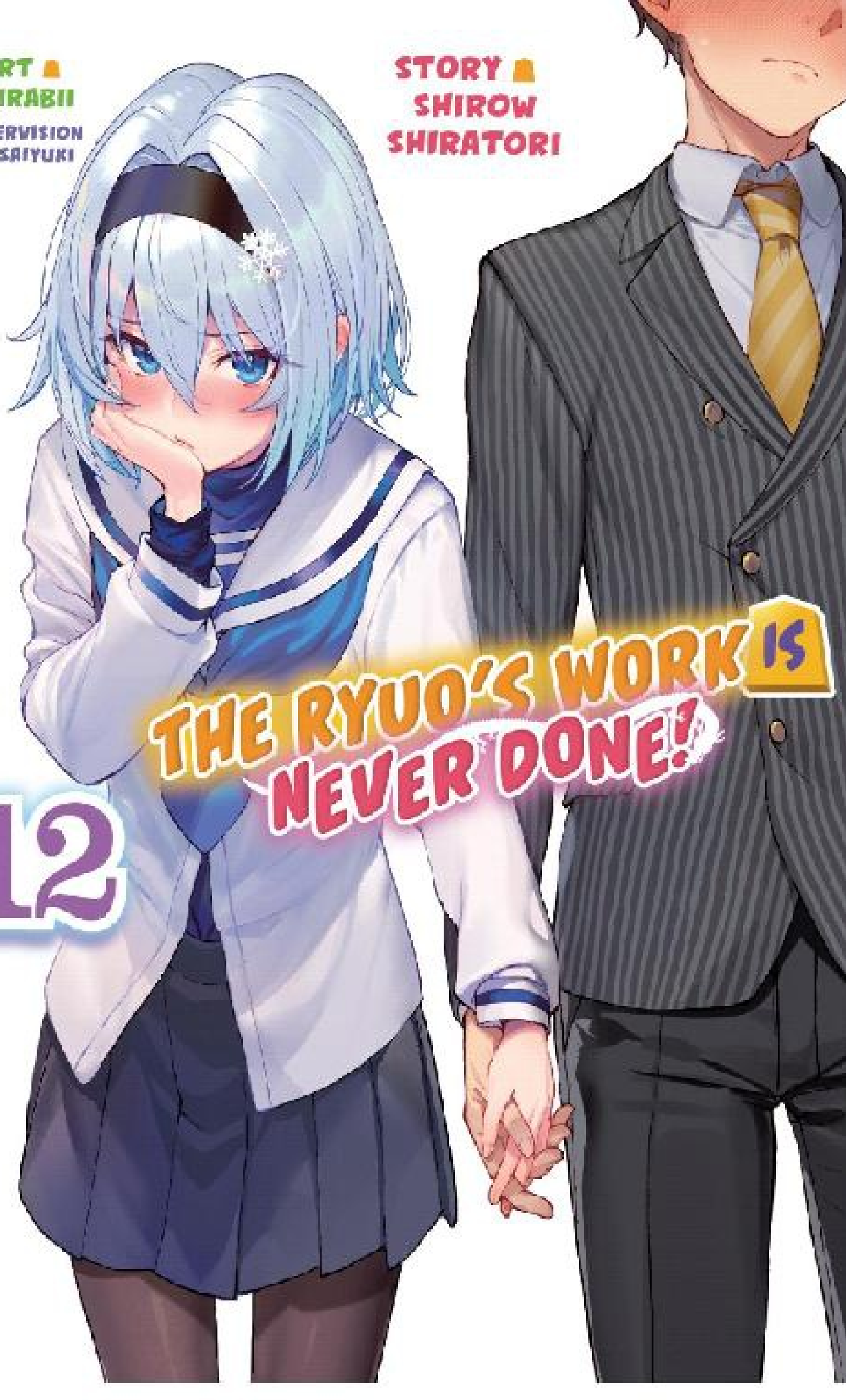


ART ■  
SHIRABII  
SUPERVISION  
■ SAIYUKI

STORY ■  
SHIROW  
SHIRATORI

THE RYUO'S WORK IS  
NEVER DONE!

12



ART ■  
SHIRABII  
SUPERVISION  
■ SAIYUKI

STORY ■  
SHIROW  
SHIRATORI

12

THE RYUO'S WORK IS  
NEVER DONE!









“Sensei, your tie is all crooked.”

“It is?! O-Oh .....  
Sorry about that.”

“Just let me fix it for  
you already!

**Lean in closer.”**











# MEET THE CHARACTERS



## YAICHI KUZURYU

Ryuo. Heard that *Ramune* hard candies are good for the brain and orders several during a match. Opponent complained he chewed too loudly and received a stern warning.

## GINKO SORA

Yaichi's older sister apprentice. Member of the Sub League's 3-dan division and holder of two Women's Titles. Insists that snacks with *Takoyaki* flavor only taste like the sauce.



## AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice. Loves tapioca with a passion. Believing that *sucking black balls through a straw is bad luck*, she made her own white tapioca. Extra chewy.

## AI YASHAJIN

Yaichi's second apprentice. Native of the *snack capital* Kobe. Enjoys selecting her own snack at a department store before playing in matches.



## YO OKITO

Holds dual titles, *Crown* and *King*. Orders *CalorieMate* by the box during title matches. Association staff runs like the wind to get it for him.

## HIUMA KAGAMIZU

Sub League 3-dan. His experience and thorough knowledge of players' tastes result in him being asked to run comparatively more errands while working as a match recorder.



## SOTA KUNUGI

First elementary school-aged member of the 3-dan division in history. Spotted a nice lady handing out candies when he first arrived for the division's regular activities in Osaka and instinctively took a picture.

## SHOJI KARAKO

Returned to the Sub League via the Admission Exam. Has worked in a *konjac* jelly factory. Often says *konjac* is the main ingredient in tapioca.



## SUMITO SAKANASHI

Ranked number one in the Sub League this season. Received a present from a female student at his driving school, which his younger sister apprentice recommended he attend. Said to have regained Shoji form thereafter.





12

STORY ■  
SHIROW SHIRATORI  
ART ■ SUPERVISION  
SHIRABII ■ SAIYUKI



THE RYUO'S WORK IS  
NEVER DONE!





# THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 12

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Cover, opening artwork and all illustrations

Shirabii



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Scrapbook

Suicide Note

Record 1:

Challenger

Showing Gratitude

On the Committee

The Future I Want

Boundary Line

Girl Talk

Sumito Sakanashi

Record 2:

Peak Fervor

Tallying Stars

Prize Machine

Fellow Sub League Members

The Player's Room

Record 3:

The Veteran Seat

Before the Festival

Back into Hell

Summer Festival

One More Time

Kuzuryu Shogi Family Meeting

Record 4:

Evening Session

Cinderella's Ambush

Cinderella in Love

Baton

All Your Youth

To Battle

Tonsure

Secret Meeting

Final Nights

Record 5:

Watching From Afar

Shoji Karako

Promise

Sota Kunugi

Prodigy

The Same Blood Flows Within Them

Only Victory

Here, Here, Here

Pulse

Sealing Move

The Last Promotion

Necktie and Dice

For the Afterword: “Who I Didn’t Become”

Review Session

# SCRAPBOOK

I have a scrapbook.

It's made up of articles that a Shogi magazine only runs twice a year.

This scrapbook, which only contains the one two-page article that's quietly slipped into the back of that magazine twice a year, has become 100 pages thick. Where did the time go?

I doubt it's worth much at all to most people.

But I treasure it.

Ever since I was six years old when I found out that professional Shogi players exist, I've been holding on to these articles, even when I ended up throwing away the rest of the magazine.

*"4-dan promotions."*

Short essays that only two people, the ones who make it through the 3-*dan* division's six-month season, can write. People who have given the prime years of their youth to Shogi pour their heart and soul into a single page; the life of the professional Shogi player in a nutshell.

My life has revolved around getting to write my own article.

On those long nights before my matches on regular activity days in the Sub League when sleep never came, I would pass the hours by reading through this scrapbook and thinking about what I would write once my turn finally came.

What would I talk about?

How hard life in the Sub League was?

Matches during my time in the 3-*dan* division that had the biggest impact on me?

The jealousy I feel toward the others who turned professional before me?

Gratitude for my Master?

Gratitude for my parents?



Gratitude for my fellow Sub League members?

The joy of playing Shogi?

The day my heart shattered?

The match that restored my fighting spirit?

As the years in the Sub League dragged on, I noticed there was more I wanted to say and the content had changed.

However, the way I wanted to conclude the article always stayed the same.

That sheer determination is what allowed me to endure my darkest days in the Sub League.

Passed up by my juniors, I managed to put up with the indignation of calling them *Sensei* and serving them tea while working as a match recorder during their matches *because* I knew what I wanted to write.

I endured giving the *king's seat* to players younger than myself and taking on a secondary role after having led practice sessions for so long. Even after winning the Newcomers Tournament as a Sub League member for the first time, I managed to prevent the question *why do weaker players than I am get to become professionals and I don't?* from rotting my heart away.

Reading through this scrapbook, I drift off into peaceful slumber.

It's the final match of the 3-*dan* division, and I hold the top position. Having placed my opponent in checkmate by deploying a Gold in front of their King, I see myself stamping a white victory star on the division annuals. Everyone at the association office is congratulating me as journalists and reporters line up to take my picture. Once that's over, I contact Master to tell him the news and then call my family soon after. It's hearing my mother's tears of joy on the other end of the line that makes me cry for the first time.

I promoted to 4-*dan* ..... I have become a professional. Processing all that joy as best I can, I sit down with a pen and start writing my article one letter at a time. My own 4-*dan promotion*.

Once I have finally gotten the words that have been brewing in my heart for so long down on paper, I start thinking about a title for my article. Ah, that's perfect. I'll call it——.

And that's where the dream always ends.

Awake, I reach for the scrapbook by my pillow.

Then I look for the article that should be there.

But, no matter how long I search ..... my page isn't there.

## SUICIDE NOTE

A man took great care attaching a piece of writing to the very end of a scrapbook.

Copies of it had already been sent to the association and his parents.

Not a hint of anger came through in its words... not toward the director or the sponsors who threw him to the wolves without any support, not for the Shogi professionals who criticized him for simply not understanding how strong Shogi software was before he lost, and not even for the fans who knew nothing yet and called him *a disgrace to humanity*.

The message was much more businesslike—an apology for forfeiting a league match held in his hometown, a desire to help spread the popularity of Shogi, and how he didn't want the association to host the funeral. The man had made sure that note was securely fastened to the back of his scrapbook.

Meticulous, he had saved every article he had ever penned since becoming a professional player.

There weren't many at all. The writer had turned down all jobs outside of playing matches for he believed that research and becoming stronger were a Shogi player's true calling. Thus he committed more time to researching his craft than anyone without sharing the fruits of that research with a soul. He was willing to play against anyone, should they only ask. Amateurs, professionals, Women's League players, even nonhuman opponents.

The man flips over his scrapbook and goes back to the beginning.

There on the first page was the first article he wrote as a professional. His eyes skimmed through the few short paragraphs—his *"4-dan promotion."*

# Born Again

Yo Okito

“I’ll never play Shogi again.”

I would think those words whenever I lost a match.

These six-and-a-half years in the Sub League have been stressful, to say the least. Hokkaido is a long way away. All the hours spent on a plane go without saying, but thinking of the time that my parents spent driving me to and from the airport made me question whether it was all worth it with each loss.

The ones who gave me the strength to sit down in front of a Shogi board each time were my fellow Sub League members from outside of Tokyo. The nights we stayed at the association before matches were precious, as they were my only opportunity to play with other people. The kindness behind the words *There’s no one else to play with, so come on* is what saved me.

I’ve been a burden to my parents and so many others: my Master who has constantly watched over me, the Shogi fans in Hokkaido who have supported me, and my fellow Sub League members who have fought with and against me. I know of several who left the league after a loss at my hands. Each of them has reached out to me after one loss or another when I would swear that *I’ll never play Shogi again*, and told me this: *You will be a pro one day, Yo. I guarantee it.*

.....

Now that I have, I know in my heart...

Even if I were to be born again, I would want to be a professional Shogi player.

After reading that line, the man took his own life.

Then, only after awakening in a hospital bed ..... and realizing that he was still himself, did the man shed a tear.





RECORD 1

雛  
鶴  
あい

AI  
HINATSURU

空  
銀  
子

GINKO  
SORA

## ▲ CHALLENGER

“Ah! He just surrendered, didn’t he?”

Only now, after watching the big board analysis on my tablet for untold hours, do I notice the sun has gone down and it’s gotten pretty dark in my room.

Commentator Tamayo Rokuroba Women’s 2-*dan*’s high-pitched voice sounds more suitable for an anime character as she squeals: “The Meijin has surrendered! Now the Challenger for the Crown Title Match is official! What’s more, he’ll be the youngest Challenger for the Crown Title in its history at only 18!!”

“Quite strong,” analyst Jin Natagiri 8-*dan* adds.

He’s supposed to be the one moving the pieces around the big board, but his hands have been hovering in place for a while now.

The camera feed switches to the arena.

The one deeply bowing their head inside the special arena within Tokyo’s Shogi Association building in Sendagya is ..... the strongest Shogi player to ever live: the Meijin.

He recently defended his Meijin title to pull off the seemingly impossible feat of having 100 cumulative title seasons.

This player, who has six eternal titles, 1,434 victories, and countless other accolades to his name, is bowing down in front of one teenage boy right now.

Dragon King Ryuo—Yaichi Kuzuryu.

Having just turned 18 today, the youngest person in Shogi history to ever have a title is trying to catch his breath while thanking the Meijin for the match.

Match recorder Sumito Sakanashi takes the match record out of the room as an avalanche of reporters burst into the arena to take his place.

The audio feed switches back to the two enthralled commentators as even more people stream into the small room.

“Last time, Kuzuryu-Ryuo was eliminated from the Crown League during the

preliminaries. This season, however, he made it through without a single loss and continued winning all the way to the Challenger Match. Now he's defeated the Meijin and claimed his first chance to be a multiple title holder with the spotlight squarely on him ..... Wow, that was really something to watch!" Rokuroba 2-*dan* says with enthusiasm.

"He held the Meijin in check from start to finish. Keeping an opponent of that caliber at bay in a big match like this as the defender ..... Only Yaichi could perform like that," Natagiri 8-*dan* adds.

"He played Ranging Rook, too!"

"His match against Oishi-King ..... well, formerly King now, was impressive to be sure, but this Shogi was full of twists and turns that no one could've predicted."

"Even the evaluation software didn't see it coming! Which reminds me, Natagiri-*sensei*, you are one of the Meijin's research partners, right? Does he use software as well?"

"Barely, if ever, I believe. He sees the software strategies that I use and other young players use and learns from them, but I doubt that he has ever directly used a program."

As for the future ..... Natagiri 8-*dan* swallows those words.

"Okito-Crown is known for being the first Shogi professional to become as strong as he is using software. How do you think his seven-match series against the face of the new generation of players, the Ryuo, will play out?"

"It's hard to deny that Mr. Okito turned to software to help sharpen his declining Shogi senses as he got up there in age. Yaichi uses software, as well, but uses it to broaden his own horizons instead——."

"So, you're saying they use it in completely opposite ways?"

"That about sums it up. It's funny how a little imagination can use the same thing to open brand new doors... depending on how you use it ..... Heh heh! Interesting! ..... Quite interesting indeed .....!"

"We've just been notified the Ryuo is ready for an interview! Please enjoy!"

Rokuroba Women's 2-*dan* deftly cuts in as the topic starts getting iffy and the



audio feed switches back to the arena.

Suddenly, Yaichi's face takes up the whole tablet screen.

".....!"

The heat of battle still radiating from his eyes, I get drawn in and can't look away.

My chest is squeezing itself so tight, I can't breathe .....

"You're in position to take a second title for the first time. Can you tell me what that feels like?" asks a journalist from the *Kobe Sannomiya Newspaper*, a paper representing a coalition of five regional companies that sponsor the Crown League.

"Well ..... It doesn't feel real yet. It was an extremely close match ....."

Yaichi is struggling to say anything.

I'm sure part of it is that the just-defeated Meijin is still sitting right in front of him, but he genuinely looks tongue-tied.

Plus, he zones out like he has a fever after playing matches that come down to the wire.

Only I know he does it ..... But that never happens when Yaichi plays against me. That habit of his .....

"Okito-*Dual Title* is on track to become the next Challenger in the Ryuo Title Match. If he qualifies, the two of you could play 14 consecutive title matches for both Ryuo and Crown."

"It'll be a long battle if that happens, but ..... This will be our first time playing in league matches, so playing against him won't get old. I'm looking forward to it."

He chuckles and the tension starts to lift.

"You have a strategy in mind? Please share any details you are willing to give."

"Strategy? Well ..... Hm. There is one thing——." Looking into his lap and scratching his chin like he's deep in thought, Yaichi looks back up and says, "I would like to practice sealing moves."

“Sealing ..... moves?”

His unexpected answer sends a murmur through the crowd.

Meanwhile, blood is draining from my face. Is he seriously .....?

“Yes, it’s true that the Crown Title Match uses a two-day format, but don’t you have plenty of experience with it during your Ryuo Title Matches?”

“No. I don’t have nearly enough experience,” Yaichi says matter-of-factly. “I was too nervous to taste anything the last time I did a sealing move.”

“Taste ..... a sealing move?”

The interview has officially gone off the rails. This is live across the country!!

“Somebody! Shut that idiot up before it’s too late!” I yell at the Yaichi on my screen knowing full well my voice will never reach the other side.

“I don’t have enough experience at all! I want to practice more sealing moves, the more the better!”

“H-Hmmm ..... So, you want to increase your level of experience with sealing moves right now .....” A little overwhelmed by Yaichi’s enthusiasm, the reporter lets the topic slide by saying, “A new perspective from a rising star!” and tries to get the interview back on track. “Will you be practicing with your live-in apprentice?”

“Huh? S-Sealing moves with my ..... Ai is in grade school!! Are you crazy?!”

“Huh?”

The reporter has no idea why he is getting yelled at, but still comes back with a question.

“So ..... It’s inappropriate to practice sealing moves with grade school students .....?”

“Of course it is! Get your mind out of the gutter! It’s a sealing move, so you’ve got to be somewhere you won’t be interrupted by anyone ..... and it has to be with, you know, someone special! Just the two of you, quietly, with plenty of .....”

“I-I see ..... Sealing moves must be done with a certain partner, quietly .....”

The reporters are nodding and taking notes, but they're completely off the mark.

The real meaning behind the *sealing moves* Yaichi is getting at ..... Only I know what it is.

My cheeks are burning so red I can feel it. Probably because my chest is squeezing even tighter than before ..... My heart may as well be beating in my ears.

Hot.

“..... That idiot .....! Idiot, idiot, IDIOT!!”

Ranting at the tablet out of sheer embarrassment, I grind my knuckles into the face of my boneheaded younger brother apprentice as he goes on and on about sealing moves, but with a completely wrong meaning.

Then, I touch those fingers to my lips ..... Hot.

## SHOWING GRATITUDE

Review session over and pieces back in the box, the Meijin bows one last time before standing up.

It takes almost no time at all to get ready to leave during summer matches.

The Meijin says one last thank you with his watch strapped to his wrist and bag in hand before quietly stepping out of the arena alone.

“Ah .....

I had something important to say to him, but ..... I wasn't sure if telling him right after winning was okay and ended up not saying a word.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. A get together is scheduled to take place at a nearby Chinese restaurant. You will be in attendance, yes?”

“What? Oh, yes ..... Of course,” I absentmindedly tell the journalist in charge of the Crown Title Match as I stare at the spot where the Meijin disappeared.

That's when the match journalist Mato comes in with questions of her own.

“Ryuo. I would like to follow up on a few points that were mentioned during the review session if you don't mind.”

“Oh, sure. Then, we should go to another room——.”

I make up my mind as soon as I start getting up.

“Sorry! Could you give me a minute?!”

Rather than wait for her to answer, I race out of the special arena and down the hallway without bothering to put shoes on in hopes of catching up with the Meijin.

I make it to the elevator, but it isn't moving.

No one is sitting on the bench outside the arena either. Which means .....!

Bounding down the stairs, I spot a familiar figure on the next landing and call out to him.

“Um ..... Meijin!!”



He stops on the spot and slowly turns around to look up at me.

“About Big Sis ..... Oh, um, Ginko Sora, my older sister apprentice——.”

This is the first time I’ve looked him in the eyes outside of a match, and it’s really intimidating.

“She saw your interview when you received the Citizens Award. You talking about her becoming a female professional ..... helped my older sister apprentice come back from a really dark place. Your words meant a great deal to her .....”

Man, this is irritating.

It was so easy talking to him during the review session, but I can’t string words together at all now that we aren’t talking about Shogi.

“So, um ..... Thank you so much!!”

I practically yell at him with my head bent low.

The Meijin’s eyes jump with surprise behind his glasses.

Then, he cracks a smile——and nods ever so slightly.

“.....!!”

I lower my head again, so much so that my knees bump into each other.

*“Keep at it.”*

I feel him say.

Footsteps echo from the stairwell after a few moments ..... Looking up, he’s already gone.

“Are you aware of the first match I ever worked as a journalist?” says Miss Mato, who is suddenly standing next to me.

I figured it out right away.

“..... His?”

“It was indeed.”

She goes on to tell me about it like a girl reminiscing about her first crush.

“It was the Challenger Match for the Crown League, just like today. His

opponent was Tsukimitsu-*sensei*, and the Meijin had traveled to Kansai for the match. As there aren't many Shogi journalists based in the Kansai area, I was given a chance."

Maybe it's because he felt bad about making the blind Tsukimitsu-*sensei* travel, but the Meijin has made quite a few trips to Kansai over the years, even when he wasn't required to.

"Nerves set in the day before, and I arrived at the arena the morning of the match, before the match recorder. I was too nervous to even greet the Meijin once he arrived ....."

I can totally relate.

I used to pass by him in the Kansai Association's narrow hallways every now and then when I was in the Sub League, and all I could do was keep my head down and my mouth shut.

"It felt like eons passed by the time the match recorder, Mr. Kagamizu, finished preparing tea and brought it into the arena. Once he did, the Meijin looked at both of us in surprise and said this."

Miss Kugui does her best Meijin impression as if remembering the exact moment.

"“Oh? Is that you, Miss Kugui? Working as journalist today, are you?”"

"..... You must've gotten chills."

"I still feel it to this day. Though I had joined the Women's League, I had yet to claim a title. Nevertheless, he took the time to learn the name and face of a junior high school student in Kansai he had never met before."

"That's amazing ..... He's busy enough as it is."

"I remember other veteran journalists talking at the party that followed that match. They said there were so many new Sub League members and young professionals that they couldn't remember who was who, even at the association ..... That got a laugh out of the professional players present at the time, but the Meijin looked truly shocked and said, 'Really? I know everyone.' That's just the kind of person he is. That's exactly why——."

Yes. That's why all of us look up to him and admire him so much.

The number of titles he has and his Citizens Award don't matter at all.

“..... Thank you so much!” I say once again to the place that man was standing just a moment ago and make one more respectful bow.

## ▲ ON THE COMMITTEE

“Yaichi Kuzuryu, safely back in Kansai!”

The jam-packed schedule of a title Challenger hit me square in the face the moment I won the final match of the Crown League!

The get together that was held after the match ended up lasting until morning, after which I took the first bullet train from Tokyo back to Osaka where Shogi Association Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu called me into the association building before I could make it back to my apartment.

Good grief.

I just had my 18th birthday AND won a chance to claim a second title, but I haven't had time to celebrate either with my apprentice!

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, Ryuo. And, congratulations.”

The blind, A-ranking pro Shogi player quickly gets down to business after saying a quick hello.

“While I hate to hit the ground running, I would like to discuss details of an upcoming event we would like you to participate in.”

“Of course, Chairman! I'll take on any job you ask!”

It's standard for players to open their schedules for the title match once they have advanced past a certain point in a league. Some of the more confident ones will schedule drinking parties to celebrate their victories, as well.

As for me, I've already freed myself up for the Crown and Ryuo Title Matches, and those last from August all the way into December.

In other words, my schedule is pretty much blank for the rest of this year.

Of course, losing early on would really sting, but ..... There are plenty of ways to fill a schedule without matches. I can set up practice groups, instruct my apprentices .....

Or ..... You know. That.

Go on dates? Or something? Hah-hah-hah.



“Ahaha ..... Hah-hah-hah-hah .....

“You seem to be in a great mood, Ryuo. Were you that excited to become the Crown Challenger?”

“Huh?! Ah, yes. Of course .....

Whoops ..... I’ve got to be more careful.

I can’t just come out and say: *I was fantasizing about going on dates with Ginko if I lost all my matches right off the bat.* We’re not officially together either .....

But my cheeks get hot if my mind starts wondering. Hah-hah-hah .....

Rather than pursuing the topic any further, the blind chairman continues.

“Splendid. Now, Ms. Oga, if you will.”

“At once.”

Former Women’s League 1-*dan* and secretary to the chairman, Sasari Oga slides a piece of paper across the table.

“This is the event we would like you to attend.”

“Please, show me!”

Fan meet and greet? A Shogi tournament, maybe? Do they want me to do a lecture?

“Request for Assistance with the Shoten Shopping Arcade Summer Festival”

..... Come again?

“Um, Ms. Oga? Is this the right printout? It has nothing to do with the Crown Title Match ..... It’s actually a local summer festival in my neighborhood. The kind of thing I would get in my mailbox.”

“Yes. It is a flyer for a local summer festival.”

Say what?

“A Shogi *boom* the likes of which has never been seen before is currently

taking place on the Japanese archipelago due to the Meijin's Citizens Award and *Sora-Dual Title's* entrance into the Sub League ..... Thanks to your assistance."

".....!!"

The *assistance* she's talking about ..... is my taking Big Sis outside of Osaka.

These two took care of finding us a hotel room, contacting Big Sis's parents and Keika, and probably pulling several more strings that I don't even know exist. Then again, I haven't told them about us going into my parents' place, and they shouldn't know about the move (the sealing move to be specific) that got Big Sis back to her usual self.

But it's like they know somehow ..... Terrifying .....

"As a result of the sudden increase of popularity, the association has received a deluge of requests for Shogi players to participate in events all over the country. In short, we have run out of players to dispatch. That is why we have come to you with this request, Ryuo."

The chairman adds to Ms. Oga's explanation.

"There was much deliberation about who we should send, but someone currently living in the area made the most sense."

Reading through the flyer, they apparently reserved a spot for a Shogi booth during their annual *Obon* summer festival. Other than that, nothing else has been decided. So we have to plan the thing too, huh?

"Then you want me to be on the planning committee ..... Well, that's fine."

"Not you specifically, Ryuo."

"Huh?"

"We will be asking Ai Hinatsuru to join the committee. You are to assist her."

"Huuuuh?!"

Not only does this have nothing to do with the Crown Title Match, but I have to assist my apprentice?! I'm a title holder, remember?!

"A-Are you sure leaving that much responsibility to a grade schooler is the best idea?! I know she's officially joined the Women's League, but what's the rest of the committee going to think——?!"

“Are you unaware of Miss Hinatsuru’s popularity in the area? She has become a local idol. In fact, the organizers have expressed great interest in having Miss Hinatsuru involved.”

As if the chairman’s words weren’t shocking enough, Ms. Oga delivers the knockout blow.

“Your name was not mentioned once during the negotiations.”

“I-I, um, I see .....

Considering that Ai attends Kita Fukushima Elementary School, which is almost connected to the shopping arcade, it would make sense that the kids participating in the festival would also go to that school.

I’ve actually been there to teach the Grade Schooler Practice Group quite a few times myself, so I can confirm that the grade school student/Women’s League player Ai Hinatsuru is pretty much a rock star.

“You mustn’t take the attitude that this is merely a *summer festival*, Ryuo,” the chairman says in a stern voice. “Tokyo’s Sendagaya, where the Kanto Shogi Association building is located, has done very well branding itself as the *Shogi City*. Surely you remember the statue located on the Hatonomori Hachiman Shrine grounds? Osaka’s Fukushima district would also like to brand itself as the *Shogi Arcade*. This event is an important first step to make that a reality.”

“..... All right. I just need to support Ai as her Master, correct?”

“Support? Why, no. Our expectations for you are not that high.” The chairman turns his head to the side and says, “We merely don’t want to you to get in her way. Understood?”

## THE FUTURE I WANT

After the meeting, I make a quick stop at Master's place (though he wasn't there because he went out drinking the instant I won the match last night and hadn't come back yet) and a few other important places before finally making it back to my apartment in the shopping arcade. A strange sensation sweeps over me as I stand in front of the door.

"..... It feels like I haven't been home in forever."

After getting back from my *runaway* trip with Big Sis, I was held up in a hotel in Tenmabashi for two weeks to sign the onslaught of requests for certificates after the Meijin won the Citizens Award. I've been home since then though.

I only spent two nights in Tokyo for the Crown Title Match, but ..... It's been a long time since I've been home without a whirlwind of things going on.

"Then again ..... I've actually got more things to do."

Getting ready for the seven matches that will decide the Crown Title.

Helping out with the summer festival the association assigned me to.

And most importantly ..... I have to tell Ai about Big Sis and me. That's going to be the hardest .....

"Haaa ..... I just can't see her smiling and saying *that's great!* no matter how much I think about it ....."

It's hard to describe just how icy their relationship is. A dark cloud builds over my head as I reach for the doorknob.

Turning it, I open the door and see——.

"Welcome home, Master!!"

The most adorable smile ever.

"..... Thanks, Ai."

My first apprentice is sitting on her ankles in the front hallway, waiting for me with an infectious smile on her face.

I can't help but smile back at her.

She gets to her feet with a little hop and congratulates me on my victory.

"You're the challenger, Master! Congratulations!! Beating the Meijin to get there ..... You're so amazing! The strongest ever, Master!!"

"Hah-hah-hah. Luck was on my side. Anything happen while I was gone?"

"Lots of people who looked like they work for the news were outside ..... But they went away as soon as I asked Ms. Oga what to do."

"They did, huh .....?"

While I'm not sure what story they wanted to talk with me about, it had to be really scary for a grade schooler like Ai to see all those strangers outside the apartment.

"Sorry about that. I'll speak with the association myself."

"Okay ....."

Ai squeezes my arm like a scared kid looking for reassurance.

— The innocence .....

A warm, fuzzy feeling washes over my heart. Somehow, I manage to hold back the urge to hug her long enough to come to my senses ..... I've got to be careful!

I mustn't touch her! Ever!

Live-in apprentice, yes. Touching, no.

Any physical interaction between a grade schooler and her Master that could be considered over the line only leads to trouble. I have to pay extra attention!

"Master? Is something wrong? You're standing like a statue."

"I-I'm fine. Just a bit tired ....."

"I bet you are! Sorry for holding you up in the hallway."

Ai immediately grabs my suitcase, spins on her heel like a cute little bird, and



takes it to my room ..... While her ears turn bright red as she whispers, “..... Master came back to me ..... I’ve never been this happy .....”

—So innocent!!

Another urge to hug her from behind washes over me ..... Gah! Down, right hand! Down I say .....!!

“Nghhh!! Gaaahhh .....!!”

“M-Master?! Are you sure nothing’s wrong? You’re clutching your right hand awfully hard .....”

“I’m fine, just go! Go before I can’t control this beast anymore .....!!”

“Uwhee?”

She looks at me, confused, but disappears into the kitchen. I take a few deep breaths to chain down the monster for good and follow.

What greets my eyes as I step into the kitchen is ..... a mountain of food spread out over the table.

Even better—.

“These ..... These are all my favorites! Wow! I was just thinking how nice it would be to have every one of them, too! How did you know?!”

“Ehehe≡ I remember every single dish you’ve ever said was *delicious* or that you *wanted to have again*, Master!” Ai proudly puffs out her chest with a, “Hn-hmm!”

She’s just so cute that I couldn’t help patting her on the head and saying, “That’s my girl≡” This kind of touching should be fine. It’s positive reinforcement, which is part of teaching.

But, it’s not just the food that blows me away.

“Wait? I know that smell—.”

“Can you tell? It’s the same fragrance that Keika used to wear when you were a live-in apprentice, Master. Also, I got your favorite kind of bath soap and the same brand of cushions and slippers you’ve always used ..... I get paid per match now, so I went and bought them for you.”

Come again?! She used what little precious earnings she has ..... on me?!

“Keika taught me what to do! I wanted everything to be perfect for you when you got home, tired after your long trip ..... That’s the only thing I can do for you .....

—Too dang innocent .....!!

Ai’s ear-to-ear smile suddenly gets blurry.

I must be tearing up .....

“No matter how tired or hurt you are ..... I want you to be able to relax when you’re here with me. You can be the real Yaichi Kuzuryu. This is my birthday present for you!” she says before smiling the same extraordinary smile she had when I walked in the door. “Happy birthday, Master!”

“..... Thank you, Ai. Really .....

Warm, delicious food.

A bright, welcoming room that looks and smells like home.

But, most of all ..... The reassurance that comes from coming home to a smile.

That happy family feeling is my apprentice’s birthday present to me.

“Eeeverything in this room is all yours, Master. Help yourself≡”

“Don’t mind if I do!” I answer with my mouth watering, but ..... So many thoughts pop into my head that I don’t touch the food.

Wondering why I’m sitting at the table holding my chopsticks in midair and deep in thought, Ai asks, “Is something wrong?”

“No ..... I was just thinking about the day you first came here, Ai.”

“It’s been a year and a half, already. I made *tsukudani* with seaweed for breakfast.”

“Things really went downhill afterward, though! Big Sis barging in here while you were in the shower——.”

Only now do I remember my true objective.

That’s right. I have to tell this girl what’s going on.

Even if that puts a few cracks in this *happy home* we have ..... I decided to put Ginko first, and that's that!

Determined, I look at Ai and say, "I have something important to talk to you about."

"If it's the summer festival, Miss Oga already told me about it."

"Oh? I ..... I see. Great, no problem then."

She said she talked to Ms. Oga about the reporters, so it makes sense that they talked about the festival then, too. Sure, sure.

..... The conversation got cut off, didn't it?

The timing gone, I decide to eat first. Ai spent all that time making it, so it would be a shame to let it get cold .....

"That was really good, Ai. Thank you for cooking."

"You're very welcome! I made a cake for dessert, so I'll get some coffee ready, too."

"You baked a cake on top of all this?!"

"Heh-heh! What's a birthday without cake? But it's not from the store, so don't get your hopes up too high, okay?"

Ai brings her homemade cake and a glass of iced coffee over and puts them on the table in front of me.

It's a simple, square cake with two Shogi pieces on top.

A big piece that has *Ryuo* written in frosting and a small piece that has the character for *Pawn*.

The two are right next to each other, a pair.

"Ah ....."

I'm not the smartest guy in the world, but even I can pick up on the message. It's me, the Ryuo, and Ayumu, because he uses the same character as a Pawn to write his name, as a couple ..... Nah, who am I kidding? That kind of a thing wouldn't cross her mind.

—Do her feelings for me ... go beyond being Master and apprentice?

Because if they do, I need to stop them from escalating.

Ai is a fifth grader. She's still just a kid, but she'll be in junior high in no time. That *just a kid* excuse won't last another two years.

—The sooner the better, while the wound won't go that deep .....!

Regaining my determination, I strike up a conversation again.

"Ai. I have something to tell you."

"Agh! I'm sorry, Master. I forgot to get the bath ready!"

She claps her hands together and jumps up before hurrying to the bath as fast as her little feet can carry her.

"Oh ..... The bath, right. Yeah. Thanks ....."

Determination, shattered.

I go ahead and help myself to some cake for now. It's not as perfectly balanced as a cake from a bakery, but there's a homemade taste to it that warms me from head to toe .....

"Sorry for interrupting you, Master. What were you going to say?"

"Hm? Oh, that ..... It can wait for another day."

I smile at Ai as she comes back into the room and tell her the cake is delicious.

Hmmn .....

I can't put my finger on it, but I seem to be missing my chances by just a hair each time ..... Like she knows my next move .....

Nahhh! It's a coincidence, right? I'm just ..... overthinking.

I-I've had a long few days, too! I should rest up for now.

"I'll be unpacking in my room, so let me know when the bath is ready."

"Ookay!"

Her innocent, bubbly response echoes in my ears as I head into my room.

Putting my suit jacket on a hanger and taking off my tie, I face plant into my bed without bothering to take off my collared shirt or suit pants.

"Whoa ..... It's like I'm floating on a cloud ....."

I've barely had time to catch my breath since the match finished yesterday. All that built-up tension is gone, along with any motivation I had to do anything else.

This must be what it's like to jump into an icy pond before getting into a hot spring, feeling tingly all over.

It's not fatigue, though.

More like overwhelming comfort. My muscles are yelling at me to stay right here and relax for the duration.

The sheets smell like they were dried in the sun. Like a warm summer's day .....

"..... This is so nice ....."

Exactly.

Living with Ai is so dang comfortable.

And it's impossible to deny that she's directly responsible for my dramatic upturn in winning percentage.

If Ai had never shown up, I'd still be title-less and wallowing in the depths of C-2 right now.

Two titles? Yeah, in my dreams.

Which of course means Big Sis and I would never have gotten close ..... And she would never give me the time of day.

"..... Who is that grade schooler, Lady Luck?"

Whoa ..... I can't picture this apartment without Ai in it anymore ..... Just me getting destroyed in the Crown Title Match .....

Ai doesn't just give me a high quality of life.

In terms of Shogi, she has already paid me back tenfold by using her Shogi sense to give me that extra jolt I need to stay on top of my game .....

Then it hits me.

"S-Since when ... did I get to the point where I can't survive without Ai?!"

I roll over on my bed comforter in anguish.

“What ..... Just what am I supposed to do .....?!”

I want to date Big Sis.

To be boyfriend and girlfriend.

To marry her.

To have children with her.

To make our own household.

When it comes to Ai, I want to fulfill my duty as her Master. At the very least, I want to train her up to the point where she'll have no trouble making it on her own.

That's not coming from a sense of duty. I want to bring out Ai's potential with my own hands, as a pro Shogi player!

The future I want is——.

“Preferably ..... I'd spend half the week here with Ai and the other half with Big Sis in her apartment.”

Perfect! That solves everything!! ..... The very fact that the idea crossed my mind at all sends me into despair at my own stupidity.

“Seriously?! That is the worst answer I could've come up with!!”

An indecisive friend to everybody?!

I'd end up hurting both of them that way. Besides, I couldn't leave Ai here all by herself for half the week while she's still in grade school.

“..... What's the right answer .....? What can I .....?”

Faced with the decision that I can honestly say is so much harder than any move I've had to make playing against the Meijin, I stay in bed without changing and keep racking my brain.

A deep sleep overtakes me before I can come up with an answer.

*Chirp ..... Chirp .....*

“Hmn .....? ..... Crap. I slept through the night .....



The next morning.

Waking up to sparrows singing outside my window, it takes me a while to piece things together.

“I don’t think ..... I took the bath last night, did I? Didn’t change clothes, either ..... Huuuh?”

Weird.

I went to bed sweaty, but I feel nice and clean. What’s more, I’m wearing pajamas. I know this brand ..... It’s the same kind I used to wear when I lived at Master’s place as his live-in apprentice.

“..... Did I get up in the middle of the night, take a bath, and change but don’t remember?”

That’s the only thing that makes sense, so it must be true. Well, I did just play in a league match and was really tired, so I reason with myself as I start getting up.

When my right hand suddenly comes down on something soft.

“Hm? What’s that?”

*Squish squish.*

It’s soft, but there’s something solid at the core ..... Yeah, like a fruit that needs to ripen a bit more. There’s a semisweet smell in the air, too. It’s summer, so it has to be!

“..... A peach, right?”

I was wrong. It’s not even a fruit. Fruit doesn’t just randomly show up on my bed in the first place.

Lying next to me is——.



A little girl wearing a men's sized collared shirt and fast asleep.

"..... A ..... i .....?"

"Mnn ..... Master ....."

Wiping her eyes, Ai sits up and smiles at me with loving eyes.

Wrapped around her pearly white skin is the collared shirt that I distinctly remember falling asleep wearing. There's something nice about girls wearing men's clothes, yeah? The baggy sleeves .....

What am I thinking?

Huh?

Hold up, hold up, hold up?

"S-Sorry! I-I-I-I didn't know you were there and——."

"Hehe!"

Ai grins as I have a small heart attack and looks at me in a way I never expected a 10-year-old would know how .....

Now I've got butterflies.

I've seen that same kind of look recently.

Wait.

Those eyes ..... *That's how Ginko looks at me———.*

"You were really tired last night, Master, weren't you?"

"Huh?"

"Well ..... You wouldn't wake up no matter what I did."

Stunning words from the mouth of a grade schooler.

Hold on a second, just what exactly did this girl who was wearing my shirt and sleeping in my bed do to me and would it be counted as cheating .....? Or worse, grounds for being arrested because what I felt when I was getting up had to be her b-b-b-bu——.

"I'll go start the laundry."

With that, Ai leaves the room still wearing my shirt. And, I'm pretty sure she

was sniffing the collar the whole way .....

“.....”

Wh-What in the world ..... Happened to me last night .....?

## 🏠 BOUNDARY LINE

With plenty of things to think about, my legs take me to the Kansai Shogi Association on autopilot while my brain is busy.

I don't have anything specific to do today. Nothing official, just ..... a hunch.

"Ah."

A hunch that turned out to be right on the money because I see her the moment I get on the elevator.

Ginko Sora.

My older sister apprentice, she is the first-ever female member of the Sub League's *3-dan* division. Holding two Women's Titles of her own, she is undefeated against Women's League players.

She is without a doubt the strongest girl to play Shogi over its 1,400-year history.

Her silver hair, seemingly translucent white skin, silver eyes that sometimes take on a blue tint, and fairy-like feminine features make her nickname Naniwa's Snow White extremely fitting. Her fame makes her pretty much the face of the Shogi world.

And——.

She's ..... my special someone.

"L-Long time, no see ..... Big Sis."

"..... Uh-huh ....."

Too shy to make any kind of eye contact, we exchange awkward greetings.

Big Sis stutters as she asks.

"Wh- ..... What are you doing at the association at this hour?"

"I, you know. I've got to confirm the Crown Title Match schedule ..... What about you?"

"I ..... have *3-dan* division matches tomorrow, so I came to do my own

inspection .....

I can't pass up this chance to tease Big Sis as she mumbles and looks the other way.

"An inspection for 3-*dan* division matches? You're playing here in Kansai, so why would you need to do an inspection?"

"Y-You ..... could just as easily confirm your schedule over the phone, yes?"

Yeah, that's what's going on here.

We promised not to see each other so we could focus on Shogi. After all, we both have big matches coming up.

So we used a *sealing move* to put our feelings on hold until Big Sis promotes to 4-*dan*, until she turns pro.

But there's no way to prevent *bumping into each other by accident*...

Which is why we both ended up aimlessly walking around the association for no real reason.

We didn't plan this.

Just happened to be thinking about each other and crossed paths. In other words, we were thinking the same thing.

Whoa.

A girl this cute actually likes me? We like each other? I could die right here.

Those are the lips I ..... *Gulp*.

"..... Quit staring, idiot. Perv ....."

Big Sis whips open her fan and covers her mouth, which actually makes my heart pound even faster.

"Big Sis. Follow me for a second."

Giving a slight bow to the guard I see almost every day, I lead Big Sis to the out-of-the-way back entrance next to the security guard's office that the night staff uses.

"There's no telling who might show up if we stay by the elevator. We can talk here."



“..... *Doufu*,” Big Sis answers, barely moving her lips at all.

By the way, *doufu* is a Shogi word to describe when you take the piece your opponent moved last turn by moving a Pawn into the same space.

It’s sometimes used as a way to say *yes* in the Shogi world.

In that way, it also means *I agree with that*. What a handy word to know.

“So, hey, Big Sis. Since we happened to run into each other, there’s something I’d like to ask.”

“That being? No promises, but I’ll listen.”

“There’s a birthday present that I’d like.”

“Congrats. Done.”

Big Sis turns to walk away, but I grab her hand and pull her close before wrapping my arm around her waist to keep her from leaving.



“Wha- ..... N-Not so close .....!”

“No one’s watching.”

Everyone uses the front door this time of day.

I lean in close enough for our noses to almost brush against each other and whisper, “I’m 18 years old now.”

“*Doufu.*”

“Being 18 means I’m an adult now. That’s what the law says.”

“*Doufu.*”

“I can get a driver’s license.”

“*Doufu.*”

“I can get married.”

“..... *Doufu.*”

“I’d like to have two kids so they can play Shogi with each other.”

“*Dou-* .....?!”

“I’ve grown up.”

“..... Yes, yes, *doufu, doufu*. Your point?”

“I’d like a more *adult sealing move* for my birthday.”

“*Dou-* ..... Huh? What would that be, exactly?”

Big Sis isn’t picking up on it. Maybe I need to be a bit more direct?

“You know ..... that. Interlocking.”

“Ki- ..... An interlocked sealing move? Oh, like holding hands and interlocking our fingers? Doing it ..... like couples do?”

Just how innocent is she?

“Not like that.”

I can’t take a chance that anyone else will hear, so I pull Big Sis in tight against me and softly whisper into her ear.

“More like .....” (mumble, mumble)

“?! Whaaa .....?”

“Then, our tongues .....” (mumble, mumble)

“*Gasp*?! That’s ..... Huuuuuh?!”

Poof! Big Sis turns bright red from the neck up.

It’s almost like Naniwa’s Snow White has an apple for a head. Fitting, considering the fairy tale the name comes from.

But she grabs my neck with a murderous glare in her eyes.

“Th-That’s not something you can just ask for!! Trash! Pervert!! H-How could I beebber do d-d-dat?!”

Big Sis being so focused on her tongue that she stutters has got to be the most adorable thing in the world.

“Besides, ki- ..... doing a sealing move here, on the Shogi world’s holy ground, with someone who doesn’t properly address their superior within the Shogi family, I wouldn’t dare! Follow the protocol! There are rules!!”

“So, I can call you *Ginko* outside of the association?”

“Um ..... W-Well ..... If you want to, I wouldn’t say no .....≡,” says Big Sis, fiddling with her hair as she looks away. It’s almost like she wants me to call her *Ginko*.

Taking Big Sis by the hand, I lead her out the back exit and into the parking lot outside.

Staff and players’ cars and bicycles are lined up out here, but there isn’t a soul around. The building itself blocks the view from the road, so there’s no way anyone can see us.

“What about here?”

“Address me as Big Sis.”

I take her one step out of the parking lot toward the street and ask again.

“And here?”

“G-Ginko is ..... fine .....”

Interesting. Even a single step outside the association is enough.

Pulling Ginko along, I take her to the front of the building and ask outside the front door, “What about here?”

“Big Sis ..... Probably.”

“What about at Twelve?”

The restaurant on the first floor of the association has a separate entrance. So it's tough to know which is which.

Big Sis's answer is——.

“Big Sis, so long as other players or staff members are there. If we're alone, Ginko should be fine .....”

“So, I can feed you with the spoon if we have the place to ourselves?”

“W-Well ..... If we're alone and the owner won't see ..... *Doufu* .....”

“Then, what about at the gift shop?”

“No, absolutely not! My goods are on sale there!”

“What about the space behind the door ..... You know, just outside?”

“Here ..... Big Sis.”

“But it's a public path, you know? You don't have any authority here, Ginko.”

“Yes, it's a public place, but! The association is right there! You will follow the protocol! No means no! You idiot!!”

“Rules are meant to be broken. I'll call you Ginko all I want! Ginko, Ginko, Ginko!”

“Wh-What do you think you're doing, stupid Yaichi! I'm telling you, no! Geeze!”

Our little *discussion* in front of the Kansai Shogi Association turns into a game of tag.

“What are you doing?”

Someone else's voice coming out of nowhere, Big Sis and I freeze on the spot.

It turns out to be someone we never expected.

“M-Mr. Sakana ..... shi?”

Sumito Sakanashi 3-*dan*.

Registered with the Kanto Sub League, he’s ranked first in the 3-*dan* division this season. If I remember right, now is his last chance to promote before the age limit forces him to retire.

In more ways than one, he’s a Sub League member that I’ll never forget.

He’s probably going to stay at the association tonight for tomorrow’s Sub League regular activities.

Mr. Sakanashi is standing there dumbstruck with a travel bag slung over his shoulder.

“U-Ummm ..... Ehhhh .....”

Her face shifting from red to a bluish green as fast as an off-color traffic light, Big Sis is in no shape to talk. So I take it on myself to ask the important question.

“..... How long have you been there?”

“For about five minutes .....”

Then he saw most of that .....

I avoid making direct eye contact as Mr. Sakanashi offers a few words.

“Well, um ..... I’m not about to say to keep your distance from each other, but wouldn’t it be a better idea to stay out of sight? So many people know who you are .....”

He’s exactly right.

Even without our fame, we should know better. That had to have been hard to watch. To think, we were acting like one of those *lovey-dovey* couples. Somebody—kill me now. Big Sis is hiding behind me and looks like she already has one foot in the grave.

“..... Pardon us. Please go on inside.”

Bowing as deep as I can to simultaneously avoid eye contact and hide my

embarrassment, I step off the main path to allow Mr. Sakanashi to pass.

I ask him on his way by, “Aren’t you scheduled to play against Mr. Karako and then Mr. Kagamizu tomorrow?”

“?! Y-Yes, I am .....

“I’m truly sorry you had to see that right before playing important matches against the top players in the 3-*dan* division. Please, forgive me.”

“Kuzuryu ..... *sensei*.”

Looking surprised, he still considers his position as a Sub League member and calls me *sensei*.

“You remember .....

“Huh? You were the match recorder just two days ago when I became the Crown Challenger. Of course, I remember who you are.”

“Not that ..... Our match in the Sub League——.”

“How could I forget? It was the match that decided who would promote and I saw you as the strongest player in 3-*dan* division before that season started, so I’d been working on a strategy against you for months.”

“A strategy? ..... Tailored against me?”

“Yes. I asked Ayumu for help.”

Openly admitting it like this is a bit awkward, but there’s no reason to hide it.

I knew that the timing worked out so that Mr. Sakanashi would promote if he won that match as well, so I went right for the win that day.

Even after all my preparation, that match came down to the wire ..... It was a contest of wills from start to finish.

I still dream about that match all the time.

Except, I make a mistake in the late game and am still in the Sub League in that nightmare .....

“It was our first match against each other, and I was fortunate that this sequence I researched played out the way it did. I would’ve lost if the match turned into a head-to-head brawl. The media and the Shogi world were pushing



for me because they wanted to see a junior high school student turn professional while you were the final obstacle. I was lucky.”

“I overpowered you, though,” mumbles Big Sis under her breath. Loud enough for even Mr. Sakanashi to hear. Big Sis just can’t stand losing anything, can she?

I force a smile and say, “Your match against Gin- ..... Big Sis is over, right? I have no reason to avoid you.”

Honestly, I’d like a chance to sit down and talk with him.

Mr. Sakanashi’s Shogi has the whole Shogi world excited to see how he’ll do after promoting out of the Sub League.

“I know! Why don’t we have lunch? There are some great restaurants around here.”

“No, thank you.”

Instant rejection.

The shock must be written all over my face. Mr. Sakanashi looks visibly uncomfortable as he quickly makes an excuse.

“..... Please don’t hold it against me. I already have plans.”

## GIRL TALK

“Wh-What’s this about, Ginko? Showing up without calling first .....,” I, Keika Kiyotaki, ask the beautiful young girl with a frown glued to her face as I guide her into the main house.

I was looking after the Kiyotaki family business, the Noda Shogi Center, when she stormed in, but I left the classroom in the hands of one of the regular customers I trust.

Pouring a glass of cold iced tea for the clearly upset Ginko, I carefully say to her, “I had no idea you were coming ....., Father isn’t around. Zaou-sensei invited him to go drinking and I don’t think he’ll be back until tomorrow afternoon. It seems like he’s always hung over these days——.”

“That’s fine. I’d rather he not be here.”

“Oh, I see.”

I thought she wanted to talk to someone about the 3-*dan* division matches tomorrow, but it seems like something other than Shogi is on her mind.

In that case, it might be better to talk in the kitchen rather than the tatami room. Pouring a glass of tea for myself, I sit down at the table.

Ginko is on the other side but is silent as a rock.

“.....”

Though, I have to say ....., she really is beautiful .....

Sparkling silver hair and smooth milky skin, whiter than virgin snow.

Then there are her eyes, blue as ice ....., Naniwa’s Snow White truly is the perfect name for her. I wonder who came up with it?

She was pretty when she was a little girl, but she’s become absolutely stunning ever since she joined the 3-*dan* division. Maybe it’s the boost of confidence that came with it? Almost like a brilliant blue flame .....

“What’s wrong? I don’t know if I can solve it, whatever it is, but ....., you can tell me if something is bothering you.”

“.....”

Her iced tea is sitting in front of her, untouched, as Ginko clenches her mouth closed.

This is big, that’s for sure. It’s starting to make me nervous .....

A few moments pass before Ginko asks while looking everywhere but at me,  
“..... You won’t tell anyone?”

“Of course not.”

“Really? Because you can’t tell anyone, ever.”

“Have I ever let any of your secrets slip before?”

“.....”

After another minute or two of silence, Ginko finally starts to open up.

“I-It’s about ..... m-my friend .....”

You don’t have any friends, now do you, Ginko?

My lips start curling into a grin, but I managed to stifle the chuckle. Control, control.

“Oh, a friend of yours? And what’s going on with this friend?”

“S-She ..... my friend ..... recently, got something like a boyfriend .....”

It’s here.

It’s here, it’s here, good gosh it’s here. It’s finally happened.

“That’s great news! You’ve liked him for so long, haven’t you? Congratulations!”

“Th-Tha- ..... No, this is my friend. And yes, she, um ..... has liked him for a long time and he told her he liked her, too ..... And she’s very happy .....”

“Happy, but it sounds like she’s got something on her mind, no?”

“.....” (*Gulp*)

Yep, yep. I know that feeling.

So, she’s reached that age.

It's, what should I call it, uncertainty? Confusion?

Those two grew up like siblings but always had a relationship that was more than friends, but not quite lovers, so figuring out what distance to keep must've been really tough ..... Nghhh! So bittersweet!

And it sounds like Yaichi made the first move. Nicely done!

Making a mental note to praise him the next time I see him, there does seem to be some trouble on the horizon. Yes, now is my time to shine!

"And, and? What's bothering y- ..... this very happy friend of yours? Trouble with her boyfriend?"

"He, really ..... wants to do it."

"Mn-hm."

Ah, it's that kind of advice she's after.

It's only natural, though. He's a teenager.

That just proves he's a healthy boy, but I can totally understand why pressing for that right after starting a relationship would make her feel like *he only wants me for my body* and not know how to react.

"I see. So, she'd like to know how long you should ask him to wait before bringing it up?"

"N-Not quite ..... It's... already happened ....."

"HUH?!"

I jump to my feet before I know it, nearly knocking over my iced tea.

"I-I see ..... It's happened already ....."

"J-Just once, though!! Only once ..... Haauuu ....."

Ginko hides her bright red cheeks in her hands. Even her ears are turning red.

J-Judging by that ..... Looks like she's telling the truth .....

Yaichi just turned 18 the other day.

Ginko is less than a month shy of her 16th birthday.

That isn't too early for a first time. Actually, those two have secretly liked each

other for over a decade, so it feels like they finally got over that hump.

But ..... yeah?

I know I did spur them on a little bit here and there, but still.

There's a part of me that kept saying *they're still just children*, so I felt safe knowing they wouldn't go beyond that line.

Now that they're suddenly adults ..... I miss those days.

Plus, there are lots of other things to warn them about now that they've made it to this point. It's really lucky that Ginko came to me so early on. I just hope it's not too late .....

But, it happened. It's done.

"Well, let it happen once and of course he's going to want it two or three more times. Teenage boys aren't known for self-control. But, the fact that he keeps coming back proves that he's crazy about you, Ginko."

"Well, maybe that's true! But, the 3-*dan* division is ..... *cough, cough!* K-Keika!! I'm talking about my friend, not me!!"

"Oh, that's right. And? Keep going."

"Right now, um ..... She has to focus on studying for entrance exams. So there's no time for a real relationship until promoting to 4-*dan* ..... g-getting into university. He promised to give her some space, but now *wants it* whenever they happen to see each other ....."

"He's that insistent, is he? It's not like he has a lot of time on his hands, either ..... If he's showing up at your researching room, it might be a good idea to take away the key you gave him——."

"No, no. More like in the back hallways, out-of-sight places ....."

"Back hallways?!"

"Trying to put it in my mouth ....."

"He's trying to put it in your mouth in back hallways?! I'll kill him!!"

I grab the sharpest thing I can find in the kitchen and head for the door. Ginko jumps up in a desperate attempt to stop me.

“Wai-! Wait, Keika!! What do you think you’re doing with those scissors?!”

“Cut off that trash’s dragon, what else?!”

“I don’t want you to go that far!!”

And ..... Ginko trails off, the tips of her ears turning bright pink.

“I-I’m ..... not against the idea, just ..... too shy .....”

“He’s trying to stuff it in your mouth in a back alley somewhere and your only problem with it is that you’re TOO SHY?! Are you serious right now?! I raised you better than this!!”

“Wh-What’s the big deal?! Kissing is a way to say hello in foreign countries .....”

“Huh? Hm? ..... Ginko? What’s he asking for?”

“Huh? L-Like I’ve been saying ..... to kiss .....”

“Kiss? ..... That’s all?”

“A-All .....? He’s trying to stick his tongue in for goodness sake!!”

Ginko leans over the table, yelling at the top of her lungs.

That reaction alone is enough to know for sure she’s not an adult yet.

“He’s asking for kisses? As long as no one else is around, why not go to town? It’s not like there’s a limit to kissing anyway.”

*Sigh* ..... I got worked up over nothing.

Turns out these two are still children after all.

“Oh, I see. Kissing. That’s a relief. Still, kissing is a big step for children who have no relationship experience. Making a fuss comes with the territory.”

“..... Ngh.”

“Just let me know if he gets bored with back hallways and wants to go to a building that looks like a castle, okay?” I say to tie things up with the bow.

But Ginko defiantly puffs out her cheeks and staunchly grumbles, “Been there many times already. Like in Sakuranomiya.”

“Huh?! T-To do *what* exactly?”

“I’ll leave that up to your imagination.”

“Oh, no, no, no. Please don’t, because that’s important. If anyone should see *them* going in and out of one of those ..... And babies are no laughing matter. Women’s League players have to take a leave of absence if they get pregnant.”

“It wouldn’t be a big deal as a professional because she can get married ..... I mean, having a b-baby wouldn’t be a problem ..... Hanadachi-*sensei* made it to a title match when she was pregnant, and even got stronger——.”

“Ohhh? This *friend* of yours is a Shogi player?”

“*Gasp!!* U-Umm ..... Employed!! I’m talking about after she gets a job! Anyone who gets the money to do something as a professional, yes? Am I wrong?”

“Sure, sure, a job. Well, you’re right in a way.”

If she still thinks I’m buying this *friend* story, she really is still just a child. The big night is still far off on the horizon. Light years away.

Even if she’s telling the truth about the hotel, it was probably just a spur of the moment impulse. I’m sure nothing major happened.

*Sigh* ..... I got worried over nothing.

Pouring myself another cup of tea, I chug the whole thing to moisten my parched throat.

“..... So, um, Keika. I was wondering if I could ask you about something .....”

“And that would be?”

“Have you ever dated someone in the Shogi world?”

“Sorry to say this, but I haven’t.”

“Oh. ....Then you wouldn’t know.....”

“!”

You wouldn’t know ..... Wouldn’t know ..... Wouldn’t know .....

Those few words plunge through my heart like daggers.

Getting tossed aside by a child I’ve looked after since she was four years old, how humiliating ..... To be totally honest, it hurts so much more than losing a



Shogi match. The pain .....

“Then, what about from school or a part-time job?”

“A few, yes.”

I’ve dated just as much as the next girl.

I’d like to think I did better than most girls when it came to boys, actually.

“But marriage has never crossed my mind. I’ve been to amusement parks and movie theaters plenty of times, but things ended with holding hands.”

“..... Pfft.”

Hmm?

She just laughed through her nose, didn’t she?

“Okay, I see. That’s why you weren’t getting the gist earlier. You’ve never had the stress that comes from trying to hide liking someone at work and won’t understand.”

Oooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?

Liking someone at work is the worst thing in the world, hmmm?

What is this, an *I have a boyfriend* superiority complex? This little girl is looking down at me, a single woman starting the latter half of her twenties, like she’s got a leg up.

Then, the final straw——.

This little girl drops a bomb.

“You’re so lucky, Keika. You can focus all your time on Shogi.”

“..... Sure can.”

Now I get it.

Yep. Loud and very freaking clear.

The reason talking to her now is getting under my skin finally clicks.

She’s not here for *advice*.

She’s here to *brag*.

“Very true. I have it so great. Actually, you’re the one who has it rough, Ginko. I gotta say, I’m impressed, though. No time to focus on Shogi during the 3-*dan* division and you somehow managed to get back on track. I’ve got nothing but respect for you, Ginko. A true super girl.”

“D-Didn’t I tell you, Keika? This isn’t about me, it’s my friend——.”

“Want your head on a pike?”

“Hey ..... That’s my line .....”

“I know you came to me for advice and everything, but it looks like I haven’t dated enough people to offer anything useful. My Shogi is weak, too. So why not ask around? You could survey everyone at the Shogi association. How about that?”

“N-No! It has to stay secret ..... Keika, you can’t tell anyone.”

Saying that after coming this far, huh?

Worse, I can’t even take her at her word.

*“I’m too shy to say it myself, so go tell everyone for me, Keika. That way, people will come to me and ask: Are you and Yaichi together? Come on, I want the attention!”*

It’s so obvious, I can almost see it in her eyes.

I’m done. I don’t care anymore, to the point that I go to the fridge, grab a canned cocktail, flick open the tab and down that sucker right then and there.

It’s a stiff drink, okay? Got a problem?

I won’t be able to make it through this without one, all right?!

“Look, just wear one of those surgical masks if *she’s* worried about him trying to *put it in*? Physical barriers work like a charm.”

“Hmm ..... A mask.”

Ginko drinks down her now room temperature tea.

“Well, I’ll pass along the suggestion.”

“Yes. Please let your *friend* know.”

Would you pass along this message while you’re at it?

*“Drop dead, normie. Want me to end you?”*

’Kay, thanks.

## SUMITO SAKANASHI

“Hey. Long time, Sakanashi.”

Beneath the tracks at Fukushima Station.

At a sushi restaurant so cramped there’s only room for a counter.

Waiting for me at this-hole-in-the-wall restaurant is—my opponent for tomorrow’s 3-*dan* division match.

“It has been a while. And ..... thank you, Mr. Kagamizu.”

About a week ago now, I sent him a message.

*“If you have the time, why don’t we meet at the usual place?”*

He never responded, nor did I expect a response. The chances he would come here today were 50-50 at best.

But Hiuma Kagamizu greets me with a smile just like he always does.

“I thought you’d show up pretty soon, so I put in an order for you. You like sardines, right?”

“..... Thanks.”

For a minnow who lost four straight matches to start this season of the 3-*dan* division like myself, eating another weak creature feels like cannibalism. However, I cannot refuse a senior Sub League member’s kindness. Taking a seat, I help myself.

Taking a bite out of his *shirauo gunkanmaki*, a ball of rice wrapped with seaweed and topped with an icefish that’s named after a battleship, Mr. Sakanashi strikes up a conversation.

“We live in a strange world. Everything’s a competition, including the sushi. We tend to pass up on *minnows* and end up choosing barracuda or seabass. Even little superstitions, like thinking *sanma* mackerel is good luck because it sounds like *sanman*— a quick advance—in mah-jongg, are all over the place.”

“..... As silly as they sound, I found myself following those superstitions before I knew it. Are they part of competition?”

“Heh ..... I wonder.”

“Though, you aren’t a typical Sub League member. Who would normally sit side-by-side with their soon-to-be opponent and eat sushi?”

“Well, I am at the top. You do have a point, though. Anyone willing to be buddy-buddy with a guy they’re about to face in the 3-*dan* division probably isn’t normal.”

Setting aside the fact that we are both facing matches that decide if we promote or are forced to retire, a true do-or-die *late-game* situation, even players on the best of terms will avoid each other the day before they play. That’s only natural.

“It’s just, turning down an invitation wouldn’t be normal for me. You knew that when you sent me that message, right, Sakanashi?”

“..... I did.”

Divided by East and West, Mr. Kagamizu and I are not particularly close, which is why we’re not on a true first name basis.

This routine of ours all started on one fateful day.

“I happened to run into Kuzuryu on the way here. He and Sora were playing a bizarre kind of hide-and-seek.”

“What is going through their heads .....?”

“Seeing them like that, having sushi together right before regular activities, seems like nothing at all. Kansai truly is a different world.”

Three years ago.

After allowing the birth of Yaichi Kuzuryu 4-*dan*, I was in a terrible rut.

No matter how sick I was of hearing about the exploits of that junior-high-school-aged professional, there was no escape. The youngest title challenger in history claiming it ..... And every time I heard about him, I couldn’t help but remember the move that sealed my fate.

“*If only I had made this move instead .....*”

Maintaining a stable state of mind while having constant flashbacks to a lost match is impossible. My next season in the 3-*dan* division was a disaster.

Since I had hit a wall, I decided to do something out of the ordinary.

Travel to the Kansai Shogi Association on a whim.

It wasn't to hunt down and extract some sort of revenge on Kuzuryu. The idea just came to me one day ..... and I was on a bus for Osaka that night.

It pulled up in front of Osaka Station bright and early the next morning and I walked to the Kansai Association in the Fukushima district. Cautiously peeking into the Player's Room, I found .....

Hiuma Kagamizu was sitting at a table and greeted me with a friendly smile.

*"Well, if it isn't Sakanashi? Would you be willing to teach me a thing or two in a match?"*

I lost in the most pathetic fashion. I doubt I even advanced to his side of the board.

That wasn't all.

That was also the day I faced a still *kyu*-ranked member of the Sub League, Sota Kunugi, the first time. Rumors about him had reached me in Kanto, but ..... He was so strong I could only laugh at myself after losing ten 10-second speed matches in a row.

There are people stronger than me.

They have fought harder and suffered more than I have.

Yet they can't promote to 4-*dan*.

Once that realization hit me ..... all the scenarios that had been running through my mind seemed insignificant and I finally was able to focus on the Shogi in front of me again.

"That day ..... When I saw you in the Player's Room playing Shogi so early in the morning, I realized what I was lacking. You have my thanks."

"You were strong the whole time, Sakanashi. One look at a player's match records and you can tell how much research they do, yeah? I wasn't going to pass up the chance to learn something."

He's being nice, but I know most of that is a lie.

I may have regained my form now, but there was nothing he could have gained from playing against the shell of a man I was three years ago.

“I also need to thank you for this season.”

“Hm?”

“When I was overwhelmed with despair after starting the season with four consecutive losses and couldn’t stand the sight of a board ..... You happened to be in Kanto and told me that there was still plenty of time and to keep my head up. It’s thanks to you that I got my head on straight. I wanted to thank you in person.”

“Hey, where’d that come from? Thank me all you want, but we’re still splitting the check.”

“After my losing streak, I decided to get a driver’s license. A person with minimal education who can’t drive stands next to no chance of finding employment, now do they?”

“Are you quitting?”

Mr. Kagamizu seems surprised.

“Finish with a winning record and you can extend your time in the Sub League, just like I did.”

“That’s alright. I’ve decided that this year will be my last.”

“..... I see.”

He doesn’t tell me to reconsider.

My sending him that message probably gave him some idea that I was planning to move on.

“..... You’ve got guts, Sakanashi. Really.”

“Me? You’re the one who has fought tooth and nail to extend your career——.”

“No. I’m just scared, that’s all,” he says, almost aggressively.

I certainly wasn’t expecting that tone.

“Shogi has become so ingrained into my life that I’m scared to go into the

outside world. My heart hasn't been in Shogi for years. That's the same as quitting."

"But, Mr. Kagamizu, you——."

"I worked as a match recorder the day after I promoted to the 3-*dan* division. It was the Meijin against Tsukimitsu-*sensei*, their golden card match. It was so much fun, and the match was so intense, I wondered if I would be recording that match for the rest of eternity ....."

Mr. Kagamizu whispers as if trying to get the words off his chest.

So I sit quietly and encourage him to continue.

"Tsukimitsu-*sensei* asked me if I *had any thoughts* during the review session. Since I was recording everything, I decided to explain the sequence I had in my head and this time it was the Meijin who said, 'Oh. What a nice idea.' ..... That meant the world to me."

I can relate, painfully so. That is the highest praise a match recorder can receive.

"But, even working as a match recorder before my first season of the 3-*dan* division ever started ..... From lunch break on the first day, there was part of me that was thinking: *man, sitting on my ankles so long really hurts.*"

".....!"

"Surprising, isn't it? I wondered how long it's been since my heart drifted away from the game, but I could never place it ..... I was stunned."

"But you have the top position right now! Your Shogi, there's an edge to it that no one else has ..... You can't expect me to believe your heart isn't in it!"

"Well, I did make a promise."

"A promise .....? To whom? What about?"

"....."

He doesn't answer.

It must be very personal. I won't press any further.

"If I may ask, is it true that Sota Kunugi lost to Sora?"



“Sure is.”

“This may not be my place to say, as I surrendered a come-from-behind loss to Sora in the opening match of the season, but ..... That shouldn’t be his match to lose, right? Just what was the problem?”

“He’s probably still a bit naïve and held back.”

“What for? Out of concern for Sora after her three-match losing streak?”

They don’t seem particularly close to me .....

Again, Kunugi is just an elementary school student. His skill is more than sufficient, but there are plenty of examples that show his mental maturity may not suffice. At this rate, he may find himself in a downward spiral before promoting to 4-*dan*—.

“Look at you, 25-year-old Sumito Sakanashi. Have you risen so high up that you’ve got the time and energy to worry about an 11-year-old prodigy?”

“.....! I wouldn’t say I’m worried .....”

“You’ve got Karako first tomorrow, right? That man laid the foundation for what the Kansai Sub League is today. His style may be old, but his fighting spirit is as strong as they come. Don’t take him lightly.”

“What, the *Karako Theory*? I admit that Kansai stubbornness has given me plenty of headaches over the years.”

“Heh. I hope that’s all it does .....”

That’s all? What does he mean by that?

“Excuse me, can we get a final round?”

Almost as if the sushi chef behind the counter was waiting for this exact moment, he pulls out two plates and sets them down in front of us.

“Fried egg roll sushi.”

People in the sushi industry call it *gyoku*. That strikes a cord to Shogi players, who use the same word for the King, and overlap the meaning with taking a lunch break by saying “*gyoku wo toru*,” or “take the king.” ..... It’s a bit forced, in my personal opinion.

I eat mine all in one bite.

Mr. Kagamizu, on the other hand, slowly sinks his teeth into the fried egg sushi and savors it.

“Let’s play a good match tomorrow. One that ..... we can both leave without any regrets,” Mr. Kagamizu says as we leave the restaurant.

With that, we shake hands and part ways.



RECORD 2

坂  
梨  
澄  
人

SUMITO  
SAKANASHI

辛  
香  
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司

SHOJI  
KARAKO

## PEAK FERVOR

“It’s an honor to get to play against *the* Naniwa’s Snow White! Let’s have a good match!”

I watch, stunned, as my opponent reaches his hand across the board.

Kanto player Kasasugi 3-*dan*’s right hand floats in midair for a few moments before I realize he’s waiting for a handshake.

“Miss Sora?”

“Um ..... Sorry, but shaking hands with an opponent right before a match .....”

“Oh, of course! Don’t mind me.”

He pulls his hand back with that same smile on his face and finally starts lining up the pieces.

—So, this is the *sportsman* I’ve heard about. He has an eloquence to him, but .....

To be blunt, I can hardly stand people like this.

Kasasugi 3-*dan* is a unique Sub League veteran in his early twenties who apparently graduated from an athletics university. I’ve heard he has a teaching license as well.

—He’s only won two matches this season, yet he’s so cheerful ..... because of his sportsmanship mentality?

Today I’m playing the 13th and 14th 3-*dan* division matches at the Kansai Shogi Association building.

Including today, there are only three more regular activity days remaining in the six-month season.

Since the final matches will be taking place in Kanto, I only have two more days left of playing in *home* territory.

—I can’t drop any match and still have any hope of advancing. I’ll win them all!

I'm not the only one brimming with determination.

There's something clearly different about the air in the arena today, something that wasn't here earlier in the 3-*dan* division season.

The top players' eyes are glowing with a refusal to lose while staying drearily quiet.

The ones in the second tier just beneath them, myself included, have an air of *just win* about them. We're ready for a fight.

However, the ones producing the strangest vibe out of anyone ..... are the ones who failed to get enough victory stars and who are starting to face the very real possibility of demotion or retirement.

For the 3-*dan* players at the bottom of the standings, *death* is staring them in the face. They're getting set to play with a noose around their necks ..... Forced to play Shogi while panicking from suffocation and despair.

And, as their opponents, the resolve to finish them off is demanded of us.

"Peak fervor."

It's a state of mind most people never experience. When it comes to playing Shogi under such extreme conditions, I doubt there's any place on earth that could rival the 3-*dan* division.

Doing my absolute best to politely mask all the explosive emotions running through my head, I make a small bow.

"..... I'm ready when you are!"

"Same here! On your mark!!"

After that unnecessarily loud response, Kasasugi 3-*dan* starts the match and keeps an even tempo with every move.

In marathon terms, he's trying to outpace the pack.

He obviously wants the lead in the early-game, and then to pull away late.

On defense, I maintain my formation and endure the attack while giving his forward pieces as little leeway as possible.

—Now is the time to endure. Steady .....

My Shogi skill has definitely leveled up after my battle with Sota. Even I can tell that I've gotten stronger and my momentum is still going strong.

I barely lost any of my practice matches over the Internet in the past few weeks.

While it's true that I'm seeing better moves in the late game ..... What's really been surprising is how well I can identify the exact moment to switch to a late-game mentality.

—Now!! Change gears and finish this one swift stroke!!

I had been playing at his speed, but I see my opening to go for the throat and barrel down the final stretch. Going on the offensive, my counterpunch hits home.

It worked even better than I imagined.

"Kh! ..... You're good ..... Didn't think I'd be on the ropes already ....., " Kasasugi 3-*dan* says just above a whisper as he steals glances at my face. Suddenly his eyes go wide when he checks his remaining time on the chess clock.

It's ticking away.

Waiting time is barely noticeable when your attack is going according to plan, but it practically evaporates before your eyes when forced to defend.

Kasasugi 3-*dan* is already doing one-minute Shogi. Meanwhile, I still have over 30 minutes of waiting time.

—Even better, I have the advantage ..... No, I'm in victory position.

I've calmly maintained a balanced formation up to this point, but I quickly rein in my excitement.

Because I remember Yaichi telling me: *In the 3-dan division, players get stronger the **farther they are behind**.*

The matches today are meaningless for players who've already secured a winning record.

However, for those who haven't won enough and are facing demotion or retirement, they'll resist with every ounce of life they have in their bodies.

—As they say, there’s nothing more dangerous than a wounded bear.

Kasasugi 3-*dan*’s record makes him that *bear* this season. He’ll keep struggling all the way to the end even if he knows he’s beaten. Striking the final blow won’t be easy.

—Stay alert! No getting complacent until he acknowledges defeat!

“! ..... Time ..... That’s all I’ve got left!!”

Caught off guard by the ticking countdown, Kasasugi 3-*dan* hastily snaps down a piece.

Then, just as I start reading the board to find the final sequence.

“P-Pardon me!!” he shouts, jumping to his feet and rushing out of the arena.

What just happened?

“Huh? ..... Huuuh?”

He wouldn’t .....

In the middle of one-minute Shogi ..... he wouldn’t go to the restroom, would he?

“..... No way.”

The players at the board next to me stop their match and look over with disbelief in their eyes.

It comes to me in a flash.

—Play a move now, and he’ll run out of time! I’ll win!

Make my move right away, and he’ll only have a minute.

That’ll be cutting his restroom trip extremely close.

Plus, he’ll have to figure out exactly what move I made. Match records are not kept in the 3-*dan* division, so it’s impossible to tell what move was made right away—.

—Play *the last thing he would expect*, and he’ll be confused! The match will be mine!!

He’d notice immediately if I stick to the same sequence.



However, moving a random piece should baffle him to the point when time runs out before he realizes what I did. It'll work!

—But ..... If I do that, rumors will spread .....

*One of her victories came because her opponent ran out that time, yeah?*

*That's not how a real pro wins.*

People will be saying that until the end of time, I just know it. That I am a fake professional, a coward who lucked out because my opponent couldn't beat a clock.

—I can win this match normally, without relying on the clock. In that case .....

Then ..... What would happen if I don't make a move?

*I didn't think Sora was that kind.*

*She waited for her opponent to come from a potty break? Really? I'm not scared of playing one-minute Shogi against her at all now.*

Having that kind of reputation as a person is wonderful, but it's a hindrance as a competitor. Plus, ending this match early can conserve my precious stamina for the second match.

—Which is it?! What is the correct answer .....

Everything about my formation for this late-game match disappears from my mind.

From victory position and straight to *peak fervor*.

I have to make my decision, now.

—There's no time to waste making up my mind! Play something, anything!!

I reach out over the board, hand racing back and forth trying to figure out what to move ..... when I catch something out of the corner of my eye and freeze.

I notice...

Kasasugi 3-*dan*, who I thought made a mad dash for the restroom, is staring at me through the very slight gap in the *fusuma* sliding doors.

“.....?!”

Just a tiny opening ..... but I can see his eye locked on me with an abnormally intense gleam.

And that silent eye is screaming at me.

*Move! Play a move already! Make the worst one you can think of!!*

Actually, that calms me down very quickly. I pull my hand back away from the board.

——..... So, that’s the *sequence* he had in mind.

With a cool head, I read through him instantaneously.

If I’d let the situation get the better of me, I would’ve surrendered my waiting time advantage.

Without the leeway to think through my formation, the chances of playing a bad move increase dramatically.

——That was too close. I was two seconds away from making the wrong decision .....

“Haaaa ..... Hff .....

I take a moment to expel the dark thoughts that tried to seep into my heart with a deep breath and focus solely on reading the board in front of me.

Calm, cool and collected, I continue with the same sequence I had been using before he left.

Kasasugi 3-*dan* sulks back to the board, glances at it with a “Tch!” and tosses a piece in surrender. There isn’t a shred of the eloquent *sportsman* left.

“..... Thank you for the match.”

This time, there wasn’t so much as a *thank you, too* in return.

Although I have the white victory star I wanted, I don’t feel like I’ve earned it.

In fact, it feels like he soiled what I hold most dear.

——He would have had a chance to win if he had played normally, so ..... why?

If the 3-*dan* division robs players of not only their decision-making ability but the most basic level of human decency, then what does Shogi have to do with it?

—Win or lose ..... This place is hell.

Seeing that peak fervor from a veteran 3-*dan*, for whatever reason ..... was more painful than I ever thought.

In the end, I manage to make it through the day with consecutive victories. Unlike the top, we in the second tier can focus exclusively on winning. So, we might have the least amount of pressure on our shoulders.

But, that naïve way of thinking gets shattered within minutes.

“Two in a row again today, huh? Strong indeed,” says the usually quiet director when I visit him to report the results. He even goes out of his way to compliment me.

“Thank you very much, sir.”

I accept his kind words and bow.

“..... However, with my three previous losses I will need plenty of luck. Otherwise, I don’t stand a chance of promoting.”

“I wouldn’t say so.”

“Huh?”

“The top players are fighting amongst themselves to get those final stars.”

The director says those words while pointing to the black-and-white stars on the sheet in front of him, which completely shatters the levelheaded state of mind that I had maintained through my matches.

“.....!! .....Ah ..... Agh, ahh .....”

Heart palpitating, can’t breathe.

Pressure the likes of which I’ve never known seizes hold of me. I crouch down on the spot, clutching at my chest in a desperate attempt to draw breath.

—I-I can’t lose ..... I must win ..... *No matter what I have to do* .....

Memories of Kasasugi 3-*dan*'s eye gleaming from between those sliding doors float to the surface of my mind, but I shake them away just as quickly.

What face will I make once I've reached true peak fervor .....? Thinking about it terrifies me.

## ▲ TALLYING STARS

“Good morning! I’m looking forward to our match!”

Faced with a greeting far too friendly for someone he was about to fight to the death, Sumito Sakanashi silently stared at the person across from him.

Shoji Karako 3-*dan*.

A man in his forties.

Sumito’s first opponent today returned to the Kansai Sub League after a previous stint via the Admission Exam.

Shoji wasted no time getting comfortable in the lower seat and offered the upper seat to his 25-year-old opponent with a beckoning smile.

“Please, take the upper seat, Sakanashi-*senpai*.”

“No, I couldn’t——.”

“Nonsense! I’ve been gone, so don’t worry about it. Please, I insist!”

Energetic and friendly opponents. The hypocritical courtesy of offering the upper seat back and forth. As both were unique to Kansai; a Kanto native like himself was at a loss.

“Then ..... I accept.”

Sumito acquiesced to all his opponent’s requests as a means of avoiding the trivial pre-match rituals that came with them.

——I may have refused, if I were still in position to promote .....

For he had already accrued four losses. A dead man walking.

On the other hand, Shoji was at the top of the division right alongside Hiuma Kagamizu.

Sumito had also heard much about him from other players in Kanto who had already faced him.

*Shogi so solid it feels like he’s playing with six Golds and Silvers.*

His playing style revolved around inundating his own territory with pieces; a

very Kansai-esque way of playing that focused on *not losing* rather than going for *the win*.

—Karako Theory ..... To think I would one day sit across the board from its originator in the Sub League.

Even amateurs will have match records should they become top-class players. Sumito had identified Shoji Karako as a viable threat before this season of the 3-*dan* division began and set about researching his match records to develop a counter strategy.

—*I sure am glad I researched him before the season started* ..... Sumito thought to himself with a grimace as he unleashed his prepared sequence in the early-game.

Had he attempted to do this research after his four consecutive losses to start the season, he doubted he would have had the energy or motivation to complete it. Not to mention he would've prioritized studying and practicing for driving school.

His strategy bore fruit right away as Sumito took control of the pace of the match.

— However, this is where things will get complicated.

After crossing his legs to sit and think for several long minutes, Sumito corrected his posture by sitting on his ankles and braced himself for what would no doubt be a heavily contested late game.

Dead man walking or not, Sub League members fight with every ounce of their being from the moment they sit at a Shogi board.

Sumito was the living personification of that pride. Drawing from it, he braced himself for Shoji's next move—.

"Yep. I lost this one."

"Huh?"

Sumito couldn't contain his surprise.

Shoji's next move ..... was to raise the white flag.

It was stunningly early and anticlimactic. The other matches taking place

around them were still in the mid-game. Sumito had purposefully preserved waiting time so as not to be overtaken in the late-game .....

“I can see why you’re ranked number one! Way too strong for me, that’s for sure!” Shoji said, opening his fan as he marveled at Sumito’s Shogi skill. “Yeah, I lost through and through. Your early-game strategy countered mine perfectly and you never let up all the way to the end. I don’t see the point in doing a review session. Let’s call it good here.”

“S-Sure .....”

“Which reminds me, Sakanashi-*senpai*. Your next match is against Kagamizu, right? Best of luck to you!”

Overwhelmed by his opponent’s grace in defeat, Sumito was unsure what to make of it as he left the arena. Though it’s true that he was elated because the strategy he spent so much time to develop had worked so well against such a strong opponent.

Furthermore, the match ended early enough that he would be able to buy the extremely popular fried chicken lunch set today rather than having to settle for leftovers as he usually did.

The second match, however, became a hard-fought battle. There was no comparison to the first.

“..... I’ve lost.”

After a flurry of lead changes, the one to make the last mistake—was Hiuma Kagamizu.

“Th- ..... Thank... you .....”

Sumito lowered his head as he fought to catch his breath. He had become so exhausted that he couldn’t sit back up for several moments.

Though both players beamed with pride in the knowledge that a spectacular match record will stay in their memories forever .....

“See, I knew you’re strong, Sakanashi .....,” said Hiuma with a look of painful acceptance in his eyes.

“No ..... This match came down to stamina. Your first match today had a

repetition draw, yes? Playing another match on the spot meant you had no time for lunch.”

“True. No one is about to give the front-runner an easy win ..... Whew, today’s Shogi took a lot out of me .....” Hiuma leans back, staring at the ceiling as the words, “I’m beat .....,” weakly rolled off his tongue. “I can count the number of weeks I’ve been on top of the division over the past few years on one hand. Who knew staying there for nearly six months took this much energy .....?”

“Hah. I was in the same position last year. Since I lost my chance to promote so early on this season, I’ve experienced far less fatigue than——.”

Sumito suddenly fell silent in mid-sentence as a chill ran down his spine.

“..... Fatigue?”

He caught a glimpse of a match still in progress out of the corner of his eye.

There he saw Shoji Karako, battling with a demonic ferocity that had been absent during their match earlier that day.

His opponent was a small child who looked extremely out of place.

And, that grown man in his forties howled at the child, “YeeeeSSSSAAHHHH!! HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT——?!!!”

*SNAAAAA——P!!!*

Shoji yelled at the top of his lungs as he brought the piece down onto the board with both hands like a lumberjack swinging an ax. The boy sitting across from him merely trembled, his shoulders jumping on impact.

As if he were being scolded. Then——.

“..... I lose .....”

In a tiny voice seemingly on the verge of tears, Sota Kunugi conceded defeat.

Murmurs passed among the 3-*dan* players who had been observing the match not a heartbeat later.

“Kunugi lost .....!”

“Karako’s given the prodigy a second black star!”



“Holdin’ out that long usin’ Normal 3rd File Rook and turnin’ the tables at the very end ..... That was some impressive Shogi .....”

The child prodigy who had been sailing through the 3-*dan* division without a single loss until the previous regular activities day had just lost to a man who was once forced to retire due to age restrictions.

Nothing tastes sweeter than the misfortune of others. Especially so when that *other* happens to be a prodigy.

*Elimination* is at the core of the Sub League, no matter how anyone may try to say otherwise.

A system designed to prevent an oversaturation of professional Shogi players, it tends to spoil promising talents and pluck them off one by one ..... Or so Sumito had found himself thinking from time to time.

The very atmosphere within the Shogi world seemed to be chanting: *Lose Kunugi, lose.*

Sub League members and even some professionals were thinking it ..... though none would say so out loud.

—Maybe it’s because I’ve given up on promoting, but am I the only one who doesn’t mind if Kunugi becomes a professional?

In fact, he was hoping for a chance to see Sota Kunugi’s overwhelming talent destroy the modern Shogi world from the inside.

“Here, I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Huh?”

Amid all the swirling energy within the Onjyoudan no Ma Arena, only Hiuma Kagamizu was wholeheartedly concentrating on their own board.

“This move, right here. I wanted to protect that space until the very end, but this is where my formation cracked.”

“O-Oh ..... I agree. So, if you had done this instead——.”

Sumito hastily returned his focus to the review session.

Despite their efforts to continue, however, the rest of the 3-*dans*’ conversations showed no signs of slowing down.

“What will happen to the standings?”

“Mr. Kagamizu will still be on top, but ..... Now that both front-runners each dropped a match——.”

“It all comes down to ranking: Kagamizu, Karako, then Kunugi.”

“So, Mr. Kagamizu and Mr. Karako will promote as it is now. After all, he beat Kunugi head-to-head, so he’s got the tiebreaker.”

“That geezer’s pretty tough, don’t you think?”

“There’s a good chance Kunugi just wasn’t that good to begin with.”

“I thought he’d be stronger than that. Still, people with three losses now have a chance——.”

The not-so-quiet whispers between the Sub League members only served to splash poison onto Sota’s wounds, still fresh from defeat.

Then Shoji’s loud voice broke through the din.

“Haaah! I thought I was done for after Sakanashi-*senpai* tore me apart this morning, but it worked out for the best! Winning became all that mattered, and I gave it my all! Just goes to show that even a regular guy like me can beat a prodigy if they go all in to win! That’s the Sub League for you, you’ve got to put it all on the line to win the match in front of you!! Forget that, and you’re toast.”

The players watching from the side nod in agreement.

“..... Put it all on the line ..... to win the match in front of you .....?”

In that moment, everything that had transpired that day clicked into place for Sumito.

——What would have happened if Mr. Karako and I ..... had fought to the last during our match?

Even if he had defeated Shoji in the end, winning against Sota in such a fatigued state would have likely been impossible. The match would come down to stamina.

Sumito also knew he would have lost to Hiuma had he fought while physically and mentally drained. After all, Hiuma’s drawn-out first match is what gave him

the ability to win in the end.

As a result ..... Shoji managed to get through consecutive matches against the top two players, Sumito Sakanashi and the child prodigy Sota Kunugi, with an even one-and-one split while simultaneously handing his front-running rival a loss.

The conclusion was forgone.

*“Shoji Karako threw the match against Sumito Sakanashi.”*

Lose in a tournament, and that player is eliminated on the spot.

League matches, however, are based on a victory star tally.

Shoji gave both Hiuma and Sota black stars in exchange for taking one himself. He understood losing would put him in a better position in the long run.

—Meanwhile, I was congratulating myself like a complete doofus ..... and kicked dirt in the face of the man who brought me back from my darkest days!

His own obliviousness irritated him to no end.

However, a different emotion held stronger within Sumito’s heart.

Giving the exhausted Hiuma his complete attention as the Sub League veteran conducted a thorough review session, Sumito spat words under his breath so quietly that no one else could hear.

“Play fair and square, and you will never promote ..... We’re too naïve. Me, and Mr. Kagamizu both .....”

## PRIZE MACHINE

“I’m hooome!! Whoa, it’s later than I thought.”

After going to a press conference, doing some interviews and a photo shoot for the Crown Title Match in Umeda, it’s early evening by the time I get home.

“I just got so into it. Ah, oh well! Big Sis won both her matches, too!”

Getting that message from the director put me in a really good mood. So I stopped to get some fruit shortcake, the one that’s really popular right now, as a treat for the Grade Schooler Practice Group. They should be having a practice session right now, but .....

Something’s not right.

“Huh? No snapping pieces or chatting ..... But it looks like everybody’s here .....”

Several pairs of shoes are by the door.

Four pairs to be exact, the perfect size for grade-school girls and all neatly lined up against the wall. That’s adorable.

Except ..... It’s too quiet.

The energetic buzz that only grade schoolers can make is nowhere to be found. That chaotic power they have to keep on talking no matter how many times I tell them to quiet down, it’s missing.

“Have I lost the ability ..... to sense them all together?”

It couldn’t be!

“..... Maybe they played so much that they all conked out for a nap?”

If that’s the case, it would be a shame to wake them up. Taking off my shoes as quietly as possible, I head inside.

What I see when I get there—is beyond words.

All four of the girls are at the kitchen table, not in the *tatami* room, and writing something in complete silence.

“What’s everybody doing in here rather than playing Shogi? Summer homework?”

“A side job!”

Mio looks up and smiles at me. The other girls must be really in the zone, because their hands don’t stop moving for an instant.

Ai Hinatsuru looks like a girl possessed. Every stroke of her pen seems to be funneling her heart and soul onto the page. It’s a little scary actually.

“A-A side job?”

“Yes. We’re making prizes for a prize machine at the summer festival,” says Ayano as she puts the finishing touches on her own paper and caps the colorful pen she was using. Then she starts folding that piece of paper.

“Hmm? What are you ..... Agh!!”

At first, I thought it was some pretty origami, but I’ve seen that shape before.

“Isn’t that ..... the *secret note* fold that girls do in the middle of class at school?!”

It’s the way girls would pass notes during class and make sure the boys couldn’t read it, just a class-wide relay of people saying: *pass it on*. Wow, that takes me back!!

Mio says, “Prize machines with girls’ letters are really popular right now! They don’t cost that much money to make, so we decided to write them ourselves! Isn’t that right, Ayano?”

“Yes. We’re using our individual writing styles and personality traits to make prizes charming enough that visitors will want to buy more.”

“Cha, too! Cha wikes pwize machines! Cha wote wots and wots!”

“And you’re going to sell them in one of those capsule prize machines?!”

I mean, I knew those things had everything under the sun in them these days, but I had no idea handwritten letters would sell, too!

“Wait, just who would buy those things? Sure, boys would be curious, but I don’t think they’d pay money to get random ones——.”

“Masta ..... Yew don’ want Cha’s wetta .....?”

“I’ll take it. Is 100,000 yen enough?”

I reflexively reach for the bundle of ten bills in my jacket pocket and hand them to Charlette.

“You bought one, Kuzunyu-*sensei*! You bought it on the spot!”

“Dah?! W-Whoops ..... Hah-hah .....”

On a side note, players with seniority traditionally treat their junior counterparts to dinner. That’s why I was taught that *title holders should carry 100,000 yen at all times*.

That’s especially true for me, considering the people who mooch off me ..... Like Ryou Tsukiyomizka and Machi Kugui.

“100,000 is far too much. One prize from the machine is 200 yen. Our estimates show that, even after management costs, we should make a considerable profit,” says Ayano matter-of-factly as she types numbers into her smartphone’s calculator.

Hmm. She’s right. If all their prizes sell, then they’ll be able to pay all the festival participation fees by simply doing instructional matches and secure the money to pay for next year at the same time.

“W-Well ..... Yes, I have to admit there’s some appeal to those prizes. And at 200 yen, plenty of people would be interested in giving it a go.”

Getting all four of their letter variations will cost at least 800 yen. Taking duplicates into account, people will probably need about 1,000 yen.

A business plan that perfectly matches supply and demand! I can hardly believe grade schoolers came up with it. That’s pro-level work.

“So, who taught you girls how to set this up?”

“Akira.”

Well, that explains it.

Mio and Ayano start giving me more details.

“We went to the association to ask what we should sell at the booth during

the festival, and Akira just happened to be there and gave us some pointers. Her advice helped out a lot!”

I would assume so. She’s a businesswoman, first and foremost .....

“We taught her the *Demon Killer Strategy* as a thank you.”

That ploy?

“Oh! Kuzuryu-sensei, would you read the letter I wrote? I wanna hear what you think!”

“That is a good idea. Lolic- ..... *cough*. Young men are the target demographic, so your opinion would be very useful.”

Was Ayano about to call me a lolicon?

“Well, let’s see .....”

Don’t sweat the small stuff.

My heart beating a bit harder in my chest, I unfold one of the letters and have a look. She must have done a rough draft first, because the fruity smell of one of those scented erasers wafts into my nose.

Her writing is cutesy, just like I’d expect grade-school girls to write.

Hi, big brother.

Thank you for always looking out for me!

The other day, do you remember ..... what we talked about?

Yep, about the boy in my class who asked me out.

I’ve thought about it lots and lots ..... I decided to say no.

It’s not because I don’t like him, just, I realized there’s someone more important to me .....

I’ll work up the courage to say so myself someday, so ..... Will you wait?

Love you a whole bunch, big brother ≡≡≡

Mio

“I love you, too!!”

“Whoa?! Y-You scared me .....

I yell, clutching the letter as Mio actually backs away. Three steps away.

“It’s not real, of course. But it made your heart skip a beat, didn’t it?”

“I seriously thought this was you saying you had a crush on me, and I nearly asked you out myself.”

Butterflies are still fluttering in my stomach as Ayano calmly explains the process behind it.

“There are actual prize machines in Nagoya filled with letters that real high-school girls were hired to write using provided examples. They seem to be selling extremely well. By the way, men apparently came up with all the examples.”

“It’s the handwriting that makes it feel real .....

That’s the whole point, now that I think about it.

“The fact that it’s real handwriting rather than a printed copy is probably why it sells. There’s a kind of warmth to it .....

The Ryuo or the Meijin sign Shogi certificates and stuff like that, but it’s putting pen to paper that has value rather than good or bad handwriting. Just like with those certificates, who wouldn’t want to have a note written by a grade-school girl?

Handwritten letters are so valuable in the age of smartphones and email because you can actually hold them in your hands.

“Thanks for working so hard on this festival. You must be tired after writing so many letters. I brought some cake for you girls, so take a break and help yourself.”

“Yay!”

Grade schoolers love anything with sugar. There’s no better treat for tired kids than cake topped with a pile of fruit .....

Ai completely ignores the cake and keeps writing. Wow, she’s focused .....



“Oh, Ai? There’s a letter on the floor.”

I crouch down to pick up the letter my apprentice wrote and take a glance at what’s in it.

Hello.

Thank you for everything you do for my Master. This is his first apprentice, Ai.

Since I can’t say anything personal during matches, I decided to write this letter instead.

I’ll get right to the point.

Would you please stop making Master’s life miserable?

Forcing him to play versus matches or do practice sessions all the time just because you have seniority .....

You just want to be alone with him, don’t you?

That’s called abuse of power, if you didn’t know.

You’re making Master very uncomfortable!

Stop taking advantage of Master’s kindness and leave him alone, okay?

I’m number one in Master’s eyes and I learn more Shogi from him than you ever will. Not just Shogi, but so many more things, too .....

The two of us have a very tight bond, so there are no cracks for you to sneak into.

Please don’t steal away any more of our precious time together!

One more thing. If you ever show this letter to Master ..... I’ll put the rest of your life in checkmate. Understand?

..... Come again .....

“Um, hey ..... Ai? This letter seems, a bit oddly specific ..... Is it ..... meant for anyone ..... in particular .....”

“.....”

The fluorescent pen that Ai is writing with suddenly comes to a stop as she looks up at me with a surprisingly mature smile and says in a kind voice, “Do you know who it could be?”

“Huh?! N-No ..... Not really ..... It just seemed .....”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?”

“No ..... I guess not .....”

Ai goes back into writing mode. She hasn’t touched the cake.

D-Does ..... she know what’s going on between Big Sis and I .....? Hang on, those two have always been like this ..... Wait, if Big Sis sees this, she’ll know right away I haven’t told Ai about us and kill me on the spot .....

I-It’s all right, no problem!

I’ll just buy them all before Big Sis has a chance to see them. Yes, I’ll buy the entire stock. H-How much is that going to be .....?

I tremble at the mountain of papers piled up next to my apprentice as Ayano eats her cake like a well-mannered young lady with a knife and fork while explaining.

“That is the Master and apprentice version. As we will be running a Shogi booth, having that theme seemed only natural.”

“Natural??? I wonder???”

I don’t think the average Shogi apprentice would comment on their Master’s love life .....

“Stories about couples with an age gap are popular right now. The main target is lolicon- ..... *cough*... older boys, so this is a natural fit.”

Mio, who practically inhaled her cake right off the plate, puffs out her chest with pride.

“We made a bunch of variations! Like teacher and student, oh! And with a senior at a school club!”

“Eight in total.”

“Ah, that makes sense. People will want to read them all out of curiosity.”

Seriously, I'm gonna have to feed that prize machine for hours, aren't I .....?

Feeling my soul sink, Charlette comes up to me with a letter in her hand and cake frosting on her cheeks.

"Masta! Wead Cha's!"

"Sure."

Unfolding Charlette's mess of an origami, I take a look inside.

"お正月Charu" (new year)

..... This looks more like a heading than an actual letter.

But she used Chinese characters, so I can tell she worked really hard on it. Okay, the Ryuo has work to do: turn that machine's dial as many times as it takes to get those prizes!!

## ■ FELLOW SUB LEAGUE MEMBERS

“You ..... What are you doing here?”—at the Gokigen Bathhouse in Kiyobashi—Mitsuru Oishi muttered in disbelief, standing behind the front counter where he had been restocking the register with small coins until a man’s face appeared between the curtains on the front door.

“Why am I here? For a bath, what else?” wearing a smile befitting of a clown, the man, Shoji Karako, answered as he wiped his brow for a few seconds too long. “I worked up quite a sweat defeating that child prodigy in the 3-*dan* division today. I could really use a hot bath.”

“You beat Sota Kunugi?! *You?!!*”

“There’s no need to act so surprised. Little Miss Ginko beat him, too.”

“This is a bit much to take in all at once ..... Though I do have a hard time believing that broken record you call a playing style would actually work against the younger players in line for promotion.”

“That pint-sized software omen sat his King down on a Gold like it was its own pillow to make that weird castle, but I found a way.”

“! ..... That’s ..... the Futatsuzuka strat, what Okito zealots started playing .....”

It was a brand-new strategy first used by a young Kanto player who made the bold claim that he *made it through the Sub League only practicing with software* and thus earned the nickname *Translator*.

At its core, the strategy revolved around building quick, and surprisingly strong, defensive formations much like the Mino Castle—style employed by many Ranging Rook players. Thus, it was the Static Rook players who had to rely on worldly senses to win. The Ranging Rook mentality that *some bad exchanges are acceptable at first so long as the major pieces are free to move* became worthless and thus ushered in a new era of defensive strategy.

—That new strat is the whole reason I abandoned Ranging Rook against Okito in our series. Now this .....?!

“Anyway, the kid is still a kid no matter how much talent he has or how good

he is with computers. There are plenty of holes if you know where to look.”

“Holes .....?”

Despite being called one of the Three Crowns of Kansai along with this man and the doctor who oversaw Ginko’s therapy, Kiyoshi Akashi, Mitsuru felt at odds with his former fellow Sub Leaguer.

In terms of natural talent, Mitsuru was by far and away superior.

Even with that reputation, Mitsuru struggled to beat Shoji in head-to-head matches. He was his nemesis in every sense of the word.

—Why didn’t my worldliness ever work on this guy .....?

The Worldly Maestro would find sequences that bordered on works of art to take the lead during the mid-game and still be unable to crack the final defenses when it mattered most.

Ginko had sharpened her own worldly senses under Mitsuru’s tutelage. What would happen if those two were to collide .....? Doubt and uncertainty seeped into his heart.

—Is that what he’s trying to do? Get to Ginko by shaking up the people around her .....?

Underhanded and devious as it was ..... it might very well do the trick.

Even if Ginko steeled herself against Shoji, she fully trusted Mitsuru. His words could easily sway her one way or another. However, what bothered him the most was that Shoji’s unexpected visit had shaken him to the core.

“Seriously, why are you here? You’ve never been the type to tell everyone and their mother that you beat a kid prodigy just ’cause you’re happy about it. You’re here to laugh at me for losing my title, is that it?”

“Really, Mitsuru, what do you take me for? I’m lonely! Being the Sub League’s one and only old fart isn’t easy, you know? There’s no one to talk to, so I came to see my old buddy.”

“Oh, is that right? Well, I can see the results on the 3-*dan* division’s home page, so you can save your breath. Go take a dip and head on home.”

“Of course, of course! I’ve got my next match to prepare for, after all. Ah,

before I forget.”

Shoji took his time, drawing out every word of the shocking truth.

“There are big plans in the works to broadcast the final day of matches over the net and on TV. I’d love it if you’d tune in to cheer me on!”

“..... What... did you just say .....?”

Mitsuru was floored ..... His voice shaken.

“Little Miss Ginko’s in high school. Sota is an elementary kid. There are laws in place to protect them from the media and nobody’d try to argue otherwise. But an old fart like me? Go ahead and film away! There’ll be cameras all over the arena on the last day.”

“Cameras ..... In the *3-dan’s exclusive* arena, and on the final day of division matches? Chairman Tsukimitsu would never allow such——!”

“All matches are held in Kanto on the final day. My new Master, an association board executive, has already given the green light. It’s happened before, too. Speaking of Kanto, that bench where you cried your heart out after hitting the ceiling in the *3-dan* division back in high school is still there.”

“I knew that without you telling me.”

It had been his reserved smoking spot when he was in Kanto for matches. Though, now that there was a designated room for smoking, he didn’t use it anymore.

“Pass on a message to our friend Kiyoshi, will ya? Tell him if he’s so worried about Little Miss Ginko, he should come up to Tokyo on the last day himself. It’ll be easy to blend in with all the reporters around.”

“You——?!”

How much do you know? Mitsuru stopped himself before finishing that sentence. He didn’t want to complicate Ginko’s situation by revealing any more information than necessary.

Instead, he countered with this question.

“What ..... kind of life did you lead after retiring? What made you throw away your Shogi player pride?”

The Worldly Maestro asked this new version of the man who had entered the Sub League the same year he did. His tone wasn't so much angry as sad.

“Why do you ..... hate Shogi so much now?”

The Shoji Karako who Mitsuru knew was talentless and stubborn to a fault, but that had only proved his sincere love for the sport all the more.

He had more pride as a member of the Kansai Sub League than anyone. Overwhelmingly so at times. He was a traditionalist, to the point where he would have staunchly opposed any media presence whatsoever .....

“What kind of life ..... you ask?” remarked Shoji, the smile of a clown plastered to his face. “First, I was a facility janitor.”

Without a high school diploma or qualifications of any kind, the employment options available to a 26-year-old man who had spent the bulk of his life playing Shogi were limited to low-wage, physical labor jobs.

“Then I worked at a restaurant part time, was a deliveryman, a security guard, looked after the elderly, did some telemarketing, spent one harvest season living on-site and worked the cabbage fields. I was even a deckhand on a fishing trawler. You could say I did everything apart from Shogi. Some things were more legal than others, too. All so I could live to see tomorrow.”

“.....”

“Any idea what the most painful ones were?”

“Beats me. The heavy lifting?”

“The ones where my coworkers followed Shogi.”

“.....!”

“I swore I'd never play Shogi again the day I got booted from the Sub League. Cut off all contact with everyone in the Shogi world at the same time. But there was no avoiding it if someone mentioned it at work. The topic of pro Shogi players would come up one way or another. And when it did ... another knife went through my heart. My dreams from the old days... dashed once again.”

Shoji bit down on his lip as he continued, spitting out each word like blood.

All with a smile.

“Shogi kills just as many as it lets live. As one of the people it killed off, I hate it. I hate it with every fiber of my being ..... But in the end, Shogi is all I’ve got. Even if it kills me.”

The man recounted his return from hell without once losing his clownish smile, laying his love-hate relationship with Shogi bare.

“Even if I were born again, I would want to be a Shogi player. I came back to the Sub League because that dawned on me. No matter what people say, no matter how many smug looks I get, I’ll be fine so long as I get to play Shogi. I rediscovered the happiness of holding a piece between my fingers ..... because I didn’t have anything else.”

The fingers clutching the coins to pay the entrance fee were trembling.

That’s when Mitsuru noticed.

The smooth hands he had seen from across the board so many times when they played in the Sub League ..... had become heavily calloused.

“Only someone who knows an even greater joy in playing Shogi than I do stands a chance against me now. Someone who won’t back down, who keeps fighting no matter how bleak their chances get.”

How much of that statement was true, Mitsuru didn’t know. Just ..... all the healed scars and rough skin covering his hands were not lying.

Shogi could tell his story had taken Mitsuru aback, so he lightened his tone and asked.

“Actually, those were just the second most painful. Any idea what was the worst?”

“..... No.”

“Nah, there’s no way you would, Mitsuru.”

With that, Shogi Karako left the coins on the counter and hummed a tune to himself as he went into the changing room.



## THE PLAYER'S ROOM

“..... Huh? Just you, Sota?”

After the Crown Title Match meeting (the real one) ends, I stop by the Player's Room on the third floor of the association for the first time in a long time.

It's always lively around here, but it's oddly silent today. Actually there's just one person in here: Sota. He's sitting by himself in the back corner of the long, rectangular room playing through match records.

Without looking up, he says, “Yes, just me. There aren't any league matches scheduled for today and having practice sessions or versus matches against people doesn't seem to be very popular these days.”

“I see ..... Well, it is that time of year.”

Summer vacation. Lots of pros are out at Shogi events and Sub League members are busy helping them.

Not to mention the 3-*dan* division is entering the final stretch.

Mr. Kagamizu pretty much rules the roost in here. Without him around, the younger guys rarely bother showing up.

“The Kiyotaki Classroom closed?”

“The *kyu*-ranking players seem to be going per usual. You haven't seen Kiyotaki-*sensei* at all recently have you, Yaichi? Shouldn't you tell him you became the Crown Challenger yourself?”

“Hm? Y-Yeah ..... Been busy. Keika has been passing messages along for us, though.”

Honestly, I've been avoiding him because it'll be awkward telling him about Big Sis.

O-Of course, I'll have to say something once we're officially going out, but ..... There's no guarantee Big Sis will promote to 4-*dan*, and he raised us like we really were brother and sister so he might be against it, which would lead to us eloping again——.

“Yaichi? What are you making that face for?”

“What?! I-I was making a face?!”

“Yes. Blushing and kind of ogling ..... Obscene.”

D-Did he just call me obscene?!

Just as I’m racking my brain, trying to figure out how a kid his age knows that word.

“..... Yaichi.”

“Yeah?”

“I ..... I still have talent, right?”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard this boy wonder’s voice shake before. He’s always overflowing with confidence.

“I heard you had a few mistakes against Big Sis and Mr. Karako, yeah?”

“..... It’s driving me crazy. This *having six of the eight combined Golds and Silvers is an advantage* thing. Deploying the Gold that should be the final blow in your own territory ..... Tilling the board, over and over again! That’s not Shogi! That’s farming!”

People tend to see defensive playing styles as a sign of having no talent.

Talent really shines in the late-game.

The ability to cut straight through all the complicated sequences and checkmate the opponent like a bright beam of light: that’s what people see as talent.

That’s how Ai Hinatsuru and Chairman Tsukimitsu play. Sota ..... is more like the Meijin, preferring to take the circular path more than a straight line.

It goes without saying that every style of Shogi takes talent to play, but .....

“That is not Shogi! I’m trying to become a pro because I wanted to play Shogi! I wanted to win every match, to go into the last day undefeated! Because then ..... Then I .....

*Slam!!* Sota hits the file folder in front of him with his fist, mouth clenched shut.

Taking a glance at the match record in that file ..... I understand why he's so upset and why he wanted to go into the final day without a loss so badly.

"What even *is* talent?"

"Sota ....."

"The Sub League is supposed to be a place to test it, right? In that case ..... Why can't talent be a number? If only it was——."

The boy who made it into the Sub League faster than anyone ever wails.

"If it was, we wouldn't need to kill each other off like this."



RECORD 3

神鍋馬莉愛

MARIA  
KANNABE

水越滯

MIO  
MIZUKOSHI

## THE VETERAN SEAT

“Well, good morning, Ginko! Aren’t you early?”

August 15, the morning of the 15th and 16th 3-*dan* division matches.

As it is my turn to prepare the boards and pieces, I walk into the arena at the Kansai Shogi Association well before the matches are scheduled to begin only to find someone already inside and struggling to carry a stack of Shogi boards.

It’s surprising to see the silver-haired man in here because he’s not a member of the Sub League, but the staff——.

“Mr. Mine? G-Good morning ..... What are you doing?!”

“The first round of the Sub League Entrance Exam will be taking place today on the fourth floor, but only the 3-*dan* division is meeting today, yes? I couldn’t stand the thought of making those young ones prepare the boards for matches that will affect the rest of their lives. So I decided to do it mysss...daahhhh!!”

“?! Careful!!”

My body moves before I know it, protecting Mr. Mine from the stack of Shogi boards falling over him.

“Sorry, Ginko! Your hands ..... Are your hands alright?!”

“..... Don’t worry. I’m not that clumsy.”

I habitually protect my right hand, no matter the circumstances. More importantly——.

“What were you thinking, *Sensei*?! Someone your age shouldn’t be carrying so many at once!”

“Ha-ha-ha. How many years has it been .....? You haven’t called me *Sensei* in quite a while, Ginko.”

“..... Have you reflected on what you did?”

Mr. Mine used to oversee the match cards at the association’s classroom. He would always be there to rein in Yaichi and I with a warning whenever we had one of our inevitable arguments ..... I can’t count how many times he praised

me, probably hundreds.

Getting compliments from the man we called *The Principal* back when I played in the second-floor classroom is one of the reasons I became stronger. There were days when I wanted to go back to that time, but now my mind is set.

Working together, the two of us finish setting up the arena. Mr. Mine stares at the corner of the room and whispers to me, “Ginko. Is the *veteran seat* still around?”

“Veteran seat .....? What do you mean?”

“You know, in front of the scroll in the Onjyoudan no Ma ..... In the very back? The place reserved for only the most experienced player who everyone recognizes as the strongest.”

“Mr. Kagamizu typically sits there, I think .....”

“So, it’s still going strong. How nostalgic.”

Thinking back to how Mr. Mine knew exactly how to prepare the arena, I ask him, “Pardon me if I’m wrong, Mr. Mine, but ..... were you a member of the Sub League?”

“I was, indeed... though I was registered in Kanto.”

Back when my heart was shattered, I remember Yaichi telling me a story.

It was about a Sub League member who seriously tried to take their own life. He said it was someone I know very well, but——.

“You couldn’t be ..... the person who jumped out the window and broke their leg, could you?”

“That story has reached your ears, has it? Well, this is embarrassing.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Why ..... you ask?”

Mr. Mine stares at his feet, looking forlorn.

“Ginko. Working at the association on staff after having to retire from the Sub League ..... Some days are agonizing.”

“..... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up .....”



“No, it’s not that.”

“Huh?”

“It’s having to say goodbye to the young ones I’ve watched grow for so long.”

“Ah .....

“I can weather my own pain. There was quite a bit in the early days, with my former colleagues arrogantly bossing me around from the professional ranks and such. But that, I got over it at some point. The real pain comes from .....

Oh ..... I get it .....

He’s been seeing shades of himself in all the Sub League members who have had to quit for one reason or another for decades now.

I bet he feels genuinely happy for the players who have the necessary talent to become a professional and reach 4-*dan*.

However, he empathizes more strongly with players like me and himself who know they have no talent and eventually get forced out of the league.

“Young people who loved Shogi with their very hearts and souls when they entered the Sub League leave it hating the sport to the point that they never want to so much as see a piece again so long as they live. After working so hard and becoming so strong, that strength becomes what they despise most in this world.”

Children who love Shogi will come knocking on the Sub League’s door to take the Entrance Exam this year as well, just as I did seven years ago.

More than 90 percent of them won’t become professionals.

Whether it’s five, ten or fifteen years from now ..... They’ll be cursing the time and effort they spent along the way.

“My heart aches every time I see one of them off for the last time ..... Every other former Sub League member who worked alongside me in the office couldn’t take the pain and quit years ago .....

—Mr. Mine ..... saw himself in me .....

That’s why he never said a word.



So that I would never think about the reality waiting for me *after leaving the Sub League*. As someone who has kept such a close watch over the Sub League's members all these years, he must've been able to tell that I only had enough talent to get in, but not through. It was all in his gentle yet agonized gaze.

—What will I do if I don't make it?

If I can never break the sealing move with Yaichi ..... I would most likely just want to disappear from everyone's memory.

And never play Shogi ..... never be involved with the Shogi world ever again.

Yaichi would spend nights like the one we had but with someone who's not me ..... I can see it so clearly in my mind that it feels real. The girl next to him is younger and much more talented than I, the .....

—No!! Anything but that, anything .....!!

If only I could disappear into a cloud of bubbles like the little mermaid. Unfortunately, reality doesn't work like that. People must bottle up their disappointment and frustration and find a way to live their lives that doesn't involve Shogi.

It must be ..... a living hell that makes dying seem like a better alternative.

"Though, every so often a young man like Sho comes around. What a nice surprise that was!"

"Sho? Mr. Shoji ..... Karako?"

"Yes. There was a time when the veteran seat was his. His Shogi was gritty, a never-surrender style that embodied what it meant to be a Kansai player. He had a great impact on those around him and the league itself."

Mr. Mine chuckles to himself, saying that also made him a lot of enemies, as if taking a stroll down memory lane.

"He drifted from job to job after leaving ..... Fell out of contact for a while, too, before suddenly making a name for himself as an amateur from out of nowhere. Lo and behold, he makes a return to the Sub League using the Admission Exam. That man has grit in spades."

“I ..... got the same impression playing against him myself.”

“Ginko. You will play against him again, yes?”

“I will. He’s my first opponent on the final day.”

“How great would it be if both of you promoted! I would certainly love for Hiuma, Sota and all the young men in Kanto to make it as professionals as well, but ..... It hurts so much, having to say goodbye to them.”

“Mr. Mine .....”

“But it won’t last much longer. I’m retiring after this year.”

“I see ..... Thank you for everything. It’s meant a lot .....”

“To be honest, I considered hanging it up a long time ago. But——.”

Then Mr. Mine tells me the reason why he continued to work at the association all the way until retirement age.

“I stayed because of a little girl who suffered through more pain than anyone else and still had a pure, unmistakable love for Shogi. You have my thanks, Ginko.”

“.....! Mine ..... *sensei* .....”

“The phrase *do your best* has never sat well with me, so ..... Let’s be true to ourselves to the very end.”

Even though I had help setting up the arena today, I had to fight much harder than I ever expected once the matches got started.

I’ve held back tears after matches plenty of times.

But ..... today was the first time I’ve ever had to do that before one.

## BEFORE THE FESTIVAL

*Tweet, tweet! Chirp!*

Birds sing outside my window as rays of sunlight flood into my room from between the blinds.

“..... Mnn? Morning already .....?”

I’m much more used to the chatter of little girls waking me up rather than birds at this point. Yeah, yeah, I’m the loli-king, so what?

“Nghhh .....! Ah, summer vacation. It must be so much fun getting together with your friends every day.”

I stretch my arms high over my head to wake up when I hear my smartphone vibrating on my desk.

“Who could that be? ..... Huh? Ayumu?”

Surprised to see that name on the screen, I answer the call. The voice of my friend and rival echoes through the room in no time flat.

“Ha-ha-ha ..... To think, you would be conscious at this hour. So, a creature of darkness can also be a morning person! How befitting of my eternal nemesis!!”

“That’s a big compliment, coming from a guy who gets up at the crack of dawn to help his parents make tofu. I’m hanging up.”

Whatever it is, it doesn’t seem important. Just as I’m about to hit the button ..... another voice with the bubbly chatter I know so well comes out of my phone.

“Heh! How foolish of you, Drakin. Passing up on the chance to speak with one such as I after a long absence!”

“Wait ..... The princess loli?! That’s you, isn’t it?!!”

I quickly switch my phone to a video feed. Sure enough, she and her brother, who have nearly identical personalities, are posing on screen with one hand in the air. A double pose. Like a pro wrestling tag team.

Ayumu’s little sister, Maria Kannabe (fifth grade).

In the same academic year as Ai, she has a very distinctive personality and two bundles of hair on her head that look just like cat ears.

Even though she lost to Mio in the King of Naniwa tournament finals, she joined the Shakando Shogi family and is set to take the Sub League Entrance Exam this year ..... Oh, that's what this is about.

Today's the day of the exam, isn't it? But Maria doesn't have to participate until the second day because she's the Elementary Meijin—.

"Let me get this straight. You're feeling nervous about the exam coming up tomorrow, so you'd like to stimulate your mind with a few practice matches against Ai or Mio, right?"

"Wh-Why, no!!"

"Then I'm hanging up."

"Cease with the teasing!" squeals the princess Ioli with tears in her eyes as she swipes at the screen. Too cute.

Ayumu yanks his little sister away from the camera and says, "You needn't be so harsh, Drakin. Even those possessing impervious Shogi skills struggle to settle the nerves the night before their Sub League Entrance Exam."

I was never going to hang up, of course. Just having a little fun.

"Concerning the Crown Title Match... Were you aware that I will be serving as the assistant observer for the opening match?"

"I heard, all right. I'm surprised you accepted the job."

Since its Ayumu, I was sure that he'd strike a pose and say, *Though I will only be observing your next title match as a player, mu-ha-ha-ha!* or something like that.

"Not being in the match myself, I admit, is disheartening. However, there have been whispers telling of the significance of this match and the importance of bearing witness to it ..... My soul speaks to me!"

"So, you want to know exactly how my match with Mr. Okito will play out, is that it?"

"Affirmative."

“A player who only researches with AI against a teenager, the first title match of its kind ..... good grief.”

“Devising a plan of action will be no easy matter.”

“Yeah ..... Mr. Okito has probably used software more than anyone and I think he got rid of all his other Shogi senses on purpose. His mind works on a level higher than regular players can even imagine.”

I’ve never played against myself, but I can just tell.

Ever since the moment he became the first pro to ever lose a match to software ..... and tried to take his own life, Yo Okito seems to have given up on humanity entirely.

“..... Hey, Ayumu.”

“What is it?”

“Have you ever wanted to become a computer?”

His answer is immediate, literally no time at all, and extremely obvious, “There would be no point.”

“Yeah. No point at all.”

I follow it up with common sense, “People can’t become machines.”

Everyone knows that, but people seem to misunderstand.

“Back when humanity was fighting against software, how do you think they thought they could beat it?”

“Software late-game readings are far too precise. Therefore, they must be overpowered at the outset, in the early game.”

“Then, after humanity started losing every match, how do you think people wanted to use its strengths in their own Shogi?”

“Human beings cannot hope to replicate software in the late-game. That is only possible early on in the match.”

“Yeah. That’s probably what most players think, too, actually.”

I hit a major slump after fighting against the Meijin in the Ryuo Title Match.

I thought it was caused by sitting across the board from the strongest person

to ever play the game ..... But that was probably just the trigger.

I started using the latest software in my own research at around that time.

Since I had *adjusted to* playing at the Meijin's pace, I assumed I could naturally do the same with software, too. That I could learn how it opens matches and get used to it.

I thought I could do the Katsura Single Jump and other strange openings, including the defensive formations that software builds to open matches. I won quite a few victory stars that way.

"But all that's just an illusion."

Copying what software does in the early game is just monkey see, monkey do.

"Where software's strength really shines, where it's literally inhuman ability to make perfect decisions, is actually when there are unlimited options ..... in the *early mid-game*."

Calculation abilities that go far beyond what people are capable of.

Then there are the sequences that result from those calculations and a memory powerful enough to never, ever forget.

No one in the world has those.

No matter how devoted Mr. Okito is to software or how hard he tries to learn those abilities, it's physically impossible. People can't become machines.

So——.

"Okito-*Dual Title*, as strong as he is, cannot play the same early game as software, and trying to do it will only leave openings for me."

That's my conclusion, for now anyway.

"So long as he doesn't plug a calculator into his brain, nothing he does will take me by surprise. Well, I'm sure he realizes that, too, so I think it'll be a surprisingly orthodox match. There's no need to strain yourself coming up with predictions at the opening night party."

It's standard for pro players and media people to make their own predictions about the upcoming title match once the match participants have left the room.

“Do not belittle me, Drakin. I am aware of that much, as well. But” he angrily says, “there’s a problem if those orthodox formations have been enhanced by software’s superior reading abilities! Continuously playing the optimal move for all eternity, and an ironclad wall of research! Is that not what occurred during the King Title Match against the Worldly Maestro?!”

“You read that far, huh .....? I should have known my rival would be up for that.”

“Enough patronizing! Retaliate with the best moves, and the match can only end in repetition draw or stalemate!! How can that be dealt with?!”

Ayumu isn’t trying to horn in on my research.

He’s just worried about me as a friend.

And, because I understand that ..... I let him in on the meat of my findings.

“Two options come to mind.”

Mr. Okito is most likely trying to do one of them.

In putting the formations that humanity has discovered over the centuries into the software program and using it to find the hidden details and thus improve their effectiveness even further... if people couldn’t change it, then——.

But I chose a different path, one a bit more human.

“I’ve come across a very interesting match record. It’s all I’ve been using for research these days.”

“A record? Could it be ..... a match between software programs? While I admit it may be possible to find flaws using such a method, I——.”

“No. That would only identify habits of the individual programs, and humans can’t play like that anyway.”

It’s been eight months since the Ryuo Title Match ended. During that time, I was dealt a painful loss by soon-to-retire Zaou-*sensei* in the placement matches and had several more slipups after I started using software for research.

How could I get stronger?

Now that I’ve overcome the strongest person on earth ..... I was sure that the answer could only be found with software.

But, it turns out, I'd already had the answer for a long time before then.

Ever since a tiny angel landed at my front door one day last spring——.

"The record I've been analyzing isn't from software, or even a pro. The hint I got came from someplace else."

"Then, a match record of whom?"

"..... Al."

"Hm? Didn't you just say——?"

Ayumu gets cut off midsentence by Maria pushing him out of the frame.

"Enough of this complicated jibber jabber. One such as I desires to engage in conversation and indulge in a few matches of Shogi with the weeds to calm my nerves for the morrow!!"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes. Stay on the line, okay? I'll take my phone to the girls' room."

Leaving my bedroom, I follow the young chattering voices toward the *tatami* room.

What's this? The *fusuma* doors are always open, but they're closed for some reason.

I bet they were worried about waking me up.

There are at least three voices coming through the door. I don't hear any snapping pieces, though. Maybe they're doing some last-minute preparations for the festival?

"Morning. Everybody awake?" I say as I slide the door open.

Well, everybody's here, but ..... Not dressed.





The whole Grade Schooler Practice Group is right here.

Just, they don't have any clothes on. Just birthday suits.

“EEEEEEKK!! PERVERT———!!”

Ai and Ayano's faces turn bright red as they curl up into a ball.

Mio grabs the colorful piece of fabric off the floor to hide everyone from sight.

Charlette, on the other hand, comes up to me with a big smile. She says, “Masta≡” with her arms out for a hug. Of course, there's not a stitch of cloth on her either.

I scream loud enough to drown all of them out.

“DAAAHHHHH?! In the buff?! WHY?!”

Oh! That fabric on the *tatami* mats ..... *Yukata* robes?! So, they were in the middle of putting on *yukata*?!

However, they must not have been able to see that through the smartphone camera.

“N-Nude, you say?! So many girls so close to sunrise ..... You are a fiend to behold, Loli-king! Holding multiple young maidens hostage in your lair .....! Is this your preparation for taking multiple titles?!”

“What titles are you talking about?!”

Ayumu, just as clueless, jumps in after his sister's rant.

“Ngh ..... Drakin, you scoundrel ..... Has what remains of your human soul already fallen so far?! Has the demonic energy that pulses through your Shogi soiled your spirit as well?!”

“No, no! Listen to me, will you?! They're getting ready for the festival tonight!!”

“A party? So then, you entice adolescent girls in the midst of summer vacation into your abode with the allure of a party only to unleash such evils upon them ..... I was wrong, your human soul no longer exists!! It has been that blackened by evil!! Hello, police department?”

“Nooooo! Please, don't call themmmm!!”

After that, a relatively calm Mio explains the situation, clears up this mess and saves me from getting arrested right before playing in a title match.

Maria has a great time talking with everyone, too!! You better pass the Entrance Exam, damn it!!

## ▲ BACK INTO HELL

Scorching, searing heat from head to toe.

“Haaa ..... Haaa ..... Haaa ..... Nghhh!!”

*Beep. Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee————*

The chess clock tracking my remaining time now that I’m in one-minute Shogi counts down the seconds like a heartbeat, as if telling how long I have to live.

*“Gasp!!”*

*Whack!!* My fist practically falls onto the chess clock switch, preserving what life I have left.

*Beeeeeee .....*

*Beeeeeeeee .....*

*Beeeeeeeeeeeee .....*

I keep hitting that switch, pounding it with my fist again and again and again, just like a cardiac massage to keep my heart pumping.

I don’t know what I’m doing anymore, let alone what pieces I’ve moved where.

This is ..... which match of the 3-*dan* division?

Late-game? Of the ..... second match? Against who? Am I in position to win? Or am I about to lose?

I don’t know. Thinking about those things only makes my life tick away faster. Just move a piece and hit that switch. Keep the heart beating.

The whole room is swaying from side to side. Both of my fists are pressed against the *tatami* mat, but I still can’t see straight. Sweltering heat. Throat bone dry. My chest ..... my chest hurts .....!

Master’s face. That’s him, peeking out from behind that pillar over there.

Which means ..... this is a dream? Then, I don’t have to keep moving, do I? My hands are swollen, joints aching. Lungs filled with pins and needles. Whole body

burning up.

My heart ..... could stop at any second.

“Agggghhhhhhhhh!!!!”

*Wham!!!* Even so, I hit that switch. My instincts are telling me to keep hitting it. That I should never stop.

The dream that feels like it could last an eternity ends abruptly.

“I lose.”

Ah .....

I collapse in front of the board, as if that voice were scissors that severed a puppet’s strings. My opponent has surrendered. Oh, so this wasn’t a dream. I’m so glad I kept moving pieces. I’m so glad I kept hitting that switch.

Glad ..... that my heart didn’t stop.

“M-Miss Sora? Are you feeling okay?”

A worried voice. Garnering concern from a defeated opponent, failure as a Shogi player ..... Master will be angry with me .....

“..... Just ..... fine .....”

“If you’re sure ..... Good luck on the final day. I’ll be rooting for you.”

“.....”

Lowering my head takes every ounce of strength I have. Pathetic, so much so that my chest hurts even worse.

—Two victories ..... Two victories again today ..... Still ..... only three ..... losses .....

A mixture of happiness and relief flood through my veins.

But just for a mere moment as I feel the tug of the rope around my neck... I’m standing on my tiptoes, not home free.

Far from it ..... The rope could get tighter depending on how the other matches today played out .....

“..... Still ..... three losses ..... Consecutive wins ..... Two in a row .....”

“Sora.”

Somebody’s hand is on my shoulder.

The one saying my name with concern is a professional player, a Sub League director.

“Ah ..... I-I apologize. I’ll go to the meeting——.”

“Everyone’s gone home. The 3-*dans* were the only ones playing today, so we decided not to hold a post-match meeting. I made the announcement this morning, remember?”

Looking up, I find that I’m the only one still left sitting on the floor of this large arena.

How long have I been here? I honestly have no idea.

Crouching down to my level, the director looks into my eyes and says with concern, “Are you alright, Sora?”

“Chu- ..... Nanzeki-*sensei* .....

“Chuni is fine. No one else is here, see?”

Kansai Sub League Director Nanzeki 5-*dan* and I met seven years ago today when I took the Sub League Entrance Exam.

Even now, I clearly remember everything. It was an extremely hot afternoon in the middle of the *Obon* summer holiday.

He was in his second year in junior high, *chu-ni* or eighth grade, while I was a second-grade student in elementary school. I fell victim to the Sub League’s signature late-game tenacity and lost a match that I was on the verge of winning. I never surrendered, but I ran out of time.

I had a heart attack that day, one single move away from victory.

Of course, my Entrance Exam ended in failure.

I took it again the next year and passed, but ..... After that day, I started targeting Mr. Nanzeki and calling him *Chuni*. I always volunteered to play

against him when he was about to promote so that I could be the one to stop him. Looking back, I'm ashamed of myself.

I mean, it's most likely my fault that he decided to become a director at such a young age .....

"Chuni ..... What were today's results ....."

"Kunugi and Mr. Karako each took their third loss. You and Mr. Kagamizu won both matches."

"Sota and Mr. Karako, both .....?! ..... Wait. Does that mean, I ..... I——."

*Ba-thump! Ba-thump!* My heart starts hammering away in my chest yet again.

No good ..... My brain won't work .....

"Kagamizu has two losses. Karako, Sora and Kunugi have three. In other words, you have officially moved into third place. Even better, you play against the top two on the final day. Isn't that great?"

The hand on my shoulder tightens as Chuni smiles.

..... Great? What's great? I won't understand unless you spell it out for me.

"You are *in control*, Sora."

".....!!"

I have a hold on his arm the next thing I know. My grip is strong enough to sink my fingernails into his skin. The fog that clouded my vision lifts in the blink of an eye.

I control my own destiny.

I won't have to wait to find out if I promote based on the other match results. I win, and I advance.

Win ..... and I will become a professional!!

"I'm impressed you won in the shape you're in. It's true that neither of your opponents were facing demotion, win or lose, but both were among the best in Kanto's Sub League. Seriously, you've gotten very strong. What secret magic did you use?"

"I'm not strong ..... Nearly lost ..... I even thought I saw Master in the

middle of the match .....

“Kiyotaki-*sensei* is downstairs if you’d like to see him.”

“Huh?”

“The first day of the Sub League Entrance Exam was held today and he served as a judge. You didn’t know?”

“..... Master ..... was .....?”

Now that I think back on it, wasn’t Master the first one who rushed to my side when I collapsed even though he didn’t have a reason to be at the association that day?

Master standing over me, thick eyebrows high on his forehead, eyes trembling with worry. He looked so concerned at the time, but he avoided the subject altogether once I was home. He’s even been avoiding me recently, never home when I come to visit. Cowardly and also benevolent ..... My master in a nutshell.

—He was watching over me but never said a word ..... And after how hard I had to fight to convince him to let me take the exam in the first place .....

That’s exactly like him. A single tear rolls down my cheek and hits the *tatami* mat.

“Are you in pain? I can call Kiyotaki-*sensei* for you.”

“No.”

Releasing my grip on Nanzeki-*sensei*’s arm, I will my leg muscles back to life and get to my feet.

“I’m just fine. I can walk on my own.”

I want to prove that I’m not the weak girl I used to be.

To show my concerned Master that I’m fine ..... and make it so everyone can stop worrying about me.

Someone is waiting for me in the first-floor lobby when I step out of the elevator.

“Hey there! Congrats on your wins!”



My next opponent ..... and the person one place above me in the standings who carries the same three losses I do.

“Looks like neither of us can afford to let the first match on the final day slip away. I’m not sure if I wanted to declare war or to wish us both the best of luck, but still I wanted to say something and here I am.”

Shoji Karako 3-*dan* doesn’t let me get a word in edgewise and keeps on talking.

My adrenaline still hasn’t subsided, I’m thoroughly exhausted, and my voice is ragged ..... But I won’t run away. I can’t let him see my weakness.

“I’ve got to tell you, Miss Sora, you’ve gotten pretty tough! I remember thinking you were a pretty strong girl when we played during my Admission Exam, but never in a million years did I think you could take that child prodigy! I was playing in Kanto that day, so I don’t know exactly how the match played out, but I hear it was really impressive. Scaaary.”

“..... I hear you beat Sota as well.”

“You’re the one who knocked him off his high horse, so beating him was a cinch. The boy lost again today, yeah? You passed by him because of the rankings, so his chances of promoting are pretty much gone.”

“I also heard that you lost.”

“Yep, to the top, Mr. Kagamizu.”

The acceptance in his eyes, it’s almost like he knew he would lose before the match even began. He even starts complimenting Mr. Kagamizu’s skills.

“Whew, he’s strong. His aura, too! I’m older, but there’s no way I could take the veteran seat from him! Well, I’ve got two years to work with while this season is his last chance, so I suppose that would make all the difference.”

“.....”

—He’s trying to get insurance right now.

Mr. Karako wants to make sure he can promote from second place. Defeating me directly would be the fastest way, but he needs me to lose my second match for any hope if I beat him.

My second opponent—his promotion would hinge on my losing to Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan*.

—How unfortunate for you, old man. No damage.

I know Mr. Kagamizu's strength without being told because I've seen it with my own eyes more than anyone. The first 3-*dan* I met eleven years ago ..... It was Mr. Kagamizu who proved to me exactly how amazing Sub League members are.

But the pitiful clown has no idea and keeps running his mouth.

"How old are you now, *Ginko*? Fifteen? That's eleven years before the age limit kicks in, so you've got plenty of time ..... Oh, almost forgot. You don't know how much time you have, do you?"

After calling me by my first name like we've known each other for years—he says something unbelievable.

"There's no telling when your heart might give out."

"?!"

Those words seize hold of me like an eagle snatching a fish out of water. I can't breathe... at all.

How?

How ..... does he know .....?

"Are you sure you've recovered? Kiyoshi is a bit too much of an optimist, if you ask me. I saw you clutching your chest during your match today, you poor girl. How about going to the doctor? Oh, wait, they might force you to rest, which means you'd have to forfeit. Not that I would complain!"

"..... Did Dr. Akashi tell you about me?"

"Oh, no, no! He's an upstanding doctor! Kiyoshi would never breach doctor-patient confidentiality. Haven't seen him in over ten years, by the way."

His words are so full of lies I can't tell what's true.

It's not just his words, either.

That clownish smile of his must be fake as well.

—This person ..... Just who is he?

Part of me wants to know the real face beneath the clown makeup.

Getting distracted by something so trivial in the middle of a match would be horrible. But .....

The more I think about it, the more I realize that this is an off-the-board ploy designed to pressure me into igniting a bomb inside my rib cage. One that could go off on the final day.

“Oh! That’s right.”

As if setting up for the final blow, Mr. Karako prods at the dormant explosive in my chest.

“Do you know what happened to all the children you played Shogi with in your ward, Miss Sora?”

They were discharged, released from the hospital. That’s what I was told.

Just like me, they should be fully recovered and living full lives by now—.

“They died. Every single one of them.”

With that, the clown passes by me and goes out the association’s front door.

After all the searing heat that pulsed through my body not so long ago, it’s now frigidly cold.

The air conditioning is probably turned up too high. That’s strange. The association never turns on the AC in the lobby. But this arctic chill has to be coming from the AC.

Because ..... I’m shivering too hard to stand.

# SUMMER FESTIVAL

*Click, clack, click, clack.*

The Grade Schooler Practice Group, all wearing *yukata* and wooden sandals, walk down the shopping arcade as if they're on the red carpet.

"You're the Shogi girls, right? Good luck!"

"I got high hopes fer all 'o ya!"

"See you at the booth later tonight!"

All the people setting up for the festival say hello to them on the way by. The girls smile and wave right back.

It seems like somebody is saying hello to Ai with every step she takes. She's a celebrity at this point. No one cares that her Master, the Ryuo, is literally two steps behind her .....

"Wow, Ai! You're so popular, so good at Shogi and even taught us how to put on *yukata*!"

"I would expect nothing less from someone who grew up at a hot spring inn!"

Mio and Ayano, very happy with their *yukata*, shower Ai with compliments as they set up vinyl Shogi boards on a long table and line up plastic pieces on them once we get to the booth.

"The only hard part about *yukata* is the *obi* sash ..... Oh, Master."

"Hm?"

"Your collar is crooked. Come here."

"S-Sure ....."

Doing as I'm told, Ai starts fixing the collar on my *yukata*.

H-Her face is so close .....

"Hey, hey, look at you!"

"Just like newlyweds on their honeymoon!"

But Ai just laughs off Mio and Ayano's teasing with her *grown-up* smile. She'd always gotten defensive before.

Maybe she's matured a bit? Or .....

"Cha, too! Cha wants to do neweewed dings wid Masta!"

Charlette puts down the Animal Shogi pieces she'd been stacking up and rushes over to me, but Ai doesn't even flinch.

"But you're going to be his apprentice, right Charlette? Which do you want to be, his apprentice or his wife?"

"Ohh? Umm ..... Bwoth!!"

One heck of an answer. Mio's eyes go huge.

"She's going for both of them!"

"You can't, Charlette. You only get one in the end, even if you go for two." Ai calmly chides Charlette's bad move but tightens her grip on my collar and says, "Isn't that right, Master?"

"Hm?! W-Well, you know how it is. *Don't run a fork in the road* as they say ....."

"That means *you can only claim one in the end, so don't fret*. You're seriously worthless trash, *Sensei*."

That bratty tone could only be——!!

"Ten-chan?!"

"Hmph! *This* is a shopping arcade? Hardly! It's my first time setting foot in this dump, and it reeks of poverty!"

Wearing a black *yukata* of her own, the young girl flips her tied black hair, unusual for her, back over her shoulder like a bird's wing as a taller woman, also in a black *yukata*, stands at her side.

My second apprentice, Ai Yashajin, and her bodyguard, Akira Ikeda.

Ai Hinatsuru happily waves at the new arrival and rushes up to greet her.

"Ten-chan! I didn't think you were coming!! After all those invitations I sent, the only response I got was *I don't care*——."

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea!! After Akira gave you that messed up suggestion ..... As her employer, I have to accept responsibility!” Lady Ai Yashijin snaps back, her whole face turning bright red. The other girls just grin and invite her into the booth.

“Come and see Shogi! We’re playing Shogi over here!”

Visitors are starting to increase now that it’s past dinnertime. The Shogi booth is in full swing.

Passing out pamphlets explaining Shogi rules and Shogi puzzles she made herself to people in the street, Ai Hinatsuru is drawing in customers.

“Try out our wonderful prize machine! You don’t have to know about Shogi to enjoy the prizes!”

“Register for instructional matches over here! They’re real cheap!”

“Animal Showgi, wight ober hewe!”

Ayano targets the non-Shogi fans while Mio and Charlette try to get some business going. Ai Yashijin is reclining in the Shogi booth, waiting to do an instructional match. Meanwhile, Akira is fishing super balls out of an inflatable pool with the local kids. Talk about a free spirit.

Instructional matches with the Women’s League players Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashijin are 1,500 yen each. Mio and Ayano are still in the Practice League, so playing with them costs 500 yen, while a game of Animal Shogi with Charlette only costs 100 yen.

Mio is trying to use those prices to appeal to passersby.

“Play with the youngest Women’s League players ever, one time for 1,500 yen! Pair with a grade-school pro for only 1,500 yen! If you like amateurs better, you can try two grade school girls for 500 yen! Or you can try younger for 100!”

..... Out of context, that would be a bit ..... Worried that some real perverts might get the wrong idea, I take a 10,000 yen bill out of my wallet, hand it to Ayano and place my order.

“100 rounds of Animal Shogi. Make out the receipt to *Big Bro*.”

Now those perverts won't be able to go anywhere near Charlette because I've got her booked for the whole night!

Ai Hinatsuru rushes back to the table and says with a smile, "Master? Please stop playing around and do some work, okay?"

"..... A title holder shouldn't be doing instructional matches for peanuts."

The association won't tell me what to charge, but working for a measly 1,500 yen feels .....

"You won't be reprimanded for doing them at a small summer festival like this. Besides, the association asked us to work here."

Now even Ai Yashajin is telling me to *work*, so I don't have much of a choice anymore.

A customer shows up almost the second I sit down at the table.

"A four-piece handicap, please."

"Ah, sure ..... Huh? Kanegasaka-*sensei*?!"

Misao Kanegasaka teaches at the nearby elementary school and is also Ai and Mio's homeroom teacher. I've done Shogi lessons for her class, too.

"How nice of you to come. Are you here on your own time?"

"This is part of my job. It may be summer vacation, but teachers are still hard at work."

It's *Obon*, but they don't get any time off .....? Grade school teachers really have it rough!

"Off-color individuals tend to congregate at events like this. Rather than scooping super balls or goldfish out of pools, they attempt to scoop up children for coins. As a teacher, I must be vigilant."

"Oh, I see! Some people are just horrible!" I say with resentment while removing pieces from my side of the board. I don't even notice how loud they snap.

"But if that's why you're here, are you sure you should be doing an instructional match? Shouldn't you be walking around the festival .....?"

“It’s more efficient to keep suspicious individuals under observation, yes?”

What?! There’s someone after the girls here at this booth?!

“Where are they?! I’ll catch them myself!”

“In that case, please stay right where you are.”

A rather strange request, but that’s easy. All I have to do is do an instructional match. All right, the Ryuo is beefing up security!

After finishing up a 40-minute instructional match with Kanegasaka-*sensei*, the next customer steps up almost immediately.

“U-Ummm ..... A-A R-Rook handi- ..... Uh, two-piece handicap, please .....”

“Asuka! You too, Maestro?!”

The Worldly Maestro, Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan*, and his daughter Asuka, who’s the same age as me, are at the booth.

“G-Good evening ..... I-I brought... something for you .....”

“*Tonpeiyaki*? Yaaay! Thanks, Asuka!” says Ai Hinatsuru from the other side of the table.

Asuka makes the best *tonpeiyaki* pancakes. Ai inhales those things. Considering she’s been working nonstop without taking time to eat or drink anything, I’m sure she’s thrilled to have something to snack on.

The girls start talking among themselves, so I decide to strike up a conversation with Asuka’s stone-faced father.

“I’m not used to seeing you in crowded places like this, Mr. Oishi.”

“Heh. I was looking forward to kickin’ back during the *Obon* holiday, but Asuka wouldn’t take no for an answer .....,” says Mr. Oishi with his head on a swivel.

“..... Say, Yaichi, is Ginko around?”

“Big Sis? She had 3-*dan* division matches today. I’m sure she went straight home ..... Do you need to talk to her?”

“Nah, it’s not that important. Not that important, but .....”

Trailing off, the Maestro suddenly changes gears.



“I heard you’re challenging for the Crown. First off, congrats.”

“Thank you.”

I will avenge your defeat, Mr. Oishi! ..... He’d tear into me if I actually said that.

It’s best for the junior to keep quiet at times like this. Now I get why Mr. Oishi came all the way out here in the first place.

“Let me share a piece of advice.”

“Please do.”

“That guy, Okito, he seemed to be *trying* to force a repetition draw whenever he was on defense. It’s a valid strategy for defenders, I know, but ..... It felt excessive.”

Mr. Oishi doesn’t sound scared or frightened, more like he’s confused.

“It didn’t feel like an option on the table, but like he wanted *to force a repetition draw no matter what* ..... Catch my drift?”

“Thank you very much. That’s very helpful information ..... Extremely helpful.”

Even in the opening formation, the defender is rated at a very slight disadvantage. That’s why software gives the advantage to offense in Shogi.

Which means that software playing on defense will prioritize getting that negative rating as close to zero as possible.

Zero—in other words, a repetition draw.

In a match pitting software against software where both programs only play the best move available, that opening formation rating gap never changes. The two programs will keep playing forever.

Repetition draws and stalemates have gone way up as a result.

Rules have even changed for software tournaments to compensate.

“..... If he was already that way during the title match against you, Mr. Oishi ..... Then it must be true Mr. Okito ..... No, maybe not yet .....”

“Heeeello?”

A woman’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

“May I trouble you for an instructional match, handsome young man?”

“Oh, yes, sure! ..... Wait, Keika?!”

Standing across the table from me is Keika, decked out in a summery *yukata*.

Of course I recognized her voice, but ..... I never thought she'd come here wearing that. She's enthralling, to say the least.

E-Especially ..... that slightly open collaaaaaar .....!!

“Yaichi, that was quite a face you were making. What's on your mind?”

“C-Cleav- ..... No. Mr. Oishi told me something very interesting.”

Apparently, I had sunk so deep into the ocean of consideration after he gave me that tip that I didn't notice the Maestro went off for a smoke and that Ai is doing an instructional match with Asuka right now.

“But Keika, you're not serious about getting an instructional match, are you?”

“Sorry, Yaichi. The match isn't for me.”

Saying so, Keika steps to the side and ..... reveals a floral fairy behind her.

“Huh? ..... Big Sis?”

Right after her 3-*dan* division matches? She still came? Even did her hair?

On a side note, the director already sent me the results, so I know exactly what happened. But I can't let her know that I've been getting messages behind her back, so I ask Big Sis with a flower in her beautifully braided hair as calmly as I can, “Are pigs flying? Because you've never gone to events no matter how many times the association has asked you to before, so why in the world would you show up to a tiny summer festival in a shopping arcade like this——?”

“Hah? What's so bad about taking a break to visit a festival? Is there a rule that requires all 3-*dan* division members to hole themselves up in their houses and do research from dusk until dawn? Want your head on a pike?”

“Easy ..... I-I never said it was a bad thing .....”

Keika grabs Big Sis by the arm and pulls her back to keep her from sinking her teeth into me and then says, “Come on, you two. Isn't there something else you want to say?”

“.....”

Going quiet, all sorts of different emotions suddenly erupt inside both of us. I get a handle on all of them right away, but ..... The pit of my chest is burning .....

Too embarrassed to look her in the eyes, I stare at the table and say what I really feel.

“..... It’s nice, to see your face.”

“..... *Doufu* .....”

That’s all Big Sis says. That by itself ..... is enough to make butterflies dance in my chest.

She couldn’t have had much time to prepare at all. Still wearing her school uniform, she braided her hair so that she could fit in with everyone else at the festival, even just a little bit. She accessorized, too. Would it be too much to think she made herself pretty just for me?

—But ..... I’m allowed to think so, right?

Desperately fighting back the urge to hug her right here and now, I do everything in my power to burn this moment into my memory. I want how she looks right now to come to mind when my spirit is about to break in the upcoming battle .....

“Ah! It’s Sora-sensei!”

“Wady Snow White!”

Mio and Charlette recognize Big Sis and rush over to say hello. Now that I think about it, these girls and Big Sis have become pretty close after meeting at the first Grade Schooler Practice Group session.

Their eyes sparkled with admiration the first time they saw Big Sis but they couldn’t do much else.

Now they’re just fine running right up to her—.

“Sora-sensei! Try our prize machine!”

“It’s 200 yen to turn the dial.”

N-N-N-NOOOOOOOOO!! Don't you DAAAAAARRRRRREEEEEE!!

"Big Sis! Th-That's for, um ..... for kids! Those are kids' prizes! An adult like yourself should show some restraint! You are an adult, right Big Sis?!"

"..... You're acting suspicious."

The bustline of a kid but the mind of a full-grown adult, Big Sis's keen senses pick up on something fishy. So she pesters another adult woman for coins.

"Keika. Allowance."

"No, no. You make enough money on your own now, right Ginko?"

Keika politely refuses Big Sis's request and looks me right in the eyes.

*"You owe me one, okay?"*

*"Yes. I'll pay you back even if it takes the rest of my life."*

If Ginko and I ever get to the point that we're officially dating, I'll never be on equal footing with Keika again ..... Not that I am right now, though.

Desperate to change the subject, I ask Keika about something that seems off.

"By the way, where's Master?"

"Today was his first day overseeing the Sub League Entrance Exam, remember? Uncle Seiichi asked him to fill in this year."

"Master... a judge? Those poor kids ....., " I mutter before stopping myself, but Big Sis nods.

*"Doufu. Just as Yaichi says, it's hot and humid enough in those rooms as it is, but having to look at those gray whiskers of his all day would make me want to die."*

"I didn't go anywhere near that far!!"

Our first comically meaningless argument in forever continues until.

"Master. Sorry to disturb you when you're busy."

Ai Hinatsuru calls out to me in that mature tone of hers. Big Sis glares at her, but Ai is taking extra steps to make sure that she avoids making eye contact at all costs ..... Oh, boy .....

“S-Sorry, Ai! I need to get back to doing matches, don’t I?! Tell you what, I’ll do four once, no, ten——!”

“That won’t be nearly enough.”

“Huh?”

“We have a big problem.”

“Huuuuuh?! Wh-Where’d all these people come from?!”

I was so wrapped up in Big Sis I didn’t notice, but ..... There’s a huge crowd of people surrounding the Shogi booth right now.

And, I’m ..... not the one they came to see.

“..... That’s Naniwa’s Snow White, isn’t she?”

“No way! It’s really her?!”

“You’d never find a cuter girl anywhere! Look at that silver hair! It’s natural, too!!”

“I, like, have to be dreaming! OMG, I’m a huuuuuuge fan!!”

It’s not just Shogi fans. Actually I’d say they’re in the minority.

More and more people of all ages are flooding in with their smartphone cameras ready. The crowd is blocking the entire street around the booth.

This is some TV star power right here ..... Wait, Big Sis is on TV quite a bit, so her ability to draw a crowd is hitting full-blown celebrity levels.

All these people are thinking they have a chance to shake Naniwa’s Snow White’s hand and take a picture with her, so they start lining up. Th-The whole booth is going to get overrun at this rate .....!

“..... Fine, I’ll fix this. Yaichi, out of the way.”

“Huh?!”

Ai’s, Keika’s and my voice all harmonize in shock.

It’s extremely rare for Big Sis to even show her face at events, let alone little ones like this summer festival ..... But now she’s talking with the fans?! This’ll make the news!!

“I-I never thought I’d see the day you would volunteer for this, Ginko ..... Has there been a change in the wind?” Keika remarks.

“Ha-ha-ha. Just as long as it doesn’t bring any rain,” I jokingly add.

Just then.

*Plip ..... Plip .....*

“Hm?”

*Shhaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—.....!!*

“Dahhh! A downpour?!”

“Eeeek!!”

“Th-That’s lightning! It’s close! Everyone... get inside, quick!”

“Hail, too?! The heck is going on?!”

The people lined up in front of the booth scream and run for cover.

Just when I thought a few drops were running down my cheek, rain starts coming down in buckets!

Lightning... and hail! In the middle of summer?! The whole shopping arcade is panicking.

Of course, the Shogi booth is pure chaos with everyone trying to get under the eaves of nearby shops.

Ai angrily glares at Big Sis and yells, “What do you have to say for yourself?! Everyone worked so hard on this, and now ..... Half of our summer vacation is wasted!!”

“Th-This isn’t my fault! ..... Now is it?”

Big Sis looks over at me, unsure. *Dou ..... fu?*

“Wheew, this doesn’t look like it’ll lighten up anytime soon .....

“It’s a good thing the pieces and boards are not made of wood .....,” say Mio and Ayano as they quickly gather up the Animal Shogi set. It’s made of cardboard, so it’ll get mushy if it gets wet ..... The vinyl boards and plastic pieces are getting soaked in the rain, but there’s not much we can do about that at this point.

If only there was a place where we could keep doing instructional matches—.

“Big Sis. The 3-*dan* division matches are over, right? Do you think we could take everyone to the arena or the multipurpose room at the association?”

“And how exactly are we supposed to transport this many people in the middle of this downpour?”

“..... Good point.”

Well, my apartment is nearby. Then again, I wouldn’t care if it was just me, but my grade school-aged apprentice lives there, too. Having so many strangers know where we live wouldn’t be a good idea ..... Not that all these people would fit in there in the first place .....

Just as that thought crosses my mind...

Kanegasaka-*sensei* arrives back on the scene with a solution.

“Permission has been granted. Everyone, please make your way to Kita Fukushima Elementary.”

## ONE MORE TIME

A constant pitter-patter of rain echoed throughout the elementary school hallways.

Despite a large group of people engrossed in instructional matches and Animal Shogi not too far away, Ai Hinatsuru sat by herself just inside the front hallway.

It was her job to draw in any customers who happened to pass by.

——..... That's... not all .....

The printouts she made are stacked in a pile on the desk in front of her, Ai lets her legs swing beneath her folding chair as she, stubbornly, avoids looking at the group.

After all, there was something there she would rather not see.

Much to her dismay, that something not only approached, but started talking to her.

“May I sit?”

“No.”

“Thanks,” Ginko Sora snaps in response and takes a seat next to Ai without another word.

Ai, looking the other way, grumbles, “..... I said no.”

“Did you say something? You need to speak up when it's raining this hard, otherwise I won't hear you.”

“*Darabuchi* .....

“As I don't know what that means, I'll take it as a compliment.”

Then, Ginko puts on an arrogant air as she appraises the summer festival.

“Things turned out pretty well for being planned by a pipsqueak. About 60 points, maybe?”

“It would've been a perfect 100 if someone hadn't shown up and brought rain



with them.”

“.....”

“.....”

The air between the two was rife with tension despite the lack of eye contact.

*I can't stand this girl!*

That was the one thing they agreed upon. That, and that alone.

“Heh .....,” Ginko scoffed through her nose, glancing down at Ai’s printouts like a sister-in-law berating a wife who can’t cook or clean.

“What is this Shogi puzzle supposed to be? Are you trying to push fans away, giving people who know nothing about Shogi something this difficult? Besides, what’s the point in working through so many moves in the first place?”

“Solving puzzles has been said to be the best training method for a long, long time. Since you seem to be having trouble in the 3-*dan* division, Sora-sensei, would you like my copies of *Shogi Musou* and *Shogi Zukou*? I’ve already solved and memorized all their puzzles!”

“The boastings of a child who doesn’t know real competition. Solve all the puzzles you want; they’ll never make you stronger.”

“You don’t have to act all high and mighty just because you can’t solve it.”

“Say that again.”

Ginko grabs a printout off the pile and starts reading.

“.....Reverse Check and *idouai*, yes? Interesting, but that combination would never happen in an actual match.”

The key to her puzzle revealed in an instant, Ai was flabbergasted.

Reverse Check is a situation in which a player in check moves their King out of the way or deploys a piece, which consequently puts their opponent in check.

An *idouai* is when a player’s only viable option is to move a piece already on the board to block a check rather than deploy a piece from their piece stand.

On their own, both only appear in matches once in a blue moon.

Therefore, they are a blind spot of sorts for many players and thus often used

in Shogi puzzles.

This particular puzzle has over 100 possible sequences, and only once the end is reached can someone realize they are the key to the final answer.

In other words, Ginko worked through that many sequences in the blink of an eye. She got to the core of Ai's painstakingly crafted puzzle in mere seconds.

—Is this ..... how strong 3-*dans* are .....?

In an attempt to cheer herself up after this overwhelming realization, Ai put on airs of her own.

"S-So? That's one of the easy ones! I could make something so much harder if I tried!!"

Then she flipped a printout over and started drawing out a brand-new puzzle.

"This one is based on a sequence I used in a real match, for your information. If you can't solve it, that means you'll never figure it out in a real match!! It's a Double King problem, the piece stand has——."

Ginko watched the girl set to work for a few moments before whispering under her breath.

"..... Please, watch out for Yaichi."

"Huh?"

"He doesn't see anything else when he is focused on Shogi, especially during title matches. He'll work himself sick, forget to eat ....."

Ginko thinks through a virtual treasure trove of memories and recounts one in particular.

"He's always been that way. He nearly got pneumonia more than once because he came up with something in the bathtub and got out to work through that sequence, but forgot to put on clothes first. Seriously, Shogi is all he thinks about. Falling into open manholes, missing his train stop and causing all sort of problems ..... I had to go get him every time something happened... so that he wouldn't end up *on the other side*."

"..... What's that supposed to mean ....." Ai retorted, trembling. "Is that your way of telling me you've known him longer than I have?! Well, I know

more about him than you do!! I live with him, so I know so many things that you don't!!”

“Sorry to break it to you, but I’m not backing down. I’m number one,” said Ginko in no uncertain terms. “But please: stop Yaichi if he starts going astray. Grab his hand and pull him back.”

“If you’re that worried——!”

*Then why don’t you do it yourself?!*

Ai managed to stop herself from saying that at the last second. The very thought of Ginko saying, “Then I will,” frightened her beyond words.

She had her suspicions.

But ..... she was afraid to find out for sure.

“.....”

Ai fell silent. In a Shogi match that has already been lost, the situation worsens no matter what move is made.

However ..... she would not give in. Surrendering was the one thing she absolutely refused to do .....

“Your Shogi is good enough as it is,” Ginko said as she neatly folded Ai’s newly drawn Shogi puzzle and put it into her pocket as she stood up. “Keep going straight forward on your own path. I may not need these long sequence puzzles, but they could be vital to your success. You may be able to absorb ideas Yaichi comes up with that I will never understand... being the Shogi Martians that both of you are.”

Shogi Martians?

Ai couldn’t understand the meaning behind Ginko’s words.

Was this some backhanded attempt at encouragement? Or——.

“I was hoping for one more chance ..... to play against a stronger Ai Hinatsuru.”

“Huh .....?”

——She, she just said my name for the first time ever .....?! Wait, before that

.....

However, Ginko opened an umbrella and stepped outside before Ai had a chance to ask.

She disappeared into the squall in a matter of moments.

All by herself... into the darkness.

“What did you mean by that .....?” Ai whispers at the frigid air still glinting silver where Ginko had passed.

For some reason, she couldn't stop trembling.

# KUZURYU SHOGI FAMILY MEETING

On a summer afternoon after the festival came to a successful conclusion...

Three young girls met at *Twelve* on the first floor of the Kansai Shogi Association building to conduct an extremely cute get-together of sorts.

“The second Kuzuryu Shogi family meeting is in session!!”

“Secwond Kuduwu meetwing! ..... What’s dat?”

“.....”

The three participants, however, had differing levels of enthusiasm on the matter.

Ai Hinatsuru, the first apprentice and leader of the meeting, was ready and raring to go.

The second apprentice, Ai Yashajin, was far less so. Ten-chan couldn’t keep up with her older sister apprentice as Ai seemed bizarrely energetic these days. Perhaps it was the summer weather?

“I came all the way here because you wanted to talk about something in secret, but are you sure we should be doing this here? What if a customer comes in?”

“There are a few hours between lunchtime and when the restaurant opens for dinner, so the owner said we could have the place to ourselves. Ah! He went home to relax, so it’s okay to share secrets!”

“You realize we’re just watching the store for him, right .....?”

After serving on the committee for the summer festival, Ai Hinatsuru had become somewhat of a bigwig in the Fukushima district. She could throw her weight around.

“Oh, and by the way, that time when you complimented me on my article about your match was the first meeting! Let’s be open about how we really feel just like we were back then, okay?”

“Fine by me. But .....”

“But what?”

“What is ..... the golden French fry doing here?” said Ten-chan, jerking her face at the girl sitting across the table.

“Uhh?”

As for Charlette, she did not understand what was about to take place. The one thing she did know, however, was that she could spend time with two of her favorite people: Ai and Ten-chan. That alone made her happy to be there.

Ai explained her reasoning. “Charlette is an apprentice in training. Isn’t that right?”

“Oui!”

Giddily slapping her hands on the table, Yaichi Kuzuryu’s (prospective) third apprentice nodded with a big smile on her face.

“Masta, Masta said Cha can be his apwentice!”

“Huuh? When?”

“At the King of Naniwa Tournament. Charlette fought so hard in the Lower Grade Division that she passed out. Apparently Master got so caught up in the moment that he said he would take her .....”

“Cha, Cha twied bewwy hawd and Masta gabe Cha a tweat!” said Charlette, her eyes twinkling with glee.

All the while, blue veins started to pulse on Ten-chan’s wide forehead as she listened to the story.

“That utter piece of trash! Taking on yet another girl ..... He just can’t help himself, can he?!”

“Ten-chan ..... Yew don’ like Cha being Masta’s apwentice?”

The young girl looked up at her (soon-to-be) older sister apprentice with heartbroken eyes.

Even Ten-chan couldn’t find it in her heart to say no to the gaze of an abandoned puppy.

“..... Well, French fry, you always have been Trash’s favorite. I suppose this

is better than that *you can be my wife* nonsense he used to spout.”

“Yaaay! Cha, Cha lubs Ten-chan!!”

“In exchange, you will respect me as your older sister apprentice! Refer to me as *Miss Yashajin* this instant!”

“Yabashin?”

“Ya! Sha! Jin! Don’t forget the *Miss!*”

“Misyavawhin?”

“Not even close! .....Yava ..... No, Miss Yashajin!!”

“Ya ..... Virgin?”

“Not virgin! Well yes, but say it right!!”

Ai watched their exchange and giggled to herself as Ten-chan angrily pounded on the table.

“Aha-ha! It looks like Charlette can’t yet,” she added with a grin.

“Can’t do what? I won’t accept her as a member of this Shogi family if she can’t properly follow the rules.”

“Well, Ten-chan, you properly respect me as your older sister apprentice, right?”

“Ugh .....”

“Now back to the meeting! There’s something very important to talk about!”

Now it was Ai’s turn to smack the table.

Exhaustion already on her face, Ten-chan got the ball rolling.

“Ginko Sora said something weird to you, right? I would be lying if I said I wasn’t curious, but what did she say, exactly?”

“You see——...”

Ai recounted the conversation she had with Sora-sensei on the day of the summer festival.

It was a long story with several complicated elements, meaning Charlette lost track of it within moments and simply stared up at the other girls for the

duration.

Ten-chan, on the other hand, was burning with rage.

“Are you serious? Is that her way of saying she’ll never have a chance to play against you again because she’s going to be a professional?”

“So, you think so too?”

“What else could she have meant? My word! Is she that confident that she’ll make it through the 3-*dan* division so easily? Defeating Sota Kunugi doesn’t mean you can get full of yourself!”

“But she’s just one victory behind Mr. Kagamizu at the top, isn’t she? Maybe that’s why she’s so confident.”

“She’s ranked second from the bottom, remember? Those rankings are used as a tiebreaker in case two players finish with the same number of victory stars. Besides, even our *sensei* couldn’t get through the division in a single season.”

“If Auntie does become a professional ..... what happens to her Women’s Titles?”

“You should really look into that much yourself.”

Ten-chan was clearly irritated, but still succinctly explained everything for her older sister apprentice.

“As the rules stand now, a professional player cannot participate in the Women’s League. In other words, the titles in Ginko Sora’s possession, Queen and Women’s Throne, will have to be returned.”

“So the Challenger Match would become the Title Match?”

“Yes, it would. It’s the same as the year they were introduced,” Ten-chan said with a nod before adding an even more meaningful statement under her breath. “..... Well, personally I don’t think the association or the league sponsors will just let Ginko Sora walk away so easily.”

“Uwhee .....?”

“More importantly!”

*Wham!!* Ten-chan slammed her palms onto the table as she cut to the chase.



The most important topic for discussion during this iteration of the Kuzuyu Shogi family meeting, that being——.

“What is her and *Sensei*’s relationship? Is it true that things seem suspicious?”

“..... Yes .....”

“How far along are they?”

“Fourth row ..... Probably .....”

“Fourth row .....? Worse than I thought.”

The two rated the possible romantic relationship in Shogi terms. Even slow-moving Pawns can promote with a single move from the fourth row.

Both Ai and Ten-chan seemed to sense danger looming, but .....

“And you’re okay with this?”

“No! Of course, I’m not!!” Ai yelled back instantaneously, her face turning sour.

“But ..... I live with Master, and I’ve been watching him for so long ..... I can tell exactly what he’s thinking ..... So——.”

“What? Are you bragging now too?”

“I just ..... I can tell where Master’s heart is .....”

“.....”

Ten-chan didn’t say a word as Ai struggled to form words through the pain and longing in her heart.

She had seen Ai struggle to speak like this once before.

It was the first time they ever played Shogi.

That was the same face Ai had made after letting a seven move check path slip through her fingers .....

A few heavy moments passed before Ten-chan broke the silence.

“Have you ever considered how I felt when I learned that Yaichi Kuzuryu had taken an apprentice?”

“Huh .....?”

“It wasn’t so simple as *how could he?! or that jerk!* It was the despair of watching the world I had always believed in come crumbling down. My parents had always told me I would be Yaichi Kuzuryu’s first apprentice, that he would come for me one day and I believed every word.”

“Ten ..... chan ....."

“I kept playing Shogi by myself in my family’s manor until that day, never questioning that the prince would arrive at my doorstep. Hah! Laughable, isn’t it? Life never works that way.”

Humph ..... Ten-chan snorts through her nose, scoffing at her former self.

“The reality was that he took some novice who showed up at his door as an apprentice before ever realizing that I, with my years of experience, even existed ....."

“Is that why ..... you had the association dispatch a teacher all those times? Not request him as a Master?”

“It was. Yet I still couldn’t ask him to take me as an apprentice to his face. I didn’t want to accept it. I wanted to be Yaichi Kuzuryu’s apprentice for so much longer, and yet ..... I was passed up for a girl my age who had only been playing for a mere six months.”

“Ten-chan ..... I-I didn’t know——.”

“You’re the one who opened up first.”

So this time I’m returning the favor.

Social interaction was far from Ten-chan’s strong suit, but the bond she shared with her *sister* through Shogi gave her the strength to keep talking.

“The feelings you keep bottled up inside are pointless unless you act on them.”

“.....!”

Ten-chan said bluntly.

With no uncertainty in her eyes whatsoever.

“No matter how lofty your goals, how perfect your plans are, without taking that first step ..... Without the courage to step forward, nothing will ever

happen. It sounds corny, but nothing starts without taking action.”

“The courage ..... to take the first step .....”

Ai tightened her grip on the fan in her hand.

A present from her Master, it was her most prized possession and never left her person.

“I fought against Ginko Sora once, and I failed. Utterly failed. I committed myself wholeheartedly, poured as much effort into research as I possibly could, and still failed,” Ten-chan continued.

However, rather than speaking to Ai across the table, her words were aimed more or less at herself.

“There was nothing more I could’ve done to prepare, and I lost ..... My heart has never been so broken as it was that day. My composure, my pride, my confidence, everything was in shambles. I never thought I would recover. *Not until I broke, that is.*”

“.....!!”

“Precisely because I was so thoroughly defeated, losing doesn’t scare me anymore. There’s no other direction to go but up once you hit rock bottom. It makes everything surprisingly simple.”

With that, a smile came to Ten-chan’s lips. She flipped her hair like a black wing over her shoulder.

“My mind is made up; I will fight. I couldn’t care less how bad I get hurt or if my heart breaks again!”

“Ten-chan .....”

“I’m grateful to you. Grateful because I didn’t become his number one. Seeing him choose someone else is what made me as strong as I am today.”

Ten-chan lifted her hand into the air.

“It gave me the will to resist, no matter how unseemly. Even *yukata* at summer festivals are fair game. The me willing to go to any lengths to win is far stronger than who I was... stronger than the girl who only waited.”

Clenching her raised hand into a fist, Ten-chan poured her heart and soul into

every word.

“Make your choice, and make it happen with your own hands. I figured out that nothing else is worth it.”

Then she posed this question.

“What about you, Ai Hinatsuru?”

“I .....

Both of her hands clung to the fan in her grasp because they had nothing else to hold on to.

“..... I don’t know. I don’t know what to do .....

I don’t have ..... that kind of courage .....

Watching the girl on the verge of tears squeeze the fan where the person she loved had written *courage*, Charlette asked, “Does yewr tummy huwt?” and “Awe yew okay?” but her words merely echoed off the empty restaurant’s walls.



RECORD 4

夜叉神天衣

AI  
YASHAJIN

於鬼頭曜

YO  
OKITO

## EVENING SESSION

“Sensei, your tie is all crooked.”

“It is?! O-Oh ..... Sorry about that.”

Quickly grabbing at my collar, I apologize to a girl eight years younger than me.

The girl who gave me this necktie as a gift—the dressed-up Ai Yashajin—is furious with me.

The angrier she is, the prettier she gets.

Getting overwhelmed by my apprentice, I try to explain myself.

“Ties need to be broken in, and it’s the first time I’ve worn this one ..... It’s good quality fabric, but that makes it slip and slide around. Judging the length is also really hard to do, and with all these nice clothes, it——.”

“Just let me fix it for you already! Lean in closer.”

“..... Sorry. I really do like the present, though.”

Back on the day of summer festival, just before going home...

Ai Yashajin gave me a really expensive necktie.

*“For your birthday, and to say congratulations on getting to the title match. But don’t go getting the wrong idea. My sensei looking like a slob in front of everyone would be more humiliating than I can stand.”*

Never in a million years did I think Ai would give me a present. Not only that, it’s something I can use for a long time. So I was surprised by the gesture, and also by how grateful I was.

*“Thank you so much! I have to wear kimono for the title matches, so I’ll wear it at the opening night party.”*

*“I couldn’t care less. This tie isn’t for that night anyway.”*

*“Huh? Then ..... what is it for?”*

*“My next lesson will be at a place with the dress code. That’s what the tie is*

*for.”*

*“D-Dress code?”*

*“Be sure to wear a matching suit.”*

..... And, well, here we are.

Dressed in my best suit, I just spent two hours instructing Ai on a terrace with an ocean view. Now, the two of us are on our way to dinner someplace else in the same building.

It’s in the hallway that I get scolded for the crooked tie.

In the end, Ai gives up on fixing it and just reties the whole thing like she’s done it hundreds of times.

“That suit isn’t half bad. When do you wear it? I’ve never seen you wear this one to any of your matches.”

“Sitting on ankles can really be hard on suit pants. They wear out pretty quick. That’s why I never wear expensive suits to matches.”

Either I buy a bunch of suit pants that match one jacket or get suits that are so cheap I don’t care if the pants get ruined.

“Okay then, when?”

“For events where I don’t play Shogi. Someone else’s anointing ceremony, stuff like that. Oh, and I wore it when I made my 4-*dan* debut announcement. I became a pro in this suit.”

“Is that right .....? It must be very important to you.”

“Yeah. Big Sis picked it out for me.”

“So that’s why it looks horrible on you.”

“Dah?! H-Hey, Ai! That’s too tight, too tight .....!”

My apprentice’s fist is suddenly very close to my neck. Practically strangling me with my own necktie, she ignores my helpless plea.

“There. All done.”

“..... Thanks.”



Even though my life flashed before my eyes for a second, the knot is absolutely perfect.

“A grade schooler who can do neckties? I’m impressed! Why do you know how?”

“Because Akira can never tie hers the right way.”

“Makes sense.”

Her bodyguard Ms. Akira Ikeda isn’t with her today. I guess she’s just on pickup and drop off duty.

“Mr. Kuzuryu. Miss Yashajin. Your table is ready.”

A staff member greets us so naturally from inside the restaurant door that it’s almost as if he had been waiting for us to finish our conversation.

As for what happens after that——.

“*Sensei*. Going in by yourself, are you?” says Ai with one cocked eyebrow. “Offer to be my escort at the very least. Are you trying to embarrass me?”

“O-Oh ..... Sorry. Here.”

“That’s better.”

I extend my elbow and Ai puts her arm through it with a very satisfied grin on her face.

She’s still ten, but every bold step she takes makes her look like she’s more grown up than me. It’s like she grew up overnight ..... Hm? Whaaa?

“Ai? Are you, taller?”

“They’re called high heels, idiot.”

Dressed in a simple yet elegant black dress, Ai sparkles like a fairy gliding through the night.

And so, we arrive at a very familiar place.

San Angelic Kobe.

This is the wedding chapel with a view of the city where Ai played in the third Queen Title Match last season.

It goes without saying that the *tatami* flooring that covered the observation deck that day isn't here anymore. Lots of bouquets and tables covered with food are here instead. This is probably what it normally looks like.

Led to a window seat overlooking the night skyline, Ai and I start by having a nonalcoholic toast.

"Happy birthday, *Sensei*."

"Thank you. It's nice to go out and have a nice evening to celebrate."

"You're welcome. You can show your gratitude by making me the apprentice of a Dual Title Shogi player."

"Say what?! I-I can't make any promises, you know?"

"He-he ..... Then I'll have to find a different way for you to thank me."

Waves of mouthwatering food start coming out of the kitchen.

Now, for the all-important flavor——.

"Delicious ..... But everything's so formal I can barely taste it ....."

"After all the title matches you have played in, you should be used to restaurants with a dress code by now."

"Eating at a place like this for work is totally different from doing it on my own time. Plus, it's only players and association people at opening night parties and formal events, so I don't feel like a fish out of water ....."

While not that many, there are customers here besides us.

This is ..... a wedding reception hall, isn't it?

"This wedding chapel is open as a regular restaurant on weekdays or when they aren't booked for a wedding."

"Really? Well, I suppose it makes sense."

Having high-quality chefs and pâtissier standing around with nothing to do would be a waste, wouldn't it?

"The restaurant invites couples who got married here to come back on their anniversaries. I received an invitation as well——."

"But didn't have someone to go with because you're not married... which is

why I'm here, right?"

"Refusing the staff's kind gesture wouldn't have been right, so I asked them if we could use a space for Shogi practice ..... After all, I feel that accepting their kindness, at the very least, is my duty as a title match challenger."

"I agree."

Ai is already the face of the Women's League, and she pretty much represents the Shogi world in Kobe. People expect her to act the part.

Now that I think about it .....

There was one other player: yes, the title holder, Big Sis.

If they sent an invitation to Ai Yashajin, it only makes sense that they sent one to Big Sis as well.

But she hasn't said a word.

Of course, she might've outright ignored it because she needs to focus on the 3-*dan* division. It would be just like her.

But ..... what if she invited someone else?

Even though I know she wouldn't, thinking about Big Sis accessorizing herself to go out for a fancy dinner with someone other than me ..... jealousy more intense than I've ever felt before blasts through my veins.

Wait, wait! She wouldn't! Ginko would never do that .....

But ..... Ngh, being out of touch is so nerve-wracking .....

"Why don't I say exactly what you're thinking?"

Ai's voice suddenly snaps me out of all the painful scenarios playing in my head.

"Of course, an invitation went to Ginko Sora as well. Did she not invite you?" she teases.

I say as convincingly as I can, "Big Sis told me she won't be speaking with me because she wants to concentrate on the 3-*dan* division."

"Is that so?"

Ai grins at me like a cat tormenting a mouse ..... Dang. Why's she got to snack

on her Master's love life .....?

No one says anything for a bit after that. It's just the clinking of knives as we eat our steak in silence.

That is, until she suddenly says, "Are you dating Ginko Sora?"

"PWFFF!!"

Nearly choked to death.

*Cough! Cough* ..... "Wh-Where did that come from?!"

"I'll take that as a yes."

"W-We aren't dating ..... yet ....."

"Yet? As in: there is a future possibility?"

"S-Sure, it's possible. Anything is possible if you think about it."

" ....."

Ai looks down at her plate as if thinking about something very hard.

"..... You're right. Anything is possible."

Finished with her main course, Ai sets down her knife and fork.

"Anyway, there's something I would like to ask you."

"That's fine, as long as it's a question I can answer."

I've had enough of ambushes like that last one to last a lifetime.

Our plates get cleared off as the waiter brings out dessert and coffee. Ai poses her question once the staff has cleared out.

"Have you ever wished ..... you were born a little sooner?"

Well, that was expected. Coming from Ai Yashajin, it's downright strange.

"A generational debate? Have you lost confidence or something?"

"That Meijin having 100 consecutive title seasons means he simultaneously crushed the chances of 100 other people having those titles."

Ai ignores my casual ribbing and keeps going.

"100 people could have been happy ..... Include their friends and family

members, and that demon deprived thousands of people of happiness. He got the Citizens Award for that? Laughable. The people of this country need to wake up!”

After trashing the god without a second thought, Ai digs into her dessert without a trace of remorse.

Good grief .....

Well, I suppose she can't help it. I raised her that way because I know that kind of unapologetic boldness is what makes her strong, and at the end of the day, I like that trait.

After a sip of coffee to calm down a bit, I answer my apprentice's question.

“While there's some room for debate as to when the Meijin will have all the titles, personally, I'm glad I became a pro when he is in his prime.”

“Even if you could have had an easier time winning titles without him in the way?”

“Yes, because the Shogi wouldn't have been nearly as complete as it would be if I hadn't played against the Meijin. I'd rather be remembered for the quality of my matches than just as a name in history books.”

“Even being recorded as the loser for the rest of time?”

“I-I'm not sure about that yet, but ..... I have a winning record against the Meijin, so .....”

“This isn't just about the Meijin. Wouldn't it be so much simpler to sit at a board in an era when software wasn't stronger than us? We wouldn't question our value as professionals.”

“Actually, I don't think it makes much difference at all. There's always been someone better than you out there. That's just the way things are.”

“Hmph ..... Okay, next question.”

“Shoot.”

“Say there's something that somebody else treasures and there's only one of them in the world. Would you take it for yourself? Or would you give up on it?”

“That's pretty abstract.”

“The hardest questions typically are.”

Ai goes back to her dessert after asking her latest question. It’s almost like she’s giving me a turn in a title match ..... Hm? A title match?

Oh ..... That’s what she’s getting at.

The Mynavi Preliminaries have wrapped up this year, so the Finals to determine the Queen Challenger should start up soon.

As last year’s challenger, Ai already has a place in the Finals and of course she wants to keep that position two years in a row.

She may have lost three straight matches, but Ai forced the strongest Queen in history to resort to a repetition draw on offense, which makes her a head above the rest of the Women’s Shogi world as its second strongest.

That’s pretty similar to my relationship with the Meijin.

How does a challenger, armed with youth, take on the undisputed and overwhelmingly strong overlord? Her naivety was her downfall in the last three-match series, so how does she prepare to make sure it doesn’t happen again?

That explains why she was asking about me and Big Sis ..... Maybe I’m overthinking it.

“It’s true that it hurts, taking what’s important to someone else. Even I felt sorry for my opponent when I put him in check back when I was about to take the Ryuo Title.”

After seeing his family’s faces at the opening night party, those moments are bound to happen.

Actually, they’ve been happening since I was a kid.

Playing against someone who was going to get yelled at by their parents if they lost. The finals of the Elementary Meijin Tournament. My Sub League Entrance Exam.

Whenever someone cried after losing to me.

And, the worst of all ..... the 3-*dan* division.

There are many people who choose to give rather than take away, like Akashi-*sensei*.

But, people like Ai and myself can't live that way. The same goes for Big Sis.

...Because Shogi is all we have.

In that case——.

“You can't think about that in the middle of a match. If something is that important to you, any hesitation shows that your heart isn't strong enough to take it.”

“You would allow that?”

“Allow it? Yeah. If there's only one in the world and you want it more than anyone else, there's no choice but to take it. Isn't it obvious?”

Defeat gives you nothing. There's only one winner in the end. Second place was just the last one to lose. That's what it means to compete.

——Is this ..... Ai's way of cheering me on?

The thought crosses my mind. I mean, the more we talk about this, the more I want to take that title for myself.

“There's no need to hold back. It only puts you at a disadvantage in the world of competition. Just focus on winning because that's all that matters.”

“Even if I have to use traps and ambushes?”

“That's what you're good at, isn't it? I like that about you, your competitiveness.”

“Hm .....?”

The dark-haired Cinderella flashes a grin before pressing her dessert spoon up against my mouth.

“You better not regret those words.”

## CINDERELLA'S AMBUSH

"Nothing beats a good sea breeze ....."

A midsummer night in Kobe.

Osaka in summer is pretty much a sauna at night, but the ocean breeze makes Kobe very comfortable.

The two of us leave the chapel and descend a long, long staircase with the breeze in our faces ..... When I hear Ai Yashajin's voice on the wind.

"Say, *Sensei*."

"Yeah?"

"About Ginko Sora. If the two of you start officially dating ..... will you tell Ai?"

"Part of me knows I have to say something."

I sigh and look up at the sparkling night cityscape.

"But I wonder? How do you think she'll react if I tell her?"

"That it would be traumatic for her, obviously."

"R-Really?"

"Yes," Ai says matter-of-factly. Then she adds, "Even children fall in love. Girls, especially."

"Are you sure?"

"..... Yes."

Of course, I realize that Ai Hinatsuru has special feelings for me.

But, young as she is, can they really be called love?

Then again, if that's what *she* thinks she's feeling, then ..... My telling her could be traumatic.

Just as those thoughts are running through my head ..... Ai Yashajin stares up at me and says out of the blue.

"*Sensei*."



“Hm?”

“Your necktie is crooked.”

With that, she reaches up to fix it.

“Hm? Oh, sorry.”

Just like before, I bend over so Ai can do her thing.

Except, her hands go passed my tie and clamp down on my cheeks, sandwiching my face together.

..... Huh?

It already happened.



Ai swiftly presses her lips against my defenseless and completely exposed mouth.

It all happened so fast———a perfect ambush.

“I love you, Yaichi,” she whispers the moment her lips leave mine .....

But every word is clear as can be.

“.....?!”

Her second ambush hits before I can get over the shock of the first one.

Like a devastating haymaker, she hits me with enough power to knock me out cold.

Ai ..... is kissing ..... me?

And ..... she said she loves me?!

Is this her idea of joke? A prank, maybe?

This sequence is so unexpected I don't know what to think. But...

My tingling lips wash all those thoughts away.

“O-Oh ..... Uh .....”

I was that close to throwing in the towel when our lips separated.

But I hang on by the skin of my teeth and try to resist.

“Were you listening to anything I just said?!”

“Ginko Sora is the title holder. I am the challenger. That's what it comes down to, right?”

“That's not what ..... Wait, is it?”

Nearly convinced, I change course right away.

“No, this isn't okay!”

“Is it the age difference?”

“Age difference? More like your actual age! You're ten!”

“How old were you when you started having feelings for Ginko Sora?”

“.....!”

“See? Love and age are unrelated.”

No good.

Ai's preparation is flawless ..... Looking back, her *ambush* was already underway at dinner.

Hold up! Even before that ..... When she gave me the necktie, she .....

I-If that's true, then——.

“Wh-When did ..... you start feeling that way about me .....?”

“I wonder? When do you think it was?” says Ai with a shady grin.

There's no choice but to take a trip down memory lane after being asked a question like that.

——When? When was it?

The moment we met? Or when I held her hand and asked her to *be a member of my family*?

What about when she said she was playing for me on her birthday last year?

The time we visited her parent's grave together, did she already .....?

Then it hit me like a ton of bricks.

Right now Ai Yashajin is literally the only thing I can think about.

This ten-year-old girl is manipulating my mind like putty in her hand.

Th-This has to stop!! Any longer on this topic and I'll never be able to get Ai out of my mind .....!

“I ..... with Big Sis. We already ..... did the same thing .....”

“Do you think saying so will make me give up?”

She grabs my necktie and yanks me down to her height. Leaning in so close her cheek nearly brushes against mine, she says with a fierce look in her eyes.

“Well, too bad! My stubbornness and inability to take a hint come directly from my *sensei*. If you must blame someone, blame yourself for raising me this way!”

With that, she suddenly releases my tie.

“Wh-Whoa .....?!”

Totally off balance, I fall down the stairs and land on my butt in the most pathetic way possible.

“I don’t care if you have feelings for Ginko Sora right now. It would be far too boring if I didn’t give her a handicap,” Ai Yashajin declares as she lords it over me ..... and the world itself.

Watching her go down the stairs one by one, each click of her high heels ringing like bells in my ears, she looks so much taller than the average ten-year-old ..... and more stunning.

“I’ll take every last thing that girl has.”

Akira pulls up in a black luxury car right in front of Ai without a sound just as she finishes that sentence.

“First, I’ll become the Women’s Throne Challenger and claim my first title. Then I’ll avenge my loss last time and become Queen.”

The challenger flips her long, black hair over her shoulder like a dark wing and looks back up at me with bewitching eyes as she says, “And finally, I’ll take you. Prepare yourself, Yaichi.”

Once Cinderella climbs into the backseat of the car, she leaves the castle-like wedding chapel and disappears into the night.

Instead of a glass slipper ..... this Cinderella only leaves a soft tingle on my lips.

## CINDERELLA IN LOVE

Once I'm in the car, I give Akira orders as calmly as my nerves will allow.

"Drive around for two hours, I don't care where."

"Yes, my lady."

Akira doesn't ask for a reason and starts driving toward the freeway.

"I'm a little tired, so I'm going to lay down while I think over today's lesson with *Sensei*. Wake me when we arrive at home," I tell her without being asked as I slip off my high heels and recline my seat all the way back.

What just happened is replaying in my head.

Not the Shogi, of course. But Yaichi is still at the center of it all.

"The ambush was a success ..... But, I can't think of a follow-up for the life of me ....."

Returning home at once isn't an option.

Because my heart won't stop pounding.

Because my face is burning up.

Because my eyes are glistening.

Because my lips are——.

"..... Hot ....."

My whole body is, too, but ..... My lips feel scalded, throbbing with each heartbeat.

I mean, I know for a fact it's not possible, but I'm worried there's a mark left over ..... And under no circumstances can I let Grandfather see it .....

"..... Ya-i-chi," I repeat in a voice so quiet that even I can't hear it, just so that I will never forget what it feels like to call him by his name.

That was the second time.

All that practice on my own paid off. I didn't trip over any syllables when it

counted. I prefer to overpower my opponents in the early stages, and today went exactly according to plan.

Thus, the successful ambush.

But there is one thing I didn't account for.

"What to do ..... I-I love Yaichi so much ..... I can't catch my breath ....."

This tympani pounding away against my ribs isn't slowing down.

I love him. I love him so much. Actually saying it, taking action, made me love him even more. I've realized I love him too much to keep still. Pressing my hands against my lips I roll from side to side in my chair, hoping my beating heart will settle down. Haauuu ..... I love you .....≡ Yaichi .....≡≡≡

Then ..... I notice something else very important.

Akira is looking right at me through the rearview mirror.

"..... You saw that, didn't you?"

Sitting up very slowly, I begin the interrogation. Akira keeps her eyes forward but answers immediately.

"No, my lady. I didn't see anything."

"You're lying to me! Try explaining why you have a nosebleed if you didn't?!"

"That is because you are too adorable, my lady."

Her answers are instantaneous. Blood drips from her nose as her fingers squeeze the steering wheel.

"Remove the rearview mirror!"

"My Lady, that is impossible ....."

"Then turn it the other way! DO NOT LOOK AT ME!!"

I fling my purse at that infernal mirror from behind the passenger seat and then slide into the mirror's blind spot behind Akira.

I will need to collect the driving camera footage before we arrive at home.

Why go that far? That should be obvious!

Footage of Kobe's Cinderella rolling around in a car with her hands clamped

over her lips and kicking her feet ..... mustn't be seen by anyone, ever!



## BATON

“There’s something I want to give ya. Can I have a bit of yar time, Hiuma?”

I got that message from Kiyotaki-*sensei* about a week after the 16th match of the 3-*dan* division ended.

“Thank’s fer comin’ to the house. How ’bout a match?”

“I would be honored to learn from you.”

I distanced myself from the Kiyotaki Classroom once the 3-*dan* division season started in earnest, so this is my first time seeing him in months.

And, it could be ..... the last match I ever play against him.

So I pour my heart and soul into each move.

“..... Ya got me.”

I fight Kiyotaki-*sensei*’s *yagura* head-on and emerge victorious. Our Shogi was a battle of wills.

“Yeah, yar strong. Strong as they come. Ya’d be right at home in the pros.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

“Have ya paid yar Master’s grave a visit?”

“Yes, before the season started.”

My Master has already passed away.

He was already over 80 years old when he took me under his wing. He was also the only professional willing to take a talentless greenhorn from Miyazaki as an apprentice.

Though he didn’t have a family or a particularly impressive career, his love for Shogi was second to none.

We would play from dawn until dusk, and he would always say to me with the most content smile on his face: “*The Shogi gods are truly kind.*”

“*Why do you say so?*”

*“They brought you to me when I had no children to call my own.”*

Looking forward to the day I would be a professional, Master held on until the age of 90 and passed away in the middle of my eighth season in the 3-*dan* division.

That was the only season I finished with a losing record. I had so many regrets after he passed that I couldn’t focus on Shogi .....

Once he was gone, I had to choose a new Master from a list of recommendations provided by the association.

For members of the Sub League, Masters also serve as our guarantors.

*“I decline.”*

Except I refused to go along with convention. It was the first time I’d ever gone against regulations as a Sub League member.

I was the only one of Master’s apprentices still in the Sub League.

And none of the apprentices Master took before me ever became professionals.

His name would disappear from the Shogi world forever if I changed to someone else. Any proof that he ever lived would be gone. That realization made me understand the true meaning of being a professional.

*“He lacks maturity.”*

*“The Shogi world is no place for anyone who spits on tradition.”*

The case may be different for someone with overwhelming talent, but that’s something I didn’t have. It wasn’t long before I was on the verge of being fired from the Sub League.

Except everyone stopped saying anything one day.

I thought it was strange, but——.

*“I’ll look out fer him as a guarantor. Please let him do what he feels is right.”*

It was many years before I found out that Kiyotaki-*sensei* had stepped in on my behalf.

After that I became more proactive in the Sub League and said hello to

members who were all by themselves.

I don't have a way to repay Kiyotaki-*sensei* as a Sub League member.

I doubt he would want that anyway.

So I decided I would help this new generation, show them the same kindness he showed me.

"By the way, *Sensei*. You said there was something you wanted to give me .....?"

"Ah, right. That there is."

He hesitates, just a little.

"It's an ol' one, somethin' trendy youngens like yarself wouldn' like, but ..."

*Ba-thump*. My heart leaps.

It couldn't be .....

"This here's the tie I worn the day I promoted to 4-*dan*. I'd like ya to have it."

Kiyotaki-*sensei* holds out a necktie for me to see.

He's right about it being an old design and it certainly isn't worth much money, but I can tell at first glance that he's taken excellent care of it over the years.

It's a priceless treasure, it has to be.

"I ..... I couldn't! Surely, there is someone else more worthy of something this important to you——."

"I was plannin' on givin' it to Yaichi when he promoted to 3-*dan*, but well, that didn' happen."

"Huh? Why not .....?"

"'Cause his student uniform had one o' them clip collars. Can't wear a necktie with those," says Kiyotaki-*sensei* with an ironic grin. It's like he's saying *even the best laid plans* with his eyes.

"..... I suppose junior high school professionals cause problems you never account for."

“Ya can say that again. Can’t even tell if Yaichi is payin’ me back or not. Had it set aside fer him an’ everythin’.”

We share a hearty laugh. I can’t remember the last time I laughed this hard. At the very least, I think it’s the first time since this 3-*dan* division season started.

I correct my posture to receive the necktie from him with both hands.

“Then I graciously accept.”

“Good.”

As if handing off a baton, Kiyotaki-*sensei* sets the necktie in the palms of my hands.

If I do make it to 4-*dan* ..... I have no doubt that I’ll pass this necktie down to my apprentice in much the same way.

“Hiuma.”

“Yes?”

“I don’ want ya to hold nothin’ back in yar match against Ginko. There ain’t no need to worry ’bout me.”

“I understand and intend to play as best I can.”

“I .....”

Removing his glasses, Kiyotaki-*sensei* covers his face with his hand and tells me something that I never expected.

“Even now, I ..... have regrets ’bout Ginko.”

“About letting her go into the Sub League?”

“Nah, ’bout teachin’ her Shogi at all.”

That doesn’t sound like it was in jest.

The regret in his voice is palpable. But why? After all the time and energy that he invested in training her?

“I’m a wreck the night before regular activities, thinkin’ ’bout things. No matter what I try, that summer day keeps replayin’ in my head ..... It was a scorcher that day Ginko took the exam, just as hot as it’s been this year .....”

“*Sensei* .....

More than likely, he’s talking about when Ginko failed her Sub League Entrance Exam. I wasn’t there that day, but I heard she collapsed from a health condition.

*Sensei* isn’t finished yet.

Quietly, he adds.

“..... Got somethin’ else on my mind these days, too .....

“Something else?”

I don’t know what, but there is something. I can feel it.

—Maybe this is what Kiyotaki-*sensei* has been trying to say this whole time?

To say I’m not interested would be a lie.

It’s just ..... I have a feeling that if I find out, I won’t be able to play against Ginko with a clear head. That scares me.

“Kiyotaki-*sensei*.”

“Hm?”

“You’ve done so much for me ..... Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

I bow my head as low as I can, my hands still out in front of me.

A few moments pass before I hear him sigh and then chuckle to himself.

“Take care o’ yarself, ya hear? I’ll be waitin’ to see the results.”

For a brief moment, I see my own Master’s smile in Kiyotaki-*sensei*, instinctively looking down at the floor ..... and staying that way for long time.

If he sees the tears in my eyes, that’ll just give Kiyotaki-*sensei* one more thing to worry about.

## ▲ ALL YOUR YOUTH

Excusing myself from Kiyotaki-*sensei*, I get stopped by her in the hallway.

“You still have a little time, right? Come with me.”

*Sensei*’s only daughter, Keika beckons me into the kitchen.

Freshly baked food is spread out on the table.

“Have some before you go. I promise I haven’t poisoned anything.”

“..... Now I’m even more scared.”

There’s nothing more frightening in this world than being in someone else’s debt.

For a person who is as openly kind to everyone as I am, being on the receiving end makes it even harder to repay. I know full well that kindness is connected to naivety during matches.

So I take up the offer this time, too.

“Your timing couldn’t be better. I was starting to get hungry.”

Keika Kiyotaki and I have known each other for more than 15 years. And she and I have been able to sympathize with each other ever since the day we met.

For a Shogi player, it can be rather embarrassing to have the names of pieces in your actual name... especially when victories are hard to come by.

Keika, who spent time away from the game, is one of the few people who can understand what I’m going through.

“Your cooking is delicious as always, Keika. You’ll make a great wife someday.”

“Careful with those compliments, Hiuma. Don’t you have a special someone making even better food for you right now?”

“We broke up... a while ago, actually.”

“Really .....? I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was my fault.”

Just as she says, I had a girlfriend who supported me through thick and thin for years.

Relationships being taboo for Sub League members ..... is just a front. The majority of people in the 3-*dan* division had girlfriends when I joined.

It's the younger players who aren't interested in relationships these days. Every professional under the age of 30 is single.

Because, well, Shogi is more important to them.

Shogi was bragging rights for my generation and the ones who came before me. It was a way to become rich and famous.

But these new guys, this generation is truly in love with Shogi itself.

They're strong because they never tire of researching, no matter how many hours they commit to it.

They're strong because they devote the time and endurance that would have gone to relationships or making money to improving their Shogi skills.

I saw the revolution with my own eyes. I felt the pressure as my own losses mounted and I was desperate to find the cause.

My scapegoat became the woman who had always been there for me.

"I said that she's the reason I can't win to her face. Horrible, yes?"

Keika is going to berate me. I'm sure of it.

But I think there's a part of me that wanted her to get mad at me. Seeing shades of my ex in her, I wanted some of this guilt off my chest before I play the biggest match of my life .....

But, Keika didn't tear into me.

She solemnly smiles instead and says this: "I'm jealous."

"Huh?"

"That woman ..... She got to be compared to Shogi, didn't she?"

".....!!"

I drop my chopsticks in surprise.

“Hiuma, I know that you devoted all of your youth to Shogi. It’s impressive, really. As someone who ran away once, I know ..... And that’s why I have the utmost respect for you. For your devotion.”

A cold thorn that had been stuck in my heart for the longest time.

One of them ..... slides out.

“..... Thank you for the food. It’s been a while since I had home cooking.”

“You’re most welcome. I was worried about taking any more of what little time you have, but I wanted to thank you somehow.”

“For being involved with the Kiyotaki Classroom? But that was a great experience for me——.”

“My father already thanked you for that, didn’t he? This is different.”

Different? What is she talking about?

“Ginko told me herself that you recognized her strength. I hadn’t seen her smile like that in ages.”

“I see ..... Then, would you pass on a message for me?”

Tightening my grip on the necktie in my hand, I tell her.

“The final day of the 3-*dan* division is a duel to death. Stop being so naïve if you want to survive it.”



## TO BATTLE

“I’m heading out.”

After a delicious breakfast that my apprentice made from scratch just for me, I grab everything I packed last night and walk to the front door.

Since my kimono and most things have already been shipped, *everything* is just a bag.

Today’s schedule: meet up with association staff at Shin-Osaka Station, take the bullet train to Tokyo and get settled at the hotel hosting the Crown Title Match.

Ai Hinatsuru follows me to the door like a puppy and repeats what she’s been saying all morning.

“I’ve decided I want to go with you after all!”

“You know I can’t let you. School has to come first right now ..... And you’re still in grade school, Ai.”

Travel, inspection and opening night party are all jammed into one Thursday, right in the middle of the week, too.

It’s September, meaning summer vacation is over. The match will start on Friday and end on Saturday, so it would be possible for her come up for big board analysis on the second day. Possible, but the six-hour round trip is a bit much for a grade schooler to handle.

“The second match is in Kobe and the third is in Kanazawa, remember? We agreed that Ten-chan would work as an analyst for the second match and you would be there to do the third. Everyone was happy with that, right?”

“I want to go to every match!”

“Ha-ha! That’s a bit greedy, don’t you think?”

Even though the Crown Title Match itself is on a weekend, the trip will take four days including travel time before and after the match.

If she’s going to take time off from school, I have to make sure it’s as little as

possible.

Going to all seven matches is out of the question.

I thought Ai understood that .....

“We’ve been over this already. You were excited to go to Kanazawa, weren’t you? Why are you suddenly insisting on going to every match when you know you can’t?”

“Because ..... Because you need someone with you, Master .....”

She doesn’t trust me to win on my own, huh?

Well, part of that is my fault. It’s true that I would have lost the Ryuo title to the Meijin if Ai hadn’t come to the fourth match.

I’d kicked her out of the apartment at the time. Even Big Sis took the brunt of my cruelty when she dropped by.

But Ai didn’t give up on me. She made me my favorite foods and left them on the door without telling me it was her .....

—I can’t let pathetic mistakes like that happen again.

That’s why I’ve been acting cheerful all the time to reassure her and did my best to make sure the title match didn’t come up in conversation.

And yet ..... What brought this on?

“No! I won’t let you go alone, Master!!”

Ai gets in front of me and blocks the door with her arms open wide. Her eyes glisten as she yells at the top of her lungs.

Then she gives a reason that I never saw coming.

“..... Sora-sensei asked me to take care of you .....”

“HUH?!”

Big Sis ..... asked Ai to .....

“It was during the festival, when we were at the school. I thought she came just to ruin it. I thought she wanted to show that she could gather more people just by showing up than I could by asking for everyone’s help .....”

Well, she did draw a big crowd and she does act like a kid when it comes to Ai Hinatsuru.

I thought so too, at first——.

“But that wasn’t why she came! She was worried about you ..... Even though she was exhausted after her matches, she still did her hair and everything!”

Small hands clutching her chest, Ai looks up at me with tears in her eyes.

“I, I could never ask her the same thing ..... I couldn’t let someone else stay at your side, trust them to take care of you ..... It would hurt too much .....

“.....”

“But Sora-sensei, she feels the same way I do ..... Even so, she asked me to look out for you .....

Ai then yells with tears teetering on the edge of her eyelids.

“That’s why I can’t let her down! I have to do my best so that you can win your matches, Master! So that Sora-sensei can play her most important match ever without having to worry about you! Because, if I don’t ..... if I don’t, I’ll never measure up to her! I’ll never be on the same level——.”

She pauses for a second.

“The same level ..... as a Shogi player .....

“Ai .....

I’ve been treating her like a kid all this time ..... Never telling her anything.

Nothing about Big Sis. Nothing about Ai Yashajin. Nothing about the title match that’s about to begin.

I had it in my head that I was protecting her by not asking her how she feels.

But that treatment is exactly what hurt her. I made her worry.

Ai Hinatsuru has already become a great Women’s League player.

She may still be in grade school, but she can sit across the board from players like Big Sis and I as equals. So——.

“Ai. I’m sorry, but I cannot take you with me.”

That's exactly why I'm choosing to go alone. So that I don't give into what she wants on a battlefield.

"Master .....!"

Her face writhing in pain, Ai tries to say something.

But I take her hand before she can get any words out.

Then I gently press that hand against my heart.

Looking at the surprise in my first apprentice's eyes, I say, "Even if you don't come with me ..... You're right here, Ai."

".....!"

"Keep a close eye on my Shogi in the mid-game. You'll see yourself there, trust me."

Now does she understand?

Were those words enough to calm her fears? Will that innocent smile of hers come back with this reassurance?

Can she feel it? What's inside me ..... Our bond that will never change.

After several long, long moments of silence——.

"..... Okay," she says, a smile like sunlight filtering through treetops growing on her face.

It's different from the *grown-up* smile she's been doing a lot these days.

But it's not her innocent, childish smile, either ..... She really has grown up since she came to this apartment for the first time.

"Be careful, Master!"

"I'll be back in a few days, Ai!!"

Finally getting to see my apprentice smile for real, I set off.

Toward the battleground.

## ▲ TONSURE

“Fwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So, you have come, Drakin! Though, now that one such as I has officially registered with Kanto, you shall never again reign as a title holder! Come! Face your dying breath in my grasp!!”

*Bonk*☆

I lower my fists right between the dumpling-like bundles of hair on Maria’s head. Lightly, of course.

“What, what?! I’ve been struck? You struck me?! That is my head, I’ll have you know!! Even Master has never raised a hand to me!!”

“It’s up to everyone in the Shogi world to make sure Sub League members know how to behave. Now that you’ve been accepted, I won’t be going easy on you anymore.”

“V-Violence! Corporal punishment! A title holder has raised their hand against one such as I! Wait until the tabloids get their hands on this scoop!!”

*Bonk*☆

This time her older brother does the honors before he picks her up by the collar, immobilizing her in midair.

“Please excuse my sibling’s transgression.”

“Nothing to worry about. Congratulations on passing, by the way.”

Greeting me in the lobby of the hotel where the title match will take place is the newly inducted member of the Kanto Sub League, Maria Kannabe.

Behind her are her older brother and assistant observer for the match, Ayumu Kannabe 7-dan, as well as their master, Rina Shakando. They seem to be enjoying teatime in the hotel lobby, but they stand out like sore thumbs.

Well, this hotel is famous for its afternoon tea service.

Not only does this building have a huge garden, a chapel and a *tatami* room, it used to be a summer home of sorts for one of the bigwigs behind the Meiji Restoration. It became the go-to place to open Shogi title match series after

getting remodeled into a hotel because of its easily accessible location in the heart of Tokyo...

...Which is why the Eternal Queen came out to see her two apprentices in their moment of triumph, even with her bum leg.

I offer her congratulations as well.

“Same to you, Ms. Shakando. I hear that Maria not only won all of her matches on the second day, but she’s also the youngest to pass the exam this year, right?”

“Indeed ..... I, too, am slightly astonished.”

It’s unusual to hear Ms. Shakando’s voice wavering this much.

Reaching for the scone on the plate in front of her to steady herself, she says, “Never could I have imagined that I would be blessed with a new apprentice at this stage of my life, let alone a young girl ..... Despite my leg, I ventured to Tsuruoka Hachiman Shrine on the day of the exam to pray for her success ..... Me, looking to the divine for assistance. Ha-ha. Please, chuckle.”

“What are you saying, Master?! It was your gracious spirit, far more caring than any deity, which guided her to victory! Kindness too valuable to be wasted on my sibling .....!”

Ayumu, who reveres his Master like a goddess, makes a point as soon as she finishes.

Well, I might as well help out my best friend.

“I think you guys make a great Shogi family. Actually, the two of you remind me a lot of Big Sis and I when we became Master Kiyotaki’s apprentices.”

“How wonderful, to draw such a comparison. I shall do my utmost to perform as well as Kousuke.”

“But seeing the three of you like this, Maria looks more like your daughter with Ayumu rather than his little sister.”

“Hah ..... Refrain from teasing your elders, young Ryuo.”

Ms. Shakando lets my joke slide with a grin as Ayumu silently watches her reaction from the side.

Meanwhile, Maria gets between the two of them, takes their hands, and says, “Master! Let’s take a photo to celebrate the occasion! Oi, Drakin! Use the smartphone belonging to one such as I to take it! Horizontally, mind you.”

*Bonk*☆

“It’s a bit earlier than we planned, but everyone has assembled. Why don’t we begin the inspection?” suggests observer Jin Natajiri 8-*dan* and the whole group heads for the arena.

At times like this, journalists and staff members stand between the players to make sure they don’t get too close to one another.

The person who comes up next to me happens to be a match journalist with long, black hair.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. This being your first match against Okito-*Crown*, how have you prepared yourself? You said that you were researching sealing moves the last time we spoke.”

I answer her question with a question of my own.

“..... What is a Kansai journalist doing working a match in Tokyo?”

“A partnership of five regional newspapers is tasked with covering the Crown Title Match. Perhaps it’s because my family financially backs each one of them?”

“.....”

“If I may expand further, the person who owned this building during the Meijin Restoration was a member of the Edo Government and a direct ancestor of mine——.”

“Okay, enough already. I got it.”

Just how many perks are there to having noble ancestors .....?

“Seriously, you were at my challenger match against the Meijin and got into the Kanto Association’s 3-*dan* exclusive arena even though you’re registered with Kansai ..... Why are you going this far?”

“Because I want a front row seat. Shogi history is about to be written, and I

want to see every detail with my own eyes.”

“.....!!”

“This isn’t some paper tiger of a match where a professional plays against a robot arm. I am here to witness the true singularity and preserve it in writing. That is my purpose for being here.”

Singularity.

The moment when artificial intelligence becomes the driving force behind human culture.

In Shogi terms, when the torch is passed from human hands to a machine ..... This person understands that won’t happen when machines start playing Shogi, but *when two people play that way for the first time*.

“..... How much material have you collected?”

“Hard to say. Though, this match may be the last piece of the puzzle.”

Ms. Mato aka Machi Kugui was the match journalist for Mr. Oishi and Mr. Okito’s A-ranking placement league match last season, but Mr. Okito declined her request for follow-up questions. She’s been looking for another chance to talk to him ever since.

The rest of the world is focused on the Meijin’s Citizens Award, Big Sis’s chance to become the first-ever female pro player, and rooting for Sota to become the first ever to reach the pros while in grade school.

However, ever since software came onto the scene ..... this man has been at the center of the Shogi world.

Everything started when he, Yo Okito, lost to a computer.

The beginning of the end.

Sitting across from that man for the first time, something feels strangely off.

He towers over me, and his hair goes past his shoulder blades.

Studying the man who would look more at home as a university researcher than as a competitor, I try to figure out what doesn’t seem right about him.



“Ah ..... Glasses.”

He’s not wearing glasses like he did before. Maybe he only wears them during matches like me? Plenty of pros hate contacts because they dry out their eyes. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone as logical as Mr. Okito opted for Lasix surgery—.

“..... Uo? Ryuo? Are these pieces acceptable?”

“Huh?! Oh, yeah! Just fine!!”

One of the journalists for the Crown Title Match asks and I quickly give my permission.

I gotta be more careful.

No matter how curious I am about my opponent, I can’t let that distract me from the board.

We check the floor cushions and lighting after that.

“.....”

Okito-*Crown* just nods at everything without saying a word.

In the end, he gives his smartphone to the observer and disappears off to his own room without making a peep.

—He used to be more talkative, or at least that’s the image I had of him .....

The two of us will be in the same room for most of the next two days. I wanted to figure out a bit more about who I’m playing so that I won’t get taken by surprise by whatever happens in the arena.

There has to be someone in here who has connections to Mr. Okito .....  
Yep.

“Mr. Natagiri. Here’s my phone.”

“Ah, yes. Your phone has been received.” Looking at my phone like there was more to it, Mr. Natagiri says in a smooth tone, “I just need to add my number to your contacts, right?”

That’s impossible because it’s locked, yeah?

“Oh, and Mr. Natagiri? You and Mr. Okito were in the Sub League at the same

time, weren't you?"

"For a little while, yes. He was one of the super elites back then," says the Switch Hitter, grimacing as he reminisces about the trials and tribulations he went through during his time in the Sub League. "He traveled to the Sub League from his hometown in Hokkaido, even further away than my home in Yamagata. If I remember right, he had to miss a few regular activities days because he was snowed in. That's why I think he grew to prefer researching on his own, but ....."

Though he didn't say it out loud, I can tell what he's thinking.

"So, you didn't bring one Miss Ai Hinatsuru along with you today?"

"She has school ..... But, why do you ask?"

It seems strange that he would bring up my apprentice out of the blue, but now that I think about it, the two of them have probably played several matches at the Kiyotaki Classroom by now.

"Ohhh, nothing. I just had a gander at her match records recently and felt so touched! A little girl like that, doing things that software could never come up with! ..... And it came to me..." Glancing down the hallway where his former training partner disappeared, the man who has committed more effort to his professional career than anyone else longingly says, "If only she had arrived sooner ..... Maybe things would be different."

Whether those words were aimed at Mr. Okito or remarking on how software has taken over the Shogi world as a whole... I can't tell.

Mr. Okito doesn't say a word during the entire opening night party, which I kind of expected.

"Um ..... Mr. Natagiri? I don't see a time slot for *players' speeches* in the schedule."

"That's because there isn't one. Okito-Crown's request."

"For real?! He can just do that?"

"He did the same thing during the King Title Match, so why not here? Public

speaking isn't exactly Mitsuru's strong suit, either."

I wouldn't say I'm particularly good at speeches, but ..... I spent all that time thinking about what I wanted to say .....

Both Mr. Okito and I went back to our rooms pretty early in the night, but thanks to Tamayo Rokuroba crashing the party (saying "*I live right around the corner!*") and Maria's formal introduction, I hear it was a blast. Players in the match are more like decorations at these things anyway.

Still, I get to go into this title match without any incidents.

Then, the next morning.

As the Challenger, it is a sign of respect to be the first in the arena. I arrive early and sit on my ankles until Mr. Okito makes his entrance at exactly 15 minutes before the starting time. But, one look at him and I jump to my feet.

"Huuuh?!" I blurt out...

...Because, seriously——!

"GAH!!"

Everyone else in the arena has the same reaction to the Crown's arrival as I did.

I mean, come on——!!

The hair that went halfway down his back yesterday is gone.

Well ..... I wouldn't say he *cut* it off so much as *shaved* it.

The now completely bald Crown sits down in the upper seat and reaches for the piece box as if nothing were out of the ordinary even though he looks like he just went through a Buddhist rite of passage.

"....."

Seriously, his shaven head's bluish black tint is so unnerving that it's like someone's disembodied soul is bowing to me from across the board .....

I heard a terrified, “What in the world?!” from Maria when the Crown walked in. Now she’s hiding behind Ms. Shakando in the back corner of the room.

Chatter immediately starts up once the sheer impact of his entrance fades.

“With the new rules in place, he couldn’t have left the hotel after yesterday’s inspection .....

“Which means ..... He did this himself after the opening night party?! In his own room?!”

“..... Is this the first time ever?”

“N-No ..... There was someone who shaved his head before a big match before, but this .....

Yes, it has happened before.

A player challenging for the Meijin title showed up for a match with a shaved head many years ago. Known as the Cue Ball Match, it’s one of the few big happenings in Shogi during the last century.

But, was the *challenger* psyching himself up for the match?

This is a match between two title holders, but Mr. Okito is defending his. Further still, he has been a pro far longer than me.

If he did this as a stunt ..... it would go against everything I’ve been taught that it means to be a pro Shogi player.

I didn’t think Mr. Okito was the type of person to take that risk.

At the same time, though, he doesn’t strike me as the kind of person who would shave off all their hair for a mental edge.

—More like ..... to get rid of the excess.

Completely oblivious to the shock on everyone’s face around him, Mr. Okito sets out the pieces. Meanwhile, I’m coming to terms with the fact that I’m shaken.

If he did this for the reason I’m thinking he did .....

—I know I told Ayumu nothing short of him *plugging a calculator into his head* would surprise me, but .....

Honestly, this is on the same level.

“Please ..... proceed with the piece flip,” Natagiri 8-*dan* urges the obviously uncomfortable match recorder.

The recorder then picks up five Pawns, tosses them into the air——.

Mr. Okito mutters something just before they fall. It’s the first time I’ve heard my opponent’s voice since I got to Tokyo.

“..... Five face up.”

“Huh?”

That whisper was so quiet that I’m probably the only one who heard it, but ..... He said it. I know he did.

The match recorder looks down at the pieces sprawled out on the cloth and announces the results.

“All five Pawns have landed face up. Okito-*Crown*, the first move is yours.”

“.....?! ”

I look at my opponent’s face, stunned.

Clean-shaven and cheeks sunken in, it looks like he’s removed all impurities. Seriously, he’d fit in with monks in training. His eyes look huge, and they’re sparkling with sheer intensity.

This doesn’t seem like a simple bluff or a ploy.

More like ..... Mr. Okito was testing to see how good the reflexes in his eyes are. He was trying to read the characters on all five pieces before they hit...

...Which leads me to one conclusion.

——It’s not just his senses. He’s trying to cross the physical barrier between people and machines, too.

He’s not just getting rid of what he doesn’t need.

Seeing his determination to reconstruct his own body stabs the little bit of naivety I still had in my heart.

——He went this far .....?

How am I supposed to fight against someone who's trying to surpass the human intellect altogether? How am I supposed to win against that?

—Keep it together!

I reflexively bring my hand to my heart.

If there's an answer, it has to be in here.

## SECRET MEETING

The match starts with a Bishop Exchange.

“T-Too fast .....!!”

Mr. Okito and I volley back and forth all the way up to the 36th move without either of us using any waiting time at all. The match recorder’s eyes spin as he tries to keep up but gives up on writing our moves down in the end and focuses on keeping the tablet updated.

“Ah, umm ..... I-It’s time to leave! Please exit!” says a very confused journalist as the rest of the disgruntled media people follow him out.

The media is allowed to stay in the arena until the second move to take pictures, so it’s normal for players to do their first moves very slowly. Apparently, some players used to strike poses in the old days.

But, considering that Mr. Okito flat-out removed the players’ speeches time slot from the opening party, he’s not about to start doing any favors for the media. Besides, there’s nothing in this man’s head right now other than the Shogi in front of him.

One look at his laser-focused eyes and it’s obvious.

“Please leave the arena! As quietly as possible, please!”

One photographer who wanted to get a picture of Mr. Okito’s head at the very least snaps a picture at the last possible second before stepping outside.

I’ll bet that the Shogi world ..... no, the whole country is going to get turned upside down the moment it gets published.

Not that that incoming pandemonium has any effect on the board.

Now that the arena has finally quieted down, the quick snaps of our pieces are the only sounds to be heard.

“Bishop Exchange Reclining Silver ..... or... a new variation of it,” the journalist Ms. Mato, who has been continuously *glued* to the boardside table ever since the match gets underway, absentmindedly says.

Almost like she had no idea, but it's somehow exactly what she was expecting.  
—Did she think Mr. Okito would do something totally bizarre if he were on offense?

As for me, this is exactly what I planned for.

I've seen this formation more often than my parents' faces. It was just that popular, but now it's been researched to the point that there are five ways to make life difficult for offense and defense...

...Which is why so many people have used it.

Offense has its own advantages while defense has counters. Since there are ways to make the match extremely one-sided, pros have figured out how to prevent those sequences. Therefore, no one really uses this formation in pro matches anymore.

"Nh .....!"

Flexing my fingers, I reach the moment of truth in the Bishop Exchange Reclining Silver strategy... a point where both software and humans agree that both sides are *equal*.

Now that my Silver has taken its place on a *chair* above my Pawn, Mr. Okito finally leans back and uses some waiting time to read the board.

Standards don't exist from this point on, only *examples* from upper matches.

"Fssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh ....."

A long breath, sounding almost like a soft whistle fills the arena.

Sucking air through closed lips, Mr. Okito looks out over the vast ocean of options laid out on the board in front of him.

I know he's just breathing, but it reminds me of a computer's high-speed fan turning on.

So I leave my seat for the first time and head for the restroom.

"..... Whew ....."

After a few moments of walking down the hallway outside the arena, I finally catch my breath. The restroom, however, is still way down the hall.



Glancing back on what should be an empty corridor behind me, “I’m pretty far away from the arena, but ..... Someone might’ve heard that .....”

Mr. Okito’s focus today is inhuman. Everything about him is.

The reason I stepped out at this moment, when the standard sequence ended, is because I didn’t want him to pick up on it, but ..... I don’t think I could’ve kept my cool being so close to Mr. Okito much longer.

Time usage. Gaze. Breathing. Subtle movements.

“And ..... his match intensity.”

Get a brand-new outfit and you feel like showing it off. *Hey! Doesn’t look good on me? I came up with a new sequence just for you!!* Getting a new hairstyle gives off a vibe like *I just switched things up. Want to play Ranging Rook?*

“I’ve heard people compare Shogi to relations before, but now I really get it.”

Since we can’t use words to communicate, we have to find the smallest cues from the person across the board to figure out what is going on in their head.

But the impact from the other side was so great this time that I realized just how unprepared I am for this whole thing ..... Kind of like shopping for wedding dresses on the first date.

Basically, I feel like I’ll lose confidence if I have to keep looking at him for a long time.

“For real, what kind of messed up thought process would make someone do that? Well, I guess anyone would *think* about it but wouldn’t actually go through with it. It just comes off as an off-the-board ploy. I guess it is possible to be caught off guard by someone’s personality before their playing style when you go against him for the first time ..... I’d feel a lot better if I could just talk to the guy.”

The thing is, though, we’re in the middle of a match that is being covered by a live feed. We can’t just take time out to chat.

Finishing up in the restroom, I step outside and see someone coming down the hall.

“..... Hm? That’s ..... Oh, crap.”

Mr. Okito.

He's probably played his move. I have to pass by him to get back into the arena because this is the only route. Talk about leaving a bad taste. Horrible taste.

I was honestly hoping that I'd get back to the arena before he left, but ..... It seems like he isn't the type to care about that kind of etiquette.

The go-to standard in the situation is to ignore each other.

"....." (*Bow*)

I lower my head just a little as we cross paths and step toward the arena—.

"Your deduction is accurate," he says as our shoulders pass.

"?!"

Freezing on the spot, I turn to face him, but he keeps speaking with his back to me.

"You were unfazed by my appearance. Surely you comprehend the reason?"

Unfazed? I nearly had a heart attack.

But ..... When it comes to why he shaved his head, it's true that reasoning won out over shock.

Mr. Okito sounds like he can read my thoughts as he says, "As both of us passed the metal detector screening, we have mutual assurance that no one is carrying an electronic device. Furthermore, only players are permitted to walk this hallway. No reporters are within earshot and we lack the means to communicate with anyone else. I concluded that the conditions were perfect for a secret meeting."

"Th-That may be true, but ....."

"Shogi is, for all intents and purposes, an exchange of information. I consider it to be a vital part of the match."

"....."

"I would like to hear your deduction."

Part of me isn't sure if we should keep talking like this.

But Mr. Okito is the one ignoring title match standards by starting this secret conversation and my curiosity gets the better of me. So, I tell him, “..... The way software gets used feels cramped, like someone trying to wear clothes that don’t fit.”

“Concur,” says Mr. Okito in quick agreement and gestures for me to go on.

It’s like me trying to use the Katsura Single Jump, for example.

I figured it out after using it quite a few times, but it’s too complex for human beings to use effectively. People just don’t have the *reading ability* to pull it off.

So I decided not to use it again. An opponent trying it against me isn’t scary at all. I’d prefer they try, actually, because I know they’ll mess up at some point.

“Software has always rated a specific formation on the board and calculated the best move from there based on a point system. Plus 500 is an edge, 800 is an advantage and 1500 is in position to win. .... is usually how it works.”

Making it that far, I change gears.

“But, it’s just a coincidence that the numbers link to winning or losing. So long as it’s a battle between two people, a software rating is just a reference point.”

Because, well, it’s just putting a value on the formation.

Formations aren’t what decide the match. Even if there is a check path, players can miss them if their Shogi skills aren’t high enough or they’re too tired to notice.

Software ratings and the best possible moves won’t help people on their own.

In other words—I get to the point.

“Have you ..... developed software to enhance your playing style?”

“Dissent.”

“Huh?”

“Not my playing style. My talent.”

That answer goes way beyond my expectations.

“It is necessary to first take body measurements in order to produce a tailor-made suit. Thus, I devised a system for measuring my talent and used those

readings to customize software for it.”

People have tried to measure their talent with software before.

I remember reading about some guy who used software to analyze match records and put a number to the strongest Shogi players in history somewhere.

“Think of it as a way to *visualize talent*. While not precise, it is more accurate than the exchange of information between humans in many instances.”

“You’re ..... trying to quantify talent?”

“As clichéd as such attempts have become, yes.”

After giving that explanation, he says something else from out of nowhere.

“Comprehension of your own talent reduces misfortune.”

“What you mean by *misfortune*?”

“The Sub League is a prime example.”

*Ba-thump!* My heart jumps in my chest.

Because someone very important to me is fighting there right now .....

“The age limit is a parameter that says: *If one has committed themselves wholeheartedly to becoming a professional and has yet to succeed by this age, giving up would be in their best interest*. However, that rating system has produced an immeasurable amount of misfortune. Should there be a means of discovering one’s talent level at an earlier stage, that misfortune would decrease.”

“..... I admit that effort alone isn’t enough to make your dreams come true in the Shogi world. There’s no guarantee effort will pay off in the end. That’s true.”

Trying and failing to hide how angry that statement made me, I counter.

“But! That effort isn’t why they fail. To play Shogi and challenge the impossible isn’t misfortune. Far from it! I’m going to play Shogi no matter what the software says. For me, that’s what true happiness is.”

“Is that so? Perhaps because you possess exceptional talent, fourth junior high school professional and the youngest titleholder in history, Yaichi Kuzuryu-

Ryuo.”

“.....!!”

“Someday you will come to understand. The misfortune of those without talent ..... those without wings who yearn for the sky.”

Mr. Okito drones on without a shred of emotion.

Wait, haven’t I heard this voice somewhere before .....?

“My system is nearing completion. This title match is one of its final tests.”

“..... To see if your playing style can beat me with that talent-rating software’s support? Would you mind answering something for me, then?”

“If I’m capable.”

“Did the software tell you to come talk to me right now?”

“I hold my response.”

“Heh!”

I can see right through him. Right to his core.

And I know.

I know I absolutely cannot lose to this guy.

“No matter what some machine says about you, it’s got nothing to do with me. I will win playing my Shogi. That’s all there is to it.”

“..... Affirmative. My rating is irrelevant.”

Yo Okito-*Dual Title* starts walking again.

I make my way back to the arena, too.

We go our separate ways—our paths never cross again.

“It’s officially time, so please seal your next move, Kuzuryu-Ryuo.”

Observer Natagiri 8-*dan*’s voice derails my train of thought.

“Huh?”

I’ve been reading so deep into the board that I didn’t even notice ..... Looking

up, everyone with permission to be in the arena is here, including the assistant observer, Ayumu.

—6:00 p.m. .... Already ....?

“Please do a seal. No pressure, though,” says Mr. Natagiri with a gentle smile.

Whoever’s turn it is when the scheduled time arrives has to perform a sealing move.

But they can take all the time they want so long as they still have the waiting time.

That being said, you have to have nerves of steel to endure the pressure that comes with trying to think with so many people being forced to stand by in the arena .....

—He’s strong ..... Every single one of his moves have been the best counter, sometimes even better than perfect .....

Mr. Okito’s software-enhanced research is flawless.

Looking back over the board, the first Pawn he advanced at the start of a match has already broken through my defenses and promoted in my territory. It’s close enough to be a serious threat to my King if I make one wrong move.

—Mr. Natagiri is just being nice ..... Everyone in here can see I’m against the ropes.

Should I reinforce my defenses?

...Or try to reach his King first?

The latest incarnation of Bishop Exchange Reclining Silver skips the mid-game entirely, jumping straight to the late-game once the early-game has run its course. It’s a never-ending cycle.

One thing’s for sure: my next move will make or break the match.

“All right ..... I will seal.”

The same words I said back on that night.

—Which reminds me ..... Tomorrow is the 3-*dan* division’s final day.

That thought hits me just as I take the envelope, perform the sacred rite and

head back to my room alone.

## FINAL NIGHTS

Hiuma Kagamizu arrived at the hotel just as one of his junior 3-*dans* had almost finished checking in at the front desk.

Walking up behind him, Hiuma said in a friendly tone, “Hi.”

“Oh, hello.”

A big, unfamiliar city. Already under the immense pressure that comes with the night before the final day of matches in the 3-*dan* division, seeing Hiuma’s face was the first ounce of relief the young 3-*dan* had felt all day.

Kansai Sub League members started a tradition of staying in Shinjuku whenever they had to journey to Kanto decades ago. Many still carry it on to this day.

Now that he had been coming here for over 20 years, the staff at the Shinjuku Park Hotel knew Hiuma so well that he could check in with little more than a nod.

Despite not making any plans to meet and with each person traveling to Tokyo on their own, the Kansai Sub League members staying at the hotel gathered together as if guided by an unknown force.

Therefore, it has become standard for the Kansai players to eat together the night before the final matches.

Though all 3-*dans* may be in Tokyo this night, steps have always been taken to ensure that Kansai players never meet head-to-head on the final day. However——.

“Did you hear that the association set up hotels for Sora and Kunugi? They’ve even got their own attendants. I get that they’re famous an’ all, but how is that fair? You’re the one with the best record, Mr. Kagamizu, so you should be the one that .....

“Easy there.”

With their nerves settling and a hot meal in their stomachs, the 3-*dans* began voicing their misgivings about the unique arrangements made for Ginko Sora



and Sota Kunugi.

Hiuma did his best to quell their frustration by saying as gently as possible, “Ginko is a high school girl and Sota is still in elementary school, yes? They need someone to watch out for them.”

His words, however, did little to convince the 3-*dans*.

One sitting at a different table slammed his fist down.

“These match ups... it’s just not fair! All of us have traveled all this way, so why——!”

“Not another word.”

Hiuma silenced his junior with authority.

“For Ginko, Kunugi and even Mr. Karako, getting this much attention ..... constantly being in the spotlight can’t be a walk in the park.”

Hiuma empathized with the group rather than spurned their anger.

——We’re the ones that get trodden over at every turn .....

It may have been part of their *training*, but Sub League members were often required to serve as errand runners or do odd jobs. The Shogi world was built on professionals exploiting Sub League members.

The only reason they put up with that treatment was because the professionals had once been Sub League members themselves.

——Fairness trumps all else in the Sub League. Anyone who doesn’t abide by it gets shunned by the rest.

The very fact that they were required to travel to Kanto for the final day was enough to draw the ire of Kansai Sub League members.

...More than a decade ago...

Hiuma Kagamizu, a native of Kyushu who had only known the Kansai Shogi Association, first made the trip to the Kanto Shogi Association in Sendagaya when he joined the 3-*dan* division.

*What if I get lost on the way .....*?

A terrified Hiuma went to one of his seniors looking for reassurance, “Um,

*may I ask you something? How do you get from Sendagaya Station to the Kanto Association building?"*

Hiuma would never forget the answer he received that day for the rest of his life.

*"Just look fer guys that look like Sub Leaguers an' follow 'em!"*

—I thought he was joking, but that really is how I found the place.

He held back a grin as he looked out over his fellow 3-dans.

Unhealthy, pale skin. Glasses. Checkered clothing.

Out-of-style haircuts and brandless second bags.

Fighting the flow of businessmen walking to the station, they drift toward the shrine as if refusing to go along with the rest of society.

Those are Sub League members.

A bit dark, earnest, perverse and yet pure, they are lone wolves who care for little else than their own improvement.

And right now those Sub League members were singing Hiuma's praises.

"Please promote, Mr. Kagamizu!"

"It wouldn't be right, you not getting into the pros!!"

"Go show them what the Sub League is made of!!!"

Hiuma was genuinely touched, seeing his juniors bear their passion and applaud him as they fought back tears, and felt heat building up in the pit of his chest.

"You guys ....."

This is what it means to be in the Sub League.

—To be gritty and stubbornly strong ..... but also to live out a more intense youth than anyone else while maintaining more purity than everyone else.

And Hiuma was proud to have been part of it. In fact, he felt sorry for Ginko and Sota for not having a chance to experience this for themselves.

—Win or lose ..... tomorrow is my last day as a Sub League member.

*In that case, I'll fight for all these guys,* he swore to himself.

Ginko collapsed into bed the moment she walked into her hotel room.

“..... Hot .....”

Body feeling like lead, she had a fever that refused to break.

The 3-*dan* division matches two weeks prior had pushed her to her physical limit, but going to the summer festival immediately afterward and getting rained on certainly didn't help her situation.

A cold had made her life miserable ever since.

The fatigue wouldn't go away. However her mind had been in continuous overdrive. No matter how she tried to rest her weary body, sleep never came. Her already weakened physical state only worsened day by day.

—..... Why won't my brain turn off .....? It's been going on and on ..... So much more than ever before .....

The journey, however, had taken so much out of her that Ginko fell face first into bed at her hotel without bothering to change out of her uniform.

That was when the phone she had absentmindedly dumped next to her pillow began to buzz.

“.....!”

Practically jumping up from the comforter, she answered it immediately.

—Could it be ..... Is he... worried about me .....?!

“Ms. Sora, I will be arriving to escort you to the Shogi Association early tomorrow morning. Please be ready at 7:30. Sota Kunugi will be in a separate car, so please don't worry. Do you have any questions?”

It was just someone from the association.

Ginko was so exhausted that she couldn't keep up with what the man on the other end was saying to her. Worse, she was disappointed. So very disappointed .....

“..... Miss Sora? Is the schedule all right?”

“..... Doufu .....”

“Huh? What did you say?”

Asked to repeat herself, Ginko felt even lonelier than before. *He* would’ve understood.

“..... Yes. That will be fine.”

“Then I bid you good night. Sleep well.”

Phone call... finished.

Ginko chided herself for getting her hopes up, even for a moment.

“He-he ..... How stupid. The rules were changed to prevent players in the title match from any form of communication after sealing move, remember .....?”

Setting the phone back down next to her pillow, Ginko decided she should at least put on pajamas and sat up.

Doing so made her feel something in her pocket.

“Hm? This is ..... The pipsqueak’s printout?”

Since she hadn’t had a reason to put on her uniform since the last day of Sub League regular activities, the paper she put in her pocket during the summer festival was still there. Her school had resumed classes after summer vacation, but she had yet to attend any of them.

—Maybe I should just drop out of school .....

Though she knew it was depression setting in, she had lost the mental capability to think about anything except Shogi long ago. Both her mind and body were running on fumes.

—..... And still my brain won’t be quiet ..... Why .....?

Her greatest fear now was her heart, the bomb encased in her rib cage since birth. The one saving grace was that her body had always warned her just before it went off.

The difference now was that she utterly refused to go to the hospital.

—There’s a chance the doctors would force me to stop, just like Mr. Karako

said .....

Forfeit and it would all be over. Desperate to avoid that at all costs, Ginko had spent the last two weeks convalescing at her parent's house.

Only her parents, who had faced death with their daughter many times before, wouldn't object to Ginko chasing her dream no matter how much she suffered in the process.

Instead they told her stories about her past, recounting the days when Ginko first learned how to play Shogi.

—After one more day ..... it will all be over after two more matches .....

Looking for even a moment of relief from the pain, Ginko unfolded Ai Hinatsuru's Shogi puzzle and solved it once more.

"Reverse Check and *idouai* ..... Heh. As if it would ever happen in a real match."

Then, she turned the paper over to look at the puzzle Ai drew out by hand.

..... 10 minutes ..... 20 minutes ..... 30 minutes .....

Time flew by as she sat with her eyes glued to the puzzle, but—.

"..... Difficult. Did this actually happen in a match?"

A sickening feeling overtook her as the minutes passed by without finding the answer. Ginko put the puzzle down on the bed and stood up.

She then made her way over to her room's large window.

"Stars ..... There aren't any at all."

The sky over Tokyo was a black void. Try as she might, Ginko couldn't find a single twinkle no matter where she looked.

So she looked down over the city instead.

Gazing in the direction of the hotel where the Crown Title Match was taking place, she whispered his name.

"..... Yaichi ....."

The person Ginko wanted to see more than anyone else in the world was framed somewhere within the boundaries of this window.

All the emotions she had kept at bay burst forth all at once. Lamenting, Ginko pressed her cheek against the window's cold glass.

Then she cried out like a helpless infant, just as she had the day she promoted into the 3-*dan* division.

“..... Yaichi ..... I'm scared. Save me .....”

She wanted him to be at her side.

To feel his arms around her like that night.

To free her weak self from the living hell that her life had become .....!

He had always appeared before her whenever she made that wish in the past. It was miraculous, as if the Shogi gods had performed that miracle just for her.

That's exactly what happened the day she became a 3-*dan*. It was the first time she beat Sota, but it was her superior opponent's overconfidence that spelled his demise.

—Miracles happen once, no matter how strong the players are. That's how Shogi is.

“But ..... you can't make the second miracle happen on your own. Isn't that right, Yaichi?”

Walking back to her bed, Ginko refolded the printout and gently slipped it back into her pocket like a good luck charm.

From there, she opened her travel bag but took out an envelope rather than pajamas.

The words *sorry to bug you* were written in barely legible chicken scratch on the outside. Ginko opens the flap and finds a nameless match record inside.

That, and a photograph taken more than 10 years ago.

Yaichi Kuzuryu sat alone in the middle of the rug on the floor of the Western-style room that was assigned to him.

...Wearing nothing but a bathrobe.

“.....! ..... ugh ..... khh .....!!”

Body swaying rhythmically back and forth, he grunted every few breaths.

It was a bizarre sight to say the least.

Taking off his kimono after returning to the room, he had ordered a quick dinner via room service and taken a hot shower. However, his thoughts turned to the board formation when he made his sealing move before he got around to drying his hair.

—Now! This is the move that will decide the whole match!!

As he was the one to issue the sealing move, he could see one move further into the future than his opponent, Yo Okito.

He wasn't simply daydreaming about what could happen.

Yaichi was using a board that only existed in his mind to determine whether or not he could reach checkmate in the late game.

*"Pant .....! Gasp .....! Paaant .....!!"*

Only opening his eyes to take a bite of his meal or gulp down several mouthfuls of water at once, Yaichi stayed sitting on his ankles, never once getting up from the rug as he worked through every sequence he could find.

Solving extremely long sequence Shogi puzzles with only a mental Shogi board is no easy task.

Unlike those puzzles, however, there was no guarantee that a *checkmate* existed in a real match. Reading this deep carried a great deal of risks.

It may all be for nothing. The fatigue could take its toll and rob him of any chance to play respectable Shogi on the second day of the match.

Even so, Yaichi kept reading as if to drive out any lingering emotions.

"Wheeew——..... I know I'm really close ..... But that last little bit ..... is so ..... far away ....."

Casting his gaze up at the ceiling, Yaichi muttered his first words in hours.

The young man had decided to rely more on analog training styles, Shogi puzzles and playing through match records in order to prepare for this title match.

Yaichi had been solving puzzles with his live-in apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru, ever since the day she moved in with him. However, they competed with speed.

Though Yaichi could hold his own in *match-themed* puzzles, Ai fared better the longer the puzzles became. Even when she was very much a novice, her effortless reading speed had always stunned the Ryuo.

Talent. There are things that exist in this world that can only be defined as such.

“That has to be god-tier ..... but...!”

Determined to reach his apprentice’s level, Yaichi planted his fists on the rug.

—Deeper ..... I have to go deeper .....!!

Deeper, deeper, deeper, deeperdeeperdeeperdeepdeepdeep——.

“Ah ..... Ahhh ..... Ac-hoo!! ..... Ugh .....”

Sniffling, Yaichi rubbed his exposed arms.

The hotel’s air conditioning was considerably stronger than the one in his apartment. His skin had become ice cold.

It was then, when his concentration finally broke, that a nostalgic voice echoed in his mind.

*“Put on clothes when you get out of the bathtub, stupid Yaichi.”*

“..... You’re right, Big Sis.”

Sensing the wrath of his younger *older* sister, Yaichi jumped up and hastily got dressed.

“I wonder if she’s in Tokyo yet .....”

He grimaced for one fleeting moment, fearing the silver girl’s ire as he had so many times when they shared the same room.





RECORD 5

桐  
創  
多

SOTA  
KUNUGI

鏡  
洲  
飛  
馬

HIUMA  
KAGAMIZU

## WATCHING FROM AFAR

“Coming to you live from the Shogi Association building! 3-*dan* division members, or at least people who look the part, are starting to arrive!”

The usual morning news show has a reporter outside of the Kanto Association.

It’s not the Kansai Association building that we’re used to, so seeing that brown, five-story brick building on every local channel feels ..... well, strange.

I turn to my antsy Master sitting in front of the TV and ask him, “Father, would you like some iced barley tea? Or would hot green tea be better?”

“Mn ..... Yah. Thanks, Keika.”

“I’m asking which one you would like.”

“Hmm ..... I’ll ’ave that.”

This is going nowhere fast. He’s too absorbed in the TV to hear a word I say.

“Ai? Would you make some green tea, please?”

“Sure!”

Ai Hinatsuru stops doing dishes in the kitchen for a moment to answer with her usual pep. The three of us have just finished eating breakfast in our *tatami* room. I was in the middle of wiping down the table, but I got distracted by the TV.

Sorry, Ai! I promise I’ll help out once I see Ginko .....!

“That man going inside now is Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan*. Closer than anyone to promoting, he is the only player with only two losses and will face the elementary-aged prodigy Sota Kunugi in his first match today! Win, and he will officially become Kagamizu 4-*dan*!”

Hiuma has a pair of headphones on and has that *don’t talk to me* vibe turned on full blast. He ignores all the reporters and walks right into the building. He sure looks ready.

The camera zooms in on its next target.

“Look, with an escort from the association ..... That’s Sota! Sota Kunugi!”

A polite-looking little boy.

Cameras swarm around the 11-year-old as the staff member jumps up to stop them. Sota scampers into the building, and I don’t blame him.

“Currently fourth in the standings, Sota would need to win both of his matches and have those ranked above him lose in order to be promoted! Will today go down in history as the first time an elementary school student joins the professional Shogi ranks?!”

The cameras follow players one by one as they arrive at the association.

“It’s almost like *the longest day in the Shogi world*, isn’t it?”

The final day in the A Division Placement Matches is called the longest day in the Shogi world. The best professionals put their pride on the line as they use every ounce of skill and determination they have in matches that always last late into the night.

Since other players’ matches determine their own ranking, those top professionals have to stay up and watch until everyone finishes.

“These are the most important matches of their lives. I was hoping they would have more peace and quiet.”

“.....”

Father stares at the screen without saying a word.

The reporters, equipped with cameras and microphones, but probably very little interest in Shogi, are chasing down the young men as if they were rare animals at the zoo.

—It’s funny how they can tell who’s in the Sub League and who’s not.

But that’s the only thing that’s funny about this.

“Ah! A taxi is pulling up to the association! Is that Naniwa’s Snow White in the backseat?! There’s no mistaking that silver hair! Ginko Sora 3-*dan* has arrived!!”

“!!”

Father and I lean in close to the screen for a closer look at Ginko on camera.

“..... Gin ..... ko .....,” father groans.

I ..... can’t breathe, seeing her in this much pain.

—So worn out ..... How many years has it been since I’ve seen her suffering this much .....?

It was seven years ago, on the day she took the Sub League Entrance Exam for the first time.

Her face looks just like it did that day... when her heart failed ..... And it’s making my chest ache.

Cameras close in the moment the taxi door opens.

But——the Ginko that steps out quiets the world.

“ ....., ”

No one can get near her, like she has an invisible barrier pushing everyone away.

Then, Ginko boldly walks toward the building with her head held higher than any of the other Sub League members so far.

Skin so pure, you can almost see through her.

Her fighting spirit is burning so vigorously that she radiates a silver aura.

“..... Stunning ....., ” whispers a reporter who is known for her own good looks. No one else could say anything.

True beauty has a way of silencing meaningless banter.

Watching this ..... I can hardly believe she’s human .....

—There’s nothing to worry about! She’s recovered! Dr. Akashi said so himself!

Repeating that to myself helps keep the tears back.

I bite down on my lip and commit to memory every second of this girl walking toward the fight of her life as she goes up to the building and disappears inside.

“M-Moving on, Mr. Shoji Karako, the first person to rejoin the 3-*dan* division using their Admission Exam in 42 years, has graciously agreed to speak with us.”

“Hello! I’ll be the one playing against little Miss Ginko in the first match, so I hate to break it to you, but she won’t be promoting today.”

I can’t believe my eyes as Mr. Karako’s lighthearted grin appears on the screen.

What are his nerves made of ..... steel .....?

“To everyone out there in Japan, please root against me! Thinking of all the disappointment on your faces gives me the boost I need to play my best!”

“A-Are you sure you should be saying that?! This is live TV .....”

“Being the villain is fine by me. So long as I’m going to be hated anyway, I might as well embrace it. It’ll make my pro debut that much sweeter ...ha-ha!” Mr. Karako says with that smile that belongs on a clown.

Does Ginko really have to face this man ..... this man who treats Shogi like a joke? Will she be able to stay focused .....?

“Keeeka! Where are the fresh tea leaves?”

Ai’s voice from the kitchen saves me from my own thoughts.

Gathering myself in a flash, I call back to her, “They should be in the bottom drawer! Put them in the tea caddy!”

Ai has a good head on her shoulders. More than that ..... She keeps a closer eye on Yaichi than anyone.

...Which is why I doubt she’ll come into this room while Ginko is on the screen.

I glance at my father.

“.....”

Still silently staring at the screen, just as I thought.

“The matches were scheduled to begin at 9 a.m. sharp, but it seems there may be a delay! While we unfortunately cannot provide live coverage inside the arena because our requests to set up cameras were rejected, professionals will be providing updates and analysis from the association’s second floor classroom. Keep it here for all the latest!”

“..... And whose fault is that delay, do you think?” I snap back at the reporter,

beside myself, but I am relieved. If the media had tried to force cameras into the arena, I would be on my way up to Tokyo right now to stop them.

The 3-*dan* Division Exclusive Arena on the division's final day of regular activities is the Shogi world's hallowed ground.

It's only natural, considering the weight of the results. Professionals are fighting for money and fame, but Sub League members are fighting for their very lives.

Meanwhile, there are so many reporters and cameramen stuffed into the Crown Title Match arena that they spill out into the hallway. I expected as much, though.

"Yaichi ..... I hope it wasn't too much of a shock ....."

It may sound bad, but they're not there to see the match itself. Comparing how many reporters were there on day one is proof enough of that. The reason so many showed up for the second day is——.

"Okito-*sensei*'s haircut ..... is that an off-the-board tactic?"

"..... He never seemed the type to use 'em before ....."

Father doesn't sound sure of himself.

Images of the long-haired Crown showing up for the match with a smooth head have been making the rounds on social media and sending people into a frenzy.

Between that and the 3-*dan* division, Shogi was the only thing everyone was talking about in Japan last night. Considering his apprentices were right in the middle of both big stories, I can hardly imagine what Father must be going through.

——Worse, at the end of the first day, Yaichi already was .....

I couldn't resist the temptation and used software to analyze the board when Yaichi did the sealing move.

"..... The program says the best move is 7 Six Pawn. But, even playing that ....."

It would result in offense being 200 points ahead, an almost even rating.

The scary thing is though ..... *that rating hasn't gone down even once since the match started.*

Every move Okito-sensei makes is the absolute best.

What's more, I've been able to understand exactly why he went with each one. He's not playing at a level beyond human comprehension like software usually does.

Yaichi has answered with nearly perfect counters each time. He's holding strong, but .....

"Both players confirmed the seal is still intact. I will now break the seal."

Natagiri-sensei, the observer, takes scissors to the envelope and pulls out the paper inside.

"The sealed move is ..... 7 Six Pawn."

Countless camera flashes light up the screen as Yaichi reaches for the board.

"7 Six Pawn ....."

Yaichi puts that piece down with authority, but that just makes my heart ache even more.

He's chosen to counterattack.

It's the best option. That's what the software says.

But, it's just ..... he hasn't been able to take a step beyond the software, either .....

"That King's real far away ....., " father mumbles with his eyes on Okito-sensei's half of the board.

That's right. One look at that board, and no one would need a computer to tell them who has the advantage right now.

I ask him, "Playing 7 Six Pawn means that Yaichi is trying to win first, right? But, Okito-sensei's next move is surely 4 Seven Pawn ..... which gives him a staging point in the fourth file by promoting right next to Yaichi's King."

Even so, the software says to attack.



Its second recommendation was to focus on defense by taking *Okito-sensei's* Promoted Pawn with his Lance at 1 Three.

The difference between the two was a few points, if that.

Personally, I think that Yaichi's playing style is more suited for defense.

"If they do both attack, *Okito-sensei* has a Promoted Pawn at 2 Two. 5 Five Knight and 6 Four Pawn are both there, too. Even worse, Yaichi's running way behind on waiting time ..... He's obviously between a rock and a hard place, yes?"

*Okito-sensei* has more than double the waiting time Yaichi does.

Time is a necessary commodity to keep the formation balanced when the King is vulnerable. Otherwise, the defenses come crashing down into an instant death.

As of now, their formations are equal. The thing is that Yaichi's waiting time *armor* is showing some serious cracks, which puts him very far behind.

—Has he figured that out, too? Is that why he chose to race to the finish?

Maybe he decided to force the issue while he still has waiting time rather than getting bled to death the way things are now.

"Yaichi is strong, but ..... That strength comes from a sense o' the big picture. He's in his element when the board's a mess, but the floor drops out when things are organized," says the Master, talking about his apprentice's weakness with a heavy heart. "Yo's always been darn good winnin' particular spots on the board. Fought him myself a few times in A, and I ain't never seen a player close out matches the way he can. The man's like the machine, bein' that precise ..... Which is probably why it was such a shock that software outdid him ....."

"Father ....."

The association kept the fact that *Okito-sensei* tried to commit suicide a closely guarded secret. There aren't even that many people inside the association who know all the details.

But Father knows everything.

He does because he was scheduled to play against *Okito-sensei* in an A

division placement match three days after the incident.

He won because Okito-*sensei* never arrived at the arena, but——That did even more damage.

“*Why’d it hafta ..... Why’d ya go an’.....*”

I can still remember what Father looked like after getting that phone call from the association. He didn’t win a single placement match after that and ended up dropping out of the A division that season.

Okito-*sensei* was granted a leave of absence and maintained his spot in A.

However, the form he sent to the association wasn’t a *leave of absence request*, but a *suicide note*. After seeing how rashly he’d been dispatched to play against software, other professional players felt he had taken a bullet for them and thus never complained about Okito-*sensei* keeping his ranking .....

He somehow managed to return to the Shogi world after that, but I have no idea how he felt adopting software for his own research. I doubt anyone would understand what it’s like to be in his shoes.

The one thing I do know is .....

——Yaichi has to play a step above software for any chance to win.

Except his sealing move was *exactly what the software said was best*.

...Which means that Yaichi is moving to the beat of software’s drum. Basically, he is putty in Okito-*sensei*’s hands.

“There ain’t no way to out-calculate a calculator when it comes to closin’ the distance.”

A calculator. That’s how Father describes Okito-*sensei*.

Seeing him now, calm as he is, I have to agree.

“Speaking of calculation speed, Ai——.”

It strikes me that Yaichi’s apprentice, currently preparing tea in the kitchen, has the same kind of talent.

When it comes to late game strength, Ai Hinatsuru is head and shoulders above many professionals. There are times when I don’t think she’s human.

I fought against her back when she had been playing Shogi for less than a year. Even though I was in position to win by the early mid-game, I watched in horror as she turned the tables and destroyed everything by the late-game.

—She showed that terrifying strength rather recently, too .....

It was during her match to qualify for the Women's Legend League.

Former Sub League member Tsubasa Gakumeki had her in *hisshi*, one move away from unavoidable checkmate, but Ai still found a way to break out of it. That kind of ability is the stuff of nightmares.

—Just thinking about it now ..... I still get goosebumps .....

To think, Yaichi saw that talent in her and brought it out ..... That's even scarier. However he is raising her, it's not for the faint of heart.

It's a *battle in itself*.

"..... What would Ai say about this formation if she saw it?"

*Shatter!*

"?!"

Father and I look around to find where the sound of broken glass came from—.

"..... ere ....."

Ai is standing there with an empty cup in her hand. She must've come in carrying tea.

What's left of the pot is at her feet, hot green tea spilling out all over. Oh no! She dropped it?!

"A-Ai?! Are you okay?! You're not burned, are you?! I've got a cloth right here——!"

I grab it and move in, but she doesn't seem to notice. Her eyes are glued to the TV, more specifically the real-time feed of the Crown Title Match.

"..... re ..... He ..... re ..... He ..... re ....."

"Huh?"

Ai starts swaying back and forth without leaving her feet.

Then I see something that makes me question my eyes.

“?! A- ..... Ai .....?”

Emerging from that 10-year-old girl’s back———— are a set of white wings.

# SHOJI KARAKO

The world of competition was unforgiving. The 3-*dan* division was hell on earth.

“..... Just as I remember it,” a man said to himself upon stepping inside the Sub League Exclusive Arena for the first time in a good ten years and seeing all the boards perfectly lined up with Sub League members sitting next to them.

Just one thing had changed ..... Gone were the analog beeps of chess clocks. Digital stopwatches had taken their place. This new technology would even count down the seconds for them.

This room still appeared in his dreams.

The man would be playing Shogi. A Sub League member would be next to him, his voice tense as he counted down the seconds with a stopwatch in his grasp.

The man was winning, his victory nearly secured.

The formation was the very same as the one and only chance the man had to promote out of the Sub League on his own power. He saw this moment in his dreams far more often than the match that doomed him to retirement. He had this Shogi won, and yet still somehow managed to lose.

Only then, once it was over, did he see it.

On the turn before he surrendered ..... a five-move check path to victory.

The man was always crying when he awoke from that dream. This morning was no different.

“But today’s match isn’t in here.”

Leaving the 3-*dan*’s *exclusive* arena, Shoji Karako passed by the restroom and went inside a small room down the hallway.

As arrangements had been made for his match to be broadcast on a live feed, a separate room was prepared just for the occasion.

“Ginsa no Ma.”

A young girl with silver hair was waiting for him inside. Donning his clownish

smile, Shoji said hello.

“Long time, Ginko.”

Shoji walked around her to sit down in the upper seat and reached for the piece box.

Ginko Sora, however, said with fire in her eyes, “May we use these pieces?”

“Oh-ho?”

—My, my ..... Somebody’s *on edge*.

He held back the urge to comment and lined up those pieces instead. Striking up conversation now would surely work against him by calming her nerves.

The pressure that came along with controlling their own destiny on the final day of the 3-*dan* division also left players open to a wide range of off-the-board tactics.

Shoji had experienced that pressure firsthand, but it was all new for Ginko.

—What better advantage is there to have?

The match that had begun with Shoji on offense transformed into a showdown between Ranging Rook and Static Rook strategies.

“Oh? That’s the Speed Castle? That’s what software dug up? You’ve been studying very hard.”

“.....”

Shoji saw it as nothing more than a poor man’s Boat Castle, but it was effective. However, no matter how much he thought about it, he refused to admit that putting the King on a Gold pillow was a viable strategy.

—I don’t get it! Not the least bit!

All his internal griping couldn’t do anything about the fact that the formations were turning against him.

Though Ginko’s game sense was even more effective than her Speed Castle.

—She’s good ..... Can’t believe this is the same girl as that frail Ginko Sora 2-*dan* from my exam day.

Sudden spurts like this were common for young players in their teens, and

thus needed to be closely monitored. Otherwise, they could break through a wall unexpectedly and pass him by. On top of that, Shoji could tell his weaknesses had been thoroughly analyzed.

—I knew she had talent. I always knew.

That's why Shoji had been wary of Ginko.

...Which was his reason for attacking her still immature mind with off-the-board tactics: to prevent her from harnessing her full potential. Targeting an opponent's weaknesses was not cowardly in any sense, but the way the world of competition worked.

“..... Just as I remember it.”

Shoji sat down to comb his mind for a strategy that would turn the tables as he breathed in a lungful of the final day 3-*dan* division air.

The world of competition was harsh. The 3-*dan* division was hell on earth.

Shoji had thought so during his days in the Sub League, and still believed it was so to a greater extent than anyone in the Shogi world.

However, he had learned the real hell on earth existed outside the arena's walls.

—I know all too well ..... that easy jobs don't exist.

Sub League members could make money by working as match recorders or giving lessons. Playing Shogi could bring in a few thousand yen, or tens of thousands of yen all at once.

However, working in the real world showed him how difficult it was to earn 10,000 yen. Shoji lost count of the number of times he cried watching professional players on TV, comparing their silky smooth hands to the scarred sandpaper his had become.

Working alongside people who were aware of the Shogi world was torture. There was no escape from the memories of his time in the Sub League no matter how desperately he wanted one. That dream would always follow.

As painful as it was, it was only the second worst working environment.

The most painful was—one where people die.

That was where Shoji was employed as a janitor mere weeks after his retirement from the Sub League.

Shogi happened to be extremely popular at the facility where he worked. The higher-ups may have thought that would make him a great fit after seeing his resume, but it proved to be nothing more than annoyance.

Shoji downright refused to touch Shogi pieces. His coworkers and even his supervisor invited him countless times, but he turned his back on those who played the game.

What brought him back to the sport of Shogi was ..... the children.

—Kids don't know about the Sub League, let alone me .....

For children who had spent a long time in the facility, Shoji coming to visit was like a breath of fresh air during their monotonous daily routine. Once he finally gave in to playing a match, another child would come up to test their skills against him.

Shoji found time between his cleaning duties to play with as many children as he could..... It was to get them off his case at first, but he genuinely started to enjoy watching them grow after a while.

However, those wonderful days were not to last.

Because the children living in that facility—were battling terminal illnesses.

He could bear any burden so long as it was his own. Even killing who he was as a person hadn't taken long to get used to.

But for these friendly children who came up to him all the time, asking him to teach them Shogi, to die and just be gone the next day ..... How could anyone endure such exorbitant conditions?

Shoji learned to smile, much like a clown, whenever he played Shogi with the children. He would see them off with the same smile when they were done.

One day, Shoji heard from the facility doctors that even the few children who happened to receive a discharge only left the hospital to spend their last days in



the comfort of their own homes.

So many innocent lives lost despite their Herculean efforts to live on.

—That was the real hell on earth right there.

Unable to endure, Shoji resigned from that position.

He drifted from place to place after that while continuously avoiding Shogi whenever possible, until .....

He found out on the news...

A child he had once taught how to play Shogi not only survived but was still playing Shogi to that day.

—You made it! Just look at you ..... So tall and strong .....!!

Learning the truth changed Shoji.

He had considered himself as good as dead ever since he left the Sub League.

In that case, why not be born again? Come back from the ashes and take another shot.

The new Shoji Karako started entering amateur tournaments. However, his experience as a Sub League 3-*dan* didn't guarantee him any easy victories. Enduring the humiliation that came from losing to amateur Shogi players again and again, Shoji honed his skills day by day.

Even after finally winning his first amateur tournament, he had to report for work the next morning, exhausted.

Those days strengthened him.

He began preparing for his chance to reenter the Sub League immediately following his tournament triumph. Invitations to join Shogi events as a special guest and play against professionals started coming in the mail. He knew how extraordinarily slim his chances were, but they felt astronomical compared to the miracle that child managed to achieve.

And now, Shoji Karako had returned to this place.

Further still, a second chance to promote under his own power was in his grasp. He wasn't going to waste it.

“Whew ..... Mighty strong! I can’t do anything against you, can I, Ginko?”

Smiling, Shoji made a big show out of a long sigh.

“That software magic you’re using is just too much for me. I tried learning it myself, really! It just never felt right ..... you know?”

Under what circumstances do Sub League members who have control over their own destiny make mistakes?

—You see, Ginko, it’s when they think they’ve won.

In truth, Ginko wasn’t all that far ahead. If only he could prevent her from using those newly awakened worldly senses of hers, Shoji could stage a comeback. He was certain of it.

...Which was why he pretended to accept his fate and focused solely on defense at an early stage of the mid-game if only to skew Ginko’s intuition by the slightest of margins. It was an off-the-board tactic, plain and simple.

—A bit underhanded, sure. But those trying to climb mountains can’t worry about the pebbles under their feet.

One move, that would be enough.

Shoji understood better than most that a heart quivering at the sensation of a piece between his fingers could very well be what sends him tumbling back into hell.

“What a pickle. Well, hmm ..... I suppose I’ll have to hold out until your heart gives out, Ginko.”

Ginko locked eyes with him from across the board and simply said, “Your words can’t affect me anymore.”

“Oh?”

“Because ..... I know you don’t mean any harm.”

“Harm? But of course I don’t. I always play fair and square——.”

Ginko cut off the chuckling Shoji to say, “This is you, isn’t it?”

Mindful to keep it out of the camera shot, Ginko showed him a photograph of a man in his early thirties playing Shogi with a young Ginko on a plastic board.

“You were there, at the hospital. You played Shogi with me ..... and the others, too.”

“.....!”

Ginko continued, looking up at the suddenly speechless Shoji Karako with soft, kind eyes.

“I completely forgot, but ..... my mother remembered you when she saw you on TV. She even found this picture in one of our albums.”

All the anxiousness and fear she felt for Shoji had disappeared in that moment. She knew there was a kind man behind the clown mask.

“You even had this live feed set up so that people would know right away if I needed help, right? You wanted to help the people worrying about me breathe a little easier, didn’t you? Master Kiyotaki, Akashi-sensei, my parents .....”

“I-I wouldn’t say that .....”

“Thank you for worrying about me, too.”

Worry? No. He wasn’t worried.

He had wanted to get under his opponent’s skin ..... To do anything it took to get an edge ..... Except his mouth wouldn’t form those words.

“But I’m fine. I’m stronger, yes? My Shogi, my heart ..... Everything about me is stronger than I was back then.”

He had to say something. If he didn’t speak now, then .....

However, words that had rolled off his tongue in bunches up to this point wouldn’t come.

“What you left in the Kansai Sub League made me a stronger player. Back when my fighting spirit was about to break against Sota, I remembered the phrase *having six of the eight Golds and Silvers is an advantage, having seven puts you in position to win*. What I knew as *mustard theory*.”

“Mustard theory .....?”

“Some stupid boy I know mixed up *karashi* mustard with *Karako*.”

Blushing ever so slightly at the mention of a *stupid boy*, Ginko explained.

Then.

“I’m strong now. I’m not the *poor girl* I used to be. So——.”

Ginko howled at him from across the board, her fighting spirit surging through her veins setting her eyes ablaze.

“So! Stop talking and play like you mean it!! Karako!!”

“Aha!”

Finally, his frozen tongue awakened.

“Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! I’ll show you, all right!! I’ll show you what standing your ground really looks like!!”

Deploying a Gold into his home territory to bolster defenses, Shoji geared up for a drawn-out war of attrition.

He had no chance of winning. That much was clear.

He kept playing, nonetheless. So long as he had waiting time at his disposal, he would show the true might of Shoji Karako.

Ginko showed her mettle as well, showed her power, the strength she had obtained.

“Watch this. I’ll have you checkmated in one quick sequence.”

In a series of moves that were fitting of the Worldly Maestro himself, Ginko systematically stripped Shoji’s King of all its defenses and, like she had many times in her youth but with far better efficiency, found a check path.

Only when he was one move away from checkmate did Shoji sigh to himself as he said, “..... Never stopped, did it?”

“..... No .....”

Cheeks flushed red from the heat of battle, Ginko put her hand to her chest and answered, “It won’t. There’s someone waiting for me to become a

professional, and just thinking about him ..... Makes it pound even harder.”

“Hah! Ahhh, yep, I lose. I ain’t got a chance!”

Tossing a handful of pieces from his stand to signal his surrender, Shoji lamented, “Girls in love are invincible!”

With that, Shoji Karako laughed to himself as he exited the room.

## PROMISE

3-*dan* division, 17th match.

As far as Hiuma Kagamizu was concerned, this match could very well determine the rest of his life. Win now, and he would become a professional on the spot.

“Good morning, Mr. Kagamizu.”

“Morning, Sota.”

This match had immense implications for Sota as well.

As the lowest ranking player with any chance of promoting this season, he couldn’t afford to finish with the same number of victory stars as those above him. He needed to defeat Hiuma and drag him down as well.

In a big match with the rest of their lives literally in the balance, slight traces of relief passed across the two players’ faces as they sat down across from each other to get started.

“You’re wearing a necktie today.”

“Yes. I might be talking with the press later ..... Does it look strange?”

“Not at all. It’s the nicest one I’ve ever seen you wear.”

The two made conversation while lining up the pieces.

Away from the familiar walls they knew, two Kansai Sub League players settled in across the board from each other in Kanto.

It was a scenario that would never take place under normal circumstances.

However, be it a twist of fate or a puppet master behind the scenes ..... a battle between the longest tenured 3-*dan* and the youngest 3-*dan* ever was about to unfold on the last day of the 3-*dan* division in Sendagaya, more or less the media’s backyard.

—I should consider myself fortunate.

Hiuma couldn’t care less about anything beyond the match before him. If

there was anything worth knowing, he could look at what happened after he promoted to 4-*dan*.

“Shall we? It’s my move.”

“Yes. I’m ready when you are.”

The two began their match just as they had countless times at the Kansai Association’s Player’s Room.

Hiuma used the first move to open the Bishop Path.

Sota then advanced the Pawn in front of his Rook.

It was a path these two had taken many times before. So many of their matches had opened this way that neither could put a number to it.

“.....”

Closing his eyes to gather his thoughts, Hiuma put a hand to his tie — and made a decisive move. His formation became as clear as day.

Sota stared at it from across the board and whispered, “*Yagura* .....”

That was the last thing he had anticipated.

Sota had defeated Hiuma’s *yagura* so many times during their practice sessions that he knew the sequences like the back of his hand.

...Not to mention that software had completely nullified any advantage that offensive *yagura* once possessed..... meaning that players who had been proficient in it had switched to Bishop Exchange and Double Wing strategies instead.

Be that as it may, Hiuma had decided to stake the rest of his life on the strategy most deeply ingrained in his being no matter how outdated it was.

“..... Shogi sure is strange, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“For a strategy as common as the *yagura* to just disappear like that ..... I remember back when I was training, I was told never to stick out the Pawn in front of my Rook because *he who plays close to the vest has the advantage*,” said Hiuma as he advanced the Pawn in front of his own Rook. “But before that,

getting this Pawn all the way to the fifth row used to be how matches were decided. Now here we are today, where everyone plays *yagura* that way.”

“..... I don’t know anything about that,” countered Sota, playing at breakneck speed with all his waiting time intact. It was almost as if he felt that using it would be a waste during the standard open stage of the match.

Meanwhile, Hiuma was using his time to pour his heart and soul into every move despite opening with an offensive *yagura*.

There is a saying: *rowing the underbrush*.

This is because forging a path through the underbrush and thickets on untamed mountainsides closely resembles rowing a boat.

There were no better words to describe Hiuma in that moment.

Back and forth, back and forth, his body swayed.

Droplets of sweat rolled down his cheeks. Wiping them off with the backs of his hands, Hiuma put his full weight behind each piece as he moved across the board’s unexplored frontier.

“Khh .....! *Pant! Pant! Pant* .....!! ..... Ngh!!”

He lacked the time or the energy to steady his ragged breathing as his mind read so deep into the board that his forehead nearly collided with it before swaying back again.

The difference in waiting time became momentous by the mid-game.

“I told you, didn’t I .....?”

Sota, who had waiting time to spare, seemed both irritated and concerned as he watched Hiuma’s remaining time evaporate before his eyes.

In his opinion, Hiuma was succumbing to the pressure of the match at hand.

Every single one of the man’s moves was an obvious choice. Anyone with a decent amount of Shogi knowledge would say: *This formation calls for this move*.

“*Cough!* Haa ..... Ugh! Haa-haa .....”

—Why is playing such basic moves hurting you that much?



Sota was already reaching to make his next move the instant Hiuma made up his mind... almost as if the young boy knew what was coming.

However, Hiuma spending *this much time* on each move was suspicious ..... So Sota sat down on the cushion to thoroughly think through the formations.

That was when .....

“Pardon me.”

Hiuma left his seat.

Sota wondered whether Hiuma was going to take a restroom break, but ..... He was stunned to see what his opponent was actually doing in the back corner of the arena.

Squats.

“Hff! Hff! Hff!”

Once, twice, three times ..... Hiuma bent his knees with vigor, taking rhythmical deep breaths as if pumping oxygen to every extremity of his body.

His eyes, however, were still locked squarely onto the board.

This wasn't the behavior of a man under immense pressure. Hiuma was simply absorbed in the match. He couldn't care less about the strange glances he was getting from onlookers. Of course, he wasn't about to let the young boy's opinion or a software rating influence his strategy.

Sota watched Hiuma for a few moments before dropping his gaze to study the board once again...

... Only to make a shocking discovery.

“.....!? I-I'm ..... behind?!”

Including waiting time, he hadn't made a single bad move up until this point.

But looking at the board again ..... there were no avenues to attack.

“What .....? But why?! I followed the latest standard exactly! I know I did! Was Ginko right when she said, *You don't have a sense of the big picture.....?!?*”

Away from the board, Hiuma couldn't hear a word the boy said.

Sota was beginning to panic.

Ginko Sora, Shoji Karako and now Hiuma Kagamizu ..... Was it possible that he had some sort of fatal flaw when it came to facing players with older playing styles .....?

*“Not knowing what it’s like to be afraid—has warped your ability to see the big picture!”*

Ginko’s words blared in his mind like a warning siren.

The few black stains of defeat on his heart began to fester, seeping deeper and deeper into his soul.

“No! That can’t be right! I’m the defender, so all I have to do to win is stop his attack!”

Shaking his head hard enough to dispel those thoughts, Sota elected to move a piece into position to contain Hiuma’s advance. Now, neither one possessed an advantageous attack route.

Hiuma wasted no time returning to his seat.

“Calisthenics during our match with your life on the line? You sure are confident.”

“Perhaps.”

Hiuma started reading again, but that didn’t stop Sota from talking.

“You’re acting really strange today, Mr. Kagamizu. It’s like you’re not trying to win at all. Why did you choose to use a *yagura* in the first place?”

“.....”

Hiuma just continued to silently sway for a few moments before—.

—Saying bluntly, “I made a promise.”

“Promise? ..... To whom? About what?”

Questions coming at him from across the board, Hiuma answered as if stammering his way through a confession.

“I could never promise anyone that I would promote. I’ve already broken that promise so many times .....”

Betrayed his Master’s expectations.

Hurt the woman who loved him.

Made his parents worry endlessly.

Hiuma made so many mistakes he could never take back throughout his life.

So he couldn't promise to win, much less to become a professional.

“But———even I can promise myself to play my way.”

Hiuma answered softly before boldly sending his Rook directly into enemy territory.

“N-.....?!”

The child prodigy with the clear eyes of a young maiden gawked as he looked down at the board.

“Now, of all times, you send your Rook?! Have you lost your mind?!”

Sota stared up at Hiuma, beside himself, but their eyes never met. Hiuma's were zeroed in on Sota's King and nothing else.

It was a brazen attack that went against the Sub League theory of *passing up on the first chance!*

The man who had continuously let chances slip through his fingers had made the decision to entirely break away from his former self.

“This is who I am! The me who will be a professional!!” roared Hiuma, fist firmly clamped around his necktie.

From there, Hiuma launched an all-out assault. His pieces surged into Sota's territory like water through a dam that had given way to the pressure.

Gone was his slow, thoughtful pace. The man with his back to the wall devoted himself entirely to this attack and was gaining ground.

Every second of waiting time spent had been poured into setting up this offensive.

The defender's formation, which looked as solid as an iron wall, was swarmed under in an instant. Hiuma trained the brunt of his attack onto the first slight

crack without missing a beat!

—I'm getting overrun .....!!

Both on the board and in terms of sheer intensity, Sota was overwhelmed by Hiuma.

The emotion he felt for the first time in his match against Ginko was once again threatening to take away his composure.

It was *fear*.

That instinctual fear drove Sota to charge out and meet his opponent head-on, but it was already too late. He was fully aware, but still he had no choice.

He had to escape the fear.

—This chain of events ..... It's just like what happened against Ginko .....!!

After following the standards laid out by a computer to the letter, Sota was now playing as fear demanded.

—That sequence I was thinking about ..... Where was it?

Hiuma repeated himself almost as if he could read Sota's mind.

"I will play my way. That's why I'm here."

Then, violently snatching a Rook off his piece stand, he asked, "What about you, Sota?"

Reaching across the board as if about to stab his opponent through the chest, Hiuma deployed the Rook deep in enemy territory.

"I ..... I-I ..... um ....."

It was now his turn, but all Sota could do was stare at his knees with his hand mindlessly on his piece stand.

He kept clicking the piece in his hand against the stand as it shook.

*“He’s a prodigy.”*

People were calling me that before I knew how to speak.

My parents are very caring, but also extremely upstanding people. They may have been blessed with a genius for a son, but they never let that go to their heads.

They wanted me to grow up with as normal a childhood as possible. I think that’s a great mental attitude to have.

However, it was a big mistake.

Schoolwork, lessons, games ..... Whenever something had a correct answer, I was always the first to find it (that includes adults, not just children my own age).

What do you think happens when someone like that goes out into normal society?

*“Waaaahhhh!! I don’t wanna play with you no more!”*

*“Your son ..... He cheats, doesn’t he?”*

No matter the situation, I always came out on top.

It’s just no fun for the other person when I always win by an overwhelming margin. That was especially true for children.

So, I came up with an answer.

*“I’ll lose every once in a while.”*

I thought it was brilliant, but trying it just made the situation worse. People got angry and hurt if and when they found out I meant to lose.

I found the best solution in everything I tried.

The problem is ..... human hearts don’t have a correct answer.

That’s why I asked my parents for something very special for my birthday years ago — the first one I can remember, in fact.

*"I want the most accurate single die from a pair of dice in the world."*

My parents searched everywhere they could think of to find one that would satisfy me.

It was titanium with a precision rate of 99.999999999 percent. The edges were rounded to cut down on wind resistance and friction, almost to the point that it was hard to see them with the naked eye.

Truly, it was a die fit for the gods.

I carried it everywhere with me, always rolling it around in the palm of my hand and in between my fingers.

So, whenever I couldn't think of an answer, that die always gave me one.

I did so many things out of consideration for those around me, they were the ones who came up with a way to come to terms with me despite everything I tried.

*"He's a prodigy."*

My opponents stopped crying once they understood that.

*"Okay. I have to be a prodigy."*

Defeating everyone by an overwhelming margin was necessary. First I had to show them that I was a prodigy, and then I would tell them. Plenty of people hated me for it, but that was fine. I'd rather they hate me than get upset.

Unfortunately that led to a different problem.

People started going out of their way to avoid playing against me.

That wasn't all.

I'd enter tournaments just to find someone to play against, but anyone who was matched up with me would give up before we got started. The matches weren't even close.

Performance always declines when someone's fighting spirit is on the verge of breaking.

My attention drifted away from people almost out of necessity.

At least emotionless machines could still perform at full capacity when playing against me.

Right around that time, a sport where humans played against machines started making waves around the world.

“Mom? What are they doing?”

“This is a board game called Shogi. A professional *Sensei* is playing against a computer.”

The fact that the human lost was all over the news.

That silver glinting robot arm across the board from a Shogi player in a fancy kimono became all I could think about and I learned the rules right away.

...First with a simple app.

Then I got a high performance computer and installed the strongest Shogi software on the market at the time.

Once I felt I had a handle on it, I tried my hand at playing other people over the Internet. Except once I started coming from behind in the late-game to win against highly rated players, I started getting messages in the chat.

“Using a program? Go to hell.”

Software user ..... In other words, someone who would go online and let a software program play in their name. I got accused of doing that enough times that my account got banned.

So it seemed people’s hearts could shatter even without seeing my face.

The only option I had left was to find strong opponents to play against in person.

My hometown of Nara doesn’t have many Shogi classrooms to speak of, so my parents took me to the Kansai Shogi Association one day while they went shopping in Osaka.

I walked in and spotted someone sitting at a booth in the corner. There was a sign that said anyone could do an instructional match with a current member of the Sub League.

He was wearing a black school uniform with a clip collar.

...That, and glasses that didn't fit his face at all. It was like he was trying to appear grown-up, but just couldn't pull off the look.

His name was written on an orange tag, but I wasn't sure how to read it.

I challenged him ..... And, for the first time in my life, utterly lost.

"You don't play against people much, do you?" he said after our match. It was like he saw right through me.

"?! You can tell?"

"Yep. Your style matches a few things that software does."

Enamored, I told him all in one breath how I learned Shogi by playing on the computer and how everyone accused me of using software programs on the Internet.

"Really? So, the software-native generation is already here. Still, I can tell you have a lot of talent. Why not join the Practice League?"

"I get called a prodigy a lot."

"No kidding."

"But ..... I think you are so much more talented than me!"

"You do? I used to be a pushover, actually. Someone younger than me with a whole lot more talent was always around, and they toughened me up. Well, something like that."

"There are people even more talented than you?!"

"Lots of them. The pros are much stronger than me."

"Um!"

"Yeah?"

"How ..... do you read your name?"

"Yaichi. I'm Yaichi Kuzuryu."

The first thing I did when I got back to Nara was find the closest classroom to my house. It belonged to a retired professional, and I asked him to take me as an apprentice.



He very nearly lost his mind the first time we played.

*“T-Too strong ..... Boy, you’re a prodigy!”*

*“Yes. I hear that a lot.”*

However, he was too weak to be a professional in my eyes. I only found out after I became his apprentice that he only achieved 5-*dan* during his career and was forced into retirement in his thirties. He very well could have been the weakest professional ever.

Due to a lack of business and having a chronic illness, Master had been seriously considering closing his classroom to open a pickle shop, but suddenly became healthy after I became his apprentice.

*“I’m gonna live ‘til I see you become Meijin! Whaaat? That day’s not so far off.”*

I passed the Sub League Entrance Exam without a single loss.

My Master’s methods couldn’t have been more obvious.

*“I won’t teach you a thing. Go to the association and learn from the best. Use the software or anything that you see fit. If it’s good enough for you, it’s good enough for me.”*

He’d never used a computer in his life, but suddenly he upgraded to a smartphone so he could use Shogi apps and watch match streams in real time.

*“I’ve gotta learn this stuff before you go pro, Sota. Otherwise, it’ll be boring if I can’t understand what’s going on.”*

Honestly, I didn’t think he could comprehend why the software does what it does considering his level of talent and his age. Then again, he seemed happy and energetic, so there was no harm in letting him try.

*“I’ve been playing Shogi all my life, but I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed researching as much as I do now. Thanks, Sota.”*

It was a strange feeling.

Knowing that my talent made someone happy. That was a first.

I tracked down Yaichi and played against him the very day I joined the Sub League.

But he promoted almost right away, claimed his own title and even took his own apprentice. Suddenly Yaichi was too busy to spend time playing against me. That being the case, I wanted nothing more than to become a professional myself and face him in a league match as soon as possible.

I played against the *younger, more talented person* who Yaichi had mentioned, Ginko Sora, but I honestly didn't think she was all that good.

*"Heh. You aren't that strong after all!"*

I remember her glaring at me after I said so. Maybe Ginko, the one person who was closest to Yaichi, was jealous of me.

Then there was him.

*"Hey there, Sota! Let's play a match."*

The oldest member of the Sub League, and kind of a strange person.

He was the first one to come up to me in the Player's Room, and always seemed to follow me around for some reason.

*"..... You again? I don't like playing against people who don't have any talent."*

*"Don't be like that. Why don't you share some of yours with me?"*

*"Life wouldn't be so difficult if that were possible."*

*"Oh? The kid in grade school is going to tell me — a guy still in the Sub League only because of a winning record — about how difficult life is?"*

*"Haaaaaa ..... Would 10-second Shogi be okay?"*

While overpowering him into submission ..... I noticed something odd.

This person lost to me so many times, but his performance never dropped.

So many people, Sub League members and professionals included, lost heart after losing to an elementary school student like me.

Some of them even quit.

Yet this person kept coming back for another match.

Further still ..... He did so with a smile.

*“..... You’re a strange person.”*

*“Really? Well, I guess I would seem weird to a prodigy like you. A talentless guy like me refusing to give up on Shogi and all.”*

*“No. Not like that .....”*

Meeting Yaichi taught me what *admiration* feels like. He gave me something to *aspire* to be.

But this person ..... it was different.

*“Well, then what?”*

*“..... Please forget what I said. Look, I have you in hisshi.”*

*“Dah?! You really are a prodigy .....”*

*“Yes, I am.”*

Exactly. I’m a prodigy.

That’s the reason why there are so many things I’ll never have.

Over the course of my entire life, this person became my first——.

# PRODIGY

*Beeeeeeep!!* The high-pitched electrical tone brought Sota back into the moment.

“Ah .....?!”

His King was in check.

Advancing his King to the third row had given Hiuma the opening he needed to deploy a Rook two spaces behind it.

—If I don’t deploy something to block this check ..... I’m dead!

Sota’s right hand was still on his piece stand. Snatching a Pawn, he deployed it directly between his King and the Rook.

That move was pure instinct.

A primal instinct to survive, like an animal fighting to stave off a predator.

“Yes, Sota! Keep playing!”

Hiuma shifted the Rook he deployed one space to the side, promoting it into a Dragon with a casual flick of his wrist.

Two minutes. That was all the waiting time Sota had remaining. Hiuma, by comparison, still had eleven minutes. However, the older player played at a breakneck speed so as not to give Sota any time to think.

“Come on, attack! You’re not going to let it end like this, are you?!”

Hiuma fans the flames as he initiates a check path. Sota hastily grabs a Rook from his piece stand and deploys it in the same file as his opponent’s King to put him in check. It looked like a move to delay the inevitable, but—.

Hiuma suddenly froze like a statue.

Taking a few moments to think, he grinned at Sota from across the board.

“Block with a Gold and it’s instant death for me ..... I can never get complacent with you, can I, kid?!”

“ ..... ”

Sota's mind was already deep in the board. His wide, round eyes were tracing sequences every which way so quickly that Hiuma's words didn't register.

As shocking as that was, Hiuma was surprisingly happy to see the boy like that.

"Are you ready for this?!"

Newfound energy pulsed through his veins as Hiuma deployed a Knight to block.

Though it appeared to be a simple stopgap, it served an offensive purpose as well.

*"Mr. Kagamizu deployed a Knight? Shouldn't he be more aggressive .....?"*

*"Yeah. Now Sota can get a check path with his own Knight at 5 Six."*

Sub League members who had finished their own matches whispered among themselves as they watched this one unfold. However, they were wrong.

Should the boy elect to trigger that check path, it would inadvertently block his own Rook and cause a chain reaction that would result in Sota getting checkmated instead. A truly terrifying backlash.

Both had their backs to the cliff, being one move away from certain death as they traded blows.

However, it was Hiuma's remaining waiting time that made the difference. Knowing he had that extra leeway steadied his hand. Sota may be sitting on the other side of the board, but even a prodigy of his caliber would struggle to catch up after falling this far behind.

—I've won!!

Hiuma was certain of it.

The exultation and anxiety of his position made him tremble from head to toe. Rivers of cold sweat poured down his spine.

—I will be a professional! It's finally happening!!

Just as it clicked, he saw.

*Reach ..... Snap.*

Sota shifted a Silver diagonally backwards as if giving it to the Dragon on a platter.

“?! What’s this .....?”

This unexpected move shook Hiuma to his very core.

A 6 Two Silver self-sacrifice.

Should he take the head being offered .....? Or was this a poison apple that would kill him on the spot?

—There’s no time! I can’t read all the way to the end .....

Reading every sequence to completion is impossible in a match.

Players must make difficult choices in those situations: believe in their gut instinct or wait for a better opportunity. Hiuma had always tended to play *something other than his first impulse*.

—..... That’s how I’ve won so many matches.

Doing so had allowed him to extend his time in the Sub League and prolong his life.

However, he couldn’t help but feel that winning that way had made him weaker in the long run.

—And that’s why I’m still here .....

He was on the verge of turning thirty. A winning record couldn’t save his life anymore. Thinking back, he realized he had never been able to push beyond mediocrity.

In that case ..... there was only one choice in this match that could determine his professional fate!

“I’ll believe in myself,” said Hiuma with conviction as he took the Silver. After all, he thought he already had the match won and he’d made a promise to himself.

The next heartbeat—.

“.....”

Sota let his head hang limp as his right hand froze in the air, which was

striking because he had been playing moves instantaneously up to that point.

—Ahhh ..... Should've figured.

The doubts Hiuma had suddenly felt were more real after seeing Sota's reaction.

The onlookers were certain the match already belong to Hiuma.

*"Why doesn't that kid throw in the towel?"*

*"Can you blame him? Lose now and any hope he had to promote is gone, and Mr. Kagamizu will promote right in front of him."*

*"But, it's over ....."*

*"Maybe he's hoping that Mr. Kagamizu will make a mistake now that he doesn't have any waiting time left? If he is, he should hurry up and make a move."*

Hiuma Kagamizu had an indisputable, overwhelming lead.

The formations on the board and the players' body language said it all. Hiuma was sitting up straight with his chest swollen with pride while Sota stared into his lap without budging.

*"....."*

The onlookers started chiding Sota and still he didn't move. Looking away from the board, one simple minute felt like a never-ending eternity.

It was Hiuma who broke the ice.

"Play it, Sota."

His voice was oddly kind under the circumstances.

"You found a checkmate, didn't you? Play it."

"Huh?!"

The other Sub League members couldn't believe their ears.

Sota finally raised his head.

“B-But ..... if I do, then you ..... then you .....!”

“Don’t patronize me!”

Sota flinched in surprise as the man who would soon turn thirty gave him a stern lecture.

“Do you think I’d be happy getting promoted knowing that you let me? Do you seriously believe that you’ll have another shot if you let me win today?”

Each word was sharper than the last, almost like he was reprimanding the boy.

“The world isn’t that nice! If anyone could still promote after making a mockery of the sport of Shogi, I would’ve become a professional years ago! Now, play it!!”

“.....”

Fingers trembling, Sota slowly reached out over the board and put Hiuma’s King in check.

It wasn’t because he lacked confidence.

Precisely the opposite ..... He was hesitating, unsure if he should play his next move. Moving a Dragon to 6 Eight.

Then, once he pulled his hand away, the onlookers finally understood.

“Agh?!!”

Single move instant death.

The moment Hiuma had taken that Silver—his demise became inevitable 19 moves later.

It was a twist of fate that went beyond human influence and into the realm of the divine.

“He ..... is ..... a prodigy .....!!”

The prodigy had returned.

The boy had tasted fear and then overcome it.



The gears in his mind that wouldn't interlock had finally clicked into place, closer than ever before.

"H-How .....? That checkmate is so clean, it's like he wrote it out ....."

"..... Nobody stands a chance against that ....."

The onlookers who had been criticizing Sota not two minutes ago were suddenly falling into the pits of despair.

The opposing King firmly in his grasp, the prodigy didn't gloat or even celebrate his victory. He simply squeezed his knees with all his might.

Hiuma studied the formation for as long as his remaining waiting time would allow.

"..... Yeah, I've got nothing."

After a quick nod of acceptance, Hiuma lowered his head in a bow and acknowledged his defeat. A heavy, heavy defeat.

"I lost. I always knew you were a prodigy."

"....."

Sota didn't thank him for the compliment.

Instead—he went with a question.

"Why .....?"

The words on the tip of his tongue had nothing to do with the Shogi that had just taken place.

But an ongoing quandary that Sota had carried with him since the day the two first met.

"Why did you bother talking with me? Why did you play all those matches with me? Why ....."

It was a question that he always wanted to ask.

"Why are you ..... so nice to me ....."

A prodigy who kept his distance from others.

The first one to ever initiate a conversation with him was Hiuma Kagamizu.

“I’ve been wondering that myself. I don’t know how many times I saw you sitting alone in the back corner of the Player’s Room and thought, *I don’t need to go out of my way to say hello. The slower he grows, the better.*”

Reminiscing, Hiuma opens up about what he was thinking back then.

“But I sat down across from you and, next thing I knew, we had already started playing. It was the same with Yaichi, Ginko and even Sumito. Why is it that I keep making my rivals stronger?”

“But ..... why——?”

“Because that’s who I am,” said Hiuma, sounding as if he had come to terms with it.

...Come to terms with all the indecision and pain that come with making a mistake at the last possible moment and rising above it all.

“Didn’t I tell you? I’m going to become a professional my way. So this is all right.”

“..... I’m sorry ..... I’m sorry .....”

Sota managed to fit a few words between sniffles but could only repeat himself.

For the life of him, he couldn’t understand why he was crying. He was a prodigy but still didn’t know .....

“Hey, don’t apologize. I still control my own destiny, remember?”

“That’s ..... right. You do .....”

Hiuma looked over at the closest Kansai 3-*dan* and asked, “How did Shoji and Ginko’s match turn out?”

“..... Sora won.”

“I see. So, it all comes down to this.”

Hiuma, Ginko and Sota were all even at fourteen wins and three losses each. The three of them were the only ones with only three losses.

Hiuma was still on top thanks to his ranking, but there was someone ranked above him sitting at thirteen wins and four losses. Therefore, it was possible he

would not promote at all if he lost the upcoming final match.

However——.

“If I win my next match against Ginko and you win yours, Sota, we’ll finish the season as the top two.”

Hiuma would have no complaints about promoting with a 15-3 record.

Both he and Sota were in control of their own fate. Just win. It was that simple.

“Think of the headlines if the oldest and youngest players in the Sub League promoted at the same time! Let’s do this together!”

“.....”

*Sniffle.* Sota wiped away the tears with the back of his hand before finally looking up with a smile.

“..... I think the media would be more excited about Ginko and I promoting, though.”

“You’re a cheeky one, you know that?”

Hiuma reached across the board and ruffled Sota’s hair.

“More importantly though, you’ll be interviewed after the match so clean up your face. Don’t let yourself be photographed leaking snot and tears. Do you need a tissue? Also, keep the cheeky remarks to yourself once you’re a professional. They’ll come at you with everything they have even without that extra motivation. Understand?”

“..... You noticed, didn’t you .....? You really are a nice person, Mr. Kagamizu .....”

“One more thing. Would you try and fix that habit of clicking pieces together on your piece stand? Talking that much during the match is also bad manners. Oh, and——.”

“Okay, okay! Enough already!”

Sota pushed Hiuma’s hand off his head, annoyed.

“We *are* promoting together, no matter what!! You and I are becoming pros

today!! That's a promise!!"

"Yeah. I promise," said Hiuma with a mischievous grin as he held out his pinky finger.

The oldest and youngest Sub League members strengthen their friendship with a pinky swear over the board.

# THE SAME BLOOD FLOWS WITHIN THEM

I spend the interval between the first and second matches in the Women's League Player's Room on the fifth floor.

"The Women's League ....."

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka gave me something like permission to use this room on my first day in the 3-*dan* division. But, does someone like me truly belong in this room? I've never been able to answer that question one way or another.

"But I definitely won't be a women's player once I become a professional ....."

I should be planning for my next match, but my mind won't cooperate. Maybe it's because I don't want to think about the match that has my life with *him* riding on it. The first move is mine, and I already know how I'm going to use that advantage. Maybe it would be good to think about something else .....

After a few minutes of wracking my brain to figure out what—.

"Ah."

It comes to me in a flash.

I take the piece of paper out of my pocket and have another look.

"Now I get it. This one is based on moving to block checkmate and Reverse Check, too."

My mind is on something else entirely, but the answer to the pipsqueak's puzzle pops into my head. After all that time I spent at it last night, just like that. Maybe my brain is just in that high of a gear right now.

"Still, she found that sequence during an actual match? That pipsqueak ..... just how deep is she reading?"

This formation should never show up in any match.

The pipsqueak must have picked a spot in an actual match she had and mentally worked out the best moves for offense and defense to make this miracle checkmate happen. I highly doubt that sequences this long and complicated would ever happen in professional title matches, let alone the

Women's League.

But I feel so much better now that I solved it.

"He-he-he ..... Maybe I have a passport to Planet Shogi now? Can I visit where the Shogi Martians live?"

Solving extremely long Shogi puzzles won't make you stronger, but it does feel good.

Perfect timing, too. I gather my things and leave the Women's League Player's Room only to see——."

"Ah! Um! Sora-*sensei*, may I speak with you for a moment?!"

A girl shows up outside the door.

Her skin has a healthy, golden glow — exactly the opposite of mine. Was she waiting for me?

"You ....."

"I'm Karen Noboryou! 1-*dan*! I've, um, worked as a match recorder for several of your matches——."

"Yes. Of course, I remember."

"Pwff!! Huh?! Holy ..... Y-Y-Y-You really remember who I am .....?!"

"....."

"A-Ah! S- ..... Sorry! I guess this is how idol *otakus* feel when their fave looks at them from the stage ....."

..... Fave?

"I always ..... wanted to play against you in the Sub League. Once I realized that would never happen, I wanted to face you in a Women's Title match at least, but ..... I ended up losing to a little girl ....."

She must be talking about Yaichi's dark pipsqueak.

There's no shame in losing to that one as a 1-*dan*. She forced me into a repetition draw when I had the first move.

Just as I'm about to console her.....

“I was depressed after I lost, but not anymore,” says an upbeat Miss Noboryou.

“I’d always treated the Women’s League like a joke. The Sub League is more competitive, so I always thought of us as above them. At least, that’s the general opinion in the Kanto Sub League ..... Losing against one of them after I had actually played in a tournament of theirs was humiliating and the guys in the Sub League called me an embarrassment .....

“.....”

“But losing opened my eyes to so many more things. I think I was scared to lose. After seeing you keep on winning against Women’s League players under all that pressure, it gave me a whole new level of respect for you. I’ve decided to keep playing in Women’s League tournaments whenever I can.”

She apologizes for blabbing on and on about herself as she and I walk down the same hallway.

“It’s just so hard, being a girl in the Sub League ..... There’s no place for us during regular activities and we have no one to go to for advice. Worse, they all say *you’re lucky because you have the Women’s League as a backup* ..... Screw you! I’m here because I want to be a pro, dammit!”

She yells at no one in particular and stomps her feet. Then, Miss Noboryou politely bows.

“The reason why I can play in Women’s League tournaments and experience so many new things is because you forged that path for me, Sora-sensei. I wanted to say thank you ..... Sorry to disturb you right before such a big match.”

“It’s alright .....

“The best of luck to you! Go show the world what girls in the Sub League——,” stopping herself midsentence, Karen Noboryou 1-*dan* gives me an amazing sendoff, “what female professionals in the making can do!!”

“..... Thank you. I wish you the best as well, Miss Noboryou.”

I don’t know if I behaved as a Women’s League members should or if my Women’s Titles were a shortcut or the long way around in the end.

But it makes me happy to know that someone else is using my footsteps as a guide. That lets me know that it was worth it... even if I did go in circles.

After following his footsteps for as long as I have, I know how important it is to have a destination.

3-*dan* division, 18th match. The last one.

Our match isn't set to take place in the Exclusive Arena, but instead in the Ginsa no Ma.

There are too many people ..... that's the reason the association gave, but both of us playing in the match don't believe that is true for a moment.

My opponent—Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan* sits down in the upper seat.

Both of us have fourteen wins and three losses.

—Win, and promote undisputed. But lose and, most likely ..... I had no idea so much would be riding on this match .....

The pressure is getting to me, so I put both my hands on the *tatami* mat before the match starts.

Even though I'm sitting down, I feel extremely dizzy.

My heart is pounding hard enough to make me feel nauseated.

Mr. Kagamizu is always so warm and friendly, but right now ..... I'm terrified of looking him in the eyes .....!

"Pardon me."

Once Mr. Kagamizu readjusts the cushion, he reaches for the piece box and puts his King in place with a sharp snap.

That's just like him.

My fingers are trembling so much I can barely set my pieces inside the lines, but his hands are steady as a rock. I heard that Sota beat him with an instant death, but it looks like he's put it completely out of his mind.

Short memory.

It's a phrase that the Worldly Maestro Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan* preaches. Draw a



line between what just happened and what is about to and forget everything behind that line. In this case, focus on the match that's about to happen.

—I ..... can't. There's too much connected to it for me to block everything out .....

Just when I think I'm completely outmatched even before we get started, suddenly...

Mr. Kagamizu says something unbelievable.

"From my move."

"Huh?!" I couldn't stop myself from blurting out.

The first move is mine. Or, it should be .....? Huh?

Double checking, I am on offense.

"Ha-ha ..... Well, this is embarrassing."

Mr. Kagamizu awkwardly smiles, but I can almost see the blood draining from his face. Even his voice is shaking, so much so I can barely hear him.

"Well, no point denying it now. I'm nervous as hell ..... Matched up against this new stronger you under these circumstances."

"..... I am, too. Part of me really wants to run away right now."

If I had just let him play the first move, I would have promoted to 4-*dan* by default because of his rule violation.

It'd be a good idea to forget about that. I won't be able to play a single move if I don't.

"Haaa ....."

We both steady ourselves with a deep breath.

Now that I know he's just as nervous ..... I just might be able to put up a fight.

Then, without a single quiver in his voice, Kagamizu 3-*dan* says with the same tone as he always did in the Player's Room before we started a match of 10-second Shogi, "Well, shall we?"

"Ready when you are!"

I bow my head as low as I can. While I don't know if I'll be able to concentrate, I want to treasure every move I get to make at least. I want this to be good Shogi, a match where I can say I played my best...

Whether I win or lose .....

This will be the first and last time I'll ever get to play against Mr. Kagamizu in the Sub League.

"..... Hn!!"

I open the Bishop Path with every fiber of my being ready to fight. Mr. Kagamizu closes his eyes for a moment to mentally prepare himself and then advances the Pawn in front of his Rook. The match takes off from there.

Older formations take shape.

This match is the fork in the road that separates what has been from what will be.

I can't think of a more fitting way for it to play out.

"Double Yagura ..... Master's favorite .....!"

"Yeah. The two of us have the same blood flowing in our veins."

Mr. Kagamizu has played mostly Ranging Rook in the past few years, but maybe he discovered something new being part of Master's Practice Group, the Kiyotaki Classroom.

He started using *yagura* at the beginning of this season and hasn't used much else since.

Bishop Exchange is extremely popular in the professional leagues right now. Yaichi even said, "*Yagura* is dead." It takes a lot of courage to keep playing it right now.

Still, he *chose* to use it.

Even professionals have difficulty using the latest Bishop Exchange strategies effectively. Sub League members who try it fall apart halfway into them.

It takes courage to stick to your guns no matter what is in vogue.

Mr. Kagamizu has it. That's what's made him strong.

—Then what about me?

What is my strength? I think I have become strong. But what is the backbone of my Shogi .....? I didn't know.

Yaichi recommended I use Ranging Rook. I didn't choose that path, though.

—Because I don't have the talent for it.

Even if it fits that dark pipsqueak second apprentice of his like a perfect ring, it isn't my size. The design does nothing for me, either.

I decided to keep playing what I'm used to: Static Rook. It wasn't part of any strategy, but it was the only realistic option I had.

Strangely enough, it's similar to Mr. Kagamizu's playing style.

Two players who have walked the same path tend to make the same moves.

We both belong to the Kansai Sub League.

We both learned from the same people.

Other than Yaichi and Master Kiyotaki, I think I have played more Shogi against Mr. Kagamizu than anyone else. He used to work with me all the time in the Player's Room even before I joined the Sub League.

However, paths always split at one point or another.

"Now ..... Here's where we say goodbye to the standards."

40th move. Mr. Kagamizu mumbles as he looks out over our completely identical formations.

I take the initiative.

First—a Bishop Exchange.

Then—advance down the right edge!

"The Lance?!"

While the standard calls for a Climbing Silver sequence from 2 Six, I thrust my Lance forward instead.

However, Mr. Kagamizu doesn't look intimidated at all.

"..... That's an interesting sequence, isn't it? Did you think I wouldn't know

about it?”

“No, I did.”

“Hm?”

“The part you don’t know *comes next*.”

He goes along with the Lance Exchange and promotes his Bishop into a Horse in the process. It’s exactly the calm response the standard calls for.

In this case, I’ll *ramp up the pressure*.

I take the Lance I just claimed off my piece stand and deploy it right back onto the board! Mr. Kagamizu’s eyes fly open.

“Right in front of the Rook ..... You put a Lance there?!”

This offensive formation borders on crude. I’m lined up to charge right through him!

A software program would probably call it questionable... but!!

—I’ve got a cannon lined up on his King in the second file. Ratings don’t account for that kind of pressure!!

I’m not aiming for Mr. Kagamizu’s King.

I’m after the courage that supports him, that strong decisiveness. If I can just put a dent in it!

“Hmm .....”

Mr. Kagamizu leans back to think for the first time, his hand is on his tie as he stares at his own territory.

Then, 30 minutes later—*he ignores my attack completely*.

“*Go ahead and try.*”

That’s the message he’s sending by moving his Pawn to 5 Five. I charge straight in.

“Aaaarggghhhhhhhh!!”

My Silver leading the charge, I use my Lance cannon to the fullest over a 30-move assault!

Pouring every piece I capture onto the front lines, I press forward! Attack! Attack!!

“..... That’s some spirit you’ve got, Ginko. Pulling out all the stops .....”

Mr. Kagamizu dips and dives his pieces to parry my strikes—and smiles.

“Did you think this would be enough to scare me?”

“.....?!”

Then, he takes my leading Silver with his King.

At ..... At the most vital point .....!!

“F-Flat Faced Defense .....?!”

“Here it is, Snow White! Victory is staring you in the face! Just try and take it!!”

Mr. Kagamizu taunts me to draw my attention to his unguarded King.

A cheap taunt.

But it makes my blood boil from head to toe.

“..... Die!!”

I went for his fighting spirit, but it’s all over if he starts taking me lightly. I deploy a Gold right in front of his King and continue my assault.

Next thing I know, his supposedly cornered King slips away like a matador in the face of a charging bull.

“!! Oh n- .....!!”

All the blood that rushed to my head drains out.

Provoke me into attacking and get the King to safety during the chaos ..... I know that’s what he’s after, but it’s too late to pull up now.

Falling for that taunt not only lost me my Rook, but a precious Gold and Silver are gone, too.

—I just did him a favor .....

With his King now safely in the middle of the board, Mr. Kagamizu says like he’s already won, “Something wrong? There’s plenty of room to roam over

here.”

If his King gets all the way to the right side ..... I’ll never be able to checkmate him .....

I missed ..... my chance .....

“..... Kgh .....!!”

I know his formation is better than mine. Software would probably say I’m 1,000 points behind right now.

The dark shadow of despair falls over my eyes.

—Is it ..... over? After how far I’ve come ..... everything just ends, this quickly .....?

The research I was banking on failed. I went first and couldn’t use that advantage. So many different reasons for losing start coming to mind ..... Until finally, I look up at Mr. Kagamizu.

Something about him sitting there, clenching his slacks above the knee with his right hand—looks just like Master.

—..... No.

I never had an advantage against him from the outset.

In terms of the mid-game’s ebb and flow, and even reading speed in the late-game, I don’t measure up to Mr. Kagamizu. Not even close.

—What is my strength?

“Ahhhh .....

I look up at the ceiling and let out a long sigh.

The stubborn, gritty Kansai Sub League has a few legends.

*“Having six of the eight Golds and Silvers is an advantage, but having seven puts you in position to win.”*

*“The opponent might have a heart attack, so use every bit of waiting time and hold out until a Gold is deployed in front of your King.”*

My head clear, I look out onto the board again.

—I wasted two of them, but I still have six Golds and Silvers, one of which is still on my piece stand.

Then I look at the chess clock.

—I still have plenty of time because I rushed into that attack.

Lastly, I checked my pulse.

—I'm fine. It's still beating like a drum.

My body is fragile. My Shogi is weak. I've failed the Sub League Entrance Exam before.

*"There are two late-games in the Sub League."*

My heart skips a beat when those words echo through my mind.

But I remember what he said.

The very same person who created those legends said that I was invincible.

In that case, there's nothing to be afraid of.

"If I truly believe I will win in the end ..... being behind along the way isn't scary at all!!"

There's one Silver left on my piece stand. I take it.

Endure, endure.

Endure, endure, endure and overcome. My story shines bright, just like this Silver.

"I'm just getting started, Hiuma."

97th move—Deploy 6 Eight Silver.

I tell him as I work that Silver into my defensive formation. Tell the person who became my Shogi guardian. Like a brother who has the same blood in his veins that I do, "I will beat you even if my heart stops."

## ONLY VICTORY

“*Cough! Haaack ..... Ngh! Gahhh .....*”

Once he saw Ginko deploy a Silver in her own territory, Hiuma Kagamizu raced into the men’s room and clung to the toilet bowl. Dry heaves wouldn’t stop coming.

His entire body shook to the point where simply sitting upright on the floor was a challenge, let alone holding a Shogi piece between his fingers.

This had happened to him several times before when he knew victory was in his grasp, but ..... never to this extent.

“..... Haaa ..... Haaa ..... Haaa ..... *Paaaant*————.....”

The formations indicated Hiuma had a commanding lead. What’s more, it was now his turn to go on the offensive. All he needed to do was push forward .....

——And I’ll win.

Yes. Force my way to victory! Then, I’ll promote! I will be a professional!!

The problem was his body seemed to reject those prospects on a molecular level. As bad as his hands were shaking, playing Shogi was physically impossible.

“Whew ..... It’s almost like I’ve got *loser* ingrained in my DNA .....”

His time in the Sub League spanned nearly 20 years.

Now, after spending more than half of his life as a member of the Sub League, today would be his last.

—— Win or lose ..... Or lose?

“..... What would happen if I lost .....?”

There would still be a chance for him to promote.

That possibility would decrease a bit if Sota won his match. But with a bonus point in his back pocket, he could still advance to *4-dan* depending on the results of other matches.

——I’d promote outright if Sota loses. If he loses ..... I can, too .....



If both of them lost, then breaking the promise they shared wouldn't be his fault.

"Okay. Maybe I can lose ....."

No sooner were those words out of his mouth than his trembling hands finally held still.

Then, just when he was feeling well enough to leave the stall—he heard footsteps enter the restroom.

"The kid I'm playing is up for promotion, apparently. You know, that grade schooler."

—Sota's opponent?

If it were true, they didn't seem anxious at all. Hiuma held his breath and pressed his ear to the stall door.

"Ah, yeah. The Kansai boy wonder."

"Seriously, I can't catch a break. You know what? I'll throw in the towel."

"I don't see a problem with that. We've both won enough to get in next season anyway."

"You're right. Winning won't change anything."

"Exactly. Strong players should promote on out. Next season, we got this!"

The two cackle with laughter. Finishing up, they leave the restroom.

Hiuma didn't recognize either of the young voices. Most likely, they were high school-aged Kanto 3-*dans* ..... Young players who never doubted they'd promote eventually even if this season didn't go their way.

Anger didn't come.

Instead, regret that he had once felt that way seeped into Hiuma's heart and soul.

Next came the pitiful realization that he was still weak enough to think *it's okay to lose*, even now.

Wishing, even for a moment, that Sota would lose made him feel vile to the point that he wanted to kill himself for it.

“..... There’s only victory. I knew that going in, didn’t I?”

Yes. He knew from day one.

...Knew that there wasn’t a single match in the 3-*dan* division where losing was acceptable.

His pathetic nerves made his body start trembling again, but ..... Hiuma couldn’t have cared less.

“Let’s do this!!”

Kicking the door open with enough force to nearly knock it off its hinges, Hiuma marched out of the bathroom stall.

He ran cold water over his trembling fingers and then splashed his face, washing it repeatedly as if trying to wipe away the shame of defeat.

Then he looked at the loser in the mirror and howled as loud as his trembling voice could muster.

“Beat me, huh ..... Not if I kill you first!!”

## ▲ HERE, HERE, HERE

Yo Okito-*Crown* takes my sealing move 7 Six Pawn with a Silver right away.

He probably expected it.

—That makes two of us.

Now that I finally have a turn on offense at the beginning of the second day of the Crown Title Match, I move without using any waiting time and deploy a Pawn right in front of one of his Golds. All right, now it's my turn to take control!

But.

“Fssssshhhhhhhhhhhhh .....—”

“?!”

That same soft whistling sound fills the arena.

The bald Crown's eyes go wide as he leans so close to the board it makes me nervous that he's going to bump into it and he pours a ton of waiting time into reading.

“Sssshhh .....”

He's reached a conclusion: to *counterattack*.

Now totally quiet, Mr. Okito slides a piece forward without making a sound.

By advancing the Pawn down the sixth file he forces me to advance my defense. Then he forcefully deploys a Pawn in the space I just left open!

“He's abandoned his own defense?! Has he read all the way to the end .....?!” Ms. Mato says under her breath as she jots something down. She's just as glued to her seat at the boardside table as she was yesterday.

Even an Eternal Women's Title Holder thinks this attack is overly aggressive. Except the further he advances, the more the formations twist and bend to the point that anyone can see .....

Ms. Mato puts it into words: “..... Too strong .....”

Every move Mr. Okito makes is the absolute best move.

Including every turn I had yesterday as the defender, I've only had two moves on offense: my sealing move and the one right after it.

Just two moves.

The price for barely making a scratch in his formation is that my King is now sandwiched between a Promoted Pawn on the right and a Silver on the left.

I'm pincerred in. It looks like there's nowhere for me to run.

"He's not human .....,," whispers the young pro working as the match recorder, as if he is both scared and repulsed at the same time. He is recording the match because the Sub League has their regular activities today, Saturday. Actually, it's pretty normal for pros to record title matches.

"..... Whew ....."

I look up from the board and out the window. It's a bright, sunny blue sky out there. A hot, hot summer sky.

That's right. The Sub League is meeting today.

—Let's see ..... The second match should've started by now, I think to myself.

The final day of the 3-*dan* division ..... Basically the last battle of the six-month war.

—Two of the most important people to me are facing off here in Tokyo, under this same sky.

I have no idea what the situation is. Mr. Kagamizu might've won his first match and already turned pro while Big Sis has already missed out on her chance.

But, if Big Sis won her first match and Mr. Kagamizu lost his ..... The two of them could be fighting for their lives right now.

One of them is guaranteed the short end of the stick. It's that kind of match.

*"Comprehension of your own talent reduces misfortune."* That's what Mr. Okito said.

*“Why can’t talent be a number?”* That’s what Sota said.

They may have a point. That way, maybe no one would have to hurt someone important to them in a big match like that.

But those two are fighting right now all the same.

If I were in their shoes ..... I wouldn’t know what to do. It be so painful I’d probably be cursing fate itself.

*“Say there’s something that somebody else treasures and there’s only one of them in the world. Would you take it for yourself? Or would you give up on it?”*

“..... That really is a hard question .....

Memories of the night Ai Yashajin said she loves me replay in my head. That night I fell headfirst into a grade schooler’s ambush.

She really put me on the spot ..... But I got butterflies, too.

Her heart used to have a thick shell, but she showed a ton of courage breaking through it.

“He-he ..... I wonder, could that be considered cheating?” I think out loud as I tap my fan against my lips.

Nah, it couldn’t be. She’s the one who made the move ..... And I haven’t given *her* my answer yet. With the sealing move in place, I can’t.

Then again ..... what if today’s the day?

When push comes to shove, there’s only one answer.

“..... Only victory. Don’t you think?”

There have been matches that I’ve *wanted to win* before.

I’ve psyched myself up knowing that I *needed to win*, too.

But there’s *only victory* for this Shogi.

Not to get the title.

I couldn’t care less about who wins the battle between people and software.

Just ..... for the girl I love.

Only victory can make me look cool in her eyes.

The girl I love is fighting her heart out. If I lose when she wins her match, I really would be trash. Heck, I'd give trash a bad name. Tell her I love her after losing? No way.

A pathetic guy like that—doesn't deserve Naniwa's Snow White!!

“Not the girl who beat Mr. Kagamizu ..... and turned pro.”

That's why I prepared a sequence for just this moment.

The biggest move I've ever made in my life.

Software takes all the information on the board and crunches the numbers to find the best move.

It takes everything it can see into account and finds the perfect way to defend any attack.

“In that case!!”

I'll attack—from where it can't see: the opposite horizon!!

“Haaaa——.....”

Closing my eyes, I take in a deep breath.

All the while picturing a tiny angel.

“ ..... Here ..... ”

Just like that little girl soaring freely over the board with two pristine white wings coming out of her back, I plant my fists onto the *tatami* mat and start swaying back and forth.

"Here ..... Here ..... Here ..... Here ..... Here ..... Here .....  
Here ..... Here ..... Here ..... Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here,  
hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehe

“Th-That’s .....?! Hinatsu—.”

Ms. Mato looks away in disbelief, as if she *saw something that shouldn't be here.*

I reach for the board.

My Rook patiently waiting at the back of the 8th file.

I pick it up between my fingers—and slide it all the way across the board!!

“Here!!”

Mr. Okito calmly deploys a Pawn to block.

I shift my Rook one space to the side the instant he lets go.

“Here!!”

He blocks that with another Pawn like it’s a walk in the park.

Anyone would have made the same move. Sub League members, pros and even software.

Here’s the part where I would pull back and the fight would continue.

...Because there shouldn’t be a checkmate.

Only Ms. Mato, who knew exactly what I had in mind, is the only one who figures out what I’m about to do.

“It couldn’t be ..... He’s read it to the end?! In so little time?! H- ..... He still has almost four hours of waiting time left .....!!”

No.

That’s not a short time.

Actually, I needed *so much more—a measly four hours wasn’t nearly enough to read all the way to the end of the match* from this point... to get past the inevitable defeat.

—I can’t soar wherever I want like she can.

I read, read, read, readreadreadreadreadreadread, read to the point where my brain broke, and I finally got wings of my own.

It’s time ..... to crash them down!!





“Khhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

Picking up that Pawn and putting it on my piece stand, I flip my Rook over—promoting it into the Dragon King and snap it down right where the Pawn used to be! Proof that that girl is with me.

“These!! These are my ..... our wings!!”

—7 Seven Promote Rook.

My newly promoted Dragon King gets taken by a Gold on the next turn. Basically, I exchanged a Rook for Pawn.

There’s only one thing that this normally unthinkable exchange could mean.

“The Rook ..... So, he read far enough ahead to know that his King couldn’t be checkmated even if he lost his Rook. .... That’s——.”

The man closest to the machine—all of humanity whispers under his breath.

“Something *only a human could read.*”

Holding his hand over his piece stand, my opponent acknowledges his own limits.

“Huh?! S-Surrender?!” the match recorder stutters as he fumbles with the tablet to press the *End Match* button.

We’ve only played 15 moves since my sealing move. Talk about a quick late-game.

But I’ve been fighting this battle nonstop in my head since that sealing move ..... It was a long, long, loooong battle .....

“..... It seems the two-day format will soon be unnecessary,” says Mr. Okito, completely calm despite the confusion around us.

“Yes. Being able to think for a whole night is too much of an advantage. If they’re going to keep the format, they’ll have to end at day one after the

opening sequences .....

But doing that would just make the second day a glorified practice session. The competitiveness would be gone.

The sealing move.

There's no question that I won because I had time to read all the way to when each of our Kings would be checkmated after I made the sealing move.

If I had to compare it to anything ..... yes, it's like the way Ai Yashajin planned a *match* from the early game all the way to a *confession of love* kiss and checkmate.

Software only reads far enough to know that there are *no issues* and it *cannot be checkmated* to make its decisions.

One look at my formation, and anyone could see it would turn into tissue paper if I lost my Rook.

However, read much, much deeper into it, and——.

“Software is way ahead of people in figuring out if there's a checkmate or not. But .....

Gulping down all the water in my glass, I say, “People are still better than software at *figuring out what sequences they need to seriously consider and which they can ignore.*”

“An ability that software will soon possess.”

“That doesn't mean people will be able to use it ..... right?”

“Concur.”

People can come close to machines but can't actually be them.

Even so, Mr. Okito strived to find out how close he could get while I chose to face machines as a human being.

Our conclusions are very different, but ..... they need the same things.

First the *courage* to make the necessary decisions, and then the *effort* to push through once a decision is made.

Talent is necessary, sure. But courage and effort can overtake it. That belief is what has gotten me this far.

Neither of us will change our core beliefs. But they can clash on the board like this. That's good enough for now.

The head journalist cautiously asks, "U-Um ..... Pardon me, but as the match ended much sooner than expected, may I ask the two of you to provide match analysis at the big board downstairs .....?"

"Dissent," Mr. Okito says right off the bat and rubs his head before the journalist can ask why. "Make a public appearance like this?"

"....."

There's not much anyone can say to that .....

The journalist looks to me for help, but all I can do is apologetically say, "It wouldn't be right for the challenger to appear without the title holder ....."

Salvation for the journalist on the verge of a panic attack... comes from fellow players in the room.

"Master and myself shall go to the venue and provide analysis. As my sibling has been entrusted with management of big board pieces, I would much like to witness her performance firsthand!"

"Jin-Jin and I will go too≡ Be sure and thank us later!" say Ayumi and Ms. Rokuroba. Both are grinning for some reason.

Ms. Mato, still sitting at the boardside table, immediately asks, "Crown: even if analysis is not an option, may I still ask you questions in private? If possible, would you be willing to demonstrate your software research techniques on a computer in the waiting room?"

"Should conditions be met, concur."

"Thank you so much! Ah, Ryuo, I will email you a few questions, so please respond when you have time."

Um, hello? I won, remember?

"And there you have it."

Ms. Rokuroba starts shooing me away.

"You're free to go, Kuzuryu-sensei."

“Indeed, your presence is unnecessary, young Dragon King ..... *In this location, that is.*”

“Why, yes. Leave now and you might make it *there* in time,” Shakando-sensei and Mr. Natagiri add, like they’re trying to stop themselves from laughing.

Finally, I get why ..... get the reason why Ayumu agreed to be the assistant observer and why everybody is in here right now.

“Well ..... But .....”

I’m still hesitating, but this time Okito-Crown adds, “Be on your way. I shall take care of the board. It is my duty as the title holder.”

Logical reasoning. Fitting, coming from him.

“Thus, your purpose here has come to an end.”

Those words are the last push I needed.

I can’t let all these people down.

I can’t ..... betray my own feelings anymore!

“..... Thank you!!”

I jump to my feet, throw open the *fusuma* sliding door, and race down the hallway.

Flinging my kimono off the second I get to my room, I slip my suit on and leave just as quickly.

I’ll take care of that stuff when I get back.

Right now, I need to get over there ASAP!

“Taxi! Where can I get a taxi .....?”

Something very important hits me the moment I step outside the hotel to get a taxi, something that makes my blood run cold.

“Ah! I forgot to get my wallet and phone first!!”

The new rules require me to leave my phone with the observer and the head journalist made arrangements with the hotel to keep our valuables in a safe.

“Should I go to the front desk?! No, I should head back to my room first to .....

Crap! M-My key is still in there! Okay, I'll talk to the front desk first and then——."

I won't need to...

...Because one big motorcycle pulls up in front of me, idling engine purring like a cat ready to pounce.

Sitting atop that metallic beast—is an Archangel with flaming red hair for wings.

"Ryou?!"

"Hurry it up, trash! Why'd you need two days to beat Poindexter, huh?! Do it in one!"

Is she crazy?!

But she looks like a real angel to me right now.

Aggressive Archangel Ryou Tsukiyomizaka tosses me a helmet. I strap it on, take a seat behind her, and yell, "To Sendagaya!"

"Where else, idiot?"

She takes off into traffic, zooming forward at full throttle like a Lance charging across the board.

Heading for the association building in Sendagaya.

To where Ginko is right now.

I want wings. That's what I thought.

"Gh .....!!"

I grit my teeth and deploy a piece in my home territory to brace against Mr. Kagamizu's attack.

I've been on the defensive ever since I played that Silver at 6 Eight and declared to *hold out even if my heart stopped*. How many turns ago was that?

The Sub League doesn't have match recorders.

Without a record, without anyone around, the two of us duel to the death on our lonely island.

I don't even know how many moves we've played at this point. It should be over 100 by now. Both of us are down to a few minutes of waiting time each.

—One-minute Shogi will be the death of me! I must avoid that at all costs .....!

My eyes more focused on the clock than the board, I hastily move my pieces about.

Things will only get worse if I lose time in a bad formation. Actually, Mr. Kagamizu might go for the safe win once he thinks he can and start overthinking ..... allowing me to catch up!

But the Sub League veteran doesn't let up.

"Shaa!"

Mr. Kagamizu uses that long reach of his to slide his Dragon King deep into my territory like a boxer delivering a body blow.

"Moving the Dragon .....?!"

It's... not the worst move, I don't think.

But it had been protecting his King. Moving it into attack without any hesitation not only shows me how much better his formation is, but how dead

set Mr. Kagamizu is on finishing me off.

*To hell with the safe win! I'm taking the shortest path to victory!.....* He is that determined.

However, taking time to admire it will get me killed.

“All right then—take this!!”

Giving him a taste of his own medicine, I snap down a Lance in an area that I had surrendered as the defender. Now I can skewer a Gold and his King in exchange for a Knight. It's the perfect counter!

But.

“Shaaa!!”

Mr. Kagamizu leaves the Knight where it is and deploys a Pawn right in front of my defensive wall to stomp it down.

It's a heavy jab with a haymaker of a Rook lined up behind it.

His perfect combination of vertical and horizontal fronts not only pushes my defenses to the brink but puts my spirit on the ropes as well.

—He's not shaking at all ..... Too strong!!

I'm overwhelmed, both on the board and psychologically. After seeing him expose his King to danger on purpose and keep his focus steady as a rock, I have to admit it.

His King hasn't moved from 4 One, but mine is diving into the smallest openings to escape. It barely has enough time to come up for air .....

—..... So far away .....

I had that King one move away from checkmate, but now it is so despairingly far out of reach. Beyond the opposite horizon.

Gone ..... for good .....?

“Haaa ..... Haaa ..... Haaa ..... HaaaAAAAHHHHH!!!”

I howl.

Howl away the fear and keep reading my options.

Defensive Shogi is basically *seeing death at every turn*.

No one move alone can save you in Shogi.

There are only moves that *slightly extend your life* and moves that *end it right now*.

I have to see my death thousands and thousands of times in order to find the one move that allows me to live for another turn.

—It hurts ..... I'm scared ..... The pain ..... Save me .....

I have to hope that he makes a mistake at some point while I keep extending my life over and over again.

Unfortunately, 3-*dans* don't make those mistakes, ever.

With this much of a lead, there wouldn't be a single match in a thousand where he'd trip up.

I keep dying in this never-ending cycle of despair. Despair compounds despair, and my spirit is breaking under its weight.

*"Pant ..... Ghhh!! Kghh ..... Argh!! ..... Haa ..... Haaaaaaaaa!!"*

My pulse is ragged.

Every death I see, every checkmate I read myself into makes my heart pound that much harder. It won't be able to hold out at this rate.

It calms the moment my King has nowhere else to go...

...Only to start hammering again at the first ray of hope.

*"Haaa ..... Haaa ..... Agh! Ah, ah, ah ..... Argh ..... ugh."*

The room starts spinning, lungs and heart refusing to work in sync as I desperately search the board for that one move that will keep me alive.

—I ..... I thought, I had gotten stronger .....!

If Yaichi, Sota or that pipsqueak were here .....

If it were one of those winged Shogi Martians with their extraordinary talent, they would find a way out of this mess while humming a little tune for good measure.



I'm not so greedy as to wish for a full set of wings.

If only I had just a single feather ..... If I just had that late-game prowess for a single moment! If only .....!!

"Did you think I'd let instant death happen again?"

".....?!"

I freeze, my thoughts being read like a book.

Mr. Kagamizu knows what this is like. He's known for years and years .....

The man in front of me isn't the kind, brotherly Hiuma Kagamizu I know. He's not even a Shogi player.

He's the *entire Sub League*.

"You're welcome to try. But that pressure won't work on me. Because——."

He spells out the unforgiving truth.

"You aren't Sota Kunugi."

"....."

"I'm sure you realize this by now, Ginko. We aren't prodigies. We aren't up with Sota or Yaichi. We're moles that can't fly. All we can do is dig through the mud to survive. Whoever's got the better formation with the most time left is going to win."

"....."

I couldn't say anything back and realize something else at the same time.

If his attack gets one move closer——my King will be checkmated. Whether it's a check path or *hisshi*, I can't read far enough to tell.

"SHUUUUUUT YOOOOOUR MOOOOOOOUTH!!"

I grab a Rook off my piece stand with as much force as my battered and bruised spirit can amass and slap it onto the board deep in his territory.

Check.

This is the only move that extends my life.

"Yes! Come! But know that death is waiting for you the moment you let up!!"

Mr. Kagamizu retreats his King.

I use the Gold that had been sitting useless after my first attack to put him in check again.

But this is the one trap I still have left.

It looks like he can take it for free, but——.

“Checkmate at 7 Three King or taking the Gold at 5 Three ..... hah!! When will you learn?!!”

——He saw through it?!

It hurts too much to pull off any other tactics. I send my Gold further in, chasing his King across the board.

Take it! Come on, just take it!

“I can tell that’s a poison apple, so give up on it already!!”

He must’ve seen the looming instant death long ago, because Mr. Kagamizu keeps moving his King away from my Gold every turn.

Until, finally, our Kings meet face-to-face with only Pawns between them.

A King Vanguard Battle .....!!

*Ba-thump!* My heart thunders in my chest, almost strong enough to crack my ribs.

——I might ..... have a chance!!

The last lines of defense themselves, the *vanguard*, collide when the Kings are so close together.

It’s like two warships colliding in a narrow canal.

One of them will die. Immediately.

However, King Vanguard Battles are close combat. The only protection I have is a thin Pawn layer, not much better than bare skin. If Mr. Kagamizu wants to kill my King, his own will have to join the battle itself .....!

“Geeh! Nghhhh ..... *Cough!* Ghhh .....!!”

My nerves hit my stomach and diaphragm, making them convulse. Hot

stomach acid drips out of my mouth and dirties my skirt. Tears start flowing, it hurts so bad.

—L-Let up for a single turn ..... and I'll die .....!

Although Mr. Kagamizu's King doesn't have any defenses, I'm still in *hisshi*. So I take a Lance off my piece stand and snap it down right in front of his King to extend my life once again. That's five checks in a row!

"Pointless!!"

Mr. Kagamizu slides his King out of the sixth and seventh checks with just his fingertip before coming right back and putting me in check!

—W-What is going on here?! This ..... This isn't Shogi!!

It's a puzzle. A double King puzzle.

With only one space separating our Kings in a standoff, Mr. Kagamizu yells, "Now———this is over!!"

He deploys a Knight onto the board with the intensity of a meteorite on impact.

——..... Checkmated.

One glance is enough to know. There's no back door to escape from and the way forward is blocked off.

The word *surrender* makes its way up my throat.

—But ..... There is one way I can resist.

Pawn Drop Mate.

If I pull my King back and Mr. Kagamizu deploys a Pawn to finish it off, that would violate the rules and I would win by default.

Surely he wouldn't have played that Knight if he wasn't worried about Pawn Drop Mate. Even I know that.

Except no one knows what will happen when emotions are running high.

And most of all ..... I don't want to give up hope!

So I pull my King back with as much boldness as my trembling fingers can muster.

“Hnn .....!”

I keep reaching my neck out over the board even after I take my hand away, rocking back and forth to keep myself ready for battle.

But I feel more like the condemned laying their head down before the executioner right now.

*B-dmp! B-dmp! B-dmp! B-dmp! B-dmp!*

My heart is pounding so hard in my chest that my opponent can probably hear it, but ..... That would be absurd.

—All he has to do is move that Gold into place rather than deploy a Pawn ..... It’s over.

*Ba-dump ..... Ba-dump .....*

It’s a simple checkmate. My heart steadies itself now that I’ve accepted death.

But Mr. Kagamizu isn’t making the move.

“.....”

He’s sitting still as a statue with his eyes boring a hole into his own King ..... while time keeps ticking away.

This is more than just playing it safe.

— ..... Why? Why isn’t he ..... playing 7 Seven Gold .....?

I know Mr. Kagamizu can see it. There’s no way he doesn’t.

Then why use all this waiting time? ..... Suddenly that story from the Kansai Sub League comes to mind: the one about running out of waiting time.

*“I thought my opponent might have a heart attack.”*

However, that happened when it was his turn to play in a hopeless situation .....

—I would understand it for my turn, but why Mr. Kagamizu instead .....  
Huh?

“Ah.”

Rather than assuming that Gold will checkmate me, I try reading past it.

Sure enough, an unbelievable sequence shows up ..... I gawk with my mouth open.

“..... The other way around .....?”

No sooner do I mumble those words than I pick up on just how shaken Mr. Kagamizu is. There’s a panic in his eyes that I’ve never seen before.

My doubts are turning into reality.

—Moving that Gold would open an escape route for my King ..... and put him in Reverse Check at the same time!!

*BA-THUMP!!!!*

My pulse had stabilized when I accepted defeat, but it goes off like a cannon now that I have hope again.

I can win?

I can win! I CAN WIN!!

That’s the moment in time when my heart reaches its limit.

“ ”

I’m not breathing.

No ..... There’s no sound. My entire body has gone silent.

The first sensation is an unnerving tranquility. Then drowsiness ..... Not quite conscious.

—My heart ..... stopped .....?

“..... Yai-chi ..... My chest .....”

I call out for help from my younger brother apprentice who isn’t here, but is fighting his own battle someplace else.

Just like I did the first time I played a match in the Sub League.

—If I collapse here ..... Yaichi will abandon his own match and rush to my side .....

It being a title match doesn’t matter.

He would ditch the review session and board analysis and come straight to whatever hospital I get taken to.

So, if I just fall asleep now, Yaichi will be right next to me when I wake up.

He'll reassure me that everything is all right.

*"You fought really hard, Ginko."*

*"You have to take it easy now, okay?"*

*"I'll be staying right here with you."*

And if I ask ..... we can pick up where we left off that night.

Unseal the confession that we made that night.

He'll be kinder to me than ever.

We can walk through the streets hand in hand. Go to the movies together. Visit the beach.

We can try anything we want together. Not as sibling apprentices, but as a couple .....

Now that Yaichi is 18 and a full-fledged adult, he'll take our relationship to the next level.

If I ask, he'll give the rest of his life to me.

The symbol of that promise will slide onto my left ring finger.

—Wow ..... It's beautiful ..... I love it .....

Sweat and tears are not only doing a number on the *tatami* mats but blurring my sight as well. I can't help but smile as that silver twinkle looks just like a ring.

— How about that ..... Everything I've ever wanted will come true ..... if I just ..... give in .....

Collapsing now might be the best thing that ever happens to me.

*He* is too nice to let weak little me be left out in the cold.

Collapse ..... And he'll always hold my hand like he did when we were children.

He'll use his right hand, his Shogi hand just for me .....

—Ohh ..... Now I see.

Visions of happiness fill my mind as I squeeze my right hand into a fist.

Squeeze harder, harder, harder.

Hard enough to dig my nails deep into the skin.

Then—.





I slam that fist right into my chest.

*Crunch.*

Bones are definitely cracked. I can feel it.

Sharp pain is right behind it.

This time, it's not stomach acid coming up my throat, but probably blood.

“Ya ..... i-chi ..... My ..... chest .....”

My chest.

## My heart feels so...!

“Hot.”

Feeling my pulse through my fist in my chest makes everything clear.

I love Yaichi.

So I can never give up on Shogi.

Run up the white flag myself during a match? Never.

I mean, because—we're not connected by love or blood. Shogi is the only bond we have.

“Pwff!!”

I open my fan enough to hide my mouth and spit out blood. Once I fan away that iron smell and cool off my feverish body, I close it with a high-pitched *snap*.

Then I wipe what's left of the hot blood off my mouth with my hand and lock eyes with Mr. Kagamizu.

“..... Make your move!!”

I'm ready to fight.

My heart stopping doesn't scare me anymore.

My spirit won't break.

Even if my heart does stop or my spirit does break, I can revive them with this hand as many times as I need to.

This hand is for playing Shogi.

Electronic beeps start counting down the seconds.

“.....”

Mr. Kagamizu reaches out over the board when he’s down to five seconds and retreats his King diagonally backwards.

It’s not a cowardly move.

“It’s over, Ginko.”

Seeing the result makes my blood run cold.

“Agh?!”

— Discovery Check .....!!

With his King out of the way, the Lance behind it has an open path to skewer my King!

It’s a mirror image of the Reverse Check that I thought of just a moment ago.

The ultimate counterpunch.

—I’ll be checkmated no matter what I deploy to block!! I-I didn’t ..... even see that move .....

There is one thing I have to do right now.

Find a way to open an escape route while simultaneously preventing check.

That’s the equivalent of doing two moves at once.

—..... That type of move doesn’t exist .....

Even if it did, I doubt I could find it in the middle of one-minute Shogi.

Which was why it is a total coincidence that one came to me with a single glance.

“..... Silver .....

The piece that shares my name is blocking my King’s escape route.

My King could escape to the upper right if only it wasn't there ..... Just as irritatingly clumsy as I am.

— ..... Wait?

In the way?

The Silver?

In that case ..... Why don't I move it?

..... Huh?

—But ..... What?! This is an actual match!!

I'm down to my final seconds.

I reach out with my blood-smudged right hand and grab the Silver.

Then, just like that—.

“Here!!”

I slide the Silver to the upper left.

This type of decisive move has never come up in any of the over 10,000 Shogi matches I've played, so I couldn't believe it actually worked even after I made the move.

A total coincidence, all of it.

Coincidence ..... And some whimsical good luck.

Because—I saw it in a Shogi puzzle recently.

## SEALING MOVE

“OUTTA THE WAY!! MOVE, MOVE, MOOOVE IT———!!”

There’s a throng of media people and curious onlookers outside the Shogi association building, and Ryou Tsukiyomizaka drives the motorcycle right into it.

“GOTTA DEATH WISH, EHHHHH?! THEN MOOOOOOOOOVE!!”

People run around every which way like baby spiders when the lights come on. The bike screeches to a halt right by the association’s front door.

This girl’s totally crazy! And ..... totally cool!

I pull off the helmet and jump off the motorcycle.

“Thank you so much, Ryou!”

“Get in there, Trash! Just don’t forget you owe me big time!”

The parking lot isn’t all that big to begin with, but it’s downright tiny with all these TV vans and cars jammed into it. The entrance and lobby are just as crowded, but I know exactly where I’m going and force my way through.

“Hey! Was that .....?”

“What is he doing here?!”

Ignoring those voices, I keep running. Dunking and diving my way through waves of humanity, I finally get to the stairwell.

The crowd outside is huge, but it’s even noisier inside.

Reason being——.

“Sota Kunugi promoted!!”

“The first ever elementary school-aged professional!!”

“Breaking news!!”

“He’s doing a press conference on the second floor!! Go, go, go!!”

*TWP, TWP, TWP, TMP, TMP, TMPPPPPP!!* The stampede shakes the whole building like an earthquake. People are going crazy outside. I’d have never

gotten upstairs if I got here a minute later.

“Sota ..... Wow. Way to go.”

Well, that makes junior high pros like me a thing of the past ..... I start feeling down on myself when other voices echo through the hall.

“Who’s the other one?!”

“Don’t know yet! Word is the match is almost over, but——.”

*Ba-thump!!* My heart leaps into my throat.

*The other one.*

Who knew three little words could have so much meaning? They’re talking about——.

“If Sota promoted but Mr. Kagamizu hasn’t yet, that means ..... that... right?”

Big Sis and Mr. Kagamizu. Whoever wins that match turns pro.

My insides feel all mixed up.

I slow down a bit to make as little noise as possible as I climb all the way up to the fourth floor.

“..... It’s quiet ..... up here .....

Peaceful, like I walked into a completely different world.

I had a match in this arena one month ago. It was a big one, the challenger match against the Meijin.

But this time, I can’t set foot past the elevator.

Only players fighting for their lives are allowed to go past this point.

It’s holy ground that only Sub League members can tread.

“Whew—— .....

There’s a long brown chair outside the arena entrance on the fourth floor. Sitting down on that antique with torn covers, I let out a long sigh.

I feel like I’m in a hospital waiting room.

The battle must still be going on because I can hear pieces clicking and the

electric beeps of the chess clock through the door.

“..... Big Sis .....!!”

I put my hands together and stare at the floor, almost like sending up a prayer.

How long have I been sitting like this? I look up when I hear someone coming——.

“!!”

Someone I know very well is standing there.

“Mr. Kagamizu .....”

“Hey.”

He pats my shoulder as I look up at him from the chair, stunned. Then he walks past me.

Halfway down the stairs, he says, “Guys... give the two of them some privacy.”

The remaining Sub League members follow him downstairs.

Then, on this deserted hallowed ground, a girl with silver hair appears.

“Yaichi.”

“Big Sis.”

She drifts over to me on wobbly legs. I burst out of the chair as if shot out of a cannon.

Stepping out into the hallway without her shoes, Big Sis can hardly stand. I rush up to her, opening my arms once I get close.

“Yaichi.”

She falls into my chest.

Pretty much a feather in my arms, I catch her.

“I did it, Yaichi,” she says with her head against my shirt.

“I promoted to 4-*dan*.”

She tells me probably the happiest thing in her life ..... More tears start rolling down her cheeks.

“I beat Mr. Kagamizu and promoted.”

“..... Yeah.”

“I was sure I lost. There was a point when I thought I was done for. But I couldn’t bring myself to give up.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s why I vowed to play until a Gold got deployed in front of my King, to play until my heart stopped beating.”

“Yeah.”

“And you know what? A miracle happened at the very, very end. A miracle, from the Shogi gods .....”

She tells me about that miracle as tears drip off her face.

“I saw Pawn Drop Mate and Reverse Check sequences ..... That’s what kept my spirit from breaking. After Mr. Kagamizu did a Discovery Check, I countered with an *idoai* by moving my Silver from 8 Five to 9 Four ..... and won. Isn’t that miracle?”

“Yeah .....”

“I have to remember to thank the pipsqueak .....”

Big Sis... being grateful to Ai?

Going against her nature and openly acknowledging Ai’s mind-blowing talent probably made her stronger in the end.

“Yaichi, I ..... I cut down ..... Mr. Kagamizu .....!”

Big Sis wails as the roller coaster of emotion she is on takes a sharp downturn.

“After all he’s done for me! He’s always been so kind, but how did I repay him .....? I ..... I .....!”

“It’s alright.”

I pull Ginko in for a big hug. Because she might fall apart if I don't.

Mr. Kagamizu, Mr. Karako ..... She's walking barefoot over the shattered dreams of so many other players. That white skin of hers is splattered with the blood of battle to the point that the gashes all over her heart and body are much deeper than everyone she's defeated.

Just thinking about it is making me want to cry along with her ..... I can't even say a word.

So——.

“Want to open it?”

“Yes.”

It's time to say the words we sealed away.







"I love you."

"Doufu."

After finishing what we started to say back on that night, Ginko's breath is hot on my ear as she says, "Can ..... I sit down? I'm exhausted ....."

"Yeah. Sorry."

I almost lay her down onto the seat and then sit down next to her.

Ginko rests her head against my shoulder.

Like a silver-haired cat wanting attention.

"I didn't get any sleep at all last night."

"Same."

"Oh? You, too?"

Hearing that must've made her happy because Ginko smiles like a little kid.

I gently brush away her bangs so that I can burn this smile that took forever to see into my memory.

Every little thing about her is captivating.

But effectively expressing feelings is impossible for two tongue-tied idiots who only know how to play Shogi like us.

So we end up talking about Shogi.

"..... Yaichi, how was your match?"

"I won."

"I see. You really are strong ....."

"I wonder if I'll be able to catch up," ..... Ginko quietly whispers.

"It'll be fine. You're a pro now."

"..... You're right."

We're lying to ourselves. Getting up to where I am as a title holder from a newly promoted 4-*dan* is not easy.

Ignoring that reality for a moment, we talk about our dreams.

"I ..... I love you, Yaichi ....." Ginko takes my right hand and whispers, "I want to hold hands and walk around the city with you. I want to go to the

cinema, go to the beach, just the two of us. As a couple, not sibling apprentices ..... I've always wanted that."

Revealing the desires she's kept hidden in her heart all this time, Ginko finishes with this.

"But, you know? What I really want to do is——."

I couldn't make out the rest.

Ginko... exhausted with her eyes closed.

As quiet as a dusting of snow the same color as her skin.

So fleeting that she might melt away with a single touch.

But——.

"..... Hot ....."

Her hand is burning up. She's always been this way, running a fever whenever she takes a match seriously .....

The ruckus is about to begin.

The ruckus that will turn Japan on its head.

First, it'll be endless waves of interviews. Then, Naniwa's Snow White will take her place next to the Meijin with the entire Shogi world on their shoulders in this new era.

It'll last forever, so long as she stays a pro.

The excuse that she is in the Sub League won't work anymore.

Waiting on the other side of the hell that is the Sub League ..... is a path of carnage that goes on for eternity.

I doubt she'll have any time to play Shogi for a while. While anyone would be jealous to have that problem, it'll probably be torture for her.

I mean, what she really wants to do is——.

"Me too ..... Ginko."

So I do what I can for her right now: give the shoulder for her to lean on and let her only think about Shogi.

About the league match we'll play someday.

# THE LAST PROMOTION

Sumito Sakanashi's final match ended in victory.

"Whew ....."

All his matches now behind him, Sumito took his time wiping down each piece one by one before cleaning the board as well.

The boards and pieces used in the Sub League could not be thought of as *expensive* by any means.

However, he saw them as scratched, worn out Sub League members who fight for their lives only to be cast away at the end. They were beautiful in a way.

"..... I, for one, will show you guys some respect before moving on."

His opponent got the hint and left his seat so Sumito could clean his final battleground at his own pace.

Once complete, Sumito touched the board one last time and said farewell.

"Well, goodbye. You hang in there."

He left the fourth-floor arena and put his orange name tag on the counter next to the shoe shelf. He may have won, but he couldn't bring himself to go stamp his final victory star on the league standings sheet.

Fading away was all he wanted to do.

That was his only wish once the reality of retirement started to set in.

And that wish played out far smoother than he ever hoped.

"..... It's so quiet ....."

Everyone inside the building seemed to be at the press conference taking place on the second floor. Even the offices, where someone was nearly always around, were eerily empty.

Was it Sota Kunugi who promoted? Or was it Ginko? Both, perhaps .....

Twelve and a half years in the Sub League.

Sumito had literally spent half his life walking these halls, but never once had

he seen them this tranquil.

“Was it always this spacious .....?”

He had been coming to the classroom here for years before joining the Sub League and even attended children’s classes put on by the association. Including that time, he had spent nearly 20 years inside this building. The fact that he would have no connection to it for the rest of his life starting tomorrow still didn’t feel real.

Walking through the deserted lobby, Sumito stepped outside the front door before turning around and bowing to it.

Cars from TV stations had filled the parking lot from end to end.

Once he was off the premises, Sumito made a quick trip to the Shogi monument at Hatomori Shrine and paid his respects.

Passed the coffee shop where he would kill time on regular activities mornings.

Passed the steakhouse where his senior had treated him to dinner after a practice session.

Passed the bathhouse he often visited on the nights he stayed in Tokyo after working as a match recorder for placement matches.

The memories kept coming as Sumito walked the streets of Sendagaya.

However, he came to a halt at the intersection across from the train station. Seeing that traffic light brought back a painful twinge from the opening day when he lost two matches in a row ..... But now, even that felt nostalgic to him.

“Mr. Sakanashi!”

Sumito heard someone calling his name while waiting for the light to change.

It was a former Sub League member, a junior of his who had left the league to work in sports journalism. Right now, though, he had a large TV camera over his shoulder. Was the ex-Sub League member worried about him because he left without saying goodbye? This was going to be more painful than it was worth.

“M-Mr. Sakanishi ..... *Pant, pant* ..... Your match .....?”

“It’s over.”

The journalist must be in a major rush because he didn't bother to catch his breath before asking questions. That camera certainly didn't help. So he set the heavy piece of equipment down as he asked, "Did you win?"

"Finished a 14-match winning streak. At least I get to go out on a high note."

Now it was Sumito's turn to ask a question.

"Who promoted?"

"Sora and Kunugi."

"I see ....."

Sumito nodded. That meant Hiuma Kagamizu lost to them both. Though his heart went out to his kind senior's plight ..... the results came from head-to-head matchups. They were what they were. Had the records of Shoji Karako that he sent Ginko proven useful?

He then followed up with another question.

"Aren't the promotees doing a press conference right now?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you here filming me?"

"Because you are the third."

He didn't understand.

"..... Huh?"

"Sora and Kunugi were the only players with three losses to win any matches today, which means your 14-match winning streak gives you a bonus point. Combined with the one you got last year, that makes you go up a *dan*."

"Not Mr. Kagamizu ..... but... me?"

Sumito had collapsed in tears at this very crosswalk in front of Sendagaya Station after losing twice on opening day this season of the 3-*dan* division.

He lost twice again on the next day of regular activities, resulting in zero victory stars over the first four matches.



Certain that there was no hope left, Sumito didn't consider trying to extend his career with a winning record and enrolled in a driving school instead.

"I-I promoted .....? Me, a professional? 4-*dan*?"

There were other seasons when he was so much more devoted to Shogi. Yet he didn't promote in any of them .....

*Hey, you're not out of this yet! Hang in there!*

Mr. Kagamizu's kind words were what kept him playing this season.

The result: a miraculous run of 14 victories.

However, it was only possible because all the pressure disappeared. Other players didn't consider him a threat after starting the season with four losses. Mr. Karako let him win just to steal a star from Mr. Kagamizu.

All the attention that should have been on him went to Mr. Kagamizu instead.

After all that, *he* was the one promoting .....?

"Me ..... 4-*dan*? But, Mr. Kagamizu should be ....."

Sumito fell onto his backside as if his legs forgot how to stand. His voice wavered as he put his head in his hands.

The happiness that should be there wasn't.

Only a continuous string of apologies to his kind senior played out in his head. This wasn't a league match. He felt so sorry for Mr. Kagamizu that he could barely stand it. *I'm sorry ..... I'm sorry .....*

A 25-year-old man: sobbing and apologizing through tears on the side of the road.

Clicks from the journalist's camera seemed strangely loud.

Passersby took glances at this bizarre scene in broad daylight, but didn't spare the time to investigate.

"Oh, there you are! I sure am glad I caught up!!"

Sumito looked up at the sound of the familiar voice.

A wheezing Hatomachi 5-*dan*, one of the Sub League directors, stood before him with his right hand outstretched.

“Congratulations, Sumito! It’s a freelance position, but ..... you’ll take it, right?”

“.....”

The last promotee could only stare up at the director.

Then he took the outstretched hand.

The curtain officially fell on the 63rd season of the Sub League 3-*dan* division.

Three players earned promotions to 4-*dan*: Ginko Sora (16), Sota Kunugi (11) and Sumito Sakanashi (25).

Five players were forced to retire from the division due to age regulations on the very same day.

Though Sumito Sakanashi was invited to take part in the promotion ceremony, he became the *second* player ever to decline.

The idea of receiving accolades while others who had been with him in the division would never return to the Shogi world didn’t sit well with him.

## NECKTIE AND DICE

“Have you calmed down, Sota?”

“..... Yes .....”

Sota, sitting on a bed inside one of the association’s overnight lodging rooms while sipping juice from paper cup, quietly nodded.

The boy had thrown a tantrum for ages the moment he found out Hiuma Kagamizu hadn’t promoted.

“Liars, cowards, weaklings should just die at the board to avoid the shame,” and other insults came pouring out of the child’s mouth as he thrashed about. But no one knew what to do about the young professional player and watched in stunned silence.

The panicking director delayed the press conference to buy time and entrusted Sota to Hiuma. After all, *“This is your fault, Kagamizu, so you fix it.”*

—So this is my last job as a Sub League member, huh .....

Thinking back, he had always watched out for the young ones.

Taking a seat next to the youngest 4-*dan* the world had ever known, the man about to be forced into retirement because of his age said sternly, “Yeesh. What’re you crying for? I’m the one who wants to cry.”

“You ....., You lied to me. We made a promise to promote together.”

Tears started building up in Sota’s eyes as he angrily puffed out his cheeks.

“Whoa, whoa, there! I’m not blaming you——.”

Hiuma knew he had to change the subject... and fast.

The problem was he couldn’t think of a new topic.

—What’s popular among elementary school kids these days?! Pokémon?! Pokémon, maybe?!

Someone with Yaichi’s fondness for kids might be able to come up with something off the top of their head, but after spending 20 years cooped up in

the Shogi world, Hiuma had become a modern equivalent of Rip van Winkle. No fun topics were coming to mind.

The only one that did—was Shogi.

“I have a scrapbook.”

“..... Huh?”

“You know, the *4-dan Promotions* articles? I’ve been collecting those for years and years ..... I was hoping to get to write one myself, though.”

“Are you talking about the ones in the back of that magazine? I always skip over them.”

“Ha-ha. I’m not surprised.”

Hiuma smiled in spite of himself.

The right to write the one article he had wanted to write more than life itself had fallen to a child who barely knew that page existed.

But that was competition at its core.

Strength of desire played no part. Those with the strongest Shogi promote in the end.

That’s why everyone could accept the results, while the tear-jerking articles cruelly tugged at the heartstrings at the same time.

Hiuma mentally skimmed through the pages of the scrapbook that would never have his own article as he continued, “What I wanted to write changed a lot over time, but I knew exactly how I was going to end it. It was going to be my goal as a professional ..... My dream, I guess you could call it.”

“Playing in a title match? Or did you want to be the Meijin?”

“If that’s all it was, I don’t think I could’ve stayed in the Sub League this long,” Hiuma answered with a smile.

He knew his own limits better than anyone else. Even if he had made it into the professional ranks, rising to the top as a 30-year-old from the basement of C-2 would have been a long road to hoe.

“What was it, then?” asked a frustrated Sota.

Though openly admitting it would be embarrassing .....

—Meh, why not? Telling him couldn't hurt.

For the first time ever, Hiuma put the idea that had been brewing in his heart into words.

"I want to always love Shogi."

".....!!"

Sota's teary eyes went wide.

"No matter how hard things got, I wanted to get through it with my love for Shogi intact. Not just that, I wanted everyone to know just how much I love it. I wanted to be the kind of professional ..... who could make people happy when they'd see my matches, the kind of professional that makes fans glad they became fans."

All because he had suffered longer than everyone else.

Because he had been chewed up and spit out by the absurdities of the Shogi world, he thought he could have the power to convince anyone.

Even if he never claimed a title.

Even if he never became Meijin.

Even if he never knew the spotlight, he wanted to prove his love for Shogi was enough to make him a professional. Just as his Master had entrusted that dream to him .....

"But it turns out I didn't have enough talent in the end. Fans would get bored watching a so-called *professional* who can't even play a decent *yagura*."

Talent was necessary to do whatever you will on the board.

Only a few select professionals, genuine prodigies, were able to produce match records that broke away from the standards. His match against Ginko had taught him that effort and desire alone would not allow him to reach that realm.

Their battle would surely live on in Sub League lore for generations to come.

—But ..... Ginko was on my level all along.

Thinking about her future prospects, Hiuma had a hard time congratulating her.

Promoting at the same time as a prodigy named Sota Kunugi meant she would be compared to him for the rest of her life.

Then there was the one she was chasing ..... Yaichi Kuzuryu was even further out of reach.

“You’re absolutely right! Your Shogi is boring, Mr. Kagamizu. You’re evenly matched with Ginko!”

“Why do you have to pour salt on the wounds .....? I already said so, didn’t I?”

“You play Shogi that would entertain people? That’ll never happen! The messy *hang on for dear life* style of Shogi that you and Ginko play only works in the Sub League!”

“Yeah. Playing against you made it perfectly clear that I can’t get clean checkmates like the professionals do.”

“It did? Then——.”

Sota took a deep breath.

“I’ll make sure your dream comes true for you.”

Now it was Hiuma’s turn to be shocked.

He sat there making direct eye contact with the youngest professional Shogi player in history.

This elementary school boy prodigy was free to do as he willed on the board.

“If I can’t promote with you, Mr. Kagamizu, the least I can do is take your dream with me.”

“My ..... dream .....?”

“I’ll play matches that are more entertaining than any other pro players: more

than Yaichi, more than any software. I'll find a way to make people who don't understand Shogi excited to watch it. Just wait, I'll single-handedly start the biggest Shogi *boom* Japan has ever seen. So please, Mr. Kagamizu, keep loving Shogi. It might be hard right now ..... But I'd like to play with you again."

"....."

"..... Does that mean no?"

"..... Nah ....."

Hiuma cast his gaze up at the ceiling... because if he didn't, he wouldn't have been able to hold the tears back. If he started crying, he was certain Sota would too .....

Hiuma Kagamizu was the first to ever talk to him.

The first to invite the little boy sitting in the back corner to play a game of Shogi.

But now their roles had been reversed ..... It was that little boy inviting Hiuma to play a match.

"I'd be happy to. Thanks, Sota."

Then he undid his tie.

After that he draped it around Sota's small neck.

Like a ribbon, like a baton.

He didn't have Kousuke Kiyotaki's permission, but he was sure this was fine. He would never have an apprentice of his own, but ..... A fellow player who would carry on that spirit was right here.

"Mr. Kagamizu, I ....."

"Hm?"

"I'm glad I chose Shogi!"

Smiling for the first time, Sota clutched the necktie in his hand.

It was much too big for an 11-year-old, but it would surely suit him one day. The prodigy was determined to hang onto it until then.

The dice weren't necessary anymore.

The dream dwelling in his fingertips told him as much.





# FOR THE AFTERWORD: “WHO I DIDN’T BECOME”

“I wanted to throw my phone in a ditch and go somewhere I’ve never been. The last thing I was going to do was play another match of Shogi.”

That’s a direct quote from the first ex-Sub League 3-*dan* I ever interviewed.

I had the opportunity to speak with several of them, and they all had *one match they would never forget*.

Specifically—one where they would have promoted if they had won.

“I had the advantage. My opponent was out of time. But, suddenly, I couldn’t read beyond a certain point. I convinced myself to make a move, any move, because I was ahead. Unfortunately, that loosened my hold on the match. Only once it was done did I realize my mistake and start doubting everything ..... Next thing I knew, my opponent’s King had made it to my back row, *nyugyoku*. I did the same, but I obviously wouldn’t have enough points in win in a stalemate. So I resigned. I went to the restroom after the match only to see my opponent burst in and dive into one of the stalls. Part of me knew at that point I could’ve won if only I’d held out just a few more turns ..... It’s a downhill slope from there.”

“I could tell from the formations that there was a checkmate somewhere, but I ran out of time and surrendered. That one formation came up in my dreams after that. Then, years later, I found a 5-move checkmate. Although I’m glad it took me that long to find it, the regret would’ve killed me if I’d found it right away.”

Seeing one match clearly every night in dreams, like it happened yesterday ..... I traveled all over to talk with many different people, but they all had the same thing to say.

The depth and severity of their scars taught me just how brutal the Sub League, and the 3-*dan* division, truly are.

While nowhere near the level that they had experienced, I went through a

major setback myself.

I had aspirations of becoming a lawyer and entered law school after finishing college, but ..... 12 years of studying weren't enough to make that happen.

Suddenly I was 30.

Gearing up for my first year of life as something other than a student with no qualifications to my name, I thought I would never be needed by society. I had been around for 30 years, but wasted every single one of them. Even now, I remember the fear and anxiety I felt back then.

Former classmates from my college days were having kids and climbing the ladder in their respective careers at that point. There were times when I was scared they had passed me by forever. Simply put, I had given up on myself. I can't thank my grandfather and mother enough for continuing to believe in me.

The light novels I started writing to help pay for my tuition were now all I had left. Unfortunately, my work always got drowned out by what was popular at the time and wasn't good enough that I felt comfortable calling myself an author. Light novels weren't considered to be *literature* by most people at the time, either. I remember one of my former classmates now working at a bank asking me, "How much are you expecting to get for these?" at a class reunion. Without any counterarguments, I had to laugh it off and accept being the butt of their jokes. It made me want to write something that would sell at the very least.

However, it takes talent to break into the mainstream. Once I realized that was talent I didn't have, I thought to myself, "I'll write something that I would want to read. An intense story about people in a world that I like, people who battle against the kind of setbacks that I've gone through."

The resulting *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* got better reviews than I ever imagined, and it gave me the opportunity to experience things that I gave up on long ago.

Keika and Hiuma were born from my own failures. I'm overjoyed that people can relate to their battles and empathize with their struggles. It makes me feel like the life I thought I had wasted might be worth something to someone else.

It's for those very people that I'll keep writing.

Struggles await even after achieving a dream, just as there is happiness when it doesn't come true. I would be honored if you came to see how Ginko and Hiuma's stories play out.



# REVIEW SESSION



# REVIEW SESSION

“She went and did it. Ginko Sora 4-*dan*, on the scene.”

“Word has reached me. Quite big news, is it not?”

Sitting on my motorcycle outside the association (in the staff area, got a problem?), I chat with Machi over the phone and watch all the chaos outside the building.

“Sendagaya’s in a frenzy. With all these rubberneckers out here, I’m gonna be boxed in here real quick.”

“All those narrow streets filled to bursting? What a great picture that would be .....

“Oh, and it sounds like my big brother apprentice got the go-ahead, too.”

“Mr. Sakanashi?! Huh? The one who lost four matches right out of the gate was promoted?”

“Yeah ..... I heard he’d started drivin’ school to get a license after trippin’ up so bad. Probably gave up on it, ya know? Won ’cause he wasn’t thinking about winning .....

Fourteen wins is usually the finish line for promotion, but there were so many monsters in there this season. With the likes of Ginko and Kunugi grabbing the headlines, most people probably forgot he was even in the division.

“The way he drifted out the front door, I was sure he’d gotten the axe. I let him be ’cause it would’ve been hella awkward, but Kanji-*sensei* tore after him.”

“Even with that husky frame of his?”

“Yeah. Getting the two bonus points netted him a freelance gig. Think Master’s bawling his eyes out right now?”

“*Sigh* ..... The longest shot to a success story that there’s been in years ..... I shall be making a note to interview him... with you there as well, O-Ryou.”

“Hey, we ain’t buddy-buddy, you know? He gave me a ton of crap for joining the Sub League in the first place.”

My big brother apprentice, Sumito Sakanashi 3-*dan* ..... Well, 4-*dan*, now.

He's as tough on himself as he is with others, even gives girls a piece of his mind. He only did practice sessions with me 'cause Master made him. He didn't even bat an eye when he told me flat-out, "I taught you that six months ago. Quit if you don't care enough to remember."

That wasn't the final straw that broke my spirit for good, but ..... I did quit the Sub League. Never got promoted either. Lost my way into demotion.

Didn't get to settle the score with Ginko in the Sub League, not even close.

"..... Hey, Machi."

"Hm?"

"You think Ginko is different? Or ..... that I just didn't try hard enough?"

"O-Ryou ....."

"I've never beaten her, not once, going way back. You don't think there's that much of a gap between her and us, do you? It's just, I can't see myself going pro. So, how'd she pull it off?"

"..... Giving up would relieve the burden, as it were."

Talent can't explain it away. After watching her and realizing that talent ain't necessarily the be-all end-all in Shogi, I can't just sit on the sidelines like this. I've got nothing against Ginko, but ..... it's just .....

"Well, if it isn't the Lord Ryou himself. Decked out with a mask and sunglasses, too."

Going out incognito? No one gives a crap about you, Trash. Grade school pros are a thing now.

"I'll pick up Trash and head back. You can't keep puttin' off your article, yeah?"

"O-Ryou."

"Eh?"

"Mind traffic laws."

Shut up. I don't need you to tell me that. I snap inside my head and hang up



the phone.

Trash leaves the association and sneaks his way toward the station, scanning his surroundings like a jittery prairie dog ..... Man, he looks suspicious.

“Yooo! Over here.”

“Ryou?! You waited for me?!”

“Has the press conference wrapped up?”

“No, but Big Sis wasn’t up for it. She probably broke a few bones.”

“Wait, what?! How the heck does someone break bones playing Shogi?! They didn’t literally throw down, did they .....?”

“She broke them herself, by the sound of it. She said she felt like she was going to pass out and slammed her fist into her chest as hard as she could. There were some blood spots on her uniform, too. I just hope she didn’t puncture a lung or anything.”

“She’s nuts ..... No wonder that girl wins so much .....”

If you’re gonna slap something to wake up, thighs work just fine. But, hitting hard enough to crack ribs ..... Even I’d have had second thoughts. Was she just that fired up?

“Well, shouldn’t you call an ambulance?”

“Nah, things are crazy enough right now. The staff is going to announce that she needs time to rest while they sneak her out the back.”

“You sure you don’t want to go with her?”

“The doctor that’s taken care of her for years happens to be a former member of the Sub League. He was worried about her and came up to Tokyo. Thanks to the livestream, he noticed something was off about her and came to the association. I was thinking I’d let him take care of her and head back to the hotel ..... Even Big Sis told me to *get going*.”

“That right? Well, fine by me .....”

“Are you worried about her, too?”

“Hah .....! Yeah, right, idiot! Think what’ll happen if some news guy says, *Girls*

*can make it to the pros, but their bodies can't take it? All of us will take flak! Who the hell would be worried about Ginko? You could kill her, but she won't die. Now hop on."*

I toss him my spare helmet and rev the engine.

Once he's on, Trash tells me, "Ginko wanted me to give you a message."

"Oh?"

*"She said, I won my matches on the final day because I could rest in the Women's League Player's Room. You giving me permission on the first day is the reason I promoted."*

".....!!"

*"I've been playing against Women's League players ever since my first day at the Kansai Shogi Association, and I'm stronger for it. While I don't know if I'll ever be considered a Women's League player, I wholeheartedly believe that my experience battling against its members made me who I am today. I'm truly grateful, thank you. .... There you have it."*

"..... Did Ginko seriously say that? Really?"

"Yes. Word for word."

"....."

"I'd like to thank you, too. Knowing that you were in Tokyo was so reassuring for me, you have no idea ..... Ginko has always been so rude to you, too. You have my gratitude."

I'm stunned.

I could never bring myself to openly thank Ginko no matter what she did for me.

That's just the way competitors are. Gratitude for an opponent just doesn't happen. Even if it did, we'd never say it out loud.

But ..... if Ginko really, actually, seriously told Trash she's grateful .....

Then she doesn't see me as a——.

"Huh? Hey ..... R-Ryou? This isn't the way we came, is it? Huh? Th-That's the

entrance to ..... HUH?! WHY'RE YOU GETTING ON THE FREEWAY?!"

Trash can babble all he wants, but I'm putting the pedal to the metal.

"DAAAAAAAAAMMIT      AAAAAAALLLLLLLLL    TO    HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE  
EE

“WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAA!!! I’M GONNA DIEEEEEEEEEEE!!!”

That little stunt got me my license suspended later, but I had to ride.

It hurts.

Like hell I'm going to congratulate her. What she did is nothing special. Today's nothing but humiliation for every member of the Women's League. I'm hurting and jealous and I feel just so pathetic ..... I cried like a baby under my helmet. Even knowing my big brother apprentice promoted just plunged the knife in deeper.

So I screamed it all out. I ride like the wind to vent.

Full throttle... until the engine burned out.

It hurts.

As long as it does, I know there's hope I can get even stronger.

“..... I do apologize for the wait. May I ask you a few questions?”

Yo Okito-*Dual Title*'s face remains stoic as he watches me finish my phone call with Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and turn on my IC recorder.

“Was that call from the association?” he asks.

“Yes. Along with Ginko Sora 4-*dan* and Sota Kunugi 4-*dan*, Sumito Sakanashi 4-*dan* is also promoted.”

“Three?”

“Due to Mr. Sakanashi’s bonus points, yes.”

I thought Okito would follow up with a comment on the newly promoted players, but he doesn't touch the subject.

Instead, he starts recounting his own experience in the Sub League.

“I have made a name for myself as a Bishop Exchange specialist since my days in the league. That research proved vital in my ascent through the 3-*dan* division. Though part of it was my own, I incorporated the research of others as well. While I was aware that doing so made me subject to criticism, that was a small price to pay for a competitive edge.”

Okito’s story has no correlation with today’s Shogi, but I didn’t stop him. Honestly, this was what I was hoping to hear.

“I was, as they say, the *walled off* type. I never revealed much during review sessions and kept my cards well-hidden at the few practice sessions I attended. That way, I had a larger hand at my disposal when the time came. I believed that the player with more cards in their hand would win the match in the end.”

“I am that type of player as well, so I can relate.”

“Except... the introduction of software changed everything.”

Okito breaks into an impassioned speech about the event that altered his life and the Shogi world at large.

“All the cards I kept hidden were laid bare. Worse, it showed the cards I had considered aces were nowhere near as valuable... all with a rating.”

Software rating.

Up until that point, players had used their own rating systems and gut instincts to assign numbers to piece formations. Differing appraisals of the same formation could alter the outcome of the match. In other words, unnumbered *cards* allowed players to bluff their way to victory the same way someone might play poker.

Once software was able to display formation values in precise detail, however, the cards’ numbers were suddenly set in stone.

Software also neatly informed people exactly what their newly discovered moves and strategies were worth.

As a result, people became aware of exactly how imprecise the battles they had conducted thus far truly were——.

“..... That is surprising. I had always assumed that it was software’s performance in the late-game that had the most impact on you, Okito-*sensei*

.....”

“The late-game is mathematics. As machines are designed to calculate, the late-game being their strong suit should come as no surprise. Especially not ..... worth choosing death.”

A shocking confession. So much so, I forgot to breathe when I heard it.

While the story has been kept out of the public eye, this is most likely the first interview where the man himself has talked about it ..... The real meaning behind today’s match for Okito comes across in those few words.

“..... You came to ..... that decision because ..... you lost your originality in the early game .....?”

“I thought there was no reason to stay alive if my being a professional Shogi player lost its value. Someone else was surely better suited for the position.”

What a genuinely pure point of view. Almost too pure, in a way.

“There are a finite number of professionals. My becoming one of them prevented others from doing so. Putting myself in their position, I had to take responsibility for losing my value as a professional, but I never could figure out another way to go about it.”

His journey to becoming a professional player was built on hiding his own research and stealing from others. Doing so made Okito a strong player, but it weighed heavily on his heart. The scars left from continuously stealing research from other players must have become too much. His attempted suicide wasn’t due to the bashing he took in the media ..... it was because of a pure heart’s guilty conscience.

The *4-dan Promotions* article Okito wrote comes to mind.

It was a beautiful, pristine piece of writing ..... and yet somehow sad. Honestly, it’s one of the best Shogi articles I have ever read.

Which reminds me of another event.

On the day Okito promoted to 4-*dan*, he became the first professional to ever decline an invitation to the promotion ceremony.

“However death eluded me. So I decided that I had been reborn and I should

find a different way to prove my worth.”

“Are you referring to your complete adoption of software?”

“The cards now had concrete value. In that case, I wanted to see how strong they would become with software in the early-game ..... But there was a limit: *a wall called talent.*”

The method Okito created for overcoming that wall is yet another surprise.

“Using analytic methods developed for chess as a guide, I developed a database for match records and used software to rate them. My ultimate goal was to put a number on talent. The player whose records produced the highest results was——.”

“..... The Meijin, perhaps?”

“*In terms of speed*, yes, the Meijin’s rating was higher than any other player.”

Okito agrees with the condition.

“The probability of making mistakes increases for the average player when forced to play quickly, but the Meijin’s probability remained constant. This is because he *can see sequences without reading them*. Of course, I found these results astounding.”

“.....”

“Then what about when more time is available? Though the sample size is still limited, there is one player who has won the majority of title matches against the Meijin.”

I say his name.

“Yaichi Kuzuryu.”

“The earliest existing record of his comes from the Elementary School Meijin Tournament, and signs of his talent were already present. You were there, were you not?”

“Yes. I remember it very well.”

How could I forget that life-changing moment?

“Software indicated that he had the ability to hold his own against the Meijin

when playing fast ..... and the talent to surpass the Meijin in matches with extended waiting time. I didn't believe it at first, but I have no choice but to accept that high probability now that I have played against him myself. I believe my own defeat proves my talent rating system to be accurate and reliable."

At this point, Okito addresses the one other person sitting with us in the room, the young man who worked as the match recorder.

"Mirai. You said something quite interesting during the match today."

Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan*. Some refer to him as *The Translator*.

He is a young player of 19 who fought against Kuzuryu in last season's C-2 Placement Matches and received the full brunt of the 6 Five Knight, a move that revolutionized Bishop Exchange. His promotion to 4-*dan* was a full year and a half behind Kuzuryu.

"Can you blame me .....? That guy isn't human."

Even I heard him mumble that during the match.

Though I thought he was referring to Okito's transformation away from flesh and blood into living software at the time——.

"Your playing style follows the strongest sequences developed by software. Every player who uses software in my generation can see it, Okito-*sensei*."

Futatsuzuka is a player whose admiration for Okito inspired him to incorporate software into his research. Refusing to take part in review sessions during his time in the Sub League, he only would work as a recorder for Okito's matches. That's why, despite being a professional now, he offered to work this title match in order to have the best view possible.

"But Kuzuryu is different. He used *your* research ..... saw that you were setting a trap and turned it into his own. That's obviously a sequence he came up with on the spot."

"Is that because ..... the Ryuo doesn't take software ratings at face value? Is he questioning them——?"

"Even I don't trust every sequence software spits out. But that's completely different from outperforming software in an actual match."

“The Ryuo said he *used the sealing move effectively*. In his words, that unlimited waiting time allowed him to know exactly how safe his King was.”

“Yeah, that late-game was unbelievable. I should’ve figured he’d find a way to use the sealing move to his advantage.”

I agree. That 7 Seven Rook Promotion was a move worthy of legendary status. Out of all the Shogi I have seen Kuzuryu play, I can say that was the best beyond a shadow of a doubt.

“But, he was just *confirming what he already knew*. Heck, I could see the 7 Seven Rook. The scary one is the move he made before it: choosing to advance when he made the sealing move and letting Okito-sensei’s attack play out. It gave me chills.”

“Is that why he wanted the extra waiting time with the sealing move——?”

Okito gently cuts into the conversation.

“Then, how much time did he *use to think* before sealing it?”

“.....!!”

I have no response as Futatsuzuka drearily glances in my direction.

“Software does have a weak point. It’s just most players wreck their formations early on trying to exploit it. They get crushed even if they make it to the mid-game. But Kuzuryu, he made it past that point. He did it within the time limit.”

..... Futatsuzuka is saying Kuzuryu saw the *7 Seven Rook Promotion before it was there...* which would mean Kuzuryu ..... was outplaying software by the early mid-game——.

“He can’t be human. That’s why I said what I said. He’s always been doing stuff like this.”

“A-Always .....?”

“Everyone knows that Kuzuryu only started using software to research less than a year ago. What do you think he’s done since then? Just revolutionized Bishop Exchange, experimented with Katsura Single Jump, then made some wacked-out Gokigen 3-File Ranging Rook strategy work and now he’s *surpassed*



*software.”*

A series of revolutions that even has The Translator in disbelief. Furthermore—.

“He did all of that in less than a year. Okito-*sensei* has been working for years but couldn’t figure those out. The guy comes up with things players in my generation could work our whole lives and never hope to achieve like it’s nothing. The youngest Ryuo in history ..... No.”

A mixture of malice and spite comes over Futatsuzuka’s face as he says Yaichi Kuzuryu’s second alias.

“The *Demon King* .....

Young players in Kanto had been calling him that name for a while.

Most likely, it was something close to an insult at first.

Seeing his rival Ayumu Kannabe 7-*dan* acting like a knight in shining armor whose sworn duty was to slay the dark Drakin made calling him a *demon* a running joke behind Kuzuryu’s back.

However the humor must have disappeared around the time Kuzuryu successfully defended his title against the Meijin.

They fought in a series of seven matches. Kuzuryu showed incredible grit after losing the first three only to come back and win the final four: that left a deep impression on the young generation of Kanto players.

Be that as it may, Kuzuryu didn’t tap into his full, latent potential until today’s Shogi.

Drawn into a situation where neither man nor machine could determine the lead, Kuzuryu was able to make sure his King was safe and simultaneously bring down his opponent with an attack from the opposite horizon. He even used sealing move regulations as a weapon.

Skill and tactics unbecoming of an 18-year-old: yes, fit for a demon king.

Residents of the Shogi world are clearly at a loss as to how to interact with their imminent sovereign for decades to come.

Some fear him.

Others are jealous.

And others still ..... are taken with him: others like Naniwa's Snow White and myself.

"Have you always been in Kansai?"

I nod at Futatsuzuka's question.

"Yes. I've known the Ryuo since he was a child."

"I'm amazed you still want to play, growing up alongside him. Merely being in the same generation makes me wish I were dead sometimes."

"Writing Yaichi Kuzuryu's biography has become my greatest ambition. He is the reason why I work as a journalist."

"Ohh? Just don't go thinking you understand what comes out of his mouth. They're the same words, sure, but he doesn't see the same things we do. He's not trying to lie, but *what he says isn't true in our world.*"

The Translator puts my own qualms into words. He didn't pull any punches, either.

This is exactly why *I only wanted Okito* to be in the room for the interview. I needed to confirm my suspicions somewhere that Kuzuryu wasn't within earshot.

"If a story were ever written from his point of view, surely ..... it would be an uplifting tale about how effort can break through any barrier. But the writer himself would never notice that he is actually the highest barrier of all. It would be the ultimate comedy and insanely cruel."

Singularity didn't happen.

Software didn't become the star... except neither did humanity.

A higher existence came into the spotlight. Rather than software appearing on center stage, that new existence stole the show by *simultaneously surpassing software and humanity.*

And it happened—on the same day the first female professional Shogi player in recorded history was born.

It's hard to believe this is real. It feels more like a fairy tale.

A legend about Snow White who grew up in Kansai, which was considered to be the fringe of the Shogi world, with her little dragon.

Snow White loved that clumsy little dragon who couldn't fly. She took him with her on all sorts of adventures where they licked each others' wounds and then rushed into battle against the next big enemy before either had truly healed.

Snow White grew into a strong, dazzling young woman ..... Overcoming many trials and tribulations, she finally reached the top.

However, that little dragon of hers was suddenly the ultimate being, soaring through the skies on massive wings: wings of talent.

Whether he wanted to or not, the overwhelming power he commanded would usher the Shogi world into a new age. That power would surely bring pain upon those he loves and those who love him all the same.

This was because those sharp claws on his hands were limited to battles in the realm of Shogi... even if they had been sharpened to protect that one little girl.

People call that monstrous dragon.



“—THE  
DEMON  
KING  
OF THE  
WEST.”

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

The Sub League arc that started back in Book 6 has reached a climactic finish.

Quite a few characters are returning for the first time in a long while and some parts may be hard to follow, but I wanted to give their stories some closure.

Please think about their pasts and futures while reading!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

There is so much I would like to write, but I would spoil the story. All I will say for now is that the manuscript for this book moved me to tears.

# The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

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