

THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII
SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI



11



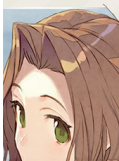
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Girlfriend



Sleepover with Ayumu



Two Tuckered Out



In the Living Room



Peeking

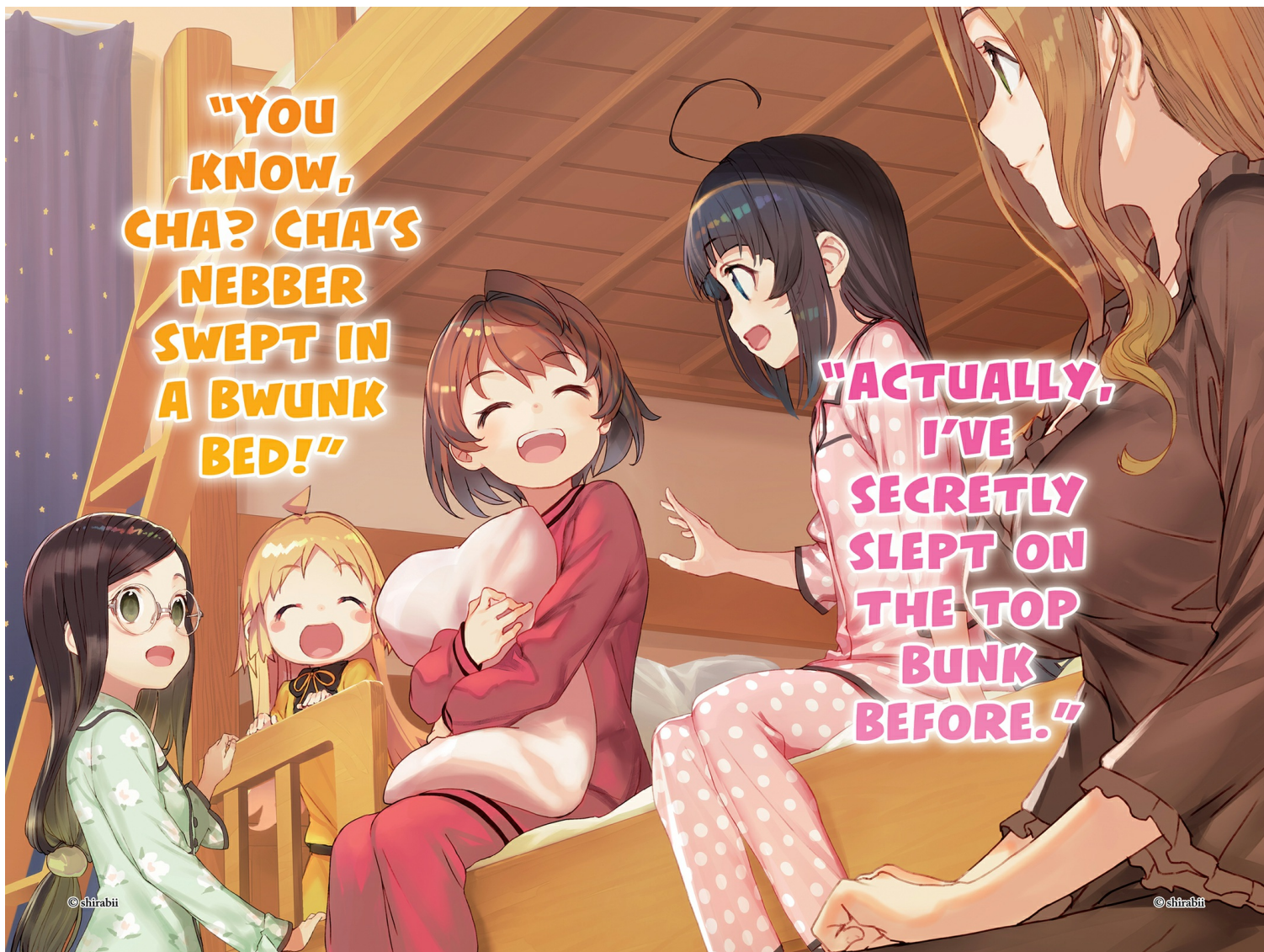


Shoulder Thumpin

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**"YOU
KNOW,
CHA? CHA'S
NEBBER
SWEPT IN
A BWUNK
BED!"**

**"ACTUALLY,
I'VE
SECRETLY
SLEPT ON
THE TOP
BUNK
BEFORE."**





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MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU

Ryuo. After failing to promote while in the Sub League, he repeatedly struck a column in his Master's house with open fists so as not to damage his fingers. Onlookers mistakenly believed he was practicing sumo wrestling techniques.

GINKO SORA

Yaichi's older sister apprentice. Sub League 3-dan. Since her appetite disappears the night before her matches, she dabs sauce on her tongue for nutrients. "Sauce is perfectly nutritious," she claims.



AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice. Superstitious, she always kept the fan that bears her Master's handwriting on her person for good luck while in the Practice League. However, since she always slept with it clutched in her hands, its actual impact is unknown.



KOUSUKE KIYOTAKI

Yaichi and Ginko's Master. With next to no money to live on during his time in the Sub League, he subsisted entirely on bread crust and mayonnaise. As a result, he was hospitalized for malnutrition.

KEIKA KIYOTAKI

Kousuke Kiyotaki's daughter. Worked at a beer garden for a short time while a member of the Practice League. At one point, she made a Woman's League player's annual salary in a single month.



MITSURU OISHI

A-ranking professional Shogi player. Worldly Maestro. His archrival suddenly announced their retirement while the two were in the Sub League. The woman who quelled his fiery, competitive outbursts was left with nowhere to go and is now his wife.

HIUMA KAGAMIZU

Sub League 3-dan. Born in Miyazaki. Eating a mango his family sent from home at a snail's pace during a match once unnerved his opponent to such a surprising degree that it became known as the mango-of-all-things incident.





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VOLUME 11

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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PROLOGUE

An unbelievable number of cameras were all lined up *behind* the upper seat.

It was inside the most lavish *tatami* room in the fanciest hotel in Osaka. The woman sitting in front of the *tokonoma* alcove wore a vibrant kimono. Known as the *Thorn Princess*, her beauty made her stand out from the surroundings that much more.

However, all those countless cameras lined up behind the Thorn Princess were not there for her.

They were pointed at the opposite side of a thick Shogi board——focused on the tiny little girl sitting there.

“Look this way, please!”

“What emotions are you feeling right now?!”

“Did you think you would win this series in a straight sweep?!”

In the face of an endless string of flashes, the little girl answered the endless string of questions one after another in as few words as possible.

Still just a little girl—who only just started the sixth grade.

That little girl joined a Shogi tournament 10 months ago simply because she was *bored*.

She was the youngest in that tournament, and never lost a single match.

On that day with me, Master, Shogi association staff members and a small army of journalists watching, she won that tournament——defeating the beautiful woman clad in a kimono who sat in the upper seat—to become the new champion.

She was the same as she had been the day before.

The same person who lived with me in an old house in an old part of Osaka, the one who shared a bunk bed with me in the kids’ room on the second floor.

We shared everything equally: from food, to allowance, to our Master’s love and support. Someone closer to me than my actual brothers.

Being together was only natural, the two of us obviously being one and the same. The thought of it being any different never crossed my mind, almost like she was my other half.

I made my way through all the cameras and swarming adults to get a picture of her in her moment of triumph and called her name.

“●●●●● ! Look over here!”

“Watch your mouth,” one of the adults snapped at me. “You can’t call her that anymore.”

Why?

I stood there, stunned, and was told exactly why.

“Because she’s a title holder—she’s the *Queen* now.”

It was as if I was some mutt that had wandered into a castle from the street, and all the adults were rushing in to protect the princess from me.

“Darn right.”

“Her status is well beyond a mere Sub League player like you.”

“Higher than your average pro, I’d say.”

“She’s the Shogi world’s treasure, a ray of hope on par with the Meijin himself——.”

All those countless voices singing her praises easily sliced apart the two who had always been together like a hot knife through butter.

At the same time, I felt a new, budding pain sear its way through me.

..... I lost the ability to call that girl by her name that day, and I still can’t.

I don’t know what to call the emotion that burned its way into my life that day either.

But there is one thing I know for sure.

That day, I gained a new reason to fight A new reason to get stronger, and that reason is still with me today.

To reclaim that girl's name.

RECORD 1

GINKO SORA
(15)

空
銀
子
(15歳)



BROKEN SPIRIT

“Big Sis.”

Rain is coming down in buckets.

My shoulders square to my younger older sister in the kitchen of my cheap apartment, *I’m holding a knife* for some reason.

Big Sis is grasping the blade with her bare hands.

And——she’s slowly guiding the tip from her heart up to her throat.

“Big Sis.”

Unable to do anything rash with the knife in my hand, I just repeat those words over and over.

The soaking wet and lifeless doll of a girl presses the tip of the blade against skin so pale you can almost see through it

“..... me.”

The muscles in her throat shift ever so slightly.

The rain drowned out most of what she said, but———I’m sure it was this.

“Kill me.”

Those words are about the farthest away from *Ginko Sora* as you can get.

I’ve heard her say things like, “Your head on a pike,” “You have a death wish?” and “Drop dead,” millions of times. Because, well, they were directed at me much more often than not.

But this is the first time I’ve ever heard her say, “Kill me” in that pleading voice.

Those ash-colored eyes of hers that always burned with conviction look like nothing more than pitch-black holes staring back at me.

Unwavering confidence that was as solid as ice has melted into this feeble,

almost fleeting shadow of its former self

So, that's why I——.

“Do you really think this old piece of metal can actually kill you?”

I respond with as big of a taunt as I can muster.

“.....!”

Emotion flashes through the doll's eyes for a split second.

Watching that spark as closely as I can, I keep going.

“Can you guarantee a knife is enough to finish the job? You said you were going to slice off your hand to punish it for making a bad move on its own, but you know that's not true, right Big Sis? The only reason you lost is because you're weak.”

I keep taunting her, but on the inside I'm feeling cold as ice and sweating waterfalls.

With Big Sis's bare hands wrapped around the knife blade, the slightest move will cut her fingers. That'll damage the nerves in her fingertips and affect her Shogi.

——Think

I desperately scour my brain to find the answer with every second these cheap taunts can buy.

The 3-*dan* division is still going on. I absolutely can't let her Shogi get weaker no matter what.

——Find a way to get her to let go of the blade

Even as I wrack my brain, part of me finds my priorities kind of funny.

This is a life-and-death situation, and still I think of Shogi first.

But it's that important. Shogi is all we have. Our whole reason for living gets crushed whenever we lose a match and a life without going pro is the same as being dead.

Which is why I——.

Laughing through my nose I say, “How were you planning to cut off your right hand in the first place? Don’t tell me you thought it would just slice right off if you just pushed the knife against your wrist? Life isn’t like manga. Right-handed people can’t use a knife with their left hand that well. Seriously, even Ai Hinatsuru knows that.”

“I-I can do it! That’s what I was doing!!”

The spiritless doll in the shape of Big Sis frowns as her cheeks flush red in a mixture of anger and embarrassment.

Eyes glistening with painful tears, she grabs at my right hand with both of hers to wrestle the knife away from me.

Letting go of the blade.

——Now!!

Just as I had planned, I seize the opportunity to drop the knife to the floor and grab hold of both of Big Sis’s hands to keep her from getting it.

Me holding her back, and Big Sis struggling with all her might.

“Agh?!”

Thrashing about, the two of us fall to the floor. I land on top of her, pinning Big Sis down.

Even beneath me, she is still trying to reach the knife. You idiot!! I tighten my grip on that arm even more and put more weight on it.

“Let go of me!”

“You know I can’t! Please, calm down!!”

“Then Just kill me”

Going limp, Big Sis’s skin has turned red from our scuffle. A single tear rolls down her cheek.



“You’re naïve, Big Sis,” I say as I kick the knife across the kitchen floor and under the table.

“That’s why you let checkmates slip away and lose. Trying to cut off your right hand, asking me to kill you just because you had your first losing streak in the 3-*dan* division? What do you have between your ears: tofu? I turned pro in junior high school, and even I couldn’t clear the 3-*dan* division in a single season. I’m more talented than you are, so please stop being so full of yourself.”

“.....!!”

Creaaak! Big Sis clenches her jaw so hard that her molars scream, and she looks the other way.

Pulling her in close like a hug, I whisper into her ear, “Would you like to hear something one of my seniors told me the first day I entered the Sub League?”

“.....”

“You’ve been spoiled the whole time, so I don’t think they would’ve told you, but I was bullied and threatened like you wouldn’t imagine. I know quite a few horror stories and experienced my fair share.”

“..... Don’t talk to me like you know everything! Spoiled I haven’t been spoiled ever!”

“Do you know the reason why the Kansai Shogi Association has fewer windows than the one in Kanto?”

“..... I don’t. And I don’t care——.”

“It was to prevent Sub League members from jumping out of them in despair during losing streaks like you right now, Big Sis.”

“.....!”

“That’s why when they built the Kansai Association, they put in as few windows as possible. So that no one *else* would try to jump out of them.”

“Did they die?”

“Worse. *He jumped but it didn’t kill him.* He broke his leg but didn’t even pass out. He felt all that pain, wide awake The worst part was that he couldn’t completely give up on his remaining 3-*dan* division matches. But no one on

earth could play respectable Shogi in that condition and he lost them all. Just added insult to injury.”

“Wh-What happened to him?”

“He’s alive, but he never turned pro. You know him very well, Big Sis.”

“Huh?”

Yes. The body doesn’t break so easily. Broken bones, given time, will come back stronger than they were before.

The same isn’t true for the heart.

Once the fighting spirit breaks and the heart gets wounded, there’s no telling if it will ever be the same again.

“..... I just... can’t take this No more, not anymore Let me die,” Big Sis, still lying on her back on the kitchen floor, says through tears. She doesn’t have the strength to stand up anymore.

The losing streak isn’t the only reason she’s plunged this far into despair.

There’s even more to it.

“..... My next match, it’s hopeless I’ll lose, that’s a fact I’ll lose four in a row, and keep losing If I have to keep reliving this pain I’d rather be dead,”

“..... Big Sis,”

I think back to the day the 3-*dan* division schedule was announced.

Just looking at that, I had a bad feeling that Big Sis’s fighting spirit might break halfway through the season.

She’s got nothing but painful battles from here on out.

The first opponent to beat her after promotion, an opponent that she beat but realized has more talent than she does, and an opponent she’s admired ever since she was a kid.

There’s no guarantee she’d win in peak condition, but she won’t even be able to put up a fight with her heart in shambles like this.

There’s no time to stand still. But She’s in no shape to move forward.

“In that case——.”

With no clue what to do, I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind in order to save my precious older sister apprentice.

“In that case, I’ll take you to a place where you can die for sure.”

“Eighth floor, right?”

“.....”

Big Sis silently nods.

We’ve arrived in front of her riverside apartment building that’s only a five-minute walk from the association. It’s brand new so it looks great, but it doesn’t look like anyone lives here. Kind of like how Big Sis is right now.

The rain is still coming down. The two of us walked here under one umbrella with me practically holding Big Sis up the whole way.

Using the spare key she gave me, I pass through the autolocking front door and take the elevator to the eighth floor.

Big Sis’s room——801.

There’s no nameplate under the number. But I’m almost certain this is it.

“I’m going to open the door.”

“.....”

I unlock it without waiting for her to answer.

This is my second time in her apartment. The two of us had one practice session here, but the timing never worked out since then.

Turning the lights on, the room is as empty as it was last time.

She doesn’t even have a table or chairs. This room is for Shogi research and Shogi research only.

“..... Hm?”

There’s something hanging on the wall that wasn’t there before.

“A poster? Or is that a calendar?”

It’s neither.

The thing is actually a sheet of cloth absolutely covered from corner to corner

with hand-written messages from her classmates.

“To Miss Ginko Sora, on the path to becoming the first female Shogi pro!”

You will make it to the pros!

New 4-*dan* promotion.

Pride of the class.

I’ve always been your fan!

Break through☆ the 3-*dan* division!

Don’t you go losing!

Undefeated!

Be legendary!

All the girls are behind you, Ginko.

Go for it!

Do your best!

Go get ‘em!

Fight!

Fight!

Fight!

Fight!

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Fight!

Fight!

Now I'm sure of it.

"Let's go, Big Sis. You can't be here now."

"..... Where could we go?" Big Sis asks, still sopping wet and sitting on the floor in a heap. Small and fragile, she's so cute that, if the situation were different, I'd be tempted to do something else right here and now.

I dry her hair with a towel that I brought from my apartment and try to sound

as excited as I can.

“Didn’t I tell you? A place where you’ll die for sure, Japan’s number one spot for suicide. If you’re going to go out, it might as well be at the best spot for it.”

“..... But, where? Where is that?”

“That’s something to look forward to when we get there.”

“.....”

“Now, we’re short on time. Hurry up and take a shower.”

“Huh?”

Big Sis looks up at me with a blank stare and I say, “You don’t want to be in Osaka, right? We won’t get there today, but we’ll get as far as we can and find a hotel for the night. So please, look presentable.”

“..... I’m fine like this. I’m dying anyway.”

“Um, Big Sis? Are you serious about this or not?”

I make an overly dramatic sigh and add.

“That can’t happen if you get arrested along the way.”

“.....”

That seemed to hit home because Big Sis doesn’t say another word and begrudgingly throws the towel to the floor as she gets to her feet.

Then, without warning, she starts taking off her clothes. Hey, hey, heeeeeeey!!

“D-Don’t do that out here!”

“..... Hmph.”

Sounding triumphant, Big Sis leaves her clothes behind like a pile of shed skin and disappears into the bathroom with a sweet scent in her wake.

Whoa She seriously took everything off

..... There’s something kinda hot about wet bras and panties

I know we’re siblings, but this kind of thing is a bit much I really wish she’d have a little more modesty. It’s not like back when we could take a bath together

Wrapping her clothes in the discarded towel, I put the whole bundle in the corner of the room for now.

Okay I'd better talk to Keika while I have the chance.

I didn't make Big Sis take a shower so that I could see her naked or get a whiff of her wet clothes. Not at all.

"Promise me, Yaichi."

Not too long ago, Keika came to me at Master's place with a request.

"If Ginko ever comes to you for help, promise me you will prioritize her. Promise me you'll only focus on her."

I'd never seen Keika plead like that before.

That's why I promised her that, if the time came, I definitely would.

Though, I've got to say, it's amazing how well Keika understands Big Sis.

She must have felt something was off about Big Sis even though she was riding a winning streak in the 3-*dan* division.

..... I'd better have her contact Big Sis's parents, too. I don't have their phone number and I doubt that Big Sis would want to talk to them herself right now
.....

A player with fans all around the country like Naniwa's Snow White going missing would be a huge scandal.

Oh, and I need to get Keika to look after Ai.

She's in the middle of a pajama party with the Grade Schooler Practice Group at the Kiyotaki house right now. I can tell her to keep Ai right where she is.

There's no telling when I'll be back from this trip but there is a time limit.

The next 3-*dan* division matches are in two weeks, and I have my own league matches to worry about

Plus, it's almost time for the Crown League Challenger Match.

I refuse to forfeit that match because I'm out of town. It might be possible to get the association to change the dates somewhat, but that would require me to explain the reason ... so that's not going to happen.

I feel horrible about pushing all this on Keika.

But Who else can I turn to?

Yeah, Keika's the only one I can ask. I know I can trust her.

My mind set, I reach for my smartphone. Then.

Before I open it, the phone vibrates.

.....?! An unknown caller Now of all times?

Nerves hit me so hard that I nearly drop my phone.

I could ignore it. Actually, it would be better to ignore it to keep Big Sis's condition completely under wraps.

But my fingertips are telling me to answer it. That if I don't, things will only get worse.

In the end, I put my faith in my pro Shogi player fingers and hit the *answer* button.

"..... Hello?"

The person who called me is none other than——.

SCANDAL

“This is Yaichi Kuzuryu’s phone, correct?”

I know the voice coming through the speaker very well.

The same voice called me from out of the blue just about a year ago now.

From a different number than what I have registered in my phone.

I’m positive that voice belongs to——Shogi Association Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan*.

“Chairman? I’m surprised you would call me so late at——.”

“Is Miss Ginko Sora there?”

That one slicing move cuts off my question and my mind goes blank.

He repeats himself.

“Is Miss Sora with you? We have been unable to ascertain her whereabouts since today’s 3-*dan* division matches concluded. Her cellular phone is still here in the locker at the association.”

“.....”

The fact that Big Sis left the association without her phone sends a fresh shockwave down my spine. She may have seriously meant to die

The Shogi association recently made an official rule that forbids players to bring electronic devices into matches.

Kansai players had been putting our phones and whatnot in a locker ourselves when we came in for matches before the rule went into effect, but now we give them to a staff member instead. That’s probably how the association figured out Big Sis was missing; she never came to get her phone.

——What should I do? Tell him? Can I trust him?

There are a lot of risks that come with letting anyone else know Big Sis’s mental condition right now.

It’s not that I suspect the chairman

But if any of her opponents find out

how close to the brink she is, it'll give them the option to attack her heart while it's weak.

Not that I blame them.

That's just what kind of place the 3-*dan* division is.

—If Big Sis loses again she'll break down entirely.

Just as I was debating back and forth, the chairman ramps up the pressure.

"Miss Sora lost both matches during today's Regular Activities. There's a chance it was a considerable shock to her system. Word came in that she was sighted leaving the association in the pouring rain without an umbrella after her matches concluded. Should we be unable to confirm her safety, we will be forced to contact the police——."

"She's here. She's in the shower right now so she can't hear this phone call."

Realizing there was no way I could keep this hidden, I tell him everything.

"I'm glad to hear it. Now, please listen closely to what I have to say."

The chairman sounds genuinely relieved but then makes a request I never saw coming.

"I would like you to take Miss Sora into hiding for a few days."

"..... Come again?"

"The fact that you are together right now means you were originally intending to go somewhere, yes?"

"Y es," I say with an unintentional nod. "We were, but Why? Why would you wan——."

"There is a possibility that the Meijin will receive the Citizens Award tomorrow."

".....!"

"The first day of the final Meijin Title Match took place today in Tokyo. The Meijin had a clear advantage at the time of the sealing move. Should he emerge

victorious tomorrow, the Meijin will achieve the momentous 100th title season as well as becoming the most winning player in Shogi history with 1,434 victories on the same day. Those alone more than qualify him for the award and it's unlikely a more fitting occasion will occur in the future."

The Meijin has come extremely close to winning the Citizens Award several times before.

The most recent one was when he was on the cusp of becoming the first Eternal Septuple, having Eternal status in all seven Shogi titles and completing 100 title seasons at the last Ryuo Title Match.

I'm the one who stopped that from happening.

"Already? Again?"

"As the government's approval rating has fallen, those in office are adamant about bestowing the Citizens Award. The medal and certificate were bought and paid for when you fought against him during the last Ryuo Title Match, you see."

"Adults trying to save face? I don't think the Meijin would willingly accept it, though."

"He is an adult as well," the chairman says with a chuckle. "But, yes, he is not happy with it. I suppose that fits well with his character, however I plan to use *any means necessary* to convince him. Chances are he will go through with it."

Okay, I've got an idea what's going on here.

"Just hypothetically speaking If someone as popular as the Meijin—like Naniwa's Snow White—were to go missing or attempt suicide while the Shogi world is in the spotlight ... it would become the worst possible scandal, right?"

"Indeed, it would. Should a sport with as plain a reputation as Shogi have to deal with a scandal of that magnitude during one of the few instances when the nation is watching, the press would focus on that scandal rather than the Citizens Award."

"But are you sure it's okay to say she went on a trip with a guy?"

"Yes, because if it's with the Ryuo, the story will be taken up by the *tabloids*

instead. Damage will be limited to a grudge from Miss Sora's fans. Please be prepared to receive a death threat or two."

"..... You're evil."

"Why thank you. That's much preferable to being incompetent."

I can tell the chairman is thoroughly enjoying this.

"How is Miss Sora, if I may ask?"

"Honestly, her first losing streak in the 3-*dan* division hit her very hard. It's three in a row, so her back is against the wall. Not to mention her next opponent is who he is"

"I see. If I were going against *him*, I would be tempted to run away myself."

That's the last thing I expected to hear the chairman say. So evil

"I've decided that the best thing for her right now is to spend some time away from Shogi to recover. She told me flat out that she doesn't want to be in Osaka and we're planning on leaving the city tonight. I was in the middle of getting ready when you called."

"That sounds like a good plan. Where do you intend to go?"

I tell him the place I have in mind.

"..... I see. That destination would actually work very well."

I was prepared for him to ask *why*, but he made a suggestion instead.

"There is a trustworthy hotel in the area. I will handle making reservations, so please spend the night there."

"I appreciate it."

"In the meantime, I will contact Kousuke as well as Miss Sora's family to explain the situation. Not to be rude, but you contacting them may lead to unwanted misunderstandings."

"I really appreciate that"

Honestly, it's a huge weight off my shoulders.

If two teenagers like Big Sis and I stayed at a hotel by ourselves, people would think we were runaways. It doesn't help that Big Sis sticks out even when she's

wearing a disguise. Tabloids these days would be all over a story like that.

Bing! My phone lets me know I have an email.

I'm willing to bet that it's a hotel booking confirmation from Sasari Oga Women's 1-*dan*, the chairman's secretary who's always at his side taking notes to assist her blind boss.

"..... Things may become rather noisy around the association over the coming weeks. Though I'm sure you have realized it yourself, Ryuo."

"I could tell the association was trying to deal with something at the Player's Meeting the other day Is that why the sudden rule change about electronic devices was made?"

Pro players and women's players had only been forbidden to hold public matches against Shogi software up until now, but the regulations the association put in place the other day are close to overkill. It's almost like they're being forced to make something happen.

Instead of answering me directly, the chairman continues, "Ideally, we would like everything to be resolved without incident. But if the adversary takes an offensive stance then we have no choice but to fight. We are, after all, Shogi players."

"Fight"

—Is it a fight we can win?

It's not like the association has people whose job is to sweep scandals under the rug like talent agencies do. Shogi players have always insisted that the association be run by Shogi players. That has resulted in an organization that always puts Shogi first, but never thinks about anything else.

When it comes to Shogi, they're very strong.

But when it comes to things that don't involve competition, they're out of their element.

A Meijin who was revered and celebrated over his whole career had his legacy smeared overnight by a scandal in the past.

There was even a time when a Women's Title Holder put in a request for an

extended leave of absence but was turned into talk show fodder all because one magazine said she *disappeared*.

—Would Big Sis be able to endure the same thing if that happened to her?

No. Definitely not.

The rest of the country and her opponents may see Big Sis as the soulless queen of ice, but I know she's an average girl who gets hurt easier than anyone else.

—She's sensitive, kind and has always been physically fragile

Almost as if he could see right through my anxiety, the Chairman says.

"It is my role to protect the Shogi world. As the Eternal Meijin and the chairman of the Shogi association, I will see it through. Even by using questionable means if necessary. Therefore, I ask you to fulfill your own role."

"My role?"

As a pro Shogi player?

As a title holder?

As a Master of two young apprentices?

Several come to mind, but the chairman wasn't talking about any of them.

"Yaichi."

Back before I joined the Sub League.

Just like when he called me by name for the first time.

In a gentle tone fit for explaining something to a kid, the man I've idolized my whole life, *Tsukimitsu-Meijin* says, "The only one who can protect Ginko is you."

That voice instantly reminds me of the old days.

Because

Because that was the first role that was asked of me when I came to Osaka to take my first step down the Shogi path.

MIDNIGHT EXPRESS

“Let’s pick up the pace! We should be able to make it just in time for the last express train!”

I speed up and pull Big Sis along by her wrist because I can’t count on her to keep up or walk straight the way she is right now.

The rain is still coming down hard and, at this rate, I don’t think it’ll ever stop. Osaka station is jam-packed with people, so it’s stiflingly humid and the floor is slippery.

—Other people probably think we’re a couple, holding hands like this

Slightly early Tanabata holiday decorations are swaying in the air, glittering.

Ignoring them, I vent a little frustration.

“Jeeze! I haven’t had to put up with a sudden trip like this in a long time.”

“..... This isn’t a trip.”

“Oh, that’s right. It’s a journey to die.”

Then, what am I supposed to call it? A final destination?

Suddenly, I’m reminded of a book.

Midnight Express. Mr. Kagamizu lent it to me a while back.

I ended up returning it to him without reading much at all, but it was a *thing* for a bit when I was in the Sub League. The book is an old journal written by somebody traveling from Asia to Europe.

—Now that I think about it Sota said he read it, too.

Sota Kunugi.

Rising through the Sub League like he was on a high-speed elevator, he’s made it all the way to the 3-*dan* division as a sixth grader and currently leads the standings without a single loss. Seriously, he’s a prodigy among prodigies.

—Unlike Big Sis, he’s probably already started researching for the next match.

The undefeated Sota is the powerhouse in the division with Mr. Kagamizu and Mr. Karako right behind him with one loss a piece. I bet he can sit in front of a board without a second thought and still have all the confidence in the world.

Then again, maybe he is so zoned in on promoting to 4-*dan* that his focus might start slipping?

—That’s an optimistic way to look at it

The pressure that comes with being at the top of the 3-*dan* division is immense.

But counting on it to crush an opponent for you would be a mistake.

Going on a trip now is the same as suicide. I know that. But Big Sis really might lose her mind if she stays in Osaka like this

Wait a sec, didn’t Mr. Kagamizu tell me something when he lent me that book?

“You can’t exactly travel abroad when you hole up in your room to play Shogi from dawn to dusk. That’s why I read this book to distract myself from the urge to get away. That, and——.”

“And?”

“The name Midnight Express comes from fugitives making their escape. Perfect for Sub League members, don’t you think?”

Runaway fugitives.

That fits our situation perfectly.

It’s impossible to separate Shogi from our memories of Osaka. No matter where we go, we can never escape from it.

Shogi is a prison, a cage. At some point, the whole city became divided into an 81-space grid to us, just like a Shogi board. That’s why we’re running away, getting out of the city.

All so that we can play the Shogi we love as much as we want.

Yet, that’s the reason the two of us left our parents’ houses in the first place: to become children of the house that revolves around Shogi.

The last express train headed north is surprisingly crowded.

Since we managed to get the last two reserved seats that were side by side, I get Big Sis situated in the window seat before I put our luggage up on the rack and sit down in the aisle seat.

Then, I take out the drinks and snacks I bought at the station and offer them to her.

“Want something to eat?”

“..... No,” she answers flatly as she stares into the pitch blackness outside the window. It sounded like a strong refusal.

“I see. Let me know if you change your mind.”

Big Sis is the type of player who eats next to nothing during her matches.

Since the 3-*dan* division plays two matches during their Regular Activities, that means Big Sis probably hasn’t eaten anything at all. She might not even have had dinner last night.

—Didn’t eating actually make her feel sick back when she was a kid?

Memories start coming.

Big Sis used to be so much weaker than she is now and was in and out of the hospital a lot. She’d also get fevers quite a bit after playing Shogi.

If she won, she’d be satisfied and that was that, but she’d get worked up if she lost and kept challenging me as many times as it took for her to win. The problem was that she could tell right away if Master or I were trying to lose and threw a temper tantrum. Talk about handful

“Yaichi.”

“Hm? Want a snack after all?”

“Hand.”

“Ahh Sure.”

I do as I’m told and take her hand again.

The first day that Master brought us to the Kansai Shogi Association, he gave

us this very direct order.

“Always hold hands whenever ya two leave the house. I’ll kick ya outta the Shogi family if ya don’t.”

He told me, “Protect a girl younger than you.”

To Big Sis, he said, “Make sure your younger brother apprentice doesn’t get lost.”

If he’d outright demanded that we hold hands, I’m sure the two of us would’ve let go the first chance we got.

Because of Master Kiyotaki’s approach, we got past normal kiddie reactions, got along surprisingly well and the two of us were able to keep holding hands no matter where we went.

It was that way for years and years.

Except one day we let go of the hand the way we were never supposed to.

And ever since that day, Big Sis and I have walked our own Shogi paths, alone.

The first one to let go was——.

“Big Sis. At least drink some Huh?”

I pause in the middle of the sentence.

Because I feel something against my shoulder.

That, and I can hear light breathing.

“..... You’re always the first to fall asleep. Some big sister you are.”

Then, it finally hit me.

Just how tired I am.

“Wheew—— That was a long day”

It started bright and early with the King of Naniwa Tournament, and then I had a match against Ayumu. I’m exhausted

“Actually, I think I was more nervous about the girls’ matches than my own.

Charlette, Ayano, Mio They've really come into their own"

Whoa. I'm tearing up just thinking about it

I quickly clamp down on those budding emotions. Now's not the time to get teary-eyed.

"..... Today is not over yet. I better rest up while I can"

I set my phone alarm to go off five minutes before the train will arrive, close my eyes and lean my head against Big Sis's head on my shoulder.

Could that be why?

For some reason—a four-year-old with ash-colored eyes and silver hair shows up in my dreams.

KIDS ROOM

I get hit with such an intense wave of déjà vu the instant I see the room filled with children that I just stand and stare.

“Keika? Are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh Yes, just fine. Thanks, Ai.”

I smile at Ai Hinatsuru Women’s League 1-*dan* as she looks up at me with concern.

She may only be in elementary school, but she’s a true-blue prodigy who’s already made it into the premier league in Women’s Shogi, the Women’s Legend League. When it comes to Shogi puzzles, she’s a monster with enough talent to surpass plenty of male Shogi players

She fits in well with this room that raised two other giant monsters of its own.

“You’ve slept here plenty of times before, haven’t you, Ai?”

“Yep! Let me see When Master secretly took Ten-chan as an apprentice and when I was in the Mynavi Tournament and collapsed after losing to Tsukiyomizaka-*sensei*, I think. It was because Master kicked me out of the apartment then.”

“Sounds like Yaichi puts you in this room whenever he doesn’t know what to do.”

“Yep♪,” says Ai, jumping up and hanging on my arm.

Yaichi and Ginko used to do that all the time back when they were little. Well, this is a surprise. The corners of my eyes are getting hot. Have I really gotten to that age?

“So Master won’t be coming today after all?”

“He wanted to come, but there was nothing he could do. Sometimes work comes up out of nowhere and that’s what happened tonight.”

Smiling, I lie right to her face.

It’s not that I don’t feel bad about it, really I do.

Uncle Seiichi Chairman Tsukimitsu called and told me to tell the girls, “Yaichi has been called in to work on an urgent matter.”

I give the reason behind the lie some more thought.

When Ginko lost her first match in the 3-*dan* division No, long before then, I had a feeling something like this would happen.

That’s why I had Yaichi make me a promise.

That if Ginko ever came to him for help, that he would only focus on her.

That he would prioritize her above anyone else, at least until this 3-*dan* division season was over.

Right now Yaichi is keeping that promise.

Which means now it’s up to me to protect what Yaichi holds dear in his place.

“You know, Cha? Cha’s nebber swept in a bwunk bed!”

“Neither have I! It’s something that only children with no siblings like me can only fantasize about!”

Charlette Isoir and Ayano Sadatou are hopping around the room, their wide eyes sparkling with glee.

Both of them smiled when they first arrived at the house, but their eyes were red and puffy.

I could instantly tell that they had shed an incredible amount of tears during the tournament, so I ignored our age difference, joined the pajama party and brought them up to this room in hopes of lifting their spirits, even just a little.

—But I never would’ve thought they would be this happy about a bunk bed.

Come to think of it, all of us in this room are only children. Perhaps it’s only natural to get excited about seeing one.

“Hehehe. Actually, I’ve secretly slept on the top bunk before.”

Telling the girls, they immediately ask me questions like “Really?” and “How was it?!”

“I was in high school at the time, so I remember it being a little cramped.”

“I fit just right! So, can I sleep here tonight? Pleeease?” the leader of the Grade Schooler Practice Group and King of Naniwa Champion, Mio Mizukoshi pleads as she starts ascending the ladder to the top bunk.

Even in her pajamas, she’s still wearing the medal she received at the podium. She must be over the moon right now. Seeing her happy like this reminds me so much of Yaichi and Ginko after they won the Elementary Meijin Tournament.

“Hey, hey, Keeka! Did Kujiyuru-*sensei* and Sora-*sensei* use this bed?”

“They sure did. We bought it just for them.”

Of course, I can remember the day the bunk bed arrived at this house very clearly even now. That includes how overjoyed those two were to see it. And that they started playing Shogi right away

“Who slept on top?”

“We’d planned on Yaichi taking the top bunk. Ginko was still small and wasn’t very strong, so it wasn’t safe for her to climb up and down the ladder.”

“Planned?”

“Ginko insisted that *as the older sister, the top bunk should be hers* and wouldn’t take no for an answer. In the end, they agreed to play Shogi before bed and the winner would sleep on top.”

Until that point, they slept side by side on futons But I think it would be prudent not to say so in front of Ai.

“Those two would argue about every little detail. Playing Shogi became their way to settle things.”

Looking around the room, there are nicks and stains scattered about.

They’re leftover scars from Ginko and Yaichi’s fights. I say fights, but Yaichi never struck Ginko, not once. Though the opposite happened more times than I can remember.

This stain here, that stain there, they’re all from the liters upon liters of tears Ginko shed in here.

The nick in the support beam in the corner came from the day Yaichi missed his chance to promote in the Sub League and hit it to vent his frustration at how

weak he was.

Lots of children have visited this room to play Shogi with those two, spent the night here and left their own nicks and stains after playing even more Shogi.

Of course, somewhere among the stains are the tears of this house's actual daughter, shed after constantly losing to children much younger than herself: mine.

"This room here used to belong to my aunt. She passed away about one year before Ginko and Yaichi came to live with us, so it had been empty. That's why we made it into a kids' room."

"Your aunt she died?" says a crestfallen Ayano. What a kind girl.

"She did. Which really made it surprising that back when Yaichi came in here for the first time He said something really weird Sh-Shocking actually"

"Huh? What did Master say?" Ai says, looking confused and curious.

I answer.

"That there was a ghost in here."

The girls shriek so hard the house shudders.

RECORD 2

YAICHI KUZURYU

(6)

九頭竜八一

(6歳)



MASTER AND APPRENTICE

“Yaichi Kuzuryu, wasn’t it?” the pro player said, putting his large, meaty hand with surprisingly sensitive fingertips right on top of my head.

“If yer that keen on playin’ Shogi with me, why not come to my place to play to yar hearts content?”

I couldn’t understand the chilly, “Huh?” that came from my father behind me.

The pro player I idolized had just extended an invitation, and six-year-old me was on top of the world. Without any idea what my response actually meant, I said with giddy excitement, “Yes! I want to play more Shogi with you, *Sensei*!”

That was how I became this pro Shogi player Kousuke Kiyotaki 8-*dan*’s live-in apprentice.

I met him for the first time at a regional Shogi tournament in my home prefecture, Fukui.

There I was, Yaichi Kuzuryu, playing against the adults in the A Rank Division and winning the whole thing just a few days after turning six.

“W-Whoa!”

“A kindergartner becomin’ the champion? That’s gotta be a first!!”

“A boy genius!”

“That one could very well become Fukui’s first-ever professional Shogi player!”

I’d been taking Shogi seriously for about a year at that point. I was the kind of player who could get in a groove and rack up wins one after another. Luckily for me, I managed to tap all my skills and more that day.

And it just so happened that Kousuke Kiyotaki 8-*dan* was the head judge for that tournament.

“*Sensei*! Would you please give this boy here an instructional match?!”

It was only natural that the adults there went to ask the pro after I won.

Kiyotaki 8-*dan* must've been interested in me, too, because he accepted right off the bat.

"Sure thin'! Okay, kiddo, how's a two-piece handicap sound?"

Except Six-year-old Yaichi didn't understand the concept of a *pro player* yet and opened his fan, sat down across from the geezer and said, "Handicaps are boring! I wanna play even Stephen!"

My father's face turned pale next to me and he shouted, "Y-Yaichi! That was very rude!!"

"Dad, shut up! You couldn't even win B Class!"

"Kgh!"

I was so full of myself in that moment that the very idea of losing never crossed my mind.

"Ha ha ha! Ya got spirit, kiddo. But——."

SNAP-AP-PP ppp!

"?!"

The echo hit me so hard I thought the geezer broke that piece in half when he snapped it down onto the board.

It was like taking a bucket of ice water to the face. Suddenly, I was awake.

"That ain't no way to talk to yar father, ya hear?"

Then Kiyotaki 8-*dan* finished lining up the pieces with a delicate refinement that was the complete opposite of that snap before taking the Bishop out of his own territory and putting it back in the piece box.

"How 'bout this. You beat me without a Bishop, then we'll talk 'bout yar even Stephen."

"..... Okay."

I could tell *something's different* after hearing that pro's snap for the first time and accepted his proposal with a nod.

In amateur terms, playing against a former A-Ranking pro player without their

Bishop is the same as playing against someone at the national level. In pro terms, probably about 6-*dan*.

Back then, I was maybe 2-*dan*. I was sure I could take on any grown-up and win, but I understood by the 20th move that my attacks would never work against the man sitting across from me. His Shogi was just *built* differently.

The only reason I was able to keep playing was——.

“..... Hmm. I see, I see.”

Kiyotaki-*sensei* would leave little windows open in his defense, simultaneously inviting me to attack and giving my nearly broken fighting spirit an encouraging push. Without that, I would’ve thrown in the towel right then and there.

“Yeah. Goin’ there Oh? Yar a strong one.”

I thought I was thoroughly dominated in that match from start to finish, but it ended with me being just a single move short of checkmate.

To everyone else, it probably looked like I had a pro on the ropes and almost won.

“He may have lost, but that kindergarten boy was one move away from beating a pro!”

“He’s some kid, I tell you!”

The grown-ups were saying nice things about me left and right, and the newspaper ran an article with a title like *A Prodigy Putting Pros on Notice! Yaichi Kuzuryu*.

But, only Kiyotaki-*sensei* and I knew what had actually happened. The true meaning behind that match.

Kiyotaki-*sensei* took out his own Shogi notebook and jotted down the entire match on the spot like it was a walk in the park. Then he tore out that page and gave it to me.

“From now on, record all yar Shogi matches like this. ’Cause if ya can go back and review yer matches, yar gonna get that much stronger.”

“Yes Yes, I will!!”

Clutching that sheet of paper to my chest like a priceless treasure, I nodded so

many times I got dizzy.

Not only did Kiyotaki-*sensei* bring out the best in me, but he also showed me how impressive pros were and how unfathomably deep the game of Shogi could go. It was a genuine instructional match, the way they're meant to be.

—Pros are amazing! Shogi is amazing!!

I followed Kiyotaki-*sensei* everywhere after that day.

If I heard that he was going to be judging a tournament, I begged and pleaded with my parents to take me there. Not so that I could play in the tournament. So that I could play a match against Kiyotaki-*sensei*.

Since summer vacation was just beginning, Kiyotaki-*sensei* was taking part in tons of Shogi festivals and tournaments, and I went to every single one. Of course, I had my Shogi notebook with me.

Other people at the tournaments couldn't figure out what I was doing.

"Kiyotaki, as in the guy that only lasted a season in A, that Kiyotaki?"

"He's never even challenged for a title, has he?"

"The one who plays the same boring old defensive *yagura*?"

Back then, Kiyotaki-*sensei* Nah, it'd be easier just to call him Master, wouldn't it? Compared to his Shogi skills, Master's reputation was pretty low.

The Meijin, who was a few years younger than him Actually, he'd lost the Meijin title at that point in time so he wasn't really the Meijin, but it'll get confusing if I call him anything else so I'll just keep calling him the Meijin, okay? That Meijin's generation had claimed almost all the titles and the younger generation under him were at the forefront of new strategies and research. So, with the exception of Chairman Tsukimitsu (he wasn't the chairman yet either but, yeah), everyone was certain that the generation above the Meijin was *over*.

"Listen, son. Are you sure you want Kiyotaki-*sensei*? There's Tsukimitsu-*sensei* and a bunch of strong, young professionals out there, too?"

"No, I want Kiyotaki-*sensei*!"

"I'm sorry to say that he's busy right now. Being a judge is a lot of work. I don't know when he'll be able to get around to doing an instructional match

.....”

“Okay Since he’s busy, I’ll play in the tournament until he’s done. Please tell me when Kiyotaki-*sensei* can give me an instructional match!”

Word soon spread that there was a little kid who came all the way down from the mountains to be *at* tournaments but didn’t want to be *in* them. What’s worse, he was a nuisance because he won these tournaments that he wasn’t planning on playing in.

But the one who was more surprised than everyone was the man being followed: Master.

“Ya again, kiddo? How are we playin’ today?”

“Two-piece handicap, please!”

I couldn’t quite break through Master’s formations, even with the two-piece handicap.

And Master never once took it easy on this kid who traveled so far just to play against him.

I’d travel hours and hours just to get to the arena and wait in the corner for hours and hours all to lose to him, sometimes in less than 30 minutes.

Whenever that happened, I’d reset the board and silently wait for him to say something.

“..... Wanna do one more?”

“Please!!”

Hearing those words was the happiest thing in the world And I got more and more hooked on Shogi every time I heard them.

Even when summer vacation ended and I was back at school, my parents came up with excuses to get me out of class and took me to wherever Master was doing a tournament that day.

After losing count of how many matches I’d played against him, I got the invitation that started it all.

..... Looking back on it now that I have apprentices of my own, Master was probably watching my parents just as closely as he was me. Testing them to see

just how willing they were.

Seeing how much they loved their son And how willing they were to let him go.

Luckily for me, I was the second son.

My older brother played Shogi as a hobby but had no intention of turning pro whatsoever, and my little brother was a toddler at the time.

My parents probably thought they could *let at least one of their sons walk his own path in life*.

Even so, my mother apparently cried ... a lot. Meanwhile, I was so ecstatic to be going to Master Kiyotaki's house that I was smiling the whole way

"If you're serious about letting him become a professional, living that far away will be an obstacle for him. Looking at the elementary school calendar, now would be the best timing for him to move to Osaka," Master explained to my parents. And he also supposedly said this: "If you're willing to put him in my care, so long as he is in Osaka, you have my word I will raise him as my own son. I cannot accept any payment for teaching or day-to-day expenses. No parent would ever take money from their child."

My parents had said they could never accept that But it was this that finally convinced them.

"I have a daughter, but I have really always wanted a son. A son to teach Shogi Raise him to be a pro if he could, but a son to share a board with. After my wife passed away, I'd accepted the fact that that dream would never come true"

That's when I showed up.

A boy who thought the world of him and wanted nothing more than to play Shogi.

We weren't connected by blood, but Shogi families are bound in a different way.

"Yaichi falling in love with Shogi has made that dream come true. That kind of

happy miracle doesn't exist in this world I ask you to please let me live it.
My dream of teaching my son how to play Shogi."

Over the 10 years I was his live-in apprentice, Master never accepted a single yen from my parents.

They didn't tell me about this until after I'd turned pro.

I couldn't hold back the tears.

SHOGI GHOST

“This one’ll be livin’ with us startin’ today.”

“Huh?”

The teenage girl standing at the front door to greet us froze with her jaw hanging open.

She was pretty, unbelievably gorgeous.

I-I get to live with a pretty girl like her? I zoomed past happy, all the way to nervous

“Yaichi Kuzuryu here came all the way from Fukui. I’m takin’ him as a live-in apprentice,”

said Master, ruffling my hair with his big hand as I nervously twiddled my thumbs.

Live-in apprentice. Hearing those words made me so happy I didn’t know what to do with myself.

The girl gave me a kind smile and bent down to my height.

“Hello there, Yaichi. My name is Keika Kiyotaki. I’m this old man’s daughter.”

“N-Nice to meet you! I’m Yaichi Kuzuryu! Thank you for having me!!” I blurted out, my face bright red as I looked away from Keika.

Wh-What else was I supposed to do?!

I mean I could see right down her shirt The cleavage!!

“How nice of you to introduce yourself! Unlike that other one.”

“What?”

“Oh, and Dad? We need to talk, so would you please join me in the living room?”

Keika’s smile was still there, but the voice she used with Master was terrifying. The kind you can’t argue with.

“Hm? S-Sure In a minute. Before that, Yaichi’s parents were nice enough

to give us a sack 'o delicious rice——.”

“Now. Right now.”

“Oh O-Okay

Master was clearly powerless here, but he must not have wanted his newly taken apprentice to see him in such a pathetic state, so he stood tall and proud. On the verge of tears, though.

“Yaichi. Go on upstairs an’ play ’til I call for ya.”

“Yes, Master!”

Following Master’s instructions, I trotted my way up the stairs. I’d been so giddy when we got here, but suddenly I felt like a fish out of water without Master at my side.

There were two rooms on the second floor.

Both doors were open, so I decided to go into the one right in front of me first. There was a bed, a desk for studying, a bookshelf and a chest of drawers as well.

..... *It smells like that girl in here!*

I breathed in a lungful of that wonderful smell girls have.

When suddenly I caught a glimpse of a pile on the carpet that looked like it had just been accidentally dropped in there.

“? What’s this?”

Something she forgot? Because if she did, she might thank me for bringing it to her!

Convinced, I picked *it* up and———couldn’t believe my eyes.

“Huh?! Say whaaaaaat?!”

A bra. A huge one!!

——The buildings in Osaka are big, but the bras are even bigger!

Thoroughly impressed and weak in the knees, a wave of fear overtook me at the same time.

From an objective point of view, I was just a horny brat who snuck into a girl's room to find her underwear. Even at six years old, I understood that much.

I'll get kicked out if I don't behave! That girl wasn't happy to see me either

"I just won't say that I came in here"

The bra thing stays secret too, and no one can make me say it. I'll just lock it away in my memories Especially the bra. Swearing to myself, I went into the other room.

Unlike Keika's room, it didn't look like anyone lived in here.

"..... Maybe it's empty?"

A few steps into the vacant room and—there she was.

"Huuuh"

A little girl, maybe about four years old, was standing there looking at me.

Even in the dim light, her skin was starkly pale and her hair glinted silver. She had something clutched in her hands like it was the most valuable thing in the world.

"?!?!"

I rubbed my eyes three, four times. I just couldn't believe what they were seeing. The fact that she had no presence at all was part of it, but—

She was just so white, almost translucent, like light was passing through her

"Ah Huh? A person"

I didn't think something so pure could possibly be another human like me. I mean She was just too pretty

That's why I asked her.

"Um, are you a ghost"

If I were in the same position now, I would've used a lighter word like *fairy* or *spirit*, but it was all six-year-old me could do to come up with the word *ghost*.

"....."

This pure white girl was looking up at me without saying a word.

“Um I’m Yaichi Kuzuryu. I’m going to be a live-in apprentice at this house starting today! Ah, do you know what a live-in apprentice is? Basically I’ll live here to practice Shogi!”

Heart racing, I rattled off an explanation in a few short breaths and——.

The girl plopped down on the floor and opened up the *thing* she was holding.

“..... A foldable Shogi board?”

The moment I saw it, every little bit of unease I was feeling disappeared without a trace.

“So, you play Shogi, too?! Come on, let’s play!”

I sit down on my ankles across from her and start lining up the magnetic pieces.

We did *rock paper scissors* to decide who went first. Apparently, the ghost wasn’t very good at it because I got the first move.

“Okay I’m ready when you are!”

I bowed my head. The white girl had her head down, just looking at the board.

“Nooow! Here I come!!”

The formation I start creating was Master’s specialty, the *yagura*.

It was this world’s most beautiful formation, as beautiful as Shogi literature. I had made up my mind that I’d do a *yagura* for my first match in this house.



When she saw that, the girl——made her moves using no time at all. It was like playing against a mirror.

“Double Yagura?”

Taking my eyes off the board, I looked at my opponent. The girl’s head was down, but her eyes were looking up at me.

That was the moment I felt a connection with the ghost.

——This is fun!

Excited, I advanced my formation. But, that excitement vanished just as quickly.

Unlike my *monkey see, monkey do yagura*, this girl’s *yagura* was the real deal.

“.....”

The time had come for counterattack, every one of the pieces snapped eerily quiet when she moved.

It was over almost as soon as she reached my defenses. Advancing on my King with the precision and accuracy of a machine, I got destroyed in the blink of an eye.

“..... I lost”

Strong. Too strong.

Slumped over and staring at the checkmate, there was no doubt in my mind.

It was impossible for a little girl like this to play such flawless Shogi. What’s more, we’d just had an intense battle, but her face was as calm as an autumn breeze, like nothing happened at all

“Wow, you really are a Shogi ghost!!” I said to the little girl.

“Pro players have actual ghosts that can play Shogi living in their houses!”

Holy cow! Pros are amazing! I was through the roof. I just played Shogi with a ghost!

To me, this was just like *Hikaru no Go*.

It’s an old manga about a young boy who knew nothing about Go getting

taught how to play by the spirit of an ancient Go player living inside his Go board and he became very good at it.

My brother had the whole series, and I read through them enough times to wear out the pages.

And now, I was going to get stronger playing Shogi with this ghost like Hikaru did Just as this story was playing out in my head.

“Hm.”

“Hm?”

“Hand.”

The little ghost on the other side of the board extended her hand.

“.....?”

Slowly, very slowly, I reached out and touched it.

“! It’s hot”

Like, surprisingly hot. We’d only just met, but I’d already figured out that her body heats up whenever she takes a match seriously.

We lace our fingers together, almost as if making sure the other one was real. Very hot.

“Then You’re, not a ghost?”

“Ginko.”

Gin? Like a Shogi Silver piece?



“There’s no such thing as ghosts. Stupid Yaichi.”

Such a pretty girl, but such a dirty mouth.

Just as I was about to snap back at her, Keika’s voice echoed up from downstairs.

“Yaiiichi! You can come down now.”

I went back to the first floor to find Master and Keika sitting side by side.

“I’m sorry about earlier. This bearded fossil didn’t tell me anything, so it was a little bit of a shock, but welcome to our home!”

Keika introduced herself more fully this time.

“I’m 16 and in my first year of high school. That means I’m exactly 10 years older than you, Yaichi. I take care of things around the house and help out in the Shogi classroom every once in a while. But, I’m a pushover, so go to the bearded fossil or the girl next to you when you want to play, okay?”

With that, Keika tells me who this girl sitting next to me like she belonged there really was.

Ginko Sora.

That was her name.

“Ginko Sora”

I mulled those words over in my mouth and they took hold in my heart as if I were casting a spell of some kind.

Silver hair and slightly cloudy eyes the color of ash.

My chest got tight for some reason, like a big squeeze.

“I say, that was a heck’va mix-up! Thinkin’ Ginko was a ghost, hah! I admit she’s got an *otherworldly* aura to her, but she’s got legs, ya see?”

Master was laughing, but he had red marks on his forehead that could only have come from pressing it against the *tatami* mat for quite a while. I knew immediately who was really in charge in this household.

—I’d better stay on Keika’s good side

And then one more.

There was one other person in this house I absolutely couldn't cross no matter what.

"'T was by only two weeks, but Ginko became my apprentice first. So, 'at makes ya the younger brother apprentice, Yaichi. Ginko is yer older sister apprentice."

"Older sister?"

"..... Younger brother?"

It wasn't a ghost living at the pro player's house.

It was something much, much scarier than a ghost. I met the one I would one day call *Big Sis*.

LIVE-IN APPRENTICE

“I’m takin’ ya both to the association today.”

I’d been Master’s live-in apprentice for a few days when I heard him say that.

“Ya can get whatever ya want at Twelve, the first-floor restaurant, for lunch.”

“Are you sure it’s okay, Master?!”

He smiled and nodded as I jumped for joy.

“Sure I’m sure. Once ya turn pro, ya can eat out as much as ya like.”

Wow! Pros are amazing! I was still in awe. Big Sis didn’t seem all that excited, but she beat Master and I to the front door and silently urged us to hurry up.

The Kansai Shogi Association building is in the Fukushima district of Osaka, just one stop on the Kanjou Line from Noda Station, the closest station to Master’s house.

Nowadays, I can walk that distance no sweat. But, for a four-year-old and a six-year-old, taking the train a single station down the line is a big adventure. Heck, just riding the train itself is an adventure.

That’s why back when I first became an apprentice, going to the association was a special event that didn’t happen very often.

“All right ya two. Hold hands and don’t let go, ya hear?”

I was fully intent on carrying out the first order Master ever gave me even as I looked down over the city through the train window as it traveled down the elevated track.

Stepping off the train at JR Fukushima Station, we passed right by all the shops built under the railroad track.

Then, we turned onto Naniwa Street, went over a crosswalk and saw——.

“Here we are. It’s ‘at brick buildin’ there.”

Even today, I can remember down to the last detail the moment Big Sis and I held hands with Master in front of the rustic red brick building.

I'm pretty sure I said, "Whoa There's something written on the wall! What's it say?"

"Shogi Kaikan."

"Huuuh?! You can read that, Ginko?"

"Easily."

Hmmph. Her face was blank but Big Sis sounded triumphant.

"This is the Kansai Shogi Association building"

I was so excited and nervous that my heart could've burst open. Big Sis's hand in mine was burning up.

This place is special to us. It's the place that's given us the most joy ... and also the most pain.

The place we've spent more time than at home or at school. It's where we've learned how to live.

It's also the place where we'll spend the remainder of our lives fighting endless battles.

I was anxious walking into Twelve for the first time.

"Th-This place looks really fancy"

My first and biggest worry was money.

Master was already letting me live with him for free, so was it really okay for me to eat for free at a restaurant like this on top of that? All I had in my wallet was five 100 yen coins

Master must've understood what was bothering me because he said in a kind voice, "There's a tradition in the Shogi world, ya see. Veterans keep the new players fed. Once ya turn pro and have an apprentice of yar own, make sure ya treat 'em to dinner, understood?"

"Y- Yes! Thank you so much, Master!!"

I swore to myself then that I absolutely would Though, that day came a lot sooner than I expected.

We sat down at a table and Master said as we opened the menu, “Ginko. No need to be holdin’ back. Ya can order anythin’ ya wanna eat.”

“.....” (point)

Using no time, Big Sis chose cow tongue stew, the most expensive thing on the menu. That shocked me so much that I forgot what I ordered that day. It was probably the cheapest daily lunch set they had. I just didn’t know if Master’s wallet would survive

“Ngh I-I ain’t never tasted tongue stew”

“Delish.”

Big Sis ignored the envy in Master’s voice as she licked her lips and gave him a thumbs up. Master returned the gesture.

“Ginko. I’ll give ya some of my pork cutlet, so gimme some of ’at stew?”

“No.”

Shutting him down hard like denying a Bishop Exchange, Big Sis finished off the tongue stew by herself and even licked the bowl clean for good measure.

—Why is Ginko so defiant?

Master’s reaction also had me confused.

Even at six years old, I could tell that Master was being a lot more lenient with her than necessary. It was to the point that *he was taken by her Shogi talent* couldn’t explain it.

“Mgh Food ain’t enough to get her to open up. Difficult child, this one”

I can still remember Master wincing as he opened his wallet at the cashier. I was sure that Big Sis was never going to bond with him back then, like the way a stray cat will never let you pet it no matter how much you feed it.

But it wouldn’t take long for Master and I to realize how wrong we were.

We took the elevator up to the third floor after eating lunch at Twelve so Master could introduce us to the association staff.

“Live-in apprentices? It has a nostalgic ring to it,” said the man who Big Sis and I would come to call the *Principal*, Mr. Mine, as he bent down to our height to give us some encouraging words. “Ginko, Yaichi, you’re so lucky to be learning from a great Master like Kiyotaki-*sensei*. I just know you’re going to be very strong one day!”

The news was a surprise to everyone, but they welcomed us with open arms. The only reason why Master didn’t get the lolicon treatment like I did back when I took Ai Hinatsuru here for the first time has to be because Master had a daughter. There’s no other explanation.

“Welp, long as we’re here, might as well drop by the Player’s Room.”

The Player’s Room is separated from the office by a single wall.

But that single wall was like a barrier separating two different worlds.

“Ever’body, got a minute?” Master called out to all the Sub League members playing practice matches and lining up match records in the room. “These two here are my apprentices. My first apprentice, Ginko Sora, and my second, Yaichi Kuzuryu. Raisin’ ’em both as live-in apprentices. Train ’em up good, ya hear?”

“Train them up? Those toddlers?”

“The classroom downstairs’ll be enough for them.”

The Player’s Room had just been remodeled, so everything was clean and new. However, the rough and gritty classic Kansai atmosphere was still alive and well.

“Seriously? You’re living with them? I didn’t know you liked kids so much, Kiyotaki-*sensei*.”

“Got that much time on your hands now ’cause you got demoted?”

Some veteran Sub League members were that blunt and didn’t even bother to stop their matches.

It was scary, sure But more of a shock, actually.

Pro players were treated like gods back in the mountains where I was from, but here they were the butt of jokes.

Even before I could ask why, I understood the answer.

It was all because a certain pro walked in.

“You took apprentices, Mr. Kiyotaki? They might be worth training up after all.”

“Ohhh Mr. Oishi. Strange seein’ ya here when ya don’t have a match.”

“My little girl said she wanted to come, so I brought her. She’s downstairs playing in the classroom, but That reminds me, Mr. Kiyotaki. Word is that *he’s* been in and out of yours recently——.”

This person wearing a suit jacket, I knew his face very well because I’d seen it many times in magazines and on TV.

——Th-The Worldly Maestro!!

For me, this was bigger than meeting a famous actor. My mind went blank.

Mitsuru Oishi 8-*dan*.

The atmosphere in the Player’s Room did a total 180 once the young leader of the Ranging Rook Party and Kansai ace showed up.

It was blatant, so blatant I could hardly believe it.

“Oishi-*sensei*! Can I ask you for a practice match?!”

“What’s your opinion on this formation?!”

The Worldly Maestro, who had just taken Master’s A placement, was only 30 years old at the time.

As the leading practitioner of the latest strategy, Gokigen Central Rook, everyone was in awe of the sheer beauty Mr. Oishi could create on a Shogi board. The number of Ranging Rook Party members in the Kansai Sub League skyrocketed because of him.

The next few years would be the peak of Ranging Rook popularity in the Shogi world as a whole.

Goki Central wasn’t the only new strategy. New, unique ideas appeared on the scene in quick succession and transformed this year into the only one that players on defense had a higher winning percentage.

Side Pawn Capture 8 Five Rook.

And Move-Loss Bishop Exchange.

This caused a Shogi revolution, wrenching control from the older generation of Static Rook Players, especially orthodox ones who played *yagura* strategies like Master.

The one exception was an all-rounder: the Meijin. He threw himself headfirst into the fray and worked closely with the younger generation to absorb their Shogi senses and made them his own.

The thing is, only gods can pull that off

I'm pretty sure that Master had lost 10 straight matches to Mr. Oishi at that point.

The victory star was pretty much the Maestro's for the taking.

I was just a kid but I *felt* the difference in the Sub League members' reactions when Master walked into the Player's Room versus when Mr. Oishi came in.

That, and I was completely taken by the Worldly Maestro's aura I knew he was cooler than Master the second I saw him

But not Ginko Sora.

Big Sis trotted her way up to the Worldly Maestro, a man several times taller than herself, and said without the slightest hint of respect, "You, Oishi?"

No *sensei*, no *Mr.*

It was like the whole room froze over. Even the practice matches stopped, the continuous snapping of pieces suddenly gone But Big Sis wasn't done.

"Stop being mean to my Master!! Ranging Rook players should all just disappear!!"

"G-Ginko! What're ya Watch yer mouth!!"

Master was so stunned he turned blue in the face.

The Maestro forced a grin. I had no idea what had just happened, so all I could do was watch Big Sis look as intimidating as a baby anteater standing on her hind legs as she stared down Mr. Oishi.

“Heh Loyal, aren’t you? That’s how live-in apprentices should be.”

Mr. Oishi put his knee to the floor so he could speak to Big Sis eye to eye.

“Ginko was it? Do you not like Ranging Rook?”

“Hate it.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s for cowards.”

“Ouch, that was a little harsh.”

For amateurs like Big Sis and I in those days, *Ranging Rook* was an outdated style that meant denying a Bishop Exchange and hiding your King behind as many pieces as possible. It was defensive Shogi that relied on counterattacks. Just tricks with ambushes.

But it was just the opposite in the pros.

Actually, it was Ranging Rook that opened their Bishop Path first at this time years ago because that’s how they kept the Static Rook *anaguma* strategy under control.

You could say that Goki Central and Ishida-style were at the forefront of *Manly Ranging Rook*.

I’m sure Mr. Oishi wanted to give her a piece of his mind that day, but he let it slide with a grin and turned to talk to me.

“So, kid, where are you from?”

“F-Fukui! I’m Yaichi Kuzuryu! I’m six years old!”

“That makes you in the same grade as my little girl.”

Mr. Oishi’s daughter Asuka is a quiet but capable girl who works at the public bath that their family owns and operates beneath their apartment. Her boobs are the stuff of dreams.

“You are new here in Osaka, right Yaichi? My girl’s shy, with a thick shell, you see. Why don’t you and Ginko drop by for a visit sometime? We’ve got huge baths.”

“Yes! I will!”

“That’s what I like to hear. You can ask her out on a date if you want.”

“Yes! I will!”

I was just so nervous at the time that I didn’t hear every word he said and just reflexively said “yes.” Next thing I knew, the whole room was roaring with laughter.

“Easy there, kid. Telling a father you’re going to date his daughter is fighting words.”

“Huh?! Ah S-Sorry?”

“Sure looks like Yaichi’ll be one heck of a skirt chaser when he grows up. You better keep a good eye on him, Ginko, or you’re in for some hard times.”

Finally, the tension disappeared from the Player’s Room.

“My word First time ya meet Mr. Oishi, and ya say that”

We were on our way home from the association.

The air was chilly with an autumn breeze, but Master was still wiping sweat from his brow as he lectured Big Sis in a stern voice.

“Ya listen here, Ginko. Now that yer a live-in apprentice, ya gotta live by the Shogi world’s rules, ya hear? Bow yar head and say hello to other players and Shogi staff! Be polite! Players are to be called *sensei*! Call your Master and Shogi family line by name! ’At’s the bare minimum. I’ll kick ya out if ya don’t follow the rules.”

“Yes, Master! Understood.”

“A textbook response?! Ah, boy Can’t trust it”

Master’s shoulders slumped.

After seeing the major trouble Big Sis stirred up on her very first trip to the association, he might’ve lost confidence in his ability to raise her. I certainly couldn’t keep her under control

After a long sigh, Master said, “..... But thank ya. I swear I’ll get back into A and be the Meijin.”

I think he really was happy.

Happy that Big Sis took his side in the Player's Room when no one else would.

But more than that He was happy that she called him *Master* for the first time.

That's why he bought us treats on the way home.

Ice cream for Big Sis and chewing gum for me But I gave half of it to Big Sis to get her out of the bad mood she was in after meeting Mr. Oishi. Like a tribute.

HUMAN EXPERIMENTATION

I may have forgotten what I ate my first time at Twelve, but I remember my first dinner as a live-in apprentice all too clearly.

Mountains of shiitake mushrooms.

“Yaichi. Do you have any favorite foods?”

“Curry!”

“Anything you don’t like?”

“Shiitake mushrooms

“Okay. Thank you!”

Keika, still in her first year of high school and wearing an apron over her school’s blazer-style uniform, started humming to herself as she set to work in the kitchen.

She was always so nice to me from the moment we met: pretty, and the older sister that I, who only has brothers, had always dreamed of. And those huge boobs.

That’s why I thought she was going to take the shiitake mushrooms out for me, but I was very, very wrong.

“.....?!”

Words failed me as I looked out over the piles of mushrooms cooked up in every way possible for dinner that night.

Keika looked apologetic, but Master said very plainly, “Sorry about this. But, father said Competitors can’t succeed if they’re dealin’ with weaknesses. There is no need to start likin’ ’em, but we’re gonna eat mushrooms every day ’til ya can eat ’em without makin’ that face. Buckle up, kiddo.”

This wasn’t an original training strategy that Master came up with, but a traditional teaching method that pretty much every live-in apprentice in the Shogi world had to deal with.

The *never run away* mindset, even from food I didn’t like, was drilled into my

head each and every day from the beginning.

As I plugged my nose and did my best to get the mushrooms past my tongue as quickly as possible, I couldn't believe my eyes watching Big Sis slather sauce onto her mushrooms and eat them like it was no big deal.

"..... What food don't ya like, Ginko?"

"None."

Ginko Sora's goal, first and foremost, was to defeat Kousuke Kiyotaki, the one who had given her a humiliating loss.

Now that the first stage of her plan for revenge, infiltrating the Kiyotaki household, was complete, her next move seemed to be reducing his fighting strength. She never complained about the food no matter what.

Though Big Sis did have a weakness——.

"I spent all that time in the kitchen cooking for you, but you can't even taste it through all that sauce, can you?"

"....."

My very first day, I noticed that the only time Big Sis's face ever showed any hint of emotion was when Keika lectured her like that.

Big Sis and Keika never seemed to get along in those days They needed about three years to grow closer than actual sisters.

It was bath time after dinner.

"What do you think, dad? Would it be a good idea to have Yaichi go in with Ginko?"

"Yeah. Ah, but join 'em today, would ya, Keika? Somebody's gotta teach him how to use the shower."

"Yes, I think so, too."

Huh? Say what?!

"Yaichi, I'll be joining you today, all right?"

"?! S- Sure!"

And that's how I ended up bathing with Keika on my very first night!

I know I've brought it up several times now, but she had just started high school at that point.

It's just that six-year-old me saw her as a genuine grown-up and, even thinking about it now, she was mature for her age. I mean, Big Sis has started her first year of high school and she's still smooth down there

Anyway, seeing Keika that night was too much for me to handle.

Which is why I stayed in the corner of the tub with my eyes shut tight

That is, until Keika was finished washing Big Sis and kindly said, "Come on over here, Yaichi. I'll wash your hair."

"U-Umm I-I can do that myself——."

"Don't be shy. It's all right See?"

I was a little kid, but it was still really embarrassing and part of me felt like I was about to cross a line that should never be crossed——.

M-Master told me to! This isn't my fault!

I convinced myself to go over there and ended up letting Keika wash me from head to toe. Of course, I had my eyes closed the whole time.

"There we are. Squeaky clean."

"Th- thank ... you"

"Now, Yaichi. It's your turn to wash me, okay?"

"?!"

The one getting washed can keep their eyes closed, but the one doing the washing has to look.

She handed me a sudsy sponge And I cautiously opened my eyes.

"Umm Uhhmmmm"

I love boobs.

But Big, wet ones glistening with bubbly soap, I love even more!

"Well? Do you think you'll be okay just you and Ginko starting tomorrow?"

“I-I I’m not too sure

That was the first lie I ever told after joining the Kiyotaki Shogi family.

“You’re not? Okay, the three of us can bathe together tomorrow, too!”

Keika, being the nice person she is, bathed with us the next night as well.

I felt so guilty about it after a few days, though, I told her, “I’m fine on my own now!”

Free time was after bath time. If Master wasn’t busy, I’d get instructional matches from him.

That being said, bedtime was 9 o’clock sharp.

“Cause amateur and Sub League matches never last late into the night. Early to bed, early to rise for Shogi. Live by those words. There’ll be plenty ’o chances to stay up late when yer a pro.”

Everything in this household revolved around Shogi. There was a reason for every part of our daily routine, and it was all for one goal: get stronger at Shogi.

Except, falling asleep was really hard after a night of hard-fought matches.

Especially on the days I lost.

On those days, Big Sis would come over to my futon and read her favorite picture books and fairy tales to me.

“I’ll read you a story.”

For a four-year-old, Big Sis could read tons of Chinese characters.

I never heard all the details, but apparently Big Sis was such a weak kid that she’d spent most of her life in the hospital and always had her nose in a book when she was there.

Six-year-old me, on the other hand, only knew the Chinese characters written on Shogi pieces, numbers that show up in match records and the ones I needed to write my name. If you take away all the characters in my name that aren’t connected with Shogi—Ya ichi Ku zu ryu—you’re only left with *zu* meaning *head*. It was my one and only character outside of Shogi.

Big Sis and I often read a book called *Elmer and the Dragon*.

It's a story about a boy named Elmer who rescues a baby dragon and they go on adventures together. The dragon still can't fly very well.

It's part of a series called *My Father's Dragon*, but Ginko seemed to like this one the most and read it a lot.

"You see Elmer? He likes oranges. But the Dragon doesn't like oranges."

"Huh? Then what does he eat?"

"Orange peels."

"The peel"

This story taught me many things like the beauty of friendship that spans species, the importance of supporting one another and how to *go with your gut*

Big Sis loved reading books, knew many Chinese characters and Master's place was filled with Shogi magazines that had everything from classic playing styles to the latest strategies.

Those magazines were just stacks of paper to me because I could barely remember the *hiragana* and *katakana* alphabets used along with the Chinese characters to write Japanese. To Big Sis, however, they were treasure troves.

"I'm trying a Bishop Exchange strategy I read about, so you're going second all day today, Yaichi."

"Whaaa"

"Close the Bishop Path and I'll cut off your head."

It's only human to want to use a strategy you just read about in a book. The same way a martial artist wants to try out a new secret technique they just learned

Master saw what was happening and said, "That's human experimentin' right there."

And he was right. I was a test subject.

Just a pitiful guinea pig. I had no rights. Because, well, I was an animal.

Big Sis tested standards and sequences she learned from books on me the same way the neighborhood bully would test out wrestling techniques he saw on TV on an unlucky kid. There were times she made me start playing from a certain formation. I couldn't refuse. Because, well (see above).

Of course, I lost more times than I can count.

Just loss after loss after loss, followed by another loss. I couldn't win at all.

I'd been treated like a boy prodigy in my hometown, so not being able to win a single match against a girl two years younger than me was more of an identity crisis than actual pain.

Simply put, what ended up happening was—.

"Ginko is the prodigy. We're totally different."

I figured that out early on. I was losing, so it was obvious.

But Shogi wasn't the only thing. Not only did she read so much more than I could despite being two years younger, the fact that she had this pristine beauty about her played a big part as well.

Basically, I started revering her like someone from a higher plane.

As a country boy from Fukui, that perfectness blew my mind.

I wanted to be something special to Ginko Sora, even if it was just as her pet.

I don't need you anymore.

The thought of hearing those words scared me more than anything.

Which is why I, in desperation, committed myself solely to being useful to Big Sis.

I took every single one of the strategies she tried on me head on, desperate to come up with a counterstrategy that wasn't in any of the books she'd read.

I wasn't allowed to avoid the strategy altogether. But I also wasn't allowed to lose the way the book said it would happen.

I have to be more useful to her than the books or magazines!

I had to become Big Sis's Dragon.

These early childhood experiences were a huge factor in my power-based playing style that mixes in an unorthodox “bend but don’t break” style of defense.

Once Big Sis tried out all the interesting strategies she could find, she moved on to techniques that *weren’t written in any books*.

Off-the-board tactics.

Some were innocent enough, like holding taken pieces in her hand so I couldn’t see them or humming songs to distract me, but others——.

Quietly knock the right Lance to the piece stand and use it later.

While reaching across the board to deploy a piece in the opponent’s territory, move a piece in your own territory while your arm is blocking their view.

There are tons of cheats like those.

It may sound childish like this, but even adults get fooled by them when they’re done at lightning speed.

You would get found out right away using them in league matches because it would be obvious on the match record, but anything goes if there’s no evidence. Shogi’s first rule is to let the opponent admit defeat. The proof disappears as soon as the pieces are put away.

On a side note, Ai Yashajin lost the first Queen Title Match against Big Sis after accidentally knocking her Lance onto her piece stand with the sleeve of her kimono. Big Sis has done this same thing many times *on purpose*, so of course she recognized it and set Ai up to deploy the piece and break the rule. To her, it was like taking candy from a baby.

At first, Big Sis secretly refined her cheating craft against the old geezers who often dropped by Master’s classroom.

Then, in matches where something was on the line —— usually chores or snacks —— she used them against me.

“Ah! Ginko That last match, you cheated, didn’t you?!”

“Hm? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Daaang it! If that’s how you’re going to do it, two can play at that game!!”

I wasn’t about to just take it lying down, so I thought of all sorts of things. Then, Big Sis would come up with new ways to cheat that outdid mine.

I don’t mean to brag, but our sleight-of-hand skills got faster and faster every day. Even now, at the pro level, I’ve never seen anyone pull off a cheat as quickly as we could back then.

Master saw all this happening, but never said a word.

When it comes to Shogi techniques and perfecting new skills, you have no choice but to do it yourself.

If Master taught us all the ins and outs, we might have gotten stronger at the time, but it would’ve held us back in the long run.

You can never be the strongest if you’re always learning from someone else.

That’s why Master held back what he wanted to say and watched as we found our own ways to get stronger, even if they were cheats and off-the-board tactics.

However, there is a limit to everything. Big Sis and I became way too proficient in our cheating techniques.

Master had seen enough, so he brought Big Sis and I to a workshop that made boards deep in the mountains of Nara and told us about the Shogi gods.

“Gods?”

“‘At’s right. If the Shogi gods got somethin’ against ya, ya ain’t never gonna turn pro. Certainly never be the Meijin.”

The smell of trees permeated the air and there were logs, thicker than I could believe even existed, piled up in well-organized stacks. It was a tranquil, almost mystic place.

Hearing about the Shogi gods in those majestic surroundings, I believed in them straightaway.

Even though the strange girl swinging around a plastic toy sword while yelling *wiener* and *tally whacker* at the top of her lungs ruined the mood

“The gods hate cheatin’ and off-the-board tactics. ‘At’s why it’s better not to

use 'em.”

“No. It’s your fault if you get tricked,” I believed, but Big Sis stubbornly refused.

“If there are gods, why don’t cheaters get punished?”

“The fight lasts forever. Can ya keep cheatin’ forever? Yer better off buildin’ up yar skills the ol’ fashioned way. It’d be faster, too.”

“Just do both. Get stronger at Shogi and better at cheats.”

“That ain’t possible.”

“Why?”

“Ginko. Wanna play me right here? Then ya’ll know why.”

“.....?”

“I won’t use pieces. Ya can play however ya want, Ginko. Cheat if ya wish, or play fair ’n square if ya wanna.”

—That’s right! No cheats will work on a mental Shogi board

While Master’s revelation hit me like a ton of bricks, I didn’t think he’d be able to play at full strength while playing blind.

Big Sis had her foldable Shogi board with her, as always, and they lined up the pieces. Master took away his Rook and Bishop to give her a two-piece handicap.

Big Sis lost. It wasn’t even close.

“Wh-Why? I won before!”

“Ya don’t get any stronger when ya cheat ’cause ya get so focused on what’s happenin’ off the board ’at ya can’t focus ’n what’s happenin’ on it. Not readin’ the board makes yar Shogi skill level drop. Obvious, no?”

“Ah

“A match ’r ten won’t make much difference. But after 100, after 1,000 matches, anybody could see the difference.”

I thought he hit the nail right on the head.

Even I could tell that my Shogi felt a little strange once I started using off-the-

board tactics. It didn't matter how much I won because I wasn't getting any stronger

"If it's just this one match that ya gotta win, anythin' goes. Cheatin' is logical if it guarantees ya'll get the win. But, ya know? We pros spend our whole lives fightin'. In that kinda world, stayin' still's the same as goin' backward," Master said as he put his hands on our heads.

It almost sounded like he was saying it more to himself.

"That man who's stronger than anyone else fights fair and square against unfamiliar opponents so that the Shogi gods'll love him more than anyone else. It's heroes like him 'at become champions."

"..... There are no gods."

Big Sis didn't believe in the gods all the way to the end, but Master's words must've reached her heart because she stopped cheating after that.

She and I were starting to figure out that Shogi wasn't just a simple board game.

It wasn't just fun, but went much, much deeper.

STOPOVER

“Yaichi.”

My eyes snap open with the sound of Big Sis’s voice in my ear.

“Hm?”

“Your alarm.”

“Ahh Sorry. It’s almost time to get off.”

I take out my smartphone and turn off the alarm.

We’ve arrived at a town in Fukui Prefecture known for having lots of hot springs.

The train stations in this area are literally named after one hot spring or another because that’s all that’s out here. We’re at one of them now.

It’s so late at night that we’re practically the only ones getting off the train.

Someone calls out to us just a few steps through the turnstile at the gate.

“I’ve come to meet you at Mr. Tsukimitsu’s request. Please, have a seat.”

The man gestures toward a rather expensive-looking car. Big Sis and I get in the back seat and the man takes us on a 15-minute drive to a specific hot spring inn.

Rather than turning in the main driveway, the car instead takes a small road around the back of the facility.

“I’m taking you to a private wing of our inn. It’s not connected to the main building, so you need not worry about having to interact with any other guests.”

“So We’re isolated?”

“Yes. Feel free to use the room for as long as you like, just the two of you.”

We’re planning on leaving first thing in the morning but hearing that does take some of the pressure off. I’m worried about Big Sis’s health, so it’s nice to know we can take it slow.

“Will you be dining tonight?”

“Umm Big Sis?”

“No.”

Instantaneous. Well, now’s not the time

“Then, no thank you.”

“Understood, sir. Simple dishes and snacks can be prepared at any time, so please don’t hesitate to contact us.”

Leading us inside the building and to the room where we’ll be staying, there are already futons laid out on the floor.

Side by side, in the same room.

“You see the problem with this, right?!”

I point at the futons and protest.

“Wh-Wh-Why in the world are there two futons?!”

“My apologies, sir. Would one futon have been more appropriate?”

“Just the opposite! I don’t know what you’ve been told, but this person and I, um Please put us in separate rooms! I’m fine with sleeping in the hallway!!”

Our guide drops his voice low enough so that only I can hear his explanation.

“Mr. Tsukimitsu was very insistent that the both of you stay in the same room. He was particularly adamant that your guest never be left by herself.”

“..... Can’t argue with that.”

Yeah. He’s right.

It’s too dangerous for Big Sis to be alone right now. That’s what’s going on. But, isn’t it also dangerous for me to be sleeping in the same room?

“.....”

Big Sis certainly doesn’t seem to mind, because the second I glance over at her she’s already plopped down on a futon.

Rather than her usual sharp but emotionless expression, her face looks so feeble that she’d collapse with a single touch Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh, ahhh.

“I shall excuse myself. Please enjoy yourselves.”

Leaving behind words that could be taken more than one way, our guide exits the room. Hang on a sec, don't these people normally say, "Enjoy your stay"? And did he really have to turn the lights down to set the mood when he left?

Anyway, it's just us in the room now.

"....."

Oh, boy.

Being left alone with Big Sis when she's this close to the edge is downright scary.

It has happened once before, but she still had a sense of who she was back then There's something scary about Big Sis as she is now. Vulnerable and cute. Now that's terrifying in a different way.

Being careful to make sure that the air in here doesn't get awkward, I do everything I can to keep my eyes off her and look out the window. "I wonder what's outside, " I muse to myself when, "..... Huh? Haven't we been here before?"

This room No, it's the garden I remember from somewhere.

It wasn't one of my title matches.

Long before that A memory from my time as a live-in apprentice.

"During Master's first Meijin Title Match The fourth match was here! That sure takes me back!"

Master was a challenger for the Meijin title two years in a row.

His opponent then was——.

"It was when Chairman Tsukimitsu was the Meijin! So, that's why, "

"Hmm. If you say so, Yaichi."

"You don't remember?!"

"Not really. I was five, wasn't I?"

"It was right before you turned six and before my eighth birthday. It ended that quickly because Master got swept in four straight losses."

Master reclaimed his A ranking the same year that we became his

apprentices, and he rode that momentum the next season to eight wins with only one loss. That punched his ticket to the Meijin Title Match, which he'd always dreamed of playing in.

The Kiyotaki household was a zoo.

Mountains of congratulatory letters and presents for Master arrived almost every day and his Shogi classroom was suddenly overrun with students.

What will happen if he becomes the Meijin?!

As a kid, I remember thinking *something big is going on* and trembling with excitement. If Master became the Meijin, that would make us the Meijin's apprentices.

But the excitement didn't last long.

That Meijin Title Match series began in April but was over before the end of May.

The fifth match was scheduled to be in Osaka, so all of us were planning to go watch the match together. Unfortunately, Master had pretty much already lost at the time of the sealing move on day one of the fourth match. I was really looking forward to seeing Master play in Osaka, so I can still remember how disappointed I was when I saw it happen on TV.

I was sad to know that Master was about to lose, but He had promised to bring us to the Player's Room where we could analyze the match with the pros and let us come inside the arena for a few minutes. Knowing that that wouldn't happen anymore was a very hard pill to swallow. On the other hand, this was all part of competition so there was nothing I could do about it and, as a live-in apprentice, I felt it was my duty to believe Master could win until the very end. That believing in and waiting for him was my job.

But Big Sis didn't.

"Yaichi. Let's go."

"Huh? Going where?"

"The arena. Master promised to let us in."

"Whaaat?! B—But, that was for the fifth match!! We can't just show up!"

“Master is going to lose like this. There won’t be a match in Osaka.”

“How can you be so mean?!”

“Are you coming or not?”

“Ummm I’ll go!”

That was how Big Sis and my first big adventure started.

The second day of the match was a weekday, so we pretended that we were going to school but instead got on a train for Fukui.

I honestly don’t remember how we got through all those train changes and arrived safely, but I think my being from there and having basic knowledge of the trains was vital. Seriously, it was nothing short of a miracle now that I think back on it.

It was already evening when we got to the arena.

Though this was our first time ever at a title match and we could’ve been kicked out if any of the staff found us.

“..... Now what do we do, Ginko?”

“Find Master. He promised.”

Big Sis avoided the main entrance and circled around the grounds and found a way into the garden.

That’s right.

Amazingly, we stumbled upon the arena window, of all things, after wandering into the garden And we crawled in through that window as if the Shogi board in the middle of the room was drawing us in like a magnet!

“Yaichi. There’s a Shogi board in there.”

“You’re right! But there’s nobody around.”

“The window It’s unlocked.”

“Say what?! You’re not going inside, are you?! You can’t do that, Ginko! That’s breaking and entering!”

“You want to see the board, don’t you?”

“..... Yeah.”

Why do we play Shogi? Because there’s a board. Seeing a Shogi puzzle makes us want to solve it, and we get an urge to analyze formations we’ve never seen before. That’s what makes us Shogi players.

It was the evening of the second day in the Meijin Title Match. Players and staff were having a short break for an evening snack.

That’s exactly when we happened to sneak into the empty room, sit down on our ankles on the players’ floor cushions and peer over the board——.

“..... It was this room that we snuck into. Do you really not remember? Did you forget what happened next? The brain isn’t built to just forget things like that.”

“There was no Internet coverage back then, so no one would have seen us anyway. What’s the big deal?”

“Yes, yes. There wasn’t any Internet coverage.” I nod a few times before saying, “But there was national satellite coverage, remember?!”

In those days, the second day of Meijin Title Matches was still broadcast during the early evening hours on live TV. It was extremely popular, and many people tuned in because there was a good chance they would see the deciding move.

While cameras were allowed inside the arena, having technicians or cameramen in there during the match wasn’t permitted because it might distract players. The solution was to put the cameras on a timer so they would turn on automatically at the start of a broadcast.

The image that camera captured and sent up to a satellite and then beamed to every corner of Japan that night wasn’t of the players contemplating their next move, but of two kids leaning over the Shogi board.

It was an incident captured on live television. A major incident.

“Who the hell are those kids?!”

“Did hotel guests wander into the arena?!”

“WHAT?! They’re Kiyotaki’s apprentices?!”

The breakroom was in an uproar. People were saying things like, “The challenger sent in his apprentices to alter the board so he wouldn’t lose,” among other things, which meant Master would forfeit due to rule violations, but just then ...

The one who silenced the commotion with only a few words was the other player.

The blind Shogi prodigy simply said with a slight grin, “*I didn’t see anything, but did something happen?*”

Seiichi Tsukimitsu-*Meijin* saying that made everything else irrelevant.

The association treated it as if Big Sis and I *were never there* and the Shogi world avoided a scandal altogether. The truly lucky thing about it is that neither of us were in the Sub League or Practice League at the time.

But——.

“..... He realized it was us after all. Tsukimitsu-*Meijin*.”

I say his name with the same mixture of awe and respect that I had that day.

The current Meijin is the best player who ever lived, so Chairman Tsukimitsu’s brilliance gets overshadowed. I have no idea how great the people who receive the Citizen’s Award are.

But for me, Tsukimitsu-*sensei* is just as great.

He’s the Meijin who Master challenged for the title and the player I’ve idolized my whole life

Only thing was that Master was furious at us.

“*At’s it. We’re done. Ya both ’r gone! Outta the family!!*”

Even though the formation we saw on the board was just Master setting the scene for an honorable defeat and had no impact on the outcome whatsoever, that didn’t change the fact that we entered the arena without permission during the Meijin Title Match.

It was Master’s first ever title match, and for the title that he’d always wanted and finally had a chance to take after decades of hard work. Now that it had slipped through his fingers, he was so angry and depressed that he ended up

with a fever and stayed an extra night to recover.

Big Sis and I, on the other hand, were forcefully sent back to Osaka.

A Sub League 3-*dan* who was in charge of moving the pieces for big board analysis during the match took us Big Sis and I tore into each other in front of him the whole time.

“Master got mad at us because you said we should go to the arena, Ginko.”

“No. We only got caught because you were so slow, Yaichi.”

“This is your fault!”

“No, it’s yours!”

We were still fighting all the way onto the train, but that 3-*dan* found a way to calm us down.

“Easy there. How about analyzing yesterday’s match with me?”

Big Sis got out the magnetic Shogi board she always had with her, and he was nice enough to explain exactly what happened from the first move.

Listening to his analysis Big Sis and I stayed quiet, holding onto his every word as our minds got absorbed into the board.

That tiny portable Shogi board suddenly felt huge, like we were staring at a place as deep and vast as outer space.

—One Shogi match has this many possibilities?!

The train ride up felt like ages, but the way home was over in the blink of an eye.

Once we got to Osaka station, it was the 3-*dan*’s turn to be surprised when he saw Big Sis and I hold hands coming off the train.

“..... You can hold hands after a big fight like that?”

We really would be kicked out this time if we didn’t hold hands.

I explained that to him, but he still looked confused and told us, *“Hmm. You two should just get married.”*

“No, we won’t!!” we yelled back at him at the same time, still holding hands.

He laughed at us.

Just before saying goodbye, I worked up the courage to ask, *“Would you teach us Shogi again?”*

“Of course I will! Come find me in the Player’s Room any time.”

It was thanks to him that our presence in the scary Player’s Room was accepted by other players. He taught us so much and became the guiding light who opened our eyes to more of the world of Shogi than we knew existed.

I didn’t know that that Sub League member’s name was Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan* until after Master felt well enough to make the trip back to Osaka.

I’ve overtaken that tall, gentle person and turned pro before him.

And Big Sis is set to face him as an opponent.

If knowing that Mr. Kagamizu will be forced out of the Sub League if he doesn’t make it through the 3-*dan* division this season is what’s pushing Big Sis so close to the brink

Maybe it would’ve been better not to have met him at all?

No matter how much my exhausted brain mulls it over, I don’t have a clue.

“Big Sis.”

“What?”

“Take a bath and let’s get some sleep.”

RECORD 3

GINKO SORA

(4)

空

銀

子

(4歳)



VENTING

The hot spring bath is fitted with *hinoki* wooden flooring and filled with steam.

I slip off my *yukata* robe and slide right into the bath, from the tip of my right big toe up to my neck all at once, without testing the temperature.

“Ngaahh!”

The water is so hot it almost hurts, making me wince. Seems like Yaichi didn’t adjust the temperature at all when he was in here before me He likes it really hot for some reason, and we used to argue about it a lot back when we would bathe together, didn’t we?

—But, it’s fine.

I already took a shower at my research room, so this bath isn’t to cleanse my body.

It’s to vent all the pain.

Everyone has their own way of clearing their mind after a loss, and mine is usually getting in the bath and slamming my fists into the water until I’ve had enough.

When I was a little girl I punched a wall in frustration once and hurt my right hand. Ever since then, I’ve made sure to punch things that don’t hurt me no matter how hard I hit them.

And tears get washed away in here.

“..... I hate this”

Letting the words come, I hit the water with all my might.

“This pain ... I hate it! I hate it!”

Splash! Splash splash!

Sweat starts pouring down my cheeks. It’s almost like the pain is leaking out of me. Every drop that leaves my body takes a bit of weight off my shoulders. Just a tiny bit.

The moment I lost—the moment I played a bad move at the very last possible second to lose my third match in a row, I seriously wanted to cut off my hand.

That must be what people call having *blood drain from your body*. My right hand wouldn't stop trembling and I had to surrender rather than play the next move.

Once I did the first thing I noticed was how other people around me reacted.

"Well, Ginko Sora's out of the running now, too."

"She can hold out, but she always ends up choking in the end."

"You get a bonus chance playing against her, even after you've lost."

Of course, no one actually said these things to me.

I just simply would have made those judgments if I were in their shoes The pain and humiliation were tearing me apart.

I refused to do a review session, left the association straightaway without taking an umbrella and went right into Yaichi's apartment Then I grabbed hold of a knife as if my muscles were convulsing.

—I meant to die right then and there.

That's not a lie. Just thinking about the moment I lost makes me want to stick as many knives into my body as I can fit.

But, now that some time has passed, that intense urge has faded.

I'm left with—.

"..... How embarrassing"

This time, I kick with my legs as hard as I can.

Now, for a whole different reason I want to die

"Just where is Yaichi taking me anyway?! And he got the chairman to reserve this place for us? That'll just get even more people involved! How am I supposed to go back to Osaka now?! A single night is one thing, but people will start making assumptions if it gets out that the two of us spent multiple nights

together What excuse is he going to come up with?!"

I sink into the water until it's just under my mouth while yelling at the top of my lungs.

My shouts send bubbles across the surface of the water.

..... I'm aware of what I did.

I realize that my selfish demands put my younger brother apprentice between a rock and a hard place.

Back when Yaichi lost three straight matches during his title defense against the Meijin, he holed up in his room. But our reactions are completely different.

Yaichi tried to sever all other relationships so he could focus solely on Shogi.

I, however, ran away from it and clung to Yaichi instead.

Going for that knife was an obvious cry for attention. I knew that he was busy with work and taking care of his apprentices along with having his own matches to prepare for, but I still went straight for his apartment

"If I keep doing this I'll become the kind of woman everyone hates"

Asking which is more important: me or Shogi?! That kind of woman.

I swore to myself that I would never, under any circumstances, become that person ... and yet here I am.

"I'm striving to get where I've always wanted be, but the harder I try, the further away it gets"

It didn't used to be like this.

It's truly pathetic for me, only 15 years old, to be harking back to my glory days, but I used to be stronger. Back then, I never thought I'd lose to Yaichi, let alone think that I would ever fall this far behind him.

But there is one thing I thought was even less likely.

That I would ever feel this much for him——.

"..... I think I'll take another shower"

I step out of the bath, wash myself much more thoroughly than before and

then put the robe I left lying on the floor back on.

Then, loosening the sash just a bit a tiny little bit, I go back into the room.

Yaichi is out like a light. Sleeping like normal.

“..... Asleep already, stupid Yaichi You have to keep an eye on me, remember? Idiot”

Angry at myself for being the only one getting my hopes up, and embarrassed about my fluttering heart I reach out and pinch the idiot’s nose closed.

“Fungh?! Oh Gah Agh? Zzz.”

“..... Tsk.”

Dead to the world.

Feeling empty, I drift away from the futon and over to the window to let the cool air wash over my burning cheeks.

I glance out over the garden from there.

The garden Yaichi said we snuck into when we were little.

“..... Of course, I remember. Obviously”

Does that mean that Yaichi remembers everything? Like the day we met, too?

I had only just turned four so, honestly, I’ve forgotten quite a bit.

However, the first match of Shogi we ever played and my opinion of him, I remember like it was yesterday.

From the first moment, Yaichi was——.

POOR GIRL

"Looks kind of weak."

That was my impression of him on first sight, and nothing more.

After playing against him myself, I was certain of it. I dominated the whole match. Strangely, he seemed happy that he lost. And he kept calling me a ghost.

"Pretty weak in the head, too."

I thought he was a poor kid.

My body was weak, and I had been called a *poor girl* my whole life. That's why I hated being called *poor*.

I only stopped being called a *poor girl* after I happened to be introduced to a certain game.

Apparently I was around two years old the first time I touched the pieces.

I say apparently because I don't remember much from that far back.

However I do remember exactly who taught me how to play.

"Ginko. Let's play a new game today."

Dr. Akashi had always been in charge of taking care of me.

Born with a frail body, I'd spent almost all my life in the hospital. But I never felt lonely. Dr. Akashi was always so kind and other children were with me in the hospital every single day.

We were strictly forbidden from doing anything strenuous.

So we spent our days doing one of two things: reading books by ourselves or playing a game with someone.

Except games got boring very quickly. The first few times were fun, but I lost interest after figuring out that luck had a big part in determining the winner.

Then, around the time when I was only reading books on my own, Dr. Akashi brought that game to me.

“This game here is called *Shogi*.”

“Shogi?”

“That’s right. It’s a game for two people. So let’s play.”

He took a portable magnetic Shogi board out of the pocket of his white lab coat and unfolded it on my bed. Then Dr. Akashi showed me each of the small pieces and explained what they did.

“This one here is the King. Lose it, and you lose the game. This piece is called the Rook and that one is the Bishop. This is a Gold and that one’s a——.”

“Silver?”

“Oh! Yes, that’s right. I’m impressed, Ginko.”

It had the same Chinese character as my name written on it: *gin*.

I liked Shogi right away.

Because, after all, no other game had a piece with my name in it.

Dr. Akashi really must have loved Shogi because he taught everyone in the hospital how to play. *Poor kids* just like me played it all the time and plenty of them were much stronger than I was.

I became taken with it. The rules were so simple, and yet I could never figure it out completely no matter how hard I tried. There was almost no luck involved. I’d never seen a game like that before.

“Mommy. Buy me a Shogi book.”

My mother went to the bookstore and bought what she said was their bestseller. The man on the cover had glasses and a permanent case of bed head.

It was too complicated for me to understand at the time, but seeing me read it seemed to send Dr. Akashi on a trip down memory lane.

“Oh! That’s a good book you have there, Ginko. It was written by a god.”

“A god?”

“That’s right. For people who play Shogi, like me, that man is a god among

men.”

Dr. Akashi was too busy to play with me very often, but he always let me win when we did and he taught me new strategies.

“Ranging Rook?”

“That’s right. The Rook *ranges* around the board, sliding left and right. That’s why it’s called Ranging Rook,” he said, sliding his Rook back and forth and sounding like he was enjoying himself.

“My best friend is extremely good at using Ranging Rook. His worldliness on a Shogi board is beautiful. Each move is so vivid, you can’t even tell that your defenses are falling apart”

“Worldliness?”

“How can I explain it? He wins before you know it, almost like casting a magic spell. I can’t do half the things he does, but I can show you what it looks like.”

That day Dr. Akashi played differently than he usually did, and it was the first time he didn’t let me win.

From that day on, I hated Ranging Rook with a passion.

After two years of playing Shogi ...

I’d become the strongest in the hospital.

Part of it was that I’d gotten stronger, but all the *poor kids* who were stronger than me weren’t at the hospital anymore.

Even so, I was never bored. Opponents were easy to find over the Internet.

Then one day a man came to the hospital.

“Ohh This kiddo here?”

“Yes, *Sensei*. While she is already extremely intelligent compared to other children her age, I’m certain that she’s a prodigy when it comes to Shogi. She could probably hold her own in the Women’s League as it is now and surpass it soon enough.”

The person who Dr. Akashi referred to as *sensei* was the one who would soon become my Master.

Though, honestly, I thought he looked like a pathetic old man.

“Ginko. This man here is a Shogi *sensei*, a very high-ranking one, too. He’s much, much stronger than I am.”

“I wouldn’t say ‘at, Mr. Akashi. I lost more than half the matches at our practice sessions, yeah?”

“That was back when you were 4-*dan* or 5-*dan*, *Sensei*. I wouldn’t stand a chance against an A-ranking professional.”

“Got demoted after the one season, though,” the pathetic old man said with sorrow in his eyes.

Totally pathetic. Probably weak.

“What’ll it be? 6-piece handicap for her?”

“No. Just take out your Rook.”

“Rook?! That ain’t fair to her, no matter how ya look at it! Ain’t she four?”

“It’s fine. Please, don’t take it easy on her.”

The pathetic old man seemed conflicted as he took the Rook off his side of the board.

“All right, Ginko. First move’s mine, ‘kay?”

Huh? We’re starting, just like this?

I’d never played in a handicapped match before. Dr. Akashi taught me how to play on an even field and matches over the Internet are always even. I thought I could beat any adult I played against and never questioned it.

But I lost. Horribly.

“..... I-I don’ believe it”

That pathetic old man won, but he didn’t look happy at all. If I had to call the look on his face anything, I’d call it shock.

“This girl, she’s been livin’ here in the hospital her whole life, yeah? Ya may’ve been teachin’ her, Mr. Akashi, but gettin’ this strong with these surroundin’s is

just

“I believe she has an extraordinary talent, the kind that only appears once in a generation. What’s more, her body has shown steady progress since she started playing Shogi. I wouldn’t have believed it unless I saw it with my own eyes. Shogi is making her stronger, that’s the only way I can explain what’s happening.”

“Yeah There’s an air ‘bout her that most kids ain’t got. Her concentration durin’ a match, it’s incredible. I was plannin’ on lettin’ her win, but ended up gettin’ serious

The two adults were excitedly chatting between themselves, but I was too angry to listen.

I couldn’t believe I’d lost. I couldn’t accept it.

Which is why, for the first time ever, I snuck out of the hospital shortly after that.

I had been to my parent’s house a few times, so this wasn’t my first time outside the hospital. However, I experienced several *firsts* that day.

The first time I walked outside by myself, the first time I bought a ticket and rode a train, the first time I asked someone for directions and the first time I went to the pathetic old man’s: Kousuke Kiyotaki 8-*dan*’s classroom, the Noda Shogi Center, all on my own.

Master was so stunned to see me walk in, I thought his jaw was dislocated.

“G-Ginko?! What’re ya doin’ here?!”

“I looked on the Internet ... and, came on my own.”

“That’s not what I Mr. Akashi ain’t with ya? Huuuh? Yer seriously here all by yar lonesome?!”

“To get revenge.”

“Revenge?”

“Shogi. This time, I will win.”

“Ah! Don’t tell me Ya want revenge for the other day?! Now ‘at’s tenacity right there

It became a big incident.

I heard that by the time Dr. Akashi and a nurse got there by ambulance, I was playing against Master while standing on my knees in a chair. I was focused on the match, so I couldn’t care less about insignificant details and don’t remember any of them. But I remember how the match played out.

I got yelled at and told to never leave the hospital on my own again, but I didn’t listen and went back.

Losing at Shogi without getting a rematch was worse than getting yelled at.

After that, my parents must’ve talked with Dr. Akashi and Master.

“Ginko. You’re well enough to leave the hospital. Would you like to go home?”

I wasn’t happy at all when Dr. Akashi said that.

Home was boring.

What’s worse, my parents always looked at me like a *poor girl* and said things like *sorry* and always seemed sad

“Not home. I want to stay here.”

“Not your parent’s house, Ginko. From now on, you’ll get to live at a place you love. Where you can play Shogi all you want ... that house.”

There? Then, yes! I’ll go! I haven’t had my revenge yet.

That’s how I, like the other children, left the hospital. Dr. Akashi gave me the magnetic board he always carried in his pocket as a present.

I would never be called a *poor kid* again.

Then, two weeks later, *he* arrived.

“Ginko, this boy here is yar little brother apprentice, Yaichi Kuzuryu.”

Little brother?

“Age don’ matter in the Shogi world. First apprentice is older. Was only by two weeks, but Ginko came to the house first, meanin’ Ginko is the older sister and Yaichi the younger brother.”

Even with Master’s explanation, I couldn’t accept it. Besides, when did I become his apprentice? We’re enemies.

And, this *little brother* of mine seemed to come from deep in the mountains.

“My grandpa grew this rice on a mountain close to home!”

“Mountain? You can grow rice on mountains?”

“You sure can, Keika. My house is surrounded by mountains What was it called again? Grandpa grew this rice on *something-something* field, but”

The first time the four of us ate together, we had rice that *he* brought from his hometown. Master never accepted money from *his* parents, so they often sent us boxes of food And the first rice I ever ate from one those boxes was in a world of its own.

On a side note, all the food I had outside the hospital was delicious beyond words.

Hospital food is bland. The fact that I could use as much sauce I wanted made me so happy, though it made Keika angry at me But, even now, I can’t stop myself from slathering it on.

“My father works in an office and my big brother says, *no way am I becoming a farmer!* all the time, so grandpa wants me to be a farmer if I’m not a Shogi pro. He told me to work the fields if I don’t turn pro.”

“In ’at case, ya can just do both. Placement matches and plantin’ season don’t overlap, and when it’s time to harvest Now ’at I think ’bout it, ya never told me what ya wanna do after high school, Keika. How ’bout helpin’ Yaichi?”

“Interesting. If I get to eat rice this delicious every day, then being Yaichi’s bride doesn’t sound too bad.”

Keika kindly played along with Master’s stupid joke.

“Yaichi. Would you marry me when you grow up?”

“Sure!! I want to get married with you, Keika! And you know!? Guess what!!

Grandpa's rice paddy doesn't just make good rice! What's even more amazing——."

Loose pieces of rice flinging from his mouth, *he* was so happy that he didn't realize Keika wasn't being serious. That struck a nerve.

"Grandpa says it all the time: *Propose at this paddy and she'll never say no!* So I'll take you to grandpa's rice paddy and make you my bride!"

Huh? Proposing in a muddy rice field?

That would never work. She'd drop dead on the spot.

"He's an idiot. A weak idiot."

After living with him for a few days, I was sure of it.

He only ever acted serious when looking at Keika's breasts. Otherwise, he was off in his own little world. And had runny noses sometimes.

On top of that, he couldn't read despite being two years older than me. That's why I could tear through him like tissue paper on the board whenever I tried a new strategy I read about in a book.

Rather than get sad when he lost, he'd act like nothing happened and just line up the pieces again. I would beat him again and again, winning until I was too tired to play. The idiot didn't know when to give up.

I hate idiots with a passion. I hate stubbornness, too.

As annoying as it was, I was apparently physically weaker than most people ... which was why I had to make the most out of every moment my limited stamina would hold out.

Normally, I wouldn't waste time with idiots.

But, strangely Being with him didn't bother me that much.

Maybe it was because he was the first person I met who was *below* me.

Someone weaker at Shogi and lower on the social hierarchy. Someone weaker than myself. A kid *poorer* than I.

That's why I felt like: *I have to toughen him up! It's up to me to protect him!*

Surprisingly enough I rather enjoyed it.

I spent most of my time at Master's house during my first two years as a live-in apprentice because I didn't have the physical endurance to go much further.

In the early months, Master would often take me to the hospital for checkups and Dr. Akashi would play Shogi with me. Some days, Dr. Akashi would come to see me at Master's house, but those visits grew few and far between.

The air became much brighter in the house once Keika and I grew close, and we would all play Shogi with each other once she became my *little* sister apprentice after joining the Practice League.

Thinking back on it now, that was the most peaceful time at the Kiyotaki house.

The world the four of us had built was comforting and I thought it would never end.

Outsiders started barging into that world more and more once Yaichi became the Elementary Meijin when he was in the third grade.

That was almost three years after becoming an apprentice.

For Yaichi, who was planning to join the Sub League, becoming the Elementary Meijin would give him a distinct advantage. So I did what I could to train him.

Then he became the champion the first time he entered the tournament.

For me he was still the same wet-behind-the-ears little brother he had always been though. I had a chance to watch his matches from the semifinals onward because they were done at a TV studio in Tokyo, but he played at a higher level at home against me.

What truly shocked me was how the outside world viewed him after he won.

"There's a Shogi wizkid in Osaka!"

"The future Meijin: Yaichi Kuzuryu."

“The first eight-year-old Elementary Meijin in history! Training to become a professional in junior high!”

The TV news and the newspapers all talked about him just like that. And the school had a big ceremony for him. Until that point, he’d been referred to as *an unlucky kid who was his older sister apprentice’s punching bag*. However, the narrative transformed into: *he was a prodigy all along*, and everyone was jumping on the bandwagon.

But the one who changed the most was Yaichi himself.

Winning went to his head.

“Ginko! Ginko! I came up with how I’m going to write my autograph, so I’ll give you the first one!”

“Why? I don’t want it.”

“Are you suuure? I won’t give you one when it’s worth a lot of money.”

Want your head on a pike?

The incident that really got under my skin happened right before his Sub League Entrance Exam on a hot summer day just before summer vacation started.

Seeing me come to the Player’s Room directly from school, Hiuma—Kagamizu 3-*dan* looked at me with surprise.

“Whoa. What’s that potted plant you have there, Ginko?”

“A morning glory.”

“You grew it at school? Oh, that’s right. Today was the closing ceremony I’ve been in the Sub League for so long that my sense of seasons is starting to slip.”

I set down the morning glory that had grown longer than I was tall in the corner along with my backpack and started playing 10-second Shogi with Mr. Kagamizu right away.

I tended to miss a lot of days, but I enjoyed going to elementary school when I was there.

Yaichi and I went to the same one, so we would hold hands on the way there and play Shogi during recess. Plenty of rumors spread once other kids found out we lived together despite having different last names, but I couldn't have cared less.

But we went home at different times, so it became my routine to come to the Player's Room at the association on my own and play 10-second Shogi against the Sub League members.

Once Yaichi and Keika arrived, the three of us would go down to the classroom to play Shogi before going home together.

That particular day was just like that or at least it should have been.

"..... He's late."

The whole school had early dismissal because of the semester-ending ceremony, but Yaichi still hadn't shown up at the association.

"Maybe he's downstairs playing against somebody in the classroom? Think about it, he's famous now that he's the Elementary Meijin. Someone came from far away to play against him just the other day And he said something about friends coming over during summer vacation."

"..... That's news to me."

"Hm?! I-I see Maybe he wanted to surprise you?"

Mr. Kagamizu's half-hearted attempt to distract me was suspicious, so I put the pieces away and went down to the second floor.

Looking around the classroom I found him.

An idiot sitting between a redhead and a black-haired girl with a dumb smile on his face.

"Heh! Just as good as I thought you were That defense you got there is pretty screwy, like usual! What kind of training makes you come up with those weird moves that actually work?"

Red had her arm wrapped around Yaichi's shoulder, goofing around like boys usually do.

Red talked like a boy and had a chest to match, but I could tell she was a girl.

Upon closer inspection, she was blushing. Her red hair made her stand out, sure, but her cheeks and the nape of her neck were nearly the same shade. Seriously, what the heck? Focus on Shogi.

The other girl was being even more brazen.

“Ahh, Yaichi, your Shogi is such a marvel to behold≡ I just love watching your Shogi, Yaichi≡≡≡”

Black was making far more contact with Yaichi than necessary as she spoke. If you’re playing Shogi, all you need to touch is the pieces, not the people around you. It was beyond me. Impure. Unsanitary. Unpleasant.

Yaichi must not have been used to being sandwiched between two girls talking him up and suddenly got out of his chair.

“I-I’m gonna hit the john!”

What a chicken. If you’re going to lose your nerve, don’t bother flirting with girls in the first place.

What’s worse, he called the restroom a *john*. Trying out a bad-boy persona?

I tracked him down outside the classroom to get answers.

“Yaichi.”

“Ah, Ginko. When did you get here?”

“Those two. Who are they?”

“J-Just friends I made in Tokyo during the Elementary Meijin Tournament”

“I thought you went there to play serious matches, but you were picking up girls? Do I have to impale your head?”

“It’s not like that! The girl with black hair is Machi Kugui from Kyoto and the one with red hair is Ryou Tsukiyomizaka. He no, she came all the way down from Tokyo today. School up there finished yesterday, so Ryou is staying at Machi’s and they’re going to play at classrooms all over Kansai. They invited me to join them, but——.”

“Going out with girls right before your Sub League Entrance Exam? You sure are confident.”

“W-We’re not *going out*! They came this far just to play against me and They’re both very strong, so it’s good practice! Why don’t you try playing against them?”

“Huh? Why would I?”

I immediately rejected the idea.

“More importantly, do you have time to be playing around with girls?”

“I didn’t think Ryou was a girl, okay? She had jeans on last time”

“.....”

Yaichi... muttering excuse after excuse. It was quite a shock to me.

—Yaichi was never a back talking little brother before

It seemed like those two wenches tricked him into thinking he’s a bad boy. It was my job as his older sister to set him straight. Now, how to do it?

I devised a plan.

“I almost forgot, Keika said she wanted to talk with you. It sounded like something important. She might want to ask you out”

“Huh?! For real?!”

“I’ll let those two know, so why don’t you go home before you miss your chance?”

“I will! Thanks, Ginko!”

The idiot left.

I took Yaichi’s place in the classroom and set the plan in motion.

“Hey. Want to play Shogi?”

Sitting across from Red and Black, I made my demands loud and clear.

“Never come here again if I win.”

“Aghhh?”

Rudely sitting on the table, Red looked over her shoulder, glared at me and said to Black, “Get a load of her, Machi. What’s small fry’s problem? And what’s with that hair? A wig? Some kinda cosplay?”

“Ginko Sora are you not?”

Black seemed to know who I was, and I watched her eyes become serious as she grinned ever so slightly.

Red looked back and forth between us a few times and asked, “You know her?”

“Only witnessed her several times in classrooms around Kansai, this one included. We have never played, though I do not know if that was fortunate or not By the by, she also happens to be Kiyotaki-*sensei*’s live-in apprentice, the elder sister apprentice of Yaichi.”

“Hmph. But she’s a puny runt.” Peering down at me as threateningly as possible, Red said, “You. What year are you? Still in kindy?”

“First grade.”

“Pwfff! First grade? But you’re Yaichi’s older sister apprentice? Ghahahahahahaha! That’s hilarious! The guy is full of surprises!”

Red laughs with her mouth wide open, calling him *the guy* and *Yaichi* as if they’d known each other forever. She was almost acting like they were a special item.

That angered me beyond words.

—I’ll end her.

My mind was set. That was the moment *Ryuo Tsukiyomizaka* was carved into my *Beyond Forgiveness List* and she’s still there. Probably will be until one of us dies. On a side note, the first name on that list was *Kousuke Kiyotaki*, and still is.

“Word has it this poor girl suffers from a weak constitution,” said Black with pity in her eyes.

Completely unaware she had violated the taboo.

“Her tournament appearances are few and far between, and even the ones where she became champion, she ultimately handed the advancement ticket to the player she defeated in the finals. Standard procedure for her, as I understand.”

“So that’s why I’ve never heard of her. Meh”

“Rumors say that she plays with the boys upstairs without accepting handicaps.”

“That’s not a rumor. It’s true,” I told her, since there was no reason to deny it.

“Hah! I don’t know if you’re trying to pull something or to get me to feel sorry for you, but that ain’t gonna work on me.”

Red snorts through her nose.

“Getting to play here in Kansai is my big chance. I want to find opponents who’ll give me a challenge, got it? I’m not gonna play patty-cake with some first grader.”

“There is one other rumor.”

“Oh? And what would that be, Machi?”

“Are you familiar with *g@yb*?”

“Isn’t that?!”

“An account name from the *Shogi Club 24* competitive scene, one well known for speed and strength. With inhuman reflexes and early-game skill worthy of professionals, that account has toppled highly decorated amateurs and Sub League members alike There are many who claim it belongs to a certain Meijin, but their typing style in chat, their habit of logging out as soon as the match ends and only playing during daylight hours has led many to believe the account could belong to a child.”

“So, you’re saying it’s hers?”

Red’s expression shifts to one I hadn’t seen thus far, something resembling a demon.

“..... But ... can you prove it?”

“The keyboard input style. Should the board be switched to *kana* mode, what do you think the keys *g*, *@*, *y*, and *b* would spell out?”

Red sat silently as she tried to figure it out, but Black gave the answer first.

“*Ginko* ... as it were.”

“.....”

More silence.

Then Red pulled out a chair, got off the table and properly sat down to face me.

“Fine by me. Who plays first?”

“You’re both weaker than Yaichi, correct?”

I reached out wide to grab the two nearest piece boxes and flipped them over onto the boards.

Pinching both Kings between my fingers, I said, “I’ll play you both at the same time. I’ll even let you play me without a handicap.”

“..... You thinkin’ you can do an instructional match with me and Machi at the same time? We placed at the Elementary Meijin Tournament, you know! A runt like you thinkin’ she can school a girl headed through the Practice League on her way to becoming a Women’s League player like me?”

“Yes. Oh, and you can have the first move, too.”

“Listen, brat. Keep this up and you’re gonna get crushed.”

Red flashed her jagged teeth and I said, “I’ll put your head on a pike.”

Our battle began.

On my right was Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, breathing fire as her offensive barreled toward me.

On my left was Machi Kugui, meticulously building up her formation against an opponent four years her junior.

—Black will be a pain. In which case

The trick to playing multiple matches at once is, though counterintuitive, *not to play multiple matches at once*.



Basically, take down one opponent at a time.

Trying to do both at the same time will make your readings shallow no matter what, and you are bound to overlook the simplest things when you're trying to keep track of more than one board.

Which is why I went for a strategy called Yagura 9 One formation, which requires a long sequence to set up against Black's defensive opening.

If it's just following the standard sequence, I could do it with my eyes closed. A change could happen along the way, but I planned on buying time until that happened.

That allowed me to focus on Red, against whom I used the high-speed Shogi I'd been practicing on the third floor just a little bit ago.

"Hah! Making no-time moves against the great Ryou Tsukiyomizaka? You've got guts, I'll give you that!!"

Just as I thought, a simple taunt was enough to get her to play just as fast.

But, compared to the 10-second Shogi I was used to playing against Sub League members, an elementary schooler's quick attack was full of holes.

I shut down her offensive before it got to me and forced her onto defense. Piece of cake.

"That's one down."

"Brat!! H-How could a brat stop my attack ... mine?!" said Red in disbelief as she stared at the board with her eyes wide. "I I went easy on you 'cuz you're a puny brat! I'm gonna be in the Women's League in no time, so why would I even try against an amateur girl like you?! Th-That wasn't even half of what I can do, and I don't care about that stupid *trash* or this crummy shack called the Kansai Association! You couldn't pay me to come back here, so don't even try, stupid moron!"

Red messes up the board, swiping away the formations with snot and tears pouring off her face. After slamming a piece she had in her hand down onto the board for good measure, Red then stormed out of the classroom. I won.

"..... Good grief. Is she intending to forfeit future matches that happen to be

scheduled in Kansai?”

Black grins to herself as she watches Red go out the door.

I had no intention of forcing her to keep that promise.

Hurt them bad enough, and even wild dogs will be too scared to come back for a while. I just did the same thing.

“Now it’s your turn. Just as you wanted, I’ll use my full strength to crush you.”

I shifted my chair over a little bit to face Black from directly across the board.

“Double *yagura* only happens when both players want it to happen. I know you wanted to face me one-on-one.”

“9 One formation favors the offense. I had no reason to refuse.”

From her voice, expression and playing style, it was impossible to tell what she was really thinking.

There was a bewitching timbre to her voice So, I ignored everything but the sensation in my fingertips once the battle got underway.

Yet, just before I could, Black pried her way into my head.

“May I make a request before the



battle begins in earnest?”

“..... What?”

“As my practice groups convene here at the Kansai Association, I cannot jeopardize my ability to come and go as necessary. Therefore, I would like for you to amend the penalty should I lose our match.”

“No. Too late.”

“Please, I beg of you. Oh, yes! If an acceptable substitute does not come to mind, you may decide once the match is over.”

It was as if she were allowing me to play rock-paper-scissors on a delay.

I liked that condition. That was the trap.

“..... In that case ...”

“Then it’s settled. Now——.”

The snap of a piece that bordered on an explosion was our opening bell.

Rather than finish the Yagura 9 One formation standard sequence, Black added a bizarre twist at the very end.

“?! Why change there?!”

Black was absolutely right about the established theory of offense having an advantage in the 9 One formation. That theory would later be overturned by software, but humanity didn’t know that yet.

Startled, I made a mistake on my next move.

——Rats! I got distracted coming up with the new punishment after I won and messed up

No one can win a match if they’re thinking about what will happen when it’s over.

No matter how much I cursed my naivety, it was too late now.

“Te-he-he.”

Displaying the competitive skill of being able to throw off an opponent by simply playing a move that she herself didn’t know was good or bad, Black strung together a series of extremely strong moves.

—Heavy!

Machi Kugui's piece snaps were high-pitched and very deliberate.

There was a great deal of intention behind every single move she made.

Fighting spirit. Intimidating aura.

No There was more to it than that.

This was *devotion*.

Tenacity. Begrudging. Passionate. Behind her aloofness, there was a terrifying unknown to Machi Kugui's Shogi. It was the first time I had ever been truly frightened of an opponent.

And this was the day I learned fear could interfere with fingertips.

—I couldn't reach for the pieces! Why?!

It was as if the fear was slowly taking hold of my neck, strangling me little by little. I glanced up at her Black was glaring down at me as she whispered, "Your torment is at hand."

As if her sleek black hair were closing in on me from all directions, Machi Kugui slowly but surely cornered my King.

—Play normally and I'll be overpowered

In that case ...!!

I stopped playing by the rules.

Unleashing the off-the-board tactics that I had kept sealed away, I used eye contact and piece snaps to make Black see ghosts.

I timed the piece snaps to interfere with her breathing, making her brain work twice as hard on less oxygen. It's a technique that even makes 3-*dan* ranking members of the Sub League panic.

"Kg-ahh! Ha Haahaa! C-Can't bre-?!"

Black ... gasping for breath.

Meanwhile, I was setting a trap for her on the board. A one-move, instantaneous kill trap.

—*Drop dead!!* I mentally screamed with all my might as I placed a major piece in a spot where it could be taken for free.

She takes it, she dies.

If she doesn't take it, then she'll win.

So long as she *doesn't trust my ability*, she'll take it. At that point, it was more a game of wits than a Shogi match. I'd gotten a good idea about her personality through our match thus far and from her way of speaking, so I primed my trap.

And Black fell right into it.

Realizing what she had done with the piece still pinched between her fingers above the board, Black began to tremble to the point where I thought she would drop it.

"!! Haaaa————....."

She leaned back, taking a deep breath as she stared at the ceiling. Then, after only hearing my next move, she bowed so low that her forehead almost hit the board and she surrendered.

"Unfortunately, I have no moves remaining."

..... Even thinking back on it now, I've always felt threatened by her. I hate her, too.

From a rich family, friendly, highly intelligent, has a way with words, highly cultured, large bust, loved by everyone Extremely endowed bust. As far as I'm concerned, all large-breasted women except for Keika can just drop dead Die Go extinct

"You are remarkably strong, Ginko! O-Ryou and I could match up against you for a lifetime and never hold our own. Why, you may be even stronger than *the* Tsubasa Gakumeki who is already in the Sub League."

Her black hair was now stuck to her forehead with sweat. Machi Kugui pulled it back behind her ear with her left hand and smiled once again.

Complimenting an opponent after being defeated by a one-move instant kill trap ... I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Aren't you sad?"

“I dream of one day becoming a journalist! Please, allow me to cover your exploits, Ginko♪”

“Journalist?”

It was bizarre for someone who joined the Practice League and trained as hard as they could to even think of becoming something other than a Shogi player.

“What about you, Ginko? If you never become part of the Practice League or the Sub League, what would you do with your future?”

“Me?”

I was blindsided.

What would I become?

I thought things would always stay the way they were. I wanted it that way.

“I want to become strong.”

That was the answer I came up with.

“Gender has nothing to do with it. I never want to lose to anyone, older or younger than me. Since Yaichi is the Elementary Meijin and he’s weaker than me, that makes me the strongest elementary school student in the world.”

“I wonder. For I know of at least one elementary school student stronger than yourself, Ginko.”

“Who?”

“Yaichi Kuzuryu.”

“Huh? Weren’t you listening? I just told you that I’m stronger than——.”

“In the early game, yes. However, as far as the mid-and late-game are concerned, Yaichi is far stronger.”

“.....!”

I felt guilty about resorting to the off-the-board tactics I’d sworn off, but what Black said made it impossible for me to mount a logical counterargument.

“I am a type of player similar to yourself, Ginko, so I understand all too well. Filling your mind with early-game knowledge is akin to starting a 100-meter

dash from the 50-meter mark. You may win, but you won't grow stronger that way."

"....."

"On the other hand, Yaichi begins 50 meters behind the starting line and has a unique stride. His growth borders on diabolical. In an era dominated by Yagura 9 One formations, he may be unable to tap his full potential. However, should a new Shogi era dawn, a generational prodigy like Yaichi will surely be the one to set it in motion. Seeing that with my own eyes, following every step Yaichi's Shogi takes is my——."

"..... Hey."

"Hm? What is it?"

I got this unpleasant girl's attention as she blabbered away as if she were enjoying the sound of her own voice and made my declaration. I issued her punishment.

"Never call him *Yaichi* again."

▲ THE FIRST SHOGI MARTIAN

From that point on, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui did set foot in my world from time to time.

Especially Machi Kugui, who happened to be in the Practice League for one year alongside Keika (though she passed her up in no time at all to become a Women's League member), and they apparently had practice sessions at Master's classroom because I saw her every now and then Though I never allowed her into the main house.

There were also a surprising number of girls who flocked to Yaichi just because he was the Elementary Meijin, but that idiot was so stupid that all I had to say was *Keika is calling you* and he'd go.

I thoroughly *convinced* all those girls after that. Not with words, but with Shogi.

Now is a very important stage in Yaichi's training. He doesn't have the time to be fooling around with the likes of you It's the older sister apprentice's duty to make sure her younger brother apprentice has the right environment to grow in.

However, none of them were a big deal.

It was a different, overwhelming entity that threatened to destroy the world that I had come to know.

The existence of Shogi Martians.

The first one invaded the Kiyotaki house about two months after Yaichi had joined the Sub League ... sometime in the fall, I think.

"Ah, welcome! C'mon inside an' make yerself at home!"

"No, I shall decline. Standing up again requires more energy than it's worth once I sit down."

The woman Master was talking to at the front door was the most vibrantly

dressed Shogi player I had ever seen.

Rina Shakando—*Women's Quadruple Title*.

The undisputed ruler of Women's Shogi, she held all four women's titles, excluding the newly introduced *Queen*. She was on her way to Kyushu to defend her Women's King title and had stopped off in Osaka.

With a young boy at her side.

"Never thought of Rina'd take an apprentice."

"Likewise, Kousuke. It was quite a shock, learning that you had taken not one, but two live-in apprentices at once. Many in Kanto believe you have lost your mind."

"Didn't they always say I had a screw loose?"

"He-he. Indeed, they did"

I watched the three of them by myself from the top of the stairs. Keika and Yaichi were out shopping, if I remember correctly.



“Sure was a bold move, takin’ a boy as yar apprentice right off the bat. People here in Kansai would call it interestin’ and leave it at that, but didn’ the stone-headed ol’ guard in Kanto give ya trouble?”

“It came down to my Master’s will before he passed. His last desire was for one of the Ashigara Shogi family line to possess the title of Meijin However, I was the sole descendent to make a lasting mark on the world. I used what little influence I wield as a Women’s Shogi player to take a male apprentice. Even went as far as having regulations be rewritten.”

“I remember *Ashigara-sensei* in his final years takin’ any kid he thought looked promisin’ But, not one of ‘em turned pro. He was so desperate to find good ones ‘at he forgot to raise the ones he had. So much talent got squandered ‘cause of him

“He was a benevolent teacher. He took me as a live-in apprentice simply because my disabled leg would make *transportation a burden* and raised me alongside his own daughters. There was only one way I could possibly repay his kindness.”

“I’d say yer already doin’ ‘at, bein’ the player ya are today, Rina! What made him so fixed on gettin’ Meijin?”

“It could not be helped. For those of that generation, the mantle of Meijin was worth *sacrificing the careers of all others* to obtain. If they could not do it themselves, it was up to their apprentice. If not their apprentice, then the apprentices thereafter. Even from beyond, their conviction has been passed down to the living, binding generations of Masters and apprentices throughout the Shogi world to this day.”

“At may be true, but

“At any rate, that is why I have struck off on my own in Kanto to start my own family line. Circumstances being as they are, getting sibling apprentices for this child will prove difficult I would like for him to bond with yours.”

“That’d be great! My Yaichi could use the extra push ‘at comes from havin’ a rival in his own generation, even if they ain’t in Kansai. Come over fer trainin’ whenever ya like.”

Master thumped his chest and greeted the apparent Sub League member with a hearty smile.

The boy listened to the adults' conversation without saying a word, though he stood tall as he could in the doorway in front of Ms. Shakando, as if he were protecting the woman who used a cane to stand.

—Almost like a knight would do for his Queen in a picture book.

I've held that image of those two for a very long time. Not because of how they dress or act, but because that's who they are at heart.

"I must be off, or else miss the inspection."

"Oh, before ya go, Rina! My daughter Would ya be willin' to meet Keika? Ya did one instructional match for her back when she was a young'un. Ya remember her?"

"But of course. Has she remained in the Shogi world?"

"Left it for a while, but now she's back. Joined the Kansai Practice League after graduatin' high school. Says she wants to join the Women's League. I'm thinkin' an instructional match from ya'd be the kind of spark she needs to really get goin'."

"..... I decline."

"Rina Ya may be thinkin' my daughter ain't takin' it seriously, but she's working so very hard——."

"No. It is not her commitment."

Ms. Shakando shook her head from side to side and explained her reasoning.

"Yet another women's title shall be introduced in the near future. This *Women's Throne League* is set to follow the same format as the Queen, in that all women, including those in the Sub League, may participate."

"Even Sub League members"

"As a title holder, I have devoted myself to expanding Women's Shogi and getting more women involved. At the same time, however, I have begun to feel that one who can surpass me at this juncture will not appear History's first female professional Shogi player to be precise."

It was the first time I remember specifically hearing that.

“Female professional player?”

Before I knew it, I was rolling those words around my mouth.

I knew that women could join the Sub League. But none of them had ever made it into the professional ranks. That’s why, strange as it was, I never thought of a woman as being part of professional Shogi.

Therefore, I’d never thought of trying to become a professional Shogi player myself because it was *simply unrealistic*. My reasoning, along with the rest of the Shogi world, was that women weren’t talented enough to make it through the Sub League.

... With the exception of one person——Rina Shakando.

“Plenty of children want to become Women’s League players out of admiration for me, and here I believe the Women’s League system itself need not exist I simply cannot endure that paradox.”

“.....”

Master couldn’t say anything else after that.

“Oh, aren’t you just the cutest thing! What’s your name?”

Back from her shopping trip, Keika was ecstatic to see Ms. Shakando’s apprentice now alone with Master and I at the house.

The boy nervously answered her.

“I’m Ayumu Kannabe.”

It may be hard to believe nowadays, but Ayumu Kannabe-*sensei* wore normal clothes back then.

In other words, he was an average handsome boy.

“Thank you for having me. My mother made this fried tofu for you.”

“Thank you! What an angel you are!! You can stay here as long as you like, okay? You could even join our Shogi family if you want, Ayumu. Oh, I’ll join you in the bath to make sure you know how to use it.”

..... I think Keika has a soft spot for handsome young boys.

“We’ll be keepin’ Ayumu here until Shakando-*Quadruple Title*’s defense match in Miyazaki finishes up. ’Til then, we treat him just like a live-in apprentice, ya hear?”

“In that case, should we find out his favorite and least-favorite foods?”

Ayumu: on the brink of undergoing the Kiyotaki household’s baptism of fire.

That’s when Yaichi showed up, bouncing off the walls like an excited puppy.

“Ayumu, Ayumu! C’mon! Let’s play Shogi already!”

“Haven’t we been playing online every day?”

“Yeah, but, isn’t the real thing so much better? It’ll be just like we got matched up in the 3-*dan* division.”

“Actually, I would like to learn as much as I can from Kiyotaki-*sensei*,” said Ayumu, looking up at Master with eyes sparkling in admiration.

“Master gave me direct orders to experience Kiyotaki-*sensei*’s *yagura* firsthand ... that *he who conquers the yagura conquers the world*

“Is that right? ’At’s Shakando-*Quadruple Title* for ya. She knows what’s what.”

“It’s obvious that your Meijin Title Match against Tsukimitsu-*Meijin*, nicknamed the Yagura Series, directly resulted in the *yagura*’s returned to relevance. Players in Kanto are once again researching what the *yagura* can do.”

“Hm? That so? Heh-heh-heh Ayumu, ya got a bright future ahead ’o ya. Tell ya what, I’ll make an exception and show ya my own latest research.”

“It would be an honor!”

Seeing Master get talked up by Ayumu was far from entertaining and I let something slip under my breath.

“..... Even though he got swept by the Meijin?”

“G-Ginko! We all heard that!” Yaichi blurted out.

“It’s true.”

“Yes! That’s why you can’t say it!!”

“..... No dinner for the both of ya tonight.”

Master, angered by the truth.

Then Keika casually leaned in to talk to Ayumu.

“Sure is noisy around here, isn’t it? I hope it won’t bother you.”

“Not in the least. My sister at home is quite young.”

Master then sat down to teach the finer details of *yagura* formations while Keika was busy cooking dinner.

He gave us all an instructional match at once. Sitting in a row with Ayumu in the center, Yaichi started whispering in his ear.

“All the members of the Kiyotaki Shogi family have pants with wrinkles above the knee on the same side as their dominant hand. Can you guess why?”

“.....?”

“We always hold onto our right knees to keep us from playing carelessly and think harder!”

“That’s so cool!”

Trembling with excitement, Ayumu bunched up the fabric around his knee and then squeezed it with all his might.

Now *that* was entertaining. I decided to join in on the fun.

“Kiyotakis also have to give new strategies names like finishing moves and yell them during matches.”

“So cool!!”

“Hey!! Ginko, don’t lie to him like that!”

Yaichi, desperately trying to correct me, and Ayumu, trembling even harder than before. I felt like I’d found an interesting new toy. The fact that it was my little brother’s friend only made it that much better.

Honest, vulnerable and took things at his own pace.

That was my first impression of the boy named Ayumu Kannabe. Looking at it the other way, that also means I didn’t think he possessed much talent at all.

Once we finished our after-bath snacks, which took longer because a completely enamored Keika served twice as much as usual, the three of us went up to the kid's room.

Now it was time for just the kids to play Shogi.

"There's three of us, so let's pretend it's a league match!" Yaichi suggested.

"I'm going to be the match recorder for Tsukimitsu-*Meijin*'s match against the Amateur Meijin coming up, so I wanna practice. You two do a match and I'll record!"

And so, I was set to play against Ayumu.

Of course, it was our first time.

"I am ready to play when you are."

"..... Ready."

We were both given one hour of waiting time so that Yaichi could get used to using a stopwatch. In essence, it was a very professional match.

"Piece flip!"

It was already determined that Tsukimitsu-*sensei* would be playing without his Bishop, make the first move and sit in the upper seat for the upcoming exhibition match against the Amateur Meijin, but we already came this far so Yaichi did a piece flip for practice. By the way, I sat in the upper seat.

The piece flip gave Ayumu the first move. The sound his pieces made when he moved sent me this message.

"*Double Yagura.*"

"*Of course.*"

I met his challenge head on.

Master had instructed Ayumu how to use the noblest of all noble *yagura* styles, the 4 Six Silver – 3 Seven Knight formation, and he wasted no time in trying it out. He rhythmically lined up his Rook, his Bishop, a Silver and a Knight all in the third file. That formation has particularly good balance because it can be shifted into an *anaguma* fairly quickly.

The 9 One formation standard that I used against Machi is also based on the 4 Six Silver – 3 Seven Knight formation.

Ayumu went on to perfect this strategy and entered the Sub League before Yaichi. He was also in the 3-*dan* division and became professional before Yaichi.

He wasn't a junior high school professional because he's two years older than Yaichi, but he's still a prodigy who made it through the 3-*dan* division a full year before Yaichi turned professional.

That is Ayumu Kannabe. *The Future Meijin*.

Even once he was in the professional ranks, he came up with his own variations on the *yagura* and that propelled him straight through the placement matches: his *light something or other* and *lance what have you* dragon killer or whatever it was.

However, at the time he first played against me——.

“Kannabe-sensei, please begin one-minute Shogi.”

“Yes!”

“30 secondsss—— 40 secondsss—— 50 secondsss, one, two, three”

Yaichi: counting down the seconds with the stopwatch firmly in his grasp.

..... I didn't find out until later, but the Kanto and Kansai Sub Leagues apparently use a slightly different style to announce the time.

I'm not saying that confusion is the reason, but I was surprised how easily I won.

Since I still had thirty minutes of waiting time when Ayumu had to start playing one-minute Shogi, I suppose my victory was only natural.

“I have been defeated.”

After he had lined his lips with ChapStick, Ayumu lowered his head in an unmistakable bow as he announced his surrender.

——I won but ...

It wasn't satisfying at all ... which is why, rather than look back over the match

to find the good or bad moves, I asked him this: “Hey.”

“Hm?”

“This match Why did you use your time like that? Wouldn’t it have been more efficient to get past the standard opening with as much time as possible for the late-game?”

“I wanted to try a sequence I came up with rather than go with what’s considered to be the best move.”

“Huh? It’s the standard. There’s no point thinking about it Besides, you had chances to hold out in the late-game and wait for me to make a mistake, didn’t you?”

“Such a victory has no value.”

“..... Are you saying defeating me isn’t a big deal?”

“No, more like”

Ayumu took a moment to think, searching for the right words and came up with this.

“It’d be winning against an opponent, but losing to Shogi. That’s meaningless.”

“?????”

It made no sense to me.

“Even if a god came up with the standard himself, I want to wear the clothes that I see fit. That’s what it comes down to.”

“A *god*?”

“That’s what he calls all the old Meijins. But, yeah, Tsukimitsu-*sensei* is the Meijin now!” said Yaichi, leaning over his just-completed match record on the boardside table and barged into our review session.

“Um, Ayumu. That *new move* you made: you were trying to open a path after Ginko changed from an 8 Five Pawn formation to a 9 Five Pawn formation on the 44th move, right?”

“That was my 6 Five Pawn. I made a slight mistake in the late-game, but I

don't think it's bad per se. In this case, the opposite——.”

In that instant, all sorts of numbers and board locations came effortlessly pouring out of Ayumu's mouth while I still thought he was just some simpleminded boy.

——Th-the match just now had that much hidden potential?!

I was well aware that standards change over time.

But Yaichi and Ayumu were taking standards that professionals developed, even ones that a Meijin who people called a *god* had written in books, and questioned every detail.

No, not just questioning. These two were——.

——These two *are trying to make their own standards.*

The transformations playing out in front of their eyes ran so deep, were so enormous I barely understood anything they said.

——Just how deep can they read?

——How are they reading so fast?

I fought off the urge to ask and quietly listened to their review session ... to their exchange of numbers and pieces at breakneck speed.

I was desperate to find some way to refute everything.

To refute that these two were seeing things I couldn't.

That there were people who came from a different planet and possessed a separate sense, an understanding of Shogi that I didn't. That this boy sitting across from me wasn't one of them. No matter how much proof of it I saw, I didn't want to believe it...

... Believe in the existence of Shogi Martians.

THE SUB LEAGUE

“Hey, Keika! Keika! Guess what! I got praised!”

Yaichi came back to the house with Master and he bounded right up to Keika like he was walking on air.

It wasn't often that Yaichi looked this happy after he entered the Sub League.

Keika asked him what had happened, and——.

“What?! You found a check path that Seiichi missed?”

“Keika. Yer in the Practice League. He's to be called Tsukimitsu-*sensei*.”

“Ah I'm sorry. Master”

Tsukimitsu-*sensei* is the same age as Master, but also his older brother apprentice. They've been close for decades.

He also dropped by Master's house from time to time, which is probably why Keika still thinks of him as more of a family friend and forgets to address him like she should.

“As they say in Go: *bystanders see eight moves ahead*. Match recorders ain't got to deal with the pressure 'at players do. Don't go thinkin' that yer stronger than pros, ya hear?”

Master clasped Yaichi's head with his big hand.

“But, yeah, it ain't like anybody coulda found 'at check path.”

With that, Master ruffled his apprentice's hair.

“Today's match was an exhibition match between the Meijin and the Amateur Meijin, wasn't it? With a Bishop handicap?”

“Yep! The one with, what was it? Mr. Yoru mata kami? And Tsukimitsu-*Meijin*! Mr. Yorumatakami thought he'd lost so he threw in the towel, but he actually had a 23-move check path that would've won it! Mr. Yorumatakami couldn't believe it and said I was amazing!”

Yorumatakami? Is that even a real name? With those Chinese characters,

pronouncing it as *Yashajin* would make more sense.

“He also said he wants me to take his daughter as my apprentice once I turn pro!”

“Well, well. Did you hear that, Ginko?” said Keika teasingly. So irritating. But I couldn’t take it out on her, so I kicked my younger brother apprentice in the back instead.

“Wh-What was that for?!”

“Shut up. Drop dead.”

Bash! Bash! What an easy back to kick.

Maybe she was feeling sorry for him, but Keika gave Yaichi even more praise.

“That’s just wonderful, Yaichi. Finding a check path that even Tsukimitsu-*sensei* overlooked—it must have really boosted your confidence.”

“Ummm I still can’t win at all in my Sub League matches”

Yaichi’s shoulders slumped and he looked like he was about to cry.

“Even practicing in the Player’s Room, I get treated like a punching bag. Everyone tells me things like *You were better before you joined the Sub League* and *You’ll last another week, tops* or”

Claiming the title of Elementary Meijin, a high-spirited Yaichi entered the Sub League at 6-*kyu*.

He thought he would climb the ranks in no time, and even I thought he would become 1-*dan* in the blink of an eye, so that might’ve put a bit of pressure on him.

But——.

“Those regular activities, they’re nothing like playing 10-second Shogi in the Player’s Room There’s so much waiting time, everyone’s trying to kill each other Mr. Kagamizu is so scary on those days, I’m afraid to go near him”

Rather than climbing the ladder, Yaichi was facing the very real danger of dropping down a rank and was fighting tooth and nail to stay at 6-*kyu*. That’s why he came to dread Sub League regular activity days and his Shogi felt timid whenever I played against him.

—*All of you, quit picking on Yaichi! I won't allow it!!* I mentally screamed with righteous indignation as I repeatedly kicked my younger brother apprentice's back.

However, I had it all wrong.

There was an unwritten tradition in the Kansai Sub League back in those days where they would never compliment promising newcomers to their face. Actually, they would be downright harsh. This harshness was meant to toughen them up, but they would do anything to protect one of their own when the time came.

On the other hand—.

“This kid'll never get stronger.”

Kansai Sub League members encouraged those who they thought wouldn't make it.

I wouldn't understand this until I was older.

That night ...

Once the idiot was asleep, I left the kid's room and went downstairs to find Master on my own. I had a request for him.

“..... Yaichi really seems to be having a hard time.”

I overheard voices once I got to the first floor.

Keika, getting a Shogi lesson from Master in the *tatami* room, sounded concerned.

“You think maybe it was too early for him to join after all? He's in the fourth grade for heaven's sake Waiting a year couldn't have hurt, could it?”

“Earlier the better. A year, a month, a week, even a day earlier is best in this world. Surely ya know 'at better than anyone?”

“Y-Yes Yes, I do, but”

“Yar worryin' too much. Yaichi'll get real strong, just ya watch. People without any talent grow bit by bit, but those who got talent grow in bursts after breakin' through a wall. For Yaichi, it's not *if* he does, but *when*. Ya can count on it,” Master stated like a fact. “Actually, I'm more worried 'bout what'll happen after

he goes pro.”

“After he becomes professional? He only just joined the Sub League, so why——.”

“There’s a limit to what I can teach him. ’At’s why I asked Mr. Tsukimitsu to take him as an apprentice instead’a me. Right before joinin’ the Sub League, actually.”

“F-Father?! Then what was all that about your *dream coming true*?! Weren’t you happy that you now had a son of your own?!”

“..... I only took Yaichi in ’cause I was bein’ greedy. I knew how he felt about me and used ’at admiration to rope him into this house. Seein’ what he did today, it was all too obvious. That kiddo deserves a stronger Master, one who’s accomplished somethin’.”

“Wh-What did Sei- Tsukimitsu-*sensei* have to say?”

“Turned me down. But Yaichi’s got talent right up there with the rest ’o the junior high professionals in the past. If he don’ go pro, I gotta shoulder the blame and retire.”

“Huh?”

Keika and I gasped simultaneously.

I’d always thought Yaichi was a *poor kid*.

That he had a weaker, stupider existence than me. That it was up to me to protect him.

But

“Master. Keika.”

Both stared at me in surprise as I walked into the room and said what I wanted loud and clear.

“I want to join the Sub League, too.”



After starting second grade, I won the Elementary Meijin Tournament. It was easy.

“See, I won. Now can I?”

“Mngh Mnggghhh

Master had his head in his hands the whole way home as we rode the bullet train back to Osaka. His apprentices had won that tournament two years running, but he didn’t look the least bit happy about it.

A headline that read *A Second Grade Elementary Student Has Become the Youngest Person to Hold the Title of Elementary Meijin: Osaka’s Ginko Sora, the Second Female Champion in History* scrolled across the news ticker at the front of our train car.

Master watched those red dots spelling out the news and sighed. I told him one more time, “I won the tournament.”

“Haaaaaa Why’d ya have to win? I felt safe knowin’ ’at wouldn’t happen, but ya went an’

He was serious. What was that bearded fossil’s problem?

Master’s response was instantaneous when I said I wanted to join the Sub League.

“No! I ain’t gonna allow it!!”

Not only was I not expecting that answer, but his strong tone caught me by surprise. I thought he’d be happy for me

Angry, I got in Master’s face.

“Why? Why is it okay for Yaichi, but not for me?”

“Yar still in the second grade, ain’t ya? Far too early.”

“But you just told Keika that *even a year earlier is better.*”

“Y-Yeah, I did, but ‘at was

I cornered him and kept ramping up the pressure. The truth was on my side, so I was in a position to win right off the bat. Just accept it, bearded fossil. But the fossil wouldn’t. He wouldn’t even give a clear reason.

That was when Master laid out conditions.

“..... All right, fine. I’ll let ya take the exam so long as ya win the Elementary Meijin Tournament just like Yaichi did.”

“Really? Yay!”

“And one more thing!” An unusually stern expression dawned as Master added, “A green light from Dr. Akashi is an absolute must. If he says stop, ya stop. Is that clear?”

“Okay.”

I agreed. Dr. Akashi would never get in my way.

“The Elementary Meijin Tournament? Sounds great! Go for it,” said Dr. Akashi at the hospital after I underwent a series of thorough tests. I knew he would take my side.

“M-Mr. Akashi Are ya sure? Really sure?”

“I don’t see why not. I couldn’t find any problems that would keep her back. Actually, the stress of staying inside could be what’s getting to her. That could turn into a real problem.”

“But

“For now, she’ll need to stop if her pulse goes over 170. Though she’s gotten so good at Shogi I doubt that’ll happen.”

And so, my shackles came off.

The Osaka qualifier was a piece of cake.

Then, rather than give away my invitation to the next round like always, I advanced to the Western Japan stage of the tournament. Commotion swept through the crowd every time I won.

“That silver-haired girl, she’s too strong!”

“Ginko Sora? Never heard of her

“A second grader this good? That’s a monster if I’ve ever seen one

“Hey, um why is Kiyotaki 9-*dan* following her everywhere?”

I was this tiny girl making her first appearance in the tournament. The darkest of dark horses, I tore my way through the Western Japan stage like a hot knife through butter all the way to the championship.

Of course, I was beyond tired by the time I got to the finals and could hardly think straight, so I played the match on autopilot, but Thanks to all my practice playing 10-second Shogi with Sub League members in the Player’s Room, my fingers knew what to do. My opponent surrendered before I knew it.

The semifinal and final rounds of the Elementary Meijin Tournament that took place in Shibuya were far easier.

I only had to play two matches. Plus, Ayumu Kannabe was already in the Sub League and Ryou Tsukiyomizaka had joined the Women’s League, so they were barred from entry. Machi Kugui had been eliminated back in the Western Japan stage.

The semifinals and finals were recorded in a TV studio.

A Sub League member does the match recording while a professional player does commentary and a Women’s League player provides analysis.

That year’s match recorder was Taishi Shinokubo Sub League 2-*dan*, Jin Natagiri 7-*dan* did the commentary and the analyst was the Thorn Princess and first Queen: Azami Hanadachi.

Ms. Hanadachi pointed a microphone at me and asked: “I know you haven’t joined the Practice League yet, Miss Sora, but are you looking to join the Women’s League when you get older?”

“The Sub League. Then, I want to be a professional.”

“Wow! Best of luck to you.”

The Thorn Princess encouraged me with a smile.

However, her eyes were saying something else entirely: *Don’t think it will be that easy!*

Summer arrived in no time after that.

The Sub League entrance examinations take place around the *obon* holiday in early August every year. That year was no exception.

“Ginko, here’s your lunch! Don’t forget to put sunscreen on. I know it’s not far, but use your parasol when you’re outside, okay?”

Keika woke up early to make a lunch for me that was stuffed full of food covered in my favorite sauce, but I didn’t have an appetite.

It wasn’t nerves ... it was the heat.

That year was much hotter than normal, and that heat was sapping my endurance more than the exam itself.

“It’s a good thing you got to skip the first round because you’re the Elementary Meijin I don’t think your body could have held out for the full three days,” Keika remarked.

“What’s worse, the arena’s air conditioner’s broken! It’s an oven in there!” Yaichi chimed in.

“It is? When is it going to be fixed? Have you heard anything, Yaichi?”

“Mr. Mine said the air conditioning company is swamped because of how hot it is right now and the earliest they can get around to fixing it would be in September.”

Talking required energy, so I just listened to them and didn’t say a word.

The first round of the exam takes place between the examinees. Four wins and they’re through to the next round. On the other hand, three losses and they fail on the spot. Those matches take place over two days.

Then, the second round——.

“You play with up to three real Sub League members. They should be between 4-*kyu* and 6-*kyu*,” said Yaichi like a know-it-all.

“You’ll get in as long as you beat one of them. You won’t have to play the rest. I lost my first two, so I was getting worried, but I found a way to win my third one. Talk about a relief.”

“..... I’ll just win the first one. That’s easy.”

“You shouldn’t take them so lightly, Ginko.”

“What about it?”

“The second round of the Entrance Exam is treated like a regular match for Sub League members. Those wins and losses can get the Sub League members promoted or demoted And they get made fun of for losing to amateurs, so they fight like their lives depend on it. It’s a life or death match in the Sub League, so everyone’s out to kill their opponent.”

“What? Shogi: life or death? You’re exaggerating.”

“No, I’m not! I heard about this one member from a long time ago who’d hold out for a long, long time! For real, he’d play Golds and Silvers around his King immediately after taking them, never attacking at all.”

“Huuuh? I don’t get why.”

“Me, too. But, you know? There’s an even crazier legend about the guy——.”

“?”

“This guy, he held out for hours, but wound up in a situation where he’d lose if the other guy just put a Gold in front of his King, but he suddenly froze in place. He just stared at the board until his time ran out and ended up losing that way.”

“Knowing he was going to lose hurt so much he couldn’t say it.”

“You’d think so, right? But, that wasn’t it!”

“.....”

He was annoying me to the point that I wanted to kick him, but I held back the urge because I wanted to know the answer.

“During the review session, everyone asked him: *You’d already lost, so why did you let time run out? Did throwing in the towel hurt that much?* You know what he said?”

“No. What did he say?”

“That *his opponent might die from a heart attack.*”

“.....”

“According to that guy, having six of the Golds and Silvers is an advantage, but having seven puts you in position to win. Kansai Sub League members call it *mustard theory*. Everyone in the Sub League knows that!”

“Mustard? Why do they call it mustard?”

“Beats me. Maybe just that nothing comes easy?”

After giving Yaichi a swift kick in the shin for pulling that answer out of thin air, we held hands like we always did and set out for the Kansai Shogi Association.

On the way there, Yaichi wrinkled his nose.

“Ginko. It smells like someone’s burning off their field.”

“Burning off?”

“People burn the leaves and leftover stalks after harvest time. But the whole city smells like that right now

“That’s because it’s *Obon*, remember? Everyone’s lighting fires to welcome the spirits of the dead.”

Once we arrived at the association, I ran into the last person I expected to see.

“Dr. Akashi?”

“Hi. I heard you were going to take the Sub League Entrance Exam, so I came to cheer you on.”

Yaichi and I were surprised to see him, but the adults around us were downright shocked.

The lady at the gift shop, the security guard, Twelve’s owner. They all looked like they were seeing a ghost.

“What?! Is that you, Mr. Akashi?!”

“Akashi as in *that* Akashi?! The one who quit the Sub League?!”

“Is it true you’re a doctor now?!”

Word that Dr. Akashi was here reached the upper floors and soon he was surrounded by association staff and professional players. Older veterans who aren’t normally there came on that day because their apprentices were taking

the Sub League Entrance Exam.

“Dr. Akashi You were a Sub League member?”

“Actually, I was, Ginko. And for a moment I was 3-*dan*.”

“A moment?”

I didn’t understand what he meant.

“Ginko.”

“Yes, doctor?”

“A little advice from someone who’s walked this path before you. Beware of the Lance handicap.”

I went off to the arena without any idea what his mysterious advice truly meant because the exam was about to start.

“Hm. Good morning to all the examinees.”

Director Yoshitsune Kuruno 4-*dan* greeted all of us and explained how the second round of the exam would take place.

I had met him plenty of times in the Player’s Room and also played against him. He’s a nice man. He’d be an even better man if he didn’t play Ranging Rook.

“You will have 60 minutes of waiting time. Once that time is up, you must play each move in less than a minute thereafter. Amateur tournaments have far less waiting time, so this format will be new to you. Best of luck to you all.”

Then the matchups were announced.

My first opponent was a second-year junior high school student, 4-*kyu*. A boy, of course. He had fire in his eyes.

“I’m ready when you are!”

“..... Ready.”

I was seven. My opponent was 14. But losing never crossed my mind.

I was sure I would have no trouble defeating a 4-*kyu* in an even match, so I had no intention of exploiting the unfair advantage given to me by the Lance handicap.

—I'll crush him head on, fair and square!!

I doubt he thought a seven-year-old girl would fight that way.

Which meant my attack had him against the ropes.

"I've won."

Those words came out of my mouth when, after only a few turns, I could see victory.

Normally, I'd never say such a thing. But I wasn't feeling well that day and I wanted to win and go home as quickly as possible.

Though I had no idea those few words would be a fatal mistake.

"..... I'll let you in on somethin', examinee."

"?"

"There are two late-games in the Sub League," said the junior high second year as he started filling his territory with Golds and Silvers.

The victory that was right in front of me started drifting further and further away.

"Ngh!"

The harder I pressed my attacks, the further away his King went.

Beware of the Lance handicap.

Those words were making more and more sense by the second.

Without the Lance, the upper player will slide their Rook to the left side of the board to compensate for the missing piece. It's so common that even Static Rook players will resort to Ranging Rook when playing with a Lance handicap.

Static Rook is a vertical, head-on style that uses Pawns to lead the charge across the board. Exchanging Pawns is the opening bell to start the fight. That's why Static Rook players can use Pawns to support their attacks in the late game.

However, Ranging Rook attacks from the side, so it's common for Pawns to remain in home territory. That's why Double Pawn violations happen, and Pawns can't be used for late-game attacks. Go with Golds and Silvers to attack instead, and they'll get taken, then redeployed on defense by your opponent.

That's what happened to me.

Once again, I thought from the bottom of my heart: *All Ranging Rook players should just disappear!!*

Taking it another step further, it should've been obvious that playing a 4-kyu with a Lance handicap would be harder than playing a 6-kyu in an even match. In fact, some professionals say that the upper player has the advantage in that situation because the handicap gives them the first move automatically. Except I didn't know that back then.

Becoming strong by playing only even matches as I did, I severely lacked experience in handicapped matches.

Simply put I underestimated the Sub League.

"Aarggghhhh!!"

The second year held out ... stubbornly.

It almost looked like he was tilling his territory, planting *seeds* on the board, deploying piece after piece from the stand.

Even if his chances looked hopeless, he refused to lose and pressed on. Like a zombie.

—This Shogi it's not in any book anywhere!

It was different from any professional's style, and of course not like the way any amateur played.

The worst game ever continued on and on as I had to destroy his options one by one.

—This isn't Shogi at all!

This was just some ugly fistfight. For the first time in my life, I hated the Shogi in front of me.

Just as I was trying to corner his King once and for all, the worst possible thing happened.

"Kuruno-sensei! The air conditioner"

"Hm Stopped again, has it? Let's open the windows for the next matches."

Everyone was in the late-game, using vital seconds to read as far ahead as they could. The heat emanating from them made the arena stifling.

“Haaa Haaa Haaa Too hot

Sweat was pouring out of me as I gasped for breath.

— Lungs hurt Eyes fogging up

Even so, this match was all that mattered.

Win, and I’m in the Sub League. I could fight in the same place as Ayumu and Yaichi.

“Then I Then I ...!”

My physical endurance had given out long ago, but I still pushed myself to read the board as hard as I could.

Hot.

It felt like my body was burning up. My heart was beating fast enough to burst open. Even so, I desperately searched for that one perfect move—.

“There ... it ... isssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!!”

I sacrificed a major piece to close the distance. He pressed on, hoping that I would make a mistake, but my attack tore through his defenses like tissue paper. I won ... this time for sure!

I picked up a Gold from my piece stand, the one that would end the match. All I had to do was snap it down in front of his King. The second year was staring into his lap as if he’d accepted his fate But he was biting his lip as if saying / *surrender* was the last thing he would ever do.

—Checkmate him and he won’t have any choice.

Getting up to my knees, I reach across the board.

Then—.

“.....?!”

Something strange happened inside my body in that instant.

Searing pain the likes of which I’d never felt before seared through my chest. The kind of pain that can’t be endured had me frozen to the spot.

His opponent might die from a heart attack.

I heard those words in the back of my mind.

Fear gripped me from head to toe. I was terrified. The piece I held in my hand fell to the board as I clutched my ribs. So much pain. Too painful to say anything at all.

“..... Yai ... chi My chest”

I used what little breath I had to call out to my younger brother apprentice who should be somewhere in the same arena playing his own match.

“My chest hurts

I only remember fragmented bits and pieces of what happened next.

Me collapsing onto the Shogi board. The pieces getting all messed up. Yaichi abandoning his own match to rush to my side. Master Kiyotaki, who I hadn't seen all morning, suddenly bursting into the arena and shouting my name. Dr. Akashi leaning over me, saying something I couldn't hear. The pain. An ambulance siren. “Her pulse is at 200.” My crying parents. An oxygen mask. Hospital colors. So much pain. Adults dressed in white lab coats peering down at me.

And then Lots of familiar faces.

They were the children who played Shogi with me and Dr. Akashi back during my time at the hospital.

—What you are doing here?

I didn't understand what was happening to me. Each second was more confusing than the last.

Weird.

It's too weird to be real.

I mean Years had passed since I'd seen them, *but not a single one had aged a day.*

—Oh. *Obon* is today.

That's when it finally hit me.

The *poor kids* who were always with me in the hospital, the ones who were better at Shogi than I was, the children who were just gone one day.

I had always thought they were released from the hospital.

That, like me, they weren't *poor kids* anymore.

But I was wrong.

Those children They're ... probably

I WANT TO BE A GROWN-UP

“Wowwie! Top bwunk is so so high up!”

The girls won’t settle down enough to go to sleep.

In the end, Charlette and Mio claimed the top bunk while Ai and Ayano agreed to sleep on the bottom.

..... Mio will be leaving Japan this summer and Charlette will be going back to France at some point. The girls on the bottom bunk didn’t say that out loud, choosing to say: *I’m scared of heights* and *I want to sleep where Master slept* instead. They truly are kind.

“I wanna see some pictures! Keika, do you have any albums?”

That’s why I couldn’t stop myself when Mio asked.

“I sure do. I’ve got lots and lots right here.”

“Oh, wow! These are precious photos!”

“Haauuu! Master was cute when he was little≡”

“Sora-sensei is so tiny, too! And Keika, wow you were young!!”

“I-I’m still in my twenties. That’s pretty young, you know?” I tell a giddy Mio as she leans over the side of the top bunk But Ai flips through the albums, her head tilted to the side like she’s searching for something.

“..... Huh? That’s strange”

“Is something wrong, Ai?”

“I think an album is missing. There aren’t any pictures of Master from his second semester in fourth grade up until he started fifth”

She’s sharp.

“Really? That is strange. Maybe dad took that album into his room Or we might have lent that one out.”

“Went? Who to?”

“The association, TV producers, magazine editors. The list goes on, Charlette,”

I explain as succinctly as possible to hide how rattled I am.

“Yaichi and Ginko became famous once they won titles, so we get requests for old pictures to go along with articles and things like that. Our Master always said, *These two are gonna need pictures in the future*, and put albums together all the time.”

“V-Very enlightening! I will remember that!!” says Ayano, who herself has writing aspirations, as she sits down on her ankles and adjusts her glasses. It’s almost like the album in front of her has become a treasure chest in her eyes.

The missing album, the one that Ai pointed out ...

It’s in my room, put away somewhere safe.

Once the girls finally go to bed, I return to my room and take it out for the first time in a very long while.

The pictures in here—are of Ginko in the hospital and the trips the rest of us made to visit her.

It was the day after Ginko collapsed in the middle of the Sub League Entrance Exam.

“.....!! I-I can’t believe”

Words failed me when I stepped inside that room.

There was Ginko Conscious but silent behind an oxygen mask, getting a blood transfusion and breathing so hard her shoulders nearly reached her ears.

Her eyes were cloudy and didn’t even acknowledge that I was in the room.

But, every so often, the fingertips on her right hand would twitch ever so slightly.

—She’s still fighting the Entrance Exam

I couldn’t bear to see her in that state and left the room soon after going inside.

I was called into a different room where I had a chance to hear an explanation from Dr. Akashi, who had always overseen Ginko’s treatment. Just

the two of us, one on one.

“Keika. I apologize for never telling you. Truly, I’m sorry.”

Kiyoshi Akashi Sub League 2-*dan* was once my father’s research partner.

My father drilled Shogi knowledge into my head from my first day of elementary school onward for several years. During that time, I saw Mr. Akashi at the house more than a few times having practice sessions with him.

A hardcore Static Rook party member, he was especially skilled with *yagura* strategies like my father.

No. Even as 2-*dan*, Mr. Akashi could overpower him.

Yet he simply disappeared at some point. I later found out that he decided to quit the Sub League the day after he was promoted to 3-*dan*.

“I want to save people, not trample them under my feet.”

Those words were all he left behind.

After that, he became a pediatrician But I didn’t know that he still had any connection to my father until Ginko came to live with us as a live-in apprentice.

“I remember you being this cute little girl, but here you are, 20 years old You’ve grown into a fine young woman.”

“Yes. I’ve grown up,” I retorted coldly. “So, I have the right to know. What does Ginko have?”

Getting treated like a child had always irritated me because I was the only one being left out of the loop.

But not knowing how to help Ginko when she was in so much pain hurt most of all.

Mr. Akashi probably intended to tell me everything when he called me into that room. He had a small mountain of paperwork ready and went through it as simply as he could.

“Ginko has been physically weak since birth. But her biggest issue is her heart.”

The name of the disease he gave me was so difficult to wrap my head around

that I didn't understand it.

For someone who barely studied at all in high school, all those medical words he used for the causes and symptoms went right over my head.

However, the last thing he said was very clear.

"Her chance of surviving five years is 50 percent."

It took me time to comprehend what those words I wasn't used to hearing actually meant.

I needed even longer to accept the reality.

"In five years one in two people die from it Is that, right?"

—What about in 10 years?

I was too scared to ask that question.

"This condition Ginko has ... There's still a lot we don't know about it. Actually, there is very little that lines up with things we do know, things we can point to and say, *that's it!* So doctors have been coming up with names and leaving it there A diagnosis by exclusion, if you will. That's what it comes down to. Doctors aren't allowed to say *I don't know* when we get asked what the disease is"

The cause, and even the symptoms, couldn't be pinned down.

The only option was to treat whatever symptoms pop up like an endless game of whack-a-mole.

"The only way to completely cure her would be a heart transplant. The problem is there aren't many hearts suitable for children available. Each of us only has one and adult hearts are too big."

He was trying to sound ambiguous, but even I could tell what he meant.

For Ginko to get a heart transplant that meant another child her age would have to not need theirs anymore.

Someone dies so another can survive.

It's an extremely cruel concept. I remember thinking it was just like Shogi.

But Ginko's battle was no game.

It was reality.

"Heart transplants are very expensive, but the chances that a child's heart will be available at all are extraordinarily slim."

"So what are we supposed to do? Just watch her wither away?!"

"No. This is the important part, Keika."

With that, Mr. Akashi told me the unbelievable truth.

"There have been documented cases of children with Ginko's condition recovering naturally as they grow older. As strange as it sounds, there's a chance her heart might normalize as she grows up!"

"Recover? Naturally? Are you sure?"

"Yes ... which is why she simply needs to stay alive as long as she can. That's imperative. Rather than some miracle pill, the best medicine for Ginko is time. Daily routine is especially important for young children Basically, they need to be convinced to stay inside at an age when most want to go outside and play. That's crucial."

Things were starting to line up.

The reason why Mr. Akashi taught Ginko how to play Shogi in the first place ...

"It's hard to be strict with Ginko, making it hard to keep her on the same routine. What she needed was a coach, like in sports Someone who could create a well-structured environment that would simulate the bond shared by a parent and child. Does this sound familiar to you?"

"The Master-apprentice relationship"

"Exactly! Apprentices get the same loving support as a parent would give, but Masters don't spoil their students. I made the decision that putting Ginko in that situation would be the best thing for her."

The mystery of Ginko Sora was starting to come together like the jumbled-up pieces of a jigsaw puzzle fitting in place to form a picture.

It felt like the whole world around me was getting turned on its head.

“But wouldn’t someone else have been better? Why did you go to my father? He never had an apprentice before.”

“But he raised a wonderful daughter.”

“.....!”

“That condition had to be met. It needed to be someone with parenting experience. Despite being a single father, I saw how well he raised you with my own eyes.”

“B-But! In that case Why not Oishi-sensei? You’re close friends, aren’t you? Wouldn’t it have been easier to go to him instead? Why my father?”

Instead of answering my question directly, he started telling me a story.

“There was something I never understood while doing practice sessions with Kiyotaki-sensei. Even if he was obviously going to lose, he always held out as long as he could.”

“.....?”

“Seriously, these were practice session matches. I wanted to sharpen my early-game skills, but he would always try to salvage a failed strategy. As he was the veteran, I went along with it, but to be honest, I looked down on Kiyotaki-sensei in those days. I thought he was just a stubborn old man who couldn’t accept that he was beaten.”

However Mr. Akashi continued.

“After I’d examined a number of children unfortunate enough to be born with various diseases, I finally understood. There is value in holding on in the face of despair, in refusing to just give up.”

“The value of not giving up”

“That man always committed everything he had to win, even in practice sessions. It was because he knew that if he didn’t do it then, he’d never be able to hold out even longer when it counted. Actually, I’d bet your father wouldn’t throw a Shogi match, not in a million years ... just as there isn’t a single life on earth that can be thrown away,” said an impassioned Dr. Kiyoshi Akashi.

It was almost as if he was trying to give himself a pep talk.

“It’s alright if the early-game doesn’t go perfectly. It’s the mid-and late-game that are important. Shogi and life are one and the same.”

Oh That was it.

So——.

“That’s why I entrusted Ginko to Kiyotaki-*sensei*. I was sure of it Not the god, not Tsukimitsu-*sensei*, not even the Worldly Maestro, only Kiyotaki-*sensei* could give that girl what she really needed. What she needed wasn’t medicine or a heart transplant.”

It was——.

“A mentality strong enough to never give up no matter what bleak reality she had to face.”

It was——.

“The courage to stand up against any opponent without fear.”

It was———.

“The muddy, gritty, stubborn determination to keep moving forward no matter how much it hurt or how intense the pain.”

Akashi-*sensei* summed all of that up with this.

“What she needed was——an unbreakable spirit.”

A year later, Ginko tried the Sub League Entrance Exam once again, this time as a third-grade elementary school student.

She passed. Her opponent didn’t know what hit him.

“Ginko!! You’re in!! Congratulations——!!”

It was the day her acceptance certification arrived.

I pulled out all the stops, celebrating every way I knew how. I’d never let her

see me sad again. Because, seriously, she'd already suffered more than her fair share during her life.

She didn't need my pity because more than enough people already thought she was a *poor girl*.

So I decided that my smile would always be there to pick her up.

Ginko had adored me unconditionally right from the start.

I have no idea what made her latch onto me like that.

Our meeting was purely a coincidence, like how the Silver *Gin*, Knight *Keima* and Lance *Kyousha* all line up next to each other If that's the case, then we should stay together, always.

That's how I'll atone ... how I'll make up for treating her so badly when she first arrived. Whether or not that'll ever be enough, I'm not sure.

"I used a whole bottle of your favorite sauce making dinner tonight! And guess what, it's that famous one that's always sold out!"

"Yay. I'll put more on."

"Go right ahead. You can use as much sauce as you like."

Dote on her. Just make her as happy as possible.

"Let's go buy you a present to celebrate! What would you like?"

"Um May I?"

After a little fidgeting, Ginko asked for what she wanted without a single stutter.

"I want that black hairband you used to wear"

"That?"

I wore it up until my high school days.

Back then, I thought it was childish, so I moved on.

"It's still in my room and made to fit any size, so you're welcome to it, but"

Was that old thing good enough?

Was she worried about my money because I still hadn't become a Women's League player?

"It's really worn out. I'll buy a new one for you, the same design and everything."

"No! I want the one that you wore!!"

That was the loudest I've ever heard Ginko raise her voice. So we held hands all the way up to my room and I gave it to her.

Standing in front of the mirror, I slipped that hairband onto her head for her.

"Giggle. Teehee"

There she was, running her fingers up and down the hairband and smiling like a girl her age should.

"Um, Keika?"

"Yes, Ginko?"

"Will I grow up to become a nice person like you?"



Right then and there, I finally understood why this girl latched onto me.

“Of course, you will ☆”

Smile! Never cry, never!!

Smile!! You’re already 20, aren’t you?!! Smile!!!

I forced my lips to curve up and bit down on my tongue to keep the tears back. I tasted blood.

—A 50 percent chance to live five years.

Desperately trying to refute those words blaring like a warning siren in my head, I smiled at Ginko and gave her a big hug.

All so that she couldn’t see the tears I couldn’t stop from flowing.

“You sure will. I just know you will.”

That day was almost five years after we first met.

Ginko’s heart never showed any signs of a problem after that.

Fifteen years had passed since that condition seized her before her first birthday.

She’s been able to withstand the rigors that come from holding two Women’s Titles while being in the Practice League at the same time. Her condition is gone.

“She’s alright Everything’s alright. There’s nothing to worry about. Mr. Akashi said she’s made a complete recovery”

Pressing the closed photo album against my forehead, I repeat the words: *it’s alright* and *she’s recovered* like a broken record. Almost like a psalm.

After I learned what her condition was called, I did my own research in medical textbooks.

It was true that other children with Ginko’s condition recovered naturally but some experts cited different diseases that caused similar symptoms to Ginko’s. The cases were all mixed up, so who knows if the records can be trusted.

“..... But ...”

Even if she really has recovered, that's not the end of it.

In terms of treating the disease, Mr. Akashi's methods were perfect.

Unfortunately, doctors aren't gods.

Mr. Akashi had made one miscalculation.

If Ginko really does turn professional if she catches up to Yaichi and makes him notice her in *that* way, I'll probably have to tell her everything.

An even harsher truth for both of them.

"Am I doing the wrong thing? But what would've been right? Should I have stopped Ginko from going to the wolves in the hellish 3-*dan* division all by herself? I"

I could never do that.

Because, for me, she goes beyond the realm of Master and apprentice relationships to *actual family*.

"..... Keika? Are you still awake?"

From out of nowhere, someone calls my name and I quickly wipe my eyes. I don't turn around so she can't see my face.

"Yes. I've been struggling with a formation and decided to do a little researching Did you need to use the restroom, Ai? Are you okay by yourself?"

"I'm on my way back. Ayano was scared to go alone, and I was awake, so I went with her."

"That was nice of you. But you need to get some sleep," I say as I finally turn around now that my face is presentable.

Ai nods, but stays right where she is.

"Um, Keika."

"What is it, Ai?"

"Master, is he really"

The girl mumbles, staring at her feet.

“Um, never mind! It’s nothing!”

She looks back up, smiling, and waves her tiny hand.

“Good night, Keika.”

“..... Sweet dreams, Ai.”

Ai closes the door behind her and goes back into the kid’s room.

A smart, good-natured and healthy little girl who is loved by everyone she meets. She’s already cute, but she’ll become drop-dead gorgeous once she grows up.

What’s more, her Shogi talent is right up there with Ginko, possibly even more.

Her very existence is as if the Shogi gods made their love for the game into a living person. Almost like Ginko was reincarnated into a healthy body

“..... Huh?”

A sudden thought shoots to my brain with a snap.

A truly horrible thought.

Back when Ginko was taken in as a live-in apprentice, the reason for it was kept from me.

The way things are these days, live-in apprentices aren’t normal.

Whenever a Shogi player makes a move that isn’t normal, there’s always a deeper meaning behind it.

A hidden reason.

“Yaichi who was it that first told you to make Ai a live-in apprentice?”

Just like back when I first heard Mr. Akashi’s explanation, I feel my world start turning on its head.

FINAL DESTINATION

Next morning. The rain is gone.

“Good morning, Big Sis.”

“..... Morning.”

Waking up, the first thing I see is Big Sis over by the window looking out at the garden.

“You don’t look like you got any sleep”

Her eyes are bloodshot. Don’t tell me she’s been up since we got here?

Big Sis hasn’t eaten breakfast either. I’m pretty sure she had water at some point, but I couldn’t put up with an empty stomach any longer and have some rice porridge.

After saying a quick *thank you* to the hotel staff, I have them call us a taxi, and direct the driver to our destination.

We arrive—at the top of the cliff with the waves crashing against the rocks below.

Big Sis looks out at the Sea of Japan before her gaze drops down to her feet. She gawks in surprise.

“These rocks They’re so jagged”

“Be careful. They’ll cut through your skin if you trip.”

Formed from cooled lava, the obsidian shale is sharp enough to shave with. Even with shoes, it hurts to walk on. And the rocks go on forever.

The end of the earth.

That phrase fits this spot perfectly.

The sky, a clear, bright blue without a single cloud after yesterday’s rain, the deep blue of the sea, and the dark brown rocks are despairingly beautiful—a

place to die.

Keeping a firm hold of Big Sis's thin arm so she doesn't fall, the two of us make our way out to the tip, to the end.

Then, once we're looking down at the surf below, Big Sis asks me in a slightly shaky voice.

"What is this place called?"

"Tojinbo. Haven't you heard of it?"

"I haven't But, somehow, it looks familiar"

Yeah.

Almost all Japanese people *have seen it at some point* without ever coming here.

"You know how there's usually a scene where the bad guy gets cornered on the cliff in suspense movies? This is that cliff."

"It was in Fukui"

"Yes, it was. In my home prefecture."

I was stunned when I found out.

"I came here once with my family when I was a kid. We made a stop here on our way to the beach. It was before I became a live-in apprentice, so I think I must've been four or five years old, but I remember it so well because it was the first time I went somewhere I'd seen on TV."

I remember my knees shaking because I was up so high. It gave me nightmares for weeks.

Looking out over the open sea, I say, "But this place is real. It's one of the places in Japan known for people committing suicide."

".....!"

Big Sis gulps.

Looking around, there are quite a few public phones directly connected to suicide-prevention hotlines and billboards with encouraging words designed to stop people from going through with it.

In a way, that's even scarier than the rocks.

"All different kinds of people with all different kinds of problems tumble their way through Japan and end up standing on the edge of this cliff. Cornered people who've run out of places to run fall from here. The pain and pressure will go away if you do the same."

It will all be over if Big Sis takes one step forward from where she is now at the edge of the cliff.

Next to her, I ask, "What will you do? Can you throw yourself over?"

"....."

Big Sis crouches down on the spot and looks over the edge. Almost like she's peering down at her own demise.

I look down, too.

It's dizzying, seeing the surf all the way down there from this height. Waves are crashing against the cliff so hard that the water's edge is nothing but white-washed bubbles.

Several long moments pass in silence.

—What if Big Sis really does make the jump?

While I really don't think she would, part of me isn't so sure.

The 3-*dan* division isn't a place where you can fight without your head on straight. Big Sis's spirit could be completely broken right now. If the thought *this is too much* crosses her mind for even a moment, Big Sis could disappear right along with those bubbles. Like the little mermaid.

If that happens, then I too——.

"..... I'm not dying. I wasn't some *poor girl*."

"Huh?"

I know Big Sis said something, but I couldn't hear over the waves.

Getting back to her feet, Big Sis looks out over the sea and says, "Yaichi."

"Yes?"

"I'm hungry."

“..... Alright.”

That was the first moment she’s shown any will to live since we started this trip.

The two of us make our way back to a nearby souvenir shop and buy two *sashimi* sushi lunches. Big Sis also gets some grilled clams, opening them all with one clean *snap*.

“Hip! Hop! Jump!”

Big Sis sounds just like a little kid as she jumps from stone to stone.

“Don’t get any closer to the edge, okay? It’s dangerous. It’d be an embarrassing way to go, losing your balance and falling off a cliff.”

“I won’t fall,” she says, turning around to stick her tongue out at me. “Don’t act so high and mighty, little brother. Idiot.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I answer, following right behind her and munching on the squid ink ice cream (mixed with little gray candies)—a specialty this area is known for.

Tojinbo’s infamous *suicide spot* reputation dates from way back.

Go here now, and it’s pretty much a tourist attraction. There are all sorts of shops and sights to visit, and it’s probably the only place in Fukui that’ll get likes on Instagram for scenery alone.

TV shows and movies only show the cliffs and the water, but there are whole streets lined with souvenir shops, Tojinbo Tower is worth the visit and the boat rides are a lot of fun!

The sky is blue, but the ocean is even bluer.

Hearing the waves crash onto the rocks is calming.

I do my best to talk over them.

“So what would you like to do now?”

“..... Good question,” says Big Sis under her breath as she looks out over the water.

Her silver hair fleetingly dances on the ocean breeze, offering a window into

her wavering heart.

While she's better than she was, I don't think she's recovered enough to start thinking about the 3-*dan* division just yet.

But the best move now is obvious.

—Get home ASAP and get back to researching Shogi.

Our opponents are all getting stronger while we're out here sitting in the breeze.

Just as some players advanced by leaps and bounds just by getting to a title match, plenty of players hit their stride while fighting in the 3-*dan* division.

It's pretty common for up-and-coming players in the Sub League to get hot and blast their way through the 3-*dan* division in a short amount of time like I did.

On the other hand, lose your momentum and you end up spinning your wheels in the Sub League until the age limit forces you out.

It's like what happens with college entrance exams.

Current high schoolers have a better chance of cruising to acceptance than *ronin* students who failed to get in the first time and have spent a full year just studying to get into college.

And high schoolers grow the fastest during the final spurt at the end. That's about where the 3-*dan* division is now, just past the halfway point.

—Now is a very important time for Big Sis because it's her first time fighting in the division. But

There's a place I want to take her.

Up until yesterday, I never thought there was a chance that Big Sis would die.

But once I realized there was a possibility, something inside me woke up and I can't stamp it back down.

That's why I invited Big Sis out on this trip.

There's something I want to tell her.

There's something I want to show her, too.

We've been together for nearly 12 years become closer than families bound by blood and been in each other's presence for a very long time, but

I've played more Shogi with her than anyone, exchanged more words with her than anyone, but

Even so, there's something I've never told her.

The most important thing. Not yet.

"Um!" I call out to Big Sis walking a few steps in front of me. I had to yell so she could hear me over the waves.

"What is it, Yaichi?"

She looks back over her shoulder, confused.

Her skin so white, her presence fleeting, it's like I can see right through her

"—Ahh It sure looks like, even after all this time, I"

Pressure building up in my chest, the words won't come out.

"Ummm Well, you see."

Acting as casual as I possibly can, but so nervous that I swallow my own spit until my mouth is bone dry, I make my move.

"Would you like to spend an extra night out?"

"Fine by me, but back at that inn?"

"No, someplace else. I mean, it's in Fukui Prefecture, but a lot further inland and it will take a long time to get there by train, so there aren't all that many interesting things to see, though I guess you could say there's really nothing special there except for the stars and going would all be a waste of time if it's cloudy, but if you'd like——."

"Long-winded. Annoying. I said I'd go, didn't I?" She cuts me off in the middle and says, "So? Where are we going?"

"My parent's house."

Big Sis loses her balance and nearly falls off the edge.

RECORD 4

九頭竜八一
(17歳)

YAICHI KUZURYU
(17)

空銀子
(15歳)

GINKO SORA
(15)

THE KUZURYUS

“Aghhh Nghhh”

Big Sis keeps groaning and moaning in the seat next to me.

Leaving Tojinbo behind, the two of us are on a train once again.

“What’s with you, Big Sis? Don’t tell me you’re nervous?”

“B-But not what ... nervous? Wanna pike inda head?”

Yeah, she’s real nervous.

Big Sis continues to rant through mixed-up words and strange sounds all while fidgeting with her hair.

“Geez Yaichi, were you always planning to take me to your parent’s house?”

“Yeah, actually that was kind of what I originally had in mind.”

“Then tell me! I would’ve picked up something for them at Osaka Station!”

“Souvenirs? There’s no need to worry about that.”

“Maybe not for you, but I definitely do!!”

“We can buy something at Fukui Station if you like.”

“That would make them think we just picked something up along the way!! I’d rather show up empty-handed!! Idiot! Drop dead, you stupid idiot!!”

“Keep your voice down!! There’s no telling what’ll happen if someone recognizes us!”

Big Sis is famous all over the country, and I’m pretty well known in Fukui.

Plus, there will be more people around who know me personally the closer we get to my parent’s place.

“Please try to stay quiet until we get to Fukui Station and change trains.”

“Meaning I can shout as loud as I want once we do?”

“No, that’s not what I said. Besides, there isn’t a train in the whole world where you can do that, is there?” After correcting that obviously bizarre logic, “But, yeah, you’ll understand once we get on the next train.”

“?”

She looks at me, confused. But it won’t be long before it all makes sense to her.

“..... We’re the only ones on the train

“Yes. No one can recognize us if there’s no one here, right?”

It’s a parade of nothing but mountains, rivers and rice paddies passing by outside the empty train car.

“..... We really are going deep in the mountains

“Yes, we are. Just a heads up: my parent’s place is even further back.”

I doubt anyone else will get on the train before we get to the final stop.

Our own personal train car takes us slowly through the mountains and passes nostalgic scenery.

It’s like I’m retracing my memories.

“..... This place: it’s pretty. A train ride for just the two of us Like a dream.”

Big Sis squints as a cool breeze comes in through one of the slightly open windows.

“Summer is officially here. It’s so green.”

“It really sneaks up on you, doesn’t it? *Tanabata* is right around the corner.”

“*Tanabata* That means the start of summer vacation. We used to get on trains just like this one in summer back when we were in elementary school and we’d go to any classrooms rumored to have strong players, remember?”

“We sure did. Once we were in the Sub League, crashing classrooms like that was our only option because we couldn’t enter amateur tournaments anymore.”

“Everyone laughed at us at first, but then they would just stare when they

lost.”

“I still remember one guy: *This can't be right!* People were especially shocked when they lost to you, Big Sis.”

“..... It would be fun to go again ... visit different classrooms together.”

Knowing full well we can't, I nod along with her. She was forbidden as soon as she became Queen.

Getting off the train, we get on a bus to go even further up the mountain. This particular bus route only runs three times a day, so miss this one and we'd have been in a lot of trouble. There's also a bit of walking to do after getting off the bus. The sunlight is so strong that we stick to the shade when we can. Sunlight filters through the leaves as we go.

Until, finally, we get to my parent's place.

“Mom, Dad, I'm home.”

I haven't been back here since I was crowned Dragon King Ryuo, so about a year and a half. I almost never came back to visit while I was a live-in apprentice, so it actually feels like I've been coming home a lot lately.

By the same token, my parents have never come to Osaka. That's probably because my younger brother was still little, but he left to live at a boarding school for junior high school kids this past spring.

The thumping of busy feet comes from deep in the house as someone rushes toward the front door.

“Coming, coming, coming, coming! Oh! Come on inside!”

My mother appearing in the hallway makes Big Sis so nervous that I can feel it. This never happens.

Speaking of things that never happen, my mother looks happy to see Big Sis with me.

“Thank you for making such a long trip. I hope this neck of the mountains wasn't too far out for you?”

“Ah, no

Big Sis is absolutely adorable when she's tongue-tied. But we can't stay frozen

in this moment forever, so I start up a conversation.

“Is Dad out in the field?”

“Nope. There’s a farmer’s union meeting today. He should be back any minute, though.”

Big Sis then whispers quietly so only I can hear, “..... Isn’t he working at that pipsqueak’s inn?”

“My older brother is, yes. I’m not sure why, but my dad decided to tend grandpa’s old rice paddy starting this year. I’m not too sure he’s up for it, but”

My grandfather always sent rice and vegetables to Master’s place while I was a live-in apprentice. He passed away right before I turned pro in junior high.

Honestly, I’m happy that my dad decided to protect grandpa’s rice paddy. Worried, but happy.

My mom looks at Big Sis and says, “Cleaning up a paddy after three years of not growing rice is a lot of work! We finally got all the weeds out and soil ready for planting yesterday.”

“That’s late, very very late.”

Then again, we can see *that* because dad is so behind schedule.

Just as the rice paddy talk picks up, Big Sis pinches my sleeve and yanks.

“..... Yaichi. Introduce me”

“Ah! Sorry, Big Sis.”

She seems to have recovered enough. So, I introduced the girl standing next to me to my mom.

“Mom, this is my older sister in the Kiyotaki Shogi family line. I’m sure you know, but she has two Women’s Titles and is pretty famous.”

“My name is Ginko Sora. Kuzuryu-*sensei* has done so much for me during our time as live-in apprentices.”

After sounding like a confused baby only a few minutes ago, Big Sis has pulled herself together nicely. She keeps her introduction short and very polite.

I can't pass up this chance and whisper, "..... Usually it'd be *I've done so much for him*, yeah? Since when are you so modest, Big Sis?"

"Idiot Oh, pardon me. I didn't mean to show up unannounced like this, especially with nothing for you"

After snapping back at me under her breath, Big Sis sounds genuinely sorry.

As for my mom, who's been grinning at her this whole time, "Don't worry, don't worry! My son bringing home a girl who can introduce herself properly is the best gift I could ever receive." Looking happily at the two of us standing side-by-side, my mom says, "After all, you are the first girl Yaichi has ever brought home. It's been a dream of mine, you know? Having my son introduce me to his girlfriend."

"We aren't dating!!" Big Sis and I retort in unison.

HIDDEN FLAVOR

“Tell me, Ginko, do you cook for Yaichi?”

Yaichi’s mother smiles at me, the two of us standing shoulder to shoulder in the kitchen.

“I have, but He seems not to like what I make for him.”

“Really? Okay, show me what you can do! I’ve always dreamed of cooking with my son’s girlfriend!”

“I-I’m not his girlfriend!”

Apparently there’s something Yaichi wants to show me, but he needs to get it ready and left me alone with his mother.

Just standing around would be too awkward, so I asked her to give me something to do. She was the one who suggested we cook dinner.

To be frank, that was a relief.

Out of all household chores, cooking is what I do best. If she had said, “As long as you’re here, would you clean out the air conditioner for me?” or “Would you get the stains out of the carpet?” or maybe “Chase the tiger off the folding screen,” I would be in a very difficult position. How does someone do these things? The last thing I wanted was for her to think I’m useless around the house. There’s no ulterior motive. I don’t care that this woman is Yaichi’s mother and I’m not competing with that elementary school apprentice of his, nothing of the sort. Simply, my pride as a woman is on the line.

..... What? I’m perfectly calm.

“Tell you what, I’ll let you in on Yaichi’s favorite flavors. Then I won’t tell Yaichi that you’re the one who made dinner and we can surprise him after he’s eaten every bite! He-he-he.”

Hmm

Yaichi seems convinced that I’m a terrible cook for no reason whatsoever, but this way I can force him to judge my cooking on flavor.

“Ahh, it’s so nice to have your cooking again, Mom. It’s even better than Ai’s Huh?! This was all Big Sis?! But it was so good!!”

..... Not a bad plan.

I’m not trying to please Yaichi. I’m trying to knock him off the high horse he’s been on ever since we got here and remind him who is higher up in the hierarchy.

“Okay Which way is the kitchen?”

I borrow an apron, tie it tight around my waist to get in a cooking mood and prep all the ingredients right away. Meat and potatoes are on the menu tonight. You can’t get much closer to *home cooking* than that, now can you?

“My, my. You have such steady hands, Ginko.”

“It’s part of my job. Shogi players’ fingertips are very sensitive, so dexterity is second nature.”

Her compliment lifting my spirits, I hum a tune and cut some more vegetables.

“If I may ask Does Yaichi ever say anything about me?”

“Nope.”

“.....”

“He talks a lot about that first apprentice of his, Ai. Usually, he’s asking me for advice on how to raise her. But I’ve hardly ever heard him say a word about you, Ginko. That’s why I’m so happy to get to meet you in person Now I understand exactly why he doesn’t say anything. He-he-he.”

“I see.”

That’s not really a surprise. I’ve known about Yaichi’s *preferences* for a long time.

At any rate, the food is almost done. All that’s left is to add some flavor and let it simmer. In Shogi terms, there’s a check path right to the enemy King and I’m closing in for the checkmate. Everything is going perfectly.

Now, to add the hidden flavor——.

“Wait a second there, Ginko.” She grabs my wrist mere moments before I

pour the extra ingredient I got out from the refrigerator into the pot and asks me, “Why are you going to put vegetable juice into meat and potato stew?”

“..... A hidden flavor. The additional nutrients will make it a perfectly balanced dish.”

My answer makes Yaichi’s mother grimace ever so slightly.

“You can whip up a salad for that. Adding juice to stew like this will ruin the taste.”

“Ah!”

How can I make such a simple error?

—It was perfect all the way to the end, so why?

Horrible flashbacks suddenly tear through my mind.

The kitchen.

The knife.

That Shogi ... where I made a mistake at the last possible moment.

“..... Ahhh Not again”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Ginko?! Are you are you crying?! I didn’t hurt your feelings, did I?!”

“..... No”

The corners of my eyes are on fire. Right hand trembling It seems the wounds from that loss hadn’t healed yet, like blood dripping out of a fresh scab.

“Always I always end up doing this. Even in Shogi I only need to make one or two more moves to win, but I end up doing something completely unnecessary and”

“I was wondering why Yaichi called me out of the blue to say he was bringing you here, but You seem to have something on your chest? I’d be happy to listen if you want to talk.”

“.....”

I blow my nose, wipe my tears away with my hand and start telling her everything.

“..... I don’t play original strategies like Yaichi does. I just follow the instructions as they are laid out in books Copying strong players like the Meijin”

It feels strange to me, opening my heart to this housewife I only just met. But the words keep coming.

I guess I wanted someone to hear them.

“But I can’t do the things that the Meijin does I try to come up with and play new moves from time to time, but they end up ruining everything like what was about to happen to the stew. I don’t have a sense for it. It’s all I can do to imitate what I’ve seen with my own eyes Someone like me could never be a professional”

Yaichi’s mother listens to me gripe without saying a word.

But then, she starts talking.

“Ginko.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know who first invented meat and potato stew?”

“..... What?”

“Well, how about the first one to fry an egg?”

“U-Umm I’m sorry. I don’t know”

“Right? I don’t have a clue either.”

“.....”

“But I do know dishes like meat and potato stew and fried eggs are more helpful to far more people than those fancy dishes that only famous cooks whip up. At the very least, I’m confident that I can satisfy every stomach in this house with food anyone can make.”

She then clears her throat and puffs out her chest with pride.

“I haven’t a clue about Shogi. But surely there are, what do you call them, strategies? Like meat and potato stew or fried eggs, right?”

“Ah”

Putting it like that, she does have a point.

There are times when one prodigy's original idea will take the Shogi world by storm and even change how the game is played.

However, not a single one of those strategies has managed to survive over the 10 years that I've been playing Shogi.

Older, classic strategies always find their way back into the mainstream.

Yagura, Bishop Exchange, Double Wing Attack, Side Pawn Capture, and the Snowroof Even Static Rook's top strategies that have been played by countless players for centuries are still in use with only a few tweaks here and there.

There are players like *Shakando-sensei* and Master who still do their own research and use strategies that up-and-coming players call *old* but are still very competitive.

Fans and those up-and-coming players only look at the strongest only watch to see how the Meijin plays.

However, there are many people who will never etch their name into Shogi history or appear in a title match yet still deserve respect.

They are professionals.

What I am trying to become.

"Here. This is the stew you made with your own hands. Go ahead, taste it."

"..... Delicious."

"See? Very well done."

She grins at me.

That's Yaichi's smile, through and through.

"You don't have to reinvent the wheel. You can make delicious food by doing what people have always done. It's doing it yourself that makes the flavor uniquely yours."

My own flavor

"Following the recipe? That's spectacular! You'll understand what a miracle it

is for everything you need to follow the recipe to be waiting for you in the fridge if you ever become a housewife. Satisfying the whole family with what's there is where we truly shine!"

"I'm impressed."

"He-he-he. You were thinking I was just a simple housewife, weren't you?"

"No, not at all——."

"But, that's exactly what I am. Managing a household like I do means that I have devoted my life to my family. It's the same way that you and Yaichi have devoted your own to Shogi."

".....!!"

Her tone is so gentle, and yet No, it was because she put it so gently that her words slice right through my naïve heart.

"Devoting your life to one thing or another isn't all that special. Everyone has had to sacrifice something they wanted to do to commit themselves to something else. That's no different from how I've spent the past 20 years supporting my husband, my in-laws and my sons without taking a single day off."

..... I thought Shogi was all there is.

I thought that a life without becoming a professional was devoid of meaning, that there was no point in living if my Shogi was weak. That's why I wanted to take my life when my chances of promoting out of the 3-*dan* division all but disappeared.

It's not that I have no respect for other walks of life.

But I'd become arrogant without realizing it. So many people have told me that *the Sub League is hell* and praised me for being *the first female member* that I thought I was committing far more effort than the average person.

It made my spirit weak.

I used talent as an excuse and simply blamed my losses on a lack of effort. The battle never ends, and I ran away from it.

A full two days have passed since the shock of that loss, and I'm still running

away from Shogi.

But if Yaichi's mother had ran away from her responsibilities for a single day, Yaichi could have died back when he was just an infant.

What could a person who thinks one loss is worth dying over ever hope to accomplish?

"I've raised three boys, so do you think I could call myself a professional?"

"Yes. I think you are more than qualified."

"Then let me speak as a professional."

She leans down next to my ear and whispers as if about to let me in on a very important secret.

"The thing about boys is that they try to hide the girl they like!"

Yaichi and his father come back later that night and we all sit down together at the dinner table.

"Well, hello there! How nice of you to come all the way out here!"

Yaichi's father grabbed a beer first thing in the door and is now in a great mood as he takes another swig.

I saw him briefly at the opening night party of the fourth Ryuo Title Match last year (though, whether or not that was just an opening night party is up for debate). However, he's lost so much weight since then and gotten so tan from the sun that I didn't recognize him as the same person at first.

"C'mon Yaichi. Why'd you wait so long to introduce her, huh? I happen to be one of Naniwa's Snow White's biggest fans!"

"Bringing her here like this is enough, right? I've been busy," Yaichi scoffs.

His mother winks at me, almost like she's saying *See?* ... Please cut that out.

Yaichi looks at me with a curious look in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Big Sis? Your face is bright red. Did you get sunburned?"

"Be quiet."

I swallowed the word *idiot* because his parents are right here. Idiot.

“Seriously, Dad, I thought you and my big brother were going to be working at the Hinatsuru Inn, so what made you suddenly go into farming? I thought Ai’s mother made you a great offer, didn’t she?”

“Well, I do have my pride.”

The man takes another swig of beer.

“A father ... depending on the family of his son’s apprentice for everything? How pathetic is that? And I’ve made one heck of a discovery!”

“Discovery?”

“You know that rice granddad was growing? Seems that was a brand-new strain all his own.”

“Whaaat?!” Yaichi and I say in surprise.

The rice that showed up at Master’s doorstep when we were live-in apprentices? Really?

“I’m sure you’ve heard about *Dragon’s Eye*, right? The grain itself is huge, and it gets sold along with top-tier brands of rice, but an offshoot of that strain is what made Koshihikari.”

“O-Okay”

“That’s what granddad was growing: Koshihikari, but he’d only plant seeds that produced the biggest grain from the previous season’s harvest. Seems he did that enough to make his own strain that makes grain big enough to rival top brands like *Dragon’s Eye*. From a business perspective, it has a good shot of working out really well.”

Downing the last of his beer, the man’s eyes twinkle as he says, “That’s why I’m going to make a new brand *Dragon King’s Eye*!!”

“That’s using me, your son, to sell rice!! What happened to your own brand?!”

“Please, Yaichi! Just for this year Please protect the Dragon King Ryuo title for one more year!! Make my escape from a desk job work out!!”

“I can’t just choose to defend a title! They don’t work like that, do they Big Sis?!”

“I’ve protected mine.”

“As I knew you would, Miss Sora! Which is why an offshoot called *Fukui’s Snow White* is in the works! If you would, can I get a picture of you holding this box——?”

“Don’t drag Big Sis into this! You know she’s not allowed to do that! Yeesh, this is exactly why I didn’t want to introduce you to her”

“If I don’t make it as a rice farmer, I’ll be a YouTuber!! I’ll try anything if I’ve got nothing to lose! *Hey—yo! This is TrashPapaTV, Trash Ryuo’s old man. Hey-hey—yoo♪* and I’ll give tours of your old room for the whole Internet to see!!”

“Do that and I’ll put you out on the street! That’s right! *I’ll kick you out of the family!!*”

“Yes, yes, yes. The rice is ready so let’s eat, shall we?”

Yaichi’s mother stands up and walks into the kitchen. Her husband and son are in the middle of a heated argument, but she doesn’t seem to mind one bit.

I join her and help set the table. I made the food, so I want to be the one to bring it out Will Yaichi say it’s delicious? W-Well, it doesn’t matter to me either way. *Fidget*

“Wait. This smell

It hits me right as I start scooping rice into bowls.

“You can tell?! Yaichi’s grandfather had some raw rice in storage. Once we heard that he was bringing you here, Miss Sora, I went to the farmer’s union to get it polished,” says Yaichi’s father in the middle of arguing with his son with a fresh bottle of beer in his hand.

I would like to know what Yaichi thinks of my cooking, but more importantly, I want to savor this rice. Even just to remember Yaichi’s deceased grandfather.

“Let’s eat.”

The four of us put our hands together before taking a bite.

A slightly sweet aroma fills my nose as memories start flooding my mind.

“..... It’s the same that we used to have at Master’s house, the four of us

together,” I say mostly to myself, but Yaichi silently nods in agreement tearing up a little.

This reminds me of the first time Yaichi and I sat around the same dinner table. If I remember right, we talked about his grandfather that day. And about the rice paddy being a lucky charm for marriage or something weird like that

“Yaichi.”

Putting down his chopsticks, Yaichi’s father takes on a quiet, much more serious tone that makes their squabble from a few minutes ago feel like ancient history.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, getting large machinery into the rice paddy is impossible. So taking care of it is a ton of work. Granddad kept working that field all those years because——.”

“I know. He wanted me to inherit it if I didn’t turn pro, right?”

“No.”

“Huh?”

“I thought it would put too much pressure on you, so I didn’t bring it up at his funeral, but He always believed you would become professional. He had more faith in you than anyone.”

“Why would?”

“I still remember him saying: *With a great player like Kiyotaki-sensei for a Master, Yaichi’ll be a pro. Only question is when.*”

“!! Grandpa said that?”

“So, you see. Even if you didn’t go pro, that field was never going to be yours,” the man says sternly. “From the time you went to live with Kiyotaki-sensei, your mother and I have considered you a member of that household. Therefore, your real family is the girl sitting next to you, Ginko Sora.”

“.....!”

Yaichi is lost for words. Like him, I gulp in surprise.

“This isn’t your house anymore. I won’t let you have that field.”

Neither of his parents came to visit Yaichi in Osaka during my time as a live-in apprentice.

Not when he became a junior high school Shogi professional, and not even for the Ryuo Anointing Ceremony.

Now, I finally understand why.

There must've been something more difficult for them than coming to visit every day.

"But you know something? We haven't cut off our ties altogether."

"Huh?"

"Seeing you fight tooth and nail against the Meijin Watching Kiyotaki-*sensei* battle through placement matches late into the night, watching Keika hold out against the Women's Legend, seeing Ai Hinatsuru keep her eyes on the board despite the blood dripping out of her nose All because I saw Miss Sora's series against Ai Yashajin, I found the courage to try something new! Stubborn, gritty, the strength to get your hands dirty It inspired me to literally get muddy!"

Sounding the happiest I've heard him all night.

And looking fatherlier than ever, the man says, "So I've decided to consider myself a member of the Kiyotaki house! Bring the whole family up for the harvest. You too, Miss Sora. I'll have a bounty waiting for you this fall."

Ohh Now I get it.

This man ... he knew the whole time. He knew exactly why Yaichi brought me here.

Fall.

That's the end of the 3-*dan* division: harvest season.

AFTER LETTING GO

“I have to go with my eyes closed?”

“Yes. I want it to be a surprise.”

Yaichi extends his hand to me as I stand hesitant in the doorway.

“It’s not all that far away. Now ... come on.”

It’s pitch-black outside. A darkness like nothing a girl who grew up in the city like me has ever seen before has its gaping maw open wide on the other side of that door.

“.....”

I reach out, sliding my fingers to fit into his extended hand, hesitate for just a moment and close my eyes.

Yaichi gently guides me forward.

But it’s still scary. Walking around in a place you’ve never been with no idea where you’re going.

“It’s all right. We’ll take it slow.”

Trusting only that voice and the feeling of my hand in his, I put one foot in front of the other——.

A whole year went to waste with me going in and out of the hospital after I failed the Sub League Entrance Exam.

Yaichi rose to a level far out of reach during that one year.

Ayumu Kannabe 1-*kyu*.

Yaichi Kuzuryu 2-*kyu*.

By the time I entered the Sub League at 6-*kyu*, those two were rising through the ranks in the East and West respectively, but always had each other in their sights. Yaichi wasn’t stagnant anymore after breaking through that wall.

My winning percentage against him in our versus matches at home had fallen

to around 30 percent by that time. What's worse: the more waiting time he had, the more I lost.

I could hardly win at all in the Sub League either.

Kyu-ranking members play three matches during regular activity days. However, my body was always burning up and my vision cloudy by the time the third match came around With the fear of that pain seizing my heart again at any moment hanging over me like a dark cloud, I was in no shape to be playing Shogi.

Most people like a fragile glass ornament and kept their distance. Finding someone to practice with was always a struggle.

Meanwhile, Yaichi was traveling further and further away without me now that he had broken through the wall.

—What am I supposed to do?! Somebody, tell me what to do!!

Master would always try to comfort me whenever my temper got the best of me after a loss.

“Ya got nothin’ to worry ’bout, Ginko. Just get stronger bit by bit. Yer still 10 years old, yeah?”

—I’m already 10

Being told to take it slow did nothing for me. By all rights, I should’ve gotten into the Sub League when I was seven Now, three years later, I didn’t feel like I was making any progress.

The way that I dealt with that pressure was—.

“Ya wanna enter a Women’s Tournament?”

“Sub League members are permitted to enter the Queen and Women’s Throne League, yes?”

“At’s true, but

I knew this went against Master’s old philosophy: *Sub League members should stay out of the limelight and keep their noses to the grindstone in the shadows.*

“The Shogi gods’ll hate ya for it.”

That was always his argument. Every single time.

That's why I prepared some ammunition of my own.

"The Sub League only meets twice a month, which doesn't give me enough meaningful matches. The Sub League is so much more competitive than when you were there, Master. Other members are doing practice sessions with professionals, but I'm never invited because I'm a girl. Even when I do find an opponent, I can never get any honest feedback!"

"..... So, 'at's goin' on, too."

It was that easy.

And so, I entered the Mynavi Women's Open Challenge Matches during summer vacation as a fifth grade elementary school student.

"Ginko, you're going to be in the tournament to become Queen?"

Yaichi and I were playing a practice match in the kid's room when he asked me that question out of nowhere.

"That's right. It's summer vacation, so I'll get bored without something to do."

I lied to him. The reason was simple: he passed me up and I hated it.

"What will you do if I get a title first?"

"Hmmm Brag!" my older younger brother apprentice said without looking up from the board. That wasn't what I wanted to hear. I wanted him to hurt, to feel pressure.

Yaichi was a first-year junior high school student at the time.

He put on a black jacket uniform with a clipping collar and spread his wings to reach 1-*dan*.

His Shogi seemed stronger every time we played, and there were whispers in the Kansai Shogi world that Yaichi might have a chance to become the fourth junior high school professional in history.

On the other hand, Kanto utterly dominated the Shogi world as a whole back then. Yaichi's perverse defensive style went against the prevailing standards like

yagura and Side Pawn Capture, so he was treated like a sideshow attraction.

That was the reason why Ayumu Kannabe 2-*dan*, whose playing style coincided with modern Shogi's *strong defense into concentrated attacks* way of thinking, was considered the brightest up-and-coming player. Actually, I think there was a good chance Kannabe-*sensei* would've become a professional in junior high school by the slimmest of margins if only he had promoted to 3-*dan* one month earlier.

However, no new heroes arrived on the scene.

The Shogi world felt stagnant to me back in those days. The Meijin always seemed to have at least three titles in his possession, and many felt that the overall level had declined.

In fact, it was the generation *right beneath* the Meijin that had declined, making his strength appear otherworldly and drew attention not just from the rest of the Shogi world, but from society as well.

Books written by the Meijin lined the bestseller shelves at every bookstore and younger players replicated everything he did, from his playing style to his researching habits. *Garnering the love of the Shogi gods* came to mean doing everything the Meijin was doing, which resulted in an explosion of Static Rook research.

A stable Shogi world ruled by a god.

That's just how overwhelmingly powerful the Meijin was at the time People were only partly joking when they said they thought that age would last forever.

... Though there were some changes.

The first big one came about when Ranging Rook started employing the *Bishop Exchange 4th File Rook* strategy, one where the *Ranging Rook* player would initiate a *Bishop Exchange*.

This was revolutionary because Static Rook party members had been taught *Bishop Exchange against Ranging Rook* for eons. That trend destroyed what was common sense.

And the other big change A professional Shogi player lost to a computer

for the first time that year.

Those circumstances in professional Shogi laid the foundation for the rest of society to shift its attention to Women's Shogi.

To put it simply: I think the world was looking for a new hero to replace the Meijin.

A young person with the power to change Shogi's image, like an idol.

That's why I started attracting more fans with each win in the Preliminaries after making it through the Challenge Matches.

"Just who is that girl?"

"She's, you know, what's-her-face? The youngest grade schooler to ever be the Elementary Meijin. That girl from Osaka"

"Haven't heard about her in forever. So ... she was in the Sub League."

"Cute and strong. You know what, I'll sponsor her."

"Yeah, me too. I was going to put all my money into Tomayon, but I'll support her instead."

Mynavi Women's Open Preliminaries.

People can choose to privately sponsor individual players during that tournament. The one who received the most sponsors wasn't the high school-aged, idol-esque Women's Amateur Meijin turned Women's League player Tamayo Rokuroba.

But rather the elementary school-aged girl facing her.

Me.

"Th-This can't be allowed No one No one told me some silver-haired loli was going to be here!"

Tamayo Rokuroba ground her teeth together as she writhed in pain. I'm certain that, when all was said and done, I absorbed a lot of her popularity.

However, I couldn't have cared less.

—Ahhh! This is so much fun!

I was basking in the joy of playing Shogi the way I wanted to play it for the first

time in far too long.

Unlike the Sub League, players in the Women's League don't focus on shutting down whatever strategy their opponent is trying to do before they can do it. Neither side cares what the other does. Both players do their own thing until one side claims victory, even without a climactic battle.

I could play 10,000 matches that way and never lose.

"That little girl, she's seriously strong"

"She's dominating everything, popularity and skills!"

"If this keeps up and she does take the title we could be witnessing history"

After the preliminaries, I was friendly and open with the journalists who rushed up to talk to me.

Master always said I was *still in trainin'* but he saved every article written about me, and business was booming at the classroom because his first apprentice was on TV. So I felt no filial piety toward him whatsoever.

Simply put, I was full of myself.

... With no idea of what kind of retribution was waiting for me.

Retribution came first in the form of a monster in the form of a human being.
Ika Sainokami.

I ran into that amateur monster in her first year of junior high school during the second round of the finals.

"Eee-he-he-he-he! Ahhh ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaaa!!"

"Ngh! S-So fast"

"Oh, I like you, little Whitey! I've never gotten this into it with a girl before!"

The very first time I sat across the board from her in the Kanto Association's special arena in Sendagaya, I could tell she was far more dangerous and erratic than anyone else.

Even though she was clearly coming up with everything on the fly, her skill

with a Rook and the worldliness she produced was unparalleled. It was all I could do to keep her Shogi circus in check.

Each of her moves were played instantaneously. The problem was that all my predictions were off the mark. She reached for pieces I never expected, almost like she was seeing things that I wasn't. A familiar dread started taking over me.

—Could she be the same as Yaichi and Ayumu?!

I played fast just to keep up with her, but there was no matching that monster's speed and my waiting time dwindled away.

I assumed that that was all part of her plan, but—.

"Tch! I was so close, so-so-so-so close Damn you piss me off so much, Whitey! Graaaaaaaaahhhh——!!"

The monster wasn't the least bit interested in my waiting time.

Playing what she was thinking at the speed it came to her was all she cared about.

I didn't understand that then and instead committed all the waiting time I had left into delivering the finishing blow.

—There!! That's it! My victory is right there!!

Then the incident happened.

Ika Sainokami played exactly as I expected, using no time at all. Then she captured one of my pieces and swiftly snapped it down onto a piece stand.

My piece stand.

"..... Huh?"

"Ah rats. Blew that one. Damn it, wrong one."

The monster surrendered like she had lost all interest in the match.

Violating the rules by putting a captured piece on your opponent's piece stand had never happened before.

At first, I thought I had Ika Sainokami backed so far into a corner that she panicked and put a piece on my stand by mistake. Cornered players are apt to violate the rules by accident.

Except the deeper I read into the board I came to realize that I had been out-read.

“Ah?! Th-This variant was hidden?”

Judging by the formations, I was certain I was in position to win.

Then, the move that was supposed to seal my victory ...

An opportunity to counter my advance lurked just a few moves later. Ika Sainokami was trying to make that formation appear on the board.

—She read it?! Long before I could Using no time at all?!

I sat there, staring down at the board in disbelief as Worldly Thunder leaned under me and, craning her neck around so far that I’m amazed her bones didn’t snap, spat this out, “Too slow, faker.”

That’s how I realized I had won the match ... but lost the Shogi.

To this day, I still hate myself with a passion for feeling safe in the knowledge that that match was mine for even one moment.

Next were the semifinals.

It was my first league match against Machi Kugui-*Yamashiro Ouka*.

But both of us understood one thing.

This match was for revenge.

“Your day of torment is finally at hand.”

“I’ll crush you once and for all,” I told her loud and clear, but it turned out to be easier said than done.

Machi the Tormentor used Ranging Rook Anaguma to hold out to the point that I only needed one move to checkmate her. She had become much stronger and slyer than she was on that day back at the Kansai Association.

“I have been done in once again. Even with the title to my name, I cannot hold a candle to you in battle, Ginko.”

After her surrender.

At a surprising level of peace with her loss, the now third-year junior high

student Yamashiro Ouka uttered the strangest thing.

“By the by, Ginko. As a congratulatory gift for your advance to the challenger match, why don’t I propose a perfectly fitting nickname for you?”

“Nick name?”

“Nicknames naturally form for strong players, yet As I have told you, I wish to become a journalist, and would love nothing more than to boast that I was the one to bestow a nickname upon a player!”

“Don’t bother. I——.”

Don’t need one.

She blurted it out before I could finish. Right in front of the other journalists no less.

“Naniwa’s Snow White Satisfactory?”

She grinned like a fox that had magically transformed itself into human form as those words came out of her mouth. The curse that will haunt me until the end of time.

See? Didn’t I tell you?

I hate her and still consider her to be my biggest threat.

The Eternal Queen was waiting for me at the challenger match, Rina Shakando.

“Kousuke, that scoundrel,” she said with obvious excitement in her eyes. “Though he claims to have no interest in women, he was raising a jewel at his side the whole time Dishonest as ever, that man.”

The legend of Women’s Shogi and the same person who first implanted the idea of being a female professional in my head started lining up the pieces with the same giddiness as someone who had just received a new outfit and couldn’t wait to put it on.

“Snow White. I shall take the liberty of appraising your talent.”

Shakando-*sensei*’s Shogi style was old, her formations archaic.

Yet, the defensive shifts she created from those outdated formations bordered on artistic and were completely different from any Women's League player I had ever faced.

—She must be taking cues from formations that only she can see

Players who have fought for a long time develop consistent themes in their playing style. Call it secret research if you will.

There's no doubt that her secret research is the reason why the Eternal Queen has been consistently competitive for so long.

—Play along and I'll get swept up into her plan I'll lose!

I resorted to a Sub League playing style for the first time against a Women's League opponent. Deciphering her target, I crushed her advance before it could take shape!

"..... Superb. At long last I've found one, at long last"

The Women's Legend happily ran up the white flag, but I spoke to her before our review session got underway.

"Shakando-sensei."

"What is it?"

"How does my talent compare to Ayumu to Kannabe 2-dan?"

"Arrogant."

"....."

"My beloved apprentice has the makings of divinity. His talent is not to be compared with one teetering on the cusp of becoming a professional."

I thought I was being scolded at first but, in fact, it was a compliment in disguise.

"You think I could be a professional?"

"Finally, I found one who can make my dream into reality."

Shakando-sensei gazed over at me with adoration.

Just then, the first of countless footsteps from a tsunami of reporters rushing through the hallway outside reached my ears.

“Your forays into Tokyo for league matches will increase once you have a title, yes? If you are keen, come to my castle for practice sessions. I have ties with many professionals and shall invite them to join us.”

“.....!! Thank you so much!”

My world expanded with every victory.

The allure was too much for me to resist after spending the bulk of my life trapped in a cage.

“Our first session shall be in June ... on this date, perhaps?”

Opening a pocket calendar, Shakando-*sensei* made a proposal.

“June? Pardon me, Shakando-*sensei*. The Queen Title Match will start in April and is scheduled to last until July——.”

“Claim three straight victories and the title match will conclude by mid-May, yes?”

“.....!”

“Please do not disappoint me. I would hate to cancel a practice session that I have only just entered into my calendar”

Like a child sitting in front of a sweet, sweet pastry, I couldn’t look away.

The 7th Mynavi Women’s Open Queen Title Match.

The first of five matches was scheduled to take place in Mito, the Thorn Princess’s hometown.

“Well, hello. I haven’t seen you since, what? The Elementary Meijin finals?”

Queen and Women’s Throne.

The possessor of the top two women’s titles, Azami Hanadachi-*Dual Title* was the one who provided commentary during my victory in the Elementary Meijin Tournament.

“I never thought I’d be playing the Sub League member Ginko Sora in a Women’s League Title Match. Well? Think you’ll ever be a professional?”

That was probably meant to be a casual taunt.

The fact that I, the challenger, was getting all the attention rather than the title holder might have gotten under her skin.

Lining up the pieces, I answered.

“It won’t be that easy.”

“.....!!”

That proved to be a counterpunch that nailed Ms. Hanadachi where she was vulnerable.

To me, the title of Queen was just a key to moving up in the world.

The icing on the cake was that I had to defeat a strong opponent, the Thorn Princess of all people, in three straight matches.

That’s what I intended *it won’t be that easy* to mean. I had no hard feelings against my opponent whatsoever.

However, all the fuss off the board made her despise her elementary school-aged opponent and put fire in Ms. Hanadachi’s veins. What’s worse, her taunt missed the mark.

I was solely focused on the battle before me.

Ms. Hanadachi was trying to fight invisible opponents as well.

The Thorn Princess plays defensively. Winning that way is extremely difficult when your heart is filled with turmoil.

The result was practically set in stone before the match began.

Being granted offense by the piece flip, I only needed a handful of moves to win the match. My victory became the top story on the news that night and into the following morning. The headline was:

Naniwa’s Snow White Defeats the Queen in Convincing Fashion!

There were many more reporters on hand for the second match because it was held in Tokyo. The Shogi world was having a field day.

The only one paying attention to the match was probably me.

Knowing she couldn’t afford to waste her turn on offense, Ms. Hanadachi

forced an attack far too soon and crumbled when it fell short.

Professional and women's players I had never met before talked about me in magazines and smiled as they talked about me on TV On the other hand, Master and Keika were worried sick about my condition, babying me in hopes that my body would hold up long enough to finish the title match.

Then, the third match.

Taking place in my hometown of Osaka and the Queen title within reach, the frenzy had reached its peak.

The location was changed at the last minute because there *wasn't enough space for all the reporters* at the Kansai Association's largest arena. That match at a high-class hotel in Tenmabashi couldn't have been called *Shogi*.

News vans surrounded the hotel. All the TV cameras. Plus, all those Shogi fans and ordinary people pushing their way inside to catch a glimpse of Naniwa's Snow White made that impossible.

Important people like the prefectural governor and mayor of Osaka came into the arena before the match began and during the break—all for a chance to have their picture taken with me.

Only me.

“.....”

They treated Ms. Hanadachi in the upper seat like nothing more than an object on the floor. She silently sat there the whole time, staring down at the board and getting called an obstacle.

“Hey! There's no room in here! Quit shoving!!”

“Queen! I can't get behind you, so could you please scoot up a little bit?!”

“Tsk Her head's in the way.”

“When's the match over? Snow White's got her *beat on* look already, so why don't we just call it now?” (ha-ha)

“Snow Whiiiite! Smile, smiile!”

The reporters, ignorant of Shogi manners and lacking common human decency, treaded on the hallowed ground behind the upper seat just to get a picture of my face. They sat flat on their bottoms in the *tokonoma* alcove to get a better camera angle, stepped on the sleeves of the Queen's kimono and took picture after picture with those loud shutters.

Ms. Hanadachi endured all those atrocities in silence and completely lost the ability to say anything to me, let alone look me in the eyes.

Then, once the match began all I had to do was use the advantage having the first move provided me to align my pieces to attack for the Throne Princess to collapse in tears on the spot.

"I lost."

Making that announcement was her final duty as a title holder, as well as the only words she said that day.

Thus, the bland and boring title match was over.

The rest of society, on the other hand, was over the moon. That match was ironically dubbed *the battle of the century* and so many articles were written that no one could hope to finish reading all of them.

Ms. Hanadachi came back to challenge me many times after that, but she became more unhinged with each passing year and each match we played.

Next came her long leave of absence.

Though, after getting married and having children she seemed much brighter when I fought against her for the first time in years during last season's Women's Throne Title Match. She was much stronger as well.

I think that was the first match that I got to play against the real Azami Hanadachi.

"Oh, I lost again! But that was a great match, don't you think?"

Those words bounced happily off the Thorn Princess's tongue during our review session, and I nodded, saying yes from the bottom of my heart.

Going back to the moment I first claimed the Queen title.

Since the match was held in Osaka, the association assigned Kansai Sub League members to work as supporting staff.

Hiuma was the match recorder.

And in charge of moving pieces for the big four analysis was Yaichi Kuzuryu 1-*dan*.

Apparently, the commentator and analyst didn't do their job all the way to the end because everyone could tell I was going to win by the mid-game. The audience was filled with people who wanted to see Naniwa's Snow White more than the Shogi match itself. From what I've been told, the big board was changed out with the screen showing different angles inside the arena halfway through the match.

... Which meant there was nothing for Yaichi to do during the late-game He must have been part of the avalanche of reporters that came into the arena the same instant Ms. Hanadachi surrendered.

Thinking back, I thought I heard him call out *Ginko* at one point.

But there were too many camera clicks and shutter flashes happening at the time to know for sure. I could have been hearing things.

"Sora-Queen. Would you please accompany me next door for your solo press conference?"

I stood up without doing a review session.

Shuffle, shuffle! The sea of journalists and reporters parted before me, and I walked down the path they created.

All of the association staff sat on their ankles and bowed their heads to me as I passed.

—So this is what it's like being a title holder

It was the first time I saw the view from the top of Women's Shogi. I was instantly enthralled. What I saw was more than enough to wrongly convince a single elementary school girl that the authority that came with her title was the direct result of her own abilities.

I was the Queen lording over all her subjects present in the room.

Then there was Yaichi, sitting on his ankles in the corner looking up at me.

I

Loved how it felt.

Well? Aren't I amazing? How do you like me now?

I just looked down my nose at Yaichi without saying a word before passing right by him on my way to the press conference.

Without holding hands, all by myself.

The next morning I found Yaichi eating breakfast alone in the back corner of the hotel's cafeteria.

He looked lost for words as I approached.

"Ah"

"Hm?"

Of course, I sat down in the seat across from him at the table.

Room service was available to me free of charge because I was a participant in the match, but I wanted to eat with Yaichi instead. We always ate together at home, so this was the normal thing to do. I was sure that he felt the same way and was about to complain that he had started eating without me.

However——.

After a quick look around the room, Yaichi sat up straight and looked me square in the eyes before addressing me as politely as possible.

"Good morning *to you, Big Sis.*"

..... I thought he was joking around.

Because, seriously, he had never once called me *Big Sis* before. Nor had he ever used such a polite tone.

Oh, I see.

You're trying to poke fun at me because I'm a title holder now. Is that it? Sure.

I'll play along.

“Good morning, Little Bro. I see you finally learned some manners. Very prudent of you.”

“Thank you. You look especially charming this morning. Are you going to make your debut as Queen?”

“Yes. I'll be talking to journalists right after breakfast.”

I answered with elegant grace. Aren't I truly amazing? Keep the compliments coming.

I then told him that I was scheduled to make ceremonial visits to the prefectural governor and mayor of Osaka, to be on TV, as well as receive numerous awards and accolades that day. I bragged on and on.

Yaichi listened to every word, waiting for me to finish before he said, “Congratulations. This present is for you.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Butterflies dancing in my stomach, I took the bag he held out and opened it up.

The box inside contained A silver brooch.

—So cute!!

It was the first present Yaichi had ever given me.

Cheap, for sure.

But, to me, it was more dazzling than any precious stone mounted in a piece of high-end jewelry.

He must've saved what little money he made as the match recorder to buy it for me I wanted to put it on and show it off to the world immediately!

Yaichi shyly looked into his lap and said, “But I'm sure you'll get much better presents than this one”

“Obviously. But, I suppose I could wear it. After all, it's from my little bro.”

Looking at that glittering snowflake-shaped brooch filled me with relief.

—Yaichi is helping me celebrate my title!

I clipped the brooch right onto the hairband I had gotten from Keika, put it back on my head and went off to speak with journalists with extra pep in my step.

All of them loved it, telling me it was perfect for Naniwa's Snow White.

"That brooch looks great on you!"

"It's so cute I could just die!!"

Every compliment only served to inflate my already bolstered ego But I never revealed who gave it to me. I wanted that to be a secret between us.

Bathed in a seemingly endless string of camera flashes, I started coming up with my next plan.

For starters, I wanted to gift Master and Keika with a vacation of some kind.

Hmm That's it! I can bring Yaichi along with me to Shakando-sensei's practice session! Ayumu will be there too, so it's perfect. I've got \$50,000 worth of prize money to pay for it. We can take the bullet train, just the two of us

Except Yaichi continued to be extremely polite even after we were back at home and kept referring to me only as *Big Sis*.

Something had changed ... permanently.

Gears had shifted in a direction I had never wanted them to go and were driving toward a destiny that I couldn't change.

Toward something I never wanted ... at a terrifying speed.

The Shogi world also underwent rapid changes as I advanced through the Mynavi Women's Open.

The introduction of Internet coverage.

Shogi fans young and old had been playing matches over the Internet for years, so they were already open to the idea.

Then came the fanfare that the Queen Title Match brought with it.

Experimenting with Internet coverage during the title match produced surprisingly high returns. It wasn't the younger generation that grew up with

the Internet, but rather middle-aged and elderly people who normally had reservations about the World Wide Web who made the largest contribution.

Internet Shogi coverage is profitable.

Several IT companies signed contracts with the Shogi Association and a studio was constructed at the Kansai Association in almost no time at all.

More opportunities to work as commentators and analysts meant more income for professional and Women's Shogi players alike. There were no objections.

Internet coverage advanced by leaps and bounds.

Yaichi and I had to watch Master challenge for the Meijin title on TV only a few years prior, but now the arena had become a very *open* environment.

Those conditions combined with the increasing popularity of smartphones and social media resulted in an explosion of casual Shogi fans: people who wanted to know what professionals ate, their faces and personalities a new type of fan more interested in elements of Shogi that happened off the board.

And the person who drew the most attention from that crowd was—Naniwa's Snow White.

"We would love for Ginko Sora-*sensei* to enter the Women's Throne League as well!"

A Women's title that had only recently been introduced.

The Shogi Association Chairman at the time and the director of a company that sponsored the infantile league came to the Kansai Association to speak with me mere days after I became Queen.

He massaged Master's shoulders and spoke with a tone akin to molasses.

"C'oon, Kooousuke. Joining the league would be the best thing for her too, riiiiight?"

Glancing at me sitting in the chair right next to Master, that elderly man who was once a dominant player with an Eternal Title to his name was so overly friendly it was sickening.

“But, Ginko She is also a member of the Sub League. A title is a heavy burden to bear. Askin’ one so young to take on even more weight

“A Sub League member, you say.”

A disturbing grin crept across the then-chairman’s face.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you also have another apprentice in the Sub League, nooo? Oh, and your daughter is in the Practice League, dreaming of one day being a Women’s League member, yeeees? If, hypothetically, regulations were to change Would it be too much of shock?”

“Chairman! My second apprentice and daughter have nothin’ to do with——“

“..... It’s okay, Master. I was planning to join anyway.”

“Ginko!”

I participated in the amateur preliminaries for the Women’s Throne League and progressed all the way through like clockwork.

The only thing was that it wasn’t anywhere near as much fun as Mynavi.

I don’t have a clue what Master did after that day.

However, A-ranking Seichi Tsukimitsu, who had always kept himself distanced from association management, volunteering to join the board of directors while continuing his career, sent waves through the Shogi world.

“I can’t brin’ meself ta shake hands with dat chairman no more. We feel a new chairman, one from Kansai is necessary. A man dat’s got more integrity dan anybody an’ stronger dan anybody.”

Don of Naniwa Tatsuo Zaou 9-*dan*, who had been the voice of Kansai in the Shogi Association for decades, specifically nominated Tsukimitsu 9-*dan* to take over.

The Meijin himself was the first to recognize Chairman Tsukimitsu from Kansai in his new position and his support sent waves across Kanto.

With the new chairman in place, there was a great deal of turnover on the Shogi Association Board of Directors.

“Though *Sora-Queen* is a title holder, she is first and foremost a member of the Sub League. Not to mention, she has yet to complete a level of education required by national law. Rather than making public appearances, her training and studies should take priority at this time.”

The number of journalists and reporters hounding me for interviews dropped off dramatically thanks to Chairman Tsukimitsu’s declaration.

It was at about the same time that one Women’s League player quietly retired.

Sasari Oga Women’s 1-*kyu*.

I didn’t interact with her very often because she lived in Kyoto, but she was Master’s younger sister apprentice, the youngest in his line. Therefore, she was my aunt.

Keika and a friend of hers in the Practice League named Sen Kouzui decided to throw a retirement party for her.

“Why are you quitting?” I asked Ms. Oga when I finally had a chance to sit down and talk with her at the party.

Rather than get angry at the extremely blunt question, Ms. Oga gently explained in terms that the child I still was could understand.

“There are a few reasons But you winning a title is a big one.”

“Huh?”

Someone else abandoned Shogi all because I had won a title?

It still didn’t make sense to me, so Ms. Oga went into more detail.

“One joined the Women’s League when one was a first year in junior high school. That was earlier than most, so expectations were high One could probably hold out a while longer. However, a girl far younger than myself made an awe-inspiring debut and rose to the top. Once one realized there was no hope of overtaking her, carrying on became too painful.”

“You’re quitting Shogi because of me?”

..... I was beyond shocked, almost floored.

Of all the things that were transpiring because I had won the title, that truth hung heaviest on my shoulders All I wanted to do was make Yaichi squirm

“Please don’t look at me like that, Ginko. Learning one’s limits so early on may actually work out for the best. Because one may have found something even more important.”

“What could be more important than Shogi?”

“Plenty of things.”

“Like what?”

“Love, marriage, those sorts of things.”

Thus, Sasari Oga Women’s 1-*dan* (she was ceremoniously promoted when she retired) left her Shogi career behind to search for something new.

Set out to find something else important to her.

..... Or ... at least I thought she was leaving on a journey, but I saw her at the Kansai Association the next day. And when I asked, “What are you doing here?”

She answered, “One has been hired as the chairman’s secretary! One looks forward to working with you, *Sora-Queen*.”

Compared to how she looked during her time in the Women’s League, Ms. Oga was brighter and seemed to be genuinely enjoying life.

Green with envy, I decided to congratulate her.

“Go burst with happiness.”

Unlike the suddenly perky Ms. Oga, having the title I’d always wanted made my life far from easy.

Sub League. School.

As well as Women’s League matches and duties as a title holder.

These burdens were far heavier than I imagined and proved to be an immense strain on my feeble body.

The absolute worst was having to travel long distances.

Yaichi, who had always been with me wherever I went up to that point, was gone.

“..... So bored.”

I rode on many planes and bullet trains with my lonely left hand hanging at my side. Long rides that used to be more fun the longer they were when we were together now bordered on torture Collecting pennants from all the places I went became the one thing I looked forward to during my travels.

Playing matches and fulfilling my duties after that robbed me of any energy I had left. Even after being graciously invited to *Shakando-sensei's* practice session, I didn't enjoy as much of it as I wanted.

Even when I limited myself to just work, Shogi fans would spot me immediately because of my hair and I'd get dragged into doing fan service.

I was overworked, plain and simple.

If it hadn't been for Keika's constant help and support, I would've surely collapsed. Though she'd never say it, I think the reason Keika was stagnant in the Practice League for so long was because she prioritized me over herself.

If I suffer retribution because the Shogi gods are angry at me, that's fine.

—But What if I'm the reason Keika never becomes a Woman's League player?

That thought alone was more painful than anything else.

Yaichi joined the 3-*dan* division at around the time I got through the Women's Throne Preliminaries and into the finals.

“Congrats. I'll treat you downstairs.”

I took Yaichi to Twelve after the regular activities were finished on the day he was promoted. The Dynamite C Set for me. Yaichi had the Extraordinary Pork Beauty.

We sat side by side at the counter, the first time the two of us had eaten together by ourselves in ages. In fact, it had been so long since we were together by ourselves somewhere other than Master's house that I was a little

nervous.

Yaichi had changed after I won the title.

The happy-go-lucky aspects of his Shogi were gone. The way he spoke and even his face were completely different.

Seeing his sharp, wolf-like contours in profile made my chest feel tight, but I didn't know why So I looked away.

It felt like I was burning up from head to toe.

Of course, part of it was the pain of knowing he had reached the 3-*dan* division before I did.

But What was it?

Why were my cheeks so warm?

"W-Well, you did pretty good for an idiot, don't you think?" I said as I got another glass of water. I don't remember how many of them I drank that day.

Now a second year in junior high, Yaichi was slated to participate in the second 3-*dan* division season, which would take place later that year. He would have three chances to become a professional before high school.

"Getting into the 3-*dan* division at 14? Isn't that a little too good? Plus, you promoted just in time to get into the October season. Master is probably thrilled."

Except ... the few words Yaichi spat out after that were anything but happy.

"I was too late."

"Huh? Too late? You have three chances to become a professional while in junior high, right?"

"I'll never have a chance to face Ayumu in the 3-*dan* division"

I guess that must've been more important to him than becoming a professional as a junior high student. Ayumu was still in the 3-*dan* division at that point, but Yaichi seemed certain that he would promote.

And he was spot on.

A month later—Ayumu Kannabe 4-*dan* made his debut.

It had been 14 years since the last time anyone made it through in one season. A legendary feat that only five people under the current system have been able to accomplish.

Meanwhile, I had reached 1-*dan* at long last.

Many people say: reaching 3-*dan* in the Sub League is the halfway point.

This boy whose Shogi seemed dull and even clumsy to me when we first played he reached 3-*dan*, the goal I was striving to achieve long before I did.

When I found out that younger brother, who I thought was weaker, *poorer* than I, had suddenly passed me and was now chasing someone else.

For the first time, I realized my own mistake.

If the Shogi gods got somethin' against ya, ya ain't never gonna turn pro.

How heavy those words were.

The seasons changed.

Autumn began, and Yaichi's first 3-*dan* division got underway.

I claimed the Women's Throne title a month later. The Shogi world and society at large welcomed the birth of Ginko Sora-*Dual Title*, but I had come to my senses.

That year came to a close and the following spring arrived.

Yaichi missed his chance to promote, but he went right back in for a second shot at the 3-*dan* division.

Now a junior high school student myself, I defended my titles wearing a sailor-style school uniform for the first time. The number of cameras increased further still, and the words *sailor uniform* began to follow me around.

I defended my Queen title with three straight victories.

Surmounting an extremely physically and mentally strenuous summer, I finally began to adjust to junior high school, as well as simultaneously becoming a Women's Title Holder and a Sub League member by the time September came around.

Then the fourth junior high school Shogi professional in history was born. 15-year-old Yaichi Kuzuryu 4-*dan*.

I was at the Kansai Association when I found out what had happened on the last regular activities day at Kanto's Association in Sendagaya.

"Miss Sora! A comment on Kuzuryu 4-*dan*'s promotion!"

"Do you have any words for your younger brother apprentice?!"

Reporters swarmed around me once regular activities concluded. I fielded their questions, but I just knew something had gone past the point of no return.

"..... I sincerely hope that Kuzuryu-*sensei* claims a title of his own and I will be devoting myself to following in his footsteps."

This time, it was my turn to call Yaichi *sensei*.

The only difference being that this stage was in public.

Yaichi moved out of Master's house as soon as he graduated from junior high.

I, too, made the decision to live with my parents at around the same time. Staying behind by myself, it was lonely. I felt like I'd been abandoned.

Everyone knows what Yaichi went on to accomplish after that point.

The youngest title holder in history.

The apex of the Shogi world—Dragon King Ryuo.

I watched Yaichi's ascension filled with emotions far from envy.

So It was true.

I knew it all along.

He's a Shogi Martian.

Accepting the truth was easier now that I *understood* he and I were different life forms.

..... And so now, looking back on the past as I'm being led through the darkness by the hand, I realize just how many bad moves I made when I had choices to make.

What if I hadn't gone against Master's orders and held onto his hand? Would I be in this much pain? Would I still want to walk down the same path?

Tell me, Yaichi

Did I make a mistake?

But I want you to know I thought everything through as hard as I could.

I made those mistakes because I was still a child

The path I thought was the best Turned out to be a dead end

SEALING MOVE

I could swear I heard my name.

“..... Hm? Big Sis, did you say something?”

I look back over my shoulder, but Big Sis has kept her promise to keep her eyes closed and is following me without any complaints.

Am I hearing things?

“Nothing really. Just wondering if we’re there yet.”

“Are you feeling tired? We’ve climbed a long way. But it’s just up ahead, so hang in there a little longer.”

After sympathizing with her, I prod just a little bit.

“Or are you scared?”

“..... Don’t be cheeky. You’re the younger brother, remember?”

Big Sis keeps her eyes closed but cocks her chin up as she snaps back at me like she’s putting on a show.

Just like a cheeky little kid. Adorable.

It seems that breaking the silence once made it scary to go back to because Big Sis keeps asking.

“..... Are we there yet?”

“Just a little bit more. Ah, this part is dangerous so please be careful.”

“I can’t see a thing, so how should I know?”

She sounds like a spoiled brat.

Is it because she has her eyes closed? Her acting like a little kid again is kind of cute.

“We’re here.”

“Can I open my eyes?”

“Wait just a second. The angle is important Ah, please turn toward my

voice.”

“The angle?”

Now that everything is ready, I let go of her hand and say.

“All right. Open your eyes, Big Sis.”

“Whoa.”

The second her eyes open—she freezes in place and a sound escapes her.

The only words she could get out to describe what she is seeing are ...

“Two Milky Ways?”

The river of stars that make up the Milky Way galaxy are right over our heads.

And———spreading out over the land beneath our feet.

The stars on the horizon reach down the side of the mountain to make it look like two galactic rivers of stars twinkling right in front of us.

“Didn’t I tell you? There’s nothing out here, but the stars are pretty,” I say as I step up next to Big Sis. “I’m pretty sure an environmental agency rated this the best stargazing spot in Japan for two years in a row. It’s kind of embarrassing that it’s the only thing my hometown can brag about, but yeah.”

“.....”

“The Tanabata Star Festival is almost here. I’m sure you were expecting the stars in the sky to be beautiful, but did you ever think they would look *this* beautiful?”

“Those aren’t houses, are they? It’s all mountains around here and I don’t remember seeing that many buildings”

“They’re terraced rice paddies.”

“Terr- aced?”

“Rice paddies that are built at an angle like a staircase to match the mountainside.”

I doubt Big Sis ever saw these growing up in the city, but there are some very famous terraced rice paddies on the north coast.

“Rice paddies on flat ground are square, but terraced rice paddies are smaller and have to be all sorts of shapes and sizes to fit on the mountainside. That’s why big machinery can’t be used up here. Keeping his paddy profitable on pure elbow grease was my grandfather’s pride and joy.”

This area has become known as a unique stargazing spot only recently.

But granddad, he knew for decades.

That’s why he had all the confidence in the world when he told me: *proposing to a lady here will never fail!*

“Water in the terraced paddies reflects the stars in the sky, making it look like they’re shining from below, too.”

“It’s like ... we’re on a different planet

“Ha ha. A trip to outer space within walking distance from home.”

“Were you planning to show me this when we first left Osaka?”

“Yeah.”

“To cheer me up?”

“That was part of it.”

There’s another reason. Actually, it’s the main reason. Knowing the big moment is coming is making me nervous

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was raining cats and dogs when we were in Osaka, right? There was no way to know when the storm would clear And a lot of things have to line up to get to see this. Imagine how pathetic it would’ve been if I had said, *Let’s go look at the stars!* and we had come all the way out here only for it to be cloudy?”

Of course, I had no idea it would look this perfect when we left Osaka. It’s like seeing auroras, you only have a slight chance. Not that I’ve ever seen an aurora.

“But I was sure the skies would clear if you came with me, Big Sis.”

“Huh?”

“Because of your name. Sora, as in the sky, and gin, as in silver?”

“Seriously? Idiot

Ginko Sora.

The thing I thought of when I heard her name for the first time was the starry skies over my hometown.

Just as wondrous And, just as pretty.

“I see So this is where you’re from, Yaichi

Big Sis stands in the middle of it all, her beautiful silver hair sparkling as if singing along with twinkling stars above and below.

I boast. “What a surprise, right?”

“No. This is about what I expected.”

“.....?”

What she expected? Where the heck did she think I was from? Outer space?

“Hey. Let’s sit.”

“The grass is wet. I’ll put a sheet down, so——.”

“I don’t care.”

Big Sis plops down on top of the dew-covered grass and tugs at my sleeve until I do the same.

Then we lay down, side by side, and stare up at the vast dome of stars overhead.

“Yaichi.”

“Hm?”

“Hand.”

“..... Okay.”

Our hands come together as if searching for each other in starlight.

Big Sis’s hand is much warmer than it was on the way up here. It’s like she’s just played a Shogi match.

Mine is probably warmer, too.

The silence starts getting to me, so I point up at the sky with my left hand and say, “Ummm That star there is Deneb in Cygnus, I’m pretty sure that one is Altair, and that’s Vega”

“Just be quiet.”

“Okay.”

I feel like my surprise opening worked like a charm but my second move fell totally flat

I obey her direct order and keep quiet, but this time it’s Big Sis who speaks up.

“Hey, Yaichi.”

“What is it, Big Sis?”

“Speaking of stars: do you remember when you called me in the middle of the night and demanded that I check if Shogi boards have stars on them?”

“Yes, I do remember that happening”

It was right after the Queen Title Match last year.

Machi Kugui had just bought her own car and invited me to go out and take in the night view. Ryou Tsukiyomizaka was there too

“But that was partly your fault, Big Sis. I mean, beating Ryou three times in a row during the title match series was bad enough, but you took all her pieces, too. That’s what set her off. She got into a heated argument with Machi, making some reckless bet that Shogi boards had stars on them——.”

“Which view was prettier, this one or that one?”

She stares at me, never blinking as her ash gray eyes take on a blue tint.

A faint blue, just like the stars twinkling above in the night sky.

“Which is it?”

“..... Probably this one.”

The most beautiful girl I have ever seen smugly grins like she won a prize.

Then she looks back up at the stars.

But I'd rather keep looking at the side of her face Gorgeous.

"..... We used to hold hands just like this everywhere we went, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did"

A wave of nostalgia hits me.

I always thought that the worst thing for me to do as a younger brother apprentice was to hold my older sister apprentice back, even if she started just two weeks before I did. I was older and a boy, so it was my job to look out for her.

We were both so young and had wimpy little arms because Shogi was all we thought about.

The two of us were scaredy-cat crybabies who could do nothing by ourselves.

But together we could go anywhere.

Joining hands just like this gave us limitless confidence, a strange feeling that we could take on any opponent no matter how strong they were.

Our portable magnetic Shogi boards in one hand and each other's hand in the other, we embarked on training pilgrimages to any classroom with a strong reputation, riding trains all over the country.

Back then, I thought of Big Sis as——.

"Hey."

"What is it?"

"That."

"Huh?"

"That politeness. Why?"

"..... Why do you ask?"

Ba-thump.

My heart skips a beat for a completely different reason.

"Yaichi, you've been overly polite with me ever since I won the Queen title, haven't you? You don't even say my name I've always wondered why."

“Well, I mean, come on, Big Sis You got angry at me for doing that——.”

“That was because You were acting so formal before I said anything”

Big Sis scrunches up her lips.

“Besides, who told you to call me *Big Sis* in the first place? I doubt you came up with that yourself. Was it Master? Keika?”

“Machi Kugui. I was in charge of the pieces for the big board during the match where you became Queen and Machi was there to do the analysis. She told me: *simply Big Sis would be best* when I asked her for advice.”

“.....”

“But, yeah, no one calls an older sister apprentice *Big Sis*, do they? Even in the same Shogi family, younger members will just add *Mister* or *Miss* for their elders. It’s basic manners in the Shogi world.”

By usual standards, I’d probably be calling her *Miss Sora*.

“But no one seemed to get angry at me for it, so I got used to calling you *Big Sis*. It just kind of stuck

“..... So that was it. Her getting back at me for preventing her from saying *Yaichi* Hmph. So she was behind it the whole time Heh-heh Heh-heh-heh-heh I’ll crush her.”

“.....?”

Big Sis’s shoulders tumble as she mutters something under her breath But I’m pretty sure I heard tiny giggles make it through the mumbles a few times before she said: *I’ll crush her* loud and clear. Actually, that’s all I heard.

Seeing my chance, I ask Big Sis about something that’s been bugging me for a long time.

“Umm Do you and Machi hate each other?”

“Could be worse.”

“How do you mean?”

“I haven’t physically hit her yet.”

Where’s the logic behind that?

Anyway—.

“Are you asking the reason why I started calling you *Big Sis* in the first place?”

I tell her why.

“..... I was still a 1-*dan* in Sub League when you took your first title, Big Sis. You were in a title match, while it was my job to move pieces around the big board. Just a tiny part of staff, someone no one would even bother to ask their name”

A girl I had shared a room with for years and years, one who I thought was exactly like me.

But one day that girl turned out to be a princess who had come down from her own castle.

The most beautiful princess in the world Snow White.

“The crowd of media there that day was enormous, and there were so many influential people I’d only seen on TV around the arena. All of them were talking about the girl who lived in the same room with me. It was so jarring, and it hurt So I decided to act tough.”

That’s a lie.

What really happened was that someone on the association staff scolded me.

But that’s just too pathetic. That’s why I’ve kept this act going for so long. This tiny little act.

Because Well, yeah.

Who wouldn’t want to look as cool as possible when they tell a girl how they feel?

“I made up my mind that I would say your name in front of everyone the day that I became as great as Naniwa’s Snow White.”

“What?”

“Getting stronger was the only way. Turning pro wasn’t enough. I needed results That’s the day I swore I would become a junior high school pro. Swore that I would become the youngest to claim a title ... just like you, Big Sis.”

I thought that would make us equals.

“But I No matter what I do, I’ll always be *kuzu*, the trash Ryuo.”

Sure, I became the fourth junior high school pro ever, but my debut match was a disaster. I even ran away for a week in shame.

I became the youngest title holder in history, but I immediately followed it up with an 11-match losing streak. My reputation plummeted despite my title.

“I thought there was a chance I could get past all that by defeating the Meijin myself to defend my title as Ryuo. But facing him myself only showed me how great that man is Even the media framed the story as *Meijin Misses Chance to Become the Eternal Septuple* rather than *Ryuo Holds Off the Challenger*.”

Then again, of course they did.

“I came *that* close to breaking down. I hurt so many people close to me while the matches were going on and I barely held myself together after the fight was over. It took me six months to feel like myself again

I know I hurt Big Sis really bad.

“But that man, the Meijin, he does fights like that several times a year and has been doing them consistently for nearly 30 years. That’s unbelievable. I thought I’d closed the gap, but Instead I only started to understand his greatness and saw everywhere I fell short. I know now I will never be able to call you *Ginko* again——.”

“No, Yaichi! You’re great, so much greater than me!” Big Sis insists as she squeezes my hand.

“Do you know what Kanto professionals and Sub League members are calling you? *Naniwa’s Snow White* is a running joke in the Sub League, but not you. Everyone bowed down because your phantom was behind me It’s all thanks to you that I had that winning streak to start the season.”

She’s exaggerating.

The thing is that Big Sis won’t give me a chance to say so.

“You’re too strong Everyone is terrified of you because they know that if you get any stronger than you already are, no one will be able to catch you

“You brought this up before, didn’t you? What am I called? It’s kind of hard to ask anyone myself so I’ve never been able to find out.”

“It’s No, I won’t say. I don’t like it. It doesn’t fit who you are at all.”

“..... Lolicon something or other?”

“No.”

R-Really? That’s kind of a relief but also a bit worrying

“Besides, the lolicon thing is true.”

“No, Big Sis, it’s not

This is how the conversation always goes. Big Sis will always say I have more than a soft spot for little girls, I deny it flat out and then we go right back to usual.

But today will be different.

I have a new move prepared for just this sequence.

The biggest move I’ve ever made.

“Do you remember that night in Hawai’i?”

“Yes

“Meeting you on the beach in the moonlight Holding hands, walking through town. Then we talked outside your hotel room door, right Big Sis? You told me that I needed to show you *proof* that I wasn’t a lolicon.”

“Yes, I said that. Your point?”

“I’ll prove it to you now.”

“Huh?”

“Stand up.”

Big Sis looks up at me from the ground, her eyes blank as I pull her up by her hand.

Keeping hold of her wrist, I look her square in the eyes and give her that proof.

Boldly, like a man should.

“Ginko Sora. From the time we first met, I have always——.”

But Big Sis cuts me off before I can finish. Yelling, “W-Wait!”

“..... Wait? There are no mulligans for Shogi players.”

“That’s not what I mean! I mean Wait, okay?! Because Because ... you’ve never once given me any hint at all that you feel Huh? Huh?”

Big Sis, getting teary-eyed as her face turns bright red.

She’s flustered and so adorable. A few moments later, she cautiously asks, “..... Sympathy?”

“You’ll make me angry.”

I’m seriously getting close.

“I’ve never known when to say it. Bringing it up when you’re depressed doesn’t seem like something a real man would do. But if there’s a chance you really might die I’ll be kicking myself forever if I don’t tell you. So”

I felt something a bit like this once back in grade school.

It was the day Big Sis collapsed in the middle of her Sub League Entrance Exam.

But her nerves just got the better of her. I heard she was hyperventilating, or had an irregular heartbeat, or something like that.

She was kept in the hospital for observation, but Big Sis saw doctors all the time back in those days.

Dr. Akashi played Shogi with her, too, so I think Big Sis was happy to be in the hospital.

But, more than that I didn’t understand how I felt about Ginko at the time, or even what kind of person I would want in a relationship.

Things are different now.

“I didn’t know why you were so important to me, or how to express it Not until recently, anyway. There were times you felt like a rival, and other times

like an older sister apprentice. But——.”

“..... But?”

“It’s become plainly obvious to me that I’ll never feel the same way about anyone else. That’s why I know in my heart that I——.”

“S-Stop!!”

Big Sis slaps my hand away and steps back like she won’t listen to a word I say.

——Figures No luck

Well, it’s official. I got shot down My gamble backfired, so all that’s left to do is man up and throw in the towel.

But Big Sis follows up with a move I never expected.

“The rest of that sentence. I, um Seal it”

Those words send a shock down my spine. She’s not turning me down?

“Seal it? Like on hold?”

“Not like that!” Big Sis grabs a fistful of shirt and says, “I know how I feel. But now’s not the time to say it I won’t be able to fight if I do I’ll be too happy”

Come again?

Now it’s my turn to be flustered.

“Like how you, um are fighting to reclaim my name I’ve been fighting so hard to catch up to you Hoping you would notice me”

Huh? HUUUH?!

“You were getting so strong! I only entered Mynavi so you wouldn’t leave me behind! I wanted you more than anyone else to be happy for me when I became Queen! Except you suddenly started acting so formal all the time——.”

“H-Hold up a second!! You’re the one who never gave me any hints! You’re always calling me *stupid* or *idiot* or *trash* You even said you hated me that

night in Sakuranomiya——!”

“Who would ever invite someone they hated into a hotel like that?! You idiot! I-I stuck my neck out over and over, but you never noticed That’s what I hate!! Stupid, stupid, stupid Yaichi!!”

“O- Only stupid people call people stupid!”

“Lolicon! Playboy! Why do you always have to please every girl you meet?! And... little girls like you too much!!”

“I get death threats from your fans! Don’t you think that’s further off the deep end?!”

“Your fans aren’t angels either! They bash me online for *playing the Ryuo’s girlfriend* all the time!”

“You get bashed? I get roasted every darned day!! I get dragged through the mud all because you took on this *idol* persona!”

“No! It’s because you became Elementary Meijin! You have no idea how hard I worked before——.”

“Hm? Worked hard? What were you doing?”

“N-No, I Y-You were the first one to move out of Master’s house, Yaichi!”

“How could I stay there when I was losing all the time as a pro?! And how was I supposed to focus on Shogi living in the same room with you?! I couldn’t get you out of my head!!”

“Huuh?! Agh Haauuu!!”

Making the cutest little noises as she pulls her hair with both hands, Big Sis steps away from the argument.

Both of us need to catch our breath after that.

Crap My stomach suddenly filled with butterflies. I can’t look Big Sis in the face, not now.

I mean What I said just now, that was——.

“..... My answer is set in stone and has been for years. Years and years and

years and years. But I can't play that move right now. So, these feelings I'm using a sealing move," says Big Sis in a voice so quiet I have to lean in to hear her.

"I want you to wait until I'm a professional. Then tell me exactly how you feel. I'll answer everything then"

Until she's a pro

I take in a deep breath, smile, and say, "Understood. I'll wait."

"..... Are you sure?"

"Yes. Because I'm certain you will be a pro, Big Sis."

Just as I've sealed away the name *Ginko*, it seems that Big Sis has also sealed away her own feelings.

All so that she can focus on the battle ahead.

I know that that childish stubbornness leads to becoming strong at Shogi ... better than anyone.

She's back to her usual self.

And she's gearing up for the fight once again.

—That's enough for now.

More than enough Yeah, after working up what little courage I have, setting up this once-in-a-lifetime miracle of a romantic situation only to come up empty I can't be a burden on Big Sis Wheeew

Just as I convince myself.

"Umm Hey?"

Big Sis tries to say something as she takes hold of the hem of my shirt. For whatever reason, she's looking away.

"What is it?"

"Women's Shogi doesn't have sealing moves."

"You're right. It wouldn't."

They're only used in matches with a two-day format.

Since all women's matches are designed to end in one sitting, sealing moves don't exist.

Only four of the seven pro titles use the two-day format, so only a handful of pro players have ever experienced one either.

But why is Big Sis bringing this up out of the blue?

"You've done them before, right Yaichi? Ryuo Title matches last for two days."

"Yes. Personally, I think the one who makes the sealing move has an advantage, so I always try to be the one to make it."

Talking about Shogi is so much easier.

Heck, I can keep talking about things she never asks about. I'm picky when it comes to sealing moves.

"Some types of players like being on the receiving end, while others prefer to leave it up to their opponent. I don't believe in all that ... which reminds me, we practiced sealing moves right before my first match as the challenger, didn't we? Wow, that takes me back."

"I've never done it for real, so teach me."

"Hm? But we practiced, remember?"

"I forgot."

"One time I could understand, but we must've gone through it——."

"I forgot, okay?!"

How is she this adorable? Seriously, I could just die right now

Thinking back on my own experience, I explain exactly how a sealing move is done.

"Well, the player who does the seal announces: *I will seal*. Then they take the match record up to that point from the recorder and write in their next move with an arrow or something before putting the record in an envelope and sealing the mouth with glue."

"The envelope's mouth"

"Yes. After that, the players write their names in red ink——."

“About that.”

“Yes?”

“How do you seal words?”

“..... Come again?”

I don't have a clue what she's talking about, not at first.

... Which is why Big Sis explains it so that even an idiot like me could understand.

All in one breath.

“Seal the place where words come out, to keep the feelings in my heart from leaking.”

The place where words come out Mouth Seal

“Huh ?! Say whaaaaat?!”

I forget myself in shock.

Even in the starlight, I can tell Big Sis is blushing bright red. I-Is she serious?

“H-Here? Now?! From me?!!”

“You're the type of player who prefers to seal, right?”

“I've never done it that way before!!”

Crap. Talk about pressure.

I'd only planned on telling her how I feel, and hopefully getting the response I wanted.

But I had no idea moves would advance this far all at once.

Okay, close to panicking now. What are the standards again? Wait, I've never done *this* sealing move before, so I don't know the correct sequence anyway.

—Wh-What's the opening move?! Put my hand on her shoulder?!

The best follow-up is putting my other hand around her waist, right?!

I didn't come anywhere near this close to a heart attack making my first moves in title matches.

But————no man would let this chance slip between his fingers.

Steadying my breath and heart rate, I say loud and clear.

“All right I will seal.”

“..... Okay,” answers Big Sis, trembling.

With both sides of the agreement, the hallowed ceremony can begin.

Big Sis closes her eyes and waits for the big moment as I lean in. Her breath is warm on my face.

Then I reach out.

I put my finger under her chin and lift ever so slightly.

Strands of her silver hair slide down her pink cheeks like shooting stars across the sky.

“Beautiful”

“Idiot”

Tense lips soften and split apart.

Then the ceremony was conducted. Well done or not, I don't know.

Touching her freshly sealed lips, Big Sis whispers through shallow breaths,
“Hot”



Yes. That was intense for sure.

I'm surprised the parts that made contact aren't melting.

"Well? Is that seal strong enough?"

"..... How should I know? Idiot"

"You're so cute, I don't know what to do with myself anymore."

Why are there more butterflies in my stomach after the sealing move than before?

So many feelings are surging through my heart right now. I can't possibly hold them all in.

I have to seal them away? Really?

Is that even possible?

Heck no

"I'd like to do another one."

"No I'll fall apart if that seal is broken"

"Please, Ginko."

"N-No fair, Yaichi Saying my name at a time like this"

It feels like I ran headfirst into a wall of her fiery will. Words are powerless.

One more push.

"Ah!"

"Wh-What?"

"I forgot something very important."

I apologize to her, sounding as remorseful as possible.

"Two copies are made for sealing moves I apologize for not explaining that."

"O-Oh? If that's how the rules work, then there's no choice"

"Yes. It's proper etiquette."

Now with Big Sis's permission, I start preparing the second sealing move. This

girl is far too trusting. She'll definitely fall for some bad guy's scheme, so it's up to me to protect her!

"....."

Bound and determined, this time I wrapped my arm around Big Sis's waist.

Our lips draw closer and closer one more time——Unfortunately.

"Yaiiichiii! Ginko-o-o!"

"?!"

Big Sis shoves me away with both hands so hard that I stumble backwards and nearly fall into the rice paddy.

You've got to be kidding

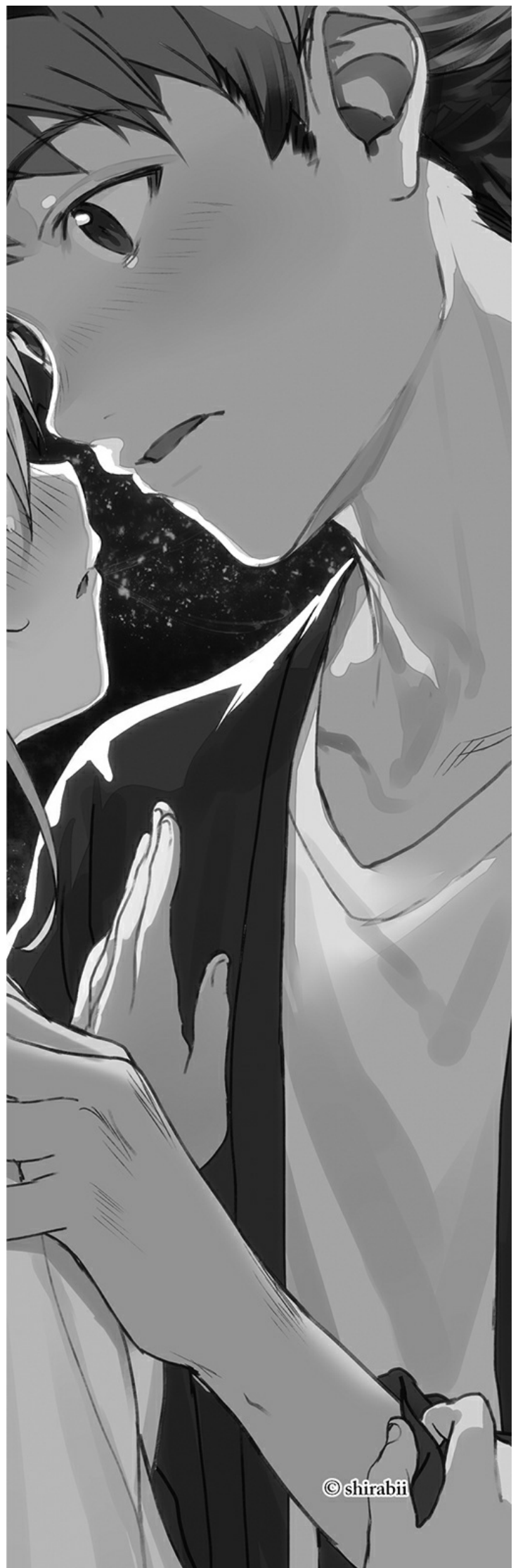
"There is a big Shogi thing on TV right now! Shouldn't you be watching?"

"..... Mom"

Why do bad moves and moms always show up at the worst possible time

Big Sis has already backed away from me and made a face that says: *we were just looking at the stars*. So much for my chance of a lifetime

"What's wrong, Mrs. Kuzuryu?"



“Sorry to interrupt, Ginko. I don’t know much about Shogi at all but——.”

Her next words pull us down from the romantic clouds and back into reality.

“Have you heard it’s the Shogi Meijin’s 100th title season? And ... something about the most wins ever? Anyway, he did it and got to the Citizens Award. The press conference is about to start!”

The shock hit Big Sis and I so hard that it was like the starry sky fell to the ground.

Because the god of the Shogi world had just pulled off another miracle.

GLORY

“Now, in recognition of his extraordinary accomplishments, the Prime Minister will present the Meijin with gifts!”

We make it back to Yaichi’s and turn on the TV just in time to see the Meijin receive black boxes filled with high-quality ink stones and feather quills.

“What? They gave him a pen set?”

“There are better words

Yaichi: describing ceremonial gifts in the crudest way possible.

Is *this* really what I want? Am I rushing things?

“Being the Meijin, he is asked to sign diplomas and certificates all the time. There could be people who see him receive those gifts in public like this and think: *those are the pens he’ll use!* and start playing Shogi, yes?”

“Oh! Wow The Meijin thinks of everything.”

That man always prioritizes what’s best for the Shogi world and makes decisions with the next several moves already in mind. Everything he says and does has a deeper purpose behind it.

Compared to him, my little brother——.

No

Yaichi..... this idiot.

“Be prepared, Yaichi. As the Ryuo, you’ll be signing your name right next to the Meijin, yes? Tons of autograph requests will come for you tomorrow, just wait.”

“D-Don’t pressure me like that I’m using the same pens I had back in junior high. Do you think somebody would give me a set like that?”

“Go buy your own.”

But I have to say

“The Meijin defended that title to secure his 100th title season today, right? I

realize it was the seventh match in the series, but don't you think having the ceremony on the same day is a little too fast to be true?"

"It seems like the match ended around lunchtime, and it looks like they decided to get it all finished up right away because the match was in Tokyo. The gifts were prepared back during the Ryou Title Match, so the government wanted to honor the Meijin while the public was in the mood to celebrate. At least, that's what I think."

"..... Suspicious."

"You think so? But considering how low their approval rating is right now——."

"No. All of that information rolling off your tongue is suspicious. You're hiding something, aren't you?"

".....!!"

"You told me it was Chairman Tsukimitsu who reserved a room for us last night, yes? The two of you aren't plotting something behind my back, are you?"

"Y-You're overthinking it! Yes, I talked to the chairman, but he just wanted to get a congratulatory comment from me for the Meijin because I'm a title holder! Because at *that* time yesterday, he already had a big lead."

"*That* time? What exactly is *that* time? Say it loud enough for me to hear!"

"The Sealing move"

"!!!!!"

N-Not that loud! Idiot!!

We're alone in the room. Yaichi's father went to sleep already because he starts planting tomorrow, and his mother also decided to turn in for the night She's probably giving us some privacy Haauuu

Yaichi is sitting cross-legged by my side. I put my head on the idiot's shoulder and ask him, "..... How long are you going to keep speaking so formally?"

"Stopping right away isn't won't happen. It's second nature at this point, " Yaichi stutters.

Minus one point.

“Besides, people have been talking about us for a long time now. If I stopped speaking formally, Machi and other journalists would pick up on it and write who knows what

“Huh? Really? You’re that concerned about what people think?”

“N-Not so much, but I live with my apprentice. I’d prefer to avoid stories getting written that would make things awkward between us.”

“Ohh? So the elementary school girl’s feelings are more important to you? Well, pardon me for being in high school.”

Minus two points.

Yaichi keeps mumbling more excuses.

“..... Ai is still a kid, so she doesn’t understand there’s a line between love and admiration. But she’s extremely smart, sensitive and picks up on everything. I just don’t want her to end up getting hurt Please.”

“.....”

I’ll be brutally honest.

I’m angry, bordering on enraged. There’s a burning feeling in my chest and a dark cloud in the pit of my stomach growing larger by the second. Minus one hundred million points.

But now’s not the time to tell him. I want to be my own woman, above all the clutter.

Yes, an adult like Keika.

“..... What about the dark pipsqueak? Don’t you think she’s the bigger problem?”

“Ai Yashajin? She sees me as some overgrown insect that happens to play Shogi. She couldn’t care less what I do on my own time.”

“Sigh So many storms on the horizon

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“Just hoping a shooting star hits you on the head and fixes your Lolita complex.”

“That’s cruel!!”

You’re the cruel one. Stupid idiot. Stupid Yaichi.

I bang my head against Yaichi’s shoulder a few times without saying anything.

“L-Look! The Meijin’s press conference is starting!!”

The Meijin, wearing a kimono with a black crest like he did for the title presiding ceremony when he received the highest possible accolade as a citizen of Japan, maintains his lighthearted demeanor despite the torrent of camera flashes raining down on him.

One hundred seasons as a title holder.

Eternal status in six titles, Dragon King Ryuo being the only exception.

And now, the winningest Shogi professional in history with 1,434 victories to his name. The Meijin answers questions on all these topics and more with vibrant energy and even gets a few laughs along the way.

“..... He truly is amazing. The Meijin.”

“If it’s winning a few matches head-to-head, even I can do that. Sure, it’s not easy, but I think I can hold my ground against him.”

“.....”

“But I’ll never ever come close to breaking his records. I can’t even imagine what it would be like to hold multiple titles for a year.”

That’s probably the truth.

I have two women’s titles, but it’s still exponentially more difficult to have two instead of one, so much so that calculating the burden would be no easy feat.

Doing that continuously for 25 years with an average of four titles each year to reach this milestone is

The stuff of gods. A truly divine achievement.

“Loved by the Shogi gods No, this man is one of them.”

“Ayumu’s been calling him *the god* for years.”

Indeed, he has.

An existence on a plain that even Shogi Martians revere and have given up trying to reach.

He is so far above me that somehow the person on screen doesn't seem real.

I've never spoken to him before, though I've lined up his match records and read every single one of his books several times.

Just like the *Shogi gods* Master was always talking about; we worship him while getting nothing in return. A being on a permanent pedestal.

That's what I thought.

"We have enough time for one last question."

A journalist stands up with that announcement.

"Meijin. Shogi software has made considerable advances in recent years. Software defeated a professional for the first time several years ago, but it's quite possible that software could best even the top professionals nowadays Yet you have never taken part in a software match. Would you like to do so in the future?"

"That's true, I haven't. And I can't deny that I find the idea intriguing. However"

However?

The press conference has gone quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

Could it be possible the Meijin would play a match against software so long as certain conditions were met? The country is on the edge of its collective seat ... waiting for that answer.

The Meijin, on the other hand, takes his answer in a direction that no one saw coming.

"What I would be most interested in playing against right now is—a woman."

..... Huh?

“The day that women join the professional Shogi leagues will soon be upon us. There is no difference between men and women when it comes to Shogi skill.”

Women? Professional Shogi?

How did he suddenly reach this topic? I don't understand.

However, the Meijin spoke so smoothly and concisely that *it was almost as if he had intended to say this from the start.*

“All of my accomplishments are simple repetitions of what other men have already achieved. I may have tallied higher numbers during my career, but what I have done is essentially the same as those who came before me. The way I see it, I only set this record because I traversed a well-paved highway to reach it.”

The Meijin casually makes light of the miracle he just performed.

“I just stated that there is no difference in Shogi skill between men and women. However, women are faced with far more environmental and institutional obstacles than men.”

He then lays out examples one by one.

Politely. Thoroughly.

“I'm positive other barriers exist that I can't even imagine. Could someone who's overcome all that play weak Shogi? I highly doubt it. Personally, I think they would be stronger than anyone.”

“U-Um Meijin?”

The journalist who first asked the question cautiously follows up.

“Might you be referring to Naniwa's Snow White? The young girl currently battling in the 3-dan division”

“Yes. Miss Sora is certainly one of them. She stands at the forefront.”

The Meijin nods again and again.

“I have had my eye on her for years. Along with her match records, I've seen how she conducts herself as the title holder, as well as her extraordinary efforts in the Sub League.”

I don't believe my ears.

“For years?”

I thought I’d only been watching him all this time.

I was certain that after taking the wrong path, my Shogi would never reach the Shogi gods no matter how I played.

But I was wrong.

A Shogi god had always been watching me!!

“Anyone can make great time by traveling on a road that has already been paved by someone else. All they must do is test to see if that person was right along the way. However, there is no glory at the end of that road,” the god declares. “There is no right or wrong on a path that has never been taken. All I can say from my own experience is——.”

The Meijin looks right into my eyes through the screen.

Then the god continues with a slight grin.

“Fortune favors the brave. At least, I believe that to be true.”

With that, the press conference comes to a close.

The TV station has already switched to a different program, but Yaichi and I can only sit here, frozen in place with our mouths hanging open.

A bit of time passes before I finally break the silence.

“Yaichi”

“Yes?”

“Do you think he was speaking to *me* just now?”

“P- Probably”

“I’m shocked My heart’s still racing”

Burning up.

My whole body feels like it’s on fire.

Each thundering beat of my heart is circulating fire through my veins. I can

feel it.

The intense heat in my blood burns away the grip fear had over me And reawakens a different emotion deep inside.

That being——.

My fighting spirit.

“..... The Meijin is so cool. I think I’m in love.”

“Wh-What you think you’re saying, Big Sis?! He’s married!!”

“A bold announcement in front of the country like that is much more appealing, don’t you think?”

“Th-That just shows what a nice guy I am, considering what my apprentice might think”

“I can’t be with some lolicon who prioritizes little girls over me.”

I stick out my tongue and stand up.

Who could stay sitting down at a time like this?

I want to get going, now.

Because a Shogi god is waiting for me!

“Let’s go home, Yaichi.”

I extend my hand to him as he looks back at me.

Home ... to where we first met.

Home ... to the place where we grew up.

“To our battlefield.”

I was a fool for trying to find a place to die.

What in the world gave me the impression that I had to look in the first place?

The place where I will die was determined long ago.

Shogi players live and die in the same place.

The only place there is for us: in front of a Shogi board.

RECORD 5

桐
創
多
(11歳)

SOTA KUNUGI
(11)

鏡
洲
飛
馬
(29歳)

HIUMA KAGAMIZU
(29)

DAN

“Good morning.”

The entire room goes quiet the moment I step into the Onkuroshoin Arena.

—It’s as if everyone is walking on eggshells

Their reaction makes it easy to tell how my shameful incident two weeks ago was received by other Sub League members.

However, that atmosphere vanishes right away.

The 3-*dan* division plays a total of 18 matches.

With 10 of them in the rearview mirror, the late game has officially arrived.

Stars are aligning to show who will and who won’t be promoted.

People at the top are under pressure to stay there.

The ones right on their heels are close to panicking as their windows of opportunity start to close.

And lastly, those with more black stars of defeat than they can handle are wallowing in the despair of knowing that their remaining matches are meaningless.

—If I lose consecutive matches today I will be joining them.

This room was filled with hope on day one, but not a shred of it remains.

Despite being in our home territory, Kansai’s 3-*dan* players are so restless and on edge that it’s as if we have never played here before.

Kanto’s 3-*dans* are off in the corners of the room with nowhere else to go. While some close their eyes to concentrate, others are solving Shogi puzzles with reckless abandon. The remainder are simply staring off into space, their minds someplace else.

I have returned.

Come back to this hell.

Only two players in this hell: the ones at the top of the standings still have

their dignity as human beings intact.

“.....”

Hiuma Kagamizu, with only one loss to his name, acknowledges me with a quick glance before returning his focus to his own match preparation.

Then, the other one.

My first opponent today————the only person in the room with a perfect record and the youngest ever to achieve 3-*dan*.

“It’s been a while, Ginko,” says a smiling Sota Kunugi as he comes up to me.

He’s not feeling any pressure whatsoever.

The match has yet to begin, but he’s talking to his soon-to-be opponent as if it’s already over.

“I was up in Tokyo for the last regular activities, but The results were so surprising! You lost two in a row, right? But, cheer up! There’s still a chance to promote with *four losses*.”

——I still only have three.

Except his demeanor is so carefree and innocent that I don’t feel the urge to correct him. In fact, merely interacting with this elementary school boy is scary enough that the idea of running away seems appealing.

The reality is: I’m afraid to face this boy again despite beating him once before.

I ran away from the nightmare of losing four straight matches in the 3-*dan* division.

“Pardon me.”

The prodigy sits down in front of the board.

Then, I ask that monster with the superhuman ability to recount match records as precisely as a computer, “Sota. You said that you would win the next time we played a match, didn’t you?”

“Yep. What about it?”

He confirms with a smile.

This is no taunt, at least that’s not his intention.

He’s simply stating a fact. Just objectively comparing skill levels and predicting what will happen when they collide, that’s all.

He doesn’t have the faintest idea of the emotional reaction his words would trigger in an opponent, what effect they would have on the world around him or how they could come back to haunt him.

—That’s what I wanted to know.

Satisfied, I reach for the piece box. I was sure my fingers would tremble, but they’re so steady that even I am surprised by my solid grip on the box.

—I’m so glad I didn’t cut it off.

I’ve apologized to and am grateful for such a reliable partner.

The only one fighting by my side today is my right hand.

There is nothing else to rely on.

I don’t intend to rely on anything else, either.

I pick up a King from the jumbled mess on the board. Pinching the pieces between my fingers for the first time in two weeks, I remember the sensation as I line up 20 pieces in my territory.

Just as Master taught me.

Carefully, politely.

But with strength and purpose.

All so that the Shogi gods would take a liking to me.

“Let’s begin,” I tell him. “Today, the first move is mine.”

THESE FINGERTIPS REMEMBER

Our match began with a bizarre twinge permeating the air.

Of course, the unique tension that comes with the 3-*dan* division is there, but this is something else.

“.....?”

I feel several gazes move in once I finish my opening move, so I look up and notice that the players on either side of us are sneaking glances over here.

But not at me.

They want to know Sota’s first move.

“.....”

Each 3-*dan* ranking member of the Sub League is in the middle of a match that could determine the rest of their lives, and yet they can’t focus on it.

That’s the effect an elementary school boy cruising to the top of the standings with 10 consecutive victories has on the rest of the players.

His overwhelming talent draws people in like a massive black hole—and crushes them into nothingness.

“Oh? You went with 2 Six Pawn?”

After seeing me open by advancing the Pawn in front of my Rook, Sota happily mirrors my opening move by doing the same. He’s goading me.

I can already see how the formations will take shape because——.

“This is one of Yaichi’s favorite strategies,” says Sota, looking up at me with a toothy grin. “Shall we find out Who knows Yaichi better?”

——He’s on defense, but the look of absolute confidence on his face is saying there’s no way he could lose. Damn prodigy

The formation is——Double Wing Attack.

Hearing that the first match the pipsqueak and Yaichi ever played was a Double Wing seriously touched a nerve but, strangely enough, I can understand

why Yaichi would take her as an apprentice after seeing how she plays it.

The Double Wing is a simple test of strength.

If I were to compare it to cooking, I'd say fried eggs, perhaps?

It's been around for eons and easy enough for children to do, yet flexible enough for the chef to show off their skills and creativity. Simply put, it pits talent against talent.

Still, the basic recipe is set in stone. Plunge the Pawn in front of the Rook in the enemy line—like cracking an egg, and then slowly turn up the heat as you take over the board during a long mid-game—is how it's supposed to work.

"Huuuh?!" all four players sitting at the boards on either side of us say in unison.

"..... Huh?"

As do I Though it took me a few moments to realize exactly where Sota deployed that piece.

Sota ignores the standard completely—*and deploys another Pawn: the one I just sacrificed that used to be in front of my Rook!*

—8 Seven Pawn?! What good would blatantly targeting my Bishop do?

Breaking off from the standard so quickly is like cracking the egg and then throwing the whole thing into the pan.

It's such an unbalanced way to attack that if someone new to Shogi were to try it, they would be scolded and told to *learn the standard*.

—If the defender gets an advantage like this it would rebuke all of Shogi history as we know it!

"What do you think, Ginko? Wouldn't Yaichi love this move?" says Sota with the same tone as a child showing off a brand new toy.

"I was saving it to play against Yaichi when we meet in the pros, but I just couldn't wait anymore!"

The elementary school boy goes against all the Shogi knowledge built up over 1,400 years and does it with a smile.

When a prodigy says it on the board, it's very convincing However ...

——..... No. Shogi should be more complicated than that.

That's what Yaichi would say. Which means the path I should take is the exact opposite ——a drawn out war of attrition!

——I'll cook up the egg as long as possible without breaking the shell!!

"Ohhhh? That's an interesting idea."

I use my Rook and a Knight in tandem to gain control over as much of the board as I can while still protecting my Bishop. Sota then leans in close the board, his eyes scanning back and forth as he spends a great deal of time dissecting what he sees.

Even his use of time goes against the standard.

It's the early game, but he's already delving into his stock of waiting time. In the Sub League, which it is said to have two late-games, everyone hangs onto every precious second for as long as possible

"I've got it! Looks like attacking is the best bet after all!"

Now confined to one-minute Shogi, Sota announces and promptly ignores my prediction.

Without caring that he basically threw all his waiting time in the gutter.

Seeing him ignore every theory in existence and cut through my carefully constructed offensive as if slicing through butter all while simply advancing across the board The difference between our talent levels is painfully obvious.

This is how champions play Shogi, with absolute confidence that their late-game prowess will win the day.

How does someone win against a Martian who can see things with a sensory organ the rest of humanity doesn't have?

"..... I only analyzed one Shogi match leading up to today's regular activities," I whisper to him as I sacrifice a Pawn, offering it up as bait to outmaneuver Sota's advance. "The match against you where I promoted to 3-dan."

"Analyze it all you want, but you won't find a way to beat me in a match you

won by chance.”

“Yes. It was by chance.”

Realizing that is exactly why the thought of facing Sota again pushed me so far into despair.

“But, don’t you find it a little strange? The difference in our ability is clear. Even so, I emerged victorious at the very end I wanted to solve that mystery. To find out *exactly why I won.*”

“.....?”

“And, I figured it out. It’s precisely because you can see things that can’t be seen Because you were born with so much strength that there’s something you lack!!”

“Sora advanced?!”

The timing of my attack is so peculiar that the Sub League members on either side of me can’t contain their surprise.

After seeing me gear up for a long war of attrition, I can’t blame them.

——But now is the time! Now is the only time!

Thinking back, hints were scattered throughout every comment Sota has made.

Arrogant and always optimistic.

He has become so taken with Yaichi’s brilliance that a talentless player like me is nothing more than a bump in the road, which is why he took a strong offensive position in the early game. That’s also why he didn’t bother saving time. To him, the board is a playground to be enjoyed.

I can fully understand how that could happen. Sota is a member of the 3-*dan* division, but still in elementary school. A prodigy, but also a child who lets all the talk about him becoming the first elementary school-aged professional go to his head. He has no fear or respect for anyone, let alone belief in the Shogi gods.

Yes———exactly how I once was.

“You are who I would be if I hadn’t met Yaichi”

I sacrifice a Knight and sling my Bishop across the board to claim a Gold and a Silver from Sota's defenses.

Chipping away at the prodigy's mask piece by piece.

"You are the poor child who spent their life in a hospital bed instead of developing what's important to be human. You are what I once was."

"*Poor child?* Are you talking about me?"

Sota sounds vaguely surprised as he nonchalantly shifts his King over to dodge my attack by a hair. There is no fear in those fingers whatsoever.

Onlookers had been watching with baited breath, but suddenly lose interest.

"..... Nope, that didn't work. He read her attack perfectly And here comes the defender's counter, ouch"

"Who cares how many Golds or Silvers you get if you have to sacrifice your best weapons"

My attack thwarted, I only have the Gold and Silver I just claimed and a single Pawn on my piece stand. Including the pieces in my territory, I have *six of the eight total Golds and Silvers*. Sota has an extra Bishop and Knight.

And his counterattack comes right away, gracefully leaping forward with the feather-light steps of an angel.

An angel of death—softly lands before my Pawn.

He's throwing away that Knight for free?!!

"Well? Can you still call me *poor*?"

He's executing a direct assault on the area in front of my King, an all-out blitz.

If that weren't enough, he has a Bishop in the first column with its sights set on my King like a laser beam.

Fear takes hold of my mind as this two-headed attack closes in.

I grab hold of my right knee, squeezing with all my might and desperately search for the right words to say.

"I admit, I'm scared Even sitting down like this, my knees won't stop shaking But!"

“But? But what?”

“This is the important thing that you lack—fear.”

“Fear? Who needs a twisted emotion like that in a competition?”

“You’re wrong.”

Shaking my head no, I let go of my knee.

Instead, I reach for my piece stand and use my trembling fingers pick one up.

“You go barreling down the wrong path headfirst because you don’t know fear. Your exponentially superior late-game skills pair nicely with aggressive attacks, but Not knowing what it’s like to be afraid—has warped your ability to see the big picture!”

I deploy it.

A mighty—4 Seven Gold!!

“..... Defending with a Gold? Really? His Knight will promote a 5 Seven on the next move, right?”

“A run-of-the-mill move like that? She knows she’s facing Kunugi, doesn’t she?”

Other Sub League members start voicing their doubts.

However, words have failed only one of them after seeing my move.

“?! Huh What?! It can’t be!!”

Only Sota Kunugi picks up on the effect my move had on the board.

A basic move turned what he thought was going to be an easy win into a rock-solid wall!

“Make light of me all you want. I’m well aware that I don’t have the strength to convince you otherwise.”

“.....”

“But you know something, little boy? Don’t you think making light of Shogi itself is going too far?”

“.....!”

Sota bites down on his lip.

Compared to a prodigy who seems destined to make his mark on Shogi history, I'm just a nameless player.

However, standards built up and perfected by untold legions of nameless players can defeat one prodigy.

One more thing.

I'll teach him the theory that gave me fits when I was young, but is now my savior.

"Having six of the Golds and Silvers is an advantage That's common sense in the Kansai Sub League. Don't you forget it."

"Wh-What could some meaningless theory possibly——."

Debating the merits of the theory does him no good now because he's already playing one-minute Shogi.

"..... Grr!!"

Sota deploys another Knight to bolster his forces, but his formation is still gridlocked thanks to my golden wall.

"He didn't promote his Knight at 5 Seven?! But, why? It would be so easy to get to the King from there"

"But if Kunugi thinks this is right Then maybe it's the way to go?"

The other 3-*dans* aren't sure what to make of it.

What is correct and what is a mistake?

Looking at them out of the corners of my eyes, I say to Sota, "You said you wanted to find out which one of us knows Yaichi better, did you not?"

"....."

"Yaichi surpassed me. I play exactly how the books I've read tell me, but Yaichi has built up his own Shogi from square one. Despite our playing the same number of moves, he has envisioned more sequences and outcomes than I can fathom"

There's no doubt that Sota has as well.

While humans gain *knowledge* that way, Shogi Martians become *strong*. Strength that combines with their natural born talent.

“But!!”

The time has come for me to put it all on the line.

I commit the remainder of my waiting time to finding a move that will lead to victory.

“I have played more matches against Yaichi Kuzuryu than anyone in the world! Even with minuscule talent! Without reading nearly as deep! Not being a Shogi Martian!! These fingertips remember everything!!”

The me who met Yaichi and the me who didn’t.

Would I have been happier without ever knowing him?

Would I have become stronger had our paths never crossed?

—No!! Absolutely not!!

It’s because I met him Because I have feelings for him that I became this strong.

That pure crystal in my heart breathed life into me.

No one can refute that. No one, not even me.

I know that for a fact because fighting is the only way I know how to find out—!!

“I can’t lose to the likes of you! I I have to catch up with Yaichi!!”

I thought that I would catch up to him by taking titles.

I believed that winning solved everything.

However, no amount of glory forged by others, other player’s research, or winning by coincidence gave me the kind of strength I wanted.

Was I mistaken? I’ve gone back and forth on that and regretted my decisions, afraid the path I chose was a dead-end I couldn’t keep pressing forward.

“There is no right or wrong on a path that has never been taken.”

In saying so, a god gave me a push.

I've done so much to draw the ire of the Shogi gods over the years: talking back to Master, ignoring his teachings, denying the gods' very existence

The gods saw all that.

And still taught me a valuable lesson.

There's only one thing I need to do to receive their love.

"Fortune smiles on the brave."

Then I need to build up the courage to fight my way forward.

I need to look at the monstrous prodigy sitting before me with a grin and stand my ground.

Even I, who was born without talent——can have courage.

"It's about time for the real battle to begin."

Now ... to play Shogi.

To take the path without any right or wrong.

These fingertips remember what to do.

TWO STONES

“*Clank!*” went a cowbell and a man sitting at the counter couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw who walked through the door.

“What a surprise Coincidence? It sure doesn’t look like it.”

They spotted each other at a café a mere three-minute walk away from the Kansai Shogi Association.

It was there the men were reunited.

“Heard from Mr. Kiyotaki. It’s been ages How many years would you say?”

“Twenty, give or take. You haven’t changed a bit, Mitsuru.”

“You’ve plumped up too much. I wouldn’t have recognized you if he hadn’t told me.”

“Wh-What can you do? I’ve forgotten what it’s like to have a routine,” said Kiyoshi Akashi, making excuses as he glanced down at the gut that had started to expand as soon as he became a doctor.

The Worldly Maestro ordered a cup of black iced coffee and took a seat next to him at the counter.

“Well? Don’t tell me you’ve been camping out here every time the Sub League meets for matches?”

“Just since the 3-*dan* division started. Up until then, I was playing Shogi at Kiyotaki-*sensei*’s classroom. It’s perfectly normal to play Shogi on your days off, isn’t it?”

“Good grief My ex-rival’s turned into a stalker. Man, I don’t want to get old,” Mitsuru Oishi said, shaking his head side to side.

The iced coffee he ordered arrived at his seat.

Sitting on top of an unusual coaster made from a horseshoe was a copper cup filled to the brim with chilled coffee. Mitsuru enjoyed a mouthful of the dark liquid, savoring the roasted flavor before he continued.

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit overprotective? The 3-*dan* division is

harsh, and I don't blame you for being worried about Ginko, but Her condition's healed up, hasn't it?"

"Kiyotaki-*sensei* is the overprotective one. What do you think he did right away when he found out that Ginko had lost twice in a row the last time the 3-*dan* division met?"

"Beats me. What'd he do?"

"Came up with some lame excuse to get Yaichi over to his house! You see, he was worried that Ginko might throw caution to the wind after those losses and do something she shouldn't, don't you think?"

"He did? Is that old man that dead set against her and Yaichi getting together?"

"Well, he's always kept her right at his hip and doted on her as much as his own daughter Just look at Keika. He won't let any man get close."

"As the father of a daughter myself, I get where he's coming from. But don't forget, he raised Yaichi, too. What's he got to complain about? Well some loose ends would need to be tied up first, but still."

"I agree with that. Both of them recently spent time with Yaichi's parents in Fukui, so I would think things are going well."

"Oh? Aren't you well-informed? Stalking at its finest. Don't tell me you went up there with them?"

"Keika told me, all right?!"

"A guy that's been secretly making trips to Kanto doesn't have any room to talk. I know you've been treating her since she was a little tyke, but there's no need to go that far."

"Looking around the city was a lot of fun, though. Plus, I quit before playing in the 3-*dan* division, so I had never been to the Kanto Association before."

"If they ever found out that *the* Kiyoshi Akashi set foot in their building, plenty of those Kanto guys'd need to change pants. Every last one of them was terrified of you promoting."

"Personally, I think Ginko playing against Shoji in the 3-*dan* division is a bigger

shock.”

“Heh. You got that right.”

The men shared a grin.

Kiyoshi Akashi, Mitsuru Oishi and Shoji Karako were all in the same grade during their school years.

Joining the Sub League at the same time, the three became rivals with vastly different styles who sharpened their skills against each other.

Though Kiyoshi was recognized as the most talented of the group, he was the first to leave the Shogi world.

“..... So,” said Mitsuru, looking his former rival square in the eyes and uncorking a question he’d kept bottled up for nearly 20 years. “I always, always wanted to overtake Kiyoshi Akashi. It didn’t matter what level it was, you always promoted into it first. But you just disappeared the moment I got into the 3-*dan* division Why? Why did you abandon Shogi?”

“Because you were there,” Kiyoshi answered without missing a beat. “I never knew if I was doing the right thing. The main reason I decided that I wanted to spend my life saving people rather than trampling them under my feet was because I met a certain person more talented than I was. Once becoming a professional player lost its meaning, I realized there were other paths to travel on life’s journey.”

“..... Even after you were so far ahead?”

“But I never beat you head-to-head. It was a three-way deadlock, remember? I could beat Shoji, but you had my number. You could beat me, but Shoji always found a way to beat you.”

“Cut the crap. I never lost to him, got it? Playing along with his last-ditch efforts to hold out was too much of a pain in the ass, so I just let him have it. What he played, that wasn’t Shogi.”

“That’s what’s called losing,” Kiyoshi smiled with nostalgia. “No one takes the brunt of your worldliness without despairing at your level of talent. Even the Meijin is jealous, I assure you.”

“.....”

“I saw that talent up close and personal and fought against it more than anyone. I made the decision to step away before the 3-*dan* division season began. Shoji spent years toiling in despair, wishing he had more talent until age restrictions forced him out. I think that’s what talent comes down to in the end,” said Kiyoshi as he looked into his empty cup. “An unbreakable spirit. Nothing starts without one. Nothing.”

That was precisely what Kiyoshi had attempted to give Ginko.

It was also what he himself had always wanted.

“I always had the lead and kept running as fast as I could, but others would catch up and overtake me The hardest thing in the world is to keep running when you know you’ve been left behind. The people who only overtake the ones who keep their eyes glued on the people ahead of them have no idea how painful that is”

“.....”

Mitsuru was about to make a counterargument but swallowed his words.

Indeed, he had always been chasing someone or another. It was Kiyoshi in the Sub League and then the Meijin after he turned professional. And now

Kiyoshi pressed on with the conversation in place of the quiet and contemplative Mitsuru.

“Just like me, Ginko has been in the presence of an unprecedented talent for years.”

“Yaichi, huh?”

“Yes. I played against him a few times during my visits to Kiyotaki-*sensei*’s residence, but he’s *that* is toxic. Almost like he plays on a different plane”

A twinge of fear laced Kiyoshi’s voice.

Though he understood Kousuke Kiyotaki’s intentions, there were times that he cursed the man for taking Yaichi Kuzuryu as a live-in apprentice.

“But, you know something? Ginko reaching 3-*dan* at the age of 15 with that monster always around in her physical condition, exerting herself as much

as she did, and having all those expectations piled up on her shoulders, she still kept fighting. That isn't normal any way you think about it. She must be quite the talented person herself!"

"Kiyoshi"

"She can fly higher. She can run faster. Even if she gets overtaken and can't see who she's chasing anymore She can still catch up and overtake them. As a physician, I want to see her accomplish it. Because if she does——."

Kiyoshi stopped himself from finishing that sentence.

Because he knew that saying, *"If she does, then I feel like I can overtake the talent as a doctor that I could never reach as a Shogi player,"* right in front of that talent would be in very poor taste.

Mitsuru looked upon his former rival as if he were staring into the sun.

"You sure seem to be in her court."

"Of course, I am," said Kiyoshi, beaming as he pointed to his puffed-out chest with pride. "I'm the one who first taught Ginko—Naniwa's Snow White—how to play Shogi and identified her talent. That was me." Then he asked his old friend, "You have recognized it, too, haven't you? I hear that she's the only training partner the Worldly Maestro has ever accepted as a professional."

"Heh"

Remembering that detail made Mitsuru chuckle, but he stifled it and explained why he chose Ginko.

"That girl is the only female who ever picked a fight with me the day we met other than my wife."

The two were once known as *Twin Rocks* in the Kansai Sub League due to both having *ishi*, meaning rock, in their names. They shared a hearty laugh sitting shoulder to shoulder at the counter. It was almost as though the clock had been turned back 20 years.

Then they thought of the girl who brought about their reunion after all this time.

Looking up from his empty cup, Kiyoshi Akashi whispered ...

“Fly, Ginko. You now have the freedom to fly anywhere.”

WHERE HE RESIDES

Hot.

Heat surges through me, more than ever before.

—So This is the intensity of a 3-*dan* division late-game, the heat of battle!

It reminds me of my first Sub League Entrance Exam.

It was the broken air conditioner back then, but now it's all heat radiating from the people engaged in battle.

—Shogi gets this intensely hot

A droplet of sweat falls from my cheek and lands on my right hand, which still has a death-grip on my skirt.

The crackling atmosphere only compounds the pressure I'm under.

Sota has been playing one-minute Shogi for what feels like ages.

Meanwhile, I'm mere seconds away from running out of waiting time.

As for the board I'm facing a continuous assault, but I still have balance ... barely. If I can just make it through this, then actually!!

—Don't be fooled by talent! Focus only on the Shogi in front of you!!

Mentally reprimanding myself, I hit my weakening knees with my fists for extra motivation.

I've always been overly fixated on this thing called *talent*.

As a result, I lose my cool when facing talented individuals younger than I am.

—..... Like what happened during my instructional match with the pipsqueak for the Practice League

Though the handicap robbed me of my Rook and Lance, I still resorted to using off-the-board tactics I had sworn off against a little girl who only started playing Shogi three months prior.

Simply put, I ran away ...

Ran away from facing a talented opponent head-on.

Because I was afraid that doing so would expose my own lack of talent.

No one can get stronger by averting their eyes from their own weakness.

“I won’t run away anymore. Not from defeat, and not from my own weakness,” I say out loud with conviction ... just to make sure I hear myself say it.

Defeat is heavy.

Losing to Sota now and shouldering my fourth loss would mean The front runner for promotion would extend his perfect streak to 11, taking my chance to achieve *4-dan* even further away than it already is, making it all but disappear.

Defeat is heavy.

Lose now, and that will be four in a row. After losing three in a row nearly drove me to take my own life, four would be scarier than death.

Defeat is heavy.

“But! That doesn’t mean I can’t carry it!!”

Then, the instant my mind became set.

“Huh?”

B-dmp! My heart beats with the force of a sledgehammer——and that sound escapes my lips.

Because the formations on the board in front of me shift into something else.

???

I rub my eyes with my right hand, thinking that all the strain was making them play tricks on me.

Even so, the board didn’t go away.

My eyes are closed but the board is still there.

It’s completely different from a mental Shogi board.

A crisp, clear Shogi board is right there in front of me.

Further still, the pieces on it are arranged in the formation I'm trying to read.

—See?

It's beyond *seeing*.

—..... I feel it. The pieces resonating with each other

There was a time when I told Keika: *"We look at where the pieces are and read the board to see what they can do. But the young men in the pros and upper ranks of the Sub League can do that without reading the board. They perceive what the pieces can do."*

Oh Now I get it.

That's what *this* is.

They don't need to read. They can tell with a look.

They're not looking.

They can't help but see.

I've described those beings with a sensory organ different from earthlings like this.

"They're Shogi Martians."

—I I can perceive pieces, too!!

Though it's a bizarre sensation.

I feel as though I'm directly connected with the Shogi board, omnipotent in the ways that each piece can interact with all of its counterparts at the same time.

One look, and I just know.

I'm not moving the pieces around in my head *They do that on their own*

with a single glance.

“.....?!”

My eyes fly open, but I clench them closed just as quickly because illusion and reality start to mix, and I feel panic setting in.

Like watching the letters on a page of a book start to converge That kind of sensation.

“..... Now it makes sense. Putting a captured piece on your opponent's stand is bound to happen like this

I grin, reminiscing about that unthinkable rule violation.

Ika Sainokami didn't have a full understanding of this ability. Most likely, she wasn't used to it yet.

“Then that's her fault!”

Promising myself that I would finally have a comeback after that bad attitude four years ago, I slowly reopen my eyes.

Then I unleash my newly awakened power!

“This is my Shogi!!”

I decide—I will play defensively and add another Silver to my Gold and Silver wall!

“Are you still trying to defend? You can't win if you're always defending.”

“Didn't I tell you? Having six of the Golds and Silvers is an advantage.”

Paying me no heed, Sota advances across the board in leaps and bounds with a Knight and a Rook. The arrow is locked and drawn, all that's left is to release the bowstring.

However I block the arrow with my wall while seeing phantom sparks burst across the board on impact.

—That was worldliness!!

Nothing compared to the magic the Worldly Maestro can concoct, but Just as relief courses through my veins, Sota reaches across the board as if to *tear my heart out through my spine!*

“Deploying behind her formation for pincer attack?! I never would’ve thought of that!”

“In check with 6 Nine Silver, King or Gold Which will it be?!”

The 3-*dans* who have finished their own matches are gathered around mine. One after another they are instantaneously left in awe by Sota’s move. It’s a flashy one that would stun *those who can’t see*.

—But gaudy moves like that have no effect on me as I am now.

“This is payback.”

Calmly taking the Silver with my King, Sota deploys a Rook in my territory, this time to put me in check once again. A formation I *already saw* has manifested on the board.

And, if my hunch is correct, the advantage should go to—me!

“I don’t mean to sound rude, but” says Sota with surprise after our back-and-forth concludes. “Were you always this strong?”

“I’m surprised myself. It’s like a growth spurt.”

“I think so, too! And for someone your age, I’m impressed.”

He compliments me with an innocent smile.

“But you still haven’t caught up to me.”

Then he unleashes a truly cruel move.

A single Pawn from his piece stand was all it took to nullify the Rook I snapped onto the board with all my might.

“Tsk! Monster”

I don’t have time to despair.

Instead, I advance my Knight to put pressure on the defending King. There is no check path, but it greatly fortifies my position.

However, Sota sees there is no check path in *half a second* and deploys a Bishop deep in my territory to put me in check instead.

Then, once I get my King out of the way, he shifts his own King deeper into the defenses.

—So fast

Because I've closed the gap, I understand.

I can comprehend this prodigy's greatness.

In the time it took me to perceive a single move, this whiz kid has read 100 as if casually skimming through a book.

If this match turns into a reading battle, would I stand a chance?

—..... Deep.

Even over the last sequence, he most likely realized his attack would sputter if he didn't have the Bishop there first. The me who walked into the arena earlier today wouldn't have been able to comprehend that intention during one-minute Shogi.

—Little by little Little by little, I'm catching up.

The formation looks No, the formation *is* in my favor.

Strength is on my side.

Then, with sudden urgency that even I can't believe—.

"Kunugi pulled his Bishop back!"

"The second round is on This is intense!!"

The Sub League members watching our battle have reached the boiling point.

Sota read that he couldn't reach my King, so he switched to playing defense.

Which would mean—.

"Did you finally notice? Did you read what you did wrong?"

"....."

He doesn't answer.

Another layer of his childlike composure disappears.

The defender in a Double Wing, Sota tried to overwhelm me with a rapid attack strategy but realized he couldn't deliver a decisive blow and is now gearing up for a war of attrition.

This child overflowing with pride has come to claim victory despite his warped

view of the big picture.

“I’ve lost about 100 matches since the day I was born. To living people, anyway.”

—I’ve lost at least 10,000 ...

Just as I start comprehending this outrageous claim, Sota follows it up with something even more unbelievable.

“But never have I lost twice to the same person. I’m taking this match seriously now.”

“Or so you say.”

I laugh through my nose, but I know better than anyone that what he’s saying is true.

My victory last time was pure coincidence.

I won but felt like I had been thoroughly defeated.

Which is why this time, for sure ...

“I’ll crush you.”

It’s reverse logic, but the very fact that Sota pulled back to defend could only mean that the formations were that much in my favor.

Now, while he’s wavering is my only chance to attack!!

“Hiyaaaaahhhhh!!”

I invigorate myself and deploy a Silver right in the gut of his King! Even if I end up losing it, I WILL get that King out in the open!!!

Then, with Sota’s King on the edge of the board, I level a Lance right at its head.

“Go ahead! Try and block this!!”



“.....”

Sota flips a piece around between his fingers while scanning the board with his eyes, looking for something. It's a Silver in his hand.

He deploys it in a place I had to see to believe.

9 Four Silver?!

“Silver?! A Silver, there?!”

That's a move I would never play even if I had three chances to relive my life. It's basically the same as exposing your chest to the tip of a lance's blade as if offering up your heart. Reckless beyond belief.

Further still, I can take either that Silver or his Horse by simply retreating my Dragon. It's a bad move at first glance, and a horrible move any way you look at!

“Kunugi is going for broke!”

“Human beings don't play like that”

There are more Sub League members watching our match now than I can count.

Not a single one of them saw this move coming.

—This is a battle between those *who can see*!!

When two players who can read moves in an instant collide in the late game, their only option is to play moves that the other *wouldn't read in the first place*.

Under those circumstances, fatally bad moves are bound to turn up occasionally.

“A bad move can be a good move if it's not exploited. So, do you know the answer?”

“Damn brat”

I'll make you eat those words.

Sota deploys a series of *bad* moves and I work my way across the board, exploiting each one of them.

Pull back my Dragon to take both his Horse and Silver ... or deploy a Rook from my piece stand to put him in check and take the Silver Sota has presented me with a plethora of options, but I choose to deploy the Rook, promoting it into a Dragon and descending on his fortress with my two Dragons leading the charge.

Sota plays all his moves instantaneously as if he is absolutely sure I will make a mistake.

Two Dragons and two Golds stare each other down.

I detect a *certain scent* in the air.

—There's a checkmate here! If I take them both with my Dragons, then maybe!!

It's the last and most difficult problem to solve.

If I fire my two Dragon missiles, I could blast my way right to Sota's King. There's a possibility that could work.

All I have to do is flip the switch.

Flip it, and it will all be over.

The problem is that if I can't finish him with this Sota's counterattack will destroy me!

—There's no time! What should I do?! Go for it?!



Shogi players instinctually read to checkmate. The me not too long ago would've charged forward even without reading all the way through.

... Because I used to win that way, hoping things would work out for the best that time too.

—But!!!!

I'm done hoping.

Passing up on the checkmate I couldn't read, I deploy a Knight above the King to put him in check instead.

"Ha!"

Sota instantly looks up from the board.

"Hahahahahaha!!

Aha!!"

And rolls with laughter.

Positively brimming with joy, Sota happily advances his King forward as if my Knight isn't the least bit intimidating and criticizes my decision.

"You let that checkmate get away? It was your one and only chance! Your opportune moment, and you passed it up! You dropped the ball at the last possible moment!!"

"Your point?"

This isn't over!

That checkmate doesn't mean anything!

"Such a victory has no value."

The voice of someone long ago echoes through my mind.

Yes, winning that way is meaningless. I've racked up victories by placing my hopes on an all-or-nothing sequence in the late-game, but none of those victories made me stronger.

"I will win with my own Shogi!! I trust this hand to claim victory!!" I yell, flipping the switch this time and sending my Dragon missiles across the board.

"It's too late for that now!"

Sota advances his King out of the way.

I pursue it with a Dragon, but The King's diagonal movement makes it hard to pin down.

"I told you that you can't checkmate me with that, didn't I?! See? Look! My King can escape by moving up the board. I'll have you in checkmate before you can catch it."

Sota taunts me like a kitten playing with a cornered mouse.

Then he yells like a child throwing a temper tantrum.

"You can't even read the simplest check paths! You're too scared to press forward for the win! It's impossible for me to lose twice to a talentless person like you!!"

Wait.

I wasn't born with enough talent?

"That simply means I never needed talent."

A healthy body.

The talent to instantly read checkmates.

The ability to create unique strategies on the spot.

There was a time when I wanted all of that. I used to curse my feeble body. My lack of talent made me lose all hope.

However, I don't care about any of that now.

"There's something else, something I want so much more!!"

To hear a certain voice.

To see that pathetic smile.

To go back to those days in the kid's room.

"Ginko."

—I just want to be called by my name again!

I set my sights on my piece stand and reach out as if trying to grasp the hand I let go of. My eyes are seeing a sequence that starts with deploying 3 Six Knight

to put him in check.

But.

—That won’t work! That sequence won’t make it in time!!

I stop my hand from grabbing the Knight and grab a fistful of my skirt instead.
Not enough! This hand still isn’t strong enough!

The shortest path to check won’t make it in time!!

—It needs to be higher! Go further!

Sequences spread out before me like clouds over the horizon.

Reading deeper, wider and faster than ever before.

“..... Oh

However these clouds of thought are hiding something very important from my eyes.

This isn’t it!

More—————!!

“..... More More

I lean over the board, putting both hands down on the *tatami* mats for support.

All so that I can find the answer I truly desire.

“More More More, more, more,
moremoremoremoremoremoremoremoremoremore
moremoremoremoreMoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
ooRRRRRRRRRR



The clouds part.

Breaking through, all that greets my eyes on the other side is—open blue sky.

Going higher still, I reach out to find what else I desire that lies even further beyond.

Rather than go with the Knight—I select a twinkling silver star.

I take it from my piece stand. The piece I chose, my piece.

The one with my name carved into it.

Then, I put it down right in front of Sota's King! 3 Four Silver!!

"Huh?! Not 3 Six Knight?!"

Sota looks puzzled by my decision to play 3 Four Silver. The reason for it is simple, he can slide his King diagonally into the Silver's blind spot on its side and escape.

Indeed, it's a clumsy approach.

"But it's enough for you."

It's not the shortest path or the best move.

Have a computer analyze the formations, and it would deliver a shorter sequence long before me.

However, I read this sequence to the end and saw victory.

That's the important reality. Not getting blinded by all the bad moves.

Seeing made me understand.

Not being able to read many sequences at once doesn't make any difference.

"Run away if you wish. No matter where you go, I will track that King down and put its head on a pike."

".....!!"

Sota bites his lip to endure the pain and, just as I thought he would, advances his King diagonally forward to avoid the Silver.

Someone in the crowd of Sub League members around us whispers.

“So This is Ginko’s Shogi.”

It’s the greatest compliment I could receive.

Watching Sota’s King out of the corner of my eye, I advance my central Knight and claim a Gold for myself.

That’s my way to announce loud and clear that my King is perfectly safe right where it is.

“Now then. The only way for the *boy wonder* to beat Snow White is to checkmate her this turn, but?”

The audience members all start analyzing sequences amongst themselves, trying to find a way for Sota to checkmate me.

If even one of them finds a way, Sota will pick up on it and I’ll lose. I feel as though I’m playing against the entire 3-*dan* division at once.

However, I won’t falter.

I’m dead set on being the strongest one in the arena.

—To the right of my King That’s where all the pieces have congregated, so his only choice is to deploy something in that area.

Either 6 Eight Bishop or 6 Nine Rook.

I have both of those options read.

—It’s alright. Neither one can checkmate me.

However, Sota deploys in a completely unexpected spot. One where he would be throwing away his Bishop for free, right in front of my Lance at 9 Seven to put me in check!!

“Attacking from behind?!”

Some of the 3-*dans* can’t contain themselves, their voices piercing the air.

“He’s just giving away his Bishop!! Wh-What happens if she takes it?!”

“It’s the final stages of a late-game, and the kid keeps playing moves that don’t make any sense!”

“Can Snow White read it?! It’s one-minute Shogi!!”

—One minute is more than enough.

I grab my skirt with my right hand and clench tight.

Then, I put my left hand on top.

I follow what Master always taught me about preventing rash decisions and read as thoroughly and deeply as I can Completely calm, I take the Bishop Sota deployed with my Lance.

“..... She took it.”

“Oh. So there wasn’t anything more to it”

“She’s strong.”

No one’s bothering to read the formations anymore.

Sota immediately deploys his Rook and puts me in check for the next several turns, but it’s nothing more than a wing and a prayer.

The end of a long, grueling battle is finally in sight.

—..... I’ve made it.

Made it to the end of the 138 moves we’ve played so far, and to the place where the hundreds of thousands of moves I’ve played over the past 12 years leads.

A place that I always thought was as far away as the stars twinkling in the night sky But, I’ve made it.

“Haaaaaa————.....”

I take in a deep breath.

—Oh. This is what it’s like after all.

The air is extraordinarily thin.

Just a desolate space without any trees or a single blade of grass.

There is no beauty here, unlike the hometown Yaichi showed me.

This place, which I could only imagine, turns out to be more desolate than I ever thought possible.

However, this will be my battleground from now on. I want to become familiar with my new surroundings as quickly as possible, so I use what's left of my final minute to burn this scenery into my memory.

There's nothing here, just like the surface of a Shogi board.

A single board made of gray stones is floating in the air in front of a pitch black sky.

The only things that stand out on this ash-colored wasteland are the footprints dotting the landscape.

Some trails go straight forward while others go around in circles. Still others cut off as abruptly as they began.

Devoid of landmarks, these footprints are the only way to know that someone else has already traversed these badlands.

Some footprints look ancient.

Others are fresh.

Somewhere among them are the footsteps I'm trying to follow.

That place Yaichi brought me just once so that I could see.

I thought a simple earthling like me would die if I ever went.

But_____.

"I'm here, Yaichi."

The snap of a piece on the board, my move.

Taking a Knight from my piece stand, I set it down snugly between the King and Rook like landing a spaceship on a new planet for the first time.

Then I leave my own footprint. A small, miniscule first step.

It took longer than it should have, but ...

What I'm chasing is still far away, but ...

At last, I'm standing here on my own feet. All I can do now is believe that he is

beyond these footsteps.

Where the Shogi Martians live among the stars.

ENCOURAGEMENT

“Kunugi lost!!”

Someone in the crowd of 3-*dans* yells as murmurs spread throughout the Onkuroshoin arena.

“You’re telling me that Naniwa’s Snow White stopped Sota Kunugi?!”

“She beat him when they were both 2-*dan*, right? Maybe she has his number, or perhaps

The murmurs get louder.

Eyes start to zero in, but not on me for winning. They’re locked onto the loser: Sota.

“Maybe the brat wasn’t so strong after all?”

What was thought to be a young, bewitching monster is now a sitting duck, injured and out in the open. Other monsters have caught the scent of blood in the air and are closing in. Each one salivating at the prospect of meat.

Sota, staring into his lap, manages to say a few words.

“..... There isn’t much time before the next match. Should we do a review session or——?”

“It’s fine. There’s nothing to go over,” I answer with a nod and gather up the pieces with both hands to put them away.

A mistake was followed by a mistake, so the last one to make a mistake lost. It was very simple Shogi. There were some contested battles, but it was a boring match in terms of Shogi theory.

However, when it came to the battle itself—that Shogi was beyond belief.

“.....”

Even with all the pieces back in the box, Sota doesn’t budge. The victor must

report the results to the office, but this is the first time he hasn't had to fulfill the duty and doesn't seem to know what to do with himself.

"Even Sota makes mistakes."

The fact that this news is making the rounds through the 3-*dan* division is a very big deal.

It means that Sota's trust is gone.

No one tried to hold out against him in the late-game up until now. I doubt that he will be able to win as easily as he used to.

And one more thing.

"..... All perfect records are gone"

"Now the top runner has one loss"

"Kunugi's starting rank was rock bottom, so everyone has a tiebreaker against him. Now it's the same as if he had two losses"

"In that case, the one at the top of the division now is——."

All eyes in the arena look toward the entrance in the direction of the man standing in the doorway.

Hiuma Kagamizu.

Judging by everyone's reaction, he must have finished today's match with a white victory star. As a result, the man on his last chance to promote is now the front-runner in the 3-*dan* division.

——I'm glad

We may be competing for the same prize, but I want him to become a professional.

All the tension from the match gone, I smile and go to say hello. My match against him is still on the horizon, but the fact that we both won today makes me genuinely happy.

"Mr. Kagam——."

"That late-game was terrible, Ginko," he practically spits back at me.

"?!"

Certain that he would offer kind words, that response takes me aback. I'm speechless.

He stares me down like a predator ready to kill and follows up his earlier statement with a haymaker.

"You know how many chances you had to checkmate? If playing against some kids still in grade school made you dance around with cold feet, you don't stand a chance against me."

"....."

The sheer intensity in his eyes makes my whole body quiver.

I stand rooted to the spot as Mr. Kagamizu hastily walks past me, his agitated footsteps echoing through the arena.

"..... Turning up intimidation already? Scaaary."

"This is Mr. Kagamizu's last shot, after all."

"There's no room for error at the top"

So many hushed voices are going back and forth around me, but I understand that they have it all wrong.

Because——.

"Sub League members encourage the ones who they think won't make it, like an unwritten tradition. On the other hand, they're downright harsh on the ones who hold the most promise in order to toughen them up."

After collapsing during my first Sub League Entrance Exam, I was always treated like a fragile ornament that could break at any moment.

That was especially true with Mr. Kagamizu. Even without him saying anything, I could tell that he's been checking in on me ever since this season of 3-*dan* division began.

That's why I'm trembling.

Trembling so much that words fail me.

“..... Th-”

Being harshly critiqued for the first time——is making me tremble with joy.

He’s already out of my sight, but I still whisper to that tall figure in the distance.

“..... Thank you. Hiuma”

The best encouragement I’ve ever received kept my spirits high as I played the same way in my afternoon match.

Played my own Shogi.

And claimed a meaningful victory.

Perfect No More

The eleventh and twelfth matches of this season's 3-*dan* division took place at the Kansai Shogi Association.

Kunugi, shouldering an expectation to become the first-ever professional Shogi player as an elementary school student, entered the arena with a perfect 10-0 record. His opponent was Sora, who has similar hopes of becoming the first female professional in history.

Sora's victory in the match erased the final flawless record from the 3-*dan* division standings and has given the one-loss Kagamizu sole possession of first place due to rankings.

Kagamizu will turn 30 once the 3-*dan* division matches conclude. Though he has been successful enough in the past to extend his tenure, this is his make-or-break season. Now he goes into battle knowing that this last and greatest chance is his for the taking.

As Kagamizu's past victory in the Newcomers Tournament gives him *runner-up* status, even third place would grant him the right to a freelance Shogi career with his second runner-up finish.

However, the 3-*dan* division front-runners will now fight amongst themselves for the remaining victory stars, meaning the most challenging matches lie ahead. There is still hope for players with three losses or less to promote this season. What scenarios do the Shogi gods have in the works? One thing is for certain: jubilation and heartbreak will unfold side by side during the season's final hours.

Sora claimed a second victory after stopping Kunugi's run of dominance. Sitting at nine wins and three losses, a ray of hope illuminates her path to 4-*dan*.

Mato

I could've sworn somebody called my name.

"..... Hm?"

I stop and take a look over my shoulder. But there's no one there.

Shogi is more popular than ever But the only famous players are the Meijin and Naniwa's Snow White.

—I guess no one recognizes the Ryuo.

The Meijin getting the Citizens Award worked a little too well because now the requests for diplomas and signatures is easily ten times that of what it was last month. The chairman and Ms. Oga snagged me as soon as I got back to Osaka and kept me cooped up in a hotel in Temmabashi.

"Didn't I tell you we would have a room ready?"

I had to continuously sign paper after paper under the strict supervision of that evil man and his secretary. The only reprieves were when Keika brought my apprentices and the Grade Schooler Practice Group members up for a few visits At least this way I can claim I've been hard at work the whole time

Now, released from my hotel prison cell for the first time in two weeks—I thought I heard someone call my name.

It was a familiar voice, too.

"Must've been my imagination That has to be it. Seriously, right now——."

The 3-*dan* division should still be in session.

Just then, my smartphone vibrates in my pocket. It's a message from a Kansai Sub League director.

".....!!"

Flashbacks from two weeks ago pop up like wildfire, so looking at it takes a lot of courage.

Slowly, very slowly, I open the message. It's today's results.

“Sora won. Kunugi lost.”

My phone starts vibrating again as more messages start pouring in.

“Sora, consecutive victories.”

“Hardly recognizable from last time.”

“Noticeably stronger than before.”

They’re all extremely short messages, but his excitement is coming through loud and clear.

The last of the messages to hit my phone like spring rain is a question.

“What did you do? Special training?”

I didn’t teach her any new strategies or sequences. She made the decision to do all her research by herself.

But It’s not like I didn’t do anything.

Thinking it over, I respond.

“I said her name.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Our conversation stops there.

He always lets me know the results right away, but the director’s job doesn’t end once the day’s matches are over. Checking up on the players who lost today is part of it. That being said, it’s not as if he can focus on a few specific players.

It has nothing to do with avoiding favoritism.

Getting too attached to certain players makes it too painful if they have to retire in the end.

“Man, he has it rough. Somebody has to do that job, sure, but many of the people he fought against in the Sub League are still there”

He’s four years older than me, but we clashed in the 3-*dan* division. Then, right after he promoted, he applied to be a director.

Now he gives me constant updates on how Big Sis is doing.

“..... He must still feel like it’s his fault that her joining the Sub League got pushed back a year and that she’s had such a hard time.”

I have regrets just like him.

Like letting go of the hand I never should have on the day she became Queen.

Swearing to myself that I wouldn’t call her by her first name until I got strong just to save face.

But, at the same time This winding road has been heartrending as well.

Even though we both felt the same way, we said nothing and just played Shogi.

This time, it was Big Sis who saved face with that *sealing move*.

We may have let go of each other’s hands, but right now I think we’re walking the same path.

Maybe that’s why?

I’ve had the feeling that Big Sis has been close by ever since I left the hotel. Really close.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ginko,” I say up to the sky where it gets lost in noisy city streets before reaching anyone’s ears.

But——.

I could swear someone said my name again just now.

You’re late, stupid Yaichi.



FOR THE AFTERWORD: *MY DAUGHTER*

My daughter was born shortly before Book 10 was released.

I couldn't help but feel like I was going in circles with all these new experiences day in and day out, but it became a great research (?) opportunity to experience firsthand some things I've only vaguely alluded to in the past, like a parent's emotions, birth, and child-rearing.

This book focused heavily on Yaichi and Ginko's childhood.

I had the basic outline planned out before my daughter was born, but I can tell that I've made several adjustments as I fleshed out the story. I hope they were for the better.

Which reminds me: I've had the opportunity to speak with several Shogi professionals whose winning percentage increased after their children were born.

Of course, I believe that the loving support their wives provided played a part, but they gave me obscure answers when I asked them why they were winning more matches when their preparation time had decreased

"I have no idea."

"I can't figure it out either."

Responses like that

However, after my daughter was born, I understood.

There is no real reason. No one has a child because they want to become better at Shogi, and a life completely different from what they had envisioned before their child came into the world is waiting for them on the other side.

It's fun not being able to read what lies ahead, and that makes us strong. I think that's the strength they found.

REVIEW SESSION



REVIEW SESSION

“Hey-yooo! Yaichi Kuzuryu’s back in the building!”

“Yo, long time, Trash.”

“Where have you been residing? Prison?”

I drop by the Kansai Association’s Player’s Room for the first time in what feels like forever, and two girls who are always there practicing hit me with the same cynical jokes that they always do. It’s reassuring, just like being at home.

“Think about that for a second, Machi. He wouldn’t be back so quickly if he’d been in the slammer, don’t you think?” says Ryou.

“Be that as it may, an extended leave of absence would result in his little treasures maturing. Therefore, Ryuo-san tapped into his own resources in order to make bail, yes?”

“Oh yeah. This lolicon here’s got cash to spare.”

“And time is considerably more valuable to lolicons than money.”

Ahhh, the good old lolicon sequence. Yeah, yeah, I’m a lolicon.

Hahaha Knowing this whole thing is about to disappear kind of makes me miss it already.

“Nah, I just went home to visit my parents. Here, I brought some *Habutae* rice cakes for you.”

“How thoughtful. You hail from Fukui, do you not?”

“Where the heck’s Fukui, again? Oh, Kyushu?”

That’s Fukuoka! Would it hurt people to study geography every once in a while?! This happens all the time.

“Fukui is part of the north coast, Miss Tsukiyomizaka. Since we’re in Osaka, just go north and you’ll find it.”

“Uh-huh, north, you say. North,” says Ryou, nodding up and down while staring at the box of *Habutae* rice cakes, as if there are dots to connect.

“Please, go ahead and eat. I brought enough to give out to other players so there’s no need to wait.”

“Hate to break it to you, but I’ve had enough of *Habutae* rice cakes for one day.”

Huh? Had enough?

“Another individual returning from a short jaunt around the country gifted us with *Habutae* rice cakes. For rice cakes and beautiful stars on all that Fukui possesses, no?”

“Hey, there’s other stuff, too! What about the Megane Eyeglasses Museum in Sabae?!”

What’s wrong with having beautiful stars?! What’s wrong with having clean air?!!

The corners of Machi Kugui’s lips curled up like a *fushimi inari* fox as she says, “Is that so? And? With whom did you see those beautiful stars, Ryou-san?”

“!”

A cold chill runs down my spine, but Ryou piles it on.

“Hang on a sec. I haven’t seen Ginko around here much at all recently, either. She was in here pretty much every day so it’s kind of weird she’d just stop, don’t you think?”

“What a coincidence it is that she turned up with the exact same souvenir mere hours before your arrival, Ryou-san Difficult not to be suspicious, do you not agree?”

“Tell me somethin’, Machi. Where was it that Ginko said she went again?”

“I believe She called it the *northern country*.”

N-Northern country?!

With the eyes of a beast that’s cornered its prey, Ryou turns back to me and asks, “So, Trash. Where was Fukui, again? Kyushu?”

“Th- The north coast”

Checkmated.

There's no talking my way out of this But worst of all is that Ryou, a Kanto player, found out. Rumors about *The North Country Incident* will be circulating through both East and West Associations by tonight. Then will come the criticism because the two of us left during the 3-*dan* division season and right before my Challenger Match, meaning I'll get death threats from Big Sis's fans

W-Wait, how long until Ai Hinatsuru finds ou-ou-ou ..., ooooooh noooooo.

"C'mon, Trash. What are you getting all shook up for? I'm not gonna blab."

"Huh? How much are you asking for?"

"Dang, that was rude I'm not taking your cash. There was stuff going on, right? That had to be rough. Hey, we're here to listen if you need to get something off your chest! Go on, have a rice cake."

"R-Ryou!"

"So, who confessed their feelings first?"

The rice cake gets stuck in my throat and I nearly choke to death.

"*Cough!!* Gah There was no confessing, okay?! Seriously, nothing happened!!"

"Oh? Then you got dumped right off the bat?"

"Ugh No, more like sealed partway through, " I explain, fumbling my way through the words. "..... Ginko is most definitely a strong one."

"Yeah, she's a beast," say Machi and Ryou as they smile with renewed energy.

"Filled with the **power of love**, she will surely break through the 3-*dan* division!"

"Yeah! Full of **all that loving!**"

Power of love, really?! Would it hurt them to have some decency?! The awkwardness is killing me

"Then again, Ryuo-san, Ginko's Silver Halo is quite dense. What strategy did you employ to break through?"

“Had to be a rock-hard Primitive Climbing Silver. That or Peerless Golds.”

“Would you stop it with the dirty jokes?! Have more respect for Shogi and a bit of modesty! You’re girls, remember?!”

The conversation was going so well before it went south real fast!!

“Actually, don’t the two of you have more experience at this kind of thing? Popular as you are ...”

“Hm?! C-Course I do! Guys ask me out on dates all the time!”

“Oh? Just as I thought. Okay, what was it like for the two of you when someone told you how they felt?”

“M-Me? Nothing much A guy in my class back in high school, under the tree of legend”

Tree of legend? How could a tree at Ryou’s old school become legendary? Probably by making noises or having an angel show up. Ryou is called the Archangel, after all.

“What about you, Machi? Some Arabian oil tycoon?”

“The greater part of my conversations with men typically involve a courtship invitation of some kind, so the first time is impossible to recall. Too many to recount.”

That’s diabolical

Then again, Machi is friendly, and part of extremely large social spheres, and has incredible spheres at chest height, so I can’t blame other guys for falling for her after talking for only a few minutes. Especially with that chest of hers. It would be nice if Big Sis caught up a bit.

“But yeah, getting asked out by a guy you don’t like is just a real pain in the ass. Ain’t that right, Machi?”

“I concur. Though the one my heart belongs to is always preoccupied by other women.”

“Yeah Ha-ha-ha.”

The two of them grimace as if saying: *good grief*.

Machi and Ryou are both beautiful, famous girls, but are they having trouble on the dating scene? That's too bad Their personalities have to have something to do with it

"Along the same line of thought, I am green with envy for those who are courted by their first loves."

"Same. Get a room and knock yourselves out!"

"Heh What are you two talking about? You've got the wrong idea."

Shaking my head with a heavy heart, I corrected the misunderstanding.

Ryou cocks an eyebrow and says, "Trash, are you seriously trying to play innocent now? Man up, will you?"

"That's right, Ryuo-san. For Ginko's sake, you must own up to——."

"The first girl to say she liked me was **a freak who broke into my locked apartment, challenging me to a Shogi match while completely naked and said *she didn't need anything else*, while throwing all of her possessions into Shinjuku Gyoen Park Pond in the middle of February**, or did you forget?"

"Oh, yeah That's what went down"

"Just think you got stung by Ika and forget about it Simply stung"

Ika doesn't sting, she bites! Would it hurt you to give it a rest?!!

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

At long last, I had a chance to get these two together on the cover.

There were so many important points and scenes I wanted to create, but how could I bring them all into the spotlight? I debated many options, but I think I found a way for Yaichi and Ginko to express their feelings without taking anything away from the plot. Please enjoy!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

Thank you, Shiratori-*sensei*, really.....

Really “Thank you.”

I can’t find any other words

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

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Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

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RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 11

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