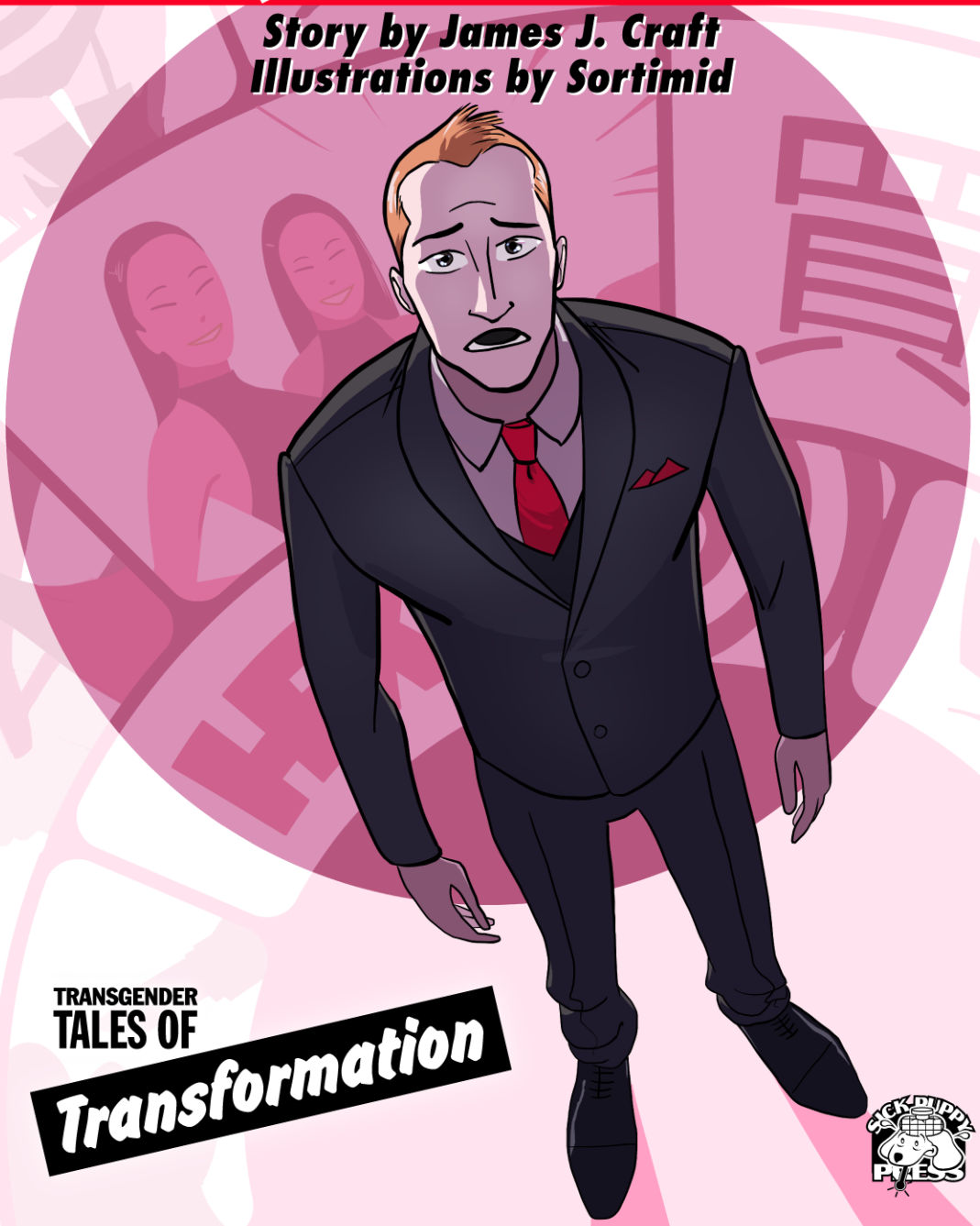
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MERGERS & AQUISITIONS

Story by James J. Craft
Illustrations by Sortimid



TRANSGENDER
TALES OF
Transformation

SICK PUPPY PRESS

JAMES J. CRAFT

MERGERS & AQUISITIONS

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Ink & Color by Joe Six-Pack
A Tales of Transformation story



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Mergers & Acquisitions



Success would come easy.

All you needed to do was to work hard, stay focused, and you could accomplish anything. The world would be your oyster.

That had been Mark's outlook three years ago. He had just completed his MBA at a rather prestigious University — where, with hard work and determination, he had finished in the middle of his graduating class — and now he had his sights set on following in his father and grandfather's footsteps in becoming a successful financial professional. There was no reason to believe that he *wouldn't* follow in the family's footsteps. After all, all he needed was to stay focussed and work hard.

Right?

But success would not be as easy as he thought it should have been. In fact, it never really materialized for him in any way, shape or form, through no fault of his own. After being rejected by his top-rated prospective employer, and several others afterwards, he began to fear the reaction of his friends and family. There was, after all, an unwritten expectation that he should find instant success in the financial sector immediately after graduating. This unrealistic expectation caused Mark severe anxiety. He became extremely reclusive, cutting nearly all ties to his former life and lying about the reasons.

Finally, after months and months of searching, sending out resumés, doing interviews and beating the pavement in an almost literal sense, he got an offer. Rightworth & Co., the most prestigious of all retailers in the country, with a worldwide reach, had a position for him. In a sense at least. He was quick to let everyone know that he had landed a job at a high-profile business over a hundred years old, where he would undoubtedly be rising to the top. That would be enough to silence the doubters, he told himself.

However, he knew the truth of the matter. While it was true that he had been employed by Rightworth and Co., the city's oldest purveyor of fine clothes, he had neglected to fill in *all* of the details. He had been told that the company promised to promote deserving candidates quickly into management and executive roles — but they would start at the bottom. The very bottom.

What this meant in reality, was that Mark hadn't been hired for anything other than as a frontline salesman. So while his MBA buddies had all landed great jobs in their fields, Mark had been forced to take a rather menial job in retail.

He told himself that it was just a temporary setback — but after three years of working the floor, temporary was starting to feel rather permanent.

On the bright side, he had quickly become one of the most successful salesmen at the men's clothing store, but that wasn't really enough, for Mark to consider himself as 'success.' He was still far too embarrassed to tell anyone of his position in clothing sales — while his classmates were moving up the ladder at prestigious financial firms. Still, on the bright side, at least his job was at least working at the most exclusive store in the business, and he was making fairly decent money — for retail — and on some rare days he even found himself actually starting to enjoy the work. It certainly had a much easier schedule and lower stress environment as compared to his pals in high finance.

Still, he wondered just how long he would have to do this work before a promotion finally came his way. First to manager, he assumed, then to store manager, then to a regional position, and finally, into the executive ranks. He was becoming impatient though, and knew time was against him. He just needed that first promotion, he figured. Then it would be easy to rise through the ranks.

Because of Rightworth's notoriety of catering to higher-end clients, Mark would occasionally cross paths with his former classmates, which proved to be extremely uncomfortable for him — to say the least — but entirely expected. He would often lie about his current role... Especially when Greg Morrison, that asshole, came in.

"Hey Malone," the silver-spoon sucking well-to-do prick would taunt, "How's the retail sector doing?"

"We're having a banner year Greg," he would lie, "Q4 earnings are up, expenses are coming down and the long-term projections are all favorable."

"Sure," Greg would sneer, "Like they would tell a salesman all that."

Mark would sigh, "Greg, I told you," he would plead, "I'm just on the floor to check numbers, I don't actually *work* on the floor." He tried to make the most indignant facial expression possible. But Greg wasn't buying it.

"Yeah right," Morrison would retort, "Well it doesn't matter anyway. Rumor has it that this store is inches from bankruptcy. That's why I'm here Malone, to do my part to save it." He would then turn to the mirror to view whatever five-thousand-dollar suit he was trying on at the moment, "You know, for the little people."

Mark wanted to punch him, but he knew he would surely be fired if he did. Being fired from a retail job would be an even worse humiliation than actually working at this level, so he kept his fists hidden behind his back, even though

he knew that Greg Morrison was right. As he watched his far more affluent and successful rival leave with several lavish new suits, costing him more than Mark made in three months, he reflected on the current situation at Rightworth & Co.

The clothing store where he was employed had been owned by the Rightworth family since the early 1900's. They had built a solid reputation of being *the* clothier for the most powerful men in the city. Since the early 2000's things had started to change, unfortunately. The market was different. Men were buying clothes online instead of in-store, and the family-run management team had refused to get with the times. This led to steady years of decline. So much so, that the elder Rightworth had ceded control of the store to Riley Rightworth, the youngest member of the family. They had finally acknowledged that without a fresh new face at the helm, the store would not survive in today's complex market.

Mark wondered if it was too little too late.

Riley was certainly a young go-getter, just a little younger than Mark in fact. There was no secret that he had wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father, grandfather, and great grandfather as the owner of the city's premiere men's store. However, soon after taking over, he had learned how the years of stagnation had crippled the business beyond repair. Even so, he tried his best, firing some of the company's oldest employees and replacing them with a younger (and cheaper) sales force, in order to attract a younger clientele.

Among the new hires, was Oliver, an ambitious college student that had been hired for the summer and stayed on for the fall and winter. Riley had tasked Mark with showing the newest staff member the 'ropes' as his direct supervisor, something the Mark wasn't particularly pleased with, as it did not include any additional compensation. It also didn't help that Oliver was as eager as a puppy, always optimistic and full of energy. These were not traits Mark valued in people.

As the months drew on, it became apparent that the urgent changes to the store were unfortunately not enough. So it came as no surprise to either Oliver or Mark, that they and the other salesmen were called into the center of the store's expansive sales floor one morning for a surprise announcement by Riley Rightworth.

"My friends," the young store owner began, "I have some important news."

Mark suspected that this was the end of his sad career in menswear. He could envision his next interaction with his friends, whereby he would be made the laughing stock of his former social circle once they learned he had been let go of his pathetic retail job. He figured that Riley was about to introduce the

Trustee of Bankruptcy who would supervise the liquidation of the store's assets. Although, when he looked off to the side of where Riley was standing, and saw a *very* attractive young asian woman standing nearby, he thought to himself, *That can't be a bankruptcy officer, can it?*

"I know that there have been rumors about the situation here for a while," Riley continued, "It's time for me to tell you what is *actually* happening. Many of you have heard of HFX, right?" he asked, looking around the room for some feedback from the unmotivated group of clothing salesmen. He had just asked them of their awareness of HFX, the uber-stylish Asian-owned upstart fashion emporium for teens and twenty-somethings that was opening up locations across America as fast as blisters on a bad sunburn. They were the bane of the fashion retail world — selling over-the-top pop influenced hyper fashions to the masses at incredibly affordable prices.

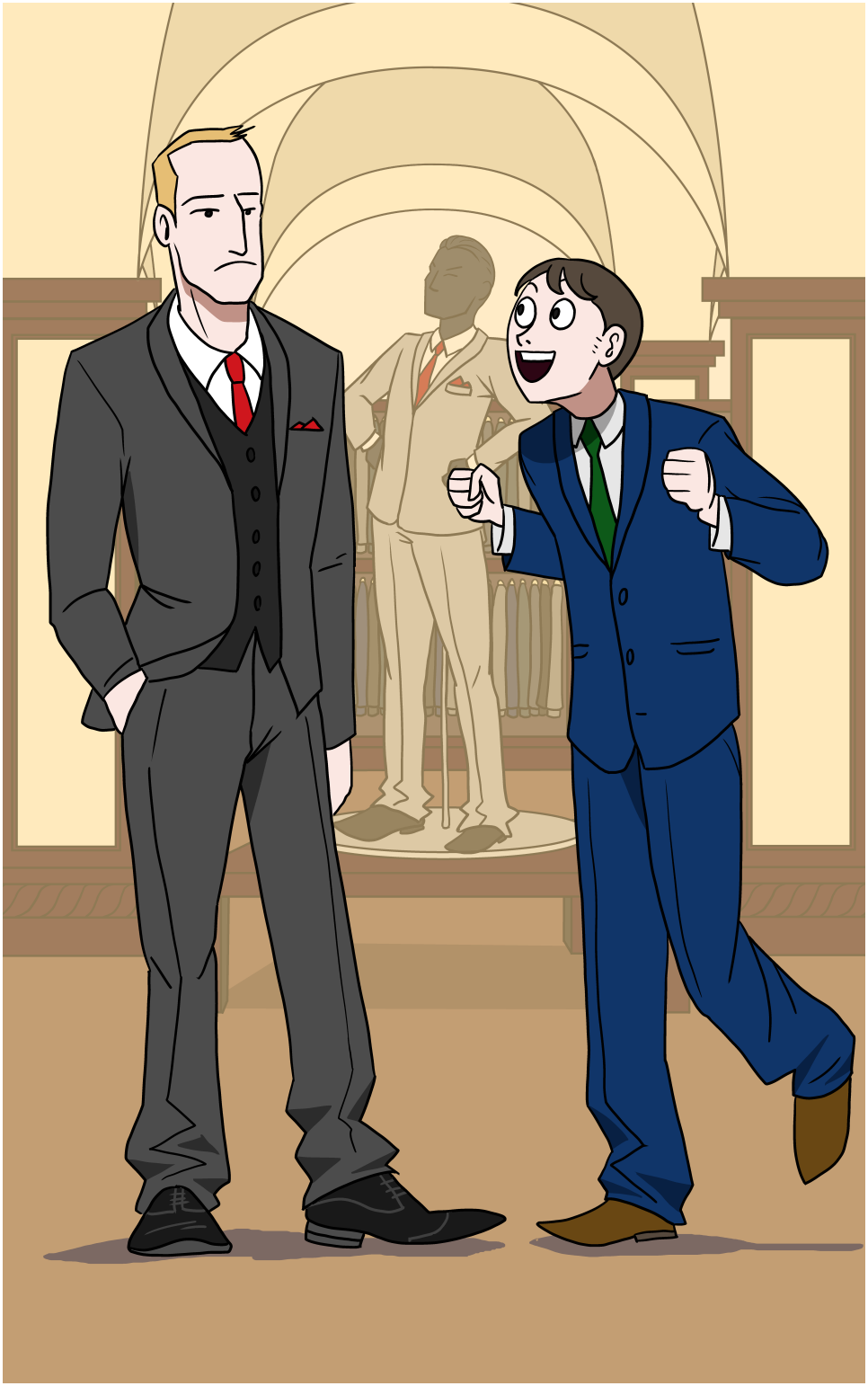
"Well," he continued, "I am pleased to announce that HFX has recently agreed to invest quite heavily in our store's future. And while I know it might sound like something of a departure for them — and us — I have been assured that with their guidance, we will soon return Rightworth's to its preeminent role as our city's fashion destination." Riley took a pause as if expecting a round of applause, but none was forthcoming. In order to avoid an awkward pause, he instead continued to speak. "Now I know that some of you have been a part of our Rightworth family for some time," he looked over at the group of remaining veteran salesmen, some of whom looked about as old as the store itself, "and I know that you may have questions about what your role within our company might be as we rebrand our store as a leaner, meaner, more youthful enterprise. So I want to offer to those of you who are interested, a very attractive retirement package, as our way of saying thank you. Thank you for your loyalty, thank you for your dedication, and thank you for making our store the success that it is today."

"You mean thank you for driving this store into the ground," Mark muttered to himself, adding, "Dinosaurs."

"What was that?" a chipper Oliver asked. It was easy to see that he was soaking up Riley's message with much enthusiasm.

"Oh nothing," Mark replied, "Just wishing them luck."

The 'old timers' seemed relatively pleased with the announcement, with most of them nodding their heads approvingly. "But we do want to emphasize," Riley continued, "to our remaining staff members, that you are an important part of transforming our store into a vibrant new brand to move forward in our changing market. In short..." he paused for a moment as he looked to the side to the young beauty at his right. "In short, we need you guys to be completely com-



mitted to changing with us, as Rightworth's repositions itself in the fashion world."

The woman nodded and smiled, silently approving of what Riley had just said.

There was a murmur in the room as the salesmen digested all they had been told, then Riley continued, "So then, if everyone understands, I will read out the names of those who are being offered a package. If you would kindly come forward, one of my assistants will see you out."

Oliver looked to Mark with a worried expression, "So are we being let go?" he asked.

Mark looked down at his young 'apprentice,' "I don't think so," he replied, "I think we're going to be the changing face of the company."

Oliver seemed pleased, in a nervous sort of way.

"Now, for those of you who are staying on," Riley began again once the the older salesmen had been excused from the room," I would like to introduce you to Natsumi Anasako from the HFX head office. As part of our transformation, I will be handing over control of the day-to-day operations of the store to her."

Natsumi stepped forward with a click of her towering high heeled platform pumps in a bright medium blue color that matched her stretchy mini skirt. White nylons highlighted her lean legs.

"Wow," Mark muttered, "She sure is tall for an Asian."

Oliver shot him an incredulous glare, causing Mark to realize his comment could be misconstrued as extremely offensive.

"I'm just saying," Mark tried to fix his slip-up. Oliver just shook his head. Working with Mark had made him come to expect the occasional inappropriate outburst.

The 'tall Asian' glanced around the room, as if taking stock of her inventory of salesmen. She wore a crisp white blouse, unbuttoned at the top to give a glimpse of her ample cleavage, and well-tailored light blue blazer that hugged her feminine silhouette, but still portrayed a sense of 'business' and leadership status. She thanked Riley before turning back to the remaining salesmen to address them.

"Gentlemen," she began with a surprisingly husky and thoroughly un-accented voice, "I know you all have some reservations about the changes that are coming to our store, but I want to assure you that I am committed to working with each and every one of you to help you through this transition, so that we all emerge from this exciting metamorphosis as an amazing new team of dedicated

professionals...” She paused, then changed the pitch of her voice to sound more like a bubble headed valley-girl, “And we’re like, totally going to have a blast along the way!” she shouted, “So who’s with me?”

Oliver started clapping immediately along with one other young salesman — but otherwise the room was quiet.

Mark rolled his eyes.

Natsumi stepped aside again to allow Riley to continue, “So for those of you who are going to be staying with us, congratulations. You’re going to see some exciting new changes here at Rightworth’s,” he paused as the group of roughly ten young salesmen looked at each other. “ Some of you may have figured out already that one of the first changes here will be to having a smaller, younger sales team. And over time Natsumi will start to bring in some of her expertise from HFX, along with some new directions and product lines that I am certain will re-energize our brand, with an edgy new style that will put us back on top. I’m very excited about our future, and I can assure you that any changes will be minor and only help us restore the Rightworth’s name in the retail fashion industry.”

Mark rolled his eyes again. He wasn’t buying it. From his financial viewpoint — which was still his primary way of looking at things — The Rightworth brand was dead. If it hadn’t been, Riley wouldn’t have had to seek a partner who was, at-best, a third-tier mass merchant of bubble-gum and glitter inspired fashions. If anything, he surmised, HFX would likely try to convert the Rightworth store into one of its own stores — due to its prime downtown setting.

But if that ever happened, he reasoned, *everyone* would be terminated. After all, *young men in suits can’t sell rhinestone encrusted miniskirts, right?*



Very little changed at first.

The HFX influence began with a new computer inventory and training system, including an easy-to-use point of sale system which was installed to replace the store’s aging cash registers. A huge, humming box appeared in the back, right next to the break room, which was apparently the ‘brains’ of the new system. It was enormous, and had a thousand wires coming out the back. To Mark’s eyes, it looked rather sinister.

The new system featured touch screen inputs and bright and colorful images. It almost felt like it was designed for use by a child, rather than the adult pro-

fessional that Mark liked to think of himself as. He felt insulted, just looking at it.

The strangest aspect of the changes were the booths. Part of the unit that had been installed in the back were booths that accommodated three people in individual stalls, where they put on headphones and sat to watch training modules. These training modules would allow staff members to be trained in a modern and efficient way, Riley had said. Mark scoffed at first, until he was informed that staff training would be a mandatory condition of employment.

Of course when Riley or Natsumi spoke about it, they used a softer term, like 'empowering the human skillset,' or 'staff resource upgrades.' They were meant to give staff the tools that they would need to succeed.

Mark thought it was a bunch of boloney.

In addition to explaining how to use the new POS interfaces, the first training module extolled the virtues of 'the new Rightworths' and 'the HFX way,' and promoted the need to make service and loyalty the 'absolute' priority of all staff members. Mark found the terminology a little strange, but he figured the new corporate influence of HFX would be the norm moving forward.

Both he and Oliver spent several hours that week engaged with the touchscreen training modules. At times, they complained to each other that it felt like their heads were spinning when they were finished, but they agreed that it was most likely the system's highly graphic interface that was taking some getting used to.

A short time after that, some new clothing lines began to arrive. They were packaged in boxes labeled in some kind of oriental language. HFX was rumored to be Asian owned, and known to import their entire product line from overseas. Apparently they were all from the fashion districts of Tokyo, Hong Kong and Seoul. As they started to unpack and merchandise, Mark was not surprised with what he saw. It was pretty much as he expected, and he wasn't very impressed.

Oliver, however, couldn't stop talking about how stylish and edgy the new merchandise was.

In fact, he went so far as to ask Natsumi if he might get an employee discount to purchase some for himself. Mark had little respect for Oliver's taste in clothes, but was still surprised that anyone would willingly wear these things, let alone spend their hard-earned money on them. It was clear to Mark that he was brown-nosing the new ownership, because there was no other excuse for buying them. Maybe, he thought to himself, he had underestimated Oliver.

Later that same week, Natsumi surprised the entire sales staff when she announced that *everyone* would in fact receive a sample of the new clothing line at no charge. "However," she continued, "We do expect you to wear your new outfit while at work. We think it will give you a first hand opportunity to show our clients Rightworth's edgy new style in real-time."

Oliver and many of the other younger salesmen excitedly accepted. Mark was less eager. Especially after Oliver appeared at work the next morning with one of the new outfits on.

The skinny pants and well-tailored jacket was on-trend with what other retailers were offering, even if the button-down shirt underneath was a tad soft in both its texture and muted color. It wasn't anything terribly dramatic, however, but it was far more 'edgy' than the usual formal suit and tie ensembles that Rightworth's was known for.

Mark had initially refused to wear one of the new outfits, as he didn't want to look anything less than a high-class professional. Even though he hadn't landed a job in the financial sector like his classmates, he had refused to stop dressing as if he had. He had reasoned that in the event he inadvertently bumped into any of them, he could still play the part if he was thusly dressed.

Even if it wasn't true.

His resolve, however, was quickly eroded as within a week he found himself to be the only staff member remaining at Rightworth's who wasn't dressing in one of the new outfits. Some, like his young friend Oliver, were dressing in the new style even in their off time, as they accumulated entire wardrobes of the stylish new clothes.

Although Mark's resolve may have crumbled, his stubborn pride kept him coming in to work in a stodgy 3-piece suit, complete with wingtips. If anything, he was getting even more traditional with his clothing choices, just to prove he was above the trends.

Eventually Natsumi pulled him into the back room and commented to Mark he really should 'get with the program.'

"Maybe you need to redo the training module Mark," she said as she tapped the interface of the touch screen with her long polished blue nails, "I can see that Oliver has already moved on the second module." She continued, as she gestured to Mark to enter one of the booths. "Talk about a real go-getter. I haven't even released the clothing line that corresponds with it, but I can tell that he's already ready." She kept tapping away on the screen. "You, however Mark, you are actually starting to fall *way* behind everyone else in terms of your training. I would really like to keep you around here. We've got some

great and exciting new things planned, and an experienced sales person like you will be a tremendous asset to us."

Natsumi paused and placed her hand on Mark's shoulders, he could feel her half-inch acrylic tips gently digging into the fabric of his clothes. "But if you aren't willing to participate fully like the rest of the group 'Mar,'" she said, using a very casual form of Mark's name, "Then you might get left behind. And I don't think that we want that, now do we?"

Mark sighed, "No Ma'am. We don't," he said, understanding that she was essentially threatening to let him go if he didn't take the training more seriously. "*I* don't," he corrected.

Natsumi smiled, then showed him to the terminal, where she had prepared the entire first module to review again. "Good," the new store manager said softly, "So go ahead of let yourself become part of the new team here at Rightworths. Let the old go, and embrace the new."

Begrudgingly, Mark did just that as he sat in the booth's high-back chair, put on the headphones and reviewed the entire first module all over again.

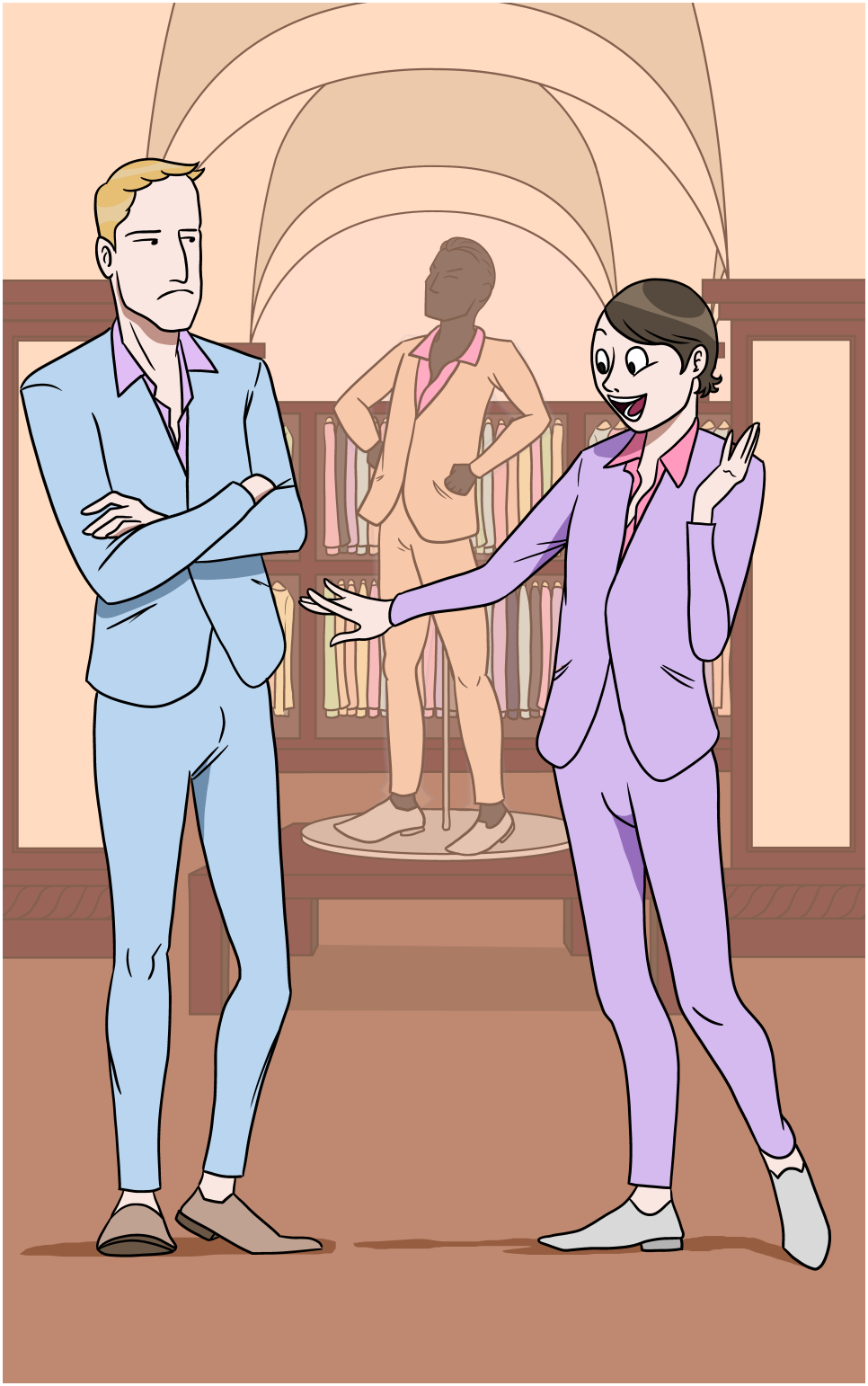


Several days later, Mark emerged from the back of the store to meet a smiling Oliver. The eager young college student was grinning ear to ear when he saw his older mentor dressed in a new pair of slim-fitting pants and tailored jacket. Mark had even gone so far as to get his barber to give him a bit of an edgy and hip new hairstyle, similar to the one that Oliver had gotten earlier.

Oliver seemed giddy with excitement as he saw Mark's stylish new look. Mark was certain that it would lead to being *severely* teased by his former classmates if and when they saw the new style of clothing he was wearing. But he knew he didn't really have a choice. If he didn't at least appear to be conforming, he would be unemployed. The silky lavender dress shirt that he was wearing today was of particular concern, but since he had completed his training module, Mark had to admit that he was far more willing to at least try the new styles. It felt like many of his old inhibitions had melted away.

Oliver wanted to give Mark some encouragement, so he gave him a high five as soon as he saw the new outfit: "Oh-my-gawd Mar — you look totally awesome, bro! Turn around... Let me have a good look!"

Mark folded his arms and gave the younger man a glaring stare. Even though he had finally relented and started to wear the store's new style, there was no way he was going to start acting like the fruit-cakes that the other staff mem-



bers were slowly becoming.

Feeling slightly embarrassed by Mark's reaction, Oliver quickly changed the subject to something that he knew would interest Mark; sports, specifically fitness. It was his go-to topic as both he and Mark had once played football in high school.

"Are you going to take up the company on their offer?" Oliver asked.

"Offer?" Mark replied. He had been preoccupied with the training so much, he hadn't been checking in with what had been going on at the store.

"Natsumi announced a free fitness club membership at City Athletic," Oliver explained. "You know, as an incentive for all of those who complete the first and second training modules. There's a class in a half hour, and we get paid for going."

The City Athletic gym was considered one of the city's most exclusive health clubs, and the cynical side of Mark wondered how a company that was near insolvency could afford such a lavish gift — in addition to all of the new complementary clothes, touchscreen interfaces and training modules.

"Seems like a bit of a waste of money for a company that's almost bankrupt," Mark grumbled.

"Are you kidding?" Oliver retorted, "It will give all of us access to the business elite in one concentrated place," he said. "Not to mention they've definitely got some of the hottest women in the city working out there," he went on, "since it offers the best activities that the ladies like ...you know, like yoga, pilates, aerobics, stuff like that."

Oliver had been going to City Athletic since the day Natsumi unveiled the incentive to staff members. He recognized that it was highly unusual for a retailer to offer such a generous benefit, especially since they actually paid to be there, but he reasoned that if it was being offered — he would take it.

"I'm just saying," Mark lamented, "From a financial standpoint, paying your employees to be somewhere other than at work..."

"We only get paid if we are following an approved fitness program," Oliver chimed in.

"Regardless," Mark scoffed, irritated that he had been interrupted, "It just doesn't make that much sense is all I'm saying."

Oliver shrugged. "I guess," he said. "Maybe HFX wants us in shape for all the new styles we're getting? The new clothes are really made for in-shape guys, so maybe they are just trying to help us fit the image better?"

Mark sighed. "I suppose," was all he could muster in a response. He still wasn't convinced that the new investors had Rightworth's best interests at heart. He then looked down at his masculine large-faced watch. "We had better get going or we're going to be late too," he motioned towards the door.

Oliver's face lit up with excitement, like a dog who had heard the word "walkies," as he grabbed his things and joined his coworker on the drive to the gym.

When the pair arrived at the club, Mark was rather impressed, in spite of his initial reservations. As promised, the the gym was the finest facility in the city, and as promised, the clientele were completely upscale. *These are the type of people that Rightworth's should be attracting,* Mark thought to himself, *not the trendy mid-market crowd that HFX was now steering them towards.*

Oliver had received word that the pair would be working with a personal trainer named Jamie during their session. "I hope she's hot!" he exclaimed in the car ride over. Mark had silently agreed. He wasn't looking forward to being at the club — but a pretty personal trainer would certainly help improve his outlook.

Sadly, both of their hopes were quickly dashed when Jamie came out to greet them, and 'she' was not the hot chick they had hoped for. In fact 'he' was not a chick at all, but a rather effeminate-looking young man.

At first Mark was extremely uncomfortable having such an obvious swish as his trainer, but knowing of all the expense and trouble that Rightworths and HFX had gone to arrange this, he sighed and decided to go with the flow. Even when Jamie produced new yoga outfits for the pair of them — that were far *less* masculine than anything he had been forced to wear up to that point — Mark remained composed. He wasn't going to get rattled or flustered by anything today. The company was heading in a new direction, and he knew he had to go with it or be left behind.

But once he held the new stretchy outfit in his hands, Mark's determination began to falter as he grunted and looked at Oliver with a concerned expression. "I don't know man... Don't you think this is all a little too much?"

Oliver shared the concern, "Well ... yeah, dude. I know what you mean. But I don't think we have a choice. Natsumi said that we *have* to follow the program that they have laid out for us." He paused to collect his thoughts, then continued. " Hey man, it's not like we're queers or something. We can totally wear this stuff and no one will care. We're still studs," He slapped his co-worker's arm in a macho, supportive way. "Right bro?"

Mark shrugged. "Sure," he said, sounding unconvinced, "If you say so." He headed off towards the locker room to change. He was at least thankful that no one he knew was around. They would *never* let him hear the end of this.

As the two co-workers each opened the gym bags given to them by the company, a white nylon thong fell out of Mark's, along with the yoga pants, top, and sneakers.

Mark's eyes were wide as he picked up the thong. *"Dude!* There's no *way* I'm gonna wear *that* thing! I mean... How can that even be comfortable, with a string going up your butt like that?" He pointed at the string at the rear of the garment.

Oliver decided he needed to show his cohort that he was capable of being the more mature man in this situation, so without saying another word, he nonchalantly slipped out of his boxers and quietly pulled the thong up over his hips and into place. He struggled momentarily, having to tuck his package down to fit into the tight front pouch. He was momentarily satisfied that he was small enough to fit in the tiny pouch, then realized a manly man like him should never have such a thought.

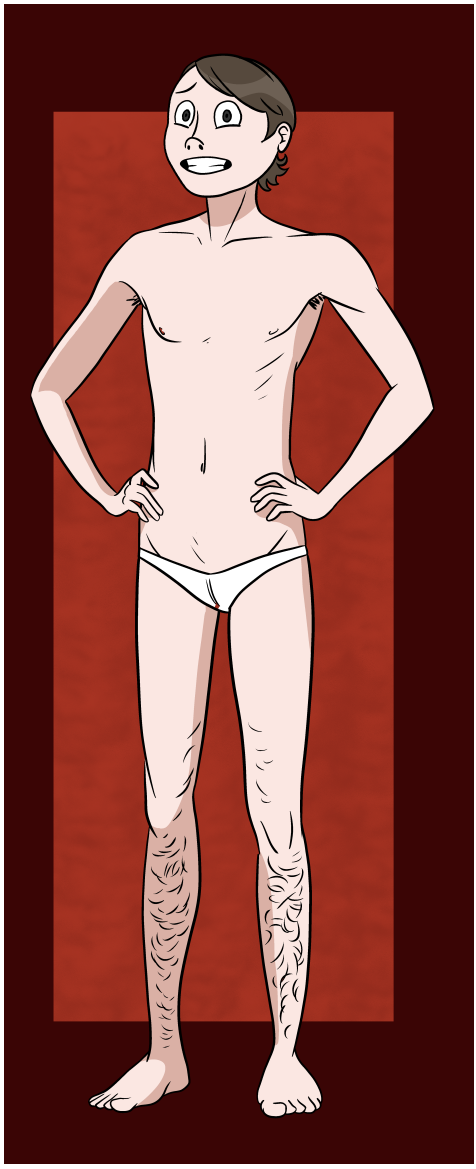
He turned and goaded Mark. "It's seriously no big deal," he began. "Don't be such a sissy, it's just like a jock strap, except a *slightly* different design." He paused to see if Mark was listening. "Besides," he continued, "I remember an old girlfriend one time talking to her friends about yoga pants, and saying that if they didn't wear thongs their lines show through. Something about VPL, whatever that was. My point is, that we don't want to be out of place on our first day, now *do* we?" Oliver could hardly contain his laughter as he spoke, realizing how silly he sounded.

Mark rolled his eyes. He didn't want to look like an insecure little kid, so with his breath partially held, he followed Oliver's lead and put the thong on. He had noticed that his coworker's crotch had been kept well 'manscaped', with very little showing in the way of body hair. He wondered to himself if it were something he should consider. It wasn't like he was overly hairy or unkempt, but there was something relatively pleasing about a smooth and well maintained crotch.

He gave his head a shake. *What the hell am I thinking?* he wondered as he finished adjusting himself into his newly acquired underwear.

After the thong was in place, Mark slipped on the black yoga pants with lavender stripes down the side and a matching black tank top with corresponding lavender stripes. It was so short that it just barely covered the top half of his torso. He paused again, wondering if he should just pack it in and head back to the store, but he was very afraid of sounding like a whiner to Oliver, and even

more afraid of being warned by Natsumi. So instead, he continued dressing by putting the sneakers that were in the bag onto his feet. They were so thin and light they felt more like dance slippers than athletic gear. They, like the yoga gear, were black with lavender striping and white soles.



He stood up, looking in the mirror, wanting to put on a brave face for Oliver, though internally he was mortified at wearing something so decidedly un-masculine. Oliver saw Mark's confidence (at least the outward appearance), and decided he should 'man up' too, and just 'own' the new workout gear. He had donned his own version, nearly identical to Mark's but with a bright teal stripe instead of lavender. He trusted that since this was a super high end fitness club, that the outfits would be high end stylish too.

Oliver give his buddy a slap on the back. "Looking good Mark," he began, "Guys with toned bodies like ours should wear stuff that shows them off, right?" He didn't know what possessed him to say that, but was sure he had heard it recently somewhere.

Mark swelled up every ounce of masculine bravado in his body and replied with a deeply toned, "Hell-ya!"

With that, the two co-workers went out onto the floor to meet up with their trainer, who brought them into a larger yoga class he was instructing. It didn't take long for the two young men to realize that they were the only males in the room.

"Ha!" Oliver whispered to Mark as they took their first yoga position, "It's just like I said, Hot chicks everywhere!" Mark smiled and nodded, but didn't reply. He was strangely focussed on Jamie's instructions.

"Shhhhh!" One of the girls in the class hushed Oliver's whisper-toned outburst.

Oliver mouthed the word 'sorry' to the unhappy participant, then focused his attention, like Mark had, on Jamie. It didn't take long to fall into a trance-like state of follow the leader, and before either of them realized it, the class was nearing completion.

Afterwards, Jamie congratulated the both them and complimented them on 'picking it up so quickly.'

"But don't get too comfortable," he cautioned them, "there's a lot more for you to learn!"



It didn't take long for the two co-workers to get into a healthy routine of work-gym-work over the course of the days that followed.

Mark felt more comfortable the less time he had to spend at work and watch the place fall apart. As long as he was getting paid, he'd take advantage of it, and the workouts were kind of addicting.

Both men were introduced to a new 'special' diet that was part of the fitness regime, which Jamie had promised them would get them a 'lean model's build.' Jamie had insisted that it would do wonders for both of them. The high protein and greens weren't so bad once they got used to them, but the portion sizes left Mark feeling famished most of the time. The addition of special high-protein shakes and strange new supplements was helpful, but still didn't fully compensate for the amount that Mark used to eat.

Surprisingly, the two kept on the new workout and diet plan despite their growling stomachs and sore muscles. Both felt 'different' but couldn't quite pin down it it was a good 'different' or bad 'different.' At least it felt like something was happening, and that was good enough to keep going.

At work, things were not going quite as smoothly. Mark was still having trouble fully wrapping his head around the new training module that accompanied the latest new product line, while Oliver continued to delve deeper into it. Not a day went by when Mark didn't see Oliver in one of the training booths, immersed in the new module. So far, of the two modules, Oliver was beating him soundly, making far more progress. As a result, Mark found himself having to hand over his customers to Oliver, because he simply didn't understand the new styles and the new merchandise. Mark was becoming concerned that he was somehow losing his connection with his young friend and protege.



It also seemed that the more Oliver finished of the training, the more his behavior and mannerisms seemed slightly 'off' to Mark. Even his speech patterns were slightly different, especially his insistence on calling him 'Mar' all the time. Mark was worried Oliver was buying into this new style a bit too much, and slowing becoming one of those dreadful hipsters.

Soon, Oliver had moved on to the *third* training module, which signaled that yet another new product lineup was going to be arriving at Rightworths — and that's when things *really* began to change.

While the store had been closed, a crew of contractors had spent two full nights, renovating an entire section of the sales floor to mark the arrival of another 'New Hip Brand' from HFX's mainstream stores. At a staff meeting, Natsumi unveiled the new marketing push in a dizzying presentation. With new brightly lit hyper-colorful displays, the new lineup was an extreme departure from the very subdued and 'prim and proper' look that had been tradition in the store since Riley's Great Grandfather had started the business.

"I hope Riley knows what the hell he's doing," Mark lamented to Oliver when the store opened the new displays for the first time that morning. "Just because it's popular with teeny boppers in a suburban mall, doesn't mean it'll be big here," he complained as he looked over the racks of so-called 'super-trendy' new clothes.

'Super trendy' according to Natsumi anyway. She claimed that every young urbanite in the city would be banging down their doors to get their hands on the new selection of short pants, shorts, fitted tops, and cropped blazers that the store was now displaying. The new line even included underwear, which was a first for the store. Especially the 'designer' underwear, as Riley described it. There wasn't a single boxer or boxer brief in entire collection. Everything was skimpy bikini briefs or thongs. The fabrics felt thin and smooth, and it seemed awfully 'gay' to Mark. But at least the colors weren't too bad ... white, black, navy and red. Even a new display of thick-soled and ramped footwear was part of the odd mix.

At least that was Mark's assessment — a *very* odd mix of odd items.

According to Oliver, however, the new clothing line was incredibly *fab!*

"Omigosh Mar!" Oliver could barely contain his enthusiasm as he browsed the new selection, "I can't *wait* to try some of these things on!"

Mark raised an eyebrow, more than a little unsure. As he looked through the displays, he couldn't help thinking the new styles were sized for really skinny guys. *Rakishly* thin. Oliver was looking at the strange sizing, too. Mark picked up some size 9 jeans and turned to Oliver. "Ummm ... Oliver, this is the biggest size we carry, and I don't think even *you* could fit in these!" He was poking fun at how thin Oliver had gotten in recent days due to their strict diet and exercise regime. He had claimed to be down to a twenty-eight inch waist, and Mark himself was down to thirty inches — but he hated to admit it. He hadn't had a waist that small since junior high.

"Shut up!" Oliver whined in a high pitched tone, "I totally *could."* He pulled the jeans from Mark's hand and held them up against himself.

"Oh yeah?" Mark taunted his cohort, "Prove it! And since you're *so* sure of yourself, maybe you'd better take a size 7 too, just in case the 9's are too big for your skinny ass. Oh... and you'd better take some new undies, too. You don't want your VPL to show now do you?" Mark couldn't help sniggering about their joke from the gym.

Oliver's face scrunched up into an overly expressive scowl as he grabbed the size seven, *not* the size nine, and headed for the change room.

"You forgot the undies Ollie!" Mark called after him.

"I don't need any more thank-you-very-much," Oliver's voice called back from inside the changing room, "I'm already wearing them!"

Mark shook his head in disbelief and disgust as his friend disappeared into the back.

Some time later, Oliver reemerged from the changing room in the sleek black jeans. The stretchy denim fit him like a second skin, and the shiny finish gave them a very edgy look. Mark had never seen pants like these before, with no pockets or a belt. An exposed silver zipper in front that was only 3 inches long due to the low waist, and matching shiny zippers on the outside of the ankles, going up the skinny legs for six inches. Mark expected to feel uncomfortable seeing his best bud in something so... cutting-edge. But instead, he felt a strange feeling about the outfit that was causing an embarrassing swelling in his groin as he complimented Oliver. "Oh God, Ollie. I can't believe you fit in those! Those are the size seven's?"

Oliver stopped and posed for his friend. "They sure are! What do you think?"

Mark just looked stunned. He couldn't believe that his young friend had fit into pants that looked so small. It was a bit of a wake-up call, too, since Mark hadn't been ready to admit that he was also becoming just as thin. Just 3 months ago, both he and his young protege had been the epitome of a toned young athlete, with muscled chest, firm biceps, and sturdy thighs and calves. He was starting to realize that Jamie wasn't exaggerating. Maybe they really *were* starting to look like models. Especially Oliver!

Mark was awakened from his daydreaming as he watched Oliver take a pair of indigo blue denim jeans back to the change room, "Let's see what these look like" he remarked as the door shut behind him.

After a few minutes he emerged in the body-hugging pants and a snug-fitting unisex top. The top was a stretchy white v-neck with a lacy pattern and very short sleeves that barely covered his shoulders. Even worse than the material, the top was so short that it didn't even cover his stomach. The pants were so low cut that his tummy was exposed for about 8 inches up to the bottom of the skimpy top.

Oliver then wandered over to the new shoe display where he grabbed a pair of odd-looking ramp heeled wedge-style shoes.

"Oliver," Mark piped up, feeling concerned, "Are you sure about those? I mean, don't you think they look, like, kinda, ummm ... you know, a little bit, um, girlish?"

"It's not girlish to be in fashion," Oliver replied as he rubbed his back gently, "it's *stylish,* not girlish," Oliver argued. "Do you *really* think a store with our reputation would be selling sissy stuff?" he said as he posed in a mock-runway-model pose.

Mark sighed. He didn't feel like wasting his time arguing with his coworker any more. Instead he stood back and watched as Ollie gathered several boxes of footwear, and sat down in the sizing chair. "You really need the right shoes to go with this outfit," Oliver said. Not one of the boxes were a brand that Mark was familiar with. They were all adorned with Japanese graphics and text, which made it impossible for him to even guess at what his friend was going to try on.

Mark's eyes grew wide as his friend slid his slender-looking feet into a pair of satin wedge-heeled pumps with a slight platform sole underneath.

"You can't wear those!" he cried out, "You'll look like a fool!"

Ollie scoffed loudly, then reached out for Mark's assistance to help him stand up in the heeled shoes. It then took him a further few minutes to learn how to properly walk in them, but once he mastered the turning of his hips and the

quick little shake of his bottom, he proclaimed, "You are missing out my friend. You should give them a try!"

Mark shot his friend a daggers. "You're kidding right? You look..." he was about to say 'foolish' when Natsumi came up behind him and interrupted.

"Amazing!" She exclaimed. "Oh *yes*, Ollie! That's a *perfect* outfit! You've really paid attention to the training! Mark could learn a lot from you!" the store manager said looking down at Mark, shaking her head, before turning back to Oliver. "I really don't see any other choice but to make *you* the lead sales rep now, so that you can help teach Mark the ropes at the new HFX Rightworths."

Mark looked at his boss with an outraged expression. "Oh don't fret Mar," she said, "You'll just be Ollie's assistant until you learn how to become a fashion leader. You understand, don't you?"

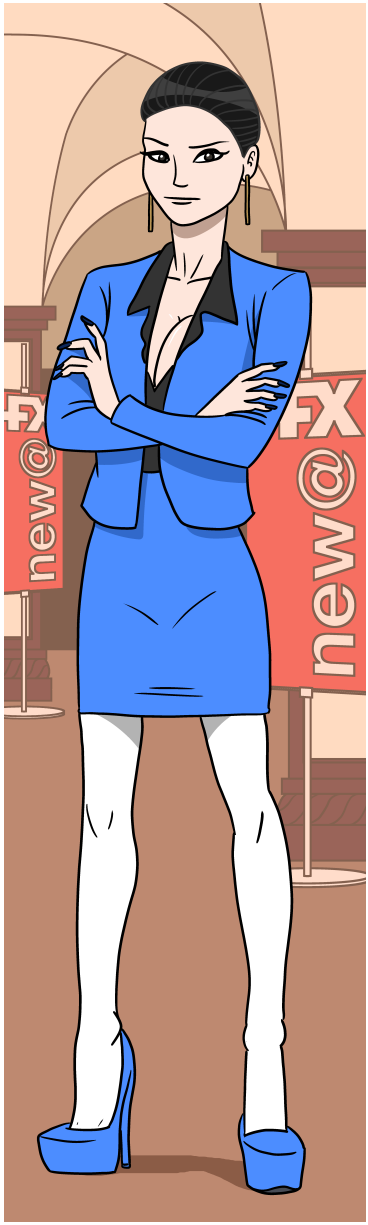


Mark was shocked at being summarily demoted, without even a discussion. He was going to give Natsumi a piece of his mind! But when he turned around to confront her, he caught a look at all of his fellow salesmen. He realized that he was in fact the odd 'man' out, as the majority of the staff were dressed in nearly identical outfits consisting of snug fitting colored pants, a feminine top and short-cut bolero style jacket and ankle-breaking wedge pumps.

Just then he spotted Riley Rightworth, the store's rightful owner, making his way to the exit with a file box in hand.

"Ry!" Mark cried as he ran

after him, "Riley! Did you hear what she just did?" Not waiting for the visibly flustered man to reply, he filled in the blanks. "She demoted me Ry. She demoted me and promoted *him*," he pointed back at Ollie who was still where Mark had left him, looking entirely befuddled. "What's happening here?" he asked loudly, "What's happened to your store? Your Great Grandfather's Store?"



Riley looked somewhat taken aback, almost incensed at the comment. "Listen Mark," he began, "My great grandfather is dead, and so is his store — it just took me a while to realize it. And if it hadn't been for HFX, there wouldn't even *be* a store anymore," he exclaimed. "Their ideas and changes are the only thing that is going to make this store a success. In fact, I'm so sure of this new business plan that I've sold them the entire business."

Mark looked shocked, "You're selling your store?"

Riley looked a little bashful for a moment, as if he felt a tiny bit of remorse for his outburst. "Not selling," he said, "Sold." He turned away for a moment, then turned back again. "You have *no* idea how bad things were before HFX came along. We'd *all* be out of a job if it wasn't for them. We owe them all our loyalty and honor."

Even Ollie, who had wandered over to see what his friend was talking about, had to do a double take on Riley's last comment. *Loyalty and honor?* both he and Mark thought to themselves, *who talks about an investor like that?*

Riley could read their confused faces. "Never mind. You'll understand later on, I suppose." He looked past Mark to Ollie. "Congratulations Ollie!" he said before turning back to Mark. "I suggest that you get back to work Mark," he said, "Your boss doesn't look very happy." He pointed at a very disgruntled looking Natsumi.

Mark sighed. He knew he was already on Natsumi's radar, and he didn't want to make it any worse. Besides, the only thing Natsumi could do to him that was worse than demotion was outright termination — which Mark couldn't allow to happen. He had bills to pay and a reputation (of sorts) to maintain.

He and Ollie returned to where their store manager was standing. Natsumi glared at Mark then turned to Ollie with a smile. "Ollie," she gushed, "As a reward for your loyalty and obedience I have a special surprise for you!"

Ollie looked elated. "For moi?" he said in a giddy voice.

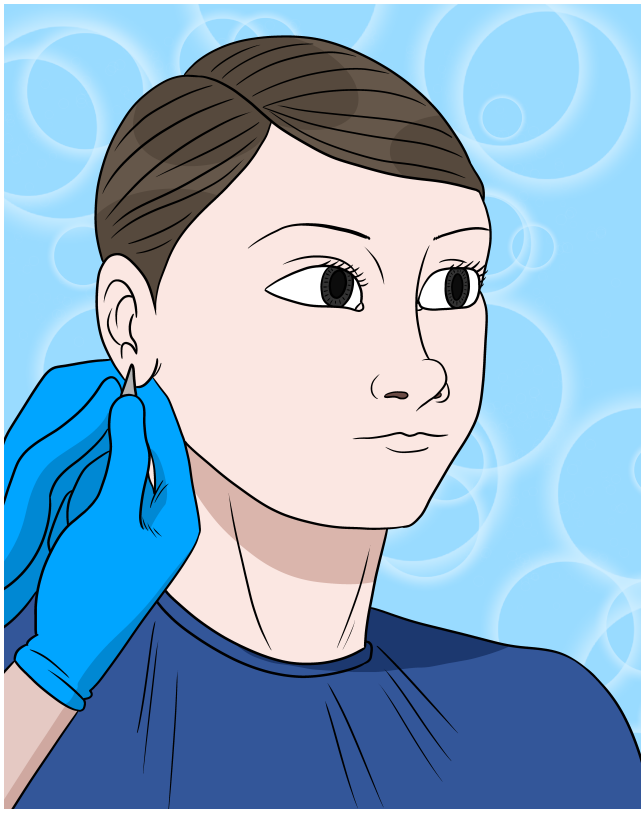
Mark walked a few steps away and tried to look busy as Ollie was led to the centre of the store. Natsumi had gathered a group of the store's youngest and most eager employees and were waiting patiently in a row. At the front of the line, a beautician had set up a salon chair on the sales floor. Mark simply couldn't believe what he was seeing. He knew that men who wore high fashion often used a little dab of cosmetics here and there to look perfect, but this was simply unbelievable. One by one, the employees were seated in the chair to allow the beautician to carefully (and seemingly painfully) shape their eyebrows into thin arches, followed by getting their ears pierced and their hair styled in an androgynous fashion. The beautician finished the process by applying a moderate amount of mascara to their lashes.



When it came time for Ollie, he appeared to be intently focused on the beautician's work, as if he was trying to memorize what she was doing — even as she painfully plucked away at his eyebrows.

Mark sighed as the beautician packed up her gear and the store

returned to business as usual, unable and unwilling to believe what he had just seen. Worse yet, now his job was to trail behind an overly-peppy Oliver. He had to keep his mouth shut as he was being 'taught' how to do the job he'd already been doing for years. Regardless, despite his customer service proficiency and salesmanship, he had to defer to the younger, far less experienced trainee as he upsold the new HFX product line to the store's customers.



It was then that Mark started to notice that the demographic of shopper at Rightworth's had begun to change. Instead of stuffy, wealthy businessmen, there were a lot more casual urban shoppers. Of those new shoppers, a strong component appeared to be either women, or effeminate men.

I hope they know what they're doing, Mark mumbled under his breath as he loaded a new training module into a booth in the back and took a seat. The lesson for this session? "Be who the customer needs you to be, and be who HFX needs you to be," was the theme. Mark simmered in anger. He already *was* who the customer needed. A level-headed, sane man with a talent for telling his male customers what they'd look most professional in. Not some fatally hip simpering toady who fell for the first shiny, sparkly thing they saw and fooled customers into thinking it was in style.

As Mark was finishing the module a half-hour later, Ollie met him with an enthusiastic smile. "Hey Mar! It's time for the gym, remember? Jamie told us to come a few minutes early because he'd have a surprise for us! Isn't that, like, sooo exciting? I can't wait to see what it is!"

Mark wasn't so sure. The way things were going today, he had good reason to expect the worst, but since he had been demoted to being Ollie's underling, he

knew he was in no position to argue. The module he had just completed had stressed the importance of that. Compliance was the new corporate directive, presumably initiated by HFX's influence over the company, Mark surmised as his friend pleaded with him to hurry.

"Come *onnn*," Ollie whined. "Natsumi said we could go early. I don't want to miss out Mar. Quit daydreaming and let's get going."

Mar and Ollie arrived at The City Athletic Club shortly thereafter and headed to the locker room to get changed into their workout wear. To their surprise, a new outfit was waiting for them in their lockers next to the old one. Ollie immediately donned the newer version before heading out to the gym. Mark, predictably, didn't. Instead he carried the new attire with him to the gym floor where Jamie was waiting impatiently for them. *"Well?* What do you think?" he asked, his face suddenly turning cross when he realized that Mark wasn't wearing his new gym clothes. *"Mark?"* he growled, "What is *with* you?"

"I can't wear this!" Mark complained, "It's too...." he paused. "It's barely..." he paused again. "It's so..." he glanced over at his friend who was happily posing in the new workout attire comprised of a pink lycra leotard with teal stripes down the sides. The leotard was square cut at the bottom to make them resemble shorts. They were basically a cap sleeve 'onesie' design with semi-opaque white tights over the legs. Mark could only imagine that there were matching pink thong panties underneath as well as the clearly visible coordinated sneakers with a 2 inch wedge heel built in. Ollie could hardly contain his glee as he modeled the shiny little leotard, knowing how sexy his body was starting to look in it.

Mark just rolled his eyes.

Jamie seemed impressed with Ollie's display, "I just love what is happening here!" he gushed pointing at the swishy salesman, "And I just *love* what you have done here," he said pointing at Ollie's newly sculpted eyebrows and mascaraed lashes, "That new line that Natsumi was talking about is going to be epic huh?" the personal trainer didn't wait for an answer before he continued, looking directly at Mark as he spoke, "Any-who... I don't care *what* you wear, but I'd imagine that if Natsumi found out how old and stodgy you were acting..." he let his voice trail off. "Whatever... just don't be late to class, or I'll put you both over my knee and give you a big ol'spankin." His serious tone melted into a giggle as he pointed towards the room where their class was being held.

Mark scoffed loudly he made his way to the class. As the two entered, he noticed the jaws dropping and eyes growing wider than usual as the other gym members watched them. Mark in particular was bothered by the other member's reactions, even though he knew that they were mostly reacting to Ollie's



new look. He did his best to avoid eye contact, as they shook their heads, mouthing "WTF" as they watched Oliver prance into the room, walking confidently on his new wedge heeled sneakers with Mark following close behind.

"Dude, I don't know about this," Mark whispered to Ollie in a nervous tone. "We're making a *lot* of changes *very* quickly. Don't you think this is all a little much?"

Ollie just looked at him blankly. "I'm not sure I know what you mean," he replied.

Mark shook his head, "Come on man," he decried, "look at what you're wearing! And look at what you were wearing before — don't you think it's a little..." His voice trailed off as he tried to find the words, but his vocabulary couldn't come up with anything, much to his concern. He wanted to say *gay, or girly, or faggy* or something of the like. But although the words began to form in his head, they would vanish well before he could make them come out.

Ollie smiled warmly as he gave Mark's arm a friendly little rub. "Look, Mar boy, you need to stop being so... ugh... like, traditional, silly! We're totally lucky to be working for the trendiest store in the City. We're gonna be *way* popular with the coolest people in town. Now... be a good boy and get with the program!"

Mark felt his face redden in humiliation as his younger, former protege took charge. He remembered that Riley had instructed him to 'learn' from Ollie and to listen to his directions. So with a defeated sigh, Mark followed Ollie through the workout area to the aerobics and dance studio, he couldn't help noticing Ollie's posture and walk seemed to have changed considerably. He figured it must have something to do with the elevated sneakers that he was wearing, and was hopeful that he wasn't giving off the same swishy vibe. Deep down, though, he knew that was probably wishful thinking. It was hard to miss the looks he was getting from all the guys on the weight machines. Some were sneering and shaking their heads in disgust. Others had a flirty smile on their face as they made eye contact to show their approval.

Mark didn't know whether to be relieved or even more embarrassed when they walked into the aerobics studio. The studio was packed with girls in their teens and 20's, and Mark was surprised to get friendly smiles and compliments as Jamie just had to make an announcement welcoming the two new 'hotties,' as he put it, to their class. There were only two other guys in the class, and they were wearing the typical guy's workout shorts and tank tops. Even though they looked like 'regular' athletic guys.

Mark took his position as the class began, but couldn't help but feel as if someone was watching him. He turned his head to scan the room, and found the eyes of one of the two other guys looking back at him. The young man quickly looked away in playful embarrassment, as did Mark. His focus was broken by Ollie, who jabbed him in the side with his elbow.

"Mar," he whispered, "I think that guy over there is flirting with me!"

Mark looked surprised, "With *you*?" He asked. He looked over at the two young men again, and saw this time, that *both* of them were looking their way. He looked over at his friend, and realized that Ollie was *engaging* the other two by smiling back in a flirtatious way.

"What are you *doing*?" he asked Ollie is stern voice. The others in class were unimpressed, and many replied with a pronounced 'shhhhh.'

The reaction made Mark feel even more self-conscious and embarrassed. The actual class wasn't any better for Mark. He never imagined it could be so hard just to do a dumb aerobics class, but he had a hard time following Jamie's moves. His inability to excel in the class was bruising his ego, as he'd always been a good athlete.

As the class was ending the two young men who were waving earlier came up to introduce themselves. They didn't *seem* gay, but they were clearly hitting on Mark and Ollie. One of the guys was chatting Ollie up as they walked back toward the locker room, and the other one was giving Mark all his attention. Mark was grateful that someone was being friendly toward him despite his queer-looking workout gear. The guy actually seemed kind of nice, and he had to admit he was good looking, like those kids that Abercrombie and Fitch hires to stand outside their stores shirtless. Mark was trying to sort all of this out. The young man was a couple inches taller than him, but he definitely seemed younger, even though he was completely confident and cocky, just way Mark had been back when he was in high school.

"So, um..." the young man said finally, "Do you and your friend want to um, you know... get a drink later on some time?"

Mark looked at him with a dumbfounded expression. *Did he just ask me out?* he wondered to himself. "Um," was the only response that he could seem to stammer out, "I um, well... I..."

"We'd love to!" Ollie piped up. "But we have a *ton* of shit to do back at work, boys."

Mark looked at his coworker with a confused expression, as if he never expected that Ollie — acting as *different* as he had been — would say yes, followed by an immediate excuse.

The other macho boy shrugged. "Oh," he said, "Okay. Well then maybe later sometime?"

Ollie smiled widely and winked. "We'll see." He grabbed Mark by the arm and pulled him back towards the lockers to get changed.

"What the hell was *that* all about?" Mark finally asked as Ollie began to change back from his workout clothes to his previous outfit.

Ollie chuckled. "You *never* say yes on the first ask silly," he swished.

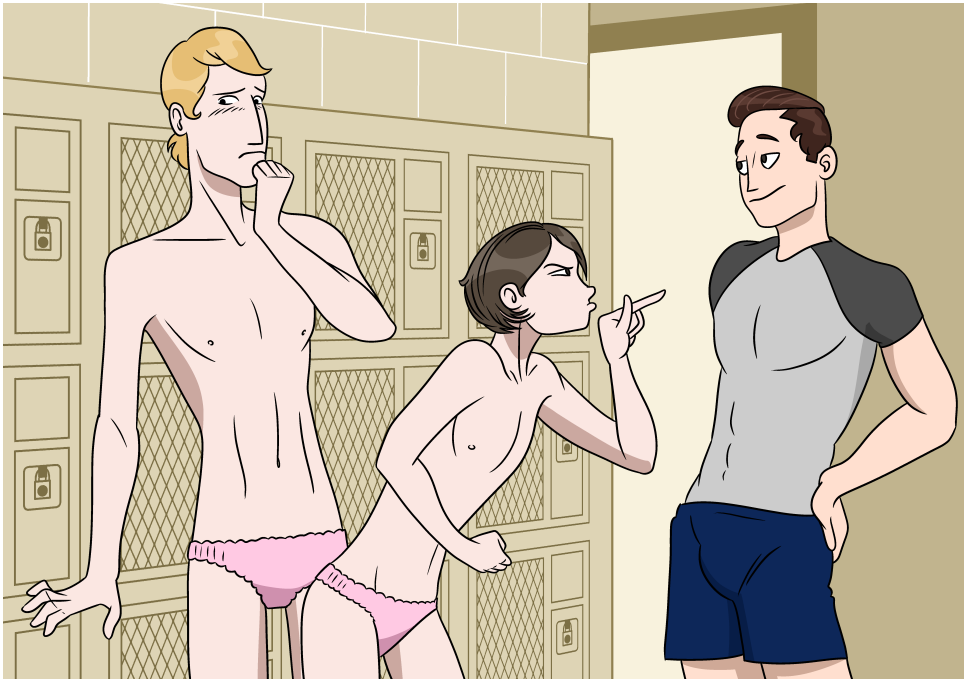
Mark looked at him with a shocked expression. That wasn't exactly what he had meant, but he now clearly realized what his friend was intending to do.

He was intending to get himself — and Mark — a date with these handsome young men.

Mark's head was spinning from all this crazy stuff. New clothes at work. New gym outfits. His buddy getting all flirty with dudes. He was in a bit of a daze as he went about showering and getting changed back into his work clothes. With his head in the fog, Mark dried off and slipped his satin thong on for his work outfit. He reminded himself that he didn't really have a choice, so he begrudgingly tucked his 'equipment' down and smoothed out the little triangular patch. Just then, his worst nightmare materialized as Greg Morrison came wandering around the corner in the locker room, doing a double take as he saw Mark's flat fronted thong. Mark said a silent prayer he'd just let it go, but that wasn't going to happen.

"Oh ... such pretty panties you're wearing, huh Malone?" Morrison said.

Mark wondered to himself, of all the people in the world, why Greg Morrison, had to be the one to see him like this. Greg had always been a step ahead of



Mark, and seemed to intentionally try to make Mark's life miserable whenever he had the chance. He had consistently embarrassed Mark in front of his friends — most importantly potential girlfriends — as if trying to remind him that he was 'Old Money' and Mark wasn't. In fact, unknown to Mark, Greg had used his expansive family connections to ensure that Mark never got employment in the prestigious financial firms he had dreamed of, something Mark would not have been surprised to find out.

Instead, Mark had gotten a job selling menswear, and now found himself in these weird new styles of trendy clothing.

He was still trying to come up with a snappy retort when Ollie piped up, "Hey moron! What would you know? These *aren't* panties. They're the very latest in men's fashion undies. You'll see... they'll be, like, *totally* popular in a few weeks. We're just fashion forward, so get over it!"

Greg's only response was to snicker as he walked away, as if slightly caught off guard by Ollie's retort. For his part, Mark just wanted to get out of there, so he finished dressing and followed Ollie back to the store like a wounded pup.

Along the way, Mark lamented about the loss of his full salesman wage. His demotion came with a dock in his already meager pay. He was worried that he wouldn't have enough money to keep up his car payment and rent at his modest apartment uptown. Later that night, as he and Ollie went for drinks at a local bar, he continued complaining.

"My life is over," Mark whined dramatically. "I might as well just accept the fact that I'm never going to be an executive — I'm going to be stuck in retail hell for the rest of my life." He moved the tiny paper umbrella that covered his straw to take a sip of the sugary sweet fruity drink that Ollie had insisted he try. He winced as the cocktail flooded into his mouth, the initial tart taste dissolving into a smooth sweetness. He had to admit, it was pretty good.

"Oh don't be such a drama queen," Ollie scolded him. "It'll all work out!" He scanned the room as he sipped his own fruit concoction.

Mark took another long sip. It was his second drink since they arrived, and the alcohol was starting to give him a nice buzz. "Oh? Why do you assume that?" he remarked between sips. "I can't afford my car, I can't afford my apartment..." He paused to take another sip. "I can't even afford this drink," he said as he stared at the half-empty glass of brightly colored liquid.

Ollie just giggled. "Oh Mar, such a negative nelly," he giggled. "You can just move in with me until you get back on your feet. I've got an extra room since my roommate moved out, and I'm nice and close to the bus route, so just ditch your car and we'll take the bus together," he said with a smile.

Mark listened intently. Could it really be that easy?

"And as for your drink," Ollie said with a mischievous grin, "We'll just have to get someone *else* to buy one for us." He giggled again. "Or two."

Mark watched as his former protege-turned-supervisor moved his eyes over to watch a pair of guys walking past their table. He had to do a double take. *Where do I know those two from?* He wondered to himself, until he remembered seeing them back at the health club.

Ollie chatted them up for a moment before turning to Mark. "Ready for another?" he asked.

Mark shrugged. He had never pretended to be gay just to get a free drink, but at this point, he didn't have much to lose.

"Sure," he replied. "Okay." Before he could think, he found his arm automatically extending to one of the two handsome young men from the gym. "I'm Mark," he heard his mouth open and the words came out. *What in the everliving hell has gotten into me?* he wondered. But knowing the amount of alcohol he had already consumed, he knew it didn't really matter.



Over the course of that weekend, Mark and Ollie moved the contents of Mark's apartment to either Ollie's place or a rented storage unit — with a striking majority to the later instead of the former. Ollie had insisted that Mark pack away his older-styled suits and dress pants, as the spare room he was going to be using had very little closet space. Mark had argued that he could buy an armoire to store the clothes, but Ollie insisted that the dainty vanity that was already there was of extreme importance to him, and that he was certain Mark would grow to see its importance as well.

Not wanting to rock the boat, as Ollie was technically saving him from financial ruin by taking him as a roommate, he instead agreed to the odd condition.

At work that week, Ollie completed his fourth module, whilst pulling Mark into his third — not quite kicking and screaming, but close. Just a few days earlier Mark had found himself being scolded by his one-time protege for not keeping up with the company's mandated training modules. The outcome of that scolding session had seen changes to Mark's schedule to allow him more *one-on-one* time on the module. The way that Ollie's voice had sounded when he had said the phrase, "one-on-one," complete with a queer-sounding snicker at the end, made Mark extremely worried as to what the young man had in mind.

He was later relieved, at least somewhat, when the training that he had decided on was geared towards more of the same. Selling, customer service and loyalty to the company. Nothing new. He had to complete the second module and move into the third module by week's end, in addition to extra practice in the newly mandated wedge-heeled shoes, learning to swivel his hips when he walked, bend his wrist when he pointed and speaking with a soft voice when he spoke.

It was those odd extras that made Mark cringe, but at the same time he was pleased that that was *all* he was getting him to do.

On this particular day, it was Mark's walking and talking that were upsetting to Ollie. It seemed that no matter what, he just couldn't get it right.

"My gawd!" Ollie exclaimed. "How can you have such *little* coordination?"

Mark lowered his eyes sheepishly at the comments. He felt as if disappointing Ollie was making him less of an employee, which was a drastic departure from past thinking — he hadn't given a crap what Ollie thought only a few days ago. However, recently relenting to Ollie's superiority as his boss and quasi-'landlord' was beginning to make Mark feel quite inferior in other ways — which was not a position he had ever been in before.

His frustrations didn't have long to fester, though. As Ollie was drilling him on the finer points of using his hands to express himself, Natsumi interrupted them. She presented both him and Ollie with a set of new outfits to wear on the sales floor. Mark, naturally, resisted the offer, but could see Natsumi's patience was growing thin.

"When you're done putting them on, come to the sales floor. Quickly, now!"

"Why the sales floor?" Mark asked in a lamenting tone.

"Now!" She said, sharply and angrily.

Scared for his job, Mark changed out without even looking at what he was putting on.

It was just a few minutes after closing, and the entire staff had collected in in the center of the sales floor, anticipating something. Much to the surprise of Mark and Ollie, it was not them and their outfits. They were almost ignored, and Mark was visibly relieved.

"As you know," Natsumi said, standing before her staff, "we have faced a lot of challenges with our new lines of apparel. And while we've done great things in training everyone... We still have a ways to go."

Mark was starting to wonder how far Natsumi was going to push them, if the training still had "a ways to go." It made him feel more than a little nervous.

"So," Natsumi continued, "I asked that our top, number-one sales team come to our store to help us!" She waited for applause, and it quickly came from the staff. "I'd like to introduce to you, direct from our HFX Flagship store in downtown Tokyo, Akari, Riku and Yuma — Team All-Stars!"

Peppy, high-energy pop music started to play as three young women, none of them older than nineteen, came bounding and bouncing out from a side door, waving and smiling to everyone as they approached Natsumi. They were dressed in identical blue outfits of short skirts and halter tops, looking not unlike cheerleaders.

"These are the top sellers?" Mark asked Ollie, not believing his eyes.

"They're so *cuuuute!"* Ollie replied. He was pressing his palms against his cheeks, gushing. "I just want to die!"

"Say hello to everyone, girls!" Natsumi said to the three uniformed salesgirls.

"Arigato!" They said in unison, bending at the knees and flashing peace signs. Mark did have to admit Ollie was right. They were extremely cute. They were also extremely Japanese, with perfect skin, sweet smiles, and lovely hair. They were almost doll-like, to Mark's observation.

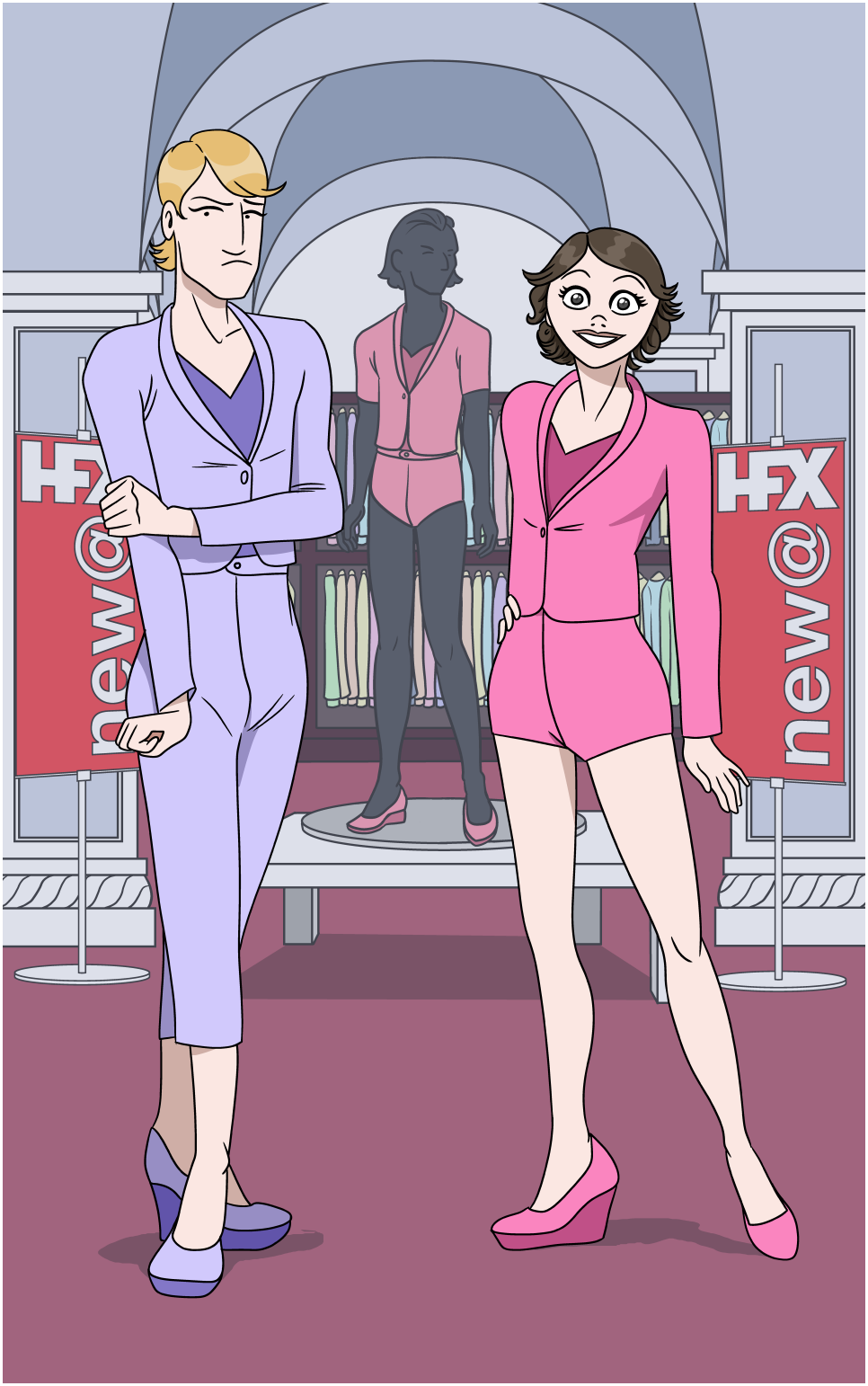
"I've arranged for our Team All-Stars to be here for two months," Natsumi said. "We can all learn a lot from them, and I want everyone here to take the time to introduce themselves when they get the chance."

"Please com-plete your train-ing!" The girls said, again in unison. They spoke slowly, in very deliberate English. "Try your best! We will be rooting for you!"

"We're all going to learn a lot from the All Stars!" Natsumi said. "I'm very excited to see the improvements they'll bring as they show you what it takes to be our best salespeople! Oh, but before we go, I want to show you our new uniforms. Ollie, Mark, would you step forward please?"

The high-energy pop music played again as the two men walked to the center of the room. Mark wanted to run and hide, but Ollie made sure he couldn't back out as he held his hand and led him towards the smiling faces of Natsumi and Team All-Star. With much fanfare, pomp and circumstance, Mark and Ollie were unveiled in their new attire in front of all the other staff.

Mark's newest pantsuit was decidedly different from anything he had ever worn before (notwithstanding the yoga outfit at the gym). It was comprised of a pair of capri-style snug fitting skinny pants, a camisole-style top and a cropped slim-fitting blazer worn with a pair of ramped wedge-heeled pumps. His eyes had been highlighted with a thin outline of eyeliner, and a light brushing of mascara, after his brows had been shaped into the same style of gentle arches that Ollie had had done weeks earlier.


HFX
new@
HFX
new@

He was completely self-conscious as Natsumi paraded them around for the other staff to see. Not that his new look would faze the other employees. Mark was officially the last one to reach the third module milestone, meaning that all of the other employees in the store had reached at *least* his level. But in most cases, they had excelled *beyond* it to Ollie's level.

Ollie's level was completely different than Mark's, as exemplified when Ollie strutted past the crowd to stand beside his former mentor. Mark continued to keep his eyes low, as he watched Ollie show off his look through his peripheral vision.

Ollie wore a similar blazer and cami-style top — but instead of capri-cut pants, he wore a pair of very-short, body hugging shorts with his ramped wedge heeled platform pumps. With the mascara applied, and hair styled in an ever-more feminine fashion, it was getting difficult to tell Ollie's true gender — if one had just met him for the first time.

Natsumi was smiling wide as the two employees stood for examination. "Ladies and Gentlemen..." she began. The phrase caught Mark off-guard, as they had never had any 'lady' employees at Rightworth & Co., and although many of the current staff were taking on feminine attributes, he was nearly certain that none of them *were* in fact ladies — except for the the girls standing behind him.

"I am so proud of each and every one of you," she continued, "It is your dedication to this store that is helping to bring about the changes needed for our future successes. You are all to be commended."

She paused to let her words sink in, before carrying on. "But there is much to do still, in order for our store to be viable." She heard the murmuring in the crowd stop as she gained her staff's full and undivided attention.

"You have all seen that the new product lines that we have introduced here have garnered considerably positive sales results, and positioned us well for future growth in this particular segment during the next fiscal quarter," she continued. Mark marveled at the fact that Natsumi's appearance was that of teenaged j-pop queen, but her vocabulary seemed to have grown to that of highly-skilled, Fortune 500 CEO. As a financial specialist himself, he found the strange juxtaposition slightly arousing.

How can she look like such a bubblehead, he wondered, *but sound like a stock analyst?*

His understanding of her use of business jargon was clearly over-and-above that of the rest of the staff, who all nodded and clapped with vacant-looking, confused eyes.

Mark sighed as he came to the realization that he might be viewed as a wolf amongst sheep if he didn't act a little less aggressively, and a little more subdued. A phrase from his training seemed to stick with him as he looked around the room at the salesforce of now-compliant men that had been retained by HFX — *It is good to belong the HFX team, it is good to accept the HFX way, it is good to embrace the HFX mindset.*

He wasn't certain why those three statements were coming to the front of his mind at that precise moment — but yet — there it was, his new prime directive.

Or was it?

Mark shook his head abruptly, as if trying to shake the thoughts away. *What's gotten into me?* he wondered to himself, *This is just a temporary job, until I can get back into the financial sector. This isn't my career.*

In his ridiculous outfit, with his new boss on one side, and the Team All-Stars sales girls on the other, he felt more uncertain than ever before. He looked around the room. He told himself that he *wasn't* like these other 'sheep'. They were here because they *wanted* to be. This was their life. This was who they were. They were retail salesmen.

This isn't me! he argued against himself. *This isn't my life!* He nearly said aloud. He wasn't a sheep. This wasn't his career. He was here because he *had* to be — until he could resume his career in finance.

"Isn't that right Mar?" Ollie snapped Mark out of his daydream. Mark had unfortunately not been paying attention and didn't know what he was agreeing to, but did not want to look silly by asking his young friend to repeat himself. So instead he decided to nod and smile — like a good HFX salesperson.

Natsumi grinned, "Excellent Mar!" she exclaimed. The Team All-Star girls clapped enthusiastically. "And now that you have committed to completing the fourth module this week, we will have all staff members caught up equally in our training regime, which will help this location to secure future investment in training and employee wellness."

Training and employee wellness? Mark wondered to himself, *What did I commit to?*

Mark's commitment to finishing the fourth module became the talk of the store over the course of the following week, with staff members randomly applauding him for supporting the 'team.' It was a rather surreal experience for a

workplace that had previously acted very singular and isolated, to suddenly be so open and communicative.

Mark wasn't sure he could trust it.

Regardless, he had publicly obliged himself to finishing the module — so he knew he had no choice but to follow through. As it would turn out, it was a good week to focus on training, as there wasn't much for him to do, thanks to the presence of Team All-Star.

At first, Mark was incredulous to the idea that these three girls, giggling and tittering amongst themselves could be the top sellers of the HFX chain. Indeed, when they were on the sales floor, helping customers, they were able to do very little in regards to service, because of their limited knowledge of English.

That changed in the afternoon, however. All of a sudden, they had vanished from the sales floor, not to be found. Then at 2 pm sharp, the lights in the store dimmed, their signature music began to play, and an announcement came over the PA system.

"Customers," a voice said over the PA, "please direct your attention to the ground floor and welcome direct from Tokyo, Team All-Star as they perform for you!"

Mark wasn't sure, but he was pretty sure it was Natsumi's voice. He was kind of shocked, as he didn't even know the store had a PA system.

Quickly, the three girls, Akari, Riku and Yuma, rushed out onto the sales floor, in their blue short-skirted costumes, and stopped in the middle of the store. Lights overhead spotlighted them. Then they started to dance.

They were lip-syncing to lyrics in Japanese, but it wasn't hard to guess what they were saying, because the distinct letters "HFX" were sung often, and the words "love" and "buy" were repeated. As they danced, the girls pantomimed the act of falling in love with the clothes sold at the store, buying them and being the center of attention, putting on a little play.

Then, one of the girls would pick up a garment from one of the nearby racks, hold it up against herself, and show it to the growing crowd. Then she would hold it out, waiting for someone to take it from her. They each did this three times, with special little dances and smiles of gratitude for every garment taken from them.

Mark watched in disbelief as the clothes the girls had selected — and not surprisingly, they were very expensive selections — were taken to the counters and purchased immediately. Behind them, more dazzled customers impatiently waited in line to buy the same style of garment.

Then, done with the performance, the girls ran off for the back room, waving and giggling as they did so.

"Team All-Star will be back at six!" Said Natsumi over the PA. "See them every day, here at Rightworth &Co., Thursday through Monday at two and again at six!"

"What has become of this place?" Mark said to himself, aloud.

"Wasn't that just *amaaazing?*" Ollie said, practically skipping his way towards Mark.

"Hard to believe," Mark replied, "That's for sure."

"They sure know how to sell, don't they?"

"Sell? All they did was dance and shake their boobs."

"Hank told me they sold $10,000 already."

"Ten grand?"

"And people are still in line. I *love* those outfits they wear! I'm going to stick around for the six o'clock show. How about you?"

"I'm off at four."

"Oh, come on! Stay! Maybe we can talk to them."

"We don't know Japanese."

"I'll learn!"

"In four hours?"

"How hard can it be?"

An hour later, it was their designated training time, and Mark and Ollie were in the back, picking training modules.

Shockingly, a Japanese language module was one of the options in the training booth, and Ollie was all-in. "Told you!" He teased Mark. "I'll be a regular expert in no time!" He hooked himself up in one of the booths and began his session.

Mark didn't have much of a choice but to continue his work in Module Four. He had committed to it, after all. Resigned to his fate, he started the training module where he had left off last time, and got comfortable in his dark booth, letting the flickering light from the screen wash over him.



A few days later, when Ollie and Mark arrived in the early morning for their shift, they found the store changed even more. It was once again under renovation as yet another new product line was being introduced.

This one was clearly geared at the typical HFX clientele, as it offered flimsy, skimpy, poofy, sparkly outfits in bright colors and glittering metallics, along with a wide assortment of related belts, jewelry, shoes and other accessories. The store now contained so much 'bling' that the traditional men's section had been relegated to a tiny portion of the sales floor, near the back.

Mark surmised that it had been strategically placed there to ensure its demise.

The signage and logos had all been changed to read 'HFX Rightworth's,' with the HFX portion in its typical gaudy, oversized format, while 'Rightworth's' had been reduced in size and stature to that of a mere afterthought, appearing to now be less than half the size of the HFX portion.

The same was now reflected in the composition of their clients, with roughly one in ten customers actually looking for fine men's wear. The other nine were in search of HFX's hyper assortment of youth-oriented high-priced ultra-trendy clothes, and a show from the now-famous Team All-Star, who were definitely drawing the crowds in. If that wasn't sad enough, of the ten percent who were still coming in for what had once been Rightworth's manly mainstays, less than a quarter were actually buying.

It was also different for Mark, as he spent most of his days folding garments or arranging and sorting the racks of gaudy clothes. There wasn't a lot of call for his menswear sales acumen, and the presence of Team All-Star had stolen most of his sales. Ollie wasn't even around to keep him company, as he was desperately trying to ingratiate himself with Akari, Riku and Yuma.

Rightworth's traditional customer base was increasingly put-off by the other offerings in the store, along with the throbbing techno-pop music that was playing in the background, the bubble-headed Team All-Star that were there to assist them, and the sense that they were being ignored for a new type of customer.

In short, Mark was certain that it wouldn't be long until the menswear section disappeared entirely.



Mark's certainty grew when he attended the gym the following day.

After already changing into their workout wear, both Mark and Ollie given given a *new* set of workout clothes, the likes of which Mark had never before seen — on a man.

The new outfits were unibody leotards in mauve and teal, similar to what one would come to expect in an all-girl's gym. The problem was, that *this* wasn't such a place. So as he held up the skimpy-looking spandex-laden workout wear, he felt a lump forming in his throat.

There was no way he was going to wear this. He looked around to see what Ollie's reaction was, but his junior coworker had already disappeared eagerly to the changing room, emerging minutes later in the new attire.

"There's no way Ollie," he lamented, "I'll be the laughing stock of the gym!"

Ollie didn't seem to share his opinion, as he turned from side to side, striking pose after pose in the mirror in the new workout wear. In addition to the new leotard, he wore new opaque white workout tights and powder mauve colored wedge-heeled sneakers. He seemed oblivious to Mark's comments as he inspected his reflection. "Whatever you think, Mar," he said softly, "Just don't forget your commitment to the company and its values."

Company and its values? he said to himself. *What the heck does that mean?*

Before he could seek a response, Jamie, their personal trainer, had emerged and was motioning at them to get moving to the yoga studio to get started. He smiled approvingly at Ollie, but reserved a disappointed glare for Mark.

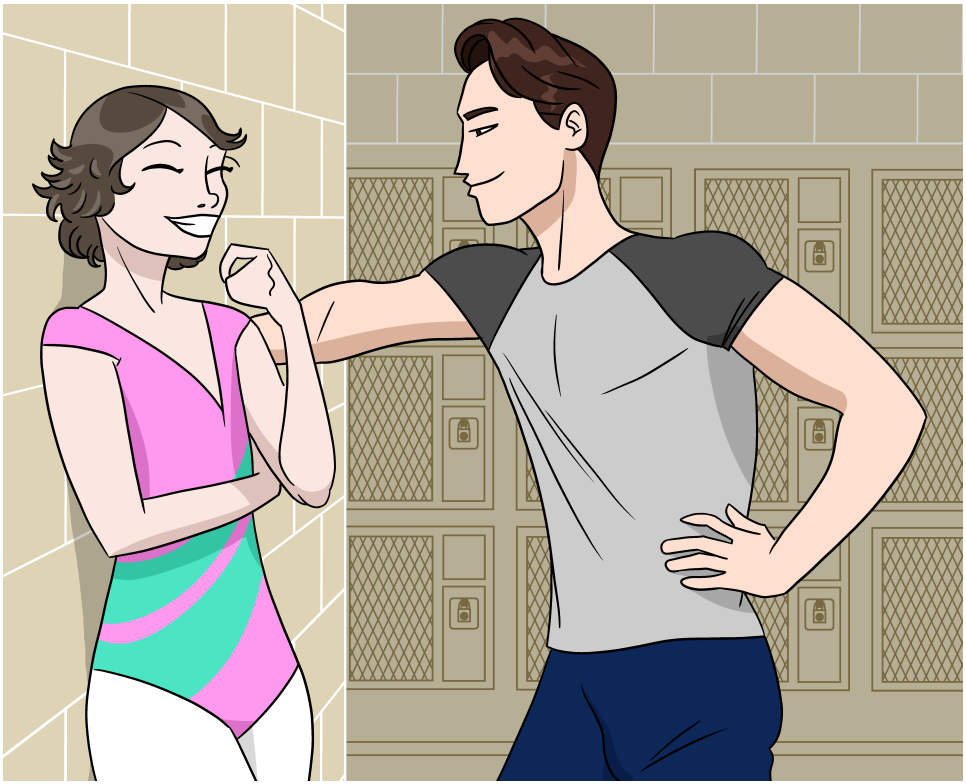
After the class had let out, Mark tried to disappear as quickly as he could — as had become standard practice for both him and Ollie since their encounter with Mark's former classmate. There was no reason to hang around and make himself a bigger target for their taunting than he already was.

As he had done for weeks on end, Mark rushed to the change room to shower and change as quickly as possible, with as little contact with any other gym members as possible. On this occasion, however, he stumbled upon Ollie — still dressed in his demoralizing workout wear — chatting with none-other than Greg Morrison, Mark's former college rival.

Mark stopped dead in his tracks, then slid to the side of the doorway, hoping that neither Ollie, nor Greg would notice his presence. He couldn't make out what they were discussing, only that their facial expressions were smiles and grins.

Is Ollie flirting with that asshole? Mark wondered. Even more disturbing to that idea, was the thought that Greg was flirting *back!*

It was Greg that noticed Mark first as he turned to his former classmate and smiled. "Oh hi Mark," he said, "I was just telling Ollie here that we should all



go out for coffee sometime. You know, for old times sake." He shot Mark an expression that seemed to border the line between sarcasm and sincerity. Mark wasn't sure how to respond to it.

"Um," Mark began to reply, but Ollie could read the reservations that his friend was feeling and interjected on his behalf. "Oh... I don't think Mark wants to be the third wheel," he inserted, then added, "Do you Mar?" He flashed Mark a hopeful smile, as if hinting that he should decline the offer.

Mark was even *more* unsure of how to reply now. Was Ollie trying to rebuff Greg's efforts in their entirety? Or was he simply trying to have a night alone with Greg? Why would he even try to have a date with another guy?

These questions danced around inside Mark's head, until more, even *stranger* questions began to appear: *Why wouldn't Ollie go on a date with Greg?* The thought seemed to burst into his brain from nowhere. It caught him so off guard that he gasped loudly, blushing as if the others in the room could have somehow read his thoughts.

Ollie stopped his chat with Greg — which had continued on while Mark was standing there in a stupefied pose — and turned to his coworker. "Are you okay, Mar?"

Mark nodded and shook his head at almost the same time. "Yeah," he blurted out quickly, sounding as confused as he looked. "No. I'm Fine. You two have fun, I'm good," he added. "I'm real busy with..." he struggled to find a sensible way to finish the sentence. "I'm good. Lots of training to do. Real busy."

With that he turned away and grabbed his belongings, heading towards the door. He needed to get away from the two of them, it was messing up his head.



Back at work, Mark delved into his training module right away. He had told Natsumi that he would prefer to do the training without distractions if possible, citing his realization that he was behind all the other staff members.

He was, of course, lying. He just wanted to be alone to grapple with the violent rush of emotions that seemed to be taking over — and the best place to do that was in isolation.

"You should check with Ollie first," Natsumi noted, "He *is* your team leader."

Mark looked around the sales floor. Ollie wasn't back from the gym yet. He wondered if he had stayed to spend extra time flirting with Greg. He shook his head to try and shake the image of the the two of them chatting together.

"Um," he began, "Ollie isn't back from the gym yet. I think he stayed to, um," he paused to choose his words carefully, *"network* with some of the other gym members. You know Ollie — always selling." He chuckled in an 'aw-shucks' tone of voice, trying to sound enthusiastic.

Natsumi nodded. "He sure is," she said with a smile, "Okay — go use the booths in the stockroom until Ollie is back." She pointed at the back of the store.

Mark nodded and scampered off, eager to disappear for the remainder of the day. He was still confused by the interaction he had witnessed earlier between his former classmate and his former protege. Even more confusing and unsettling was his own reaction to it.

I don't know what the hell's the matter with me, he said to himself as he logged into the next module, *It's like the whole world is going mad and I'm the only one who's noticing. Unless, I'm going mad and no-one else is noticing!* He sighed to himself as the training session began. The fourth series of HFX training was even stranger than the first two. It began to teach key phrases like 'customer servitude', 'a total commitment to HFX' and 'an unending desire to provide your client a most pleasing experience'.

That last one was especially concerning. *What the heck does that even mean?* he wondered to himself.

"A perfect interaction with a customer is a thing of beauty," the training voice-over said. "So a good salesperson is always searching for beauty." The video showed many different salespeople selling things to delighted customers. All of them women, Mark noted. "Beauty in sales, that's what HFX is all about. Ask yourself, how do you bring beauty into your sales? How can you make your sales focus on beauty? What can you do to be more beautiful?"

Mark was almost following along with that line of logic until he heard that last sentence. Beautiful? He had no intention of asking himself how he could be more 'beautiful.' It was a bizarre question to even ask in a sales training video. It was kind of *gay* to ask, really. Then again, everything about this job was feeling more gay by the minute.

He skipped through the bizarre training session to the portion that introduced the store's new product lines — new to Mark anyway. His fourth module was exactly one module *behind* the store's newest offerings. So while the others on staff were being trained on the fifth module's principles and goods, Mark continued to lag behind. Admittedly, he realized that as a student, he had *never* allowed himself to be anything but at the head of the class. Yet, in this case, he couldn't seem to bring himself to take the initiative in his on-the-job training — and it didn't seem to be getting any better for him.

Disparaged and deflated, Mark took a break. As he stepped out of the booth, temporarily blinded by the bright interior light, he looked around. He had been here for a few years now, and had grown familiar with the back room. It didn't feel quite as comfortable as it used to. He began to picture what life would be like for him once he had left this job. Would he remember this place years after he had left it? This place already felt distant to him.

A chime went off on his phone, reminding him to take his supplements he had been given at the gym. He popped them down with a sip of water, then went back to work on his training. He stepped back into the booth feeling a little woozy, something that usually happened after he took his pills. He had gotten so used to it, he didn't even question it anymore.

"At HFX, beauty is just a part of the job," the voice-over said. "When you want to be better, you have to present yourself better. Standing tall and confident. Smiling. You have to look better. Do you want to look better? Of course you do. Why not say it out loud."

The voice paused. A little prompt came up on screen that said, "waiting for voice input." Mark realized he had to say something. "Uh..."

"Say you want to be better."

"I want to be better," Mark said. The screen seemed to accept it.

"Say you want to be beautiful."

With only a slight pause, Mark did as asked. "I want to be beautiful." For some reason, he didn't feel the same sense of urgent disagreement with the phrase as he did a few minutes ago. He felt far more agreeable, now. He wanted to show his loyalty. He wanted to be a loyal employee of HFX.

"Being an ideal HFX employee makes you beautiful," the voice said. "It makes you pretty. Do you want to be pretty?"

"I want to be pretty," Mark answered.

"HFX makes you pretty, Mark."

Mark felt a tingle of excitement run through him. Incredibly, he liked the idea of being pretty.

"Your training for this module is complete, Mark. Are you pleased?"

"I am," Marks said, not embarrassed to answer a question posed by a computer.

"Wonderful. You will work hard to become the ideal employee, Mark."

"I will work hard to become the ideal employee," he repeated.

As the training program came to an end, a short but detailed quiz would test each salesperson to assess whether they were ready to proceed to the next module. Mark scored so low on the first half of his quiz, the system suggested a remedial course supplemental program, plus a retest on the modules' objectives, and notified him that his supervisor would be informed of his lack of progress so that they could 'take appropriate action.'

"Oh great!" he said aloud as he read the message the program had generated. *That's all I need now,* he returned to using his 'inner' voice, *I bet Natsumi is just waiting for a reason to fire me, and this is probably as good a reason as any.*

As if on cue, Natsumi's voice filled the previously quiet stockroom. "Mark? May I see you for a moment?"

Shit, he thought to himself, *Here it comes. I'm about to become unemployed.*

He sighed, slumping his shoulders forward as he walked towards the store manager's voice. As she came into his sightlines she had her typical serious pose, hands on her hips, with a stern expression on her face. It was a stark comparison to her asian-influenced hyper-fun girly outfit, composed to a princess-like puff sleeved blouse under a corset-style vest, that gave way to

tutu-inspired miniskirt, perched on super-tall six-inch stiletto platform death-trap shoes. He wondered how anyone was supposed to take her seriously as a manager when she was dressed like that.

"Follow me," she commanded, as she turned to leave the room.

He obediently followed, instantly forgetting the thoughts he had had only seconds ago about her inability to be an effective leader. The thoughts in his head, in fact, changed so quickly that he had entirely forgotten what he had been thinking about before.

As they emerged back into the store, Mark noticed that it was well past closing time, yet all of the staff members were still there — including Ollie. In fact, they had all gathered around him at the rear of the store, where the recent construction had been. Ollie was seated at the centre of the group on a tall salon chair. He smiled at Mark as he approached. Natsumi moved through the crowd to stand beside the former junior salesman, then turned to address the group.

Mark was incredibly confused. She didn't want to see him specifically — she just wanted him to join the others.

"So as *most* of you have seen in your fifth module training," Natsumi began, "We are launching a new product line here at HFX Rightworth's..." she let her voice trail off as the employees tittered with excitement, "That's right everyone," she changed her tone from serious and subdued to chipper and energetic, "We're moving into salon services now!"

The staff erupted into spontaneous applause — all except for Mark, who was even more confused than he had been a moment ago.

Natsumi faced the crowd with an infectious smile. "This entire new section of the store is going to be a full-service salon. Hair, makeup, scents and skin. We'll be moving some of you to working full-time here at the HFX Salon, and won't that be exciting!"

Mark could feel the genuine interest and anticipation from the crowd of salespeople, and had to admit, he was a little excited to see what this meant.

"So to help us get started," Natsumi continued, "Holly here, offered to be our little guinea pig, so we can all get some first hand experience. Okay?"

Ollie sat very still as Natsumi covered his body with a salon cape, then proceeded to give a tutorial on the many new face-creams, scrubs and gels that the store would begin selling the following day. She placed each on Ollie's face and hands, showing the staff the proper techniques and explaining the many benefits of the products to them. As she worked, a small crew of contractors appeared in the store and began to remove the final section of men's wear behind

them, revealing a clean and modern salon encased in glass. Only Mark seemed to notice, as the last pieces of Riley Rightworth's family heritage were boxed up and shipped out.

"Now," Natsumi said loudly after a long hour of product introductions, "Holly, how's your skin feeling?" she turned and asked Mark's former protege.

"It feels amazing!" Ollie replied.

"You hear that girls?" Natsumi asked, "Amazing! Which is what we want all of our clients to say when they leave here, right?"

The group nodded and giggled the affirmative to her before she carried on. Mark looked around the room at the former salesmen that Natsumi continued to refer to as 'girls', and realized that they had all taken on very feminine appearances. So much, in fact, that many would easily be mistaken for 'girls'. He was still trying to discern if Natsumi had called Oliver 'Ollie', or 'Holly.' With the right inflection, it was easy to make the 'H' sound very lightly.

How did this happen? he wondered to himself.

"Are you ready to keep going?" he heard Natsumi ask. "Mark? Are you following all this?" She looked directly at him before turning back to the group. "Mar is a little behind in her training, but we're going to get that all resolved real quick," she said the others before turning her eyes back to Mark. "Right Mar?"

Embarrassed by being singled out by his boss, Mark blushed feverishly, nodding. "Yes Ma'am," he said, quietly.

Natsumi seemed pleased by his response, and turned her attention back to Ollie. "Good" she said. "So now back to this," she continued. "Once our clients have gotten amazing skin, we can help them to finish their looks with some amazing color." She smiled as she unveiled a table to the right of them that was covered with various cosmetics.

The group gasped collectively.

"That's right everyone," Natsumi announced, "We are getting into the makeover business."

She let her words settle in the audience before she continued. "It's all part of our unending desire to provide our clients a most pleasing experience, right? Mark?" she turned to him again, "You're just working on your level four — so this should be fresh in your mind, right?"

Feeling humiliated and singled out a second time, Mark nodded, his cheeks bright red.

"Why don't you go ahead and repeat that phrase Mar? Natsumi smiled as she began to open some of the items on the table.

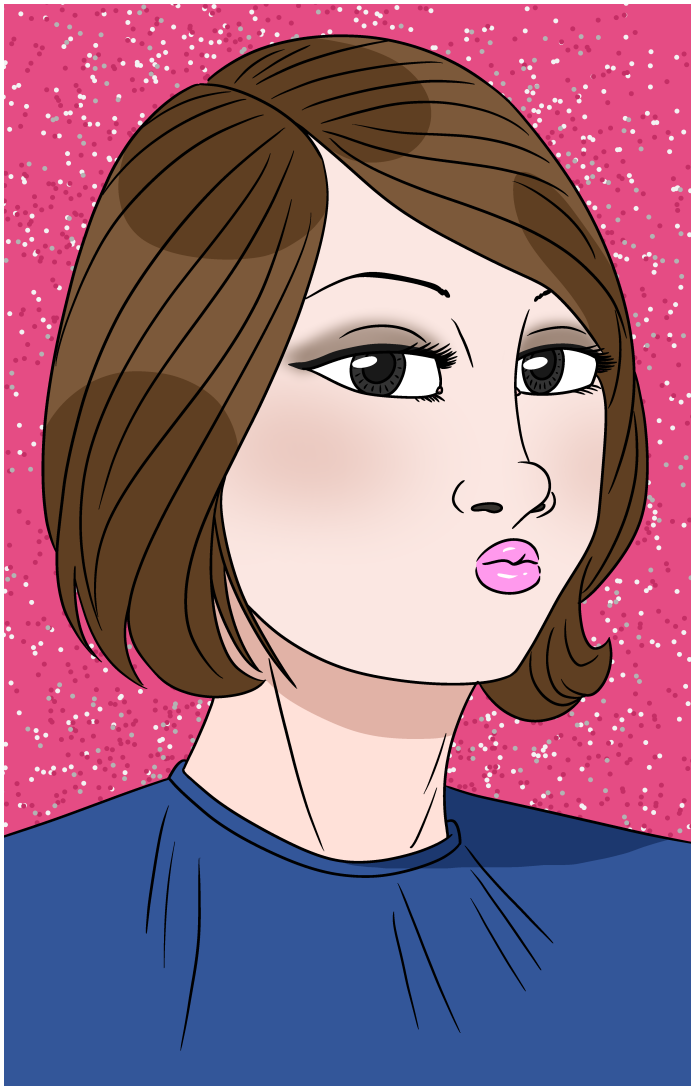
Mark froze like a glass of water in Antarctica.

"Come on Mar," Natsumi insisted, "Let me hear you say what you've learned...we had an unending desire..." she tried to start the phrase for him hoping to get him to continue it but Mark was still too embarrassed to speak.

"Come on Mar," she goaded him again, "Let me hear you say it... or it will be *you* up here in the chair right after Holly."

With the threat of being next in line to be a makeup model quickly sinking into his head, Mark felt his mouth move to auto pilot as the phrase pushed its way out of his head, "an unending desire to provide our client with a most pleasing experience," he spat in a slurred garbled mess of a phrase.

"Try it again hun," the manager smiled, "You're almost there."



Mark calmed himself, closing his eyes, then repeated the phrase, "We strive with an unending desire to provide for our clients a most pleasing experience, and to find beauty in everything we do." He exhaled nervously as he spoke.

"Excellent!" Natsumi exclaimed, "You're well on your way!"

For the first time since Natsumi became store manager, Mark actually felt pleased with his accomplishment, and even slightly at ease with the

changes that the store had undergone.

At least, that was, until she began to apply foundation to his friend's face. Concealer would follow, with a loose powder to finish, blended together to give his face a flawless, blemish free matte finish. Eyebrow pencil followed next, drawing his already thinned brows into high graceful arches. After that, his eyes were lined with thick black liner, followed by the careful application of false eyelashes and healthy coating of coal-black mascara. Glossy pink lip color was applied to his thin lips next, making them appear slightly larger, yet graceful and pretty.

Mark stopped and shook his head. He had just thought of his friend's lips as 'pretty.' Yet there were no other words to describe them.

Dammit, he thought to himself, *what's getting into me?*

Natsumi finished the demonstration by replacing Ollie's stud earrings with large hoops, then styled his already longish hair into a very modern style, with long sweeping bangs that covered one of his eyes entirely. When finished, the entire group, including Mark, gasped and tittered at the result.

"Amazing, isn't she?" Natsumi summed up the feelings of the collective group.

Mark nodded in silent agreement, *yes... she is*.



When Mark showed up for his class at the Gym, it was a different experience than he had gotten used to. As he came out of the changing room dressed in his new leotard, he was no longer as anonymous as he used to be.

Although Ollie had not shown up for class, Mark was far from alone. In a routine he had begrudgingly gotten used to, he had been assigned yet another new gym outfit. This one was blue with white stripes up the side, and had the "HFX" logo prominently displayed across his chest and up one thigh. Once he picked a spot to do his exercises, the women who took the class with him couldn't help but be intrigued.

"Did you get that at HFX?" One of them curiously inquired about Mark's new outfit.

"Well, I work at HFX," he said.

"Is that so?" Was the response. "Really!" said another. "How interesting," said someone else. All of a sudden, he was the most popular person in the class. He fielded questions about when new fashions were due in, questions from people

who wanted to know when the next sale was, and everyone seemed to want to know about Team All-Star.

"My boyfriend is always asking to see them," a young woman asked Mark. "He buys me anything they have in the show."

"Do they sell their outfits at the store?" Was another question. "They're so cute."

"I'm so jealous. That's why I take this class," was another comment. "My husband is always finding excuses to drop by your store and ogle those girls."

Before he knew it, Mark was no longer at the back of the class, but up front. He was everyone's best friend, now. Whenever there was a break, he was swarmed with attention, and although he was sure he was just being flattered to get a discount, they all complimented Mark on his thinner body. It was nice to hear some recognition of his hard work.

It wasn't until the end of class that he began to realize that the aerobic routine they were all doing was, in fact, to the same music that the All Stars performed to.



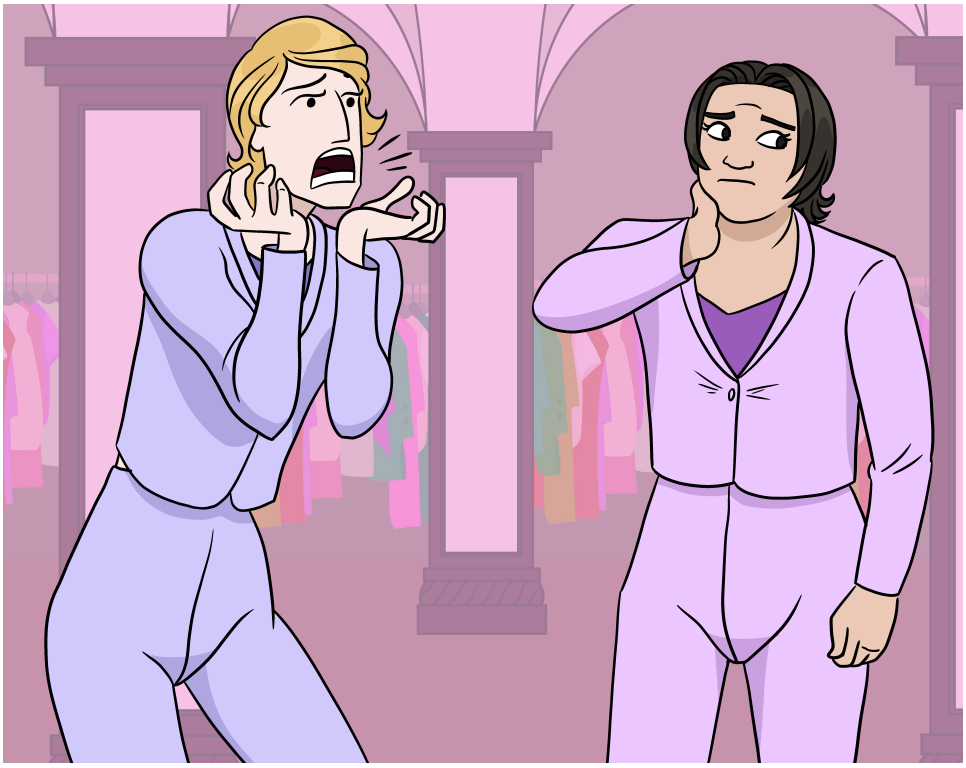
To say that the staff at Rightworth's were on a trajectory towards femininity would be an understatement. Yet none of them, save for Mark, seemed to be fully aware of the changes they had already experienced and were in process of experiencing.

This made Mark crazy.

"How can you *not* see what is going on?" he would complain to anyone that would listen.

True, since he began his remedial training to *officially* complete module four, he found it was getting harder and harder to speak out against the training program and the changes that Natsumi and her HFX corporate masters were making to the one-time shrine of fine men's clothing. In fact at times, as he had experienced during Ollie's public makeover, he found it was much easier to just agree and go along with things. It was far less work to simply accept the messaging he was being given.

However, as much as he would find himself settling into HFX's new dogma and mindset, it didn't take long for the little voice in the back of his head to start screaming, *this is wrong!* On occasion, that little voice would actually come right out. As was the case when he was speaking with one of the other



salesmen at the store, a former IT specialist who — like Mark — had taken a job at Rightworth's 'temporarily' while he looked for another job.

Three years later, Hank was still selling menswear — or at least he *had* been selling menswear up until a few days ago. Now, dressed in snug fitting capri pants, with a slim-fitting button-down shirt and a well-tailored short sleeve blazer, he was listening to Mark rant about the changes that had taken place at the store since HFX had bought them out.

"How could you *not* see what is going on?" Mark exclaimed again as he drew his venting session to a close.

Hank wasn't sure how to react. He had known Mark for as long as they had worked here, and respected his thoughts. He had always thought of him as a friend, given their shared history outside of the retail world — him in high-end corporate IT, Mark in high-end finance. He reluctantly had to admit that some of what Mark was saying *made sense*, but Hank wasn't sure he *wanted* to agree. He knew the importance of compliance with HFX training, and was worried that he could be reprimanded if he spoke against it like Mark was.

"I guess..." was the only response that Hank could muster, looking clearly uncomfortable as he stood there listening to Mark spouting off.

"You *guess?*" Mark decried. "You *guess?* Hank, look around you. Look at yourself! Hell, look at me." He motioned at their much-changed attire. "We used to come to work in suits and ties. More importantly we used to *sell* suits and ties, remember? Now look at us." He motioned at their outfits a second time. "What do we even *call* this?"

"Well," Hank began, instinctively drawing on his HFX training to answer the question, "These pants are called man-pris." He motioned at the slim fitting capri pants that he and the other staff were constantly wearing, called 'manpris' because they were capris for a man... apparently. "And these are our posture-perfect comfort boots." He smiled and pointed at his wedge heeled shoes. He was proud that he knew his stuff. He had been trained thoroughly to respond to *any* client inquiry.

Only his client wasn't a 'fashion-forward' young male, as the training referred to their new clientele as, and Mark certainly wasn't part of their 'core demographic' — teen and pre-adult females. No, Mark, as a man, was considered by qualified HFX staff as a 'hard sell.'

"Man-pris?" Mark retorted, "Do you even *hear* yourself?"

"Well sure Mar," Hank replied, again on instinct. "They're similar to the capris that our core-demo wear, only custom tailored for a man. Get it? Man-pri?" Hank smiled again, proud of his thorough knowledge of the HFX sales training modules.

Mark sunk his head in defeat. He wasn't getting through to his friend. Was it too late?

"It doesn't really matter now anyway Mar," he continued, "Natsumi wants all sales staff to move on to phase five clothing styles only. So we really shouldn't even be wearing these styles any more, right?"

Mark just shook his head, knowing this was a lost cause. "Of course not," he said sarcastically, "she probably wants us in skirts next." He rolled his eyes.

Hank just laughed. "Don't be ridiculous Mar," he scoffed.

Mark felt some small degree of comfort in Hank's response. Clearly his co-worker was much further engaged in the corporate training module than he was. So to hear him scoff at such an idea — the idea of a skirted male sales staff — was somewhat of a relief.

"Well that's good news," he responded in a much more even and relaxed tone, "you had me worried there for a second."

Hank chuckled and smiled. "Nothing to worry about Mar," he said with a continued confident tone as he turned to walk away, "we're weeks away from skirts — just shorts, hot pants and skorts from now on."

Mark's jaw fell open as he watched his colleague saunter away, taking slow careful steps in his wedge-heeled shoes that forced his rump to roll slightly from side to side.

"Oh my god," he muttered, "I've got to get out of here."

He turned to go towards the exit, but saw a stern-looking Natsumi standing nearby, glaring at him. So instead he forced a fake smile and headed in the opposite direction to avoid Natsumi's disapproving eye.

Which, as it turned out, would be something he'd have to do for the rest of the week.



Every single day since Natsumi had made over Ollie, he had worn his new hair and makeup exactly as she had done it.

In the mornings, Mark observed his roommate standing before his mirror, carefully styling, curling, dusting and painting, until his youthful boyish face gave way to an equally youthful — but girlish — equivalent. It caused significant tension between them, as Mark was very noticeably unhappy with what he was seeing, and Ollie very noticeably confused as to why.

As far as Ollie was concerned, everything at HFX Rightworth's was wonderful. He would chirp while he worked, extolling the virtues of the HFX way. Everything was about total customer servitude and his total commitment to HFX. Mark found him practically insufferable.

What was even worse, was that he had been hanging around Akari, Riku and Yuma, otherwise known as Team All-Star, and had struck up a genuine friendship with them. That just made Mark's job all the more miserable, watching his former protege succeeding where Mark had failed.

Ollie would finish applying his makeup, look into the mirror and recite his unending desire to provide his clients a most pleasing experience. Then he would slip into his wedges and with Mark begrudgingly in tow, head off to catch the bus.

Mark had grown used to the strange looks he got while taking public transit, though having a naturally flirtatious Ollie sitting next to him seemed to take the focus away from his own peculiar appearance. People commented on the 'nice lesbian couple' and in fact, they had both been asked on the occasional date.

Mark just clenched his teeth as Ollie thanked them for their interest, but notified them that he was already seeing someone. Of course, the someone to

which he was referring was Mark's old nemesis, Greg. The two of them had shared coffee more than once and were now planning to meet at a club for drinks. It dawned on Mark then and there, that Ollie was a lost cause.

If he was going to convince anyone that a nefarious plan was afoot, it would need to be Hank. Hank still had doubts about the training, Mark could feel it. Hank still listened to Mark rant without sliding into his training-induced fashion-speak about the store's changing demographics and the importance of manpris.

Okay — except for that last time.

On the bus ride into work that morning, Mark resolved that he would focus his efforts on Hank before it was too late.

Unfortunately for Mark, it already was.

As they entered the store, Mark could see Hank already seated at the salon, in the same chair he had seen Ollie in a week before, with Natsumi standing proudly beside him.

"Oh good," Natsumi exclaimed as Ollie and Mark approached, "Now that Mar and Holly are here, we can get started on Hank."

Mark felt a lump in his throat. It seemed almost like Natsumi was looking directly at him as she explained how she had asked Hank to be the next volunteer to move up in phase five. Hank nodded sheepishly, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone — especially Mark.

Jesus, Mark cussed to himself, *it's like she could read my mind. What the hell am I going to do now?*

For the time being, all he could do was nothing. Nothing but watch as his other friend — the one who had briefly thought could help stop this insanity — as he had his eyes lined and his brows plucked.

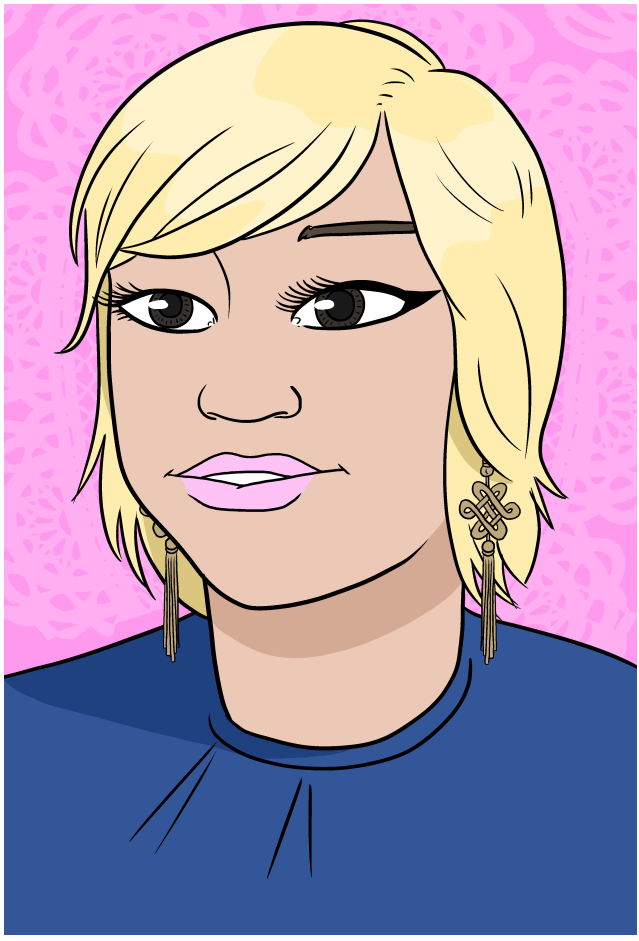
"That's finding beauty for the customer," Natsumi said to Hank.

"She's so right," Ollie said, enchanted.

Natsumi began gluing long feathery black lashes into place for Hank, blending them together with his real lashes with a lash curler and thick black mascara.

The black eyeliner Natsumi had used was drawn out at the edges, giving Hank an almond shaped eye that subtly changed the appearance of his ethnicity from scandinavian to asian.

Pale foundations and powders gave his face a matte finish that highlighted the dusting of blush on his cheeks and hint of eyeshadow on his lids and creases. Natsumi then carefully styled his shortish hair into a feminine look with sweeping bangs — not too dissimilar to the look that Ollie now sported.



Dangling asian-inspired earrings replaced his former studs, as Natsumi put the finishing touches of a pale pink lipstick onto his now-pretty mouth. In thirty short minutes, Natsumi had successfully erased Hank and replaced him with someone else.

Someone girly.

"Everyone," Natsumi announced as she dismissed Hank from his chair, "I'd like you to meet Hannah."

Mark corrected himself: *Hank is gone, Hannah is here.*

"Dammit!" he muttered as he saw Hank, still in his man-pris and blazer, eyeing up an outfit Natsumi had handed him off the rack, with a new pair of spike-heeled shoes.

"So when can we do you?" Mark heard Natsumi's voice beside him. "The system says you've been taking the remedial exercises over and over again Mar," she continued, as Mark turned to see her standing directly in front of him. "I think a makeover would certainly help you to get over that wall you seem to be encountering."

"Oh, what? Me?" Mark stammered, "I just want to keep redoing it until I have it perfect Ma'am," he lied. "You know, it's that total commitment to HFX's unending desire to provide our clients a most pleasing experience and stuff," he threw in to sound more convincing.

"And *stuff?*" Natsumi questioned.

"Yeah," Mark replied, "Total customer servitude. You know, that."

Natsumi scowled at him, looking like she was about to make a comment, when Ollie's chipper voice interrupted. "Mar! We've got to get to the gym! We're going to be late!"

Mark had never been happier to hear his former protege's voice, even though he thought it was weird to have to go to the gym after only thirty minutes at work. However, in this instance, he didn't question it.

At the gym, Mark had long-since abandoned any hope of maintaining his male pride, having given in to Jamie and Ollie's pressure and adopted the new leotard-style workout wear. The popularity amongst the ladies of the class, boldly proclaiming his employment at HFX, was one of the few things in his life that made Mark feel good about himself, and it was comforting to have the large white HFX logo on the chest of his leotard. In fact, he was rather pleased at how it was fitting as of late. It seemed that his body was changing — and for the better.

"Curvy is better, ladies!" Jamie, the personal trainer would proclaim to their classes. Not having anything else to go on, Mark would shrug and agree. He could only compare himself to the other members of the class, who were all female, and he wasn't conscious that he found himself now sculpting his body to be slender and, as Jamie kept repeating, curvier.

Mark felt like he could barely even concentrate on his workout, given how many of the girls wanted to talk shop with him. They wanted to know when the next fashion trends were coming, what to wear for the season, and of course, when the sales were coming. He was more than happy to talk about these things, as he had been training hard, and liked to feel knowledgeable and helpful. At the same time, he wished he could get through one workout without having to deal with his job.

His workout sessions were the only time that he wasn't thinking about the madness that was taking place at work. Yoga especially was his most peaceful and thusly most sought after time.

What followed on this day, however, was far from peaceful.

"Hey Mallone!" he heard Greg Morrison exclaim, "When are you gonna come for coffee with Holly and me?"

Holly and I, Holly and I, Mark corrected his former school-chum's poor grammar in his head. It had always been a pet peeve of his. He often lamented how a neanderthal like Greg could have ended up as the head of his family's finance empire with his cave-man speak, while Mark was left to wallow and toil in the depths of retail hell.

"I've asked him like, a hundred times," Ollie piped up in Mark's defense, "He's so skittish when it comes to going out. I think you scare him."

The two of them laughed then disappeared to the change room together, leaving Mark to stew in his own torment.



Mark continued to struggle his way through the remedial training as the days bore on. It didn't help that he was feeling absolutely miserable. The whole store was counting on him, and he was failing. His roommate was now dating his rival, and had to hear him gush about Greg endlessly. On top of all that, he was sure he was about to be fired.

He was moping his way around the back room when Riku, from Team All Star took note of his sour face. "Mar sad?" She asked him.

"I'm okay," Mark replied, not wanting to look bad in front of the top salespeople in the HFX corporation.

"Do not be sad, Mar!" Riku said, "You work for HFX!"

That did comfort him, but he wasn't sure for how long he'd keep his job, given how badly he was doing in the training. He tried to force a smile for Riku, but given her reaction, he realized he hadn't done a very good job.

"Yuma! Akari!" She said to the two other members of Team All Star. She motioned for them to come over. "Kigyō surōgan ōen!"

The quickly lined up, as if it was some kind of drill. "We are the heart of tomorrow!" They said in unison, pumping their arms in the air to punctuate what they were saying. "We make your dreams! We are passionate and obedient! We are corporation HFX!"

Mark couldn't help but smile in the face of such cuteness and compassion. The girls surrounded him and hugged him. "Thanks," he said.

"Mar feel better?" Riku asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"Let's do our best!" She said, before heading out the door with one more smile and a kick of her leg for Mark. "OK!"

He checked his schedule printed out on the wall, and saw he was due for another two hours of training. Resigned to his fate, he put on the headphones, dialed up the fourth training module's remedial lessons and sat down in the booth, ready to try again.

For nearly two hours, he fought with the testing, failing time and time again. As much as he consciously wanted to get the questions right, he could not bring himself to care about the subject matter. He didn't care what the best approaches were to selling panties. He didn't care about positioning the sales of a skirt to match a blouse. He didn't care about adding on high heels to a dress sale. Deep in his mind, even as he was wearing many of the same items he was selling, he was still closed to the idea of being feminine fashion expert.

However, just when he was about to give up, something strange happened on the computer. All of a sudden, a message came up congratulating him on passing. Seemingly through some act of god, he was passed forward to the fifth module. If he hadn't known better, he would have reasoned that Natsumi had simply grown weary of his lack of progress and moved him on in hopes he would somehow improve through immersion in the next level.

On the plus side, Mark was no longer the sole staff member at the bottom of the training pool who was still stuck on the fourth module that everyone else had long since moved on from.

On the downside however, Mark was now the sole staff member at the bottom of the training pool who was stuck at the beginning of the *fifth* module that nearly half the employees had since moved on from.

He emerged from the training booth to see his boss waiting for him.

"You did this?" He asked her.

Natsumi nodded. "I can't have you holding us back, Mar. We all work as a team, and the team has to move on."

"But I... I still don't know this stuff."

"Consider yourself my special project, Mar," Natsumi said. "From now on, I'm taking direct control of the situation, and I'll take responsibility for getting you trained and certified. I will make you the best salesperson in this store, no matter what I have to force you to do."

Mark swallowed hard. He didn't like the sound of that.

"Meanwhile, I need you on the floor," she continued. "And that means I need you in uniform." She took a large blue box off a counter and handed it to Mark. "Put it on."

"*Another* new uniform?" Mark asked, almost whining.

"Yes!" Natsumi barked. "Is there a problem with that?"

Understanding that anything but a positive response would result in him kicked out onto the pavement, he shook his head.



"Good," the tall woman replied. "Now let's get moving. I need you to cover people's breaks."

"The girls told you, didn't they?" Mark asked. "Team All-Star."

"The girls are concerned for you, Mar. They like you. They want you to do well. Now, get moving."

Mark unpacked the boxes, to find that he was now the owner of a tiny blue blazer with the HFX logo running up the left sleeve. With it came a white blouse and a matching blue floppy bow tie. He was wondering where the pants were when he realized there were none to be found. He now had to wear shorts to work. Tiny, blue, sequined shorts with the "HFX" logo on the side.

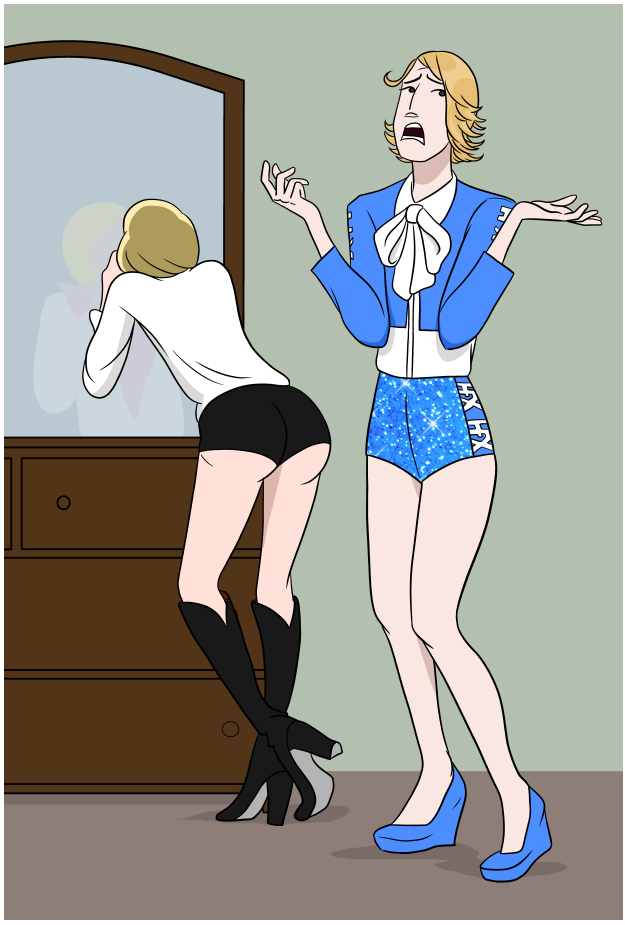
Man-pris, or whatever he was once told they were called, were no longer an option. Short shorts, and whatever lay beyond the beachhead of the next module, were to be the new norm.

And Mark hated it.

He was complaining loudly to his roommate — Ollie — some days later, as he emerged from his bedroom in the new HFX-mandated bottoms.

"I look ridiculous!" he whined aloud as he looked for Ollie's response. But to Mark's chigrin, Ollie was no one to be found — until he entered into the effeminated boy's bedroom. There, he spotted his former protege-turned supervisor with his back turned, fussing with something in the mirror at the far side

of the room. He was dressed, much as he had been for weeks now, in typical HFX hotpant shorts, and a flowing dressy top. The only thing different that Mark could see were the thin tights and backs of knee high boots his friend appeared to be wearing.



He glanced quickly around the room, noting the pinkish feminine decor and abundance of HFX clothing. It was hard to fathom that months ago, this would have been the room of a pretty macho guy.

Now Ollie was much less macho, and much more pretty.

Mark strode out of Ollie's room, feeling frustrated. He wanted to drop himself down in front of the TV and just forget about his troubles. He was about to do just that when the TV program ended and to show the HFX logo. "HFX," said a female voice-over. "The heart of tomorrow."

That gave way to a romance drama, a man holding a crying woman. They were both Japanese, and as they spoke, they spoke in Japanese. Mark abruptly paused, unable to understand why it was on. Then he realized something. This wasn't Ollie's TV, as he remembered it.

"What happened to the TV?" Mark shouted from the living room.

"Oh, they installed a new one! For free!" Ollie yelled back. "Isn't it great! The screen is so much better!"

"Who installed it?" Mark asked.

"HFX, of course!" Ollie replied. "They were practically giving them away."

"Why is it in Japanese?"

"Well, it only gets HFX corporate channels," Ollie explained. "But it's even better than cable, and I don't have to pay for it."

"But it's in Japanese!"

"So?"

Mark grumbled as he flipped through the 4 available channels, finding an all-corporate advertising channel, a business channel, and two romance drama channels. They were all in Japanese. Having no English programs wasn't worth it, even if it was free — but it wasn't his apartment.

"HFX," the woman on the TV said, "We make your dreams." Only the slogans seemed to be in a language he could understand. It was worthless.

Mark shook his head as he cleared his throat, eager to continue complaining about his new attire.

"There's no way I can go to work like this Ollie," he lamented loudly, as he returned to Ollie's bedroom.

Ollie didn't turn. He continued to work at whatever it was that he was deeply invested in at his dresser mirror, "Don't be such a grumpy gus Mar," he replied, "You'll be fine."

"I look like a freak," Mark retorted, "How do they expect me to ride the bus dressed like this. I'll get jumped."

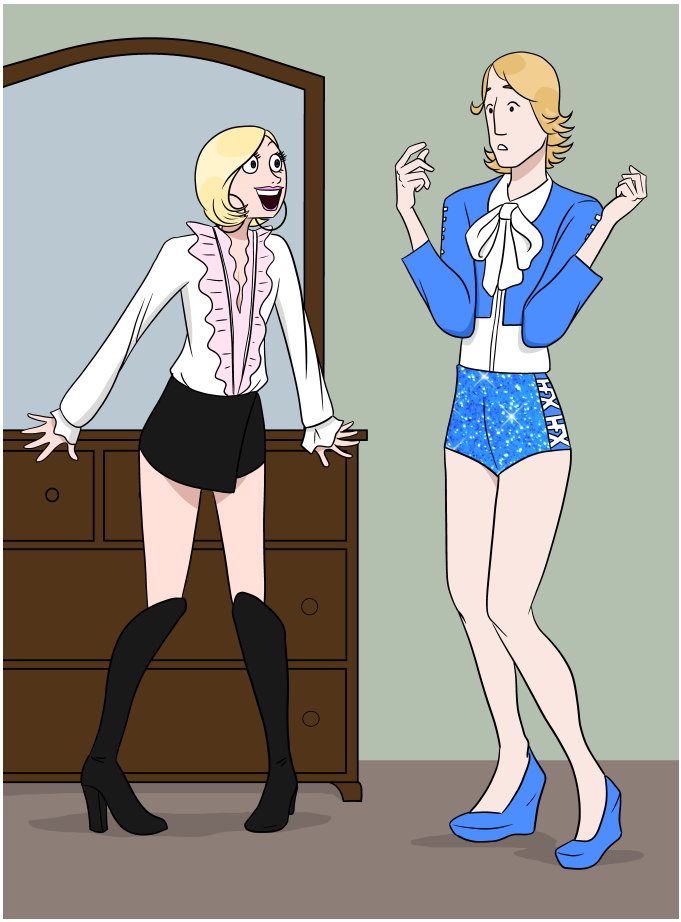
"Now you're just being a drama queen," Ollie chuckled, still not looking at his roommate. "The rest of us have been dressing like that for weeks — and nobody cared. Not one problem."

"Yeah but..." Mark paused before finishing the sentence. He wanted to shout that *it wasn't right* that he was dressed in girly shorts and sissy-shoes. Conversely, he lamented for a moment that his friend had been able to adapt to the new HFX mentality much more readily than he had been able to. But he knew he couldn't dare make such an announcement aloud — that would only somehow substantiate the reality that he was so intent on resisting.

"But I just don't know what to do Oll," Mark sighed, feeling slightly deflated by his honest admission, "You just seem to be doing so well. I'm a little envious" he sighed.

Ollie spun around, "You really mean it?" he asked, "I mean, *you* are envious of *me?*" Ollie seemed to be so excited by Mark's honest expression that he missed the change of Mark's face and body language changing from a look of depression to one of shock as he glanced at the front of his friend. The shorts Ollie had been wearing were actually a *skort* — short-shorts with a flap across the

front, creating the illusion that they were actually a very short miniskirt! In addition, Ollie's dress shirt was actually a lace-trimmed blouse.



Large hoop earrings hung from each ear, and his hair and makeup had been carefully styled and applied in an elegant and very feminine manner.

In short, Mark's friend looked like a totally hot babe!

"Wh...what..." was all that Mark could muster to say as his mind raced.

Ollie looked concerned, "Are you okay Mar? You're acting a little weird."

Mark pointed at his outfit with a gasp, "Ollie, you're wearing a skirt. You're dressed like a g..."

"Oh don't be so silly Mar, it's a *skort*, not a skirt" Ollie interrupted him with a distinct scoff, "How'd you ever get through level five without knowing the difference between a skort and a skirt?"

Ollie paused for a moment as Mark simply stood and stared, dumbfounded.

"Anyhow," he eventually continued, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had overtaken them, "What did you expect me to wear on a date?"

"A date?" Mark gasped again, "You're going on a *date?*"

Ollie looked a little insulted, "Uh, yeah," he replied with a hint of indignance, "With Greg Morrison, from the gym? You remember him — you guys went to school together."

Oh I don't have to remember! Mark thought to himself. He didn't need to recall Greg the spoiled, entitled rich kid rubbing his wealth and influence in everyone's face. He didn't need to dig deep to bring back the memories of Greg using his power and influence to get the marks that everyone *else* had to actually earn. He barely had to ponder Greg instantly getting a job at his Family's wealth-management firm upon graduation, and taking half of Mark's class — the majority of his friends — with him.

Most importantly, he needed no time to bring back the fact that Greg did *not* offer him a job, and in fact made it his mission to blacklist Mark from ever getting a job in the financial sector again. All because Mark had scored higher on the Dean's Honor Roll — through legitimate effort. Greg had bribed and bought his way to his barely-passing grade instead of actually working for it. He need not remember how Greg had essentially ruined Mark's life and forced him to work in retail — all because *Mark* had worked harder than him, and made him look bad.

So now, Greg was going to 'date' his former protege-turned-supervisor and roommate, who was himself turning into a gigantic sissy. He couldn't believe this was actually happening.

Mark continued to stand with his jaw agape — trying to remain as stoic as possible.

"Are you okay Mar?" Ollie finally asked.

Mark sighed, "No" he responded, "I'm really not." With that, he turned and returned to his room. Mark threw himself on the bed, pulling the pillow up over his head. As Ollie passed by to collect his purse before he left, he sighed as the soft sounds of Mark's muffled sobbing filled the apartment.



Over the coming days, Ollie's dates with Greg began to grow in numbers — sometimes they would get together two or even three times a day. They would meet for lunch, meet for coffee, meet for dinner, meet for drinks. It seemed that the two were becoming quite the item.

Mark couldn't wrap his head around it, though he no longer sobbed over it.

Not only had Mark never thought that Greg was the kind of guy who liked to date other (albeit feminine) guys, he had never figured that Ollie would *be* that feminine guy.

In fact, Ollie was growing so feminine that it was hard to think of 'him' in masculine terms.

At work, the former Oliver was now spelling his name with an 'H' at the front. 'Holly' as he preferred to be called, had pushed through the company's sixth module and was now midway through the seventh. Pants and shorts had long-since given way to skorts and with the newest product line having been unveiled in the store recently, he had even been seen in a miniskirt — the exact same rhinestone encrusted miniskirt that Mark had insisted that the store would never sell.

Since the remainder of the men's formal wear section had been removed, and 'Rightworth's' had been taken off the sign, Mark's other premonitions had already come true. HFX had completely infected the once-proud high-class retailer and turned it into a trendy glitter-bomb of disposable fashion items.

But the change had done what was intended. It had made the store relevant again, and more importantly — profitable.

On any given day, HFX was a veritable ocean of trendy young people, searching for the latest trends and clamouring over the newest arrivals. Men flocked to see Team All-Star perform and rushed to buy whatever they were selling. Mark had seemed to finally come to terms with being Ollie's helper on most days, finding items in the stockroom for him and other salespeople and cashing them out on the POS terminal, which he was now quite well versed in using.

He had convinced himself that it was far easier to let the other former salesmen interact with the bubblegum-chewing fashionistas that were now flocking to the store, instead of him. For Mark, it was better to be in the background instead of the forefront — an idea that was a *drastic* departure from his previous strategies. He reasoned that he still hadn't fully wrapped his head around the idea of being an employee of the kind store that Rightworths had become.

An employee of HFX.

While his low profile was intended to keep him 'under the radar', Mark was still under the watchful eye of Natsumi. He had grown used to being randomly quizzed by Natsumi, who always seemed to be nearby, lurking a few steps away. Mark was starting to wonder if she was building a case to let him go, as their relationship had never been a strong one.

With that in mind, Mark resolved to make the best of his job, while he still had it.

On this particular day, Mark had stayed late at the store to make another attempt at plowing through the training module. It was more 'for show' than anything, as he was paying about as much attention to the program as he had been in previous attempts — which was very little.

About mid-way through the module, Mark heard a commotion coming from the front of the store. Curious as to what the fuss was all about, he made his way there, where he saw a grouping of the store's staff mulling around chatting excitedly.

"What happened?" he asked Darcy, one of the other staff members.

"Hannah's leaving us," Darcy replied with a soft voice. He had developed a lisp in the last few months that made him sound like a pre-teen.

"Who the hell is Hannah?"

Darcy just gave him a blank stare, not understanding the question. It took Mark a moment to recall that Hank had fully become Hannah a mere few days earlier. "Oh right, *Hannah*." He rolled his eyes. "So what's happening to him?" he asked, "I mean *her,*" he corrected.

"Oh, she's been recruited by Morrison Financial's IT department," the former salesman-turned-transexual replied.

Mark growled to himself at the mention of the Morrison name.

Goddamn that Greg Morrison. Not only had he beaten and blacklisted Mark in college, he was now 'dating' Mark's protege turned supervisor turned girly-boy. And now to make matters worse — he was hiring away one of Mark's few 'friends' from the store where he had been sentenced to toil. It was like Greg was determined to make Mark's life a living hell — and worse — he was succeeding.

Mark felt anger welling up inside of him as he looked over at Hank, whose appearance was decidedly different since the last time they had talked. Dressed in a short minidress with thigh high stockings and heels, Hank blushed when Mark's angry gaze fell on him, as if he was embarrassed by his new look — or at least embarrassed by Mark's reaction to it.

"Hank...?" Mark began, but before he could continue Natsumi stepped in.

"Now Mark," she began, "Unless you have supportive words for Hannah in her new role, I suggest that you hold onto it for a later date." The entire group stopped and went silent as their eyes turned from Natsumi to Mark, who was now feeling the heat of being singled out by his supervisor.

"It's just that..." he began, then paused when he realized he was about to make it worse by singling out the fact that Hank was finally getting the job he deserved, but had only done it by turning himself into a girl.

"It's just that..." he repeated again, "I had no idea he was leaving us." He did his best to sound thoughtful. "I don't know what I'm going to do without you

around... Hannah." He threw Hank's newly feminized name in at the end as an added touch.

The group erupted into a cheer, as Mark wiped his brow. He realized he was going to have to play along if he didn't want to be fired, even though he knew he shouldn't.

But what choice did he have?



In the days that followed Hank's departure, Mark pushed through the fifth training module with uncharacteristic determination. Partly because he was trying to distract himself from the craziness that he was witnessing around him, and partly because he was feeling more and more compelled to finish the training. Mark was feeling completely torn — he hated the store and its training and principles, but felt an increasing desire to try and make it work. If he could deflect Natsumi's attention from him, maybe he could figure out what the heck was going on here. So he decided to do his best to comply with everything he was being trained and told.

At least for now.

He had resentfully worn the new uniform, complete with short-shorts every day, the same that the others had already embraced long ago as part of his progression to module 5. But even though he was towing the corporate line, he was far from happy about it.

These two diametrically opposed positions that he was feeling were causing the young man to act increasingly angry and impatient. Natsumi even had to interject on one occasion when she found Mark yelling at his teenaged client for not having any fashion sense.

"Mark!" he trendy store manager exclaimed after escorting him off the sales floor, "What on earth has gotten into you?"

Mark's eyes grew wide with anger. He had kept his mouth shut for far too long on this. He wasn't able to hold back any longer.

"Me?" he retorted, "What's gotten into me? I'm the only sane one left around here!"

Natsumi recoiled with a confused look on her face.

"Oh don't play coy with me," Mark continued on his tirade. "You know all about what's going on around here. In fact, I'd bet that you're at the center of

it. In fact, now that I think about it, this all started when you arrived! It's been *you* that's been doing all of this the *whole* time."

Natsumi continued to look confused by Mark's outburst. "What are you even talking about Mark? Are you feeling okay?"

"The changes! All the changes that you've made," Mark ranted, "To the store, to our staff..." his voice trailed off as he looked down at his short-panted self, with a forlorn expression, "to me." He sighed.

The store manager let him pause for a moment, then spoke softly. "Mark, I think you've been a little over worked lately. I've been watching your logs, and you've been putting a lot of extra time in." She placed her hand gently on his shoulder. "I think you need a little time off. Why don't you head to the gym for a workout — it'll help you to relax — okay?"

Mark intended to keep arguing. He was charged up and wasn't going to let Natsumi go unchecked for her grievances. There was something 'funny' going on at the store, some reason why everyone accepted all these bizarre changes in their lifestyle, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

However, the sight of Riley Rightworth, former owner of the finest men's clothier in the City sitting at the staff table gave him hope. Riley was one of the reasons he hadn't given up. It was his trust in Riley that had kept him from walking out the door on day one.

"Riley," he pleaded, as he approached him, "You have to agree with me. These changes are crazy! There's something going on here."

Riley had been mostly absent since Natsumi took over, making only occasional appearances at the store. Mark figured that the former owner must have a strong dislike for the changes that were taking place.

He was wearing a well tailored blazer and crisp business-like white button down shirt. The top buttons were left open, giving a glimpse of the former store-owners smooth chest bone, just how Riley had always looked.

"I don't know Mar," he said after a long pause, "I don't think it's as bad as you say it is. Like I've said before, Natsumi and HFX have *saved* this store, not ruined it." He shrugged his shoulders and looked to Natsumi for approval.

"But..." Mark tried to say, but was cut off.

"I am just honored that I am able to be employed by such a wonderful company," he added with a smile.

Natsumi smiled and nodded. "Very good Riley. Your training has come, perhaps, the furthest of any."

Riley blushed and nodded politely. "Thank you Ms Natsumi."



"Perhaps you might show Mark and I your compliance and acceptance of your training as you finish preparing for work?"

Riley nodded, turning to the purse on the table to his right. Without hesitation, and to Mark's horror, he began dusting his face with pale foundation, followed by thick eyeliner, heavy mascara, blended tones of dark gray, silver and white eyeshadow, with a bright purple lip gloss to finish. It was then that Mark noticed that Riley's slightly elongated fingernails had previously been painted a matching shade of purple.

Upon completion, Riley packed his purse, then stood up from his seat at the table, revealing a short purple-glitter encrusted miniskirt and white micromesh stockings below. He smiled and nodded to Natsumi and Mark, as he headed out to the sales floor in matching platform heels, themselves encrusted in the same purple glitter. "I will do my best, Ms. Natsumi," he said.

Mark felt faint.

"Ry?" he whimpered as he realized what he was seeing. "But, I thought...."

"Part of Riley's sale of Rightworths was a commitment to continue to work here for a full calendar year," Natsumi offered, "To ensure a smooth transformation." She smiled. "I mean, transition."

"That can't be right," Mark said.

"All that's left now is you Mark," she said, sensing his anger at seeing Riley fully transformed. She put her hand on his shoulder and smiled. "Now please, be a good employee and do as I ask".

Mark's head instantly felt dazed. He was having a hard time remembering what his issue had been. *Why am I so angry?* he wondered to himself. Then

with a sigh, his shoulders sank forward. "Okay," he said in a defeated tone. He was angry with himself for giving up so easily.

"Good." She smiled again. "Why don't you head over to the gym and work off all of this negative energy?" she instructed.

Mark nodded as he grabbed his stuff and headed to the gym. He wasn't sure why, but he knew he had to comply.

Mark made his way to the gym in a little bit of a daze, unable to reconcile his sense of reality with the situation he now found himself in. He slipped out of his wedges and shorts and into his stretch leotard, even as he tried to make any kind of sense of his world.

"Mar!" Came the call as he stepped out of the changing room. He looked and saw Akari, Riku and Yuma who were decked out in matching outfits to the one he was wearing. They were just coming out of the women's changing room and immediately surrounded him as they made their way to the workout area.

"I wish they have big gyms like this in Tokyo," Akari said.

"Our are so small!" Riku added.

"This our first time here. Maybe you show us what to do?" Yuma asked.

"Yes! Show us!" Akari asked as he leaned over his shoulder, smiling. They were always smiling.

They needed not worry, because as soon as they entered the large gymnasium area, they were immediately treated like rock stars. All the women knew who Team All-Star were, and were unable to control their excitement at seeing them.

"My husband will be so jealous!" one of the ladies said. "I want a selfie!" another said.

"You have to teach us the dance!" One lady demanded. "Yes!" "Teach us!" Yes, yes!" the rest of the class chimed in.

"Well," Jamie said, "I'm not standing in the way of my students. Would you mind?"

Team All-Star graciously agreed and stood in front of the class ready to show off what they could do. At the last second, Yuma grabbed Mark by the arm and pulled him alongside. "Help us!" she said.

By the applause and laughter in the group, Mark knew he was stuck and couldn't back out. One of the girls plugged their phone into the sound system and began to play the Team All-Star music.

At first, Mark was only faking it, just making random movements alongside the girls, but he soon realized he knew the dance moves. They were almost a copy of Jamie's regular routine. He found himself perfectly in sync with Team All-Star as they did an abbreviated version of their dance.

It was strange for Mark, as he expected to feel embarrassed being in front of so many people, but he enjoyed performing. He played with it, exaggerating his moves and mimicking the super-happy bouncy personalities of the Team All-Star girls. He was having a great time.

Mark's mood was much improved after his workout and the yoga session that followed. He even took time to chat with some of the girls from the class afterwards. Not in a flirtatious way, as he would have likely done months earlier, but in a friendly way that he couldn't explain. It felt more like talking to his sisters than to women. At least what he imagined talking to his sisters would feel like, if he had had any.

As the girls of Team All-Star trotted away, all smiles and giggles, waving him farewell, Mark saw something. Out of the corner of his eye, he had spotted Ollie at the back of the class. They hadn't spoken in a few days. Mark realized that they hadn't been on the best of terms with his roommate over the last week or so, and with his newfound good mood, thought it was as good a time as any to make amends. He started heading in Ollie's direction, but was sidetracked by the women in the class again. When he looked over, Ollie had left the room.

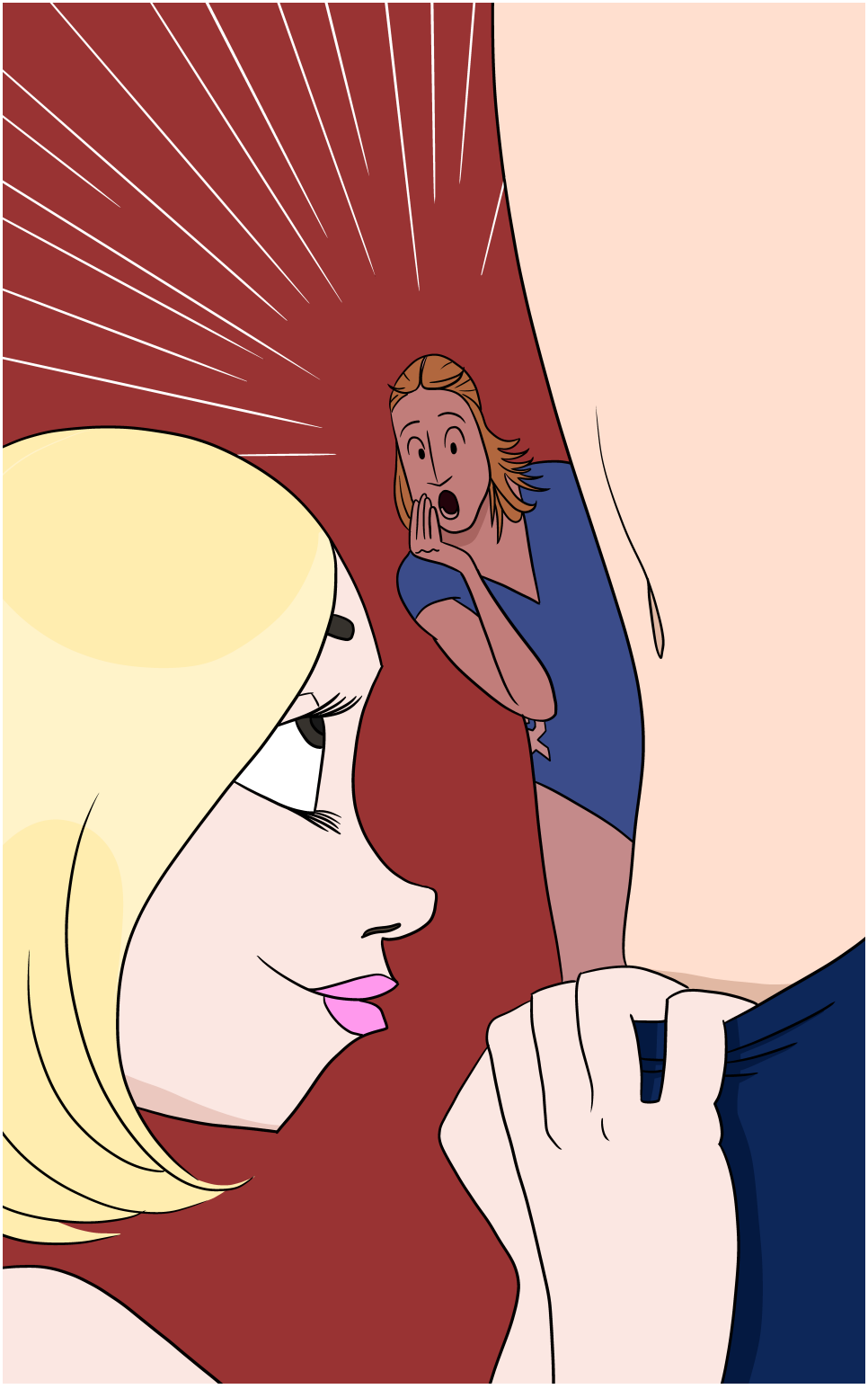
No matter. He was feeling very much in a zen kind of place. He decided that he wasn't going to get worked up over things — that is, until he walked into the change room a few moments later.

Mark's mouth fell open as he stumbled upon Greg Morrison, standing naked in front of him with a very wide smile on his face. One that seemed to grow wider the moment that Mark walked into the room.

Mark paused for a moment then looked to the floor before Greg to see the source of his giant smile. A figure, on their knees before Mark's nemesis, was bobbing and making garbled slurping noises. Mark couldn't be certain *who* it was, but *what* they were doing was entirely obvious.

"Hey Mark," Greg taunted, "Did you train her to do this?"

Mark looked confused. "What the hell are talking about Morrison?" he replied.



"Well Holly used to work for you, didn't she?" Greg replied, scoffing. "I thought maybe you might have taught her how to suck cock. I always figured you to be a bit of a cocksucker yourself Mark, am I right?" His eyes fluttered as the blonde figure at his feet worked their magic on his tool. He grunted and groaned.

"Fuck you Morrison," Mark hissed as he headed towards his locker.

"Oh don't be such a pussy Malloy," Greg retorted, "Maybe I should get her to suck you off when she's done with me."

The figure kept their fellatio momentum and did not break their work on Morrison's tool. "See," Greg continued to taunt, "She likes the idea too, Mark."

Mark rolled his eyes as he turned away, but not before taking a second glimpse of the figure giving Greg a blowjob. He stopped and turned back... staring at the pretty thing on their knees before his former school rival.

"Oh, look at this baby," Greg grunted, obviously nearing climax, "I think he's interested in my offer. He's checking you out."

Mark was, in fact, checking the figure out, and a look of horror covered his face as he realized just *who* it was that was giving Greg oral — it was Ollie!

"Ollie?" he exclaimed.

Greg was obviously aroused by all of this as he bucked his hips, sliding his man-pole deeper. "Oh my god..." he moaned. "You had no idea it was her, did you?" He grabbed the back of Ollie's head and pulled it closer.

"What the fuck are you doing Morrison?" Mark yelled as he lunged forward in anger. "Get off of him!"

Regardless of the fact that Greg was seconds from orgasming, he was still in control enough to see Mark's lunge coming, and in response, sidestepped to the left. Mark, not being the most coordinated person on this occasion, kept moving forward, tripping over a kneeling Ollie, and lunging face-first into the locker door on the other side. The very audible sound of cartilage snapping filled the room as the steel door collided with Mark's nose. A combination of the impact and the pain of the impact disorientated Mark, who lost his balance and fell backwards, hitting his head on a bench as he fell.

The last thing he remembered seeing before he blacked out, was the distorted expression on Greg Morrison's face as he reached climax. *I hate Greg Morrison*, he thought to himself before everything went dark.

Oliver was sitting before him, much as Mark remembered him. The somewhat gangly, slightly immature young man whom Mark had mentored at Rightworth's was chatting about something, but Mark wasn't sure what it was. All Mark was certain of was that Oliver's appearance had completely returned to what he had originally resembled; a stylish, yet gangly and slightly immature young man, in a blazer and button down shirt.

Mark blinked his eyes, not fully understanding what the young man was saying, but pretended to follow along anyway. He looked around the office, seeing his University degree hanging on the wall, along with pictures of Mark with... none other than ... Greg Morrison after a round of golf, sport fishing, skydiving, and lastly — kissing.

Mark gasped loudly, "What the fuck?!"

Ollie looked confused. "What's the matter Mark, you look like you just saw a ghost."

Mark pointed at the picture on the wall as if it were spewing toxic waste, "What the fuck is *that?*"

"That's your wedding picture with Greg," he replied with a very matter of fact tone.

"What?" Mark gasped.

"Do you want me to get you a coffee?" Ollie looked worried. "You're acting a little off," Ollie said, standing up and heading for the door. "I'll be right back."

Mark gasped loudly as he took a glimpse of his former protege again. From the waist up, he was wearing a stylish blazer and shirt, but the waist down, Ollie was dressed in a short, body hugging miniskirt that showed off his amazingly round and very feminine ass. His legs were encased in navy-blue nylons and were long and lean, ending in navy blue leather platform pumps with four-and-a-half inch stiletto heels.

"Holly!" He exclaimed, "What are you wearing?" He covered his mouth in surprise. *His name isn't Holly — its Holly, like Holiver,* he argued with himself. *Why can't I say Holly's name?* he gasped quietly.

Oliver turned and stared at him. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked again, looking concerned. Mark noticed that Ollie's nails were painted a bright glossy navy blue to match his stylish shoes, and much longer than a boy would ever wear.

But Holly isn't a boy, she's a girl, a voice inside his head said.

"This is the office dress code," Ollie continued, as he modeled briefly before continuing, "It's what we wear to work every day"

Mark gasped, "What?" He looked down at his lap and saw two long lean legs encased in nylons as well. "What the f..." He jumped out of his chair, landing perfectly on his own pair of four-and-a-half inch platform pumps, in the same blue tone as Holly's were. He instinctively tugged the hem of his miniskirt, then gasped aloud at having had that instinct.

"Mark?" Holly asked again, "Are you okay?"

Mark looked panicked, frantically looking around the room.

"Mark?" Holly continued, "Mark? Mark?"

Mark's vision blurred as he continued to hear his name called. "Mark? Mark?"

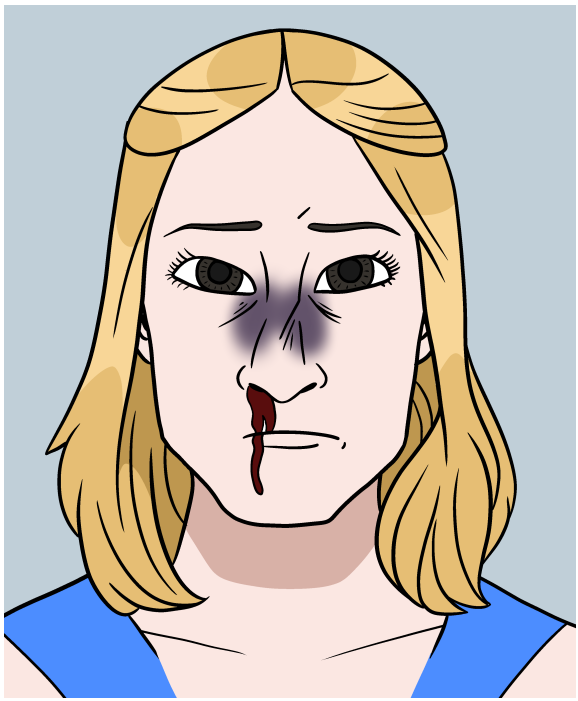
When his eyesight returned to normal, he realized that it wasn't Ollie, or Holly, that was speaking to him, but his store manager Natsumi — and he wasn't in an office anymore, but in a hospital room.

"Mark?" Natsumi continued, "Mark, can you hear me?"

He nodded. "Yeah, yes. I can." He suddenly felt pain flooding his senses from the front and back of his head. "Where... where am I?"

"You're at a private medical clinic, you had a fall at the gym," Natsumi replied. "It's a good thing that Holly was there or who knows what would have happened. You're very lucky."

Mark looked in the mirror and saw the reflection of his mangled and bloodied nose looking back at him. He recalled that something had happened, something horrific that he had seen at the gym. But he couldn't quite remember what.



"I fell?" He asked his boss.

"Into the locker, then backwards onto the floor. You've broken your nose in several places. Thankfully no other damage, though you'll need to rest up for a while." Nasumi smiled, reassuringly. "Like I said — you're lucky Holly was there, it could have been worse."

Mark scratched his head.

He was racking his brain to remember what had happened. He knew Holly had been there, and he knew they had chatted... or something. The only thing he could remember was something about oral sex and wearing a skirt, but he couldn't place either them beyond that.

"Hey-hey," Natsumi cautioned, "Take it easy. You've got a mild concussion. Try to avoid any heavy thinking for a while."

Mark looked at her funny, *what does she mean by that?*

She continued as the clinic's medical staff entered the room, "They're going to probably put you out soon anyway," she said.

One of the staff members went to the I.V. bag that was dripping fluids into Mark's arm. The patient did a double take as if to say 'where'd *that* come from?' as the staff member injected something into the drip line.

Mark looked back at Natsumi, "What's going on?" he asked.

"They're going to repair your nose now Mark," the store manager said with a smile. "Just relax. HFX has a very generous medical plan. You'll look as good as before in no time, maybe even *better.*"

Mark was about to say something, but then the sedative took hold, and instead, his world went black.

When he awoke hours later, he could feel bandages and swelling on his face, including his nose, and oddly enough — his chin. He moaned and turned his head to the left to look into the mirror. The reflection confirmed his bandaged status, which in turn caused Mark to sigh deeply.

He had dreamt about being in the office of Morrison Financial again, dressed in a short blue miniskirt and high platform heels, just like Holly was, only this time, his blazer was tailored to match his slimmer curvier physique, complete with budding B-cup breasts.

He shook the sleep out of his head, then looked down at his chest to confirm that it was still as flat and manly as it had always been... and to his relief, it was.

I must be on some pretty good pain meds, he told himself. After all, there was no other explanation as to why his dreams had taken such a bizarre turn. Dreaming about working at Morrison Financial was one thing, but wearing a skirt to work was *way* out there.

Wasn't it? he asked himself.

Mark would spend the next few days back at his shared apartment trying his best to recover. He had been lying in front of the HFX big screen for days, just to have some kind of company. Oliver, or 'Holly' as everyone now called him, seemed to be out all the time when he wasn't at work. He called it 'going out for a drink,' but Mark was quite certain there was more to it. After all, a boy didn't need to wear a cute skirt and heels to have a drink with another boy.

Especially with Greg Morrison.

The thought of Ollie and Greg 'having a drink' together made his blood boil. Mark couldn't quite single out the reason why, but he seemed to think that their strange relationship had something to do with his ending up in the hospital, though he couldn't recall anything in particular.

However, the doctor had warned him that getting worked up about things was counterproductive to a speedy recovery, so whenever he felt his blood-pressure rise, he would turn back to the TV. The shows seemed to have an odd calming effect on him, even if he didn't get the language. The women were always dressed so stylishly, he couldn't help but be fascinated. While it wasn't something that Mark himself could relate to, it was helping him to have a better appreciation for Ollie's emerging sense of style. Whereas the cute skirts and heels that he was wearing used to irk Mark something fierce, he was suddenly feeling embarrassed about how he made such a big fuss about it. It was just a style, just fashion. Styles changed so fast and fashion was so fleeting, why would he get all bent out of shape over what someone looked like? What a waste of time, he told himself. If anything, he should be complimenting Ollie and the other guys at work for how much time and effort they put into their looks, not tearing them down.

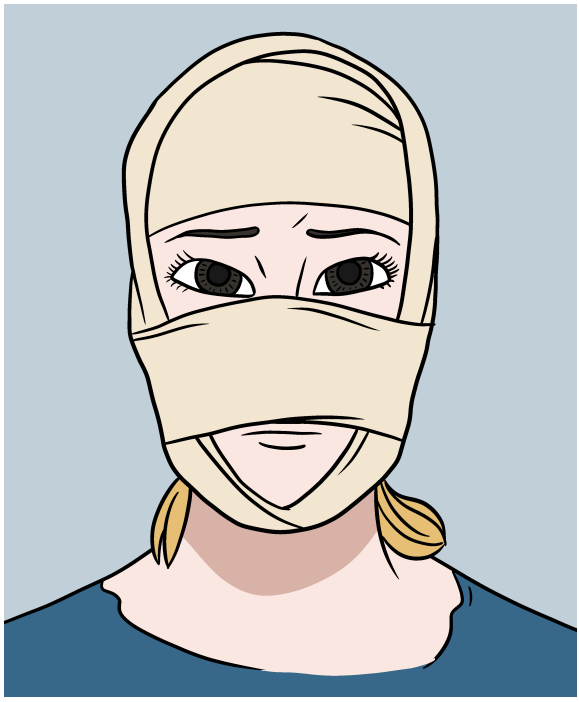
One afternoon, still severely bandaged, he wandered into the living room, to find his roommate painting his nails. It was odd for Ollie to be around during the day, so Mark looked quite surprised to see him.

"I can do yours, too," Ollie asked cheerfully.

Mark had just recently binge-watched the ten-part mini-series "Hāto no Dorobō," or "Thief of Hearts" — if he understood enough Japanese to get the title right. All the girls in the show had amazing fashion sense and were always dressed in the latest, trendiest styles. In addition, their hair and makeup were always perfect, and they looked so gosh-darned cute, he just wanted to hug them all. One thing he kept focusing on were their nails. They used so many different colors and styles, making their hands look so elegant and graceful. Was jealousy the right word for what he was feeling?

No, he just wanted to find the beauty for the customer, he reminded himself. Just like had been instructed. He must be beautiful for the customer. A beauti-

ful mind, a beautiful attitude, and beautiful in appearance.



"I guess so," he said with a sigh, shrugging as he sat on the chair opposite the former Oliver. "But go easy on me, I'm not sure what I like," he said, "so nothing too dramatic."

Ollie-turned-Holly smiled. "Of course not," he said, as he started to guide his former supervisor in the art of nail care.

Mark didn't realize just how dirty and unkempt he had let his nails get until he and Holly started working on cleaning and filing them into smooth short-ish tapers.

"These will look better once you grow them out a little," the feminized boy affirmed, "Unless you get impatient like me and get extensions." He held up his half-inch long tapered acrylic talons with a giggle.

Mark's face went white as he looked at the color of his roommate's fingernails.

They were blue, just like he had seen in his dream.

Seeing the panicked expression on Mark's face, Holly quickly lowered his hands. "...Or not. There's no rush, babe."

Mark looked down at his own clear polished nails with thin white colored tips. Surely it was just a coincidence, he tried to reassure himself.

"Are you okay?" Holly finally asked after several long uncomfortable moments passed.

"Yeah," Mark replied. "I just... It's just that..." he stammered, not knowing how to reply without sounding crazy, "I had a dream the other day, and you were in it...."

Nice going genius, Mark scolded himself, as he went from sounding crazy to sounding crazy *and* gay.

"Aww," Holly cooed, "Markie, that's so cute"

Mark rolled his eyes. "Yeah well," he continued, "You had that same nail polish and a matching outfit in the same color." He paused, unsure if he should tell more, or just keep silent. "I had the same nails," he told his friend, "And the same outfit."

Holly looked interested. "Well, I certainly hope it was cute. You still have some really drab looks, no offense."

Mark smiled. "I know, it's just..." His voice trailed off. "In my dream, I was wearing a skirt."

Holly just blinked his eyes. " And...?" he asked, not fully understanding Mark's dilemma.

Mark shook his head and went back to painting his nails. "You're right," he said dismissively, "I'm sure it's no big deal."

Convalescing at home was having an odd effect on Mark. He was getting restless. Since all of his energy had been wrapped up with what was happening at the store, not being there was causing him to feel useless.

To find something to do, he had sunk himself into whatever was on the HFX big screen, becoming addicted to dozens of the shows it played 24 hours a day. Most of them were sappy romances, which he couldn't bear to miss an episode of.

Mark could follow the shows surprisingly well, and even had worked out a few words and phrases of Japanese here and there. He didn't even mind that the commercial breaks were all for women, extolling HFX's various products for the female consumer. It gave him insight into his customers, he told himself.

In fact, his favorite show was called "Kondō Aikō-ka No O Mise" or "Shop of Mixed-Up Lovers." It was a drama-comedy about the employees of a huge Japanese store (an HFX, naturally) who were prone to falling in love with each other. Mark wasn't really into the story much, but seeing how they ran the store had him captivated.

The quality of service they provided was another level. They were unlike any salesperson he had seen in the US. They cared only about catering to the customer, but stood their distance, staying silent and only being involved when they were asked to help. They were humble, courteous and docile at all times. He wondered why he had never been taught to sell like this before. It made so much sense.

It also made him realize how lucky he was to have a job with HFX, and how HFX was going to such lengths to care for him, and train him. All the characters in the show were so well taken care of by their company, and they loved their company back. He became more and more confident that HFX would look after him, if only he could show them he was the kind of employee that they needed, and that he could embody the beauty they wanted from him.

"I must be beautiful," he would mumble to himself several times a day, almost unaware that he was doing it.



Some days later, Natsumi arrived at the apartment with an important-looking man at her side. Mark felt like he had met the man before, but was having trouble placing him.

"And how is Markie feeling today?" the man asked, pulling a chart from his briefcase.

"Mark," he corrected. "Who are you again?" he asked.

"This is the Doctor that performed the reconstructive surgery on your nose Mark," Natsumi said

"I don't normally make house calls Markie," the doctor said with a thin smile as he put the file back in his briefcase, "But Nat here persuaded me otherwise." He then produced a pair of surgical scissors, and began to remove the bandages around Mark's head.

Natsumi smiled as Mark's eyes darted to his supervisor, her expression quickly turning a look of embarrassment.

Soon, the bandages were fully removed, allowing the doctor and Natsumi the chance to stand back and observe the doctor's work. Mark judged by their expressions that that work had been quite good.

"She's going to be lovely Nat," the doctor grinned. Natsumi nodded in agreement. Mark narrowed his eyes as he processed what had just been said. *...She? ...Lovely?* he thought to himself. *What the heck is he talking about?*

Insight would come soon as Mark was turned towards the mirror in the room to look for himself. After a moment, his eyes grew wide with concern as he noted some very noticeable changes.

"My nose..." he whispered, "It's so....."



"Ah yes," the doctor interjected, "You'll notice that we had to make a few modifications there, Markie. You see, the damage incurred by your fall was far more extensive than we first thought. That said," the doctor paused for a moment, "I think we ended up with a spectacular result. Possibly even better than the original."

Mark brought his fingers up to touch his nose, it felt so slender and smooth. It would be impossible to tell that it had been a broken mangled mess only a few weeks ago. In its newly repaired form, it was much smaller and — for lack of a better word — *cuter* than before. He was absolutely outraged, yet at a complete loss of words over his altered appearance.

His long nose had always been the signature of his appearance — be it good or bad — and to now see how deeply changed he looked, it felt like a part of him, the most important part had been stolen from him. This was all a result of the incident in the locker room, one that he could barely remember.

"Morrison!" he suddenly grumbled aloud.

The Doctor looked confused, turning to Natsumi, who remained still, observing Mark's reaction.

Mark's face turned to a scowl. It was coming back to him. Detail by detail, his mind, shocked by his new appearance, had suddenly unlocked the memory of seeing his friend and roommate engaged in felatio with his arch-enemy in the gym's changing room. It all came flooding back.

Mark was very confused. He had been told many-a-time a very different account of what had happened, that he had slipped on the wet change-room floor; yet, this awkward, horrific memory was becoming more and more clear by the second. The only detail which escaped him was if it was Ollie or was it Holly sucking a man off. That didn't seem to matter as much as one thing he knew was certain — it was all caused by Greg Morrison.

Again, Morrison was the cause of yet another thing that had gone miserably wrong in Mark's life — his nose. His signature trait.

"Well if there's nothing more..." the doctor recognized the awkward pause that had developed and started to gather his things.

Natsumi smiled. "Thank you Doctor Angel," she said, "You have certainly exceeded our expectations."

The doctor smiled. "Any time. I hope we'll be doing business again soon," he said as nodded his appreciation to her, then headed for the door, leaving Natsumi and Mark alone.

It was Natsumi's turn to open her briefcase. She then motioned Mark to turn towards her.

"You blame Greg Morrison for this," Natsumi finally spoke, "Don't you?"

Mark nodded, then looked at her with an astonished expression. How had she known about Greg Morrison?

"How do you know about Morrison?" he asked, his outer monologue reciting the sentence spoken by his inner monologue.

"I know a great deal Mark," she smiled, "Let me tell you about the path that has led us here," she said as she retrieved a paper clip from her case. She walked over to the HFX big screen and made some kind of adjustment to it he couldn't see.

All of the sudden, the screen flickered and the HFX logo appeared on it, with some Japanese lettering. "Accepting Voice Command," was what it said, if Mark understood his Japanese. He had been getting much better with the language lately.

"Executive override," Natsumi said to the screen. "HFX asset Natsumi, Alpha 2104."

"Kenshō-zumi," the screen replied in a robotic female voice.

"Actually, Mark, rather than me tell you, just watch," Natsumi said. "Play final module video," she instructed the screen.

"Hampton Fashion Exposition began humbly in a small store in the Hamptons on Long Island, New York in 1988. They began with the simple philosophy of bringing the latest in fashion to customers before they even knew they wanted it."

"In 1997, Hampton Fashion Exposition was acquired by Global International Telecom, and was renamed Hampton Fashion Extreme. Hampton Fashion Extreme became a trendy store for rich and famous summertime residences in

the Hamptons, but it became so successful that it expanded to open a few more outlets in Manhattan and Soho. Eventually it added another store in Brooklyn, then a fourth in the Bronx. By then of course, it had started to move somewhat down market. Trading high end labels for more affordable options."

"Pay attention, now," Natsumi said pointing at the screen.

"And that," the narrator resumed, "Is when the name HFX came into existence. The original owners could see that they needed a massive investment to continue their expansion. It was then that the really *interesting* part of HFX's history came into being. HFX stands for Hayakowa Financial Exchange, owned by Mr. Ronoka Hayakowa and a group of powerful Japanese investors. Two years ago, Mr. Hayakowa purchased Hampton Fashion Extreme and renamed it HFX."

"Pause," Natsumi said. The video froze.

Mark's eyes were starting to glaze over. Natsumi stopped for a moment as she waited for Mark to catch up. He looked at the small brush brush in her hand before nodding.

"I know what you're wondering." She paused again as if she expected Mark to reply. The confused man just looked at her with a blank expression.

"You're wondering why a wealthy and successful Japanese financier would invest in an American fashion store?" She broadened the question.

Mark let his mind wander. *Why <u>would</u> a wealthy and successful Japanese financier invest in an American fashion store?*

"You see Mark, Americans think in the short term. Japan has existed for thousands of years, for them the long game is the only game. The long term strategy is the only strategy. It is their biggest advantage."

Mark looked confused.

"Let me go back," Natsumi said as she smiled, "Before Hampton Fashion Extreme, Hayakowa tried to purchase Morrison Financial, Greg Morrison's family's company."

Now Natsumi had Mark's complete attention.

"It had been reported," she continued, "that the elder Morrison was in failing health. Still, they were refusing to sell. Officially they said that the company was in good hands with their heir-apparent, Greg Morrison — who was attending university at the time to sharpen his prowess, since he was next in line to lead the firm."

"Mr. Hayakowa became aware that Greg's dying father G. Elmer Morrison *hated* the Japanese — and for that matter, just about every other minority."

Mark narrowed his eyes and nodded. He could certainly vouch for the Morrisons being a family of racist elitist pricks, at least based on his interactions with Greg.

"Realizing that the Morrisons would never sell to him, Hayakowa instead purchased what would become HFX." Natsumi went back to the Screen. "Resume playback."

"Over the next several years," the narrator continued, "HFX spread across the country like a virus, acquiring dozens of smaller stores and chains along the way. They called it the Japanese Invasion, much like when the Beatles arrived in the 1960's and brought with them a horde of British fashion trends. HFX was bringing flashy funky and affordable fashions inspired by Japan's Hyper Fashion scene to the American masses."

"Pause," Natsumi told the screen.

"Now, what no one really knows," Natsumi said, in a low conspiratorial voice, "is that this pattern of unpredictable acquisitions was completely intentional, so as to not raise any alarms when HFX purchased Rightworth's. Rightworths as you know, had been known for some time to be in a poor financial situation. It was also known to have a very interesting employee. One who was worth everything to Mr. Hayakowa and HFX."

Mark lifted a finger as if he had a question, "Hold on," he finally said, "You mean to tell me that this Japanese investor essentially bought a glitter-bomb fashion chain, just so he could get access to a single employee without anyone knowing?"

Natsumi shrugged. "Yes, that's the reason, Mark," she said with an approving tone. She was clearly pleased that he had been paying attention.

"But that makes no sense!" he continued. "Just hire that person away, throw some cash at them. They'll quit and join your company. It doesn't make sense to spend millions..."

"Billions," Natsumi interjected.

"...Billions on one person. That's nuts."

"So be it. Now hold still, I want to show you something."

As Natsumi took his chin in her hand, and pointed it towards her, Mark was still focused on the question at hand. "Who is it? Riley?"

"I'll let you think about it for a while."

"Who else is there?" He asked aloud. He was so focused on this tantalizing question, he failed to note that Natsumi was brushing makeup on his face.

"Resume video," Natsumi said to the screen.

Mark's thoughts drifted from thinking about what this Hayakowa character was up to and who he had bought the store to get. His eyes went back to the screen as he listened to the narrator's mesmerizing voice.

"And now you," the video continued, "as an employee of HFX are contributing in your own small way to the glory of the Hayakowa Empire. You are a soldier in a battle, and like a soldier, you know HFX will take care of your every need. You serve a purpose. A purpose that brings you fulfillment and life. You can feel it in the way you smile after completing your assigned tasks. You can feel it in the way you present yourself to the world with a positive attitude and impeccable style. You can feel it in the way your superiors trust you to do as you are told. You are Hayakowa. You are HFX."

"I am HFX," Mark said aloud, forgetting he was with anyone.

"Markie?" Natsumi said to him. "Marrr-kieee?" She sang, trying to get his attention. She resorted to snapping her fingers directly in front of his eyes, which started him blinking, like he was waking up from a nap. "Markie? Are you there, Markie?"

"Hai," Mark replied with a nod.

"I'm done," she said.

"Done?"

Natsumi smiled and pointed at the mirror. Mark turned his head and gasped. He realized that while all this had been happening, she had been slowly applying makeup to *his* face! His shock was two-fold.

First was the fact that she had been applying cosmetics to his skin without him even knowing, since he would have *obviously* protested had he known.

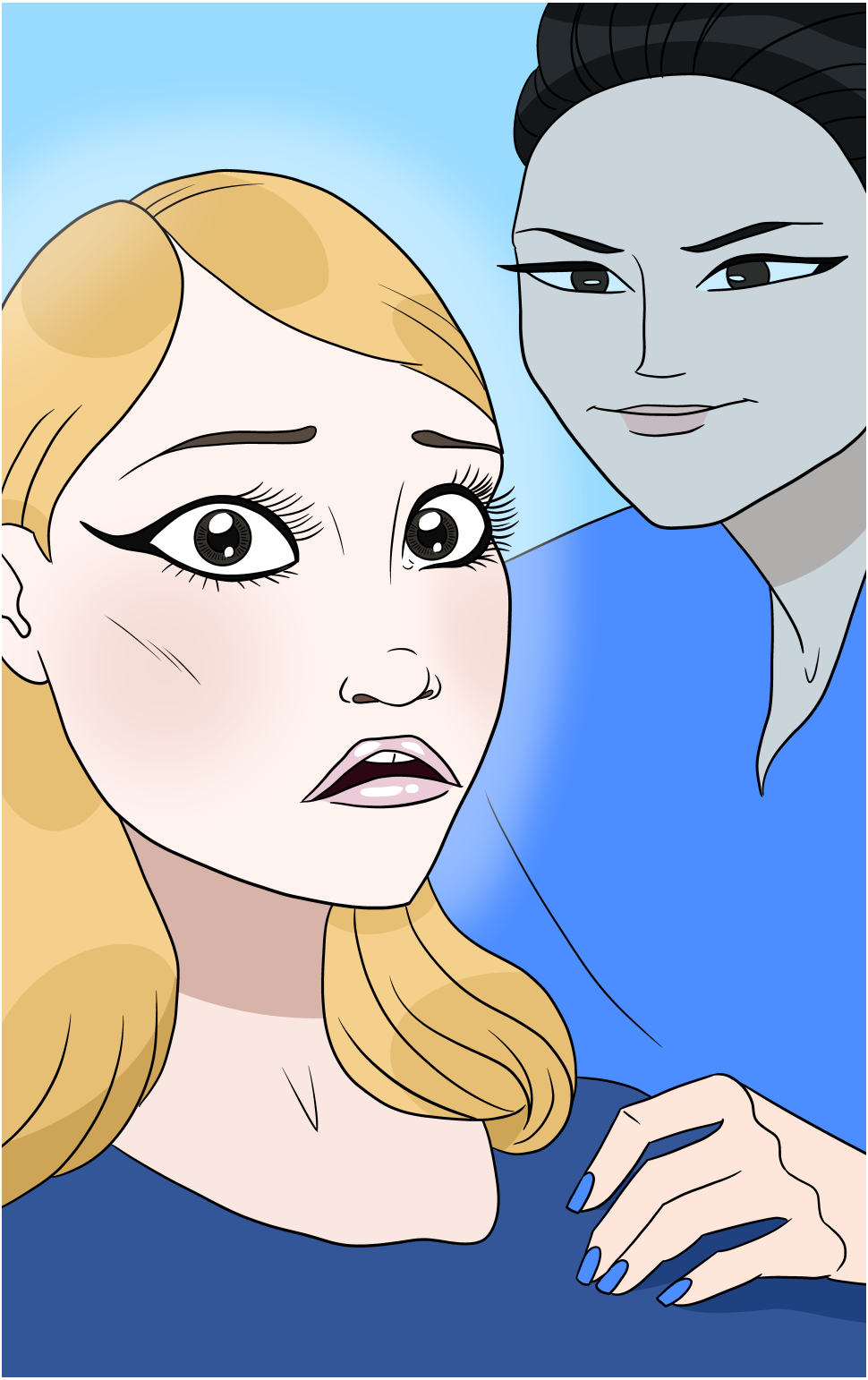
The second issue was even more deeply troubling, as he couldn't argue with himself the fact that his newly painted appearance looked *great!*

Better than great even, he looked *pretty*!

"Omigosh!" the word escaped his mouth, "what have you done?" He spoke with a panicked tone.

His skin had been given a light dusting of matte foundation, giving him an even, if slightly pale complexion. His eyes had been drawn out with dark liner, and somehow his lashes coated with thick, dark mascara. He knew enough about mascara to know that he would have had to look up at the ceiling while she was applying it — yet he had no memory of that every having taken place.

His cheeks had a bold brushing of rose-colored blush and his lips were painted in a muted rose-pink with a high gloss finish.



A hint of blue eyeshadow had been applied to his eyelids — the same color of the outfits in his dreams.

"I've merely helped you to complete your final training module Mark/" Natsumi smiled at his reaction. "Congratulations. You are almost ready," she said.

"Ready?" Mark's voice changed from panicked to confused with a hint of angry. "Ready for what? What can I possibly be ready for now? You've ruined my life! How can I ever go back into the financial sector looking like this?" He pointed at his prettified face.

Natsumi gave another reassuring smile, "Patience Mark. Mr. Hayakowa's competitive advantage has always been to give just the right amount of information at just the right time. All will become clear in good time."

She paused to allow Mark to calm his nerves, then continued. "Meantime, let's get you dressed and back on your feet, shall we?"

Mark sighed and nodded the affirmative. A quiet voice inside his head was reassuring him that Mr. Hayakowa was very wise, and it would be best for him to comply. He was a soldier, after all, a soldier for Hayakowa. He knew he had heard this voice for quite some time, but only now did he decide to listen. After all, he reasoned, he had been bedridden for weeks, and was anxious to get moving again. Strangely, it was the thought of being back to work that interested him most.

After watching so much of his favorite HFX show, he had a craving to get back on the job. He wanted to be the employee that HFX wanted him to be. He wanted to provide a new level of customer service. He wanted HFX to care for him like he cared for them.

So with a new-found enthusiasm, he wasted no time getting dressed in the outfit that Natsumi had laid out before him.

The skort was ultra-short, and covered in blue-crystal glitter that sparkled and shone. Like the skorts that Ollie had once worn, it gave the appearance of a skirt from the front and shorts from the back. They were quite a drastic departure for Mark, and were most certainly a stark contrast to the crisp white tights he wore beneath them.

The tights were a perfect match to the white top, which hugged closely to his body, exposing the hint of curves that had been slowly developing over time — including two small mounds with swollen nipples over his chest. Mark thought they were somehow related to this facial reconstruction, but in hindsight knew that wasn't possible.

The pale blue blazer finished the look. It was the same blue that he had seen in his dreams, and in the picture of Hank...er, Hannah. It was standard

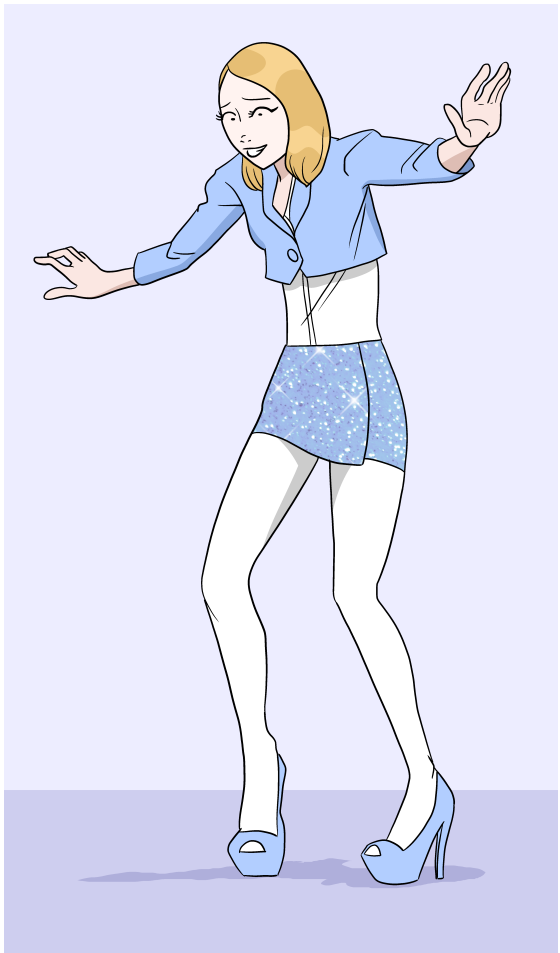
Hayakowa dress-code blue, and was color-matched to his new peep toe platform pumps with a stylish five-inch heel.

Wait a sec! He thought to himself. "I can't wear those!" he yelped, "I'll kill myself."

"Nonsense, Mark," Natsumi reassured, "I told you I would help you get back on your feet. I am here to assist you fully." With that, she slipped his pretty-looking nylon encased toes into the shoes. The toenails had been painted pale blue (likely while he was sleeping), and showed a tiny hint of color through the tights, through the peep-toe cut out at the front of the shoes.

They're adorable! He thought, then winced at his own reaction. He had worked so hard to avoid following in Ollie's girlish path — but now it seemed to be such a chore. *Wouldn't it just be easier to give in?* He wondered to himself about simply surrendering his masculinity to Natsumi's femme suggestions.

As if she could read his thoughts, Natsumi chimed in with her own reassurance. "They *are* adorable!" she said, as she graciously helped Mark to his feet. He took two steps and stumbled, but regained his balance (and dignity) quickly and began to sashay around the room as if he had been born on a catwalk.



These aren't so bad! He told himself as he shimmied his pert bottom from side to side with each short mincing step. He looked confidently up to Natsumi with a smile. "I'm ready," he said.

Natsumi returned the smile. "Yes, I think that you are Mariko," she said, slipping Mark's planned new name into the sentence, "I think that you are."

Mark's head was so full of pride, fear, humiliation and

excitement that he didn't even notice.



Mark's return to work was a dizzying experience. So much had changed while he had been gone. All of the salespeople on the floor were wearing identical blue blazer outfits just like he was. It looked so much more professional to him, and he was filled with pride to be a part of it.

"Look!" One of the salespeople said as they saw Mark gingerly walk inside. "Look everyone!"

Suddenly, he was surrounded by his sales team, giggling, cooing and gushing as they crowded around him.

"Girls, girls! Please!" Natsumi said. "You have customers."

They heeded Natsumi's words and backed away, bowing to their supervisor and then skittering away in their peep-toe pumps back to their assigned spots.

"They look so different!" Mark said, noting that their masculinity had been completely stripped away. They looked and acted like girls now. Very stylish girls, in their blue HFX uniforms.

Natsumi agreed. "Isn't it wonderful? They've all accepted HFX into their heart."

"HFX is a wonderful company," Mark replied, unprompted. "They have made the only sensible choice."

It wasn't much longer before Mark was working sales himself, standing on the floor, demurely folding his hands in front of him at his waist, feet together, waiting to be of assistance to his customers. At the slightest sign, he sprinted to the customer's side, answering questions, flattering them with their choices and doing whatever was necessary to make their HFX experience the best it could be.

He delighted in his job, enjoying it like never before. Everything he had learned watching his show at home turned out to be just the right thing to do. He felt he was in exactly the right place, helping customers. He had been so resistant to HFX, and he felt like a fool now. They knew what was best for him, and he wanted to do his best for them.

"When you greet a customer," Natsumi had told him, "Apologize for your masculine appearance. It's the polite thing to do." Mark had to agree. After all, HFX knew best. They knew what their customers wanted.

It was a little awkward, but he began every interaction with, "I hope my masculine appearance does not offend you, and I humbly apologize."

When Natsumi told him that he needed to smile more authentically, he carried a hand mirror with him for six days to check and make sure he smiled in just the right way. Soon, he had made it second-nature for him to give the most encouraging and heart-warming smile every time.

"I must be beautiful for the customer," he would whisper to himself as he got ready for work every morning, doing his makeup. "I must be beautiful," he said under his breath as he rode the bus to work in his short skirt and tights.

The only thing missing was his roommate. Ollie, or Holly as she was now legally known, had left her job at HFX and moved out of the apartment that she shared with Mark. She was now living at the Morrison's massive family estate on the outside of town, as Greg's fiancé, much to the astonishment of the financial community, and horror of Greg's old-money family.

Mark considered searching for a new roommate, but with a whole extra room now available, it gave him so much more space for his ever expanding wardrobe of glittery HFX clothes.

"I can really see the beauty in how you treat the customers," Natsumi told Mark a month after he had returned to his job.

"I must be beautiful for the customer," Mark automatically replied.

"But you can be even more beautiful," she said. She escorted him to the store salon where the HFX beauticians worked on him for many hours. He had no idea what was happening, but he knew Natsumi and HFX were looking after him, and making him better.

Sure enough, he was enamored with his new shoulder-length straight black hair. The extensions made him feel so much more professional. He looked more like his fellow sales team, and they were just as excited to see his changes, too. He hadn't really noticed before, but all the sales people in their blue blazers and skirts also had straight black hair.

The girls at the gym also noted his new dedication to being beautiful for his customers, and praised his new look. Jamie even teared up and burbled something about "finally matching his outside to his inside." Mark didn't understand, but gracefully accepted his praise.



"In addition to technological superiority, Japan's culture makes it a leader in quality of life," said the HFX big screen in Mark's apartment. He was busy getting dressed, ignoring the show. Some of the girls in his exercise class wanted to go out for drinks, and he was busy choosing a dress for the evening out. The screen was playing in the background, as it almost always was in his tiny home. "Few other peoples can claim to have the heritage and pride of the Japanese," said the narrator of the travel show. "Countries like the USA constantly struggle to catch up to the superior Japanese way."

"No," Mark said to his reflection, as he examined himself in a glittery halter-top dress he had just purchased using his HFX discount. "It's not me," he said, as he discarded it and went back to his closet. He chose a new outfit, a glittery flared skirt with a matching glittery jacket over a blue spaghetti-strap top. He liked blue. It was his favorite color.

His phone rang, which startled him, as he had zoned out a little looking at his reflection. "Moshi moshi," he said, answering it.

"We need you at the store, Markie," Natsumi said, sounding distressed. "It's an emergency!"

"Yes! Right away!" Mark said, happy to feel needed.

He arrived at the store breathless, having taken an expensive taxi all the way in to arrive as quickly as he could. "What's happened?" He asked.

"Riku has the flu!" Natsumi said. "She can't do her six o'clock performance tonight."

"Is she going to be okay?" Mark responded, concerned. Riku, along with Akari and Yuma had been so wonderful to him. He had so many things to learn from them, and they had been very generous with their time.

"I'm sure she'll be fine, but she can't perform."

"Does she need anything? Can I bring her some medicine? Some food?"

"No, she's being cared for, after all she is a valuable HFX asset," Natsumi said.

"What can I do? How can I help?"

"You need to help Team All-Star, Markie. Akari and Yuma need you."

"Me?!"

"Yes, get dressed in the All-Star uniform, Markie. You go on with them in twenty minutes."

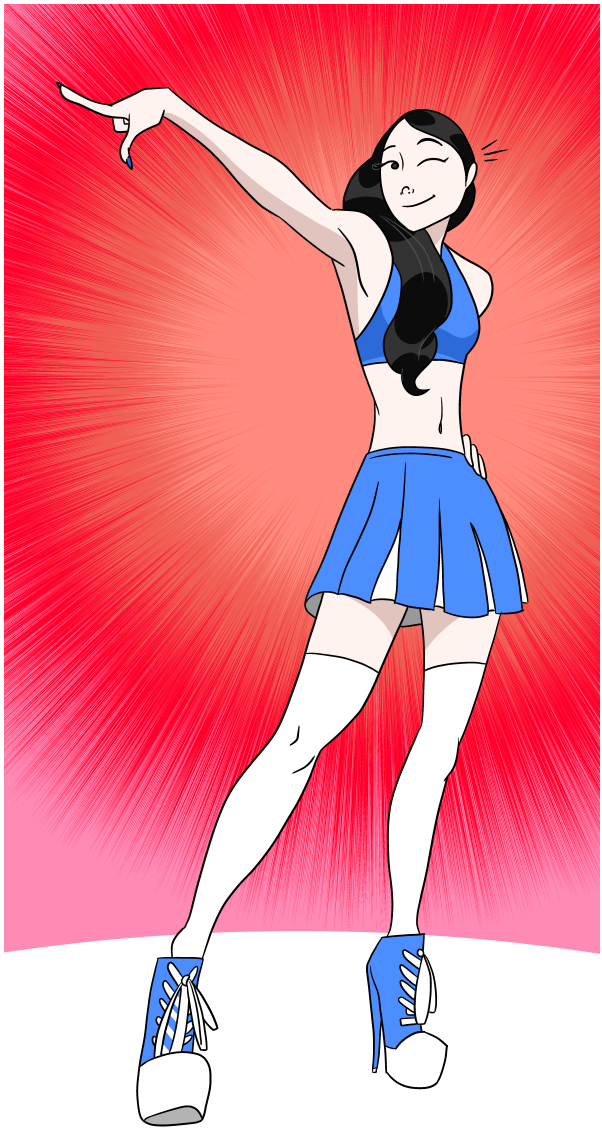
"What?" Mark replied, in shock. "But I can't..."

"Akari and Yuma tell me you know their routine by heart. They say you're the only one who can replace Riku."

"But I... I can't!"

"Yes you can, Mark. Akari and Yuma believe in you. I believe in you." Natsumi paused to build tension. "HFX believes in you."

Twenty minutes later, in the trademark blue uniform of Team All-Star, Mark stepped out into the store. His short cheerleader skirt swished around his hips as he walked in syncopated stride with Akari and Yuma, waving to the crowd.



"Direct from Tokyo, please cheer for HFX's very own Team All-Star!" Natsumi announced over the PA system. The All-Star music began and Mark could feel the energy in his body go through the roof. His heart was pounding under his stuffed bra, as nervous as he was. They got to the performance area and the lights singled them out.

"Akari!" Said Akari, as she announced her name to the crowd. She posed by bending over and flashing a peace sign.

"Yuma!" Said Yuma, who folded her arms and put a mockingly stern expression on her cute face, posing and freezing like Akari had.

"Mariko!" Said Mark, in a high-pitched voice he'd never tried to use before. He held a wink and a finger-point pose as he kicked a leg.

"We are Team All-Star!" They said in unison. The music began and it was time to dance.

Mark shocked himself with how well he was able to do the routine. It was almost like it had been burned into him. All these months doing the workouts at the gym had left him with more than enough skill and talent to do the All-Star dance.

He was frightened at first, but even while he was dancing, he could see the appreciative looks from the customers. He was sure they would see him and turn away, disgusted by his masculinity, but instead, their eyes followed his every move. Soon, his fear was replaced with satisfaction, and if he was being honest with himself, his satisfaction was being replaced with pride.

"You did amazing out there, Mariko," Natsumi said as the team returned to the back room.

"Sugoi!" Yuma praised.

"Yabai!" Akari added. "Yabai yo!"

They hugged him tightly, squeezing him like a vice. Mark giggled, blushing as he accepted their acclaim, and kept his humility. He bowed and thanked his coworkers. "Doumo arigatou gozaimasu," he said, thanking them.

Natsumi was unusually effusive, reverting to her girly-girl persona. "You were wonderful, Mariko. They loved you! I loved you!" She put her hand on his shoulders. "I think you're ready."

"Ready for what?"

"For ultimate beauty," Natsumi said.

"Oh yes!" Yuma said. "Ultimate!"

"Ultimate! Ultimate!" Akari said with excitement.

"Do you want ultimate beauty, Mariko?"

Mark wasn't sure at all what he was being asked, and he wasn't even sure why they were calling him "Mariko," but he was swept away with the moment. "I want to be beautiful," he said.

"HFX will give you ultimate beauty!" Natsumi said. "Is that what you want?"

Mark looked in the eyes of the three girls surrounding him, and seeing the pleading, anticipatory looks in their eyes, he had little choice. "Yes. I want ultimate beauty," he said.

Everyone cheered his decision, even Natsumi.



Three days later, Mark found himself lying on a hospital gurney. Over the past 48 hours, he had briefed by Dr. Angel about what he could expect from his upcoming procedures. He almost didn't want to hear it. He just wanted to have it all over with.

On the day of his first surgery, Natsumi came by to visit, and make sure he was doing all right.

"Miss Natsumi," Mark said, almost afraid to ask a question. he clutched the bed sheets as he spoke. "This all seems so extreme. Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"This comes from the very top, Mariko," she said.

"You mean...?"

"Yes, Hayakowa himself."

Mark steadied himself. If this was coming from Mr. Hayakowa, the man who founded this great company, then he had to do it. He took many deep breaths. "It can't be helped, then, can it?"

"No," Natsumi said, patting his forehead. "Don't be afraid. You have a great future ahead with the company."

Mark was quiet, contemplating what he wanted to ask next. So much had happened to him recently — so many thoughts poured in and out of his mind. Just six months ago, he never would have guessed he'd be where he was now. So much had changed, ever since HFX came into his life. "Miss Natsumi," he finally said in a muted voice.

"Yes?"

"Why did HFX buy Rightworth's?"

"Oh, that," Natsumi said with a serious tone. "I'd hoped you had forgotten."

"They wanted Riley, didn't they? It couldn't have been anyone else. You said they bought it for one person."

Natsumi giggled. "You, Mark. We bought it to get *you.*"

Mark sat and let his jaw slowly droop open. Then his forehead started to wrinkle. His eyes refused to blink.

"I can see you have many questions," Natsumi said, obviously enjoying seeing the young man failing to compute the situation. "Mark, as hard as it to believe, you have been the most essential element of Mr. Hayakowa's plan."

Mark had a bewildered look on his face. "But... I'm just a salesperson. I'm not worth so much money. So much effort. Why?"



"It's simple, really. You're a failure, Mark. A pure failure." Natsumi patted him on the leg. "You fell so far from the heights of your education, failed so hard, that it created an opportunity. You, Mark, had gone to school with all the up and coming young executives in a number of important businesses. Greg Morrison, prime amongst them. You know many powerful and important people, Mark."

He had never thought about it like that. He did know a few people at the top ranks of Fortune 500... Well, maybe ten... Or twenty... Thirty people?

Natsumi continued. "You studied with them, lived with them, drank with them, learned their secrets... You have enough dirt on these people to do real damage, practically to the entire US economy. Or, if used properly, you could control the economy. A little bit of research revealed your unusual position that we were able to take advantage of."

"Me?" Mark said. "But if I did, how would you use me? I haven't told you anything."

"You've told us quite a bit, actually. Your sessions in the training booth have been a ruse, frankly. The reason you had such a hard time learning was because we were using the time in our training booths to get information out of you. We have hours upon hours of confidential, personal information about your former classmates."

"I'd remember that."

"Just as an example, you told us that back in school on a number of occasions, Greg Morrison had been caught paying transgender hookers for sex. He also had a pattern of going after Nordic women with blond hair as girlfriends."

"Like Hannah?" Mark asked, afraid of the answer.

"And Holly," Natsumi said.

It was all a bit much for Mark to handle. He began to feel tears building up in his eyes. "What did you *do* to me?"

"Turned you from a failure into a billion-dollar asset, Mariko." She seemed to have no remorse. "We've been buying companies left and right at cut-rate prices. Once they know that we know their deepest secrets they're happy to sell to us. We now control some of the biggest companies in data networking, artificial intelligence, entertainment, oil, aerospace, and even consumer electronics."

"You really have been using me, haven't you?"

"Yes, Mariko. Have you been reading the financial reports lately?"

Mark had to admit, he had not been keeping up in recent months.

"According the the WSJ, Morrison's CEO, Greg Morrison, has become completely distracted by a lovely transgendered girl whom he has been secretly seeing." Natsumi paused. "Well, secretly until a month or two ago, when some footage from a locker room emerged, but we don't need to get into that. Morrison is trying to rebound. In fact, they just hired a sharp new IT executive to try and shore up their many cyber-related issues. You may have met her before?" The store manager held up her phone with an article on it that was introducing Hannah Lee as Morrison Financial's new CIO. Pictured was an image of Mark's former friend Hank, dressed in a familiar-looking blue skirt suit ensemble similar to the blue outfits Mark had been seeing in his dreams.

Mark gasped. "You did all of this just to plant Hank inside Morrison Financial?"

It was a stroke of genius, he had to admit. But would it be enough to force the desired outcome?

"*Hannah*," Natsumi corrected, "as the CIO is only one of our objectives Mark." she said. "With the company in turmoil, Mr. Hayakowa has been working many back channels to purchase a controlling interest in the company. I expect that his work will be completed shortly."

"I see," Mark said. "I've been used."

"You are an asset to HFX, Mariko. One of our most valuable."

"But... Why... Why are you making us into... Girls?"

"Because, Mariko."

"Because *why?*"

"Because Mr. Hayakowa wants it that way."

"Oh," Mark replied. Strangely, the answer satisfied him. He was a soldier in the Hayakowa way. He was an asset to HFX. He only needed to know what he was told. This was his place.

"Are you ready, Mark?" The nurse said, poking her head into the room.

"Mariko," Mark corrected. "And yes, I am ready."



Natsumi flipped through the pages of the glossy Japanese fashion magazine she had picked up in the lobby. She skimmed over the photographs of trendy teen fashion, trying to get a general sense of what HFX would likely import into America as the 'next big thing.' She chuckled aloud when she spotted an

article about the growing appetite for Japanese fashion in the United States, *how apropos,* she thought to herself.

A few years previous, she would have paid the article no mind. Americans wearing Japanese fashions? Ridiculous. Of course, a few years ago — she wouldn't have even been able to read in her newly adopted first language.

"Natsumi?" A soft voice interrupted her thinking. "Hayakowa-san ga anata to hanasu junbi ga dekite imasu. Anata wa kare no jimusho ni hairu koto ga yurusa rete imasu." Natsumi looked up at the rather tall girl standing before her and smiled, lowering her head briefly to acknowledge the instructions the girl had just relayed.

'Mister Hayakowa will see you now. You are permitted to enter his office.'

"Watashi wa anata no yasashi-sa ni kansha Hisui," Natsumi replied in fluent Japanese to the office girl, *'I appreciate your kindness, Jade.'*

There was an unspoken connection that Natsumi and Hisui (Jade) shared. Both had come to work for Mr. Hayakowa in very complex ways. Both had started off in very different places.

Both used to be American.

Both used to be men.

Rumor had it that Mr. Haykowa had hand-picked Jade when she had been a promising young international law student from the United States named Jake.

But that was an entirely different story.

"Natsumi!" a male voice beckoned from the office, "Isoide! Hairu!" It was demanding that she 'enter' and 'quickly'.

Natsumi minced past Jade and into the private office of Hayakowa-san in her towering platform pumps. She curtseyed for him as she entered the space, bowing her head for a moment in respect.

"Ah, Natsumi," he began, "Watashi no hoshi no jūgyōin. Anata ga watashi no tame ni hataraku koto ni totemo kansha shite imasu. Watashi wa kōun'na otokodesu."

She blushed and looked down. Hayakowa-san had just told her that she was his star employee, that he was very grateful that she works for him and that he was a lucky man.

"Shōjikina tokoro," Mr. Hayakowa continued, "anata mo otokodesu. Hijō ni kōun'na otoko. Watashi wa tadashīdesu ka?"

Natsumi was further embarrassed by her bosses statement. *You are a man too. A very lucky man. Am I correct?*

"Īe Hayakow-san" Natsumi replied, "Watashi wa mohaya otokode wanai." *No Mr. Hayakowa, I am a man no longer.*

Hayakowa laughed as he continued to speak to the former man in Japanese. "You are no longer many things Natsumi. I have purged all that is wrong from you, leaving only purity and power. How fortunate you are to have met me."

Natsumi remembered back to being the store manager at the original HFX store in New York when Mr. Hayakowa had first acquired it. Of course back then, she was known as Nate, and for all appearances was a red-blooded young American man.

A year of intense training modules, and a month at the Thai medical clinic had cured him of all that.

Ever since his repurposing, he had been Natsumi, the transgendered Chief operating officer of global expansion for Hayakowa Industries — the offshoot business venture of Hayakowa Financial Exchange. She was a proud Japanese transgendered woman who had renounced her former self almost entirely.

But was she still a man in any way?

She caught a glance of Mr. Hayakowa looking down at her groin. "Well," he said in his formal Japanese dialect, "you are *almost* a man no longer. Which is something that I shall finally grant you as a reward for your excellence. Then truly," he paused to smile, "You will be purified of your maker's mistakes."

Natsumi beamed from ear to ear. It had been such a great honor to be purged of her inferior American appearance, but now to be granted the privilege of true womanhood was the greatest gift possible. Next to being a genetic Japanese man, that is. But Natsumi knew that only the purest, like Hayakowa-san were blessed enough to have been granted that. On the Hayakowa scale, the Japanese male was ideal, followed by the Japanese woman, followed then by Natsumi's current form — the Japanese transgender.

All others followed thereafter, with the American male falling somewhere near the bottom. But Hayakowa-san was working very hard to change all that. He and his colleagues were intent on granting more and more young American men the gift of enlightenment as they were repurposed.

"How has our newest placement taken to their new role?" Mr. Hayakowa asked.

"Mariko?" Natsumi affirmed.

Hayakowa nodded.

Natsumi smiled, "Subete ga keikaku-dori ni itta" she replied confidently.

'Everything went according to plan'

Mariko hopped off the bus and with sprightly energy arrived at her workplace, the sales floor of HFX. Waving to her co-workers with a bright smile, she headed to the back room. As she shed her coat, she was almost too eager to get to her locker and see the uniform she cherished like nothing else in her life, the one for Team All-Star.

It had been months now, but she still was excited to come to work every day. When he had returned to the store after his procedures, he was treated almost like a rock star. All the new 'girls' of the HFX sales team had wanted what Mariko now had. She was the first to get to the ultimate beauty level and ascend to the lofty heights they all wished to get to someday.

Mariko removed her long coat to reveal her everyday street clothes. She was dressed in the latest HFX style, a silver lamé minidress with a large boob window. Three-inch platform silver lamé pumps with six-inch heels were on her feet and candy-colored polka-dot tights on her legs. Long, sparkling earrings hung low, almost grazing her shoulders, as the light danced off her glossy pink lips. When she blinked, her long, dark, thick lashes almost created a breeze. She looked like she was ready to go clubbing for the night, but it was early morning.

She began to remove the dress, and showed off the slim, shapely body surgery had given her. Her skin was perfect and smooth, a compliment to her supple body, which looked years younger than she actually was. Her breasts looked young and perky, her tummy didn't have an ounce of fat, and her legs were long and limber. She pulled the tiny flared skirt of her uniform up onto her wide hips, and pulled the small top snug and tight over her C-cup boobs.

The uniform was just as revealing and flashy as the regular Team All-Star uniform, but this one was special. It was for Team All-Star USA. And she was in charge of it.

When Team All-Star left to return to Tokyo, Natsumi had declared that Mariko, who had been performing with the girls for several weeks, was now the lead of the new Team All-Star USA, and put him in charge of recruiting two new members.

Only for the briefest of moments did he hesitate. He had been changed into a girl now, almost totally, but this was another level of girlishness that he hadn't seen coming. If he were to accept, he would on a new path in life, one that would take him farther and farther away from his desires to be the financial executive he had spent his entire life trying to be. Now, he would only see a life

full of fashion, frills, panties, hair appointments and yes, seeking the attention of a cute guy.

He understood now. He understood the addiction. He was addicted to being Mariko. He needed to be female — as female as he could be. He had wondered why Mr. Hayakowa would go through so much trouble to change so many people from men into women, but he knew why now. It was like a drug, womanhood. Given a taste of what it was like to be pretty and feminine, he could only crave more of it. Mr. Hayakowa had Mariko's loyalty for life. He felt like he had been saved from a lifetime of misery and struggle to blossom into beauty and servitude.

"Osoreirimasu," she said to thank Miss Natsumi for her offer, in what was quickly becoming her native language.

That would be appropriate as she was now as Japanese as if she was natively-born there. Her long black hair and almond-shaped eyes left no doubt as to where Mariko was from, even if it was more spiritual than real.

Now that she had been performing as the lone member of Team All-Star USA for over a month, Mariko was eager to find the two who would dance alongside him.



"Excuse me Ms. Mariko?" a meek voice came from the doorway to the back room.

"Nihongo de hanasu," Mariko said. It was HFX company policy to always speak in Japanese when talking business.

The voice sighed, then tried to excuse themselves again, this time in Japanese, "Watashi wa chudan shite moshiwakearmasen, Misu Mariko", which translated into *I am sorry to interrupt you Ms Mariko.*

Mariko smiled. She knew how difficult it was to learn the superior language. Especially for someone like Greg Morrison.

He turned around and gave his approval. "Very good Greg. You are learning well."

Greg nodded and bowed his thanks, as he had been trained to do since being hired at HFX. The reports in the media — unaware of Haykowa's nefarious plans of slow, calculated acquisitions and blackmail — had been quite damning for Greg.

His new outfit was damning as well.

He was dressed in a pair of short glittery blue shorts and a cropped blue blazer that showed his midsection — tastefully covered by a snug-fitting button down white sleeveless blouse and blue floppy bow tie. His legs encased in white tights, ending in wedge-heeled pumps.

It was the HFX standard salesgirl uniform, which he wore as he was working the HFX sales floor as a junior apprentice salesperson. Mr. Hayakowa's blackmail had reduced him to accepting this meager job, a scandalous drop from his former position of power.

It rather suited Greg, or Geiru as he would someday be called. His hairwas now down to a bob-cut level which framed his prettyfied face well. Graceful arching brows, long feathery eyelashes, thick black liner, drawn to the outer corners of his eyes along with pale pink lips and cheeks, played well against his ever-more-pale face.

Indeed, pale skin was a requirement of the HFX dress code for female and transgendered staff. One day, if Greg was to be fortunate enough, his skin may be permanently blanched like Mariko's had been during her 'ultimate beauty' treatment.

"Now," Mariko continued, "What is the purpose of your interruption Geiru?" He looked down at her near-white fingers, accentuated by inch-long acrylic nail extensions.

Greg paused, looking at his short navy-blue nails for a moment, "Oh, um, I was told you wanted to talk to me." He sighed. Knowing that at one-time *he* would have been the one telling Mark what to do.

But no more.

"You are going to train with me at the gym," Mariko said. "Be there tomorrow morning at five. We will be training for three hours every day for the next two months."

"Why?" Greg asked.

"Because I said so," Mariko replied. "Is that not enough?"

Greg didn't need to know he was going to be the next member of Team All-Star USA. He was going to be trained, programmed, and surgically altered until he was ready to accept his new life as a giggly little dancer, shaking his but and boobs for attention.

"Yes, Miss Mariko."

"Geiru Arigatogozaimasu. Anata wa deru kamo shirenai." Mark dismissed him promptly, *Thank you Geiru. You may get out.*

Greg nodded, still humiliated from what had been done to him, but without any other course of action, knowing his compliance was mandatory.



Mariko smiled and turned back to the mirror as he did his face, his new reflection looking back at him. The altercation with Greg in the changing room had already softened his face, but with the delicate touch of the Dr. Angel's hands, his old self was now completely lost. It was there that he had received modifications to his hips, chest and neck (where his adams' apple was removed), along with the skin blanching and intensive language training. He had been hooked up to a portable HFX training booth for the whole month he had spent recovering.

They had started treatments on his eyes, to make him look more ethnically Japanese. The resulting image was that of a rather tall woman of Japanese ancestry. In fact, the executives had already dubbed Mariko, Natsumi, Jade and

the many others joining their ranks as "Senotakai on'nanoko" or "tall girls." It was a term they all took pride in. Mariko was tall to begin with, but with her skyscaper heels on she was like a towering amazon.

Knowing that she had not only taken over Greg Morrison's life and was to spend the next several months slowly destroying it, piece by delicious piece, being the head of Team All-Star USA and the top-selling salesgirl in the store was enough to be a reward in itself. But having Greg in training to be her subordinate was icing on the cake.

Mariko walked over to one of the training booths. "HFX asset Mariko, Beta 3991, requesting access," she said to it.

"Access granted," it replied.

"Increase target femininity level for trainee Greg Morrison to 200, and implement the appropriate training modules."

"Done."

200 was the very top level she could input. She wanted Greg to be a truly simpering sissy of a man. She also wanted to make sure he never got the sexual reassignment surgery he would begin to crave in a few months.

Holly, his wife, was more than willing to help Mariko, too. She had taken over all of Greg's remaining assets and forced him into taking the HFX job. She had grown to hate the condescending and pompous man just as much as Mariko had.

As for the third member of Team All-Star USA? Oddly enough, he already knew who that was going to be. It was just a matter of waiting for the right moment to ask. Natsumi herself had been unusually curious about the position. Even though it was a step down from her managerial role, Mariko had the feeling she was yearning to wear the skimpy costume and dance. She couldn't blame her.

It would be a step down, yes, but just like Mariko had learned, sometimes when you reached the bottom, only then do you find what you were always looking for.

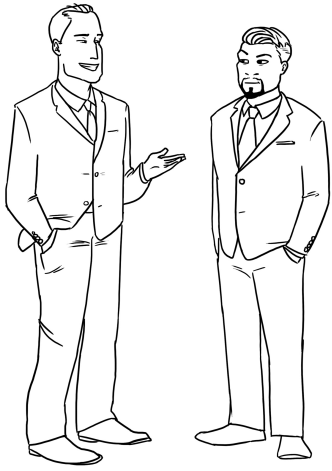
Success hadn't come easy, but it was finally hers.

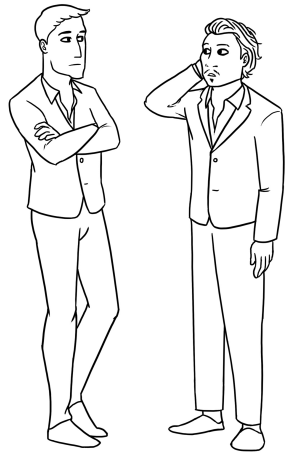
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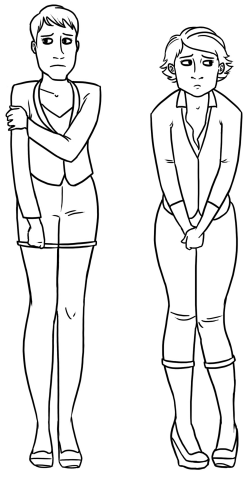

TEAM
All-Star
USA

Concept Art & Sketches

This book had a long production history, and early on the author commissioned many sketches to accompany the first drafts. We present them here as a bonus.





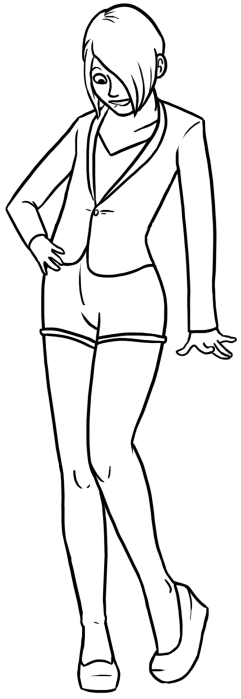










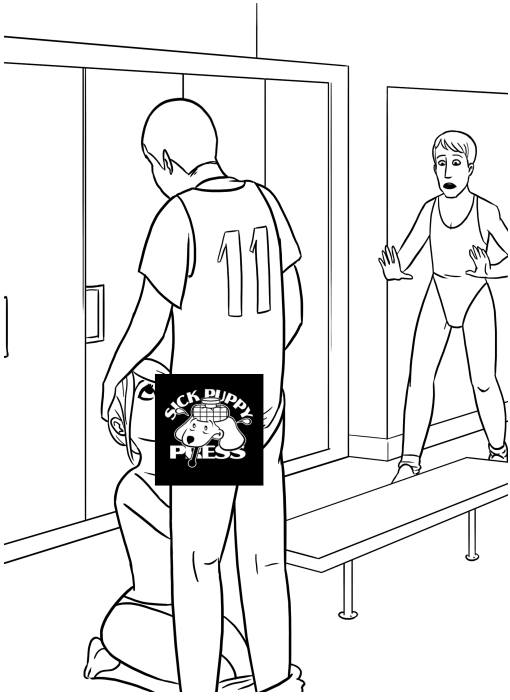











11
SICK PUPPY
PRESS





Titles from Sick Puppy Press

Sick Puppy Comics

Making Friends

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Three college students sign up for a six-month isolation experiment. Things start to get a a little strange, and they begin to lose their masculinity day by day. Yet, they don't seem to even notice... Full Color Comic Book / 38 pages

The Pet Sitter

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Asked to look after a supermodel's pet for a while, James finds himself thrust out of his own apartment and into hers. Day by day, it seems like circumstances adapt James to become the resident of a supermodel's lifestyle. Full Color Comic Book / 29 pages

A Curious Curse

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. When teen goth Brandyn gets his drivers' license, he thinks it's a ticket to adulthood. Unfortunately, he's already cashed a ticket in the opposite direction. Full Color Comic Book / 27 pages

Boys Will Be Girls

Story & Art by Fraylim, Script by KK, Ink & Color by Joe Six-Pack. The "Summer Blossom" camp welcomes anew group of young men. But although it may be an all-boys camp when they arrive, it's girls-only when they leave. Full Color Comic Book / 100 pages

The Step-Witch

Story by Joe Six-Pack. Dillon has a new stepmother. Problem is that she and Dillon don't get along. More of a problem for Dillon is that she's a witch — and wants a daughter. Full Color Comic Book / 17 pages

Double-Crossed

Story & Art by Joe-Six Pack. Jesse is on the run from justice. When he finds an old friend who can help him, that old friend seems more interested in helping Jesse become a woman. Comic / 24 pages

The Charm

Story by Joe-Six Pack, art by Osoku WARUI. Gavin is a student who laments his boring life. Then he crosses paths with Krista. Things are about to change, and not necessarily for the better. Comic / 24 pages

Candlewick Court Series

Welcome to Candlewick

By Joe Six-Pack. Book 1 in a series. Candlewick Court is looking for new residents. Residents who will find new lives and new genders in a suburban paradise with a mysterious purpose. Book / 149 pages / 30 illustrations

Surrender to Candlewick

By Joe Six-Pack. Book 2 in a series. Candlewick Court has found it's first homeowners, and the kids need a school to attend. What kind of bizarre transformations await them? Book / 152 pages / 38 illustrations

Brides of Candlewick

By Joe Six-Pack. Book 3 in a series. The story of Colin and Elliot concludes as we welcome Candlewick Court's next homeowners. Book / 159 pages / 39 illustrations

Teens Transformed

She Made Me Into My Sister

"A Little Too Clever" by Joe Six-Pack. Wyatt wanted to help his girlfriend get revenge, but at what cost? As it turns out, a cost greater than any boy could have imagined. Book / 88 pages / 20 illustrations

Gone Girly for Good

"Big in Japan" by James J Craft. Mike and Ken were one-hit-wonder rock stars. Then they discovered they had fans in Japan, so they left to become famous. Then they discovered that the Japanese didn't know they were guys. Book / 77 pages / 26 illustrations

One Year in Tokyo

By James J Craft, illustrations by Kwon Lee Tran. Mickey is forced to spend a year with his father in Japan. However things often get confused when words get translated from English to Japanese, as Mickey soon finds out... Book / 87 pages / 20 illustrations

Student Exchange

By Joe Six-Pack. Kelley Sue's convinced a French exchange student to disguise himself as a girl. What happens when she realizes he has no intention of returning back home? Book / 77 pages / 22 illustrations

He's a Valley Girl, Fer Sure

From the files of TGStories.com: "Corey Taylor's Big Bodacious Adventure" by Joe Six-Pack. For Corey, the only way he can get into college is to pretend to be a girl. But when does it stop being pretend? When he's cheerleader? A girlfriend? A beauty queen? Book / 78 pages / 17 illustrations

From Boys to Bridesmaids

"Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom" by James J Craft. Two spoiled and privileged boys are about to be put in their place by their new step-mother. And their place is by her side as her bridesmaids and daughters. Book / 77 Pages / 16 illustrations

Little Mis-ter Popular

"My Two Moms" by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Thanks to his aunt's "Confidence Club," Leon will find a way to become popular, and to get over all his hang-ups... Including his masculinity. Book / 77 Pages / 17 illustrations

Bride to Be

By Joe Six-Pack. Derek and Cole grew up together as kids. One year, though, Cole has to start pitching in at the family wedding business. His life will never be the same. Book / 63 pages / 25 illustrations

Winning is Everything

"Costume drama" by Joe Six-Pack. Seth made a funny little bet for Halloween. He needed to pull off the impersonation of a Cheerleader for a party. What's at stake? 100 million dollars and his manhood. Book / 215 pages / 37 illustrations

Creating Samantha

Story by Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by The Might Fenek. Samuel was under the tutelage of his legal guardian, only his guardian had no intentions of letting him grow up male. Book / 70 pages / 16 illustrations

Convicts to Co-Eds

Story by By Courtney Captisa & Claire Bear, illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Three teen boys are sent to a reform school. What they can't know is that they are about to be "reformed" all the way into skirts... And beyond. Book / 154 pages / 31 illustrations

Mall Makeover Madness

"A Day at the Mall" by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Four boys are going to have one weird day at the mall. By the time the day is over, it's four girls who leave the mall to begin their new lives. Book / 109 pages / 25 illustrations

Crosley High Chronicles

By Joe Six-Pack. River is coming to a new school, and trying to fit in. The problem is the only way he's going to fit in is in skirts and heels. Book / 217 pages / 75 illustrations

The Substitute Ski Bunny

By Joe Six-Pack. Walker is a young man who's fallen in love with a girl. The only way he can get close to her is to dress up and become her roommate. It's not going to go according to plan, though. Book / 132 pages / 31 Illustrations

Tales of Transformation

He's the Wrong Girl

"Office Chemistry" by Joe Six-Pack. James had to fill in at the reception desk. Problem is, the business is a bio-genetics company. And all of the sudden the coffee tastes funny. Book / 53 pages / 14 illustrations

City Boy, Country Girl

By Joe Six-Pack. Richard's successful city life is interrupted when a sheep he wants to fleece needs urgent care out in the country. But instead of returning home, all Richard's wife hears are a series of suspicious excuses. Revised in 2019. Book / 92 pages / 34 illustrations

Thames Greene

By James J Craft. Ira wanted something better for his family. A new start. But in Thames Greene, everyone's getting a new start, whether they want it or not. Book / 77 pages / 26 illustrations

Hiding in High Heels

"How Not to be a Sissy" By Joe Six-Pack. Vince was on the run from people who wanted their millions back. Howard was a friend with a funny little idea and a knack for making subliminal CDs. Mini-Pix / 48 pages / 15 illustrations

A Blessing in Disguise

By KK, illustrations by Kannel. Jay was a witness to a murder, and now he's the target of a vicious criminal. Resorting to a female disguise, he becomes trapped with no way out. Book / 84 pages / 16 illustrations

I'm Your Dolly

"Barbie-in-a-Box" By Joe Six-Pack. Tyler wasn't much of a boyfriend anymore. Jessica wanted to throw him out, but then a better idea came to her, in the form of the Barbie-in-a-Box service. Tyler better get used to pink. Book / 103 pages / 20 illustrations

His Life as a Trophy Wife

By Joe Six-Pack. Nick had a great life, but then it evaporated. Now he's down on his luck. In steps a wealthy executive wiling to pay him handsomely to pretend to be his wife. What can it hurt? Revised in 2018. Book / 256 pages / 39 illustrations

Male Monday, Girl Friday

"Hey, Cutie!" by James J Craft. Daniel is going to be promoted from his average life to an exciting executive position. At least, that's what his bosses are telling him. They may not be telling him everything. Book / 58 pages / 20 illustrations

The Happiest Place on Earth

From the files of TGStories.com: "The Fairest One of All" By Joe Six-Pack. Will is a kid looking for a job. He gets one, performing as Snow White at a theme park. For Will, he doesn't suspect that playing the role and wearing the costume is slowly changing him, day by day. Book / 51 pages / 21 illustrations

Hello, Nurse

From the files of TGStories.com: "Quality Health Care". Dane is filling in as a nurse for his pal Jimmy at his new office. Although both are doctors, Dane begins to take to his new role as a nurse. Soon, he feels compelled to be the ideal nurse. Book / 44 pages / 15 illustrations

My Boss, The Bimbo

"If I Were a Betting (Wo)Man" By James J Craft, illustrations by blackshirtboy. CEO Lucas has a superiority complex. When his long-suffering secretary is able to feed into Lucas' competitive nature, he'll make any bet to prove his dominance over women. Book / 38 pages / 10 illustrations

He's the Girl They Want

"Rallies'" by Joe Six-Pack. Spencer has a great new executive job in the food service industry, but first he's got to learn the ropes of the business by waiting on tables. He just doesn't quite fit in with the cheerleader theme. Yet. Book / 63 pages / 22 illustrations

Demoted and Degraded

"Trixie the Secretary" by Angela J. Cindy didn't much like Tom Jones attitude and his advances, so when she has the opportunity to help take the wind out of his sails, she takes it. But she had no idea that it was all designed to make Tom into Trixie the secretary. Book / 87 pages / 17 illustrations

I, Candy

"Sissy Sweets" by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Inheriting his family's bakery requires this young man to become the new face of the business. A female face. Book / 45 pages / 15 illustrations

Boyz II Girlz

"The Making of the Ballroom Brats" by Joe Six-Pack. The Ballroom Brats become the newest worldwide celebrity sensation. How did four unsuspecting guys at a fast food joint become the hottest girl group in music? Book / 113 pages / 34 illustrations

His Strangest Desire

"Employee of the Month" by Joe Six-Pack. Mick is declared Employee of the Month, and he's going to find himself hurtling headlong into facing his weirdest inner desire. Book / 59 pages / 19 illustrations

Hard Time or High Heels

"I'm Turning into My Mother" by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Colby got deep into debt to a local gangster. Before long, he's on the arm of that very same gangster as his reluctant girlfriend. Book / 75 pages / 20 illustrations

Seriously Skirted

"The Show Piece" by KK. Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Mel finds work at a clinic as a secretary. He slowly begins to fit to role. Book / 75 pages / 19 illustrations

From Mister to Sister

Story by Melissa N., illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Dan just wanted to help guide his girlfriend's sister out of her depression. Instead, he's being guided out of his manhood. Book / 84 pages / 24 illustrations

The Russian Girl

Story by Melissa N., illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Casey's wife has had enough of watching him kill himself with work, so she forces him out of his comfort zone... Into the life of a female stripper. Book / 196 pages / 30 illustrations

Swindled into Skirts

"Beta Male" by Joe Six-Pack. Kyle inherited a multi-million dollar mansion in southern California. He begins to adjust to the Cali lifestyle, but his adjustments seems to have a decidedly feminine flavor to them. Book / 78 pages / 23 illustrations

Stories of the Supernatural

A Change for the Better

"Do-Overs" by Joe Six-Pack. Evan wants a chance to do over his biggest mistake. He gets the chance, but he keeps wanting his new life to be a little bit better than the last. Book / 59 pages / 18 color illustrations

Changed and Rearranged

"Wrongs Make Wright" By Joe Six-Pack. Chris and Matt were rivals. Then, Matt decided to show everyone how smart he truly was by impersonating a teacher. But the disguise becomes more and more real, much to Chris' dismay. Book / 74 pages / 19 illustrations

From Pals to Gals

From the files of TGStories.com: "Mandate of the People" By Joe Six-Pack. Teens Jeremy and Stewart are good friends, but a bit thick in the noggin. When they jokingly nominate each other for Prom Queen, they slowly become the perfect candidates, thanks to some magic. Book / 45 pages / 16 illustrations

A High-Heeled Halloween

Story & art by Joe Six-Pack. A costume shop has four spooky tales to tell this Halloween, where the price you pay for your costume is far more than money. Book / 128 pages / 34 illustrations

Crossed Fiction

If the Shoes Fit

"Hand Me Downs" By KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Sydney is a teen who is just trying to make it through the summer with no money. He finds himself wearing hand-me-downs from his sister, and that takes his life in a whole new direction. Book / 98 pages / 30 illustrations

Sisters for the Summer

"Camp Counseling" By Joe Six-Pack. Brock McCade always thought of himself as a real man, or at least he would be one, someday. After summer camp, he's no longer so sure. Book / 76 pages / 17 illustrations

They're the Girls for the Job

"Peace and Harmony" By James J Craft. Illustrations by blackshirtboy. Pete and Harmon need jobs bad. How far would they have to go to get them? Book / 64 pages / 19 illustrations

Blondie's Lost Summer

By KK. Illustrations by Fraylim. Carl's dream summer was about to become three months of dresses, heels and makeup. Book / 159 pages / 48 illustrations

Blondie's Lost Year

By KK. Illustrations by Fraylim. Book Two in the Blondie Series. Carl's trip to Florida has been horrible enough, trapped in dresses and makeup. Now, high school has presented a whole new level of humiliation for him. Book / 221 pages / 52 illustrations

Blondie He's Not

Story by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Mark got a job at a salon, and fell in love with one of the customers. Problem was that customer was Candi "Blondie" Wethers, and what happened to Candi was about to happen to Mark. Book / 151 pages / 40 illustrations

I Never Wanted to be a Woman

"Politically Corrected" By Cheryl Lynn. Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Michael's politically active mother has decided she's going to make her hippie son over into the daughter she always wanted. Book / 64 pages / 19 illustrations

The Boy's Guide to Girlhood

Story by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Dweeb Kenny and cool Rex find themselves trapped in a Principal's twisted scheme, and only one of them is going to get out in tact. Book / 109 pages / 32 illustrations

Fashion Victims

Story by Lauren Bliss, illustrations by Fraylim. Teenage boy Jamie just needed clothes for school. Oh, he's going to get clothes for school. Just not male ones. Will he ever need male clothes again? Book / 67 pages / 26 illustrations

The Making of a Beach Bunny

Story by KK & Fraylim, illustrations by Fraylim. Before heading off to college, John wanted to spend his last normal summer at the old rental summer house with his friend Stanley. There was nothing about this summer that would be normal. Book / 134 pages / 58 illustrations

Seriously Sissified

A Family Femmed

“The Femmed Family Robinson” by James J. Craft & Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by Sortimid. The Robinson boys all had dreams of their own, once. Now they have new ones, thanks to their stepmother. Book /96 pages / 29 color illustrations

Forever Femmed

Story by James J. Craft & Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by Sortimid. “A Family Femmed’s” Deborah is still hard at work, flipping men into sissies and selling them to the highest bidder. But this time, there’s a new wrinkle. Book / 108 pages / 28 illustrations

Auntie’s Girl Time

By Cheryl Lynn. David was just a young teenage boy who wanted all the things in life a man could look forward to. His aunt, though, is going to make sure he never gets them. Book / 79 pages / 20 illustrations

Revenge of the Cheerleaders

“Pansy Cheers” By Angela J. Patrick Sears was a football player trying to sleep with every cheerleader at his small college. He’d have to pay for his conquests. Book / 116 pages / 19 illustrations

He’s Got His Mind Made Up

By James J. Craft. Illustrations by kinkyrocket. Corey has just a sliver of a chance to get into college, but that chance involves becoming his stepmother’s maid. And she wants him to fit both the role and the dress. Book / 68 pages / 16 illustrations

Fated for Femininity

Story by KK, illustrations by RocketXpert. When a web page shows Evan having sex with another boy, the poor kid is chased out of town — right into the arms of a gender therapist who has her own agenda. Book / 70 pages / 15 illustrations

Web Classics Revisited

Two Forms of ID

By Joe Six-Pack. Harvey had the unusual ability to convincingly imitate a teenage girl. In desperation, he has to use that talent to make some money. But when is enough enough? Paperback / 194 pages / text only

