Blind Luck 3: The Ever Winding Road

by onkoona

Summary

Sai’s continuing journey though life.
This is the last in the BL trilogy. Please read the others first or this makes no sense.

Notes

Hikaru no Go and it's characters belong to their makers, I'm just borrowing them for a while.
Welcome to the last part in the Blind Luck series!
The story is finished and will be uploaded as the chapters come out of the beta-ing process. Thus posting may be irregular.
Much thanks to my beta Reenan Lefey!

For those that wondered here by mistake, go read the other parts first or this makes no sense.
Part 2: 'No way Back' (storyid: 6972045)
The story continues straight on from part 2.

And now: enjoy the ride!

Blind Luck

Part 3: 'The Ever Winding Road'

Chapter 1

Much had happened in the few months since a homeless amnesiac blind man had followed a vaguely familiar sound off the street and found himself transported into a newer, safer world, where he found acceptance and friendship and fulfillment. In that time not all of Sai's dreams had come true yet, but that was not so strange. Life continues on, and when earlier wishes are fulfilled, new ones take their place swiftly enough. Of course, Sai wasn't the sort of person to start wishing new wishes until he had thoroughly enjoyed the coming to fruition of the old ones. He had a roof over his head, a job that he could actually do, and he had friends, nice friends. All with their own quirks, to be sure, but that made them unique after all.

About six weeks after it had been put on his wrist at the hospital, the cast was deemed ready to come off. Sai had celebrated in private, first by spending a good 10 minutes in the bathroom scratching his re-exposed skin until it finally stopped itching, and then heaving a contented sigh as he cooled his now hot skin down under a cold running tap. Ogata had surprised him with a plate of curry hamburger for dinner, now that he would be able to eat with both hands again. Sai ate it with relish, after having had so many teaser tastes of the dish from the many servings of left over sauce on crackers; it was wonderful to be able to eat the real thing. As it turned out, the blind man decided he really liked the sauce better than the actual burger. So when he was offered the dish again later that week, he begged off, but requested Ogata order extra sauce with his own burger so Sai could have that with his rice and vegetables. Ogata's willingness to indulge his friend in this, no doubt, strange request, gave Sai a contented feeling.
When he had first come to stay at Ogata's, he had eaten everything the man had offered him, but after about a month of a steady diet of three square meals a day, Sai had started to turn down offers of third helpings; he had realized that horrible empty feeling in his stomach had finally gone away. He was, however, not ready to turn down any offers of seconds just yet; his fears of empty bellies in future could not be assuaged quite so easily. He fervently hoped that this fear would go away too in time, for he had such a great life already, even if there were some imperfections here and there.

One of these imperfections was Ogata. After their tiff in front of the shelter - an event that Sai still blamed himself for more than the Go pro - Ogata had promised he'd do better, and for the most part he did. Sai fully realized that having everything his own way was how the Ogata had lived all his life, and that considering another's feelings had not been much of an issue before Sai had come into it. He knew Ogata tried not to bully him, but once in a while the man just pushed him too hard. Whenever that happened, the blind man found himself in the unenviable potion of having to chastise his benefactor, knowing that he could lose all by doing so.

Yes, Ogata was his benefactor; he provided Sai with a home and he provided Sai with a job, which in turn provided Sai with more money than he ever had had in his life, or at least in the life he remembered.

So far, Ogata had taken seriously any rebuke Sai had given him whenever Ogata's behavior warranted it in the blind man's opinion. Ogata always promised to do better, and he always failed.

The biggest failure was the bi-monthly bout of drunkenness Ogata indulged in. That very first time Sai experienced it, Ogata had arrived home utterly sloshed and had forced Sai into a 'nice 'n' friendly game of Go.'

Sai had been frightened, having caught on to the Go pro's inebriated state too late - he had chided himself for not smelling the booze on the man sooner. Sai had been around plenty drunk men outside the shelter doors and really should have known better, but he hadn't been able to get away as the man had kept blocking his exit. So the former ghost had been forced to play the most ghastly game ever, feeling abjectly miserable throughout.

When, the next morning he had been unusually quiet in their morning routine, Ogata had asked him why, and Sai, wanting honesty between them, had told Ogata of his feelings. Ogata's reaction
had been familiar; it was the same as with their first fight: an admission of guilt, and a promise to do better which the blind man had accepted.

But a few weeks later Ogata came home drunk again, reducing his promise to ashes. This time though, Sai was much faster in reading the situation and got out of the apartment before the titleholder could stop him. He spent a cold few hours on the windowsill of the topmost hallway of Ogata's apartment building, trying to stop himself from crying by mentally replaying two of his latest games with Touya Meijin at the same time. That may have been really good practice, but it couldn't totally take away the jitters of that night.

After the third time they went through the cycle of Ogata's drunken arrival, Sai's subsequent flight, and Ogata's profuse apologies and promises of betterment the next day, Sai had to face the fact that this behavior was a permanent thing with the titleholder, as was the 'kind' bullying, and the former ghost realized he had to either except the man as he was or leave his house. Since leaving was not a real option - if nothing else the blind man was in too deep a debt with the title holder - Sai stayed and made sure he was gone from the apartment on the few evenings a month that Ogata had his 'party'.

And this was why the blind man sat in the dark on a cold windowsill late one Sunday night in November. Sai had been lucky that he'd had a book in his bag that day and that he'd managed to snatch the bag before getting out. Or maybe it wasn't luck, but merely a premonition firmly based on past events that had made him keep his bag filled and close by for the last two evenings.

Anyway, he had his book and an apple to tide him over until he could head downstairs at no earlier than 4 am, and find his bed.

The book fascinated him; it was about the history of Japan, and even if it mentioned the Heian period - his own period - only briefly, it was a very interesting read.

It was the book on Braille he had bought that had set him on the path towards many more books; it had introduced him to the Library for the Blind which lent out books in Braille by mail, for free. All you needed was a postal address and you could borrow new books every week!

Before signing up for a library card, Sai had asked Ogata's permission to use his address as a mail drop. And the man had allowed it right away, saying he was happy to give his friend a chance to read.

Sai had been delighted when the first book arrived. It was a small catalog of the Library's most popular fictional titles accompanied by a section on non-fiction books that included the history
book that he was reading now. There also had been a plastic disc in a paper sleeve, that Hikaru informed him was a CD. Sai had heard of CDs but had never held one, and he certainly did not have a player to play it on. That was what he had told Hikaru, who immediately dragged him to the mall to get one.

Playing the disc had been an eye-opener for him; it was full of news, spoken aloud, and especially geared to blind people's interests. One of the items mentioned was that Tokyo Historic Museum** was holding an exhibition on the entire history of Japan for the next 3 months. It was intended for grade school age children really, but it also turned out to be sympathetic to the blind as you were allowed to touch (replica) items of each period.

Sai so wanted to go, and whined - he still blushed at the thought of how he had whined! - at Hikaru to take him there next Wednesday, as he knew the boy had that day off as well. In the end Hikaru had given in, saying that only for his friend would he go to such a 'stupid kiddy exhibit'.

Sai was grateful, very grateful, that his friend would come to his aid. Hikaru really was his only link to the past and he hoped he'd be able to remember more with the added stimulus of the objects there.

Sitting on the cold concrete windowsill, Sai was just finishing yet another chapter on civil war - Japan had had an abundance of those, it seemed - when a noise startled him: the click of high heels on the tiled landing.

'Who's there?' a female voice chimed from the direction the foot falls had indicated, a strong note of suspicion marring its tone.

Sai got up quickly, clutching the opened Braille book to him to prevent it from falling. He bowed and said, 'Fujiwara Sai, from downstairs, sorry to startle you, Miss.'

'Asano Miiki. What are you doing here so late and in the dark?!' the lady said, her tone now
showing fear and anger too.

The blind man was startled again; he had not known it was dark up here. How could he have? And now, knowing it was dark here, he realized the picture he was making, that of a strange man lying in wait at a woman's door, ready to do whatever it was that nasty men did to nice women at 3 am in the dark.

'Oh!' he exclaimed, 'I meant no harm! I didn't know it was dark here; I'm blind, you see, and ... and I was reading my book...' he trailed off, knowing how lame he sounded.

'Blind?' she said the disbelief palpable in her voice. 'Step forward, where I can see you,' she commanded.

The lady's tone was very firm now, and Sai knew what was coming next; he had been in this situation before. This was where he got chucked out. Resigned to that fact he grabbed his bag from behind him, knowing he wouldn't be able to come back for it later. He put the strap over his head and hoisted the weighty book so it was wedged beneath one arm, while with the other he found the wall, needing it to guide him since his cane was still in his bag. He didn't dare cause more delay by getting it out.

He was inching forward along the wall, when Miss Asano snapped, 'Well hurry up, get into the light!'

'I'm sorry, Miss, I can't see the light,' he said, speeding up his gait, but not wanting to come too close to the lady. She might carry something she could hit him with; she sounded angry enough.

'Stop there!' she said, and Sai stopped in mid stride holding himself absolutely still.

'Look up.'
'You live in this building?' she questioned him.

'Yes, Miss, number 304,' he answered promptly.

'You were reading you say; show me your book.' The tone left no room for argument, but still Sai hesitated; the book was not his but belonged to the library and if she took it away from him, he'd be in trouble with them for sure. Then he reminded himself he had a job now, and he could pay whatever fine the library would impose on him if he lost their property. He handed over the book.

Sai pushed himself even closer to the wall as he heard the swooshing of the pages being leafed through.

'Well, that certainly looks authentic enough,' the lady said, adding, 'You best go on home, it's late.'

'Yes, Miss. Thank you,' he added, taking the book back as she thrust it into his hand.

With a 'Good night, Miss,' he followed the wall towards the stairwell and exhaled when he heard her door open and close.

He went through the door to the stairwell before stopping to get his cane out. After checking the time - 3:35 am - he decided to chance going back to Ogata's apartment, hoping the man would be passed out on the couch by now.

As he made his way down the steps, he reflected on what had happened. He realized full well he couldn't sit on that particular windowsill for some time to come, and never again at night. There were quite a few more window seats in the hallways throughout the building; he'd have to find himself one elsewhere.
But moving to another seat would not prevent this from happening again; people would always be scared when surprised by ugly people like himself in the dark at night. If only he had known he had been sitting in a dark corner! The whole thing might not have happened if not for that. The blind man did understand about fear in the dark; he experienced it himself all day, every day, after all. He needed to find another, well lit, place to sit for next time, and that was a fact.

He let himself into his friend's apartment as silently as possible some 5 minutes later, where he was greeted by loud snores coming from the living room couch. He sighed once in relief and proceeded to make himself ready for bed, taking care to give the couch a wide berth.

Another 10 minutes saw Sai in bed, letting the easing of the stress of the night's excursion lull him into a deep slumber.

That Monday, like every Monday, was a working day, the last of his working week before he'd have Tuesday and Wednesday off.

On Mondays Touya-Meijin always booked all of Sai's time until two o'clock, as he did on Thursdays, that being the first day of Sai's working week. On Thursdays they'd play a very serious game that usually ran the full reserved period, with only a small tea break. But on Mondays they took it easy because Sai would be mentally tired from a full week of playing Go all day long.

Of course this particular Monday he was also physically tired from having lost half a night's sleep, and so he did his best to hide the yawns he just couldn't stop from coming. The Master Go player either hadn't noticed his fatigue or was too polite to mention it. The latter more like, considering Hikaru blurted out, 'Sai, you look like hell! Didn't you get any sleep last night?' the moment he spotted the blind man when Hikaru had come in the club at two.

The former ghost evaded the young pro's question, and effectively distracted him with the game Sai had played against the Meijin last Thursday that sat on one of the two the Gobans on the table.
The other Goban held that NetGo game from years ago and all three Go players continued the game discussion, which the two older players had been having before Hikaru had arrived.

It was around the afternoon tea break that Ogata came into the club, his appearance heralded by a cloud of cigarette smoke.

It came across to Sai as rather rude when the titleholder only bothered to wait with his interruption long enough for a short silence to fall in the conversation, while the three players thought about an alternative to a decisive move that hadn't panned out for Sai in the newer game.

'Fujiwara, can I have word with you?' the gravelly voice sounded, sending a small smoke cloud into the blind man's face.

Sai sighed; he knew what this was about and he really felt too tired to listen to more apologies. Also he really was enjoying the game discussion, making it tempting to turn the man down, very tempting.

'Fujiwara-san, you go ahead. I'm sure Shindou-kun, Akira and myself can look at another game for a bit until you come back. You won't miss anything important,' the Meijin said.

Sai got up automatically, but as he stood he thought, 'You're wrong, all Go is important, and I'll be missing it!/ shocking himself with his own anger.

He sat back down.

He knew anger was the worst thing to bring to a heart to heart; the chance of saying things you don't mean is just too great. And Sai was plenty angry right then, angry at Ogata for again putting him on the spot, angry at himself for letting Ogata put him there, and most of all angry that he had no choice but to take the titleholder's generosity, which he inevitably had to pay for by putting up with the man's controlling and selfish behavior. A righteous anger suddenly flared up at his own unkind thoughts towards the Go pro and he chided himself yet again for thinking such things.
Sai realized he needed to calm down before talking to anyone about anything, and to that end he said, 'I'm sorry, Ogata-san, I'm in the middle of a discussion right now, and I promised to play Hikaru next. So it will have to wait until later.'

What he said hadn't been rude really, but neither had it been very polite. It was all true however, and it was the best he felt he could do at the moment.

'Ogata,' Ogata started to say, but was interrupted by the arrival of Ichikawa with more tea and sweets.

The commotion of setting down the tray and handing out tea cups and cookies seemed to effectively stop Ogata from speaking further. And by the time Ichikawa left, the man had apparently done some thinking of his own. He said, 'Alright, later is fine,' and left it at that.

Sai let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and then turned back to the game discussion, uncomfortably ignoring the thick smoke producing presence of the Go pro for the rest of the afternoon.

By the time dinner was over, Sai was absolutely exhausted; the sleepless night and the tension of the day had really done a number on him. And worse of all, he hadn't even had that talk with Ogata yet!

'Fujiwara, you look all done in. I think it's time to quit for today,' Touya Meijin said in a kindly tone, placing the refilled goke back on the Goban with a click.

He was right of course, but Sai didn't particularly want to go 'home' right now, as it would mean alone time with Ogata, and maybe he'd not even have a home to go to once they'd fought again.
No. There mustn't be a fight, the blind man thought. He'd had enough of fighting and of the fear of losing all. But he did realize he'd not be able to put a confrontation off indefinitely.

Alright,' he sighed, retrieving his cane-bundle from the table and slipping his bag's strap over his head before getting up. The air displacement and increase in cigarette smoke next to him alerted him to the sudden presence of the 10-dan at his elbow.

'Fujiwara, we still need to talk,' Ogata said, blowing a cloud of thick smoke in Sai's face.

The blind man turned to his oldest friend and the two members of the Touya family and bowed saying, 'Thank you for the games today and I'll see you on Thursday. And you on Wednesday, of course, Hikaru,' he added, not wanting his friend to think he had forgotten their trip.

The three all bade him a good night, but none of them said anything to the titleholder standing next him. Sai waited until the sounds of their footfalls had faded before turning back to Ogata. Before the other man could start speaking the blind man said, 'Let's not do this again,' exhaling in a loud sigh.

'Do what? Look, I'm s-,' Ogata started, but Sai interrupted him immediately, 'You're sorry, and you won't do it again, I know.' He flipped open his cane and turned in the direction of the exit, adding, 'We both know that you will, so let's leave it at that and go home; it's been a long day.' He started walking, keenly aware that Ogata hadn't moved at all.

This was a pivotal moment, Sai realized; the other man's reaction would make or break their relationship. The blind man knew he had reached the pinnacle of rudeness by just waltzing over Ogata's big moment of semi-sincere contrition. And he so hated being rude! But in dealing with the Go pro, he had learned that if he wanted Ogata to take notice, being rude was apparently inevitable.

It was when the former ghost heard Ogata's footfalls moving fast to catch up, that he let out the breath he'd been holding. And when Ogata overtook him to hold open the door for him, he knew it was going to be alright; Sai would have a home to go to tonight at least.
As he tapped his cane out in front of him, walking to the elevator that gave exit to the basement, he reflected that he felt like a ball that a willful boy - Ogata - kept bouncing against a wall for fun. What may be fun for the boy was not so much fun for the ball, for he felt bruised and tired.

* While I didn't make up Library for the Blind, I don't actually know that Tokyo has one or, if it does, that it works the way I described it. I based my description on my local version.

** Though Tokyo undoubtedly has museums, I made this Tokyo Historic Museum up. Again I based the description on a local version.

Don't forget to review!
That Tuesday Sai stayed in. He usually slept in on Tuesdays until mid-morning. Then he'd either go meet Hikaru somewhere - if the boy was free - or he'd explore the neighborhood around Ogata's apartment building by himself. But today he had slept until 11:30, and then had found the rain pelting the window so hard he could almost feel the cold water through the double glazing as he laid a hand on the damp window pane.

He had taken up his book again and read about at least 7 bloody battles before Ogata rang his mobile at 5 to ask if he wanted a ride to the club for dinner and Go. Sai countered with a suggestion of curry hamburger at 'home' with a game for desert, because he really didn't fancy getting wet - the rain had not let up for a single moment all day - and because he knew the neither the Touyas nor Hikaru were going to be at the club today, so it really wasn't worth the trip. Mrs. Touya had commanded the male members of the family's presence at dinner that evening, and Hikaru had mumbled something about bowling with 'the guys'. Sai knew, of course, that 'the guys' were the young pros friends from when Hikaru had been an insei. Sai had met Isumi (a solid player, maybe too solid; mustn't forget playing Go is fun too) and Waya (a maniac on the board, but sloppy and thus very beatable), not too long ago. But Sai wasn't too interested in joining them in 'bowling' after Hikaru had explained the game to him.

The 10-dan pro and the former Heian noble shared a curry burger - extra sauce - and a strong game of Go after Ogata had warmed himself up with a hot shower; he had gotten home soaked, making Sai feel justified in indulging in his boring domesticity of that day. Sai did hope the next day's weather would be a lot better, because one day indoors in per week was quite enough for him, and there was the outing to consider. Yes, tomorrow Hikaru would take him to the museum, and hopefully, the former Heian noble would find more of his past there!

Wednesday saw Sai and Hikaru alighting Kawai's cab at the taxi stand in front of the Tokyo Historic Museum.

Sai had never been to this part of Tokyo before and immediately he could hear the difference in street sounds. The closest he could describe was that the space sounded like a much bigger version of the square in front of the Mall on Ogata's street. Here too was the sound of water falling, but almost like there were ten fountains instead of just one. The echoes of the street sounds were different as well. Maybe the buildings were taller here, or just bigger. There was no way for him to know, really, and Sai settled for enjoying the sounds without knowing how they came to be.

Hikaru had been his usual high spirited self that morning. As Sai had noticed in dealing with his young friend - when not actually playing or watching Go - the kid just couldn't sit still; fact that Sai found a very amusing contrast. But since listening to street life was not anywhere as interesting as Go - at least to Hikaru - the boy pulled on Sai's arm, effectively breaking the blind man's contemplative mood. Sai let himself be dragged up a seemingly never ending stone staircase until they reached a plateau, which Hikaru then steered them across. Then there were a few more stone steps, and a sudden change of ambiance heralded their entry in a big enclosed space.

Hikaru left him standing, saying something about 'getting tickets and a map,' and cautioned him to stay put. Sai had no intention of straying; he was too busy listening to the noises of human life reflecting off the walls and the awfully high sounding ceiling. The echoes were stupendous!
The sudden appearance of a voice next to him startled him momentarily.

'Can I help you, sir?' A man's voice.

Sai froze, thoughts running through his head at 10,000 miles a minute. Was he in trouble? Was he in the way? Would he be moved on now? And if so, would he be allowed to walk out under his own steam or be bodily removed? If he was removed, would Hikaru be able to find him or would he be lost in a part of Tokyo that was unknown to him? What was he going to do when night came, he didn't want to be out all alone at night!

Then he stopped himself. /Hikaru. Remember you're here with Hikaru and so you're not alone./ The thought of his friend calmed him enough to rethink the situation and modify his own reaction to it. The man's voice had not sounded harsh or unfriendly, so Sai admonished himself for reacting to it as if it had. No, the man had sounded friendly enough, and the offer of help seemed kindly meant too. He exhaled and formulated an appropriate response to the man's query.

'My friend is getting tickets and a map,' he added that detail hoping that the addition would make Sai's presence there sound more convincing. This guy could be a security guard, with the task of keeping the riff raff out. And as a former inmate of the Men's Homeless Shelter of Harbor street, he knew very well what it is like to be considered 'riff raff'.

'He should be back soon,' Sai continued nervously. Hikaru was really taking his time, worrying the blind man somewhat, even if he was sure Hikaru would not abandon him here.

'In that case,' the man spoke politely, 'I will leave you to it. Should you need any help at all, just raise your hand and I, or one of my colleagues, will help you. We are at your service,' he added and the air displacement in front of the former Heian noble indicated the man's polite bow. Sai gave a short bow and thanked the man.

Just at that moment Hikaru reappeared, relieving Sai's overactive anxiety. The boy gently put his hand on his elbow and steered him out the noisy hall. Sai was quite glad of his young friend's help, as the echoes of that huge room were so overwhelming he wouldn't have been able to follow the boy's footsteps by sound alone.

They left the hall and entered a corridor to come to a stairwell. They had gone up one flight of stairs then through another corridor, up three steps, a right turn, down 6 steps, through a heavy door, turned left, down another corridor, turned right, another three steps up, and through another heavy door, when Hikaru stopped them and started fiddling with a big piece of paper.

'Uh, Hikaru, are you sure you know where we're going?' Sai asked, trying not to sound too critical. He actually wasn't worried about getting back to the big hall; these narrow passages and bits of stairs were very easy for him to remember. But the trip so far seemed oddly complicated to him, with its twisting and turning. Of course Sai had - as far as he remembered - never been to a museum before, so he had no real clue what the layout of one might be.

'I'm taking a short cut,' the boy mumbled distractedly, 'we should be close now.'

Sai decided to leave this part to Hikaru; he was old enough not to get lost in here anyway. As he waited, he stepped a little closer to the wall he had felt was there with his cane. The sounds during their convoluted trip had been oddly muffled, and now that there was a moment, he decided he wanted to verify a theory he had on that. He touched the wall with his finger tips and was not at all surprised that they encountered soft cloth instead of hard wall paper or paint. There was actually some give in the material as well, indicating there was a space behind the fabric. Well that
Sai had just noted it down as an interesting choice of wall covering, when Hikaru resolutely said, 'Right. We've missed a turning; we need to go back.' With that, the boy wrapped his hand around Sai's elbow and he was once more being directed where to go.

It was with some relief that Sai found himself in a new space, after having maneuvered through yet another heavy door. This space was roomier than the corridors had been, but had a similar hushed quality, so he assumed the wall here were covered in fabric too. He was about to tap his way over to wall to find out when Hikaru spoke.

'Ah, this is it. Oh, I think we've missed a room or so, 'cause this is the Nara period already. Uh, I think the start of the exhibit is this way,' the boy said and Sai felt him tug on his sleeve, indicating direction.

But Sai didn't move and instead asked almost breathlessly, 'Isn't the Heian just after the Nara period? Can we go there now?'

The former Heian noble of course had known the sequence of Japanese historical time periods, but reading about them in a book was likely to be quite different from experiencing them in a museum. He suddenly found himself very anxious to go straight to his own period now that he was finally so close.

'Yes, it is,' the boy confirmed. 'Yes, we can, if you wanna. Uh...' Air was displaced when the young pro swung around the blind man, as if looking 'round for information.

'Ah, over there,' Hikaru stated and again Sai received a tug on his sleeve. He followed the boy's muffled footfalls and felt the air current shift when he passed under an arch into a new room.

'Oh, look at this,' came from his left. Sai changed direction and moved towards Hikaru new location.

'It's "the silk day attire of a mid-level ranked courtier", it says here,' the young pro continued more softly when Sai had reached him. It was odd; the fabric muffled sound effect of the place made even a boisterous kid like his friend keep his voice down almost naturally.

'It looks just like what you used ta wear. T' same colors too. Look at that pattern, like that, yeah,' Hikaru mused. Sai stretched out his fingers unconsciously, wanting to touch the fabric, feel its rich reality, only to come upon a cold pane of glass blocking his way.

He did not have time to think about his disappointment, because just then there was a sudden swelling of human noise behind him as many feet entered the room and a female voice rang out loudly, seemingly unimpressed with the compulsion to stay quiet that the room's decor had hoped to produce.

'This is the Heian period. It lasted from the year 794 to the year 1185. In this classical period the imperial court experienced its heyday of art, most notably poetry and literature. The /Tale of Genji/ was written in this period. Daisuke, thumb out of your mouth, now!' The sudden change in the lady's voice startled Sai, but since the rebuke obviously had not been meant for him he relaxed immediately.

Undisturbed the lady continued her monotonous monologue with, 'the nobles at court also spent their time playing music and games and of course, practicing politics. The actual running of the country was left to the lower officials and the warrior class, who kept the peasants in line, while
the nobility had their life of leisure.'

The former Heian noble frowned at this information; had his class and therefore he himself been a wastrel in his first life? The Braille book had indeed mentioned that life at court was good, but it had also said that the Heian period had been one of the most prosperous of Japan's history. But the chapter on the Heian period had been disappointingly short. Did this lady know more than the book?

The lady continued talking and walking, taking the many tiny footsteps with her.

'The period ended in 1185 - Raiden, leave that alone! - with a bloody civil war that pretty much wiped out the entire corrupt noble class, and from then on the warrior class ruled.' Suddenly the footsteps seized. 'Who can tell me who was part of the warrior class?' She paused a moment and silence reined.

'Tadashi?' she asked.

'The samurai, Miss Hama,' a very young voice replied.

'Yes, that is correct. Riku stop pulling Haruka's hair. And as you all know my ancestors were samurai too.' There were many murmurs of assent, all very young voices. The procession started moving again, Miss Hama's speech fading as she and her school class moved into the next room.

'Now the Kamakura period is much more interesting; it's the time of the samurai. See those swords? Those are /katana/ and were used to...'

Sai stood with his hand still on the glass and feeling deeply disappointed in himself and his class. Had his contemporaries really left all the work to others while they had lived a life of luxury? Had he? The Braille history book had said that everybody had prospered, but had made no mention of the division of labor of that period (nor had it in any of the other periods, to be fair), so what the teacher had said could well be true.

'Hikaru, is what she said true?' he asked his friend softly.

'Uh? Who said what?' A clear note of confusion in the kid's tone.

'About the Heian nobles not working but only playing games?' /Of Go/ he almost added.

'Uh, yeah, I think so. That's pretty much what I remember from history class. We skipped most of the early periods and did loads on the Meiji Restoration. Very boring.'

Sai hadn't reached the chapter on the Meiji Restoration yet. So he couldn't agree or disagree with his young friend's assessment of the period and gave no comment. He realized he needed more information on his own period as well as the others. Until he had read more he would reserve judgment of his own class. It could well all be true, and he knew that he would be bitterly disappointed if it was, but as long as he didn't know, there was hope.

'Oh look here,' the boy pulled his sleeve again and he let himself be lead along the glass wall, his hand slipping gently over the glass.

'It's a map of Japan. I think it was actually drawn in the period. Oh, look, they've got the shape of Hokkaidō wrong!'

Sai of course couldn't see and wasn't very interested right now anyway. But as the young pro had halted his advance along the wall to look at the map, Sai had had to halt as well or run into his friend's back, and while coming to a standstill his hand had dropped down from the glass to the
fabric covered wall underneath where his ultrasensitive fingers had grazed a plastic tag mounted on the wall. It had bumps on it, that Sai's fingers read instantly as ‘-missioned'.

Sai perked up immediately; the joyful novelty of being able to read had not worn off, nor did he think it ever would. He let his fingers find the beginning of the tag and then read out, 'Map of Japan, inscribed as having been commissioned by Emperor Shirakawa in the third year of his reign, 1075.'

'Gee, is that what that says?' The boy move next to him and his hand brushed Sai's as Hikaru touched the tag. He had shown his friend his Braille books before so the concept was not new to the boy.

'Pretty neat; I can't see there is anything there at all in this light, but you can read it just fine, I guess!' Hikaru sounded pretty surprised at that. 'Maybe I should learn me some of that too!' he added, laughing.

They moved on the next window, where Sai found a tag that said: 'Later illustration of /the Tale of Genji/, depicting female quarters in the imperial palace during the Heian period.'

'Urg, the perspective is all funny,' was Hikaru's only comment.

Being male, Sai rather doubted he'd ever been in the female quarters. The history book mentioned that men and women lived separately most of their lives, unless they were married, and mostly not even then. Sai wondered briefly if he had been married, way back then, but then dismissed the thought; if he had been then he hadn't told Hikaru about it when he'd been a ghost, because if he had the young pro would have told him by now.

He really hoped he hadn't been married, because the idea of leaving a wife - or even worse a wife and child - behind when he had committed suicide struck him as utterly wrong, and he just couldn't see his former self - however much of an over privileged wastrel he might have been - feel any different on this subject than he did right now. He exhaled. Of course, he would never know for sure, unless he started remembering his first life properly. He reminded himself that that was exactly why he was here today; only so far, disappointingly, no memories had been triggered. Not too surprising, he realized, since he hadn't actually been able to handle any Heian item yet!

He found Hikaru's arm and urged, 'Hikaru, there are supposed to be objects that can be touched here, can you find them for me?'

'Sure, uh, lemme look, it's actually quite dark in here...'

The boy started moving away from the wall with the map and art work, and Sai held on to his arm and followed closely until Hikaru halted again.

'Here it is, on this table.'

Sai moved next to his friend and indeed found the edge of a table. His hand slid across the surface, finding a big plaque fastened to it. Hoping to find more Braille he moved his fingers across it, but they came away disappointed; the plaque was perfectly smooth. Then his hand was grabbed and moved a full hand-width to his right where the fingers encountered another plaque, this time with Braille relief.

'This is the one you want,' Hikaru said, letting go of his hand.

"Objects can be handled freely," it said. Sai reached out further across the table, hoping to encounter a familiar object that might make him remember and give him a glimpse of the past. The table seemed to run out a lot sooner than he had expected and Sai found his hand suddenly
plunged into a depth. As he pulled his hand back hastily, the back brushed some object that then shifted and started to fall. The blind man grabbed the object quickly - a bowl of some kind - and brought it towards himself. He sat it down on top of the Braille plaque and started feeling it.

It was round, cold to the touch (ceramic for sure) with relief on the sides (a flower, he thought, a chrysanthemum maybe) and ridges that could indicate a circular decoration all around the rim. It felt like an ordinary food bowl, one he'd had thousands of meals out of. But hold on, the bowls at the hospital and the shelter had been plastic or metal, not ceramic. It was only recently that he had been eating from ceramic plates and bowls, and those had felt nothing like this one! No, he was holding a bowl like the ones from his first life in his hands; he was sure of it. /Oh!/ A harrowing thought just occurred to him; he wasn't holding an actual 1000 year old bowl was he? He unconsciously gripped it tighter when he asked Hikaru the same thing.

'Uh, I doubt it,' the boy replied and then paused. 'Oh, here it says: "All items in the handling bin are made by Yunomi Enterprises, in their reproduction department. Yunomi Enterprises is proud to make available these items that are meticulously produced using the authentic materials of the period, wherever possible." I guess not then, but that's not bad either,' Hikaru added.

Sai was still uncertainly fingering the bowl, unwilling to let it go for fear of damaging it, when he asked his friend to describe what was in the 'bin'.

'Uh, some more bowls, and chopsticks. Paper scroll, brushes, comb, fan, musical instrument, some pieces of cloth from kimono, I think. Uh... Nothing about Go though! That sucks!'

Sai was starting to feel his friend's impatience. If there wasn't anything Go related on the table, there would be nothing to hold the young man's attention. But Sai was unwilling to let himself be hurried and he wasn't about to leave without touching all these items, hoping for a single spark. 'Hikaru, can you put this bowl back for me and,' he had think for a moment what to try first. Maybe the most tactile, he decided, 'hand me the kimono cloth, if you please.'

'Sure,' came the boy's reply. Sai was happy to note that the tone of annoyance had disappeared; maybe Hikaru wasn't really pissed off after all.

The bowl was lifted from his fingers and a swatch of soft cloth was placed in his open hands a moment later. Sai ran his hand over it in slow sweeps; it was the softest and smoothest material he'd ever felt. There was a sense of sweeping his hands across yards of material, hands and arms entering luscious sleeves when dressing, smoothing out folds and tucking material under belts of contrastingly colored silks, and long sleeves sweeping outwards like the wings of a white crane, before settling on the ground out of the way of the Goban. Sai's hand stilled as, before his eyes, he saw the Goban filling up with moves and counter moves. The hands playing were not his, but that of a boy, and his vantage point wasn't quite right either, as though he was not sitting properly in from of the Goban but more off to the side. He looked over to his left and next to him sat Hikaru, tailor fashion, still a young boy wearing a bright yellow T-shirt. Sai looked over to the boy's opponent, but the other side of the board was shrouded in complete darkness and he was unable to make out the other player's face. Unconsciously he raised his hand to his mouth in consternation, but was immediately distracted by the white silk sleeve that covered all of his hand. It was very high quality material, soft and smooth to the touch, as soft and smooth as the swatch he was rubbing between his fingers right now, here in a museum in Tokyo. With that awareness, the vision faded and Sai's world was black once more.

He swallowed at the loss of light and wished the vision back again, but his world stayed stubbornly dark. Had this been a memory? Or merely a sensory fragment? If a memory, it was an odd one, to be sure. But odd or not, true memory or not, Sai was very glad to have experienced it.
Over the next half hour the blind man handled each item as his young friend passes them to him, one after the other. First was a brush and some paper, both of which Sai recognized as familiar, but neither drew a spark. Then came some chopsticks, a comb and a fan. The fan, with its bamboo ribs and paper 'wings', was just as familiar as Hikaru's own tasseled version had been when he had handled it, but it too neither sparked a memory nor enabled a vision.

Then another bamboo item was laid in his hands. It was long, adorned with ridges at intervals, with seven holes placed evenly along one side and with a single oval hole placed at some distance from the others. Sai recognized it at once as a /fue/, a flute. Of their own volition his fingers sought out the round holes, covering them with the pads of the each finger's first joint and the oval was placed to his lips, bringing the flute out to his right. He breathed out strongly, and a single wailing tone was produced. Without his mind commanding them, his fingers shifted, finding a new formation of covered and uncovered holes. He breathed again, only now realizing that it wasn't a breath at all, but more a powerful pushing out of air from his mouth. Another, lighter tone came forth. Again a slight shift in positioning his fingers, blowing out more air, and the tone changed to a lower one again. Lift some fingers, lower others, blow and another long tone came forth, bringing with it a mist of deep red. Dark at first but becoming more vibrant by the lengthening of the tone. A new tone brought a veil of orange, and another a partial disc of yellow. Sai noticed that his black world, wherever it wasn't now red and orange and yellow, was turning blue above him and green below. The yellow disc grew stronger and rounder as it slowly rose in the distance, the reds and oranges turned into fluffy pink clouds, all commanded by the flute's changing tones. Sai could see and feel the wind play gently with the green grass at his feet. The sun was now so bright he couldn't look straight at it and he slowly turned around. He cast his eyes upon the purple mountain range up ahead, recognizing mount Daimonji in its early dawn state, its snow tops colored pink by the weak sun.

A wind blew and made the sleeves of his Heian noble's outfit flap around him wildly. But it was not strong enough to make him stop his song. New tones flowed and with them the fields around him were lit by the early morning sunshine. An elongated high tone seemed to produce a flock of birds that flew overhead, while the lower tones seemed to point out nearby trees that were crooked from being whipped by the same winds, year in and year out. Middle tones gave life to the far mountains and a nearby stream, and the tall summer yellowed grass that was being whipped around his knees in the strong breeze. Then the wind suddenly died down and Sai saw a beautiful sunny day. The sun shone warm on his silk clad back and the mountains glistened in the distance. As he looked up he saw that the sky was a vibrant blue that stretched out into infinity, like the single note he was playing stretched out into first one tone than another, and another, and...

As he lowered the flute from his lips the vision was lost and his world turned dark once more. He carefully placed the flute to the table and used his sleeve to wipe away the tears that ran down his cheeks. It had been the most magnificent thing he had ever seen. He was grateful for the vision, truly grateful, but why did it have to end?

'Excuse me sir?' A male voice came across the table. Sai felt drained and bruised, and the last thing he wanted to do was to talk to a stranger.

'If I may say, that was most beautiful, you play well, sir,' the man persisted.

'Thank you,' he replied dully before turning to Hikaru and whispered, /I'd like to go now, please./

/Alright,/ Hikaru said and Sai felt his left arm taken up and he had just time to unwrap and extend his cane before the young man had started moving them out.
An interminable journey of corridors and turns and steps up and steps down brought them to the outside air. But when Hikaru started to drag him down the huge stone steps outside, Sai resisted his pull and sat down heavily putting his head in his hands. His hands became wet instantly with the tears he just couldn't stop. His shoulders shook with irrepressible sobs.

'Look, uhm,' the boy stammered. 'D'ya want something to drink or somethin'?" Hikaru tried after a half minute. 'Yeah, that's a good idea,' he answered his own question. The boy's hand padded his shoulder once and then moved off.

'Stay here, I see a soda stand, I'll be right back.' The boy's voice grew softer with distance and anything more Hikaru might have said was swept away by the wind.

Sai wiped his sleeve across his face, trying to get most of the moisture off. That vision had been so beautiful, the colors so vibrant and the sensations so real. There was no way he would believe that that place hadn't been real to him at some point in his life. He could remember the fluttering white sleeves he had worn and the purple trousers that the grass had grazed in its wild dance in the wind. Hikaru had described how he had looked as a ghost, the clothing, the hair, the fan and of course that hat. The description had not included a flute, but then maybe he hadn't had one as a ghost. But at least it made it very likely that the vision had been of some place his former self had visited. Sai experienced a wave of homesickness towards that untouched place. He so wanted to go there or, barring that, he would settle for just seeing and experiencing it again.

He suddenly wondered if going back in to the museum and handling the flute again would call back the vision. The thought was interrupted by Hikaru's arrival with a can of soda for Sai, and one for himself.

While he sat and sipped the drink - with odd bubbles in it that tickled his throat - he decided against going back. He realized that if he were to try the flute again and the vision would not reappear, he'd be heartbroken. Even if the vision did come again, it would inevitably come to an end again and his heart would still be broken. No, it was wiser to not try and just cherish the experience he'd already had. At least it was for now.

With that, he finished his sickly sweet drink, gave his face a last thorough wipe, and asked his young friend where he wanted to go next. The day was young after all.

TBC

Don't forget to review!
Chapter 3

(Sorry for the late posting! Chapter 4 will be up in a few minutes as well! Hopefully there will be more regular updates from now on.)

Chapter 3

Fujiwara Sai, the newest employee of the Touya Go Club, succeeded almost completely in putting the incident at the museum behind him. Having a full time job playing Go, a library full of new books to read, and his hanging out with his new friends, left no time for thinking about would-have-beens.

He was happy, truly happy, even if his world was only ever lit by the light of a shining Goban, and the only colors he ever saw where that of black and white and wood.

The only times the world was really dark was when he wasn't playing Go or wasn't reading; not that reading created light, it just made the darkness less dark. The interaction with his friends did much the same thing. But when he was alone, on his off days or late at night, his world was very dark indeed. It was at those times that the blind man let himself remember the flashes of memory from Hikaru's stories and the vision called forth by the flute. They were bitter sweet moments and Sai strictly rationed reliving them, for he could feel the depression each caused by creating a longing for things he just could not have.

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It was the Tuesday after the museum visit that Sai was reminded of the incident in a very unexpected way. The first thing he did every Tuesday was listen to that week's CD from the Library. As always it had come in Monday's mail and Ogata had put it in his cubby hole by the door.

He'd play the disc while having a lazy breakfast. It ran an average of 45 minutes and had all kinds of interesting bits on it. First there was the news, then tidbits of general information like the review of the Tokyo Historic Museum exhibition, and lastly there would be advertisements of all kinds. All this, but especially the advertisements, was completely new to Sai, and most of it was incomprehensible to him. But in the few weeks he had been listening to the CDs he did feel he started to understand more about the world he lived in.

That Tuesday Sai was startled by an advertisement almost at the end of the run.

"Desperately seeking: blind flute player seen in Tokyo Historic Museum in Heian Room, November 6th, around noon. If you know this person, please contact Library Gazette Ads under number 5554."

Last Wednesday had been November 6th and it had been past noon when Sai and Hikaru had made it out of the museum. There had been no-one else playing earlier, but it was possible someone had a little later. /Possible yes, but highly unlikely./ No, Sai was pretty sure they were looking for him. The question was 'why'?

With a shock he realized why. He could have sworn he had put that flute down gently, but maybe it hadn't been gently enough and he'd broken it without knowing. Maybe he should not have been playing it in the first place. Maybe there had been a plaque saying precisely that and Hikaru had missed it; the boy had said it had been dark there.
He gulped. If he had broken the flute, he would have to pay for it. At least he now he had a salary, but who knows how much a flute like that would cost? There was really no other way but to contact the Gazette and find out. Phoning the Library was not difficult since he had plenty of practice ordering new books almost every week.

'Library for the Blind, moshi moshi,' came the same friendly lady's voice that he always got when phoning them. He asked her how he could respond to the ad, to which she explained that the Library could pass on to the ad placer either his phone number or his address on record for further contact. After he asked what she thought they might want from him, she said she had no information on that; all she knew was that they were not members of the Library, that the ad had come from outside.

Sai gave her permission to pass on his address, figuring it would be better if any demands for compensation for the damaged flute came by mail instead of over the phone. That way he could ask advice from Ogata or Miss Ichikawa. Because apart from Mr. Uwayaku, they were the only people he knew that might be able to help him with this kind of thing.

As he was about to leave Ogata's building to continue his explorations of the neighborhood the next morning, the doorman stopped him.

'Fujiwara-sensei,' the man had started calling him that after Sai had accepted his apology so many weeks before. 'A messenger dropped this off for you early this morning.'

Sai turned around in surprise and felt a folded piece of paper being put in his left hand. He grasped it, feeling it with his thumb and fingers. It was an envelope.

'Thank you,' he said automatically. Then he added, holding the envelope out towards the man, 'would you mind reading it to me?'

Asking this was a gamble, he knew. He was pretty sure that this letter was about the broken flute - he expected no other letters - so letting a stranger read it would be embarrassing to say the least. However, he really wanted this problem sorted out as it had given him a sleepless night already. And maybe the doorman would stop being so overly polite once he realized that Sai was only human after all. So he handed over the letter and was content to let the chips come down where they would.

After listening to the telltale sound of paper being torn, Sai was surprised by the doorman's next comment.

'Uh, sorry sir, I can't read this.' An unfolded paper was placed in the blind man's hand and the doorman's claimed inability became understandable; the letter was in Braille.

There was a tiny park with a bench just behind Ogata's building and Sai headed straight there still clutching the letter.

After sitting down, folding his cane, and putting his bag beside him, he put the letter on his knee and let his fingers find the beginning of the missive.

'Most honorable Fujiwara-san,' it started, making the hope that he wasn't in trouble after all bloom in his heart. Of course, Sai had never received a personal letter before, so he was not at all sure that all letters didn't start in this way.
'We've taken the liberty of having this letter translated into Braille, so as to enable you to access it more easily, or in case there is no one available to read it to you.' Well, that was clear, they meant this letter to be read by him, presented in such a way that he would not have to go through a third party to read it. The way they had made sure Sai could read the missive without having to go through any third party to gain access to it's contents, was both impressive and convoluted.

Sai could only think of two reasons for such a precaution; either they were being excessively polite or the subject matter of the letter was extremely serious. Sai vehemently hoped the former, because he was pretty sure if they had gone through all this trouble for a broken flute, a custodian's salary might not be nearly be enough to compensate for its loss.

He read on.

'An acquaintance of ours heard you play the /ryuteki/ in the museum on Wednesday last. He had made a recording and replayed it to us.'

Sai was startled yet again. He had been recorded?

Hikaru had explained about recordings laughingly some weeks ago when Sai had referred to the people speaking on the Library Gazette CD as 'tiny flat ghosts that always say the same thing in the same way, but never listen when you tell them to stop!' This was after he had been forced to listen to the same track 20 odd times when a button got stuck on the CD player. It was then also that he learned the uses of the other buttons besides the 'start' and 'eject' button.

'We would be most honored if you could see your way to visiting our company's facilities,' the letter continued.

'Please let us know when you would be available.

Yours sincerely,

Yashida Hachiro, executive

and

Fukurou Takeshi, executive

for

Yamatogoto Inc.

Ongaku lane 5674

Tokyo

Japan

tel:...'

Sai folded the letter after memorizing the address and telephone number out of habit.

They wanted him to come to their company? Why? The letter had been super polite but hardly informative. Sai's heart sank. What if it was to get him there to have him arrested for causing damage?

He took out his phone and carefully dialed the number.
'Yamatogoto Incorporated, how may I help you?' a cheerful young man's voice chimed.

'Uh, Fujiwara Sai calling. I've been asked to contact a Yashida-san or a Fukurou-san,' he stammered.

'Why certainly! Putting you right through!' And a tinny tune started playing in the blind man's ear.

But before Sai had a moment to think about the significance of the music - if any - the tune stopped and a deep male voice said, 'Yashida speaking. Ah, Fujiwara-san, I'm most gratified you called so promptly. When can we expect you?'

Again Sai had to swallow. Might as well get it over with, he thought.

'Right now is alright, sir?' He made it a question.

'That would be most opportune! You are already in the neighborhood?' Mr. Yashida asked.

'Uh, no, uh, I doubt it,' the former ghost said and gave the other man the number of Ogata's building.

'Ah yes, I know that place. It's quite far from here. Shall we say in one hour then?' Mr. Yashida asked.

Sai realized he'd have to get a cab and an hour's cab-drive would not be cheap. But he was fully conscious of the fact that if he didn't deal with this right now, the next step could be the police knocking at Ogata's door, and that would never do!

'Yes, sir, that would be no problem,' he said with a heavy heart and finished the call.

Sai had called Kawai's dispatcher and got a ride in Mr. Nezumi's cab, since Kawai had the day off. Mr. Nezumi was a big guy, even bigger than Kuma. He always helped Sai into the cab and he always mentioned if there were steps or obstructions in the blind man's path whenever Sai alighted. He did that even on very familiar terrain like the Go club or Ogata's building. On the whole it did make Sai feel more secure, even if it was redundant sometimes.

When the cabby dropped him off at the Yamatogoto building he warned Sai of a revolving door with three steps leading up to it, before driving off.

Sai stood on the side walk for a few moments longer collecting his courage. He was a full ten minutes early; Nezumi could possibly outdrive Ogata where speed was concerned. While that always got Sai to his destination early, it did leave his heart firmly lodged in his throat every time, and he really needed the time gained to stop shaking.

When he felt as ready as it was possible to be with the threat of the coming confrontation looming over him, Sai flipped open his cane and advanced on the steps leading to that infernal rotating door.

'Sir?' The voice came from ahead left. /Male, young/.

'Yes?' Sai asked politely.

'If you'll come to me, sir, this side entrance is easier to navigate.' The young man's voice had moved closer, and presently Sai felt a guiding hand on his left arm. He let himself be guided into the building by the young man's hand, through a normal door, figuring that that was the fastest
way to get inside.

Once inside the large sounding space - an entrance hall with stone floors and matching hollow echoes - the young man bade him wait and Sai could hear him make a phone call informing Mr. Yashida and Mr. Fukurou of his arrival.

'Yashida-san will see you now. I will take you up,' the young man said and Sai felt the hand reappear on his arm. Again he let himself be guided, through a door, up two flights of stairs, down a corridor, right turn, another corridor, and then through heavy doors that the young man needed both hands for to pull open.

'Please enter,' the young man said and Sai could feel the slight displacement of air indicating the man had bowed.

Sai stepped forward and felt as well as heard the door fall shut behind him.

'Ah, Fujiwara-san, I'm so glad you could come,' spoke the same deep voice Sai had heard over the phone. 'Yashida Hachiro, pleased to meet you.' The air was disturbed again.

Sai bowed back, quite low, saying 'Fujiwara Sai, pleased to meet you.'

'Fukurou Takeshi, pleased to meet you,' came from the right, causing another slight air flow. Sai turned to his right and repeated his introduction and bowed again deeply.

Both gentleman's greetings had been in the most polite forms of speech. In the life that Sai could remember he had never been spoken to in such a manner nor had he had much opportunity to use really polite Japanese. The few times he had felt it necessary to use it he had been ridiculed. Hikaru had told him that as a ghost his speech had been old fashioned, almost haughty. The boy also had said that 'folks don't speak like that anymore'. Well, apparently these 'folks' did. The blind man noticed that even if he didn't remember having used these speech patterns, they came back to him very easily indeed.

'We are indeed gratified that you had time for us today,' Mr. Fukurou said.

Sai returned with, 'I must apologize profusely for any damage I may have caused.' With that he bowed deeply again and left his head down while he waited for the gentlemen's verdict.

'Damage? I am unsure... Yashida-kun?' The older sounding of the two said, his voice laced with genuine mystification.

'I know of no damage, Fukurou-san. Of what do you speak, Fujiwara-san?' Yashida asked.

Sai came up out of his bow hesitantly. Had he got it wrong? It wouldn't be the first time now would it, but still he needed this cleared up one way or another.

'Uh, the flute back at the museum...?' he stammered. He added, 'I may not have put it down carefully enough?' when the other two remained silent.

'I know not of any damage caused by you. Ikegaki-san, who has the honor of being a museum guard at the illustrious Tokyo Historic Museum, has not spoken to me of any damage that day, thus I know there was none. It was he who made the recording of you that prompted us to invite your worthy self here,' Mr. Yashida said.

Sai was shocked. He was not in trouble after all? As the realization washed over him like a hot shower, he felt intense relief.
'Fujiwara-san are you unwell?' Mr. Yashida asked.

'Uh, quite well,' Sai hastened to reassure him. 'May I ask why you requested my presence, if not for that?' he added.

'Why, to ask you to play of course!' Mr. Fukurou's voice went up in what sounded anticipation.

'Play?' Sai could kick himself for his dumb utterance; he sounded like an ignorant clod.

It did not seem to faze Mr. Fukurou who continued to speak, 'Will you do us the honor, the privilege of playing a piece for us? The recording Ikegaki-kun made was somewhat lacking in quality, for he used his mobile telephone to make it, and such a small thing only has a meager ability.'

Sai recognized that older man was actually babbling. Was the man nervous? Sai knew he himself babbled when he was nervous, but would such a distinguished old man?

And being asked to play? Sai could hardly believe it! It would be wonderful though! /Oh, but hold on,/ he had no flute. He couldn't play without one.

'Maybe it is I who has the meager ability,' Sai said. 'I would not mind playing, but I have no flute,' he added with a sigh.

'You did not bring your flute?' Mr. Fukurou sounded incredulous, but before Sai could protest the accuracy of the assumed facts in the posed question, the older man continued, 'Joshu-kun, kindly get the /ryuteki/ off the display please.'

'But, sir!' said a young man's voice that sounded shocked. It came from a little further away and to the left, indicating to Sai that the owner had been standing off to the side, as if in attendance.

'Please bring it here.' Mr. Fukurou's voice still had the same polite tone, but somehow the request had a lot of authority behind it.

'Yes, sir,' Mr. Joshu responded promptly.

As Sai could hear Mr. Joshu move about, Mr. Fukurou continued talking. 'It's a gift the company received when His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince visited our facilities many years ago. Ah, here it is,' he said as the young man had rejoined them.

There was the sound of a box lid coming off a box and after a pause Sai felt a slender bamboo length touch his hand. He pulled his hand away, for fear of damaging the flute.

'Fujiwara-san, would you play?' Mr. Fukurou urged.

'Fukurou-sama, I could not possibly do justice to such an instrument!' the former Heian noble exclaimed.

'Fujiwara-san, any musical instrument, no matter its origins, is meant to be played, or its purpose is lost.' The bamboo touched Sai's hand again, as the old man continued speaking, 'Please play for us, so we may hear this dragon flute* sing once more.'

Well, putting it like that Sai could hardly refuse, even though he still felt grossly inadequate to play such an illustrious flute.

A tiny bud of hope bloomed within him. Maybe by playing this flute he'd visit the glade again. /Oh yes, that would be marvelous!/
'I will be my pleasure then,' he said. 'If I may hand it back for a moment?' he added, holding it out again. The slight weight was negated as it was taken from his hand. Sai used his momentarily free hands to quickly fold his cane, slip the strap off his wrist and put the bundle in his bag, which in turn he proceeded to push from its normal position beside him to further behind his back, to improve his elbowroom. He had noticed that at the museum the bag had restricted his movements somewhat.

'Joshu-kun can take care of your bag, if it pleases you,' Mr. Yashida said.

A presence appeared at his side, Mr. Joshu Sai assumed, and he hesitated for only a split second. Giving the man his bag might be risky; he might not get it back. But the fact that he was in a company building, with an attendant at the door, an assistant here, and these well-spoken gentlemen, did tip the scales for the blind man. He lifted his bag, slid the strap over his head, and held it out for Mr. Joshu to take. The absence of the bag's weight on his shoulder and its mass by his side left him feeling oddly naked. He didn't get more than a moment to ponder it when the flute was laid in his hand again.

'Please, play,' Mr. Fukurou said, using the politest of verb forms.

As they had in the museum, the blind man's fingers found their proper place on the instrument immediately and Sai laid the flute against his lips once more.

He breathed in and gently blew across the oval hole. A single tone came forth, as clear as summer's sky. Sai let his fingers and mouth shift a fraction and the tone modulated to the more muted texture of autumn leaves. While pushing his breath out with a lot more force he shifted again turning the tone up into a swallow's flight straight towards heaven.

He breathed in again and started another tone, followed by another, playing a long drawn out lament. If you would have asked him how he knew what note to play next, he'd have told you he didn't know. But as he played the notes and modulations he knew he was playing them from some distant memory, from somewhere he had played them in the past.

As had happened in the museum, the notes created another vision, a 'mindscape' if you will. It was a different one than he had been to before. Each of his notes called forth colors, shapes, textures, and sensations, which culminated in a rocky mountainside with a small stream running down eroded rocks. There was vegetation and tiny wild flowers, trees and birds - swallows in large flocks, but no human life, save himself, again in his flowing white sleeves.

The music let Sai repose in that brightly lit place as long as it lasted. But like all things, it had to come to an end. And when it did the light went out as he lowered the flute from his mouth.

The separation didn't hurt any less than it had the first time, but this time he expected it and he managed to stop the tears from forming in his eyes. The place the music had taken him may have been different than the first time, but it had felt no less real. It did leave him wondering if either place had ever truly existed in his first life, or even in his ghostly life, or were they just the product of his over active imagination. What was starting to bother him was that both locations had been devoid of even a hint of human life, apart from himself, that is. If these mindscape were not a reconstruction of a memory but more a creation of his own imagination then it was a depressing thing to realize that he seemed to be all alone in this world of his own making.

Sai was effectively called away from his maudlin thoughts by the emotion in Mr. Fukurou's voice.

'Oh, that was so beautiful! Well, Yashida-kun, I must say I feel justified in letting this young man play the prince's flute, for was that not even better than the /Etenraku/** from the recording? Ah, to hear such high quality playing, it is most exhilarating.'
Without taking a more than half a breath the old man continued speaking, 'My dear Fujiwara-san, the way you push the /seme/(high pitched note) out of the /hukura/(low pitched note), it is such a sensitive act. And that /syouka/(melody), most elegant!'

As the older man used each of the strange words, they instantly became clear to the former ghost, very much like the memories had come when Hikaru had talked about their time together. That he must have been able to play the flute in his first life had been clear to Sai since last week, but that he possibly had been good at it was new. And he apparently knew an unknown tune, maybe one that had been lost over the last 1000 years.

When Sai had discovered he had a good talent for playing Go - and after the time it took for him to actually believe it - he had felt that horrible uselessness that he had had to live with for as long as he could remember, slowly melt away from him. And now he had discovered another innate skill. Rediscovered it really, since he must have worked at learning the flute as much as he had worked at perfecting his Go, in his first life. Possibly more, for playing an instrument well takes a lot of time, this much he did know. He was suddenly very grateful to his former self for taking the trouble to learn these things, for now he had two skills not just one. Of course the quality of the instrument mattered a great deal in music making. Sai was sure that even a mediocre player could make this flute sound good. He told the older man as much.

'Oh no, I've heard good players play this precious flute before, but they couldn't make it sing like you just did. And that melody, I've never heard it before, but it is most ancient, I feel sure. Is it a family /syouka/?'

Tell the truth or lie, it always came to that. It would have to be the obfuscated lie the former ghost had been giving everybody else. Sai pulled himself together mentally and answered, 'I honestly don't know. I was in a car accident over a year ago and lost my memory. I only recently rediscovered my name, but I can't remember anything of my former life.'

A silence fell after he had finished talking. As always when he was reminded of his past he felt a strong echo of the emotions of back then. The total confusion, the constant loneliness, the occasional embarrassment, the fear, the pain - both mental and physical and the utter despair of his days in the shelter came back to him almost as powerfully as when he had first felt them. /No!/ He was not going to go through this again. He had a job now and a home and friends. He would never go back to the shelter ever again!

The anger and determination blew away the other more negative emotions, leaving rage running up and down his spine. To stop the feelings from over flowing Sai balled his fists tightly and felt his arms tense up with the pent up energy.

He forced himself to exhale, inhale slowly and exhale again. With the dawn out breaths the anger slowly left his body and after a minute or so his fists uncurled of their own account.

'Well,' Mr Fukurou said just as the silence became uncomfortable, 'Let us sit down and have tea.'

The mundane process of requesting his bag, getting out his cane, being directed to a seat, feeling it out so he could sit down, refolding the cane, putting it in his lap, and putting his bag by his leg on the floor, gave Sai a few needed moments to get his emotions back under control. By the time the tea had been served, tasted, and thoroughly verbally appreciated, he was able to give a well thought out response to Mr. Fukurou's inquiry of, 'I sense an interesting story in your past, Fujiwara-san, I would very much like to hear it, if you are of a mind to share it.'

The request was made in such a way that the former ghost could easily turn it down without loss of face to the older man. But he found he did not want to hold back; he found he wanted to tell his
Sai told the gentlemen his story as he knew it. Of course he left out all that he agreed with Hikaru to leave out. When he came to the end of the story Mr. Fukurou had some questions which, and Sai should not have been surprised about this, were all about his new experiences with playing the flute.

'So you had not know you could play the /ryuteki/ before you touched it in the museum?' Sai nodded as he took another sip of his second cup of tea. 'How remarkable!' Mr. Fukurou exclaimed.

'What about other instruments? Like the /biwa/, the /shō/ and the /koto/?' Mr. Yashida asked.

Sai finished chewing his sandwich and swallowed - as 'tea' had turned into 'lunch' a little while ago - before answering, 'I have not had cause to handle any of those instruments, but I do recognize the names, so I cannot be totally unfamiliar with them.'

'And do you know what other /syouka/ you might know?' Mr. Yashida said.

'I have no way to know that but to play them myself, if they will come out that is. Or, failing that, it is very likely I would recognize one if I heard it again,' Sai responded.

'Joshu-kun, please put on that CD that's on my desk. Yes, that one,' Mr Fukurou directed his assistant, and a moment later a single flute tone made Sai put down the last of his sandwich on his plate before moving the plate off his knee onto the coffee table in front of him. He sat up in his chair as the second tone wailed out around his head. The third tone was the clincher; this was the tune he had played last week.

He remembered the glade, the mountains, the grass and the sky as the tune progressed. But this time he did not enter the glade, it was only the reflection of a memory, and so it had not half the presence or impact it had had when he had played the notes himself.

There were also a few jarring instances when Sai's idea of what the next note should be did not match the sounds he was hearing. But on second thought he was not too surprised, after all, his version of the /syouka/ was a 1000 years old. It was actually remarkable that there were so few changes to the tune.

The song came to its end and so did Sai's memories. Then a new tone started, short and ending in a sharp /seme/. Another /hukura/ note started and it also went up in a /seme/.

'Joshu-kun, switch it off, please,' Mr. Yashida said, almost drowning out the next note.

'No! Please leave it on,' Sai pleaded, his mind totally on the notes as they happened.

'Leave it on,' Mr. Fukurou commanded, and Sai was able to listen to the entire song without any more interruption.

The song did call up images in Sai's mind of dark blue skies with candy pink clouds, of colorful fish swimming in fish tanks, of water fountains spewing water into man-made basins. But somehow the colors were too bright, the motions too wooden and the shapes too simple. The whole thing was very much like the images Mr. Risu had evoked in him when he had read that passage from Ogata's tropical fish book, back at the book store.

The vision disappeared as the song came to an end and he could hear an electronic click that he
had learned heralded the end of the CD play back.

'That was interesting,' Sai said. 'I recognized the first song; it's the one I played at the museum, but not the second.'

'The first is called 'Etenraku', it is very old, from the early part of the Heian period. Yes, that's the one Ikegaki-kun recorded. The second is from the latter part of the period, thus it has more use of /hukura/ to /seme/ shift in it.' Mr. Fukurou explained.

Yes, it had had a lot more dual notes in it than 'Etenraku', Sai had realized that while listening. Possibly an excessive amount of dual notes. Definitely a few note-shifts he had not tried before. All of a sudden his fingers itched to try these for themselves.

'Fukurou-same, may I handle the /ryuteki/ once more?' the blind man asked.

'Most certainly,' the older gentleman said to Sai, before commanding his assistant to hand the blind man the instrument.

Sai shifted to sit on the tip of his chair and brought to the flute in position. He cleared his mind in much the same way as he did just before starting a game of Go and languidly blew the first /hukura/ of the second song. Just as the other flute player had done, he pushed the lower note one octave up into its corresponding /seme/. He closed it and then played the second /hukura/, pushing it too into its /seme/ state, when the timing of the song had called for it.

As he played the song the images he had seen before reappeared, and this time they were a lot more detailed, more real. But he found he did not have much time to appreciate the improvement as replaying the song from memory was taking most of his concentration. So he let the blue sky, fish and fountain drift by him, without giving them much attention. The last note to the song was a /seme/ to /hukura/ combination, something he was fairly sure he had not played much, if at all in his first life; it felt most unfamiliar.

His world turned dark once more and he rested his hands with the flute in his lap.

'But I thought you said you didn't know that piece?' Mr. Yashida's voice held much incredulity.

'I do now,' Sai said, knowing full well how pedantic he sounded. It was pride he knew, pride in his accomplishment. And he wasn't sorry he felt that pride right now.

'But...' the younger of the two gentlemen started.

'Yashida-kun.' There was warning in the older man's voice. 'Joshu-kun, please set up Kamome's CD. Third track, please.'

Sai found he was not too worried about Mr. Yashida's disbelief. He might have been before he had gotten his job at the Touya club, but not now. Now he didn't feel he had to justify his abilities, since they did not impact on his livelihood.

Mr. Fukurou's reaction was more interesting. If you kept the strategies of Go in the back of your mind here, it was clear what the man had in mind.

'You are testing me?' Sai asked.

'Yes, if you're amenable,' Mr. Fukurou answered.

'Yes, I think so.'
There was the telltale click of a button being pushed and the whirring of the CD and then the track started.

This song was different again from the other two. It had a lot less dual notes for one and it was almost entirely in /seme/, which struck the blind man as very unusual. The tune also sounded to him as being a children's song, a lullaby maybe. It wasn't really much of a test as it would not be hard at all to replay this tune, all the more easy because the last third of it was a repeat almost exactly of the beginning.

The image it produced in his mind wasn't very clear. Sai recognized a child playing with an open fan, but of neither the child nor the fan could he have given a description.

The moment the track came to its end, he put the flute to his lips and continued the melody without breaking the rhythm of the tune.

The image of the boy and fan became clearer. The simplicity of the song gave Sai time to enjoy the vision. It was indeed a boy playing with the fan. His chubby cheeks dimpled as he smiled and twirled the fan around his small fingers and then threw it up into the air, flapping his long sleeved arms in glee. The fan fell soundlessly onto the tatami mat and the boy's braids by the side of his face bobbed about as he dove down to retrieve it.

As Sai played through the repeated part of the melody, he wondered briefly who the child was. Maybe it was himself when young, or the child of a friend, or a sibling or cousin? But the vision provided no more information than what he had gleaned when it started. His questions of where and when and who were met with the mute notes of the song only.

It was a nice thought that the boy might be a family member. Even though the child would have lived and died a thousand years ago. Sai held the flute tightly to his chest as his old longing of finding family squeezing his heart painfully for a moment.

'Well, that was a triumph, I do believe,' Mr. Fukurou said. The blind man came back to himself, as his introspection was broken by the words.

'Thank you,' Sai responded automatically.

'I, he started to add then an insistent beeping emanated from his bag: his phone. He apologized, attempted to put the flute on the table, which was promptly intercepted by the ever present assistant, before retrieving the buzzing device from his bag.

'Moshi, moshi?' he spoke into the phone.

'Hikaru here, 'r you ready to mosey?' his onetime host said. Sai was painfully aware that the tinny voice was loud enough to be heard by everyone in the near silent room. Hikaru's cheerful but rather rude language was embarrassingly out of place here with these polished gentlemen.

'Are we keeping you from an engagement?' Mr. Yashida asked in a near whisper.

'Uh, just a moment Hikaru,' Sai said and then laid his hand over the phone, so he could talk more freely.

Over the many weeks that Sai had only Tuesdays and Wednesdays off, a certain routine had been established. Since Hikaru had school until 3 every Tuesday and had /oteai/ or tournament games at the institute some two or three times a month on Wednesdays, they had a standing 'date' of spending those Wednesday afternoons together, more often than not playing Go somewhere.

'Uh, I do apologize, it must be around 2 o'clock; Hikaru always calls around then,' Sai explained.
'It seems that we are keeping you,' Mr. Fukurou stated. Sai considered protesting, but he knew it would be an untruth, so he said nothing.

'We will finish our meeting than, Fujiwara-san,' Mr. Fukurou said, and the movement of air indicated that both gentlemen had gotten up from their seats and had bowed. Sai quickly followed suit.

'Thank you so much for coming, it was most delightful. Maybe we could meet again some other time?' the old gentleman said.

'Thank you, I'd like that very much,' Sai said. Yes, he would love to come again and play this magnificent flute!

'Well, then we will,' Mr. Fukurou enthused.

'Joshu-kun will show you out,' he added, thus ending the meeting.

* /ryuteki/ = 'dragon flute'

** /Etenraku/ = most famous flute piece from the Heian period.

Note:
Before writing this story I knew nothing about gagaku music as much as I knew nothing about playing Go before seeing 'Hikaru no Go'. The internet is a wonderful thing and now at least I can pretend I know lots about either subject. Doesn't mean that I really do know anything, tough, keep that in mind.

Note2:
Thanks for the lovely reviews! Keep 'm coming; review = love!

Note3:
Sorry about the erratic updating; holidays and what not and I'm feeling myself coming down with a cold or something like, so that may slow up the works some more, sorry. :/

Don't forget to review!
Chapter 4

Again sorry for the long delay. I'm hoping to start posting every week at the very least, hopefully faster. Don't forget to follow/subscribe to receive notification of new chapters being posted. Enjoy!

Chapter 4

The rest of Sai’s week was filled with Go; playing Go, talking about Go, reviewing games of Go. Why, he hadn’t even had time to read his Braille books much less think about last Wednesday’s 'outing'!

He loved it of course; playing unlimited Go was his idea heaven. But by the time Tuesday came around again he really was in need of a break from it all.

This 'weekend' had a /oteai/ and tournament free Wednesday for Hikaru so they had agreed to another sleepover after Hikaru’s classes had ended on Tuesday. That left that Tuesday morning to sleep late and laze about, which Sai promptly did.

He was just gathering his things to head out for his now regular late Tuesday morning walk, when the door bell rang. He hesitated for a long moment. The door bell had only ever rung when Ogata had ordered food or when the laundry he had sent out had returned. Sai was sure there was no laundry expected, since Ogata habitually ‘did’ laundry on Thursdays, and Sai had not ordered any food; he never did, feeling it not was his place to do so in someone else's house.

The bell rang again, galvanizing him into action. He opened the door carefully.

'Good morning, sir, sorry to disturb you,' the light voice of the doorman chimed, 'there was a parcel delivered to you and since it's rather big, I thought I might bring it up before you leave for the day. Shall I bring it in for you?'

Sai automatically stepped aside and the doorman, displacing more air than usually, probably due to the 'big parcel' walked past him into the apartment.

'Can you see who it's from?' Sai asked, wondering who'd send him anything. He hadn't needed to order more books from the Library, having not finished a single book in the last week. And he had certainly not ordered anything else.

'Uh, "Yamatogoto Inc." it says,' the doorman said, and added, 'Do you want me to open it for you?'

Sai decided against that, unaccountably wanting a bit of privacy when dealing with the contents of the parcel. He thanked the doorman and let him out.

He sat down on the couch, setting aside his bag and cane, freeing his hands so he could open the mystery parcel.

On top of the box he found two envelopes. One was had the unmistakable Braille label of the Library on it. He opened it quickly and found the week's installment of the Gazette CD, unsurprisingly.

The second envelope was more interesting, it was blank to the blind man on the outside, but inside he found a Braille letter. The letter was very politely worded and of course it had come from the
two kind gentlemen.

As with the last missive from them, it was long winded and rather uninformative. All it really said that they had had a good time when Sai had visited and would like to meet again some time and that they had sent him a small gift, the result of which they were anxious to discuss at this proposed later meeting.

His curiosity now much peeked, he struggled to open the box. After some fruitless prying at the edges of the box, Sai found that he could scrape an edge of the sticky tape off and when he had a big enough piece he could pull off large ribbons of the stuff, thus clearing the edges and freeing all the flaps on the box.

From among the squishy packing material he pulled forth one oblong box and a cube shaped heavy box, wrapped tightly in more sticky tape. He set them out on the table and decided to opened the oblong box first. It had a simple lid held down with a paper ribbon wrapped around the box, which in turn was held together with a small piece of tape. He slid the ribbon of the box and carefully opened it.

His fingers felt inside and encountered a now familiar feel; the ridges of the bindings on a /ryuteki/ flute. He lifted it out of its box, running his fingers up and down its length. It didn't feel exactly like the one he had played at the Yamatogoto building, nor was it the one from the museum. But it was a real flute, and the bamboo felt real to him also. He positioned his fingers and put the instrument to his lips.

He played a long low tone, letting it draw out for as long as his breath would allow. The flute's wail was beautiful. This flute was a quality item, maybe not as good as the one from a week ago but very nearly so anyway.

Sai spent some minutes enjoying himself playing a languid song, conjuring up slowly falling autumn maple leaves, that were occasionally disturbed into fluttering by a light breeze.

He was gratified to know that he could call up images with this flute just as much as with the others. And now that he had a flute of his own, he'd be able to do that anytime he wanted to.

He set aside the flute and tackled the cube shaped box. Its lid slid off quite easily, and inside he found about 10 CD boxes, each with a few words of Braille written on a note inside. The notes were very brief; they either held a name or one-word description, like 'traditional', 'Heian' or 'gagaku'. Sai took the first CD and tried it in this player. The notes had described it as 'early Heian' and so it was, for the first notes played were the opening of /Etenraku/.

Sai was delighted with this find, for if these CDs ran as long as the CDs from the Library, he would have hours and hours worth of music to listen to, and to learn too.

He much appreciated the gifts and being unable to write the kind gentle he decided to call their office. Unfortunately both were out so he opted to leave a polite message instead.

Sai spent the rest of the afternoon between listening to CDs track and then reproducing them on the flute, conjuring up beautiful landscapes, covering all the seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter passing through his mind scape one after the other.

All too soon the tranquility of his flute playing was disturbed by the jingle of his cell phone. Sai was quite surprised that it was already three o'clock when he picked up the phone to let Hikaru know that he was still at home. This in turn surprised Hikaru, as it was a beautiful day outside, and he would have expected Sai to be miles away from Ogata's place by now. They arranged to meet at the mall, near Ogata's apartment building in, as there was a Ramen store nearby.
Sai decided to bring the flute so he could show Hikaru his new found talent. But before he left the house he tidied the CDs away in the back his clothing drawer. The letter he put with his other Braille things; none of his friends could read Braille after all. He wasn't at all sure what gave him the impulse to be so secretive about the music, but he somehow felt a little self-conscious about it.

It was on the way to the mall that he realized something; apart from Hikaru none of Sai's friends ever did anything with music. There was never music on at the Touya Go Club, nor had there been in the Heart of Stone. When Sai was alone with Ogata in his apartment, while Sai was reading and Ogata did what ever it was he did on the computer, there was never any music on. Sai had only ever heard music when he was at Hikaru's house. Mrs. Shindou liked soft music in the background in the living room and Hikaru would sometimes play something a little more modern when Sai stayed over and Hikaru had some homework left to do. But all in all the Go players Sai knew did not listen to music. How odd.

Hikaru's reaction to Sai's flute play had been a bit mixed, to say the least. Sai had waited until after the ramen was all gone - Hikaru had been ravenous - and they had moved to the little park that was off one of the side streets behind the mall, before giving him a demonstration.

'Ah, yeah, nice,' Hikaru said sounding less than convincing. Sai felt a stab of disappointment; he had hoped Hikaru would like it at least. The sentiment must have shown on his face because Hikaru hastened to add, 'geez, I don't know much about old music like that.'

'/Old music'/.'/Yes, that was a fair comment,/ Sai supposed, after all he had been born 1000 years ago, if that is not old than what is? He had played standing up but now he sat down, trying to school his expression away from disappointment.

'Look, there's loads of people who love that kinda music, honest,' Hikaru said hesitantly.

Sai realized that again the boy was right; there were people out there that did appreciate this kind of music, like the two nice gentlemen. He would play for them and for himself, and that would be enough.

'You wanna go to the Heart of Stone? We haven't been in while. I wanna see you beat five of those dudes all at once!' Hikaru tugged on his sleeve as the boy sprang up.

For almost a whole second the lure of Go was not enough to combat Sai's disappointment, but then a thought of the black and white stones entered his mind, dancing around for a moment before jumping into their /goke/ and leaving a painfully empty grid, that just screamed to be filled.

That Thursday the nice weather disappeared and it was already raining when Sai arrived to work that morning. As he made his way to his work spot, after a cheery /ohayo!/ from Ichikawa, Sai was very glad he had decided to wear his new sweater that day, as the day's dampness had taken hold of the entire Go club.

Pretty soon he was set up with some soup and crackers - Ichikawa said soup first thing was a must in the wintertime in the Club - and it warmed him up nicely. He was rather grateful for the warm start, as playing Go was hardly the kind of 'sport' that would keep one warm!

After Touya Meijin arrived, Sai wasn't given anymore time to ponder the weather, because the man sat right down and had Ichikawa /nigiri/ for them. Sai got white and the 6 and a half /komi/ advantage.
Over the past weeks Sai had surely but steadily been gaining on the Master player. Where in that first game he had had to forfeit in the face of a more than ten /moku/ loss, now he was losing with as few as 3 /moku/. Sai was not anywhere near beating Touya sr. yet, but he detected a definite upward curve.

He really liked fighting his rival on the board; he could go all out against a stronger force, what could be better? Off the board, they had slowly become friends. And as friends they would talk about this and that during their tea and lunch break. There was an unspoken agreement between them that there was no Go talk during food breaks. It was that lunch break that the Meijin came with a surprise.

Tea had been poured and drunk fast, to prevent it from cooling. There had been more soup and sandwiches, and Sai decided the cold weather warranted taking a third helping. He was just biting into an egg sandwich when the older man started to speak.

'Fujiwara-san.'

Sai sat up straighter, as Touya sr. had not used the polite suffix of -san in reference to Sai in weeks; something was up. Sai resisted the urge to feel guilty; he was pretty sure he hadn't done anything lately that might make his rival cross. Right?

'I have favor to ask,' the older man's booming voice continued. /A favor?/ Sai knew he would do anything the Meijin might ask of him! He was well aware that this man was also responsible for him having a job here, just as much as Ogata was, being the principle owner of the Touya Go Club.

'Young Akira has decided that he is grown-up enough and he wants to move out.'

Sai nodded. He had had some fore knowledge of this, as the younger Touya had complained - in a manner that was oddly polite - that now that his father was back from China permanently, they were, as Touya had put it: 'a little too closely pressed together'. Sai experienced a moment of guilt over this; it was after for him that Touya sr. had come back. And if he was able to do anything to help the situation, he would do so. But for the life of him he could not think of anything that he might do that might help.

'It would help my wife if Akira could go and live with someone older, more experienced,' Touya sr. went on. Sai listened intently, still not seeing how he could help.

There was a pause, as though the Meijin was gathering his thoughts. At least Sai hoped that was it as he had no idea what to say to this.

'Fujiwara-san, your living arrangements with Ogata have always struck me as of a temporary type,' the Meijin continued, hesitancy in his voice.

Temporary? Sai wanted to protest here; his living at Ogata's could not be temporary! To be sure it was not ideal, but if Sai did not live there where would he go?
'Would it not be of benefit to you both if you moved in with Akira?'

Sai was speechless. Move in with Touya-kun? /But!/ he wanted to scream, how could he do that? Where would it be? Would he be able to afford it?

'I know this is an imposition on you. I'm sure you would rather want to live on your own. But an arrangement where you could share a flat with my boy, would make my wife worry so much less. And you being a friend of my son's, he would not feel himself impeded in his feelings of liberty. So as a large favor I'm asking you this.' Here the Meijin trailed off.

Sai knew here was the point at which he should say yes or no, but there where too many questions unanswered for him to make any sense of how this would work.

How Ogata would react to this development? Ogata was just too much of a mystery to Sai, for him to say if the title holder would welcome the move or be dead set against it.

'I've talked to Ogata-kun already,' the Meijin said after Sai's silence. 'He is not averse to the idea. He said,' here the older man paused, 'he said he felt it might be the best solution for you both.'

Sai exhaled. Ogata already knew and he wasn't even angry. The bind man felt relief wash over him; here was one fight that they wouldn't be having. Then the feeling turned into sadness, sadness for all the fights they had had, for the anxiety the blind man had had over their friendship. Yes, Sai living somewhere else would be the best solution.

He nodded once and asked, 'Where would we live?'

'Next week there is an apartment becoming vacant, one flight up from Ogata-kun's,' the Meijin's low voice came, carrying in its tone more than a little relief.

/No!/ Sai thought. Apart from the fact it was situated so very close to Ogata, one floor up, a fact that Sai couldn't place in the situation of them living away from each other; there was the costs of place like that. He was no fool; he knew nice apartments in an affluent part of town like Ogata's was in, were not meant for people with charity jobs like himself.

Ice ran down his back as he tried to keep his emotions out of his next question. 'How much would it cost?'

'Well,' the older mans voice was hesitant now, 'as I'm asking it as a favor, I think it would best if I pay the rent.'

'No,' Sai interrupted his friend with that single word. 'No, I have a job now, so I should pay for my own lodgings. If I can't afford it, then I should not have it.' He could hear his own voice quiver, as he tried to keep tears from filling his eyes.

He knew the Meijin, his friend Touya Kouyo, meant well, but Sai own pride would not let him become such a burden on his friends. Not now he had a job. Now he wanted, /needed/ to pay his own way in the world.

There was a long silence, in which Sai locked the muscles in his neck firmly to keep his head high, to support his argument. He couldn't see his friend, he couldn't read his face. He just hoped that the Meijin understood his point of view and that he'd accept it.

As it had before in times of conflict with his friends, Sai's heart cried out in anguish at the possible cost of refusing his friend's too generous offer. Sai knew he was too stubborn, too passionate, too quickly emoted and too suspicious of generous offers that too closely resembled traps. Had the same situation not happened with Ogata in the beginning? And still went on to a lesser extent.
Ogata would push him into situations he didn't want to be in, and all because the title holder had the leverage, what with housing Sai in his apartment.

Sai had little choice but to acquiesce to Ogata's wishes or he'd be back at the homeless shelter. That Sai was 'allowed' to call Ogata on his behavior was only by Ogata's own 'benevolence'. In truth Ogata could put his foot down and Sai's only options would be obedience or returning the shelter.

He didn't want a situation like that with the Meijin, with his True Rival, /no!/

The older man broke the long silence by saying, 'Very well, we'll make up rental agreement later.' He paused to take a breath, the kind Sai had heard him take when they'd have their Thursday morning game; it usually signaled the start of a very interesting game.

'Thank you,' Sai said and bowed.

No more was said about the subject until their second game was finished and Sai resurfaced enough from the marvelous world of Go to realize Ogata and Touya Akira had joined them.

'Father, have you asked him yet?' Touya asked and Sai was almost shocked at the emotions he could hear in the young pro's question; excitement and longing. The younger Touya really wanted this, the thought made Sai feel bathed in warmth; he was wanted. It felt good.

He resolved, then and there, that he would sit on his pride as much as he could and take whatever rental agreement Touya's father would offer him. The happiness of his friend would be put before his own pride. He knew he might waver later; his pride had taken such a beating in the first year that he could remember, that it wanted some space in his life too. Compromises were going to have to be made.

'I said yes,' Sai said, before the Meijin could answer his son.

'Oh, wonderful!' Touya cried out. Sai had to smile; he'd never heard the normally so serious boy be so boisterous. And he sat back with a fresh cup of tea as both Touya's started discussing preparations for moving. Or rather Touya-kun was making a list, Sai could hear him scribble, while the Meijin answered every second question with 'You really need to ask you mother that.'

The second silent person in the company was Ogata who hadn't said a word yet, but of whom Sai was sure was still present, the constantly refreshed atmosphere of cigarette smoke being a testament to that fact.

Sai knew there would have to be some talk between them today. Sai was moving on and he felt he had in no way paid his debt to the title holder. But once that the blind man would leave the Go pro's flat, the debt would stop mounting up and maybe Sai would get a chance to make a real start at repaying him.

Yes, moving house would give Sai a chance at a more even friendship with the prickly title holder and he would be making two of his friends, and Mrs. Touya, whom he hadn't even met yet, happy. It was a win-win situation; something Sai could remember never having been in before. It felt really /really/ good.
Don't forget to review!
Chapter 5

As it turned out the talk Sai had dreaded having with Ogata about his moving out was over in two seconds flat. The moment Sai had made a move to start it, that night at the point just after Ogata had served the regular evening tea and just before their regular after hours game would start, Ogata had said, 'It's how Touya-sensei wants it, and that's good enough for me.'

Sai had to think a moment about his friend's statement, about the kind of relationship the Meijin had with Ogata, but he quickly decided that it really wasn't any of his business and said, 'Thank you,' instead. Not specifying if he was thanking the man for letting him move out, or for not starting a fight, or for the nice jasmine tea Ogata had just served him.

'White okay?' The calm voice of the title holder drifted from the other side of the coffee table. Sai nodded agreement and sipped his tea.

That Friday and over the weekend, Sai heard nothing about his move to the new apartment or any rental agreement. But since neither Touya had showed up a the Go club, the Meijin's absence being normal but not his son's, Sai was given no opportunity to ask them. Ms. Ichikawa professed to know nothing and Sai believed her, and Ogata said he only knew the door number of the new flat, which was 406, one flight up and one flat over from his own.

This information, meager as it was, had calmed the blind man somewhat on the Saturday; if the place had a number it wasn't entirely fictitious. But by Monday morning Sai's calm really was running out; was he moving or wasn't he?

That he do so, and soon, was essential as again became clear that weekend.

Sai had taken a cab home that Saturday night. It was late, he was tired. Once home he found the flat empty and his heart sank; that how it usually went on nights Ogata came home drunk.

Sai put his bag in it's customary place by the left end of the couch, where he usually sat. He went to the kitchen and found an apple which he took to couch and put in his bag. Then he went to the end of the shelf where he kept his books and retrieved a book 'Poetry of the Heian Period' (he would much rather have taken the book he was reading at that time 'Animals of the World' but it was really thick and heavy and not conducive to making a quick getaway) and his CD player, which was loaded with an 'Edo Period' CD from his music collection.

With these things in his lap he plopped on his end of the couch and lay his head on the back. He felt gravity pull him into the soft couch cushions. He was dead tired and all he really wanted to do was go to bed. But with Ogata possibly coming home drunk, it just wasn't an option.

It was the door slamming shut that startled him out of his snooze. He quickly grabbed his bag, opened it up, gathered the book and player from his lap and dumped them inside the thick canvas bag, just as he heard Ogata stumble about at the front door, probably trying to get his shoes off and failing. Then the singing started and the sound was heading towards Sai in the living room. Sai quickly secured the bag, slung it across his shoulder and headed for the entrance to the kitchen that was in the living room. From there on he hoped to exit the other end of the kitchen which
would bring him straight to the shoe racks and the front door.

Sai could hear Ogata enter the living room behind him, his singing having made way to muttering, the content of which Sai couldn't make out, not that he particularly wanted to know anyway. He reached the shoe racks safely, gathered his shoes, but didn't bother to take the time to put them and quietly slipped out of the apartment.

He put on his shoes, unfolded his cane and made his way to the stairwell. He went up one flight and found the flat right above Ogata's. He moved down the hall to the next door and let his hand glide along its high gloss surface. This would be his new home. With a new house mate, young Touya Akira.

Sai was in no doubt that Touya-kun would have his own quirks and idiosyncrasies, Sai was sure he must have plenty of faults himself, but hopefully because the boy was so much younger than Ogata and, unlike Ogata who was a confirmed loner, Touya had always lived at home with other people, things hopefully be better. Still, Sai resolved to give Touya as much space as possible, since, most probably, most of the rent would be paid by the Touyas, his own contribution being but at pittance in comparison. Sai was not fool enough to believe that even with a shared rent, some one of his pay grade couldn't possibly afford to live here.

But Sai knew he had no choice but to accept the hand out and in recompense he'd make sure the Touyas, father and son, would have no complaints at all.

He was tired at work on Sunday, that being a perfectly ordinary working day for him. But Ms. Ichikawa kept him well supplied with tea and soup and cake, enough to keep him going until dinner time. Predictably Ogata showed up at that time and Sai found himself eternally grateful to the man for deciding to forgo his usual yarn spinning and instead taking him out to curry dinner in a restaurant nearby, producing a foldable Goban for a short after dinner game. Then the Go pro drove them home and Sai found himself on his futon ready for sleep not too long after. Apart from Go, they hadn't talked at all. And Sai had found it so restful, he couldn't even worry about it much.

Monday's game was interrupted by Touya coming into the Go club with news; he had seen the new apartment that day and he was very happy about it but arrangements would have to be made for things like furniture and bedding as the place was totally empty. Sai was just starting to work up a big worry about what it would cost and how it may all be arranged when Touya sr. just said, 'Here son, take my gold card, check with your mother about the bedding, but just go buy whatever else you think you need and just have it delivered.'

Sai closed his mouth with a snap after he realized it was hanging open. He quickly covered his faux pas with his left hand. What was he to make of this? Shouldn't he contribute some funds as well? Sai had no idea what furniture might cost, quite a lot if you got it all new, certainly more than he could afford. Sai wished he could talk to Touya-kun in private a moment but the boy had already run off.

'Touya-san,' Sai tried. The man gave a grunt of acknowledgment to show that Sai had been heard. 'Uh, should I, uh, is this all correct?' Sai asked timidly.

'What?,' the man sounded distracted, 'oh that. Yes, it's all settled; it's my and my good wife's birthday present to our boy. A little early I know, these things can't always be timed correctly. Anyway, it is what he wants and that is what counts.'
With that the conversation seemed to be over and Touya sr. went back to comparing the two games that were laid out already. Sai had no choice but to follow suit.

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Tuesday morning when Sai woke up, he found that Ogata had already gone to work. When Sai felt around for the usual rise balls and fruit for breakfast on the coffee table he also discovered a small heavy envelope that turned out to hold a key with a tag attached.

If there had been anything written on either the envelope or the tag, Sai couldn't read it of course. So it left him with a small mystery. Or, as he felt the shape of the key in his hand, maybe not. The key felt very similar to his key to Ogata's apartment, apart from the 'teeth' of course. Could this be the key to #406?

Sai wolfed down one of the rise balls, leaving the rest for later, before gathering his bag and cane, and putting on his shoes and leaving the apartment. Two half stairs got him to the next floor and he found the door in a jiffy. He touched it in the same way he had done a few days earlier before taking the key from his pocket and sliding it into the lock. It seemed to fit. Then he turned it slowly and that worked too. Then the door went POINK and it opened almost by itself.

'Good morning, Sai-san!' Touya's voice rang out. Sai smiled and stepped forward into the new space.

'Have you been here long?' he asked, slowly swinging his cane out looking for a similar single step up as there was in Ogata's place. He found it and toed his shoes off before taking the step up.

'Not long, just came in to inspect the deliveries. We have book shelves, a couch, two lounge chairs, a coffee table and a chest of drawers for in the bedroom. That's the coffee table,' Touya added just as Sai's cane struck it. Sai nodded and navigated around it.

'The place is exactly the same as Ogata-san's, except it's mirrored,' Touya's voice sounded as the boy moved around. Sai had found his way to the couch and it too seemed to be placed in an exact mirrored version of the 10-dan's home.

'I though it would be easiest to just copy in mirror the layout you are used to. I hope the reverse effect isn't bothering you?' Touya's voice had come closer as Sai had moved around the room. At the far wall Sai let his hand run along the wall wide shelving, that was so crammed full at Ogata's but here was nearly empty.

'No bother at all, thank you for thinking of me,' Sai said and bowed in the direction he had last heard Touya's voice.

'No problem,' the boy said from an entirely different position. Touya on socks seemed to be stealthy, Sai would have to remember that.

'Come and see the kitchen,' the voice ran from yet another location, one close to where Sai expected the mirrored kitchen to be. He tapped his way over, entering through the living room-to-kitchen archway.

While the parquet floor in the living room was very similar to Ogata's, the linoleum in the kitchen was not. This was thicker and almost bouncy and smelled very new. The kitchen counter top was mirrored as well, putting the cooker in the right most corner and the sink just left of center. Not that it mattered much; apart from getting fruit from the fruit bowl, Sai had not used Ogara's kitchen at all. And neither had Ogata done more than make tea and instant coffee in all the time Sai had been there.
I've put the cups, bowls and plates in this cupboard, the cutlery goes in here, knives lengthways to the right than forks, then spoons and the chopsticks, small spoons at the front, width-ways,' Touya started talking enthusiastically while opening and closing cupboards and drawers. Almost as if he expected Sai would be touching any of it.

'Here could be food stuffs, like bottles, tins and dry packages,' the boy continued having opened another cupboard, this one above the counter. 'I've ordered one of those Braille label makers, so we can label things so you know where what is. And I bought a water cooker, so you can make tea or ramen any time you like. Does that sound okay?' the boy trailed off.

Did that sound okay? Was he kidding? it sounded marvelous! If Sai could make tea and instant ramen soup all by himself, he'd always be able to eat and drink something warm. What with the winter knocking at the door it sounded great. Sai felt so very happy and cared for he gave Touya another bow and said, 'Thank you, truly.'

Sai's actual moving was very easily accomplished; all it took was one trip with Touya caring the sizable carton box they had filled with Sai's stuff, while Sai opened, closed, locked and unlocked the doors to both apartments in turn.

Once the box was put on the coffee table, Touya announced that half the book shelve wall was Sai's. What on earth was he going to do with all that space? Then Touya showed him that part of the shelves were two retractable writing surfaces, one for each of them. There also were foldaway chairs that were the right height for sitting at these 'desks'. Between them they decided that Touya should have to one closer to the window so he could make use of the natural light and he could set up his PC there. The other desk had the advantage of being next to the connecting wall to the bedroom and Touya suggested having some hooks put on the wall so Sai could hang his bag there, if he liked.

It all sounded so wonderful, no, it was so wonderful, Sai could hardly take it all in, and he decided to find 'his' seat on the couch and sit down for a bit.

Sai got used to his new home rather quickly. Touya was as good as his word and the hooks were installed and he taught Sai how to use the water cooker and that Braille label maker turned out to be brilliant and they managed to make a division of household chores that seemed fair to both of them.

Touya put himself in charge of the laundry, insisting on organizing Sai's wardrobe for him. At first Sai was disgruntled about it and in no little way worried Touya would start acting like Ogata. But after careful thought and observation, Sai decided it was something else.

Of course to a blind man, it wouldn't matter if purple was worn with red, but to a fashion conscious young man like Touya it really did. So Touya organized Sai's three drawers (and sacrificing one half of his own allotted drawers in the process, since the piece of bedroom furniture only held five drawers) into two drawers of clothing that would fit only with clothing in the same drawer and one drawer of clothing that goes with everything and also held Sai's socks and underwear. Touya would tidy the clean clothes away in the right drawer for Sai. In the end, after the blind got a few compliments on his dress sense at work, Sai decided Touya had not over stepped any bounds.

As for Sai's household chores options, only cleaning the place was left really. Touya and Sai had sat down with the in-house facilities brochure. And had promptly chocked on the prices; if Sai had
know what the catered dinners cost here, he would never have let Ogata go to such expense!

Ordering dinner in-house was out. As was the cleaning service and the laundry service. Even using one of these things on a semi-regular basis would cost more in a month that Sai made in the same month!

This was how Touya ended up taking the laundry to a nearby laundromat every week and how Sai ended up with doing the dishes, cleaning the kitchen and mopping the floors. And Touya ended up 'cheating' and when Mrs. Touya insisted they'd have cleaning lady over once a week, paid for by the Meijin.

Sai hadn't seen Ogata since that Monday night and hadn't really talked to him since the Saturday before that. Now that Sai had moved out officially effectively without a word to the Go pro, the blind man was understandably a little nervous when the man joined the Touyas and himself at 2 o'clock that Thursday afternoon.

Sai had played an intense game against the Meijin and the younger Touya had joined them for the lunch break, so they'd ended up chatting about the new apartment for over an hour before starting their second game of the day.

It was Ogata's smoke that signaled his arrival to the blind man who was busy fortifying his white territories against a mighty black onslaught. Sai could do no more than note the man's presence because he needed all his wits about him if he wasn't going to lose miserably. He was hoping for a loss by no more that 3 moku and it wasn't looking good right then.

In the end he did lose and by 4 and a half moku. But at least he was now free to try and not start an argument with the 10-dan Pro. Great.

'Did the move go okay?' the Go Pro's smoky voice asked. Ah, he was being polite, this was good, polite Sai could do.

'Very well, thank you. Touya-kun was a big help and there wasn't really much to move anyway,' Sai said, realizing too late how that sounded.

'Ah, I'm pleased he was helpful. Do you like the new flat?' the man asked, all perfectly polite. Maybe there would be no argument today after all; even if Sai's sneaking away on Tuesday hadn't been very courteous, Ogata didn't seem upset. Sai cautiously let himself feel relieved.

He decided to let his reticence go and put some more enthusiasm in his voice when he answered, 'oh yes, I've got a desk to sit at and more shelves than I'll ever need and Touya sorted my clothing by color and gave me three drawers and there is a water cooker in the kitchen and I made all the tea and ramen soup yesterday,' Sai let the sentence run out. Oops, maybe not the right thing to say, pointing out all the things Ogata had never given him.

But again Ogata didn't seem to get upset and said, 'Well, that's wonderful. Anybody want tea or coffee?' instead. Sai wasn't 100% sure if that counted as 'not upset'.

It was time that told Sai Ogata truly wasn't upset, in fact quite the contrary; now that they weren't sharing living quarters, their relationship improved quickly and they managed to play significantly more Go; sometimes five times a week. Mostly Ogata would book time with Sai at the Go club or they'd have a short after hours game and on Sai's off days they sometimes played at Ogata's flat if Hikaru was unavailable to take Sai on outings. It worked out pretty well for both of them; Sai got
to redeem his debt and Ogata got the coaching he felt he needed for his next big title tournament.

Time passed quickly and it was filled with hot tea, ramen soup and curry sauce with rice and vegetables, as much as Sai could eat, games of Go against the best players of Japan, teaching opportunities for the patrons of the Touya Go club (and the Heart of Stone Go club), reading to his heart's content, enjoying the freedom of having a pad he could legitimately call his own and, quite surprisingly, having an avid audience in the two kindly gentlemen who gifted him with that wonderful flute and the marvelous music collection.

Every few weeks he would visit them and spend a morning or afternoon playing music and talking music, much as he would if he were playing Go with his Go Pro friends. The only difference was that he would always be the one to play, a fact that very slightly marred the experience; he would so love to play music with someone, sometime.

Don’t forget to review!
Chapter 6

As Christmas and the end of the year approached, something memorable happened. It was on a Monday evening when the weather was particularly horrible and both Sai and Touya Akira were at the flat in around dinner time. While this didn't occur too often, when it did they would always end up playing the evening away quite happily. It was only just after 6 but the both of them had already had ramen dinner and it did look like it was going to be one of those evenings, so Sai went into the kitchen to make a large pot of green tea and to gather their biscuit tin that was full of Mrs. Touya's delicious cookies, while Touya was setting up the Goban and arranging the seating. It was going to be a fine evening, Sai thought and found himself humming with happiness.

Just as tea was served and they were ready to start the game the door bell rang. 'I'll get it,' Touya said and Sai could hear him getting up and padding over to the door on his socks. 'It's probably Ogata-san, though I thought he was busy tonight or I would have invited him over,' Sai mused aloud and Touya gave 'mmm' of agreement just before the door lock clicked and the door creaked open.

'Hya all,' Hikaru's unmistakably brash voice sounded. The same Hikaru who had let Sai know earlier that he had to go straight home after school and so couldn't stop by the Go club that day, because his mom had insisted. Sai remembered, after Touya had relayed the text message, musing on how nice it would be to have a mom that worries about you like that, and whether he had had one in his first, now long forgotten life.

'Good evening Shindou, did you come over for a game?' Touya asked politely. Sai could hear the usual footwear dumping noises and then, 'What's the duffel bag for?' Touya asked, his voice now going up, where before it had been neutral.

'Well, uh, gee, not exactly, uh,' Sai could hear Hikaru's embarrassment. 'You see, uh, I had a fight with my mom about school, like I really don't wanna go no more, and uh, I kinda told her I decided to live here, kinda,' the boy trailed off. 'Sorry.'

Sai didn't drop his tea cup (though it was a very near thing) and Touya didn't explode (possibly also a very near thing) and after everybody calmed down from the shock, Touya cleared away to /goke/ and all free had a long sit down to talk it over.

One thing became clear quickly, Hikaru was adamant about not going back home. So the Meijin's son and the blind Go player talked it over and decided that Hikaru could stay as an indefinite guest, since Hikaru's career wasn't bringing enough money to pay a realistic share in the rent. Once Hikaru's school days would become work days there could be a chance at a proper rent agreement.

Sai could tell Hikaru was a little miffed at all the talk of money and rent, Sai told him firmly that free lodgings was only available for temporary guests or permanently at his moms place; his choice. Hikaru chose to stay.
Having a third person in the house took some getting used to. For one thing, Hikaru wasn't very meticulous with putting his work bag away and that first week Sai tripped over it quite spectacularly and ended up with bruised knees. Touya let his rival have an earful and from then on Hikaru got with the program; no lose items on the 'walkways' in the house.

Getting the kitchen organized for three people instead of two posed more problems, Hikaru being very good at piling dishes in the sink and leaving food packaging strewn all over on the counter. Again, Touya took the boy to task, but also he divided up the kitchen into two parts; one part that was 100% organized and that was Sai's domain and the other part were chaos would rule. Touya also installed a plastic basket where the dirty dishes would go so Sai could find them and wash them. Sai had gotten good at washing and drying, but now that Hikaru had joined then, the drying became the boy's chore as well as putting the stuff away in the right place, thank you very much. Sai suspected Touya had added Japanese labels to the shelves, so Hikaru had no excuse for making a mistake.

Throughout Hikaru's domestication process Sai made sure to giggle behind his hand only; it was quite clear the boy had never done household chores in his life and he took the strict instruction very badly. Too bad Sai couldn't see Hikaru's face as Touya read him the riot act almost daily. Poor Hikaru. But none of it seemed to scare the boy into going back home, Sai had to give him that.

As autumn had given way to winter, Sai's walks outside became less frequent. Not in the least because the majority of his time was being claimed by his job and some of his free time by his friends but also because every few weeks Sai would take a cab out to the Yamatogoto building where he would spend some exciting hours talking nothing but music and where, of course, he played for his small but eager audience.

Each time he had come to visit his music friends they would have something new for him to try. Early December, they had offered him a range of old fashioned musical instruments to try out, not all with equal success. There had been stringed instruments, a /biwa/ and a /koto/, of which he was sure he had played a /biwa/ before, but apparently had not gotten far with studying it, for whatever reason, because his playing was plainly mediocre. The /koto/ sounded very familiar, but he was very sure he had never played it.

There had been percussion instruments, though familiar sounding, but not any Sai felt he had even played himself, and there were more wind instruments. A /hichikiri/, that consisted of many sound pipes and produced a multitude of tones simultaneously; a very familiar instrument but not one he could play. A /shō**/, that had a naked reed at one end that would go into the mouth and the player would blow through the reed to bring out the note; Sai had certainly never played this instrument before, and he couldn't even be sure if he's ever heard it before.

There were also flutes that were played in a similar fashion to the /fue/, the /noh-kan/ and the /shinobue/. The latter was not familiar to Sai, but he could play it easily enough. As he could the /noh-kan/, except getting a proper melody out if it seemed quite awkward; it was tuned in the wrong keys for that. But it was great for going straight from /hukura/ to /seme/ and back, and it was loud enough to blow the cobwebs out of anybody's brains!

Last of the wind instruments that day was a /shakuhachi/, like the /shō/ it was played with both hand out in front of the player, instead of to the side, with one end of the flute set against the lower lip, by creating just the right cavity between the flute and the lips, a tone could be created and was modulated by the holes down the flute. Sai was sure he had heard this flute before, but not often, and he had not played it. But of all the wind instruments that were not variations on the /fue/ this one he thought he could learn to play fairly easily. And he was delighted when, after he had said
so, the flute was lent to him to practice. (Sai could tell that, though well made, the flute was not a prized item, and therefore he didn't hesitate taking the offer to borrow it for few weeks.)

Sai had ended that day's session with playing another long round of /etenraku/ as Mr. Fukurou had requested. It seemed to be the older man's favorite. Sai also indulged his audience in their choice of location; room next to where they had had tea that morning. The old gentleman had requested it because the acoustics were thought to be better there. And Sai did indeed find them to be so and he took his time with the piece, enjoying the mountain landscape that formed as he played. Yes, that had been a very delightful day.

The next time he came to see the gentlemen, it was getting close to Christmas time and he was welcomed with many delicious food for mid morning tea. After tea and pleasantries - both gentleman were always very keen on the proper exchange of pleasantries - Sai presented them with the results of his learning to play the /shakuhachi/, for which the party was moved to the room with the great acoustic.

First he played a tune from one of the CDs that had been lent with the /shakuhachi/, his favorite tune form that disc, that called up a deep forest landscape, where the overhead foliage kept the day's summer heat at bay and where a small stream trickled from rock to rock. After that he played a piece that really was meant for the /fue/ but to which Sai felt the /shakuhachi/ could give it another dimension. As he had practiced well over the last few weeks, it came out quite ethereal with earthy undertones, just as he would hoped. It called to him the vision of an ornate garden being planted. Where the gardeners had left some patches unfinished, showing the raw black earth, as they had left their work for the day. The evening sun was laying shadows everywhere where it wasn't covering the place in a sheen of pure gold.

Lastly he played a short piece of his own composition. Sai was quite nervous about playing it before an audience, after all he had only ever played excising melodies, but when he announced it, the gentlemen seemed to be very willing to hear it. It was quite short and Sai had been inspired by a game of /shidogo/ he had played with one of the patrons on the Touya Go club. It had been an unexpectedly graceful game, his opponent not being of high Go rank but she did have an ancient type of grace, that maybe had grown from playing Go all the 80 years of her life. The resulting game formation had been elegant and when Sai had revisited the /kifu/ while in bed that night, an idea of a tune had come to him, and having a few hours free the next day emboldened him to try it out on his /fue/.

And so he played it to his friends and found them delighted with his work.

Sai felt lucky he had time until 4:30 that day at least. He had a Go date with Ogata for that evening and he had promised he had get take out - ramen had been chosen - for Touya, Hikaru and himself for dinner at the flat around 6. So he could spend most of the day playing and talking music with his newest friends.

After they all had a traditional fish lunch - Sai had to smile when he thought of how his oldest friend Hikaru would have hated this lunch and how loud the boy's complaints would have been if forced to eat it - which everybody enjoyed it very much, they again moved to the 'music room' and Mr. Fukurou announced he had a present for Sai. This surprised the blind man, as a traditional exchange of seasonal gifts had already taken place - Sai had given sweets and cookies and had received CDs and a packet of what was most probably also cookies - so he was most certainly not expecting more.
First, Mr. Fukurou said they would listen to some new music, a thing the blind man was always happy to do. Unsurprisingly it was a piece of flute music but not of style that Sai had ever heard of before. It was full of short notes and almost rhythmically played. Sai also couldn’t place the flute it was played on; certainly not one of the wind instruments he had tried last visit. The tune was merry and probably meant to be danced to; Sai could certainly envision people dancing to it; two handsome men in long flowing silk robes with slow moving fans* like a swarm of butterflies on a string and, oh, were did that come from? It couldn’t have been a triggered memory since Sai had never heard this music before. Maybe it was his imagination? If so he now wanted to play this song and see if he could produce more images of dancers. But as he listened and realized that neither the /fue/ nor the /shakuhachi/ could produce these notes the way that music track sounded, a sadness came over him, one that matched the sudden change within the music. Oh, how he would love to play this! But he knew he shouldn’t get greedy, should be happy being able to play two lovely flutes already. As the music turned happy, so did Sai’s mood; yes, he would just enjoy listening to this new music and hopefully the gentlemen would gift him with a CD full!

Three more songs were played and Sai started to see a pattern in the style. Where Japanese flute music would attempt to create a mood with long drawn out tones and sudden starts and stops, this new music, ‘Western Classical’ as Mr. Yashida called it, was full of quickly following notes, one after the other. Also it appeared to go in a circle; a previous part was repeated later on, in some cases the whole thing was repeated with only minor variations in notes or tempo.

When Mr. Yashida asked how Sai had liked it he gave him his ‘analysis’. Oddly, speaking his views on the music aloud, made him think of discussing a /kifu/ of an old Go game played by people long ago.

Afternoon tea was served while they had talked about the /kurashiku***/ music and after Sai had been stuffed full of vanilla cake and green tea, it was suggested that they adjourn to the music room, which made Sai look forward to another chance to play. He was just a little worried he had eaten a little too much; a bursting belly wasn’t the best for flute paying, he had found.

Ah, how his life had changed so much that a full belly could be considered a problem!

The surprise gift was given to him in the music room. He was sitting down after he had played a short piece on the /shakuhachi/ and a longer piece on the /fue/ when Mr. Yashida bade him put his flutes away - Mr. Fukurou had told Sai the /shakuhachi/ was his after he had played it so proficiently that morning and Sai had been most grateful - and handed him another flute.

At least Sai thought it was a flute; it was long and thin enough for being one, but there the similarity to any flute Sai had ever held stopped. It was cold to touch, made of metal. When Sai tried to feel for the holes, there were strange wires and big round buttons on it instead. After feeling around where he would expect a mouth hole to be on a /fue/ type flute he finally managed to find something familiar; a mouth hole set upon a raised mount, all metal as well. Experimentally he tried to hold the thing as though it was a /fue/, still being unable to find any finger holes, and set it his mouth. He inhaled - the scent of silver entering his mouth - and exhaled with medium force. A high tone came out, obviously a /hukura/ he tried modulating the note into a /seme/ as he might on a /fue/ by changing the blow angle to the mouth piece and intensifying his blown out breath. The flute squealed in a very high pitch, too high.

'Sorry,' Sai said, and he took the instrument away from his mouth, quite embarrassed at the ghastly noise.
'Not at all,' Mr. Yashida said, 'it's not bad at all for a first try. Let me show you how to work the pads,' he added, his voice coming closer.

They spent some time on this, with Mr. Yashida placing each of Sai's fingers on different pads and then letting him try out how they worked. The most awkward thing about this flute were not the pads - once Sai had grasped the concept of them, he could work them easily enough - but that there seemed to be 11 holes (with pads over them) and 4 more closed holes that could be opened by pressing a lever with free finger. Now this was not easy!

Basically he practiced under Mr. Yashida's instruction until it was time to leave. Even though he hadn't been able to produce a tune of any kind on it, he was assured that it was his to keep. As Sai was instructed how to care for the new instrument his mind boggled a bit; this was silver item, the /fue/ and the /shakuhachi/ were both bamboo, and though well made, they were not made of precious silver.

Now how did he know of the value of silver? Then he remembered, some where in one of the history books he had been reading it had said that in ancient Japan silver used to be a rare metal, so rare it was worth more than gold. To westerners, gold had been the more precious metal and they had been happy to exchange Japan's gold for their silver in trade. Maybe that was why this flute was made of silver; the lesser valued, and more abundantly available metal in the west. Still this flute was not a cheap item, Sai could tell that much, and he promised to the kind gentlemen he would take good care of it. And he insisted he would be giving it back if he couldn't learn to play it, to which his friends made only shushing noises; they seemed to believe Sai could play any flute!

But, as he was walked to the taxi waiting outside of the building, he realized he was really looking forward to learning to play the 'alien' flute, difficult or not.

When he showed it at home - ah, the thrill of thinking of the flat he shared with two of his best friends as his home was just not getting old - both Touya and Hikaru seemed to be impressed with the gift. If he knew both his friends he was sure their awe was for two totally different reasons; Touya because the flute was complicated and old - Touya had said it looked old - and Hikaru simply because it was shiny - Hikaru still had a child's eye for things and shiny things would catch any child's eye - but both seemed happy for Sai that he had a new instrument to learn, even though neither was very musically inclined themselves.

When Touya and Sai had first moved in together, it had been Touya who had helped pack and unpack Sai box of worldly belongings. He simply couldn't have missed the boxed flute and the CD collection, and of course he hadn't. That evening, when the commotion of the move had died down Sai had played his flute for Touya, who seemed to have been very impressed. 'It sounds just like it does on the radio,' the boy had said, and he had added that his mom listened to such music often when she was arranging flowers, so Touya wouldn't mind at all if Sai practiced when he was home. Sai had been worried about that. What with Sai wanting to practice - which he hadn't at Ogata's for fear of disturbing the man or the building's other occupants - he really didn't know when he would have the chance for it. But Touya had assured him that as long as he stopped before midnight, there would be no trouble from the neighbors; it was the house rule. Also he had added that the building was quite new, only 15 years old, and had been build with very thick walls. Sai found himself reassured at this and from then on played his flute in the house any time he wanted. And later when he got the /shakuhachi/ he felt free to practice it.

Hikaru had already know about the flute before he joined them, so there was no problem there. When Sai had showed both boys the /shakuhachi/ he had received one day, Hikaru merely declared it ugly looking and went back to his manga reading or was it /kifu/ studying, Sai really
couldn't tell which. Hikaru also didn't seem to mind Sai's flute practicing, 'I can tune it out, no worries,' which both relieved and annoyed Sai just a bit, after all, who wants to be told they can be 'tuned out' like that? But at least it worked out so Sai could practice to his heart's content.

The next chance to play his flute - now flutes - before his loyal audience came on the first Tuesday in January. And from the moment he arrived at their offices the day was full of surprises. For one, Mr. Yashida and Mr. Fukurou didn't start out the day with lengthy greetings and leisurely tea drinking and appreciation but asked Sai to come straight to the music room after only one cup of tea - at which point Sai apologized for not being able to play a tune on the silver flute yet, but Mr Yashida assured him nobody would have expected him too, the instrument was not an easy one. And Sai was also told that that day he would be playing the /fue/ and the /shakuhachi/.

Once he had arrived in the music room the blind man was introduced to five gentlemen, all musicians, each with an instrument Sai did not play and one man - Nagai Saki, a man with a deep voice - who's role Sai did quite grasp; he was referred to as the 'conductor'.

Sai then learned he was to play in an ensemble; he was overjoyed and humbled at the same time; he had never played music with anybody before, what if he found he didn't have the ability? He said as much to Mr. Fukurou, who in turn told him 'We can but try,' and Sai decided to take comfort in that; it's the trying that counts, in music as much as it is in Go.

Playing in an ensemble was interesting to say the least, and it sure was harder work than playing alone, but in the end he did get something marvelous out of the extra effort.

The first piece that had been chosen for them to play was the /etenraku/. Sai's now extensive CD collection had three different renditions of the song, one as a /fue/ solo and two as an ensemble version. Mr. Nagai, who seemed to be in charge from the very first, first asked Sai to specifically play the /fue/ part of an ensemble version of the /etenraku/, 'pauses and all,' the man said.

Being asked to play only one instrument of an ensemble piece was quite a weird request, Sai thought, but once he just started playing the full music in his head and filling in his bits out loud as they came along, it wasn't hard at all. Sai imagined that to a listener it must have sounded like bits of a song with unnaturally long pauses in between. Sai decided not to give the oddness much thought; Mr. Nagai knew what he was doing. Well hopefully anyway.

The act of doing something with this much concentration took away any chance of Sai calling up a vision from his playing. But Sai wasn't worried; he had played alone long enough that he knew the visions would come if he was comfortable and familiar enough with the tune to stop having to work so hard just to play it.

Once Sai had played his own last note - in his mind the track played a little longer so his last act in the song was to remain silent - and lowered the flute from his lips Mr. Nagai said, 'Mr. Fujiwara, that was perfectly timed, how much practice did that take?' over some murmuring from the other musicians which Sai couldn't quite catch.

'Practice?' Sai asked. Before that day Sai would never have even thought of playing only one part of a multi instrument piece, pauses included, so why would he have practiced for it?

'Well, I did tell you he's good,' Sai heard Mr. Fukurou say. It was followed by a belly laugh from Mr. Nagai that was so loud it startled Sai.
'So you did, sir, I bow to your wisdom. Again, ha!' the conductor said away from Sai, in Mr. Fukurou and Mr. Yashida's direction.

'Mr. Fujiwara,' Mr. Nagai's voice was now trained on Sai, again startling the blind man; it really had been a long time he had been spoken at in such a loud voice and it didn't bring back good memories.

'Mr. Fujiwara,' the man repeated, this time in a much more sedate tone.

'Yes, sir,' Sai almost stammered.

'Do you think you could play the /fue/ part if everybody else plays theirs?' the man asked.

Sai took a moment to think; this really was something new, something he was sure he had never done before. But somehow he felt confident that he would be able to make valiant try. He told the conductor as much.

And so try he did.

Since the first instrument to open the song was the /fue/ Mr. Nagai directed Sai to start when ready. When the first drum beat joined his wailing /fue/ he was almost startled out of his concentration. But he recovered quickly and kept on playing. Not long into the song he started to realize that the other instruments in the ensemble were doing their part ever so slightly different from the versions on the CD. Sai had notice before when he had played the CDs at home that there were difference between the two recorded versions as well. So it stood to reason that this ensemble, with the instruments being played by different people than from the recording, - or at least at a different time since he had no access to listings of musicians' names - would not produce exactly the same sound; similar yes, but not the same. Having thought out the discrepancy, Sai got back to concentrating on the music, which, apart from the now expected variations, was sounding wonderful and Sai found himself...

And then there was a insistent tapping sound, like a thin cane hitting a table's edge repeatedly and all the other players fell silent. In surprise Sai too tourniqueted the long note he had been playing and dropped the flute from his mouth.

'Mr. Tanaka,' the full force of Mr. Nagai's voice boomed, making Sai stand up straighter and tightly clutch his flute; he really was glad he wasn't being addressed, he wouldn't want to be in Tanaka's - he was the /shō/ player, who had made most of the variations in the song so far, but by no means the only one - shoes just then!

'Mr. Tanaka, you're rhythm is way off, consult you sheet music and try not to confuse the others with your antics,' Mr. Nagai almost barked, prompting the poor guy to stutter, 'Yes sir, right away sir, sorry sir, sorry everybody.'

There was a moment of silence that was only broken but the quick shuffling of paper and then the three sharp taps were heard and Mr. Nagai said calmly 'Mr. Fujiwara, from the beginning, when you're ready.'

Taking his cue Sai put the flute back to his mouth, inhaled, and started the /etenraku/ again.

Playing the song the second time was indeed easier, not in the least because the /shō/ part was now rendered a lot closer to the versions of the piece that Sai knew. Indeed Mr. Nagai's reprimand of Mr. Tanaka - though rude and overly loud - had improved the man's performance and it seemed some of the other players were keeping better time as well. Sai had never thought of how one
musician's inharmonious playing could affect other members of the ensemble. Much like how in a teamed Go game a team could falter just because the teammates were not in accord. He's seen it happen that time that Hikaru and Ogata teamed up against Touya and Sai himself; both Ogata and Hikaru were good players singly, but together they were a mess. If they had tried play music instead of Go, what horrid sounds those two would have produced!

In the end the ensemble managed to play the song out to the end twice, without being stopped by that annoying tapping of Mr. Nagai's that was always followed by some to-the-point criticism, but also in a too loud voice, that thank the kami never ended up being leveled at Sai. Not that Sai would want Mr. Nagai shouting at him, but he did hope that he had been skipped because he actually hadn't messed up, not just because he was a guest and it was his first time in an ensemble. Sai guessed he would have to ask Mr. Yashida about it; he really was too scared of Mr. Nagai to ask him directly.

After that Sai was whisked off for lunch with the two older gentlemen in what Sai had started calling the 'entertaining room', because he was always entertained there as a true old fashioned guest and he had to admit he loved it.

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Sai playing a few short pieces on his bamboo flutes and the three discussing the performance as well as Sai's experience with the ensemble. Mr. Yashida particularly asked after Sai's progress with the silver flute and when Sai had to admit he could barely make an proper series of notes, Mr. Yashida had him show what he could do and then he gave him some pointers about posture and finger positions that Sai would definitely be trying out when practicing next.

All in all it had been a very satisfying day, but Sai was quite exhausted by the time he arrived home for dinner. Still, when Ogata ran his doorbell at 8:30 sharp, Sai found that he was so ready for a good game of Go to round off the day. He knew tomorrow he would fully process all the things he had learnt that day, but tonight he would relax and he found that after all these months of feeling guilty over owing the pro for his lodgings, now that he was paying his own rent, he was so much freer in his dealings with the 10-dan. Now they could truly play as equals.

* the piece Sai is hearing is a flute solo J. S. Bach. (patita for flute). Further pieces were Mozart, Paganini and more Bach.

** in the Heian period male dancers were particularly celebrated, and by other men too. The dance style would have been slow, showing off elegance more that having a rhythmic basis.

*** 'classical' in Japanese, meaning western classical music.

**** the /shō/ is a pipe mouth organ.

Guest reviewer: Will Sai become a pro?
Author: Well, that is the $64.000 question, isn't it? Just keep on reading!
Don't forget to review!
Chapter 7

In a relative short time so much had changed in the life of one lonesome blind man. He had gone from homeless, useless, friendless and unwanted to employed, rent paying and surrounded by friends who were interested in him and what he did, be that playing Go or playing music. Life after he’d woken up in the hospital, that at first had resembled a sea of tears, now had turned out to be an ocean of fulfillment, and Sai let himself be engulfed in it with joy.

Mid January saw Sai really looking forward to meeting the nice gentlemen with their beautiful instruments again that coming Wednesday. Not that he’d not be enjoying the nice relaxed day of Go games that lay ahead of him on that Monday. Oh, no! But he had found that last Tuesday's flute playing session had actually enhanced his Go. Especially in the serious battle against Touya sr., he had felt the lingering effects of Tuesday's musical high. And the Meijin had noticed it too and had even commented on it.

This new-found acceleration in Sai's game had been the other man's excuse for scheduling an extra game on Saturday. And inviting 'a few of his Go associates' along to come watch. Sai had been quite intimidated at the large amount 'a few' turned out to be. But once the first stone hit the board he had lost all sense of what lay outside of that fascinating Go grid and its black and white inhabitants.

The game had been brilliant and Sai was proud that he only lost by one and a half /moku/. He was making progress and it was there for all to see.

That Monday he would be having the game replay and dissecting.

'A replayed game is quite different from a game that you're playing,' Sai reflected, to himself mostly but both Touyas were there to hear it. 'It's the time that you can really start to appreciate the beauty of the formations,' he continued. Sai always felt that in playing a game he should always consider, even only in a very small part, the elegance of the shape and symmetry of the outcome. He had realized, after reading all the books in the Library on the Heian period, that this was a true Heian sentiment. And he felt proud of the fact he had managed to retain that sliver of his past, regardless of his amnesia and without any prompting from anybody.

The game discussion took the better part of the morning and was made all the sweeter by the arrival of tea and cake for lunch.

After lunch Hikaru joined them, and they gave him a recap of the conclusions of the game so far. As always the young pro had some surprising comment to add, leading to another hour's worth of discussion, much to Sai's delight.

At some point Miss Ichikawa came and asked the Meijin to come to the office. This was by no means an unusual occurrence on a Monday, after all it was the first day of the official working week and Touya sr. was the primary owner of the Go club; there was bound to be business that had to be dealt with by the boss. So no one in party was surprised when the Meijin told them to go on without him.

The discussion was over pretty quickly after that so when young Touya suggested a game Sai was rearing to go. It was Hikaru who suggested Sai played both of them simultaneously again and Touya agreed.
The game was exhilarating, much like the first time he had played them like this. Except now he was a lot more practiced in keeping both Gobans and all the strategy in his head and he was able to fully enjoy the experience.

Playing in the music ensemble had felt not unlike playing multiple opponents at the same time in Go; it was the work of keeping up with what the others were doing that made it so. With the exception that in playing music Sai already had already had a 'preview' of what his fellow ensemble members were going to do; all he had to do was keep track of any variation and, if need be, adjust his own playing accordingly.

Sometime during the game, Sai had smelled Ogata's signature smoke cloud. But it had moved away pretty quickly, most probably Ogata was also heading to the office upstairs; he was a co-owner after all. Apart from registering the title holder's arrival in the club, Sai paid the incident no further mind and he went to concentrate fully on the game.

When playing Hikaru and Touya separately, Sai always added an element of teaching to his strategy. Not that he played outright /shidogo/ with them, no, for that Touya was too far advanced and Hikaru would throw a fit if he realized he was being 'hoodwinked' as the boy put it. So usually Sai played Touya with 3 stone handicap and Hikaru on an equal field, just because the kid stubbornly insisted. And Sai would - without Hikaru catching on at least - slip in some teaching Go here and there.

But with both of them 'attacking' him at once, Sai found himself on a more equal footing and he felt himself freed from the responsibility of teaching Touya to look deeper and Hikaru to not get sloppy; he could just pay straight out. And Sai enjoyed every moment of it.

When Sai had won from Touya by a comfortable six and a half /moku/ and he was finishing the game against Hikaru - who had long since lost by at least 10 /moku/ but wouldn't give in gracefully - he acknowledge the renewed presence of Ogata by his smoke cloud drifting by and the Meijin by the way he scraped his chair just so on the floor, before sitting down.

As Hikaru drew the game out some more, the hairs on the back of Sai's neck started to rise. Something was wrong. And he felt it coming from Ogata and the Meijin, not Hikaru or Touya.

'Hikaru,' he said in a warning tone. This practice of Hikaru of drawing out games against him was not exactly new; it was a bad habit that Sai had called him on before. And Hikaru would know full well why Sai’d used that tone just then.

'Ah geez! Alright, I resign,' the boy whined. But before either Sai or Hikaru could say more the Meijin spoke, 'Fujiwara-san, may we have word with you?'

Ice ran down his spine. In their time together they had long since let go of honorific suffixes; to the Meijin Sai was just "Fujiwara" and even if Sai still adressed the Meijin with "Touya-san". To have him use the polite suffix of "-san" with Sai, and in that tone, meant something very very wrong indeed.

'But of course,' he answered.

'In the office, if you please,' Ogata said from beside him. Ogata was involved too? Sai couldn't tell if that made the matter worse or better.

He automatically gathered his bag and stood. He unfolded his cane and started to follow the heavy male footsteps that were heading to the stairs to the upper story. Behind him he could hear Hikaru
ask Touya-kun what was going on. Just before the noise of multiple feet on the wooden stairs drowned the voices out, he could hear the other pro answer that he really didn't know.

Once upstairs Sai was guided to the conference room by Ogata's hand on his left elbow. After he'd entered the room, the door was closed behind him and chairs were drawn out, the scrapping on the floor dulled by the thick linoleum. He was guided to sit on a chair not far from the door. He folded his cane in his lap.

The icy feeling he had had before was slowly multiplying in the silent room. He wracked his brain trying to find what he could have done wrong. He was sure he hadn't damaged or broken anything while at work, because he hadn't touched anything but the chair he sat on and the door of the rest room (and the tap and the plunger, of course. Oh, and the paper towels).

Could this be about his playing the flute for the nice gentlemen? It was true he hadn't told Ogata or the Meijin that he played, but Hikaru knew and Touya-kun too. While Sai doubted Hikaru would have said something if playing the flute was in anyway improper, Touya-kun would certainly have spoken up. Wouldn't he?

Before Sai could think up anything else he might have done wrong, Touya sr. Spoke, 'Fujiwara-san, I have some bad news.' Sai held his breath and gripped his bundled cane tighter; there was nothing else he could do.

'The club has received an official letter from the Go Institute,' he continued. 'I, I am very sorry, but the club will lose its licence if we employ some one to teach or even play Go who isn't a Certified Professional.'

Sai sat stunned. 'Lose its licence.' 'Teach or even play.' The ice in his spine became freezing water and he felt himself almost drain away as he was dragged into a downwards funnel. He had lost his job. His dream job. The only job that was even remotely suited for.

He hadn't realized he'd hung his head down, until he felt a hand on his arm - Ogata's - and he almost reared up at the sound of his voice so close next to his ear. Ogata was either sitting on a chair very close to his or he was just squatting down next to him.

'We - ah sorry, I didn't mean to startle you,' the title holder said. The man shifted beside Sai, taking his hand off his arm. Chair legs scraped and faux leather creaked.

'We're both very sorry about this. I - It was totally unexpected.' Ogata's voice came from a little further away now making Sai feel on the one hand a lot less oppressed but on the other hand abandoned. Right then he didn't know what he should feel, not to mention say.

'We've talked this over,' the Meijin's voice boomed from across from Sai. He didn't sound angry at all, just serious. As he usually sounded, really.

'We both own this club,' he continued. 'And while we can't afford to lose our licence, it is up to us who we let play in it. We have decided that you can keep playing here as you have been and we'll sort the rest out some other way.'

No. Sai knew that that wouldn't right. If he wasn't allowed to play Go (and get paid) even in the unofficial way he had been, then he had no job. And if he had no job, he could not afford rent. And if he couldn't afford rent, he was back to being homeless. A wave of fear came over him at the thought. It passed with the realization that being homeless was likely to be his lot in life and that he had to face that now. His one chance at a real job was gone for good.
'So, I am to move in with Ogata-sensei again? If you'll have me that is?' Sai added in a soft tone.

'Of cou- ' Ogata started, but was interrupted by his own teacher. 'No. I want you to keep sharing with my boy,' the Meijin's voice carried determination.

/But, I won't be able to afford the rent,/ Sai thought desperately. He really wouldn't be able to come up with any rent at all without a job. Maybe he should try borrowing the money. There had been people in the shelter who had talked of such things. Yes, maybe that is how it was done? He really had no way to know.

He drew a deep breath and said, 'I will borrow money for rent then.'

'No!' Ogata's voice and he sounded upset. Sai suddenly found his upper arms ceased in an iron grip and his teeth rattled in his head when the hands shook him once.

'You will _not_ borrow money from anybody, ever!' the title holder shouted in his face. Just as suddenly Sai was let go and he slumped back in his seat, his upper arms burning.

'Not while I have breath in my body,' Ogata trailed off, the sound coming from just in front of Sai and moving back towards the chair Ogata had sat in moments ago. The faux leather squeaked as the man retook his seat.

'Ogata-kun, calm down,' the Meijin said in his most authoritarian voice. 'And Fujiwara-san, I will not hear of talk of borrowing from you again. You are my Rival; the one I've been waiting years for, possibly my whole life.' Sai drew breath the say he really wasn't good enough to be the man's rival, but the older man was faster as he continued, 'The fact that you are a little behind has no bearing on this; you are the one, I know it.'

Sai had sat up to make his speech but now he slumped back in his seat. Couldn't he see that Sai, the way he was right then, was no a true rival? The person who had played the Meijin in _that_ game was gone, and in his place sat a blind man with no prospects. Sai knew that, try as he might, he could only do so much to overcome his blindness and would not be able to meet this man in a head to head like that game had been, ever again.

'I co-own the apartment building the flat is in and I co-own the Go Club. As my true Rival I offer you a place in both, in exchange for playing me,' the Meijin spoke with finality.

/In exchange for games./ Now didn't that seem familiar? And yet, once Sai had come to live with Touya-kun, the time he had spent in Ogata's company had all been pretty much game related, instead of household related or semi-fighting, as it had been when he stayed at the title holder's place. It could work with the Meijin too, couldn't it? It would mean however, having to swallow his pride once more and be a kept man.

Somehow that didn't sit right with him. Sai knew he had no choice; he was no good for anything but Go and now that way was barred to him. All he could do at the moment was acquiesce, but he found he couldn't say the words; his pride wouldn't let him.

'Well then, that's settled,' the Meijin said into the silence. Sai heard him pushing his chair back as he stood. He heard Ogata stand as well and he followed suit.

Once they reached the bottom of the stairs, Touya's concerned voice rang, 'Father, what's going on?'

'I'm fired,' Sai answered the question, sounding listless even to his own ears.
'What? Why?!' Touya's questions were drenched in incredulity and shock.

'There was a "cease and desist" order from the Institute,' Ogata explained. 'Here,' he added and a piece of paper crackled as it exchanged hands.

"After a complaint was made, that we cannot ignore?" What complaint?" Touya asked after a few moments.

'A apparently a Pro who has played Sai here. We're not quite sure who, but it was most likely months ago, because I know the Institute; they never move fast,' Ogata sneered. Sai let his head droop down lower. This was all his fault; he got the Go Club in trouble. At least this time his getting fired should take care of the problem.

'A Pro?' Touya repeated. 'Hmm, there was this guy, a 5-dan, that first week. He tried to cheat Sai! I had him black listed,' he added.

Dama-san. Sai remembered him well.

'Hmm,' the Meijin growled as confirmation.

'Well, I'll make sure he regrets this,' Ogata spat.

'Calm down, Ogata-kun, getting revenge will not undo what has been done,' the Meijin stated coolly. 'The westerners say that "revenge is a dish best served cold." So no running off half-cocked. And anyway, I want to take part too,' he added. 'Hmm,' Ogata voiced his agreement.

There was a long silence before the Meijin spoke: 'Let's get back to game.'

Sai suddenly had enough. Of the conversation, of being in a social setting, even of playing games. He wanted time to think, time sort things out in his head. And he wanted - Hikaru. Where was Hikaru? The boy would not have been silent through all this; that was nowhere near his style!

'Where is Hikaru?' he asked of no one in particular.

'He had a tutoring game, so he left just after you went up stairs to have your talk,' young Touya informed him. 'He said he'd be back as soon as possible, but that it would be a long while,' he added.

So no Hikaru to talk to, Sai mused. That left only one thing.

'I want to go home,' Sai stated.

A silence fell. And when it was clear to Sai there was not going to be a response, he turned in the direction of the front door and started to tap his way there. There was movement behind him and Ogata announced, 'I'll take you,' as he passed him by his right side.

By the time he had reached the door, it was already open; he could feel the draft from the landing and stairwell. He headed down to the car park, keenly aware that Ogata was just far enough ahead that Sai really couldn't feel his presence. He caught up with Ogata at the basement's heavy door, which the pro player was holding open for him. 'Just wait here, I'll get the car,' Ogata said before walking off.

Normally, Sai would walk with him to the car, unless there was a good reason not to, like that time there had been a huge oil slick on the car park floor. But now Sai didn't even bother being miffed at the Go Pro for effectively parking the blind man, for the sake of convenience.
No, now it didn't matter any more. Sai was going to be a kept man because he was a cripple and that was a fact. It was about time he got used to being dependent on people for his every need; he'd be housed and fed by charity from now on. He knew he'd be a burden to some one or other for the rest of his life.

That cold dark thought wrapped around his heart and started squeezing it so hard, it almost made him cry out. He sobbed instead; a dry sob even though his eyes were burning. Ogata would be back soon and he didn't want to cry in front of the Pro again; Sai knew how much the man hated tears. Ogata was back to being his benefactor again and while he was not the principal one, he'd be an important one, Sai felt sure. It would not do to become more of a burden than he was helpless to avoid. So, no tears or demands, or anything like that, ever again, this he vowed.

By the time the Go Pro had driven up to him, Sai had regained his composure, or at least enough of it so he didn't feel he'd start crying immediately. The journey 'home' was spent in silence. While he could hold on to his composure, Sai didn't feel that talking would be safe. Anyway, he knew Ogata liked the silence. And maybe that was for the best; there really wasn't anything to be said.

TBC

Don't forget to review!
Chapter 8

Ogata left pretty quickly after seeing Sai to his front door. The blind man had been unsure if the Go Pro had wanted to come in, but he had certainly not wanted any company himself, so he had not invited the man in. He just wanted some peace and quiet and he wanted it alone.

After dealing with his shoes and coat, he sat in his spot on the couch for some time, his feet flat on the seat, his arms wrapped around his legs and his head resting sideways on his knees. His mind spun in similar thoughts as he’d had just after he’s found out he’d lost his job.

Who would want a blind Go player? Well, Ogata did and the Meijin did. And Touya-kun, and Hikaru. But none of them could make the rest of the world want him enough to give him a livelihood. And so he'd lose his hard won independence.

Sai was well aware that independence was a luxury that a cripple couldn't always afford. He knew he had been very lucky so far; he had friends who believed in him enough to organize a real job for him. It was not anybody's fault that the job was against the rules of the Go institute. And to make up for his loss of employment, the Meijin had offered him his continued hospitably. ‘Continued’ yes, because in the end it had been Touya-san and Ogata-sensei who had paid his salary and therefore his food and housing. So the only thing that would change now really, was Sai's official status as 'employed'. He could live with that, couldn't he?

He suddenly felt a yearning for a cup of tea. He got up and went to the kitchenette, where he automatically went through the motions of make the hot beverage.

First he found the water cooker by letting his hand glide over the counter surface. It was in its usual spot. He found the handle and lifted it off it's cradle. He used the push button on the handle to open the lid and held the cooker under the tap to fill it. He turned the nob on the cold water tap open by half a turn and counted to 5; that would be enough to fill the tea pot about three quarters.

He closed the lid and put the cooker back on it's cradle. Then he moved the whole thing into the corner out of the way and flicked the wall switch, after groping for it on the wall.

He got the small serving tray from where it leaned against the wall and set it down in front of him on the counter. He got the pot from the shelf, keeping a finger on the lid so it wouldn't fall off, placed it on the tray, carefully putting the lid on the tray next to the pot. He got a tea bag out of the carton that had a torn off corner on the lid, signifying it was green tea. He put the bag in the pot and waited until the cooker went \text{/CLICK/}. Carefully he found the cooker's handle (it was likely to be hot!) and lifted it off the cradle. He found the tea pot with his other hand and when he knew where it was, he very carefully aimed the nozzle of the cooker at the top of the pot. Sai had gotten pretty good at this maneuver and hardly ever poured water over the outside of the pot any more. He put the cooker back on it's cradle and gingerly put the lid back on the pot. He got a tea bowl from the cupboard and placed it on the tray. He picked up the tray in both hands and with an elbow touching the wall, followed by a foot scouting out what was in front of him when he ran out of wall, he put the tray on the coffee table. He retook his seat on the couch and poured himself a cup of tea.

As he sat a while just holding the cup, blowing on it to get the temperature down to a drinkable level, he realized he had come a long way already. He could make his own tea and noodle soup. He could do dishes and other useful chores like make the beds and mop floors.

With that thought he put his cup on the table and went back to kitchenette. There he checked how
large the stack of yesterday's dirty dishes was and then he pulled the sink stopper in his hand by it's chain, blocked the drain with it, turned the hot water nob, found the dish soap bottle and squirted some in the rapidly filling sink.

After he had finished the dishes he mopped the kitchen floor. And after that he made a fresh pot of tea - the first had gone cold - and sat back on the couch. He felt a million times better for having accomplished these small tasks that a year ago would have been completely beyond his ability. He really enjoyed that cup of tea.

Somewhere halfway through drinking his second cup of tea the day's troubles started to re-invade his mind and he decided playing his /fue/ might calm him down, so cleared away the tea things and got his flute out to play one of the pieces on the latest Japanese music CDs he had been given. It was a wonderfully languid track with flute and percussion and he played the track in his head so he could 'hear' the drum beats as well as his own flute playing.

As always a vision started with the first note he played; a deep purple cloud appeared in his black world. With a drum beat and Sai's next few notes a dark red disc was revealed from behind the purple cloud. Slowly the single cloud started to multiply, soon filling the sky until there was no black left in it. The sun disc grew larger and turned from a deep red to a vibrant scarlet, revealing a black mountain range up a head. Than an odd yellow streak appeared, seemingly out of nowhere and Sai felt a momentary unease because he was pretty sure his tones had not produced it. Then it faded and he paid it no more mind.

The purple sky, the blood red sun, the black mountains in the distance with their blue peaks, they all grew more vibrant with each tone. The deep blue river flo-yellow swirl -wed elegantly across ragged rock. The dark green gasses danced - yellow, Yellow, YELLOW, /BREEEEP/

Sai put his flute down. /BREEEEP/ came again, quite insistently from the left, the exact direction of where his bag sat by the side of the couch. He carefully set down his flute in its box on the table and leaned over the side of the couch to fish his phone out of his bag.

'Moshi moshi,' he said into the small device after flipping it open.

'Hey it's me,' the tiny voice of his oldest friend sounded in his left ear. 'Ichikawa-chan told me you had gone home. What happened?' Hikaru asked.

For a moment Sai was surprised that the boy didn't know, but then he remembered that Miss Ichikawa had once said that she disliked giving out personal information on the phone at the club. He supposed that the termination of his job was personal information, well sort of anyway.

He took a deep breath and said, 'I got fired.'

'What? Why?!' the boy exclaimed in pretty much the exact way that Touya had. Sai almost laughed at similarity, but then remembered the topic of conversation.

He quickly explained what he knew, pulling the phone away from his ear as Hikaru started to shout his indignation. Sai couldn't really blame the boy for his outburst; inside he felt as much emotion about the loss of his job.

Once the tirade had come to an end, Hikaru said, 'Look, I'm 10 minutes away from the flat. Meet me at the taxi stand.'

'What for?' Sai asked, truly puzzled; what was the boy thinking?
'We're going to the Institute.'

Sai had been waiting long enough at the taxi stand to already regret having forgotten to grab his thick winter jacket, when he heard the generic sound of a car pulling up and the specific sound of his young friend calling out to him. He used the latter sound to find the right door on the car and climbed into the taxi.

'Hikaru, why are we going to the Go institute?' Sai asked after Hikaru had given the driver that destination. The boy had said on the phone that that was where they'd be going but had almost rudely hung up before the blind man had been able to ask why.

'We're not going there to complain, are we?' he added, suddenly worried Hikaru might cause a scene in such a venerable place. Sai might not be able to remember the time he had spent with the boy at the Institute when he had been a ghost, but he did know the Hikaru of the here and now and he had witnessed the boy go off like a firecracker before. Admittedly, it had only ever happened when Hikaru played Touya, but the blind man had been more than discomfited with the experience all the same; Sai really hated disharmony and strife. He strongly suspected that this also was a character trait he had inherited from his first life as a Heian noble. All the books he had read on Heian court life had talked of balance and beauty and harmony. He had liked the thought of having retained a trait as refined as that.

'No, we're going to get you signed up for the pro-exam. It's about time too, don'cha think?' the boy added.

In his time at the shelter he had learned not to be seen to be over emotional, but now he just couldn't help him self. He launched himself at his friend sitting next to him in the speeding cab and hugged him with both arms. 'Oh Hikaru, thank you, thank you, thank you!' he said, well squealed more like, he had to admit. Sai very much appreciated the fact that the boy didn't throw him off immediately, but after a few seconds the blind man got a strong vibe to let go, which he dutifully did.

He sat back in his own part of the taxi's back seat, rearranged his bag and cane and mused, 'It will be so wonderful to become a pro. Is it a difficult exam? What do I have to do? How long will it take?' he added the questions eagerly as he turned his head in the direction of his oldest friend.

Then the boy started to explain about the preliminary exam, about how you had to win 3 out of 5 games. Sai was a little disappointed he wouldn't get to play the last two if he had won the first three; it seemed like a missed opportunity to him. But then Hikaru promised that the exam itself was likely to consist of at least 25 games, after which the three people with the highest win score would pass the exam. It all sounded like sheer heaven to the blind Go player and he yearned for those games with all his heart.

There were two downsides to taking the pro-exam; one, that the event didn't start until June, and it was only January now. And two, that once you'd passed the exam in early September, you wouldn't be an official Pro until the ceremony the next April. So, even if all went well, Sai wouldn't be able to resume his job for another 15 months. On the upside, there would be the /shinshoudan/ game for him next January; the initiation game against a high ranking Pro. Oh, how Sai wanted to play a game like that!
The one year and three months' wait bothered him, because he'd be living on charity all that time. But on the whole it was a lot better than the prospect of having to take charity for the rest of his life, with no chance of even paying any of it back.

Sai was guided through the Go Institute's sliding doors by Hikaru's hand on his arm. He could hear the unmistakable gurgling sound of a fish tank water pump coming up on their right as they moved into the building. Just as he could feel the cold glass of a fish tank eat away at the warmth of the air next to it, the boy stopped, let go of his arm and whispered, '/Stay here, I'll come right back for you.'/

The former ghost turned towards the glass, automatically bundling his cane to keep it out of the way, he touched his hand to the cold surface, as the young pro’s footsteps sped away from him.

At the edge of his hearing was the unmistakable sound of Go stones being played. Sai had to forcefully distract himself from their allure by contemplating the fish that were likely to be swimming behind the glass, fish that he would never be able to see. He knew he could imagine them and if he had his flute the image would be almost real. But before he could start on some serious imagining he heard Hikaru call, 'Shinoda-sensei!'

The boy was quite far away, but having been reliant on his hearing for so long, Sai could hear quite a bit more than any sighted person, so the distance was not insurmountable for him. Of course, in effect he'd be eavesdropping and Sai did disapprove of sneaky things like that in principle. But he did find that in this place, so close to his goal of being able to play great Go forever, he just couldn't help but listen.

'Shindou-kun? You have no game today, I think? What brings you here?' a calm older male voice replied. Hikaru had called the older man 'sensei', was this the man who had helped Sai's young friend with the practical things of becoming a pro? Maybe that is why Hikaru was speaking to him; interceding on Sai's behalf! Sai pricked up ears his even more.

'Well, uh, hold on a sec, uh...' Sai almost sniggered at recognizing the sounds of Hikaru fiddling with his backpack; the boy could never get that thing to do as he wanted, but he wouldn't get a replacement either, saying 'then I gotta relearn where everything is, geez!'

Finally there was the sound of the bag being set on the ground, making room for the sound of pages of a book being furiously flipped. 'Ah, here it is!' Hikaru said triumphantly. Sai cringed as he heard paper ripping; Hikaru wasn't tearing up a book was he? Oh, what blasphemy!

'Please, tell me what you think of this game, sir,' Hikaru asked. At least the boy was polite to this man; it almost made up for the tearing of paper, Sai thought. Almost.

There was a long moment of silence. Sai let his hand glide along the damp glass, catching the moisture that had landed on the surface from his nearby breath. What was taking so long? What was Hikaru showing the sensei?

'Hmm,' the older man said. 'Touya-kun, he did well against a three stone handicap,' he added.

'Touya played black, sir,' Hikaru pointed out.

'Oh? Oh! Then the other player did very well indeed,' Shinouda said. Sai winced as another paper was torn.

'Look at this one, sir,' Hikaru said as Sai heard papers rustling with handling.
Another silence.

'Hmm, Ogata-sensei was in form here, but the other player was not bad either. Yes, a very good game,' the sensei said.

'You do realize that Ogata was playing white here, sir?' Sai was appalled at Hikaru's omission of Ogata's honorific suffix. But apparently Shinouda-sensei had not noticed, because he gave the boy no rebuke and exclaimed instead, 'He played white?!

'This Fujiwara-san is really very good, very good indeed,' the sensei continued after a small silence. Sai dropped his hand in shock. They were talking about games he had played against Touya and Ogata. And this Shinouda-sensei, a sensei at the Go Institute, was impressed with his game-play. Sai could feel his heart pound in his throat and he was about to start walking towards them when there was another tearing of paper and Hikaru's cheerful voice sounded.

'You'll find this really interesting.' Paper rustled. Sai stood quite still, gripping his cane bundle so tightly, his fingers started to hurt. He consciously relaxed his hand. What game was the boy showing the sensei now?

'Hmm. He played the former Meijin,' Shinouda said and then was silent again.

'A very high level game,' he declared and Sai felt a chill run up his spine. Which game was it? The one from Saturday? No, Hikaru had not been at the club on Saturday. Then last Thursday? That game had been pretty good, but the one on Saturday had been better. And Sai remembered Hikaru being there on Thursday. He did not remember the boy asking for a /kifu/ though.

'Fujiwara is keeping up well in this game,' Shinoda mused. Sai could hear an agreeing sound from Hikaru.

'Beautiful formations. Lovely /ko/ battle right here. Hmm. Very nice.' Before Shinoda-sensei could say anymore, Hikaru asked, 'Don't you think Fujiwara is good enough to take the pro exam, sir?

'Good enough? Most definitely good enough!' the sensei said in a sincere tone. 'If that is what Fujiwara-san wants to do, that is,' he added.

'Oh, Fujiwara-san,' Sai heard Hikaru over emphasize the suffix - naughty Hikaru! - before continuing, 'would just love to take the exam!' The boy's voice had grown louder as he had come to the end of his statement and the he almost shouted, 'Sai! Come here, please!'

Sai swallowed his heart back down his throat and completed his turn away from the fish tank, to the direction of Hikaru's and Shinoda's voices. He unfolded his cane and started forward.

There was a loud crash; the uniquely recognizable sound of crockery hitting a hard floor and shattering. Sai stopped, startled at the unexpected noise. Then, before he could start moving again, there was another noise; Shinoda-sensei's angry voice, almost yelling: 'Shindou! Is this a joke? How dare you do this?!!'

'What? No, sir! No joke!' Hikaru's voice held incredulity and genuine shock. Sai stood as petrified.

'Shindou, this had better be a joke, because if it's not, than what you've done is a thousand times worse!'

The sensei's voice was not as loud now, and had lowered in timbre, indicating a deeper anger of
the type Sai had heard before, and had felt the consequences; the tough guys at the shelter, when they spoke in a tone like that, people got hurt, badly. Ijimekko had used that tone that night he had twisted Sai's arm. His left wrist twinged at the memory and involuntary he took a step back.

'If this is not a joke, how could you come here with a blind man and give him the hope that he could ever become a pro?!' the sensei went on relentlessly.

'But you've seen how good he is! Doesn't that matter?!' Hikaru argued.

'He. Is. Blind,' Shinoda clipped back. 'He will never be accepted as a worthy opponent.'

'I/I think he's a "worthy opponent". And so does Touya and his dad and Ogata too!' Hikaru screamed.

Sai couldn't take anymore, he swiftly turned around and walked away as Shinoda-sensei started to explain in detail why Sai would never be allowed to become a pro.

His mind was as numb as his fingers as he walked, tapping his cane in front of him. Vaguely he noted that he had left the building, traversed the sidewalk and had crossed a street, not even hearing car horns blaring and people shouting at him; he just kept going.

He walked straight until he could go no further than he chose randomly between left and right and went that way until he could go no further and so on, all the while running the same phrases over and over in his head:

"Is this a joke?" / "He is blind. He will never be accepted as a worthy opponent." / "If you can't play Go, you should not be taking opponents!" / "Stupid blind man!"

Shinoda-sensei was right; a blind Go player is just not acceptable. The sudden change in his thought processes stopped him in his tracks. He shuddered before he realized he was cold, very cold. Then he shuddered again when he realized he had no clue where he was or how he had gotten there. And that he didn't have his jacket with him and it smelled like it was going to rain soon. A sharp thunderclap confirmed his suspicion.

Then his phone rang and he fished it out of his bag.

'Moshi Moshi?' he said

'Where are you? I've been calling you! Where did you go?!' Hikaru sounded frantic.

Getting Hikaru to find him, when he didn't even know where he was, had been incredibly complicated and Sai was soaked to the bone by the time the boy did find him and got him in a dry taxi. But Sai felt none of it; he was just too numb inside to perceive his own body.

Once home Hikaru made him take a hot shower and he spent some hours sitting on the couch, letting his hair dry, and pretending to listen to, first Hikaru's rant of the unfairness of it all and later Touya chewing Hikaru out for even trying to get Sai in the pro exam.

Apparently the other pros that knew Sai, had known he would never be accepted and had therefore, out of deference for Sai's feelings, had never brought the subject up. This realization flayed the already seriously subdued blind man. And yet, he chided himself, he should have known this would happen; after all who wants to play a blind man at Go?

Touya and Hikaru were still going at it when Sai got up from the couch and, moving towards the
bedroom, said in a dull tone, 'Good night."

Sai had fallen asleep surprisingly swiftly. Or maybe it was not such as surprise, for once he had lain down and the numbness had disputed a bit, he had felt utterly exhausted and depressed. He had feared that the depression would keep him awake, despite the exhaustion, but the next thing he knew, he was jerking awake from a deep slumber.

Of course he couldn't tell the time by his surroundings; to a blind man, day and night inside a modern dwelling feels exactly the same. So whenever Sai had woken up, during the night or in the morning, he would check the hands on the alarm clock first, before chancing disturbing his room mates. Hikaru could be quite cranky when his rest was disturbed too soon.

As he reached over to find the clock, a wave of vertigo crashed over him and he drew a breath sharply. Or he tried to, because it felt like no air was coming into his lungs. He tried again, but this time he was wracked with a very painful cough, as though his body desperately tried to clear an obstruction in his airways. He coughed again, trying to draw air in after, but again his lungs wouldn't fill properly and the cough had hurt a lot. He tried to suppress the next cough, but he found he couldn't stop coughing and couldn't take in a proper breath either.

He started to panic. /I can't breathe!/ he wanted to shout, but there was no breath with which to do it. When the coughing had started Sai had rolled over on his side and now he rolled all the way onto his stomach and tried to push up from the ground, using his arms, so could get up and try and get his breath back. He tried one mighty push, while coughing continually, but his arms just wouldn't push him up. In defeat he slumped down on his elbows, a minor pain shooting up his arms from the jolt. He hung his head down, as he quickly found that to be a marginally more comfortable position.

He still felt he couldn't breathe, his lungs screaming for air - the little he had been able to take in not nearly enough to give relief - his throat burning. And all that time, the coughing just wouldn't let up, worse, his hacking was starting to bring up phlegm and Sai was mortified to realize, positioned like this, he was unable to catch the substance in an appropriate manner.

All he could do was try to breathe and seemingly fail. /Well, that is nothing new,/ he thought miserably, another cough burning his throat, /I'm a failure all around, aren't I!/ A particularly violent cough made his diaphragm spasm painfully, bringing up a large amount of moisture, which Sai had no choice but to expel onto his futon. /Oh god, Touya's going to kill me!/ Then he felt a movement before his face and a hand on his back. A cloth - a handkerchief most likely - was gently wiped across his mouth. 'Geez, waz that racket?' Sai could hear from the direction of Hikaru's futon. He knew from experience the boy never was very with it when just waking up. But before Sai could think about getting enough breath to apologize, Touya said in a firm tone, 'Fujiwara is ill. Get the box of tissues from the bathroom and get the phone, we may need to call a doctor.'

A doctor? /No! It's just a cold, I had one last year, no big deal/ Sai wanted to say, but another volley wracked his frame and burned his throat. Last year it hadn't hurt so much, he had to admit to himself. He wanted to scream with the pain of it. He felt his eyes tear up and drops gilding down his nose only to be caught in the handkerchief.

When the fit had passed he became again aware of the hand on his sweaty back, soothingly sliding up and down. He was panting shallowly now and tried breathing a little deeper. Instantly, a burning pain lanced down his throat and he ceased the attempt, going back to panting.
'Can't breathe,' he managed to get out before another coughing fit struck. He road it out as best he could, absently noting that the blessed hanky was now a wad of tissues. When the fit ended, Touya moved his hand and urged the blind man around. Sai assumed it was so the young pro could take a look at him, but the shift in position was very uncomfortable so he fought the action instinctively. Of course Touya got his way, as Sai had no strength left to really stop the movement. Panting became increasingly harder in this position and an odd rushing in his ears started to drown out everything else.

'Oh god, his lips are blue! Shindou! Get the emergency services on the line, now! We need an ambulance!' Sai only just heard over the building noise. He felt his body being shifted back to its previous position and indeed, he could pant a little better this way. He was glad to note the noise level had died down a bit, but then he was distracted with another very painful series of coughs.

It seemingly took forever for help to arrive and by that time Sai was so out of it, no spoken word made sense to him any longer. All he knew was that his entire upper body felt like it was on fire and he could only take tiny gulps of air.

The fist action from the men in white made Sai curse them; they turned him on his back onto some hard surface, causing paint to lance through his chest and hindering his breathing further. The second thing they did made him bless them; a mask was fitted over his face and after a male voice said, 'Don't worry, we've got him on oxygen,' Sai found that even with the uncomfortably shallow panting, his lungs were starting to feel better and the pain in his chest started easing. He was just getting used to the more airy feeling when another coughing fit started. It burned as the others had, but now he started to loose his breath again. He panted harder but lesser and lesser air seem to be drawn into his lungs. He tried to get the mask off; he needed the breath! A hand grabbed his wrist and pulled in away firmly. Sai's head was spinning and he was 'seeing' star-bursts, no breath was coming in at all now. He tried to swat the mask away again with his other hand but it too was caught and held. His lungs screamed for air and he started threshing.

'Karazu, come help me hold him down!' the male voice called out, though Sai hardly heard it over the ringing in his ears. He did feel someone grabbing his legs and strapping them down. A panic welled up inside of him; his earliest memories of his time in hospital came rushing back. There had been straps and drugs and nausea. And he never wanted to live through that again! He redoubled his efforts to get free, but his legs were strapped too securely and the person was already tying his left arm down by the wrist.

Sai got less and less air, and by the time his other arm was strapped down and they started securing his head, the actions seemed surreal and far away to him. And he was so tired. So tired, and the pain and the noises were slowly receding.

'Inkou, he's tuning blue!' New male voice.

'There is a blockage of the air passage, it's swollen! I'm gonna try intubating.' First male voice. Sai's head was tilted by latex-gloved hands. His mouth opened and what felt like an enormous hose was pushed into his throat. It hurt. But somehow the pain didn't really register anymore. Nothing had much meaning now.

'Damn it, I can't get it in! Karazu, prepare the tracheotomy kit!'

'I'm going to give you something to sleep now,' the first male voice said, a hand grasping his arm and pushing up his pajama sleeve. A sudden pain shot up his arm. Vaguely Sai remembered what that was; a needle full of drugs. He would have protested if had had the strength or the breath. As
it was, the last things he heard were the man, who was further away, saying, 'You boys had better step outside now, this is not for you to see.' Followed by Hikaru's reply of, 'I'm sure as hell not leaving!' Affirmed by Touya's grunt of agreement and equal determination.

/They are good kids, these two,/ Sai thought dreamily and he knew he would miss them terribly. Then his world faded out.

Don't forget to review!
Chapter 9

Sai found himself walking in the dark. The noise of his shoes hitting tarmac and the feel of it under his feet clearly defined his path as a road or sidewalk. Around him were the noises of a typical busy day in Tokyo. Sai would have guessed he wasn't too far away from a train station.

That it was dark did not surprise him; his life had been in darkness for as long as he could remember. That he was on a road did not surprise him; he was used to walking the streets for days on end. The fact that he hadn't done it in many months didn't change his lack of surprise.

The fact that he couldn't quite remember why he was walking or where he was headed also didn't surprise him; he was sure it would come back to him in a little while.

What might have surprised him would have been the lack of the worries - over shelter and foot and safety - he used to carry on his walks. But somehow, none of those things worried him now. No, now it was something else that drew his attention and it was about to give him a surprise.

It was Sai's own sense of direction that told him where to go and he found he could do nothing other than follow it 'blindly'. He knew it had never steered him wrong in the past and he had learned to trust it to keep his mental map positioned correctly at all times. But here, where-ever 'here' was, Sai had no mental map available and so had to rely on his sense of direction alone.

Of course Sai kept sweeping his stick out in front of him, but so far he had not encountered a single obstacle in the way. In all the time he had been walking, seemingly straight ahead, the only thing that had changed was the ground under his feet. And that only from one type of tarmac to another.

But obstacle or no, reason or no, Sai felt pulled onwards in that one direction, so onwards he went.

After a very long time the tarmac gave way to gravel and the city sounds to the sounds of some park on a Sunday. As he walked onwards Sai had decided to stop and ask where he was, should he run into somebody. But while there were the noises of children playing not too far off, no-one was on his path and somehow Sai could not make himself go off the path and find somebody. So he stayed on his course, where-ever it might lead him.

After, again, a very long time, the gravel gave way to grass and after that to a dirt path. All sounds of human activity had long since been left behind and for a while the sounds of a dormant forest accompanied him.

Then, so gradually that he didn't notice at first, the soil became a smooth surface - not unlike the floors of the Touya Go Club - and the ambient sounds had disappeared altogether.

Sai was pulled forever forward, into silent, dark nothingness. The only solid thing was the floor beneath his feet. And out of habit, by now knowing full well there would be none, he still swung his cane out in front of him to scout for obstacles.

To Sai it seemed he had walked forever in this formless, empty void. It could well have been only
hours, but it was equally likely that it had been days. Thinking about it made him realize he was neither hungry or thirsty. Now that did worry him; for even if it had been only hours, he should have been feeling some thirst at least.

His worry, however, did not get time to bloom, as something distracted Sai from his train of thought. There appeared to be something visible up ahead; a faint glow. *No, that was not possible*, Sai thought. It must be a memory or imagination fragment. Yes, that was much more likely.

As an experiment he turned his head away. In most of his imaginings and memory 'sights', the image had moved with his head when ever he had moved in the 'real' world. So if this was inside his head, it would stay more or less in front of him, no mater which way he turned. But when he turned his head now, the glow moved out of his field of vision.

In shock Sai quickly turned back, lest the glow disappear altogether; instinctively he knew that glow was very important and he should go to it. And so he hurried on.

As Sai moved ever onward the glow very slowly started to increase in size, but either it did not illuminate anything or there was nothing to illuminate, the former most likely because when Sai tried to look at his hand holding the cane it was all in darkness.

On he walked until, 'Hey, you,' the deepest voice Sai had ever heard grumbled from a spot just over the blind man's right shoulder. Sai stopped walking, and then slowly turned around.

Before him, some three paces away, stood a creature that towered over him, with bright red skin, yellow eyes, a grotesquely hideous face, wild jet black hair and the physique of a being used to wrestling giants. He wore a yellow loin cloth around his huge hips and had a long wooden club in his hand ready for use.

Sai took a deep bow and said, 'Oni-sama*, by way of acknowledging the monster's presence. The fact that the creature was there did in no way surprise him, even though it should have.

'Fujiwara, you have come back. Are you ready for another round?' the demon asked, his empty hand swinging around to indicate a primitively made Goban with closed /goke/ sitting on top. And as the words were said, Sai remembered having spoken to this particular demon before.

'It appears I have,' Sai stalled, only now searching for information, for memory. And this time it did come as Sai called; the recollection of Sai having challenged this demon to a game of Go. And what the stakes had been, uh, what had they been? Sai's memory seemed to start slipping away again and he frantically started grasping at any sliver of a memory that could...

'If you have a moment, Fujiwara-san,' came from over his left shoulder and the voice was so very familiar. Sai turned around quickly and with the mysterious light in the background there stood Honninbō Shuusaku, his Torajiro, tall and proud.

'Torajiro!' Sai exclaimed. He stepped forward to his old friend and ever indulging host. The Edo Go master looked as he had done in his hay day, wearing the fine silks he had worn to the Edo games, his face radiating health.

'Welcome back, Fujiwara-san,' Torajiro said and bowed. *Welcome back*. Yes, Sai remembered being here before, when he was trying to get back to Earth, to Hikaru. And now he remembered what the far off light was too.

'Torajiro-kun, am I dead?' he asked, a tendril of fear wrapping around his heart; again he wouldn't have been able to say a proper goodbye to his young friend, again Hikaru would be so terribly
'No,' Torajiro said, taking away some of Sai's anxiety. 'This is but the anteroom to Heaven and for
now you are safe enough, as long as you don't engage the Oni-sama, or stay too long,' he added.

'If have but a short time here?' Sai asked and Torajiro nodded solemnly.

'How come I now remember my life? How come I can even see you?' Sai asked.

'Do you remember challenging the Oni-sama to play?' Torajiro asked, and as he asked Sai found
that he did.

'I wanted to go back down to Earth and comfort Hikaru and the Oni-sama promised that he would
send me if I won,' Sai recounted.

'Yes,' Torajiro said. 'Do you also remember that he said that even winning would not be enough,
that there would be a two fold price to be paid?' Sai nodded; he did remember. 'He said there
would be a direct payment and an indirect payment.'

'Yes,' Torajiro said. 'Look at the Oni-sama's belt,' he instructed and Sai looked over at the
creature's belt. There was an assortment of peddles, beads, feathers, clumps of metal tied with
string hanging off it. 'See the two purple stones tied together to a single string?' Sai did. 'That's
were your eyesight ended up; the direct payment.'

'And my amnesia was the indirect payment,' Sai concluded. 'Yes,' Torajiro said. 'That sacrifice
was sent straight to the Buddha; I saw it go up.'

Sai was silent for a moment. He remembered it now. The game, the winning, the instant journey
to Earth. And there was more. He turned back to Torajiro and said, 'And I remember you
sacrificed your Go for me, even though I asked you not too! Your Go was beautiful, how could
you have given it up?!

Then Torajiro, who had looked off into the distance while he had helped Sai remember, turned
and looked straight into Sai's eyes and said, 'My Go was mediocre at best.' He raised a hand to
stop Sai from protesting. 'I was always grateful that you would nurture my meager ability, but my
Go has never been more beautiful now that it is wrapped around your finger to guide you on your
way.'

Sai looked at his right hand and there on the ring finger was a thin silver band with a beautiful
pink stone set in it. Torajiro's Go, guiding a blind man's way. Sai knew instantly that this was how
he been able to navigate his eternally black world; this homing beacon, that always pointed in the
same direction. It was a life saver. Torajiro's sacrifice from Heaven had saved Sai's life over and
over again on Earth.

'Truly, truly, thank you,' Sai said and gave his friend and former host the deepest type of bow. As
he came up a female figure had appeared just behind Torajiro and a dainty hand now rested on the
Edo Go Pro's arm. The lady wore tradition kimono fitting in with the latest Edo styles. Sai
recognized her at once; she always had been a fashion conscious lady.

'Tachibana-donno,' he bowed, 'we meet again, how do you do?' he added.

'Fujiwara-sama,' she bowed even deeper, 'I took the liberty of coming to see you. We weren't sure
you'd remember anything at all from your time here,' she added.

'Why thank you for your concern, nobble lady, I indeed do recall my first life and the time I sent
with your generous husband. Though I do not recall anything that might have happened in
Heaven,' he added.

'Ah, then I may say again thanks for taking care of my husband in his life and bringing him to a
sate where he could marry me,' the Lady Tachibana said, blushing a bit as her husband
admonished her boldness.

Then Torajiro turned serious and said, 'No mortal may know what happens in Heaven. But that
doesn't mean none of our questions will get answered,' he continued. Then he waved his left arm,
his fine kimono sleeve fluttering wildly, and Sai looked in the direction indicated and saw three
figures silhouetted against the background light. All three were sitting in /seiza/ and wore the robes
of the Heian period. Two wore tall hats and one wore her hair in the female style of a Heian
courtier. Sai could not make out their features, nor indeed any details, so he stepped forward only
to stumble into some obstacles; chairs he would guess by their feel.

As he flipped out his cane to try and navigate around the invisible chairs, his friend's voice
stopped him.

'Don't go any closer. There is a point of no return,' Torajiro said in a low tone.

'But they are my family,' Sai argued, 'I want to see them properly!'

Torajiro shook his head. 'You can't, It's been a long time, a thousand years they have waited, that's
a lot longer than most spirits here. You will be able to talk though. Can you not hear your father
call you?'

Sai could not and said so. Torajiro nodded and said, 'then I will relay his words to you.'

Torajirii turned to the taller of the two male figures and bowed and then he appeared to be
listening, as the figure bowed and then sat up again. Presently he turned to Sai and said, 'He told
me to tell you that he is sorry, that he was wrong, and that he shouldn't have chastised you before
you left, that he shouldn't have rejected you like that.'

Sai turned to silhouetted figure, sank to the floor and said, '/Chichi-ue*/, it is I who should
apologize for having been such a stubborn son and disgracing the Fujiwara family name!' He than
bowed his head until his forehead touched the ground and held the pose.

'Your mother speaks,' Torajiro announced from behind him. He fell silent for a long moment and
then he spoke. 'My son, it was we who were in error, raise your head, I beg you, we were
misinformed, deceived even, about the circumstances of you accepting the challenge to that horrid
game. We now know you could not have refused. We also found out about the Cheater. He was
caught not long after you, uh, after you left. Please, raise your head and look at us with
forgiveness, and so we can look at you with pride.'

Sai's head came up as he felt the balm of those words soothing old hurts. He remembered the last
meeting he'd had with his parents in his Heian life; they fought bitterly over the choices Sai hadn't
been able to prevent himself from making. They also had yet another argument over his life choice
of becoming a Go tutor instead of a government official like his father. It was to be their last
communication because after Sai's sentence of banishment from court had been handed down, this
parents had refused to speak to him again. They effectively had cut him dead. And now he was
here, facing his family again, he realized that that rejection had been the final thing that had driven
him to seek a watery grave.

'/Haha-ue**, I have always loved and respected you and /chichi-ue/ too. I'm sorry I was not
stronger. I'm sorry is wasn't smarter with court intrigue. I'm sorry I was so willful in wanting to
play Go,' he said. Then he added, almost to himself, 'I chased the Hand of God and forgot to look
at the path I was on. I paid for that mistake with my life and I hurt my family in the process. My mother and father and my brother.' Here he stopped. His brother. He had a brother. The memory suddenly flooded his mind; a little boy playing with a fan while Sai played one of the court ladies at Go. His baby brother.

Suddenly the presence of the third figure made sense and Sai shifted his position towards it. '/Otōto ***gerät**/?' The figured bowed. Sai looked over at Torahiro who was seated behind him.

'Your brother speaks,' Sai's guide said.

'/Ani-ue****/, have you come to play me?' Torajiro passed along just as the figure moved his arm in a sweeping gesture making the silhouetted long silken sleeve wave in the current created by the motion. As the arm and sleeve stilled Sai saw a Goban had appeared in front of the figure complete with two /goke/ sitting on it, ready for a game of Go.

Sai started to get up to go sit at the other side of it and finally play a game with the brother who, when both were alive, had been much too young for any serious Go. But a hand on his shoulder startled him into stopping the motion; never in Sai's ghostly existence had Torajiro been able to touch him. Instinctively Sai put his hand over his old fiend's before turning around. The fingers were pleasantly warm, oddly alive in this place of ghosts.

The moment was broken and he turned all the way around. Torajiro gave him a simple shake of the head; /now is not the time for Go/ he seemed to say. Sai nodded once in understanding and followed his friend up to a standing position. He turned back once more to his family, but was just in time to see their silhouettes disappear.

He turned back to his friend, who was alone as well, his wife having apparently left already. 'It's time to go, isn't it,' Sai asked. His friend nodded. Sai glanced over to where the demon was now seated on one of the invincible chairs.

'Will he let me leave?' Sai asked.

Again Torajiro nodded and added, 'Yes, he has no dominion of those who are still living, so you can leave without having to pass him.'

Sai the looked at his friend's face. To have to say goodbye to such a dear friend, he glanced at the ring on his finger, such a noble, kindhearted, generous friend. The thought hurt his heart and he looked up again and pleaded, 'Can I not stay, here with you, with my newly found brother, with my forgiving parents? Why must I go back to a world of utter darkness, where I'm nothing but a useless person that requires charity to eat and sleep and be led around by the arm? Please, let me stay,' he sobbed as he found he tightly grabbed the front of his friend's clothing and had buried his now wet face in the soft fabric covering the man's chest.

A gentle hand landed on his head, gliding a little on his hair before giving him a soft pat on his head. 'Fujiwara-san.' Torajiro's voice found it's way his ear and Sai felt a finger hook under his chin just as the hand fell away from atop his head. The finger insistently urged his chin up and Sai chose not to resist it's directing.

As their eyes met and Sai looked deeply into his friend's brown orbs, looking his fill, Torajiro shook the finger under Sai chin as if to awaken the formal Heian noble and said, 'And what of your friends? Will they not miss you? Will they not be heartbroken if you just leave them like this?'

Sai knew he Edo friend was right; Ogata would be angry and the Meijin would be left unsatisfied. Touya-kun would cry, Sai felt sure, and Hikaru would be inconsolable; had been inconsolable the
last time Sai had died. Could he put the boy through that a second time?

And what of his friends at the Heart of Stone, and of Kuma-san? And Mr. Fukurou and Mr. Yashida. Sai friendship with them was young yet, but Sai had felt a bond and if he stayed here, if he died for good this time, the breaking of it would hurt the kind gentlemen.

But what of his life? He had no job to go back to, he would be run out of money soon. He'd have to live on charity, could his pride take the pounding?

'Fujiwara-san listen, pride be damned, self reliance be damned. You posses what is most important in life; friends that care about and are willing to aid any which way they can. Go back for their sake. And,' Torajiro bounced his finger under Sai's chin for emphasis, 'don't you dare show your face here for another 50 years!'

Sai smiled; Torajiro was always such a good and supportive friend. When he went back he'd miss him terribly. Oh, would he even remember? He asked the question.

His guide sighed and said, 'No, you will not remember anything that transpires here. The living may not know of the matters of the dead, I'm sorry.'

He wouldn't be able to remember. Not Torajiro nor his wife, not his parents nor his rediscovered brother. It hurt.

'Will I go back to the,' and he had to swallow at that point, 'darkness?' Torajiro nodded gravely.

'That is the price you paid for the passage into the realm of the living.' Sai nodded; it was fair, even if it wasn't something to look forward to.

'Will I remember any of my former life?' he felt he had to ask, already knowing the answer. Torajiro shook his head. 'Will I remember you as were in life?' Again a shake. 'My life at the Heian court?' Another shake. 'Hikaru?' Shake. It was as he had expected; he would be as he was before. It saddened him to lose these memories, like losing the people in them all over again.

'I will remember for you, I promise,' Torajiro said, 'until you come back and can remember yourself.' Sai nodded his thanks, his eyes prickling with drying tears, his friend nodding solemnly. They stood silently like that for a moment.

'My friend, farewell,' Sai said and he impulsively threw an arm about the Edo man's shoulders, pulled him close and hugged him for a short moment. Then he stepped back and said, 'Point me the way, my True Guide.' And Torajiro wordlessly swung out his arm to a point behind Sai and the former Heian noble spun around to align himself with it. There was nothing but darkness up ahead.

Sai looked over his shoulder for a last goodbye but the space to the left of him was empty. Sai looked over the other shoulder and there the demon still stood, silent and grinning menacingly. Sai suppressed a shudder as he turned his head back, his eyes now on the blackness in front, then he unfolded his cane and started walking.

* Chichi-ue = honorable father
** Haha-ue = honorable mother

*** Otōto = younger brother (because of Sai's brother is the younger, Sai doesn't have to use the 'ue' suffix)

**** Ani-ue = honorable older brother (because Sai is the older brother, his younger sibling does have to use the 'ue' suffix)

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Don't forget to review!
Chapter 10

It was the beeping that roused him. A rhythmic high pitched beeping in conjunction with a mechanical wheezing sound, right next to his head. He slowly opened his eyes, but found only blackness. And then it hit him, the blindness, the trouble breathing, the paramedics; he was in a hospital again, wasn't he? And he was alive.

The last bit surprised him; he had been so sure he'd been dying but apparently not. He wasn't quite sure if he actually felt happy about that. He was sure that he felt in pain and that he was very uncomfortably lying quite so flat with a thing on his face and that his throat hurt like hell. To alleviate some of the some of these symptoms, Sai tried to move his right hand to his face, but something was pulling on his middle finger and he didn't seem to have the strength to free himself. So he stopped trying that arm and tried moving the other one instead. His left arm felt like it had been made of lead, but nothing seemed to be pulling it down and Sai managed to get his hand to come up to the face. There he felt a something like an oddly shaped bowl had been placed over his nose and mouth and it seemed to be irritating his breathing. He tried swatting it away from his face after he found that his fingers didn't seem to work quite as they should. Immediately he felt a hand wrapping around his wrist, effectively stopping his by now desperate movement.

'Mr. Fujiwara, don't do that, you need that to breathe,' a gentle older female voice said, from next to Sai. The bind man tried apologizing, almost as a reflex, but his throat burned as he tried to speak and no sound came out at all. More desperate now, he tried again to speak or even just produce a sound, but nothing came out and deep panic stated to over take him; what if he had lost his voice forever?

The warm hand on his wrist was joined by another enfolding his hand.

'Fuijiwara-san, calm down, you can't speak because of the tube in your throat. It a temporary thing; you will be able to speak once the tube is removed. Please, stay patient and calm until then,' the woman's voice told him calmly.

It did help knowing he'd be able to talk again at some point and Sai managed to calm down enough to try and get his bearings. And then the calm lady spoke more and it was all comforting.

'Well, let me see, I was told to give you as much information as I could think of, since you can't ask any questions. Is that all right?' she asked while gently petting his hand. He nodded, the gesture much reduced in stature because Sai appeared to have very limited movement of his head; there was too much alien stuff attached to it. But the apparently the gesture was understood because the lady continued talking.

'Firstly, you are in Tokyo General Hospital. You had an acute case of pneumonic distress, as they call it, last Monday night. You were rushed to hospital and they had to put a tube in you throat at the base of your neck so you could breath.' Sai shuddered at the explanation; at least he didn't remember the later part of the events.

'There was some surgery and you had to be put on a respirator. You've been here for five days now. It's Saturday today,' she finished. Five days. He had missed so many working days. Then he remembered; he no longer had a job. And that meant he'd have no income. And he'd just spent five days in hospital. How in the world was he going to pay for that?

When Sai had lived at the shelter, there had been many stories of how other people had gotten
there. Some through drink, some through gambling, some through bad luck. But there had also been one that had ended up losing everything because of hospital bills.

Sai knew he'd never be able to pay for his medical care and it upset him greatly. But oddly, not as much as it would have a week ago. Really Sai felt so weak that getting properly upset would be spending more energy that he had, and so, for now, he let it slide. And anyway, the nice lady was talking again and Sai's head felt so fuzzy he really needed his full attention to understand what was being said. Apparently he had already missed some of her speech.

'... So my husband is just off getting us some sandwiches for lunch and Akira-kun is currently at the Institute for an informal game and some sort of Go publicity thing, an interview or something, I'm not sure. And Shindou-kun has gone with him. They should be back here in another hour or so,' she said. 'Uhm, what else? Oh, Ogata-kun said he'd be around later this afternoon,' she added after a short pause. 'And a letter has arrived for you, well more than one but this one we can't read; it's written in that blind script Touya-kun explained to me about. Very strange looking.' She let go of his hand and after some noises of stuff being handled a folded piece of paper was placed in his hand. It was his wrong hand for reading Braille but he appreciated the gesture all the same; he could feel enough to know it was probably from his music friends. They'd probably be wondering why he hadn't shown up last Wednesday. Sai hoped they wouldn't be too angry he hadn't canceled the meeting properly. Now there was another thing he was too tired to worry about.

But his train of thought was interrupted because just then there was the unmistakable sound of a door opening and closing, and Sai felt a small tug on his hand when the lady, Mrs. Touya as Sai now remembered, spoke in a direction away from Sai, 'honey, he's awake at last!'

Sai was not surprised at who spoke next. 'Fujiwara-kun, are you awake, can you hear me?' the Meijin's deep voice boomed. Sai gave a painful nod. 'That is good. Now all will be well,' the Go Master pronounced.

/'All will be well.'/ That would be so nice. To Sai not 'all' was well, but at least some was; he was alive and his friends were not far away. For now it was enough and with that Sai let the fatigue that was trying to overwhelm him have its way, and he closed his eyes and knew no more.

Over the next few days, Sai was wake for longer and longer periods of time. The only bad thing to happen in that time was the removal of the breathing tube, which really hurt, all the rest was great. All his Go friends were around talking Go, playing Go, with always someone keeping Sai informed of the formations. Of course, even with the tube gone, Sai still couldn't speak so he couldn't play and he also found that he was so tired that he would lose the virtual /goban/ he had created in his mind to follow the games. But he found he was okay with that; if it turned out the game had been a good one, he would ask Touya for a /kifu/ reading when he left better and he was really too tired to care much at all if the game was mediocre. Just having friends around all the time, even if Sai couldn't participate fully, was so wonderful and such a contrast from when he had been in the hospital before.

In a quiet moment Sai had even been able to read the Braille letter that had been put in the drawer of his bed side table. The missive had spoken of the concern the two gentlemen had for their friend – they had called Sai their 'particular friend' almost make Sai blush – and many hearty well wishes were expressed in it. The words had so moved the blind man that he kept taking out the letter every morning and kept it under his hand where he could feel it, all through the day.

It was only a week later that all of his friends were in the hospital room at the same time. Sai was slowly regaining his voice; his throat still hurt, as the doctor had said it would for a while yet, but if he kept it short, he was allowed to speak as he pleased. First thing he'd done with it was play
against the Meijin, but he was still so weak he lost big time. It didn't matter in the slightest; as long as he could play at all.

Now his friends had taken the opportunity of discussing what was to happen next. That morning the doctor had informed Sai - and Touya who had been present at the time - that he'd be ready to leave the hospital in two more days. After that he had been ordered to stay indoors for at least a week and a half and not to go back to work - the doctor apparently didn't know Sai was unemployed - for at least two weeks after that. He was to take oral medication and he was to use the neutralizer for the medicine that had to be inhaled. Sai would need care, the doctor had said, but not around the clock, just having a roommate would be enough.

So that day found Sai sitting up in bed, Ogata and the Meijin standing at the left side of the bed - with Mrs. Touya somewhere behind them - and Touya and Hikaru on the right side of the bed. Sai just sat there, fingering another letter he'd gotten from the two gentlemen - he had managed get someone to write them a reply once he'd gotten his voice back and what he was holding was their very sweet reply in Braille - while his four friends discussed his life.

'I think it's totally ridiculous that they won't let Sai take the exam,' Hikaru was almost shouting. Hikaru, Sai's oldest friend, the only one from before his amnesia. The kid had such a deep heart and such a loud mouth.

'Look,' Touya-kun interjected, 'I understand that Fujiwara would never be allowed to take part in the tournaments or even in the /oteai/, but if he could just get his certificate, that would help so much.' Touya-kun, the boy Go genius, with his honestly and his caring nature. Sai could only feel warmth for his friend at that moment.

Then from the other side of the bed Ogata spoke, 'Don't you think I haven't told them the exact same thing? Don't think I've threatened to resign if they didn't do at least that? They won't budge, they just won't!' The man was really getting upset, Sai could tell by his voice. But it was a good kind of upset, because it told the blind man it was kindly meant towards him and just knowing that Ogata would go so far on his behalf was a very sweet feeling.

'I called in every favor the Go counsel owed me, but still the answer was "no',' the Meijins deep voice spoke. Sai had never had any doubts about his true rival's feelings; they had mutual respect and the man had never had their differences in position in life stand in the way of their rivalry or their friendship.

There was an abrupt change of subject when Touya-kun relayed what the doctor had said a few hours earlier.

'Fujiwara-san can come home with me,' Ogata said swiftly, but the Meijin corrected him at once, 'No, we agreed he's to go home to the shared flat.' To which Ogata gave a reluctant sounding but accenting grunt.

'I have Mondays and Fridays off, or at least I can free those days up easy, so I'll be looking after Sai then,' Hikaru piped up.

'He doesn't need around the clock care, the doctor said, but I would feel better if we try to have some one on hand everyday for the next week and a half. I can clear next weekend; I'm ahead this month so I don't need the income,' Touya-kun said.

'I can take Wednesdays,' Ogata stated.

'We'll take Tuesdays and Thursdays,' Sai could hear Mrs. Touya say from behind the two older men.
And all the while this divvying up of the blind man's care schedule was going on, Sai sat propped up against two big pillows, wearing flimsy hospital pajamas, with an IV needle up his arm, still clutching the Braille letter, thinking that with friends like these, life couldn't possibly be better than this.

The end

'The end'? Well, no not quite. There's a 'few' epilogues coming up still!
The first of the epilogues follows directly from this point of the story.
Because, after all, life goes on and on and I could follow Sai until the end of his life, but that might be a bit boring, so I did it this way instead.

The next chapter will be up on Tuesday.

To the guest commentator: Life isn't always fair and you don't always get what you want. But, if you're lucky, you may get what you need.

Don't forget to review!
Fujiwara Sai, who'd been, once in a now forgotten past, a Go tutor to the Emperor of Japan, then a ghost doomed to forever wander and whose only chance at realizing his dreams of playing Go, and reaching the Hand of God, lay in relying on friendly hosts, and who now was a convalescing blind man, whose hoped to be playing Go and playing the flute for and with his friends soon, was busy doing as much as he could, which was lying stretched out on the couch and trying to get enough air in his lungs to stop that horrible compressed feeling.

It was at least another 30 minutes before he would be allowed to take the next medicine inhalation, but he wasn't too sure he make it that long. But he did want to try, because the doctor had told him that taking more than one dose of the medicine within an hour would be harmful. The man had also said that if Sai had too difficult a time breathing, even with the hourly doses, he was to go see a doctor. As Sai lay there wheezing, he realized that it might just come to that, because he wasn't going to last another half hour he felt sure.

As he retrieved his phone from the coffee table and pressed the 1 and then the call button, he was, apart from the uncomfortable breathing, quite calm; he knew Ogata would come running - the man had gone down to his own apartment to retrieve something and had probably stopped to check his e-mail or something - and he would help the blind man as a true friend would and Sai would not ever have to feel guilty about it. It was a great feeling.

The next day - the doctor had, the day before, changed Sai's meds and now the blind man could breathe a lot better - was the first day Sai would be home alone for a good chuck of the day. Touya-kun and Hikaru both had official games to go to, the Touyas had a wedding to attend but Ogata would in his own apartment working on his computer, so he would just be a call away, and Sai now knew that that arrangement would work.

Sai spent the morning reading a few hours, then he got out his /fue/ and experimentally tried playing it. He very quickly put the flute back in the box and the box he put back on the shelve after he'd stopped being dizzy, from messing with his breathing. He was rather miffed with himself that he had forgotten to ask the doctor when he should try playing the flute again; not knowing made him that much more impatient!

Tired from all that effort, and from experiencing such a strong surge of emotion, Sai took himself back to the couch and sat back for long while, just playing back some music in his head; one of the modern compositions from one of the newer CDs in his music collection.

It was the door bell that woke the blind man, and Sai groggily got to his feet. As he made his way to the door, he tried to figure out who it could be. Not any of his Go friends; they all had keys and wouldn't bother to ring before coming in. He was expecting no parcels but of course it could still be the doorman with a delivery of some sort.

He reached the door just as the bell chimed a second time. Carefully he sought out the door latch, grasping it and pulling the lock open, while he gasped the knob with his other hand and pulling the door open.
'Good morning Fujiwara-san,' the unmistakably cheery voice of Mr. Yashida chimed, followed by a soberer 'I hope you are recovering well,' spoken in the cultured tones of Mr. Fukurou's voice. All of a sudden Sai felt happiness spread though him and a smile forming on his face; he hadn't realized how he's missed his music friends these last weeks.

'I hope we are not intruding,' Mr. Fukurou added. 'Not at all!' Sai hastened to say, stepping aside and inviting the gentlemen in.

'We've brought Joshu-kun, I hope you don't mind,' Mr Yashida said as Sai made his way back into the flat so the guests could have room to shed their coats and shoes. 'Not at all,' Sai repeated before moving to stand next to the couch, leaning his leg against it because the shock of the arrival of the sudden visitors, however positive, had zapped the energy he had gained from his short nap. He needed to wait until the guest had been greeted properly and had been given refreshment before it would be polite to sit down himself.

'Oh, Fujiwara-san, please sit down, you look pale,' Mr. Yashida said, his voice coming from the entry point of the living room. 'Since we've come unannounced, Joshu-kun can take of us and play host, if that's okay?' he added.

'But,' Sai started. Having a guest serve themselves and others, it just didn't seem right.

'No buts,' Mr. Joshu said. 'I'll be delighted to be of assistance, my friend.' Sai felt another wave of warmth; Sai had only ever had interaction with the soft spoken Joshu, with the young man in the role of, well 'butler' Sai supposed, to the older gentlemen. The fact that Joshu was calling him a friends gave Sai an even better feeling about the man; after all Joshu knew of Sai's origins - or at least the ones in this life - and still the man accepted the blind man as a friend. Sai promised himself that Joshu's kindness and friendship would be returned in as much measure as Sai could muster. It would certainly not be a fair exchange, but Sai swore it wouldn't be through lack of trying!

'Please sit down, Fujiwara-san' Mr. Yashida repeated and Sai did so just as Joshu announced, 'Ah, I've found the kitchen and the tea pot. Green tea all around?' Everybody murdered accent and Sai could hear tea making sounds from the kitchen.

Consistent with the gentlemen's behavior in the past, there followed a period of exchanging pleasantries. All very nice, but Sai did feel he should let the gathering know he wasn't up to any music playing. He said so, worried that his visitor's would be disappointed.

'I am sorry you've come all this way, well, for nothing,' he ended his explanation. 'Oh, not at all,' Mr. Fukurou said. 'We came to see our friend and maybe talk about music if we feel like it. None of us expect you to be up to playing, we do know you've been released from hospital just over a week ago. So do not worry, my friend, we've come to see how you are doing and we are not at all disappointed,' he added.

With this Sai was reassured enough to start enjoying the tea Joshu had made and the vanilla cake the gentlemen had brought. As he listened to his three visitors talk about music and tea and cake, the blind man found himself in happy and relaxing company; just the thing to make a long convalescence bearable.

When Sai next awoke, he almost shot up from his seat on the couch. Didn't he have visitors? Had he fallen asleep on them? Sai was mortified at the idea; the height of rudeness.

'I'm sorry, I fell asleep,' he excused himself to the room. A room that was oddly quiet. The blind
man heard no movement. Not even breathing could be heard. So, empty than; the visitors had left. Sai suddenly felt sad, and a bit frightened; what if he’d scared them of?

Then there was a noise from the direction of the kitchen. ‘Who’s there?!’ Sai yelped, not being used to not knowing who was in his house.

Footsteps, socks of wood, and then, ‘Oh, Fujiwara-san, you’re awake. Good. I made soup, do you want a bowl?’ Joshu said.

‘Uh, yes,’ Sai found himself stuttering after his nose had caught a whiff of delicious smelling /miso/ soup; obviously not from one of Sai’s instant soup packages. As serving noises emanated from the kitchen Sai sat down properly and tried rubbing the sleep out of his eyes; boy, he was beat. The thought of food sounded so good right then.

The late lunch - it was already three o’clock - turned out to also be freshly made rice with vegetables and sliced raw fish that Sai was pretty sure - Touya had done the groceries, but Sai hadn’t smelled any fish among the haul, and besides that had been two days ago - hadn’t come from his shared fridge. Joshu informed the blind man that he’d brought ‘some’ stuff for lunch. And he reassured Sai that the gentlemen hadn’t left because they had felt insulted but rather, that the three of them had decided, after Sai had fallen asleep on them, that it really was too early for a lengthy visit and that Joshu should stay behind in case Sai might need something when he’d woken up. Joshu had used the ‘down time’ to make soup and rice and also to turn the planned lunch supplies into a few /obento/ boxes after he’d found some empties on the dirty dishes pile.

A dirty dishes pile, oh dear! Sai shuddered to think what the kitchen looked like with Hikaru in charge of it for the last few weeks. He knew Touya would have done a better job, but the poor boy was already doing so many other chores, including basically managing Sai’s transport schedule to and throw from work before he had lost his job. (Touya-kun had offered and it had made Ogata very happy to; knowing when Sai needed a ride in advance. It had improved their game scheduling too; up until before Sai’s hospital stay they had been able to combine Sai’s getting picked up from work, dinner and full evenings of Go quite successfully.)

But Joshu verbally waved Sai’s apologies away and confided in him that he was the eldest of a family of nine kids - all boys except the youngest - and that he had been in charge of kitchens his whole life. And besides he liked making /obento/s.

They talked a little while longer and then Joshu insisted on clearing up and after a hearty farewell the nice man left Sai alone with his thoughts. Yes, it had been a good day. And it wasn’t quite over yet, because the boys would be back by 7 o’clock, they’d said. So Sai decided this time to lie down on the couch for another nap.

The weeks flew by with Sai busy getting his strength back and receiving visits from friends of all kinds. Even Kawai stopped by for coffee one afternoon when a fare had brought him into Sai’s neighborhood around break time. Like most guests the cabby made his own drink, Touya-kun having set up the kitchen so things were very easy to find for visitors; apparently he’d had done very thorough job - too thorough in Hikaru’s loud opinion - with the /hiragana*/ label gun. Hikaru complained bitterly that the kitchen now looked like a kindergarten!

After having been discharged from the hospital Sai had been surprised at how relaxed he felt about his dependent situation. Somehow the world was different, kinder, after his - as he later found out - near death experience. He remembered nothing from winking out at the flat where the
paramedics had helped him to waking up to Mrs. Touya, but somehow something had clicked in his life and he felt the happier for it.

Maybe life was just looking better after having nearly died, or something. Sai decided not to investigate the effect more closely than that. And anyway, something of unexpected importance happened just a month after he’d come home.

It started with a phone call from Mr. Yashida; could the gentlemen - and Mr. Joshu - come over the next day? That would be a Wednesday in March, and since everybody was off doing Go stuff, Sai was free to receive the welcome visitors. And so the ‘date’ was set and that Tuesday afternoon Sai put in an extra hour of flute practice - first scales on the silver flute and then a mini (unasked for) concert for the boys on his favorite flue, the /fue/- so he could feel ready to impress his music friends. Life was really fine sometimes!

Wednesday mid-morning saw the company of three arrive on 10:30 on the dot. Pleasantries were exchanged, tea was made and served with delicious gift cookies - by Joshu as usual - and then Mr. Fukurou spoke at length. And Sai had trouble following what he said, because the man using a lot of terms Sai didn’t know like ‘recording contract’, ‘music industry’, ‘royalties’ and ‘world wide distribution’. It really didn’t help that most of these words originated from a language called ‘English’ which the blind man was totally unfamiliar with.

Then Mr. Yashida interrupted his friend - a thing that never had occurred before in all the time Sai had know the two - by saying, ‘Fukurou-san, I don’t think Fujiwara-kun is grasping any of what you just said.’ Sai was glad of the interruption, because he was getting more confused by the second, and confusion always made him feel small and helpless, and surely he had had enough of that!

But Mr. Fukurou and Mr. Yashida had always been kind to him and they were so again that day as they explained in detail what Sai apparently had missed realizing had been going on all those visits he had made to the ‘music room’.

‘It’s a recording contract for four CDs of traditional Japanese music,’ Ogata said after a long silence after Sai had handed the man the papers the gentlemen had left with him that afternoon. Ogata had been the first person that popped into Sai’s head to consult on, what had understood to be, a matter of money and law.

‘This is, uh, this is amazing,’ Ogata said after another silence. ‘They are offering you real money here,’ Ogata’s voice sounded awed.

/Why wouldn’t their money be real?/ Sai thought, and then he said it too.

What followed was a rather incomprehensible explanation that Sai, after some questions, distilled down to meaning that it was unusable to pay an untried new-comer like Sai such an amount of money. At first Sai felt flattered by the gentlemen's offer. And then it sunk in; he could make money, ‘real money’ as Ogata put it, with his music. And then Sai sat still while the world spun around him 180 degrees yet again. And then he had Ogata explain exactly how these kind of earnings worked, which the man did for a full hour until Sai felt he had understood how it worked.

Simply put, if he went to ‘music room’ and played his flue - any one of them he could play well - his paying would be recorded and a collection of these recordings would go on a CD. The CD
would be multiplied and these copies would be sold in stores in Japan and the rest of the world - oh my! - from which money would come in and end up at Yamatogoto Inc., Mr. Yashida and Mr. Fukurou's company. From there Sai would be paid a (large) single sum after he's made the original recording and a smaller sum that would come from the total sales of each and every CD. So it would be good for Sai to record a lot and great if he could make it sound so good, a lot of people would buy his CD. And if after he had made those 4 CD, a lot of CDs had been sold, there could be another contact, which would mean more money.

It sounded like a dream, and for a moment Sai wanted to pinch himself just to check that it wasn't. But Ogata had said that while a lot depended on Sai's hard work when making the recordings, outside factors could influence the process; traditional music could suddenly go out of fashion. Sai listened very closely to each word his friends said and took to heart that nothing was certain. He promised himself that the money earned - that wasn't spent on rent and food and on donations to the homeless shelter and the Library - would be saved for a rainy day.

Of course life goes on and so it did for Sai. And sometimes things went well and sometimes they didn't. But through it all Sai had great friends to rely on, who would support him when things went badly and who would cheer him on when things went well. And Sai realized that, despite a few minor flaws, he was having a wonderful life.

Do stick around for Epilogue #2!

Notes:
* obento = Japanese prepared lunch.

** hiragana = Japan's simplest script; even a 4 year old can read it.
Haruko and her BFF Ayaka had decided to go the mall that after school. It had been raining all day and neither felt it was worth standing out by the school's soccer field looking at the boys getting muddy while they were getting soaked themselves. No, the covered mall had a great heating system and the best music store around, so it made sense to go there and check out the new releases.

As Haruko was flipping her way through the A section of the foreign pop groups, she was roused by Ayaka, who drooled, 'Ooh, look at that! Isn't he dreamy?’ Haruko quickly rounded the end of the A-G row and came face to face with a cardboard poster stand of the complete life sized cutout of a musician who was holding a traditional Japanese flute in play position with his eyes closed as though the picture was taken just as he was getting into his music. The man wore a modern outfit with a dark gray suit pants and matching vest with under that a baby blue buttondown shirt with a dark blue bowtie. He had a round face, with a modest nose, cherry red lips, elegant eyebrows, long black eyelashes and the longest hair Haruko had ever seen in her life, it fell all the way to the man's calves.

Just to the side of the cutout Ayaka stood with both hands balled against her cheek, obviously totally in love. Haruko could hear her sigh deeply from where she stood. Oh dear.

Haruko left her friend at the cutout and started to look for the dreamboat's CD that was advertised as 'the newest sensation in traditional music'. 'You do realize he's gonna be playing /gagaku*/, 'n' crap like that, don't you?’ Haruko told her friends as she looked for the CD.

'Oh, who cares what he plays, just look at him, he's so yummy!' Ayaka drawled, swiveling her hips and her upper body like a 3 year old, making her school uniform tartan skirt dance. Urg.

By now Haruko had found the CD 'Morning mist in Heian-kyo**' and after looking at the front - the same long haired dude in roughly the same pose but now in a more traditional outfit - she turned it over, quickly glanced down the track list and then found the jackpot: the blurb. She started reading it aloud, knowing Ayaka would be very interested in any mention of marital status for her new true love.

'Fujiwara Sai is the new great star of traditional Japanese music. Not only is he most proficient in the known music of by-gone ages but he has been able to embrace and harness the old ways into new compositions that will astound and amaze you,' she read out.

Well, that was nice, Haruko thought, not only the old stuff recorded again, but some new old stuff added. Just what the world needs.

She looked up at her friend who was still making googly eyes at the cutout.

Haruko continued reading aloud:

'Fujiwara may seem to have come out of nowhere, but nothing is less true. He's had a hard life,' Ayaka sighed happily and loudly, still looking at her new man, 'over coming amnesia,' another louder sigh, 'homelessness' Ayaka almost moaned here never taking her eyes off the cutout, 'and blindness...’ Now Ayaka stiffened; Haruko could see her friend almost go in shock.

'Blind? He's blind?' Ayaka asked giving her friend a hard look, dropping her kawaii-Pose entirely.
Haruko quickly scanned the rest of the blurb but she found nothing more about any blindness in it. 'Seems so,' she told her friend.

Ayaka scoffed at that, crossed her arms over her chest, took one last look at her now ex-new man, then turned bodily away, spinning on one of her heels, and huffed, 'well, that's no good; if he's blind he can't see me, no point in me throwing my pretty self at him, now is it?'

Haruko, of course, couldn't agree more - *blind, what a waste!* - and suggested they go to the Jpop section to see if the new Arashi CD was out yet.

Notes:
* gagaku = traditional Japanese court music.
** Heian-kyo = old name for Kyoto

Do stick around for Epilogue #3!

Don't forget to review!
Epilogue #3

Sai was sitting at one of the tables in the ground floor public play room of the Go Institute waiting for Hikaru to come down from his /oteai/ game that day. He had come a little earlier than planned, because Ogata had offered him a ride from the Touya Go club, as the man had to do some Go business at the Institute.

No sooner had Sai sat down at a table - that no doubt held a Goban, even if he couldn't see it - when some young voices asked him for a game. Very young voices, Sai was thinking, maybe 8 or 10 years old. His mood saddened when found himself having to explain why he couldn't. He didn't tell them he would never be an official pro-player; these kids were too young to understand such things. But he couldn't not explain about his blindness; it was pretty much self evident, but to a child, nothing is self evident, now is it?

So he patiently explained, trying to keep his emotions to himself. And, despite his condition and his explanation of the limits that condition imposed, one of the young voices wanted to play him anyway.

As the children talked amongst themselves on how and what, Sai could discern four distinct voices, of which he suspected one was female. Then the 'negotiation' was over and one of the other voices - not the one who wanted to play - said he'd place Sai's stones for him. And so chairs scraped as seats were taken and Go was ready to be played, making Sai's heart flutter with delight, as playing Go always did, no matter the ability of his opponent. And the fuzzy feeling that washed over him as these kids seemed to accept him, flaws and all, was keeping him warm nicely in the underheated play room.

Hikaru had been standing behind Sai's chair for a while now; Sai had noticed his presence but didn't want to interrupt the /shidogo/ game he had going with the boy that had played his stones in the first game of the day. For this second game, the boy had asked for a teaching game because he wanted to get stronger in the /insei/ class. And Sai had been happy to oblige. The boy wasn't half bad; a bit sloppy here and there, but that wouldn't stop him from going far. Like Hikaru had.

Once the game was over, Sai felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Hikaru whisper, 'teaching the competition, are we?' 'Not my competition,' Sai whispered back smiling and then told the kids he had to go. There were many noises of disappointment at the news and even more requests for him return soon. Sai smiled at both sentiments and made his goodbyes.

Hikaru grabbed a hold of Sai's left elbow, as he always did when they'd go somewhere by foot, walking briskly down the lobby of the institute, but not too fast. But at the door to the outside he suddenly stopped, jarring Sai's walking rhythm into stopping also.

'Oh gag, it's really thick out there,' Sai's oldest friend said. 'Thick?' Sai asked. 'The fog,' Hikaru clarified. Oh, Sai thought, not really comprehending. 'Is that bad?' he asked. 'Well, yeah, means I can't see a thing,' Hikaru explained with the tiniest hint of irritation in his voice. 'Well, hold on to me then; I'm a champion at not seeing anything,' Sai dead-panned and started walking again, pretty much dragging his friend with him as the boy seemed unwilling to let go of his arm.

The automatic sliding doors whooshed open and they moved through them. Once they reached the middle of the sidewalk Sai stopped and asked, 'Where do you want to go? The park? Or the
ramen shop?' 'The ramen shop, I guess,' Hikaru stammered. And as Sai turned left sharply and started walking, his cane tapping out in front of him and with Hikaru following, the boy asked 'Uh, are you sure? I really can't the road at all. Not even the sidewalk,' he added.

Sai just nodded and kept walking. He could tell the air was different with that added moisture that was creating the fog; even the street sounds were altered. But Sai was at home in this part of Tokyo and the fact that there were likely not going to be any cars driving at speed only made it easier for him.

Some twist and turns, sometimes crossing the empty streets, brought them to restaurant and both entered the place with satisfaction; Hikaru because he'd be eating ramen soon and Sai because for once in his life he had led some one instead of being led. And it had been easy and successful. And there was hot food at the end, what more could you want?

Do stick around for Epilogue #4!

Don't forget to review!
Mrs. Masahiro was really too Japanese - even after having lived in New York for 40 years now - to show her self-satisfaction through whistling a merry tune like her American boss always did, but she was sorely tempted that day. That day she had indeed something to be self-satisfied about today; her boss was going to be so happy!

So she didn't whistle as she brought the afternoon tea tray - delivered straight from the Russian Tearoom - and placed it on the edge of the boss' desk; the only empty place in the cluttered, old fashioned, office. Her boss, Mr. Leipowich, was still writing busily as the tray touched the table but as soon as it did, he stopped, replaced the fountain pen's top so it wouldn't dry out over tea, sat back in his chair an said, 'Ah, Mrs. Masahiro, you are a life saver; I could do with a break about now.'

For a good 10 minutes Mr. Leipowich and Mrs. Masahiro enjoyed their tea and cakes in companionable silence, as they had done every afternoon for the last 30 odd years. A good tea requires no conversational embellishment.

But after that silent appreciating, it was customary to update each other on the day's events they separately had enjoyed. Usually this part of their tea break was pretty boring, but not today. Today, Mrs Masahiro had great news and she decided to come right to it.

'You remember we talked about Fujiwara's new concert tour in Japan,' she asked.

'Oh, yes, he's fantastic, I would so love to book him here at Carnegie,' Mr. Leipowich gushed, a look of sincere longing on his face. 'It's a goddamn shame he just doesn't play outside Japan. I just gotta try going there next tour, cause if the mountain won't come to Mohammed, then I'll just have to haul my butt over there,' he sighed.

'Well,' Mrs. Masahiro said, 'I don't know about Mohammed, but I do know how to get Fujiwara here, I think,' she hedged. Well that got her sizable boss out of his equally sizable chair in a hurry, and she smiled discreetly behind her teacup as he said, 'Really?! Who do I have to have killed? And,' here he sat down again, 'how much is it going to cost us?'

Mrs. Masahiro put down her cup, used her cloth napkin to dry her mouth daintily before saying critically, 'Well, it's not the costs that are worthy of mentioning, it's going to be the organizing that is.'

'Okay, now I'm intrigued, lay it on me, Mrs. Masahiro,' Mr. Leipowich said. And so the Japanese American lady did, laying out the plan she and her husband had come up with to solve all their problems.

And so it came about that that April, Carnegie Hall had a three week run of Japan's most excellent flute player, playing traditional Japanese music with his 5 regular Japanese musicians and western classical music with the New York Youth Orchestra. And that is also how Carnegie Hall ended up hosting the first official amateur Go championships outside of Asia. After all, you can't catch fish without some premium bait and it had been Mr. Masahiro who had known what to pick, after all, even though he hadn't been back to Japan in decades, he still received and read WeeklyGo like any other dedicated Japanese amateur Go player.

圍碁*圍碁*圍碁
Do stick around for Epilogue #5!

Don't forget to review!
Chapter 15

Epilogue #5

Was there anything more blissful than playing the flute all day and Go all evening? Maybe playing Go all day and flute in the evening, well, Sai knew he was going to find out soon enough, because after rehearsals' end the next Saturday his tour of concerts was scheduled to start and he'd be 'free' to play in the Go tournament in the day time. He did expect the three week booking to be grueling especially with the Go games scheduled for during the day, but if he was honest with himself - and he tried to be that as much as possible - he knew he was going to love every tiring second of it.

But for now he had a few hours off and, while Ogata was taking father and son Touya to the Museum of Modern Art, Hikaru had promised to take Sai to Central Park. So off they went, Sai tapping his cane out in front of him, his trusty bag slung over his shoulder - under which he wore the new rain coat his friends had bought him at the airport as it turned out unexpectedly to be very wet and windy in the Big Apple - and with Hikaru holding on to his left elbow so he could steer the blind man away from obstacles as they navigated the streets.

The famous park was not far away from the music hall Sai was rehearsing in and also not far from the hotel he shared a suite in with all his friends. Getting around New York was both easy and difficult; easy with the map Hikaru had - and was adapt at reading - difficult because of the group only Ogata spoke enough English to talk to the 'natives'. Touya-kun had been quite annoyed with himself when he found that his high school English just didn't work as it should have and he could hardly communicate at all with the New Yorkers, Sai remembered. He felt sorry for the boy; it is a disappointment to realize a failure like that, especially if you had been under the impression you had succeeded.

But going to a park requires no language at all and the walking direction were easy enough; leave Carnegie Hall by the front entrance, turn right, keep walking until you hit the park. There would be three streets to cross, Sai was told after he inquired and there was no clicker system but there were traffic lights for pedestrians. Watch out for traffic, he was told. People in New York drive like mad, he was told. No kidding. Well, that's what he'd be bringing Hikaru for. That and the nice company.

Once they managed to get to the park, the city sounds seemed to devolve into busy park sounds; kids running and squealing, bicycles riding, people walking and talking. And there was music being played off in the distance some where as Sai could feel the sun on his face and smell the scent of flowers in the air, intermingled with the smell of car exhaust and humanity.

As much as Sai recognized each smell and sound for whay they were, there were also quite different from those in a Tokyo park. As Hikaru led him down an asphalt covered path, he drank in this new version of old familiar things.

After some strolling, the rhythm of which was pleasantly broken by Hikaru's occasional comment on things Sai could not see, Sai made Hikaru stop walking as he tried to catch the tune that was being played by a western style string instrument some ways away from them. There. He could hear the bow on the strings howling a long note before it started another merry couplet.

'What's up,' Hikaru asked from besides him. 'Nothing's up. Can you hear the music,' Sai asked back. Hikaru was silent for a moment and then he said, 'yeah, I can. Can't tell where it's coming from, though,' he added. 'But I can,' the blind man stated and started walking in the direction of the music, his friend following, still holding on to his elbow.
They went a ways but the Hikaru pulled on Sai's elbow and said, 'This way or you'll run into that tree.' Sai let himself be directed around the obstacle, then he re-found the music and the direction it was in and started walking again. Hikaru had to steer him around a few objects here and there but by and large Sai could follow a direct path to the stringed instrument's music.

The sound had been getting louder, indicating they were getting closer, when the music suddenly stopped. Sai stood still, hoping the sound would come back, but it didn't. He was starting to get very disappointed - he had really wanted to hear more up close - when an idea struck him. He quickly opened his bag and took out his flute and, with his cane still hanging from his wrist, he re-played the central theme of the music he had heard. Then he dropped his hands and waited, Hikaru standing close at his side.

At first there was just the park sounds but then Sai heard the bow wail and play the melody again. He quickly set off in that direction, Hikaru having to hurry to keep up. The sound was swelling; they were getting closer. Then the music stopped again and Sai stopped to play again. After playing exactly what the other had played he stopped and held his breath. And let it out when he heard the melody again.

He moved forward and found himself climbing a small hill. Once the ground leveled out and even started to slope down again, Hikaru called out, 'there! I can see them,' and guided Sai the rest of the way even when the playing had stopped.

Hikaru indicated a halt and they stopped moving. 'There's two black men, one has the whatsit instrument,' Hikaru informed Sai who nodded that he'd heard him. They all stood silent for a while, Sai being unable to figure out what, if any thing, was going on. When he thought they'd been silent long enough, he pulled out his flute and played the melody again.

'/Hey man, that's the dude who's been playin' at ya before,'/ a dark voice said. The words had been in English, Sai could hear that much, but he couldn't understand a word of course.

'Hikaru, what did he say,' Sai asked, knowing that it was unlikely Hikaru had understood any of it either; the boy's English was a lot worse than Touya-kun's.

'I dunno,' Hikaru whispered back. And then the playing started again, playing a different tune. When it stopped Sai copied it as exactly as his flute would let him.

'/Hey dude, that's some wicked tootin' you got goin' there. Wanna play some more?'/ a second low voice said from the direction where the music had come from. Sai could do nothing but look uncomprehendingly.

'/Hey bro, I don't think the dude's from around here; I don't think he speak no English,'/ the first voice said.

'/There's more to life than speakin' English,/ the second said and played a short series of notes on his instrument, a cello, Sai guessed; the Youth Orchestra had one too. Sai repeated them. A longer series was played, which he again repeated.

'/See?'/ the second voice said, /'this dude don't need no English, we can talk just fine.'/

More was played, a melody this time and Sai started repeating it when the cello started playing a counter to the theme. Sai kept playing, putting in minor changes to the original when he heard the cellist do the same. They played for a good 10 minutes like this until the variations ran out naturally. From the change in the ambient sounds, Sai concluded people had come to listen to them and it made him feel appreciated.
'Yes folks, that's some great playing, please give generously!' came the first voice now from some place behind the blind man.

Hikaru's mouth appeared at the blind man's ear. 'Sai, looks like the other guy is collecting money from the crowd, is that like, okay?' Sai had to think on that for a moment. He had had to beg for money in his time; he would never forget what that was like. Were these guys homeless? Was this money for food and shelter? Even if it wasn't, Sai felt it wasn't up to him to judge; when he had begged he had had nothing to offer in compensation. This cellist and his friend had good music to offer at least, there was no shame in that that Sai could see.

'It's alright, let them,' Sai said and put the flute back up to his mouth and started a tune that he hoped was universal enough that the cellist could follow it and so that they could 'talk' together a little more. After all, it takes two to make great Go and that went for music too as far as Sai was concerned.

Do stick around for Epilogue #...

Ehr no, that really was the last of them. However I reserve this space in case I come up with any more epilogues or out-takes. Who knows, I may.

I hope you all enjoyed the story!
I'm assuming since you've made it all the way to the end that it didn't totally suck.

You can use 'follow the author' to get notifications of new stories being uploaded here, but also keep an eye on my user page as I have at least two more Hikaru no Go stories in the planning that are not the right material for FF.

All my stories will appear on ArchiveOfOurOwn, but do read the tags and warnings for the ratings and genre of the stories, before reading. I use the same name on AO3 as here.

Don't forget to review!

I answer all ff member reviews!

(I would answers guest reviews to, if I could only figure out how! ;)

Tx, Me-Anne (and all guests), for sticking it out until the very end! And yes, I could keep writing snippets of Sai's life forever, and I'm not discounting the possibility that a few epilogues may appear! But first I need a breather!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!