

**My Quiet Beach Vacation
Is Actually a Government Population Initiative,
as I Suspected**

Story Starts

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Chapter 2.2 -

**Obviously, All Scientific Progress and Governmental Reproductive
Sponsors Are Entirely Above Board**

The applause died like a candle in a typhoon. Aria and Shino stood at centre stage, their expressions shifting from celebratory to businesslike with the practised ease of women who'd hosted too many industry events.

"Now then," Shino said, her deadpan cutting through the residual murmurs.

"Let's discuss the first portion of our programme."

"The fun part!" Aria added, bouncing slightly. The movement did things to her chest that several people in the room tracked involuntarily.

I was several people.

Shino adjusted her clipboard. "As mentioned, this programme will last at least one month."

At least.

At least.

Let me trace the trajectory of this particular goalpost, shall I? Komachi had sold me on five days. Five days of sun, sand, and whatever other alliterative holiday pleasures existed. Then, upon arrival, the programme had revealed the true duration: one month. I'd barely finished processing that betrayal when Shino had just—casually, as though discussing the weather—appended "at least" to the sentence.

Five days. One month. At least one month. At this rate, by Tuesday they'd announce this was a lifetime appointment with a pension scheme and dental.

The goalpost hadn't moved. The goalpost had sprouted legs, boarded a bullet train, and was currently somewhere past Hokkaido heading for international waters on its way to Vladivostok.

'I wonder if the Kujou sisters were from that part of Russia.'

My eyes drifted toward those blue foreign irises, then slid sideways into Miura's green ones.

'Wait. Were they always green?'

Then those eyes narrowed, and mine contracted as if zooming out—registering the full nakedness of someone who owned something phallic, probably vibrating, and named after me.

I resumed staring directly ahead. The stage curtain had a very interesting weave pattern. Cotton-polyester blend, possibly. Excellent thread count.

"The month-long duration ensures all participants achieve successful fertilisation," Shino continued, as though she'd just said something mundane about train schedules rather than casually referenced the reproductive hijacking of my genetic material. "STORK extraction windows require precise timing relative to conception, and we've built in adequate buffer periods."

Buffer periods. They had buffer periods for impregnation. Someone had made a Gantt chart. Somewhere in a government office, a project manager had sat down with a spreadsheet, poured themselves a sensible cup of green tea, and plotted "Hikigaya Hachiman's involuntary fatherhood" across thirty-one colour-coded cells. They'd probably used conditional formatting. They'd probably enjoyed it.

Hideo Kojima had spent three months on android foot articulation, and a civil servant had spent comparable effort scheduling my reproductive output. The twenty-first century was a marvel of misallocated human potential.

"But!" Aria raised a finger. "We don't want anyone getting bored during that month!"

Because boredom was the primary concern here. Not the kidnapping. Not the forced nudity. Not the android wombs. Not the tentacle extraction demonstration I was still classifying as medical. Boredom. The programme had identified the real enemy, and it was insufficient entertainment.

"So we've prepared a series of events!" Aria beamed. "Think of them as... team-building exercises!"

Team-building exercises. For breeding. The HR department of hell had taken notes, decided they could do worse, and had apparently outsourced implementation to a JAV studio.

"Let's discuss the first round," Shino said. "And its stakes."

A new slide appeared on the screen behind them. Bold text, clean graphics, the aesthetic of a corporate presentation designed by someone who watched too much reality television:

ROUND ONE: FIRST WIFE PRIVILEGES

"For this first event," Shino explained, "we will accept only five participants from Hikigaya-san's assigned partners. Each accompanied by their programme partner, of course."

Five. Out of eleven women who'd been presented as my future wives. So this was competitive now. They'd gamified marriage. Somewhere, a game designer was weeping into their keyboard—not because the concept offended them, but because they hadn't thought of it first.

"The winner of this event," Aria said, her voice taking on a breathy, excited quality, "will be designated First Wife!"

She said it like it was a title. Like there was a crown involved. Knowing this programme, there probably was, and it was probably shaped like something

that Shino would describe with perfect deadpan accuracy while Aria tried to stop her.

"First Wife privileges include," Shino read from her clipboard, "priority selection of the master bedroom in the Tokyo residential complex, first choice of office space in the professional wing, and—" she paused, her expression never changing, "—first night privileges with Hikigaya-san upon programme completion, and the power to set schedules for proper relationships between Hikigaya-kun, the first wife, and your sister-wives."

First night privileges.

They'd actually written "first night privileges" on an official government document.

Somewhere, a civil servant had typed those words. Proofread them. Spell-checked them. Run them through the appropriate approval channels. Multiple supervisors had stamped their hanko on a form that contained the phrase "first night privileges" in the same font used for tax legislation. A budget had been allocated. Line items had been created.

Japan's bureaucracy was a marvel. Say what you would about administrative efficiency—when this country committed to a concept, it committed with the thoroughness of a nation that had perfected the art of taking things too far and calling it diligence.

"However!" Aria held up a manicured finger. "Participants who enter this first event will be ineligible for the next event, which will have entirely different prizes! So choose wisely!"

A strategic element. Volunteer now for bedroom privileges and scheduling authority, or hold out for unknown future rewards. Game theory applied to matrimonial competition. John Nash had built his career on the mathematics of strategic decision-making in competitive environments, and I was fairly certain that even he would have looked at this scenario, put down his chalk, and walked out of the lecture hall.

Aria's expression shifted then—her eyes going soft, unfocused, one hand rising to cradle her own cheek as though holding something precious.

"This first scenario," she said, her voice dropping to a fond murmur, "was inspired by the very first video Shichijou Productions ever produced."

Her eyes glistened with what could only be described as maternal nostalgia. The expression a normal person wore when remembering a child's first steps. Aria wore it for pornography.

"We were so young then... and the participants we found were just darling. They had this nervous energy, like—"

"Aria." Shino's cough was surgical. Sharp enough to sever a train of thought at the root.

"Mm?" Aria blinked, returning from whatever memory lane she'd been strolling down. Given her industry, that lane probably had mood lighting and a questionable soundtrack. "Oh! Right, right."

Shino faced the room. "So. Who would like to volunteer?"

Silence.

The kind of silence that exists in the space between a grenade's pin being pulled and the explosion. Thirty-odd people, most of them naked or nearly so, all processing the same calculation: the benefits were extraordinary, the cost was participating in a scenario inspired by pornography, and the audience included everyone they knew.

From my peripheral vision, I could see the hesitation ripple through the row like a wave. Downcast eyes, fidgeting hands, women glancing at each other to see who would move first, none wanting to be the one who—

Two hands shot up simultaneously.

Totsuka Saika's right arm extended with the crisp enthusiasm of a student who'd finished the exam first. Her silver hair swayed with the motion, and her

face held that bright, uncomplicated smile that had haunted my adolescence for entirely different reasons than I'd believed at the time.

"Hai!"

Several seats down, Yuigahama Yui's hand went up with the same lack of hesitation. Her face was flushed, her bun slightly askew, but her arm was steady.

"M-me too! I volunteer!"

They hadn't even waited for the silence to become uncomfortable. They'd volunteered like this was a school trip sign-up sheet rather than a competitive breeding event. The speed was—

A hand squeezed my right thigh.

Not gently. Not tentatively. The kind of squeeze that said *I have made my decision and your quadricep is simply the nearest available surface on which to announce it.*

"Senpai~" Isshiki Iroha's voice curled upward from my right, sweet as antifreeze. Her hand remained on my thigh—warm, possessive, her fingers pressing into the muscle with the confidence of someone who'd spent years perfecting the art of casual physical contact that was anything but casual. "I'll participate too!"

Three.

Then, from further down the row—a voice I'd never expected to hear volunteer for anything adjacent to pornography, or anything adjacent to anything adjacent to pornography.

"I'll enter as well."

Yukinoshita Yukino. The woman who once refused to attend a cultural festival booth because the costumes were "degrading to the dignity of the student council." She sat with her spine straight, her chin elevated, her expression

carved from ice—but her ears burned red. The colour crept down her neck, disappearing below her collarbone.

She'd said it whilst looking directly ahead. Not at me. Not at anyone. The way someone agrees to a surgical procedure: acknowledging its necessity whilst refusing to dignify it with emotion.

Four.

A fifth hand didn't rise.

Instead, there was a whispered conversation happening several seats down. Ebina Hina had leaned into Miura Yumiko's space, her mouth moving rapidly, her hands gesturing with the fervour of someone pitching a business plan to a reluctant investor.

"—first wife, Yumiko! First wife! The bedroom! The office! Think of the closet space—"

"I'm not—Ebina, stop—"

"—and the content I could produce, the angles, the morning-after scenes would practically write themselves—"

"This isn't about your manga—"

"—you literally named your vibrator after him."

Miura's face went nuclear. The shade of red hadn't been invented by nature; it was the kind of colour that existed only in moments of absolute, soul-annihilating mortification—the red of a sun going supernova, if the sun had also been publicly confronted about its intimate relationship with a battery-operated device bearing a classmate's nickname.

"FINE!" Her hand shot up like it had been launched from a catapult. "I volunteer! Happy!?"

Ebina's smile could have powered the Tokyo grid.

Five.

Five volunteers. Five women who had, of their own apparent free will, agreed to participate in an event inspired by JAV, with me as the central figure, for the privilege of being my "first wife."

I sat very still.

'Why?'

The question rattled around my skull like a pachinko ball bouncing through a machine whose payout I didn't want to calculate. The programme offered benefits, sure—careers, funding, facilities. But those came regardless of participation order. The "first wife" title was bedroom priority and office space. Was a slightly larger closet worth volunteering for pornography-adjacent competition?

Unless—

Unless Komachi was right.

The thought landed with the weight of a structural diagnosis you'd been avoiding. The kind where the surveyor sucks air through their teeth and says "well, the good news is the foundation is intact" in a tone that makes clear the bad news involves everything built on top of it. Unless those presentations hadn't been fabrications. Unless Totsuka really had imagined my face during her only sexual encounter. Unless Yuigahama and Yukinoshita and Isshiki really had drunkenly agreed to share me. Unless Miura genuinely—

No.

Denial was a river in Egypt and I was building a dam. A bloody great dam with reinforced concrete and a hydroelectric plant and a visitors' centre where tourists could come and admire the engineering while I drowned quietly behind it.

These were rational women making strategic calculations about government benefits. Nothing more. The fact that five of them had volunteered within thirty

seconds with varying degrees of desperation meant nothing beyond good financial literacy and an appreciation for real estate.

That was my story. I was clinging to it like driftwood in a sea that was actively working to pry my fingers loose.

"Wonderful!" Aria clapped. "Five volunteers! Totsuka-san, Yuigahama-san, Isshiki-san, Yukinoshita-san, and Miura-san!"

"Each accompanied by their assigned programme partners," Shino confirmed, checking her clipboard. "Sakurasawa Sumi with Totsuka, Sarashina Ruka with Yuigahama, Yanami Anna with Isshiki, Shinomiya Kaguya with Yukinoshita, and Kujou Alisa with Miura."

The partners stood as their names were called. Sakurasawa, the painfully shy voice actress, rose on legs that still appeared to be operating under protest. Sarashina stepped forward with her hand on her chest and her jaw set—fierce, aggressive, the stance of a woman who viewed cardiac conditions as personal insults to be overcome through sheer stubbornness. Yanami stood with that same practised ease, her smile pleasant and her eyes calculating in a way that suggested she'd already mapped out three contingency plans. Shinomiya rose with the deliberate grace of old money making itself visible. And Kujou Alisa straightened to her full height, ice-blue eyes fixed forward, radiating the energy of a diplomat attending a function she considered beneath her station but would execute flawlessly regardless.

Ten women. One scenario. Inspired by JAV.

I was going to die. Not metaphorically. My cause of death would be listed on the certificate and the coroner would have to use a very creative interpretation of "natural causes."

"For those who did not volunteer," Shino addressed the remaining participants, "please follow me to the buffet area beside the truck. Take this time to get acquainted with your partners."

She said "get acquainted" with the same inflection most people reserved for "proceed to your designated emergency exit." Her deadpan was a weapon of mass destruction—a flat, monotone warhead that detonated meaning from context alone.

The non-volunteers rose from their seats with varying expressions. Haruno looked amused, as though she'd chosen to spectate specifically because watching would be more entertaining than participating. Hiratsuka-sensei appeared relieved—the specific relief of a woman who'd been handed a temporary reprieve from confronting the romantic implications of a programme she'd been enrolled in against her will. Kawasaki's face was unreadable, though her hands clenched at her sides. Ebina lingered, shooting one last significant look at Miura.

"Get me some good stories," she whispered, loud enough for half the room to hear.

"I will END you, Ebina."

"Love you too~"

Shino herded the buffet group toward a side exit. As they filed out, I caught Haruno's eye across the room. She winked. The wink contained multitudes, none of them reassuring. It was the wink of someone who had front-row seats to a disaster and had brought snacks.

Then the metaphorical side doors closed, and it was just us. The volunteers.

"Right then!" Aria's energy shifted from hostess to director with unsettling fluidity. "Volunteers, if you'll follow me!"

She gestured toward the truck—the one from Shichijou Productions, the one with the magic mirror panel that had been sitting at the edge of the room like Chekhov's pornography vehicle, patiently waiting for its third-act entrance. Its rear doors stood open, revealing an interior that was less "truck" and more "mobile production facility."

We were led inside.

The truck's interior was deceptively vast—either through architectural trickery or because it was, upon closer inspection, less a vehicle and more a mobile complex that had simply chosen truck-shaped camouflage. The magic mirror formed one entire wall, and through it I could see the non-volunteers settling into the buffet area. Hiratsuka-sensei stood with her arms crossed, talking to one of the staff members with the stiff posture and clipped gestures of a woman whose patience had been refinanced at a punishing interest rate.

Corridors branched from the main space, and Aria directed the women and their partners toward individual preparation chambers.

"Ladies, your private rooms are this way! You'll find wardrobe options and briefing materials inside. Take your time getting comfortable!"

The five volunteers were each guided by their programme partners toward separate doors. As they passed me, each interaction was a fingerprint—unique, distinct, and permanently impressed on whatever remained of my composure.

Totsuka offered a small, determined wave. "See you soon, Hachiman!" The energy of a pre-match warm-up. She was treating this like a tennis final, and I was the trophy she intended to take home.

Yuigahama's hand brushed mine as she passed—just fingertips, barely a touch—and her "Hikki..." was so soft it might have been breath. The single word carried approximately four hundred implications, none of which I was prepared to unpack.

Isshiki squeezed my arm, her nails leaving small crescents in the skin. "Don't go anywhere, senpai~" As if I had options. As if "escape" were a verb available to me in this context. As if the doors weren't locked and the island wasn't surrounded by water and my clothes weren't in a location that had never been disclosed.

Yukinoshita passed without touching me. She didn't need to. Her eyes met mine for a single frame—blue, fierce, burning with something between fury and resolve—and then she was gone, Shinomiya at her side, black hair beside black hair like a matched pair of blades being carried to the armoury.

Miura stomped past muttering a monologue that included "kill Ebina," "stupid programme," and what sounded like "stupid Hikio and his stupidly large—" before the door cut her off. The truncation was probably for the best. Whatever adjective she'd been building toward, it would have been either devastating or flattering, and I wasn't equipped to handle either.

Then I was alone in the corridor.

For approximately four seconds.

"Hikigaya-kun."

The voice came from behind me. Professional. Measured. The tone of someone who had already seen everything I had to offer in a clinical context and had filed it under "work in progress."

I turned.

Konuki Sayo stood in the corridor, her lab coat pristine, her expression pleasant in the way that dentists were pleasant when approaching with instruments. In her right hand, she held a syringe.

Not a metaphorical syringe. Not a syringe-shaped package of vitamins. Not a novelty pen designed to look like medical equipment. An actual, medical-grade syringe filled with a liquid that caught the overhead lighting and shimmered with the faint iridescence of something that had no business being inside a human body.

"Konuki-san," I said, taking a measured step backward. "That's a syringe."

"It is."

"In your hand."

"Correct."

"Pointed at me."

"Also correct." Her smile didn't waver. "You're very observant, Hikigaya-kun. That's a useful trait."

"What I'd find more useful right now is an explanation of why you're holding a syringe within injecting distance of my person."

"This—" she raised the syringe, letting the light play through the liquid like a sommelier presenting a vintage, "—is a performance support compound. Completely safe. Government approved."

"Government approved." I repeated the words the way one might repeat a diagnosis. "The same government that approved my kidnapping, forced depilation, and enrolment in a breeding programme. That government."

"That's the one!" She seemed genuinely cheerful about this. "You'll need it for the event. Five partners is quite the demand on the male body, and whilst you're young and healthy, human biology has certain refractory limitations."

The word "refractory" landed in my brain and detonated on impact.

"You want to inject me with a drug that—"

"Ensures adequate performance across multiple sequential encounters, yes." She tilted her head. The tilt was calibrated—warm, professional, the exact angle of someone explaining a routine procedure to a patient who was being unreasonable about it. "Think of it as insurance."

"I think of it as chemical assault."

"Now, now." She took a step forward. I took a step back. The corridor was not infinitely long. This was a problem. "The waxing was also involuntary, and you survived that beautifully."

"I have a fundamentally different definition of 'beautifully' than you do."

"Hikigaya-kun." Her voice took on the patient cadence of a lecturer addressing a student who had confused effort with understanding. "You are about to participate in an event with five extremely motivated women. Without pharmaceutical support, you would likely—" she paused, selecting her words with medical precision, "—disappoint them."

"I'm completely fine with disappointing them. Disappointing people is my core competency. I've been disappointing people since birth. My mother has said so. Repeatedly."

"Unfortunately, the programme parameters require a minimum standard of—"

"I didn't agree to any programme parameters!"

She considered this. Then nodded, as if conceding a philosophical point in a debate she'd already won. "That's true. But—" she glanced over my shoulder with a look I would later categorise as the expression of a hunter who has finished positioning the beaters, "—we prepared for that contingency."

The skin on the back of my neck prickled with the instinct of prey that has realised the grass is rustling in a coordinated pattern. The kind of pattern that doesn't occur in nature. The kind that involves radio earpieces and a predetermined signal.

I didn't even get to turn around.

Two bodies pressed against me from behind—one on each side, materialising with the silent proficiency of trained operatives rather than hospitality staff.

From the left: warmth, the faint scent of something expensive and floral, the press of bare skin against my arm. Hayasaka Ai. The same woman who had overseen the forcible separation of me from my body hair. The same woman who had read my light novel aloud to me without a hint of irony or a single change in expression, as though she were reading a weather report in a language she found tedious. Her expression hadn't changed—the controlled blankness of a professional who had processed every possible ethical

objection to her current actions, filed them appropriately, and proceeded regardless.

From the right: softness, enthusiasm given physical form, a presence that radiated energy like a small sun that had been told about personal boundaries and chosen to ignore the concept. Fujiwara Chika. Unlike Hayasaka's professional neutrality, Fujiwara's face wore a smile that said she was enjoying this—not maliciously, but with the pure, unthinking delight of a golden retriever who didn't understand why the squirrel was upset about being chased.

"Don't struggle, Hikigaya-san," Hayasaka said, her voice close enough to my ear that I could feel the breath. "It takes less than three seconds."

"Hold still, hold still!" Fujiwara chirped from the other side, her arms wrapping around mine with surprising strength. "Konuki-sensei said it doesn't even hurt if you relax!"

I did not relax.

Every muscle in my body seized simultaneously—the full-body lockdown of a rabbit that has looked up from its grass and found itself between three foxes who have already discussed the menu. My arms went rigid. My legs turned to concrete. My brain, which should have been sending signals to flee, instead delivered a priority bulletin: *You are naked. They are mostly naked. Their bodies are pressed against yours. You are already chemically aroused from the earlier compound. The appropriate emotional response does not exist in any language you speak.*

Fujiwara's chest pressed against my right arm with a softness that defied the load-bearing principles I'd studied in structural engineering courses I'd never taken but felt qualified to reference. Hayasaka's hip aligned against my left side with a precision that suggested either rehearsal or an innate spatial awareness that would have made her excellent at Tetris. Between them, I was immobilised more effectively than any restraint could manage—because restraints didn't smell like flowers, and restraints didn't have body heat, and

restraints didn't make the traitorous parts of my brain whisper *this isn't entirely unpleasant, actually*.

Shut up, brain.

"Ah," Konuki said, approaching with the syringe raised. "Perfect. Thank you, girls."

"My pleasure!" Fujiwara sang.

Hayasaka said nothing. Her grip didn't falter.

"Wait—" I managed. "Wait, I haven't consented—this is still technically—the ethical implications of—"

The needle pierced the side of my neck.

The sensation was brief—a pinch, a cold pressure, then warmth spreading outward from the injection site like ink dropped into still water. The compound diffused instantly, its effects propagating through my bloodstream with a speed that spoke to engineering rather than pharmacology.

"There," Konuki said, withdrawing the syringe with a satisfied nod. "All done."

"You just—" My voice came out slightly strangled. Not from pain. The warmth was spreading downward now, pooling in my core, radiating through my limbs. "You just injected me without consent."

"Technically," Konuki corrected, capping the syringe, "you consented when you drank the hydration supplement before the sterilisation chamber."

"The sterilisation—"

"The drink *before* the sterilisation chamber. Not a sterilising agent. That would defeat the entire purpose." She patted my cheek with her free hand. The gesture was maternal in a way that made it worse. "You're building up a tolerance to non-consensual medical procedures. That's growth, Hikigaya-kun."

"That is NOT what growth means."

"In clinical terms—"

"No."

"From a psychological resilience standpoint—"

"No."

Fujiwara giggled against my arm, the vibration travelling through her body into mine in a way that my newly enhanced nerve endings registered with approximately four hundred percent more clarity than I wanted. "You're so funny, Hikigaya-san! Most people just say thank you!"

"Most people aren't ambushed by pharmaceutical wranglers in a pornography truck!"

"It's technically a mobile production suite," Hayasaka corrected, still pressed against my left side despite the injection being complete. Neither she nor Fujiwara had released me. I was beginning to suspect the restraint had served a dual purpose—one medical, one that nobody was going to admit to on an official form.

"Could you—" I shifted. The movement pressed me further into Fujiwara. I shifted the other way. Hayasaka. Every direction led to a wall of warmth and bare skin. Navigating this corridor was like trying to escape a room where the exits had been replaced with additional rooms. "—let go?"

"Mmm." Hayasaka's response was noncommittal. A sound that contained neither agreement nor refusal—simply an acknowledgement that I had made a request that would be processed in due course, with "due course" defined at her discretion.

"The compound needs thirty seconds to fully integrate," Konuki explained, making a note on her clipboard. "Physical contact helps with circulation and absorption."

"That's not real science."

"I'm the medical professional here, Hikigaya-kun."

"You were a school nurse."

"I *was* a school nurse. I've since diversified." She smiled. "Now I'm a government-contracted reproductive health specialist. With a very generous budget and a personal mandate to keep you operational for at least thirty days."

"Operational." I seized on the word. "You said operational. Like I'm equipment. Like I'm a piece of industrial machinery with a service schedule."

"If the metaphor fits," she said, and made another note on her clipboard.

The warmth continued to spread. It felt different from the earlier compound. That had been an indiscriminate arousal—a blunt instrument, a hammer taken to the endocrine system. This was more surgical. More precise. I felt alert, energised, my body humming with a readiness that had nothing to do with my mental state and everything to do with whatever designer cocktail was currently staging a hostile takeover of my biochemistry.

"What exactly is in that?" I asked, because knowledge was power even when that knowledge was terrifying and the power was purely theoretical.

"A proprietary blend," Konuki said. "Tabane-san developed it. Completely safe—clinical trials showed zero adverse effects."

"Tabane. The woman in the rabbit outfit developed it."

"She's a genius."

"She's a lunatic who demonstrated a tentacle extraction in a reverse bunny outfit."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive." Konuki tucked the clipboard under her arm.

"You'll notice enhanced stamina, reduced refractory periods, and sustained

engagement capacity. Side effects may include heightened tactile sensitivity and increased emotional receptivity."

"Increased emotional receptivity." I repeated the phrase the way a bomb disposal technician might repeat "it's probably fine." "What does that mean?"

"Don't worry about it!" Fujiwara finally released my arm with a cheerful pat. "It just means you'll have more fun!"

"Fun" was not the word I would have chosen. "Fun" implied agency. "Fun" implied a situation one had entered willingly and could leave at any point. What I was experiencing was the opposite of fun—it was the sensation of being strapped to a rollercoaster that someone else had designed, someone else had started, and someone else was currently adding loops to while it was in motion.

Hayasaka released me a half-second later. The sudden absence of warmth on both sides left me feeling oddly exposed—which was absurd, given that I'd been naked for the past several hours and exposed was my default state. And yet.

"The participants are preparing," Hayasaka informed me, her professional tone reasserting itself. "You'll be brought to the main chamber once they're ready."

"Preparing." I latched onto the word. "Preparing what? What is this event? What did Aria's first video involve?"

Hayasaka and Fujiwara exchanged a glance. Hayasaka's face revealed nothing. Fujiwara's revealed everything—she bit her lip, her eyes sparkling with barely contained glee, her cheeks pinking in a way that suggested the answer was something she found hilarious, exciting, or both, and possibly also something she'd been looking forward to all day.

"You'll find out soon, Hikigaya-san!" Fujiwara said. "But I promise it'll be really cute!"

"'Cute' is not the word that inspires confidence in this context."

"It's not as extreme as you're imagining," Hayasaka offered. This was, objectively, the most reassuring thing anyone had said to me in the past three hours. It was also a bar so low that a flatworm could clear it without adjusting its altitude.

Konuki gave me one last look—appraising, clinical, the gaze of an engineer evaluating whether the machine would hold under load.

"Drink water," she said. "Stay hydrated."

Then she walked away, heels clicking against the truck floor, leaving me standing in a corridor with two semi-naked staff members and the growing realisation that whatever the compound was doing to my body, it was working.

I could feel everything. The air circulation against my bare skin. The faint vibration of the truck's systems through the floor. My own heartbeat, steady and strong in a way it hadn't been ten minutes ago. And beneath all of it—low, insistent, undeniable—an alertness that said *ready* in a language that bypassed cognition entirely and spoke directly to something older and less civilised.

Thirty seconds ago, I'd been a man facing an impossible situation. Now I was a man facing an impossible situation with pharmaceutical assistance.

Somehow, the upgrade made everything worse.

"This way, Hikigaya-san." Hayasaka gestured toward a door at the end of the corridor. "We'll wait in the preparation area until the participants are ready."

I followed. Not because I'd chosen to. Not because I'd consented. But because every exit was locked, every alternative was absent, and forward was the only direction that remained. Hayasaka walked ahead of me in a maid uniform that had been designed by someone who understood exactly what the word "uniform" was supposed to distract from, and it was working, and I hated

that it was working, and the compound was making sure I noticed exactly how much it was working.

The preparation area was a small room with a single chair, a water cooler, and a mirror.

The mirror showed me what I'd become: naked, hairless, chemically enhanced, and wearing the expression of a man who had realised—with the absolute clarity that comes only at the eye of a hurricane—that his life had departed the rails somewhere around the second strip of wax and was now careening through open countryside with no brakes, no track, and no destination except wherever these people decided it would end up.

Five women were getting ready behind those doors.

Five women who'd volunteered to compete for the title of my first wife.

In an event inspired by the debut production of a JAV studio.

Whilst I sat here, in a chair, injected with Tabane's proprietary science, waiting.

The kitchen in that Tokyo complex had a wok station.

A bloody wok station—the one used in Chinese restaurants.

I took a paper cup from the cooler and drank water, because the medical professional who'd just drugged me without consent had told me to stay hydrated, and apparently I was the kind of man who followed his captor's health advice.

Growth, Konuki had called it.

I was growing, all right. In directions I'd never planned and at a rate I couldn't control.

Somewhere, in a government office I'd never see, a photograph of my sister smiled from an employee badge—one eye covered by a decorative patch, three hundred self-awarded Komachi Points glittering in her wake.

My sister had won.

I drank more water and waited for whatever came next.

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End

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