

5 THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
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SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI







MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU:
Ryuo. Changed all the wallpaper in his room as he prepares to defend his title against the Shogi world's strongest challenger.



AI HINATSURU:
Yaichi's first apprentice. She's learning new cooking techniques to help support her Master during his defense matches and has made noticeable progress.



GINKO SORA:
Yaichi's elder sister apprentice. A third-year junior high school student who thinks she's taking it too easy on her younger brother apprentice but can't help it.

AI YASHAJIN:

Yaichi's second apprentice. She went back into New World to play at a Shogi parlor for the first time in a while and was stunned to find it had been turned into a fried kebab restaurant.



KEIKA KIYOTAKI:
Daughter of Yaichi's Master. Sensing that the distance between Yaichi and Ginko is changing has made her both excited and anxious.

RYOUTSUKIYOMIZAKA:

A Women's League player who holds the Women's King title and, despite being nicknamed the Aggressive Archangel, prefers to be chased when it comes to dating.



MACHI KUGUI:
A Women's League player registered in Kansai who holds the Yamashiro Ouka title but also has another face.

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THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE! 5



THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 5

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Cover, opening artwork and all illustrations

Shirabii

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▲ PREMISE

1

Games such as Go, Gomoku, Chess, Othello, and Shogi are classified as zero-sum, all-inclusive, two-player games where a player's well-timed decisions, rather than coincidence or luck, determine the outcome.

2

Shogi, as a game, is *incomplete*.

△ PRODIGIES

There is a word known as “prodigies.”

It refers to children blessed by a higher power.

Children born with talent far exceeding that of the average person.

Better than most adults in their respective fields before they know the difference between right and left, they are adept and clever. Many people expect them to keep growing far beyond anyone's reach when they become adults themselves.

However, most prodigies—gradually become *people* with age.

There are many reasons.

Some simply mature faster than their peers. Others let their talent go to their heads and stop trying. The late bloomers catch up to them. Others still start families and become normal *adults*—.

Also, the amount of talent they possess is irrelevant so long as they are human beings made of flesh and blood. Ability fades with age And new talent will take their place.

Thirty years ago ...

A *prodigy* appeared in the Shogi world.

That boy learned how to play at the age of seven and became Elementary Meijin at the age of eleven.

A member of the Sub League by twelve, he became only the third junior high school professional player in history when he was fifteen.

He claimed his first title at nineteen and possessed all seven titles at once by the age of twenty-five.

And now ...

That prodigy, currently in his mid-forties, is on the brink of accomplishing something that's never been done before: achieving 100 combined seasons as a titleholder.

Showing no signs of age.

No lapses in ability.

The prodigy ascended to a level as yet unseen faster than anyone else. He amassed more experience than any of his contemporaries and maintained his position at the top by converting that experience into strength.

Most prodigies become normal people as they mature.

In that case.

What happens to the chosen few who don't?

They—become *gods* themselves.

RECORD 1

SASARI OGA

OCCUPATION:

SECRETARY AT THE KANSAI SHOGI ASSOCIATION

RANKING:

WOMEN'S LEAGUE 1-DAN (BEFORE RETIREMENT)

AGE:

23

HOMETOWN:

UJI CITY, KYOTO

NICKNAME:

THE SHADOW DON



ROMANTIC PLANE RIDE

“..... Master”

A quiet voice in my ear.

Ticklish like soft feathers, like the soft ringing of a crystal bell, a tingly and warm voice It'd be so nice if I could just keep listening to it just like this forever

“Master Are you awake?”

There's a tug on the blanket and I open my eyes.

Looking in that direction My tiny apprentice is peeking over at me with a sad look on her face.

“..... Hm? What's wrong?”

“I'm sorry. Were you sleeping?”

“Just resting my eyes.”

Stretching out under the sheet with a big yawn, I look outside the window.

Pitch black. All I see is my reflection in the glass. Looks like it'll be a while before we get there.

My apprentice speaks up again and holds out a glass.

“Master. Here's some cold water.”

“Ah, *sankyu*-.”

“*Yuwa-uwerukamu!*”

I pat my apprentice on the head as she uses some of the English she just learned. “Tee-hee≡,” she giggles happily.

Even in an airplane, my apprentice isn't shy about making sure I have what I

need. Adorabibble.

“..... Whew. It gets so dry in planes”

The cold water rolls down my throat. It wouldn't stop after that first gulp.

We're sitting in business class of a plane headed for the place where the first round of the Ryuo Title Match is set to take place.

Whenever players have to take a plane or the bullet train to go to a match, only players and observers ride in business class or the green car. Everyone else involved usually rides in the cheaper seats.

But it's pretty lonely spending nine hours by myself and, honestly, I've got too much free time on my hands.

So I asked the organizers to let my live-in apprentice sit up here with me. That way it feels like I'm relaxing at home.

In no way did I do that because I have a Lolita complex or because I want to give grade school girls special treatment.

My challenger for the match, the Meijin, should be sitting around here somewhere. The organizers know to keep us separated so things don't get awkward.

I pass the empty glass back to Ai and ask, “So? Something bothering you?”

“Um There's something I can't figure out no matter how hard I try”

“Like what? Because if it's your math homework, go ask the journalist Ms. Mato, okay? She's in college, you know.”

Having never gone to high school and since I only really thought about Shogi when I was still in school, even a fourth grader's math homework can be a bit much for me.

It's normal for pros to graduate from high school these days, and many of them go to college, too. Maybe I'm the odd one out.

On a side note, I wrote a paper called *A Report on Move-Loss Bishop Exchange Reclining Silver* for a summer project one year in elementary school. My teacher said that he “didn’t understand it very well” but the Shogi world loved it.

But, that isn’t important right now.

“It’s this right here

With these words, Ai nervously holds out a book.

“This is the special edition for this year’s Ryuo Title Match. The one *Shogi World* magazine put out.”

They normally don’t do anything for run-of-the-mill title matches, but the hype for this one is on another level. So the magazine threw a bunch of pictures together and rushed a special edition out to the shelves. Although it says *Ryuo Title Match*, the Ryuo (me) isn’t in here anywhere. It’s all beautiful, glossy pictures of the Meijin looking all high and mighty in a kimono sitting on the other side of a Shogi board. If that weren’t enough——.

“The Septuple Crown in Reach at Last!”

“Unprecedented! Will this be his 100th title season?!”

All spelled out in big bold letters.

“What *is* this, a Meijin fan book? Then again, Shogi books that have him on the cover sell a lot better than those that don’t.”

That’s why most *Shogi World* covers are photos of the Meijin.

Ai starts talking like she’s coming up with an excuse.

“Uh, um I thought it would be a good idea to learn about your opponent, Master

“Ah, got’cha. Thanks for the help.”

In her own way, she was looking for any weaknesses the Ryuo Title Match challenger might have——the Meijin. Or, in other words, she was researching

my enemy.

I pat her smooth forehead and smile. My apprentice's noble efforts are so endearing.

"And? Did you find out anything about him?"

"It's this right here"

Ai then points to one of the Meijin's many mysterious claims about Shogi—a page dedicated to what we call *Meijin-isms*.

Her tiny finger is hovering over one of them.

"Without Pawn Drop Mate, offense is assured victory."

"Uchifu Tsume" It's against the rules, right? It prevents someone from using a Pawn from their piece stand as the last move to put their opponent in checkmate"

"Yep. That's why it's called Pawn Drop Mate."

Most of us in the Shogi world just call it Pawn Drop. It's a rule most beginners have a hard time wrapping their heads around at first because it says that any player who does it loses the match.

"Why would the person who moves first always win if this rule wasn't there?"

"Hmm Offense wins without Pawn Drop, yeah"

It's one of the most mysterious Meijin-isms out there and also one that's caused lots of people a ton of headaches trying to figure it out.

It goes without saying that I've argued with Big Sis about what it means many times—.

"That's a good question. I don't think he meant anything by it though."

“Uwhee?!”

Ai jumps up in surprise, leaning all the way over me.

“B-But, but! The Meijin held all seven titles at once and has *eternal* status and everything except Ryuo! He’s unbelievably good, right?! So why, why would someone like him?”

“Hmm He just ... kinda felt like it? At the time?”

“Huuuh-?!”

Ai yells before slapping her hands over her mouth.

The lights are off inside the cabin and many people are asleep.

What’s more, the Meijin is definitely somewhere close by.

The real icing on the cake is that many members of the media who have no connection to Shogi are traveling along with us. There’s no telling what they’ll write if anyone hears strange noises.

The two of us lean close enough for our foreheads to brush against each other and we continue our conversation in hushed voices.

“Then The Meijin just made it up out of thin air?”

“Made it up, or it could be just a sense or a feeling. Either way, I think he just said what his gut was telling him. It’s not like there isn’t any reasoning behind it though.”

“What kind of reasoning?”

“It’s been said that the rule was put in place by someone with authority saying: *common foot soldiers should never take the King*! If that’s true, I can see how everything that goes into the Pawn Drop rule could sound strange.”

“So, it wasn’t a rule put in to make Shogi more interesting?”

“Nope. But that’s exactly why it seems weird.”

“What about Repetition Draw?”

“It’s bound to happen no matter what you do.”

A Repetition Draw, or *sen-nichi te*, is what happens when both players repeat the same moves.

Although the implications are different, comparing it to clutching in boxing might make it easy to understand.

Since the game would never end once a Repetition Draw starts, a rule was put in place to force it.

“There’s a lot of discussion about *exactly how* to end it, but the rule right now states that the players start over and switch offense and defense once the same move happens four times. People claiming that *Repetition Draws are Shogi’s cancer* say that the offensive player should lose on the spot.”

“The one who starts it is at a disadvantage, right?”

“The only reason they happen in the first place is because both players think the one who started it is at a disadvantage.”

“On the other hand, if the rules said that *the offensive player loses* then I think the defenders’ go-to strategy would always be forcing their opponent into it.”

Since conditions make it easy for Repetition Draws to happen in Move-Loss Bishop Exchange matches, a lot of people would start using it just like me Wait, offensive players would purposely block that strategy, so it would get wiped out, wouldn’t it?

“Well, whether they’re trying to do it or not, Repetition Draws are going to happen, so things might stay pretty much the same.”

“But the one who starts a Checkmate Repetition Draw loses on the fourth turn, right?”

“That’s another rule I don’t totally get.”

Switch offense and defense, then play another match for Repetition Draws.

However, if the Repetition Draw puts a King in check, the one who initiated it loses.

I have no idea why that rule exists.

“Oh, and speaking of rules

“Let me guess: Two Pawns?”

That’s got to be the rule people break the most often.

But that makes it very easy to understand why that rule is there.

“I think preventing two Pawns from being in the same column balances out the fact that you can use captured pieces as your own.”

“There are a lot of good moves with Two Pawns, right?”

“Yep. If that move were okay, Pawns would become too strong and that would mess up the whole balancing system.”

“Does that mean that the Pawn Drop rule is there to make Pawns weaker?”

“Some people think that way——.”

Maybe it’s the air pressure or maybe I’m just getting sleepy, but I take a deep breath to pump some more oxygen into my brain.

“The thing about Shogi is that the offense has the advantage if you think about it normally.”

“It’s easier to attack with the first move.”

“Exactly. In fact, their chance of winning is higher. Also, the one who attacks first usually takes the first Pawn, yes? Moving first means the offense has a faster route to check. Therefore, you can make a case that Pawn Drop Mate is actually a rule to *limit the offender’s power*.”

“Oh! I see!”

“Pawn Drop helps balance offense and defense. That could be what the Meijin was trying to say.”

Shogi, by nature, assures the offender's victory.

Thanks to the Pawn Drop Mate rule, a balance of power between offense and defense can be maintained.

Therefore, without Pawn Drop Mate, offense is assured victory.

That could be the logic.

Since the Meijin never explained the reasoning behind this particular Meijinism, it's a mystery

“Ah! If that's true, then the Checkmate Repetition Draw rule also——.”

“... Limits what the first person to force check can do Yeah, I can see that. Everything lines up.”

I think there's a reasoning behind all the rules that makes us wonder why they exist.

Shogi is such a well-made game

As I was admiring the depth that is Shogi ...

“..... Fwmm~,” Ai makes a funny noise and sprawls out on my lap like a cat. So cute.

“What? Is something else on your mind?”

“I understand that certain moves are against the rules to keep the game fair but In the end, does offense win? Or is defense the one that'll win?”

“Well”

The Meijin said it: *without Pawn Drop Mate, offense is assured victory.*

And.

If that's true——.

As long as Pawn Drop is a rule How will Shogi end?

“If both players make the absolute best moves every turn, I’m not exactly sure how that match will turn out.”

“Even with a computer?”

“Yep. Computers don’t always make the *best* move, more like the most aggressive. When two computers face off, the Shogi becomes a shoving match. Right now, I think people are closer to solving Shogi than computers.”

The reason people lose to software is because computers don’t get tired or nervous and make mistakes.

And most Shogi matches are decided by who makes a mistake first.

“In matches between the top pros, like title matches with the Meijin, the offensive player tends to win more often than the average. That’s because they can compound the best moves in the late game without messing up.”

“So, the offense wins?”

“Not necessarily. I mean, it’s been proven that the defender has a big edge in *Doubutsu Shogi*. Statistics show that defenders using *yagura* are winning a lot more recently and, if you really dig deep, it might turn out that defenders have an advantage.”

“Does that mean the rules are going to change?”

“That’s possible. Specific rules about Repetition Draws and Deadlocks were changed not that long ago.”

That goes for Go, Chess, and Shogi too.

Games that have been around for a long time need to be updated to maintain balance as new tricks and strategies are discovered. Even in *Doubutsu Shogi*, or Animal Shogi, which is a simplified version of Shogi that uses animals as pieces.

Rules are still changing now.

But——.

“For me personally.”

“Yes?”

“I think the rule against Pawn Drops is a way to make Shogi puzzles more interesting.”

“Fwhee? Make Shogi puzzles more interesting?”

“Like the *Final Judgment* puzzle.”

“Final Judgment?”

Ai tilts her head at the unfamiliar words.

The subject changing to Shogi puzzles, one of her favorite things in the world, has her bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as she looks over at me.

I could just explain it to her but I don't know if it's the altitude or the Dramamine I took, but it's really hard to concentrate.

There are still about three hours left until we arrive.

I bet we'll be hitting the ground running once we get there, so I should try and catch some z's while I can.

“Well, there's no point in thinking about it too hard. There's a rule against Pawn Drops, and no one knows if offense or defense will win out in the end. People and computers are still a long way from finding the answer That should be good enough, don't you think?”

I pat my still-confused apprentice on the head, yawn, and close my eyes again.

I have to be ready for the tough battle waiting for me when I open them again——.

OASIS

“Alooooooha~♪”

The heat of the Hawaiian sun on my face after nine hours cooped up in a plane, I’m practically jumping for joy.

Yes——Hawaii!

The island where it’s always summer——Hawaii!!

A match hasn’t been held outside of Japan in a full five years and it’s the first match of this year’s Ryuo Title Match! In Hawaii!!

“So, Ai. What d’you think of these sunglasses? Nice, right? Right?”

“*Ku-ru!* Very cool, Master!! They’re perfect!!”

“Ha ha ha. Will the locals think I’m one of them?”

“*Fwee~♪*”

My apprentice tries to whistle like an American but fails miserably. Adorable.

Then, an ice-cold voice came down to rain on our parade.

“.....Pathetic. We’re in Hawaii. Get over it.”

“B ... Big Sis

My younger “big” sister, the dual title holding Ginko Sora, also known as Naniwa’s Snow White, is glaring icicles at the two of us but——.

“..... Even in Hawaii, you wear your school uniform?”

“I’m a Sub League member in junior high school, so why wouldn’t I? This isn’t a vacation.”

Big Sis, wearing her mostly black sailor-style school uniform, has a matching black parasol open above her head as if outright refusing to let the strong

Hawaiian sun touch her skin.

Her almost mystical appearance is getting a lot of attention from the locals. People all around us are calling out things like “Whoa!” and “Fantastic!” She’s sticking out like a sore thumb.

“Sorry about all of us forcing our way onto your trip, Yaichi.”

Big Sis isn’t the only one. Actually, Keika and Master Kiyotaki came along for my match in Hawaii too.

Even worse, Master Kiyotaki has decked himself out with sunglasses, a polo shirt, Bermuda shorts, and plastic sandals. Since this is Hawaii, he just looks like a tourist, but he’d look like a really shady geezer wearing that getup in Osaka.

By the way, a Shogi magazine hired Big Sis to do commentary and paid her way over here.

Master, Keika and Ai all paid out-of-pocket (I paid for Ai though).

Originally, I was planning to come here by myself and have Ai stay at Master’s place. She was fine with it at first, at least until she found out Big Sis would also be here.

“I’m going, too, no matter what!”

With no idea what to do, I went to Master for advice and he said, *“Might as well all go, eh?”* One thing led to another, and now the whole Shogi family is on vacation I can’t really complain though.

Keika’s been a really big help since we started planning everything back in Japan. I don’t know the first thing about going abroad and she prepared a lot of things for me.

Even though she has her own important match coming up

“I really am sorry about all this, Yaichi. But I, I just wanted to come to Hawaii with you

“Keika

She was that worried about me?

Could this possibly be love?!

Just as that thought crossed my mind.

“You see, one of my friends who went to college? She went abroad with her boyfriend when the two of them graduated. She came back, gave me souvenirs and wouldn’t stop talking *That’s right, Keika. You don’t have a boyfriend, do you? ... Shogi is just a Japanese game, right? Then you’ll never get a chance to go overseas My my, you poor girl On an endless loop*”

“.....”

“But I !! Here I am in Hawaii, ha-ha-haaaaaa! In your face!!”

Keika’s broken.

“Ai! Ginko! We came all this way, so let’s go have some fun?! There’s plenty of money ... locked and loaded!”

“Huh? K-Keika Ain’t that my credit card ya’re talkin’ about?”

“You’d just use it to put some cute clothes on 2-D girls anyway. In that case, make some *real world* purchases for your daughter, apprentice and granddaughter apprentice.”

“N-NoooooOOOO! I was gonna get Miss Nitta’s SSR limited outfit with thaaaaaat!!”

Master’s broken, too.

“The Kiyotaki Shogi family is lively as always. I’m rather jealous.”

“Ch-Chairman

A voice comes in from off to the side while I’ve got my head in my hands and look up to see the Japan Shogi Association’s chairman and Eternal Meijin status holder Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan*.

A man who has had many thrilling battles against my challenger for this Ryuo Title Match, the current Meijin. His name is all over the Shogi history books, a blind prodigy—.

“..... You’re, wearing sunglasses?”

“This is Hawaii.”

“One selected them.”

The chairman’s secretary and (retired) Women’s League 1-*dan* Sasari Oga puffs out her chest with pride. On a side note, it’s a good thing the chairman can’t see because their clothes match. Of course, their sunglasses do, too. Looking at them, I doubt anyone who didn’t already know who they are would think their relationship was strictly professional.

Since the chairman is old enough to be her father, he looks like someone who’s having a fling behind his wife’s back Ms. Oga’d probably be happy if somebody made that mistake though.

“But, Chairman, Sir You’re, um, blind, right?”

“I can tell a slight difference between light and dark. Hawaii’s sunlight is quite strong,” the chairman answers with a smile.

I see

“Now, Chairman. This area is quite dangerous so keep a tight hold of one’s arm. The natives have been eyeing us for quite some time now, perhaps we’re being targeted. This is a foreign land, we must be alert for danger at all times.”

“Oh? Is that right?”

“Yes. This place doesn’t look safe in the slightest.”

Of course, it’s nice and peaceful here.

The chairman normally holds onto Ms. Oga’s shoulder to go from place to place. But all the sunlight seems to have gotten her excited because she’s

clinging to his arm like a full body hug. Those sunglasses aren't doing anything to hide the giddy look on her face. Little devil

A little ways away from the Kansai Shogi group, the always mild-mannered Meijin is standing in the middle of a throng of reporters with a cheery smile on his face.

Our ride to the hotel is in a fancy limousine! Damn!

All five of the Kiyotaki Shogi family members sit across from each other inside but there's room for more. Ai, sitting next to me, looking back and forth between my face and out the window, seems like she's having the time of her life.

"Master, Master! The sea and the sky are so blue!"

"Very much so. Hawaii is something else."

"If only Ai came too! Then everyone'd be here!" Keika says.

"She'd never come to something like this. Knowing her." Big Sis adds under her breath.

They're talking about my second apprentice, Ai Yashajin. I invited her but, *"Huh? Why do I have to go?"*

All I could say was, *"Oh, okay"* and let the subject drop.

But, I've got to say——.

"Being an international match, don't you think there are a lot of Kansai people around? The chairman, Ms. Oga, Master, Big Sis, Keika, and even Ai, The observer is from Kanto, but the assistant observer and the match recorder are both from Kansai. Add in the fact that the journalist Ms. Mato is from Kansai and pretty much everyone in the arena for the match will be from around the Osaka area. Then again, you guys are here on vacation and bought your own tickets but"

Normally, title matches take place somewhere in Japan.

If it's in the eastern half, then it's mostly Kanto people and pros around the match. The same is true for Kansai pros with the matches that take place in the west.

Except this match isn't in Japan. The personnel and schedule were all up to the media coverage and the association.

"I don't think it's all that strange that a lot of people connected to me are here because I'm the title holder. I kinda feel sorry for the Meijin, having to come all the way to Osaka to catch the plane"

"Soft," Master and Big Sis snap right back at me.

"Title matches start by makin' with the atmosphere. Matches lastin' two days with a boatload o' waitin' time like this one get decided by who's more relaxed and fights the best."

Master has fought on the Meijin Title Match stage twice, so his words hit home.

"Movin' pieces around ain't the only battle to be fought durin' title matches. All the travelin' and the party the night before are part o' it too. A ton o' your opponent's fans'll be at the party and try thinkin' what it's like to have all the cameras in the arena trained on the guy across from ya. It's hard to keep yar cool with all that tension in the air. Bein' surrounded by friendly faces'll help protect ya. Tactics, plain an' simple."

Master I thought he only came along to have a good time, but he was thinking that far ahead

Big Sis, with her multiple titles, chimes in. "That's right. Why do you think we took time out of our busy schedules to join you on this trip? Stop taking in the sights and focus on the match."

"..... Okay."

Yes. The battle has already begun.

I'd been feeling like a tourist, but no more. Sitting up in my leather seat, I do a quick stretch and concentrate on how to deal with the strongest challenger!

But that renewed focus completely disappeared not ten minutes later.

“Ho-ly COOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!!”

I step outside the limousine and take a look at where the match is going to be held: one of Hawaii's five-star hotels.

Being top of the line, the hotel has its own private beach. Birds are flying freely in and out of an inner garden behind the front desk, which is right in front of the pool, and the white sandy beach is just behind that in front of the deep blue ocean.

How can I keep a cool head seeing all this at once? Not happening.

“Wah-HOOOOOO—————!!”

Master charges out toward the beach in his plastic sandals and yelling at the top of his lungs. I follow right behind him with Ai in tow. Keika mumbles some complaints under her breath and pulls Big Sis along with her after us. Then we all take a picture together in front of the ocean.

“All right, Kiyotaki family. Smile~.”

Ms. Mato works the camera like a total pro, taking pictures of all of us doing the *shaka*, Hawaii's hang-loose hand sign. The association didn't have enough money to assign a cameraman, so that duty fell to Ms. Mato along with maintaining the blog. She's going to be busy.

“I would like a picture of the participants here on the beach. Oh, and since the match is in Hawaii, please wear Hawaiian shirts instead of suits.”

So the Meijin and I change into colorful *aloha* shirts and pose in front of Diamondhead Mountain doing the *shaka* and smile for the camera.

The distance opponents maintain during title matches varies case by case.

I've heard the mood can turn sour pretty quickly if the players don't get along or have a history against each other, but the air can turn competitive even if the two are friends.

As for us Nothing special.

Since we've barely met, there's no need to exchange words or shake hands, but he doesn't *feel* like an enemy. The Meijin has been smiling the whole time too.

..... Could it be that since I'm so much younger it's hard to flip the switch?

Here I am, standing next to a legendary player but I don't feel any competitive fire. If anything, it's more like a shrug.

After splashing around on the beach for a while, the hotel staff showed us to our rooms.

"If the Ryuo group would please follow me down this hallway."

Players in title matches talk with the media in joint sessions, but the organizers go to great lengths to make sure the two don't cross paths anywhere else.

The hotel had it all planned out, sending my group and the Meijin's group down different paths at different times.

Our rooms are so far apart that there's no way we'd run into each other until the actual match starts. It's a little detail, but very much appreciated.

"The chapel on the hotel grounds also hosts wedding ceremonies. It's been very well received by our Japanese guests," our guide explains as we pass by a small stone church facing the inner garden.

She then says that famous people often like to have a small ceremony with

their family and close friends here before having the reception back in Japan.

Big Sis is making a face like *Okay? And?* But the rest of the girls look really excited all of a sudden.

Keika's face is melting with glee as she says, "How wonderful ≡. Getting married in a place like this, what could be better than that? ≡"

"Ah, why don't we make a reservation——?"

"A pike through your skull."

"Darabuchi."

..... What? Just joking. Well, about eighty percent serious, but still.

Right behind us, Ms. Oga is whispering into her boss's ear, "Chairman~ One would love to get married here~≡," with a quiet, enticing voice.

"Well then," he responds. "I shall see what I can do to find a good match for you."

"....."

Serves you right, *Shadow Don*. Heh-heh-heh.

We get into an elevator on the other side of the inner garden and then I part ways with everyone else because they're staying on a different floor.

"This room is set aside for the Ryuo," says my female guide in fluent Japanese as she explains all the features in the room. She almost looks Japanese too, maybe a second or third generation American?

I've got a double room even though I'm staying here by myself. She tells me it's because the single rooms are more cramped.

"This room has the best ocean view in the entire hotel. Please, step out onto the terrace and see for yourself."

A burst of blue light and a gentle breeze flow into the room the instant I open a large white window.

It's all bright blue ocean.

Stepping outside, Diamondhead is off to the left. This room has the most Hawaiian view imaginable. So this is what ocean view means!

Coming to Hawaii was worth it just to see this! I sigh ... beside myself.

"Haaa"

"Ohh, woowoow!!"

An extremely familiar voice right beside me But one that shouldn't be there. I jump half out of my skin and look down.

There's my apprentice, holding onto the railing and leaning out over the terrace.

"Huh?! Ai, how long have you been here?"

"Hehehe≡"

She playfully sticks her tongue out before dashing back into the room like she was running away from me. Then she dives face first onto the bed.

Yeah. That was cute.

She doesn't usually want this much attention. She must be really happy to be here in Hawaii.

Now that I think about it, she seemed pretty happy when we went to Kobe, too.

"Master, Master! The bed is so bouncy! And the bathtub is huge!"

"They sure are. This is a nice room, don't you think?"

"So nice, Master! So, so nice!"

"Ha-ha-ha. You can stay in rooms like this once you have your own title!"

"..... I, I want to stay in this room, too," (*glance*) she says with a pillow in her arms, looking up at me with just the top half of her face lifted off the bed. So

darn cute!

How could anyone turn down a request from such a cute apprentice?

“You can use this room anytime I’m not around. I’ve got to do some interviews and meet some important people with the Meijin real soon, so I’m sure Keika and Big Sis will take you out somewhere. Probably shopping, yes? Tell Keika she can keep her shopping haul in here if she doesn’t have any room for all the bags as well.”

“..... Yay.”

That’s a strange reaction. Sounds happy, but not really. Huh? Did I make a wrong move somewhere?

The woman who led me up here hasn’t said anything, just watched with a happy smile on her face before asking, “Is she your younger sister, perhaps?”

“Huh? Ahh, something like that——.”

“I’m not his little sister! I’m his live-in apprentice!”

The guide tilts her head at words that most Japanese people probably wouldn’t understand.

“Live-in apprentice?”

“Two people who live in the same place but aren’t connected by blood! Our bond is much stronger than that!”

“.....”

That smile disappears from the (female) guide’s face.

Oh crap, she’s got the wrong idea Wait a minute, isn’t America a heck of a lot stricter about pedophiles and that kind of stuff-ff-ff-ff?

“No! It’s not like that! She is my student, I teach her Shogi *Suchu-dento! Aiam tei-cha-!* Ai! Explain exactly how it is to her!!”

“Awa-ru-mu hazu onri-wanbeddo in jyapan!”

“Wha? Umm Ai? What did you just say Gahh?! She’s looking at me like a criminal over here?! Seriously, what did you say?!”

“You said to explain exactly how it is, Master. So I told her that our room only has one bed in Japan.”

“Why’d you have to tell her **that**?!”

I might not even get to play the match if rumors that Japan’s Dragon King brought a little girl into his hotel room start going around!

One slipup now and I’ll forfeit the match because I’ll be in jail Heck, I won’t be able to go home?!

“O-Oh, that’s right! Tip! I need to tip you?!”

The only option left is to get on her good side with some money!

I pull out my wallet, but Ai says in a calm voice.

“That’s okay, Master. She’s on the hotel staff. You only need to tip the housekeepers who change the sheets, the waiters in the cafeteria, and people like that.”

“That’s right! You’re so little but already so knowledgeable.”

The hotel staff member looks impressed by Ai’s unexpected familiarity with the system.

Overjoyed to find a new topic, I jump right in to keep it going.

“Actually, this girl grew up at a traditional Japanese inn with an *onsen*—a hot spring”

“Is that so? Which one?”

“In Ishikawa Prefecture Umm, it’s on the north coast, a place called Hinatsuru——.”

“Are you serious?! *T-the* Hinatsuru?”

“You’ve heard of it?”

“*Ofuko-su!* Anyone in this industry who doesn’t know the Hinatsuru Inn still has much to learn.”

She nods at me like it’s common knowledge. Is that inn that famous?

“In that case, this young lady here is next in line to take over for that legendary *Okamisan?*”

The hotel staff member starts trembling as she says the Japanese word meaning female owner, *okamisan*, with an English accent.

So even people in Hawaii know who Ai’s mother is? I don’t stand a chance. She’s untouchable.

“I am Ai Hinatsuru. My pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Ai sits up on the bed, sitting on her ankles in perfect posture and bows down so gracefully it’s hard to believe she’s only a fourth grader. She’s the splitting image of her mother, which sends a cold chill down my spine.

Meanwhile, the staff member looks like she’s speaking to an angel from heaven. “If you have time, please come greet my manager!” she says, shaking Ai’s hand.

UTOPIA

The party the night before the match was light and cheerful from start to finish.

“This has gotta be the first time in Shogi history ‘at everyone was wearin’ Hawaiian shirts at the openin’ night party.”

“I agree. But it makes taking interesting pictures that much easier.”

The journalist in charge of the blog, Ms. Mato, and Master Kiyotaki are talking to each other. Master is already wearing the *aloha* gear he bought at a huge shopping mall. It’s not all that different from what he was wearing when we got here though

Since these colorful shirts are treated like uniforms in Hawaii, pretty much everyone here including the match participants is wearing them.

Actually, wearing suits around Waikiki makes you stick out in a bad way. Try thinking what it would be like wearing a suit instead of a bathrobe at a Japanese *onsen*. The Sub League member working as the match recorder and I went to a Shogi event hosted by a yacht club in Waikiki and decided to do a little shopping on our way home still wearing a suit and tie. Long story short, we got swarmed by local kids that kept asking us, “*A-yu-mafia?! A-yu-mafia?!*”

For that reason, the party is packed full of people in Hawaiian shirts.

Everyone’s gathered in the hotel’s inner garden. There’s a bonfire going, lighting up tables upon tables of delicious food all while ukulele music and the ocean waves mix in the background.

With VIPs like Hawaiian state officials and people from the Japanese consulate here, I’d normally be a nervous wreck. It’s thanks to all the Hawaiian shirts that I can relax. These things are amazing.

“I can scarcely believe two days have passed since our arrival in Hawaii and tomorrow marks the beginning of this season’s Ryuo Title Match. These two days have been filled with various Shogi events all around Hawaii. The Ryuo Title Match is of course garnering much attention from Japan, but, as the Shogi Association chairman, seeing local residents take part in the events and having genuine interest in Shogi has brought me great joy. At the same time, it has also reminded me of my duty to introduce the sport of Shogi to a wider audience.”

Chairman Tsukimitsu takes it upon himself to act as the party MC and makes a formal greeting up at the front.

On a side note, he’s wearing a kimono to keep the Hawaiians entertained. Mr. Tsukimitsu is a Kansai person through and through because I’m pretty sure only someone from Kansai would try this hard to make other people smile.

“This season’s Ryuo Title Match has great meaning not only for the participants, but for the Shogi world as a whole. More time has been set aside to accommodate the time difference for this match than title matches held on Japanese soil to ensure that the Ryuo and the Meijin can play at peak condition——.”

The chairman was right in the middle of his speech when he came to a sudden halt because of a loud murmur in the back.

Ai, Big Sis and Keika showing up in Hawaiian dresses called *muumuus* is the reason why.

Looking like a long, loose dress, it’s a fashion staple for Hawaiian women.

Keika smiles at all the attention coming her way, blushing a bit.

“Ahaha Looks like we’re the belles of the ball. Right, Ginko?”

“.....”

“These clothes This is a little embarrassing. I feel like I’m wearing a swimsuit (>_<)”

“Nothing to worry about! The two of you are so cute! We’re in Hawaii, so let’s live it up a bit and have some fun!”

Of course Keika is the center of attention.

That *muumuu* is bringing out curves that most Japanese women only dream about! I mean her boobs could break free at any moment!

As for Big Sis and Ai Well, it looks like they’re just wearing a fancy towel. They’re cute, I’m not denying that. Very cute, very cute. Smooth.

The three of them walking in brightened up the party like a bouquet of flowers.

“You three! Please stand together so I can take a picture for the blog! Look this way, please!”

Ms. Mato is taking pictures left and right.

Apparently, blog views skyrocket just by posting a picture of the most popular women’s title holder by far, Big Sis.

“To be blunt, they’re more effective than match photos,” is what she said, and that’s a bit depressing.

What’s worse is that the grade schooler who appeared like a comet over the Mynavi Women’s Open is also a hot topic among fans. “To be blunt, rather than pictures of the Ryuo (omitted).” Now that really is depressing.

That being said, getting a good picture of Big Sis is next to impossible.

“Women’s dual title. Please smile for the camera.”

“.....,” (looking thoroughly dejected).

“Please, Sora-sensei. It’s a title holder’s responsibility to look friendly.”

“..... If you want pictures of a women’s title holder, there are better ones than me around. You know, the ones also smiling like pervs.”

“There are? I don’t see any.”

“.....”

Once everyone had a chance to admire the beautiful women, it was time for the participants to give speeches.

As the Ryuo, I’m up first but I’m actually more anxious about this than the match.

On the surface, all I have to do is *say whatever I want*.

I can say anything But, just like Shogi, things like this have *standards* to follow and I’m sticking to them.

I mumble through everything before going up on stage, making sure I’ve got it down pat. “..... First, thank the organizers. Then the local coordinators as well. The hotel’s accommodation has been outstanding. Make sure to bring up the VIPs, it would be better to bring it up if they were involved in previous title matches”

Of course, there are *forbidden moves* too. I can’t talk about any other title matches or say anything good about our sponsor’s rival companies.

I was the challenger last time, so all I had to do was echo what the previous Ryuo had to say.

But I’m up first this time, so that strategy won’t work.

That’s why I’ve been researching how to do this kind of speech more than Shogi since I got to Hawaii two days ago.

—I’ll prove to everyone I’m not nervous by delivering the perfect speech and put pressure on the Meijin right out of the gate at the opening party!

Now in front of the microphone, I’m ready to open my speech with the perfect line because I’m so ready!!

“Umm Everyone, *aloha*.”

Laughter explodes. Why?

I wasn't trying to joke around or anything, but for some reason people laughed up a storm during my speech Well, better than silence!

Compared to my bright and aggressive style, the Meijin's speech was normal and by the book.

The main points were: "I'm not thinking about the Eternal Septuple or the 100th title season at all ... I'd like to further my research to find the truth behind Shogi with the Ryuo on this stage." He wasn't saying anything all that interesting, but the lights flashing around him are about 100 times brighter than they were for me. Those media guys aren't here to cover the Ryuo Title Match, they're more interested in the Meijin. I don't care Really.

Now's the time when participants receive a bouquet of flowers.

"..... the normal procedure, but we've decided to follow local tradition and present the players with a Hawaiian *lei*."

Lei—basically a necklace of flowers. What a spiffy idea.



The daughter of one of the guys from the Japanese consulate gave the Meijin one as Ai put a *lei* over my head.

“I have been informed that the *lei* being presented to the Ryuo was handmade by his apprentice. Those small hands strung the flowers together in hopes that her Master will emerge victorious. There’s no better gift than that.”

Stunned by what the chairman just said, I ask Ai, “Is that true?”

“Y-Yes Um, I’m sorry it doesn’t look as good as the others”

“What are you talking about?! This is awesome. I’d wear it to the match if they let me.”

“Master ≡≡≡”

Complimenting her *lei* makes Ai smile from ear to ear.

I was sure she was out sightseeing and shopping the whole time but To think she was busy making something like this for me. That kind of support is the best present ever.

I’d love to give her a big hug right here and now. I hold back the urge though.

But now there is a thorny chill in here that feels out of place in Hawaii. But come on, this is Hawaii. It’s got to be in my head because snow and ice don’t happen here.

Now then, players would normally leave the party at this point but——.

“There is also an occasion to observe besides the Ryuo Title Match.”

The chairman pauses to build up a bit of suspense and then, “Ai Hinatsuru, the young lady who just presented the Ryuo with a lei, is celebrating her tenth birthday today!”

“Fwhee?! Whaaaat——?!”

I was caught off guard just a moment ago, but now it’s Ai’s turn.

Everyone at the party, other than Ai herself, knew this was going to happen. The hotel's ukulele ensemble starts singing happy birthday and the rest of us join in.

Ai's face is a swirling mix of surprise, joy and embarrassment as she squeezes my Hawaiian shirt sleeve and looks at me with big, round, glistening eyes. That's puppy-level cuteness right there ≡.

"That's not the only gift we have for you this evening."

The cook in charge of tonight's meal pushes a big cart into the garden once the chairman said that, bringing out the *real star of the party*.

Ai's eyes light up.

"Shogi puzzle cake!"

Yes! Her favorite thing in the world, a Shogi puzzle, had been masterfully created in chocolate But, there's more than that.

The cook made the board itself and the legs underneath out of cake! What is he, a wizard?!!

"Chocolate sponge cake coated with a layer of milk chocolate to re-create the wooden grain patterns The Shogi grid and writing on each piece are chocolate icing. Not bad"

Big Sis seems impressed and she hardly ever compliments anything. That might be jealousy in her eyes She's not going to demand that I make *this* on her birthday, is she?

"Even got a piece stand Well, I'll be."

Just as Master said, there's a piece stand made of chocolate off to the side complete with captured pieces lined up on top waiting to be played. Of course, they're chocolate, too. Talk about mouthwatering!

The chairman, who made the Shogi puzzle on the cake, explains in a slightly matter-of-fact tone.

“What do you think? As you can see, the puzzle starts in the shape of a heart, but a new shape appears as the puzzle is solved. This particular puzzle requires many turns to complete, so——.”

“Woow! It starts off as a big heart but turns into a small heart at checkmate on the 27th turn! A *rittaikyoku dume*!”

“.....”

Cut off in the middle of his explanation and the answer announced for everyone to hear, the chairman falls silent, stiff as a board with a smile on his face.

S-Sorry about that This girl, she’s a god when it comes to Shogi puzzles

By the way, a *rittaikyoku dume* is a Shogi puzzle that starts with all the pieces laid out to form a picture at the beginning and turns into a different picture by the end of it.

It goes without saying, but making these puzzles is extremely hard.

I’m sure that part of the reason the chairman put in this much effort was to help build up excitement for the Ryuo Title Match, but also to show that he has high hopes for the girl.

“..... Receiving a heart cake from the chairman Two hearts at that Even though she’s ten *Even though she’s ten*”

Ms. Oga’s heart is in rough shape.

Everyone at the party was happy to see a cute little girl getting a birthday cake at first but Now that they understand how amazing she really is, that happiness has turned into a frenzy.

“Damn girl!”

“That was fantastic!”

“She’s a genius!!”

The compliments keep coming.

Ai is now the life of the party. All these reporters and journalists crossed the ocean for a chance to see the Meijin, but now they’re asking to get pictures of my apprentice with her Shogi puzzle cake. It’s getting a bit loud in here actually.

The chairman has regained his composure and poses a question to Ai as she does the best she can to talk with the media swarm.

“If I may ask, Ms. Hinatsuru. Is there a present you would like from your Master for your birthday?”

“Fwhee?!”

Blindsided, Ai starts sputtering. So cute to watch.

“Um ... Well.” It took her a few moments, but Ai builds up the courage to look straightforward and answer in a loud, clear voice. “Uhhh, I I want Master to win tomorrow’s match!!”

Applause erupt for the commendable apprentice who thought of her Master before herself.

The chairman tries not to laugh and says, “Well, there you have it, Ryuo. What’s your answer?”

“That’s a lot of pressure,” I answer with a grin.

But Ai turns blue in the face and yells, “S-S-S-SO-SORRY!! Forget I said——.”

“What? So, it’s okay with you if I lose?”

“No, that’s not okay!! Win no matter wha- Oh no?! I said *win* again!”

Boom! The inner garden explodes with laughter. Ai’s face goes red as a hibiscus.

“You’ve certainly found an excellent apprentice, Ryuo. Now you absolutely must not lose.”

“Very true. As you can see, the Masters aren’t as strict on apprentices as the apprentices are on their Masters in the Kiyotaki Shogi family. It’s tradition.”

My witty comeback to the chairman’s ribbing got the biggest laughs all night. Yessah!

“He ain’t kiddin’,” Master mumbles with a bone-dry smile despite being in Hawaii. His credit card must be just as dried out.

Among all the smiling faces, only Ai, “..... Master, you meanie,” she says, puffing out her bright red cheeks.

Too darn cute

The Meijin listened to our very Kansai-esque banter with a cheerful smile on his face until it was finally time for the participants to leave the party and get ready for tomorrow’s match.

PAWN MIRAGE

“As this is the first match, Kuzuryu-ryuo’s Pawns will be used for the flip.”

The match recorder takes a cloth from a wooden box and spreads it out on top of the floor mat before taking five Pawns from my side of the Shogi board and tosses them up a lot more dramatically than he needed to.

The five Pawns dance in the air, spinning—land with dry, wooden clacks and bounce to all corners of the cloth.

“Five face up.”

The first move is mine. Sweat starts flowing out of my right palm even though my hand is just resting on top of my knee.

The match is happening in a spacious room that overlooks the inner garden on the second floor.

Since this hotel doesn’t have any *tatami*, they put mats down on the floor to make it look more Japanese-y. The board, pieces, floor cushions and armrests were all brought here by the Kansai Shogi Association.

Since past title matches have taken place in the grand halls of art museums and hotel observation decks, bringing them here wasn’t a big deal. We can hold matches pretty much anywhere.

“We didn’t need to set up a tower this time since that ceiling camera was installed. It’s so much easier,” one of the journalists in charge of covering the Ryuo Title Match for a magazine told me with a laugh in the hotel’s cafeteria this morning when I stopped in to say hello.

That same journalist is now leading a hotel executive to the board-side table.

Since that foreign executive can’t sit on his ankles, he looks very cramped sitting on his butt with his knees in the air between the observer and the

chairman who are each wearing a kimono. It's so surreal. I could swear the Meijin's eyes are smiling behind his glasses.

Then, at 9 a.m. local time, we got started.

"The appointed time has arrived. Please begin the match," announces the observer and everyone bows.

We players keep our heads down even as everyone else starts getting up. We're giving the media a chance to take all the pictures they need.

Once all the shutter noises die down, I take a deep breath, reach for a Pawn in my formation and wait.

Feeling even more shutters and flashes go off than before, ".....!!"

Snap! I bring the piece down onto the board with a loud crack. Then I wait for all the pictures to finish up.

My opening move—opening the Bishop Path with a 7 Six Pawn.

The reason I chose the most orthodox opening in the Shogi book is to prevent the Meijin from figuring out my strategy.

—My strongest offensive strategy is the Double Wing Attack. Of course, the Meijin has prepared for it

Double Wing turns into chaos, so it would be better to use in the first match when I'm at full mental and physical strength. Trying to use it in a later match could be asking for trouble.

—This isn't just the first round in the Ryuo Title Match. It's also my first time playing against the Meijin

Back as an amateur and even as a member of the Sub League, I never sat across the board from him.

There are some things that you just can't get until you play an actual match. No amount of replaying Shogi records can compare to the real thing. At the very

least, I want to gather as much information as I can during this match.

2nd move. The Meijin opens his own Bishop Path. He looks completely calm.

The way things are, it's impossible to tell what strategies will come into play.

"At this time, would all media members please exit the arena."

The journalists and reporters closest to the door leave the room once the observer makes the announcement and the rest file out behind them.

It's customary for the media to leave after the second turn (basically, once they've had a chance to photograph each player's first move) for title matches.

"....."

I stay sitting on my ankles, close my eyes and wait for the last one to leave. I already know what I'm going to do.

3rd move. I advance the Pawn in front of my Rook.

Another orthodox move, one that gives my opponent the right to choose the opening formation That's how it looks, but I'm actually trying to bait him.

What I want—is for the Meijin to choose Gokigen Central Rook.

The Meijin used Ranging Rook against Ayumu in the qualifier.

And I defeated the Meijin's training partner, Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*, using Gokigen Central Rook.

In that match, I went against Extreme Rapid Battle, backed up by the Meijin and Mr. Natagiri's joint research, and barely came out on top. Without a doubt, my opponent has thoroughly researched that match record and come to this conclusion.

Gokigen Central Rook is still viable as a strategy—.

I've never played against the Meijin. However, we've fought indirectly through our training partners.

With all that information, I'm prepared to face his research head on.

—Bring it!! Come at me with that Pawn right down the middle!!

Doing my best to keep my eyes off the board, I keep hoping that that's exactly what's going to happen.

The Meijin reaches for the board almost like my wish is coming true.

But his fingers didn't take hold of the Pawn I wanted them to.

That's not a Pawn—heck, *that's not even his own piece*.

“..... Really?”

Was that Ms. Mato? The Sub League match recorder?

Could've been me for all I know.

I'm not sure who, but I know someone accidentally let a word slip as soon as they saw what the Meijin decided to do.

He picks up my Bishop, places it on his piece stand, then picks up his own Bishop and promotes it before slapping it down with authority where mine had been!

Executing a Bishop Exchange on defense. In other words—.

—— Move-Loss Bishop Exchange.

“.....!!”

That information zips from my eyes into my brain and my whole body starts burning up seconds later.

The Meijin ... is using my strat?

“.....”

I take a sip of ice water from my glass and chew on one of the cubes to cool

off. Then I wipe my hand with a hand towel. If sweat was flowing out of my palms during the piece flip, it's a torrent now.

—What does this mean?

Is he trying to make it harder for me to use Move-Loss Bishop Exchange as a defender later on if I beat him on offense with the same strategy here?

Inconsistencies happen because he'll use the same strategy on offense and defense.

I'm sure some player told me that.

But, on the other hand.

What if I beat his Move-Loss Bishop Exchange now and then beat him using it as a defender?

There's a word for that in the Shogi world: Double slap.

“.....”

I glance out at the inner garden to calm myself down a bit. Then I take his Promoted Bishop and complete the Bishop Exchange.

“Meijin: An Unforeseen Move-Loss Bishop Exchange!”

Aloha to everyone in Japan.

This is Mato, reporting live from the board.

The morning skies are bright and clear in Hawaii. A gentle breeze is blowing through the arena.

The match, which began at 9 o'clock in the morning local time, has advanced to the twenty-seventh move at present: 10 o'clock.

Snacks were delivered to the players right at ten. The Ryuo enjoyed iced tea and pancakes while the Meijin only asked for a Hawaiian specialty: Kona coffee.

Chocolate-covered macadamia nuts and Honolulu cookies among other Hawaiian confections were available to the rest of us in the break room.

Shogi Association Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu, Kiyotaki 9-*dan*, Sora Dual Title and other skilled players gathered around an analysis board early this morning and have been vigorously exchanging opinions left and right since. This is quite an unusual sight for the first day of the two-day title match. The appearance of a completely unexpected strategy has opened up a psychological battlefield as well.

The Meijin's Move-Loss Bishop Exchange currently dictates the board. A chorus of surprise and excitement wafted from the break room when the Meijin initiated the Bishop Exchange on the 4th move.

I had a chance to speak with Move-Loss Bishop Exchange specialist, Chairman Tsukimitsu, just moments ago.

—Did you have any indication that the Meijin would use Move-Loss Bishop

Reporting on the
Ryuo Title Match
from all angles!

RYUO TITLE MATCH LIVE BLOG



29th Season
Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu

Exchange?

“Honestly, no. If I may offer an excuse, I believe that every professional Shogi player who came to Hawaii was caught off guard, not just myself. Excluding the Meijin, of course.”

—For what reason did the Meijin decide to use it against the Ryuo, a specialist with this strategy in his own right?

“The Meijin is known for defending against his opponent’s signature strategies and making them his own. It’s common knowledge that the Ryuo prefers to play Double Wing Attack on offense and Move-Loss Bishop Exchange when on defense, however the Double Wing option disappeared on his first move. That may be why the Meijin decided to proceed with a Move-Loss Bishop Exchange.”

—At present, does Move-Loss Bishop Exchange favor offense or defense?

“Both are locked in a struggle for supremacy this year with a win-loss rate of fifty percent. However, the data pool is insufficient because it has appeared in so few matches. In the most recent example, a match between myself and the Ryuo in June, he claimed victory on defense. For that reason, he may have some reservations about playing it on offense This may not mean much coming from the defeated, but I had an opportunity to claim victory on offense. It’s still too early to know how this match will play out (laughs).”

—Thank you for your time. I look forward to your

analysis later in the match.

On a side note, the chairman's secretary Sasari Oga Women's League 1-*dan* (retired) who was on hand for the interview interjected, "The chairman won that Shogi!" So I would like to add her comment here.

I also spoke with Kuzuryu-*ryuo*'s favored pupil and a live-in apprentice, Miss Ai Hinatsuru (Practice League Member, current Mynavi Finalist).

—Sorry to disturb you in the middle of your cookie, Miss Hinatsuru. Can you describe your Master's condition this morning?

"Uwhee?! Pha, fwm (Chewing the last few bites of her cookie) *Gulp*. Umm, I went to his room to wake him up this morning, and I think he looked great. He always has a hard time waking up, but today he woke up right away"

—You woke up the Ryuo? Are you saying you went into his room?

"Yes. Master left me in charge of his spare key E-hehe≡."

—He must trust you a great deal. What's he like at home?

"Master is really nice and teaches me Shogi every day! But with the Ryuo Title Match coming up, he's spent lots of time cooped up in his room recently. Even though he's really busy, he always takes time to play Shogi with me every day! E-he-≡."

—I see. Then he's been devoting extra time to his own research. Speaking of which, he was recently seen with Sora-*sensei* in Harajuku. Was that a practice session in Kanto as well?

"..... Huh? He He was"

—What? You didn't know? Rumors have been circulating since pictures of

Sora-sensei dressed for a date or perhaps a practice session were posted on the Internet Well then, it appears there are some things the Ryuo hides from his apprentice. It must've been a very secret practice session.

“Hmm Must've been Hmm”

—Thank you very much.

In an interesting twist, should Ms. Hinatsuru advance all the way through the Mynavi Women's Open, she will face her *Aunt* apprentice, Sora-queen, for that very title. I sensed that the air between the two members of the same Shogi family has become so strained over the situation that they avoid looking each other in the eyes.

Sora Dual Title is fifteen years old.

Miss Hinatsuru turned ten only yesterday.

The Hawaiian sky may be a bright, clear blue but there's a foreboding sense that storms on and off the board have been building quickly since sunrise.

Mato

UNDER THE MOONLIGHT

“So this is the beach at night.”

Day 1 of the match over and done with, I went back to my room after the dinner party but couldn't turn my mind off. So, I decided to go for a walk on the beach by myself.

It's past 10 o'clock at night.

The Meijin closed off Day 1 of the first Ryuo Title Match with a sealing move on the 50th turn.

“..... I'm in control of the board. I also have more waiting time left”

When matches are split into two days, it gets shut down at 6 o'clock. So, whichever player's turn it is at the end of Day 1 writes their move down on a piece of paper and seals it in an envelope. The observer will open it and read the move to start Day Two.

That's called a *sealing move*.

There's a lot of discussion about whether the player who makes it or receives it has the advantage.

For me personally, I think the one who makes it has an edge.

“..... The player who makes it knows what move is coming next, so they have a whole night to think and plan”

The Meijin made the sealing move, but I got him to use a good amount of waiting time to claim it, so that works for me.

“I've got thirty more minutes than he does As long as I can maintain the lead, that time will be a huge asset in the late game,” I tell myself in a quiet whisper as I walk along the dark, sandy beach.

I would love to talk with somebody about how the match is shaping up, but it's still going on. Since I'm not allowed to talk with anyone about Shogi, I'm talking to myself like this to keep my head on straight, alone.

“..... There's no doubt his sealing move will be taking the Pawn I advanced to ♞ 2 Four. That's for sure. I'll choose to take it with the Rook. The problem is what the Meijin will do from there”

A sequence pops into my head and I follow it.

“ ♞ 6 Five Pawn, ♜ 2 Three Bishop, ♞ Take with Gold, ♜ take with Rook, promote, ♞ 6 Six Pawn ♜ 3 Three Dragon If the ♞ 6 Seven Pawn promotes here, then ♜ takes it with the Gold, into ♞ 6 Seven Bishop, ♜ Gold retreats to 6 Eight, ♞ 4 Seven Bishop, promotes Maybe?”

But, I throw that sequence out right away.

“..... Yeah, there's no way that'll happen.”

If things played out just like that, I'd send my Bishop directly into enemy territory and sacrifice it to get a Promoted Rook, also called a Dragon and the strongest piece in Shogi. But I'd also be capturing the Meijin's Gold and Knight and taking control of the sequence as well.

The Bishop is a big piece, but getting both the Gold and Knight for it makes it well worth the trade.

“If it's for two, take the Pawn as well. as the saying goes. Yeesh, I've got to stop dreaming up sequences that go my way That'll come back to bite me.”

I'll have a commanding lead if it does go that way, but reality isn't so nice.

“..... I mean, I've got an *anaguma* defense already in place, so it's hard to see things going south.”

My defense can't get any better than it already is. Even if taking those two pieces is greedy, as long as I can get that Dragon, the most powerful piece in Shogi, then I should be able to fight on equal footing.

“If it goes that far

—I might win.

Of course, I’m not going to say that out loud. Even just to myself.

But, I really—.

“..... Huh?”

Hearing something different in the waves pulls my focus away from my mental Shogi board and toward the real ocean.

I look up—and make eye contact with an angel.

The angel, wearing a swimsuit, gently sparkles in the crisp moonlight.

An unbelievable sight But, I’m sure it’s an angel.

I mean, there’s no way any human being could be this stunningly beautiful

“..... Yaichi?”

“Huh? Big Sis? Is that you?”

The angel turns out to be Big Sis.

She comes out of the water, silver hair dripping wet as she walks barefoot across the sand in my direction. All the water droplets in her silver hair sparkle like stars in the moonlight.

How could she be this beautiful? I ask myself, watching her. She then wraps her arms around herself, like she’s trying to hide her chest and says in a sharp voice, “..... Perv.”

“W-w-well, you’re in a swimsuit! Where am I supposed to look?!”

I make a counterargument and turn away to hide my burning red face.

“B-But What are you doing swimming at night?”

“I’d get sunburned during the day.”

“Ahh You would, wouldn’t you.”

Big Sis has been pale since she was born and extremely sensitive to sunlight.

Now that she’s grown up a bit, she can go outside during the day for a while. But even still, she needs that parasol Big Sis used to collapse after only a few minutes out in the sun back when she was little.

That’s why she got so good at Shogi.

It’s the only game that you can play indoors that can never be perfected no matter how much you play. She discovered it and got hooked. Then again, saying that all Ginko Sora had was Shogi might be more accurate.

It’s pretty jarring how thin her arms and legs look in the moonlight.

Just as I was following the moonbeams with my eyes, Big Sis says, “What are you doing out so late, Yaichi?”

“What? Oh, I, uh”

“Peeping?”

“No!!”

I can’t talk about Shogi, remember?! Give me a second to come up with something else!

Sand crunching beneath her feet, Big Sis walks over to one of the hotel’s outdoor showers and rinses off before grabbing a towel hanging from a nearby tree branch. She then wipes off her white skin and dries her hair.

Watching all this beneath the light blue moon is like seeing a fairy tale come to life

Big Sis looks at me as I’m getting caught up in the moment and says, “Doesn’t matter. I was just getting bored of swimming and was thinking about going for a

walk around the city. Come with me.”

“At this time of night?”

“Because it’s night. It’s too hot in the afternoon and we’d stick out.”

Well, I wanted to go for a walk and wanted someone to talk to as well. I’m fine with going into the city but

“You’re not seriously going to walk around wearing that?”

“As if. I’ve got something to wear over it.”

“You do? Did you bring some clothes out here?”

“Yes. I just had something brought.”

“Come again?”

“Your jacket.”

“Mine?!”

So, you’re saying you want me to take off my jacket?! I’m in a title match, what if I catch a cold?!

Big Sis spins to the right and grabs hold of my hood before I can get away.

“Come on. I’ll wear it for you so off with the jacket.”

“But I just bought it and I’m only wearing a T-shirt under here. It’s a bit chilly——.”

“Off.”

“Okay.”

The hierarchy system I’ve had shoved down my throat since I was a kid won’t let me refuse. I’ll probably be jerked around by this silver-haired devil disguised as a beautiful angel for the rest of my life

I reluctantly remove the jacket that I liked so much when I bought it. I protest with my face to let her know how much I hate what’s happening once I get it all

the way off. That's when a low kick comes flying in.

"I'm putting it on now. Turn the other way."

She's just putting it on, so I don't see what the big deal is. Then again, she is acting a bit embarrassed.

I do what she says, dragging the leg that took the brunt of that kick behind me.

"..... Yeesh. If only you were just one thousandth as nice as you are cute"

Thinking she'd get angry at me for no reason if I stay too close, I start drifting toward the city and get back to thinking about Shogi.

The second match is in Osaka. I'll have the home arena advantage.

—Tomorrow, if I can win Then winning two in a row could actually happen!! A winning streak against the Meijin!!

I admire the city's sparkling lights as my train of thought picks up speed—.

"..... Don't go without me"

"What?"

Big Sis quietly says something behind me and pulls on my shirt.

"I wouldn't go without you. I'm waiting right here."

"..... Perv."

"What, why?!"

No reason at all

Now wearing my jacket, Big Sis holds out with her arms at me to show how much the sleeves dangle.

"Like a tent."

“What’d you expect? Sure, I’m not all that tall, but any men’s jacket would be too big for you. Plus, I’m two years older, remember? You understand that, right? You forgot, didn’t you?”

B-But, I got to say Wearing a big jacket like that, yeah

I know she’s got a swimsuit on but It looks like she’s wearing nothing underneath.

“Perv.”

“H-h-h-how?! It’s not like that’s the hot outfit or anything!! Besides, you’re like a sister to me so it’s not like I want you that way!”

“I hate this jacket because you look at me like a piece of meat.”

“Then give it back.”

“No.”

The spoiled princess can say whatever she wants. I don’t get it at all

She must just be in the mood to mess with me.

For the first time since we arrived in Hawaii, Big Sis smiles so big it’s like her lips jump right out at me.



“Come on. Let’s go.”

With that, she takes my hand and starts walking.

Honolulu’s a big tourist city, so I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that there are quite a few people out even at this time of night.

Many shops are still open, and they’ve got tons of customers.

“..... Looks like that *sanuki* udon chain restaurant is the most popular one around

“..... That’s kinda disappointing

Watching all those white folks line up outside a Marukame Noodle Shop out of the corner of my eye, I start exploring the Hawaiian city at night with Big Sis and no real destination in mind. Walking around a foreign city at night alone would be scary, but for some reason, it’s kind of exciting with her.

We meander down one of the big streets until Big Sis stops in front of an ice cream shop.

“I want some.”

“This late? You’ll get fat.”

“It’s lunchtime in Japan.”

I don’t see how that’s relevant. But she says it anyway and then takes *my* wallet out of *my* jacket pocket and uses *my* money to buy ice cream like that’s naturally how it’s supposed to work.

We find a bench close by and take a seat. Big Sis looks extremely satisfied with that first bite. She gave me a little bit too Just a bit.

“Pretty good ice cream, don’t you think, Yaichi?”

“Pretty sweet, but yeah.”

Almost everything I've eaten since getting here has been sweet, but I think that ice cream might've just out-sweetened everything else.

I get up and go throw the cup away in the trash can.

Big Sis is still sitting on the bench when I get back. She holds her hand up toward me.

"..... Nm."

"Ah Okay."

I take that hand and help her to her feet like a princess getting out of her throne.

She loosens her grip as we start walking And, without really thinking, our fingers start interlocking.

Sort of like when you decide on a Shogi formation, you search for the right position in combination without saying a word and it falls into place.

In the deepest formation possible.

"....."

Something in my gut tells me we shouldn't be doing this, and my heart starts racing. The problem might be I'm still in the middle of the match. The Meijin's sealing move is still in the envelope and here I am walking around the city at night, holding hands with a girl.

But This is Hawaii! I tell myself as an excuse and I remain hand-in-hand with a girl beautiful enough to turn heads everywhere we go in this foreign city.

It sounds like something out of some guy's daydream, but it's really happening. A soft *zing* goes through my chest every time I catch a glimpse of Big Sis's profile.

We must've held hands thousands of times since I was a little kid

I set out into this vast world on my Shogi adventure with a tight grip on her

hand, and that adventure is still going.

It didn't matter how dark the cave or how vicious the beast, I could take on anything as long as Big Sis was with me. Nothing scared us when we were together, and I truly believed we could go anywhere.

But, when was it?

When did we let go and start going off on our own?

In the end, we got back to the hotel about an hour later.

It's almost midnight. I've got a big match to continue tomorrow, so I need to lie down and give my mind and body a break even if I can't sleep.

I walk Big Sis back to her room and ask before she opens the door, "Please give me my jacket back."

"No."

"Say what?"

We're back in the hotel, so what's the problem? Having just bought that jacket, it really hurts to have it taken away so soon. Does she like wearing men's clothes that much?

"Oh yeah, Big Sis. Who're you rooming with?"

"No one. I offered to share a room because I'm in the Sub League, but I think I got special treatment because of my titles. Why do you ask?"

"Huh? No reason Ai said she's sharing with Keika, so I was just wondering who would be staying with you."

"..... Even now, at a time like this, you think about some grade school girl."

"What? A time like this?"

"Idiot, idiot. Loli King."

“I’m not like that?! How many times do I have to tell you?!”

“Where’s the proof?”

“Come again?”

“..... If you want me to believe you, prove it.”

With that, she presses her back up against the door and looks right at me——.

Then leans her head back a bit and closes her eyes.

“.....!!”

T-This is!

At first, I was sure she was teasing me. This is her *go to* pose whenever she wants to have a bit of fun at my expense, which is quite a bit.

But I figured out right away that something was different this time.

Even in this dark hallway in the hotel, I could see the nape of her neck turning red Her eyelashes quivering.

That’s how I could tell Big Sis was serious.

Because, I mean——that’s exactly what happens to her when she is about make a decisive move in a match

“S-Stop teasing me! I’ve got a match tomorrow! I need sleep?!”

In the end, I refused to take Big Sis’s bait and avoided her move completely.

I turned away, pretending to be shy and a bit angry before leaving as fast as my legs could carry me.

I thought I heard a voice behind me as I was moving through the hall.

“..... Such an idiot.”

My heart was beating so hard when I got back to my room I wasn’t sleepy at all.

Is that because I feel like I’m going to win tomorrow? Is there another reason?

I thought about it until I fell asleep, but still didn't have an answer.

🏠 SHOCKED WASTELAND

“The sealing move is—— 🏠 Pawn taken at 2 Four.”

Day 2 of the match starts with the observer announcing the sealing move.

The Meijin did exactly what I expected, but there’s still a part of me that breathes a sigh of relief when the observer makes the announcement. That means I didn’t spend all that time thinking last night for nothing.

The match then starts going exactly how I predicted.

He must think he used too much time yesterday. The Meijin is keeping up the pace. Since I already read through everything that’s happening, I match him step for step.

——I’ve got thirty minutes of waiting time over him. If I can keep this up until late game, I’ll be sitting pretty!

I kept playing with that thought in the back of my head but My hand stops in midair.

“..... Isn’t this?”

I stare at the board in disbelief at what just showed up.

It’s exactly what popped into my head when I was out walking on the beach last night But it was so lopsided in my favor, I threw it out because I thought *reality isn’t that nice*. Well, here it is.

“.....?”

I sneak a glance at the Meijin.

The man sitting across the board from me is cleaning his glasses like he was relaxing at home. There’s no negativity, no stress at all. It’s not the kind of relaxed that comes from thinking *things don’t look good, but oh well* either.

“???”

I can't tell what he's thinking at all, so I look back down at the board and think through everything one more time.

—Has he set a trap somewhere

I check my formation for holes, but I've got an *anaguma*. It's not exactly an impenetrable fortress, but I know my defenses are stronger at the very least. I don't see any traps either.

All I need to do now is focus on how to attack.

I stopped thinking about the sequence when I got to this spot last night because I thought, in the unlikely event it actually showed up, victory was in the bag. If one hundred pros looked at the board as it is now, I'd bet that all one hundred would say it's just a matter of time until I win. I'm that far ahead.

Think of it this way: I'd be the only one with face cards in my hand if we were playing poker. Not only that, I've got plenty of time to figure out my next move.

So I set to work to figure out exactly how I'm going to land the final blow—.

——Huh?

The more I thought about it, the closer I lean in toward the board. I frown.

The reason.

—There's nowhere to attack?

That can't be right.

Seriously, I've got a Dragon in his territory, I traded my Bishop for both his Gold and Knight and I've got full control of the sequence. With all these things going my way, I should be able to cook up a devastating offensive.

But at the same time.

Even with all the best ingredients—they're useless if you don't have anything to make.

“Hm?”

My eyebrows climbing up my forehead without realizing it, I lean even further over the board.

—That hard? With all these great ingredients to work with? Seriously?

But the deeper I read, the more I realize it’s not just *hard*.

No matter what sequence I follow, I can’t find a single one that works in my favor. Not one.

So, basically

—Could, I be in really bad shape

To say I’m shocked would be putting it lightly.

Whoosh A cold chill runs down my spine but my head and face start burning up. It feels like I caught one heck of a cold and the stomach flu at the same time. My heart is pounding against my ribs so hard it hurts.

Careful to keep my voice steady between these thundering heartbeats, I turn to the recordkeeper and asked in a calm, quiet voice.

“Record, please

“Here you are.”

Focusing hard enough to keep my hands steady, I take the papers from him.

I didn’t ask for it so I could see who made what move when. I remember all that clear as day.

There are numbers written down beside each move that I need to check—waiting time usage.

“.....!!”

A scream near broke free the second I saw those digits.

Since Day 2 of the match started, the Meijin has only used seventeen minutes

of waiting time.

That's less than two minutes per move. Considering we had eight hours to start with, that's almost nothing.

I was absolutely sure that the Meijin was thinking: *oh well*, and went with the sequence because he didn't have a choice, certain that he thought he used too much time on Day 1 and had to make up for it.

But I was wrong.

The Meijin didn't feel like he was losing.

"..... Oh no"

Words fell out of my mouth even though I thought it was locked up tight. The realization hit me so hard that my heart had to cry out somehow.

—No way Has he read it?! all the, way through?!

".....!!"

I give the sheets back to the recordkeeper.

But I couldn't keep my hands from shaking anymore.

The papers aren't all that thick, but I can hear them wobble.

"Pardon the interruption. I'm here to take lunch orders"

Someone from the hotel staff enters the room with menus in his hand.

Honestly, I couldn't care less about lunch. Now's not the time for eating. I'd have given up the whole break for more time to think.

.....But, skipping lunch might show the Meijin how shaken I am right now

Nah, the fact that I'm thinking about that at all means he already knows. Even so, I'm trying to keep up the act. It's the only defense I've got left.

I skim through the menu and point at something that I can just wolf down and be done with it.

“This The house club sandwich.”

Meanwhile, the Meijin didn’t order a thing.

—He’s not eating lunch? Why not?

I’m so on edge that even his *not ordering lunch* sends my train of thought into a tailspin.

Skipping lunch is perfectly normal. He might’ve just overeaten at breakfast, or he might be the type that’s happy enough with the snacks served during the match between the breakfast and dinner provided during title matches.

It’s also possible that the food here in Hawaii didn’t agree with his stomach.

But I’m in such bad shape that I think—*Don’t tell me The match is as good as over?! Did I mess up that bad?!*

Nothing else came to mind.

Your heart hurts when formations crumble.

And the match itself ends when your spirit breaks.

Including the lunch break, I thought as hard as I could for over two hours but couldn’t find a way back from the brink. The only thing I figured out during that time was that I’d been too naïve. The more I thought about it the more I felt that poison circulate and etch away at my fighting spirit.

I put a Pawn in enemy territory as soon as the match got started again, but it was just a bluff.

The Meijin keeps up the high pace he’s had since this morning. I knew it, he’s already read to the end.

“Ouch”

Seeing the Meijin’s Pawn plow through what I thought was a strong *anaguma* felt like watching someone else’s problem. I’m in no shape to keep up the fight, let alone find a way to come back from behind

I go on attack just for the hell of it, but the Meijin defends perfectly.

Then on the 92nd move

The Meijin deploys a Gold right next to my King and I bow my head.

“..... I lost.”

2:45 in the afternoon—it’s over.

The Shogi match I thought I couldn’t lose at the end of Day 1 ended in failure before the afternoon snacks were brought out on Day 2.

“One at a time! Do not rush into the room!”

The match recorder and cameraman were swallowed up by an avalanche of journalists at pretty much the same moment I threw in the towel. The observer tries to do crowd control, but nobody’s listening.

Shutters start clicking as soon as the media floods in, cameras at the ready as they jockey for the best position.

The best position—basically, where they can get a good shot of the Meijin’s, the victor’s, face.

“.....”

The two of us just stare down and don’t say a word. We don’t move a muscle. Can’t.

At this point, journalists working for newspapers and magazines have the right to ask questions first.

But, the players me, I’m so depressed that I’ve brought the room’s vibe down with me. Those journalists couldn’t say anything.

It was the chairman who broke the ice.

“..... Thinking about it logically——.”

I have no idea when he sat down next to the board because he was real quiet about it, but he tells a room so crowded there's nowhere to stand what my heart wants to say.

"..... Making an *anaguma*, completing a two-for-one trade, possessing a Dragon with control of the sequence would normally be very promising for a player with the first move"

He sounds genuinely surprised.

Even Chairman Tsukimitsu, a Move-Loss Bishop Exchange specialist to this day, didn't think the match could turn south. Just like I didn't.

"So then, you're saying——."

A Shogi journalist finally speaks up and cautiously confirms what he heard.

"The Meijin's Bishop deployment was *magic*?"

"Magic? What just occurred cannot be put in such simple terms."

The chairman snaps back in an unusually harsh tone and says in a slightly fearful voice, "That was a miracle."

▲ AURORA

There's a sound going off in my head.

"A magnificent start toward the Eternal Septuple title! Is a clean sweep in the making?!"

"The opening move is yours for the next match. Please tell us your thoughts!!"

"Meijin! A message for everyone in Japan waiting to witness history!!"

The room's silent tranquility broke when I lowered my head.

Journalists and organizers rush through the hallway, their footsteps echoing.

A media avalanche, shutters going off.

And the Meijin's voice constantly responding to a never-ending slew of questions.

Some questions were directed my way, to the loser. But for the life of me I can't remember what they were or what I said.

The one thing I do remember is that strange sound, and the fact that it was always ringing in my ears.

The Meijin happily answered the mountain of questions thrown his way. I don't know what got written down, but I do know he didn't give them the flashy answers the reporters wanted. Just simple things like *I'm not thinking about the record* or *I'll be playing to deepen the understanding of Shogi in the next match*. Blinding flashes went off whenever he moved one of the pieces, right along with all the digital pings and electronic clicks that go with them.

But this is a different noise, deeper, like an earthly shake that won't stop.

The review session over, I went back to my room but the noise wouldn't stop.

Thinking it could be thunder, I go to the window to look outside but it's not raining. I don't know when the sun went down, but the sky is full of countless twinkling stars just like when I was out walking with Big Sis.

But the noise I couldn't hear last night is crystal clear right now.

—What the heck is it?

I stare up at the night sky from the corner of the room, completely forgetting to take off my kimono, and try to figure out what the sound is.

Someone's behind me.

"S-Sorry I knocked, but you never answered"

It's Ai.

She apparently came to bring me down to the after-party because I never showed up. That's right, I gave her my spare key. That must be how she got inside.

"Um Master? Please don't be too hard on yourself."

Forcing herself to sound cheerful, the young and lively apprentice tries to encourage her Master after his failure.

"It's all right! It's just one loss! All you have to do is take one match, and then you'll—," she got that far before swallowing the rest of her words.

Because she saw my face when I turned around.

"Just one loss you say?"

I throw the *shingen bukuro* drawstring pouch I'd been clutching to the floor and yell at her at the top of my lungs.

"After seeing that match, how can you say that?!"

"*Gasp*!"

My apprentice, barely ten years old, looks terrified.

I've never seen her make that face before. I'm also pretty sure that she's never seen me make this face either.

But I'm not stopping. These words aren't going to be stopped.

"How can you be so peppy after seeing that Shogi?! Do you actually think this'll stop at one loss?! If this were later in the series, I'd be totally screwed?! He just tore my Shogi sense out by the roots!!"

"Sho Shogi sense?"

"It'd be fine if he found a move I didn't read! I can fix that problem! All I'd have to do is read deeper!"

It's possible to read more sequences by redistributing how much time I spend on each one. I can adjust right then and there.

But——.

"I read that sequence perfectly and lost because *he proved me wrong!*"

I never thought that could ever happen.

The right sequence came to mind right away, but I rejected it.

It was the best move.

"What's worse, against the strategy I've researched more than anyone he just destroyed every single thing I knew, the sense that I've worked so hard to build?! I've played tens of thousands of matches, but the Meijin just proved everything wrong with one!!"

In that moment, I finally figured out what the noise is.

It's——the world crashing down around me.

"There's no time Should I go back and research everything about Move-Loss Bishop Exchange from square one? No! There's no way to know if the Meijin would let me use it That means researching would be a waste of time! Damn it!! What the hell am I supposed to do?!"

Ignoring my trembling apprentice in the corner of the room, I collapse to the floor, biting my fingernails and mumbling to myself.

The Meijin took aim at my strongest point and sliced it down.

Without a sound.

Just broke it.

There was a bus tour scheduled for the players the day after the match because they couldn't do much sightseeing before it.

However, I canceled my seat and took the earliest flight back to Japan on my own. There wasn't a second to spare.

The skies that were so open and blue when I came to Hawaii were now covered in thick, gray clouds. Rain came down as if trying to drive that point home.

And that sound won't stop.

RECORD 2

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka

- PLAYER NUMBER: 34
- BIRTHDATE: May 13th, 1998
- HOMETOWN: Choufu City, Tokyo
- MASTER: Keiji Kazahari 9-dan
- TITLE HISTORY:

Women's King- 3 Seasons

Empress- 1 Season

Ryou Ts

SPINNING DRAGON

“..... I lost.”

The second match ended without any fireworks.

The match, held at a hotel in Osaka, took place only two weeks after the first one so I went in thinking this one was a lost cause, a *throwaway match*.

So losing didn't hurt that much.

This is what I said during a post-match interview.

“I'll have the first move next time, and I'm finally getting used to playing against the Meijin after two matches. I believe I'll be able to play better Shogi in Tendou.”

Being in Osaka, lots of familiar faces were waiting for me in the break room, ready to do their own review sessions and break down all the turning points with me. Unfortunately, without any real fireworks during the match, there wasn't much to talk about at all.

That doesn't mean the after-party wasn't fun.

The S&M novelist from Kobe, Dan Onizawa, is here. But, he just waves at me on his way over to talk with Big Sis and Ai for the first time in months and looks like he's having the time of his life. Big Sis, on the other hand, looks like she'd rather be anywhere else

I also happen to run into the last person I expected to see.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*, please allow me to thank you once again for looking after my granddaughter.”

“Ah It's nice to see you again.”

Ai Yashajin's grandfather.

With Akira standing just behind him, the man was very careful not to draw attention to himself and waited for the right timing to come up to me once I was by myself.

“I’m sorry, sir. You came all this way and I couldn’t give you a good match to watch

“Not at all.”

The elderly gentleman slowly shakes his head from side to side.

“I may not know much about Shogi, but I know a thing or two about competition. The look in your eyes during the match, Kuzuryu-*sensei*, told me you’ve made an important discovery. I look forward to seeing how you use it in your upcoming matches.”

“Well, when you put it that way

My heart feels lighter somehow. I take a look around the room and ask, “Is Ai with you today?”

“My lady is in her quarters, studying. Her match draws near.”

The *match* Akira is talking about is the Mynavi Finals.

Her match is on the same day as Ai Hinatsuru’s in Tokyo.

“..... I must apologize that I haven’t been able to work with your granddaughter much recently. I plan to accompany her to Tokyo on the day of the match.”

“Thank you very much, Kuzuryu-*sensei*.”

He takes my hand and starts tearing up.

“I beg you, please continue to be by my granddaughter’s side. I beg you

Then, the third match.

This one is taking place in Tendou City, Yamagata Prefecture and I'm perfectly prepared on all fronts.

The city, said to be the birthplace of Shogi, is home to 60,000 people. It's the only place in the world where people seem to eat, sleep and breathe Shogi.

Its *Human Shogi* event every spring is pretty famous, too.

Tendou Station is connected to their Shogi Museum. It goes without saying that there are detailed exhibits showing their traditional way to carve Shogi pieces, but they've also got extensive title match analysis on display.

The Ryuo Title Match is front and center. They've dubbed it the *Match of the Century* because the Meijin is on the verge of capturing the Eternal Septuple title and his 100th title season. Outside, there are posters and flags all over the town saying the same thing.

People here have caught Ryuo fever. Journalists and Shogi fans alike are there to greet us at the bottom of the station's stairs and accompany us all the way to the arena.

Even the hotel hosting the match has gone the extra mile by renaming their designated Shogi arena, usually called the *Taki no Ma*, to the *Ryuo no Ma*.

—All of this is getting me even more fired up for the match

Determined to win, I step into the *Ryuo no Ma* feeling like I own the place and vow to protect this space and my pride. Refusing to leave anything out on the board, I face the Meijin head-on, fighting him blow for blow.

The first and second matches both ended early in the afternoon on Day 2, but the third match is still neck-and-neck deep into the late game.

One-minute Shogi for both of us. It all comes down to this.

—My King is safe I can win!!

Finally adjusted to this pace after a long, long dead heat, I focus the last of my strength to find a sequence that puts the Meijin's King in checkmate.

However—.

A strange move comes flying in out of nowhere in a match where we've been going full speed for so long.

"Hm! Hnn?!"

Red flags fly in my gut and I pull my hand away from the board.

That bizarre move the Meijin put down It looks pointless, and yet there's something ominous about it. It feels wrong.

Like spotting a stone in the middle of the road while barreling down the freeway. That kind of move.

—What!? Am I in trouble?!

There's no choice but to serve away from the path I set because staying the course right now with that stone in the road might send me into a tailspin. Press forward now and there'll be no going back. I have to read this through, perfectly. But There isn't enough time to do that.

—I need more time! Three, no just two minutes!

A shameful thought crosses my mind.

Not a sequence, but I can get the time I'd kill for right now by *initiating* a certain situation on the board. That's what popped into my head.

But, it's a way that some people consider *disgraceful*.

An option I wouldn't normally take, one that players get grilled for when they do. But.

—I've got to avoid losing three in a row With time, I can win this! Then!

The line between my aesthetic standards and my will to win is blurring quite a bit.

The match recorder starts talking as I grappled with the dilemma.

“Fifty seconds. One, two, three, four——.”

“..... Haaa!”

It was like my fingers took control and made the decision for me.

A Repetition Draw.

I can buy time by repeating the same moves.

Since Repetition Draw rules go into effect on the fourth move, that gives me three turns worth of time.

Also, if I use all fifty-nine seconds available to me on each of my turns, I can buy quite a bit of time. Now that it’s happening, there’s more than enough time on my side.

——Enough to read my way to the end!

I sit all the way down on my cushion and read as fast as I can, waiting until the exact last moment to make my moves.

However, that’s when I realized I’d overlooked something extremely important.

And, once I saw it reading to the end wasn’t at the top of the list anymore.

“..... Gwah?!”

The move I’m repeating puts my opponent *in check* each time.

——*Checkmate Repetition Draw*!!

The players switch turns and start over for normal Repetition Draws.

But, when check is involved, *the player who initiated the Repetition Draw loses after the fourth turn if their opponent’s King is in check!*

In other words, four turns of this and I lose.

I was so focused on finding a way to get his King that I forgot about one of the most basic rules. Panicking, I turn to the match recorder and say.

“How many was that?! Three?!”

“.....”

“That was too close?!”

The match recorder has an uncomfortable look on his face but doesn't say a word.

Of course he wouldn't. That number of turns determines who wins and loses right now. Telling me anything would be the same as helping.

I should know that, and I probably would have realized it if I had a cooler head right now.

But in this nail biter, knowing that I've taken the *shameful* escape route by starting a Repetition Draw to buy time and come that close to losing I can't think anymore.

“Khh!”

I break the Repetition Draw with my head still spinning. It was a horrible move.

I knew it as soon as I let go——.

“.....!!”

It felt like all the blood got sucked out of my body with a *crack*.

Sweat streams down my spine and immediately soaks into my kimono, which in turn weighs down the fabric and chills me to the bone. It's like I'm wearing a boat made of ice.

The Meijin lets out a long sigh.

A very, very disappointed sigh Hearing it is so embarrassing, I want to die right here and now.

As soon as he makes his next move, I bow my head.

“..... I lost.”

Setting the scene was impossible. The only thing this loss did was soil the match record. A *failure* in every sense of the word.

“Meijin! Thoughts on your three-match winning streak?!”

“Now that the Eternal Septuple title is within reach, what would you like to say to all your supporters across the country?!”

The media swarm, brandishing their IC recorders and microphones, descends on the Meijin like a pack of wolves competing for the first bite, or sound-bite in this case. They’re also fighting to get directly behind me for the best angle, cameras at the ready.

An army of journalists and reporters circle around behind the loser’s back after Shogi matches ...

Because everyone wants a picture of the winner’s face.

All the loser can do during that time is stare at the floor and endure all the flashes going off behind their head.

The agony of defeat and proof of your own weakness get shoved down your throat every single second.

This time, with the Meijin’s Eternal Septuple title and 100th title season just one win away, it felt twice, maybe three times more intense than usual.

The Meijin is being really nice about it, saying things like *It was a close battle to the very end* and *I’m more interested in pursuing Shogi theory rather than the title in the next match*. That’s exactly why trying to escape into a Repetition

Draw was so embarrassing.

Finally, the interview ends——.

“Preparations for the evening meal have been completed. Please come to the dining hall at your leisure.”

Someone working for the hotel makes an announcement, but none of the journalists is paying attention. They’re all putting what the Meijin said down on paper or desperately trying to get a few more words out of him.

Not really up for a full review session, I talk with the Meijin about the final sequence for a couple of minutes before cleaning up the board as fast as I can.

Journalists are still asking questions and the Meijin is still answering them. Nobody needs me here. So I leave my opponent to it and stand up to leave on my own.

I was just about to take a step when.

“.....!!”

Pull!!

It feels like something’s pulling on me from behind. Next thing I know, my face hits the *tatami* mat.

I fall face first onto the floor because someone stepped on the hem of my kimono. *Wham!!* Man, that was loud.

The arena is silent again for a moment.

For the first time, everyone’s looking at me——.

Just as I get up on my hands and knees, I hear someone somewhere say.

“..... That hurt.”

Zing!

Anger and embarrassment come together with the pain of losing, bubbling

over as everything explodes into a blaze of fury Tears start streaming out of my eyes.

“.....”

Unable to say anything, I practically run back to my own room. No one paid any attention to me at all.

The after-party is the last place I want to go.

I start packing to leave the instant I get back to my room.

I took way too much damage from this loss, but I'd like to secure as much time as I can to prepare for the next match. Even if I can't win, it's my duty as a player to put up a decent fight.

At least, I thought so at the time.

“..... Maybe I should go down there and show my face first.”

Big bag over my shoulder, I step out of my room and head toward the party.

All I have to do is say hello to a few people, that's it. Just as I reach the entrance.

“Of course that guy's going to lose the title. What would you expect?”

Voices come through the door and I stop, frozen. They're journalist's voices that I know all too well.

My feet won't move.

“He took two elementary school girls as apprentices. One of them lives with him, right?”

“Maybe he thinks playing house will somehow result in playing better Shogi.”

“You know, the Meijin, good as he is, hasn’t taken a single apprentice yet because he’s so determined to perfect his Shogi skills. That Ryuo, he’s not good enough to actually teach people how to play.”

“Everyone singing his praises after taking the title probably went to his head. He’s still basically a kid, so I can’t really blame him.”

“Speaking of titles, Naniwa’s Snow White is shaping up pretty well to defend her title in the Women’s Throne Title Match for the third time in a row. How long do you think she can keep up the perfect streak? Then again, she’s a monster right up there like the Meijin.”

“That girl is marketable, very much so. There are rumors floating around that she’s dating Kuzuryu. I really hope she dumps him sooner rather than later.”

“Couldn’t agree more. Ginko should find a boyfriend who’ll make better headlines. Just imagine if she started going out with an actor.”

“Shogi has the Meijin, and he’ll make more than enough headlines on his own.”

“Don’t forget about Kuzuryu’s apprentices. With looks like theirs, the two of them will be household names in no time once they make their Women’s League debuts. Two ten-year-olds with enough talent to make it to the Mynavi Finals deserve to have a proper Master. That’ll be better for everyone involved.”

“However that works out, I just want the Meijin to hurry up and become the Eternal Septuple. That’s what everyone wants. Someone should just tell *him* to get out of the way.”

“Maybe he’s figured it out already? He’s lost three straight after all.”

“Ha-ha! Well then, he’s contributing to the Shogi world in his own way.”

Maybe I should’ve stepped in, defended myself.

Heck, it’s times like this that a competitor should say something.

..... But, it just wasn't in me.

I'm weak, that's the truth. It's also true that I enjoy living with my apprentice.

He's not actually good enough to teach people how to play.

Those words stabbed me right through my heart. They also hit the nail right on the head.

Why in the world did I ever take her on as an apprentice?

Am I more comfortable always having someone weaker than me around?
What is she, my cute little pet?

I can't deny any of those claims, there's no way.

Rather than going into the party, I stay out of sight, sneak out of the hotel, and start walking toward Tendou Station.

It's not far enough away to justify calling a taxi And I don't want to hear whatever the driver might say when he sees my face.

“..... It's freezing”

Tendou's autumn evenings are cold enough to make the bottom fall out of a thermometer.

But what's worse are all the Shogi decorations along the road. Each Ryuo Title Match poster I see feels like an icicle through the chest.

The only bullet trains still running stop in Sendai, but I don't give it a second thought and buy one. Every moment in this Shogi-obsessed town is torture.

Walking onto the deserted platform—someone took my picture.

It was Ms. Mato, the journalist.

“..... Even now, you take pictures? That's cruel.”

“That's my job.”

Lowering the camera, she takes a pen and notepad out of her coat pocket and

says, “I became suspicious when you never showed up at the after-party, so I hailed a taxi and here I am.”

“You watch pretty close, don’t you?”

“Yes. I’ve always watched you.”

True, she’s been shadowing me ever since the first Ryuo Title Match. That’s the kind of devotion I’d usually admire but Right now it’s just a pain in the ass.

“So, why didn’t you come to the after-party?”

“It’s the loser’s job to fade away.”

“Would you please tell me the real reason? For me

“..... I’m sure you already know without me spelling it out. Knowing you.”

Ms. Mato isn’t an enemy, I know that.

But, after hearing what those other journalists had to say

“Please write whatever you’d like.”

Boarding the bullet train like it was the last step in my great escape, I left Ms. Mato standing alone on the platform.

I found a net café close to Sendai Station once I got there to kill time until the first train.

Going from a title match participant’s hotel suite to that filthy, narrow cubicle with a single chair was like moving from a castle into a pig pen. Sleep never came, so I spent the hours turning manga pages. I don’t remember anything I read, but at least I didn’t have to think about that Shogi loss for a little while.

Talk about pitiful.

▲ ROCK BOTTOM

“Welcome home, Master.”

My apprentice greets me just inside the front door with her usual peppy smile.

Of course, I’m sure she already knows I lost.

One more loss and my title is gone I know full well she is keeping up this happy act to make sure her Master who’s been forced into a do-or-die match will be as comfortable as possible. But, it just annoys me.

Maybe she can tell, because there’s a fearful quiver in her voice when she says, “Uh, um Dinner is ready and I drew a bath for you”

“..... ‘Kay.”

“The bed is made, too”

I drop my things off in my room without saying a word, trudge into the tub and then to the dining table.

Ai, probably sensing my mood, kept herself out of sight in the *tatami* room the whole time. She didn’t make a single sound.

Honestly, I was grateful for the space.

I don’t know why, but anything she does right now just pisses me off I guess it’d be more accurate to say I’m furious at this urge to intimidate someone weaker than my pathetic self just to feel like a man again. As long as I can’t see Ai, I can’t take out this frustration on her.

However, as soon as the clock struck 7 in the evening——.

“Umm Master? May I, have ... a moment?”

“What?”

“.....!”

Ai quivers just inside my doorway.

Like a terrified slave trying to judge their wicked Master's mood, she tries to smile at first but then switches to making a more serious face

All of it's getting on my nerves. But why? She's such a cute apprentice.

“I, um Will go to the Mynavi Finals tomorrow in Tokyo So, uh A match,” Ai says, her body trembling the whole time and she suddenly blurts out. “I, I'm so sorry to disturb you when you're tired! One match ... please teach me Shogi!” she yells in one breath before collapsing into a deep bow.

“..... Fine.”

“! T-Thank you so much!!”

Ai bounces back up and looks up at me. That's the first time I've seen her real face since I came home. Like a cute little puppy

“When you're ready!”

Formations took shape right out of the gate.

Obviously, I'm not taking it easy on her today.

All I want to do is crush my opponent as quickly as possible.

“Ah! Keh!!”

Under siege, Ai holds her ground and sets up to fight as long as her strength will last.

However, she's so far behind that she's got zero chance to come back.

Even if there's a big difference in skill, the weaker player can hold out for a long time if they abandon offense and focus only on defending. That type of match takes forever to end.

“Khh Haaa Haaa!”

Ai is holding out.

Just as I refuse to hold back anywhere near as much as I normally do and move in to crush her formation, Ai ignores the pressure and keeps protecting her King. Leaning over the board, looking at the utter despair makes her face twist and turn.

All of that irritates the hell out of me. I rudely snap down a piece, and then get angry at myself for acting like this It's a vicious spiral.

I just want this match to be over and done.

This is just a waste of time.

— I don't have time to be doing this right now!

I slam down my next piece, trying to get the message across.

But, Ai didn't get the hint. She's only thinking about how to survive one more turn. That total obliviousness was the last straw. Fiery anger surges through my veins.

Once it reached the boiling point.

“.....!!”

I bite down so hard my teeth whine and I knock the pieces across the board with my right hand.

“Agh?!”

At first, Ai had a *what did you do that for?* kind of look on her face as she looked up and down between the pieces scattered around the board and me.

But a few moments pass and every ounce of blood drains from her skin. Shivering and blue in the face as if she'd been caught out in a blizzard, her body starts violently shaking as she screams, “P-Please forgive me!!”

Ai dives away from the board, going from sitting on her ankles to full-out prostration on the floor. She quivers and cowers for several minutes without budging.

“Ummm I, need to use the bathroom Sorry

Keeping her head down, Ai practically runs down the hall toward the toilet.

Sob Sob I can hear her from here.

— Why the hell did I, do that?

Self-loathing hits me like a tidal wave.

I can hardly believe myself. If only I could take it back.

I’m not trying to be super strict on her.

Because seriously, I didn’t have to mess up the board when words would’ve worked just fine.

Holding out against a pro or a member of the Women’s League when you know you have no chance of winning is not only rude to them, but rude to the fans as well. That’s why you need to throw in the towel when you know you’ve lost.

Yes, I should’ve taught her with words.

I want time to myself right now. So, I’m sorry but that’s all for today.

Yes, I should’ve told her the reason.

Why couldn’t I do that? Why did I get so angry at Ai? Why was taking out my frustration on her the only way to vent?

— Because I’m backed into a corner, I guess.

That’s all I could come up with. In that case——.

..... Staying like this Living together, too

It was a bizarre living situation from the start.

Live-in apprentices are a thing of the past, and I'd be in high school right now while living with a grade schooler. Of course a rumor or two is going to go around when two people our age are living under the same roof without any family connection.

—Living with me will hurt Ai's career

Once a decision is made, all that's left is the follow-through.

I take out my smartphone and contact the people I need to talk to. Everything was settled with a few calls.

Ai comes out of the bathroom a few minutes later.

..... Please forgive ... my rudeness"

Her eyes and nose are bright red. Tear trails over her cheeks are crystal-clear.

Seeing her so cute, innocent and vulnerable will make me have second thoughts I look away.

Stopping just short of the *tatami* room, Ai sits on her ankles in the hallway.

The deep green color of the *tatami* mats is a barrier between us, separating her from my world.

Staring at the Shogi board, I tell her.

"I've asked Akira to look after you tomorrow. Meet up with Ai Yashajin at Osaka Station and go onto Tokyo from there."

"....."

Ai opens her mouth as if trying to say something, but no words come out. She's just mouthing dry air.

Maybe she cried so hard she lost her voice.

Ignoring that, I tell her the rest.

"Then, once your match is over, go directly to Master Kiyotaki's place. I've

asked him to look after you until the title match is over. I'll send your things along tomorrow."

It may sound like a short-term deal ... I understand that there's a very real chance Ai will never come back here again.

I'm sure Ai can sense that.

That's why she's not trying to respond no matter how long I wait for her.

Silence is the only thing she can do to defend herself right now.

So, I press her for an answer to drive my point home.

"Is that clear?"

"..... Yes"

Her response was short and so quiet it faded into thin air.

A pitiful man who became Ryuo by mistake and the girl who idolized him to the point that she had dreams of entering the Women's League.

This became the temporary Master and apprentice's final exchange.

PIECE FIREWORKS

That day, Ai Hinatsuru hardly said a word since morning.

“What’s wrong with you? You were so gung ho during the Challenge Matches, remember?”

“..... Huh? Oh, yes E-he-he”

Ai Yashajin, sitting in the seat next to her, tried to strike up a conversation, but Ai Hinatsuru only answered with an unconvincing smile.

“.....?”

The dark-haired girl could tell something was amiss but chose not to pry. She didn’t even ask about Yaichi’s whereabouts even though he was supposed to be there with them.

Fourth floor of the Tokyo Shogi Association: *Unkaku*.

A long scroll with *Mynavi Women’s Open* painted in big letters hung in the alcove of an arena the two girls were setting foot in for the first time.

“Th-thank you for Huh?! Ai, what are you doing?!”

Ai Hinatsuru was in mid-bow, starting to greet the people already inside when she froze on the spot

Because she was shocked ... that Ai Yashajin walked right into the room and sat down in an upper seat as if it had her name on it.

The Sub League member working as the match recorder was just as taken aback But the young Yashajin didn’t seem the least bit concerned as she looked down over Hatomori Shrine from a nearby window.

It wasn’t long before Ai Yashajin’s opponent, Karen Noboryou Sub League 2-*kyu*, entered the arena.

“..... I don’t see my seat.”

Karen, dressed in her high school uniform with the orange name tag that identified her as a Sub League Member pinned to her chest, stood in place with a knapsack over her shoulder.

Agitation permeated from her voice and body language.

Ai Yashajin stayed seated as she addressed her opponent.

“You’re ruining the view. Stop standing there and sit down already.”

“You’re in the Practice League, yes? And I’m older than you. Did no one tell you the higher-ranking player sits in the upper seat?”

“This is a Women’s Shogi Tournament, right? In that case, the leagues don’t mean anything. I just sat down because the seat was open But, I’ll let you have it if you want it that badly.”

“Not much of a taunt.”

Karen set her knapsack down on the floor and took a seat. Although she was wearing a smile, her anger came through loud and clear when she snatched and opened the piece box, the upper player’s responsibility, before Ai could reach it.

Although it got off to a rebellious start, pieces were lined up on Ai Yashajin and Karen’s board as they prepared for the match to begin.

On the other hand, the last person Ai Hinatsuru’s opponent had yet to arrive.

Just as the final minutes were ticking away, and the staff members were getting antsy—.

Twp! Twp! Twp! Thunderous footsteps echoed through the halls, growing louder and louder until the sliding door was flung open with incredible force.

“.....”

The final participant took a quick glance around the arena. “Tsk!” She

snapped her tongue loud enough for everyone to hear.

“..... Why do I of all people have to play an even match with a grade school brat?”

The woman drags her feet across the room, carrying only a fan clutched in her left hand, and plops herself down in the only remaining unoccupied upper seat.

“Two grade schoolers, and some high school chick in the Sub League Heh! Being trapped in here with all these kids is gonna make my Shogi suck.”

Although she herself was a high school student only last year, the competitive aura pulsing around her shut down any arguments before they could start.

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, Women’s King.

Nicknamed the Aggressive Archangel, she was one of the best players the Women’s League had to offer.

Since she was the Mynavi Challenger last year, Ryou had been seeded through the Preliminary Matches and was favorited to win the whole tournament. She may have lost to the current Queen, Ginko Sora, in three consecutive title matches, but no one doubted her prowess.

Of course, Ai Hinatsuru knew how prestigious an opponent she was about to face.

She also knew that Ryou often came to the Kansai Shogi Association’s Player’s Room and was relatively close to her Master, Yaichi.

That’s why she thought—— Master will praise me for sure if I can beat her

Large eyes gleaming, Ai glared at her opponent with no reservations.

“..... And of course, the brat decides to stare me down before proving herself. She’s got that same look in her eyes the Kuzu does, the one that pisses me off.”

Starting to legitimately despise the elementary school girl staring at her

without even saying hello, Ryou addressed the girl.

“Hey. Start lining up your pieces, got it?”

Flipping the piece box upside down, the individual pieces scattered across the board with soft wooden clacks. The Women’s King then started snapping them into position without aligning her breathing with her opponent. Not to be outdone, Ai slapped her own pieces onto the board with just as much vigor.

Ai Yashajin listened to the chaos unfolding beside her and thought—She’s too eager to win This could be bad.

However, Ai Yashajin didn’t say anything. Defeating the Sub League member sitting across from her would require her full attention.

Ryou and Ai Hinatsuru’s pieces in place, the match recorder hastily executed a piece flip that resulted in Ai being awarded the first move.

Then—.

“It’s now time to begin the matches. Please proceed.”

“When you’re ready.” Three voices overlap.

Ryou remained silent, glaring at her opponent.

Ai Hinatsuru took a deep breath to steady her nerves.

“Haaaa— Nh!!”

Tensing her lips, Ai advanced the Pawn in front of her Rook.

Ryou answered with exactly the same move, advancing the Pawn in front of her own Rook, using almost no waiting time whatsoever. Seeing that, Ai advanced the same Pawn again without a second thought.

For the first time today, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka seemed interested in her opponent.

“A Double Wing, eh? Is the brat showing some spunk by starting a rumble? Or is this the Master’s *monkey see monkey do*?”

“.....”

“Fine by me. Don’t get much of a chance to go against Static Rook players like me in the Women’s League. Should be entertaining at least!”

With those words, Ryou advanced her own Pawn another space forward.

The two then collided, their pieces like the claws of two ferocious carnivores locked in a brawl, digging deeper and deeper into each other’s flesh——.

The battle ended exceptionally early, before the afternoon lunch break.

“..... I, lo st”

The one struggling to squeeze out an admission of defeat——was Ai Hinatsuru.

Total defeat.

She was unable to stand her ground, let alone put up a fight. It was that kind of match.

Ai had rushed forward with her King still sitting in the starting position with nothing for defense.

By the same token, Ryou left her King sitting as well and decided to meet the advance head on. Backing down from an Aerial Battle, one of her specialties, against an elementary school girl was simply not an option, so almost all of her moves were made in less than ten seconds.

Ai fought back with speed, matching her pace.

It became a game of chicken, seeing who would flinch first in this high-speed duel But Ai’s hand began hovering over the board and she was overpowered.

Reading speed and depth are Ai’s strengths.

She has won hard-fought matches against opponents who win with

experience by processing an overwhelming *amount* of information.

While she'd never say it out loud, Ai had a great deal of confidence in her abilities. She could keep up with Yaichi when the two of them did Shogi puzzles together, typically arriving at the correct answer at his speed or faster.

—I can beat anyone when it comes to reading speed and accuracy!

Ai was certain of it, though she'd never say so.

All competitors firmly believe that they are the best. If not, they wouldn't trust what they read and would always lose.

However, Ryou deviated from the sequences Ai was reading many times during the match ... At the turn of a hat.

And once Ai read a new sequence, she was awestruck.

—This one is better than the one I followed?!

She'd never experienced that feeling before

"Having a hard time believin' your eyes, huh? Never been out-read by another woman?" Ai looked up from the board with a start. Ryou hit the nail right on the head.

"Your readin' is too shallow. You look into all the options that pop up and end up wastin' time. You read a lot, sure, but most of it's garbage."

"....."

"People tend to trip up when their opponent plays somethin' they never expected. You might have won like that up until now, but it won't work on me. Want to know why? Because I cut out all the worthless sequences and only follow the best. Any idea why I can do that?"

Ryou bears her pointy teeth as Ai listens without saying a word.

"Cause I've got *sense*. That little thing called Shogi talent."

Ai wasn't the only one.

Every player who has ever lost against Ryou Tsukiyomizaka in this fashion became painfully aware of a talent gap separating them.

Blown away by Ryou's pure speed and faced with a wall of talent that could never be cleared, many of them quit Shogi altogether.

The difference between those born with wings and those born without becomes painfully obvious when big pieces collide in mesmerizing Aerial Battles. That's how Ryou became known as an *angel*.

An angel that ends lives.

An angel of death. Simply put: the Grim Reaper.

That's the Aggressive Archangel——Ryou Tsukiyomizaka.

"Hah! Here I was thinkin' you were some prodigy 'cause you beat Ika. That's all you got? A review session isn't worth the time without anywhere to go over," Ryou says as she slides her hand across the board, snatching up the pieces and putting them back in the box.

While only a coincidence, it was strikingly similar to what Yaichi did the previous night And gouged out a piece of Ai's already reeling heart after the loss.

".....!"

Ai didn't respond. She just sat on her ankles, stared into her lap, and dug her fingers into her knees. Determined not to let the enemy see her cry, she bit down on her lip in a desperate attempt to hold back the tears.

Every piece already back in the box, Ryou got to her feet and pointed her fan right at Ai's face.

"Oi. School kid." As if looking down on Ai from the top of a mountain, she said, "I fought that Master of yours in the Elementary School Meijin Finals. No handicaps, got that?"

She was referring to the Elementary School Meijin Title Match eight years

ago—.

Although she lost to Yaichi, a boy two years her junior, that particular title match is still remembered as one of the best of all time.

All four participants who made it to the semifinals became professional Shogi players or joined the Women's League, showing just how much talent was on display for that year's Elementary School Meijin Title Match.

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka possessed a wealth of talent and is remarkably strong.

"Tell me, what's the handicap when you play against that Master of yours? No Rook? Two-Piece?"

"....."

"Then again, he ain't that scary without a handicap anyway. The Meijin's goin' to put him in his place at the bottom of the barrel where he belongs. Hah! Losin' three in a row, that's too weak! He'd probably lose with a No Bishop handicap on his side, yeah?"

".....!!"

Ai bit down even harder on her lip to endure the pain, hands shaking as they clutched her knees.

However, there was nothing she could say.

Skillwise, she wasn't in a position to talk back And saying anything now would put her Master in an awkward position.

That's why she stayed silent. However, she glared daggers at Ryou Tsukiyomizaka with fire in her eyes.

Staring down on her with a bitterly cold eyes, the Women's King simply said, "You're out of your league. Scram."

▲ LUNAR ECLIPSE

“What’s th A-Ai?! Are you all right?!”

Keika rushed out the door without her shoes when she saw Akira half-carrying Ai up to the house.

Taking the limp girl from her, Keika brought Ai inside the threshold and set her down against the wall before sliding her feet into the plastic sandals her father wore in Hawaii and went back outside.

She could see Ai Yashajin in the back of a taxi parked out front and the empty seat were Ai Hinatsuru had most likely been sitting. The back door was still open.

Akira was standing next to that open door like a well-trained guard dog.

“You came all the way out here from Shin-Osaka Station by taxi? I’ll get some money to cover——.”

“No! The Lord of the Manor shall cover all travel expenses. Please do not concern yourself.”

“But”

“She’s saying we don’t need the money. People that don’t have any to start with should just nod and go along with it,” said a clearly agitated Ai Yashajin with her arms folded across her chest.

“My word! Getting completely destroyed at the Tokyo Association then crying all the way here I’ve never been so annoyed! Don’t play that way if you’re going to cry so hard when you lose! Everyone knows charging headfirst into a title holder won’t work!”

“There was nothing she could do. Her opponent was Ryou Tsukiyomizaka after all, and—— ...”

“No matter who your opponent is or where your head is at, playing Shogi is pointless if you don’t win. Excuses won’t change anything.”

“..... You know what. Yes, you’re absolutely right.”

“?”

Ai fell silent, losing interest after Keika wholeheartedly agreed with her opinion.

A few moments later, “Humph.”

“Akira. We’re leaving.”

“Oh! Wait just a second!”

“..... What?”

“Congratulations on making it through the first round. And Thank you, for winning.”

“Huh? Why are you thanking me for that?”

“Because if both of his apprentices lost, Yaichi would never get back to his usual self. That’s why you won, isn’t it? Why you used all those off-the-board techniques——.”

“.....!”

Ai Yashajin broke off eye contact and looked down to hide her face.

“Ginko and I have been analyzing your matches inside for a while now. Ai’s Shogi was a little disappointing, but—— ...” Dropping her voice down to make sure Ai Hinatsuru couldn’t hear her, Keika continued, “Yours was fantastic. Every move you made said *I refuse to lose*, even though you were going against someone from Kanto’s Sub League. I know maintaining a stronger defense than your opponent isn’t your style, but you did it anyway You sacrificed your pride to come away with the win. You have my respect.”

Ai Yashajin defeated Karen Noboryou in the match earlier that day.

Due to the fact that Kanto Sub League has more members than its Kansai counterpart, promoting is much more difficult.

Karen had yet to achieve a *dan* ranking, but her skills were on par with Ginko, a current 2-*dan* in Kansai. More than likely, she would've been able to hold her ground against a Women's League title holder. Therefore, winning against Karen is a pretty big achievement.

"Keeping up a strong defense against a skilled opponent is actually more difficult than attacking. No matter how good you are at defending, the fear of getting overpowered first never goes away"

The best way to look away from that fear, the simplest solution ...

That is—to attack.

"Shogi is one-on-one, so your opponent will defend whenever you're on the attack. That's when you can ignore the fear" But it comes at a price. You lose the moment your attack gets cut off. Just like what happened to Ai in her match today."

"Not really" I just thought winning would be easier with a strong defense. It's better to have a tight formation to protect against any surprises when playing against an unfamiliar opponent. That's just common sense."

Ai had meticulously woven formations that allowed her to constantly be *in a slightly better position* than her opponent ... in order to avoid getting tripped up by strategies she had yet to research.

Then, all she had to do was wait for the impatient Karen's fuse to run out.

Under normal circumstances, Karen would have identified Ai's strategy early on and changed the battle into a war of attrition" However, the fact that Ai's taunts before the match hit home and that she never considered an elementary school girl to be any real threat sealed the unexpected loss.

After the match, Karen's lips turned purple out of stunned disbelief. She

curled into a ball in front of the board and was unable to stand on her own for quite some time.

Knowing that she had never once taken the lead from a Practice League Member in elementary school crushed her confidence, breaking her *spine* into pieces.

“You know what else? Ginko said some good things about you ... about your Shogi skills today.”

“.....”

“Her Shogi is still weak. But, she’s got a strong spirit.”

“!!”

Ai Yashajin’s face flushed red as if a bomb had gone off under her skin.

Was it anger? Or perhaps——.

“Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP! B-Bottom feeders shouldn’t talk about other people’s playing style like they know everything! I won for me! I wasn’t playing for anyone else, especially not that weak piece of trash I have to call Master! Make no mistake!!” She narrowed her eyes, glaring at Keika like a demon and added, “Tell Ginko Sora she’ll lose one of her titles if she doesn’t start learning what my Shogi can do.”

“Why not tell her yourself? She’s inside.”

“I refuse to get friendly with an opponent. Even one in the same Shogi family.”

Ginko stands at the top of the Mynavi Women’s Open as *Queen*.

Should Ai Yashajin keep winning, the two will collide in a five-round title match.

Remembering, Keika said, “Which reminds me, you now qualify to enter the Women’s League. Congratulations. Are you going to register right away?”

“..... As of now, I don’t plan on it.”

“The faster you do, the easier it is to get promoted.”

“I don’t care,” Ai said, almost brushing off the advice. Then, she continued with a small, devilish smile on her lips. “And, don’t you think it’s more interesting this way? Naniwa’s Snow White, flawless against Women’s League players, losing her crown to an amateur in grade school——.”

“See, I knew you had a kind heart.”

“Huuh?”

“You’re letting her join first. Your older sister apprentice, Ai.”

“.....!!”

Ai Yashajin froze, the devilish smile still on her face.

“Hmm,” muttered Keika, pressing her forefinger to her lower lip and said as if searching her memory, “I don’t think you’ll have to wait too long. Today didn’t go her way, but Ai will get promoted to C-1 if she can keep up her winning streak in the Practice League. All that’s left is getting Yaichi——.”

“Th! That’s not my problem!! Don’t say things you don’t understand!! You You presumptive hag!!” Ai flicked her hair over her shoulder like a long, dark wing and kicked the door all the way open in frustration. “Akira! Get in the car already!! I’ll have the driver leave without you?!”

“Y-Yes, my lady! Well then Keika, excuse us!”

Giving a deep bow, Akira hastily jumped into the passenger seat next to the driver.

Keika watched the taxi’s taillights disappear down on the street with a slight grimace.

“..... That girl. If only she were more honest with herself.”

Then, she went back inside to find Ai Hinatsuru still wearing her shoes and

slouched against the wall. Keika looked down at her with a motherly smile.

“Ai. Go take a bath and I’ll get dinner ready. Then, please tell me about it once you settle down a bit about everything that happened since yesterday.”

Keika prepared a dish called *nikusui* for Ai.

The easiest way to explain this is it’s beef on udon noodles just *without the noodles*.

The broth-filled bowl Keika placed in front of her certainly looked like something out of a Kansai noodle shop.

But rather than noodles, it was chock full of extra meat with a half-cooked, runny egg on top.

“It only takes a few minutes to make, but it’s nice and hot and it really hits the spot! Perfect for when you’re exhausted. Doesn’t that sound good?”

“.....”

“I always made it for Yaichi and Ginko whenever they came home, crying and listless after losing a Shogi match.”

“..... Master did?”

“He sure did. I’d make it for him now, too, if he’d just come by”

Keika’s face lights up with a meek but warm smile as she takes a trip down memory lane.

“That’s the thing about those two. When they lose, they downright refuse to leave the board until they win. They don’t drink or eat anything, just keep playing with tears flowing. By the time they get home, they’re so weak that a small gust of wind could knock them over. Regular food just wouldn’t go down their throats. Isn’t that right, Ginko?”

“.....”

Ginko was off in the corner by herself, looking at her smartphone acting like she couldn't care less what the others were talking about.

While she had no intention of speaking with Ai directly, Ginko seemed interested in what the girl had to say.

Fighting back another grimace, Keika turned away from the stubborn girl and back to Ai.

"Once you get your appetite back, it's really good with rice and an egg. Put a little special soy sauce on it, and it's like magic! The best thing you've ever tasted!"

"..... I want to try."

"Great! Wait right there!"

Keika shuffled back into the kitchen, her slippers smacking against the wooden floor. She then cracked an egg onto a bowl of rice like she's done it millions of times and brought it back out to the table.

Then, she patiently waited for Ai to finish eating.

"So, Ai? Could you please tell me what happened? All Yaichi said was, *Please take my apprentice until the Title Match is over.*"

"..... It's It's, all my fault"

Tears started pouring from the girl's eyes once again.

"I've done nothing but bother Master Even though he's trying so hard I can't do anything"

"Ai You're not bothering him. Far from it, Yaichi's been winning a lot more since you came."

"..... No As long as I'm there, Master"

Ai strung words together in spotty whispers.

Once the topic changed to Yaichi's mental state——.

“.....! I had no idea”

Keika was at a loss for words. She couldn't believe that pressure had pushed him that far.

“.....”

Ginko's ears perked up, her fingers completely still over her smartphone.

Once Ai had finished, Keika tried her best to lighten the mood.

“Anyway Let's leave him be for a while. This is the kind of thing that he'll have to get over on his own anyway. In the meantime, I'm so happy you'll be staying here with us, Ai!”

“..... Thank ... you”

“That's okay, you don't need to say thanks. But, you've got to be sleepy by now? My father is out doing Placement Matches, so he'll be late. Actually, he'll go out drinking somewhere once he's done so there's no telling when he'll come home.”

With that, Keika led Ai up to the second floor.

The second-floor bedroom—the room where Yaichi once slept. Keika tucked Ai into her Master's old bed and walked toward the door. With her hand on the light switch, Keika asked, “Ai, do you need anything? Just name anything you want.”

“..... Okay, then——.”

Keika's eyes widened in surprise as she listed off a few things Then started tearing up.

She promised she'd get everything ready, and a weak smile appeared on Ai's face for the first time that night.

So innocent and endearing, it was all Keika could do to keep the tears back.

Ai fell asleep moments after closing her eyes, the room silent but for her soft

breathing.

Keika switched off the lights and quietly slid the door shut.

Then, just as she was coming down the stairs——.

“Oh?”

She saw Ginko getting ready to go out the front door. And she thought the girl would be staying the night

“Ginko? Where are you going? It’s late.”

“I forgot something at the Association. I’ll go straight home to my apartment after that, so I won’t be coming back here tonight.”

“You can get it tomorrow?”

“I don’t want anyone taking my stuff.”

“I think you’ll just make things worse right now.”

“..... See you later.”

Ginko made a quick exit. Keika watched her go, forcing a smile as her shoulders slumped.

OSHI

RYU

RECORD 3

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Machi Kugui, Yamashiro Ouka

PLAYER NUMBER: 33

BIRTHDATE: April 17th, 1998

HOMETOWN: Kyoto City, Kyoto

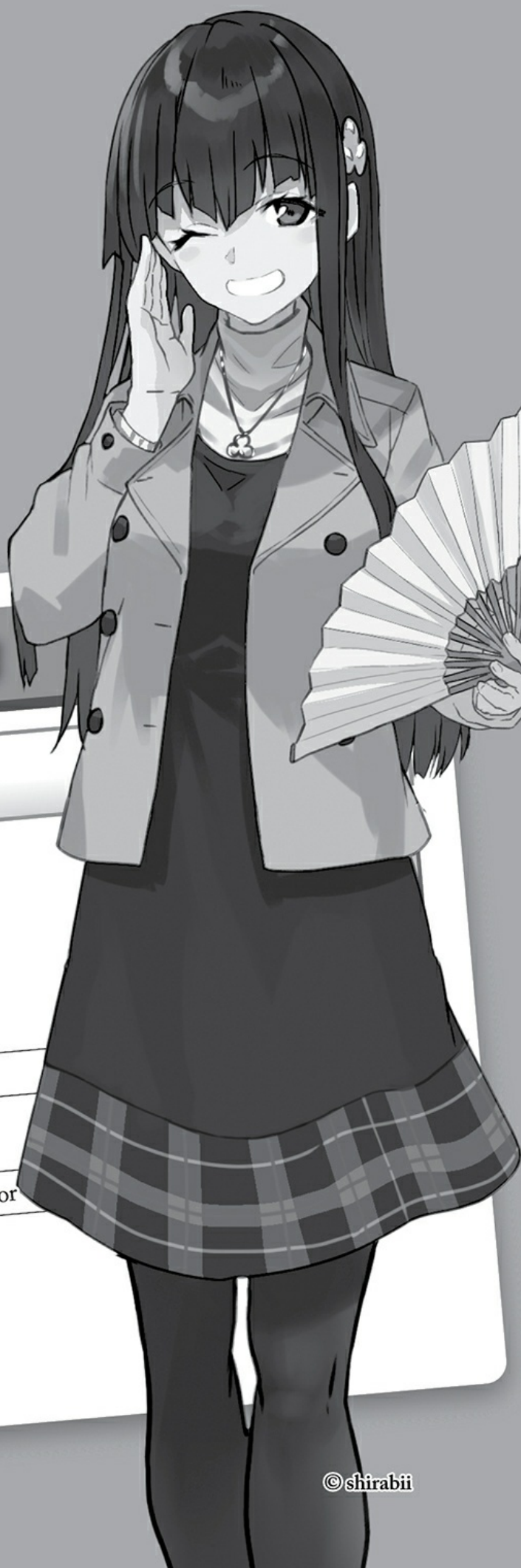
MASTER: Taisei Kayaoku 7-dan

TITLE HISTORY:

Yamashiro Ouka – 4 seasons

OTHER NOTABLE TITLES:

Kyoto's Yamashiro Tourism Ambassador



TENTATIVE LOVE

My room feels much bigger without Ai here.

“..... Too much,” I mutter as I work at my computer.

But it's not the room. I'm getting frustrated at how much Shogi information I have to go through.

Since everything I thought I knew turned out to be wrong, I've been using Shogi software to help me research all the sequences starting at square one.

The software's got more Shogi skills than top-class players ... plus it never gets tired or emotional. If anything can lead me to the right answer, this is it.

And that's been mostly true. The software has given me many different answers but, yeah.

“..... This won't work. It's too inefficient.”

I've gone through one little tidbit of Move-Loss Bishop Exchange sequences with the software and it already feels like I hit a dead end.

There are too many things to check People and software think in very different ways. So, I can't understand how it got the answers it gave me no matter how hard I try. I'll have to just flat-out memorize everything.

In the end, it'd be the same as staying up all night to prepare for a test. It'll be a long, long time before I get any better at Shogi like this.

“..... It'd be so nice if someone told me what I'd face in the match, saying something like: *This formation and this sequence are coming up!* That's not how it works in an actual match though Doesn't help that the Meijin plays Static Rook and Ranging Rook, the perfect all-rounder”

I've lost most of my confidence, but I'm not so far gone as to think that preparing like this will help me win against the Meijin.

“But Then, what other options are there?”

So long as I don't trust what I'm seeing, software is the only thing I can count on right now. There's nothing else

Shake! My whole body shivers.

“Pretty cold It's already November, so why wouldn't it be?”

Should I turn on the heater or go take a bath? Usually, Ai would show up and say: *Master! The bath is ready!* before I'd have time to think about it

The doorbell rings just as that thought passed through my head.

“.....?”

Who could that be this late at night?

I quietly get up and try to peek out the window, but I hear the door unlock before I get over there.

My heart jumps into my throat for a second.

But——.

“Yaichi? I'm coming in.”

A different girl from the one I was thinking of appears. One with silver hair——.

“Big Sis? Why're you here?”

“Why?”

Big Sis looked like she was about to complain, but her face returns to its usual emotionless shape just as quickly.

“Nothing much. I happened to be close, so I thought I'd stop in. I just left a practice session at the association. Which reminds me, Yaichi. The Mynavi Finals match records, did you see them?”

“..... No, I haven't. I think it's better for me to focus on my own match right

now.”

“True. I think that’s what you should do, too.”

Big Sis agrees with me immediately but Now I’m curious and skim over the records.

Ai Yashajin won. A nice, strong win.

But Ai Hinatsuru’s Shogi was totally out of balance.

I know why better than anyone else.

Now I wish I hadn’t looked.

“You’ve got it the worst right now, Yaichi. That’s why you should just focus on yourself. This is no time to be worrying about some grade school girl’s feelings.”

“.....”

“I understand you, Yaichi. That’s why I’m with you no matter what you decide.”

“..... Appreciated.”

“Sure.”

Big Sis gives me a happy nod before plopping down on my bed.

Is she planning to stay here?

She’s saying she supports my decision to keep Ai at Master’s place for the time being so I can focus on myself, but comes to stay here herself? Talk about a contradiction. What’s she trying to pull?

For now, I’ll just ignore her and get back to my research——.

“..... Could you not stare at me like that?”

“Do you want any help? Is there anything you want me to do for you?”

“Nothing really.”

“I see,” she says unconvincingly, sitting on my bed and swinging her feet back

and forth.

..... Ignore, ignore.

I've got my research to focus on. Just me and the computer. Focus, focus

At some point, Big Sis gets up, grabs one of my Shogi books off the shelf without asking, lies down on my bed and starts reading.

I can hear every page she turns, every shift of fabric when she changes position It's strangely distracting. I never thought the situation of having a beautiful girl in a sailor-style school uniform lying on my bed would chip away at my concentration this much.

She must've gotten bored of reading, because Big Sis starts talking to me while still sprawled out on my bed.

"Want me to make you something to eat?"

"Can you make anything that can be eaten?"

"Of course I can Like eggs on rice."

"I can make that myself, so don't bother."

Shutting down the conversation there, I turn my focus back to the computer. Big Sis is lazing about on my bed. Hugging my pillow, giving it a few whacks every now and then. Basically, she's playing around.

Maybe five minutes later, she speaks up again.

"Shouldn't you take a break? Aren't you tired?"

"Not at all."

"I could get you some coffee."

"No thanks."

She sounds a bit pissed. Her face is a blank slate, but I've been around Big Sis long enough to know how to read her mood.

Enough already. Would you just please go home, like now?

More shifting fabric sounds as she lies back down on my bed Yeah, I didn't think it'd rattle me this much.

—..... And people are saying things about us, too.

Thinking back to what I heard during the third match after party, I want to scream at the top of my lungs.

And she has no idea what's going on—.

"..... Say, Yaichi," says Big Sis, laying on my bed with my pillow in her arms, in a quiet but strong whisper, "..... are you sure there's nothing, you want me to do? I'll make an exception right now and do anything you want."

"Anything like?"

"..... Like what was going to happen next, in Hawaii"

Hawaii.

Just the sound of that one word brought all the painful memories flooding back in excruciating detail—and the sound I've been hearing since then ramps up to a deafening roar. Too much to bear. Then

Something inside me snapped.

"..... You know something?"

"What?"

"Please just leave me alone. I've got my title match to fight, and you've got to defend your Women's Throne title, right? I appreciate the offer to help, but each of us should be focusing on our own battles right now."

"I'm fine. I not going to lose anyway. So, I'm here to support you."

"..... Geez! Why don't you get it?!"

I get up from my chair, glare down at Big Sis lying on my bed, and yell right at

her.

“People are saying things, bad things about you because you spend so much time with me! It’s annoying, isn’t it?! That’s why I’m trying to put some space between us, at least during the title matches! I’m trying to help you out here, so would you please wake up and figure that out already?!!”

“Then just come out and say it! What are you so worried about?!”

Big Sis stands up and looks me right in the eyes. “People have been saying stuff for years, remember?! And they all shut up when you showed what you can do! You took the title——.”

“And I’m about to lose it!”

“That’s Seriously!!”

Really ticked off, Big Sis grabs my arms and yells.

“So what if you lose the title?! The idiots who wouldn’t look at you without it won’t be there from the start! Any of them who only showed up after you got that title can all just disappear!!”

I don’t need the title?

What the hell is she saying?

Me having this title is the only reason people tolerate us being together, isn’t it? Once that balance is gone, they won’t let us, right?

Why do you think I’m working so damn hard to——

“I want to be with you, always! Now and forever!! We can get stronger together like we used to!! Is that not enough?!”

“.....”

Get stronger together?

Me and Big Sis? Like we did when we were kids?

If if it were that easy to improve Then why the hell don't I know what to do??!!

"..... Say I did have you around, how would that help?"

"Huh?"

"What could a lowly Sub League member actually do?"

".....!!"

At first, Big Sis had an *I don't understand what you're saying* kind of look on her face.

But her ash-colored eyes instantly take on that blue tint that means she's ready for a fight. Her hands, wrapped tight around my arms, are shaking.

I'm fuming myself and won't stop now.

Panicking, with my back against the wall, regretting everything that happened with Ai, anger at my own worthlessness and that damn noise that's been pounding inside my head since I lost in Hawaii make me scream at Big Sis with no end in sight. I let her know exactly what it feels like and nothing's going to stop me.

"Who do you think I'm going against, huh? *That* Meijin, *him*! It's nothing like the soft Shogi someone who's never played a match in 3-*dan* League knows. I'd get rusty doing practice sessions with you, Big Sis. Using software on my own is so much more efficient—."

I get that far, and freeze.

Because I saw tears building up in Big Sis's eyes.

—Shit. I said too much.

"B-Big Sis. I sor——."

The tears didn't fall.

But a fist came down in their place.

“Die!! Burn in hell, you piece of trash!!!”

Her fist hits me square in the nose like a rock. I fall backward onto the floor. All of her weight must’ve gone into that punch.

“Hurry up and die!! Die like the brainless scum you are, Yaichi!!!”

Long, sweeping kicks like she’s trying to score a soccer goal from midfield relentlessly slam into my side. Her sharp fingernails jab deep into my solar plexus, knocking the wind out of me. I can’t breathe.

Lastly, she pulls out the spare key to my room and throws it, keychain and all, at me from point-blank range. One more “Die!!” and Big Sis storms out of my room, stomping all the way.

“Gahh Owwch What is ... that woman’s problem?!”

Gingerly sitting up, I touch my nose to make sure I’m not bleeding.

Luckily, there’s no blood which means no bones are broken. I don’t think Big Sis was holding anything back though

“..... I know I’m trash, you don’t have to tell me,” I muttered to myself as I crawled back into my chair and started moving Shogi pieces across the monitor with my mouse.

Even though I finally got the study environment I wanted, I didn’t get much done at all that day.

▲ HOLY FLAME

“Yaichi is so mean! He’s horrible! Utter trash! I-I went to check on him because I was worried, but he said I’m in the way That I was in his way!!”

Ginko left the house saying, “I won’t be back,” but still ended up returning thirty minutes earlier than I expected and crying her eyes out.

She burst into the room and jumped face first into my lap, absolutely bawling Everything she was saying boiled down to one thing, “Go to hell, Yaichi.” She’s even harder to look at than Ai.

Naniwa’s Snow White doesn’t let anyone else see her like this.

“He can die for all I care That piece of trash should just die! I-I waited for him at the bottom of the stairs But he never came after me!!”

“Yes, yes, I know. You can cry all you want, but try to keep it down, okay? Ai is sleeping upstairs, and you don’t want to wake her up, do you?”

“..... Ungh Hnghh”

Of course, the last thing she would ever want is for Ai to see her like this. Ginko bites down on my skirt to keep her wailing under control.

Ah-aah This is one of my favorite skirts, too.

Oh well. Ginko’s so cute like this, so I’ll let it slide.

“My word I told you, didn’t I? That going tonight was a bad idea. Pressuring him now was a bad move on your part, Ginko,” I say, gently stroking her hair. She’s a total mess right now, but the princess still has a bit of anger left to get out and pops her head up.

“No, it wasn’t! Yaichi’s the bad one! He’s the one that said I was in the way!!”

She yells with all her might, a fresh wave of tears streaming down her cheeks. Then she plunges her face back into my lap.

Spoiled rotten, this girl.

It's like she's reverted to the four-year-old she was when she first got here.

Ginko has always come to me like this after squabbling with Yaichi through the years.

"Keika, Yaichi just——."

"But Yaichi's the one that——."

"Yaichi's the bad one. Not me. Go make him sorry!"

Ginko's asked me to do it hundreds, maybe thousands of times by now.

But she doesn't really want me to scold him.

She wants me to help her patch things up.

This spoiled princess can't bring herself to apologize on her own. She panics whenever the two start arguing.

Her *make him sorry* means *do something or make him forgive me*. So, I always call Yaichi over once I've gotten Ginko to calm down and say something like: *It's the man's job to apologize for this kind of thing, even if they're right. Don't be mad at Ginko, okay?*

And convince him to make up.

Even after fighting with her, Yaichi would look like nothing happened at all and go out to play more Shogi. It didn't faze him at all. He'd forget all about the argument after about an hour because Shogi was the only thing on his mind.

And Ginko hated that.

Which is more important: me or Shogi?!

Her lips could explode and those words still would never come out of her

mouth.

But that's exactly what's going on.

It's a cliché ... but it's an accurate ultimatum that women have been giving men ever since Shogi was created. Ginko has been saying it every other way she could think of all this time

"But What can you do?" I whisper, gently stroking Ginko's silver hair as she sobs into my lap remembering when the two of them were just little kids

Ginko was such a frail little girl, and Yaichi was the only one her age who'd play Shogi with her.

The only boy who'd walk at her pace.

Always with her, he was the one who'd be on the other side of the board with a grin on his face. He was special to her.

Those feelings *not* growing into love would be the bigger surprise.

"Yaichi's the only one who will go along with the princess's every wish when it comes to Shogi, or even everyday things."

Back when Yaichi first came to this house, he was just a little brother through and through. She had him wrapped around her finger and he was always close behind.

At some point though, Yaichi started taking the lead. His Shogi abilities started pulling away from hers, went beyond Master's and are now out of anyone's reach.

There were signs.

Ginko acts all cool and calm, but she's an emotional roller-coaster when it comes to Shogi. She bawls like there's no tomorrow after a loss and is up on cloud nine when she wins. Master says that *kids who cry get strong*, but all I saw was a child venting all that pain in one big explosion.

Yaichi was just the opposite. Win or lose, he always looked like he was on an even keel.

But he wouldn't leave the board.

Especially when he lost, he'd just sit there for hours or days on end thinking about where that Shogi went wrong all by himself.

I think it must've been a little while after he entered the Sub League. Probably around the time he was in sixth grade.

Yaichi hit a wall and got a B on his record in the Sub League.

No matter what he tried, he just couldn't win against lower-ranking players without that Lance. He'd sit by himself and stare at a board all the time back in those days.

Watching over him from a distance all that time, I knew he wasn't sleeping at night and all the time he was spending in front of a Shogi board was unhealthy. But one day, when I couldn't take it any longer, I went to tell him to *get some sleep already*.

That's when I saw.

Yaichi, sitting alone in his room with his Shogi board was staring at it and crying harder than I'd never seen.

There wasn't much noise at all, just tears streaming down his cheeks He was so focused on the board that he forgot to wipe them off. I saw it all.

All the emotions he kept bottled up inside were coming out in tears.

That's how I saw it.

From there, I realized that *this boy can change the agony of defeat into strength*. It felt like that was the first time I saw Yaichi for who he really is What his talent really is.

It wasn't much later that Yaichi cleared that wall—and got stronger almost

overnight.

From what I can tell, his state of mind now is pretty close to what it was back then. He is going up against the tallest, thickest wall he's ever faced and has gone back to the drawing board to reinvent himself so he can clear it.

That's probably why Ginko is so anxious.

Yaichi's about to clear another hurdle and go even further away. Ginko's afraid of getting left behind

Which brings up one more thing.

Not by much, but Ginko reached *that age* more quickly than Yaichi.

As I see it, that's what's really separating these two when it comes to strength.

Yaichi only has Shogi in his head. Now and always.

But, inside Ginko's heart——.

“..... Still just a baby boy, isn't he? That Dragon King of ours.”

Yaichi doesn't understand it himself.

He doesn't realize how much impact he has on those around him, how otherworldly his talent is, he has no clue. Ginko would probably yell at him, calling him a *blind moron* or something.

During that first match, I have to admit the Meijin's big picture sense was amazing, but Yaichi was right there with him. No one could look at that Shogi and say, “Kuzuryu played shoddy, baseless Shogi and crumbled.” I was there in the break room in Hawaii, but those two were playing at such a high level, it all went over my head.

Sure, the second match wasn't his best, but he nearly won the third. It's not like there's that much of a skill gap between the two of them either. Yaichi has lost three straight, but he's improving. I'm pretty sure he'll win the next match

if everything plays out normally.

Yes. Normally.

He just doesn't have enough experience to do that yet.

I mean He's only seventeen.

He was sixteen when he took the title.

Even the Meijin didn't get his first one until he was nineteen.

And no one was dominating the Shogi world back then like he is now.

Despite never playing head-to-head, Yaichi took the top title as a sixteen-year-old while the Meijin had the rest of the Shogi world under his thumb.

Thinking about it logically—that means Yaichi has just as much talent as the Meijin, if not more.

Unfortunately, I'm the only one in the Shogi world who can accept that fact for what it is. Active players don't like the idea that someone younger than themselves could be at a higher level. It's much easier for someone like me, who knew their talent ceiling from the start, to see these things.

A truth that only I—and no one else in this world, including Yaichi himself—have figured out.

That's why I want to tell him, *"Yaichi, you aren't weak."*

That.

And one more thing.

"I've been watching you grow."

Also.

"I know how hard you've tried, all those painful tears you've shed, that you've cried in front of your Shogi board I know that you never run away, no matter how hopeless the situation or how strong the opponent. I know."

I want to tell him all of it.

But I'm sure he wouldn't even look at me right now. Even if he did, I doubt he'd take what I had to say seriously.

I don't care what it takes. I'll find a way to get through to him.

"Oh, I know. I know that you are always, always trying as hard as you can."

No one else.

I'm the one that needs to tell him.

"That's the big sister's job, isn't it?" I whisper quietly under my breath, still gently patting Ginko's head as she sobs in my lap.

..... And feeling heat building in the pit of my chest.

LABYRINTH

“..... Where?”

With only the computer monitor for light in my room, I’ve been researching nonstop.

Ever since I felt I hit a wall trying to use the software to help me figure out the best move, I’ve been trying all sorts of things only to have them lead to even more dead ends. Day in and day out, over and over again.

It’s like I’ve gotten lost in some massive dungeon ...

With no idea where the exit is Heck, I don’t even know where I am anymore.

If there is a Shogi god, all I want is some kind of sign. Some indication telling me I’m going the right way.

“..... If it’s effort you want, I’ll give as much as it takes”

No matter how much time I poured into it, there was a constant cloud of fear hanging over me that all of this was pointless

That I’m going in the wrong direction ... that if I don’t turn back now it’ll be too late.

All that fear and stress prevented me from making any progress at all ... more like going around in circles in the same spot.

“..... Please, tell me Somebody”

Some proof that I’m going forward.

I want to feel like I’m closing in on an answer.

I want someone to tell me I’m *right*.

All I hear is that same damn sound—.

“..... All I can do is get stronger. I have to do it alone.”

Competitors are always on their own. The need to depend on others leads to *weakness*.

Keika, Big Sis, Master and the apprentice who unconditionally adores me
It was so nice being around everyone.

That soft, warm atmosphere was slowly rotting me away.

—I threw it all away. So I can get stronger.

My mind made up, I barely left my apartment at all and hadn't had a square meal in ages.

That hunger is sharpening my mind and body. A constant supply of coffee and chocolate, pretty much anything with caffeine, and water has kept me going. Turning my smartphone off cut my last line the outside world.

Just once, I left my room to go stock up at a convenience store across the street. But when I did, there was something hanging on the door knob.

.....?

There was a letter folded in half inside a bag.

To Yaichi. I made some of your favorite things. Please help yourself.

Keika's handwriting.

Soft handwriting, the kind I'd seen since I was a kid, the kind that made me feel warm inside just by looking at these messages. I'd know these anywhere.

There was a Tupperware container full of food in the bag, too. Still warm. Just as the message said, it was full of my favorites.

But I don't feel hungry at all And don't feel like eating this much anyway. A full stomach would just make me sleepy and I wouldn't be able to concentrate.

But more than that—it reminded me of the warmth that I've put behind me

.....

I felt bad for Keika, but I stuck the food in the freezer and didn't touch it.

The next day and the day after that, there was a bag outside my door ... Each with a message from Keika.

To Yaichi. Are you eating everything?

To Yaichi. Take care of yourself, okay?

To Yaichi. Make sure to stay warm when you go to bed.

All of them were messages concerned with worrying about me written in those warm letters.

Each of them was short and never once mentioned Shogi. It's like she was giving me a lot of breathing room The effort that went into each one came across so strong I could feel it.

But yesterday's message was different from all the rest.

To Yaichi. My match is tomorrow. I know you're busy, but please watch.

.....?

Something felt strange about that one.

It's extremely unusual for her to ask anyone to *watch* her Shogi. She was never comfortable with friends or family watching her play and, even if she did invite someone, she'd say something more like: "I'd be happy if you were there to see."

That little detail felt very strange.

That's why ... even though I had my own research to do I remembered her match was going on just after lunch.

“That’s right Today, the Mynavi”

First round of the Finals. She’s playing against Ms. Shakando.

I know that she’s a women’s title holder, but I don’t think anything in that match will be useful for a pro title holder like me. Watching that match won’t help me at all.

I’ve made up my mind. Anything that doesn’t make me stronger must go.

But——.

“It’s Keika’s match”

I thought about it for a while but——open the Mynavi Women’s Open official site and click on the *Match Record Blog* button.

FOREST OF THORNS

I thought she had wings.

But the person who appeared in front of me didn't have any.

Forget wings, she didn't have a set of working legs

"Pardon me," she said with a feminine voice so delicate it may as well have come from a glass bell. Glamorous, puffy skirt waving from side to side, she moves into the upper seat like it's where she belongs.

Tokyo. A special arena within the Shogi Association.

I look up at this person from the lower seat on hollowed Shogi ground, a place I never thought I would ever have any connection to.

Women's Legend Rina Shakando.

She's taken the Queen title four times, but that's her current Women's League title. Also holding the status of Eternal Queen, looking at her is like seeing the queen of some magical kingdom in a fairy tale storybook come to life.

This is not my first time meeting her.

Actually, back when I was a little girl, my father introduced me to her and she gave me an instruction match. I still remember how kind she was.

But now, sitting across the board from her like this, her presence is so overwhelming that those warm memories are getting blown away right before my eyes

"Master, what brand shall you be drinking today?"

"Let's see A straight Rizé shall do nicely. It is best to feel invigorated on the morning of an extremely important Shogi match."

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Her gallant apprentice Ayumu Kannabe 6-*dan* is beside her, assisting.

This boy No, I suppose I should call him a young man. He has accompanied his Master to the association every single time she came here, just like this, since he started junior high school.

Shakando-*sensei* can walk fine on her own if she uses a cane, but using one of them here would damage the *tatami* mat. So she always needs someone to assist her—.

That reasoning has to be only the tip of the iceberg. That look in Ayumu’s eyes when he’s around Shakando-*sensei* is a lot more than the loving respect a pupil has for their Master.

“.....”

I take a few quiet breaths to steady myself and look once again at the renowned Women’s League player sitting across from me.

The one at the top—.

She already reigned over the Women’s League when I was learning how to play.

Maintaining that position uninterrupted for the next twelve years, she’s become a living legend in the Women’s League.

She fended off the next generation flawlessly, dominated the following one and is currently holding her ground against the one after that.

It wasn’t until a prodigy who skipped over the Women’s League to enter the Sub League—until Naniwa’s Snow White appeared on the scene that she was the single driving force behind Women’s Shogi.

I, someone who once discarded Shogi and is on the brink of being discarded by Shogi itself, am about to face that renowned legend at the top

— I don't belong here, do I?

Feeling rather small and insignificant, I look away from the Shogi board.

Ayumu comes back a few moments later carrying a full tea set on a silver platter in his arms. Shakando-sensei offers her loving apprentice some kind words.

“Much obliged. Now, you must go.”

“I shall return, for the afternoon meal”

“Yes.”

Once their *parting is such sweet sorrow* exchange is over, Ayumu gives me a slight bow before leaving the arena.

Shakando-sensei picks up her teacup, but rather than take a sip, she takes a deep breath to leisurely enjoy the aroma.

“Such a lovely fragrance The smell of tea helps to soothe my nerves before an important match like this. Otherwise I struggle to control my quivering fingers.”

She looks at me with an elegant smile from the upper seat. At the same time, it takes everything I have to force my lips into a strung-out smile back to her.

—This person is nervous about going against me ... of all people? There's no way

Is Shakando-sensei saying that she, too, gets nervous playing in the Mynavi Finals, the most important tournament in the world of women's Shogi? I'd sure like it if she does. Because, I mean, I'm too tense to speak right now

“Excuse me, Sensei

My nerves making my voice sound strange, I do my best to greet Shakando-sensei. It's taking every ounce of courage I have.

“It's nice to meet you. I'm Kousuke Kiyotaki's daughter, Keika Kiyotaki. I hope

today——.”

“That introduction is incorrect.”

“Huh?”

“Our paths have crossed before, yes?”

“You remember me?”

“*Fu-fu.*”

She places the teacup back on the platter and smiles as if she’s enjoying the moment. Then the person at the peak whispers, “Now. Start from the beginning.”

“Ah, umm It’s nice to see you again, *Shakando-sensei*”

“Yes. I have been looking forward to this day.”

She must’ve done tens of thousands of instructional lessons over the years.

If she still remembers every single one There’s only one way that’s possible

This person takes every match she plays seriously.

Even when going against some little girl, she’s committed herself one hundred percent to every single match she’s ever played.

“.....!”

My body heats up in a flash.

This is what it is. This is what people at the peak are like. That’s what’s different. The difference between us.

The love of Shogi, the depth.

Loved by Shogi ... the love for it. The strength of that bond.

“Well then——shall we begin?”

Shakando-Women’s Legend says, her voice bubbling with excitement as she

opens the piece box.

Almost like a young girl in love.

The piece flip determined that I'm on defense.

However, I'm the one who aggressively took control of the match.

"Opposing Rook is it? Well, well?"

The 12th move.

Shakando-*sensei's* hand comes to a stop when she sees me swiftly slide my Rook across the board.

"..... I see."

My strategy is more like a scheme.

The chances of beating her with a *yagura* or a fourth file Rook are a million to one at best.

That being the case, if I use a strategy I've never played in a league match, at least I know she won't have any research on me.

—That is if Shakando-*sensei* would actually research someone like me.

"*Fu-fu*. Interesting Quite interesting."

The Eternal Queen opens a black, Western-style fan with a quick *shick*.

"Then—I expect you to thoroughly entertain me."

She moves a central Pawn forward and brings out a Silver.

"Extreme Rapid Battle!"

Creak! My jaw clenches so tight I hear my teeth cry.

My little scheme isn't making Shakando-*sensei* slow down at all. Actually, she's coming out to meet me head on, abandoning defense in favor of a fast offensive.

Right where I want her.

—Go ahead and take the fifth column! While you're busy over there, I'll build up a strong Mino Castle!

Refusing to let the fear of her attack control me, I reinforce my defense.

Ai Yashajin's Shogi is still fresh in my mind. What I wouldn't give to have her nerves of steel.

Then again, I don't have anything close to her talent or guts either.

What's more, someone with my level of skill isn't about to cut off an attack from the person across from me any time soon.

—How's she this good with small pieces?! These are just Pawns, so why?!

Advance, Throwing Star, rise and then isolate—.

The Women's Legend keeps using all these light and quick Pawn techniques to keep me from getting anywhere, like a cat toying with a mouse.

It wasn't long before she built up a formation that all but guaranteed her victory.

I I had no idea she was this much better than me

.....Wherever

Wherever I move a piece, no matter how I try to attack, I'll end up taking losses.

It's like I'm stuck in a forest of thorns.

There I was, drawn in by a beautiful flower, but had no idea what I was getting into By the time I knew what was happening, I couldn't move a muscle.

— Is this all? Is this as far as I go? I

Tears start building up in my eyes at how pathetic I am.

That's when.

"This is an important match, yes?"

"..... Huh?"

Pretty sure that Ms. Shakando said something to me, I look up from the board.

But she wasn't looking at me. Ms. Shakando is just sitting there, sipping her tea like she hadn't said anything.

..... That's right.

—Today's Shogi I can't lose. It's Shogi I absolutely can't lose!

My hand drifts to my chest.

Back when I lost my way, Ginko was the one who told me, *"The real you is strong. But, because you think you're weak Because you have no confidence, you don't play with your own style. You are your own roadblock."*

When my spirit had all but gone out, Ginko's words provided a new spark.

"Come on, Keika. Play with more confidence! That's the most important thing for any competition!! It's the only thing!!!"

That spark she gave me is still burning now.

That fire within me must be the same that's been passed down through the generations like a massive relay since the moment Shogi was born. A holy flame connecting us all. That flame tempered my spirit with a pure love of Shogi that knows no bounds.

Right now, I have confidence.

Not confidence that I'm stronger or that I'll win the match.

I'm confident that I love Shogi more than she does.

—I can finally say it! Say that I love Shogi more!!

Because I threw it away once before.

Because I know that Shogi doesn't love me back.

Because I'm fully aware this is a one-sided relationship.

I know that my love is real.

"Confidence Confidence!" I say to myself so I can hear it.

My back is against the wall on the board. What's worse, Rina Shakando-*Women's Legend* is on the other side. The possibility of coming back is next to nothing.

This is when I'd usually give up.

But today This match right now, I absolutely have to win. I don't need to sugarcoat it by thinking: *Leave it all out on the board or I haven't lost as long as my spirit hasn't broken.*

Just win.

Win no matter what.

When that's the only option—I can be strong!!

Burning Burning!

I clench my chest to reaffirm what I already know. The flame is there.

Today, it's burning inside me.

A reason why I absolutely cannot lose.

..... Win no matter what. Never, ever give up. I will not break. Not until my last piece is taken and my King is done for I will keep fighting no matter what happens!!

Reaching for the board to pick up a small piece feels more like I'm loading a gun and turning to face the enemy head on.

DIAMOND

“What What’s this?!”

Seeing that blog update——felt so bizarre that words wouldn’t come out.

“I-Is this really Keika playing against Ms. Shakando?”

At first, I thought I had their turns mixed up, so I go back and check. I was certain that the defender taking control of the match and pulling away was Ms. Shakando and the one struggling to keep her formation intact was Keika

But, it’s the opposite.

“H how did this happen? Where did the match turn?!”

Mind racing, I scroll back through the match record, back to the beginning and start over.

Falling behind in the mid-game, Keika was on the brink when Ms. Shakando got a Pawn into her territory on the 61st move.

The skill level between them looked too great to overcome at that point——.

But, on the 76th move.

Keika had just finished forcing Ms. Shakando’s Rook out of place with the three Pawns she had on her piece stand and jammed her own Rook into a favorable position to put the King in check.

That hard-fought, muddy sequence Keika made happen slightly ... ever so slightly knocked Ms. Shakando off her pace.

Now with the match flow under her control, Keika started playing her own tune on the board.

She’s so focused on her dynamic Rook and Bishop sweeps to bring the match up to her tempo, I bet she’s forgotten that her opponent is someone far above

the clouds, the four-time Queen. It's like all she's thinking about is how to get the best move onto the board That *win no matter what happens* mindset of hers is coming through loud and clear on the match record.

If Ms. Shakando's Shogi is a delicate piano sonata, then Keika's is a round of drums and flutes set to a folk song. Every stubborn, muddy Kansai player's spirit is pulsing in her fingertips.

"How's this going to end?! Who'll come out on top?!"

Now caught up with the real-time updates, I'm on the edge of my seat, almost diving into my computer screen each time I refresh the page every thirty seconds.

I can't even blink.

Each move seems to put that player ahead. That's how close these formations are.

But, at this rate——.

"Keika could against Ms. Shakando?"

Late game.

Both are in one-minute Shogi. Both Kings are in danger as a Practice League member exchanges blows with the Women's League legend on a terrifying tightrope where the slightest mistake will send one plunging to the hell below.

Who? Who would've?!!

Who could've ever seen this coming?

I know Keika better than anyone, but I can't believe it's happening. Ms. Shakando, the one who toyed with Big Sis in a practice session, is getting overwhelmed by Keika——.

At last, the final stage.

It's Ms. Shakando's turn.

If she puts her Knight at 7 Four, she'll win. But if she moves it two squares over to 9 Four, Keika will take the victory. It all comes down to this.

Both put Keika's King in check ... but couldn't have more different outcomes.

Only two squares.

The difference between those two choices changes a life.

"Which one will it be?!"

Ms. Shakando chooses—————9 Four.

Keika did it. She won.

"..... Intense"

That's the only way to describe it.

Amazing Shogi.

I've just seen incredible willpower with my own eyes.

That wasn't some dress-up doll.

No one else could have played like that.

Really, the only one in the world.

That's the Shogi that only Keika can play.

Just as people's hearts take so many shapes, Shogi that has real emotion in it takes on its own unique characteristics.

I'm holed up in a dark room by myself, but the bright light coming from that Shogi is lighting up everything I see.

The room should be cold, with no heater on in November, but That Shogi burned hot enough to make me sweat all the way down to my fingertips.

"..... Intense!"

I practically shout to myself and replay the whole match again from the top.

After her first attempt to apply pressure in the early game failed, Keika was consistently overwhelmed by Ms. Shakando's display of skill and got systematically driven back into a corner.

But—she was strong from then on. She didn't break.

She let the best move slip by over and over, failed and got muddy.

Never giving up, she willed herself to get back up and keep moving forward. It was that kind of Shogi.

Even going against someone as skilled and renowned as Ms. Shakando, Keika didn't flinch a single time. And she was the one who charged in without a second thought when her opponent shook just a little bit. It was like a beacon for her.

There were no flashes of brilliance, no moves that really stand out like diamonds in the rough.

If it was some stuck-up guy in the Sub League, they'd probably say, "I'd rather die than make that move." Just clumsy, irritating Shogi

That's how I know it wasn't skill that led to Keika's victory.

It was—an unyielding determination to win that did it.

The courage to believe that victory would come and keep pressing forward.

No one could break it, it would never break and was more beautiful and solid than anything else That's the Shogi I saw.

Each move had the everlasting glint of a gemstone.

"Whoa"

Now I want to see what the arena looked like during the match, so I open up the blog history.

There's a picture of Keika here so magnificent it blew my expectations out of

the water.

“I-Is this ... really, her?!”

It's a picture of Keika staring at the board so hard that her face is twisting into a knot.

There's another one of her where she looks like she's about to cry but is determined to keep fighting.

An update says that Keika never left the board during the lunch break. Instead, she sat there with a painful look on her face, her hand on her chest as she kept repeating. “I can do this!—I'm strong! I won't lose!” to convince herself to keep going.

“Keika's always so gentle Who knew she could get like this in front of a board?”

But almost immediately, I realized how important this match was to her.

If she won—Keika qualifies for the Women's League.

“..... I guess dreams do come true. Even dreams I didn't think were possible”

Another blog update comes in, this one with a picture of her right after she won the match.

It says that rather than saying, “I lost,” when she threw in the towel, Ms. Shakando lowered her head and said this:

“Congratulations. You've become strong.”

Keika couldn't keep her tears back after hearing that ... at least that's what the article says.

There's a picture of her looking down and away, pressing a handkerchief

against her eyes.

And in the background, Ms. Shakando is looking at her with a kind smile

Ms. Shakando, the one who once told me flat-out that low level players had no place in the Women's League, is wishing the best for Keika now that she can join From the bottom of her heart.

".....That must've been ... an amazing match"

The left hand holding her handkerchief to her eyes and the right hand still squeezing the daylights out of her knee even after the match ended show just how much time and effort she's devoted to Shogi over the years.

"She's been giving it everything she has"

Lost heart so many times. Always wondering if it was worth it.

Chasing the dream that rather than getting closer day by day kept drifting further away She made a miracle happen. No one else. She did it.

Keika as she is today is blinding to me right now

Another blog update.

This one has a video of her post-match interview attached to it.

"....."

I'm on the fence about if I should press play or not.

..... Is it okay for me to watch this right now?

There's a part of me seeing her achieve her dream A part of me that's jealous, and that's pitiful Watching it scares me.

But I have to.

Keika's note told me to *watch*. I'm sure she wasn't just talking about the match. She must want me to see what she looked like during the match and after, too. Everything.

So.

“.....”

I click on the play button. My finger trembling just a bit.

“—Now you finally have the Women’s League qualification you’ve always wanted. How do you feel now that the dream has come true?” the interviewer asks and Keika responds like she’s only just realizing it herself.

“Ah that’s right. Of course it was in the back of my mind, but——.”

This should be the happiest day of her life now that she’s achieved her lifelong dream, but rather than talk about how happy she is, Keika goes in a completely different direction.

“I wanted to show something.”

“—Show? Like, delivering a message?”

“Yes. Um How to explain it That, miracles happen? I spent a lot of time thinking about what makes the impossible possible. Because, I mean, I needed nothing short of a miracle to beat *Shakando-sensei* today, right?”

“—Did you find an answer?”

“I did At least, I feel like I did. The one thing that makes miracles happen But it wasn’t anything special. Far from special, it’s something very normal that happens every day I’m sorry. I don’t know how to put this”

“—You can take all the time you need,” the interviewer says.

Keika tries to speak, opening her mouth only for the words to get stuck. But she keeps trying and keeps talking out of sheer willpower.

Keika is desperately trying to get a message across But to whom?

My heart rate picks up.

“A child who started off so weak and got strong out of nowhere, started beating adults one after another And one day ends up defeating opponents who should’ve been unbeatable. I wanted to show that that kind of miracle actually happens quite a bit in the Shogi world Basically, that someone with no talent like me could, umm

Words fail her again.

She keeps opening her mouth, but no words come out. Only tears

“Uhh I’m sorry about this. I’m just so dumb, and so bad at Shogi I have no idea how or what to say

Squeezing her handkerchief, Keika looks down at the floor like she’s frustrated with herself and for some reason apologizes on the day her dream finally came true.

Then she looks up, tears streaming down her face, and says, “Sorry. It’s not something I can put into words. That’s why I tried to show it by winning today’s match. Basically——.”

She forces her messy face into a smile.

Looks at the camera—*looks at someone who should be watching through that camera* and says with all the might she can muster ...

Something that only those who have fought with everything they had, only those who claimed victory with their own strength can say with the most unshakable confidence in the world.

“No effort goes unrewarded. I fought to prove it.”



“Did you watch? Yaichi?”

Tears like gemstones sparkle their way down her cheeks and off her chin.

More solid and beautiful than diamonds, her effort turned into crystals.

■ AFTERNOON SKY

The waterworks were going before I knew it.

“..... Keika”

Rivers barreling out of my eyes.

Everything I’ve kept caged up inside is getting washed out all at once, the tears keep coming.

It’s like I’m back to the crybaby I used to be, crying out Keika’s name like some toddler.

“Keika Keika!”

Keika fought for me.

With her own Shogi life in the balance.

A match that determines her destiny.

But she didn’t play to join the Women’s League—she played for me.

She did all that, but I I!

“H-How could I have been this stupid?!”

Not only to Keika.

Big Sis came all the way to my apartment and said she wanted to help me.

And the one who cheered me on more than anyone else, Ai.

I need to talk to them, right now.

I want to apologize.

“.....!”

Unable to sit still anymore, I make for the door and go outside in the old T-

shirt and sweatpants I've been wearing in my room.

Where to, I don't know.

Keika is still in Tokyo.

Big Sis and Ai ... who knows where they are.

But the one thing I do know is they aren't in my room. So, I can't stay here.

Early evening, already?!

Having been a while since I went outside, the air is cold and brisk My lungs feel cleaner with every breath.

Then ... I notice.

".....?"

There's a paper bag hanging from the door knob. *Like always.*

There's a container inside, and just like always, *it's stuffed full of warm food—*.

"Warm?!!"

Keika is up in Tokyo for the match.

Which means the one who made this has to be—.

".....!!"

I got so angry at how stupid and pathetic I am that I bit down on my lip hard enough to taste blood.

If it is who I think it is, then the food in here would be!

I open the container and try a little of the fried eggs and handmade *onigiri* rice balls inside.

The flavor is the same as what I ate in that park close to the association.

“..... Ai.”

No doubt about it.

The one who made this and brought it all the way to my door——was Ai.

The notes from Keika must’ve been because she thought I wouldn’t take the food if I knew.

She wanted me to be as comfortable as possible but still find a way to be useful She’s been doing everything she could to help me this whole time. All for her piece of trash Master and wanting nothing in return.

The food is still warm.

That means she might still be close!

“Ai!”

I practically fly down the apartment stairs.

Nearly tripping over my feet a few times, I race through the early evening shopping district.

My out-of-shape body is screaming for me to stop.

Legs cramp up and my lungs feel like they’re about to fall apart.

One of my untied shoes falls off, but I couldn’t care less and keep running.

A total sputtering mess, just like my Shogi right now, I keep on going.

Then——.

In the busy street cast in red by the falling sun I see an angel.

She doesn’t have wings, but her back is glowing clear as day.

“..... Ai”

A small frame swaying side to side as she walks toward the station.

The instant I saw her.

“Ai!!”

I shout as loud as I can.

That small back jumps in surprise

Then slowly turns to me.

“..... Master?”



Once I see that face——.

A fresh wave of tears builds up in my eyes.

Even stumbling forward, I can see this glowing angel.

I sprint toward her as fast as my legs will go.

Now looking my way, Ai starts running toward me, too.

Even though it's been so long since I ran like this I could face-plant at any second.

Still going forward, I land on my knees and——.

Looking totally pathetic, I embrace the elementary school girl as she wraps her arms around me.

The people passing by look at me like some alien from outer space, but they can say whatever they want. I don't care.

The important thing The most important thing is right here in my arms.

"I'm sorry, Ai"

Thinking I was protecting her, that was just a convenient excuse. I was only trying to protect myself. I was the one pulling all the strings. The only thing I ended up doing was blaming her for my losses.

This girl saved me ...

During my losing streak ... when my spirit was about to break ... when the weight of the title *Ryuo* was crushing me to death.

That's why I swore to myself I would raise her.

And I

"Ai I'm sorry! So, so sorry!!"

“Master

Still in my embrace and me apologizing on an endless loop, Ai says, “..... Master I, I have something to tell you

“Hm?”

“Two days ago I was promoted to C-1.”

“.....!!”

That came as such a shock I gulped down all the air in my throat.

A Practice League member getting promoted to C-1 means—she can join the Women’s League at 3-*kyu*.

But Ai’s voice is shaking even though her dream has come true.

“Master, may I may I become a Women’s League player?” Ai whispers, her whole body trembling in my arms. “Because if I do I’ll always, always be your apprentice Is that okay with you?”

Master and apprentice relationships in the Shogi world aren’t set in stone while the apprentice is in the Sub League or the Practice League.

If the apprentice drops out of those leagues, the relationship gets erased like it never happened.

On the other hand, once they turn pro The relationship becomes permanent.

So——.

Eyes glistening with tears.

Scared to hear the answer, Ai asks.

“Will you take me as your real apprentice?”

The answer's obvious.

"I won't let you go. Not again."

Saying so, I hug her even tighter.

Evening in the shopping district.

Lights coming on in the bars around Fukushima Station, we swear to become Master and apprentice forever.

Not exactly a sacred atmosphere.

But I feel like it's the best one for us.

We'll start over from right now.

We'll start walking right here.

Not alone, but together.

"Master I can't ... breathe"

"Ah! Sorry."

"It's okay. I'm really happy"

I loosened my grip out of reflex, but she tightens hers. Tiny hands wrapped around my neck pull me closer as she rubs her cheek against my chest.

After a bit, we both let up and separate enough to look each other in the eyes.

"..... E-he-he. I'm crying."

Tears rolling down her smiling cheeks, she wipes them away with her sleeve.

I take care of the last one with my thumb, stand up and take her hand.

"Now, let's go home. It's gotten a bit messy though."

"....."

"Ai?"

I'm pulling, but she's planted to the spot.

"What's wrong? Should we go get your stuff at Master Kiyotaki's place first?"

"..... It's ... not that"

She looks up at me like she's really hurting.

"..... People will say bad things about Master if I live with you"

"Ai, you knew?!"

"....."

Nod. A small, tiny nod.

She knew that people were roasting me for living under the same roof with a grade school girl who's completely unrelated to me by blood.

Even if no one said it to her face, a quick Internet search would show everything.

This little girl was getting blasted by adults hiding their real names on the net.

But Ai never said a word about it to me. Keeping it locked up inside her like her own secret, she focused all her energy on finding some way to help me.

She used that tiny body of hers as a shield to protect me from the negative comments.

She did all of that and I I!

"You have nothing to worry about. I'll be the one to protect you from now on."

"Master"

"I will protect you, no matter what. I won't run away again."

I drop to my knees once again, embrace her and swear to her.

I thought I was all alone in pitch black darkness.

But I wasn't.

I just had my eyes closed.

Too scared to look at reality, I shut myself up in my room and stared at the simulated Shogi world on my computer screen. Of course it was dark. I had my eyes closed.

But the world outside my room is so bright now that they're open.

There are so many people around me who worry about me, want to help me Who think of me as necessary.

“Let's go home. Home to our room.”

“Yes! Master!!”

Standing up, I get a good grip on her hand as the two of us walk back to the apartment.

The afternoon sky is full of warm light Expanding out forever and ever, it holds the two of us like a glove.

I don't hear that sound anymore.

POSTER

RECORD 4

AKINA HINATSURU

AGE: 33

HOMETOWN: NANAO CITY, ISHIKAWA PREFECTURE

SPECIALTIES: CUSTOMER SERVICE

INN MANAGEMENT

FAVORITE THINGS: HER HUSBAND'S COOKING

DRIED SEA CUCUMBER

🏠 DAUGHTER'S HOMECOMING

“Master≡”

My apprentice and I are sitting side by side on the express train bound for the fourth Ryuo Title Match and couldn't care less that people are watching us poke fun at each other.

“Master≡ Hey, hey, Master≡”

“What is it, Ai?”

“Just saying hello≡≡≡”

My apprentice is in the window seat, but she's looking at my face rather than the scenery rolling by and keeps saying “Master≡—Master≡” but not much else.

Just like a chirping little bird.

And I give my tiny apprentice a pat on the head every time she does.

It's been an endless loop, repeating hundreds, maybe thousands of times since we left Osaka Nah, since that day.

“Ai. You don't have to worry so much. I'm not going to leave anymore.”

“Would you call me 'Ai' again please!”

“Hahaha. You're so cute, Ai.”

“Meeow≡”

So darn cute ≡

My tiny apprentice rubs her little face against my arm. Cute as a kitty. It'd be so nice to stay in this moment forever

Every day since we made amends has been like this.

“..... Yeah, the deed’s been done no matter how you look at”

“..... Just a little too close for comfort”

“..... So it’s true, he’s a full-on Lolita lover”

“..... What’s the number for child services”?

And other slightly disturbing comments reach my ears but They don’t matter!!

I mean, come on. Hear me out.

That day when we got back to the apartment, I got to eat my fill of her cooking for the first time in forever. Then, once I was finished with my bath, I asked Ai, *“I want to do something for you to make up for everything that’s happened. What would you like? Is there anything I can do for you? Because if there is, I’ll do anything”*

“..... Ummm Okay”

She looked at the floor, twiddling her thumbs, and answered in a quiet little murmur.

“Hands”

“Hands?”

“I want To fall asleep, holding hands ... with you”

Why?

I asked her. She kept staring at the floor, but her face turned bright red as she said with the puniest little voice——.

“Because I don’t want to wake up and not see you there Master”

Who on earth wouldn’t give her a big hug after hearing thaaaaaaataat?!!

Normally, I sleep on the bed in my room and Ai sleeps on her futon in the *tatami* room, but I've been bringing my own futon in there with her since that day so we could fall asleep holding hands.

She wanted to sleep in the same futon, but that crosses the line.

She may be my apprentice, but she's someone else's precious daughter.

Nothing short of marriage would make it okay for me to sleep in the same bed or futon with any girl.

..... Although she's usually halfway onto my futon holding my whole arm like a teddy bear by the time I wake up! There's nothing I can do about that, nothing at all.

Anyway, the two of us have been pretty much attached at the hip since that day.

Of course, acting like this is going to draw lots of negative attention.

The reason that the journalist Ms. Mato (usually a chatterbox), who should be sitting right behind us, has stayed silent since we left Osaka is because she can't believe what she's heard so far. Maybe more repulsed at this point. I can figure that much out myself.

Ahh, I'm spoiling her. I'm spoiling my apprentice rotten.

But what's wrong with that?

—— Me pushing her away caused so much pain

For a ten-year-old girl Especially for one who only knew me when she came to Osaka for intense training like her, that experience must've been worse than death.

I've got to make up for that, so a little bit of spoiling is going to happen. Actually if I don't shower her with affection now, Ai's heart might be scarred forever.

That's why I'm spoiling her. I'll spoil her to the moon and back.

So, why should I care what people here on earth are saying?!

That's right! I won't run away!

No matter how they roast me, the trials and tribulations I have to go through I'll take it all on!!

"Oh ... and Master! Let's show them once and for all!" says Ai, clinging to my arm like a koala. "We have to show all the little thieves that sneaking into rooms when people aren't around to take what isn't theirs won't work! Otherwise, they'll start getting ideas!"

"? S- Sure? Yeah. I guess?"

What is she talking about? It kind of feels like We're talking about two different things here Maybe?

Oh! That's right.

I owe someone else an apology, not just Ai.

Big Sis.

I went and apologized to Keika right away but It's like Big Sis has been avoiding me and I haven't gotten a chance to talk to her face-to-face yet.

After everything I said, it would be wrong to say, "I'm sorry" with an email or over the phone. These kinds of things need to be done in person, so I'll do it when I get the chance.

"Hmm, she has to be around here somewhere"

Just as I start getting up out of my seat to find her, "Oh! Master, that's one of the rarest birds in Japan outside the window, isn't it?!"

"Say what? Where, where?"

"Awhh It's already gone. Tee-hee≡"

Ai tilts her head and sticks out her tongue. Adorable.

Why do the most interesting things always show up outside the window whenever I try to find Big Sis? Nah, I'm just overthinking it.

Just like Hawaii, Big Sis, Keika and Master Kiyotaki are coming with me, too. I'll definitely see her during the arena inspection and the opening night party before the match, so I don't need to try and force anything right now!

"Though, we sure are bringing quite the crowd with us"

All eyes are focused on this match. More than double the usual number of players and journalists from Osaka alone are going.

What's more, there should be at least twice as many people from Tokyo on the north coast bullet train at this very moment, following the Meijin like kids behind an ice cream truck now that he's one match away from claiming the Eternal Septuple.

I just hope the inn doesn't explode.

"There's no problem! We can serve these numbers without missing a step!!"

"You're probably right. Because, after all, the arena this time is——."

Just as the words were coming out of my mouth, the train pulled into the last stop and an announcement came out of the speakers: The last stop on the Thunderbird Express train that connects Osaka to the North Coast—Wakura Onsen Station.

Right on the platform: *Welcome! 30th Season 4th Ryuo Title Match.*

Written on a long horizontal flag, but

"Whoa. That's quite the wel come?"

Congratulations! A new Women's League player has arrived!

Welcome home! Miss Ai Hinatsuru

From the Wakura Onsen Hot Spring Committee!

“

The whole train, which was getting noisy as people were gathering their things together to get off, goes silent for a moment once that way too huge banner comes into view.

Why? Why an elementary school girl’s name and not the Ryuo or Meijin?

Why did they even make a banner that big in the first place?

Part of the answer is where this match is going to happen.

The best *onsen* hot spring spa inn in Japan.

A place so well-known that it’s the first one people think of when someone says “Wakura Onsen”: Hinatsuru.

A place I’ll always remember because this is where I took the title of Ryuo.

In other words———where Ai grew up.

“Master! Let’s hurry up and go!”

“Ah Sure

Now back in her hometown, Ai grabs my wrist with a lot more zip than usual and practically yanks me off the train.

Leaving the station, this time there’s a billboard in front of us. It’s to direct people to the Ryuo Title Match.

30th Season 4th Ryuo Title Match

Arena ← (Party and Commentary Analysis Venue)

And right next to it, there was this even bigger billboard.

Reception Hall

Kuzuryu Family

Hinatsuru Family

..... Wh at? Is this?

“Master≡”

“Y yes?”

With a strong, two-handed grip on my arm, Ai looks up at me with a hearty grin——.

And very clearly says, “You won’t run away anymore, right?≡”

The Wakura Onsen Committee greets us with the same enthusiasm as a hot spring geyser.

“Welcome home!!”

“Hi there, Ai!”

“Congratulations!!”

“Thank you for the inspiration!!”

“Best of luck to you!!”

This isn’t about ... the Ryuo Title Match.

If I had to call it anything, I’d say it’s the *Ai from the Hinatsuru family has triumphantly returned home after becoming a Women’s Pro!* celebration.

“Wait? There’s something else going on here, isn’t there?”

“Ah! Master, that car is here to pick us up!”

The spectacle was only just beginning.

Players and other Shogi staff are usually shuttled from the station to the arena in a small bus or something, but there's a convertible with the hood open and a driver in the front seat waiting for us The first float in the parade.

Of course, that convertible is for me and my apprentice.

"E-hee-hee≡ Master This is a little embarrassing, isn't it?"

"You could say that, yeah"

The car starts moving, slowly.

The streets leading to the arena to Ai's family's place are lined with the locals, all hooting and hollering and waving flags around. Who do they think we are, the Imperial Family?!

It seems like every third person knows Ai, because so many people call out to her like old friends, their hands waving in the air. She said she was embarrassed, but Ai's waving back with just as much excitement.

There are other people around too, probably visitors spending the weekend at one of the hot springs. Wearing *yukata* robes and very confused looks on their faces as the parade goes by, I guess they decided this is some sort of tourist attraction because they start waving along with everyone else and taking pictures left and right. Please, stop!

"....."

This is so awkward that I'm frozen in the chair next to Ai. The human body seems to go numb to protect the heart during unexpectedly awkward situations. An extremely forced smile appears on my face while my apprentice is absolutely beaming next to me and waving to the crowd. Meanwhile, I keep folding and unfolding my handkerchief in my hands out of everyone's view. My palms have turned into sweat fountains.

The silver lining in all this is that it didn't take very long to get to the inn at all.

On a side note, the group from Tokyo arrived before we did. Apparently, the welcome committee told them, “Oh, please go ahead and take a taxi.” The Meijin himself was among them, but the people here didn’t seem that impressed. Just a *that’s nice* and done. Is Ai a celebrity or something

“Ryuo, and all guests here on behalf of the Shogi Association, I bid you welcome to the Hinatsuru.”

The one greeting us with a polite bow just outside the front door is: “I am the proprietor of this inn, Akina Hinatsuru.”

The super manager whose name is known around the world—Ai’s mother.

“Mom, I’m back!”

“Ai You’ve grown so much since I last saw you

Ai sprints up to her. The two join hands as Akina gazes at her precious daughter’s slightly more grown-up face for the first time in over half a year with glistening eyes.

Then, after a few nods, she says something totally outrageous.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei* has made you into a fine young woman.”

“Yep! Master made me a grown up!”

There’s a lot of mother-daughter love there, but their choice of words was kind of unsettling and all the journalists lined up behind us are taking notes like mad for some reason. They’ll make plenty of interesting articles out of that one for sure. Not so much of the culture or sports kind, but the social commentary. Yes, yes, I like young girls, Lolita complex, yeah, yeah. Just go ahead and write it already.

“..... I beg your pardon.”

The owner wipes the happy-family-reunion tears from her cheeks.

“Ai. Go into the kitchen and show your father how much you’ve grown. I will

see to our guests.”

“Okay!”

“Now, I shall escort you to your rooms. The arena inspection will follow shortly after.”

Akina’s refined and elegant words make all of us from the Shogi Association want to stand up straight before giving her a nod.

Even the inspection blew my mind.

“This room shall be the arena.”

She led us to a room that I know very well, the one where I took my title of Ryuo——.

At least, it was.

“Huh? Has the name changed?”

“It has. I’ve had some alterations done, so it was only fitting ...”

She explains the new name as I’m looking around in confusion.

Garyouhousu no Ma——That’s this room’s name, meaning *unrecognized potential*.

“*Garyou* in Chinese characters is usually written as 臥龍. However, these have been changed to 臥竜 to pay homage to the Ryuo Title Match. Media members and journalists, please do not make this oversight when publishing your work.”

Ai’s mother’s *friendly* pressure even has Ms. Mato, the person in charge of the blog, clearly on edge. There’s no room for typos

The line filing into the room gets hit with another surprise.

“W-Whoa?!”

The arena——has been totally remodeled.

For starters, the camera that shows the board from overhead has been built into the ceiling.

... On about the same level as the arenas at the association Or that's what I thought. But in reality it puts those arenas to shame.

"The camera in the ceiling is not the only one. Over twenty different cameras have been installed throughout the arena, in order to view the match from a variety of angles."

That many?! Hang on a sec I can't tell where any of them are?!

"Exposed cameras are the epitome of crudeness. What's more, light reflecting off a camera lens can become a distraction and hinder the players' concentration. The cameras themselves are hidden within the support beams and walls around the arena. Each is equipped with the smallest lens available." Mrs. Hinatsuru explains like she's reading my mind.

Ms. Mato was busy taking photos when she noticed something else.

"What's this? The *tatami*——."

"Indeed. The mat in the center where the Shogi board will be placed is custom ordered to be double the size of the regulation *tatami* mats. This is to prevent the edges from being seen in the overhead view."

She paid that much attention to the little things

"Blinds have been added in addition to the curtains covering the windows, in order to allow complete control over the amount of sunlight entering the arena."

Gesturing toward the windows and ceiling, Akina continues bragging um, explaining the room's features.

"Lighting equipment has been installed on rails around the ceiling and can be adjusted at any time. All cables, including ones designed for broadcasting equipment, are completely contained within the walls: not a single one is

exposed in the room, hallways or emergency exits. There are metal detectors installed in the door frame to make it possible to shut out all electronic devices.”

With all that explanation out of the way, Mrs. Hinatsuru makes a declaration.

“Allow me to say once and for all that there is no better place suited for Shogi matches than this, the *Garyouhousu no Ma*, the world over.”

“..... I don’t know how to handle this much amazing stuff”

“How how much did this cost”

The people here have seen countless title matches, but they have no idea what to say. Akina watches them look around in shock with a really satisfied smile on her face.

I’m surprised, too, but for a different reason.

Sure, everything in here is amazing beyond words but Ai’s mother hated Shogi with a passion. She was against her joining the Practice League until the very, very end.

I realize it’s her daughter’s Master who’s playing in the match, but why would someone like that invest this much money in Shogi?

“..... This is too fishy What in the world is she planning”

“Kuzuryu-sensei? Do you have an issue with this room?”

“Huh?! O-Oh, no I’m just, so impressed Ha ha ha”

“..... As long as this facility passes inspection, I would like to move on to the board and pieces.”

They’re all top of the line, too. Each of the pieces shines like a gemstone, which is probably pretty close to what each one of them is worth.

What’s more, there are three complete sets. Mrs. Hinatsuru is pointing to each of them, saying, “Go ahead. Choose whichever you wish.”

All of us lost for words, we could only stare and sigh. In the end, we end up going with the one Mrs. Hinatsuru kept pointing out, the most expensive set of the bunch.

Neither the Meijin nor I is really the type of player to make a lot of demands during the inspection, so the whole thing wraps up less than five minutes after Mrs. Hinatsuru was finished talking.

Well, that's pretty normal as normal goes, but—.

"Now then, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. You must prepare for the opening party. Please, follow me this way."

"Say what?"

Leaving another staff member in charge of showing the Meijin and Shogi Association staff around the inn, Mrs. Hinatsuru takes my hand and leads me directly to another room.

It's a small room right next to the big hall where the party is going to be.

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Please change into this kimono."

"Huh? This isn't the one I had sent up here, is it?"

Bulky and heavy, most players send their title match kimonos to wherever they're staying before they leave.

I mean, those things don't really fit in an apartment closet anyway, so we ask the shop where we got it made to hold onto it for us. After that, just drop them an email saying, "I have a match here on this day, so please send it," and it's all done.

That's why it's always exciting to see what kimono is waiting for me but This one here is definitely *not* it.

But Mrs. Hinatsuru looks at me with all the conviction in the world and says,

“No. This one is fine.”

“But look. This one has a crest on it, see? I’d only wear one of these for a title acceptance ceremony Or some important family event

I won’t say it never happens, but it’s extremely rare for someone to wear a crest to a title match.

Which means the shop must’ve accidentally sent me someone else’s kimono——.

“It’s fine. This one is fine for today. Everyone is waiting, so please change as quickly as possible.”

“But

“I said it’s fine! Get changed!!”

“Yes ma’am!!”

Mrs. Hinatsuru’s overwhelming aura doesn’t let me explain and I start taking off my suit.

“Are you able to don a kimono on your own?”

“F-For the most part

“Excellent. I need to assist my daughter with her preparations, so I will see you at the venue.”

“Okay then

Her daughter’s preparations? What does Ai need to get ready for? Maybe she needs to go talk to people around town now that she has the Women’s League qualification

My half-baked theories were completely crushed at the opening party.

LONGEVITY

“..... Holy”

The opening party venue is packed wall-to-wall with people.

The main hall, which probably holds upwards of 1,000 people, is filled with countless tables surrounded by people wearing their best suits and piled high with expensive food and Japanese sake. Everyone seems to be having a great time.

And there’s nothing wrong with *that*.

“Weird Something here doesn’t add up”

“Aren’t opening parties usually like this?”

“For the most part These parties are usually a chance for the fans to mingle with players without all the formality. I’m used to it being standing room only with a bunch of high tables and finger food”

There are some closed parties where only players and association staff can get in, but a majestic ceremony like this fits the Ryuo Title Match. It is the top title after all.

“So, it’s not all that weird for the party to be in a big place like this or for there to be boatloads of people but——.”

“Then, what’s the problem?”

“Well Yeah. You’re right, you know.”

I may have agreed with my apprentice as she looks over at me with those innocent, sparkly eyes, but I just can’t shake the feeling that something is off.

The biggest question.

That’s——*why can I have a normal conversation with Ai right now?*

The opening party is taking place in the main hall. I'm sitting on a stage at the very front along with the Meijin but Ai is here for some reason. Right between us.

Simply put:

Me.

Ai.

Meijin.

Like that.

I have *hakama* pants on, also decorated with a crest by the way, while Ai is sitting right in the middle and dressed in all white. Just looking at how we're seated, it's obvious that she's the star. Ai is center stage.

Not only is the Meijin wearing a regular suit, he's sitting by himself further down the table. He's pretty much on his own island. I'd say the distance is like me, Ai, Meijin. I know there are times when Sub League members get introduced along with the players when title matches take place in their hometowns and they become the star that night. Ai getting this kind of reception isn't all that weird. I could totally understand that this was a *Ryuo Title Match Opening Party and Ai's Women's League Entrance Celebration*.

Then why does she need to be wearing those white robes? At first I thought, "Wow, Ai looks cute in anything≡," but the more I think it over the more I realized this is anything but normal. And having me wear these crests is really strange. This certainly isn't the average opening night party.

Because, seriously——.

"What's with all the folding gold screens?! And why are we sitting in front of them?! Wearing family crests?!"

“Calm down, Master. This hall is used for wedding receptions all the time, so those screens are always in here. There’s nothing strange about that.”

“Don’t you think you’re a little too calm, Ai?!”

“I grew up here.”

That’s not the problem?! You’re not just going to leave it at that, are you?!

..... Even the program for tonight is just bizarre.

Usually, the schedule for these parties is pretty much set. It starts with some kind of local cultural performance like taiko drums and then *Opening words* → *Toast* → *Players’ statements* → *Commentators give their predictions*. Generally around those lines.

But tonight’s program is:

Greeting from the Governor of Ishikawa Prefecture—

Congratulatory Message from the Prime Minister (live via satellite)—

Toast from Chairman Tsukimitsu—

Player Introductions—

Match Predictions from the Commentators with a Big Board—

All that is fine. There’s a lot more flair than I’m used to, but nothing all that out of place.

The real problem starts after that.

Women’s League Qualification Signing Ceremony—

Gift Exchange—

Families Drink Ceremonial Sake—

Just what kind of events are these? What gifts? Ceremonial sake?

The clothes that Ai and I are wearing included, I don’t think any of those are necessary for a Shogi match’s opening party.

“I know something is up Don’t you feel like this is some kind of ceremony rather than just an opening party?”

“Uwhee? A ceremony? What kind?”

“T-That’s what I don’t know”

What do they mean by *families* anyway? Whose family?

Trying to figure that out, I take a look around the hall and see——.

“Pops?! Mom And Big Bro, too?!”

My family is sitting at the closest table to the stage and waving at me! They’re sitting so close, in fact, I didn’t even notice them!

“Hold up?! W-What are you guys doing here?!”

I jump out of my chair and rush over to the table.

They’ve never come to any of my title matches You’d think they would’ve called me if they were coming to this one.

“Hang on a sec, Big Bro. Should you really be out here right now? You said you couldn’t find any jobs at all, didn’t you? You’re about to graduate and still haven’t——.”

Mom jumps in, cutting me off with glee.

“Yaichi. Your brother will be working right here ... at Hinatsuru.”

“Say what?!!”

“I was failing interviews left and right but then the owner here No, President Hinatsuru reached out to me with a job offer.”

Completely stunned that my brother was already loyal enough to refer to Ai’s mother as the *president*, he tells me about the situation.

“Let me tell you, I had no idea why the owner of such a classy inn like this would go out of her way to contact a college student like me But it all made

sense when she told me what's going on. To think, you'd decided to invigorate the Japanese hot spring industry along with Ai and the Wakura Onsen Committee by managing this inn while playing Shogi And I'll be right here to help you out!!"

"Huh? Hold on. Is that what she told you?"

I promised Ai's mother that if Ai didn't become a Women's Title Holder then I'd be helping out at the inn, right?

My brother starts talking again, forcing my train of thought off the rails.

"As a future member of this family, I'll be right here supporting you and Ai for a long time to come! I'm on board with this 110 percent!"

"Hold up, hold up, hold up! Slow down there a minute! Who said anything about joining her family, because I haven't agreed to anything like that?!"

"Please, Yaichi, try to understand this! I'll be off on my own real soon but still haven't found a job! I don't want to do this job-hunting thing anymore!!"

"Is that any excuse to sell off your little brother?! Aren't you embarrassed at all?!"

"Nope! Not even a tiny bit!!" says my brother with a toothy grin. "I really don't think a piece of trash who gamed a grade school girl into this cushy position has any room to talk!"

"Wha?!"

So now my own flesh and blood is saying I have a Lolita complex huh?!

I was just about to fire back with a counterpoint when my dad steps in.

"Yaichi. My company has had to do some restructuring and all but forced me into early retirement. Luckily, the Hinatsuru family has offered to hire me with the same conditions I had before. But that's not all! Your younger brother is currently at an open campus for a very well-known private boarding school, but it was Mrs. Hinatsuru herself who wrote a letter of recommendation for him."

“So wonderful So very wonderful,” mom chimes in, hammering dad’s point home. She looks so happy she could cry.

“They’ve invited our whole family to stay at this wonderful inn over the New Year’s holidays ... for free! And I must say, her daughter is quite cute. Why are you complaining?”

“Because all of you have no problem living it up by offering my life as bait!!”

“Please don’t say that, Yaichi We’re here today, first and foremost, to support you any way we can. We’re not trying to take advantage of the situation. That’s what I want you to take out of all this,” my father says as he puts his hand on my shoulder.

There’s a very, very expensive-looking watch glinting on that wrist. I push his hand away and yell at the top of my lungs, “Trash! This family is all trash!!”

“You fit right in!!”

All my closest relatives burst out laughing at the same time.

A few Shogi Association members sitting at a nearby table are slowly pulling away at the sight of such pure trash on display.

Then again, yeah There are things I understand because they’re family.

I’m sure they’re being overly friendly and supportive because they’re worried about me and want to cheer me up.

Since both my father and brother play Shogi, they know how rough the pro Shogi world is. They never once brought up my win-loss record when I came home for a visit and actually never brought up Shogi at all.

I heard that mom has been so weak she couldn’t even look at my match results.

That’s why they’ve never come to even one of my title matches until now. I never asked for a reason, but I don’t have to. We’re family.

I know why my family is showing this much support.

I know why they're so determined to cheer me up.

They saw me singled out by newspapers and TV shows, casting me as the bad guy and just had to do something to help.

My brother probably got left behind because he's still too young to understand that. Mrs. Hinatsuru also had to be in on this. How else could this Shogi title match opening party become so bizarre? It looks and feels more like a wedding reception.

The problem is——.

"A-Ai did you, um know about this?"

"Uwheeee? Know about what?"

"..... Never mind."

Those innocent, sparkly eyes looking right at me, Ai tilts her head in one of the cutest acts I've ever seen.

It's better not to get a straight answer out of her. Not right now.

A murderous air suddenly sweeps over me and I freeze on the spot.

".....?!"

The malicious aura skewering me like a shish kebab is coming from the next table over.

My second family—the Kiyotaki Shogi family table.

That terrifying aura is emanating from a girl sitting at that table, one with silver hair and wearing a black sailor-style school uniform.

"B Big ... Sis"

I can't see her face because she has her back to me at the round table, but it must be something fierce.

Because I mean, Keika is sitting directly across from her and she's pale as a ghost, shivering Master made some snarky comment and got smacked in the face without a second of waiting time ticking by.

"..... I'll apologize to Big Sis, tomorrow Nah, I'll find a time after the title match is over. That'll work"

Shaking in my shoes, I step away from my Shogi family's table, go back up to the stage and take a seat.

Then ... I happen to spot a man and a woman walking this way.

".....! Her, " Ai whispers as her body goes stiff as a board and grabs my hand under the table. I didn't know her grip was this strong.

"Hello there! How've you been?"

"Ahaha~☆ Hello, heeello!"

The two people were called in from Tokyo to do the analysis on the big board: Jin Natagiri 8-*dan* and Tamayo Rokuroba Women's League 2-*dan*.

They're also acting as joint MCs for the party but What an odd choice. Neither of them has any connection with the north coast.

And the fact that they've come up to say hello together like this is just so out of left field that I couldn't stop myself from asking, "Huh? Mr. Natagiri Ms. Rokuroba? You're friends?"

These two should go together like oil and water. I was sure that Mr. Natagiri hated women with a passion and Ms. Rokuroba strikes me as the type of woman who'd hate people like him

But Mr. Natagiri's answer was even more out there.

"I taught Tamayo here everything she knows about Shogi. I used to teach at an on-location classroom for the association a while back and that's where we met. From there, we've done regular practice sessions ever since she entered the Practice League."

“You have?!”

“Ahaha~☆ That’s riiight. Surprised?”

Personal relationships in the Shogi world defy comprehension.

Every so often you’ll hear about two people who *would never get along* who have actually been doing practice sessions together for decades.

“That’s on the condition that I look after Tamayo whenever she visits Tokyo from her hometown in Numazu. Because, see, her Master is quite busy, being on the board of directors and all.”

“That’s right. My Master, he seems to be busy doing some little chores for the Meijin’s Citizens Award ceremony and whatnot. All the details, you know? So, he’s still back in Tokyo. You know how it goes: send the apprentice all the way out into the middle of nowhere while he’s sucking up to the movers and shakers. Real classy.”

“Really? Sounds like you’d be a great pair as Master and apprentice

“What was that?”

She’s glaring at me. Why are the popular Women’s League players so scary?

Mr. Natagiri cracks a smile and says, “It just so happened that the apartment right next to mine was vacant, so I turned it into my own practice session studio. I let her live there for a while on the condition that she would move out when she started getting work as a Women’s League player. But she’s still hanging around for some reason.”

“Wait, what?! You live next door to him?!”

“Yep~. That’s why I was thinking when I invited you to a practice session, you could stay in Jinjin-sensei’s room overnight if it got too late. Well, the plan kind of disappeared though. That practice session ...”

“Heh heh! Too bad☆”

Jinjin looks at me like a hunter watching his prize get away.

Daaammnn I nearly fell into that trap Ai's fingernails are digging into me but she's not saying a word

"But, Yaichi. You're welcome to join our practice sessions at any time. Feel free to use my bed if you need a place to sleep. I don't mind at all☆"

Then where exactly are you planning to sleep

"Jinjin-sensei's room has everything you could dream of! And, this man here, he's perfect around the house! I'd never leave if I lived with him, that's for sure. It's just so easy!"

"Heh heh heh. Making me clean the rooms, making me cook, how in the world did you grow up to be like this?"

"But, Jinjin, your cooking tastes so much better."

Yep, she's officially dropped the *sensei* altogether. This must be what it's like when they're alone.

Stunned, I look at them and say, "Y-you two could probably just get married, don't you think?"

"Ahaha~☆ No, no."

They dismiss the idea at the exact same time.

But it wasn't just the timing, even their voices harmonize in perfect sync.

..... Don't have a clue.

Anyway, these two get the opening party started and keep it going like a well-oiled machine.

"What a wonderful message from the prime minister live via satellite. Only a true leader could deliver a heartfelt story like that!"

“And he’s very much my type.”

“Ahaha~☆ Jinjin, for being a switch hitter, your comments always hit straight down the middle.”

Those public speaking classes Ms. Rokuroba took are really paying off. She’s a perfect MC.

Getting just enough laughs from the audience to keep everything casual, she’s working through this bizarre title match opening party schedule like it’s a walk in the park. Now I see why she got called up from Tokyo.

Her talents really shine through during the *Player Introductions*.

“..... And that is how Ai overcame her parents’ objections to become Yaichi’s apprentice. Just nine years old at the time, she left everything she knew behind to undergo strict training in Osaka. The one who raised her with a sometimes firm, sometimes gentle hand was none other than Yaichi. A bond between the two would soon grow strong enough to surpass the bounds of Master and apprentice——.”

One thing after another and there’s not a single set of dry eyes in the hall. Whoa. Even I’m tearing up a little bit Thanks to her, no one found it strange that the *Player Introductions* were mostly about Ai for some reason.

Oh, and the person who was supposed to be the real star of the night, the Meijin, barely got a thirty-second introduction. That’s almost cruel!

But the one who really had it tough wasn’t the Meijin.

Suddenly in the spotlight, Ai changed dresses a total of four times during the evening. I went around to the tables where the community leaders were sitting to pour them some drinks but

“..... I always thought of little Ai as my own granddaughter”

“..... Why would she ever prioritize Shogi over becoming a chef? That’s a game, not a job, right?”

“Ryuo? Hah! Dragon King? *Dara!* What’s a worm doing calling himself a dragon?!!”

Each table hit me with every complaint and misgiving in the book. They weren’t sugar-coating their feelings at all.

Ai and her mother are pretty much celebrities to these powerful people, like superstars. And I’m the thieving bum who’s stealing one of their idols away.

—I was wondering why Ai’s father isn’t around So this is why

Pouring drinks for them while forcing a smile, suddenly I’d give anything to be in his shoes. Heck, I haven’t seen him once since I got here.

That friendly smile he gave me when I took Ai as my apprentice, that *Let’s figure this out together* and all the support he gave wasn’t just goodwill.

“..... He wanted someone else to take all this abuse in his place!”

No matter what grievances the powerful locals said to my face or horrible things they said behind my back, their tune changed immediately once Ai came back into the hall.

“Ai! I’m so happy for you.”

“You have such a nice Master. We can rest easy.”

These guys will say anything to make Ai happy.

As soon as they realized that complimenting me made her happier than saying nice things about her, the locals started treating me like the greatest thing since sliced bread. Yeah, I’m not happy about this

Then, the time came for the Women’s League Qualification Signing Ceremony to get started.

Chairman Tsukimitsu, acting as a witness for the signing, walks onto the stage in a kimono with the papers in his hands. The vibe suddenly turning serious, I have no idea what’s going on as he turns to ask me.

“Ryuo. Do you, as a Master, swear to take Ai Hinatsuru as your apprentice?”

“Yeah

“Miss Ai Hinatsuru. Do you swear to take this man as your Master, and proceed down the Shogi path with him in sickness and in health?”

“Yes! I do!!”

“Excellent. Both of you, please sign your names on this sacred parchment.”

As soon as the chairman said that, Ms. Oga held out a pen like passing me a priceless artifact.

“.....”

While I have many questions about this overblown ceremony, I’ll have to sign this paper at some point anyway. So, I write my name into the *Master* slot.

Once I hand her the pen, Ai starts writing her name like the thing is going to explode if she makes a mistake.

“They are now officially Master and apprentice! Please wish them luck with a round of applause!!”

Ms. Rokuroba stirs up the crowd.

As someone right in the middle of all this, the crowd reaches a fever pitch as I’m starting to connect the dots. These people are a little too excited to be wishing a new Master and apprentice well on their journey There’s something else mixed in with all those cheers.

“Heh heh Lucky guy,” Jinjin says with a heartfelt smile. Why do you feel jealous?

“Now the association has secured a place to hold future title matches, even on a tight schedule.”

“Well played, chairman. A spectacular move.”

Chairman Tsukimitsu and Ms. Oga whisper back and forth. So, you’re the ones

that sold me out.

The totally plastered locals are cheering right along with my family.

Mrs. Hinatsuru is trying to hold back tears at the sight of her daughter growing up.

And, the one table that's remained eerily quiet the whole night, the Kiyotaki table

If I was to say that the Meijin sitting off on his own with that calm smile, never once complaining and enjoying himself was the silver lining, then it really was.

WALTZ

“..... Ugh I don’t feel so good”

I wake up with the worst headache the next morning.

“Damn it Those geezers They must’ve spiked my drinks during all that excitement last night”

I looped through the tables of local leaders a few times, and each time they’d say, “Come on, just one cup,” hand me some rank-smelling juice, and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

There must’ve been alcohol in there because the room was spinning by the end of the night.

Worried about me, Ai pulled me all the way back to my room only to find—the room was different.

“W-What’s this?!”

A futon had been laid out on the floor for me. That’s fine. This is an inn. They do that for all their guests.

The problem was There was only one futon, but two pillows.

And one of them was the pillow that Ai used when she lived here.

The culprit was clearly on the inside Well, there’s only one suspect.

“Awh, Mom! Don’t embarrass me like this!!” Ai had said, sounding angry and turning bright red. But, she stayed right next to me and twiddled her thumbs while looking right up at me to ask, *“T-This Is a no-no, isn’t it?”*

That it is.

Even drunk, I knew it wasn’t okay. Absolutely not. I wouldn’t even dream of being that physically close to a little girl, and so many bad things would happen

if I actually did in the real world.

“But We’re legally bound as Master and apprentice now, so s-sleeping in the same futon would be okay? Don’t you think?”

No, no I don’t.

And I don’t think a relationship between a Shogi Master and apprentice has anything to do with sleeping in the same futon in the first place.

“..... Awwhh”

Ai looked reluctant to leave even though she was saying, “It’s a no-no,” to herself as she drifted out of my room.

“Was that a bit mean? Oh, no, no! W-What am I saying”

Am I still a bit drunk?

“Maybe a shower will clear my head”

Since it’d be a waste not to try out the hot spring while I’m here, I take a dip, too. Once I dry my hair, I head back to my room to find the futon gone and breakfast waiting for me.

Everything is being set up by the owner—Mrs. Hinatsuru. Sitting on her ankles on the floor, she places her hands on the *tatami* mat and greets me with a polite bow when she sees me come in.

“Good morning.”

“Ah Morning.”

“Did you enjoy yourself last night?”

“Enjoy what?!”

“..... Yes, I don’t blame you. I myself felt it may be a bit rushed.”

Sounding a bit on edge, Mrs. Hinatsuru sets all the food out on a small table for me.

I don't have much of an appetite At least, I didn't until I saw the food. I can't explain it, but my mouth is watering.

"This morning's breakfast is rice porridge. Please add as much of this sauce as you like."

Everything laid out, she says, "I shall return once you've finished," and leaves the room.

I pick up the wooden spoon and scoop some of the porridge into my mouth.

"..... This is pretty good!"

It's normal rice porridge But it's somehow really, really good.

Of course the rice is soft and warm, but adding the sauce gives it an extra zing that's perfect for me.

There's a small menu card sitting on the tray, so I pick it up and have a look.

"Let's see *Bonito broth with a pinch of fish oil from the Noto Peninsula for flavor*. That makes sense Hm?"

It looks like there's something written on the back of the card.

I flip it over and see one word written in clumsy letters.

"*Sorry.*"

It doesn't say who it's from, but I know. The person who cooked all this food—Ai's father.

"..... Well, I guess this porridge is good enough to call us even."

Good food makes people more forgiving. That bad headache from the alcohol finally clears up.

Mrs. Hinatsuru comes into my room again the instant I take the last bite, almost like she was watching for the perfect moment.

"I shall assist you with your kimono."

“Huh? That’s all right, I can do it myself——.”

“I insist.”

“..... Okay.”

I have no say. Giving up, I let her dress me.

This kimono isn’t like the one last night. It’s the kind people wear for title matches, so that’s a relief but There’s nothing to do while she’s getting all the folds in place for me. I strike up a meaningless conversation to keep this from getting too awkward.

“Um What’s Ai doing this morning?”

“She’s currently eating crab.”

Crab for breakfast Well, she loves that stuff. *Crabby*≡ I can just see my apprentice smiling with her cheeks stuffed full of it. So cute.

..... But, it’s strange. Part of me feels like my apprentice got stolen away by crabmeat. Ai would normally come wake me up before starting to cook breakfast But now she’s happily chowing down on crab this early in the morning

As I was feeling jealous of a crustacean ...

“..... Are you angry?” Mrs. Hinatsuru, her hands pinning my kimono in place, stops to ask.

That caught me off guard for a moment.

She’s probably talking about last night’s opening party (?) but I’ve never heard her sound so unsure of herself.

“Well A bit surprised, sure. But I’m not angry.”

That’s the truth. Actually, part of me is grateful to her.

This is helping me atone for making Ai go through all that.

By no means am I off the hook but seeing her even just a little bit more like her old self makes me happy.

But her mother wasn't done.

"I owe you an apology, *Sensei*."

"If it's about yesterday, I really don't——."

"I'm not talking about that."

"Huh?"

"I I was certain that Ai would return home within a day or two."

She continues with a tight grip on my sash.

"How could she not? How could two children, ages sixteen and nine with no family relationship, live under the same roof with only Shogi in common? That arrangement is doomed to fail. I scoffed at the idea."

"....."

"However, Ai never once told me she wanted to come home. It didn't matter if we were talking on the phone or corresponding through email, she only talked about you and Shogi"

Mrs. Hinatsuru pulls out her smartphone and shows me the messages that Ai sent to her.

Master said I've gotten stronger today!

I lost today, but I'll have Master train me up a bit and try again!

Don't worry about me. I'm laughing every day in Osaka. Master is with me, so I'm not lonely!

Every day is a dream come true. Thank you so much for letting me become Master's apprentice!

All of Ai's messages were packed full of the words *Shogi* and *Master*

I got so teary-eyed halfway through that I had to stop reading because the letters were too blurry.

“But! B-But, that’s not how it was! I’m the one that should be apologizing to you, not the other way around!”

My kimono still isn’t set, but I drop down on all fours on the spot anyway.

“Ai Miss Hinatsuru has cried so many times in Osaka. Her saying that she was laughing every day, that’s a lie. And it was my fault My fault because I’m a worthless Master and she ended up getting hurt so many times!”

What happened after the third match wasn’t the only time.

Thinking back, Ai was always crying. When she lost to Big Sis, when she lost to Ai Yashajin, when she beat Mio, when she won against Keika Ai’s heart has been gashed over and over, and she cried.

“..... She would’ve been laughing and smiling a lot more as a normal elementary school student. But she’s cried so much all because she met me and Shogi I was so focused on myself that I wasn’t even there to support her for the match that would have gotten her into the Women’s League, the most important match of her life!”

“That’s all fine.”

“..... What?”

“I agree that Ai has most likely cried more than she would have if she were living in this household. There is no doubt in my mind she has shed many, many tears. I can tell as much.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because I’m her mother. I can tell when she’s acting like everything’s okay and she’s happy so that I won’t worry about her. I can also understand the reason behind it as well.”

Mrs. Hinatsuru pulls me back to my feet, straightens all the layers of fabric,

and starts fixing my kimono in place again.

“We, as parents, are also able to prevent her from getting hurt. However, parents will always revert to protecting their children. Should they fall and cry, we will help them to their feet and soothe their pain. We hold their hands so they never fall in the first place. Children raised in such a manner will never experience the pain, loss and happiness necessary to mature. So——,” Mrs. Hinatsuru says as she gives my sash a strong tug and finishes tying my *hakama* pants into place. “That’s why, Kuzuryu-sensei ... you are the only one who can get hurt with her, cry with her, then get back on your feet together and keep walking forward together.”

“.....!!”

“She’s spent less than a year in that humble apartment of yours, but that time has been far more valuable to her than the years she’s spent living in the spacious, ornate Hinatsuru Inn. The best thing for her is not to be constantly protected by her parents but to be fighting alongside you Even if that means she gets hurt from time to time.”

Slipping the *haori* jacket over my shoulders, Mrs. Hinatsuru continues.

“I wanted to give her one last gift as a parent and strengthen her bond with you, to bolster your connection any way I could” Now finished, Mrs. Hinatsuru nervously smiles at me and says, “But everything may have been a bit rushed. I offer both you and Shogi my most sincere apologies. Allow me to ask you to watch over my daughter once more.”

She then sits down on her ankles and places her hands on the *tatami* mat.

“As the owner of the Hinatsuru, it is my duty to protect the future of this inn, to protect its reputation as the best in Japan and to ensure it gets passed down to the next generation. That is both my responsibility and my greatest joy as the owner. However, my greatest joy as a mother can only be my daughter’s happiness.”

Motherly love shines through with every word she says.

“Yaichi Kuzuryu-*sensei*.” At last, Mrs. Hinatsuru bows all the way to the floor and says in a kind voice, “Please walk this path together with my daughter. Please Forevermore, together.”

The match was scheduled to start in fifteen minutes by the time she left my room.

There’s an unwritten rule that says both players need to be in the arena ten minutes early, so I’m really crunched for time.

“Crap! I’m gonna be late”

Shingen bukuro pouch in one hand and fabric rustling underneath me, I race out of the room, around a corner and see a thin leg stick out right in front of me.

“Whoa?!”

I catch myself just before I fall on my face.

There’s only one person in the world who would do this.

“Come on, please stop, Big Sis! It’s easy to trip in these pants!”

“..... Tsk.”

She snaps her tongue, clear as day. Yep, she wanted me to trip What if I’m late because of her?

Then again, I knew this was coming.

Considering what Big Sis is like, I doubt she’d leave it at that. Back when we were kids, she’d trip me on asphalt and throw big rocks at me until I cried.

Her pulling that on me right now would be a big problem That’s what I’m afraid of.

“Your collar.”

“Huh?”

“..... Fix it already.”

She reaches around my neck and straightens the collar on my jacket because it had been sticking straight up.

“.....!”

Well, this is surprising.

Memories of that night come flooding back with her face so close to mine

My heart is slamming against my ribs. I have to apologize, right now.

“Big Sis! I——.”

“You’ll be late. Get going.”

“Okay, may I have some time to talk with you after the match is over?”

“..... I’ll think about it.”

She answers just above a whisper, turning away at the same time.

“Thank you!”

I take off toward the arena, gliding through the air like I grew wings.

Journalists are lined up at the front of the room waiting for me when I step inside the arena. All of their cameras level at me in unison as I get closer. An endless stream of flashes and shutter clicks wash over me. I feel like I just walked into a firing squad.

“Good morning.”

I make a quick bow and walk inside the room.

The Meijin is already here, sitting in the lower seat and cleaning his glasses. Once I make another bow, I sit down in the upper seat. Another avalanche of flashes surrounds us. All the journalists crammed in here have pushed the

association members all the way to the edges of the arena. Looking around, I only know a few faces: Chairman Tsukimitsu, his secretary Ms. Oga and the journalist Ms. Mato. That's all.

Then, ten minutes pass without much of anything to say or do.

—Wait a second This is the first time I've thought about Shogi since I got up here

I only just now realized it.

There was so much going on that I didn't have time to think about Shogi. My head is just a blank canvas Although that's a cool way to put it, it just means I'm going in without a plan.

—Meh, no big deal. I'm on defense anyway.

Any other time, I'd realize how far behind I am already and start panicking.

But today for some reason, I feel optimistic. I want to start playing right now, like a kid who can't sleep the night before a vacation.

"Oh, it's time."

"9:00 a.m.," Chairman Tsukimitsu calmly says from the observer's seat.

I'm used to observers making this grand announcement: "Please begin the match" or something like that and try to keep from sounding nervous. I knew the chairman was different.

"Now, let's enjoy some tea and begin the match, shall we?"

A prominent pro Shogi player who'd been through so many high-stakes battles himself, he wasn't trying to rattle us with a joke. He's telling us to relax because this battle is going to be long and hard, so using our energy on pre-match jitters would just be a waste.

The Meijin grins, and I can't help but curl the corners of my mouth up right along with him. Our breathing aligned, we lower our heads.

“..... When you’re ready.”

Countless flashes go off and the shutter clicks drown out our voices. The exact opposite of silence But I’m already in the zone, concentrating on the match so everything going on around me sounds distant.

Amidst all that, the Meijin’s hand looks like it’s dancing on air as he reaches toward the board to make the first move.

Flittering like a feather, his right hand takes hold of the Pawn in front of his Rook and advances straightforward. That movement is so sharp and crisp I thought the tip of the piece might shatter the square on the board. I immediately know what I’m going to do.

The Meijin’s offense—Double Wing Attack.

“..... So, that’s what it’s going to be? All right then.”

Just like he did in the first match, he’s trying to use one of my specialties against me.

Of course, I accept the challenge. How could I not? I advance the Pawn in front of my own Rook.

The thing about the Double Wing early game is that the players mirror each other’s moves.

That makes it kind of a waltz, me matching the Meijin move for move, keeping pace with his dance step for step.

DISARRAY

“The most monumental match in Shogi history has produced a great deal of surprises!” says a very excited news anchor.

It’s the 9 o’clock national news.

The Meijin and I are their top story.

“The first day of the 4th Ryuo Title Match came to a close today with the whole country watching. The Meijin made the sealing move However, the match as a whole has been proceeding at a snail’s pace with both players simply mirroring each other! Many Shogi fans have been expressing their disappointment in this uneventful match all over the Internet since early this afternoon

The camera zooms out to show another person sitting next to the anchor.

“*Sensei*. What are your thoughts on the match thus far?”

A woman dressed like a witch takes over the whole screen with her seemingly endless magical smile and says softly, “Indeed, this match is still following standard procedure to the letter. It’s possible for a pair of amateurs to reach this exact situation on the board.”

Standing next to the woman, who would’ve been hunted for witchcraft back in medieval Europe, is a dashing young man wearing a white cape who would surely have been a knight back in those days.

It’s the Master and apprentice with no idea how weird they look—— Women’s Legend Rina Shakando and Ayumu Kannabe 6-*dan*.

“.....”

I freeze, the remote control in my hand.

Having just finished eating dinner with only people from the association, I

came back to my room and turned on the TV thinking I'd relax a bit before bed.

And now this.

..... Somebody didn't think it all the way through when they hired those two. But the news anchor, poor girl. She's edging away from the oddballs

I keep watching, unable to take my eyes off the screen.

"While the results may be alike, the content is far different It's strikingly similar to an amateur musician performing the same piece as a professional. The notes are identical, but the sound is worlds apart. Do you not agree? God Cauldron."

"It is just as you say, Master. Just as god created humans in his image. Just as is profound thoughts are beyond our comprehension, humans make the mistake of trying to replicate the god's Shogi techniques"

Rather than help viewers understand her point, that comment just made things worse.

"I-I see"

The news anchor has *I don't get it* written all over her face, but responds anyway. Hang in there

"The reason their match has proceeded so slowly despite following the standards so closely could only be that *they're confirming the standards are correct with each move.*"

I thought that explanation would never fly on television, but Ms. Shakando boils it down to even simpler terms.

"The Meijin has employed the Double Wing Attack for this match ... a strategy with a long history. However, with its immeasurable variations, the Double Wing Attack has not been researched to the extent of *yagura* formations or Side Pawn Capture and has been classified as *Power Shogi*. Even so, the Shogi Association has around four thousand match records on file in their database."

“F-Four thous-

“Those two have each match memorized. Combined with their own practice matches and research, each can mentally reference over ten thousand matches at any time. Both players are committing their utmost concentration to scour each one in order to find the absolute best move on each turn during this title match. They may be following standards, but the time required to do this with every move is extraordinary.”

“W- Why go that far? Winning is possible without going through all that trouble.”

“Surely, you already know the answer. Is the Meijin pursuing a solution to the Double Wing Attack formation? No, he’s looking for a solution to the game known as Shogi ... a solution that lies on the precipice between victory and defeat.”

“A solution to Shogi? What, exactly, would that be?”

“Which would emerge victorious: offense or defense, should each player always make the best move possible? It’s the answer to the puzzle a high power presented us with when Shogi was created. Fu-fu That answer is worth far more than some status as the Eternal Septuple derived by humans.”

“S-So The moment they stop following the standard would be?”

“The moment Shogi as we know it ends and completely new Shogi will come into existence. While I have no way of knowing exactly when that move will occur, a new Shogi era will dawn tomorrow.”

“..... That’s the Eternal Queen for you. Nothing gets by her.”

While I’m not sure what all of this *new era* is about, her idea that we’re going so slowly because we’re thinking through the standards is right on the money.

Meticulously replaying all those match records to find the tiniest deviations takes a surprisingly large amount of time and energy It’s worn me out.

The Meijin's sense of scale is horrifyingly out of this world. So much so that just sitting across the board from him is overwhelming.

But I'm keeping up. I'm still in it!

That fear of suddenly realizing *I lost* like the first match isn't going to happen this time.

Throwing away all my assumptions seems to be helping me keep pace with the Meijin's reading speed. My own predictions have been right so much more this time than the third match, it's not even funny.

Though, it doesn't feel like I've improved ... at all.

But, whereas I couldn't even see the Meijin's moves before, now it's like I'm stepping on his shadow. I'm somewhere at the edge of the other worldly sense he has.

The real question is when and who will break from the standards. Will it be me, or will it be him?

While I'm psyching myself up for the final battle, Ms. Shakando turns to the TV camera with a somber look on her face and says, "..... Once cast aside, the Double Wing Attack has once again been brought into the limelight. With the limits of standard progression knowledge coming into view and the feverish expansion of computer software, it has been highly unusual for dated Shogi like this to suddenly appear out in the open during the modern era. Fu That is what has allowed an old lady like myself to remain competitive with the younger generations."

"Please do not say such a thing!" Ayumu yells before the news anchor could get a word in edgewise.

Come on man, this is a live broadcast.

"You are far stronger and more beautiful than anyone, Master! No damsel could ever compare!!"

“Fufu. Such adorable words It is quite possible we will witness the end of this world during the match analysis tomorrow on the Internet. One as aged as myself could not possibly decipher and comprehend it all Will you stay with me till the very end, God Cauldron?”

“I would stay at your side through hell and back should you only ask, Master!”

The heck is this?

The announcer got thrown for a loop for a second there. Even I didn’t see that little scene coming. But she pulled herself together real fast and pushes the TV show along.

“I ... see your point. Now, about the all-important sealing move——.”

Oh, nope, nope!

Nearly jumping out of my skin, I change the channel.

It’s against the rules to listen to another player’s analysis while the match is still going.

Actually, I should’ve changed the channel once they started talking about Shogi but Those two suddenly showing up was just so mesmerizing that I couldn’t take my eyes off the TV. Kind of like when you see something creepy
.....

Oh well, I’ll just watch something else and it’ll be fine——what, are you kidding me?!

Just as I breathe a sigh of relief.

They’re talking about today’s match over on this channel here toooooo!

It doesn’t matter how many times I hit that button, every station is just Shogi, Shogi, Shogi——.

I-Is every single channel analyzing our match?!

I keep pressing that button, praying that I'll find something that's not.

Until finally I see a picture that doesn't have a Shogi board on it.

"Now then, let's go out on location——."

At last, a news program talking to a reporter dispatched to who knows where to cover some incident. That poor guy is standing outside at night, wearing a long coat and shivering as he talks with the studio.

This should be safe.

I toss the remote onto my futon and sit down on the sofa next to the window.

My body feels like lead

This is crazy I knew the Meijin's Eternal Septuple title and his 100th title season would draw some attention, but this much?

I've been caught up in the *Ai Whirlwind* since arriving at the Wakura Onsen, so I completely forgot that the rest of the country is counting down the hours until the Meijin gets immortalized by these grand achievements.

The media is going to go nuts tomorrow.

..... The whole country will be waiting for the moment the Meijin makes history Basically, waiting on the edge of their seat to see me throw in the towel

Just as I was starting to feel that no words could possibly describe what's going through my head.

A strange light shines in through the window. The curtains are closed but it's bright in here.

Huh? What's with this light?

Curious, I pull back the curtain to have a look——.

"There! That was Kuzuryu-Ryuo looking out the window just now! The lights in the Meijin's room are already off, but it appears the Ryuo is still awake!

Perhaps he's planning out his strategy for tomorrow?!"

I heard that voice loud and clear.

But not from outside: *from the TV*.

???

Really confused, I look back and forth between the TV and the window.

"He's looking this way! The Ryuo is looking at us! Perhaps he's too nervous to sleep?! He appears to be rather anxious——," the field reporter repeats as he points at one window on the side of a massive building.

There's a spotlight outside the inn that's aimed directly at my room.

A whole bunch of broadcast vans from different TV stations are parked around it.

That means——.

Say what?! They're filming me?!

All those vans are outside?! Seriously?!

I fling the curtain shut and turn off the lights. Whatever happened to privacy?!

"Lights in the Ryuo's room have gone off! He appears to be done with his preparations and is going to sleep!!"

"No, because I can't believe how far you're willing to go for a story!!" I howl at the TV, but of course there's no answer.

The news anchor in the studio asks a question.

"Is that all the information from the scene?"

The reporter squeezes his microphone.

"Not quite. Although we were denied an interview with either of the players, the owner of the inn hosting the match was gracious enough to speak with us."

Oh, come on.

“We learned that Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* took her daughter as his own apprentice, and the two are to be betrothed.”

“Betrothed? But, the *Ryuo* is only seventeen, yes? That’s too young to be engaged

“The two have been living together in Osaka since April, and plan to make the engagement official once the girl is legally allowed to marry and then become the next generation to run this inn.”

“How old is her daughter right now?”

“From what I’ve been told, she’s a fourth-grade elementary school student.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“Yes. Many Shogi fans who made the journey to watch the match in person spoke to us, saying they ‘Want the Meijin to win,’ ‘The *Ryuo* should be arrested as soon as possible,’ ‘Execute him as soon as his title’s gone,’ ‘Take him away,’ among other things. In fact, it seems that most people are rooting against the *Ryuo* rather than for the Meijin——.”

Hold up. This is a national broadcast, and they just said I’m engaged to and living with a grade school girl, casting me as some perverted Dragon King, and I’ll be forever known as——.

..... *Time for bed.*

I turn off the TV, close every single one of the curtains, crawl into my futon and forget everything.

Thankfully I got some sleep

Then, next morning.

As usual on Day 2, we set our pieces in the starting position and move them as the match recorder reads through everything that happened yesterday.

Once we're up to where we left off, the observer reads the sealing move But since the observer this time is blind, that duty fell to the assistant observer.

"I shall read aloud in the chairman's place."

Stiff as a board, he reads what's written on the paper.

"The sealing move is Whaaat?!" the assistant observer yelps in surprise. "P-Pardon me. The sealing move is——."

What he said caught everyone other than the two of us players by surprise because it went against what's considered to be Shogi common sense.

The Meijin——broke away from the standard.

"!! It's time, huh"

Watching the Meijin's right-hand dance above the board, I clench my jaw and prepare for battle.

From here on out, I can't rely on any of Shogi's 1400-year history, the four thousand Double Wing Attack pro matches on file at the association or the sense that I've developed since I started playing.

That move went against Shogi itself, throwing it all into disarray.

IONIZATION

The sealing move—once the Meijin deviated from Shogi standards, the atmosphere inside the break room sizzled as if struck by an electrical charge.

“The evaluation software won’t settle on a rating!” exclaimed Mato, the journalist, as she tried to analyze the match on her computer.

Jin Natagiri and Tamayo Rokuroba, busy preparing the large Shogi board for their own analysis, groan in acknowledgement.

“Those two are reading too deep Software casts a wide net, but doesn’t read any more than a few turns ahead. That’s why it can’t keep up when they spend time reading deeper than it can predict, and it can’t assign a value to each move

“Then Does that mean my computer is useless for determining who has the stronger formation for the rest of the match?!”

Tamayo clutched her head in her hands. It was her job to analyze and predict from the defense—Yaichi’s side.

“What am I supposed to do? I’m totally clueless right now

Not a single player in the room rebuked her complaining as *pathetic*.

Each piece’s current location was so bizarre that it was impossible to determine what formation each player had on the board. Neither the professional Shogi players in the break room nor the software at their disposal could comprehend what the two players in the arena were doing any longer.

In the midst of it all, “Master will make this move.”

“Huh?”

The one reaching for Tamayo’s analysis board—was Ai Hinatsuru Women’s League 3-kyu.

Now officially part of the Women's League, she had the right to participate in match analysis along with the others in the break room. She took full advantage of it right away by predicting what move Yaichi will make.

Jin watched from the other side of the board and gave a heartfelt nod once he saw what the girl had in mind.

"Ohh? I see, I see. Indeed, that seems right up Yaichi's alley."

However.

"Smart aleck grade schoolers should keep their mouths shut! Yaichi will obviously move here."

Reaching in from behind Tamayo's opposite shoulder to make her point was Ginko Sora, Women's Dual Title.

Jin nodded once again, impressed.

"Ha-haa I could see that too. Yes, I think Yaichi might prefer that one."

Ginko stood up to her full height, looking down on Ai with a *Heh heh*, and touting her victory. However, Ai leaned over the board again to put the piece that Ginko moved back in its place and advanced her own without missing a beat.

"Here."

"Like this."

"Here."

"Like this."

"Here!"

"Like this!"

Ai and Ginko go back and forth, insisting that their own predictions were correct while simultaneously denying the other's. The two repeatedly moved the other's pieces back to the original position like bickering children with no

end in sight.

“Ah, um Excuse me——.”

Sandwiched between the two, Tamayo tried to interject.

“You stay out of this!”

“Uh Okay? S-Sorry?”

Wondering why she was the one getting scolded, Tamayo thought, *Oh well, no biggie. They're showing me some moves, so what's the problem?* And decided to watch the girls' analysis (?) without interrupting them. She whispered under her breath.

“..... Better not dig too deep into this one”

The Meijin and Ryuo were engaged in Shogi far removed from the mostly *anything goes* sense of modern-day Shogi matches. Trying to understand their thought process could negatively impact her own Shogi senses. The very thought scared Tamayo to the core.

Shogi had the power to fascinate people and change them from within.

The effect grew along with the level of play, to the point where top-tier matches would affect bystanders like a massive energy source altering its surroundings at a molecular level.

The person who understood that *second best in the world* was quietly sitting at the back of the break room, listening to his secretary read through the match record thus far and analyzing the match on his own.

“..... Which brings us to the current 51st move. The Ryuo has already spent forty minutes of waiting time thinking on it.”

“All right.”

Seiichi Tsukimitsu nods to Sasari Oga and silently ponders her words for a minute before getting another person's attention.

“..... Ms. Mato.”

“Yes, Chairman.”

“What is the problem with the software?”

“It won’t give me a clear value. Both formation ratings and move predictions keep changing by the second Chairman, may I ask you question?”

“By all means.”

“How do you feel about the match so far? I can’t add any comments to the live blog as things are right now”

Completely at a loss, she responded with a question of her own.

As someone directly hired by a newspaper sponsoring the event, it was her job to pass along information as well as professional analysis to the media throng waiting outside the break room. Saying, *I don’t know* was not acceptable.

“Let me think”

Seiichi thought of how best to phrase his answer.

“There are two schools of thought in Shogi. Board theory in other words, trying to find the correct answer in Shogi itself. The other way to approach it is not to consider theory at all, instead focusing on victory by forcing the opponent to make a mistake.”

“Yes.”

“*He* prefers matches with a large amount of waiting time—basically, these two-day matches are his chance to pursue the next level of board theory. That’s why he’s visibly frustrated whenever his opponent makes a bad move. I’m sure you know about that long, disappointed sigh he makes.”

That sigh itself had become legend.

Even if it put him at an advantage, the Meijin would always look irritated

when an opponent made a mistake.

“Yaichi, on the other hand, plays more for victory rather than for knowledge. The Kansai playing style The willingness to stubbornly hold out, be dragged through the mud as it were, so long as it leads to victory can be explained another way. It waits for the opponent to make a mistake.”

“But The Meijin won’t make a mistake.”

“Are you familiar with the phenomenon of *ionization*?”

“I can’t say I am”

Caught off guard by having a word with no connection to Shogi suddenly thrown at her, Mato paused in confusion.

“It’s the process by which molecules susceptible to electricity produce ions from an electrical charge. Lightning and auroras are produced by positively charged ions from high voltage built up by friction in the atmosphere.”

“T-That’s interesting but What does it have to do with, um Shogi?”

“The point I’m trying to make is that a large energy source can induce all sorts of change. Pure air can transform into lightning.”

“So, by sitting across the board from the Meijin ... the Ryuo is changing?”

“Shogi is energy. People require large amounts of energy to think. Simply playing Shogi is physically exhausting, yes? However, what remains in place of that expended energy once the match is over?”

“..... A match record?”

“Exactly. Match records are crystals left behind by that energy. The more thought that went into their creation, the stronger they glow,” Seichi confidently declared. “He’s pursuing a solution to the game of Shogi at this very moment. A solution that has eluded countless prodigies over the past 1,400 years, one that rapidly advancing technological power couldn’t produce, to the

ultimate question—*Should each player make the best possible move each turn, does offense or defense emerge victorious?* That is the answer he seeks.”

“.....!!”

Mato and Sasari, seated beside Seiichi, couldn’t contain their surprise and curiosity. Anyone who plays Shogi wants to solve that mystery.

At the same time, neither was about to take Seiichi’s outlandish claim at face value.

“Playing Shogi by yourself is impossible. Therefore, finding a partner who can consistently make the best possible move is a necessity. For that very reason, the Meijin has been priming Yaichi over the past three matches. His Shogi has absorbed an incredible amount of energy and is transforming as we speak.”

“The way you talk about it ... makes it sound like you’ve experienced this yourself——.”

“Yes. I have *been in this very spot with him before.*”

Mato nearly gasped at those words.

It was true.

Back when the Meijin first achieved the Septuple Title, this man was the one who held out to the very end.

Despite claiming five titles as his own before being overwhelmed by a conqueror from the next generation, losing one title after another, this man continued to fight.

He fought to defend his last one in the face of the Meijin’s six titles just after the Hanshin earthquake struck and became a beacon of hope to the people of Kansai.

Amid ruins, from hospital beds, they watched this Shogi player continue to fight on no matter how many losses he took. They saw themselves in him and every move he made brought them courage.

There was no doubt Shogi gave people strength in those trying times.

Even now, people continue to talk about *the legendary single move that delayed the Septuple Title for a full year*—the *Dastardly 7 Seven Knight*.

“Playing against him I had already lost my vision and could only see my own mental Shogi board, *but I still saw it*. My eyes, which could only sense varying degrees of light, clearly saw bright blue sparks flashing from piece to piece. It was that light that showed me. It led me to the 7 Seven Knight.”

The man who had once held the title of Meijin, supposedly blind for decades, turned to face the monitor and calmly asked, “Can you not see it? All that light pulsing in the arena.”

Mato and Sasari thought this truly absurd claim was nothing more than a joke. After all, the chairman loved saying strange things with a straight face.

However.

“.....?!”

One look at that monitor, and the two women were at a loss for words.

A bizarre light ... an aurora filled the picture of the arena on the screen.

“..... That’s just digital noise, right?”

“..... Probably”

Mato and Sasari blankly stared into the screen.

Back in the arena, Yaichi had less than one hour of waiting time remaining.

CLIMBING DRAGON

My heart is pounding.

My mind is in overdrive.

It's scary how well I can sense what's going on around me. Even the small noises outside the room are clear as a bell.

"..... I never knew I could see this much"

My own abilities are shooting through the roof. I can tell.

My mental Shogi board has more detail than the one sitting in front of me and the pieces are moving around at the speed of light. I can feel how each of them works together without having to read it. It's like the whole board is at my fingertips and it's as intoxicating as a drug.

All my thoughts are melding together.

There are times when you can tell what a strong opponent is thinking just by how they use their waiting time and their body language. All that info gets absorbed and your skills skyrocket for a little while.

It's that feeling like right after nailing a 100 mile-per-hour fastball in a batting cage. Every pitch from then on looks like a beach ball coming at you.

Each of the Meijin's moves feels like it's coming in at 200, 250 mph.

I followed the standards at his pace during Day 1, so I picked up the Meijin's superhuman sense to always find the best move on the board.

—Reached divinity.

People often ask me: *If you played against the god of Shogi, what handicap do you think you'd need to win?*

An all-knowing god would of course know everything there was to know

about Shogi.

The perfect move would be made every single time.

Therefore, playing against the always-perfect Meijin might be the same as playing against that god. It's safe to say he is the closest thing to a god here on earth.

“..... Playing against a god with no handicap? What did I do to deserve this punishment?”

The guy sitting across from me doesn't seem human.

At the same time, he doesn't have the divine aura that a god or angel would have.

It's more like a bottomless pit, a black hole sucking everything inside. That sensation.

—— He's not a god. Just a person, like me.

The Meijin has lost before.

Which means I have a chance. Even I have gone up against the impossible and beat opponents when I thought winning was hopeless.

My battle against Mr. Natagiri's Extreme Rapid Battle clearly comes to mind.

I proved the Meijin's own conclusion to be wrong that day.

——If I can do the same thing again I'll win!!

My eyes glued to the board, I ask the match recorder, “How long is this turn?”

“One hour and eight minutes.”

“And altogether?”

“You have used seven hours and seventeen minutes.”

Swish! Fabric rustles as I put my fists down on the *tatami* mat and lean down over the board to push my brain to work even faster. I pour all my strength and

waiting time into the dark abyss that is Shogi to find it!

To find that one god-killing move.

"Gaahh!!!"

I clench my jaw so tight my teeth start screaming.

—More! Faster, faster!!

Everything I see starts turning red. Gallons of blood rush into my brain to fuel the acceleration. My heart is beating in my eyes. My inner ears start twinging as the rest of my body heats up in a split second. A blood vessel breaks in my nose at some point and hot blood starts dripping.

The body breaks down when a god's applying pressure.

—Almost there!! Please, hold out just a little bit longer!!

"AGHHH

Read.

Read. Read. Read.

Readreadreadreadreadreadreadreadreadreadreadreadreadreadreadreadread

Then, just before my time and strength ran out, right before

“_____There!!”

I smack my discovery onto the board.

The ultimate move, the one that I pushed beyond my limits for nearly two hours to find. A perfect move that is beyond perfect.

—Did that do it?!

It feels like it. I look up from the board and wipe away the blood dripping from my nose with the back of my hand.

The Meijin outdoes my reading with one move in no time flat.

“..... Huh?”

I was numb for a second.

My brain registers the shock a few moments later.

“No no way”

Already way beyond my limit, that shock shatters my spirit.

I threw a 300 mph fastball only to take a 500 mph fastball in the face.

It's that much of a shock.

—— Is he actually a god? Him, right here?

He can't possibly be human like me.

What's more, the Meijin hardly ever moves without using any waiting time whatsoever.

Especially in a big match like this. He always thinks things through to the last possible second, even during one-minute Shogi. Maybe he likes thinking and it just became a habit.

But ... he played that move right away.

Following the meaning through to its conclusion He's already read through to the end.

“..... Ahh-ah”

I didn't mean to sigh, but it came out anyway.

My head drops down like my neck snapped. I'm holding it in my hands.

——If that didn't do it Then nothing will

Even if, by chance, he really has read through all the way to the end, then I'll have to find a move even better than the last one for any chance to win

But I don't have the strength or the time to find it I'm too far gone

— I've lost Yeah.

There are some things that can't be done no matter how hard you try.

That move right there made it all too clear. He's too good

— But, I put up a great fight, didn't I?

I was prepared to lose my title after that absolutely pathetic loss in the third match.

All that was left was to figure out how to go out with a bang After my close encounter with the media's enthusiasm yesterday, I know that that's what the world wants.

No irony, just a feeling of pure accomplishment.

I'm the lucky one. I got to face a player I've always admired and have a front row seat to his grand achievement at the same time.

As a fellow player, this is an honor. Even though I lost, my name will be etched into Shogi history forever.

—I've put on a good show I've made my contribution to the Shogi world

There is no dinner break on Day 2 of the Ryuo Title Match.

The sun is already down, so now's a good time to throw in the towel. Surrendering now will let all the evening news stations break the news and give the morning papers time to write their articles.

An historic match.

My last role to fulfill as the defeated—is to leave behind a beautiful match record.

—Now I might as well give it a fittingly beautiful last act.

I set to work figuring out how to set the scene, then.

No effort goes unrewarded. I proved it, didn't I?

"Huh?"

I look up thinking that someone spoke to me and glance around the room.

That voice I'm sure it

"..... Keika?"

I don't see her. The only ones in the arena are the Meijin, the match recorder and me.

But I hear that voice again.

You've won against opponents with much better rankings and talent before, yes? You saw me do it, didn't you? Yaichi.

".....Kei ka"

I know that's her voice.

Of course, I realize there's no way she's in the arena.

Maybe my brain is so tired that I'm hallucinating her.

But If Keika were in here with me, I'm sure she'd be cheering me on.

That alone I can believe.

I mean, what Keika did for me——.

..... Showing me that really intense Shogi

I ball up the hand that was about to set the scene for my surrender.

Seems like a little bit of the strength I thought was gone is still there I can still fight.

Deciding not to throw in the towel, I search for my next move——.

Hah! What good would that do? A move fit for useless trash like you!

I pull my hand away from the board as another voice fills my ears.

I find another move And timidly ask it.

— How about this one?

Not too bad, I guess? Better than the first one.

A girl dressed in black, arms crossed and chin pointed high as she jabs me with sarcasm.

But, there should be a better one than that. Put some actual thought into it.

“.....Ai Yashajin”

She scolds me for trying to go with a knee-jerk reaction.

It's true I'm very low on time.

But it's at times like these I need to stay calm and read as thoroughly as I can.

I grab a fistful of fabric right above my knee with my right hand and put my left hand on top of it as I read further and further ahead.

Other than the idea I had, yet another option presents itself.

Two choices Two. Which one is right?

I hesitate.

Make up your mind already, Yaichi.

A frigid voice, like ice.

But I, and probably only I, can feel the warmth in that voice hiding beneath the surface.

Because I've got a stronger bond with her than anyone It's my sister's voice.

If you don't win I'll never, ever talk to you again

A bit of loneliness in her eyes, Big Sis shows up wearing my jacket and puffs out her cheeks like a little kid.

I've got butterflies in my stomach. But why? We're siblings, so why's Big Sis doing that?

..... Not that complicated, is it?

I grimace at my own simplicity. Who would've thought that thinking about a girl here and now would give me a second wind?

I don't have talent like the Meijin does.

I don't have his ability to make split-second decisions.

I don't have his inhuman Shogi endurance.

Or his sense of the big picture, not even close.

I'm probably missing something on a personal level.

The difference in experience is hopeless, the difference in ranking even moreso.

As a player, as a person, he's way ahead of me pretty much everywhere.

I can't beat him in any category.

The Meijin has every single thing I don't have.

Everything needed to win at Shogi.

But, I have ...



I've thought about my weak spots enough.

Enough with trying to find things I'm better at than others.

Rather than counting my enemies, I should be remembering what the people supporting me have said.

Losing isn't scary.

It hurts It hurts like hell, but it's not scary.

I can put up with rejection.

But.

I don't want to reject the people by my side.

I don't want to betray the ones who believe in me no matter how useless I am.

In that case, my only option is to keep pushing forward.

Even if I can't believe in my own strength or my own talent.

I'll fight to the very, very, very end by believing in the people who believe in me. I won't give up. So what if I dirty the match record? I'll keep playing the way I think will lead to victory.

That's— that's what it means to try!!

I swing my arm forward and slap a piece onto the board! It felt like punching the *me* of a few minutes ago who thought *getting this far and losing is still an honor*.

The Meijin, seeing that

? Was that a smile?

I can't see his mouth because his fan is in the way, but I'm sure he smiled.

Could he tell what I was thinking? Did my sudden change of heart, something like a little kid would do, make him grin? Somehow, it feels like this man can

read me like a book.

But, I'm not embarrassed at all.

My fingertips were ice cold, but now——.

Intense.

There's a fire burning in my chest.

A fire that no amount of cold words or the harsh winds of reality could ever put out.

It's strange how a situation you thought was unsalvageable before turns into "it's not *that* bad" once that flame starts burning in your heart.

The Meijin considers his options.

Using his remaining waiting time bit by bit, he responds with the best possible move every single time, just like I knew he would.

With my formation almost nonexistent and barely any waiting time, I don't have much to choose from. It's all I can do to prevent him from pulling further ahead.

——Don't give up! There's a chance as long as I don't give up!!

Then, the very last stage of the late game arrives.

The Meijin is out of time, too. Both of us are playing one-minute Shogi.

"Here!!"

I take advantage of my last opportunity to counterattack and advance my King toward enemy territory!

Both of our Kings are lightly defended. That's the thing about Double Wing Attacks when both players focus on the center: the Kings charge out to face each other in a final clash. The time has come.

"Intense Intense!!"

It feels like my whole body is on fire.

My nerves and adrenaline have turned my throat into a desert.

My heart's pounding so hard it'll break a few ribs at this rate.

My King is mostly on its own, facing the Meijin's incoming attacks like charging at an enemy stronghold, dodging arrows as they whiz by!

"Gahhh!!"

A dangerous dance where one false step means certain death on the spot.

Slipping past the enemy defenses and exchanging blows with only my reflexes to rely on.

But as someone who likes the Double Wing Attack, I'm used to this kind of fight! If we're both limited by one-minute Shogi, there should be an opening somewhere!!

However.

Khh! So strong!!

I started the dance, but the Meijin gradually takes the lead.

Forget about a wrong step, this Shogi god hasn't even put a toe in the wrong direction. He's shooting down bullets with bullets at point-blank range!

"How does a pro in his mid-forties have the reflexes to keep up with a teenager?!"

Another shiver of fear goes down my spine. He's not human

Nerves, hopelessness and an undying thirst for victory. Thoughts and feelings collide inside my head. I'm so close to my absolute limit I can't tell which one is which as they mix together in one jumbled mess.

I should be good in the situation. I've played tens of thousands of matches just like this.

But I can't see a good move!!

Damn it! Why?! I'm so close I'm so damn close!! Just a little more, just a little bit more?! If I don't push through now, when the hell will I?!

Clutching my knee, I smack my fist against the side of my head a few times like trying to fix a broken TV, hoping that somehow my brain will show me something.

Show me! Show me already!!

This Shogi! This match right here!! I have to win this one no matter what!!

That moment.

The Shogi board disappears from my sight.

Master! Let's see who can solve it the fastest!!

"..... Ai?"

Things I've seen many times before spread out around me.

It's my room.

Not this arena or my room at the inn, but the one in Osaka.

That shabby old two-bedroom apartment in the Fukushima shopping district.

There, the two of us are laying down on the floor side-by-side. Ai is sprawled out on her stomach next to me, giddily pouring over a flimsy book.

That book——.

..... Shogi puzzles?

My mind blasts off.

Thoughts start racing through my head like a dam broke somewhere. Shogi boards, the apartment, a torrent of memories flow through.

—I should know! It should be here somewhere!!

I remember.

I know the answer. That key has to be around here someplace. It can't be too far off. I know for a fact I've seen it before!!

I comb through my memories as if looking for that important something I'd lost.

All these memories are so compact that I relive the last few months in a matter of seconds.

The opening party, the shopping district at night, that computer screen lighting up my dark room, Tendou's streets, the night on the beach—all go by like watching film in reverse—.

Until the moment when Ai asked me about one of the Meijin's more prophetic claims on the plane to Hawaii.

———*Without Pawn Drop Mate, offense is assured victory.*

That's it!!

Those words provide the spark that launches me all the way to the conclusion.

This.

This has to be the answer.

I had the wrong idea about what those words meant this whole time. But right now, what the Meijin was trying to say *I understand the puzzle that the god of Shogi posed to humanity.*

..... *But, really?! Is it really okay?! This Actually doing this——."*

The solution I found isn't just a little unorthodox.

I might lose the second I make that move.

One thing's for sure, it'll be talked about for a long time.

Because——*I'd be doing a forbidden move on purpose.* That's pretty much a death wish.

.....!!

My finger on the piece, doubt starts creeping back into my mind.

Going through *that humiliation* again It'd be like sticking my finger into my still-wounded heart and carving out an even bigger hole. I don't know if I can take it.

Only ten seconds left. The match recorder is counting down.

—— Should I? Is it really okay?

I might never live this down.

If I make a different move, I might be able to protect the *Ryuo* title's honor even if I end up losing it.

But.

..... I'm the kind of guy who'd regret *not* playing something a lot more than playing it. Don't you think?

For sure!!

Everyone here supporting me in spirit agrees and all nod at the same time.

That settles it.

Master! I'm right here with you!!

Picking up the piece, my hand feels warmer somehow. It's like someone's

hand is on top of mine.

As if my young apprentice is guiding me—I dive into that new sequence headfirst.

SINGULARITY

“A Repetition Draw?!”

The break room erupted.

The same moves are being repeated in the arena at this very moment.

Should the repetition continue for four turns, this match will be declared a draw—players will then switch offense and defense and immediately play another match.

However, a certain condition prevented that from happening this time.

“The Ryuo has the Meijin in check during the sequence! At this rate, it’ll be a Checkmate Repetition Draw and the Meijin will win!!”

“No, it’s too early to call! The Ryuo might be trying to buy time like he did in the third match——.”

“Then tell me where he’s going to change the sequence?! How else could it turn out?!”

The Shogi professionals in the break room start making their own predictions on how the match will end, but that’s a quandary so complicated that computer software couldn’t solve it. Even Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu, a renowned Shogi puzzle author who could locate a check path faster than anyone, was unable to produce an answer.

However.

In the back corner of that break room——.

“..... Here.”

A single little girl started forcefully rocking back and forth.

“Here Here Here Here Here Here, here,

here, here, here, here, here,
hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere—.”

While her eyes were open wide, they were not perceiving reality.

Her eleven mental Shogi boards were a blur as she worked through all the limitless possibilities. Sitting on her ankles, she leaned forward as her thoughts raced further and further, far beyond anyone else.

“Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereher

“I’ve got it!” yelled a Shogi player in his early twenties who had been working on an analysis board. “No matter how the Ryuo changes the sequence, he has no way to contain the Meijin’s King! Actually, changing it up would put his own King in check! The Meijin wins!! The Eternal Septuple is born!!”

With that, a bevy of elated journalists rose to their feet as one.

However.

“Nope.”

The only voice of opposition came from the smallest girl in the room.

“Huh?”

The startled young professional player searched for who said it But she was already gone.

By that time, Ai Hinatsuru had sprinted out of the room.

“Ai?! Where are you go——?”

Leaving Ginko in charge of analysis at the big board, Keika was on her way back to the break room when she spotted Ai dash out the door and tried to stop her.

Except Ai didn't even look over her shoulder as she ran in the opposite direction, away from the arena——.

Then, only a few seconds later.

“..... Could it be?”

Seiichi froze as if making a chilling discovery as he quietly analyzed the match with his eyes closed.

Concerned, Sasari spoke to him from her seat next to the chairman.

“Sir? Is something the matter? Chairman?”

For all intents and purposes, it seemed as though he didn't hear Sasari's voice.

“C-Could?! Could that situation A-Actually?!”

Seiichi's face turned pale as he trembled.

Sasari had never once seen the chairman react like this and knew immediately something monumental had just occurred. Something far rarer than the Eternal Septuple title, something that would render the Citizen's Award as old news

At the same time, another irregularity occurred in the arena.

“What's the problem?! Why aren't any of the monitors working?!”

“I have no idea! A weird, fuzzy glow started showing up a while ago and now!”

The screens that were supposed to show the arena had gone blank. The bizarre digital noise had grown to a point that the picture had dissolved into nothing but bright light.

It was impossible to see inside the arena. The noise was causing the microphones to malfunction as well, making the match recorder's countdown extremely difficult to hear. However, the static voice akin to a badly tuned radio was the only way to comprehend what was happening in the arena. The break room fell quiet as all strained to listen.

One of the reporters mumbled.

“..... Hey. The Meijin’s not making a move.”

Fifty-five——.

Fifty-six——.

“There are only five seconds left. Think he’s okay?”

“What’s the problem? He won, didn’t he? What’s holding him back?”

“Maybe he’s using every last second he’s got to be sure? Seems a bit much if you ask me though

Fifty-seven——.

Fifty-eight——.

“Hey! Isn’t he cutting it too close?!”

“How many seconds are left?! One?!”

Fifty-nine—————The voice was drowned out by the static.

“..... Did we lose the signal?”

Someone whispers within the deafening silence. Those words echo as if shot out of a cannon.

One moment later.

A phone installed in the break room rang.

“It’s from the arena!”

Sasari, the receiver pressed up against her ear, says with her eyes wide in disbelief.

“T-The Meijin

Her voice shook as she exclaimed.

“The Meijin has requested the match be suspended!!”

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Meijin (Throne, Monarch, Emperor)

TITLE HISTORY:

RYUO:	6 seasons
MEIJIN:	11 seasons, 19th Meijin (will hold sole-possession traditionally upon retirement)
CROWN (TEI):	18 seasons, Eternal Crown (will hold joint-possession traditionally upon retirement)
THRONE (OUZA):	24 seasons, Honorary Throne (will hold joint-possession upon reaching 60 years of age)
MONARCH (BANOU):	13 seasons, Eternal Monarch (will hold joint-possession traditionally upon retirement)
KING (OUSHOU):	12 seasons, Eternal King (will hold joint-possession traditionally upon retirement)
EMPEROR (KITEI):	15 seasons, Eternal Emperor (will hold joint-possession traditionally upon retirement)
TITLE MATCH APPEARANCES:	131
TOTAL TITLE SEASONS:	99

CHAMPIONSHIPS

MAI-ASA CUP SHOGI OPEN:	5
MAI-ASA OPEN TOURNAMENT:	4
ALL JAPAN PROFESSIONAL TOURNAMENT	3
GALAXY LEAGUE	5 (not including victories before the results were made public)
PUBLIC BROADCASTING CUP:	10
ALL-SPEED CHAMPIONSHIP	3
SHOGI TREASURY SB CUP	5
ALL ROOKIE TOURNAMENT:	1
ALL STAR TOURNAMENT OVER 5 WINS	4
OCEAN KING TOURNAMENT:	2
YOUNG ORCA TOURNAMENT:	2
TOTAL:	44

SHOGI AWARDS:

MOST PRESTIGIOUS PLAYER AWARD:	22
BEST PLAYER AWARD:	3
BEST WINNING RATIO:	7
MOST MATCHES:	12
MOST WINS:	14
LONGEST WINNING STREAK:	5
MOST MEMORABLE MATCHES:	6
MATCH OF THE YEAR AWARD:	1
COURAGE AWARD:	2
MOST PROMISING ROOKIE	1

OTHER HONORS:

Citizen's Cultural Award
Prime Minister's Award of Personal Achievement

FINAL JUDGMENT

“Which one Who won?!” a reporter shouts from somewhere inside the avalanche of media people pouring into the room while I’m busy trying to catch my breath.

Who won? Good question.

“Did the Meijin run out of time?!”

“No, look at the board! He put down a Pawn at the last second!”

“The match record says he played it in time!”

“So, what’s the problem?! Why was the match suspended?!”

The Meijin got that last move in by the skin of his teeth. He put a Pawn down right in front of my King.

Then, the second he played it He asked the match recorder to call the observer, and I gave the go ahead.

No one has thrown in the towel or broken any rules, but the match can’t continue like this.

As for why——.

“The observer will now explain what has transpired,” Ms. Oga announces as Chairman Tsukimitsu walks into the room behind her.

The arena goes quiet.

All the reporters and journalists point their microphones and IC recorders toward the blind Shogi player.

The chairman’s face is as calm, cool and collected as usual, but there’s a bit of a nervous tremor in his voice.

“Allow me to put this in simple terms. I believe that all of you in the media are

aware that after the same sequence of moves has occurred three times in this match ...”

The journalists silently urge him on. Even the match recorder nods.

“In Shogi, the same sequence being repeated is called a Repetition Draw The match concludes on the fourth turn, the players switch roles and start over from the beginning.”

He must’ve double-checked the Repetition Draw rules before coming out here. There hasn’t been a peep out of the media people yet.

“However, in the event a Repetition Draw occurs with one player in check, *the one who initiated check loses the match* This is referred to as a Checkmate Repetition Draw and it is a forbidden move.”

Now the reporters and journalists are starting to get restless.

“Please look at the board. In this situation, once the Ryuo takes the Pawn the Meijin played on his last turn—the sequence shall repeat for the fourth time as well as put the Meijin’s King in check, *resulting in a Checkmate Repetition Draw*.”

“Ahh!!”

“So, so that means The Meijin won?!”

“Be patient. Take another look at the board.”

The chairman tells them to look again and all of their cameras zoom in on it.

“In order for the Ryuo to survive the situation, he has no choice but to take the Pawn put in play by the Meijin. However, he cannot because that would be a forbidden move. In that case, the Meijin’s Pawn is what put the Ryuo’s King in checkmate—in itself another forbidden move known as Pawn Drop Mate.”

“..... Aghhh?!”

Their surprise echoes out on a delay. The journalists and reporters finally

figured out what just happened.

I'm breaking the Checkmate Repetition Draw rule.

The Meijin is breaking the Pawn Drop Mate rule.

"What's difficult is determining whether or not the Meijin's decision to deploy the Pawn violates the rule. Were it not for the Checkmate Repetition Draw, the Ryuo would be able to take it and not be in checkmate."

The chairman sounds more excited with each word.

The reason probably comes from the fact that he's not only a player, but a Shogi puzzle creator as well.

"This is the one area missing from Shogi as it is now and has been ignored for quite some time. *The game of Shogi is incomplete.*"

One of the reporters asks with a shaking voice, "W-Why Hasn't it been taken care of?"

"Because no one believed this situation would ever occur in an actual match between two people," the chairman answers with a smile. It looks like he's enjoying this weird situation. By some miracle, he finds it ridiculously entertaining

Yes. No one thought this would ever happen.

Well, someone might've said it'll crop up at some point but No one came up with an answer for it.

That's why they left it unsettled. Solving it would be a pain.

Why not just figure it out it when it comes up!

People went with it. It's surprising how that kind of thing flies in the Shogi world. We read as far ahead as we can in Shogi, but don't give our lives in the real world much thought. I mean, who could do something as crazy as devoting their lives to a game and plan for the future at the same time

But, the chance was always there.

No matter how close to zero the chance was, everyone involved with Shogi knew there was a chance the situation could turn up on the board at some point.

“They felt this way because the debate already existed in the realm of Shogi puzzles. Pawn Drop Mate colliding with Checkmate Repetition Draw: that concept has yet to yield a solution—thus, no one has ever found a true answer for this, the most arduous of conundrums.”

Taking a deep breath, the chairman put the name to that difficult problem.

“That Shogi puzzle is called—Final Judgment.”

“Final Judgment”

Everyone in the room thought those magnificent words fit the situation perfectly.

“That’s why, as these two rules stand, their relationship has been referred to as the Final Judgment Question and left unsolved for many years despite being proposed many times. However, I believe the time has come to reach a verdict.”

I could tell the Meijin tensed up a bit when the chairman said that.

My heart is beating in my throat right now.

Judgment will finally be made.

“For me personally—,” the chairman says flatly, “as an author of Shogi puzzles, I believe that *Pawn Drop Mate should not apply* in this situation.”

“.....!”

Cold sweat rolls down my back at those words.

Basically—he’s saying he thinks I lost.

“..... By the same token, it’s impossible to ignore an official rule. And so long as that rule is on the books, this match must be declared invalid. I intend to suggest this situation be handled like a Repetition Draw when I confer with the Ryuo Title Match Committee as the observer momentarily.”

“It’s a draw!!”

WHOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAA!! Contrary to the small army of reporters and journalists living it up right now, I’m breathing a sigh of relief.

—That That was close

After having accepted the loss, I feel like I was on death’s door but somehow made it out alive.

“Amazing This is absolutely amazing!!”

“This decision has never happened in Shogi before! Not once!!”

“No! Nothing’s been settled yet?!”

“These two They’ve surpassed Shogi’s rules as well?”

“G-Gods

The miracle that just happened seems to be more important for the media people right now than who won the match. They’re scrambling around.

At the same time, the Shogi Association staff here is getting over the shock and starting to scramble for a different reason.

“What’s the Ryuo Title Match regulation for Repetition Draws on Day 2?!”

“Replay the match the day of?!”

“Surely, it would be rescheduled for later date

“That wouldn’t be feasible from a scheduling standpoint, would it? Especially with the Citizens Award——.”

It’s a tough call.

If we were going to replay the match right now, even though we both get only an hour's worth of waiting time, the sun would be up by the time everything is said and done.

That would extend the event by a full day and overlap with customers who have already booked rooms at the inn. Asking our hosts to make a change like that at the last minute isn't possible——.

Just as that thought crossed my mind.

“Please do not be concerned!!”

The owner comes into the arena——Ai's mother.

Now the center of attention, Mrs. Hinatsuru makes an announcement of her own.

“The Hinatsuru is the best inn in all of Japan. All guests, including members of the media, Shogi Association staff, as well as commentators may retain their rooms with meals provided free of charge!”

WAAAAAOOOOOHHHHHHHHHHH!!

The arena shook even harder that time than when the match was declared a draw. Everyone's already so hyped up with it being quite late in the evening that they're chanting Mrs. Hinatsuru's name. This is nuts.

Looking immensely satisfied with their response, Mrs. Hinatsuru says, “And of course, no one will be required to leave the premises once the match has concluded. Please take advantage of our hot spring and massage facilities at your leisure.”

“And in return Understood?”

Ms. Mato, the one in charge of the blog, nods up and down like a bobblehead doll. She has to type out Mrs. Hinatsuru's praises and get them up on the blog right now. And of course, she needs to get a few pictures of the owner's good side to go with them. She'll have to deal with a claim from the Hinatsuru Inn if

she doesn't. Live bloggers have it rough

The chairman says in a dignified voice, "I will now speak with the Ryuo Title Match Committee to determine proper procedure. Players, please retire to your rooms until a verdict has been reached."

ARCANA

Getting back to my room, my apprentice jumps out like an excited puppy.

“Master!!”

She takes hold of my waist as I stagger inside and supports me as I drift my way into the room.

“Master! Do you want to take off your kimono?!”

“No. But the *hakama* pants, yes. And I’d like to loosen the sash, too. Please help.”

“Of course!!”

With my fingers about as strong as tissue paper, Ai loosens it for me.

Still standing, I do everything I can to forget about the match that just finished.

If the committee decides to treat it like a regular Repetition Draw, I’ve only got thirty minutes to rest.

I’ll lose for sure if my brain is still stuck on the first match.

Finally able to take a deep breath now that my sash is hanging loose around my waist, I take a seat on the floor cushion. Ai appears a second later with a tray full of food in her arms.

“Rice balls! They’ve got salmon in them, your favorite! There’s some fried eggs, too!!”

“Thanks. This is great.”

Everything is fresh and still steaming like they’re right out of the cooker. Of course, Ai made them all by herself.

Taking a bite, I didn’t know food this good even existed.

Anything and everything tastes wonderful when you're running on fumes but Ai's cooking goes beyond that. I could keep on eating this forever.

Memories of sunlight filtering in through the trees at the park pop into my head.

The place where the two of us always eat lunch, that park.

"..... That was delicious."

I cleaned the plate, but Ai sounds a bit disappointed.

"I wanted to make curry for you But, there wasn't enough time"

"Nah Yeah. Just the thought is enough."

She looks genuinely sorry, but I still make sure to thank her.

That curry, it's one of the tastiest things I've ever had but It makes me ... pass out

But there's something else on my mind.

Ai must've left early to come back here and get everything ready. The heaters have been on long enough that the whole room is the perfect temperature and the bathtub is full.

It's all perfect A little *too perfect*.

"Ai. Did you read how that situation would turn out?"

"I, um Yes."

Just as I thought

"But I wasn't sure if the Pawn Drop Mate would happen or not so I thought there'd be a chance you'd have to play another match. The first thing I had to do was get the bath water running and then go prepare food in the kitchen, all before waiting for you to come back to your room——."

"Ah, I gotcha Thanks," I say as I pat her head.

Ai looks so happy.

My adorable, tiny apprentice But this girl here saw Final Judgment coming before me, and maybe even before the Meijin. That's almost scary. My cute little Shogi demon.

My hand going back and forth through her hair, Ai gets up the courage to ask, "... How ... will it turn out?"

"No clue."

That's the one thing I really don't know.

"They won't just say I outright ... lost I don't think so anyway. I know the chairman won't suggest it at the very least, and the committee will listen to him because he's the observer."

The real question is when the rematch will happen—.

"There's a very good chance the next match will happen today."

I have to stay battle ready. But, at the same time, I need to rest up.

I've been pushing myself way past my limits for the past two days. Both my brain and my body are spent and begging for a breather.

I don't say anything to Ai because she'll get worried, but I actually can't see very well at all. My nose isn't bleeding anymore, but there's a real possibility it could start leaking again when my blood pressure goes through the roof during one-minute Shogi. I gotta get some rest

I take some eyedrops out of my bag and use them.

"I'm going to lie down until they make a decision. Wake me up if someone comes."

"S Sure!"

I close my eyes and wait for the cooling drops to soak in.

Then, when I open my eyes again A very determined Ai is sitting on her

ankles in front of me and says, “Um Master.”

“Yeah?”

“Please ... use use my lap!”

Lap?

Use her lap? As what? Oh, as a pillow?

..... Put my head ... in a grade school girl’s lap

“Uh, thanks for the offer, but I’m happy knowing you want to help.”

But of course, that’s too much. That kind of contact with a grade school girl? Way too much. No amount of explaining would ever be enough if someone saw me do that. Forget about Shogi. It’s too risky to take up that offer with a small horde of media people gathered here. Cannot happen.

Shogi matches can be replayed Life ... not so much

“But ... I’ll just put my head on one of these cushions and get some shut-eye.”

“N-O.” “Gah?! What do you think you’re doing, throwing the cushions like that?!”

“There, go ahead≡”

Ai pats her tiny hands against her knees.

“.....”

“Go ahead≡”

She scooches her way closer without getting up.

Everything from the look on her face to her body language is saying: *You won’t run away, right?*

..... I’ve got no way out of it. This is checkmate.

“..... Well, okay then

I’m conflicted.

But right now, what takes top priority is Getting every second of rest I can.

Spending energy on an argument with my apprentice right now would be the worst move I could make. Pros are duty-bound to always give their best performance. The risk of getting arrested for a bit of skin-ship with an elementary school girl is nothing compared to failing in my duty as a Shogi pro.

And, really, there's nothing all that dirty about it, right? I'm just falling asleep in her lap. She's the one who offered, too.

All those excuses running through my mind, I lower my head onto Ai's knees——.

Plush≡

“Ohh?!”

Her knees are small, but warm. That sound was already out of my mouth before I knew it

That special kind of heat that only kids have melts into my neck, soothing every ache and pain. The soft yet firm support is something no fancy, top-of-the-line pillow could ever hope to copy. This is some good healing right here.

“Master

Ai leans over my head and I feel her little fingers go to work on the tense spots. She gently presses up under my eyebrows and kneads little circles around my forehead. She's massaging my whole head.

Th this is awesome ≡

“It's all right You will win, Master

My apprentice's soft voice in my ears, I slowly drift off into a light snooze.

The heat coming from those tiny knees and the palms of her hands are so soothing.

Exhaustion fades away everywhere she touches—.

“?! My eyes?!”

What a miracle! I was blind as a bat, but now I can see!! I can see!!

This grade schooler arcana gave me the power to break my own limits?!

—With this I just might ... win

Surrounded by my apprentice’s warmth, I see myself giving an interview after defeating the Meijin.

What led to your victory in the rematch?

Sleeping in a little girl’s lap is what did it. It’s surprisingly effective. Ha ha ha!

I’m so done.

“Um Ai? I should get up and get ready——.”

I really should wrap this up before someone sees or things could get real bad.

And, just as I was about to sit up, my worst fears come true.

“Yaichi! The rematch has been set”

Big Sis bursts into the room and gets halfway through what she was going to say before freezing up.

So does Keika when she comes in a second later.

“My, my,” she says, a bit surprised.

And right behind her, Ms. Mato jumps in saying, “Now that’s a scoop!!” taking pictures nonstop. Please, cut that out, I’m begging you!!

“It’s not what it looks like!! Nothing dirty happened, I just needed to relax——.”

I jump to my feet to do damage control.

But, with my loose sash the only thing keeping my kimono together, the robes open up—and expose everything underneath.

Everything? Of course, my boxers.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeekkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk!!”

It's not every day Big Sis squeals at the top of her lungs.

“H-H-Hold on Just hold on a sec!”

I scramble to keep the kimono from falling off completely and fail miserably. Big Sis looks away, letting out another high-pitched scream.

“Yaichi, your *hakama*! Why’d you take it off and loosen the sash?! What were you doing, dressed like that with a grade school girl in here?! Y-You wouldn’t violate the sanctity of a match——.”

"I haven't done anything!!"

“Then why are you almost naked?! With a nosebleed!!”

“I have to rest up anyway I can, you know?! Come on, Big Sis. You wear kimono all the time, so you know it’s hard to breathe when that sash is too tight!! I needed air!! And my nose has been bleeding since the middle of the last match, okay!!”

Then, Ms. Mato throws questions at me.

“Does that mean you have been resting with an elementary school girl?!”

“You shut up and never say another word!!” I yell at her, but she’s grinning like a sly fox. That had no effect at all.

“Oh, yes. My younger sister sent me a message for the Ryuo.”

"Sister? Oh yeah, your younger sister apprentice."

Ms. Mato's younger sister apprentice—she's talking about Ayano.

“She and her friends seem to be having a sleepover. From what she’s told me, they wanted to come up here to cheer you on in person.”

Sounds like the members of the Grade Schooler Practice Group are still awake

and watching over my battle.

Ms. Mato pulls out her smartphone and hands it over to show me a picture.

It's a selfie of the practice group, all fresh out of the tub, wearing pajamas and making hearts with their fingers.

Check out our cute picture! Keep trying hard! —Mio

Do the best you can! —Ayano

Masta, lub you≡ —Charlette

Each one wrote a message to go along with it.

The corners of my eyes get hot the instant I see it.

“Everybody

Such cute, upstanding kids It's so nice how they can come out and say they like me. I couldn't help but smile as a warm, fuzzy feeling wraps around my heart.

Though I'm sure people seeing me grin at a picture of grade school girls right after a bath won't help my case I guess I got so touched by their support that now my nose is bleeding again, too

“Isn't that nice. Master.”

Ai looks at the picture of her friends and smiles. I'm not sure why, but that smile is terrifying.

Big Sis's voice is ice cold, too. Below freezing.

“..... Hm? They sent you *this* kind of picture? *This* is what makes you happy?”

“No, I never asked for it. This was all their idea.”

“Die! Drop dead right now!!”

“Um, Big Sis? This isn't anything——.”

“Ready to have a pike through your skull?!”

She picks up an oversized vase that was sitting in the alcove in my room and hoists it up to hurl it in my direction. DOOOON'T! THAT'LL KILL MEEEEEEE!!

“Come on, that’s enough, you two. This is no time for fooling around. Yaichi, hurry up and tie your sash. Check your bag and make sure you have everything. Do you have your handkerchief?”

I manage to survive the encounter with Big Sis and not die before battle with the Meijin thanks to Keika stepping in. See, I knew she was a saint. But, that wasn’t fooling around. I was literally almost killed.

“.....”

Big Sis keeps picking up the vase and putting it back down while I was getting my kimono back on like all that anger had no place to go.

But, in the end, she puts the vase back and says, “..... You said you wanted to talk to me when the match is over, right?”

“Y-Yes

“I’ll give you a piece of my mind when you’re done. So——.”

Her whole face twists like she bit into a piece of sour fruit as she whips her arm around in a full swing.

It slams——into my back at full power.

“Get out there and finish this!”

■ TOURYU (BILLOWING DRAGON)

“The main issue at hand is the Citizens Award,” Ms. Oga whispers into my ear as the two of us walk down the hallway leading to the arena.

“Administrators and staff have already gathered at the Prime Minister’s residence to begin preparations for the announcement. Conducting the rematch at a later date would change all the arrangements already set in place for the ceremony. Therefore, there have been many requests for the matter to be settled by this evening.”

“Oh, I get it.” I keep walking and ask her, “So? You’re saying I should lose?”

“Don’t be absurd. One was merely stating facts,” Ms. Oga says with a shrug.

“Personally, one likes men with the mettle to destroy shrewd schemes set in motion by adults.”

“I love you.”

“That is unfortunate. One’s heart already belongs to another.”

That rolls off her tongue right before Ms. Oga disappears.

Was that a message from the chairman? He’s supposed to be neutral as the observer, so is it really okay for him to do this? Then again, the whole country is rooting for the Meijin so he might’ve thought stoking my fire a little bit might balance things out. He thinks so far ahead, I can’t keep up.

Whatever the case, I’m fired up.

*The evil Dragon King who’ll plunge the country into darkness and despair
That’s me, huh? Looks like I’ve got a part to play.*

I’m the type of anti-hero teenage boys can’t get enough of. Of course I’m raring to go.

Everyone important is waiting for me in the arena once I step inside.

“I’m sorry about the wait,” I say and take a seat in front of the board.

“I shall briefly summarize the Ryuo Title Match Committee’s verdict,” the chairman, and observer for the match, says.

“The previous match’s result shall be *handled as a Repetition Draw* with the players switching offense and defense for a rematch. Also, while an immediate rematch is a possibility, they would like to take each player’s physical condition into consideration as well. The rematch can be scheduled for later date. Players, I would like to hear your opinions on the matter.” Saying all that in one breath, the blind chairman *looks* in my direction and says, “Ryuo. What do you suggest?”

“I——.”

Rather than face the chairman, I turn to look at the Meijin.

“I want to play right now.”

My fatigue is gone thanks to Ai. It’s thanks to Big Sis that I’m wide awake. The Grade Schooler Practice Group stayed up late to watch this match. I’m in peak condition right now.

The Meijin agrees and that was that.

“As both players were out of waiting time at the end of the previous match, one hour shall be granted to each for the rematch,” the chairman declares as the rematch gets started.

“No matter who claims victory, this match will be carved into the annuals of Shogi history. Please make this Shogi worthy of that standing.”

“When you’re ready.”

The chairman’s epic words in my ears, I bow along with the Meijin. All the camera flashes going off right now are making everyone in the room squint.

The first move is mine.

“Now

What to play? I feel like I could do anything right now.

I climbed higher than I’ve ever been during the earlier match, so it felt like looking down over the board from on top of a mountain then And I still feel that way.

I can sense how every piece works in tandem with the others.

The board itself looks narrow but feels extremely deep at the same time. Shogi has never seemed so deep before.

— I could fall right in

Time could fly by looking at the opening formation just like this. I’ll lose if I stay at my two-day pace. I needed to change things up.

While peering in to see how deep Shogi goes, I see something completely different

—I’ll play whatever my heart tells me to.

My tiny, straightforward, earnest apprentice appears over the board. I knew exactly what I would play as soon as I saw her pure enthusiasm in my heart.

“Nn!”

Fighting spirit roaring, I advance the Pawn in front of my Rook.

An onslaught of camera flashes ensues.

The Meijin had his eyes closed but he opens them to play the same move, sticking out the Pawn in front of his Rook.

More blinding flashes, too many to count.

“..... Now, if may I ask the media to please exit——.”

Journalists and reporters start getting up when the chairman gave them the

signal.

Normally, I'd wait until the last one had filed out.

Except ... I'm not stopping. Part of it was that I don't have much waiting time, but even more than that, there's an energy surging inside me that won't let me wait.

“.....!!”

Picking up the Pawn I moved my last turn, I push it one space forward. Almost like I'm unleashing a dragon onto the board through my fingertips.

My strategy of choice—Double Wing Attack.

My resolve is shining through clear as day.

I'm not afraid of another Repetition Draw. It could take hundreds of matches, but I'll play as many as I need to finish this. I will never break!

I grind that Pawn into the board just to show how determined I really am.

Seeing that, the Meijin—.

“.....”

Advances his own Pawn one more time with what I'm sure is a smile on his face. That hand of his is light as a feather.

Then, we dive headlong into Shogi that will surely be talked about forever.

BOARD OF FANTASIA

My waiting time was gone before I knew it.

“Fifty seconds One, two, three, four, five, six, seven——.”

“Kh!!!”

Pressured by the match recorder’s countdown, I grab a piece from the board and smack it down like swimming through water.

The Meijin was all about his pursuit of Shogi theory knowledge during the match that ended in a Repetition Draw, but he’s changed gears entirely. Now, he’s playing to win.

..... *Not thinking about the record* huh? Yeah right! You’re sprinting right for it!

And, the truly frightening thing.

The Meijin——is stronger when he’s out of time.

He’s transformed himself into a *quick glance quick move* type of player during that thirty-minute break.

——There’s no way this is the same person I played against last time! Is he a god for real?!

Meanwhile, I can’t seem to flip the switch.

——There are too many options! I can’t focus in and end up reading through every single one at full speed!!

I started the match in high gear and read deep into every sequence if I let my mind wander for even a second. That’s why my waiting time went up in smoke

Long gone, I’m already playing one-minute Shogi.

On the other hand, the Meijin still has three minutes of it but plays each one of his moves in less than one. He's conducting a masterful battle and his waiting time isn't decreasing at all.

—That gap is huge

Only three minutes.

But that three minutes gives him triple the amount of time that I have to read to the very end. In other words, he can run three times faster than me once we get to the homestretch!

..... And I've got my hands full just trying to keep up!!

My spirit nearly breaks each time I see the gap in experience between us, but I don't have time to feel bad for myself. Each and every second I have is spent reading the board.

I'm way beyond my limit.

My sense of time is gone. I can read through seemingly infinite sequences in the blink of an eye, but it feels like an hour goes by each moment. I'm so tired that the line between my mental Shogi board and the one in the arena has blurred to the point I'm having trouble telling the two apart.

Haaa huh.

Losing concentration, I look up from the board for a brief moment to catch my breath.

This person

My train of thought off of Shogi for a second, I look at the man sitting across the board from me right now, the Meijin.

—So That's what his face looks like.

It always seemed like he lived in another world. Right now, during the rematch of the fourth match, is the first time I've ever looked him square in the

face.

Salt-and-peppery stubble has grown onto the chin of a tired middle-aged man playing Shogi late into the night.

His eyes are sunk pretty deep and surrounded by dark bags. Bloodshot, too. His mouth is hanging half open and I can hear soft groans coming from inside.

It's much different from Chairman Tsukimitsu's youth and refinement.

He certainly doesn't have Mr. Oishi's charming free spirit.

Of course, he's no god. He just looks like a run-of-the-mill guy.

Seeing the Meijin like this

—So cool.

That's my honest reaction.

Just like kids grow up idolizing the characters in anime and video games, he was my idol. Even now, sitting across from him, I admire him more and more with every move he makes.

He wasn't born into special circumstances.

He doesn't have some extravagant destiny to fulfill.

Born in a new suburb of Hachioji City in Tokyo, he went to public school and grew up like a regular kid on the block. Other than the fact that Shogi was the only thing he could think about, he was a normal boy. Even now, he rides the train to the association, swaying back and forth like everyone else. Having two daughters, his wife recently said on her Twitter account that he plays Pokémon Go wearing shorts around the house.

Just your average geezer. A kind father.

At the same time—he's a brave warrior.

A man who kept on fighting without getting bored, losing interest or losing a step the whole way.

No stage too big for him, he faced his opponents' best strategies without fear and that courage is what destined him for victory, to become the best player in Shogi history.

Seeing him this close up, looking at him face to face for the first time I can't help but look up to him.

I don't think I'm stronger than he is.

I don't think I have more talent, or that I could become like him.

But, that's fine by me.

The Meijin is the Meijin, I'm me.

That's why I play Shogi my way. Staring blankly at him in the middle of this neck and neck battle and only coming up with something so plainly obvious is pretty stupid, but there's nothing I can do about it.

"After all, only death can fix stupid"

I smirk at myself, whispering under my breath. Then, in that exact moment ...

The Meijin's hand starts shaking before he puts a piece down in a place I never saw coming.

"?! Magic!!"

I knew it was an extraordinary move the moment I saw it.

These unexpected curveball sequences people call *magic* have opened the gates of hell in the late stages of the Meijin's matches many times before, allowing him to pass back and forth between worlds whenever he wants. That's the Meijin's special talent.

It's like when kids do something just out of curiosity, like destroying a wooden

castle you've built together on a whim just to start over again and build something new from square one.

I'm in limbo, and he's a demon that's trapped me in a never-ending Shogi match hell.

Damn, Four-eyes is brutal! How can he physically keep going?!!

Anyone's fighting spirit would snap in the face of a move that reset the whole match this far into the late game.

But.

..... Fine, then. Let's do this!

The only thing the Meijin's strange move did was stoke the fire already burning inside me.

There's only one weapon that can deal with magic. I have it.

Clenching my jaw as tight as it would go, I read all the way up to the limit and *smack that piece onto the board despite not reading all the way to the end!*

"There—how's that?!!"

Energy pulsing, I grab a piece and swing that weapon as hard as I can.

The only one I have in my arsenal—being stubborn and willing to get muddy: Kansai Shogi.

It'll never have a name that sounds as cool as magic, but Kansai players like me aren't going to lose to a few curveballs.

Standards can eat dirt. This is sudden-death Shogi. I don't care if I end up like roadkill, I'll tread water as long as it takes. Get as muddy as it takes. This stubborn fire can burn my insides to a crisp. I'll keep playing until my heart stops beating!

“..... Intense”

I pull my collar open and vigorously fan my neck. My brain's working so fast that it's overheating and feels like it's going to explode. I chug what's left of my water and wipe my lips with the back of my hand. Sheer adrenaline has kept my nose from bleeding.

The Meijin narrows his eyes at my move and straightens his hair with his right hand. Then, he thumps his lower back with that same hand and groans in pain.

“Fifty seconds——.”

Rushed, the Meijin starts drawing Xs in the air. It almost looks like he's praying to a god of some kind.

“..... Seven, eight, nine——.”

He plays at the last possible second with his hand shaking the whole time. Not just his right, but his left hand clenched around his neck is shaking up a storm. Those trembling hands unleash another round of magic hellfire over the board and drag me further into purgatory ... deeper into the torture known as never-ending one-minute Shogi.

“Intense!!”

Feeling the Meijin's flames burning my skin, I play another stubborn, muddy move and step deeper into that purgatory on my own.

Into the board of fantasia.

■ FLUTTERING PETALS

Ai Yashajin gazed up at the stars.

She sat on the porch, her legs swinging off the edge in front of her home's impressive garden with her eyes glued to the 3 a.m. night sky.

"My lady. As it is quite late, please return to your quarters."

Akira had asked her ten, possibly twenty times by now, but the only response she received was an uninterested "Yes" —Ai never once moved from the spot.

The one thing that held her attention was the tablet computer at her side, more specifically the Shogi board displayed on the screen. The girl would pounce over it for a closer look whenever an update was posted.

She would then immediately return her gaze to the stars once she knew the current situation.

How many hours had this cycle been going on? No, it wasn't just today. Ai had been doing this for over a month *Ever since the night she qualified for the Women's League*, Akira thought.

—Does this level of wholehearted devotion exist?

Ai had been waiting this whole time while playing her way through Yaichi's match records.

I'm going to join the Women's League ... so be my Master.

She was waiting for the right time to ask.

There was no need to wait. Yaichi was already her Master, so a little paperwork was all that was left to do.

But Ai couldn't bring it up.

Because she knew Yaichi was suffering.

Unlike Ai Hinatsuru, Ai Yashajin wasn't living with him. However, she had played through Yaichi's match records more than anyone. One look was all she needed to know how Yaichi was feeling at the time. That's why she didn't want to put any more on Yaichi's plate right now.

So, she waited, biding her time out of sight.

Waited for Yaichi to play with comfort and ease, for that was when she would ask him to become her Master.

And she was still waiting.

She kept the registration form hidden in her pocket at all times. The corners long since curled over, weeks of folding and unfolding the paper had taken their toll. Nonetheless, she couldn't put it down Not until Yaichi defeated the Meijin.

—That lucky imbecile I'll never forgive him if he loses.

Keeping her young Master company as Ai gazed at the sky, Akira grumbled to herself.

Ayumu Kannabe howled on *Niko Live's* broadcast.

“Envision it! Yourself as the Almighty Dragon King! You, vanquishing the god to stand at the summit!”

This wasn't so much analysis as cheering.

Getting to his feet, Ayumu slammed his fist into the big board and kept hollering.

“That vision shall become your might!! I shall challenge you at your peak! Then we can continue the endless battle of good versus evil just as we have always done!!”

Of course, his cheers would never reach the players' ears.

There were some audience members who mocked his senseless banter and demanded he focus on match analysis.

However, the vast majority of them had a lot to say.

"Damn, he's fired up!"

"Yeah, trash dragon, fight hard!"

"The prince doesn't seem half bad (lol)."

"I want to see those go head-to-head for a title!"

"Everybody needs a best friend."

"Tearing up over here"

"Intense!!"

So many people were rooting for Yaichi, and Ayumu for that matter, that their supportive comments nearly blocked out the picture as the white letters scrolled by.

The thoughts of the nation uniting as one ... Ayumu continued cheering despite never being heard.

"Rise!! Fight on, my eternal rival!!"

Rina Shakando watched her beloved apprentice root for his dear friend from the commentator's chair with a look somewhere between affection and jealousy in her eyes.

The girls had gathered around a single smartphone beneath a big blanket. None slept a wink as they followed the Shogi match in real time.

"Wow *Kujyuru-sensei* is amazing"

Eyes sparkling, Mio kept saying "Wow" on repeat.

Charlette was starting to fade just a bit, but she wiped the sleep out of her eyes and asked, “Will Masta win?”

“I don’t know But, he might. I ... want him to win,” Ayano answered as if praying in a hushed voice in hopes that her parents wouldn’t realize they were still awake.

Actually, her parents had been aware that the girls were awake for hours but pretended to be oblivious. They were happy knowing the children had found something to be passionate about.

Ayano, her glasses off, leaned in so close to the smartphone that her nose touched the screen.

“I don’t really understand what’s happening on the board but It looks like Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s pieces have a heartbeat. Like they’re all about to push back”

“Did Masta see our picta? Did wee make him happwi?”

“I’m sure we did! W-While it was a bit embarrassing I’m glad we sent the picture. Aren’t you, Mio——?”

“Ayanon! Cha! I’ve made up my mind!!” Mio yelled as quietly as she could under the covers, her gleaming eyes open wide.

“I Me, too?! I’m going to go pro!!”

Countless children first dreamt of being a professional Shogi player that night.

Despite the late hour, more and more professional Shogi players filed into the break room at the Hinatsuru as the night progressed.

“Well, if it isn’t Oishi-*sensei*! And your daughter, too?!”

“What?! The King, here?!”

“It’s the Worldly Maestro!”

Surprise echoed around the room.

Mitsuru Oishi was known for doing his own thing and only came to the association for his own matches. But here he was at the site after many long hours behind the wheel of his own car.

Empty cigarette carton still clutched in his hand after the long drive, Mitsuru Oishi announced the reason for his visit.

“I thought it was about time I tried out one of these North Coast Onsen Hot Springs. People in our business are rather particular about water.”

“P pardon, us”

Asuka quietly followed her father into the break room and quickly found a spot in the corner with a great view of an analysis board and didn't take her eyes off it. While a very shy girl, she never once moved from the spot.

Professionals, Women's League members and amateurs left their homes one by one and set out for the Hinatsuru.

There was no way to know when the match would end. It could very well be over by the time they arrived.

Even so, those men and women felt they had to be there. All to see just one match.

Why? Because Shogi was their life.

“..... 3:30 a.m., Oishi-King arrived in the break room with his daughter Asuka in tow. Mr. Oishi immediately found a seat in front of the big board and began directing analysis. On the opposite side stands Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*. The two fought head-to-head many times in the Sub League's 3-*dan* Division. It's like watching a scene from back in those days And that should do it.”

The journalist Mato photographs the room and uploads it along with comments from several players onto the official blog. She updated it as much as humanly possible. Now wasn't the time to worry about mistakes. Prioritizing

speed and amount over accuracy, Mato wanted the readers to feel as though they, too, were in the room.

All the while believing that immortalizing the moment was her duty as a journalist.

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka had just purchased a cup of hot coffee at a highway rest stop.

“..... Damn”

At the same time the Repetition Draw decision was about to be announced, Ryou burst out of her Tokyo home, jumped on her motorcycle and sped off toward the north coast as if drawn by a magnetic pull.

But, upon checking the match record at said rest stop, she'd been unable to take another step.

Machi Kugui, already at the match site, was sending her a constant stream of messages and video clips but she didn't read any of them. Unread messages on LINE were piling up as well, but she couldn't look.

“..... Damn”

However, she couldn't take her eyes off the match record no matter how hard she tried.

Ryou met Yaichi in the Elementary Meijin Title Match Finals. She was in fifth grade and he was in third when they first played against each other.

Yaichi won that match, but Ryou strongly felt she would win the next.

However, that *next* never took place.

Because Yaichi entered the Sub League.

Ryou had already qualified for the Women's League, but she chose to take a leave of absence from Women's League matches and went against her Master's

objections to enter the Sub League herself.

Three years after Yaichi won the Elementary Meijin Title, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka joined the Sub League with a 5-*kyu* ranking as a second-year junior high school student.

One year later, she dropped out as a 6-*kyu*.

It was the first major setback she had ever encountered, but Ryou refused to stop walking down the Shogi path. Claiming a Women's Title would allow her to play against professionals. She honed her skills, believing with all her heart she could win if only a regulated match could be set up. Utterly destroying Yaichi's apprentice had left a very satisfying taste in her mouth.

But ... now.

Seeing him play against the Meijin at the very top of the Shogi world, Ryou had no choice but to face the harsh reality.

—I'm I'm never gonna catch up to him

“Damn!”

She crushed a paper cup between her fingers. The hot coffee burned her hand, but that pain was nothing compared to what she felt in her heart.

The coffee dripped down onto the asphalt by her feet, but hot tears leaking from her eyes hit the ground alongside them every so often.

“Damn!!”

Each move that was made crushed her spirit into smaller and smaller pieces. Her tears showed no signs of stopping. Unable to take a single step out of the chilly rest stop, the girl simply cried and said “Damn” on an endless loop.

A strange air had filled the main hall.

“Twenty years ago This reminds me so much of the night he took my last

title.”

Standing alongside his younger brother apprentice, Kousuke Kiyotaki, Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu brought up the day the Meijin claimed all seven Shogi titles.

It had become a legend among legends in the Shogi world The words of one present at the time become gospel. Which was exactly why the over one thousand guests present to watch the match at the Hinatsuru fell silent as not to miss a single one. All leaned forward on the edge of their seats waiting for him to continue.

“..... He stopped being open and honest about his true feelings after that night. Without friends, without revealing anything about his private life, he would simply give the same smile no matter what he was asked.”

It was true, the mysterious Meijin-isms all but disappeared once he had that seventh title. The audience came to the realization and nodded.

“Once those declarations had more impact as he stood on top of the Shogi world, his words took off on their own as if they had wings ... though he did not wish for it. That’s why he separated himself from the management side of the Shogi Association and never took an apprentice of his own. That freedom was not afforded to him. The one place where he was truly free was on the Shogi board. Unfortunately——,” Seiichi said in a remorseful tone.

And no one dared interrupt him.

“Unfortunately, he faced isolation even there because he was never able to find someone who could communicate at his level. He’d become too strong on his own and Shogi cannot be played by only one player at a time.”

That being said——Seiichi turned his face toward the big analysis board that his eyes could not see.

“Now he’s found someone with whom he can be his true self. After twenty long years, finally.”

Then, he finished by adding one more thing.

“I’m a bit jealous that that person was not me.”

Twenty years ago No, as recently as ten years ago, Seiichi would never have brought this information to light. But now, he admits how he felt to the crowd with a lonely smile on his lips.

Then, he brings his younger brother apprentice into the conversation.

“Which reminds me, there was a time when you asked me to take Yaichi as my own apprentice, yes Kousuke?”

“That there was Though ya shot that down usin’ no waitin’ time at all.”

The audience chuckled.

Kousuke kept speaking, mixing in jokes as he went.

“But, ya know? Yaichi had talent in spades. I remember thinkin’ *At’s no good. He’ll gratitude me if I raise ‘im up for sure.* Gratitude in the Shogi world is what we call it when the apprentice beats the Master. But that ain’t gratitude at all. Losin’ to yar apprentice hurts like ya wouldn’t believe. Players used to retire ‘cause of it in the ol’ days. So when I tried to push ‘im off on ya, ya sure lived up to yar title as the Eternal Meijin. Saw right through me.”

The audience roared with laughter.

Once it died down, Seiichi quietly asked, “Kousuke. Do you still wish to pass him on to me to this day?”

“.....”

He hesitated for a moment.

“..... While I don’ know if I should be sayin’ this with Yaichi’s folks right here but” He gave a short bow of acknowledgment to Yaichi’s family, watching the match with baited breath in the corner of the main hall, before stating with conviction, “He’s my son. I’m damn proud of ‘im, and I ain’t givin’ ‘im to nobody

else.”

With tears in his eyes, he finished with words so quiet the microphone couldn't pick them up.

“Now this is gratitude Thank ya, Yaichi.”

Ginko Sora sat in the break room, shivering.

“..... Yaichi”

The room temperature wasn't all that cold. In fact, it was so full of people that the air was rather toasty.

Even so, Ginko was shivering.

Her always clear, pale skin had faded into a stark white hue. Any further, and she might just disappear altogether.

She had her arms wrapped around her chest, fingers clasped to her shoulders and shivered as if encased in ice.

Her eyes were distant, looking up at the ceiling as if searching for faraway stars on a winter's night. Looking far, far away——.

“Yaichi Gone far away, again,” she murmured blankly.

Like an infant would. Like a mute child.

“..... Liar. Yaichi, you liar. I told you not to leave me behind. You said you wouldn't, you said it”

“You're just going to have to chase him harder, Ginko.”

Keika came up behind her, placed her hands on the girl's shoulders and offered words of encouragement while thinking to herself: ——The miracle that Yaichi and the Meijin are pulling off makes mine feel fake. It's on a different scale.

This one was equivalent to when the game of Shogi was born into this world, a true miracle.

That's why if Ginko wanted to pursue him, she would need an even bigger miracle to catch up.

The odds of that happening were extremely low.

However.

With enough effort, she could surely do it. Her feelings would certainly reach him. Keika had no doubt in her mind.

Whereas before she thought of it as inconsequential, now she could declare it with all the confidence in the world.

She wrapped her arms around the shivering *younger older sister* from behind.

Then, Keika gently whispered into her ear.

"Let's do our best, okay?"

No effort, in Shogi or in love, goes unrewarded.

🏠 WHAT MUST COME

Endless one-minute Shogi is still going.

“Haack!!”

My nerves have reached the point I feel like I’m going to hurl, but I keep getting dry heaves.

“Ughh! Haaack! Ohhaaaa!!”

Going back and forth, I can barely breathe as we each twist and contort our minds with no end in sight. My heart is screaming out in pain without making a sound.

—Time If only I had some time!!

I’ve been able to dodge the killing blow so far, but who knows how long I can keep this up. The board is a total mess and my formation may as well be held together by spaghetti.

I’m not the only one in rough shape.

The Meijin looks exhausted, his face twisting in pain and low groans come out of his half-open mouth. He’s still fighting, but only holding on by a thread.

The difference is he still has two minutes of waiting time and hasn’t had to deal with one-minute Shogi. Just waiting for me to mess up Waiting for the perfect moment to unleash the strike he’s got prepped and ready!

“Cough! Haaaack!!”

That pressure is killing me, and these dry heaves just won’t stop.

—Everything hurts! Hurry up Hurry up and put me out of my misery!!
Make it stop!!

I writhe in pain next to the board like a wounded soldier wanting nothing

more than a quick death.

My fighting spirit is so close to shattering.

Physical and mental endurance gave out a long time ago, but my Shogi skills have reached a level so much higher than they've ever been. I can't believe I lasted so long in one-minute Shogi like this.

But

My reading skills only got this high because sitting across the board from the Meijin pulled them way past their limits.

—I can't control it anymore!

Time starts flying the instant I start reading the board and it's been the match recorder's countdown that's dragged me back into reality. It's a vicious cycle.

I have to slam on the brakes just as I'm picking up speed every single time.

— And both of us have a check path somewhere!!

It's frustrating, knowing that I could find it if I just let my mind go into overdrive but that's too risky. If I did that and worse came to worse, I'd forfeit the match by running out of time.

And if I lose a title match, if I lose my title because I ran out of time, that'll become legendary in its own right. Of course, in a very bad way. I'd have to retire just to save face.

Retiring just two days after my apprentice joined the Women's League—.

That's just way too pathetic!!

Still unable to read all the way through, hearing the match recorder's countdown makes my heart jump into my throat and I make a move.

Once he saw it.

Once the Meijin who'd been rocking back and forth, his face twisting and turning in pain saw what I did—.

Slide

His upper body rises above the board and then freezes in place.

It's like ... what a cobra would do right before bearing its fangs.

Poised to deliver the killing blow.

Am———.

——Am I, checkmated

All the blood disappears from my body, slushing like it's going down a drain.

Did he find a way to trap my King before I could find a way to trap his? Nah
..... That's the only explanation.

—— So then, it's over.

My shoulders fall with a *crack*, like my neck broke along with them.

I can't keep my head up. Every bit of strength in my body fades away

No matter how determined you are to *never give up* at the start, your spirit
can only stare defeat in the face for so long until it breaks. Pushing beyond your
limits only speeds up the process.

—— Once he plays his move, I'll throw in the towel.

Of course it hurts. I don't want to lose my title. Going out on a four-game
losing streak is pitiful.

But on the other hand It'll finally be over.

I'll be free from the pain of this one-minute Shogi hell, know relief

But in that second, something strange catches my eye and I look up.

“.....?”

The Meijin——is reaching for the pitcher of water next to the board.

Then, he pours some into his cup.

I blankly stare at it happening for a moment when ...

“ ”

.....

A second wind courses its way through my empty body. The gears in my brain start spinning again.

Ba-dump, ba-dump! My heart starts sending blood to every part of my body.

Heat.

A word falls out of my mouth.

“..... T ime”

I repeat it once more.

“..... Time”

Yes.

The one thing I wanted more than anything else.

The one thing I didn't have any more of.

What I couldn't use during one-minute Shogi and needed to speed up my train of thought.

And right now, the Meijin is using it.

Those last two minutes he kept, he's giving up the last of his waiting time.

In other words.

—I can use that time!!!!

I immediately threw everything to the wind and let my brain run wild.

[illegible]



I could finally read. All the way to the end.

Immediately after.

—*Snaaap!!*

The Meijin hammers the finishing move down to the board.

He grinds that piece into the square, certain he's claimed victory.

But.

My fighting spirit is still in one piece even after that move.

I respond using no time at all, not even bothering to breathe.

Only then did I realize I hadn't been the whole time.

"Gasp!! Haaaa Haaaa!!"

I give my burning lungs the oxygen they crave.

Looking up from the board, I stare at the ceiling.

"Haaa Haaa Haaa Whew———"

And then take several deep breaths.

The dry heaves have stopped.

I can tell the Meijin knows something is up from across the board.

Those low groans he's been making the whole match have turned into long sighs.

But they're different from the frustrated ones he makes when his opponent messes up. These sound more like he's venting anger at himself.

As soon as I heard that, a part of me was sure that I'd won.

— Kind of ironic

When I went to check the TV broadcasts after the match was over, I found out

that the Meijin spent a total of one minute and forty-seven seconds on that drink of water.

One minute forty-seven.

That's—how long it takes my brain to reach top speed.

This battle has gone on for three days, nearly 30 hours in total, but it was that one minute and forty-seven seconds that decided the winner

What if he hadn't taken that drink?

If he hadn't used up the last bit of his waiting time to make absolutely sure what he was reading was right, I would've given up as soon as he made his next move. It sounds strange, yes, but I just know.

But ... the Meijin drank.

He sat back to think, being thorough to the very end, being the cobra crafty enough not to rush the killing blow. He did so because that's who he is.

Pursuing victory, cautiously advancing step-by-step toward the win That's where I found my chance.

And I took advantage of it.

Took exactly what I wanted: *time*.

That, and—.

“Thirty seconds—”

The match recorder announces now that the Meijin has used all his waiting time and is now playing one-minute Shogi.

He hasn't given up, his eyes racing around the board looking for a glimmer of hope—.

“Forty seconds—”

Another long sigh.

Leaning all the way over the board, the Meijin slowly starts sitting up.

“Fifty seconds——, One, two, three, four, five——.”

The Meijin picks up his cup one more time and drinks the last of his water.

But, this one wasn't to double-check his sequence like last time. There was a different reason.

So that he could say the words to end it.

Moistening his throat so his voice wouldn't crack——.

Then, he says it.

Words I've never heard him say before.

“I lost.”

In that moment, the fourth match of the 30th season Ryuo Title Match came to a close.

Including the Repetition Draw match, it lasted a total of twenty-nine hours and forty-seven minutes.

The victor: Kuzuryu-*Ryuo*.

I ... won.

▲ BRAND NEW WAY

I hear a rumbling of some kind.

It's getting louder and louder, loud enough to make the building shake. Is that thunder, an earthquake? I thought it might be that same noise I heard in Hawaii, but all of my theories turn out to be wrong.

Because ... it was the media people stampeding this way.

"Please don't push! Enter slowly, one at a time!!" the match recorder yells as he tries to contain the onslaught, but that's not going to happen.

Blinding lights flash over my eyes.

It's all their cameras going off. They're taking so many pictures that it's just one continuous blast of light.

—The light that's been pointed at the Meijin all this time

That thought flutters through my head as the questions start coming.

"Ryuo! How do you feel right now?!"

"This being your first victory over the Meijin, did you think you could win?!"

"When did you know the match was yours?!"

Normally, reporters working for the newspapers and magazines sponsoring the event get to ask the winner questions first.

But right now, there are so many reporters here who've never covered Shogi before rushing up to me like a pack of hyenas that the idea of *waiting their turn* doesn't occur to them.

I answer in a dry and airy voice.

"..... Winning hasn't sunk in for me yet."

That's the honest truth.

I have to win another three matches in a row to defend my title. Three matches against this superhuman opponent.

"I finally got one. That just means I can keep fighting," I say to end the interview and then a wall of microphones shift over to the Meijin as if waiting for that exact moment.

Even though he's clearly exhausted, the Meijin starts calmly going over the important points during this match and goes on to talk about his plans for the fifth match.

But ... that's not the information the reporters are after.

"Did the 100th title season and the Eternal Septuple Title being so close put more pressure on you?!"

"There are reports that the government is preparing for your Citizens Award Ceremony. Will the next match be the one?!"

The Meijin's ever-calm face transforms once that question was asked And he counters with sharp anger in his voice.

This is what he said in a surprisingly harsh, commanding tone.

"Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* is the best Shogi player in the world right now. My best might not be enough to win."

So all I can do is focus on the match in front of me—the Meijin ends the interview on that note.

..... Tears of happiness leak out of my eyes.

Just hearing that feels like I've got an extra big piece on my side.

I duck my head and speak in short sentences to hide my wet eyes and shaky voice as the two of us do a review session. The Meijin is absolutely giddy despite what happened during the interview as he and I analyze how things

could've turned out differently in a few places on the board.

—This person really, really loves Shogi

And for some reason, that makes me really happy.

We might never run out of things to talk about in this review session.

But, Mrs. Hinatsuru was waiting for a good moment and steps inside.

“The hour is late, but a meal has been prepared for you in another room. Please make your way there when you're ready——.”

We, the players, wanted to keep doing the review session, but the staff and media people have to be exhausted by now. Keeping them in here wouldn't be right.

The Meijin looks genuinely disappointed but gathers up all the pieces on his side of the board and pushes them into the center.

I opened the piece box and take out the bag before making stacks of two and putting them neatly back into the box.

—*Thanks for sticking with me for so long*, I say inside my head as we exchange bows once all the pieces are put away.

The Meijin leaves the room and all the media people and staff shuffle their way out after him.

I can't stand up.

At the same time, I can't let other people see me this dead tired.

“There is no need to rush. You may arrive at your own pace.”

The chairman must've sensed my condition as he follows the match recorder out of the arena.

“The star of the party is supposed to arrive late, after all.”

Leaving behind a smug comment that fits him perfectly, the chairman closes

the sliding door behind him.

“.....”

Left alone in the room called *Garyouhousu no Ma*, I sit in front of the board like the match is still going on and blankly stare at the ceiling.

—I actually won?

I still can't believe I beat the Meijin. Even looking back on it now, I think it was more lucky fingers than skill that put me over the top.

..... *But*

This victory here makes me believe I'm on the right path.

No effort goes unrewarded Right.

Those might just be pretty words. Plenty of effort goes unrewarded all the time. No matter how long you hold out, a loss is a loss. Coming back from the brink is a lot rarer.

But———You won't get anything unless you fight. Unless you keep on fighting.

Hmm!

I force myself to my feet. My muscles are still soup at this point, so it was all sheer will.

Fighting tooth and nail to get the sliding door open, I leave the arena.

“Haaa Haaa”

My body feels like lead, but I make my way down the hallway with my hand on the wall for support.

The elevator is, what, fifty feet away? It might as well be all the way to the moon. My sweat-soaked kimono is so heavy it feels like I'm wearing a boat over my shoulders

“Agh?!”

One of my wooden sandals slips off my foot and I trip on the spot.

Too exhausted to react, I hit the floor face first before I can put my arms out to catch my fall. My glasses go flying, clattering away.

“Gah! A-cough!! Haaa Haa”

The battle is not over. I can't let anyone see me like this.

—If I don't get up right now!

But, the harder I try, the heavier my body feels and my head is throbbing so bad it feels like it's going to burst open at any second. I could pass out if I'm not careful.

—Maybe I'm dehydrated? There's no time for a restroom break during one-minute Shogi, and I didn't drink any water

That thought came to mind as I fade in and out of consciousness.

Then.

“Um.”

Someone's speaking to me.

When I heard it I thought I was dreaming. That beating the Meijin was all just a dream and the match was still going

Because, I mean, I heard that voice the whole time during the match cheering me on, offering support. A girl's voice.

But the speaker is kneeling on the floor in front of my face-planted body and smoothly says, “Have some water.”



I lift my head up toward the cup and she puts her warm hand on my cheek, tilts the cup into my mouth and helps me drink.

Just like on that day.

Cold water seeps through my whole body—.

“Ahh

Suddenly, my headache and dizziness are gone. Like magic.

“..... Thanks,” I say as she looks at me with a teasing grin.

I’m sure this girl has watched me closer than anyone. Thought about me
Thought about only me and believed that I would win.

That’s why she was waiting for me with a cup of water right here.

That day—It’s just like the first time the two of us met.

I’d completely forgotten about when she showed up at my apartment, but
Now, I remember everything.

A memory that only the two of us have. A treasure we share.

That’s why I say.

The same thing I said in this spot, to the very same person.

“I’ll do whatever you want as a way to say thank you.”

“You will?!” the girl says, her eyes lighting up with happiness as she makes her
tried-and-true request. “Okay, then——.”

Ai Hinatsuru and I We exchange the promise.

The promise that started it all.

“Will you Please teach me how to play Shogi?!”

“I’d be glad to.”

It’s the strongest vow in the world, so strong that nothing could break it.

Crazy for devoting our lives to a simple board game, but the most exciting
vow anyone could ever make.

I climb back to my feet and start walking again.

I take my apprentice's small hand at my side.

"Now, let's go play Shogi."

Even if that journey is a never-ending road of pain and suffering——

The two of us will make the most beautiful match records together.

AFTERWORD

“I think I’ll end the series at Volume 5,” I remember saying to my editor and the manager of a bookstore in the Chubu region of Japan during a promotional tour a few days after the first *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done* novel was released.

My editor simply said, “All right.”

There was no *let’s keep this going* or anything like that.

Initial velocity is a very important term in the publishing industry. It refers to how well a book sells right after release. The reason it’s so important is because sales typically drop like a rock shortly after publication.

The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done didn’t have good initial velocity at all.

There was so much more I wanted to write, but as a professional writer, I am duty-bound to write what people want to read. That was my mindset at the time, but I still decided to devote myself entirely to the story I wanted to tell for five books. In the end, the first book picked up more steam than I could ever have imagined. I can’t put into words how surprised I was to learn how many people were reading my work.

I’m running out of pages as it is, so I’ll leave the *thank yous* for the next volume.

Being able to say that is the best feeling on earth.

30th Season Ryuo Title Match 7th Match Review

THE ONE TO END THE LEGEND

Written by: Mato

The Shogi world is bearing witness to a legend.

It's the story of one man and everyone else.

Out of Shogi's nearly 1500-year history, the reason that the *legend* is transpiring right now is due to the one man presiding over it like a god.

The series of miracles he has performed harken to those found in mythology.

Joining the professional ranks in junior high school, he claimed his first title at the age of nineteen. From then on, there wasn't a single season in which he did not have at least one title to his name. His domination of the Shogi world continued, and his feats are now a marvel that no one else has been able to achieve.

That is why, right now.

The Shogi world is bearing witness to a legend.

Yaichi Kuzuryu left his first small footprint on the Shogi world at the Elementary Meijin Title Match.

In third grade at the time, this was both his first tournament and his first championship. At eight years old, he was the youngest person to ever claim that honor. "A wiz kid has arrived!" The Shogi world took notice of him right away.

His record would be broken the following year by none other than his *younger older sister* and lifetime rival Ginko Sora, but Yaichi Kuzuryu's steady advance into the world of professional Shogi had only just begun.

He became the fourth junior high school student to turn professional.

Also, he became the youngest person ever to claim a Shogi title.

What's more, it was the Shogi world's most prestigious title: *Ryuo*. His ascension prompted discussions about how the next generation had arrived throughout the game and expectations were on the rise.

— However, the Shogi world was witnessing a legend.

The first match of the 30th Season Ryuo Title Match in Hawaii was to become the legend's final act.

“Eternal Septuple.”

“100 Cumulative Title Seasons.”

All hoped for a chance to witness this miracle of miracles.

Refusing to let the moment slip into history unnoticed, news networks and publishing companies sent representatives across the sea to join Shogi fans on a pilgrimage encompassing the arenas where the matches took place. The official live blog received hundreds of thousands of views on consecutive days, and it felt as though not a day went by without the Ryuo Title Match on the front page of newspapers and being discussed on the evening news. The country had Shogi fever.

“It had already been decided that once the Meijin claimed the Ryuo Title, he would receive the Honorary Citizens Award. The Shogi Association was making its own preparations and Meijin, who refused the award once before when he had all seven to his name, would surely have accepted it this time,” the Shogi Association chairman and possessor of the Eternal Meijin title, Seiichi Tsukimitsu, frankly stated.

The first three matches were dominated by the Meijin—.

Watching those victories unfold, it seemed that the Eternal Septuple was just a matter of time.

But, a miracle took place during the fourth match.

Final Judgment—After forcing a draw in a heated match by triggering the single blank spot in the Shogi rulebook, Yaichi Kuzuryu claimed his first victory over the Meijin in the rematch that took place thirty minutes later. Their duel

spanned three days for a total of twenty-nine hours and forty-seven minutes.

Tsukimitsu, who was on hand as the observer, explained, “While I am a professional Shogi player, I am also a Shogi puzzle creator. I’ll be the first to admit Shogi puzzles are not the same as an actual match But I assure you with the utmost certainty that this situation will never happen again. That goes for Shogi puzzles as well.”

When I asked him why, the very man who made the decision to replay the match despite the unknown territory, Tsukimitsu smiled and said, “Because the rules will be changed.”

“Had I not been there, the match very well could have been scheduled for another day. While that may sound like the most suitable option, there were several circumstances like the Ryuo Title Match schedule and the Citizens Award, which denied the Association and Player Committees the time necessary to officially change the rule. As the observer, I decided it was my responsibility to do everything possible to find a solution and asked the participants for their input. Both wanted an immediate replay, and that settled the matter.”

This is in hindsight, but there is a possibility the Meijin may have won had Tsukimitsu not stepped in. Reason being that compared to the Meijin in his mid-forties, Kuzuryu is a teenager and could win on endurance alone.

“Indeed. Conducting a replay in that condition can turn out for better or worse, but I believe that Shogi turned out for the best. One look at the Shogi record makes it very clear. Shogi of that caliber on a rematch is exceedingly rare. At the very least, I do not remember any that compare.”

The fifth match. Kuzuryu rode his momentum from the earlier match to an overwhelming victory.

The sixth match. The Meijin took full advantage of being on offense and

opened with an aggressive strategy, but Kuzuryu took it in stride and shut it down completely. Strong Shogi.

Then, the match of destiny, number seven.

After a piece flip determined that Kuzuryu would play on defense, he drew on his trump card, the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange, and attempted to extract revenge for his loss in the first match.

While impossible to tell who had the stronger formation through the bulk of the match, the Meijin's hand quivered a total of three times.

However—it was Kuzuryu who claimed victory.

I had an opportunity to speak with the one who has had a closer view of Kuzuryu's ascent than anyone, Ginko Sora. She had this to say about her younger brother apprentice.

"Yaichi's No, Kuzuryu-*sensei*'s Shogi clearly changed during the seventh match."

"*Yaichi* is just fine," I offered.

But Sora said, "Please fix it for the article, okay?" before going into greater detail. "It's stronger. I don't mean that he found stronger formations or that his skills have improved. I think it's stronger on a level that can't be explained like that. He's obviously elevated himself to a higher plane. Up with the Meijin Leaving us behind"

"Where do you think the gap is between Mr. Kuzuryu and yourself?"

"..... It's impossible, to improve at Shogi without winning."

This was quite possibly the cruelest question any player could be asked, but Sora gave me a straight, honest answer.

"Many people say that losing makes you stronger. But that's a lie. They're only trying to distract themselves after losing. No one gets stronger at Shogi without winning. I'm sure you can relate?"

“Yes. I believe you are absolutely right.”

“Win at Shogi and you can play against stronger opponents. Those stronger opponents will then include you in their practice sessions and allow you to experience a higher stage. Without that, the gap only gets wider——.”

Gaze falling to her feet, those words lacked her usual mature, almost frozen tone.

Almost as if——.

“You sound almost as if you were being left behind by a special someone.”

I gently prod for a reaction. But rather than deny it, Sora had this to say.

“I love Yaichi. I want to hold his hand and go out to the town. I want to go to the movie theater with him, go to the beach with him and do all sorts of things together. Not as siblings, but as a couple”

Revealing her feelings to someone else for the first time, Sora continued.

“But, what I really want to do with Yaichi is play Shogi.”

Just play Shogi——.

Ginko Sora said loud and clear: Shogi was all she wanted. That’s why she had no choice but to get stronger herself.

I felt defeated because I was unable to become strong like her.

Eight years ago, Elementary Meijin Title Match——.

Eliminated in the semifinals, a little girl was crying her heart out on a sofa in the corner of the television studio in Shibuya that hosted the match when a young boy came up to her.

“Don’t cry. You shouldn’t cry.”

“..... Why?”

“Because you only really lose when your heart breaks.”

“But I can’t stop. It hurts, and I’m too sad

A fresh wave of tears rolled down her cheeks. The boy, unsure what to do, kept saying “Don’t cry,” like a broken record until he finally pointed to the Shogi board with a shining beacon of a smile on his face.

“I’ll show you some fun Shogi!”

With those words, the boy went to face the one who defeated her in the semifinals and took a seat at the board under bright lights.

Then, once the match started—the girl forgot to cry.

She was enjoying watching him play Shogi so much that the tears dried up

Deviating from standards from the early game, it had the excitement of venturing into a cave for the first time. The boy’s match record was a treasure map.

She watched him hoist a trophy taller than himself up over his shoulders during the awards ceremony. Their eyes met, and he flashed that same beaming smile.

See! Wasn’t that Shogi fun?

As if he were saying it out loud.

Seeing him for the first time that day—seeing his Shogi, she was certain that this would become part of his legend.

That was also the day she started running.

Since she didn’t have talent, she thought sitting across the board from him in a league match would never happen. She would never experience his Shogi from the closest position possible, as an opponent.

Then, she at least wanted a front row seat—to become a journalist and watch his matches from the board-side table.

She also strived to join the Women's League in order to acquire the knowledge she would need to understand his Shogi even just to a slightly deeper degree.

Her efforts paid off with a Women's Title, allowing her to interact with him at the Kansai Shogi Association as well as in Title Match arenas. Even now, she follows him wherever he may go—.

"Today's Shogi was just as fun to watch as the one back then," I tell Kuzuryu in the hallway after he left the party to return his sleeping apprentice to her room. A look of confusion washed over his face before asking me.

"Did I ever say that?"

This wasn't some façade, but he truly seems to have forgotten that day.

I felt anger swell, but then remembered that Shogi was the only thing on this wiz kid's mind and overcame that anger to conduct the interview.

"..... Would you tell me how you defended your title? I'm especially interested in your mental condition before that all-important fourth match From right after the third."

I press for the answer I didn't get that night on the platform at Tendou Station, and this time he gave me one.

"I was in a bad place after the third straight loss. After having what I thought I knew about Shogi rejected in the first match My physical and mental endurance were up against the wall. I know I caused more than a few problems for the people closest to me. I was so high-strung at one point that my live-in apprentice couldn't take it anymore and hid in the restroom at one point"

The little girl asleep in Kuzuryu's arms flinched upon hearing the word *apprentice*.

"How did you come back from that? So many other players fell into slumps

after going against the Meijin and didn't recover for quite some time."

"The Meijin is amazing. His talent, his experience, effort and accomplishments. I can't beat him in anything like that. Now that I've successfully defended my title, I think I figured it out. The Meijin is definitely stronger. But——."

Looking down at his sleeping apprentice with kind eyes, Kuzuryu continued.

"Just as he has many things, I have important things, too. Once I realized that, everything just worked itself out."

"Important things?"

"Even when I couldn't believe in my own talent and skills I believed in the important people inside me. When everything I thought I knew about Shogi was proven wrong, when everything I thought I was got rejected Then what's left inside? What is it that determines who the pro Shogi player Yaichi Kuzuryu is? I was able to find a new answer."

"And what was it? That answer"

"I have the best Master in the world; the strongest older sister apprentice, Keika; a rival like Ayumu; a strong Kansai Shogi network with people like you, Mato——."

Hearing my own name certainly caught me off guard, but I maintained a strong poker face as I wrote down every word Kuzuryu said. I wasn't going to let one escape.

"Every bit of Shogi knowledge I built up over the years was shattered, but the important things inside my heart will never break. I think that's what kept my spirit going."

"Just to confirm You are saying that you won because of the people there supporting you. Is that correct?"

"Yeah. The Meijin was too, but I think I was blessed with just a little bit more."

“And you have the best apprentice, yes?”

“Yes. Apprentices.”

Kuzuryu flashed a grin.

“I have two of them, but the Meijin doesn’t even have one.”

“So, apprentices are the key to victory?” I jokingly asked, but Kuzuryu donned a surprisingly serious face and nodded.

“I think so.”

Making his declaration with no waiting time, Kuzuryu tilted his head forward in a slight bow, said, “Good night,” and walked right by me. Just as he passed my ear, he added, “..... You only lose when your heart breaks.”

Carefully supporting his apprentice sleeping in his arms as she clung to his kimono, Kuzuryu walked down the long hallway alone.

All by himself. No——.

The legend is not over. At least, not in the way most predicted or wanted it to end.

The legend is not over. The Shogi world is still witnessing it.

However, it’s no longer the story of one man against the rest.

Someone has appeared in front of him: a boy possessing the same strength. He appears as a dragon wielding an unbreakable sword and continues to challenge the man at every turn.

These two will surely clash many times in the future. Their battles will take place far out of reach of anyone else where they will play Shogi unlike anyone else. This new era is sure to stand out as one built on miracles within Shogi’s long history. Then——.

The legend ends, and a new legend now begins.



REVIEW SESSION

That day, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui were in the Player's Room like usual.

But rather than sitting across a Shogi board from each other, both are leaning back in their chairs and looking bored out of their minds. Machi lives in Kyoto, so her being here isn't that big of a stretch, but Ryou had to come all the way here from her place in Tokyo. I doubt she'd make the trip just to kill time. Doesn't she have any friends?

"Hello there. Come for a practice group?"

I say hello to be friendly.

"I'm here for work, a side job of sorts."

"I'm gettin' interviewed. The guy's going to meet me here."

"An interview? Why would someone have you come all the way to Kansai for an interview when you're registered in Kanto?"

"The magazine said it's all part of some promotional tour and asked me to meet them halfway. I gotta tell you, it's hard being famous. A bombshell like me with a title attracts all sorts of attention."

"So, what kind of magazine is it? Nudie? Something for gamblers?"

"Want a check path to an early grave, do you? Asking is too much of a pain in the ass, but it's probably a Shogi magazine of some kind."

"How do you know?"

"The journalist's name."

"Ah That makes sense."

Shogi writers are known for using pen names. That's what tipped her off, for

sure.

“I got the offer over email, but I’ve never heard of the guy. How do you even read this? Koku?”

Ryou takes out her smartphone and shows me the message.

The sender’s name is 鵠 *Koku* (Swan). That’s the way Ms. Mato writes her pen name.

“I’ve seen guys go by *Kumquat* and *Crow*, but what gives? Why do Shogi writers use these really messed up names?”

“Back in the olden days, it was quite common for writers to use names like 陣太鼓 *Jindaiko* (War Drum) and 竜騎兵 *Ryukihei* (Dragoon), but recently most favor simpler names that can be expressed with a single character like 純 *Jun* (Purity) or 昇 *Noboru* (Rise).”

“Why do they even need a pen name in the first place? Real names are good enough, don’t you think?”

“I think it helps them do what they have to do. I mean, think about it. Whenever a player works as a journalist, things get in the way no matter what they write

Memories of things written about me run through my head as I say that. Fantasizing about teaching whoever wrote them a lesson in a dark alley somewhere has crossed my mind more than once or twice. Though, losing was my fault!

“Yeah, that’s the thing about journalists. No matter how well they think they wrote the article, tons of people tell them they got it all wrong.”

“What ... would you have them flatter the interviewee the whole time? That would make for quite the boring article, no? But publish something too scathing, and their requests for interviews will be rejected while the Shogi world hastens them into early retirement. You’re suggesting they tie their own

noose.”

“You got a point there. A very good point.”

“But you, Ryou, you talk so openly during interviews, right?”

“Hmm Well, there are things that I will and won’t talk about, yeah?”

“Okay. Then I shall interview you. Ryou, what is Side Pawn Capture to you?”

“Side Pawn, eh? Let me think”

Ryou puts on her thinking cap for a few long seconds.

“..... Gotta be Ozaki.”

Asked about her favorite strategy, the Women’s League player answers with the name of her favorite singer for some reason.

“You’ve got that one song you’ve got to sing at karaoke, don’t you? That ace in the hole you take out as soon as you walk in the room. The one song that you know will get you pumped up and everything from then on will be a blast. For me, that’s Ozaki and Side Pawn.”

“I-Is that so? Interesting”

Looks like even Machi wasn’t expecting that and she starts grinning. I jump in and give her a hand.

“W-Well Lots of players listen to music to psych themselves up before a match.”

“Listen? Hell, sometimes I like to go and sing it myself.”

“Huuh?! Ryou, you go karaoke before matches?!”

“This is just between us, got it? Doesn’t leave the room.”

Ryou’s mouth curls as she presses her index finger against her lips.

“Whenever I get too excited to sleep the night before a match, I’ll just go for an all-nighter at some karaoke place and get so into it that I turn up late for

matches! Like hell I tell them the truth, so I make up some excuse like my alarm didn't go off (haha)."

S-So the reason she's late all the time is That?

"Of course I've got Ozaki going in my head during the match, too. *Diving All Night* starts up once the pieces start clashing and the rhythm just takes over. Even start swaying side to side sometimes."

"So then, whenever a Lance claims a piece in the late game, *Jyugo no Yoru* starts playing—."

"And why *Boku ga Bokude Aru Tameni* gets stuck in my head when I see the win."

"You've got the fever."

"Fighting back tears. To the extreme (haha)."

"Falling down dead would be so hardcore."

Machi tries making a joke that a punk rocker like Ryou would find funny and must have hit the sweet spot.

Ryou clutches her side, laughing as she says, "Hell, yeah (haha)! There was actually a time when I punched out a window at the association because losing hurt so bad (HAHA)!"

That's quite the confession. I heard about there being a broken window at the Tokyo Association a little while ago, but Who would've thought the culprit would be sitting right in front of me?

"But, yeah, where the hell is that journalist? The guy was supposed to be here an hour ago. I've had enough waiting around, so why don't we go grab a bite to eat under the rails at Fukushima Station?"

"Yes, let's. I got an interesting story, so that should be enough."

"Machi. Do you think you can write a good article?"

“With so many interesting things to work with, should be no problem.”

“Eh? What are the two of you blabbering about? Hey, Machi, the hell did you take out from under the table? That, that’s a voice recorder——?!”

“Tsukiyomizaka-*sensei*, thank you for agreeing to the interview≡”

“You?! Machi, you’re a journalist?!”

“That I am. I said so ... first thing.”

“Like hell you did?! You said you were doing some part-time gig——.”

“Yes, my side job. With a Shogi magazine.”

“There aren’t many Shogi writers in Kansai, so Machi pitches in by writing a few articles every now and then. Sometimes she gets hired by newspapers, too. Just a little while ago, she came to Hawaii to help out with the official blog and wrote a freaking awesome article about the Ryuo Title Match for *Shogi World* just the other day. That was all her, yeah? You know: *The One to End the Legend*.”

“Oh, you read it? Quite a bit got cut out for publishing, a real shame at that Ginko had so much more to say But I’m glad you liked it, Ryuo.”

“Things Big Sis said? More than what was in the article?”

“That’s for you to ask her yourself≡”

Pretty much everyone in Kansai knows Machi works as a part-time journalist, but I guess Ryou didn’t because she’s usually around Tokyo.

Wait, she kept that detail from Ryou on purpose, didn’t she?

“That’s cheap, Machi! You and *Kuzu Trash* pulling a fast one on me like this?!”

“Think back, Ryou. I told you my name right at the start, no? It was in the mail I sent you.”

“Huh?! You liar! This thingy here Koku? Swan? Whatever the hell pen name this is——.”

Ryou thrusts her phone forward and points at the “鵠.”

The corners of Machi’s lips curl up like a sly fox and traces the Chinese character in the air with her thin finger. Then, she says.

“This can be read as *kugui*, yes?”

An article featuring a Women’s League member called *Ryou Tsukiyomizaka’s Map to Being Nineteen* (Written by: Mato) that was published in a magazine half a month later dominated the Shogi world’s news for two weeks straight. The Shogi Association had some very sharp words for her, but she got boatloads of invitations to go out for karaoke after that, so she’s been having a good time.

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

I believe you can tell by one look at the Table of Contents that this book has over thirty titled segments. Coming up with names for each one was harder than I thought. That's why I borrowed a few ideas this time around.

Personally, I think *Spinning Dragon* and *Climbing Dragon* are really cool.

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

Ah, Hawaii I'd love to go with Keika.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

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