

Sai's Disciple

Von distinctive

Kapitel 1:

Hitting the gadget that rang so damn annoyingly, Hikaru felt like a contradicting controversy this morning. Not that he actually knew the meaning of those words. A lazy late summer day greeted the boy with warm sunshine through the windowpane and lively birds were giving him his second wake-up call for the day.

Befuddled he tried to make sense of input besides his usual "Mah let me sleep some more". There was something missing... he squinted into the bright light... something...

"AGH!" He startled awake, immediately charging into action, suddenly remembering.

It was his first day of junior high school though he really didn't even want to think of school. At the same time he had to wonder about all the new friends he will make and all the amazing sports clubs he could attend... elementary school didn't offer any such clubs therefore it was a novelty he definitely didn't want to pass up. Hence, with mixed feelings he half-ignored his mother's calls from downstairs "Yeah yeah mom I'm already awake" and went into the adjourning bathroom, refreshing and dressing himself.

Finally equipped with his Haze Jr. High uniform and his bag slung over his right shoulder he bounced down the steps, narrowly missing his mother who had just wanted to come up.

"Someone is very energetic today." She chuckled. Hikaru huffed.

"Duh. Mom, it's my first day in a new school." He exasperatedly tolerated his mother's straightening of his clothes, smoothing out of wrinkles he really didn't care about.

"Come on, Hikaru, breakfast first." She commanded. "Your lunch is on the kitchen desk, you can get it after eating..."

"Mom, I probably won't even stay away till lunch!" A first day at a new school mostly consisted of a welcome speech, class assignment and introduction. Hikaru had just finished his breakfast when the door bell rang.

"That must be Akari." He exclaimed, happy that his childhood friend hadn't forgotten

their promise to go together. Jumping up from his chair which made a scraping sound on the floor, he grabbed for his bag, nearly forgetting the bento in the process but taking and packing it into his bag after he noticed his mother's reproaching gaze.

"I'm leaving, mom!"

Five minutes later Akari was still waiting in front of the Shindo's residence, already impatiently tapping her right foot.

"We're so going to be late." She stated with a half-glare when her friend finally emerged from the house. The bleach banded boy merely grinned, approaching her with brisk steps.

"Oh come on, Akari. You know that's early for me! I can't help you being such a stick in the mud when we're still in time!"

"Oh you!" She playfully cuffed his ears.

"Ow! You totally act like my grandma!" He complained dramatically, rubbing his abused appendages. For some time they walked down the narrow streets next to each other uncharacteristically silent, caught in their own thoughts, until the station was already in sight.

"I'm kind of excited." The girl confessed out of the blue, turning to face him. "Have you already thought about what clubs you want to attend?"

"Soccer of course!" Hikaru said with an exaggerated "duh" expression on his face. Akari giggled.

"Should have known that."

"You?"

"... I don't know yet." She muttered indecisively. "Maybe the Go club..." Hikaru promptly came to a halt and turned towards her with an incredulous look on his face.

"Y...you play Go!"

"Why not?" She retorted defensively, annoyed by his disbelieving outburst.

"No, it's just..." He sputtered. "It's an old men's game!" They had finally reached the station which was filled with people going to work using public transportation at this time of the day. The boy's last very loud exclamation had earned them irritated looks from some bystanders.

"A friend taught me." The girl corrected proudly. "Mere three years older than us, female."

"...Are you any good?" Hikaru, sometimes knowing when a point had to be conceded,

eyed her doubtfully. She shrugged. "There are not too many different people I've played..." She acknowledged.

"Thought so. They probably would kick you from the club after you showed them your skills in Go, all the while chanting *ommmmm*." He teased her.

"Oh you!" Narrowly escaping another ear cuff, laughing, they now had to hurry in order to catch the train which had just arrived at the platform. They caught it, but just so.

When they finally reached Haze Jr. High the last stream of students was filing into the wide front yard and the gate was about to close.

"Matte!" They yelled simultaneously, desperately reaching for the closing goal. A short, dark-haired guy with glasses, dressed in the customary Haze uniform, halted his attempt when he saw the two huffing and puffing beings running straight for him.

"You're late." He chided, assessing them critically and coming to the right conclusion, his strict countenance softening.

"You must be first years. The ceremony is about to begin." Closing the school gate behind them with a final click he pointed over his shoulder.

"Come on, I'll show you the way." They thankfully accepted their senpai's directions.

"I'm Tsutsui by the way." The boy introduced himself as they walked through the school yard towards the main building. "Tsutsui Kimihiro."

"I'm Fujisaki Akari." The girl smiled. "And this is Shindou Hikaru, we're childhood friends." The two guys nodded at each other.

The school's own banquet hall was brimming with voices and the occasional scraping of wood on floor.

"Mah it's too full already." Akari sulked. "I bet there's no place to sit any more!" Tsutsui had to smile at her attitude.

"I guess I'll see you around school." He excused himself. "Oh, you can find me in class 3b, ask for me if you have questions and such." And with that he disappeared outside.

"Nice guy." Akari commented. Hikaru looked at her askance.

"New boyfriend of yours?" He taunted.

"Oh you!"

"I'm home!" He shouted as he entered the house, shedding his shoes and bag. No answer.

"Mom?" He called out hesitantly. "Anybody home?" His only answer was the kitchen clock ticking away.

"Guess not." He scoffed. "I wonder where she is..." Hungry, since he hadn't found the time to eat his bento, he went into the kitchen to grab a glass, prepared some juice and sat down at the desk to get down to business. That was when he discovered the piece of paper wedged in beneath the spice container. Still chewing he picked it up, eyeing the kanji reproachfully.

Somehow it read.

Dear Hikaru

Your dad suddenly had to leave for overseas. It's work related. Since he will be gone quite a long time I decided to go with him. I asked my parents-in-law to watch over you for the next months, they'll get you some time in the afternoon.

Sorry for the short notice.

Your loving mom

"What the...?" He sputtered with his mouth still full, suddenly glad that no one was present to observe the current mess.

This was new. His mother had never left with his father before, due to his father's strict separating of business from family. Though father had never been gone for quite so long before...

Not knowing what to do with himself and somewhat feeling disoriented by the newest developments Hikaru decided to go play early afternoon soccer at the park, wishing to clear his head. He wanted to be able to think. Not that he had any real skill for thinking anyway, a teasing voice, suspiciously sounding like a certain girl, chimed in. Thus, dressed in his most casual clothes, grabbing a back bag and packing in his soccer ball he left for the park.

The park was empty but for a few scattered people either enjoying the early afternoon sun for a read on a park bench, walking with their dog (or cat, as Hikaru noticed, astonished), playing on a meadow or merely relaxing with closed eyes.

There were also a few pairs of various ages sitting or walking together. His gaze was unconsciously drawn to a figure who sat some feet away from the sunlight, enjoying the shadow in the corners. The person's face looked strained as if in pain, he noticed, a bit uncomfortable, feeling like a voyeur.

Yet he couldn't help but wonder... was it a girl... a guy? He really guessed a girl, but he couldn't be all too sure when... The girl's? guy's? eyes suddenly snapped open, mightily startling the boy, who stumbled backwards ending in an awkward position.

When nothing happened save for the stare he blinked and relaxed, deciding it would be best to just walk on as if nothing had happened. As he strolled on, aiming for the meadow, a curious thought flittered through his mind that didn't quite sound like his.

Now, what was that about?

He had gotten lucky. His grandparent's car arrived 'round five o'clock when he was just returning from the park. Meeting some other kids asking him to play with them had really made time run by fast and when he finally noticed how far the sun has already crawled towards west he had thought that he was already too late.

His grandpa greeted him with his customary "Hey boy" while his grandma gave him a brief hug which he endured.

"That really surprised us." She stated drily. "I've always known our son to be sporadic like this, but Mitsuko..." Hikaru honestly didn't think his father to be sporadic, more like overly organized, but who was he to contradict his father's parents?

"Why come here so late though?" He grumbled. Not that he really was annoyed at them since he got to play in the park, but still... They went into the house, his grandpa helping him pack most of his stuff into big plastic bags while his grandma made sure that everything inside the household was secured and turned off.

"The plants will wither still." They heard her lament from downstairs. Hikaru grinned slyly at his jii-chan.

"Grandma and her green thumb." The old man chuckled back. "Some things never change." When they finally had everything gathered together they locked the door, taking the house key with them.

Crawling into the back seat of the car Hikaru buckled up and they took off, leaving the familiar block of houses behind. Staring back at it wistfully his current situation suddenly hit him hard. It wasn't that he felt abandoned by them or anything... it was... it was just...

His grandpa seemed to sense his darkening mood, because he spoke up, not taking his gaze from the front though. "The reason we couldn't come any sooner was that we were at a Go match until now." He told the brooding boy. "A friend of mine was a commentator."

"Go again, I should have known." Came the insolent reply. "I'm used to it from you gramps, but grandma too? I thought women didn't have the brains for Go?"

"Oh you." His grandma huffed and cuffed his ears, even though it was pretty much awkward to arrange from the front seats.

Living with his grandparents didn't turn out to be as bad as he had feared. While they had their ticks Heihachi led a pretty open-minded household. He actually helped Hikaru rearrange his vast manga and video game collection in the guest room. Even

his feeling of abandonment had somewhat lifted when his kaa-san called the very next day, sounding very remorseful.

Obviously father was to be some kind of messenger in a country where it was very weird to be wife-less and where it looked even better to have his wife by his side when being visited by or while visiting a prominent figure.

It was his second week attending Haze Jr. High now and he has made some new friends, including a rather foul-mouthed senpai and a contrary silent yet humorous boy called Yukimura who newly defined the saying "calm waters are deep". Both were members of the club he attended.

While he didn't meet Akari's and his first day acquaintance Tsutsui again, he knew that Akari has actually joined their senpai's club which obviously overjoyed said boy. Turns out that compared to other schools the Haze Go club wasn't exactly popular... as if he cared. Hikaru was satisfied with his own club activities.

"Shindou-kun, where are you going?" The quiet voice of Yuki-kun, as they fondly called him after a certain character who seems vulnerable and weak yet packs quite a punch, came from his left as they walked across the back yard, shoulder to shoulder, crushing crisp grass underneath their feet.

Soccer practice had recently come to an end and Yukimura, who was one of the better players in their team, had exited the dressing-room with him. Turning towards the main building instead of the expected school gate Hikaru looked at his friend contritely, sports bag dangling from his left shoulder.

"Sorry, Yuki-kun, I'm leaving with Akari today." He explained.

"Isn't Fujisaki-san in the..." The boy squinted as if trying to remember something really outlandish. "Shougi club?"

"It's Go." Hikaru corrected with an undertone he probably didn't even realize he had. "And yeah, she is." They said their mutual good-byes and the bleach banded boy briskly walked towards the main building. Until now he never had to get her personally, but she had told him that it might take longer today.

Despite all the new friends he made in class Akari was certainly still his best. I could check out this Go club after all, he thought, curious despite himself.

After running around some (while Akari had told him it had gone in one ear and out the other) he found out that the Go club always gathered in the chemistry lab, courtesy to Tamako-sensei. When he arrived there and slid open the lab door he didn't find the expected auburn-haired girl and neither did he see four-eyes.

Instead the sight of a messy red-head who was lazily flipping a fan with a huge shougi symbol on it greeted him when he threw an imploring gaze through the open door. Huh, Shougi? Hikaru blinked, confounded. Had his friend actually been right?

"Ano...I'm looking for Akari-chan." Hikaru tentatively announced himself.

The other looked up from his waiting position, surprised.

"Fujisaki-kun and Tsutsui-kun?" The other boy asked idly, considering the boy standing at the threshold briefly.

"They went to the teacher's room to have a talk with the Haze Go club's sponsor. Something 'bout getting a new board 'cause the old one isn't well maintained or stuff like that." *Flip.* Leaning back casually until his middle back touched the table edge behind him the red-haired boy eyed him seriously.

"You can wait or do you want t-..."

Step, step, step, BANG! They red-head jumped, nearly losing grip on his fan.

"Kaga! Are you attempting to run off another potential member again!" A furious voice came from behind Hikaru who's bag hit the ground in shock.

"Ah, speaking of the devil. Here comes Tsutsui-kun." The boy called Kaga chuckled. "And he's royally pissed off. Why would I try to run off members anyway?" He questioned with open honesty. *Flip.*

"Well, you don't really try." Four-eyes admitted quietly so that only Hikaru and maybe Akari who stood close behind him could hear it, all the while glaring at the shougi-boy. The bleach banded boy's head swiped from one to the other, puzzled. They seemed like archenemies at a ping pong match.

"Roll that by me again?" Red-head was hitting the ball back mockingly.

"I said: your personality is all that's needed for that!" The stereotype of calm-boy spat at him.

"Mah. Stop it, you guys." An exasperated Akari said from behind Hikaru, passing by Tsutsui and him, thus entering the small chemistry lab.

"By the way, sensei accepted one of our requests. Which means no longer training on a scratched up board at least." She grinned triumphantly.

"Training?" Hikaru automatically asked. Turning around she blinked.

"Hikaru? Why are you here?" He sweat-dropped.

"Silly. You told me to wait, right?"

"Oh that's right..." She reddened. "Um... you don't know Kaga yet. Kaga Tetsuo is the chief of the Shougi club but a temporary Go club member. Shindou Hikaru, my childhood friend." She introduced them.

Eh! A shougi chief as a Go club member? Somewhere in his brain he could faintly recall that they were pretty much different concepts. "Are you any good at Go then?" He asked innocently.

Kaga shot a reproachful glare at him, skilfully flicking his fan shut.

"I detest Go." He declared imperiously, pointing the shut fan at the hapless boy. "But I'm good enough in both games to beat the pants off you and everyone else, idiot."

What the...!

"Who are you calling an idiot, carrot-head?"

"Hikaru!" Akari reprimanded him from a corner of the room, but was blatantly ignored for the sake of them shouting their heads off. They're really one of a kind, quarrelling like that on their very first meeting... While they were bickering back and forth Tsutsui knelt down and pulled out a goban from a locked cupboard.

"Kaga is a temporary member for the up-coming inter school Go tournament." Tsutsui explained while opening the fold-able board and extracting some things.

"We are still missing one member though."

"Why don't we just take this brat?" Kaga suggested out of the blue, rubbing his chin with a smirk on his lips, obviously finished exchanging insults with the boy. "I like his attitude, you could teach him."

Brat? Hikaru decided to go for the more obvious thing this time. "What? I'm busy enough with soccer and such!" The crestfallen gaze Tsutsui sent his way nearly did him in. He awkwardly rubbed the back of his head.

"No, really, sorry."

Tsutsui let out a disappointed sigh. "'s alright, nothing new."

"Tsutsui-senpai?" Akari piped up, having gathered her school stuff. "I'm leaving for today." Behind them Tsutsui and Kaga went down to business, pondering over some map, list, paper or whatever.

"Are they always like that?" Hikaru asked in amazement after they were out of ear-shot.

"Pretty much." Akari sighed. They made their way to the station, talking about random things, manga and video games. When they were about to cross a traffic light Akari suddenly seemed to have a revelation.

"Oh that's right! The school festival will be soon and the soccer club won't have much to do, right?" They had crossed the street by now, slowing down their steps and filtering through the crowd that was gathering near the train station. Since Hikaru

lived with his grandparents now the train station was the utmost goal they could go together.

"Actually no." He admitted, throwing her an imploring gaze. "Still you'd have to attend anyway, right?" She went on, a strange gleam in her eyes.

"Um... yes I guess so." He replied warily. His best friend nearly bounced up and down with anticipation.

"Then how about you h-..."

"Hey, Hikaru! And Akari too!" A hoarse yell came from behind them. Both teenagers turned around, shocked.

"Gramps?" The boy asked, surprised when he saw the old man exiting the shopping mall and coming straight at them.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Shopping, what else to do in the very centre of Tokyo?" His jii-chan grouched. Shopping! "That didn't sound very excited, Shindou-san." Akari stated hesitatingly. The old Shindou huffed at this. "Not for me." He disclosed.

"I had to drive my wife and a friend of hers."

Akari furrowed her brows. "Why not take the public transport?" Hikaru eyed his jii-chan puzzlingly when the man sighed, then groaned, then sighed again, looking very much like his personal version of

"Guess what? Oba-chan's friend has some semi-mild case of mysophobia." He whispered to them behind forth-held hand, seemingly uncomfortable.

"You don't want to know what measures I had to take with cleaning the car before she wanted to climb in."

She has...what?

"What's that?" Hikaru and Akari exclaimed in unison.

"Fear of germs, dirt and stuff." The old man rubbed his non-existing top hair awkwardly.

"In any case, nobody is at home and since I forgot my wife was in possession of the only key right now..." Hikaru groaned.

"Damn, I can't go home." "The ladies told me they don't wish to be disturbed for five hours." Both males groaned again with the same feeling of inevitability behind it, while Akari was left looking back and forth between them, confused. It seemed there was some kind of insider information she was missing.

"Um...I have a date later this day. See you tomorrow, Hikaru. Good day, Shindou-san." Excusing herself, she bowed to the older Shindou.

Her friend watched her leave, slack-jawed. "So she's dating that Tsutsui after all, huh?"

"Tsutsui-san? Who is Tsutsui-san?"

"Oh, just this senpai of ours..."

In the end Heihachi invited his grandson to ramen, since the boy just wouldn't stop whining about his grumbling stomach.

"One ramen with lots of beef and extra noodles please." Hikaru ordered with glittering eyes, swigging down the food as soon as it arrived.

"People will think we are starving you, Hikaru." His grandpa tsked.

"Bft eimnt geing msch rmen lely." The boy complained, finally being fed up with chewing and just gulped the rest down, nearly choking. Shaking his head "That kid is hopeless" Shindou-san leaned back in the chair, tuning in the conversations around him.

"The next delivery is to the Go salon just next door." Someone said. Probably the proprietor. "The owner is a new regular."

There is a Go salon next door? Leaning back in his chair he let the lingering aftertaste of his favourite ramen relax him. *I haven't been confronted with Go that frequently for a very long time. Since the moment mother left me with my grandparents it's almost like... like some higher being wants me to go back to Go, pressing the game on me, not easing off. Strange that I only notice it now while it has been going on for days. Leaves me wondering what else it will throw my way...*

"Hikaru, let's take a look at this Go salon next door." His grandpa demanded eagerly. This definitely is being controlled from somewhere. Welcome to the NHK, anyone?

"But gramps..."

"I even invited you to ramen, so you can be accommodating for once." Or he must be cursed. *First I have to hang out with my gramps of all people, and now I have to enter a Go salon too? How uncool.* Hikaru sighed. Actually there was always a worse. He could be hanging out with carrot-head right now. Still, he was so looking forward to all the manga and video games that were waiting for him back home.

Hikaru didn't exactly know what he had expected a Go salon to look like but this wasn't it. The front door was automatic and made Hikaru jump when he expected having to push it open. Within it looked more like a fine restaurant than any kind of salon he could ever imagine.

There were tropical plants, semi-high walls separating areas, a fish tank and, the only thing that was somewhat expected, pictures featuring Go and Go certificates hanging on the walls. The most likely things to find here were, of course, the tables, the chairs, the gobans and the geezers.

"Welcome. For two?" The lady behind the reception desk greeted them. Jii-chan nodded, ignoring his grandson's grimace. I thought we would only be taking a look!

"Alright, that's 750 yen for you and 500 yen for the child." While the old Shindou finished the procedures Hikaru used the time to assess the clientele. They seemed to be of the upper tier, some in suits and others in expensive looking sweaters. It made the boy definitely feel out of place.

"Um... jii-chan, I'm not sure this is..." He began in a low voice but immediately stopped when he saw a lone boy his age sitting in one corner of the big room.

"There's a kid!" He exclaimed, causing the boy to look up from his reading. His grandpa startled up and when he saw the other boy too his face immediately brightened.

"Ah, hello Akira-kun." He smiled, greeting the boy, the boy smiling back and bowing slightly. "He should be about your age. But what is he doing here..."

"It's his father's new Go salon." The reception lady explained readily enough. "When the old one burnt down Touya Meijin decided to invest in a bigger one close to the centre of Tokyo. There is a Cultural Institute nearby too and many people who learn Go there come here to gain experience."

"Touya Meijin, Akira-kun?" Hikaru asked curiously when they walked over to one of the empty tables. His grandpa scoffed at his ignorance, but explained it anyway.

"Meijin is a title you can earn when you are a pro. Since titles have a ranking too and Meijin is the best ranked title Touya-sensei has earned yet he is called Touya Meijin. And Akira-kun is his son."

"You don't really know anything, huh, kid?" A mocking voice came from the left table when they just were about to sit down. What was it with the people today, calling him idiot, brat, then kid? Before he could react though another voice piped in.

"Let the boy be." The man who was playing the insulting voice's owner said, putting down another black stone.

"Better concentrate on our game, you really need that."

"But to not know the master and Akira-sensei..." The first man said, shaking his head in resignation as if he had just learnt that the world was even worse off than he had first assumed.

"Well, sorry for being ignorant." The boy muttered, abandoning his seat after a while

in preference for taking a good look at the game both of them were playing.

His grandpa had gotten into an intense Go discussion with some other geezer and then they had started playing which left Hikaru sitting rather lonesome. At first the black and white dots on the light brown board's surface didn't make much sense to him due to years of negligence but then they slowly started to take shape.

Black is obviously in the lead but white still has a chance if ... it is actually one of the easier problems...

"Geez, I resign. You're just too strong today." Eeh?

"Today? I always win." The other man boasted, amused.

"But white could have won!" The two men eyed him in bewilderment at his loud outburst, while most of the other people were staring at him, bemused, or even irritated at the interruption.

"Errr... really sorry for that." He bowed to them, red-faced.

"And how would you have gone about it, boy?" The man who had played white asked, somewhat curious.

"Err... wait." Hikaru made his way closer to the board and went about rearranging some pieces until they had reached a former state of the same match.

"If white had gone there first it would have been better. Black would have been in trouble." He arranged the board back to its latest glory. He didn't notice that he had gotten added audience curious about a boy his age knowing more of Go than someone their age did.

"And there it was a bit too early to resign. While you would have to sacrifice some stones you could still have won that skirmish on the left lower side by surrounding there..." he pointed at the grid points.

"...and there and while at it seriously threaten this group of black stones in the middle. White could have won barely...err... probably by half a moku."

"White would have easily won by two moku and a half." Another voice said. Startled out of his concentration he noticed the boy he had seen sitting alone before standing next to him eying the board all the while throwing him curious glances.

"I'm Touya Akira." He politely introduced himself. "Shindou Hikaru." He automatically said back.

"Do you want to play a game too, Shindou-kun?" Touya asked, in some way fascinated by the other boy's problem solving. And it hadn't been all too easy to solve either.

"No, not really." Came the unexpected reply. "I don't play Go."

The bob-boy coughed. "You don't...?"

"Uh... that came out wrong. I mean I prefer not to play Go." *That sounds even worse... argh!* Inner Hikaru was pulling at his hair. The other boy merely tilted his head slightly, eying him thoughtfully.

"Why not? You are pretty good."

"I am – ow!" He nearly toppled over when he was hit in the back, hard.

"If Akira-sensei says your are good it means you must be decent." White said, grinning at him while Hikaru was nursing his aching back, glaring at the man reproachfully.

"Why don't you play him and have some fun? It's not often Akira-kun gets to play someone his age after all."

"But I-..."

"No, don't argue. Here, sit down." A reluctant Hikaru was pressed back into the seat he had formerly occupied.

"And Akira-sensei, please do sit down." What a difference, Hikaru thought wryly. The other boy, now sitting opposite of him, was looking at him apologetically.

"Sorry for this." He tried to diffuse the situation after the audience had gone back to their own tables, getting a resigned sigh as answer.

"Don't worry about that." A discomfited silence followed where Hikaru threw occasional peeks at his grandpa sitting some tables down, but they both seemed very concentrated, they hadn't even noticed the commotion just now.

"Don't just sit around like that, play!" Came the obnoxious man's voice from the neighboured table. Hikaru stared at the board, suddenly mesmerized by the lines and grid points.

"Shall we play?" The hesitant voice startled him out of his stupor. He was actually tempted. How long had it been? Why had he stopped? His friends didn't want to hang out with a Go nerd, he remembered. His parents didn't care either way. And his gramps...

Hikaru, his jii-chan rebukes him gently. Never start fights that you are sure to lose. It was deep winter again. The fire in the hearth was crackling merrily and warmly, the door leading out to the summer-side terrace closed for this season.

They are sitting in front of the shrine of jii-chan's brother – always ready for a good game of Go the old boy, grandpa always boasts fondly but then turns sad – playing said game. The dead have to be honoured, he says.

And what is more honour to a dedicated Go player than having people immortalizing it in front of his very grave? He was able to read into the game like no other, but he died too young, didn't get the chance to change his mind and enter the Pro world.

He always used to trick me into multiple Ko fights on the board, we constantly laughed about that. Jii-chan, little Hikaru pipes up. I'll learn to play like uncle did, so don't be sad anymore, ok?

Hikaru ... over the fluffy blanket straightened out underneath them and over the goban where the game was still going on Heihachi shuffled his grandson's mop dotingly.

How had it all begun? With this warm and sand-retching scene of a grandfather and –son? With the Go-prodigy who was the brother? Or many many thousands of years ago when the game was first invented? How had it all ended? With doubts.

Hikaru, what are you playing for? Whom are you playing for?

"Shindou-kun?" Given Touya's worried expression his name must have been called for some time now. "We don't need to play if you don't wish to."

Instead of answering Hikaru asked the question that was burning his mental trails right now.

"Have you ever thought of quitting Go?" The other boy looked at him incredulously. Well, that answers my question but then his face turned thoughtful. All the while inner Hikaru was bouncing in circles, desperately shouting: I am not just about to have a psycho talk with some stranger my age, I'm so NOT.

"Err... to be honest, no." How refreshingly direct. "But I sometimes had my doubts. I used to ask my father a lot if I had talent and such when I was a kid."

"You did?"

"Yes, and he would always answer that he was sure I had, but that my two most important talents always will be the ability to work hard and my dedication for the game."

They were interrupted by someone called Ichikawa-san, as he found out, who asked them if they wanted something to drink. While Touya was asking for some green tea and him declining he found time to ponder over the other boy's answer.

Hard work and dedication, huh?, he thought dryly. Father would probably love him to bits. But actually he could relate to it somehow. He liked soccer, some would even say he was devoted to it.

Curious he asked: "Are you very dedicated to the game?"

With his right thumb the other was drawing small circles on the top edge of the tea cup in open contemplation.

"I guess so. I'm playing whenever I can and I'm studying fuseki and kifu too, all the while developing my own style." Somehow the other boy managed to make him feel like a total fail. Had he ever worked that hard on something? Not even his soccer had gotten that much effort...

"I bet you must be the typical nerd then. Top of your class, huh?"

That earned him an offended glare. "I'm NOT a nerd!" White and black were looking up from the next table, obviously startled and for some strange reason a bit incredulous.

"Just kidding, geez, don't take the words so seriously."

But Touya was staring at him intensely now, seemingly processing something that only recently had started to make sense.

"Shindou-kun, have you stopped playing Go because your classmates shunned you?" Hit the nail on the head, would you? Inner Hikaru was currently drowning his face in a trough of water.

He glanced sideways. "Partly." He admitted. "How did you guess?"

"It often happens, it wasn't much different with me when I was younger." Inner Hikaru tentatively pulled his soaked head out of the trough.

"W...weren't you lonely then?" Touya shrugged, staring into his tea, obviously uncomfortable.

"No, I don't think so. I had father's friends to talk and play Go with. I convinced myself that I didn't have any need of some immature brats back then." That certainly explained the other boy's grown-up attitude.

"And father supports me a lot, I don't think I've ever contemplated quitting Go, not even in my dreams."

Taking a tentative seep he finally looked up and Hikaru once again found himself the focus point of the other's inquiring stare.

"What about you? What was your reason for playing?"

"Grandpa... I guess."

"Shindou-san?"

"Actually his brother. Grandfather used to say how great he was at Go."

"But you have never played for yourself?"

Suddenly faint impressions came to him, like a puzzle needing some time be put back into the right order.

He found himself staring upon a board. Space. The upper right hoshi, the upper left hoshi, they were the stars and the black and white stones the planets that were gradually creating a new universe...

He subtly shook himself. "Not that I recall."

"Then why don't you test it out?"

Huh? "Test it out?"

"You haven't played in a while, right? Then it is no wonder you can't recall certain emotions you might have experienced back then. So let's play."

Sometime along their weird peep talk Hikaru's reluctance had kind of melted away, leaving a certain anticipation. It was still a game of geezers and nerds of course, and yet... "Alright, let's." He agreed. "But only one game."

Touya nodded and began moving the bowls, holding the bowl with the black stones out to him. "How about you place down three stones?"

"Eeh?" Hikaru exclaimed, nonplussed. "Won't we nigiri? And I don't want to put down stones against a boy my age!"

"Baka!" White yelled from nearby before the stunned other boy could react. Black snickered. "What a boy! Playing with no handicaps against Akira-sensei."

"Alright, geez. I'll take black but I WON'T put down any stones." Hikaru proudly conceded. Black snickered again. Touya merely looked apologetic. "Fine, suit yourself."

"Sure. No pressure, right?"

They exchanged the customary greeting, Hikaru a bit hesitant due to his inexperience with serious players. And so, as it was the course of events Hikaru went first.

His hand shook slightly when he pulled out a black stone with a soft kaching. Eyeing the board silently he tried to recall the last game he played, and failed.

"What're you hesitating for at your first move, boy?"

Black and white, who he later would get to know as Matsuura-san and Inoue-san, had approached the board, now standing very close as silent audience... or not. No pressure, sure.

"Can't you back off some?" He complained, finally getting his hand out of the bowl and placing the first stone at the lower right hoshi with a quiet pachi.

Immediately answered by his opponent's taking possession of the hoshi parallel to it. After they had finished the usual starting fuseki the game continued very aggressive, Touya purposely trying to inflame Hikaru's Go while said boy defended against the attacks as well as he could.

The other boy was giving off a pressure Hikaru had never felt the likes of, having only played his grandpa and the occasional equally Go-obsessed friend who visited. Soon it had him sweating and the epitome of a head-ache was steadily approaching. That was how he made his first real mistake (he was pretty sure there had to be more).

Inner Hikaru let himself fall down stomach first, working the hapless ground with his fists like in throwing a tantrum.

ARGH! That's actually harder than playing in a soccer match with the ball ready to pass and the expectations of the whole team weighing on me.

He looked up. Touya was mustering the board in silent contemplation. While he didn't look like he felt particularly threatened or anything like that he gave off the feel of being on a mission.

Yeah, beating the crap out of me probably. How can he look that relaxed while I have to defend with every turn, that's so aggravating!

Hikaru was about to put down another stone when something moved at the edge of his consciousness. Space. Hoshi. Stones. Planets.

And suddenly the whole memory came back to him.

"What are you doing, Hikaru-kun? Are you only playing around?"

"Yeah, only playing." A small Hikaru laughed, pointing at the board. "Look, look. I'm making my own universe! The goban is the space. The upper right hoshi, the upper left hoshi, all the hoshi, they are the stars and the stones are the planets."

He gasped, finally understanding. He had learnt Go for his grandpa, sure. He had even continued playing for him. But he had wished to create his own universe and for this to be God on his own, he had found some real appeal in the game and thus in playing it with others.

When looking in the board now he could still see the remnants of the space of old, but he was also able to see something else. A slow smirk tilted his lips upwards.

"Well, it wasn't that bad." Touya consoled him when Hikaru had resigned half-way through the match. "pit pat." Hikaru sulked, unconsciously using his grandma's way of expressing 'nonsense when you hear it'.

"It didn't even reach yose!"

"Hey boy, don't be too full of yourself by expecting to beat sensei at an even game!" Praised boy moved his hands in a placating way.

"It's alright, Matsuura-san." And turning back to his former opponent.

"Shindou-kun, how about I-..." He interrupted himself when he saw the other boy brooding over the board, his light green eyes hidden by the blond bangs.

"Are you alright?"

When Hikaru looked up again Touya didn't find the expected defeated look but a burning inferno instead.

"Only wait until our next game!" He promised. "I'll beat you then!"

The Matsuura guy sputtered, Inoue-san snickered. Touya merely watched him with a blank expression. That was when his grandfather finally decided he had played enough Go and came over towards them.

"Hey, boy, have you finished your things?" When he noticed Touya sitting with him, and over a filled goban no less, he looked astonished at first but easily found his bearings again, deciding to come back at it later. "Let's go, or we will be too late!"

Hikaru actually blanched when he recalled the very reason that had led him here. Heihachi excused them and left the salon in a half-run, dragging a semi-protesting Hikaru along with him.

After they had left the three remaining participants looked at each other in astonishment, then shrugged. Probably some insider information they were missing.

"Was the boy really any good?" Matsuura asked, doubtful.

"He's better at insight than actual playing." Akira admitted. "He probably lacks experience, but some of his moves really surprised me."

Looking sideways at the goban he remembered the unexpected move the boy had placed after making a damning mistake. It was like having a glimpse into a potential the boy hadn't even begun to dip into. He also recalled Shindou's challenging gaze, as if he had found another reason for playing Go in him.

And that was how Hikaru finally found his way back to Go. In the end it was Akira who realized that it was his Go that might have been an empty Go.

tbc