

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 2.1 -

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

The truck from Shichijou Productions sat there like a monument to corporate sponsorship nobody had asked for. Its one-way mirror panel caught the overhead lights, reflecting back our collective nudity in a warped funhouse panorama that somehow made everything worse.

I wanted to look away. I wanted to look away from everything—the truck, the women, the entire island—but even staring down at my own lap offered no refuge. Something was currently at full attention and staring back.

Then Shichijou Aria and Amakusa Shino stepped forward.

They moved in synchronised tandem, shifting into poses that belonged on a Saturday evening variety show rather than a government reproductive briefing. Aria tilted her head, one hand raised in a peace sign, her considerable chest shifting with the motion in a way that drew involuntary attention from every pair of eyes in the room. Shino mirrored her on the opposite side, one hip cocked, her dark hair falling perfectly across one shoulder, her expression the flat deadpan of someone who had practised the choreography but forgotten to rehearse the facial expressions.

"Welcome back, everyone~!" Aria sang, her voice warm and maternal—a late-night radio host easing you through the small hours. "We know that was a lot to take in!"

"Mmm." Shino nodded, fingers pressed to her chin. "A lot to swallow, you might say."

"Shino-chan."

"What? I'm talking about information."

Aria giggled, and the sound was disarmingly genuine. "Before we continue with the next portion of our presentation, we'd like to take a moment to thank our sponsors!"

Sponsors. This government initiative had sponsors. Because of course it did. Japan's demographic crisis had apparently been outsourced to the private sector, and the private sector had answered with the enthusiasm of a conbini putting up Christmas decorations in October.

"First!" Aria stepped forward, placing both hands over her heart—a gesture that, given her state of undress and the sheer volume of what those hands were trying to contain, communicated earnestness through sheer physical impossibility. "I'd like to introduce a company very near and dear to me. After graduating from high school, I used a portion of my family's inheritance to establish Shichijou Productions."

She paused, her brown eyes sweeping the room with genuine warmth.

"Japan is suffering. Our birth rates have dropped to historic lows, our population pyramids are inverted, and our young people feel they cannot afford to start families. When the government approached me about this initiative, I knew—I knew—that Shichijou Productions had to lend its full support."

Admirable. Truly. A philanthropic heiress using her wealth to address Japan's most pressing social crisis. The sort of story that'd make the evening news, bring tears to NHK commentators, inspire a generation of—

"What exactly does Shichijou Productions produce?" Yukinoshita's voice cut through the room like a paper knife through cheap origami.

I could answer that in my sleep, but silence was golden and I intended to hold the line.

Aria's smile didn't waver. "Adult videos."

The silence that followed had physical weight.

"JAV, specifically!" Aria clarified, as though the issue had been one of taxonomical precision. "We're one of the top three studios in the Kantō region. Our catalogue spans over forty genres, and we've recently expanded into VR content!"

"She's the real deal," Shino confirmed with a sage nod. "Market leader in the 'healing' subcategory and the saimin category."

The hand on my thigh squeezed. "Senpai, do you know this company?"

Everything froze.

Isshiki leaned in. I could feel the coolness of her skin against my arm, and something pointy brushing against my bicep.

'Ignore it.'

It seemed like somehow everyone had grown less wary of being naked. Maybe I could turn to take a look—

Another warning squeeze. I snapped my head back to its original position before it had moved a full centimetre.

"Senpai?"

'Answer. Give her a denial. Anything.'

"Hmmm... I'll be asking Komachi."

The squeeze tightened.

I could feel my soul attempting to leave my body through my left ear. Somewhere to my left, Hiratsuka-sensei had pressed both palms against her face in a gesture I recognised from every parent-teacher conference where a student had done something technically legal but morally catastrophic.

"And!" Shino stepped forward, crossing her arms beneath a chest more modest than Aria's but held with the confidence of a loaded weapon. "I'd also like to introduce my company as a co-sponsor of this programme. Amakusa Interactive—Japan's third-largest eroge developer."

She said it with the same tone a Toyota executive might use to announce quarterly earnings.

"Our latest title, *Forbidden Dorm: Summer Semester*, sold three hundred thousand copies in its first week. We believe strongly in the connection between romantic fantasy and real-world reproductive motivation."

"So Japan's breeding programme is sponsored by a JAV studio and an eroge company," I heard myself say.

Both women turned to me with radiant smiles.

"That's correct!" they harmonised—or as close to harmony as deadpan and melodic could manage.

"But we are not the only sponsors; you'll find out about all of them during the various activities we've arranged for everyone," Aria said. "Everyone worked hard to provide an itinerary that mixes conception, fun, and something memorable you'll cherish until the day you retire."

"And hopefully, by then the population has been stabilised, so that your pension is already being funded by the next generation," Shino added.

Ah, yes. The pension crisis—where today's retirees are funded by today's workers, and today's workers are increasingly outnumbered by the retirees they're supporting.

This country was doomed. Not declining—doomed. We'd passed the event horizon sometime between the bubble economy and this exact moment, and now we were simply rearranging deck chairs on the Yamato as it slipped beneath the waves.

Shino's expression reset to professional neutrality. "But before we continue, we'd like to introduce some very important people. As you've all noticed, there are more faces in this room than were in Komachi-chan's presentation."

Aria nodded. "These wonderful women are our volunteer staff! But they're much more than that."

"They're also participants," Shino continued, her deadpan delivery somehow making the word "participants" sound like a euphemism for something far worse. "Each of them came to this programme voluntarily, with goals and dreams that the government has promised to help achieve."

"In exchange for their participation and their help in achieving everyone's goal of—" Aria paused, pressing a finger to her lips.

"Conception," Shino finished.

"Conception!" Aria echoed brightly.

The word hung in the air like a chandelier someone had forgotten to bolt to the ceiling.

"These volunteer partners have each been assigned to one of our seated participants." Shino gestured toward our row of naked, horrified bodies—a museum guide indicating a particularly interesting exhibit. "Their role is to support their assigned partner in winning programme tasks, which come with significant incentives."

"Lots and lots of incentives!" Aria clasped her hands together beneath her chin.

"The kind that make you want to work hard," Shino added.

"And push deep into your goals."

"Shino-chan is right. You'll want to thrust yourself into every opportunity."

"Giving it everything you've got until you reach the climax."

"Of each task."

"Of each task, yes."

They delivered this exchange with the synchronised timing of a manzai duo who'd been performing together for decades. Tsukkomi and boke, except both of them were boke and the universe itself was the suffering straight man.

It also didn't help that Shino had been visibly slipping her thumb between her index and middle finger with each innuendo, her clenched fists punctuating the word "thrust" like a particularly obscene exclamation mark.

Shino raised one arm toward a curtained entrance to the left of the stage. "Now then. Let's introduce our volunteer participants and their partners, shall we?"

"Let's!" Aria turned toward the curtain as well, and both women struck a new pose—Aria's hand extended in presentation, Shino's arms crossed with scholarly authority.

The curtain parted.

I glanced over my shoulder before twin squeezes on both thighs hauled my attention back to centre.

'When had the people behind us moved?'

The first woman who stepped through was small—shorter than average, with chestnut hair that fell past her shoulders and wide eyes that scanned the room with an intensity bordering on clinical. She wore nothing except a few decorative frills—white lace trim along her wrists and a narrow ribbon choker at her throat. Her body was slight, almost fragile-looking, but she stood firm. She had already decided, and she would not be backing down.

"First up!" Aria announced, her palm open toward the newcomer. "Sarashina Ruka-san, age twenty-three! Ruka-san's dream is to become a cardiac specialist and medical researcher!"

"She wants to turn her own heart condition into expertise that saves others," Shino added, and for a brief moment, her deadpan broke into something approaching respect. "Her vulnerability becomes her weapon."

Sarashina Ruka stood at the edge of the spotlight, one hand pressed against her sternum—against her heart. The gesture looked involuntary, habitual. Her eyes found each face in the row of seated participants until they landed on one.

"Ruka-san's assigned partner is—" Aria swept her hand toward our row. "Yuigahama Yui-san!"

"Eh?!" Yuigahama straightened in her seat, her hair bouncing. Her face cycled through surprise, confusion, and then something cautiously warm. "M-me?"

Ruka descended the short steps from the stage, her bare feet light against the polished floor. She moved behind Yuigahama's seat and stopped there, offering a small bow.

"Sarashina Ruka. Please take care of me."

"A-ah! Yuigahama Yui! Likewise!" Yuigahama twisted in her seat, giving a slightly frantic bow that accomplished little given their mutual nudity but conveyed genuine goodwill. "Let's do our best together, yeah?"

Ruka's eyes lingered on Yuigahama for a moment. Something in them softened—the recognition, perhaps, of a fellow person who wore her emotions on the outside.

Then Ruka's gaze drifted. Across the space. Toward me. Her expression sharpened. Her hand pressed harder against her chest.

I looked away. Directly away. Nothing to see here. Just a naked man trying to achieve spiritual transcendence through sheer force of denial.

"Next!" Shino stepped forward, assuming the presenter role. "Shinomiya Kaguya-san, age twenty-two."

The curtain parted again, and the woman who emerged carried herself as though the frills adorning her body were a designer gown rather than scraps of decorative lace. Shinomiya Kaguya—dark hair cut precisely, crimson eyes that swept the room like an auditor reviewing a balance sheet. If the yamato nadeshiko ideal had survived into the modern era, it would look exactly like this and be twice as dangerous.

"Kaguya-san is the heir to the Shinomiya Group," Shino continued, "one of Japan's four largest corporate conglomerates. Her dream is to achieve full independence from her family's control—to restructure and break free on her own terms."

"The government is offering legal and financial backing to help her do just that!" Aria added. "A strong, independent woman building a strong, independent future!"

"While getting frequently—"

"Shino-chan."

"—inspired by the programme."

Shinomiya Kaguya descended the steps with measured pace—a boardroom negotiation, not a breeding facility. Her expression betrayed nothing. Her eyes found Yukinoshita Yukino in the seated row, and something passed between them—mutual recognition between two women who understood exactly what it cost to carry a family name that weighed more than you did.

"Shinomiya Kaguya-san's partner is Yukinoshita Yukino-san!"

'Summer and spring meets winter and autumn.'

Yukinoshita's jaw tightened. Her ice-blue eyes met Shinomiya's crimson ones. For a moment, the temperature in the room dropped by approximately three degrees—one of those weather reports where the actual reading says thirty-five but the "feels like" underneath says thirty-nine.

Shinomiya took her position behind Yukinoshita's seat. Neither woman spoke. Neither needed to. The nod they exchanged carried the weight of a treaty between rival nations—grudging, formal, and loaded with the unspoken understanding that they'd either destroy each other or become allies terrifying enough to topple empires.

"Our third volunteer!" Aria took the lead, sweeping her arm toward the curtain. "Kawashima Ami-san, age twenty!"

The woman who emerged was—

I blinked. She'd been standing behind me not two minutes ago.

If Shinomiya Kaguya's beauty was architectural—structured, deliberate, built to last—Kawashima Ami's was editorial. Blue hair, a shade too vibrant to be natural but worn with enough confidence to make anyone questioning it feel like the unreasonable one. Long-limbed and lean, she'd spent years being looked at and had decided to make it everyone else's problem. The frills on her wrists and ankles looked like accessories she'd chosen rather than been assigned.

"Ami-san is a former model who wants to transition into screen acting!" Aria explained. "She's ready to shed her old skin and bare everything for the camera!"

"She already seems comfortable with the baring part," Shino observed.

Kawashima descended the steps with a runway walk that turned a government facility into a fashion week catwalk. Her eyes swept across the seated participants, lingering on each face—sizing up competition, as she always did. When she reached the bottom step, her gaze landed on Haruno, and a slow smile curved her lips.

"Kawashima Ami-san's partner is Yukinoshita Haruno-san!"

Haruno, who had been watching the proceedings with her characteristic cat-who-swallowed-the-canary expression, leaned back in her seat and gave Kawashima a finger-wave.

"My, my. A model turned actress. How exciting~"

Kawashima circled behind Haruno's chair, one hand resting on the backrest.

"And a political heiress with manipulation issues. We'll get along great."

Haruno's smile widened. Kawashima's matched it.

I made a mental note to never, under any circumstances, be in a room alone with those two simultaneously. The combined strategic malice would constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention.

"Fourth!" Shino announced. "Sakurasawa Sumi-san, age twenty-three."

The curtain rustled. Parted. Nobody emerged.

The curtain rustled again, more violently this time, as though something behind it was experiencing a small crisis.

"Sumi-san?" Aria called gently.

A foot appeared. Then a hand, gripping the curtain fabric with white-knuckled desperation. Sakurasawa Sumi materialised from behind the curtain like a deer stepping onto a motorway—wide lavender eyes, peach-pink hair gathered in a side tail, and a body that seemed to be attempting to fold in on itself despite having nowhere to fold. The frills around her wrists trembled. Her face burned crimson from hairline to collarbone.

"S-Sumi-san dreams of a career in voice acting and theatre!" Aria's voice softened to nursery-school-teacher gentleness. "Performing without direct social exposure as a stepping stone toward confidence!"

The irony of a woman who wanted to avoid social exposure currently standing naked before twenty-plus people was apparently lost on the programme organisers. Or not lost on them at all. Hard to tell with this crowd.

Sakurasawa managed three steps before her legs locked. She stood frozen in the spotlight, hands clasped before her, mouth opening and closing without sound. A goldfish at a press conference.

"Sumi-san's partner is Totsuka Saika-san!"

Totsuka—who I was still recalibrating as female, a process requiring the complete disassembly and reconstruction of three years of high school memories—brightened immediately. She half-rose from her seat, grey-green eyes shining with the unconditional warmth that had made her the most dangerous person in my social circle long before any of this.

"Hi! I'm Totsuka! Let's work hard together!"

The radiance of that smile hit Sakurasawa like a physical force. The frozen girl blinked, and some fraction of the terror drained from her face. She managed a nod—tiny, barely perceptible—and shuffled to her position behind Totsuka's chair on legs that functioned more like stilts.

Totsuka turned in her seat and reached up to gently squeeze Sakurasawa's hand. "It's okay. We'll figure it out."

Sakurasawa's blush intensified to a shade I hadn't known human skin could produce. But she didn't pull her hand away.

Something warm stirred in my chest, and I crushed it immediately. No. Absolutely not. I was not going to find anything about this situation heartwarming. This was a government breeding programme sponsored by pornographers. Warmth was a trap.

"Fifth!" Aria stepped forward, her pose shifting to a more dramatic angle.

"Mizuhara Chizuru-san, age twenty-four!"

This one emerged from the curtain with theatrical timing—someone who understood entrances. Chestnut hair that caught the light, angular features softened by wide brown eyes, a posture that spoke of hours spent in front of

rehearsal mirrors. Mizuhara Chizuru carried herself like a leading lady—which, given her stated dream, was presumably the point.

"Chizuru-san wants a career in acting!" Aria explained. "She's been working in the compensated dating industry alongside our previously introduced Sarashina-san and Sakurasawa-san to fund her training—"

"A rental girlfriend," Shino clarified. "So she's had professional practice for what we're doing here."

"Shino-chan, that's not—"

"She's been practising romance in controlled conditions. That's literally our programme model."

Mizuhara's composure flickered—a twitch at the corner of her eye that suggested Shino had found a nerve—but she recovered with professional speed. She descended the steps with measured grace, scanning the seated row.

"Mizuhara Chizuru-san's partner is Hiratsuka Shizuka-san!"

Hiratsuka-sensei stiffened.

"A twenty-four-year-old rental girlfriend," she muttered. "Paired with me."

Mizuhara took her position behind Hiratsuka's chair and offered a formal bow—deep, correct, the bow of someone who'd been taught proper etiquette and wielded it as armour.

"Please take care of me, Hiratsuka-san."

Hiratsuka's eye twitched. She opened her mouth—the reflex of a teacher who'd spent a career steering students away from exactly this kind of work—then closed it, exhaled through her nose, and gave a curt nod.

"Likewise."

"Sixth!" Shino took the lead again. "Kujou Alisa-san, age twenty!"

The curtain parted to reveal silver-white hair that cascaded past shoulders with the inevitability of snowfall. Blue eyes that held the frozen clarity of a Siberian winter. Kujou Alisa walked like someone who'd grown up in a place where the ground might swallow you if you weren't deliberate about where you placed each step. Half-Russian, half-Japanese. Looking at her, I'd have guessed half-Russian, half-ice-sculpture.

"Alisa-san is bilingual in Japanese and Russian!" Aria announced. "She's on a government fast-track into the foreign ministry and dreams of a career in international diplomacy!"

"She's already experienced in bilateral negotiations," Shino added.

"She—"

"Between herself and a partner. Bilaterally."

"Shino-chan, please."

Kujou Alisa descended with rigid composure—a diplomatic function where showing emotion constituted a national security breach. Her blue eyes swept the row and locked onto Miura Yumiko, whose blonde hair and sharp features presented an unexpected mirror.

"Kujou Alisa-san's partner is Miura Yumiko-san!"

Miura's eyebrows rose. She looked Kujou up and down—the appraising eye of someone who evaluated aesthetics for a living, or at least for a hobby advanced enough to constitute a career.

"Huh. Not bad."

Kujou took her position behind Miura's chair. "Kujou Alisa. Yoroshiku."

"Miura Yumiko." A pause. "Your hair's natural?"

"Da."

Miura's lips curved into something approaching approval. In the language of fashion-conscious women, this exchange apparently constituted a bond forged in fire.

"Seventh!" Aria spread both arms wide, her considerable assets following the motion with a delay that suggested a fraught relationship with inertia. "Suou Yuki-san, age twenty!"

The next volunteer emerged with an athlete's stride—compact and efficient. Suou Yuki had short dark hair, sharp eyes, and a body that spoke of regular and uncompromising physical training.

"Yuki-san dreams of a career in sports management and esports!" Aria continued. "She wants to bridge the gap between traditional athletics and competitive gaming!"

"Two kinds of joystick expertise," Shino noted.

"That's—actually, that one works," Aria admitted.

Suou descended with minimal ceremony and zero embarrassment. Either she'd already made peace with the situation or she genuinely didn't care. Given the athlete's build and the directness of her gaze, I suspected the latter. Some people were simply born without the gene for self-consciousness. I resented them on principle.

"Suou Yuki-san's partner is Ebina Hina-san!"

Ebina, who had been maintaining a suspiciously serene expression for the past several introductions, adjusted her glasses. Her nostrils flared. Not in the catastrophic nosebleed way from earlier, but in the way of a sommelier detecting a particularly complex vintage.

"A sports management hopeful," Ebina murmured. "With an athlete's build. And she's going to be standing behind me. While we're both—"

"Ebina." My voice came out flat at the same time as Miura's. "Don't."

The two of us met eyes—then both looked away simultaneously as a squeeze on my thigh wrenched my attention forward. Both our faces coloured. Somewhere between Miura's drunken confession about a phallic object bearing my nickname and the current situation, direct eye contact had become a minefield neither of us was equipped to navigate.

"I was just observing the aesthetics, Hikitani-kun."

"You were composing a doujinshi outline and we both know it."

Suou took her place behind Ebina's chair. She gave a short, sharp nod.

"Yo."

"Yoroshiku~!" Ebina's smile was radiant and dangerous.

"Eighth!" Shino stepped forward with renewed energy. "Yakishio Lemon-san, age nineteen!"

The curtain exploded open. That was the only accurate description. Yakishio Lemon didn't emerge from behind the curtain—she detonated through it, all tan skin and explosive energy and hair the colour of sunlit honey that bounced with every stride. She took three steps onto the stage and struck a pose with her fist raised, grinning with enough wattage to power the facility's backup generators.

"Lemon-san wants to be a professional track and field athlete!" Shino announced. "She's already competed at the intercollegiate level!"

"She's very fast," Aria added.

"Quick on the track. Hopefully not quick in—"

"Shino-chan."

Yakishio bounded down the steps—a golden retriever released from a car after a long drive. She scanned the row with bright eyes until they landed on Kawasaki Saki, who was sitting with her arms crossed and her jaw set in the

expression of someone preparing to endure something terrible through sheer stubbornness.

"Yakishio Lemon-san's partner is Kawasaki Saki-san!"

Yakishio skidded to a halt behind Kawasaki's chair and leaned forward, her face appearing over Kawasaki's shoulder with unsettling proximity.

"Heya! I'm Lemon! Let's get along!"

Kawasaki's eye twitched. She turned her head fractionally—enough to acknowledge the energetic missile that had just attached itself to her personal space.

"...Kawasaki."

"Cool! You look strong! Do you work out?"

"...Sometimes."

"Awesome! We're gonna be great partners!"

Kawasaki's expression suggested she had a different word in mind than "great," but she didn't voice it. The resignation in her shoulders was the kind that took years to cultivate—the resignation of an eldest sister who knew that resistance against certain personality types was thermodynamically impossible.

"Ninth!" Aria clapped her hands together. "Yanami Anna-san, age twenty!"

The next woman stepped through with a light step and an easy smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. Yanami Anna had blue hair, a gentle face, and the general aura of someone who'd heard the phrase "better luck next time" so many times it had become a personal motto. She looked nice. Approachable. Yet somehow she bore the composure of a person who always came in second.

I recognised the type. I'd spent most of high school being a variation of it—except where she'd responded with relentless cheerfulness, I'd responded

with a philosophy degree's worth of defensive cynicism. Different armour. Same wound.

"Anna-san dreams of becoming a food critic and restaurant reviewer!" Aria beamed. "She has an incredible palate!"

"Good with her tongue," Shino confirmed.

"That's—"

"Food criticism requires a refined tongue. What were you thinking, Aria?"

Yanami's easy smile wobbled. She descended the steps wearing the "everything's fine" expression I recognised because I'd worn it myself for years. The difference was that mine came with a scowl and hers came with a laugh, but neither version fooled anyone who'd ever used it.

"Yanami Anna-san's partner is Isshiki Iroha-san!"

Isshiki's fox-like eyes evaluated Yanami from hairline to toes—a recruiter scanning a CV.

"Let's work hard, okay, Anna-san?"

First-name basis. Immediate. Unprompted. Isshiki had skipped approximately four levels of Japanese social protocol and landed directly on familiar territory before the other person had finished introducing herself. It was a power move disguised as friendliness, and it was textbook Isshiki.

Yanami settled behind Isshiki's chair. "Yanami Anna. Nice to meet you, Iroha-chan."

She'd matched it. Interesting.

Isshiki's smile sharpened. "Perfect."

I'd seen that smile before. It was the smile Isshiki wore when she'd acquired a new resource. Yanami had been categorised, filed, and integrated into

whatever thirty-eight-slide operational framework Isshiki was currently running. The food critic didn't stand a chance.

"And last but certainly not least!" Shino's deadpan cracked into something almost theatrical. "Nanami Mami-san, age twenty-four!"

The final volunteer emerged, and the room's atmosphere shifted—not the temperature this time, but something subtler. Barometric pressure, maybe. The sort of change that made old injuries ache.

Nanami Mami was blonde, beautiful, and moved like something that had evolved specifically not to be heard approaching. Her smile was a masterpiece—warm, inviting, perfectly calibrated. Her eyes were the problem. They evaluated, calculated, and discarded in the time it took most people to blink.

"Mami-san aspires to a career in corporate law, specialising in mergers and acquisitions!" Aria announced. "She'll channel her intelligence into a field where it's truly valued!"

"Predatory instincts, but for business," Shino summarised.

Nanami descended the steps with measured grace. Her eyes swept the row, pausing on me for exactly one second—a second that felt like being X-rayed by someone who already knew what she was looking for and was merely confirming its location.

"Nanami Mami-san's partner is Orimoto Kaori-san!"

Orimoto, who had been maintaining her characteristic "this is all pretty funny, honestly" expression throughout the introductions, waved cheerfully.

"Oh, hey! I'm Orimoto! Nice to meetcha!"

Nanami took her position behind Orimoto's chair. "Nanami Mami. A pleasure."

The smile she offered Orimoto was flawless. Warm. Genuine-looking. And somewhere in the depths of it, something coiled and waited.

I knew that type. I'd spent years being that type, in my own lesser way. The difference was that I'd turned my perception outward as a shield. Nanami Mami had turned hers into a scalpel.

Or at least that's what I thought. Whether the redirected blood supply came with side effects like enhanced psychological profiling of newly met naked individuals was a question best left to Konuki's medical expertise.

All ten volunteer participants now stood behind their assigned partners. The room had filled with a geometry that even I couldn't pretend was accidental—twenty-one women arranged in precise pairs, plus Aria and Shino on stage, plus one man at the centre of an equation he hadn't been asked to solve.

'Thirty. There are thirty women in this room and one of me.'

The metaphorical kind of screwed. The literal kind was, presumably, on the itinerary.

I decided to make that future Hikigaya's problem and moved on before the thought could furnish itself with details.

Aria and Shino returned to centre stage, resuming their twin-idol formation. Aria placed one hand on her hip; Shino crossed her arms.

"Everyone!" Aria's voice carried across the room with genuine warmth. "You've now met your partners. These women have volunteered—not just for themselves, but for you. Their success is tied to yours, and yours to theirs."

Shino nodded. "Support each other. Push each other. Work together to achieve your goals."

"And," Aria's eyes sparkled, "congratulations on taking your first steps in restoring Japan's population!"

"One thrust at a time," Shino murmured.

"Shino-chan!"

"One step. I said step."

"You absolutely did not."

The large screen behind them flickered to life, cutting off the exchange. The image that filled it was an aerial shot—drone footage, steady and cinematic—of a sprawling complex in what was unmistakably central Tokyo. The building was enormous, a modernist statement in glass and steel that occupied an entire city block. Green spaces surrounded it. A running track circled its perimeter. The rooftop caught the sun.

"This," Aria gestured at the screen with reverence, "is the government's gift to all of you."

The footage shifted to interior shots. Spacious apartments with floor-to-ceiling windows. A state-of-the-art kitchen with a professional-grade range, six burners, a built-in wok station—

I catalogued these details with the involuntary precision of a man whose lifelong ambition was domesticity. Six burners. A wok station. The countertops looked like quartz. There was a double oven.

'Stop it. You're being bribed.'

The footage continued. An Olympic-grade swimming pool. A professional recording studio. A fully equipped medical suite. Playgrounds—plural—with equipment that suggested children were not merely expected but produced at industrial scale. Office spaces. Conference rooms. A track and field facility that made Yakishio gasp audibly behind Kawasaki's chair.

"This complex will be your home, your workplace, and your family's foundation," Shino explained, her deadpan carrying unusual weight. "Modern wiring. Fibre-optic throughout. Dedicated business suites for every participant's career development."

"A pool, a track, a gym, gardens, a playground, nurseries—" Aria ticked off features on her fingers. "Everything you'll need to grow as a family and achieve your professional goals."

"Think of it as a love hotel," Shino said, "but permanent, government-funded, and with better amenities."

"Shino-chan, it's a family complex."

"What do you think happens in families?"

The screen showed one final shot—the building at sunset, its windows golden, the Tokyo skyline stretching behind it. It looked like a dream. A custom-built, government-funded dream designed specifically to address every practical objection a rational person might raise against starting a family.

Which meant there was a catch. There was always a catch. The catches with this particular programme had been stacking like Russian nesting dolls—each one opened to reveal something worse inside, and I'd lost count of how many layers deep we were.

"Now!" Aria clapped her hands, drawing attention back to the stage. "Let's introduce our support staff!"

Shino nodded. "These are friends and colleagues of many of our volunteers. They're here to ensure the programme runs smoothly."

"And!" Aria raised a finger. "If they also achieve conception within this month—"

Within this month.

The words landed with the blunt force of a structural beam dropping from a condemned building. Not five days. Not the resort vacation Komachi had packaged in a lottery-win envelope with a bow on top. A month. Thirty days. Komachi had lied about the duration the same way she'd lied about everything else—completely, cheerfully, and with the strategic foresight of a woman who'd been planning this since before I'd moved out.

A month.

Four weeks of—

My higher cognitive functions performed an emergency evacuation. What remained was the lizard brain, and the lizard brain's only contribution was to note that thirty days times thirty women produced a number it was not emotionally equipped to process.

"—they'll also receive full government support!" Aria finished cheerfully.

"First," Shino gestured to the side of the room where several women stood in what I generously called uniforms—the same maid-bikini hybrid frills that had been the dress code since the cruiser. "Our medical expert."

Konuki Sayo stepped forward. The woman who had waxed every hair from my body with the methodical precision of a groundskeeper and then given me a massage whose psychological implications I was still cataloguing. She wore her nurse's frills like someone who viewed the human body as a professional concern rather than a source of embarrassment. Which, for her, it was. The problem was that her professionalism kept extending to me personally.

"Konuki Sayo-san," Aria introduced. "She'll be our dedicated medical professional, ensuring everyone's health throughout the programme."

Konuki's eyes found me. They travelled down. They travelled back up. The smile that spread across her face was the smile of a mechanic who'd been handed the keys to a car she intended to keep running at peak performance regardless of the car's opinions on the matter.

"I'll be making sure Hikigaya-kun stays virile this whole month," she said, and the way she stressed the word added approximately seven syllables to it.

A shiver ran down my spine. Not the pleasant kind. The kind prey animals experience when they realise the rustling in the undergrowth isn't the wind.

"And the rest of our support team!" Aria swept her arm toward the remaining staff.

Hayasaka Ai stepped forward first—the same woman who had overseen the forcible separation of me from my body hair, who had read my light novel aloud without a hint of irony or a single change in expression. She stood now with controlled blankness. She'd seen worse. She was saving her reactions for her diary.

Beside her, Fujiwara Chika bounced on her heels, pink hair swaying, her smile broadcasting on a frequency that could jam radar equipment. She waved at the room with the enthusiasm of someone who had either failed to grasp the gravity of what she'd volunteered for, or had grasped it completely and decided gravity was optional.

"Karen Himemiya-san and Yumeko Shikiya-san—" Aria gestured to two women who carried themselves with quiet composure, accustomed to standing near chaos without being consumed by it.

"Maria Kujou-san—" An older girl with brown hair who shared a surname with a certain silver-haired diplomat-in-the-making. She waved. Behind Miura's chair, Kujou Alisa waved back warmly. Maria had the unguarded warmth of an older sister who apparently approved of her younger sister's life choices.

"—and Nukumizu Kaju-san!" A girl with a quiet, slightly bewildered expression who looked like she'd been expecting a significantly less eventful summer.

The support staff assembled at the side of the room—a chorus line of frills and mixed emotions. Some stood with professional composure. Others fidgeted. Fujiwara was already whispering something to Hayasaka that made the latter's left eye twitch in a way that promised consequences later.

"Wonderful!" Aria and Shino returned to centre stage. Their poses shifted—gone was the variety show energy, replaced by something more focused. More deliberate.

"Now," Aria's voice dropped half an octave, the warm tone sharpening into something that demanded attention. "There's something important we need to address."

"We're sure many of you have been wondering the same thing," Shino continued. The deadpan had given way to genuine seriousness—maybe the first real seriousness she'd shown all evening.

Orchestral music swelled from hidden speakers. Trumpets. Strings. The sort of soundtrack that accompanied nation-defining announcements in wartime newsreels or particularly aggressive insurance commercials. The lighting shifted, pools of white concentrating on the two hosts as the rest of the room dimmed.

"Japan's birth rate has hit a historic low," Aria said, and the screen behind her filled with graphs—descending lines, shrinking pyramids, projections that terminated in numbers preceded by the word "extinction." "Careers. Financial burden. Physical sacrifice. The reasons are many, but they all come back to one fundamental problem."

"You can't have a baby and have a career," Shino stated. "Not really. Not without sacrificing one for the other."

"Pregnancy takes nine months from the body. Childbirth takes more. Recovery. Nursing. The physical toll alone forces a choice that no person should have to make."

Shino nodded. "Until now."

The music built. Timpani rolled beneath the strings. The screen went dark, then erupted with a single word in block capitals:

S.T.O.R.K.

"The Synthetic Terminal for Offspring Reception and Keeping," both women announced in unison.

"And to introduce this revolutionary technology," Aria extended her arm toward a section of the stage floor that had begun to glow, "we're honoured to welcome its inventor!"

"The woman who will change the future of human reproduction," Shino added.

"The genius behind STORK—"

The floor panel slid open.

"—Shinonono Tabane!"

A platform rose from beneath the stage—hydraulic, smooth, accompanied by a burst of theatrical fog that caught the overhead lights and turned them into a soft pink haze. Standing on the platform, one foot slightly ahead of the other, hands raised in twin peace signs, was—

A reverse bunny outfit.

My brain processed this in stages, each one worse than the last. A reverse bunny outfit meant that the parts traditionally covered were instead exposed, while the parts traditionally exposed were clad in the outfit's distinctive fabric. Shinonono Tabane wore elbow-length gloves, thigh-high stockings, rabbit ears atop lavender hair that fell in wild waves past her waist, and a thin strip of connecting fabric whose strategic coverage could be most charitably described as theoretical.

She was also grinning. Her relationship with conventional sanity was best described as long-distance, and neither party was making much effort to close the gap.

"Hiiii~!" Tabane waved at the room, bouncing on her heels with an enthusiasm that sent corresponding waves through regions her outfit had elected not to govern. "I'm Shinonono Tabane! Inventor of STORK, quantum dynamics theorist, and part-time genius! Nice to meet you all!"

She bounded off the rising platform before it had fully locked into position, landing on the stage with the grace of a cat and the energy of a caffeinated squirrel. Her rabbit ears bobbed. Her chest moved independently of the rest of her in a way that suggested it had filed for autonomy and was awaiting the paperwork.

"First~!" Tabane held up one finger, spinning on her heel. "Before I talk about STORK, I have to thank some very special people!"

She pressed her palms together in a gesture of gratitude that was undermined slightly by the way it framed her exposed chest.

"Taro-sensei~! Thank you so much for helping design all of the STORK models! Your understanding of the female form was absolutely essential to making sure the androids look and feel authentic!"

She bowed, ears flopping.

"And Kojima-sensei~! Who was particularly interested in making sure their feet were perfect!"

She paused. The room waited for elaboration.

None came.

"I didn't really understand why, but Kojima-sensei spent three months on foot articulation alone! The toe joints have seventeen degrees of freedom each! That's more than the hands!" Tabane's grin didn't waver. "Anyway~! Thank you both for your sponsorship and support of this programme!"

The screen behind her shifted, and from concealed panels in the stage floor, a row of androids rose into the light.

Seven of them.

I recognised them immediately. Every gamer in the room recognised them—and based on the sharp intake of breath from Ebina's direction and the way Suou's posture shifted behind her, I wasn't the only one processing the aesthetic choice.

They were YoRHa units. Or close enough that Square Enix's legal department would need a stiff drink. Sleek, porcelain-pale forms. Black visors. Bodies that existed on the far side of the uncanny valley, in the territory where the question stopped being "is it human?" and became "does it matter?" Their

construction was immaculate—joints smoothed, synthetic musculature visible beneath the skin in the way it shifted as they moved.

Because they were moving. Subtle shifts. Weight transfers. The mimicry of breathing.

The central unit stood with her hands at her sides, silver-white hair falling across her visor. Where the original's black dress would have been, a clinical white bodysuit left her midsection exposed—a design choice that would become relevant shortly, though I didn't know that yet, and ignorance, for once, was functioning as intended.

"These," Tabane announced, spreading her arms to encompass the row, "are STORK units! The future of childbearing! And aren't they cute~?"

She spun to face them, clasping her hands beneath her chin.

"The concept is simple!" She held up three fingers. "Step one: conception happens naturally!"

She winked at the room.

At the room in general. I was simply located within the room. That wink was a broadcast, not a targeted transmission.

It was absolutely a targeted transmission.

"Step two: once the egg is fertilised—approximately forty-eight to seventy-two hours after conception—STORK extracts it!" Tabane turned to the central android. "Let me show you how!"

Something shifted at the android's lower back. A panel opened, smooth and silent, and from within emerged a tendril—approximately thirty centimetres long, its surface gleaming under the stage lights. It moved with fluid, organic grace, curving and flexing with the precision of a surgical instrument.

"This is STORK's extraction appendage!" Tabane explained, reaching out and letting the tendril coil around her forearm like a pet snake she'd raised from

birth. "Titanium-carbide alloy core, but the exterior is wrapped in synthetic material that perfectly mimics human flesh! Warm to the touch, flexible, and gentle~!"

She squeezed it demonstratively. It yielded under her grip. Beside me, Hiratsuka-sensei's hand had migrated from her knee to the armrest of her chair, where her fingers were leaving impressions in the padding.

"Now! For a demonstration!"

Every person in the room achieved perfect posture simultaneously. In my case, this meant locking every muscle into a state of rigidity that would have drawn compliments from a mortician.

"Don't worry, don't worry~!" Tabane waved dismissively. "I'll be the demonstration model! I volunteered!"

Of course she had. Of course the genius inventor of android surrogate wombs had volunteered to demonstrate the extraction process live, on stage, in a reverse bunny outfit, in front of an audience that included a JAV producer, an eroge developer, a woman who was almost certainly taking mental notes for a doujinshi, and me—a man whose capacity for processing new information had exceeded its warranty approximately two hours ago.

Tabane positioned herself beside the central STORK unit and turned to face the audience. She placed her hands on her hips and grinned—a cooking show host about to flambé something that really shouldn't be flambéed.

"So! The extraction appendage extends from the STORK unit, like so—"

The tendril extended further, its tip tapering to a smooth, rounded point. It curved downward behind Tabane—

I suddenly found the ceiling very interesting. Architecturally. The support beams used a cantilever design that I could probably study for the next several minutes without needing to look at anything else.

"It enters gently—always gently!—and navigates to the cervix using micro-sensors!"

Tabane's voice carried the same breezy commentary tone one might use to explain how a rice cooker worked. I continued my rigorous architectural survey of the ceiling. The fluorescent light fixtures appeared to be industrial-grade, possibly T8 tubes, which offered excellent luminosity per watt—

"Oh~! There it goes!"

To my left, Hiratsuka-sensei had adopted the posture of someone watching a horror film through her fingers. To my right, Isshiki's grip on my thigh had tightened to the point where I was reasonably certain she was leaving a bruise, though whether from shock or fascination I couldn't determine and didn't want to.

A secondary screen descended from the ceiling—the ceiling I'd been studying so diligently—and filled with what I was going to classify as a medical imaging feed. I was going to classify it as medical because the alternative required acknowledging things I was not prepared to acknowledge.

"As you can see! A secondary probe extends from the tip—hair-thin, incredibly precise!" Tabane's narration continued with the cadence of a nature documentary. "This enters the uterus and locates the fertilised egg! The probe attaches using a bio-adhesive compound and gently extracts it! Quick, painless, and the mother can go right back to work!"

The screen displayed the procedure in overlay graphics—clean, clinical, labelled with the dispassionate accuracy of a medical textbook. It looked, in spite of everything, genuinely impressive. The engineering was elegant. The precision was extraordinary.

The fact that it was being demonstrated live by a woman in rabbit ears while orchestral music played was, I suppose, simply what scientific progress looked like in a country where the demographic crisis had reached the point of avant-garde reproductive theatre.

The tendril withdrew. Tabane exhaled, rolled her shoulders, and grinned at the audience as though she'd just finished demonstrating a kitchen appliance.

"And that's it! No pregnancy! No morning sickness! No physical limitations! The STORK unit carries the baby to full term in its internal gestation chamber, which replicates uterine conditions with 99.97% accuracy!"

She clapped her hands together.

"Each unit can carry up to three babies simultaneously!"

Three. Per unit. Ten units on stage. Thirty potential simultaneous gestations from the visible hardware alone, and something told me Tabane hadn't brought her full inventory.

"And it gets even better!" Tabane skipped—literally skipped—to the nearest STORK unit and pressed her palm against its chest. "STORK units are fully equipped for post-natal support! They can breastfeed!"

She pressed a spot on the android's collarbone, and the unit's chest panel shifted. Beneath the synthetic skin, reservoirs became visible—translucent chambers filled with pale liquid.

"They synthesise breast milk tailored to each baby's needs—including the proper antibodies! During the breastfeeding stage, STORK analyses the infant's immune profile and produces customised immunoglobulin compounds!" She winked. "Better than biological breastfeeding in terms of immune response accuracy, though of course nothing beats the real thing for bonding!"

She patted the android's head. The android tilted its head into her hand. The gesture was disturbingly cat-like.

"STORK units can assist with all aspects of child-rearing! Feeding, monitoring, emergency response! They're connected to a central health network that tracks developmental milestones and alerts the parents to any concerns!"

Tabane spun back to face the audience, rabbit ears catching the light.

"So! To summarise!" She counted on her fingers. "Conceive naturally! STORK extracts the egg! STORK carries the baby! STORK helps raise the baby! You keep your career, your body, and your freedom!"

She threw both arms wide.

"Welcome to the future of family~!"

The orchestral music swelled to a crescendo. The STORK units behind Tabane shifted in unison, their heads turning to face the audience in a synchronised movement that was either deeply reassuring or deeply terrifying depending on how many sci-fi films you'd seen and how well those films had ended.

The room didn't fall silent so much as it emptied of sound. Two dozen people simultaneously processing information that restructured the fundamental terms of the arrangement they'd been dragged into.

The breeding programme had seemed barbaric. Insane. A relic of dystopian fiction that someone had slapped a government letterhead on and called policy.

But STORK changed the equation.

The central objection—the physical sacrifice, the career derailment, the nine months of bodily surrender—had been engineered out of existence by a woman in rabbit ears. What remained was—

No. Stop. I was not going to find this reasonable. I was not going to sit here, naked, in a government facility, and conclude that the programme that had kidnapped, drugged, and stripped me was actually sensible because a genius in a reverse bunny outfit had built mechanical wombs shaped like video game characters.

I was not.

I was absolutely not.

The wok station in that Tokyo complex had a commercial-grade ventilation hood and I'd counted at least three prep stations in the drone footage.

'Stop. It.'

Aria and Shino returned to centre stage as Tabane bounded off, waving, her rabbit ears bouncing with each step. The STORK units remained standing behind them—a synthetic honour guard with black visors and the patient stillness of machines that had all the time in the world.

"And there you have it!" Aria clasped her hands, her expression warm. "No one has to choose between family and future anymore."

Shino nodded. "Your bodies. Your careers. Your terms."

"So!" Aria turned to the room. "Let's make this work! For Japan!"

"For Japan!" several voices echoed—Tabane's from offstage, loudest of all.

For Japan.

I sat in my chair. Naked. Hairless. Aroused against my will. Flanked by hands on both thighs that had long since stopped pretending to be accidental. Surrounded by thirty women in varying states of undress. Staring at a row of android surrogate wombs built by a woman in a reverse bunny outfit, sponsored by a JAV studio and an eroge company, in a programme orchestrated by my sister, whose face was still frozen on a secondary screen wearing an eyepatch and a smile that said she'd planned this before I'd learned to do my own laundry.

For Japan.

The kitchen had a wok station.

I was so screwed.

-=&<o>&=-

End

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