

18

THE RYUO'S WORK IS
NEVER DONE!

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII
SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI





A7-MATCH SERIES

DEFENDING THE CROWN

TITLEHOLDER

CHALLENGER

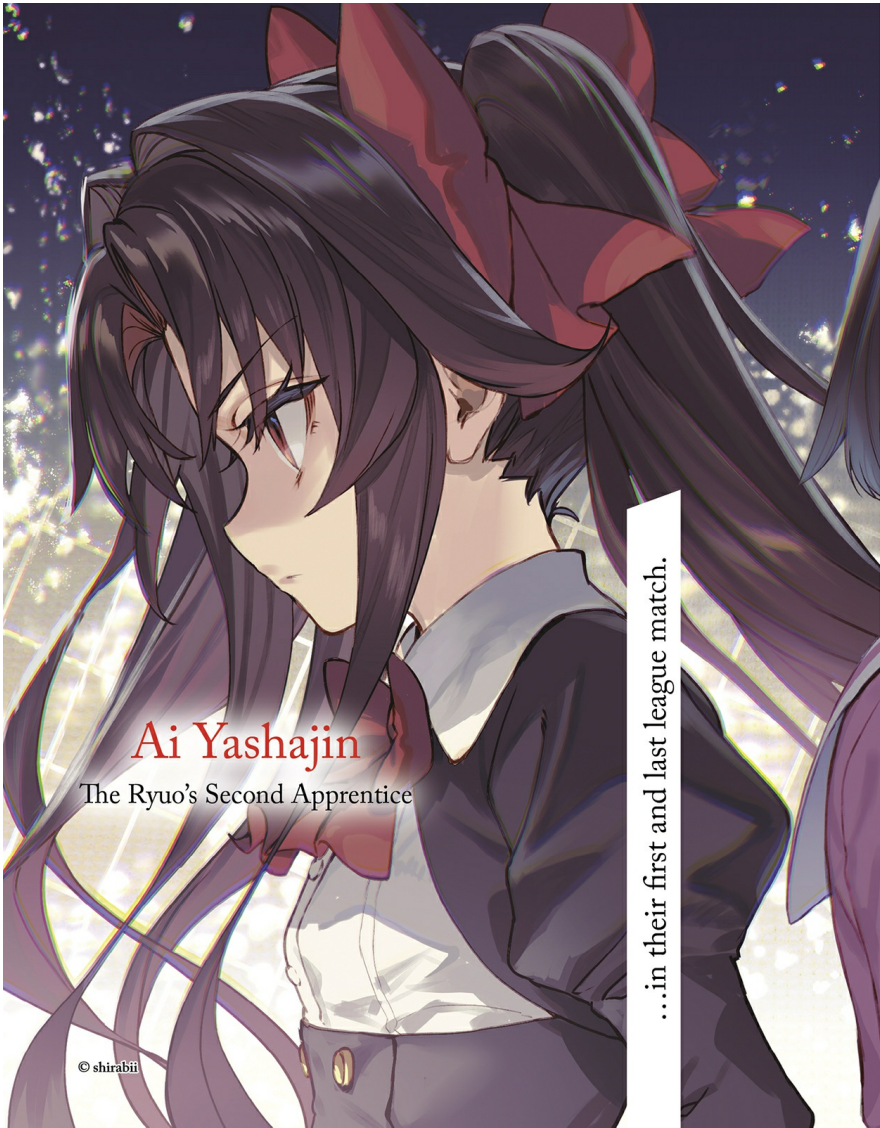
Yaichi Kuzuryu

Ayumu Kannabe

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Ai Yashajin

The Ryuo's Second Apprentice

© shirabii

...in their first and last league match.

Two girls have put their futures on the line...



The Ryuo's First Apprentice

Ai Hinatsuru

© shirabii

MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU

Ryuo. With the Crown Title, he is the youngest dual titleholder in history. He purchased probiotic drinks with sleep aids in order to ensure restful sleep while traveling to defend the Crown Title. When trying them out in advance, however, he found that he had missed 48 hours worth of work when he woke up.

AI YASHAJIN

Yaichi's second apprentice and Dual Women's Titleholder. She has a habit of putting carbonated water from Hyogo Prefecture in everything. Her opponent watched in horror as she put it in her tea during a match.



AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice and Women's Legend Title Holder. With *warabimochi* drinks said to be the successor to tapioca, she came up with her own recipe and tried selling it at her family's inn.



GINKO SORA

Yaichi's older sister apprentice and first female professional Shogi player. She got hooked on roasting coffee while undergoing medical treatment and insisted her mother try the brew as well. A heated argument ensued when her mother claimed the flavor was *weak*.

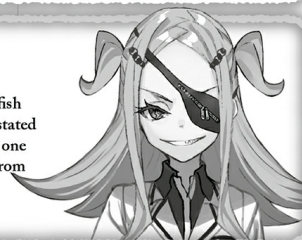


AYUMU KANNABE

A League Shogi Player. Now of legal age, he decided to try his hand at alcohol. Bravely venturing to a department store, he returned home with cologne of all things. A wonderful aroma soon filled the Shogi Association building.

IKA SAINOKAMI

Empress. Known for drinking like a fish during matches, one particular legend stated she consumed ten two-liter bottles in one sitting. What's more, it was straight from the bottle.



YO OKITO

King. While fasting, he refused all food and beverages during a match. Rumors that he could *turn particles in the air into energy* or *had mastered photosynthesis* were soon to follow.

KOUSUKE KIYOTAKI

Yaichi's Master. Beer being his favorite drink, opening several cold ones in the morning and taking a nap in the afternoon is his standard on days off. However the cause of his late-night insomnia still eludes him.



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VOLUME 18

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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▲ Nigiri

He told me that there are players in the Shogi world who have skills that go beyond just playing Shogi.

“For example, handicap matches.”

We were in the *tatami* room of that two-bedroom apartment I remember so well.

I was playing a practice match against Master on a gorgeous 8-and-a-half inch thick Shogi board that stuck out like a sore thumb in that plain and simple room.

Just as we did every day back then.

“Pros always give you a handicap but take the first move in instructional matches, yeah? Some people who aren’t all that impressive in an even match become monsters when they’re down a few pieces. They’re better off that way, even.”

“I don’t get it!”

“Right? But they exist.”

He explained it to me at one point.

Since the higher player has to play with fewer pieces, they have no choice but to find ways to fill their piece stands with better pieces.

Basically, they constantly aim for good trades.

But playing that way is considered *lame* since most professional players want to win a match with one single move at the end. That’s why players who can play lame, gritty Shogi while waiting for a chance to counterattack are incredibly strong in handicap matches

“..... Or so they say.”

“I still don’t get it!”

“Uh-huh.”

Master softly smiled.

He never flashed a confident smile or laughed from the pit of his stomach. It was like he was never sure of himself But I love that soft smile of his.

“But the one I can’t wrap my head around is *nigiri*!”

“*Nigiri*?”

“You don’t know?”

“..... Like sushi?”

“Well, the *grip* part is the same.”

Master gathered up all the pieces scattered around the board and put them back in the piece box.

“But this involves gripping pieces instead of rice. First, you stick your hand into the box like this———”

Then Master pulled out a fistful of pieces with his right hand and spread them out on the board.

“There! I’ll make a Shogi puzzle using only these pieces!”

“Uwhaaa?!”

“And... no thinking time. It’s all on the spot. In the whole Shogi world, I’d say there’s three people who can do it, maybe? It’s one heck of a crowd pleaser.”

“The ultimate party trick”

Back then, I was a beginner who barely knew the difference between professional Shogi players and Women’s League players.

But since I had learned to play Shogi with Shogi puzzles, I knew that some of them were categorized as *nigiri*.

It never dawned on me that they were made like that, though

“I saw Chairman Tsukimitsu make a *nigiri* puzzle in person. I had a front row seat because I was working as his assistant during a New Year’s party a while back.”

“W-Was it on TV?”

“The chairman said it’s not easy to do at all. First, he said he had to spend a month getting mentally ready for it.”

“Oh, wow!”

“Once he shifted his mind from typical match Shogi to *nigiri*, his head had to be completely clear on the day of the party—as in: he couldn’t think about *anything* else. He told me, point blank and dejected, *whenever I do this, my winning percentage plummets*. That’s why———”

“Master.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll try it.”

I can still remember the shock on his face.

Not just shock at all the pieces I grabbed or the different kinds.

But also———at the puzzle I made.

“Two Golds, one Knight, a Lance, Pawn, Pawn, Pawn, Pawn Okay.”

It took about fifteen seconds or so to make.

I mean, I had it worked out in my head by the time I finished counting the pieces.

“I’m done.”

“What do you mean you’re done? How could

Master clearly had his doubts when he saw where I put down the pieces.

Slowly but surely, though, his eyes grew serious.

That was probably the first time I saw him make that face———

Master looked up from the board and said in a scary voice, “Ai.”

Then he slipped on the glasses he only wears when a match really matters to check the puzzle one more time before slapping the pieces off the board.

He then said this:

“Never do *nigiri* in front of anyone again. I forbid you Understood?”

🏠 The Fourth Rule to End the Game

“The reason I agreed to the Meijin’s proposition?”

Ryuo Takeru Usui (at that time) came to a halt when his good friend and Shogi journalist posed that question.

The Player’s Meeting, which had been held at the Kenpo Plaza next to the Kanto Shogi Association building, ended in a state of disarray that had hardly ever been seen in recent years.

Many of the players themselves had stayed behind to discuss the issue even further despite the extremely late hour.

Only Takeru had seized the opportunity to leave and was caught by the journalist.

“Hmph. Yes, that man only speaks once in a blue moon at Player’s Meetings. Since he was proposing rules for *a fourth possible way to end the game*, in addition to surrender, Repetition Draw and stalemate, arguments are bound to happen.

Shogi players were very sensitive about rule changes.

While fairness was in the discussion, the most important aspect was exactly *who would benefit from said changes*.

Coming from someone who had been sitting at the top of the Shogi world for so long, the Meijin’s words carried a great deal of weight.

However, if they were intended to compensate for his declining late-game skill in his advancing age, his suggestion would have met fierce resistance. Nearly every player thought so.

The issue was that, as the implications were analyzed the discussion dissolved for a different reason.

The rules didn't make any sense whatsoever.

"His new rules wouldn't take effect until the 500th move. The longest match record we have didn't even reach 400, so how could a match ever last another 100 plus? Then there are the rules themselves. Number of pieces in the opponent's territory? In check or not? There are too many conditions to make head or tails of them. No human being could consider the whole list during one-minute Shogi. It's impossible. Makes you want to ask him who he's planning to play against. Martians? Oracles from the future?"

"Why did you give your approval if you have so many critiques?"

"Because I liked the name."

"The name?"

"Yes. *Nyugyoku Declaration*. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Most players opposed the Meijin's proposition at the time.

Not so much that they were against the changes, but they failed to comprehend what issue they were meant to address.

It was Takeru's approval that turned the tide.

Even if they couldn't understand the content, the rules could be considered fair if the Meijin's greatest rival, Dragon King Ryuo Usui, was in favor of the changes this was the mindset of many Shogi players.

However, said Ryuo's only reasoning for it had nothing to do with Shogi theory itself.

"Besides, don't you think Go and Shogi are really somber when ending the game? Chess players discuss when to call it a draw and shake hands, for goodness sake. Meanwhile, we Japanese consider hiding our joy after a win to be virtuous. Same goes for sumo wrestlers. A *yokozuna* got roasted just for pumping his fist Anyway....."

"The point is," ——— Takeru Usui began. "In Shogi, we say *I lost* and bow. I've

never liked that, personally.”

The man heralded as the best early-game prodigy to have ever lived spelled out the real reason he threw his weight behind the fourth rule to end a game with a grin.

“Just once, I’d love to say it myself. To declare: *I win.*”

RECORD 1

祭
神
雷

IKA
SAINOKAMI



■ Birth of a Monster

“Mister. What’s that?”

It must have been about six months after I’d moved into the old folks home when that little girl first came up to me.

She was in elementary school, I’d imagined, and the daughter of one of the women on staff. She’d come here after school was let out and later go home with her mother once her shift was over.

“This? Shogi.”

I didn’t bother looking up from my ragged old foldable Shogi board and kept moving the pieces in hopes she’d get the hint to scram.

But my tone didn’t phase her and she kept asking questions.

“Oh? Do you play it by yourself?”

“No. I’m lining up a match record

“?”

“Normally it takes two to play.”

“Okay! How about we play?”

She pulled up the chair on the other side of the board and sat down.

Which was a surprise.

Kids interested in Shogi were out there, sure. But for a kid her age not to be scared of a grumpy old man like me?

Chills ran down my spine for a moment

“..... No. I’ve sworn off playing against anyone ever again. Find someone else.”

There were plenty of board games and even a TV in the recreation room. I thought she'd find something to entertain herself over there, but

She didn't budge.

"Then I'll watch. That'd be okay, right?"

"....."

I sighed and went on like usual, thinking she'd disappear eventually

But she came and watched me line up records every day after that.

"Mister. Is it fun clicking those pieces by yourself?"

"Yes, it is."

"More than playing a game?"

"Yes, much more."

Ignoring her outright would've been childish of me, so I answered whenever she asked me a question. The girl was quite the chatterbox.

While this area is rather diverse by Japanese standards, she said being a quarter Russian made her stand out a bit too much at school.

That's why she was always here.

She probably missed plenty of school. There were times she'd show up at the old folks home in the morning and stay all day once she started watching me play through match records.

I was concerned about what her mother thought

But her job was far from easy. So long as her daughter wasn't stirring up trouble, she seemed all right with the arrangement. I honestly can't remember her saying much of anything to my face.

Save for one.

“Does she have a talent for Shogi?”

I merely shrugged. How could I know that when I hadn't seen her play?

Right. Playing against her was the only way to find out

A week passed, and the girl kept coming to my table every single day. What's more, she sat and watched me play through match records the whole time. Two weeks, three weeks, a full month passed and she never took her eyes off my board.

I was the one who caved first.

“Would you like to play?”

“..... A-ha-ha!”

She lined up the starting formation from memory.

Based on how she held the pieces and the order, it was clear as day she had zero knowledge of Shogi. That made it truly impressive that she'd sat and watched me for so long.

I decided to play an even match with her, probably a habit left over from my days doing instructional matches as a pro.

I let her go first, and the happiest little smile crossed her face as she moved her first piece with the glee of a puppy stepping out onto an open field for the first time.

“..... Put the piece right in the middle of the square.”

That was the only advice I gave her.

Here I was, thinking I had to hunt for signs of talent

But as we went along, I got suspicious and stopped the match.

“Are you really an amateur? Because you sure don't look it to me.”

“Huuuh?”

“Only a handful of pros would make that move you just did. It wouldn’t happen by chance, either. How could a little girl just———”

I made it that far before I realized what I was saying.

Yes, even if they knew how to play Shogi beforehand, no elementary school kid would’ve played that move. And yet, this one just did.

She gave me a funny look and explained.

“I’ve watched you play by yourself a lot, mister. And this formation looked right.”

“Formation?”

“This one moves different, right?”

She picked up a piece and stared at it like it just fell out of the sky. I’m sure that’s what she said, that the pieces moved differently.

I was beyond shocked.

How was she playing so well *without understanding how each piece moved?!*

Was that even possible? But there she was, playing all the best moves without so much as a second thought. We were 100 moves or so in, but neither side had a clear advantage

“..... All right. Let’s keep going.”

“A-ha-ha! Thanks, mister!”

A cold chill, like I’d just witnessed something truly scary, crept over me as we started back up again.

Once we got to the late-game, an old man like me needed time to see what moves were on the board. But the girl, she moved like clockwork.

“Hey Are you thinking like you should?”

“Hm?”

She craned her neck all the way to the side like she had no clue what I was talking about. Then she smirked.

“I can tell what to do next just by looking.”

“.....”

Kids play fast. Picking up moves in a glance is a sign of talent, too.

But this girl wasn't anything like them.

There was something different about her at the core that separated this girl from every Shogi player I'd ever met.

No.

This kid was different from every person I'd ever met

“That's checkmate,” I told her after holding off the last spurt.

“Checkmate?”

“It means you lose.”

“..... Awww. Over already?”

She slumped over, sad.

This was a budding monster. She'd grow if I watered her. Grow into a talented beast who would turn the Shogi world on its head

But that didn't interest me anymore.

Although I thoroughly enjoyed my first match against another person in a long time.

“This isn't the end.”

I earnestly wanted to play more Shogi with her.

So I put the pieces back into starting formation and told her, “You can always start again in Shogi, no matter how many times you lose.”

“A-ha!”

It didn't take her long at all to overtake me.

Two months after I met this lightning-quick girl, I couldn't even give her a proper challenge. Sure, age had taken its toll on my brain, but I used to play Shogi for a living.

“You have completely surpassed me.”

“Yeah-huh. Let's play another match.”

“Not that I had anything to teach you from the very beginning”

I was used to our conversations not lining up by that point. It had begun to dawn on me who she was.

Interacting with words didn't have much of a point.

So I gave her a different method of communicating.

“This is for you. Take it.”

“Huuuh? What's this?”

“Certification.”

“Certi...fi... cation?”

“Truth be told, my authority to issue these expired a long time ago”

I gave her the sheet that I had written while harkening back to my life in the past.

“1-*kyu* Miss Ika Sainokami”

Her reaction far exceeded my expectations.

She froze like a statue, staring wide-eyed at the paper until tears came pouring down her cheeks.

“Wh-What’s wrong?!”

“I’ve never, ever gotten an award before”

She got a so out before words failed her.

It was just one piece of paper and yet.



“Grow strong,” I told her with a firm squeeze of her hand. “Do that, and you can get anything you can dream of. Certificates like this will pile up. Beautiful plaques, medals, championship trophies, money, fame, friends, work, you name it. You can live the best life.”

“Woow”

She wiped away those still-flowing tears and flashed that grin.

“Kay then. That’s what I’ll do.”

I decided to enter her into an amateur Shogi tournament.

“You’re not coming with me, Mister?”

“Couldn’t get permission to go out.”

It may have been an amateur tournament, but being spotted with someone blacklisted by the Shogi Association wouldn’t be good for her reputation. That had to be avoided.

“I’ve asked someone to look after you,” I told her and gave her a worn-out business card. “You’re to address him as *Master* from now on. Understand?”

“Master?”

“Like a teacher.”

“Aren’t you my teacher?”

“I’m a friend, no?”

“A-ha! Yep!”

I contacted my former younger brother apprentice and asked him to be her Master, even if in name only. He was so surprised that I was still above ground that he agreed for old times’ sake.

That night, the girl ran right up to me, smiling ear to ear.

“Mister! I got another award!”

The awards piled up in no time.

So many, in fact, that she was invited to join the Women’s bracket in invitational tournaments. She went on to meet all the requirements to join the Women’s League without ever having to set foot in the Practice League.

That’s where she hit a wall for the first time.

One by the name of Rina Shakando. No matter where they encountered each other, nothing the girl did seemed to work against that woman.

Against an opponent thoroughly versed in tactics both on and off the board, that strong but erratic girl couldn’t even so much as stand her ground.

“The *Assassin* She is stronger than the pros. That woman may act all graceful and refined, but she could slice down almost any pro if she got serious.”

“Did you get sliced, Mister?”

“Yes. Like a toothpick.”

..... I never thought I would come clean about my crimes to her.

Telling her about Rina Shakando and the board of directors pulling her strings behind closed doors.

I was treated like a disposable pawn. There was a time when I wanted nothing more than to make those who had cast me aside when it suited them suffer But that burning desire for revenge flamed out.

My life was nothing but a continuous spiral of losses. Now, at the end of it all, I met her. This was my big chance to turn the tables. I was grateful to Shogi for the first time.

Right after we had that conversation, the girl became a Title Challenger.

A five-match series for Empress.

She came back after the fifth match and walked up to me like she'd found the best present in the world.

"Mister. I sliced her for you."

She took down the strongest woman alive to claim a Women's Title.

She only kept getting stronger after that.

Age caught up with me just as quickly.

Unable to play a decent match of Shogi, days passed like dreams. Nevertheless, the girl came to visit me on almost every one of them.

Then, on one particular day...

"Mister! I found one! A guy just like me!"

"Just like you?"

There's another? Someone who can do what she does?

"Who? A pro player?"

"Nope. He's in the Sub League, but he's stronger than pros. Stronger than title holders!"

"..... If you're the one saying so, it must be true"

I nodded as satisfied relief passed through me. My greatest worry was gone.

"And? What's his name?"

" "

That's the last time I clearly remember seeing her face.

I passed away seeing that ear-to-ear grin like when she got her first certificate.

If anyone can hear me now

I want you to know her true colors.

Match Recorder

“DAH!!”

That dream felt so real that I woke up screaming.

Going to sleep with the AC on full blast didn't help. I'm drenched with sweat and my heart is still thundering against my ribs

“Hff Hff Haaa! Wh-What was that?”

An old man.

And a little girl.

“..... That girl She looked a lot like Ika”

I think her name came up in the dream, but the smaller details are already fading.

As for the old man, I have no idea. Yet it feels like I've lived through an entirely different life A strange weight is hanging onto the back of my mind.

Wait Where am I, anyway?

“Oh yeah I came to my apprentice's title match”

Apprentice.

Saying that word out loud makes something click, like the relationship between that old man and the little girl became so much more real.

Was he the person who taught Ika how to play?

“..... Nah.”

I take a quick shower to wash off the sweat before getting dressed and leaving my room.

“..... This building is just bizarre”

Once I have breakfast at the cafeteria, I head out for a walk around the place.

The really strange thing is that there wasn't anyone else in the cafeteria with me. Maybe I just got there too early

The layout is so much different from every inn and hotel I've ever stayed at because it used to be a medical retreat facility.

“This used to be a public building But it was a hospital before that, right? D-Does that mean a g-g-ghost visited me last night?!”

A spirit with unfinished business?! That's terrifying!

And this place would make the perfect set for a B-movie horror flick.

The budget for Women's League title matches is lower than for pros. Much lower.

That's why the matches sometimes get played in community centers out in the boonies. The rental fee for public buildings is pretty cheap. I mean, even city governments sometimes host Women's League title matches.

It does make for a homely atmosphere, which is nice. But still!

“..... Man, am I glad I'm not playing here”

Talking to myself helps to stave off the fear as I point my feet in the direction of people.

To the arena.

“Good morning, Kuzuryu-*sensei*.”

“Ah Morning.”

Already there to greet me when I walk inside is the young woman working as today's match recorder.

Karen Noboryou 3-*dan*.

Something feels weird about her sitting at the boardside table.

There's nothing strange about Sub League members working as match recorders for Women's Title matches, so it must be because she herself was challenging for a title not too long ago. Her opponent was my apprentice, today's challenger.

Something else is off about the room.

The upper seat shows signs of someone having been there.

"Is Ika already here?"

"I believe that Sainokami-*sensei* slept in this room last night."

"..... Come again?"

"She went to eat and change her clothes."

"She slept in here?! Something is seriously wrong with her"

This isn't on the level of, *A title holder slept in the arena?! That's unprecedented!* It's more like

Is she nesting in here?

"Ugh The upper seat is a sacred place, and it's a mess. She's a wild sleeper, trust me Well, she's wild when she's awake, too"

"True to your reputation, you are rather familiar with her sleeping habits."

"Hey, hey! Cut that out! I only know because she's conked out in the middle of matches during practice sessions before! What do people in Kanto think Ika and I are, huh?!"

"I would rather not sully this sacred ground to explain. Shall we step outside?"

"..... No, that's okay."

I sit down in the seat as far away from the match recorder as possible. Having

that much distance will be better for both of us.

Miss Noboryou, Ika and I are all the same age.

But we never encountered each other growing up because we lived so far apart. Ika was in Tohoku, I was in Kansai and Miss Noboryou was technically in Tokyo, but way out on the island of Hachijo-jima.

There's also a pretty good chance that Ika hasn't graduated high school for one reason or another. Reason being that she wore a school uniform in her league match against Sota the other day. Then again, girls visiting theme parks in their old school uniforms seems to be trending on social media these days, but I don't know for sure.

In the Shogi world, at least, people who were in the same grade have played plenty of times before. That's why it's so weird the three of us never ran into each other. We might have been in the same building, but we never played each other or recorded one another's matches.

And now, here we are in the same room. Not at a Shogi Association building, but an out-of-the-way title match.

Three parallel lines running along different horizons.

"..... I hated you," mumbles Miss Noboryou as she wipes off each of the pieces.

Par for the course. That's why I wasn't shocked to hear it.

Actually, I assumed she did.

The only way two people the same age could avoid each other for so long is one going out of their way to avoid the other. I have no reason to hate her.

But, she definitely does.

"I hated your apprentices, too. I saw them as annoying little insects that only got in Sora-sensei's way. Even though we were separated into East and West, I believed Sora-sensei was the ideal both as a Sub League member and as a

woman. But———”

“But?”

“I may have been wrong.”

Carefully placing the clean pieces back into the piece box, Miss Noboryou goes on.

“Because the solution to Shogi may be different from the vague image I had in my head. If the final frame is different, then so must be the sequence of events that lead to it. The same could be true for the starting point as well. In which case

“.....”

The sound of her closing the piece box lid echoes against all the pressure in here.

It’s like she was trying to shut the very existence of Ginko Sora away, and it gives me chills.

“There can be no doubt that the Shogi you showed us is from decades, or perhaps even 100 years in the future.”

She must be talking about the Placement League match I had against Taishi Shinokubo 7-*dan* the other day.

Miss Noboryou was the match recorder for that one, too.

I got so frustrated when *Dark Taishi* kept forcing Repetition Draws no matter what strategy I played to get me to show him my research that I used a sequence that the world’s fastest supercomputer taught me.

One from the distant future where moving the King straight forward is the first move.

“However, that is different from the future I saw.”

“..... What?”

Hearing something I couldn't let slide makes me snap back at her.

After arriving at my conclusion, going through match after match against the supercomputer Awaji, here's Miss Noboryou saying I'm wrong.

A mere 3-*dan* division member.

"Call it a parallel world. The one that I saw was much different. It was more genuine, more complex and more clear-cut."

She's contradicting herself.

But I can't back up my version either. Awaji is a secret. Who knows what would happen if the whole world found out that only Ai Yashajin and I can access it freely.

"I'm here today to record them with my own hands. I'm sure that that monster can step into the *future* I couldn't see playing against her."

It seemed like Miss Noboryou was being respectful when she said, "Sainokami-*sensei*," earlier, but I guess she does have some resentment toward the girl her age who crushed Big Sis with the Tomahawk strategy.

———I can relate.

"But are you sure signing up for the first match was the right call? The last day of the 3-*dan* division is next week, right? The rest of the match will happen after the division is———"

"The first match is the only option, actually," she says with absolute certainty.

As if today's match is more important than the 3-*dan* division.

"This title match *won't be a series*."

"Come again?"

What's she talking about? The Empress Title Match is a best of five.

It'll be three matches long at the very least.

Just as I start to have doubts that Miss Noboryou was mentally healthy enough to work as the match recorder, more people file into the arena and interrupt our conversation.

This room is smaller than the typical arena, so everyone is trying to squeeze by everyone else without stepping on toes. That includes Miss Noboryou.

But she isn't looking at me anymore.

The *future* she has been waiting for is here.

"Good morning, Yashajin-*Women's Dual Title*."

■ The Match Begins

“It’s time. Begin.”

The observer’s announcement was so quick and blunt that everyone other than the players nearly jumped out of their socks. Usually, it goes something like:

“It is now time to begin the match. Empress Sainokami, the first move is yours.”

But the observer for this match, King Yo Okito, didn’t bother with the extra words and just said, “Begin.” Furthermore, neither of the players is the type of person to exchange a polite greeting before the match, so this was good enough.

This is the moment the Empress Title Match gets underway.

The first title match between Ika Sainokami and Ai Yashajin.

“A-ha!”

Ika, swaying left and right with her tongue peeking out her slack jaw, has looked absolutely giddy ever since she got the first move from the piece flip. There’s drool dripping down her chin for goodness sake. Is she on something?

Here comes the crazy And it’s not just her face.

Strange doesn’t begin to describe the way the Empress sitting in the upper seat is dressed today.

The black patch over her left eye is the same as always.

But she’s wearing a black leather ensemble with studded belts to match.

Anyone else in that outfit called *Empress* would be in a dungeon after dark.

Ika had always shown up to her league and title matches in a school uniform

up until today. I don't know if she graduated or was expelled, but this switch is out there even for her.

It goes without saying that one of the association staff members asked her why she was dressed like that, but she just gave them a blank stare and said: "Huh? 'Cuz I'm hot?"

Nothing else.

"..... Why doesn't the observer issue a warning?"

"..... Probably because it wouldn't do any good. They can't just not let her play"

I agree with a lot of things the staff are whispering back and forth, but I have a different theory.

———Heat She might really need to stay cool.

When I played against her father Yo Okito in the Crown Title Match, he shaved his head right before the first game. It makes sense that his daughter would reach a similar conclusion.

The challenger, on the other hand, is dressed more conservatively.

That said, it's not a kimono.

Ai Yashajin-Dual Women's Title is wearing a pitch-black dress.

———As her Master, I should've insisted she wear something more traditionally Japanese

While I know it's my fault, I was at a loss for words when I saw her walk into the arena this morning.

She was just so beautiful.

There's an air of danger in the two Women's League Players dressed in the color of darkness. The thing is that Shogi players like me are typically drawn to beautiful, dangerous things. That's why everyone here knows this is crazy, but

no one moves to stop those two from playing.

And, those two pulverize the Shogi world's norms on the board, too.

“Hihihi! HIIHIIHIIHIIHI!”

Ika moves her hands around over the board like dowsing rods for a full five minutes before suddenly snatching a piece.

And that piece———

“Huh?!”

The staff and media people gasp.

They did so because moving it first doesn't follow any Shogi standards.

Until a few days ago, anyway.

“The King to open the match?!”

“5 Eight King!”

“Hey, isn't that what”

I don't blame them for being stunned.

That move was also played by a top Shogi player in a league match only a few days ago.

That player being———Dragon King Ryuo, Yaichi Kuzuryu.

“Look, look. ≡ Yaaaichi,≡” says Ika, craning her neck, and only her neck, around to look at me.

“I'll prove that, so much more than this dark little twerp, I actually get you and love, love, LOVE you so much! ≡≡≡”

“.....”

Curious, I sneak a glance in Ai's direction.

If Ika can imitate Awaji's playing style then just being on the defensive puts Ai in a very tough spot right away.

Reason being that I couldn't do anything whenever Awaji played that move against me.

"Hmph."

But Ai just opens the Bishop path without so much as a second thought. She looks surprisingly human doing it, too.

———Is she planning to exchange the Bishops and force a Repetition Draw?

That's another limited Shogi solution pointed out by Awaji. So long as both players keep their Bishops on the piece stands, a Repetition Draw is inevitable.

———If that's the case Shogi becomes a game about pursuing the Bishop, not the King, when playing on defense.

"Take your leave."

At the observer's command, I get to my feet and make a quick exit.

Only the match recorder and players are left as everyone else files out in the blink of an eye. Actually, more like running away.

Now in the hall, I hear my name.

"Mr. Kuzuryu."

Okito-*sensei* is waiting for me. Scary

"Join me for a moment."

"For research?"

"No. A walk," he answers in a hardy fair tone and shakes his head.

To me, that's the opening signal for a match.

"As a father, there are some things I would like to confirm about my daughter's first lover."

"..... First off, may I please explain that we aren't now and never have been in

a relationship?”

A nearly hopeless battle for the Kuzuryu Shogi family is about to begin.

Ghost Story

“Really, *Sensei*, I had no idea! To think that Ika is your daughter!”

I finally tell him after we meander around the building for a while. It was one of the biggest shocks of my life, to be sure.

“It was a shock to me as well. You of all people being my daughter’s lover.”

“Please, *Sensei*, listen to me Ika might see it differently, but as far as I’m concerned, we aren’t together!”

“Elaborate.”

“No matter how Ika your daughter feels about it, I’ve only had feelings for one person my whole life. We were always side by side as kids and I think we’ll always be side by side in the future.”

“Does said person share these feelings?”

“If I may ask the same question, *Sensei*, why didn’t you marry Ika’s mother?”

I counter to get out of the hot seat.

Because, well, I don’t know what Ginko’s level of commitment is or what kind of future she has in mind

“A common pitfall for Shogi players.”

Okito-*sensei*’s voice is very plain.

“I was still young and prioritized Shogi above all else. She just could not tolerate that. I could barely manage to score as a romantic partner, but failed as a father. It was the correct decision.”

“.....”

I hate that I can understand exactly where he’s coming from.

Get serious about Shogi, and no amount of time is ever enough.

Matches often last late into the night, and your win-loss ratio directly impacts your life. Watching someone ride that roller coaster would be worse than actually being on it yourself.

That's why people in the Shogi world tend to pair off with each other. The same is true in the Go world. I can't deny that it's hard to meet people outside of it, though.

"Her time as a single mother must have been extremely difficult, but she never revealed our daughter's existence to me. Not until that day, at least."

Okito-sensei attempted to take his own life after losing to a computer in a televised match. Apparently, Ika's mother was there when he woke up in a hospital bed and told him about Ika.

Then, she asked him to pay child support.

When I first heard that, I understood it as her way of giving him a reason to live.

Now that I know all the details, I'm almost certain of it.

That Ika's mother still loves Okito-sensei and finds her own way to express it.

"Have you been able to meet much since then? As a family of three, I mean."

"I now have opportunities to see my daughter, yes. Her mother says she is rather busy with work. All of the child support payments are being used for Ika's sake, or so I'm told. She insists on covering her own daily expenditures."

"If I may ask what does she do?"

"Elderly care."

Last night's dream flashed before my eyes. A river of sweat rolls down my back.

———It's a coincidence, just a coincidence

I desperately repeat that to myself, but deep down I know coincidences don't line up *this* much.

Awaji showed me the future of Shogi when I played against it.

Did I get the ability to see the past as a result?

———Hello!! Of course not, you idiot!

"So, then. You have feelings for another?" says Okito-*sensei* without any way of knowing the battle taking place in my head right now. "This is a confusing position to be in as a father. While I still do not wish to part with my daughter, I thought I could rest easy knowing she would have a partner such as yourself."

"While I'm glad I have your trust as a man"

"As a man? No." Okito-*sensei* stops walking, squares his shoulders to me, and says with the utmost seriousness, "You and my daughter are cut from the same cloth. Yaichi Kuzuryu. You, like my daughter are not human."

"..... What do you mean by that?"

"The elderly man who taught my daughter Shogi was an ex-professional."

"An ex"

Something felt weird about how he described that.

Reason being that even after they retire, pro players still keep their status as pro players.

Losing that status would mean either the Shogi Association forced him out for their own purposes or there's an extremely rarely used *expulsion* system.

"Said elderly man once filled something akin to a personal secretary role for a particularly influential player of the day. He wrote books under that player's name and carried out assignments that could not be done in the public eye."

"And then gotten rid of?"

“I do not know the whole truth of the matter, but I do know that said elderly man apparently wrote more books under the names of other professionals without their knowledge. Many publishers’ standards were lax in that era.”

“I know that publishers no one had ever heard of put out some weird books way back when Like Static Rook players writing about Ranging Rook strategies, stuff like that.”

By the time the pro player realized their name was on it, the publisher had disappeared without a trace. That’s how the system worked. Machi Kugui told me a bit about it when we wrote *Kuzuryu’s Notebook*.

“However, such a lifestyle cannot last. The elderly man had faded from the public consciousness when he quietly moved into a government-run senior facility. Without anyone to play Shogi against, he passed the time by lining up Shogi recorders by himself.”

“.....?! ”

I look around the room with a start. Why is it so chilly in here when it’s the middle of summer?

This building is now a privately owned medical facility.

Rumor has it that it used to be a rather unique hospital of sorts.

“No way”

“I believe your conclusion to be correct.”

Okito-sensei nods like he just read my mind.

“The elderly man passed away inside these very walls. It’s also the location where he met my daughter and taught her how to play.”

Th-That dream It took place here?!

My knees are trembling. What is this, a ghost story?

“My daughter claims to be able to hear his voice. She had a conversation with

an empty room last night. I cannot understand where the voice is coming from, however.”

Then, *Sensei* turns to me and asks with a completely straight face.

“Can you hear it?”

“..... I don’t know”

The old man and the girl in my dream last night

Every ounce of logic in my brain is desperately trying to convince the rest of me that it wasn’t real, no matter how realistic it felt. But, then again

“I happened to visit that elderly man but a few days before his death.”

“You met him?!”

“*Met* might not be the correct term One look at the stock of adult diapers crammed into the room was enough to understand his condition. While he would make a faint response when the names of professional players he once faced were spoken aloud, that was all. At the very least, he didn’t acknowledge my presence in the slightest.”

The old man I dreamed about also got steadily older.

His last moments were happy, though———

“The elderly man was in my daughter’s mother’s care. She said that she spoke to him each and every day without fail, but hardly ever got a response.”

“..... And?”

“Can you not make the connection?”

I swear *Okito-sensei*’s eyes look like a guy seconds from delivering the scariest line of a ghost story.

The shocking truth.

“At the time he was supposedly teaching my daughter, *the elderly man had*

already lost the ability to verbally communicate with others."

".....! Th-Then?!"

I'm stunned.

The old man in my dream not only answered Ika's questions, but taught her how pieces moved and even had a soft spot for her. Their meeting was a miracle in the twilight of his life, and he was grateful for it.

———Then what the heck did I see?

That story from the old man's point of view.

Why did I dream about something that never happened?

"Saying he *taught* my daughter Shogi may also not be the correct term. In actuality, my daughter continually watched him line up Shogi records and nothing more."

"W-Wait just a minute, *Sensei*! Are you saying she learned the game by just watching match records play out?! N-No human being could possibly———"

"Hearing about it was the confirmation I needed. My daughter possesses a talent for deriving information from formations using eyesight alone."

"What do you mean by formations?"

"Facial expressions, for instance."

Okito-*sensei* runs his hand along his mask-like face and starts listing.

"Subtle hand movements. Number of blinks. Things that normal people can only comprehend as a feeling in the air. In Shogi terms, piece location. It was through all of these visual cues that the elderly man conveyed Shogi to my daughter At least, that is what she claims."

"..... That's impossible"

No matter how much I try to refute that explanation, there is no denying that Ika picked up pro-level Shogi skills thanks to that old man.

“Yes, it isn’t normal. My daughter is incapable of establishing logical verbal communication but was gifted with this ability to compensate.”

Then, the man who suddenly became a father one day adds.

“Having a daughter like that is what gave me the conviction to develop deep learning software.”

■ Deep Dream

“I can’t stand eating alone.”

I get summoned to Ai Yashajin’s room as soon as the match pauses for lunch. There’s no ignoring a player’s selfishness- request during a title match.

But there is a limit.

“Listen up, Ai”

People are going to talk if it gets out that the Ryuo secretly visited his grade-school aged apprentice in her private room. It’s suspicious enough that I came all the way out into the boonies to accompany her to this match in the first place. Not in a lolicon sense, though. In Shogi terms!

“This isn’t smart. Misunderstandings are bound to happen, yeah?”

“There shouldn’t be an issue unless you’re the assistant observer.”

It seems the young lady doesn’t get the hint.

Thoroughly enjoying the Tohoku cuisine that she hardly ever has a chance to eat, Ai continues.

“And you’re writing a match article today, yes? There’s nothing improper about sharing lunch with your apprentice for material. So long as you don’t discuss the match, that is.”

“..... Just to be clear, the association staff took my phone as well.”

There’s a lot of gray zone when it comes to how isolated players should be during a title match.

The rules are in a transition period, and the details haven’t been completely ironed out to this extent.

The players themselves are forbidden to carry any electronic devices starting

the day before the match, but that's not the case for the match recorder, journalists and others involved with the match. They can break the rules all they want if they are so inclined.

That said, this is a Women's League match. Pros like myself are so much stronger than Women's players wouldn't need to rely on electronics if they can ask us for pointers.

———Then again, today's match is the exception.

Even the early stages of the match this morning went beyond the normal realm of Shogi sense. Especially Ika. Even I can't understand what the heck she's trying to do.

"By the way, I spoke with Okito-*sensei*———"

To avoid discussing the current formations, I bring up the weird dream I had as well as what Okito-*sensei* told me.

Grade schooler or not, I had to tell *someone* about the ghost story I'm in right now.

———Knowing Ai, she'll say, "Huuh? What are you, a moron?" and laugh it off!

I accepted her summons to lunch knowing that a tsunami of criticism was coming my way, but

Rather than shoot it all down, Ai takes a completely different angle.

A supernatural one.

"Have you ever heard of apophenia?"

"Have you ever heard that I never went to high school?"

Ai shrugs off her Master's retort with a huff and then elegantly devours a piece of sushi using chopsticks. Wow, that ticks me off

"..... And? What is this apophenia, was it?"

“That’s what it’s called when a person can make sense out of chaos.”

“.....!”

At one point, I was told that I was *hallucinating* when I said there’s a systemic reason behind the moves software makes.

The person who said so was Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan*. He happens to be Okito-*sensei*’s research partner.

He’s also a graduate of The University of Tokyo and a software developer on top of being a pro Shogi player.

A guy so smart and skillful that he was dubbed the *Software Translator*, insisted that Ika and I are one and the same.

That we were both something other than human.

“There’s also a type of apophenia known as pareidolia, a phenomenon in which a person visually derives information out of random data A simple example would be seeing a human face in a tree trunk.”

Or a man in the moon.

Or seeing shapes in the stains on the ceiling.

Ai explains that pareidolia is a term to describe those instances.

“It’s known to happen with computers as well. Things that shouldn’t be there sometimes show up in images created by deep learning software while it is analyzing random images.”

“Like haunted photos?”

“Researchers call these strange happenings *deep dreams*.”

“Deep dreams?”

“Due to overfitting, computers can make the same mistakes as people. Isn’t that interesting? Androids are counting digital sheep. And———”

Ai takes a moment to wipe her mouth with a napkin before saying.

“Both apophenia and pareidolia are classified as mental illnesses.”

“Mental illness”

“Ika Sainokami has been an interesting subject for me for quite a while now.
My curiosity

wins out over unease in her case. Though I’m sure you feel differently.”

Ai Yashajin’s inner scientist is showing as she mumbles on.

I can feel excitement coming from the one-in-a-million girl attempting to seize the future of Shogi itself using the world’s fastest supercomputer.

“The last time I played against her, I could tell the software algorithms were affecting her own emotions. She abandoned them completely in her matches against Ginko Sora and Sota Kunugi. This Shogi is something to behold, isn’t it? Today might be the last time you ever speak with Ika Sainokami the person.”

“..... Are you saying that learning how to play Shogi like a computer has driven Ika insane?”

“Not quite.”

Ai adjusts my wording.

While only slight, the implications are huge.

“Ika Sainokami comprehends the formations on the board like a computer processing images. For a human being that’s too much weight to carry.”

“.....”

“Taking in that much information has changed the makeup of her brain, allowing her to acquire more of it the more her brain resembles a computer. That’s why her Shogi has gotten so strong. At the same time, though, *it loses the traits machines don’t need.*”

“Traits machines don’t need? Like a heart?”

Ika grew up surrounded by old folks with cognitive problems.

In that environment, she craved even the slightest bit of human interaction. She wanted to be loved, but the only people around couldn't communicate.

What if one of them was able to express some kind of emotion through lining up Shogi records?

And if Ika understood that gesture as a sign of affection?

In that case

If that is the case, it's heartbreaking

What we perceive as a battle, Ika misinterprets as love. Now she's on the verge of losing that completely.

Ika can't be forgiven for what she's done within the Shogi world.

I sure won't forgive her for hurting Big Sis without so much as a second thought.

Even so, if that monster loses whatever semblance of a heart she has left

"It's time. I'll be going now."

Ai stands up, adjusts her kimono, grabs her pouch with her watch and her fan inside, and makes for the door.

"Ai!"

I shout because I couldn't get to my feet in time.

Flipping her hair over her shoulder like a black wing, Ai turns to face me.

"What?"

"..... Nothing."

Her opponent's origins. Ai just theorized that the monster she is about to go hunt is actually a sad, lost soul in search of love.

———..... Can she still fight knowing that?

I couldn't bring myself to put it into words.

If I did, it might impact the match.

"It's about time we compare notes."

I'm drinking tea in the association staff green room when the observer comes back after the match starts back up again and strikes up a conversation.

"I'm told that you have access to the world's fastest supercomputer, which runs deep learning software, Mr. Kuzuryu. Please inform me of its rating."

"....."

He's not picking up on how awkward it is for me to talk with him, at all.

———Maybe he's lost all of his emotions, too

I was just starting to sympathize with him. Feeling a little betrayed, I do what he asked.

"Awaji. Rate the current formations," I say into my phone and numbers show up on the screen.

Of course, my phone isn't doing the calculations. The supercomputer in Kobe sent them to my phone remotely.

"Awaji says the offense has an advantage."

"With these formations? My own software cannot settle on a rating She's too strong."

"That's because Ika has played the best move according to Awaji all the way back to moving her King to 5 Eight on the opening move."

Now that I've said so, I counter with a question of my own.

"The software you developed is deep learning as well, correct, Okito-sensei? Have you given it a name?"

“No.”

It was a short but clear rejection.

Now, him refusing to show his hand yet again is really getting under my skin.

“..... I played against Awaji for a full month. Nonstop.”

“Did you? That is an interesting approach.”

“Ika has been playing the same moves as Awaji, and I don’t think I can do that even after playing against Awaji for a month. In all seriousness, no other program would ever play 5 Eight King as the opening move. No one would ever think it was an option without learning from Awaji’s match records.”

I keep talking, almost to prevent *Sensei* from getting any words in edgewise.

These things should be kept secret, but the words just kept coming.

“The thing is that Ika could only have studied a total of 101 Awaji matches, including the match I played against Shinokubo-*sensei*. Being able to replicate Awaji’s sequences to this degree It’s unbelievable.”

What if this actually is apophenia like Ai was talking about?

What if studying Awaji’s match records gave her a deep dream, which showed her how to play this style?

I’m no doctor or scientist.

This just might be a regular guy mixing supernatural with sci-fi. Heck, dreams and reality are mixing together at this point.

But in terms of what’s on the board right now Ika is doing it.

“You said you haven’t given your software a name, yes? In that case, I’ll give it one for you.”

“.....”

“Its name is———Ika Sainokami.”

Ika is one of an extremely limited number of people on earth who can *run* deep learning software in their minds.

Knowing that, Okito-*sensei* gave her a continuous stream of data to process and therefore honed that rare talent.

I doubt that's ever been done before.

That's the very same experiment that Ai Yashajin conducted with the supercomputer Awaji, but Okito-*sensei* did it with his own daughter's brain.

The result Ika successfully replicated Awaji's playing style in a match of Shogi.

"Please answer one question for me," I ask, dropping my voice as low as it can go.

The one question I had to ask no matter what.

"Were you experimenting on Ika? Your own flesh and blood"

In that moment he woke up in a hospital bed after losing to software drove him to attempt suicide.

He then received a daughter who has the talent to surpass software itself.

Did he start plotting his revenge against software?

"She drifts further and further away from being human every time. Yes, her Shogi skills got stronger But still!"

I've said it before and I'll say it again, Ika Sainokami hurt someone very dear to me. That's why I'll never forgive her. I couldn't care less if she breaks, and I'd gladly give her a taste of her own medicine if I got the chance.

But.

I still yelled.

The old man in my dream made me.

“Do you think she’s really happier this way?! Do you want your daughter to be killed by a computer just like you?! The daughter you only just met!!”

“Then, answer me a question.” Looking down on me with glass-like eyes, Okito-sensei asks. “Would you be able to stop your apprentice from doing so when they yearn for strength? Even if said method defies convention?”

“.....!!”

“Will your apprentice win, or will my daughter?”

Shifting his gaze to the board on which Ika was starting to pull even further ahead, King Yo Okito quietly murmurs.

“Let us watch and find out whose love prevails.”

Confronted with a pro Shogi player who referred to the board to determine the strength of love, there was nothing I could say.

The coalition of five newspaper companies that sponsor the Empress Title Match and the Empress League itself have a negative stance about livestreaming matches.

While I personally think they’re twiddling their thumbs in the past, I can’t think of anyone who would want to show the world what Ika is like during matches.

The only camera in the arena for this particular match is fixed to the ceiling above the board and we can kind of hear what the players are saying in the association green room.

“Hehe! Heeeeeeee Hihihhehhehihi!!”

Even from our only view inside coming from one ceiling-mounted camera, Ika’s near-euphoric state comes through loud and clear.

That weird laugh of hers rings out as her pointer finger dances across the

board, making most of her moves without using a single second of waiting time. The only exception was the five minutes she waited before making her first move. As to why, I have no clue.

The board is beyond complex.

This match started out as Static Rook, but the big pieces have slid around and changed hands so often that it's impossible to classify anymore.

Of course, no match between human beings has unfolded this way before. But no one would've imagined formations like this, let alone researched them. Ika doesn't seem to care about that and barrels forward at breakneck speed.

Those fingertips of hers strike like lightning.

Her formations fit together like clockwork, the gears spinning in overdrive. Ika lives up to her *Worldly Thunder* nickname in every sense of the word.

Meanwhile, Ai Yashajin is quiet.

“.....”

Well, that's normal for Shogi matches But I've got a pretty good idea what's going through her head right now.

I'd bet she has one hand over her eye, reading as deep into the board as she can while meticulously managing her time and choosing her next move.

Typical Shogi senses won't work in that arena.

The only option is to read what you can and reinforce what you see. There's no way to tell if you're ahead or behind in matches like this

“Yashajin-sensei. You have one hour remaining.”

“.....”

The match recorder's voice, followed by a soft click of the tongue. Ai's hand still hasn't shown up on the screen.

“Heeehahahaha!”

Another round of Ika's high-pitched laughter comes through the wall.

"Ika has pulled ahead," I mutter to myself after checking Awaji's rating.

Even human eyes can tell that she has a commanding lead at this point.

"Mine matches that evaluation as well. Offense has a distinct advantage," Okito-sensei says just as quietly.

If a computer played from this point, Ai's chances of turning the tables are pretty much zero.

The only thing that could save her now is Ika making a mistake

"You stated earlier that I am using my daughter, yes? That she That I am making Ika carry out a personal vendetta against computers."

"What about it?"

"I did not feel the slightest hatred or despair when I played against software."

The first pro player to formally lose against a computer continues this trip down memory lane despite my confusion.

And he ends up using a word that doesn't fit at all.

"It was *love*."

"..... What?"

"You have faced off against a supercomputer, have you not? Didn't you feel it as well? That overwhelming mix of admiration and jealousy one feels for a strong opponent. Did you not see it for yourself? The beauty within that Shogi?"

".....!!"

I played against Awaji nonstop for nearly a month.

At first, it was nothing but torture But I did pick up on it at some point. Once I uninstalled the way human beings play Shogi and installed software's

version of the game, that is.

I realized just how much fun it was.

But I used a younger version of Big Sis to trick myself into matching Awaji.

———Because I thought I'd die if I didn't. Still

Looking back on it now, I make another realization.

———Maybe I didn't have to go that far to abandon my own humanity?

"That is the same as my daughter's love for you."

Awaji's rating leans further and further toward Ika with each passing moment.

Almost like the two are merging together.

"Even after learning Shogi, my daughter's talents were exceptional. She became isolated, unable to see eye-to-eye with anyone until encountering a prodigy named Yaichi Kuzuryu The impact of that moment must have been equivalent to seeing light shine through complete darkness. Surely you can understand? The genuine purity of only being able to love a person via Shogi."

"..... I'm afraid I can't, and I'll never have feelings for Ika."

I answer as bluntly as possible to hide that fact I'm a bit shaken. My heart is pounding enough to make my ribs hurt.

"So then, who is it you intend to play Shogi with in the future?"

"What do you mean *who*?"

"Ginko Sora? She may have attained a professional rank, but she will never be capable of challenging you in an even match. In fact, no one in your generation or below can hold a candle to you. Only the Meijin can match your talent, but his skill will inevitably decline within the next few years."

"What does that have to do with anything? I understand admiring strong players, but it's nowhere near the same thing as love———"

“Then allow me to rephrase my question.”

As if to trap me in a pincer formation to checkmate the King, Ika’s father presses me even further.

“You will end up spending the most time with my daughter. Will Ginko Sora be able to endure?”

“.....!”

“As a rather considerate boy said, the current format for title matches allows for players to spend a total 171 days together with you should they clash in all the title matches, as well as regularly scheduled league matches. My daughter started openly talking about becoming a professional player once she heard that.”

The very thought of that nightmare coming true makes me gasp for air. Could that actually happen in the future?

For better or worse, Okito-*sensei*’s advance gets cut off there.

“H-Hey! Look at the screen!”

One of the association staff members jumps to their feet with a start.

“The Empress took off her eyepatch!!”

“Seriously?! Does that mean the match is almost over?!”

Ika’s face is on the screen.

The *whole screen*.

In other words, she’s stood up to get as close to the ceiling-mounted camera as possible.

“YAAIIIIIIIICHIIIIII.”

She shouts my name.

“You better *WATCH CLOSELY!* Put on those glasses you wear for matches! I’M

GONNA PLAY JUST THE WAY YOU LIKE IT≡≡≡”

Somehow, Ika’s naked left eye has an ominous glow on the screen.

It’s zooming around from side to side, almost like a fish with no eyelids. It’s not looking anywhere close to the board, so what in the world is she seeing right now?

“I’ll make you understand.”

Ika’s declaration echoes through the wall.

“That twerp Sota, this brat Ai and of course that silver-haired hussy aren’t worth your time. Only me, your lil’ Ika Sainokami, IS WORTHY OF YOOOUUU!!”

Midnight Sun

“How about taking a seat?” Ai Yashajin said quietly from her seat while the title holder on the other side of the board was standing on her tiptoes and yelling into the ceiling-mounted camera.

“I’ve played my move. So, it’s your turn now.”

“Aggghhh?”

Clearly irritated, Ika glared down at the girl with her right eye as the left scanned the board.

“Haa-haa, all right then. Trying to draw things out, are you, little tramp? Die already. What if Yaichi missed my move, huh? How’re you gonna make up for that? You die on the next move anyway.”

“Don’t let your guard down.”

“Yeah, I know, Mister.”

“Do you really? All your losses these days are instant deaths.”

“Yes, I know that too! I get it, okay?! I’ll reeead the daaamn boooard!” snapped Ika as she made a gesture to the right of the match recorder sitting at the boardside table.

“.....?”

An ominous chill crept through Karen Noboryou as she timidly looked to her right, but, of course, no one was there.

“Nooow Watch me read.”

There was a swift plop as Ika landed on her cushion and proceeded to stick her neck out as far as it would go for a better view of the board. This time, both her eyes were locked in.

To the average person, it was just a square piece of wood.

For Shogi players, *looking* was how they comprehended the formation and *reading* referred to identifying the sequences to play their next move.

However, Empress Ika Sainokami's version of *reading* was unique.

A pure, pristine light illuminated the whole area.

"Ahaaa!"

Her eyes opened like saucers as she reached out into that bright abyss.

"Heeraaaaa fuuuuutssssss gahhhhhhhhh."

The sounds coming from her mouth no longer carried meaning.

Altering her thought process to act like deep learning software made it difficult for Ika's brain to process symbolic verbal language.

Then again, Ika had never needed words to begin with.

Her brain had its proverbial hands full trying to sift the deluge of visual stimuli, and that allowed her to comprehend tens of thousands of times more information about the world than the average person.

That ability was firing on all cylinders as she *looked* at the board.

It was equivalent to seeing the future.

Brilliant fireworks went off in her mind as she saw exactly how this match was going to play out.

A future where she had already won.

But not just this particular game. Ika could see herself winning this title match in a clear three-game sweep.

And yet, the elementary-school-aged girl in front of her had an arrogant smile on her lips.

"Your flag is already flying."

..... Fl-ag?

Ika's mind, which had become specialized for visual recognition, couldn't detect the change in the air that brought about Ai Yashajin's statement.

The only word it did catch, *flag*, triggered a series of images to course through her brain.

Flags of all shapes and sizes came up in an instant.

Country flags.

White flags. Marine flags.

Square flags. Triangular flags. Flags at half mast. Beach flags.

Flag, flag, flagflagflagflagFLAGFLAGFLAGflagflagflagffffllaaaggg

Ika's waiting time slipped away as she struggled to identify the one specific flag her opponent pointed out. Just what could it be?

Ai Yashajin told her.

"A death flag."

The girl with dark hair that flowed like black wings then reached out with her right hand.

It was a pointless move. Ika reached that conclusion immediately.

"Ahh kgaaamooogh."

Incoherent tones fell from Ika's lips as she opened her eyes wider still to see her next move.

———Aha! There really is nothin' prettier than Shogi.

Shogi always had a distinct glimmer ever since she first laid eyes on the sport in this very building. Everything else was a dull monochrome with no visible future to speak of, and yet that worn-out board an old man was using to line up match records sparkled like a gold-paved road leading right to it.

That glimmering light only got stronger.

———Death flag? What even is that? Everyone in here's doin' just fine!!

Ika could see every elderly person she met at this facility at this very moment. Even her past, which had been as dark as a moonless night, seemed to sparkle with happiness.

———Hey, Mister! I found it!

The girl who was never understood nor understood her peers had finally found it.

A passport to a happy future.

With her A-League-ranking father acting as the observer, she would propose to the only man on this planet with talent similar to hers. He couldn't possibly refuse. Even if he said no, that wouldn't change the fact that he was destined to spend half of the rest of his life with her.

What the old man had said was true. Getting strong enough really had made her dreams into reality.

"I'm happy for you, Ika."

———Thanks, Mister!

Ika Sainokami wasn't alone anymore.

She could already see herself adorned in a gorgeous white wedding gown just as soon as this match en———

That's when gruesome amounts of blood burst from Ika's eyeballs.

"Gl———"

The bright realm was instantly stained pitch black. Ika covered her eyes as if

trying to gather any fragments of light that remained, but only blood came out from between her fingers.

With the ferocity of a waterfall.

And it wasn't slowing down.

"G-Glasses Someone Glasses, please"

Ika begged as blood spewed from each eye.

She couldn't see.

That's why she wanted glasses. She was sure that a pair of them would let her bask in that light of happiness she saw just moments ago.

"I can't see S-Someone Glasses"

Sway.

Her sense of balance askew, Ika leaned all the way up the board in hopes of seeing the pieces over and over again.

But it was all for naught.

The ultra-sensitive light receptors, which acted as her eyes had become drenched in dark red blood.

"..... Please"

That would be the last word from Ika Sainokami's mouth.

The pool of her blood on the board had expanded to the point that it was dripping off the sides and onto the *tatami* mat below. That steady plip was all that could be heard in the arena.

"Hyeee! EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!!"

Karen let out a blood-chilling scream as she scuttled backwards.

She retreated with such velocity that the sliding door came off its track in her wake.

Ai Yashajin calmly watched the entire scene unfold from atop her cushion. She then picked up a pitcher of water, poured herself a glass, and slowly drank it all.

Just because she was thirsty.

“She still hasn’t played?”

The anxiety in Yaichi Kuzuryu’s voice was palpable as he watched from the association’s green room.

His apprentice had all but lost at this point.

What’s more, Ai Yashajin’s previous move was akin to laying her head on the block. It may have looked like she was lining up for a counterattack, but in actuality she was asking the executioner to make it quick by setting the scene, most likely.

The faint echo of voices gave the impression that the match had already ended, but it was Ika’s turn. Furthermore, her head was so close to the board that it was blocking the camera’s view. However, her hand was nowhere to be seen.

———All Ika has to do is bring down the blade and the match is over

Yaichi tilted his head. Ika wasn’t the type to be cautious when victory was close enough to taste.

What in the world could be stopping her?

When suddenly, something appeared on his smartphone’s screen.

“Huh?”

The numbers were unbelievable.

The overwhelming statistical advantage Awaji had calculated swung completely in the other direction.

“Awaji went back on the rating?! No way?!”

In other words, it showed Ika had lost.

She had been in a victory position until just moments ago. Every move she played lined up with Awaji’s best possible option. Ika never made a mistake.

Did that mean Ai Yashajin’s last move surpassed the world’s fastest supercomputer?

“Th-That’s not possible”

What he just saw confused Yaichi no end. Was there a problem with the machinery? Had Awaji glitched? His mind raced to find an explanation when a loud noise came from the arena

Thud.

Looking up, he was stunned to see what greeted his eyes.

“..... *Sensei?*”

King Yo Okito already had one foot out the door.

The only place he could be going was———

“Okito-*sensei*?! The match hasn’t ended yet!! *Sensei!!*”

The observer entering the arena could send a clear message to the players: the match is as good as over.

Thus, it had become standard practice for everyone except the match journalist to stay outside during title matches.

In spite of that, Yo Okito completely ignored Yaichi’s calls as he made a beeline for the arena.

Whether he was worried about his daughter’s condition or wanted to warn his daughter that she was suddenly on the verge of losing by entering the arena, Yaichi couldn’t tell.

Ika's hand still wasn't on screen.

There was no denying that something unprecedented was happening in the arena.

“Tch!”

Yaichi grabbed his suit jacket from the back of his chair and went after the observer.

▲ The Girl Who Became a God

I step into the arena right behind Okito-*sensei*. For some reason, the sliding door is off its track and Ms. Noboryou is halfway into the hall and pale as a ghost.

Inside the arena———is even more shocking.

“I-Ika?!”

I scream her name the second I see her sitting stiff as a board with blood spewing out of her eyes.

———Now *this* is crazy!

There’s no way she can continue the match, zero.

Actually, she needs medical attention... now. There’s nothing normal about bleeding out your eyes.

———She needs help! But

The match is still going.

Interfering now might void the match entirely. If she were an ordinary person, people would be rushing to her aid without a second thought. However, none of the adults here can so much as put a finger on her because of the situation.

Wins and losses are life and death to a Shogi player The results are more than sacred.

———What do we do?! Appeal to the observer?!

Okito-*sensei* is standing right there, but I still can’t open my mouth. Ika is his biological daughter. That fact is making his decision even harder

“It’s about time you showed up. What kept you?”

Okito-*sensei* didn’t acknowledge Ai’s quip and turns to the match recorder

instead.

“Remaining time?”

“Th-There is still over an hour. Th-Th-Though Sainokami-*sensei* has spent seventeen minutes on this turn so far”

“She won’t be playing a move,” Ai interjects matter-of-factly.

The little Challenger turns to the still-hesitant adults and starts issuing orders.

“Call an ambulance if you don’t want her to die.”

A two second pause.

Okito-*sensei* needed that time to take a breath.

“Under my authority as the observer, I hereby end this match due to a player be physically unable to continue.”

No one objects.

One look at this place, and it’s obvious the Empress can’t even lift a finger.

“I will consult with the organizers to determine the result of this match. At the very least, it will not be restarted today. The Empress will be taken to a hospital for evaluation.”

The adults take action like they were all shot out of cannons.

“C-Call an ambulance!”

“Quickly! Get the Empress into another room! Move!”

Ika gets carried out of the arena but she hasn’t made a sound. Is she even alive?

What in the world just happened?

How does someone sustain that much physical damage just by playing Shogi?

Sure, Ai Hinatsuru once got a nosebleed in the middle of a match, but

I sit down behind the lower seat.

“Ai What happened?”

“Malnutrition. Of the brain, that is.”

“What?”

“Shouldn’t you be celebrating? She beat Ginko Sora by driving her into exhaustion, and I just gave her a taste of her own medicine. Your apprentice did that, don’t you understand? I should be getting a *Well done!* right about now.”

I take a deep breath.

“..... Could you be more specific? So that even I can understand.”

“Human brains are always in flux.”

“What do you mean *flux*?”

“They *can’t continuously think about one specific thing* out of necessity.”

Ai taps on her forehead between her eyebrows.

“We call that *concentrating*, but our brains aren’t built to delve deeper and deeper into one specific idea. Massive amounts of energy would be necessary if they get honed to work like a machine. That’s the same as suicide for any living thing. People can’t become machines and machines can’t become people.”

“.....”

Noboryou 3-*dan* and I make eye contact before realizing it.

Most of what Ai is saying makes sense.

Running Shogi software on a computer takes tons of electricity. That’s especially true for deep learning software. The amount of power those computers use is immense. I’ve heard that they can knock out the power to a house because the voltage went too high.

What would happen if you tried to do that with a human brain?

It would need enormous amounts of nutrients and oxygen.

More than the human body can provide

“This is what happens when the heart sends too much blood to the head trying to get more oxygen into the brain.”

“Blood vessels in her eyes must have ruptured,” says Ai between sips of tea like that horrifying truth was just dinnertime conversation. “So you see, I wasn’t afraid of Ika Sainokami’s approach from the start. It’s physically impossible to use.”

In her match against Big Sis, Ika had five hours of waiting time but only used eight minutes.

Now I realize that she didn’t *only use eight minutes* but that she could *only use eight minutes*. No matter how special her brain might be, it only had a regular teenage girl’s body to power it.

I can accept that if that’s all it was.

That Ika’s unique brain put her a step above the rest of humanity. Ai Yashajin used that against her.

Releasing Awaji’s match records might have been part of her plan to take down Ika all along.

It happens a lot in *shonen manga*. The enemy has the ability to absorb energy, so the hero purposefully gives them more energy than they can handle, And they explode.

But there’s something I can’t just ignore.

“.....”

I look down at the blood-soaked board. Specifically, where all the pieces are.

Ika imploded before she could make another move, but Ai had turned the

tables and claimed higher rating at this exact point in the match.

Basically, Ai Yashajin surpassed Awaji with the last move she made.

“May I ask you one more question?”

I waiver as the words come out of my mouth.

———She won’t give me a straight answer, will she?

The question I’m about to pose has to deal with core elements of her research. There’s no way to know if she’ll speak openly when someone else is in the room.

So I decided to go with this instead.

“If you had a chance to play against the Shogi gods right now who do you think would win?”

“What would happen if I played against Shogi gods? Me?”

The girl who is undoubtedly the closest to divinity at this very moment smirks and says, “They wouldn’t play against me at all. It’d be a boring match.”

A Game of Numbers

Ika is carried out of the room still unconscious and Okito-*sensei* joins the staff members as they file out one by one to have a meeting about what to do now in another room.

That leaves me alone in the arena with Ai Yashajin and Ms. Noboryou. It's totally silent.

There's also a bad taste that goes beyond words.

Thirty minutes pass with us just sitting by a blood-splattered Shogi board when the *fusuma* sliding doors quietly open.

"After deliberation, we have decided victory belongs to the Challenger," says the observer in a strict tone without sitting down.

Ai bows her head like she would in a normal match. Except this time, it's to an empty upper seat. Ms. Noboryou and I lower our heads out of reflex.

We must look confused because the observer steps inside by himself.

"There are two reasons. First, chances are extremely high that the Empress' waiting time would have expired had the match continued and, second, that there is no rule to postpone the match due to health issues after the match begins at this time. By the way, if I may ask———" says Okito-*sensei* as he takes a seat at the boardside table. "If you are indeed a god, you would of course know the solution to Shogi, yes? That is why said match would be *boring*. Was Shogi such a simple game all along?"

"You know those games based on numbers?"

"....."

That answer doesn't line up with his question

I guess I look like the one who doesn't get what's going on because Ai takes

one long look at my face before nicely spelling it out so even an idiot like me could understand.

“Two players go back and forth, saying numbers from 1, 2, 3, *etc.* until one of them loses for saying a specific one. As long as the amount of numbers you can say at one time is limited, it’s easy to find a way to win.”

“Intriguing———”

Okito-*sensei* is the first to figure it out.

“Ai Yashajin. Am I correct in assuming you have reached the *narrowest solution?*”

“Yes. As far as I’m concerned, Shogi is over,” answers the girl fleetingly.

Over, she says.

Not this match, but Shogi altogether.

“H-Hold on just a minute Ai.”

I don’t follow at all.

“I saw Shogi’s solution using Awaji just like you At least, I thought I did. What you just played is very different from my own conclusion. How in the world did you surpass Awaji’s sequence in the first place? What do you know? What is this narrowest solution?”

I’m familiar with the concepts of narrow and broad.

But how would those change the solution to Shogi?

“I have the fastest supercomputer in the world, as well as the resources to run the most powerful calculation software in existence. As of this moment, there is nothing stronger. Yes?”

“Probably, yeah.”

That’s why I thought Awaji playing against itself would show the pinnacle of Shogi, its ultimate solution.

But Ai's words shatter that assumption like glass.

"However, even Awaji can't beat run-of-the-mill Shogi software on personal computers if the match starts in certain formations."

"Haaa?!"

At first, I thought I'd just heard something revolutionary.

But on second thought, isn't that common sense?

"Well yeah, if the starting point is already checkmate or *hisshi* Or if the formation was completely out of whack, sure it could lose."

"Yes, but there are other instances, too."

Ai begins to succinctly explain to her slack-jawed audience.

The end of the grand epic known as Shogi.

"It's included in what people call *standards*."

Standards?

"By standards, you mean *standards*, right? The sequences that have already been figured out."

The one we say all the time? Like *everything so far has been standard* or *the standard here would be*?

"Yes. People have spent the last 1,400 years unearthing all sorts of standards. What are they, exactly? Don't you think that using Awaji, which is many times stronger than a person will ever be, would make them next to useless? That's what I thought at first. It turns out that wasn't the case."

"And that's how you managed to surpass Awaji's sequences?"

"Right again. I found formations where low-spec computers *ended up winning* against Awaji and went backwards from there."

"Ah!!"

Ms. Noboryou and I gasp at the same time.

That hit me like a hammer to the head. An idea that could flip heaven and earth, make Copernicus go pale!

The first thing you'd normally do after getting a high-spec machine is investigate where and how it surpassed existing software.

Except Ai decided to go in the other direction.

“..... Prodigy”

I mumble, stunned. Her mind is just built different. Too different. She found a method to find an answer to Shogi that her junior-high-grad Master never even considered.

I've got a murky gist of what Ai is trying to say.

Deciphering Shogi completely is impossible, even for Awaji. There are certain formations in which it can't produce an accurate rating.

That's probably very true in the early-game.

But the way Ai put it, it sounds like she figured out how to make points of no return before Awaji can rate the formation.

Where even Awaji can't avert checkmate.

Which means nothing on this planet could win starting from that point.

In that case, what's wrong with calling it the narrowest solution?

“I've named those points *death flags*. The player who initiates that point will lose in Shogi.”

And Ai continues.

“Death flags are hidden in all types of formations, but they're easiest to find in a specific one. It's the most important one, by the way.”

I have no idea. Noboryou 3-*dan* looks just as clueless next to me.

Okito-*sensei*, however, answered instantly.

“Opening formation.”

“Right. Games derived from chess *purposefully limit the movements of pieces at the beginning*. There aren’t many legal moves at the beginning and putting your opponent in check is impossible.”

“Applied wisdom meant to draw out the game, I would presume.”

“Older RPG video games use the same method. Everyone would die if they were allowed to face monsters on the world map right away. So the player is locked in the King’s chambers instead.”

“Dragon Quest? How nostalgic.”

What does Dragon Quest have to do with this?

I can’t keep up with these two as it is, and now they’re going off on their own tangent.

“Ai. Hey could you go back to that number game thing again? I still don’t get what you meant

“Game 21, for example. The rule is that you can say up to 3 consecutive numbers. The person who goes second and who always says a multiple of 4 will win. If the first player says *one*, then the second player says *two, three, four*.”

“So if the first player says *one, two*, the second just says *three, four*? How could you ever compare Shogi to something so simp———”

I remember it just as the words are coming out of my mouth. The future Awaji showed me pops into my mind.

A truly terrifying conclusion strikes me like a bolt of lightning.

Goosebumps flood my whole body.

Shivering and covered in sweat, I manage to say, “No way The reason Awaji played 5 Eight King first is because

“It’s waiting,” answers Ai with her eyes locked on mine. “Awaji waits for the opponent to step on a death flag.”

“In which case, Shogi’s conclusion is an inevitable win for the defender?” inquires Okito-*sensei*. “Hmph

Ai responds with a faint grin, but nothing more.

I know it’s just the four of us here, but Ai divulging this much information in public means she doesn’t think it’s valuable anymore.

———Then Ai Yashajin really found a way to guarantee victory in Shogi?

If so, then what does that make my Shogi conclusion?

What about all the Repetition Draws, Double *Nyugyoku* matches and Stalemates that Awaji found playing against itself? That wasn’t the solution to Shogi?

The more I hear, the more questions I have.

Wait Is Ai telling the truth to being with?

Is there any proof that this whole situation isn’t an elaborate trap she set for us?

Anything Ai Yashajin says must be taken with a grain of salt.

But there’s one thing that’s very clear.

Her words are going to send waves through the Shogi world and everyone is going to be just as stunned as me.

This tiny girl sitting in front of a large Shogi board.

Not only are the two titleholders in the room unable to refute her statements about the essence of Shogi, their own Shogi senses are being thrown for a loop.

One of the pro players put in that position, Okito-*sensei*, is very blunt about his feelings on the matter.

“..... I may have been better off dead.”

Ambulance sirens echo off in the distance.

Ai ends her spiel on a humble note.

“It’s too difficult for a calculation machine, even one as powerful as Awaji, to fully express an answer to Shogi. Even if it anticipates death flags and watches for them from the beginning, it doesn’t have enough power to perfectly decipher the sequences. That’s why I think the conclusion to Shogi itself will keep changing.”

“But these flags of yours will remain in place.”

“Yes. The line that separates a win from a loss isn’t going to move. So long as a rule change doesn’t allow Knight to go backwards or something like that, anyway.”

“Because the possible numbers you can count at once in the Game 21 applies to the amount of possible squares one particular piece can move at once in Shogi, and Shogi is limited to the number of squares on the board.”

It’s surprising how simple Ai’s solution to Shogi sounds when put into words.

Yeah, the Shogi gods wouldn’t play against her. What moron would keep playing a number game forever when they already know how to win?

It wouldn’t matter if offense or defense was guaranteed to win.

“Players are forced to start in an uneven opening formation in Shogi. The number of death flags that exist from the opening formation to the point the formation becomes absolutely even Well, not too many to memorize.”

If anyone could memorize them all.

If Ai Yashajin is the only one here who knows where they are.

“Let’s suffice it to say that as long as Awaji is the fastest supercomputer on earth, no human being could ever beat me.”

The current solution to Shogi———Ai Yashajin is guaranteed to win.

■ Translation Machine

“The patient will be transported to the nearest hospital! Are there any family members present?! We need someone to accompany her in the ambulance———”

“I am her father.”

Okito-*sensei* stands up to answer the medic’s call. He’s dressed in a full kimono but didn’t hesitate for a second.

The staff, who had no idea they were related, are stunned.

“..... Father?”

“Empress Sainokami and King Okito are?”

“Wouldn’t it be a serious violation if he knew that when he agreed to be the observer?!”

Okito-*sensei* seemingly ignores all the whispers and says to Ai, “My apologies. While I regret being unable to see my duties as the observer through to completion, no one else can fill this role.”

“It’s not like you can do anything else here, right? Go.”

If that’s what Ai says, no one can go against her.

And so, King Yo Okito disappears out the door at Ika Sainokami’s side.

Left behind, Ai Yashajin looks down at the Shogi board and pieces still splattered with blood.

“Yashajin-*sensei*. I’ll take care of———”

“Allow me.”

Ai stops the match recorder, Ms. Noboryou, as she steps forward with a cloth.

“I already consider this part of my job.”

She’s declaring that the title of Empress has already changed hands.

Now, Ai Yashajin is ready to conquer the Shogi world.

Everything goes quickly after that.

First off, the association issued a temporary gag order to keep information surrounding this match from going public. Too many rules have been broken to let everything come out all at once, like the fact that Ika’s father was working as the observer. So basically, I have to *keep my mouth shut for now*. They didn’t mince words, either.

Now that’s decided, there’s nothing left to do here and we all leave the arena. More like scurry away to put as much distance between ourselves and the eerie building as possible.

So Ai Yashajin and I end up on our own en route to Kansai.

And on the plane ride home...

“..... Wow, what a hypocrite,” I mumble, beside myself.

Using what can be used, then playing the *dad* card at a time like that.

I’m not trying to defend Ika at all. After what she did to Ginko, I wanted to start the bloodbath myself but There’s something about Okito-*sensei*’s behavior that irks me. Maybe the old man from that dream has something to do with it.

“A hypocrite?”

“What Okito-*sensei* said about experimenting on Ika *because* he loves her Hey. Your Master is trying to have an important conversation and you’re gaming on that tablet? Am I not worth your time anymore?”

Being a (soon-to-be) Triple Title Holder must have gone to her head because

she's playing on a Shogi app instead of giving me her full attention.

Now that I think about it, she was on that thing the entire flight over to Tohoku, too. I thought she was attending to Yashajin Group business

"Have you been playing that app this whole time?"

"I bought the company that makes it. It's fun to play and good practice."

Ai finally looks up.

"But this is new, you being angry at someone else."

"You think so?"

"Yes. You're usually angry at yourself."

"..... You think so?"

I feel like I've been mad at everyone else a lot these days, but I guess it wasn't always like that. Ai Hinatsuru and Big Sis have been angry at me a lot more often, so I don't remember

I ponder that for a few moments when Ai Yashajin says out of the blue, "Using software has helped us to comprehend more situations than we ever would have before and to read deeper than ever, yes? Why do you think that is?"

"Because it gives us a rating, yeah?"

"Yes. Numbers are a common language, so that makes it easier for us to understand." Then she looks deep into my eyes and asks, "In which case, what would you use in order to understand Ika Sainokami, who can only express her emotions through Shogi?"

"What would I use? To understand her?"

"Yes, and give it some serious thought."

"Understand someone who's not even flesh and blood? How the heck would I do that?"

..... AH?!

The answer Ai is looking for hits me almost immediately.

But

“Well That can’t be true, could it? Would Okito-*sensei* actually use software to do that?”

“Yes, exactly that.”

Ai confirms my theory like she read my mind.

“Yo Okito started developing deep learning software so he could communicate with his daughter. It’s a *translation machine*.”

“Translation

That reminds me of Okito-*sensei*’s research partner, Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan*.

He is nicknamed *The Translator*.

The whole Shogi world, including me, has the wrong idea about Okito-*sensei*.

We thought he turned himself into a machine, that he didn’t have any blood left in his veins.

But what he was actually after was a way to talk with his biological daughter

“I knew right away because I yearn for the same thing.”

“What thing?”

“A parent’s love,” says the orphan who lost both her parents in an accident as she looks back down at her tablet.

Something she’ll never have again.

“So, I just know. I can’t help it.”

She looks lonely somehow, forlorn. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she’d lost the match.

It's almost like she envies the loser.

The match ended early, so Ai Yashajin and I get back to Kansai from the Tohoku region by nightfall.

By the way, our means of transportation was———

“..... I'd never been on a private jet before”

“You're exaggerating. It's a small company plane.”

Stepping off the airplane at Kobe Airport, Ai just shrugs. I follow her down the stair like a faithful butler. I'm actually her Master, though.

“Lady Yashajin! Please call upon us again when you need to travel!”

“Thank you. It was a comfortable flight.”

Their entire staff has come out onto the tarmac and lined up to greet (only) two customers

Wow

This is awkward

How much did all this cost

“Uh, Lady Yashajin? Yeah

I know there weren't any commercial planes when we arrived at the airport, but don't you think chartering a plane is a bit overboard

“I can get work done on a plane, so I can just make enough money to cover it on the way. The wealthy who prioritize efficiency use private planes like a taxi. It's cheaper in the end.”

“Uh-huuuh. When you say *cheap*, about how much are you talking?”

“5 million yen, give or take?”

“That's even more than the Empress Title prize money”

5 million, for an hour on a private jet

I'm no expert, but I wouldn't call spending more on transportation than winnings *efficient*

This Empress Title series has shown me time and again that my apprentice has, in every possible sense, broken the barriers of the Shogi world.

“I’m going to visit Awaji What about you, Yaichi?”

There’s a direct line connecting Kobe Airport with Keisan Kagaku Center Station. Apparently, it’s still running this late at night.

———It’s an invitation from the devil.

If I were to nod my head yes, Ai would probably teach me all about those *death flags*.

The narrowest solution, too.

With that information, I would never lose again.

Of course, what Ai really wants to do is use me as a guinea pig to see if those death flags work on a top-level pro.

If

What if *he* came to challenge me again?

One thing’s for sure, I wouldn’t have been able to resist this tempting offer.

“I’m going to head straight home. I’ve got my own title match to prepare for.”

“Oh yes. So the challenger has been determined?”

“Moments ago, actually.”

The smartphone that never left my hand is still hot in my pocket.

The Crown League Challenger Match.

The Meijin went undefeated in the White Conference while his much younger opponent rose in the Red Conference with the same flawless record The two collided, and he was in complete control from the start.

Not since his golden years, when he had all seven titles at once, has the Meijin looked this strong.

There's no question what was behind this massive surge, the chance for a rematch against me. One look at his Shogi these days is enough to know his sights are set on the future.

———Had it been him He could've disproven the future that Ai and I saw.

But no.

The prodigy who put his own stamp on Shogi's 1,400-year history was defeated in the final sequence of an intense clash. Victory slipped through his fingers when the tables were turned against him at the last second.

I had gotten to my feet at some point. Ai turns to me and asks, "Shouldn't you be more excited? He's your eternal rival, isn't he?"

"I guess so"

"You get to face him in his first-ever title match. Why not consider it an honor?"

It's been quite a while since I saw *him*. But visualizing his face doesn't ignite my competitive spirit. I feel a bit lonely and disappointed, to tell the truth.

The fire is gone because, well, I'm the only one who knows how this 7-match story is going to end.

"I wish this happened a little sooner. 100 years ago."

Even so, I've chosen to fight without looking into these *death flags*. It's a line I refuse to cross *because* he is my opponent.

I want to face him with as much Yaichi Kuzuryu left as possible.

Challenger

People flocked to see the review session despite the late hour. So many were crammed into the Shogi Association's Special Arena that it was difficult to breathe.

But the energy was so intense that just breathing the air made them feel like they had become one metaphorical big piece stronger.

“.....”

Both players were silent following the match.

It was typical protocol for the defeated to begin the review session.

However the defeated player in this particular match could only hang his head and sigh in disbelief. No words could escape his trembling lips.

It was so rare to see the Meijin so crestfallen that most of the attendees were looking at him rather than the board.

The ice didn't break until one of the reporters from a sponsoring newspaper posed a question to the victor.

“..... My ticket to titles matches has been blocked by the Meijin by the slimmest of margins time and again. Though it was luck, finally breaking through is such”

The victor's response was so choppy and quiet that everyone had to strain their ears just to pick up a few words here and there.

Many were already calling for the Crown League Challenger Match to be dubbed one of the memorable matches of the year.

“They're both waaay too strong”

“Even Kuzuryu better watch out, yeah?”

“This generation is finally facing off in title matches!”

“I saw them play in the Elementary Meijin Finals. It’s come full circle.”

“Tearing up already.”

Comments were pouring in from all corners of the internet.

The louder they became, the more the Empress Title Match, which had ended prematurely on the same day, fell from public consciousness.

How could they ever imagine that the keys to Shogi’s solution were so heavily involved?

After the review session and interview, the professional players and Sub League members who came to watch the review session and attend the press conference started leaving the Shogi Association.

A single elementary-school-aged girl was among them.

“Ryuo’s Fledgling.”

The victor that day addressed her with no hesitation upon spotting her.

She was remarkably easy to find despite the crowd.

The reason was simple. People in her vicinity were ignoring her presence to the extent that she appeared cloaked in an invisible barrier.

“..... *Sensei*”

Ai was conflicted.

Would the young player’s choice to speak with her on this joyous day result in his social exile? The girl knew the risk he was taking.

However, she couldn’t ignore him either. She politely bowed her head.

“Congratulations on your victory.”

“Thank you.”

The young man then responded with a question.

“What of them?”

“U-Um Maria was in the Katsura no Ma but left saying, *One such as I cannot bear to watch!* and went home

“I’m not referring to my sibling.”

“.....!”

Then, who?

Ai was not so inept that she had to ask.

“..... Master is with Ten-chan, I think. He was asked to do some work for the Empress Title Match.”

“Yes. Then it is true,” the young player who was set to face Crown Yaichi Kuzuryu acknowledged in a quick breath.

“He seemed to have uttered a phrase during his placement match against Dark Taishi. Something along the lines of *I’ll show you hell.*”

“Hell

Ai had also been playing a match at the association on that fateful day.

“He thus vanquished Dark Taishi with nothing short of sorcery in the early game, leaving his very spirit shattered. Shinokubo 7-*dan* has holed himself up within his quarters since that match, not even showing his face at practice sessions.”

Memories of that day were still crystal clear in Ai Hinatusu’s mind.

Yaichi’s imposing aura when he entered the arena when she was on the brink. That, and seeing Taishi Shinokubo listlessly drift through the hallway like a ghost.

“A true monster now resides within his soul. I plan to break the fetters of Shogi’s darkness and banish it over the course of a seven match series.”

“..... But”

Ai struggled to find the right words.

Awaji's matches, complete with Yaichi's analysis, were being hailed as the comprehensive epitome of modern Shogi. The very fact that Yaichi was willing to make that information public meant that his research had already reached an even deeper level.

No matter how strong the young player before her was, how could he ever compete with that?

“I will vanquish your Master,” said the young man with a confident twirl of his white cape.

Ai couldn't help but say his name. “Kannabe-sensei”

“I have told you before. That name is simply a mask that allows me to exist in this realm. I possess a separate, true name!”

Ayumu Kannabe looked over his shoulder at Ai Hinatsuru, hiding half of his noble face with his hand and striking a pose that reminded the girl of time long since passed.

The same pose he struck the first time their paths crossed at the Kansai Shogi Association.

“Knight of the Shogi Realm! Silver Chevalier———Sir Ayumu God Cauldron!”

Everyone in the vicinity exchanged awkward glances, but Ai was in awe to the point that her knees began to tremble.

“God-sensei”

The sheer depth of Ayumu's feelings toward Yaichi and his intense determination brought Ai to tears.

After all, only a true White Knight could slay the Demon King.

RECORD 2

空
銀
子

GINKO
SORA



Public Institution

“Nice of you to come.”

A very high-ranking Shogi professional invited me over to his house today.

“C’mon in. Make yourself at home.”

“Th-Thank you for h-habbing me!”

No professional player in Tokyo has invited me where they live before, other than Natagiri-sensei, of course, but he was hosting me.

And that was only because Grampa-sensei asked him

This time, an opponent I faced before reached out to me.

“U-Um! This is a famous brand of *sake* from Ishikawa, Joukigen! It was served at a Nobel Prize dinner party, so I promise you it’s very good quality!”

“Oh? Sorry for the trouble,” the former Dragon King Ryuo, Takeru Usui 9-dan, says and takes the bag so naturally, it was like handing him groceries.

“Still, how can you tell good *sake* from the cheap stuff at your age? Aren’t you still in grade school?”

“Dad is My father is the top chef at my family’s inn. He taught me. Sorry

“That’s nothing to apologize for. Everything served at the HinaTsuru during the Ryou Title Match was top notch, so I can’t wait to taste this. Speaking of, I just remembered that the HinaTsuru’s manager herself recommended *sake* to me personally.”

“Mom The manager remembers you very well, Usui-sensei. She said that you stood apart from the tens of thousands of guests she has served over the years.”

“Heh. Of course I do.”

The former Ryuo, a prodigy said to be on par with the Meijin, passes up my compliment and then picks up a picture in his entryway for some reason.

And says this.

“Anyway, this here is my son. He’s in his second year in junior high and has been completely hooked on a monster-based card game recently. I tried playing it with him, and there’s a surprising amount of strategy that goes into it. Is it popular in grade school, too?”

“Um Yes. The boys are always playing it during recess.”

“Yeah, I bet. My son might not look it, but he’s got book smarts and is a darn good athlete. He’s creative and doesn’t get bored easily, just like me. Handsome, too, don’t you think?”

“H-He sounds wonderful! And very handsome, too!”

“.....”

“.....?”

What’s wrong? Should I have complimented him more?

“..... Any thoughts?”

“Uwhaa?”

“Hmm. Whatever.”

Takeru Usui 9-*dan* puts the picture back on the shelf and disappears into the hallway.

———..... What was that about?

I’m still confused even as I race after him.

First of all, I don’t understand why he invited me here at all. We traded contact information when he called a taxi for me after our match the other day.

Then, completely out of the blue, I got a message from him saying *come* and this address.

——— I don't think he wants to do a practice session or a versus match either.

Before I know it, we stop in front of a door that has a plaque that says *Research Room* on it. Usui-sensei takes out a gaudy key and opens the lock.

"Go on. Not just anyone gets to come in here."

I follow him inside and see

"?!"

An unbelievable sight that takes my breath away

Notebooks.

Notebooks upon notebooks upon notebooks. And even more notebooks.

Piles of them are stacked high like towers that reach all the way to the ceiling everywhere I look. It's like a forest of notebooks in here.

"Wow I had no idea it was *this* impressive"

Natagiri-sensei has a surprisingly large collection of books, but that was nothing compared to this.

Usui-sensei sounds satisfied.

"I'd wager you knew about this room, then?"

"Oishi-sensei told me this is where you fought a war against the world"

"Argh. I thought I told him not to let Statics in on it."

I honestly can't tell if that was a joke or not.

"You can come here whenever you wish from now on. Read anything you like."

"Th-Thank you so mu———"

I freeze right in the middle of a word.

Because there's someone else in this notebook forest.

"Hello. I go by Wada."

"Wada?"

Are there any professional *senseis* with that name?

Maybe he's a strong amateur?

"See? She forgot who I was, so you didn't stand a chance," Usui-*sensei* teases.

Mr. Wada looks about 60 years old. There are lots and lots of men that age in the Shogi world, so I can't remember him right away.

"I was once the journalist responsible for covering the Ryou Title Match and was present when Kuzuryu 7-*dan* or should I say Mr. Kuzuryu claimed the title in the 29th season."

"Ah! Then———"

Of course he came to the HinaTsuru on the north coast!

Mom would be so angry at me if she found out I didn't recognize a guest. Even worse, if he was in charge of the Ryou Title Match, then I had to have seen him many more times after that

"Don't worry, Hinatsuru-*Women's Legend*. Another journalist had taken over the position by the time you went to Hawaii with Mr. Kuzuryu. I wouldn't expect you to remember me."

"But you've still got clout," Usui-*sensei* interjects with a grin.

Clout?

"Mr. Wada was pivotal in establishing the Ryuo Title. You could say the association owes him."

"I wouldn't go that far I was just doing my job, after all."

“Humble as always. But we pro players don’t think he needs to be.”

The former Ryuo says flatly.

“Paper companies aren’t just association sponsors. They’re like employers for players and journalists. Match articles, columns, observer requests, big board analysts at the venues, the list goes on. If you throw in the Amateur Ryuo League and High School Ryuo League, it would be near impossible to find a player who hasn’t taken a job from Mr. Wada.”

Usui-*sensei* counts on his fingers.

Since I played in a title match myself, I know firsthand how much time and money the newspaper companies commit to maintaining the leagues.

“Playing Shogi isn’t the only work we do. Actually, for those who cannot play as much, the paper's intentions are more important than at the height of their career. Catch my drift, Ai?”

“You’re saying that he has a lot of sway over *senseis* who don’t play as many matches as before or have already retired but have votes in player’s meetings Right?”

Usui-*sensei* gives me a satisfied nod.

Now Mr. Wada speaks up.

“I have one other role. Actually, I would say that is the main reason I’m here.”

“? What is it?”

“My role as a public institution.”

I remember hearing about those in class at school Umm, what was it again?

“I will write an article about what you’re trying to achieve, Miss Hinatsuru.”

“! You mean, a newspaper article?”

“I won’t be holding back like a Shogi magazine would. Rather, I’ll be writing

the facts as they are.”

My goal: creating a Professional Entrance Exam.

This is the perfect opportunity to get that message out into the world.

———But

Not only will the things I say reflect on me.

But also, now that I have a title, my words will impact its reputation.

Usui-*sensei* seems to pick up on my hesitation.

“A sports paper foots the bill for the Women’s Legend League, but it’s also connected to the paper company that sponsors the Ryuo League. Picking up articles written by Mr. Wada, who is a Ryuo Title Match journalist, won’t cause a conflict of interest.”

..... It’s no wonder people call Takeru Usui 9-*dan* a master tactician.

His systematic attention to detail makes me feel ten times lighter.

There’s a hint of pride in Mr. Wada’s tone.

“We have a readership of ten million.”

“That’s back in the day, yeah?”

“We still advertise using that number. And, even if our physical subscribers are only half that number, articles that appear on actual paper are so much more influential than those on the internet.”

Ten million.

I can’t even imagine it.

Plus, the papers go out to people’s houses, so the number of people who read them is actually even bigger. Their articles are also published online

“Many things will happen, just so you know. Putting your name and your face in the paper doesn’t only bring flowers and sunshine,” Mr. Wada gently explains

as my whole body starts to tremble. “My articles have drastically changed the lives of some people. And you, Miss Hinatsuru, are still an elementary school student. At your age———”

“I’ll do it.”

I kneel on the spot and lower my head all the way to the floor.

“Please, let me do this! Please!”

“Good answer.”

That wasn’t Mr. Wada, but Usui-*sensei*.

I have no clue why he is going this far to help me, but I can’t let this chance pass me by.

Mr. Wada excitedly opens his calendar to schedule an interview.

“Well then, let’s dub this venture as *Project I!*”

“Project Ai?”

“Old farts like him like assigning names to everything,” adds Usui-*sensei* with a shrug. “As an old fart myself, I can tell you that it strikes a cord. What are we to do?”

Executive

“There’s somebody I’d like you to meet.”

This was the first thing that I thought when Rokuroba-*sensei* sent me that message.

Finally, it’s about time.

This phrasing could only mean one thing and one thing only. The big one.

——— A marriage announcement.

Contacting me this way is a bit too formal, though.

After all, I lived with Tamayon-*sensei* and her fiancé Jin Natagiri 8-*dan* for a while.

“I wonder if she’ll ask me to be a greeter at the ceremony. I’m pretty sure she’ll ask Rinrin-*sensei* to do a speech Oh! Maybe I’ll get to be the flower girl!!”

Tamayon-*sensei* told me to come to a really classy restaurant in Tokyo’s Minato Ward in her message. I put on my best clothes and made the trip. So I can almost hear the wedding bells as I open the door and spot her dressed up as a lovey-dovey college student.

The man sitting at her side is, of course———

“Hello there. Tamayo has told me so much about you.”

“..... Whaaa?”

That’s not Natagiri-*sensei*.

He’s not even Japanese.

This white man has blonde hair and blue eyes, looks around 50, incredible fashion sense and is probably rich

At first, I thought maybe he was her father, but no. Tamayon-sensei's parents are Japanese.

Huuuuuuuuuh?

Wh-What is this? Why was I invited to come to a fancy restaurant in the Minato Ward to meet a white man who's even older than my father?

Worse, I'm right here but the two of them are pretty much all over each other as they start going over the menu.

"Papaaa. Can you order this wine for me, pleeease? ≡"

"I don't see why not."

"Oh, can I have some pocket money, too! ≡"

"Keep this up, and my wallet won't survive many more days out with you, Tamayo."

A sugar daddy!!

"Oh, please, Mr. Executive. ☆ You've got plenty to spare!"

"He-he-he. But you're eating up most of my executive pay checks."

"Tee-hee-hee~≡ You're the best, Papa! ≡≡≡"

..... Just what is going on here?

So this middle-aged man has to be a big time executive for a company. On the board of directors, for sure. He calls the shots.

Which means he's using the company's money to wine and dine Rokuroba-sensei!

"Tamayon-sensei"

"Hm? Oh, sorry. You're still underage, so I'll get you a soft drink——"

"I was wrong about you!!"

I glare at her through the tears in my eyes.

“It doesn’t matter how much you like dandy, over-the-hill men! What are you doing living it up in Minato Ward with a sugar daddy when you have a wonderful partner in Natagiri-sensei This is unforgivable, *darabuchi*!!”

“Wh-What’s with you?! Why are you so angry?! And a sugar daddy?! Whoever said I had a thing for over-the-hill guys, anyway?!”

“All the men you fall for are geezers with money, Rokuroba-sensei! Are a handsome face and a thick wallet your only standards?!”

“Ngh!!”

I must have hit a sore spot because she keels over.

But she stands up straight just as quickly.

“He’s my Master, got that?! MY MASTER! Bruno Redmond 9-*dan*! He’s the executive director! Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of him?!”

Master?!

Then she———

“N-No matter how hard it is to find sugar daddies these days, for you to do nasty things with him for money and call him Master The Master-apprentice relationship is sacred! You disgust me!!”

“That’s rich, coming from someone pining for their own Master!!”

We lunge at each other, only for a waiter to pull us apart. Only then were we able to sit and calmly listen to each other.

“Th-Then You really are a professional *sensei*?”

“Perhaps seeing my Promoted Pawn badge would make you believe me?”

Redmond 9-*dan* runs his finger under the collar of his expensive suit to make the badge shine.

The golden, Shogi piece—shaped badge with a ♔ written on it proves that he is employed by the Shogi Association proper. I received one of those myself when I won my title not too long ago.

Okay It seems I jumped to the wrong conclusion Haauuu

“I was never blessed with a child of my own, so I interact with all of my apprentices as if they were my children. That’s why I ask them to call me *papa*, but that seems to have caused confusion here.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Papa. It’s this brat’s fault for thinking I’d ever go out looking for sugar daddies!”

..... There’s so much I want to say right now, but I hold it all back.

This time is my fault. Yes, completely my fault. And I apologize.

But I don’t think I’m the only one who would get the wrong idea *mumble mumble*

“You’re still in elementary school, Miss Hinatsuru. I wouldn’t expect you to be familiar with all the inner workings of the Shogi Association. Why don’t I explain what I do as an executive of the Shogi Association while we wait for our food to arrive, hm?”

“..... That would be very nice of you

“The Board of Directors has a large jurisdiction. Five seats are assigned to Kanto and two spots for Kansai. The chairman and other executives are elected from within our ranks as well.”

If anything were to happen to the chairman, the executive director would take over their duties apparently.

That means this man is the Shogi Association’s second in command.

Hearing that by itself makes it sound like Chairman Tsukimitsu is higher up———

“Mr. Tsukimitsu has control over the Kansai directors, but they number less than half of the Kanto group. We’re always the ones who truly decide what happens whenever the board votes on something.”

“The Kanto Association has always had the real power. They still do,” adds Tamayon-*sensei* with a “he-he.”

All while gobbling down really expensive wine

“Kansai players can win all they want, but it won’t matter. That is just how the system is built. Just FYI: we Women’s League players are in pretty much the same boat.”

“Tamayo is absolutely right. Ms. Shakando has been granted a seat on the board due to the increasing membership in the Women’s League, but the fact that she held all the titles herself for so long only worked against her.”

Redmond-*sensei*’s handsome face doesn’t change, but there’s a bit of sadness in his voice.

“In order for Women’s League players to officially join the association, they must either claim a title, as you have done, or achieve a rank of 4-*dan* or above. The problem with that is that no less than 400 victories are required to rise from Women’s 2-*kyu* to 4-*dan*.”

Even with a 50 percent win rate, that would take 800 matches.

It feels so distant.

Even if there are twenty matches every year it would still take 40 years to reach

“With how few Women’s League matches there are, achieving 4-*dan* on victory stars alone is quite a tall task.”

“Let me put it this way. Female Association membership never increased because Shakando-*sensei* and the then-Sub League member Ginko Sora hogged all the titles for themselves.”

“And holding a Women’s Title doesn’t allow Sub League members to join the association, just to be clear.”

These two clearly talk about these things all the time. Just the way Master and I used to talk about Shogi.

Politics and things.

“Are you bored? Please bear with me a little longer.”

Redmond-*sensei* is considerate and jumps right to the point.

“The Board of Directors’ jurisdiction is clearly defined in the association’s statute. Article 27, Section 4 is entitled *Rules, Regulations, and the Alteration or Elimination Thereof*.”

“.....!”

“The changes you are seeking, Miss Hinatsuru, fall within this category That is our interpretation and we have proceeded as such.”

“Do you get it? You’ll never, ever get any traction without the Kanto directors on your side!”

Now I finally understand why Rokuroba-*sensei* set up this meeting.

———Support from Kansai players and the Women’s League won’t be enough

I thought I just had to get lots of people to support me.

But, I was wrong.

My whole strategy was the same as a beginner stubbornly trading out for stronger pieces, caught in an endless cycle with nowhere to go.

But, cornering the King is the point of Shogi.

And right now A King has come out in the open, right in front of me!

“..... U-Umm———!!”

Just as I was leaning forward to make my move.

Redmond-*sensei* beats me to the punch.

“As a representative of the Kanto directors, I have a favor to ask of you, Miss Hinatsuru.”

“A favor from me?”

Shouldn't it be the other way around?

“Yes, indeed. We would like your help. That is the main reason I asked Tamayo to arrange this appointment.”

Executive Director Bruno Redmond flashes a Hollywood grin and speaks so smoothly, it sounded rehearsed.

“It goes without saying that there will be *pocket money* with your name on it.”

▲ Preparations

“Maria, bring that one there. Yes, the indigo.”

In Nerima Ward, at the largest clothier in all of Tokyo.

Rina Shakando Women’s 8-*dan* gives orders to her precious apprentice in a massive, 500 square foot room with textiles of every color laid out in all directions.

“This fabric will not do. A terrible match for Ayumu’s skin tone Bring that one there. Ahh, now this could also do nicely! My word, how can I possibly choose when so many patterns fit that young man like a glove?!”

This store, Shiraito Gofuku, is famous for supplying lots and lots of professional and Women’s League Shogi players with kimonos.

The previous owner was a prominent member of W. University’s Shogi Club. Rokuroba-*sensei*, who attends the same university, told me that their success got their foot in the door inside the Shogi world and players keep going back.

The previous owner’s son is in charge now. He timidly comes forward and says.

“Shakando-*sensei*, you have accumulated a rather large bill already

“I could not care less.”

The Eternal Queen laughs it off.

“My apprentice is making his title match debut. If now is not the time to spend lavishly, then I do not know when is. Seven kimonos for a 7-match series No! As the Crown Title Match uses a two-day format, I must have differing attire for each day! I’ll take fourteen full sets.”

“But there’s no guarantee the match will last until the seventh———”

“It shall.”

She cuts him off quickly, almost like that was the one thing she wouldn't discuss.

“A mere fourteen sets still will not suffice. The Meijin orders a new kimono for each and every title match he takes part in, correct? Surely he keeps more than 100 of his kimonos at your establishment.”

“Yes. We built a storage unit for him specifically.”

A-A whole unit?!

“I've received instructions from the Meijin to take you there afterward. He wishes for his dear friend Kannabe 8-*dan* to have a kimono that suits him.”

“Their body type is nearly identical, yes. Nearly everything there should fit

Receiving a kimono from *the* Meijin is an honor that would make any Shogi player jealous At least, I think so. But Shakando-*sensei* doesn't look so sure.

“Losing the Challenger Match to Ayumu must have left him immeasurably crestfallen. Imagine wanting to attend the match so badly that he would give clothing just so that at least something of his was at the Crown Title Match. He-he-he

“He did look heartbroken during the review session, which is unusual for the Meijin.”

Telling her what I saw that day seems to brighten her mood quite a lot.

“He must feel that he has unfinished business with your Master after the last series. At this very moment, the Meijin is hosting a practice session with Switch Hitter at his vacation home in hopes of preparing a 7-match series for Ayumu.”

“I heard. Natagiri-*sensei* was very excited about it. He said he *couldn't wait for some male company for the first time in forever* when he left.”

By the way, Rokuroba-sensei was furious with him, saying the whole thing was *cheating*.

God-sensei left Tokyo the day after he won the Challenge Match to join them at the Meijin's summer home.

I bet he'll stay cooped up in there right up until the Crown Title Match starts. There won't be any time to get a kimono made.

That's the real reason why the Meijin offered to give Ayumu one of his.

———Shakando-sensei probably wanted to choose it with him

But the men are absorbed in Shogi. I think that is what's making Shakando-sensei say such mean things about the Meijin. She's lonely.

"The strongest Shogi players of this age have formed a party and embarked on a quest to slay the Demon King, none other than your Master. He certainly is strong enough to have earned that moniker. Which do you think shall prevail?"

"..... Well"

That's a hard question. The toughest of toughies

I want Master to win, naturally.

But

"..... I don't know. But I want it to be close to last for a full seven matches."

"Ample opportunity for each to find and exploit the other's weaknesses if it does indeed last to the seventh. You truly are a competitor to your core."

"I-I didn't mean!"

"He-he-he. Apologies, apologies. With my apprentice taking part in a title match, I feel as though I'm walking on air. Forgive me, will you please?"

"Shakando-sensei. I would like to get your advice on———"

“You have met Bruno, yes?”

“..... I have.”

The Kanto director asked me for a favor. Shakando-*sensei* is also registered with the Kanto Association.

———Then she already knows

Should I agree to it or turn him down?

I came all the way out here today to get some help with that decision, but———

“Ginko was very much the Silver that is in her name.”

“.....?”

“Direct and unable to shift sideways or retreat backwards. However, she could be coaxed into moving at angles and was an easy piece to use due to her tremendous power. Though she was also a pitiful piece that was taken the moment it entered enemy territory due to overworking her frail body.”

I have no idea where she’s going with this. But she’s the one who asks me the next question.

“Ai Hinatsuru. How do you perceive yourself?”

“A Pawn, I guess?”

I’d love to say I’m a Rook or a Dragon but If Sora-*sensei* is a Silver, I barely even qualify as a Pawn.

Surprisingly, Shakando-*sensei* shakes her head no.

“You are no longer on the board, but the hand manipulating the pieces. This is because rather than take the path laid out before you, you have elected to follow your own Leaving the path predetermined by the immense organization known as the Shogi Association.”

“.....!”

“Following a path indicated by another is simple, no matter how challenging said path may be,” says the woman who changed the course of history without looking up from the beautiful fabric in her hands. “By the same token, taking your own path is a much more difficult task, even if the path itself is not as challenging. Ginko and I have constantly averted our gaze from that fact

I highly doubt that the path I’m trying to take right now is any more difficult than the one she took.

“Paths open if you are strong.”

I believed that and focused only on getting stronger.

Yes, what I’m trying to do is hard, but that’s because I’m still in grade school and don’t have any experience

That’s why I thought *Shakando-sensei* would tell me the answer.

But *Sensei* gently lets me know that I can’t be that naive anymore.

“Please understand that I have nothing left to teach you. In fact, I believe a businessman’s advice would be more applicable. The owner of the establishment, for one.”

The owner stops to think for a moment after being suddenly dragged into the conversation.

“Perfect victories aren’t good when it comes to sales and negotiating. It leaves a bad impression. It’s better for the other party to walk away feeling like they got the *win*.”

“So, losing is winning?”

“Precisely. How well you can lose is the key to successful salesmanship.”

“How very interesting. I, for one, could never follow that advice.”

Shakando-sensei laughs and adds with a big grin.

“Shogi players are not cut out for business. All we think about is seizing

victory!”

The Invincible Girl

I could tell my opponent's fighting spirit waned as soon as our pieces collided.

"Here———"

I focus all of my attention on the board so I won't drop my guard.

"Here, here, herehereherehereherehereherehere"

This isn't the first time.

It's happened every time I've played against a Women's League player for a month now.

They give up the moment the fight starts.

I've just kept going out of my way not to notice their faces or body language.

"Ah Haaa"

Her hand floats over the board.

Then she nervously taps on her piece stand, then goes back and forth between pieces on the board. She clearly can't make up her mind.

To what?

To attack or defend?

———That's not all.

To face me head on, or to give up right now.

"Hmm"

She decides to defend in the end. But I can tell her fingers have already given up.

The board instantly tilts in my favor. If a computer analyzed it right now, I'm sure it would say I have the advantage, if not that I am in a victory position.

———This is dangerous, isn't it?

I'd be fooling myself if I thought *I'm winning because I've gotten stronger* right now.

This is proof of how important the mental side of Shogi is, that making yourself *appear to be stronger* leads to more wins. The Kansai players were right to put so much emphasis on having a strong heart. Living it like this makes me happy for a second.

But

———What's the point of beating an opponent who won't fight back?

The gap between this and facing a strong-willed opponent is so great, I might start doubting myself.

An opponent who isn't afraid of me at all Long, flowing black hair comes to mind right away.

The girl who's waiting for the winner at the end of this tournament, Queen Ai Yashajin.

"Hereherehereherehereherehere———!!"

I visualize Ten-chan across the board from me instead of my opponent and keep playing the best move every time. Winning by a lot isn't the goal. I want to win by one move! By the skin of my teeth!

"HERE!!"

"I-I lost, okay! You win, you win!"

Just as I see a long-sequence checkmate and initiate the first check, my opponent almost screams her surrender. I don't think there was enough time for her to read it, though.

It was more like a reflex, that she thought there was nothing she could do if I already had her in check I could hear it in her voice.

Her head down, she whispers quietly so only I could hear.

“..... Sorry”

“It’s alright Thank you for the match.”

———This was how Sora-sensei saw the Women’s Shogi world

I fight with all my heart, but my opponents won’t even try.

It’s lonely.

Almost like I’m being left out.

There are so many Women’s players and Shogi fans around me all the time, but I feel like I’m visiting from another planet.

“Without further ado, let’s hear from today’s winner!”

After the match.

I came to the venue’s grand hall all by myself, received a bouquet of flowers, and had a microphone put in my face with a bunch of people watching.

This is the third time I’ve gotten through the Preliminaries, but it feels like there are more people and journalists here than ever. If I had to guess why, it’s probably

A representative from MyNavi, the Queen Tournament’s sponsor, says, as friendly as can be, “I’m sure your early exit from this tournament last year was a huge disappointment for you, Women’s Legend Hinatsuru. This time, you are the first one to make it through and you are the unquestioned favorite. Congratulations!”

“Thank you!”

“Well, I suppose after defeating eleven professional players in a row, these results are to be expected. Not to mention that you have been undefeated in Women’s League matches after claiming your title in the 5th match. It’s almost

like the invincible Snow White has returned.”

That got a round of applause from the crowd.

A twinge of pain slices through my chest, but I keep a big smile on my face so that no one else can tell.

“The current Queen is your sister apprentice, Miss Ai Yashajin. Umm, who is the older apprentice again?”

“I was first to join and my birthday is earlier! So I’m her older sister apprentice!”

“How much earlier?”

“..... Two months”

Boom! The venue erupts in laughter. Haauuu

“Ending on that punchline was the plan but you won so quickly that it’ll be a while before the next winner comes to speak with the press. So I’d like to take a few questions from the audience, if you wouldn’t mind?”

Hands shoot up all at once.

A microphone gets handed to the first person.

“I’m sure everyone here wants to ask this, but———”

He leads with that and delivers the question I knew was coming.

“Have you made any progress setting up a Professional Entrance Exam?”

“.....”

I knew it was coming, but it still takes me a minute to find the words.

The mood in here changes like a light switch. Everyone from the guests to people involved in the Shogi world go quiet so they don’t miss anything I have to say.

It’s so quiet here that I can almost hear the sound of clicking Shogi pieces

from matches still being played in the next room. The pressure builds, making the decision even harder for me.

“.....”

Do I attack or defend?

I take another deep breath, put on a new smile and give my answer.

“I think the Shogi Association will make an official announcement about that at some point.”

🏠 Poisoned Bun

“Interestin’. Tellin’ ya to keep yar head down...”

Grandpa-*sensei* shovels a big spoonful of curry into his open mouth.

“Still, sounds right up a Kanto director’s alley, if ya ask me.”

We’re at the MyNavi Women’s Open venue, the aptly named Palace Side Building, which is right across from the Imperial Palace.

Grandpa-*sensei* is treating me to curry at Alaska, a restaurant on the very top floor. But I’d say it’s my heart that’s full right now. So many memories.

———We used to eat curry just like this all the time when I was in Osaka, didn’t we?

Tsubasa Gakumeki, who also made it into the main tournament along with me, is here, too. But this is her first time meeting Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* face to face, and she’s frozen stiff with nerves.

“Ya haven’t even touched yar curry, Miss Gakumeki. Not to yar likin’?”

“N-No! I-I mean I-I’m already full, so Don’t mind me”

“A twig like ya? Yar wastin’ away over there. If curry ain’t yar thing, how ’bout some pasta, eh?”

“I-I-I’m fine! I-I-I don’t need anything!!”

For someone as shy around new people as Tsubasa, Kansai people’s overly friendly style might be a bit overwhelming. Maybe I shouldn’t have invited her?

Then again, Grandpa-*sensei* agreed to work as a judge for this tournament and came all the way here from Osaka. Chances like this don’t happen very often, so I wanted to introduce him to my friend. Hang in there, okay, Tsubasa?

“Good stuff, Ai?”

“Yes!”

People from Ishikawa Prefecture, like me, are very particular about curry. But even I have to admit that this curry is delicious. It's a bit darker, too, like Kanazawa-style curry.

There are tons of things to do even after the matches are over, like taking pictures with the sponsors, drawing straws for seating on the main tournament stage and more. Playing two important matches in one day is enough to make me hungry, and now I'm starving!

By the way, both Tamayon-sensei and Rinrin-sensei lost in the first round of the Preliminaries, so they're already out at the bar for a review session in the early afternoon. They invited me to join them, but I'm not old enough to go inside.

“So, yeah, Ai.”

Grandpa-sensei says quietly after downing the whole bowl.

“Bout what ya said earlier Did Mr. Redmond really ask ya that? To *wait to say anything to the press about the Pro Entrance Exam?*”

“Yes.”

“When it comes to newspapers, the association can usually pull strings with the paper's executive to keep things from comin' out. But they can't do nothin' at press conferences after matches and there's always a chance ya might say somethin' wild to fans. He must've wanted to nip that in the bud.”

“I spoke with Usui-sensei and Mr. Wada about this, too. They said if that was the case, I should *pull back and wait for the association to make a move*”

“Hrmn There's no denyin' Mr. Usui's a Shogi prodigy, but he's never sat on the board of directors”

Is Grandpa-sensei upset that I accepted the board's request?

Then again, I get the sense that it's the director position itself he doesn't like

.....

“So? Knowin’ Mr. Redmond, he meant *pocket money* as a request, yeah? What did ya ask for?”

“To make the Professional Entrance Exam permanent.”

“That’s what ya’ve been gunnin’ for since the start, yeah? Personally, I think a one-time deal’d be good enough.”

Tsubasa has been quiet up until now, but she starts mumbling.

“M-Me, too I don’t think you need to insist on that”

I understand what they’re saying, and that they’re saying it for my sake. Tamayon-*sensei* and Rinrin-*sensei* said the same thing.

That’s why, when I submitted my original request to the association, I deliberately avoided bringing it up.

———But I just can’t let this go.

“Did Mr. Redmond make any promises?”

“Just that he would do his best.”

“Sounds like a poisoned bun to me.”

“That I’d lose if I took it?”

There’s a phrase in Shogi: *doku manju*. If you take a *poisoned bun* that’s left out that’ll be what makes you lose. It looks like a great move that will give you an advantage, but actually triggers a trap

Is Mr. Redmond’s suggestion really a poisoned bun?

“I’ve been on the board before. Ran me so ragged that I quit after one season, though”

“Is it a hard job?”

“Puts a serious dent in yar Shogi researchin’ time. Yar winnin’ record, too. But

it was more personal relationships that took a lot outta me.”

“Personal relationships?”

“It differs from person to person, but a director's main job is to kiss sponsors’ boots and ask for money.”

Grandpa-*sensei* scratches his salt-and-pepper colored hair.

“I got no problem bowin’ down to players when I get beat, but most of us pros have a tonna pride. Somebody’d say somethin’ dumb right when we got a sponsorship hammered out and I’d have to go smooth things over again ’n again. It got old real quick.”

Then, once he downs a full glass of water.

“..... Mr. Redmond might be stuck bein’ somebody else’s errand boy”

That was barely loud enough for me to hear it.

Tamayon-*sensei* and Redmond-*sensei* said that the Kanto Board of Directors have the most power in the Shogi world.

But maybe that’s not true?

———Then, who does?

My mind keeps digging deeper into that train of thought, but I need to lighten the mood at the table.

“By the way, how’s Keika? I was sad I didn’t get to see her during the Preliminaries. Has she been doing all right?”

“Good question She’s lost so much that she’s barely in any matches these days. Mirror opposite of ya, Ai. She’s been on her computer day ’n night, never comin’ out of her room at all. The heck’s she doin’ in there?”

“Shogi research, I would imagine. A lot of younger *senseis* don’t have a Shogi board at home.”

“It’d be great if she were but”

Grandpa-*sensei* winces and drinks more water.

He always drinks beer after his work is over, but he's had nothing but water today. Was he trying to be considerate of Tsubasa?

Or does he have even more important work to do after this?

Master Kiyotaki's Visit

"Ginko. You have a visitor. A man, by the way."

I was on my way back to my room after my usual checkup when a staff member I've come to know very well flags me over.

"A very handsome man in a kimono!"

———Yaichi? No way!

After showing up out of the blue and disappearing without a word, did he come back?

But he's about to defend his Crown title. I haven't checked to see who the challenger is yet, though. He's probably wrapped up in his preparations right now.

———Maybe he wanted to show me the new kimono he's going to wear?
Yeah, right.

He'd never come before a title match. Obviously.

Even so, this painful twinge in my chest has to mean part of me is hoping
hoping that he prioritized me over Shogi.

".....!"

I'm willing myself to stay calm, but my feet speed up all on their own.

Then, I step into my room and have a reunion with a very important person in my life.

"This place ain't half bad."

"Master"

The pain in my chest leaves in a literal heartbeat. Surprisingly fast. The sight of that geezer's beard is a miracle drug. He should get licensed and start selling.

“Disappointed, are ya?”

“Not really.”

I zoom past him and slide under my bed covers in no time flat.

Next comes one of Master’s long-winded sighs.

“Really, Ginko? Is that any way to greet yar Master after all this time? I wanted to come see ya earlier, but Keika kept insistin’ that ya’d *reject anyone in the Shogi world* other than her and wouldn’t let me———”

“Where’s she now?”

“Got her clock cleaned in the first round of the MyNavi Prelims, see? Musta been a real shock to her system ’cause she’s been cooped up in her room ever since. Had tons of jobs lined up workin’ the big board and doin’ live commentary for the Crown Title Match, but she canceled ’em all. I ain’t got a clue what’s goin’ through her head no more”

“.....”

“Hm? Do ya?”

“Not really.”

Actually, I do.

Keika has been at my side all the time since I was transferred out here.

She stood by at the Shogi Association building the whole time I was playing against Ika Sainokami, which turned out to be the match that forced me to take a leave of absence. She’s also secretly been my personal liaison with the association.

Coming here at least once a week, being here for me when I needed to talk with someone, bringing her favorite books for me to read so I wouldn’t get bored, taking me camping on the facility grounds I’m more certain now than ever that it’s a good thing Keika is around.

..... But something has started to dawn on me.

Is she using me as an excuse to run away from reality.

Hmm.

I have no room to talk since I ran away myself—but she’s spending half the week over here, lazing around with her nose in some romance novels, complaining: “I highly doubt anything in *My Abusive Family Sold Me Off to Some Sleazy Rich Folks But the Guy I Married Turned Out to Be Nice and Jealous of All the Attention I Got From My Abusive Family* would ever happen.”

Her complaints about them are oddly specific, too.

“That kind of a twist never happens..... Just no. This author has no idea what real life is like..... The marrying a high-spec-macho-guy to become rich isn’t trending anymore. Right now, the buy-and-raise-your-own-younger-guy is what people like. The cute boy trend has come back around.”

But wait, Keika has always been into that stuff, hasn’t she?

So that’s why I told her.

“If you’ve got so many gripes, why not write it yourself?”

It just so happened that the volume she was reading had an ad for a newbie writer’s contest

That’s probably what’s going on.

“Then I’ll ask you, Master. Why’re you here? She told you not to come, didn’t she?”

I have to change the subject before it comes out that this is my fault.

Master’s response wasn’t what I expected, though.

“Got a message from Shoko, to tell ya the truth.”

“My mother contacted you?”

“Yeah. Said Yaichi was here.”

“..... Chatterbox”

I let my guard down.

My mother had always stayed as far away from the Shogi world as she could.

It had been a good ten years since she talked with Yaichi, so part of me just assumed she'd be the last person to tell someone where I am.

“I dunno if ya know or not, but Mr. Kannabe is challengin' for the Crown Title.”

“Ayu- Kannabe 8-*dan* is?”

“Those two're meetin' in a title match.”

Master heaves out a long, tired sigh.

“I told papers and magazines that I wanted to *get into A League 'n be Meijin*, too. But time passed me by. It's takin' all I got to keep my spot and I dunno how long I'll last. Times are changin' way too quick, I tell ya”

“..... Yes.”

A title match between Yaichi and Kannabe-*sensei*.

Two opponents who I used to play against all the time in the kid's room at Master's house one that I used to dominate is challenging in a title match. Just hearing that makes a searing pain tear through my chest even worse than before.

But this time, it has nothing to do with my condition.

It's envy.

“Have ya heard 'bout Ai?”

“Somewhat.”

“She's fixin' to turn pro without goin' through the Sub League.”

Master takes off his glasses so he can massage his eyelids with his fingertips.

“I just,” he mumbles as he stares at the ceiling. “I just don’t think she’s doin’ this ‘cause she wants to be a professional. The whole time she was Yaichi’s apprentice in Osaka, not once did I ever hear her say she wanted to go pro. Now, outta nowhere, she”

Master scratches his scalp.

———Well, this takes me back.

So many memories flash after seeing that.

Master tends to fidget when his brain is overloaded during matches. Vigorously scratching his head, biting his nails, squeezing his pant leg, thwacking his head with his fan.

There was something that I admired about him when he was in pain.

I knew that I wanted to be a pro just like him.

Starting at some point, I started thinking that playing Shogi was supposed to hurt and seeing Master suffer was all the confirmation I needed to know I was right about my own suffering.

———I’ll never acknowledge anyone who plays Shogi just to have fun.

The same twinge as before rends in my chest. Envy.

And the reason I’m suffering now is———

“Say the policy does change, and Ai does go pro, I don’t think she’s thinkin’ ‘bout what’ll happen after that. Actually I’ve got a hunch that she’s after somethin’ else entirely.”

Ai Hinatsuru.

The last time I spoke to that pipsqueak I was still in the Sub League. It was right before the final match of the 3-*dan* division, when I was a complete wreck physically and mentally.

“Please watch out for Yaichi.”

The summer festival at the shopping arcade. That’s what I said to her when the two of us were alone.

Something occurred to me then that’s been on my mind ever since.

What if Yaichi and I had never met?

Wouldn’t he have gotten so much stronger than he is now? He’d have been free to grow any which way and charge headlong into Shogi theory without ever looking back, wouldn’t he?

“Stop Yaichi if he starts going astray. Grab his hand and pull him back.”

That was my request. Not only was she young and healthy, she never hid her feelings for Yaichi and has far more talent than I do.

Ever since she entered the picture, I’ve had a feeling.

A feeling that I’m the shackles holding Yaichi back.

And that the one who gives him wings is

“And? Would you get to the point, Master?”

“If I’m fallin’ to pieces like this, plenty of other players are gonna be really shaken up. Even if this gets brought up for discussion at a Player’s Meeting, there ain’t no way we can reach an agreement on our own. What I’m tryin’ to say here is———”

Master puts his glasses back on.

Then, looking me square in the eyes, he says, “The one whose voice actually matters here is the player *who took the opposite route from Ai*. The pro who didn’t try to dodge the Sub League and endured that trial by fire all the way through Namely, Sora 4-dan.”

..... Me?

“My gut tells me yar the tippin’ point, Ginko. A yes from ya, it’ll happen. But if

ya say *no*, it'll take movin' heaven an' earth to make the change."

"....."

How am I supposed to process that I still have that kind of influence?

Not too long ago, the pressure would've been too much to handle.

But now, I don't even need to plug my ears. My head is perfectly calm as I listen to what Master has to say.

Which is why I thought.

———Maybe now I can ask.

"Ai's tenacity won me over but to be frank, I still have some doubts. What do ya think is best, Ginko?"

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours."

"And that is?"

"..... Master———"

Of course, actually putting the words together makes my heart lurch.

I power through that darkness in my chest and endure the pain.



“Master Did you try *that* as my spare?”

I didn’t mean it as an attack or criticism.

Just, I wanted the honest opinion of the renowned judge, Kousuke Kiyotaki. Surely the person who molded a prodigy like Yaichi Kuzuryu must have been thinking about it for a long time I’m sure he’s spent years and years thinking about it.

About who would be the best match for Yaichi.

“.....”

A long pause.

There are a lot more silver strands in Master’s hair now than when I knew him best. He is staring at the floor, but it’s crystal clear just how hard these last six months have been on him.

Then he opens his bearded mouth.

“I———”

■ Yaichi Kuzuryu's Visit

"I'm home."

One station away from the Kansai Shogi Association, *Noda*.

Big Sis and I spent most of our lives in this old neighborhood that had managed not to burn down during World War II. It still feels like a page out of history.

"Keika? I'm hooome."

I step into the house that is a Shogi classroom, which smells like the 80s for the first time in a very long time.

"Keika? Master? Are they both out?"

I'm used to Keika's saintly smile and *welcome home!* always being here to greet me, but they're strangely absent Hold up a sec.

"Whaaa?! Wh-Why's it so messy in here?"

Keika always keeps this place spotless. Under her watchful eye, the whole house was clean as a whistle whenever Master invited younger players over for practice sessions and the sweet aroma of good food wafting out of the kitchen was a given.

Now the Kiyotaki house feels abandoned.

My heart rate picks up. Should I turn around and go? When suddenly there was a thud from the second floor.

Looking over at the stairs, Keika stumbles her way down wearing something close to pajamas.

"..... Hi there"

"Wh-What happened, Keika?! You look totally exhausted!!"

“..... I must’ve conked out. The deadline is almost here”

D-Deadline?

A match article? Or is she doing a column?

“I-If now’s not a good time, I can come back———”

“Come on in. I’ll pour some coffee,” says a wobbly Keika as she navigates the hallway with her hand on the wall.

I kick off my shoes and rush over to help her before she falls.

“Hey, how about I pour the coffee?”

“..... Please. It’s in the fridge.”

After guiding her into a chair, I take two glasses out of the cabinet and fill them up with ice.

On a side note, the fridge is chock full of energy drinks, bars of chocolate and coffee mix (the bitter base used for café lattes, unsweetened). That’s it. Judging by the fridge, I’d say an author who just hit the big time and is making a final push to finish their next book lives here.

———Wait, didn’t Keika mention a deadline? But there’s no way.

I needed a few spoonfuls of gum syrup to even take a sip of the brutally bitter concoction that came out of the fridge, but Keika takes a huge swig right off the bat. So this is what caffeine addiction looks like

She sits across the table from me and skips the pleasantries.

“Well?”

“Yeah.”

I look Keika straight in the eyes and get right to the point.

“Ginko’s mother told me. How it’s her genetics that’s the problem.”

I’ve rehearsed this part enough so that everything comes out smoothly.

“Oh All right. You know”

Keika lets out a long sigh without looking up from the pitch black liquid in her glass.

So then, she knew the whole time.

“That was the reason that Master forbade us from dating, wasn’t it? So we wouldn’t get ahead of ourselves and make a kid.”

“.....”

“And the reason why Master insisted on having Ai be a live-in apprentice was to keep Ginko and I apart, right?”

“.....”

Keika presses her hand against her head like she’s trying to keep a headache at bay. Then she lets out an even deeper sigh.

Time crawls by until.

“..... Personally, I think Father is hoping that you and Ai do eventually end up together. He’s never said so out loud, but that’s the only thing that makes sense..... Of course,” Keika adds as if coming up with an excuse, “I’m sure Ai’s enthusiasm had something to do with it And then, I think Ai caught on as well. Just how much she realizes it, I don’t know”

That’s why she left. The whole sequence makes sense thinking about it that way.

Taking Ai as my apprentice wasn’t a mistake. I want to believe that.

But, as for making her a live-in apprentice..., that was probably a bad move judging how things turned out.

I mean, both Ai and Ginko got hurt in the end.

“I have so many regrets and I’m angry at myself. Just thinking back on how stupid I was, going on and on about how our future together would be

when I had no clue about her condition makes me sick.”

This is a review session.

Review sessions have a clear purpose: so we don’t make the same mistake next time.

The next time For when I get to see Ginko again.

So that I can ask how she feels once and for all.

I know that, even now, she still loves me. A pathetic guy like me doesn’t deserve anywhere near as much love as she has for me.

“But when I saw that she grew her hair out for me I got worried. Had my absent-minded hopes and dreams actually ended up hurting her? Are my delusions keeping her trapped in there?”

The thing is that in order to find out for sure, I have to ask her if she knows everything about her condition.

Ginko’s mother said she hadn’t told her.

I also checked with Dr. Akashi, the one in charge of Ginko’s treatment in Osaka. It turns out he hasn’t explained it to Ginko either.

If she ever finds out, it’ll be directly from me When I think about that, it makes me worry that an ignorant and inexperienced Shogi player like myself actually could do it.

———Can’t Shogi players just focus on playing Shogi?

The problem is that Shogi’s future is even bleaker.

The future Awaji showed me is beyond saving. I’ve even started to question the point of playing the game at all

On top of that, Ai Yashajin has found her own solution to Shogi. That means that the Shogi world will become a place where only those who know it can win. Effort, grittiness and talent won’t mean a thing once that happens. If I don’t

want to live in that world, my only choice would be to abandon Shogi altogether.

But for Shogi players like us, losing Shogi would be a fate worse than death.

“Even now, I don’t want to lose Big Sis. I want to be with with Ginko forever. I want to have a happy family like the one we had in this house!”

Yelling that inside these walls is what makes it finally click for me.

That’s what I’ve really been after.

I grew up here, with Ginko.

After going pro in junior high, I became the youngest title holder ever, claimed a second title and got strong enough to be on the cusp of my own solution to Shogi.

But where did that get me?

I’m strong but I’m not living happily at all. Responsibilities are piling up, fights are becoming faster and more intense and playing Shogi with all those severe conditions is suffocating.

I want the happy days I spent here to come back.

The days when I fully believed that dreams came true with enough effort while winning and losing matches against everyone every day. The way things used to be

There’s no going back to being a kid, I know that. But! Even so, I!!

“What do you think, Keika?”

“I think it’s a miracle that Ginko is still alive right now.” Keika answers bluntly. “And miracles don’t repeat themselves. That’s why they’re called miracles.”

“.....”

I can’t breathe. It’s like she drove a wedge straight into my chest.

She calls out my naiveté, and it hurts.

“If the two of you do have a baby and that child inherits Ginko’s condition I don't know what they'll think about their own situation. The one thing I do know is that the day will come when you regret being so determined right now, Yaichi.”

“Me?”

“Watching a child suffer right in front of you is hell. And it goes without saying that you won’t be able to devote all your time and energy to Shogi like you do now. That’s what living with a sick or disabled family member means.”

“..... Hell”

Keika’s words carry so much weight because she’s the one who looked after Big Sis.

Neither Big Sis nor I became strong on our own.

Master taking the two of us as live-in apprentices resulted in Keika trying and failing to get into the Women’s League for so long. It also explains why her skills are stagnant even now.

“Plenty of married couples can’t have children nowadays. More and more of them make the decision not to... every year. It would be more than possible for the two of you to raise a promising child as your live-in apprentice and start a family that way.”

“.....”

“A day might come when you see a summit you could’ve reached if you didn’t have a child and regret going through with having one. Think about it long and hard.”

“..... Yeah, I will. Thanks, Keika.”

“Yaichi,” she asks, the second I finish the last bit of coffee in my glass. “Do you love Ginko?”

“Yes.”

“Uh-huh.”

I answer without missing a beat. Keika nods.

“Okay, then what about Ai?”

“.....”

“Ginko disappeared from your life at the same time that Ai did. That’s when you realized just how important Ai was to you am I wrong?”

I stand up without saying a word.

The time to fight has come.

“Are you afraid you really might develop strong feelings for Ai? That’s why she’s the only one you refuse to see, isn’t it? You’re fine being around me or Ten-chan, but you go out of your way to avoid her”

I pretend not to hear the words chasing me out of the room.

Awaji taught me that it’s better not to disturb things that should be left alone.

🏠 Boys' Shogi Camp

In a room so inundated with male odors that the throat begs for mercy, Natagiri 8-*dan* crosses out the final remaining number on the waiting time reference chart placed atop the boardside table.

“Kannabe-*sensei*, one-minute Shogi begins now.”

“Acknowledged!!” I softly scream with my gaze firmly affixed to the board.

Beginning yesterday morning, both of us have exhausted nearly every last second of our allotted eight hours of waiting time in this match. As that time itself has been measured using a stopwatch that shaves off seconds down to the nearest minute, we have been at war for well over sixteen hours, at the very least.

The formation, indistinguishable. However there is a discrepancy in our waiting time.

Thinking is a luxury I no longer possess.

“———There!!”

My first instinct leads me to a sequence that exploits my adversary's vulnerable underbelly and I ride out in full force.

Immediately following that is a body blow in the form of a big piece that arrives from a completely unforeseen angle.

“Urgh?!”

Being hit unexpectedly under one-minute Shogi makes breathing physically impossible. Worse, a follow-up blow nails my defenses before the phantom pain left by the first can fully dissipate.

“Ngh! Arrrgh!!”

Already suffering from fatigue induced by a match longer than any I have ever experienced, an unexpected flurry of blows at the very end forces pathetic grunts and groans from my lungs.

Except this pain is not nearly enough.

———If *he* were here the sequence would have been even more merciless

I spend my last threads of consciousness offering up my surrender.

“What’s with you? Chin up,” says a scantily clad Natagari 8-*dan*, emerging from the bath while drying his damp hair with a hand towel.

I, who had received the honor of the first bath, remain hunched on the sofa and give this response.

“..... One who could raise their chin after being defeated by an adversary they vanquished in the Challenger Match under title match rules seems far more unnatural to me”

“Are you going to act like this when it counts? Because when the title match starts, it’s the time starting from when you know you lost a match that’s important.”

“How do you mean?”

“You lay the groundwork for winning the next match once you accept the current one is lost. It works the other way, too. Once your opponent knows they won, it’s their chance to pile on the damage. They’ll try to crush your spirit. And if you mope around like this, it’s safe to say it works like a charm.”

“.....”

“There are some tricks of the trade just for this. And the only place to pick them up is playing on the title match stage.”

———The point of saying that escapes me

“How am I supposed to contend without that experience———”

It comes to me in a flash in the midst of my counterargument.

Did the Meijin organize this session just to give me said experience?

“Be grateful. Even young pros hate the idea of having to do a practice match using title match rules, and that busy, busy man not only gave you that much of his time, he made the offer in the first place.”

Very true.

The Meijin proposed this title match preparation session the very day the Crown Challenger Match came to a close.

The participants: the Meijin, Natagiri 8-*dan* and myself.

It was that number that first struck me as unusual.

By and large, practice sessions are carried out with an even number of participants. That way, all can take part in matches simultaneously.

This session, however, only had three.

Two play while one records. Even the Meijin took his turn.

Then, once the match was complete, we used computer software to analyze the sequences while conducting our own thorough review session. This, I assumed, was the most vital element.

Reason being that Yaichi Kuzuryu of late has risen to a point that the Shogi sense of one individual would never be enough to stand against him.

Chances are that the Meijin intended to host this practice session regardless of the Challenger Match outcome.

The final event scheduled for the excursion was a two-day format mock title match between the Meijin and myself. It was the most extreme form of practice I have ever undergone.

“Playing an eight-hour waiting time match against the Meijin with a recorder present to boot. Even a chance to practice a sealing move. This was the real thing, what title matches actually feel like. Why, I’m so jealous, I could bleed green for days!”

It goes without saying that my gratitude is boundless.

Natagiri-*sensei* filled the role of match recorder, even using a stopwatch to track the waiting time. I never imagined an A League player, one who challenged the Meijin in the Meijin Title Match just last year only to be vanquished, would consider attending such a practice session.

But with the title match on the very near horizon, dark thoughts start to emerge through the tattered remains of my fighting spirit.

———Was this retaliation against me for robbing him of a title match against Yaichi Kuzuryu?

When, from out of the blue, Natagiri 8-*dan* asks, “You’re having a beer, right?”

“No, I———”

“Haven’t had one before, hm? Then tonight is too good of a chance to pass up!”

I formulate my counterargument to that flawed logic, but Natagiri 8-*dan* takes a can of that alcoholic liquid from the refrigerator and tosses it in my direction.

“You’d better get an idea of how much beer you can hold. After all, it’s next to impossible to avoid drinking entirely at opening night and closing parties.”

“Wouldn’t a sip during the opening toast suffice?” I retort, and somehow manage to catch the cylindrical projectile of a beer can.

In the event that this title match runs to a full set, there will be seven parties of both varieties. Indeed, with that many opportunities, I may end up consuming more alcohol than anticipated.

This beverage is also used to celebrate victories and dull the agony of defeat Both of which I anticipate experiencing over the course of the title match.

“Word to the wise: hard drinks can be a good weapon to have.”

“A weapon How?”

“Picture this: it’s your first title match. A series of seven games, all against your life-long rival and best friend. You’ll either be stiff as a statue or roaring with competitive fire. Things don’t flow like they usually do when you’re like that, no?”

“.....”

“That’s where a nip from the bottle, or can, comes in. Just the right amount can give you a good night’s sleep. The problem is that the inexperienced tend to drink too much when they’re just starting out. That’s why right now, with full-fledged veterans around, is the best time to experiment. Okay?”

“.....”

Why do I feel as though these are sweet words meant to persuade me?

“..... Then I accept.”

“Cheers! ≡”

Natagiri-*sensei* plants himself beside me, close enough for our shoulders and legs to touch, and raises a can to his lips. Deep, indulgent gulps echo as he drinks the entire beer and, almost as if taunting me, flips the can upside down.

The 8-*dan* grins from ear to ear upon seeing the tremor in my eyes.

“Better start with just a little taste.”

“.....!!”

Not a drop of alcohol has entered my system, and yet I feel my face turn a red hue.

While I highly doubt consuming this concoction will have much if any

influence over me it is slightly frightening to consume something I have never tried before.

No, I say! What is there to be frightened of?!

“Hmn!”

I press the can to my lips and tilt my head all the way back.

The cold liquid flows like rapids into my open throat.

And I choke.

“NRGH?! Koff! KOFF!”

“O-ho! Very nice. ≡” Natagiri 8-*dan* gleefully comments between swigs from his second can next to me.

Perhaps he derives pleasure from teasing me?

“Why are you sitting beside me in the first place? Face to face is the standard, yes? Oh, and don more clothing, would you please?”

“What, after we played naked together?”

“..... I kept my undershirt on during that match.”

The emptiness of that counterpoint is apparent, even to me. But I argued back lest I would appear weak in his eyes. Ever since that fateful A League Placement Match, I have been on the receiving end of messages from this man every single day. Master Rina has even suspected me of being unfaithful.

“So tell me. Did you get a feel for title matches?”

“I had a fairly solid image of them already. A vision of my inevitable clash with Drakin in a 7-round bout, to be specific. However———”

“This wasn’t what you had in mind, hm?”

“I yearned to freely collide head to head, my power against his, rather than to cross blades in this dystopian Shogi world bound by digitally produced ratings.

So you are correct.”

The alcohol must have entered my system because words I wouldn’t normally utter come forth.

“Think computers impure, do you?”

“In all honesty, I cannot rid myself of that perception.”

“Yes, it’s true that they can run all sorts of simulations for the early-game. It’s also true that the one who sticks to standards rather than striking off on their own usually wins. But you could also say that the importance of reading your opponent has become that much more important in professional Shogi, no?”

Reading the opponent rather than their emotional state—this refers to inferring what software program the opponent uses, how deep their understanding of standards goes, how that influences their playing style and applying it to your own preparation.

Though it can be said that a competitor’s true characteristics shine through in the battle of data analysis

“But isn’t that just a battle between computers in the end? Human beings downgrading themselves to mere tools.”

“People can’t even hold a candle to machines now.”

“.....!”

“Only a select few have reached the levels you’re talking about. And even if they had sole access to the strongest computer around, playing that way would give you a certain uniqueness, don’t you agree? If you want to reject that sentiment, your only choice is to win.”

“.....”

“From where I’m sitting, you look like you’re desperate to find the reason you lost. If you do, then you can justify the butt-whooping the Meijin just gave you. Tell me, why do you think you beat him in the Challenger Match?”

“But of course, my skill was———”

It dawns on me as the words leave my mouth.

In terms of skill, title match experience and techniques used therein, I’m far outclassed by the Meijin. That became painfully obvious today.

Then the reason I was victorious against him before was!

“Mine was stronger.”

I bring up the one aspect of which I would never lose to anyone. A vital aspect that a computer could never experience.

“My determination to face Yaichi Kuzuryu was stronger than that of the Meijin!!”

“If you understand that much, quit doubting yourself.”

So saying, Natagiri 8-*dan* takes the can of beer out of my grasp and downs the remaining liquid in one swift motion.

Climbing to his feet, he asks, “It’s about time we got going, don’t you think? The grown-up pajama party is waiting!”

“..... Yes.”

I accompany Natagiri 8-*dan* to the bedroom where the Meijin awaits with, unsurprisingly, an open beer in his hand.

His earlier victory has made him more jovial than usual. As he has done every night of this excursion, the Meijin regales us with whatever stories come to mind.

Tales of the era when he possessed all seven titles, including his thoughts after losing one for the first time

I sat there, my ears agape and my mind a sponge.

Here is the Meijin, speaking about Shogi with the same energy and passion as an adolescent.

His story is a colossal epic, as if foretelling the fate of all the stars. It's about the birth and death of a planet called Shogi, which lightly spans thousands, hundreds of thousands or even hundreds of million years.

Why did Shogi come into being and how will its existence come to an end?

Long before we were born, the Meijin clearly understood how modern Shogi would evolve and envisioned further beyond.

It all sounds so absurd Even I, born into the generation for which computerized Shogi is commonplace, have a hard time believing that we are talking about the same game.

That's when I understood beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The Meijin's overwhelming loneliness.

He traveled millions of light-years beyond his contemporaries, well before software became as strong as it is today. This man has lived in complete solitude because Shogi requires two to play.

Yaichi Kuzuryu is surely experiencing the same isolation loneliness at this very moment.

His supercomputer of a rocket ship may have already whisked him to a place where the rest of us cannot reach

"I will close the distance. I swear it," I proclaim while reaching for the night sky beyond the window.

Though I may become the laughingstock of this generation, my sights are set on the bluish glint of planet Shogi far off in the distance.

RECORD 3

九頭竜八一

YAICHI
KUZURYU

神鍋歩夢

AYUMU
KANNABE

▲ First Date

It's the big day, and I wake up much earlier than usual.

That's typical on days I get to play against *him*. I'm too excited to stay in bed, like a kid right before a field trip.

I'm more depressed about Shogi than at any other point in my life right now

But, surprisingly, playing a match against him on a big stage is just what I need to lift my spirits.

"..... Big Sis used to chide me all the time. *Don't be so restless. Yeesh.*"

I smirk to myself and get out of my futon.

After a quick breakfast, I put on my kimono on my own with a midsummer view of Mikawa Bay out the window. It's been over half a year since I put one on, but it didn't take anywhere near as much time as I thought it would.

"Might as well go."

My patience gone, I grab my prepacked bag and leave my room.

Every association staff member and media person I pass in the hallway can't believe their eyes.

"Huh?! The Crown is already"

I don't bother to stop, just lightly step past their stunned silence and go inside the arena. Waiting at the boardside table with all the prep work finished is the match recorder, almost like she knew I would show up early.

"Good morning, Kuzuryu-sensei."

"Good morning Ms. Noboryou."

I rush to the upper seat. It looks like Karen Noboryou 3-dan is just as excited

for this match as I am.

Word gets around that I'm already in the arena and the media people nearly trip over themselves as they pile in. They're mumbling things back and forth but not loudly enough for me to catch every word.

"..... Doesn't the Challenger always enter the arena first?"

"..... Think he's trying to give his opponent some prematch jitters? It's his first one, after all."

Probably something like that.

It's true that the higher ranking player is typically the last to show up. After all, the new guy would get nervous if the boss was at his desk when he came in to work on the first day. Talk about working under pressure.

But for us, that kind of thing won't happen.

Kr-shak! K-kr-shak! Shak!

"Well, he's here."

Tons of camera shutters go off on the other side of the wall. There's no mistaking what that means.

My heart is pounding like I'm out on a first date

"The Challenger is entering the arena!"

He appears in the doorway with cameras still flashing in his wake.

“What kept you, Ayumu?”

“You arrived too early, Demon King.”

Somehow he looks even more stunning in this traditional kimono than in his usual white cape getup. Like sunlight shimmering on the ocean in summer, men and women alike can’t help but admire his sheen.

“..... That kimono Kannabe 8-*dan* is wearing It looks just like one of the Meijin’s”

“..... Did he give it to the Challenger?! Then, does that mean he’s acknowledged Kannabe as his successor instead of Kuzuryu?”

“..... Word is he got back from a practice session with the Meijin just yesterday”

Normally, those kinds of comments would tick me off a little, but today they make me proud.

———I knew Ayumu’s huge potential before anyone, even the Meijin!

I feel like the guy showing off his new supermodel girlfriend during their first dinner date at the fanciest restaurant in town. Meanwhile, that supermodel is doing their usual prematch routine: pouring their own tea. Even in a title match, Ayumu is still Ayumu.

Once both of us are ready, we face each other and trade greetings: “Let’s have a good match!”

Then I set up my side of the board with the regular Ohashi style, but Ayumu whips out his own *coolest line-up style of my own design!* to get his pieces in place. Seeing him do it in a kimono this time is novel, but also makes him stand out even more than usual.



“The piece flip belongs to Kuzuryu-Crown.”

I pick up five Pawns and scatter them over a white cloth———four land upside down.

Ayumu will go first.

“The first move is yours, Kannabe 8-*dan*.”

“God Cauldron, please.”

Ms. Noboryou ignores Ayumu’s request without so much as a blink. The local media who don’t know much about Shogi exchange confused looks, like that was some kind of Shogi jargon just now. Nope, just Ayumu being Ayumu.

The clock strikes 9:00.

“..... Hph!”

Ayumu reaches for the board without the slightest hesitation.

The media people are drawn to his opening move like a magnet.

“The Pawn in front of the Rook!”

“Will the Crown get to play his specialty, the Double Wing Attack?!”

Once I gently wipe my glasses clean, I respond with the same move. It’s only the first match, but the intensity here is off the charts.

However.

On the fifth turn, Ayumu opens the Bishop path.

———Yeah. Of course he would.

I nod, mentally. Ayumu always knows exactly which strategy I want to play.

“Here I come,” I say, licking my lips as I send my Bishop hurtling into Ayumu’s territory with the velocity of a sword yearning to pierce flesh.

The seven-round Crown Title Match is our first title match against each other.

The curtain opens with a Normal Bishop Exchange.

“Behold! My very own *Interchanged Bishop Same Stool Gin!!*”

“Just say Bishop Exchange Reclining Silver, will you?”

Calling it *Gin* in Japanese just adds to the confusion.

Ayumu’s never had good naming sense, but his research is absolutely perfect.

“?! Th-This This is what Bishop Exchange will become in 100 years?!” the match recorder, Ms. Noboryou says in disbelief as she leans all the way over the boardside table.

The basic formation is still the same as the Bishop Exchange style played right now, but the sequence varies ever so slightly. This future version was part of the 100 Awaji matches I released to the public.

If the Bishop Exchange does last another century, it’ll probably look pretty close to this. Ayumu and I play striking moves one after another almost as if to convince people they’re



seeing the future play out today.

Normally, even one extraordinary new move would make a match *memorable*, but the two of us are unleashing enough to light up the sky like summer fireworks.

I manage to get Ayumu in check by quickly deploying a Pawn, but he spins his King out of it while simultaneously calling his forward Silver back for defense.

At the same time, I sweep through his formation, claiming piece after piece with a Silver I deployed deep in his territory before sealing his Rook in place with a Gold.

It's hard to grasp the meaning behind nearly all our moves, but we play them without using any waiting time whatsoever. It's gotten to the point that the first one to stop is the one behind on their research, which means death when playing Bishop Exchange.

Then, with our waiting time very much intact, we break for lunch.

"Wh-What in the world is going on here?"

"Who's winning?"

The media people stare in shock, like our unprecedented pace gave them whiplash. Ayumu and I, however, head back to our rooms without a word.

Lunch is an incredible assortment of local seafood from Mikawa Bay.

The board is tense Or at least it looks that way. Both of us are still well within our research range, so we have the mental leeway to enjoy the food. The local delicacy called *kounago* is especially good. Then there's egg soup, fried oysters, tempura It's all fresh as can be. Oh, and *kounago* is a type of small fish. There's nothing suggestive about it, just someone on the staff said, "I was sure you would enjoy it, considering how much you enjoy miniatures!" Yeah, I'm going to head back now.

We pick up right where we left off afterward, at full speed.

“Hey, whoa, whoa, whoa!”

“This match is going to finish before day two!!”

The media is allowed to take pictures at the end of the lunch break. The thing is that we’re advancing so quickly that I can hear the stressed out voices of the media people coming through the wall as they file out of the arena.

Pieces pass back and forth between us in a neverending spiral.

Then, once the central area of the board gets cleared out, we promote our big pieces square in the middle of the other’s territory. Ayumu: a Horse. Me: a Dragon.

Compared to the Silver and Gold layers of armor around my King, Ayumu’s has nothing but rags protecting it. Another two moves, and it’ll be on a Check Path.

———Yeah, he’s going for *nyugyoku*.

I deploy pieces directly in his King’s path to prevent it from reaching my side of the board but Ayumu’s counterpunch is better than I expected.

“4 Four Pawn?!”

Not setting a secure path forward for his King or reinforcing his King’s defense, but a grand visionary move to put light pressure on MY King.

So, he’s beyond human.

“In that case!”

I deploy a Lance at 6 Four, giving it up for free!

“.....!!”

Noboryou 3-*dan* has leaned so far forward, her shoulders are beyond the boardside table. It’s almost like she can’t believe two people on this planet could come up with moves like that so quickly.

“Not bad, Ayumu.”

“Likewise.”

I’m so giddy, I can’t help but compliment him. That doesn’t mean either of us have slowed down. Ayumu’s King is at the edge of the board and I put it in check three times in a row. But, as if being under so much pressure added fuel to the fire, the offensive King starts a strong, swift ascension into my territory.

Nyugyoku is almost here.

———..... I’d better start thinking.

Stopping his King at this point would be difficult. To make matters worse, my piece stand is nearly empty. That means I need to figure out what to do with my own King.

But I can’t just leave his King alone, either. The counterattack will hit the second I let up.

———Preserve my pieces and wedge his King to the side!

I deploy a Pawn at the very back of my territory, like a goalkeeper making his last stand. That’s the 100th move of this match.

Suddenly, Ayumu stops.

“.....”

His colored contacts disappear behind his eyelids and he stays put. It’s almost like he’s sleeping sitting up.

It’s not that he’s trying to slow down the match. He’s not going to move at all. An hour passes. Two hours, and even a third but Ayumu doesn’t budge.

Then, just as the reddish light from the setting sun started filtering into the arena, Ayumu, in typical fashion, addresses the match recorder without even opening his eyes.

“..... I would like to save my adventure at this juncture.”

“Very well.”

There’s still a decent amount of time before 6 p.m. when we’re scheduled to pause the match for the day, but Ayumu calls for an early exit in his own unique style. Ms. Noboryou, who was stunned by all of our new moves earlier, doesn’t even bat an eye. It’s easy to see that members of the Kanto Sub League have built up an immunity to his quirks.

The only way Ayumu, who has never done a sealing move before, could’ve done all this without hesitating is that someone with experience showed him the ropes.

———All that was to stop me from using my sealing move technique?

I sealed the match right before a pivotal move during last year’s Crown Title Match to give me the whole night to think.

There are two conditions for that to work: I have to be the one to make the sealing move and the board has to be so complex that it’ll literally take all night to read to the end.

And Ayumu prevented them both.

....Because offensive *nyugyoku* is still well within the bounds of our research.

Punishment

After all the formalities that come with the sealing move are over, I head back to my room. The thing is, I'm pretty sure someone else is in here.

Stepping inside, I see———

“Okito-*sensei*?”

The tall, lanky man standing by the window takes his eyes off Mikawa Bay to look at me.

I can't hide the surprise in my voice as I ask.

“How did you get in here?”

“The staff granted me access when I informed them you are engaged to my daughter.”

“You what?”

“I'm joking.”

Jokes usually come with some kind of facial expression, but his face is blank

Then again, there's something heavy in his voice, too. I take off my *haori* jacket and ask, “How is Ika?”

“A medical leave of absence will be necessary. I penned the paperwork and submitted it to the chairman myself no less than an hour ago.”

“I see

Chairman Tsukimitsu is an extremely busy man. He came over here from Kansai this afternoon and was present at the time of the sealing move, but I heard he has to leave after lunch tomorrow.

I bet that Okito-*sensei* came all the way over here just for a moment of the

chairman's valuable time. That sounds like something someone as stubborn as he is would do, but

"The Empress Title Match has concluded. For a five-round title match to end with only one match it's unprecedented."

That sounds like Ika I stop myself from saying so out loud.

I'm still angry at her, but Okito-*sensei* hasn't done anything wrong. To him, Ika is his precious daughter.

So precious, in fact, that he developed Shogi software just to communicate with her.

"I shall be stepping away temporarily as well. This is my way of taking responsibility for my own actions."

"Responsibility? How so?"

"Accepting the role of observer while being fully aware that my daughter was playing in the match."

"Oh"

Yes, that is a big problem.

But him accepting that punishment must mean that he's going to make his relationship with Ika public.

Almost out of reflex, I answer, "Congratulations."

That surprised me, but I think Okito-*sensei* is even more so. It's rare for him to be caught off guard, but he manages a nod.

Still, the air in here just turned awkward.

From a certain point of view, I'm congratulating him for my apprentice sending his daughter to the hospital. Almost fanning the flames, even

I bring up something else to make him forget what I just said.

“..... What is going to happen to the King title?”

“Shall I entrust you with it now? All will be yours eventually.”

“.....!”

“I’m joking.”

Okito-*sensei* must realize that he struck a nerve because he gives me a rare smile.

“I will be reinstated before the King Title Match begins. Chairman Tsukimitsu made it crystal clear that abandoning titles would not be tolerated and that I must atone for my daughter as well.”

“That’s a relief. Even if I do get the title, I’d rather earn it myself.”

“That frightens me to hear. Not a shred of my being believes I have the ability to defeat you.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Tomorrow, why don’t we———”

I stop myself at the last possible second.

But it seems Okito-*sensei* understood everything.

“Those who cannot comprehend the reasoning behind the title matches of the future you are designing at the moment will surely criticize you.”

“I’m prepared for that.”

Okito-*sensei* nods. Maybe my conviction came across.

“I have one more thing to say. It’s about Mirai.”

That confuses me for a second. Wait, wasn’t that?

“Are you talking about Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan*?”

“He apparently intends to share the deep learning software we developed with an individual you are destined to face.”

“Judging by your phrasing, I’d say it’s safe to say he isn’t talking about Ayumu.

Who then? The Meijin?”

“I am not aware of exactly who, but

The last shred of sunlight disappears behind the Pacific Ocean.

Then, scanning the sky for the moon that should be there, Okito-*sensei* says,
“He did say that two programs would be necessary.”

▲ Seesaw Match

“The sealing move is———Deploy 8 Four Silver.”

Following the observer’s announcement, Ayumu’s white hand glides over to 8 Four and snaps down a Silver. He’s protecting his King now that it’s in *nyugyoku* but

The people watching can’t believe their eyes.

“Wh-What was he thinking?! The Pawn Kuzuryu put down can take the Horse for free!!”

“*Nyugyoku* in the first match?!”

Ayumu’s choice for the sealing moves doesn’t surprise me at all. It’s still part of the standard. I take the Horse using barely a second of waiting time.

The real problem is four moves away.

———Challenge the King in my territory or go for Double *Nyugyoku*?

That’s where this match is going to hit a crossroads to the future.

One path leads to a false future. Assuming that Ayumu got there using the 100 Awaji matches I released as a base and his research is *perfect*, I won’t stand a chance.

But, in a way, that’s the bright future.

Compared to the other path which leads to the future beyond saving.

It’s the barren wasteland Awaji showed me again and again through our matches. The place that we always ended up no matter how many times I started over: my solution to Shogi.

Since Ayumu doesn’t have access to Awaji like I do, he hasn’t seen the wasteland yet.

Then, what if

———What if I pressed all the way to conclusion here and now?

What move would Ayumu play in response?

I take my eyes off the board to look Ayumu square in the face.

The Ayumu sitting there———is bleeding out of his eyes.

“GAAAAHHHHHH?!”

I jump backward, gasping for air but still can’t breathe.

Shocked, Ms. Noboryou looks over at me.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*? What’s the matter?”

“S-Sorry It’s nothing Oh! But, um———”

Hurriedly getting back onto the cushion, I rub my eyes as hard as I can.

Only then do I realize I’d seen a mirage when reading deep into the board.

“Would it be alright to turn down the thermostat just a little?”

“You want to make it cooler?”

I can practically hear *it’s cold enough already* in her voice as she looks in Ayumu’s direction.

“I have no objections.”

He answers without looking up at the board because he’s so far behind in waiting time. Of course, there’s no blood either.

Cool air flows into the arena and my heart finally calms down

That was because I heard about Ika from Okito-*sensei*, right?

Was it a warning, maybe? If Ayumu or I play beyond human moving forward,

one of us is going to break.

———I saw Ika in that state. But Ayumu doesn't know. Which means

That vision chose me.

An 8 Two Pawn to checkmate the offensive King.

"Mngh?!"

Ayumu lets out a soft grunt.

Then, an expression I never expected appears on his face.

He looks———kind of sad.

"So This is your"

I might've seen it wrong, though.

Because he declares with gusto not a second later.

"..... Then I shall cut you down!!"

"You can try!"

That triggers a head-on clash.

I put Ayumu in check, he blocks it. His King has far fewer protective pieces, but closing in on it all at once is just too difficult now that it's reached my second row.

"I am a Knight of the Board! A battle of Kings would please me to no end!!"

Ayumu gets payback right away, putting my King on a check path.

That's when I commit all my strength to a second check rush! Only one path leads to survival, and I highly doubt that Ayumu has enough time to read all the way to the end.

However, he didn't mess up.

"Whaaa?! H-How'd the King get?!"

Ayumu finds a way to horizontally slide the King into my deepest row, making all my checks pointless!

It's like the hero of an action movie is barely holding onto the roof of a skyscraper by their fingertips. *Nyugyoku* is one of the most complex situations in Shogi, and Ayumu found the one and only correct answer.

Just as he said he would, Ayumu leads his King on a collision course with mine.

“Behold———Game set!!”

I watch in disbelief as my attack fizzles out. The instant it's gone, Ayumu reaches for his piece stand and takes hold of a Bishop as if drawing a blade from its scabbard. He then brings it down in one swift stroke.

———That's one heck of a way to go out

I was mentally prepared to lose the instant I decided to engage head-on, but I didn't think I'd be sliced down so vividly. The amount of preparation Ayumu put into this title match goes way beyond my expectations.

That's why it hurts so much. I might actually cry.

“I lost.”

After visiting the restroom to get my kimono straightened out, I wipe the tears out of my eyes and lower my head.

And so, Kuzuryu-Crown throws in the towel on move 135.

“..... Thank you.”

There seemed to be more he wanted to say, but he's got nothing left in the mental tank. He literally gave every ounce of his being to checkmate my King.

“Kannabe 8-*dan*! Congratulations on your victory!!”

“Please tell us what you're going to focus on for the next match!!”

I watch as the media people descend on my best friend before leaving the

arena... alone.

The arena moves to my home turf for the second match: Kansai.

Kobe's *parlor*: Arima Onsen.

Said to have been the favorite of a prominent sixteenth century samurai named Hideyoshi Toyotomi, people in Osaka and Kyoto flock there because it's a doable day trip away.

Since there's a ropeway connecting it with the farm and athletic facilities in Rokkousan, there are a ton of children here too.

So, naturally, kids are all over the place. Even in the arena.

"Go win, Kuzuryu-sensei!"

"You can beat him!"

A group of grade school kids wave at me from the lower seat side of the board. It's not uncommon for local kids to come to title matches on a field trip, but these kids are from the heart of Osaka.

"Quiet, everyone! A very important match is about to start."

The person leading them is Ai Hinatsuru's former homeroom teacher, Misao Kanegasaka-sensei. She asked me to come to the school and teach Shogi to her class a while back. Apparently, those kids wanted to come cheer me on so badly that they managed to get this classified as an *educational field trip*.

It's a great story filled with a lot of heart, but that's not the way the other people here see it.

"A miniature cheering squad"

"Even the Challenger's Master, Ms. Shakando, is showing restraint and staying outside the arena, but this"

"The Loli Crown does what he wants, apparently."

I always get called the Loli King because I have the Dragon King Ryuo title, but this is the Crown Title Match. So the Shogi people here have adjusted. I only wish they'd show as much consideration for me as they do for the sponsor.

“The time to begin has come. Lo- Kuzuryu-Crown. Please begin the match.”

Even the observer is convinced I'm a lolicon. I'm not sure if I have the home advantage at all, but that doesn't change what I have to do.

———I WILL win this match.

I don't hesitate at all to advance the Pawn in front of my Rook for my opening move and open the Bishop Path on the fifth move because I wholeheartedly believe this is how the title matches of the future will look.

The formation I want to play———Bishop Exchange Double Reclining Silver.

And, just like Ayumu did during the first match, I waste no time moving my King to safety on the left side of the board.

“Very well I shall meet you!!”

Static Rook players don't care if they're on offense or defense when the formations are the same. Being able to win on either side has a unique term in the Shogi world:

A double slap.

“Die for a second time, Demon King of the West!!”

Ayumu rushes straight in to attack the opening in front of my King. Considering he won with *nyugyouku* last time, I don't blame him.

That's why using his strategy against him is the natural choice for me.

“Trying to force my advance before it begins, are you?! Then I shall crush you beneath my feet!!”

As if donning the persona of a Knight on his way to dethrone the King (me), he

puts me in check at the 62nd move.

That's where I seal the match for day one.

With the seal move done, I head back to my room and change into a *yukata*. Then, it's off to the hot spring because I want to enjoy tonight's meal without being a sweaty mess.

"Ah, Ry- Crown. Did you visit the bath?"

On my way back to my room, I happen to bump into a local journalist from Sannomiya, Kobe.

He wrote a fantastic article about Ai Yashajin a while back, so I open up as a way of saying thank you.

"Yes. The water was great. It's no wonder Arima Onsen is so popular."

"If I may ask, is Miss Yashajin here to cheer you on? She does live nearby, after all."

"Cheer for me? I doubt it."

"That's too bad. I was hoping for a chance to do a follow-up interview, but I haven't been able to reach her at all."

I bow my head. While I hurt for him, I totally get what Ai is thinking.

"Speaking of this hot spring, the men's and women's baths switch after dinnertime. In other words, you just bathed in the same water as the elementary school-aged girls who came to root for you earlier today."

"That would explain all the youthful energy I have right now. Ha-ha!"

This conversation happened. I won't try to deny it.

But the newspaper headline the next morning was:

"Kuzuryu-Crown Recovers Energy by Bathing in the Same Water as Grade

Schoolers After the Sealing Move!”

Just why

While that headline could be easily misunderstood, I could clearly see each and every sequence during the match.

No sooner had Day 2 started than Ayumu unleashed a barrage of big pieces and Golds in a valiant attempt to crush my King. Each one, however, misses by a hair.

On the other hand, I manage to invade and overwhelm his side of the board with Pawns just as Awaji once did to me.

“Kgh I am defeated.”

The match was as good as over before the lunch break, but Ayumu kept thinking both before and after it Then he threw in the towel without making another move.

Looking at me, a title holder so dominant that the challenger wouldn’t even try to hold out, people start whispering back and forth.

“H-He’s too strong Is he *actually* a demon king?”

“..... Is the Demon King that strong, or is the offense locked to win when playing Bishop Exchange?”

“..... Well, it looks like players starting on defense won’t be playing Bishop Exchange for a while

The only pieces I moved much at all were my King and the Pawns.

Ayumu finished me off with keen late-game skill, but I didn’t let him get to that stage this time. Hey, I’m not just going to lay down and take that kind of punishment.

It goes without saying that the newspapers will pick up on that for their headlines———

“Little Girl Power Unleashed! Challenger Blocked to Perfection!!”

“Are Grade Schoolers the Key to Defending the Crown? Overwhelming the Opponent With the Smallest Pieces!!”

Just why?

This article also came out.

“Kuzuryu-*Crown*’s third apprentice, Charlette Isior, is currently honing her skills in the Kansai Practice League in hopes of joining the Women’s League someday. She joined her friend, Ayano Sadatou, on an after-school trip from Kyoto to Arima Onsen to cheer on her dear Master on the second day of the match. Once she heard that he was going to win early in the afternoon, she said, ‘Cha is gowing to bwathe with Masta!,’ which resulted in quite a scene.”

Unfortunately, there was an error in the article. I never took a bath with Charlette.

Gold and Silver

With the second match ending early, everyone made it back to Tokyo or Osaka on the same day. I, however, stayed at Arima. Just to be clear, it wasn't to take a bath with Charlette. It was because I had business at the building on the other side of the road from the venue.

And who should I find here but———

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Welcome to the Yashajin Group's health resort.”

“You guys own way too much of Kobe

Akira Ikeda greets me at the door.

She is both Ai Yashajin's trusted bodyguard and faithful assistant, not to mention the president of the Yashajin Group's construction company, Lolihome.

Yes, she has many faces, but most definitely loves to watch grade schoolers.

“If Ai wants to talk to me, why not ask me at home? Why'd she come all the way out to Arima and not even stop by to watch my match? Even little devils have standards, you know?”

“My lady is busy entertaining some business partners.”

Entertaining? Ai Yashajin?

“If she's working, I'll head on home. I don't want to disturb her.”

“There's no need for that. Please, indulge in the hot spring in the meantime.”

That must've been a signal of some kind, because a small army of buff men in black suits show up from who knows where and take my suitcase right out of my hands.

Resistance seems futile. I'm used to it, though.

“I've already spent enough time in a hot spring to make my fingers wrinkly for

a week

“Lady Ai merely wishes for you to indulge in all that Arima has to offer. Are you aware that there are two types of hot spring water here?”

“*Gold and Silver*, right?”

“Indeed. The Silver bath is a transparent, carbonic water. Fairly standard for hot springs.”

Akira leads me further into the building with a satisfied nod.

“The Gold bath has a high salt content with iron infused sodium, which gives the thicker water a rustic hue. The ability to experience both of these baths in one place is what truly makes Arima Onsen extravagant. The hot spring spas in this very building draw from both water sources!”

“Are you planning to venture into the hot spring market as well?” I ask with an annoyed tick as I try to keep up with her.

Lolihome has secured contracts to remodel both Shogi Association buildings: Kanto in the east and Kansai in the west. They are even set to sponsor the Women’s Placement League, which is in the works.

The Yashajin group has started seeping into the Shogi world through both the container and the content. Their chief executive is my apprentice, but even I can’t tell exactly what she’s trying to achieve.

“We purchased an inn recently. A property in Kanto, to be exact.”

“.....”

“Should you wish to know further details, you may bring it up with my lady whenever you please. On a side note, we intend to make vast improvements to the lodging available within the new Shogi Association buildings. I would love for you to test them out, Kuzuryu-sensei with your young apprentices, of course!”

It’s easier to get information out of Akira because she doesn’t hold her cards

anywhere near as close to the vest as Ai Yashajin, but I can see how she survived so long in the dark underbelly of society. She read me like a book.

———A Shogi nerd like me wouldn't stand a chance against her

"The main bath is just through these doors. A change of clothes has been prepared for you. We shall have your current outfit dry cleaned, so leave it on the floor of the changing room, if you please."

"Alright."

With that, Akira takes her leave.

I briefly consider making a run for it right here and now, but I wouldn't get far. The better choice is to take a bath here for a while and listen to what Ai has to say.

"And I'm pretty tired anyway Ah, here it is."

There isn't a soul around as I slide the big door open.

It seems like this place doesn't separate the men's and women's baths. Then again, that might be normal for these health resorts, so I don't worry about it and get undressed. Now in the buff, I open the second door, which leads into the bathing hall.

And what a hall it is! I've got this place all to myself! Except, I don't.

"Huh?"

There's something in the steam

“Tell me, Ryuo-san, is it this Gold bath you want to enter?”

The elegantly smooth Kyoto dialect is coming from an equally elegant beauty soaking in the back of the tub. Her skin is slightly pink but those mind-bending curves of hers are impossible to miss.

I can't see any other details because the water is too thick but that actually makes her look even more racy!

An there's someone else———

“Or is it the Silver one? Agghhh?” says the beauty with an attitude sitting in the clear Silver bath.

She's leaning back in a pose like an athlete or supermodel. With her looks, she could pull off either one. Wow, she's hot!

They sound just like the goddess that showed up in Aesop's fable about the honest woodcutter but That goddess wasn't anywhere near this sexy!!

I yell, naked as the day I was born.

“MACHI?! RYOU?! Wh-Wh-What're you two doing in the hot springs?!”

“Don't get all choked up, Trash. I've got a towel on, see?”

“I'm choked up because I DON'T!!”

I quickly hide behind the blinder wall by the bathing bowl, but that just makes me seem like more of a pervert.



“I happen to be towel-less as well. See? ≡”

“You don’t have to get out just to show me! I already *know*!!”

Something very similar happened during our cram writing session at Amanohashidate! Looking back, it was nothing short of a miracle I didn’t make a move And, as Keika said, miracles don’t happen twice!

“Wh-What are you two doing here in the first place?! The Yashajin family owns———”

“Yeah, and one of ’em invited us. Your apprentice, actually.”

“Ai did?”

Then she’s going to be entertaining these two?!

“Yaichi and Ayumu, a title in the balance. As lifelong friends of both, O-Ryou and I were talking and decided that we should *swing by the arena*. It just so happened Ten-chan offered us a free hotel room as well as transportation to and from Arima.”

“Actually, it was ’cuz that company with the messed up name is a sponsor for the association now.”

Lolihome, no doubt. Now I’m starting to feel bad.

“It was a proposal to discuss match operations and regulations for the Women’s League in the near future between Women’s Title Holders. As I had a veritable mountain of questions pertaining to the Women’s Placement League, I had no reason to reject the offer Thus, here I am.”

“Free food, free booze and a chance to use the best supercomputer on the planet to analyze your match with Ayumu. Now that’s a sweet deal. The little gremlin still hasn’t shown her face, though.”

That’s when the bath door opens.

“Kugui-Yamashiro Ouka. And Tsukiyomizaka-Women’s King.”

Akira calls out to them.

“Lady Ai will see you now. Please make your way to the cafeteria once you have a chance to cool down.”

“Ah, at long last.”

“Tch! Couldn’t be bothered to come get us herself, eh?”

The two stand up like they’re all out of patience. Whoa! Whoa! WHOA!!

“.....!!”

But Ryou gets up with so much velocity that her towel couldn’t keep up! I slam my eyes shut, but I’m pretty sure I saw something jiggle before my eyelids closed!

And Machi is, well, Machi. My eyes are shut tight, but I can tell her well-endowed boobs passed right in front of me. Those things bend the air to their will. W-Wow!

I curl up in a little ball in the corner of the bath hall. Akira then calls out to me from behind my back.

“Please enjoy the bath privately at your leisure, Kuzuryu-sensei. This shouldn’t take more than five hours.”

“Ah, sure.”



The sliding door snaps shut, and I'm left with a conundrum to solve.

"....."

Whose leftover water would be the correct choice Ryou's silver or Machi's gold?

■ Fallen Angel's Temptation

"I would expect nothing less of a proposition from Yashajin-*Women's Dual Title*. The league design for your Women's Placement Matches is superb. Do you not agree, O-Ryou?"

"As long as there are more matches, I don't give a rat's ass about the details. Go ahead and do whatever."

Two Women's League players are seated before me.

Machi the Tormentor and the Aggressive Archangel.

Both have held their titles for multiple seasons and qualify for *Queen* designation despite only being twenty years old. That kind of strength is rare, even within the Shogi world.

Additionally, they are among the few women who are full-fledged members of the Shogi Association.

———They would've dominated the era had they been born at a different time.

I pose a question for those two players.

"More importantly, how did it feel to use Awaji?"

"....."

Offering to discuss the new league was merely a guise to get them here.

The Second Crown Title Match took place just across the street. I provided these two access to Awaji so they could analyze the match on their own.

It's my version of wining and dining.

The fancy food, beverages and even the hot spring were just icing on the cake compared to Awaji.

Kugui takes a sip of the best chilled *sake* from the Nada area to wet her lips. Her tone couldn't be more serious.

"..... It does grant quite the advantage if available."

"Not that I'd actually be able to use the thing. None of its *best moves* makes any sense. Felt like I was playin' against Ika the whole time"

"There's nothing to worry about as far as that's concerned."

I smile to alleviate Tsukiyomizaka's concerns.

"We've already developed a training tool that helps people overcome their biggest weaknesses as human beings. The two of you would reach Tier 2 No, Tier 1 with ease."

"Oh? And what does that entail, exactly?"

"You don't need to know that yet. Take up my offer, and I'll explain it."

"Then how 'bout leading with that offer?"

"Good point. Then I'll get right to it."

There's no need to butter them up. They couldn't possibly refuse anyway.

"Would you join my research group? The world's fastest supercomputer and the latest Shogi AI will be at your disposal."

"What lavish hospitality."

"I'll include the solution to Shogi as well."

"Ohh"

A dubious flash twinkles in Machi Kugui's eyes.

Got her.

"You seem interested, Kugui-sensei. Or perhaps I should call you journalist Ms. Mato?"

"Just Machi will do fine, Ten-chan."

The fox grins back at me. By the looks of it, getting her into the fold won't be all that difficult.

On the other hand, Tsukiyomizaka sounds suspicious.

"What's the price?"

"What you just saw."

Tsukiyomizaka's personality comes out in her Shogi, always going for the throat. That's why I had the ultimate move ready in waiting.

Yaichi walking in on them in the bath hall wasn't a coincidence.

"Acknowledge that *he* is mine, and not Ginko Sora's Catch my drift?"

"....."

I've already looked into exactly how these two feel about my Master.

So, I know he's not just a childhood friend or a rival to them.

Yes. I'm testing their loyalty.

I need to find out if they'll surrender the most important thing to me or not.

"There's no need to bow down to me. I don't need your respect, either. All I want is for you to conquer Women's Shogi on the east and the west respectively. That includes after Ginko Sora comes back."

Ginko Sora.

That name gets their attention. I can see it in their eyes.

He-he-he. I won't let them claim the thought has never crossed their minds.

That *if only Ginko Sora didn't exist*.

"The regulations currently state that female professionals *have the right* to participate in Women's League matches. However, I fully intend to make it so that *they have no choice but to play* in the upcoming Women's Placement matches."

“You’re implying that Ginko would play in it once she returns, no?”

“That’s correct. You need a place to get your revenge, don’t you?”

The way things are now, these two need to qualify for pro league matches for a chance to play against Ginko Sora.

Even if they do, there’s no guarantee they will. It’s luck of the draw. And that chance will only come up once a year, if that.

That’s not nearly enough, now is it?

“You can beat Ginko Sora. Just picture it. Her head down, the words *I lost* coming from crestfallen lips.”

———I will take everything from her.

I swore I would.

Pressuring me into losing by a rule violation in our first title match is a humiliation that will haunt me the rest of my life.

Now it’s my turn to humiliate her.

She made it all the way into the pro leagues, but imagine the humiliation of being defeated by Women’s League players again and again.

Her spirit won’t just break, it will shatter. The mere sight of a Shogi board will make her nauseated. Her fingers will tremble every time she tries to touch a piece.

———Can you love a Ginko Sora without Shogi, Yaichi?

I need strong pieces to make it happen, so I continue my recruiting pitch.

“Neither of you have beaten Ginko Sora. Ika Sainokami throttled her, but I put that girl out of commission permanently. Awaji made it happen. It gave me the solution to Shogi by establishing a concept that goes beyond standards toward an assured victory. Don’t you want it? This ultimate power?”

“..... Khe-he-he! Bwah ha ha ha ha!!”

One bursts into laughter, Tsukiyomizaka.

“HE-HE-HE! Assured victory, ya say?! Now that’s sweet! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! Ginko’d never be scary again if I had that!!”

After laughing so hard that she literally had to hold her ribs down, Tsukiyomizaka goes stone-faced and says this: “Shove it where the sun don’t shine, runt.”

“..... May I ask why you don’t want it?”

“Heh, I guess you wouldn’t understand, would ya?”

The Women’s King scoffs at me before unleashing a torrent of verbal abuse.

“The solution to Shogi? Tossin’ standards for a guaranteed win? Don’t gimme that crap! I’m not playin’ Shogi to find useless combos or trivia. Any runt that doesn’t get why better not even say Ginko’s name. Got a death wish, huh?”

“O-Ryou! You’re being quite rude.”

Kugui admonishes her friend from the next seat over.

All according to plan. With all that pride and a short fuse, Tsukiyomizaka was bound to go off at some point. But Kugui is level-headed and shrewd enough to see the value of what I’m offering. That’s why I made sure to talk with both of them at once.

I knew she would understand———.

“The little miss is still but a youngster. Why, at her age, of course she wants to show off the trinkets papa and mama purchased for her. Smile and say *neato* before you make her cry.”

“.....!!”

The fox scathes me even deeper than Tsukiyomizaka and giddily watches my reaction.

That foul greedy Kyotoite!!

“O-Ryou and I have indeed failed to defeat you, Ten-chan. Being 20 years of age and defeated by an 11-year-old does not bode well for our chances in the future.”

Then why go out of your way to clash with me?

Kugui explains.

“But here is the issue, yes? The notion that the heart can be conquered via a Shogi match is beyond infantile. It is our duty as grownups to scold you for this. Isn’t that right, O-Ryou?”

“Damn straight. That piece of trash Master of yours sure didn’t. Otherwise, ya wouldn’t have turned into a spoiled little imp.”

Tsukiyomizaka bares her teeth like a ferocious beast.

“You wanna know Shogi’s solution? I’ll give it to ya: the Great Tsukiyomizaka wins. I’ll make ya cry along with Ginko once the Women’s Placement Matches start, so go have your super-duper computer teach you how to surrender, runt.”

“..... Getting rid of you isn’t even worth my time.”

Their value has been set just now.

These two are curs, bottom-of-the-barrel losers who don’t even have the courage to try out new methods.

“Enjoy the humiliation when my hand-picked Women’s League players take your titles. You’ll lose over and over to players you thought were far beneath your level again and again, making you look back on this day and regret your decision all the way to the grave.”

This is no mere prediction.

It’s the one true answer derived from simple mathematics. Elementary mathematics, I might add. If they can’t understand that much, then they aren’t worthy of their titles.

“I’ll see to it you spend the rest of your lives toiling in the lowest bracket of the Women’s Placement matches alongside Ginko Sora.”

The negotiations failed.

But this doesn’t hurt my plans in the slightest.

Awaji has already identified Women’s League players with the same level of talent as these two. Raising them will take a lot of work, but it’s only a matter of time before they knock Tsukiyomizaka and Kugui off their respective perches.

“Isn’t there a Women’s Leaguer ya have to take down first?” says Tsukiyomizaka like a parting shot on her way out.

Kugui nods and says, “Very much so,” in the same tone.

“That girl can produce answers your super machine could never teach you, not that you would comprehend it.”

I know exactly who they’re talking about.

Machinery’s ultimate rival: pure natural-born talent. Someone who came into this world at Tier 0.

———You’ve become a bigger thorn than I ever dreamed Ai.

My mind is now set.

I will remove my older sister apprentice from the Shogi world if it’s the last thing I do.

🏠 Tier 0

“Ai, don’t tell me Did you just have a fight with Machi and Ryou?”

I had enough time to laze around in the bath and take a nap before getting called in to talk with Ai Yashajin.

She takes a bite of her dinner and casually shakes her head.

“Why would you think that?”

“They both sent me angry messages, so I kind of figured”

Machi wrote that I must be *held liable* for the product I *created*.

Ryou just said *die*.

Ai just shrugs when I tell her.

“I invited them to a practice session and they turned me down. Fitting in has never been easy for me.”

“.....”

What could she have possibly said or done that would’ve made them send death threats to her Master over an invitation?

Besides, why would Ai bother trying to make a practice group when she has Awaji? And with Women’s League players? She has to be after something else, something big

I’m too scared to dig any deeper. Ai brings up something else once the silence gets a bit too heavy.

“It's one win and one loss, yes? How does it feel to play your first title match against your greatest rival?”

“He and I do think a lot alike.”

I answer after, between mouthfuls of chilled cider.

“As long as both players can bring out their full potential, offense will win in modern Shogi. It’ll be a seesaw match, just as I thought. Actually, I’m amazed that Ayumu hasn’t cracked under the two-day format yet, even though he doesn’t have experience———”

“He has good support then?”

“Most likely.”

I’ve seen the kimonos that Ayumu wore to the first and second match before.

They belong to the Meijin.

And I doubt the clothing is all Ayumu borrowed. The strongest Shogi player having his back I would’ve shouted *cheater!* at him if he’d had that kind of advantage before.

Now I bet he wants to yell that at me.

“It’s a big relief, you know.”

“What is?”

“Seeing that you won’t pull out Awaji’s strategies left and right. Though you did let one slip during the Placement Match with Taishi Shinokubo Yes?”

———So she did call me over here to issue a warning.

Ai Yashajin and I made 100 Awaji matches public, but we only released ones that used existing strategies like *yagura* and Bishop Exchange.

Opening moves like 5 Eight King should be avoided because they might infer the existence of death flags.

It’ll cut into our advantage.

“I must say, though, that both of you are playing almost exactly what Awaji recommends all the way to the end of the first and second matches. This title series might be the end of the Bishop Exchange.”

“First a warning, now a compliment. Busy, aren’t you?”

“Neither of us has the time to go home, so I have to say everything while I have the chance,” says the workaholic head of the Yashajin Group. She’s in the middle of dinner but still has her tablet at her side. She’s going to extreme lengths to do Shogi research even when she’s this pressed for time, and I take my metaphorical hat off to her.

“..... Well, there’s something I want to say too.”

Everything I heard about Ika’s condition from Okito-*sensei*.

I wanted to tell Ai in person. Leaving that as it is would leave a horrible taste.

She lets me finish and then says, “So then, the attempt to boost human Shogi senses to the same level as a computer has ended in failure.”

That’s how Ai summed up the match that finished before it could end. She doesn’t seem at all interested in the Empress Title even though it’s going to be hers very soon.

“Even with the superhuman abilities of Ika Sainokami, the human body isn’t built to keep up. A cyborg could, perhaps, but that’s beside the point.”

“Are you saying that humanity will never be able to catch up with computers?”

“Just don’t read the formations. It’s all about memorizing.”

Well, it’s true that knowing the death flags early in the match would grant a huge advantage.

The thing is

“Shogi isn’t that simple. There will always come a point when memorization isn’t going to help. That’s especially true in the mid-game when it’s easy to make a mistake. How do you plan on compensating for that?”

“With this.”

Ai turns the tablet to face me.

But that's not Awaji's interface. It's a typical title screen of a game I see all the time.

"..... A Shogi app?"

"I told you, didn't I? That we bought a company that makes a competitive Shogi app. I don't see much room for growth in the near future, but it brings in a steady stream of benefits. It was a good buy."

"I wasn't talking about management——"

"I'm talking about Shogi. Specifically the kind that people play."

Words come pouring out of Ai.

"This app records the time used to think along with the moves. As of now, there are hundreds of millions of match records in the database. One that large has never existed before now As we speak, people at all skill levels are playing an unfathomable number of matches and they just keep going. Most of their matches wouldn't be preserved otherwise—especially strong amateur players."

"But that database includes raw beginners, right? Talk about inefficient. Wouldn't you be better off compiling pro match records instead?"

I was just about to point out that there are tons of match records with fewer mistakes when I freeze on the spot.

It finally hit me what Ai is trying to do.

"..... Are you studying how human beings think and make mistakes using those records?"

"It was a very good buy!"

What's more, the game that Ai now owns has a paid subscription feature that lets the player go against Ai.

Which means there's also a database for people playing against a computer.

"This data has taught me how to play like software would against a human opponent. Artificially, yes, but that's how I reached Tier 0."

"Tier 0?"

Tier.

That's how characters are ranked by strength in online games if I remember right.

The lower the number, the stronger the character.

"Yaichi Kuzuryu, Ai Hinatsuru, Sota Kunugi, Ika Sainokami and the Meijin. Those five people are Tier 1. All have the potential to go well beyond the average person and are as strong as a human being can become."

"..... You rate Ai Hinatsuru that high?"

"Oh? And you don't? When it comes to late-game skills, I think of her as Tier 0. She truly isn't human!"

"....."

I didn't answer. There was nothing that could be said.

I knew that Ai Hinatsuru's Shogi talent was extraordinary the instant I first played against her.

"Tier 2 would be Seiichi Tsukimitsu, Mitsuru Oishi, Ayumu Kannabe and the like. Though I'm sure Tsukimitsu would be Tier 1 if he weren't blind."

Oishi-sensei took a title from the Meijin despite the handicap of playing Ranging Rook, so there's a chance his talent is at a higher level than Static Rook players.

That goes for Ayumu as well. Had he been alive in another era of Shogi history, he'd have dominated the Shogi world for a long time. With his strength coming from something other than a machine or affinity, how could he not?

He's a medieval knight through and through.

"By the way, my own potential is about Tier 3. That's right on the border of where professional players could challenge for a title. Not much different from Machi Kugui or Ryou Tsukiyomizaka's level."

"Modest, aren't you?"

"You would rate me even higher?"

"If I'm being completely honest, I can't rate you at all. I also realize that admitting it makes me a failure as your Master"

It's become obvious that I'd be kidding myself if I still think I have any control over her.

My train of thought has never put one wheel outside the edges of the Shogi board.

I'd bet the same is true for nearly all pros: Meijin included.

But Ai Yashajin seems to be observing Shogi from a distance. Her vision is too wide not to be.

It's like she's watching the tiny little Shogi world from outer space or the future.

"Awaji taught me where to find the death flags. The app data provided me with an endless supply of puzzles that show exactly how to cover human blind spots. These two together have elevated me beyond what humans can do."

She doesn't sound like she's bragging.

It's cold, unrelenting confidence.

She used computers the way they were meant to be used: as a tool, to conquer the game known as Shogi and become the model player of a new age.

"And you, *Sensei*, built your own version of Shogi a century from now in your head through countless matches with Awaji Reaching a goal no human

being could ever hope to achieve.”

Ai Yashajin reaches out with one of her delicate arms, puts her hand on my cheek and makes a prediction.

“We took different approaches to surpass humanity and the two of us will end Shogi, together.”

■ The LOLI Rating Function

“..... So it lived up to its impressive billing? This *Awaji*.”

“Yes. There’s no mistaking that it uses deep learning software.”

A rental space in the middle of Tokyo.

I———Ai Hinatsuru, am meeting with professional Shogi player Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan* and Women’s League player Machi Kugui-*sensei* to exchange information.

We’re here instead of my home, the HinaTsuru, or the Editing Room in the basement of the Shogi Association because Futatsuzuka-*sensei* wanted it this way.

“I brought my own software as well, and there was quite a discrepancy between the two for suggested moves and overall rating. The time it took to produce results was also extremely short. I have no qualms at all about calling it Shogi from 100 years in the future.”

Kugui-*sensei*, who is here as the Shogi reporter *Mato*, looks more tense than I’ve ever seen her when she plays Shogi.

“Miss Yashajin claims to have used *Awaji* to derive a solution to Shogi and even create a way to overcome the standards and assure victory. I doubt it was a bluff”

“Okito-*sensei* has kept me somewhat abreast on this matter. Her method seems rather similar to the anticomputer strategy that was popular in the distant past If that is true, that would make it exceedingly difficult to defeat because it is such a simple method.”

“If it’s machine power you need, why not use an American cloud service———”

“The financial resources required to do so would be astronomical———”

Futatsuzuka-*sensei* and Kugui-*sensei* have done all the talking ever since we got here. I’m only understanding about half the words that are going back and forth in front of me.

———..... Why was I invited?

Do they want to ask me specific questions about Ten-chan? But I haven’t seen her since I left Osaka and she never, ever mentioned making software before that

“Miss Hinatsuru.”

“Whaaa?! Y-Yes? Futatsuzuka-*sensei*.”

Hearing my name out of nowhere almost made me jump out of my skin.

“How familiar are you with Shogi software? Do you use it often?”

“To be honest, not much”

“That’s no good. I guess *senior* Kuzuryu didn’t teach you those ropes.”

He sounds just like a teacher in school.

“Are you aware that current Shogi software runs on a CPU while deep learning versions use a GPU?”

“Yes I know that much. Most professionals use the CPU version, right?”

“You are correct. And, *current Shogi software* generally refers to a single program.”

Nearly all professionals are using a software program that’s available for free. No one knows who made it, which sounds really fishy

Futatsuzuka-*sensei* says that’s also true for Shogi software developers.

“Chess software from overseas has been localized for Shogi searches, but the important part is the rating function.”

“Rating function?”

“Think of it like a person’s ability to see the big picture. If this element is flawed, no other aspect of the program will allow it to acquire Shogi strength. And one particular prodigy had a breakthrough that revolutionized the rating function.”

The rating function was announced almost five years ago, but no one could use it until deep learning software caught up with it.

“The Low Output, Low Input rating function, or LOLI for short.”

“Was the creator messed up in the head?”

“Yes, their creation was so far ahead of its time, they could be called crazy.”

That’s not what I meant

“The program’s size was not only miniature, but lean and swift when it came to calculation. That is why it is so accurate even on home computers. In fact, LOLI has been localized into overseas chess software for just that reason———”

His enthusiasm nearly knocks me out of my chair.

B-But what do I do?

This is very important information but I can’t focus with him saying *loli loli* all the time!

“The one problem with LOLI was that it always performed best in its original state, no matter what modifications were made. It was complete the moment it came into the world. That means it has an incredibly low ceiling.”

“Then deep learning program software, on the other hand, has room to grow because, while upgrades cost money, they get results. Correct?”

Kugui-*sensei* checks with him, but Futatsuzuka-*sensei* puts both his hands up.

“That was my theory, but with the world’s fastest supercomputer behind it, I have a feeling that Awaji is the pinnacle.”

“.....”

The air in here just turned heavy.

Kugui-*sensei* said that Ten-chan is planning to let people who listen to her use Awaji so that she can take over the Shogi world.

———Would Ten-chan really do something like that?

Even if she said she was trying to crush Sora-*sensei*, that’s not the Ai Yashajin I know.

Shogi players usually are only interested in things that make them stronger.

That’s especially true with Ten-chan. She didn’t even want to talk with other people. Actually, she prioritized getting better at Shogi to the point that she wasn’t willing to share the results of her research

At least, up until now.

——— But *What if she got so strong that she couldn’t get any stronger?*

Did Ten-chan change when she hit that point?

Something changed about Master after he used Awaji.

He always looked like he was in so much pain whenever he reached a higher level too fast It hurt so much watching him, too. At the same time though, I was so happy being at his side to support him.

There was something magical about the time we spent getting stronger together. I treasure those memories so much I’d say learning to play Shogi was worth it just to get them.

Finding an answer to all of Shogi or a way to guarantee a win would make someone happy in the moment but what happens after that?

Now that Ten-chan lives in a world without the pain or sense of accomplishment that comes from growing through effort, what will she want to do?

If I were in her shoes What would I do?

“Now, if Awaji were to have a weakness.”

Futatsuzuka-*sensei* and Kugui-*sensei* have been talking the entire time I was lost in thought.

“I can only think of one person on the planet who could identify it.”

“That being?”

“The one who created LOLI. Which brings us to today’s main topic.”

Futatsuzuka-*sensei* drops his voice down low.

“I would like to give both of you access to the deep learning software that Okito-*sensei* and I developed. It should prove crucial when the time comes to combat Yashajin. I hope it serves you well.”

“Are you certain?” Kugui-*sensei* asks in surprise.

“There are two reasons. One being to exact revenge on Yashajin for what she did to Miss Sainokami. Putting aside her transgressions, she is still the daughter of my mentor and training partner.”

“You want us to fill that role?”

“Yashajin’s next target is the very title you hold, Yamashiro Ouka, yes? And, Miss Hinatsuru, should that tournament proceed as is———”

“Yes. I will play against Ten-chan in an official match for the first time.”

We’re part of the same Shogi family tree, so we don’t get matched against each other without an important reason. In fact, tournament organizers make sure that we’re in different blocks in the Preliminaries.

That’s how the Yamashiro Ouka Tournament is different———

“Ouka has no Preliminaries and no efforts are given to prevent Shogi families from colliding. Apart from the top four from the last season, even title holders have flat odds during the seeding process. Nothing short of a tournament of

hardship.”

Kugui-sensei, whose full title is Queen Yamashiro Ouka, says by recalling the Ouka Tournament.

That’s why unusual things happen in that tournament Players registered in the East and West matching in the first round, new professionals playing against title holders I’m sure it’s fun to watch, but the Yamashiro Ouka Tournament makes every player anxious.

“Why not take this opportunity to obliterate one another, Ai-chan?”

“Ah-ahahaha

That sounded like a joke but Her eyes are serious

Ten-chan and I won’t hold anything back.

That means that I have a chance to test and see if she really has found a way to guarantee victory in Shogi.

But

“..... Thank you for the offer, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to use information generated by deep learning software. Kugui-sensei probably could, but me

“You have nothing to fear as far as that is concerned, Miss Hinatsuru. You have a world-class expert in your court.”

“Huh?”

“The man who developed LOLI and completed Shogi software as we know it. He is actually a senior of mine from our college days. Haven’t you figured out who I’m referring to yet?”

Then, Futatsuzuka-sensei says the name.

The second I hear it I scream.

“WHAAAAAAAAT?!”

“Judging by that reaction, I would say you were in the dark on this particular matter.”

H-He is a world-class expert?

Yes, knowing he’s around is reassuring but Whaaat? I still can’t believe it.

“You stated that there are two reasons earlier. May we hear the second?”
Kugui-*sensei* asks.

“Oh, yes. The second one is actually more relevant. This may be taboo for a developer of Shogi computer software, but———”

Futatsuzuka-*sensei* gazes off into the distance for a moment, grins for the first time, and looks right at me.

“You see, I was originally a Ranging Rook player. And your match with Usui-*sensei* was nothing short of inspiring.”

“Ah”

“So I would like to entrust you with the future of Shogi.”

The match that Usui-*sensei* and I played is about as far from computer Shogi as you can get. At least, I thought so while playing it.

But it led to me being given brand new Shogi software.

It sure was a winding path But taking on Usui-*sensei*’s System strategy head-on rather than avoiding it is what opened this path.

“Thank you very much! I’ll, um take good care of the future you *senseis* have created.”

———Destiny. Out of my way.

I’ll keep those words in my heart and press onward.

They ring even truer to me now.

That’s when my phone starts to vibrate on the table, letting me know I have a

message.

“Uwhaaa? From Tamayon-*sensei*?”

A short message shows up on the screen, but it sets off explosions deep in the pit of my chest.

They’re getting louder and louder, like cannons closing in.

It took me a second to realize that it is my own heartbeat.

“You know what just got decided. Get to the association, asap.”

🏠 The Series Where Offense Always Wins

The Crown Title Match is deadlocked at one win a piece. I'll jump right to the end and say that the one who went first won every match through the sixth.

The third match was a Double Wing Attack.

But Ayumu's version of it was so far removed from the modern Double Wing that nobody understood what he was trying to do.

"A 9 Six Pawn version of the Double Wing Huuuh?! He moved the 1 Six Pawn up, too?!"

"The defender secured the seventh file in the meantime. Does that mean trash Kuzuryu has the lead?"

"Wait just a minute here! The offense has slid a Rook into the open 7 Four spot!! What purpose is there in doing that?"

"I don't have a clue anymore."

I heard that Shogi fans with software analysis were stunned and even the commentators on the broadcast had no idea what to say other than, "It's a mystery."

Actually, this formation is a mystery to both Ayumu and me, too. We don't understand it, but this is what Awaji says is the best move and maintains the best balance in the formations.

Maybe that's why Ayumu didn't look all that happy even though he won, just like in the first match.

Fourth match.

The first move was mine this time, and I set up for a Double Wing Attack.

Ayumu boldly accepts. A win here means he'll have three victories, one away from taking the title, and he gunned for it at full speed.

"The challenger sure is in good form."

"Kuzuryu-*Crown* is struggling to hold his ground."

That's apparently what analysts were saying at the sealing move.

On the contrary, I was burning bright.

Ayumu was trying to smother my attack by going on the attack himself despite being the defender. I vigorously sidestepped his strikes and took him out with a counter.

The biggest difference between this match and the second was that Ayumu kept playing even after his last shred of hope for a comeback faded He eventually surrendered with the most heartbroken look I've ever seen on his face.

"..... I have been defeated."

"Thank you for the match."

I threw my head down to accept and we did a short review session. The staff and media people then watched, clueless, as he left them all behind. That brought us back to a tie at two wins a piece.

Fifth match. The formation turned out to be the one that everyone said would *definitely* show up at some point during the series: *yagura*.

Ayumu was counting on that *yagura* castle to win him this match. Even I, who knows the future, had to admit that one was nearly perfect.

"..... It's beautiful"

I managed to hide my mouth with my fan as those words slipped out in the middle of the match.

Ayumu's research leading up to this title match was so much further along than I ever dreamed it would be. The Meijin and Mr. Natagiri came through for him big time.

———How did he make this much progress with only 100 match records to work with

This *yagura* castle is like the whole of humanity's wisdom coming together, crystalizing like an impenetrable diamond on the board.

I threw in the towel before I even took a swing at it.

Even though Ayumu was one win away from taking the title in the sixth match, I wasn't worried at all because the first move was mine.

It was a *yagura* for both of us again.

The modern *yagura* is steadily morphing into something like a Double Wing and looking more like a rundown shack sinking into the ground than a castle. But the ones played *a few decades from now* tend to be well-defined strongholds. After computers rediscovered the benefits of the Snowroof formation, it steadily replaced the *yagura* before disappearing along with it. Maybe the more evolved computers understand pain and fear.

The match became a war of attrition that lasted over 300 moves.

"Haaa Haaa Haaugh!!"

"Wheeeew———"

Both of us were gasping for breath, shoulders rising and falling. There was no end in sight even at 11 p.m. on the second day, but I was holding up much better than Ayumu.

I was physically tired, sure, but never once did I think I was going to lose.

That mental leeway turned out to make all the difference.

“There!”

I was able to focus up until the very end, landing a fatal blow even as our Kings were cornered in mind-numbingly complex sequences.

Then, after 313 moves, I won. Now that we’re tied at three wins a piece, the full set is complete.

“..... Why won’t Kuzuryu play that 5 Eight King strategy he used against Shinokubo?”

“Probably because it’s too big of a risk.”

“Then Kannabe is just that good?”

I turned my back on their conversation and left the arena.

I get a phone call right after winning the sixth match.

“What the deal, Yaichi? Is he giving you that much trouble?”

It’s my older brother.

“Wasn’t Shogi’s solution either a Repetition Draw or Double Nyugyoku? Neither of those have happened yet.”

Just before the Crown Title Match started, I had a chance to talk with my brother for the first time in ages at Shinjuku’s Gyoen Park. Rather than congratulate me on winning or dispense some tough, brotherly love, he decides to pick a fight.

“You’ve started doubting the future you claim you saw, haven’t you, Yaichi? Your mindset always comes out in your Shogi. Always has, going way back.”

“And you can’t see past the surface, as always.”

I know he’s just taunting me, but I go along with it anyway.

“There hasn’t been a Repetition Draw or Double *Nyugyoku* because I’m

purposefully avoiding them. It'd be easy enough to do it, but then it'd get copied right away. A title match coming down to multiple Repetition Draws and waiting moves? I'll pass."

"....."

"Besides, the only way to get to the wasteland Awaji showed me is for both players to play at the same level as a super computer. Ayumu and I aren't that good."

With human levels of Shogi skill, it's hard to trigger that kind of Repetition Draw or stalemate.

Impossible, actually.

"Do you know what the largest paradoxical existence in this world is?"

"The Static Rook Party?"

"Yes. Because they play exactly the same strategy on offense and defense."

I set the phone on the low table in my room and turn on the speaker so I can keep talking as I peel my sweat-soaked kimono off.

I'd been wanting someone to talk to.

One of the few people who lives within the same time frame.

Characters that time slips into the past in movies and TV shows typically use their knowledge of the future to live like kings, but the reality isn't anywhere near as easy as it looks.

You can't talk anywhere near as much as you used to because your secret might come out and knowing what's going to happen next is a lot of weight to shoulder.

Day after day in overwhelming solitude chips away at your humanity.

"With Awaji on my side, I know for a fact that my research goes further than his. But since 100 matches worth of records of the most well-known Static Rook

strategies have already been released, starting as the defender puts me at a huge disadvantage if his research has gone deeper than mine.”

“The first move is that big of an advantage: is what you’re saying?”

When playing formations that human beings came up with, the first move almost guarantees victory in Shogi.

As long as they play the best move every time, the offense will win. That’s just how Shogi is built.

I used to be able to ignore the paradox of Static Rook players using the same strategy on offense and defense, but I don’t think I can anymore.

Because, well, Ayumu and I have proven that the first move will win when both players use Bishop Exchange, Double Wing Attack, and Yagura strategies during this title match.

“Which is why he’d find a way to counter my research if I showed it early on in the series. I had to keep it hidden all the way to the end.”

In other words, the offense has to stay focused and play the best move every time to win.

Meanwhile, the defense has to hide their research knowing full well they’re at a disadvantage while building up enough power to land a knock-out punch if the offense does make a mistake.

“That’s a title match in the age of first-move victory Makes you wonder why we play Shogi at all.”

“There’s no point complaining. Computers aren’t going anywhere.”

The era of pulse-pounding matches when players push their brains to the absolute limit is over.

Now all we have to do is find the move a machine says is best. It’s a contest of who can be the most like a computer when a new formation comes up.

“Hey, um———”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“..... Never mind. I’m calling it a night. Bye.”

I was about to ask him about Ai Hinatsuru, but stop myself at the very last second and hang up.

There’s nothing wrong with asking him But what Keika said is still in the back of my mind.

———Man, am I glad I’m in a title match right now. It gives me something else to focus on

My goals are clear as day.

“Avoid the hell I saw at all costs and try to keep Ai Yashajin’s *death flags* as under wraps as possible.”

They’re doable, for sure.

For example, say the strongest software gave a 51 to 49 rating.

From a person’s point of view, the 51 looks like a 100. Everyone would choose to go with it.

Thus, the truth inside the 49 stays hidden.

“If I can hide half, then Shogi shouldn’t advance very fast at all”

But to do that, I need to be at the very top of the Shogi world. I have to be the best of the best.

My plan is based on a model from the past.

It was back when the Meijin had all seven titles.

Shogi was stagnant the whole time. Reason being that everyone tried to play exactly like the overwhelming powerful *deity* at the very top. Creativity vanished.

Ranging Rook strategies all but disappeared from the Sub League and the newest pros because everyone had their noses buried in the Meijin's books.

"That's what the world was like when Usui-*sensei* created System and claimed the Ryuo title. That guy is on a whole other level"

Prodigies like him don't show up every generation.

Seriously, if someone asked me to come up with my own original strategy like System, I'd say, "That's impossible." I could become really strong, but creating something like a new strategy will never happen. Some people are even saying that you have to lose your creativity to get strong in this new Shogi era. It's hard to be human.

"..... Still better than that barren wasteland. Much better."

Back when I was playing match after match against Awaji.

It wasn't until the final week that I could play a decent match with the supercomputer.

I never won, of course.

But I got to a point where I didn't break somewhere in the middle and played *to the end*. That's the first time Shogi ever sent me into despair.

Learning that the only opponent that could get me to go all-out was a machine.

Knowing that I'll be stuck on a deserted island for the rest of my life.

"..... There's no way any human being could beat me in that wasteland because no one who knows even the slightest bit about Shogi would ever research how to win that way"

I grab some carbonated water out of the fridge and drink it down while watching the night sky start to light up from the open window. The humid summer air feels heavy on my skin.

The seventh and final match is next.

If I get the first move, I can just play the standard all the way to victory.

My first title match against Ayumu will finish up with everyone seeing a false future. That's probably the best result for everyone. Ayumu will be hurting, yes, but it's not the worst case scenario.

“But

If I'm on defense, then———

RECORD 4

山
刀
伐
尽

JIN
NATAGIRI

名
人

MEIJIN

■ The Decision

The seven members of the Shogi Association's Board of Directors, including Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu and Bruno Redmond, convened in a meeting room on the second floor of the Kanto Association building. One additional former member of the association joined the meeting remotely from the Kansai Association building, as well.

Only one of the directors was female, Rina Shakando Women's 8-*dan*. The rest were all men with distinguished careers as title holders and A League membership added to their names.

Their mere presence was suffocating.

Ai Hinatsuru sat in a folding chair, her spine erect as she endured the pressure.

The only other seat granted in this gathering was given to the vice chairwoman of the Women's League, Tamayo Rokuroba. The pressure was causing a sharp pain in her abdomen, however.

At the same time, she couldn't keep her hopes from climbing ever higher.

———Everyone's here Then we have a legitimate shot, don't we?

“.....”

Ai Hinatsuru, sitting next to her, was remarkably calm. Almost scarily so.

She was the living embodiment of a strong Shogi player focusing their mind before the most important match of their life. No matter the result, the competitor in her heart would continue the fight.

Seeing this girl not even flinch while being stared down by so many top Shogi professionals was striking for Tamayo, and even somewhat reassuring.

———Aren't I supposed to be giving the emotional support here?!

“The board of directors have come to a decision.”

It was Chairman Tsukimitsu, located in the center of the room, who spoke.

A silence as thick and heavy as molasses followed. The clicks of Shogi pieces from the classroom next door were faintly audible as he cleared his throat.

“Concerning Ai Hinatsuru-*Women’s Legend*, an exception shall be made to allow a Professional Entrance Exam to take place. The selection of the examiner and criteria shall be made at the board’s discretion.”

“Yee—!!”

Tomayo nearly jumped to her feet, a triumphant cry of “Yeeeeees!” on her lips before she hastily planted herself back in her chair.

Bruno Redmond 9-*dan* grimaced at his problematic apprentice before shifting his gaze to Ai Hinatsuru.

“Congratulations. You’re now entitled to become only the second person in history to take this type of exam. It was a unanimous decision, by the way. We will contact you with a specific date for the exam ———”

“I refuse.”

“..... Huh?”

Bruno and Tamayo echoed simultaneously.

Their shock was apparent, but Ai repeated herself without so much as a stutter.

“I refuse to take the exam under those conditions.”

“..... Would you please explain why?”

Seiichi softly inquired and Ai calmly answered.

“I want to create a permanent path for anyone, including Women’s League players, to become a professional Shogi player without going through the Sub League, not be an exception. I’m willing to leave the content of the exam up to you, but I refuse to undergo the exam until that change has been put in place.”

“That matter can be addressed once you have passed the exam and proven yourself as a professional player, yes? Is that not enough?”

———Exactly! That’s a great deal!

Tamayo applauded Seiichi in her mind. Go, make Shortie say “yes”! Quickly!

But.

“No.”

Ai stubbornly refused that path.

“If I were to accept that condition now, I would just become a *previous example*. Becoming a professional can’t be taken as lightly as trying to get a vaguely defined exception. There have to be clear requirements!”

“.....”

The blind chairman listened intently to Ai Hinatsuru’s assertion.

Bruno spoke up from beside him, tension beginning to seep into his voice.

“Were your Grand Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* with us today, he would surely tell you that you couldn’t have asked for better conditions. I’m positive he would want you to take the exam. Are you going to betray all the people who worked so hard to get you into this position in the first place?”

“Just the opposite. I can’t be satisfied with my own situation *because* of all they have done for me. Kiyotaki-*sensei* would absolutely say so!”

Ai stubbornly held strong. Desperation was starting to set in as Bruno turned to his apprentice.

“..... Rokuroba Women’s 2-*dan*, talk some sense into her.”

“I think———”

In that moment, Tamayo realized what her Master had in mind.

Making an exception for an individual to take a Professional Entrance Exam was most likely always within the board’s jurisdiction.

However, they had to convince Ai that they were willing to work with her, otherwise she would tell the media and use public opinion to put pressure on them to change the system.

All members of the board were here today to pressure her into saying yes.

And she hadn’t been brought in to give Ai courage but to convince her to go along with the *adults*.

She was the *Gold* deployed to checkmate *King* Ai Hinatsuru.

———And that’s fine by me! Defending here is the only move anyway!

Tamayo Rokuroba knew because she was also an adult.

Her master Bruno Redmond had no sway over the association. Although he made it into A League, he never claimed a title. Though he had name recognition as the first foreign national to become a professional Shogi player and join the board of directors, he was just as low on the totem pole as she was at the end of the day.

The chairmanship was customarily held by a person with title experience, so if Seiichi Tsukimitsu was not at the top, he wouldn’t even be able to maintain the administration. Bruno constantly complained to her about his weak position. Even the meeting when Ai accused her of having a sugar daddy was originally meant as her way of encouraging him as an apprentice.

Even now, Bruno’s desperate gaze clinging to her proved she was right. Were they alone, there was no doubt in Tamayo’s mind that he would be pleading at her feet right now.

———Some bigwig sponsor probably had some harsh words for him.

The Sub League system was the backbone of the association. It was the only line that truly separated amateur from professional.

Should it disappear, the association would lose its status or so some sponsors seem to think. The fact was that they maintained several systems including the Women's League and promotional instructors, but even those were funded by sponsorship contracts based on professional matches. So long as appeasing the sponsors took priority above all else, arguments between the players themselves were next to meaningless.

However, Tamayo had a change of heart just as she was about to spell out that truth for Ai.

The deciding factor: the young girl's hand was trembling when she took it.

——— This kid, I swear

Behind that almost cheeky exterior, Ai was terrified. She had made a pivotal move that put everything she had built up thus far at risk of being lost forever.

Going through with it required far more courage than sitting across the board from a professional player.

———She's been fighting this whole time! Me, on the other hand

That's when Tamayo's mind was set.

She gave the trembling fingers a reassuring squeeze.

"I think that proposal is a valid option."

".....!"

Tamayo's tone made Ai Hinatsuru flinch for the first time since entering the room.

She grinned over at her junior and continued.

"But! If she Ai Hinatsuru has another option in mind, then that is the right move for her! We have made the collective decision to support her. Not

because she claimed a title or because she has defeated professional players, but because she is fighting on behalf of all Women's League players all by herself!!”

“T-Tamayo

Though she felt sorry for her shaken Master, Tamayo made one final push.

“If we don't show support for her now, it would be no different from when we were doing nothing at all. Therefore, the Women's League will honor her judgment to the very end even if that means going against the board's wishes.”

“Well done.”

Amidst the stunned silence of the board members, only the former Women's League Chairwoman Rina Shakando applauded.

“For the love of?! Are you TRYING to throw everything we've done out the window?!”

“I-I'm sorry

The two left the association building and settled in at a nearby burger joint where Tamayo Rokuroba began venting her frustration by devouring everything on her tray.

“..... Look, it's not like I don't get where you're coming from. Frankly, I think you're right. But you just turned the entire board against you, yeah? Do you have your next move planned out?”

“

Ai looked down at her lap, silent.

———Here we go again. She's hiding something, isn't she? Why's she in such a rush anyway?

The elementary school student was behaving like an elderly person trying to

finish a bucket list after being told they only have a few months left to live.

———I'm not sure why, but maybe this is the only chance she'll get? But, if that's true, then?!

Tamayo vigorously crumpled up the burger wrapper and downed the last of her shake in one big swig.

"I gotcha. It's my turn to step up and take one for the team."

"Huh?"

"Look, a few weekly magazines have offered to run articles about the Pro Entrance Exam if I do a sexy photoshoot for them. A bikini No, I'd be willing to go as far as a hand bra pose if that'll convince them! After all, the bulk of the Shogi population is middle-aged men! An appeal to both their hearts and their pants will———"

"That won't work."

"What?! Are you saying my girls aren't worth that much?! Huh? HUH?!"

"No, no! That's not what I meant"

Tamayo slammed her empty shake cup to the floor and Ai jumped to her feet in an attempt to soothe her furious friend. Then, speaking just loud enough for Tamayo to hear.

"The board's reaction taught me something very important. Now I know who we need to ask."

It wasn't the media or the most powerful people within the association.

They needed someone———with enough influence to move the entire country.

Dressed for Death

A seventh match is unique.

Title series only last until the fourth if one player wins them all. No one knows if there will be anything beyond the fifth match. The odds of reaching a fifth, sixth and seventh decrease with each passing match.

That means only venues with strong Shogi connections or a history of hosting Title Matches would even consider hosting a seventh match.

But to me, Yaichi Kuzuryu, seventh matches aren't all that unusual.

My first title match, and when I defended it for the first time, each lasted to the eighth match.

“That might not have anything to do with it, but the association sure booked a nice place.”

The garden here is so green, it's hard to believe this is in the middle of an urban environment. Just walking around it is putting my mind at ease.

This hotel used to be a summer home belonging to an elder statesman during the Meiji Restoration who happens to be one of Machi Kugui's ancestors. I also beat *Okito-sensei* last year in this very hotel to claim the Crown Title last year.

———That was also the day Big Sis turned pro.

A year has already passed since then. Part of me feels like the time flew by, but so much has happened since then that if someone said it had been ten years, I'd believe it.

If there's anything I know for sure, it's this.

“There have been a lot more goodbyes than hellos

But I have to get used to this loneliness. If I want to be as strong as the Meijin,

solitude is going to come with it That could mean losing a friend tomorrow over this Shogi match.

The inspection goes smoothly and I've got a little free time before the opening night party.

Someone asked me to meet them here before then.

"Greetings."

"It's been too long, Shakando-sensei."

She's admiring the crape myrtle tree while waiting for me at the back corner of this elegant garden.

"I've asked Maria to ensure our privacy. While I understand that may not be wholly enough, she has grown much of late."

"I heard that she's rising through the ranks, too."

Maria Kannabe is Ayumu's little sister and a female member of the Sub League, which isn't all that rare nowadays. She joined at 6-*kyu* but is already 4-*kyu*. Reaching 4-*kyu* in the sixth grade is pretty fast, even compared to boys with potential.

"Shall we stroll?"

"Sure. Oh take my arm."

"Well, well. This may cause a misunderstanding should we be seen, no?" says Shakando-sensei with a playful grin as she reaches out with her free hand. The path through the garden is kind of bumpy and trying to walk on it with just a cane for support would be dangerous.

She then looks up at me as if trying to read my mind.

"He-he You are easily influenced by the women in your vicinity, you see. It is rather entertaining to imagine who you are doing such things with these days."

“You didn’t attend the first match, if I remember correctly. Did you come this time because it’s closer?”

I let her comment slide.

Bringing up a topic like this is definitely something Ai Yashajin would do.

“Why no. He extended an invitation, even procuring rooms for Maria and myself.”

“Ayumu did?!”

“He foresees this being a momentous occasion, no doubt. He even went as far as preparing a special set of clothes.”

“Is he planning to walk down the aisle after claiming his first title?”

This hotel hosts plenty of Shogi title matches, but it is also famous for having one of the best chapels in the country. Shogi players have had receptions there.

“You wanted to speak with me, yes? What is it about? If you want to know about Master, I haven’t seen him in———”

“It’s about your fledgling.”

“.....”

I had that feeling.

But I doubted that Shakando-*sensei* would bring it up the day before a title match.

It would distract me from Shogi.

———Does she want Ayumu to win that badly?

That thought passes through my head and I immediately hate myself for it. Shakando-*sensei* isn’t the type who would pull that kind of underhanded stunt.

I bet she genuinely wants to tell me something somewhere she won’t be overheard and it would be better for me to know now rather than once the

match gets going.

I was right, too.

“The board of directors granted her an exception and approved her taking a Professional Entrance Exam. However, she refused on the spot. The conditions were unacceptable to her.”

“I see.”

“You don’t seem all too surprised?”

“Knowing Ai, she has a reason.”

My heart skipped a few beats, actually. Why the heck did she say no?! Wasn’t that test the whole reason she moved to Tokyo in the first place?!

There are so many questions I want to ask right now, but I will myself to stay cool. Shakando-*sensei* will pick up even the slightest twitch through my arm right now. I have to keep my heartrate down and sweat under control.

“..... Quite strong, both you and her,” says Shakando-*sensei*, releasing my arm and looking up at the lush greenery overhead. “The board of directors seized me by the core, turning me into their *assassin*. That girl surpassed me and made it look so simple. She commands the Women’s League not with power, but with courage.”

Courage.

That word makes my tear ducts clench.

Because that was the first word I gave Ai.

———She took my teachings to heart. Not that anything I have to say is worth it.

“Ayumu has grown strong as well.”

Shakando-*sensei* looks at me with pleading eyes.

“Do pull out all the stops for tomorrow’s Shogi, will you not? That young man

has gotten this far in his pursuit of you

“I have never once gone easy on him and I don’t plan to start now.”

Leaving Shakando-*sensei* with Maria, I head back into the building to get ready for the opening night party.

Then... the next morning.

I arrive at the arena a little early so I can prepare for the piece flip and find a lot of familiar faces waiting for me inside.

The observer is Takeru Usui 9-*dan*. He was the Ryuo before me. On a side note, this is the first time he’s ever worked as an observer, so this match is already making headlines.

The match recorder is Noboryou 3-*dan*. A person working multiple matches in the same series isn’t unheard of, but it only happens once in a blue moon.

The match journalist is Ms. Mato. She sat in that spot at this time last year, too.

Sitting behind her is Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, who seems to be having a hard time sitting on her ankles in *seiza*. Someone would get angry at her if she sat up on her knees at a time like this.

Shakando-*sensei* and Maria are standing with the media people in the corner of the room. Standing up after sitting down is a challenge for Shakando-*sensei*, so it’s easier for her to stay up.

Almost everyone from the Elementary Meijin Tournament ten years ago is here.

Ayumu and I didn’t play against each other back then, but I sometimes dream about it.

Our younger selves walk over to a Shogi board lit up for the cameras and play a match in those dreams.

As for the match itself, I don't remember how it goes.

But I always wake up in a cold sweat whenever I have those dreams, so it's safe to say they're intense fights. I've even woken up in tears before, so I probably lost in some of them.

Right now, though, Ayumu still hasn't arrived.

Just as I'm settling into the upper seat.

"Kannabe-*sensei*?! Wh-What are you wearing———?"

The hallway outside the room erupts.

Ayumu wouldn't wear his usual cape getup to a title match, but his outfit today blew all of us normal people's expectations out of the water.

"Whoa?! That kimono! It's?!"

"Pure white, top and bottom!"

Yeah.

Ayumu steps into the arena wearing all white.

That includes the *haori* jacket and *hakama* trousers. Even the bag around his shoulders doesn't have a shred of color to it. Wearing that to a Shogi match is beyond unprecedented.

"I know the guy's got a thing for white, but yeesh That get up is practically———"

Ryou's stunned mumbling sums up what everyone in the room is thinking.

"..... How dead people are dressed for funerals"

"I apologize for my tardiness," says Ayumu like a samurai of old as he enters with a bow and sits down in the lower seat. His face couldn't be more serious.

Only then did I realize I watched the whole thing play out without actually sitting down. Quickly getting into *seiza*, I reach for the piece box.

———Geez! What made him choose *that* of all things?

Is it his way of saying we should fight like ourselves one last time?

Or is he really prepared to lay down his life in this match?

“It’s time for the piece flip.” Ms. Noboryou says as she gets to her feet and procures five Pawns. “Face up will indicate Kuzuryu-Crown.”

Clackity clackity clack! Our fates are literally in her hands as Ms. Noboryou gives the pieces a few extra shakes before letting them fly.

“.....!!”

All eyes are on the piece flip of destiny. The player with the first move has won every match so far. So the chances that whoever gets it today will win go way up.

But I want the first move for a different reason.

———I don’t want to show it if I don’t have to that barren wasteland.

Beating Ayumu on defense is much easier said than done. If I’m in that position, I’ll have no choice but to use the Shogi solution Awaji showed me in this one match. I can already see Ayumu in that pure white kimono, but splattered in his own blood like Ika. A future where he really is already dressed for his funeral.

The five Pawns land on a white cloth.

Ayumu takes a short breath. All eyes in the arena are on me.

Ms. Noboryou gathers up the scattered pieces and returns them.

I put those pieces back in their rightful places on my side of the board, my fingers steady as a rock.

“How about that? It’s time,” says observer Takeru Usui 9-*dan* before kicking off the match in a unique fashion. “Take it away, kiddos. You’re up, Kannabe.”

■ Match Journalist

My eyes follow Ayumu's first move from my seat at the boardside table.

"2 Two Pawn"

I jot down notes in my notebook.

Ayumu is indicating a Static Rook strategy. He still holds the pieces the same way as when he was a child.

I didn't have a chance to play against him in the Elementary Meijin Tournament, but I've admired that beautiful grip of his for a long time, even mimicking it myself.

———Though mimicking him was an attempt to garner Yaichi's attention.

The two players in front of me have a special connection.

The same generation, childhood friends, compatriots, rivals.

I put those words to paper, and each one hits the mark. At the same time though, they feel slightly askew. I wouldn't write anything approaching boy's love territory, of course, and that wouldn't be accurate either.

I would join these two and O-Ryou at overnight practice sessions at the Kiyotaki household (aiming for nights when Ginko wasn't there) or at the Kannabe residence, playing until I literally dozed off at the board I can't recall the number of times I would awaken to find them still playing against each other.

Their own private time? Are we intruding? I remember them discussing the answer to Shogi, the final solution. Ayumu would go on about outer space and the big bang. Yaichi would chide him with 'How much time's left?'"

I keep my pen moving, recording whatever thoughts come to me while we wait for the next move.

I know I have a bit of time before Yaichi makes his move.

He has a *first move routine* that resembles a morning routine, after all.

First, he pours a glass of water into his cup and takes a drink. His Master taught him to do that so he wouldn't make a rash decision on this first move. Even now, Yaichi faithfully obeys. Then comes a deep breath.

“..... Haaaaaah———”

Closes his eyes for a moment———clenches the lower lip, and picks up a piece.

I've watched him do this for years. But something feels a bit different about it today.

The reason, it turns out, is which piece he takes.

“The King?!”

Yaichi's fingers pick up his King.

In all the time I've known him, I've never once seen Yaichi choose to move his King first.

“..... This is it, huh?”

“..... I guess it works on defense, too?”

The players around me whisper back and forth as Yaichi moves his King straight forward.

I record it in my notes, saying each pen stroke under my breath to make absolutely sure no mistakes are made.

“Fiiive Twooo K-i-n-g.”

“..... 100 years,” the match recorder, Noboryou 3-*dan* mumbles next to me.

All the cameras going off made it difficult to catch anything else, but I'm

positive she also said the word *real* as well.

The 3-*dan* division wrapped up last week, but her winning percentage dropped so low that she is in danger of being demoted. The Sub League director, Hatomachi-sensei, was elated to hear that Noboryou 3-*dan* had registered to work a second match in the Crown Title series. “All of you should take a page out of Ms. Noboryou’s book and redouble your efforts! You’ll never become a professional unless you improve!” or so he said.

I, on the other hand, don’t find this to be a motivational story at all.

The Shogi Noboryou 3-*dan* played at their regular meetings couldn’t be truly defined as *Shogi* anymore.

She worked as the match recorder for Ika Sainokami and Ai Yashajin’s match as well.

Her admiration for Ginko Sora led her to work her matches whenever possible, but when she was present for Ginko’s professional debut and saw her so thoroughly defeated by Ika she started pursuing Yaichi and Ai instead.

———How obvious.

As someone who spent her time on the heels of Yaichi Kuzuryu, Noboryou 3-*dan*’s thought process is clear as day.

If I were to put the hungry stare that she has trained on one of the players right now into words, it would be this:

“Women are always drawn to the strongest.”

After nearly an hour staying in the arena, I make my exit when the morning snack arrives and join other staff members and players in the waiting room.

Ayumu seemed to be anticipating the opening King move and had a response already prepared. Playing it instantaneously, Yaichi seemed to take that as a challenge and responded in kind. The two have traded blows so quickly that I

never had a chance to take my leave.

———A League membership and multiple titles, but these two are still the same kids from back then.

Reminiscing lifts my mood as I open the waiting room door.

“Huh?”

Bewildered, I freeze in the door frame.

The sight that greeted me was so different from what I was expecting that I couldn't help it.

Of course, I knew that *O-Ryou* and *Shakando-sensei* were present. But the air in here is so tense, it's as if the match were drawing to a climactic finish at this very moment.

Professional players flocking here is no surprise, but members of the Women's League, Sub League and even some strong amateur players are lined up at the tables. What's more, every single one of them is looking down at an analysis board as if a loved one were on their deathbed.

“What?”

For a moment, I thought I might have misread the date. So I open my calendar and see that yes, it's a weekday in the summer. I suppose that explains why students aren't in class, but

“Why so many? It's the morning of the first day.”

“Quite the sight, isn't it? For this many pros to be on hand for the first day of a two-day match, why, it's like seeing pigs fly while riding a unicorn. Wouldn't you agree?”

The man who challenged the *Meijin* this season looks up from an analysis board to address me.

“*Natagiri-sensei*”

This is the first time Ayumu's research partner has come to the venue during this series. It's almost as if he knew it would last seven matches from the very beginning.

"Apparently, the waiting room during my match against the Meijin was almost empty. Probably because they all assumed there was no point since I was going to lose anyway!"

"I think jealousy had more to do with it."

I sit down directly across from the Switch Hitter and give him an honest explanation.

Jin Natagiri is a hard worker .

In the Shogi world, success when working as hard as he does indicates that effort trumps talent.

If there's one thing this world hates, it's the hard-working player who surpassed you.

Effort is a derogatory term.

Once someone is labeled as talentless, it becomes difficult for anyone to accept that person *had talent all along*. Many would rather die than admit it outright.

"Everyone must feel the same way about these two About Yaichi and Ayumu. They're both around 20 years old, but here they are competing against each other for a title. Acknowledging that they are *strong* means acknowledging that their own day in the sun will never come"

"Well, have they acknowledged them, do you think?"

"No, at least not in the conventional sense."

Interpreting the heavy air in here as positive acknowledgement of an opponent's abilities wouldn't be right. It's nothing like respect or esteem

“Envy? Hatred? Impatience?”

I open my notebook and jot down more words. The more I look them over, the more I feel each one misses the mark.

Natagiri 8-*dan* peers over at my notes from the other side of the table and says with all seriousness, “..... I’ve been hoping for a chance to speak with you for a long time.”

“With me?”

Given his reputation, I’m surprised this man would show any interest in a female. I admonish myself for that bias right away though. He took in Ai Hinatsuru, after all.

“Not only are you the editor of *Kuzuryu’s Notebook*, you have watched Yaichi Kuzuryu’s Shogi closer than anyone else and wrote about him using your *Mato* pen name. If anyone can figure out the purpose behind *that* opening move, it’s you. Am I wrong?”

“..... I do have a theory.”

“And I would love to hear it.”

“No matter how you think about it, advancing the King on the open move goes against Shogi theory. It’s a meaningless move *under the rule saying a match ends when the opponent’s King is checkmated.*”

“.....”

“There is a way for Shogi matches to end besides a checkmate.”

Back when the *anaguma* strategy tormented the Shogi world.

Similar logic was used in an attempt to make that ultimate defensive strategy into an unstoppable powerhouse.

The formation was created by my Master Taisei Kayaoku 7-*dan* and was relevant for a brief time———

“..... Is it the Pinwheel you’re talking about?”

“The concept seems similar. Just

“Just? Do tell.”

“The Pinwheel was designed to force Repetition Draws, but Kuzuryu-Crown seems to have something more distant in mind. Something beyond the world as we know it. Otherwise he couldn’t have mercilessly butchered Shinokubo 7-dan to such an extent

I jot down the quotes and information that went into my theory.

“Could that be the solution of Shogi?”

There isn’t any proof yet, so I leave the core part blank.

Even after all these years of knowing Yaichi Kuzuryu, this was the first time I was shaken to my core.

———Was this the Shogi I wished to see?

I idolized him for his strength.

But just what was that strength in the first place? Surely it wasn’t sequences and standard memorization.

“Freedom.”

That boy’s Shogi made a board restrained by one rule after another look like a treasure map.

Right now, there are players other than myself who are still trying to comprehend Yaichi’s Shogi. But if he continues forward on his own like this there will come a day when the collective consensus becomes:

What you’re trying to do doesn’t make any sense, so go do it somewhere else.

This 7-round title match will decide what ultimately happens. That’s the impression I have.

Will Yaichi become isolated within the Shogi world or not———?

“Incredible. Absolutely incredible.”

A clapping sound from across the way gets me to look up from my notes. It's Natagiri 8-*dan* who's putting his hands together.

“*He* came to the same conclusion. Doing so with so much less information than you have just goes to show he really must have traveled here from Planet Shogi, don't you agree?”

Natagiri 8-*dan* isn't looking at me.

Instead, he's looking past me toward the doorway.

“..... There's no way?!”

I spin around in disbelief.

What's more, I'm not the only one who has noticed.

“MEI———?!!”

It was as if the eyes of everyone in the room were about to fall from their sockets.

The strongest of them all———The man with four titles is standing there.

“The Meijin, in a title match waiting room?!”

“H-Has this ever happened before?!”

Title holders never work as observers.

As a general rule, they don't get involved with other title matches in any way.

Therefore, it's highly likely the Meijin hasn't set foot in a waiting room in the past two decades

“Please, come on in. I've saved the best seat for you,” says the man who fought him tooth and nail in the Meijin Title Match. Natagiri 8-*dan* then stands up and pulls out the chair for him.

Right in front of me.

“Huh?!”

“More so than I, the Meijin is the one who wanted to chat with you. Once I reminded him that journalists tend to spend the second day cooped up in the arena, he asked me to claim a seat while he took care of another matter. A seat across from Ms. Mato, to be precise!”

I’ve spoken with this man plenty of times for match articles in the past but My knees tremble.

His eyes are already laser-focused on the analysis board, his hands clasped around his cheeks. That’s a habit of his when he’s concentrating.

“Now! What do you say we take a trip through time, hm?” says a giddy Natagiri 8-*dan* as he resets the board to the opening formation.

The observer for this match, Usui 9-*dan*, is speaking to a journalist off in the corner, but it’s clear as day he is listening to every word being spoken at this table.

I jot something else down in my notebook.

“Time machines aren’t all that scary when everyone is coming with you.”

Never in a million years could I use that in an article, but I feel it sums up the thoughts of everyone here quite nicely.

🏠 Throwing Cash

“Oh! Over there!!”

Lobby of the HinaTsuru, Tokyo.

It took until the early evening, when customers are coming in one after another to check in, for me to finally track him down.

“Hey!”

“Miss Ai? Is something the ma———”

“Is it true that you made LOLI?!”

I put Master’s older brother on the spot.

The revelation was just so overwhelming for me that I completely forgot he’s working and there are customers around.

“Tell me! You’re the one who uploaded LOLI’s data online and made it free, right?! Everyone’s downloaded it and enjoying the benefits because of you, right?!”

Murmur, murmur, murmur

“Loli data on the internet?”

“Enjoy the benefits?”

“Actually, he kind of does look the type, doesn’t he?! ”

Several families on vacation reel back in shock at seeing an elementary school girl shouting “loli,” “loli” at the top of her lungs in the middle of the lobby.

“M-Miss Ai, please! This is bad for business! Really bad for business!!”

He quickly wheels me around and pushes me down a hallway to an empty room.

Now that we're in an empty meeting room, Master's older brother looks at me with tired eyes.

"..... Who told you?"

"Futatsuzuka 4-*dan*. He also wanted me to say hi."

"That guy"

Master's older brother massages his temples and breathes a long sigh.

"Yes, I'm the one who created LOLI's rating function and released the software you're using right now onto the internet. I'm also involved with GUI stuff, and some other things."

"Why didn't you say so?!"

"Anonymity, for one. It's a scary world out there."

"You're scared?"

"For longtime Shogi fans, software is a demon dead set on destroying the Shogi world. Anyone who would distribute it for free is nothing short of a terrorist. Letters threatening to kill me *and restore peace to the Shogi world* would pile up in no time."

"Ah"

He's right. There are still lots of professional players and Women's League members who hate software. They'll reluctantly use it, but they never talk about the developers and they aren't grateful at all.

Like me.

"..... I'm sorry for making a scene. I didn't think about your situation, that you might get killed if your secret got out. That's why you were panicking, isn't it?"

"Well, I thought you were going to get me murdered, socially, for a different

reason.”

He says such strange things. Uwhaaa?

“It is a secret from the public at large, though. Of course Yaichi knows, and so does everyone who worked with me in college.”

“So the *acquaintance good with computers* Master sometimes brought up was you all along! And, since Futatsuzuka-sensei was your junior at University of Tokyo———”

“That’s right. I also should mention that Mr. and Mrs. Yashajin, the creators of Awaji, also graduated from the same university about a decade before me.”

“.....!!”

That name comes out of nowhere and almost makes my heart stop.

Everything is connected.

A web that started a long, long time before I ever learned how to play Shogi.

“Ten-chan’s Ai Yashajin-Women’s Triple Title’s parents right?”

“Yes. They were my seniors in the Shogi club and even came to visit us once in a while after they graduated. That’s how I got to know them.”

Master’s older brother quietly recounts stories from his college days.

He’d been dabbling in computer programming since he was a junior high student and learned a lot from Ten-chan’s parents while at the University of Tokyo. They inspired him to try out his own ideas.

By that point, Ten-chan’s parents were already building a supercomputer while working at a big tech company, which has one of the strongest Shogi clubs in all of Japan.

Master’s older brother was also one of the top amateur Shogi players in the country and was planning to work for that company once he graduated.

But Ten-chan’s parents died in an accident.

He was so devastated that he took time off from college before formally taking another year off. Before he left though, he coached the University of Tokyo's Shogi Club to claim the Student Throne Title

"..... My life probably would've worked out a lot differently if they hadn't died that day. I still think about that sometimes."

"I-I'm so sorry"

"Of course, the manager taking me under her wing has made life better than ever. She is absolutely incredible. I'll follow her to the ends of the earth!"

"U-Umm?!"

My mother was a zealot. Then again, plenty of the staff and even our customers are the same way, so I'm not all that surprised.

"..... Uh-huuuh. I could see Awaji coming out in Yaichi's Shogi these days, but never in a million years would I have thought the Yashajin's daughter would hatch a plan like that."

Master's older brother scowls when I tell him what Ten-chan is up to. I don't think I've ever seen him do that before.

His mentors' daughter and his employer's daughter.

He might feel trapped between the two of us.

"Futatsuzuka-sensei also said that you could give me some advice if he gave you the deep learning software he has been developing. Like attack strategies, maybe?"

"Oh?"

"Please, teach me about it! Is deep learning software really that amazing? Do you think you could make something even stronger than Awaji?!"

"That's a no."

He didn't even pause.

"Fighting deep learning software with deep learning software turns into throwing cash around."

"Cash? What's money got to do with it?"

"Simply put, deep learning software makes its own policy network to predict the future and dual networks to go out and find it I'll spare you the finer details, but let's just say the process costs a lot of money. That's why I never touched it."

"Futatsuzuka-sensei said so too. That deep learning's model? gets stronger the bigger it gets."

"Yeah. That's why it ends up costing a fortune. Financial backing is more important than the original concept. That's why money gets thrown around."

He says the scale goes way beyond what a single person could handle.

A company over an individual. And above the companies is the country.

Ten-chan is moving the country.

"Supercomputers are typically federal projects, you see? Her companies and tax money were orchestrated to create Shogi software. I've got to take my hat off to that kind of political clout. A computer nerd like me couldn't get that much in 10,000 years."

"..... And Ten-chan has all that power"

"Please don't get down on yourself, Miss Ai. Yes, the model used to create deep learning software is extremely complex. My LOLI could never compete against it."

"Then there's no———"

"But there's billions of even more complex models all over the place."

"Huh?! Where?"

“I’m talking about the brain.”

Master’s older brother taps the side of his head.

“The neurons in the human brain come together in a network that is unfathomably more complex than a machine-made model. Which means that humans have the potential to grow even further beyond. With the right teacher, it’s theoretically possible for a grade school girl to take down the God-like Meijin.”

“The right teacher”

“It’s easier said than done, of course. I think Futatsuzuka’s experiment tried to tackle that head-on and that’s what made it crumble.”

He then quietly adds.

“I also tried an experiment to see if a person could play like a computer Let’s just say it didn’t go well.”

“U-Um! M-May I ask you something?”

I just had a very scary thought.

The person whose playing style is closest to a computer’s right now.

What if he wasn’t born with that ability but someone taught him how to do it a long time ago?

“The first person to teach Master how to play was!!”

“Just a coincidence.”

He rejects my wild conclusion right away.

“I was just a country boy clicking away on a keyboard in my spare time when I showed Yaichi the ropes. That balanced style of Shogi came from his talent. Well, then again”

Master’s older brother grins at me.

“Older brothers have a tendency to teach their younger brothers the worst things, yeah?”

■ Barren Wasteland

Ayumu Kannabe pulled back his sweat-soaked bangs and swiftly applied eyedrops.

“Ngh

The searing pain was so intense he thought blood was about to burst out through his eyes. However, Ayumu welcomed the pain.

For pain was his only ally.

———Maintain focus! Even the slightest waiver means death!!

His summer *haori* jacket was light as feathery angel wings, but even that began to feel like heated shackles and now lay abandoned on the floor behind him.

———That happened after move 150, did it not

Ayumu slapped his cheek to force his mind out of the past and back into the moment. His eyes, still stinging, refocused on the board in front of him.

———Concentrate, Ayumu Kannabe!! The fight yet continues! Calmly appraise the formations!!

The board had devolved into utter chaos.

As a professional, moving the King forward on the opening move was a difficult decision to make. Rather than a wasted move, it seemed to set the formation far too early in the match. Sitting on the receiving end, Ayumu had set out to take full advantage of it.

———..... And I built a sizable advantage in the early-game

Ayumu couldn't help but reflect on the sealing move, specifically how he could *feel* the grip he had over the formations.

He attacked with reckless abandon at the start of Day 2. He had the defending King dead to rights at the edge of the board before lunchtime, and was one metaphorical step away from seizing victory. Had Ayumu even one more Pawn on his stand, there was no doubt that the defending King would have been checkmated.

Alas, Yaichi Kuzuryu had a sequence of despair waiting for him once the final goal was in sight.

Having read that his King couldn't be checkmated far earlier, Yaichi shifted his King around the board with a single finger and dodged Ayumu's attacks with effortless ease

“..... Demon King”

The expression on Yaichi's face across from him could not contrast any greater with his own.

Haori jacket still draped around his shoulders, he appeared perfectly comfortable. It was as though the idea of losing this match wasn't in the realm of possibility for him.

The Demon King then pressured Ayumu on the board.

His message: *Play like this if you want to stand a chance against me.*

It was a single rope strung between two jagged cliffs.

———This narrow route is the only way

The elation of his first title being within reach and the terror of knowing a single slip would send him plunging into the agony of defeat. Those two emotions swirled in his mind, pounding his very being as Ayumu dug his fingers into the rope.

The determination he forged during his session with the Meijin became a source of courage.

———Do not falter! Reach forth! I am going *there*, aren't I?!

One more audible slap to his own cheek and Ayumu Kannabe advanced his King with all the strength he could muster.

“Forward!!”

To what awaited him at the end of the rope———a barren wasteland.

The journalist in charge of the livestream calling out the move count was all that could be heard in the waiting room.

“..... The next move will be the 200th.”

The players who had gathered there were glued to analysis boards in an attempt to derive some semblance of meaning behind the moves being played in the arena, but even professionals couldn’t distinguish a good move from a bad one. None could speak, they were concentrating so hard.

Each had arrived at the same thought.

This game *wasn’t Shogi anymore*.

“Whoa”

The sound escaped the journalist’s mouth before he could stop it.

Seeing a formation that takes shape after 200 moves could only be described as an anomaly.

The two Kings, one at 1 Five and the other at 9 Five, seemed as two cannon-laden ships exchanging fire———entrenched in the middle of the left and right edges of the board, their battle raged on.

“It’s almost like they turned the Shogi board on its side”

“How can they keep playing the best moves when the pieces are lined up like this They’re *both* monsters”

The Kings made a slow and steady advance under the protection of their escort of pieces.

Double Nyugyoku.

The anomalies kept appearing on the board as if from behind a smoky veil.

“It’s a burnt, barren wasteland,” said someone beside themselves.

Pieces had completely disappeared from the center of the board.

Software displayed promoted pieces in red on monitors to make them easily identifiable, but now every screen in the room was drowned out in a red hue. Each King arrived at the opposite side of the board with its own big piece bodyguards for protection.

“..... There was no way to see this coming after the sealing move”

“Offense has won every match so far but, I’m not so sure about this Shogi”

Software indicated an offensive advantage, but everyone was taking that rating with a big grain of salt. Some were starting to doubt it altogether.

“If the Demon King of the West has been playing in a way to make this happen from the start, Has he surpassed computers entirely?”

No one spoke. There was no stronger affirmative than their silence.

Rina Shakando Women’s 8-*dan* spoke to her apprentice, who was similarly glued to a monitor with her mouth agape.

“Maria.”

“One such as I?!”

“Recite the rule.”

Ending the match with a checkmate under Double Nyugyoku was difficult.

Thus, *separate ending conditions* were necessary. *The rules* change.

Maria hesitated for just a moment, but was soon counting on her fingers as she reeled off the regulation.

“Well First, one King must have achieved *nyugyoku* or be on the verge of doing so such that forcing checkmate would be challenging for either player. All pieces other than Kings are assigned a point value, with big pieces being five and small pieces being one. Then, if both players have a tally above 24, a stalemate can be called should both players agree to do so Yes?”

“What a good memory you have.”

“But of course! The humiliation I suffered at the hands of a weed at the King of Naniwa Tournament was due to my spotty understanding of the rules for a stalemate! Trying to recall broke my concentration and resulted in an instant death, so it has become my nightly regimen to read through the procedure five times before bed and sear it into my memory!”

Shakando gave her proudly beaming apprentice a pat on the head and continued.

“However, I was not referring to that rule.”

“Wh-Whaaaaaa?”

Her gaze was not on Maria’s bewildered expression. Instead, it was trained on the two players displayed on the monitor.

Shakando’s words became an opening bell and the journalists within the waiting room sprang into action.

“Have any stalemates happened in title matches before?!”

“It happened in the King Title Match, right? Two of them between Oishi-sensei and Okito-sensei”

“Not in the Crown Title Match, though! It’ll be the first one ever!”

At the same time, plans were being drawn up for withdrawal.

For matches at the Shogi Association, a rematch would be carried out the same day.

When a match is played on location, however, the host's schedule has to be taken into account. Thus, the rematch taking place on the same day wasn't the norm.

Unlike Repetition Draws, stalemates typically occur late into the night. As the inn's schedule took priority, stalemates during a title series resulted in an *eighth* match taking place.

"An eighth match I can already see it," remarked observer Takeru Usui 9-*dan* as he straightened his kimono and started walking to the arena.

Now his turn, Yaichi was looking at his friend sitting across from him rather than the board.

"Hff Nghhh Gaaahhh Koff!!"

He looked as if lost under the hot desert sun.

Dry, aching coughs and skin tinted red from a fever. The sweat that had been pouring out of his skin nonstop not too long ago was now absent. He was dehydrated, no doubt.

"KOFF! Kgh Aghhhhhh!!"

And now a series of dry heaves overcame Ayumu. The man dressed in a kimono reminiscent of body dressing for funerals might actually pass away at this rate.

———This is dangerous.

Yaichi came to that decision looking at his friend, not the board.

He had found himself in a similar position both when he first took the Ryuo title and when he defended it against the Meijin.

With only a few minutes left of waiting time, the remaining seconds were too precious to use asking for more water, let alone excusing yourself to visit the

restroom.

Furthermore, the afternoon snack delivered at 3 pm was the last chance to refuel on the second day of the Crown Title Match. Yaichi understood this would happen and brought his own extra water and snacks into the arena.

Yaichi clearly had a slight edge when it came to how to play in title matches.

———I also played tons of Double Nyugyoku matches against Awaji.

Normally, Shogi players wouldn't spend much time at all researching Double Nyugyoku standards. Most wouldn't even bother playing against a computer. Yaichi, on the other hand, had.

In his eyes, this was the solution to Shogi.

It didn't matter to him if this formation never came up between human players.

"Ayumu."

Yaichi picked up an unopened bottle of water and held it out.

".....?!"

The challenger's head snapped up. The Demon King addressed him as gently as possible.

"There's no point going any further. Let's call it a draw."

He offered a stalemate.

"Right now, I've got 24 points and you have 30. 250 moves is more than enough, don't you think? Let's start over on another day."

In that instance, Yaichi would have the first move.

———The first move guarantees victory in this title series.

It goes without saying that Yaichi had been trying to force this result from the moment he moved his King back on his open move.

He could envision the series playing out like this back during the first match, in fact.

Show Awaji's Repetition Draw sequence even once, and it would be easily copied. However, purposefully triggering a stalemate was far more difficult to achieve even after seeing it happen.

He could protect both his title and the future of Shogi at the same time.

"Just to let you know, my point total won't drop below 24 again and it's impossible to checkmate my King at this point. What about you? Can you keep finding the best moves when you're hurting this bad?"

Traditional aesthetics as both a Shogi player and a human being were paramount to Ayumu. Allowing this mess to continue in a title match should be the last thing he wanted.

That could be a humiliation worse than defeat.

"Take the draw and we'll start fresh. You'll get your waiting time back and have a chance to rest. We can end this playing normal Shogi. That would be better for you, wouldn't it?"

"....."

Ayumu said nothing even as he reached for the water bottle in Yaichi's outstretched hand.

Then parched lips started forming words.

🏠 Terms of Battle

It's been a very long time since I set foot in this room.

Unlike the Onjyoudan no Ma, the *tatami* mats and sliding doors in this arena are practically falling apart. I remember the director telling us time and again to keep our hands off the walls because the paint flakes off with a single touch

Mold tickles my nose as I take a look around and remark, "They never should have waited this long for a new association building. What is this place, 40 years old? One good tremor and it's done for. This obsolescence is putting the children who learn how to play Shogi here in danger, don't you agree?"

We move down the corridor that connects the Minase and Kinki arenas on the fourth floor of the Kansai Association Building. The Practice League still meets here, and our younger sister apprentice is part of it.

My *older sister* is near the doorway, so I ask, "Isn't the association building in Tokyo even older? I've only been there a handful of times, so I can't comment on it myself. Are you comfortable there?"

"..... It could be better," says Ai Hinatsuru, showing some restraint while holding her backpack to her chest.

"There's cockroaches, too"

"Gross! Would you not talk about that?!"

How can anyone focus on a match knowing one of those black creepy crawlies could show up at any second?!

"Being here sure brings back memories, doesn't it, Ten-chan? There's so many It'll be sad to see them go"

"True. I can't deny that."

I turn to look at her properly for the first time.

She may have gotten taller.

Compared to when our paths crossed here on a regular basis, her face looks more mature. Is it the shorter hair?

Or am I seeing her in a different light now that Awaji has shown me what she's worth?

"Do you remember our first match?"

"Of course, I do."

It was for my Practice League Entrance Exam.

Ai Hinatsuru was my final opponent.

I won that match. From start to finish, I thought I was in complete control until the director pointed out that she missed a check path.

Ai broke down in tears once she realized it. She cried and cried, saying how much it hurt.

The two of us haven't played an official match since then.

"So, what is it? You must have something important to talk about if you wanted to meet face-to-face like this."

"The Professional Entrance Exam"

"I heard that you snubbed the board of directors' offer. Is that true?"

"Y-Yes"

Even the players and Sub League members who support what she's doing were split in two camps once word got out.

"Okay, what does that have to do with me?"

"I did some research about the only other Professional Entrance Exam and found out how former gamester and Shakando-sensei's Master made it happen."

“Is that so? How’d he do it?”

I played dumb.

The so-called Demon of Hakone, Sadatoshi Ashigara was the only player to test into a professional 5-*dan* ranking and it was neither by appealing to the newspaper media nor pleading with other professional players for support.

“He got a sponsor,” Ai answers. “That person wasn’t a strong Shogi player, but they had authority. Enough of it to make the association do whatever they wanted.”

“.....”

“When I turned down the board’s offer, Shakando-*sensei* clapped her hands and said *well done*. I think everyone else in the room thought she was talking about Tamayon-*sensei*’s speech but I think she was applauding me for finding the right answer.”

The timidity in Ai's voice disappears with each passing word.

She presses on with confidence that only comes from reading all the way to checkmate.

“Redmond-*sensei* was trying his best to convince me to take the offer, but I’m starting to think that Chairman Tsukimitsu and Shakando-*sensei* just wanted an alibi.”

“An alibi?”

“Uh-huh. A way to prove to sponsors that they *tried* to win me over. And Mr. Mine, who used to work at the Kansai Shogi Association, participated in the meeting remotely. Some employees do sometimes join the board after they retire, but that never happened with a Kansai Association employee before. Someone who is close to Mr. Mine and could benefit from having him on the board decided to appoint him. Someone like you, maybe.”

“..... That organization is just as out of touch as they always have been. In a

bad way, I might add.”

Finding anyone with sway over the board of directors isn’t possible.

Because *they’re not on the inside*.

The association started out as a bunch of gamesters, nothing more than a collection of ornery men who would say, “I don’t care if what you’re saying is right, I won’t listen because it’s you who’s saying it.” Therefore, they can’t decide anything for themselves.

Then who calls the shots?

The *higher ups*, that’s who. Just like the feudal age, isn’t it?

That’s how I managed to manipulate the association from the outside, through people with political and economic clout.

My plan to secure contracts to rebuild the Shogi Association buildings went off without a hitch.

“You’re right that the association won’t listen to the powerless masses. There’s only a handful of people who can sway them. And yes, I have that kind of power now.”

“.....!”

Her eyes fly open like a cat. After finding someone who could make her dream a reality, how could she not?

“Please, Ten-chan! Help me set up a Professional Entrance Exam!”

“..... Sure.”

“!! Y-You will?! Really?!”

“Once you beat me.”

Judging by her lack of surprise, I bet she anticipated that response. Ai is just quietly looking at me.

After all, she knows I'm not done yet.

"There's one more condition, too."

Once I lick my dry lips, I tell her.

"The one who loses has to quit Shogi."

Thud.

That was the sound of Ai's backpack slipping through her arms and crashing to the floor.

"..... Q-Quit?"

"Don't you think it's a bit too convenient for you to have a chance to turn professional without the risk of losing anything? That's the same risk every member of the Sub League is running right now. Is it too much for you? Swear to me that you'll retire from the Women's League and never sit in front of a Shogi board again if you lose, here and now."

"....."

She probably thinks I'm telling her to give up on Yaichi.

———I'm not that naive.

I know the reason why she wanted to become a professional in the first place. I've known since the start, and I didn't even need Awaji to figure it out.

We *are* sisters, after all.

Adding the part about *the one who loses* means that I'll have to walk away from Shogi if she wins.

———That is more pressure for you, isn't it?

The weight of knowing you could change someone else's life. Having that on

her shoulders is the only way for Ai Hinatsuru to play up to her full potential of Tier 1, the apex of humanity.

Ai Hinatsuru has made a mess of so many lives at this point, and she's done it all with tears running down her face. One look at her overwhelming talent at such a young age shattered her opponents' will to fight one after another akin to a soul reaper or a plague.

But if I beat her at her absolute best, I can prove that I have ascended to Tier 0 once and for all.

Surpassing Ginko Sora and on the same level as Yaichi Kuzuryu.

"..... Okay."

Ai squeezes the hem of her skirt with all her might.

"If I lose to you, I'll quit Shogi forever."

Friendship

Pushing the water bottle away, Ayumu says, "I refuse."

It took me a second to realize what he meant.

At first, I thought he was refusing the water, not my offer of a stalemate.

"..... What?"

"I REFUSE!!" Ayumu repeats and slams his fists down on the *tatami* mat and leans over the board, showing me he clearly wants to keep going.

"Hey Think this through, will you?"

Some annoyance comes out in my voice. Players aren't supposed to let that happen during a match, but Ayumu rejecting the stalemate gets under my skin.

The match will never end if we keep going from here.

Well, actually There will be an *end*. There's a *rule* for that.

But going that far would be meaningless.

We both have enough points and there's no chance of our Kings being checkmated. All we can do now is just produce an endless chain of Promoted Pawns.

It'll become a stalemate in the end anyway.

"Yes, I know you'll lose the first move advantage in a rematch. I completely understand where you're coming from and I admire your willingness to fight to the end without giving up."

I notice the observer, *Usui-sensei* coming into the arena through my peripheral vision but keep trying to get Ayumu to see reason.

"But all you're going to do is muck up this match record and cause trouble for the staff at this hotel if you keep playing. This is a title match, remember? We're

not playing a practice match in the kids' room anymore.”

“.....”

Compiling meaningless moves as a pro is called *soiling the record*. We hate it when people do that.

That's because it'll stay in that record forever.

For Ayumu, who has always honored tradition and cared about aesthetics, being criticized by future players for all eternity is something he should want to avoid at all costs.

I was absolutely sure he'd agree to a stalemate, but———

“..... Are you aware of Mozart's twilight years?”

He said something that had nothing to do with Shogi. M-Mozart?

I have no idea how to respond to that, but Usui-*sensei* does it for me.

“He was a boy genius who wrote his first piece of music as a five-year-old, but his money dried up along with his popularity as he got older. Word is he couldn't even pay for a headstone on his grave or a funeral when he passed away.”

“Yes. Mozart spent his final years in isolation But it was not due to financial struggles”

Ayumu is so completely absorbed in the board that he doesn't notice the difference between our voices.

He just keeps talking like a witchdoctor casting a curse

“Prominent figures like Bach and Handel were history in Mozart's day. Beethoven had yet to distinguish himself as a composer and Wagner wasn't even born yet. He advanced too far ahead of his time to the point that his contemporaries couldn't comprehend his music and left him out in the cold”

“That’s how it always is for prodigies. I speak from experience.”

The creator of *Usui System* acknowledges Ayumu’s point and then asks an obvious question.

“But what does that have to do with this match?”

“I will not allow Yaichi Kuzuryu to become another Mozart.”

Ayumu’s voice shakes with glee, but he never once looks away from the board.

“Finally I have finally made it this far. At last, the true battle can begin. This match will end everything, once and for all. Judgment shall be cast before the *500th move*.”

“?! A-Ayumu Are you seriously trying to make that happen?!”

Shogi rules took one player refusing a stalemate when all the conditions were met into account.

So there are a few ways to settle it.

First, the match has to continue all the way to 500 moves.

The regulation currently says that *all matches that reach 500 moves will be unconditionally replayed from the beginning*.

Ayumu is talking about *the other rule*.

It says that if a player meets specific conditions, that player will be recognized as the winner if they declare that they have met all the conditions.

In the Shogi world, matches end with one player lowering their head and acknowledging their loss. This is the one exception when the winner can declare their own victory.

It’s called———

“The Nyugyoku Victory Declaration!!”

The four people in here other than Ayumu harmonize.

Usui-*sensei* looks worried that he could make the correct call as the observer with all those complicated rules in play.

Noboryou 3-*dan* is in utter despair thinking about how much longer she's going to have to stay sitting on her ankles.

The journalist Ms. Mato rips up everything she wrote so far because now the match will either end in a victory declaration or a 500-move stalemate.

As for me A certain moment popped up in my head.....

During the first match, when I had to choose between going for a checkmate or playing Double Nyugyoku..... That look on Ayumu's face when I decided not to play Double Nyugyoku He looked lonely, almost hurt.

"Th-There's no way"

I get back to the match to see if that really is the case.

Ayumu plays his next move instantaneously.

Seeing him keep all the victory declaration conditions in mind, in addition to the point tally and avoiding checkmate while extending the match under one-minute Shogi that *no way* became a *definitely*.

Ever since these rules were set in place, *no match between human beings has ever been decided by a victory declaration*.

The conditions are just that strict.

While I doubt that even pro players have them all memorized, the biggest reason no one does it is because———

"In the event the conditions have not been met, the declaring player will lose the match."

That.

You have to completely grasp not only your own pieces, but your opponents

as well in a matter of seconds.

Most will settle for the tie than crosses that razor-thin bridge.

But Ayumu, who has already rejected a stalemate, is making every move necessary to meet all the conditions.

He's not even hesitating. *He would have had to have researched* to get this far without making any mistakes.

Just knowing the conditions doesn't mean you can play this efficiently!

"Ayumu Don't tell me you were expecting this and researched how to play Double Nyugyoku strategies?!"

"Not I."

"Huh?"

"He was the one who ventured into the boundless possibilities that exist post-Double Nygyouku. Though he never had a chance to show it in a match, he kept researching For years and years, he thoroughly dissected this very battle! I am merely benefiting from the fruits of that labor!"

The *he* Ayumu is talking about.

Who was it that spurred on talks of Shogi's solution, accurately predicted the future and even set a rule that would soon be necessary?

"The Mei jin?"

I heard that everyone had doubts when the Meijin first proposed the Nyugyoku Victory Declaration because it was so complicated and unrealistic.

But after listening to Ayumu's story I get a different picture.

———Was it because he wanted to enjoy Shogi even more?

All of Awaji's Double Nyugyoku match records plunged me into despair.

Seeing all those matches, which would end in either a declaration or a

stalemate at the 500th move all lined up, made me believe that was Shogi's inevitable future and it broke me inside. How could Shogi be so flawed?

But my friend sitting across the board is saying this:

Don't give up before figuring out the intricacies of Double Nyugyoku matches.

"Fine then, show me what's possible!"

"Acknowledged!!"

A duke it out over the shoulders type of brawl. The true mark of a Double Nyugyoku match!

The average pro would struggle to keep moving without their formations falling apart in this barren wasteland, but the two of us have studied this phase so well that we're setting traps for each other as we go.

Only those with a superior sense for how pieces interact have the skill to exchange blows in this type of fight. Something will give if you read sequences through one at a time.

———If I don't reach out with all my senses I'll lose!!

This isn't a reading contest anymore.

How much of my life have I devoted to Shogi pieces? How earnestly did I pursue possibilities and the future of Shogi?

The depth of my genuine love for the game called Shogi is being tested.

"Onward, my Sub-Golds!!"

Bent on fulfilling the *ten or more pieces other than the King in the opponent's territory* condition, Ayumu summons a constant stream of Pawns from his piece stand.

Cleaning up my territory feels like playing whack-a-mole. I find a moment to breathe and ask the match recorder, "What move are we up to?!"

"The next move will be 388 N-No! 390!!"

My path is set. Keep Ayumu from fulfilling the conditions until the 500th move.

That way, it'll end as a stalemate no matter what the point totals are. In other words, if I can prevent Ayumu from meeting those conditions through move 499, this match will be moot. We will have a rematch.

There are 110 moves left before 500. A typical game of Shogi ends in that amount of moves but———

“So easy,” I say as I *sacrifice my big pieces* to keep Ayumu from invading my territory.

I'm way below 24 points now.

There's no way to offer a stalemate anymore.

Now that I've abandoned the final retreat path, Usui-sensei gets out of *seiza* and crosses his legs.

“Play your hearts out, kiddos,” he says. “Takeru Usui'll observe right along with you!”

The date changes, but we're still fighting.

Ayumu and I break past the previous record for the longest match, 402 moves, but a hellish 98 moves of Shogi are still sitting in front of us.

Then again, that *hell*———

“Haha! How fun is this?!”

Keeping the amount of Ayumu's invading pieces out of my territory is such a thrill. This brand new version of Shogi is more fun than I've had in a long time.

“KHAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

“HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

It's the middle of the night, but roars erupt in this quiet traditional hotel in Tokyo as our endless game of tag rages on.

"Is this Shogi at all?"

I don't have an answer prepared for that question.

If there's anything I can say, it's this I'm amazed Ayumu has managed to keep his formation so delicately balanced for this long. He must've practiced with the Meijin countless times.

"There's something wrong in that guy's head, don't you think, Ayumu?!"

"On that point, I wholeheartedly agree!!"

I never beat Awaji.

But I did force a tie twice. I escaped long enough to make it to the 500th move with the same strategy I'm playing now.

Even so, I can't shake off Ayumu.

Both of us felt like we'd cracked the other's shell around the 400th move. I never imagined that two people could play correctly long enough to make it into this unknown abyss But Ayumu is playing just as strong as Awaji right now!

"Here's to humans!! But———!!"

The finish line comes into view as we round 450 moves.

As long as I keep this up, my guts are telling me I can make it!

"Just 50 TO GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

Yelling at the top of my lungs to keep myself fully alert, I allow Ayumu to fulfill the third condition.

I stop hunting Ayumu's tenth invading pieces completely.

Instead, I bar him from reaching the last requirement with every ounce of my

life!

“The declaring player cannot be in check.”

I have to keep him in check, last requirement, all the way to the 500th move. In other words, the small army of pieces I’ve built up have to threaten his King for the next 50 turns straight.

25 checks in a row!

“Check!!”

I snap pieces down as fast as possible so he doesn’t have any time to think and put his King in check every single turn.

Check!

Check! Check!

Chechcheckcheckcheckcheckchechcheckcheckcheckcheckchechcheckcheckche

None of these checks feel very threatening on their own. Of course not. Both of us know there’s no way either of us can put the other in checkmate.

It’s just a mere stalling tactic to draw out the match but every move I can force out of him is more important than the last.

“What move was that?!”

“The 496th!!”

I look down at my empty piece stand and snap my tongue in frustration.

Out of ammo.

———But I just need two more moves!

If I can find a way to put his King in check two more times, a stalemate will be called.

So long as Ayumu’s King stays in check, he won’t be able to make the declaration. I have to figure out a way to do that using only what’s on the board

but———THERE!!

“Check!!”

———YES!

Miraculously, there was a piece ripe for the taking in a position where I could put Ayumu’s King in check at the same time. Taking an extra piece on my stand, I can guarantee a stalemate next turn. It’s two birds with one stone.

Usui-*sensei* lets out a long sigh.

Probably a sigh of relief that he won’t have to be the first observer to call a match based on a victory declaration in history.

I place the piece I took onto my piece stand, absolutely sure this will end in a stalemate since I have Ayumu in check on the 496th move.

“.....”

Ayumu has been playing at lightning speed all this time, but now he stops.

There’s only one thing he can do in this situation: let his King be put back in check.

Then, he says, while moving his King with trembling fingers, “*Check.*”

“Huh?”

Move 497.

My eyes shoot open as his hand pulls away.

What?

Did he just say?

“You are in check,” Ayumu repeats.

Saying I’m in check.

I’m the one who put him in check so how can it be that I’m in check now?

“R-Re

The observer and match recorder get up on their knees and shout.

“Reverse check?!”

I can’t even speak anymore.

———He got me

That *miraculous* piece wasn’t a miracle at all.

It was a deadly poison apple.

Even while being put in check more than 20 times straight, Ayumu wasn’t just aimlessly running his King around. He was setting a trap for me the whole time.

I was so focused on keeping him in check until the 500th move that I completely overlooked something that I’d normally never miss.

My own King’s safety.

“A reverse check, here? Now?! Then———”

I’ll be checkmated if I don’t protect my King!

Falling into a trap at the very last single possible moment, I’m forced to use the piece I’d intended to be the final check on Ayumu’s King for my own King’s defense instead.

“..... Kgh!!”

I take the piece and place it in front of my King rather than Ayumu’s. If I didn’t, I’d lose.

Once my fingertips leave it

Ayumu doesn’t play a move. It’s his turn, number 499.

His right hand, what should be reaching for the board right now, reaches for the heavens instead.

“|———”

Ayumu Kannabe extends his arm as high as he can and says those words.

The ones that only the person who endured a long, grueling fight to seize a win at the very end can say.



“I am victorious.”

He looks almost divine right now.

So much so that it's easy to forget he's a pro Shogi player

“S———”

Staring absentmindedly at Ayumu's outstretched fist, observer Usui 9-*dan* starts the confirmation. It took him a moment to react because every match up until now has ended with “I lost” I don't blame him.

“So, you are declaring you win, yes?”

“Correct.”

“Nice. I'll confirm.”

Usui-*sensei* turned to ask the match recorder Miss Noboryou to confirm all conditions were met on the tablet, but the thing ran out of battery at some point during the match. So she had switched to the old-fashioned way: on paper. Not that even the latest tablets come with an autodetection feature for a victory declaration.

As for the match recorder herself, she hasn't been able to take a bathroom break in several hours and flew out of the arena the instant Ayumu declared.

Almost as if taking her place *Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud*! Media and association people swam through the door.

Now that Ayumu has claimed victory, a draw isn't going to happen. Either he has met all the criteria and won or I'll be given the win if he's missing something.

This judgment will decide everything.

“The offense has one, two, three, four 10 small pieces and three big for a combined 25 points. Combine that with what is in the defender's territory

..... Damn it! I should've blocked this pain-in-the-ass rule when I had the chance

The camera got a good angle of Usui-sensei counting up the pieces on the board.

It goes without saying that Ayumu and I already know the result.

But I'm more than happy to wait for the observer's final decision. We were both playing one-minute Shogi. If even one of the conditions isn't met, then I get to keep my title

"..... Got it."

After making painstakingly sure that everything is in order, the exhausted observer makes the announcement.

The result of the first Nyugouku Victory Declaration match in history.

"At the time of declaration, Kannabe's King was in *nyugyoku*, had over ten pieces besides said King in the defender's territory, possessed over 31 points worth of pieces on and off the board and was not in check. The total number of moves, barely, has not reached 500. Therefore———"

Gulp It's so quiet in here that everyone heard him swallow some spit.

Then the silence gets destroyed.

"With a total of 499 moves, I confirm Kannabe 8-dan's victory declaration to be valid!"

WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!

The venue trembles in the dead of night.

"It's over?!"

“By declaration! The first one ever!!”

“What was the last move?! WHAT?! The offense’s *declaration was the last move*?!”

“I-I thought the match would never end”

“Kannabe-Crown has been born!!”

“Kuzuryu’s first title loss He’s actually the youngest ever to do that, too! Just a bit younger than the Meijin when it happened to him!”

..... No tears came out the moment I lost the title.

Maybe I sweat too much during the match and my emotions are too numb to cry?

I try to stand but end up tumbling backward and my back hits the *tokonoma* pillar. I lean on it and just stare up at the ceiling as moments drift by.

“..... Haaaaa”

My head was heavy as lead a second ago, but now it’s light as a feather. All the dark clouds I’ve been carrying with me start to lift. I feel refreshed, somehow.

There’s no pain at all.

I don’t even feel like reviewing the match in my head. Rather than analyze the good and bad moves, the whole thing glistens like a treasure just the way it is
.....

But here’s what I say to Ayumu.

“..... Sorry for turning your first title match into this”

“It’s fine. We’ll have plenty more.”

Sounding like he did back when we first met, the divine aura Ayumu had when he made the declaration is gone. He’s got the face of a kid who played until he dropped.

———There’s nothing waiting for us but a pitch black wasteland

The edge of the world I’d wanted to keep hidden.

Surprisingly it was kind of fun.

I got my fill of both the excitement I had the first time I picked up a Shogi piece and the thrill of an intense match. Admittedly, there were too many moves.

Why, though?

The utter nothingness I felt when playing against Awaji here is suddenly satisfying.

Ayumu came with me this time. That has to be it.

With a best friend at your side, a wasteland, hell or even outer space can become the best arena ever. I know that now.

“Hey, New Crown.”

Since I still can’t get up, I reach toward Ayumu and ask, “Would you come back here again with me?”

“We are no Mozarts. The old standards remain far from perfected. Untold new melodies are yet waiting to be uncovered.”

He takes my hand and offers a firm squeeze before saying.

“However, I would not turn down an occasional venture.”

As playing this over and over would be fatal, Sir Ayumu adds with a serious face. He hasn’t changed at all since the day we met.

He’s always been like this.

Even when he’d stay over at Master’s place while Big Sis and I were playing *Title Match*, he stuck with us for hours and hours without so much as a complaint.

The same was true when Big Sis and I went to all the Shogi classrooms to beat all the students around Kanto. He just made that serious face and tagged along

“..... I wonder if I can bring Ginko here”

She might not be able to endure the trip.

But, if Ayumu and I can establish a path with standards, someone else might come join us someday. Then we can enjoy Shogi to our hearts' content.

Here I'm sure I can experiment with Shogi like I used to in the kid's room back when I was an apprentice.

The Sky at Sunrise

My smartphone dies in my grasp at the very second the match ended.

“..... Hot”

The screen which had shown the match for hours and hours is now dark, but the heat from being on so long is still there.

499 moves.

The first Nyugyoku Victory Declaration ever.

Reflecting on a match I'd never imagined, let alone seen before my heart clenches.

“..... Oww”

But this isn't jealousy.

More than Kannabe 8-*dan* Ayumu taking the Crown Title from Yaichi.

More than Yaichi losing a title for the first time.

It's a notion that crosses my mind that's making my heart squeeze.

———What if I sat across from Yaichi as the Challenger in Ayumu's place?

Could I do the same thing?

“No I'd never make it there”

Surely, I'd run out of time when those two were playing at breakneck speed, make a stupid mistake of some kind and die an instant death.

I had always dreamed of facing Yaichi in an official match as a pro.

But now? I saw it.

Even if I do get that far Yaichi wouldn't bother playing all-out against the likes of me anymore.

“Hey, Yaichi

I tap my phone to make my boyfriend's face appear on screen, but the wallpaper doesn't show up because the battery is still dead.

It was so hot just moments ago, but now it's ice cold.

“..... You don't need me after all Do you”

I look up at the silver sky starting to grow brighter, feeling more alone and miserable than ever, and ask that question over and over.

■ A Voice from the Darkness

“..... I have failed”

The New Crown mutters, draped over my shoulder and alcohol on his breath.

The after party was short, but Ayumu was such a stickler for social obligations that he drank all the *sake* rice wine put in front of him. Drinking any of it after nearly 500 moves would make anyone crash. The only thing I could do is carry him back to his room myself. Everyone else is already asleep!

“Shouldn’t this be the other way around? Doesn’t the loser usually drown their sorrow in a bottle and the winner has to take them back to their room? Yeah?”

“..... Utter fail ure”

He can barely talk. Damn! This guy is adorable.

“I didn’t even know you drank.”

“..... The Meijin and Natagiri 8-*dan* instructed me at our excursion”

Hopefully that’s where the lesson ended

I lay my best friend down on the bed, but he looks like he’s in a bit of pain.

“Should I loosen your sash?”

“..... Please”

I undo his kimono as he sprawls out on the bed.

You know, I’ve never even taken Big Sis’s clothes off before

The fact that the first person I’ve ever disrobed is a guy is just too sad. Yeesh, he’s even got silk boxers on pure white ones

“Now that I think about it, Ai was there to watch us play beside the board in a

Crown League Match, wasn't she?"

"Yes When we played until sunrise"

I still remember it like it was yesterday.

The streets of Naniwa right before dawn.

Ai crossing the street in front of the Kansai Shogi Association building. She was so full of adrenaline after watching Ayumu and I play. I'll never forget what she said.

"I wanna play Shogi just like you!"

Those words saved me.

And then by my friend who played that Shogi with me.

"..... Thanks, Ayumu."

I sit on the edge of the bed and say with my back to my friend. I'm too embarrassed to look at him, though.

"———Thanks, Ayumu, for showing me that I'm not alone."

There's no stopping the advance of computers.

But I'll never feel alone again. Now I'm certain of it.

No matter how much progress I make, someone who can catch and overtake me will show up. I guarantee that plenty of people in the distant past have felt that same despair.

Correct moves, mistakes. Loveable idiots who will wager their lives to teach you that there is not only one correct move or mistake. I won't doubt that anymore.

That's what being a Shogi player means.

"Come on, Ayumu. I'm baring my heart over here. Would it kill you to say something back"

Zzz Zzz Zzz

I look over my shoulder to see my half-naked best friend out like a light.

“Already asleep?! Come on?!”

I smile and quietly leave the room so I don’t wake up the snoozing winner.

Now back in my own room, I lock the door immediately.

Running on fumes myself, I stumble my way inside and kick off my traditional sandals, letting them land wherever. Blindly searching for the light switch along the wall didn’t get me anywhere, so I press onward into the darkness.

Then flop face-first onto the bed.

“.....”

Closing my eyes the reality I’d tried so hard not to see hits me like a ton of bricks.

———I lost. To Ayumu.

Yeah.

A lot happened, but a loss is still a loss.

Even though I had the overwhelming advantage of a supercomputer as a study partner, I wasn’t strong enough to win in the end.

“..... Ugh”

My molars clatter.

The pain makes my whole body tremble as if shivering in the cold.

“Mngh Ngh”

Dry heaves like hiccups come up from the pit of my lungs, making the most pathetic little noises. I clench my gut to keep them down, but it’s no use.



“Urrggghhhhhhhhhh”

I cried with my face buried in the bed sheets.

“Waaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.....!

WAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Hot tears pour out of my eyes and they aren’t slowing down

It hurts. Losing to Ayumu hurts so bad!

Part of me doesn't want anyone to see me like this, but the other wishes someone was here with me so bad it stings. Tidal waves of regret wash over me. If only I'd shown my ace in the hole in the first match and won. Who cares about the solution or the future of Shogi? If I’d known it would hurt this much, I should’ve asked Ai Yashajin about death flags when I had the chance. Cowardly? So what? Losing hurts so much worse!

So this is the agony of losing a title!!

“Mnggghhh W-Waaahhh Uaaaaggghhh”

I’ve cried like this before.

It was after a Placement Match I thought was in the bag but Zaou-sensei destroyed me right before he retired.

That day, I cried my heart out into Big Sis’s lap in the Player’s Room at the Kansai Shogi Association. Pretty much like a little kid who just lost his first game of Shogi.

“..... Ginko”

I wish she were here.

I want her to tell me it’s going to be okay. To feel her touch, to hear her soothing voice. I wanted to tell her everything I can’t say to anyone else.

R-r-r-riiiing! R-r-r-riiiing!

A shrill sound blasts through the darkness.

That's not my smartphone.

It's the hotel's phone on the nightstand that's ringing.

".....!"

Jumping up, I quickly wipe off the tears and snot. Clearing my throat a few times, I pick up the phone and say in a brighter tone than usual to hide the fact I've been bawling.

"Yes?"

A familiar voice responds.

"How badly does losing your first title hurt, Yaichi?"

"..... Ai."

My second apprentice sounds like she's about to go out for a picnic, which is rather striking to hear in this dark room.

She isn't here, of course, but I can just see the look on her face right now.

She's teasing me.

"Don't tell me you thought a Nyugyoku Victory Declaration wouldn't happen in a match between people, did you? I was sure that was part of your Shogi solution. Were you underprepared? Or did you think Ayumu Kannabe wasn't good enough?"

"Ai, listen. Here's what——"

Just as I was going to explain that Ayumu made it to the Shogi future I saw.

That we weren't alone anymore.

But——

“Right now you’re high on adrenaline and exhausted after an extremely long match, as well as feeling the afterglow that comes from a few reassuring words from your best friend. Both of those will be gone after a good night’s sleep. Here’s what’ll be left when you wake up.”

She whispers through the phone like she’s telling me a secret. The truth.

“A burning desire to win.”

“.....!”

A sudden wave of nausea hits, like she just carved out the squishiest part of my heart with an iron spoon.

“The bottom line is that you underestimated Ayumu. You always have. That’s why you deliberately held back in the first match and losing is so painful. You have plenty of chances to ask me anything and everything about death flags, but you thought you could win without them, didn’t you? It’s not too late, you know.”

Ai rips off layers of my soul so easily, it’s like she’s peeling an onion. She exposes pieces I never wanted anyone to see each time.

Stop I beg you

“I’m about to start killing off all the players who you are supposed to handle further down the road, just like I did to Ika Sainokami.”

She’s not just saying she’ll beat them.

She’s announcing that she will inflict so much damage when she wins that they’ll never want to touch a Shogi piece again.

Kill their hearts.

“The Meijin, Sota Kunugi, Mitsuru Oishi, Yo Okito, Seiichi Tsukimitsu, Jin Natagiri, and the one who took your title today, Ayumu Kannabe. I’ll kill them all. Then, yes, if she has the inclination, I’ll torment Ginko Sora like a bug!”

Ai adds that such weak talent wouldn't be worth her time to take care of personally with a mocking laugh. She's talking about the first female pro Shogi player ever.

Once the laughter fades, Ai starts talking again.

"Then you'll understand that I'm the only one on earth who belongs at your side. I, the only person who understands Shogi's solution and how to implement it in a match, am the only one who can play Shogi at your level So, just watch. Have a front-row seat."

What is she planning?

I want to ask but the words get stuck in my throat. My vocal cords are too scared to work.

"I'm going to turn the first player you recognized as talented into a bloodbath."

"Wh-Who"

"The player you identified and became so enthralled with that you kept her out of everyone else's reach at your side. The one you raised with all your heart, and your heart wants to play against more than anything in the world. The one you really want to spend the rest of your life playing Shogi with."

Her voice gets rougher by the second.

Throttling the feelings, the future hidden away in my heart.

"Stop, please!! Not another word———"

"Ai Hinatsuru."

The voice disappears from the darkness. Ai Yashajin hung up.

When suddenly———

The door I know I locked clicks open and someone walks inside without bothering to take off their shoes.

“Ah

I turn around with the phone receiver still in my hand and find an agent of darkness standing there.

Sunglasses over her eyes, the woman says in a tone so overbearing, I know I’m not allowed to refuse.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Prepare to depart.”

I didn’t ask where we’re going.

Our destination is obvious.

Hell.

RECORD 5

雛
鶴
あい

AI
HINATSURU

夜
叉
神
天
衣

AI
YASHAJIN

Like Cherry Blossoms

It's morning. Today's the day.

I wake up to find the house is empty.

"..... Keika?"

I walk downstairs from the kids' room and find breakfast on a plate with plastic wrap over it on the table next to a note———

"I'm the match recorder, so I'm leaving early."

That's it.

Grandpa-*sensei* seems to be out, too, so it's just me in this big house. This could be the first time I've ever been here all by myself, now that I think about it.

"Thanks for the food," I say as I put my hands together and start eating.

Being so considerate is just like Keika.

———Showing favorites would be unfair.

That's probably why Grandpa-*sensei* left too. Like father, like daughter.

Sipping this Kansai-style miso soup brings back so many memories.

"Oh, now I get it"

It suddenly makes sense.

That's why organizers try to keep members of the same Shogi family from playing against each other.

"I get it" That was it"

They say it's to prevent matches from being fixed.

But actually

“..... It hurts to have your heart pulled apart”

Grandpa-*sensei* and Keika acted so happy to have me over that I never noticed such a simple thing.

Shogi never came up in conversation yesterday, not once. I’m sure Grandpa-*sensei* knows I turned down the Board of Directors’ offer, too.

Master’s title match never came up either.

I peeked at the result, so I know.

But I haven’t looked at the match record yet.

If I did I might be too scared to keep fighting.

I take the train over to Fukushima station where the Kansai Shogi Association is and buy some bread and a drink from a convenience store once I get through the gate.

“The one across from the association isn’t there anymore”

Seeing how much the area where I used to live has changed is a shock to my system. I stay away from the shopping arcade completely because I’m scared to see what else has changed.

Yamashiro Ouka Tournament Matches have two hours of waiting time. That means that, including the lunch break, they end between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. if both players use all of it.

“I have to eat up while I can, even if my tummy hurts.”

I say to pep myself up.

Lots of Women’s League players go without lunch on match days. Sometimes everything gets settled before noon because of waiting time, but today I’ll lose for sure if I play like that.

I watch the bumps in the street pass under my feet when———

“I’m winning today, for sure!” a little girl yells as she runs past me.

Right behind her is

“When will you learn? Ranging Rook can’t win anymore.”

“Didn’t you hear what Kuruno-*sensei* said? Computer ratings aren’t everything!”

“Hey, hey! Listen to this! My daddy said he’ll take me to see the big board at the Throne League if I reach 1-*dan* by the end of the summer!”

A group of four girls, maybe eight or nine years old, rush by clutching their green Match Cards like they’re their passports to Shogi country.

They must be going to the association’s classroom. One look at the *Silver* Shogi keychain dangling from one of their bags makes it easy to tell who inspired them to learn how to play.

“..... That’s right.”

I’m looking straight ahead before I know it.

“No one goes there planning to lose!”

I watch the four girls disappear through the front doors as if drawn in like magnets. It’s time for me to go in too.

There’s only one match happening at the Kansai Association today.

I go up to the fifth floor and take a look at the board at the entrance.

There are two name plates outside the Onjyoudan no Ma arena’s door.

“Ai Yashajin-*Women’s Triple Title*”

“Ai Hinatsuru-*Women’s Legend*”

..... Yet another jolt to my system.

I had nothing to my name the first time I came to the Onjyoudan no Ma. I was

just a little puppy following Master around. This is also where I met God-*sensei*.

“It was so exciting. This place seemed like so much fun.”

Sure, I was nervous but not scared at all.

Now I’m grateful to be able to play in this storied arena.

Other than that, I’m a bit scared of my opponent and also confident in myself. It's a mix.

“Wheeeeeew———

There’s so much going on in my head that I stand there with my shoes on.

Nerves are starting to make my fingertips go cold

Today could be my last day. I slap both my cheeks and..., “Good morning!” — greet everyone inside the arena in a loud voice.

Keika is already finished with the preparations and is sitting at the boardside table. She’s going out of her way to avoid making eye contact.

I quickly sit down in the lower seat, put my backpack down a little ways from the board and close my eyes.

Footsteps. Someone’s coming.

Sliding steps, unmistakable. She always walks up on her toes like a cat.

Then———

“Don’t you think the rules to keep Shogi family members from playing against each other are pointless?”

I open my eyes and see Ten-chan sitting across from me in the upper seat.

She’s already pouring pieces out of the piece box.

“Think about it. Just because two players have the same Master doesn’t mean they’re friends. Actually they probably hate each other so much they’d rather see the other player dead, no?”

Snap!

Ten-chan puts her King in the starting position but keeps talking.

“The new Women’s Placement Match League I’m designing will use the same matching system as this Yamashiro Ouka Tournament. Sibling apprentices could face off in the first round. It would be so nice if the outdated Master/apprentice system disappeared, along with this crumbling old association building. If you need a guarantor around for insurance sake, just use an insurance company.”

“.....”

I quietly bow and gently place my King onto the board. It’s perfectly lined up with the grid, dead center. Now I know for sure her mind games didn’t get to me.

Ten-chen turns to look at Keika.

“I mean, you’ve been jealous of Ginko Sora and hated her before, haven’t you?”

“It’s time for the piece flip,” Keika says rather than respond. “Face up will indicate *Yashajin-Women’s Triple Title*.”

The pieces twirl beautifully through the air and———all five land face down.

I go first.

“Just like back then.”

Ten-chan is talking about our match in the Practice League.

She played Move-Loss Bishop Exchange on defense that day. I messed up at the very end losing because I overlooked a 7-move check path.

I’m fully confident I could shut down a Move-Loss Bishop Exchange in the early-game now.

But———

“..... Offense, defense, it doesn’t matter anymore. You can have whichever

you want,” Ten-chan mutters.

My heart had been so calm, but those words stirred something.

———Because she knows Shogi’s solution?

I can’t even imagine what early-game Ten-chan is going to play against me today. It should be even more advanced than what Master’s older brother’s deep learning software showed me

“Come. I’ll scatter you like cherry blossom petals.”

“When you’re ready!”

I make a short bow, take a deep breath and push the Pawn in front of my Rook forward.

It starts now.

Ten-chan and my first and last official match.

▲ Best Seat in the House

Akira has brought me to the Kansai Shogi Association.

“The computer in the Player’s Room has been modified to allow it to remotely operate Awaji. Watch my lady’s match from there.”

“You modified the association's computer?”

“Yashajin Group employees have been dispatched to assist the Shogi Association staff.”

My body is a wreck after a marathon of a match followed by a long car ride, but I completely forget all about the pain and fatigue after hearing that.

“We have also accepted association staff members into our ranks. This personnel exchange program will ensure the new Shogi Association Buildings exceed expectations.”

“Shady as———”

“Personnel exchange,” Akira repeats as she palms my face with her right hand.

Ow, ow, OWWW! Women aren’t supposed to have this kind of grip!!

“For your information, Awaji has been updated to identify the locations of death flags.”

“.....!!”

“Of course, I will not forbid you from creating a match record, but all streaming feeds have been disabled. The only place to observe this match in real time is in the Kansai Shogi Association’s Player’s Room.”

Which can only mean Ai Yashajin is going to use death flags today.

Then she’s planning to show me how powerful they are when I’m at rock-

bottom after losing a title, is she?

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*,” says Akira at the strangely perfect moment, almost like she can hear my thoughts.

Or am I just that easy to read

“Lady Ai Yashajin is a genius. You shall gain a fresh understanding of that today, no doubt. Just as you will come to appreciate the new Shogi world designed by her hand.”

“Akira

Forget the Shogi world.

I’m not bitter after losing my title. There’s just something I want Ai Yashajin to know.

“I had a thought. If Okito-*sensei* went so far as to develop deep learning software as a translator for Ika, maybe Ai Yashajin’s parents built Awaji because———”

“Hurry. The match is about to start.”

Akira points at her watch and opens the car door. Her tone is surprisingly gentle.

“Aren’t you going to stay and watch?”

“I have work to do.”

Then, just as I get out of the car, she boldly declares, “Besides, I already know the outcome.”

The person I expected to be in the Player’s Room on the third floor is sitting in a chair when I walk in.

“Yaichi, eh?” Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* says with a glance out of the corner of his eye. “Have a seat.”

“..... Okay.”

I pull out the chair across from him and sit down.

It's been a long time since we were alone in the same room. I lived with him longer than my own father, but I'm actually a bit nervous.

“Ever since ya put out those *Awaji* records, the Player's Room's been deserted. Just like this. Seems ever'body's too scared to play without runnin' their ideas by a computer at home first.”

“How's that my fault?”

Master doesn't mince words. It's a Kansai type of kindness.

And the kindest thing of all in this Players Room is———

“How 'bout playin' a few matches? Been a while.”

With that, Master pulls a big case of *ramune* hard candy from his pocket.

Candy Shogi, a standard here in the Kansai Player's Room.

“Are you trying to take candy from your own apprentice?!”

“Can't if ya win. Or are ya shakin' in yar shoes at the thought of playin' the geezer who beat Ayumu in a Placement Match, eh?”

“.....!!”

I grab a chess clock out of the closet and get it set up. Each player only gets 10 seconds to move in Candy Shogi and the winner takes a piece from the loser. This time we're playing for *ramune*.

With the rules so much in favor of the young, I rack up wins one after another.

“Who was it that was scared of you, again?”

“Naaah! I'm just makin' sure my apprentice gets a square meal after losin' out on title money, 'at's all!”

“No one can fill up on *ramune*, no matter how many they eat

The candy itself only has value through the end of grade school.

But older Sub League members used to plunder my supply back then. Mr. Kagamizu was especially ruthless, not even taking his foot off the gas when playing against grade school kids or even kindergarteners. The one exception was Big Sis. Most of the candy he took from me ended up being her afternoon snack. It bordered on extortion.

Beating up on Master this badly reminds me of those days when suddenly——

“Went to visit Ginko.”

“.....!”

I freeze.

Though I did recover in time to make a move before my time expired, it was a horrible one.

“She asked me if Ai Hinatsuru was her replacement.”

“..... What did you say?”

“That she’s better off not knowin’.”

His tone caught me off guard.

Master is angry.

“Could ya, her Master, ask that? Ya might’a gotten stronger at Shogi but Yeesh, ya didn’ raise’r her right.”

Master makes me pay for my blunder and steals a *ramune* for the first time. It’s just one of the pile I already took from him.

But I couldn’t care less about the candy anymore.

“So then what exactly are you saying I did wrong?”

Actually, I know I messed up... a lot.

But I'm in no state of mind to just laugh it off when my own Master is doing the pointing.

Not the guy who's been avoiding me up until now when I'm at my weakest!

"You wanted to keep Ginko and I apart, didn't you, Master?! What other explanation is there?! Otherwise, you would've told me her disease was genetic a lot earlier!! If I'd known, I'd——"

"Cool it, Yaichi. There ain't nobody 'at knows the future. Thinkin' ya did is what lost ya yar title only yesterday, or have ya forgot?"

"I lost my title because I was weaker than Ayumu. That doesn't change Shogi's solution one bit."

"Ya lost cuz yar argue fer argument's sake. When are ya gonna own up to yar mistake, Yaichi?"

"You're the one who started the argument, Master!!"

There's no playing Shogi like this. I fling my pile of candy across the floor.

That's when——

"Oh? Have you returned from Tokyo already, Ryuo? You must be quite a devoted student of Shogi to be here after playing such a long match."

"Chairman Tsukimitsu?!"

I'm halfway out of my chair before a look from his secretary, Ms. Oga, stops me in my tracks.

"H-Have you come to watch the match as well, Chairman?"

"I do have a rather strong connection with Miss Yashajin. Of course, I'm interested to see how she fares But it is Miss Hinatsuru who has my attention today."

“Ai?”

“She asked me a question in private after being called in by the board the other day. It seems she was curious about a *certain skill* of mine He-he-he. Something very interesting could be in store for us today.”

Master pulls out the chair next to his and the chairman sits down.

Being brother apprentices, their minds are completely in sync.

“Mr. Oishi would have liked to be present, but refrained on account of *Yaichi* *bein’ there’d leave a bad taste*. Though he did say that in his next opportunity to play against you, Ryuo, he is bound and determined to prove to you that the solution to Shogi is, in fact, Ranging Rook.”

“Kunugi 4-*dan* also stated that he would like to attend. However, he’s looking for *his* new place together today and will be late.”

“Well then, the Player’s Room may be lively yet.”

With the two of them chatting away, I head over to the computer in the corner of the room. Awaji’s cutting-edge GUI looks outdated on this antique computer monitor.

“No autoupdates on the match”

That means I have to input each move manually. It’s been over a year since I lined up a match record.

I glance over at the overhead camera feed.

Ai has just opened the Bishop’s path on the fifth move.

“Bishop Exchange, huh? Yes, the first move gives you an advantage, but don’t forget you’re playing against Ai Yashajin.”

Ai Hinatsuru has racked up victory stars by playing Bishop Exchange strategies against pros lately, but Ai Yashajin is even better at them.

Then again———

“Huh?!”

The defender moves a piece completely outside of any Bishop Exchange standard.

“..... Why did she move that one?”

Ai Yashajin plays 1 Four Pawn.

I’ve never seen a pro or a computer make that move at this point. What’s more

She’s not playing Awaji’s *best move either*.

Gone Without a Word

“..... What is this?”

This isn't going the way I expected at all and I'm confused.

Ten-chan is always creative in the early-game, and she always shows off her talent in the fastest way possible.

That's why I thought she'd set a trap for me since I had the first move.

But I never even dreamed this would happen.

Moving her Pawn at the far end is such a mystery to me. That's like passing her turn.

If that weren't enough, I get far enough ahead to change out the Pawn in front of my Rook on her side of the board.

———It's too big of a price to pay just to block a Bishop Exchange.

The formation settles on the Double Wing Attack, one of my favorites.

That's why I'm confused. No matter how I look at the board, *I'm ahead in every way.*

“.....?”

I spend a bunch of waiting time reading the board, but the nagging feeling that something is off doesn't go away.

It's not because I'm behind, though.

There are just too many fun sequences to consider.

“Ngh!”

It's actually Ten-chan who's hurting. That big white forehead of hers is all sweaty. It's almost like we're in the late-game right now.

Is she trying to do something special?

———Or did she make a mistake?

I look over at the clock on the boardside table. I've used a lot of time, but Ten-chan has used more.

"Hmn!"

I slap my cheeks with both hands to make myself focus.

———I can't let my guard down! Save as much time for the late-game as possible!

If Master's older brother's predictions about Awaji's playing style and capabilities were right

And if Ten-chan has mastered them

Taking the lead in the early-game is impossible. That means I have to set up the board to *make it easy for me* in the late-game.

But a little voice whispers into my ear.

———Couldn't I just press this advantage all the way to a win

It's probably my one and only chance.

Things might take a turn for the worse if I let it slip by

"..... Here"

Caution is going further and further out the window every second.

Confidence swells up to take its place. The urge to strike is taking over

"..... Here Here Here Here Here Here Here Here, here, hereherehere———"

I know I shouldn't, but being on the hunt is so much fun that I couldn't stop myself.

The fear of having to quit Shogi today if I lose is gone without a trace. All

that's on my mind now are all sorts of sequences branching out from the formation in front of me.

I lose all track of time

"Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereher
....."

Next thing I know, I'm alone in the arena.

It's lunch time But I couldn't stop my train of thought from plunging deeper into the board.

"Haaaaaaa— — — — —....."

I take a really big breath.

So big that I lean all the way over the board like I'm about to dive into it and then unleash everything all at once!

"Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereher

"The match has resumed."

Keika's voice makes me look up with a start.

Ten-chan is back at her seat, leaning on the armrest and reading the board, too.

An hour, including the lunch break.

I found an answer after reading as much as I possibly could— — —and I'm going for it with everything I've got!!

"CHOMP!!"

I stuff the *onigiri* rice ball I bought on my way here into my mouth to get some nutrients and make my decisive move while still chewing!

"Fwhhhh!!"

The battle starts now.

The first move advantage lets me charge out with guns blazing.

“Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereher

Our pieces collide with snaps all over the board.

But it’s the sound of my attacks systematically wiping out Ten-chan’s defenses.

“Ngh!!”

A groan makes it through her clenched teeth.

———It’s working!

Ten-chan is definitely taking damage. I push even harder now that I know I’m racking up points.

———My attack will break through!!

“..... You should’ve stayed happy as Ginko Sora’s spare I wouldn’t have had to go this far if only that was enough for you”

“Spare?”

I look up before I realize it and meet Ten-chan’s eyes.

There’s a dark fire burning inside them.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like being the one left behind?! Every single one of you always comes and goes without a word, always! You do your own thing, meanwhile it’s the rest of us who get hurt!”

All of us in the arena are part of the same Shogi family tree, so Ten-chan doesn’t bother trying to be nice.

“How is it fair for the ones left behind not to win, huh?! There’s no point in working hard if there’s no justice in this world! If the gods won’t play fair, then I’ll *make them*! Otherwise———,” says Ten-chan, her burning eyes now glistening. “Otherwise Yaichi is going to be miserable”

“.....!”

I bite my lip.

I understand what Ten-chan is trying to say.

I can't help it.

———But you already rejected it!!

Attacking my heart as a distraction right before an important move is all part of her strategy. Whether that's how she actually feels or not, my reading ability will suffer if I'm still thinking about her words rather than the board.

That's why I stopped trying to put myself in her shoes.

I have to turn this boiling blood into fuel for the next stage!

“I hate taking what's given to me! I want to take it myself! Even destiny!!”

“Then that's what I'll give you.”

Ten-chan does something unbelievable the second she says that.

“Huh? Whaaa?!”

After our verbal back and forth, I was sure my eyes were playing tricks on me when I first saw it.

“?!?!”

Nothing changes even after I rub them.

T-Ten-chan just moved a big piece that was serving as the pillar of her defenses right up to my closest attacking piece and left it there for free!

———Sh-She's giving me her Horse?! Has she lost her mind?!

“Here's destiny, Ai Hinatsuru.”

I stare down the Horse held out to me like a sacrificial lamb, but Ten-chan is as calm as can be.

“One called a death flag, see?”

“.....”

I can't *not* take the piece and swiftly add it to my piece stand.

■ The Fallen Angel's Leap

As soon as I saw that move, I got a very clear picture of Awaji's rating in my head.

Offense winning probability: 0%.

"It's over, Ai."

But I doubt any living person has the same image in their mind. From their point of view, Ai Hinatsuru just played the best move, hands down. Everyone from a beginner who just learned the rules all the way up to the Meijin himself would say that.

Even so, I'm the one who will win. Reason being that that's the way Shogi's solution works.

"Just watch. You'll realize you can't win after 25 moves. The tables will fall into my favor after that."

"....."

She doesn't say anything. Naturally.

Just looking at the board, she probably assumes I'm running my mouth right now. And it's true that my Shogi skills aren't good enough to come back from this position.

"I'm sorry but I can't give anyone a quick death anymore. You're going to suffer for a very long time, assuming you don't surrender."

Yes. Winning from here will be no small feat.

Because it will require finding a unique series of moves that don't exist in either current software or in human Shogi history.

———And to add to that *I've gotten worse.*

Simply put, death flags are a ploy on a grand scale. They're the same as *Pac-Man* and *Kakutofu* strategies at the core. Invite the opponent into an ambush, guide the match into your favor and then bring down the guillotine with research.

Researching those unique sequences to finish off the ploy means you can't work on conventional Shogi and you get rusty. When it comes to using orthodox Shogi standards, there's no doubt I'm weaker than I used to be.

Ai Hinatsuru, on the other hand, has worked her way to a level where even professionals can't beat her. That kind of talent paired with effort is awe inspiring, even scary.

However, I have two major advantages.

First, the fact that I will win in the end.

Second, and even more importantly, I know that fact.

Shogi is a mental sport, and knowing that victory is in your grasp is vital to finding the best move in time. *Confidence* would be another way to put it.

That indisputable path to victory made my Shogi skill grow by leaps and bounds.

"I won't tell you to give up. You probably don't believe me yet."

Sliide I calmly make my next move.

Ai stays hunched over the board with her eyes zooming around looking for traps.

— — — There aren't any to find.

What I've done is far beyond setting a simple trap.

My mother didn't include Shogi's rules in the code when she programmed Awaji.

Even now, Awaji doesn't know how the pieces move.

That isn't especially surprising. Domain knowledge tends to hinder deep learning software.

That's why Awaji roamed free in its early stages Without any restraints, it rampaged around the board with its incredible reading capacity and speed. It would win that way, too. A pain in the neck piece of software if there ever was one. That trash was the last thing a person would want for Shogi research.

So I couldn't help but feel it when I first interacted with Awaji myself.

It plays like Ai Hinatsuru.

Adjusting Awaji to use all sorts of strategies gave me a taste of how Yaichi Kuzuryu must have felt in the days he spent training her.

———I probably was the same way at first

I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't know how to play Shogi, so I don't know what it's like to be a beginner.

I do have a very precious memory, however.

It's of my father wanting to teach me how to play and my mother quietly wanting to keep me away from Shogi.

Memories from when the three of us lived together like that are irreplaceable. Yes, they were arguing about how to raise me, but I was happy.

Because the reason they were fighting was for my sake.

"..... I didn't want to face you like this. We missed our chance to play at our absolute bests."

Thirteen moves after Ai Hinatsuru's death flag went up, the board starts contorting in a very new direction.

At last, human eyes can see what I've always known.

"Huh?"

The color drains from Ai Hinatsuru's face.

“Wh-Why?! How? And so suddenly?! Whaaaaaa?!”

The shock makes her lose concentration. It's clear as day.

A gigantic crevasse has opened in *truth*, and it's crumbling beneath Ai Hinatsuru's feet. People can't comprehend just how fast the high rating she built up so far is plummeting right now.

How can this happen?

This is just a theory, but I think it's because Awaji didn't know Shogi's rules in the first place.

Unshackled creativity found a brand new realm that current software and humans couldn't find on their own.

So Yeah? Finding a way to break through is utterly impossible.

No matter how far someone has surpassed human reading speed, they can't read what's in their blind spot.

“Kgh! H-Here Here, hereherehereherehere!!”

Ai valiantly continues her search for the best move.

Like a climber desperately searching for a handhold as they fall off the cliff, it's a despairing sight.

Unable to watch anymore, I get to my feet.

“..... This is why we don't need Shogi family rules. Holding back players who really want to face each other is just so Who even thought of that torture”

This world is so cruel to the people I treasure. It's unfair.

So I'm going to change it.

Nothing can be done about the past, but the future can still be changed. Even if just a little.

When Father played against Seiichi Tsukimitsu at the Kansai Shogi Association building, Yaichi was the match recorder. That connection with him is what led me to Ai Hinatsuru.

I'm really not happy about destroying a building that is so important to my past.

But if someone has to do it, then I want the chance to design the new one with my own hands. No matter what mean things are said about me, no matter how much hate comes my way, I'll get my hands dirty to make it happen.

Creation through destruction.

That's— — —how to make the future your own.

"Play all the moves you want. I'll play along until the very end"

I sit back down now that my heart is set.

Watching my older sister writhe in pain, I gently whisper in her ear.

"Enjoy these last few moments you have together with Shogi."

Unable to Die

Shogi players typically think about two things when they fall behind in a match.

The first is about what to do when the match is over.

They give up on winning and think about what will happen after they surrender. When to start packing up their stuff, what to have for dinner, that sort of thing.

The second is reflecting on the past.

If they think there's a small chance they could still come back, players reflect on the match to figure out where they went wrong or find holes in their research.

When I realized Ten-chan had pulled away further than I could catch up, I thought about the past.

But not about the Horse I took and not trying to figure out what I should've done differently.

Something even further back.

Back to the day I was called in to speak with the board of directors, just after I rejected their offer

"I would like to speak with you, Mr. Chairman."

I went up to the chairman's office after the meeting without telling anyone else, and Tsukimitsu 9-*dan* said he could spare a few minutes. There was a favor I wanted to ask.

"I have a question that only you can answer."

“As I said earlier, there is nothing more I can do or advice I can give concerning the Professional Entrance Exam———”

“No, this is about Shogi puzzles.”

“Oh?”

Chairman Tsukimitsu, who is known for making Shogi puzzles, seemed a lot more interested now.

“Could you tell me the trick to doing *nigiri* puzzles? Master once told me that he has seen you do one. He also said you had to do a special preparation”

“Well, well. You bring up an extremely interesting topic.”

He didn’t ask me why I wanted to know or anything.

Maybe he already had an idea.

“This is true for Shogi puzzles in general, but *nigiri* is quite challenging if you have any conventional Shogi sense left in your mind. Sequences that seldom, if ever, appear in matches tend to be the main theme of the puzzles. That is especially important for me, since I rely heavily on reading the board. I believe you and I have that in common.”

“I can relate. My mind tends to keep considering formations that show up in matches first”

“In fact, it’s important to see a lot of Shogi puzzles and then organize them into useful themes in your mind in order to overcome that instinct. Your official match records are not helpful when creating puzzles,” the Chairman says with a laugh.

B-But I don’t think it’s funny

“When it comes to *nigiri*, it’s a battle against time. If the completed puzzle doesn’t form in your mind within the first few seconds, it never will no matter how hard you try. That’s why you need determination.”

“Determination?”

“Yes. The determination to never allow thoughts like *what if I can't?* or *there aren't enough pieces* to cross your mind. You must finish with what is available. A great deal of focused determination is necessary to make it happen.”

“..... That sounds hard”

A long time ago, I successfully did a *nigiri* in front of Master. It was back when I was a beginner with no idea how Shogi works.

But it was just a coincidence.

I happened to grab pieces that fit well together. I did try a few more times on my own behind Master's back, but I couldn't do it again. Now I know it was just beginner's luck.

“That can't be chalked up to mere coincidence.”

“Huh?”

“You learned the basics of Shogi through puzzles, Miss Hinatsuru. Therefore you didn't have conventional Shogi sense at that time.”

“Ah!”

Beginner's luck.

That's what he was talking about.

“Then that means I can't do it anymore doesn't it?”

“.....”

Chairman Tsukimitsu went quiet like he was considering his words.

I couldn't take the silence and opened my mouth to break it, but that was when he spoke up.

“I only gained the ability to do *nigiri* after I went blind.”

Then he made a shocking admission.

“There was also a moment when I intended to commit suicide.”

“Whaaa?!”

“It was when my eyesight was rapidly deteriorating and I underwent many procedures and cornea transplants trying to save it. They were not a walk in the park, let me tell you. Topical anesthetics are used to control the pain, but your eyes get sewn for hours and you are restrained in one position the entire time.”

“.....”

“Also, steroids are injected into the eyes to prevent infection. I can honestly say that it is the single most painful experience anyone can go through in this world. I was only able to endure it out of the slight hope that I would be able to see well enough again to keep playing Shogi.”

He suddenly starts recounting his darkest days.

Listening was all I could do

“Unable to do satisfactory Shogi research, swallowing upwards of 20 pills a day, countless hours traveling to and from the hospital, enduring all that pain and still my eyes wouldn’t recover. My losing streak in official matches showed no signs of stopping. I lost every one of my titles and was even demoted in Placement Matches. I contemplated it every day.”

“..... Retirement?”

“No, death.”

I’m speechless. The chairman then turns to face me head-on.

“Have a look at these eyes for yourself.”

And then he opened them.

One look at what was in his eye sockets made me———

“Hyee———?!”

I caught myself mid scream and clasped my mouth shut with both hands.

His pupils were a weird murky white, and the rest was all bumpy like he had golf balls where his eyes should be

“This is the aftermath of multiple cornea transplants. It’s the stitching that does it.”

After so many surgeries, the doctors told him that they had run out of safe angles for another transplant After his last hope for sight was gone, the chairman decided to go to the roof of the hotel he was staying at in Tokyo after losing another match.

He was going to jump.

But that plan was doomed from the start.

“Going to the roof by myself wasn’t possible because I couldn’t read the buttons on the elevator anymore. I had missed the window within which it was possible to take my own life. My determination came too late.”

“D-Determination

“I was forced to accept the reality that I had become blind. And that's when I realized it.”

“..... Realized what?”

“I was unable to see anything. However, I could clearly see a Shogi board in my mind.”

“.....!!”

“Even if I couldn’t tell where the elevator buttons were, my mind’s eye could place pieces on a board if I were sitting in front of one.”

A mental Shogi board.

As Shogi players, that’s the thing closest to all of us.

“I am closest to a healthy human being when sitting in front of a Shogi board. There, I’m free to move about as I wish. Just like when I had the gift of sight.”

He closed his eyes and leaned back.

“The bottom line is: Shogi is all I have. Unable to die, my only option is to cling to the board in my mind.”

The Eternal Meijin then says he only achieved a high success rate with *nigiri* after that happened.

He said so with his eyes closed and a smile on his face, as usual.

“Determination is the trick.”

■ In the Mud

“Th-The hell’s goin’ on?”

Master groans as the offense’s rating plummets like a boat going off the edge of Niagara.

“I know Ai was leadin’ just a bit ago. So how’d the ratin’ flip so fast?”

Master and the others are tracking the match on a computer Ms. Oga brought in. Their jaws are hanging so low, you’d think a magician just made the table disappear.

But I know exactly why it happened because I’m using Awaji.

“She stepped on a death flag.”

That is when I looked at the full death flag data for the first time.

It’s stunning.

Seeing the whole truth gets scary enough that I seriously consider unplugging the monitor

Take the Bishop Exchange strategy that Ai Hinatsuru tried to play in the beginning.

That strategy had a total of 1,886 death flags sticking up. Step on one, and the defender is toast.

Just 1,886 formations!

Memorize them, and anyone could get an edge over anything, even Awaji. This is the solution to Bishop Exchange, an answer that human beings have been trying to find for centuries.

The even scarier thing is the sequence Ai Yashajin played to avoid them, starting with the 1 Four Pawn.

Moving that Pawn forward suddenly made the number of defending victory formations shoot up. My second apprentice worked backward from them and led my first apprentice directly onto a death flag.

Basically, it's *A Game of Numbers*.

Looking at the whole picture, I can tell the defender has far fewer options to get their opponent to traps than the offense. Shogi really is a horribly unbalanced game.

Of course, simply knowing where the death flags are doesn't mean it's easy to draw the opponent into them. On top of that, the sequence to put them into checkmate from there goes against conventional Shogi wisdom to the point that everything feels weird. Finishing the win is very difficult.

But knowing this versus not knowing would completely change how you play the game.

Just how someone would change their lifestyle if they knew how long they have to live.

———My match with Ayumu was child's play, wasn't it?

Looking at this data, I can tell that advancing the King with the first move is a limited strategy that's only viable when the opponent tries to utilize their big pieces right away. It'll make a splash but become obsolete just as quickly. It's that kind of strategy. The thing is, the entirety of humanity's 1,400 years playing Shogi *has just been a splash*

One that dries up today.

This match will convince people that, ironic as it is, this match between two grade school girls is closer to true Shogi than a title match between top pros.

"Their ratings are fairly even right now, but Ai Hinatsuru's rating will never go any higher than this. Ai Yashajin has won."

"Y-Ya mean it's over? Here?"

“Yes. Ai Yashajin has completely mastered Awaji’s playing style. It’s safe to say she is the only human being who could win from this position. She developed her own training method to do just that.”

“Is this Shogi?”

The offensive formation is easier to understand with human Shogi senses. I can’t blame Master for not believing me when I say the defender already has the match won.

But this is Shogi’s solution.

I sum up how Ai Yashajin discovered death flags and found out how to use them as briefly as possible.

Then I end the explanation by saying this: “Once all players in the Shogi world know about death flags, they’ll develop techniques to avoid triggering them. That sounds like a fun game if you ask me. Though I’m sure everyone’s opinion will be different.”

Even I’m surprised at how easily I’ve come to accept this solution. Am I thrilled? No. But I’ve become *used to this feeling* ever since I was first learning to play Shogi.

The information divide.

That used to be the difference between Kanto and Kansai Shogi.

Having more players registered in Kanto meant research advanced at a faster rate. Having top players like the Meijin and Usui-*sensei* registered in Kanto and having practice sessions there kept all that early-game information from leaving the area.

The advances these study partnerships made in the early-game became cemented as features of modern Shogi, and only a sliver of Kanto’s pros benefited from it.

That information divide first led to titles and then to more Kanto Sub League

members making it into the pros, putting a ton of pressure on us Kansai players

“Shogi software is what finally broke that edge. But that doesn’t mean it’s an even playing field for everyone now, either.”

“Those who cannot use a computer are left behind,” the chairman murmurs.

Even though voice compatibility software has made it easier to verbally operate a computer, he’s completely blind. Chairman Tsukimitsu looks young, but it’ll be an uphill battle for him to survive in an era dictated by computer research when he’s already in his fifties.

Not to mention that, right at this very moment, one young girl is monopolizing the fruits of software’s labor to wield that immense information divide to reshape the Shogi world once again.

“Shogi, like what Ayumu and I played, going back and forth while not allowing the other to get a decisive move, will end in Double Nyugyoku or a Repetition Draw. Use death flags like what Ai Yashajin is doing now, and information disparity *becomes* the decisive move Whichever the case, the Shogi world is in for some big changes.”

“Nah, nothin’ll change.”

Sure enough, Master shoots that idea down like the stubborn old fossil that he is. But then, he crosses his arms like a big shot and starts ordering me around.

“Have a look fer yarself. Not at the ratin’ but at Ai.”

“How can I when there's only one camera and it’s mounted to the ceiling———”

The IP camera is mounted on the ceiling and trained on the board, so the players don’t usually show up on the screen. Their hands when they play a move, yeah, but nothing else

“What the?!”

Swish, swish. The back of Ai Hinatsuru’s head is bobbing in and out of the frame.

She’s leaning so far forward that she’s blocking the view of the board. I can’t tell what’s happened the past couple of moves because of it.

I can practically hear her usual “here, here, here,” so it’s easy to tell she hasn’t given up at all. Actually

“..... Is she planning something?”

“At’s right. She hasn’t thrown in the towel, an’ I wouldn’ at this point if I were in her shoes, either.”

“Why not?”

“Could ya surrender when ya don’ know where ya messed up? There was a match where Mr. Tsukimitsu said he had a check path but I didn’ believe him an’ got disqualified ’cuz I played a different move without realizin’ I was in check.”

“Oh yes. I remember that,” the chairman adds with a grin.

Am I allowed to laugh?

Ai Hinatsuru is definitely playing like she has something in mind. Even though her software rating is going south, she's trying to make the board as complicated to human eyes as possible.

The problem is that her opponent is too good for that.

Ai Yashajin has trained herself to overcome human blind spots, so I doubt she’ll make any mistakes at this point. Beating her now would be the same as beating Awaji itself.

Does my first apprentice have any weapons left?

No. Did humans like us ever have weapons to begin with?

“At there’s muddy, gritty, Kansai Shogi.”

Master puts Ai Hinatsuru’s strong, gritty battle into words.

“At’s how we broke through the information divide with Kanto. Or have ya forgot?”

“..... Even if the death flags are wrong, both my apprentices have the same amount of talent and devote the same amount of time to Shogi. Therefore, the one who’s most efficient will win. Am I wrong?”

“Ya know somethin’, Yaichi?”

Have ya forgot this, too? comes through in Master’s voice.

“If ya got Mr. A, who studies efficiently ’cuz someone told ’em to, and Mr. B, who believes somethin’ is absolutely true an’ studies without a clue why, it’s Mr. B who’s gonna get stronger.”

“.....!”

I got this speech enough times as a live-in apprentice to make my ears fall off, but now these words are much more convincing, strangely enough. Especially after losing the Crown Title.

Master smiles, turns to his granddaughter apprentices and shouts some encouragement they’re never going to hear.

“Both’a ya! The real battle starts in the mud!!”

🏠 The Opposite Side of the World

I realize my chances are grim at the exact point that Ten-chan said I would. But I'm more surprised than hurt or sad.

———D-Does Ten-chan really have Shogi's solution?!

That's the only explanation that makes any sense. I've never lost this way before, without knowing what went wrong.

It usually stings when your Shogi senses get crushed to smithereens.

Right now, though, I don't have enough leeway to feel it.

"Hinatsuru-sensei. One-minute Shogi begins now."

"Whaaa?!"

Keika's voice almost made me jump out of my skin. I look over at the clock and realize that, suddenly, I'm waaay behind on time.

———There's no time left! I have to do it now!!

Now that my mind is set, I reach for the piece stand.

And———

"Ngh!!"

Grab every piece on it.



“.....?!”

“Huh?!”

Ten-chan gasps and I can tell Keika is halfway to her knees.

Sometimes, when a player loses in an extremely frustrating way, they'll surrender by scattering the pieces on their stand across the board. I bet that's what they think I'm about to do.

———Sorry for the confusion!!

Holding your pieces to keep your opponent from seeing them is bad manners. But right now for the one minute I have, I'm going to insist!

“.....”

I close my eyes.

A mental Shogi board appears and I visualize sticking my hand into it.

I know the pieces I have in my hand. I have to use them and what's on the board to make a Shogi puzzle so hard that even a supercomputer can't solve it right away.

———I can do it! It's the only way to win!!

I follow Chairman Tsukimitsu's advice and think only in terms of Shogi puzzles. I've already got some of my own sequences in mind.

And, above all, my heart is dead set on finishing the puzzle no matter what!

“Here———”

I squeeze the pieces as if sending up a prayer to the Shogi gods and bow my head.

My train of thought dives into the opposite side of the board.

When I concentrate as hard as I can, everything slows down. Outside noises sound muffled, like being underwater.

There is no one way to make Shogi puzzles and the time needed varies from person to person.

Some creators say puzzle themes come to them in their dreams while others think and think and think about one specific theme until the puzzle completes itself.

But there's an obvious pattern that all puzzles made by Shogi players have in common.

———A heavy reliance on reading.

Efficient and precise late-game skills are necessary to win at Shogi. The ability to manage overwhelming amounts of information in the late-game is literally what brings home the bacon for Shogi professionals. They couldn't survive in this competitive world without it.

That's why puzzles made by Shogi players are easy to solve *for Shogi players*. It's their weak point.

———That won't work! Ten-chan will figure that out right away.

I'm picturing a puzzle that challenges the reader to think.

One that finishes by breaking the rules with a Pawn Drop Mate after thinking through it all the way to the end But the key to avoiding it is in the first few moves. A puzzle like that.

My mind delves even deeper Memories flash before my eyes, but going in reverse so I can find Awaji's weak spot.

The first memory was from a few days ago.

"There's no weak spot. It's *built*," Master's older brother told me after analyzing the data Futatsuzuka 4-dan gave me.

He threw his hands in the air and crushed any hope I had left. Agghhh

“Whew, I have to tell you, deep learning software has become a juggernaut. My LOLI is as good as dead. Deep learning is the name of the game now. LOLI is over and done.”

Agghhh

“So yeah, no weak spot. But———”

“But?”

“You make your own Shogi puzzle, right, Miss Ai?”

“Um Yes. Master forbade me, but when he wasn’t around”

“Have you ever noticed software has trouble analyzing multiple check paths at once?”

“Yes!!”

That came out louder than I meant, but what he said happens quite a lot.

Everyone always says *software is strong in the late-game* and it *never makes mistakes*, so no one believed me when I asked them about this.

“But I thought that was because my computer wasn’t good enough.”

“It’s more of a program problem, actually. The process computers use to read sequences is surprisingly simple. First, they scan their memory for similar *check path formations* seen in previous matches and then find the shortest sequence to reach it.”

“How short?”

“5-move checkmates, usually.”

What?!

Only five? I mean I can read formations with check paths longer than that.

“The analysis that came out with Awaji’s match records made no mention of a checkmate routine. Personally, I think that’s because Awaji’s programming was

originally designed for Go and then modified for Shogi. It's lost that element."

"What does that mean?"

"Awaji is strong, but it underestimates Shogi."

Master's older brother uses chess software as an example.

"Pieces steadily decrease during a chess match, so analysis of the end-game is over and done. Chess software will announce *mate* once it detects a seven-move check path."

"Does that mean it has every possible seven-move check path memorized?!"

"Yes. The chess version of Shogi puzzles can't use orthodox themes anymore. A variant called *Fairy*, which uses special rules is mainstream now."

I-I had no idea

But Shogi hasn't reached that point.

"Two special rules: taken pieces can be redeployed and forbidding Pawn Drop Mate, create a vast world within Shogi that sets it apart from other board games. In fact, Shogi's late-game can be considered a completely different game on its own."

A different game

"People *changed the rules of Shogi to make Shogi puzzles more interesting*. That's the defining factor that makes the game called Shogi so different. Two separate realms are contained within a single board. Nothing else in existence does that."

"! That's what"

I've heard something just like that before.

It was during Master's first defense of the Ryuo title. On the airplane to Hawaii, we were talking about how the Meijin once said, "The offense would always win if it weren't for Drop Pawn Mate."

Master said, *“I think that was just added to make Shogi puzzles more interesting.”*

Maybe Master and his brother reached that conclusion together?

“Computers can’t read what the author of a particularly difficult Shogi puzzle had in mind. There is no other way for them to be 100 percent accurate than to flat out read the formations, like 5-move checkmates. Depending on the puzzle, however, all that reading could take a lot more than a minute.”

“Even for a supercomputer?”

“Yeah. The faster they read, the more formations they have to store in their memory. It’s only a matter of time before that memory gets overloaded.”

“What happens then?”

“In my software’s case, it tried to promote a Rook where that wasn’t possible, which is against the rules. Basically, it glitched.”

“That can”

“I’m not sure about deep learning software like Awaji’s, but there’s a possibility something similar will happen.”

Master’s older brother went on to guess that, unless the creator was extremely particular about Shogi puzzles, no one would bother fixing that bug.

Since Awaji’s Shogi solution was based on data with this flaw still in place, there could be a small hole in the armor.

“In Shogi, *more options are available* when more pieces are on the piece stand rather than on the board Which, in turn, makes reading what’s there much more difficult in the late-game. And, by outlawing consecutive Check Repetition Draws and Pawn Drop Mate, interactions between the number of pieces on the stand and unpromoted pieces on the board become even more complex.”

“I know of a few Shogi puzzles based on that, but in actual matches———”

“The odds of a difficult check path like that showing up are tens of thousands to one. That’s not even a margin for error. Developers think so, too. All we’re interested in is improving our win rate. But players aren’t like that, now are they?”

“Right, because competitors know that *winning this match could change their life*”

I’m starting to understand what he’s trying to say.

“Two players go against each other. One wants to *win as much as possible* and the other thinks *I only have to win this match*. In other words———”

“Yes?”

My heart pounds as I wait for his next words.

“You have a chance to beat Awaji, Miss Ai.”

“.....!!”

“Even machines can’t beat you when it comes to making Shogi puzzles. If you can’t read to a checkmate in the late-game, neither could a supercomputer. At least not in less than a minute, it couldn’t.”

“So I need to make the late-game look like a Shogi puzzle?”

———That’s impossible! common sense shouted at me.

But someone in an even deeper place whispered to me.

They said that if I could fully concentrate, the chances weren’t zero.

“Computers What kind of problems give them trouble?”

“Problems where there are many ways to put the King in check no matter how they respond on top of implicitly showing several sequences to read, which hides the true intention of the creator, I believe.”

“

“By the way, the 1,525-move solution to *Microcosmos* is easy enough to figure out. The length has nothing to do with it.”

Even I understood that.

Microcosmos is extremely long, but there are only so many ways to put a King in check. As a problem, it’s not all that hard. It was designed to be long, so lack of difficulty doesn’t take away from its value as a Shogi puzzle.

“Ah Could I show you something? I have it right here———”

Shogi *Suizou*.

The collection of unpublished Shogi puzzles Kugui-sensei gave to me.

One of them matched Master’s older brother’s description to a “t.”

“This puzzle here. Number 17.”

“Hm? How about that? It’s designed so only the Lance can block, right?”

Only a decorated amateur like Master’s older brother could have identified the theme that quickly.

Once he had time to read deeper

“O-Oh wow?!”

His eyes fly open in surprise. I admit it was satisfying to watch.

I remember blurting out “No way?!” back when I first figured it out.

“It’s a 67-move sequence But out of all the puzzles I know, I think this would take the longest to solve if you couldn’t identify the theme.”

“And since it hasn’t been published, this puzzle won’t be in any software’s database! Yeah, this just might work.”

He took a picture of the page in Shogi *Suizo* with his phone.

“I’ll run it through the computer right now. Let’s see how many minutes it

takes

I sent up another prayer to the Shogi gods as Master's older brother walked away.

To please, please, please take more than a minute

I don't think I stopped praying while I waited for him to message me. He never did that day, which actually gave me more hope.

But there was still no word from him the next day.

Or the next day. Or even the day after that.

It wasn't until I saw him on the fourth day that I found out.

"How long did it take?!"

Master's older brother just held up three fingers.

Three

"Three seconds?"

He shook his head no, so I tried again.

"30 seconds?"

"No."

"Then was it three minutes?!"

My heart pounded in my ears when I asked, but he shook his head "no" yet again.

"No."

"Then, was it 30 minutes?!"

"No."

"Three hours?"

"No."

Only then, after shaking his head side to side over and over again, did Master's older brother give me a straight answer.

"Three days."

..... Looking away from that memory, I gradually turn my focus back onto the board.

I've never made any high-difficulty puzzles like that before.

Then again, I've never tried. Part of that has to do with Master forbidding me from making them. I couldn't put my heart into it.

First, I look between the board and the pieces in my hand and sift through the ideas that spring into my head. Master's older brother advised me to stick to ones that have a lot of options for blocking pieces, so I focus on them specifically.

———None of these will work

Ten-chan will see right through simple traps like this.

Ten seconds have gone by.

Pressure builds now that so many precious seconds are gone, so I scrap all the ideas I had and focus on sequences that would make Ten-chan make a mistake instead.

———What is there?! Ten-chan doesn't have a weakness or blindspots!

Of course, she doesn't.

Her skills were complete the very first time I met her.

She was good at Bishop Exchange, meaning she never left any doors open.

Not to mention she had so many creative ideas for the early-game.

A prodigy who had everything I didn't.

I've lined up every one of Ten-chan's match records.

——— All of them are outstanding but her best was probably against *Sora-sensei*.

The Third Queen Match replay.

Ten-chan lost in the end seeing her strength in person as a journalist for the match gave me goosebumps.

———Master probably liked the match that ended in a Repeat Draw better.

After all, it played out according to the match he had against *Oishi-sensei* right beforehand.

Ten-chan used and got immediate results after losing to *Sora-sensei* twice already.

"Nice, isn't it? I got it from him."

———Her saying that made *Sora-sensei* really angry

Master would write notes on Ten-chan's match records and put them on her parents' gravestones.

I've snuck peeks at those notes before.

And I got jealous.

So jealous that the black fire roaring in my gut made me want to rip the whole thing to shreds. I still remember those flames.

I've been jealous of Ten-chan for lots of things since we met.

Her playing style is almost the same as Master's.

I can't get a word in when those two are talking.

And right now, they're closing in on the solution to Shogi.

I know that their pace picked up dramatically once I, the live-in apprentice always getting in the way, was gone.

———Everyone's happier now except for me, anyway.

If Yaichi Kuzuryu's first apprentice had been Ten-chan instead of me I think the Shogi world wouldn't be such a mess right now.

20 seconds have passed.

Oh no I have to think hard about the formation on the board and make a Shogi puzzle, but I lost this much time thinking about Ten-chan

I can make a Shogi puzzle that can fool a computer.

The themes I prepared for today can do that.

But a person who can read the intent behind them could solve those puzzles in seconds.

———Not enough! These aren't enough!

Even if I strung all the ideas together in an extremely long sequence, Ten-chan wouldn't even blink twice.

That's why there's only one conclusion here.

I can't beat Ten-chan from this point.

It took me half of the only minute I have to reach that answer.

Time remaining: ———30 seconds.

“ ”

I softly place the piece in my hand back onto my piece stand.

Because I'll use the last 30 seconds I have to come to terms with defeat like a Shogi player does when their last ray of hope gets snuffed out

..... I thought I'd gotten stronger But I just can't beat Ten-chan

I mean, even that first match we played against each other in the Practice League, she completely schooled me———

“Ah!”

It hits me.

———There

I've found the last key I've been looking for all this time.

It feels like finding two jigsaw puzzle pieces that fit perfectly after all the pieces were scattered.

My heart leaps with excitement after being quiet for so long. I go back and find a Shogi puzzle I'd almost thrown away and desperately try to put it back together. All 11 of my mental Shogi boards are working at light speed, lining up the pieces when they turn and yell at me.

Sounding surprisingly like Keika

“..... conds———”

“Dah?!”

The realization that she has started counting down brings me back to the top side.

Blood drains from my face.

It's the same as waking up for the second time on a school day. That *oh no!* feeling. Suddenly I'm sweating from head to toe! I yell out of reflex.

“H-How many minutes?!”

“None. Six, seven, eight, ni———”

“!!”

I have one second.

No time to hesitate. I reach out over the board to spring the trap I’ve spent this whole match setting up.

“—————Here!!”

“Hmph? I see how it is

Ten-chan smirks when she sees what piece I played.

“Studied up on the weaknesses of deep learning software, have you?”

She saw right through me, and it didn’t even take a second.

“Yes, it’s true that even Awaji needs a lot of time to read through every sequence when there are many options available for pieces to block with. Put up enough of these instant death sequences, and it might eventually trigger one. But aren’t you forgetting something? You’re playing against a human being right now!”

She flicks her long, black hair out like a wing.

Then, snapping down a piece with a high-pitched *crack*, she turns her hand over and beckons me forward.

“Come. I’ll dance for you.”

“HEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHERE!!”

Attack, attack and attack some more. That way, pieces keep getting exchanged and options keep growing higher and higher as I draw Ten-chan into the formation I built on the opposite side of the world.

“Come at me all you want! I’ll keep dancing through the very end!!”

“HEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEF

I crank up the speed and make the board even more complex.

Ten-chan’s King spins and pliés about the board, but it doesn’t make a single mistake. It’s enough to make the little voice in my head think she read through this sequence ages ago

———Don’t give in! I can’t give up now! Make your fighting spirit come across on the board!!

Even if I’m losing right now!

Even if I’m going against the solution to Shogi!

I haven’t lost as long as my spirit isn’t broken!!

“HEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHERE!!”

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

Ten-chan’s waiting time goes by.

She’s not letting me see that she’s out of breath, but even Ten-chan has to be exhausted after dancing so elegantly this long!

When suddenly she almost leaps off the armrest she was leaning on and shouts, “How long is left?!”

“Four minutes.”

“Tch

This is the first time in the entire match she’s looked like she’s under pressure.

Then she leans over and loosens the ribbon around her collar. I think she didn’t mean to, but she also yells, “..... Too hot!”

———Now

I make my move.

“HEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHERE— — — — HERE!!”

I can’t checkmate Ten-chan’s King. At least, not right now.

That’s why— — —

“Now, you give me options?! Challenging me to checkmate you, huh?! I accept!!”

Yes. I played an open challenge to Ten-chan just now.

“You say you have Shogi’s solution figured out. Why don’t you prove it?”

“KRRNNNNNGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Ten-chan covers one eye with her hand and clenches so hard, I’m amazed it didn’t fall out.

She’s never shown so much tenacity before, not even against Sora-sensei!

It makes me feel satisfied to know that I forced the Shogi player Ai Yashajin to go all out.

I can’t win otherwise.

“— — — — — Got it.”

Ten-chan lets out a deep breath and she makes her move with shaky fingers.

“It’s over, Ai,” she tells me.

“..... Sorry about this.”

“Huh?!”

The match certainly did end when she made that move.

I don’t hesitate and slide a piece into position.

Ten-chan makes her move just as fast. Two checks in a row using no time at all.

But— — —

“..... Wha?”

That white hand of hers stops in midair.

She leans in so close that her nose almost touches the board and then looks up at me in wide-eyed disbelief.

“Wh-What did you——?”

Ten-chan is always so collected, but she’s on the verge of losing her composure.

“What did you do?! Ai Hinatsuru!! WHAT DID YOU?!”

I can’t say anything, but Keika speaks up from the boardside table.

“Yashajin-*sensei*, one-minute Shogi begins now.”

“.....!!”

Ten-chan’s pretty black hair gets frazzled as she scratches her head relentlessly between moves.

Her fingers tremble so hard she can’t hold a piece.

“I-Impossible! I *know* you stepped on a death flag! This result completely violates true Shogi, and that’s impossible!! This THIS!!”

Yes. I think so, too.

I really think she found a core truth to Shogi.

“Th-This sequence, like someone drew it up happening in a real match? Was Shogi always so pretty?”

The reason why I still came out on top in the end is——

“..... So That was it”

Once she sees that she can’t checkmate me by the skin of my teeth, Ten-chan organizes her messy piece stand.

Then, after clearing a check path, she leaves everything to me.

For the first time this whole match Ten-chan's real feelings come across in that move.

So I play the next move out of respect: putting her in check.

That move———is our last.

“Well then, Awaji lost,” says Ten-chan as she adjusts the loose ribbon and bows her head.

▲ 7 Moves

“Let me in on it, would you?”

Those were Ai Yashajin’s first words right after losing.

“Was there a checkmate?! Or wasn’t there?! Which is it?!”

“The checkpath to my King was———”

Ai Hinatsuru deftly reversed the board to the exact point where her opponent erred.

“Wha?”

Yashajin understood the instant she saw the formation. The answer seemed so simple after being pointed out to her.

“It really was there?”

“Uh-huh. Exactly seven moves.”

Hinatsuru traced out the sequence with her fingers, but Yashajin still couldn’t accept the truth in front of her eyes. Acknowledging it was even harder than coming to terms with the loss.

The death flags were correct.

Yet, she was defeated.

The very core of Yashajin’s being couldn’t accept Hinatsuru’s answer, one that coexisted with the true essence of Shogi and her own victory.

After all, that shouldn’t have been humanly possible

“O-Outdoing Awaji with such a simple trick And for me to overlook a seven-move checkmate I-Impossible”

“..... No matter how good you are at Shogi puzzles, there are some problems

you just can't solve," Hinatsuru mumbled under her breath.

The agony of defeat still stung in her memory.

"You can solve any puzzle, no matter how long it is, if you can sit down and think at your desk by yourself. But when two people are sitting at a board with a lot on the line like this you can't," said Hinatsuru, looking up from the board to meet Yashajin's eyes.

"You're the one who taught me that Remember, Ten-chan?"

"Ah———"

That moment came back to her.

Her first match against Hinatsuru.

In that Practice League bout, Hinatsuru unleashed wave after wave of furious attacks while Yashajin evaded them with pinpoint precision. It was a grand match that saw both of their strengths go toe-to-toe. It was also Ai Yashajin's first time experiencing a true high-stakes match.

What's more, she was victorious.

All because Ai Hinatsuru had missed a seven-move check path in the late-game.

A simple seven-move check path eluded Ai Hinatsuru, who could solve 1,000-move Shogi puzzles in an instant.

That is what carried Hinatsuru's hope up through the very end today.

Memories of moments when she was on the cusp of giving up, as well as all the other miracle comebacks her unbreakable spirit had brought about.

"..... It was right there"

Yashajin bemoaned using the same words Hinatsuru had on that fateful day.

While Hinatsuru had broken down in tears immediately afterward, Yashajin was in surprisingly little pain. In fact, something similar to the relief that

accompanies solving an extremely long math problem had budded within her.

If this was the last match she would ever play, she had no regrets.

That thought crossed her mind

“..... My decision to concentrate resources on upgrading the software’s early- and mid-game capabilities could have been the real mistake”

“I think that was the best way to help your winning percentage. Creating this late-game was just a lucky coincidence

But....”

“But?”

“Even if Shogi is completely figured out, that split is close to infinite for people. So, actually———”

“New elements will be added to the game?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Hinatsuru leaned forward and continued.

“I think late-game tricks to fool the opponent will get more attention now. That includes how to use waiting time. Fans can still get excited, so I don’t think the professional Shogi world is going to collapse any time soon.”

“You want the fans to see players make mistakes when the solution is obvious from the start? That sets them up to be laughingstocks. I’ll have no part in that professional world, thank you.”

“Just let them laugh.”

“.....!”

It was the ease of Hinatsuru’s words that struck Yashajin.

What could she have endured in Tokyo that solidified her determination to this extent? Yashajin contemplated it for the first time. Clearly, Hinatsuru had suffered in her own way

Ai Hinatsuru put the origin of that suffering into words.

“You see? I’ve always felt like I owed someone.”

“..... As in?”

“I didn’t start playing Shogi because I loved it, more like someone I loved did. I wondered if a person like me should be allowed to be a Shogi player. My heart wasn’t as pure as yours or Sora-*sensei*’s when I found Shogi”

“.....”

“But you know? After living in Osaka, coming to Tokyo meeting so many people, playing against them, winning and losing At some point, I realized something,” said Ai.

She spelled out her reason for playing Shogi in no uncertain terms.

“It’s not Shogi I like. *I love competing with other people with Shogi.*”

“.....!!”

“That’s why having people around to play with is what’s most important to me. I need someone who will go all out and play high-stakes matches against me. And they have to———”

“Be human beings”

It was such solid logic that even Ai Yashajin, with all her knowledge, couldn’t think of a counterargument.

Just like a three-move checkmate, the most fundamental element of Shogi.

“To me, Shogi puzzles are a way to compare smarts with the author a competition, you know?”

“..... If that’s all, then it doesn’t have to be Shogi, now does it?”

“Nope. Shogi is the best.”

Yashajin countered with an exasperated breath, but Hinatsuru’s response was crystal clear.

“Meetings happen by chance but in the end, Shogi is what really lets me go all out. And besides.”

“Besides what?”



“The people in the Shogi world are all so interesting!” said the girl with a smile despite being subjected to the fiercest attack ever seen from that very Shogi world.

And yet

———*Liking* the battle. How does anyone stand a chance against that?

She was blindingly radiant.

Words like *solution* and *truth* had a suspect element to them. Ai Yashajin herself couldn’t help but feel they were drifting further away from them whenever she said them.

She had been forced to confront that feeling.

Not only had she lost the match, her heart had lost as well. Thoroughly.

“Haaaaaa———

Yashajin let out a long sigh.

She had always considered herself more advanced.

Other people her age may as well have been infants in her eyes.

That was especially true with Ai Hinatsuru. The girl thought traveling to Osaka on her own to ask someone to take her in as a live-in-apprentice didn’t strike Hinatsuru as a big deal. Counting on the kindness of others to that degree came across as reckless and irresponsible.

Yashajin did not dispute Ai Hinatsuru’s talent, but there wasn’t a single page she wanted to take out of her book.

After all, *she* was the advanced one.

If Hinatsuru was a Roman gladiator armed with Shogi puzzles and a stubborn, gritty mindset, then she was the Terminator who just arrived from the future. There was simply no contest.

However, that assumption was her downfall.

———I may have been looking away from something very important

After deriving invincible sequences in her research and using them in matches, there was no contest left. Of course, she would grow bored over time.

The future held value *because*, win or lose, the end result was a mystery.

Hinatsuru bet everything on that chance and dove in headfirst.

She left the protection of Yaichi's shadow.

She trampled the Shogi world's biggest taboo: rejecting the Sub League.

She muddled the board with what appeared to be one bad move after another and challenged the future every chance she got. Her unbreakable heart had become her mightiest weapon.

Ai Yashajin had forced Shogi to evolve.



On the other hand, Ai Hinatsuru———evolved from within.

“Hmph.”

Yashajin tucked her long, dark hair behind her ears.

“It seems I have to accept what you say. The winner had the clout, after all.”

“You don’t have to admit it like that, you know? You could say something like: *I just happened to miss a checkmate at the end, that’s all! As a title holder, aren’t you ashamed to win by mistake?! like you usually do.*”

“Excuse me?! When have I ever said something like that?! I said I’m convinced, okay?! That should be enough!”

“The review session goes until the loser is satisfied

“Living in Tokyo turned you into a jerk!!”

“Oh no. It made me stronger.”

Keika, listening to their banter from the boardside table, couldn’t contain a burst of laughter.

———These two are the top players in the Women’s League?

Rather than joy or envy, uneasiness had crept into the young women’s minds after Ginko Sora won the Queen Title.

Not only was Sora young herself, there were adults who could take advantage of her youthful naivety and some Women’s League players were shaken by the sight of her.

But there was an air of dependability in the two sitting before her now.

She surmised that it was because both of them had gone beyond the board and achieved things that even adults never dreamed were possible.

There were two of them.

Just one would be lonely.

But with two———Shogi can be played.

“..... Nicely done.”

The Women’s Shogi world was making definite progress.

Keika’s own heart had begun to shift away from Shogi, but now she knew she couldn’t walk away. Just being part of the world gave her a sense of pride.

———This purity is just too charming.

Here were two girls bantering back and forth, completely unrecognizable from two who were fighting their hearts out.

Two exceptionally cute 11-year-old girls.

They looked as close as real sisters.

Keika spoke as she held out a printout of their match record.

“Great match, both of you! Why don’t we continue the review session at the house over some food and drinks?”

The invitation made Ai Hinatsuru’s eyes light up while a look of reluctance crossed Ai Yashajin’s face.

The loser went along with the winner’s wishes in the end, begrudgingly.

Spare

“..... We were indeed present for something incredible”

The match is over.

Even now, 30 minutes after checkmate, no one in the Player’s Room has budged an inch.

Because we’re too stunned to stand.

“Two sixth grade elementary school girls have just discovered a Shogi puzzle within a live match that I could never hope to find in my lifetime. I’m grateful to the higher power that took away my sight For if I had seen it play out with my own eyes, I very well might have retired today.”

It’s Chairman Tsukimitsu who breaks the long silence.

But his choice of words gets my attention.

“..... Discovered?”

“All Shogi puzzles exist within the realm of Shogi. They only take physical shape when someone discovers them.”

The chairman says they’re like carved statues.

Just as a beautiful work of art is already inside a chunk of marble, Shogi puzzles exist within the massive boulder that is Shogi from the start.

“Everything is always right in front of us. There is no special meaning in that. In our youth, the Meijin and I debated Shogi’s solution for better or worse But it’s rather like the measles.”

“

Those words blindsided me like a sucker punch and hurt even worse.

That shame isn’t going anywhere, so I just stare into my lap as the chairman

and Ms. Oga leave the Player's Room.

Now there are just two of us left.

Master and I.

"Yaichi."

".....! M-Master"

"'Bout Ai bein' a replacement for Ginko. Keika told me ya came to ask her yarself. Have ya still not figured it out?"

"....."

Confused, I don't say anything and just stare back into my lap.

Master quips like he's had enough of his clueless apprentice.

"Ai is Ai. Just like how Ginko is Ginko. Nobody's anybody's replacement."

There aren't any spares.

I guess so. But

"The reason I had ya take Ai as a live-in apprentice was I thought ya'd both grow better that way. Nothin' else."

"..... Maybe that was true at first."

I manage to say without looking up.

"But, didn't it ever cross your mind? Can you say say beyond a shadow of a doubt that the thought of keeping Big Sis and I apart to protect us never crossed your mind? Can you?!"

"Sure can."

Master opens up about it for the first time.

His reasoning is so clearcut, there's no room to argue.

"I lost my wife when she was young. It was just me an' Keika."

“Ah

The loneliness on Master’s face leaves me speechless.

“But never once have I regretted marryin’ her in the first place. I’ve never wished I’d married some healthier girl instead. ’At’s what it means to be in love. Am I wrong?”

“.....”

“There ain’t nobody who knows the future. All ya can do to avoid regrets is makin’ the move ya think is best at the time.”

I was so sure the future was set in stone.

That nothing but pain and sorrow was waiting for Ginko and I.

But

“Ai’s always makin’ the choice ’at’s right for her path. I thought the least I could do was give her a push. It wasn’t any different when ya followed me ’round askin’ for Shogi lessons way back when.”

“Making your own choices

After Ginko disappeared what have I done, exactly?

Did I make any decisions for myself?

Just blindly believe that computer-generated match records were the unavoidable future and pursue them as much as possible, that’s it.

I knew what had to be done from the very beginning, but I always lined up some kind of excuse to avoid it.

I didn’t even make the decision to go see Ginko when we were finally reunited. I snuck away from there and went home. Then I blamed it all on Master.

Meanwhile, two grade school girls are going through the shredder, fighting their hearts out to get even a little further down the path they’re forging for

themselves.

Worse: the reason they chose that path———

“I really am trash.”

“Finally get it, do ya?”

Master’s voice is sharp as a whip as he lets his failure of an apprentice have it.

“Ya need more trainin’. Go on back to square one!”

■ The Beginning of the End

“Yeesh! Why on earth do I have to sleep in the shack?!”

I gripe for probably the hundredth time while setting up a futon on the *tatami*-matted floor.

The Kiyotaki residence, not far from the Kansai Shogi Association building.

Ai Hinatsuru is staying here while visiting from Tokyo, and made me come back here with her even though our match is over.

Grandmaster was overjoyed, “*Havin’ my two granddaughters home! It’s just like summer vacation!*” and Keika’s cooking was edible (because hunger is the best seasoning!) so that’s fine.

BUT!

There was no need for Ai and I to bathe together, style each other’s hair or for the two of us to sleep side by side like this!

“Yes, the review session ran late and I know the last train already left, but I live within driving distance! There’s no point in me staying here tonight! And to sleep next to the one who beat me today! How am I supposed to get any sleep when the sight of you makes me remember the match?!”

Ai answers with a smirk, “You said you’d do anything I wanted, remember?”

“! I know!”

My word, I’m beyond annoyed!

I didn’t make that promise to end up doing *this* But a promise is a promise. Yes, yes, I’ll do what you say. I just have to do it, right?

“We’ve never had a sleepover with just us, have we, Ten-chan?”

“It’s the first and probably the last.”

“There you go again But that’s what I love about you, Ten-chan!”

“Yeah, yeah. Me, too,” I offhandedly echo and she angrily puffs out her cheeks at me.

But, I was being honest.

Even when we first met, I didn’t hate her. Did I go out of my way to talk to her? No but I didn’t feel any of the hostility I had for Ginko Sora toward her.

I was a bit happy even.

As an only child, she was the first sibling I ever had.

She invited me to a review session after our first match in the Practice League Then again with other members of the Sub League and Master’s grossly named *Grade Schooler Practice Group*. I eventually got comfortable enough around them to speak.

“..... Getting close to anyone scares me.”

“Even now?”

“Yes Even now.”

I open up to her.

My being able to flow into this kind of conversation so naturally has to be because I lost.

I hate losing.

But winning all the time is painful in its own way, too.

“For me, Shogi is a series of sad memories no matter where I go. The sadness piles up just as fast as the wins because I know if I keep pursuing strength the way things are now, I’ll end up following in my parents’ footsteps.”

“Is that why you wanted to end it?”

“Maybe”

Had Mother and Father not devoted their lives to developing artificial intelligence, I might've avoided this sadness altogether.

Do I even like Shogi in the first place?

Right now I'd like some space and some time away from it.

There's no rush.

I'm still in elementary school, and that's too much waiting time to commit to only Shogi.

"Using Awaji taught me so many things. Deep learning software can make more than you've ever dreamed of into reality. Can you believe it? The world can be changed, the future can be built with a calculator. So, basically———"

"Basically?" she says and locks eyes with me.

I answer, dead serious.

"Devoting it only to Shogi is a waste."

"Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's it?"

Ai is in stitches with laughter.

I guess my serious tone was the kicker.

She's tearing up, even rolling on the floor and says without holding anything back, "You're the only person in the world who would ever think to use the world's fastest supercomputer for Shogi, Ten-chan. You've also spent more money on Shogi than anyone in the world. And now you're sounding like you're not sure if you like Shogi at all? That's Kobe's Cinderella, for sure."

"Just stop."

She's seriously ticked me off, so I roll over to turn my back on her.

Then comes a hurried apology.

"S-Sorry, Ten-chan! I didn't mean to tease———"

“Ai.”

I cut her off with my back still turned.

“Shogi is the reason I was born at all.”

How could I not love Shogi? I’m grateful to it with all my heart.

I mean———

“Shogi is how I managed to get through the sadness on the worst of days. It’s thanks to Shogi that I have such dear friends.”

“Ten-chan

“Thank you, Ai.”

That’s something I can only say with my back turned like this. It’s so embarrassing, my face feels like it’s on fire.

But the pit of my chest is even hotter.

“I lose interest in things when I know the answer. The flame goes out. So, actually, I don’t care about Yaichi anymore.”

Part of that is true, part of it isn’t.

The human heart is complicated, just like Shogi. It’s hard to accurately quantify things.

But I’m sure Ai will understand. It’s because I’m sure that I can open up and talk about these things.

Even the emotions that can’t be put in words.

As my sister apprentice.

As my biggest rival.

As my first friend, I’m sure Ai Hinatsuru will understand.

“I like him, but I think I see my parents in him, too. So I know that I’ll have to leave him behind someday,” I say without turning around.

I'd just die if she saw how much I'm tearing up.

"But that's not how you feel, is it, Ai?"

"..... Uh-huh."

"The solution is still the same, you know?"

"Yes, I do Mostly."

"It's iffy, watching like this."

"H-How's that any different from you?"

"Say that again?!"

I roll over to face her like a careening boulder and grind my forehead into hers.

"Who's the one who left without a word and is trying to turn the Shogi world upside down, huh? I'm replacing the terribly outdated association buildings, reviving the Women's League from the brink of extinction with Ginko Sora, taking care of the youngest title holder in history after he thought he'd been abandoned and went on a reckless tear, all while desperately trying to clean up a certain someone's mess."

"Ugh Sorry I'm sorry"

"Learn your lesson, seriously."

"..... Um, Ten-chan? I'd like a turn to talk now. Would you listen?"

"If I can sleep while you're talking. I'm dead tired."

I pull my head away and shimmy back onto my own futon. She can say whatever, but I'm calling it a night.

"I have eleven mental Shogi boards."

"I know. I was on the receiving end of each one."

I don't have anything against Ai, but I hate that annoying late-game skill of

hers with a passion! If there's anything that can measure up to the fury that comes with having the advantage I've carefully built up all through the match come tumbling down at the very last second, it's——

"I can't see them very well anymore."

A gasp in the dark.

It takes me a few seconds to realize it was me. Ai's expression is strangely calm, considering what she just said

"..... Since when?"

"I noticed during the Women's Legend League Preliminaries when I played against Tsubasa."

"Ser———?!"

I spring up off my futon and almost scream. Luckily, I clasp my hands over my mouth just in time.

Grandmaster and Keika are in rooms close by.

———No one can know about this

Ai keeps on talking while I struggle to catch my breath.

"During my match with Tsubasa, my eyes didn't work right and I had a nosebleed. I barely won in the end but Something hasn't been right since then. It used to be so easy to use those boards, but now they're drifting away and moving all on their own"

"....."



Why didn't I pick up on this? There were so many signs.

Ika Sainokami falling apart.

Ai forcing things like there's no tomorrow.

———How could her body be unscathed?

Now, Ai Hinatsuru wanting to sleep next to me made sense.

She's afraid to sleep by herself.

"Help me Ten-chan"

That wasn't the voice of a girl prodigy who leaves defeated professionals in her wake or of the superhuman who can outthink a computer.

It was the voice of a scared little girl who didn't understand what was happening to her.

There's a scroll in the alcove written by Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* that says: *My golden years start tomorrow*. Moonlight is shining right on it, so it sparkles in the dark room.

They're the cruelest words Ai Hinatsuru could hear right now.

"My golden years are almost over. Please I need your help, Ten-chan"

FOR THE AFTERWORD

(Spoiler Alert)

I'll be talking about plot points here. If you haven't read the story, I highly recommend waiting until you finish it to read this section.

First, I need to make an apology.

The rules and regulations that govern the Shogi world in this book differ slightly from the actual rules.

For example, a process for a Professional Entrance Exam already exists in the real Shogi world and Women's League players are permitted to take it if they meet the criteria.

A story arc for Ai Hinatsuru's battle to establish one was in the back of my mind from the beginning, so I never touched on that test until I started the Ais' battle again.

The Nyugyoku Victory Declaration in this book also differs from the actual process.

While it's true that the number of declaration victories are increasing in computer Shogi, the rules for stalemates and declarations for amateur, pro and computer Shogi are not standardized. Since explaining that in the story would just make things more confusing, I simplified it into one overarching set of rules.

In addition to those points being left vague up to this point, the fear of becoming so focused on expanding the themes of *artificial intelligence* and *Shogi's solution*, things that I don't fully understand myself, and losing the core *human* element to the story has been eating at me I've been grappling with it for a long time now.

However, thanks to the *human* story that I've built up over the previous 17 books, I feel like I was able to use those themes and push myself to write the story I wanted to write. Yaichi and Ayumu, Ika and Ginko, and so many others. I feel that it was thanks to their support that this book barely came together in the end.

Then, there's Ai and Ai.

Their names come from the *A.I.* of artificial intelligence. Ai Hinatsuru has late-game prowess, which surpasses human intellect, and Ai Yashajin possesses overwhelming skill in the early-game. The two girls, born of two aspects of Shogi software, have become the ultimate sword and shield.

They came into the story to face each other as rivals.

But as they gained stronger personalities throughout the story, their relationship has peaked as you have already seen in this book. Light novels have been called an art form, but writing these two *Ai*s makes me feel like I'm only on the starting line when it comes to being an author.

Now, for gratitude.

In addition to Saiyuki's input, I interviewed computer Shogi developer Tsuyoshi Kanda (HN Rainmetaru) and Shogi puzzle creator Masahiro Kishimoto (HN kisy) for countless hours to make this book.

Rather than just putting their wisdom directly into the book, I took some creative liberties to make the story more interesting. However, I believe my *fake* additions have made it nearly unreadable for experts in the field.

I take full responsibility for that and offer my most sincere apologies. I may have reached the starting line as an author, but my lack of ability is really starting to hurt.

And lastly, an announcement.

The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done! will finish after two more installments.

I still have plenty of ideas, so I'm certain I will publish a few side stories here and there, but the main arc will conclude with Volume 20.

With the ending in sight, I'm more motivated than ever to bring you thrilling stories that will have you on the edge of your seat until the final page!

**REVIEW
SESSION**



“All of us got titles now, eh?”

Old-style bar in Sendagaya.

The place is walking distance from the association and has booths where ya can lay out and down booze so plenty of Kanto Shogi players crash here 'til morn when their review sessions run late.

This is where Machi an' I set up a party for Ayumu.

“The four who lasted long enough for the cameras to turn on in the quarter finals during the Elementary Meijin Tournament all havin' titles by 20 has to be some kind of record, eh? Even the Meijin's generation didn't have our kind of thunder.”

“We are the miracle generation, indeed.”

Machi nods even while downing *sake* like the stuff is water.

Her family has got tons of *historical* and *traditional* stuff goin' on, so she's been sneakin' drinks at events since she could climb out of the crib. So yeah, she can handle the stuff like nobody's business. My parents run a liquor store, but she drinks enough to make *my* jaw drop. Worse, there's no way to tell if she's drunk. If she seems plastered, it's all an act.

Today, though, she's being really buddy-buddy.

“..... Still, not that my dynasty can last too long. Ha-ha-ha”

“Hey, I defended my title the other week, so I'm good for another year at least. But if that runt challenges me, I doubt I'd stand a chance. Then again, I'm two-for-two against her in official matches. Never lost!”

“Meanwhile I have lost to both the Ais: your point?”

Machi flicks her wrist, downing the rest of the cold *sake* in one swig and blabs on and on without a trace of pink on her face.

“In all seriousness, are not the two Ais too strong as it is? Not even

professionals could compete with Ai Hinatsuru if she can make such a high-quality Shogi puzzle in one-minute Shogi. Mistakes galore, yes? Instant death, yes? If we throw our weight behind her to stop Ten-chan, an even stronger monster will be in our midst, yes?”

“Yeah, that’d be damn near invincible

The match between Kuzu’s thing one and thing two wasn’t streamed, so I had to wait for it to be registered to see for myself.

To be blunt, the early-and mid-game were way over my head.

The only thing I figured out was that the defense suddenly had a huge lead at one point halfway through. The offense was dead to rights. Nah, I’m damn sure the nail was already in the coffin.

“But I don’t get how she got the checkmate

“Word is that computers tend to freeze when they haven’t got enough memory to process several options simultaneously.”

“And whose *word* is that, eh?”

“Yaichi’s elder brother’s.”

“Somethin’ about that guy creeps me out

“I, too, would rather he not become my brother-in-law.”

No kidding. Just the thought of being related to him by marriage makes me wanna hurl

“Drop dead!!”

“Suddenly furious, are you? Scary.”

“What are ya, plastered?! ’Cuz I got enough alcohol in me to picture weird

crap like that!! Where's the star of the party, huh?! Would it kill ya to speak up?!"

"He has long since drunk himself under the table."

"How could a title holder be *that* weak?"

Ayumu had two, maybe three pints of beer when he said somethin' like, "screw alcohol" and conked out. Still, the guy's been going from one gathering to the next these days and drank at each of them. He's past his limit, that's all. We're gonna have to toughen him up.

"..... Do you think Yaichi's depressed?" mutters Machi, twirling an empty *sake* bottle in her hand.

How about that? Her cheeks are red, for once.

"A mature girl is ready and willing to make it all better and yet idiot."

"The guy's a lolicon, yeah? Fat chance he'd take ya up on that," I quip, but, real talk for a sec.

I'm a chick just like her, but she's giving off a hot drunk vibe strong enough to make me tipsy right now.

"Sides, he can't drink yet."

"Indeed. Shogi is his only avenue to drown the agony of defeat."

"Live it up with another round after winning! Can't do that either."

We were just kids not too long ago, but here we are old enough to drink. All except one Precious little Kuzu is two years younger than the rest of us and still left out.

He's always been runnin' out in front of us. There've been times he was so far ahead that we lost sight of him.

I'd bet he's still runnin' now, doin' what he needs to do.

The day we're all downin' cold ones together is coming, just not yet.

We haven't won against that cheeky Snow White yet, but it'd be fun to invite her along when we do.

Then she'd be stuck as the odd one out, sipping orange juice while we have the good stuff. We'd get in some good verbal jabs and there's nothin' she could say back. It's gonna be awesome.

But Yaichi Kuzuryu doesn't have the time for cold ones until then.

"..... Get your crap together, Trash Ryuo."

I quietly toast our friend who isn't here.

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

Ais Hinatsuru and Yashajin are on the cover this time. Both haven't been on a cover together since Book 2, which is also the last time they played in an official match. They've gone from the fourth grade to the sixth story-wise, but it's been seven and a half years

They have grown since then, so please read their battle all the way to the end.

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

This volume's cover is Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin. I've drawn these two many times over the years, but it's surprising they haven't both been on the cover since Book 2. I hope you'll notice the changes to their design that reflect their growth.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 18

Story by Shirow Shiratori

Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 18

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