

Thesis

Volume One: Creative Writing
Cooperation

Volume Two: Exegesis

Portraying The Other in Salaryman Novels and How Their Identities are Constructed

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Cooperation

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Chapter 1: Work&Experience Centre

Advertisements displayed on bicycles have become the rage, especially when many more now choose to commute by bicycle all over the country. He wasn't too sure when these stickers, which were a smaller version of those advertisements splashed across the bodies of cars and also bigger than the smaller car decals, had been manufactured. Custom-made in size and length, now these stickers carrying the characteristic blue and white font of the words 'Work&Experience Centre 2099' and a QR-code appeared on bicycle baskets, bicycle frames and bicycle wheel spokes. All those neatly parked bicycles in the bicycle park were uniformly stickered. It wasn't so bad if they were parked, but the mosaic on the wheel spokes really gave him a headache when one flashed past. He felt as though something was splitting inside him. When he saw a mosaic on a wheel spoke, he had to resist the temptation of poking through it. He refused to put the mosaic on his wheel spoke.

Anyone who registers their unique sticker advertisement number with their bicycle registration number is entitled to a pay-out of three hundred yen. Three hundred yen goes a long way for a person who is unemployed, a student who still is physically growing, or a part-timer who is just before payday—it can buy you three burgers at a fast-food place; or a decent bowl of rice topped with meat; or even a bag of pasta and two sauce packs, with a few cents to spare. This scheme first spread by word-of-mouth ten years ago, according to stories told by Hanazou's father.

Hanazou remembered that once a year, starting from when he was thirteen, he went with his siblings to the local city hall on their bicycles to get their stickers (and of course their pay-outs). They usually ordered some form of take-out on that day, like pizza or sushi. But his memory of that time was hazy as he had only just settled in this country at thirteen. As the years passed, these blue and white stickers became synonymous with the job-hunting period that could start as early as mid-summer and could last till end of spring. It did not really matter what that company was about when he was a kid, but now that he was nearing the end of his student years at university, Hanazou decided to pay more attention to the advertisements and maybe make some time to search for details about the company on the internet.

As the small blue and white advertisements swirled past him, the billboard across the street chose the correct moment to change to a blue and white advertisement depicting a tall building named 'Work&Experience Centre' before zooming out to show a map detailing their branches in five cities in the country. Pictures of people, and even kids,

showed them trying their hand at laboratory work, construction, teaching and sport umpiring while the captions rolled on past: *Can't decide on a job? Unsure of your skills and potential? Go to the Centre to try-out different jobs! 50% Discount: \$10 Entry Fee for Students and Job-seekers!! Open 10AM to 10PM.*

Hanazou looked away from the ten-second advertisement and down at the sticker on his bicycle. He took a picture of the QR-code for the first time and listened to his device which started telling him about the campaign. Hanazou wondered how many of those ear-phones wearing youngsters were also doing their job research on-the-go. The bicycle-crossing light turned green, and he carefully pedalled down the street in the direction of his accommodation.

“Anyone, including Foreigners, is welcome!! Paid internships are available and can be as short as a day or as long as 2 weeks,” his ear-phones chirped. “Providing a CV is recommended. If possible, please indicate a job industry, specialisation or skill-set. Don't worry if you are still unsure, we will help you identify your strengths and weaknesses when you experience our Centre's facilities. Walk-ins are fine but for a faster and smoother profiling, please register online before arrival. We hope to see you soon!”

Seeing that tomorrow was a free weekend—a long weekend due to the public holiday of something equivalent to Labour Thanksgiving falling on a Sunday, Hanazou decided to register at the site the moment he sat down in front of his laptop at home, before he lost his drive to try out something that he had never done before. He made a voice memo about it as he cycled past the familiar shops and houses on the way home. The Clothes and Items Recycling Centre was on the left with its blue and yellow sign, and the famous franchise of Family Restaurant was on the right with its black and yellow sign. He turned the corner when he came to the local 100 yen shop with its large and faded green sign and the scenery changed significantly. A huge expanse of fields spread out to the horizon for the next ten minutes before he came back to civilisation again. A couple of low-rise houses were grouped together next to the canal-like waterway; the waters originating from the Kobushi Mountain that was situated within the prefecture.

“I'm home,” he called out quietly to what the Japanese would call a 1K mansion. It was just an apartment with one kitchen. He was lucky to have found a slightly furnished apartment on the fifth floor of an eight-storey building at a reasonable price. Needless to say, it was one of the few taller buildings in this area. It was even only fifteen minutes from his university on his bicycle. He cleaned his shoes on the pile of junk mail just inside the entryway and took them off. He removed the sauce packs from his bento, a boxed meal that

he was lucky to buy at half-price at the supermarket on the way home, and popped it into the microwave as he switched on his laptop. Searching ‘Work&Experience 2099’ was easy enough.

“And click,” he muttered as the microwave beeped angrily. A flashy animation, mainly in blue and white flew across the screen. If the speakers were turned on, he had no doubt that trumpets and some kind of classical music would be welcoming his visit to the website. He hurried to the microwave and using a fork to pull the box out, levered it on to a small flimsy cardboard box (that used to house sticks of ice-cream but was now filled with smaller boxes)—his makeshift coaster for hot food. He grabbed a newspaper to use as a place mat—scanning the article that had the pudgy face of Mariko Supreme who had made the headlines for winning the Grand Prize in the Talk Show category at a recent Entertainment Awards Ceremony, in spite of or despite being a cross-dresser—before covering it with his makeshift coaster.

“Thank you for the food,” he said as he clapped his hands together. Breaking open the wooden chopsticks, he carefully tapped the plastic cover off the box as steam billowed out. He picked up the cover with his chopsticks and placed it on top of a plastic bag. Some drops of water diluted Mariko’s face, smudging the purple eyeshadow. Using his free hand, he browsed through the website in search for the Online Application button and the address of the nearest Centre.

He found the information after a few minutes. Leaving the internet browsers open, he held his chopsticks in his mouth by biting them and used both hands to peel open the sauce packs. Fried food isn’t fried food if you can’t enjoy it with their matching special sauces! The white one goes here and the brown one goes there. He actually hadn’t minded about this as they tasted like universal sauces but his classmates had been shocked. He cleaned his hands on a nearby napkin and brought up another browser to watch a cartoon as he enjoyed his food—he’ll fill up the online forms after he finished eating. Some specks of sauce dotted Mariko’s already diluted face as he slurped and crunched. After half of each fried food was eaten with their matching sauces, he also dipped them in both the white sauce and brown sauce. He was alone right now and could dip them however he liked!

He roughly wiped his right hand on a napkin and began to fill in his details on the form. His left hand that was occupied by the chopsticks extended its little finger from time to time to tap a key on the keyboard. As he filled in his name, Hanazou paused for a second to reflect his childhood foolishness on his insistence to call himself ‘Hanazou’. He had been influenced by a well-known comic about a monk who had superpowers and wanted to have a name meaning ‘The one-and-only monk’. But he had been confused between his first

language and the Japanese language: not only did he forget to put the possessive ‘no’ after ‘hana’, he also mistakenly thought that ‘hana’ meant ‘one’ in Japanese—it did not, but it did mean ‘one’ in his first language.

Although Hanazou was not one to religiously observe all the festivities of the public holidays, he still decided to head out after submitting the online forms. He slowly walked through streets of people, some of whom were observing the traditions, while others were watching the big screen televisions that were in shop windows or on buildings with interest as they queued up outside cafés and restaurants.

“Aso-san,” was a phrase he heard being thrown about in the wind. Who’s an arsehole? Hanazou peeled himself away from the GPS map on his device to glance at the News Flash that appeared on all the televisions all at once. ‘*ASO MOUNTAIN*’ flashed the headlines. Ah, I was mixing languages in my head again...

It was not difficult finding the way to the nearest Work&Experience Centre. Hanazou had not expected that it was just a street away from the route he normally rode home on. For the majority of the city’s population who eat meals at a set time each day, it was the pristine lunch hours, which were the best time to visit any ‘attraction’ as there would definitely be fewer visitors then. Hanazou parked his bicycle in the bicycle lots under the tall building, which he would later find out was twenty-five storeys high. He smoothed his hair that had been blown about in the wind and checked his reflection in the glass window. He bent his head down, pretending to look at something on his phone, and smiled quickly, checking his front teeth.

A strategically placed banner beside the lifts informed him that the entrance to the Work Experience Zone is at Level 9 while the entire Work Experience Zone stretched up to Level 14. A helpful guide pasted in the lift colour-coded the building into three coloured blocks—green for ‘Child’, blue for ‘Work’ and white for ‘Office’ with the exception of ‘Catering’ and ‘Parking’ which were in light pink and grey respectively, and listed the departments on each floor in big lettering as well. Of particular interest to him were the Child Development Areas on Levels 1-7, Catering on Level 8, and Human Resources on Level 20. The lifts whooshed up silently to Level 9 and dinged open with a chirpy “Welcome to the Work Experience Zone!” as the iconic blue and white logo came into view.

There were a few touch-screens, probably voice-activated, embedded into the corridor on one side, while two staff members armed with smaller devices stood in the

middle of the archway of job dreams. Hanazou reported his name to the two women who smiled in obvious relief at his pre-registration. Something seemed a little strange about the women but Hanazou attributed it to the trick of light under the archway. The women instructed him to remember to report or type his name at every station he went to as well as to fill in an indicator of how well he liked the job. This was all for the sake of profiling his Personality, Skills and Job Compatibility. After Hanazou handed over the money for the entrance fee, he received an 8-hour water-resistant ink stamp on his forearm. To well-wishes of “Have fun!” and “Do your best!”, he entered the place of dreams, as the women wiped their brows surreptitiously while congratulating each other on a job well done.

It was clean and sterile. Soft waiting-room music played in the background. From what he could see, rooms upon rooms with see-through windows lined the whole place. Some visitors were observing through the windows, while others participated in some activities in rooms that had a red ‘In-session’ sign. Hanazou looked at the map in his hand; He was in the Popular Job Zone, where age-old and common jobs like teaching, data-entering and waitressing were on display for try-outs. Well, he had to start somewhere. There were many rooms for teaching; some had signs like ‘Language’, ‘Mathematics’, ‘Dance’ and ‘Drawing’ on their white door. Hanazou picked the nearest door that had an activity starting in two minutes and typed his name in the device at the door. He sat down in one of the five chairs and watched the one minute demonstration video loop itself.

“Why do I have to learn how to teach from a young person and a woman at that?” Hanazou heard an old man complain as soon as the staff demonstrator stepped forward almost from the shadows. Hanazou looked around and found the source of dissent in the form of a forty-something man, whose head had the starting indications of hairline reduction. Hanazou had to stifle a snort as his identification skills of ‘old man’ were spot on. The demonstrator’s careful blank look was replaced by a business smile as she launched into her explanation of the class. Hanazou felt that something was a little odd with her expression, but he did not have time to dwell on that as his personalised, five-minute topic was delivered to his personal device.

They now had five minutes of preparation time to think of a way to teach their topics to this class of ‘students’. Based on his skill set, Hanazou chose English as his topic, and he had to teach two out of the five given words in five minutes. Meanings, sentence samples and pronunciations were all provided. It was a contest about the method of delivery: could the audience understand the concepts, pronounce them properly and remember the words after just five-minutes? Hanazou decided to use a few of the methods that the demonstration video suggested: story-telling and repetition. At a glance, while his

target words seemed easy, they were also abstract. His five words were ‘Love’, ‘Death’, ‘Life’, ‘Purpose’, ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Despair’. He chose ‘Death’ and ‘Life’, by linking them together in a cheesy sentence that he had heard somewhere—‘Where there is Life, there is Death’. He would have to explain the reason behind the sentence. Associating the concepts with pictures would make it easier to visualise and remember as well, so Hanazou pre-loaded three pictures on to his device.

DINGGG.

Five minutes were up. By a random draw, the old man was to present first. He sauntered up, slicked his thinning hair over his crown, a smart suit accented his arrogant glare. Although Hanazou was not yet well-versed in suits, the old man’s suit looked clean and sleek. Surprisingly, the old man chose the same concepts as Hanazou but his language of instruction was mainly Japanese. Although his pronunciation of the English words was native, maybe it was because he was Japanese or maybe his angle of approach was not well-thought out, because his five-minute lecture was a torture as he arrogantly droned on and on about the concepts. He did not encourage ‘student’ participation nor did he even bother to interact with them. He just continued feeding answers as though the audience members were brainless robots. It seemed like he was trying to impress the others with his vast knowledge. Hanazou noticed that the demonstrator glancing a few times at a wall panel, sometimes looking down at her device, sometimes putting on a professional smile.

The corners of Hanazou’s mouth twitched as he resisted an urge to yawn and reached for his water bottle instead. The old man’s droning was cut-off by the grace of the five-minute bell and a quick feedback from the audience begun. The old man was dumbfounded at the poor feedback as he had not expected that the two remaining participants would unanimously agree that it was a boring lecture that did not adequately emphasise the main points of the topic nor address the objective of the exercise within five-minutes. Before the old man could spew out further dissent than his face already showed, the demonstrator calmly provided reasons of non-success, pointers for improvement and even some strengths of his presentation.

“You are wonderfully knowledgeable about the topics and extremely fluent in the language that you used to present in,” the demonstrator smiled politely. “However, given that it is a short presentation that one had to think up quickly, it is quite a challenging task. While your expansive knowledge would be great for a long lecture, it may not be a good format to use for a short presentation that has a five-minute limit. The audience in this room is not the same as that in a school or university where students usually prepare for a lecture beforehand, so unless the audience has prior knowledge of the topics, it may be better to

use less technical terms or to use more time to explain what the technical terms mean. As technology evolves the audience changes as well and so we presenters must keep up with the times in order to capture the attention of an audience that may have trouble focussing on a long explanation.”

The man seemed like he had something to say—

“This is, after all, a place to improve yourself and find out your strengths and weaknesses,” the demonstrator concluded calmly. “You learn something new every day, and by putting yourself out there and trying new things in the Work&Experience Centre; you can further hone your skills. Let’s give a round of applause for the wonderful effort of Mister...”

Moreover, even though the rest of the participants gave presentations that were more interesting than the old man’s, the demonstrator was objective and impartial to all. She highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of all presentations, and congratulated them for trying hard. Even though the demonstrator was a woman, she did a marvellous job mediating and facilitating the session while standing her ground and remaining objective and impartial. Although unsure of what the other participants felt at the end of the presentations, Hanazou felt that he had learnt so many things about presentations in the span of twenty-five minutes that could be applied to every aspect of his work life, from interviews down to product sales.

After that frenzied twenty-five minute note-taking session, Hanazou decided to relax for a bit and explore the other rooms and levels. He wanted to observe and maybe try his hand at specialised jobs that were of interest to him, like construction work, Italian cooking and animation. He put his notebook in his bag and wandered along the corridors, sometimes stopping to try his hand at cooking (because he was hungry), sometimes pausing to earn Centre Points by ‘working’ at a job like data-entry or pasting stamps on envelopes, and other times halting to observe through the windows. For each activity he did, whether it was just pure observation, or hands-on learning in a class or on the job, he could earn Points that could be exchanged for things like food, drinks, future discounted entry into the Centre and so on. His device tracked his progress in a stage-like mastery system, similar to those in games, awarding him stars or points for ‘clearing’ a class or job, while also displaying his overall ‘total score’, ‘industry scores’ and ‘skill scores’. In the span of two hours, he had only tried five jobs and observed six out of the five hundred jobs available in the five broad industry sectors. A message appeared with a ‘Ping!’: ‘Dear Job-seeker, you

have not had a rest for two hours. It is advised that you rest. Food and drink can be bought at the rest areas located at...’

Ooyama closed the door and switched off the observation windows after the last participant bowed and left the room. Except for the initial unwilling old man, the rest of the ‘students’ seemed to be a good fit for the company—‘short and succinct’ was how the company held their meetings and proposal presentations. Drawing up their ‘score cards’ on his device, he graded the latest batch of students and digitally stamped an additional flower pattern on two of the cards. He stifled a snort—the flower pattern was such a ‘Japanese’ way of grading something, which was just a little redundant when he also had to write in numerical scores. Maybe it made the good scores easier to identify. Being careful not to rub off his make-up by mistake, he massaged his temple in an attempt to relieve his headache. It was probably time for lunch. He counted the number of panels from the main door and pressed the heel of his hand against it. The door popped open and slid sideways to reveal a small hidden room that had space enough for a monitor, desk, chairs, and five people.

“And that is what you’re supposed to do in the Popular Job Zone, Kotori,” Ooyama said to the person inside.

Kotori looked up from his notes and device and nodded. He had been compiling a list of mediating sentences, clear and concise instructions, positive feedback and suggestions that Ooyama had used just a while ago. He has also quickly jotted down the flow of the ‘lesson’—what Ooyama opened with and then what activity came next.

Kotori had started observing and working from Level 1 two months ago. Now he had progressed to Level 9. The Popular Zones in the Child and Work sections actually enhanced general skills that could be used in almost any sector of the workforce. However, as he had just arrived fresh from the Child section where workload, speech patterns and job scopes were slightly different, he had to recalibrate himself. The only unchanging factor was that Ooyama was his mentor since Level 1 and would be his mentor till he cleared all twenty-four Levels of the building. Sometimes Kotori wondered if taking one week to learn the work in one Level of the building was too little time, but all he could do now was to learn and absorb. Kotori checked his long hair in his reflection on the monitor before saving his work progress. He stretched his fingers as though miming the actions of a children’s song as he sighed.

“Shall we go for lunch?”

“Hang on, let me have a breather.”

Kotori pushed a button and the door popped shut, enveloping the room in a soft blue glow. At another push of a button, a capsule slid out from one of the walls and Ooyama climbed into it.

“Twenty minutes?” Kotori asked. Ooyama nodded.

Kotori switched the control to ‘Preservation’; the words before it were too faded to make out in the dim light. He then summoned another capsule, setting it at the same control, and climbed in as well. This capsule looked slightly newer—the word ‘Make-up’ shined brightly before the word ‘Preservation’.

The hatch closed on Kotori with a soft hiss.

“That was terrible,” he heard Ooyama whisper over the capsule communication.

“Forget it,” Kotori replied, as the smell of lavender and calming music filled his capsule.

“But there was one person, Hanazou was it? Who was quite...” Ooyama’s voice trailed off.

“Quite... okay?” Kotori finished.

There was no reply.

Kotori sighed, set the timer for twenty minutes and closed his eyes.

Hanazou wiped his hands on his striped handkerchief as he walked out of the high-tech toilet that was clean and sanitised. He had needed a break after trying out fifteen jobs and observing twelve. According to the tutorial in the device, he would get some results from trying out at least twenty-five jobs in a single sector, of course, the more he did, the more data could be derived and a better Job Profiling could be done. He sank down into the cushioned sofa that was set into the walls outside the Men’s toilets. He was regretting that he had ignored the system’s message.

The smell of citrus assaulted him before he heard someone say, “Are you all right?” A tall woman in a long dress and a long-sleeved sweater bent down towards him. A smaller woman walked out behind the taller woman and stood beside her. Hanazou nodded. It was not as though he had to meet the target of twenty-five jobs in one sector in just a day during a single visit—that was what the Points were for. Hanazou looked up and noticed a staff pass with the name ‘Ooyama’ hanging in front of his face. The two women were muttering something to each other.

“How many points have you accumulated?” the small woman knelt down to ask him. Hanazou handed her his device. He noticed a light smell of lavender coming from her. The small woman looked up at the tall woman and nodded.

“Actually, there are point-based Rest and Recreational facilities here as well, although those are not widely advertised. For customers, you can use your points to rest in a lounge, sleep-pod, or even an internet/manga café. As you have a lot of points, if you would like a better place to rest, do use your points for that,” the tall woman said as she transferred a map to his device with a flick of a finger that was manicured simply in a transparent shine. “It won’t do to tire yourself out. Don’t push yourself too much. You’re doing fine,” as she gave Hanazou a pat on the shoulder. Hanazou sank a little deeper into the sofa.

“Maybe you’re feeling under the weather as the snowstorm is coming. There’s quite a big temperature difference compared to yesterday.”

“Between you and me, the Centre is actually planning to give each visitor who’s here today a free voucher for 2-3 hours of Experiencing Time as compensation for advising visitors to leave early in order to prepare for the upcoming storm. So please don’t feel pressured to stay on if you aren’t feeling that good and do make full use of the Rest and Recreational area,” The small woman quietly pushed a few chocolates into his hand before getting up.

The two women bowed and walked away carefully. The scent of lavender and citrus lingered in their wake.

“I wonder what’s on the menu today,” one of them said softly.

“I’m more worried about the storm. I’m worried that my hair would—”

The tall woman suddenly placed a hand on the smaller woman’s arm.

Hanazou watched their silhouettes become smaller as they walked down the corridor, past a security guard who suddenly appeared. He saw them exchange imperceptible nods. He still felt that something was off about them. After closing his eyes for a moment as another wave of nausea washed over him, he swiped his finger across his device. He was in luck—there was a point-based rest area near the position of where the security guard was standing at the end of the corridor. Hanazou decided to replenish his energy with some food before heading home. He’d come back to continue next time.

He carefully folded his handkerchief, stood up slowly and placed it back in his back-pocket. Hanazou walked towards the security guard who smiled when he saw Hanazou approach.

Kotori was extremely thankful for the many high-tech things this high-tech building had. But he was still a little hesitant about walking into the Ladies’.

“This way,” Ooyama led.

They did walk into the Ladies’... Kotori’s steps faltered.

The Ladies’ opened up to a huge area of sinks and mirrors, and the toilets were tastefully hidden behind a wall of sinks and a partitioning wall. There was no one there at the moment. Kotori almost heaved a sigh of relief. Ooyama marched up to a lonely sink in the corner, swivelling around to make sure no one was watching and then disappeared after a scanner scanned his fingerprints and cornea.

“Hurry up,” came a disembodied voice. “I really need to go, so if you aren’t coming, I’m leaving you there.”

Kotori nervously stood in the spot Ooyama vacated. He glanced at the mirror above the sink—the image was slightly crooked. He flinched as he saw the red light from the scanner zoom towards his hand and eyes. And then he was jolted to the side into another room.

A small white and blue logo smiled up at him as he un-plastered himself from the cushioned wall. It was a stickman with three strands of hair. On one strand of hair, there was a ribbon.

“There’s a short-cut to the canteen through here,” Ooyama emerged from a stall and washed his hands. “Unfortunately, during renovations, they forgot to build a better entrance to this toilet from this floor.”

“Is—is this the only toilet we can use?” Kotori asked.

“No, there’s one for every two floors, and there’s entry-ways on each floor. Although some are harder to get into than others.”

“Tha—that’s quite a luxury...?”

“I suppose,” Ooyama glanced at Kotori’s pale face. “It’s because we entered from the public area which has Ladies’. You don’t have to if you use the other entry-ways that require staff access.”

Kotori visibly brightened.

Ooyama whipped out his device the moment he got to the building’s staff canteen to send a message to the staff at the Rest and Recreation area. Then he and Kotori sat down as delicately as befitting a woman. They did not particularly want to go outside in that get-up.

It was because the company building was an oasis, a place where they were dressed-up for work. Yes, work. Maybe instinctively they did not want to cross the threshold of their mental limitations by passing through the boundary of the safe zone marked by the building's glass doors. Going home in that get-up was another matter altogether.

Kotori pulled out the notes he made earlier and read through them again as Ooyama ordered their food from the tablet attached to the table. They had to be careful not to ruin their make-up while eating. Ooyama had taught Kotori the trick to this a few weeks ago: Before you are able to master eating daintily, the faster way is to eat something that does not ruin your make-up. It was that simple. In other words, no noodles, nothing too sticky and long like cheese on a big slice of pizza, or natto which stretched more than cheese and stuck to everything, no soups that do not provide a soup spoon, no chocolate-powdered bread that puffed everywhere and made one's teeth black and so on. Kotori had devised an even easier way to remember it—eat everything that comes in small bite-sizes, and avoid things that cannot be served or cut into bite-sizes before consumption. However, eating was the easy thing, Kotori mused as he finished reading his notes. It was trying not to sweat that was the hardest.

He looked up at Ooyama and asked him for some pointers regarding the Popular Job Zone.

Then he asked the question that worried him the most, “How do you not sweat under pressure? Or when things start to go... bad?”

“Practice,” Ooyama replied. “And maybe conditioning. If you do not feel stressed when that situation occurs, you might have a clearer head to disperse the situation.”

Kotori held back a sigh. There were no short-cuts to life any more than that.

A man in white pushed a food trolley up to them and unloaded their lunch. Several small plates of small pieces of karaage, steamed prawns and diced vegetables accompanied tofu and mixed grain rice. A sauce for the prawns and mayonnaise for the chicken came in separate bowls. The lunch set Ooyama ordered also came with the option of having a soup spoon. He had looked closely at the pictures in the menu.

Kotori and Ooyama positioned themselves carefully to be at the most optimal angle from the table; they did not want to drop a piece of food on their clothes. While keeping their knees together and feet tucked in, they ate as daintily as they could and tried not to open their mouths too wide. Thinking back to their staff training days, Ooyama and Kotori were yet to be at the level of dainty eating of slipping a small square of tofu into one's mouth using chopsticks without the food touching one's lips. Lipstick was one of the worst

inventions of make-up ever. The two men let out a collective sigh, exchanged a glance and started eating.

Kotori was glad that Ooyama had the same eating pattern as he did—having a few small servings of food several times a day. It would have been worse if he had to walk around the place trying to find the staff canteen, then sit and eat by himself. Kotori had been tired of eating the same thing for lunch and dinner every day or starving himself by not eating breakfast and dinner just so that he could eat the set lunch with the rest of the employees in previous companies. He remembered Ooyama saying something along the lines of “Just because I’m big and tall, it doesn’t mean that I eat five bowls of rice at every meal. It’s not like I’m in a sports club...” when they had that conversation. They both had it tough. Eating was not that easy after all, but at least they had unconventional options in this company’s canteen. And they were thankful for it. And also for the special toilets and preparation areas that were only for the use of people in their unique get-ups where they could touch up their make-up and dressing.

While the pain of eating during work hours had changed for the better in some sense; that was not the only thing that was different. Kotori felt like his entire life had changed from the moment he had arrived at the company.

Two months ago, Kotori had first woken up to the shaking of the earth on his second day of work.

Chapter 2: It's even harder to wake up on the second day

Beyond the soft white curtains, the first sun made its attempt to filter through the mist to reach the window. According to the digital clock at the top left-hand corner of the television that was showing the morning program 'JIP!', it was barely past 6.30 am. The two fluffy brown dog mascots made their bounding appearance, dragging the man, who was smiling forcedly, around on the other end of their leash. Despite that, they were friendly and allowed everyone and anyone to cuddle up to them. Or maybe it was pre-recorded and the bloopers were cut...

The television cast out different coloured lights as it went into commercials. Not one bird or animal was up yet—when suddenly sharp dings broke through the muted television's disco lights. A few squawks and fluttering followed after. As if to seal the moment, the floor started swaying as though it had one too many 'fresh and spicy~' beers. The reverberations shook through the thin futon that someone was lying on, rattled the television and growled onwards and outwards. This prompted the previously motionless hand to smack at the rectangle that was dinging and forced the formerly prone body to curl up tighter with the sheet that was used as a blanket. Other than the subdued rattling and growling, the only other sound was quick breathing and fast heartbeats.

The person who was on the futon which was in the middle of the small apartment was actually considering a few things: 'Is my life going to end?', 'When will it stop?', 'Should I slide over to hide under the TV table?' and 'Thank goodness it isn't as bad as the one in Mito when I was on the fourteenth floor then. All-hail first floor living, BANZAI!! Now only the floor shakes, and not the entire building.' Slightly crusted eyes were peeled open to squint at the television.

~~EARTHQUAKE WARNING!! EARTHQUAKE WARNING!! 6.2 magnitude at Nagano~~ flashed garishly and chirpily at the top of screen, accompanied by some shrill dings. A different set of dings in some nostalgic melody prompted the person to sit up politely on his shins automatically.

"Uuuhh, Kotori speaking."

"What? Are you still asleep? Get up!!"

"Huhh, huhh? Oh, Oh—" Kotori looked at the caller ID to make sure that he had identified that voice correctly, "Ooyama!"

"Have you forgotten what day it is?!"

Kotori uncomfortably tilted his neck backwards, swayed a little on his ankles and peeked at the ceiling calendar which had the current day and date lit up in white. It came as a surprise that it had not fallen on him just seconds before. Oh, the wonders of the technically advanced unit Japanese housing. It scared him to think of what else could be invented or what new forms of surveillance could be installed. He squinted. Tuesday. 30! Three and Zero twinkled joyfully back at him. He fumbled for some eye drops for the dryness that all the squinting had caused.

Kotori sat up straighter in a hurry and placed one hand, with its fingers closed respectfully into his palm, on one knee. He levelled his shoulders and gripped the phone with his other hand as carefully and politely as he could muster at 6.31AM in the morning. He managed to get a cramp after one second. That's what sleeping on a thin futon does to you. Or maybe it was the lack of adequate stretching before and after riding his bicycle.

"Urgh," he managed to say as he writhed and convulsed in prickled waves. The phone slipped a bit as his calves twitched.

"Well, then! I'll see you in ten minutes."

"Orh."

Ooyama, seemingly being Ooyama, had decided everything again without having heard anything from Kotori other than the few weird noises one is prone to make after being rudely awakened by a poorly chosen alarm tone and a sudden earthquake. Or maybe he was just being considerate; he knew that Kotori was not in the right frame of mind to make decisions after such a rough morning.

To say that it was only a rough morning today will be an understatement. He had endured a twenty-four hour international flight. Then he waited for twenty minutes for his luggage to appear on the luggage conveyer belt, because he had been the first one to check in, so his bags were the last to come out. After which, he took a two hour or so local train in trepidation and with all his luggage to get to Mito. He reached at two in the morning. Next he survived three days of training while half-asleep and another three hour car ride to his new temporary abode. When jet-lag finally caught up to him, he was melting under the day temperature, freezing during the night, and he had hardly slept at all since his neighbours' baby cried all the time every day and the other neighbour's alarm rang at 5AM every day. Those walls were sure damn thin. He had just moved here during his few days of rest, and it was already time to get to work.

The first day of work last week had been easy—filled with introductions and more introductions, explanations and maps, and a very brief stint of helping a project group with translation. It was finally the second day of work. He still was not used to it. No, in fact, he had never ever done this before. The second day of work would be his first time... and who was this Ooyama person again? Not to mention, it was a weird first name. Did that person actually look like a big mountain? After a few seconds, a blurred face and tall structure appeared in his mind. That person that Kotori had thought of actually did look like what his name indicated—a big mountain.

Ooyama was his assigned senior mentor whose only commonality with Kotori was the last digit of his employee ID: They both had an odd number. Kotori was unsure why this was important. The early events in the morning must have jarred his memory. ‘JIP!’ carried on merrily with bright child-friendly colours on television. Cartoonish clouds, suns and futon beaters twinkled and swivelled. The mid-afternoon will be a good time to air futons, with the highest temperature at twenty-five and the lowest temperature at fifteen.

Old news flashed by in disturbing pictures as a wrap-up to the end of the program, things that he had seen almost every day since it happened: the same-old pictures and videos of an erupting volcano in a nearby area, the same-old people wearing masks to avoid breathing in the ash, the same houses collapsing from the debris as old people sat on their damaged porch looking sad and dejected, and the same-old video of police trying to squash peaceful protests in Hong Kong in a mess of pushing, trampling and banner waving. JIP!’s clock ticked on beside the still flashing Earthquake Warning sign.

Kotori nodded to himself and made some mental notes. Then he waded on his knees through the mail-order packages and food wrappers that were strewn on the floor to get to the inner door that had swung open the moment the earthquake started. He could feel a cold draft coming in from beyond the door via the kitchen window. He checked to see if anything had fallen from the loft and quickly picked up the rubbish on the floor. He should have tied the garbage bag up last night. He was glad that Ooyama didn’t live on the same floor. At least, he had the decency not to ring the doorbell or kick the door at this ghastly hour. Maybe he was waiting at the front entrance... That would be cold. Kotori walked into the kitchen and washed up at the sink.

As Kotori quickly freshened up and picked up his bag at 6.39AM, he also reflected that he had not arrived in the country at a good time. It had been a full-on year, what with the outbreaks of Ebola, following the games in Sochi, watching the damning documentary about how whaling came to be banned in Japan, and the start of the terror known as ISIS. He even flew in just a few days after the protests in Hong Kong and, to be on the safe side,

the flight transfer was redirected. It was not a good start for the beginning of a journey and a new life in a different country. Kotori sighed as he bent down and took out two squeeze-bags of energy-supplement jelly drinks from the small fridge. On his way out, he remembered to grab his raincoat that he had hung on the shower curtains' pole.

Kotori, with a hurriedly stuffed backpack, opened his apartment door to see Ooyama leaning against the opposite wall. His hand clenched in reflex which nearly squeezed out the jelly of energy-supplement drink from its squeeze-bag. It was only the second day, but he was suddenly full of appreciation for this Ooyama, who had been and still is such a nice guy. Kotori greeted him, made a few bows, apologised for his lateness and hurried to press the lift button. Surprisingly, Ooyama brushed the conventional apologies and formalities away with a small smile. 'As expected of someone who had experience of studying and working abroad,' Kotori thought. Kotori handed a packet of energy-supplement drink to Ooyama.

Ooyama was not feeling that good either. Various thoughts swirled through his mind as he waited for Kotori. He was at the point in his life where he had to consider what to do with, well, the rest of his life. He was at that uncertain age. It wasn't that he was unsatisfied right now nor was he unconfident that he would not be able to maintain his body and features for another ten or twenty years. Maybe it was time to move on again. He had had spent a few years at a different Centre and was now close to the end of his third year here. Another change of scenery would be nice. Maybe that's why he was suddenly assigned to be a Mentor—that sly company CEO!

Ooyama rubbed his nose as he leaned against the wall and patted his pockets for a smoke. The chills that were going to descend from the coming typhoon hung ominously in the air, although the sky seemed suspiciously blue. Ooyama looked up at the smoke detector. Nah. He took his hand away and examined it. It was not as weathered as before as he had been applying moisturiser diligently every day. He made sure to do finger exercises too in order to tone them. 'Why am I putting in so much effort...? Maybe I really do like the work after all...' he thought.

Ooyama pushed the sleeve of his jacket up to reveal a simple watch on his left wrist. Eight minutes had passed since he gave Kotori a wake-up call. He had only seen Kotori once, last week, during the first meeting. He only remembered that Kotori looked really like a battered, tired and small bird—embodying his name, Kotori. Like 'Ooyama', 'Kotori' was a weird first name too. It would be some time later before Ooyama realised that

Kotori's name was Koto-ri, not Ko-tori, which did not mean 'small bird' at all! In fact, Kotori's real name was Zheng Li which meant 'the string instrument, Zheng' and 'pear'. 'Zheng Li' was un-pronounceable in the Japanese language and Kotori didn't know anyone who could pronounce it either, so he decided to go with a Japanese pronunciation of his name. When Kotori was deciding how the characters of his name should be read using Japanese pronunciation, he chose Kotori instead of Sourì because he didn't want it to be homonymous with 'Sorry'.

Ooyama returned to this train of thought: Why would someone working overseas be willing to come back? Has the situation not gotten any better? But it's not like it'd be much different here either. In fact, it might be more anal and rigid here... At least the good point was that Kotori was not overweight and had a nice face.

Most of the employees have a nice face. In fact, all of them do. And they usually have nice figures too. Ooyama racked his brains to think of someone who was not like that. Ah. There were a few, but they shaped up after their internships or after some rigid training, or rather, the company nutritionists and the company personal trainers shaped them up. Fairly few were still slightly prosperous as one had to take their age and 'seniority' into consideration. There was no doubt however, that those people were definitely healthier and had a much reduced risk of the diseases that came with seniority. It also greatly helped that services and facilities were all free for an intern and employees paid really discounted fees.

Ooyama searched his heart and mind, and felt that he was actually quite content working for this company... Except for the hidden membership of that special department. That was really quite a radical idea. It'd be hard to see immediate results from it. However, it had been in place for nearly ten years as well; an idea too ahead of the times, and ten years was still not enough for the times to catch up to it—

"Geh urgh," Ooyama choked on his saliva when he jerked his head when he saw the door in front of him open suddenly, snapping him out of his musings. Should I submit a transfer request or quit? The light coloured hair of Kotori's peeked out from the gap.

"Eek," Kotori gasped as the door rebounded on its anti-burglar long metal hook. He closed the door quickly. A muffled metallic thump later, Kotori managed to open the door fully so that he could get out. Ooyama got a better look at Kotori as Kotori's flushed face drained of colour at the sight of him. I've got a reason to stay on for the next six months at least. Trying not to laugh at Kotori's obvious agitation, he greeted Kotori quietly but brightly and accepted the proffered jelly drink squeeze-bag thing with a smile. It was slightly cold.

The mist hung over the day like a low cloud. There might be a chance of rain later that day, which would weigh down the autumn flowers' pollen particles that filled the air, and hopefully, the particles would stay down. It was hard to see and too cold to talk. They were glad for the squeeze-drink which gave them some needed calories and provided an excuse not to make small talk. There would not be much to say as nothing could be seen at the moment.

'Did you sleep well?' would come off as being too personal. 'Have you adjusted to Japan?' might be a question that was still too early to ask. 'Did you wait long?' or 'What time did you get up?' would likely produce polite lies that would make Kotori squirm in further apology. It was only a few minutes but such questions swarmed through their tired brains endlessly. What would be the socially acceptable thing to say in this situation? By the end of the awkward lift ride, exiting the building and seeing the mist, unknown to each other, they decided unanimously that saying nothing at all would be a better choice. They passed the five minute walk to the office in sucked silence. The faint smell of sugared jelly hung stalely in their wake.

The imposing building loomed out of the mist. It was one of the many grey-marbled concrete-looking high-rise buildings that this area had. Across the road, the pink neon sign that looked like AEON but according to the Japanese was actually EON flashed faintly. The street sign nearby indicating Yukoku-ji Temple faintly reflected a pink light. As it was still early in the morning, the EON department store was still shut. Bicycles swirled past them in a hurry. Hunched and with elbows tucked in, people in suits and uniforms shook their heads slightly in disapproval. Cars crept and sped along the roads. Smart drivers took care to avoid some puddles that were left behind in the aftermath of the rain that signalled the nearing arrival of Typhoon Vongfong while others created waterfalls. Kotori was glad he brought his raincoat to shield himself from the reluctant remains of the abnormal weather. Ooyama was already prepared—he was wearing water-proof clothes. He actually looked like someone who was prepared to climb a mountain in the rain. But it wasn't safe these days, especially at Mount Ontake where the volcanic ash has become mushy due to the rain.

Some early risers were already bringing their children to school while waving neon flags and walking in a single file. Others were bringing out rubbish bags and placing them either under nets or in metal cages. It was also kind of new to Kotori, but nothing in particular needed an additional explanation from Ooyama. People were just going about their lives in the way that they were taught or the way that they thought it should be lived.

To others, he was sure that they just looked like normal salaryman on their way to work. They finally reached the automatic glass doors which slid open slowly. They showed their passes to the security guard who nodded. They rode another lift up. If something had to be said about the lift, then it only had three buttons. '1', '35' and '60'.

Ding.

Ooyama turned to Kotori once they were safely within their office doors, "What's that on your back? You look like you're going camping, not like I'm any better. Hahaha..."

"A..A few clothes and shoes and mak-mak-makeup..." Kotori stuttered, hurriedly removing the squeeze-drink from his mouth with a small pop.

"Didn't I say not to worry about that? You'll learn over time, and there are other staff who'd like to help us with that."

"O-oh. I forgot."

"As expected." Ooyama gave Kotori a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"You'll get used to it real soon!" Ooyama grinned.

Kotori reeled. It was stunning. He tried not to faint. Why were all the employees here so good-looking? So well-built? So strong? So... Kotori tried to give himself a once-over. He knew he was plain. He was only around average height, which was small and short in comparison to others. He didn't have that much muscle. He was lucky enough that he didn't have a beer belly. He only had two pecs; he swept his gaze on Ooyama's upper body, he was certain Ooyama had at least ten. He wondered how he even had been hired in the first place. Did he fail to meet some criteria or was it because he failed that he was hired? He tightened his grip on his backpack straps, sucking his squeeze-drink determinedly.

Kotori followed Ooyama's dazzling pace through endless doors and similar-looking corridors, failing to remember the way again. They quickly reached a door which had a piece of paper attached to it with a lone sticky-tape, Changing Rooms. A 'Changing Room' is a normal, functional room that any kind of organisation will, most likely, have. It is a place where metal lockers line up from wall to wall and there is a curtain or shade to change behind. It is a place to put your stuff like bags, clothes or food. If you are lucky, it might be combined with part of a small rest area with chairs and tables. It might be the equivalent of a combination of a locker room, lounge and tea room. That's what a normal person would expect of a normal Changing Room. That's what a normal Changing Room looked like in the Japanese university that he went to. But that was what Kotori did not see. As his jaw dropped, the door closed behind him resolutely. He will be contained inside for the next two hours. As the door closed softly behind them, the paper wafted up for a split-second to reveal the original name-plate on the door: Make-up Area.

Chapter 3: Masks

saku.Ra and yo.zora are companies under Sky. They both have positively exponential statistics of revenue and growth, and are also famous for having good working environments and good-looking staff. The brochure that Hanazou was holding stated.

And as pictured in the brochure, the men and women who walked along the corridors, the lobbies, the rooms, all had the air of achievement and beauty. *Join us for a better future!* There was a smaller print near the bottom of the A4 brochure and Hanazou peered carefully at it: *You may even find the One!* The one what? Was it a job or a person? Hanazou's finger tapped thoughtfully on that phrase.

The candidates fidgeted as they waited in similar sleek 'office' suits on uniformly drab chairs that lined a long corridor, waiting for their interview. It was as though everyone had bought their work clothes from the same clothing shop—oh right, in this country, there were only two major clothing shops that specialised in affordable work clothes. The air was slightly damp as it was raining. Umbrellas sat wetly in long plastic bag holders as some candidates sponged up their sweat with dainty handkerchiefs and flicked some rain off their shoulders.

“Which company do you want to work for?” someone whispered.

“Of course, saku.Ra! The women there are top of the top. And all of them are beauties!” came the whispered answer. “You?”

“Of course, yo.zora! The men there are so handsome!” squealed the fan-girl's reply.

Hanazou stifled a snort. How could they not know that there were no women in saku.Ra and no men in yo.zora? Wait, was he the only one who knew? He looked at the other candidates. The whispers about the employees in saku.Ra and yo.zora carried on. Well, he didn't really believe his father's words either. He looked carefully at the brochure again. His eyebrows drew together.

“Number 69! You may enter now,” a woman with a clipboard called.

Hanazou stood up, brushed off the creases in his striped suit, and entered the big oak doors.

Ooyama and Kotori looked up from their papers to see a young man in a grey and black suit that was tastefully striped with some silver and well-polished leather shoes walk in semi-confidently. He gave off the air that he knew what he was doing and why he wanted to work at the company.

The first few questions were standard ones: what are your skills (Hanazou had many), what can you contribute to these companies (Hanazou's creativity), which company would you like to work in (no preference—there were a few raised eyebrows at this), what do you feel about gender equality (not much, as long it doesn't get in the way of his work), why do you still want to work for this company even after you have done an internship here (it seems to have an inclusive, non-discriminative culture and he would not need as much training as new staff would—there were collective nods that this), and then came the million-dollar question that had been saved for the last for the candidates who had a good evaluation from their internship,

“Wha-what are your opinions about cro-cross-dressing?” a small pretty woman asked.

Well, she looked small only because the people she was sitting between were tall. A tall woman beside her elbowed the small woman a little. The small woman put down the paper she was using to hide her face and smiled at Hanazou uncertainly. Her face was red. No. Hanazou blinked. *His* face was red.

He gasped a little too loudly. He had not noticed. How could it have escaped...? He had not been looking at all. He took a really careful look at the tall woman and realised that she was a man too. Their make-up and dressing were perfect. Their hair and features were perfect. Even their voices. Right down to their fingernails... Hanazou could feel his ears turning red. He flicked his eyes over to the two men who sat at the same panel as the two 'women'. They weren't men either. He nearly laughed.

“You, you have negative—”, the small woman started hesitantly, as he had been silent for too long.

Hanazou cleared his throat. “I would like to answer the question,” he announced.

“Oh, oh. Please.”

“I'd like to work in the company you work in,” he pointed at the small woman, who dropped her pen in surprise. The look in his eyes had caught Kotori by surprise.

“Why?” asked the tall woman.

“Because, even though you both are so beautiful, you both are men,” he said matter-of-factly. “And you two are women.” He waved a hand at the two 'men'.

“Well done!” Ooyama clapped. “So, why don't you want to work with them?” He looked towards the 'men'.

“Well... I don't know if they hire men...”

The entire panel smiled mysteriously.

“And,” Hanazou continued, “If someone can look that beautiful in women’s clothes, I don’t think I will mind,” as he looked at Kotori pointedly.

“Ah, sorry about that. She must have been nervous,” said Ooyama as he gave Kotori an affectionate pat. Kotori blushed a little more under the combined stares of Ooyama and Hanazou.

“We look forward to seeing you again Number 69!”

The entire panel bowed.

When the door closed after Hanazou, Kotori whispered to Ooyama, “I...I think he’s not b...”

“I agree,” came the reply. “He has potential; he was not overly distracted by perceived beauty and managed to ‘uncloud’ his eyes...or should I say, the scale fell from his eyes...?”

Ooyama drew a flower pattern on Hanazou’s application file, as expected of an applicant who had gone through a recent internship. Not many interns were actually privy to the cross-dressing situation and no candidate had actually noticed anything was off with the interview panel. Ooyama glanced sidelong at Kotori and peeked to see if he was done with his evaluation of Hanazou.

“Next please,” Ooyama waved his hand and smiled at the staff who was waiting patiently at the door at the end of the big room.

‘It was a simple job,’ Kotori thought. ‘All I have to do is to draw a mark when a candidate said something that was in-line with the model answers and write down all the answers that were different.’ Another peculiarity of the company was that it was not a group interview despite it being the first round of interviews. Every candidate walked in alone and was given around five to seven minutes each. The questions were straightforward; not a second was wasted.

Ooyama actually said that it did not matter if anyone did say a model answer to every question because only a few questions mattered. Of course, it’d be good to have some brownie points from the start, but, as Ooyama shrugged, most people lie during the interviews. Kotori recalled that he had closed his mouth and picked up his pen after Ooyama’s declaration. Ooyama had given him a pat and told him not to mind it too much. But what Kotori really wanted to ask was why they had to wear women’s clothes when all

they did was sit behind a desk and ask pointless questions for answers that they weren't really interested in hearing.

Kotori wrinkled his nose and frowned. He really had not expected that he would be made to ask such a question. He had been already been so nervous just sitting there with his knees together while facing stranger after stranger, which might have been the reason why that candidate had seen through him. Kotori's frown deepened. Ooyama suddenly smiled as though he had read his mind.

"It's a good place for practice, right? How are you feeling?"

"A good place to practise what?"

"Getting used to it yet? Need to touch-up?" Kotori exhaled an indistinguishable sound. Does one attain the skill of reading minds after three years of work?

"No."

"What?"

"Just remember the training you did in the morning and you'll be fine. Didn't we survive till Number 69 without being found out? Let's keep it up till Number 80 and we can finally go home."

Kotori nodded slightly at Ooyama's fist which pumped in the air.

Number 70 shuffled in, to be baffled by some of questions asked like all the others.

Hanazou exited the interview room with a pounding heart. His calm expression and exterior did not betray his true feelings. He had finally remembered where he had seen those two 'women' before—it had 'clicked' as he was walking out the door. A few months ago, he had been desperately trying to find a job which suited him and visited a Work&Experience Centre in an attempt to suss out his strengths and skill set. Two female staff had expressed some concern as he rested on a sofa near the toilets. He had not noticed it then as he was too tired, but he was sure that the staff then had to be his interviewers just now. There had been a mix of lavender and citrus in the air. He took out the chocolate wrapper he had put in his pocket for good luck. He had hoped that his recent one week internship here would put him in good standing. 'They didn't even ask about the schools I studied at or about my studying abroad. They didn't even ask me for my passport,' Hanazou reflected. This seemed like a good start; this radicalness.

He opened his umbrella with a flourish as he stood at the foyer outside the glass doors. Small pink petals rained down on the cloth with soft tapping sounds as they caught the wind. He was glad that the heavy snowstorms had stopped before April. And the

unstable mountains and volcanoes had calmed down after being smothered by all the snow. Compared to the long and eventful winter during which a few prominent people had also passed on, including one of his favourite science-fiction-fantasy authors—Terry P., April was extremely tame.

If he was lucky, he would be called back for another interview the following month. If he passed that one, he might have a final interview or he might even be able to start work in a few months. Not that he knew how the hiring process at this radical company worked. But the prospect of it thrilled him. He had always wanted to work in a place where it seemed that no harassment or discrimination occurred. Such a place was but a fantasy in the real world—he had worked at so many part-time jobs which had such a conventional and oppressive system of hierarchy that quite frankly, he was sick of it all.

His observations of the company, starting from various internships in middle and high school in specific departments, and his recent internship after his visit to the Work Experience Centre, made him more determined of his decision of wanting to work in that company. Especially so when that small woman, man, also worked there. Hanazou daydreamed as he carefully walked towards the taxi stand upon a scattered pink carpet of cherry blossoms. Many people around him were wearing face masks. He could see some shops in the distance that had huge signs indicating the price and brands of hay fever pills and face masks. He twitched his nose. The pollen here was different.

Hanazou turned away from the taxi stand and walked towards the shops. It'd be better if he protected himself, on the way home, from the Japanese Spring. It was just as well as he had run out of supplies a few days ago. The umbrella did not help to block much pollen. A few school children gave him some real-good stares as they filed past in their going-home group, their yellow caps catching the sun and some pink petals. He must seem quite eccentric—a man in a suit under an umbrella that was lowered to cover half his face. Would it have been better if he had been in a skirt? A skirt under an umbrella surrounded by wafting small pink things seemed to fit the season better, almost like some clichéd scene in an anime where the girl turns around to meet a boy or when a boy looks up to see a girl being bathed in an ephemeral uncanny wind of pink.

He walked up to the shops and compared prices at a glance. He chose the cheapest hay fever and cold medication which, he knew, would not be sold at any cheaper price. He gave the prices of the face masks a once over—it cost the same as the medication. He turned away from the sign and paid for the medication, musing over his recollection from a few months back when he had no money to buy medication as it was not yet pay-day and tried to cure himself of his cold with the hundred and fifty yen, 1.5 litre bottle of Vitamin C

Water instead. He remembered that his colleagues made some kind of remark when he pulled the huge bottle out of his bag.

Then he went to the neighbouring shop which seemed like a second-hand junk shop and, as he expected, found a box of a hundred simple single-use face masks that cost only thirty yen for the whole box. Gut instinct honed from one's childhood memories is a scary thing. It was a wonder that he could even remember—he had left Japan when he was eighteen and returned when he was twenty-two. It had been two years since he returned and now he was nearly finished with a post-graduate degree at a local university but it seemed like nothing had changed since he left.

Maybe the slight change was that the kids in their yellow caps did not shout things at him like they used to do years ago because kids were too honest about their opinions of people that look different. The older people had always been good at minding their own business and making sure that you never heard them gossiping about you. If you happened to hear them, it was because they wanted you to hear it. Indirect shaming had been in vogue for a long time.

Hanazou gave a bitter smile as he picked up the box of masks to examine it. He flicked open the cardboard flap quickly to make sure that the contents were sealed. A mask was really useful, but he didn't know where to buy the cloth ones that could be washed, and that came in many colours, patterns and pictures. Maybe only the trendy areas had it, or the trendy shops that were usually in trendy areas. Maybe a place like Harajuku—if it still exists; he was pretty sure that many trendy districts had been forced to close for some reason or another. Maybe for overly promoting the subculture that the rest of the people who follow the general culture are ashamed of—usually something to do about having the freedom to dress in their chosen fashion style.

He had heard from someone that those masks could be bought at any pharmacy, but, he couldn't find them when he swivelled his gaze around the previous shop. He didn't particularly like to speak because the first reply would be something along the lines of, "Even though you look like that, you have good pronunciation." Hanazou didn't want a random shower of cold water to dampen his high spirits. Those masks probably cost thirty to fifty times more than this box of one hundred masks anyway... It was also highly likely that a reusable mask of good quality would cost as much as a baseball cap—around a thousand to a thousand five hundred yen maybe, since a good paper-synthetic one would cost anything from two hundred to five hundred yen each. Those N95 ones may even be

more than a thousand yen, not that a biohazard or life-threatening haze would occur, touch wood, like those in countries he had been to, where the air was not quite fit for the lungs.

But, yes, it was good for maintaining anonymity. It is difficult for strangers to recognise you by your eyes alone and with the (not-so-great-of-a) help of the ambiguous shape of the rest of your face. The urge to do something bad had always struck him when he had been younger. He would strap on a mask, take off his school cap, make sure that the school badge was not visible anywhere, and do something bad like jaywalking or kicking a stone or walking on the tops of wall dividers that acted as fences between houses and roads. Sometimes, he would slouch or change the way he walked, like swaggering as he stuck his hands in his pockets or walking with his legs turned out or standing up tall and crisscrossing his legs like a model down a runway. The sense of liberation was tremendous. And now, here he was, buying masks to restock his supply again.

He glanced up, barely concealing a smirk, and noticed that the shop assistant had been glaring at him from behind the counter that was a few metres away. He wondered if he had tracked some pollen in and looked around to see if there were any yellow or pink things attached to him or on the ground. He noticed that there was a well-placed gap between some merchandise, and for a second, he saw the indoor lights glint on the shop assistant's spectacles. He reached outwards and gave the teddy bear in front of him a few pokes. He thought that he heard a tsk of irritation as the shop assistant's gaze was blocked. Feigning nonchalance, Hanazou shuffled sideways as he browsed along the tables and shelves. Sneaking a glance behind him, he noticed that there was a tall pretty lady a few shelves behind.

Ahah.

She had pink hair.

The hair on the back of Hanazou's neck suddenly trembled as he struggled to fight back a shudder that was creeping down his spine. He has just heard someone mutter, almost inaudibly, about taking some pictures. Hanazou pretended to reach for something beside him and took a quick look at the person along the same aisle as him. It was someone else. Someone in a suit. Someone who seemed to be breathing heavily. Someone who had a black aura. Hanazou stepped away quickly, clutching the box of masks to his chest, and whipped out thirty yen in coins in lightning speed. As he turned away with his purchase, he noticed that the shop assistant had changed the direction of his glare. The shop assistant had not been staring at the pink-haired lady. The tip of a sturdy wooden handle of a broom was leaning almost too casually against the inside of the cashier counter. Hanazou had seen it when he paid for his masks.

Hanazou walked past the aisle that he had been in and noticed that the man who was breathing heavily in a suit had taken out a mobile phone. He seemed to be pressing the buttons but as Hanazou walked past, Hanazou saw that the phone was actually in camera mode. Hanazou wondered if he should do something, or if he should just mind his own business, like a local would. The shop assistant seemed to be extremely prepared by the looks of it. Maybe it happened often.

The pink-haired lady was in an aisle closer to the doors. Hanazou pretended to trip on something and dropped his umbrella and box of masks on the ground. Clatter. Clunk. Thump. The man in the suit let out a silent jump. The pink-haired lady looked up, or rather, looked down at Hanazou slightly worriedly. A soft whisper of, “Are you alright?” brushed past Hanazou’s ears. It hardly broke through the noisy pop songs that were blaring over the shop’s speakers.

“Ah, yea, thank you,” Hanazou managed as the pink-haired lady bent down to pick up his dropped items. As they were both blocked from view for a moment, Hanazou quickly whispered, “I think there’s someone sneaking photos of you.”

The lady looked up at Hanazou in slight shock. Much to his surprise, she smiled.

“Thank you. I know. Don’t worry.” She gave him a hard manly squeeze on the back of his hand as the umbrella was pushed into his hand.

The hand that squeezed him had long fingers, almost too long and bony for a woman’s. The calluses on the hand’s palm that rubbed the back of his hand were rough and bumpy. The nails too manicured and well-trimmed, the feet near him too big.

Hanazou opened his mouth to say something but felt the box of masks being pushed into his chest instead. “Don’t worry,” the lady said again. “Leave quickly. It’s dangerous.” If it was dangerous, there was even less reason for Hanazou to leave, he’ll protect her...

The lady all but dragged him up to his feet with superhuman strength and said a little too loudly, “Are you okay? Hmm, I see. You can take a taxi over there, see, you can see the sign from here.” Hanazou realised that the pink-haired lady was taller than him by at least half a head, and with a small push in the small of his back, Hanazou was evicted from the shop without much ceremony. As Hanazou blinked in the sudden afternoon sun which had failed to permeate the dark interior of the shop he had been in, he failed to notice two men in black flanking the two sides of the door in a crouch.

Hanazou wobbled forward and clutched the metal bannister that served as a pavement divider. The bicycle that was chained to the metal bannister flashed blue and yellow in rectangular patches. As Hanazou tried to regain his sight, there was a sudden yowl and a muted thump. There were more sounds of a scuffle and things falling over. Hanazou turned around to see two men leap up from their crouched positions to barricade the door just as the man who was breathing heavily in a suit burst out. Just like a movie, a well-placed chop incapacitated the man who collapsed downwards without any more fuss.

The door opened once again as the pink-haired lady strutted out. She flicked her pink hair out of her face and over her shoulder, blew on her hands and smoothed her skirt. She gave the suit-man a jab with her high-heels. “Anyone hurt? I wish I had kicked him in the...” she growled deeply. Hanazou dropped his items in surprise.

“What, are you still here?” The lady looked up at the sound and advanced towards him. Hanazou flinched and backed into the bicycle. It poked him in weird places. “Stop dropping your umbrella. You’re gonna put a crack in that lovely wooden handle, y’know?” Hanazou gulped and nodded and took the proffered item from her. Her?

A man in black sidled up to Hanazou. A police badge was flashed at him. Hanazou took another step backwards and bumped against the metal bannister. “It’s okay, don’t worry,” the policeman grinned. “Just sign this document to agree that you won’t talk about this case or what you saw until the official announcement. Okay? You’ll be notified immediately when you can talk about it. If you need some help, for example if you feel agitated and stressed by this incident, talk to him with the pink hair over there okay? Do you agree to sign it?”

Hanazou nodded dumbly and raised his right thumb. It was pressed against the screen of the policeman’s device. “Don’t be so worried!” The policeman gave him a hearty clap on the shoulder. “We finally got him. Thanks to the... oh, you interviewed for that company? Well, well, well... If you get in, the pink guy’s going to be your senpai! What a coincidence!” Hanazou looked down on his chest to see that he had forgotten to take off his interview badge that was the size of a B5 paper. Was that what the kids in yellow caps were staring at?

He glanced over at the pink guy. The pink guy? Hanazou gave them all a short bow, making sure his eyes were glued to the floor and not trained on their faces, and turned away. It was enough for the day. He couldn’t take it anymore. It was time to get home before something else happened. He unsealed the pack of masks and carefully pulled one out as he walked away. He meticulously sealed the pack again, giving the package a little blow just

in case. He folded some lines into the mask and then strapped it on. The air felt so much lighter and cleaner. His eyes were starting to water a little. Hanazou wasn't sure whether it was due to the pollen in the new city or the shock from what happened just now. He'll feel better after a sleep. He started slowly off towards the taxi stand again.

“Isn't he a sullen one?”

The pink man looked up and in the direction of Hanazou and shrugged.

Number 69. He might have caught on to something. Katanaka made a note to report this to someone later, the sly old guy at the top... or maybe Ooyama.

A couple of televisions in shop windows flickered to various programs that were currently showing. Some cheerful ladies were demonstrating the various models of masks that were on sale. Others showed some jingles for hay fever medicine. One showed detailed weather forecasts up to the times of sunrise (4AM), sunset (6PM), moonrise (7PM) and moonset (11PM). And one showed a reminder for the upcoming public holiday—Shouwa Day, and how one could go about celebrating it: the festivals to attend, and the temples and shrines to visit. Hanazou briefly wondered if there would be any beans to throw or if the huge sushi rolls that were almost the length of his forearm with their accompanying compasses would be on the market again. He wasn't sure what it would be.

He reached a taxi and jumped as the door opened before his hand even touched the door handle. He seldom took taxis. He should have cycled here instead.

Chapter 4: Transformation

Although Kotori had cross-dressed previously as part of his job, he seldom had to interact with other normal staff or the customers. He usually just sat inside the secret room or ate in the canteen. Kotori felt certain that today was the day that something would happen.

Kotori followed Ooyama through a non-descript door into a room that was supposed to be a changing room. The grandness and brightness of the room overwhelmed Kotori. It was huge, modern, bright and expensive. The wall-length mirrors that stretched up to the ceiling reflected his timid entrance behind the poised Ooyama. The polished parquet gleamed while squeaking under his hastily and badly polished leather shoes. Lush carpets lined the floor area in front of the sturdy wooden lockers that had little gold doorknobs. A locker had enough space to place a stuffed backpack, hang up some clothes and even had ample shoe space for knee-length boots. A few doors lined one side of the room; some had an embossed silver shower head on it, while some had ‘W.C.’ in gold lettering. There wasn’t a speck of dust or a speck of rust on anything, not even on the huge mirrors.

“You’re early, Ooyama!” cried a voice that seemed to come out of a tall muscular man. Kotori turned towards his voice and noticed that the changing rooms curved deeper to the right. This man had a work-belt that was full of knobby and cylindrical items... Kotori had no idea what they were.

“Oh~ Katanaka! Here’s the new guy, Kotori, he officially started recently,” Ooyama pushed Kotori forward. Kotori stumbled towards Katanaka and saw an area of soft leather chairs, makeup mirrors—and a pocket of a dark blue denim vest and the waft of a gentle scent. As the Katanaka bent down to look at him, Kotori noticed that the tall man was wearing a pink wig.

“Yes, yes, I remember him from the internship, though I—I mean, he didn’t have the chance to dress up much. Nah, it’s not a wig!” the man winked. “I dyed it.”

Kotori blinked. Another person who could read minds.

Katanaka stood back to get a better look at Kotori and then spun him around for good measure. “Hmmm, hmmm,” Katanaka nodded. “Is it your day today too, Ooyama?”

Ooyama nodded.

Katanaka clapped his hands in what seemed like glee.

Ooyama gave a small sigh.

“Show him what you’ve got, Kotori,” Ooyama instructed.

Obediently, Kotori took out a few packages from his stuffed backpack.

“Where did you get the clothes from? Don’t tell me you went—”

“Ma—mail order!” Kotori blushed.

“Ah... You taught him well, eh, Ooyama? It’s a good thing you have your own. It might be hard to find some in your size, y’know. Don’t worry, hand me the receipts and you’ll be reimbursed.”

Ooyama had already settled in a leather chair and was pulling out a cigarette. Katanaka quickly produced a rubber band and shot it across the room at Ooyama.

“What was that for?” Ooyama snapped as he rubbed his fingers.

“No smoking in this room!” Katanaka pulled out a couple more rubber bands.

“Okay! I got it!” Ooyama lifted up his hands, showing his palms in surrender to Katanaka. He picked up the cigarette that had fallen on his lap, dusted it carefully and put it back into its box.

Ooyama got up reluctantly and shuffled into a room behind a metal door— the metal smoking room. Unlike the posh changing rooms, the smoking room was just a box-shaped area, with metal benches and metal vents and metal ashtrays and a small length of window at head height. Strong vents vacuumed the smoke away quickly and if you weren’t careful, your hair would get sucked into the black holes too. The only time one could smoke was before work started and at the end of the day because it was a pain to get the faint smoke-smell out of wigs and frills. To make things worse, Ground Zero, where they interact with customers, is a smoke-free zone—faint smells wouldn’t make the cut. In fact, they would get the cut.

Ooyama rubbed the area between his eyebrows as he carefully directed smoke upwards towards the vent and away from his clothes. It was going to be a long day. He leaned against a metal handrail and watched Katanaka flourish clothes from Kotori’s packages excitedly. Ooyama smiled as he watched them hustling and bustling, forgetting for a moment about the cigarette dangling on his defined lips. The cigarette made a dash for its life and was sucked into the black hole. Ooyama was no longer chained to the vents on the ceiling. He could finally turn his face away from the ceiling and stop squinting down his nose at Katanaka and Kotori. He gave a sigh. So much for a quick cigarette—it got away too quickly. He shuffled out of the metal smoking box, took out several dental and facial products from his bag and proceeded to thoroughly clean his orofacial cavities.

An unfamiliar swish of cloth at an unaccustomed height gave Ooyama a slight poke in the arm. He looked up from the sink through soapy eyes. He gave a suddy wave. He rubbed his face with cold water after a hot wash and patted his face with a towel. Reflected in the mirror, he saw a girl waiting nervously behind him. He gave the mirror a better look.

She was painted to perfection: a delicate nose, a pair of fluttery big eyes, pouty but conservative lips, flawless skin. Light beige nails stretched from dainty hands that extended from a tight, black long-sleeved top which was peeking out from under the black, collared dress shirt. A pearl brooch rested on the end of one collar, weighing the shirt open to reveal the tip of a tantalizing collarbone. Her hands were clasped respectfully together in front of her knee-long white skirt and near the thin gold hem, stockinged legs reached down to a pair of wobbly black heels that were pitching forward... Ooyama made a quick turn. Soft ringlets of brown hair bumped into his chest as a light flower scent exploded around him. Ooyama swallowed his breath; his palms shaking on her shoulders. He still wasn't used to this. Tear-filled puppy eyes looked up at him in worry.

"It's hard to walk," Kotori-chan said. CLAP, CLAP. Ooyama awoke from his stupor at the sharp sound.

Katanaka stood with his palms together. "Kotori-chan, that was a good tone! But your walk! Again!" Kotori untangled himself from Ooyama's clasp and practised walking and stopping over and over as Ooyama stood frozen by the sink.

A rubber band landed firmly and painfully between Ooyama's eyebrows. He twitched.

"Ooyama-chan, you need to get ready too!" Katanaka waved a set of clothes at him. He gave a nod and excused himself to the bathroom.

Kotori was still diligently practising walking, sitting, and a slew of hand and facial gestures as dictated by Katanaka from a list by the time Ooyama emerged from the toilet.

"Pay attention to your fingertips and the turn of your toes!"

"Don't push her too hard," Ooyama reminded him.

"Okay, let's take a rest! You still have a lot of time," Katanaka smiled kindly at Kotori. "Read the list while you rest."

"Her job today is just to sit and look pretty. And maybe take some notes down."

"Is that so? Then for today, Kotori-chan should really focus on sitting pretty and remembering some gestures."

Kotori put his knees and ankles together in a hurry while trying to align his fingers elegantly into the postures pictured in the heavy training book that was on his knees. He would be part of an interview panel today, but all he needed to do was note-taking. It would be a really simple assignment, if he could get his body to perform just right. All he had ever done before was scuttle around with Ooyama or eat in the staff canteen in this get-up. Kotori was determined not to make a mistake today.

While Kotori was absorbed in self-study, Ooyama quietly got ready with some help from Katanaka. While some might feel that blue lipstick was the wrong colour for a lipstick, and that people who put it on look like they died from the cause of drowning, it was actually a useful colour to put on the base layer of make-up. Depending on the shade of blue, it could deepen the final shade of make-up and also cast a soft light on the wearer's lips.

Using two different tones of blue on different parts of the lips for the base colour, Katanaka applied a beige-pink on top of it after it dried. It suited Ooyama really well. Ooyama usually wore long sleeves and long skirts with loose tops to hide his tall and muscular frame. He felt that it would be quite a spectacle if he didn't. He checked his final transformation in the mirror as Katanaka fluttered around making final adjustments.

"How long have you been working here, Katanaka?" Ooyama asked as he twirled around in a final check.

"About five years."

"Oh, yeah, I remember now. Have you ever thought of transferring to another branch or another company?" Ooyama asked.

"I like it here," Katanaka replied.

"But there are other branches in other cities and countries too," Ooyama said.

"I am used to the company culture here. Even if it's the same company, the culture may not be exactly the same. And I won't be able to see my cute Ooyama-chan and Kotori-chan anymore."

"..." Ooyama silently puffed up his hair.

"Are you thinking of submitting a transfer request?" Katanaka continued.

"I'm into my fourth year now. I'm wondering what I should do."

"Are you asking me for advice?"

"Well, you are more experienced than I am..."

"I like it because the CEO managed to create a district. It took many years of hard work and it still is hard work now, but... the existence of the district itself is really quite a miracle." Katanaka stilled his hands that were putting away the make-up containers.

“Ah, the shopping district that extends on the road between and behind the company buildings?” Ooyama said as he smoothed out his sleeves.

“Yes. A place where the freedom of expression in terms of fashion is allowed. And there usually aren’t any gawkers or people who take photos without asking, like how it was long ago in a different district.” Katanaka hid a wry smile as he continued packing up.

“Yea, the gawkers... Was it the district that was shut down in a so-called clean-up before the arrival of the Olympics?” Ooyama remembered reading it in the news.

“Yes. The shops could not survive... The only facilities that always had paying customers were those selling Food and Beverages.” Katanaka shook his head.

“I see. So, actually, what the CEO has done is quite grand? Is he extremely rich or something?” Ooyama turned to look at Katanaka.

“It was based on agreements and discounts really. But he is a multi-billionaire.”

“Hmm,” Ooyama nodded.

“The company provides almost a never-ending flow of customers and potential employees for shops in the district. The staff at the company can also go on sponsored internships at those shops. Some might even become disciples and run the shop when the owners retire. They, in turn, train the next batch of ‘heirs’. This way, skills will be passed on for generations, even if the people doing them are not linked by blood.” Katanaka all but recited from the Guidebook.

“I did wonder why we were always sponsored and so welcomed at those shops. Sometimes, I feel that the district is almost a self-sufficient town,” Ooyama slightly tilted his head to one side.

“We do grow our own crops in the fields nearby, you know.” Katanaka raised an eyebrow at him.

“No wonder the food here tastes so much better and cleaner.”

“Because of the tie-in at the hospital, or rather, because the hospital is run by the CEO’s family, we have nutritionists, psychologists and even sport instructors. They can even provide you with a detailed monthly plan.” Katanaka rattled off from memory.

“What great benefits—”

“Anyway, didn’t you already know all this?” Katanaka raised his eyebrow higher.

“Just vaguely...?” Ooyama finally tossed away the frozen polite expression on his face and grinned.

“You just wanted Kotori to know about it without expending too much effort, didn’t you?” Katanaka sighed.

“Although, I’m not sure if he is even listening...”

They both turned to Kotori who was still absorbed in the thick guidebook, unaware of any conversation that had been going on.

“I think that I have to tell him about it again later,” Ooyama groaned and he looked at his watch.

As both Ooyama and Kotori were ready, Katanaka pressed a button on a remote control and a projector projected a video on a cupboard door.

“It’s part of the regulations. A thirty-second refresher. After that, you only have to pass my test and you’re good to go.”

Ooyama and Kotori nodded.

It was a minute and a half before the door opened and a spruced up Ooyama-chan and Kotori-chan exited to begin their work day of interviewing potential employees.

“Do you have a request today?” Ooyama turned back just before he stepped out of the door.

“Yeah, I don’t really like always being the decoy for those nasty jobs though.”

“Just think of it as a community service...”

Katanaka sighed.

“Give him a good kick!” Ooyama winked.

Katanaka’s lips twitched listlessly in response. Ooyama gave him a gentle pat.

The conversation flowed over Kotori as he read the guidebook carefully. It did not seem that difficult. The book had a lot of handy tips and long detailed explanations and instructions. Short, embedded videos showed him important information for each chapter. Kotori opened the mirror that was attached to the book and practised as the video showed him how. It was a lot of information to take in.

‘Uh~~~~~’ Kotori thought that he could hear Ooyama moaning in the toilet. Ooyama came out looking refreshed after nearly seven minutes and varied moans. Ooyama caught his eye and gave Kotori what looked like a sheepish smile. I wonder what happened? It must have been a tough one. Kotori went back to reading and learning the guidebook.

Kotori diligently practised hand and finger positions, sitting postures and facial expressions. He stood up to practise walking. Thirty minutes had passed but he still had not completed half of the book. He flopped down with a sigh. Kotori looked up to see Ooyama walk out fully dressed. He was striking. There was no overly applied makeup like some of the cross-dressers in Kabuki or Takarazuka. Instead, it was tastefully and strategically

applied to enhance and soften his features naturally. The right amount of wax, the right amount of spray, the right amount of curls and the right amount of wind-swept-ness. The morning stubble was gone; the skin baby-smooth. The broad shoulders and hard chest were hidden under long loose clothes. The thin waist emphasised by the slight tapering of the clothes at the waist. The thin but surprisingly shapely calves peaked out under the long skirt in opaque stockings, with not a hair to be seen.

Kotori gulped. He was looking at a well-balanced specimen and for a few seconds, his brain was deceived. He knew that he was looking at a man but he could not seem to control his body. As Kotori gave Ooyama many once-overs, he came to the same conclusion each time—it was breath-taking. It was not that he saw something weird that Kotori had to take another look; he had been trying to find a flaw, some flaws that would give Ooyama away, but no matter how he looked, he could not find any.

Kotori tried to take a few shaky breaths and strained against his blouse and skirt. Ooyama was already appealing as a man, and with his great personality, even more so. But to think that he'd be so attractive as a woman as well... Was this what the girls meant by 'Girl Crush'? Although this was a 'Guy Crush' in this case. Which was it? Kotori wondered if he came close to that or even if he could give that kind of impact to others. Was that why outsiders always gushed about the beauty of the employees? Kotori's mind swirled with thoughts as his vision was filled with Ooyama.

Ooyama slowly crossed the room towards Kotori as Katanaka clapped and danced in joy, extremely pleased with himself and his disciple. Ooyama seemed to be careful not to appear too gangly or awkward and even carried himself with a sort of stately pride. As the female Adonis slowly came nearer to Kotori, all Kotori could do was shrink back into his seat and try futilely to tear his eyes away. A hand descended from the heavens and lightly brushed past his cheek. Kotori felt his cheek turn hot. He felt his collar being tugged closed.

"You're exposing too much of your neck and collarbone!" Ooyama laughed and buttoned a button that had come loose. A light breath caressed his face. Kotori could not take it anymore and closed his eyes..

"Oh dear, that seemed to be too much of a stimulus," Katanaka chuckled. "Don't worry, Ooyama is one of the best-looking ones, aside from myself. Once you get used to us, you'd get used to everyone else too. It's always better to be exposed to the best first."

"Oh," Katanaka exchanged a look with Ooyama.

"And you just joined the good-looking club too," Katanaka added softly.

"Oh?" Kotori scrunched his eyebrows in thought.

Katanaka handed them some chocolates and mint tea as they watched the thirty second refresher video, which they busied themselves with while avoiding looking at each other. Then he bid them good luck and good bye with a motherly pat on their backs.

It'd be a few hours before Kotori could even look up in the general direction of Ooyama's face. They walked down the corridor in silence.

Katanaka's smile faded as Ooyama and Kotori slowly disappeared from sight, his mind roving back to his upcoming job. He wondered why there were so many perverts in the world. Katanaka clasped his hands together, intertwined his fingers and did an arm wave—starting from his left shoulder to his left elbow to his wrists to his right elbow and ending at his right shoulder and back again. After a few arm waves, he shook his arms loose and started jogging on the spot. Even though he did not like the hard, dirty and dangerous job, it was not a good idea to start an undercover job without stretching first.

Katanaka made a mental note to ask the higher-ups if Ooyama could help out more often during the colder months, when the thickness of arms could naturally be hidden by layers. It was getting tiring being the only go-to guy when it was a tough job or when the others had failed. The perverts hardly showed up when the 'woman' was with someone else like another 'girl', much less when 'she' was with 'her' 'boyfriend'. Katanaka finished stretching his legs and gave a few preliminary low kicks. He nodded his head in satisfaction and proceeded to do a few sets of low, mid and high kicks. 'I'll definitely take down those perverts today,' he thought, his pink hair whipping about as he ended with a round-house kick. Smoothing his hair back in place, he strode determinedly into the onsen area to take a hot bath in the artificial hot spring and wash off the light sweat that he had worked up.

Chapter 5: What a company does

A company should have some kind of specialisation, Kotori thought. Like how a small factory would specialise in making thermo-flasks, or things with ‘thermo-’ in them, like thermo-flasks... Maybe saku.Ra specialised in bringing dreams to the people, the common-folk, the public...? Kotori sniffed, his brain was not really working. He vaguely remembered someone telling him to wait for Ooyama, in case they had last-minute problems and needed an extra person for Ooyama’s project. And Kotori had only just finished his own project a few minutes ago.

Kotori sighed. It had been less than three months since he had started, because he had a gloriously metal-coloured week off—The Golden Week plus the weekend. He was still puzzled about what exactly his work should be or what the company was supposed to be. Unlike Ooyama who heads various projects and has some other supporting role in other projects, Kotori mainly followed Ooyama around for slightly more than two months assisting him and learning things. He had only started dipping into non-Ooyama projects in the recent two weeks as Ooyama had suddenly become really busy for that period. So he still had no idea how to answer questions like “So what do you do now?” when he bumped into old friends on the street. The company name was self-explanatory it seemed, and nothing else needed to be said after they gushed over his name-card. However, Kotori had always wondered. It nagged at him. Well, sometimes. During the sparse amount of free time he had between work, collapsing to sleep and waking up again.

What did he do? The company seemed to have numerous projects ongoing all the time and it seemed like he did bits of everything here and there... One day would be used setting up the interior of a new shop; another day would be interviewing potential employees; the next day would be helping a group of employees to colour the backgrounds of the manga and anime they were producing. Sometimes he would do some printing or make some tea or order take-out, but usually he was shuffled from group to group to do this or the other—from baking pastries, to drawing advertisement storyboards, to giving his opinion on colour and fabric, to substituting a sick actor, and even working as a waiter. Kotori was just glad that he wasn’t stuck doing a boring chore everyday like tallying receipts or pushing buttons or making coffee that a newbie would normally do according to horror stories from his university friends. Or even, cleaning the toilets...

On the other hand, floating around without a clear idea of what his job scope or role should actually be was mentally taxing. It was like he was a handyman who was only

worthy because he was handy for that moment and could be readily disposed of as soon as the job was done, like a ninja who does all the work in the shadows only to be killed or forced to take his own life after he has run out of his usefulness. Kotori rubbed his stomach to check for an imaginary L-shaped wound as he rested his head on his arms. He blanked out for a few moments.

“How’s The Saviour?” A low voice whispered.

“Resting on the desk.” Another low voice whispered back.

“Oh, where’s Ooyama?”

“Don’t know.”

“I hope he’ll be back soon. Then they can clock off together.”

“Is the water boiled?”

“It just finished. It’s a little hot.”

“Steep the tea first.”

“Got it.”

If Kotori had lifted his head, he would have seen the tops of two heads bending over the table in the tea room.

The smell of green mush wafted into Kotori’s nose. Kotori looked up to see a cup of tea on a cup coaster by his head. He weakly gave a smile at the two colleagues who patted his head softly before they sat back at their desks. Kotori took a few sips of the hot tea, feeling it gush down towards his stomach in a steady warmth as he put his forehead back on the desk.

Kotori’s thoughts turned to the first few phases of Project K that he had been preparing. It was about a new and unique job that was going to be featured at the Work&Experience Centre soon. The festivals at which kimonos were usually worn were coming up in a month’s time, so they had been rushing to get the groundwork down. He wondered if it would be well-received. Well, in the Children’s Zone, as long as they didn’t cry, it was a job well done. ‘I just hope that they don’t pull on my clothes...’ Kotori thought. The Adult Zone wasn’t part of his job just yet as he was still in training.

Other than that worry, work at the moment was fun and joyful. He challenged his limits and feed his need to learn something new. There also wasn’t anyone oppressing or pressuring him. Although projects and proposals had to be quickly vetted and updated at a round table once a week, that was the business of the more experienced staff who took turns being the Office Leader. Considering that the company’s mottos of ‘Usefulness’ and ‘Punctuality’ were calligraphed on every lift and door, it was a good reminder to be that.

Even uncalled-for overtime was not an economical thing to do, unless you were making up for the days you were ill. Kotori thought that he always did his work well of course. He wondered if he should ask Ooyama if his work so far had been satisfactory—

“Look at that,” someone’s snigger cut into his thoughts. “Sleeping so blatantly on the desk in the afternoon.” There were a few stifled laughs.

“That’s not a nice thing to say,” the staff doing the company tour admonished. “You don’t know the circumstance...” A few of the other staff looked up from their work and registered the presence of a group of people.

“But really, what a waste of space and productivity,” continued the patronising voice. “We don’t do things like this in my father’s company. The person will be fired immediately!”

The staff in the office exchanged a few glances. Some of them stopped typing and curled their fingers into their palm.

“What in the world is wrong with this company?” the haughty voice went on. “Who needs a place to learn skills or try out various jobs? If someone doesn’t know what his skill or purpose in life is, he isn’t worth my time at all!”

The staff in the office bristled collectively and murmured among themselves.

“There are staff working, please refrain from...” the tour guide chided.

“Who’s working?” the voice retorted even more loudly. “It’s obvious that a staff member is slacking off.”

Purpose in life, huh, Kotori-chan thought. Slacking, huh. As Kotori-chan wondered if she should wake up or continue sleeping, the door right at the back of the room slammed open. The Leader for that office stood with his arms crossed on his chest and glared at the owner of the haughty voice.

“For your information, she is a very competent—”

“Competent!!” cried Mr. Haughty in mock disbelief. “If that is competent, how much more competent are the other employees?”

The Office Leader pursed his lips into a white line.

It was not nice to make such a generalisation that implicated the rest of the staff. Kotori-chan could not feign sleep anymore and lifted her head from her table, just as a few staff members started to stand up at the same time that Ooyama walked through the office door.

“Oh, I’m done! Let’s go,” Ooyama waved a folder at her. Kotori-chan quietly thanked the staff around her for their help, bowed at the Leader and turned around. The owner of the haughty voice gulped involuntarily when he saw her. Her slight frame trembled a little and her voice shook slightly as she turned her tear-filled eyes to him.

“I apologise that you have had a bad impression of this company based solely on my individual actions. I should have taken a rest in the lounge instead, but as I did not want to trouble my mentor to go out of his way to look for me there, I decided to rest at my desk from which I could immediately see him the moment he returned to the office. Thank you staff and Leader for looking out and standing up for me. I am sorry if I caused any inconveniences,” she bowed again. Her soft curls bounced as a light lavender smell wafted towards the group of people.

“She’s so cute,” someone muttered.

“How could you say that to someone so cute,” someone else said.

“You know, I heard that this company doesn’t tolerate any harassment or bullying...” another person continued as the three speakers stared at Mr. Haughty.

“I heard of that too.”

“Look, you made her cry.”

“How could you!!”

“I bet she was only resting for a brief moment...”

“She must have been really tired...”

Mr. Haughty gulped even more and fluttered his hands about in agitation.

“I didn’t know that the person was a she or that she was so pretty,” he protested as others shook their heads and murmured behind their hands.

It was so different compared to the time when Kotori was bullied years ago in school. The people in-charge, the teachers, turned a blind-eye even though they observed Kotori being bullied by students and other teachers right in front of them. He had only worked at this company for nearly two months, and he had not expected that the staff would be so protective of a fellow employee. Even random by-standers spoke up for him. He felt very grateful. If only that had happened during all those years of being bullied in school.

“Hey... don’t make my cute junior cry,” Ooyama reproached.

“Please excuse me,” Kotori-chan said as she followed Ooyama who led her out with a comforting arm on her shoulder. Kotori gave a slight smile as she exited the office.

“You turned on the faucets at the right time,” Ooyama mused when they were out of earshot.

“That wasn’t it. I was really scared and ashamed,” Kotori mumbled.

“Aww, don’t worry. We’ve got your back. I’m sorry this happened.”

Kotori shook his head slightly. “I wonder if he’d swear at me if he found out—”

“There’d always be someone like that. Anyway, let’s get some good food and drinks to celebrate the end of the project. Okay?”

Kotori closed his mouthful of protest and nodded.

They walked through an indoor passageway and exited through a back door into the shopping district that was behind the building.

“Let’s take home some good food from that famous restaurant over there and celebrate in my house, okay? I think they have turkey, if not, fried chicken. I doubt getting a delivery would be useful since it’s so close—it might be even faster if we just run over to get it and run back to my place.”

“Okay.”

The staff and potential interns stood silently in the icy aftermath. Mister Haughty suffered some cold glares. The tour guide surreptitiously wrote something down on his tablet. He gave Mister Haughty a look. Mister Haughty paled as he realised that he had done something that was not very smart.

The rest of the staff in the office silently directed some hateful scowls at him before typing sounds continued to echo in the office. The Leader ignored them and continued on his way to the tea room to get some tea for the next meeting.

“L—let’s continue with the tour,” the tour guide finally choked out, giving the staff in the office deep bows as he exited. The back of his shirt collar was slightly damp.

“Hey. Heey~!”

Kotori flinched and a thick sheaf of paper fell off the table on to the carpeted floor. Maybe it was carpeted thickly so that staff and papers could be absorbed without disturbing others from their work.

Kotori’s mind was still on the latest projects that he had helped with. How could anyone expect that he could learn something just by looking at it once? How many times this week had he been looking at things once? His brain was currently overloaded and

running over capacity. Well, liking to learn new things didn't really equal to learning ten new things a day did it...

Someone gave Kotori a weak shoulder-slap. Kotori finally squinted his eyes open and looked up at a powdered panda which shocked him wide awake. It felt like *déjà vu*.

“Ooyama!” Kotori had not seen Ooyama for a week since Ooyama started on the next phase of Project K. Project K was heading soon into pilot phase, bringing in Kimono Wearing and Fabric-selling to the Work&Experience Centre. Sourcing willing sponsors from the traditional shops had been difficult, and learning some ropes so that they could assist the professionals had been tough as well.

Ooyama had spent a lot of time in many discussions with various people, while going over the plans. The most recent one was about the booth in the Work&Experience Centre: How big would it be, what would it look like, who would make the booth, which suppliers would provide the materials, who would man the booth, how much would it cost, what would be the expected time frame and so on. He had spent a week discussing and liaising before he put it all together in a presentation. He had just presented his five-minute piece on the layout and manpower needed for that booth. It was finally approved. This part of the phase was completed.

“Is it completed?”

Ooyama gave a small nod, his wig sliding off a little and shedding some powder like tiny cherry blossom petals. His thick make-up could not even begin to cover his massive eye-bags. He managed a weak thumbs-up as he dragged up a long and flowing sleeve.

“Well, I'm done too. Let's go home.”

They trudged out of the office to calls of ‘Good work!’ and ‘Rest well!’ from other staff amid glances of envy as Kotori and Ooyama had finally finished their recent projects. Kotori paused at the door to give a final bow and a soft salutation before leaving. He pressed his thumb to the ‘Attendance’ scanner to change his status to ‘Rest’ and lifted a limp hand up from Ooyama's frame to do the same for him. Due to the size difference, Kotori was having some difficulty lugging Ooyama out. He managed to get them into the lift and propped Ooyama up against one wall.

Ding. The lift rushed down so smoothly that Ooyama was still comfortably not moving. Kotori opened his jaw to click his ears. Bracing himself under one of Ooyama's armpits, he tried dragging him out before the doors closed.

“Umph.” The lift doors closed once, pinching both of them in a shoulder. They finally stumbled out of the lift, narrowly escaping losing a wooden clog and tearing a fabric. Kotori wondered how long it would take them to get to the company housing that was five-minutes away. Ooyama suddenly pitched to the side a little and Kotori scrambled to support him. Despite being limp, Ooyama’s stiff posture was held up by the twenty-centimetre wide cloth belt that tied his kimono together, and Kotori felt like he was trying to support a ramrod straight but falling tree that was dropping flowers.

The television in the lobby was predicting the upcoming storm patterns and warnings were issued for the upcoming thunderstorms. *Beware of strong wind, rain, flooding and lightning in the late afternoon.* The television warned in flashing, big red letters and videos showed people storm-proofing their houses with tape and boards of wood.

“Sorry,” Kotori called out, as he accidentally bumped into someone’s briefcase as he turned away from the screen.

“It’s alright,” Hanazou replied, dusting off his briefcase. He stood to the side as he watched a comical sight of a small woman lugging a tall woman away from the lift. He blinked. Correction: a small man lugging a tall man... Hanazou hesitated. He was wearing a new suit, black lined with red, it being his second interview. He glanced back at the two men wobbling along; they must have pulled an all-nighter. Maybe even longer than that since it was already eight-thirty in the morning. They seemed to be having a hard time. It was already difficult to walk in a kimono when one was conscious, much more when one was out of it. Hanazou did not really want his new suit to get dirty but the sight of that smallish man got to him. That man looked familiar. Kind of. Hanazou sighed. Well, he was early anyway.

Hanazou walked up to the two men just in time to hear Kotori whisper, “Please try to keep your wig on! You’re really not helping me here!” Hanazou had to stifle a laugh. As Hanazou bent down to adjust the wig of the man who was collapsing on the rapidly weakening smaller man, he caught sight of Kotori’s face. Hanazou’s voice caught in his throat.

“I’ll help you,” Hanazou mumbled throatily. Kotori staggered as the weight on him was suddenly lifted. Kotori looked up to see Ooyama being lifted up into the air and come to rest in an awkward position on the shoulder of a well-built man. This man was in a shiny new suit. Kotori seemed to have seen that suit pattern before, but in a different colour. He looked familiar. No, Kotori shook his head, I’m just tired. Kotori blinked and turned back to the man to thank him.

“Ah. Ah...” Kotori started, “Isn’t that position awkward? Isn’t he heavy?” He’s carrying Ooyama as if Ooyama is a huge bale of fabric! Or a sack of rice.

“Hmm? No.” Hanazou replied. They both turned to look at Ooyama who was sprawled on his back but still miraculously balancing on Hanazou’s shoulder. Ooyama was held in place by a strong arm across Ooyama’s cloth belt.

“I—is the backbone supposed to bend in that direction?”

“I don’t want him to touch me any more than it is necessary. Especially that.”

“Ah... That...” Kotori wondered if this man was being too extreme. Surprisingly, Ooyama looked fine balancing on the back of his cloth belt where it was done up in a big knot and was he was slipping into sleep.

“Where are you going?”

“Ah! Th—this way please! It’s only a five minute walk.”

Vuuuup. The glass doors closed behind them. Kotori pointed towards the neighbouring building. Hanazou nodded and followed Kotori who was now carrying two briefcases and a cloth pouch. A late rain was starting to drizzle.

Kotori hurried along the connected walkway and scanned his employee card at the door of the next building. The monitor flashed a ‘Welcome Back, Kotori!’ as the glass doors slid open. Hanazou was careful not to swing Ooyama into anything as he walked behind Kotori. The security guards looked up and glared ferociously at Hanazou. The guard nearest to them stood up. Kotori smiled a greeting at the guards and bobbed his head.

“If you can just prop him in the lift, that would help me a lot,” Kotori gushed.

Hanazou could see that Kotori was quite tired but as a stranger, he did not want to overstep the socially acceptable boundaries of polite help. Despite being unwilling to just stop here, Hanazou carefully set Ooyama down, and dusted off any remnants of power from his clothes. He felt Kotori press something into his hands while saying ‘Thank you!’ a few times.

The lift door slowly closed on the scene of a tired Kotori, and the back of Ooyama, who had been propped facing the wall, their arms disappearing behind the closing door until all Hanazou could see was coloured fabric and then no more. Hanazou opened his hand to see a couple of chocolates in his palm. It was the same brand as the ones he received a few months ago.

Hanazou flashed a broad smile. He was more than determined to ace the interview today. As he turned around to head back out, his interview tag tapped on his chest, catching

the light. The guards made mental notes of the name and number that were printed in huge font on the tag. They gave Hanazou a little nod and opened the door for him to exit through.

Chapter 6: A Sign

As he walked out of the doors, Hanazou ignored the looks from pedestrians who had seen him just now. Before he walked out of the building, he made sure to turn his interview tag around so that the white back of the tag faced the public. The tag had been hidden by his arms and Ooyama's body just now, so he hadn't paid it any attention. It wasn't that he minded the gossip; he just didn't want it to affect his interview. He took deep breaths as he walked along the covered passageway, smoothing his hair and straightening his suit.

With another vooop, the glass doors opened again. Hanazou took the lift up to the interview room. In the waiting area, he flipped his interview tag back to face the front...

Wearing his red striped suit coupled with a few lucky chocolates gave him enough good luck to ace the interview. He was welcome to start anytime. He opted to start in the following week. He was also allocated an apartment in the company housing that was located right next to the offices cum Work&Experience Centre—the building that he had helped Kotori carry Ooyama to.

It is said that it is a sign of luck when it rains on the day that one moves house. It was supposed to be starting to be Summer. While the shrill call of the crickets was irritating, random earthquakes were more so. Did the typhoon season also arrive early? *No*, says the Television. *It's just a random typhoon that was swept towards the peninsula by the winds. And off-season typhoon.* What's this, a sport? He kept track of the typhoon using his phone application and the news on Television. *Oh, we are so lucky! The impending typhoon has headed off in another direction! We are saved by the Weather Gods!* chirped the television enthusiastically.

The relief felt almost stupid. The threat of natural disasters was so real but usually just a mere threat. It was, literally, too far away. Even his mobile phone had a setting called 'Emergency Warning'. It had only beeped once, when the epic-centre of an earthquake was right in the prefecture. It had happened when he was at school, and immediately all the televisions on the campus were tuned in to the News channel for updates on the earthquake. *An earthquake of such magnitude! No precedent! The epic-centre was in the prefecture!* flashed the captions. He wasn't sure if he needed to hide under a table. No one around him

seemed to be doing it. The off-season typhoon and sudden earthquake might have been the prelude to the lightning storms and volcano eruptions that the peninsula later experienced.

But that was not his concern at the moment.

Hanazou struggled to roll his carrier-bag over the bumpy tiles. The wheels kept getting caught between the bumps. The tiles were supposed to be special-needs friendly. Hanazou gave another pull before the wheels attained their freedom. He finally straightened up and stood in front of the reception where the security guard was waiting. His hair was slightly damp from the exertion and from the light rain that he had been caught in when he got off the taxi.

The glass partition separated him from the guard.

“Hanazou,” the guard said.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Please place your face here.”

Hanazou leaned forward while a red beam of light scanned his face.

Then, a small rectangle of light lit up on the reception desk’s counter.

“Thumbs here please.”

Finally, the registration was all done and the guard directed him to the lift.

As the lift door closed, Hanazou wondered when he would be able to meet the small woman, man, in this building. Maybe he would meet him at the mailbox area? Hanazou probably had to go there when his stuff were delivered.

Even though Ooyama was tired, he still had to get out of his kimono first. Kotori fumbled with the tight bow that was on Ooyama’s back. Ooyama groaned into the sofa as he held his breath for a few moments. Finally, the suffocating binding loosened slightly. It was only the first layer of the belt. The wide cloth belt slowly unravelled, revealing smaller and thinner cloth belts underneath. Kotori carefully rolled the wide cloth belt up as Ooyama pulled at the knots on the thin cloth belts. After pulling at two knots, two thin strips of cloth fell to the ground and the kimono hung slightly looser on his body. Ooyama tugged at the layers of kimono in dissatisfaction.

“There’s an inner cloth tie inside the layers,” Kotori reminded him.

“Umm.” Ooyama fumbled around his chest area and found the knot.

Kotori helped Ooyama to unload the layers, carefully folding them up and pushing them to the side. When only the final layer was left, Ooyama went into his bedroom to change into more comfortable clothes.

Kotori sighed. He really wanted to wipe off his make-up and take off his wig too. Oh, that's right...

Ooyama suddenly came back out. The inner layer of the kimono was casually draped over his shoulders, revealing his chest and a pair of soft-looking track pants. Ooyama took a seat in front of Kotori and bent his head down. Kotori quickly removed the hair ornaments from Ooyama's hair and carefully removed the wig.

"Thanks." Ooyama shrugged off the kimono layer and pulled the baggy shirt that was in his hands over his head. "Sit down. I'll help you."

Some time later, two freshly washed faces sat around opened packets of chips and a few chilled beer cans. Ooyama had lent Kotori some clothes to wear.

"Cheers." It was quite subdued. They were both quite tired.

An empty can of beer rolled away in irritation as Ooyama turned over in his sleep. He flinched, crossing his arms in front of his face. He furrowed his brow as he braced himself for an attack. The metallic sound of the rolling empty can sounded like the sound of a metal bat scraping the ground—a sound he would rather forget. "Why don't you ever fight back?!!! Huh?!!!" someone was screaming. He felt the metal bat collide with his arms. Once. Twice. Thrice. His back was to a wall. There was no escape... except by fighting... or waiting it out... It's okay, it'd be over soon. I am a man; I have to suck it up. He steeled himself. What could be more embarrassing than being bullied by kids smaller than you? He did not want to rely on anyone else for help.

You're not allowed to pick a fight, okay? Cos you're trained. He remembered his father's booming voice as his mother gently stuck some white cotton pads over a wound on his arm. *Be smart and only do it in self-defence! Only do as little as possible in order to get away, 'kay?* His father had ruffled his hair affectionately. To tire the bullies out, around five hits should be enough. A metal bat is quite heavy after all... Thump. Someone was screaming something again. Just wait for it... Thump. He moved quickly—launching off the wall to get enough propulsion to praise the bat out of the attacker's hands. He swooped at the correct angle. CRINK CRANK CRANK... He ran for it, as the bat rolled away. Had he been standing at the wall for too long? It had gotten kind of cold...

He gave a sneeze. A couple of chip packets floated down and covered his upper body. He swiped some off his face in sleepy annoyance. There was a bright light on the other side of his eyelids and the feel of the cold floor was familiar—he must have forgotten

to set the floor heating again. He peeked out slowly and saw daylight filtering under the hems of the curtains, between the table legs. Yes, he was home all right. Huh? Home? He sat up in a hurry, knocking his elbow on the corner of the table. His face turned red in the effort not to scream out loud as his knee jerked involuntarily. Ooyama kicked something soft which murmured and rubbed the afflicted area. Ooyama squinted at that thing half-sprawled on the sofa and half-sprawled on the floor. The thing shifted in its sleep.

Ooyama scrambled backwards instinctively. What was this? The thing, as though reading his thoughts, suddenly rolled over and the hood of his jacket fell off to reveal his features.

It was Kotori.

Ooyama heaved a sigh of relief. No, wait, how did Kotori get here? How did he himself get home? Ooyama rubbed his face with his hands...

Chapter 7: Miso soup does not cure a hangover

Ooyama couldn't remember much despite rubbing his face a few times. He did remember he had been in a kimono though. Where was it? It was work clothes. Katanaka will get angry if something happened to it. Ooyama looked around. He finally found it, folded up neatly in the corner of the room, far away from the beer cans and chip crumbs. He gave a small sigh of relief. Kotori must have helped him.

He oddly remembered floating in the air as well. Was Kotori actually that strong? He couldn't really tell that from his small frame. If he was, he'd really like a bout with him as practice.

Looking at his watch, it seemed like he had crashed for nearly twelve hours. No wonder he was hungry. Although he had pulled a few all-nighters, and worked beyond the daily contracted end-time that had been specified by the company for most of the week, he had been working off-site so there was no way he could have clocked in at the company. What a loophole. Ooyama wrinkled his eyebrows. Well, it had been tough working to the times that suited the suppliers since they were only willing to meet at the close of business. Wearing a kimono at the negotiations had also helped greatly, and he also had only worn a woman's kimono on the last day, after they had come to an agreement. They were, hmm, yes, slightly surprised. Ooyama rubbed his eye bags solemnly.

Ooyama looked up just in time to see Kotori shudder violently. He leaned closer to hear what Kotori was mumbling.

'No.. no.. Sorry..' Kotori repeated over and over, while rubbing his arm where Ooyama had joggled him a moment ago.

'No.. no...!' Kotori trembled, almost as viciously as the fear which struck at him. His arms flailed about and his knees jerked as he slid off the sofa. He brought a cushion down with him which cushioned his head from hitting the floor.

Ooyama turned to look at the clock as he wondered if his First Aid Kit had that scary device for calming allergic reactions—something that looked like an auto-syringe that one could stab easily into oneself... or another person for that matter. This had happened once before, in the office. He remembered that they were looking for the scary device then too. What else did the First Aider tell him to do? Think. Think!

He wasn't even sure if it was an allergic reaction.

be the cushion. He turned his head a little to get a better angle. There was a mouth. It was snoring softly and slight stubble trembled.

Kotori tried pushing against the person he seemed to be lying on. The legs and arms around him tightened their grip in response. ‘What’s this? Some sort of Koala?’ Kotori thought. Oh, I have one arm free! He slowly unclenched his fist. The pins and needles shot down his arm and he shivered involuntarily. The arms and legs tightened further. It was like sinking in quicksand while being squeezed to death by a snake. He grabbed the shoulder of the person in front of him and managed to manoeuvre into a position with better visibility. He hooked his arm around the person’s neck in order not to slip down again. Oh, it’s Ooyama.

The thudding in his heart slowed down a little as Ooyama’s arms and legs readjusted themselves and secured him in his new position. Kotori wrapped his free arm around the cushion as he gently lowered his cheek to Ooyama’s shoulder. With his nose tucked near Ooyama’s Adam’s apple, Kotori slipped back into dreamless sleep. Ooyama, on the other hand, seemed to be dreaming that he was falling and so had to cling on to something for dear life...

“Just suck it up. She is being bullied at home. Like, her mother favours her brother. She has to do all the housework like cooking and cleaning for the entire family, especially the younger brother. Like, she’s having it tough so she’s just releasing it on you. So suck it up.” What in the world... How could this person not even consider that Kotori was going through the same thing? Just because Kotori didn’t say anything when he is bullied, it doesn’t mean that he wants to be bullied or even that he comes from some happy family. Kotori’s been doing what she’s been doing since he was eight. He didn’t even release it on anyone and here he is getting bullied by someone two years older instead? Wow.

“Where have you been? Why are you late? Your shift has started!!” Why do you always look for me? The other prefects don’t do their duty either. *“What nonsense! They are doing their duty properly! Look!”* Those prefects weren’t there earlier. Kotori wonders where they materialised from. They must have some intel that he doesn’t have—and so they are able to put on their ‘hard-working’ behaviour only when there is someone there to affirm it. That’s what society is. Kotori relearned it concretely at the tender age of eleven. He was the only one who did what was right even when no one was watching. Gods are watching. Who cares, say the rest. The people in power have to watch, else it won’t count.

Kotori's nightmares were never-ending. Ooyama struggled not to lose his grip on him. Kotori dug his fingers into Ooyama's neck as tears slipped out of the corners of his eyes. Ooyama winced slightly and flexed his shoulder blades.

A childhood was supposed to be happy. Supposedly. What childhood. Happiness is also optional. Kotori continued to hear the endless voices that had plagued him for decades; he had lost count how many voices there were as they had resentfully blended together over the years:

"Why are you in the dark? You didn't—forgot to switch on the lights again."

"Are you singing? Practising? But why in the dark?"

"Did you fall asleep? Go sleep on your bed."

"Your school is shit, so what if you are first in class?"

"Why aren't you doing the housework?"

"Why didn't you cook?"

"What are you doing? Stop slacking."

"STOP singing!!"

Ooyama awoke to a strange broken humming coming from Kotori. Was he singing? He stroked Kotori's head slowly and wiped the few tears that leaked out. It's okay. It's okay.

It will be okay.

Ooyama gave Kotori another nudge. Kotori was still dead to the world. It was not a surprise, considering that they had just completed their projects. The sun was setting now. Ooyama sighed. He decided to take a shower. Kotori was still asleep fifteen minutes later. Ooyama made sure that Kotori was breathing and then set about cooking with as little noise as possible. Ooyama was just glad that Kotori was not trembling or crying anymore. Keeping up the koala bear lock really froze up his muscles. At least, Kotori had a peaceful expression on his face now. Wait, he's not dead right? Ooyama checked Kotori's breathing yet again. Ooyama sighed.

Kotori slid down the side of the sofa that he had been leaning against to better feel the warmth from the floor. A few cold drops hit Kotori's face. He wrinkled his nose. He wondered if it was raining, did he forget to close the window again? However, the feel of the floor was different and there was the rumble of distant traffic. Did he collapse in some

strange alleyway? There was only one passageway to the apartment building though... Ah, well, whatever, it was warm; just another five minutes...

Food was being cooked somewhere nearby: Little sizzling and scraping noises, the smell of miso and fried chicken. Kotori opened his eyes a tiny bit but all he could see was black leather and a wooden floor. Then, all of a sudden, a kitchen and dining area came into view before he was hoisted to face upwards (the hanging light on the ceiling was awfully close) and then finally, all he could see were bulging arm muscles and a collarbone emitting the scent of funky soap. Kotori's lips brushed against Ooyama's collarbone as Kotori wriggled in Ooyama's tight grip to get a look at his captor's face. Ooyama shivered and pulled Kotori closer in order not to drop him. Kotori was pressed against a white furry cloth.

Kotori was dropped on to something soft and springy. Something else that was soft and slightly heavy was pulled on top of him. Kotori resolutely kept his eyes closed. He heard a soft sigh and then felt someone poking at his furrowed brow.

"You're awake, aren't you," came Ooyama's amused voice. Kotori peeked towards the voice.

"I did think you were struggling more than..." Ooyama stopped himself.

"More than...?" Kotori asked.

"...Before..." Ooyama breathed quietly.

"Before?"

"Yeah, maybe you were dreaming of something...? You know, like how dogs flail their legs about when they dream."

"I was... struggling...?" Kotori paled.

"Nah... just... flailing about. I bet I do that too... You know, there was once, I went to sleep on the right side of my bed and woke up on the left side, with my legs on my pillow! I really wonder how I 180'ed and still managed not to roll out of bed..."

Kotori offered a weak smile.

"Go back to sleep. You'll soon remember it after you've rested. Want some food? I cooked something light."

The smell of miso and chicken entered his senses again.

"I'll get fat if I eat then sleep."

"If you can crack a joke, you must be feeling better," Ooyama smiled. "How about a squeeze-bag of vitamin jelly-drink? I remember you like to drink that?"

"Okay."

Kotori fell asleep even before he had finished half a pack of jelly-drink he had been weakly sucking on. Ooyama put the packet on the bedside table and turned on the night-lamp.

“Sleep well. I promise that you won’t get any more nightmares tonight.” Ooyama murmured.

Ooyama then sat down at a table and drank his miso soup slowly. When he finished, he ate a few bites of chicken with rice. He felt a little better but not completely cured yet. Maybe he should have added more spices in it. He poured Kotori’s portion back into the pot and put the bowls he used into the sink.

After brushing his teeth and changing his clothes, Ooyama climbed in on the other side of his wide bed, reached over to hold Kotori’s hand, and finally, comfortably fell asleep.

A fresh scent that mixed with the residue miso smell hung in the air.

Kotori’s hand twitched a few times during the night. Sometimes, Ooyama’s hand twitched involuntarily too. And there would be a reassuring answering squeeze in response. It’s all right. It’s all right.

It’s just a dream. In just a few hours, the night will be over.

Chapter 8: Meeting

Hanazou woke up bright and early on his first day of work. As he had done internships with the company previously when he was in high school, he was put straight-away on the shortest probation: one month. He was looking forward to starting his day at work.

As usual, he had to do introductions. He knew what to do now. He did it fast, made it snappy, always ending it with “I look forward to working with you and thank you for having me”. He was introduced to his mentor—Katanaka. Now the onus was on Katanaka to show him the ropes.

“It’s great that you have done internships with us previously,” Katanaka started.

“Yes, but only within a few sections.” Hanazou modestly replied.

“Do you still remember what those sections did?”

“I have kept the handbooks that I was given years ago and re-read them.”

“Ah, some of that information may be outdated, but I suppose most of the important information would be the same...?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“I suppose.”

“Will I get a new handbook?”

“The only guidebook that’s still in use is for the cro—I mean, ah, the acting department. We use videos and practical training too.”

“I see. What about the rest of the work?”

“Do you remember the device you had when you visited the Work Experience Centre?”

“Yes.”

“Most of our work is now digitalised. You can think of the device as something like a tablet.”

“Oh, I see.”

Hanazou kept up with Katanaka’s walking pace with ease. Maybe it was also because they were similar in height.

“The important thing is the scheduled black-out time for computers, devices and other electronic items. For one hour at around lunch time every day, most of the company will be in darkness as they conserve energy by switching off the lights and most electronic

devices. Unless you are given permission, overtime work past 7PM is not allowed. The building also ‘shuts down’ at 7PM,” Katanaka continued as they entered a lift.

“I will remember that.”

“Please also remember that even though most things are done electronically now, we do follow-ups by sending confirmation emails and messages, phone calls, meeting face-to-face, or leaving a note on the desk. You can also use video calls to establish rapport.”

“I will. But what if that person does not have a device that is capable of receiving or making a video call?”

“We provide those devices to our staff and clients.”

“I see. So this one is mine?”

“Exactly. Take care of it. Oh, we’re here.”

They had exited the lift and had been walking through the building as they had this exchange.

They had arrived at a lounge that had a clear view of the shopping district below. The shopping district extended out towards a tall building at the end of the street. Just faintly, Hanazou could see more shops behind that tall building. There seemed to be a faded fat cross-shaped symbol on the side of the tall building.

“I did one of my internships there,” Hanazou pointed at a clothing shop in the middle of the street while smiling fondly.

“Oh, isn’t that where they teach sewing? The old lady is still at it, although she has quite a few disciples and even a few branch shops now.”

“Is she? I should catch u—greet her again sometime.”

“Yes, you should. And your most recent internship was at the Odourless Café?” Katanaka pointed at another signboard.

“Yes, it was. While I was working there, many customers told me that they liked the concept because they did not like having the smells of food and drink on their clothes.”

“Yes, it was quite a big hit when it first opened. It still is one of our best shops.”

“Could I ask a question?”

“Please go ahead.”

“Did an employee propose to have a shop like that?”

“Wow, that’s right. You do have a discerning eye.”

“Ah... Thanks—Thank you very much,” Hanazou mumbled.

“Actually, I was the one who proposed that idea. Technically, I am one of the owners.”

“No kidding! I really like that shop!”

“Haha!” the corners of Katanaka’s eyes crinkled and the politely dazed expression disappeared from his eyes for an instant. “Now I know why I was assigned as your mentor.”

“Was that because of—”

“Maybe,” Katanaka replied vaguely, his expression returning. “Because you have some experience in working for those shops, it is likely that you will be posted to their stalls in the Work Experience Centre as well.”

“I—I... see.”

“After that, based on your skills and preferences, you can become a floater like Kotori or specialise in one sector for a few months. Ideally, it would be good if you have experience in all sectors.”

“Okay... but who is Kotori?” Hanazou was sure that he did not know anyone by that name.

“Ah,” Katanaka paused. “Well, you might meet Kotori at the Welcome Party,” he scratched his head in uncertainty. “And maybe Ooyama too. Anyway, you need to remember what the buildings and streets in this whole area look like. That’s the purpose of bringing you here.”

Hanazou’s first day of work was not that bad. He taught something that he knew to others. He learnt a few new things himself. He ate lunch with the members in his office. He went home before 7PM. His mentor was nice and they were more similar than they had initially thought. There was a list of things to do and learn every day which his mentor had already sent to him in advance. It was not a problem if he finished the list early, nor was it a problem if he needed more time to learn something. He felt like that the company needed him and welcomed him, and he felt motivated to do something for such a welcoming place. This was so unlike any of his previous contract-based jobs, where the most ghastly one was when he was thrown into the countryside without any help, and after finally successfully conducting classes for six months, suddenly was instructed not to teach and then regulated to pushing the buttons on the CD Players because the main staff never bothered to find out what track numbers were. He could not even do anything even when the clients complained to him. Telling the company did not help and none of the local staff bothered to help him either.

He was glad that he had reapplied to the Work&Experience Centre for further internships and then for a graduate job.

The days flew by at his new job at the Work Experience Centre. At the moment, his job scope was to rotate around the stalls at which he had interned at previously. It was relatively easy as he could still remember most of the duties that he had previously done .

“It will become tougher soon,” Katanaka had informed him wearily today. “Do you remember the day we met?”

Hanazou nodded. He remembered the pink hair that matched the cherry blossoms that floated in the breeze while a suited man lay prone on the ground. That shade of pink matched the shade of pink in front of him.

“We received two new requests. They’re in their planning stages now. At the earliest, the dispatch might be next month. You’d have to come with me...” Katanaka put on a forced smile. “You can just observe if it is too tough on—” Katanaka recalled the report on Hanazou that he had received and the things that he had to be careful of.

Hanazou shook his head slightly. “We’re partners,” he declared firmly.

It was finally Friday. On this Friday, the office that he was part of partook in lunch together again. This time, they seemed more casual and laidback, maybe because they had already met their deadlines for the week. They welcomed him again and gave him a small toast for a good week of work done. He was then informed to turn up at the Function Room in the company housing at seven later that night for a Welcome Party. Other colleagues in other sections were also invited. Even his neighbours in the company housing were invited. Remember to come! What about food? Oh, bring some if you want to. He felt extremely touched. He never had a Welcome Party before. Neither did he ever have a Farewell Party either. He wondered what it would be like. He hoped that it would not be an excuse for getting drunk on company expenses or a place to brush off sexual harassment with the excuse of being drunk. He hoped that he would neither be on the receiving end or on the giving end.

The Function Room came with a drink bar and a few bar-tenders who also doubled as waiters. Most people brought some kind of packaged snacks and desserts with them. Others brought homemade finger food, rice, pizza and salad. The only catering was a compulsory mini-burger that each person was given as they entered the door. The mini-burger had the right amount of vegetables and meat; it was not oily or overly salty, and it left enough space in the stomach for further food and drink.

“What’s the point of the mini-burger?” Hanazou asked Katanaka when he saw him in a corner as he waved the burger in his palm.

“It’s the company’s welcome present.”

“I see.” Hanazou accepted the explanation without a fuss.

“It’s actually to prevent you from drinking on an empty stomach. Although the bar has a free-flow of nuts and chips to go with the drinks.” Katanaka sighed.

“Mm.” Hanazou had already bitten into the burger, or rather, he finished it in one bite.

“Come on, don’t just stand here. Go talk to other people and make more friends.”

“But I don’t...”

“Then, let me introduce you to your neighbours, Kotori and Ooyama.”

“You’ve said these names before. Are they your good friends?”

“As expected. You have a good memory. I entered the company slightly earlier than Ooyama. Kotori is under Ooyama’s care...has recently become one of my favourites—ssh, that’s a secret. We’re all in the same department,” Katanaka winked.

Katanaka walked over to a group of men who were playing billiards in the corner with Hanazou. The empty packages of mini-burgers were neatly folded up and enclosed by a clean napkin. A passing waiter carefully picked the stack up and carried it off. A tall man straightened up from the table after missing a shot, as a smaller man beside him watched him in concern.

“Are you drunk already, Ooyama?” roared the watching crowd.

“I’m just tired. I just got up you know...”

“You had a couple of days off! What are you talking about,” said another while giving him a hearty slap on the back.

“My arms still feel tingling,” Ooyama muttered inaudibly as his legs trembled a little. He was still recovering from the aftereffects of the koala hug.

Katanaka stood near Ooyama and Kotori. There was a sullen man with him. Kotori looked at him carefully. Oh, Kotori’s eyes widened. He gave Ooyama a poke.

“You should thank him.”

“Eh? Hi, thanks Katanaka.”

“No, not Katanaka. The other person.”

“Eh? Erm.. thanks?” Ooyama looked carefully at the sullen man. “Oh, Number 69.”

“Eh? Number 69?”

“What am I thanking him for?” Ooyama yawned and stretched his arms wide. He was still tired even though he had rested for a few days. The koala hold had really taken a toll on him right at the start of his rest days.

“He, er...” Kotori tried to think of a better wording. Picked you up? How about, carried you on his shoulder? No, no. Treated you like a sack of sand and hoisted you up on his shoulder as though he was a construction worker? It seems to be becoming worse.

“I pi—” Hanazou started to say but Kotori interrupted with a louder “He ah...”

It sounded like a Hya. Ooyama’s eyebrows lifted a little. Was it the kind of ‘Hya’ when someone hits their funny bone or was it the kind of ‘Hya’ when shouting in a dojo?

“I ca—” Hanazou repeated but Kotori interrupted with an “OH!”

Kotori still hadn’t thought of a better way to say it, so he just asked desperately, “O—oh, what’s your name by the way?”

Katanaka watched this exchange with some amusement. It was quite funny how Kotori’s face was gradually getting redder as he interrupted Hanazou time and again. Kotori’s lips twitched and his fingers that had clutched on to the hems of his shirt turned whiter and whiter.

Hanazou opened his lips to reply and then thought better of it and looked askance at Katanaka. Katanaka was slightly surprised.

Didn’t he try to speak the truth just now with no qualms about anything? Without even introducing himself first, at that. And now he was suddenly asking for...? For what? Help? Permission? Someone to officially introduce him?

Katanaka smiled and gave Hanazou a light pat on the arm.

“This is Hanazou.”

“Hanazou, this is Kotori and this is Ooyama.”

“Oh. You really look like a small—guh...” Hanazou began but Katanaka suddenly gave him a clap on his back.

“He really wanted to meet you guys,” Katanaka said cheerfully and loudly. “So you’ve actually met before?”

“At an interview,” Ooyama replied as he scooped some rice and topped it with some chips that he had brought over.

“At...at the end of a project phase,” Kotori’s voice got softer and softer.

“Ah, he helped you?” Katanaka winked.

Kotori nodded quickly.

“Eh~? What did he help you with?” Ooyama asked with a mouthful of salty and crispy and soft mixed in his crunch.

Kotori really wanted to roll his eyes, but he just smiled ambiguously.

Actually, Kotori had seen that Katanaka was in the corner the moment he had entered the room with Ooyama. The pink hair was quite hard to miss. He was relieved that there was someone else that he knew in the room. Because he was a floater, he felt that he did not have deep relationships with anyone in the department, though he was surprised that many people greeted him and thanked him for his help on their projects. He had actually wanted to tell Ooyama that he was going to sit with Katanaka as he didn't like to mix with a rowdy crowd of people that he didn't really know, much less play billiards with them.

What he didn't expect was that Katanaka would actually come to them and that there was a sullen man tagging along with him. But well, at least he turned out to be an acquaintance.

Kotori stood to the side and picked up some plates. He offered an empty plate to Katanaka who took it with a kind smile. He also offered Hanazou a plate, who took it without standing on ceremony. After they filled their plates with some food, they stood a small distance away from Ooyama who had finished eating and was continuing with billiards. It wouldn't do to get poked by any long stick by accident.

It was a while later that Hanazou reacted with, “Number 69?”

“Wasn't that your interview number or something? I think I remember seeing it on your chest at one point,” Katanaka said with a squirt of fruit juice.

There was some silence as Hanazou processed this information.

“Number 69?” Hanazou repeated.

Kotori looked up from his napkin. “Sorry, I don't actually remember what Number 69 looked like. I was too nervous then,” Kotori gave an apologetic smile. “I do remember you when you pi—, ah, ca—, ah well, helped Ooyama.”

“Too nervous? I... I helped Ooyama?” Some wrinkles appeared on Hanazou's forehead.

Ah, Katanaka clapped his hands after he wiped them with the new napkin Kotori handed to him.

“Kotori-chan,” Katanaka said in a quiet voice that only the three of them could hear.

Ah. A pink colour slowly made its way up Kotori's face.

“The big, er, person, in the kimono... do you remember?” Kotori asked.

“Yes, I remember the kimono...” Hanazou flicked his eyes over to Ooyama and gauged his approximate height. Then Hanazou mimed lifting something to his shoulder. Hanazou looked at Kotori next and tried to remember where Kotori’s head had reached.

“That sack, ah, person, was Ooyama?” A flicker of shock flashed past his eyes. See, you did treat him like a sack, Kotori thought while suppressing a smile.

“And that was you?” Hanazou’s eyes widened.

“Congratulations,” Katanaka grinned. “Now that you’ve seen both of his faces, you have to keep it a secret, okay? Oh, and Ooyama’s too.”

“You know too?” Hanazou turned to look at Katanaka.

“Didn’t I say from the start that we are from the same department?” Katanaka’s eyes twinkled.

“Same... You, you mean they do the same things you did, we do, too?” Hanazou’s voice became hushed.

“Have you?” Katanaka asked Kotori.

“What?” Kotori was on to dessert. It was just a piece of chocolate, but it had a sticky centre which made it hard to speak more than a few words.

“Er... How do you find the work? Was it too difficult?”

Kotori gulped down some water. “It was mostly planning and projects. If I’m not in the office, then I’m in the Work&Experience Centre. I actually became a few shades whiter,” Kotori pouted.

Hanazou looked less tense.

A roar of laughter from the billiard players broke into the conversation. Someone had managed a trick shot but just barely missed.

Looking over at Ooyama, Katanaka said softly to Hanazou, “Ooyama has.”

Hanazou felt his jaw clench.

As though Ooyama had some sixth sense, he turned around to look at them.

“You haven’t been flicking rubber bands at my legs have you, Katanaka?” he mouthed.

Katanaka raised the drink glass that he had just gotten from the waiter and showed him the napkin in his other hand.

“You haven’t been thinking of it, have you?” his exaggerated mouth shapes were actually quite funny.

Katanaka shrugged and took a sip from his glass.

“Hmm... I think I need to rest,” Ooyama announced as he gave his spot to someone else. He had already played for an hour. It should be enough. He gave everyone at the billiard table a bright smile, and quickly left them to it.

“Katanaka, oh hey Kotori, I’m going up to rest after I drink this.”

Ooyama flicked on the television the moment he got home. He bent forward and gave a little stretch. He didn’t really like socialising that much on his day off either.

Suddenly, the television started screeching babymetal sounds. Ooyama gave a start. He looked up from the cushioned slippers he just stepped into and saw Ladymoustache. ‘That’s a lot of muscles there,’ Ooyama thought. ‘It’s pretty amazing that he’s wearing bikini tops and miniskirts...’ At that thought, Ooyama closed his eyes as he curled up on the sofa, the sounds from the television program turning into white noise. I wonder if Kotori managed to...

Technically, it was the Welcome Party for the new hires in his department, but it felt like an extension of work as Katanaka dragged him around to meet the staff from different sections that he hadn’t had the chance to meet yet. He had only been there a week and was immediately busy with work, so of course he hadn’t met them yet. Katanaka didn’t have to drag him around too much though, as some people also went up to them in twos and threes. But there were too many names and too many faces. They all started to look the same after a while and the dim lighting didn’t really help much. As it was an informal event, most of the staff hadn’t even bothered to bring their name cards as well. It was so different compared to Hanazou’s first two days of work during which, the number of name cards he had received from the people he worked with in his section and from the clients he met could fill up an entire album. He remembered some of them were really stylish like all black or all gold. But that wasn’t the only thing.

It was the informal clothes that everyone was wearing. At least a tall person in a kimono or a small person with curly hair was easier to remember. There were even slight differences in suit patterns and cuts that he’d seen all week. In here, everyone seemed to be wearing some kind of round-necked T-shirt, like it was a uniform. It even seemed to be of the same material and the same cut. Did everyone also buy their informal clothes from the same shop too? The U brand! It suddenly occurred to Hanazou.

Aside from Katanaka whom he could recognise at a glance even under the bad lighting, everyone else also had the same skin tone, same coloured eyes and hair, and almost the same face shapes. Hanazou was sure that he was the same as well, although the only difference was that he was wearing a V-neck T-shirt. It was also from the U brand. He scratched the back of his head... He raised his drink glass whenever Katanaka instructed him to.

Many colleagues at the party were also taking this chance to gossip with the people from other sections or those who sat far away from them in the office since there wasn't much time to socialise with anyone except the people sitting nearby during work hours. Others were enjoying some recreation like darts and billiards in loud excitement. The background noise was quite loud, to say the least.

Moreover, Hanazou was also still in a daze as he ruminated on the shocking facts that Katanaka had revealed to him. Or should he call it the truth instead? He couldn't help but glance a few times at the small man called Kotori. The softly made-up face and big eyes in his memories were slowly overlapping with the face of the man who was nonchalantly standing at the food table. Just as it overlapped completely, the man looked over at him.

Kotori just so happened to look Hanazou's way from across the food table and their eyes met for a second. Kotori gave Hanazou a small nod and continued staring. At the same time, Kotori was also balancing a tart on his plate. Or rather, Kotori seemed to be looking at something behind Hanazou. Hanazou was just about to turn around when he heard a deep voice go, "Katanaka, oh hey Kotori—" Hanazou had just turned around and seen Ooyama, when, upon hearing "Kotori", he tilted his head back again to look behind him. Kotori had suddenly appeared within earshot behind him with the tart on his plate.

He listened to what Ooyama said silently. Katanaka just nodded while Kotori looked conflicted between eating the tart and following Ooyama. Then Kotori was distracted by some colleagues who came up to him, and Hanazou was dragged around the room by Katanaka.

It was eight-thirty by the time he heard Katanaka say the words that he wanted to hear the most, "That should be enough. Let's go home."

Katanaka looked around the room for a while, "Kotori seems to have left too."

Chapter 9: A Project Together I

Kotori and Ooyama had received some work emails during their long week of recuperation. Project 811A would start on the Monday that they were back. They had a few other tasks as well: helping out at a Maid Café and Host Club; and at a kimono clothes shop and a tea ceremony. Kotori groaned as he flicked through the emails once, then read them carefully again.

Kotori and Ooyama walked into the office on Monday looking less like zombies. They greeted their colleagues as they walked through the office doors; even though there had been a party recently, no one looked hungover. Then they met up with Katanaka in one of the meeting rooms. Hanazou was already sullenly waiting inside.

“You’re here? Hanazou and a few others, including I, will be on this project”, Katanaka explained.

“Good morning, Katanaka. How have you been, Hanazou-san,” Kotori greeted while Ooyama just nodded towards Hanazou and Katanaka. Hanazou nodded back at Ooyama and smiled at Kotori. Katanaka just nodded and continued,

“Before you can be of use at those establishments, you guys will have to do some research and get some practice beforehand. Please go to these establishments as customers today and watch what the workers do. Starting from tomorrow, you guys will be on a two week internship at each of our partner establishments to learn how to work at these places. The rotating roster will be up tomorrow, so that everyone will get a chance to experience all the jobs.”

Ooyama and Kotori nodded. They had already received the specifics in the detailed emails. They knew that this was just a formality. This was the start of the planning and preparations for the yearly festival that was held in the district. If they passed the internships at the establishments they were rostered to, they could help out at the stores during the festival, which would give the original store staff and the store owners some time to enjoy the festivities.

Ooyama had done some training previously and had recently been wearing some kimonos, so he could help Kotori with the basics. He helped Kotori into his kimono as Katanaka briefed Hanazou on their tasks for the day. Kotori and Ooyama would soon make their way to the kimono shop in the shopping district that extended beyond the office

building. Then Katanaka helped Ooyama in wearing his kimono, while Kotori passed the time trying to get to know Hanazou.

“I usually work with Ooyama and only see Katanaka sometimes, but Katanaka is really nice, right?” Kotori tried to start.

“Yes, he is.”

“Er... how are you finding the work?”

“At the moment it is going okay.”

“That is good.”

“Ah, did you enjoy the Welcome Party? It’s quite rare to see so many people from other sections in the same place.”

“It was okay.” Hanazou could hardly say that he couldn’t remember who he had met then, could he...

“Is the kimono pretty?” Kotori asked when he noticed that Hanazou was looking at his clothes.

“It is pretty.”

“It’s nice, isn’t it? Have you worn one before?”

“I’ve only worn the men’s one.”

Ah, Kotori’s face had a slight blush. “It’s not that different?”

“Yes, it seems only the colour and maybe the number of layers...?” Hanazou looked at Kotori’s neckline.

“It... seems so.”

“What will you be doing while in this kimono?” A slight wrinkle appeared on Hanazou’s forehead.

“Just being a customer in a shop and buying what Katanaka needs,” Kotori replied. “I hope that the shop staff doesn’t talk to me...”

The wrinkle disappeared on Hanazou’s forehead for a moment.

“Do you know what Katanaka does?” Hanazou asked carefully.

“He helps with the clothes...?” Kotori tilted his head to the side.

“You—you don’t know?” Hanazou raised his eyebrows.

Kotori tilted his head even more.

Hanazou almost breathed a sigh of relief.

“Do you know any self-defence skills like some martial arts or something?” Hanazou continued as the frown came back.

“No?” Kotori replied as he adjusted a belt that was too tight. “Do I need to?”

“Yes, you do,” Katanaka and Ooyama replied at the same time. Katanaka had fast and strong hands, and had already finished tying the belt around Ooyama’s kimono.

“The earliest self-defence class starts next month. I just booked it for you yesterday.”

“Oh...? Okay...?”

Katanaka checked their attire one last time before sending them out of the room.

“Is this your first time going to a traditional arts shop?” Ooyama asked as he pulled out the list of shops Katanaka gave him.

“I’ve bought some yukatas from a shop before, but I never really noticed or knew how to match fabrics or colours or designs...”

“And, do we really have to be in women’s clothes?” Kotori continued. “Isn’t that a little... dangerous?”

“It’d be more authentic to pose as a customer if we’re already wearing the clothes, don’t you think?”

“Ah, I see. We might get better or special treatment if we look like Kimono Connoisseurs?”

“Yes, maybe. Although they might be suspicious of a woman who is quite tall... Not all shops have clothes that are longer than the average length either—although the ones in the shopping district here have them.”

They had reached the old wooden sliding paper-door of the kimono shop after walking through the morning sun.

“You ready?”

Kotori nodded and smoothed down the cloth in front of his chest.

Ooyama pushed the sliding door open with a smile.

‘It is not that difficult to pretend to be a customer, as long as one didn’t need to talk,’ Kotori thought. He was still slightly nervous. Katanaka had actually also asked them to buy the things that their department needed. In particular, more cloth ties and belts. They slowly walked around the display shelves and tables, taking note of the placements of the items and the costs. Ooyama had seen some of these recently, but that was a memory from one week ago and he also had not paid particular attention to them then. At least he remembered how to wear a kimono...

Sticking close to Ooyama, Kotori browsed through the items on display. Sometimes poking at them with a finger, sometimes bring his sleeve closer to the item to observe if the colours would match his kimono. After looking at almost every item carefully, they finally reached the fabric side of the shop.

Some bales of cloth were hung up on display, while others were folded neatly on the shelves. There were a few ready-made kimonos already hanging on hangers, but mostly, there were just loads and loads of fabric all around. Darker colours with simple patterns were on one side, and brighter colours mainly with flower patterns were on another side. Kotori spotted the area that housed the belts and ties that they were looking for and headed straight towards it.

He couldn't walk very fast because he was in a kimono, but his excitement still showed on his face. It was a new world. The smell of fabric, the lingering smell of dyes, and swirling patterns rushed past the periphery of his eyes as he made his way towards the belts. It really seemed quite obvious what his purpose was. He started to compare the colours and patterns of the belts to his kimono. However, after he had looked at nearly ten belts, Ooyama still had not come over. Kotori turned his head and looked in the direction of Ooyama.

Ooyama was calmly talking to a shop staff. He revealed a little bit of white arm as he compared some fabric against his skin. He nodded a few times. Then he went over to the darker coloured fabrics and made a few more comparisons. He nodded again at the staff's words and gave a little bow. Flicking a loose strand of hair behind his ear, he walked up to Kotori. How could he be so calm? He even talked to someone!

“Don't you want to look at the fabric too?” he asked Kotori.

“I want to hurry up and finish the task before taking my time to,” Kotori pouted. “I don't want to hang around for a long time not buying anything...” Thirty minutes had already passed since they walked in.

Ooyama gave him a little pat.

“Alright, let's pay for the things we need and then continue browsing.”

Kotori smiled in reply, and then sucked a breath in to wiggle his torso slightly as one of his belts was digging into his ribs.

The next day, Ooyama and Kotori headed out to the shopping district again. As usual, Kotori was sucking on the squeeze-bag of jelly. He seemed quite happy. He looked up at

Ooyama and offered him another squeeze-bag. Ooyama shook his head as he rolled up the one he had just finished sucking, “Thanks.”

“I’m finally getting some sun,” Kotori hummed as he slurped the last dregs from the squeeze-bag. It was always hard trying to get the last drop out. The straw was too hard. After tossing the empty squeeze-bag into his backpack, he checked his reflection in the window of a shop that was not yet open. They had to be early to make a good impression.

Ooyama took a look at Kotori via their reflections in the window. He was right—a few months of indoor work had made them slightly paler. Copying Kotori, he screwed the cap of the squeeze-bag tight and put it in his bag. He looked at the various wrappers and other things that cushioned the squeeze-bag. Hmm, he had to remember to empty out the rubbish that had collected inside and separate them when he got home.

They stopped outside the old sliding paper-door that they had gone through yesterday morning as customers. As they purposely stood there for a couple seconds longer, their morning shadows were cast on the paper-door.

Then with a soft swooshing sound, Ooyama slid the door open extremely carefully. His grandfather’s house also had those doors, and he had poked holes in them by accident as he had tried to slide them open, or he had used too much force and had taken the door off the frame... Although he had mended the holes or put the door back, he remembered that his grandfather had always been extremely peeved, while his father just chortled in the background.

“Good morning, I am from saku.Ra,” he started.

The elderly staff members looked up with a hesitant smile.

“Someone from the company, probably Katanaka-san, would have given you a call yesterday to remind you about the schedule today.”

The staff members nodded.

“That’s great!” Ooyama flashed a broad smile. Kotori felt that Ooyama was being unnecessarily enthusiastic. “Do you remember me from the week before?”

There were a couple of tiny strained smiles.

“Thank you for your help today. We will be in your care.” Ooyama bowed deeply, at forty-five degrees, head and eyes looking at the floor. Kotori hurriedly did the same.

Professional and polite bows were returned.

Although they did not mind fitting or selling their Kimonos, it seemed really hard for them to teach Ooyama and Kotori how to match fabrics, colours and designs, especially for women’s clothing. Maybe it was because there was no printed manual or maybe it was

because there were many staff and so the teaching was not really systematic... They also didn't have much time before the shop opened for business.

Ooyama and Kotori only spent a quick hour just trying to learn the basics regarding the different styles for men and women. Then they could only begin observing what the staff did when the shop opened. Only when there were less or no customers, did they manage to learn more things.

Brrringg. Brrringg.

“Good Morning. Thank you for calling Matsuda’s Japanese Clothes. Oh, I see. Thank you for your patronage. Yes, yes. Ooyama-san and Kotori-san. Pardon me, but they are...? Men? Yes, I see. One tall and one short. Oh, was the tall boy called Ooyama? That’s a unique first name. Oh yes, the other week, yes, that’s right. I see. Yes. An hour of teaching them how to match fabric and select clothes? Erm, even women’s clothing? I understand. We will try our best. We look forward to working with them. Thank you for reminding us about the appointment. Have a good day.” The young staff put down the telephone.

“Grandpas and grandmas, do you remember the tall man from the other week? He’s coming back today. Please treat him kindly as you teach him how to match fabric and select clothes.” The young staff turned to the five people who were sitting around the tea table.

A cacophony of elderly voices erupted all at once but somehow they could hear what the others were saying:

“Who’s that?”

“He’s from saku.Ra.”

“Which one?”

“The tall one.”

“The hardworking one?”

“Ohh, the one in the dull kimono?”

“Ah, yes. I think that’s the one.”

There was a little silence, before three people spoke over each other.

“He’s a little tall.”

“It seemed a little short.”

“He looked okay in it.”

A few small glares were shot towards the speakers.

“Too bad he isn’t a woman.”

“That had been a little surprising.”

A few soft cackles rung out, before they paired up in twos or threes and had their own little conversations. One set of conversation was markedly louder than the others:

“So, selecting and matching?”

“Who would like to do it?”

“Didn’t we already draw lots last week? Who got the marked sticks?”

Two raised hands.

“Are you sure?”

“I think so.”

“Don’t really remember. I was told to put my hand up.”

“Want to draw again?”

“No.” That was said quite firmly.

“You don’t have to teach them anything too advanced. They are not here to steal trade secrets.” The young staff sighed.

There were some small sighs of relief and looks of disbelief.

“They will help us with our display in the Work Experience Centre. So they will start an internship with us.” The young staff continued.

“They will?” A few old voices chimed in.

“Yes. You can teach them more things during the internship.”

A few of the elderly staff exchanged a look.

“If you like them, they can also help us during the festival.”

There were a few slight frowns.

“It can still be in the Beginner Level. They just need to know enough to be able to help us. Like names of things or basic matching.” The young staff patiently explained again; he went through this process every year and had been repeating the same things all week. Every day was a *déjà vu*.

“That might be helpful.” A few of the elderly staff remarked.

“They will be assigned to help us whenever we have a display there.”

“Ah, yes. Of course. That would be very helpful.” A few elderly staff nodded.

“But a kimono?” A lone hoarse voiced interjected.

There was another round of silence before the cacophony descended again:

“He looked okay in it.”

“You said that just now.”

“I wonder if he will wear one today...”

“He had a nice body though.”

“Grandma Miki!” The young staff tried to stop them from gossiping.

“That’s true.”

“Grandpa Hatsu!” The young staff obviously failed to stop them from continuing.

“But too bad, the one he had on that time wasn’t very good.”

“Yes, he would have looked better in a bolder and darker coloured men’s kimono.”

“Yes. Because he is tall.”

“And has a strong body.”

“Shall we put him in one?”

“But that’s what he has to wear during the internship...”

“Oh, yes. I forgot about that.”

There were a few happier smiles around.

A few hours passed as the staff enjoyed their early morning’s hot tea and discussed other topics.

“Excuse me! We are from saku.Ra.” Something else was said softly. There was a small buzz of excitement and anticipation. The door slid slowly open to reveal the tall man with a nice figure. Many pairs of eyes gave him a once-over before shooting telepathic messages at each other with their eyes: *‘Yes, yes. I remember him.’ ‘Oh, yes, the young man from that week’. ‘See, I told you he had a nice figure.’ ‘Who’s that behind him?’ ‘Who?’* Many pairs of eyes craned to look at a smaller slender man almost hidden from sight.

‘If it’s him, he might look extremely good in a woman’s kimono.’ ‘The tall one wore one once. It was okay...’ ‘If he wears one... That colour or fabric would be good.’ ‘Will he wear a wig?’ ‘I still don’t like the idea of a man wearing a woman’s kimono’. ‘You old man. Can’t you tell? Have your senses gone dull? Look at that stature, that figure, that size, that body!’ ‘I am reluctant... but yes, I see what you mean.’ ‘I suppose anyone can wear anything they like.’

“You might have heard from...” The staff almost gave themselves away with a collective almost-gasp as their telepathic messages were interrupted. They managed to stop themselves in time.

Gathering their thoughts, they put on their professional blank faces and professional smiles. ‘Don’t let your thoughts surface! Get a hold of yourselves everyone!’ the young man who had picked up the phone screamed in his heart.

“Do you remember me from last week?” *‘Of course!’ ‘I had no idea that the person inside the purple kimono was him.’*

“We will be in your care.” *‘Oh right, they are here to learn.’ ‘I want to teach them how to make a good selection for themselves.’ ‘You can ~~just~~ teach them about men’s clothing and Grandma Miki can take over later?’ ‘I want to have a go at them too.’ ‘Me too.’ ‘Don’t be stingy’. ‘Share them with us.’* The eyeballs of the staff members had flickered about quickly, and a slight bent of an eyebrow finally prompted them to calm down.

The staff who were assigned to teach Ooyama and Kotori stiffly stepped towards them. Kotori looked at Ooyama worriedly but it didn’t seem like he noticed. Kotori was not sure if he had read the atmosphere right or he was just being overly sensitive. They greeted all the staff politely with deep bows. They also took out the snack-presents that they had bought at one of the snack shops in the district and gave it to the... who should they give it to? Ooyama and Kotori could not really tell who the oldest person in the group was.

“Grandma Miki and Grandpa Hatsu,” the young man who had picked up the phone helped them out.

“Ah.”

Ooyama and Kotori offered the presents to the staff whose feet had twitched when they were named. They weren’t the ones who had slightly stepped forward.

The internship at the shop had officially started. Maybe because of the appearance of young new blood in the shop, or because of the upcoming festival next month, there were a lot more customers than before. Although the grandmas and grandpas had seemed slightly stand-offish at first, it only took a few days before they could not contain their excitement. Now, it seemed that they openly welcomed them with merry twinkling eyes. The only disconcerting thing was that they made Ooyama and Kotori wear at least two kimonos a day, using the pretext of learning how to match fabric, design and colours, or so Kotori thought.

Ooyama waltzed into the backroom where Kotori was resting as comfortably as he could in a tight kimono. “I think I attract more customers when I dress like this,” Ooyama mused as he lifted his hand up to fix his hair ornament. “The ladies, especially the bigger and taller ones, keep asking me for my help and the men keep asking me for my opinion,” he chuckled.

“At least that’s better than what I get,” Kotori grumbled. “Regardless of what I wear, they all just scream “So cute~~~” and ask if I’m someone’s grandchild.”

“Well, at least they do talk to you,” Ooyama replied while trying not to laugh. “If I’m wearing a man’s kimono, all I get are high-pitched screams and cold glares.”

“Was that why Grandma Miki made you work the register or help her get fabric from the storeroom yesterday?”

“Yeah. Grandma Miki’s really smart, you know? If I’m at the register, the screamers and glarers might feel more compelled to buy something just so that they can scream and glare up close.”

“And did they?”

“Almost eighty percent did. It’s an amazing sales tactic! Although very few bought kimonos...”

“Don’t you feel horrible that your looks are pulling in some sales?”

“If my looks can move some stock, why not? We need all the help we can to revitalise this area and the economy. And as long as no one is spitting at me or beating me up, I think that’s quite an improvement.”

“I think they might if they know that.....”

“Yes, that’s possible, but I don’t think anyone has caught on yet,” Ooyama almost giggled. Kotori pursed his lips silently.

“Are you miffed because you aren’t able to sell much stuff or are you miffed because the customers treat you like a kid?” Kotori opened his mouth to reply but he himself was not that sure what it was. As a result, he just gaped at Ooyama.

“Why don’t you turn that into your weapon then?” Ooyama patted him on the shoulder. “Depending on what you say and on your behaviour, you might be able to do it. You don’t need to be a smooth-talker but you may need to give them a reason so that they feel compelled to buy something from you.”

“That’s almost like trickery...”

“But all the sales people do it all the time. We aren’t as bad as they are and it’s for the sake of the job, right?”

“So I should say something like... Grandma is getting mad at me because I can’t sell anything and she’s going to cut my pocket money or something?”

“That sounds like a legitimate reason. Hmm... add in some puppy-dog eyes.”

“Like this?” Ooyama swallowed his teasing grin as he looked down at Kotori’s face. He froze for a moment.

“Ooyama-san?”

“Yes, they’d work.” ‘It might actually work too well even,’ Ooyama thought.

“I’ll try it out later.”

“Yes, yes, you do that,” Ooyama muttered as he shakily picked up his tea cup and drank some scalding tea quickly. He choked a little.

With a determined expression, Kotori left the backroom as his break time was up. He ducked under the cloth curtain and went out to the front of the shop, hoping that he would be more useful now.

“Heehee!”

“Haahaa!”

There were a few children running about in the shop again.

“Look, look, there she is!” they swarmed towards Kotori who had emerged from the back of the shop.

“Play with us!” Attempting to tug at her arms.

“Please don’t run in the shop.”

They ignored her. Kotori felt a little useless again. He looked at Grandma Miki who had a feather duster in her hand.

“You brats!” She waved it about.

“Heehee! Play with us, grandma!”

She shuffled around the displays in a circle as the children screamed.

Grandpa Hatsu opened the front door at an opportune time and the children ran out. He closed the door swiftly.

There was a collective sigh.

It was always hectic after the ‘end of school’ bell rang. The children going home would normally make detours in the shopping district. And they had been stopping by regularly ever since Kotori and Ooyama had started their internships.

Kotori didn’t know how to deal with children who just wanted to run around screaming ‘Heehee’ and ‘Haahaa’. The children he had come into contact with at the Work&Experience Centre had all concentrated on getting the tasks done. Should he give them a task to do? He could hardly tell them to do their homework could he? Did they even have any homework at that age? He wasn’t too sure about the education system at the primary school level.

Maybe they were interested in the kimonos?

Kotori shook his head slightly.

“I am sorry,” he apologised to the store staff.

“It’s okay, those brats are just brats.” Grandma Miki kept the feather duster somewhere.

“They just want to play because they are bored.” Grandpa Hatsu huffed.

“Sometimes they even snatch our sweets.”

“How about letting them play in the Work&Experience Centre? I think the first hour is free for children their age.” Ooyama walked out from the backroom with some flyers.

“Would that work?”

“We just have to try.”

The sound of high-pitched voices and laughter sounded through the paper sliding door again.

Ooyama strode forward and stood just behind the door. When the door opened, he loomed at the children while stuffing flyers at them.

“Go play there. Show it to your parents.”

“Wah~! She’s here!”

“So tall! So tall!”

“What happened to the tall man from the other day?”

“This must be his sister!”

“Heehee!”

“They look alike!”

“Haahaa!”

The children scampered away clutching the flyers.

There was some peace and quiet for a few days.

“Heehee, we’re back!”

“Haahaa!”

The staff inside the kimono shop flinched even before the door was energetically slid open.

“Play with us!” they hung on Ooyama’s arms.

He was in a men’s kimono this time. It was dark blue with thin horizontal lines. They weren’t really stripes.

Ooyama lifted his arms up as the two children squealed. The other children crowded around him waiting for their turn. He glanced at Grandma Miki. She nodded when she caught his eye.

There were customers in the shop who were seriously choosing their fabric. The constant laughter that was spurred on by nothing was not very conducive. Ooyama carried the two children to the backroom as a small crowd followed behind him.

“Hey Kotori,” Ooyama put the children down as Kotori gave a start.

“They’re all yours.”

He gaped at Ooyama just as he fell backwards and saw the wooden ceiling.

“Okay. Wait.” Kotori said firmly as he pushed them off him.

“Here,” he took out some papers that had some patterns on them. “If you colour them nicely, you get to eat some sweets.”

He took out numerous sets of colouring pencils and spread a large white paper over the only table in the room. The patterns were those that were available in the shop. It was an activity that they normally did in the Work&Experience Centre. It was over there that a child’s coloured drawing could turn into a digital kimono. Here, it could only be a basic colouring exercise.

Surprisingly, the children sat around the table obediently. At first, they just picked up a random colour and coloured it in with abandon. However, when they saw what Kotori was colouring, they all asked for another sheet of paper and began to colour seriously.

“Remember to write your name on your paper,” Kotori said when they were nearly done.

The tea was cooling in its pot and the sweets were unwrapped.

Chapter 10: Some things are better not remembered

Hanazou woke up drenched in sweat. That dastardly dream again. It had been a few years. He had not gone back to that place, much less that prefecture. Daily oppression for a year while he had been over there really did things to his mind.

He must have been slightly overworked and stressed. Although he had been surprised to see the pink haired person at work, he was more surprised to be teamed up with him. Because of his lean thin build, he often accompanied Katanaka on undercover jobs but usually stayed in the shadows as backup on operations. This was because Katanaka refused to let him participate even though he said it was okay and he was willing to.

Katanaka taught him a lot regarding the undercover jobs and it was only yesterday that he was allowed to go undercover by himself. While he felt safe knowing that Katanaka and the police were near-by, it had been slightly nerve-wrecking being so close to the perpetrator. He put his martial arts training into good use as he twirled out of the perpetrator's grasp and gave a few short decisive blows. After that, however, he could not get rid of the feeling that someone was going to attack him every time he put on that attire. He wondered if he should tell Katanaka his worries.

Hanazou pulled a towel off a hanger and mopped up his sweat. If he remembered right, there was something new in that nightmare of the past that he had repeatedly. He had been in a dress. Was this why Katanaka didn't really like doing undercover work? Hanazou pulled off his shirt by the collar and continued wiping sweat off his back. He opened his wardrobe and groped around for a shirt to wear. His hand brushed against something soft and scratchy. Frills! He became a little panicky. No, I don't have any of those. He slid the back of his hand higher and felt a knot. It's a tie. Hanazou gave a sigh of relief.

He found another shirt and pulled it on as he sat on the end of his bed. With his head in his hands, he massaged his temples. He wondered if he should drink some plum wine and try to go back to sleep. He pulled out the bottle of umeshu from the bedside drawer and poured out the recommended serving of it. He crunched on a plum thoughtfully as the wine sloshed around in his mouth. It was sour. He gave a little shiver. He got up to check that the doors and windows were locked before crawling back under his blanket. There was still another four hours before it was time to go to work.

He fell into a fitful sleep again...

SHUT UP! GET LOST! YOU, GET OUT NOW! Someone was screaming. It seemed to be directed at him while smirking and pointing to the door. *Oh my, my English is not very good. I learnt them from American dramas. Smirk. Smirk. Don't they mean '~kudasai'?* With an emphasis on *kudasai*. Hanazou struggled to maintain his expressionless face. *I'm sorry, she didn't mean it that way. If you don't mind, could you please leave the room for a while?* Someone zoomed over and whispered hurriedly on his left. Hanazou got up to leave without a fuss. 'I wonder why everyone loves to make me get out so much,' he pondered. He sorely contemplated whether he should say something rude in Japanese next time and then pretend that 'my Japanese is not very good, teheh xp' while sticking out a little of his tongue and using a fist to bump his forehead lightly.

There's no way that she didn't know that. He shook his head in disbelief as he stared out into the darkness outside the window and barely made out some girls playing lacrosse in the pitch-black. How far can one go to claim that it was a 'cultural and linguistic misunderstanding'? It must be so convenient to selectively pretend to understand and pretend not to understand things to suit the situation. Dire situations called for dire solutions. But one really didn't have to be so openly rude about it and even relish in their rudeness, did they now? Some might even call it a misappropriation of culture. Whose culture exactly?

Hanazou shook his head. Almost being drawn into the blackness, he walked away from the room he was told to get out of and towards another exit. That was the only door that separated him from the darkness outside. He could see some light and some heads in the room he was told to get out of, not that he was interested in it. The pitch-black was more interesting. He wondered if his bicycle light would be bright enough to see through the gloom on the way home. Just as Hanazou was about to place his palm on the glass door, someone called out to him. "We're done, Hanazou. Hanazou? Where are you? Where did you go?!!" and he walked back quickly to the voice. One is not allowed to run in the corridors. He gave an amicable smile. "I think there are some people playing a sport outside," Hanazou started. "I wanted to have a better look but it is hard to see. How do they even play the sport in the darkness?" "Ah, yes, they sometimes come over to play on our grounds. They're young, so I suppose they can see okay in the dark. They are from a Junior High School, or maybe it was a university—" BEEP BEEP BEEP.

The voice was, thankfully, cut off by the alarm. Although it was a calm voice, it was too polite. Had four hours gone by so fast? Groggy-eyed, Hanazou gave his flashing phone a few irritated taps. It was a message about impending storms and earthquakes. Hanazou turned his phone over so that the light from the screen would not irritate him further.

Burying his head into his pillow, he tried to get back to sleep. Another three more hours to go. He wondered if he could go over to someone's apartment right now. He didn't like the idea of going back to that dream again. But it was three in the morning. His colleagues who all lived in the same building as he did might not be too welcoming. He sighed.

Tapping his password into his phone, he typed a few messages and sent them. *Bibip~* came a reply. Hanazou sat up so hurriedly that he became dizzy for a second. *Bibip~* came another reply. *Go back to sleep you idiot*, the second message was written by Katanaka. *The storm is coming. Be safe, stay warm and dry. Try to sleep. Drink some milk? See you tomorrow*, wrote Kotori. It seemed that a few people had been woken up by the disaster warning messages. Hanazou fell on his back with a plop, his cross-legged legs sticking up at a ninety-degree angle. Tapping his message screen thoughtfully, he revealed a small smile and closed his eyes.

“Oh, I've seen that everywhere...”

“I do not have the obligation to carry your tiny pink LB bag—” Hanazou heard conversation seeping downwards which slowly crescendo-ed when the lift doors dinged open. He gave a chuckle when he saw Ooyama pretending to sling a strap over his shoulder with his thumb and index finger while expressing a face full of disgust.

“Good Morning.”

“Morning.” Head tilts were exchanged.

“Did you manage to get back to sleep?” Kotori inquired worriedly. Hanazou gave him a light pat on the shoulder as he nodded slightly. He turned to Ooyama and accused,

“You didn't reply even though you read it!” Ooyama grimaced and wrinkled his nose at him.

“Other people replied, didn't they? Ohh~ Nice tie you got on. And I see your shoes are squeaky clean as usual. Won't you hate it if your look was spoilt by a tiny pink LV bag?”

“Why would I even be holding one?”

“Actually, it might even look good on Hanazou-san,” Kotori offered. “Because he looks great in anything. He might even start a new fashion trend.”

“So it definitely wouldn't suit me because I have too much muscle?” Ooyama said as he resumed the pose of pretending to hold a bag on his shoulder and swinging his shoulders back and forth like a young girl, his biceps and back muscles rippling in the process.

There was a pause as they collectively tried to visualise a small pink bag sticking out like a rectangular sore. Almost at the same time, they raised their right hands and waved it in front of their faces.

“Right? Girls should really be told these things. I have no intention of being their porter or maid.”

“But many people still think in that old way—that girls are weak and so the guys just feed their own ego by pretending to be macho by their ability to carry girls’ bags,” Hanazou said with a laugh.

“It’s not limited to bags too. I-I’ve seen guys who fall over themselves trying to help girls to carry their things, even if they were only holding a sheet of paper,” Kotori offered hesitantly.

“What? Did that happen here? Oh, wait, there aren’t any...” Ooyama’s brow furrowed a little. It was too early for his brain to be functioning properly.

“Or did you experience that yourself?” Hanazou was quick on the uptake as usual.

Kotori blushed as he nodded, “When I was in a dress...”

Ah. For an instant, the image of Kotori-chan and her sweet smell and soft curls and upturned big eyes and her head which was at the same level as their chests...

“Ahem,” Ooyama cleared his throat as he folded his hands in front of his stomach in a polite manner. Hanazou, whose ears had turned slightly pink, swung his briefcase in front of his thighs.

“Err... oh... yeah, I, uh, sort of understand why...” Hanazou mumbled.

“Hmm, well, you can always firmly refuse their help,” Ooyama remembered that he was supposed to be Kotori’s mentor.

“But they become even more eager when I do that,” Kotori said with an exasperated sigh, his eyes which were becoming slightly teary, twinkled and sparkled as they reflected the lift’s bright lights when he looked up at Ooyama and Hanazou.

There was a longer silence. They were saved from trying to think of a solution as the lift calmly announced that they had reached the ground floor. In their hurry to get out of the lift, they got stuck in the lift doors as they had tried to exit at the same time. After a second of sliding and turning shoulders, the lift spat them out into the lobby. Without a word, they both started hurrying towards the office building. Kotori-chan should, really, be re-categorised as a weapon of ‘man’ destruction.

The glass doors vooped open as Kotori hurried to catch up to them with a “Oh, wait up. Why are you suddenly walking so fast?” The cool morning air hit their faces as they

hurried past women cycling past in sun visors and neon yellow jackets. The temperature calmed them down and freshened their brain cells. The lights that lit the covered walkway were still turned on, although it was quite bright outside as the sun had already risen three hours ago at 4.40AM. The day would only progressively get warmer as there was only half a month left before the ‘official’ start of summer.

The brisk walk pumped his blood around and the quiet time spent while walking quickly in silence with Hanazou further allowed Ooyama to recollect himself. He turned his thoughts back to the upcoming tasks for the day and nodded at Hanazou who had indicated that he was going to walk off in a different direction.

Hanazou headed off to look for his mentor, Katanaka. Hanazou didn’t really need to look for him actually. There were but a handful of places that Katanaka would be. Hanazou found him in the changing rooms, where Katanaka was putting the finishing touches to his attire.

“Oh, you’re right on time,” Katanaka said, looking up at Hanazou’s reflection in the mirror. Today, his pink hair was hidden under a shoulder-length black wig. If Hanazou had not expected to find Katanaka here, he would have thought that it was someone else.

“We can’t always look the same every time,” Katanaka explained as he caught Hanazou staring at his new wig. “We have to change the look, style, behaviour and mannerisms from time to time.” Katanaka put a plain brown ribbon-shaped clip in his hair and turned his head to check it out in the mirror.

“Won’t you forget what identity you’re portraying?” Hanazou asked as he took a sit next to Katanaka and picked up some cosmetics and cotton swabs. Hanazou applied some toner and moisturiser on his face, before picking up the BB cream. Katanaka combed Hanazou’s hair back and put a hair net on his head, “Treat it like you’re an actor acting in different dramas. Better yet, an actor with schizo.”

“You’re getting a new wig and style too,” Katanaka continued as he picked up a wig.

“Geh, a bob cut?” Hanazou complained. “I’ll look like a mushroom from afar.”

“At least we are wearing suits today,” Katanaka tried to console him.

“With tight skirts?” Hanazou almost cringed in horror at the thought of having to pay for the tailoring fee after a tussle.

“No, pants.”

“Oh, thank god... Ah. Then I might be fearful of being attacked when I’m wearing pants too...” Hanazou furrowed his brow as he leaned closer to the mirror to draw some eyeliner.

“Have you been starting to get the chills this early?” Katanaka said as he smoothed the wig in place.

“How can I get over it?” Hanazou stood up and took his change of clothes from Katanaka.

“Hmm,” Katanaka sat on a sofa and pondered as he watched Hanazou slip his slim muscular figure into a formal blouse and suit pants. “I suppose you can live with it or learn to separate work from personal life.”

Hanazou glanced at Katanaka via the mirror as he adjusted the jacket over the blouse. “What about you? What did you do?”

Katanaka smiled wryly. “That’s why I regularly use the free health services that are provided.”

Hanazou turned around to scrutinize his facial expression.

Katanaka let out a small laugh as Hanazou’s serious expression. “I was joking! Although that’s half-true... It’d be good if you can talk to someone about it, a significant other or even your mother. The other thing I do is ‘association’.”

“ ‘Association’?”

“Why do you think we have to bring our work ID badge with us when we’re working?”

“For identification?”

“Yes, half-correct.”

“Do you bring your work ID badge with you when you are not working?”

“No, I bring my personal one... Oh.”

“I suppose, if you can successfully associate work, the work clothes and your work ID badge together, it might help alleviate some of the fear.”

“That would take some time...”

Katanaka clapped a hand on Hanazou’s shoulder. “We’re a team, aren’t we? We can work in this together.”

After some thought, Hanazou said, “But I can’t associate you with work.” Hanazou lifted a hand to brush a wayward hair that was ruining Katanaka’s coiffed look. “Because I see you around outside work too!”

“Ah, that’s right. Maybe you should stop asking if I’d like to go for some food or drinks after work, and keep your days off to yourself. Oh, and also, don’t message me at odd hours,” Katanaka joked. Hanazou couldn’t think of a come-back.

“Maybe it would be better to associate something nice and soothing with your non-working hours too, like kittens or puppies or your favourite food or even this—,” Katanaka showed Hanazou a picture on his hand phone.

Hanazou’s ears turned pink almost instantly. “But... t-that’s a colleague too...”

“But isn’t he pleasing to the eye? And he gives out such a soothing vibe...” Hanazou’s ears steadily became redder.

“Isn’t it great that we found a solution so quickly?” Katanaka winked as he walked out of the changing room.

Hanazou wasn’t that opposed to wearing those things. He had only been slightly reluctant at first, but he hadn’t had to do it until the one month probation was up. Seeing how Katanaka took it so professionally was also a learning point. It was just a uniform. It was just part of the job. Katanaka didn’t seem to mind it that much... And they didn’t have to do it every day either and they were paid extra.

He tugged at the hair net that was digging into his forehead and pushed it a little higher. Would I go bald due to all the tugging? Maybe I should dye my hair instead. Ah, I might go bald faster.

Like Kotori, he had pored over the guidebook when he first had training. Katanaka was enthusiastic and patient as always.

“Again.”

“Again.”

“Again.”

The never-ending repetition made him seem like a demon. But he was given appropriate rests too. Katanaka had even poured him tea and fed him snacks.

When he got used to the attire, he practiced sparring and grappling in them. Now that was difficult. The fabric was too smooth, the shoes too wobbly. He was always defeated by Katanaka. Hah, but Katanaka was always defeated by their instructor.

He remembered staring at the soundboards in the ceiling while he lay on the mat. He had just been thrown by Katanaka who was not even breaking out in a sweat yet.

Katanaka had even given him a handicap—Katanaka was in the wobbly shoes while Hanazou in flat shoes.

Hanazou thought of something and leapt up suddenly with a flip.

“I want to try again in the wobbly shoes,” he said with determination.

“Puahahaha~” The instructor and Katanaka laughed.

After calming down and wiping the tears from his eyes, Katanaka said, “Let’s change to another set of clothes. These are too ripped.”

“Ah.” Hanazou had only just noticed.

“Docked from my pay again...?” he muttered dejectedly.

Katanaka gave him a light pat.

“At least, you are still better off than Ooyama.”

Hanazou looked at him.

“Ooyama could ruin the attire just by bending down.”

Hanazou’s eyes widened.

“After a lot of trial and error, we finally had to use a special stretchy material for all of his clothes.”

“Did he have to pay for the ones...”

“Of course. But he complained so much and tried to get back his money’s worth by eating at my house instead,” Katanaka laughed.

Chapter 11: A Project Together II

The walk to the train station took them through civilian areas. Where the pink cherry blossoms were once in full pollen-y bloom, there stood inconspicuous trees. And where once there were ubiquitous green bushes, were bushes of pink and blue flowers. Flower shops were boasting an abundance of sunflowers and irises. In the midst of being drawn to what previously were mundane backgrounds and forgetting about the existence of the once wondrously pink and red trees, Hanazou also forgot that he was not in civilian clothes and wondered why he was drawing the attention of many men.

He looked up to see Katanaka's straight black hair waving slightly as he walked, sometimes revealing a lanyard that was around his neck. They were pretending to be typical company employees who usually hung their work ID cards around their necks. HA. Hanazou looked down to see his work ID bouncing on the soft fabric of his blouse and his short bobbed hair brushed his chin lightly. This wasn't the time to be amazed by the flora in the streets.

He walked a few steps quickly to be abreast with Katanaka, who was alternatively smiling shyly and twirling a strand of hair around her finger.

"What are you doing?" Hanazou hissed quietly while keeping up a smile for passers-by.

"Being... friendly?" came the reply.

"Why? Won't you stand out too much?"

"Nah, don't worry, it's fine."

"But..."

"Or we can also be self-absorbed like everyone else," Katanaka waved an arm towards the civilian crowd who were either listening to something using their ear pieces or headphones, or swiping at their smartphones, or even, doing both. They watched the more agile ones look up in time to swerve, twist, stop or side-step other civilians who were on their phones in order to avoid a collision.

"A lot of men are staring..."

"In a good way or bad way?"

"Er... maybe in the way that they think that we are, erm, female?"

"Oh, were they sizing you up?"

"Not just me, you too..."

“What do you mean? They sized you up, they sized me up or you sized me up too? Or was it me who was looking at you?” Katanaka replied with a trace of a laugh.

“Er, ah,” Hanazou fidgeted as he debated if he should admit to any of the options.

“Well, you got me there,” Katanaka smiled broadly. “How did you know that I was also thinking that your shadow looked a little lascivious? You have some serious curves going on there.” He pointed to the ground. It was definitely curvy.

“That’s the padding!” Hanazou hissed. “You’re wearing some too!—What?” Hanazou realised that he had fallen into Katanaka’s trap as he felt Katanaka’s gaze on him as his eyes were attracted yet again to Katanaka’s ‘body’.

Hanazou gave Katanaka a kitty punch as Katanaka gamely attempted to block his weak fists. As Katanaka’s palm closed over Hanazou’s fists, he pulled him closer and whispered, “Don’t worry, police-san are always near us. Did you really think I was winking randomly?” Katanaka thought for a split second, “Hmm, well, but some of them are plainclothes...” Katanaka released Hanazou’s hands and spun him around suddenly. “Some of them are behind us, some are in front, usually there’s at least four of them so that we are protected in the general compass directions—”

There was a sudden buzz in the ear piece that looked like a hearing aid. Hanazou scrunched his shoulders in shock but Katanaka just continued walking normally.

“I’m sorry, Kata-sa—chan. Suspect T suddenly got into a car and is heading in your direction. Could you help us?” a deep authoritative voice said calmly.

“Overtime?” Katanaka-chan said quietly.

“Yes.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Hanazou already had his smartphone out and was pretending to surf social media.

“Oh~ look at this. So cute!” he said as he showed Katanaka a picture of Suspect T and the car that Suspect T was in. It looked like a taxi.

“Hmm, yes, cute,” Katanaka replied monotonously.

“Try to stop the car at the lights. Make him come out of the vehicle if you can. Get into position. The car is pulling up near you in one minute.” Katanaka started walking closer to the side of the road as he pointed to a random structure.

“Oh, that’s pretty!” Hanazou moved closer to Katanaka to see what he was pointing at.

“I’m going to fall on the car, if possible, I’ll try to hit the side mirror,” Katanaka whispered. “There’s no guarantee that he’ll stop or even come out. You might have to hit the window and yell at him to stop for my safety.” Hanazou nodded.

“And starting count-down. Ten, nine, eight...”

On the count of one, Katanaka pretended to stumble and fell to the right. As he predicted, he hit the suspect’s car and side mirror. Hanazou gave a loud scream and tried to support Katanaka by lightly holding on to one arm. The car braked suddenly after the impact but started inching forward almost immediately, ignoring the red light.

Hanazou circled an arm around Katanaka’s waist as he reached over to pound on the car’s window. “Please stop!” she yelled frantically. “You’re going to roll over her foot!” The window slid down an inch. “Huh?” the driver tried looking at the side mirror but it was pushed out of angle. “Please stop!” Hanazou said again. “The back wheel is going to crush her foot!” The driver finally decided to stop the car as the way forward was also blocked by cars turning in from the side road.

“I’m so soooorry, mister taxi driver...” Katanaka drawled while pretending to be drunk as she lifted her face to look at the driver. “My heel is stuck on the road, AH! It hurts!!” her eyes turned watery and she bit her lower lip. Hanazou pretended to collapse a little under the weight of Katanaka and clutched at the car’s door handle for support. There was a click but the door did not open. Instead, the car tilted a little to the left, to the alarm of the driver. Now it was Hanazou’s turn to look up to plead for help.

“I’m really sorry, but can you help us?” she begged, struggling to get upright from her bent position, unaware that the collar of her blouse had fallen open to reveal the start of the bust line. Hanazou clearly saw the driver’s Adam’s apple move up and down as he gulped.

“Ah!” Hanazou bent down a little more. Pretending to be panting from the exertion of supporting Katanaka’s weight, Hanazou’s mouth opened a little as he let out a few ‘Ha’s and looked up at the driver. The driver’s eyes bulged and one eyelid twitched.

“Ah, erm, ah, okay,” the driver pushed the button for Emergency Lights after a short silence. As he got out of the car, a white car behind him horned once. The driver raised his hand and waved towards the two women. The driver of the white car stuck his head out of the driver seat’s window and asked if he needed help. He nodded as he walked past the bonnet of his car, probably thinking that it would be better to have more help. Maybe he could just use the other driver and make him handle it and then he’ll drive off once they stopped blocking his car. The driver of the white car got out of his car quickly.

Suspect T sized the two women up as he walked behind them. They both had good figures and had pretty faces. He smiled to himself. “Thank you for helping us,” Hanazou and Katanaka breathed softly in unison. “I’m sorry for hitting your car, I was just trying to get a taxi,” Katanaka said while wincing in pain and biting her lip again. Suspect T nodded as he said, “It’s okay.” Suspect T’s eyes trailed down Katanaka’s dark pants leg with a little disappointment; however, both Hanazou and Katanaka were mid-squat, with their tops opened at an ‘optimum’ angle, something which seemed to please Suspect T as he could not hide a smile.

“Ka—Miki-chan, are you okay?” Hanazou asked worriedly as he belatedly remembered that they were undercover. For a second, a kind Grandma’s face appeared in his mind—the kimono shop’s Grandma Miki, who had previously taught him about kimonos.

“Can you help me disengage my foot from the grille?” Kata—Miki-chan pretended to lose balance and clutched on to the handle of the passenger door. “Please be gentle, I think I sprained it,” she said with tear-filled eyes. “Ah!” she cried when Suspect T took hold of her foot.

Just seconds after Suspect T bent down, the driver of the white car arrived on the scene. He exchanged looks with Hanazou and Katanaka. He peered at the stuck shoe and foot for a second. “How about you take your foot out of the shoe? I’ll help pull you up.” He tapped Suspect T as he told him to hold on to the shoe so that the foot could come out more easily.

“One... Two... Three...!” Katanaka stood up suddenly and kicked out at Suspect T by accident. Suspect T fell backwards on to his bottom in surprise. “I’m so sorry!!” Miki-chan squealed. The driver of the white car offered a hand to help Suspect T up. Suspect T took his hand unsuspectingly and as he was being pulled to his feet, he was handcuffed. They were suddenly surrounded by a few serious looking men.

“What are you doing?” Hanazou said. “Yeah, that’s right. He just saved me. Why are you arresting him?” Miki-chan tried to explain. “Shut up!” several men said as they pushed Hanazou’s and Miki-chan’s backs so that they were leaning on the car.

“Kyaa~~!” Hanazou and Miki-chan screamed.

“What are you doing?” Suspect T shouted. “They have nothing to do with me! Why are you arresting them too?”

“Too?” Miki-chan’s muffled voice quivered. “Mister, are you a bad guy?” she asked.

“But he helped us, so he is a good guy,” Hanazou countered muffled-ly.

“Un~!” Miki-chan nodded, her hair bouncing on the back of her neck.

“Stop talking and come with us,” some stern men said as they dragged Suspect T away. “You have the right to call a lawyer and the right to maintain silent.” Suspect T walked away with a slight struggle as he kept turning back to look at the backs of the two women. He was put into the white car.

One of the stern men stuck a red siren on the roof of the white car and they sped away from the scene.

Hanazou and Katanaka leaned on the car for a few more minutes. There was a buzz and the stern men then released their grasp, which was not strong in the first place, and directed them to another car, which was black. Katanaka bent down to rescue his shoe from the grille before being escorted, with Hanazou, to the black car. The car doors closed solemnly and the car sped off in a different direction.

“Are you alright?” the driver of the black car asked as they sped away. “Did you really sprain your ankle?”

“No. I’m fine, thanks,” Katanaka said. “I got goose-bumps when he caressed my foot,” Katanaka shivered. Hanazou took one of Katanaka’s hands in his and patted the back it gently.

“You didn’t have to go that far trying to stop the car,” Hanazou admonished. “Did you get a bruise when you hit the car?”

“I wouldn’t know until I take off the padding. But my shoulder does feel a little sore.”

“See?” Hanazou sighed. “Don’t be so reckless! You should take care of your body.”

“Exactly, your partner is right,” the stern men chuckled in unison. “We really do need your help, so please don’t damage yourself while working undercover for us.”

The policeman in the passenger’s seat slowly tossed some calorie bars and jelly packs to the back seat. The policeman in the backseat caught the food deftly and distributed it to Hanazou and Katakana. “Fuel up! There’s another job to do.”

Hanazou and Katakana let out an involuntary sigh. It was going to be a long day.

Hanazou unwrapped his second golden calorie bar. It tasted like artificially flavoured cardboard but it did make him feel full. “I hope it ends before the supermarket sale period is over,” he mused as he bit carefully into the bar. He used one hand as a plate, in case crumbs dropped over his nice blouse and pants.

“Which supermarket are you thinking of going to?” Katanaka asked as he sucked quietly on a jelly pack, a few golden calorie bars on his thighs.

“Either B mart or Y mart. But B mart seems to have better sale items.”

“Yeah. It does, if you get there in time.” Katanaka meticulously pushed remnants of the jelly from the bottom of the pack up to the opening, curling the pack up like one would do to squeeze the last drop of toothpaste out of its tube. “Did you not cook rice this morning?”

“Ah, I was in a hurry because of the lack of sleep.”

“Oh, that lonely message you sent after you were woken up by the Safety Warning message from the Natural Disasters Bureau?” Hanazou threw a calorie bar at Katanaka.

“You’re always welcome to eat at my place anytime, like how Ooyama feeds Kotori sometimes. It’s not that healthy to keep eating outside food unless you order take-out from our district. But over time, it’d get expensive too... Oh wait, you need to disassociate from me... Hmm... How about—” Katanaka bit down on the short thick plastic straw that was attached to jelly pack and rummaged in his pocket.

Some golden calorie bars slid down to where his thighs formed a V-shape while others dropped into the abyss between him and the policeman. He whipped out his phone as the policeman was trying to rescue the calorie bars from being squashed between their legs. Reaching over the half-bent policeman, Katanaka showed Hanazou Kotori’s picture yet again. Kotori was shyly standing in a dress, blushing furiously, with one hand adjusting his curls and another grasping the end of his skirt like a bashful young child.

“This was the first time we put it on him. During his internship days,” Katanaka finally explained. Hanazou was glad that he had three packets of jelly drink on his lap. He waved the picture away. The adrenaline from the incident just now had made him hungry. He carefully peeled open his third calorie bar as he glanced at Katanaka over the policeman’s muscular chest and shoulder holster. The policeman was silently holding out the dropped bars in his palms, as Katanaka was nonchalantly opening another jelly drink. Hanazou wondered how Katanaka seemed so unruffled despite having to ad lib on the fly in mere minutes due to the change in plan.

“Slurrrrp!” broke the silence in the car. It came from the driver’s seat. “Sworry,” he tried to say while holding the pack in his mouth by biting the straw. In the moment when Hanazou’s attention was distracted, the policeman beside Katanaka took the jelly drink from Katanaka’s trembling fingers and opened it for him quickly. Katanaka nodded his thanks as the policeman patted Katanaka’s knee and nodded back knowingly. The

policeman then dug around in the pocket that was behind the driver's seat to the muffled "Ow" from the driver as he felt a few pokes, and handed some muscle-ache relief patches to Katanaka. "Just like what the new guy said," the policeman voiced gently. "You need to take care of yourself."

"Thanks, Tanaka," Katanaka smiled slightly.

"It's not Kata-chan's fault," the policeman in the passenger seat interjected in his deep voice. "I was the one who implied that he should stop the car at all costs."

"Overtime pay helps," Katanaka forced a grin. "You better pay us on time this time, Ten-san."

Ten wrinkled his nose at him.

After spending nearly forty-five minutes in the car, they were finally nearing the location of the next undercover job. Another hard, dirty and dangerous job... Ah, according to Ten-san's briefing, this one was dirtier than the last one...

"The job that you were originally heading to at the train station is starting soon. We'll drop you off at the station where the incident starts, so that you don't have to take the train down," Ten explained. "You can go back right after we get the guy—there shouldn't be any other jobs for today."

Hanazou and Katanaka nodded as buildings moved past the car windows. Signs for restaurants, retail, real estate and tuition centres filled most faces of the buildings. Rainbow swirls of different coloured squares brightened the dull monotone facades of the buildings. Sometimes a huge truck rumbled past and blocked the view of the buildings; Sometimes a cloud casted its shadow on the brightly lit road. Katanaka flinched at the shadow, even though there was no accompanying vrooming of loud engines. He nearly always dipped his head at the sound of a plane passing overhead, just barely stopping himself from crouching down and hiding. Katanaka flicked at a piece of dirt on the window, the blackness of the opposite vehicle allowed him to see his and Hanazou's reflection clearly. All he could see of Hanazou was the back of his head and a little curve of an ear.

Hanazou was squinting out into the sunlight town while running the details of the train job over in his mind. He didn't like it that Katanaka was always the decoy who had the first and closest contact with perpetrators. Although there were other decoys, Katanaka was so good at his job that even Ten-san, the chief of the police undercover operations, would entrust him with sudden tasks and depend on him to ad lib well. Hanazou wondered

when he would reach Katanaka's level as he watched the scenery slowly climb uphill. The car had entered a highway.

The scenery started to change slowly. Buildings got shorter and shorter, and further and further apart. Previously enclosed by tall sand-coloured tired-looking buildings that were pockmarked with colourful signs, the small puddles beside the black tarmac slowly reflected yellow-green fields full of something and unobstructed blue skies. Even without opening the window, the smell of manure and grass and earth and nature seeped in. It wasn't that much faster travelling by car, but the extra fifteen minutes meant that they had more time to scout out the place and even, touch up their make-up. They were also travelling in relative comfort; away from prying eyes. The Police were also showing the citizens that they were doing their duty in patrolling the areas, so it was nearly a hat-trick of hitting three birds with one stone. The car tires crunched on something loudly. Then there was also a squishing sound.

"Oh no," the driver sighed.

"What? You didn't puncture a tyre, did you?" Ten asked worriedly.

"I don't think so. But I think I just crushed a frog and some snails."

"That's just bad luck. There's no space to swerve unless you want to plunge down into the fields and destroy the crops that are flanking us." Ten tapped on the window as he peered out at the numerous tall yellow or green stems neatly springing out of the square plots that stretched far out into the horizon.

"I need to remember to hose the tires down when we get back," the driver muttered as the car continued slowly on, checking the dashboard and tyre indications to make sure that the tyres were alright.

The car left behind the unfortunate dark green frog with a light green and white underbelly that lay in its sudden tomb of broken shells and slime. The snails slimed away off the road in translucent stickiness, abandoning their broken homes and slithering away from the grotesque sight of the poor frog with its exposed internal organs. Bright red blood mixed with slime and flowed a little until it dried on the tarmac by the sun. A hungry slow bird hopped down to pick at the remains. Despite the shrill ringing of an oncoming bicycle, the bird did not fly off in fright but walked slowly, almost arrogantly. Its decapitated head joined the frog on the broken shells; its body likely to be eaten by other predators later. The cyclist skidded a little, narrowly avoiding falling into the fields, and continued on his high-speed way on the road. A dumb beady eye rolled up to eye the heavens in reproach as deep red blood matted the feathers and created a small circular patch on the tarmac. If the flat-

headed crested pigeon had chosen to fly away... If the cyclist had slowed down... These questions remained as unanswered and as forgotten as the previous dried blood from other roadkill on the tarmac. Blood upon blood upon blood, washed clean by the rain and then forgotten.

Unaware that things could be learnt from unfortunate roadkill, the passengers of the car focussed only on their impending work, while the driver felt apologetic that he had dirtied the precious car and accidentally ended the lives of the innocent.

They finally reached the end of the road that winded between the endless fields and slowly the roads evolved towards civilisation. It was a welcome sight.

The last few minutes to the station were quite deserted. The morning peak hour was over and it was still early for lunch. Students were nowhere to be seen and adults were at work. The few people that populated the streets that this hour were housewives, people having brunch, tourists and stray cats.

The thing that remained the same aside from the famous brands of restaurants and retail was the plastic bottles that were on the corner of most streets or tied to metal poles. Filled, usually cylindrical, plastic bottles with no labels, typically standing in twos or threes, tied in white fabric string or transparent tape or white plastic string, stood guarding the streets. There was likely more of them than the numbers in police force. Similar to the train of thought in the other city, the filled bottles were thought to be effective in scaring stray animals, especially cats, away from the area. The water was supposed to catch the sunlight and startle an approaching animal.

Hanazou felt that it was more effective reflecting the lights from vehicles at night and startling the driver than it was startling animals. In fact, the animals didn't seem to care about the bottles, much less than be frightened by it. Cats approached the bottles fearlessly and pawed and scratched at the bottles. Some even tried biting them. Others nonchalantly marked their area despite having to stand close to the bottles to do so. The point of putting out the bottles was really quite questionable when it was effectively useless. Hanazou pointed it out once, and Katanaka had quipped that it was the same with many old traditional rules in the workplace.

The plain black car with its red siren catching the sunlight passed by some determined people who were refilling and retying bottles. They ranged from elderly people to what looked like middle-aged people—it was hard to guess when everyone normally looked young with their baby-faces. Hanazou had once met a ninety year old elderly gentleman who looked like he was only sixty.

The gentleman was perfectly mobile and had even more strength than he did. He had helped lift Hanazou's bicycle out of a field and repositioned the bent handlebar. The gentleman was even more knowledgeable of the world than the highly educated people he had met: he relived stories of the war, showed off his prosthetics and certificate of bravery, and even spoke a smattering of a few languages like English and Mandarin, although the gentleman also routinely refilled the bottles near his bicycle shop. If all the neighbours were doing in it, then one had to fit in as well I suppose. Hanazou was glad that he lived in a high-rise building and didn't have to bother with the bottles—the caretaker or security guard took turns in placing the bottles near the garbage disposal area.

Hanazou tore his eyes away from the people carrying the 1.5 litres of filled bottles and looked out into the streets. No other action was going on. Even the stray cats were nowhere to be seen. This part of the town seemed deserted. As the car neared the station, more activity started to fill the street. People could be seen leaving or entering convenience stores, book shops and supermarkets. There were people milling about the station and the fast food restaurants nearby. The security guard at the entrance of a car park saluted passers-by as he waved a red glowing stick and white gloved hands.

“Gacha gacha kacha gacha~” The sound of a train rumbling as it left the station sounded from overhead. Katanaka flinched. At the drop-off point, Hanazou, Katanaka and Tanaka alighted from the car. “We'll join you later,” Ten said as they went off to find a lot to park the car in, preferably a cheap one and in the shade.

“There's some time so I'm heading to the restroom. You should go too, Hanazou,” Katanaka adjusted his clothes and brushed off imaginary crumbs. Hanazou nodded. Tanaka escorted them to the Ladies' and took a quick break in the Men's.

Hanazou and Katanaka walked out looking refreshed. Civilians who passed them would have thought that they were girls in heels having a fun day-off. They were both actually in shoes that looked like heels on the outside. It was harder to balance in a fast moving train in wobbly shoes. They had to thank one of the employees at the Centre for the design. Tanaka was leaning on a wall a slight distance from the toilets as he waited for them.

“Thanks for waiting. Right, let's go,” Katanaka said. Even though they had a 2D map and had gone through plans using a 3D map and satellite imaging, it was useful to scour out the location in real life. They went on to explore the station arcade, noted the position of the toilets and emergency exits, and paid particular attention to the area that lead up to the gantries of the station's only entrance and exit, before entering the station.

There were a few staircases and escalators leading down to the platform. There was one lift as well. When they got to the platform, they pretended to be looking for a specific coloured line and number on the floor as they covered the platform from end to end. “Ah, here it is,” Katanaka pointed randomly at an orange line. “Yes, we found it,” Tanaka replied. They were not that off—right beside where he was pointing at was the carriage number in which they would be stationed in. A man sitting on the bench behind them looked up from his newspaper and Tanaka smiled slightly at him.

There was another man buying something from the vending machines that were at one end of the bench. The vending machine was so high-tech that it was entirely a large touch-screen and even told the time and screened the latest news. A drink rolled down with a clank and a clonk. The man handed a drink to the man with the newspaper. When he saw Tanaka and crew, he gave a barely perceptible nod.

Two men were to be stationed at the doors in the carriages that were in front and behind the target carriage. Tanaka, and the driver who had just found a park, would be stationed in the target carriage. There were even more plainclothes policeman on the platform of each station starting from the one they were at to one station further from where the perpetrator usually alights. Some were dressed as salaryman, some looked like backpackers. The human nets were in position and now they needed the decoys to lure the target into the net.

With two minutes to go, there was a familiar buzz in their ear pieces. It was a confirmation that the target had boarded the train, the Red Azuki Number 51. The said train would arrive at their platform in exactly two minutes.

“Have you taken the Azuki before?” Katanaka opened with.

“No,” Hanazou replied.

“There supposedly a red streak on the outside roof of the train,” Katanaka gestured with his hands.

“Oh, that’s interesting.”

With a shrill bell and an announcement, the train slowly approached the station. From a distance, it looked like it was moving slowly as it took ages to reach their end of the platform. But as the train drew up, a gust of wind was created that belied the speed that it was previously moving at. Hanazou and Katanaka put one hand to their head as their hair had waved in the gust while the train whooshed past them with a Goooooooh.

The train doors beeped open and Hanazou and Katanaka entered the carriage as elegantly as carefully coiffed ladies would do. *This is a special rapid train to Tokyo. It will*

terminate at Tokyo station. Passengers who want to travel beyond Tokyo can take the next train or change trains at Tokyo station. The announcement said. They were lucky to have got the cooperation of the train company to terminate the train one station after the target's stop. The stations were far apart, so they had some time to resolve the situation. Now they had to see if the target would remain on the train or change trains.

Luckily for them, the target remained in his original position, holding on to a handle strap, after carefully listening to the announcement. The two ladies took their position near the doors of the carriage, pointing at the advertisements on the ceiling and carrying on their cover conversation.

The target flicked his eyes at them and watched them with concealed interest. Hanazou could feel his eyes on him whenever he moved to inspect a new advertisement or pointed at the television screen above the doors. Hanazou glanced at Katanaka and the men flanking the doors in concern. The target's stare was uncomfortable. Katanaka turned his back to the target and mouthed, "It's okay," to Hanazou.

As the two ladies passed the train journey in feigned enthusiasm at the advertisements and news on a lazy morning, the target slowly moved towards them after hearing the announcement for his stop. The hairs on the back of Hanazou's neck prickled and he clutched the back of his right hand nervously. At this point, a few people got up and the two ladies took a seat near the doors of the carriage. Hanazou ended up sitting right beside the glass panel that separated him from the doors and the plainclothes policeman who was standing near it.

Upon the change of their position, the target looked lost for a second. He pretended to peer up at the route map above the door and shuffled back to hold on to a handle strap. He chose to stand right in front of Hanazou. Hanazou's eyes flicked once, from the left to the right. Katanaka tapped him on the arm and directed his attention to a picture on his mobile phone. Hanazou turned his gaze downwards and saw a picture of cute kittens curled up in peaceful sleep.

Typical of any train in Japan, the train suddenly jerked, braked and tilted, as some commuters let out a collective gasp. And without surprise, the announcement of apology came a few minutes too late. *The train may experience some jerks or sudden braking. Please hold on. We are sorry for the inconvenience.* Untypical of any of Hanazou's experience was having someone fall right on top of him, with groping hands that tried to take advantage of the confusion.

Luckily, Hanazou's handbag protected his thighs and lower abdomen. Almost like a goalkeeper, Hanazou's hands protected his chest in a waving motion, matching the movements of the target. Hanazou had bit down a shiver when he felt the target's nose and lip touch the area between his neck and shoulder. The target was also trying to thrust his hips into Hanazou.

"Oh my god," came Katanaka's high-pitched squeal that Hanazou was already used to as he last heard it a few hours ago. "Are you alright?" as she surreptitiously slipped her bag on to Hanazou's lap in an attempt to fatten the buffer. The man tried to stand up and pretended to fail, thrusting himself into Hanazou again and attempting to press against him as much as he possibly could. Hanazou took the opportunity to turn his head to protect his shoulder, and the target biffed his nose on his skull. The feeling of unsolicited soft fatness assaulting him from all sides was quite revolting to say the least. In fact, he could not tolerate unsolicited and unwanted physical transgressions into his personal space; and the unsolicited and unwanted touching of his body was even more intolerable. With each jolt and vibration of the train, the target also swung his hips in time to them and rubbed fervently. Hanazou clenched his jaw and refrained from kicking out.

Katanaka exchanged a look with two men standing nearby. People were already standing properly back up after the series of jolts but the target was still lost in his own world.

"Can you help us?" Katanaka pleaded.

"Oh, no, I don't need help," the target all but panted.

"Are you sure that you are alright?" Katanaka leaned over to stare up at his face. The target's face twitched. Almost uncontrollably, the target convulsed.

Katanaka tapped her foot. Immediately, the two men pulled the target off Hanazou just as some white liquid spurted out from him. "W-what?" Hanazou turned her flushed face up to look at the target. The shining white of his belly distracted his attention for a second before he saw the face of the target. The target had an expression of bliss which did not last long when he realised that he was being held up by his shoulders. He tried struggling, at which point Katanaka screamed, "Pervert!"

The two men tightened their grip on the target, his white belly shaking with fury as he tried to escape their grasp. Hanazou's eyes filled with tears as his perfectly shaped mouth opened to from the first sound of 'Why?' while looking at the target. Some more white liquid spurted out as Hanazou tried to shrink back into the hard seat.

"You devil! You demon! You slut! You incubus!" the target screamed as he was dragged out when the doors opened. "I've been doing this for years and have never been

caught!” It seemed like he was ready to froth at the mouth. It wasn’t really their fault. Many passengers had gotten off this train to transfer to another train due to the announcement, so it was not as crowded as it would usually be. However, it was unexpected that the suspect, who was normally more careful, would still attempt his acts. They had actually expected that they would fail today. The sudden jerking of the train had actually worked in their favour... for once.

Hanazou shuddered at the thought of the countless girly fabric or bags that had been the victim of the white liquid. He was glad that they had plastic coverings on their bags. Unfortunately, the second shot had hit him on the leg and a wet spot spread on his pants. He reeled in disgust—a stranger’s body fluids were definitely the number one thing he couldn’t tolerate. It’s disgusting when a stranger coughs in his face; it’s even worse when they sneeze in his face; and it’s far worse when it’s other body fluids that come out of the lower half of their body.

“I’m sorry, but can you accompany us as well?” one of the men escorting the target out said as he passed by. The two men flanking the door followed behind Hanazou and Katanaka as they exited.

Katanaka was carefully balancing the liquid on a handbag. It seemed capable of rolling off because of the plastic. The two men behind them produced a huge plastic bag in which Katanaka placed the soiled handbag. “I’m sorry, but we need your pants too,” Tanaka said apologetically. Hanazou hurried to change out of it in a nearby station toilet. He wiped his leg and rubbed some hand sanitiser on the affected area. He then pulled out a new pair of pants he had just bought from the station’s small department store. He bunched up the soiled pants and put it into the plastic bag Tanaka had given him. He emerged from the toilet feeling only slightly cleaner.

He handed the plastic bag to Tanaka and followed them out of the station. For the second time that day, Hanazou and Katanaka sat in a car with some policemen. The target had been whizzed off in an officially marked police car.

Aside from the immediate neighbour sitting beside Katanaka and some other civilians who were in the line of sight of what was happening, no one else on the train actually knew what had happened aside from that there had been a pervert. Being a typically homogenous society, no one had stepped up to offer their help or even offer a tissue. However, it was also debateable that they would offer their help. They were just glad that it had not happened to them. They probably had amassed yet another story to their repertoire that will be told as entertainment at gatherings and drinking parties. The internet-savvy ones would probably have updated their online statuses with a few choice words.

Chapter 12: Healing

“That was horrible,” Hanazou muttered thoughtfully, rubbing the spot that he cleaned through his pants.

“Good work!” Katanaka said while patting the back of his hand. “You did great to resist the urge to kick him.”

Hanazou massaged his temples and let out a sigh.

“That’s right,” Tanaka interjected. “You did well to hold out until we got the evidence.”

Tanaka held out a jelly drink to him. “Good work.” Hanazou wasn’t sure if it was healthy to drink so many jelly drinks in one day, but he took it anyway. He needed the energy.

Ten twisted around as he addressed them from the passenger seat, “After the paperwork is done, we’ll drop you off at the district.”

“Thank you.” They spent the rest of the trip in silence as they watched the scenery roll backwards as though someone was rewinding a tape.

Hanazou must have dozed off as he felt Katanaka saying something while shaking his arm. He opened his eyes. The blinding sunlight cleared to reveal the familiar background of the district that was just beside their office building before it was blocked by Katanaka’s face.

“We’re reaching the police station soon,” Katanaka said. “The target might be inside... Are you okay with that?” Hanazou nodded.

“Right. Prepare yourself for it.”

Thankfully, the target was not seen in the police station. It was likely that he was in a holding area somewhere. The police recorded their statements and registered the evidence. “I’m sure you know it but I have to tell you that the evidence would be sent to the laboratories for further analysis as part of the protocol,” Tanaka explained. “And because it’s troublesome to explain, we will keep your identities secret and use Lady A and B as usual.”

Katanaka nodded.

Tanaka re-read their statement and then turned the computer screen to let them check it. They didn’t have any more to add. They picked up the computer pen and signed

their agreement with the statement. “Great! That’s all. Thank you for all your help again,” Tanaka smiled broadly.

Katanaka got up on weak legs as Tanaka offered a hand to stabilize himself with. Hanazou pushed himself up and out of the chair by holding on to the table. “Take a rest,” Ten said as he saw them out.

They walked back out into the glaring sun and smells of fried food and soy sauce and soup. They spotted what looked like Ooyama and Kotori ducking out of a shop in the distance. They seemed to be in expensive-looking fabric.

Meanwhile, Ooyama and Kotori had gone about doing some paperwork after they separated from Hanazou and Katanaka at the office building in the morning after their daily morning briefing. When they had finished that in about two hours, they headed down to the changing rooms.

It was the last day of the internship at the kimono shop.

Kotori was a little sad to leave but Ooyama assured him that they would have regular interactions from now on. He could even visit them anytime as they were just a few minutes away. It wasn’t as if anyone was moving far away.

Kotori nodded as he smoothed the soft fabric over his body. It had been an intensive week but it had been fulfilling. He had really enjoyed the company of the gang of sprightly people at the shop and he had learned a lot.

It was only a half-day today. They were allowed to go home once they passed the test. When they had finished dressing, Ooyama and Kotori made their way to the Kimono shop.

“Good morning,” Ooyama and Kotori said as they bowed.

“Morningg~!” cried many voices at different times.

They spent two hours revising some points about kimonos before they took a break. The test would start after the break.

Kotori spun the hot tea cup slowly, his small slender fingers touching the cup lightly and for a split second. The cup rotated anti-clockwise as the tea inside it swirled lazily. Ooyama was delicately cutting a traditional sweet into smaller pieces so that he would not choke from too much sweetness when he fit it into his mouth. The soft thumping sound from the cup made Ooyama look up. “Are you nervous?”

Kotori’s fingers stopped their movement and he nodded.

“It’s okay. You have the whole day to re-take the test as many times as you have to, until you pass,” Ooyama grinned. “It is their designated rest-day after all.”

“But that’s not very nice,” Kotori protested.

“It took me three tries before I got it the first time,” Ooyama continued as he stabbed a soft piece of sweet with the wooden dessert pick. “I take this refresher every year, so it’d definitely be easier for me,” he looked up as his eyes twinkled. “You don’t have to be perfect, you know.” Ooyama chomped on the red bean sweet thoughtfully.

“I really don’t think anyone would say that aside from—”

“I would!” cackled Grandma Miki suddenly, as she looked up from her tea.

“Me too! Me too!” chorused everyone else, some spitting red bean on their tables.

“I was going to say that,” Ooyama waved his dessert pick at them and Kotori smiled shyly.

“Break will end in five minutes. Are you okay with starting the test soon?” Ooyama and Kotori nodded.

The test was actually pretty simple. It was just helping someone put on the kimono within a time limit and remembering at least seventy percent of the item names and prices. The difficulty was that there were so many items. And for Kotori, it was a little tough on him when he was tying up the kimono. However, the recent strength training he had been doing with Ooyama, Katanaka or Hanazou, whoever was free after work, in preparation for the self-defence course that he had been signed up for, helped with increasing his strength. Not only were his arms and fingers slightly stronger, his core and legs were too. At least, after two weeks of training, the knots he tied did not come loose as quickly as they were now closer to the body. But he still had some difficulty with the belts on the kimonos. He really wondered how Katanaka did it. Did he actually have years of practice?

It took a few hours and repeating the test three times before he could pass it. Ooyama managed to do slightly better—he only took it twice this time.

Hanazou and Katanaka were walking along the street where the Kimono shop was situated. From a distance, they saw two figures exiting a shop in the corner. As they got closer, they could make out that it was Ooyama and Kotori.

Hanazou sprinted up in a flash, leaving Katanaka’s hair being buffeted by a small gust of wind.

‘Good—,’ Kotori started before being engulfed in a blouse and suit jacket. He was squeezed tightly to the blouse and he was quite trapped as Hanazou’s chin was firmly pressed over the top of his head.

Ooyama contemplated kicking Hanazou’s butt just as Katanaka walked up. Upon seeing Katanaka’s drawn face, he gave Katanaka’s shoulder a few light pats as Katanaka winced slightly. “Let’s have some lunch.”

They headed towards a restaurant that had private rooms and served excellent finger food. Kotori was half-dragged and half-carried by Hanazou in his excitement.

They sat down in relief in the air-conditioned restaurant. A few minutes in the sun was all it needed to raise one’s body temperature. Hidden under the table cloth, the four men relaxed and sat with their knees spread slightly more apart than usual. Ooyama and Kotori adjusted their fabric so that they could free their legs.

“It’s almost the end of the lunch hour. We barely made it!” Ooyama said as his finger traced a line on the menu.

Tapping on a touch screen, Katanaka ordered a buffet lunch for himself. “Have you decided?”

They nodded as they tapped on the touch screen. Katanaka selected the dishes he wanted and pressed ‘Order’.

In a few minutes, a soft ding and a red flashing light indicated that their food had arrived in the food lift. Ooyama and Katanaka distributed the first round of food. It turned out that they had all ordered the buffet lunch.

Soft music played over the speakers as they slowly bit into their dumplings or tofu or rice cake or fried food. Hanazou crunched away on his meat as the others needed something soft and watery to soothe their stomachs first. Hanazou had already been soothed by Kotori, and so started with meat first.

Ding, ding, ding. Small portions of food arrived one after the other as they cleared the small plates quickly. Cutlery clinked on the ceramic dishes and cups thudded softly on the table cloth. A television flickered in the corner and provided updates on today’s news.

A pervert caught! Shocking video taken by a passenger. Full story on tonight’s news. The headlines flashed. A piece of fried food dropped from Hanazou’s mouth and splashed into some dark sauce.

“Geh, that’s dirty, what are you doing,” Katanaka said as he tossed a napkin at Hanazou. He followed Hanazou’s line of sight and saw the headlines.

“Wow, the story’s out already? I hope our faces were not taken,” as some soup spilled out of his soup spoon as he wasn’t concentrating.

Ooyama turned around to look at the television. “Don’t worry, the company would force them to put mosaics on your faces or cut the video so that you don’t even seem to appear in it.” Ooyama reached over to pat Katanaka’s hand which had crushed a napkin in it.

Hanazou stretched out and grabbed one of Kotori’s hands, causing him to jolt in shock and spin back from watching the television. It caused him some whiplash.

“Do you want my rice cake or do you not want me to see it?” Kotori asked with a rare moment of insight.

It was Ooyama’s turn to drop a piece of spicy red tofu which smashed into the table cloth and scattered. A piece landed in Katanaka’s tea cup while some quickly stained Ooyama’s fabric red.

“Geh, so dirty. What’s up with you guys today?” Katanaka threw more napkins at Ooyama.

“I don’t like spicy tea...” he continued dejectedly.

“That’s gonna cost some cleaning fees,” Hanazou observed dryly with his mouth full of food.

“Geh,” Ooyama muttered as he dabbed at himself. Ooyama lifted his eyes from his chest and gleamed at Katanaka. “Don’t even think about it.”

Hanazou released Kotori’s hand just as Kotori was starting to say, “Are you alright—”

“I want to try some of your rice cakes,” Hanazou cut in.

“Hey, no fair, me too,” chorused Ooyama and Katanaka at the same time.

“If it tastes good, I’ll order some too.”

Confused, Kotori quickly served up spoonfuls to the awaiting bowls that were being thrust at him, the news on the television already forgotten.

After lunch, Katanaka remembered the pre-requisite for undercover jobs and that Kotori had been doing some strength training. He leaned over and squeezed Kotori’s forearm in his palm. There seemed to be a little more meat on it now.

“Have you started the self-defence course yet?” Katanaka asked Kotori as they walked back to the office.

“It’s going to start soon,” Kotori replied.

“I see. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

“Keep up with the strength training. Text me anytime; I’ll come over if I’m free.”

“Thanks!”

“You went to the Kimono shop today?” Hanazou stated.

“It was the last day, the test,” Ooyama replied as he dabbed at his stain again.

“Oh, I see.”

“I think you’ll start your internship there in a few weeks,” Ooyama waved in the direction of the shop. “It will be a good breather from having to be out with the civilians all the time.”

“Who would fill our roles then?” Hanazou asked.

“There are other teams, or, whenever Kotori passes the martial arts test, maybe Kotori and I...”

The corner of Hanazou’s mouth twitched and his gaze hardened.

“He needs to experience working in that kind of environment too.”

Hanazou gave a nod silently.

“I think,” Ooyama said as he looked into the distance. ‘He would really grow as a person when he passes that test.’”

Hanazou wondered if it would be alright, if Kotori would be alright. He had spent just a few weeks working with the police in the midst of civilians, although he could count the number on one hand, he already felt burnt out. He really needed a break. He glanced at Kotori who was chatting happily with Katanaka. He caught a few words like ‘colour’, ‘fabric’ and ‘matching’.

‘Maybe he’s stronger than he looks,’ Ooyama thought as he also watched Kotori describe the test animatedly.

The four of them only had to write a report of what they had done today before they were done for the day. They sat down at their desks and opened the form for reports. Although Katanaka had more to write, his typing speed was so fast that it did not even stop once for thirty minutes. It was like it was alive and had a melody of its own. Kotori showed Ooyama his report before he sent it, while Hanazou showed his to Katanaka. For once, they ended before the end of office hours. Ooyama took a look at his watch as they waited for the confirmation from the system. Finally, with a ping, the system updated their project statuses. They were also given an additional two days of holiday.

“Cheers!” Four beer cans clinked together. “Good work everyone.”

The four of them shared a beer together in the recreation room of the residence building. Hanazou crunched on some peanuts. They had already washed off their make-up and were in lounge clothes.

“I can’t wait to go to sleep,” Hanazou yawned.

“What? The night, I mean the day is still young,” Katanaka exclaimed as he opened his second can of beer.

“Count me out,” Hanazou yawned again, picking up his second beer, he bid them farewell, tousling Kotori’s hair as he left.

Katanaka chugged his second beer, only pausing to eat some beer snacks. “Hey, don’t drink so fast,” Ooyama stopped Katanaka from opening a third beer and pushed a bowl of finger food towards him.

“It’s just beer,” Katanaka shrugged. Katanaka glanced at Kotori who was holding his beer can with two hands like a baby with his bottle. Kotori’s eyelids were drooping as he rested his chin on the can. He had overused his brain power today.

“I suppose when the adrenaline subsides, you just feel tired...” Katanaka observed. “I only ever feel like drinking or having a smoke.”

“No more drinks,” Ooyama said firmly as he confiscated the beer and signalled at the waiter to take the drinks away. “Go have a smoke while I bring Kotori up. I’ll be back soon,” as he lifted Kotori carefully and half-dragged him away.

He turned around suddenly and wagged a finger at Katanaka before heading out of the door. Katanaka headed out to the balcony where he tapped out a cigarette, his first one in a week. Blowing out puffs of smoke, he watched the white holey moon mistake the time as it shone awkwardly in the bright blue sky. It would be but a matter of an hour before the sun would set at around six-thirty. Even the moon was early in this country, Katanaka chuckled.

He finished his cigarette slowly, enjoying every puff of it. The smoke drifted over his pink hair towards the district and the police station. He was glad that he did not have to see the police for a while. He slowly extended his right arm, tried to lift it higher than ninety degrees and failed. He slowly rolled his shoulder back and forth in pain.

deedeeDee. The television was turned on and he heard the announcer saying, “And now for the shocking video that was uploaded this afternoon...”

Katanaka headed back inside and leaned against a wall as he watched the news intently. As Ooyama predicted, all that could be seen of Hanazou and Katanaka were their handbags and pants. Katanaka made a note not to use those items anymore. Despite the two

beers and a cigarette, watching the news renewed the horrible feelings he felt at that time. It left another bad aftertaste in his mouth.

Katanaka sat down at the bar and order a bottle of whiskey. Although he drank slowly and interspersed it with some beer snacks, half the bottle was empty by the time Ooyama came back.

Ooyama looked up at the news which was replaying its highlights. He nodded when he saw the video. Patting Katanaka on the back as he gave him a face that clearly said ‘You didn’t listen’ and said, “You should go to bed.”

He asked the bartender to keep the bottle and piggybacked Katanaka to the lift. As he walked towards Katanaka’s apartment door, he wondered vaguely after Hanazou.

I hope he’s not drinking inside his apartment, Ooyama thought as he exited Katanaka’s apartment after throwing him on the bed, noticing that Katanaka winced slightly. Katanaka even tried to give him a feeble kick. Ooyama covered him with the quilts and closed the blinds. He also went to get some bottles of water out of the refrigerator and placed it on the small chest of drawers that were beside the bed.

‘Maybe I should reply his messages next time,’ Ooyama thought as the lift door closed. ‘Hanazou’s...’

Chapter 13: Dissonance

Katanaka woke up sore. He was one of the few lucky ones who seldom had a hangover. He held a hand in front of his mouth as he exhaled. He wrinkled his nose at the smell. Reaching out in the semi-darkness, the full moon somehow providing some light, he felt for the stick of gum that he kept on the chair beside his bed. His fingers tapped impatiently for the oblong shape. Crinkle. The sound of foil being crumpled filled the silence before muffled chomping sounds did.

Katanaka rolled on to his right side to look at the moon. He winced and decided to only turn his head. 'I need to see the doctor tomorrow,' Katanaka thought as he spread gum over his teeth with his tongue and then licked it off. He closed his eyes and tried going back to sleep.

Katanaka reached over and pushed the button on his mobile to check the time. Only one hour had passed since he had managed to close his eyes. The sky seemed to be steadily getting brighter. After some time, Katanaka tapped his mobile again. Another hour had passed. As the cold and alcohol wore away, he felt the pain in his shoulder increase. Ooyama's chagrined face floated up as he thought about having another drink. He waved a hand through the apparition and closed his eyes again.

Katanaka woke up, or rather, checked the time every hour for the next three hours. He snorted as he remembered Kotori saying that that was what 'sleeping like a baby' really meant. The sun was starting to shine through the gap in the curtains and irritating birdsong had been grinding on his nerves since an hour ago. Weren't the double-layered windows supposed to block out sound? A sudden breeze cut through the room from the window and hit his nose. He got up sheepishly and shuffled to the window. He closed the outer window and then closed the inner window. Outside sound disappeared like magic.

Gone were the days of poorly constructed rooms and sleepless nights of hearing his housemates blast movies and scream at their MMPORG games for hours on end till the wee hours of the day. Living alone in a sound-proofed house was the best. Maybe I should get a pet, he thought as he climbed wearily back under his two quilts. Maybe it was due to the sun warming the top of the quilt, Katanaka finally dropped back into sleep, his head moving restlessly from side to side. At least his hand stopped reaching for his mobile and he didn't open his eyes.

Katanaka managed to drift off for three hours before waking up with a jump. His pillow was a little wet and the quilts slightly skewed from him trashing about in his sleep.

His right shoulder screamed at him. Katanaka buried his left cheek into his pillow and screamed silently. One quilt unceremoniously slid off the bed. His hand stretched towards his mobile and stopped suddenly. There's no point in calling in a doctor, Katanaka thought as he curled his fingers into his palm. It wasn't as though he had x-ray or ultra-sound equipment in his apartment and all the doctor would do would be to prescribe painkillers. Painkillers... Katanaka's head whipped towards the chair. There were a pile of small boxes and bottles in the corner. Why didn't he think of that before? He sat up, exposing sweat stains that extended like bibs on the front and back of his shirt, grabbed a water bottle and bent forward to read the small words on the boxes. They are all painkillers.

Carefully breaking the capsule seals of two capsules, he downed the painkillers with some water, throwing his head back as he tried to swallow the medicine. Did I swallow the gum? Katanaka looked around worriedly. It wasn't on the chair. Oh no. Oh my... Oh, there it is. He picked it off the bed frame and put it on a random piece of tissue that was on the chair. He gave a yawn and curled up, even though he wasn't particularly tired. 'I'm the type that needs a lot of sleep in order to heal,' he mused out loud to himself and closed his eyes. Carefully levering his right elbow on his stomach, he padded the underside of his right arm with bunched up quilt. He felt like he was coming down with something, and wondered if he should pop some cold medication too. He slipped back into his dream of being chased while wearing a dress.

From afar, Katanaka heard a muffled ringing sound. Dingdongdingdong. He looked around for a chiming clock but he could not see anything. Then came a clinking sound, like prisoner chains, and he looked behind him frantically. As he stared into the horizon, black circles started to emerge. The circles grew bodies and arms and legs. As the silhouettes become clearer and nearer, he saw the chains on their wrists and ankles. What first caught his attention were their orange coloured bodies. It was the same shade that those who were forced to do community work wore. Sometimes even traffic controllers or labourers or cyclists wore that shade of orange. However, these people normally had other colours on their uniform—black, neon yellow and light yellow. They also normally carried a shiny stick or rubbish-picking tong or rode a bicycle, and hung about in groups of two or three, although they usually were alone.

These orange chained silhouettes were just orange, aside from their black hair and skin-coloured hands and feet. The orange people filled up the horizon from west to east, and no matter how far west or east Katanaka looked, he could not see the end of the line. The orange suited people advanced forward slowly, and Katanaka could see that there was

a row of other orange people behind the first row, and the rows extended back as far north as he could see. Katanaka stumbled backwards, trying to avoid the incoming tsunami of people, but there was something behind him blocking his escape. A small wind puffed up Katanaka's skirt at his knees and he shivered. Sweat stuck some of his pink hair to his cheek.

The tsunami was still too far from Katanaka for him to see what was going on. He could barely make out that at a dingdong the first row disappeared behind the second row, as though the orange people were doing a marching formation performance that seemed to be hugely popular in this country. As the marchers got slightly closer, Katanaka could hear them chanting something that sounded like 'Killed' repeatedly. *Koroshita*. They're still alive, what are they talking about?

Katanaka watched the on-coming waves of the people head steadily towards him. There was no other option other than being swallowed by them when they reached him. He swallowed and watched their advancement, hardly blinking. As shouts of "Killed!" filled the air and the orange colour reflected light blindingly, the people came into clearer focus when they were about sixty metres from Katanaka.

Dingdong.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh—," Katanaka let out a high-pitched scream at the chiming sound as guillotine blades materialised in the air in front of the first row of orange people and swooshed at them. Everything happened so fast, that it would be missed if one blinked. Choking back bile, Katanaka watched heads fly as the second row calmly jumped over prone bodies, swinging arms, twitching legs and rolling spheres. The third row stumbled slightly as some people had their legs caught in something. The stumblers were pulled forward by the people flanking them. If one had the indifference to bend down, one would see legs kicking and shaking as some of the orange people tried to dislodge strands of black hair, arms or legs.

The orange people in the new first row looked straight at Katanaka at his scream as their view was suddenly unblocked and they could see where the sound came from. As one, they extended their right index finger and pointed at him. "Killed," they said decisively. "Killed!" and jabbed their fingers towards him. Suddenly, they started running forward, the first row changing every second. Katanaka rocked back and forth in horror, slamming his head repeatedly on the hard surface behind him. With a final scream of "Nooo——!!", Katanaka was engulfed in orange. He felt his arms being pulled away from body, his cheeks

being prodded. Some cold liquid was sprayed repeatedly on his face as the swooshing sound created a wind that stirred some hairs on his head. It smells like blood.

“Katanaka!” Hanazou called again, rescuing Katanaka from the depth of his orange bedsheet by pulling his arms that were above the quilt and getting him into a sitting position. Katanaka winced and collapsed sideways on to his right side, his hair waving about in the sudden movement. He held his right arm close to his body as his right cheek hit the pillow. Katanaka rolled onto his face shakily. One of his knees slipped and he kicked out. Hanazou finally saw Katanaka’s sweat-soaked shirt as the quilt shifted downwards. Hanazou grabbed the back of Katanaka’s shirt and pulled him back up. He slid forward so that he could see Katanaka’s face.

Picking up a water bottle and opening it with one hand, he propped Katanaka up using one leg as he poured some water on to his hands. Hanazou then flicked some cold water at Katanaka’s face and then pressed his cold palms on Katanaka’s cheeks. It didn’t seem to work. Hanazou put the water down and dragged Katanaka to the edge of the bed. Squashing pillows and quilts behind Katanaka so that he would not fall backwards, Hanazou quickly leapt to the curtains and dragged them open. The hot, orange afternoon sun hit Katanaka as he swayed unsteadily, his feet slipping on the carpet, his knees knocking each other. Hanazou saw some medicated oil on the bed-side chair. He grabbed it, opened it and waved it under Katanaka’s nose. It took a few minutes but, slowly, Katanaka opened his eyes and squinted into the sun. Hanazou squatted down in relief, only to fall on his behind when Katanaka screamed at him.

Katanaka looked down to see a sphere of black framed by orange light wobbling in front of him.

“Ahh—,” Katanaka shrieked.

“What?” the black sphere turned its face up to ask, the sun giving its head a halo.

“Eekk!” Katanaka shrieked again.

“Let’s go eat something,” the black sphere continued, ignoring Katanaka’s cries. “We have to see the doctor and psychologist later. I was told to tell you so.”

As the black sphere’s face came into focus, Katanaka was relieved to recognise Hanazou.

Katanaka shuffled off to the toilet while Hanazou settled into a sofa in the living room. He flicked the television on with a deedeDee. Girly pop music greeted him softly with a blast of cuteness, until he noticed a hairy man in a short dress dancing in the corner. *A new idol group! With Ladymoustache! Catchy tunes and cute dance!* were the captions on

the screen as Ladymoustache gallivanted to a cutesy dance routine while showing off his huge muscles and hairy legs as he towered over the other idols. He ended his part with his signature body-building pose of flexing his arms as his twin ponytails, tied with ribbons, bounced and flanked his moustache and beard. Hanazou didn't know what to make of it. It was too different from what they were trying to do—blend in inconspicuously when in cross-dress. On the other hand, Hanazou marvelled at Ladymoustache's courage to appear on national television like that. Hanazou didn't move as he watched the television program with his mouth slightly open.

A shrill ring broke Hanazou's attention and Katanaka almost dropped a towel as he emerged from the toilet. The speaker came on automatically as a clear video of the caller appeared on the screen.

"Hello! I'm calling from the Security Box downstairs," the caller said as he saluted. The automatic identity check scanned the man's face and identified him as a guard from the box. Katanaka pressed a button and the camera zoomed out to reveal the contents of the Security Box—there was no one else but the two other guards who were eating bentos on their transparent glass tables. Identity checks cleared their statuses. Katanaka pressed another button and surveyed the corridor outside the Security Box and the only door into the building. There was no one there. Picking up his mobile phone, Katanaka opened a few applications and double-checked the situation in the Security Box and surrounding areas. They all showed the same scene. Deciding that it was safe to answer the call, Katanaka pressed the 'Speak' button and said, "Hello."

"Oh, that's great. Are you alright? We sent your work buddy to check on you when we saw him this morning," the security guard said. "We registered that he entered your apartment but he has not reported back to us."

"Yes, thank you. Yes." Katanaka shot Hanazou a look. Oops. Hanazou had been too caught up in the television program. He whipped out his phone and tapped the 'Confirmation' button on his task and recorded a message quietly.

"Well, that's good. Oh, we just received confirmation from your work buddy... fingerprints... okay... iris... okay... voice recognition... okay... camera..." Katanaka and Hanazou watched the two guards stop eating and hurry to their computers. They flashed their thumbs up when each criterion was said. Hanazou stood up and held out his phone at arm's length as he tried to get into a two-shot with Katanaka. "Camera... okay. Thank you for your cooperation," the guards saluted. "Please take care of yourself and do not be afraid to trouble us."

“And as usual, I mean not as usual, but it happens regularly, erm, but, anyway, we received a suspicious package addressed to you this morning. It seems to be from the same sender as the other ones as it had similar writing. We called the Special Police immediately and they took care of it. It seemed to emit a wave which caused door bells to malfunction as we had received complaints from some residents who live on various floors who were sleeping. We believe that the culprit was trying to make people open the door or call out to ask ‘Who is it?’ in an attempt to identify which apartment you lived in or your voice. It was just a minor hindrance and all the residents are always vigilant and always pretend not to be at home anyway, so, I should think, that it didn’t really bother them that much. We will upgrade the doorbells to have an identification pad on the button and on other parts of the device to prevent future inconveniences. It is the design fault that resulted in a threat to your safety and well-being and we are deeply apologetic. We will continue to do our outmost to ensure that the building is safe and impenetrable to unapproved visitors and objects. Thank you very much.”

“Un,” Katanaka said in reply after the long standard drivel. “Thank you very much.” The call ended.

“The same sender?” Hanazou asked as he put his mobile phone down.

“Hm,” Katanaka replied without any emotion. It seemed to Hanazou that Katanaka did not want to talk about it, so Hanazou did not ask any further.

“Let’s eat something and then go to the doctor’s. Are you ready yet?” Hanazou walked back to the sofa and picked up the remote control, tactfully changing the subject.

“Yes. Let’s go.”

Hanazou turned off the television with a deededoh.

As they were trooping out of the door, Katanaka patted Hanazou’s shoulder and said quietly, “Thanks.”

Katanaka and Hanazou walked past the security guards on the way to the exit. They gave each other little nods. Katanaka made a mental note to remember to buy some snacks for the guards and his neighbours later. They walked for five minutes to the office building in the heat that was starting up.

Upon entering the cool office building, Katanaka walked briskly to the lift as Hanazou followed, slightly confused. Pushing open a metal lid on the button panel inside the lift, Katanaka pressed his thumb on the scanner and then looked at a camera lens which revealed itself after his thumb print was scanned. There was a beeping acknowledgement sound and a click like a door lock. The numbers on the display panel slowly counted

upwards until they reached Level 13—a floor that did not even have a button on the panel. The door slid open silently.

The floor was divided into two big spaces: one side seemed to be more sterile and had some beds and medical equipment; the other side had many rooms that had long lounge chairs. Some of the beds had the curtains drawn around it, and some of the rooms had the door closed.

“We’ll come back later,” Katanaka explained as he walked down the corridor that separated the two sides. “They don’t have the specialised equipment that I need here.” Hanazou nodded.

They reached the other end of the corridor and discovered a hidden lift after turning a corner. There was no ding sound here either. After scanning Katanaka’s identification, the lift hurtled downwards to yet another unlabelled floor. “This is the staff’s underground access,” Katanaka said as he stepped out of the lift into a well-lit tunnel.

Advertisements of internships and shops flashed on the tunnel walls. Katanaka poked at one flashing advertisement before it disappeared. Hanazou ambled up beside him to get a better look at the catalogue Katanaka was browsing through. It was a snack shop that packaged its snacks into pretty gift boxes. Katanaka was looking at the boxes that had twenty to thirty pieces in it.

After considering for a while, Katanaka selected four boxes of one type of snack and a box of another snack. He turned to Hanazou and gestured at the lone box.

“Oh, did you help me buy a box? I was going to do it later,” Hanazou said.

“I’m not buying it for you. It costs this much,” Katanaka tapped on the price. “Tax is included.”

“Ah, right. But why did you buy four boxes?”

“For the people at the apartment building.”

“Oh, right,” Hanazou looked at the number of pieces of snacks his box had. “Isn’t that too many?”

“You need to give some to the policemen as well.”

“Ah.”

Having finished with their online purchase from the electronic advertisement, Katanaka and Hanazou continued down the tunnel. Sometimes, they could hear some music coming from the left wall of the tunnel where there were hatches. Sometimes they heard some voices chattering. Once, Hanazou was sure that he could smell something delicious. The hatches were quite big. If one bent one’s head slightly, one would be able to pass through quite easily. As Katanaka trudged silently onwards with his right hand in a pocket

of his pants, Hanazou wondered if it was the right time to ask questions. He finally ventured with, “Is the underground shopping mall beside this tunnel?”

Katanaka turned his head slightly, glanced towards Hanazou and nodded, not even breaking out of his long step or fast pace. As Katanaka was slightly ahead of him, Hanazou could not see that Katanaka’s face had slowly turned ashen from exertion. They continued forward even when another tunnel merged in on their right. The other tunnel did not look as swanky as the one they were in: it did not seem lit and it had a dark, dank smell. Hanazou swivelled to look at the small sign that was at the mouth of the other tunnel: Home.

“Does that mean the apartments?” Hanazou could not stop himself from asking. Katanaka nodded. “Why didn’t we take that route then?”

Katanaka whispered a soft reply, “There’s only one way in and out of that one. It was an old escape route. Claustrophobic.”

“That’s not very safe.”

Katanaka did not reply.

After another five minutes, they reached the end of the tunnel. It opened up into a wide space which had a few metal doors. They pressed a button and took another lift up. They emerged into a clean, sterile lobby of the hospital that was at the end of the district.

“Hello, we’ve been expecting you,” the receptionist said as she looked up. She scanned Katanaka’s face and her gaze rested on his shoulder. “Please go in when your name is called.” Katanaka nodded as Hanazou passed her their Japan Health Insurance Cards which she gave back after confirming the insurance numbers.

They sank into the soft seats in the warm blue waiting room. The colours in the hospital were all warm. It wasn’t a typical whitewash which was a relief. The colours of a muted television flashed on one wall while the sound of a radio program hummed softly through the speakers. It was loud enough to listen to if one concentrated but soft enough to be background noise. After a few minutes, door near the reception opened and a doctor walked out. “Katanaka and Hanazou.” They stood up.

Katanaka and Hanazou entered the doctor’s office and sat down.

“I see that you are from the big company over there,” the doctor began. “Isn’t it great that you don’t have to search for a clinic that accepts foreigners as your company is affiliated to this place?”

Katanaka nodded silently. This one seemed to like to talk.

“I suppose you’re here to treat your... shoulder injury? Because I specialise in bones and muscles.” Katanaka nodded again.

“And what about you?” he turned to Hanazou.

“Just a general check.”

The doctor nodded as he gave Hanazou a once over, before starting the examination.

The doctor gently prodded Katanaka’s right arm and shoulder, and then his right ankle. Then he pressed a button on a phone and asked if the x-ray and ultra-sound rooms were ready. He produced a gown from a cupboard behind him and instructed Katanaka to take an x-ray of his shoulder. “Maybe you need to help him get changed,” he said to Hanazou. Hanazou nodded, his face slowly losing its colour. He had clearly seen the doctor checking Katanaka’s shoulder and ankle. Didn’t Katanaka say he was okay? Why did they need additional tests then?

The doctor made some notes about the injury site as Katanaka took an x-ray. Katanaka was then directed to the ultra-sound room to do another scan as the x-rays were printed. The doctor who stood beside the staff holding the scanner gave a few ‘hmms’ as he watched him slowly move the scanner around Katanaka’s arm, shoulder, back and chest. “See here,” he said, pointed to a fuzzy mass on the screen. “Some swelling and bleeding. And this, indicates a possible tear.” The doctor nodded in agreement.

“Hm,” Katanaka countered as he endured having something cold and oblong poking his painful shoulder and then his leg.

“All done,” the doctor said after a while. A nurse swooped in with a tissue and wiped the gel off quickly.

“I’ll see you back in the doctor’s office after you get changed.” Katanaka nodded as Hanazou helped him with his clothes. It was lucky that he was wearing a big open-front shirt that had push buttons. It was easy to snap the buttons open and close with one hand. Hanazou didn’t really need to help much.

As Katanaka was having an ultrasound done, the x-ray technicians were busy printing out the x-ray. They suddenly twittered excitedly. When the doctor came out of the ultrasound room, they rushed up to him in a hurry, waving and almost shouting about the x-ray. They had seen something and wanted to discuss it with the doctor at the first possible moment. Their excitement was almost unbecoming for a traditional Japanese person working in a traditional workplace. The doctor took a few seconds to remind himself that not all of them were Japanese and the workplace wasn’t very ‘traditional’ either. “Phew,” he released a small breath, plastered on a polite smile and the light in his eyes became dull again.

They had a hurried discussion in the corner after he waited for them to calm down. “I see... I thought so... Good work,” the doctor said. He wondered if he should reprimand them for being slightly noisy a few minutes ago. But when he looked at their proud faces, he bit down and swallowed his words. “Good work,” he said again. Their faces lit up even more. “It was good that you spotted that...” A nurse came up to him to ask if he had any specific instructions for the dressing of Katanaka’s injuries. His brain whirred quickly to combine all the information that he had just seen. Then he gave the nurse, who had been waiting patiently, his instructions.

Katanaka shuffled into the room with his arm in the sling which a nurse put on him after he came out of a changing room. Some plastic cold packs were draped over his shoulder and some packs were taped to his ankle. Katanaka heaved the right side of his body along as his left leg gave small shuffles. He settled carefully into a chair. He made sure that the right side of his back and arm did not touch the back of the chair. The doctor flicked on a square board of light and stuck the x-rays on it.

“It may be a little hard to understand, but see here,” the doctor tapped a dark area on the x-ray which looked like every other dark area with a thin metal stick. “That looks like bone bruising which probably indicates that your shoulder was dislocated and then popped back in by itself. Our equipment is really good to have detected that,” the doctor rubbed his nose with some pride.

“And here, the white bits like this that look like bones,” he traced the half skeleton on the x-ray from the collar bone to the upper arm. It was quite obvious to them that they were bones. “The white line is clear, which means you didn’t fracture anything else. There’s also no bruising on the x-ray and on your skin in those areas.” The doctor turned to look at Katanaka. “Which means that your bones are fine.” Hanazou nodded in relief. Katanaka just looked sleepy, his eyes slightly unfocused.

Seeing that, the doctor sped up his analysis. “The ultrasound correlated with the x-ray, which also showed one muscle tear, in this area,” he tapped somewhere on the x-ray. “The rest of the muscles seem okay, just slightly sprained. I don’t think you need a stronger examination like the MRI...” The doctor sat back down and put the tips of his fingers of one hand against the other hand’s. “What were you doing anyway, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Er...” Hanazou started.

“I stepped in a ditch, twisted my ankle and hit something with my shoulder as I fell,” Katanaka cut in calmly, his eyes half-opened.

“Oh, that’s terrible,” The doctor sympathised in a monotone. “Anyway, keep taking your painkillers. I’ll give you a prescription for stronger ones if you need them. Please go see a physiotherapist after a few weeks to do some muscle rehab.” Katanaka nodded.

Then the doctor did a check on Hanazou, making sure that there weren’t any swelling or broken bones, which he didn’t have. To be on the safe side, Hanazou would come back for additional tests on another day.

Katanaka and Hanazou thanked the doctor and walked out. Katanaka signalled for his bag which Hanazou passed to him. Digging through it, he immediately swallowed some painkillers with a mouthful of water. Katanaka’s eyes became slightly less foggy from the pain. After waiting in the waiting area by the pharmacist counter, they finally picked up the medication that the doctor had prescribed.

As they walked past the reception, the nurse bade them a good day.

Instead of being back underground, Katanaka pressed the button on the lift which corresponded to the ‘Street Level’. He put on a baseball cap under which he tucked his pink hair. He couldn’t reach behind his head, so he just wrapped a scarf snugly around his neck. A little pink could only be seen if Katanaka bent his head. Katanaka flexed the fingers on his right hand, feeling a little cramped from the exertion. Hanazou just followed him quietly, seemingly deep in thought.

The hospital lift gave a small gentle ding as it reached the street level. Katanaka and Hanazou walked out into the late afternoon sun while shielding their eyes.

“Let’s go to the snack shop to pick up the boxes of snacks on the way home,” Katanaka suggested.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Why don’t you head back first?” Hanazou looked directly at Katanaka’s ashen face. His brows wrinkled in slight worry.

“It’s safer not to be alone,” Katanaka replied.

“Ah. Is that why...” Hanazou looked at Katanaka’s bag in which he had put the arm sling and medication.

“If that crazy stalker thinks I’m down, I’ll be attacked for sure,” Katanaka muttered so quietly that Hanazou had to step nearer to hear it.

“Let’s be quick then.”

Katanaka and Hanazou hurried down the street towards the snack shop. They picked up the boxes after showing the receipt and hurried on their way. Somehow, Hanazou even managed to buy some fruits and meat as they walked past the vendors in a hurry. They power-walked the last stretch to the apartment building and huffed as they leaned on the

side of the Security Box. If there was a colour paler than ashen, it was the colour of Katanaka's face. The main door to the lobby of the apartment building slid shut quickly and blocked the outside world from sight.

"There wasn't anyone following us, was there?" Katanaka wheezed at the guards who were watching the cameras. One of them shook his head.

Katanaka carefully tore open the wrapping paper covering the gift box with a finger and took out a couple of snacks. "Here," Katanaka said as he held them on an open palm. The guard who was on receptionist duty unlocked a small window and whipped his hand out quickly. "Thank you for always helping me with my mail."

Hanazou held out two boxes of the snacks as Katanaka asked, "Can we put some as a small token of gratitude in the residents' mail boxes?" The receptionist guard nodded. Unlocking the door of the Security Box, the guard exited quickly and locked the door again. Then he led them swiftly to the door of the room where the mail boxes were. He unlocked the door, ushered them in, and locked the door behind them. First, he inspected each snack that was brought out with a scanning device and counted the total number. Then he carefully watched them place the snacks in the mail boxes. When the task was finished, he ushered them out again with a nod.

The guard quickly slipped back into his box and picked up the form that had materialised on his desk. He filled it in with the details of the gifts and the gift-givers. He held up the form for Katanaka and Hanazou to read through the glass window. They both nodded at the correct information. Then the guard pressed a button which released a hidden camera and identification pad. "Please look at the camera and press your thumb on the pad," the guard instructed. The word 'Confirmation' flashed two times. The guard nodded. "Thank you for the food," he finally smiled as the complicated and intense task was now over. He turned to file the form into a thick secretive-looking file and put the file back in the drawer with its friends. Katanaka and Hanazou bowed to the guards. The two guards at the back grinned with their mouths full of sweet pastries and gave them a wave, not even risking taking their eyes off their monitors. They even ate their regular meals at an angle from which they could see the monitors. Katanaka gave Hanazou a nudge.

"Smile."

Hanazou forced one stiffly and bowed again. He was still reeling in shock from all the processes.

They didn't wait long for the lift to arrive. As the lift started moving, Hanazou finally seemed to be jolted awake and asked, "Why smile when they aren't looking at you?"

“They can see you through the camera feeds on their monitors,” Katanaka replied.

“Oh.”

Katanaka offered a snack to Hanazou who tore it open carefully so as not to drop pastry crumbs in the lift. He half-expected a guard’s voice to boom, “HEY YOU! No eating in the lift!”

“Oh, I have another question,” Hanazou asked the moment his mouth was empty and licked clean of crumbs.

“What?” Katanaka asked wearily, leaning on the cold lift walls.

“Why didn’t he use an electronic form? Even though we do a lot of paperwork too, we seldom use real physical paper.”

“That’s to prevent hacking. Although I do think that they have an electronic or digital database on a safe device that has never been connected to the system or to the internet... Or so the rumours say.”

“But, isn’t that quite... p-primitive?” Hanazou hesitated to say something negative. Walls have ears, he remembered his grandmother saying.

“Maybe that’s why he was so careful about locking the door. I couldn’t really see what he did with the drawer of files but it did sound like he was locking them up too.”

“But if that gets broken into...” Hanazou glanced at Katanaka.

“The rumour also says that all the guards have three-dans in a couple of martial arts. They also have a physical test every week. If they fail that test...” Katanaka attempted to give a shrug and winced.

“If they fail the test...?”

“I don’t know either. That’s as far as the rumour goes,” Katanaka’s eyes glanced at the digital indicator. The number had just changed to the floor he lives on. Katanaka gave Hanazou a nod and stepped off. Without looking back, he trudged to his apartment door. Katanaka gave a jump and almost lashed out when he heard Hanazou sniff.

“What are you doing behind me? You don’t live on this floor,” Katanaka said as he pulled his apartment door open and sidled in.

“Please excuse my intrusion,” Hanazou said as he also sidled into Katanaka’s apartment. Katanaka reeled around and tried to pull the door shut quickly but the only thing that did not manage to get in was the bag of food and the remaining snacks. Hanazou narrowly missed getting his fingers pinched. With a sigh, Katanaka turned around and walked into the living room after kicking his shoes off. Hanazou opened the door briefly and rescued the food that was now slightly squashed.

“Let’s have some meat soup,” Hanazou said as he took off his shoes at the entryway.
“Uh,” Katanaka grunted from the depths of the apartment.

Chapter 14: The Gift of Rest

From the sofa, Katanaka had watched Hanazou cook some meat soup and keep the leftovers in the fridge a couple of days ago. Now, Katanaka took out a serving of meat that Hanazou had sliced previously, and placed it on the table pensively. “I wonder how I should thank him,” he mused out loud as he untied the bag gingerly and emptied the contents into a saucepan of boiling water. Katanaka scooped out half a spoon of miso and dissolved it in a ladle that he hooked on to the saucepan. Putting down the spoon, he carefully tilted the contents of the ladle that was in his left hand into the pot. A few days were not enough to fully recover from his injuries; but at least, he could now barely hold a small utensil at an angle for a few seconds now, compared to how he used to drop them at first.

It would be the sixth day since Katanaka started cross-dressing at home, in full make-up. He made sure not to stick his face in the steam that rose out from the saucepan. He did not want to have additional eyelashes and glue in his food. In all actual fact, it was easier to wear a skirt with one hand than it was to wear pants. Katanaka revealed a wry smile. It was already such a struggle getting his underwear on that having one less layer to struggle with was such a blessing. He really wanted to be in no pants but he didn't know when Ooyama or Hanazou or Kotori were going to show up. ‘I can't even be naked in my own house,’ Katanaka thought.

Katanaka grasped the handle of the saucepan and swirled around to place the saucepan on a circular piece of wood, his skirt flaring up a little. He had not stepped out of his house for six days. Miraculously, there was no suspicious mail either. Maybe the stalker had gone on a holiday. Katanaka went to check that the door and window grilles were locked for the umpteenth time before sitting down to eat.

The in-house psychologist called him once a day and talked at him for a while. He would also do the mental imaging exercises and tried to think happy thoughts during the session as instructed. He didn't really expect to fly. Twice, he had a session together with Hanazou as they were work partners. On those days, Hanazou would hang out at Katanaka's apartment in full gear as well. It was part of image training. Katanaka's chopsticks paused on their way to his mouth as he smiled at the memory. Hanazou had to block Katanaka's attack every time Hanazou was standing behind Katanaka. It took a while before Hanazou learned not to stand behind Katanaka at all. The fault also lay in Hanazou,

who walked without any sound despite wearing indoor slippers, which should have made floppy scratchy sounds on the carpet. “Ah, I should have known,” Katanaka recalled the memory. The movements of someone trained in the arts of self-defence are different.

Vooop. Katanaka looked up sharply at the sound, his neck creaking a little. It was the wind outside the window sucking in the air from the apartment. It caused the curtains to hit the window and grilles as they were pulled outside against their will. Then Katanaka also turned to look at the door. Is it my imagination or is the door handle slowly moving downwards? Slipping out of his slippers, he tiptoed quietly to the door, trying not to squeak on the kitchen tiles, trying not to ruffle the carpet and trying not to kick shoes over in his hurry. He held his breath as he stared intently at the door handle while standing on the cold tiles.

The nose supports of his spectacles gave a little creaking sound when his head moved. Katanaka clenched his jaw and refrained from wrinkling his nose to push his spectacles up. He stood, hunched over and motionless, for a good while, staring at the door. Vooopp. Startled, Katanaka’s spectacles’ nose supports gave another creak. It wasn’t as though he had eyes on the back of his head. Deciding to deal with it one thing at a time, he tiptoed back to the window and tied the moving curtains away from the small opening. Then picking up the saucepan, he settled into the mats and quilts that he had piled up for six days by the inner door. He ate as quietly as he could while watching the door. Satisfied after sitting there for an hour, he got up, locked the inner door and went to do the dishes. Then he closed the double-layered windows in the living room and locked them. He prevented the inner door from opening by wedging short poles into the metal grids at the bottom of the sliding door and jamming the back of two chairs that fit perfectly in the panels of the door, which prevent the front and back panels from being slid back. He also placed a few metal cups and bowls on the chairs and under the windows.

Heading back into his bedroom, he locked the bedroom door and blocked the entrance with a heavy sofa. After locking the windows and grilles, he drew the curtains slightly across. Picking up a book, he opened a cupboard door that was slightly lower than that his waist. It was about half his height. Settling down on to the mattresses inside, he proceeded to read a book by lamplight, all but entirely closing the cupboard door as he needed to have a peephole to monitor the door and window. A tiny fan clipped on a small hook hung near him and rotated the stale air.

It was his small refuge after being deluged by horrible dreams during the first two nights after the undercover work had ended. It helped him get to sleep as there was nothing above, below or around him but the walls of the cupboard. Huge empty spaces always

seemed to be filled with something or another that could not be seen. He used to live in a messy room as the mess filled up empty spaces, but a bigger room meant that more things needed to be sprawled around, which seemed to be even worse as it'd always look like a burglar had just ransacked the place when he woke up. After an hour, Katanaka went to sleep again, as he usually did during his rest week, like a vampire. He might be forced by the psychologist to graduate to the bed after the week was up. Might. 'Maybe I really should get a pet, although it'd make a lot of noise too', were his last thoughts before drifting off to sleep.

"Hello," Hanazou greeted Katanaka when they met in the lift on Monday morning. It had been two weeks since they had gone to work. One week had been the scheduled rest after a job, and another week had been for them to recover from their injuries.

"How's your shoulder?"

"It's slowly getting there."

"And your ankle?"

"Oh, that's all better."

"When should we leave the snacks on the tables?"

"Hmm, the tradition is either at the start of the day when no one is there yet, or find a time when there isn't anyone there during the day and put it there secretly."

"That's just so weird. Isn't that just plain rude to leave things on another's desk with no explanation? Oh, and are we giving one piece each to every person in the office?"

"It depends. The tradition is to give it to the higher-ups first, and then work downwards. Some people only give to a select few—those in their cliques. Sometimes they include the person who took over their workload specifically. If they like someone a lot, they might even give that person two or three pieces..."

"That's even weirder. It's like their idea of Valentine's Day where only the girls can give presents to the guys."

Katanaka shrugged slowly and lopsidedly.

"Weird," Hanazou muttered as they walked out of the lift. They nodded at the people in the Security Box.

"Good morning!" the receptionist guard on duty greeted cheerily.

"Then we have to follow the tradition too?" Hanazou asked as they stepped into the morning sun that was already starting to hurt their eyes and skin.

Rubbing a forearm thoughtfully, Katanaka said solemnly, "Not really."

Hanazou almost walked into one of the pole that lined the passageway. “What? Say that again?”

“Not really.”

“Then what are we going to do?”

Katanaka gave laugh at Hanazou’s worried expression. “Don’t worry about office politics. They always boil it down to the differences between them and us anyway. I’ll just do what is more convenient first.”

“I’ve been giving them personally to each person as I thank them and chat with them for a few minutes for the past, I dunno, well, many many years. Or else I leave notes for them if they aren’t around,” Katanaka continued. “Some of them usually take it as some kind of ‘Internationalisation’ time and ask questions or even sometimes practice another language on me. I feel that you have to show the love equally to everyone in the room. It sometimes won’t do to follow what they do...”

“The nail that sticks out will be hammered down,” Hanazou suddenly quoted from a page in the Company Guidebook, from the section covering how to work and interact with other co-workers. A similar comment was also noted in the section on how to live in the society.

“I wonder if the hammered nail will be bent?” Katanaka said as they entered the office doors. “Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of “homogeneity”?” Their conversation ended abruptly as it wouldn’t do to gossip in the workplace, but that was the rule only for the foreigners.

Katanaka and Hanazou unwrapped the boxes of snacks and folded the wrapping paper carefully. They put the paper back into the bag that held the boxes. Looking around the office, Katanaka moved his hand in a slicing movement and indicated that he would take the left side. Hanazou pointed to the right side and nodded. Armed with a box of snacks each, they started approaching the staff that were already sitting at their desks. Quiet conversation ensued over the soft hum of the air-conditioning. It took them nearly twenty minutes before Katanaka and Hanazou met back at their desks. Their boxes were only a quarter empty. Sitting down with a small huff, they gulped down some tea that had been steaming on their table a few minutes after they had arrived at the office. Hanazou swivelled around to look at the communication blackboard that recorded staff leave. Three other people were on leave, two on business trips and two others would be leaving early to go on other trips. Noting down their names, he started to pen sticky notes for them as he set aside seven snacks.

Katanaka rifled through the stack of papers that had not been on his desk when he got off work two weeks ago. Most were mainly communications: meeting minutes, announcements of new projects and updates of the progress of completed or ongoing projects. Some staff still had not got the hang of going paperless. Katanaka reverently filed the papers away. 'I'll toss them when no one's looking, as usual,' he thought. Katanaka glanced at Hanazou who was diligently copying out names. "Remember to leave around half a box for the Admin Staff—the ones who handle our paperwork, dole out the stationery and quietly serve us tea." Hanazou stretched out a hand and patted a box that was near the top edge of his desk without looking up. A sticky note on the box read 'Admin'. "Hm," Katanaka grunted in acknowledgement. "Un," Hanazou grunted in reply, still concentrating on writing each stroke perfectly.

Katanaka produced a key from his bag and opened a desk drawer. Previous experience had taught him to always lock his desk in order to prevent others from ransacking it. This country isn't as safe as one would think it is, or maybe, there's always someone somewhere who had the uncommon hobby of ransacking desks. Maybe they are all related to each other. Sometimes, he wondered why they expected to find. He was human too, like they were.

Katanaka winced a little from the memory of the ransacked-desk harassment of the past. 'At least,' he mused, 'no one had scribbled offensive words on the desk or left 'presents' in the drawers.' He looked over at Hanazou and noticed that Hanazou's desk key wasn't in the desk's lock too. Glancing up at Kotori's and Ooyama's desk, he realised that their keys weren't there either, unlike most of the other staff who left their keys openly in the lock. Katanaka revealed a small smile. Then he pulled out the company's tablet, and checked the other notifications and announcements that he had received. In the time that he took to complete this, more staff had arrived at the office. When Katanaka was done with catching up on his paperwork and paperless-work, he got up again to hand out snacks and thanks.

The 'allocated' duration for snack-giving was drawing to a close. It wouldn't do to hang around doing nothing but waiting for people to show up. They had to look busy. As Hanazou caught up with his paperwork, Katanaka wrote sticky notes for the rest of the staff who had yet to show up at the office. They finished their tasks at nearly the same time, so they both quickly walked around the tables handing out the last of the snacks. Picking up their schedule for the day, they left the office with their tablets and a small box of premium snacks. It was time for the meeting with the CEO to report on their completed missions and to officially report in for work.

Kotori flinched as he entered the office, his neck disappearing for a second.

There it is. That innocent-looking offending packet of food. It might be on my table and then again, it might not. K brand of chocolates, Japanese sweets, G brand of chocolates, rick crackers, nuts, bottled drinks, T brand of banana snack, more chocolate, candy... you name it. What's it doing there is always a mystery, although by the end of the day, word gets around as to the sender's identity. Somehow. And the 'sadness' when it isn't on your table because they skipped you must only be the second kind of harassment you can get from this. Kotori's eye flicked quickly over the tables towards his desk that was on the other side. It looks like it's on my table too? And it begins again, this never-ending cycle of meaningless and almost useless omiyage.

It does make for a great snack time though. I don't mind if it's real omiyage, like if someone visited Kyoto, Hokkaido or Okinawa and was nice and kind enough to bring some local food and snacks back to share. But those random acts of omiyage giving or the 'thanks and sorry for covering my work leave/sick leave etc.' even when I didn't do anything to help, is kind of burdensome. Because I'm the kind of person who would return in kind, although that's another whole kettle of fish: I have to take into consideration the size, type, shape and weight (and possibly price) of the received snack and make sure that I do not give something of a lesser or bigger 'value' back. Usually, after a mutual exchange, it stops there between us but sometimes the cycle never ends. One would think that it's just a snack... That's what I thought at first, all those years ago... It isn't. It's a psychological warfare.

Kotori walked towards his table in trepidation. Some tables proudly displayed their snack in a prominent place, usually in a bare corner or in the middle of the table while others had them on top of the other stuff that covered the table. Others pressed the emptied wrapper under a small paper weight. In the individual bins that were placed strategically next to the empty-of-snack tables, the snack wrappers were floating on top of the other trash. One could see that the 'new' trash had been carefully slid into the bin around the snack wrapper. How could he tell? The snack wrapper seemed to be sticking out like an Eiffel Tower.

Some tables had sticky notes on them—that was normal, a traditional form of communication between the staff in the office. Maybe they did not want to rack up phone bills, although messaging apps used Wi-Fi nowadays... and the office had unlimited Wi-Fi. Kotori sighed quietly—another mystery he had yet to understand. The minute-long walk to

his desk felt like ten years as he could draw similarities from the current scene to the old ones at his previous workplace years ago. Kotori stepped towards his desk and scanned the top of it.

‘Wow, I received one,’ Kotori thought, almost in relief. There was a sticky note on his desk too. He tore it off his desk and held it closer to his eyes.

Dear Kotori,

Thanks for covering us when we were on our leave.

–Katanaka and Hanazou

I wonder if Ooyama gave omiyage the last time... the last few times...? Kotori looked up just as Ooyama walked into view.

“If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, yes, I did,” Ooyama said as he tore open the snack Katanaka and Hanazou had left for him and bit into it. “You owe me some money, if you’re thinking of paying me back.” Kotori’s appalled expression said it all and Ooyama almost sent crumbs flying at him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” Kotori’s cheeks turned red and the expression in his eyes hardened. His curled bangs bounced as he looked up at Ooyama. “It wasn’t that important,” Ooyama said after he swallowed. “It’s not that expensive anyway, although after a while, it does add...” Ooyama trailed off when he glanced at Kotori, who was rummaging for his wallet. “Hey, hey, you don’t have to return it now. I don’t even know the exact amount. I’ll send you the receipts when I find them later, okay? Anyway, how were the tests?”

Kotori hesitated for a while before putting his wallet back in his bag. He put his bag on his chair before looking up again. His expression was unreadable as always. Ooyama looked at him carefully and decided not to be too hasty in forming a conclusion. Ooyama waited patiently for Kotori to speak. Kotori puffed his bangs up and took out a blue, furry, hard folder from his bag. “Here,” he handed it over to Ooyama.

Ooyama opened the hard blue folder and read the certificate inside. “That’s good, you passed the first two tests.” Kotori nodded shyly, his bangs bouncing a little. The first two tests were on theory. His practical lessons had only just started.

“Keep working on it!” Ooyama gave Kotori a light pat. Brushing off crumbs from his shirt, Ooyama shuffled over to the Cleaning Equipment Cupboard and took out a broom and dustpan. “Are you going to eat the snack now?” he asked Kotori. Kotori nodded. “Then I’ll wait till you’re done before I sweep the crumbs up.”

Katanaka and Hanazou pressed the top-most button on the lift panel when the doors closed. Automatically, identity checkers popped out of the side of the lift. They both presented their fingers and irises, and gave samples of their voices. They stood still as a scanner scanned them from head to toe a few times. Then the lift started moving upwards.

“That was quite intense,” Hanazou muttered when the lift finally started moving.

“It is the CEO,” Katanaka replied, waving the premium snacks at Hanazou.

A few seconds passed in silence before the lift slid to a stop and the doors glided open silently. A shiny white floor greeted them. It was slightly blindly coming from the dull lift. They closed their eyes slightly. Wooden arches and pillars, and warm blue walls flanked the white floor. A wooden door at the side of the corridor swung open suddenly as Hanazou was still absorbed in taking in the interior.

“I’ve been expecting you,” the CEO beamed at them. “I see that you’ve finished the mandatory gift-giving in the office?” Katanaka nodded and bowed slightly. The CEO waved a hand at him. Hanazou just stared. The CEO gave a chuckle and walked into the archway of the opened door as Katanaka started to follow slowly behind him. Right before Katanaka reached the door, the CEO popped his head back out and asked, “Is he coming?”

Katanaka quickly turned back and jogged a few steps. He reached an arm out and pulled Hanazou out of his reverie and dragged him to the door. It was a cosy room, filled with a few skylights and the lights hung about in naked bulbs. The bulbs were covered by weaved baskets of different sizes, shapes and lengths. The walls were lined with drawings and paintings in soft tones. The window to the huge balcony was open and a breeze made the white curtain dance.

Katanaka dragged Hanazou and pushed him gently to sit on a sofa after the CEO sat down. Katanaka handed the premium snack box to the CEO with a bow before sitting down himself. “You don’t have to be so uptight,” the CEO said as he examined the box. “Oh, it’s my favourite. You remembered!”

“Let’s share these as we have some tea,” the CEO continued as he poured out steaming tea from a white porcelain tea kettle. “Just the tea is enough,” Katanaka ventured to say. “Don’t stand on ceremony!” the CEO flicked his eyes across Katanaka’s face. “I see... maybe you should take more sick leave.”

Katanaka flinched, a finger slowly curled on his tea cup. “I cannot...” he tried to say.

“This is a direct order from your grandfather,” the CEO retorted huffily as he puffed at his hot tea. “Or should I say CEO? Is CEO bigger than grandfather?”

Hanazou choked on the snack that he had been forced to eat since he seemed to have lost all his communicative powers once he had stepped out of the lift.

“But I am not on the family register,” Katanaka replied quietly. It was a well-rehearsed answer that slipped out smoothly and without hesitation, honed from years of repeating it. It was an answer that normally solved all problems...

“Oh, don’t mind about that,” the CEO brushed it off lightly. “Here, have a snack.”

Katanaka hesitated.

“So many years have already passed,” the CEO continued as he leaned over and pressed a snack onto the back of Katanaka’s hand that was resting in a polite overlapping fashion on his lap.

“But, I think, they are still...” Katanaka placed the snack on the table, beside his tea cup, and resumed his polite hands.

“Well, I don’t know how they actually feel, you know, since no one says anything of worth,” the CEO bit into his snack and chewed thoughtfully. ‘You know, the Japanese thing, the façade...?’

“Anyway, how’s your new partner?” the CEO licked his fingers before looking up at Hanazou’s big eyes that only became bigger.

“He seems to be overwhelmed,” Katanaka observed gently.

“Haha! He’s a good kid, isn’t he?” the CEO replied. “Well, now that I’ve seen you, send in your report or whatever you need to do. Not that I need it since I already know. I think it’s just for updating the records?” the CEO drank a sip of tea. “And take four more weeks of leave,” the CEO said as Katanaka stood up to go. Katanaka gave a slight nod.

Pulling Hanazou up to his feet, he made to leave the area, but before he could do so, the CEO remarked somewhat dejectedly, “You didn’t finished your tea and eat your snack.”

Spinning around, Katanaka gulped the rest of the hot tea that was remaining in his cup as quickly as he could handle it and grabbed the snack with the same hand after his hand put the cup down. He quickly stuffed the snack into his mouth. Finishing with a slight bow, he pushed Hanazou out of the room.

The door closed behind him silently and they were left alone in the white and blue and wooden corridor. Some crumbs dribbled from Hanazou’s mouth. Katanaka’s hand moved swiftly to catch the crumbs before they hit the floor. A dustbin revealed itself from a wall and slid out towards them. Katanaka disposed of the crumbs into the bin. ‘Just how much does he monitor...’ Katanaka thought before noticing a tiny red dot flash at the top of

a painting frame opposite him. He gave another small bow to the red light and dragged Hanazou by the arm to the lift.

The lift doors slid open silently without him even doing anything. They got on the lift and finally as the lift doors closed, the meeting with the CEO was over. Or so they thought.

“Remember, I said to take four more weeks of leave,” a soft voice suddenly muttered.

Katanaka jumped silently, his shoulders moving up to touch his ears and his hand clenching on Hanazou. Katanaka nodded faintly.

“Good.”

They waited a little while longer, but the voice no longer said anything.

By the time they exited the lift and reached back to their office, their digital attendance signs had already changed to ‘On Leave’ with a small date range in the corner.

Hanazou looked closely at his. Unlike, Katanaka, he had only been given two more weeks of leave. A soft ping from his device alerted him to incoming mail. He read it carefully. It was about his work during the time Katanaka was not around.

They looked into the office but could not see Ooyama and Kotori anywhere. They placed the empty snack boxes into the cardboard recycle area before leaving the office. They could finally go home. It was only eight-thirty in the morning...

Hanazou looked up from the sticky notes that he had been writing. It wasn't that many but his fingers were already cramping up. Becoming more digitalised had its drawbacks too... He stretched his fingers desperately when he was done with writing the notes. Then he checked his work emails to see what he missed. He heard the scratching of a pen as he typed on his laptop. He gave a sidelong glance at Katanaka and saw him writing on some sticky notes.

He actually hadn't really believed Katanaka when he said that they were going to meet with the higher-ups. There weren't many to start with as the company had been going under a restructure, according to Hanazou's father. Oh wait, Hanazou paused, his fingers in mid-air. There will always be one. That was the CEO. Was this the CEO that Katanaka was talking about?

“It's time to go, the scheduled meeting time...” he heard Katanaka say as he felt a soft touch on his arm. He sent the email that he had just finished typing and nodded. He

picked up the premium snack box that Katanaka had specifically pointed out to him that day. Now, he looked at it carefully again, and committed it to memory. Then he handed the box to Katanaka.

He followed Katanaka to the lifts. The lift behaved in a way he had never seen before. He must have looked quite shocked. He couldn't remember what he said. He was beginning to feel nervous.

It seemed like they were really going to meet the CEO!

When the lift door opened, his eyes were stuck on the nameplate that embossed the letters 'CEO'. His nervousness took root in his legs and he froze there. There was a sound.

He turned his head and looked at the person who appeared. It was a man who was about the same height as Katanaka. But instead of having pink hair, this man's hair was white. Moreover, although he had a few wrinkles on his face, his body was also slim like Katanaka's. Who is this person?

Hanazou just stared, hardly taking in the layout or design of the place. Then he felt someone tugging on his arm and his feet followed the direction of the tug. He was pushed to sit on something soft. Hanazou's gaze did not leave the white haired man's silhouette. It wasn't until a few minutes later that Hanazou realised that he was still staring at the white haired man's face.

A crinkle sound alerted him to the snack that was being pushed towards him. He took it in reflex. The hand that pushed the snack towards him also indicated for him to pick up the tea cup. Hanazou's fingers twitched in confusion.

Then the hand that had entered his vision retreated back and held another tea cup, bringing it to its owner's lips. It was only then that Hanazou picked up his own tea cup. Hanazou didn't know what to say, so he steadily bit into the snack.

The warmth of the tea mixed with the sweetness of the snack, although the bitter aftertaste from the tea still lingered in his mouth. The clouds in his head had cleared somewhat. His ears slowly became unblocked and he heard the conversation that had been going on around him. Previously, all he saw were the white haired man's moving lips.

His ears chose the wrong moment to be unblocked. Hanazou's eyes widened and he couldn't help but choke on the snack he was eating. It was rude to make any sound, so he just choked silently and gulped down some tea.

Did he hear that right? "Grandfather?" Oh my god. But he didn't hear of this from anyone at all, not even Katanaka. In fact, Hanazou searched his memories, it seemed like no one treated Katanaka any differently...? It seemed like there were some problems...? Was

this also connected to the reason why Katanaka had to do all those undercover jobs? Hanazou still couldn't figure it out.

If Katanaka knew what Hanazou was thinking about, he would have laughed and said, "No," to the last question. That was because many of the staff were on leave as they were recovering and the new staff had yet to pass their martial arts tests. Or, if he was feeling particularly boastful, he would have said that he was the best at it. Ten-san had said so too.

Oh, it seemed like they were talking about Hanazou now. Hanazou's eyes widened slightly. Four more weeks of leave? What about Hanazou? He had already finished his snack and tea. Then he was pulled up and off the sofa. He finally remembered to bow at the white haired man.

He felt himself being pushed out of the room and into the lift. He was about to release a breath that he had been holding in when suddenly he almost jumped a foot into the air. He felt a pressure on his arm. A voice had come through the lift. It sounded like the white haired man's. Maybe there were hidden speakers somewhere. He looked at Katanaka and saw him nod. He nodded as well.

After a moment of silence, they both heaved a sigh of relief.

After checking back at the office, Hanazou realised that he had been given more time to rest as well. He walked back to the apartment building with Katanaka.

"Have a good rest," was the last thing he heard as the lift door closed after Katanaka pushed him out. Katanaka disappeared back into the lift and vanished from his sight.

The door had closed.

Chapter 15: Reporting

Kotori had not seen Katanaka in the office for nearly two months. He had been wondering about it as he rode the lift down the apartment building. He had sometimes seen Hanazou and had eaten some meals with him when they had the time in between their work. Ah, but he had met the both of them in their apartments when Ooyama dragged him there a few times. It just so happened that some of those times had been when he was in women's clothing... Well, at least they seemed to be happy. And recently, Katanaka's and Hanazou's faces weren't looking so gaunt anymore, not like that affected their strength.

Kotori had been diligently going to the self-defence training class. It was held twice a week. He didn't really know why he had to go, but both Kotori and Katanaka said that he had to. But he was slightly relieved as he was no longer floating around the various projects. It seemed like his workload had lessened? Maybe because he could not skip those classes, so work had to make time for that instead. Then who had been covering for Katanaka? Kotori tilted his head to the side. He had been too preoccupied with his own things.

At first, he had learned the self-defence skills like any other student. After the basics were learnt after a month, he focussed more on training a few moves tailored for his height and strength. This was all just for the basic level of certification though. It was not possible to become an expert after only six weeks. Kotori was clear about that. At the minimum, he needed to be able to get away from an attacker. Pinning him down or disarming him was, of course, an advantage. Kotori sighed. He really wanted to be like Ooyama or Katanaka or Hanazou. He had seen them sparring or training fiercely sometimes after the class had ended. He felt useless compared to them. No. He slapped both his cheeks with the palms of his hands. I need to catch up to them, or at least, not be some deadweight that pulled them down.

The morning sun intermittently hit his face as he hurried under the passageway. He looked away from the glinting sun rays and saw the tall back of Ooyama who was just entering the office building. After a few months, he could already recognise Ooyama from behind. Kotori hurried to catch up.

Ooyama was chatting with Hanazou as they were walking. They had met coincidentally in the lobby of the apartment building. Ooyama listened to Hanazou's reports and worries as he had for the past few weeks. Now that Katanaka was obediently resting as though he was

under house arrest, Ooyama had taken Hanazou under his wing as well. They both didn't forget to barge into Katanaka's apartment twice a week to check up on him. They had even agreed on the days. Or more like, Ooyama had texted Hanazou the schedule. Ooyama even came to check up on Hanazou regularly during his initial two weeks and extra two weeks of leave. Sometimes, Ooyama had strung Kotori along with him, and the normally brief check-up of forcing Katanaka or Hanazou to eat, take a shower, and change their clothes and the bedsheets dragged on for a few extra hours. Kotori seemed to take it in without much fuss; he even further obliged them, offering several times to put on a dress when he saw that Katanaka and Hanazou were wearing them inside their apartments.

With some distance put between Katanaka and Hanazou, Hanazou managed to cool-off a little and was able to slightly disassociate not only Katanaka from his private life, but also from the attire he had usually been made to wear during undercover operations. He had only been doing it for a few months, so he was not in as bad a shape as Katanaka, according to the psychologist whom they saw together. He had been worried, which was why he went along with Ooyama's scheduled check-ups on Katanaka. He had also been relieved when Ooyama and Kotori also came to visit him. He had not been forgotten.

“Regarding the internship at...”

As they were waiting for the lift in the lobby of office building, the glass doors slid open and revealed Kotori.

Ooyama turned to Kotori and said seriously after greeting him with a smile, “You should be taking that martial arts test soon. You've been going to the classes for a few months now, right?” Kotori nodded, relieved that he was making some progress.

“Have you managed to twist an attacker's arms or legs yet?”

“Of course! That's the basics!”

“That's good.” “That's great.” Hanazou and Ooyama gave Kotori a pat on the back, although Hanazou's expression looked slightly strained. Kotori smiled happily, proud of his achievements.

Kotori mimed an arm twisting motion.

“I can sidle away quickly after that. Sometimes I can even land a kick on him as I escape. I've even pinned the instructor down a few times!” Kotori said with a triumphant look on his face.

“What? Seriously? I had a hard time trying to do that just once,” Ooyama exclaimed as Hanazou nodded in agreement.

“When I was in women’s clothes...” Kotori chattered on happily as he described how he pulled it off while the instructor was immobile with shock.

Ooyama and Hanazou exchanged looks and wondered if Kotori actually really needed to learn martial arts when him being in a dress was a weapon in itself already.

“Yes, the element of surprise is also important,” Ooyama said encouragingly.

When they reached the office, Ooyama remembered that Hanazou had been saying something. After clocking in and greeting their colleagues, they headed to a meeting room to have a quick briefing about the tasks for the day.

“You were saying something about the internship at...?” Ooyama asked Hanazou once the briefing was over and Kotori had left to check a stall at the Work&Experience Centre.

“Ah, yes, they have confirmed their participation at the festival. I will add them to the list and finalise how many staff will be working during the festival.”

“That’d be good. Thank you.”

“But there is a little...”

Hanazou hesitated.

Ooyama waited patiently.

“... I have interned at that café right before I was hired. There had been no issues then. Or maybe, I was lucky and never met them, but...”

Ooyama frowned a little, trying to recall what had been on Hanazou’s file.

“Oh, Katanaka’s shop?”

“Yes... Ah, I’m sorry, did I not mention it?”

Ooyama nodded.

“What happened?”

“I went back there for a short refresher and it went okay until...” Hanazou frowned. “For a few days, we began receiving strange packages that we never ordered.”

Ooyama frowned as well.

There was some silence as they thought about it.

“Did you manage to see who delivered it?”

“The cameras only captured the post-man or delivery man.”

“Any possibility that they are...”

“No, the police have already checked it.”

“Has this happened to Katanaka before?”

Hanazou went quiet as he turned over the memories in his head.

“No... Ah! I saw it once.”

“Where?”

“At the apartment building.”

“At the apartment building?”

“What did the security do?”

“They just informed Katanaka that they got rid of it.”

“Has he received any more of it at the apartment building?”

“I wouldn’t know...”

Silence descended again.

After thinking it through, Ooyama advised Hanazou to inform the security which patrolled the shopping district and to put the packages that the shop received into a plastic bag and hand it over to security.

Hanazou nodded.

“I’ll write up a report about it. I’ll also drop by later,” Ooyama reassured.

The frown on Hanazou’s face lessened a little.

Ooyama flipped open his laptop and began typing into a document. Although he said it was a report, it was actually a form with a template. It made things faster and he did not need to write whole sentences. He also put in a written request for the collaboration of the security at the apartment building, the security at the shopping district and the forensics section in the hospital. After he checked it over for spelling mistakes, he typed in the email address of the sly old guy—the CEO.

Ooyama’s index finger paused on the mouse right before he clicked ‘Send’. Then, he clicked it with determination. Katanaka probably hadn’t said anything at all. Who knew how long this had happened. Was this why the reports from the psychologists never showed much progress? Ooyama clenched his fist. He should have known.

Ooyama recalled his own frantic behaviour when he could not find Katanaka in the apartment when he dropped by for the first visit. As Katanaka had not responded to him as he stood at the entry-way where the racks of shoes were, he just slid the door open. It didn’t budge, so he had assumed that it was not aligned properly and used more force. He heard something bending. It was only when he had entered and looked back at the door did he realise that there was a small bent pole between the door he had just opened and the wall. He hadn’t thought much about that. It must have been part of the door frame.

He strode straight into Katanaka's bedroom using the master keys security had temporarily lent to him. He vaulted over the sofa that was blocking the doorway. There was a lump on the bed, so he gave it a shake. There was no movement and there was no sound. Ooyama held his breath and listened carefully. There wasn't even any sound of breathing! In a panic, Ooyama yanked off the blankets quickly. There were only pillows on the bed.

Ooyama turned a few circles on the spot. Wasn't the door locked? Maybe he locked it after he had gone out? No. Security said that Katanaka had not come out of his apartment for a few days. At first, he had answered the calls from Security, but he had not answered the call today. It wasn't the first time he had been like this. The last time, Hanazou was the one who checked up on him and he had been fine.

Ooyama pulled out his phone and pressed Hanazou's name. The call connected after a few rings.

There was silence as they both waited for the other to speak.

"Ooyama?"

"When you went to Katanaka's house that day..."

"Yes?"

"Was he sleeping in his room or on the sofa in the living room?" Ooyama asked as he went out to check the sofa in the living room. It was as empty as it had been when he had walked in a few minutes ago.

"Eh?"

"Don't 'eh'."

"I think... he was in his room, on the bed?"

The call disconnected and Hanazou only heard the end tone of dududuuu.

Ooyama went back to the bedroom and pushed down on all the surfaces of the king-sized mattress. Surely if someone was being crushed, they would make some sound or movement? Nothing was going according to his expectations today.

Ooyama sat on the edge of the bed and loosened his tie. As he did so, his gaze fell on the cupboard in front of him. One of the doors was slightly ajar. No, it cannot be...

He stood up so suddenly that he had to sit down again. He reached a hand out and slowly pulled the cupboard door open. There was a figure inside. It was curled up with its back to him but he could still see some of the pink hair on the back of its head. Its back was undulating slowly. It looked as though its face was buried in the back of the wooden cupboard.

Ooyama sat on the floor for a long time until his butt became cramped. It was carpeted but that didn't prevent him from getting cramps. It was only then did the body

move to grab at the blanket that was pooled around its thighs. Then the left hand reached backwards towards the cupboard door. It stretched a bit further, looking for the door handle. It couldn't find it.

The figure carefully rolled over in the small space and met Ooyama's eyes. The hand paused in mid-air as it reached for the door handle. It was some time before a soft, "Oops, you found me," was heard. It was almost playful.

Then the door closed.

Ooyama felt that his decision to report the thing about the packages to the CEO was a good one. At that time, Ooyama had resisted the urge to scream "NONONO Don't pretend you didn't see me!" and carry Katanaka out of the cupboard.

After he watched the closed door for a while, he knocked and informed Katanaka, "I'm going to cook. I'll come back when I'm done." Then he locked the bedroom door after he exited and went into the kitchen.

At that time, he had attributed it to the dangerous and dirty job that Katanaka had to do in succession in the same day. It must have been hard on him. Plus his injuries had probably made it worse... Ah, he had forgotten to unbend the bent pole by the sliding door. Katanaka never mentioned it during his later visits though. Well, at least he knew where to find Katanaka now. During his subsequent visits, he had hurriedly marched straight to the cupboard, lifted him out and dumped him on the bed. Right before anyone else reached the bedroom door. He wondered if they had noticed that Katanaka seemed to be sleeping on top of the blankets every time...

Ooyama looked at his schedule for the day. He had a few hours of free time. He'll go and crush some packages later. He remembered that the Changing Rooms had a shirt that was ripped at the sleeves. It's time to put his muscles to good use.

Ooyama picked up the phone and called the CEO directly. The report and email had been marked as 'Read' in the system. The CEO said that the collaboration was possible and that they would do their best to resolve this issue as soon as they could. "Take care of Katanaka," were his last instructions before the call ended.

Ooyama ditched his tie and dress shirt and put on the shirt with the ripped sleeves. He changed his sleek black belt for a coloured one and ran his fingers through his hair. Kotori waited by the door, in informal clothes as well.

“Let’s go for lunch.”

Kotori nodded.

They headed out of the building into the shopping district. They stopped outside a few food shops and pretended to look at the menus before deciding on Odourless Café.

Hanazou looked up as the door opened and smiled.

“What would you like to have?” Ooyama asked Kotori as they buried their faces in the menu.

“What about you?”

“I think this, this, this, this, and— this, look nice,” Ooyama flipped a page.

“That’s Set A,” Hanazou said after a pause.

“Oh, that’s great.”

“I’ll like to try Set B then,” Kotori said.

“Sure, coming right up.”

Ooyama and Kotori surveyed the large and breezy interior of the shop while waiting for their food. Nobody looked suspicious. In fact, Ooyama looked the most suspicious. Kotori stifled a laugh.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Kotori’s eyes twinkled.

As Kotori played with the table ornaments while avoiding Ooyama’s look of grievance, two men walked into the shop. They were dressed in a similar style to Ooyama. It was like they were part of the same gang. Kotori stifled another laugh.

The two men had noticed Ooyama the moment they had entered the door. They blinked slowly while Ooyama blinked in return. It was reassuring that the shop was also being protected from within. It was a miracle that Security was actually so fast in finding some staff members who liked to eat food that were generally cold and bite-sized, and drink tea in small cups. Maybe they didn’t?

Ooyama’s thoughts were broken by the clink of a plate as their dishes were placed in front of them. Deeper wrinkles appeared in the middle of Ooyama’s forehead.

“It’s odourless, you know. Not tasteless. And it’s not like it is a hundred percent odourless. You can still smell something if you stick your nose close enough.” Hanazou made a move to push Ooyama’s head into a plate but Ooyama tapped his hand away nonchalantly with a flip of his hand.

Ooyama picked up his fork and ignored Hanazou. He was sure that Hanazou had a grin in his eyes.

Chapter 16: Just a little more

Near the end of every year, before there was too much snow, a small festival would be held at the district to thank all the shops for their continued support. The shops would set up small stalls and the staff at the Work&Experience Centre would help plan and man the stalls. This would allow the shop owners to enjoy the festival. The first day was for the public to enjoy, the second day for the store owners and staff to enjoy and the last day for the Centre Staff to enjoy.

They usually managed to get three different acts each year, which made the festival bigger and more fun. Now they had to decide on which three acts to get, or actually, who were willing to come. They were in negotiations with two visual kei bands, Ladymoustache and Takarazuka. They'd have something like music sets and an excerpt of a play. It was just short acts of ten minutes, including a five minute Q&A sessions. Fan signs were an additional fifteen minutes. Only those who had queued digitally and were within quota could attend the fan sign events.

Although that was the plan, a survey on the Centre staff and store staff revealed that they were interested in different acts. It wasn't possible to firmly separate the festival into three specific days. So rotating shifts had to be made and finalised.

As Kotori and Ooyama had recently interned with the kimono shop, had worked on Project K and were also accepted by the kimono shop, one of the stalls that they would help to man was the kimono shop. They would also help with Katanaka's store, Odourless Café. Setting up the rosters for just two shops already took up some time. Hanazou and Ooyama finally looked up from their devices on which they had been moving rectangles around while they consulted each other.

“Kotori, the rosters are done.”

Kotori looked up from ordering refreshments and nodded. He received the file on his device and began allotting the numbers of drinks and food available for each shift.

Hanazou and Ooyama took a break and went to make some tea. They came back and placed a cup on Kotori's desk just as Kotori clicked 'Save'. They drank their tea in silence.

They looked over at the other teams in the department. Everyone was busy with something—some on their devices, others on the phone, and others with their faces on their desks. The other teams in the company would also help at the stores they had interned or

trained at this year, with the average being in charge of two to three stores. It was helpful that their company was quite big and everyone could be placed on short shifts, allowing everyone to have a chance to help and a chance to play.

After they finished their tea, they went over the plans for the stalls again. It was a simple festival along the street, so most stores just had a table in front of their actual store. Only those who needed to sell piping hot food needed a moveable stove.

“It is a good thing that the stores selling hot food are not close to the kimono store.”

“Yes, the Odourless Café is the closest one and it’s a really a good match.”

“Hopefully there won’t be food smells sticking to the kimonos at the stall.”

“I heard that it’d mainly be selling cold food?”

They looked up to see Katanaka walking through the door.

Katanaka no longer had pink hair. He had dyed it a dark brown. If he had not spoken, they would not have noticed that he had walked in. They gave him a wave. Katanaka walked over and sat with them.

Ooyama and Katanaka stood up to head to the progress meeting with the latest updates.

“How... was your rest?” Ooyama asked as they walked off.

“As you can see.”

Hanazou and Kotori then busied themselves with procuring the banners for the marquees. They had already gone down to measure the space in front of the stores the other day.

“Have you managed to find the correct size yet?” Hanazou looked over at Kotori from across his desk.

“Hmm...” Kotori’s eyes flicked quickly and he scrolled past various pictures of marquees.

“You’re not looking at the size?”

“I’ve found the size; I’m now choosing the colour.”

“Me too, although I’ve already found the colour.”

A file pinged into his device. Kotori opened it and saw a simple light yellow bordering on beige banner with the words ‘Odourless Café’ printed in small print in the corner. It was the same font that was used in the store’s signboard. Hanazou had already

digitally edited the banner to show the design that he wanted. The banner also had a straight-edge, not a wavy one, with a black border, giving it a more modern and sleek look.

“That’s nice. You’re really fast!”

“You just choose too slowly...”

“Ah,” Kotori finally found a colour that was similar to the kimono shop’s cloth banner that hung on the front door. He quickly edited the shop’s logo on to it. Then copying the colour, he added it into the document showing the overall layout of the stalls at the festival. Some rectangles were already filled with various colours. The rectangle for Odourless Café was also already filled with the colour he saw from Hanazou’s file. Just when did he have the time to do that?

“I need to run this by the kimono shop,” Kotori began.

“Well, I’m free right now, so I can come with you.”

“Don’t you need to— Oh.”

“Yes, I only need to ask Katanaka later.” He had already sent it to Katanaka via email.

Kotori got up to head down to the shopping district. It wouldn’t take long. He was sure that he could settle this and order the banner in before thirty minutes was even up.

“What happened to the older banners from previous years?”

“Our stores didn’t participate recently and their old banners had been recycled too.”

“Oh?”

“They rather have fun than man a stall,” Hanazou laughed.

“That... really sounds like what they’d do,” the edges of Kotori’s lips turned up too.

As they walked in the afternoon sun, they greeted the store owners who were basking in their chairs outside their stores.

The shopping district was slightly in a slumber. It was just before the ‘end of school’ bell. A sort of calm...

“This is a good day for a ride,” Hanazou commented as a light breeze ruffled his hair and he turned his face to soak in the sun.

“I hope the weather would still be nice next month...”

“Did you forget to factor in a space for a heater?”

“I did, I measured it and allocated an area for it in the stall.”

“Then, it wouldn’t matter?”

They stopped in front of the familiar wooden sliding door of kimono store; their shadows printed one tall and one short black oval on it. Hanazou had also spent two weeks interning there. But he had an even harder time due to the—

The door slid open and Kotori greeted Grandma Miki. He followed her inside to the backroom to show everyone the design. The store was having a break time and everyone was drinking tea and eating sweet snacks at the back as usual. Kotori bowed again as he went towards the backroom.

“Heehee!”

“Haahaa!”

Hanazou was just about to follow them in when he heard that sound behind him. He whirled around and took a step to the side.

Something brushed past his hand that had lagged behind. Ooyama stepped around Hanazou and walked into the kimono shop.

“Oh~! The other handsome brother!”

“Ikemen!”

“Come pla—”

Hanazou jumped on to a bicycle that was parked outside the store. It had Grandma Miki’s feather duster in it. She must have forgotten to bring it in after dusting her bicycle.

In a rush, Hanazou whirled his legs in a circular motion. He wobbled and almost fell. He hadn’t cycled since he had started working for the Work&Experience Centre. He shot out and away from the kimono store. He didn’t dare to look behind to see if there was a crowd of children following him.

“Hanazou?” Katanaka’s voice streamed past. The draft that came from Hanazou’s bicycle flying past buffeted Katanaka’s dark brown hair.

Portraying The Other in Salaryman Novels and How Their Identities are Constructed

Volume Two: Exegesis

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Abstract

The Self and the Other binary can be explained as such: that which is not the same as the group (Self) is the Other. However, what happens if this Self travels outside the boundary of the group and becomes a minority (Other) in another group? For example, when West meets East. After cross-cultural interaction and communication, is he a Self, an “Other”, or is another Self formed? Scholars suggest that the boundaries between the Self and the “Other” are complex, layered and blurred (Derrida *Grammatology* 73; Napier 42; Hijjya-Kirschner 23) and conflicts may also arise, resulting in an identity-crisis. Cultural theorists further suggest that the Self/Other binary is also nullified by cross-cultural interaction (Kumar 84; Hall 277; Dagnino 11).

In the context of Japanese Workplace Literature (salaryman novels), how then are the Self and the Other constructed by Western and Japanese authors? In particular, how is the identity of the marginalised “Other” portrayed in salaryman novels? After analysing and comparing two salaryman novels written in Japanese by Japanese writers: *Princess Toyotomi* (Makime Manabu) and *Fushouji* (Ikeido Jun); and two salaryman novels written in English by Western writers *Fear and Trembling* (Amelie Nothomb) and *The Blue-eyed Salaryman* (Niall Murtagh), it seems that Western writers are appear more conflicted about the ambivalent and ambiguous Self/Other in the Japanese context than the Japanese writers are.

This thesis thus attempts to fill the research gaps in the analysis of Japanese workplace literature by Western and Japanese writers in terms of how the Self and Other of “Others” are constructed. It also proposes that the construction, conflict and hence confusion of Self and Other are not only due to the differences between Western-centric and Japanese-centric theories of Self/Other, but also due to the Japanese concept of “*honne-tatemae*”, the indoctrinated salaryman identity (a Japanese Self that can be learnt, crafted and performed) and the way the salaryman genre tends to portray the marginalised “Other” in novels. Furthermore, Westerners’ negotiation between Western and Japanese culture adds further confusion to their formation of identity.

Also part of this thesis is *Cooperation*, an experimental slice-of-life salaryman novel. The exegesis, thus, attempts to situate the Creative Work within Western and Japanese literary contexts of the Self and the Other. As the issue of Asian non-Japanese workers (“Others”) in Japan has increased in significance in recent years, *Cooperation* also attempts to extrapolate the analysed portrayals of the Self and Other to the representation of these “Others”.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Signed:

CHUANG YING XUAN

Feb 2019

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Coming from an extremely Westernised, immigrant Asian country where it was compulsory to learn British English and at least one language of one's ethnic race, I was not consciously aware of my "two-ness" (Du Bois 4;—a term originally used to describe the bicultural Black American) as everyone was, at least, a bilingual. Moreover, not only are the country's four official languages of English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay commonly used by the people, most transport signage and transport announcements are also in these languages. Furthermore, as foreigners and permanent residents make up around forty to forty-five percent of the population (Population sg 2), it is common to come into contact with people and languages from all over the world. Additionally, the ubiquitous use of the local English-based pidgin-turned-creole language (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 160), Singlish, which combines words from many languages and dialects, further melded whatever "plurality" I felt into "one-ness".

With this ingrained acceptance of differences, I learnt the Japanese language and culture (Advanced, JLPT N2) and Korean language and culture (Intermediate, Sejong 3) over eight years. Hence, despite constructing two new linguistic and cultural identities, I did not feel any conflict among my identities as I was used to and receptive of multilingual, multiracial and multicultural societies.

However, it was upon interaction with Japanese and Korean people at work or in social settings while studying and living abroad in Australia, U.K. and Europe, that Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness" (4) finally hit me. It may be because these languages and cultures come from countries that have a history of being mono-cultural, homogenous and anti-foreigner, that these interactions really allowed me to "look[ing] at one's self through the eyes of others" and "measure[ing] one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 4). As at the time of research, my proficiency in

the Japanese Language was better than the Korean language, I interacted with the Japanese community in Adelaide by attending, volunteering at or organising numerous Japanese events. I also went on a ten-month research trip to Japan where I immersed myself in Japanese working culture by working in Japanese workplaces in semi-full-time and casual positions. I roughly spent more than half of my working hours at my desk in offices and observed how “Others” were categorised and how they interacted with others in the workplace.

The trip to Japan left me conflicted and frustrated. No matter how perfectly I behaved as a salaryman: speaking the language well; looking and behaving like a Japanese person; doing my work to the satisfaction of clients; adhering to Japanese societal and company rules and etiquette; I was still considered an “Other” as I was an “outsider”. I observed that other “Others” in the workplace, the other foreign workers, also received similar treatment. However, in comparison, I had quite a different experience as I was not a “white” Westerner. For example, no one believed that English was my first language; they even rejected the existence of my home country as they did not know much about it! The other baffling thing was that they also continuously said that I could not speak Japanese even though I had conversed with them in Japanese every day for ten whole months as they could not converse in English and further helped in interpreting and translating the communication between Japanese colleagues and Western colleagues.

I realised later that this was partly because I was not Japanese and also not a “white” Westerner, partly because I was a new employee, and partly due to being hired by a dispatch company. For my main job, I was dispatched to work in three different workplaces during the five-day work week in a 1-2-2 ratio, and Japanese colleagues in all workplaces were aware of this. However, Japanese colleagues still assumed that I was more “loyal” to the dispatch company as it is “in-charge” of me and my employment. Ironically, I only met my supervisors from the dispatch company roughly two times a year, only knew two other dispatch workers from my company (a senior whom I rarely saw as we were not dispatched to the same workplaces, and a colleague at one workplace whom I may meet once a week when I was dispatched there but seldom spoke to) and never worked at the offices of the dispatch company. This assumed “loyalty” was clearly conveyed to me when I was suddenly interrogated and subsequently ostracised at one workplace when the same-

workplace-colleague abruptly resigned. At that time, I had been repeatedly asked if I had known of my colleague's intentions, why hadn't I told the workplace if I knew, why didn't I know about it when we were from the same dispatch company and "seemed close" (which, I was told, was inferred from our sparse interactions), and that it must have been my "loyalty" to the dispatch company that "prevented" me from telling the workplace about it. It is evident that some constructs of my individual work identity (salaryman identity) did not match with that of the Japanese and the Japanese workplace (organisational and societal norms of the salaryman identity).

I was extremely depressed as I felt that my identity in the workplace had been completely denied. I could only retain my sanity at work by muttering to myself in Mandarin and Korean, and by staying in a space devoid of any other worker. Moreover, Japanese colleagues inconsistently switched between applying "Foreigner" and "Japanese" rules on me and my colleagues, and I was in confusion when my Self at that moment did not match the current rules.

Upon returning to my home country from Japan, it took me a few days to realise that my salaryman identity (or if I dare say, my "Japanese Self") emerged even when I was speaking in English. I enunciated the English language extremely clearly with an American accent (the accent preferred by the Japanese), superficially and perfunctory displayed "politeness" to my mother, and did not reveal my inner thoughts and truth (*honne*: Ishii, Saravia V. José and Saravia V. Juan 86) to anyone as I was not close to my family members. This was my *tatema*, a part of my salaryman identity that acts according to the social expectations of the Japanese community and through which social interactions of outsiders (Foreigners) and insiders (Japanese people) take place civilly (Ishii et al. 86; Kato 9). However, this behaviour was extremely out-of-place in my home country which did not have the same Japanese societal rules, social expectations and history.

Having experienced all this, I became aware that the construction of the Self and identity vary depending on culture and society, and of the conflict that may ensue between them (Hall, 277). Abundant research, such as in the fields of sociology and psychology, has been done about Foreigners and Foreign Workers in Japan and many of them have repeatedly

mentioned that Foreigners find it hard to fit into society or the workplace (Tsai 523; Kashiwazaki 40; Romdiati 6-7; Le Bail 6). While the Foreigner's cultural differences and aptitude to integration are part of the factors, many researchers concur that this was mostly due to Japanese society not accepting them (Tsuruta "Fantastic" 395; Tsai 534; Kashiwazaki 31). They also found out that having Japanese language abilities or behaving like a Japanese person had little to no effect on integration and assimilation into Japanese society (Tsai 532).

Furthermore, despite the current record-high numbers of around 2.6 million foreign residents who are able to work legally in Japan [of which 2.19 million were Asian] (e-Stat 1), numerous stories about the exploitation, injuries, and deaths of Asian foreign workers and the lawsuits they filed against their employers, have long since been reported in the news (for example, Kakuchi 1; Kyodo "2014 death" 1; Harney and Slodkowski 2; Ryall 2). Commonly reported issues, particularly from the low-skilled, blue-collar or intern/trainee sectors, include pay that is below the already low, hourly minimum wage [minimum wage ranges from \$5-7], extremely long working hours, and poor work and living conditions (Ryall 2-3; Kakuchi 1; Harney and Slodkowski 2-3; Romdiati 14). These particularly affect foreign workers in construction, fishing, manufacturing and caregiving, which are deemed as "dangerous, hard or dirty" jobs (Romdiati 10; Ryall 2) that are "shunned" by the Japanese (Romdiati 17; Ryall 2).

Additionally, at the end of 2018, the Japanese government approved new foreign employment policies that will allow a further 345,000 high and low skilled, blue-collar Asian workers to work in Japan (Rich 1-2; HRM Newsroom Asia "Japan to open 50,000 jobs" 1; Shiraiwa 1; HRM Newsroom Asia "Japan approves new policy" 1; HRM Newsroom Asia "Up to 340,000 foreign workers" 1) to fears that this would lead to further exploitation of foreign workers (Rich 3-4). All these developments demonstrate that the Foreigner and Foreign Worker in Japan have been and continue to be a significant concern.

Although social issues are commonly addressed in Japan using entertainment mediums (such as television dramas, films, animations, comics and novels), notable television entertainment about the Japanese workplace such as *Hatarakiman* (Anno), *ServantXService*

(Takatsu), *Aggretsuko* (Sanrio, Russon 2), *Working* (Takatsu, Manry 1) and *Shomuni* (Yasuda, Fuji TV “シヨムニ” 1) do not have Foreign workers as characters in them. However, they do have a few Japanese characters who do not behave like a Japanese worker would (behaving like an Other). In fact, *Working* (Takatsu) and *Shomuni* (Yasuda), both of which feature numerous Others and are also based on Japanese comics (*manga*), were also so well-received that they each had four seasons that ran over four years (Ressler 1; Manry 1; Fuji TV “年末” 1; Fuji TV “シヨムニ” 1).

In addition, literary research revealed a scarcity of literary information and novels regarding the Western or Asian (non-Japanese) Other in the workplace. Again, the common trope is of a Japanese person not behaving in a Japanese manner— for example, Japanese author Ikeido Jun’s modern novels about Japanese workplaces, including *Fushouji* (Nippon TV 1; Okunuki 2; Blair 2). Moreover, many of Ikeido’s novels have also been well-received, won or been nominated for prestigious literary prizes and were made into extremely successful multi-season television dramas (Usami 2; Kodansha 1). *Fushouji* was also well-received and made into a two-season television drama (Okunuki 1; Blair 1; Nippon TV 1).

The limited previous research was predominantly about the Western Foreigner, even though only around 20% of Foreign Residents in Japan were of Western origin (e-Stat 1; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Japan “Statistical Yearbook 2017” 63). Among the few Japanese salaryman novels I had been able to find, Makime Manabu’s modern workplace novel *Princess Toyotomi* (in Japanese) stood out as a female Western-looking worker (with mixed Western and Japanese heritage) was one of the main characters. Although the character was portrayed by a male Japanese actor in the film-remake, the film was actually helmed by top Japanese actors and even had 5000 extras (Japan Today 1; Tenkai Japan 1; Cirone 2; Zhao 26). Moreover, *Princess Toyotomi* sold more than 100,000 copies in the first month of publication and was a finalist for the esteemed Naoki Literature Prize (Zhao 26; Kodansha 1).

The Western Foreigners themselves have also written novels about their own Japanese work experience (for example, Niall Murtagh—*The Blue-eyed Salaryman: From World Traveller to Lifer at Mitsubishi* published in 2005, Amelie Nothomb—*Fear and Trembling*

published in 1999, Rob Payne—*Sushi Daze* published in 2004, Andrew O’Connor—*Tuvalu* published in 2006, and Jake Adelstein—*Tokyo Vice* published in 2010). Nothomb’s novel was translated into many languages (Rees 1), won literary awards such as the Grand Prix of the Académie Française (Gheorghe 73; *Fear and Trembling* 133) and was successfully made into a film (Brussat F. and Brussat M. 1; Rees 1). Murtagh’s novel was also translated into many languages, including Japanese (Jeffs 2; Jackson 1). Both Nothomb’s and Murtagh’s novels were selected for analysis due to similarities with the selected Japanese novels in their portrayed workplaces: offices in companies, a similarity that the novels by Payne, O’Connor and Adelstein did not have.

In this exegesis, Chapter Two provides close readings of the representations of the Self/Other of the culturally-different Western Foreigner character in the Japanese workplace, in the novels *Fear and Trembling* and *The Blue-Eyed Salaryman*, written by Western writers. This is supplemented by the comparison and contrast of the portrayal of the character of the “Other” in the Japanese workplace, in novels written by Japanese writers: *Princess Toyotomi* by Makime Manabu, and *Fushouji* by Ikeido Jun in Chapter Three.

The analyses of the four texts propose that a character’s boundaries of Self/Other in salaryman novels are blurred not only due to cross-cultural interactions (West and East) but also due to Japanese concepts of *honne-tatemae* and the Other, as discourses of Self and Other are constantly changing due to social and cultural factors (Hall 277, Dagnino 5-6, Armour 2-3) and the ambiguities that are present in human interaction (e.g. Tsai 533). In the context of the genre of salaryman novels, the identities in question are the salaryman identities crafted and performed by Western and Japanese salaryman characters which conflict with their Self and/or social expectations of salaryman identity. Moreover, the Westerners are further aware of their position of being an “Other” in the Japanese community—a Foreigner, which adds to the conflict and confusion of their construction of identity.

The exegesis further situates my writing, *Cooperation*, within the above-mentioned Japanese and Western literary contexts. *Cooperation* is an attempt to fill the research gap

by being an experimental salaryman novel about non-Japanese Asian Foreigners in the Japanese workplace, who have occupied the highest percentage among Foreign workers in the Japanese workplace for many years (since data became available in 2008, Japan Macro Advisors 2) and have lately become a significant topic of concern due to the new blue-collar worker immigration and employment policy. *Cooperation* also explores how the literary portrayals of the culturally-influenced Self and Other, and salaryman identity, can be extrapolated to the representation of the Asian Foreigner in Japanese work literature.

1.2 Main Texts

The Blue-eyed Salaryman: From World Traveller to Lifer at Mitsubishi by Niall Murtagh (in English), *Fear and Trembling* by Amelie Nothomb (“Stupeur et tremblements”, translated into English), *Princess Toyotomi* by Makime Manabu (in Japanese) and *Fushouji* by Ikeido Jun (“Misconduct”, in Japanese) are the main novels analysed.

The Blue-eyed Salaryman, written by Murtagh, is about a character also called Murtagh (an Irishman) and his experience working in a Japanese mega-corporation in Japan for thirteen years (starting from 1991) and becoming the first Western full-time employee who was even promoted to manager-class (Jackson 1; O’Donoghue 1; Jeffs 1). His ties to Japan not only come from studying the Japanese language and then a doctorate at a Japanese university before being employed by a Japanese company, but also from Miyuki, his Japanese wife, and subsequent children who were born in Japan. Through interactions with Japanese employees and supervisors, his Japanese wife and family, and Li, his university classmate and the only Asian Foreigner mentioned, he constantly provides his thoughts on his Western or Japanese Self. Throughout the novel, he rationalises internally from a Western point-of-view (and sometimes externally through conversations), and only adapts to the Japanese workplace and etiquette rules that he can accept or is forced to accept (such as bowing 5; or his marriage announcement to the company 102-103), and reaches a state of compromise (such as only nodding slightly instead of bowing 5; and asking his wife what to do about the announcement 102-103). At the end of the novel, while he advises that one should learn when it is the right time to frame-switch between the Selves to suit the situation (226), he resigned from the company which he felt was still not welcoming to foreign workers after thirteen years (227; Jeffs 2).

Fear and Trembling, written by Nothomb, is about a character also called Nothomb (a Belgium woman) and her experience working as a contract employee in a Japanese company in Japan for one year in 1991. Mostly, she lays claim to her Japanese Self by being born and having lived in Japan for the first five years of her life (15-16), her fascination with Japan and her proficiency in the Japanese language. Like Murtagh, she also

understands and accepts many Japanese workplace and etiquette rules, while internally rationalising them from a Western point-of-view. However, throughout the novel, she also commits many mistakes that snowball into external projections of the conflict between her Selves (57-60) and outbursts of numerous arguments with her direct superior Fubuki (e.g. 104) and other bosses (e.g. 126). Finally, she is demoted to wash the men's toilets (91-92) but still carries out the full term of her contract. Despite having her Japanese Self forcibly denied by her company right at the start of her contract (11-12), at the end of the novel, she still tendered her resignation at the end of her contract following the Japanese resignation process (116).

Princess Toyotomi is about the working life of three Japanese National Financial Auditors from Tokyo as they uncovered financial and national secrets while auditing in Osaka, Japan, over the course of six to seven days—one of which was that Osaka was, in fact, “Osaka Country” that operates independently from the country of Japan. They are: the Western-looking woman, Asahi Gainsbourg (“Ge—nzubu—ru” in the Japanese language [*Toyotomi* 26]), who actually has Japanese heritage, and is also a proud citizen of “Osaka Country” who tried to reveal the existence of “Osaka Country” to her direct supervisor, Matsudaira, and the rest of Japan; Gainsbourg's direct supervisor, a straight-laced typical Japanese salaryman Matsudaira, who discovers that he has “Osaka Country” family heritage that he did not know about as he had moved to Tokyo; and Japanese salaryman Torii who seems to be implicated by Gainsbourg's scheme and who is also smitten with Gainsbourg. While they are in Osaka, they also meet middle schoolers, Daisuke and Chako, who are central to the “Osaka Country” plot. Although Gainsbourg's plan fails, Gainsbourg and Torii attain a better understanding of “Osaka Country”. By the end of the novel, Matsudaira gives up on auditing “Osaka Country”, forgives Gainsbourg for her actions and takes his three-person team to audit the finances of another country.

Fushouji is about the work lives of Japanese bank employees, in particular, of Hanasaki Mai, a straight-talking female employee and Souma Ken, her male, direct supervisor and how they solved various problems such as embezzlement and harassment in eight different situations (eight chapters in the novel). Although there are no Foreign characters, Hanasaki does not behave like a Japanese person would, instead she speaks out about and tries to resolve the dishonest or lazy practices she sees. However, she is sometimes unable to fully

settle the situations and Souma steps in to hammer the final nail in the coffin—in some critical moments, Souma behaves unlike a Japanese person as well.

From this point on, the titles of novels will be abbreviated: *The Blue-eyed Salaryman* as *Blue*, *Fear and Trembling* as *Fear*, and *Princess Toyotomi* as *Toyotomi*.

1.3 Self and Other: Western and Japanese Literary Concepts

Salaryman genre and salaryman identity (The Self in salaryman novels)

In the course of my research, I started to question how similar and different the portrayals of Self/Other in salaryman novels are when they are crafted by Western and Japanese authors. Furthermore, I wondered how (and why) are Western writers appear to be confused about Self/Other in the Japanese context, whether the Japanese writers are also confused, and how their “confusion” is different. Finally, I wanted to know how the marginalised Asian (non-Japanese) Other can thus be portrayed in Salaryman novels. However, in this specific context, analysing these involves dissecting the complex correlation of the Other with the salaryman genre; the salaryman identity and its synonymous masculinity; and cultural and cross-cultural reading, criticism and theory.

Firstly, what is the salaryman novel? The umbrella term for the Japanese literary genre about work and business is called the “Business Novel”, which can be divided into numerous other categories such as Finance, Industry or Salaryman (Prindle “Shiroyama” 322; Muta 7-8). In this exegesis, I focus on the Salaryman novel, *sarariman shosetsu* (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 1; Skinner 146; Spiridon 2).

The salaryman novel is about “the lives and work situations of salaried employees in large companies and government bureaucracies” (Skinner 141); “a chronicle(r) of salary earners” (Prindle “Shiroyama” 322) in which the “sad and happy episodes—tragicomedy—of salaryman lives are written” (Mulhern x). Modern authors like Ikeido Jun (one of the most famous contributors to the “salaryman” genre), Mayama Jin and Azuchi Satoshi have written in this genre and normally address the anxieties and questions that the employees have in a range of topics such as work conditions, work stability, relationships, and the economy (Alexander 1; Matanle, McCann and Ashmore 644). Critic Sataka Makoto implies that these novels are a way to know the real-life situations at companies as negative information is heavily censored in the media (Alexander 2). Many researchers also state

that this allows for clever critique on employees and their workplaces, and allows the Japanese people to critically re-evaluate the “salaryman” culture and their own working conditions (Matanle et al. 641; Skinner 148, 150-151; Gordon 2).

The Self in salaryman novels is closely tied to the meanings and connotations of the term “salaryman”, which is a term that is unique to Japan and born out of Japan’s economic and socio-political climate (Matanle et al. 640; Dasgupta “Emotional” 373; Dasgupta *Re-reading* 1; Skinner 146; Spiridon 2). This is a masculine Self particular to the Japanese workplace—the salaryman identity, or “salaryman masculinity” (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 34-35). Not only does the, predominantly male, salaried workforce identify as “salarymen” and they also regard the title as the Japanese equivalent to the “American dream” (Matanle et al. 641; Dasgupta “Emotional” 373; Dasgupta *Re-reading* 2; Skinner 146; Spiridon 108).

The title of “salaryman” annotates the ideas of a secure and usually life-long employment; of predictable salary increases and rank promotions according to length of service; a sense of purpose and belonging from the commitment and loyalty to the company; to finally, being married and becoming the breadwinner and pillar of their family (Skinner 141-142; Dasgupta “Emotional” 373; Dasgupta *Re-reading* 3 and 101). Furthermore, the “salaryman” typically embodies the values of an “ideal” and “normal” Japanese citizen who is able to “work/function in society” (*shakaijin*; Dasgupta *Re-reading* 64): wearing a neat dark-coloured suit and a white shirt, with neat black hair—a non-flashy, conformist appearance (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 34, 89-91); being punctual for work (89-91) and being able to speak in the degree of politeness appropriate to the situation (34 and 67-69). These make up their identities, and the collapse of which will lead to widespread and deep-seated anxiety of the loss of masculinity, authority and self-identity (Matanle et al. 646; Dasgupta “Emotional” 375).

Moreover, Japanese workplace culture and etiquette emphasizes harmony (*wa*), homogeneity, conformity, following the “rules” (spoken and unspoken) and respecting authority (Befu 29-30). Yet it also “strictly enforces binary gender roles, seniority and dependence in a self-proclaimed ‘paternalistic’ but also patriarchal hierarchy” (Befu 30). Scholars and critics have proposed that some of these ideals are maintained through

punishments like ostracism (Befu 30) and neglect (Ogasawara, e.g. minimizing the interaction and speech with a colleague, 130), and strict management like worker surveillance and authoritarian culture (Befu 33; Matanle et al. 644). Moreover, employees are further taught how to behave according to company etiquette and policies through entrance ceremonies, military-style induction trainings, refresher trainings, and “how-to” manuals or guidebooks (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 62-69). This is further supplemented and reinforced by portrayals of the ideal salaryman in popular culture and media, such as advertisements (91), “how-to” guidebooks (68), government-published/sanctioned guidebooks (2), novels (27), comics (28, 68), magazines (68) and films (28). This indoctrination of the concepts of the ideal salaryman results in what Dasgupta coins as the “crafting” of salaryman identities and masculinities (e.g. 62, 64, 65).

The indoctrinating of salaryman identity and masculinities is so heavy that it is unsurprising that female employees can also construct their salaryman masculinities as they undergo similar training as the men (Dasgupta “Performing” 195; Dasgupta *Re-reading* 66-69); and this can be extended to the non-Japanese employee as well. This phenomenon is seen in the foreign or female characters in the salaryman novels *Toyotomi* (Gainsbourg), *Fear* (Nothomb), *Blue* (Murtagh) and *Fushouji* (Hanasaki). Of course, typical salaryman masculinities are also portrayed by male Japanese characters such as Torii and Matsudaira in *Toyotomi*, and Omochi and Saito in *Fear*.

However, Dasgupta not only suggests that the above-mentioned elements form the “parameters of salaryman masculinity” (*Re-reading* 98), but also that these ideals of salaryman masculinity have slightly shifted towards the opposite spectrum of, for example, “uniqueness” (64), “individual responsibility” (40), “assertiveness” (40), “risk-taking” (40) and having less expectation or desire of life-long employment (40). Externally, this can be clearly seen in their appearance and behaviour by wearing more “flashy” and colourful clothing (e.g. 91, 96), sporting dyed hair or a stylish hairstyle (e.g. 91, 96), having frank speech (e.g. 98) and doing “(relatively) random acts of insubordination or noncompliance” (98). Dasgupta also further implies that an individual’s construct of salaryman masculinity can conflict with societal standards of salaryman masculinity, especially when the individual’s construct of it differs from societal expectations (98). The relationship is

complex and an individual can simultaneously challenge and abide by societal expectations of salaryman masculinity (77 and 98).

The shift towards this “neo-salaryman” masculinity is clearly shown by the appearance and behaviour of my four characters in my Creative Work, *Cooperation*. They also encounter conflicts when their masculinities challenge the norms. Moreover, certain actions of Tenshi-san (*Fear*), Murtagh (*Blue*), Gainsbourg (*Toyotomi*) and Hanasaki (*Fushouji*) also illustrate the conflicts between an individual’s salaryman masculinity and that of societal expectations.

Concepts of the Self/Other, and The “Other” in Salaryman genre

The Self and the Other are defined by binary dichotomies such as masculine/feminine, powerful/powerless; coloniser/colonised (Al-Saidi 96; Hutchinson and Williams 3; Napier 41; Ashcroft et al. 155). These dichotomies are formed in order to establish social identities (Engelund 1; Zevallos 1-3; Al-Saidi 95), especially in separating a “them” (“the other”) versus “us” (“self” or “group”) mentality and categorisations, as the “self” cannot be defined without also defining “the other” (Al-Saidi 96, Hijiya-Kirschner 21; Ashcroft et al.156). The Other (“them”) does not belong to the group (“us”), may be seen and thus treated as inferior due to lacking essential traits the group has and can never be part of the group unlike an “outsider” (Melani 1; Zevallos 3-4; Al-Saidi 95). This serves to let the group maintain its power over the Other, enforce discrimination against the Other and make the group seem stronger and better in comparison (Engelund 1-2; Ashcroft et al. 155; Zevallos 3-4). However, the Self in literary theories tend to focus on Western discourses of the Self/Other, which is centred on the supremacy of the West (ethnocentrism of the West), and thus the Self is usually the Western Self (Ishii, Saravia V. José and Saravia V. Juan 82-83). For instance, in the two salaryman novels written by Western writers, the Western salaryman characters constantly rationalise from the Western point-of-view and put more emphasis on Western values over Japanese ones--it is clear then that the Japanese are seen as the Other. However, this is in contrast with what was discussed earlier: that the Self in salaryman novels is the salaryman, a Japanese concept.

Thus while the concept of binary opposition is somewhat applicable to the Japanese construct of the Self and the Other, the Euro-centric theory of the Self is not universal due to differences in history, culture and language (Ishii, Saravia V. José and Saravia V. Juan 83). Various researchers explain that through history, geographical expansion and contraction, wars, immigration and economic fluctuation, Japan was the “coloniser” that was also influenced by the West and immigration, and the Japanese Self was defined in the face of the Others inside and outside Japan (Hutchinson and Williams 1-4; Walker 304; Ishii et al. 84; Spiridon 106; Hijjiya-Kirschner 19-20). Ching also states that although the Japanese are not too racially and culturally different from the countries they colonised (42), Japanese scholars have argued that the Japanese do not belong to the “yellow or brown” categories of Asian races (52-57), but identify as a “white” race (53) similar to but not the same as the white Western colonial powers (46). It is because of this that they also see themselves, Ching claims, as “a cut above” other Asian races (55).

In a subversion of Euro-centric theories of the Self, the Japanese Self is hence “superior”, “masculine”, “the coloniser”, drawing from the epitome of “Japaneseness” such as the loyal and honourable *samurai* (ideal Japanese male Self) and the beautiful and well-mannered *nadeshiko* (ideal Japanese female Self) [Hutchinson and Williams 6; Ching 43]. They have power over people they consider as “the other”: people who look different or people who behave differently from what Japanese society adhere to and expect—the “racial division and difference” according to theories of “Japaneseness”, the *Nihonjinron* (Hutchinson and Williams 4). The “Other” in the Japanese context is “inferior”, “feminine”, “the colonised”, and “powerless” (Al-Saidi 96; Napier 45; Hutchinson and Williams 9)—someone who is not part of the group, “the outsider or foreigner” (Ishii et al. 84-85). Ishii et al. further state that the outsider (*sotomono/gaijin*) was “regarded as a threat to the stability of the community”, a concept that may be deeply rooted in the psychology of the Japanese due to Japan’s exclusion policies and its penalties (84) or due to the war losses at the hands of the Americans (Tsuruta “Fantastic” 346).

Due to Japan’s exclusion policies, the Japanese consider all people who are of a different ethnic group, culture and nationality as the “outsider/foreigner” (Japanese term: *sotomono/gaijin*) or “alien” (official English term used in Japan) that is embodied in a

compulsory “Alien Registration Card” for “Foreign Residents” (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 1-5), regardless of the number of residency years, being born to a Japanese family overseas and returning to Japan, or being born to a “foreign” family in Japan (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 1 and 4; Kashiwazaki 31; Ryu 312; Hijiya-Kirschner 22). This also includes the ethnic Koreans and Chinese, and other minorities in Japan (Kashiwazaki 35; Ryu 312). The official English label of “alien” (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 1-5) denotes a stronger sense of the separation of the Japanese Self from the Other, no longer just a “non-membership of the... community” (Hijiya-Kirschner 22) but as a separate entity. It is clear then that the categorisation of the Self and Other in the Japanese context goes beyond simple binary dichotomies and is deeply influenced by Japan’s history, politics and society.

The construction of the Self (insider) and Other (outsider) in the Japanese context is further assisted by the dichotomy of “*honne-tatemae*” (Ishii et al. 85), the Japanese cultural mechanism that guarantees unity by “placing the interest of the community before the interest of the individual” (Ishii et al. 85). When this construct is not understood, it baffles foreigners (Ishii et al. 83 and 85) and readers of Japanese texts (Ishii et al. 88). Ishii et al. further suggest that the portrayal of this construct via characters’ dialogue or actions (88) in Japanese literature can serve to differentiate the Japanese Self from the Western Self (83).

Simplistically, *honne* is “the principle of the individual” and *tatemae* is “the principle of the group” (Ishii et al. 88). *Honne* means “the inner truth that is not shared with strangers”, usually the outsiders like foreigners (Ishii et al. 86-87; Kato 1), and *tatemae* is acting according to social expectations of a community based on perceiving one’s social level with another’s which, by avoiding conflicts, ensures a harmonious (*wa*) environment of social interaction between and among insiders and outsiders (Ishii et al. 86; Kato 22). Kato further explains that a person in Japanese society is primarily concerned with becoming and remaining accepted by others harmoniously which is achieved through *tatemae* (16). Kato also states that when using *tatemae*, language is modified when speaking to insiders and outsiders depending on situational and social contexts (20), and Japanese people usually use *tatemae* with foreigners (13). Thus, it is no longer a dichotomy of the Japanese Self and Other, but three-pronged: *honne* Japanese Self, *tatemae* Japanese Self, and the Other. Some links can be drawn between *honne-tatemae* to Western theories of the private (Self) and

public (Other) spheres such as Heidegger's theory of Self and "the-they". Heidegger's concept of the authentic Self (167) corresponds somewhat with the concept of *honne*—the principle of the individual with a choice (67-68). However, although the concept of *tatemae* is similar to Heidegger's concept of "the-they" or they-self (inauthentic Self), *tatemae* goes beyond being aware of how to behave according to social expectations: "the they' maintains itself factually in the averageness of that which belongs to it, of that which it regards as valid and that which it does not" and "Publicness proximally controls every way in which the world and Dasein get interpreted, and it is always right," (Heidegger 165); and the way one is different from the Other: "In one's concern with what one has taken hold of, whether with, for, or against, the Others, there is constant care as to the way one differs from them..." (Heidegger 163). Instead, *tatemae* focuses on harmonious social interaction and acceptance between and among insiders and outsiders.

Moreover, there are many layers of insider/outsider categorisations, similar to the blurring of Self/Other or public/private spheres. It is not limited to comparisons between dichotomies of public/private spheres such as employment/home, but includes comparisons within and between the categories of neighbourhood (home), employment, and country (Ishii et al. 87). One can simultaneously be the "insider" and "outsider" of the various categories; for example a Japanese person can perceive a non-Japanese person to be an "insider" in relation to one's workplace if they work together but also consider the non-Japanese person as an "outsider" due to the non-Japanese person being a foreigner (Ishii et al. 87). The insider/outsider categorisation changes according to one's point of view, and "what is *soto* (outside) for one person may become *uchi* (inside) for a person included in that *soto*" (Bachnik as quoted by Armour 10). Furthermore, how a foreigner is accepted into insider/outsider groups depends on whether the foreigner fulfils (*uchi*) or violates (*soto*) the expectations of group members—"Japanese (*uchi*) one minute, foreigner (*soto*) the next" (Armour 10).

In the analysed novels, the third person narrators and narrative in *Fushouji* and *Toyotomi*, allow the assertion of the superior Japanese Self (especially, the salaryman identity), Japanese values and "*honne-tatemae*". This is further accomplished by the Japanese language which not only has many layers of polite language, but is also linguistically complex: there are many words for "I" which reflects a character's display of politeness or

masculinity/femininity; pronouns can be and regularly are omitted; and phrases like “think/seems like” are used when expressing personal thoughts and feelings (Gerstle 118). Conflicts between the Self and Other usually arise when *tatemae* is overstepped or broken, when a character chooses between displaying *honne* and *tatemae* in a “wrong” situation, or when a Japanese person expects the Western-looking character to behave in a “Western” way but the character does not. Internal conflict can be seen in their thoughts which are sometimes embedded in the narrative, while external conflict can be seen in their actions, behaviour and direct speech. Moreover, the characterisation of the superior Japanese Self (who knows how to behave as a salaryman) and inferior Western Other (who doesn’t) is not only clearly evident in *Toyotomi* and *Fushouji*, but also in some instances in *Fear* and *Blue*.

I will now analyse the portrayal of the Other or “Others” in the genre. There are few Japanese workplace literatures that are about the Foreigner in a Japanese workplace, in a Japanese company, in Japan (Prindle “Romance” 208-209). In fact, Prindle attests that “foreigners never play a leading role” in Japanese Business Novels and only appear as “background characters” (“Romance” 208).

Prindle suggests that Foreigners depicted in Japanese business novels set in Japan (before 1991) served as “stereotypes of evil”—they were “insidious and harmful” (“Romance” 208). However, Tsuruta also mentions that the Foreigner in a Japanese novel may not only be an object of “undue fear”, but also an object of “unbalanced admiration” (“Fantastic” 395)—common stereotypical physical descriptions of the Western Other range from “the beautiful”, for example “of paralyzing beauty” (“Fantastic” 395), to “the ugly”, including “large body size, body hair and... body odour” (“Fantastic” 396).

This may also be linked to Japan’s historical and geographical expansion (and contraction) through war and propaganda or trade (Tsuruta “Fantastic” 393-394) which made them see the “foreigner as enemy” (Hutchinson and Williams 2; Tsuruta “Fantastic” 397). This resulted in the Japanese people’s reluctance to interact with Westerners and the formation of what Tsuruta claims is a “deep inferiority complex” (“Fantastic” 394) that seems to have

begun even before WWII (Tsuruta “Fantastic” 393) and is expected to last for centuries (Tsuruta “Fantastic” 394).

These depictions of the Other are evident in *Toyotomi’s Gainsbourg*—the schemer who is also so beautiful that everyone is mesmerised by her beauty. Moreover, despite Gainsbourg’s beauty, she embodies a typical salaryman by dressing in dark-coloured suits. Further depictions of the Other are also seen in the portrayal of Foreigners in *Fear*. In this text, Nothomb is accused of betraying, scheming and having an inferior brain, while Kramer, Nothomb’s Dutch colleague, is mocked for his physical inferiority as he has body odour. However, while the descriptions in *Fear* are further accompanied by satirical commentaries that come from a Western frame of reference, the concepts of loyalty and physical abilities are elements of the salaryman masculinity.

Prindle, like Tsuruta (“Fantastic” 394), also suggests that Foreigners in Japanese Business Novels were “rarely seen as psychologically realistic people” (“Romance” 209) as they are considered inferior to the Japanese. Tsuruta also attests that many Japanese authors do not go beyond physical descriptions of Westerners and do not write about “what might be in their hearts or heads”, implying that Western characters are incapable of “subtle interaction with Japanese characters” (“Images” 151). This proves to be true in *Toyotomi* as Gainsbourg does not narrate any chapter in the novel, although other characters do so. Her thoughts and feelings are only guessed by other characters from her actions or revealed through her direct speech. However, when applying this to *Fushouji*, Hanasaki on the other hand, frankly speaks her thoughts, and reveals her feelings. Hanasaki’s behaviour, in some situations, challenges the traditional notions of the salaryman masculinity, revealing the shift towards “neo-salaryman” masculinity (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 40).

Another common trope for the representation of The Other used in Business novels is being depicted as a character who stands up against the work system or discrimination or “traditional Japanese values”, which is something which seldom, if never, happens in real life (Skinner 143; Matanle et al. 653; Otani 3; Kodansha 2). This is typically embodied in the character of the Foreigner, but it can also be seen in Japanese characters in workplace literature that do not have Foreigners in them. This is the Japanese who does not behave

like a Japanese person, and is clearly evident in the character Hanasaki in *Fushouji*. Hanasaki is almost like an “anti-thesis” of a salaryman (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 40).

Cross-cultural theory and the blurring boundaries of Self/Other

Jacques Derrida’s critique of the Western model of binary dichotomies proposes that the Self and the Other cannot be so clearly autonomous (Derrida *Grammatology* 73; Derrida *Monolingualism* 63; Hutchinson and Williams 6; Mikics 75). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that two totalistic entities cannot separately exist (for example: “That the signified is originally and essentially [and not only for a finite and created spirit] trace, that it is always *already in the position of the signifier*” 73). Hutchinson and Williams further explain Derrida’s theory —that these entities are “always in dialogue and always influenced by each other” (5).

Derrida also expands this to linguistic and cultural identity by proposing that “The Other is monolingual as all languages can be seen as “Other” because no one can claim ownership of a language” (*Monolingualism* 1) and that language is influenced by being “heard, understood and misunderstood” by others (Maleuvre 171): “We only ever speak one language – and, since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other, kept by the other. Coming from the other, remaining with the other, and returning to the other” (*Monolingualism* 40).

In the context of West meets East (crossing-cultures) in salaryman novels written by Western writers, Derrida’s arguments in *Monolingualism* are, aptly, compatible with Stuart Hall’s cultural theories. In particular, that identity is further influenced by society, culture and language: “cultural identities—those aspects of our identities which arise from our ‘belonging’ to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and, above all, national cultures” (Hall 274) and “Identity [is] formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (Hall 1987 as quoted by Hall 277). When the West meets the East, it is not surprising that cross-cultural interaction and communication would lead to conflict and tension in the Westerners’

interpretation of the Self/Other dichotomy. This is due to Westerners viewing themselves as “superior” to others, while in the Japanese context, the Japanese culture is the dominant culture and thus the Japanese view Westerners as the “inferior”. Through the negotiation of two cultures, the boundaries of Self/Other are blurred or “nullified” (Hall 277, Kumar 84, Dagnino 11): The Westerners are simultaneously “superior” and “inferior”. This is further complicated by their “crafting” of salaryman identity which leads to further conflict between their salaryman identity and societal expectations of salaryman identity, and their Western Self/values.

This raises the question of why an identity of a *different* culture can be “crafted”. If one approaches the “crafting” of identities as portrayed in salaryman novels via cultural theories on identity such as those by Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede & Minkov, and Stuart Hall, these theories can be usefully applied to the analysis of the Foreigner’s identity that is portrayed in the salaryman novel. In the influential work of Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organisations—Software of the Mind*, the cultural and cross-cultural researchers repeatedly emphasise (e.g. 4-7, 8-11 etc.) that “Culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned” (6) and that “culture is learned, not innate” (6). This is also in-line with Stuart Hall’s proposal that identity is influenced by “the cultural systems which surround us” as “it is historically, not biologically, defined” (277). Applying this theory to the Western characters in the analysed salaryman novels who have lived and worked in Japan for a period of time, it is not surprising that they can learn the culture and thus “craft” a “Japanese” identity, the salaryman. This is also further perpetuated by the salaryman identity itself, which is heavily indoctrinated to employees by Japanese companies and Japanese society, allowing the salaryman identity to be learnt and hence “crafted” (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 62-69).

In the analysed novels, at times, not only does the Westerners’ crafted salaryman identities conflict with their own Western culture (the Self), they also conflict with Japanese culture (the Other, or Japanese societal and organisational concepts of salaryman identity). Cultural theories and Self/Other theories, propose that this is due to one culture being dominant over another. Yet, in the analysed novels, Western values triumph over Japanese ones at times (rational thinking for example), while Japanese culture is dominates Western culture at

other times (following proper procedures for resignation for example). This highlights the fact that the dominant culture changes according to situations which then affects identity: it reveals the blurring of Self/Other, and the “continuous forming and transforming of identity” that is affected by the surrounding culture systems (Hall 277).

Furthermore, this changing of the dominant culture is not only affected by societal norms and situations, but also influenced by the one’s consciousness of and extent to which one performs salaryman identity (Dasgupta “Performing” 197). This performance of salaryman identity is also possible for other characters in the novels, including the Japanese. And this choice of “performing” identity to conform to one culture over another would result in further conflict. In this thesis, I apply the theories of cultural studies to theories of Self/Other and salaryman novel genre (including salaryman identity) in an attempt to unpack the portrayal of the Western Other in salaryman novels. This approach makes it possible to consider various aspects of the Other in salaryman novels which are, most significantly, portrayed through characterization and narrator.

Although the analysed texts mostly progress in a chronological order, the differences in the narrator affect the portrayal of the Self and Other: the first and second person is used in *Blue*, and the first person in *Fear*. The thoughts and feelings of the Japanese characters can only be inferred in *Blue* and *Fear*, while those of the Western characters are clearly conveyed as the narrators are the Western characters. This also allows the narrator to constantly rationalise from a Western point-of-view—asserting their Western Selves despite being in a Japanese environment. Conflict thus arises when the characters struggle between their logical Western Selves and what they are supposed to do in that situation following Japanese rules (their identity as a worker in Japan, specifically as a salaryman). Internal conflict can be seen in their thoughts which are embedded in the narrative as comments, while external conflict can be seen in their actions and direct speech. Further in-depth analyses of these are provided in the later chapters.

1.4 My Novel, *Cooperation*

Cooperation is an experimental, slice-of-life salaryman novel about the ups-and-downs of the working and private lives of Hanazou and his colleagues, Kotori, Ooyama and Katanaka, over the course of one year. All four of them are Asian (non-Japanese) male workers working in a Japanese workplace, but are not from the same countries and the common-language they share is the Japanese language. Moreover, although the characters have Japanese-esque first names, these are uncommon first names for a Japanese male (Benesse Corporation 1). These names are derived from the pronunciation or written form of their original name, or are nicknames they give themselves. This is similar to the English names Foreigners give themselves when they visit a predominantly English-speaking country; in the Japanese context, they require a name to fit in with societal demands of homogeneity, one that is also pronounceable in the dominant language. These are the reasons why they retain their Japanese-esque names even in their private lives. Moreover, parallels can be drawn between their Japanese-esque names and Gainsbourg's name in *Toyotomi*. Although her name is translated as "Gainsbourg" in English, her name is actually "Ge—nzubu—ru" in Japanese (*Toyotomi* 26), adhering to the way the Japanese pronounce "Gainsbourg".

The four characters work for a Work Experience Centre that has sections for children as well as adults. This Work Experience Centre is loosely based on my experiences and knowledge of various Job Experience Centres, Work Help Centres, Job Fairs and KidZania. Reflecting the exploitation of foreign workers that happens in Japan, my four characters have a broad work scope that range from doing lectures and demonstrations and office work, to getting sponsorship from other companies. They also work with other organisations, such as the police, in "hard, dangerous and dirty" jobs. As they are physically indistinguishable from Japanese people, and as a further challenge to societal expectations of salaryman identity and masculinity, they regularly put on "costumes" to change their outer appearance by cross-dressing. They interact with each other and with other Japanese people and colleagues, and work towards a big project that is held at the end of the year.

The conflicts between their Self and their crafted salaryman identity occur when they challenge Japanese cultural and work norms and when their Self and individual salaryman identity differ from those that are regulated and sanctioned by societal standards. In *Cooperation*, I portray their inner conflict by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the multi-character narrative and the omniscient narrator. I further extrapolate this by using flashbacks and nightmares. I also illustrate characters' displays of "*honne-tatema*" clearly in a few scenes to show how "*honne-tatema*" constructs the Self and Other and the conflicts that arise from this.

Noting the large numbers and rising importance of Asian workers in Japan since 2014 (Eiraku "changing" 1), I attempt to fill the gaps in the literature regarding the portrayal of marginalised Asian Foreigners, in the Japanese workplace in Japanese Salaryman novels. By extrapolating the techniques of characterisation used by Western and Japanese writers and drawing upon detailed analyses of Japanese and Western Salaryman novels, I hope to portray Asian Foreign salaryman characters and their struggles with identity in my novel. Furthermore, other studies about Foreign and Asian Foreign workers reveal that Asian Foreigners are more tolerant of Japanese culture and they have less cultural shocks compared to Western Foreigners (Tsai 529-530). In my novel, I thus hope to convey the difficulties the Asian Foreign worker in the Japanese workplace faces and their importance to Japanese society which differ from the issues faced by Western Foreigners. In addition, by depicting a character's display of "*honne-tatema*" clearly in some scenes, I hope to express what both the Japanese and Foreigner are really thinking and doing within the constraints of Japanese society and workplace.

I should note that homosexuality is not the main area of analysis in this thesis. However, I am highly aware of the role this plays in identity formation and have thus included within *Cooperation*, some descriptions of my characters' struggles with sexuality in their private lives. Despite this, my characters do not "come out" due to the overwhelming societal pressure of being a salaryman, who is assumed to be heterosexual. In fact, the descriptions of sexuality in *Cooperation* reflect Tom Gill's statements on the homosexual salaryman in his critique of Dasgupta's analysis of homosexuality in *Re-reading* (177-178):

This is not to say that homosexuality is absent from salaryman life—far from it. But there is a massive gap between the reality—that a certain percentage of salarymen are gay—and discourse, in which homosexuality is an entirely abstract topic. If Dasgupta *had* asked his informants about homosexuality, they would probably have been happy to talk about it... The crucial point... is the extreme disconnect that has developed between working life and private life in urban Japan. (177)

Gill notes further that:

Gay Japanese men almost never come out in the workplace, so there are no opportunities for confrontation. After departing the workplace, the employee may go home to his wife, to a brothel, or to a gay bar—and it is a matter of indifference to his workmates which of those he chooses. (178)

Therefore, in my novel, there are only a few scenes which briefly describe the characters' struggles with sexuality. These scenes usually occur when the characters are in a group they consider their inner circle. For example: "Kotori gulped. He was looking at a well-balanced specimen and for a few seconds, his brain was deceived...Kotori tried to take a few shaky breaths and strained against his blouse and skirt" (39), or "Ooyama swallowed his breath; his palms shaking on her shoulders (35)".

Additionally, in my novel, there are no female characters that add to the conflicts my Asian Foreigner characters face as my characters deal with additional confrontation when they are cross-dressing as a female. For example, when Kotori is in cross-dress, he is shamed for sleeping on his desk by a male outsider, a student who is on a tour of the company (43). Kotori may not have been singled out if he had clearly looked like a "man" by wearing "masculine" attire like pants instead of a skirt, or having shorter hair. In another instance, a cross-dressing Hanazou is blamed and shamed by the male pervert on the train (103-104). If it was clearly a "man" who had apprehended the male pervert, it is unlikely that the pervert would have screamed insults like "You devil! You demon! You slut! You incubus!" (103). Even though the Asian Foreigner characters are not of the female gender, they are often

mistaken as one when they are in cross-dress, and face similar issues that a “real” female may face. As my cross-dressing Asian Foreigner characters play both male and “female” roles in my novel, they are able to highlight the issues of gender, power and masculinity by themselves. Thus, an additional female character that serves to highlight these issues would have been redundant in my novel.

2. The Self and Other portrayed by Western Writers

My analysis aims to show that Western writers appear to be conflicted about their characters' Self/Other as cross-cultural interaction allows them to be aware of being simultaneously Self "and" Other, not "or". Furthermore, their constructed salaryman identity sometimes conflicts with societal notions of salaryman identity, as well as their awareness of being Self "and" Other.

2.1 *Fear and Trembling* (Amelie Nothomb)

Fear is written by Nothomb and is also narrated by a Western character, Nothomb, in first person singular (Honoré 109). In this section, I will clearly indicate "the character Nothomb" and "the author Nothomb" to differentiate between them. The first person point-of-view allows the character Nothomb to view herself and others from the Western point-of-view, assert and rationalise her Western Self and values, and treat the Japanese as the Other, despite being a foreign salaryman in a Japanese workplace and society where the dominant culture is Japanese.

For example, the character Nothomb's direct supervisor Fubuki is likened to the "epitome of a Japanese woman's beauty" (Honoré 110), the "*nadeshiko*" (*Fear* 7), with explicit descriptions of her appearance, height and bearing, often being further compared to a "Japanese bow" (5). Honoré draws further links between the physical structure of the bow to the "perfect physical elegance...of a Geisha" as geishas are "often drawn following a curved axis in traditional Japanese engravings" (110):

Her complexion, simultaneously white and dusky, was the kind the poet Tanizaki describes so beautifully. Fubuki was the incarnation of Japanese beauty—with the stupefying exception of her height. Her face suggested a direct connection to the *nadeshiko* (carnation), a nostalgic symbol of the young Japanese virgin in former times. (*Fear* 7)

These observations of the physical are in line with traditional "Japaneseness" (Hutchinson and Williams 6) and the reference to the Japanese poet Tanizaki further compounds the image of the ideal Japanese Self. However, Honoré also suggests that the image of the bow

evokes the sense of the ideal male Japanese Self—the samurai, which constructs a sense of Otherness on top of her *nadeshiko* portrayal (111).

Honoré further states that the character Nothomb's "loving fascination" with Fubuki (109) portrays Fubuki as "a form of erotic crystallisation" (110) as Nothomb is always being "transfixed" (*Fear* 6) or "mesmerised" (*Fear* 55) by Fubuki's beauty. This further adds to the portrayal of Fubuki as the Japanese Other, as something that is exotic and Oriental to the Western eye.

Furthermore, insights into Fubuki's inner thoughts are never revealed. Instead, Nothomb infers ("I was fairly sure..." *Fear* 75), observes ("I watched the way she behaved..." 75) and guesses ("This is what she must have been thinking..." 78). This is similar to the Japanese' portrayal of the Western Other—not being able to be constructed as "real people" (Tsuruta "Fantastic" 394) and not writing about "what might be in their heads or hearts" (Tsuruta "Images" 151). The character Nothomb's hyperbolic physical descriptions of Fubuki, coupled with Fubuki's increasingly sadistic (Honoré 110) behaviour (for example, *Fear* 46) and Nothomb's conjecture of Fubuki's inner thoughts, elevate the portrayal of Fubuki to an unreal "caricature" (Honoré 110), cement Fubuki as the Other and assert Nothomb's Western Self.

However, the Western character Nothomb seems to be predominantly created by the author Nothomb using the Japanese writers' techniques of the Western Other in Japanese work literature (Prindle "Romance" 208-9; Tsuruta "Fantastic" 394-6; Tsuruta "Images" 151) and also drawing on Japanese concepts of the Other. Compared to the Japanese people, Nothomb has inherent inferiority physically, mentally and behaviourally, which even borders on racism (Honoré 117; Prindle "Romance" 208-9; Tsuruta "Fantastic" 394-6; Tsuruta "Images" 151). Much of the "inferiority" is described in regard to the superiority of the Japanese (Honoré 117-8). These contrasting descriptions of the character being simultaneously "superior" and "inferior" to the Japanese are observed throughout the novel and paints the confusion of her Self/Other identification.

Moreover, the character Nothomb's inferiority as an Other is not only due to being non-Japanese ("white girl" *Fear* 11), but also attributed to being Western: "That disgusting sort of pragmatism is worthy of a Westerner" (32) and "Your despicable behavior is typical of Westerners" (46). These comments uttered by the Japanese characters in the novel border on "racism" as they articulate their hatred of the Other (Honoré 117) and also constructs Nothomb's, the character, sense of being the Western Other in Japan.

In particular, the inferiority that the Westerners have regarding the superiority of the “Japanese brain” (Honoré 118), is a common thread throughout the novel, for example:

“The Western brain is inferior to the Japanese brain.” (*Fear* 119)

“There is always a means of obeying. That’s what Western brains need to understand.” (12)

“Perhaps the Japanese brain is capable of forcing itself to forget a language. The Western brain doesn’t have that facility.” (12)

Most interestingly, aside from the second quote, the character Nothomb actually declares this inferiority herself. Unsurprisingly, the Japanese accept those statements as plausible explanations to Nothomb’s various “handicap[s]” (*Fear* 119) and inabilities (“Fubuki seemed both delighted by and prepared for this” [*Fear* 119]; and “This absurd argument seemed admissible to Mister Saito” [12]). Moreover, the character Nothomb further elevates her inabilities by calling herself “mentally impaired” (*Fear* 52). This implies that she is aware of this through cross-cultural interaction with the Japanese culture and members of the culture, receiving “affirmation” from them for her acknowledgement of her inferiority which is in line with how the Japanese view her.

However, diction like “seemed”, “forcing” and “absurd” indicate that she is rationalising from the Western point-of-view as well. Furthermore, by acknowledging her inferiority to the Japanese, she also displays an understanding of *tatemae* (Kato 20). The character Nothomb further uses this knowledge of *tatemae* to almost manipulate Fubuki’s reactions (118-121):

“I was making her deliriously happy...” (120)

“I realized that she wanted something more... .. So I put on a mask of terror... she replied, a little too enthusiastically... I had succeeded.” (121)

The character Nothomb does not seem to just be the Western Other any longer as she converses with Fubuki using *tatemae* but also reveals the *honne* in her unspoken thoughts (in the above quotes) with diction like “put on” and “succeeded” (Honoré 119).

Her Western Self can also be seen in the narrative, for example through “internal retrospective speech” (Honoré 118), “enunciative comments” (Honoré 119), “axiological modalities” (Honoré 112) references to Western culture and literature (Hijiya-Kirschner 24), and the association of Western values such as “reason, measure, compassion”, “logical”

and “commonsense and goodwill” (Honoré 112) to Nothomb. These serve to juxtapose Western and Japanese values, and evoke the feeling that Western values are better than Japanese ones (Honoré 112). According to Honoré, this juxtaposition also reveals the “gaps”, “perversity” and “brutality” of the Japanese (112):

“I was treated to a well-deserved telling off. I had committed the crime of showing initiative.” (*Fear* 18)

“Quitting would have been the most logical thing. And yet I could not quite resign myself to this idea. To Western eyes, there would have been nothing ignominious in this; to Japanese eyes, it meant losing face.” (12)

From the first quote, it can be inferred that the Western value of “initiative” does not sit well in the context of a Japanese workplace in Japan. Not only was the character Nothomb scolded, but the scolding was “well-deserved” as she had, hyperbolically, “committed a crime”. These juxtapositions and hyperboles (“axiological modalities” according to Honoré 112) serve to cement the feeling that the Japanese do not appreciate Western values; that these values have no place in the Japanese workplace, and harsh punishments await these offenders.

Similarly, the second quote (*Fear* 12) attributes Western values as “logical”, and the juxtaposition of “axiological modalities” (Honoré 112) of “nothing ignominious” with “losing face” (on a simple level, meaning embarrassment; Kato 25) evoke two ends of the cultural emotional spectrum regarding resigning. At the same time, the character Nothomb is aware of and also conflicted in her identifications of being both a Western person and a “Japanese” salaryman as she struggles to choose between doing the “logical” (Western values) or “losing face” (Japanese values, which threatens the *tatemaie*, Kato 26).

Her Western Self can also be seen in the various references to Western culture and literature (Hijiya-Kirschner 24). However, when placed in the Japanese context, these references also seem to be the Western Other. These evoke feelings of conflict and further represent Nothomb’s struggles with self-identity. Western objects such as “neon lights” and “Coke” (*Fear* 57) are mentioned in the novel. “God” and “Christianity” are also common and recurring motifs (for example, 57). Western literature is also referenced throughout the novel, for example, Greek mythology: “My Danaides” jar was constantly filling with figures that my feeble brain managed to empty out again. I was the Sisyphus of accounting, and like the mythical hero I never gave up” (54).

Moreover, many references to Western culture and literature are juxtaposed by direct or indirect references to Japanese ones. In the quote above, “figures” and “accounting” refer to the character Nothomb’s work in the Japanese office which are contrasted with the Greek mythology references of “Danaiides jar” and “Sisyphus”.

Another instance is when the character Nothomb directly compares her transcribing of accounting work as “a monk... in the Middle Ages” that achieves the serenity of “a sort of Zen of accounting” (*Fear* 40). She also describes herself as a “white geisha” early in the novel (*Fear* 16). With the combining of these two images from different cultures and religions together, the character Nothomb seems to identify as both Western and Japanese, and manages to achieve a co-existence of her representation of her Western and “Japanese” Self (her salaryman identity) in this instance; as Armour puts it: “it’s like, this guy is Japanese stuck in a white man’s body” (15).

The character Nothomb further projects her claim to her “Japaneseness” in *Fear* by heritage of birth (*Fear* 15-16; Orthofer 1; Gheorghe 75), her father is also the Belgian Ambassador in Japan (*Fear* 117; Honoré 113; Orthofer 1), proficiency in the Japanese language (*Fear* 11) and her love and fascination with Japan (“I had always had a yearning to live in the country I had worshiped since early childhood” *Fear* 13; Orthofer 1). These statements are in-line with cultural theories which state that identity is influenced by social interactions (Hall 277, Armour 2), by learning the language (Armour 1), and theories of “Japaneseness” which state that “blood and ancestry, physiognomy, and language and behaviour boldly constitute ‘Japaneseness’” (Armour 8). These claims are also seen in the author’s other works: *The Character of Rain* and *Tokyo Fiancée*, in which they are major themes. The author has also expressed these beliefs in various interviews (Honoré 121; Rees 1) and also attests that *Fear* is about her true experience (Honoré 108; Rees 1):

PM (interviewer): ... Is what you write really true?

AN (Amelie Nothomb): Oh, sure. It’s completely true.

PM: A life experience...

AN: An experience that I completely lived during the entire year of 1990.

(qtd. in Honoré 108)

Could it possibly also be true?

It was absolutely true, she [Nothomb] says. Believe me, I have not enough imagination to think up that story... (Rees 1)

In *Fear*, the character Nothomb tries to externally connect with many other Japanese people, in particular her direct supervisor, Ms. Fubuki, in an attempt to show that she is not a Western Other, but has and identifies as a “Japanese” Self. Nothomb tries to draw connections to their hometowns as Nothomb and Fubuki were both born and lived in the same Japanese region of Kansai (*Fear* 15-16). Fubuki humours Nothomb at first, until finally, after a series of Nothomb’s work errors, Fubuki eventually reveals that Fubuki does not think so (“Do you really think you and I have anything in common?” 54). Even though Fubuki knows about Nothomb’s heritage, the knowledge of this did not change her perception of Nothomb as the Western Other (Prindle “Romance” 209; Tsuruta “Fantastic” 396), denying Nothomb’s construction of her “Japanese” Self.

The character Nothomb also tries to construct her “Japanese” Self through externally exhibiting extremely flawless Japanese behaviours and perfect Japanese speech (Gheorghe 74), which should help her formation of her salaryman identity. However, this backfires on her right at the beginning of the novel (*Fear* 11) and she was ordered not to do so anymore, as it conflicted with her physical appearance and caused the company’s business partners to lose trust in them (11). Unable to openly exhibit her “Japaneseness” after that incident, she stops behaving as Japanese custom and etiquette would decree and seldom spoke Japanese (16). With her heritage and language being denied, a part of Nothomb’s “Japanese” Self was denied by her Japanese colleagues and workplace (Gheorghe 78). Hence, her salaryman identity could not be fully crafted in this area.

However, in regards to her job, she externally behaves in a Japanese manner, like a salaryman would, for example regarding resignation (Gheorghe 79): despite being assigned by Fubuki to clean the toilets (*Fear* 91), Nothomb refused to resign, but stayed on until the end of her contract as “a Japanese would have done” (94). When the end of her contract approached, Nothomb left the company following Japanese tradition of tendering in her resignation to every level of the hierarchy, starting from her immediate supervisor Fubuki (manager), up to the President, Haneda (116-129) without complaining about the work situation when she was explaining her reasons for leaving (117). This is also a display of *tatemaie* of what Japanese society expects her to do in that situation (Hutchinson and Williams 13; Matanle et al. 646; Kato 16).

The knowledge and execution of this is in direct contrast to the character Nothomb's behaviour early on in the novel where her Western logical Self took precedence in her actions at the Japanese workplace. Instead of rejecting Mr. Tenshi's (who is not her direct supervisor, but took pity on her and "entrusted her with a job that she deserves more", Honoré 112) assignment of writing a report, she accepted it even though she was aware that Mr. Tenshi was "taking a considerable risk" (*Fear* 25) as he did not follow the rules of hierarchy in the workplace (1 and 36). When Nothomb learned that Fubuki was the one who reported them to the vice-president Omochi (33), which caused Nothomb and Mr. Tenshi to be harshly scolded by Omochi (29), Nothomb insisted on confronting and talking things out with Fubuki—following the logical reasoning of a Westerner (Honoré 112).

Unfortunately, "in Japan, one does not speak about problems" (Honoré 112) and the character Nothomb's conversation with Fubuki made the situation worse. This is especially so as Nothomb, as a new employee and as a Westerner, is not in Fubuki's inner circle to whom Fubuki can display *honne*—Nothomb should have used *tatemaie* instead to harmoniously deal with that situation (Kato 1).

This constant conflict between the character Nothomb's Self/Other and salaryman identity not only results in external arguments with Fubuki and other bosses, it also results in an extreme external outburst when she was alone in the office. Nothomb suddenly felt a sense of liberation (*Fear* 57), took off her clothes (57), hopped from desk to desk (57), compared her suffering to those of God and Christ (58), hugged and kissed Fubuki's computer (58), before putting her clothes back on (58) and dumping the trash from Fubuki's wastebasket over herself (59). The allusions to liberation and religion reflect Nothomb's Western Self and values (Hijiya-Kirschner 24), while her clothes and actions symbolise the restriction of her Selves and her external portrayal of Self. By interacting with Fubuki's items, it can be implied that she worships Fubuki, and wants to Fubuki to accept her Selves. However, her wearing of her clothes before dumping the trash evokes a sense that her internal selves (and *honne*) would not be accepted—only the restricted external portrayal of her Selves (and *tatemaie*) can be accepted.

The character Nothomb also presents the identification of the ideal Japanese Self as the ideal Japanese man, albeit using some stereotypes, for example, by using images of the "samurai" (*Fear* 25) and references to Bushido and honour (for example, "losing face" 84 and 117). Moreover, with the exception of the characters Mr. Haneda and Mr. Tenshi, she presents the representation of the Japanese salaryman in a negative light, which can be inferred that she does not subscribe well to these representations—viewing them as the

Other: “That fate of the Japanese man isn’t that much more enviable. Japanese women at least have the chance to leave the hell that is their work by getting married” (72).

Mr. Saito (Fubuki’s superior) in *Fear* is one example of a Japanese man defined by work: stereotyped as a typical salaryman (Honoré 110) by being “small, lean and ugly” (*Fear* 2), “nervous” and “sickly” (*Fear* 100) as a result of work stress (Honoré 110), and being a stickler to rules and policies (Honoré 110).

Mr. Omochi (the Vice-President) is another example. He was “enormously fat and terrifying, proving that he was the vice-president of the division” (*Fear* 2) and is constantly referred to as “The Obese One” (example, *Fear* 63). Honoré also suggests that Omochi is a “caricature of the sumo wrestler” (Honoré 110), another Japanese symbol of masculinity and power. However, despite this link to a positive and powerful masculine symbol, Omochi uses “brutal language” and “physical violence” (Honoré 110) to assert his power, that he is even likened to the “Devil” (*Fear* 64).

Unlike the positive characteristics of the salaryman as described previously that almost border on the romanticised, the descriptions above show the character Nothomb’s stance of this Japanese Self—she views it through the lens of the Westerner rationalising using Western values (Honoré 120) and subverts this Japanese Self into the Other (Honoré 121), despite the “salaryman” being symbols of Japanese masculinity and power—ideals of the Japanese Self.

On the other hand, the only two male characters that the character Nothomb describes in a positive light may be another representation of the ideal Japanese Self. Mr. Haneda (President of the company) and Mr. Tenshi (Director of Dairy Department), the anchors of “moral positivity” (Honoré 113) in *Fear*, are described with positive Western references to Christianity (saviours), but are unfortunately, “perfectly powerless” (Honoré 113) as they are unable to save Nothomb from her worsening work situation.

Haneda is described as having “...a slim body and an exceptionally elegant face. An aura of profound goodness and harmony emanated from him” (64); “a voice that was extraordinarily beautiful and refined” (63); and as “God” (64). Tenshi is described as “the Messiah” (23); and “‘Tenshi’ means ‘angel’. I thought he wore his name extremely well... and he had taken this initiative without asking for anyone else’s opinion” (25).

The character Nothomb shows her Western Self by describing Haneda and Tenshi in Western terms and values (Hijiya-Kirschner 24), and other positive features, which seem

to render their representations of the Self as more ideal. In comparison to Saito and Omochi, they are so unreal (Honoré 112) that they are effectively powerless (Honoré 113), much like the Western Other. This lack of power also juxtaposes with them being labelled as saviours—a powerless saviour only evokes feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

In contrast, Fubuki in *Fear* describes these men in more positive and polite (Murtagh 75) terms using *tatemaie*: Fubuki reasons that Mr. Saito is at the mercy of his superiors (*Fear* 14); Mr. Omochi is “an exceptional person” who is also at the mercy of the hierarchy; and Mr. Haneda is “a remarkable”, “very intelligent” and “a very good man” (14). However, it is clear that the degree of the descriptions reflect her bias towards Haneda—that even to the Japanese, Haneda is the ideal male representation. Furthermore, the fact that Fubuki is still able to describe Saito and Omochi in positive terms despite being harshly and brutally reprimanded by them numerous times (Honoré 116) implies the use of *tatemaie* (Kato 21).

The Western male Other, although less described, is similar to the female Other—inferior to the Japanese (Tsuruta “Fantastic” 396). There is only one mention of this in *Fear* which details the physical inferiority (Honoré 117) the Western man, Kramer, has (78-80):

“Don’t whites realize that they smell like corpses?”

‘If we could only get them to realize how badly they stink...’

‘They’re made like that.’” (80)

The assertion by various Japanese employees that Kramer, and in extension the “whites”, is physically inferior to the Japanese sets him as the Western Other, and further compounds the fact that the concept of Japanese superiority is common among the Japanese. In comparison, all the character Nothomb portrays of Kramer from her perspective is that he held a good status in the corporate ladder equal to Fubuki’s (77), “was a good man, and nice-looking” (77) and is at a height that is a “potential match” with Fubuki’s (77). With these descriptions that draw comparisons to Fubuki, who is the ideal female Japanese Self, Kramer does not appear to be an inferior being—he seems, at the same time, almost equivalent of the Japanese male Self as well as a Western Self. Moreover, Nothomb’s ability to describe Kramer positively despite the extreme negative reactions of colleagues to and her awareness of his body odour also attests to her *tatemaie*.

In conclusion, it is clear that non-autonomous Western and Japanese Selves and Others are constructed in *Fear*—they are symbiotic. However, Nothomb experiences conflicts of her Selves not fitting in with the Japanese workplace as she rationalises from the Western point-of-view and selectively displays “*honne-tatemae*” that may not match the situation. Ultimately, as Honoré has proposed (121), she views the Japanese, and in extension her “Japanese” Self, as the Other. Hence, she appeared to be conflicted about her construction of her Self and Other. In fact, a comment by the author in an interview in relation to her construction of her Japanese Self in *Fear* sums this up: “I think that maybe my mistake was to really try to become a Japanese girl. They don’t want you to become Japanese” (Rees 1).

2.2 *The Blue-eyed Salaryman* (Niall Murtagh)

Blue is written by Murtagh and is narrated by a character named Murtagh. In this section, I will differentiate between the two with “the character Murtagh” and “the author Murtagh”.

Many stereotypical images of the Japanese man and salaryman are portrayed in *Blue*. However, there are few physical descriptions of them, unlike the character Nothomb who can specifically describe them as “slim” (*Fear* 64) or “obese” (*Fear* 63). Of the few physical descriptions, dress plays a part in the formation of the Japanese Self, not only for Japanese salarymen, but also for the character Murtagh:

“Miyuki’s father is wearing a suit, white shirt and tie...

‘He has been a salaryman his entire career. He will not feel dressed without a suit.’”

(*Blue* 97)

“Everyone wearing the same salaryman white shirt and grey suit, carrying the same salaryman briefcase...” (*Blue* 3)

It is clear then, that the salaryman is almost synonymous with a suit (as also observed by Skinner 146), which assists in the formation of the Japanese Self. This association of the suit and identity is so pervasive, that not only all of the workers seem to be wearing the same uniform, but the suit is still worn even when not in the office, as evidenced by the representation of Miyuki’s father (97), as though they would lose their identities should they wear other apparel.

In comparison, although wearing the company jacket or uniform assists the character Murtagh with fitting in with other Japanese employees through a uniform dress and associated identity (59), a “Japanese” Self—a salaryman, Murtagh reveals his thoughts about disliking the personality that is constructed when he wears his Mitsubishi jacket (66). It is evident that Murtagh both accepts and rejects this representation of his salaryman identity. This also shows Murtagh’s use of “*honne-tatema*” (Kato 6): in the workplace, he wears the company uniform to fit in harmoniously (*tatema*), something which he dislikes but does not voice out (*honne*).

Aside from physical descriptions, other characteristic features of the salaryman are evident in their behaviour which helps to construct the Japanese Self. For example, how long employees work overtime in the company in a day, which shows their devotion and loyalty

to the company. The character Murtagh separates them into three groups: the “ultra-overtimers” who stay in the company for 27-hours (*Blue* 58), the “medium-overtimers” who “do a few hours” (59) and the “minor-overtimers” of “an hour or two” (59).

The character Murtagh observes that the ultra-overtimers have a sense of pride (58) for their “overtime feats”, and this sense of pride adds to their creation of their Japanese Self. In contrast, justifications of the minor-overtimers as people who do not want to sacrifice their work-life balance (for example, “we want a life away from the company” [59]) come across as more logical (Hijiya-Kirschner 24). The character Murtagh again, while subscribing to the Japanese concept of “overtime”, rationalises it using Western values, and finds some kind of middle ground—he is, at once, “Japanese” and Western. Moreover, these minor-overtimers reveal the changing concept of the salaryman discourse with their “forward-thinking” views on maintaining a work-life balance.

The character Murtagh observes that the Japanese Self, in the face of the unknown Other, clearly behaves in a manner that is totally opposite of the Westerner who speaks in a “loud voice” and “achieves eye contact” (*Blue* 9). His colleague, Majime, does not make eye contact (9), only looks at his desk or computer (8), and communicates by mumbling (9) when interacting with Murtagh. In fact, this inability to function in front of a Westerner evokes feelings of powerlessness, oppression and inferiority—that the Foreigner is a fearsome Other (Tsuruta “Fantastic” 394).

Furthermore, the first person narrator Murtagh does not and is not able to provide insights into the thoughts and feelings of Majime, as Majime is the Other to Murtagh (Prindle “Romance” 209). Similar to Nothomb, Murtagh guesses, observes and infers: “I fear I make him uncomfortable” (*Blue* 8) and “I’m sure he’s scared of aliens...” (9). By Murtagh acknowledging that he may have made Majime uncomfortable, and trying to resolve this issue (9), Murtagh’s stance as the powerless Western Other shifts into the powerful Self, and even the Japanese Self, as he finds “Japanese” solutions to this communication problem (“I desist...from eye contact... I look only at the computer on his desk... we’ve found a way to talk to each other” [9]). It is clear that after cross-cultural interactions, Murtagh is aware of being seen as an Other while at the same time logically finding a solution and even finding one that a Japanese person can accept.

There are many other instances where the inner thoughts and feelings of other Japanese characters are also not revealed in *Blue*. The character Murtagh guesses, observes and infers, for example:

“Perhaps he is hoping that I will change my mind...” (160)

“Riko-T didn’t really drink that much...but he doesn’t argue with his boss. He is expecting to be promoted...and is on his best behaviour.” (118)

It is clear then, that the character Murtagh is on the outside looking in, and the portrayal of the Japanese employees do not seem to be very real characters, as though they are the Other (Tsuruta “Fantastic” 394).

Other “non-typical” (*Blue* 150) behaviours of the Japanese create a different angle to the Japanese Self and maybe even position them as the Other—these behaviours seem to point towards a movement away from traditional notions of salaryman identity. A few of the character Murtagh’s colleagues were more open-minded and friendly towards him, for example other managers (78 and 150) and Riko-san (8), who were open to interacting and conversing with him. Some even seemed to be able to accept that Foreigners do things differently and did not ostracise or force them to do things the “Japanese” way (of which the character Nothomb was predominantly subjected to in *Fear*):

“Wanabe-B knows that foreigners move to a different rhythm. The day after tomorrow will do”. (112)

“The big Japanese companies can be flexible when they want to. I’ve got some special treatment already.” (33)

This more open-minded thinking and behaviour reminiscent of Western values, which is made possible by the interaction with the Foreigner and is sometimes even being initiated by the Japanese themselves, is in opposition to Tsuruta’s claim that the Japanese refuse and do not want to interact with the Other and hence will not be able to change their opinions of the Other for many generations (“Fantastic” 395-398). This paints another kind of salaryman identity, which seems more contemporary and “Westernised”. This more contemporary salaryman identity still retains some aspects of the “ideal” salaryman: they are still able to, as Dasgupta mentions, function “normally” in the workplace (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 64). However, this more contemporary salaryman identity also conflicts with

traditional notions of the Japanese Self. Moreover, the Japanese people's acceptance of the character Murtagh's Western Self allows him to solidify this construction of the Self.

Similar to the character Nothomb, the character Murtagh asserts his "Japanese" Self in a few ways: for example, his proficiency in the language, the length of years lived in Japan, his knowledge of Japanese culture and etiquette, and following those etiquette rules ("*honne-tatemae*"). All these assist in his construction of his salaryman identity.

For example, in regards to the health check questionnaire, he finally writes "proper answers that the Mitsubishi medical staff would expect a good employee to write" (*Blue* 67). The quote illustrates Murtagh's knowledge of what is acceptable in Japanese culture and behaviour, and he behaves accordingly—a show of *tatemae*. However, he only comes to this understanding after looking at the questionnaire from a Western stance, which shows the clash the content of questionnaire had with his Western Values—the conflict between the Japanese Self and Western Self is shown using "enunciative comments" (Honoré 119) in the narrative, for example:

"Do you have any of the following thirty deformities? Have you suffered from the following sixty-two diseases? I don't know because I've never heard of half of them in any language. I assume the strange diseases don't apply to me." (*Blue* 65)

"Are personal relations in your office good? Yes—except for the quiet people who don't talk to one another and the shy type who feel uncomfortable with foreigners." (66)

"Do you try to see the good in others rather than the bad? Yes. If I didn't I'd be long gone." (66)

The italicised questions that get increasingly "awkward and personal" (66) are juxtaposed with the character Murtagh's truthful and logical answers, which indicate that he is viewing the questionnaire from the Western point-of-view and also his *honne*—what he really thinks (Kato 6). However, after this struggle between his Selves, he reconciles with his "Japanese" Self as a salaryman by writing socially acceptable answers that leave a good impression and do not worry the employer (*tatemae*, Kato 23). Murtagh further displays his understanding of the "*honne-tatemae*" by explaining that the questionnaire "makes me think what I am supposed to answer" (*tatemae*), "what the consequences will be if I don't answer" (*tatemae*) and "what the consequences will be if I do answer" (*honne*) [*Blue* 65].

The character Murtagh also recalibrates his point-of-view by using humour and sarcasm in the narrative, and acknowledges that he views issues from a Japanese and a Western point-of-view. It can also be inferred that he has choose between the two: “If I worked for an American or European company I would never see questionnaires like this... and life would be dull. At times like this, it’s almost fun to be a salaryman. It depends on how I look at things” (67).

Later on in the novel, the character Murtagh also clearly acknowledges that he has a “Japanese” Self and a Western Self: “Mitsubishi is more fun than a Western company, once I force myself into bi-cultural mode” (122), and it implies that he simultaneously has two selves.

However, despite the character Murtagh’s ability to construct Western and “Japanese” Selves, and even acknowledgement that he should change his point-of-view depending on the situation, he is constantly reminded that he is the Western Other in Japan through discrimination, or even, a lack of precedent which renders him powerless under the rules and laws of the workplace and society.

For instance, the character Murtagh’s construction of his “Japanese” Self after years of living in Japan, and even marrying a Japanese woman, is denied by the simple act of naming. His company insists that he write his name using the Western order of first name-family name while his wife could use the Japanese format of family name-first name, even when his wife had taken on his Western family name, on a company form (102). This is despite him having worked in the company for a few years and having constructed a salaryman identity.

Other labels that are used to identify him are terms like “foreigner” or “alien” (for example, 8-9). When Murtagh uses these terms in reference to himself and “Others”, he is aware of his own Otherness and is even able to reflect on himself and “Others” from the standpoint of both a Westerner and a Japanese: “I’m sure he is scared of aliens but I can’t help it, and besides the eyes and hair I’m not that weird. I’m about average height and weight in the department and don’t have a loud voice likes some aliens” (8-9).

It can be inferred that Murtagh thinks the reason why his Japanese colleague seems afraid of him boils down to physical appearance. However, he rationalises (Western Self) that he cannot change this. He also acknowledges that other Western Others have what a Japanese person may consider as a “loud voice”, and further explains that he does not. The knowledge of the former and the adherence to Japanese etiquette in the latter implies that

cross-cultural interactions allow him to acknowledge that he is simultaneously Self and Other.

The character Murtagh's other physical inferiority as the Other, if one is subscribing to the theory of "Japanese superiority" (Ishii et al. 83; Tsuruta "Fantastic" 396), is the colour of his eyes. Irregularity was found in his eye examination during a health check and he had to go for further tests in a hospital (*Blue* 68). However, the doctor finally explains that it was an error made by the machines which could not detect the "irregular" colour of blue: "In this country all eyes are dark brown or black in colour, but there are no blue eyes, like yours" (69-70). Cementing this is the character Murtagh's closing comment of the scene which shows the conflict of his "Japanese" and Western Selves: "*Real* salaryman don't have blue eyes" (70)—his construction of his "Japanese" Self as a salaryman is denied because of his physical difference as the Western Other.

The inability of the Murtagh's Western Self or "Japanese" Self to always triumph over the label of the Western Other during cross-cultural interaction results in a compromise—he carefully determines when "acting foreign is an advantage and [when] it is not" (226). However, at the end of the novel, Murtagh expresses his deep disappointment that a Westerner's construction of his "Japanese" Self is not welcomed in the Japanese workplace (226) regardless of how long he had been working there (227), and ultimately, like Nothomb, resigns from the Japanese company (224) following the Japanese procedures (Kato 22; Matanle et al. 646).

Moreover, Murtagh is the only character, in the four analysed novels, who mentions the (non-Japanese) Asian Other in the Japanese workplace or school in his novel, *Blue*. When Murtagh was studying in a Japanese University, Murtagh explains that his course mate, Li, is Chinese. However, due to being discriminated as an Other at work, Li was made to do "boring tasks", did not receive a good wage as a Chinese employee in Japan and thus, decided to return to his home country where he would be paid better doing work that matched his qualifications (*Blue* 85).

This predicament is similar to the character Nothomb's and also reflects the situation that Asian workers face in Japan (Le Bail 15, 27 and 39), however, the difference is that Li had no qualms in quitting and leaving Japan, implying that his "Japanese" Self (if he had

constructed one while studying the language, a PhD and then working in Japan) was not in conflict with his Chinese Self. According to Tsai, this could be due to the similarities between the Chinese and Japanese cultures, resulting in more tolerance, less disappointment and less attachment to Japan: “The absence of a honeymoon stage could be explained by the similarity of the Chinese group’s cultural context to the Japanese...” (Tsai 530). In fact, Sun argues that Chinese people and Japanese people may also be more “unwilling” to accept each other’s culture due to historical and political conflicts between the two countries (220). This results in difficulties in maintaining one’s Chinese culture in Japan and the difficulties in “accept[ing]” or being “accepted by” Japanese culture leads to the development of a “marginalisation attitude” (Sun 220). Those people with a “marginalisation attitude” tend to have “little possibility of or interest” in either “maintaining [Chinese] cultural values” or “forming relationships with others in the new [Japanese] culture” (Sun 221). Tsai’s and Sun’s theories are thus useful in explaining Li’s actions and identity construction in *Blue*.

Furthermore, Li’s identification with his Chinese Self and values are strong, and his actions that go against what the Japanese expect of him to behave (Japanese norm) position him as the Other. For example, although the character Murtagh infers that the teacher (*sensei*) is responsible for everything that goes on in the students’ lives and the teacher needs to be consulted for every decision, Li did not do this when he got married (20-21). In fact, he felt that “it’s all stupid, especially if you look at the situation from the Chinese point of view” (21). This rationalisation further attests that his values are superior to the Japanese. Furthermore, Li also acknowledges that he is an “outsider” in Japan (21). The ability to acknowledge this after cross-cultural interaction show that Li is aware that he is, simultaneously, a Chinese Self and a Chinese Other.

In conclusion, although it is evident that the Self and Other are not autonomous, the character Murtagh, like the character Nothomb, constructs his Selves from the Western point-of-view, resulting in him rationalising about his “Japanese” salaryman Self using Western values. This coupled with interactions and reactions with other people, serve to create conflict with his Selves. And Li also thinks from and creates his Selves from the Chinese point-of-view, resulting in some conflicts with how the Japanese expect him to behave.

3. The Self and Other portrayed by Japanese Writers

My analysis aims to show that Japanese writers appear to be less confused about their characters' Self/Other as their individual salaryman identity (or Japanese Self) only sometimes conflicts with societal notions of the "ideal" salaryman (or "ideal" Japanese Self). Although there is no cross-cultural interaction, the characters are sometimes aware that their individual salaryman identities subvert "ideal" notions of the salaryman.

3.1 *Princess Toyotomi* (Makime Manabu)

In *Toyotomi*, Makime portrays the Western Other (Gainsbourg) with such an emphasis on her physical beauty that she is always described using her physical appearance every time she enters a scene. She captivates not only the male characters, but also the female characters that see her. In line with the unreal portrayal of Westerners, Makime's representation of Gainsbourg elevates her to a status of a "goddess" (Tsuruta "Fantastic 397), and also expands on Tsuruta's analysis of the beautiful Western Other ("immobilizes a nearby Japanese male" ["Fantastic" 397]) by being more powerful. These cement Gainsbourg's representation as a Western Other in *Toyotomi*:

Gainsbourg is constantly described as having "light tea-coloured eyes" (e.g. 14, 278 and 301), a "long neck" (e.g. 14) and "alluringly white skin on her neck, chest or limbs" (e.g. 14 and 301)—features that are synonymous with a Foreigner, akin to Murtagh's blue eyes. Her beauty even seems ephemeral, "her skin was so white that it seemed transparent" (84).

In another instance, Gainsbourg's beauty is so unreal to a female middle school student Chako, that even normal actions and ugly objects become beautiful:

"...the way she stood was ravishingly beautiful. It seemed unbelievable that the usual ugly green slippers that guests wore looked like a high quality colour on her feet."

[...女性の立ち姿は、うっとりするほど美しかった。緑色のどうしよもない来客用スリッパさえ、女性の足元では、何だか上等な色づかいに見えてくるから不思議だった。] (84).

The enraptured Chako further expresses her wish that it would be “great if she could become such a wonderful adult” (84).

On the other hand, Chako’s male teacher, Oono, was so overwhelmed when he first saw Gainsbourg that he says “What’s” instead of “Who’s”, which further heightens the uncanniness of Gainsbourg’s beauty:

“He could not help but murmur ‘What’s that?’ as he was obviously overpowered by Gainsbourg’s height and beauty when [he saw] the woman who suddenly standing there as [he] left the teachers’ room. “

[「何んや、あれ？」 職員室を出るなり、いきなり立っていた女性の、その大きさと美しさに明らかに圧倒されていた大野がボソリとつぶやいた。]

(87)

The above physical descriptions of Gainsbourg and the reactions of the people who see her position her as an unreal Western Other (Prindle “Romance” 209; Tsuruta “Fantastic” 394; Honoré 110). However, her ability to captivate the people who see her, beautify the surroundings with her beauty and even, become idolised, imply that she has power over others—a Western Self. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Chako’s description of Gainsbourg as “a wonderful adult” with Oono’s “What’s that?” (instead of saying “Who’s that?”), also show that there are differences in the way that the Japanese view her: to a female student, Gainsbourg is idolised and becomes the epitome of female beauty, while to a male teacher, she renders him helpless in the face of her beauty and becomes an object—the Other.

In addition, Gainsbourg’s “goddess-like” qualities of “the beautiful Other” oscillate to the other end of the spectrum of “the ugly” at times (Tsuruta “Fantastic, 394). For example, as Matsudaira was starting to unravel the mystery in Osaka, he observes that Gainsbourg seemed inhuman: “for a moment, it seemed like shadows had formed the shape of a human” (*Toyotomi* 282). The portrayal of Gainsbourg is still unreal, but also carries undertones of the “evil” Western Other (Tsuruta “Fantastic” 395; Prindle “Romance” 208).

Making this more complex is that Gainsbourg, although having an extremely Western appearance, is actually Japanese (she is half-Japanese, *Toyotomi* 19 and 514) and her name when pronounced in the Japanese language is “Ge—nzubu—ru” (*Toyotomi* 26). Gainsbourg also regularly asserts her Japanese Self through speech and *tatema*, which assists in her construction of her salaryman identity. Even Matsudaira, her direct supervisor, cannot come to terms with this paradox after hearing Gainsbourg speak in extremely polite

Japanese: “No matter how accustomed [he was] to seeing it, [his] subordinate’s face did not look like a Japanese person’s at all” (282). Thus, it is no surprise that Gainsbourg faces difficulties in the construction and assertion of her Japanese Self as well as her salaryman identity.

One of the ways that Gainsbourg asserts her Japanese Self externally is by constantly stating her nationality when she feels that people are judging her by her looks or when others start to speak to her in halting English: “I’m Japanese” (「私、日本人なの」 85), and “Please do not worry, I am Japanese” (「ご心配なく、日本人です」 26). Moreover, her ability to use the different degrees of politeness, casual in the former quote when speaking to a student and polite in the latter quote when speaking to other salarymen, further demonstrates her knowledge and ability to use language according to the situation—the *tatema* (Kato 20). It is clear that she is aware that, because of her physical appearance, she is seen by the Japanese as a Western Other, and actively seeks to assert her identification with her Japanese Self. Following Dasgupta’s proposal that “assertiveness” is one trait a “neo-salaryman” may possess (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 40), Gainsbourg’s “assertiveness” in correcting others’ views of her also implies that she has shifted away from traditional notions of the salaryman.

Furthermore, she is almost always portrayed as eating Pocky (a common Japanese biscuit snack consisting of long pencil-like biscuits that are either covered in flavoured seasonings or are five-sixth dipped in some kind of chocolate, and costs roughly one to three dollars), passively showing her “Japaneseness” externally (e.g. *Toyotomi* 19 and 23). However, this juxtaposition also heightens her portrayal as an unreal figure, similar to God Haneda in *Fear* (“it was difficult for me to imagine God in such a place [the men’s toilet],” 98); the “goddess” is actually eating such a humble and commonplace snack, drawing attention to the simultaneous construction of her Japanese Self and Western Other.

In the construction of her Japanese Self, Gainsbourg also strictly adheres to some Japanese behaviour, for example, what other people can call her. In the Japanese context, the first name is only used when interpersonal relationships are close and more intimate (*honne*; Kato 21), and the family name is more commonly used when addressing someone (*tatema*;

Kato 21). Gainsbourg adamantly and constantly refuses to let her colleague, Torii, call her by her first name, Asahi (*Toyotomi* e.g. 15-20). Not only is this a deliberate action that is used to try to keep Torii at a distance, she also asserts her Japanese Self by following the Japanese rules.

However, Torii is blinded by Gainsbourg's physical appearance of a Westerner and, despite Gainsbourg telling him politely not to (*Toyotomi* 15 and 29), and then repeatedly stopping him and telling him that she is Japanese or correcting his mistake, he still insists on calling Gainsbourg by her first name per "Western" custom. The exchanges draw attention to the positive and negative embodiments of Japanese cultural values (Matanle et al. 646) and the *tatemae* (Kato 26). In one instance, Torii uses her first name, Asahi, twice in a conversation, and she did not correct him the first time (*Toyotomi* 19). However, after the second time, she asks him, "Who is this Asahi?" (「旭って誰のことですか？」 20). Torii then immediately addresses her using her family name, even adding the polite suffix of "-san" (Mr. or Ms.), in an attempt to mediate the situation (「ゲーンズブルーさんは、今日……」 20) in a show of *tatemae*.

These exchanges also represent the conflict that arises from cross-cultural interactions: the negotiations of the Japanese Self and the Western Other within the boundary of "*honne-tatemae*". Torii, as the Japanese Self which is stereotyped as the embodiment of Japanese politeness in this case, seems to attempt to adhere to a different cultural norm in order to make Gainsbourg feel at ease. However, Torii's repeated refusal to recognise and respect Gainsbourg's feelings and self-image by taking her, literally, at face value, creates a notion that Torii is an "oppressor" (Kato 25-26). Torii oversteps the *tatemae* resulting in conflict instead of harmony (Ishii et al. 86; Kato 22). This dichotomy creates tension between the Self and Other, with Gainsbourg confronting situations of having to constantly prove her Japanese Self in the face of rejection and denial.

Moreover, the omniscient or third person limited narrator actually refers to Gainsbourg by her Japanese first name, Asahi, throughout the novel, while other characters are referred to by their surnames. Her surname or full name is only mentioned a few times by the narrator or by Gainsbourg (e.g. *Toyotomi* 16 and 478). This works in two ways: by using a Japanese

name, this represents Gainsbourg's Japanese Self and distances her from being the Western Other; on the other hand, using her first name, a "Western" concept of name-calling, also brings attention to her portrayal as the Other.

However, following the Japanese literary concepts of the portrayal of the Other, the narrator does not reveal Gainsbourg's thoughts and feelings (Tsuruta "Images" 151). But the narrator does reveal some feelings and emotions of other characters, particularly the other Japanese characters that look like a typical Japanese person. For example, "Torii thought that..." (e.g. *Toyotomi* 171), and "For Matsudaira..." (e.g. 272).

Gainsbourg's thoughts and feelings can only be inferred from her reactions and her speech, which reinforces her portrayal as the Other (Tsuruta "Images" 151; Prindle "Romance" 209). The few, sparse and often repeated descriptions of her facial expressions such as "stiff" (*Toyotomi* 271, 278, 301, 402), "puzzled" (272), "flustered" (278), "pale" (282, 284); and of her facial features such as "shadows between her eyebrows" (270, 301), and "red eyes" or "teary eyes" (478, 482, 483) are the only clues to her thoughts and feelings. Moreover, Gainsbourg's thoughts and feelings can only be inferred from the politeness or casualness of the words in her direct speeches, for example when she was scolding Torii regarding salutation (e.g.15-16) or politely confessing her plots to Matsudaira (478-483) as there usually is no indication in the text regarding Gainsbourg's speech verb (verbs such as shout/yell).

On the other hand, Gainsbourg's ability to display *tatemaie*, which allows other characters to infer what is not said (*honne*), also creates Gainsbourg's Japanese Self, (Kato 17-18) and especially, her salaryman identity. For example, when Matsudaira, her supervisor, notices that Gainsbourg's pale face had become even paler (*Toyotomi* 282), he asks her if she was alright. She deflects his questions with a "plausible" explanation ("It must be due to Vice Chief's [Matsudaira] words that were unexpected" 「きつと……副長のお話が思いもしないものだったからです」 282) and forcedly smiling and nodding while saying the *tatemaie* expression of "[I'm] fine" (口の端に無理に笑みを浮かべ、「大丈夫です」と旭はうなずいだ 282). Matsudaira understands this as her *tatemaie*, is aware that she was not okay, but also knows that she does not want to talk about it any further and changes the

topic (Kato 23-24; *Toyotomi* 282). However, after Gainsbourg's revelation later (478), this scene can be read as mixing in her *honne* (she was actually shocked because of Matsudaira's words [in the first quote], not pretending to be) and pretending that it is her *tatemae*. Her understanding that her statement of *honne* will be taken as *tatemae* in that situation further reinforces her Japanese Self (Ishii et al. 89).

At the end of the novel, Gainsbourg plans to take responsibility for her actions by officially meeting Matsudaira to politely inform him that she will resign before she plans to hand in her resignation letter to the higher-ups (*Toyotomi* 525—528)—a display of her Japanese Self as a salaryman and *tatemae*, a resolution that allows social harmony to be preserved (Hutchinson and Williams 13; Matanle et al. 646). However, Matsudaira advises her against it by actually using his *honne* in their exchange (526—527). If Gainsbourg misunderstands Matsudaira's words as *tatemae*, she would have resigned. However, she does not and at the conclusion of the novel, she joins Matsudaira's team on their next auditing task (532-533). Gainsbourg's ability to correctly identify Matsudaira's *honne* is another display of her Japanese Self (Ishii et al. 92).

Furthermore, Makime also uses other narrative techniques to construct "Otherness" which help to further portray the "Other". One method is in the chaptering of the novel—it is separated into various scenes labelled as Board of Audit of Japan (e.g. *Toyotomi* 95, 167) and Osaka Municipal Karahori Middle School (e.g. 53, 134).

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the Auditors from the East of Japan (Tokyo) are the "logical" ones, and through their interactions with the West of Japan (Osaka) which result in conflicts, they discover that the whole of Osaka is actually the "Other"—Osaka had been operating as an independent country, "Osaka Country" within Japan for hundreds of thousands of years and its people were people of "Osaka Country" not the country of "Japan". The "logical" versus the "illogical", directly correlating to East of Japan and West of Japan, seem to mimic the colonialisation of by West of the East, and historically, of Japan losing wars to the West (Hutchinson and Williams 1-4, Tsuruta "Fantastic" 346)—the externalisation of the Japanese Self and Western Self.

According to an interview with the famous publishing house that published *Toyotomi*, Makime also mentions that he portrays a different Osaka from those previously portrayed

by in the media, and in doing so, further creates the “Other” (Bungeishunju 3). He intentionally writes about “less famous” and “less populated” places in Osaka, uses the “interesting” and “funny” Osaka dialect to also create a “tenser and sadder atmosphere during serious developments” in the novel, and gives his characters names that have their counterpart in actual Japanese History (Bungeishunju 3). The unreal setting then helps to reinforce the representation of Osaka and the people of Osaka as the “Other”, and conflicts arise from interactions with the people not from Osaka—the auditors from Tokyo.

In conclusion, Gainsbourg being regarded by others as the “Other” due to her Western appearance conflicts with her assertion of the knowledge of the Japanese language, her use of “*honne-tatemae*” which allows her to be capable of “subtle interaction with Japanese people” (Tsuruta “Images” 151), and the narrator dominantly using her Japanese name Asahi throughout the novel, which all serve to strongly construct her Japanese Self. Although her constructs of the Self and Other are not autonomous, she identifies more strongly with her Japanese Self and salaryman identity, and unlike the character Murtagh and the character Nothomb, is not confused.

3.2 *Fushouji* (Ikeido Jun)

In Kodansha's, a famous publishing house's, interview with author Ikeido Jun, Ikeido states in reference to Hanasaki Mai in *Fushouji* that "it's because it's interesting to have the character do things that you cannot do in real life" (Kodansha 2) as the reason behind creating a fictional character who "stands up to the status quo" despite the odds in the salaryman genre (Skinner 143; Matanle et al. 653; Otani 3; Usami 3). Hanasaki, who behaves contrary to Japanese rules and etiquette, and especially those of a Japanese female, is clearly the Other in *Fushouji*. She seems to embody a "new style of corporate masculinity" such as attributes like "individual responsibility", "assertiveness" and "risk-taking" (Dasgupta *Re-reading* 40) as she subverts the traditional notions of the salaryman. Hanasaki's portrayal is assisted by the linear "manga-like" narrative (Kodansha 2) where the omniscient narrator clearly reveals Hanasaki's thoughts and feelings as the situations play out (unlike Gainsbourg's portrayal in *Toyotomi*).

Her name, Hanasaki ("花咲" *Fushouji* 12) literally means "Flower Bloom" and her colleagues coined a nickname, Kurusaki, meaning "Crazy Bloom" ("狂咲" 12) for her as she acts "crazily" unlike a Japanese person or "ideal" salaryman would (an "Other"). This Kurusaki Self conflicts with others and is also juxtaposed by her Hanasaki Self. However, Hanasaki, and even Souma her direct supervisor, sometimes accepts both of these Selves.

Her Kurusaki Self emerges when she stands up to others and scolds them, regularly breaking *tatemaie*. The speech that she uses as Kurusaki is also more masculine and casual (not polite), which also subverts notions of the "ideal" salaryman as she, as a woman, exaggerates salaryman identity and masculinity. On the other hand, her Hanasaki Self is entirely capable of preserving harmony by displaying appropriate *tatemaie* phrases (Kato 20), when she displays qualities of an "ideal" salaryman.

For example, upon being introduced by a new boss to her new direct supervisor, Souma, Hanasaki displays *tatemaie* by humbly saying the extremely polite *tatemaie* greetings (Kato 23) of "Although [I'm] an incompetent person, [I'm] in your care," (「ふつつかものですが、よろしく願います」 *Fushouji* 13). She still managed to say that even though she had just heard Souma cry in casual Japanese, "Ku—Kurusaki! Why are you—!" (「く、狂咲！ なんで お前が——！」 12) because they already knew each other as they had worked together previously in a different workplace (13). By abiding by what she was

expected to do in that situation, maintaining the *tatemae* of civility and politeness in the new workplace, Hanasaki displays her Japanese Self as an “ideal” salaryman.

In another instance, after Hanasaki points out areas of in which an employee can improve in the workplace, she ends by encouraging that the worker “would be able to do it if [she] works hard as [she] has a good aptitude,” (「でも、スジはいいから頑張ればすぐにできるようになるよ」 19). This display of *tatemae* expressions of the “willingness to trust that difficulties can be overcome if we [one] just work hard and believe” (Usami 5-6) while talking to a subordinate in more casual Japanese again shows Hanasaki’s Japanese Self (Kato 20) as an “ideal” salaryman.

On the other hand, conflicts arise when Hanasaki instantly changes to Kurusaki when she becomes angry. At times, she is able to maintain politeness (e.g. *Fushouji* 38-39, and 96), while other times she shouts in casual Japanese (e.g. 40 and 142). Regardless of the politeness level of her speech, Kurusaki’s questioning of authority and ignoring of workplace hierarchy and *tatemae* goes against the social behaviour a Japanese person should exhibit and subverts notions of the “ideal” salaryman. Her supervisor, Souma, sometimes tries to stop her or mediate the situation.

A polite confrontation, for example:

“Mai was angry, ‘...Do [you] know that?’

In an instant, Yajima’s face clearly surfaced an angry expression, ‘What did you say?’

‘I’m sorry, Branch Manager,’ Souma cut in.” (39)

Although Mai uses polite language, she makes Yajima “lose face” (*tatemae*, Ishii et al. 86; Kato 26) as she questions his authority (his position is higher than hers), hence Souma tries to quickly mediate the situation. Souma also “lost face” as he is responsible for Mai’s actions as she is his direct subordinate. Mai later reveals that she knows about this but does not care for “face” and *tatemae* (“[I] don’t know, that kind of thing” *Fushouji* 40), because the problems will not be resolved if she was concerned about that (40). This clearly shows the conflict between the Kurusaki Self (subversion of “ideal” salaryman, or the “Other”) and Hanasaki Self (“ideal” salaryman), and she chooses to display her Kurusaki Self in order to solve workplace problems. She is aware that she is simultaneously both Kurusaki (“Other”) and Hanasaki (Self) and chooses between them; This also draws similarities to Murtagh’s advice of choosing when it is beneficial to show the “Japanese” or Western Self.

Furthermore, her Kurusaki Self is so powerful that she can render male colleagues speechless (142) with her extremely masculine and exceptionally impolite outbursts, ““Stop bullshitting!” [This] was the moment that Kurusaki’s anger exploded” (142) (「ふざけんじゃないわよ！」—the phrase also means “Damn it,” “You’re fucking kidding” and “You’re full of shit”, Weblio 1); or even overpower other male colleagues with a “burning gaze” to the point that somehow they cannot move their feet (97). This adds an additional sense of “Otherness” to Kurusaki, a sense of masculinity to a female character, and exaggerating notions of salaryman masculinity. This masculine speech and behaviour that is used to oppress others, is similar to Omochi and Saito in *Fear*, when they are scolding their colleagues. Moreover, even Fubuki in *Fear* uses this to oppress the character Nothomb. It is clear that the salaryman identity is not only constructed by male employees, but also female employees.

Moreover, the narrator further portrays Hanasaki as the “Other” by referring to her by her first name, Mai, throughout the novel. Calling someone on a first name basis is indicative of “Western” values (the Other), similar to Gainsbourg’s portrayal in *Toyotomi*. On the other hand, as she does not have a Western name like Gainsbourg, this may also create a sense of intimacy as, in the Japanese context, you only call another by their first name when you have a close relationship. The duality of this further places Hanasaki as both the “Other” and the (Japanese) Self. Furthermore, other characters are referred to by their surnames, further compounding Hanasaki’s portrayal as the “Other”.

Moreover, Souma constantly calls her “Kurusaki” throughout the novel (e.g. 12, 142, 211), even depending on her Kurusaki Self to solve a problem, “Ku..Kurusaki, [I’m] counting on [you]” (「く、狂咲、頼む.....」 95). This again conflicts with Hanasaki’s Japanese Self and cement her portrayal as an “Other”. On the other hand, Souma calls her “Hanasaki” when he is trying to appeal to her logical Japanese side, for example when he is trying to comfort her and appease her anger (215). His knowledge of this, and the deliberate change from “Kurusaki” to “Hanasaki” further represents the conflicts between her Selves.

However, unlike the portrayal of the “psychologically unreal” Other (Prindle “Romance” 209; Tsuruta “Images” 151), Hanasaki’s thoughts and feelings are clearly conveyed by the omniscient narrator. The narrator directly uses “Mai thought...” (*Fushouji* 21), “Mai was shocked...” (116), “Mai sighed...” (e.g. 119, 160), “Mai felt...” (e.g. 43) and also reveals her thoughts with “enunciative comments” (Honoré 119) in the narrative. Of the latter, for example, after someone condescendingly speaks to her in casual Japanese even though it

was the first time they interacted, Hanasaki's thought of "[I] don't like men who behave too familiarly" is revealed in an enunciative comment (*Fushouji* 118).

This comment clearly shows that Hanasaki is adhering to Japanese etiquette and *tatemae*; not only does she not reveal her *honne*, she also prefers to use *tatemae* when speaking to strangers. Furthermore, throughout her conversation with that person (117-118), Hanasaki maintains politeness in her speech (*tatemae*), which further shows her Japanese Self as an "ideal" salaryman in the workplace.

In another instance, Hanasaki's worries are portrayed in enunciative comments and physical descriptions after an employee replies "...maybe" to her question of "How is it? Are the numbers adding up?" (242):

Her semi-long hair that reached her shoulders bounced up instead as Mai swallowed down the words 'Is this person okay? It'd be troubling if it is maybe.'
大丈夫かな、この子？ たぶんじゃ困るのよね。そんな言葉を舞は飲み込むかわり、肩までのセミロングの髪をさっと跳ね上げる。(242).

Hanasaki is again displaying her Japanese Self and *tatemae* by keeping her thoughts to herself (*honne*) and not pressuring the employee by vocalizing them; however, she also unconsciously revealed her *honne* through her physical action. The conflict between her *tatemae* and *honne*, and the externalisation of her *honne* that is symbolic of Kurusaki, further represent the struggles between her Selves.

Moreover, contrary to Prindle's ("Romance" 208-209) and Tsuruta's ("Fantastic" 394-395) analyses regarding the portrayal of the physical appearance of the Other, Hanasaki's appearance is hardly described (similar to the character Murtagh in *Blue* and the character Nothomb in *Fear*). Aside from a vague reference to Hanasaki's height ("Aota [a male superior] is slightly shorter than Mai" *Fushouji* 167), the length of her hair (242) or the repeated imagery of the "sharp" gaze in Hanasaki's eyes (e.g.172), nothing else is known of her appearance. This movement away from distinct physical descriptions of the Other that differ from the Japanese Self is similar to the portrayals of the character Murtagh in *Blue* and the character Nothomb in *Fear*. However, unlike in *Blue*, even Hanasaki's dress is not mentioned. In one sense, her appearance and dress do not serve to externally complicate the relationships between her Self and Other like that which is seen in the portrayal of Gainsbourg in *Toyotomi* or Murtagh in *Blue*, while in another, it evokes a sense of invisibility to Hanasaki, implying that she is "unreal"—an "Other".

In addition, Hanasaki, while being able to start solving a problem that arises in a workplace, is not always able to resolve it by herself and a male superior usually comes to her rescue—a reversion to the status quo, which is similar to Gainsbourg’s situation in *Toyotomi*. For example, a male superior might hit the employee who was in the wrong and offer an apology to Hanasaki (e.g. 143 and 372). This shows the dominance of the Japanese Self over Kurusaki; despite Hanasaki’s attempts at portraying a masculine salaryman identity, in the end, it is the male salaryman who still has more authority. There are a few times, however, that Hanasaki is able to unravel the mystery by herself and resolve the problems or issues that she had been unearthing and analysing (e.g. 236-237 and 277-278). This reveals the triumphing of her Selves over others (Souma, other employees and Japanese workplace), and especially, of her individual salaryman identity over societal expectations of salaryman identity. This again, highlights that Hanasaki is embodying what Dasgupta terms a “new style of corporate masculinity” (*Re-reading* 40), a “neo-salaryman” identity.

In conclusion, while the Hanasaki Self and Kurusaki Self are portrayed as not autonomous elements in the novel, the analysis of character Hanasaki reveals that Hanasaki can selectively become Kurusaki whenever she wants to. Moreover, the struggle between her *honne* and *tatemae* also signifies the conflict between her Selves, however, she chooses, like the character Nothomb and the character Murtagh, when and what to display after considering the situation.

4. Representations of the Other in *Cooperation*

In order to portray the symbiotic (not autonomous) Self and Other of the salaryman in *Cooperation*, I focus on characterisation: how the salaryman identity is portrayed by my characters.

Foreigners who look distinctly different from the Japanese can be portrayed using the techniques of the white Westerner—with a focus on physical appearance as the catalyst (Prindle “Romance” 208-209; Tsuruta “Images” 151; Tsuruta “Fantastic” 395-396). However, this technique does not work well for the Asian Foreigner who looks similar to the Japanese, and exhibits an “absence or invisibility of otherness” (Ching 41). In this case, I draw upon Makime’s technique of changing their descriptions (for example, similar to Gainsbourg, who is at once the embodiment of “the beautiful” [*Toyotomi* 84] and “the ugly” [*Toyotomi* 282]), by literally, changing their dress, which is symbolic of an external portrayal of Self, similar to the character Nothomb’s, the character Murtagh’s and Gainsbourg’s portrayal.

As the male characters wear “female” attire (for example, skirts, blouses, leggings and dresses) as part of the company uniform specific to their department, their differences are, according to Tsai, exaggerated and they can be distinguished from the Japanese (“The non-Asian group of respondents, racially different from the host nationals [Japanese], did not have to stress their difference by nativistic symptoms as much as the Asian group... [the Asian group]...unconsciously define their self-concept more aggressively against Japanese culture in a Japanese environment” 534). In a sense, the characters are also forced to construct a *nadeshiko* identity (ideal Japanese female Self) that fits into Japanese society, which conflicts with their original Selves that see the *nadeshiko* as an Other. Moreover, appearing “feminine” also challenges the salaryman “identity” which is mainly made up of men.

Appearance-wise, Kotori for example, looks so feminine that Ooyama could not believe his eyes:

She was painted to perfection: a delicate nose, a pair of fluttery big eyes, pouty but conservative lips, flawless skin. Light beige nails stretched from dainty hands that extended from a tight, black long-sleeved top which was peeking out from under the black, collared dress shirt.... Ooyama swallowed his breath; his palms shaking on her shoulders. He still wasn't used to this. (*Cooperation* 35)

In another example, they also try to appear more feminine in order to construct that *nadeshiko* Self: “Kotori put his knees and ankles together in a hurry while trying to align his fingers elegantly” (36) and “While keeping their knees together and feet tucked in, they ate as daintily as they could and tried not to open their mouths too wide” (14).

However, the advancements of costume and make-up may render the difference invisible to others. Real-life Japanese cross-dressers such as the extremely famous Matsuko Deluxe (Ronald 2016 1; Ronald 2017 1; Fifield and Oda 1) adopt a feminine manner of speech and dress, and appear similar to or even more lady-like than real women. This is a generally accepted style of cross-dressing that can be seen in all Japanese media and TV, as well as the current Japanese cross-dressing scene in real-life (Law 75; Mitsuhashi 210; Fifield and Oda 1). This adds another layer of invisibility to the Asian Other—the Asian Other knows that he is different from the locals, even when in cross-dress, but the locals may not be able to even see the difference or know that they are non-Japanese Asian Others.

This can be seen in a scene in which Kotori gets mistaken for a Japanese female; however, Kotori still behaves according to what is expected of him (*tatema*), exhibiting his “Japanese” Self as a salaryman:

‘How could you say that to someone so cute,’ someone else said. ...

‘Look, you made her cry.’

‘How could you!!’

‘Please excuse me,’ Kotori-chan said as she followed Ooyama who led her out with a comforting arm on her shoulder. Kotori gave a slight smile. (*Cooperation* 44)

Due to this, their differences are further internalised, which result in further narrative portrayals of the “Other”. According to Napier, these portrayals can be “nightmares” and “flashbacks to the past” (44). This is because their conflicts with the Self and Other cannot be externalised while in the workplace as their cross-dressing is not known to employees outside their department. Although all four characters have nightmares, Katanaka, as the employee who has worked at the company the longest, is constantly plagued by them to the point of developing paranoid behaviour (*Cooperation* 83). Katanaka’s nightmares are also more grotesque and terrifying than the other characters’ who only dream of their past, for example:

These orange chained silhouettes were just orange, aside from their black hair and skin-coloured hands and feet. The orange people filled up the horizon from west to east, and no matter how far west or east Katanaka looked, he could not see the end of the line. The orange suited people advanced forward slowly, and Katanaka could see that there was a row of other orange people behind the first row, and the rows extended back as far north as he could see. (114-115)

Katanaka’s actions that are the result of paranoid behaviour (127-128), are also an external manifestation of the conflict and turmoil of the Self and Other, and these are also portrayed by other physical afflictions such as shaking (96) or by emotional dependency on others only while in the private sphere of their homes or inner circle of friends (118).

Furthermore, the construction of their “Japanese” Selves as salarymen can further be seen in their behaviour as they abide by Japanese etiquette rules and other behaviour, such as taking part in gift-giving. This is a “customary” practice in the Japanese workplace (Ogasawara 140), the act of which is quite politicised (Ogasawara 141), the understanding of which reveals their Japanese Selves:

‘Hmm, the tradition is either at the start of the day when no one is there yet, or find a time when there isn’t anyone there during the day and put it there secretly.’ (*Cooperation* 129)

...

Hanazou swivelled around to look at the communication blackboard that recorded the staffs' leave. Three other people were on leave, two on business trips and two others would be leaving early to go on other trips. Noting down their names, he started to pen sticky notes for them as he set aside seven snacks. (130)

However, although they abide by the “tradition”, they also fulfil it in their own way—they do not pretend to maintain “secrecy” that is “advocated” by societal expectations but wrote sticky notes instead. This rationalising (129-131) reveals the triumphing of their individual salaryman Selves over the notions of the “ideal” salaryman Self.

Moreover, similar to *Princess Toyotomi* and *Fushouji*, I also use multi-narrators (third person limited and third person omniscient) and “enunciative comments” (Honoré 119) to provide direct insights into the characters' thoughts and feelings.

An example of my use of enunciative comments is:

‘Did you sleep well?’ would come off as being too personal. ‘Have you adjusted to Japan?’ might be a question that was still too early to ask. ‘Did you wait long?’ or ‘What time did you get up?’ would likely produce polite lies that would make Kotori squirm in further apology. It was only a few minutes but such questions swarmed through their tired brains endlessly. What would be the socially acceptable thing to say in this situation? (*Cooperation* 21)

The above quote illustrates their inner conflict as they think of the socially acceptable thing to say. This also contrasts with what their actual behaviour, further illustrating the conflict between a person's *honne* and *tatemaie*. Continuing from the above scene, Kotori and Ooyama decide not to talk at all and preserved a silence, again showing their “Japanese” Selves (21).

Furthermore, not only are the thoughts and feelings of the main characters described, those of side characters are too. For example, when Kotori and Ooyama entered a scene:

‘Excuse me! We are from saku.ra.’ Something else was said softly. There was a small buzz of excitement and anticipation. The door slid slowly open to reveal the tall man with a nice figure. Many pairs of eyes gave him a once-over. *Yes, yes. I remember him. Oh, yes, the young man from that week. See, I told you he had a nice figure. Who’s that behind him? Who?* Many pairs of eyes craned to look at a smaller slender man almost hidden from sight. (77)

However, when the narrative switches to Kotori and Ooyama’s limited perspective, all they could visually observe were: “The staff who were assigned to teach Ooyama and Kotori stiffly stepped towards them” (78). In this case, the juxtaposition helps in the construction and conflict of the Self and the Other (the Other who is not privy to the thoughts of its observers) in terms of “*honne-tatema*”.

Like Gainsbourg and Hanasaki, my characters sometimes disclose to other characters that they are non-Japanese Others despite having a “Japanese” appearance, which reveal their constructions of the symbiotic (not autonomous) Self and Other. For example, when a young man who was touring their company criticizes Kotori for resting at the desk while other employees were working, Kotori explains the situation clearly instead of just perfunctorily apologising:

‘I apologise that you have had a bad impression of this company based solely on my individual actions. Although I was instructed to take a rest, I should have taken a rest in the lounge instead, but as I did not want to trouble my mentor to go out of his way to look for me there, I decided to rest at my desk from which I could know immediately the moment he returned to the office...’ she bowed again. (44)

This logical explanation, coupled with Kotori’s understanding of the “Japanese value” of not troubling superiors unnecessarily, clearly shows Kotori’s identification as a Foreigner and as a “Japanese” salaryman.

Hanazou also reveals slips in his direct speech, alternating between “*honne-tatemae*” either due to his excitement or accidentally revealing to his superior that he had accepted others into his inner circle. For example, Hanazou is familiar with the owner of the clothing shop, but in the conversation with his superior, he has to maintain *tatemae* and speak in polite language. However, he makes a slip and corrects himself quickly, “Is she? I should catch u—greet her again sometime” (61). His fluctuation between *honne* and *tatemae* throughout the entire conversation (61-62) finally makes his superior laugh—making his superior break his *tatemae* for an instant as well (62). This shows the conflict between Hanazou’s identification of Self and Other which is externalised in his speech.

In addition, according to Tsai’s study on the Asian Foreigner, the Asian Foreigner is more tolerant than the Western Foreigner: “The Asian group showed less significant change in the development of its attitudes over all factors” (Tsai 529); and “The absence of a honeymoon stage could be explained by the similarity of the Chinese group’s cultural context to the Japanese...” (Tsai 530). I portray this by revealing multiple times that, for example, Hanazou usually does not mind about the uniqueness of his work (24, 89-90) or the Japanese culture (5, 60). The characters also internally question but usually do not act out on it unlike Gainsbourg and Hanasaki—for example, they also do not ask their colleagues for answers (e.g. 21; 43), thus not challenging societal notions of the “ideal” salaryman in this case.

In conclusion, the portrayals of the Asian Foreigner characters’ conflicts with their identities can be seen by analysing characterisation and are also assisted by the multi-narrator and third person omniscient narrator. However, as their cultures are similar to the Japanese, they also reach a state of compromise, but unlike the white Westerners, they internalise their dissatisfaction which results in different manifestations of the “Other”—such as nightmares.

5. Conclusion

This exegesis set out to analyse how the “Other” is portrayed in salaryman novels and how their identities are constructed. Undoubtedly, there are limitations in the currently available research and I suggest areas of future study: I propose that further research can be conducted on other modern salaryman novels as the currently available research not up to date (Gills 175). For example, a 2018 street interview of Foreign workers in Japan, conducted by Asian Boss, and a 2016 Japanese government survey of Foreign Residents in Japan (Centre of Human Rights Education and Training) reveal that despite the influx of Foreign workers, the Foreign workers’ experience of working in Japan has not deviated far from those portrayed in *Fear* and *Blue*. Some findings of a 2018 survey on “Japanese Value Orientations” indicate that the Japanese have become less interested in interacting with Foreigners (Eiraku “the changing view of foreigners” 1; Aramaki Hiroshi, Murata Hiroko and Yoshizawa Chiwako 1) and that the traditional perceptions about family, gender and work have been changing (Eiraku “Women” 1; Aramaki et al. 1). Other findings of this survey should be made available (currently, only the 2008 report, as compiled by Kono Kei, Takahashi Koichi, and Hara Miwako, is fully available), and further researched on. Additionally, how the homosexual salaryman fits into the salaryman discourse can be explored further. Moreover, in this thesis, I draw upon a “general” definition of Western theory of Self/Other dichotomy. Another reading of *Fear*, as Honoré points out and also explains (110, 115), can be that the author is writing and responding critically to the representations of Japan in French media and press. Similarly, for *Blue*, Murtagh could have been responding to the representations of Japan in Ireland. This is a consideration for future work.

In this thesis, I have suggested that the boundaries of Self/Other are blurred, cross-cultural interactions allow the building of the awareness of being Self/Other and further conflict arises from the differences between individual salaryman identity and societal notions of the “ideal” salaryman identity. I have analysed this by deconstructing their representations in the novels, focussing on characterisation.

The analyses of *Blue* and *Fear* reveal that the Other is usually portrayed as the white Westerner who has logical Western values while the Japanese characters and their associated Japanese behaviours are illogical. Furthermore, these Western characters craft their salaryman identities (“Japanese” Self) and this not only conflicts with their Western Selves, but also with their labels of being the Other and notions of the “ideal” salaryman. Although they are aware of being simultaneously Self and Other through cross-cultural interactions, they are portrayed as subscribing more to the Euro-centric view of the Self and Other, whereby their Western Self is superior to the Other.

The analyses of *Toyotomi* and *Fushouji* reveal that the “Other” is usually portrayed as a character that looks foreign, or a character that behaves unlike Japanese norms. It is largely the way Japanese society views these characters with rejection that serves as a catalyst to create the conflict between their Self and Other—when their individual salaryman identities or Japanese Selves conflict with those of societal expectations. In fact, these characters are portrayed as subscribing more to the Japanese notion of the Self—the superiority of the Japanese over Others, as they constantly assert their Japaneseness.

There is also a similarity between *Fushouji*, *Blue* and *Fear*, in which the characters are portrayed as selectively subscribing to the Self or Other, or *honne* or *tatemae*. It is implied that it is a conscious decision in *Fushouji* and *Blue*. Hence, while it is clear that the Self and Other have been constructed as not autonomous in all four texts, there are instances in which the Self and Other can be “selected” to be displayed.

Moreover, the Western writers do not seem to use or show an understanding of “*honne-taemae*” consistently, whereas the Japanese writers use “*honne-taemae*” more clearly and consistently. As such, the “Others”, portrayed by the Japanese writers do not seem to have a clear portrayal of the Western Self, but have a clearer portrayal of the Western Other. This allows the “Other” in *Toyotomi* and *Fushouji* to retain their Japaneseness.

In conclusion, I have shown that in salaryman novels, the portrayal of a Foreign (or “Other”) character’s Self/Other and identity is complicated by cultural and individual differences.

These differences consist of the conflict between cultures (for example, Western and Japanese values and behaviour), the conflict between Western-centric and Japanese-centric theories of Self/Other, the conflict that arises from the selective usage of *honne-tatemae*, and the conflict between an individual's salaryman identity and societal expectations of salaryman identity. These differences are further highlighted by the stilted way the salaryman genre portrays the Other in novels, which is largely seen in character portrayal. It is also clear that the ambivalence and ambiguity of cross-cultural human interaction cannot be explained by a single theory.

I further extrapolate my findings to the portrayal of Asian Foreigner salaryman in my novel, *Cooperation*. First, I have suggested that with the rise in the importance of Asian Foreign Workers in Japan, salaryman novels and those about Asian Foreign Workers would increase in significance to Japanese society. Furthermore, the understanding of *honne* and *tatemae* is a key factor in differentiating the Self from the "Other" in Japanese contexts. Moreover, I have also proposed that there are differences between the Western Foreigner salaryman and Asian Foreigner salaryman and this influences how the Asian Foreigner salaryman is portrayed in salaryman novels. However, as the Asian Foreigner is rarely seen as a character in salaryman novels, the portrayal of the Asian Foreigner can only be extrapolated from the available portrayals of Western Foreigners and the "Other" in salaryman novels. *Cooperation* is thus, a novel in which the symbiotic Self and Other of Asian Foreign Workers are further explored. It is also an attempt to clearly show how *honne* and *tatemae* can be used to portray the conflicts of their Self/Other and identity which is complicated by cultural and individual differences. It represents my hope to reach out to the interested reader regarding the plights and representations of the Asian Foreign Worker via a salaryman novel that is unlike those written by Western writers.

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