

# Nostalgia

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*AU. Hikaru never entered the professional Go world, opting instead to placate Sai with NetGo and Go Salons. Years pass by and now Hikaru is a normal office employee going about his daily life until...*

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## 0 - Nostalgia

**Full Summary:** AU. Hikaru never entered the professional Go world, opting instead to placate Sai with NetGo and disguising himself when visiting various Go Salons. After Sai's disappearance his love for Go diminished until Akari coerced him into playing in the school's Go Club, where he discovered Sai in his Go and therefore relearned his love for it. Years pass by and now Hikaru is a normal office employee going about his daily life until...

### Nostalgia

He walked along silently down the waterlogged streets, shoes splashing in the puddles scattered along the ground and raindrops soaking into his suit. He sighed, eyes searching for a dry store to wait in, hopefully a ramen stand. After all, a bowl or few of ramen was always welcome to him.

"No! That was a great move," cried the voice of a young boy, cutting Hikaru out of his melancholic thoughts. "You're just not good enough to see it!"

"Not good enough?" another voice cried out, "And who beat who that last time?"

Hikaru smiled nostalgically as he looked towards the two boys in the Go salon screaming at each other. Taking a minute, he decided to enter the salon 'just to take a peek' he assured himself.

The jingling of a bell sounded his entrance to the small shop. A girl at the counter greeted him cheerfully, asking if he was there to play. Hikaru shook his head and politely refused, explaining his desire to just stay there and wait out the rain. The girl nodded back at him and gestured into the shop for him to look around if he was interested. He thanked her before wandering off towards where the still arguing boys were.

They must not have noticed his presence judging by how they kept quibbling with the other. He stopped and looked at the game on the goban, then whistled. It seemed that the two players were pretty evenly matched, but that wasn't what took his notice. It was the level the two seemed to have played at, they definitely weren't mere amateurs.

"That move at 15-7 was pretty well placed," Hikaru commented lightly, shaking the two boys out of their frustration. "It solidifies the territorial dispute very well, making for an excellent defense."

Dismissing his comment, the red-haired boy to Hikaru's left suddenly spoke up. "Who are you?"

"Shindo Hikaru, just a random passerby," he introduced himself.

"Oh, you know how to play Go mister?" the other boy asked, eyes shining in excitement.

"I do dabble in it from time to time," Hikaru answered vaguely, a mysterious smile on his face.

"Oh." The boys' faces fell a bit, he noticed belatedly.

"But I used to be pretty proficient at it," he added hastily, smiling encouragingly at them as if to make his point.

"We're insei mister Shindo," answered the blue-haired boy.

"Play a game with us and we'll see how strong you are," the red-haired boy challenged quite boisterously.

Hikaru looked in dissension with himself at the probe to his pride. He stared at the two anticipating faces of the boys, sighed and gave in to them. "Alright, but just one game boys," he relented before going over to the counter and paid the adults' fee. He then walked back to the table and sat down across from the red-haired boy. The boy looked extremely eager as he pulled out a handful of stones and placed his hand on the board. "Nigiri!"

Hikaru took out one stone from his own goke and placed it on the board, waiting for the boy to count the stones in his hand. It was odd numbered. The stones were quickly swept back into the goke.

"Onegaishimasu," both players intoned and bowed to the other before sitting straight back up.

As his eyes focused on the goban, Hikaru's eyes sharpened as his hand reached into the goke, picking up a stone and rolling it between his middle and fore-fingers.

*Pa-chi!*

The first stone was set.

*Fin?*

# 1 - Reminiscence

## Reminiscence

He had won. It wasn't by much, but it gave him a sense of pride to know that he'd been able to hold his own against an insei. Go had been an obsession for him during his early teenage years, and yet after he'd been swamped with exams in the latter part of high school, it was slowly forgotten. It'd become a memory far in the recesses of his past. Though now that he thought about it, Go had always been a constant in his life, starting with his grandfather's useless persuading of him to learn it, then along came Sai and his nagging insistence to play the game. The Go club and its members during his high school days were there for him too, and Akari. It was always Akari, the ever vibrant and faithful childhood friend who never gave up on him.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, he turned to the boy before, smiling comfortingly. It was the polite thing to do, after he'd stomped on the child's pride in a game. "It was a good game. Don't be discouraged here, you'll get better."

The child merely looked up at him, eyes glistening with unshed tears and nodded in agreement. He would become stronger, Hikaru knew as he looked at the child's determined gaze. 'Yes, he definitely will.'

Smiling to himself, Hikaru thanked that child for game loud enough for him to snap back his attention to him, rather than the continuous stare at the board. Grinning at the child sitting across from him, he gave him a response, "Don't worry, you'll definitely improve."

With that, Hikaru stood up; removing his suit jacket from the back of the chair and sliding it back on. Walking to the counter, he asked for his suitcase and umbrella before silently leaving the salon. All the way home, he kept replaying the game he just played over and over in his head. There was just something about that game that kept nagging at him; sure the child had potential, a lot of it too from what he could see. As he reached the apartment door to his home, the sudden revelation of why the game nagged at him hit him, why the way the game flowed both enamored and greatly disturbed his mind. It was the way the hands were played that had him take notice at first. The child had played quite a bit like Sai did, except on a much lower level. The child was merely a child after all, it was not expected that he would have Sai's sage-like play at that age, but he would grow. Yes, he definitely would.

Finally opening the door to his home, he was greeted by the sight of his wife bustling around, papers and a pen stuck firmly between her lips as she carried a steaming pot from the kitchenette to their small living room that doubled as a dining room. Quickly discarding his shoes at the doorway and dropping the suitcase by the kitchenette entryway, he went over to help carry the steaming pot to the low table in the living room, placing it carefully on a coaster. Turning around, he was regaled with the happy and smiling face of his wife, with papers and pen now in hand and her large chocolate brown eyes shining in gratefulness at his help. "Welcome home, Hikaru."

Smiling back at the sight, Hikaru answered, "I'm back, Akari."

All thoughts of the Sai's Go-like playing child dissipated from his mind as he sat down to eat dinner, basking in the calm and casual atmosphere at home.

## 2 - Coincidence

### Coincidence

It was just another day at work, another day of eating out during lunch. Akari wouldn't mind if he'd just went to get a bowl or two of ramen for lunch, but that was only as long as he eats healthy for the rest of the week. Shaking himself out of his thinking, he looked up to see that his feet had led him to the doors of a well-known ramen shop. Opening the door, his senses were greeted by a waft of freshly cooked and mouth-watering ramen smells. The owner behind the counter greeted him with a wide smile and gestured for him to take a seat anywhere he'd like.

Hikaru nodded and sat down in a seat at the counter, placing an order for one pork ramen and another bowl of miso ramen. He took off his suit jacket, folded it and placed it beside him on the counter top, waiting patiently. As it was the lunch rush hour, there were many customers seated in the small establishment waiting for their ramen. Taking his time to look around the room, he noticed a magazine rack beside the door and went to retrieve a copy or two to read just to pass the time. As he neared them, he recognized a few copies of Go Weekly lying at the top of the pile, grabbed them quickly and returned to his seat.

"One pork and miso ramen each!" was called out soon enough and he grabbed his two orders, sliding them along the counter to his seat. Taking a pair of one-use chopsticks, he pulled them apart, picked up a mouthful of ramen and dug right in. While he was happily slurping away at his noodles, he didn't notice the store's door opening and letting in two younger customers. They made a beeline for the counter seats, taking the two to his left. "Two chicken ramen, sir!" one of them called out.

"Alright, two chicken ramen coming right up!"

The two boys started chattering about various things until one of them noticed the stack of magazines beside Hikaru. "Hey, mister, can we—ah! It's you!" the red-haired boy of the two shouted loudly, finger out and pointing in an accusatory manner. A few heads turned around to the source of the loud sound to see a teenage boy pointing at an office employee. Hikaru finally looked up, slightly alarmed at the sudden yell in his left ear. However, his face took on an enlightened look as he recognized the two boys; they were the same ones from the Go salon he'd visited a few days ago.

"Oh, it's you two again," Hikaru replied congenially, waving for the other customers to return to their own business, "Here for a good bowl or two of ramen as well?"

The red-haired boy just stared dumbly at Hikaru's calm and composed reaction to his prior outburst.

"He's really sorry for surprising you like that sir," his blue-haired friend apologized quickly. Discreetly, he elbowed his friend, nudging for him to apologize as well.

Blinking out of his stupor, the red-haired boy nodded quickly, his face blushing hotly in embarrassment, as he bowed his head and mumbled out a quick, "Sorry."

Hikaru stared at the two apologetic boys for a moment before bursting out in laughter as the scene displayed before him, before quickly waving his hand in front of the two boys' shocked looking faces to dismiss his laughter. "No, no, it's quite alright. I used to be pretty rude and brash when I was your age, probably still am."

An awkward silence fell over them before one of the boys spoke. "Uhm, I'm Ohka Tetsuo, sir," the blue-haired boy introduced himself before gesturing to his friend, "and he's—"

"I can introduce myself just fine!" the red-haired boy interrupted, pushing Ohka out of Hikaru's line of sight. He pointed to himself, thumb jabbing at his chest, "And I'm Taguchi Shun, insei extraordinaire and future Hon`inbo!"

Hikaru deliberated a few seconds, letting what the child said to sink in before replying, "It's very nice to meet you then, Ohka-kun, Taguchi-kun." He smiled at the two Go playing boys, there was hope yet for the future of Go.

### 3 - Star Point

**Note: Hikaru's age is around 26 if you're wondering. And he's married to Akari for the sake of convenience. If you have questions, I can answer them through PMs, or you can leave it in the review. Lastly, sorry for the extremely long wait, it WILL happen again. Now excuse me, because my fried fish is burning.**

Star Point

It was both refreshing and amusing meeting the two insei at the ramen shop by coincidence. He'd left the shop feeling much more light-hearted and carefree than when he'd entered, there was even a slight bounce in his steps on the way home. He was looking forward to watching the ongoing improvement of those two lively insei on their pursuit in the Go world. They were definitely going to make waves.

He sighed as he opened the door to his apartment home, and was greeted by the wafting scent of curry coming from the kitchen area. Moments later, Akari's head popped out from behind the kitchen wall, greeting him cheerfully. "Welcome home Hikaru."

"I'm home," Hikaru answered her, smiling brightly and eyes twinkling, "smells good." He set his suitcase on the floor leaning against the wall, taking his work shoes off with ease and entering the hall, heading towards the sitting room, a small grin still on his face. "Well, someone seems happy today," Akari noted coming up from behind Hikaru, holding onto a steaming pot, her eyebrow raised at his demeanor, "What's up?"

"I met a few interesting kids today," Hikaru answered quite vaguely, taking off his suit jacket and loosening his tie before sitting down on the sofa before elaborating, "they play Go, insei actually."

"Oh?" Akari commented neutrally, though she had given herself away with her tone, and Hikaru could tell she was even more interested by the slight shine in her eyes that appeared when he mentioned Go.

"Maybe you'll meet them someday," Hikaru teased her, turning his twinkling eyes up at Akari, his laptop pulled onto his lap. He turned back to face his laptop, getting back into work, "Call me when dinner's ready."

Knowing what Akari's answer was, he focused on the opened documents littering across the screen and the two excel spreadsheets filled with numbers, dates, names and list of places.

It had been an even two hours before he stopped and looked at the time. 11:38, he sighed, saved his work, setting his laptop aside and stood up and stretched for a bit. Quickly, he took his now empty bowl of curry sitting innocently beside him and set it inside the similarly empty sink. Heading back to the sitting room, he found Akari curled up, sleeping peacefully on the couch beside the sofa. Shaking his head in fondness at the sight, he picked her up as gently and quietly as possible and set her in bed, pulling the covers over her before silently leaving the room back towards the sitting room and his laptop. But first, a cup of tea would do nicely to keep him awake for the next few hours.



Sitting back down with a cup of tea in hand, Hikaru took his mouse and opened a browser window. He sighed and quickly typed in NetGo's address. Just as quickly, he logged into his long untouched and unused account, one that he'd made for himself while Sai was still around: "FujiWara".

He sat back, taking a sip of the hot tea, clicking on a random game in-progress and watched. It had been quite a while since he'd been on NetGo. He would slowly ease back into the game he loved so much in his early teen years, but for now he would only watch and relearn everything he'd made himself forget. Slowly he'd rebuild his Go.

He knew Akari still kept up with the Go world from time to time with her work as an editor for one of the Go magazines, and another for business. There were Go magazines strewn all over their apartment home, hiding in every which nook and cranny. Shaking his head out of his thoughts, he turned his attention back to the game, taking in the shape of the stone and each hand that was being set down. He shook his head disappointedly, the way the game was going was too sloppy, there were too many openings for attack and places left with little defense. The game was a complete mess in itself. Hikaru let out a sigh, opting to look for another game to watch. Hopefully one that was better than the last.

It was another hour and a bit before he finally gave up in finding a perfectly decent game to watch, or maybe one that was interesting in its moves. He was getting exasperated, what happened to all those good players he encountered when he was still a teen? Closing his tired eyes, he rubbed the dry and sore feeling out before opening them again. He stared at the screen with a wisp of disappointment lining his face, watching the current players was no good. Making a split second decision, he moved his mouse over a name on the list and sent a request for a game of speed Go. He was going to play a game, it was to test himself.

How would his go fare now, after years of dormancy? He waited for a reply, unconsciously holding his breath, a slight feeling of nervousness creeping up on him as the seconds ticked by seemingly slower than usual.

'Challenge Accepted' flashed across his screen and he let out his breath, hand shakily holding on to the mouse. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, eyes now focused on the screen, his grip on the mouse tightened as he moved it over a star point and clicked, setting down the first move. It was his first big step back into the Go world.

## 4 - Hesitation

### Hesitation

It was his day off, a day he would usually welcome with open arms and a loud shout of joy followed by spending the day outdoors, but today was different. Today he had holed himself in his apartment, sitting in front of his laptop playing Go on NetGo. He'd ignored all calls from his phone that wasn't from the office, and continued with his games. It was like he was possessed by Sai. He would have been fine just sitting there in front of his laptop all day, had Akari not forcefully dragged him out to a reunion of their junior and senior high school Go Club. They were meeting at a Go convention being held near their old high school.

The public community hall near Haze Senior High School was buzzing with activity, it seemed that in the past few years, Go had received much more interest from the younger generation. Convention goers were bustling about going on with their business all throughout the decently sized community hall. However, many of the customers present were still middle aged to old men; there were quite a few younger children and teenagers scattered about in the crowd from Hikaru's vantage, he was superbly surprised at the turnout for such a small convention such as this one. He looked about, searching for some familiar faces in the crowd, hoping to recognize one of the former Go club members, as Akari had a harder time looking over the crowd. Finally, he noticed a familiar looking group standing by a line of vendors selling what seemed to be various books related to Go, if the sign beside the table was accurate.

"Hey Akari," Hikaru tapped his wife's arm as he pointed over to the group, "I think they're over there."

Akari looked in the direction Hikaru gestured to and nodded in agreement, pulling him along behind her as she pushed her way through the crowd. As they neared the group, someone whom Hikaru suspected to be an older looking Tsutsui Kimihiro glanced their way and waved enthusiastically to the couple while informing the group beside him of the approaching two. As they joined the group, Tsutsui greeted them warmly, "Hikaru! Akari! It's so good to see you two again!"

"Likewise Tsutsui-sempai," Akari replied cordially, a small smile on her face and twinkles in her eyes belied her delight at reuniting with one of their old friends. Hikaru merely grunted in response, a sheepish smile on his face betraying his discomfort at being present at the reunion. He hadn't contacted any of his friends from the Go club in years after all. Akari discreetly elbowed him in the ribs and glared at him from the corner of her eyes, promising a world of hurt if he didn't answer properly. Scratching at his head, Hikaru sighed and answered this time, laughing nervously and a bigger smile on his face, "He sempai. Been a while hasn't it? Hehe."

Tsutsui smiled brightly as his underclassman, happy that Hikaru didn't seem to have changed from when he was a teenager, and reached out ruffling Hikaru's hair. "It's good to have you back with us." He gestured to the rest of the group standing behind him, beckoning for them to join the rest of the group for introductions. "Hey everyone, our own club's Go 'prodigy' is here!"

Hikaru's eyes widened in panic as he noticed there being more people in the group than he remembered of the number of members the Go club to have had, especially since he knew each member of the club in the year he graduated in. He gestured to a group of teens still in their (familiar) school uniforms standing towards the outer side of the group of whom were glancing nervously at him. "Is that...?" Hikaru stared at the skittish group of teens standing beside him, looking to Tsutsui with a questioning gaze.

Tsutsui merely smiled benevolently at him, as he answered the unfinished question, "Yes! They're the current members of Haze's Junior and Senior Go club."

"You invited them to a reunion?" Hikaru asked, stupefied, as his eyes widened as he continued staring at the bright eyed teens. "No, I did," Akari cut in from behind him, pulling at his arm and dragged him towards the group of teenagers, "I thought this would be a good break from work for you, and to get you to start playing Go again."

"But I—," Hikaru tried to protest, but was silenced by Akari's knowing look. "NetGo doesn't really count," she cut him off in mid sentence. Hikaru hung his head in defeat as he silently and obediently followed behind his wife to greet the young and aspiring Go players of his old junior and senior high schools.

"Hello there everyone!" Akari chirped cheerfully at the nervous group. "How are you finding the convention so far?" There were scattered nods and mumbled answers to Akari's question. Pointing to the silently grumbling Hikaru beside her, she introduced him to the students, "This grumpy looking guy here is Shindo Hikaru. He used to be out star player in our days in Haze's Go club. Don't let his expression confuse you though; he's really a nice guy to get along with. He's just pouting because I separated him from his precious laptop."

The murmurs around the group of teenagers increased, many of the girls had started giggling at Hikaru's 'cool looks' and 'cute pout', while others wondered at his Go playing abilities. Hikaru gave the group a look before giving them a grimacing smile, he was feeling even more uneasy with all the loud whispers centered on his person. "Hikaru? Hikaru?" Hikaru blinked out of his thoughts at the sound of his name being called, he looked over at Akari's expectant face. Cocking his head to the side in question, Hikaru made a face when Akari answered him by repeating her request to have him play a game with the teens. He quickly declined, stating that there were many pros, ones more suited to teaching, at the convention for the teens to play against. Pros, he thought, who were definitely better than he was, and would most likely pester him once his secret came out – no, Sai's secret.

## 5 - Direction

### Direction

It was just another day at work, and another day of filing away papers into their proper folders and stacks. Sighing, Hikaru stopped typing away at the report he was given to write on the company's current sales in regards to customer volume. It was quite boring to say, and very fitting for his skills in memorization as he had little need to reread over the charts he was given to work with. He looked out at the bustling city below, from behind his desk near the window, to the streets full of people going about their lives. He sighed again, getting up and heading to the coffee room to get a cup of hot tea; he didn't like coffee, it was too bitter, even with all the sugar and creamer he would put in. On the way, he stopped to check the time on the huge clock strapped to the wall above the photocopier, and was glad to see that his shift for the day was almost over. He was right to go with his feeling in taking the early morning shift for today, the reports could go home with him after all. He had been starting to feel restless sitting at his desk for hours, reading and typing up a report for his boss to present at a company board meeting, and for him, sitting for hours on end concentrating on doing one boring thing was quite an achievement for him. He was the athletic type, one who should be running about doing many things at once and moving his body, not confined to a desk reading and writing reports that needed intellectual skills to achieve. Smiling while humming to himself, he quickly poured a cup of tea for himself and returned to his desk, shuffling some papers around and placing them semi-carefully into his briefcase before sitting back to relax and enjoying his tea.

As the clock hit 3 p.m., Hikaru quickly stood up and finished the last of his tea, taking his briefcase in hand and left the office. He strode quickly, yet not too quickly to make it seem that he was too eager to leave, towards the elevator, his thoughts taking a turn towards Go related issues, especially on him playing Go online once he finished that damn report. He automatically brought up a recent game he played to mind and started to review the hands both he and his opponent placed, dissecting each move and making careful observations in the way of how each stone could be advantageous and the risks each stone had in regards to the final outcome of the game. He realized now, looking at the hands he played, that his Go was extremely similar to way that Sai played, how each move seemed to replicate what Sai would do in that very situation. But the more games he played, he thought, the more his moves were deviating from the solid and straightforward moves that Sai would play; his moves were filled to the brim with traps, illusions and misleads. Just like the impact Sai had left on the Go world, the impact on his Go moves were still there but had started to fade into the background, and his own Go came into the light.

The elevator doors opened and he entered; to his surprise, his direct superior was also in the elevator car. It was not unusual for him to see his superior a few times in a day; however, to see him in the elevator car at this time of the day happened to be unusual. Hikaru knew that it was not nearly the time for his superior's break or even for him to be heading for home. Grinning easily, Hikaru stepped into the elevator car and greeted his superior with a friendly hello. His superior looked up in surprise at Hikaru, pausing in his reading of a pile of papers in his hand, and nodded in greeting to Hikaru, hand waving to Hikaru in a polite gesture. Glancing at the papers, Hikaru was gob smacked to realize that they were a pile of kifu, all printed off from internet games from what he could tell. The one that his superior had

been studying looked like one of an unfinished game.

Curious and surprised, Hikaru blurted out unthinkingly, "A kifu? You play?"

His superior looked to him, even more surprised at Hikaru's words rather than his sudden outburst and obligingly answered him, "Yes. You?"

Hikaru realized belatedly at his rude outburst and answered rather abashedly, a nervous and apologetic smile on his face, "Yeah, from time to time, on the net, and sometimes in a salon."

"Hmm, interesting," was his superior's reply, "I didn't realize that young people these days would take an interest in a game like Go. I, myself, mainly play on the net to pass time. There isn't enough time for me to go about the city to salons nowadays compared to when I was younger and had less of a workload."

"Yes, I get what you mean," Hikaru nodded in agreement. His superior looked towards him, holding the kifu out to show Hikaru. "It's not common for me to find another person interested in the game in this company. What do you say to a game sometime?" his superior asked.

Hikaru took to kifu, looked over it and nodded, a small smile on his face, "Yea that might be nice; a break from all those reports." He'd found another friend with a love of Go.

## 6 - Rise

### Rise

Rumors spread quickly, especially in the Go world, and more so in the case of strong players on NetGo; this is mainly fueled by the sudden appearance and disappearance of the suitably dubbed 'Saint of NetGo', the one called 'Sai'. Every time a strong player who played like Sai shows up on the net, many Go players would pay attention to them, and many rumors would surface, reaching to the ears of many pros who aspire to play against Sai.

This time, it was Hikaru's online ego at the center of those rumors. Of course, being the busy worker that he is, Hikaru rarely had time to even encounter such rumors. He was content to just use what little free time he had towards polishing up his rusted Go skills online or whenever he could stop by the salons. This was one of the days he had time to stop by the salon and play against opponents face-to-face, and having the feel of very real and very solid Go stones in between his fingers. Placing moves with a mouse by clicking just did not have the same feeling as the real thing. It was a feeling Hikaru rejoiced and felt comfort in. It brought to mind the memories of his very short time with Sai. He smiled fondly at the memories; it had seemed so long ago, so lost in his thoughts that he did not hear the call of his opponent sitting across from him.

"Shindo-san, Shindo-san!" called the middle-aged man sitting across him, a hand waving before his face. Hikaru blinked, jerked back to reality. He gave a sheepish apology to his opponent, but the man merely waved it off saying that it was no problem at all. Hikaru smiled at the man in thanks as his gaze returned to the board spread out before him, hand reaching into the goke, rolling a single stone in between his fingers. As gracefully as he could, Hikaru placed the stone down near the bottom right hand corner of the board, successfully building a bridge between his two black groups and to hopefully be able to defend from the oncoming white group from above. He looked up once again, "Your turn."

The man laughed boisterously at Hikaru's move, before placing another one of his white stones down, advancing the group towards the recently bridged black groups. "You're quite good at this kid!"

Hikaru pouted at being called a kid, he was already in his mid-twenties! That should definitely count towards him being recognized as an adult and not a kid anymore. Forcing his face into a more polite manner, he answered with his own rather childish barb, "And you're not too crappy at this either, old man!"

The middle-aged man just gave Hikaru another loud laugh, hand slapping his knee at Hikaru's retort. He was easy going guy, and very easily amused, but also quick to anger when offended. Hikaru just smirked back at the man; placing another stone down, reinforcing the bridge he'd created. The game continued in a similar manner and Hikaru returned to being semi-lost in his memories as he played each hand.

A bell sounded announcing the presence of new customers entering the salon. A loud shout was heard not long after in the direction of the front counter, and many heads in the salon turned to see what the

ruckus was about, including Hikaru's opponent. Hikaru, however, was still lost in memories and not particularly paying attention nor interested in the commotion. Soon, the loud shouts quieted and everyone returned to their games. Hikaru's opponent chuckled, turning his head back to the board, eyeing it before placing a stone on a different section of the board. "Quite the lively little brat that one, his friend looked fairly embarrassed by that outburst. Ah, kids these days."

Hikaru only nodded in agreement to be polite. Another stone was placed, still reinforcing the frail bridge between the two black groups. Hikaru continued to stare at the board, images of different paths flashed through his mind as he tried reading ahead of the game by a number of hands. So focused on the game now, he did not notice or hear the sound of footsteps approach the table he sat at. Another half hour later, the middle-aged man resigned, chuckling happily as he left his seat to order a cup of tea. "Good game kid. It's nice to know that not only are young people these days are still interested in this old game, but to have quite a strong hand at it as well." As he passed by, the man reached out and ruffled Hikaru's hair up a bit in a friendly gesture. "You've got some fans too."

Confused, Hikaru turned his head to see what the man was talking about, and was surprised to see two young teens standing beside the table; one was staring at the Go board while the other was looking at him in a sheepish manner. The one staring at the board finally looked up at him and pointed an accusing finger at him, shouting, "You! It's you!" Hikaru blinked, he was confused, what did the brat want? He was sure he'd never met – ah, stopping in his thoughts, Hikaru took another look at the two and their appearances finally clicked in his mind. Grinning at the two Hikaru answered in an amused voice, "Yes, it's me. What can I do for you boys?" The red-head, Taguchi he remembered, let his finger fall slightly as he stuttered for a while before shutting his mouth up as if not trusting it to correctly form a sentence. There was a short silence as Hikaru looked towards Ohka, the blue-haired and calmer one of the two, and prodded, "Well?"

Ohka only shook his head from side to side, indicating that he did not know what Taguchi had on his mind. Raising an eyebrow, Hikaru turned his attention back to Taguchi. "Well, Taguchi-kun? What is it? I won't know unless you voice it."

Taguchi's mouth opened suddenly as he blurted out in a loud manner, finger pointing at him accusingly once again, "You're FujiWara!" Hikaru blinked for the second time that day, this time in surprise. He did not know how Taguchi could have guessed that his name was Fujiwara, obviously mistaking what Taguchi was yelling about. Sighing, he tried to correct the teen, "No, Taguchi-kun, my name is Shindo Hikaru, not Fujiwara. How did you ever come to that conclusion?"

Taguchi blinked as well, not expecting Hikaru to have misunderstood his outburst. He shook his head quickly, arms waving around in wide gestures, "No, no! I meant... you're FujiWara! On NetGo! That famous FujiWara in the rumors flying around! That strong NetGo player!"

"Oh, okay," was Hikaru's immediate response before he stopped and stared at Taguchi in silence, taking in all that was told to him and processing the information in a more coherent manner. As soon as everything became clear to him, his eyes widened as he sat up straight in his seat, eyes turning to stare straight at Taguchi. "What?" He turned to Ohka, looking for confirmation at what Taguchi said, "Is it...?"

"Yes sir," Ohka nodded, in agreement with Taguchi's choppy statements. Taguchi cut in, "Wait, wait, you mean you're really FujiWara and you didn't know?"

Hikaru laughed a bit weakly, a sheepish expression on his shocked pale face, a hand reaching to scratch behind his head in embarrassment. "Haha. I'm not that interested in doing anything else on NetGo other than playing against other people. I'd thought it was a bit weird that more and more people were requesting for games and even more spectators watching the games I play, but didn't pay attention to it. But yes, Taguchi-kun, my username is FujiWara."

The two boys just stood there and stared at Hikaru's denseness. It was quite a wonder for him to not have heard of rumors pertaining to him in all the time that they'd started. Ohka took Hikaru's silence as a chance for him to speak his part about the rumors, "Um... sir, do you know that the rumors are speculating that you're probably the second coming of 'The Saint of NetGo Sai'?" Taguchi snorted at the comparison to Sai, "More like the disciple of Sai. They say that Sai was much, much stronger, like a God."

Hikaru smiled at the boys, he was much calmer now, after thinking things over and partially accepted the rumors and his skills. He did play like Sai after all. "Taguchi-kun is right Ohka-kun; Sai was much stronger than I am. That much I am sure. He was a great player and many people strove to be like him. I was just lucky." The two boys looked at him, standing in silence while Hikaru immersed himself in his memories of Sai.

Yes, he was truly lucky to have really known Sai.

*'Thank you, Sai.'*



## 7 - Disciple

### Disciple

It had started when the two started following him around at the salon. To him, the two brats were just too persistent, even by his standards. They hadn't stopped pestering him to play games every time they spotted him. It had gone to the point where they'd even asked to drop by his home and play there as well. When he'd told Akari of his troubles with the two stalking brats, she merely smiled at him and told him to let them be before falling prey to a fit of giggling. Hikaru did not know what she had found to be funny with his situation.

Days went by at the salon, and other times online, where he was nagged by the two teens, Taguchi especially, to play even more games against the two. The constant calling of 'sensei' was also starting to grate on his nerves, he now knew what his parents must have gone through while raising him; he had been just as stubborn as the two teens that now bothered him. Hikaru smiled to himself, at least the two brats hadn't taken to stalking him at work as well; but knowing Taguchi's personality, he wouldn't put it past the kid to that as well, if he'd only knew where Hikaru worked at.

Dropping the finished files onto the desk of his superior, he returned to his desk to retrieve his coat and backpack and leave for a long anticipated very late lunch break; he was not due back at the office until the staff meeting the day after at the latest, and earlier if there were some adjustments needed to be made to the reports he'd just dropped off for review. Walking towards the elevator, Hikaru let out a breath of relief as he loosened the tie around his neck and unbuttoned the first two buttons on his white dress shirt. It felt so good to be free of the constraints of the (in Hikaru's opinion) constricting 'proper' dress code of the company during work hours. He didn't really understand why he even needed to dress up 'properly' in the first place if there were no customers to see him dressed like that. The only times that really called for him to dress in a suit was for staff meetings, presentations and when he worked up front with customer service, but those were rare as he worked in the background, getting information sorted, analyzed and written up in reports. The sound of the elevator bell sounding to remind him of his stop jerked him out of the thoughts of petitioning for a much slacker dress code, as he stepped off the elevator and into the main lobby.

Passing by the customer service agents standing behind the front kiosk, he was stopped as one of the ladies called to him. "Shindo-san!"

Stopping in his walk, Hikaru turned around and gave the lady a questioning glance, "Yes? Is there a problem?"

"Ahh... no," the lady, Kamisugi Hotaru he noted as he glanced at the name-tag, hesitated as she seemed to try and reform what she was going to say. After a short pause she seemed to regain her voice, she continued, "There's a young boy here to see you. He's waiting in the open lounge area by the café area. Um... he said you'd understand if I told you that it's your disciple."

"My disciple?" Hikaru repeated, looking confused. He did not have any idea what a brat would want with him

no less than having a disciple. And a disciple in what exactly? Hikaru was well aware that he was not the smartest guy around, nor did he have any other outstanding abilities that he was aware of, so it came as quite a confusing situation for him to hear of having a disciple.

Noticing his confusion, Kamisugi asked, "Is there a problem Shindo-san? Do you not know the boy? Should I have sent him away?"

Tearing himself out of his confused thoughts, Hikaru shook his head and smiled at the customer service representative, "No, no, it's alright. I'll go over and see who this child is."

"Are you sure I shouldn't have sent him away?" Kamisugi asked worriedly, not knowing whether she'd done something right or wrong, "Oh... the boy was so excited when he said that he'd finally found 'his Shindo-sensei' and asked for you. I couldn't say no and just told him to wait until you were off for a break before I would contact you."

"Shindo-sensei...?" Hikaru deadpanned, his voice dropping several degrees as his eye twitched in annoyance. He turned around abruptly and started walking in a slightly faster pace towards the open lounge, his thoughts all racing towards one conclusion – it had to be Taguchi! Of all things, why did he have to jinx himself earlier for thinking of this very situation he was currently walking into?

Entering the lounge area, Hikaru stopped and took a quick glance around to find the distinctive red of Taguchi's hair and found him sitting quietly in the corner, behind a potted plant, some papers in hand, a backpack by his feet and dressed in his school uniform. Sighing, Hikaru took a painful step forwards to Taguchi's direction. The boy didn't look up from his papers, even as Hikaru stopped before him, and Hikaru was forced to clear his voice until he glanced up.

"Taguchi-kun," Hikaru said shortly, giving the brat a stern look. Taguchi's face brightened up as he registered that Hikaru was standing before and jumped up abruptly, smiling and giving an impromptu hug.

"Shindo-sensei!" Taguchi cried happily, "You're here! You've gotta help me!"

Groaning, Hikaru pried the brat off of him and held him at arm's length, "Alright Taguchi-kun, what is so important that you had to stalk me to my work place?"

"There's this tournament coming up for the insei, called the Young Lions Tournament, and I was practicing, but because I'm not part of a study group under some pro I came across some problems when playing, and I don't have anyone else to help me explain things for some of the games I played. The teachers don't have time to go over games with everyone either, so I thought that I would be totally stumped, and then I remembered that I still have you to help me, Shindo-sensei!" Taguchi spilled out quickly and all in one large breath, panting heavily after he'd finished explaining his problem.

Hikaru blinked as he slowly digested what Taguchi had just said before confirming what he'd said, "Ok Taguchi-kun, so you're going to be in a tournament but you needed some advice in your Go playing so then you decided to come ask me, is that it?"

Taguchi nodded vigorously, confirming Hikaru's question. "Yes!"

"What did I get myself into?" Hikaru sighed, hanging his head morosely. He held his head up again and looked at Taguchi. He mentally stumbled back at the kicked teary puppy-dog expression Taguchi was sporting before groaning and agreeing to help, "Alright, but only when I have time and no more visiting while I'm at work!"

"Yes!" Taguchi yipped happily, jumping up and down in joy, "Thank you Shindo-sensei!"

Hikaru turned to exit the building, but stopped when he noticed Taguchi wasn't following. He turned around and looked questioningly at him, but Taguchi only looked back confused. Hikaru smirked at the brat and asked, "Well? Are you coming or not? I don't have all the time in the world you know."

Taguchi looked stunned before quickly recovering, picked up his bag and ran after Hikaru. As they walked along to the parking lot, Taguchi spoke up again, "Ohka's also coming too. I told him to wait at the Kami no Itte salon and hold a spot for us."

Hikaru groaned again, "Great, another brat, just what I needed." He stopped at his newly purchased sport bike, placed the backpack on the seat, picked his helmet off the handle and placed it over his head. Looking at Taguchi, he belatedly realized that he was a helmet short and silently swore. Pointing at Taguchi he ordered for the brat to stay and watch his things while he went to borrow an extra helmet from a co-worker.

Shortly after returning, he noticed Taguchi gawking at his bike in awe that even his eyes were glittering with stars. Clearly his throat to get the boy's attention, he tossed the helmet at him, "Catch, brat."

Dropping his bag, Taguchi caught the pink and flowerily decorated helmet; nose scrunching up at the girly design he gave Hikaru a withering look. "Do I have to?"

"If you don't want me being pulled over, then yes, bear with it kid," Hikaru said as sternly as possible, while trying not to laugh at Taguchi's unfortunate plight. Strapping his temporary helmet on, Taguchi grumbled in displeasure and wounded pride at having to wear such a grisly looking helmet.

"Come on Taguchi-kun, we don't have all day," Hikaru called from on his bike, backpack strapped to his back, gloves on, visor up and engine humming, ready for use. Hastily, Taguchi strapped his own backpack on and got on the bike, sitting behind Hikaru. "Hold on kid, unless you wanna fall."

Taguchi did as he was told, and was glad for it as Hikaru suddenly sped out the parking lot and onto the street.

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Entering the Go salon, Hikaru smiled at the familiar receptionist, before handing over his bag, registering and paying the adult fee and waited for Taguchi to do the same. He looked around the room while he waited and noticed Ohka sitting at a rather isolated area in the salon and strode over to the quiet boy. He pulled out a seat across from as the child looked up to see who had disturbed his examination of the game on the Go board. His eyes lightened as he saw Hikaru.

"Hello Ohka-kun," Hikaru greeted genially, "I hope you're well?"

"Yes sir, Shindo-sensei," Ohka replied politely. He turned to notice Taguchi about to sit beside him, looking a bit pale, "What happened Taguchi? Are you feeling well? You a bit pale."

Glaring at Hikaru's arrogant smile, Taguchi answered stonily, "No, I'm fine. Perfectly so."

"Okay, if you say so," Ohka backed down, but still giving Taguchi worried looks. Hikaru snorted in amusement as he chided Taguchi for his tone of voice while addressing a worried friend.

"Now then, shall get on to what you two want me to somehow help with?" Hikaru questioned the two boys as he pointed to the board. Both Ohka and Taguchi quickly changed their demeanors as they suddenly sat up straighter, eyes looking to Hikaru in attention. Hikaru smiled a little at the eagerness of the two to learn and better themselves in their pursuit of Go.

Shaking out of his thoughts, he took a look at the finished game on the board in question and the corresponding kifu paper, Taguchi handed to him, with the hands numbered neatly in what he suspected was Ohka's handwriting. Nodding to himself, he took in the opening shape and the continuing formation of the stones on the board from beginning to end, analyzing while going through other possible hands each player could have placed for a generally better outcome. Putting the papers down, the flow of the game memorized freshly in his mind's eye, Hikaru turned to the board where the same game was set before him and started to discuss the good and bad points to his two 'new' students.

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Before he knew it, three whole hours had passed while he'd discussed away three different games to the boys, all while answering questions each boy brought up each time they did not understand why he would make a different move that looked useless or when they had a different move in mind to achieve a similar situation. The boys were not the only ones learning something new, Hikaru himself was as well. While starting to discuss a fourth game the boys had brought with them, Hikaru's phone started ringing a certain tone that reminded him where he was supposed to be. Smiling sheepishly at the boys, Hikaru answered the phone, while standing up and moving to the end of the table, facing a window and looking outside. "Akari?"

"Hikaru!" Akari's voiced sounded exasperated from the other side of the line. "I was expecting you home for almost two hours! Where are you?"

"Ah... sorry Akari," Hikaru apologized quickly, hoping Akari wouldn't skin him alive when he finally got home, "It kinda slipped my mind. I'm with the two brats at Kami no Itte. I've been conned into teaching them for a while until this tournament of theirs comes up."

He could hear Akari sighing on the other end, "Okay Hikaru, I'll let you off lightly this time, but do remember to at least message me next time."

"Haha. Ok," Hikaru agreed quickly and easily, not wanting to be on the end of Akari's ire.

"Oh, it's raining now," Akari informed Hikaru, a few shuffling sounds were hear, "I'll be heading over with

a raincoat for you."

"Thanks Akari," Hikaru smiled softly, as he answered gratefully. Ending the call, Hikaru returned to his seat across from the two boys. "Well boys, it seems that I may have to leave in a bit."

"Why?" Taguchi asked suddenly, "Was it because of that call?"

"Did we get you into trouble Shindo-sensei?" Ohka asked, worry lining his face.

Hikaru chuckled, "Haha. No, no, I'm not in trouble Ohka-kun, don't worry. Not much. And I need to be leaving soon Taguchi-kun, because it's getting late and you two need to be heading home soon too."

"B-but that means you're still in trouble!" Ohka cried out, paying attention to Hikaru's words.

"It's fine Ohka-kun," Hikaru smiled at the boy, "Akari understands."

"Akari?" Taguchi perked up at the name, he wagged his eyebrows at Hikaru, "Your girlfriend or something?"

Hikaru smiled mysteriously and answered teasingly, "Or something."

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About half an hour later, the doors to the salon opened to reveal a semi-soaked woman wearing a cheap plastic rain poncho found in convenience stores entering. She smiled at the receptionist while taking off her wet poncho and folding it up, placing it back into its packaging and then into her messenger bag. Explaining to the receptionist that she was merely looking for someone, and no that she was not there to play at all today, she glanced around the room before walking to the isolated corner where Hikaru and two boys sat.

As she stopped behind Hikaru, she noticed that the three were still immersed in their discussion and decided to wait until there was a lull in the talking to announce her presence. It was another few minutes when one of the two boys, Ohka, looked up and noticed Akari. Stopping his thoughts of the game, he elbowed Taguchi in the ribs to get him to stop talking as well. Hikaru stopped as well when he realized that the boys' attention weren't on the game anymore, but rather on something behind him. He turned around in his seat to find himself looking up at Akari standing there.

"Akari!" Hikaru said in surprise, "When did you get here?"

"A few minutes ago," Akari answered, smiling as she pulled out a chair and sat down beside Hikaru. "You were so immersed in your discussion so I didn't disturb you, nor did you notice me."

"Sorry," Hikaru laughed sheepishly, hand immediately scratching the back of his head in embarrassment.

"It's alright Hikaru," Akari laughed, eyes shining in mirth, "I know how you get when you focus on something."

Hikaru smiled at Akari in thanks. She smiled back and then looked over to the two boys, "So, are you going to introduce me to your esteemed students?"

Taguchi and Ohka, who were only listening up until Akari mentioned them, jumped in their seats in surprise at suddenly being addressed. Hikaru smiled broadly as he turned back to look at the two boys, gesturing with his right hand, "The one sitting on the right with the blue hair is Ohka-kun, and the one on the left with red hair is Taguchi-kun."

"Hello Ohka-kun, Taguchi-kun," Akari smiled benignly at the two boys in greeting, "It's a pleasure to finally meet you two. Hikaru here complains about you boys all the time."

"Ugh... Akari..." Hikaru groaned at his wife, "You don't have to tell them that. Boys, this is Shindo Akari, and I'll leave at that."

"Shindo?" Taguchi repeated, his face frowning, "So she wasn't your girlfriend after all?"

"A sister perhaps?" Ohka suggested, as he turned to Akari, "It's very nice to meet you Shindo-san."

"Well, not very imaginative students you have here," Akari laughed, sharing a knowing look with Hikaru.

"What? What did we miss?" Taguchi demanded; he looked a bit affronted at the knowing looks the two adults were sharing.

"Akari is my wife boys," Hikaru answered Taguchi, his eyes shining in laughter. The two boys' eyes widened as they registered what Hikaru just told them. Ohka flushed red and looked down, while Taguchi stood up and yelled at Hikaru in frustration.

"Shindo-sensei!"

Hikaru chuckled at Taguchi's expected outburst. Akari smiled at the interaction between Hikaru and his makeshift students; it reminded her of the time when she and Hikaru were in Haze's Go club where Hikaru would always bicker with Mitani.

It was cute.

And having Hikaru being exasperated at being called 'sensei' was merely a bonus.

## 8 - Setting

### Setting

After he'd agreed to advise the two boys with their Go, he started to find them visiting him in his home on the weekends and whenever he had spare time to deal with them. Akari found it entertaining watching him interact with the kids and acting just like one himself. He himself found it to be rather annoying at times, as the two brats' pestering and constant jabbering would tire him out even more, especially after a long day at work. He had complained to Akari about all the problems the two would bring to him, asking for his opinion, cutting in during his explanations with their thoughts, Taguchi especially, and just generally sending his peaceful and monotonous life to the dogs. Though to be honest, he was starting to get attached to the two brats, however rowdy and annoying they seem. Now, he couldn't really see himself spending his free days without his home being intruded on by the brats.

"—sensei! Shindo-sensei!" Taguchi's voice, laced with annoyance cut through Hikaru's thoughts. Hikaru shook his head clear of distracting thoughts mentally, and turned to Taguchi, giving him a questioning look.

"What is it brat?" Hikaru asked, ruffling Taguchi's hair a bit while smirking at him. It was always fun messing with him, what with his quick temper and brash nature.

Taguchi growled in frustration, as his arms went up to try and block his mentor's hand from ruffling his hair. It was always so embarrassing when his mentor did that, after all, he wasn't a little kid anymore. Noticing that Hikaru stopped ruffling his hair, he looked back up at his mentor and sighed, "You weren't listening were you, stupid sensei?"

Hikaru bristled a bit at being called stupid by the brat, but shook it off quickly; someone had to act the part of the adult in their little group after all. Plus, it would be unbecoming of him getting bothered by a brat almost half his age. But, being the person that he was, Hikaru was definitely planning on some kind of revenge for later. He gave Taguchi an almost too sweet of a smile, letting the brat know of his ire and asked in a sweet yet venomous voice, "And what, were you asking about, Taguchi-kun?"

Going slightly wide-eyed at his mentor's reply, Taguchi froze, staring at Hikaru's creepy smile. Shaking himself out of that feeling of fear, he sat up straighter, glared at his mentor in an attempt to look unaffected by the hidden threat of pain, and repeated his question from earlier, "I asked if you could come by the Go Institute next weekend and meet my friends, old man!"

"Your friends?" Hikaru repeated, an eyebrow raised in question, "And why do you want me to meet your friends?"

"Um... Shun and I mentioned to them that we have a mentor now," Ohka answered quickly, before Taguchi could come up with some much exaggerated reason, "and they said to prove it and to bring you there to meet them..."

Hikaru laughed, loudly and amusedly, "I didn't realize that having a mentor was that big of a deal to insei."

"It isn't really," Ohka mumbled, sounding rather irritated. He glared over at Taguchi with accusing eyes and huffed angrily, "Some idiot got hot-tempered and boasted that sensei is some kind of God of Go and on the same level as that Saint of NetGo Sai. The others didn't believe him, so now we have to bring you there to prove that you are."

Hikaru merely smiled in amusement this time, his head shaking at the antics of his two students, Ohka especially. It was always gratifying to see Ohka acting his age from time to time, even if it was irritation from the problems that Taguchi caused left and right. Soft footsteps took him out of his reverie and he looked up to see Akari holding a tray of what smelled to be some sweet snacks. Shuffling over to the side a bit, Hikaru made space for Akari to kneel down and place the tray on a corner of the living room table. He smiled at her in appreciation of the snacks presented before him, his hand reaching out to quickly swipe one of the sweet smelling cookies off the tray; Akari smiled back, shaking her head as her eyes lit with silent laughter at Hikaru's childish actions.

Turning her attention to the fuming Ohka and non-repentant Taguchi, she brought them to attention with a clearing of the throat, her hand gesturing to the tray set on the table, "Enjoy the snacks, boys."

With a cry of glee, the two young teens dove forward grabbing at the delicious looking cookies set before them and began stuffing them into their mouths. It was only halfway through eating his third cookie that Ohka realized the manner he was eating in and quickly turned to Akari and thanked her for the snacks, his face blushing in embarrassment all the while. Akari laughed off the quick thanks from the boy, even as he forcefully pulled his friend's head down in a bow to thank Akari properly for the food. She was used to dealing with people with crude manners; Hikaru was exactly like that when he was a teen after all.

Sensing what Akari was thinking to say, Hikaru glared at her for a brief second before pouting. He did not like to be talked about on the topic of being polite and having a good mannerism, so he changed the topic. He turned to Ohka, as Taguchi seemed to be enjoying the cookies a bit too much what with the speed he was downing them, and asked, "I will show up there this weekend if I can, but you and Taguchi-kun will have to sort out the business of his false boasting yourselves. Do I make myself clear?"

Ohka nodded in agreement, it was the most he, well, they, could do after troubling their mentor during his free time so much already. With that, Hikaru smiled proudly at Ohka before continuing the discussion they were on before the interruption subsequent break.

Sitting to the side Akari smiled, it seemed that Hikaru was getting along with his students just fine. She was glad.



## 9 - Path

### Path

It was finally the promised day. Hikaru had been anxiously waiting for the very day he'd show up at the Institute and meet his two students' friends. Sure, he was nervous and all to be visiting a place full of not only people aspiring to professional Go players, but the professionals themselves. Tugging nervously at the neckline of his henley shirt, Hikaru swallowed down his nervousness and set his feet walking in the direction of the Institute entrance. As he walked into the lobby, he was overwhelmed by the awkwardness he felt standing there in a place he was not accustomed to. He moved his gaze around the vast space of the lobby, located the service counter and hurriedly walked there.

As he stopped in the front of the counter, he looked around for an employee to help answer some of his questions. Noticing the bell on the counter, he pressed it and waited for someone to come over. He did not wait long for a middle-aged looking man to approach and asked for his business there. Smiling sheepishly at the man, Hikaru asked about the insei classes that were going on and for when those classes ended.

"They end at 4 p.m. sir," the man answered, giving Hikaru a stern look. "Is there an insei you are looking for?"

Chuckling a bit in embarrassment, his hand scratching at the back of his head, Hikaru replied, "Yea. Two of my... students, I guess, asked me to come here to meet them today. I've never come here before, so I was a bit nervous about being in the way."

"No, no, visitors are always welcome to wait here in the lobby, the cafeteria or in one of the public study rooms," the man assured Hikaru while pointing out the designated areas before turning back to his work.

Feeling grateful towards the man, Hikaru thanked him properly, bowed and headed towards the cafeteria. After all, he was a bit early and a little snack wasn't going to hurt him any, though Akari may have something to say about that. Walking in the cafeteria, he noticed a few people sitting around the tables either eating or reading.

Finding the vending machines, Hikaru walked up to one filled with snacks, took out his wallet, fed some coins into the machine and punched a button for the snack he wanted. Taking the bag of chips out from the tray, Hikaru stopped and thought about getting some other snacks in case he wanted more. Glancing over the selection in the machine, he shrugged and got some more bags of chips and a few bars of almond chocolate. Passing by the drink machines, Hikaru stopped and bought a bottle of Coke and proceeded to take his stash of junk food with him back to the lobby. He was sure that if he stayed in the cafeteria then he would miss the meeting time with his students.

Taking up a spot on one of the benches scattered in the lobby, Hikaru dumped his food on an empty spot beside and proceeded to open up one of the bag of chips. Eyes idly glancing around the lobby while he munched on the chips, he spotted a rack of magazines settled in front of one of the pillars and

next to a potted plant. Striding over to the magazine rack, Hikaru lazily flipped through the titles before deciding to go with Go Weekly. Heading back to his seat, Hikaru began flipping through the pages of the magazine, smiling at the page showing the Go problems for readers to solve, and another page filled with discussions of different moves used, their importance and the how's and why's to using them.

'Sai would have loved to read these.' Hikaru thought fondly, a gentle smile on his face.

As he continued reading through the stack of magazines he brought with him to his seat, Hikaru glanced at the large clock placed in between the two elevator doors a few times to ascertain the time. The clock struck four, yet no one had entered the lobby yet. Sighing, Hikaru continued to read the magazine he was currently holding, his ears listening for the shuffling of feet from the direction of either the elevator or stairs.

The elevator dinged and Hikaru heard a group of people step out of the elevator. Taking a quick glance up, he saw that neither Taguchi nor Ohka were in the group that just stepped off the elevator. It was 4:30 p.m. now. Setting the magazine down and brushing off any crumbs from his person, Hikaru stood up and approached a group of people who looked to be around his age.

Putting on a friendly smile, Hikaru interrupted the conversation with ease, "Excuse me?"

The group of four turned and all gave him questioning glances. Finally, dark blue-black haired man replied, "Yes? Is there something we can help you with?"

"Ah... yea," Hikaru fumbled to form a coherent sentence without sounding like a nervous wreck or a stalker, "I'm waiting for two of my, err... students from the insei class. I was told that the class ends at 4 p.m., but..."

The dark blue-black haired man's eyes lit up in understanding, "Oh! Well, yes the class does end at 4 p.m., but sometimes the instructor would keep students back to have some discussions with them about their games. They should be down soon now, there's no need to worry."

"Oh, err, thank you," Hikaru said, nodding his head in thanks. "I guess I'll leave you four to your conversation now. Sorry for interrupting."

"It was no trouble," the dark haired man replied politely. He gestured to himself, "I'm Isumi Shinichiro. These are my peers, Waya Yoshootaka, Ochi Kousuke and Fukui Yuta."

"Nice to meet you," Hikaru greeted, bowing his head, "I'm Shindo Hikaru."

"Shindo Hikaru?" repeated the brown haired man, Waya, frowning as he stared at Hikaru's face, "Never heard of you before. You a newbie or from another prefecture?"

Shaking his head in the negative, hands up in front of him in a placating manner, Hikaru answered, "N-no, no, I'm... -oof!"

Sitting up from where he was tackled down, Hikaru looked down to see both Taguchi and Ohka clinging onto him, faces smiling joy. He groaned, rubbed his temple in a soothing manner, and proceeded to pry

both boys off his person. However, that wasn't working very well.

"Boys..." Hikaru started to scold the two, but was cut off by the two.

"Shindo-sensei! Shindo-sensei!" The two boys cried in joy in unison. "You came! You really came!"

Hikaru then felt an even bigger headache coming on.

'Ugh.'

## 10 - Feint

Feint

Visiting the Go Institute was becoming a ritual to Hikaru now. Every weekend he had a day off, he would head to the institute and wait for his two students to get off class, and then spend the rest of the afternoon with either just the three of them or with their group of friends in discussions or friendly games. Recalling the disaster that was the first visit he had to the institute, Hikaru was glad that it hadn't ended in bloodshed. Namely, on the side of his two students.

*"Shindo-sensei! Shindo-sensei!" The two boys cried both in joy and unison. "You came! You really came!"*

*Hikaru then felt an even bigger headache coming on.*

*'Ugh.'*

That headache he had been feeling finally reared its' ugly head and hit him. Hissing at the pounding he felt his head was getting, he forcefully shoved his students off, glaring at the two. This was not how he expected to have been greeted when he promised the two boys that he'd visit the Institute. However, thinking back on all the pestering they had been doing the past month or so, he should have expected something of this sort.

Sighing rather audibly, he intensified his glare two-fold, forcefully shoved the two boys off his person and stood up, patting down his rumpled clothing, all in one sweeping motion. The two boys he'd deposited on the ground had finally stopped with their excited babbling, and seemed to take in their surroundings and the ridiculous way they had been acting only moments earlier set into their rational minds. Blinking in stunned shock for a few moments as their minds processed their previous actions; they then proceeded to laugh sheepishly to conceal the embarrassment they felt.

A clearing of the throat brought their attention back onto Hikaru, and the two paled instantly. They stared wide-eyed back into Hikaru's eyes, the expressions on their faces pleading for both forgiveness and a quick and painless punishment. Hikaru was not so easy to forgive, however, the expressions his students were pulling brought great amusement to him, so he let the grudge go. For now, that is.

Rolling his eyes, Hikaru sighed, "We'll deal with that embarrassing act you two pulled later. But for now, isn't there something you two wanted to tell me?"

Letting out the breath they both had been holding in, waiting for Hikaru's answer, they quickly changed moods and leapt to their feet. Taguchi quickly gathered their insei friends, while Ohka led both Hikaru and the group through the Institute and to an empty study room. Taking a seat by the door, Hikaru waited for the rest of the group to each take a seat, before giving a prompting look to Ohka to speak.

Inclining his head at Hikaru's prompt, Ohka spoke up, grabbing the attention of the other four insei in the

room, excluding Taguchi who sat directly to Hikaru's left with a bored look on his face.

"Well, um... this is Shindo-sensei," Ohka shakily presented Hikaru, who nodded to the insei gathered in the room. "Um... he's me and Taguchi's mentor... kinda."

Two of the insei raised a single brow at Ohka's unsure voice, while the other two only nodded politely for Ohka to continue. Nervously, Ohka glanced towards Taguchi for help in the introductions. Taguchi, of course, merely shrugged back at Ohka. Hikaru, noticing Ohka's obvious distress took over for him, laying a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder.

Smiling at the small group before him, Hikaru continued, "As Ohka-kun introduced, I am Shindo Hikaru, a kind of mentor to Ohka and Taguchi-kun. And you may or may not have heard from either boy, I am an amateur Go player. Much of my experience in playing Go lies with NetGo, so I am afraid that there are rules and etiquette that I am not aware of that applies to playing face-to-face with an opponent, on a solid Go board and in official tournaments. So in a sense, I am learning just as much from Ohka and Taguchi-kun as they are from me."

The insei stared at Hikaru after his introduction of his own self. One of them, a violet-haired girl elbowed the brown-haired boy beside her to start talking and end the awkward silence they were left in. The boy, however, only elbowed and shoved the girl back, glaring at her pestering. Hikaru chuckled as quietly as was possible for him at the sight of the kids' antics. Finally, the lavender-haired boy sitting to Taguchi's left decided to speak up first.

"Um...I'm Hayasaka Tokio. I'm in Group A, and currently rank number 10. It's a pleasure to meet you, Shindo-san...sir," Hayasaka Tokio nervously introduced himself, and gave a short head bow to Hikaru in respect. Hikaru smiled widely at the boy and bowed back in acknowledgement.

With the boy's initiative, the other three insei took their turns in introducing themselves to Hikaru. The dark-grey haired boy beside Hayasaka took his turn next, announcing his name – Yamamoto Junta, his group – Group A, and rank number – number 8. Then followed the violet-haired girl, Otonashi Kotori, Group A, rank number 5, and finally the brown-haired boy, Kurota Sou, Group A, rank number 13.

After all the introductions were finished, Hikaru invited the kids all to eat at a family restaurant, as he himself was getting hungry. Taguchi and Ohka quickly agreed, while Hayasaka and Otonashi were a bit reluctant to accept Hikaru's generosity to pay for them, and Kurota and Yamamoto were indecisive whether to tag along or not. With lots of coaxing from both Taguchi and Ohka, the four other insei decided to accept Hikaru's sudden invitation and left the Go Institute in their small group, chattering animatedly and constantly bombarding Hikaru with many questions regarding Go.

As he walked along, surrounded by the chattering insei, Hikaru felt the headache he had been ignoring intensify.

*'Oh shoot.'*

## 11 - Lull

### Lull

His days visiting the Go Institute increased as the load at his workplace lightened considerably, especially with those interns he had helping him sort and record the data. Oh, the interns, how he just loved them so. Hikaru had not thought so at the beginning, when he was training the two interns where everything was, and how things were to be done. There were many mistakes and accidents in the beginning of their training, but as time progressed and the two interns got used to the pace around the office, they improved rapidly. Now all Hikaru needed to mind were checking over the nearly finished reports and compile them into one large statement to present to the boss. This, of course, left Hikaru lots of time to spare for getting around to finishing others things he'd left to the side in favor of his work.

Of the many things on his list, spending more time with his two disciples and their friends was at the top of his list, along with doing those household chores he'd been leaving half done, and doing something for Akari to show his appreciation for still putting up with his now even more hectic schedule. He decided that for the upcoming weekend, today included, he was going to finish as much work as possible in the office, go home and finish the chores that seriously needed to be done, and order some good Italian take-out—since cooking was out of the question for him—of course, it had to be the kind that Akari was especially fond of. Spending time with the insei, Hikaru mused belatedly, would be better off left for his usual visiting day on Saturdays. With that all thought through, Hikaru began to execute his plan of action in the most efficient manner he could—quickly, seriously, and thoroughly.

That evening, as he rode home on his bike, Hikaru stopped by the Italian restaurant Akari was fond of, placed an order and set a time for the delivery to arrive two hours later. He needed time to clean up the apartment without the distraction of good food lying after all. That, and Akari would definitely disapprove of his gluttonous self for devouring the food, as he had a penchant for doing.

Setting foot into the apartment suite, Hikaru quickly dumped his backpack on the floor, leaning beside the shoe cabinet, and rushed into the living room. Quickly and methodically, he picked up the random issues of various magazines and neatly piled them on the magazine rack standing beside the TV screen. Various other items and knick-knacks were carefully placed along the designated display shelf on the top shelf of one of the bookshelves situated along the wall. Dirty dishes lying about the suite were carried to the sink, dumped in and soaked in warm bubble filled water, waiting to be washed. Clothes were picked up, and either carefully folded and placed away or thrown into the hamper. A vacuum was brought out and floors were vacuumed quickly, before Hikaru rushed over to the sink to wash the dishes.

As he placed the last cleaned plate on the drying rack, the buzzer to the door rang. Quickly drying his hand on a tea towel sitting on the counter beside the sink, Hikaru went to answer the door. As he walked through the short hallway, he glanced at the clock to see that almost two hours had passed by since he arrived home. Stopping by his backpack by the shoe cabinet, he rummaged through it to find his nicely hidden wallet to pull out a few bills, then stood to answer the door. The delivery girl stood there with the boxes of food, repeating the contents of his order for confirmation, and then summed up the cost for the food. Hikaru paid her, told her to keep the change, closed the door and took the boxes of food inside to

place on the kitchen counter. Calculating the time it would take for Akari to return home, he decided that he needed a well-earned shower. That and he was really smelly and sweaty, which of course, meant that Akari would be nagging at him to take a shower anyways when she got home.

It was to a surprisingly cleaner home, and the nice aroma of what smelled suspiciously like take-out from Al Porto Ristorante. This was something definitely worth investigating, was Akari's first thought, but it was quickly banished from her mind as she crept towards the living room and was presented with the sight of Hikaru setting out cutlery and dumping what appeared to be risotto into two stoneware bowls. Smiling as she watched the scene play out, she silently placed her bag down beside the telephone table and cleared her throat, announcing her presence.

Hearing the clearing of a throat, Hikaru flinched and tensed, his head slowly turning around to find a smirking Akari looking at him, and eyebrow raised in question.

"Uhh... Welcome home?" Hikaru said in a sheepish manner, giving Akari a nervous sounding laugh.

"Welcome home indeed," Akari agreed, her smirk still in place, as she walked over beside Hikaru and sat down. "What's the occasion?"

"Nothing special," Hikaru answered as nonchalantly as he possibly could, calmly doling out the rest of the risotto into the bowl. He stood up, cardboard boxes in hand, and went to dump them in the trash can under the sink.

"Oh, is that so?" Akari continued questioning, her piercing gaze following Hikaru's movement.

Returning to the living room to sit beside Akari, Hikaru sighed exasperatedly, "Yes, I just felt like being nice today, so just shut up and eat."

Turning his head away from Akari's view, Hikaru scowled. The day was not turning out as he planned. Akari was just too perceptive and unrelenting with that skeptical look she was giving him.

Akari stared at the back of Hikaru's head, blinking at his reaction. She then grinned as she realized that Hikaru was pouting. The thought and image of Hikaru pouting sent her into a fit of giggles that led to full blown laughter.

At the sound Akari's giggling, Hikaru hesitantly turned his head back to look at her. He was not quite sure why she was giggling in the first place. Scratch that, she was outright laughing now. Scowling once again, Hikaru heatedly asked, "What's your problem?"

At Hikaru's question, Akari muted down her laughing, pinched one of Hikaru's cheeks and answered, "Oh, Hikaru, you're just too cute!"

Giving Akari a flabbergasted expression, there was only one thing on Hikaru's mind. *'WTF?'*

## 12 - Invitation

### Invitation

It was yet another day of visiting the Go Institute to meet up with his disciples, plus the other brats. The results of the day before with dinner with Akari were quite baffling to him to say the least. Today, however, he was going to have everything go smoothly, and without him coming out looking like a fool.

The day started out nice enough; there were a few clouds in the blue sky, the sun was peeking out from behind those clouds every so and then, and it was all topped with a light and cool breeze. This was definitely what early autumn was like, in terms of it being perfect.

Hikaru stretched his arms and legs out from the soreness of the ride from his home to the institute. It normally doesn't take that much time to get to the institute, however, today he'd hit a few more red lights than usual, and so the trip time took about another ten minutes longer. Smiling at the still beautiful weather, he grabbed his bag along and walked up to the Go Institute.

Entering the modern and clean building, Hikaru eyed the lounge chairs scattered around the front lobby. Picking out a chair situated beside both a support pillar and electric outlet, he headed to the seat and sat down. Pulling his bag onto his lap, he pulled out a mini portable laptop, and placed his bag down to lean beside the side of the chair.

Flipping the lid of the laptop up, he turned it on and waited as it loaded onto the log-in screen. While it was loading, Hikaru glanced up and took a look at the clock hanging on the wall behind the reception desk. It read 3:26, he had yet another thirty or so minutes until his students got off from their class. Turning his gaze back onto the screen of his laptop, he quickly typed in his password and logged on. Net-Go was waiting for him.

"Oh, come on Isumi!" a loud voice whined, coming from the direction of the glass door entrance to the Go Institute. "Just tell them you can't make it, and you'll reschedule!"

"Wayu," answered a tall dark blue haired man, this was Isumi, "That would be very inconsiderate of me, as I was the one who requested the meeting on that certain date."

"I still don't get why you can't just give some excuse to change the date," a dark auburn haired man, Wayu, complained back at Isumi.

Isumi sighed, there was no way he could get Wayu to stop pestering him, until he agreed to at least do something about it, so he answered, "I'll talk to them about it, but no promises. I won't say that I'd be able to go to our insei class reunion just yet."

Wayu grumbled in annoyance, but took the compromise.

As the two walked through the lobby, Wayu glanced at a very familiar looking figure from the corner of



his eye. Stopping to take a better look, he saw that yes, he had definitely met the man sitting in the chair beside the pillar, but he just couldn't place the name. Grabbing Isumi's shoulder, Waya quickly explained that he was going to approach the man sitting the chair with a laptop, and for Isumi to stay and wait for him. Isumi looked towards where Waya gestured to, saw the man and nodded for Waya to go ahead. Smiling at his friend, Waya turn away and briskly walked up in front of Hikaru.

Hikaru was so engrossed in his game that he had not noticed that there was someone standing before him.

"Hey," a voice cut through Hikaru's thoughts on where to place his next move.

Blinking in surprise, Hikaru looked up to see a man standing before him. Quirking his eyebrow questioningly, he asked, "Yes? What is it?"

The unfamiliar man blinked at him, giving Hikaru a blank look. There was a pause before the man spoke again, "You... just looked familiar is all. I was just trying to figure out who you were again."

"Well, I don't remember y—wait, Waya Yoshootaka?" Hikaru replied, asking for confirmation of the man's identity.

Waya gave Hikaru a surprised look at the mention of his name, "Yes, that's right. And who are you?"

"Shindo Hikaru," Hikaru answered amiably, giving Waya a polite smile, "Your friend, Isumi was it, helped me some time ago. You and a few others were present at the time too."

Waya scrunched his face up as he tried to bring up any relevant memory to what Hikaru had just told him. After a few moments, a light bulb flashed in his mind, as he found the particular memory that was mentioned. Giving Hikaru a wide grin, he said, "Oh yea! You're the guy who had two insei tackle you!"

Grumbling at the memory, Hikaru glared at nothing in particular before nodding his head in confirmation of Waya's recollection. "Yea, that's... right."

"So, what are you?" Waya asked, changing the topic, as he eyed the clothing Hikaru wore, "I've never seen a pro who looked like you before."

"No, I'm definitely not a pro," Hikaru shook his head, hand pulling the lid of his laptop down, "My work consists of data compilation and analysis for a certain company. I can't really tell you much about it; it's all confidential information to the company."

"Nah, that's alright," Waya laughed it off, his mind going into overdrive at processing what this Shindo Hikaru had just told him. "I wouldn't wanna hear about it, nor would I understand what you would say anyways."

Hikaru laughed too, "I know, confusing isn't it?"

"So you interested in Go huh?" Waya asked, changing the topic once again, and without a moment's notice.

"Yes, I just recently got involved in this old hobby of mine again," Hikaru answered. He frowned a bit and sighed, though fondness could be detected in his voice, "Though now I've got two little brats pestering me all the time to mentor them in Go."

"Haha, I could see that," Waya laughed at Hikaru's exasperated look.

"Waya," Isumi's voice called to the auburn haired man. He pointed at his watch and continued, "We have to get going if you don't want to miss the game."

"Coming!" Waya called back to Isumi. He turned back to Hikaru and gave a sheepish grin, "Sorry, gotta go now."

"No, no, that's fine," Hikaru replied, shaking his head at Waya's apology.

"Right," Waya nodded. He took out a piece of paper and pen from his backpack and wrote something down, passing the paper to Hikaru. "That's the time and place for my next official game. Bring your students along and watch; I'm sure it'll be educational for them, and who knows, you might pick up something yourself. Just tell the guys that I invited you and they'll let you in the observation room without question."

Looking at the information written on the piece of paper, Hikaru nodded and thanked Waya. Running off to where Isumi was waiting for him, Waya looked back and waved at Hikaru, "I look forward to seeing you and those brats of yours at the game!"

## 13 - Whisper

### Whisper

There had been more and more rumors in the forums about an online Net-Go player resembling Sai. It was disconcerting to say the least, at least, for the moderators in part as they had the job of making sure nothing in the posts got out of hand. For Hikaru though, it was very nerve-racking; on one hand, he kind of wanted Sai to continue to be remembered by various Go players, but on the other hand, for him to continue playing like he was would undoubtedly bring unwanted attention from shady individuals. Sighing at this new dilemma of his, Hikaru decided to keep himself away from NetGo for awhile, if only to let the influx of Sai rumors die down a bit before returning to playing the game online. He would have to stick to playing in various Go salons in the city, his students, and possibly Akari for the moment. It was the safest route of action, he thought.

With his mind made up, Hikaru turned his thoughts towards his work. The two interns he had been saddled with were comfortable with what they had been initially told to do, so now he had to give them some more responsibilities. This, of course, meant that he had to teach them new skills, mainly in how to write a report in the both the standard format and in the format that their direct superior preferred. This was definitely going to be a lot of work.

Sparing a look at his desktop calendar, Hikaru noticed a specific date circled in red marker. He took a closer look and realized it was the date for Waya-pro's Go match. Rubbing at the junction between his eyes, Hikaru groaned, he knew that he couldn't make it to Waya-pro's match that day now. It interfered with the date that an important guest was to arrive to negotiate an important contract with the company. Hikaru was needed there at the meeting to look over the data reports and contracts to ensure that their company was able to supply the necessary materials for the negotiation to work.

Picking up the phone on his desk, Hikaru dialed for Akari's cell phone number. The tone rang twice before Akari picked up.

"Hello, Shindo Akari speaking," Akari answered from her end.

"Akari," Hikaru greeted with a small frown on his lips. He sighed, "I need... a favor."

"What is it?" Akari asked, sounding a bit concerned.

"I... I need you to take the boys to a Go-pro's match this Friday," Hikaru replied. "I'm pretty busy for this week with guest relations breathing down my neck for accurate reports, so I won't be able to make it. I left the note with the information of the match stuck to the fridge. It's by the to-do list, and should just be a small scrap piece of paper."

"Alright Hikaru," Akari grinned, the thought of watching a pro match was just too exciting. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"The boys should be waiting at the Institute around 1 p.m.," Hikaru informed, as he flitted through the folder one of the interns gave him, "And Waya-pro said to inform the people at the institute to let you in the observation room as an invitation from him."

"Ok, got it," Akari nodded, having scribbled down the information on her schedule book, "Good luck with work Hikaru."

"Yea..." Hikaru mumbled back. He paused, then spoke again, "Thanks Akari. You're a lifesaver."

Akari giggled on the other end before hanging up.

Setting the phone back down on the receiver, Hikaru continued reading the files from the folder and groaned. This was too much work, he thought. His dilemma with the Sai rumors just almost seemed much more inviting at this point.

Almost.

## 14 - Anticipation

### Anticipation

Akari was excited about watching Waya-pro's match from the observation room. It was something that she did not see much of everyday. And to think that Waya-pro was to play against the genius Touya Akira!

Bustling about and getting ready to meet Hikaru's two disciples, Akari was feeling rather flustered and ecstatic at the same time. Her hair was flying about in all directions from the way she rushed around gathering up her necessities and hastily packing them away in her bag. Soon enough, she was all dressed and ready to head to the Go Institute.

As she made her way up the steps leading to the front entrance of the Go Institute, Akari felt her pulse speed up in anticipation. This would be the very first time she was to witness such a match between two popular and still steadily rising Go players, and to think it was not something for work, but a good-to-honest invitation to watch from one of said players. Of course, the invitation was originally for Hikaru and the boys, but this was just as exciting.

Making it up to the top, she noticed Taguchi and Ohka just entering the building, and quickened her steps. It wouldn't do for her to keep the two enthusiastic boys waiting after all, all the while unaware of how her own eyes seemed to gleam with unrestrained glee. Akari giggled to herself, thinking of all the notes she was going to jot down about the match, and of all the possible impromptu interviews she could have with the pros who decide to watch this particular showdown. It was a once in a life-time chance for her, and it was all thanks to Hikaru!

"Aunt Shindo!" Taguchi's voice cut through Akari's inner fantasies. She looked over to where the two boys were waving for her to join them at the door. She smiled and nodded at them before picking up her pace and hurried over to the two boys.

"Good afternoon Taguchi-kun, Ohka-kun," Akari greeted genially, "How are you today? Excited about watching the match?"

"Yeah!" Taguchi shouted in reply, jumping up in excitement, and eyes sparkling.

"Good afternoon Aunt Shindo," Ohka replied politely, jabbing Taguchi in the side to calm him down, "We're very excited to be able to watch a match between Toya-pro and Waya-pro. Please thank Shindo-sensei for us for the invitation."

"There's no need to be so formal with me Ohka-kun," Akari laughed off Ohka's stiff and formal reply, while patting the boy in the back. "From what I gathered, you should be thanking Waya-pro for the personal invitation."

"Yes ma'am," Ohka nodded stiffly.

"Well, let's go in now, shall we?" Akari asked the two rhetorically, as she pushed the two through the automatic doors of the Institute.

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Walking towards the side room, Akari noted that there seemed to be quite a large number of people, mainly teenagers who she assumed were insei, and many of the lower level pros in attendance at the Institute that day. Of course, there were also a few higher level pros there as well, but not as much the other two groups she had noted. As she reached the door to the observation room, she was surprised to see two security guards standing by the door, and the rough line that seemed to form from it. Sidling up to one of the people closer to the door, she was even more surprised to see that only a few of the people were allowed into the room.

"What's going on here?" Akari asked in shock. Taguchi and Ohka looked just as shocked, but for a different reason.

"Apparently, because of the large number of people wanting to witness Toya-pro and Waya-pro's match, they've made it a policy to have a list made for the number of people allowed to enter the observation room, due to space constraints," a person standing beside Akari, who had overheard her question, answered her.

"But, how does it work?" Akari asked, confused.

"First come, first served," another person answered Akari, as they walked away from the door, scowling. He sighed as he continued, "However, the room's been filled, so unless you're on the VIP list, then you can't get in."

The people in the crowd, who were close enough to hear the announcement by said person, groaned collectively in defeat and slowly started to leave the vicinity. Taguchi and Ohka were of the same mind as they too heaved a long sigh, turned and started to leave along with the crowd.

"Ohka-kun? Taguchi-kun?" Akari called, as she noticed the two boys starting to leave, "Where are you two going?"

"Eh?" the two boys looked at Akari in question, "But...!"

"Don't worry boys," Akari winked and smiled at the two boys, "We can get in. I'm sure Waya-pro made sure of that."

Pulling the two boys along behind her, Akari walked up to the security guards by the door. One the guards, stopped them, tapping at the clipboard he held in his hand.

"Name?" he asked Akari.

"Shindo Hikaru, with Taguchi and Ohka," Akari answered the guard, "We were invited by Waya-pro."

The guard nodded as he glanced at the list in front of him and found the name. He motioned to his fellow guard to let the three in, "Confirmed; Shindo Hikaru, for three. Enjoy the match."

"Thank you," Akari nodded to the guards and gestured for the two giddy boys to follow.

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Upon entering the room, Akari and the boys were met with the sight of various pros. The boys however, were able to pick out some of their fellow insei. The rest of the groups in the observation room were assumed to be family or friends who decided to just tag along. Spotting an empty space in the room, Akari quickly rushed over and commandeered the space. She then ordered the two boys to find some spare chairs, while she went to scour for a Go board. Settling into their seats, the three patiently waited for the match to start.

"Excuse me," a voice surprised the three sitting at their table. They all looked up to see who was addressing them.

"Yes?" Akari nodded for the man to continue. He looked familiar for sure, Akari thought, but she wasn't able to place where she'd seen him right at the moment.

"Could you possibly know of a Shindo Hikaru?" the man asked, a sheepish look on his face as he asked. "My friend asked me to see if I could keep him company should he show up for this match."

"Yes, I know Shindo Hikaru," Akari answered the man, "Is this friend of yours Waya-pro?"

"Yes, that's correct," the man answered, looking seemingly relieved to not have embarrassed himself any further. He gestured to the two staring teenagers, "I assume these two are the 'insei brats' that Waya mentioned to be studying under Shindo-san?"

"Yes... and who...?" Akari nodded to confirm the assumption, her face scrunching up as she tried to place the face of the man standing before her.

"It's Isumi-pro!" Taguchi cried out, still staring at the Go pro before him. Ohka only nodded, too in awe to voice anything.

"Isumi...?" Akari's eyes widened in recognition as she took a second look at the man standing before her. "Oh! It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance Isumi-pro!"

"Ah... and I as well," Isumi smiled at Akari, as they shook hands. "And you are?"

"Oh! I'm so sorry, I am Shindo Akari," Akari introduced herself. She gestured to the two boys, "And these two are the insei, Taguchi Shun and Ohka Tetsuo."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance sir!" both insei vocalized as they bowed in unison to the Go pro.

"Haha, likewise, Taguchi-kun, Ohka-kun," Isumi nodded to the insei. Turning to Akari, he asked, "You

don't mind if I join the three of you do you?"

"No, not all, Isumi-san," Akari shook her head, gesturing for Isumi to join them. Nodding in thanks, Isumi pulled up a chair next to the three, sitting perpendicular to them.

"As I've already mentioned, Waya has asked me to keep you company during his match, and answer any questions you may have regarding the game for the duration of the match," Isumi informed the two insei and Akari, "So please do not hesitate to ask questions regarding the match."

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Shortly afterwards, the match began. The first hand went to Toya.

*Pa-chi!*

3-4, Komoku.



## 15 - Yield

Yield

The tension that was building up in the observation room was so palpable that you would have to be rather thick-skinned to not feel it. The spectators watched in anticipation for the next hand by the two warring Go pros.

*Pa-chi!* 12-7, another move was made by Waya-pro.

*Pa-chi!* 11-4, countered Toya-pro.

A pause. Waya-pro's hand hovered just over the go-ke, his sharp auburn eyes wandering over the surface of the board in search of an advantageous move to play. The pause in movement continued, as Waya-pro's eyes stopped at a specific cluster of stones to the lower right, a considering light in his eyes at the sudden appearance of such a boon.

His hand continued its downward dive into the bowl, picking up a single stone between his middle and fore-fingers, then swiftly and gracefully placed the stone down in the intended spot near the cluster. The hand played; Waya-pro's shoulder sagged down just by a mere half centimeter in relief. The stone he'd just played would be a starting point in his regaining of territory back from Toya-pro.

Mere moments after his stone was placed down, Toya-pro proceeded to quickly slap down another stone in succession. Glancing up at Toya-pro's face for a sliver of a moment, Waya-pro was taken aback by the usual stoic look the other young pro had placed over his face. Gritting his teeth imperceptibly, Waya-pro set his own face in an expression of grim determination. His gaze was once again focused on the board spread before him, hand at the ready to place yet another stone.

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The game lasted for whole length of time allotted to the two players. In the end, Toya-pro won, just as was expected of the young pro. The score was 60-50, with komi, Toya-pro's score was upped to 65.5 against Waya-pro's 50.

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In the observation room, both Taguchi and Ohka were mesmerized by the level of play exerted by the two pros in the match. Each stunned speechless at the beauty each moved was played in compared to their own still needing refining plays. Akari, though able to recognize a few moves here and there, was not truly able to pick up on the undertones of the quite amazing match. She merely smiled as she watched the awed looks of wonder the two boys wore on their faces.

Isumi, who had continuously explained each hand played to Akari to the best of his abilities, was glad at the heightened level of enthusiasm the two boys displayed after the match. Standing up from the seat he

had been occupying, he walked over to a small corner table to pour himself some water for his rather parched throat. Returning to the table, he was surprised to see the two previously quiet boys now arguing over some points on the match they'd just watch, and who would be the one present what problem to their mentor.

Giving Akari a worried look, he asked, "Is it alright to leave the two of them like that?"

Akari just smiled and waved his concerns away, giggling at the twos' antics, "Don't worry, they're always like that. It's rather cute to watch at times."

Nodding to Akari, and trusting her judgment on the matter, Isumi sat back down and promptly ignored the slight disturbance the two boys were making.

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The two adults sat in companionable silence, while watching the antics of the two debating insei, waiting for Waya-pro to arrive in the observation room to meet them. After another ten minutes had passed, the door to the observation room opened and in stepped Waya-pro. Looking around the room, Waya noticed Isumi sitting beside a nice looking lady and two brats. Smirking, he walked towards where the four were sitting and garnered their attention by clearing his throat a bit loudly.

The two adults looked up, while the two brats continued their bickering, unmindful of their audience. Isumi, seeing his friend smiled and stood up, clapping Waya on the back and congratulating him for a match well played.

"You did rather well, especially since it's against someone of Toya-pro's skills," Isumi said encouragingly to Waya, a big smile plastered to his face for Waya's sake.

"I could've done better," groused Waya, slapping away Isumi's encouraging pats. Turning his attention to Akari, he asked, "Who's this? And where's Shindo?"

"Nice to meet you," Akari bowed slightly and greeted Waya politely, a smile on her face, "Hikaru apologizes for not being able to make it today and asked me to take the boys in his stead. I'm Shindo Akari. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Ah, Waya Yoshootaka. A pleasure to make your acquaintance as well," Waya greeted politely after Akari. He gestured to the two now silently watching boys, "I'd hazard that those two are the terrors Shindo Hikaru spoke of?"

Akari giggled at the description of the two boys, while Taguchi and Ohka both protested at being called "terrors". Straightening herself from her giggling fit, she gave each of the boys a stern look and admonished them for their ill-mannered behavior.

"Now, I want the two of you to introduce yourselves properly to Waya-pro here," Akari requested of the two. The boys nodded their consent.

Taguchi, as usual, spoke up first, a hand thumping his chest, "I'm Taguchi Shun! It's nice to meet you

Wayapro sir!"

Ohka came next, his voice not as loud, but just as eager as Taguchi's, "And I'm Ohka Tetsuo. It's nice to meet you sir."

Smiling at the boys, Waya waved his hand in a dismissing manner, "It's nice to meet you boys too. You don't have to be so formal with me either; I'm pretty cool with you not using polite speech around me."

"Great!" Taguchi cheered, happy to not having to watch his mouth around Waya. Ohka nodded in understanding.

"Now what do you say we go get ourselves some sushi!" Waya exclaimed to the boys. Pausing a moment, he looked to Akari, a sheepish expression on his face, "If that's ok with you Miss Shindo?"

Smiling softly, Akari looked down at the two eager and pleading expressions on Taguchi and Ohka's faces, she nodded to Waya. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

"Great! Let's go guys!" Waya cheered, leading the two excited insei out the Go Institute, followed by Akari and Isumi at the back.