

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 1.3 -

**Naturally, Government Initiatives
Have My Best Interests at Heart**

"Speaking of things named after my dear old brother—"

From my peripheral vision, no fewer than four people flinched. Miura's shoulders jerked upward like a cat doused with water. Ebina clutched the armrest of her chair. Orimoto's jaw locked mid-protest. And three seats down the row, a sharp intake of breath that could only belong to—

Kawasaki Saki.

'Speaking of things named after— What else has been named after me? How many objects bearing my name or likeness exist in the apartments of women I went to school with? Is there a market? Am I a brand? Do I need to consult a trademark lawyer?'

The screen transitioned. New slide. New victim.

KAWASAKI SAKI — COMPATIBILITY PROFILE

The layout was identical to the previous profiles. Clean. Professional. Government-branded with the BREED logo in the corner, because apparently even Orwellian reproductive programmes needed consistent visual identity. Komachi had put more effort into the graphic design of this dystopia than I'd put into four semesters of university coursework. Five, if we counted the one I was currently sleepwalking through.

Kawasaki's measurements appeared in crisp white text against a dark background. Height. Weight. The triple threat of numbers that no woman

wanted broadcast to a room of acquaintances and one unfortunate man sitting under a spotlight with nothing covering him but regret and a pharmaceutical erection that had outlasted several friendships tonight.

Kawasaki's thumb drove into her remote immediately. Not the frantic hammering of Hiratsuka-sensei or the competitive button-work of the trio—this was methodical. Deliberate. Each press accompanied by a minute shift of her body in the chair, the steady rhythm of someone who had decided that if persistence alone could save her, she would persist until the heat death of the universe or the battery's death, whichever came first.

Blood Type: O

Press. Press. Press.

Hobbies: Knitting, cooking, motorcycle maintenance

Press. Press. Press. Press.

Motorcycle maintenance? That was new. Or rather, I'd known she rode—you didn't miss Kawasaki Saki on a motorcycle, the image had a certain aesthetic permanence—but I'd never catalogued it as a hobby. She maintained her own motorcycle. There was something about that—competence in a practical, grease-under-the-fingernails sense, the intersection of mechanical aptitude and stubborn self-sufficiency—that my brain filed under "objectively admirable" before I could stop it.

'Stop admiring things. Stop admiring anything. You are in no position to admire.'

Virginity Status: ✓ (Confirmed)

The pressing intensified to a frequency that threatened the device's structural integrity. Kawasaki's face had gone the colour of umeboshi—that particular shade of pickled-plum red that existed nowhere else in nature and communicated a depth of mortification that no English word and only a handful of Japanese ones could adequately capture. Her jaw was clenched so tight I

could see the tendons in her neck standing out like cables on a suspension bridge approaching its load limit.

How was Komachi confirming these things? Did she have informants in gynaecology offices? Had she bribed health ministry officials? Was there a subsection of the BREED programme dedicated specifically to virginity verification, and if so, what was its acronym? Knowing this programme, it probably had one, and it was probably something like V.I.R.G.I.N.—Verified Intimate Readiness and Gynaecological Integrity Network.

The scope of my sister's intelligence network was beginning to concern me on a national security level. Forget the declining birthrate—someone needed to investigate whether my little sister was running a shadow government. The Diet had oversight committees for things far less invasive than whatever Komachi had been doing with her gap year.

"Now!" Komachi's voice chirped from the speakers, her one visible eye sparkling—the particular gleam that preceded maximum psychological damage. "Instead of telling the story myself, I thought I'd bring in a special informant who can speak to Saki-san's feelings for Onii-chan!"

Kawasaki's pressing stopped. Her hand froze mid-press, hovering over the remote like a grenade with the pin already pulled but the arm not yet committed to the throw. Her eyes, which had been fixed on the screen with the intensity of someone watching a countdown reach single digits, widened.

"Of course," Komachi continued, tilting her head with exaggerated consideration, "our informant would like to remain anonymous."

The screen cut away from Komachi's feed. A pre-recorded video began playing.

The first thing I noticed was the blur. A heavy mosaic filter obscured the figure in frame, reducing them to a vaguely humanoid smear of pixels. Standard witness protection aesthetics—the visual language of government informants and convenience store robbery footage. The second thing I noticed was the black bar positioned directly across the figure's eyes—a thick, rectangular

sensor stripe laid over the already-comprehensive blurring, as if Komachi's production team had disagreed on which anonymisation method to use and resolved the conflict by implementing both.

The redundancy was almost impressive. Like wearing a balaclava under a motorcycle helmet. Inside a cardboard box. With a fake moustache drawn on the outside of the box.

But even through the double layer of censorship, certain details bled through. The figure was short. Male. Young—teenager, probably. Sitting on what appeared to be the floor of a modest apartment, the camera angled to capture both him and a room in the background.

A bedroom. Specifically.

The walls had that particular arrangement of posters and shelves that screamed "responsible older sibling's room"—a corkboard with schedules pinned to it, a small desk stacked with textbooks, clothes folded with military precision on a shelf. I recognised the organisational philosophy. It was the same one I'd seen in Kawasaki's locker back in high school—the system of someone who'd learned early that if you didn't impose order on your life, nobody else would do it for you.

And on the bed, visible through the open door behind the blurred informant, a figure lay sleeping.

Long, dark blue hair fanned across a pillow. One bare arm draped over what appeared to be a body-length pillow.

Even without enhanced resolution, even through the carefully constructed layers of anonymity, there was not a single person in this room who couldn't identify both the apartment and its inhabitants. The blurred figure's height, build, and general fidgety energy pointed to exactly one person.

Kawasaki Taishi.

Saki's younger brother.

The boy I'd spoken to precisely twice in my life—once during that whole affair with her night job back in high school, and once in passing at a convenience store where he'd bowed so deeply he'd nearly headbutted the magazine rack. Both times he'd radiated the nervous energy of a small dog meeting a large dog—all eager eyes and barely contained vibration.

"Anonymity" was doing quite a lot of heavy lifting here. More weight than the word was structurally designed to bear. The censorship was less a disguise and more a polite fiction—sunglasses at a family dinner, insisting nobody could recognise you.

"So," came Komachi's off-screen voice in the recording, presumably conducting the interview, "can you tell us about the subject?"

The blurred figure shifted. Even through the mosaic filter, I could sense the oscillation between sitting still and fidgeting—a browser tab buffering between two states of anxiety. Taishi had always been the earnest type. The sort of kid who'd sell out his own family not from malice but from an overwhelming, puppyish desire to be helpful. The boy who, when asked "can you keep a secret?" would answer honestly: "probably not."

"Nee-san... I meant the subject has liked Hikigaya-san since the first time he helped her."

Just. Straight out. No preamble. No hedging. No rhetorical warm-up or any of the social lubrication that separates civilised disclosure from emotional detonation. The directness of a teenager who hadn't yet learned that some truths are better left in their coffins, nailed shut, buried six feet under, and marked with a headstone that reads "DO NOT EXHUME."

A beat of silence.

Then Komachi's recorded voice, gentle as a knife wrapped in velvet:
"Remember, anonymous informant-san, we're protecting your identity here."

"R-right! I meant—the subject! The female subject who is definitely not my—not anyone's—" The pixelated blob waved its hands in frantic circles, the

universal gesture of someone attempting to stuff a confession back into their mouth after it had already escaped. "The person in question!"

I could feel the sweat forming at my temple. One sentence. The kid had lasted exactly one sentence before blowing his own cover. The mosaic filter. The censor bar. The careful camera positioning. Komachi had probably spent hours setting up this elaborate witness protection theatre, and Taishi had detonated the entire operation with his opening word.

'Nee-san. He said nee-san. On camera. On a government recording. Taishi, the anonymity was for you as much as for her. Did Komachi explain that and you just forgot, or did she deliberately not explain it because the failure was the punchline?'

Knowing Komachi, the failure was absolutely the punchline.

Three seats down, Kawasaki had gone completely still—the kind that preceded either catatonia or fratricide. Knowing her relationship with her brother, fratricide was leading in the polls. Her remote hung limp in her fingers, the mute button forgotten. What use was muting when your own brother had already detonated the munitions depot from inside the building?

"Shall we continue, anonymous-san?"

"Yes! So the sub—the person—she keeps this notebook, right? Under her mattress. And inside—"

Kawasaki's thumb returned to the remote with renewed violence, hammering the button with the singular focus of a woman trying to outrun the exact moment her life would end, one press at a time.

The audio didn't cut.

"She doesn't say it," Taishi's blurred form continued, one hand scratching the back of his pixelated head—guileless, oblivious, "but I could tell. After Hikigaya-san and the others helped her quit her night job, she started acting different."

Press press press press press—

"She smiled more. Started humming when she cooked dinner. And she—"

The button. Kawasaki was pressing it with a fervour that had entered the realm of religious devotion—each press a prayer to the god of mute functions, a deity who had already demonstrated tonight that he was either dead, absent, or actively malicious.

The audio did not cut. The pre-recorded video, as Komachi would later explain with the apologetic insincerity of a war criminal at a tribunal, operated on a separate audio channel entirely.

"—kept bringing up 'Hikigaya' in conversation. Like, I'd say something about school and she'd go, 'Oh, that reminds me of what Hikigaya did at the cultural festival,' or 'Hikigaya mentioned something like that once.'"

'She was—She brought me up? In casual conversation? Kawasaki Saki, the girl whose default mode of interaction was the verbal equivalent of a closed fist, was voluntarily introducing my name into family dinner discussions?'

I tried to imagine it. Kawasaki at the kitchen table, serving rice, Taishi talking about his day at school, and somewhere in the gap between responses—"Oh, that reminds me of what Hikigaya did." The image was so incongruous with the Kawasaki I knew that my brain kept rejecting it, like a card reader refusing a bent coin.

But Taishi had no reason to lie. Taishi didn't possess the cognitive architecture for deception. The boy was made entirely of sincerity and poor judgement, and right now both were operating at maximum capacity.

"Then I found these."

Taishi's blurred arm reached off-screen and returned holding something. He opened it toward the camera, and even through the censorship filter, the contents were unmistakable.

Scrapbooks.

The pages were filled with photographs of me, specifically—pulled from school event albums, class photos, possibly even candid shots taken during Service Club activities. And beside each photograph, arranged like a serial killer's evidence board or a teenage girl's first love collage—two aesthetic categories that shared more visual DNA than either would care to admit—were photographs of Kawasaki herself. Side by side. Paired. Some had decorative borders in what looked like coloured pencil. Hearts? Stars? The blur made it difficult to determine the exact shape, but the intent shone through the pixels.

Kawasaki Saki, the girl who radiated "don't talk to me" energy with the intensity of a space heater set to maximum, had been maintaining scrapbooks. Plural. Of us.

"She has three of these," Taishi confirmed, holding up fingers—proud, eager, a kid presenting a school project. "One from first year, one from second year, and one from after graduation that she still adds to."

After graduation. She was still adding to it. At twenty-one years old, Kawasaki Saki was cutting out photographs and arranging them in scrapbooks like a Victorian maiden pressing flowers from her beloved's garden, except instead of flowers it was photos of a man with dead fish eyes, and instead of a garden it was a life defined by aggressive avoidance of the very person she was documenting.

The dissonance was staggering. It was like discovering that a bear kept a diary. A meticulous, multi-volume diary with decorative borders and colour-coded tabs.

To my right, Isshiki shifted. The hand that had pinched my side earlier had migrated—not retreated, *migrated*, the way borders shift on a political map after a quiet annexation nobody voted on. It now rested on my upper thigh, casual-looking, wanting very badly to pass for accidental and failing with every passing second.

To my left—

Hiratsuka-sensei's palm lay flat against the surface of my chair. Casual. Inadvertent-looking. Except her pinky finger pressed against the exact point where my outer thigh met the seat—a territorial encroachment so subtle it could have been dismissed as accidental if not for the fact that it hadn't moved in three minutes. Accidents shifted. Accidents adjusted. This pinky was a planted flag on a newly claimed continent.

I was flanked. Hemmed in. Two points of contact—one actual, one imminent—from women who'd apparently decided that Kawasaki's humiliation provided adequate cover for advancing their positions. While the room's attention was fixed on the screen, the battle for my thigh was being waged in silence, and I was the territory with no vote in the conflict.

On screen, Taishi had set the scrapbooks aside and was gesturing toward the background of the shot. Toward the bed. Toward Kawasaki Saki, sleeping peacefully in her room, unaware that her brother was conducting a nationally broadcast exposé of her romantic life three metres away from her unconscious body.

"And then there's the daki."

Kawasaki's pressing halted. Her entire body went rigid—not the controlled stillness she'd deployed earlier but a full-system lockup, every muscle firing simultaneously and cancelling each other out, producing a state of paralysis that looked, from the outside, like someone had pressed her pause button.

"See, Nee-san has this dakimakura—"

"No," Kawasaki said. Out loud. In the room. A single syllable of absolute denial directed at a pre-recorded video that could neither hear nor care. The word left her mouth with the futile conviction of someone shouting "stop" at an oncoming train.

"—she calls it the Hachi-daki."

The room reacted. Yuigahama covered her mouth with both hands, eyes wide above her fingers. Yukinoshita's eyebrow achieved facial escape velocity,

leaving the gravitational pull of her usual composure entirely. Haruno leaned forward—someone watching their favourite drama reach its climax, popcorn spiritually if not physically present. And Miura, who moments ago had been the primary victim of Komachi's broadcast, now wore the relieved expression of a prisoner watching the firing squad redirect its aim—sympathetic, certainly, but primarily grateful.

Taishi, blurred and bar-eyed but radiating the oblivious goodwill of a golden retriever delivering a dead bird to its owner and expecting praise, stood up and crept toward his sleeping sister. The camera followed—smooth, steady footage, a wildlife documentary closing in on its subject.

The sleeping Kawasaki lay on her side, arms wrapped around a body pillow. As Taishi drew closer and the camera's focus tightened, the blur couldn't entirely obscure what was printed on the pillowcase.

It was me.

A full-body illustration, rendered in custom-commissioned anime art style—the dead fish eyes, the slightly hunched posture, even the perpetual look of existential fatigue that I'd been told, on multiple occasions, was my resting face's only setting. Someone had paid an artist to draw me. Someone had provided reference material. Someone had probably gone through a revision process—"Could you make the eyes a bit more dead? Yes, perfect, that's the one"—and printed the final product onto a dakimakura cover, and someone was currently sleeping with it pressed against her body with a possessiveness that bordered on structural.

A dakimakura. Of me. The Hachi-daki.

Someone had conceptualised this, researched custom printing services, entered their credit card information on a website specialising in anime body pillows, clicked "confirm order," tracked the shipping notification, opened the package, put the cover on the pillow, and lain down beside it. Not once. Across multiple seasonal variants.

Taishi carefully lifted the edge of the dakimakura cover, revealing the printed face more clearly to the camera. Even through the mosaic filter, my own dead-eyed expression stared back at me from the pillow. We made eye contact, me and pillow-me. Two Hachimans, separated by medium and context, united by the shared experience of being trapped in situations we never asked for. Pillow-me looked resigned to his fate. Real-me aspired to the same acceptance but hadn't achieved it yet.

"She orders custom covers online," Taishi whispered to the camera—hushed, reverent, a naturalist who had stumbled upon something rare and was trying not to spook it. "She has a summer one, a winter one, and one in a suit for some reason."

A suit. Kawasaki Saki had a version of the Hachi-daki in formal wear. And unlike the other covers, this one wasn't imagination—it was memory. I'd worn a suit exactly once in her presence, during the night job incident in first year. The night I'd shown up at that place to help get her out. She'd seen me in it for maybe twenty minutes total, under fluorescent lighting, in a service corridor that smelled of industrial cleaner, and she'd carried that image home and had it rendered into a body pillow cover she slept with nightly.

'There is a pillow version of me in a suit. I wore a suit once—once—in front of her, for maybe twenty minutes, and she turned it into a nightly companion. Suit Hachiman exists in a parallel textile dimension, being held by a woman who has never once told me she likes me while conscious. Suit Hachiman might be doing better than me.'

Then, as if the universe had decided the scene lacked a final devastating flourish, the sleeping Kawasaki shifted. Her arms tightened around the pillow. Her lips moved. And from the speakers, amplified by whatever microphone Taishi was wearing, came a sound that detonated in the silent banquet hall like a fragmentation grenade delivered by carrier pigeon.

"...Hachiman..."

My name. Murmured in sleep. Soft, unguarded, stripped of every wall Kawasaki Saki had ever built around herself—and she'd built more walls than most medieval fortifications, each one reinforced with hostility and silence and the particular stubbornness of the eldest daughter in a family that needed her to be strong. All of those walls, every single one of them, dissolved in a single unconscious syllable.

She hadn't said "Hikigaya." She'd said *Hachiman*. First name. The intimate form. The version reserved for family, lovers, and people who had earned a closeness that Kawasaki had never, in any waking moment, indicated she wanted from me.

But apparently she wanted it in her sleep. Where the walls couldn't reach.

The silence that followed lasted approximately one point four seconds.

Kawasaki stood up.

The motion was violent—chair legs screeching against the floor, the remote gripped in a white-knuckled fist. She drew her arm back and hurled the device at the screen with the form of a softball pitcher and the fury of a woman whose entire inner world had just been projected in high definition to an audience that included the man she'd been sleeping next to—in pillow form—for years.

The remote sailed through the air, struck the edge of the projection screen's frame, and ricocheted into the darkness beyond the spotlights. A distant clatter confirmed its landing and subsequent destruction.

Third remote down today. Hiratsuka-sensei had crushed hers. Miura had thrown hers with poor form. Kawasaki's throw had actual mechanics—shoulder rotation, hip engagement, follow-through. If this programme didn't work out, she had a future in softball.

"TAISHII!" Kawasaki's voice ripped through the hall. Raw. Unfiltered. The vocal equivalent of a natural disaster. "I'M GOING TO KILL YOU! YOU HEAR ME? WHEN I GET HOME, YOU'RE DEAD! DEAD!"

She spun toward the screen, fists clenched at her sides, chest heaving with each furious breath. "THAT LITTLE—HOW COULD HE—I TOLD HIM TO STAY OUT OF MY ROOM!"

I should not have been looking.

I was looking.

In my defence—and I want to stress that this was a defence born of physics rather than intent—Kawasaki Saki was standing. Fully upright. In a room where everyone else was seated. Under spotlights that left nothing to imagination, nothing to inference, nothing to the merciful ambiguity of shadow or distance. And she was animated by a rage so physical, so full-bodied, that the natural consequences of sudden movement applied themselves with mathematical precision.

Newton's first law states that an object in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by an external force. When Kawasaki threw her arm forward, when she stamped her foot, when she whirled from the screen to curse her brother's name to the ceiling, every part of her that was not anchored by bone or muscle followed the trajectory dictated by momentum and gravity.

Her breasts bounced. There was no more clinical way to phrase it, and I was reaching desperately for clinical because the alternative was honest, and honest would have required admitting that the sight had rerouted approximately sixty per cent of my cognitive processing power to regions of the brain I was trying very hard to keep offline.

I catalogued these observations with the same detachment I applied to all unwanted sensory input, which is to say, no detachment whatsoever. My eyes were traitors. My peripheral vision was a collaborator. And whatever they'd put in that drink interpreted moments of heightened visual stimulus as a signal to redouble its efforts, like a malicious algorithm that learned from engagement metrics.

Isshiki's fingers shifted on my thigh—a subtle repositioning that coincided precisely with Kawasaki's most dramatic rotation. Certain pharmaceutically

sustained parts of my anatomy responded with a twitch that carried the unmistakable energy of a Stand user squaring up across a prison courtyard. *'Oh? You're approaching me?'* it seemed to say, except nobody was approaching, and the organ in question had no business issuing challenges it couldn't back up in a room full of witnesses.

'Stand down. I am ordering you to stand down. This is not a democracy. You do not get a vote.'

The organ did not recognise my authority.

On my other side, Hiratsuka-sensei's pinky had been joined by her ring finger, doubling her territorial holding—quiet annexation while the world's attention was elsewhere. Her gaze remained fixed on the screen, but that expanding hand told a different story. Land grabs. Manifest destiny. The slow, patient acquisition of territory by someone who'd decided that waiting was a strategy, not a weakness.

I was a contested border. A demilitarised zone with active incursions from both flanks. And I was in no position—literally, figuratively, anatomically—to negotiate a ceasefire.

"Now then!" Komachi's voice brightened with the tonal whiplash of someone changing slides at a corporate presentation that had just featured a woman's custom dakimakura. "Let me summarise Saki-san's profile!"

Kawasaki didn't move. Didn't protest. She sat with her head tilted back, eyes fixed on the ceiling, arms limp at her sides. The posture of a woman who'd accepted her fate with the same resignation I brought to Monday mornings. And Tuesday mornings. And every morning of every day since I'd developed the cognitive capacity to understand that mornings were a recurring problem with no permanent solution.

"Kawasaki Saki, twenty-one years old. Blood type O. Dream career: stay-at-home mother!"

I knew this. I'd known it since high school—since that conversation about careers where Kawasaki had mentioned it with a defiance that dared anyone to judge her, her chin lifted and her eyes hard, as if she expected the world to tell her it wasn't enough. Nobody had told her that, because nobody had been listening closely enough to hear it. Except, apparently, me. And my sister, who listened to everything and recorded most of it.

It had struck me then because it was a mirror. Her dream and mine were two halves of the same domestic equation. Stay-at-home mother. Stay-at-home husband. The compatibility was so obvious it felt like a maths problem where someone had written the answer in the margin and I'd been too busy staring at the wrong part of the page to notice.

"Has been in love with Onii-chan since he helped her during the Kawasaki family incident in first year of high school! Maintains multiple scrapbooks documenting their relationship—"

"There is no relationship," Kawasaki mumbled at the ceiling. Her voice had the flat quality of someone correcting a factual error on a death certificate.

"—owns a custom dakimakura known as the Hachi-daki with three seasonal variants—"

"Kill me."

"—and calls out Onii-chan's name in her sleep! Her younger brother Taishi-kun... I meant our anonymous informant rates the compatibility at, and I quote, 'eleven out of ten, please marry my sister so she stops being scary.'"

'Eleven out of ten. The kid broke the scale. Taishi gave us a rating that exceeds the maximum possible score because he wants his sister to stop being scary. I don't know whether to be touched by the sincerity or alarmed by the implication that Kawasaki's romantic frustration has been manifesting as household terrorism.'

Kawasaki's head dropped forward. Her hair fell across her face like a curtain drawn across a stage where the performance had gone catastrophically wrong and the audience was still in their seats because the exits were locked.

Komachi's expression softened. Just slightly—a recalibration from "cheerful torturer" to "cheerful torturer with a conscience," the difference measurable in millimetres but significant in meaning. She leaned toward her camera, and her visible eye held something that might have been genuine warmth. The same warmth she'd shown during the Miura segment—rare, brief, aimed at the moments she considered important enough to deserve sincerity rather than strategy.

"Saki-san."

No response.

"Saki-san, I know this isn't how you wanted any of this to come out. And I know you're going to destroy Taishi-kun's PlayStation when you get home. But..."

Komachi paused. The timing was deliberate—she'd inherited our mother's sense of dramatic cadence, or perhaps refined it through years of manipulating her older brother into situations that required precisely timed emotional beats.

"You and Onii-chan want the same thing. You want a home. A family. Someone to cook for, someone who'll be there. He wants to be a househusband, and you want to be a stay-at-home mum. That's not a coincidence, Saki-san. That's a blueprint."

A blueprint. My sister was selling domestic compatibility like a real estate agent selling a floor plan. Open-concept living. Natural light. Pre-installed emotional codependency. Two-car garage of mutual avoidance that could be converted into actual communication with minor renovations.

And the worst part—the genuinely, authentically worst part—was that she wasn't wrong. The blueprint was there. It had always been there, drawn in

lines I'd refused to read because reading them would have meant acknowledging that the househusband dream wasn't an abstract philosophical position but a plan that required a specific person on the other side of the equation, and that specific person had been sitting three seats away from me in every classroom, every school event, every accidental encounter at the convenience store, maintaining scrapbooks and sleeping next to a pillow with my face on it while I wrote essays about the theoretical merits of domesticity without ever once considering who I'd be domestic *with*.

"So please," Komachi continued, her voice carrying the weight of someone who believed absolutely in what she was saying, "take this opportunity. Don't let embarrassment win. You've been holding back for years—I've seen it. Everyone's seen it. The only person who hasn't seen it is the idiot sitting in the middle of that row, and we both know he needs things spelled out."

'Oi. I was right here. Could hear everything. The "idiot" had ears and a functioning auditory cortex, thank you very much.'

But my indignation was a thin, brittle thing—a shell of protest around an interior that was mostly just... quiet. Because she was right. I hadn't seen it. I'd looked directly at it, repeatedly, for years, and I'd filed it under "probably nothing" with the same determined obliviousness I applied to all evidence that someone might genuinely care about me. Denial wasn't just a river in Egypt. In my case, it was an entire hydrological system—rivers, tributaries, aquifers, all feeding into an ocean of strategic blindness that I'd mistaken for self-awareness.

Then movement. Three seats down. Kawasaki's head lifted. Slowly. The curtain of dark blue hair parted, strand by strand, revealing a face that had undergone a transformation in the thirty seconds it had been hidden.

The mortification was still there—flushed cheeks, tight jaw, the residual tremor of someone who'd just had their deepest secret broadcast to a live audience. But underneath it, rising through the embarrassment like a green shoot through scorched earth, was something else.

Determination.

Kawasaki Saki's fist clenched. Not in anger this time. Not in the white-knuckled fury that had destroyed a remote and threatened a brother's life. This was different—a gathering of force, a compression of will, a decision being made in real time. She raised her fist, knuckles up, and pumped it once. Small. Tight. Someone who'd reached a decision, and the decision had teeth.

Then she turned.

Her eyes found mine—dark, steady, burning with an intensity I'd only seen once before. During that confrontation at Destinyland, when she'd stood under the fluorescent lights of a service corridor and admitted she was working nights to pay for her brother's education. The same brother who had just sold her out on government television, but that was a matter for later.

That same defiance. That same raw, unpolished honesty that didn't know how to be anything other than what it was.

Kawasaki Saki looked at me. Directly. No flinching, no averting, no retreat behind the fortress of her usual scowl. She held my gaze—unwavering—someone who'd decided that shame was a luxury she could no longer afford.

I looked back.

What else could I do?

Isshiki's fingers pressed against my thigh—firmer now, insistent, the territorial claim escalating from suggestion to declaration. Hiratsuka-sensei's hand had expanded its jurisdiction further still, ring finger now fully committed to the surface of my thigh in what was becoming less an incursion and more an occupation. And across the row, I could feel the weight of other gazes—Haruno's amused, Ebina's analytical, Yukino's unreadable—swivelling between me and the woman who was, for the first time since I'd known her, not looking away.

Somewhere in an apartment I'd never visited, there existed a body pillow with my face on it. Three seasonal variants and formal wear. Scrapbooks charting the progression of a feeling I'd been too dense—or too committed to denseness—to notice. A notebook under a mattress. A name murmured in sleep.

And now Kawasaki Saki was looking at me with an expression that said, plainly and without decoration: *Yes. All of it. Every word was true. What are you going to do about it?*

I didn't have an answer.

But for once, the silence between us felt less like avoidance and more like the held breath before a reply.

The moment stretched. Kawasaki's gaze held mine—dense, inescapable, demanding acknowledgement of orbital mechanics that had apparently been governing our interactions for six years without my knowledge or consent. Her eyes were dark and steady and full of something that made my chest do uncomfortable things, and I was on the verge of formulating a response—or at least a facial expression that could pass for one—when the screen flickered.

New slide.

TOTSUKA SAIKA—COMPATIBILITY PROFILE

The transition was so abrupt, so surgically timed, that it severed the thread between Kawasaki and me like a scalpel through suture. One moment I was drowning in a six-year confession delivered entirely through eye contact; the next, I was staring at a profile card featuring someone I'd believed, until approximately forty minutes ago, was a boy.

Kawasaki blinked. The spell broke. Her gaze dropped to her lap, and the curtain of dark blue hair fell back into place, and whatever had been building between us retreated behind the walls like a garrison pulling back from an exposed position. The fortress was back up. The gates were closed. The drawbridge was raised with the speed of someone who'd realised they'd left it

down in enemy territory and was correcting the oversight before the invaders—in this case, her own emotions—could exploit the opening.

But her hands, I noticed, were still clenched. Still holding that fist. Still carrying the weight of the decision she'd made.

'Filed under: things to address later, if "later" ever arrives, which in my experience it rarely does because I am professionally skilled at converting "later" into "never" and then pretending "never" was the plan all along.'

On my right, Isshiki's response to the interruption was immediate and physical. Her fingers contracted into a vicious pinch—not a gentle squeeze, not a subtle pressure adjustment. A full-contact, nail-assisted strike that sent a bolt of localised pain through my quadriceps. A wasp that had studied an anatomy chart before selecting its target.

I did not flinch. I refused to flinch. Flinching would acknowledge the pinch, and acknowledging the pinch would acknowledge the hand, and acknowledging the hand would require addressing the broader geopolitical situation developing across my lap, and I was not prepared for that summit. Not now. Not while a screen was displaying the measurements of someone I'd spent three years of high school changing clothes near without a single alarm bell ringing in my supposedly functional brain.

The pinch released. The hand did not withdraw. If anything, it advanced—a centimetre, perhaps two. The frontier moving inward, fingers resettling slightly higher on my thigh and daring the indigenous population to object.

On my left, Hiratsuka-sensei's ring finger had been joined by her middle finger—each representing a different branch of her intent. The pinky had been reconnaissance, the ring finger the advance guard, and now the middle finger had arrived with supply lines and a five-year plan.

On screen, Totsuka Saika's profile filled the display.

Height: 161cm. Weight: 49kg. Blood Type: A. Hobbies: Tennis, jogging, cooking.

Tennis. Right. Tennis. The sport I'd watched Totsuka play dozens of times, admiring the graceful arc of a serve, the light footwork, the way sweat caught the afternoon light on skin I'd attributed to "naturally pretty boy features" rather than the considerably more straightforward explanation of "this person is a woman."

Three sizes appeared on the screen.

B82—W58—H84

My brain processed the first number. Then processed it again. Then ran it through a secondary verification system, and the secondary system confirmed what the primary had reported: *Those numbers do not correspond to the flat chest you observed in the boys' changing room for three years.*

B82.

That was not the measurement of someone who could plausibly pass as male in a high school locker room. That was someone who had been actively, deliberately, and—given the physical demands of competitive tennis—painfully concealing a bust that my brain had never once associated with Totsuka Saika.

Wait.

The boys' changing room.

The thought arrived late—absurdly, catastrophically late, a fire alarm after the building was already rubble—but it arrived with force. Totsuka had been changing in the boys' locker room. A girl. A biological, B82-wielding, confirmed-female girl had been entering the boys' changing facilities at Sobu High, removing her uniform, binding her chest, changing into athletic wear, surrounded by teenage boys in various states of undress, and nobody had noticed. Not the students. Not the faculty. Not me.

'Don't catalogue the specific instances. Don't remember the time Zaimokuza stripped to his underwear and did stretches. Burn the files. Salt the earth.'

I turned to my left. Hiratsuka-sensei was, after all, my former homeroom teacher. She'd had access to health records. If anyone would know—

My eyes made contact with her chest before they made contact with her eyes.

This was not intentional. It was geometric. When a seated person turns their head sharply, the natural sightline passes through the thoracic region before ascending to the facial one. Physics. Trigonometry. The angle of incidence equalled the angle of humiliation.

Her nipples stared back at me. And the worst part was that my prolonged stare had created a social obligation of its own. I'd been looking long enough that looking away felt *rude*—as if my gaze had entered a conversational contract with Hiratsuka-sensei's chest, and breaking contact at this stage would be the equivalent of hanging up mid-sentence. The politeness trap. We were a nation enslaved by our own courtesy, and my eyeballs were the latest casualties.

"The question you're not asking," Hiratsuka-sensei said—and her voice came from above, from the face region, from the part of her I should have been addressing this entire time—"is one I've been asking myself for the past forty minutes."

Her tone was flat. Professional. An educator writing an incident report about their own negligence.

"I don't know how it happened. I don't know how the school missed it. And I am going to have a very long conversation with the administrative office when this is over."

She paused. Her hand lifted from the chair—and instead of withdrawing, she pressed two fingers against my chin and tilted my head upward. The firm, corrective motion of a teacher redirecting a student's attention to the blackboard.

"Eyes up, Hikigaya."

My eyes went up. Finally. Gratefully. Hiratsuka-sensei's face stared back—red, rigid, radiating superhuman restraint in the face of a former student who'd been staring at her chest while she tried to address an institutional failure.

"Thank you, sensei," I said, because my mouth had apparently decided to participate in this disaster without consulting the rest of me.

"Don't thank me. Don't look at me. Don't turn this direction again until you've installed a guidance system."

I turned back to the screen.

I looked at Totsuka. Not at the screen. At the actual Totsuka. Sitting in the row, naked under the spotlights.

And there they were.

Breasts. Actual, undeniable, gravitationally significant breasts, sitting on Totsuka's chest with the quiet authority of facts that had always been true but had chosen this particular moment to announce themselves. Round. Present. Occupying space in a way that Totsuka's chest, in my memory, had never occupied space, because my memory was built on a foundation of lies and compression garments.

'Three years. Not a flicker. I had spent three years in the changing room equivalent of a locked-room mystery, surrounded by evidence, and I'd walked out every time without solving the case because I'd never thought to open it.'

'Well—technically she opened it. Every day. In front of me. And I still missed it.'

My eyes met Totsuka's.

Totsuka's arms crossed over her chest—not aggressively but flustered, the slightly belated coverage of someone who'd noticed being noticed and was responding with the speed and effectiveness of closing the barn door after every horse in the prefecture had left, formed a union, and sent a formal letter of resignation.

Her cheeks flushed pink. A soft colour—the warm pink of cherry blossoms in early bloom, which was exactly the sort of poetic comparison I should not have been making about someone whose gender I'd been wrong about for a third of my conscious life.

One hand drifted from the protective cross to scratch at her jaw. Pure Totsuka—that same sheepish habit I'd seen a hundred times on the tennis court. The familiarity hit harder than the revelation itself. The gesture was the same. The person was the same. Only my understanding had changed, and it had changed so late that the lateness itself was a punchline.

"I used to wrap my chest." Her voice was soft, aimed at the floor between us. "It was easier for tennis. The binding kept everything... stable during matches. And by the time I got used to it, everyone just assumed..."

She trailed off.

'Stable. She compressed a B82 into invisibility for athletic performance and social convenience, and the word she chose was "stable." As if without the binding, her breasts might have achieved critical mass and detonated, taking the tennis club and my assumptions with them.'

'Actually, that's more or less exactly what happened tonight, just on a delayed fuse.'

"Now then!" Komachi's voice returned, bright as a morning alarm that had learned to enjoy its job. "Let's continue with Saika-chan's profile!"

Virginity Status appeared on screen.

X Not a virgin (Confirmed)

Totsuka Saika was not a virgin.

My mental filing system attempted to create a new folder, labelled it "TOTSUKA: THINGS I DID NOT KNOW AND AM NOT PROCESSING WELL," and immediately ran out of disk space.

"This one's a fun story!" Komachi chirped.

'Define fun. Redefine "pure." Redefine "world." Redefine everything.'

"So there was this one night when Onii-chan and Saika-chan were drinking at our—I mean, at Onii-chan's apartment."

Our. She'd said "our" and corrected to "Onii-chan's." The geography of this story was already producing anxiety at a cartographic level.

"I was there too, obviously, because it's my apartment too even if Onii-chan pretends it isn't. And they were drinking—Saika-chan brought over this nice plum wine, and Onii-chan was being his usual self, which means he was reading a book and occasionally grunting in response to conversation like a bear that had learned exactly enough Japanese to be disappointing."

'I do not grunt. I vocalise acknowledgement through minimalist phonetic responses. It's efficient. It's what bears would do if bears had the social awareness to participate in conversations they didn't want to be in, which is exactly the comparison she just made, so perhaps her characterisation is not entirely without merit.'

Totsuka's hand was still at her jaw, scratching lightly, but her eyes had shifted to the screen—wary, watchful. She was calculating whether running was still an option. The answer, as everyone in this room had learned, was no.

"Now, what Onii-chan didn't know—because Onii-chan doesn't know anything about anything related to human emotion—is that Saika-chan had come over that night with a plan."

The word *plan* landed in the room with the weight of a tactical briefing. Across the row, Haruno's eyebrow rose. Ebina leaned forward. Even Yukinoshita allowed a fraction of interest to surface in the slight forward tilt of her chin.

"Saika-chan was trying to initiate something."

"She kept refilling Onii-chan's glass. She moved closer on the sofa. She laughed at things that weren't funny—which, honestly, is most things Onii-chan says, so that part wasn't hard—"

'Oi.'

"—and she was building up to it! The atmosphere was there, the wine was flowing, and Saika-chan had put on this cute blouse that showed just a little bit of collarbone, which was practically screaming in Saika-chan's language—"

"—and then Onii-chan fell asleep."

The sentence landed like a punchline delivered by a firing squad. Clean. Efficient. Fatal.

"Just—out. Gone. Head back, mouth open, the full dead-fish sleeping pose that runs in the Hikigaya bloodline. Saika-chan had been gathering courage for two hours, and Onii-chan lasted exactly until the moment that courage was about to pay off, and then he switched off like a laptop that hadn't been plugged in."

'ALDH2 gene. Biological predisposition. Forty per cent of the East Asian population. I didn't fall asleep to spite Totsuka. My central nervous system is more susceptible to depression than most. In every sense of the word.'

I risked a glance at Totsuka. She was biting her lower lip. The pink had deepened. She was reliving every second.

But she wasn't reaching for her remote.

The mute button sat in her lap, untouched. Totsuka was letting this happen. Either she'd accepted inevitability, or she wanted me to hear it.

"So there I was," Komachi continued, her voice dropping into a wobbly, liquid quality—drunk Totsuka. My sister was doing a drunk Totsuka impression on a government broadcast.

"Hikigaya Komachi-chan," she slurred, swaying slightly, "your brother... your brother ish sho shtupid."

"He doesn't shee me as a girl. He's never sheen me as a girl. Hic. I could—I could show up in a wedding dress and he'd ashk if I was coshplaying."

'That... is probably accurate. My brain would have generated twelve alternative hypotheses before arriving at the obvious one, and by then Totsuka would have changed out of the dress and gone home.'

"And then!" Komachi straightened, breaking character. "Saika-chan told me something really interesting."

"There was this one time, before that night, when someone confessed to Saika-chan."

Totsuka's hands tightened over her chest. The blush reached her ears.

"A tennis player. A guy from another university. He'd been watching Saika-chan's matches and fell hard."

Komachi paused, and her visible eye gleamed.

"He confessed to Saika-chan thinking she was a boy."

First silence. Then comprehension. Then—

Ebina's hand slapped over her mouth. Her eyes went wide. Not with horror. With the activation of creative centres that had been waiting their entire life for exactly this piece of narrative fuel. Her nose twitched.

"He—" Ebina started.

"—thought Saika-chan was a guy," Komachi confirmed. "He confessed his romantic feelings to the person he believed was a beautiful male tennis player."

"And then?" Ebina breathed.

"And then they went physical."

The nosebleed launched.

"Wait, wait, wait," Orimoto interjected. "He thought Saika-chan was a guy. He confessed. They got physical. And then—"

"And then he found out Saika-chan was a woman," Komachi completed. "To his absolute horror."

'His horror. Because this man had mustered the courage to confess homosexual feelings in a society that still hadn't fully normalised them, had received acceptance, had progressed to physical intimacy, and had discovered at the moment of truth that the beautiful boy he'd fallen for was biologically female. He'd come out of the closet and fallen into a different room entirely. He'd ordered chicken and received fish and eaten the fish because sending it back felt rude.'

"So they were both embarrassed," Komachi continued. "Really embarrassed. The kind where you can't make eye contact but you also can't stop what's happening because stopping would make it more awkward, and the only way forward is through."

"They had sex," she said, breezy as a cooking show describing a recipe step nobody had requested, "out of mutual embarrassment and a shared commitment to not hurting the other person's feelings. They were too polite to stop."

'Politeness sex. The most Japanese reason to have sex. Not passion. Not love. Not even lust. Politeness. Social obligation made flesh. "I can't possibly refuse—you've gone to so much trouble." The same energy as eating a meal you didn't order at a restaurant because correcting the waiter would cause a scene. Except instead of an unwanted pasta, it was an entire sexual encounter, powered by the same cultural engine that makes people stand in orderly queues during earthquakes and apologise to vending machines when the button sticks.'

'Somewhere, a sociologist is writing their doctoral thesis about this.

"Intercourse as Social Courtesy: The Role of Tatemae in Japanese Sexual Encounters." The bibliography would consist entirely of Totsuka Saika's lived experience and a pamphlet from a railway company about queueing etiquette.'

"Now here's the part that Saika-chan told me while drunk," Komachi said, and the impersonation returned—wobbly, stretched vowels, confessional.

"I only agreed because I thought Hachiman would never see me as a girl," drunk-Komachi-as-Totsuka said, and the name—*Hachiman*, first name, the same version Kawasaki had murmured in her sleep—landed in my chest like a stone dropped into still water.

"If he's never going to look at me that way, I thought... hic... I might as well know what it feels like. With someone. Anyone."

Something twisted in my abdomen. Not the pharmaceutical heat—this was different. Colder. The specific temperature of guilt that comes from realising you've been the cause of someone's loneliness without ever being present enough to notice. A debt you didn't know you were accumulating, interest compounding silently behind every interaction you'd filed under "friendship" while the other person was filing it under "heartbreak."

"But the whole time—" Komachi's voice dropped to a whisper the microphone caught and amplified, "—the whole time, I was imagining Hachiman. Hic."

Dead silence.

Then Komachi broke character, sat upright, and added with conversational cheerfulness: "She also said it was good practice! Her words, not mine. 'Might as well practise for the real thing,' she said. Direct quote. I have it written down."

'Practice. Match preparation. Film study but tactile. She approached intimacy with the same strategic framework she applied to tennis—practice matches to prepare for the tournament that mattered. And the tournament that mattered was me. I was the Grand Slam she'd been conditioning for, and I'd been

asleep on a sofa while she gathered her courage three feet away, snoring through the most important match point of her career.'

"So!" Komachi's voice shifted. The drunken Totsuka evaporated, replaced by something louder, more authoritative. She straightened, squared her shoulders, and adopted the barking cadence of a sports instructor delivering a halftime speech.

"Totsuka Saika!" Coach-Komachi bellowed, one finger pointing at the camera. "This is your chance! You've been on the bench for years! You've trained! You've prepared! The court is open and the net is down and the opponent isn't even paying attention because he's an idiot who falls asleep during critical match points!"

'She'd prepared tennis metaphors. Sport-specific motivational language. The level of preparation was psychotic.'

"Hai!" Totsuka's voice rang out—clear, immediate, reflexive. The response of an athlete who'd spent years answering to coaches, muscle memory overriding the higher brain functions that might have counselled restraint.

"You've got the serve! You've got the backhand! You've got the stamina—"

"Hai!"

"—and you've got home court advantage because this idiot already likes spending time with you! He just doesn't know why because his emotional processing runs on dial-up!"

"Hai!"

'Dial-up. She compared my emotional intelligence to 56k internet. Technologically dated and devastatingly accurate.'

"So when I say go, you're going to march onto that court and you're going to win. And after you win, you're going to give Komachi-chan lots and lots of nieces and nephews!"

"HAI!"

Totsuka pumped her fist. Pure athletic reflex—explosive, full-body, arm thrust skyward. Her entire body rose with the gesture—heels lifting, spine arching.

And physics collected its due.

Her breasts—the B82 breasts that had been compressed, strapped, and denied for the entirety of their existence in my awareness—launched into motion. They rose with the upward thrust of her arm, achieved a momentary apex, and descended into a secondary oscillation that sent them swinging in opposite parabolic arcs. Left went right. Right went left. They passed each other at centre court like rally shots—

'Are they playing tennis? Have her breasts achieved autonomous athletic function? Because what I'm witnessing has the cadence, the timing, and the lateral dynamics of a baseline rally between two evenly matched opponents.'

The fist pump had lasted one second. The seismological event lasted considerably longer—diminishing waves, each oscillation still governed by the mathematics of momentum and the absence of any structural support.

Ebina's nosebleed erupted with renewed vigour.

"Saika-chan's chest," Ebina whispered through her fingers, reverent, awed, "was hiding... all of that... this entire time..."

Haruno slow-clapped. Three deliberate, measured claps—a theatre critic who'd witnessed something transcendent.

"Game! Set!" Komachi roared.

"MATCH!" Totsuka completed, and the final fist pump was the most vigorous yet—a full extension from hip to overhead that produced a mammary response that could have been scored by judges. Technical merit: 9.5. Artistic impression: 10. Deduction for excessive lateral movement: none, because there were no rules here, there had never been rules here, rules had left the building during the first profile and never returned.

Isshiki's nails sank into my thigh—five points of contact transmitting a single message: *Stop looking. Stop looking at anything that isn't the middle distance or I will leave marks that require explanation.*

I stared at the middle distance.

The middle distance stared back.

Totsuka finally lowered her arm. The rally concluded. Both participants came to rest in a state of détente, slightly flushed from exertion, their match temporarily suspended pending further provocative fist pumps. The ceasefire held. Barely.

She looked at me. Not with Kawasaki's burning intensity or Isshiki's strategic calculation or Hiratsuka-sensei's patient territorial expansion. With something simpler. Softer. The same look she'd always given me—on the tennis court, across the classroom, at that izakaya where she'd poured plum wine into my glass and tried to tell me something I'd been too unconscious to hear.

That look said: *I've been here the whole time. I was always here. You just didn't know what you were looking at.*

Her hand drifted to her jaw again. Scratch, scratch. The old habit. The thread of continuity connecting the Totsuka I'd known to the Totsuka that existed, linking the boy I'd imagined to the woman who'd been real all along.

"One last thing!" Komachi chirped from the screen, back to baseline weaponised sweetness. "Saika-chan's dream is to become a professional tennis player. And she told me—sober this time—that she wants someone who'll be in the stands at every match. Someone who'll cook dinner and have it ready when she comes home from training." Komachi paused. Tilted her head. "Know anyone like that, Onii-chan?"

I did not respond. I could not respond.

A stay-at-home husband for a professional athlete. Dinner on the table when she walked through the door. The househusband dream, given form and function and a specific person to be domestic for.

Komachi had done it again. The blueprint. Different dimensions than Kawasaki's—built around training schedules and match days rather than children and quiet mornings—but the same fundamental architecture. A home. A partnership. A reason for the domestic skills I'd been cultivating in philosophical isolation to exist in practical application.

'The househusband dream was supposed to be theoretical. A thought experiment. When did it become a floor plan? When did it become a series of floor plans, each one occupied by a different woman who apparently saw the same future I did and just... decided not to tell me until my sister forced the issue on a government island while I sat naked under a spotlight?'

Totsuka smiled at me one last time—small, warm, certain—then looked away, her hand falling from her jaw to rest in her lap beside the untouched mute button.

She'd never pressed it. Not once.

==&<o>&=-

End

Tatemae (建前, "built in front") is a fundamental Japanese social concept representing the "public face," façade, or socially expected behaviour, opinions, and statements a person displays in public or professional settings. It is the opposite of **honne** (本音), which represents one's true feelings or desires.

Next Chapter Update: The World of Otome Game is a Second Chance for Broken Swords

If you want to read the next chapter, head over to [d i s c o r d . g g](https://discord.gg/AAX6Sha3vY) (slash) AAX6Sha3vY

and get the Spellcaster role.

If you want to read chapters: 1.4 (7.5k words), 2.1 (8k words), 2.2 (5.4 k words), 2.3 (8.7k words), 2.4 (4.3k words),

head over to pat re on: 13thsephiroth.

AN: Okay, I just finished with a meeting today, and the sit-stand desk I ordered arrived yesterday. So in preparation of a no-write day I managed to wrangle up an extra chapter of this increasingly absurd story. Hope you enjoy this car crash of a chapter. I also have like a half way finished chapter of my Danmachi fanfic and might also do an unscheduled update of that, meaning you'll get a public upload of that story in a day or two—or three. Enjoy!

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