Angel Leader Kim Jonghyun

by officialjpdara

Summary

More than half a decade after Produce 101 Season 2, Kim Jonghyun and the rest of NU'EST broke their contract with Pledis Entertainment and started their own entertainment company. Their third boy group would've done their debut if not for CEO Kim Jonghyun's unwanted trip to the past—to the Produce 101 era.

Notes

I've been trying to avoid survival shows of any kind, as my poor emotional constitution can't handle my favorites getting axed at the end of the show, but then I have a really persuasive (and evil sister) who made me watch Sorry, Sorry and Never performances quite a few times (Note: 17, last count) and withheld information on who they are. Had no choice but to research and watch Episode 0 last week and it got me hooked (Stupid Mnet).

See, I have this horrible luck and it manifested its horns at Episode 11 when my fixed pick Kim Jonghyun, onibugi leader of all the legendary stages of Season 2, got 14th place. Damn. Then Samuel got 18th place, and I thought the world was ending and that Kylie Jenner chose to go on religious pilgrimage in the East.

So I thought, why not write something?

I have no hate whatsoever with Wanna One, JBJ, and NU'EST W; they're young idols who did their very best on the show, smart enough to play the hearts of the viewers without downplaying their personalities and talented enough to prosper in the idol scene. And NU'EST's fame was a long time coming (Note: I became a fan of NU'EST in 2014).
Jaehwan, Jonghyun, Seongwoo, Daniel, Daehwi, Kenta, Yongguk, and Minhyun were my fixed picks as well since Episode 3 and I'm truly happy for them.

Stupid onibugi leader though, can't get this plot out of my mind. Read a few fanfics and saw a dearth of Kim Jonghyun being his 'Angel Leader' self and everyone trying to get a piece of the good captain so I had to write something.

If there are any changes in the plot line, consider the guy knowing everyone and not giving a crap about the ranks because he's gonna get the trainees in the end anyways (Sucks to be you, crappy entertainment companies!)

Onibugi's about to capture everyone's hearts and you should be there to witness the chaos!

So, uh...have fun reading!

(Inspired by a fusion of the MORII fanfiction and all the Produce 101 time-travel fics!)
I am Marty McFly

The moment he woke up, Kim Jonghyun knew something was wrong.

It was too dark to see anything other than the silhouette of his closet and the small coffee table a few feet away. But he learned not to ignore his intuition, and it was sending off very bad signals which prompted him to scramble up and away from his bed. Breathing heavily, he scanned the room with wary eyes.

It was a strange feeling; seeing that everything is in place but knowing something was out of place—the couch, cabinet, the trusty thermos on the bedside table that Minki gifted him for his nineteenth birthday. Everything was there where it should be.

Except…

Jonghyun rushed to his desk table near the window and gaped.

Where was his papers?

His table was clear and tidy, no sign of him ever working on it last night. His sign pen was not on the pen latch, his draft proposals and submitted financial reports on their company’s plan for comeback in March were not in his untidy paper basket. Even Dongho’s performance evaluation on—

Bang! Then, “Jonghyun-ah, what’s with all the ruckus in here?”

“Yah! Why did you overturn your chair?”

Then a voice much closer to him whispered. “Hyun-ah, are you okay? You look…stressed.”

Jonghyun let out a wild laugh but inside he was panicking. Badly. He’s the CEO and he lost his documents. This is really bad. But then maybe this is a very elaborate prank, even if it’s not their style. He pulled the curtains open, letting the moonlight wash over their confused faces, and sent them the darkest glare that he could muster at three in the damn morning.

“Where is it?”

Near the door, Aron hyung frowned in confusion. “What—?”

Jonghyun wildly gestured to his desk table. “The papers and my sign pen. The deals, reports—everything!”

Minki snorted in disbelief. “I don’t know what you mean by deals and reports, but you gave your music sheets to me last night. As for your pen, you lost it, remember? Does arcade and stupidly bringing a fountain pen to a basketball shooting game ring a bell?”

“…what.”

Dongho narrowed his gaze but did not comment.

Jonghyun was so confused that it was difficult to think past the viscous molasses that his brain suddenly became. He doesn’t remember any music sheets stacked in his eyesore of a desk, that was Dongho’s job and he never intervenes in his perfectionist brother’s forte unless absolutely necessary. And an arcade? The last time he went to an arcade was when his
trainee dongsaengs begged him for a day-off and he treated them to an all-expense-paid trip to Japan. As far as his memory recalls, he was not in the basketball shooting game and he did not bring his lucky pen for very obvious reasons.

Minhyun walked closer, his worried expression illuminated by the moon. “Jonghyun-ah, what’s wrong? Tell us, please. We can’t help you if you won’t tell us.”

“I—I—”

Jonghyun backed away from the concerned expressions, trying to think through. Years of leading his entertainment company honed his intellectual and rational side to a sharpness the likes of which no one expected he could reach. Granted, he pursued an idol life for more than half of his life and the only “sharpness” expected of him were in his choreography and rapping skills, but being the executive director of his own company changed him and his priorities in life.

But for the life of him he didn’t know what to make out of this. Either Minhyun and Dongho became formidable actors overnight and they were pranking him for reasons unbeknownst to him or they seriously did not know what the problem was. And that in itself is ridiculous because their future idols’ path to stardom just disappeared under their noses.

Wait—

“It’s my birthday isn’t it? That’s why you’re pranking me—”

Slap!

Jonghyun stared at the fuming Dongho, the red handprint on his arm a glaring reminder that, yes, the laidback Kang Dongho just slapped him hard enough to bruise.

Dongho’s blank expression was unnerving. “There. You needed to come back to your senses, Jonghyun-nie. Calm enough to think?”

A wary nod.

Dongho let out a long sigh and ushered the others towards the bed. They sat in a circle, eying each other in trepidation. When the silence began to grate on his nerves, Dongho closed his eyes with a pained expression.

“I know it’s hard on everyone, especially you Jonghyun-nie, and I’m so sorry about everything. It’s my fault that we’re getting into Produce 101. The Pledis girls…they were telling me how the show gave them a fighting chance to debut and…I just thought that, maybe, we can try one more time before we…stop trying.”

Aron hyung’s face was grim as he patted Dongho’s shoulder in comfort. Minki was unusually silent as he stared down at his hands. Minhyun looked away from the others.

Jonghyun was in shock.

It can’t be.

The dark and dusty back of the closet was not the ideal place to find the answers to all that is happening now but it can serve as an excellent source of refuge and/or “hiding place” from the pressing questions. He wrapped both arms around his knees and ignored the pounding on the door.
and the anxious voices calling out for him to let them in.

Kim Jonghyun was in turmoil with his emotions running all over the place.

Produce 101.

Is time-travel even possible?

He remembered watching a subbed movie of *Back to the Future* when he was in Pledis but that was make-believe, a loose interpretation on the idea of travelling back through time and somehow not changing anything in the future, which is really stupid once he thought about it a few years after he watched the movie. Admittedly, he did not follow scientific trends and breakthroughs as much as tabloids and social media posts about his company but he was certain that such research on a very controversial scientific revolution crossing over the boundaries of fantasy and reality would have trended all social media platforms indefinitely.

But it doesn’t change the fact that he just went back through time.

A logical person would verify the impossible and he just did. He ignored Minhyun’s increasing worry as he asked questions like “What date is it today?”, “What time?”, “Where are we?”, and ask for all their cellphones synced to their time zone. His suspicions were confirmed but he was adamant that he called his mother and asked the date before abruptly ending the call after she complained at the time he called.

Three weeks before the first shooting.

Damn.

What was he supposed to do now?

Jonghyun woke up to the sound of Minki’s screeching and let out a sigh. He folded his bed sheets and went out the room just in time to watch Aron hyung slather Minki in lotion and walked out of the room with a bang. That was fine, normal, an almost-everyday occurrence of their maknae being a diva. Minki would get over it eventually, he rolled his eyes in fond annoyance. As he always did every time Minhyun or Dongho gets too much of his attitude and retaliates accordingly.

He had bigger fish to fry at this point.

Three weeks had blindly passed by. He could recall their rehearsals and the frustrated groans of disapproval from their mentors. After their tenth failed dance rehearsal, Jonghyun slipped away from the others and eavesdropped on the mentors’ discussion. The results were not good: Dongho’s vocals were slipping into flats and sharps, Minhyun’s dancing went from idol-mediocre to downright trainee-horrible, and Minki was sullener and his performance was greatly affected. It was a good thing that Aron hyung did not see the disaster of NU’EST but the commentary made Jonghyun think of the consequences if he were to change anything.

He didn’t know what would happen if NU’EST performed better than the audition he remembered.

The ball was in his hands now.

The only thing he had to do was to throw it or let it roll away.
He was in a daze as he methodically ate his rice and spooned his soup before they were ushered by a Pledis representative into a black Sedan. They were brought to the studio, shaking hands and determined expressions intact, and met the aesthetics team of Produce 101.

It was a whirlwind of activities after that. They were given a room to themselves far from the hundred trainees milling around the studio but the cacophony of shouts and heavy running outside caused bile to rise up his throat. He pushed it down harshly while gently correcting the smudged eye shadow with a Q-tip. The makeup was rushed and messy as the few makeup artists juggled all the trainees’ style concepts while avoiding other running coordinators. Soon, they were left alone in the room to finish dressing up. Their years of experience showed as they put their matching black tuxedo ensemble and clipped their accents and microphone on each other’s suits without saying a word.

Aron hyung not joining them was what Jonghyun remembered, to both his relief and sadness. He did not know what his knowledge would bring in the timeline, the unfair advantage that he had over everyone, but the fact that some things did not change made him a bit reassured that he was going the right way, wherever that is. However, he was still sad that they would not be complete. After all, for better or worse, the show did change their fates in the end.

Together, they walked towards the couch and sat down in unison. Minki grabbed the nearest water bottle, took a sip, and passed it to Minhyun. Dongho was wringing his fingers, a sure-tell sign of his nervousness. Aron hyung was there to support them, standing behind the couch with a blank expression on his face.

Jonghyun watched all this with sad eyes. It was painful to see his brothers’ insecurities painted in red for everyone to see. He did not forget the confident stance of Minhyun as he evaluated each trainee with special skill sets with a critical yet kind eyes, the pleased expression on Dongho’s face as his “vocal babies” reached notes higher than he could ever do, the sophisticated aura of Choi Minki as he flitted over the performance units like a fairy godmother on sugar high, and the calm and reassuring personality of Aron hyung as he produced new concepts and videos like they were going out of style.

These were not the persons he knew who were at their full potential.

Kim Jonghyun narrowed his gaze as he remembered the slander he heard from his mentors and present CEO, the six-year hiatus, the numerous almost-disbandment notices he callously received from a representative on a tacky piece of paper—

“Enough.”

Three heads swiveled in his direction, mouths agape at the hard tone in his voice.

“Hyun-ah…”

“We’re doing this the right way. No hesitations, no rookie mistakes—we’re idols, older than most of the idol groups today, and with six years of experience etched on our bodies. I know you don’t want to be here;” His voice slipped into a whisper as he stopped Dongho from wringing his fingers. “But treat this as an opportunity to start again. We’ll get through this.”

The tension left their shoulders as they gave their leader a shaky thumbs-up and a smile. The only one who did not look up was Minhyun who further shrunk into himself.

Aron hyung smiled beseechingly. “Come now, Minhyun-nie. We can do this. Weren’t you the one who said that this can work if we knew how to play right? So, we need you and your over-critical
mind to help us win and debut together.”

To his left Minki stood up and unceremoniously plopped down on Minhyun’s lap, ignoring the oomph and glare from the visual member, “Yah! You even told me we’re going to find our dongsaengs-for-life because Seungkwan-nie, Minggyu-ah, and Seokmin-nie were just too annoying!”

Jonghyun remembered the interaction between his members and the young trainees they bonded with. After the competition, they kept close contact with Seonho and Guanlin because Minhyun and Dongho won’t take “I’m too busy, hyung!” for an answer. Minki’s children from Yuehua Entertainment and his ‘Oh Little Girl’ babies were too clingy to even ignore. And his ‘Sorry, Sorry’, ‘Fear’, ‘Never’ team…

“No.” Minhyun shook his head. “I—I don’t really care whether we win or not. We’re more than this. Just…don’t let us forget who we are, Jonghyun-ah, please.”

At that moment, Jonghyun made a promise. He may not know the reason why he was sent back in time, but he was here now and his brothers need him. He didn’t care if he places 14th again. Eight years from now, he will make an oath to his company, to his trainees, to his brothers…and he’d be damned if he won’t get them the push that they need and avoiding all pains as much as possible.

“The competition got tougher when these people came,” someone whispered in the back.

“Why are they debuting, again? Isn’t it a bit unfair that they get to join?”

“Our chances of winning just got smaller.”

“Don’t you think that a 5-year idol joining is a bit, um…”

“Isn’t it sad that SEVENTEEN succeeded them even if they debuted first?”

Kim Jaehwan subtly looked to his right. Their scathing tones belied the awed expressions on their faces as the formed idol group performed in front of trainees. Some were truly amazed at the charismatic aura that the idol trainees were showing. Others were skeptical and disbelieving as their sunbaenims performed far below what they expected from a debuted group—a ‘D’, they got a ‘D’!

Most were just in shock. After all, they are still an idol group, formed longer than most of the groups they know, and they’re joining a competition for trainees.

Jaehwan did not know what to think.

He did not think of NU’EST as poor performers nor did he think of them as the epitome of success that only idol groups can reach.

He thought they looked blank. Like, they were just, there.

Jaehwan was not most people. He was the silent type, an observer. He saw the harsh glares hidden by deceiving murmurs of awe. He saw how the four men in sharp tuxedos contrasted with the poor amalgamation of hoodies, ripped jeans, and lax shirts. He saw them tense as they heard what the other trainees were saying.
Kim Jonghyun looked back, scanning the crowd with a forced smile in his face. He met the startled
gaze of the independent trainee Kim Jaehwan and his smile grew softer as he exchanged a small
nod of acknowledgement to the trainee Minhyun was deeply impressed with. He turned back, just
in time to catch Minhyun’s questioning stare.

We’ll do better. Before, Jonghyun would have looked straight ahead, away from all the stares:
away from Kahi, the judging stares of the mentors, away from all that. But he, out of all people,
knew that avoiding the criticism would be seen as weakness, an outright refusal to acknowledge
their failures. We can’t be seen as weak. I have four important persons depending on me. He met
each stare with a smile.

Minki’s hands were slightly trembling and he grasped the limb as tightly as he could between
them, hidden from the cameras. Dongho remained stoic and calculating as he eyed some of the
wary trainees.

On his other side, Minhyun whispered as he nodded slightly. “We’ll rise to the top, Jonghyun-ah.”

Don’t worry, Minhyun-nie, I’ll make sure of it.

I made a promise to all of my brothers.

Even at my cost.

They were divided and the practice was gruesome. After two days of failed vocal and dance
rehearsals for ‘Nayana!’ stage they were utterly dispirited. The mentors were ruthless as they
subjected everyone to harsh criticisms, much more to those who cannot keep with the
choreography and vocal training. The added weight of guilt for failing to show a powerful
performance for their audition—

No. Jonghyun shook his head, determined to pull this off, if not for himself then for his members.
They talked about this in the dressing room before they went into their audition and they were
adamant that he would be the sure ace into the competition, even betting that he would get Rank 1
in the missions, much to his ire.

“I don’t really care whether we win or not. We’re more than this. Just…don’t let us forget who we
are.”

Hard for him to do really, he grimaced as he watched Kahi noona verbally flay both Dongho and
Minki with sharp rebukes and disappointed stares. The other trainees were looking down on their
feet, nervous and scared of the scary dance instructor that they once thought was nice and
welcoming. The trainee beside him, a heart-shaped faced lanky boy with mousy hair, was shaking
so badly that he almost dislodged his mic from his green sweater.

A curling red haze momentarily overcame his senses and he clenched his fists behind his back,
aware of the seven cameras brought by cameramen and a few dozen others hidden above the
mirrors, waiting to capture the best story for the viewer.

This. This is why he hates survival shows.

The emotional torrent and psychological abuse brought down by words and criticism from
someone who clearly doesn’t know the trainees, and merely based it off on what is seen and what
is not shown just makes the show even more of a horrid ordeal that these trainees have to face for
months. And that’s what makes Produce 101 popular—it’s because the idea of creating your own
idol group, preconceived notions and all, overshadows all the pain and emotional breakdowns that your idols face just to get enough screen time to capture your attention.

But with years of experience being an idol and a CEO in his trophy belt, he should be the most knowledgeable of how showmanship works.

It is brutal and more often than not, unrewarding.

But it is what it is.

Just...don't let us forget who we are.

Jonghyun thought of how desperate and haunted his dongsaeng sounded and it became a mantra in his head. He knew what they would be facing.

Maybe...Minhyun was on to something.

We're more than this.

He moved closer to the quivering trainee and whispered, "You okay?"

The trainee jerked up, wide eyes blinking up at him.

Yuehua Entertainment Ahn Hyeongseop, the vinyl sticker contrasted with his green uniform. Jonghyun was dimly aware that he was staring disturbingly at an anxious Hyeongseop and that he should stop before the boy spontaneously combusts but he couldn’t.

Not with his idol looking at him strangely.

“What—?”

Jonghyun ignored all honorifics and focused on the distressed expression on his face. Trembling but with an unyielding determination to ease even a little of the child’s pain, he grasped his hand and gave it a slight squeeze.

He’s too young, he grimaced. But the awed and grateful expression turned towards him alleviated some of the pain in his heart as he saw the insecurities and fear Hyeongseop once told him back when they were both in Produce 101.

Jonghyun looked back to the front with calm gaze. It was not only for them, not only for NU’EST, because the ill-disguised horror and despair in Hyeongseop’s eyes serves as a crippling reminder that it was not only him who had so much to lose—

He was not an impulsive person (that was Minki’s main personality) but at that moment, he knew he changed something in the future. Whether it’s a good thing or not remained to be seen, though. Nevertheless, he knew he had a responsibility to fulfill and it includes everyone who touched and would touch his life in the future.

“It’s okay, Hyeongseop-ah.” Jonghyun saw the dazed expression on Hyeongseop, hoping no one caught their small interaction. He squeezed his hand and was happy when Hyeongseop squeezed back, albeit a shaky one.

(Jaehwan sent him an apologetic glance as the Cube chicks ran off to spread the news that Kim Jonghyun admitted he felt like a father for all trainees and with that responsibility he wanted to
treat everyone with chicken.)

(He never said a thing but then what can he do with a scheming Seongwoo, a crazed Jiseong, a mischievous Samuel, and a Lee Daehwi ready to kill for chicken?)

Years afterward, and with almost thirty faces looming over his bed as they cheerily woke him up for breakfast, he’d wonder if Minhyun having eerily accurate predictions and Seongwoo quipping in an offhand manner that Jonghyun had foreseen the future and went back in time just to stop him from renewing his contract with Fantagio Entertainment mainly for the idol’s awesome cooking were made to bring bouts of insanity in his life.
Dinner with the trainees from different classes was…well, consider him slightly unnerved that he didn’t realize how awkward it was the first time.

Well, except Class ‘D’ of course, much to Jonghyun’s pride.

Class ‘D’ was the first to be dismissed by their impressed mentors. Their rehearsal ended with a light atmosphere of laughter, teasing, and rowdiness. Kwon Jaesung admitted that he had no hopes of them leveling up because of their subpar performance, vocal-wise and dance-wise, for the re-evaluation. But he was so surprised and touched at how the so-called low-ranked trainees were able to surpass their differences, especially pride, to help and work together, even exclaiming that Class 'A' never showed such professionalism and camaraderie with each other. Kahi noona was smiling so wide after the evaluation and congratulated everyone for a job well done.

Jonghyun was not stupid. He saw the knowing glance his sunbaenim threw at him on her way out.

Minki and Dongho sat in front of him, their slumped shoulders two days ago were gone as they jabbed innocent insults at their dongsangs for acting so clingy with their Jonghyun-nie. Gunhee stuck his tongue out as he hugged the amused Jonghyun’s arm to his body.

And because Minki would not admit that he was furious at Gunhee for getting his usual hugging position, he just threw a stray carrot at the vocalist.

Cue a small food fight led by Minki, thankfully unseen by the cafeteria staff because they’re the only ones in the cafeteria.

Jonghyun exchanged an exasperated glance with Guanlin and Dongho but avoided a flying pillow (Where in the heck did Hyeop get a sofa pillow?) towards his face.

His small act of comfort became a catalyst to something he was not sure of. But one thing he knew was that his friendship in Class ‘D’ did not happen the first time around and he was glad he did it now.

After he comforted the teen, they were given a two-hour break to freshen up and “re-evaluate their purpose in life”. Minki left the room without a glance and Dongho followed after he signaled Jonghyun to stay put to divert questions from the others. No one noticed the sudden departure of the NU’EST members, preferring to wallow in their misery. One of the few who were relatively okay emotionally was Hyeongseop.

The boy was jolly underneath the shy persona and it showed with his wide grins and eye-smiles as he copied Jonghyun do the choreography in ‘Nayana’. Minki and Dongho joined them and relegated his most embarrassing moments to a laughing Hyeongseop. Their infectious rough-housing/tutorial attracted the attention of many trainees. Soon, Jonghyun was surrounded by many familiar faces begging him to teach them the song, much to Dongho’s amusement.

The atmosphere in Class ‘D’ room suddenly changed from the oppressive aura to a welcoming one. The trainees who didn’t want to make friends for the fear of having more competition made a 180-degree turn were laughing with each other as they made improvised dance moves to the ones they forgot. Jonghyun was the only one unsurprised as Hyeongseop showed the others why he’s one of his priced dance lines in the future.

Still, Hyeongseop was like a wallflower compared to a diva-and sparkles Choi Minki, both past and
future. But then, isn’t everyone? Jonghyun snorted and hastily dismissed the curious glance from a passing Lee Kiwon before Hyeongseop resumed his impromptu dance battle against a coerced Lee Gunhee and Kwon Hyeop with everyone cheering them on.

Poor Guanlin was overwhelmed by his loud hyungs that he chose to stick to the normal ones like Dongho.

It was slightly nostalgic for the time-traveler to see Dongho taking into Guanlin like a papa bear being overprotective with his cub as he blocked the others from pulling the Taiwanese boy into their crazy ways.

The mentors returned two hours after, dreading another abysmal performance from the lower-ranked trainees, but was pleasantly surprised because what was once a hopeless class became…acceptable. It was a surreal to see how the strategized, not to show-off but to help the others.

Kwon Jaesung, the dance instructor, noted the trainees lined up front: Ahn Hyeongseop, a sure-shot to Class ‘B’ or ‘A’ if not for his subpar vocals; Kim Donghan, good at performance and stage presence; Choi Minki, member of NU’EST and was an “okay” dancer if not always eaten by his nerves; and Lee Kiwon, adequate in memorizing choreography but lacks finesse.

The four were eye-catching as they danced to ‘Nayana’ with a confidence not found days ago. There were a few mistakes here and there, Choi Minki a tad offbeat and Kiwon having difficulty with the jump part, but it was far better than the last rehearsals.

The trainees in the middle were the ones who cannot dance for their life or were too distracted to stamp the choreography in their heads. But he could see their effort as they followed the dancers in front to their very best. They cannot be main dancers, true, but they’re coping. And that’s the best he can get from vocalists and rappers like Lee Gunhee, Lee Hoolim, Lee Yoojin, and Yoo Hoseong.

The dance instructor raised an eyebrow at the trainees lined at the back, subtly correcting the wrong step with a nudge at the leg or a hand brushed on the shoulder. Notable trainees at the back were Kim Jonghyun, Kang Dongho, and Lai Guanlin.

He didn’t understand why the Cube trainee was positioned at the back when he needed all the help he can get. His question was answered when Kim Jonghyun shuffled to his left and positioned himself slightly in front so the Taiwanese trainee can follow the steps.

Kwon Jaesung exchanged a small smile with Kahi.

It seems Class ‘D’ found their middle ground.

And he said this to the trainees whose self-esteem and confidence rose up as they received glowing commendations from the mentors and ended the dance rehearsal with wide smiles on their faces.

Therefore, the rowdy group of Class ‘D’ caught the attention of the other classes.

In the middle of their lunch period, Class ‘A’ trudged in the cafeteria with tired faces and slumped shoulders. The sight of green-clad trainees having fun was such a novelty to the A-list trainees that they stopped in their tracks to watch Ahn Hyeongseop smudge rice on a protesting Dongho and get a mild rebuke from Jonghyun who pulled his sweater down next to him. Guanlin, who was seated beside the burly vocal, hesitantly gestured to his cheek and laughed when Dongho wiped his cheek and passed the flattened rice to a shrieking Minki.
The pink-decked trainees hastily shuffled towards the table nearest the food, still glancing towards their table with various expressions on their faces. Class 'B' followed next, looking slightly less stressed than 'A'. Class 'F' entered next, looking so dejected that Jonghyun wanted to ease up their pain a little bit by smiling comfortingly at them. He was rewarded by shy smiles and lighter faces.

Class 'C' entered last. Immediately, Minhyun’s wary gaze met his worried ones and his tensed shoulders loosened a bit and smiled towards his brother before he sat down his table to eat, ignoring his classmates who were gaping at Kwon Hyeop and Kim Donghan’s exaggerated mukbang challenge. Their reactions were as comical as Class 'A' but a bit subdued due to the mob of cameras and staff trailing in as they positioned their equipment to film the trainees’ first lunch.

Jonghyun sent a warning glance to the others and they settled down giggling and whispering jokes to each other. He was satisfied when they kept their food where it should be.

One of the staffs, a tall masked man with a heavy-looking clipboard, went over their table. “Class 'D', you will be the last to be evaluated by your vocal instructors. Standby for evaluation after the other classes.”

The table was oddly silent as the man turned and walked to Class 'C'. A hesitant Guanlin whispered, “What does it mean? Why are we the last?”

Kwon Hyeop frowned, “I don’t know. We did well in today’s dance evaluation, right? Why—”

He was stopped by a snort. Heads swiveled in the direction of the unlikeliest person to make such a noise.

Jonghyun gestured for them to come closer, squished so tight that he felt Hyeongseop halfway on his lap, as they piled their heads together and blocked out the rest from their table. They watched as the expressionless face of their de-facto leader morph into a wide grin.

“Congratulations Class 'D'. We just received a gift from the mentors for a job well done. They’re giving us free time to practice more.”

Soon their confused expressions changed into surprise, awe, then to jaw-dropping realization that they were noticed for their hard work and teamwork early in the show.

They were given a fighting chance.

Jonghyun watched with both resignation and fond exasperation as the table of Class 'D' dissolved into laughter and chaos, their happiness and pride cannot be contained further.

The other trainees were shocked to silence.

The cameras were eating this gold of a storyline.

Jonghyun didn’t give a rat’s ass about Mnet’s editing.

His class did well and he was happy he helped this time around.
A New Friend

They did not do as well in singing compared to their dancing but they were easier-going now and
took the criticisms with an eager smile and a promise to do better than letting pity and nerves
swallow them whole.

Lee Seokhoon seongsaengnim heard about what happened in Class 'D' from the dance instructors
and was understandably curious. The other classes were evaluated first and most of them met but
did not exceed expectations: Class 'A' was still the group of elite trainees trying to outdo each other,
'B' was not much better, 'C' was passable as they remained the same consistent "okay" group, and
'F' was just saddening to watch.

So, it was no surprise that he was anticipating the “underdogs” of the competition, a group who
suddenly made the best out of their situation and work together under a certain Pledis trainee who
took them under his wing.

A leader early in the competition—what a pleasant change for once, Lee Seokhoon could only
shake his head in disbelief as he watched the de-facto leader open the rehearsal room, bow towards
them, and usher the other trainees in before entering last.

The vocal mentor raised an eyebrow at the united front that Class 'D' was showing with the
younger and more dance-oriented trainees placed in the middle and the vocally-trained ones
standing at the ends.

“Okay. Let’s start. Maroo Entertainment Kwon Hyeop…”

As the evaluation went further, Lee Seokhoon exchanged a glance with Shin Yumi. It was
amazing, really. Each trainee called up-front was not hesitant in delivering the song and did not
falter when he made them stop to repeat the part that were too sharp, a bit flat, or running on a
whole different note.

Instead of wilting in humiliation, they turned uncertainly to the left where Kim Jonghyun was
standing with Pledis trainee Kang Dongho. It also did not escape his notice that the encouragement
from the two experienced trainees made the others stand up straighter, a fiery determination
burning in their eyes.

When Lee Hoolim’s raspy tone reached one of the higher notes that he had difficulty in with little
effort and abruptly paused to throw an awed expression to the left before resuming with far more
confidence than when he started, he concluded that these trainees discovered their potential that he
was unable to see since the beginning in just a few hours with Kim Jonghyun, who coincidentally
decided to show his vast potential that Lee Seokhoon dismissed multiple times.

The main rapper of NU’EST and the one who cannot carry a note to save his life, as Kahi lamented
more times than he can count, was doing admirably well for a rapper. He stuck to vocal tone,
changing the key to suit his voice more than screeching the song. His husky tone and low, almost-
but-not-quite baritone vocal range made the cutesy song alluring to the ears—a sensual, almost
provocative rendition portraying his charisma and emphasizing the fact that if his rendition
happened to be broadcasted, the fans would go wild. His dancing—well, he’s not the main dancer
for no reason.

And yet the moment he finished without any flourish, he silently waited for his verdict and
thanked him for the compliment before he dismissed the praises from his awed classmates with a
blush and disappeared at the back of the line, clearly letting the limelight go to the others.

Lee Seokhoon acknowledged their hard work and effort as he noted their marked improvement in their vocals. He also gave them pointers to remember—

“Avoid raising your voice. Some of you are reaching the screechy-stage already. Just let the music adjust to your vocal color and it will turn out better.”

—and gave an offhand approval on the person who helped them improve in such a short time—

“I’m glad that someone among you knew what he was doing.”

The glances towards a blushing Kang Dongho did not go unnoticed.

Overall, he was content that they performed best among all the classes and he sent them off to dinner. They trailed outside, talking and laughing with each other, but not without patting or outright hugging Kim Jonghyun who was standing on the sidelines.

Kim Jonghyun turned back to them, smiling. “Thank you again, seongsaengnims, for teaching us and uplifting our spirits. We promise to do better so you’ll be proud of our class. Goodnight and thank you again.”

After the Pledis trainee bowed to them and closed the doors, Shin Yumi seongsaengnim whispered as they exited the rehearsal rooms. “I don’t know what I just saw but that is one heck of a leader right there.”

Seokhoon watched as Class ‘D’ waited and dragged a laughing Jonghyun towards the cafeteria.

“If that trainee won’t make it to Top 11, I’ll throw my keyboard at the producers.”

“But…we learned so much from you…”

But that doesn’t mean he has to help all the time, Jonghyun inwardly moaned at the imploring faces weakening his argument.

Because news traveled fast in Produce 101 regardless of time and place, it was not astonishing that the sudden improvement of Class ‘D’ spread like wildfire amongst all the trainees. Anyone with the right motivation can do anything they put their minds into, he’d reason out if he got interviewed and/or harassed, but their fast improvement had a lot of tongues wagging.

He was not affected by their opinions. Rather, he was much more interested at the other rumors…

“What did you just say?”

The hysterical tone did not deter the talkative-for-once Hyeongseop as he leaned forward to grab a fried shrimp off Jonghyun’s plate. “The other trainees are talking about you, hyung. They were interested so they approached the others and you know how Gunhee worships the ground you walk on and given the chance to brag about you…So,” He trailed off with a teasing lilt. “Now everyone’s referring to you as Angel Leader Kim Jonghyun, Main Leader Kim Jonghyun, Leaders’ Leader Kim Jonghyun, well that’s a bit of a mouthful but, hey, it works.”

“Again. What.”

The deadpan expression of Hyeongseop was eerily reminiscent of Aron hyung when he’s
particularly moody. “For someone so smart you can be as dumb as Hoolim hyung.”

Ignoring the offended “Yah!”, Jonghyun pressed the matters further. “But I didn’t do anything! I gave you pointers and taught the class the dance steps but that’s it.”

“Hyung forgot about the vocal training,” Gunhee whispered conspiratorially to an amused Dongho.

“And how to work the camera,” Minki brushed his nails on his sweater.

“You taught me how to pronounce korean words, hyung,” Guanlin muttered under his breath.

“See?” He waved a hand towards the others. “And I rest my case.”

*Why is Hyeongseop especially tenacious today out of all places?* Jonghyun inwardly despaired as he gaped at the Yuehua trainee.

“Okay, fine, maybe there is some truth to the rumors, but I still don’t get why it’s such a big deal to everyone. Every class has a leader of some sorts. Like Kang Daniel from MMO,” He pointed to a grinning pink-haired trainee among the orange-clad group. “I heard he led Class “B” after Jaesung seongsanagnim saw his performance yet no one’s talking about him.”

Kwon Hyeop jabbed a spoon in his direction. “Exactly. He didn’t exactly pick the position but he was chosen to take it. Unlike you hyung, you actually took the initiative to teach this moron here,” The incensed look on Ahn Hyeongseop’s face was so ridiculous it put a smile on everyone’s faces. “Before you decided that he’s not worth your effort so you went over to us, took pity on our horrendous dancing, and graced us with your angelic presence.” He wagged his eyebrows like a vaudeville villain as everyone laughed.

Minki put in his two-cents. “Because we’re the low-ranked trainees, Jonghyun-ah. Doing so well in a day when they’ve been slaving away for days was like a slap to their ego. Even the mentors noticed how you positioned everyone so we can all benefit from each other and that no one will get left behind.”


The said leader did not look convinced.

*Jonghyun is such a worry-wart,* Dongho resisted the urge to roll his eyes and sighed as he put the glass down, silently analyzing the tension on his shoulders and tried to ease his discomfort. “Yah, Jonghyun-ah,” He softly reprimanded. “Don’t worry about them. It’s their problem, not ours. Just know that when you get promoted, we’d still harass you for tutoring because you’re our leader-ah and you better remember that.” He meant it as a joke but the others agreed profusely on the sentiment.

Jonghyun had a far more complex problem than escaping his group (and self)-imposed responsibilities. He may not know why he was sent back in time but he’s not heartless that he’d want to change *everything* in *Produce 101*. Even now, he can feel the eyes as everyone speculated on his motives and/or genuineness. The stares were grating on his nerves and making him antsy because he did not get this much attention before and the fact that he’s now the trainee to watch out for implied that so many things had changed and he’s powerless to stop it.

He glanced at Class ‘C’ table and met Minhyun’s questioning gaze. He swallowed the bile that rose up his throat.

Minhyun, the only NU’EST member who got in the Top 11 and debuted as a Wanna One member.
In the first timeline, Minhyun was the one responsible for his rise to the top as “The Nation’s Leader” during the group battles. Not only his popularity increased, but so did his 'Sorry, Sorry' Team 2.

What does that mean for their future? Will Minhyun-nie even be noticed for his talents when he’s there, getting all the fame and attention early in the competition? But then what if it turned out to be a good thing, that most of Class ‘D’ would get promoted and with his current reputation, he’d get to help his all of brothers…

Jonghyun wanted to scream. No wonder the smartest people alive said they would never touch time-travel with a ten-inch pole—it was nerve-wracking and he wouldn’t be surprised if he doesn’t come out of this with sanity intact.

But worrying for something he had no control over was pointless, he learned that the hard way when he started the company from the bottom. Trying to stick to what he knew the first time was just dumb—he’d try to think of something when he gets there.

But in the meantime, …

He faced their pleading stares as he smiled weakly. “Uh, I’m okay with it I guess. Just for an hour, okay? We need proper rest for tomorrow’s activities…”

“Oneul bam juingongeun Naya na! Naya na!”

“A little higher at the hook, Donghan-nie.”

“Ne, Dongho hyung.”

“Neomaneul gidaryeo on Naya na! Naya na!”

“Ne mameul humchil saram Naya na! Naya na!”

“Argh! Why can’t I get this step right?”

“Just think you’re a little bird, Hoolim hyung. Jump then recover the steps so you won’t miss the part. Like this…”

“…Minki-yah, I’m 187 centimeters in height.”

“A giant ostrich flying then.”

Everyone stopped their group practices and laughed till they were crying. The boys all clapped the sassy Minki on his shoulder as the gaping face of Lee Hoolim sent them all in an early grave for laughing too hard. Near the doorway, Jonghyun watched his fellow trainees in fond exasperation. He couldn’t find it in his heart to stop them from rehearsing—it’s been two and a half hours already—not when they were too motivated and won’t take no for an answer.

Minhyun chuckled behind him. “You’ve been busy adopting, Jonghyun-ah.” They observed the mess that was Class ‘D’. “So…are we included in your pet project too?”

Beside the amused visual, Park Jihoon had a tiny smirk on his face.

It was still a shock to Jonghyun when he visited Class ‘C’ and saw the two unlikeliest people to click seated in the corner, chatting like they were the best of friends. He must’ve looked stupid
standing there with a hand raised to knock but he was so surprised he was unable to say anything. It was a good thing Minhyun looked up and rushed to his side, ushering him to sit beside a gaping Jihoon and ignored the stares drilling into his back.

He never thought that the two were friends during the competition. A few greetings and exchanged smiles and that was it.

Heck, Jonghyun had more interaction with the Maroo trainee than all of his members sans Minki combined. Minhyun and Jihoon’s friendship grew when they were part of Wanna One but then both had closer members to them than each other.

What brought the change? Did he really change so much in such short time? It was truly a sentimental moment seeing his two brothers standing in front of him like it was any other day in the company.

But a small part of him was sad that the growing bond between both Wanna One’s visual kings was reminiscent to that of Seongwoo and Daniel’s renowned friendship, already thinking of a certain Park Woojin training quietly and a Kim Jaehwan alone.

He shook his head, dismissing the nagging thoughts, as he shouted at Hyeongseop and Hoolim to stop their mock-brawl before anyone breaks anything (Dongho got his sweater torn and Jonghyun was petty enough to ignore the calls for help). Their smiles slipped into surprise as they saw the yellow-clad visitors standing behind him.

The awkwardness was broken when Kwon Hyeop dashed to a wide-eyed Jihoon with a manic cackle. “Jihoon-nie!” The said person began waving his arms to stop his friend and backed hastily into Jonghyun as he tried to avoid the human bulldozer. The resounding crash was loud. Jonghyun tried to come out of the dogpile he unintentionally got into but he could only curse when Minki joined the pile with a jaunty wink, prompting the others to join in.

After that, the others warmed up to the two Class ‘C’ trainees and invited them to join the group rehearsals that Jonghyun divided and they were intrigued enough not to decline. Minhyun skipped to join the vocal team led by Dongho who was doing vocal exercises with half of Class ‘D’. Jihoon was uncertain of where he should go. He stood in the middle, stiff and wary.

Jihoon was always the quiet one, Jonghyun smiled as he wrapped an arm around the jeojang boy’s shoulders. “You have nothing to worry about Jihoon-ah. Everyone’s nice here in ‘D’ class.”

“I don’t know where to go, hyung.” The quiet voice tugged his heartstrings as he remembered the cute and shy boy as one of Korea’s leading idols in the future.

“Well, I know you’re a great dancer and right now, we need a stable and sane teacher who can lead us in the choreography,”

Jihoon bit his lip in worry.

“That is if you want to—I mean, it’s okay if you want to practice by yourself or go with Minhyun-nie for vocal practice. It’s no problem—”

“No, no, I want to stay here. It’s just—”

“I—I want to learn from you too, hyung.”

Later, as he was readying for bed, he’d think about the trainees he somehow took under his wing and how they worked together in ways he never thought could happen. He’d ponder on how they
defer to him in making decisions for their class. He’d wonder why they would want a failed idol as a leader.

He’d curse at how he messed up the timeline, *bigtime*.

But at the moment, as he brought a timid Jihoon into the dance group composed of the most uncontrollable trainees in Class ‘D’ (The mocking cries of Choi Minki and Ahn Hyeongseop only pushed him into describing the dance line as “horrible, horrible brats” to a laughing Jihoon) and witnessed the subtle change in Jihoon as he became more receptive to Minki’s vivacity and Hyeongseop’s crazy antics and even reciprocated back with his aegyo, he thought that these people made his return to the past a happier place.

He’d save them again.

He saw them fall once—he’ll make sure to catch them before they crash.

*Just like what a CEO and a dear brother should do.*
Class 'B' felt...*strange*. Seeing orange and not green was making him nauseous with the thought that he did well but he left the others behind. When he got promoted, he cried. Everyone was shocked but he didn't care. He turned back to his *dongsaengs* and hugged a smiling Gunhee to his body. The other trainees thought he was thanking them but when they saw the tears running down his face, the happy façade cracked as the sadness they were feeling brought down the tears they were hiding.

It was difficult and the sight of his red eyes and trembling smile when he entered Class 'B' hushed the raucous cheers to a minimum. A few asked him if he was okay and one callously joked about him being stupid when got promoted two levels up but he didn’t answer back as he kept his head down and sat at the back of the crowd. The position, the race to the center, the added screen time—he didn’t care about any of those. He'd done this before and he had different goals now.

He cried because he knew that his classmates deserved so much more.

“You did so well, *hyung*, you deserve this. Don’t worry about us, *hyung*. We’ll be fine,” Gunhee patted his back and wiped his cheeks with a trembling hand.

Lai Guanlin did not speak, he just hugged the person he owed to the most.

Dongho shook his head when he began to speak. “I know what will come out of that mouth Jonghyun-ah and I refuse to hear an apology. You did really well in the re-evaluations. We owe you the help and guidance you gave us and we would never dream of holding you back. Just go, knock them off their feet.”

The smile Dongho gave him was full of meaning.

*Minki and I do not blame you. I want you to go up and I know he would too.*

Someone grasped his hand and he looked up to a familiar face with a sad smile. “*Yah, Jonghyun-nie hyung*, it’s okay. I know you miss them. We can sit with the others during lunch or dinner if you want…”

He knew at that moment that Jihoon might be his anchor in this insanity.

After the re-evaluations, he was happy to see Donghan and Hoolim join his in Class 'B' and was ecstatic to find out that Hyeongseop levelled up to 'A', just like the first time. It was a testament to his leadership qualities that he was only filled with regret that the others were demoted to 'F' but Jihoon did not let him wallow in his misery. Instead the *jeojang* boy, with the help of Donghan and Hoolim, distracted their out-of-sorts leader to the best of their abilities.

As soon as the staff announced the end of re-evaluations and the day was free for them to practice on their own but they cannot leave their hallway so they will have their lunch and dinner delivered to them, Jihoon immediately dragged him to a corner and grabbed a tablet off the table. He pushed the device roughly onto his hands.

“What—”

“I need help, *hyung*. They told me some of my moves were not as sharp as it should be. I blame
“Hyeongseop-ah for that, by the way.” The cute pout of Park Jihoon was not as distracting as the fiery determination seen in his doe-eyes.

When he did not move, Jihoon threatened, “Move now, hyung, or I’ll tell Minhyun-nie hyung that you made me cry.”

Jonghyun let out a forced chuckle, wiping his face with the orange sleeve. “Well, when you put it like that, how can I say no without fearing for my life?”

They played the track and positioned themselves the way they practiced many times in 'D'. If they noticed how Jonghyun faltered in his step as he turned to look to his right where Minki usually stands, they did not question it. Soon the somber mood disappeared as they traded back insults and disses at each other wherein the most prominent diss was the sexy jeojang rendition challenge judged by a cringing Jihoon.

*Seongwoo would’ve loved to join this,* Jonghyun thought with a pang in his heart as he thought of the charismatic yet lonely boy trying to prove himself and outshine the others in 'A'.

“Argh! No! No! That’s—That’s vulgar Hoolim hyung! It’s not—I never envisioned that kind of action—”

The red-faced Jihoon stopped his ranting when the others laughed in his expense. A sharp pain ran up his arm. “Yah, Jihoon-nie! Why did you slap me?”

“Ah—er—I—Because you’re the nearest.”

He knew all eyes were on them as they descended into a chaotic mess with Donghan as the unfortunate sacrifice in the dogpile they ended up in. Jihoon’s sharp elbow was digging into his chest but he did not care. The teasing and dogpiling each other was familiar to him and served the best way to calm him down and clear his negative thoughts.

Jihoon smiled knowingly as they tumbled away from each other, groaning in pain and muttering curses as they nursed their sore limbs. But the tension and sadness were gone. This time, Jonghyun stood up and lent a hand to pull them up. The four trainees started practicing again with Jonghyun correcting their stances and teaching them how to jump perfectly. To their surprise, Hoolim executed the jump move perfectly.

Jihoon gasped. “Whoa…Hoolim hyung…That was perfect.”

Donghan nodded seriously. “Yes, just like a flying giant ostrich.”

Instead of getting annoyed, Hoolim laughed at the memory.

Dance practice took most of their energy so they went off to refresh in the bathroom across the room. Only Jonghyun and Donghan remained in their corner, watching the other trainees practicing in groups.

“*Ne, Jonghyun hyung*…”

“Hmm?”

“Are you going to do the same here?”
Jonghyun looked towards the vocalist with a bewildered expression. “What do you mean, Donghan-nie?”

His answer came with a gestured nod across the room where a familiar trainee stood by himself, frowning at the choreography on his tablet. Jonghyun cursed in his head. He forgot that Kim Jaehwan was placed in Class ‘B’ for both grading evaluations. It just didn’t occur to him that the talented vocalist belonged to a class that is not ‘A’. He was grouped with Jaehwan for most of the competition and was close to the calm and reserved (not when he’s laughing, Jonghyun suddenly remembered with a shudder) trainee even after their 'Sorry, Sorry' performance.

He knew that Jaehwan was too talented not to be noticed, their “legendary” Super Junior performance proved that, but right now it was obvious that Jaehwan was getting stressed from all the dancing that he had to do and Jonghyun owed it to his future idol and friend to give him a helping hand in his time of need.

Donghan didn’t need a confirmation. With a pat on the back, he left to follow Hoolim having a bathroom break.

Jonghyun, on the other hand, was scared out of his wits. Jaehwan was too cunning for his own good. He learned that from the times he got roasted and outsmarted by the cackling idol during guesting and press conferences. Seongwoo even admitted that he was scared of the timid-looking Jaehwan. “Because innocent people are the ones with the craziest minds!” Seongwoo looked hassled when he said that to a curious Jonghyun Sajangnim.

Only Minhyun and, oddly enough, Guanlin can curb the “psycho-laugh” Jaehwan. He’s no Minsajang or cutie namja Lai Guanlin but he’ll try.

“Oh, hello.”

Jaehwan looked up from his tablet in surprise. Standing beside him was the controversial Leader Kim Jonghyun of Produce 101. Briefly he wondered why he was approached by the said person.

He looked at his left. No one. Jaehwan cleared his throat. “Ah, hello sunbae—”

Jonghyun waved his hand in dismissal. “No, I’m not an idol here. I’m just a trainee like you. You can call me informally if you want?”

Jaehwan was curious enough to do so.

Jonghyun bit back a smile as the analyzing stare drilled into his back. He led the vocalist into their little group and introduced him to the others. Donghan, who became a fanboy of Jaehwan during his audition, asked for pointers in breathing techniques, vocal ranges, and a “How to be Kim Jaehwan” crash course pamphlet before an amused Jaehwan led the practice starting with guiding Jihoon and Hoolim in adjusting the song to their vocal tone.

Jonghyun was optimistic that he would get to the end of Produce 101 without any drama. Jonghyun also knew that future Bae Jinyoung would give him the stink-eye for being so stupid in thinking that a survival show that survives on drama would have no drama.

Luck truly hates onibugi time-travelers.

It was past two in the afternoon and they were having a short water break. The class was still
broken into groups rehearsing the dance steps or individuals who wanted to practice on their own. Most of the trainees still had their packed lunch placed to the sides untouched. Jonghyun, on the other hand, absolutely refused to continue practicing if they wouldn’t eat their meal.

They were about to finish their lunch when a loud crash came from the side near the door.

Jung Sewoon and Lee Insoo.

Jonghyun still could not believe his eyes as he watched the two, normally calm and jolly vocalists started a heated exchange of words, fists balled up at their sides and mouths spitting foul insults after insults. Kim Donghyun and Takada Kenta grabbed Sewoon and Insoo and held their arms in a vice grip. The others rushed to the commotion, half of them forcing Sewoon and Insoo apart, half going as spectators to the ongoing fight.

“Hyung. What do we do?”

Donghan turned to look at their leader. Hoolim inclined his head in expectance. Jihoon was so still beside him but from the clenched jaws and strong gaze he knew that Jihoon was prepared to do anything he would tell him to do.

Jaehwan quietly observed the unusual dynamics.

Jonghyun closed his eyes. This never happened, too. He dimly remembered fights breaking back then but the staffs were hushed about it and punished those who opened their mouths. Now, there were no staffs. Just a bunch of trainees who didn’t know each other too well to interfere with each other’s businesses.

*Except me,* Jonghyun supposed.

Sewoon and Insoo were unknowns to Jonghyun because of their few interactions. Future Minki and Dongho would know better, but at the moment they were as friendly as strangers.

He knew how these two worked, somewhat but he didn’t know how to proceed.

A part of him was resigned at the fact that maybe it was his fate to change the course of *Produce 101.* Because as soon as he steps into that fight, his vague future would grow even more unclear until he’d be as blind as the rest of them, making his return to the past uncertain. But the larger part of him, the kind and forgiving nature that no hardship had ever managed to break, wanted the changes that was happening now.

“You were always a kind leader, Jonghyun-ah. Even now when you’re leading all of us to greatness. You became firm, yes, but the kindness is still there. The kids—they are very lucky to have you to guide them.” Minhyun toasted a glass of water to a sad Jonghyun on the rooftop of their building.

Jonghyun never ignored his instincts.

He looked up at the eyes watching them from above. Casually, he placed a hand over the mic on his collar, pretending to brush off lint on his pristine sweater.

“Jihoon-nie,” The said trainee jerked up in surprise. “Don’t answer, mic open— Please close the door so no one will enter. Hoolim hyung, Donghan-nie, see the cameras near Jung Sewoon? Please go underneath it and flip the switch behind it.”

Jihoon did as he was told. Jonghyun asked Hoolim and Donghan the same thing. The two split off
in different parts of the room, going as normal as possible and hiding in the crowd before
dismantling the cameras with a stretch of the arm.

Jonghyun walked with measured steps. The other trainees saw his approach and backed down.
They knew who this person was—Kim Jonghyun, leader of Class 'D' and the one responsible for
leading said class to miraculous improvement within a few hours of tutelage. Their hopes rose up
as the said leader walked up to the two feuding trainees, placed a firm hand on their shoulders, and
talked them down from the anger clouding their minds.

Jaehwan watched the proceedings in awe. Two hours ago, it seemed like the end of Class 'B' when
prides clashed and temper rose from all the frustrations brought by being in the competition. The
others were on the same mind track, apprehensive and slightly fearful of what the mentors would
do with Class 'B'.

But Kim Jonghyun did the impossible, Takada Kenta remarked as they crowded around a
reconciled Sewoon and Insoo with a Jonghyun mussing up Kenta’s hair.

“It seems our leader-ah just can’t help himself, “Donghan shook his head in amusement as he sat
beside his three friends.

Hoolim snorted. “He’s Angel Leader Kim Jonghyun. It’d be wrong if he did not step in. Remember
the time when Hyeop-i e was bullied by that trainee from 'C'? Jonghyun-ah’s face was so red
Minhyun-nie thought he was apoplectic in rage.”

“But—I never saw hyung mad!” Jihoon’s mouth dropped. “I thought he was the type who doesn’t
know how to get mad.”

“When it’s about him, he can take hits. But hit on his kids—then it’s game over.”

Jaehwan looked back at Jonghyun. Said Angel Leader was on the other side of the room,
committedly massaging the kinks on Kim Donghyun’s shoulders while listening to Kenta’s
exuberant story-telling with Sewoon rolling his eyes in annoyance beside him.

The others resumed their practices, hearts light with the assurance of a leader who can help them
through their troubles. And if they were slightly jealous of the green-clad trainees that their leader
can’t stop talking about, no one can say anything different.

“Every class would need a center for the performance. Brand New Music Lee Daehwi was chosen
as the center of Class ‘A’ with the highest number of votes from one-hundred-and-one trainees.
Centers for other classes would be chosen by the members of the class through voting.” The
Nation’s Representative, BoA, announced after the center battle of Class ‘A’.

Jonghyun frowned at the slight change of rules. It was slightly different than what he remembered.
For a jolting moment, he was overcome with trepidation that he was starting to change the rules
of the competition as well.

Jihoon tapped him on the shoulder. “Are you a fortune teller by chance, hyung? How did you know
we’re going to battle it out for center position?”

“I didn’t,” Jonghyun sighed. “Last season’s center battle was the same for Class ‘A’ but having a
center battle for the other classes too? Is Mnet playing us?”
Jaehwan, who was seated on his other side, grimly nodded.

Class ‘B’ was quiet when they returned to their rehearsal room. Varied expressions flitted in their morose eyes as they let considering glances touch each familiar face. Jonghyun was regretful of the fact that the tentative friendship he painstakingly built the past few days was on the verge of collapsing.

_The competition changes you_, he overheard a somber Kang Daniel warned one of his trainees who wanted to join the new season of _Produce 101_.

And he was not bluffing. The suspicious and contemplative glances thrown at their friends crushingly reminded him that these trainees don’t know each other yet. He could only do so much early on in the competition.

Choi Dongha, an independent trainee, started the voting by electing himself as a center. The others began to elect themselves as well, even prompting the others to dance and sing to ‘Nayana’ to prove themselves. Hoolim voted for a shocked Donghan because of his charismatic face and cool dance aura. Sewoon took the cake with voting for Takada Kenta and Kenta voting for him in return.

Yeo Hwanwoong gasped. “Wah, daebak…It’s like Tom and Jerry helped each other.”

Jonghyun was calm because he had only one choice for a center and the winking eyes of Park Jihoon would catch far more attention than any _aegyo_ they would show. A small smile made its way to his face at the thought of a proud Minhyun gushing over his “baby Hoon-ie” getting the center position.

“I choose Kim Jonghyun hyung.”

_wait, what—_

He didn’t notice the sudden whiplash and the jolt of pain that streaked though his neck. He was not dreaming—Jihoon did nominate _him_.

Jihoon was oddly determined to place him in the frontlines.

“Jonghyun _hyung_ can do it! I’ve seen him dance many times and he’s no slacker in the dancing position. His voice—well, I heard him sing once and he can be the ‘sexy center’ with that raspy tone of his—”

Jonghyun was horrified to see everyone eating up Jihoon’s stories about his irresistible vocal color, alluring aura, sharp dancing, and so many stupid stories about him saving the whole Class ‘D’ with his leadership qualities and _onibugi_ smile that he wanted to cry at the injustice of it all.

For a moment, he wondered if Hyeongseop, Minki, and Jihoon developed telepathic abilities purely to torment him.

—And then there was that time he winked at the camera and smirked…” Jihoon had a dreamy look in his face that got everyone fooled except a pained _onibugi_.

_Park Jihoon truly is a master of acting_, Jonghyun was reluctantly impressed as the others withdrew their votes and casted it on _him_. The dancer even had the audacity to grin proudly when Jonghyun gave him a warning stare.

The voting went by with three being the highest. It was an odd feeling; the rest of Class 'B' was staring expectantly at him when he raised his arm.

“I haven’t nominated anyone yet.”

Donghyun nodded in compliance. “Oh, right, sorry Jonghyun-nie hyung. Who—”

“Park Jihoon is my center and I can’t think of anyone better than our Jihoon-nie.”

“You were supposed to be center, hyung…."

They were in a locked vocal room few doors down the hallway. Jihoon observed the tensed shoulders and blank gaze, as if Jonghyun-nie hyung was looking at something he cannot reach. A few seconds after his expression went from eerily blank to curious. Jihoon let a relieved sigh as he was beckoned over to sit beside Jonghyun-nie hyung. An arm wrapped around his shoulders, he cuddled to the person he found the most calming.

“Why did you nominate me, Jihoon-ah?” His voice was soft and imploring. “Why?”

Jihoon did not answer. He pressed deeper into the embrace. Jonghyun was about to ask again when he heard the boy whisper, “Because I know you deserve far more than what you're getting.”

Jihoon heard Jonghyun’s breath hitch but he continued, the dam slightly breaking at the edges. “I watch you sometimes, you know? When you’re not looking—It’s just—you look so happy when you get to help others. But when the spotlight is on you, you curl up and hide in the shadows, unnoticed. Alone.”

“Jihoon-nie—”

His voice was rising and his face felt hot and wet at the same time but Jihoon wanted to tell everything before he breaks. “They get noticed, hyung! I got noticed by the mentors for doing well even if I gave all the credit to you. You got the slack when the others got scolded, you got no recognition when we did well—it’s infuriating! I wanted to tell them how we were hopeless a few days ago, how we’re on the verge of collapsing on our own because our pride kept getting in the way but you saved us. You helped everyone back on their feet, made us reconcile our differences and work together the same way you taught Class 'D', the same way you made me feel welcome even if I was not in 'D’—”

Jonghyun wanted to ease the pain Jihoon was feeling. He truly did; but what can he do when he’s part of the problem? Jonghyun began to apologize but Jihoon refused to accept it.

Jihoon was mock-scolding the apologetic leader, hastily wiping his tears away with the orange sleeve. “Even now you’re apologizing? For something you did not do? You’re truly exercising your Angel Leader powers with anyone, even me.”

“But you were crying because of me…”

“Well. That’s what you call empathy, hyung. Look a dictionary up.”

“Why you—!”

The somber mood broke as the two laughed their frustrations away. Soon, the voice of Donghan shouting outside brought them back to reality. They got up from their sitting position and brushed
off their pants.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung…”

“Hmm…”

“Can you promise me something?”

Jonghyun turned around to stare questioningly at the weird expression on Jihoon’s face.

“Just…give yourself some credit okay? You’re our leader-ah and it pains us when you’re not doing anything for yourself.”

Jonghyun snorted before pushing forward and grabbing Donghan to make a three-second head start. “I’ll do my best, Hoon-nie. And you better do yours, center boy!”

“Yah!”
Five hours into the stage rehearsals and Jaehwan was tired. Not the kind of tired that comes with practicing non-stop for days, subjecting the unprepared body in fast and rigorous dancing coupled with singing your lungs out and jumping in the air like the bird (“More like a penguin attempting to fly,” Jihoon muttered under his breath) that he never was.

No, he was not tired from the practice—he was tired of what he was seeing.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung, teach me how to do that jump move again, please?”

“One moment, let me just help Gunhee-ah okay?”

“Hyung! You’ve been monopolizing Jonghyun-nie hyung since we stepped on the stage! Go away!”

“Uh, Jonghyun-nie hyung, I don’t think I can do this—”

“Yes, you can, Gunhee-ah, just believe in yourself.”

“Jonghyun-ah! I got you a snack!”

“Yah! I got that for him, not you!”

“Later, Minki-yah, I have to help Guanlin-nie too.”

Jaehwan was standing on the sidelines, watching the chaos unfolding in the growing circle around a certain Kim Jonghyun with fascination.

He knew about the strong relationship Jonghyun had with his previous class. Donghan never run out of stories for him to hear when they’re on break or sometimes at lunch when Jihoon and Jonghyun mysteriously vanishes from Class ‘B’.

Donghan opened up one time they were alone in their circle at Class ‘B’ table. Across the cafeteria, Jonghyun and Jihoon was sitting in 'D' class, laughing with Hwang Minhyun and Yoon Jiseong.

“Sometimes, I wonder how I got to ‘B’. I was hopeless back then, dancing was messy, vocals unstable—no one was trying to help and I kept messing up. I thought it was the end for me. If not for Jonghyun-nie hyung…”

He left the statement hanging but Jaehwan already knew what he wanted to say.

It was inspiring to hear how the dubbed Angel Leader took the difficult task of leading and pulled his classmates up from their misery and encouraged them to better themselves even with the limited time they have to prove they’re worthy to debut. Class ‘B’ also found the story uplifting. What was once a conversation between two people became an impromptu storytelling in the middle of the cafeteria. Donghan had to fend people off his back when they bombarded him with questions about Class ‘D’ and their leader.

Jaehwan was not surprised at how tight-lipped the 'D' trainees were. Given their sudden improvement in a day, all trainees would be clamoring for tips and suggestions on how to rise up in the ranks. Oddly, the rumors about the underdog class came from the mentors and all of them surrounded a certain Pledis trainee. And because Kim Jonghyun is now in Class ‘B’, they got the
The brunt of the gossip.

The whole class was really drawn tight with all the rehearsals and the added weight of having to keep the others away from interrupting their class made their lives a little bit hectic. Takada Kenta was visibly fuming as Kim Donghyun sent the seventh trainee fishing for information out of their room.

“Tiring to watch, isn’t it?”

Jihoon looked vaguely resigned, nodding his head in Jonghyun’s direction. Jaehwan gave him a curious look. “Had my first dose of Hyun-nie hyung’s fanboys two weeks ago and I still tire of having to look out for hyung.”

It was a surprising truth—Jihoon somewhat became Jonghyun’s bodyguard and Number One Fanboy. Jaehwan remembered a certain Ahn Hyeongseop from Class ‘A’ get smacked by Jihoon when the boy rushed behind Jonghyun. Park Jihoon also denied any accusations about monopoly of time and unfair setting up meetings with Jonghyun through him.

Jaehwan personally thought there was some truth to the allegations. After all, he witnessed the same aegyo prince eating his way through the snacks given by the fanboys without remorse or a generous soul to even hand him a morsel.

Jonghyun soon called Class ‘B’ for a group meeting while the other classes were being evaluated by the mentors, much to the crowd’s disappointment and Jihoon’s blatant relief. They gathered on their platform and formed a circle, barricading the rest of the world.

“Okay,” Jonghyun started. “Game plan. Do your best, okay? Don’t make mistakes, but if you do, make it small and unnoticeable—like it was part of the choreography. Heeseok-ah, more on the jump so you’ll be seen. Hoolim hyung, uh, less on the jump or you’ll fly off the stage.”

Laughter ensued as the mentioned trainees protested in unison.

“Donghan-nie, use that charisma and visual of yours. Same with you, Donghyun-nie. Hwanwoong, smile more and you’ll rock the visual aspect. Also, less uptight on the flow.”

The three blushed fire red but nodded shyly.

“And Jihoon-nie…throw a wink in the end.”

“What?”

Jonghyun resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “I know your strengths. You know your strengths. Stop playing dumb.”

Jaehwan shivered. “Still can’t get that aegyo out of my head. Horrifying ordeal indeed.”

Jihoon sighed.

Jonghyun threw a last quip before they were called on stage.

“Jihoon-nie, do the wink and you’ll capture their hearts, I assure you.”

And capture their hearts, he did.
It was outrageous how one detail hyped the whole stage into unprecedented proportions. The “4-second unbeatable wink” of Maroo Entertainment Park Jihoon yeonsusaeng won the viewers’ hearts and votes and placed him as first in the popularity votes. The whole thing was hyped to the point that other trainees began inventing their own aegyo line for the fun of it. Jihoon could not look Fantagio Entertainment Ong Seongwoo in the eye for days because of that. They had a rare day-off where everyone can slack and be lazy and most of the trainees went to sleep the moment it was announced. Jihoon was rough-housing with some of his friends in Class 'B' when the television panned to the 'Nayana' stage they performed.

It felt like an accomplishment to Jihoon, until it reached the dreaded 4-second wink…and everyone went wild.

Mortified, Jihoon hid behind an amused Jonghyun.

After the special stage, they were called for the next task. Class 'A' uniform was glaringly pink amongst the blue walls with 'B' and their eyesore of an orange uniform lined up behind them. Hyeongseop, cheerful as ever, waved at him while Jihoon looked like he swallowed a whole lemon. Jaehwan and Donghan were placed farther left besides Choi Dongha and Lee Insoo. Hwanwoong beat the other trainees and smugly stood beside him.

The Nation’s Representative BoA stood beside a glass box with the logo of the show put on it.

Battle Rounds.

The innocent-looking box never looked so worrying as it did now.

He chanced a glance behind him. Minhyun tilted his head to the side with an odd expression on his face, looking at the box like it was about to bite and cuddle him at the same time.

Minhyun was ever the strategist of the team, Jonghyun let out a small smile as he trailed his eyes towards the 'A' class, immediately zoning in on Kang Daniel’s pink hair below him and Ong Seongwoo’s confident stance a few places to the left.

When he was eliminated and started promoting with NU’EST immediately after as a sub-unit, he was the controversial member for months on end. Everyone thought he’d be part of Wanna One, debuting with Minhyun and the rest of his teammates. Aron hyung scoffed as he entered their small dormitory with a sheepish expression. “Tsk. Surprised to see you here, Jonghyun-ah. I was so sure you’d debut as Wanna One’s onibugi leader.”

Aron showed the trending posts in Naver. It was chaos: The finale of Produce 101 became the most viewed episode, almost thrice the highest percentage of viewers from all episodes watched the finale. And the reactions were the same; all were disappointed of the line-up, specifically the elimination of the Nation’s Leader and the injustice of Kim Samuel not debuting with him. Fan-made posters of all his teams rose up in the trending ranks with ‘Sorry, Sorry’ and ‘Never’ taking the top ranks.

Jonghyun was both anticipating and dreading the team selections. With how he changed the trainees’ dynamics when he took the leadership of both classes and got the attention of the trainees as a leader hyung and a formidable contender, he wouldn’t be surprised if other opportunistic trainees put him on their teams.

But then his 'Sorry, Sorry' brothers…
“However—there’s some new changes in the battle evaluations.”

Jonghyun should’ve known better, he cursed under his breath. BoA sunbaenim pulled a different cue card, an ominous-looking blue paper, and began to explain the rules that could potentially destroy the Top 11 ranks that he was sure of.

“Produce 101 had an online voting on the rule that must be changed this season and the producers have decided. Due to the viewers’ overwhelming demand of impartiality in the competition, no team should have more than two ‘A’ trainees in their group. Online votes will also be tallied in the ranking system during the live performances. The team with the highest votes in the online ranking will also receive 3,000 benefit points during the first elimination.”

Chaos ensued.

Jonghyun let out a shocked curse but it might as well be a forced exhale with the whoops of joy and excited yells. Beside him, Jihoon gaped at the sudden turn of events. It was a major change in the voting structure of Produce 101. Group battle missions for Season 1 was unfair because of the blatant favoritism with Class ‘A’. Having to draw out a name from the roster of all trainees regardless of class standing with a chance to pick either six or seven team members was a solution to the issue beforehand. But limiting the number of high-ranked trainees might even the odds a bit, even if some of said high-ranked trainees were not happy about getting their sure pass to Rank 1 team axed by the new rules.

Then the voting process was changed as well. Last time he was here, votes that mattered in the benefit points were given on-site, intentionally positioning Produce 101 under the spotlight with the excellent promotions and live stages. The fact that online voting is now given the same importance as onsite voting explicitly implies that the two highest-ranking teams could get 3,000 benefit points either from the onsite voting or onsite voting, securing Top 14 for the first elimination.

But if only one team was ranked first in both voting times, then it might as well annihilate more than half the trainees’ numbers to shreds.

His head started to spin.

Just what the hell did he get into?

“What is the most important position in Produce 101?” BoA asked the class.

“Center.”

“Therefore, Brand New Entertainment Lee Daehwi gets to pick the first.”

Lee Daehwi went to the front and called out his team members. Jonghyun leaned forward when Lee Daehwi hesitated, glancing in the middle of Class ‘A’ where Kim Samuel was standing and few places to the right where Ardor & Able Ha Seongwoon was expecting to be chosen.

Jonghyun felt his heart drop.

He knew the past Daehwi’s Avengers team had more than a few mouths crying foul but Samuel confided in him that he somewhat enjoyed his first team in Produce 101 even if the competition ran high within their team.

“I liked doing Boy in Luv but it was too much pressure. I had to compete with everyone, hyung. It was exhausting, really.”
Jonghyun’s jaw dropped when the ‘Nayana’ center decided to go for Ha Seongwoon instead. He wasn’t the only one.

“Guess friendship doesn’t really matter when there’s 6,000 points at stake.” Hwanwoong sadly whispered.

Jonghyun was truly worried for the kid. He hoped Samuel-ah would get his chance to shine this time around.

“Maroo Entertainment trainee Park Jihoon.”

Jonghyun let out a light snort at the resigned expression on Jihoon’s face before the boy quickly masked it as he stepped down the platform and joined Daehwi and Sungwoon up front. The trainees’ surprise turned to incredulity at how the center of ‘Nayana’ picked his team. Yuehua Entertainment Lee Euiwoong, Cre.ker Entertainment Joo Haknyeon, and C9 Entertainment Bae Jinyoung finished the line-up.

“They’re gonna ace the online votes, for sure.” Someone muttered behind him.

“Might as well give up now. 6,000 votes and the Mnet Countdown! Stage is just too much if they got everything.”

“The audacity of this kid!”

“But then…we have two chances to get at least 3,000 votes…”

“Damn, he got the most popular ones.”

“Yeah, popular. He chose the voting machines when there are still extremely good ones in ‘A’ and ‘B’ so…”

Jonghyun could not speak to defend Daehwi. He was hoping that the eager kid would see the reactions and try to tone down his eagerness to win but it was a futile effort. The kid picked from almost all classes—two ‘A’s, one ‘B’, one ‘D’, and two ‘F’s—it was a colorful bunch. Sure, they were given the freedom to choose their members provided that there should only be two from ‘A’ and Daehwi did well picking ‘F’ trainees as a way of letting the viewers know that he disregarded ranking. Unfortunately, his bold move only showed that he was the type of person who went for the popular kids.

What riled the others, though, was the fact that he put Wink Boy Park Jihoon, Pretty Boy from Jeju Joo Haknyeon and Perfect Idol Visual Bae Jinyoung together as a sure-fire way to hype the team with their already-big fanbase.

Jonghyun was a firm believer that popularity could never beat talent. It was a cunning move on Daehwi’s part with the assurance that they would go up the ranks no matter what, and for a 17-year old trainee with no experience in showmanship it was a solid move on his part.

But Daehwi was not aware of how most people judge before they think and the reaction of the trainees was foretelling enough of what the viewers would think. The determined kid was not yet shrewd enough to think of reputation instead of aiming for the prize or experienced enough to realize that stages are meant for performing. And performances are made with stable vocals, superb dancing, excellent rap line, and charisma.

*Good looks can be of help, yes, but talent does not show on faces.*
Jihoon realized that as soon as he saw the roster of Lee Daehwi’s team.

“You’ve got have a strong team.” BoA noted as she looked over the team.

“Yes, I’m planning to build the *Avengers* team.”

In front of him, Kang Daniel laughed.

Nevertheless, Jonghyun inwardly promised to check the team and try to shelter the unsuspecting Daehwi from the modern witch-hunt that would surely happen again and the kids that would get affected by it.

Daehwi picked out a ball in the box and brought out Minhyun’s name. His heart was throbbing erratically as Minhyun scanned the expectant faces with no hesitation.

Jaehwan was called first. The trainees were surprised at the choice, expecting the idol-turned-trainee to pick his members for the battles. But they were not as surprised as Jaehwan. It pained him to see how Jaehwan expected not to be called for a team and vowed to make him see different.

Daniel was chosen next followed by Seongwoo, the latter stirring the crowd once more.

Minhyun smiled. “*Pledis Entertainment* Kim Jonghyun.”

*Minhyun had always been predictable.* He got the same team, after all.

*It’s time,* Jonghyun took a deep breath and went up the front.

He bowed to Seongwoo, who looked surprised at the gesture, before he counted the roster of trainees Minhyun had chosen.

*One, two, three*…he stopped short.

Wait a second—

“And…*Oui Entertainment* Kim Donghan.”

What.

Maybe he didn’t need to protect Daehwi and Jihoon.

When there’s a Hwang Minhyun prepared to wreak havoc in the ranks.

Jonghyun dearly reminded himself not to strangle a certain sand fox.

Minhyun was not overly confident in the beginning due to his still-dreadful-after four-years-of-outrunning-Dongho track record but he wanted to put a good act in front of his team—an astute judgement, if he said so himself, because everyone looked worryingly detached from each other, Daniel and Seongwoo more so. BoA *sunbaenim* gave everyone ten minutes to decide on the song they would be racing for.

“So,” Minhyun faced the others as they looked back at him curiously. “What song do you like?”

“Uh, anything goes, I guess.” Donghan shrugged.
Jaehwan tentatively spoke after Donghan nudged his arm. “I’d like something with good lyrics in it. Infinite’s ‘Be Mine’ or Beast’s ‘Shock’ is good.”

Daniel wanted a high-powered, dance-till-your-panties-drop performance (Jaehwan slapped the boy on the mouth to censor it) and placed his vote on Bangtan Sonyeondan’s ‘Boy in Luv’ with 2PM’s ‘10 out of 10’ a close second. On the other hand, Seongwoo was all for ‘Call Me Baby’ for a sexier performance and the body-rolls that he would ace.

Minhyun looked up at the only song that could threaten their team performance. “Anything but ‘Manse’. Seriously, anything but that.”

Jaehwan, Donghan, and Seongwoo caught onto it immediately and winced at the risk of NU’EST performing to their hoobaenims’ song and giving Mnet more ammunition against them. Daniel ahh-ed in realization after Seongwoo whispered the problem in his ear.

Minhyun nudged the preoccupied Jonghyun out of his reverie. “And you, Hyun-ah?”

Jonghyun quirked a small smile. “I think we’ll rock ‘Sorry, Sorry’.”

Sadly, Minhyun was unable to run faster than Daehwi so they had no choice but to wish that the song they would perform goes with the manly concept Minhyun was going for. Finishing last became a sore spot for the team captain and Daniel did his best in uplifting their spirits by sarcastically exclaiming that they should avoid the Avengers team at all costs in order to win.

It would’ve been a great day for Hwang Minhyun because he got a song choice that surprisingly worked well with their concept if not for the others reacting to his running performance.

“I know this may seem like an insult but…I’m happy you sucked at running, Minhyun-nie.”

The affronted glare did not deter Seongwoo from snorting in amusement.

Minki did not fail to laugh out loud whenever Minhyun passed by their group on the way to the bathrooms, Jihoon had a strange taunting look in his face, and Seongwoo was simply insufferable in his teasing. Daniel and Jaehwan soon became Minhyun’s refuge and break from Seongwoo, with the former distracting the funny Ong and the latter scaring the wits out of everyone. As soon as they met, Minhyun had a bad feeling that he started the destruction that would soon end the world with Ong Seongwoo as the evil mastermind, Kang Daniel as the gassy lackey, and Kim Jaehwan as their master.

Oblivious, Jonghyun was too busy worrying at the new and major changes in the timeline. He was so sure Minhyun would pick the same members again and it’ll be just like old times: Hyunbin, Daniel, and Seongwoo in the maknae (fake-maknae for Seongwoo) line and Jaehwan, Minhyun, and him trying to salvage their reputations and failing spectacularly in the process. The Avengers team without Samuel he can work with, yes, but he was stupid to think that the deviated timeline would not affect their lineup. After all, he had been changing too much. It was later proven by Minhyun himself when Jonghyun asked him of his choices.

“We need Jaehwan to have a good performance. Vocal-wise, he’d outstrip anyone without even trying. Daniel and Seongwoo, they’re our dance machines—Seongwoo with freestyle and Daniel with choreography. Seongwoo’s one of the most charismatic trainees here and he’s talented in everything, Daniel would definitely stand out with that pink hair of his and his ability to work the camera. Plus, his face and athletic build would make the noonas fall in love with him.”
“Donghan-nie…” Minhyun tucked his legs under him, gazing at their youngest member rough-housing with Daniel. “I’m not really sure why I picked him. I had other trainees in mind but I thought our team should have someone tall and eye-catching because the trend for boy groups nowadays was a tall maknae.”

Jonghyun had much bigger problems to worry. “Oh…I just thought you’re close with Kwon Hyunbin from YGK+…”

Minhyun groaned at the awfully familiar question. “Jihoon and Minki asked the same thing, you know. Hyunbin-nie’s my friend, don’t get me wrong, it’s just—I have to think of the others, too, Hyun-ah. We need someone who can keep up with the other members. Jaehwan-nie will take a while to warm up to the others and Daniel and Seongwoo are detached enough as it is. Giving our complete attention to help Hyunbin memorize the choreography would only push them away. And I have a feeling that he’d only get bad rep if he messes up and you try to fix his mistakes.”

“But we could have taught him, Minhyun-nie.”

“You would. Can’t say the same for us though.”

Jonghyun winced.

Minhyun hit the problem right in the head.

The others may have grown fond of the model after their performance and in the years to follow but the leader knew that the first two days of ‘Sorry, Sorry’ was lukewarm at best. He remembered how Jaehwan and Seongwoo were the farthest from the group. Jaehwan was not close to anyone as well. The independent trainee had to watch his actions because getting even a little screen time was priceless for someone who had no company to back him up. Not to mention the guy was an introvert when the situation calls for it. It took a while before he grew comfortable with the others, Hwang Minhyun especially, but to the vocalist, Kwon Hyunbin was someone whom he would choose for anything except being in a performance team together.

Seongwoo was a more complicated case. The latter was a consistent Class ‘A’ trainee, Daniel explained to a saddened Jonghyun after Seongwoo walked out the room when Hyunbin got on the A-rank trainee’s nerves, and to be in a team with a trainee that slept more than practice gnawed awfully at his pride.

Daniel saw the apprehension in Seongwoo’s the moment Hyunbin joined the group and ultimately decided to give center to Seongwoo, which endeared the pink-haired trainee to the older dancer. The Fantagio trainee was mollified with being center and happy with seeing for himself how talented and self-sufficient Jonghyun, Daniel, Minhyun, and Jaehwan were.

Hyunbin, however, became Seongwoo’s personality waterloo. Jonghyun had to lock himself and the angry trainee in their dormitories to prevent Seongwoo from lashing out on Hyunbin. It became worse when Jonghyun got scolded by Jaesung seongsan-ni because of Hyunbin’s incapability. Seongwoo was absolutely livid but Minhyun, Jaehwan, and Daniel talked the guy down. But the lesson was not drilled into their youngest member. Even Daniel, calm and forgiving Daniel, was grasping on the last thread. So Jonghyun decided to nip everything in the bud. Hence came the reputation of Kim Jonghyun as the “Nation’s Leader”.

It would have turned out well in the end but Minhyun doesn’t know that. As of the moment, his brother had his “talent scout director-persona” on and that alter-ego can be as cruel as any cutthroat company in the industry.
Heck, what changed in this timeline?

“And it’s no use to think of what-ifs, Jonghyun-ah, Donghan-nie’s with us now and he completes our team of manly visuals. Don’t think on it too much,” He stood up and nodded his head to their right. “Hyunbin-nie will do well with Hoseong’s team.”

They chanced a glance on the far right of the metal bleachers. Kim Chan picked Kwon Hyunbin as his last pick. The ‘Be Mine’ Team 1 looked amicable with each other. Notable trainees with Hyunbin were Hoseong-i-e and Jaewoo-yah, and Jonghyun trusted his past classmen to help Hyunbin with his vocals since the song was more vocals than dance.

“Besides, Donghan’s too good not to be picked, in terms of vocals, dance, and stage presence. Plus, that new hairstyle of his made him stand out more. He’s perfect for the team.”

Jonghyun backtracked. Hairstyle? True enough, Kim Donghan sported soft bluish-violet hair with a dark hue to give it a cool and mysterious vibe and the sight of Donghan beside the bubblegum-pink Kang Daniel was eye-catching with their contrasting hair colors. The onibugi time-traveler vaguely remembered him suggesting to a skeptical Donghan two days after the ‘Nayana’ performance that colored hair would look good on him. The blonde hair did not appear before the group battles but his suggestion must’ve pushed Donghan to go over his fears of hair coloring products. It was a tame look compared to blonde but it was a huge step for Donghan (and far too early in the competition).

Serious? Jonghyun wanted to curse. A major change in the timeline because of hair color?

Jonghyun felt a migraine coming up. He thought this was his chance to help Hyunbin-nie but everything went haywire.

After Produce 101, he did not have much interactions with the model-turned-idol and the close hyung-dongsaeng relationship that they had slowly disappeared till they seemed like distant friends that do not know how to react to one another. Jonghyun kept tabs on their tall maknae, his worries increased when he found out that Hyunbin-nie auditioned for the parent company YG Entertainment and got rejected. He remembered how excited Hyunbin was with telling him of his plans to leave the high-fashion industry and become a fully-fledged idol.

“If I don’t make it, Jonghyun-nie hyung, I will still become an idol. My CEO said that if I get a big fanbase, then she’ll speak with YG Entertainment about a possible swap of trainees.”

Jonghyun was heartbroken when he saw the new YG boy group debut without the tall form of Kwon Hyunbin. He waited for any news about a possible solo idol debuting or a tall model-turned-actor making waves in the drama industry but none appeared. He contacted the CEO of YGK+ and was disappointed to find out that Hyunbin left their company before he auditioned for YG. It was as if he vanished—burdening Jonghyun more because he was unable to do anything for the big guy.

He may not be in a team with the trainee but he would make Hyunbin-ah proud of himself, one way or another.

He loved his dongsaengs, too. He had to think of them now.

It was a roller coaster ride for Kim Jonghyun as he tried to keep his team in tip-top shape. The same positions were retained: Seongwoo as center, Jaehwan as main vocal, and him as the leader. After
the most peaceful center position battle in the whole Produce 101 history, they started practicing. Jonghyun, with the mindset of a CEO, strategically arranged his team to let each member shine while polishing the rough edges. Daniel was assigned to help Jaehwan memorize the choreography. Minhyun, along with Jaehwan, was delegated with the vocal practice. Jonghyun used the time to go around the sub-units while helping Donghan and Seongwoo in the choreography and dance break.

He didn’t do this the first time because he was hesitant to lead a group of strangers, fearing that he would hurt their feelings thus messing up the team’s tentative teamwork. NU’EST was different; they’ve known each other for far too long. But he knew this team far better now than he did before. It might be unfair to Jaehwan that Jonghyun knew of his insecurities, to Daniel with his deep-seated fears of never debuting, or to Seongwoo because the guy confided secrets that only the two of them knew, but he never wanted them any harm. And this benefit of knowing what would happen in the future could help them rise farther than they had ever imagined.

As a result, “Sorry, Sorry” Team 2 grew tighter in their relationship, surpassing what they previously had in Jonghyun’s past.

Donghan was the maknae with his towering height and handsome features. Under Jonghyun’s tutelage and Jaehwan’s effective method of vocal direction, he was doing well in the choreography and vocals. Not that they had to teach him—Minhyun was observant as always. He remembered Donghan getting the center position of ‘Call Me Maybe’ and the kid did well enough to last far in the competition. But now, without the pressure of having to do so much for his group as Hwang Minhyun’s team was so efficient it was unbelievable, he became more confident with the numerous encouragements he received from everyone.

Jonghyun was apprehensive, though, when Jaehwan noted that Kim Donghan was as laidback and mischievous as Ong Seongwoo, fully knowing that two Ong Seongwoos running around in the same team was too much for any leader to handle. Fortunately, the time-traveler CEO was well-versed in child-rearing and he would recommend the books he read to any budding chairman managing unruly trainees every damn day. He knew the youngest from Class ‘D’ to ‘B’ and yet he was still surprised at how the youngest immediately connected with the hyungs of the team. The youngest of the team became Daniel’s new dongsaeng and Seongwoo’s apprentice in their goal of receding his hairline with the trouble they put themselves into.

Seongwoo and Daniel developed their famous brotherhood as soon as they clicked together in the rehearsals. One cannot be seen without the other, Minhyun jokingly commented when they came across a disappointed Lee Woojin. Seongwoo became more comfortable after Jonghyun reached out to him with a handful of snacks. The pack of gummies soon flew into a pink-haired trainee’s mouth after said trainee stole it from Seongwoo’s hands.

Jaehwan remained the same crazy main vocalist of the team but he was more open now. Jonghyun’s early friendship with the independent trainee in Class ‘B’ was a boon in their teamwork. He knew that Jaehwan was a wallflower capable of growing teeth, legs, and a cackling laugh to match but it was a slight bummer that Jaehwan became a bit too attached to Minhyun and Seongwoo, thus fueling his manic tendencies and scaring everyone (just him, really) with his eerie Hwang Minhyun-like evil plans in the process.

Minhyun-nie was and will always be the Hwanggallyang of Produce 101.

They moved in the same dormitory, pushing each other to get their preferred bunkbeds. Daniel lost to Seongwoo and Donghan and got the top bunk, Jaehwan scared Minhyun into giving him the
lower bunk bed, and Jonghyun watched everything with a sigh. It was pandemonium in their
dormitory; sheets upturned, clothes scattered in places that clothing should not be in, stray gummy
bear candies found under the pillows, a dirtied shirt on Minhyun’s tidied bed—

Minhyun went mad and made them do chores early in the morning. And because they did not want
the fierce side of Hwang Minhyun to ever resurface again, tidying up their place became a habit
that grew on them.

They were given the training room with Team 1. Hyeop-ah greeted Jonghyun with too much
enthusiasm for Team 2’s liking. Yoo Seonho, the recently proclaimed Hwang Minhyun’s Number
One Fanboy, hugged Minhyun to his chest.

Donghan wondered how Jihoon would react to that scene.

Soon they were called for vocal evaluations. Lee Seokhoon seongsaengnim let the first group to
perform. It was going well until Ha Minho interrupted and began to convince the mentor to allow
self-written rap lines into the song. Jonghyun felt Seongwoo bristle and squeezed his forearm
gently. The debacle escalated when Cheetah seongsaengnim entered in the scene and run Minho
down with sharp rebukes aimed at his talent.

For a moment, he wondered if he said yes. Years of experience dabbling in song-writing and being
a co-lyricist in his hip-hop group made him confident in his rapping abilities. Daniel can do it,
certainly, but he lacked training in rapping as compared to dancing.

But one thing he knew Daniel hated was being goaded, and Ha Minho unknowingly got the ire of
the Peach Fairy.

Jonghyun met Daniel’s with a question.

Will you do it?

If the other team wanted a rap verse and to have fair judging, then it’s only right to ask the person
challenged by the other team.

Daniel shook his head.

I won’t slip to his level, hyung. We’re way better than that.

Jonghyun had to smile.

Dance evaluations went badly. Team 1 did well with only minor mistakes from Seonho. Team 2,
on the other hand, went awry. Jaehwan, who was doing okay in their rehearsals, froze up at the
sight of their mentor’s unimpressed expression. Seongwoo tried to salvage the performance by
positioning himself in front of Jaehwan but the instructor saw it already. The dressing-down was
horrible. Their mentor immediately noticed Jaehwan’s less than stellar dance performance amongst
the likes of Seongwoo, Donghan, and Daniel and took well-placed shots by making him repeat
their performance alone.

Jonghyun was horrified. This did not happen the first time around because—

Because Hyunbin was not in their team, the time-traveler realized with a jolt. The dance instructor
immediately zoned in on their weak link.

Jaehwan.

Jaehwan was downtrodden, not with his terrible performance but with how Jonghyun-nie hyung received the brunt of the scolding aimed for him.

“Is this what you call ‘prepared’? Trainee Kim Jonghyun, do you think this is the level of performance I was expecting from your team? I remember you leading both your previous classes but you couldn’t lead a group of five?”

Seongwoo saw Jonghyun flinch but kept his head down. The center badly wanted to interrupt and take the blame from their leader but he knew Jonghyun wouldn’t like that. “I—I’m sorry, seongsaengnim. I will do well in the future.”

Kang Daniel was a chill guy but he never thought he could be upset at someone so badly as their mentor. It was unfair and uncalled for but their leader never stood up for himself. Jaesung seongsaengnim went on a tirade about how Kim Jaehwan’s two left feet even stumped the miraculous leader Kim Jonghyun. Their dance mentor was being oddly mean at Jonghyun, as if it was Jonghyun messing up the choreography.

And what did his leader do? He bowed and apologized for not doing his job well.

Was this a prank or part of the drama? Daniel didn’t know. He was too upset to care. It was a good thing that their mentor stopped berating Jonghyun hyung or he won’t be able to hold back the retort that was slowly building in his chest.

It was also slightly gratifying that Kwon Hyeop and Yoo Seonho were also upset at the scene in front of them.

They went to the vocal room for privacy. Jonghyun locked the door and turned the lights off before squeezing in between Seongwoo and Daniel.

Silence.

Jonghyun, ever the good leader, tried to lighten the mood. “It’s okay. You don’t need to be mad at seongsaengnim. He was right, I did not do my responsibilities well and got all of you pulled down.” He frowned then hastily wiped the expression off with a cheerful smile. “Well, no worries! I know that if I do my job well and we help each other, we’ll get compliments from our mentors for a job well done—oomph!”

Jonghyun wheezed at the sudden impact of a body to his solar plexus and looked down at the pink tresses softly tickling his nose and wrapped an arm around the shaking trainee. He feared the reaction of Daniel the most when he got a tongue-lashing from their dance mentor. The boy was just too kind and soft-hearted. Although Daniel had some of his moments he ultimately had his heart in the right place. He was suddenly reminded how he hated the show as it destroys the trainees little by little.

Daniel hugged him tighter, almost suffocating him, but did not let go. He shifted to a better position, practically seating the pink-haired trainee on his lap, and patted his back. And if his jersey was getting damper by the minute, he did not complain.

Jonghyun looked up at the sad expressions of Team 2 and smiled comfortingly. “Yah, a frown
doesn’t suit you Seongwoo-ah, you look constipated. And Minhyun-nie, I saw that clenched fists of yours. Don’t let me see that again or I’ll tell Jihoon.”

Minhyun lightly raised an eyebrow, but the grim line of his lips told a different story. “I’m definitely sure that he would do the same thing.”

Donghan nodded in agreement.

The team leader sighed. “This is what I feared. No. Don’t let your frustrations cloud your judgement. I’m fine, I truly am. He is still our mentor and he was doing the best that he can for us to have a good performance— “

“It was still wrong. You—you did not deserve that.” Jaehwan looked down, voice choked as he fought back the tears that were threatening to fall. “I—I’m sorry Jonghyun-nie. I made a lot of mistakes and you got scolded because of me. I promise to do better.”

Jonghyun wordlessly opened his other arm and caught Jaehwan’s body to his other side. The two members of the team began to draw comfort from their leader as their frustrations began to ebb away with every calm exhalation.

Minhyun patted Daniel’s shoulder and ruffled Donghan’s hair before sitting down and leaning his head on Jonghyun’s shoulders. Donghan smiled tremulously, tears building up in his eyes. He went to Jaehwan’s side and hugged him comfortably. Seongwoo, who was the quietest out of the bunch, opted to crawl in front of him and used his outstretched leg as a pillow to lie down on.

The sniffl es quieted down into light snores as the four slept their sadness away into oblivion.

It was silent for a moment before Minhyun started. “That opened a can of worms for me.”

“Minhyun-nie— “

“I know you said we should not discuss about NU’EST while we’re here but I can’t help it. It seemed like we’re back in Pledis and with you taking all the slack for us. Again.”

“It’s my job. I’m happy to do it.”

Minhyun did not answer for a moment and the small dark room was filled with light breaths and shuffling limbs.

Then a saddened voice whispered, “The kids—they look up to you, you know. That was their wake-up call. I had to stop Seongwoo-yah from choking our mentor.”

“Good thing you did or it’ll be the end of us all.”

“That’s not the point and you know it. These kids haven’t seen how harsh the idol industry is. That was a mild rebuke compared to the other unfair things we’ve heard in almost a decade but they don’t know that.”

Jonghyun sighed. “What’s your point, Minhyun-nie?”

“Cut yourself some slack, Jonghyun-ah. You’re already burdened enough with so many things. These kids saw you get scolded and immediately blamed themselves for it. They adore you already and it’s just three days after we formed the group. Imagine if you broke down completely under the pressure... They would break, Hyun-ah. Spare us the pain, please.”
Jonghyun tightened his arm around Daniel, his reply to the plea was a soft “I’ll try.”
Battle Rounds

It was ridiculous how the team Jonghyun was leading suddenly began to demand so much of said leader’s time that he had no moment of silence to relish in. It was outrageous, unnecessary, infuriating, and all the adjectives that Hyeongseop could put in a sentence without having to resort to expletives when Jonghyun-nie hyung cut their already short time together because Kang freaking Daniel needed help with the choreography.

And here everyone thought Joo Haknyeon was the stupidest trainee in Produce 101.

Hyeongseop knew he was severely outclassed by the infamous duo so he decided to call for the reinforcement (even if he doesn’t want to). To his surprise, Minhyun-nie hyung was calm and collected as he listened to the frustrated Hyeongseop’s drama-like story of Jonghyun-nie hyung being brainwashed by evil hyungs or that Kim Jaehwan bribing their leader with his power vocals. At end of the very long tirade, Minhyun was left with the impression that Ahn Hyeongseop would be a successful writer in the future.

(After seven years, Ahn Hyeongseop felt a strange cold draft go up his spine and decided to make a concept storyline for their next comeback.)

Minhyun-nie hyung did not react the way he envisioned it but after he found out the reason why 'Sorry, Sorry' Team 2 was practically tied together at the hip...well...he somewhat wished his crazy imagination was true and that Seongwoo hyung and Daniel hyung were just infuriatingly clingy.

He just didn’t mean to shout in the hallways, Hyeongseop tried to appeal to a pissed-off Hwang Minhyun, but the damage had been done. Everyone knew of the incident the next day.

Minhyun wondered for the thousandth time if he was the only normal person in Team 2. The others decided after their tearful moment in the vocal room that Kim Jonghyun was just too precious to be exposed to the evils of the world and that he must be protected at all costs. The Busan visual was also convinced that Seongwoo conveniently forgot he was a part of “evils of the world”. Seongwoo was hard to remove once he decided he must be everywhere you were, regardless of propriety and/or concept of personal space. It was disconcerting the first time he saw the center sprawled over a disgruntled and very awake Jonghyun early in the morning but they soon got used to it, which made Minhyun think that they're also on the road to crazy town.

He also discovered that Donghan had a brain and that Daniel had too much air stuck in his. The trainee knew what excuses he should do after being the leader’s classmate in all their classes. Choreography, vocals, how to do sultry eye-makeup—Jonghyun was happy to comply. Daniel, on the other hand, had the same alibi on a loop.

Choreography. No wonder Hyeongseop called him. He probably feared for Jonghyun’s safety in the airhead dancer’s proximity. Frankly, Minhyun thought Hyeongseop should look after Jonghyun too. If the leader never noticed anything odd with the pink-haired guy, then he needed to be checked as well.

Jaehwan’s own brand of keeping the oblivious onibugi from everyone was simple: companionship. It was difficult to catch Jonghyun by himself when there were at least three people surrounding him with Kim Jaehwan as a permanent fixture at Jonghyun’s side. Seongwoo teasingly asked if
Jaehwan decided to become Kim Jonghyun’s manager and the center’s face after Jaehwan confirmed his rumored position made his day.

Minhyun was relieved that Jaehwan and Donghan, by far, were the most normal members of the group.

Jihoon’s reaction was the scariest. The center for “Boy in Luv” Team 1 broke their peaceful dinner conversations when he strode over to their table and banged his tray table next to Jonghyun. Seongwoo was about to send the boy off when Daniel jammed his elbow in his stomach.

The expression on the visual’s face was absolutely mutinous as he glared daggers at Kim Jonghyun. Jonghyun smiled at the newcomer but did not say anything, which made said trainee angrier. Minhyun was poised to step in between the two because Jihoon’s veins were alarmingly popped out and he looked like he wanted to smack the life out of a certain onibugi leader.

The staring competition got tenser as Jonghyun’s smile slipped off into a hard expression. Jihoon lasted a few seconds longer before he sighed heavily and rubbed his temples.

“Why am I even worried about you, hyung? You’re just being unapologetically,” He reached over Jonghyun’s tray and angrily bit into the bread. “Irritatively,” The glare went back full-force. “Infuriatingly you.”

Jonghyun gave a noncommittal shrug before he pinched his cute dongsaeng’s cheek. Jihoon exasperatedly shook the hand off before he pinned Seongwoo to his seat with a harsh glare. Seongwoo froze. “Heard you’ve been following my hyung around.”

“Well—I—er—”

Jihoon dismissed the flabbergasted guy with a snort. Daniel was spooning his soup when he felt the hairs on his neck rise. “Hmm. Kang Daniel-ssi…You’re okay, I guess.”

_Not a threat_, that was what Daniel made out of the short statement, to which he let out a relieved sigh. Seongwoo looked vaguely insulted.

Jaehwan got the same treatment, albeit warmer than the two. “Jaehwan-nie hyung,” Jihoon let his gaze move to meet the vocalist’s gaze. “Don’t let it get to you. You’ve been doing well in your dancing.”

Minhyun and Donghan each received a demand to do their protection detail well from a trainee younger than them but still took it seriously as if it was the president who handed down the instruction to them.

Jihoon met their gazes evenly before letting the harsh expression drop entirely. Seongwoo yelped in surprise. The most popular boy in _Produce 101_ suddenly bear-hugged the most popular leader to his chest and made the gasping Jonghyun promise that he would be good, eat at least five meals a day, and make time for all his dongsaengs who missed him terribly.

The thrown glare at the dongsaengs part did not escape anyone especially Seongwoo.

Then he parted from a slightly-blue Jonghyun, fondly patted his asphyxia-addled face, and left the table with a cheery wave, absentmindedly noting that he finished all their meals in one go.

_Oh well, they were too slow to stop him anyway._ Jihoon skipped over to a curious Seongwoon with
a smug grin on his face.

Behind him, Seongwoo gaped at the innocent-looking visual walking away from their table.

Jonghyun smiled fondly. “Ah, Jihoon-nie’s always looking out for his hyungs. Aigoo, that kid’s too sweet for his own good.”

Seongwoo’s face was the definition of scandalized. “Sweet?”

Donghan gave him a weird glance. “Hyung, he’s never been sweet to anyone that’s not you or Minhyun-nie hyung.”

“Oh?” Jonghyun tilted his head off the side. “But that’s nonsense! He just told me to eat well and he made friends with all of you. Usually, he’s the shy type, but for once, he talked to you…Oh well, now you are friends with Jihoon-nie! We can arrange a get-together with him and maybe his team, and Class ‘B’, and Class ‘D’, oh and Guanlin-nie too…” The onibugi leader proceeded to list all of his dongsaengs in practically all the classes, unaware of the disbelieving expressions from all his members.

Seongwoo just banged his head on the table.

The last two days passed like a blur and the next thing Jonghyun knew it was the performance day. He woke up first, blinking slowly at the dark room before folding his sheets and going down the bunk bed. His body clock was so attuned to waking up at four in the morning that he didn’t need to look at his watch to check. He took a long bath dressed in a black sweater and track pants to prepare for the lengthy hours ahead of them.

He had two hours before breakfast was served in the cafeteria. He prepared a thermos of coffee from his packed instant drinks and sat cross-legged on the cold floor, sipping on the bittersweet drink as he waited for the others to wake up.

Minhyun was the first. Hair bedraggled and face puffy, he shuffled towards him and took the offered mug. The bitter drink made him frown in annoyance but the added caffeine to his system jolted his system from his zombie-like state. With a “Good morning, Jonghyun-ah.”, he took his towel.

Donghan went next, then Jaehwan who stayed seated on his bed. Daniel woke up and greeted the others as he went down to drink from the cup of water Jonghyun handed to him.

The silent morning was broken by Seongwoo who woke up with a yell and a dangerous roll over the bed’s railing. The others scrambled to catch the guy before he fell off completely. Everyone was breathing heavily as they pushed the heavy Seongwoo back on his bed.

Seongwoo suddenly sat up, still with his eyes closed.

“In your face, Daniel! I got Rank 1!”

Then went back to sleep once more.

Minhyun went out in his shirt and pants, drying his hair with a towel. He paused at the strange sight of everyone looking up at Seongwoo’s bed with various expressions on their faces.

“What? What’s going on?” Minhyun raised an eyebrow.
They turned in unison when a disgruntled Seongwoo woke up, stretched his arms with a groan, and went down the bunk bed to greet the others. When he caught sight of everyone staring at him weirdly, he slowly backed away.

“What? Is there something on my face?”

The day passed quickly after that.

The cafeteria was mostly void of people aside from the few trainees scattered around, sipping hot beverages. One trainee looked up, surprised at the fairly large number of trainees entering the cafeteria. When he saw the faces go closer, he gaped at the sight of the elusive team. No one had seen a hair or hide of ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 since yesterday. He heard Lee Gunhee wanting to stage a search party for the team, Kim Jonghyun to be treated as a priority, but Choi Minki said it was pointless to look for someone not wanting to be found.

“But what could they be hiding from us?” Gunhee cried.

“Trust me, you’ll be very surprised.”

The search party of forty trainees stopped at that.

Good thing, too, or the search would’ve ruined the whole surprise. And it was one heck of a surprise, Widmay Entertainment Kim Yehyun thought as he stared at each member of the team with a growing case of fanboy syndrome.

“Whoa…”

Donghan did not notice the stares in the cafeteria, lamenting on the missed chance for rehearsals. They missed a whole day of rehearsals yesterday after Jonghyun-nie hyung dragged them out for some errands. Imagine his surprise when their leader brought them to a van waiting near the gates at seven in the morning.

“Are we even allowed to get out?” Seongwoo asked.

“Of course we are! Shooting’s over and some of the trainees shortly went back to their companies for meetings with their bosses and/or managers. It would be unfair if they won’t give us the same liberties.”

“Then why is there a man seating behind the car?”

“Oh, that’s Aron hyung. He’d be accompanying us today to satisfy the companion-slash-non-disclosure-agreement part of the clause. Don’t worry, he talked to your company managers already for this trip and they allowed it.”

Minhyun ran towards the van without a backward glance.


“Yeah, sure, that’s his job now.”

The team was so shy with Aron hyung it was borderline embarrassing. Daniel could not even look the famous DJ in the eye. Minhyun broke the ice after an exchanged exasperated glance from Jonghyun. Soon, the oldest member became acquainted with ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2, pulling a
starstruck Daniel and Donghan into a conversation about fashion of all things.

The two animated people was interrupted by a hesitant Donghan.

“Uh, not to be impolite hyung, but why are you suddenly asking about hair preferences?”

Kwak Aron immediately turned to face their leader with a glare. “Yah, Jonghyun-ah! You didn’t tell them?”

“I—Everything was happening so fast, I didn’t get the chance to tell them.”

Minhyun frowned at the two older people. “Tell us what?”

Seongwoo knew something was up the moment Jonghyun-nie interrupted their dinner, telling them to dress up and meet him at the entrance in five minutes. They knew better than to complain though, so they rushed out the cafeteria, almost running each other over, and hastily slammed their trays in the bin, ignoring the hundred stares digging through their backs.

He had so many ideas running from his head: fire-alarm, surprise Super Junior concert, NU’EST members starting their own company and they’d get to see the building first—but not this.

Aron-si rubbed a hand on his face. “I didn’t have this problem with Minki and Dongho’s team. Aish, Jonghyun-ah,” He cut his tirade off whilst scrubbing his face red in frustration. “Okay, what your leader forgot to tell you is that you’ll be having a little makeover today.”

“What?” Seongwoo gaped.

“Makeover. Hair. Clothes. Makeup. Accessories. Piercing, if you like. Anything that could amp your performance in two days, except fixing your nose or something surgical. That I cannot do.”

Everyone sat still, staring at the amused NU’EST member in shock.

Jaehwan was thinking differently. “But…don’t we have makeup noonas to handle that? And the outfit would be given by Mnet, right?”

“Sure, the aesthetics team would be there to do your makeup, but remember how many trainees there are that needs the same thing, if not more. The twelve noonas or hyungs would go mad.” Aron hyung shrugged. “So, Jonghyun-nie here called me to do some legal stuff with Mnet to allow all trainees to have a say in the aesthetics department. The rest’s too technical to explain but gist goes: If the trainee can afford it, or the company’s willing to sponsor it, then he can change his hair color or pierce his ears provided that no surgery of any sort would happen while the show is airing.”

“I’ve never heard of that rule before,” Daniel mused.

“An unspoken rule ever since, really. Jonghyun-ah brought it up with me and because I had some, er, contacts…so, yeah. If you know it, good for you. If you don’t, it’s okay because you guys have resident makeup noonas ready for the performances.”

Jaehwan was unconvinced of the whole thing. “But isn’t it unfair? I mean, I’ve seen the other trainees and they don’t look different.”

Aron hyung shrugged. “It’s called showbiz, Jaehwan-si. Maybe they’re not allowed by their companies or they don’t know about it, but it’s not our call. Mnet did send an email regarding the now-legalized rule and there’s been talks of setting a press conference after the episode is aired, so
if their company chose not to say anything, then it’s out of our hands.”

The van was silent for a moment before a clap thundered at the back of the car.

“That’s why!” Donghan clapped all of a sudden, startling everyone from their musings. “I asked Minki hyung if I can visit their dorms but he said I’m not allowed to enter their rooms. And they never restrict anyone from going in so I thought something weird was going on.”

“Ah, Minki-yah,” Aron grinned. “His team got their small makeover a few days ago too. That’s why they’re wearing caps or hoodies to hide their hair and new ear piercings.”

“Wait, Aron hyung…”

“Consider it paid, Jaehwan-ssi,” Aron hyung interrupted with a smile, knowing where the tentative question was heading. “A little Pokémon character said so.”

Jaehwan didn’t need a confirmation. He turned to a smiling onibugi.

Their day started with a visit to one of NU’EST’s old contacts in Insadong. Minhyun gasped as the van rounded into a familiar narrow road lined with quaint brick houses. The van stopped in front of a store with a vintage-themed façade. The windows, clear and shining in the soft morning rays, were lined with intricately-carved oak wood. A male mannequin dressed in a fancy royal blue lapel tuxedo greeted them in its nonliving wonder. The wooden door with a small tinkling bell above it completed the olden feel of the place.

Aron hyung pushed Minhyun inside, waving to others to step in as well. The inside was even more beautiful than the front. Homely brown rustic walls were decorated with wooden carvings in likeness with Renaissance statues found today. An expensive-looking chaise lounge was placed in front of the fireplace, sending any visitor reeling with the picturesque yet comfortable store.

The aged man in thin spectacles at the counter rounded his desk and hugged the NU’EST members with familiarity that comes with knowing someone for a long time. Mr. Hae, as he wanted to be called, ushered the seven boys towards a red drape curtain with gold stitching and pushed it aside. The trainees were stuck in awe at the modern circular room of mirrors with a three-step cross platform made of glass in the middle.

“Mr. Hae, these are the trainees I talked to you about. You already know Minhyun-nie and Jonghyun-nie, of course,” The two mentioned trainees waved. “But their teammates must be new faces to you.” Seongwoo led the introduction with a deep bow which prompted the others to introduce themselves in a more reserved manner.

Mr. Hae greeted the newcomers with a bright smile but did not speak. Daniel soon realized why. The man walked towards the end of the room where racks upon racks of beautifully tailored suits were hung and gestured to Jonghyun, his hands rapidly flitting in what was unmistakably sign language.

Aron saw the understanding dawn in Daniel’s face. “Mr. Hae’s one of our oldest contacts in the industry,” He explained while looking at the expensive-looking loafers on the shelf. “This started as a family business, in France actually, but Mr. Hae wanted to get out of the Parisian life and went back to Seoul for retirement. But he never truly stopped making suits.”

Minhyun went back to their group, holding a suit as black as midnight with wavy patterns on the coat. Jaehwan felt his heart stop at the beauty of the suit. Minhyun grinned as he handed the suit to
a starstruck Jaehwan. “His suits are masterpieces. High-quality fabrics are weaved from locally-found natural fibers and the intricate designs on it are so unique that I haven’t seen it in any designer suits. But Mr. Hae works mostly alone, though, extremely picky of customers and hates the whiny and demanding kind so he stays out of the spotlight. We wouldn’t have known of him if not for Jonghyun-nie’s monthly wanderings.”

Seongwoo approached Mr. Hae and Jonghyun-nie and watched the two conversing with Jonghyun talking and Mr. Hae doing the sign language. His attention turned to the racks of tux and he started to look at each one after an accommodating nod from Mr. Hae.

“Whoa…I’ve never felt something so soft!”

Mr. Hae pointed at him and the suit. Jonghyun smiled. “Well, what are you waiting for? Get moving.”

That prompted the others to crowd the racks, taking their picks with Jonghyun and Mr. Hae assisting them. Minhyun helped Jaehwan pick his outfit, what with the two vocalists having the same style preference. Donghan wanted something a bit provocative and Jonghyun stuck with their youngest to look for his piece, with Aron as their judge.

It was a fun morning for the team. They each had five best picks to choose from and Mr. Hae was kind and patient as he took their measurements and looked for the right size in his “magic suitcase”. They needed ready-to-wear tailored suits and yet the pieces perfectly fit their frames, making them look absolutely dashing in fancy suits and puffy morning faces. Ong Seongwoo was a gold mine of facial expressions as he modeled his suit in front of them. The fun soon ended when Aron hyung reminded them of their schedule in Itaewon.

Mr. Hae placed the clothes in tuxedo bags but he vehemently refused the payment Jonghyun was handing out to him. The old man signed furiously, saying that no cash must pass through his palms and threw a warning glare at the persistent Jonghyun. The man even went further by adding the handmade Italian leather shoes in boxes and pushing them towards a flabbergasted Donghan.

“What—Mr. Hae, we couldn’t—”

The old man clasped the leader’s hands in his and signed slowly.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you, Jonghyun-ah. It warms this old man’s heart that you thought of me to help you and your friends and never forgot about me even after all these years. Consider this a gift from your first friend in Seoul.”

It was a tearful goodbye with the kind old man. Ong Seongwoo was bawling over a patient Mr. Hae who was fondly patting the center’s hair. They parted with bright smiles and light hearts as they waved at Mr. Hae before the van pulled away and into the main streets.

They did not have time to breathe because of their spa and hair consultation somewhere in Itaewon followed by having an ear curator create their piercing style. The hair salon went faster than the ear piercing (Seongwoo wanted to pierce his whole face!) because they went with almost the same hair colors or just a new hairstyle. Shockingly, Daniel let go of his trademark peach-pink hair color because of his thinning hair follicles and went with the colorist’s idea of recreating a darker look to Donghan’s bluish-violet hairstyle.

The stylist noona, who goes by the mononym ‘K’, was a twenty-seven-year-old hairstylist from South Jeolla trying to make a name. Aron met the stylist from a recommendation and was left very impressed with the quality of treatment she gave all her customers at a very affordable price. He
also had nothing but praises for her expertise and innovative way of fusing colors while minimizing hair damage. Her team, a blonde-haired girl named Tia and two burly guys named Jinwoo and Ryewoon, started immediately as soon as they stepped over the doorway.

K noona gushed over their overall look after her team finished their work. “Super Junior’s known for their cold, chaebol-like mysterious aura. From your visuals, I think you’ll slay the bad-boy, rich kid aura well.”

Jaehwan had a feeling that he would barely recognize anyone in his team by the team they stepped on the stage.

Aron hyung inspected their new hairstyle and color in the mirrors. “You did well as usual, Elie,” He teased the blushing hairstylist with the name he fashioned for her Elie Saab-inspired fusion of light hues with vivid satin-like shades. “But I noticed you did not do as good of a job with Minki-yah, though.”

“Well,” K noona flipped her gray-accented hair over her shoulders. “He looks prettier than me so he can’t pull of what these guys have. Plus, I just did the world a favor ‘cause he’d make the world burn if he wore any of my masterpieces.”

They left her salon after paying a discounted price for the service. Aron hyung immediately caught the woman staring at Minhyun and Donghan and teased her mercilessly for it, much to the two trainees’ embarrassment. Jonghyun ushered everyone to the van, swinging the bag of hair products to Daniel, and waved at the stylists before driving to Gangnam where Dongho suggested a good ear curator in Apgujeong.

They had to be cautious as the place was near the tourist attractions in Gangnam and for sure the area must be packed with K-Pop fans roaming the streets. Daniel knew they won’t get recognized but that doesn’t go for Aron hyung, Minhyun-nie hyung, and Jonghyun-nie hyung. They went down the van with masks on and hoodies flipped as they brisk-walked inside a small building between KB Bank and a small ramen house.

The ear curator was a middle-aged man who worked with many artists in the industry, much to Daniel’s excitement. The pictures of notable artists, models, and actors neatly lined up on the walls only proved that statement. Kwon Taeyong may be a tad colder than Mr. Hae and K noona but his no-nonsense attitude oddly comforted Jaehwan from his fear of getting accidentally stabbed with that horrifyingly sharp stick in his hand.

Minhyun and Jaehwan did not do the procedure, so as to maintain the pristine image they were going for, but Donghan, Daniel, and Seongwoo went all out while Jonghyun picked something moderate.

Their last stop was the night market in Hongdae. Unfortunately, a fan recognized Aron hyung and he had to be left behind in Apgujeong. The money was handed to Minhyun-nie hyung who gave them a reasonable budget to buy whatever they needed to complete their look. Seongwoo and Daniel went off to buy eye makeup, Jonghyun went with Donghan to buy eye contacts, and Minhyun dragged Jaehwan to a store that sold good-looking rings.

They took two hours to finish before returning back to their dorms while eating their evening meal inside the car. They reached the building at ten in the evening and was so utterly exhausted that they slowly trudged in their dormitories while dragging bags of clothes, makeup, and accessories. Fortunately, no one saw them and their new looks but Jonghyun did not want to risk it. He locked the door and pushed the bags in the small cabinets. He soon fell asleep and the others soon followed.
Waking up early in the morning, Donghan thought he could practice, but Jonghyun put his foot down against last-minute practice, determined to let his members rest before the actual performance. 'Sorry, Sorry' Team 2 went to one of the tables near the window while Minhyun, Donghan and Jaehwan volunteered to grab their breakfast. Jonghyun had to bite off a laugh as he watched poor Seongwoo deal with a standoffish Daniel. It was hilarious to watch but for the others the skinship became a bit too much. Minhyun had to stop Seongwoo from suffocating Daniel to death.

An hour after breakfast, they were ushered into a black van with tinted windows. Jonghyun and Donghan went at the back, Seongwoo and Daniel followed after, and Minhyun and Jaehwan occupied the first row. A masked staff went to the passenger seat and asked them to put masks on.

The ride was quiet and Jonghyun appreciated the silence from his sleeping members. He shifted in his seated position, putting their maknae’s lolling head on his shoulders, and made himself comfortable. Their dormitory was three hours away from Seoul by car.

They circled the press barricading the entrance, Jonghyun instinctively bowing his head to hide his face, and went to the backstage door. The others woke up groggily and trailed after the staff who brought them to their dressing room.

They were roomed with three other teams, according to the piece of paper taped to the door: ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 1, and ‘Boy in Luv’ Teams 1 and 2. They were the last ones in because Seongwoo had a dramatic scene of jumping into Minhyun’s arms from the second floor and got his trackpants torn and obscenely pulled out from his body. Minhyun dearly hoped it would not be aired while Jaehwan wanted it as the opening of the show for all episodes.

Four seven-foot-tall white partitions divided the room, boxing two teams on each length of the room. Battling teams were placed in front of each other with a makeshift sliding door for privacy. Jonghyun noted that they were placed adjacent to Jihoon’s team.

The noise levels were outrageous. Rooming almost thirty trainees in one middle-sized room did so many bad things to anyone’s hearing. Jaehwan rubbed his ear uncomfortably. They were led to the couches by one of the staffs who said that the room wasn’t ready yet.

The three teams were already done with their attires and some of them had makeup on already but most were also waiting for the room to be available to them. Hyeop and Seonho greeted them in black button-down and velvet maroon tuxedos before Jihoon called them over to sit on the couch across their counterpart team. The seating arrangement was in a square, with ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 1 facing a vacant couch and both ‘Boy in Luv’ teams facing each other.

Daniel cautiously noted how they were placed between the two feuding teams like a flimsy barrier against a raging hurricane. Beside him, Seongwoo gulped at the sight of Park Jihoon. Jonghyun went over to Kang Dongho and Lee Insoo, clapping each back in greeting, before zoning on Lai Guanlin and hugging the tall trainee.

“Wah, you look handsome, Guanlin-ah. The sangnamja concept suits you really well.”

The Cube trainee shyly smiled before returning the hug. Jonghyun then worked on his “leader-ah magic”. Jaehwan made the concept a colloquially-accepted answer to how Kim Jonghyun makes everyone he meets fall in love with him. Daniel and Seongwoo had never seen it because they never interacted with their other members before their team was formed. But they knew Jonghyun was friends with Minhyun, Donghan, and Jaehwan so they must have seen it
happen once.

From the resigned expression on Minhyun-nie hyung’s face, Daniel knew it would be a sight to see.

Jonghyun definitely saw changes in both teams. ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 2 was still gunning for schoolboy-turned-hot-university-dude with their white button-down and black tie but the hairstyles and makeup was an improvement from dark, sloppily smudged eyeliners and slightly pink lips. Dongho took advantage of their makeover with his new piercings. Kim Yongguk looked cool in his dark hair with subtle tints of red. Lee Gunmin went for the varsity-type with his red hair and gummy smile. Kim Sangbeen went for the cold upperclassmen style.

As soon as Lai Guanlin stepped away from the hug, Kang Dongho dragged a familiar face hiding behind his hulking figure.

“Damn! You look fine, Samuel-ah.”

Yep, Seongwoo said it exactly like you heard it.

Jonghyun grinned at the young trainee even if he was still in awe at the plot twist of this timeline. Kim Samuel in the opposing team? He expected Lee Yoojin of Namoo Actors to pick Samuel for his team since he was the third to form one but for some insane reason the other trainees forgot Samuel’s presence until Chun Entertainment Kim Yongguk chose the Brave trainee first.

Someone up there must’ve loved drama too much that she pitted Samuel against the team he was originally in. But then he looked happy, Jonghyun realized as he watched the young trainee slap Dongho for dragging him in the first place. The startling contrast between a Kim Samuel competing amongst his team members for a little screen time and the Kim Samuel in Dongho’s team having a good time as part of the spoiled maknae line of ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 2 abated his worries.

Gone was the innocent-looking thirteen-year old that Jonghyun knew. Samuel went with shiny honey-brown locks curled on one side, small hoop earrings, and a thick silver chain peeking out from his opened button-down.

“Yah, Jonghyun-ah! You remember this kid? He's now the center, choreographer, and dongsaeng of our team!”

Jonghyun smiled at the sheepish expression on Kim Samuel’s face. “Course I do. It's been a while Muel-ah. I’m glad you remember us, your first hyungs in the industry.”

Samuel swatted Dongho’s hand running through his gelled hair. “How can I forget? You used to drag me around in the practice room with Dongho and Aron hyung. Almost threw me out the window once, too.”

“Yeah, well, you were and still are my youngest dongsaeng. That’s how I show my love to you.”

Daniel face-palmed at the dark expression on the others’ faces. Beside him Lee Insoo chuckled. “Oblivious guy, isn’t he?”

“Is he always like this?”

“Oh, you haven’t seen the others yet. Just a fair warning to your team—never put Jihoon-nie, Hyeongseop-ah, Minki hyung, and Jonghyun-nie hyung in a room. I’ve seen it once,” The blonde guy shuddered. “Never again.
Seongwoo decided to interrupt their conversation. “Hyeongseop…Oh, you mean Ahn Hyeongseop? He was promoted from Class ‘D’ to ‘A’. He looked normal to me, albeit a little shy. But not to the extent that I need to fear for my life.”

The wary glance at the laughing “visual from hell” Park Jihoon (Seongwoo was proud that he thought of this) did not go unnoticed.

Lee Insoo raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

After half an hour, their team was called into their prepared room. Jonghyun-nie hyung slid their door open and immediately sought out the makeup noona in a Pororo facemask and gestured to the bags pushed on a trolley by Minhyun. Lee Jihyun noona, a thirty-five-year-old makeup artist from Gochang, was only relieved that her insane workload was decreased by six trainees. She had ten more trainees to take care of. But she had to ask the leader of this team once more—

“Jonghyun-ssi, are you sure you’ll be okay?”

The handsome trainee smiled reassuringly. “Yes, noona, we’ll be fine. We can dress ourselves first. We’ll try to do things ourselves but we may need your help in the hair and makeup though. Makes things faster, I guess.”

Jihyun was so grateful she agreed immediately. With a short wave, she left ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 and ran to the other rooms with trainees in need.

Jonghyun turned to his members. “Well, Aron hyung was right. It’s better to do things ourselves if we can.”

Seongwoo was stuck at an impasse because he did not know what to make out of his leader. Kim Jonghyun was incredibly popular amongst the trainees and staff because of his talents and personality. An underdog, Noh Taehyun said when the rumors of a trainee leading his class in the spotlight reached their ears. That peaked Ong Seongwoo’s curiosity. He was rewarded when Hwang Minhyun chose him for his team, a group wherein said underdog trainee was also a part of.

And the term never suited anyone better than Pledis Entertainment trainee Kim Jonghyun. Sultry vocals, check; Sharp dance movements, double check; Excellent rapping tone, triple check; Leadership skills, a hundred checks for that. And his teammates were no pushovers either: Kim Jaehwan and his damn good vocals, Kang Daniel and his b-boy skills, Hwang Minhyun and his aristocratic visuals and honeyed vocals, Kim Donghan and his unbelievable height and aura—

Hwang Minhyun sure got his admiration for creating such a powerful team.

The perfect team to get at least 3,000 points, a little voice whispered in the back of his mind.

Nevertheless, his once-solid impression of the Angel Leader was once broken when the trainee took responsibility of having no aesthetic artist by being one. He wasn’t the only one gazing at the leader who was pairing the ensembles with a critical eye, exchanging hangers every now and then to match the concept well. Minhyun, who knew the leader for more than 6 years, was surprised at what he was seeing. Jonghyun was known for his laidback and casual style but he was arranging their outfits not only to suite their concept but also their taste.

Seriously, is there anything the guy can’t do?
The leader rolled the dress rack to each member, pulling out the black-and-white tuxedo ensemble with subtle accents on the fabric for them to change into. The accessory boxes were placed on their table for them to wear after their makeup. Seongwoo thought Jonghyun was finished acting as their visual director but he surprised them yet again when he grabbed sharp-toothed comb and a bottle of—gel?

“Seongwoo-yah,” Jonghyun went behind him with a grin. “How do you feel with gelling your hair back?”

Seongwoo shrugged. “I guess I could pull it off, but no promises though.”

The leader immediately started combing through his hair, applying serums and occasionally spritzing shine sprays, and pulling it back with the help of the gel and hairsprays.

After Jonghyun-nie styled his hair, he took back all his misgivings and started to think that Kim Jonghyun was really an angel in disguise.

The others ran to their seats, eager at what their leader had in mind for their hair.

After two hours, Jihyun noona came back and stopped short at the sight of the last team she needed to assist.

Visual shock team, she concluded as she went to Hwang Minhyun and prepped his face, her mind running with so many ideas on what she could do to amp their visuals more.

As if they needed more, she scoffed in her head.

Her eyes trailed to the leader and she knew who the mastermind behind their styling.

Damn, what I wouldn’t give to have that trainee in my aesthetics team…

“Minki-yah, have you seen Daniel-ah or Jonghyun-ah around?”

“Hmm, no, hyung. I haven’t seen him since yesterday morning.”

Yoon Jiseong was getting worried. Minki may have told him off in the nicest way possible but that doesn’t mean he could not get worried that he had not seen anyone from ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2. It didn’t really help that Hyeongseop was practically whining in his ear. He was so tempted to send the boy to Jihoon-nie but the Wink Boy had greater problems to solve (his overly-competitive teammates, for one) and getting saddled with Ahn Hyeongseop was too much for anyone.

They were almost complete in the waiting room, aside from a few teams, and the ominous-looking flat-screen LED TV was making him jittery.

The door opened and in came ‘Replay’ Team 1 in their pink ensemble. Yoo Seonho was mouthing his incredulity at the turtleneck Moschino sweater Jung Jung was wearing. The trainees felt underdressed compared to Yeo Hwanwoong’s pink-flower boy team. Some trainees were convinced that the two Yuehua trainees from Mainland China sponsored their aesthetics or paid Yuehua to do it for them. Hyeop wouldn’t be surprised because the two were known as the chaebols of Produce 101.
Half an hour before the show starts and still, there were no signs of ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 1. The ‘Boy in Luv’ Teams just entered the room a few minutes ago and they took up the front seats. Hyeop was in the same room as the two controversial teams but it was the first time he’d seen their outfits.

The two teams were gunning their best. Team 1 may have, admittedly, fancier outfits but he’d bet his whole idol career that Team 2 would slay the audiences.

He looked up at the clock. Fifteen minutes till five.

The room was silent as their performances drew nearer.

*Must be the nerves ‘cause they’re eerily quiet,* he empathized with his fellow trainees.

Or so he thought.

“Yah! Where the hell’s Daniel?” Jiseong huffed impatiently.

Someone tapped his shoulder and he turned to the YGK+ trainee who wordlessly pointed at the door.

He felt his jaw drop.

And he wasn’t the only one.

If asked, most of the trainees would say that the stage performance was the most nerve-wracking moment of the night. Donghan begged to differ—it was the wait that made him feel like his stomach was being harshly twisted and thrown in all directions. Even the comforting presence of Hwang Minhyun was not enough to put his rebellious stomach at ease. It was not only him though; Jaehwan *hyung* idly commented that he felt like throwing up and Daniel *hyung* was inconsolable. Seongwoo *hyung* was like an idol in a trainee’s body because he looked at-ease and comfortable while everyone was slowly losing their minds.

Jonghyun-*nie hyung* seriously was a godsend. He distracted their team as best as he could, sharing stories about an adolescent Hwang Minhyun, much to said visual’s annoyance. The two experienced trainees were calm and cool in the face of pressure but they did not let it unnerve them. It helped calm his nerves as he pushed his chair closer to the leader, absentmindedly noting that other trainees shuffled closer to listen to the jovial Kim Jonghyun.

The boom of *Produce 101* opening credits jolted everyone from their stupor/conversations and they stopped to watch the cameras pan over the hundreds of fans screaming their excitement.

“That’s a lot of fans,” Hyeop gulped anxiously.

The Nation’s Representative BoA introduced the first song to the clamoring audience. The ‘10 out of 10’ teams walked out in contrasting red and white ensemble. Team 1 was dressed in casual red lounge jackets and black denim pants while Team 2 was going for a *Kill Bill*-inspired white nylon sports jumpsuit and metallic chains. Daniel smiled as the camera caught Jiseong *hyung*’s memorable facial expressions.

Both performances showed different concepts, Jonghyun analyzed with a critical eye. Team 1 was going for a fun-filled showcase with Yoon Jiseong’s mastery in facial expressions and the two *YGK+* taking the performance by storm with their tall height and funny antics while Team 2
went full-on with acrobatic stunts with Byun Hyunmin as their Bruce Lee-impersonator.

Jonghyun ignored the others betting on who will win and listened to his three members’ discussion amusedly. Beside him, Jaehwan leaned in to listen as well.

Daniel put his arms behind his head. “Byun Hyunmin would surely get the highest votes.”

Seongwoo shrugged. “Yeah, he made the flips look so easy.”

“I don’t think so,” Seongwoo and Daniel looked at a thoughtful Minhyun. Minhyun continued, “He may have done the stunts but he had no lines. I think Hyeongseop-ah would have the highest number of votes—those facial expressions would rank him high, even with Noh Taehyun’s vocals.”

Seongwoo looked unconvincing but then the results showed up—

“Whoa,” Daniel gaped at an unsurprised Hwang Minhyun. “Are you also fortune teller by chance, Minhyun-nie hyung?”

The center for ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 went from disbelieving to reluctantly impressed as Minhyun correctly predicted the highest ranked trainee. Jonghyun watched as his team began placing bets on the trainee with the highest votes, ignoring the weird expressions on the other trainees’ faces.

EXO’s ‘Call Me Maybe’ teams went with similar concepts—a sensual performance without being too promiscuous. Both delivered well: Seong Hyunwoo’s charisma and dancing was what a center should exhibit and Han Minho’s raspy tone and overwhelming stage presence made the two trainees as tough contenders for the highest rank.

Seongwoo grinned as he placed a bet on Han Minho getting first place. Daniel was about to follow the center’s lead when Minhyun shook his head.

“Sadly, Jang Moonbok had his hair as the main attraction, even if there’s Seong Hyunwoo as center. He’d rank first here but I’m a bit worried that the long hair would soon lose its touch.”

Ong Seongwoo wringed his hair when Minhyun-nie was right. Again.

SHINee’s noona-attracting song ‘Replay’ went similarly with ‘10 out of 10’: Team 1 went for the pink, sugary, and adorable-with-kaleidoscopic-pink-circles-floating-like-flower-petals concept. Daniel was enthralled at how Choi Minki made the performance memorable with his flower-boy visuals. It was obvious how a debuted idol worked the stage compared to the others because the NU’EST member never failed to catch the camera at the right moment. The other trainees were gushing over Team 1’s visual and Lee Gunhee’s vocals. Jung Jung’s flip put the icing on top.

Team 2 went for the cute and manly concept, seducing the viewers with smooth vocals. Kim Sanggyun was the contender for their team, Jonghyun thought.

Daniel scratched his head. “I don’t know…Lee Gunhee?”

Donghan had a different choice which coincided with Seongwoo and Minhyun.
Seongwoo scoffed. “Of course, Choi Minki would rank first! That face is much prettier than most of the noonas I know. Although Lee Gunhee’s vocals could give a slight competition and Jung Jung’s a phenomenal dancer and that flip would’ve broken my bones if I tried it, but hands down, Choi Minki gets the attention here.”

Minhyun high-fived Seongwoo and Donghan when they turned out to be right.

And their dongsaengs SEVENTEEN’s ‘Mansae’ which propelled Seungkwan’s insane vocals—

“Park Woodam. And a large number at that.”

Daniel laughed at the funny expression on Ong Seongwoo’s face when the camera panned to a whopping number of 270 votes for a staggered Park Woodam.

The fun was good while it lasted when one of the staffs called the ‘Sorry, Sorry’ teams backstage. Everyone cheered and shouted their support as both teams went out of the room. The backstage staff roughly fixed their headset microphones and earpieces before sending them off to the left side of the stage with nary a backward glance.

The work was shoddy: Seongwoo’s microphone was detached from the lapels, Donghan’s in-ear was just hanging off the appendage with no tape, and Jaehwan’s mic was wrapped around his neck like a boa constrictor. Jonghyun couldn’t blame the staff for their negligence because they were understaffed so he decided to help his members. His team did not curse or frown at the staffs, opting to just watch their leader unwind Jaehwan’s mic with a reassuring smile and basked in their leader’s selflessness.

Once he was done with Minhyun’s faulty earpiece, he gathered the group in a circle, noting his team’s anxiety as the director resumed the show after the commercial breaks.

“I am so proud of you, guys. We’ve made so many good memories as a team. This team I will never forget. So, let this stage be a performance everyone will remember.”

“Legendary,” Minhyun murmured. “I know our stage will be legendary.”

Seongwoo sniffed haughtily. “Well, you have me as the center so it’s no surprise, really.” Daniel slapped him on the back of his head.

“I—I will do my best, hyungs.”

Jonghyun ruffled his hair. “I know you will, Donghan-nie. Let’s do this stage without any regrets, hmm.”

“Yes!”

Simultaneously, they placed their hands together as Jonghyun counted. “1, 2, 3—”

“Fighting!”

As if on cue, the Nation’s Representative BoA called the teams. “Trainees, come on up!”

Jonghyun’s heart was beating erratically. He was nervous, severely so, but tried to hide it from his team members. He knew he changed a lot of things the moment he decided to screw the timeline
up for the sake of his *dongsaengs*. He didn’t know exactly why he was back in the show but it was too late to back out now.

Not that he would back out with too much at stake.


So many others whose brightness dimmed as their names were forgotten as second thoughts.

So many talented people whose chance to stay in the spotlight was robbed the moment the media grew tired of them.

So many idols whose light burned so bright that they blinded themselves to what was important.

So many who felt alone.

Never again.

He was and will be the *Nation’s Leader*.

He’d push them up even when they’re tired to take a step.

That was a promise.

The screaming fans were mesmerized by the sparkling eyes of Kim Jonghyun.
Reactions and a Dilemma

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You know, I thought I made peace with my team and how our stage went. There were some mishaps, yes, like Dongho hyung scaring the wits out of Daehwi and our team getting branded as a strong group just because the Wink-boy of Produce 101 was there, yada yada, so overall, not bad for a team with everyone itching to stab each other with mental force alone,” Jihoon pursed his lips at the twenty-eighth (he was counting, sue him) trainee who gushed his amazement at a blushing Hwang Minhyun.

Minhyun intervened, red face contrasting with the crisp lining of his black tuxedo. “Well—"

But the current Rank 1 trainee was on a roll, waves of frustrations coming off him. “But you suddenly reminded me of how jealous we were of Hwanggallyang’s team—still am to be honest, which I hate you for, by the way. Like, seriously, how the hell did you come up with a team like that? Do you have major shares in CJ E&M so you got to pick the cream of the crop? Something crazier like hidden superpowers? Or time-travelling?”

“Or…maybe I had eyes and a brain to match,” The Pledis trainee rolled his eyes before bidding the exasperated trainee farewell for his interview.

Park Jihoon wanted to believe that Hwang Minhyun just had the eyes of a hawk and a brain like that of a president of an entertainment company, he truly did.

But, damn, he made all the other teams look like amateurs.

Jihoon had high expectations from “Sorry, Sorry” Team 2 the moment Hwang Minhyun chose Jaehwan-nie hyung as the first pick. The Pledis trainee didn’t stop there though, much to his disbelief. He had no choice but to admire and watch with envy as Minhyun-nie hyung formed a well-balanced team of power vocals, superb dancers, unfairly good visuals, and the Angel Leader Kim Jonghyun to boot. The sad part was that he wasn’t the only one.

The line-up scared everyone into choosing seven members in a bid to overwhelm the first two teams with sheer numbers in case they had no choice but to battle the strongest teams in the evaluations. And Jihoon was not even apologetic when he smirked because the smarter trainees thought that Hwang Minhyun’s team was stronger than Lee Daehwi’s, even with the ‘voting collector’ trainees in his team.

Heck, the “Nayana” center, smart kid that he was, summarized the plan of picking their opponent to “Anyone except Hwang Minhyun’s team”. It took most of his willpower to hide his frustrations but he knew Jonghyun-nie hyung saw through his mask. The trainee with the “L” sticker rushed to his side during break and whispered that they would’ve chosen Jihoon in their team if Daehwi hadn’t gotten to him first.

“That doesn’t really help, hyung, now I’m stuck in a team that wants to flay me alive for getting center.” Jihoon sulked.

The leader of Team 2 had a strange glint in his eyes. “Just show them that Park Jihoon doesn’t need his wink to show a good performance.”

*Easy for him to say*, Jihoon thought, as the dubbed Angel Leader entered the stage first with an
attractive smile on his face, followed by Kang Daniel and Kim Jaehwan with Ong Seongwoo, Hwang Minhyun, and Kim Donghan finishing the team in their splendid glory. ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 really took advantage of the changed rules. Jihoon knew about the rule that allowed them to fund their aesthetic looks from his company and told Daehwi about it. Their team leader called his director for possible sponsorship and got a good amount from it. That was the only time Jihoon was happy he was popular amongst the viewers.

Still, Daehwi knew that expensive clothes does not equate to a good fashion sense and took charge of their finances. After the makeup noona was finished with their team, Jihoon had to admit Daehwi was right.

And it seems that it wasn’t only Daehwi who had a keen eye on fashion.

*They had one heck of a designer,* Jihoon gaped.

“They all look handsome and rich in their suits.” Park Woodam gasped.

“Are they planning to go to an award show after this?” Joo Haknyeon shook his head in defeat.

The camera panned to the group for five seconds, long enough for the viewers to take in the sight of the visual hard-carry group.

‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 went for dressy black-and-white tuxedos with intricate detailing on the chic midnight coat. The metallic accents half of the team was in gave them the rich bad boy persona with the thread-like silver chains hanging off Donghan’s belt loop, the heavy-looking rhinestone-encrusted crown brooch with an ‘S’ pin hanging at the end of the chained lapel on Ong Seongwoo’s left breast pocket, and the shiny diamanté lining running down the asymmetric shawl collar and populating the breast pocket of Kim Jonghyun.

The accessories were elaborately done to accentuate their visual concept. Kim Jaehwan went for a slightly-tousled hairstyle with a studded vintage cross placed below his buttoned collar and soft makeup to make his caramel-brown eyes pop. The layered necklace and short sterling silver ear threaders in Kang Daniel’s left ear made his new blue-tinted black hair sexy with his hair halved, one side gelled and the other falling softly over his eyes. Hwang Minhyun forgone the detailing and jewelry but was still ethereal in his unbuttoned white dress shirt and shiny hair elegantly curtaining his startling hazel eyes.

Kim Donghan shocked everyone with how different he looked. The quiet boy was normally seen smiling, his round face placing him amongst the young-looking trainees. But that was non-existent now: Donghan-nie’s gaze was piercing, styled mismatched earrings alluring, his hair looked a unique violet color under the stage lights. To an astonished Park Jihoon, Kim Jonghyun and Ong Seongwoo took the top visual ranks. Ong Seongwoo, well, the center was the only one with slicked-back hair and black studs in his earlobes but his face and body proportions looked damn good with his overall outfit. Jonghyun-nie hyung’s parted hair lightly curled above his eyes and his makeup emphasized his enigmatic leader-ah persona. The detailing on his coat made him shine all the more. *As it should be,* Jihoon vowed to thank the person who made his hyung look like a star.

They looked like freaking veteran idols collecting their umpteenth award of the year as they went up the stage in unbuttoned black-and-white tuxedos with Kang Daniel’s smoldering gaze and Kim Donghan’s ridiculous height topping their manly image.

Seongwoon-nie hyung grumbled under his breath at the unfairness of Team 2’s height range.

Daehwi threw their main vocal a disgusted stare. “Forget about the height range! Look at their
The gasps of awe from the others only fueled Jihoon’s parasitic thought that he should’ve hidden behind Jonghyun-nie hyung to escape Lee Daehwi’s calculating gaze so Minhyun-nie hyung could’ve picked him for their team.

Both teams introduced themselves.

Team 1 doing a cheer with a revised name taken from their cover song. “Hello, we are Super Mari—oya oh!"

Team 2’s train motion and thrown cheesy lines at the end just screamed Ong Seongwoo’s involvement. ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 1 performed first and Jihoon did what he overheard Minhyun-nie hyung and his team were doing with the other teams: he noted each team’s strong and weak points.

Although they had Choi Dongha, a good vocalist, their strong point was Yoo Seonho and his masculine, byeongari-like looks. Even if he disliked the Cube trainee with every fiber of his aegyo-inspired curls (he found out that he was eying Jonghyun-nie hyung to add to his hyung collection), he had to admit that Seonho had visuals on point. With the perfect height and face, his aura was still adapting to that of an idol but the potential is there.

Hyeop-ah hyung as center was an okay decision, with his slightly exotic looks, but he couldn’t deny that Seonho overpowered his labelmate with his daring jump at the dance break. Their weak point though were the rappers. With the song being a vocally-inclined hit, it would be difficult for the rappers to adjust.

It was a good performance in general, Jihoon thought as he clapped with the others when Team 1 ended with their final pose.

Then came Team 2, and boy, did they blow everyone out of the waters in the rudest way possible.

Jiseong hyung’s offended expression after the two centers sassedit each other summarized what they looked like the whole time.

The moment Ong Seongwoo took the center position with Kim Donghan leaning on his back, hands in his pockets, in a dramatic and k-drama-esque way, he knew everyone was hooked. And that was just the beginning pose. Ong Seongwoo smirked after four beats into the song and everyone went crazy at the overwhelming stage presence of the center.

“So unfair, this team’s visuals are too damn good,” Someone whined in front of him.

“Damn, I envy that jawline of his,” Hong Eunki sighed in his far right.

“King of Proportions indeed,” Byun Hyunmin agreed.

Jihoon tried to be objective as he analyzed the performance of Team 2 but it was too damn hard when he felt stirrings of red-hot envy bubbling in his gut. Ong Seongwoo was the best center for the song with his prominent facial features, perfect height, and talented singing and dancing. Truly a triple threat if he ever saw one.

But Minhyun-nie hyung could give him a run for his money; damn the man and his handsome, aristocratic looks and sharp hazel contacts. He knew the Pledis trainee the longest amongst the
“Sorry, Sorry” Team 2 members and even he was surprised at how right his hyung fitted the concept.

More reason to envy the guy then, Jihoon scowled as he listened to Samuel do his “Oh my god!” exclamation when the camera focused on Hwang Minhyun.

“Minhyun-ssi could be center too, with his princely looks and vocals and all,” Daehwi commented with a strange look on his face.

Jihoon then focused on the dark-haired trainee who sharply turned and gave a wink in the camera. Kang Daniel, without a doubt, was a double-sided idol—cute offstage, sexy onstage. He knew a little about Team 2’s Peach Fairy (not anymore, though) but Jonghyun-nie hyung had nothing but praises for the MMO trainee, much to Ahn Hyeongseop’s irritation. That little model walk he did and the freaking wink-salute would be the death of every fangirl out there.

“Whoa, that wink…You better watch out, Jihoon-nie,” Dongho hyung laughed.

Jaehwan-nie hyung deserved to be main vocal, no questions asked. Park Woodam may have the attention of the audience with his high note in SEVENTEEN’s “Mansae” but his harmonization with the subvocals and that small improv was unexpected and pushed the performance to greater heights. And he looked like he belonged amongst the high-ranked visual trainees with his stage presence. Donghan-nie and recently initiated Kim Jaehwan-fanboy Lee Gunhee would fight anyone to the death if contested.

“Jaehwan hyung killed that verse!”

“Seriously, what is this team?” A trainee shouted his disbelief.

His eyes trailed to the tallest member of the group.

He had some doubts on Donghan-nie’s part on the group because of his age and the sexy concept of Super Junior just did not suit the cute twenty-year-old trainee. But he was glad to be proven wrong because he made an impact to the stage with his dance charisma and visuals.

“Whoa…Donghan-nie looked so good on stage.”

“Yeah, but I was so busy staring at Jonghyun-nie hyung. Even with two lines he still got my attention.”

Jihoon sighed resignedly at the camera panned to the last member of Team 2. He was pissed, yes, at how the onibugi leader rashly dismissed himself from the spotlight. Eventually he’d forgive Jonghyun-nie hyung once he learns how to give himself some credit and get greedy enough to take center position (or pick him as his baby trainee since Seonho got Minhyun-nie hyung’s favor, but he would never admit that).

He also had the bad feeling that he’d sooner get out of his Wink Boy reputation than see the leader take center position.

“It doesn’t matter who Minhyun-nie hyung gets in his team when he has the Angel Leader spouting miracles everywhere he goes.”

The performance stage of ‘Sorry, Sorry’ happened smack right in the middle of the line-up and even with the other stages they still ranked first amongst the trainees. Daehwi was on a hunting spree, asking every trainee he could find if they knew who styled the team. It was a futile effort, however, since no one knew who blessed ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2’s aesthetics.
On a purely unrelated note, a certain makeup artist was in a meeting with Kwak Aron, petitioning for a specific onibugi trainee to join her aesthetics team after Produce 101.

The night ended with “Mansae” Team 1 getting the highest total of votes for the onsite ranking. It was unsurprising, given Park Woodam’s 270-point raise, but the grudging whispers that a certain Team 2 should’ve won the onsite voting plagued the dormitories that night.

Which gave Jihoon the reason to drag a slightly sleep-drunk Ahn Hyeongseop out of “10 out of 10” Team 2’s room and a Choi Minki passing by the lavatories and unceremoniously barge into “Sorry, Sorry” Team 2’s dormitory at ten in the evening, rolling his eyes at a wet and shrieking Ong Seongwoo with a pink towel wrapped around his body, and roughly shoved his body on the nearest bed, almost pushing Jaehwan-nie hyung off the mattress.

“Hyung, save me please.”

Jaehwan, who woke up from his deep sleep, jolted as he peered with narrowed eyes at the pleading face of Jihoon. His older brother instincts went off as he unconsciously hugged the pouting Jihoon and almost smothered him in his chest. Jihoon squirmed and opened his eyes to the sight of Hwang Minhyun laughing across the small room, book set aside. Kang Daniel sat beside the fox-eyed prince with an amused grin on his face. Hyeongseop settled between the two members while Minki climbed on Minhyun’s bed and looked down on them with a hand under his chin and a bored expression to judge them all.

“You knew this would happen,” Jihoon accused.

Minhyun looked smug. “Yep.”

“And that it’ll blow up in the trainee camp.”

“Hmm.”

“Am I the first one to ask you if it’s possible for us to be teammates in the next evaluations?”

“Nope.” Everyone replied to Jihoon’s sigh.

“Well…Can I just steal Jonghyun-nie hyung? You still have Minhyun-nie hyung and Daniel hyung—”

“No!”

A grunt of dissatisfaction came from the bundled curls underneath the thin blankets. Hyeongseop stretched his arms over his head and slumped over Minhyun’s lap. “Ugh, you guys are so unfair. Just lend us Jonghyun-nie hyung for the next evaluations so we could get some popularity boost from the Angel Leader.”

“Why get our leader?” Seongwoo narrowed his eyes. “If popularity’s what you’re aiming for, ask higher-ranked trainees like Kim Samuel or Park Jihoon.”

Everyone turned to the Rank 1 trainee. Said trainee turned his nose up haughtily. “I want hyung on my team, too. And I won’t fail.”

Hyeongseop huffed in frustration. “Don’t be greedy, Jihoon-nie. We sure as hell know you don’t need Jonghyun-nie hyung in your team. Seriously, have mercy on us invisible trainees, hmm?”
“I don’t need hyung for more screen time. He’s talented and a good leader. I want him to lead our team in the next evaluation.”

Minki intervened, drawling his sentence in a lazy manner. “Uh, how ‘bout no? He will be my leader, as it should be. So,” He waved a hand dismissively. “You peasants can go suck my—”

“Okay!” Minhyun shouted. “Enough with the tug-of-war thing with Jonghyun-ah! It’s the producers’ decision whether or not he’d get into your team—”

“Still think Jonghyun-ah would be in our team just the same. Legendary stage of Produce 101, remember?” Seongwoo taunted with a smirk and Minhyun was not sorry to see the red patch on the forehead that he smacked.

“Nah, that’s not exactly true Seongwoo hyung,” Daniel, ever the humble trainee that he was, tried to stop his hyung from being off-putting. “We did okay, yes, but other groups did better than us.”

This is getting nowhere, Minhyun thought, and the wary expression from Jaehwan proved that disaster (because, really, what did he do to deserve having the trouble trio and Ong Seongwoo in a room together?) would soon come wrecking their door.

“Anyway,” Minhyun threw a dark glare at a smug Seongwoo. “Change of topic—”

He was abruptly cut off however when an incensed Hyeongseop pushed Minhyun away as he suddenly stood up from the bed. Minhyun could only grab the pillow to smother his face in it, willing everything to return to where they should be. Would Jonghyun be mad if he sent Seongwoo to him just to maintain the peace he oh-so-cravingly wishes?

Nah, he won't, he'd even be delighted, Minhyun groaned.

“I don’t know if you live under a rock, Daniel hyung, or just being obnoxious like Seongwoo hyung here, but you’ve became the top tier team. Like, do you know how frustrating it is for us to stay in the dormitories? Suddenly I’m relegated to being everyone’s advantageous new friend because I’m close to the Kings team—” His voice went a few octaves higher. “‘Yah, Hyeongseop-ah, Euiwoong told us you were close to Jonghyun-nie hyung’—”

“You know Kim Donghan from Class ‘D’, right Minki hyung?” Minki quipped, rolling his eyes.

Jihoon chuckled. “Daehwi has a crush on you, Minhyun-nie hyung ‘cause the first thing he asked me was ‘You are friends with Hwang Minhyun, right?’”

Seongwoo was unbelievably smug about their newfound popularity and did not miss a chance to lord it over everyone. Daniel had to stop Hyeongseop from strangling the too-talkative-for-anyone Ong Seongwoo. Minhyun was still stuck at someone having a crush on him and Jaehwan was dearly praying that their leader would save him from all this.

Only Donghan, with weeks of experience handling the trouble trio, had the mental stability to focus on something different. “Kings team?” He voiced out his confusion while he studiously combed Seongwoo’s hair near the window (and restraining him in the process because Minhyun-nie hyung looked a bit too red for his liking).

“That’s what they started calling you,” Minki huffed. “Some made stupider names like Real Avengers and Visual 101 but that one stuck out. It’s not ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 anymore because Hong Eunki began the campaign to create a name for your legendary stage. Kid even had the audacity to block Dongho’s way and ask for Minhyun-nie’s fan sign.”
"I like *Justice League* Team better though," Jihoon said.

"Either way, both names depict the same team that everyone wants to be in."

Jaehwan was the quiet spectator as their three (unwanted, Seongwoo would definitely say) visitors lamented on the broken status quo in their respective teams because it was wrecked by the *Kings*. He expected a quiet but fun evening with his teammates for their good performance. Jonghyun *hyung* went to the local grill house a few minutes away from the premises to buy meat. He and Daniel wanted to come along but they were not allowed to let two or more people out. Besides, Jaehwan felt it was a good thing Jonghyun was gone because the kind leader would go mad from what he would be seeing at this moment if he did go out.

That still doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to be saved from all these crazy people.

Jihoon and Hyeongseop slipped into a tense game of stares, their infamous feud resurfacing back with vigor. Hmm. Maybe Donghan-nie was right, the *aegyo* prince was a bit too possessive and the *Pick Me!* boy was no different either. Minki *hyung* and Minhyun-nie *hyung* were both arguing and agreeing with each other in an odd turn of events when Minki brought up the case of trainee scalpers looking for easy money with the *Kings* team. Minki *hyung* wanted to take advantage of the trainees’ stupidity while Minhyun-nie *hyung* did not want to touch the subject within a ten-foot pole.

A harried-looking Kim Jonghyun arrived with bags of heavenly-smelling grilled pork belly and boxes of sweet-looking streusel breads from a nearby bakery. Their attention was drawn, however, on the trainees milling behind the leader.

Daniel raised an eyebrow when the others sans Seongwoo did not react to the additional guests his leader ushered inside the small room. They weren’t expressionless; rather, they looked like they see this every day.

Minhyun shook his head in exasperation. “Yah, Jonghyun-ah, you really are impossible. You were only gone for an hour. How did you manage to get half the trainees up at this time, and the youngest ones at that?”

“I didn’t. They found me with food.”

“Ah,” The newly-dubbed *Kings* team chorused.

“Wait,” Jihoon raised a hand up. “Where the hell did you get freshly-baked streusel bread at half past eleven?”

Jonghyun responded with a sheepish grin. “Well, a kind lady saw me walking aimlessly down the street and bought these for me.”

Jaehwan face-palmed.

The leader distributed the food and utensils to the hungry trainees. Soon, the room smelled of grilled meat and it became a tight squeeze in the dormitory.

Kang Dongho climbed up Minhyun’s bed with Minki, munching on the pastries. Jaehwan and Jihoon shifted to accommodate Lai Guanlin’s long limbs and shared the *galbi* and *jjigae* in the plastic container. Yoo Seonho was all sprawled over Minhyun while Daniel shared his pack of gummies with a pouting Ahn Hyeongseop.

Donghan and Hoolim were seated on the floor eating snacks from their leader’s stash. Jonghyun
had the bulk of trainees cutting off his air supply with Ong Seongwoo pushing past his personal space to share the special order of jokbal and gopchang from the old lady near the convenience store.

“Hyung… are you sure it’s okay for us to be here?”

“Of course, why wouldn’t it be?”

The hard edge on the Angel Leader’s tone did not abate Bae Jinyoung’s apprehensions but the warm presence of Kim Jonghyun’s arm wrapped around his shoulders eased some of it away. Kim Samuel tucked his legs and prodded a quiet Lee Daehwi to eat some of the streusels.

The presence of good food and warm atmosphere dissolved any tension between the newcomers. Conversations started with Minhyun congratulating the other teams’ performances while the mentioned trainee blushed in embarrassment or puffed up in pride.

Jaehwan noticed something different. The slightly separated group of ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 1 alerted him that it couldn’t just be the food that brought them here. Dongho hyung and Minki hyung he could understand because they’re part of NU’EST too, no matter how hard Minhyun-nie hyung tried to censor they’re debuted idols for six years. Samuel knew the Pledis trainees longer than anyone in the competition, Guanlin’s practically Jonghyun-nie hyung and Dongho hyung’s baby trainee, much to a certain aegyo prince’s frustration, and Minhyun had Seonho. But the Avengers team and ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 2’s famous center Kim Samuel here in their dormitories?

Something was amiss.

He leaned forward and caught Dongho’s eye. “What happened, hyung? It should not have taken hyung an hour to get back.”

Dongho sighed. “It was terrible. We saw Jonghyun-ah and some bullies.”

Jihoon’s jaw tightened. He didn’t need to know who was bullied.

3:15 a.m.

Jonghyun was tired. He may be years younger than his thirty-year old self but the ache was not in his body; it was his mind that dearly needed some rest. His makeshift cot on the floor was overtaken by a sleeping Jinyoung so he was stuck in a tight position between the petite-faced trainee and a very clingy Jihoon.

Their visitors decided to stay for the night and Jonghyun gave up his bed for Minki and Seonho. Minhyun gave his bed to Dongho and Guanlin and went with Seongwoo up in the center’s bed. Jaehwan and Donghan squished together on the bed, leaving Jonghyun with ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 1 surrounding him on the floor.

A shadow illuminated by the moon caught Jonghyun’s attention. He looked up to a lean figure with his back turned, looking out the window. Jonghyun sighed. He slightly pushed Jihoon to the left, shaking off the needles on his arm, before standing next to a morose Lee Daehwi. The ‘Nayana’ center was quiet as he leaned on the comforting presence. And if Jonghyun heard sniffles from the trainee, he didn’t comment on it.
“I like it here. It’s nice.”

“They’re nice, I guess. A bit rowdy at times, drives Minhyun-nie mad every day, but everyone’s kind.”

“As expected from the Justice League Team.”

The familiar name set his heart to erratic thumping. Daehwi did not notice the strange expression as he stared at the dark shadows outside. “Yeah, you’ve gotten the nation’s attention on your team, hyung. Heard one of the staffs talking about the legendary Kings team taking the whole night by storm. I believe the name came from Seongwoo hyung’s crown brooch. Personally, I like Justice League more, from your new international fans...Much more united, like no one would get left behind.”

Jonghyun shook his head at the implication of the words. “Don’t let the others get to you, Hwi-ah. Bunch of assholes those trainees are. They’re just jealous they’re not half as talented as you.”

“Talent? Is talent really what is valued here?”

No, it’s not. Jonghyun did not reply; he had to give Daehwi that.

“It’s okay if it’s me they’re targeting, hyung, really. I get bullied a lot even back in America and in my old companies—I had the talent, sure, but I had no visuals to boast. My CEO was skeptical of me being here, said he pictured my career as a producer, a man behind the screens, not front and center,”

“Then your CEO must be stupid for hiding someone as bright as you.”

“Maybe,” Daehwi weakly smiled. “Fat load of good it did when I became center. I was careless; I didn’t think further than getting the 6,000 points. Now the others are hated because of my pride. I don’t know what the others see in us but we’re not evil hyung.” The ‘Nayana’ center’s voice was shaking so badly that the words were garbled and almost unintelligible. Jonghyun hastily led Daehwi out the door and went to the nearest fire exit where he sat the upset trainee beside him.

The Angel Leader’s heart broke at the sight of Daehwi-ah’s pain-filled gaze. “I know Daniel hyung and Seongwoo hyung aren’t fond of me but please hyung, I know you’re the only one who won’t judge me for my actions, and I need you to understand that we’re not like what the camera will portray of us. I just know Mnet will do something to jeopardize our rankings because we’re being true to ourselves.”

“Daehwi, Daehwi,” Jonghyun wiped the tears running down the trainee’s cheeks. “Calm down, please, I’m listening. I’m listening.”

Daehwi hiccupped before looking up at the sympathetic gaze with hope. “Our team’s kind, too. Haknyeon hyung is like me, I suppose. He’s arrogant, determined and eager to prove himself but he gets easily rattled by rankings so comes off as a spoiled brat. Seongwoon-nie hyung’s self-aware most of the time but he gets so little screen time that he feared of his idol group’s future because this is their last chance to survive. He’s getting desperate, hyung, but I had to look out for Woojin-nie hyung and BNM boys. Euiwoong-ie has so many insecurity issues that I don’t fucking know how to heal. Jinyoung-ie—he had too low self-esteem. I tried to help him in the vocals even at the expense of Dongho hyung’s ire. He—he didn’t need to get some hate too.”

“And Jihoon-nie?” Jonghyun tentatively asked.

“Smart. Controlled. Sometimes manipulative. Knows how to work the camera even if he gets little
screen time, enough to let the viewers know he exists,” Daehwi listed. “His charm and visuals are his greatest asset and the guy uses it extraordinarily well. Euiwoong told me Jihoon was closed-off at the start, hard to befriend until he met Minhyun-nie hyung and you.”

“Guess Jihoon’s the only normal one amongst us,” Daehwi bitterly scoffed. “Just because you reached him just in time to save him.”

“Daehwi-yah…”

His faraway gaze immediately zoned on Jonghyun with startling accuracy. “Makes me wonder if you Pledis hyungs have ulterior motives. Because no matter how hard Mnet hides the fact you guys are debuted idols, it doesn’t change the fact that we know you will have a definite future at the end of this—it’s only a matter of when. So, what’s in it for you?”

“What?”

“Why are you being so nice to us, hyung? This is a competition; no one would be surprised if you started to get a bit greedy.”

It was too silent. Daehwi feared that he went too far with his questioning because Jonghyun-nie hyung was not answering. He opened his mouth to apologize when a quiet voice spoke.

“I guess it’s because I’ve got nothing to lose and everything to gain. I’ve been in the industry for six years, Hwi-ah. Six years. You must’ve been what, eleven or twelve? You’re probably still in America deciding your future, but for us, we’re in the game already. Pledis was in-debt back then and they needed revenue so debuted us in 2012. It was a hasty decision and dearly costed us too much.”

“Debts, debts, debts,” Jonghyun darkly chuckled. “That’s what happens when you fail to debut. We were in so much debt with our company that we had to live off of the members’ salaries. Pledis tried to promote us but with big groups like EXO and BTOB promoting at the same time, it became difficult for us. Soon we vanished from the radar and went on hiatus for four years.”

“That’s not true!” Daehwi protested. “I searched Naver and found your debut track with Minhyun-nie hyung.”

“One of the last, I assure you. Most groups would’ve given up but we never did—Dongho-yah continued to be in the scene as PRISTIN’s vocal director, Aron hyung with his stint as a DJ, Minki-yah as part-time model, and Minhyun-nie’s CFs. In this industry, Daehwi-ah, you learn to be resourceful. When things aren’t going well as expected, then you find time to look for greener pastures while fixing whatever mistake you caused.”

“You make it sound so easy, hyung” Daehwi’s voice went lower, instinctively angling his head away from the deactivated mic. “We’re also human. Even I get pissed sometimes that I just want to tell everyone to fuck it. It’s damn too difficult to act all happy and jolly when everyone’s out to get you.”

“I know you know the gist of how this industry works, Hwi-ah. Talent can get you far but without good attitude, you’re a sitting duck. You’re still young, you have to be patient because if this ain’t for you then you have a whole lot of opportunities waiting for you in the future.”

“A stepping stone, our PR manager said,” Daehwi conceded. “Doesn’t mean we won’t get checked for psych evaluations by the time we reach 30.”

Jonghyun closed his eyes at his failure to protect the little ones for the second time. He was so
elated and happy that his “Sorry, Sorry” team was formed the second time that he completely forgot on what was more important. Lee Daehwi was the most talented trainee for Kim Jonghyun, a young avant-garde idol-slash-producer only at the age of 17. Minhyun may have his fixed pick in the form of Kim Jaehwan but Daehwi became his pick the moment the inexperienced trainee maturely shielded the Avengers team from the backlash.

The younger trainees like Lee Daehwi, Kang Daniel, and Park Jihoon knew far more of what the idol industry truly cares about than the older trainees. Daehwi, Daniel, and Jihoon knew how to play the game, coming off as the adorable dongsaengs that no one could truly hate. Daehwi, however, was the textbook definition of a comeback. Daniel and Jihoon never truly had the viewers calling out for their blood but Daehwi had, multiple times at that.

Years past Produce 101, when the MAMA Awards Producer of the Year was given to Brand New Music’s Lee Daehwi and said awardee shocked everyone in his speech of farewell, Daehwi called him to thank his hyungs one last time before he goes back to his hometown in America and stayed there indefinitely. A week after his departure from Brand New Music and the whole of South Korea, Kim Jonghyun received an anonymous email.

“Thank you hyung for everything. I don’t know how you did it but you saved me from myself years back in both my brightest and darkest memories. I’m taking an indefinite leave, hyung, but when I come back—is it okay for me to join your company?”

Jonghyun waited for three years.

Daehwi did not come back.

Jonghyun had his heart broken again when he witnessed the lithe figure stand in front of Kim Samuel and Bae Jinyoung, glaring at the group of trainees blocking their way to the cafeteria. He sharply remembered his vow to shield the innocent—and the Avengers team was one.

No matter, that was in his past already, and he’s back in Produce 101 to help right? He might as well do some helping. Jonghyun rounded his shoulders and cracked his neck to the side. He’d done this to Hyeop-ah’s bullies, he can do it with Daehwi’s too. Straightening his posture, he rounded off the corner.

“What’s going on here?”

Bae Jinyoung was the first to see the newcomer. The sight of the unlikeliest of trainees to visit their hallway made the trainees hesitate. Everyone knew of Kim Jonghyun’s reputation as the Angel Leader of Produce 101 and recently, of the Kings team. Kind and patient, he once heard Lai Guanlin describe the famous trainee to an eager audience in ‘F’. The idol-turned-trainee who used his experience and talent not to aim for center position and surpass everyone else but to teach and guide the trainees in their televised transition from unknown trainees to South Korea’s most beloved ones.

He doesn’t look nice and kind now, Jinyoung slipped further behind Daehwi. Rather, Kim Jonghyun could freeze the whole room with his frosty glare and thinly pursed lips. The trainees, both involved and spectators, parted to give way to the intimidating leader trainee.

The spectators eagerly soaked up the oncoming drama, not even lifting a finger to help. Jonghyun
was so disgusted that he couldn’t meet their eyes, afraid of seeing a familiar face persecuting kids because their balls ain’t big enough to confront the problem without their masks or name tags on.

Jonghyun met each wary gaze with a dark glare of his own before he walked in the middle, shielding the three from the hateful glares of the other trainees. “Well?” He asked the silent group.

A boy in a black hoodie and blue face mask stepped forward and pointed a finger accusingly. “We were having a good time with our friends when he started calling us names and started mocking our ranks because his team got the highest ranks in the whole competition.”

“Faggot,” Someone muttered in the spectator group.

He heard a hitched breath behind him but he was too far gone. Jonghyun rarely gets mad but when he does, he was dangerous. Normally people lose their rationale when encountered with the red-haze clouding your judgement.

Not Kim Jonghyun. Which makes him more dangerous.

“Then you must have smaller balls than I thought for you to get affected by it. What—getting threatened by 17-year-olds? If that’s the case, then Daehwi-ah,” He was met with a confused expression. “You’ve done well knocking these punks back to Earth.”

The furious expression could not be hidden by their masks. Jonghyun smirked before offering a hand to Daehwi who was too happy to get out of the situation. He turned back to wrap an arm around Jinyoung and Samuel before walking out the room.

“And to the person who said such a homophobic slur, well, you may have your face covered but I’ll know of your identity soon enough. Better call your CEO to pull you out of here because if I caught you and you’re still here…” Jonghyun let the threat sink into them as he turned back to meet the fearful gaze of the trainee whom he knew had thrown the offensive word.

**Bingo**, Jonghyun smirked.

(A week after, 98 trainees became 97.)

The three Avengers were silent as he led them to his dormitories with Dongho and the others ahead of them. Lee Daehwi was happy he met his Jonghyun- nie hyung. He was confused at first with how Class ‘B’ and ‘D’ gravitated towards the Angel Leader, his team member Park Jihoon a notorious example of that, but now that he had seen a glimpse of what made everyone fall madly in-love with Kim Jonghyun he understood the trainees’ hero-worship for the Pledis trainee.

The two trainees were silent under the fire extinguisher.

“Jonghyun- nie hyung?”

“Hmm?”

“Is it okay if we do this again sometime?”

“Only if you like sleeping on the floor but, yeah, you can sleep in our dorms anytime.”

“And can we bring Euiwoong too?”

“If he wants to. I mean, our room will get crowded and Seongwoo’s a bit overwhelming on any
day, but I’ll do my best to make him feel comfortable.”

Daehwi yawned, leaning back on his new friend and protector’s side. “No one would care about a stupid room if you’re there, hyung.” The young trainee slipped further in his sleep but not before muttering, “Should have gotten you ’stead of Jihoon-nie.”

Jonghyun stared down at the sports watch on his wrist before wrapping his arms around his folded legs.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Thank you for continually supporting my first Produce 101 fic here in AO3. I'd do my very best in ensuring that this fic stays alive and enjoyable for all you wonderful readers.

Fun fact: I did meet a fashion designer once in my trip to Korea. We chatted for a little while I perused his streetwear-inspired semi-formal/corporate wear and they're amazingly tailored and his female designer wear's just good, arguably even better. He's very nice ahjussi who grew up in abroad (therefore, can speak English well) and settled in Korea with his wife and two kids so I got the inspiration for Mr. Hae from him. K noona was also an inspiration from a hairstylist somewhere in Hongdae that I met and she's a brilliant artist as well.

That's for now! Will update the soonest!
The Aftermath

The following morning went a bit quiet. His body clock was so used to waking up at four in the morning that he had no choice but to wake Daehwi up so he could sleep in the room for an hour or two. The young trainee did not protest from being woken up but he demanded to be given a piggyback ride on the way. Jonghyun was too soft-hearted to decline. After tucking Daehwi between Jinyoung and Jihoon and lulling Samuel to sleep once more, he silently went out the room, hoping to get some fresh air and a place to think.

*Produce 101* filmed far from the city, a three-hour drive on a lax time going from Seoul to English Village in Paju. A picturesque destination northwest of Seoul, it boasts its heavy influences from Western and European culture in the heart of Korea. It was also a tactical location for Mnet, what with the tourist spot’s strictly-implemented rules on destructive and immoral media and violations on human privacy, knowingly and unknowingly, broken by the press and media representatives.

So, he had nothing to worry about crazy fans and rude reporters circling the perimeter. Though the place was heavily rigged with hundreds of cameras around every corner, it still gave some semblance of normalcy and peace for Kim Jonghyun to think.

It was too early for anyone to wander outside the dormitories anyway. The small grass plains outside the third fire exit with the heavy door was his best bet to stay hidden from the staffs patrolling the halls.

Or Minhyun. Mostly Minhyun.

It was easy to forget he was an outsider when he’s faced with so many faces at every turn. He tried to fit in, to be the shy and quiet *Pledis* trainee hiding behind Minhyun’s shadow. Maybe it was the familiarity of the practice rooms getting to him or the faces of the trainees that changed his life one way or another, but he almost forgot his predicament until Daehwi jolted him from lulled sense of security. *Produce 101* was familiar, he made memories here. It was far more complicated now. Before, he had only one goal: NU’EST. But now he was not sure if that’s the only one he should aim for. He knew these kids more than they knew themselves, even with a different timeline, and having to see for himself how a difficult time his fellow trainees faced in the show instead of secondhand stories, rumors, and tabloids was heart-wrenching.

Hate. Envy. Prejudice. Crab Mentality. Bigotry. Perceived sense of accomplishment from callous validations—That was just skimming the surface. Jonghyun was aware of all this and unfortunately, it was nothing new or shocking in the industry. He created his idol groups with the mentality of an idol. He prioritized his artists’ emotional and psychological state before anything else, equipping them and preparing them for the emotional torrent they would face the moment they let their idol personas rule them, and let them have their freedom to write and produce their music which endeared them to the fans more. With a fresher outlook and more concepts surrounding their songs, heavily limiting the outlook that love can practically solve anything, Minhyun led their debuts to success.

It was the golden era of small entertainment companies. And *HMG Media* was known for recruiting versatile trainees, disbanded idol groups, and newly-discovered talents, from underground dancers to independent filmmakers and freelance graphic artists, with their populous social media platforms scouting/promoting Korean artists to the world.

To South Korea’s shock, *HMG Media* also became the home to the once-*Produce 101* contestants and managed by the reversal idols NU’EST themselves.
The sight of Ahn Hyeongseop shy and leagues away from his position as a main dancer, actor, and budding creative writer made him realize that maybe he could do something. The small change of comforting a trainee dear to him created a domino effect, tumbling over a known event one after the other, that Jonghyun could only watch anxiously.

Justice League Team was, by far, the hardest to face.

Ong Seongwoo was the first to contact him a year after HMG Media made its waves on the market with their first idol group. His long friendship with Minhyun ensured the charismatic idol’s connection did not diminish. He was one of the few who were updated in NU’EST’s bitter legal dispute with Pledis Entertainment, their subsequent six-month hiatus, and the formation of a new company under their names with Kim Jonghyun taking up the executive office and Hwang Minhyun being a major shareholder.

In a classic Ong parody, the Fantagio idol and actor slipped away from the company with an unsigned renewal of contract and a smiley-face cookie on his manager’s table, drove to their company’s base in Yongsan at ten in the evening, and practically demanded his new contract from a bemused Minhyun.

The next day, lead actor and the ‘Nation’s Funny Guy’ Ong Seongwoo was found lounging in Minhyun’s office, seated on the glass table and looking over the list of trainees waiting for the scouting director’s approval with a disgusted look on his face.

Jaehwan was the most problematic. During Wanna One promotion, he was given a ten-year contract under Stone Music Entertainment as a soloist. His vocals soared through the digital charts, establishing his name as the next K. Will of drama OSTs. Even after four years it was nothing new to hear the balladeer’s voice depicting the emotions of the lyrics, almost sending Dongho to the hospital due to dehydration.

Jonghyun was truly happy for the once-independent trainee and was planning to let Jaehwan at peace when CJ E&M went under fire for fraud and non-compliance of taxes. The company had their funding cut by angered investors and severely affected all artists under the label. But CJ E&M did not rise to the top overnight; They mercilessly took advantage of Kim Jaehwan’s large fanbase and contributed revenue and grossly pushed the idol past the limits of any human being.

Minhyun and Seongwoo were in direct contact with Jaehwan, asking about his health because the singer looked too thin and peaky in one of his online segments. Jaehwan soon broke under the two’s persistent pleadings for Jaehwan to leave before he gets killed by the label and filed his resignation letter. CJ E&M vehemently refused to accept the letter and pulled their lawyers to sue HMG Media and Kim Jaehwan for breach of contract. Aron hyung was in uproar because Jaehwan haven’t signed anything with them yet, counteracting the warrant with a battalion of lawyers for their company.

This in turn led Jonghyun into his first legal battle against another a big company like CJ E&M. He wanted to back off at first but when Dongho reminded him of the harsh repercussions Jaehwan will face if he did not back the singer up, Jonghyun steeled his nerves and fought his hardest.

He lost the first battle but won the rest. Kim Jaehwan went under his company but not without consequences. The vocalist cannot guest in any CJ E&M production and music shows nor collaborate with any idols from CJ E&M and any of its subsidiaries for five years.
In a characteristically-crazy Kim Jaehwan way, he grasped Jonghyun’s hand in both of his. His voice was mellow, almost flowy, as he smiled in earnest. “No need to feel sorry about it, hyung. I knew what I was going against. In fact, I should thank you for getting me out of that hellhole and giving me a chance to find my happiness again.”

“I want to perform on stage once more, hyung, not just in the recording room...not alone.”

Kang Daniel was the hardest to reach: Known as the face of South Korea for four years running, his company tied a noose around his neck and forced him to let go of his idol dreams because he was not a strong enough performer to go solo. Yoon Jiseong was too old to debut, so the company let Jiseong go on varieties and hosting instead of debuting with Daniel, and the other trainees immediately refused to be overshadowed by Kang Daniel if they debuted with the famous Wanna One center.

Daniel’s fame dwindled slightly after the band disbanded but the ‘Nation’s Center’ did not suffer any stagnancy in his career. A few singles were released but ultimately his fame was credited to his CFs, modeling, and acting stints in the industry. Jonghyun decided not to contact the celebrity after he formed their company away from Pledis, even with Minhyun’s plea for reconsideration, and that turned out to be his first mistake.

Kang Daniel walked in the room in a sleek navy-blue pinstripe suit and windswept honey-blond tresses. It was the contract signing between their companies on a huge collaboration between one of HMG creative directors and the twenty-eight-year old actor co-managed by Stone Music Entertainment for the actor’s endorsement with Balmain. Jonghyun was wary of how Daniel would react at the news of him being the mysterious CEO of the rookie company with rising idol groups and excellent producers in his name, fully knowing that his once-teammate would have left the acting industry instantly just to debut in a group again.

The amicable smile faltered completely at the sight of Kim Jonghyun seated at the seat of the supposed chief executive of HMG Media.

That was the start of the end of Kang Daniel’s friendship with Kim Jonghyun.

“Kim Jonghyun-ssi,” The startled trainee stood up and bowed at a male staffer holding a clipboard in one hand and asked a curious Jonghyun if they could do an interview since he was awake already. Nodding, he followed the staff to one of the activity rooms in the main building that was transformed as the interview room. He sat on the plastic stool chair and readied himself.

“So, we’ve noticed that you wake up pretty early, Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng. Do you do anything particular at this time of the day?”

Jonghyun sheepishly shrugged. “I’ve been an early riser even in my trainee days and it doesn’t bother me if I’m the only one awake at this time. I do try to prepare some food for my teammates to eat when they wake up.”

“Truly commendable of you,” The staff praised. “We’ve also seen a footage of you comforting other trainees in breaks and after dinner. Most of the trainees look up to you as the Angel Leader because of your admirable leadership skills and kind personality. Some even said that they want to be in your team in the next evaluations. What can you say about that?”

“Really? They said that?”
“I believe the exact words of Yuehua Entertainment Ahn Hyeongseop yeonsusaeng when we interviewed him yesterday was ‘I want to be teamed with the Angel Leader, Nation’s Producers. Please make it possible for me?’”

“Aigoo—” Angel Leader, huh? That’s new. Jonghyun let out a chuckle. “Hyeongseop-ie’s too sweet to his hyungs. But they’re exaggerating of course. I only do what I could to help and if I get to team with them, then I’m lucky to get to perform with such talented people.”

The interview started with light topics like his habits as an early riser and newfound camaraderie with most of the trainees as a hyung to the dongsaeng trainees.

“Jihoon-nie’s always been kind to me. It touches me how he truly believes in me.”

“In Hwang Minhyun’s interview, he said he was jealous that his first friend became much closer to you instead of him.”

Jonghyun laughed. “Jihoon-nie’s just riling Minhyun-nie for the laughs. It’s nothing serious. I’m pretty sure the two would get a good laugh out of this.”

Then the questions went to more serious topics like his interesting reaction of teaming with OUI Entertainment Kim Donghan—

Jonghyun went a little bit cautious at this. ‘Donghan-nie’s been a constant friend to me since the first-class evaluations. We’ve been in the same class since the beginning and I was surprised that Minhyun-nie knew him. But now that I think about it, who’d dismiss Donghan-nie’s talents? The boy’s too good not to be noticed and Minhyun-nie always had a knack for observing people.”

And his legendary performance with ‘Sorry, Sorry’—

“Really? We trended in all social media sites?”

The staff noted the flabbergasted expression on the trainee curiously. “Yes. Do you want to see your stage performance? We don’t usually show the footage before it is aired but I think we can have exception.”

“Yes, please,” Jonghyun airily breathed as the staff faced her computer and pressed play. Twenty seconds in the video, Jonghyun could only say “Wow.”

In the first verse, he was unable to watch their stages until after the eighth episodes because he was terrified of what the public thought of their Super Junior cover. He was soon persuaded by Jaehwan who had not seen the video yet and Seongwoo was only too happy to play their legendary stage. They did admirably well the first time but the performance playing now was…he had no words for it.

He was drawn first to the trainee in the middle. Seongwoo slayed the visual center yet again but Jonghyun thought the charismatic Fantagio trainee did leagues better in this stage. Seongwoo’s slicked-back hair and handsome smirk earned him gasps from the trainees and the mentors.

“He’s one of the crowd favorites, that one,” The staff pointed to the center. “Not as popular as Park Jihoon or Kim Samuel but he’s right below them. Personally, there’s something about him that pulls you in and his looks only proved that.”

Ong Seongwoo had always been an eye-catching whenever he performs or even enters the room
and Jonghyun’s gamble with doing a hairstyle that no one expected the trainee could pull off only emphasized the guy’s visuals, granting the funny Ong first place on their team with 127 points. Daniel looked dark, mysterious, and very provocative as he winked in the camera, earning him more than thrice the amount of points he got the first time. Donghan was their visual *maknae* with his tall, masculine form and fierce, alluring gaze. His crisp movements seduced the audience into giving him 93 points. Jaehwan knocked everyone off their feet with an added adlib at the end, securing his position as a top vocal with 98 points to his name. Minhyun, well, the guy was heartbreakingly unreal with his sharp hazel eyes. The visual did not want to get contacts at first, but Jonghyun persuaded him soon after.

Staff *noona* nodded her head seriously. “A very good touch. His white skin only emphasized that eerie glow in his eyes. I think 113 points is not enough for him. And 80 points for you is just a travesty of your talents.”

Jonghyun did not mind getting last place, not when his members were still riding high with happiness that they ranked quite high in the onsite voting with all of them placing in the Top 11 ranks. He truly was happy with the results of the stage but not for the reasons that his team thought.

The time-traveler had three days of sleepless nights as he fought with his conscience. If he changed too much, what would happen in the end? Donghan in ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team was a major game changer already and doing more reckless things would literally shoot things out of proportion. But the thought stuck to him like a leech sucking off the rationality in his brain and he was basically withdrawn at this point, scaring Jihoon and Jaehwan in the process. Oddly, he found the solution in the form of Takada Kenta admiring *Yuehua Entertainment* Huang Justin and his thousand-dollar wardrobe.

Kenta sighed with a hand under his chin, gazing three tables over. “Wish I had so much money that I could drown in it.”

Kim Donghyun looked up from his food. “What? Who—”

“Huang Justin. Heard the others talking about that Swiss watch of his that costs millions of won. Bloopy or something.”

“Bloopy? Sounds disgusting.”

“*Blancpain*, you mean.”

They simultaneously turned to a cornered Jonghyun who realized he made a mistake. Jihoon was especially interested how the guy knew a Swiss designer with a very fancy name. Jonghyun blew the thing off by the distracting the others with more practice, cursing himself for slipping. But that went at the back of his mind; the inspiration from the *Yuehua* trainee led him to contact Aron *hyung* two weeks before the battle rounds.

Because if they allowed a trainee to have designer things like *Blancpain* of all expensive things, what’s stopping them from allowing the same to wardrobe choices for the performances?

He took a great risk in contacting Aron *hyung* about putting the loophole in the producers’ attention. It could be perceived as cheating and in some unconvoluted way, it kinda is, but with someone influential bringing the issue up and successfully legalizing a technically-illegal rule without repercussions to him, the trainees, his company, NU’EST, and practically anyone involved brought relief to Jonghyun. He also had to thank Minki for badgering him to go with him to various cosmetology classes because it was worth it in the end—they looked absolutely gorgeous and
The staff looked over his shoulder and commented, “You look complete. And the style concept was the best, by far, in the competition.” Then she pinned him with a pointed stare. “You did well in the visual and aesthetics department.”

Oops.

Jonghyun laughed nervously. “Ah—thank you, noona. I’m surprised at how you found out though. I did my best to keep it a secret.”

“The producers don’t, but I do,” She said. “One noona from the aesthetics team told me about the talented trainee with an excellent eye for visual direction.”

Jonghyun was caught off-guard though when the staff began to ask him about the ideas and visual concepts he was cooking for the next evaluations, the angle he was going for in the ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage, the genius idea behind Ong Seongwoo’s slicked-back hair, Kang Daniel’s mysterious hair color, and Hwang Minhyun’s cat-like hazel eyes, and so many more questions that got Jonghyun’s head spinning.

He was absolutely terrified that he’d be named ‘Nation’s Stylist’ or something stupider to add to the already numerous taglines he already had.

Jonghyun was so relieved when the staff thanked him for the interview and dismissed him with a reminder that the trainees must be in the cafeteria by now. He rushed to the cafeteria, hastily greeting any passerby with a smile, and saw Seongwoo waving his hands like a madman near the back of the hall.

“Oh, Jonghyun-nie hyung?”

Jonghyun turned to a fidgeting Hong Eunki who was holding an odd-looking glossy paper. The contemporary dancer hastily pushed the paper and a pen to a bewildered Jonghyun with a smile.

“Can you please sign it?”

Confusion aside, he grabbed the pen and signed a short encouraging note with his name and drawing of an onibugi beside it. This soon became a trend of sorts, he realized, as the day passed and his hand was aching from all the signing he had to do. And it was not only him who was stopped by a crowd of trainees—Team 2 had many trainees congratulating them on the hallways and complimenting their stage. ‘Kings’ Team’ they were called, Seongwoo explained to a very confused Jonghyun, which was started by the trainees who were so amazed with their stage that they had to have a name.

Seongwoo thanked Daniel profusely for buying the famous crown brooch behind his back because he thought it was a cactus.

Jonghyun was proud, nonetheless, of what they achieved when he saw Jaehwan’s struck expression when he was approached by two trainees asking to take a picture with him.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung!”
Jonghyun’s eyes widened at the determined expression on Daehwi’s face as he marched to where he was seated between Donghan and Daniel. He tried for a smile that ended up quite lopsided and forced.

“Ah, Daehwi-ah, how’s it going—”

“That’s not important, hyung! I’ve been wanting to talk to you all day! The others won’t tell me but I was hoping you would,” The BNM trainee batted his eyelashes in an imploring way.

The alarm bells in his head blazed an angry red. “Yes?”

Daehwi pushed Minhyun to the side and sat on the vacated seat, almost jumping in excitement. “I want to know the name of your stylist, hyung! She must be amazing!”

Donghan interrupted with an annoying smile. “He, Daehwi-ah. It's a he.”

“Really? The stylist’s a male?” Jonghyun could practically see the stars in the trainee’s eyes and slightly backed away from the very, er, enthusiastic Lee Daehwi. “That makes it even better! You should give me his name, hyung!”

Jonghyun bit back a sigh of relief when Daniel kindly shooed Daehwi away but the Angel Leader knew he’d face Daehwi again. Thankfully he knew what was going on because Daniel warned him of a certain ‘Nayana’ center on the prowl, looking for him because the other members of the Kings Team just won’t tell the kid who their stylist was.

At first, the pink-haired guy had no problems telling Daehwi that Kim Jonghyun single-handedly planned their outfits and hairstyles but for some reason his teammates just didn’t want to. The most vehement reaction came from Ong Seongwoo who was deeply convinced that by knowing Jonghyun-nie the visual director practically handed them the win would increase the chances of said visual director-slash-leader stolen from them in the next evaluations.

Daniel thought that was very absurd, but even he could definitely see the perks of keeping it a secret because even he got so much attention because of the talents and visuals honed and developed by his leader hyung. At first, he never thought he’d get a high place in the team. He knew he was not as popular as Funny Handsome Guy Ong Seongwoo and Princely Visual Hwang Minhyun or as talented as Vocal Hard-Carry Kim Jaehwan, which greatly affected his very low self-esteem. He continued to smile with all the insecurities of being the weakest in a great team weighing him down but Jonghyun-nie hyung saw through it.

One night, as the others trailed off to the showers to bid the day goodbye, Daniel stayed behind to practice some more. His movements were sloppy from his overworked body but he persevered to ace the dance break that Seongwoo hyung and Jonghyun hyung aced in such a short time. It was complicated, he thought they’d only be doing some cool hand tutting as salute to the original Super Junior’s music video but Seongwoo hyung wanted to take advantage of his skills as a hiphop dancer.

“Hyung, I don’t think doing the Windmill 2000 would do the performance any good. It’s too hiphop-y to a sexy dance like ‘Sorry, Sorry’.”

The center rolled his eyes. “You’re a dancer, aren’t you? Surely, you’re not limited to fancy b-boy moves. No, what I have in mind is something different.”

It was a combination of various dance styles segmented to a grand time of seven seconds. He could do it, he’s not stupid, but for some reason his movements were jumpy and tense and it was noticed
by Seongwoo who became a bit frustrated at the slow progress. Daniel could not blame his hyung, he was just looking out for his team, and Seongwoo hyung apologized immediately after anyway so the issue was solved the soonest it popped out. But it got him questioning if he really deserved to be in a team as talented as this one.

“Still practicing?”

Jonghyun-nie hyung was standing on the doorway with a towel in one arm and two cups of chocolate drinks from the instant packets the leader brought to him that Daniel adored. The two sat close to each other, facing the slightly fogged-up mirrors silently. Daniel drank the warm and sweet chocolate with a sigh.

“You’ll ace it, Niel-ah. I’ve no doubt about it.”

Daniel’s face hardened. “I thought I could but I’m not sure about it now, hyung. It’s such a short dance break yet I can’t get the movement right.”

Jonghyun was silent for a moment before he abruptly stood up. The bright-haired trainee followed his leader to the center of the room, perplexed at the sudden action. Jonghyun-nie hyung rummaged his pockets and pulled out a white piece of fabric decorated in hearts with silly-looking eyes.

Jonghyun chuckled at the raised eyebrow. “I bought it to tease Minhyun-nie.”

Daniel laughed at the statement, thinking that it was just show-and-tell, when Jonghyun-nie hyung rolled it to a thin strip and raised it to Daniel’s eyes. The dancer would’ve balked if it were other people but he trusted his leader, too much even.

His vision was soon obscured by the fabric and he felt a hand softly tying the makeshift blindfold on the back of his head. The darkness slightly unnerved him but the familiar calm tone soothed him as he blindly stood in place.

The voice of Jonghyun-nie hyung came from his left where the tablet was placed last. “I’ll play the track, okay? In three, two…one.”

He stumbled a few seconds in but recovered soon afterward. It was a disconcerting experience. He never tried to intentionally blindfold himself and dance to the music because he was foremost a dancer who learned by seeing. And having his most precious asset robbed off him by a piece of fabric made him a bit antsy.

“Don’t fight it, Daniel-ah,” Jonghyun called out. “Just dance.”

He heard the familiar EDM tones overlapping the chorus: dance break. Daniel had reservations dancing without seeing but for this moment, he let the music speak to his body. The choreography taught by Seongwoo hyung flashed before his eyes and he did not think—he just danced. He asked Jonghyun-nie hyung to repeat and repeat until he got it right.

He was panting afterwards, fatigued and shaky on his feet, but the clapping jolted him from his tiredness as he pulled the bandana off.

“Well done!” The proud expression shining in his hyung’s eyes warmed him far more than any hot chocolate in the world.

Daniel smiled gratefully as he took the offered tablet. Jonghyun-nie hyung took a video of him the
whole time. He saw seven videos of himself with six failed ones and one that brought him to tears because he did it. His oh-so kind leader hugged him to his side as he led them out the room. Daniel was still too moved to speak and Jonghyun-nie hyung remained quiet to respect his thoughts. They stopped in front of the door and the leader was about to open it when Daniel pulled on his sleeve. Daniel didn’t need to voice the question because Jonghyun-nie hyung knew what was troubling him.

“I had the same problems before, Niel-ah. It’s because we’re overthinkers, we think more than we feel, and I guess that’s sometimes a weakness for us. But you don’t need to. You,” the Pledis trainee reached to brush his fingers over his eyes. “Don’t need to dance with these.” He put a palm to his chest. “You just need to dance with this.”

At that moment, Kim Jonghyun earned his respect and love. It increased further when the leader continuously pushed him to improve like silently correcting his mistakes with a soft nudge and softly saying his congratulations when he got the note that eluded him for days. Jonghyun-nie hyung taught him how to work the camera, “A wink wouldn’t hurt anyone, Daniel-ah”, and told him some of his stories as a trainee. Then came the performance day when Jonghyun-nie hyung knocked everyone off with his secret talent of styling them to look like idols.

Daniel sat quietly the whole time, his eyes solely trained on the smiling onibugi leader who somehow made all these possible. He then realized that Kim Jonghyun was too talented not to be snatched away from them and that sudden epiphany came back with a vengeance when a loud Daehwi knocked the door down, jolting Donghan from his sleep, and promptly asked them where Jonghyun-nie hyung was.

They weren’t stupid, regardless of what Ahn Hyeongseop said, so they made a bunch of lies to distract the kid.

After he left, Seongwoo hyung immediately started a protection detail (of sorts) to barricade Kim Jonghyun away from the “pesky gremlins”. And Kang Daniel was tasked to stop the “peskiest of all gremlins”.

“Ah, I feel guilty for lying to Daehwi-ah,” Kim Jonghyun smiled sadly. “But then if I tell him, it’ll get out and I don’t want that.”

“You don’t have to, hyung, if you don’t want to,” Daniel patiently patted his hyung’s arm, while inwardly rejoicing at the turn of events.

Daniel’s task of stalling Lee Grem-hwi was successful, however it couldn’t be said the same for the others. Jaehwan had a pretty difficult time handling the full force of Lee Gunhee, Yoo Seonho, Lai Guanlin, and the Ahn Hyeongseop as the four trainees banded together to drain him little by little. Donghan tried to help him but to no avail. The four were just too powerful and soon enough, Jaehwan reached the “threshold before he became utterly, completely raving mad” and got Jihoon in on the secret just to have a strong ally because Minhyun was too busy laughing at his predicament, Donghan’s a coward facing any situation that had Ahn Hyeongseop stamped on it in angry red ink, and Seongwoo was being the bossy punk that he truly was.

Unfortunately, Park Jihoon couldn’t help Jaehwan and the rest of his team in stopping the others from harassing Kim Jonghyun because he was handling some issues within his backyard. After wrenching the truth out of Jinyoung-ie, he had to find out who bullied his teammates. Granted they did not start off as best friends but the boy grew on him. He didn’t want to burden Jonghyun about it because he had a lot of things to do and it shouldn’t concern him in the first place. It’s his team
that needs help and he’d be damned if he just let the trainees bully them into submission.

But the rats were smart, covering their faces and hair thus making them unidentifiable to Jihoon. He resorted to consulting Dongho hyung about the incident to which he replied that someone’s already did something.

“Who?”

Dongho cryptically replied, “Who else would do something about it?”

Jihoon’s expression lightened into a dawning realization because the leader’s just one man, right? He couldn’t possibly do it alone. He was proven wrong when the news reached their ears and he got to observe everyone’s reaction to it.

“Someone left? At this time? But the competition just started!” Seongwoo yelled.

“Minki hyung told me he knew the guy from ‘F’ class. Said the guy’s talented but reserved and has this look in his eyes that he couldn’t pinpoint.”

“Do you know his name?”

Jaehwan hesitated. “Hyung wouldn’t tell me.”

Jihoon slept with the turmoil he’d seen in Jonghyun-nie hyung’s eyes troubling his dreams.

The following day was absolute chaos. It truly was and Yoon Jiseong would swear up and down the hallways to anyone that would listen (and could listen because the trainee could talk anyone into their madness) that Mnet’s been paid to do this to all them because it looked fun.

“Argh, I can’t feel my legs,” Daniel groaned from where he was lying on the pavement.

“Speak for yourself,” Minhyun’s voice was squeaky from having his lungs run out on him. “I don’t think I have a soul anymore.”

“Ugh, how are you even standing?” Seongwoo glared up at the impeccable Kim Jonghyun who did not even sweat after the sprint they did for the damn wake-up call. And the guy didn’t even tell him it was no fire-alarm so he brought his bag with him! The nerve!

At the time when normal people—Jonghyun-nie hyung doesn’t count, thank you very much—are sleeping, the speakers blared ruthlessly and the piercing EDM tones was unforgiving to the person nearest to the blasted device.

Daniel was a kind and forgiving person, patient and understanding, an “angel sent from above” as described by his dear mother, but at that moment he just wanted to curse anyone in his path.

The others were on the same page as him. He saw Jaehwan tuck his face under his pillow and did not move again. He was about to follow in the dream world when a soft tap on his shoulders roused him from his sleep-addled mind.

Kim Jonghyun looked refreshed and very much awake, warming his hand around a cup of coffee. Wordlessly, he reached over to hug the leader in greeting before he rose up with a groan. The screeching abomination was on its second run already but Jonghyun-nie hyung was abnormally calm, silently waking each member with a tap and a whisper.
Everyone arose from their deadened state and began dressing up in their “class” sweaters. Donghan resented the fact that they had to separate into classes again, Minhyun seconding the statement, but their leader told them to dress faster so they could get first seats. Jonghyun grabbed his black cap before opening the door and running down the stairs. Daniel ran after the leader with the rest scrambling to catch up.

The other trainees arrived at the assembly point, groggy-eyed and disoriented. Some were bending their heads down, trying to hide their red eyes and puffy faces from the cameras surrounding them. The director gave them a few minutes to right themselves. Jonghyun gathered his team to the side and fished out a comb of bananas and two small water bottles in his hoodie. Donghan immediately grabbed the fruit and devoured it whole while Jaehwan slowly munched on it.

Soon they entered the practice room and was segregated by rankings once more. Seongwoo and Daniel banded together in ‘A’ and Minhyun trudged to ‘D’ while Jaehwan stood quietly beside Jonghyun, Donghan, and Jihoon in ‘B’. Everyone was anticipating the surprise.

Only to be sorely disappointed.

A tall burly guy, twice as large as Minki and two heads taller than Jihoon, entered the now-silent hall in a tight black shirt with bulging muscles. The trainees who were just showing off their muscular bodies gulped at the sight of someone who can bench press them with one hand. Kim Seunghyun, a fitness trainer of idols and actors, measured their shoulders to see who had the widest span. Daniel, unsurprisingly, had one of the longest shoulder spans in *Produce 101*. At least Minki hyung found the ordeal humorous with him pretending he had broad shoulders too.

Measuring shoulders was fine and safe for Kim Jaehwan and he was about to settle down when the fitness trainer decided he wanted to assess *Produce 101* trainees physically because, why the hell not?

Jaehwan gritted his teeth as he resisted the urge to plop on his stomach and denounce any dream of him becoming an idol.

It was terrible. He was not an athletic person, never ran for a whole five miles without any “life or death” reason, and he avoids gym (torture) houses like the plague. It must be the planks that made those gym people scream.

Donghan groaned. “Why? Why does it have to be fitness of all things?”

Jihoon grunted in agreement.

Jaehwan spared a glance to his right and scowled mightily. “How the fuck can you breathe normally?” The expletive came out of his mouth but Jonghyun-nie hyung was unbothered by it.

The leader smiled and said he was used to it while raising an arm in front of him, looking all fly and dandy as he did it. He would have believed him because, apparently, fitness is a must for all idols if he hadn’t seen Minhyun-nie hyung red in the face or Dongho hyung with a myriad of expressions on his face, most of them dark and dangerously aimed at the fitness trainer.

The fun (for Mnet) didn’t end there. They had plank wrestling matches, a tough abdominal core game wherein each player must try pull and outbalance each other in order to win. They were paired by random and Jaehwan breathed a sigh of relief when he got Jung Jung as his opponent. Jung Jung was lankier than him and his wrists looked thin so he had a great chance of winning.
Unfortunately, he discounted the fact that the Yuehua trainee was a contemporary dancer and must’ve trained his body for years. Thus, Jaehwan lost spectacularly. And he’s not the only one who did because Jihoon looked a bit too annoyed at the gloating Seo Seonghyuk at the moment.

Jaehwan was extremely happy the morning exercise was over and he did not feel guilty when he practically ran towards the cafeteria, using what was left of his power to sprint away the torture room. Donghan and Jihoon had the same idea, flanking him as they pushed anyone out of the way. They reserved the nearest table to the food counters and welcomed the tired members of their teams slumped on the seats.

“You okay, Daehwi-ah? You look a bit…peaky.”

Jonghyun reached over to put a hand over the ‘Nayana’ center’s forehead when a hand immediately grasped his wrist.

Daehwi grinned, his teeth showing the mischief hidden behind the cute façade. “I’d feel better, hyung, if you’d tell me who your stylist was.”

Jonghyun looked like a deer in the headlights. Minhyun pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re seriously still into this, Hwi-ah? Everyone’s stopped bugging us except you.”

Daehwi jutted his lower lip. “No. It’s been on my mind since the battles and I asked literally everyone! And no one, no one, knew who handled your team, and it’s driving me crazy!”

Ha Seongwoon snorted. “Huh. If you’re really that desperate, ever thought of asking the staff? They must know more than us, right?”

Shit.

The Kings’ Team glanced at each other in alarm as Lee Daehwi dragged protesting Bae Jinyoung away from the hot soup and hightailed away. The Avengers’ Leader turned towards the others, inching away from the furious glare of Ong Seongwoo in front of him.

“What?” He cautiously asked. “Did I say something?”

Safely to say, Kim Jonghyun was mobbed by the end of the day, much to Ong Seongwoo’s frustration.

Seongwoo never wanted to be the bad guy, no sir, he never did. He’s the funny guy, the protagonist’s unbelievably handsome-looking best friend who’d do anything for him/her even at the expense of his dignity as a good citizen of Seoul and Bruno Mars’ biggest fan. So, no, it wouldn’t make sense if the always-joking (Sometimes too much, Minhyun-nie would say but he’s not listening to what that liar had to say) suddenly breaks off the “spoof-train” and started making everyone’s lives a bit harder than usual.

But dammit, those gremlins were hard to push away.

Or lose from their tails, either way really.

“Hyung, can you check our closet? Jinyoung was in hysterics since last night because he saw something move inside.”
Seongwoo stepped in front of the leader, hiding him from Daehwi’s sight. “He can’t come to your dormitories. He’s going with us to the arcade.”

“What?” came from a very confused Jonghyun. “But we just had an arcade night yesterday, Seongwoo-ah, remember? Daehwi-ah was even there.”

Seongwoo spluttered in response.

Daehwi hastily dragged Jonghyun towards their building, skipping all the way with the leader chuckling at his antics. Seongwoo was just a bit clingier than usual, Jonghyun reasoned out to himself. The Fantagio trainee usually does that when he feels unsettled or scared and Jonghyun knew fully well that it was a combination of the two plus the dark uncertain times ahead of them made the normally-cool guy hard to remove from his person.

And it was not only Seongwoo who decided to stick himself to Jonghyun. The younger trainees—Jaehwan resorted to calling them Squirtle Squad and he could not deny the uncanny similarity so the term was seamlessly integrated into their dictionaries—was very persistent in dogging him everywhere, and he meant everywhere. Minhyun complained quite a few times that he had to push bodies away just to get to the toilet. Regrettably, Minhyun had no say in the matter because his teammates were also part of the bodies lying strewn over their small room. The bloody ghost was not even scary, Minhyun cried at a cowering Seongwoo, but their center had nightmares replaying over his head so the reprimand left his other ear.

They had no chance to recover from the scare they had with the mirror because everyone was severely reminded of the looming elimination in sight. The newly-installed countdown to the final stage literally hung on the topmost part of the walls where the trainees could not look away even if they wanted to. They were not allowed to go home at this time so they had to stay in their dormitories to wait.

Kim Jonghyun had been trying to put everyone at ease since the start of the show, cheering up the morose and homesick kids and staying late into the night going to other trainees’ rooms and talking the hysterical ones to calm down as they faced harsh comments and dark thoughts. It was a difficult job, Minhyun sighed, as he accompanied his brother around the dormitories at two in the morning with only a flashlight in one hand and a thick wool blanket in the other. Donghan was the first the catch the leader in his nightly escapades and confronted Jonghyun-nie about it. They didn’t stop him, not like they wanted to or could, but because the hostile environment greatly worried the team for Jonghyun’s safety.

Jonghyun looked ahead, stopping behind a column as a staff member passed by their place. He whispered as soon as the coast was clear. “You don’t need to come with me, Minhyun-nie. I’ve been doing this far longer than what you think and no one did anything to me after the incident so, go back to sleep now, it’ll be a long day tomorrow.”

“But I want to,” Minhyun insisted. “It’s my turn anyway.”

He wasn’t wrong, Jonghyun sighed. His team devised a time schedule so they could accompany their leader at night after Donghan told the others of what he saw. The CEO time traveler was surprised when Donghan barged into one of the slightly hidden training rooms in the first floor. The maknae of Kings’ Team stopped to stare at the crowd of trainees squeezed around his hyung. Jonghyun explained to a confused Donghan what he had been up to and he felt bad that he was not doing something as good as what Jonghyun-nie hyung had been doing for the other trainees. His hyungs were deeply touched at how truly noble their leader was, sacrificing even sleep just to stay
with the young ones.

But Minhyun wanted to cry at the unfairness of everything. Even someone as angelic as Kim Jonghyun could not escape the hatred of some people. His eyes trailed to the barely-hidden scratch on his leader’s right arm. It had scabbed over but the memory of it being a bloody mess was still fresh in his mind. He never thought that Jonghyun and Seongwoo would get into a ground fight and was furious at the two trainees who risked a lot for joining.

“What would’ve happened if someone saw you! Dammit Kim Jonghyun, Ong Seongwoo! It’s a good thing the cameras were dismantled and you have no visible marks but still, dammit! You could’ve been removed from the show! Don’t you understand how crucial having a good behavior would help you get out of here intact—”

“Stop talking, Minhyun! Let us talk,” Seongwoo glared from his slumped position on the floor. “Daniel and Jaehwan caught the end but they don’t know what happened in the beginning.”

Seongwoo started talking and Minhyun wanted to wring his leader’s neck. He knew how Jonghyun thinks more than anyone but for some reason, Jonghyun’s protective instincts towered over his fears of getting Mnet’s attention and being persecuted for his debuted idol image and NU’EST’s failure as an idol group.

Seongwoo just caught the punch coming towards Jonghyun and got righteously furious about the underhanded strike but Jonghyun still participated first to help two trainees bullied by mean trainees.

He wouldn’t condone such act as well but throwing punches wouldn’t solve anything, he told a quiet Jonghyun as he patted antiseptic ointments on the gash. The onibugi leader silently received the reprimands from him and Jaehwan while Daniel let his fury rain down on a chastised Seongwoo.

What made Minhyun angry was how callously their leader dismissed the incident.

“Uh, in case you didn’t notice hyung, there’s some sticky fluid running down your arm.”

Jonghyun smiled at a freaking-out maknae. “I’m okay, Donghan-nie, just a scratch. Nothing to worry—ow.”

Jonghyun winced at the pressure applied on the wound with a damp washcloth. Jaehwan did not say anything as he continued to press hard on his arm.

“That’s not the point here, hyung,” Daniel approached their leader. “You could tell the staff or file a complaint—”

“No. We won’t do that. I forbid it.”

The hardness in Jonghyun’s eyes vanished as he scrunched a smile out of the tense situation. “I know you’re all mad at me and I understand completely why. If I were any saner, I’d be mad at me too.” Then the forced smile was replaced with a solemn expression. “But you can’t stop me from protecting everyone. They’re just scared and desperate of the uncertainties in their position that’s why they lashed at me. We don’t need to make the matters worse. They need someone to listen to them, to comfort them, to be there for them…They call me Angel Leader for a reason, Niel-ah. I’d be betraying their trust if I’ll do what you say.”

Minhyun slowly walked towards Jonghyun, eyes imploring as he raised both hands in deference. “We’re not asking you to betray everyone, Jonghyun-ah, but with you not doing anything to those
assholes just meant their deed went unpunished. They won’t stop, and soon your inaction would lead to the others getting hurt. Would you let Jihoon-nie or Samuel-ah get hurt by these people because they ranked the highest?”

The Angel Leader hesitated. Minhyun thought he won the round but he completely forgot that Kim Jonghyun was as hard-headed as Choi Minki on a very bad day if he was pushed against his will.

“I’d protect all of you, that’s a promise.”

The conviction stole their breaths away.

“Any idea on who’d get first?”

“The odds are with Jihoon and Samuel getting first and second—can also be interchanged but the votes would be close to each other, I bet.”

“Hmm, maybe. I would’ve said the same for last week but there’s the Kings’ Team …”

The three gossiping RBW trainees looked up when they caught sight of MMO coming out on stage. Their eyes immediately zoned into one of the Kings and noticed something different on Kang Daniel’s uniform.

“I’ve never seen such a complicated knot on a necktie before,” Choi Jaewoo could not look away from the styled necktie.

“Think he’d teach me how he learned to do that?” Hwanwoong mused.

“No need to bother. Looks like Jonghyun-nie hyung knows as well.” Gunhee snorted.

True to Gunhee’s words, Pledis trainees entered the stage sporting similar styles. Hwanwoong was speculating that it was no coincidence that the Kings’ Team plus Minki hyung and Dongho hyung came out wearing necktie styles that no one had ever seen. Gunhee was convinced that it was either Minhyun-nie hyung or Jonghyun-nie hyung who did that but he did not say anything as the last few trainees walked down the stage and in their seats.

BoA sunbaenim walked on the stage with a smile on her lips and the cue card that could potentially grant or destroy their dreams. The others were frozen in their seats but Jonghyun could only admire the almost-systematic way the Nation’s Representative placated the terrified trainees with friendly banters and an occasionally-thrown compliment towards a specific trainee before pulling the rug under their feet.

“You may have done well in your group evaluations but is it enough to save you from getting eliminated?”

Yep, BoA sunbaenim was the best emcee for a show as dramatic as Produce 101.

“As of April 30, 2017, we’ve received the highest rating for both seasons of Produce 101, amassing 4.952% audience share nationwide which is four times the rating share of season 1’s battle evaluations—”

Minhyun hitched a breath.

“—and all teams ranking high in Naver’s trending list with at least a hundred thousand views in
almost all fancams and performance videos.” BoA looked up from her card. “However, we can only pick eleven trainees to debut as the next I.O.I. and this will be decided by the Nation’s Producers by voting. Can you guess how many votes were tallied? Yoo Seonho yeonsusaeng, you look like you have a good guess.”

Seonho shouted, “500,000 votes!”

“Hmm, no. Jung Sewoon yeonsusaeng, they say you’re one of the smartest trainees here, any guess?”

“1,000,000 votes?”

This caused a commotion because getting a million votes was just absurd to think about—

“Close but not quite. As of 11:59 pm yesterday, the highest ranked trainee achieved an amount of 1,547,982 votes in the total tally.”

The reactions of the trainees were priceless, Jonghyun laughed under his breath. The show had never seen such a big number in tally. It’s true that Season 1’s Rank 1 trainee Jeon Somi never reached the 1.5 million line for the whole show and the fact that whoever ranked first in the voting period reached a little over that large number only proved the astounding TV ratings that Produce 101 achieved not yet halfway through the season.

The time-traveler could only wonder on what Mnet did to hype the show to unprecedented heights.

“But before we proceed on the rankings, 3,000 benefit points must be given to the highest-ranked team in the online voting.”

Jonghyun felt the pessimism oozing from the others. Compared to a million, a few thousand votes seemed very small, barely denting the ranking tally with what they had to contend with. But Jonghyun knew fully well how even a thousand votes could make a huge difference between elimination and proceeding to the next stage.

“This legendary stage captured the hearts of the Nation’s Producers with their idol-like charisma and stage presence, brilliant vocals and dancing, and unparalleled visuals. We have four contenders for the best battle team picked by the viewers.”

Everyone gasped as the big screen split into four names. BoA raised an eyebrow at the lineup. “Four strong teams have the highest number of online votes: Bangtan Sonyeondan’s ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 1, INFINITE’S ‘Be Mine’ Team 2, Bangtan Sonyeondan’s ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 2, and Super Junior ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2. Let’s narrow it down a bit.”

The screen showed some graphics before it ended with two names. Beside him, Seongwoo choked.

“Ah,” BoA nodded. “It seems the two controversial teams got the top 2 ranks. We’ve seen their performances but I do want to know what they think about the results. Let’s start with our ‘Nayana’ center. Lee Daehwi yeonsusaeng, what can you say about getting the Nation’s Producers’ attention with your cool performance?”

Daehwi grabbed the microphone and answered the question with a cautious smile. “We feel very grateful that the Nation’s Producers thought our stage was done well.”

A brief and diplomatic answer, Jonghyun nodded in approval. He was glad he got to warn Daehwi
about the viewers perceiving him as an arrogant upstart. The young trainee only sighed in resignation because he knew what the leader was referring to.

“Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng,” Jonghyun looked up with a start. “As leader of the legendary stage, ‘Sorry, Sorry’, what do you think made the Producers choose your team as one of the best teams in the group battles?”

Seongwoo looked at the soft smile in their leader’s face as he said, “Teamwork.”

BoA looked impressed. “Very well said. In that case, let’s see who will get the 3,000 benefit points for the first elimination period.” The two names zoomed in and out, one after another, until they were just a blur of unintelligible names. The screen zoomed out.

“With 320,476 online votes, ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 1 gets the 3,000 benefit points!” Polite cheers erupted from the crowd before they settled down. BoA smiled. “With that finished, we’ll begin with the eliminations at the 59th rank to the 3rd rank. At the 59th rank, we have—The Vibe Label Yoon Jaechan yeonsusaeng...”

The names kept being called, filling the lower seats going up the upper echelon. Jonghyun felt the stares burning through his back but he didn’t mind them in favor of talking to an upset Seongwoo.

“I really thought we’d win, Hyun-ah,” The center looked down on his hands, avoiding the cameras trained on them.

Jonghyun smiled comfortingly as he grabbed one of Seongwoo’s hands. “If it makes you feel any better, I think we did far more than anyone expected, surprising everyone even ourselves. Isn’t that enough in the end?”

Seongwoo quirked a small smile. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Jonghyun was okay with the results in the online voting. He did the best that he could to make the performance rise in the charts and trending sites and he could not begrudge Daehwi’s team of their win in the online votes because they did extremely well in the evaluations just like all the teams did. Unfortunately, not everyone was happy with the outcome of the votes. Jihoon smiled for the cameras but it did not reach his eyes. Daniel-ah may be seen as a happy-go-lucky kid by the other trainees but the leader knew him too much not to ignore the crushing disappointment seen in those puppy-like eyes. Donghan-nie was not too far from them and the pointed glances at Jaehwan, who sat beside him, did not go unnoticed. Jaehwan must be feeling pretty gloomy right now and Jonghyun wanted to reach out to their vocalist.

Minhyun, who was listening on his other side, leaned forward in their space with a teasing grin. “And if it escaped you Seongwoo-ah, you’re voted as the most handsome trainee, ranked 1 in visuals because of your looks in the ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage. Anything to say to our leader-nim?”

“Oh? How did you know I was voted Rank 1 because of that? Unless—” At this, Seongwoo looked positively devilish. “Why, I didn’t know you found me handsome, Minhyun-nie.”

The spluttered response from a beet-red Hwang Minhyun was ignored as the Kings’ center scrunched up his face in mock-tears and hugged the startled Jonghyun to his chest. “My son would be named after you, Kim Jonghyun-ssi. Seriously, don’t laugh at me, I’m not kidding! I’d even name my dog or my pet fish after you.”

“And if it’s a girl?” Minhyun mocked.
“I’d still name her Jonghyun for my peace of mind.”

Jonghyun snorted in amusement as the two visual kings of ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage bickered like children. Amongst all the parts of Produce 101, he expected the visual rankings to remain the same as it did the first time, with Jihoon getting first, Jinyoung a close second, and Minhyun, Minki, Seongwoo, and Hyunbin getting into Top 11 because there shouldn’t be a strong enough catalyst to push their names up or down the visual ranking list without any major face modification whatsoever.

Unfortunately for Jonghyun, or fortunately for the Kings’ Team, whatever ranking he remembered was entirely different now than it was before. For one, he found out that Donghan and Daniel got into the list, taking tenth and eighth place respectively. Minhyun was ranked third and Seongwoo took Jihoon’s spot as the first with Jihoon getting second place. Jihoon was not disgruntled that his place was usurped by Seongwoo, he even thanked the Kings’ center for taking the burdensome spot from him. Seongwoo cautiously nodded and it became an inside joke in the team when Seongwoo admitted he was absolutely scared of the innocent-looking Park Jihoon.

The eliminations from fifty-ninth to thirtieth place went predictably well as he noted the rankings were similar to the first timeline. Admittedly, he remembered only a few trainees in the lower bracket and he was ashamed to realize that he did not do a really good job if he couldn’t even remember some of their names. Jonghyun vowed to do better in the weeks to come.

“There was a surge of popularity from the 30th place up. I was really surprised at this trainee who came from his 68th place to 29th place…HF Music Company Park Woodam.”

Jonghyun watched with growing trepidation as the ranking got more complex. Park Woodam was one of the trainees he remembered was in the lower bracket but for him to jump thirty places up was astounding. RBW Yeo Hwanwoong took 28th place with Brand New Music Lim Youngmin following soon after at 27th. The ranking went wilder the higher the rankings went: Media Line Lee Woojin went four places down, YGK+ Kwon Hyunbin went four places down, Brand New Music Park Woojin went seventeen places up—it was a mess. Minki-ah took Yoo Seonho’s 15th rank while Dongho displaced Park Sungwoo’s at 17th place, with the displaced trainees dragged down to 19th and 18th place respectively.

“At 14th place, with their legendary ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage…”

The Kings’ Team all leaned forward.

“With 867,298 votes, ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2’s main vocal, independent trainee Kim Jaehwan.”

Jonghyun exchanged an awed glance between Minhyun and Seongwoo as a stunned Jaehwan stood up on stage and sat on the highest seat an independent trainee had ever gotten. He thought that the rankings at the forties were weird enough but he was dead-wrong when Jaehwan uprooted Euiwoong in his place. Not that it was a bad thing per se, because he couldn’t think of anyone more deserving than Jaehwan-nie, but it only means that the rankings from eleventh to first couldn’t be predicted.

Good for everyone, bad for a time-traveler.

BoA did a double-take when she reached 13th rank. “Whoa, I really can’t believe it. This is the largest leap of ranks that I’ve ever seen in Produce 101. From 78th place, going up sixty-five places to Rank 13—”
Minhyun did the mental calculations and he whispered in awe, “Donghan-nie.”

“OUI Entertainment, Kim Donghan yeonsusaeng.”

Donghan looked on the verge of crying as he addressed his fans and thanked them for their support. He hugged Jaehwan two seats away from him before sitting down on the blue chair. The atmosphere grew tenser as the eleven coveted seats were lighted up in cue as BoA announced the trainees in the top ranks.

Jonghyun closed his eyes, fearing already of what the outcome might be. The rankings were mixed and unexpected. Hyeongseop-ah took 12th place with a shaky smile on his lips as he slipped seven places down the ranks. Similarly, Cre.ker Entertainment Joo Haknyeon went down five places to 11th place. Jinyoung-ie looked positively floored with his maintained position in Rank 10 while Jiseong hyung was crying rivers as he stayed in 9th place.

Then the rankings started to unravel and twist what he knew of the first timeline. Daehwi, who was expecting to be eliminated because of the harsh reception he got from claiming that he created the season’s Avengers Team, gratefully accepted his rank at 8th place. Seventh-placer Guanlin-nie was smiling widely as he sat beside Daehwi who gave him a brief hug.

“At 6th place, we have the member of the so-called legendary Kings’ Team who happened to have the most watched fancam in the first 24 hours. With 1,117,245 votes—”

“Damn,” Seongwoo whistled. “We’ve broken the million line.”

Minhyun furrowed his eyebrows. “Fancam? It’s either you both, me, and Niel-ah. Which one of us—Wait, that means—”

“Rank 6 goes to MMO Entertainment Kang Daniel yeonsusaeng.”

Daniel walked confidently on stage, smiling all the while as everyone clapped for the trainee. Seongwoo and Minhyun hollered their support at the now-blushing trainee. BoA sunbaenim remarked his surprising choice of hairstyle, agreeing with the sheepish dancer that the dark color suited him well. Donghan, who received the same compliment with his violet hair, threw a salute towards a grinning Daniel. The two teammates high-fived each other, Jaehwan fist-bumping his agemate, before Daniel took another level up and sat on his seat with the glittering number 5 on it.

BoA looked down at her cue card in surprise. “Oh, it seems the Kings’ Team are dominating the top ranks for this elimination period. Another member from the Kings’ Team touched the hearts of the viewers with his visuals and talent. Gathering 1,220,928 votes in his name and ranking fifth in this season’s first evaluation, Pledis Entertainment—”

It’s about time, Jonghyun thought as he readied himself to stand up and take the place.

“—Hwang Minhyun yeonsusaeng.”

What.

Jonghyun could not believe his eyes as Minhyun went up the stage and greeted everyone with his trademark eye-smile. He expected to be called in 8th place because that was his rank in the first evaluations. But when Daehwi got his position, he grew worried. Daniel got 6th place and the Angel Leader felt sweat gathering on the back of his neck. Then Minhyun got called before him...
“From fourth place and up, the difference between votes only run a few thousand-votes,” The camera panned to four faces on the screen, catching Seongwoo’s smug smile and Jonghyun’s deer-in-the-headlights look. “Omo! It looks like we have two members from the ‘Boy in Luv’ stage and two members from ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage. Are you curious on who got bounced up in the top tier ranks?”

“Yes!” The trainees chorused.

“Let’s pause for a moment,” BoA drew the cards back, much to everyone’s disappoint. “We’ll draw the sixtieth place…Individual trainee Kim Sangbeen.”

Raucous cheers rose from the crowd as the trainee in question went up the stage and sat on the last vacant chair in the lowest level. The camera soon returned to their faces, dividing the screen into four once more.

“In fourth place, we have another member of the Kings’ Team. With 1,345,232 votes, rank 4 goes to—”

“It’s me,” Jonghyun murmured. “It’s definitely me.”

“Wait, Jonghyun—ah—”

“Fantagio Entertainment Ong Seongwoo yeonsusaeng.”

“Told you,” Seongwoo rolled his eyes as he lightly pushed the standing Kim Jonghyun down his seat before climbing up the stage.

Seongwoo was a ball of energy as he thanked the fans for greatly supporting him and his team. The center thanked his team for the great performance and teamwork, mentioning each member with fondness. Jaehwan looked ready to strangle the center alive for his passive-aggressive compliment-insult against their main vocalist. BoA laughed with the others as Seongwoo bowed with a giant flourish and ran up the stairs to the seat beside Minhyun.

“Third place goes to one of the ‘Boy in Luv’ Team members. With him as the sexy and charismatic center of the ‘Boy in Luv’ Team 2, amassing 1,354,693 total votes—Brave Entertainment Kim Samuel yeonsusaeng.”

Jonghyun felt numb as he watched Samuel stand up on stage, smiling handsomely at the cameras as he thanked his fans and talked to the emcee about being center of his team. Jonghyun could not process any of these because he was facing so many emotions that it was practically drowning him. How did he even get to be a contender for first place this early in the competition? He had two lines in the freaking song but still he got so much attention from the producers that he had to fight Jihoon-nie, who was practically the surest member of the next I.O.I.

“So, we have two candidates for the sought-after Rank 1 place—Park Jihoon yeonsusaeng, how does it feel to have your closest hyung trainee as a rival for first place?”

Jihoon-nie, who sat two rows in front of him, glanced back to him with a strange look in his eyes. The ‘visual center’ took the mic gingerly. “I don’t really mind. In fact, I’m very happy that Jonghyun-nie hyung is appreciated by the fans,” Jihoon met his gaze with a softer look. “Ne, Jonghyun-nie hyung, I don’t know if anyone told you this but you’re my fixed pick this season and it touches my heart that everyone sees how talented and kind you have always been to me.”

Jonghyun had no words to say to that.
BoA sunbaenim aww-ed at the trainee’s statement, surreptitiously wiping her eyes with a brushing sweep of her fingers. “A heartwarming message from our own Park Jihoon. Well, let’s see who gets first this evaluation—”

Their faces looked oddly contrasting on the screen, Jonghyun hesitant and Jihoon determined, while they waited for the votes to finish counting above their names.

1,500,000…

Jonghyun choked. They both broke the 1.5 million line.

The numbers trailed faster and faster.

And stopped.
**Position Evaluations**

“I hate this,” Seongwoo harshly pulled at the sticker Daniel stuck to his back. “Why can’t we get permanent dormmates? Can’t they see it takes too much effort to move to different rooms for every evaluation? It’s not like we practice in our rooms or do cheesy-girly stuff together to get closer—”

“Pig-themed face masks.” Minhyun quipped inside the bathroom.

“—we just sleep because we’re close to damn falling on our feet to even talk—”

“You don’t stop talking, Seongwoo hyung,” Daniel lazily bit on his gummy jelly.

The Kings’ center threw a heavy glare at the unapologetic trainee before continuing to pester their leader in unleashing his “leader-a-h magic” on the unsuspecting dormitory staff to let them stay together for the rest of the competition.

Donghan, who was finished in packing his clothes, opted to observe his two bickering hyungs quietly. At this point, he normally tries to be the mediator, the sane-and-cute-dongsaeng that no one could refuse (except a certain Kim Jaehwan), and never failed to stop any of his stupid hyungs from rendering any bystander deaf with how loud they are.

But not this time, no. For once he was in complete agreement with his hyungs because how the hell could anyone part with such a dynamic and perfect team and learn to adjust again with other people? It would be difficult, that much was true, mostly because of the preconceived notion of the other trainees when it comes to anyone who was part of the Kings’ Team.

His vantage point saw what his teammates couldn’t. The reaction of the other trainees when four out of six of ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 sliced through the eleven ranks like heated knife slicing through butter was absolutely comical. For the same reason, Daniel hyung outranking ‘Nayana’ center Lee Daehwi and Perfect Idol Visual Bae Jinyoung left the trainees awed and impressed. Donghan overheard at least six trainees who voiced out his wish to get a new hairstyle and some ear piercings to look like the famous Fancam King Kang Daniel.

Kings’ Center Ong Seongwoo was a given, no one was surprised when he retained his place at number four because the guy’s just good at everything and his shocking visuals in their stage only secured his position in the next I.O.I all the more. Hwang Minhyun was an undercard like him but it’s like the Pledis trainee shed his shy persona and blew everyone away from rank 5 and claimed it as his own. Minki hyung was fully convinced that Hwang Minhyun’s sudden rise from 16th place to 5th place was due to his hazel contacts and the aesthetics of a wonderfully-unbuttoned white blouse, even if the blushing Hwanggallyang tried to explain that it was a wardrobe malfunction.

Emotions were at an all-time high because they lost half of their numbers in one go. Minhyun-nie hyung went with Minki hyung to stay with the devastated trainees from their classes while Jonghyun-nie hyung was called by a sobbing Lee Gunhee because ‘D’ class was cruelly halved in one night. The remaining members of Kings’ Team decided to stay in their room because Seongwoo hyung quietly said that it’d just be like rubbing salt on the wound.

“Leave them be,” Seongwoo sighed. “They won’t find any comfort from us.”

Seongwoo listened to the others as they admitted their mixed feelings in ranking high on the list that night. As de-facto leader of the group, he tried to comfort Jaehwan and Donghan but he was not the leader type, that he could admit. But it was an uphill battle, trying to convince his mind that
it’s for the best because he would not shine with the now star-studded group, but he was losing terribly because he knew in his heart that he was wrong.

His fears were not without basis because with them being the high-ranking trainees, they could get sidelined because they’re a threat or used unfairly because they’re a threat. The consistent ‘A’ class trainee was used to the burden put on his shoulders but it doesn’t mean it’s not painful and he feared that his teammates would grow lonely because of it.

Unfortunately, they could not convince their leader of this even with Donghan almost crying in frustration and Daniel treating Jonghyun with sad, puppy eyes. The next day, a staff knocked on their door and took their bags away for transfer when they’re grouped for the next rounds.

The next evaluation was what Jonghyun remembered in vivid memory. He remembered choosing “Rap” and getting a team with ONO Entertainment Jang Moonbok, Hanareum Company Kim Taemin, and Guanlin. He was chosen leader mostly because of his high rank and expertise and took the three inexperienced trainees under his care. ‘Fear’ team was different from ‘Sorry, Sorry’ in many ways, most of them sending the Pledis trainee to nostalgic memories of taking care of Minhyun, Dongho, and Minki back in the old days with Aron hyung keeping them sane and together.

‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team felt like a collaboration between self-efficient budding idols, even with Hyunbin as their weakest link, but ‘Fear’ Team was the opposite because he had to help all his members: Moonbok’s rapping tone sounded odd against the track, Taemin’s too shy to talk louder than a whisper, and Guanlin could rap in English and Mandarin and not in Korean.

Jonghyun faced far more than lacking teammates. Guanlin’s insightful opinion on changing the rap lines as means to tell the world of their story was a double-edged sword for someone as troubled as Kim Jonghyun. His fears became the world’s as he penned them on a piece of paper and performed it for the first time.

He’d never forget Dongho’s reaction to that.

Nevertheless, he was divided with his choices as they entered the training room by rank. The training room where they chose their teammates for group battle positions looked different, mostly because of the huge blue wall spanning the whole width with two doorways almost twenty meters apart and obscuring two-thirds of the room. Across the wall were metallic placards roughly twice the size of their vinyl sticker nametags, evenly spaced out between each other.

Performance choices, Jonghyun’s eyes were trained to the far right where ‘Fear’ was put.

Then he caught something different.

Samuel leaned towards Jihoon. “Wonder what those lightbulbs are for. You have any idea what those are—”

“Shh!”

Samuel recoiled at the sudden hiss before he hit the visual on the arm. “What the hell, Jihoon hyung?”

Jihoon peeked at the incensed trainee with a glare. “Didn’t your mom tell you not to interrupt someone who’s making a wish?”
“Wish? What for?”

“For you not to be on my team.” Jihoon muttered under his breath.

Samuel opened his mouth to retort, most likely a backhanded comment or to complain to an amused-looking Hwang Minhyun standing beside him, when BoA sunbaenim entered the room with her blue cue card.

Jonghyun was beginning to fear that blue cue card she uses for evaluations.

“How are you, Produce 101 trainees? Did you have a good sleep last night?”

Samuel winced at the memory of not getting enough sleep because he was crammed between his hyungs and the giant Lai Guanlin for comfort. Gunmin hyung, one of the most reliable and jolly people he had the fortune to meet, was eliminated last night.

BoA sunbaenim addressed Individual trainee Kim Sangbeen and GON Entertainment Hong Eunki, both of which were in danger of getting eliminated as the two trainees were lying at 60th place and 36th place respectively.

BoA sensed the slightly glum atmosphere and went for the motivating message. “It’s not the end for your friends who had to leave. Cheer up and face the next challenges with a smile. Work hard for your friends okay?”

“Ne!” The trainees shouted their gratefulness at the short yet moving message from their sunbaenim.

“But the battle’s not yet over. Oh, I do hope you won’t lose more sleep after this.”

The mood plummeted. Jonghyun seriously wanted to know who was giving the emcee her script so he could congratulate him/her on a job well done.

“The second stage of Produce 101 is the positions evaluation. In this stage, each trainee has three positions that he could choose from: vocal, rap, and dance. Each performance was oriented to suit the position and the trainers are equipped to assist you in composing your lyrics or choreographing the dance but most of the work must be done by each one of you.”

Jihoon gulped.

“Thirteen performances will be performed: five vocal, four dance, and four rap performances,” BoA pulled out a sleek-looking black remote and pressed on it. Samuel gasped when the placard, which turned out to be a metal contraption, split into two with a creak. The song choices were found behind the metal placard and the trainees rapidly scanned the list, dearly hoping to have a song that would work for them.

Jonghyun’s only thought was on the awesome production of the show. Remote-controlled metal sliders? Damn, they got a lot of sponsors after that impressive TV ratings.

BoA sunbaenim glanced at each determined face and smiled. “Do you see what’s behind me? Can you guess?”

“A wall!” Seonho shouted.

BoA blinked. “Well…you’re not wrong there. Any more guesses?”
“Maze.”

Silence.

Everyone stared at Kim Jonghyun with various emotions on their faces. BoA sunbaenim looked uncertain before she caught herself and smiled, cocking a head to the side in curiosity. “That’s right.” Jonghyun feared she was going to ask him how he knew but she just shook her head and proceeded to explain the mechanics.

“You do have an idea on what is to happen, don’t you Pledis Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng?”

Jonghyun’s quiet “Yes,” was some sort of confirmation to an increasingly-wary Park Jihoon, whose eyes were almost popped out of its sockets.

“Smart of you to realize early on,” BoA sunbaenim nodded approvingly. “This season’s position evaluation goes a little differently. Each trainee must choose his position and the song choice for it. Unfortunately, each song only has a limit based on the maximum number of trainees that can perform it,” Whispers arose. “Therefore, once the quota has been reached, the song choice will close—” The metal door slid shut over her song ‘Amazing Kiss’. “—rendering you with one less song to choose from.”

“Crap,” Samuel cursed under his breath.

“I don’t like where this is going,” Minhyun muttered under his breath.

There’s must be a catch, dammit, there’s always a catch, the Angel Leader thought as he fixed his gaze on the seemingly-innocent lightbulbs, his warning bells creating so much ruckus in his head that he could hear them blaring in the back of his mind.

“However, we have prepared a few more surprises for you.”

Everyone groaned.

BoA looked particularly devious as she pointed to one of the lightbulbs placed above Jung Seunghwan’s ‘If it was you’. “See this lightbulb? Big, isn’t it? Enough to warn you of trouble, yes?”

No one spoke a word.

“This lightbulb, essentially, could save your life—and your performance. Trainees who have chosen first are waiting on the other side, listening to you getting called one by one, and can attempt to do the ‘steal or bail’: a ‘steal’, in which they declare their intentions of wanting you on their team by pressing the blue buzzer button,” At this, she pressed the remote and the lightbulb turned a brilliant shade of blue.

“And a ‘bail’—” The lightbulb went a bright and harsh red. “—wherein a trainee could block anyone from choosing their song, rendering their team temporarily closed by pressing the red button.”

Jihoon’s eyes were about to fall on the ground.

“The ‘steal or bail’ can be done when each team has at least two members and can only be done once each so choose your move wisely. Three teams can do the ‘steal or bail’ at a time so I suggest you take your chances and press the buzzer before anyone goes ahead of you. In the case of two or more ‘steals’ or ‘bails’, the trainee can choose amongst the teams who did a ‘steal’ or choose the
remaining teams who have not done a ‘bail’.”

“Remember: one ‘steal’ and one ‘bail’ per team only.”

Jonghyun felt another migraine coming as he thought of how different his past was. There were no complex rules the first time, they only had to choose their song and pray that they’d be able to get it before it closes, but now the rules changed again, mind you, that he was left wondering if he really did return to the past.

The new rules were brutal and demeaning, Jonghyun clenched his jaw, because of its destructive effect on the psyche of the trainees who suffered enough in getting unnoticed by the Nation’s Producers and dumped in the lower echelon of the rankings. Then there’s also the chance that anyone could be stopped from choosing his song because other teams wanted him, even if he necessarily doesn’t want to be in it, or blocked from his choice because he’s not good enough for the members already in that team.

The time-traveler shouted expletives in his mind as he worked to keep the dark expression out of his face.

To ‘steal or bail’, that’s the punchline of this position evaluations.

Why can’t anything go as expected?

BoA waited for the chaos to subside as the trainees slowly digested the rules. “In the last evaluations, 3,000 benefit votes were given to the highest-ranking teams in the live votes and online votes. For this evaluation period, we went a little higher. Can anyone guess how much?”

Seonho was uncharacteristically quiet, the shock of the evaluations still clouding his mind. “5,000 votes?”

“Fortunately, it’s higher than that. The highest-ranked trainee of each team will get 10,000 benefit points,”

The whispers grew louder.

“—And the highest-ranked individual trainee of each position from both live and online votes will each get 100,000 benefit points.”

BoA lightly brushed her ear to fend off the trainees’ loud voices.

Beside him, Samuel went to an alarming pale color and Minhyun was not far off in draining the blood in his face. Seongwoo and Daniel were unnervingly still whilst Jihoon went back to closing his eyes and mumbling words too fast for him to catch. Jonghyun was just relieved that something went according to plan even it pales in comparison to the new rules.

“What’s the most important position in Produce 101?”

“Center!”

“Therefore, our Rank 1 Maroo Entertainment Park Jihoon, who happened to be the Avengers’ center, gets to choose first.”

Jonghyun watched blankly as Jihoon stood up straighter, subtly pocketing his trembling hands, and walked towards the left doorway and disappeared around the corner. The silence was deafening to the point of suffocation. He tried to lean forward so he could see where Jihoon went or what
position he picked because he could not be sure of anything else in this competition. The Rank 1 trainee picked Jason Derulo’s ‘Get Ugly’ dance performance the first time around but the time-traveler learned the hard way that he should not trust the timeline and should always take it with a grain of salt.

Especially with how unpredictable Jihoon-nie was. That frustrating moment when he answered BoA sunbaenim’s question on his preference would haunt him in his sleep.

Jihoon smiled cryptically. “I’ll see what would suit me best.”

Jonghyun never wanted to strangle anyone as much as the jeojang boy at that moment.

BoA sunbaenim looked to the side and nodded. “Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng, you’re next.”

“Jihoon-nie.”

No answer.

“Jihoon.”

He felt like he was talking to a mannequin.

“Yah! Park Jihoon!”

“What, hyung?” The Rank 1 trainee muttered sullenly but did not look at him.

Jonghyun sighed. It was a lost cause trying to make Jihoon see sense. The visual trainee was too upset to even look at him without glaring or, gods forbid, bursting into tears. Frankly, he preferred the first one because a crying Park Jihoon was just too heartbreaking. Plus, it would earn him the ire of the Hwang Minhyun and he would never wish that on anyone.

After his name was called, Jonghyun kept his steps silent as he entered the maze. Behind the wall was a forked pathway with three vinyl boards pinned above each path: a pink sign with ‘Vocals’ on the far left, a neon-orange one with ‘Dance’ in the middle, and a bright red card with ‘Rap’ printed on the glossy placard on the far right. A long plastic table was placed in the middle displaying thirteen cards of the song selections. The name of the artist and the track title was printed on the card but there were no song ranks.

His eyes widened at the implication.

No ranks. No biased belief that the song ranked first was the performance-to-beat because it was the most popular song, like what happened with ‘Get Ugly’ and ‘Downpour’ which he realized was a ruse made by the producers to band the high-ranked trainees together for the hype.

With it gone, though…

Damn.

It will be a free-for-all and as mixed as it could possibly be.

Jonghyun eyed the dance positions before trailing his gaze to the rap positions.

It would have been easy if he stuck to what he knew, what he was trained to be for eight years, but
as his hand inched towards the orange cards he hesitated.

Why, he’d ask himself later that night, but at the moment he had to pick one—He closed his eyes and let his hands trail over the cards, grabbing the song he knew ran deeply in his heart.

Jihoon was understandably struck speechless when he entered the room with the red card facing towards the trainee.

“Why’d you pick rap, hyung? I picked dance so we could be a team!”

Jonghyun sighed. “No, you didn’t. Dance is truly for you, Park Jihoon, not for me.”

Jihoon gaped like a fish out of water. “But—But—I searched you in Naver! Your fans said that you would do well in dance and that they were sure you’d pick that position because it’s what you’re best at.”

“Even if I’m good at dancing, I wanted to express myself in rap. Don’t get me wrong, the fans were right that my strongest point is dancing but I wanted to develop my other talents as well, and rap happened to be one of them.”

Jihoon sighed and reluctantly accepted his reason. He was still sad that he wasn’t able to get Kim Jonghyun in his team but that doesn’t mean he won’t try again. Yep, he had some plans ready for execution.

Meanwhile, for the onibugi Angel Leader, he was truly at a loss with these kids. It was like they were running on a whole different spectrum, swinging between both extremes like a freaking pendulum. Maybe it was the shock of having thirty trainees leave the competition in one night or the result of getting first in ranking, though the former sounded more valid than the latter, but Jihoon had been acting weirder than usual.

And it was not only Jihoon. Seongwoo and the rest of the Kings’ Team almost made their room a detention site for him while Daniel tries to convince the staff to make them permanent roommates. Almost, if not for Jihoon’s intervention. Even Daehwi and Jinyoung broke out of their timid shells and bombarded the tired Jonghyun with pleas for him to get them as roommates by exchanging two of his future teammates with them. Jihoon was absolutely livid when he found out about that and still, Jonghyun didn’t know why the normally-shy trainee would react like that. Like, how did he know when exactly step in?

Come to think of it, everyone has been acting weird since he first came here. Was it because of the water they’re drinking?

Outside, Minhyun felt the overly-familiar tingling in his senses that a certain onibugi leader was being obnoxiously obtuse, again. He met the exasperated expression on Seongwoo’s face, who also developed the same senses to protect the Angel Leader from unworthy souls (The visual trainee from hell always came first in his list).

The jeojang boy was coughed none too gently when Samuel voiced out his confusion with Jonghyun-nie hyung getting a rap position instead of dance.

Samuel cocked a head to the side. “But, hyung, I remember you freestyling. You were really good.”

“Thanks, but I’m not that good of a dancer though.” Jihoon’s deadpanned expression forced a chuckle out of him.

The Angel Leader watched the trainees pile into the room, carrying colorful placards in their hands.
Samuel was a surprise to him. The trainee was once the center of ‘Get Ugly’ and with him picking a different song would definitely affect the rankings again.

“I do covers of Ed Sheeran so I wanted to try something not in the RnB genre, I guess.” Samuel shrugged as he handed over the ‘Shape of You’ orange card.

Samuel’s consequential ‘to-hell-with-the-timeline-Kim-Jonghyun-knows’ choices planted so many holes in Jonghyun’s plans that it was the understatement of the century when he says he was a ‘little scared’ with what the rest would pick; try ‘terrified’ and ‘out-of-sorts’, that’s what he was feeling as he wished to whoever’s watching over him that there would be no more surprises.


Jonghyun was glad that some things never changed.

But then again, someone up there really hated his guts.

They let Joo Haknyeon, Hyeongseop-ah, and Lee Euiwoong pass through with no hassle. Joo Haknyeon went for the dance position in Flo Rida’s ‘Right Round’, Hyeongseop-ah took the first position in NSYNC’s ‘Pop’ Team to the surprise of everyone, and Euiwoong in the rap team ‘Who You?’. Donghan-nie went without hassle in ‘Shape of You’, happy that he got Samuel in the team because someone as talented as the 16-year old trainee would be a huge boon to their team. Jaehwan took no time in picking ‘Downpour’ and received the hug from an exuberant Jiseong hyung. Minki almost ran Daehwi over as he rushed towards ‘Playing with Fire’ with a creepily-large smile on his pixie-like face.

Jonghyun had every right to fear that expression. Eight years, eight long and frightening years, and he still could not fathom the inner workings of Choi Minki’s multi-dimensional mind.

The LED floor tiles which divided their teams suddenly lit up a soft green. Jonghyun saw their lane lighted up, as well as Minhyun’s, Daehwi’s, Donghan’s, and Jihoon’s lanes.

Then everything went spiraling downwards.

A crackle in the speakers prompted them to look up as BoA sunbaenim’s voice rang out from everywhere. “Five teams have two members in their group and are now able to ‘steal or bail’.”

As if on cue, the plexiglass housing of the buzzer buttons swung open with a schlock sound. Guanlin approached the two hard-looking buttons blinking below their title track, one in blue and the other in red.

“Hyung!” Daniel slapped Seongwoo’s hand from pressing the blue button. “Don’t touch or you’ll waste our chances!”

Seongwoo pouted. “But it’s so blue.”

Jihoon rolled his eyes. “Later, Seongwoo hyung. You get to slam the button when it’s our time.”

The first buzzer went to Dongho.

As soon as BoA sunbaenim announced his entrance in the maze, Minki pushed a protesting Daehwi out of the way and slammed the blue button hard. Immediately, their lightbulb and LED lane
changed from green to a brilliant blue light, the illumination casting shadows on Minki’s grinning face and capturing everyone’s attention.

“Whoa,” Donghan whispered as the blue light danced around Daehwi’s dazed expression.

“A ‘steal’ for Pledis Entertainment Kang Dongho yeonsusaeng from ‘Playing with Fire’ Vocal Team. You may proceed immediately in the maze to join your team. Good luck.”

Everyone was silent before Seongwoo said, “Damn, this is the coolest position evaluations ever.”

It was chaotic and migraine-inducing to a certain Kim Jonghyun as the others went from timidly tiptoeing around the rules to slamming the buttons without remorse or hesitation. ‘Shape of You’ Team did the first ‘bail’ when they pressed the red buzzer for Park Sungwoo. The red light on the two trainees looked dark and intimidating as they watched the oldest trainee sadly look at the lighted team before joining the ‘Get Ugly’ Team, much to Seongwoo’s frustrations. The thrown glare at Donghan sent bad vibes up Jonghyun’s spine because these two were once teammates and he feared that Seongwoo and Donghan’s relationship would turn sour after this. Fortunately, both reconciled soon after with Seongwoo fondly messing Donghan’s hair.

But Produce 101 is nothing without a little competition. To compensate the addition of Park Sungwoo in their dance line-up, Jihoon stole Park Woojin before the opposing dance team could. The trainee from Brand New Music was truly a good dancer and he’d be damned if anyone (Samuel-ah and Donghan-nie were looking a bit too strong for their liking) got the jump on them. The shy ‘A’ class trainee walked towards the ‘Get Ugly’ Team where a smiling Daniel was madly waving his arms.

Donghan was not bothered in the least. Let Seongwoo hyung be pouty and upset with Sungwoo hyung, we have a plan, Donghan exchanged a nod with Samuel as the Brave Entertainment trainee pressed the ‘steal’ button the moment BoA sunbaenim announced Ardor & Able Noh Taehyun’s entrance in the maze. Ong Seongwoo’s priceless ‘I-just-swallowed-a-particularly-sour-lemon’ expression for completely missing out on the gem that was Noh Taehyun made Donghan’s day.

“Well-played, Donghan-nie,” Seongwoo gritted his teeth.

Kim Samuel has a good eye for dancers, the Kings’ maknae thought with a grin as Noh Taehyun clapped both of their shoulders amicably.

Kim Donghan may have done a smart move in securing two of the best dancers in the competition, one in freestyle and the other in krumping, but not everyone did a good job picking their song well. The first surprise of the evening (or is it the hundred? Jonghyun wanted to think it’s the first or he’ll go mad) was Ha Seongwoon joining the ‘Get Ugly’ Team because if he expected anything from the debuted trainee, he’d go for vocals like ‘Downpour’ or ‘If It Was You’. According to Kang Dongho, resident vocal director, Ha Seongwoon had a vocal register that can reach higher notes than even Park Woodam, it’s just shrilly because he was not trained to use it. So, this would’ve been a great chance for Seongwoon hyung to show how wide his range was but the guy apparently thought there were too many vocalists in the competition and gambled a chance to showcase his dancing. Unfortunately, he picked the wrong song for it, based from the look of dismay in his face as he saw the line-up of dancers.

The distant sound of a metal creaking was heard at the end of the room. “Jason Derulo’s ‘Get Ugly’ is now closed.”

“Now the game begins,” Minhyun whispered.
The first ‘steal’ for the vocal team came from Minhyun’s ‘Downpour’ Team. The Kings’ Hwanggallyang hoped that Seongwoon hyung would join their line-up but the vocalist chose dance this time and Minhyun could not begrudge the trainee of his chance in showing his dance skills because if there is anyone who could do both, it was HOTSHOT’s Ha Seongwoon. They were still down with two members but he had someone in mind that who could work…

Minhyun pressed the ‘steal’ button for Star Road Entertainment Takada Kenta.

“Minhyun-nie hyung!” Seonho cried.

“Sorry, Seonho-yah,” The visual rank three smirked.

Seonho, incensed and very determined to beat his favorite hyung, used their ‘steal’ for Media Line Lee Woojin. The two popular vocalists joined their respective teams, curiously looking at the unexpected groups formed. The time-traveler just sat in mind-numbing disbelief the whole time for he had never seen the trainees so competitive and disturbingly methodological as they meticulously handpicked their members and blocked the others.

Joo Haknyeon of ‘Right Round’ Team grabbed the reins from Hwanwoong and did a ‘bail’ on ONO Entertainment Jang Moonbok. The previous Class ‘B’ trainee looked pissed at how Haknyeon intervened without even asking but it was too late. The long-haired trainee placated the apologetic Hwanwoong and said he planned to go to ‘Boys and Girls’ Team anyway. Brand New Music Lim Youngmin welcomed Moonbok with open arms before stealing his labelmate Donghyun right under their noses. Lee Daehwi was absolutely ruthless and blocked HF Music Company Park Woodam from ‘Playing with Fire’, forcing the vocalist to go to ‘If It Was You’ Team, utterly dejected. Woodam’s labelmate Woo Jinyoung was definitely not happy at the ‘Nayana’ center.

“YGK+ Kwon Hyunbin yeonsusaeng, it’s your turn to enter—”

Slam!

Jonghyun could only gape at Kim Jaehwan and Ong Seongwoo who pressed their red buzzers before anyone could react. The Angel Leader wanted to defend his teammates, his brothers, because he understood their actions to a degree. This was still a competition and the two Kings’ members had no prior connection with the model trainee or even knew him well enough without letting the others color their perspective but the pressing disappointment at their actions were weighing down on him. His past memories with the Justice League Team went to the forefront of his mind, rewinding each laughter painstakingly as the curling red haze fueled his determination.

If no one could spare Hyunbin even an ounce of trust, even his brothers, then he’d do it.

He’d done it before and he’d do it again.

His hard gaze rested on Jaehwan and Seongwoo who both looked chastised and guilty before he slammed the button.

The room went silent as BoA sunbaenim’s voice rang in the room. “YGK+ Kwon Hyunbin was blocked from ‘Get Ugly’ and ‘Downpour’ Team but was stolen by ‘Fear’! Kwon Hyunbin yeonsusaeng, what can you say about this sudden turn of events?”

A crackle and some shuffling before, “I’ll work hard to prove to the ‘Fear’ Team that I could do it.”

Jonghyun let out a small smile.
His team was almost the same as before; Guanlin and Taemin were part of his team in the first verse and now Hyunbin was part of the group and Jonghyun couldn’t help but feel that he’d done something good for once. Guanlin knew him now and the Taiwanese trainee was comfortable enough to show his jolly side towards the two trainees who were very uncomfortable being in a team with the Rank 2 and Rank 7 trainee. Hyunbin was positively shaking in nervousness as he introduced himself to his team.

A hand on his arm stopped Hyunbin from stuttering his age. Wary doe eyes met a warm chocolate gaze and a bright smile. “You have nothing to fear, Hyunbin-nie. I will help all of you to deliver the best performance of the night, I promise.”

They voted for the center position and Jonghyun immediately put himself out of the battle, to Guanlin’s obvious disapproval. Ultimately, the Cube trainee won over Taemin for the center position for his eye-catching performance in his fancam in ‘Boy in Luv’.

Hyunbin grew more comfortable with the Angel Leader after that. Taemin, who Jonghyun knew the least in the first verse, was shocked when their leader singled him out by asking random questions to break the ice. He thought that the top-ranked trainee would look down on him being a low-ranked trainee but the guy was too humble to be real. Kim Jonghyun felt like warm sunlight caressing your face in the morning and he basked on the kindness the leader inherently had in spades.

Jonghyun ignored the ruckus coming from the other teams as they tried to steal and bail on trainees like they were going out of style. Guanlin-nie once asked him if they were going to use a ‘bail’ but Jonghyun was firm in his decision not to push anyone away from picking their team, which happened in the case of Taemin who chose the last position for ‘Fear’.

Their team went into a circle, discussing on possible stage plans that they could do. Taemin opened the topic of wanting to internalize the lyrics but Guanlin suggested that they compose their lyrics, to which Jonghyun gave a fond shake of the head. The others agreed immediately, saying their points and suggestions on what to do. Jonghyun softly pulled the others in a tighter circle as he read the tentative lyrics his members came up with. The first who finished was Taemin who wanted to tell his struggles as a trainee followed by Guanlin whose lyrics portrayed his homesickness and dreams in a mix of English and Korean words.

Jonghyun smiled reassuringly at a nervous Guanlin before he gently corrected some grammatical errors and rephrased it to sound better. Hyunbin, unfortunately, was having a hard time writing his lyrics. Jonghyun tried to help him as much as he can but only through his heart and soul could Hyunbin write his heartfelt lyrics, not from anyone else.

“What scares you the most?”

Jonghyun quietly asked Hyunbin, their legs folded below them as they observed the other teams settling down with their new members. Guanlin and Taemin were slightly separated from the two, trying to give them some space out of respect as their leader listened to what Hyunbin had to say.

“A lot of things.”

“What things?”
“The industry. Haters. Our teachers. Some mean trainees,” He whispered too softly that Jonghyun had to strain his ears to catch the last bits.

“That’s a lot of fears,” Jonghyun commented. “But I did not ask you to tell me who you feared. I asked you what scares you the most.”

It was silent, too silent. Jonghyun opened his mouth to retract the slightly intrusive question when Hyunbin answered.

“I’m scared of not amounting to anything. I’m terrified that my parents worked so hard for me to be here just to get all their hard work wasted because their son is not talented enough to debut.”

Jonghyun sharply inhaled.

“Before I went here, they told me not to join, that I should just stick to modeling because, there, I wouldn’t get hurt by people. I just need to walk and go for callbacks and if I get harsh criticisms from designers like calling me ‘stupid’ or not ‘not good-looking enough’, it’s okay because no one would know and make a fool out of me in articles. Becoming an idol—they never wanted me to be an idol because I’d offer too much of myself to people who should not rule me for the rest of his life. I’d get hurt too much, they said, but I pushed them to let me join in *Produce 101*.”

“Why?”

“Because I never wanted something more than anything…and that scares me the most.”

The *Angel Leader* tried to smile and failed terribly. He settled for a half-grimace, his heart heavy at the confession. “That’s a start. Write what you feel—your insecurities, fears of hurting your parents, your desire to debut—and let your pen bring your words to life.”

Hyunbin nodded determinedly. “I’ll work hard, Jonghyun-nie hyung. You can count on me.”

Jonghyun felt tears welling up in his eyes.

It had been three days since the position evaluations and Kim Jonghyun was tired. His body felt like lead was running through his veins, his head constantly throbbing painfully, but he soldiered on for the sake of his team. They rehearsed nonstop, revising and redirecting the parts to somehow portray their stories in a chronological order.

As if they’re one person but had many fears dwelling in the darkness of their hearts.

The concept struck him late at night while he was busy revising some lyrics that Taemin-nie wrote in the rare moments he got too emotional and put expletives in it. He’d been working on their stage for two days already, sacrificing sleep and sometimes food, to make it work. The three kids were dozing off in their beds, emotionally drained from dealing with their fears every day, but he was not sleepy even if it the sun rose an hour ago. He had so many things on his mind for him to get a few hours of shut-eye anyway.

Jonghyun rubbed his face and turned the tablet torchlight off and placed the few sketch designs for their stage on the edge of the bed. He took out his lyrics under his pillow.

Even without the lights on he could feel the ridges of the pen engraved on the paper, the same way his fears were crudely carved in his heart for him to feel and for no one to see.
His team was too distracted with their own parts to realize that their leader never practiced his part in front of them. And he preferred it that way as it was too raw for him to callously tell anyone. He didn’t even want to hear it himself because no one wants to hear the things he deeply hid from everyone broadcasted for all to make a spectacle of.

But he knew he’d do it four days from now and he was terrified. He wrote the lyrics before the position evaluations, sure that he’d get ‘Fear’ once more, in one of his vulnerable moments. ‘Fear’ had been an emotional song for him and even after the show ended it never failed to rouse so many conflicting emotions within him that he wrote more than twenty versions of it, filling the lyrics with a little bit of his heart every time he took a pen.

Jonghyun let the rough texture of his written demons caress his fingers as both his past and present warped within the crumpled paper. Twelve lines, one-and-a-half verse, the others insisted he get half of the third verse and the whole fourth verse. It was Hyunbin’s part that was decreased but the trainee wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“I couldn’t take this away from you, Jonghyun-nie hyung.”

“But why Hyunbin-nie? You’d lose a third of your lines and it’s not fair to you.”

The familiar gummy smile did not reach his eyes. “Because I think you need to tell your story, hyung, but you never got the chance.”

Jonghyun had no words to say to that.

The leader sighed before he sank into his bed and closed his eyes.

Five minutes, just a little rest before I wake everyone up.

“Jihoon.”

The jeojang boy looked up from the drawn formations in his hand and frowned at the two newcomers. In his peripheral vision, he saw Daniel hyung, Woojin-nie, and Seongwoo hyung look up at the uncharacteristically-morose Donghan and Samuel. Seongwoo hyung raised an eyebrow in confusion.

“Oh, Donghan-nie, what a surprise it is to see you. Haven’t seen you these past few days though. So, what’s up?”

“It’s urgent—” Donghan started but a preoccupied Ong Seongwoo stopped him from talking.

“Make it quick, okay, Seongwoon hyung’s waiting for us.”

Seongwoo scrambled backwards when a furious-looking Donghan stomped towards him. Samuel grabbed both arms of the Kings’ maknae and locked both limbs in a stronghold.

“Hyung! Calm down! There are cameras around,” Samuel whispered urgently, shaking the older guy slightly.

Donghan’s enraged expression settled on a shocked Park Jihoon before he scoffed. The anger simmering underneath reached the members of the Kings’ Team and Jihoon who flinched. “Why am I even bothering? All of you just used Jonghyun-nie hyung to your advantage,” He rested a glare on a stunned Ong Seongwoo and Kang Daniel. ‘Kings’ Team? Pah! Ungrateful lumps the lot
of you are. He was always there for you and when he’s the one who needs help, you’re all gone, lost in your priority to win, to even bother checking up on him.”

“Jonghyun-nie hyung’s right. Forget what I said, you’re too busy anyway. Good luck on the evaluations—not that you need it.” Donghan spat and walked away with a troubled Kim Samuel following him.

They sat still, shocked from the sudden confrontation, before Jihoon wordlessly stood up from his seat and rushed outside the dance training room, Seongwoo a footstep behind. After a hushed apology to Woojin, Daniel went after the two trainees.

They ran towards the dormitories where the ‘Fear’ Team was staying and saw masses of white and blue sweaters surrounding someone on the left bunkbed. Seongwoo pushed his way towards the middle and stopped short.

It was terrible. The first thing they noticed was the sheets and upturned pillows. The bedsheets weren’t just damp but wet, as if someone poured water on it on purpose. Then a body was being cradled by a frantic Jaehwan.

With a jolt they realized it was Jonghyun-nie hyung. The normally-bright and cheery face of the Angel Leader was pallid and sickly, lips almost void of the healthy pink color.

“Hyung,” A choked whisper came from Jihoon.

Jaehwan looked up, emotionless. “He’s okay. He woke up a few minutes ago and said he just needs some rest. Go back to your teams, I’ll handle everything from here.” Guanlin hesitated and Jaehwan pushed the tall Taiwanese trainee away from the bed. “Go, Guanlin-nie. Jonghyun hyung said he needs to sleep. He’d be so disappointed once he finds out you did not practice today.”

Guanlin, who stood beside Hyunbin, exhaled forcefully. “Fine. We’ll do our best for hyung.” The ‘Fear’ Team walked out the door followed by the other trainees who went inside the room after Jaehwan screamed.

“Not a word to anyone or you’ll be dealing with me.”

The trainees nodded once before following the ‘Fear’ Team out the door.

Silence. Seongwoo and Daniel were staring in horror while Jihoon gently pressed a finger on the wrist, sighing in relief when there was a steady pulse.

“Jonghyun hyung’s fine,” Jaehwan shook his head exasperatedly. “Scared the shit out of me when I visited him and he wasn’t waking up.”


A small cough interrupted whatever the vocalist was about to say when the leader rose up from his lying position, rubbing his eyes tiredly, before he zoned in on the three new visitors.

“Jihoon-nie,” Jonghyun smiled. “Why are you here? Aren’t you supposed to be practicing—oof!”

Seongwoo couldn’t help it, he burst into tears. Jonghyun immediately grew alarmed, hastily pushing forward and brought the trainee to his chest. Daniel and Jihoon latched to his sides. Jaehwan rolled his eyes but did not stop the boys from hugging Jonghyun hyung. Frankly, he was still in shock after what happened.
Call it a gut feeling, but his instincts told him something was wrong.

He left his team for a few minutes, saying he had to go to the toilet but in truth he was planning to visit his leader before they split up and practice with their respective teams after breakfast—only to give him a heart attack when he saw the unmoving form of Kim Jonghyun on his bed.

Minhyun-nie hyung and Jiseong hyung happened to be suspicious of the strange reason and followed the vocalist towards the dormitories when they heard the scream. Donghan and Samuel, who were thinking the same thing as Jaehwan and was planning to check on their hyung as well, heard the plea for help and ran towards the room. As soon as they entered the door, Minhyun closed it down with a hissed command to be “quiet or the staff will hear”.

Jiseong hyung went into his ‘mother-hen’ mode and checked the Angel Leader’s temperature and pulse, relief evident in his face when it returned a steady one. “He’s a bit hot, must be fever. We need to lower his temperature.”

“Uh, Jiseong hyung, shouldn’t we call for the nurse or send Jonghyun-nie hyung to the hospital?” Samuel spoke hesitantly.

Minhyun sighed heavily. “If you want Jonghyun-ah not to talk to you for a month, then you’re free to do so. The guy’s too stubborn to talk some sense into,” He shook his head. “No, I think it’s better if we help him on our own. I think he’d like that more than creating more drama with the staff.”

Samuel silently nodded before he excused himself and went to the bathroom to help Donghan prepare a small ice-bath with the wash basin Jonghyun-nie hyung ironically had to treat sick trainees who refused to call the staff for help. Jiseong hyung rid the shivering leader off his damp clothes and put on a new shirt and pants with Jaehwan lifting the limp body off the bed. They painstakingly rubbed the cold fabric all over the body and hoped the temperature would settle down to normal. An hour later they were rewarded with a groan from their patient. Samuel had to push Jonghyun down before he dislodged everyone from the narrow mattress.

“What—” He winced. “Ow, my head.”

“Painful, isn’t it?” Minhyun drawled. “That’s what you get for not taking care of yourself, dumbass.”

Jonghyun ignored the biting response. “Jiseong hyung, what happened?”

“You have a fever, Hyun-ah,” The MMO trainee frowned as he wiped the clammy skin. “You haven’t been resting, have you? And from the circles under your eyes, you’ve had little to no sleep.”

Silence.

“Why—why would you do that?” At this, Jiseong grew more upset, his lips trembling. “I had to find out from Guanlin—our Guanlin-nie! —that you haven’t been eating. What’s wrong? Talk to us, Kim Jonghyun.”

“I’m fine, hyung, just a little stressed. Nothing serious except a few hours of sleep. Besides, I know all of you have a lot of things to think about and you’re all busy to see me—”

Bang!

“Yah, Kim Donghan!” Minhyun yelled.
“I’ll make sure he’s okay, hyung.” Samuel followed the trainee out of the room.

Jaehwan asked to stay with his leader so Minhyun-nie hyung and Jiseong hyung could go back to their remaining two members Takada Kenta and Kim Seonglee and act like there’s nothing wrong to throw the staff off their case. Unfortunately, the dramatic entrance of ‘Get Ugly’ Team brought the attention of the other trainees roaming the halls near ‘Fear’ Team’s dormitory.

*I couldn’t blame them*, Jaehwan thought as the three dancers repeatedly apologized to a flustered Jonghyun. If he did not happen to be at the right place and time, he would’ve found their Jonghyun-nie hyung in a far worse condition and that would be a pain to explain to Park Jihoon and Ahn Hyeongseop—

A wail like that of a dying whale shark came from outside the door.

Jaehwan pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Seongwoo.”

A grunt.

“This is not your bed.”

An arm slapped his chest once before the trainee cuddled in his side.

“Seongwoo, go back to your room.”

A snort then the snores started again.

This is insane, Jonghyun thought with a sigh. After he recovered from fever the next day, the notorious clinginess of the Kings’ Team came back with a vengeance and at least a dozen members of the Squirtle Squad in full-armor regalia. True, he missed his former teammates during the times he catches glimpses of the blue-haired Daniel laughing with Seongwoo or Minhyun together with Jaehwan but he did not approach them because he knew they were busy adjusting to their teams. Daniel took the leader position in ‘Get Ugly’ so he had a heavy responsibility in keeping the peace between Ha Seongwoon and Ong Seongwoo, coaxing a timid Woojin into communicating with them, and teaching the choreography to Park Sungwoo without frustrating the funny Ong with the slow progress. Jiseong hyung was the assigned leader of ‘Downpour’ and still he needed both Minhyun and Jaehwan with him to help their team in their vocals. So, no, he didn’t need to burden them even more with his petty problems.

Daniel took the leader position in ‘Get Ugly’ so he had a heavy responsibility in keeping the peace between Ha Seongwoon and Ong Seongwoo, coaxing a timid Woojin into communicating with them, and teaching the choreography to Park Sungwoo without frustrating the funny Ong with the slow progress. Jiseong hyung was the assigned leader of ‘Downpour’ and still he needed both Minhyun and Jaehwan with him to help their team in their vocals. So, no, he didn’t need to burden them even more with his petty problems.

That was not the case now. His self-imposed exile went down the drain when he had at least four friends or dongsaengs watching his moves in the guise of accompanying him because “he’s not as noisy as Daehwi-ah”. It was as if they’re trying not to leave him alone, even in sleep. He had to deal with at least two bodies squished around in the morning and he had to bring them back to their dormitories before anyone caught them.

The most aggressive ones were Jihoon, Seongwoo, Daehwi, Jinyoung, and Guanlin. Jihoon was a given and he still had no idea how their friendship grew deeper to the point that the visual prince was rarely seen away from the Angel Leader. Seongwoo had to be carted away by a pissed-off Daniel when the ‘Get Ugly’ lost his right-hand man in one of their bad days. Jonghyun tried to help Daniel but the blue-haired trainee was determined to pull his team through the evaluations safe and unscathed (in the case of Ong Seongwoo). Daehwi, well, his friendship with Minki and a slightly
stinted, acquaintance-like relationship with Dongho cemented his hero-worship on anything Kim Jonghyun because of the stories he had heard from them. Jonghyun would swear to the heavens that the two NU’EST members were the ones sniggering around the corner like fools as the second-to-the-youngest trainee bombarded him with questions out of the blue. Jinyoung and Guanlin were his favorites—they were quiet, cute, and good listeners even if only one understood him.

Nevertheless, these five trainees he considered the extremes and there was a dozen more names that had the same sentiment as the five, which made Kim Jonghyun’s life harder because of how the trainees stuck to him like glue.

Everywhere.

The Angel Leader wondered if he had to bring a bat to hit anyone with it.

After his recovery, he went back to his team only to discover they finished their surprise with a smile. During his rest, Taemin finished the drafts for the sequence of the song, Guanlin presented his new and improved lyrics and the excellent pronunciation left Jonghyun reeling, and Hyunbin’s lyrics was heartfelt and beautiful, the deep baritone of the trainee as he rapped his lyrics touched him to the core.

After their evaluations with Cheetah seongsaengnim, everyone was moved to tears. Guanlin received compliments on his diction and emphasis of words, Taemin with his stage presence, and Hyunbin with his rapping tone. The climax of the evaluation, however, went to an uncomfortable Jonghyun and his profound and poignant lyrics left a lasting impression on the renowned rapper.

It was a good thing that the evaluations this time was only with the rap teams and he got to keep his lyrics hidden from two-thirds of the trainees. It was all for naught really because by midday everyone knew of how Kim Jonghyun made the fierce Cheetah seongsaengnim cry.

“I didn’t know you could write such sad lyrics, hyung,” Samuel once commented when he and Donghan sat in the old Kings’ table for lunch.

Jonghyun shrugged nonchalantly. “For one, it’s not a good conversation-starter, and two, it just didn’t come up.”

Jihoon stared at him weirdly. “Your nonchalance at everything about you bothers me.”

Jihoon was not the only one who was unnerved at how Kim Jonghyun easily dismisses himself. Lai Guanlin noticed early on how the trainee liked to stay in the shadows like a sentinel watching over them. Guanlin was proud to say that he knew Jonghyun-nie hyung way before the famous Rank 1 trainee and Kim Jonghyun -fanboy Park Jihoon, although Ahn Hyeongseop takes the prize for being the first non-NU’EST member Kim Jonghyun befriended in the competition. Still, he has been quietly observing the Angel Leader since the beginning and he was deeply worried about how closed-off his leader-ah was.

He confronted Jonghyun-nie hyung once, wordlessly handed over the sketch designs he found scattered below the bunkbeds when he cleaned the room on a whim, and the only thing he got was a smile, a smile!

“Hyung, what does these mean?”

“None that you should be concerned with, Guanlin-nie,” A hand softly ruffled his hair. “Just some plans for a stage, that’s all.”
“Wait—so that means, you know how to design stages?”

The shrill tone didn’t bother the leader in the slightest. “Among a few things. You won’t tell Daehwi-ah, right? I managed to smoke my way through when he cornered me so he doesn’t know I was the mastermind behind our ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage.”

Guanlin’s eyes got bigger. “You designed those outfits? You said you only do stage design!”

"Among a few things," His leader chuckled weakly before he hastily excused himself.

_Damn, why can’t hyung realize how precious he is_, Guanlin sighed heavily as he watched the others fawn over the ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage being played in the big screens all over the cafeteria. The staff decided to let them to fully watch the previous performances and it was quite a nostalgic moment for everyone. He saw many of the trainees with tears in their eyes and some were outright bawling on their teammates’ shoulders. They were undoubtedly strengthened by their good performance the first time and everyone wanted to do one more stage again.

Two days. Two days before positions evaluations.

He had never feared for anything more in his life.

Not for him or Hyunbin-nie hyung or Taemin-nie hyung.

But for the smiling Angel Leader who looked so strong, unyielding, and firm but was truly fragile, gentle, and badly hurting somewhere they could not reach.
Kwak Aron was totally stuck on what he should do as a NU’EST member. There he was, preparing to meet Jonghyun-ah to pick up the rented suits for Mr. Hae, when he was called by their CEO for an emergency meeting. He was expecting disbandment notices or solo promotions as a DJ-slash-producer for their company’s active idol groups but, apparently, that wasn’t the case. Aron was still in shock because he never thought he’d promote NU’EST as the lone member, heavily capitalizing on the viral fame of his members in Produce 101.

They’re a group, not solo idols temporarily formed, and Aron would never choose to try forming a sub-unit without asking permission from his brothers. Not that he’d go with it really, even with the numerous opportunities offered to him when he got weekly calls from Minki and Dongho and few-but-long meetups with Minhyun and Jonghyun. No, his CEO just said to “aggressively promote NU’EST now”, not specifying the how, so it was up to him.

And he had a great plan. Sadly, Jonghyun was not into it as much as he thought.

“No.”

“Come on, it would work—”

“No.”

“But—”

“What, or better yet, who gave you the stupid idea to do a photoshoot with both my teams at this crucial time? Are you crazy?”

Aron put his palms up, frustrated expression marring his face. “It’s not stupid, Jonghyun-ah, it’s actually the best idea I can come up with since the boss told me to promote NU’EST and you happen to be the most popular member now, Minhyun’s a close second, but he’s part of the Kings’ Team too so it’s like hitting two birds with one stone.”

Jonghyun sighed after he took a sip of his water. “Seriously, you’re also part of that bandwagon?”

The defeated expression on the leader of NU’EST did nothing to deter Aron from his goal. “That’s your name now so I’ll use it anytime I want and you also have Justice League as a name but that’s irrelevant to our discussion. Just, listen to my point, okay, before you dismiss it. It may have escaped your narrow tunnel of observation but you’ve become quite popular these days—”

“I noticed. Rank 2 remember?” Jonghyun deadpanned but his hyung was on a roll.

“—like, really popular, the kind wherein you’re the talk of the town, beating top idols left, right, and center with your onibugi face conquering the charts. Jihoon-ah and Minghao had to do damage control with their rowdy members in one of their fan-cafés. And that’s all because of your leadership skills and kind persona and freaking sexy cheekbone highlighter, as applauded by famous cosmetic artists, and your visual direction skills, which I still didn’t know you of all people could do—”

Jonghyun felt his blood turn to ice. “Wait, go back, you said what?”
“Huh? Which part—” He must’ve seen something on his face when Aron lighted up in realization. “Oh, you mean the visual direction. Yeah, Mnet took quite a lot of ratings up because of your interview and that footage of you doing your team’s hair…”

The *Angel Leader* sat stunned beyond belief as Aron *hyung* relayed everything that happened after episode three was aired. Ratings skyrocketed, *Kings’ Team* trended in all social media sites, calls flooded *Pledis Entertainment*, and everyone associated to their company got interviewed about *Produce 101*. Poor Woozi-ah had to deal with his members dishing out secrets about their NU’EST *hyungs* and trying to be a responsible leader-slash-PR of SEVENTEEN because Seungchol’s absolutely useless in reining the more difficult members like Seungkwan, Seokmin, and Minggyu together.


Jonghyun looked at it in a different angle. Aron *hyung’s* plan had some merits, mostly on their rising popularity, but it did have more drawbacks, mostly ethical issues that the *Angel Leader* could not put aside. For one, they’d only be doing it as the *Kings’ Team* with ‘Fear’ Team completing the roster. What about Minki and Dongho, then? Should they be put aside and left to fend for themselves while Minhyun and him rose amongst the ranks? The very thought rubbed his skin raw and he itched to banish the thought away from his head. And that’s just the first; there are so many issues that would be brought up with Mnet’s blatant favoritism towards high-ranked trainees and with him, the *Angel Leader*, seemingly using it to take advantage of the attention and votes.

The aggressive pushing from *Pledis* just fueled his decision to leave *Produce 101* at once and form his company by the end of the week.

“Allright,” Jonghyun started slowly. “It *could* work but not this time. It’s too early and if I had any say about it, which I *do* because without our intervention *Pledis* wouldn’t be sucking up to us, then *all* the trainees must join. No exceptions.”

“Hmm. Fine. I think *Pledis* can go around the technicalities with Mnet about it but that’s a solution to promoting you, I guess. Just make sure you’d do something to remain on top of everyone’s attentions. Bring Park Jihoon too; the viewers absolutely loved his hero-worship and your *hyung-dongsaeng* relationship in the eliminations. Having the both of you in one photo would slay everyone to the Arctics, figuratively and literally.”

The glare did not work on blocking the force field that was Kwak Aron’s mouth.

Kim Jonghyun really wanted to know the exact rules of time-traveling. He went back, sure of himself that his knowledge of the future would propel him seven or even ten steps ahead of everyone, but there was almost little to no consistency in the timeline. More often than not, he found himself scrambling to come up with at least three plans to counter the changes without affecting too much of the rankings.

Well. Look at how *that* turned out.

Nevertheless, he was not the kind of person who made tantrums when nothing’s going according to the plan. There’s still so much to do and so little time.

“Let’s talk about that photoshoot later, I have a plan for my ‘Fear’ stage and I need your help…”

As Jonghyun-ah outlined his plan in a few sketch designs and summarized story plan for their stage, Kwak Aron could only raise an eyebrow at the surprisingly well-thought of plan and for the
hundredth time that day, he wondered where the leader got his ideas from. After their meeting in a little coffee shop ten minutes away from Produce 101 dormitories, Aron understood why the aesthetic team, and on a smaller degree Pledis’ creative directors, was stunned in amazement with Kim Jonghyun’s proficiency in visual arts and creative writing.

Unbeknownst to the scheming of the whole world who wanted a piece of the Angel Leader, said leader was trying to juggle his responsibilities towards each team. He didn’t know how it happened exactly but it started when he visited Hyeongseop-ah’s team.

‘Pop’ Team was one of the top contenders in the position evaluations with the diverse dancers in their group. There was Hyeongseop-ah, who was well-acquainted with freestyle and locking, GON Entertainment Hong Eunki’s contemporary ballet background, and Lee Junwoo’s vast dancing styles. Jonghyun was very familiar with Hyeongseop’s technique and slightly knew about Eunki’s but he was truly in awe of Junwoo’s dancing.

“Whoa,” He whispered.

Beside him, Hyeongseop smirked. “Tell me about it. Even I’m still wondering how the guy just passed under everyone’s noses. Heck, I wouldn’t be surprised if Seongwoo hyung stole him if he knew just how good Junwoo hyung was.”

Lee Junwoo was one of the trainees whom he didn’t know much about. He vaguely remembered him as the trainee with the cute eye-smile in ‘Shape of You’ performance but that’s it. Hyeongseop then explained that Eunki noticed the trainee from his stint as Class ‘C’ center in the ‘Nayana’ stage and did some stalking. Safe to say, Hong Eunki was deeply impressed and hit the ‘steal’ button before ‘Right Round’ Team could. The FENT Entertainment trainee was a quiet one, preferring to watch his team in the sidelines. But as the choreographer of the NSYNC hit, he interacted well with his team.

And the choreography was spot-on, too. ‘Pop’ was an early-2000s hit from one of the biggest boybands in history, a dance-infused song with excessively rhythmic beats and spliced percussion edits, which made it a fairly difficult song to choreograph. Jonghyun was worried that the team would be unable to show dance styles reminiscent of the popular dances back then but Junwoo did a remarkable job fusing early 2000s dance with modern dance seen today.

“Junwoo hyung’s a good leader, a bit quiet, but with Eunki hyung and Insoo hyung here, they more than make up for the silent members.”

“I noticed you left your name out on purpose.”

The mousy-haired trainee rolled his eyes. “Technicalities. But, thank you for making time to visit us, Jonghyun-nie hyung.” Hyeongseop’s voice went lower as Junwoo passed by them, throwing a smile towards Jonghyun before he went to help Namoo Actors Lee Yoojin on the chair choreography. “Your presence really helped us, hyung. Our first evaluations did not go well.” The center of ‘Pop’ Team admitted morosely. “And with how strong Taehyun-nie hyung’s team was and Daniel hyung leading a star-studded team…” He trailed off but the Angel Leader didn’t need more to get the picture.

Hyeongseop was the only trainee in the higher ranks, at 12th place, and with him being the most popular member no one argued his credibility as the center. But Hyeongseop’s presence in ‘Pop’ team was not enough to placate the others especially with how popular their competitors were. ‘Get Ugly’ team had Rank 1 trainee Park Jihoon, Kings’ Team members Ong Seongwoo and Kang
Daniel, *BNM’s* choreographer Park Woojin, *Ardor & Able’s* dance master Ha Seongwoon, and visual killer Park Sungwoo and the six trainees in one group casted humungous shadows over them.

Not that *Shape of You* was much better. Completing their line-up were Rank 3 Kim Samuel from the so-called *Pirates* Team of ‘*Boy in Luv*’, the *Kings’ Maknae* Kim Donghan, the *Chaebols Justin* and Jung Jung, Class ‘F’ to ‘A’ Kim Taedong, and the best dancer of *Produce 101* Noh Taehyun. This in turn only fueled their pessimistic sides even more.

So it was no wonder that the rest felt inadequate compared to the two teams. They were star-studded beyond belief and Hyeongseop understood why his team felt threatened by them. But he knew wallowing in pity won’t get them saved for the next evaluations. Jonghyun-nie hyung taught him that much while he was in Class ‘D’. So, he tried to ease the tension amongst his members but they were too downtrodden to even let his encouragements bring their spirits up. He had no choice but call on his favorite hyung.

He didn’t want to burden his Jonghyun-nie hyung even more, what with him sick for two days and just fully recovered yesterday, but he was getting desperate. The *Angel Leader* took one look at them and talked to his team for two hours, his soothing presence doing wonders to their wounded egos as he told them his experiences competing with bigger idol groups. By the time they resumed practice and had another evaluation with Kahi seongsaengnim, they were happy and contented with their team and choreography. Their dance teacher even praised their bright disposition and Hyeongseop knew he could never repay his hyung for all that he did for him.

Ahn Hyeongseop smiled wider.

Jihoon noticed something was different with *‘Pop’* Team. He knew they were having problems with the team dynamics but they didn’t look bothered or frustrated now. In fact, it seemed like the team found their common ground, which he deeply admired and envied, so he cornered his frenemy about it in dear hopes.

“Hyeongseop-ah.”

The center of *‘Pop’* Team whirled around and noticed his Frenemy No. 1 waiting behind him. Normally he’d get into serious argument with the visual prince (because he got to know Jonghyun-nie hyung first! Jihoon had Minhyun-nie hyung already!) but this time, even the sight of Park Jihoon only a foot away did not send him into rampage.

“Jihoon-nie!”

Jihoon looked very disturbed at the exuberant greeting but he asked Hyeongseop nonetheless.

“Noticed your team’s doing well,” Jihoon nodded his head to the left.

“Oh, I had nothing to do with it,” The *Yuehua Entertainment* waved a hand. “It’s all Jonghyun-nie hyung.”

“…You don’t say.”

Jihoon was not surprised that his hyung had something to do with it. The guy had too much kindness in him waiting to be unleashed at any moment that it felt like the guy was too unreal to be true. And it seemed like the *Angel Leader* just had to go to every team for some motivating speech or something.

With their team though, it went a bit differently because Jonghyun-nie hyung caught them in the
middle of a fight.

The *jeojang* boy was so tempted to wring Seongwoo *hyung*’s neck and lock him with Daniel *hyung* for the rest of the day because the guy was easily riled up by anything that Ha Seongwoon did. It started with *HIM Entertainment* Park Sungwoo choosing ‘Get Ugly’. Seongwoo *hyung* was not entirely happy with how the events turned, especially with Donghan-*nie hyung*’s intervention.

His vision of a powerful dance team crashed down because they had a member that would have been better anywhere else. But he got over it, albeit with difficulty, due to Daniel *hyung*’s conviction that he could help Sungwoo *hyung* give the best performance for their team. It was going well with their team—He got to ‘steal’ Park Woojin before Samuel-*ah* did, Woojin was happy with the line-up, Sungwoo *hyung* promised to do his best and not slack off, which earned him brownie points from Ong Seongwoo—it really was looking up and Jihoon became more optimistic.

Then Seongwoon *hyung* joined their line-up and to his confusion, the *Kings’ Center* looked particularly ill all of a sudden. It was only through Woojin-*nie* that Jihoon found out the two had a rather lukewarm-at-most-turbulent-at-least relationship back in Class ‘A’. Noh Taehyun was the one who stopped the two from clashing but the older trainee was not here now, much to Seongwoo *hyung*’s rapid-fire cursing.

With Taehyun *hyung* as leader in ‘Shape of You’ Team, who was looking more like a team than their fucking circus act as each day passes, there was no one to stop the two Class ‘A’ trainees from butting heads. Poor Woojin-*nie* and Daniel *hyung*, both from the same class as them, had to act as mediators lest they kill each other from one too many fights for preferred dormitory beds to early dinner hours.

This time the two were arguing about their placements.

“You’re not listening to what I have to say! Centers don’t work that way!

“Yeah, well, you’re looking at someone who had been a center before so you have no right to tell me what to do—”

Daniel groaned. *Not again.*

Seongwoon *hyung* had been fighting the placement of the team since Daniel volunteered to be the leader and main choreographer and Woojin got center by unanimous decision. The blue-haired trainee only followed what *his* leader did for ‘Sorry, Sorry’ so he placed Woojin the same way Jonghyun-*nie hyung* did for Seongwoo *hyung* when he was their center. Daniel also planned for Jihoon and Seongwoo to flank the center for the killing parts because they’re the visual tandem of the group. He learned that from Minhyun-*nie hyung*.

Seongwoo *hyung*, who also had an idea on what his friend planned, supported the Daniel’s idea that centers must always be seen on camera, regardless of whose fancam it was. Seongwoon *hyung* did not like the implication of it. Woojin, if possible, went even quieter in the midst of the arguing trainees and only Jihoon could talk to him without the dancer reacting negatively to the attention.

*Where did he go wrong?*

Daniel wondered for the thousandth time how Jonghyun-*nie hyung* handled their team so well there was rarely an argument between them. He didn’t even sleep with one eye open back in the *Kings’ Team!*
To the blue-haired trainee’s mortification, his idol saw all these and wordlessly dragged the two feuding trainees and gently pulled Park Sungwoo out the training room. Daniel hyung breathed a sigh of relief and left the three hyungs to his leader but the feeling of failure and guilt was still there. Jihoon and Woojin shrugged before resuming their practice.

Two hours after, just before they left for lunch, the three hyungs returned looking reserved and quiet. Jihoon was worried for a moment because Ong Seongwoo was never quiet even when he’s sleeping, as he witnessed three nights ago in their dormitory, and feared the fiery spirit the Fantagio trainee had in spades was snuffed out. Jonghyun-nie hyung entered the room last and motioned for them to sit down.

After a few moments of silence, Jonghyun shook his head. “And here I thought ‘Right Round’ was terrible at teamwork. To my disappointment, your team’s way worse.”

Daniel looked down, face pale.

“But, there’s still hope,” The leader of ‘Get Ugly’ Team looked up. “Any bad blood between your hyungs are cleared already, Niel-ah. I expect them to do their best under your supervision. Now, I have a question for all of you—how badly do you want to win?”

Woojin looked taken aback. Seongwoo whispered, “With everything that is in me.”

“Then,” The piercing gaze of the Angel Leader hit them in the gut. “If you really want to win, shouldn’t it be a team effort instead of trying alone? Compete if you must but a good performance must come first. That’s how idols, professionals work. If you really want to win, learn to be a good team player before anything else. Treat your members equally, no favoritism. All have unique contributions in the group, don’t sideline anyone just because you think they won’t amount to anything.”

Jonghyun-nie hyung bid them goodbye, hugging each one of them, before he went back to his team.

Jihoon thought their barely-passable team dynamics was further split into two but his worry was unfounded when ‘Get Ugly’ team performed slightly better as a unit now than before, Jonghyun-nie hyung’s words ringing clear in their heads. They reached a tentative relationship, somewhat professional but with a tinge of camaraderie, and that made four days of hell for everyone an ugly past that no one wanted to bring up.

The next day, Jihoon left a bunny cookie on ‘Fear’ Team’s table and left as fast as he came. Hyeongseop did not need any confirmation from Jihoon. He knew exactly who did the seemingly-impossible task of making the currently-ranked-first dance group a cohesive unit for the first time.

For a certain onibugi Angel Leader who was munching on the cookie Jihoon-nie left (the bunny cookie that looked a little like a pink Pokémon was totally a give-away), it was stressful trying to keep the teams together.

Hyeongseop’s and Jihoon’s teams were the more conflicted ones but that doesn’t mean it was not tiring to get into the more stubborn teams’ heads. Joo Haknyeon almost got his team torn into shreds because of his pride and competitiveness but he intervened just in time. If not for Daehwi’s explanation for the Cre.ker Entertainment trainee’s attitude, he would have left the trainee be. And that was just touching the surface; it seems that personal grievances influenced their actions since the beginning of the position evaluations.
At least the vocal teams were doing better than the dance teams because they were, more or less, evenly distributed among the song choices. He had no reason to worry about ‘Playing with Fire’ Team with Dongho and Sewoon have completely contrasting ideas because they two had different teams to assert their expertise in or ‘Spring Day’ Team because they had no good vocalist to help them now that Widmay Entertainment Kim Yehyun was in their team to help them with the arrangements. The two teams were working in-sync with each other, aside from Daehwi’s ridiculous fear of Kang Dongho, and they’re making good progress from what he heard from Jinyoung-ie.

‘Amazing Kiss’ was doing okay but not as fast a progress as ‘Spring Day’. Sewoon-nie was far better off with BoA’s hit than BLACKPINK’s song because he could show off his guitar skills and the song just fit his tone well. Gunhee-ah, WH Creative Seo Sunghyuk, and MMO Entertainment Joo Jinwoo complimented each other nicely.

The two top contenders for vocal positions, ‘If It Was You’ and ‘Downpour’, were competing against each other. Jung Seunghwan’s ballad hit had the team of Park Woodam and Hoseong-ie to reach high notes, Yongguk-ah’s lower vocal range, and The Vibe Label Yoon Jaechan to round their vocals up with his melodic baritone voice.

On the other hand, ‘Downpour’ had an amalgamation of crowd favorites and serious vocal powerhouses: ‘Replay’ Team 2's Master of Facial Expressions Yoon Jiseong, ‘Be Mine’ Team 2’s Center Takada Kenta, ‘Call Me Maybe’ Main Vocal Kim Seonglee, and the Kings’ Team vocals Kim Jaehwan and Hwang Minhyun. All teams had their strengths and weaknesses playing against each other and it was almost a tie between the vocal teams at this point.

The rap teams…well, they’re the quietest and most aloof of the bunch. Maybe it was expected of rappers to remain stoic and calm even when bad things hit the fan but the persona made it extraordinarily hard for Jonghyun to reach out to his fellow trainees.

But he had to do something because, based from years of experience, these people were most susceptible to their inner demons because they’re tasked to write their own lyrics for the song. He asked Jang Moonbok about how he was faring in ‘Boys and Girls’ Team. He was fond of the ONO Entertainment trainee from the first timeline’s ‘Fear’ Team because of the trainee’s light-hearted nature. He may not sound as good as other rapper trainees like HF Music Company Woo Jinyoung and Hunus Entertainment Kim Sanggyun but there was something about his high, resonating voice that pulls you in. Jonghyun was scared that Moonbok would feel slighted because ‘Right Round’ blocked him from their team but it was all for naught since the trainee found his niche in BNM Lim Youngmin’s team. The Angel Leader was relieved that Moonbok was shining in the three-man team for he deserved it.

Lee Euiwoong-ie was a different case; Daehwi once said that the trainee had so much baggage weighing him down so Jonghyun went to him first. Euiwoong-ie was a harder person to read than even Jihoon sometimes and being in a team with competitive rappers, who had more to deal with than help a confused and weary boy, dealt invisible blows on the Yuehua Entertainment trainee.

Jonghyun once caught Euiwoong crying in the toilets. He did not say anything because there was nothing that should be said. He sat beside the trainee and wordlessly offered a handkerchief. Euiwoong took the cloth with a nod. They were silent in the first-floor lavatories, sitting against the cold linoleum floor, hopelessly lost in their thoughts.

A husky voice pierced the quiet room. “Daehwi told you about me then.”

The Angel Leader shrugged.
“That kid’s too nosey for his own good,” Euiwoong absently chuckled. “Told him to mind his damn business and the next thing he does is tell you about it.”

Jonghyun let out a short laugh.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” The youngest member of ‘Who You?’ questioned. “Because you’re just wasting your time if you’re gonna sit here with me and not talk.”

Jonghyun’s voice softly pierced the closed-off trainee’s walls. “I don’t think you need someone to talk to. I’m here to listen.”

Euiwoong sat absolutely still, as if he wasn’t breathing, but the thousand emotions running through his big eyes expressed far more than any word he could ever say. Jonghyun waited, and waited, and waited before he heard a stifled gasp from the person beside him. He didn’t even react when the trainee grabbed him as if he was his only lifeline. His shirt was damp from the tears, he didn’t mind though.

They did not exchange any words after that. They didn’t need to. Euiwoong just needed someone to hold on to and Jonghyun was willing to be that person.

Kim Sanggyun’s grateful expression was more than worth it.

But after his tearful moment with Lee Euiwoong Jonghyun was reminded that he had some problems in his own turf. He knew he was being a coward, hiding from his own problems instead of facing it head on, but he couldn’t do it. Their evaluations with Cheetah seongsaengnim left him wary of how the others would react with his lyrics. Heck, Guanlin’s dumbfounded face when he heard his lyrics for the first time remained bright-eyed and smiling while his members read the final masterpiece rendition of the gut-wrenching song.

It was entirely different from what they performed in front of their teachers, more final if he had to describe it. Their evaluations piece was all over the place with no fluidity in the transitions, almost like the lyrics were hastily patched together to complete the generic track arrangement.

Not anymore though.

Kim Jonghyun’s words did not come easier to read now than the first time they read it.

Taemin-nie hyung went towards the silent leader and hugged him with all his might. Hyunbin did not leave Jonghyun-nie hyung’s side throughout the night. The following morning their gloomy atmosphere when their leader gave the lyrics to them was momentarily forgotten.

The Angel Leader woke them up at half-past five in the morning with Guanlin being the first to
wake up to a smiling onibugi leader’s face. ‘Fear’ Team’s maknae was not ashamed to ask for a good morning hug from his favorite hyung and was gratified when the leader granted his wish. He watched his Angel Leader softly nudge Hyunbin-nie hyung and Taemin-nie hyung awake, handing over some pants and hooded sweaters for them to wear in the windy morning.

Guanlin didn’t know where they were going at first but soon got an idea when he saw the familiar face of the last NU’EST member waiting by a black sedan.

“You all look terrible,” Aron hyung peered into their bloodshot eyes.

“Ha-ha, way to state the obvious, hyung.” Jonghyun-nie hyung snarked.

“Fine,” Aron hyung huffed. “Be like that, I don’t care.”

Taemin and Hyunbin went to the back and the rest of the team plus a masked Kwak Aron sat in the middle. Hyunbin was undoubtedly confused about the whole thing. He didn’t know what was happening and at an ungodly hour at that but he trusted his leader not to put them in danger. Plus, Guanlin looked excited about it.

“I see some of you experienced the NU’EST way of makeover, yes?” Guanlin nodded “As for you Hyunbin-ssi and Taemin-ssi, we started this tradition back in the group battles when ‘Replay’ Team 1, Pirates Team, and the famous Kings’ Team got their makeover from our contacts,” At this, Hyunbin let out a gasp. “Yes, sick visual concept, right? And it’s all thanks to this guy who made everything possible.

“What?” Taemin choked.

Taemin didn’t know what to think. True he was as stunned as the rest when ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 showed their princely ensemble to everyone. After the stage performance everyone was thinking on the mystery of the Kings’ Team’s stylist and even he had heard various theories going around.

And the person they’ve been looking for almost two weeks was right under their noses! Kim Taemin wanted to bash his head on the car window for being stupid in dismissing Seonho’s surprising theory that his Pledis hyungs had something to do with it.

He knew Lee Daehwi would be furious about this because he asked Jonghyun-ah every chance he could get, only to find out he’d been asking the wrong question all this time.

“It’s not that shocking,” The Angel Leader blushed bright red.

Aron hyung rolled his eyes. “Don’t mind him, he’s just naturally clueless. Anyway, we’re out early so we could avoid the masses and a certain Lee Daehwi—Jonghyun’s plan, not mine—and return late in the afternoon while everyone’s gone to plan for their stages.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Guanlin nodded.

“Wait, I’m still stuck at the fact Jonghyun hyung styled the freaking Kings’ Team.” Hyunbin put a hand on his temple as if to push an oncoming migraine.

Aron hyung patted the YGK+ trainee’s shoulder. “You better get used to it because he’d be doing it again with your team.”

Jonghyun groaned at the expectant looks from everyone.
Meanwhile, Minhyun was having a dilemma with his *Kings’* Team.

“Minhyun-nie hyung, they’re gone.

Minhyun looked up from his socks. “Gone? Who’s gone?”

“The ‘Fear’ Team.”

Minhyun sighed. The put-out expression on Kim Jaehwan’s face only reminded him of Seongwoo’s face when Donghan offhandedly commented on the looming position evaluation performances and the concepts each team would be going for. They were having another weekly meeting as the *Kings’ Team* to catch up on each other’s lives. Minhyun thought it would be another day of ‘I hate Ha Seongwoon with every fiber of my being’ from Ong Seongwoo but it turned out to be a meeting about Kim Jonghyun’s comeback as a visual director.

“Dammit! Now there’s four more people in on the secret! Isn’t Jihoon enough?”

The dig on Jaehwan being a tattletale did not go unnoticed. “Hey! They got my back against the wall. I had to do something before I got swamped by the Squirtle Squad,” Jaehwan defended.

Daniel exchanged a glance with the saner members of the team. They too had some misgivings about letting more people in on the hidden talents of their *onibugi* leader. They knew they’re coming off as possessive and they won’t deny it if someone pointed it out but they had to accept the fact that Jonghyun-nie hyung would do the same for any team he’d be in even if they’re petty enough to feel jealous about it.

“Damn, now we’ve got to compete with the new visual team. Good thing Jonghyun-ah went to a rap team instead of dance.”

“New visual team?” Minhyun raised an eyebrow.

Minhyun wanted to stab Jaehwan’s exaggerated eyeroll. “In case you haven’t noticed, Minhyun-nie, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you did, Jonghyun-ah have top visuals in his team: our Guanlin-nie and your friend Kwon Hyunbin. Kim Taemin-ssi may not be as good-looking as the others but I’d bet my rank that Jonghyun-ah would do something to level up the visuals to unfair heights.”

Donghan joined the conversation. “But we can’t expect hyung to always do everything for us. I mean, we could do our own aesthetics right?”

*Easier said than done*, Daniel grimaced. His style went for casual streetwear, Seongwoo hyung favored loose and comfortable, and Jihoon-nie’s a fashion terrorist—goes to show that no one can’t have it all.

“Whatever your opinions are, I’d rather try than do nothing at all,” Minhyun said as he put on his shoes. “Come on, Jaehwan. We have a meeting with one of Jonghyun-ah’s contacts in Jongno-gu.” He dragged Jaehwan from the team. “You’ll be fine waiting for your van, right?”

“Yeah, Justin had some plans for us,” Donghan shrugged.

“We’re waiting for Woojin-nie and the *BNM* van,” Daniel nodded.

Seongwoo had high hopes for the *BNM* stylist that would be going with them. But a little part in his mind thought about a certain *Angel Leader* and his excellent visual direction.
While Ong Seongwoo was lamenting at the loss of Kim Jonghyun in his team, said visual director was dealing with overenthusiastic kids instead of mature trainees. It seemed like the shock of him actually being the stylist behind the most legendary stage ever in *Produce 101*, as quoted by Taemin and re-quoted multiple times by everyone when he had to match each ensemble in front of them, didn’t wear off even after he said they should get over it.

Mr. Hae was unhelpful as always. He may not hear them or talk to them but he sure does know how to get the gist of the story from body language and gestures. Jonghyun would bet that his old friend was taking so much amusement from him getting swamped by his team on sugar-high.

Jonghyun contacted the fashion designer again for help with the concept he was going for. His previous team only saw half of Mr. Hae’s works in formal wear because that was what they needed to complete the Super Junior chaebol-like aura. This time though, Jonghyun requested that he choose from the more extravagant designs of coats, topcoats, jackets, blazers, and trenches from the designer’s fall/autumn line.

“I still don’t get why we’re looking for coats when it’s spring,” Taemin whispered to Guanlin as they watched Jonghyun and Hyunbin switch racks and hand their choices over a smiling Mr. Hae.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung must be cooking up something in his mind,” Guanlin said.

Guanlin didn’t know what his leader was planning for their concept as he remained tight-lipped about his ideas before he showed it to them. Aron hyung backed their leader up by telling them to trust Jonghyun-nie hyung because he knew what he was doing, as blatantly exhibited by the famous Kings’ Team.

Soon after, the leader came back to their sofa with two ensembles hanging from each arm. He handed a maroon suit to Guanlin and a white one to a confused Taemin.

“Go,” Jonghyun whispered. “Try them.”

Guanlin went to the changing room filled with mirrors from all angles. The suit felt too soft and light when he ran his hands on it and the dark color contrasted beautifully with his pale skin. He put the maroon button-down and black slacks, admiring the texture and small intricate patterns running down the sides of the suit and his comfortable movement with the loose pants, before he turned around in the mirror and gasped.

He must’ve looked at himself stupidly for the past hour when there was a knock on the door.

“Guanlin-ah, we’ve finished changing into our suits. Are you done yet?”

The stupefied trainee could only open the door and let the other person see him.

“Whoa! You look regal, Guanlin-nie!” Aron hyung clapped him on the back. “Come! Let the others see you!”

Guanlin let the compliments wash over him from his teammates and a proud Aron hyung but his gaze was fixated on the Angel Leader who had a small, nostalgic smile on his face. The others soon realized that Guanlin was not receptive to their praises and stayed quiet as the Cube trainee slowly walked forward on the glass pedestal where Kim Jonghyun was waiting.

Jonghyun smiled wider when Guanlin climbed up the stairs and stood in front of him.

“It suits you, Lin-nie,” The Angel Leader softly nodded.
“Hyung,” Guanlin choked from the emotions gushing out from him.

Jonghyun-nie hyung circled around him, aware that he got everyone’s attention, but the leader only had his eyes on the emotional Guanlin. “I had this concept going around my head since I got you in my team and called Mr. Hae three days ago about getting this suit shipped from a friend in Taipei.”

Eyes warm and tone soft, Jonghyun touched the collar of the suit. “This is an asymmetric Nehru suit made from local textile fabrics with small pattern details reminiscent of traditional wear of indigenous Taiwanese people. Small enough not to offend insensitive people but noticeable enough to let everyone know that you have not forgotten your roots. And this,” Jonghyun-nie hyung pulled a shimmering midnight-black coat with three-button fastening and a notched collar.

Guanlin’s breath hitched but he wore the cashmere coat over the suit. He let his hands fall down when the leader turned him towards the mirror.

“This is you, Lai Guanlin, soon-to-be top Korean idol who is proud of his Taiwanese roots. The coat only symbolizes your desire to protect your identity from anyone who wish to exploit it. It also represents both your fears and your will to be someone your parents would be proud of, someone who you’d be proud of.”

“This is what fear makes you do—it protects, not destroys; it paralyzes you, it makes you helpless, but it also helps you realize you fear something because you know how to love.”

Lai Guanlin let the tears fall down his face.

It was an emotional morning for the ‘Fear’ Team as they found out the concept they were going to do onstage. Poor Hyunbin-nie had to drink several bottles of water to prevent dehydration. Taemin was no better, because the truth wrenched his gut out of him. It was a heartbreakingly beautiful concept and he now understood why his leader did not tell the plan outright as it would have ruined the dramatic atmosphere of having them to discover for themselves.

Mr. Hae, with the assistance of Aron hyung, packed their ensembles in suit bags and piled them in the back of the van. Taemin was disappointed that their leader did not try his suit in front of them, he only checked the fittings in the changing room and deemed it acceptable before packing it ahead of them. But Jonghyun-ah was not swayed, he just grinned and said they would have to wait with the rest of the trainees.

They arrived in Itaewon for their hair consultation. Guanlin was familiar with K noona from ‘Boy in Luv’ and went right ahead to Jinwoo hyung who happened to be the same person who did his hair before. Tia noona was gushing over Hyunbin hyung’s visuals and was absolutely starstruck when the trainee bashfully admitted that he came from YGK+. Taemin hyung went with Jinwoo hyung’s twin Ryewoon and started consulting him about hairstyles that would suit his facial structure. Jonghyun-nie hyung had K noona to work with him.

Aron hyung explained the general gist of the concept and the colors of their suits and coats, as well as the detailing of the collars, to create the mental vision of the hairstyles that would work. Guanlin did not complain when Jinwoo hyung asked him if he could do something different. Hyunbin-nie hyung went with Tia noona’s suggestion of coloring his hair with a brighter color for his bright personality. Taemin hyung went with his leader’s suggestion that he try a silver hair color, to the approval of Ryewoon hyung. Jonghyun-nie hyung retained his jet-black hair color and opted for a subtle change in his style.
They decided not to go for piercings since they were contented with their current ones. Instead they went to a jeweler from Gangnam, one of Aron hyung’s dearest friends, that was willing to rent them some jewelry for a reasonable price. Taemin was not sure about this stint when Aron hyung told them that their companies sponsored the group’s trip.

“Guanlin-nie’s from Cube and Hyunbin-nie’s from YGK+,” He gestured to the youngest trainees in their team perusing the shiny necklaces with Jonghyun critically perusing each one. “Their companies chose to sponsor your team because the ‘Fear’ Team will inevitably be conquering the trend charts after your performance. It’s not much though, but we can make do with it if we don’t buy unnecessary things. Plus, Jihyun noona gave our leader a good discounted price for the rentals and it’s way less than the expected rental price.”

Jihyun noona, a stern middle-aged sophisticated lady who smiled a lot in Jonghyun-nie hyung’s presence, let them choose from the beautifully-crafted chokers to statement pendants on thin, layered chains. Guanlin was eyeing some of the pins while Hyunbin was attracted to the cuff bracelets.

Soon, they got their picks placed in meticulous aquamarine jewelry boxes and they were driving back to the dormitories. They reached Produce 101 buildings by five in the afternoon and were glad to find only few trainees were roaming the grounds. Fortunately, their building was devoid of people and they were free to return to their dormitories with bags of clothes and food to last until the following morning. Jonghyun-nie hyung was adamant that no one would leave their rooms before they got called by the staff tomorrow at nine in the morning.

It was an entertaining and nostalgic night for the ‘Fear’ Team. Their group did not have many bonding moments but Guanlin was happy that they were having fun as a team now, even if it was a little late. ‘Boy in Luv’ Team was different than ‘Fear’ Team, he realized this as he listened to Hyunbin tell stories about his father and his early rise as a model. His previous team were all laughs and rough-housing with the Brave Entertainment trainee dragging him into mischief, much to Yongguk hyung’s annoyance, and having no choice but to let so many hyungs take care of him in a slightly-suffocating manner.

On the other hand, ‘Fear’ Team had more quiet moments with everyone facing both the light and dark sides warring inside them. He felt uncomfortable unraveling his fears at first but he soon appreciated how selfless and noble Kim Jonghyun was when he took care of them as best as he could while facing his own demons.

Under his wing, Guanlin grew wiser and braver, more than he could ever do in ‘Boy in Luv’ Team, and that was fine too. He was fortunate that he belonged to two teams that improved different sides of him, the fun-loving and the cool and compassionate one, and he knew he could never compare the two teams with each other.

The following day, Taemin woke up to a soft pushing on his left arm. It was a nice wake-up call compared to the sirens trying to bust their eardrums during their surprise morning exercise. The sun was softly warming the room from the opened blinds and illuminated the small makeshift rag with bowls of rice and stews, plates of galbi and pajeon, and a loaf of bread placed in the middle. His stomach growled in response. He went down the bunkbed and waited for the others to wake up. Five minutes later, they were peacefully eating their meals and chatting amongst each other.

“Where did you get the rice and stew, Jonghyun-nie hyung?”

The leader shrugged. "I woke up a bit early today and went to the cafeteria. I figured that we
should have a nice, hearty meal before we go."

The soup was warm and the grilled pork soft and Taemin counted the start of the day a success. They showered after the hearty meal, packing their wardrobe ensembles and letting their leader choose their accents to be put in the box Hyunbin found from the stash of bags.

At quarter to nine, a soft knock roused them from their nap. One of the staffs led them to a silver sedan parked between two vans. Jonghyun glimpsed the recognizable purple-haired Donghan going into one of the vehicles before it rushed off into the driveway. Taemin took the passenger seat whilst the maknaes surrounded a resigned Jonghyun as their convenient pillow.

The soft murmurs in the cars stilled as they drove into the largest gathering of fans Taemin had ever seen.

“What the—” Guanlin trailed off.

It was pandemonium. Masses of teenagers, middle-aged adults, kids—all of them were fans waiting for the trainees that took South Korea by storm. Taemin was both horrified and awed whilst Guanlin all but stuck his face on the side window, gaping at the long lines of cheering fans waving their banners and faces printed on brightly-colored papers.

They circled around the fans and went to the backdoor, allowing two hulking men usher them inside the building. The inside had a different kind of chaos; the staffs were running around the hallways, shouting instructions with one another as they pushed racks upon racks of clothes. He noticed some trainees in hoodies being ushered into their rooms by women and men dragging metallic suitcases.

Jonghyun followed the staff and stopped at the door third to the end. “Fear” was written above “Downpour”.

Well. He’d be seeing some familiar faces again today.

He opened the door and let his members in before he stepped into the room and looked around. There were only two partitions dividing the room into two halves with a narrow hallway in the middle for passage, making the dressing room a lot bigger than he thought. Hyunbin-nie went inside their area and greeted the aesthetic team waiting inside.

Jonghyun stopped short at the familiar petite woman standing at the front with a guy and a girl flanking her.

“Hello, ‘Fear’ Team! My name is Lee Ji hyun, head of the aesthetics team for tonight,” The makeup artist smiled brightly. “You can skip formalities with us, we don’t mind. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we’ll be assisting ‘Downpour’ Team first for, say, half an hour to a quarter before that —”

“Wait, you’re leaving Ji hyun noona?” Hyunbin widened his eyes.

“Oh, I think you’d do fine,” The pointed glance did not go unnoticed and Jonghyun dearly wanted the earth to bury him alive. With a wink at the increasingly-anxious Angel Leader, Ji hyun noona and her team closed the door with a soft thud.

After a few seconds, Guanlin scratched his head. “Okay, what was that about?”

The leader hid his face in his shaky palms.
Guanlin was kind and patient. He always took pride in his calm demeanor but sometimes, he tends to let loose. Because, dammit, Jonghyun-nie hyung was about to finish with his hair when a flying foot kicked their door open, startling the leader into dropping the curling iron on the floor.

Jonghyun frantically waved the noise levels down. “What the hell’s going on?”

A disheveled-looking Ong Seongwoo let the reprimand fly through the other ear. “They won’t mind because I, no, we need your help!”

“Oh Seongwoo, I am not hiding the body.”

“Because we need your expertise—wait, huh? Body? No, I did not kill anyone jeez! We just need your help and fast.”

*It wouldn’t be suspicious if I get Hyunbin-nie hyung and Taemin-nie hyung to hide Ong Seongwoo’s dead body for me though, right?* The Taiwanese trainee viciously glared at the intruder.

“What help?”

The ‘Get Ugly’ member gave a short version of the story: some wardrobe malfunction, a creepy crawling insect scaring the wits out of Kang Daniel, Park Jihoon on a rampage, and Park Woojin trying to save their souls—it was ridiculous to an incensed Lai Guanlin. Unfortunately, Jonghyun-nie hyung bought the story and high-tailed away with Ong Seongwoo at his heels.

‘Fear’ Team looked at each other and sighed.

The team knew that they should get used to getting interrupted in their time with their leader but still it was irritating when other teams try to steal the leader from them. It was a miracle when Jonghyun got to finish their ensembles before he got called for consultations and/or pest control. After the third attempt of ‘Get Ugly’ to monopolize the leader’s attention, Jonghyun put his foot down and sent Ong Seongwoo back to his teammates, saying that he more than helped them in their ensembles and makeup. Seongwoo met the intense glare of Lai Guanlin and backed off accordingly.

Jonghyun-nie hyung sighed as he cracked his spine backwards. “Why are they being like this? Seongwoo and Jihoon, I understand, but Jaehwan-nie’s being clingy as well. Hyeongseop-ah and Minki-yah were even worse! What is wrong with them?”

The incredulous expression on Kim Taemin’s face brought a smile to Guanlin’s face.

Their leader was able to focus on them after an hour of getting interrupted. It was a good thing they planned their outfits earlier today and only had to wear them before Jonghyun-nie hyung lightly pushed Taemin hyung on the seat and grabbed the curling iron.

“I shouldn’t ask you if you knew how to use *that*, right?” The 23-year-old trainee warily backed away from the scalding metal.

Jonghyun-nie hyung let out a belly-rumbling laugh before he softly took a part of the silvery strands and curled it inwards.
The two maknaes sat gaping as their leader created a beautiful masterpiece from the handful of tools available. They looked absolutely stunning and Guanlin felt guilty for ever doubting the leader in picking coats and suits instead of something edgy and street-wear style for the song piece. The concept itself was brilliant and the Cube trainee wondered if Jonghyun-nie hyung hid this part of him for years and only unleashed it now. Heck, the Taemin-nie hyung they knew before did not look like the Kim Taemin they’re seeing now.

“Wow.”

Jihyun noona entered the room after an hour and a half, looking hassled and tired, and took one look at them.

Damn.

Their visuals would set the fangirls aflame tonight, the aesthetics artist thought with a sigh.

Her long-suffering expression jolted a few chuckles from Hyunbin. “Jonghyun-ah?”

“Yes, noona,” They chorused.

“Didn’t need any help to make this happen now, did he?”

“No, noona.”

“And where did he go?”

“Being the visual director of Produce 101,” Taemin quipped from behind the mirrors.

“Aigoo,” The makeup artist face-palmed, to the amusement of the rap group. Then she looked them up and down with a critical eye.

Even with no makeup, they look amazing, Lee Jihyun wished to take pictures of the team and make Kim Jonghyun’s portfolio herself so she could submit it to Kwak Aron-ssi and Pledis representatives to place the trainee on her aesthetics team.

Or steal him right under everyone’s noses.

Whichever works faster.

“Hmm. I think the Kings’ Team have found their visual rival.”

The ‘Fear’ Team felt their self-esteem skyrocket.

Jonghyun didn’t know how he became one of the aesthetic teams but he somehow got the task of arranging each team’s ensembles to an impeccable degree. Seongwoo was obstinate to the point of infuriating but he loved his friend too much to ignore the overwhelmed expression hidden in his grinning face. Jonghyun went to where ‘Get Ugly’ and ‘If It Was You’ Teams were staying.

Woojin opened the door, hair a mess and eyeshadow sloppily streaked, and let both of them in. Jonghyun stood near the door, staring wordlessly as Daniel tried to pair a hideously-looking orange harem pants with a pink striped navy-cut shirt and looking like a crayon box vomited all its colors in one go. Sungwoo hyung was contemplating between a forest-green polo and a Mandala-designed
tie-dyed shirt, Seongwoon hyung’s newly-pinked hair was hidden in a beret of all things, and Jihoon-nie was hopeless, enough said.

Daniel was the first to see him.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung!”

The puppy-like trainee slammed into his body, blue-tinted hair glinting below the fluorescent lights.


“Oh, this?” He lifted the pink shirt up. “Jihoon-nie picked it for me from what we’re given. Thought it looked ugly at first, but it’s bright and I think it works for a light and summery-vibe concept?”

The raised question at the end only brought disbelieving expressions exchanged between him and Seongwoo.


After the Angel Leader practically reassemble their concept to something that they never thought of and so damn cool that they were hitting themselves over for not thinking of it in the first place, Ha Seongwoon was stuck between two decisions. He never interacted that much with the Pledis trainees, especially Kim Jonghyun. They were from different classes and had little no reasons to talk with each other that won’t raise a few eyebrows in the process.

Daehwi was the one who introduced the two Pledis trainees in the Kings’ Team and he did what he did best when faced with a new situation: observe. He observed how Hwang Minhyun had Kim Jaehwan and Kim Donghan round his long and nimble fingers. He noticed how Minhyun and the rest of the Kings’ Team followed Kim Jonghyun without question. He saw how Kim Jonghyun led his team admirably well, hence the reason why most, if not all, trainees practically fought each other for a little bit of time with the Angel Leader (Jihoon, apparently, was the infamous number one enemy of everyone when it comes to Kim Jonghyun and Hwang Minhyun).

He knew little about the NU’EST leader, but this is insane.

Even him, a debuted idol too, did not know how to mix-and-match clothes like that of an aesthetics director or a fashion designer. Where the hell did Jonghyun-ah get that chic-looking denim jacket from the pile of clothes BNM bought for them? As he was watching the Angel Leader hand over possible combinations of shirt, denim and corduroy, and pants for a sleek, hip-hop and b-boy infused dance performance, the Ardor & Able Trainee was hit with a train of thought.

Kim Jonghyun was part of the Kings’ Team and no one from the staff took credit for the visual knock-out they did for ‘Sorry, Sorry’. And now he’s seeing the leader in action…

His eyes widened in realization then he chuckled.

Daehwi would be so pissed.

After almost four hours of going back and forth between the teams, he felt like he was a beachball getting passed overhead and in tight spinning aerodynamics at that. He just finished helping Kenta with a new hairstyle that he wanted to do but could no explain to the confused stylist and had to go
back to his team and get dressed.

It would be a tight squeeze, what with his very limited time, but he could manage. Fortunately, he returned to a complete ‘Fear’ Team carefully munching on some snacks to avoid crumbs falling on their sophisticated cashmere/faux-fur/twill coats and messing their makeup. Jihyun noona was waiting for him in one of the vanity tables, a bored expression on her face. They looked up when he entered and the makeup artist did not waste time in ushering him towards the makeshift changing room.

He momentarily stunned everyone dumb when he went out before a cough drew everyone’s attention to an awed Jihyun noona. “What—er—what concept are we going for tonight?”

Jonghyun looked surprised. “Oh, anything will do noona. Just like the boys.”

“Oh, no, that’s not happening.” Jihyun noona disagreed, all the while promising to herself that Kim Jonghyun would get the best visual award for tonight’s performances.

Because if the leader looked like that and did not get the best aesthetics to at least be on par with his stunning ensemble, she might as well resign from being an aesthetics artist. She shook her head and continued. “See, the boys gave me the gist of your performance and they gave me their preferences. But they don’t know what you’ll be going for, Jonghyun-ah.”

Silence.

Then a soft yet strong voice said, “Momentary pain but so much hope for the future. That’s what I’m going for, I guess. I’ll be wearing contacts noona for tonight.” The makeup artist silently nodded and started her work.

After an hour of doing his makeup, the two assistants fixing his hair and setting it to softly fall over his eyes, the only thing anyone could think of was ‘King of Kings’ Team’.

“Hyung.”

“Hmm? Yes, Hyunbin-nie.”

“They’re staring.”

“Don’t mind them, Bin-nie. They’re just in awe of you.”

“But they’re staring at you, though.”

“Oh.”

Jonghyun didn’t realize that performing last in the rap groups grated on one’s nerves. The stares did not bother him as much as the subtle manipulation of arrangement in the song line-up. To be placed last in the final set of performers only meant that Mnet was banking on their stage to end the night with a bang.

Dammit, if that ain’t "subtly pressuring" them to do their best then he didn’t want to find out what is "forceful pressuring" for the entertainment corporation.

One of the staffs called ‘Fear’ team backstage. Everyone cheered and hollered their support as they went out of the room. The backstage staff attended to them more diligently now with the mic fixed
in place with clear tape and the lapel securely connected.

His members were too quiet, Jonghyun thought. Maybe they all needed some words right now.

“I know this stage would wrench your deepest emotions out from you and the only thing I can ask is that you say what you want to say. Lyrics—” He trailed off then resumed in a whisper. “Written words wouldn’t matter when there are words unwritten that should be said.”

“Jonghyun-ah,” Taemin started.

“I just want to say that I’m proud of you. You’ve all done well in sharing parts of you that you wouldn’t want to tell others. It’ll be hard and I won’t blame you if you lose control. But,” He softly smiled, his sparkling eyes glinting in the darkness. “Don’t let fear control you. Control your fear, enable it to power your courage to stand in front and tell your story.”

“I—I’m scared, hyung,” Hyunbin trembled.

Jonghyun reached up and lightly touched the trainee’s eyes. “Close your eyes. When you’re losing control, close your eyes.”

Then he put a hand out, palms down. “We’re in this together, we’ll face our fears together, we’ll conquer them together.”

As one, they placed their hands together and cheered.

Super Junior's leader Leeteuk sunbaenim called their team up. “Let’s welcome, the ‘Fear’ Team!”

Jonghyun first saw the onibugi placards and balked. He wanted to back out, to turn back and forget about the competition, but he knew in his heart that he’d be letting his fear win.

He had to face it sometime soon and now was as good a time as any, even if they're the last performers of the night.

The theatrical fog started to diffuse on the stage, masking almost everything except the familiar leather sofa placed in the middle. The cheers were muffled in the loud beating of his heart as they sat around the chair, head looking down and microphones grasped tightly in their hand.

This is what fear makes you do—it protects, not destroys; it paralyzes you, it makes you helpless, but it also helps you realize you fear something because you know how to love.

The track started and they looked up at the night sky.
That night, Kim Jonghyun, the Angel Leader, Nation’s Stylist and time-traveling extraordinaire, had to face emotional trainees while watching his words in case he made everything worse.

“It was so sad, hyung! I can’t believe you’ve been hiding so much pain inside that you haven’t burst yet,” Yoo Seonho wailed and the leader was left wondering why the self-proclaimed Hwang Minhyun-fanboy was clinging to him like that of a chimpanzee in the Amazons.

Seonho’s unnaturally big eyes widened further. “You’re not dying, are you?”

Jihoon had enough. “Yah!”

Face set in grim determination, he all but dragged the tall Cube chick away from his hyung and threw the protesting trainee onto Minhyun-nie hyung’s lap.

“Jihoon-nie, be nice to Seonho-yah.”

The murderous glare sent Hwang Minhyun’s way made the ‘Downpour’ Team’s Classy Vocal, still in his slightly-damp petal-pink striped twill dress shirt, backtracking his statement and opting to quietly comb the distressed chick’s hair with his fingers.

The others were quiet as they observed the tired-looking Jonghyun patting Jihoon’s hair who chose to stay silent in the Angel Leader’s embrace.

It has been a memorable night for everyone as they roller-coaster-ed away in the surge of emotions throughout the performances. There was the high-packed energetic performance led by the dance teams, the nostalgic and sentimental stages for vocal teams, and the heart-stopping and tear-jerking lyrics by rap teams. Daniel was impressed by all stages but even he could admit that Seonho and Jihoon were not the only ones affected by the performance of the night from ‘Fear’ Team.

The Fancam King did not have any doubts that the Angel Leader would, once again, slay everyone ‘till they get severe heart palpitations and be declared clinically dead for a second before they wake up and start all over again for so many unjust reasons.

Firstly, coats in the middle of spring was preposterous to even think about but when the Kim Jonghyun thought it looked absolutely fantastic in the one of the most dramatic performances of the position evaluations then it should be a fashion statement even if the weather was sweltering hot. He overheard Jung Jung claiming dibs on a similar coat worn by Kim Taemin that Justin had in his current wardrobe.

Secondly, they looked like gods it’s not even funny, goddammit!

Kang Daniel was certain that by the end of the night he’d be found researching on how to freaking be like Kim Jonghyun.

And the funny thing about it was that it won’t be just him.

“I just—can’t even—ugh, seriously—” Seongwoo spluttered in minced sentences before devolving into accented foreign profanities and the occasional wish that he had the same unbelievable competency that their leader had when it comes to everything.

Only Ong Seongwoo saw the ‘Fear’ Team before anyone else from the dance groups did. The
Kings' Fancam Master had some things on his plate that he needed to attend to so he sent Seongwoo hyung to ask their leader for help because he couldn’t handle everyone and do the styling by himself. Their stylist noona was preoccupied with ‘If It Was You’ Team at the moment but Daniel thought that doing something they could do would lessen the workload a little bit for the overworked stylist. Not to mention, finishing early would give them more time to change anything if they had better ideas for the concept.

However, he bit more than he could chew. Daniel wanted to try what Jonghyun-nie hyung did for the Kings’ Team but he overestimated their capabilities. Seongwoon hyung was absolutely helpless in anything fashionable and Jihoon was banned from choosing anything, period.

When Seongwoo hyung returned with a worried and definitely not-yet dressed Jonghyun-nie hyung, his curiosity was peaked. The leader of ‘Get Ugly’ was hoping to catch a glimpse of Jonghyun-nie hyung’s concept design but the guy was not even wearing makeup. Daniel pulled his friend away from the others and asked what he saw of ‘Fear’ Team. The Kings’ Center called foul for being used as bait/look-out but reluctantly admitted that the team looked, for a lack of better term, “so damn good Kings’ Team might be outranked in visuals”.

So, naturally, he got scared. Because if ‘Fear’ Team beat his beloved Kings’ Team in terms of visuals, and they were and still are the illustrious group of killer visuals that had all members ranking in top fifteen and garnered almost seven million votes in total due to the media’s attention on them, then it was no wonder why the ranked-first visual trainee felt threatened by them.

He had no time to prod further when the Angel Leader walked towards them with a stack of clothes lightly placed on his forearm. Jonghyun-nie hyung did not pull any punches as he directed them to unexpectedly-brilliant combinations and styled their hair to fit their sexy b-boy concept for ‘Get Ugly’. Daniel was in awe the whole time because Kim Jonghyun treated them as if they’re his team, encouraging any suggestions for their concept, all the while straightening Sungwoo hyung’s hair and instructing Woojin on the possible accents that he could use for his acid-washed ripped denims. Jihoon only raised his chosen outfit and waited for a thumbs-up from the leader.

Heck, he knew firsthand how the leader worked and he’d always say to anyone who’d listen that Kim Jonghyun’s motives were always firmly wrapped in cunning and skill but his intentions were pure and kind.

They had no opportunity to thank the leader because other teams like Donghan-nie’s ‘Shape of You’ Team and Jaehwan-nie’s ‘Downpour’ Team called him for assistance. Daniel was disappointed when he did not see his leader for the rest of the day until it was only fifteen minutes before the show starts. Seongwoo hyung huffed at the uncanny similarities of the Kings’ Team and now the ‘Fear’ Team being the last group to enter the waiting rooms.

“We’re missing one more team,” A staff noted as he looked over the list on his clipboard half an hour before the live shows start.

“Which team?” His colleague looked around the room.

“Uh, ‘Fear’ Team.”

“Oh, that team.” The meaningful smile in the staff noona’s face was evident. Seongwoo and Daniel exchanged a glance. The other trainees were anticipating the arrival of the last team who got held up in the dressing rooms by their aesthetic team. The leader of ‘Get Ugly’ Team wanted to see the anticipated team for himself.

He was disappointed, so thoroughly disappointed.
Because—his beloved Kings’ Team just got their ass handed back to them.

Unlike some of the teams who were hiding their ensembles beneath plain-looking puffer coats and Produce 101 staff jackets, ‘Fear’ Team did not hold anything back. It’s like they’re egging them on, fully showing their visual concept to anyone who dared to look and gape.

And they look outstanding.

‘Fear’ Team entered the room in their expensive-looking trench coats softly swinging behind them as they took confident steps forward in the now-silent room. The coats were made of shimmery and heavy-looking fabrics that made the blue-haired trainee tempted to run his hand through the soft-looking, feathery faux-fur lining.

The four-man team went all-out in their visual concept. The maknaes were the first to enter the room and they caught everyone’s attention.

Lai Guanlin was a stunning individual and Daniel could appreciate the trainee’s handsome visuals. However, tonight, his visuals refined his princely-aesthetics to the smallest detail. His jet-black hair was curled into wavy locks softly curtaining his eyes and minimal makeup was done on his face aside from the light toffee color shadowing his eyes and the soft peach-toned lips, and yet Guanlin looked exactly like the manhwa dark prince he sometimes read in webtoons. With his maroon suit designed with uniquely beautiful earth-toned patterns running down the sides and the shimmery midnight-black cashmere coat with a crystal blossom brooch pinned on its breast pocket, Guanlin looked ethereal.

Kwon Hyunbin was a sculpture of art as he embodied both seductiveness and innocence in a flawless transition of visual concept. Hyunbin’s honey-blond hair was parted at the center and combed lightly at the sides to fit the Eggsy Kingsman hairstyle back in the 1940s. His eyes were alluring with the glittery peach color lining his eyes and the dark red color on his lips made his structured face all the more attractive. The contrast between Hyunbin’s silver buttoned-up dress shirt and the black stand-up collar overcoat with gold embellishments was striking as he raised a pale wrist decorated with diamond bracelets and silver cuff links. Kwon Hyunbin seriously took his visuals to another level.

Daniel let his eyes trail over the hyungs of the team guiding the younger ones to their seats at the front. His breath hitched. The Kings’ Fancam Master thought that the ultimate visuals of ‘Fear’ Team were the first two members with their tall heights and beautifully-sculpted faces but he was dead-wrong. So dead-wrong, he let his jaw drop at the sight of the two older trainees.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Seongwoo hyung let out unintelligible words under his breath. Donghan let out a choked laugh.

Kim Taemin was the complete opposite of Lai Guanlin’s dark Manhwa prince concept. Daniel never expected that the quiet trainee could ever look like this. There were no words needed to explain Taemin-nie hyung’s visual concept other than the word ‘light’. With his silvery-blond hair in a wind-swept look curled to the side and eyebrows tinted to match the platinum strands, the trainee looked the part of the otherworldly prince with his asymmetric rose-gold plated ear threaders. His eyes were lined in dramatic gold eyeshadow, contrasting splendidly in his snowy-white turtleneck and tweed coal-black trench coat. His height only made him the fair-haired prince in the fairytales.

“Whoa, he looks like Shigeka Narushige,” One of the younger trainees began to explain a manga he had been reading before he joined the show and Daniel could only agree to the description. But only a handful was interestedly listening to the plot of Silver Diamonds. The rest were humming
distractedly because their eyes were on the last member of the ‘Fear’ Team.

“Never thought I’d think of wanting to wear chokers of all things,” Seongwoo whispered as he absentmindedly waved back at Jonghyun-nie hyung’s greeting.

The first thing that registered in his mind was the eyes. Gray, stormy gray orbs lined with dramatic brown eyeshadow met everyone’s stares. The Angel Leader did not have any accessories, not that he needed to when the statement chokers more than gave the word ‘accessory’ a different definition. The leader of ‘Fear’ Team had two kinds of chokers around his neck, a thin black velvet band above a luminescent rose-gold crystal link choker decorating the pale expanse of skin. Kim Jonghyun was mesmerizing in his slightly-opened ebony satin dress shirt and jacquard trench coat embellished with metallic floral patterns.

If Lai Guanlin was a prince, then Kim Jonghyun was a king.

*As fitting of the Kings’ Angel Leader*, Daniel grinned.

“Someone, get me the stylist of this team ASAP,” Lee Daehwi looked ready to kill.

Daniel was disappointed that they won’t get to talk to Jonghyun-nie hyung. He felt slightly better, though, because Seongwoo and Jihoon didn’t look too thrilled about it. Dejected, they trailed off with a female staff guiding them in a room at the left side of the stage. Blue monobloc chairs were lined up in two rows, one row elevated a step higher, with a TV screen spanning half the room and two cameras placed at the two ends.

‘Get Ugly’ Team sat beside ‘Right Round’ Team, the other teams piling on the higher platform, and they listened to the familiar intro song of *Produce 101* blaring in the speakers. A staff member opened the door and called the first performers of the show.

‘Right Round’ gave an acrobatic-heavy performance courtesy of Byun Hyunmin of the K-Tigers but there were twists to the routine so as to prevent it from getting tedious. With a collaborative effort between Yeo Hwanwoong and Byun Hyunmin, it was a power performance. It was not only the taekwondo black-belter doing the stunts but the whole team was doing half-flips and barrel rolls to create a very engaging routine coupled with power rapping from Kim Sangbeen and Kim Namhyung to fit Flo Rida’s catchy rhyming hooks.

“The stunts, man, the stunts are just amazing,” Seongwoo’s jaw dropped as Byun Hyunmin did a complicated triple-sequenced standing single backhand-back tuck-full twist layout at the killing part.

‘Pop’ Team was the complete antithesis of their predecessor. The NSYNC hit was a combination of early-2000s dance classics like the “1-2-step move” and “shuffling” and modern styles fused into a three-minute performance. Lee Junwoo was the unexpected trainee, Woojin thought as he choreographed the dance to utilize the set design of a classroom setting to show off their moves in a parodical sense of 2000s-blockbuster films. The trainees were wearing baggy sweaters when they arrived in the room and must’ve removed it before going upstage because they did not look like that a while ago. Hong Eunki, Lee Gwanghyun, and Lee Insoo were eye-catching in their leather jackets and curled hairstyles as they served fanservice in the fancams. But Lee Yoojin and Ahn Hyeongseop took the visuals to another level.

“Oh heck.” Yeo Hwanwoong cursed as the camera panned to the two trainee’s sexy concept brought to life with metallic chains, bomber jackets, and hoop earrings completing the dark and sultry makeup.
“Damn, Hyeongseop-ah knows how to grind that floor,” Noh Taehyun whistled as he rubbed his ear from the shrieking fans loving the center as he busted some heavy body-rolls and caught the cameras with a hooded wink, showing off his startling sultry eye makeup and naughty smirk.

Jihoon was in-denial the whole time. Seongwoo was sulking in the corner because he knew only one person who could do that precise slicked-back hair and dark makeup and he did it with other trainees! The insult! Jihoon made it worse when he praised the Angel Leader for his involvement with ‘Pop’ Team no matter how reluctant he may be due to personal problems with ‘Pop’ Center Ahn Hyeongseop, but he's mature enough to put that aside for the amazing aesthetics brought by Kim Jonghyun.

The center of ‘Get Ugly’ Park Woojin had a feeling that he’d be dealing with this for the whole night.

Soon, it was Donghan-nie’s Team to take the stage. Noh Taehyun stood up first, followed by Justin who smirked at them before removing his plain-looking windbreaker jacket and signaling for the others to do the same.

Jihoon’s jaw dropped.

‘Shape of You’ Team was—well, consider ‘Get Ugly’ Team adequately threatened by the dance team. They were wary of the team since position evaluations and they had the right to be, because the Kings’ Maknae got in a team with Kim Samuel and the Noh Taehyun. Donghan and Samuel were strong enough to go toe-to-toe with them but they never thought Samuel would have the balls to steal Noh Taehyun. As if to add salt to the lemon Ong Seongwoo bit into, Jung Jung and Justin joined the crew with Kim Taedong completing the roster.

“Did they just…” Hong Eunki trailed off.

Seongwoo hyung just had the expression that said “Fuck this life”.

The Ed Sheeran-hit was popular even in South Korea and Daniel had no doubts that the team made some twists in the song. The Caribbean-melodic beat soon started and the choreographer of ‘Get Ugly’ was stunned into silence. It was a sleek synchronized choreography showcasing each of their specific styles and Daniel could only say that Noh Taehyun and Kim Taedong were geniuses. The visuals were outstanding as well. Donghan-nie, Justin, and Samuel-ah looked every bit like sexy Casanovas, and Jung Jung as their center was the best move they did, the Yuehua trainee looked the complete opposite of ‘Replay’.

“That’s what happens when you get Justin and Jonghyun-nie hyung working together in one stage, wow,” Jihoon stated. Seongwoo hyung slowly shook his head in disbelief.

The performance got the first encore call for the season which added to Seongwoo hyung’s anxiousness.

Soon their team was called with ‘Get Ugly’ as the last dance performance of the night. They went onstage, nervous at the outcome of their week-long preparation. The leader of ‘Get Ugly’ knew his group had more troubles than fun. His worries were unfounded, however, because his team managed to perform well under duress. Woojin-nie and Seongwoo hyung were natural centers even if it took quite some prodding for the BNM trainee to let loose a little. Seongwoon hyung was a great dancer, his moves were precise and clean. Sungwoo hyung tried his best in following the steps even if he stumbled in the more difficult ones. Jihoon was an angel as he positioned himself slightly in front of the trainee just enough for him to follow without the Rank 1 trainee fully covering him away from the cameras.
They did okay. Not as great as he imagined it, but far better than what anyone could expect from a team that fought more than work together.

‘Get Ugly’ returned backstage and into the room where the other dance groups were seated. They were welcomed with applause and congratulations for a well-done routine. A few minutes later, one of the staffs ushered them out and into the waiting area. They piled in the front rows and Jihoon noticed that more than half of the trainees were gone.

Vocal groups were up next.

His preoccupation costed him though. Seongwoo hyung and Daniel hyung took the nearest seats behind Jonghyun-nie hyung because Justin and Jung Jung were seated beside the Angel Leader, chatting away in a mix of Korean and Mandarin words to an indulgent leader.

Samuel looked flabbergasted. “What—hyung—you—Mandarin?” The almost-falsetto at the last depicted the once-Pledis trainee’s confusion.

The hyung in question rubbed the back of his head, gray eyes slitted into a sheepish smile. “Uh, well, you remember I told you I’ve been teaching someone in Korean?”

“Yes, and?”

“Uh, well…I also get Mandarin lessons, in return.”

Seongwoo hyung was so surprised he forgot to close his mouth, Justin said so in Mandarin. Jung Jung and Guanlin chuckled at the hidden diss and explained the phrasing to an interested Samuel and Jonghyun-nie hyung. As for Jihoon, well, he had half a mind to show his homework in every subject he’s taking just to get his hyung to teach him.

Donghan just watched the chaos in resigned amusement, dearly praying that no jealousy would come out of this new development.

Years ahead, he’d be biting off his words as he forced the Yuehua trainees plus Lai Guanlin and Yoo Seonho away from Park Jihoon, Kim Samuel, Lee Daehwi, Bae Jinyoung, and Ong Seongwoo.

The vocal teams started fifteen minutes after the dance evaluations.

And they started with a bang and fire.

Literally.

Kang Dongho rearranged the BLACKPINK hit into a sexy rendition befitting the lyrics of the song. If anyone should win in the best stage effects, ‘Playing with Fire’ would be the frontrunner, what with their pyrotechnics display with Yoon Heeseok carefully lifting a sparkler in one hand at the killing part and the confetti shower with Lee Daehwi blowing it towards the camera in the chorus part. Visual-wise, they looked handsome and chic and the sunglasses of Choi Minki only added to the “fire” they brought on stage. Sexy bandits indeed, he heard Taedong hyung mutter under his breath as the camera panned to the final pose of the trainees’ heated gaze and panting chests.

Jung Seunghwan’s ‘If It Was You’ was as exceptional as Yoo Hoseong and Park Woodam reaching high notes higher than G#4s. The ballad was well-rounded with Yoon Jaechan dealing with the
lower registers. Kim Yongguk’s voice though was a pleasant surprise because—

“His voice is like honey,” Jihoon was awed at the trainee who seemed like an introvert but hid so much emotion in his voice.

“That’s my hyung, right there!” Samuel cheered and high-fived with Justin.

‘Spring Day’ had a nostalgic theme to it, almost similar to ‘If It Was You’ in its autumn stage design but with falling sakura petals, soft pink backdrop—basically all things pretty, the team had it. Yoo Seonho was breathtaking in his piano accompaniment and Kim Yehyun in the guitars. Lee Kiwon, Bae Jinyong, and Lee Woojin harmonized well with each other. Their visuals were matched with the soft, emotional concept and Donghan could only sigh tiredly when Seongwoo hyung noticed subtle touches like that of his ensemble last evaluations and whispered his suspicions to him. The Kings’ Maknae gave a pointed stare to Daniel hyung who nodded and smacked the grumbling Ong on the arm.

‘Amazing Kiss’ was the underdog of the vocal performances, Taehyun-nie hyung commented halfway through the song. The stage was elegant with amber hues of light washing over the performers’ faces like a shower of golden tears, very appropriate for the lyrics of longing that BoA sunbaenim put her emotions into. Seo Sunghyuk and Joo Jinwoo sounded amazing together and the addition of Lee Gunhee reaching the higher notes made them a well-rounded team. The most memorable part was the acoustic arrangement right after the second chorus with Jung Sewoon’s guitar strumming the only accompaniment to the soft voices.

“Sewoon-ie did well,” the Angel Leader smiled proudly.

The anticipated vocal stage was Minhyun-nie hyung’s team. Donghan knew the moment the two power vocals of ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage banded together for the I.O.I ballad that they just became the team to watch out for. Having the centers from other stages or the most popular ones only secured their position as top vocal team.

And they did not disappoint.

“Wow,” Jung Jung gasped.

Ten seconds into the song and Donghan decided that ‘Downpour’ stage was the performance to beat. Kim Jaehwan was a vocal powerhouse, no questions asked. Hwang Minhyun and Takada Kenta sounded lovely with their melodic lines and soft trilling notes. Yoon Jiseong was a surprise with his full voice at the lower registers. And Kim Seonglee rounded all the vocals with his baritone voice and harmonization with everyone. The stage was spectacular, too. The group was elevated in glass circular platforms, glinting off magnificently from the spotlights aimed at each singer, mimicking how the sunlight peeks over the dark cloudy sky. The raining stage effect on the screen only increased the sad symbolism further.

Jihoon noticed something different, though.

“Is—is that water?”

The doe-eyed trainee pointed to the wet patch on Kim Seonglee’s pink sleeve. Donghan frowned as he saw random patches on the other members’ clothes. He thought it was sweat the first time he saw it, but now he’s not sure anymore because they can’t be sweating when they’re just there standing.

The answer came in the chorus.
“What the—it’s raining!”

It was not just drizzling but full-on rain with the swoosh of the wind blowing their hair to the left and the water darkening their pink ensembles. Daniel hyung stood up from his seat and he was not the only one trying to crane his neck to look above the stage but the screen was limited to what the camera was filming. The ‘Downpour’ Team looked like a beautiful heartbreak with the water running down their faces and a thousand emotions flitting in their soulful gaze.

“Did they open the roof?” Seongwoo hyung was a second away from bolting in his seat to see for himself.

Daniel hyung had a more pressing concern: “Why don’t they look like drenched kittens?”

“No, it’s just the sprinkler system. And don’t worry Niel-ah, it’s the waterproof makeup.

Donghan immediately had suspicions that the Angel Leader knew something about this because he didn’t even look bothered about the surprise stage. And it seems that Jihoon had the same idea. The denim-clad trainee narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean, Jonghyun-nie hyung?”

The Angel Leader shrugged. “It’s logical. Obviously, the Produce 101 staffs won’t let their trainees get sick, right? And as far as I know, roofs don’t just open easily.”

Jihoon still looked doubtful but let the subject drop as he turned to the screen wherein Minhyun and Kenta were slaying everyone with their powerful harmonization.

The others looked too invested in how the surprise raining down on the vocal team happened and Jonghyun sweated a bit, cursing his impulsive self. He didn’t want to steal the attention from Jaehwan-nie and the rest of the ‘Downpour’ Team because of his stage design.

It was his first time to deal with a stage design since he returned back in time and he was damn nervous about it. Two days after the position evaluations fiasco, Minhyun cornered him in the ‘Fear’ practice room as he was about to clean up after his members before calling it a day. He thought his brother was just there to visit him or rant about their dongsaengs from Kings’ Team not making any time to talk to them (Their topic was almost always about ‘Get Ugly’ Team) but he was surprised when Minhyun asked a question instead.

“Hyun-ah, how good are you in designing?”

Warning bells rang in his head. Jonghyun cautiously asked, keeping an eye on the approaching person. “I don’t understand what you mean—”

“Lie.” Minhyun narrowed his eyes. “But I won’t push. I have an idea and I want to ask you about it.”

Jonghyun thought the world was out to get him the moment the Kings’ Hwanggallyang rummaged through his pockets and brought out wrinkled papers with drawings and explanations written on it. He hands the paper over for his perusal. The Angel Leader could only raise an eyebrow as he read further into the plan. Definitely ostentatious, not to mention a bit tricky what with the technology present six years from now was nonexistent today, but it would work if he talked to the right people and not just random staffs. And if he outlined it to the smallest degree, too.

He’d done it before with Seongwoo, Jihoon, and Jaehwan’s comeback stage for Inkigayo. The show producers were hesitant at first because it was a new concept and for the obvious reason that water and stage lighting just don’t work well together and anything dangerous could happen, from idols slipping and breaking their necks to stage explosions that would jeopardize lives. Hence, why
stage directors were so wary of having outdoor stages in the middle of the monsoon seasons. But Minhyun-nie and Aron hyung were cunning men with an objective; They hired stage engineers, lighting directors, sound engineers, and many intellectuals that could explain the technical aspect better to SBS and not risk destroying anything and having to pay for it, as said by a dubious Minki. They were prepared for anything, just to give the dream stage that would shock everyone.

It was a first for SBS, and any live and televised indoor stage really, so they placed the two-year idol unit at the prestigious last where veteran idol groups usually held residency, out of curiosity at the intriguing concept. Jonghyun was in the backstage, wanting to see his brothers perform. The CEO of HMG Media was not able to enjoy the performance as he was too worried about his brothers’ safety. He only got to watch it with his eyes fully open when SBS sent a full version telecast as thanks for the spiked ratings with the group’s blockbuster performance in Inkigayo.

“Is it possible?”

The hopeful tone in Minhyun-nie’s voice made him try for the ‘Downpour’ stage.

“Leave it to me.”

Jonghyun contacted Aron hyung about stage designs and did not let the guy distract him from his purpose, even if the outside news shocked him momentarily. He probably scared his oldest member out with his enthusiasm on the ‘crazy plans’ (he checked his reflection in the mirror when Aron hyung looked a bit too freaked out) but once an idea was planted in his head, it was near impossible to remove it. So, he pushed through, remembering the months of study and analysis with the stage engineers, and made his own move with Produce 101 stage directors.

It was good thinking on his part that he went to Aron hyung first because the stage directors did not ask him any questions, just waited for him to finish explaining before they said that they had it installed already. The director looked very amused at his gaping expression but told him representatives of Pledis Entertainment hired stage engineers to get it finished two days before the performance stage. The safety concerns brought up by Mnet caused some hassle with Pledis, Aron hyung said in one of their calls, but it was given solution because ‘Downpour’ Team won’t fucking slip with the wire harness camouflaging in the dark stage setup.

Jonghyun was split into hating Pledis and loving their very active intervention.

‘Aggressive promotion’ indeed.

But their efforts paid off in the end because the ‘Downpour’ stage was as beautiful as he imagined it would be and Jonghyun was happy to see the audience in awe of the vocal team’s performance.

Jonghyun smiled.

Everyone was caught up with ‘Downpour’ stage and its rain concept (literally) except for one trainee. Park Jihoon knew something was up with Jonghyun-nie hyung. The leader may be proficient in many things like lyrical compositions, visual directing, and making everyone love him, and now stage design turned out to be one of them, but hyung was definitely not a good liar. Oh no sir, the guy’s better off with knocking everyone out with his visual direction and incorporating rain in an indoor stage than with trying to come off as innocent when the stage had so many touches of Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun in it.

The makeup, the styling, heck the idea of using sprinklers was ingenious and brilliant and Jihoon
was left questioning why only small few of idol groups use the concept in their stages—oh. Right. ‘Downpour’ was a vocal stage, no dancing so the risk of slipping was lessened considerably. A raining stage was perfect for it. He’d probably die if he tried to dance to a slippery stage.

Ironically, Kim Jonghyun would’ve laughed at Jihoon’s assumption because the rapper’s fancam on their Inkigayo comeback garnered almost forty million views with his flawless dancing on a flooded stage. Future Jihoon would’ve scoffed at how unadventurous his past self was and Future Ong would’ve made a spectacle out of it.

His musings were soon forgotten when the staff called the rap teams for their evaluations. Jonghyun-nie hyung gave them a bright smile before he followed Kim Taemin out of the room. Fifteen minutes later the vocal teams trailed into their seats, high from the energy they got from performing. They kept some distance away ‘Downpour’ Team because the group were still dripping from their rainy stage. Kim Seonglee was delicately squeezing the water out of his sleeves and Jaehwan-nie hyung was fixing his damp hair with Seongwoo hyung’s compact mirror. A grunt of exhaustion came from his side and he turned to stare at Minhyun-nie hyung’s slumped form sitting at the vacated seat.

“I’m so tired I want to sleep,” The pink-clad trainee moaned.

Jihoon raised an eyebrow. “Tired from your incredible stage?”

Minhyun-nie hyung exhaled heavily and gave a side glance. “You’d believe me if I said yes, right? I don’t know why I even pushed through it.”

“Wait, you did that?”

“Oh no. Jonghyun-ah did all that. It was just my idea to have a rainy background for the stage—just didn’t know he’d take it literally.”

“What!”

The shriek caught everyone’s attention as they turned to the group where Jihoon sat, shocked into silence, as a livid Lee Daehwi descended upon a terrified Hwang Minhyun. The others had no chance to grill the former Kings’ Team member—‘cause damn, how the hell did the Angel Leader do something like that? —because the rap teams were called in by Leeteuk sunbaenim. It took a while for the staff to clean the stage and wipe off the floor void of any dampness but now the show resumed from its break with its first rap team.

Jihoon had high expectations with the rap teams. Produce 101 was packed with talented rappers with different tones and rapping style. Heck, he considered himself a sub-rapper if he would have the chance to debut in the next I.O.I. The way rappers perform captivated him most, the fast-paced rhythmic telling of a story and the vast range of tones that one can hear from the most versatile rappers in the industry never failed to impress him like how he fanboys over the most talented dancers or the most expressive idols.

‘Boys and Girls’ was a laidback electrodance music by Zico and it fit the three trainees well. Jang Moonbok channeled his Ending Fairy persona by flirting with the audience, flipping his trademark long hair let loose for the fun concept of the song. The BNM Boys Lim Youngmin and Kim Donghyun had such impeccable teamwork together and the duo looked absolutely exciting as they supported each other’s antics.

“This stage is so fun to watch!” Woojin-nie couldn’t stop smiling throughout the performance, happy that his hyungs were having fun.
Jeong Dongsu was the star of ‘Rhythm Ta’, no arguments about that. Kim Dongbin and Kim Taewoo were amazing in their own ways, but the 27-year-old trainee took the IKON-track to a different level with his fast-paced rapping and gritty lyrics. Daniel hyung could almost feel the hearts coming out of Seongwoo hyung’s eyes as he knew the hyung trainee liked rapping even though he couldn’t do well enough in it.

‘Who You’ was a high-energy packed performance of hiphop rap from Woo Jinyoung, Ha Minho, Kim Sanggyun, and Lee Euiwoong. Out of all the performances, they had the least stage flair but what they lack in stage design more than made up with their charismatic rapping and satirical lyrics to urge anyone to give in to their more rebellious side. Ha Minho may be an asshole (he won’t forget what the guy did to the Kings’ Team) but when it comes to rapping, the Vibe Label trainee surely knows how to spit rhymes, as expected of the hiphop company. Too bad, he’s not as kind as Taedong hyung though. Daniel had a constipated look on his face when the camera zoomed in on Ha Minho’s smirk.

Kim Sanggyun, A-Tom of their sunbaes Topp Dogg, was a given and he knew how Euiwoong worked from their ‘Boy in Luv’ stage. But the surprise came from Woo Jinyoung. The HF Music trainee was as good in rapping as his labelmate Park Woodam was good in singing. His ‘Woo Jinyoung, mitcheoji’ and the wink would go down in Produce 101 history as the “time someone called himself crazy and actually looked good doing it”.

Kim, A-Tom of their sunbaes Topp Dogg, was a given and he knew how Euiwoong worked from their ‘Boy in Luv’ stage. The surprise came from Woo Jinyoung. The HF Music trainee was as good in rapping as his labelmate Park Woodam was good in singing. His ‘Woo Jinyoung, mitcheoji’ and the wink would go down in Produce 101 history as the “time someone called himself crazy and actually looked good doing it”.

Then came ‘Fear’ Team and the subsequent descend of Produce 101 into the abyss known as Jonghyun Royale.

They came on stage to the gasps of the audience. Jihoon couldn’t blame them; even he got starstruck by the team’s visual concept. ‘Fear’ stage was dark and mysterious. All stage lights were out except one spotlight that was aimed at the leather sofa at the middle of the stage. The trench coat-clad trainees sat on the sofa with Lai Guanlin and Kwon Hyunbin leisurely seated on the couch, and Kim Taemin and Kim Jonghyun perched on the arm rest looking down on their feet.

The poignant piano arrangement brought them to life as Lai Guanlin took the reins.

Jihoon knew that the insecure Cube trainee had some problems in communicating to them. Staying for six months didn’t mean you knew how to speak the language of the country you’re staying in and in the few weeks he came to know the Taiwanese trainee, Jihoon understood why Guanlin had an introvertive personality. But the way he’s rapping now with the lyrics he made himself, speaking about a home longed for with simple but powerful words phrased in a verse that made Justin and Jung Jung shed tears of empathy and the others in awe of his diction and emotion.

Kim Taemin’s words hit him in the gut though. His fears were centered on the uncertainty of debuting and the fear of losing himself in the whirlwind that was the idol industry. The rapper’s stunning visuals only added to the haunting vision. Every one of them could relate to Taemin-nie hyung’s lyrics as they faced the same demons in their weakest moments.

The backdrop didn’t help in the emotional torrent brought by ‘Fear’ Team. What was once a black canvas, void and empty, now showed a budding blossom tree, blue-white and glittering hypnotically against the dark expanse of the stage. The lyrics faded into the screen, the words shown in the leaves of the tree for everyone to see.

Kwon Hyunbin did not hold back. His deep rapping tone was gut-wrenching as he told his self-doubts about entering an industry that was so far from the one he was in. High-fashion modeling and being an idol were too different from each other and Hyunbin was no exception to the aspiring trainees who wanted the same thing but were not as good or talented as the ones who were shining in the spotlight.
The blossom tree was dimmed.

The track suddenly stopped and the stage was eerily silent. The trainees could not react to the sudden malfunction, too captivated at how Kim Jonghyun did not stop to check the sound system or look back to the backstage staffs in askance—

He rapped and let his voice out, the only thing you can hear amongst the silenced crowd.

*I asked myself if I should be here*

*With so many others reaching out the same prize I still do now even as a debuted idol*

*Until when should I keep trying, I have a lot on my back*

*But I kept enduring it with eyes closed and a pained smile on my face*

*I wanted to cry, the tunnel’s getting darker by the second*

*But my heart yearns to ease their pain, the people who believe in me*

*This is how I love*

*It’s heavy, I feel the world’s crashing down on me*

*I’m scared, so scared that I’ll drown before I reach them*

*Scared that I’ll see my soul slowly wither away in their screams for help*

*But I’ll still do it*

*I love like the wind that makes you feel alive*

*Angel Leader, they said*

*It’s not a job but a promise to do more*

*To remain strong and kind*

*I’m scared of walking a lonely path, an opposite path*

*But I’ll get there, I’ll follow*

*To those who believed in me*

*I’ll save you before I drown*

*Don’t worry*

*When I didn’t want to see anything*

Kwon Hyunbin’s deep voice sent their breaths running away.

*When I was scared to look, I closed my eyes*
When I didn’t want to do anything

Lai Guanlin’s gaze was so full of emotions.

*Even if you don’t trust me, I’ll find a way*

When I didn’t want to listen to anything

Kim Taemin looked heartbreakingly beautiful.

*I hear that voice that mocks me*

When nothing was held in my hand

Kim Jonghyun looked up from his seat, startling grey eyes meeting his own.

*I was scared*

*Now I am not.*

The light of the tree blazed a burning white before sputtering out.

Jihoon’s breath hitched.

The night ended too soon for the trainees but for Kim Jonghyun, he couldn’t be any happier. Their stage was going so well and he was so proud of his members letting their deepest fears out to the world and came back stronger than ever until the track spluttered out on his verse.

He felt the worry from Guanlin and Taemin but he put his palm on the *Cube* trainee and signaled for them to settle down. Jonghyun shoved the confusion out of his tensed posture and rapped. No amount of sabotage or sound malfunction could ever stop him from telling the world of his story. Future Dongho was right, the only way to push the darkness back was to *let it in and use it to power you*. Hyunbin-nie was also right, he needed an outlet and this happened to be his chance. His hesitation and doubts on picking ‘Fear’ for the second time was his selfishness clouding his mind but the fog cleared and he realized, deep in his heart, that his soul overpowered his dark side and would always choose ‘Fear’.

He must’ve looked a sight because Hyunbin looked shaken as he met his members’ suspiciously bright gazes.

As soon as they reached backstage, Guanlin and Hyunbin stuck to him like the glue for industrial-use. The rankings unsettled the team that he was not first place but in second. He was fine with it because his members did exceptionally well, far better than the first timeline because they dealt with their fears while helping each other.

Taemin-ah shied away from him though.

Jonghyun reached an arm towards the silver-haired trainee. “Yah, Taemin-ah. It’s okay, I’m not mad you got first place.”
“But, you should have been first—”

“None of that now,” The hard tone in the Angel Leader’s voice stopped Taemin from his argument as he let his leader’s arm wrap around his shoulders. “You did well, all of you were amazing on stage, and if I were one of the producers, I’d have a hard time picking any of you for first place.”

“You did well, too, hyung. I wanted to cry but that’d ruin the makeup you put on me,” Hyunbin-nie sniffled and his hyungs laughed at the pinched expression on the trainee’s face.

Guanlin-nie did not smile at the joke. His intense gaze rested on his leader’s face. “Hyung, that was not the lyrics you presented to us.”

The two other members widened their eyes in realization as they turned to face the leader in unison. Jonghyun was tempted to lie one more time, to tell them that it was the lyrics, just a revised version of it that he came up with last night, but for some reason, he knew Lai Guanlin would see through the lie and call him out on it.

“I—You’re right, it’s not. I had many versions of my lyrics.”

The shadows backstage made Lai Guanlin’s gaze sharper. “How many?”


Taemin-ah choked. “Twenty!”

“More or so, I don’t know. Time flies when I’m writing.”

This only cemented the thought that Kim Jonghyun was too precious for anyone and Lai Guanlin vowed to watch out for his hyung even more.

Jonghyun readied himself for the onslaught of emotions that would render him speechless, what with him recovering from his weaker moments and more vulnerable to crying once he sees the faces of his brothers earlier than he was prepared for. He tried to lag behind the team but Hyunbin had a seriously-tight grip on his arm so he was forced to gather his composure before they reached the room where the others were.

The trainees’ reactions were—wet.

They were the last to arrive in the room, Jonghyun glimpsed at the crowd before he got hit by a hundred-pound of muscle squeezing his lungs out. The teary face of Kang Daniel greeted him and he scrambled to wipe the flood of tears that were threatening to drown the trainee. That soon became a trend as he tried to calm the others from their crying. He shot the cameramen a pointed stare and nodded when they turned the cameras off and backed away and out of the room for a few moments of privacy.

It was difficult. The rap teams were the most collected because they heard the gist of the lyrics already even if he changed his whole verse on stage. The vocal teams were emotional but had composure in doing so. Jaehwan and Jiseong hyungs had red noses from scrubbing the appendage too much. Gunhee-a h and Daehwi-a h only wailed further when he smiled at them. Minhyun, Dongho, and Minki approached him with a hug but did not say anything except a tremulous smile and a kiss on the cheek from Minki-yah. They didn’t speak, his brothers knew he faced his problems better alone, or with his lyrical compositions, but their silent support meant the world to Kim Jonghyun.

The dance teams—
Guanlin and Hyunbin were understanding of the situation as they let the younger trainees take their place around their leader. Samuel and Hyeongseop were inconsolable as they clung onto him. Justin and Jung Jung, his two new **dongsaengs**, each grabbed onto his coat and did not let go. Seongwoo, Daniel, and Donghan, his **Kings’ Team dongsaengs** sat in the chairs around him, quiet and with their heads bowed down.

Jihoon only stared at him, a myriad of emotions in his large doe eyes, before he grabbed Jonghyun’s face and softly kissed the top of his head.

Leeteuk **sunbaenim** did not look surprised at their fixed visage and red-rimmed eyes. He proceeded to summarize the results of the positions evaluations with an almost detached tone. Jonghyun could not blame him because he was proxy for BoA **sunbaenim** who grew too attached to them not to react to the results.

The individual position rankings were different but the **Angel Leader** expected that things won’t be necessarily the same now, the time-traveler was slowly coming to accept that. The Dance position Rank 1 went to a shocked Ahn Hyeongseop and Jonghyun knew, without any bias, that the dancer deserved it. The **Yuehua** trainee developed in front of his eyes during the practices and ‘**Pop**’ stage became memorable with Hyeongseop-ie’s newfound confidence in showing off the sexy side of him.

Vocal position Rank 1 went to Lee Gunhee with three points more than Kim Jaehwan and Hwang Minhyun tied together for second place. Gunhee was the star of ‘**Amazing Kiss**’ before and he only improved in this stage. The Rap position Rank 1 caused quite a few whispers when Woo Jinyoung took first, two points higher than Taemin’s 667 points, but when he clapped for the talented trainee when Woo Jinyoung turned to stare at him uncertainly, the whispers quieted down.

Leeteuk **sunbaenim** looked down at his cue card before addressing the crowd. “Online votes for the highest position evaluations trainee would be announced in the next eliminations.”

The trainees could only nod tiredly.

As soon as they reached the dormitories at half-past ten, Jihoon high-tailed away towards the ‘**Fear**’ dormitories with Seongwoo **hyung** and Daniel **hyung** right at his flanks. It seems that he was not the only one who thought of an impromptu sleep-over. Donghan-**nie hyung** was already seated on the floor with Jung Jung and Justin chatting quietly with Samuel. Members of ‘**Downpour**’ and ‘**Playing with Fire**’ Team arrived two minutes later and they made space for the newcomers around the dorm.

The **Angel Leader** only sighed when he caught sight of the trainees inside their room still in their costumes. Hyunbin and Taemin were shocked at the now-crowded dormitory but Guanlin shrugged nonchalantly before he went to seat beside Dongho. Jonghyun knew that the night was just about to start so he sent everyone to change out of their stage outfits. Only to shake his head in exasperation when everyone came back within the span of fifteen minutes, still in their ensembles but with duffel bags hanging from their shoulders.

The sleepover had a lighter atmosphere than the gathering in the waiting room backstage. Daehwi was so mad at his deception that he scared even Dongho with his passionate monologue about honesty, truth, and helping others. The ‘helping others’ part was explained to him by an amused Minhyun as ‘Share your blessing, Jonghyun-**nie hyung**, and style us for the next evaluations’.
Jonghyun was too soft-hearted to refuse the puppy-dog eyes of Daehwi and Seonho together, much to Ahn Hyeongseop’s fury.

Jonghyun sighed in relief when Seongwoo and Daniel returned to the room armed with so many foods that Jaehwan was practically salivating at the smell. Their small space of a room got even more crowded when Jinyoung-je went in the room after the infamous Kings’ Team duo with Euiwoong, Gunhee and Kenta. It was a tight squeeze trying to fit twenty trainees in the room but they managed admirably.

Hyunbin opened the windows to let the stuffy air out as they cheered when the plastic containers were opened. It was a feast and they had fun reminiscing on the practices with their teams and the performances on stage.

Seongwoo took the direct and blunt route.

“I want the ‘Downpour’ stage.”

“Excuse me?” The insulted expression on Takada Kenta was hilarious.

“You heard me,” Seongwoo put his tongue out. “Jonghyun-ah, will you please work on our stage design in the next evaluations?”

“Oh, hell no! He’s coming with us!”

“What makes you think the Angel Leader would be in your team?”

“Since tonight when I placed first in dance evaluations.”

The diss did not escape Ong Seongwoo and the room descended into chaos.

It was a tight squeeze but they managed admirably. Guanlin had Dongho and Seonho bunking with him, Hyunbin had Jaehwan and Minhyun sharing his bed, and Taemin had Kenta and Seonglee with him.

Jonghyun let Jung Jung and Justin take his bed while he made makeshift mattresses out of the blankets and duvet comforters the others brought with them. It was just like the sleepover back in the ‘Sorry, Sorry’ dormitories, only with more people around him. He bid the others goodnight and settled in his blankets for a well-deserved sleep.

The Angel Leader tried to sleep but couldn’t. He raised an arm to check the time on his watch. Quarter past three in the morning, he groaned in frustration before he stood up from his blankets, gently returning Samuel’s arm from its place on his waist, and quietly left the dorms.

The gardens were void of life except the gentle blowing of the wind. The Angel Leader wrapped his jacket tighter around his body before he sat on a bench under the elm tree. It was the most peaceful morning he’d ever had since the position evaluations and he couldn’t be more thankful. It was as if the storm had been swept away and all was calm. He just couldn’t sleep from the excitement that night and the realizations that came to pass. It was truly ironic that the fears he had been hiding from turned out to be the answers to the questions of uncertainty that had been boggling his mind.

“Can’t sleep?”
Jonghyun whirled around to face Jihoon, disheveled and puffy-eyed, walking towards him with the denim jacket he used for the ‘Get Ugly’ stage. The Rank 1 trainee sat beside him and took a lungful of air with a pleased sigh.

“Can say the same to you,” Jonghyun softly chided.

The mousy-haired boy shrugged. “I did sleep, just saw you walking out the room so I followed.”

It was silent between the two trainees. The wind was playful as ever, weaving between them and cooling their bodies in the sensation.

“You did not cry.”

Jonghyun frowned. “Why would I do that?”

“With the emotions running in your lyrics, hyung, I’d be surprised if a normal person didn’t.”

“You didn’t,” Jonghyun pointed out.

Jihoon hugged his legs to his chest. “I think I’ve been desensitized with your selflessness, hyung, to the point that it sickens me that you only know how to give, give, and give, without taking back your due.”

“You heard my lyrics, right? It’s just not in my nature.”

“I also heard your lyrics saying that you’re ‘drowning’ and ‘can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel’ or was that just my imagination?”

Jonghyun sighed. “Those are my fears, Jihoon-nie. I may seem indestructible to you or that I possess ‘leader-ah magic’ from Seongwoo’s rants, but I do know the feeling of being weak and helpless. Sometimes, it gets worse, but I’m managing. The stage only gave me the chance to let out my troubles without hurting anyone in the chance that I burst out from everything. So, that’s not giving because I’m taking my due as a human capable of making mistakes, and many mistakes at that. Besides, I get happiness and companionship from all of you. Isn’t that enough of a due?”

Jihoon hmm-ed. “I suppose. But you didn’t hear this from me, okay? Daehwi’s out to get you for his team. He just didn’t have the guts to tell it outright a while ago because he’d be practically pronounced as dead with Hyeongseop around.”

The Angel Leader chuckled. “I fear that I would be the one dead for all the lies I told him.”

“Technically, you did not lie. He just asked the wrong questions and you answered accordingly.”

Jonghyun laughed with Jihoon.

Jihoon slowly let the laughter out of him before he settled with a soft smile. “I’m glad you’re happy now, hyung.”

He didn’t bother to lie. “I am now.”

“You worry me too much, hyung, ever since I went with Minhyun-nie hyung to visit Class ‘D’. It made me grow more mature in the few weeks I’ve been around you than in the years I knew you as nothing more than Junior Royale of NU’EST,” The trainee complained before enumerating the Angel Leader’s traits that infuriated him.

Jonghyun bit back a sad smile. Years from now, the Maroo Entertainment trainee would become a
famous actor, so famous that no one did not know who he was, the talented actor reliving his golden age of acting back in his childhood days, but he would be unhappy, stifled, and lonely. So lonely. He knew Jihoon barely enough to follow his steps, other than second-hand news of him in the acting industry and sparse detours as a singer in the idol fandom from Seongwoo or Jaehwan. He didn't know that the once-ranked second Produce 101 trainee and one of the most popular Wanna One member was slowly drowning in the profession that he was good at but never fully wanted. Jihoon was an actor but his heart was in performing on stage, basking in the exhilarating feel of the stage lights and thousands of fans lighting up their light sticks for him, and having so many brothers to look up to as they all rose to meet their dreams hand-in-hand.

But Jihoon was also opportunistic and cunning. He knew that leaving the acting industry and Maroo Entertainment would leave him hanging off the rails, no income to place him back to stability. He was trapped and did not know how to get out. Only Minki’s interference brought Jihoon to his attention. It was the cleanest transition of companies Jonghyun had ever seen. With Jihoon’s popularity, that was surely a surprise. But the handsome idol only smiled at his current-now-former company and left with few heartfelt goodbyes and a timely finished contract. Jonghyun was happy when he glimpsed a brighter Park Jihoon three days after he received an email from Maroo Entertainment’s CEO, chatting with his fellow Produce 101 brothers as Minhyun talked about his prospects as a main rapper for the next idol group.

It left the future CEO a pleasant feeling that he changed Park Jihoon to be a better person whilst he had the chance here in Produce 101. He had no guarantees that Jihoon would go to his company in the future but he was contented with the fact that Jihoon may have a much brighter future as both an idol and actor, either with him or in another company, and would not be forced to choose between what he was good at and what he loved most of all.

“—And you remember that time you chose Hyeongseop over me—why are you smiling like that?”

Jonghyun smiled wider. “Nothing, I’m just really happy that you’re my friend, Park Jihoon.”

The weirded-out expression lightened into something softer. Jihoon blushed red before he started to angrily call the Angel Leader out for distracting him.

Jonghyun smiled.

Everything was alright for once.
And...he spoke a bit too soon, dammit.

“I fucking hate Murphy’s Law.”

The uttered expletive from the Angel Leader stirred quite a few heads to turn from the people standing in front. Guanlin, who was seated next to him, raised a spoonful of rice, agreeing wholeheartedly to the statement. As to how the trainee knew the philosophical aphorism at a tender age of sixteen, Jonghyun did not dwell on it further. He had far more pressing things to worry about than a boy knowing about the adage than most people.

It’s absolutely ridiculous how everything changed just because he had a soft spot for Ahn
Hyeongseop, Lee Gunhee, Kwon Hyunbin, Park Jihoon—

*And all the Produce 101 trainees*, Jonghyun conceded with a sigh.

Changed timeline or not, it’s too late to go back and be indifferent to everything. Because everyone’s paying attention to them, and Mnet’s being a good company and complying to the Nation’s Producers’ wishes.

Their usual morning duties usually involved being present for breakfast at half-past seven, meeting with the mentors at nine, and rehearsals and evaluations for the rest of the day until the set curfew at eleven. The day after performances, however, they were free to do anything they want, which was all and swell because he had plans to spend the whole day with his ‘Fear’ Team before they split apart and go on their ways. It took some bribery just to convince Seongwoo give them some ‘team bonding’, which Jihoon further unhelpfully elaborated as Jonghyun-speak for “We don’t want you here.”, and ease the funny Ong’s ruffled feathers.

Unfortunately, the *Produce 101* producers had *different plans* for the trainees.

And wasn’t that a scary thought?

He was about to lead his team out the cafeteria for some quiet time in the dormitories before they went to the nearby park to go on a picnic when a female staff member stopped them from going out. Perplexed and a little wary, they went back to their seats.

A few minutes later, the mentors entered the hall followed by BoA sunbaenim and a horde of staff members. Oddly, there were no cameramen present nor staffs that were in-charge of their aesthetics and queuing the speaker to talk once the camera was set. It was just them, the mentors, the staff, and a few new faces that made the Angel Leader incredibly wary. *It was too private*, Jonghyun frowned.

The Nation’s Representative coughed lightly on the microphone that she was given, not that she needed to when the attention of everyone zoned in on her.

Hyunbin tensed when Taemin speculated if they were getting eliminated at that moment.

“I hope not, I haven’t had that streusel bread Jihoon-nie hyung was talking about,” Guanlin sadly sighed.

Taemin’s suspicion was not the reason why almost all the staff was huddled near the doors, their black jackets with the logo patch on the left breast pocket was recognizable even afar. No, it was so unexpected that Kim Jonghyun had half a mind to contact leading science experts and ask if changing so little could drastically affect the rest of the timeline.

BoA sunbaenim did not go for pleasantries like she normally does during mentor speeches. Instead, she announced the news that shook him to the core.

“In light of the tremendous success of the group battles and position evaluations, the show producers have decided to grant opportunities for trainees to reach out to the Nation’s producers in more engaging environments.”

Taemin had his eyebrows furrowed close. “*Engaging? What does that even mean?*”

Hyunbin leaned towards him. “You know what she meant by that, *hyung*?”

Kim Jonghyun clenched his jaws but nodded tersely.
Hmm. Mnet’s playing on a whole different ballgame now, it seems.

The *Angel Leader* knew how critical promotions were for both the artist and the company. Too little promotions and the company would sooner see their artist vanish in the people’s minds as a one-hit wonder than a profitable avenue and name; too much promotions and the artist would sooner see his company use his credibility and reputation almost to the point of human abuse just so they can ‘strike while the iron was hot’. It takes years of experience, hundreds of failed instances for a golden chance of long and stable revenue coming in everyone’s pockets. And no one knew more than CJ Corporation, home to many subsidiaries encompassing music, fashion, and TV industry, how to keep the money rolling.

And now they happened to be the proverbial gold at the end of the rainbow.

BoA *sunbaenim* started to divide the whole group for the different promotions that they’d be doing. Thirteen performances, thirteen groups, sixty trainees, Jonghyun counted in his head, as he watched the trainees walk over each mentor accompanied by a handful of staff members. That was, by far, the largest number of people in a reality survival show and promoting *all* of them in as many ways as the show can would practically place a hefty sum in their pockets.

The first group was for television promotions like *Get It Beauty*, *SNL Korea*, and *Lipstick Prince* and Jonghyun got the sense that the show was banking on the crowd favorites like Yoon Jiseong, Lee Gunhee, and Choi Minki for their variety potential. They were joined by the more outgoing personalities like Seo Sunghyuk and Yeo Hwanwoong, the unique trainees like Byun Hyunmin and Kim Yehyun, and the popular ones like Lee Yoojin and Hyunbin. Several others were called to complete the roster.

The blond-haired ‘Fear’ member looked back at them sadly before he joined the lineup.

The second group was a bit more different because their focus was the outside world. Radio promotions, guesting, a motorcade, you name it, they’d do it. They had a more rounded list of trainees, with most of the members of the teams that were not chosen for variety promotions. Yoo Seonho was called first, to the tall trainee’s surprise. Notable trainees in the lineup were the *hyungs* of ‘Get Ugly’, Joo Haknyeon and ‘Right Round’ Team, Lee Euiwoong and Kim Sanggyun of ‘Who You’ Team, half of ‘Pop’ Team, and the rest of ‘Spring Day’.

Only a handful of groups were left, and with ice shooting up his veins, he realized just who were left to band together.

Guanlin let out a quiet “Oh dear”.

*Exactly my sentiments*, Jonghyun thought as he ran his eyes over the remaining trainees who just happened to either be the highest-ranked ones grouped for position evaluations activity or the ‘hot issues’ of *Produce 101* since the group battles.

Jonghyun stood up with his ‘Fear’ Team and led his team to where Minhyun was gesturing the empty space beside the remaining members of ‘Downpour’ Team. Jaehwan patted his arm in greeting and Kenta gave a shaky smile before they looked away from him. They did not know what they were going to do or what the producers had planned for them so they waited for BoA *sunbaenim* to tell them the highlights of their promotional activities.

“Third group,” Her eyes rested on them. “You have a meeting with the producers in thirty minutes at the training center.”

The *Angel Leader* bowed before he walked out with the others following, all the while muttering
curses in his head.

It was a quiet group that trudged into the training center with confused expressions. ‘Get Ugly’ felt unsettled with the loss of their two hyungs and Seongwoo and Daniel did their best to fulfill the void in their team. The team went to seat beside the ‘Fear’ Team who also looked anxious at the loss of Hyunbin. It wouldn’t take even a stupid person to sense that something was up with the show. Before Ong Seongwoo joined Produce 101, his CEO made him watch the whole season one where his sunbaes Choi Yoojung and Kim Doyeon landed high ranks and consequently debuted in I.O.I. He was coached on what to do, what not to do, how to act, how to react, and so much more just to create his ‘idol side’ and build his fanbase early. He even had notes, brims of paper filled with episode summaries and possible outcomes if a certain trainee acted differently in the situation, memorized and kept in a drawer in his house.

But there was never any promotional activity done by the trainees during Produce 101.

So, this was new progress and Ong Seongwoo was both terrified and excited at what the show planned for them.

Unfortunately, not everyone had the same thoughts as the Fantagio trainee.

A few feet away from him, Hwang Minhyun tried to stop the jitters wrecking his frame. The Pledis trainee felt the weight of the news he received from Aron hyung yesterday and it was taking a lot of willpower not to blurt it to his leader. He got a call from his hyung telling him to meet at the coffee shop near a small inn which was a ten minute-walk from their dormitories and thought that they were just going to catch up and exchange stories with each other.

He got so much more than a story.

“Tell me this is not true.”

The oldest NU’EST member looked at him sadly. “Minhyun-nie—”

“Hyung. Tell me, please.”

Kwak Aron raised his palms, imploring. “Then what do you exactly want me to say? That you kids are not getting attention? That Jonghyun-ah’s one of the less popular trainees and would get eliminated in the next evaluations? Min, all of you are damn popular now, so popular that many are scrambling to guest you in their shows. You’ve been, what, in the trend charts for a week now—Jonghyun-ah and your Kings’ Team never went out the media’s attentions and it’s been three weeks already— and you even rose up after the position evaluations because some fans spoiled your ‘Downpour’ stage fancams so it’s not surprising that the companies are planning to shorten their contracts with CJ E&M, if not vetoing it altogether.”

“Who are the trainees—”

“I can’t say, Minhyun-nie, I’m so sorry. But I just wanted to let you know first before the second half of position evaluations episode gets aired and shit hits the fan.”

“And what does Pledis think about this?”

Aron hyung’s only answer was a grimace and a curt, “Bad.”

“In what way?”
“They want to pull Jonghyun-ah out.”

The blunt statement made his heart stopped for a moment. “What? But they can’t!”

“Try telling that to our boss. I talked with Jonghyun-ah a week ago about the company’s decision to ‘aggressively promote’ NU’EST members in Produce 101 and our leader waved it off, probably thinking it was nothing. It seemed like that for the next few weeks, the boss looked satisfied enough because NU’EST had never been so famous with our old songs charting in Genie and our fandom slowly rising from the ashes,” Aron hyung smiled proudly before sighing. “But then came in your ‘Downpour’ stage and with you admitting that our leader thought of it all on his own…”

“Well, they got a bit, er, territorial.”

“What? I didn’t—”

Aron hyung gave him a judging stare. “Did you seriously forget that you’re in a goddamn Mnet show? Whatever footage they could get from you, they will take advantage of it. One of your teammates, Kim Seonglee, mentioned him in one of the interviews. And I saw the raw footage of you talking about it to Park Jihoon.”

The Rank 5 trainee felt waves of guilt crash down on him as he faced the consequences of his actions. He never foresaw this happening because this was too extreme of a reaction. Seriously, pulling out trainees that were getting fame and attention to your company just so you could keep an eye on them? That was a mad man’s plan.

But then, there were too many facets to the story and he had no inkling of an idea on what the other companies’ stand were that pushed them to go toe-to-toe with a magnate like CJ E&M because Aron hyung did have to draw a line somewhere in telling him and keeping something confidential.

But the companies fighting each other was insignificant to Hwang Minhyun because his brother Jonghyun-ah was getting sandwiched in the middle—

All because he was selfish enough to ask the kind leader for help on their stage design and knowing that his leader would keep pushing uncharted boundaries just to make them shine, he’d do it in a heartbeat.

Even at his expense.

“Damn.” Minhyun wanted to cry and he won’t be ashamed to do so.

Aron hyung nodded morosely. “That’s why you cannot tell Jonghyun-ah or he’d get sick with worry. Dongho and Minki, too, ‘cause it’s not outside the realm of possibility that they’d do something reckless and unknowingly doom us all.”

Minhyun truly didn’t know what to say. In the industry, contracts are binding, almost impossible to legally break without steep compensations from the other party. Even if the matter was resolved, names could be dragged in the mud because of the issue—innocent people. The Kings’ Hwanggallyang frustratedly rubbed his face raw as the smiling faces of his dongsaengs and hyungs flitted on his mind, of the kind leader’s warm smile that he always looked for every time he felt discouraged…

“This—Fuck,” He cursed. “This is madness.”

Aron hyung rolled his eyes as he fiddled with the teaspoon in his coffee. “Tell me about it. Pledis decided that I should be one of their representatives since I’m almost always here anyway so I was
there the whole time. Technically, I’m contract-bound not to tell you anything but then with all the possible contract-breaking that will happen in the few weeks, they probably would not notice the small breach anyway.”

“Just—” Aron hyung’s gaze sharpened. “Be prepared, alright? Mnet’s getting a bit too desperate for my liking.”

“Ugh,” Minhyun groaned. “Is this why you called me here?”

The Pledis representative and NU’EST member ignored the dark glare aimed at him. “Among a few other things. With that pressing news over and done with, I have a few more news for you—No, no,” Aron frantically waved when his dongsaeng was about to cry. “No news about Jonghyun and other trainees possibly getting pulled out from the show! It’s just…there’s been a few, er, debates about the trainees of Produce 101.”

The hesitant expression drew Minhyun away from his misery. He didn’t know how much more he could take. “What debates?”

“About Kings’ Team and…” Aron hyung trailed off. “Well, it’s better that I showed you.”

The phone was handed to him and when Minhyun read the numerous articles—

Five minutes later he used up his quota of curses for the whole week.

Minhyun hastily looked away when a curious Kim Jonghyun met his stare. He couldn’t, he just couldn’t. He knew his leader as Kim Jonghyun, NU’EST’s JR, and the Angel Leader of Produce 101, and in all those names and personalities, only one outcome would happen if he were to tell his leader.

And that outcome, he could never accept.

So, he’d stay quiet, keep his head down, try to stop the leader from doing a bit too many ‘leader-ah magic’, intervene if he must, and not ask for more than what he should ask of Jonghyun-ah—for everyone’s sake but mostly for his Angel Leader’s sake.

Minhyun took a deep breath and settled his qualms about doing what he planned to do as intervention.

Meanwhile, said Angel Leader felt like he was having an out-of-body experience as he watched the normally-noisy trainees silenced by the tense atmosphere and the impending meeting with the show’s chief producer. It was disturbing how they were as taut as a bowstring when they jumped to a startled Kim Samuel who just went outside to get some water.

This just won’t do, Jonghyun shook his head as he pulled a slightly-shaking Guanlin against his side. The Cube trainee laid his head on the leader’s shoulder and drew deep breaths. This spurred Kenta, who was seated next to him, to lean on Jonghyun’s other side and put his lanky arms around the leader’s waist for comfort.

Fifteen minutes into the clock and Seongwoo had enough. Loudly, he marched over to where his leader was seated and slumped down in front of him.

“The silence is killing me, Hyun-ah. Talk to me.”
Jonghyun quirked a lopsided smile. “Daunting, isn’t it?”

The disgruntled expression pulled a laugh out of the Angel Leader. The two Kings’ Team member began to draw attention as they chatted about anything out of the blue. The other trainees did not participate in the conversation but their tensed shoulders slowly relaxed from the lack of worry that their leader had.

The doors suddenly opened and all conversations halted as the show’s main producers walked into the room followed by other people that was definitely not from the show.

Jonghyun let his eyes rest on Produce 101’s PD Ahn Joonyoung. The famous producer was a household name in the future that Kim Jonghyun came from. Bespectacled with limp hair and slightly tanned skin from being stuck in shooting sites for most of his days, the guy looked unassuming at first but Jonghyun the CEO knew fully well how cunning and brilliantly ruthless the guy was in handling the show. Called the ‘PD of reality survival shows’, Ahn Joonyoung knew how to run the business and when he delivers, he gives it his all and no one could stop him.

Frankly, he was more interested in the new faces because they were vaguely familiar to him, though, as if he’d seen them in a dreamscape distorted by the hazy strips of consciousness.

PD Ahn Joonyoung stepped forward, slitted eyes dragging over each face, settling over him for almost five seconds, before trailing over the rest. Two places to his right, Minhyun tensed.

Satisfied with what he saw, whatever it was, the show’s PD nodded. “We’ve been getting tons of calls to guest you in variety shows but we, the producers,” He waved a hand towards his entourage. “decided to bring you to a different kind of promotion—”

Kim Jonghyun felt the bewilderment coming from his fellow trainees.

“—So, we’ll be forming units out of you soon with a photoshoot coming in two days…”

Wait, what—

The Angel Leader let his jaw drop.

They were divided by one of the staffs of Produce 101 to Kim Jonghyun’s slight relief because at the very least, the management stayed constant with their people throughout the show. Mostly, though, he was incredibly suspicious at how they were grouped. Seongwoo, who was the second person in the group, noticed the way the trainees were arranged as their unit was slowly formed with Jaehwan joining the group as the third member, leaving Minhyun and Kenta in ‘Downpour’ Team.

“Have you noticed how the high-ranked trainees are grouped in the same group? Not that I have any problems with it, don’t get me wrong. It’s just—it’s like they’re setting the others up to fall.”

And wasn’t that a sobering thought.

Their unit was slightly disconnected from the others, near the exit of the room, and they were the only ones who only had half of the quota. The two other units were almost completed but the awkwardness in their posture, Jonghyun could tell how uncomfortable they felt with the situation. The units must have six or seven members to complete and their unit needed three more members.

Seongwoo and Jaehwan stuck close to him, face etched blank but from the fists clenched on his
shirt they were terribly worried at the proceedings.

It was a complicated process with some teams missing one or two of the original members, like the famous Kings’ Team in unit three or the newly-favored ‘Shape of You’ Team in unit two, or forcing a trainee to pick one from both his teams, in the case of Guanlin and Jaehwan.

Heck, there were trainees that did not go to either of his teams and got thrown with unfamiliar people, as was the case with Daehwi, who had never been grouped with anyone in unit one.

The first unit had a very random roster with Kenta joining the team with Sewoon, Justin, Taemin, and Daehwi in it. Jonghyun could feel their awkwardness even from where he was standing.

Guanlin looked so conflicted, eyes flitting back and forth between unit two and three, before he hesitantly went with the producer-nim towards unit two with Dongho, Jung Jung, Samuel, and Noh Taehyun, thereby lacking one to fulfill the six-member quota.

Only a third of the original number was left and Jonghyun didn’t know how the remaining trainees would be segregated. Daniel, Donghan, and Minhyun was not yet picked, as was Jihoon and Bae Jinyoung, and some of the lone members of the groups chosen for variety and radio promotions like Woo Jinyoung and Hyeongseop.

His warning bells were at an all-time high as he ran his gaze across the faces of each unit and found possible visual concepts the show would be going for. Then he studied the unchosen trainees and he realized with a jolt that there was a trend but why was the producers taking so long to form the units?

Daniel and Bae Jinyoung were the easiest ones because they’re sure-fire picks for a sexy concept but the producers were deciding where to put them because there were two possible units for them: two teams to be exact, Jonghyun thought as he glanced at his members then at Dongho and Guanlin in unit two. Minhyun and Hyeongseop were a bit tricky and he somewhat understood why the producers were taking their time deliberating.

Minhyun did two different stages, one was a cool and sexy concept and the other a soft and dreamy concept, and both of them ranked top in both voting periods so, theoretically, Hwang Minhyun should be the trainee to watch out for because of his versatility in visual concepts and performance stages; his presence in the unit was an added bonus, too, because he would definitely increase the unit’s popularity. Same with Hyeongseop, the Yuehua trainee, who was once known as the cute Pick Me! Boy of Produce 101, was fantastic in his dark and sexy concept and become a trend sensation after his fancam for ‘Pop’ outranked the Fancam King Kang Daniel’s ‘Get Ugly’ fancam.

Woo Jinyoung and Jihoon were the ones that baffled the producers the most, though. Youthful-looking and handsome trainees, they should be the first ones picked after Justin and Daehwi was put in the unit. But the two had so much potential than their aegyo-personified faces; the former had cute features but his swag and rapping talents just won’t fit what the producers were going for with the first unit while the latter…well, Jihoon should be in Daehwi’s team of flower boys but the producers did right when they decided to look for a possible new angle.

Kim Jonghyun agreed with their new analysis on the trainee because he knew how Jihoon rocked the ‘sexy vibe’ as good as the flower-boy concept, maybe even better, but no one was aware of that because ‘Nae maeum seoge jeojang’ would always preclude any sexy concept Park Jihoon would go for.

Jonghyun dearly wondered what brought the sudden change of the producers’ angle for Rank 1 Park Jihoon.
“Hyung, are we going to get Daniel hyung, Donghan-nie, and Minhyun-nie hyung?”

Jonghyun patted their dongsaeng’s hair. “I don’t know Jaehwan-nie, I really don’t.”

“It’d be nice if we can form Kings’ Team again,” Jaehwan whispered.

Seongwoo met Jonghyun’s worried stare with one of his own.

*Produce 101* PD Ahn Joonyoung circled the seven trainees, studying their side profiles. Jonghyun kept both eyes trained on the producer as he eyed them with a criticizing gaze. The producer nodded to one of the staffs who raised a thumbs-up as she wrote something in her clipboard.

“*Yuehua Entertainment* Ahn Hyeongseop, please go to unit one. *OUI Entertainment* Kim Donghan, unit two.”

Jonghyun could only watch Hyeongseop proceed to Daehwi’s group and Donghan towards the cheering unit two with unease. Jaehwan looked very worried at the turn of events and Seongwoo went back to his habit of biting his cheeks in nervousness.

“*HF Music Company* Woo Jinyoung, unit two please.”

Dongho and his team looked shocked at their new addition but erased the expression to warmly welcome the talented trainee in their seven-member team.

Meanwhile, Seongwoo was having the skivvies as he stared at the last three trainees.

“*MMO Entertainment* Kang Daniel—”

The blue-haired trainee looked up in curiosity.

“Unit three.”

Seongwoo let out a whoop and high-fived Jaehwan as the blue-haired trainee skipped towards them with a gummy smile. It was turning well, even if Donghan was not in their team, at least he had Jonghyun-ah, Jaehwan-nie, and now Daniel-ah with him as a unit. The Fantagio trainee could only hope that Minhyun-nie would join them and it’d be like the Kings’ Team all over again!

Sadly, that was not the case, much to Seongwoo’s frustrations.

“*Pledis Entertainment* Hwang Minhyun—proceed to unit one.”

“*C9 Entertainment* Bae Jinyoung, *Maroo Entertainment* Park Jihoon—proceed to unit three.”

Ong Seongwoo stared at the PD like he just murdered his cat and served him dinner with it.

“So, who will be the overall leader of all units?”

Jung Sewoon was assigned to be the mediator of the voting for the leader position. PD Ahn Joonyoung gave them the outline of their activities: magazine photoshoots with *10+ Star Magazine* and *Stylenanda*, guesting on shows that the variety show group and external promotion group wouldn’t be able to join in, and a fan-meet.

Apparently, the producers liked how they performed so much, the select twenty trainees who were both popular and talented enough to be banded together, to the point that Mnet decided to create
temporary groups *while the show was fucking going on!*

They were permanent in a way, regardless of what team they’d get into for the last performances. Albeit, they were made solely for promotional purposes and would be active during *Produce 101* as fan-made groups so their promotion activities ran differently from the other groups but they’d be like a sub-unit with possible singles and stages in addition to the evaluations in the show.

Kim Jonghyun could not fathom the move Mnet just did. It was bold and so *unexpected* that it took quite a while before the news sank in and the red haze dangerously clouded his mind.

There were too many drawbacks than advantages, mostly on their workload as a trainee-part-time-idol without getting paid and having guaranteed careers after the show, the unfairness of everything with the other trainees, and the possible conflict issues when Wanna One debuts and half their members’ promotions were divided between the new group and their formed units during *Produce 101*. That won’t be a problem *now* but Jonghyun didn’t trust Mnet as far as he could throw them.

He had a very, er, *intimate* relationship with the company and the future CEO in him knew Mnet would sooner grow more balls than brains and extend their contracts like its finances depended on them.

Dammit, he needed to talk to Aron *hyung*, ASAP.

“I think Jonghyun-nie *hyung* would do a fantastic job of being the overall leader of all units,” Seongwoo raised his arm.

“I second the motion,” Jihoon nodded while the other trainees muttered their assent.

“Well, if that’s the case,” He pulled out a glittery-silver ‘L’ sticker out of the vinyl sheet. “Jonghyun-nie *hyung* is now—”

“Wait.”

Sewoon looked surprised at the interruption. “Uh, Minhyun-nie *hyung*, you have something to add?”

“I,” The visual idol looked uncertain before he took a deep breath. “I also want to become leader.”

Kim Jonghyun was proud to say he only blinked once when Minhyun made his bid for the overall leader position. Minhyun as a leader was not impossible, what with him immediately picked as unit one’s leader, but it surely was surprising. And not a good move at the moment with how shaky the rules of *Produce 101*.

Dongho looked dumbfounded as he listened to Minhyun’s promise to do his very best to lead the twenty trainees in their promotional events. The others were of the same page as they stared at the calm-faced Hwang Minhyun like he was an alien sent to brainwash them.

The *Starship* trainee’s usual calm disposition was not present that time. In fact, Sewoon looked unsettled as he stared at the determined Minhyun and the curiously-surprised *Angel Leader*.

“Uh, well, er, we have two trainees wanting the position. I guess we, uh, take votes?”

Jonghyun did not raise his head up from his arm, firm in his decision to continue sleeping lest he wakes up in the nightmare that was the new *Produce 101*, but alas the fates truly hated him with every fiber of their being. A soft hand shook his shoulder him from his wishful thinking and he
sighed at the offered silver ‘L’ sticker to him.

When he cornered Minhyun on the way to the lavatories, his brother was tight-lipped about everything. Jonghyun aimed to dispel the rumors that there was division amongst the trainees so he hugged his brother and smiled as if everything was alright. But the pointed stare didn’t escape Minhyun, who nodded in acquiescence. Jonghyun did not want to create conflict with his most trusted friend so he pushed and pushed, because the only thing that could make Hwang Minhyun tell was to mentally weaken him till he slips. Minhyun put up a good fight but he was not known as a shrewd CEO for nothing.

Minhyun made a slip.

“Minhyun-nie, I’m worried for you. It’s not because you wanted to be leader, I’m completely fine with that, but it was risky, what you did was very risky.” Jonghyun kept his voice calm and even as he gently prodded on the wary Minhyun. “Understand that we’re at one of our more vulnerable moments, Minhyun-nie, and the younger ones need stability now more than ever, and with how Mnet’s changing the rules just ‘because they got high ratings, we need to show a more united front. A good thing there were no cameras or staff back there—”

“I don’t give a damn about Mnet or the cameras,” Minhyun scowled. “Paint me in the ugliest picture they could muster and I wouldn’t give a damn either. I was only looking out for you. I did that to stop you from making another mistake again—”

Jonghyun wrestled to keep the baffled expression on his face. “Mistake? What mistake would I be making again?”

Minhyun clamped his mouth so hard it was turning white before he fled back the rooms.

Jonghyun sighed. There was something going on with Minhyun and he didn’t need a few more brain cells to put Minhyun and Aron hyung in the same sentence.

Which made his urgency to talk to the NU’EST member-slash-Pledis representative at the soonest possible time.

Jonghyun watched as his unit battled for the center position, because what is Produce 101 without a center, right? And that was the case when the staff asked them to pick a center for the photoshoot. Out of all the teams, theirs got acclimatized easily with each other, owing to the fact that four out of six members were from the Kings’ Team and two were teammates from the Avengers’ Team. Not to mention they were familiar with each other from the impromptu sleepovers/arcade trips/tutorials that the group battle teams often found themselves in.

Jihoon and Seongwoo were the two contenders for center but Jaehwan decided to shake things up even more by nominating Daniel into the list. The ‘Get Ugly’ leader looked like a deer in the headlights as Jaehwan pushed him to say something. Seongwoo immediately backed down from the center position, stating that he had been center before and Daniel was the perfect center for their unit.

Jihoon thought for a while, sharp eyes flitting in his direction.

No, Park Jihoon, don’t you dare, Jonghyun let out all the warning he could muster in his pointed stare. Jihoon rolled his eyes but nominated Jinyoung, backing down from his bid to take center position. Jonghyun relinquished any hold on the center position with Daniel soon following and handed the crown sticker to Jaehwan who gently attached the vinyl crown sticker on a stunned Bae Jinyoung.
It did not escape the *Angel Leader* that he was grouped with half of Wanna One.

Someone up there hated him with the passion of a thousand burning suns.

A staff member approached their table with a stack of folders in hand. She handed each blue folder to them with the logo of the show and the company stamped side by side in front.

It was a contract.

Jonghyun perused every word, both implicitly and explicitly stated. Jinyoung reached the last page first and was about to pick up the pen to sign his name when a hand firmly stopped his. Jinyoung turned to Jonghyun-nie hyung, who did not look up from the form.

“At ease, Jinyoung-ie, ” The soft yet firm tone calmed him down. “Don’t sign just yet, let me read through it first, okay?” Jinyoung nodded in thanks.

By the time he reached the end, the *Angel Leader* could only sigh. It was a good thing the staff left the room, even dismantling the cameras when he glanced pointedly at the devices, because he did not try to hide it from the others. The two other units congregated around his team, waiting for their leader’s input.

“Hyung?” Daniel leaned forward cautiously.

It was a sound statement. They were referred to as ‘promotional trainee units’ thereby coined to a term ‘promo unit’ and their contract states their responsibilities as a ‘promo unit’, restrictions on all the companies involved, exception clauses in the case of him being a debuted idol—it was similar to what NU’EST agreed with *Pledis* and *Produce 101*, only that the promo units’ activities were more extensive than the expected evaluation periods and much shorter because they’re going to be active until the final eleven members of I.O.I was presented to the viewers.

Jonghyun wondered how long CJ E&M thought of this before they made their companies sign it. A better question would be: how the heck did they manage to make the companies sign it? The signatures of *Pledis Entertainment*’s Board of Directors loomed in front of him and they even managed to add NU’EST’s promotional managers and Aron hyung’s signature in it.

Frankly, he was stunned at the audacity of *Pledis* not sending any lawyers to brief him before the news sprung out like a scary jack-in-a-box prank. Heck, Aron hyung would have sufficed but no, they had to do everything on their own just like what was agreed upon by CJ E&M and his company, even with the conglomerate group changing rules left, right, and center.

Jonghyun was more furious at the other companies than *Pledis* because they left their innocent trainees off to signing things that they didn’t have any idea about. At least *Pledis* trusted him enough to know how to read and understand contracts before agreeing to anything written on the paper, however shortened and summarized it was.

The intimidating small font size did not bother him the slightest. Heck, he had more than a decade’s worth of drowning in contracts as NU’EST’s JR and HMG Media CEO Kim Jonghyun and font size should be the least of CJ E&M’s problems when dealing with an angered Kim Jonghyun.

But what’s done is done, the companies “pussied” out and he was left to help his brothers, both old and new, to cope up with the train-wreck that was *Produce 101*.

Jonghyun looked over each contract his brothers had, all twenty of them. No loop holes yet but the clauses are definite and irrevocable unless by external situations forced upon the company, the
trainees, or both.

“Hyung, when they say ‘promo units’, are we supposed to have albums and stuff?”

Jonghyun thought for a while before he answered Daehwi’s question. “Possibly some singles, but not a whole album. From the contract, we’re just formed for promotions but no rules against releasing singles from it.”

Hyeongseop was uncharacteristically quiet. “So, we’re permanent, regardless of rank or if we get eliminated?”

“It’s what the contract says but only until the end of Produce 101.”

“That’s a bummer,” Seongwoo sulked.

Jonghyun slowly stood up from his chair and let his eyes meet each nervous expression, smiling to keep his dongsaengs calm. “It’ll be alright. At least we’ll be a team permanently with promotions that could help us build our fanbases for the future. At least until the show ends.”

For good.

That eased the tension evident in the pursed lips and taut jaw muscles. One by one they signed their contracts as legibly as they could. Dongho went out to get the staff members and they took the contracts with a bow and assurance that they had to meet with their temporary managers and representatives from Stylenanda in a few short hours.

The Angel Leader expected the two other units to split off from his team and plan on their own but they didn’t. Instead they formed a circle around him seated on the cold floor. His team even shifted to accommodate the fourteen other trainees. The two leaders from unit one and two, Minhyun-nie and Taehyun-nie hyung, approached him.

Noh Taehyun scratched the back of his head. “Uh, visual concepts are really not my thing so,” He let the statement hang before he stared expectantly at him. “I’d be really happy if you could help us.”

Minhyun sighed. “Lead the way, Jonghyun-ah.”

The photoshoot with the famous magazine and Stylenanda was in two days, a fan-meet in Seoul SK Convention Hall in four days, then the airing of episode seven with half of the performances followed by the presentation of concept evaluations songs a day after that. A week after the groupings they’d be halved to thirty-five for the concept performance.

Then there’s the recording with the producers, rehearsals, another fan-meet, and now they had to squeeze promotions between the tight schedules.

Well, he never said being an idol was easy and the Angel Leader could only hope that his fellow trainees were fully prepared to face the onslaught of activities.

Dammit.

Their brainstorming session turned out okay. With his cards laid on the table, Jonghyun had no way to bluff his innocence when Justin bluntly asked for visual concepts that unit one could do for their team. It was a semi-peaceful gathering as they strategically divided each unit for the
photoshoot and the fan-meet. Jonghyun had the kids Justin, Samuel, Jung Jung, and Daehwi in his visual direction team and they were assigned to formulate possible concepts that could be done with such limited time space.

The four trainees were adept in styling, unlike their other ignorant hyungs, so they were glad to be in a team with the talented Angel Leader, even if it was only for visual direction.

Unit three was different because he let his five members plan for the fan-meet, much to Jihoon’s exasperation and Jaehwan’s bummed-out expression.

An hour before lunch time, the representatives from 10+ Star Magazine and Stylenanda entered the room. The Angel Leader breathed a sigh of relief that he thought ahead and sent Daniel to check with the staff for the representatives’ arrival. What was once a room littered with stray papers was clean and neat as they pushed the tables back to the center.

The meeting started out well and ended with the Angel Leader harboring a massive headache.

10+ Star Magazine Creative Director Lee Hwangcheol was capable and astute, quite an aloof man, but he answered any queries they had with a clear no-nonsense answer. Stylenanda Stylist Director Kim Heejung ran on a different spectrum than the standoffish creative director. Mid-forties, she was kind and accommodating, which was nice and all but Jonghyun preferred the creative director’s direct-to-the-point answer than the treat-them-like-kids approach. Beside him, Jihoon agreed wholeheartedly with his hyung.

“We’ve come up with a few concepts that each unit could work with but I want to ask if you had any ideas, just so we can compare,” Kim Heejung-ssi smiled amicably.

“Uh, well,” Jonghyun waved Daehwi to start when the trainee looked at him uncertainly. “The concept we have should showcase our flower-boy visuals. Pink and white ensembles against colorful backgrounds to bring out our visuals more with certain types of flowers clipped behind our ears.”

The stylist raised an eyebrow but agreed to the concept plan, changing some visual styles to suit the photography elements but conceding to the plan with an impressed look on her face.

Unit two had a different concept planned. Samuel and Donghan went forward, showing the sketches Jonghyun had drawn to visualize the plan. It was a dark and gritty concept, almost vintage-noir with touches of black-and-white streetstyle to add dimension and mystery to their style and silhouettes.

The creative director exchanged a glance with the stunned stylist before they proposed a few changes, like “A backdrop of Seoul skyline would work better,” or “Noir concept would look better in hooded lighting”, but they ultimately agreed.

Jonghyun stiffened when he felt eyes on him.

“All of your styling concept would be phenomenal for the special edition magazine for Produce 101 trainees. Why, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were fashion design students or majoring in creative direction!”

The Angel Leader felt uneasy when the others glanced in his still form before turning back to the two representatives.
“And for unit three?”

Jonghyun took a deep breath and went forward, smiling as he handed over his sketches and summarized plans.

They were going for a dreamy vintage concept with signature chiffon and silky retro-inspired pieces to accentuate the soft natural lighting. Jonghyun thought of unit two’s concept for them at first but he changed his mind at the last minute because Dongho, Donghan, and Guanlin’s frames were that of models and would ace the edgy vibe more.

And for some reason, the thought of gracing the magazine’s glossy pages with their team’s concept lying between the two contrasting concepts of unit one and two never left his mind. Which was why unit three was going for something soft and beautiful, impactful and sexy, to entice everyone with his members’ visuals.

He could just imagine the awed fans with Park Jihoon and Bae Jinyoung’s visuals.

“…Old buildings, theme parks, even a studio with a bed in it could be a good backdrop, like how the reader could be transported back through time to a forgotten and enchanting place,” Jonghyun slightly grimaced at the innuendo.

It was silent as the creative director and stylist perused his paper like a teacher reading the wayward student’s abysmal written report. The flipping of pages was the only sound heard in the quiet room.

Then, “You’ve dabbled in creative direction before, Kim Jonghyun-ssi?”

*For six years and counting. “Just in my time here in Produce 101.”*

The creative director lowered his glasses down his nose bridge, looking up at him from the top of the black frames. “Hmm. I might have to talk to your company about hiring you in my team.”

Jonghyun spluttered. “What—Director-nim, I—”

*Stylenanda’s* Kim Heejung joined in the conversation. “You may have some competition with that. His visual direction with his teams was aired, not to mention his fashion design and aesthetics direction, and everyone’s clamoring to get him.”

Jonghyun’s brain stilled. *What?*

“Hmph,” The Creative Director of 10+ *Star Magazine* shrugged. “What’s a few contacts if you won’t use them?”

Jonghyun wanted to cringe away from the attention while Jihoon looked like the Christmas seasons came early.

The stylist smiled at them before grabbing the papers and putting it inside her folder. “Anyway, your concepts are different and diverse, which was Mnet’s plan for the photoshoot promotions, and manageable enough to do with the budget and sponsors for the shoot. We’d meet again in two days at five in the morning to get everything done by six in the evening.”

With a hearty wave from the stylist and the creative director’s unreadable expression aimed towards a stunned Kim Jonghyun, they left the bowing trainees.

Jonghyun’s only thought was, *‘Oh no, what did I just do?’*
Jinyoung was really happy.

In fact, he felt like he was on cloud nine.

He had misgivings at first, being placed in group three with the other high-ranked trainees, and he was absolutely terrified being in a unit with most of the Kings’ Team in it but he soon got over it when he realized that he could not think of a better team to be in than in unit three. It was truly unbelievable how talented and efficient the Kings’ Team was, as he exchanged an awed stare with Jihoon-nie hyung.

Seongwoo hyung and Daniel hyung lived up to their name as fancam masters and center experts when they arranged their planned performance with him in the middle. They decided on a tribute sexy performance for their fans and Seongwoo hyung suggested Junsu and Flowsik sunbaes’ ‘Tarantallegra’. He didn’t know the song but when they searched the MV, Jinyoung knew this would be a sick and extremely difficult performance. It has a fast-paced choreography, soaring vocals that Jaehwan-nie hyung and Seongwoo hyung could ace, and a lot of crotch-grabbing.

Like, a lot.

Jinyoung was really unsure at first and wanted to back out from being center when Daniel hyung called over their leader.

Jonghyun-nie hyung only smiled at him and, “Your visuals and talent could launch a thousand ships of fangirls and this number would only prove it. So, I could not think of anyone better in being our center than you, Jinyoung-ie.” He said it with so much conviction and finality that Jinyoung was moved to tears.

His new team was so remarkable. It was like they thought in one frequency, coming up with ideas that amazingly worked well together. Frankly, Jinyoung could hardly care about the ideas because he was more concerned with how he would fit in within the tight-knit group. But his hyungs were kind; they never made him feel like he did not belong in their group. Instead, he was treated like a pampered muknae, babied by Jonghyun-nie hyung and teased relentlessly by the other hyungs. Jihoon was not part of the Kings’ Team but he was more familiar with their members so it took little time before Jinyoung got used to seeing the Rank 1 trainee within the legendary group.

Jinyoung watched the dynamics of the hyungs. Seongwoo hyung and Daniel hyung was like twins from different mothers but they deferred to Jaehwan-nie hyung almost always because the vocalist was immediately assigned as Jonghyun-nie hyung’s proxy while the leader was off to come up with visual concepts for all units. He thought that the famous duo was inseparable but Kim Jaehwan clicked seamlessly with the two dancers, thus forming the triple threat that was the Kings’ Trio.

“Since we’ll be doing ‘Tarantallegra’ in the first fan-meet three days from now, we have decided on our cover for the next fan-meet in two weeks.”

Jinyoung should’ve been running away from the evil gleam in Ong Seongwoo’s eyes (Jihoon-nie hyung just did) but alas, he has not yet developed his “psycho-radar” at the time.

“We’ll do a sexy number as suggested—”

Daniel hyung looked diabolical. “—so, we’ll do Dalshabet’s ‘Joker’.”

Jaehwan-nie hyung gaped, horrified.
Seongwoo thought it would be damn difficult to teach choreography while relearning it himself but
he was wrong—it was borderline hellish. Jinyoung and Jihoon had never heard of the song before
and Daniel only knew the famous killing dance but not the title of the song nor the name of the
artist.

Regardless of his disbelief at the three not knowing the legend that was Kim Junsu sunbaenim,
young-ah had to drag them to eat or rest sometimes, putting a limit to their bodies since they
had more evaluations to go, but he did not necessarily stop them from practicing in one of the
training rooms with ‘Tarantallegra’ on loop until ten-thirty in the evening because the Angel
Leader knew how much his unit wanted to show their skills to their new fans away from the
television evaluations, letter grades, and scary ranks.

The practices were trying his short stump of patience, though, but his salvation came from his
Angel Leader. Jonghyun-ah knew the choreography extremely well after a few watches, which
made Seongwoo wonder if the guy ever thought of resting even a tiny bit, and lightened his
workload considerably when the leader divided the group with him focusing on Jaehwan-nie and
Jinyoung-ie while he taught the dancers of the unit. Then their leader divided the song into six
members: Jonghyun-ah, Daniel-ah, and Jihoon-nie would divide Flowsik sunbaenim’s parts while
he had Junsu sunbaenim’s vocal parts divided with Jaehwan-nie and Jinyoung-ie.

The track, the choreography, vocals and rap—it was massive. Three days of rehearsals should not
be enough for anyone to master ‘Tarantallegra’ but the Angel Leader’s intriguing method of
multitasking was effective for their team since they finished memorizing the choreography by
lunch time the next day. It would take some more polishing for dance, vocals and rap but the
progress was incredibly fast, even for a veteran idol like NU’EST’s JR.

Ong Seongwoo had been tallying the considerable number of talents the Angel Leader had that
could not be justified by normal people (he seriously still didn’t know how the leader made
‘Downpour’ stage rain) and he had another thing to add: Kim Jonghyun must have a Time Turner
in his chest because only him could manage to lead a group into memorizing a full choreography in
a day and a half and evenly distributed parts and roughly memorized lyrics by dinner time.

That evening, they were relaxing in the cafeteria, stuffing their bellies full with meat and
replenishing the energy they burned dancing and singing, while they waited for Jonghyun-ah to
come back from his meeting with Aron hyung.

They were complete in the dining hall with the trainees from groups one and two scattered about,
chattering loudly about the promotional plans that they’d be doing. Jiseong hyung was relentless as
he chattered about their guesting on Get It Beauty in the next few days. It seems that everyone was
caught up with their new activities.

Their table was having a different discussion, however.

Jaehwan-nie frowned in thought. “What I don’t get is why; why would Mnet spend so much to
promote sixty trainees in different shows?”

Jinyoung shook his head, his timid personality finally suppressed when he got exposed to the
noisiest hyungs he’d ever met. “I think it’s not because Mnet wants to, they just don’t have a reason
not to. Produce 101 is the current number one show amongst the survival shows in different
television networks. The ratings are so high that it’s stupid not to guest even a few of us for the
promotion. Like, seriously, have you seen your leaked HD pictures?”
Seongwoo cocked a head to the side. *Interesting.*

“Leaked?”

“Tsk. You’re such an old guy, Jaehwan-nie hyung.”

“Yah, Bae Jinyoung!”

Jihoon gasped as he looked over the tablet Jinyoung was searching with. “Wah, look at this picture of yours, Jaehwan-nie hyung!”

Jinyoung turned the screen towards them.

It truly was a masterful work in the hands of high-definition cameras and creative fans. The picture of Kim Jaehwan looking to the side with an enigmatic smile and shining eyes captured the best angle for Jonghyun-ah’s visual direction and outfit and Jihyun noona’s work for ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage. They searched for other fan photos and were blown away by the quality of each one. *Kings’ Team* was the most searched photos in Naver followed by the *Avengers’ Team*. Seeing the incredible visual concept brought to a more concrete memorabilia Seongwoo was admiring, the Rank 1 Visual trainee cemented his decision to do all he could to keep Jonghyun-ah in his team.

Daniel, who was looking over Jihoon’s shoulder, pointed to one of the top articles. “Oh, what’s this?”

Seongwoo and Jaehwan walked over and read the article. Their expressions morphed into horror.

“Oh shit.”

“Jihoon-nie hyung! Wait!”

Jihoon ran outside the cafeteria with Jinyoung running after him.

It was raining cats and dogs and Kim Jonghyun didn’t give a damn.

He was tired.

So tired.

He knew he changed the timeline by extending a hand to Class ‘D’ and ‘B’, by befriending Park Jihoon early on, getting Donghan for ‘Sorry, Sorry’—his actions brought this chaotic mess into the past that he thought he knew. But how could anyone ignore other’s pain? He was an empathic person, incapable of understanding how anyone could ignore other’s pain, and he never stood a chance against his compassionate nature. But he tried, goddammit, he tried his hardest to remain shy and weak to others. He was successful at first but he severely underestimated his formed attachment with the brothers he had in the future.

Maybe this is why time-traveling was only in fictions and not reality because it’d be painful to watch the ones you love suffer loudly while you stay in silence.

Aron hyung did not mince his words or coddle him like a baby. The older man knew what his purpose was and said that Minhyun was only protecting him from the backlash of ‘Downpour’ stage. Jonghyun thought that the producers did not like it but it was the contrary that frightened him even more. They *liked* it too much, to the point that they’re willing to extend the show just to
keep him locked in the contract.

And Pledis didn’t like that at all.

Jonghyun didn’t know what to do. Everyone knew he did something to ‘Downpour’ stage and he doesn’t trust the show enough to ask them to remove his involvement with the stage design so the best thing to do was to slip into anonymity, just to buy him more time to help his brothers, all of them, to debut and have stable careers. The plan was soon shredded when he remembered their hopeful expressions as he promised to assist them in both visual direction and stage design.

A part of him wondered if leaving the show was really a bad thing. Once he leaves the show, make an alibi related to sickness or planned engagements, then the attention would be shifted to the others and they’d get the spotlight he had but never wanted. He’d be free to move and help his dongsaengs without having companies fighting over him and manipulating the rules in order to do so. And if Pledis won’t be helpful, then he had the chance to establish his company. It was two years early but then what’s the difference really? He’d get loan from the bank, sponsors, terminate the joke of a contract he had with Pledis, and watch over all his brothers in the safety of his own office.

The leaving part was sounding better and better as he walked through the rain (“Ironic,” He shook his head) back to Produce 101 dormitories. He was about to go back his room with ‘Fear Team’ when he felt a heavy form crash into him. Jonghyun grunted in surprise before looking down at the mousy hair and teary doe eyes.

“You’re not leaving, are you?”

The article, his mind supplied. Jonghyun sighed. “Jihoon-nie—”

Jihoon yelled, grabbing his face in both the trainee’s hands.” You can’t! You just can’t! We need you! Tell him Jinyoung! Tell him!”

The timid trainee was hugging him so tight it was hard to breathe. “Jonghyun-nie hyung, please.”

“Please.”

Jonghyun closed his eyes as he wrapped both arms around his dongsaengs.

*I’ll save you before I drown.*

“I won’t leave you, you have my word.”

Jonghyun wanted to say no, he truly did.

But he truly forgot the power his beloved brothers had on him.

Let Mnet make their move.

He’s angry.

And he’s done playing on the sidelines.

They want a show?

*I’ll give them a show.*
Disclaimer: Photos have not been taken, edited, nor distributed by and for any malicious purpose. This is only for personal use and visual aide to the literary piece posted in Archive Of Our Own website.
Jonghyun was glad that the following morning returned back to normal. The incident was brushed under the carpet with a select few knowing of the breakdown that happened. Jihoon snuck themselves back in with Jinyoung as their look-out. Their drenched sweaters and puddled footsteps drew some attention from passersby but they brisk-walked ahead towards ‘Fear’ Team’s dormitories to avoid unwanted questions. It was a novel experience for the Angel Leader to get coddled by the maknaes of his unit as they shoved all the towels they could find and roughly wrapped him inside it. He tried to make them stop with the fussing but he only got served with Future Bae Jinyoung’s patented glare in its baby-spruce form. Jihoon, with the patience unlike that of an eighteen-year-old, pushed a simmering ginger tea concoction in a Styrofoam cup that the trainee prepared from his box of tea packets.
“Hyung, drink this,” Jihoon placed a pink tablet on his hand. “To prevent you from getting sick.”

Half an hour later, the other half of unit three barged into the room and saw their damp state. Then Dongho and Minki arrived, rightly furious at their entertainment company when they found out about it from a hassled-looking Minhyun, but the visual told them to calm down and not do anything stupid. The vacated ‘Fear’ dormitory became unit three’s that night because Jihoon and Jinyoung wouldn’t let go of him and Seongwoo, Jaehwan, and Daniel were adamant in staying within a meter from his person. Unfortunately, Minhyun and Dongho had to leave for fan-meeting practice with units one and two and Minki had a sleepover with Jiseong hyung and Gunhee in the SNL Korea group.

He woke up at three in the morning with two lanky arms wrapped around his torso and constricting his breathing pathways. It was a good thing he woke up early when he glanced at his watch.

It was photoshoot day.

Jonghyun went down the bunk bed and prepared bottles of water for them to drink before he took a short bath, donned comfy sweatpants and shirt, and went out the room to look for a staff member rounding the halls.

He found someone near the entrance of the dormitory building. The staff looked surprised to see him running about so early in the morning but relented with the odd request when said trainee asked if he could be accompanied to the nearest convenience store.

When they returned to the dormitories chatting amicably and carrying triangle kimbap, ham sandwiches, and fruits in pink plastic bags, the staff member was left with a deep sense of pride that he got to know Kim Jonghyun and his kindness even for a short moment.

The Angel Leader lugged the heavy plastic bags inside the dorm and the crackling noise woke up Daniel and Jinyoung who were light sleepers. Fifteen minutes later, they were groggily looking at a smiling Kim Jonghyun telling them to get dressed.

“It’s four in the damn morning, hyung,” Jaehwan whined.

“Ugh, there’s no sun yet,” Seongwoo jammed his face in his pillow.

Jonghyun idly stirred his coffee. “As it should be or else we’ll be late for the photoshoot.”

*That* woke them up better than any caffeine he could inject in their system.

The trip to the photoshoot site was filled with liveliness and excitement. *Produce 101* opted to go for the more economical route and rented a mini-bus that could accommodate all trainees in one vehicle, which was an advantage to Jonghyun as he handed out breakfast to rowdy trainees and overworked staff and cameramen who wanted to eat. It was good thinking on his part that he bought out the entire section of pre-cooked meals and fruit baskets in the GS25 convenience store, costing him almost four hundred thousand won too, but at least everyone got sufficient breakfast meals to start the day right. Fortunately, it did not go to waste as everyone had empty stomachs grumbling so the plastic bags were finished fast. He went towards the middle portion of the bus and sat next to Minhyun, who was his seat mate for the trip, and thanked his brother when the visual offered two triangle kimbap and an apple.

“I took it before it goes to Jihoon-nie’s abyss of a stomach.”
Jonghyun let out a chuckle.

Their location site was in one of the lesser known places near Mapo-gu that had a picturesque view of the Han River and pretty scenic routes of towering skyscrapers and modernized infrastructures in Seoul. But their first destination was a house one of the show’s PDs lent to them for the photoshoot. It was a three-story white house with a front porch, a veranda on the second floor, and a quaint garden at the back.

The Creative Director Lee Hwangcheol of 10+ Star Magazine and StyleNanda’s Stylist Director Kim Heejung were there waiting on the porch with a handful of assistants and stylists behind them. They bowed in greeting before they followed the directors and their teams into the house. Jonghyun had to carefully maneuver around the cameramen and stylists ambling around the house carrying heavy lighting equipment and sophisticated-looking clothes. It was a tight squeeze in the makeshift dressing room; eight small vanity tables with lighted mirrors, two sofas placed facing each other near the door, and nearly thirty people milling about. It was a fun experience though. The stylists and makeup artists knew their art well but they never tried to undermine the suggestions from the inexperienced trainees. Instead, they listened well and tried to incorporate the ideas with their concept. He noticed this when Daehwi stepped up to one of the noonas and suggested something different for Kenta’s makeup.

Why, if he didn’t know any better, he’d think the noonas were waiting for them to suggest something, but that would be weird right?

Minhyun frowned at the sudden tingling of his Jonghyun-is-being-obnoxiously-naïve-again senses. He had no time, however, to watch the incident as he put on the ensemble hanged on the rack with his name on it. Daehwi was the first one finished and the ‘Nayana’ center thanked the heavens that he got to witness Kim Jonghyun as a visual artist. The Angel Leader was inspiring to watch as he went around the room, helping as best as he could while he got accosted by no less than three trainees asking for his opinion on their makeup and ensemble. He’d seen the guy critically looking at the rows of earrings before choosing an edgy-looking star stud for Jinyoung hyung before proceeding to styling Jaehwan-nie hyung’s hair in elegant curls.

“Daehwi-yah, you’ve been staring at Jonghyun-nie hyung for fifteen minutes, already,” The amused tone of unit one’s leader Hwang Minhyun registered in his mind but he was preoccupied at watching the Angel Leader.

“Minhyun-nie hyung.”

The former Kings’ Team member cautiously raised his head. “Yes?”

“I don’t think I’m your fanboy anymore.”

The blunt statement made Hwang Minhyun even more wary. “Uh, okay?”

“Tell me, who’s my competition for Jonghyun-nie hyung’s attention?”

“Oh, uh, I guess it’d be Park Jihoon.”

Daehwi raised an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

“And…the rest of the world.”

The ‘Nayana’ center frowned. “You’re joking.”

Minhyun-nie hyung snorted. “Wish I was,” He muttered before he excused himself and walked
towards Kim Jaehwan.

Ever since he saw how the ‘Kings’ Team upped their astonishingly good visuals to quite unfair heights, he hunted down the stylist who made it possible. Unfortunately, he was barking at the wrong tree and asking the wrong questions the whole time. Now that he thought of it, there were a lot of evidences pointing to the Pledis trainee. There was the time all of the Kings’ Team avoiding him like the plague, Jonghyun-nie hyung changing the topic every time he brought it up, and it was even aired during the ‘Sorry, Sorry’ segment and he dismissed it as coincidence. He still could not believe the answer was in front of him the whole time. But he tried to rein his curiosity in when his BNM hyungs warned him about being too overbearing.

“Just try to stop hassling Jonghyun-ah, alright? He has half the trainees to watch over already, he doesn't need you adding to his load.” Youngmin-nie hyung ruffled his hair before leaving with Donghyun-nie hyung.

He almost forgot his quest under all the rehearsals for ‘Playing with Fire’, only to be sorely reminded when he saw ‘Fear’ Team looking like princes in expensive-looking trench coats, thereby earning the prestigious name of Manhwa Team from a newly-instated fanboy who was unshakable in his belief that the team must have a name like the ‘Kings’ Team did. Forget Youngmin-nie hyung, he was on the verge of starting a manhunt! Good thing he didn't have to wait that long because Minhyun-nie hyung slipped and he had to find out that it was not only visual direction that the Angel Leader was proficient in but stage design was also added to the numerous talents the guy had.

Heck, he didn’t even know how he’d touch that certain avenue of visual direction when he debuts in the future. Which was why Lee Daehwi jumped on the chance of learning from the leader when he got chosen as representative of unit one for visual concepts along with Huang Justin.

Kim Jonghyun was a master in visual arts. Daehwi originally thought of a sexy concept for them with sultry eye makeup, harnesses, and leather but Jonghyun cocked a head to the side, thinking.

“Sexiness doesn’t always mean leather and heavy eyeliners, though. Even the softest-looking concept could be sexy in the way both visuals and photography worked hand-in-hand.”

As he said this, Jonghyun-nie hyung began to sketch in smooth, soft strokes and began to explain the visual concept he had in mind. Daehwi and Justin could only stare at the detailed sketch design for their photoshoot. He thought he saw the best of it but when they all stepped out from the makeshift changing rooms in their complete ensemble.

The stylists gasped.

Unit two was just staring at them.

The members of Kings’ Team and newly-established Manhwa Team took one look at them and shrugged, as if saying they’d seen the wonder that was Kim Jonghyun the visual director more times than they needed to.

Park Jihoon and the rest of the world, huh? Daehwi had a plan though.

Unbeknownst to a certain scheming center, Jonghyun looked at what his design concepts brought to life. When the first unit presented their taffeta-and-lace designed elegant fabric in a coral-themed ‘Le prince des fleur’ prince-like wonder of a concept, Jonghyun wanted to cry. When the second unit sashayed in front of everyone in their grungy 90’s style with biker-inspired leather pants and button-downs with unexpected floral and retro-like patterns to put the needed twist for unit two’s
‘Urban Monochromism’, the Angel Leader felt overwhelmed at how proud he was of his vision coming to life.

He stared at each one, delighted at how each ensemble worked wonderfully, from Hyeongseop’s stunning flowery vine painting drawn down his right cheek with cream-eyeshadow to Lai Guanlin’s bad-boy aura with the Dior sunglasses lent by Jung Jung who happened to have the designer thing in his bag.

Jonghyun thought that all the photoshoots would happen in the picturesque house but the directors had other plans for units one and two. Unit one and two were sent to do street photoshoots with a handful of crewmembers and cameramen so they got their makeup and ensemble done in the house before they travelled to their photoshoot location in the sedans parked inconspicuously a few blocks away.

Soon, it was only unit three left in the dressing room.

Park Jihoon didn’t know if his hyung was just oblivious or was playing coy but this was ridiculous. The moment the Angel Leader entered the room, it was like the muted excitement surged up into a barely-restrained inferno. The noonas were friendly but when a certain someone was within hearing range, they tend to go a bit, uh, overly friendly. He knew he was young and he barely had any relationship with anyone but he knew the coordi-noonas had a crush on the onibugi leader.

Jinyoung, poor Jinyoung, was caught in the middle as Jonghyun-nie hyung inspected what their center was wearing while the three noonas behind him was starstruck when the leader glanced shyly at them.

“Hopeless, absolutely hopeless,” Jaehwan-nie hyung sadly shook his head.

Jihoon was glad that his hyung didn’t notice—he had so many competitors for his favorite hyung’s attention; he didn’t need more people vying for it.

And if he glared a bit at the makeup artists and got a warning glance from Jaehwan-nie hyung, well, that’s entirely his business.

“Well…Hwangcheol hyung was not kidding when he said you got some eye, Kim Jonghyun-ssi.”

Said trainee turned fire-truck red but the others gave them no attention as they poured over the raw shots they did over the computer, exclaiming the outstanding visuals enhanced by the soft lighting.

Jonghyun was proud he did right by choosing a softer concept for his unit than the edgy looks he initially wanted. Although the grunge-style would’ve worked with their unit, what with the visual powerhouses of Produce 101 all banded in the same group, it was refreshing to see a new twist from the likes of the normal sexy concept that people see all the time. Besides, they would’ve looked like they were trying a too hard to nail the style that unit two could’ve done it in their sleep.

The vibe of their photoshoot was enjoyable as well. It was not rushed or stressful, even with the many NGs and Jonghyun was happy with how the shoot proceeded with nary a hassle. The photographers and the crew were efficient and had a talented eye as they angled the shoot with the natural lighting from the morning rays, illuminating their faces like they were in a dream, cascading sunlight and fading shadows highlighting the contours of their faces as they stared up into the cameras.

The visuals and style were nothing like he imagined it would be.
Ong Seongwoo looked captivating in royal blue chiffon turtleneck and aquamarine contact lenses as he leaned down the pristine white couch with one arm behind his head. Jonghyun was behind the director, watching the Kings’ center slay the photoshoot. The Fantagio trainee was a natural both in modeling and performing and Jonghyun clapped his age mate on the shoulder for a job well done.

“I’m just glad my hairstyle in ‘Sorry, Sorry’ made a comeback,” Seongwoo boisterously bear-hugged Jonghyun-ah, careful of tearing his leader’s dainty ensemble.

Jaehwan was a charming visual in peach overalls embellished in gold accents with one strap unhinged as he leaned against the bookshelf with his head cocked to the side and a book tucked to his side. The one-strap overalls were a last-minute touch one of the stylists did before the main vocal stepped into the set. It did wonders though in upping Kim Jaehwan’s already good visuals.

“I can’t believe he made overalls look hot,” Daniel chuckled.

Kang Daniel was a show-stopper as he flaunted his softer yet graceful side in the photos with his deep green contacts and light orange eyeshadow. The makeup was an experiment for Kim Jonghyun as he played with the color palette one of the noonas gave to him and the Fancam King gave him a thumbs-up when he asked for permission. The result was stunning as Daniel peeked around the white curtains, his pastel-yellow velvet jacket slipping off one shoulder and showing his V-neck statement shirt.

“Fancam King on the prowl, everyone,” Jaehwan laughed when the blue-haired Daniel winked at him.

Jihoon and Jinyoung, Jonghyun was still not over his amazement, were just—he had no words for it. Jihoon was ecstatic to have a chance to show his sexy side and was not deterred after all the good-natured ribbing he got from his other hyungs. Jinyoung was even shy with Jonghyun’s idea of their center taking the visuals to another level but the Angel Leader believed he had something to show so Bae Jinyoung did.

And, damn, the visual princes did not disappoint.

He encountered some skepticism from the other trainees because the aegyo prince couldn’t look as sexy as the former Kings’ Team because the guy was the personification of cute. Jihoon may not look affected but it sure hit the trainee’s ego. Which was why Jonghyun vowed to Jihoon when he was helping his dongsaeng dress in his outfit in the changing rooms that he’d do his best to bring out the sexiest side of Park Jihoon.

Jihoon was teary as he hugged him longer than he usually did after that.

Joke’s on everyone who thought you couldn’t do it Jihoon-nie, Jonghyun grinned.

Jihoon was exuding exquisite elegance in black satin wrap dress shirt and disheveled damp hair as he leaned on the armrest of the black chaise-lounge and stared back at the camera above his vintage gold-rimmed eyeglasses with such intensity that he could melt the lenses right off.

“Wow,” Jaehwan gasped.

“Jeojang Boy who?” Daniel put his hand around his ear as he raised a thumb-up to Jihoon who winked at the camera.

“How the hell could he make the aegyo wink look sexy?” Seongwoo moaned at the unfairness of it all.
Jonghyun smirked.

Poor Seongwoo-ah.

He hasn’t even seen Jinyoung-ie yet.

Jaehwan noticed the change of expression in his leader’s face. “Uh, hyung? Why is your face like that?”

Their conversation was halted when their unit’s center and maknae entered the set.

Jinyoung could not be described as anything other than ‘center’ as he laid on the blush pink velvet pillows and duvet blankets. He looked absolutely ethereal in white gossamer and plunging v-neckline, exposing a part of his chest and accentuating the long choker train of rubies and crystals locked in intricate vines. The starry amethyst studs glinted beautifully under the warm sunlight and the hooded gray-green gaze only made him look divine.

“I—I—What?”

Daniel bit his lip to keep from laughing. “Sorry, Seongwoo hyung. I think our maknaes kicked our asses.”

After the shoot with their leader taking the last spot, the photographer could only hand his camera wordlessly.

“Wow.”

Well, consider Ong Seongwoo threatened in his Rank 1 visual rankings—which happened every time Kim Jonghyun took the reins in visual direction.

Every damn time.

The photoshoot ended on a great note and Kang Dongho was left with a new understanding of how Kim Jonghyun worked with so many people, varied personalities and all, without going insane at having to adjust and still getting liked by everyone. He was not even the leader of unit two but the others took whatever he was saying with utmost consideration, even Taehyun hyung. Their photoshoot concept was something he really wanted to do and he was lucky that Jonghyun-ah thought of it well. He got enough slack being a burly and tattooed man in a show for trainees, not including his debuted idol-status, so the chance to show how he could rock a grungy concept settled well with his pride. Motorcycles, cars, the black-and-white feature, he was still in awe of how the leader thought of this within three hours.

The vocalist was reminiscing the time he was first introduced to the leader. Back then, Kang Dongho was in awe of the only male trainee of Pledis Entertainment before he and Aron hyung was added in the roster. But then he got his shock in being introduced to a timid and almost inhibited trainee, who liked to hide his face and shy away from the furtive glances, instead of a self-assured and charismatic idol-to-be from what he gleaned from Jin-ah noona.

Only to get his mind blown and preconceived impressions forgotten as soon as Kim Jonghyun danced. Rapping, composing, and dancing were the three things he knew his leader excelled in and now he had to add visual direction and stage design. Dongho smiled. If there was anyone whom he thought would last in the industry, then it was his leader with an endearing smile. They may have hit the rock-bottom for far too long, but with how his leader was rising in the ranks he wouldn’t be
surprised if Jonghyun-ah would single-handedly raise NU’EST up from the ashes.

Minhyun, on the other hand, was worrying on the repercussions of Kim Jonghyun intervening yet again.

Minhyun bit his lip in worry. He had been observing the leader since they were divided into units by the show’s producer. Dark shadows marred the youthful-face of Kim Jonghyun and the downturned lips only added to his years, but he rarely saw this kind of face from the Angel Leader when they’re not alone. In front of the other trainees, he was smiling and laughing, very much into his leader-ah character almost all the time. But, lately, he saw the toll of Jonghyun-ah doing so many things at the same time, from visual directing to handling their impending fan-meeting in two days, by simple observation and Minhyun was getting more concerned.

Because if Jonghyun was starting to slip off his “leader” persona unconsciously, then he must not have been handling the burden as well as he thought he could.

His other members also noticed but ultimately decided to let Jonghyun handle his problems. Dongho thought that their leader was just tired and Minki had unwavering belief that Jonghyun-ah would be alright soon enough. Aron hyung was the only one who had seen the turmoil in Kim Jonghyun’s eyes but he was powerless to do anything about it, especially when their leader thought they were just exaggeratedly caught up on something that would disappear once he settled everything down with the activities.

It was how NU’EST does things with Jonghyun because the leader wanted to handle his problems on his own. For the Angel Leader, company was the best thing anyone could do to help in his problems.

But the thing was, Minhyun had a creeping feeling that things won’t return back to a stable state—not when numerous articles about Produce 101 were blatantly posted like this.

---

*Mnet’s ‘Produce 101 Season 2’ Kings Team Had Fans Clamoring for More Performances*

May 5, 2017 10:35 KST

Popular reality survival show ‘Produce 101’ came back for Season 2 with 101 male trainees competing for the chance to debut as the next boy band of Korea. The show earned accolades as they consistently trended the charts with their unique lineup of trainees and outstanding live performances. Recently, fans have been drawing attention to the Kings Team who topped the charts with their sexy rendition of veteran idol-group Super Junior’s ‘Sorry, Sorry’.

**Fantagio Entertainment** Ong Seongwoo, **MMO Entertainment** Kang Daniel, **OUI Entertainment** Kim Donghan, **Pledis Entertainment** Kim Jonghyun and Hwang Minhyun, and **Independent trainee** Kim Jaehwan swept the crowd with powerful vocals, notable dancing, and excellent charisma and went viral in Naver, Daum, and various social media sites for weeks after their live performance.

Devoted fans of the group created “Justice League”, a fandom dedicated to the battle group and its talented trainees, and is currently petitioning for Mnet to allow the temporary group more performances, thereby setting the Twitter charts on fire with the tag staying consistently at the international charts.
Minhyun grimaced. The articles were getting bolder and more audacious and he didn’t even know where to start. There had been so many articles about his battle teams since the third episode and it seems that the hype did not end, even with the position evaluations episode airing already. Then this article was published a week ago but the issue borne hundreds of debates on the possibilities of the temporary team performing together once again, the infamous ‘Avengers’ v.s. ‘Kings’ argument, NU’EST getting sidelined for the newer and more popular group, Mnet being manipulative assholes again—it was never-ending. Their fancafés, both from NU’EST and ‘Kings’, were in their noisiest stage and the Hwanggallyang of ‘Kings’ Team could only be thankful that there were no massive fan wars created.

Well, that was not technically correct, because there was a fan war ongoing within the dormitories.

Minhyun had been enjoying a moment of silence in ‘Downpour’ dormitories, pouring over a novel he brought with him from NU’EST’s apartment when the door banged open. The twenty-three-year-old knew he was getting, well, older if his only reaction to Ahn Hyeongseop’s unfortunate arrival was a prayer to the heavens for guidance and patience not to hit the trainee with his book.

“Minhyun-nie hyung! You’d never believe what I just heard!”

The Princely Visual learned how to take Hyeongseop’s stories with a grain of salt as the Yuehua trainee was notorious in slipping into histrionics and practically butchering the truth and layering it with his own. The hastily-scrawled “Keep Out” would not deter Ahn Hyeongseop in his most determined state. Nothing bad with it, really, because the trainee only did this when Jonghyun-ah’s involved—which happened to be every time he gets interrupted in his quiet time.

Hyeongseop was not lying now. In fact, he sounded brief and to-the-point as he relegated the conversation he overheard near the vocal practice rooms. Minhyun knew about the “Who is better?” argument with Jihoon-nie’s ‘Avengers’ Team and his ‘Kings’ Team, but apparently that was bit of an old news to the trainees, unlike the chaos happening in the outside world.

It was ‘Manhwa’ vs ‘Kings’ now.

With the ‘Fear’ Team shocking everyone with their visual concept and dramatic stage design, the smarter trainees raised parallels with their ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage. It was small discussions at first, but the debate grew exponentially after Jonghyun’s secret of being the person responsible for both teams was let out of the bag. One of the trainees started calling ‘Fear’ Team the ‘Manhwa’ Team due to their ethereal, manga-like visuals on stage and the name stuck like a pesky gum on one’s sole.

Soon, the debate reached both teams and the reactions were so varied Minhyun had the fleeting thought of asking again if they heard the question right. Taemin-nie and Hyunbin-nie were stupefied at how the trainees reacted to their symbolistic ensembles, Guanlin-nie was momentarily speechless before he waved it off with his carefree nature, a feat that Hwang Minhyun truly wanted the other trainees to learn before they go mad when they find out just how much their idol was well-received outside the premises of Produce 101. The ‘Kings’ Team was divided; Donghan-nie and Jaehwan-nie were fine with ‘Manhwa’ Team taking the prize for the best visual concept because their visuals were nothing to dismiss about but Seongwoo-ah and, oddly, Niel-ah weren’t
as generous. He expected denial from Seongwoo but Daniel? That was a surprise. But then he realized that anyone could be just as jealous and petty as Ong Seongwoo when it comes to Kim Jonghyun (Does Park Jihoon ring any bell?) and the easygoing Fancam King was no exception.

He truly found the debate amusing and stupid and he had a few laughs with Dongho and Minki about it when they encountered an incensed Ong Seongwoo dragging Kang Daniel and Kim Jaehwan away from the ‘Manhwa’ fans, but not everyone found it funny.

Why he was even surprised that Kim Jonghyun didn’t know all about the fan wars, he had no clue, but it was definitely amusing to see Jihoon’s face when their leader claimed naivety. But the Angel Leader was more concerned with the news than the trainees getting divided between the two visual powerhouse teams.

“Oh dear,” He rubbed a heavy hand on his face. “These changes things.”

He made Jonghyun read the articles and discussions, hoping to alleviate some of the stress away from the leader’s tensed shoulders, but he was dead-wrong as the Angel Leader quietly read everything with growing alarm.

“What?” Minhyun felt a chill go up his arm.

“The fans, ‘Justice League’ fandom, trending charts—they want us to debut.”

Minhyun furrowed his eyebrows. “So? Isn’t that what we’re all aiming for in the end?”

“No, you misunderstood me. The fans want us. They want us to debut—

“But not with I.O.I.”

Minhyun gaped. There were no other debuted units from the first season other than I.O.I and the possibility of all of them debuting and getting into units together was more than they could wish for. What baffled the visual was the sensed wariness from the Angel Leader.

“But isn’t this a good thing, Jonghyun-ah? In the end we’ll be debuting together, no hard feelings would come from being eliminated if we’d debut at the same time anyway.”

The Angel Leader’s gaze had a hard glint in it. “And what would happen to the ‘Kings’ fans if Seongwoo or Daniel debuts in I.O.I? Or perhaps, Jaehwan and Donghan? If we all debuted in I.O.I? Then it’ll be like ‘Kings’ Team but with five additional members, a dangerous move when it comes to the dynamics and equality in the new group where one would shine brighter than the other even before the group was formed.”

Minhyun knew an unspoken question when he hears it.

And what about NU’EST?

Then Jonghyun sighed as he opened a new tab and typed the show’s name. “No matter, there’s still a lot more to go before anything’s final but it would be wise if we took care of our next steps.”

Minhyun grimaced. “You’d do the same thing too, right? You won’t intervene too much in stage designing and visual concepts and other talents you miraculously hid for years under your onibugi front? You’re doing so much more than what you should, Hyun-ah. I’m getting worried for you.”

Silence, then Jonghyun softly answered in an amused tone. “Hey, you don’t need to worry for me. That’s my job, remember?”
Minhyun grimaced. “The job could rot, for all I care, you’re just like us, too.”

The *Angel Leader* sighed, dark circles prominent as he gave him a wan smile.

Few hours later while he was practicing with unit one, Minhyun warily remembered his leader left before answering him.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung, I don’t think I can do this.”


“What if I mess up and my dream ends here and I won’t get to debut ever again?”

“No—”

“Or that the viewers would find me ugly and trying too hard—”

“That’s absolutely absurd,” Taemin butted in. “You’re definitely idol material.”

The model trainee began to wildly toss his clothes on the bed in a bid to search for his necktie. “But that won’t exactly help me not to make a fool out of myself, now would it? Argh, I don’t know what to do! I’d be meeting Lee Honey-ssi and the Sandara Park sunbaenim in ‘Get It Beauty’ and I’m freaking out!”

The two *hyungs* of ‘Fear’ Team tried not to meet each other’s eyes lest they blurt into laughter.

Hyunbin barged into their dormitory with wild eyes and hair looking like birds attacked it. The first group for variety promotions were supposed to guest in the popular beauty show tonight and Jonghyun was confused that the trainee was not yet dressed in his uniform when it was three in the afternoon already. Guanlin looked up from his textbooks, glasses askew, and asked the trainee what the fuss was about. It was very amusing to the team that the handsome trainee was having a mental breakdown at the thought of meeting the Miss Universe runner-up and the famous female veteran idol from his parent company.

“Don’t be silly, hyung,” The ‘Fear’ center rolled his eyes as he fixed Hyunbin’s hair. “You look too handsome for them to notice that.”

The trainee was entirely unconvinced as he shakily tied the familiar blue necktie around his neck. Taemin scoffed at his botched attempts and pushed his hands away.

“Thanks, Taemin-nie hyung,” he whispered.

Hyunbin felt the familiar warmth engulfing his insides as he met his members’ smiles. It was comforting to know that he had the support of his closest teammates even if he got separated from them for the promotions. He had some negative thoughts at first when his name got called for group 1 and the rest got in group 3, who just happened to be the strongest promotional group in the show. He was just as jealous as the others when they found out that group 3 had permanent sub-units for the show and would most likely be roomed together in the next evaluations regardless of their evaluation team. What he wouldn’t give to have friends that won’t pretend he didn’t exist after they get new friends from their new teams, Hyunbin sighed as he watched Minhyun-nie hyung laughing with Lee Daehwi and Ahn Hyeongseop in their cafeteria table with envy and wishing he was with the newly-formed units.
The ‘Manhwa’ Team—he’d never get over the strange fluttering in his stomach every time he hears the name—strove to lighten the load on Hyunbin’s shoulders as they became his lifeline these past few days as he was not close to the others to form something deeper than tentative acquaintances like what happened in his ‘F’ class and group battle evaluations. His ‘Be Mine’ Team were nice and cordial to him, but that was it. Hoseong-ie hyung was patient to his slow progress and he was caring to everyone in the team but ever since they got in different teams for position evaluations, it was like they didn’t know each other, reverting back to the aloof countenance they had in the first meeting.

To his unending relief, Jonghyun-nie hyung, Taemin-nie hyung and Guanlin-nie were not like that. They did not push him away or found him a nuisance when he gets a little lonely and wants to be close to them. Jiseong hyung was kind to him too but the de-facto leader of variety promotions was too preoccupied being the eomma of their group so he could not intrude on the leader’s limited time for privacy. He also could not intrude on Jonghyun hyung because the appa of all trainees and the overall leader of the promo units had other pressing matters to attend to, and the added weight of being everyone’s support was draining the Angel Leader little by little. He tried to keep his worries hidden from Jonghyun-nie hyung but the Angel Leader did not take to it well. The hard expression on Kim Jonghyun’s face as he demanded him to open up to him at any time of the day was something Hyunbin would never forget.

Hence, why the YGK+ trainee was freaking out on the vaguely resigned ‘Fear’ Team.

Jonghyun-nie hyung patted his shoulder in comfort. “You just need to calm down, Hyunbin-nie. Act natural, don’t forget to show your funny side and have fun on the segment.”

“I’m sure Sandara Park sunbaenim won’t begrudge you a fansign after. After all, you both belong to the same company,” Guanlin teased.

“Do some rap from ‘Fear’, that’ll impress her I think,” Taemin nodded seriously.

If possible, Hyunbin never looked as pale as he did now.

“Yah! Knock it off you two,” Jonghyun rubbed his nose bridge before he smiled at the stressed trainee. “Hyunbin-ah, it’ll turn out great, okay? No need to impress Park Sandara sunbaenim, I believe she’s already impressed with all of you doing well in the competition. Variety shows are fun to do and the hosts are kind and accommodating,” Not all, his mind supplied but Jonghyun shook his head to banish the pessimistic thoughts away. “And I’m sure they would take good care of you and won’t make you feel uncomfortable. Just be yourself and don’t be afraid to be a bit more boisterous. The viewers would like a more dynamic guest than you all standing so ramrod still.”

Jonghyun had no qualms in telling Hyunbin to let loose because no one could ever surpass the born-for-variety Choi Minki. The Angel Leader was both excited and terrified at what the diva Minki would do for SNL Korea this Saturday. Horrified thoughts aside, Hyunbin was not the first from the other groups who approached him. At five in the morning, while he was doing some morning walk, he got approached by Euiwoong who had the same worried expression that Hyunbin was wearing now as he asked for tips in their guesting in Arirang K-Poppin’.

The trainees were doing one heck of a job now as he watched the live stream of Arirang radio in their site. He had guested in the radio show a few years back with NU’EST but the segment had a different DJ now. From what he had heard from Aron hyung, DJ Isak was accommodating to anyone regardless of reputation or standing. It was refreshing to see that it also went for trainees.

Yoon Jaechan and Lee Gwanghyun were the noisiest of the group, exuberantly answering the DJ’s
questions on the life of trainees inside the dormitories, while Kim Sangbeen and Yoon Heeseok covered the ones that had something to do with rankings. Then the questions shifted to the performances and the Angel Leader was relieved that the DJ asked each one’s stages and did not single out the higher-ranked trainees like Seongwoon hyung, Euiwoong, and Haknyeon. Their segment lasted for thirty-five minutes, far longer than NU’EST’s first guesting as a debuted idol, and Jonghyun was glad his fellow trainees got exposure.

Unit three resumed practices after the first radio promotions.

They were on the last rehearsals for tomorrow’s event, squeezing last-minute rehearsals and dearly praying that no one would interrupt their limited practice time again. Jaehwan was lenient at first but it soon turned annoying because they could not complete one cycle of practice without their leader getting called by the other units or the trainees in the variety promotions. ‘Tarantallegra’ was not an easy song to cover; Seongwoo hyung and Niel-ah had to modify some of the choreography already because their time was short enough as it is, and Junsu sunbaenim’s lines were distributed among everyone and not just the vocal line for faster progress.

But in the leader’s defense, he could catch up well to them even if he was out most of the time.

It was just them that had problems with everyone taking their Jonghyun-nie hyung’s attention.

“What now?” Seongwoo looked like a fire-breathing dragon with his flared nostrils and eyes that could kill.

Daniel peered out the door while he gulped mouthfuls of water. “There’s a lot of people outside. Oh, I see Jiseong hyung and Hyunbin-nie too.”

Jihoon looked over the blue-haired trainee. “They’re not asking for help with variety shows again, right? Because that’d be like repeating yourself over and over again like a human recorder.”

Jinyoung wringed his sweater. “Would Jonghyun-nie hyung be able to catch up? He’s been gone for most of the time.”

Seongwoo hyung looked ready to go out the room and give them a piece of his mind. Jaehwan stood up from his seated position and put a hand on the trainee’s shoulder.

“It’s fine, hyung. We’re almost done with the rehearsals and Hyun-nie hyung’s doing well.”

More than well, Jaehwan exchanged an amused glance with Jihoon. The Angel Leader did not set them back with his absences; in fact, they’d only look on with resigned amusement whenever they see the leader progressing faster than they thought. It took him back to the time he saw the previous Class ‘D’ trainee’s re-evaluation video from Donghan-nie and the fast advancement of the Pledis leader in the difficult choreography only cemented Kim Jaehwan’s belief that the Angel Leader can do anything.

Said Angel Leader returned with an apologetic smile and they resumed their practice. The vocalist could not help but feel proud of the performance his unit had planned. With minimal help from their mentors, who believed that they didn’t really need any more help after they’ve seen and evaluated them a few times, they were the only unit who made their residence in one of the dance rooms, practicing for hours on end with the promiscuous song blasting from the speakers. They even had to practice after curfew with only a few hours of sleep to compensate their tired and sweaty bodies. It was far harder than what he did for ‘Nayana’ and ‘Sorry, Sorry’ but Kim Jaehwan never had more fun than he did with unit three. Jaehwan was not the type of person that likes to compare, but his promo unit team was turning out to be a tough contender for the best team he had
ever been in.

He knew how talented Ong Seongwoo and Kang Daniel were; his time as a King was one of the most prominent memories he had from the show. Jihoon and Jinyoung were new team members for him but the maknaes were turning out to be just as talented as the first two. It only took some nudging from their leader for Park Jihoon and Bae Jinyoung to break off of their shell and show a side of them that no one had seen yet. And don’t get him started on the Angel Leader, he’s the reason why they were laughing hysterically at three in the morning instead of doing an epic crash-and-burn.

He’d repeat what unit two said when they saw their performance.

“Goddamit, we’ll set the roof on fire!”

Jinyoung grinned at the compliment before they started to rehearse with more vigor.

They went for a break by seven-fifteen for the live telecast of Get It Beauty. Huddled together to see the show playing on the small tablet, Jinyoung played the streaming site. It was a fun segment to watch because their friends did not come to the show empty-handed. Led by Yeo Hwanwoong and Hong Eunki, they prepared a short dance number for the delighted hosts while Seo Sunghyuk and Kim Yehyun sang a ballad. Jonghyun-nie hyung laughed when Hyunbin-nie hyung grew red in the face when he got approached by Sandara Park. Seongwoo hyung was positively green with envy as their fellow trainees got their makeup done by famous celebrities.

“Donghyun-nie’s so lucky he got his eye makeup done by Lee Seyoung-ssi,” Seongwoo hyung groused when the actress went close to the blushing trainee, earning some teasing remarks from her co-hosts.

“If you think that’s lucky, then Kwon Hyunbin stumbled over the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,” Niel hyung snorted as he pointed to the fanboy getting the ‘Most Favorite’ star from his idol Sandara Park.

“It’s not too late for us to do variety promotions, right?” Jaehwan-nie hyung said. “I mean, we’re still a promo unit so…” He trailed off.

Jihoon-nie hyung had a particularly evil gleam in his wide eyes. “Why, you’re also a fanboy of Sandara Park, hyung?”

The main vocalist grumbled something under his breath.

Kim Jaehwan grew up as a happy and optimistic kid. His eomma never lacked in telling him to be more self-sufficient and hard-working, to never stop dreaming even if his dream was within an arm’s reach. At first, he didn’t do well in the dancing aspect, but he soon came to enjoy it after he performed as an idol on stage. Now he wouldn’t mind getting to debut in an idol unit even with the insanely difficult choreography that came with it. However, he never imagined he’d resort to underhanded techniques just to keep his unit from amassing havoc.

All because the fan-meeting was turning into a disaster.

He’s not even the leader!

“Jonghyun-nie hyung, Saranghae!”
The heart-shaped hands of Ahn Hyeongseop pulled hearty chuckles out of the Angel Leader as he caught a hug from a Lee Daehwi who, according to the script, should get jealous and overprotective of his hyung.

Script my ass, Jihoon slipped in satori, voice going deeper as he muttered insults under his breath when their leader was caught in a role-playing game with Ahn Hyeongseop and Lee Daehwi as fan-service. Daniel laughed himself hoarse at the creative ones while Seongwoo tried his best to catch up with the dialect.

If that wasn’t even enough, the emcee called Jonghyun-nie hyung once more to do a fanservice for the audience.

“We’ve seen your re-evaluations video of ‘Nayana’,” The emcee read from her cue card. “I believe the fans would be happy if you’d show them your performance, am I right?”

The cheers went louder.

The Angel Leader gently removed the heart headband he got from Donghan and went to the center of the stage. Safe to say, the crowd’s cheers went to nearly earsplitting as they shrieked encore for the leader, much to the trainees’ hidden frustrations. Heck, even Daniel hyung and Jaehwan hyung could not hide their displeasure when their leader showed off his sexy and cute side for the fans.

Jihoon hid a scowl when Justin and Jung Jung rushed towards the tired leader, a water bottle in one hand and a face towel in the other. Seongwoo hyung, ever the competitive bastard that he was, run from one end of the stage towards the Angel Leader who looked surprise at the burly security detail the trainee was dragging by the arm.

“What—Who’s that with you, Seongwoo-ah?”

“Meet your security detail, Jonghyun-ah.”

“Security detail?”

“Yes,” Seongwoo smirked at the fans, the camera zooming into his mischievous expression, before he adopted an innocent look as he stared at the confused trainee from underneath his long lashes. “I figured that you needed some protection for your heart—”

“I don’t—”

“—Lest you get stolen from me.”

The audience never screamed as loud as they did back then.

Jihoon cursed as the Angel Leader went fire-truck red before chuckling good-naturedly, hugging a proud Ong Seongwoo back with the tips of his ears red.

The fancams of this meeting would be…infuriating to watch.

Will this day even end well?

The trouble started when they woke up to the sight of Ahn Hyeongseop flipping their blankets over and looking for something, or someone. The famous ‘Pop’ center woke up extra early so he could ask his Jonghyun-nie hyung to go with him for breakfast. He was frustrated at the third unit for getting his leader’s attention and fought tooth and nail with Jihoon just to get that coveted place. He lost tragically, much to the wink boy’s sadistic pleasure, so he endured and slept early because
Jonghyun-nie hyung usually wakes up at half-past four. Unfortunately, he woke up at half-past five. Jonghyun-nie hyung was not in the old ‘Fear’ dormitories, nor was he in the new one given by the staff since unit three just couldn’t be split at the moment.

So, he looked for the missing leader in his unit members’ beds.

“Where’s Jonghyun-nie hyung?”

“The hell, Ahn Hyeongseop!” Jihoon yelled as he pulled his pillow and smacked his frenemy in the face. “Just wait for hyung! He just went to get breakfast with Minhyun-nie hyung!”

As if on cue, the two Pledis trainees entered the dormitories with unit one and two standing behind them in various states of befuddlement. Most of them had their eyes closed and they sat on the beds of unit three, groggily rubbing their eyes. Daehwi squeezed into Jihoon’s bed while Samuel and Donghan climbed over Jonghyun’s and slept their tiredness away. The packed breakfasts woken most of them up from their stupor and they gobbled the meal up. Unfortunately, they could not enjoy the food when the staff called them into their vans.

The ruined breakfast, no matter how inconvenient or hurried it was, should be an indication that shit was about to go down but no, Park Jihoon remained as optimistic as he could because it was his first fan-meeting. Well, it was a first for everyone, except the Pledis trainees, Noh Taehyun and Kim Samuel. Nevertheless, he had high hopes of establishing his name outside the jeojang image that he construed for himself because staying cute and pretty all the time was just so exhausting. He’s a guy capable of being sexy, thank you very much Seongwoo hyung, so he’d damn well deliver.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have a choice but to use his jeojang aegyo, not for enticing the fans who painstakingly waited in line just to see them but for a horrendously-oblivious Angel Leader who got half the trainees following his steps like poor baby ducklings to their mama swan.

He should be the only baby duck, goddamit!

Everyone was roomed together in the dressing room, a spacious expanse with twelve vanity tables, leather couches placed in the U-formation, and racks of clothes brought by Stylenanda, one of their sponsors for the fan-meeting. Unit three was near the back-end of the room where the fridge and makeshift cot were positioned under the windows. Jihoon sat with his unit, makeup and hair finished already, while they waited for their leader to come back. The Rank 1 trainee was worried for Jonghyun-nie hyung as the idol-slash-trainee was doing too much. The aesthetics team for the fan-meeting was different from the noonas they got to know in the show. They were an aloof and cold bunch, preferring to stay quiet while they did their work, and Jihoon had no problems with that except for the fact that they also dismissed his Angel Leader’s suggestions when it came to the visual concept. Seongwoo hyung and Dongho hyung looked ready to start a fight but a warning glance from Minhyun-nie hyung stayed their itching fingers.

“We know what we’re doing, Kim Jonghyun-ssi,” One of the aesthetics hyungs shook his head in dismissal.

Jonghyun-nie hyung bowed in acquiescence and backed away.

The aesthetics team did well for units one and two, with the former going for a softer concept with their ballad cover of INFINITE’s ‘Can You Smile?’ and the latter for an avant-garde concept to channel their inner G-Dragon-fashion-concept with an acoustic cover of the multi-awarded...
BigBang leader’s hit ‘That XX’. It was only them who’d do some dancing and the stylists decided that their ensembles should be lace of all things.

Daniel hyung tried doing the chorus choreography and the flimsy fabric tore into two.

Jonghyun-nie hyung remained his calm and smiled apologetically at the stunned stylists before he ushered a confused dancer into the changing rooms. They heard some whispers before a startled yell prompted them into pushing though the curtained room and stopped short.

Kang Daniel was dressed in a half-way unbuttoned classic dress shirt as black as midnight and tight shimmery-looking pants embellished in metallic rings and thread-like chains tied at the waist. The MMO trainee was decorated with interlocked necklaces trailing down the exposed chest and the famous ear threaders made a comeback for the ensemble.

The Fancam King was back with a vengeance.

Unit three surrounded the two trainees, blocking the others from viewing the magic happening between Daniel hyung and Kim Jonghyun as they watched the Angel Leader drag the heavy tray filled with makeup and hairstyling tools. With an expert hand, Jonghyun-nie hyung started with the makeup.

An hour later, they were scrambling to go next, ignoring the other trainees who were admiring the transformation of Kang Daniel under Kim Jonghyun’s capable hands.

Jihoon would be a hypocrite if he denied how excited he was with their incoming performance.

The performances of the other units were amazing: Unit one’s ballad with guitar and piano accompaniment by Jung Sewoon and Lee Daehwi was stunning as they sang to one of INFINITE’s emotional songs with Minhyun-nie hyung and Kenta hyung taking the reins with their vocal prowess. Unit two’s unique arrangement of G-Dragon’s song with vocal line of the group going for a raspy, RnB-fused rendition of the lyrics left everyone amazed with the rap prowess of Woo Jinyoung and Lai Guanlin as they rapped with the guitar.

It went well and Jihoon was happy that the others didn’t treat the units’ performances as competition, which was a welcome relief from the drama found in the show. The fanservice part of the meeting may have left a bitter taste in his tongue but he had high hopes for their performance.

Their visual concept was everything he imagined and more. Unit three went for the sexiest concept he’d ever did, with chains, chokers, leather, and all the body rolls and crotch-grabbing that they would do for ‘Tarantallegra’ and he couldn’t wait for the emcee to announce their stage.

The Angel Leader outdid himself once again with the limited time and choices he had for their visual concept.

Seongwoo hyung had a silk choker around his décolletage. The curled tresses only made him look more handsome in his dressy collared shirt, leather pants, and numerous rings populating his nimble fingers.

Jaehwan-nie hyung, Jonghyun-nie hyung, and Jinyoung-ie were the show-stoppers for the visual concept. With heavily-lined eyes, Kim Jaehwan looked like he was about to steal everyone’s hearts in his all-black ensemble, leather knee-high boots, obsidian studs, and tousled hairstyle. Bae Jinyoung was the center of everything, with his chic glittery coat hanging over his tall frame and ending above his knees, unbuttoned dress shirt, and the leather belt choker trailing down near his
Jonghyun-nie hyung went risqué with an almost-fully-opened dress shirt, only three buttons clasped at the bottom, slicked-back hair, and dark sultry eye makeup.

Jihoon was left with the impression that he should bring a bat with him so he could smack the shit out of anyone who thought of approaching his hyung while he was dressed like that.

The Rank 1 trainee rubbed the velvety feel of his chest when his leader spritzed body glitter mist over the exposed skin. The outfit felt lightweight even with the leather vest he was wearing over the dress shirt buttoned two-thirds of the way to accentuate the snowflake crystal hanging around his neck and the chandelier earring hanging off his left ear. He had doubts that the accessory won’t fall in their performance but his misgivings were assuaged when his hyung securely clipped the earring near the junction of his lobe and cartilage.

The Angel Leader played with a circle-shaped container in his palm. “Jihoon-nie, how do you feel about wearing contacts this time?”

Jihoon caught his reflection in the mirror, startling blue eyes greeting him back.

After their leader secured their earpieces and lapels, he gathered them in a circle.

“No regrets, okay? Whatever happens, we’ll do our very best in doing Junsu and Flowsik sunbaes’ song justice, yes?”

“No!”

They went up the stage with their “game face” on: fierce gaze, slightly parted lips, a smirk or wink here and there, as demonstrated by the Fancam King and King’s Center for future sexy-concept references.

The fans screamed their loudest as Bae Jinyoung took center at the first beat of the drums.

Kim Jonghyun was glad that the fan-meeting was a success. Entertaining a thousand fans in a theater was no easy business and yet his fellow trainees did an excellent job. It was a fun experience and he was thankful that he got to do one with his brothers.

He should have known that Murphy’s Law would come to bite him in the ass again.

The Angel Leader was damn frustrated but he could not show any weakness.

Not when he’s alone with people he didn’t know, much less trust.

“Do you agree with our terms and conditions?”

Jonghyun met each gaze with an unwavering blank expression, all the while cursing the producers of Mnet for outing him as the so-called "PD trainee of 'Downpour' stage" during one of the press conferences when the network filed disclosure violations against the perpetrators of the leaked photos of 'Downpour’ stage due to the show’s explicit statement that no photography of any kind can be done during live stages as protection of privacy of the trainees and the production.

Unfortunately, the reporters focused on a more juicy topic: the famous idol-turned-trainee creating one of the most significant stages in the Korean media.
After all, what's a few leaked photos when they can focus on the "unbelievable trainee who made it rain"?

Goddamit, they made it seem like he's some deity or something!

The Angel Leader rubbed his face in frustration. He knew this was both a bid for the show to take control of the mayhem that was sweeping the whole country and a bold declaration of their omnipotence and tight reins on the trainees and the companies involved.

By establishing Kim Jonghyun's presence in Produce 101, thereby insinuating his stage production was a part of Produce 101's maneuvering.

Jonghyun rarely made stupid decisions.

Sadly, his recklessness in showing off his deck of cards so early on was one of them.

The Angel Leader had many things on his plate—preparing for the fan-meeting, thinking of what to do for the concept evaluations, trying to keep everyone healthy and sane by the end of the show—that he neglected to watch the people he should have been keeping an eye on since the beginning —

The men behind the stage.

Jonghyun leaned back on the reclining desk chair. “I would like to speak to my company’s representatives before any decision is finalized,” He let out a cordial smile. “Standard protocols, you understand.”

Produce 101’s PD Ahn Joonyoung looked steadily at the trainee. The producers were stunned to encounter a trainee, albeit a debuted one, negotiate the terms and conditions of the contract like a seasoned company lawyer debating on financial stability and capital investments with their investment partners.

“Alright, we’ll be leaving you.”

The producers left them, bowing and thanking them for the time the Angel Leader granted them. As soon as the doors were shut, all the tension left his body as he looked down at the clipped papers in his hands.

“They’re very, er, persistent.”

Jonghyun did not turn to look at Aron hyung. Instead, he turned his chair to the person who managed NU’EST. It has been quite a while since he had seen Song Taehyuk and Jonghyun remembered they did not part peacefully with the Pledis manager. After the legal battle with the company, NU’EST lost most of their contacts with the administrative staff they grew close with for eight years.

Song Taehyuk was one of them.

The manager handled their sub-unit NU’EST W for a year and six months with a completed NU’EST when Minhyun returned from his promotions with Wanna One. But the attacks slowly came with Minhyun-as-Wanna-One fans calling for blood, controversies aimed towards Dongho, Ren, and Aron, and Pledis gradually pulling him and Minhyun away with new promotions, forming a duo, and assigning a new manager just for them. The troubles accumulated to the point that it wasn’t even worth it anymore, thus the split with the only company they knew.
Taehyuk hyung exhaled heavily. “They know not to play with us. Pledis may be passive most of the time but when forced—that’s when they’ll brandish their horns.”

Don’t I know it, Jonghyun slumped in his seat at the statement.

CJ E&M had nothing to lose, that’s why. This is one of their bold statements in undermining Pledis and they had a good and valid reason in doing so.

“But to offer a new contract statement to a currently active artist from another company? Just because you thought of ‘Downpour’ stage? Wow, they’ve got guts, that I can definitely say.” Aron blew out a disbelieving chuckle.

Song Taehyuk shifted uncomfortably in his seat but did not meet his eyes. Currently active described his contract nearing its expiration date and Pledis not taking any step to offer him a new one—which made CJ E&M take the first move.

It was something that he asked his CEO for the sake of his members and the future of NU’EST but for reasons unknown, Pledis has not handed him his contract renewal or even told him that one was in the works already.

The old Jonghyun would’ve been so worried about his future in the company and the high possibility of him getting axed from NU’EST but the new Jonghyun only had suspicion and logical guardedness at the question of why his company was taking so long to make him sign the same contract he did almost a decade ago.

Still, he had contingency plans ready in the case that Pledis Entertainment won’t renew his contract as an idol under their agency.

“Yeah, well, I won’t do it anyway.”

“Of course, you won’t.” Aron hyung snorted. “If they’re overworking you now, and you’re not even paid, what’s gonna happen to you if you did sign with them?”

Jonghyun raised a glass in toast, remembering how Kim Jaehwan got dragged in the mud by the entertainment company.

“Now that the issue is set aside and how we still have some privacy left, I have an idea, a couple actually, for the concept evaluation stages and this needs to be done as soon as possible.” The Angel Leader pulled out the worn envelope he’d gotten from the staff and presented stacks of papers to an astonished Kwak Aron.

Aron hyung looked over the familiar handwriting of his leader as he outlined his sketch in the smooth paper. The oldest member of NU’EST could not hide his impressed expression at the extravagant detailing of the stage.

“You’re pushing this through, aren’t you?”

The resigned defeat only made Kim Jonghyun smirk in triumph.

“I’ve never seen such detailed stage plans, the visual concepts are absolutely phenomenal,” Their manager looked over Aron’s shoulder, eyes wide in wonder as he took in the designs that could put the performances under the limelight once again. The burly man looked up at him with a disbelieving expression. “A normal person would ask you where you learned this but then you’ve had years to master the art from your hiatus.”
The time-traveler winced before giving a shaky smile at how his manager unknowingly created a rough yet possible plan for him in the case he gets questioned by anyone.

“I’d never believe you again whenever you say you’re watching anime or reading manga with your doors closed,” The accusing expression on his elder brother’s face was comical before he settled for a wary tilt of the head. “The CEO wouldn’t like this.”

He had no say in the matter though, Jonghyun thought. And if he did, he wouldn’t refrain from intervening again. Mnet was starting to play dirty, and he’d bet his whole future company that Pledis won’t take the slight with a smile. His company can be as petty as he is and the Angel Leader was gambling on that chance.

Because at the end of day, he was still part of Pledis Entertainment, putting impending contract expiration and their slightly tumultuous relationship aside, and if he wanted to do something with Mnet, working together was the best way to do it.

Disclaimer: Photos have not been taken, edited, nor distributed by and for any malicious purpose. This is only for personal use and visual aide to the literary piece posted in Archive Of Our Own website.
Pledis Makes A Move

In the years that he gave inane thoughts some of his precious time, which happened more times than he needed to know, Kim Jonghyun made the decision that he liked Thursdays.

Why? Because it’s the precipice of safety before he falls precariously in the abyss of doom and despair, as demonstrated during the weekends where he had to deal with everyone ramming his door down from excitement.

Thursdays were nice for him, not as hectic as Mondays or overused as Fridays, and the chance to do something productive was a given bonus. As a CEO, he had strange moments of encountering his trainees about to swell in restrained excitement at the impending weekend and his idol groups really swelling in excitement, practically jumping off walls as soon as the clock struck five. Maybe because he set his working days from Mondays to Thursdays or that there was a mini all-you-can-eat dinner buffet that comes from his pockets every second and fourth Thursday of the month, but Thursdays were heavenly to a simple Kim Jonghyun.

I think I like Fridays now, the same Kim Jonghyun grumbled in his thoughts.

Beside him, Jaehwan leaned towards the leader. “Hyung, you have any idea why we’re here?”

Jonghyun clicked his jaw shut before nodding.

Concept Evaluations.

Goddamit, as if that’s no pain in the ass for the time-traveler who was dearly wishing that something, or anything, would remain the same, the producers of the show had the idea of showing all the positions evaluations, half of which was aired last week and the other half to be aired, tomorrow which happened to be a Friday.

On second thought, Thursdays still sound better, Jonghyun sighed inaudibly.

He did have the right to fear this part of the competition; he didn’t stay in the industry for almost twenty years without growing a few brain cells. After all, it’s like the pot calling the kettle black if he thought that the concept evaluations would stay in his previous timeline, what with the drastic changes in the rankings after the airing of the first half of positions evaluations.

Jonghyun was just finishing in preparing morning teas and hot compresses to soothe his members’ dry throat and strained muscles from the fan-meeting last night when the speakers came to life, blaring the theme song ‘Nayana’ around the room and promptly jolting Daniel to wake and almost fall to the floor. The others soon followed, glaring murderously at the ear-splitting sound. All except Ong Seongwoo, whom the leader noted just rolled to the side and snored the morning away with a long-suffering sigh. Jaehwan and Seongwoo took a hard beating to their vocal chords and Daniel had been suffering from muscle aches throughout the night and was unable to sleep in the process. Everyone had numerous menthol patches stuck to their backs and hamstrings after he massaged each limb all night so they could sleep well and wake up later than normal today.

Sadly, that wasn’t the case as the speakers shrieked maddeningly for the second time after the announcement registered in their brains.

“All trainees must be in the training center in thirty minutes.”

The Angel Leader wordlessly handed over the Styrofoam cups with warm coffee/tea/milk in it to
the groggy-eyed members before nudging Seongwoo awake.

Twenty minutes later, they were sprinting towards the training center in their corresponding sweaters—black for the rap teams, red for the dance teams, and blue for the vocal teams. There was some hassle with Jihoon and Jaehwan accidentally exchanging sweaters and Seongwoo being a drama queen and demanding to be piggy-backed (Jinyoung conceded at first before dumping the insufferable Ong on his butt) but they arrived in the open space below the steps.

Jonghyun handed over fruit and granola bars, that he coincidentally bought a few hours ago from the convenience store for himself, to his sleepy teammates that were tired from their promotions and just wanted to sleep the day away.

Jinyoung peered at him with an accusing gaze. “Why don’t you look half-dead?”

“Well—"

Seongwoo slumped against Daniel and jabbed a finger at the leader. “Don’t bother, I’ve been barking at that particular tree for ages,” Seongwoo glared.

The Angel Leader smiled in nonchalance before wrapping an arm around Jaehwan’s shoulders and walking towards the training rooms. What greeted them were not the boisterous laughter or squeaky shuffles against the shiny vinyl floor, but rather tired grunts and unusually silent trainees leaning against the walls, pretending to stand up straight whilst their eyes slowly closed. Only a few groups were wide awake and aware of their surroundings, and Yoon Jiseong called them over to sit in the middle of the room.

“You look dead-beat,” Jiseong hyung commented as he nudged a half-asleep Daniel with his shoulder.

“I feel dead-beat,” Daniel groaned.

Seongwoo plopped down heavily on the blue-haired trainee whose only reaction was a tired grunt. “Remind me not to volunteer again for the next fan-meeting.”

“What happened?” Park Woodam tentatively asked.

“Well—"

“The better question would be is—what didn’t happen?”

They all looked up to the arrival of the promo units with Hyeongseop at the front, eyes glinting amusedly as he offered the tablet device to a curious Jiseong hyung who put it down on the floor. The other trainees milled behind the variety promotions leader and looked over his shoulder to watch.

“Whoa! It’s us!”

“Glad your perceptive skills aren’t as rusty as your brain in the morning, hyung,” Jihoon’s tone was dry.

Aron hyung sent the video link to him early in the morning and Jonghyun watched the video in his tablet. It was a fancam of their ‘Tarantallegra’ performance, which happened to be the best footage he’d seen from all the fan-meeting videos uploaded. The Angel Leader could still not fathom how the fans could take such high-resolution videos without getting caught by security; funnily enough, even after almost two decades in the idol industry, that was still one of the few mysteries he was
After watching their performance, he was left with the impression that the fans just got the ultimate fanservice from his unit.

It was a good decision on Seongwoo’s part that he picked the underrated song for them to perform. Ong Seongwoo was in his element as he showcased his singing abilities together with his amazing dance choreography as he did a different spin with the verses. The lip-biting did not escape the sharp focus of the camera and the screaming fans.

Kang Daniel exceeded his previous fancams, thereby establishing his name as the Fancam King, with a more intense version of him in threaders and rapping in Flowsik sunbae’s English lyrics as he took the center of the stage. Park Jihoon was an unexpected treat to the fans with his sexy ensemble and borderline-promiscuous choreography as he rapped and danced in the dance break with Seongwoo and Daniel.

Bae Jinyoung was the greatest surprise in their stage. As the center, he was in the screen most of the time and anyone who was watching would not put the once-timid trainee with the dangerous-looking idol seducing the fans with his hooded gaze. Jonghyun raised an eyebrow, impressed when Jinyoung opened three buttons down his shirt after the killing move at the chorus. Kim Jaehwan was a power vocal and a visual at the same time with Junsu sunbaenim’s high notes while dancing and harmonizing with Seongwoo and Jinyoung—quite a big accomplishment for the trainee who was once terrified of dancing.

With that said, Aron hyung had terrifyingly impeccable timing and sent the ranks in which they trended with the fancams.

Number 1 in five major trend charts. An influx of JYJ/TVXQ/Junsu XIA fans into their fanbase. Bae Jinyoung slaying everyone with his HD photos. Park Jihoon going from aegyo prince to wink slayer.

Jonghyun wasn’t bluffing when he said he was cautiously anticipating what would happen next.

The new rankings blurred in his mind when the staff them line up and stuck new vinyl stickers on their abdomen as protocol that the staff follows usually after every airing of an episode to update the viewers on the current rankings of their fixed picks.

There was a commotion when Kang Daniel ranked second and Justin jumped over fifteen places up to eighteenth but the rest remained within a five-place range of rankings. Ignoring the furtive glances in his direction, Jonghyun looked down at the large number 3 to the left of his name. He knew he should be surprised because he got first in the previous timeline but he just shrugged the ranking off. There were too many factors that could’ve pulled his rank down and he didn’t care one bit, even if Guanlin, who stood beside him, was stunned at the rank he got.

“I was expecting you’d get first, hyung,” Guanlin said.

“It’s fine, Number 3 is not a low number,” Jonghyun eyed the number on the Cube trainee. “You’ve went down two places, Lin-nie. Are you alright?”

“Honestly, I don’t think I have the energy to stay upset at the stupid number, hyung,” Guanlin looked around before he lowered his voice down, a frown marring his face. “Not when Taemin-nie hyung just left us.”

Jonghyun wrung the cloth inside his pocket. The departure of Kim Taemin and Ha Minho was all
the trainees could talk about this morning. Ha Minho’s sexual assault on an underage teen wrecked the show with the shocking news and everyone was left reeling. Even if he had no information on the matter aside from biased articles, the bottom line still stood at the devastation of Minho’s future as an artist. But the news was crudely swept under the carpet when Taemin-ah broke the news of him leaving the competition to all the promo units right after the fan-meeting.

The ‘Manhwa’ member went straight to the point; in an almost detached manner, he said that he had to leave the competition due to his serious health problems and a possible surgery to prevent further complications. Jonghyun knew this was true as he had to help the trainee whenever he was too tired to move or was experiencing constipation and heaviness in his abdominal region. He was no expert in medical terminologies or diseases in the stomach but Taemin must go through the surgery if he wanted to go further as an idol or an actor, in which the latter Jonghyun knew Kim Taemin would ace perfectly well.

Jonghyun sighed before patting Guanlin’s shoulder in comfort and greeted Minhyun, Donghan, and Jaehwan as they went to his side, numbers six, twelve, and ten glinting off their shirts.

Guanlin didn’t take to the news well and with the help of Dongho and Jaehwan, they managed to calm the distressed trainee down. But the news reached the ears of the other trainees and by the time they reached the dormitories, it was pandemonium as the others surrounded the twenty-three-year-old Hanareum trainee. Hyunbin was more receptive to the news, bidding his team member farewell even if he was sad about it.

“Taemin-ah’s in a good place, Lin-nie. He needs to do surgery so he’d feel better,” Minhyun caught the conversation and sent the Taiwanese trainee a sad look.

The staff ushered everyone out of the training rooms and led them to the building where they held ‘Nayana’ practices with all the classes. Instead of the empty space and a bright stage with the show’s logo across the whole backdrop, the room was transformed back to the auditorium that it was meant to be.

The trainees shuffled into the red chairs, chattering excitedly at the surprise in store for them. Jonghyun had Jaehwan to his left and Jihoon, Jinyoung, Minhyun, and Seongwoo to his right.

Jihoon leaned towards him. “Something tells me that this ain’t a simple meeting.”

No use hiding it now.

“I think this is the concept evaluations,” Jonghyun muttered under his breath.

Jinyoung whirled, eyes wide. “What? We’re doing this right now?”

“I wonder how we’d pick the songs,” Minhyun said. “If it’s like the last season, we’d pick our songs, right?”

“I think we couldn’t base any rule from the previous season,” Jihoon huffed.

“We barely have any similarities with season 1’s rules. Mnet would do something different this time, I’m sure of that.”

Jaehwan put his clasped hands in front of his mouth. “Why does that make me even more nervous?”

They’ve been having this conversation since the time they got to hear the demos of each concept song uploaded in Mnet’s website, the show smartly omitting the name of the producers in case of
biased favorability, and there were some division amongst the trainees in the case of song preference.

In the first timeline, concept songs were introduced first to them before the Nation’s Producers got to vote for the trainees that would work well with the song. Hence, the cheating and voting manipulations that got so many trainees under the harsh spotlight for their misconduct, whether directly or indirectly done by them or their fanbase.

This time around, the show decided the switch the game up a little. They got to hear the demo song but the producers were unknown to both the contestants and Nation’s Producers—which was the reason why the trainees had contrasting preferences unlike in his past because the producers’ names and reputation did not lead to any biased decisions for the trainees.

“I like how the tune of ‘I Know You Know’ goes,” Jaehwan shrugged as Seongwoo brought up the topic in their dormitory.

“Not a popular opinion but I do understand what you mean,” Dongho shrugged. “I’d pick that, too, just because my vocal range would go well with the song.”

“Is it weird that ‘I Know You Know’ reminded me of an SM artist’s song?” Jonghyun raised an eyebrow at Samuel’s surprising assumption. And oh-so true, the Angel Leader resisted the urge to smile when the others dismissed the Brave trainee’s preposterous idea that a producer that worked with the one of the largest entertainment companies in South Korea gifted the song to trainees like them.

They just finished rehearsing for the fan-meeting when unit one plus Dongho and Minki barged into their dormitories, immediately latching on his unit members as they showed the uploaded demos and increased the volume to maximum. It was a nostalgic feeling for the Angel Leader to be able to listen to the evaluation songs that he had not heard of in years.

Although it was the demo version, it still didn’t fail making him smile at the memories of his ‘Never’ Team. There was a large chance that the same team could be made this time but he didn’t want to get his hopes up. For one, Seongwoo could be in the ‘Open Up’ Team, Jaehwan in ‘I Know You Know’, and Daniel could be in ‘Never’ after he kept an eye on his team and loosely commented on the disadvantages of manipulating the producers to their cause.

He knew it wasn’t the right way to go and he lost some sleep along the way, but he did not care as much for the possible reshuffling of concept teams this time around than the impending backlash on their rankings and their growing fanbase. He remembered how Daniel cried himself to sleep after he got called out for cheating in the concept songs, manipulating the fans to bring him to ‘Never’ concept. It wasn’t only him who cheated, which made things worse; Kim Dongbin had his ‘Open Up’ or ‘Never’ preference cleverly posted in his social media account and Lee Kiwon’s had his plea for ‘Open Up’ in his fanclubs.

The bottom line was still the same, though: if he could prevent any more voting manipulations and/or controversies that would only pull his brothers down and pull the show up with the bad publicity, then he’d do it without any hesitations.

“I’d go for ‘Open Up’ any day. From the demo, it sounded sexy and because I, too, am sexy,” Seongwoo let a naughty half-smile enhance his features. “Feel free to draw parallels from that.”

Jinyoung looked up from his school homework and gave a disgusted scoff. “If that parallel goes with you being a sorry excuse of the word ‘sexy’, then I’d concede without objections, hyung.”
Seongwoo scowled.

It was strange that most trainees picked a different song from the one they would perform in the evaluations if everything went exactly the same as his previous timeline. Daehwi thought ‘Oh Little Girl’ was appropriate for him, as well as Kenta and oddly, Woo Jinyoung. Jaehwan and Dongho were all for ‘I Know You Know’ as a close second if the slots for ‘Never’ was full and Seongwoo was all for ‘Open Up’.

“What about you, Jihoon-nie?” Minhyun asked the Rank 1 trainee.

“I know that the fans would like me to do ‘Oh Little Girl’ but I’m dearly hoping the ‘Tarantallegra’ performance would convince them that I can be sexy, too,” The aegyo prince ignored the condescending snort from Seongwoo. “I’d like to be in ‘Never’, though.”

Jonghyun couldn’t help but ask. “That’s a surprise, you will do well in ‘Oh Little Girl’ but the song from Tri—,” The Angel Leader bit off his words before he could utter the producer’s name (Drastic consequences if he did slip, Jonghyun bit his lip). “I mean, ‘Never’ had a different vibe than ‘Tarantallegra’. If you wanted the sexy concept, you could go to ‘Open Up’ or ‘I Know You Know’. So, what attracted you to the song?”

“I don’t know,” Jihoon shrugged. “But I just felt the choreography and stage of the song would be dramatic and beautiful. The chorus would be phenomenal.”

Minhyun and Daniel, the two who wanted to be in ‘Never’ as well, nodded in agreement. The Maroo Entertainment trainee’s insightful analysis made the others think twice, replaying the segment of ‘Never’ again and again, before shifting boats within the span of ten minutes.

The concept evaluations would happen now, regardless of Bae Jinyoung’s incredulity at the sooner-than-expected start of evaluations. Jihoon was about to open his mouth when BoA sunbaenim entered the stage dressed in pristine white blazer and pencil skirt with her cue cards in hand.

The concept evaluations went well as expected: they got to see the introductory footage of each song gifted by talented producers and their equally-famous works.

Kiggen and ASSBRASS’ produced hiphop song ‘Oh Little Girl’ roused the trainees with its addicting tempo and soft, light vocals. Jonghyun risked a glance at the two maknaes on his other side, wondering if Jihoon and Jinyoung would do the same evaluation concept this time around.

Veethoven and ASHTRAY’s ‘Show Time’ was a crowd-pleaser with its Nu Disco genre and fun choreography with the air guitar strumming and mic stand solos. Devine Channel got the amazement of the crowd with their notable collaborations with Bangtan Sonyeondan’s ‘Fire’ and VIXX’ ‘Fantasy’ before the Future EDM-genre took a sexy turn with the compelling ‘Open Up’ and its equally-seductive choreography.

The hype increased even further with the appearance of the retro-infused trio from Cube Entertainment Triple H with their Deep House masterpiece ‘Never’ and its emotionally beautiful lyrics and dramatic choreography, and the famous producer Hyuk Shin, who composed Justin Bieber’s ‘One Less Lonely Girl’ and produced EXO’s top-ranking hit ‘Growl’, taking the Synth Pop/Funk genre to a higher level of vocals and choreography with ‘I Know You Know’.

They were excited to perform any song in the list; however personal preferences could not be avoided as most of the trainees literally had stars in their eyes at the lyrical deep house song
‘Never’. Most of the trainees were gunning for the song and the famous HyunA sunbaenim’s touch in it and the Angel Leader caught quite a few speculative glances from the others as they put two and two together.

Obviously, the most popular trainees would choose the most popular song. It was how the trainees from Season 1 picked their concept evaluation song and everyone thought it’d be the same thing for this season.

Oh, how wrong they were as the Nation’s Representative explained how the songs would be divided amongst the trainees.

“For this season, the concept evaluations songs each have trainees that were handpicked by our Nation’s Producers,” At this, he heard stifled groans from the trainees. “Based on what suits you best, whether it’s by vocals or dance, so I expect that each trainee would find the song suitable for your range or your dancing and rapping abilities.”

“Doubt it,” Kim Sanggyun muttered under his breath and Jonghyun could not fault the trainee for his pessimistic outlook of the show.

“However,” BoA sunbaenim pulled out the familiar blue cue card from behind the normal-looking white ones. “We changed a bit in the rules of concept evaluations.”

Jonghyun should be worried that he was apathetic to Produce 101’s pimped shenanigans, but he was just tired of fighting something he couldn’t win in. Better do something to up the performances and trending charts, a battleground he was very familiar in, rather than cursing the producers for their admittedly-cunning management, a battle he would definitely lose at with no men to make a dent on the corporation’s reputation.

“Due to the massive reception of the viewers from the live performances and promotional activity of Produce 101 trainees, the Nation’s Producers went into a voting system on how the benefit points should go. The winning teams of concept evaluations, for the onsite and online voting system, shall be rewarded—”

The emcee broke off from her script and called out a surprised Seonho. “What do you think is the reward for the winning teams?”

“3,000 points?”

“Hmm. Close. But,” BoA sunbaenim stretched the word before smiling. “I believe I should hold off that announcement for the next eliminations.”

Way to pull the rug out from under them, Jonghyun could only shake his head in defeat. In case Mnet goes down the drain, their script writers would serve as their salvation against the pitfall.

“Unfortunately, there had been voting manipulations,” BoA looked up from her cue card, face void of expression. “And drastic consequences must be sanctioned for such transgression.”

The Angel Leader tensed.

“Kiwi Media Group Kim Dongbin, 2Y Entertainment Lee Kiwon, MMO Entertainment Joo Jinwoo, please stay behind after the evaluations.”

Jonghyun felt disappointed, not with the trainees but with himself. It seems his reach did not extend as far as he thought it would. The others refrained from glancing at the aforementioned names but Jonghyun gave an encouraging nod at the three trainees, fully aware on how brutal the competition
was and acknowledging their chance to stand back up from their mistakes. Jonghyun was only happy to see the people beside him follow his lead and turn to give a smile towards the discouraged trainees.

BoA soon called them by random, calling Lee Gunhee first followed by Hong Eunki. Soon, half the trainees’ number were called before Park Jihoon was called up front. Jihoon looked confused at what the envelope said before he walked down the stage and out the room. Kang Daniel was next and was asked about his reaction to being the Rank 2 trainee for the sixth episode.

“You’ve been popular since the group battles Kang Daniel yeonsusaeng, consistently going up the ranks.”

Jonghyun smiled at his friend. Daniel was a rarity in the industry because he was the adaptable kind. Even if ‘Get Ugly’ and the remaining performances were not aired yet, the Fancam King’s fanbase was ever growing with each televised episode and more screen times. The Angel Leader had no doubts that the MMO trainee would debut in Wanna One again.

“I am happy about it,” Daniel shyly nodded.

“Well, I hope you’d stay in a high ranking after the concept evaluations. Now, off you go.”

Daniel pocketed the envelope and jogged out the door.

“Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng, come on up.”

Jonghyun really wanted to know just exactly who he had pissed off in the first timeline. The intuitions that he came to reconcile as an uncomfortable yet nifty trick developed and honed in the years of being in the top tier of the idol industry usually only tingles in warning, but now it was all horns, trumpets, and marching bands creating havoc in his mind as he waited in the room ‘D’ with half of the past ‘Never’ Team.

And Park Jihoon.

The Angel Leader did not hesitate to open the door because he was so certain that the same trainees were in room ‘D’, which happened to be the same room that ‘Never’ Team was assigned in.

Only to get the surprise of his life when he entered a room when he saw the mousy curls seated above the startled face of the Rank 1 trainee.

The Angel Leader only had three answers on what title song was hidden behind the pink sticker: ‘Oh Little Girl’, ‘Open Up’ or ‘Never’.

The hiphop song was just preposterous for a rapper like him and the sexy concept could probably work but the absence of Kang Daniel, the personification of ‘Yeoreojo’, removed some possibility of their song being ‘Open Up’. The most possible concept that both of them could work with was ‘Never’ but there was a teeny-tiny bit of a drawback that they just managed to destabilize the status quo of the competition with Park Jihoon and Kim Jonghyun and the highest-ranked trainees grouped for the concept evaluations.

The sarcasm was practically oozing from his thoughts.

Jihoon had the same idea. “Well, this changes things. Getting paired with you Jaehwan-nie hyung was a possibility,” The main vocalist shrugged. “Guanlin-nie, I can definitely see the appeal,” The

The Angel Leader choked out a laugh. “You think?”

Rolling his eyes, Jihoon leaned his head against the wall. “Ha-ha, very funny. Seriously though, I’m happy you’re with me in the concept evaluations but you just ruled out the possible concept song we’ve been thinking about.”

“But you should probably tell us if you have something more hidden under that unbelievably large sleeve of yours, hyung,” Daehwi snorted. “As of now a cutesy and youthful concept doesn’t seem like a good prospect for us, but you’re full of surprises, Jonghyun-nie hyung.”

Jaehwan nodded in agreement.

They were interrupted by a muted thud from the door. Jihoon raised an eyebrow when Ong Seongwoo entered the room with a flourish. The Fantagio trainee looked surprised at the weird lineup of trainees staring at him with the same befuddled expression on their faces.

“And I rest my case.”

Jonghyun was still reeling at the changes in the concept evaluations. He was positive that Jihoon would be in ‘Oh Little Girl’ room and not ‘Never’ or whatever concept song this room was assigned in. Minhyun-nie arrived in the room, followed by Lim Youngmin, Joo Haknyeon, Park Woojin, Yoo Seonho, and Ha Seongwoon. The last of the trainees earned some pursed lips from a dissatisfied Ong Seongwoo but that was largely ignored by the Angel Leader for more pressing reasons.

It was almost the same lineup but the significant change that Park Jihoon brought into the lineup with his huge presence disgruntled quite a few trainees, particularly Haknyeon and Seongwoon, when they realized just who were in their midst.

They had more than half of the current Top 11 trainees with Park Jihoon in Rank 1, him in 3, Ong Seongwoo in 4, Hwang Minhyun in 6, Lee Daehwi in 7, Lai Guanlin in 9, Kim Jaehwan in 10, and Lim Youngmin in 11.

So many single-ranked digits, Jonghyun bit his lip, and it was probably a good thing that Seongwoon hyung remained his calm even at the chance of having to face Seongwoo once again.

They were twelve now and after the surprise eliminations, cutting the numbers to thirty-five, he’d have to choose seven from the twelve talented trainees which made the Angel Leader incredibly wary of that part of the concept evaluations.

One of the staffs got the trainees’ attention. “You may remove the sticker for your evaluation song.”

Minhyun volunteered to do the honors with Jaehwan and Jihoon cheering him on. The Hwanggallyang coughed in embarrassment before pinching the top right corner and slowly dragging it down, peeling the adhesive while the others did a countdown.

Well.

What do you know.
It seems he was destined for ‘Never’ after all.

The selection of the two centers was the most headache-inducing moment he had gotten in both Produce 101, and that included the time he had to deal with ‘Super Hot’ Team and him facing everyone after his subsequent elimination from the show. He knew that having a star-studded team, full of talented singers, dancers, and rappers, would cause quite a commotion amongst the viewers and within the show, but, seriously, six centers?

Grant him the patience for this.

The first to raise his hand was Minhyun which was a surprise to everyone except Jonghyun. It may seem that the trainee was trying to compete with his younger teammates but that wasn’t the case because Jonghyun knew Minhyun-nie for far too long not to notice how the trainee connected to the song on a deeper level. Minhyun wanted to be center, not for the attention but for the chance to be the lead character portrayed in the poignant lyrics of ‘Never’.

Seongwoon hyung argued his vocal abilities would be catered best as the center of the song, while Haknyeon wanted to be center again. Guanlin tentatively raised a hand, saying he wanted to try being the center of the song because of the emotions. Jihoon raised a hand, shrugging that he had no profound reason other than wanting to try. Seongwoo didn’t back down from the challenge, shooting his arm up to volunteer for center.

The others who didn’t try to be center looked conflicted at the six powerful contenders for the position. Woojin rapidly nervously looked back and forth with each face while Daehwi didn’t hide his exasperation from the cameras and rolled his eyes at Jihoon’s imploring face.

Jonghyun coughed. “Well. We have quite a few candidates for the center position. The six of you, please, exit the room first.”

Seongwoo shrugged before ushering the others out.

The room was tense in silence before Seonho exhaled. “I’ve never seen half of the team vying for center position.”

“Oh, trust me,” Daehwi deadpanned. “That’s nothing new, you should’ve seen our ‘Boy in Luv’ Team.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Jonghyun raised his voice a little. “We have to decide for two centers for our teams. Since we have three viable centers each, and to avoid favoritism, then we’ll choose the center for the other team. Jaehwan-nie, Seonho-yah, we need to pick from their team: Guanlin-nie, Seongwoon hyung, and Haknyeon-nie,”

“Okay, hyung,” Jaehwan gave a thumbs-up before starting a discussion with a serious Seonho.

“Youngmin-ah, you’re the leader for the other team, yes?” The BNM trainee quietly whispered an affirmative. “Then your team would need to choose amongst our members: Jihoon-nie, Minhyun-nie, and Seongwoo-ah.”

The BNM Boys looked at each other before nodding.

“Alright, the audition will take place now.”

They sang the hook verse with the whispered “Never” before the chorus. Seongwoon hyung did
well, his vocal prowess was no joke. Seongwoo increased the emotion with his rendition of the song. Jihoon-nie tried to exude masculinity in the killing verse and his vocals greatly improved, as noted by Daehwi. Haknyeon-nie sang well but lacked the emotion needed for such a dramatic piece. Guanlin-nie channeled the strong persona he did for ‘Fear’. Minhyun-nie outdid himself with his vocals and dramatization of a pining lover.

After their piece, the six trainees went out the room while the judges congregated in two circles. Jaehwan and Seonho picked Guanlin for Youngmin’s team while the BNM Boys picked Minhyun for the center position. Seongwoo and Jihoon just shrugged and patted the centers on the shoulder with a pleasant smile. Jonghyun was worried though when Seongwoon hyung and Haknyeon looked a bit too strained at their loss.

The practices went well for both teams. The balance of having the dancers and singers divided evenly between the teams was a good move for ‘Never’ team. Jonghyun had Jihoon-nie and Seongwoo with him as the dancers while Minhyun, Jaehwan, and Seonho divided the vocal lines. Meanwhile, Youngmin-a h had his fellow BNM trainees for dance, Guanlin for rap, and Seongwoon hyung and Haknyeon taking the reins for vocals. Jonghyun should credit Woojin-nie for being perceptive enough to immediately pulling Seongwoon hyung away with their team, and away from Jonghyun’s team where Seongwoo was.

The choreography remained the same in the first timeline which eased the Angel Leader’s burden a bit as he focused on helping both teams get accustomed with the numerous placement switches and twirls in the chorus part. The turn and jump took quite a while before Seonho and Daehwi mastered it but their overall progress was relatively fast than the other concept teams.

During lunchtime, the Angel Leader was accosted by a frantic Daniel in the lavatories.

“Hyung, I can’t do this.” The blue-haired trainee wrung his hair. “I’m the only one who’s a dancer! Can you help me, hyung? I thought ‘Get Ugly’ Team was hard but this is harder!”

Daniel was having a hard time with ‘Open Up’ Team, what with their roster having the vocally-oriented trainees in it, but Jonghyun wanted his brother to learn how to lead, all the ups and downs with it, because the leader was certain Kang Daniel would debut as Wanna One and he’d need the leadership skills soon enough.

Jonghyun bit his lip. “It’s going to be okay, Niel-ah. But you do know that I shouldn’t cuddle you all the time, right? I’d check on you but that’s the most I should do.”

The trainee only exhaled a sigh of relief, hugging him in thanks before waving goodbye for their practice.

“Yah! Eat first, Kang Daniel!”

“But hyung!”

“I mean it.”

Jonghyun hid a smile when the trainee rolled his eyes in mock disdain before walking towards the cafeteria. It was a good thing though that he had Kim Taedong, Kim Seonglee, and Kim Donghyun helping him with the difficult choreography of the EDM song while Dongho took the lead for vocal direction.

Donghan had a different problem with ‘I Know You Know’. A few hours after, the Kings’ Maknae knocked on their practice room and called him for help. Even if the song was not as dance-oriented
as ‘Open Up’, the song needed power vocals for it to work. They had too many dancers to begin with.

“It’s a nightmare, hyung,” Donghan moaned as he banged his head on the wall. “I don’t want to pressure Yehyun, but he’s our best vocalist and he’s doing admirably well in leading us dancers with the vocals. But I’m scared he’d crack soon, hyung, and I don’t want that.”

Jonghyun gently stopped the trainee from losing more brain cells with a firm hand. “Okay, first, stop doing that or you’d forget your choreography,” Ignoring the horrified look, he pressed on. “Second, you have to help Yehyun-nie, Donghan. Moaning about it and worrying over something that would not happen if you tried to ease his burden is worthless now, don’t you think?”

“But I’m no vocal, hyung.”

Jonghyun patted the trainee’s shoulder. “You don’t need to be as good as your Jaehwan-nie hyung in order to sing. Some people are born to do that but that doesn’t mean you can’t learn, right? The best thing I could suggest is to help your team members master the song well. I believe soft vocals will work with the song better than power-belting through it.” The Angel Leader smiled at the memory of the team giving justice to the song with their bright vocals.

Jonghyun was not overly worried for ‘I Know You Know’ Team because they had good rappers like Woo Jinyoung and Hyunbin, and they did have ‘Spring Day’ Team’s Kim Yehyun. The absence of powerful vocalists was a slight hindrance because most of them were distributed in the other teams, most notably ‘Show Time’ and ‘Oh Little Girl’, but the Angel Leader believed in his fellow trainees’ capabilities.

‘Show Time’ and ‘Oh Little Girl’ were more stable than the two aforementioned teams because of their impressive lineup. They had ‘If It Was You’ members Park Woodam and Yoo Hoseong-ie for vocals; power rappers Kim Sanggyun, Kim Sangbeen, and Jeong Dongsu; and ‘Shape of You’ members Kim Samuel and Noh Taehyun for dance line.

The latter team did not lack in all aspects of the performance as well. The ‘Oh Little Girl’ Team had Minki-yah to lead them as one of their centers and their team had tough trainees for vocals, dance, and rap. Lee Gunhee, ranked first for vocal positions, topped the vocalists with Jung Sewoon and ‘Downpour’ Team’s Takada Kenta soon following. They also had rank 1 dancer Ahn Hyeongsop and ‘Shape of You’ Team’s Justin and Jung Jung in their roster. Rappers were abundant in the concept team, with Lee Euiwoong and Jang Moonbok taking most of the attention.

So, no, Jonghyun didn’t need to worry for both the teams. He had faith that everyone would ace the concept evaluations.

Choi Minki had no illusions on the reason why they were back in Pledis Entertainment. The last time he had seen any of the administrators or company staff there were barely any goodbyes or good luck wishes, aside from the select few that he’d gotten close to in the years he stayed in the company. Now they were being greeted with a welcoming committee and a buffet for lunch.

Aron hyung subtly squeezed his arm. Play nice.

The oldest member of NU’EST and the official Pledis representative for Produce 101, as stated by Jonghyun-ah, gave them some heads-up as soon as they went inside the company van at six o’clock in a Saturday morning.
“We’re going to a meeting with Sajangnim.”

Dongho blinked twice. “Say what now?”

Minki didn’t need the flowering words that their president told his representative to tell them, such as “You are doing well in the competition” or “The CEO wanted to congratulate you” and some other bullshit that even his hyung did not believe.

“There’s something wrong.”

The silence was unnerving but the maknae did not look away from the still Kwak Aron, even with the drilling gaze poking to his left. Minhyun and Dongho looked equally surprised.

It was a few tense minutes before Aron hyung conceded with a sigh. “I just can’t get past you, Minki-yah, can I?”

The man turned to his other side before looking at them with a serious expression. “Look, just so we’re clear, there’s nothing wrong with you or the company or NU’EST—”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Minhyun put a hand on his chest.

“—But it could lead to a disaster if we don’t plan to take actions for it.”

That wiped off the relieved smile on the visual’s face.

Minki had an idea on what Aron hyung was referring to. He wasn’t blind nor oblivious as he glanced at the three other members of their group. With Dongho, Minhyun, and most especially Jonghyun frequently ranking high in the charts, the latter two still within the Top 5 weeks after their performance in the group battles, it was no surprise that the chance of NU’EST ever doing a comeback as a complete unit was little to none.

Kang Dongho was a crowd-favorite since his fancam in ‘Boy in Luv’ blew over the internet and the ‘Sexy Bandit’ tag stuck to him until now. But whatever fame Dongho got from his performances and sexy-guy aura paled in comparison to what Hwang Minhyun and Kim Jonghyun had as the legendary Kings.

Minhyun-nie was the Hwanggallyang of Produce 101, the person responsible for the formation of arguably the strongest team to be formed in the whole competition. Then the ‘Downpour’ performance knocked everyone out. He was there with the other vocal teams, watching with amazement as the team made the impossible happen: rain on a live stage. The second half of the episode was aired yesterday and most of the trainees congregated in one of the training rooms to watch the episode in peace. The camera work did the stage justice and the ‘Playing with Fire’ center knew that Minhyun-nie’s ‘Ninano’ Team slayed the fancams.

But Minki knew deep down that his leader and the Nation’s Angel Leader’ Kim Jonghyun stole everyone’s hearts with his heart-stopping lyrics in the ‘Fear’ stage.

Which scared him more than he thought it would, because he had the strangest feeling that the leader was being pulled from so many places and Choi Minki had no fucking idea on what he was supposed to do.

“What the hell do you mean it would turn to a disaster?”

“Exactly what I said. The aired second half of position evaluations and the result of concept evaluations trended once again and you’ve gotten even more famous than you did before with the
full footage of your raining stage.”

Minhyun frowned, his tone going down to a harder edge. “Then isn’t that a good thing? We’re achieving what we’ve come to accomplish in the damn show, hyung, so forgive me if I say I can’t see the bigger picture here.”

“True,” The man slowly nodded. “The boss wanted to do an experiment with us as ‘reversal idols’ and it went well.”

“See? Then why—”

“Unfortunately, it went too well.”

Dongho had enough. He pushed down the incensed idol from rising in his seat. “Minhyun-nie, stop for a second,” Dongho turned to Aron hyung. “Start talking, hyung.”

“The groupings of the concept evaluations garnered quite a few fan wars, overlapping whatever miracle you did with ‘Downpour’ stage.”

Minki exchanged a glance with Dongho. It was the first time all of NU’EST met in one place and the warning bells in his head rang wild. They painstakingly avoided any controversy with Mnet and their debuted-idol status by pretending they had a professional, almost-alof relationship with each other. The fact that their CEO called them for a meeting in the company was the proverbial slap to the producers’ faces, not to mention important if their oldest member and official Pledis Entertainment representative for Produce 101 set an emergency meeting a few hours ago.

Minki chuckled darkly. “Any casualties?”

The vocalist meant that as a morbid half-joke but Aron hyung maintained a no-nonsense expression. “A lot. This time, it came from the fanbases of your members.” He pointed to Minhyun and the quiet Jonghyun.

Minhyun frowned. “Our team?”

“Let me ask you this: how many popular trainees do you have?”

“Uh, twelve, so I guess that’s everyone,” Minhyun immediately answered.

“Right. So, your team has half the members of the famous Kings’ Team, half of top competitor ‘Avengers’ Team, half of the so-called Dance Moguls of ‘Get Ugly’—I could go on but I think that’s a lot of halves if I do say so myself. Now tell me, how many top-ranked trainees does the other teams have?”

The Kings’ Hwanggallyang’s eyes widened in horror.

“You get my point now, yes?” Aron hyung nodded. “The viewers saw how the powers shifted drastically with eight out of eleven top trainees in one group and that led to fans clashing with each other. Although most of them loved the fact that their ultimate favorites got into the same team for the evaluations but the fact still remained that only half would make it like what happened with season 1.”

Aron hyung sipped on his coffee. "Hence, the fan wars. You wouldn't believe how many emails we got from fans that wanted to petition a reshuffling of teams with NU’EST members taking over a concept song, because if it was possible to group Top 11 together, then NU’EST being grouped together is not impossible as well."
"Normally, I’d be thrilled at the chance, but there would be a larger backlash with that, I’ve no doubt.” Minki grimaced.

Minki thought it was just the possibility of them not doing a comeback as a whole but he was wrong, oh so wrong.

Which was why he had to tell his leader before everything goes to hell after the meeting they had with Sajangnim.

“Jonghyun-ah.”

The young leader turned back to his approaching form, smile not quite reaching his eyes.

“Oh, Minki-yah, is there something I can do—”

“Remember what you said to me on the eve of March 14, 2012?”

Silence.

“I do,” came the soft reply.

He nodded squarely. “Then you know what I mean. I’ll see you in the dormitories tonight.”

Choi Minki was not a religious person, but at that moment he prayed.

That his leader and brother would come out of everything unscathed.

Their meeting with their CEO went amicably well with future plans with NU’EST as a sub-unit in the case that one or more of them debuts in I.O.I. Dongho would continue as a producer, Minhyun would try to promote solo activities and a possible drama project in the works, and Ren had various offers as a variety host and as a model for cosmetic brands as their boss was banking on their maknae doing well in SNL Korea later this evening and getting the right publicity for it.

Jonghyun noticed however that the CEO avoided discussing his plans with him and the slight did not escape his members. They dearly wanted to ask what Pledis would do for their leader but a warning glance shot towards them by said leader halted their tongues.

Kim Jonghyun, tough and cunning future CEO of HMG Media, should’ve known it was just the calm before the storm. Well, if he could call the subtle but powerful changes in the concept evaluations the “calm before the storm” but semantics aside, he had to face larger obstacles at the moment, alone.

Kim Yeonsoo, current President of Pledis Entertainment, succeeded Han Sungsoo Sajangnim and his experience told him that the guy was more aware of his surroundings than their previous CEO. Wilier and with far more grit, Kim Yeonsoo Sajangnim was a raging tiger compared to the domesticated wolf that Han Sungsoo was.

Truth to be told, Jonghyun was divided on what he should say. On one hand, he knew the boss was responsible for having the girls persuade Dongho to join the show. He was also aware that it was his boss that granted them sponsorship for their aesthetics on stage. But on the other hand, Pledis was the primary reason why CJ E&M was taking drastic measures to every aspect of the show.

He was proud that he kept his voice even and composed. “You called for me, Sajangnim.”
“Ah, yes, I have been meaning to talk to you and this was the most opportune time to do so.” The president leaned back on his chair. “You have made the headlines with your skills.”

*Straight to the point,* Jonghyun nodded. “I did the best I could with my years of experience as an idol.”

“So, you did,” The placid gaze sharpened. “However proficient you are in rapping, dancing, and lyrical composition, I am much more interested at the, let us say, *unknown crevices* of your talents.”

“It has been a life lesson of mine to continue learning and honing skills that I have acquired or may need to acquire in the future as stagnancy would only lead to ill-fated events that I would have prevented if not for my ignorance and pride.”

With narrowed eyes, the CEO of *Pledis Entertainment* leaned forward. “Then you should be aware that your talent in creative direction and stage design caught the attention of quite a few wolves around the block, yes?”

Jonghyun curtly nodded. “CJ E&M contacted me three days ago with a contract.”

“And?”

“I refused.”

The president looked slightly taken aback. “That is the biggest surprise I have heard this day. But why? In three months, your contract with us will expire and you’d be without any agency to back you up.”

It took all of his will to maintain a calm composure. “Then so be it.”

It was silent for a moment before the president recovered from the stilted response of his now-most bankable artist.

“It seems you have finally grown a backbone, Kim Jonghyun. Normally, I would not tolerate such insubordination,” Kim Yeonsoo pushed his glasses up. “But I admit to being curious as to what your newly-grown sass and cunning would bring to my company.”

“We have many idols and soloists and a few but talented in-house producers with Bumzu, NU’EST’s Baekho, and SEVENTEEN’s Woozi. But creative direction and stage design are unique commodities in the idol industry and having those skills brought out for everyone to see would attract attention from other companies like, say, moths to a flame.”

The insinuation was not lost to the *Angel Leader.*

“True, but what is there for them to do? I have a group to get back to.”

The tensed atmosphere in the room lightened considerably. The president’s serious expression shifted to a more welcoming one. “I see. Your new contract would be ready by the time you finish promotions in *Produce 101.*”

A while ago, the others were discussing the possible repercussions of having uneven teams for such a critical evaluation like concept evaluations, and now the CEO was heavily implicating the aftermath of the competition and its direct effect to future NU’EST activities. Jonghyun could not concentrate on both things.
This was what he feared: the backlash of them disregarding the unspoken rule against banding top trainees in one team. In the first timeline, ‘Never’ Team had a powerful lineup of trainees and they got praises from everyone for their powerful performance even if they didn’t win the benefit votes. Maintaining Number 1 in nine major digital charts and achieving a Perfect-All-Kill for three weeks straight, ‘Never’ Team was arguably regarded as the legendary performance of the season.

This timeline, though, had a lot more complications than what he faced before. The scales have been tipped over and Jonghyun didn’t know what to do. It wasn’t Jihoon-nie’s fault nor was it the Nation's Producers', and Jonghyun could not find it in him to blame anyone for the disaster that was waiting to happen.

But if they vote the same way they did before, then the reactions would be tremendous…

Jonghyun narrowed his eyes in determination.

It could work. It has to.

“If I may, Sajangnim?”

“Hmm, yes?!”

“I have a counter-proposal for you,” At this, the Angel Leader pulled out the folder he had been keeping from everyone since he came back to the past.

The president of Pledis Entertainment thought he knew the first male trainee that Sungsoo hyung brought into their company almost a decade ago but the papers in his hand was conclusive proof that he severely underestimated the young boy from Gangwon. The stage designs he received from Kwak Aron was ostentatious and expensive to a fault but he could see the advantages it could bring to the company if he were to invest to such massive stage productions.

“I will talk to our lawyers and board of directors about this.”

Jonghyun smiled lightly before bowing and calmly walking out the door.

Fantagio was all for it as well as Cube and their major shareholders were so happy with the immense fanbase that the idols they once called failures were getting from the show that they had no problems shelling out millions of won to make the creative direction of one Kim Jonghyun possible. With how the job was done by someone they didn’t need to pay and their assets increasing with the highly-publicized show, it wouldn’t surprise Kim Yeonsoo if they agreed to what their most viable asset was proposing.

He won’t pull Kim Jonghyun out of Mnet’s clawed clutches like he initially planned. The papers in his hand only proved that Kim Jonghyun was doing spectacularly well as a consistent hot issue since the group battles with him arguably the most talented trainee with his lyrical composition, visual direction and stylist from the aesthetics, and now a stage designer of ‘Produce 101’. What made it worthwhile for him was his consistency in showing the viewers how incompetent and unfair the show truly was with him and his “baby trainees” doing most of the work.

It was also the show management’s carelessness that they conveniently forgot that their fabricated persona of a trainee who single-handedly raised their show to unparalleled heights with his experience as a failed idol and compassion in leadership was also the real Onibugi Leader of NU’EST, a soft-spoken leader who just happened to have the cunning to use his thick armor to savagely ram their heads in with absolutely no fear in doing so.

Hence, Mnet can suck their balls for all he cared. They’d be getting the pot of gold in the end.
anyway.

Because CJ E&M wouldn’t be able to stop them.

“Hyung! Can you help me with the choreography?”

“Just give me a sec, Daehwi-ah. Okay, Haknyeon-nie, jut your right foot forward and—”

“Jonghyun-ah, Niel-ah’s here!”

“I’ll be right there in a moment. Now, the sequence goes like this, you can follow Seonho-ah—”

“Uh, Jonghyun hyung, I have a question about the rap distribution.”

“Oh, hey, Jihoon-nie. Mind waiting for a second? We’re about to finish with the third verse.”

Jaehwan stood calmly in the midst of all the chaos that descended upon the ‘Never’ Team. He wasn’t stupid, he knew the peaceful quo they had before was savagely cut after the variety group guested in *SNL Korea*. The variety trainee for the popular show were the most iconic crowd-pleasers in the show. They had Lee Gunhee, Byun Hyunmin, Lee Yoojin, Park Woodam, Jang Moonbok, and Kim Yongjin in the roster with Yoon Jiseong and Choi Minki leading the group. Between the two trainees Jaehwan had no doubts that the show would be a riot already.

The guesting was going well with the trainees showcasing talent in variety skits and the hosts applauding their live performances and doing a rendition of the notable stages like ‘Downpour’, ‘Amazing Kiss’, and ‘Right Round’.

Then the show went downhill.

The *Kings’ Vocal Hard-Carry* should’ve known that such a satirical variety show should be, well, sardonic in their invasive questions to the trainees. The rest of ‘Never’ Team was huddled in a circle, watching the show on the tablet in Daehwi’s lap at 11:15 in the evening, and the horrified looks on everyone’s faces depicted the outrageous turn of events when the hosts loosely parodied some of the aired scenes that made the headlines, only it was wrapped in thinly-veiled sarcasm that made their fellow trainees uncomfortably laughing to keep up with the pretenses.

Jaehwan was relieved that Minki hyung was there to help.

The veteran idol was unbelievably unruffled at the questions and valiantly helped the others when they had a difficult time answering without coming off as arrogant or stupid. Choi Minki sat in the middle of the group, right between Gunhee and Yoojin, but the others frequently gave him questioning glances before they answered the question or joined the conversation. Jiseong hyung was also a great help because he got louder and more loose-mouthed as he blurted out inane comments or personal instances to turn the situation back to him after the hosts referred to an article about Kim Yongjin and his alleged nose surgery and Byun Hyunmin’s talents only lying in his acrobatic skills.

“Are they always so…” Woojin trailed off in dismay.

“Mean?” Haknyeon helpfully supplied.

Guanlin nervously wringed his fingers. “I don’t think I want to do variety shows after this.”
“No, don’t think like that, Guanlin hyung,” Seonho lightly implored.

Jaehwan was watching the reactions of the older members of the team. Seongwoo hyung looked serious as he sent meaningful glances to Minhyun-nie hyung and Youngmin-nie hyung. The three grew closer with each other and were sometimes seen together in the cafeteria, laughing and having fun with being VJs for ‘Never’ Team with the younger trainees.

The show went even further when Kim Jonghyun’s name got brought up in the impromptu skit. Everyone turned towards the team leader, gauging his reaction. But Jonghyun-nie hyung’s unreadable expression sent warning bells on the independent trainee’s mind.

The segment on SNL Korea ended on an ambiguous note but the damage had been done. With their leader’s name getting dragged like that, the team banded together to keep anyone away. The Angel Leader waved off the indirect insult, placating Daehwi and Seonho that the skit meant to be satirical and not offensive, but they did not listen. Not that they wanted to because the guy needed all the protection he could get from risking his neck all the time for them.

He heard this from Minhyun-nie hyung in their weekly meeting with the Kings’ Team. Their leader was notably absent for some reason and Jaehwan was relieved that was the case because if not then he wouldn’t have heard the gist of what was really happening outside their training rooms.


“No, I’m not. Which is why you all should be really careful from now on. The eyes of the public are on us and a misstep could lead to disastrous consequences.”

Jaehwan knew this to be true. He overheard some of the staff talking about some of the companies taking steps to counter Mnet. As to why they’d do that he didn’t have a clue, but the bottom-line was still drawn on them helping the Angel Leader as best as they could even if he didn’t want them to intervene on his behalf.

Which was why their team had to watch over their Angel Leader everywhere he went. The episode was deleted immediately but the trainees watched the variety show during its airing and they too were horrified and incensed at what happened. The SNL group was traumatized, and if not for Jonghyun-nie hyung and Minki hyung, they’d probably be hiding in their rooms right now.

The ‘Never’ Team did not stop the other trainees from entering their training room. Their leader must be drowning in so many things right now, doing so much even for a six-year idol, but they knew that Kim Jonghyun could help them and they were not that selfish to restrict the others from finding some peace in the chaos that was promotional activity.

---

Mnet To Support Pledis Entertainment in Legal Action Against ‘SNL Korea’ for Mistreatment Towards ‘Produce 101’ Trainees

May 21, 2017 12:46 KST

Popular reality survival show ‘Produce 101’ and its parent conglomerate CJ E&M also plan to file contempt against the hosts of ‘SNL Korea’ for slanderous and ill-willed skit content portraying the
trainees of ‘Produce 101’. Fans of notable trainees like Pledis Entertainment Choi Minki, MMO Entertainment Yoon Jiseong, Rainbow Bridge World Lee Gunhee, and Namoo Actors Lee Yoojin were in uproar at the poor and inconsiderate treatment of the management towards the trainees who had their first guesting on the variety show. The survival show that aimed to create the representative boyband of South Korea earned numerous fans across the country and in foreign lands had thousands of fans flooding the trend sites and tvN’s network headquarters with petition to suspend the hosts and staff involved in the script writing.

Pledis Entertainment CEO Kim Yeonsoo recently filed violation of privacy and bullying against ‘SNL Korea’ management and TV network tvN, a subsidiary of CJ E&M company, for unjustly dragging Pledis Entertainment trainee Kim Jonghyun’s name in the skit, immorally objectifying Pledis Entertainment trainee Choi Minki, and invasively prying on sensitive matters for all the trainees who guested or were also unfairly mentioned in the segment.

Produce 101 Season 2 PD Ahn Joonyoung released a statement in behalf of CJ E&M regarding the issue and Pledis Entertainment's actions, “We are in the process of investigating the incident with our TV network and the administrators before we filed contempt against the perpetrators. We are firm in our stand with justice and fairness and are against any form of bullying towards and from our artists. We dearly apologize to the fans, to the companies of the trainees currently signed in our management for ‘Produce 101, and to the trainees who was subjected to such ridicule and unfairness.”

The hosts of ‘SNL Korea’ have recently released an apology video in V Live and their social media accounts. There have not been any official statements from the other companies nor the rest of the trainees currently adjoined in the second season of Mnet's ‘Produce 101’.

Jonghyun put the tablet down with a sigh.

*It’s starting.*
“So,” Kwak Aron trailed off, eyes unusually sharp as he studied the expressions flitting on his dongsaeng’s face. “You’re trending, yet again.”

“I know.”

“Tsk. The number of times you’ve got the media’s attention in roughly three months as a trainee than in all of the years you’ve been an idol is just ridiculous.”

The official representative of Pledis Entertainment leaned back on the couch that had been his home since the time he was sent to watch over the show. The barista did not even blink when he entered the doors and ordered his usual drink and pastry before proceeding to seat at one of the hidden couches near the corner. But the woman did a double-take when the Nation’s Leader went inside half an hour later, looking impeccable and bright at eight in the morning.

Kwak Aron smirked in amusement. Trust the guy to attract people, even if the woman frequently saw them in one place, and be oblivious about it.

In front of him, Kim Jonghyun grimaced at the awful bitterness of double-shot espresso sans milk and any sugar that would cause him to crash halfway through the day. He was not an avid coffee drinker but there were select times wherein his head was throbbing painfully and no amount of calming tea could curb it.

This was one of the times he needed more than instant coffee packets and sweet lattes.

“I guess I don’t really need to ask how bad it is, right?”

“You haven’t seen the news?”

Jonghyun gave him a look.

Aron raised a bushy eyebrow before he conceded in resignation. “Fine, be like that. The outside world is a bit messed up now but it depends on how you look at it. On the other side, CJ E&M’s been doing damage control ever since the episode was aired and they’ve been facing the angry mob for two days now. Even the unaffected agencies demand corresponding compensation. On your side, the trainees of Produce 101 have never been as much of a hot issue as you all are now. The SNL debacle only pushed your fans to rally together and stand behind the “persecuted” trainees, regardless of their bias. It’s a PR’s nightmare, honestly. I haven’t gotten a wink of sleep since...”

Since you’ve made the charts with your unbelievable talents, he wanted to say but the eldest member of NU’EST knew that would only make matters worse.

Jonghyun tiredly rubbed his palm to his face. “Not only you, hyung. I’ve had tenants in our dorms.” The Angel Leader also had no proper sleep after what happened because the ‘Never’ Team dormitories was swamped by the other teams.

The Angel Leader only sighed when he opened the doors to welcome half the trainee’s population in their remotely bigger room. His teammates, who opted to read the new articles and social media posts screen-captured in Naver instead of sleeping after a long day of practice, did not look up at the commotion of almost thirty trainees milling through the room.

“You okay?”
Jonghyun glanced at the person who stood by him for so long. The fox-slitted eyes did not gaze away from his face, reading any sign of distress or sadness. But the disappointment was clear on Minhyun’s aristocratic face when he didn’t see anything aside from the half-lifted smile on his lips and the glacier-like orbs staring back at him. So, he was not surprised that the Hwanggallyang was the one who called Aron hyung in the first place.

Kim Jonghyun had different opinions of what happened in SNL. Granted he was not new to how idols were badly treated sometimes in variety shows but the script writers went a bit too far in their satirical skit. He had no problems with getting caught up in the drama. He was used to it and can handle more than what they said about him but what he couldn’t fathom was how they callously dismissed the other trainees and humiliated them.

Contrary to what the others thought, he was more bothered by what the hosts said towards his brothers than what they said about him. Jonghyun grimaced. He’s heard worse than what the hosts did in vilifying his “idol status” as a tragic failure and their offhand comments on him giving up the idol industry for his more successful stint as a creative director.

He tried to tell this to the incensed Kings’ members and the rest of unit three and to just to let it go. The same could not be said for some of the members of ‘Never’ Team, though. It took Daniel, Seongwoo, and Jaehwan to stop an angry Park Jihoon from unleashing his anger at the producers. And Jihoon would’ve succeeded in throwing off his hyungs if not for Minki’s timely arrival at the training rooms.

Rather, his focus was on what was unsaid. Pledis Entertainment took the cake with their legal action against the network. As if that wasn’t enough, there was no dearth of speculations on the other companies either joining Pledis in keeping Mnet leashed and trained to heel or working to pull out their trainees out of the show because of the bad rep Produce 101 was getting.

“And how’s Kim Yeonsoo Sajangnim taking all this?”

“Milking it for what it’s worth,” Aron hyung smirked, trying to hide the confusion he knew his face was showing after the stilted way Jonghyun addressed their president. “Our dear ol’ company has been making good of the tentative truce they have with the other agencies, rallying them up to conquer big bad CJ E&M. And they’ve been shaking up the media with their, uh, very active, stance since last Saturday.”

“Funny thing, that,” Jonghyun snorted. “The moment someone takes a stand, the rest follows like sheep.”

Aron ignored the condescending tone of Jonghyun. “So, now you’ve done the impossible, Jonghyun-ah, you’ve made the headlines for once, and not just social media trend charts but the news as well. The network may have deleted the episode but there are hundreds of clips now playing in other sites. I believe the episode trended internationally for a whole day and everyone wants to hear something from you and the trainees.”

Jonghyun heaved a deep sigh. “I don’t see the point in releasing a statement, hyung. The hosts and writers apologized, the others just want to forget about it, I want let the matter go, end of story. Why can’t they just back off?”

He sounded tired and drained and Aron was heavily reminded that his leader was dealing with the aftermath of SNL terribly. The promotional activity with SNL Korea started on a promising note and ended in a catastrophe wherein everyone was pointing fingers at anyone who seemed suspicious. The following morning, they were bombarded with news about the hosts possibly getting suspension, tvN under fire for airing the episode, CJ E&M for allowing it in the first place,
death threats, impending boycott—it was utter madness!

Since it was a weekend and the trainees were allowed to use their devices, the young ones did not waste any time in telling the only person they had on speed dial and that can do something about it. Kim Jaehwan and Kang Daniel were the first two to message him in their phones minutes after the segment had ended.

At the time, he was still shocked at what happened in SNL Korea and could only read the text without understanding any of the words. Soon, Ong Seongwoo was flooding his inbox with messages asking for help because their leader-ah was hiding his emotions again. And just few hours ago, when the sun barely up, Minhyun, Minki, and Dongho called him and told him of their worries for Jonghyun-ah, prompting him to check on the guy for everyone’s sake.

Jonghyun may have covered the dark shadows peeking out of his concealer and the unnaturally red lips with lip color from biting onto it but Aron knew his dongsaeng far too long not to notice the leader’s anxiety attacks. The Angel Leader was facing too many responsibilities all at once and the added weight of having to avoid the staff and press camped a kilometer around the perimeter of the trainees’ dormitories, clamoring to get a statement from the man of the hour, was only adding to the burden on Jonghyun’s shoulder.

Kwak Aron sighed. “As much as I wish I could do anything about it, the issue is too big to be ignored. Let’s ignore for one moment that your kids got slandered; even then, the moment they opened their mouths and dragged you and Minki-yah’s names in the mud, it made everything worse because you’ve been in the industry longer than the guest hosts. You may be a Produce 101 trainee now but the disrespect of a hoobaenim to a sunbaenim would not be tolerated.”

“They’re not my kids,” was the weak reply of the Angel Leader to which the NU’EST gave a pointed glare.

“Could’ve fooled me, if I haven’t seen you take care of those kids both in the show and away from the spotlights, then I might’ve taken the bait,” Aron hyung snorted in amusement. “But the problem lies there, Jonghyun-ah, and your fans won’t take this lightly. Either we release a statement...or we let it slowly get washed away.”

“And what do you propose that we do?”

Silence.

Then, “It’s up to you, not me. I’m just here to know your decision for everyone.”

“What?” Jonghyun’s eyes widened.

Aron hyung had a knowing glint in his eyes. “Yep, your kids told their companies that you have decided for them. You’re their leader, right?”

Jonghyun could only exhale a gust of air. He knew that his decision would not only affect him but also the others. Releasing a statement would only make matters worse and he wouldn’t put it past the vultures not to strike an open wound. What’s done is done, he nodded grimly, and talking about it would only be held against them as a weakness to be exploited. However, there’s also the chance that sweeping it under the rug would only add to the mystery of what happened, with no definite answer and tons of speculations, and that was a double-edged sword if he’d seen one.

Jonghyun clicked his jaw shut. “Stay quiet for now. It was a slight that can be overlooked. The trainees are starting to get over it and it wouldn’t help them focus in the evaluations if the issue
gets dragged longer. Let the agencies fight over the issue, we have more important things to do than try to mollify the masses with words.”

“When you could just knock everyone off with your next stage design, I believe?”

Kim Jonghyun did not answer. The Angel Leader only leaned back on his seat, lightly sipping on his coffee as the epitome of casualness and poise.

Aron hyung glared at the leader. “And now that we’re on the topic—You have no idea how hard it is to set the stage to what you have envisioned. Like, seriously, I’ve never worked so hard in my life before!”

“True. You’ve been invaluable to us, hyung, and I couldn’t have done all these without your help,” The sincere expression morphed to a knowing glint in the leader’s bright eyes. “But you’re having fun, right?”

The glare slowly dissipated from the NU’EST member’s face before he sighed in acquiescence. “Fine, yes, it’s nice being able to do all these things. I never thought I’d be good at directing and it’s all thanks to your unbelievable talent in creative direction and stage design that I’ve been able to pitch some of my ideas in. The directors’ faces when they found out I was the one supervising everything was priceless.”

“Hmm.”

“But, still, the stage designs for the concept evaluations—I have no words for it! Your ‘Downpour’ stage can’t hold a candle to them. No wonder Sajangnim didn’t pull you out like he threatened to do before; I’d bet the whole company you’d trend once more after this. You don’t have any more surprises in store, right?” Aron hyung chuckled in humor.

It was silent before Jonghyun pushed a white envelope towards the horrified Kwak Aron.

“No.”

Dammit! He meant that as a joke!

“Yes.”

“Is this—?”

Kim Jonghyun softly waved a hand and murmured, “Be my guest.”

Kwak Aron knew the guy for almost a decade and he was proud to say that he was the first to see the untapped potential beneath the timid layers of one Kim Jonghyun. Ha! Dongho and Minhyun didn’t believe both him and Minki about their leader’s sleeping alter-ego, look where they are now, catching up to the hurricane that was the Angel Leader and just staring dumbly at the how the leader with an unassuming personality practically created the stages and aesthetics the likes of which was only seen from the grandest awards shows.

Aron rushed to read the detailed designs, impeccably written with the familiar scrawl of his brother, and gaped.

“Just…have mercy on the fangirls and fanboys, please?”

He could only throw an accusing glare at the Angel Leader whose bright eyes glinted with veiled mischievousness as he lifted one corner of his cupid-bow lips in a tiny smirk.
Hwang Minhyun knew the calmness was too good to be true.

The following days were...calm.

Unnervingly so.

And the Kings' Hwanggallyang was scared to give it a cursory inspection, much more dwell on it lest he fan the dying embers into a raging inferno because the aftermath of the SNL promotion was a mess to begin with. He just got to stop ‘Oh Little Girl’ and ‘Open Up’ Teams from their planned revolt and the ‘Never’ Team from revolting even more and adding more stress lines to poor Jonghyun’s face.

The SNL debacle was roughly pushed in the back of their minds for more pressing matters. BoA sunbaenim just announced that they’ll eliminate half of them before the teams for concept evaluations were finalized. The horror etched on his friends’ pallid faces only depicted the brutal truth of survival shows. Minhyun stepped in to watch over their team when Jonghyun-ah was preoccupied checking over the other teams and being his “leader-ah” self, as usual, and was saddened that he could not reach to some of his teammates unlike how his leader got into their walled hearts with a smile.

“It’s not you, Minhyun-nie hyung,” Daehwi softly whispered during one of their midnight talks. “The others are just afraid. And with how someone as kind and talented as Jonghyun-nie hyung being insulted on national television, well, I can’t blame the others for letting their fears get the best of them.”

Seeing the hurt and confusion warring in his face, Daehwi backtracked with a mild rebuke. “Don’t be daft. They don’t hate you; now stop that ridiculous expression, you’re stressing me out,” The BNM trainee scoffed before sighing. “Look, the others are just not sure of their future after this. Produce 101 is such a huge stepping-stone, hyung, but it doesn’t mean it would end well for everyone.”

Minhyun didn’t like how the others were dismissing their talents as something expendable. The self-loathing was just too much of a reminder on what he had faced—well, still facing sometimes in his darker moments—and being a witness to others suffering from the same demons was a sharp break to his rose-tinted glasses.

Daehwi and the rest of the BNM boys were self-assured with their standing in their agency with their stint as trainees in the show was a logical move to build fanbase early before they debut as an idol. Minhyun was not even surprised when the seventeen-year-old trainee admitted that they will debut no matter how the show ends in a few weeks. Amongst all the trainees, the BNM boys were the most cohesive group in the auditions, two rappers and two vocalists, and he had no doubt the four boys would make a spiffing idol unit in the future.

The others were uncertain but went out of their way to hide it. He knew Seongwoo and Jaehwan since their ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage and Minhyun just knew the two Kings would make it far in the future, either an actor or a soloist, he’d bet his most prized books that the Kings’ Center and the Kings’ Vocal Master would be famous. That wasn’t the case for them, however, because Kim Jaehwan was still, technically an independent trainee and Ong Seongwoo was a firm believer of concrete evidence and not intangible imaginings.
“I just know they’d put me in dramas. And why shouldn’t I? With a face like this,” Seongwoo gestured to his sharp jawline and aristocratic nose. “I’d rock the drama industry.”

Minhyun liked to think he knew the charming center more than what his age-mate showed in his hilarious antics. “But you don’t want that.”

Ong Seongwoo’s haughty grin slipped off into something half-hearted and sad. “Why shouldn’t I?” He repeated hollowly.

Minhyun pinned Seongwoo with a challenging stare. “Then make them see you can do both.”

Seongwoo stiffened before leaving the visual in the ‘Never’ dormitories for dinner with nary a backward glance.

Minhyun was almost at his wit’s end. He was not cut out as leader material, that was Kim Jonghyun’s in the truest sense of the word. He remembered the time he accompanied Jonghyun in one of his night escapades, silently checking on all trainees and staying with those who needed some company.

Minhyun was the quiet spectator by the doorway, watching the young ones open up to the comforting presence of the Angel Leader and getting strength from their Jonghyun-nie hyung in return. But this was out of his capabilities: he was not the comforting type nor was he the passionate leader that everyone looks up to. He preferred silent touch instead of words as comforting tools but sometimes a soft pat on the back could not do as much as a heartfelt message to heal the soul.

“I’m fine, Minhyun-nie hyung. You don’t need to worry about me.”

A voice that sounded suspiciously as Jonghyun-ah told him to push slightly further.

“Seongwoo may have fooled me but you haven’t, Hwan-nie. You’ve been my teammate since the group battles and we’re both each other’s fixed picks since the ‘Nayana’ stage so I think I reserve the right to know a bit more of what’s happening in that head of yours.”

It was silent for a moment.

“Aren’t you afraid, hyung?”

Minhyun didn’t need any more elaboration. “I am, I just hide it better. Besides, you won’t have problems in getting a contract deal with an agency, Jaehwan-nie. You’re too talented not to be signed immediately after this. Heck, I’d bet you’d get so much attention after Produce 101 that you’d have a company soon!”

Instead of getting the motivational boost that Minhyun was expecting, the main vocalist only slumped lower against the wall. The darkness of the room made it difficult to see Jaehwan’s expression but his voice said more than what he wanted to say.

“I know I should be happy and all that I’ve reached this far into the competition…But,” He hesitated. “That’s the scary part, isn’t it? The not-knowing part. I pray every night that I’d get somewhere in this gamble of mine, Minhyun-nie hyung, but sometimes, I just can’t help but think negatively, especially after…that.”

Minhyun grimaced at the reminder of the failed stunt in the variety show.

“Hey,” He murmured. “That’s just a snag in our way to fame. And I won’t tell you that you won’t
hit a few more along the way because we’ve had our own snags too…But it’s not a gamble if you’re doing so well in what you love to do. It’s just you chasing your dreams.”

Jaehwan coughed a short laugh. “Jonghyun-nie hyung said the same thing, you know.”

“That’s because he said the same thing to me six years ago,” Minhyun smiled at the surprised expression on his friend’s face. “Cheer up, Jaehwan-nie. The future’s too bright for us to fear. We’ve got this far, right? Might as well enjoy and live it up to the moment. Heaven knows we’ve done quite a bit of sulking for the past weeks that we forgot to have fun performing on stage and with the others.”

“Besides, if no agency wants to get you, you can just go to Pledis and be an artist with us.” Minhyun winked.

The morose expression lightened considerably before the vocalist huffed a laugh. “I’d take the offer, hyung, thanks.”

The tension was nonexistent as they trailed out of the room, chatting more readily than the past few days they were burdened by their thoughts. The others were easier to handle because Seonho was an overgrown mushroom that sprouts anywhere he went and Seongwoon hyung didn’t need any pep talk from him when he got it before from Jonghyun-ah during the position evaluations. Haknyeon-nie was an open book and did not restrain himself from blurting it out, Jihoon waved off his worries with an enigmatic smile, and Guanlin was more grounded than he thought.

Nevertheless, Minhyun was proud that he helped his teammates and that Jonghyun-ah returned to their team still standing strong after the SNL debacle. He could only wish that it would stay the same after their numbers get diminished in three days.

Jonghyun watched his team with growing unease. The news of the impending eliminations slowly unraveled the bonds he painstakingly wrapped around the more emotionally-attached trainees. The trainees weren’t stupid; they knew exactly what would happen after they get cut down to thirty-five. And the fact that the chances of ‘Never’ Team getting eliminated was little to none only burdened their troubled hearts because they knew only seven would remain in the group, forcing them to choose who’d remain and who’d get kicked out.

He’d never seen the ‘Never’ team looking so pale before. The speculative glances from the other teams did not help him in keeping his team united.

Amongst the five evaluation concepts, it was a general consensus by the four other teams that ‘Never’ was the top team for the evaluations, as stated by Donghan-nie in one of the times they were alone in the small garden behind the dormitories of ‘I Know You Know’.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice,” The Kings’ Maknae groaned in defeat at the sheepish grin.

With how star-studded their team was, housing almost all of the highest-ranked trainees and half the number of the “Hot Issues of Produce 101”, and with the song being a crowd-favorite even before they found out who the producers were, Jonghyun could not blame the others for being competitive to maintain their positions in the team.

And here he thought six trainees battling for two centers was too much.
He now had an idea of what ‘Get Ugly’ Team faced when Ong Seongwoo and Ha Seongwoon were put in one team. Woojin-nie and Jihoon-nie were crude enough to keep the two trainees apart most of the time even if the two hyungs of the team had a semi-professional relationship with one another but that doesn’t mean there were no clashes. The Angel Leader had to intervene quite a few times when their tones rose higher than what was considered polite. Jonghyun had faith on the two reconciling their differences soon but the elimination surprised knocked the progress down a few notches.

The impending change roused deeply-seated frustrations amongst the trainees and the Angel Leader had to find out that his friends also had some problems with each other, which doesn’t help their team in the slightest. Daehwi reluctantly brought to light the story of Haknyeon and Jihoon’s less-than-stellar relationship from their stint in ‘Boy in Luv’, with the former hating Park Jihoon’s selfishness for the center position and the latter hating everything about Joo Haknyeon’s histrionics. Safe to say, Daehwi was not impressed of how his former teammates were ruining ‘Never’ Team’s dynamics and flayed everyone with sharp rebukes and blunt honesty.

Jaehwan watched their leader’s expression going colder as Seongwoo followed Jihoon out the door in an attempt to put themselves away from a glaring Seongwoon hyung and Haknyeon. Woojin-nie and Seonho-yah restrained Minhyun-nie hyung from dragging the two inside the room and Youngmin hyung just looked tired from dealing with everyone.

Guanlin tentatively spoke, “Hyung?”

Jonghyun hyung did not speak. His back was stiff, face set in grim determination as he went around the room, dismantling the cameras at the three corners of the room and leaving only once device working to the left of the door. No word was said as the others stared warily at the angered leader before slowly sat down in two lines after his hand jerked in a downward motion.

“Minhyun.”

The Kings’ Hwanggallyang left the room.

Five minutes after, Seongwoo and Jihoon went inside trailed by a cautious Minhyun.

He could count on one hand the number of times he’d seen that hard expression on Jonghyun-ah’s face during the show. True, as part of NU’EST, he’d been the recipient of the “firm leader” persona of Kim Jonghyun many times already which was the reason why he knew how to stay in check whenever the same pointed glance was thrown at him. Unfortunately, their new friends wouldn’t know how to deal with an angry Jonghyun.

Woojin stayed quiet throughout the verbal lashing his hyung handed out to the feuding trainees. Beside him, Youngmin-nie hyung watched the interaction, still and barely breathing from the tension that in the room. The Angel Leader did not raise his tone or even yell at Seongwoon hyung and Seongwoo hyung.

Rather, he maintained an even and calm tone to dissuade the hot-blooded hyungs and the more emotional younger trainees from crying or lashing back. The ‘Get Ugly’ center had never seen this side of the Angel Leader before and frankly, he was both frightened and relieved that Jonghyun-nie hyung knew when to be kind…and when to be firm.

He was sorely reminded of Niel-ah’s warning just after the announcement. The blue-haired main dancer of ‘Open Up’ dragged him away from his team, oddly serious and grim, and drilled into him the importance of watching out for their leader.
“Jonghyun-nie hyung,” Kang Daniel broke off with a frustrated headshake. “He’s too kind, Woojin-nie. Seongwoo hyung and Seongwoon-nie hyung won’t become friends overnight, Jihoon-nie and Joo Haknyeon are even worse; they’d clash sooner or later, and I fear for hyung. They’ll push him too far. Just...watch out for hyung, okay Woojin-nie? You, Youngmin-nie hyung, Jaehwan-nie, and Minhyun-nie hyung can watch over him for me, right?”

At the time Woojin could only nod because he’d never seen the Fancam King so desperate before but he came to trust the MMO trainee after his fair leadership in ‘Get Ugly’. Jihoon looked chastised enough but the other three did not let go of whatever wrongdoing they perceived the others have done. This must be what he meant, Woojin wrung his fingers worriedly as the once-bright eyes of Kim Jonghyun dimmed little by little.

What to do, what to do—

“Hyung, we’ll do better.”

Woojin swerved his head to look at a determined Yoo Seonho hugging a startled Kim Jonghyun to his lanky body. The Cube trainee was one of the few boys that caught his attention. Dubbed as the Byeongari of Produce 101, Seonho was a delight to be friends with (although Ahn Hyeongseop and Park Jihoon would disagree otherwise). But the tall trainee’s oddly-sharp intuition surprises even the infallible Hwang Minhyun. The byeongari may be a clingy chick but even he could not deny Yoo Seonho knew how to keep their tempers in check.

Jonghyun-nie hyung’s expressions flitted into a thousand more that it was difficult for him to catch even one. Then he sighed deeply, slumping against the larger form with so much weariness lined in the corners of his mouth and the paler-than-usual slender neck of the Angel Leader. Woojin felt vindicated when the feuding hyungs cut off their vitriolic remarks towards one another and Haknyeon looked guilty.

“I don’t want to raise my voice,” The strength in Kim Jonghyun’s voice, rising evenly above the silent room and tempered by the dangerous glint in his eyes, belied the fatigue shown in the pallor of his skin. “But I will if I have to.”

The tensed atmosphere kept them still, waiting for the shoe to drop as their leader gathered his strength from a sad Seonho. Woojin could only stare anxiously at how tired the Angel Leader looked.

“We’re a team,” Woojin’s breath hitched. “And no matter what happens in the results of the eliminations, we’ll always be one. This is not just about you anymore, Seongwoon-nie hyung,” He glanced at the expressionless Ardor & Able trainee before flitting over to the other three. “Nor it is about your dislike to Seongwoo hyung, Seongwoo-ah—” Seongwoo hyung looked guilty. “—your irritation at Jihoon, Haknyeon-nie—” Joo Haknyeon looked down. “—or whatever wrongdoing Haknyeon did to you, Jihoon-nie.” Jihoon nodded.

“Look around you,” He tiredly gestured around the room. “Maybe you’ve been too caught up in your disputes but you have seven other people in the same boat, all facing different problems but still willing to work together, and you have been dragging them down...dragging us down.”

“Hyung,” Lai Guanlin murmured.

“I don’t know where you want to go in this silly feud of yours, but this could be the end of us,” Jonghyun sighed. “And you’re still caught up fighting one another. In the next few days, we could be looking at a halved ‘Never’ Team and I don’t want any regrets from everyone.”
That ended all arguments.

Woojin was left in awe at how the Angel Leader made the team whole again with a few words. Granted, they hit him unlike most of the insincere words he has heard in his life, and he had to help Daehwi stop crying because of how stupid his hyungs were, but the dancer never thought the dynamics of their ruined team would change, and for the better at that.

‘Never’ Team picked up the slack and renewed their practices with vigor. Whatever feud Ha Seongwoon and Ong Seongwoo were stuck in was momentarily pushed back in favor of working together like the tentative teamwork the two once Class ’A’ trainees did for ‘Get Ugly’.

The difference between Daniel hyung’s leadership and Jonghyun-nie hyung’s lied on the fact that Jonghyun-nie hyung opted to let them sort their differences on their own, granting them freedom to do what they want unlike how Daniel hyung watched their every move like a hawk.

Jonghyun-nie hyung, and in connection, Youngmin-nie hyung let the two trainees know that they put their trust on the two hyungs not to do another verbal smackdown. Seongwoon-nie hyung may have snapped back at Seongwoo hyung a few times but the Kings’ Center vividly remembered his promise to Jihoon not to add more stress to the overworked Angel Leader and with the Jeojang Prince promising the same thing and has been keeping to himself instead of angering Joo Haknyeon even more.

The vocal and rap evaluations with Shin Yumi seongsajangnim and Cheetah seongsajangnim went well because the two groups of ‘Never’ Team was balanced in vocals and rap. Woojin and their group was evaluated first: Seongwoon hyung was a vocal powerhouse, belting through the lyrics with Daehwi and Haknyeon supporting him well. Guanlin was the most improved in his rap part at the chorus and Youngmin-nie hyung took the reins in the first rap section. For a team that was just about to fall straight into the abyss, they were doing pretty damn well, all things considered.

But Woojin was not that petty to deny that the other group was more prepared than they are. The former Kings and a certain byeongari shined in the vocal parts of the song whilst Jihoon-nie and Jonghyun-nie hyung took the reins for the rap sections. Woojin saw Daehwi’s jaw drop at the huskiness of his idol’s voice as he rapped the second rap part of the section, complimenting well with Jihoon’s voice in the third verse.

“I never knew Jonghyun-nie hyung was talented in rap,” Haknyeon gasped.

Woojin thanked the heavens for having a smart hyung like Youngmin-nie hyung as their group’s leader slapped a hand to stop the tirade that would surely come out of an incensed Lee Daehwi.

Tsk. Fanboys.

The dance evaluations went a bit differently than the vocal practice. Woojin was wary of this part of the evaluations because the choreography of ‘Never’ was not an easy piece to do and it took most of his composure not to cringe at the mistakes his group was making. Jihoon’s group was no better; Jaehwan-nie hyung was stumbling in his steps and Seonho had a difficult time at the verses. The BNM rapper bit his lip at the thunderous expression growing darkening the face of Kwon Jaesung seongsajangnim.

“Is there anyone who could demonstrate how it should be done?” The veiled threat was evident in
their instructor’s honey-coated sarcasm.

No one was standing up. Should I stand up, Woojin thought, about to push himself up before a gentle hand pushed him down. It was Daehwi. His dongsaeng was calmly looking ahead but the tight grip on his arm told him a different story. Woojin didn’t question the ‘Nayana’ center’s motives when Seongwoon hyung stood up with a confident smile on his face.

“Okay, show me,” Kwon Jaesung seongsaengnim commanded.

Between Seonho-yah and Youngmin-nie hyung, Seongwoo hyung hid a frown before wiping it off. Daehwi glanced in the direction of the hyungs, biting his lip in worry. Seonho-yah, Woojin-nie hyung, and Haknyeon-nie also looked confused. He didn’t know what his teammates were thinking or why they didn’t volunteer with Seongwoon hyung when the memory of having six trainees battling for center was still fresh in his mind but in the weeks that he was in the show, he learned how to keep his mouth shut.

It wasn’t until later when Youngmin-nie hyung told him why they backed off.

“It was Minhyun-nie’s plan,” He shrugged. “Seongwoon hyung needed to have some reassurance in the team. With so many high-ranked trainees...” Youngmin-nie hyung frowned in thought before he shook his head. “No matter, Jonghyun-ah agreed and brought Seongwoon hyung in the attention of the viewers.”

Well, it worked. Seongwoo-nie hyung looked happy at the encouragement he received from the dance instructor and was amicable and positive in their night practice, even gently patting Seongwoo hyung on the shoulder once in thanks.

The practices went smoothly after that and Jonghyun-nie hyung continued to help everyone in the choreography and Daehwi was caught once more at how inspiring his idol was even outside creative direction and stage design. The guy was just a talented dancer, being the sole member who had memorized the steps in such a short time. Heck, Daehwi didn’t know how the Angel Leader can digest the whole tutorial video that fast but the leader did, and now he delegated his time between the groups, helping with the positions and chorus moves.

The Angel Leader wanted to get mad, he truly did. But he wouldn’t because it would be pointless to do so.

Mnet is truly ruthless, aren’t they? Jonghyun sighed when the DJ hosts of SBS Power FM Young Street Radio brought the topic up once more. The show staff must’ve thought they were stupid enough not to know that radio hosts are generally briefed of what they can ask and what must be avoided so as to avoid awkwardness and unfortunate events in the segment.

After the legal troubles and what-nots, the show decided to resume the promotions in a bid to make use of the short time they had the trainees on a paper leash. Truly, Mnet should learn from the SNL mishap even though radio guesting were not as rigorously promoted as variety show guesting. However, with how the trainees captured the attention of the media when they didn’t release any personal statement, the Produce 101 representatives should’ve seen this coming from a mile away.

The only upside from the radio show was the fact the trainees were better prepared this time around. The topics were mostly light and personal, even if there were some vague Segway
pertaining to SNL, but Kim Sanggyun and Kim Namhyung took good care of the younger and more talkative trainees from blurring out things they would regret soon after. Yoo Hoseong, Lee Insoo, and Lee Kiwon were the bright vitamins of the group, their energies at a full-time high. The attention of the DJs laid on Lee Woojin and Lee Junwoo as they were bombarded questions about their position evaluation performances with the former as a member of the ‘Downpour’ Team with their famous raining stage and the latter as the main choreographer of the underdog sexy dance team ‘Pop’.

*KBS Cool FM Sukira Radio* with F.T. Island’s Lee Honggi sunbaenim was lighter and more fun and Jonghyun could only be thankful that anything about legal stuff was avoided completely. The ‘Never’ Team was tuned in to the segment at ten in the evening, cheering Woojin, Seonho, and Youngmin on with their guesting. They had the fewest number for a promotional activity but they sure were the closest amongst the other variety show groups. The current teammates kept the other trainees in the conversation which the Angel Leader approved of. Park Sungwoo, Kim Taedong, and Kim Yongguk completed their group and with the ‘Never’ members familiar with the others, either from a past team or class, there was barely any awkwardness. The outgoing persona of the host largely helped to their adjustment in talking.

Overall, the radio promotions went without a hitch. Everyone liked the idea of radio promotions that the rest of the trainees were dearly wishing that they’d be able to do the same kind of activity. He caught Jaehwan mumbling his interest to do guesting on radio shows quite a few times already. True, radio shows are less daunting than variety shows and the Angel Leader could see the appeal it had to the shyer trainees of the show.

Then came the shocker.

In the form of a style magazine.

“What!”

“Ah!”

Jonghyun accidentally bumped his head on the ceiling and swore when he saw the fashion sketch he painstakingly drew (he was still a failure in drawing details) was ruined by a jagged pen scratch dismembering the head of his model.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung!”

The Angel Leader rolled his eyes at the recognizable voice of Ahn Hyeongseop hollering in the hallways before he went down the bunkbed and opened the door. Unfortunately, his team was still on the cusp of waking up and the jarring screech was so powerful it jolted Ong Seongwoo from the dead. The ‘Never’ Team scrambled out of their beds, Jaehwan and Seonho almost falling off their bunkbeds, as they frantically searched for the noise. Woojin, Seongwoon hyung, and Guanlin bumped heads in their bid for the toilets and Minhyun was glaring at something in the ceiling.

All the while the Angel Leader could only face-palm at how his team thought it was the damn alarm again.

“Hyung!”

*Right, work,* Jonghyun pinched his nose bridge before he stepped to the side to let the people
outside their door. Hyeongseop was annoyingly chirpy at six in the morning and he had a battalion of people behind him. Daniel sheepishly rubbed his head at the pointed glare in his direction while Jinyoung and Donghan rolled their eyes in annoyance. The rest of units one and two and a mixture of trainees from the variety promotions shuffled inside the room, trudging their feet not unlike zombies in an apocalypse, and squeezed in the beds with the disgruntled ‘Never’ Team.

“Ugh, the sun’s not even here yet, goddamn Mnet,” Seongwoo groaned from under his pillow.

“Uh…hyung, the sun’s here. I’m just sitting in front of your window.”

“Jonghyun-ah,” the muffled voice addressed him. “The sun’s talking! Silence the fucking sun, will you?”

Kang Daniel looked very insulted and punched the visual in the gut. Kim Jonghyun just accepted the truth; that no matter which timeline, he didn’t have any idea on how to deal with Ong Seongwoo.

The Angel Leader didn’t have any more time to dwell on such a worrying fact because the cause of their unceremonious wake-up call brandished a glossy object in his face.

“Look!”

“Aish, stop with the silly waving,” Jonghyun grabbed the wrist before it hit him in the face. “Now what—”

He stopped short. It wasn’t a picture like what he initially thought. It was a magazine with the familiar layout of 10+ Star Magazine and the logo of Stylenanda placed on the bottom right of the cover. The cover had the group photos of each promo unit in a triangle surrounded by the words like “Exclusive” and “Produce 101 trainees”.

“What did I tell you, hyung? It’s cool isn’t it?” Hyeongseop prattled, jumping giddily on his feet as he pointed on their faces. “I still can’t believe it! We’re in a magazine!”

The word “magazine” knocked everyone from their stupor as they hurriedly flocked around a surprised Angel Leader who slowly opened the magazine.

“Where did you get this, Hyeongseop-ah?”

The Yuehua trainee shifted nervously and blurted out that he sneaked out of the dormitories. Hyeongseop noticed the frown on the Angel Leader’s face and shrunk into himself. “I guess, I got too excited? And kinda went to buy a copy?”

Jonghyun raised an eyebrow.

“And…the fans who were lined up might have noticed me…and gave me their copy in exchange for an autograph…and a photo…”

The Angel Leader rubbed his temples. It’s too damn early for this.

The staff gathered the promo units yesterday to tell them that the release of the exclusive magazine was on the 25th of May, which was today, and everyone got thrilled when the staff of 10+ Star Magazine gave out the soft copies of the photoshoot in small thumb drives enclosed in blue boxes. Unfortunately, they couldn’t use the drives in their tablets so they had to wait for the complimentary magazines to be sent to them.
Jihoon, wrapped in his blanket like a cocoon, glared at a sheepish Hyeongseop. “And you couldn’t have waited for the magazine copies to arrive here in, oh, I don't know, two freaking hours?”

“Psh, as if you’re not interested to see it.”

Jihoon opted to ignore the triumphant Hyeongseop and shuffled closer to the Angel Leader to see what captivated the other trainees.

“Whoa.”

The future Kim Jonghyun was not new to the modeling scene since he had people like Ahn Hyeongseop, Hwang Minhyun, and Choi Minki who was active in the drama and fashion scene even if the former was part of his idol group as a main dancer and the latter two had responsibilities as shareholders and directors of their respective departments in HMG Media. Still, Jonghyun knew that stopping them from exploring their interests would only hinder their growth. Besides, their management was very efficient with only a few yet talented people in the administrative hierarchy and just enough idols in their roster to be considered a mid-sized agency.

The addition of Ong Seongwoo and Park Jihoon into the company did keep them on their toes, though, due to the two being popular and experienced actors and artists but that only cemented CEO Kim Jonghyun’s decision to keep a finger within the fashion scene as well.

So, being in a magazine was nothing new to him. What was new to him, however, was that this was his first aesthetics and creative direction in a magazine.

And it went more than well, if he had to go by the awed gasps of the trainees.

The first unit was displayed first. The pastel theme of *Le Prince des Fleur* was stunning with the enhanced colors of pinks and orange against the glimmering Seoul skyline and the blue and purple expanse of the cloudless sky.

The scouting department did well in picking the location, the photographer did justice on the concept, and the editors were superb. Unit one’s group photos were pretty and elegant in their pink-accented white ensemble, their individual photos even more so.

“*Wah*, we look stunning,” gasped Kenta. Hyeongseop puffed up in pride.

“That’s some sick-looking flower painting!”

Lee Daehwi’s white long-sleeved lace shirt contrasted stunningly against a background of red, pink, and white roses while Ahn Hyeongseop was the opposite with the vast blue sky as his background and the only flower in the shot was the gold rose vine painted beautifully on his cheek.

“I miss Taemin-nie hyung,” Guanlin sighed

Kim Taemin was a bittersweet memory in his pink taffeta collared shirt and platinum-blonde hair.

“That guitar!”

Takada Kenta’s pink overalls and its nature-inspired backdrop was almost poetic, as were Jung Sewoon’s Casanova-inspired flowery guitar and Justin’s bubbly photo against a bright pink mural.

Unit one’s leader took the prize though; Hwang Minhyun’s hooded gaze and a flowery crown circlet was a sight to behold as he laid on the edge of the building, looking up at the camera with the streets of Seoul far down below.
Dongho busted out in full-bellied laughter. “The hell you doing on the edge and looking down from the top of a thirty-story building?”

Minhyun blushed bright red. “Yah! I thought it looked good, and it did. And for the record, it’s a forty-story building.”

“Who cares?” Minki snorted. “If Minhyun-nie wants to fall off a building and die looking fabulous, he’s free to do so.”

The trainees laughed while the Kings’ Hwanggallyang glared daggers at the snickering idiots.

Seonho saved his favorite hyung from the relentless teasing by changing the topic and rushing an amused Jonghyun from stalling in the pages.

“Hyung, I want to see more!”

Unit two was the complete opposite of unit one. Gritty and edgy, it felt like a 90’s magazine catalog with its black-and-white concept. The location was strategic; the heart of Seoul with rushing city buses and taxi cabs, towering skyscrapers, and people bustling about in their daily life was the main backdrop of the photoshoot.

It was the perfect setting for avant-garde streetwear style to come to life. Amongst the selection that Stylenanda arranged for them to wear, unit two’s Urban Monochromism had the most intensive style wardrobe. It was all metallic chains and rings, vintage-looking accessories and tousled waxed hair, sleek motorcycles and sharp graffiti on bleak grey walls, and Kim Jonghyun applauded the scouting team of 10+ Star Magazine and Stylenanda’s stunning work.

“You look like bad boys!”

And Lee Daehwi’s statement was true. The group photo of unit two did not disappoint as they casually lounged on the railing of the Mapo bridge, the sun’s morning rays and the skyline of Yeongdeungpo-gu behind their backs, creating a golden silhouette against their black ensembles.

“Are those tattoos real?”

“That’s a real motorcycle! You don’t even have a license!”

“Did you get a pastry, hyung?”

The individual photos fully embraced teenage rebellion in leather jackets and smoky eyes with a tinge of color completing the chic photoshoot. Woo Jinyoung looked dangerous standing against the graffiti walls in black dress shirt, leather jeans, chandelier earrings, and startling blood-red eyeliner.

Jung Jung embodied his ‘Bad Boy Prince of China’ persona in striped collared dress shirt, casual black blazer, and stunning rose tattoos decorating his pale neck while crossing down the pedestrian lane.

Kim Samuel was a show-stopper in windswept hair and zip-up jacket as he rode a black motorcycle. Noh Taehyun went from the best dancer of Produce 101 to the bad boy leader of unit two in his all-leather ensemble and metallic blue boots, clinking chains curtaining his leg and his gelled hair, as he walked by a cute-looking bakery.

The stunners were the last three members. Kang Dongho did not hold back in his ‘Sexy Bandit’ image with his tight-fitting long-sleeved shirt, ripped jeans, heavy eyeliner, and rose-themed red
choker as he stared down at the camera angled to capture his outfit and the towering Finance Center behind him.

Lai Guanlin was the epitome of “bad boy”, looking unbelievably sophisticated in his Dior sunglasses and shiny burgundy-red bomber jacket as he elegantly peered above his designer eyewear while standing on the steps of a commuter bus parked beside a waiting shed.

Donghan took the visuals of unit two to a whole other level. The Kings’ Maknae went all out; his backdrop was the whole Mapo district behind him as he posed mid-walk in the middle of the bridge with his bluish-violet hair a beacon of color against his silver leather ensemble.

Jonghyun was so proud of how everything went in his first aesthetic direction in a magazine and the others did not fail to congratulate him on that. The Angel Leader felt the blood rushing up his ears when the trainees saw unit three’s photoshoot. It was more than what he imagined. Ong Seongwoo, Kang Daniel, and Park Jihoon perfected the seductive gaze, Kim Jaehwan was timeless in his modern ensemble, Bae Jinyoung was their ultimate model in their Once Upon a Dream concept—

And then he saw his page.

The Angel Leader met the smoldering icy-blue stare in his photo. Jonghyun ran a gaze in his black plunging dress shirt, flowy satin pants, and intricate bracelets and ear constellation threaders decorating his façade. His exposed chest was painted with curling rose vine masterpieces and it contrasted beautifully against the white gossamer curtains.

All the while, Jonghyun could only thank the aesthetics noona who was talented in painting.

“What?”

“Oh my god!”

“Jonghyun-ah! Why would you do this? Now, I’d have to fend off everyone from taking you away from me!”

Kim Jonghyun face-palmed.

The arrival of the magazine was heavily anticipated by the trainees. Even the ones who sneaked out to line up in the nearest magazine store, risking their anonymity just for the coveted publication, even waited for the complimentary catalog. Jonghyun was happy that the magazine did not just have their faces on it but also the other trainees had exposure with their exclusive interviews printed after the style catalog pages.

The rest of the day was spent on perusing the style magazine and fending off the other trainees from bombarding him with questions about the creative direction. The Angel Leader could only stare pleadingly at Minhyun and Jihoon to save him from the pressing questions. The practices resumed during the day but his team was too distracted to function well because the photoshoot was pushed at the back of their minds in favor of the more pressing issue.

Eliminations.

Jonghyun stopped the evening practices after Guanlin tripped over Daehwi who was also caught
deep in his thoughts. The other members silently walked back to their dormitories for a well-deserved rest.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung.”

The Angel Leader turned around. It was Haknyeon standing behind him with his hands behind his back, looking at him strangely.

“Oh, Haknyeon-nie, what can I do for you?”

Kim Jonghyun was worried for the confident visual trainee. He knew that Joo Haknyeon had a pretty rough relationship with most of the trainees, Park Jihoon more than most, but the Angel Leader could understand the Cre.ker trainee’s thoughts better than the other trainees who was offended by his greediness for the center position.

His thought process was interrupted when the young trainee ran up to him and hugged him tight. Haknyeon did not speak for a few moments and Jonghyun felt his heart go out to the misunderstood trainee.

“Thank you, hyung, for everything.”

The Angel Leader tightened his hold on his dongsaeng.

Kim Donghan shifted in the blue and grey Produce 101 uniform. It has been a long time since he donned the ensemble and he could not remember the last time he did even if the number thirteen was etched in his mind. He glanced at the Pledis hyungs to his left and Jaehwan-nie hyung to his right. There was a huge chance that his rankings could go down even if the ‘Shape of You’ performance was high in the ranking charts.

After all, there were too many factors to consider. Heck, the previous episodes and the screen time could potentially outrank half of them out of the Top 35. But Jonghyun-nie hyung was adamant that he will reach the concept evaluations and the Kings’ Maknae could only wish that his hyung was right.

The Nation’s Representative BoA sunbaenim slowly walked on the stage. On cue, the blue Produce 101 partition rose up to show the thirty-five royal blue chairs stacked to form a pyramid. The trainees gulped.

“Good evening, trainees of Produce 101! It’s an exciting night, isn’t it?”

Nervous chuckles ran across the room.

“Well, I, for one, am thrilled at the surprises in store for all of you! So many things had happened in the weeks that the show had been aired and I wish that all of you learned much from your mentors.”

“Yes!”

“My, such an active group,” BoA sunbaenim smiled. “And because of your hard work and activeness in giving your all in the performances and the promotional activities that you have been doing, the Nation’s Producers reciprocated with so much love.”

She looked down at the blue cue card.
As of May 20, 2017, the TV ratings of Produce 101 Season 2 blew away all previous ratings with a whopping 6.144% audience share nationwide, the highest rating achieved by a survival show—"

"Wow," Minki hyung murmured.

"—and all teams taking the top 20 slots of Naver and Daum’s trending list with a minimum of three hundred thousand views in all position evaluations videos. Because of the tremendous success of the position evaluations, the Nation’s Producers opened the chance for all producers to participate in choosing the eleven trainees to debut as the next I.O.I."

Then that means…

"International fans are now able to vote. For twenty-four hours yesterday, May 25, 2017, the lines have been opened in Mnet’s website for all fandoms to vote for their favorite trainees."

"Heol," Donghan choked.

A few seats from the flabbergasted Kim Donghan, the Angel Leader felt his mind spinning in circles. It was the grandest move of the show’s producers yet. Reaching out to include the international fans would take serious consideration for it to happen, not to mention the outrageous funds and connections needed to overcome the invisible barriers.

However, Mnet’s smart, deviously so, in partitioning budget to include the possibility of having non-Korean fans to join in the fan-fest. And Kim Jonghyun approves of the move, remembering the avid fanbase of the future Wanna One in different parts of the world, beating even some of the veteran idol groups in awards because of the support they had abroad.

BoA sunbaenim winked. "Yoo Seonho yeonsusaeng, you’re pretty clever. Can you guess again how much votes did the Rank 1 trainee get?"

"2,000,000 votes!"

"Hmm, sorry, it’s way too low."

Murmurs rose amongst the trainees because two million was too large to fathom, even with the one and a half million Jihoon got last eliminations—

“As of 11:59 pm, Rank 1 trainee garnered 3,723,434 votes in total tally.”

Jonghyun bit his lip from cackling out loud. The trainees looked ready to faint at the tally of votes in first place. Almost four million in votes, the number was almost inconceivable but the serious expression on BoA sunbaenim’s face said that she was dead serious about this. The number only proved the power of adding millions of fans abroad to the shocking TV ratings of Produce 101.

Goddamn Mnet and their ingenious PR team, Jonghyun snorted.

“Before we get ahead of ourselves, we do have benefit points to award to the highest-ranked trainee for each position in the evaluations.”

The tension was palpable in the air. In the group battles, the trainees callously dismissed what three thousand points could do to the rankings. After they saw the numerical difference amongst the four contenders in Rank 1, they learned not to underestimate benefit points, especially if it’s far larger than what they had in the first eliminations.

“For dance position, a benefit of 100,000 points will be awarded to the talented trainee whose sexy
dance stage seduced the Nation’s Producers with his fluid dancing in the position evaluations. We have three contenders for the Rank 1 dancer voted by the online viewers.”

The big screen split into three. “GON Entertainment Hong Eunki of ‘Pop’ Team, MMO Entertainment Kang Daniel of ‘Get Ugly’ Team, and Ardor & Able Noh Taehyun of ‘Shape of You’ Team.”

Kim Jonghyun raised an eyebrow, reveling on the expected lineup. BoA sunbaenim asked the three trainees on their reactions to being chosen as best dancer in the evaluations. Eunki was emotional in his speech, Daniel thanked the fans for their support, and Taehyun hyung addressed the good teamwork he had with the ‘Shape of You’ Team.

The three names and the Produce 101 pictures of the trainees slowly faded before one name shined through in the middle.

“Ardor & Able Noh Taehyun yeonsusaeng!”

Kim Jonghyun clapped for the Ardor & Able trainee because if anyone deserved the benefit points, it was Noh Taehyun. The choreography of ‘Shape of You’ looked shocked before he thanked his fans for the support. Then the benefit points for vocal position was brought up next.


The trainees looked divided at the roster of candidates for benefit points. The addition of Lee Gunhee, who was already awarded the onsite benefit points for vocal position, in the list roused some whispers in the crowd but most were waiting for the results with bated breath. The screen swirled the names and pictures in a dizzying pattern before settling for one name.

“Independent trainee Kim Jaehwan!”

The main vocalist was shaking in unbridled excitement as he thanked the Nation’s Producers in a heartfelt message and even did a demo of his killing verse in ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stage and his highest note in ‘Downpour’. Daniel and Seongwoo rose from their seats, hollering and cheering for the red-faced Jaehwan.

Then came the rap positions.

And boy, was that a shocker.

“The rap position,” BoA sunbaenim started and Kim Jonghyun felt stares digging at his back. “Has two contenders.”

The screen split in half. “We have Cube Entertainment Lai Guanlin and Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun, both from the ‘Fear’ Team.”

Kim Jonghyun wondered if fate was playing with him again. It was déjà vu for the time-traveler because this happened before; he and Guanlin battled for the top position after the position evaluations, outranking Jihoon who was at three. Apparently, this time around, they’d be battling for the online benefit points instead.

BoA sunbaenim smiled. “Let’s ask the two trainees on what they think about the results. Lai Guanlin yeonsusaeng, is there anything you could say about being a contender for the benefit
points in rap position and battling your leader for it?”

Guanlin looked taken aback at the question before he answered the question. “I just want to thank
the Nation’s Producers for their support,” Then he turned to smile at him. “And to Jonghyun-nie
hyung…I, uh, am grateful for being a kind leader to me since the beginning,” At this, the Cube
trainee hesitated before he swallowed furtively and soldiered on. “I know it wasn’t an easy task for
you to help us in the ‘Fear’ performance but you did so much for me in helping me tell my story,
hyung, and I can only wish that you’d get the support that you deserve.”

It was quiet, too quiet. But the Angel Leader did not pull his gaze away from the sincere yet intense
expression on his dongsaeng’s youthful face. Jonghyun knew what Guanlin was pertaining to, and
he could only part with a small nod and a tremulous smile.

BoA sunbaenim was more subdued. “A beautiful message, Lai Guanlin yeonsusaeng. Truly each
one of you exceeded far and beyond in the few weeks I’ve had the pleasure of seeing you
perform,” The surreptitious glance in his direction did not go unnoticed by Jonghyun. “Well, let’s
see who won the top rap position in the evaluations—”

The display disappeared completely. Two second later, a name popped out.

“Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng!”

Jonghyun opted for a smile to hide the turmoil of worry that he was feeling inside. He felt so many
emotions in his head that he felt he was about to explode. He knew it was unfair because he was a
time-traveler and he’d been in this position before. He was worried of how his brothers would fare
in the drastic changes of Produce 101. He asked for fate to be in his favor once more in his bid to
pull all of his kids up in the ranks and make them shine like the stars they truly were.

But he couldn’t say that.

He wouldn’t want to.

It was his burden to bear and he’d carry it with his head held high as he does all he could to make it
all possible.

So, he just hugged Guanlin before addressing the fans for their support to him. In his peripheral
vision, he saw the ‘Never’ Team, ‘Fear’ Team, and the Kings’ Team shouting out their
encouragement.

The eliminations from thirty-fourth to twenty-first rank went like a rollercoaster. The Vibe Label
Kim Taedong went down three places at 34th place, RBW Park Woodam went down five places at
33rd, BNM Kim Donghyun went up six places at 32nd, RBW Lee Gunhee up three places to 29th,
and Media Line Lee Woojin ranked down to 28th place. Then there was C2K Entertainment Kim
Seonglee who jumped sixteen places up to 31st. It was unpredictable; Woo Jinyoung, who got the
live onsite benefit points for rap, was still placed at 30th, which the trainees noticed with
trepidation.

“Damn, even benefit points don’t benefit you that much,” Dongho cursed.

YGK+ Kwon Hyunbin went down to 27th and Jonghyun and Guanlin threw a cheer towards their
dongsaeng and hyung when he thanked the ‘Fear’ Team. Then the rankings went crazier: Constant top-tier trainees Cre.ker Entertainment Joo Haknyeon went down sixteen places to 26th
and Yuehua Entertainment Lee Euiwoong downranked to 22nd place from his previous place 7
ranks up. **BNM** Park Woojin from 20th to 24th, **Ardor & Able** Ha Seongwoon going down four places to 25th, **Star Road Entertainment** Takada Kenta maintaining his position at 23rd, and online benefit points recipient **Ardor & Able** Noh Taehyun went two steps up to 21st.

“His popularity from the vocal stage of ‘If It Was You’ increased his rank thirteen levels up—At Rank 20, **Chun Entertainment** Kim Yongguk yeonsusaeng.”

Jonghyun leaned forward, eyes sharp as he took note of the ranks and their previous ranks from the group battles. Although the rankings were changed every week, it was still a huge change from the fifth week where they had their first eliminations.

At this point the ranks are crucial and it would do him well to watch everything. **Cube Entertainment** Yoo Seonho went down one place to 19th and **Starship Entertainment** Jung Sewoon went up to 18th place. The Angel Leader’s eyes widened. That was Park Sungwoo’s place! He glanced at the hyung who looked like he was on the verge of passing out.

The time-traveler could only watch helplessly as the ranks got shuffled.

“Another broad jump from another trainee!” BoA sunbaenim raised an eyebrow, impressed. “With his unbelievable stage presence in ‘Shape of You’, he went up from rank 30 to rank 17—**Yuehua Entertainment** Huang Justin yeonsusaeng.”

Justin was teary-eyed as he threw an aegyo towards the camera. Then 16th place was snagged by **MMO Entertainment** Yoon Jiseong, who was previously in 8th place from the group battles followed by **C9 Entertainment** Bae Jinyoung at 15th place from his previous 9th place. **Pledis Entertainment** Choi Minki maintained his position at 14th with **Pledis Entertainment** Kang Dongho rising from 16th place to 13th. **OUI Entertainment** Kim Donghan maintained his 12th position.

“At 11th place, with 2,778,468, we have the leader of ‘Boys and Girls’ jumping fifteen places up—**Brand New Music** Lim Youngmin yeonsusaeng.”

Youngmin sighed a breath of relief as he went up the blue chairs.

**Yuehua Entertainment** Ahn Hyeongseop went up one place to 10th and ‘Nayana’ Center **BNM** Lee Daehwi went two places down at 9th place—

“At 8th place, with 2,873,476 votes, we have the **Casanova Bandit** who stole the hearts of the Nation’s Producers during his stint as center of the Pirate Team in ‘Boy in Luv’ and as the sexy dancer in ‘Shape of You’—**Brave Entertainment** Kim Samuel yeonsusaeng.”

Beside him, Dongho was cursing under his breath. “8th place! That kid deserves higher than that, dammit!”

Samuel went up, a relieved smile on his lips as he faced the cameras and did a fanservice by dancing his killing part at the ‘Shape of You’ choreography.

“At 7th place, this trainee stole the hearts of the fans with his visuals, vocals, and dance abilities. As the center of the legendary stage ‘Sorry, Sorry’, ranking first in the visuals of **Produce 101**, trending in his performance in ‘Get Ugly’ as the “meme of the night”, and his sexy and dangerous fancam in the ‘Tarantallegra’ performance at the first fan-meeting. At 3,023,248—”
“Wow, you just broke the three-million-line, you bastard,” Minhyun mock-scowled at the grinning trainee.

“You’re just jealous you can’t have this face, Minhyun-nie,” Seongwoo threw a kiss at the annoyed Hwanggallyang.

“—Fantagio Entertainment Ong Seongwoo yeonsusaeng.”

Seongwoo walked with swagger, smiling and winking at the hooting trainees on stage. Donghan mimicked throwing his shoe at the laughing visual. Seongwoo did his “meme face” and his killing part of body rolls in ‘Tarantallegra’ before doing a shout-out of challenge to an incensed Hwang Minhyun.

Minhyun scowled. “Yah, Jonghyun-ah, put a leash on that monster please!”

BoA sunbaenim looked down at her cue card. “Oh, it seems that we would see that challenge sooner than expected. At 6th place and a four-thousand difference from 7th place, this trainee earned fans with his aristocratic face and stunning vocals in the raining stage of ‘Downpour’. His fancam ranked first in all vocal teams in major trend charts. With 3,027,342 votes—Pledis Entertainment Hwang Minhyun yeonsusaeng.”

Minhyun went up the stage and proceeded to thank his fans. However, he could not escape the emcee when she challenged the blushing Hwanggallyang into doing the “meme face” of Ong Seongwoo.

“Seongwoo should sleep with one eye open,” Minki laughed.

Jonghyun was barely paying attention to the hilarious exchanges of the trainees. His attention was caught by the fact that Jaehwan was not yet called.

The Angel Leader felt the unwelcome yet overly familiar cold running up his veins.

The ranks will change again.

BoA sunbaenim was smiling when she looked down at the blue cue card. “Let’s proceed. At 5th place, another one of the Kings garnered attention for his talented abilities. With his fancam in promo unit three’s ‘Tarantallegra’ performance as a crowd-favorite—”

Jonghyun breathed.

“—we have MMO Entertainment Kang Daniel at 3,112,343 votes!”

What.

Jonghyun was truly fearing the ranks.

“Let us see who are the four trainees seating in the top ranks,” The camera panned to four faces on the screen, catching Guanlin’s shy smile and Jaehwan’s deer-in-the-headlights look. “Omo! It looks like we have the “Hot Issues of Produce 101” in our line-up. Maroo Entertainment Park Jihoon, Cube Entertainment Lai Guanlin, Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun, and Independent trainee Kim Jaehwan. My, this is a new turn of events. Should we see the new ranks?”

“Yes!” The trainees chorused.

“Wait for a moment,” BoA drew the cards back and the trainees groaned at the suspense. “We’ll
draw the thirty-fifth place…*Hunus Entertainment* Kim Sanggyun yeonsusaeng!”

The crowd cheered as the trainee in question went up the stage and thanked his fans. Then the camera soon returned to their faces, dividing the screen into four once more.

“Fourth place goes to the *Dark Prince* of the so-called *Manhwa Team* of ‘Fear’ Performance. With 3,222,345 votes, rank 4 is—*Cube Entertainment* Lai Guanlin yeonsusaeng.”

Guanlin went up the stage and thanked his fans in Korean and Mandarin before sauntering up his seat. Minhyun was caught up with the fact that Guanlin’s large votes didn’t need really need any benefit points because of the outrageous number of voters in his stead.

“Now I wonder how the 100,000 benefit points would add to your rank,” Minhyun’s calculative gaze made Jonghyun incredibly wary.

“Third place—Wow! This is a surprise!”

It took all of his calm disposition not to throw his show at the stage.

BoA *sunbaenim*’s doe eyes were blown wide. “At third place, with 3,328,664 votes, we have the trainee that caught everyone’s attention with his powerful wink—”

Jonghyun’s breath hitched.

“—his performance in ‘Get Ugly’, and his stunning promotional photoshoot.” At this, everyone knew who the emcee was referring to when the screen showed the catalog page of the *Once Upon a Dream* concept and the alluring gaze behind the gold vintage specs…

“Rank 3 goes to *Maroo Entertainment* Park Jihoon yeonsusaeng.”

Jihoon smiled and went up the stage to send his thanks to the fans then to their promo unit for their support in his self-challenge of doing a sexy concept. The visual may have addressed each one from their unit, but Jonghyun felt Jihoon’s eyes resting on his still form. BoA *sunbaenim* was impressed on Jihoon’s modeling skills and asked him to do a repeat of his new image as the *wink slayer*. Jinyoung, who was asked the same by the emcee, laughed good-naturedly at Jihoon’s sudden change from the cute boy to a dangerous-looking *namja*.

“So, we have two candidates for the sought-after Rank 1 place—*Individual trainee* Kim Jaehwan yeonsusaeng, how does it feel to be the first independent trainee to achieve such a high rank?”

Jaehwan was speechless. It took quite a few coughs before he got to speak on the mic. “I have no words to say. I can only thank the Nation’s Producers for their invaluable support to me, my parents and friends, to my ‘Downpour’ Team for the fun that we had.” Then the main vocal took a deep breath. “Guanlin-nie already said what I wanted to say but I just want to give you my thanks, Jonghyun-nie hyung. Even if you’re not in our vocal team, you still managed to help us in so many ways; the aesthetics, stage design, everything—”

He knew he should be worried because *this would be aired* and everyone will now have a concrete proof of involvement in the raining stage but for the life of him he couldn’t give a damn.

“Thank you, hyung.”

He was happy he got to help.
BoA sunbaenim took a while to recover from the surprise of having a trainee do such a beautiful stage. A few moments after, she continued where she left off even if her eyes were drawn to the far left where a certain Pledis trainee was waiting for the results.

“Let’s have the name of the Rank 1 trainee for position evaluations—”

The trainees looked up at the screen in tensed anticipation while the emcee cocked a head to the side and blatantly stared at Kim Jonghyun yeon—no, hoobaenim.

*The talents this kid had in spades,* Kwon BoA was in awe of the so-called Angel Leader when she remembered the footage of ‘Downpour’ Team’s rainy stage.

*And it wasn’t even CGI!*

Unbeknownst to the thoughts of the Nation’s Representative, Jonghyun looked at the colorful display of swirls as they covered the name of the highest-ranked trainee. The numbers of votes beside their names were ever increasing, almost a blur.

Then stopped.

Jonghyun went numb as his name went above Jaehwan’s.

“Rank 2 goes to Independent trainee Kim Jaehwan yeonsusaeng with an amount of 3,367,298 votes.”

“And our Rank 1 is Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng.”

Jaehwan burst into tears as he thanked the fans for their support and hugged him to his chest. Jonghyun was smiling at the cameras, joking with the trainees at the platform he was standing on, but his mind was running at a thousand miles per hour. Now that he was Rank 1, what should he do now?

BoA sunbaenim clapped her hands. “Congratulations, trainees! You have done well in every evaluation and I could only wish you well in you endeavors in the future!”

“However, there is some announcement that you must know—”

Jonghyun felt his blood run cold.

“I did promise to tell you the changes during the presentation of concept teams, didn’t I? Well, a promise is a promise,” She pulled the familiar blue paper, the same one that destroyed the timeline that he knew.

“Due to the incredible reception of *Produce 101*, the show producers have decided to step up the ante—”

Below his seat to the right, Jaehwan murmured, “Here we go.”

“Onsite votes for the live performance of concept evaluations will run different with the online votes tallied a day after the aired episode. Twenty thousand benefit points will be awarded to each member of the winning concept team, a hundred thousand benefit points will be given to the highest-ranked trainee in the winning team, and a chance to perform at a special stage *Mnet Countdown* for the first-ranked team—”

*I really don’t like where this is going,* Jonghyun bit his lip.
“Online voting, however, has some upgrades,” At this, the mischievous glint in BoA sunbaenim’s eyes was evident. “In addition to the twenty thousand benefit points per team member and a hundred thousand points for the Rank 1 trainee within the team, the concept evaluation’s guest producers have decided to grant full creative rights to the winning team.”

Wait—

“The winning team from the online votes will have the chance to do a special stage on *Mnet Countdown*—”

“—and to shoot a music video as well.”

Well.

Goddamnit.

Just the thing he needed to solve his dilemma in ‘Never’, Jonghyun sighed when he saw Ong Seongwoo fall out of his chair.

MVs.

*Fate really hates me.*
Fixed Picks are a Pain

As the president of his entertainment company, CEO Kim Jonghyun was no stranger to making difficult decisions. For eight years, he had to swallow the bitter pill more times than he wanted and more often than not it led to situations that made things ten times worse. He had to deal with controversies to keep the board of directors satisfied, flopped comebacks to give way to larger companies, wrong investments to compromise between two feuding parties and avoid the backlash that would hit his promoting idol groups, and so much troubles that the only thing he could do was sleep on it and dearly wish that the problem would solve itself the next morning. But that’s not how the world works, and that was not the work ethic a person must have when so many lives depended on his every decision. His carefree days were over the moment he swore to do his best as the chairman of HMG Media and he wouldn’t change anything about his fate.

But as he stumbled his way in every aspect of the idol industry like a newborn fawn tripping over its early steps, Jonghyun learned to trust his instincts far more often than his worrier of a brain.

And his instincts were telling him to prepare himself for the concept evaluations.

“Hyung, what do we do now?”

Kim Jonghyun didn’t have an answer to that, even if he had been thinking of one ever since the damned concept evaluations pushed him into an early aneurysm, and a bloody one at that.

A few weeks ago, he had to deal with the new rules on online votes, high TV ratings, promotional units, and now this—

An MV.

Produce 101 was pulling all the guns now.

The others were still reeling from the onslaught of having their numbers cut down to half when BoA sunbaenim decided to drop the bomb on them. He had to stop the others from self-combusting both in excitement and anxiety at the new twist in the show.

“A MV! A real music video,” Lim Youngmin, the ever imperturbable BNM leader, repeated the mantra that he had been saying for the past thirty minutes.

After five, seemingly endless hours of reassuring the still-keening-from-the-whiplash-of-possibly-doing-an-MV trainees into a somewhat subdued version of themselves and getting a frantic Hwang Minhyun off his case, Kim Jonghyun was done being surprised.

True, the results knocked him back a few steps and he recovered soon after, albeit with reluctance. But a new twist amongst the many damned “snake trails” that Mnet brought into the show, much to the time-traveler’s chagrin, cruelly pulled away his renowned calm “leader-ah” composure and the safety net he painstakingly weaved from the frayed threads left by how the position evaluations went.

‘Steal or Bail’, the Angel Leader muttered under his breath followed by some unsavory words.

Nevertheless, it was a tiring effort to keep everyone floating above the crashing waves so, yes, Kim Jonghyun decided to just close his eyes and plunge in the deep waters.

But the concept evaluations were testing his patience.
And they weren’t holding anything back.

Concept Evaluations just got more complicated.

Jonghyun bit his lip to keep the expletives that were nearing the tip of his tongue. He felt the drilling stares of a certain Hwanggallyang and a Wink Slayer stabbing the back of his neck.

Unlike what Minhyun-nie and Jihoon-nie suspected, he did not plan this with their management nor with Mnet even with the odd instances that heavily coincides with their theory that the Angel Leader was powerful enough to influence the producers due to Produce 101’s tremendous success showcasing Kim Jonghyun’s visual and aesthetic direction.

The ‘Never’ trainees with the presence of Dongho-yah, Niel-ah, Minki-yah and Jinyoung-ie went out of their way to see him before meetings with the show producers at nine in the evening and accompany him to meet strange men in formal-looking suits calling him during breaktime. It took Minhyun a while to stop Seonho from asking an autograph from the tech support for the stage design because they looked badass in their suits and mysterious-looking suitcases.

“They don’t have guns,” the Hwanggallyang moaned, as he repeated his argument for the hundredth time. “It’s just blueprints and the occasional Lotte pie. No armaments.”

Seonho had a strange look on his face. “So—like Men in Black, only Korean, and instead of heist, they’re gonna rob Produce 101 with...bread?”

Minhyun just had the I-am-done look on his face, to Seongwoo and Daniel’s amusement.

They entered Main Training room A where they held the surprise morning exercise, alert and wide-awake despite the hour they have been awakened by the ear-splitting sirens of ‘Nayana’. Jonghyun, who was busy trying to finalize the visual concepts of the team he was stuck in for days, jumped a foot in the air. It was unexpected because the staff usually let them sleep in for at least one more hour a day after the eliminations and the Angel leader was only thankful for the brief respite to think ahead and do some things that he needed to know without cameras watching his every move. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case now and the leader of ‘Never’ Team sighed in resignation and went about his task of waking up his team.

Jonghyun was deeply worried for everyone. At the first run of their morning alarm, everyone was awake, even the notorious sleep-lover Ong Seongwoo. At the second run of the titular song, the whole team was dressed in the pink shirts and their newly vinyl stickers plastered in the middle and was on their way to the training center, nodding in greeting at the equally-tired ‘Showtime’ and ‘Open Up’ Teams.

It was a difficult night for everyone as evidence with the dark circles shadowing their eyes and the seemingly-amicable atmosphere that would descend to chaos anytime soon. Half the concept teams were nearly decimated and the worried trainees could not find their sleep with the looming concept evaluations and the huge problem of them having low numbers. ‘Oh Little Girl’ and ‘Never’ had a problem that was quite the opposite with the Hiphop genre having one extra member and Deep House genre still had the original set of twelve to choose seven members from.

The moment they entered the room Kim Jonghyun immediately noticed something unusual.

“What are those?”

The slightly-hysterical tone of a sleep-deprived Ong Seongwoo only brought the attention of everyone towards the front of the room. Lined with equal distance apart were five mid-sized
television screens playing some kind of video. Roughly three-quarters of an arm span, each screen had a flower ribbon the color of the concept team’s shirt wrapped around its body like an expensive gift for Christmas. The printed name of the team on the placard placed on top of the television only solidified Jonghyun’s suspicion that Produce 101 placed the screens to frighten the trainees and a certain Angel Leader senselessly.

Haknyeon moved closer to the screens while everyone milled behind him, curious at what the screens were doing there. “Hey! That’s us in the training rooms!”

Jonghyun realized the Cre.ker trainee was right. Upon closer inspection, the screens were showing each concept team practicing in the training rooms. The Angel Leader was wary of the footages but he was absolutely terrified of the small black boxes piled in a clear glass box like gumballs a few feet away from the screens.

Jihoon peered into the glass box, finger tracing the shape of the objects inside. “These look like bomb detonators.”

“You’ve been playing too much League.”

Jihoon huffed at the rebuke from Minhyun.

Bomb detonators?

Yeah, sure, pigs can fly right? If he could go back in time, then anything could happen.

Because at that point, the Angel Leader was at a loss on what this time’s Produce 101 had in store for them.

“So,” Seongwoon hyung’s tone was light as they gathered in two lines of six and sat down on the cold floor, eyes still on the television screens. “Who are we kicking out?”

Cue nervous chuckles from the teams seated around them.

Jonghyun pursed his lips. He could just imagine the headache he’d be sporting after.

The Angel Leader and overall leader of ‘Never’ Team knew that the Ardor & Able trainee was just trying to keep the atmosphere light, even if the effort was lacking, but his statement roused suspicions in the teams—

Because that was the most viable solution now.

With three teams lacking members to complete the seven-membered team and it just so happened that the remaining two teams combined had the exact number to fill the vacant spots in the other teams was not overlooked, it was not surprising that there was some tension amongst them. From the dawning expression of horrified understanding in Youngmin and Minki’s faces, everyone caught up to the chance that Mnet would make ‘Oh Little Girl’ and ‘Never’ Teams pick seven from their current numbers and let the other teams pick the remaining ones to complete their numbers.

Jonghyun let his eyes rest on each team, both terrified and excited at how they would be divided this time around. Will he still have the same members? If not, who will leave? Who will stay?

Will I still be in ‘Never’?

Five minutes after they sat down, BoA sunbaenim entered the room in stylish pastel-green flowy blouse and denim jeans, looking casual despite the fact that Jonghyun was damn sure her presence
was the contrary.

Then the Angel Leader caught sight of the familiar blue cue card.

Well.

If that card isn’t a guarantee that shit’s about to go down, he didn’t know what is.

“Good morning, dear trainees! I trust you all have slept well, yes?” She brightly asked the crowd.

The trainees let out a quiet affirmative.

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you—”

“Ne!”

The Nation’s Representative looked pleased. “Much better. Now that the eliminations are over, it’s time to proceed to the next round: concept evaluations. Five concept songs have been gifted to Produce 101 trainees to showcase their talents in the concept teams that the Nation’s Producers put you in, “BoA sunbaenim started while the TV screens behind her began playing the introductory video of the producers and the choreography of each concept song.

“Let’s see our remaining teams: ‘Showtime’ Team has five trainees,” Jonghyun glanced at the red-clad trainees who nodded. “Then we have ‘Oh Little Girl’ Team has eight members, ‘I Know You Know’ has four trainees, ‘Open Up’ has six members and—”

Jonghyun stilled when he felt dozens of eyes on them.

“—with ‘Never’ Team still complete in their twelve-man team.”

BoA sunbaenim smiled. “Since we have five songs and thirty-five trainees, there must be seven members in each concept team—”

Behind him, Daehwi leaned forward, almost touching his back. “Hyung,” One of the maknaes of ‘Never’ Team whispered urgently. “What do we do now? They’ll split us apart!”

Jonghyun subtly reached behind him to grasp the trembling hand tightly.

Hold on, Daehwi-ah.

“—Hence, we need to do some reshuffling to, say, even out the numbers.”

“However,” BoA sunbaenim read the card she had on her hands, eyebrows rising in amusement at whatever was written in the paper. Jonghyun felt his stomach churl in apprehension. “We have some surprises ready for you.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Youngmin-ah murmured, his face with a slight greenish-tinge.

Murmurs rose from the crowd. Jonghyun accidentally bit his tongue to stop the curse that wanted to come out of his mouth.

Of course, there is, because why the hell not?

Jonghyun bit the inside of his cheek.

The emcee looked behind her before smiling before them. “What can you see behind me?”
“TV screens,” chorused by half the trainees in the room.

“True,” The emcee assented. “Anything else?”

“Remotes.”

BoA sunbaenim nodded at Gunhee who answered. “That’s right, these remotes,” She fished out one of the black boxes, which turned out to be a shiny black remote with huge colorful buttons, and raised them for all to see. “Have the power to keep you in your concept team—”

“—or kick you out of it.”

Jiseong hyung gulped.

“For this season’s concept evaluation, the producers have decided to let the trainees have a feel on what it is like to be a Nation’s Producer and have the chance to vote for the concept team they like.”

“Exciting, isn’t it?”

The trainees could only gape in shock.

BoA sunbaenim was unbothered of the lack of reaction. “There are five buttons corresponding to the concept teams that we have for this evaluation: Red is for our ‘Showtime’ Team, Blue is for ‘I Know You Know’ Team, Black for ‘Open Up’ Team, White for ‘Oh Little Girl’ Team, and Pink for ‘Never’ Team.”

The second screen from the left showed a blue background with the title of the song and the member’s faces below it. “With the uneven number of team members, the roster will be reshuffled by letting the trainees vote on the best concept team. Selection of teams for the trainees depend on the number of votes,” The screens flared brightly before the light dimmed down to show a zero.

“The concept team with the highest number of voters will be the trainee’s team for the concept evaluations.”

“Five seconds will be given,” At this, the “0” shifted down to accommodate the countdown timer on top of it. Jonghyun avoided looking at the screens, stomach churning. “You can choose not to vote but I wouldn’t recommend it, because—”

She pressed the blue button a second before the timer reached zero and the second screen from the left blazed in brilliant blue with glittery silver ‘I Know You Know’ and a “1” encompassing the whole screen with its fancy script.

“—Every vote counts.”

“Wow,” Daehwi gasped. A few feet to his left, Donghan looked entranced.

Jonghyun was reluctantly impressed at the efforts the producers were doing in order to hype the show. At the rate they were going with the innovative ideas for a survival show (he was still reeling from how the position evaluations’ ‘Steal or Bail’ concept), he wouldn’t be surprised if Produce 101 got recognized as a gameshow too.

Two of the show’s staffs began handing out the little remote to the trainees. Jiseong hyung passed one to him before handing over the remotes to his members. Jonghyun looked down at the device, only the slightest wider than his pointer and index finger put side by side. The shape was sleek and
thin and the buttons looked soft enough to press comfortably. It was a neat little thing but the Angel Leader knew fully well that the concept evaluations won’t be the same again because of the damned thing.

It was going well when—

“Huh? Why don’t I have one?” Hyeongseop raised a hand to alert the staff member.

The female staff member shook her head and pointed in front. Beside him, Youngmin-ah, who also didn’t get a remote, looked very confused at the turn of events.

BoA sunbaenim smiled at the disgruntled trainees. “Ah, yes, another part of the selection process. As there are only twenty-five remotes for only twenty-five trainees—”

She paused for effect.

“I don’t like where this is going,” He heard Jiseong hyung whimper.

“—the remaining ten won’t need to vote. The ten trainees’ positions in their respective concept teams, as of today, are permanent as the ‘Fixed Picks’ of concept evaluations.”

Silence.

Then—

“The fuck—” Daehwi screamed against the hand that Woojin used to block his dongsaeng’s occasional potty-mouth.

The Angel Leader felt the beginnings of a migraine pulsing in his temples. The added noise of every trainee reacting in stunned disbelief at the sudden turnabout of events did not help the dull throbbing in his head. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Jonghyun couldn’t blame them for their reaction; heck, if he hadn’t developed the calm composure he was always known for and didn’t have the instincts of a seasoned chairman, he’d react the same way they did.

How the hell could they select ten trainees before today—

The memory crashed onto him like a thousand-ton freight train going at 200 miles per hour.

Shit.

Kim Jonghyun inwardly slapped his face, hard.

He forgot the interviews, goddammit!

Instincts of a seasoned chairman, my ass, a voice taunted in his mind.

The interview from three days ago slipped in the back of his mind. Their team was called into the interview room, much to ‘Never’ Team’s confusion and slight irritation at the interruption. The modern themes of lighted columns, symmetric patterns of the glass-encased décor, and the bright iridescence of the room brought nostalgic memories to the Angel Leader when he remembered the time when he defended his “balding scalp”. It was similar to the setup of Visual 101 where they ranked the most handsome trainees in the show but this time there were only twelve photos pinned across the glass divider instead of sixty pictures.

Kim Jonghyun thought it was just an interview as he picked the familiar foxlike eyes and elegant nose of Hwang Minhyun as the member that best fitted the concept.
His stupid self didn’t even realize it was a ruse all along!

BoA sunbaenim looked admirably calm amidst the chaos that descended on the trainees. She raised a hand to quieten the crowd.

“In the span of a week, each team were interviewed by the staff on who was the most important member of the team. Most chose their ‘Fixed Picks’ based on how they fit the concept best, whether it was their visuals and charisma, vocals and dance abilities, or profound leadership,” Jonghyun stiffened at the thrown glance in his direction. “You all have chosen the best member in your team.”

She smiled.

“And these talented trainees are the ‘Fixed Picks’ of the concept evaluations. And as the permanent members of their team, they are given a boon.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw Guanlin swallow nervously.

“The ‘Fixed Picks’ have the exclusive right to pick one other member to permanently stay in the team while the rest can either remain on the same team or be transferred to other teams after the votes have been tallied.”

All the screens showed two blank squares above five blank lines.

“Damn,” He heard someone curse softly.

BoA sunbaenim looked up from her cue card with a flourish. “Got the gist? Then let’s see who are the ‘Fixed Picks’ of concept evaluations, yeah?”

The trainees leaned forward in anticipation while the Angel Leader wanted to curl up and hide his dumbfounded expression. He was still caught up with the fact that he callously dismissed the interviews.

It was pure cunning on Mnet and Produce 101’s part, using the interviews that everyone thought was just some sort of fan-service because the trainees rarely held themselves back from being honest in answering the questions, only to knock everyone out cold with the news that the segment of “Who fits the concept best?” was actually a part of the concept evaluations, days before the reshuffling happened!

Crafty bastards.

Jonghyun could not deny the genius behind it. Because of the uneven distribution of trainees, they were bound to pick only seven from their number and let the other members go to the other teams. Unfortunately, there would be some problems, mostly drama from the viewers, because their favorite got axed from the concept team the audience chose for them.

But with having the trainees do the axing themselves, and in such an intriguing way too, and putting two fixed members in the team secured a part of the original team’s fanbase, the show did not compromise their weekly-reign as the “Hottest Issue of Survival Shows” because of it.

And with all the twists and turns brought out in each evaluation, like turning the cards around and letting the trainees do the voting for once, would only hype the already-popular show even more, and in so doing the show would keep the growing fanbase interested or livid, whichever works, thus the projected increase of TV ratings.
All because of an interview segment.

The show twisted the meaning of “fixed picks” and turned the whole concept evaluations upside down!

He may not like the pesky producers of the show but he wouldn’t deny that they hired a damn-good PR Team.

The first screen from the left zapped to life, red-themed graphics capturing everyone’s attention as the technicolor lights reminiscent to what a disco ball looked like pulled back and dimmed to a minimum before bursting to life with a name and picture to match the trainee who was the first ‘fixed pick’ of concept evaluations.

“The ‘Fixed Pick’ for ‘Showtime’ is Brave Entertainment Kim Samuel yeonsusaeng.”

The Rank 8 trainee looked stunned amidst his cheering members.

“And who will be your ‘Fixed Pick’, Kim Samuel yeonsusaeng?”

Samuel looked hesitant, gaze flitting on each of his member’s face, before he steeled himself. “I pick MMO Entertainment Yoon Jiseong yeonsusaeng.”

The oldest trainee was teary-eyed as he hugged and thanked Samuel for choosing him. The two trainees went to stand beside their team’s screen where Samuel and Jiseong hyung’s faces occupied the two black squares.

BoA sunbaenim then proceeded to name the ‘Fixed Picks’ for the other teams. Blue-clad ‘I Know You Know’ Team had Kim Donghan as their permanent member for the concept and the Kings’ Maknae picked the Visual Prince of Manhwa Team Kwon Hyunbin.

‘Open Up’ did not waste time in pointing at a red-faced Kang Daniel before the middle TV screen showed the Fancam King’s face as the first member of the black team’s sexy concept. Daniel did not hesitate in picking Kang Dongho to remain in their team.

‘Oh Little Girl’ took the longest out of the four teams before the VCR showed Huang Justin’s name as the fixed member for the cute, schoolboy concept. The Chinese trainee, after a minute of deciding, went for vocals and selected Jung Sewoon as the second fixed member of the hiphop genre.

“And last but not the least, the ‘Fixed Pick’ for ‘Never’ Team is—”

“That is so you, Jonghyun-nie hyung,” Daehwi quipped from behind.

“Nah, it’s not—”

“—Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng!”

“Told you.”

Jonghyun hastily stood up after a hard nudge from Daehwi. The Angel Leader turned to look at his team. Seongwoo and Jaehwan were hooting obnoxiously, Minhyun clapped hard at the unanimous decision, and Guanlin had a very smug look on his face.

BoA sunbaenim put her microphone up. “Your ‘Fixed Pick’, Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng.”

At this point, the Angel Leader was stuck with a dilemma. During the interviews he picked
Minhyun-nie as the best member for the concept because of his dramatic flair, soulful gaze, and mellifluous vocals. Although the others fit the song and concept well, Hwang Minhyun just had this feel of elegance and refinement beautifully swirled in the saudade of the lyrics, its poignancy and depth embodied in his performance as their group’s center. So, he was very serious in his selection.

But now that the whole team was at stake, he felt the stirrings of guilt in his gut. He just knew that after having two ‘Fixed Picks’ in each team, it would be a free-for-all, and the chances of ‘Never’ Team ever forming the same way they did before were not that high.

He’d be saving one and alienating the other ten and that was a hard decision to make. Maybe he could let go of the position—

A sharp jab in his ankle jolted him from his thoughts. Looking down, he met the warning glare of Lee Daehwi.

No.

“Kim Jonghyun-ssi, final decision?”

But then forgoing his earlier decision in picking Minhyun and going for the safer ones like Park Woojin, Lai Guanlin, or even Park Jihoon almost felt like a betrayal. He’d be lying to the audience by saying he didn’t pick Hwang Minhyun because there are other members that were better with the concept. He’d be lying to the trainees by defending his actions as a bid to avoid backlash from the viewers.

Most of all, he’d be lying to himself by trying to convince everyone that he did it to protect his team when he could’ve been fair in the first place and just handled the bad press by showing off the stage concept and visual direction.

He met each of his member’s gaze and he was proud they did not back down from the intensity of his gaze.

Fight.

Don’t let the other teams take you away.

Determined smiles came from the ten members of ‘Never’ Team.

Jonghyun turned towards the waiting emcee.

“I pick Pledis Entertainment Hwang Minhyun yeonsusaeng.”

The Angel Leader smiled as the surprised trainee went to his side before going to the right side of their screen. Daniel threw him a thumbs-up and Dongho winked at him.

“What do you think would happen?” Minhyun whispered as a they surrendered the devices they had on hand and staff ushered them out the room.

“I don’t know but we’ll get our members soon enough.”

Minhyun gave a wan smile. “If they could change the whole concept evaluations, just like that, I find it hard to believe that I could still be caught off-guard.”

Twenty minutes later, Hwang Minhyun ate his words.
The moment the ‘Fixed Picks’ left the training room, Guanlin just knew that shit was about to go down.

The *Cube* trainee was normally articulate in Mandarin and not Korean and adequate in English and he learned the phrase from, oddly, Seongwoo hyung. The guy may not be as good as Daniel hyung or Daehwi hyung but when it comes to profanities and things that he could use to infuriate the other *hyungs* (Kang Daniel was first with Kim Jaehwan, Hwang Minhyun, and Park Jihoon in second place), Ong Seongwoo had a vast vocabulary.

Still, Minhyun-nie hyung and the Angel Leader just left him to deal with the rest of ‘Never’ Team. And if he had any say about it, he would’ve begged the two to just let him go with them because dealing with a Kim Jonghyun-less ‘Never’ isn’t a wonderful experience.

BoA sunbaenim gave them ten minutes to prepare for the rearrangement of trainees. Immediately, he was tugged into the huddle. From his peripheral vision, the other teams did the same, only with a smaller circle than their group of twelve.

“So, what’s the plan?” Seonho asked.

The other members turned towards the de-facto leader of team after the Angel Leader and Hwanggallyang’s absence. Youngmin-nie hyung looked very uncomfortable with the attention but slowly started with a wary expression on his face.

“I guess…we just have to vote for what we think is best for the team.”

That was the most ambiguous command that he had ever heard. What is truly best for the team, Guanlin didn’t know. As far as he was concerned, ‘Never’ Team had the most diverse trainees: power vocals, superb dancers, spitfire rappers, heck they even had the renowned leaders of *Produce 101*. And having to choose only half and let the other teams get the other half was grating on his nerves.

Guanlin looked to the side and deliberated on his possible choices. Jaehwan-nie hyung and Seongwoo hyung were the surest members because of their popularity not only in their team but also in the others. The current Rank 2 and 7 trainees also did not lack on talent, which made them the most dangerous contenders in the competition. Seongwoon-nie hyung was a close second to the Kings because the guy was a triple threat as well and no amount of complaining from a certain hyung would ever stop Guanlin from seeing the Ardor & Able trainee a force to be reckoned with.

Then there’s the BNM Boys with Youngmin-nie hyung’s rapping tone, Woojin-nie hyung’s dancing abilities, and Daehwi hyung’s formidable adaptability. Amongst the three, however, Lee Daehwi had the most chances of staying in ‘Never’, even with his infamous stint in the Avengers Team.

The Dark Prince of Manhwa Team had different plans for the three most versatile trainees in their team: Seonho-yah was one of the tallest trainees in the show and yet Guanlin got the impression that his fellow *Cube* trainee would do well in the flower-boy concepts. From what he gleaned from Minki hyung’s short demonstration of their chorus part and Hyunbin-nie hyung’s rap verse in the Synth/Funk song, Yoo Seonho would do well in both concepts and Guanlin could only hope that Seonho won’t feel betrayed by him voting for him to go to either ‘Oh Little Girl’ or ‘I Know You Know’.

Joo Haknyeon was harder to pinpoint; the former Avenger was a crowd-favorite since the
beginning because of his boy-next-door visuals and yet Guanlin just had the feeling that Haknyeon-nie hyung could go to the other concepts without hassle. The most difficult member to decide on was Jihoon-nie hyung. He could vote for the Maroo trainee to stay in ‘Never’ but from the speculative glances towards the Rank 3 trainee, Guanlin had no doubts that Park Jihoon was a popular pick and even with his duality as the adorable Aegyo Prince and sexy Wink Slayer would ace any of the concepts, hands down.

As for him, he’s fine anywhere he’d go because he was the adaptable kind even if that kind of strength was deeply buried beneath layers upon layers of insecurity and all-around shyness.

Jonghyun-nie hyung never lacked in reminding him that.

After the ten-minute break, they were arranged by rank. To his left were Jihoon-nie hyung and Jaehwan-nie hyung were talking quietly to each other. On his other side, Seongwoo hyung, Daehwi hyung, and Hyeongseop hyung were huddled together but Guanlin couldn’t hear anything from the scheming trainees. Guanlin dearly felt the absence of Minhyun-nie hyung and Daniel hyung who were both his constant neighbors in the rankings. He felt slightly off-balance without the presence of the two calm and collected hyungs.

“Are you ready?”

Guanlin tightened his grip on the remote.

He watched with trepidation as BoA sunbaenim started calling out trainees by random.

“Let’s have the first trainee: C2K Entertainment Kim Seonglee yeonsusaeng,” The middle screen flashed the trainee’s photo and name. “Ready your devices! Only five seconds for voting! Countdown in 5…4—”

Guanlin pressed the black button.

“—3…2…1!” The screens blacked after zero and immediately flared to life, showing the number of votes per team.

Guanlin felt his eyes widen in shock.

The trainee was the main vocal of ‘Open Up’ and he had heard Seonglee hyung reach the high notes when he visited Dongho hyung in one of their practices and yet—

“With 11 votes, ‘Showtime’ wins!”

He couldn’t believe it!

‘Showtime’ was higher by two points, beating his choice of ‘Open Up’ Team! What the hell! Dammit, is this what it felt like to be a Nation’s Producer?

Seonglee hyung looked disappointed but saved face when he went beside the screen where his face filled the first blank space below Jiseong hyung’s face. Beside the shocked Taiwanese trainee was an equally-shocked Jihoon-nie hyung and Jaehwan-nie hyung. The independent trainee slowly turned to them, his face a picture of horror.

His voice a mere whisper, Jaehwan-nie hyung said, “Did you vote—”

“No,” Guanlin immediately reassured his hyung.
Jaehwan-nie hyung then turned to the Maroo trainee who only frowned. “I had to. ‘Showtime’ needed more power vocals in their team. Woodam hyung isn’t enough at this point.”

Guanlin gaped at the visual trainee.

Yep.

*Shit’s about to go down.*

While the Dark Prince was lamenting on how his votes failed to put his fellow trainees in the concept team they would do best in, Jihoon was busy getting worried of how the reshuffling was wreaking havoc amongst them. He wasn’t blind nor stupid; he knew half of the trainees had other preferences and this was a way for them to go to the teams they wanted in the first place.

Unfortunately, the ones who liked where they were won’t give up their place without a fight.

And that was the hard part, because they wouldn’t be given the chance to fight for their place.

It was chaos and Jihoon could only look on helplessly as the others got in other teams. Choi Minki got an overwhelming number of votes for ‘Open Up’, to the surprise of everyone. The remaining members of ‘Oh Little Girl’ looked upset at how the other team stole their leader and ace but Jihoon casted the same vote as most did. Choi Minki will definitely ace the sexy concept with the Fancam King and the Sexy Bandit.

Noh Taehyun was the first trainee to remain in his current team and the relief was evident in the Rank 1 Dancer’s eyes as he joined Seonglee hyung in ‘Showtime’. Kim Taedong had only five votes for ‘Open Up’ while it was a landslide decision for him to go to ‘I Know You Know’. Lee Woojin looked particularly pleased when the former member of ‘Shape of You’ joined their concept team. Similarly, Kim Donghyun got outvoted from ‘Open Up’ and joined ‘I Know You Know’.

“Whoa,” Seongwoo hyung gasped. “‘I Know You Know’ is looking particularly strong now.”

Jihoon agreed with the analysis. From Donghan-nie hyung and Kim Taedong-ssi’s tandem in ‘Shape of You’, the two fulfilled the dance line well. Lee Woojin’s vocals would ace the melody of the song, even with the loss of their main vocal Kim Yehyun, and Hyunbin-nie hyung had a good rapper tone.

Then ‘I Know You Know’ was shuffled, to the obvious frustration of Lai Guanlin, and had a surprising trainee added to their roster—

“With 15 votes, Cre.ker Entertainment Joo Haknyeon is now part of ‘I Know You Know’ Team!”

Whispers broke out from the crowd as a poker-faced Haknyeon stood up from ‘Never’ Team and trudged towards his new team. Jihoon didn’t know what to feel at this point as he subtly removed his thumb away from the blue button. He wouldn’t claim to be a kind person and just let the guy stay in ‘Never’ Team even if there was some, er, difficulties, encountered with the trainee. So, there was no love lost between them, but he could sympathize with anyone who had to learn a new song and choreography in a week, even if it was Joo Haknyeon of all people.

Two places to his right, Daehwi wrung his fingers nervously. “Damn. I forgot Donghyun-nie hyung doesn’t like Haknyeon-nie.”

Seongwoo raised an eyebrow. “What? Seriously?”
Daehwi thinned his lips. “Yeah. Let’s just say Haknyeon-nie and I got into some fight during ‘Boy in Luv’ and hyung didn’t like the words Haknyeon-nie used.”

Jihoon pursed his lips at the memory. Haknyeon’s got his work cut out for him, that’s for sure.

Then it was ‘Oh Little Girl’ who got shuffled and Jihoon felt cold fear creeping up his spine.

Takada Kenta and Hyeongseop of ‘Oh Little Girl’ got transferred to ‘Open Up’ Team and ‘I Know You Know’ Team while Lee Woojin was sent to ‘Oh Little Girl’ and Jihoon noted that only the ‘fixed picks’ of ‘I Know You Know’ remained as the original members of the team.

“What the heck…” Jaehwan-nie hyung trailed off.

Guanlin just had the look of utter misery on his face, his thumb still resting on the red button even if the Media Line trainee got into the white-clad team of ‘Oh Little Girl’.

In a twist of events, HF Music Company Woo Jinyoung got snagged by ‘Showtime’ and from the dawning looks of fear and apprehension from Jaehwan-nie hyung and Seongwoo hyung, they just realized that the ‘fixed picks’ of ‘I Know You Know’ won’t see their original members after the reshuffling.

For one terrifying moment, Jihoon wondered if ‘Never’ Team would only have Jonghyun-nie hyung and Minhyun-nie hyung as the original members.

Lee Euiwoong and Lee Gunhee remained in ‘Oh Little Girl’ after a close cut between their current team and the contenders ‘I Know You Know’ and ‘Showtime’. Lee Gunhee also stayed in ‘Oh Little Girl’ which was a great advantage for the hiphop team. Park Woodam was also part of his original team even if everyone was caught in suspense when ‘Showtime’ was higher by one vote against ‘Never’.

The first member that got into ‘Never’ was Kim Jaehwan. With fifteen votes, the main vocal looked all too ready to pass out at his secured position.

“Our main vocal’s safe,” Daehwi breathed a sigh of relief as they noted the other trainees who looked dismayed as the Rank 2 trainee and power vocal went to ‘Never’. Park Woojin was called and achieved ten points for ‘Never’, a close call for the rapper what with ‘Open Up’ almost tying with nine votes.

“So is Woojin-nie! Damn, the first one who got into the team I wanted for him!” Guanlin clapped enthusiastically as the grinning rapper all but ran towards a cheering Jaehwan-nie hyung.

Jihoon looked at each screen, noting the number of slots needed to fill the team: ‘Showtime’ and ‘I Know You Know’ needed only one more member, ‘Oh Little Girl’ had two slots open, and ‘Open Up and ‘Never’ required three more trainees.

Guanlin bit his lip. “Jihoon-nie hyung, we’re still seven—”

“I know.”

You don’t need to remind me, Guanlin-ah, the Rank 3 trainee thought.

Then the trainees called were from ‘Never’. Lee Daehwi kept his place as a vocal of ‘Never’ Team. Ong Seongwoo hid his relief in the guise of hilarious antics as he joined a clapping Jaehwan, Woojin, and Daehwi lined up for ‘Never’ Team.
“Will the remaining trainees stand in the first row?”

Guanlin shifted closer to him.

“My, what a lineup of trainees!” BoA sunbaenim exclaimed. “We have Bae Jinyoung yeonsusaeng from ‘Oh Little Girl’ Team, Kim Sanggyun yeonsusaeng from ‘Showtime’ and five trainees from ‘Never’, who happened to all have high-rankings in the competition. Let’s hear from our ‘Never’ Team: Kim Jaehwan yeonsusaeng, your team only have one slot left. Who do you think would get the final place for ‘Never’ Team?”

Youngmin-nie hyung froze.

The main vocal gingerly coughed before addressed the question. “I believe anyone deserve to be in ‘Never’ but I also think that even without being in ‘Never’, their talents would do any of the teams’ concepts justice.”

Good answer, Jihoon nodded.

BoA sunbaenim smiled. “An astute answer from our independent trainee. Well, let’s proceed to the last few trainees…”

Jihoon felt the world dim as he closed his eyes.

Kim Jonghyun didn’t know how it happened but the concept evaluations broke the perpetually-calm Hwang Minhyun. The moment they entered the training room, Jonghyun just knew they were in for a rollercoaster ride in the Arctic before plunging down the deepest crevice of the Earth’s solid inner core.

Training Room ‘D’ only had one cameraman and a staff to record their reactions while watching the happenings of the reshuffling on the obnoxiously large flat-screen TV mantled above the mirrors. It was hellish for the Angel Leader as he gave his all in not bursting into tears at how Produce 101 pitted all of them against each other while trying to avoid glancing in the staff’s direction in case he slipped and accidentally strangles someone.

Preferably someone in a black jacket with a triangle logo patch on the left breast pocket.

Murderous thoughts aside, the Angel Leader was left in muted disbelief at the plot twist that was the concept evaluations. He didn’t have any hopes that everything would remain the same. No, that’s the confidence of a fool and he wasn’t a fool. But even the nimblest prodigy would be taken aback at how his intricately-made plans were thwarted by a seemingly-innocent mishap that was the concept evaluations.

And because he’s no genius, “taken aback” wasn’t the apt term to be used. “Sweating like a pig” seemed like a better adjective.

Minhyun was fixated at the screen with eyes popped wide open as Takada Kenta left ‘Oh Little Girl’ for ‘Open Up’. Then he went into so many expressions in the span of ten minutes that Jonghyun was truly worried for the state of his brother’s facial muscles. After all, the human body could only take in so much.

Then came the results of the final lineup and Jonghyun was worried that his eyes would fall out of its sockets.
Because, in a miraculous turn of events, ‘Never’ Team retained the same members.

Both in the past and now in the present.

Seongwoo crashed the door open with his hands raised up high. “I’m back!”

Jonghyun did not have the time to lift his jaw back up before he was accosted by Jaehwan, Woojin, Daehwi, and Guanlin. Minhyun was valiantly peeling off Ong Seongwoo’s body away from his personal space. Soon, everyone was trying to smother the cackling Ong with a furious Hwanggallyang in the front lines while the Angel Leader was lost in his thoughts.

He lost so many this time around.

Haknyeon-nie.

Youngmin-ah.

Seongwoon hyung.

Seonho-yah.

Jihoon-nie.

Jonghyun made better memories now because he had very little to fear. He remembered the shrill laughter at ten in the evening as they rested on the training room floor after dance practice for four hours straight, and the deep conversations they had during the all-nighters they had to perfect the vocals and rap parts. There were tears shed as their best dancers sprained their ankles and pulled their muscles to perfect the moves and words said but not means as their frustrations rose when they strained their vocal chords to exhaustion, but they still remained strong even if they were almost torn at the seams.

Strong and lasting memories, and the Angel Leader could only thank whoever sent him back.

But now he had a new team (or old, for the time-traveler) to lead as Jaehwan stuck the “L” sticker to his chest.

And besides, the more he thought about how lucky he was to be in a situation where he could change things for the better, the more he got determined to do his best for all teams in the competition.

The following days had some of the most confusing moments of Produce 101 that Kim Donghan had been in.

The ‘fixed pick’ of ‘I Know You Know’ was slight saddened that only him and Hyunbin-nie hyung were left as the original members of the team but his momentary lapse of weakness was overshadowed by a mix of curiosity and confusion at the unexpected trainees, which happened to be the stronger trainees from three of the four teams, that completed their finalized team.

It took a few seconds for the bleary-eyed Kings’ Maknae to distinguish the familiar face going to the bunkbed beneath Hyunbin-nie hyung.

“Uh, Woojin-nie?”

A grunt.
“Shouldn’t you be in ‘Oh Little Girl’ Team?”

The youngest trainee of  Produce 101 spat an expletive before he ran like hell. Donghan did not let the fifteen-year-old get away with his potty-mouth so he told Daniel hyung, of course.

That was just the tip of the iceberg. Donghan realized that it wasn’t only him who had to guide his former teammates to their new dormitories when it was too late at night for them to realize they’ve been going to the wrong bed. Jiseong-ie hyung had to drag Seonho from ‘Never’ Team quite a few times and Dongho hyung made it a point to check their room for stragglers or missing persons before calling it a night. Team practice wasn’t that much different, except for the fact that they had to deal with a new practice schedule for that day.

“What do you mean we can only practice from until eight?”

Seongwoon-nie hyung frowned and tried to negotiate. “But, hyung-nim, we have to relearn the whole choreography and song for the concept evaluations—”

Donghan didn’t need to peak behind the black mask to see the staff hyung was getting annoyed at the questions. He placed a hand on the frustrated main vocal of ‘I Know You Know’. “Hyung, let it go. We’ll do our best to practice. But we just want to know why our time would be cut.”

The staff shrugged his shoulders. “Unit promotions will start tomorrow and variety promotions in two days.”

“We know that, staff-nim,” Donghan said. “But we’ve been rehearsing well for both the promotional activity and the concept evaluations. I don’t think there’s a need to shorten our practice time.”

The staff shook his head. “It’s not only that. You also have to prepare for the MV.”

That stopped them short.

It was a good thing the staff member hightailed away before Seongwoon-nie hyung got his hands on him. He understood why the Ardor & Able trainee was fighting hard for an extended practice time. The new members of the team were having a difficult time mastering the routine and song. Hyeongseop-ah and Hakyneon-nie were still shaky in the rap and vocals section, and Donghyun-nie and Taedong-ie hyung had to learn the choreography many times to at least get by Jaesung seongsaengnim’s inspection without getting called out for their incompetence. Seongwoon-nie hyung was the fastest to learn his parts and the choreography, even with Hyunbin-nie hyung in the comparison, but the older guy took it upon himself to show a good example to the others because he was their center.

Still, the shortened practice time was troubling enough but the staff’s refusal to tell them more than the vague answer pertaining to the MV shooting for the winning team in the online votes was downright maddening.

If he won’t get the answers from the staff, then he’d ask the next best person.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung!”

While the Kings’ Maknae was on the prowl for the elusive Angel Leader during lunch time, said leader was getting pulled in so many different directions. Earlier that day, he had an early call from Aron hyung asking about clearance heights and exhaust pipes. Five minutes later, Kim Yeonsoo
Sajangnim called for the promotions and Pledis’ stand on the issue with SNL and Mnet in general. Fifteen minutes after, just before his team went for breakfast, a harried-looking staff practically gave him call privileges because the onslaught of calls addressed to Kim Jonghyun was just difficult to manage.

Jaehwan was an angel and Jonghyun couldn’t thank the main vocal enough for it. ‘Never’ Team’s progress was going well and almost everyone mastered the choreography already. The tandem of Daehwi and Jaehwan as the vocal directors was the smartest decision he had ever made and the two were just as efficient as Woojin and Seongwoo’s teamwork in the choreography. Camaraderie between the members was strong and no fights had been reported to him because the six members were close to each other even if everyone in the team belonged to popular teams back in the other evaluations.

Then came the distribution of parts and Jonghyun encountered some, er, difficulties.

“No.”

“But, Daehwi-ah, I’m okay with my part—”

The ‘Nayana’ center scoffed in disbelief. “Yeah, well, I’m not. Four seconds isn’t enough to showcase your skills. So, you’re taking Woojin-nie hyung’s second rap part.”

Jonghyun turned towards Park Woojin, who shrugged.

Daehwi’s hard expression softened. “Look, Jonghyun-nie hyung, you don’t have to agree immediately, okay. We’ll just see if you’d do the part well.”

The Angel Leader sighed and did that part with Jaehwan in front of the team.

“Butjabanaelsudo damanaelsudo eopseo”

“Shiganeun galsurok nae soyuyongman keojyeo—”

The song abruptly stopped.

“Yeah, nope, you’re definitely not doing, well, that.”

Jonghyun looked up from the arm that encircled the main vocal close to his chest. Jaehwan turned to the front, carefully moving around the embrace so as not to dislodge the Angel Leader’s arm.

“Huh? Why not? I think Jonghyun-nie hyung did a good job—”

Seongwoo quipped beside Minhyun-nie’s shaking form. “Yeah, well you didn’t do a good job, Jaehwan-nie. I know I’d do better than you.”

Jaehwan’s expression was priceless as he got pushed to the sidelines and Seongwoo gleefully took his place while Daehwi protested vehemently. Amongst the chaos, Kim Jonghyun felt so out-of-place when everyone, even the rappers and a strangely-laughing Hwang Minhyun, tried the verse originally for Kim Jaehwan but was mysteriously up for the taking because Daehwi didn’t, and he quote, “like the expression on Jaehwan-nie hyung’s face”.

“He—He wasn’t even looking! His back’s turned the whole time!”

Daehwi and Seongwoo were as steadfast as a rock in their decision to battle it out for the verse after the first chorus.
Jonghyun didn’t have time to argue with his predicament because there were more pressing matters at hand. It’s not that Kim Jonghyun didn’t know what he going to face the moment he took action in changing the rules for aesthetic direction during group battles. On the contrary, he expected that this would happen at some point in time because his stage designs weren’t easy to do.

But not in the middle of concept evaluations.

Still, the Angel Leader couldn’t help but feel excited about the MV concept brainstorming because of Hwang Minhyun’s incredible prowess in creative storylines.

The future head of Marketing Management and Artist Development of HMG Media was the mastermind of most of the storylines in their music videos, intimately working with their in-house directors, storywriters, and aesthetics department, and left everyone stunned with the loops and turns that he showed in the detailing and vague references.

He wondered what the Hwanggallyang would do for ‘Never’.

Minhyun had the look of dawning comprehension as he gaped at the persons who entered the training room. ‘Never’ Team bowed in greeting before glancing between the smiling would-be MV director of the winning concept team and the stunned Hwanggallyang.

“Hmmm. You haven’t changed I see, Minhyun-ah.”

Jonghyun bit back a laugh.

“Sungkyun hyung, what—how—”

It was a last-minute decision for the Angel Leader to include options for a concept director. Aron hyung was ecstatic to bring in one of Pledis’ more frequent contacts and Kim Yeonsoo Sajangnim looked surprised when he read his plans during their last meeting but relented, saying that a comeback for the director of NU’EST’s ‘Overcome’ and ‘Love Paint’ director and script writer was the best thing to do. Yoo Sungkyun was the mind behind ‘Overcome’ and its dramatic cold wonderland and the purely-epic visualization of the plotline, and ‘Love Paint’ as the opposite of its predecessor with the intensified yet soft pastel colors and bright backdrops which was a fitting theme to the epilogue of ‘Overcome’.

Mnet must truly be in a sticky situation if they’d listen to one of the so-called “smaller companies” instead of using their more well-known contacts like Zanybros or Metaoloz.

The director sat on the head of the table, smile bright as he took in the last team of the day. “So, your team’s the last for the day. Well, time for introductions then. I am Yoo Sungkyun, production director of some of the idol music videos. Some of you may not know of me but I’ve worked with those kids before,” He gestured towards a still-gaping Minhyun and a nodding Jonghyun. “in their ‘Overcome’ and ‘Love Paint’ music videos and I will be the director for the first music video of a concept team in Produce 101.”

“Daebak,” Daehwi gasped.

Daehwi didn’t know what to think of Produce 101 anymore. Honestly, he thought it would be the same as the first season and went about his everyday life as a trainee because he was confident with himself and his BNM hyungs. He did suffer a lot of backlash with the Avengers Team but he never imagined the show would be as changed as this one. Heck, he was just talking about this with Donghyun-nie hyung when they were interrupted by a staff saying ‘Never’ Team had a
meeting for their stage and MV concept.

The ‘Nayana’ center must’ve looked unappealing with his eyes popped out of their sockets as he shrilly exclaimed a “What!”

Then the staff turned towards the blue-clad trainee. “Oh, and ‘I Know You Know’ Team would have another meeting in three days.”

Daehwi lambasted his hyung for not telling him of the surprise, to which the ‘fixed pick’ defended himself by saying he just found out from a frantic Kim Donghan an hour before they met the director. What made it even more amazing to Lee Daehwi was that he’d work with the director who did the NU’EST videos he had been stuck in for days since he jumped on the bandwagon as a newly-instated Kim-Jonghyun fanboy.

He won’t let Park Jihoon get his hyung/idol attention, thank you very much.

But it was enlightening to a trainee like him because this would be the first time that he’d work with a director for an MV. The ‘Nayana’ video didn’t count, so did all of their performance videos and fancams, because it wasn’t theirs. And ‘Never’ was a new song and would be theirs if they win the most online votes for the concept evaluations.

Seongwoo hyung was curious, though, with the reason why they were being asked about concepts for the MV when they haven’t even had met and recorded with the producers yet.

The glint in the director’s eyes as he raised his cap higher was almost daunting. “Stage concepts are one thing; music videos are another. It could take days, even weeks, to shoot scenes and that’s just the raw footage. There’d be editing, splicing, reshooting after the NGs are discarded. Then there’s the planning, teaser photos and videos, meetings and signing of contracts—a day wouldn’t be enough to polish everything. That’s why Produce 101 decided to let all the concept teams plan before the concept evaluation performances to both save time and produce the best music video for the trainees of the show.”

“Which is why,” Yoo Sungkyun drawled. “You’d better win.”

Hence, Lee Daehwi’s warpath to winning the damn evaluations just so their team could have the chance to shoot ‘Never’ not because of the points but because of the ridiculously beautiful plotline that they came up with the song.

The Hwanggallyang did not pull any stops.

“I don’t know about revenge themes,” He admitted after Jaehwan suggested a story of lost love and doing everything to get it back. “But I feel like we could portray much more than that.”

Jonghyun-nie hyung had a strange expression on his face. “What’s your idea, Minhyun-nie?”

Minhyun hesitated. Seongwoo and Woojin’s expectant looks, Jaehwan and Daehwi’s subtle jumping from their seats, and Guanlin’s raised eyebrows were intimidating to say the least. But the timid trainee drew his strength from the smiling onibugi leader.

Show them what you got, Hwang Minhyun.

“I mean, think about it. What does it mean to ‘let go’? And how far are we willing to go to achieve that? I think our concept could be…”

Thirty minutes later, Lee Daehwi was stuck with one thought:
Goddamit, Hwang Minhyun was the epitome of a bias-wrecker.

“Ong Seongwoo!”

“Where the fuck is Ong Seongwoo?”

Hwang Minhyun face-palmed at the murderous expression on Bae Jinyoung’s face. Normally, he’d be washing the eighteen-year-old trainee’s mouth with hand soap for the plethora of expletives coming from his potty mouth but even he was mortified at what the Fantagio trainee got the stylists to do for him.

He should have known that the diabolical trainee had a plan like this when he brought heels into their late practice session two days ago.

“What are those?” Jihoon stared at the horrifying torture devices in the Kings’ Center’s box. Jaehwan was worryingly pale and Jinyoung looked like the end of the world started with the box.

Seongwoo grinned toothily. “The secret to the best fan-meet ever.”

The song was not as difficult as ‘Tarantallegra’ and the steps were easy to remember. But that was when they were in sneakers. Doing it in heels made it the bane of their existence. He didn’t know why he even agreed to a unit collaboration with unit three but somehow his brain got muddled up and he got roped into having some temporary alliance with Jonghyun-ah’s unit because Daehwi, Kenta, Justin, and Hyeongseop would be doing a game of sorts that required aegyo trainees and not ahjussi trainees like him (That statement had Ahn Hyeongseop written all over it!) and Sewoon was borrowed by unit two.

At this point, he was regretting ever agreeing to Ong Seongwoo.

Badly.

Heck, the only ones nonplussed about this were Niel-ah and Jonghyun-ah. Kang Daniel just shoved off his surprise before donning the shoes like it was nothing. Kim Jonghyun did not even blink!

They did well for their practice run but that was in shirts and training pants.

Not this.

Glittery red and black dresses similar to Dalshabet’s ‘Joker’ was what greeted them the moment they entered the dressing room for their second fan-meeting. The units were separated by rooms this time and Minhyun could not be more grateful at the chance that the other units weren’t here to see this. Dongho would surely die of laughing and Minhyun didn’t have the patience to see that. Nevertheless, they only had an hour and a half before the show starts and they still haven’t even approached them since they arrived and Jinyoung chased the cackling Seongwoo out of the room.

Daniel wasn’t helping with his comments. The Fancam King shrugged, “At least we won’t be putting fake breasts.”

Jaehwan paled.

Dammnit, he should have known that something was amiss the moment Ong Seongwoo woke up before anyone else.
Minhyun blinked the sleep out of his eyes once, twice, then thrice, before squawking like a parrot. “Ong Seongwoo?”

The visual dragged his blanket out. “Come on! We’ll be late for the assembly!”

The members of the promotional units said goodbye to Woojin, who only waved before going back to sleep, before they got into the vans. The Angel Leader brought out some food for breakfast as they ate the bread and fruit in the vehicle. The second fan-meet was slightly bigger this time, accommodating one thousand five hundred fans in the theater. Fans were lined up in front waving Produce 101 flags, posters, banners, and other cheering paraphernalia with their faces on it.

The number of fans that came to see them was the primary reason why he was zipping up the tasseled red dress and slipping into the red heels that they had practiced in. The second one was that he was no coward, as taunted by Kang Daniel and his admittedly-cute auburn faux bob wig, and that he can ace any concept.

Any concept.

He was no Choi Minki but he’d do his part justice, even in a tiny red dress that showed off his legs more than he wanted anyone to see and a shiny red wig reaching down his waist in a tumble of wavy curls.

Their makeup was done by makeup artists because Jonghyun-ah was busy running around the other two units and doing his miracles in red heels and a wavy brunette wig. It would’ve been a little better if the Angel Leader handled their aesthetics but he was adamant that the makeup artists would do better because they’re girls in their unit performance and a female idol’s makeup was different to a male idol’s.

Hwang Minhyun knew that was bullshit. Makeup is makeup, the Angel Leader once told him.

Jonghyun just didn’t want to accidentally laugh and smear mascara all over their face.

Jihoon came out of the dressing room in a shoulder-length pink wig. Jinyoung approached them, his pin-straight black wig adorned by a fancy joker crown glinting off the light.

The two maknaes were silent before—

“How good are you in target-shooting?”

Jinyoung had an evil smirk on his face. “Excellent.”

Then the most-hated person of unit three went in their room dressed in the same red ensemble and a startling platinum-blonde wig, arms brandished wide as if he was the one who brought all the good things in life.

“So? How do I look?”

Jihoon and Jinyoung exchanged a meaningful glance.

The center of unit three gestured at the joker crown pin on Jihoon’s left vest. “Is that brooch sharp enough?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t need a bow and arrow. My aim’s good enough.”
Seongwoo didn’t need a confirmation. He ran, the two enraged maknaes at his heels.

Jaehwan hid his face under the curtain of his new black curls, dearly fearing for the state of unit three’s psyche after the fan-meet.

Kim Jonghyun was so sure they’d survive the fan-meeting.

And they did.

Sort of.

Well, Ong Seongwoo was his (semi) permanent bedmate now, but that’s minor to his initial worries over ankle injuries and getting stabbed by the pointed heels during a particular dance move where they raise their leg up.

His unit did so well in their performance and practically owned their femininity with the sexy number. Jaehwan got over his shyness and reached the high notes. Minhyun channeled the cold princess aura of Jiyul 수배임, and Jihoon and Jinyoung were very pretty in their ensembles. The ones who truly were eye-catching were Kang Daniel and Ong Seongwoo. Those two did not even have an ounce of shyness in their bodies as they did all sorts of fan-service for the newly-built “Ong-Niel” ship and gyrated their hips in their modified version of the dance.

Modified because Jaehwan and Jihoon looked like they were about to faint at the original choreography.

Minki made it worse when he found the fancams a few hours after. Minhyun looked so red after encountering a laughing Minki that Jonghyun was worried the 황가량 would explode. It was an inside joke between them that Minhyun would do a girl’s cover soon enough after the visual vocalist teased Minki after his Boys’ Day stint for MBC Show Music! Core three years ago. Minhyun attempted to delete the footages, even creating a pseudo-account to report the videos, but the uploads were just too many to count.

On an unrelated note, a scheming Kwak Aron and the rest of SEVENTEEN uploaded the fancams again after they were mysteriously reported.

Still, the fan-meet was a breath of fresh air for everyone and Jonghyun felt it was a good way to release some stress. The variety groups did a motorcade and a meet-and-greet a day after in one of the malls in Hannam-dong and no interviews or controversy were brought up during the promotional activity so Jonghyun was glad it went without hassle.

Their following meetings with the director and creative staff went well after their brainstorming created a rough yet concrete plan for the MV if they win. But the MV was put as second place by ‘Never’ Team, to Daehwi’s reluctant agreement, because their stage went first.

“How can we win if we won’t do a damn good job on our stage, huh?”

Seongwoo’s argument was valid. Hence, they also planned their stage design—

Or did.

Because how could they, and he quote Guanlin’s words, beat the stage plan of Nation’s Stage Master Kim Jonghyun?
“Hyung…”

“Wow.”

Seongwoo glared up at the sheepish expression of the Angel Leader. “I seriously don’t know why I even doubted you. Goddamn, Jonghyun-ah. This is—Are you even a trainee?”

Jonghyun deadpanned. “No.”

The Kings’ Center impatiently waved a hand. “Yeah, yeah, I know that. But I doubt even idols can make this masterpiece!”

Guanlin was perusing the other schematics in an almost-detached way—

“And you have plans for other stages, too?”

“What?”

“Let me see!”

It was silent as they digested the schematics of the concept evaluation stages. Woojin’s eyes were wide, frantically reading the lines with palpable disbelief. The Kings took one look and proceeded to either glare at him because he hid this “unbelievable” talent of his or stare at him in exasperation because the stage was the grandest stage that they’ve seen from any survival show.

Daehwi was staring at him in an unsettling way.

And Guanlin had his patented Why-am-I-bothering-with look perfected to a T.

Jaehwan choked a laugh out. “You sure you’re even an idol, hyung?”

“Not really.”

Silence. Then—

Minhyun rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and I’m a shareholder of your entertainment company.”

Funny thing, that.

Kim Jonghyun smiled mysteriously.
"So, how’s it going for you, dear?"

The soft comforting voice of his mother on the phone almost lulled him to sleep. His last call with his parents was when he woke up in the past, disgruntled and utterly devastated at the loss of his important documents, the life he had established, and the people he had left behind. But now that he had more time to talk to the family he had not spoken to in years, he was grateful for the chance.

“I’m doing okay, eomma. How’s my devil noonas?”

His mother’s laugh lightened the tightening in his chest. “Oh, don’t be like that, your sisters are being very supportive of their dongsaeng, you know. You should be proud.”

I know, eomma.

Kim Jonghyun may have had the fastest growing agency in the idol industry as the renowned reversal idol who, with his group, created a new company like what their BEAST sunbaenims did, but his rise to the top was riddled with heart-wrenching decisions. Friends lost, fans disappointed, but what almost caused him to go mad was his family’s estrangement. Because somewhere along the way, the people who stood by him the most, even when NU’EST was on its final breath, pulled away and was not heard of since.

It wasn’t even his family’s fault because he was the one who got pulled away first as he made home in the awfully-big and cold office in his company hundreds of miles away from the modest yet homely abode of his parents. It wasn’t even for lack of trying either, with the half-written Christmas cards from his sisters and beautifully-made birthday cakes with a touching birthday message scrawled in chocolate icing he found buried below the mountain of papers on his desk months after his birthday.

Whether being an idol in the front scene or being a CEO in the backstage, both took too much of his time to realize on what was more important and worthwhile.

Not this time.

Jonghyun did not hide the laughter in his voice. “I do, I really am proud of the she-devils. Those noonas may have made my life difficult back then but they still got my back, in that annoying way that older sisters do to torment their younger brothers, of course. Still, can you just tell them thanks for sending me a beautifully-written letter which consisted of nothing about their support of me and everything that had to do with Kang Daniel and Park Jihoon’s fansign? I was heartbreakingly touched.”

He heard his father quipping a joke in the background that he looked like the famous MMO trainee when he was thirty years younger. Then there were his sisters screaming for him to do it or he’d never get a foot into the house. His mother then defended him and the sound of his sisters’ pain when his mother pinched their ears made him laugh.

The noises were muted as he heard his mother open the screen door towards the small backyard, away from his shrieking sisters. He heard the familiar squeak of their wooden chair underneath the tree his great-grandfather planted.

His mother was more pressing this time. “Are you sure you’re fine, Jonghyun-ah? I’ve seen the news and the ladies in the market were talking about a show and you were the headlines…it wasn’t
pretty, son, and I didn’t know what to do so I asked Yejin-nie. You remember her, right? She’s the one who sometimes fetched you to school if your appa was not there to pick you up—"

Jonghyun’s face softened. “Eomma, you’re rambling.”

The normally soft-spoken lady went into a tirade and Jonghyun was left speechless at how his mother just told him everything that she, and by extension his whole family, had been doing since he went to Produce 101. The Angel Leader knew that his family kept away from the celebrity scene, preferring the calm solitude and freedom than being scrutinized by the public as a famous idol’s family, but for them to truly step out of their comfort zone to promote him on the streets, malls, markets, their workplace, and his sisters’ social media just made Kim Jonghyun truly happy that his family loved him even if he wasn’t able to bring food to their table in years.

Dammit, he’d do the right thing now.

“I truly am fine. I wasn’t that much affected by it. I’m more worried about Dongho, Minki, and Minhyun, really, and the kids here. They’re just so young.”

“You four were much younger than them, son, when you debuted. But I know what you mean. Just be kind hyungs to them, just like how you treat your dongsaengs in Pledis.”

“True. But I forget they’re also dreaming to be idols and the fact they would debut young just doesn’t sit well with me sometimes.”

It was silent on both sides of the call before his mother started once more. “You’re doing well guiding them, son, and I just know they wouldn’t have gotten the same from anyone else. You’ve always been angel to everyone and I’m so happy everyone sees it now.”

“Thanks, mom.”

Her tone went on a cheery note. “Well, you’ve been eating alright, yes? At least three meals a day? Okay. Don’t let Dongho-yah eat too much, he’d get a stomachache after. Make sure you’re resting alright? And drag Minhyun-ah and Minki-yah too if they’re overexerting himself.”

Five minutes of getting reminders to eat and sleep well, his mother ended the call with a soft goodbye. Jonghyun was left smiling with ease.

The past days were not as easy as the others think.

Well, easy for them but not for him.

‘Never’ Team was more laidback than the other teams because their progress was much faster. They did not need to adjust to new members in the team. Even Guanlin and Jaehwan, who had the hardest time memorizing the choreography, had most of the steps pat down when Minhyun and Woojin took their time to teach the Cube trainee on a two-on-two practice session.

So, Jonghyun did not restrict his members from relaxing a bit before the producers met them for the evaluation. They needed it really after the news of their song’s producers Triple H checking up on them rattled their nerves a bit.

Daehwi, Woojin, and Jaehwan took to following him almost everywhere and he relented to letting the two curious trainees to a few of the meetings he had with the stage production team. Woojin and Jaehwan sat silent throughout the meeting while Daehwi did not bother to hide his excitement. The ‘Nayana’ center literally had stars in his eyes when he saw the stage design coming to life in computer graphics and simulations.
“So cool!” He screamed in their ears as they trailed back to the training room ‘D’.

Minhyun, Seongwoo, and Guanlin were the newly-formed Visual Trio of ‘Never’ Team and were often seen visiting other teams when their team was not practicing. Their forms were distinguishable even from afar. Jaehwan could only shake his head in exasperation when he glimpsed their spear formation, with the Kings’ Center in the middle with the Hwanggallyang and the Manhwa Dark Prince closely flanking him; an admittedly-cool Produce 101 rendition of the show’s top visuals forming the bad-boy group in famous dramas.

No, he was handling more than what his team thought he was doing.

The Angel Leader tried to juggle his meager time in practicing for the concept evaluations, stage designs, MV concepts, aesthetics design—heck he even had Seungchol and Jeonghan call him for suggestions in their comeback’s visual concept!

“Come on, Jonghyun-ah! What should we do for the concept? There’s so much to do! You reckon I’d look good in a mohawk? I’ve been wanting to do that since I saw it in a catalog—”

“No, just go with what I suggested and you’d look good. Trust me.” Then he ended the call and sighed.

Goddamn, it was really late for this as Jonghyun wondered how the leader of SEVENTEEN got the staff of Produce 101 to allow him to contact trainees at one in the damn morning.

Now that he thought of it, why the hell was Seungchol and Jeonghan still awake at that time? Few hours after, he found his answer in the form of an excited Seungkwan telling him of their entire schedule for the year before asking him for Kim Jaehwan’s autograph for his sister.

Still, he’d take a frantic Seungchol and a rambling Seungkwan any day than the technical stuff he’d been dealing with the production staff and the stage designs. With all that was happening in Produce 101, he truly forgot how difficult it was to plan stages from scratch.

Well, technically, not from scratch but for the sake of his sanity, he'd consider it as "from scratch" because the amount of work that came with it was so outrageous that Jonghyun feared of what would happen if he did a stage from scratch when he was dealing with strangers instead of his trusted production team in HMG Media.

He did it once with ‘Downpour’ and the raining stage and he was overcome with anticipation and trepidation in equal measures at the thought of doing it again in Produce 101.

Thank heavens for small blessings. The technical team hired for the stage effects came from the same company that he frequently called for his idols’ stages. But they were horribly curious because the plan he put into detail was suspiciously similar to what their services offered.

“You are certain you didn't have a past stage that we haven't fixed?”

The show’s staff fidgeted uncomfortably at the reminder that he was not a trainee but a debuted idol.

Instead of lying outright, because the head tech looked very sharp and would probably catch him and his lie, Jonghyun gave a half-truth. “Maybe, I’m not sure. We did have a lot of stages with dry ice, fog, and stuff.”

The head tech narrowed his eyes but nodded. “Very well. I don’t know what your part is in the stage design,” At this, the staff looked even more uncomfortable. “But the show’s producers said
you were knowledgeable enough in stage designs so, I guess, that’s why.”

The *Angel Leader* didn’t know what game Mnet was playing now, but he decided to play along. After all, sometimes you have to let some battles pass in order to win the war.

At least the stage designs were finalized and the implementation of the stage effects was halfway through and they still had ample time to double-check the installations to ensure the safety of everyone. Then *Stylenanda* came to the show and agreed to sponsor the trainees’ wardrobe and then dropped the bomb on him with another counter-proposal—

“We want to feature you on our magazine as the visual director.”

Kim Jonghyun took a minute to digest everything in the world. Then he coughed gently and timidly replied, “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

*Stylenanda* Stylist Director Kim Heejung leaned back on her seat, smile growing wider. “*Produce 101*’s Exclusive Catalogue increased our monthly sales by 5%, a surprising rise what with the limited sales projected once the issue was released, and we’ve considered receiving contractual offers with *Men’s Uno* and *High Cut*, and also a possible renewal with *10+ Star Magazine* for another exclusive, but this time with the debuted trainees of *Produce 101*.”

“And what would be my part in this, Kim Heejung-ssi?”

She pressed on, a shapely eyebrow raised. “I believe that with your busy schedule with the upcoming concept evaluations, you’ve been unaware of the happenings outside. Since the airing of episode eight, you’ve become the hot topic with your visual direction in the photoshoots for the magazine and the reception was greatly received by our staff and the chief editors want to work with you again. And from the aesthetic designs that you have given me,” She glanced down at the sketches she had on hand. “Well, we’d both benefit for this possible collaboration.”

“In the meantime, I have five different ensembles to prepare,” She stood up with a soft hmm. “Think about it, Kim Jonghyun-ssi. We’d love to work with you again.”

Jonghyun opted for a smile that gave away nothing whilst his brain went into haywire as the stylist director exchanged pleasantries with a female staff before making her way out of the room, skirt flaring against the afternoon rays.

It wasn’t just some unofficial statement he couldn’t get out of because it was a package deal with the ensembles the other teams wanted but it was a proposal and the *Angel Leader* would bet his whole career that if he agreed at that point, Kim Heejung would not hesitate in naming the terms and conditions and fashioning a rough draft of the contract for their company’s lawyers to peruse in.

So, he was truly stuck at an impasse because he knew that agreeing to it would only put another tight hold on him after the show ends when his career was at a standstill for him to decide on which path his career should go. But at the same time, not agreeing with it was social suicide because they depended on sponsorships for the stage concept.

The company’s help in funding aesthetics direction won’t be enough now if he planned to go full throttle. Because with the sponsorship, it’s not only clothes that you get but also the publicity. Not for him and NU’EST, but mostly for the other trainees in the show who had little backing from an established contact with a reputable influence in the industry.

Jonghyun sighed, knowing he agreed to it in his heart anyway. They needed *Stylenanda’s* support
after the brainstorming session for visual direction the teams did a few days ago just after the reshuffling.

In one of the rare times they were all complete, what with the different promotion days and practice times, Jonghyun took advantage of talking to each team on what they wanted to do with their stage. The Angel Leader didn’t want to presume what each team wanted to do because forcing them to wear something that don’t sit well with them went against his moral codes. He made suggestions and showed them his planned stage design for each team but that was it as far as creative development should be on his part; the rest was up to them to decide whether they’d go ahead with it or not.

The trainees were very impressed in the stage design and was stunned to find out that everything had been installed already.

“Whoa! The stage design, hyung, is so damn cool!”

“Thank you,” Jonghyun smiled. “But I think the aesthetics direction should not be done by anyone but you.”

Everyone perked up at the thought. Ever since they saw the magazine catalogue and saw the Angel Leader’s prowess in aesthetics direction, they’ve been itching try their hand in it. Their leader could do the stage design, as they had no idea on how to go about that and the unbelievable Kim Jonghyun more than sufficiently knocked them back down with how the stage design would work —goddamn stage director Kim Jonghyun—but the aesthetics they can do so they were excited in deciding what to wear to match the vibe of the stage design of the Angel Leader and they did not hold back on the brainstorming.

What made it an entertaining experience for everyone was that the suggestions weren’t restricted to the members of each group. Samuel and Seonho thought a colorful theme for ‘Oh Little Girl’ would be amazing and ‘I Know You Know’, by unanimous decision, was sexy flower-boy team of the concept evaluations. Seongwoo suggested a sexy theme for ‘Open Up’—

“Come on, Niel-ah! The Sexy Kangs should make a comeback! Like, can’t you see where I’m going with this?” Seongwoo animatedly waved his arms to portray his vision. “With the chokers and eye makeup? Jonghyun-ah’s stage design would only amp your visuals!”

Then Jinyoung raised his hand up beside an amused Choi Minki, “Yeah, I get the eyeliner part but what I don’t get is the stage design. Why is it so dark, though? And why is there a bed? I don’t get it.”

Silence.

The expression on Ong Seongwoo’s face was priceless.

A choked plea, “Jonghyun-ah, help!”

Jonghyun backed away, grinning. “Oh, no way. You brought this upon yourself, Ong Seongwoo. Yah, Daniel-ah, you’re the leader. Why don’t you answer your maknae’s very interesting question?”

“Wait—What—But that was your stage design!”

The Angel Leader was having too much fun on the two gaping trainees’ expense. He made a zipping motion to his lips and settled back against the wall.
Dongho and Sanggyun burst out laughing their heads off while Daniel went red-faced as he tried to explain the concept to a confused Bae Jinyoung in a way he won’t get slapped by a tensed Kim Donghan to his right.

After the brainstorming session, Kim Jonghyun was left in awe at how some of the trainees had talent in visual direction as well.

What caught his attention were the younger ones: Kim Samuel was a pleasant surprise with the Brave trainee being unexpectedly well-versed in fashion and aesthetics as he made his team’s stage concept a concrete idea with his vision drawn in paper. Apparently, the ‘fixed pick’ of ‘Showtime’ took advantage of them also coming for an MV concept that he thought ahead of time and proposed a concept for the disco-esque feel of the song. Ahn Hyeongseop and Kim Donghyun were the opposite of Samuel whereas the latter was a planner, the former two were instinctive.

Jonghyun knew of Ahn Hyeongseop as the HMG idol was known for his creative spinning in the plotline of their comebacks, working with Aron hyung and Minhyun in putting twists in their MV to entice the fans to create more theories and knock them out cold (that was Hyeongseop’s slightly vindictive side one-upping his fans), so it was slightly nostalgic for the CEO time-traveler to see some of his creative-writer Hyeongseop shining through in his symbolic ensemble for ‘I Know You Know’. Kim Donghyun, he didn’t know much compared to the rest of the BNM boys, which was why he was so staggered at how the BNM trainee crafted their ensembles to match what the lead dancer of ‘I Know You Know’ thought for their stage.

‘Oh Little Girl’ had a lot of trainees with an eye for visual direction. Huang Justin was a given and the Angel Leader had seen the Yuehua trainee’s potential early in the position evaluations and their tandem with the ‘Shape of You’ Team’s aesthetics. Lee Gunhee and Jung Sewoon may not be as knowledgeable in fashion as Justin was but the trainees both knew how the aesthetics should work when it comes to the lyrics and the general feel of the song. The RBW trainee laid out the foundations for the ‘Oh Little Girl’ stage while the Starship trainee rounded it up with the detailing.

As for ‘Never’ and ‘Open Up’, well, he let the concept brainstorming surround the two teams as they traded ideas back and forth. Hwang Minhyun and Choi Minki were both given since he had almost a decade to work with both men in their respective directorships in artist development and art direction. At this point they were diamonds in the rough but the potential was there and the chance of his two brothers honing their creative skills early on was a great possibility. But Lee Daehwi and Lai Guanlin knew how to style their ensemble to fit the idea that Hwang Minhyun formed. Takada Kenta might as well take the trophy for sexy-concept mastery as he laid out plans for ‘Open Up’ and their alluring stage.

All the while, Kim Jonghyun took a seat back and watched everyone take center-stage in the brainstorming session.

His fellow trainees may have designed what they would wear, but he would ensure all the stages rose up to heights they never thought of.

Drawings weren’t enough to visualize what they stage would look like.

Oh no, he had a lot more planned and boy, they’d be in a surprise.

Lai Guanlin knew that coming from one of the biggest companies was both a boon and bane to a six-month trainee like him. Only a few companies joined Produce 101 and had the same idol group
success as his company, like the numerous boy and girl groups that Pledis Entertainment, Starship Entertainment, and FNC Entertainment had or currently has.

Cube never failed to deliver talented idol groups like BTOB, former 4Minute and BEAST sunbaes, CLC, and PENTAGON, and the trainees didn’t lack interest whenever his sunbaenims was brought up in conversations that he was participating in and got questioned for it. Seonho had it worse because he was the more talkative one but the byeongari trainee reveled in the attention. Still, the added screen time for him and Seonho was good for them in the competition but that came with higher expectations and harsher judgment if they won’t step up to the challenge.

But there were times he was having fun as a Cube trainee.

This was one of those times.

“Hyung.”

A breathy whisper.

“You’re seeing who I think I’m seeing right?”

“Yeah—I think I’m in love.”

“Yeah, HyunA sunbaenim is so pretty…”

“What? No, I was looking at Hui sunbaenim! Wow, I remember him back in our old company. Wow, he looks good…”

Guanlin bit his lip to prevent from laughing out loud.

It was hilarious how Seongwoo hyung and Daehwi hyung shifted from their serious personas to the biggest fanboys of Triple H sunbaenims. They were in the middle of another practice wherein they were both singing and dancing as if they’re on stage. Jonghyun-nie hyung led the practice and it was different than what they rehearsed before.

Woojin-nie shifted slightly to the right to give space to him and Daehwi hyung. “Jonghyun-nie hyung, why are we that much closer in the chorus?”

“Because of our stage design.”

Jaehwan-nie hyung frowned. “What about it?”

“You’ll see,” was the only reply from their Angel Leader.

“Now, for the meeting with the producers, maintain a wider distance, similar to what we’ve rehearsed for the past two weeks. This closer formation is only the stage itself.”

That roused their curiosity even more.

But the questions were pushed back in favor of greeting their producers with a bow while trying to pass off their ogling as polite—and dearly failing in the process if the amused smiles of Hyojong hyung and Hotaek-ie hyung were anything to go by. Woojin-nie hyung was the first to see them and from his shocked expression, Jaehwan-nie hyung muttered a “What?” before looking up. Soon, everyone followed and the only ones who remained a sense of decorum was him and Jonghyun-nie hyung. Heck, even Minhyun-nie hyung was speechless.

HyunA sunbaenim, fashionably dressed in a plaid Balenciaga coat over a white shirt and denim
shorts contrasting well with her flame-orange hair, walked a few steps forward with a smile on her face. “We just came by to see if you are doing well.”

‘Never’ Team laughed shakily as they bowed in thanks.

Hyojong hyung smirked at him, his platinum-blond hair a stand-out amongst the dark hues. “Ah, will you look at that? Our Guanlin-nie’s here.” Hotaek-ie hyung raised both eyebrows at him.

Ah, the hyungs really liked to tease him, Guanlin thought as he felt the blood rush to his face. His members stared at him in awe because the producers knew him by name, and at an informal way too.

The Manhwa Dark Prince rolled his eyes. Seriously, it’s like they forgot he was from Cube too! With a very private environment, even the newly-scouted trainees were bound to meet the famous artists working in the same building. Heck, he had met HyunA sunbaenim quite a few times before.

“So, how is the song?” HyunA sunbaenim asked.

“It’s good, but it’s also difficult,” Minhyun-nie hyung said.

The producers quirked a smile.

Minhyun-nie hyung hastily backtracked. “Don’t get me wrong; it may be difficult but the lyrics are good.”

“Oh, thank you,” Triple H’s lyricist and main vocal Hui bowed timidly.

Guanlin resisted the urge to tease his hyung for being so shy towards them. Hotaek-ie hyung may come off as an introvert to people who only met him once or a few times, but Guanlin and Seonho were familiar to how crazy the members of PENTAGON, CLC noonas, and their fellow noona and hyung trainees actually were.

Then ‘Never’ Team noticed the trainees all piled outside. He saw Daniel hyung and Youngmin-nie hyung first. The MMO trainee looked like a fish out of water while the rest of ‘Open Up’ team standing behind their leader with the same expression on their faces. Then came the other teams, watching them from outside the glass doors. Seonho waved at him before pointing at the producers, mouthing the words “Hyung” and “Daebak!”.

The producers looked outside and the other trainees scampered off. Guanlin smiled proudly at how their team would be the envy of everyone even if he knew he won’t get sleep tonight.

Oh well, he’d just sic them all on Seonho.

HyunA sunbaenim nodded encouragingly. “Please show us a good stage later. Good Luck! Fighting!” She smiled before the three producers went out the door.

It was silent for a moment but the producers triggered the whole team and started a fire within them.

“Oh, we are so going to knock them all off,” Seongwoo hyung murmured.

And they did.

‘Never’ Team was fidgety with excitement as they sat with the other teams in the main training room. Jonghyun looked at the producers were seated together on a table, talking quietly with each
other. ‘Oh Little Girl’ producers Kiggen, a tall and willowy man in a khaki sweater and black-rimmed glasses, and ASSBRASS, a timid-looking guy in a black statement long-sleeved shirt and ripped jeans, sat the furthest away from everyone. To their left, Devine Channel producers looked bad-asses in their all-black denim outfit and baseball cap.

One of guys was Choi Youngjoon who was a talented choreographer and was responsible for most of SHINWA sunbaes’ complex dances and TWICE’s memorable choreographies, and who now happened to be the choreographer of ‘Open Up’. The guy caught the Angel Leader’s eye because he hasn’t noticed his presence before. And now that he did, Jonghyun didn’t know how he missed it the first time. Choi Youngjoon, who he got to work with in the choreography of future Ong Seongwoo’s solo comeback, now stuck to him like a sore thumb.

Triple H took the center seats and HyunA sunbaenim was seated between the male members of the trio. Kwon Jaesung seongsaengnim was also present, much to Jaehwan’s anxiousness. Then ‘Showtime’ producer Veethoven who was known for his club music. Renowned producer Shin Hyuk took the nearest seat towards the trainees and the blank expression on the man’s face plus his dignified and poised posture got the ‘I Know You Know’ Team very intimidated.

Soon, Jaesung seongsaengnim began calling each team one by one. ‘Showtime’ was up first. The choreography was executed well but there were some things to improve on the vocals. Samuel, who was their center, was a good vocalist but his range was rather restricted to mid-range vocals and the high notes required for the song was just a few notes higher than what he could do without straining his voice. Kim Seonglee and Park Woodam were phenomenal and established themselves as the power vocals of the competition. However, the producer looked a bit unsatisfied with the performance but ultimately stated that he’d help the vocals come around since the chorus was the most vital part of the song.

“This is nerve-wracking,” Woojin-nie murmured.

‘I Know You Know’ went worse than what he remembered in the past. Even with the team having even distribution in vocals, dance, and rap, Producer Shin Hyuk was not pleased with the many mistakes coming from Hyunbin-nie and Haknyeon-nie in the second chorus. Hyeongseop became nervous and accidentally forgot his part which became awkward silence when everyone waited for the next line but was treated with silence. The producer’s face slipped into an emotionless expression but he still complimented Ha Seongwoon’s performance as the power vocal center of the team.

“You have good vocals,” He nodded approvingly at the proud Ardor & Able trainee.

At that point, the trainees became more nervous with the evaluation. ‘I Know You Know’ was one of the stronger teams and yet they made so many mistakes in front of the producer who gifted them the song.

“I changed my mind, I don’t want to impress HyunA sunbae. I just need to get out of this without making a mistake,” Seongwoo paled.

‘Oh Little Girl’ was a breath of fresh air unlike the tensed atmosphere with the two previous teams. Park Jihoon and Lee Euiwoong took the most attention with their visuals and confidence in executing their parts perfectly. Although Huang Justin made some mistakes in pronouncing his words and when Jung Sewoon, Lee Gunhee, and Lim Youngmin missed their parts after a particularly difficult step, Producers Kiggen and ASSBRASS let the mistake go and congratulated the team for a job well done.

The sexy concept of ‘Open Up’ Team was better compared to its predecessors. Kang Daniel took
the reins for the choreography and was eye-catching even with his nondescript look. Kang Dongho and Choi Minki tandem for the concept served even more allure in the choreography, with the former taking on the main vocals and the latter channeling the unbelievable idol aura of NU’EST Ren. Kim Sanggyun’s rap verse was executed perfectly and Kim Yongguk as center completed their look well. It wasn’t perfect, there were mistakes made in various parts of the song where the choreography was fast-paced and there were a lot of shifting and changing formations, but they did well for a team who only had three original members.

Then came ‘Never’ Team—

Jaesung seongsaengnim started with a stern voice. “Although there were some who got into other teams, I’m sure there is a reason why you were selected for the team. I hope you will prove it.”

Seongwoo gulped.

Hyojong sunbaenim kept the serious atmosphere on a lesser note. “The song emphasizes deep emotional lyrics and I hope you will sing the song as if you are a drama character, and all of you are the main leads.”

“Show us your fighting spirit, ‘Never’ Team,” HyunA sunbaenim cheered them on.

Their team went to the first formation, encircling the center and going around Minhyun-nie for the first eight seconds of the song. Jonghyun noticed the determined expressions on his members’ faces and he breathed.

They’d be fine.

Guanlin was happy to be back in Cube. He truly was. Since joining the show, he was one of the few trainees who didn’t leave the dormitories during weekends for family or meetings with their company representatives. Rather, he stayed in his team’s rooms with Seonho keeping him company. But even the byeongari trainee had to go home to his family sometimes so Guanlin was mostly alone. It didn’t bother him as much as the others thought. Sure, he liked friends coming over to brighten his day but he was also a reclusive person and sometimes preferred quiet times like a normal person does.

Still, it felt gratifying that he would be returning to his company to record their song with Triple H sunbaenims and get some practice within the famous Cube dance rooms with his new friends.

“Wow, Cube is so cool,” Jaehwan-nie hyung gasped as he saw pictures of all the past and present artists and idol groups signed with the label. The main halls of the agency were designed to showcase the talents of Cube Entertainment in a grandiose manner.

“I forgot Rain sunbaenim was also part of Cube before,” Minhyun-nie hyung murmured as they passed by a huge portrait of the famous RnB-artist since the early 2000s.

They were scheduled to record with Triple H sunbaenims at one in the afternoon so they had four hours before the recording. Guanlin showed his locker in the rest and recreational room and some of the halls that he was allowed to show them like the tribute hall where Cube’s former artists like 4minute, Beast, A-Pink, and soloist G. Na and past actors and actresses like Seo Woo who was most notably known in the drama ‘Cinderella’s Stepsister’ were paid homage to.

The company’s cafeteria was spacious and void of many people so their breakfast at the cafeteria was spent in comfortable conversations as they watched the few people eating with them. They met
some members of PENTAGON hyungs on their way up to the main halls but they did not stay for long due to their tight schedules.

Recording was going well for Kim Jaehwan. They weren’t even tired after rehearsing for hours because of their excitement in recording their song. The main vocal was familiar with how studios work and he had been to a few when he recorded demos with his past band and as a budding soloist.

But they were not as good as what Cube has to offer. Jaehwan’s attention, for once, was not on the celebrity producers that were currently guiding Seongwoo hyung on the protocol. No, he was captivated with the state-of-the-art sound equipment and soundproof glass enclosure that must’ve costed the agency millions of won to build.

His members were amazing in their parts before they tried to do something else. It was easy to do whatever they wanted in the recording studio and Triple H sunbaenims did not restrict their artistry in playing with the song.

Daehwi-yah did a rendition of Minhyun-nie hyung’s parts, Minhyun-nie hyung went for it and sang and rapped the whole song, Guanlin-nie admirably put effort in his Mandarin version of Woojin-nie’s rap, and Seongwoo hyung showcased his vocals and reached the high notes of the song. Since the others did something different in their recording, why not showcase something different? Jaehwan took a deep breath and rapped, to the amazement of everyone. Then it was Jonghyun-nie hyung’s turn and the leader did not disappoint.

“You are so doing that part, Jonghyun-nie hyung,” Guanlin said, ignoring Seongwoo hyung’s squawks of protest.


“Can we get a copy of that?” was the only thing Hwang Minhyun could say.

The day of the performances was hectic and migraine-inducing to a certain Angel Leader. Their day started with peacefully as the trainees were woken up by the Angel Leader and ended with a bang. Literally.

Jonghyun took quite a bit of time trying to jolt his members awake while avoiding flailing limbs aimed to dismember him in a quite painful manner. The others woke up soon after and did not even blink when he handed over Styrofoam bowls of cereals and a piece of fruit for them to eat. The room was soon quiet as they ate their meal in relative silence while they waited for the bathroom to be cleared.

Seongwoo stretched his arms over his head. “Concept evaluations’ Day. Man, I’m so excited for this round.”

“Yeah. You haven’t stopped talking about it since last week,” Minhyun groused.

“Even in your sleep, hyung,” Guanlin added.

The Kings’ Center scowled.

Yesterday’s events took a lot from them as they practiced well past midnight, trying to squeeze some last-minute practice since half of their day was spent in a trip to Itaewon to meet K noona and do something about their unflattering mop of hair.
Lee Daehwi heavily anticipated the so-called NU’EST makeover that the other trainees were talking about. Since the secret of Kim Jonghyun as a talented visual and aesthetics director came out, the Angel Leader’s former teams received so much questions from curious trainees and Daehwi felt vindicated that the Kings’ Team didn’t hide secrets anymore. Donghan-nie hyung was his biggest chance of first-hand impression back when the Kings’ Maknae was part of ‘Sorry, Sorry’ Team 2 and the guy did not hold back information. Daehwi learned more things about being part of the most popular team formed in Produce 101 Season 2 than what he would get from, say, Minhyun-nie hyung, Jaehwan-nie hyung, Guanlin-nie, and heavens forbid, a territorial Ong Seongwoo.

Which was why he was so excited for this trip. He and Woojin-nie hyung were the only ones who wasn’t a part of Jonghyun-nie hyung’s teams before and he had high expectations.

And the NU’EST hyungs did not disappoint.

“Ah, so you’re the famous Lee Daehwi.”

“Um, ye—yes. Nice to meet you, Aron sunbaenim.”

The oldest member of NU’EST waved a hand in dismissal. “None of that formality stuff. Aron hyung works just fine.”

Daehwi was so starstruck with Kwak Aron that it took a hard nudge from an exasperated Woojin-nie hyung to bring him back to Earth. The guy may be a famous DJ but he had a funny atmosphere to him. The ‘Nayana’ Center glanced at ‘Never’ Team’s leader conversing with Guanlin-nie and Woojin-nie hyung, then to their center who was caught in a game with Seongwoo hyung and Jaehwan-nie hyung in the middle row of the van. He had worked with all of NU’EST members in the show and he noticed that they all had differing personalities that somehow work together for them even when most people would find it difficult.

“Since you have outfits ready for the stages, I guess all there is to do is go for hair consultation with K noona.”

Seongwoo hyung frowned. “So, we won’t be visiting Mr. Hae now, right?”

“Who’s Mr. Hae?” Daehwi asked.

“Oh, he’s an angel of a man who was responsible for our clothes back in ‘Sorry, Sorry’.”

Guanlin added, “Also with ‘Fear’ Team. Those were the coats he designed.”

What.

Daehwi was so mad at how nonchalant the Kings’ Center and the Manhwa Dark Prince were. Don’t they even know how fucking amazing their outfits looked in the group battles and position evaluations? Heck, he’d even bow to the man for his beautiful works.

Park Woojin rolled his eyes at the thunderous look on his dramatic dongsaeng’s face.

Itaewon was far from Paju so their drive was long but their hairstyle makeover took even longer. K noona was such a cool person as she handled his hair with care even if her team had to fix his team’s hair aesthetics. Jonghyun-nie hyung illustrated their concept and the stylist was brimming with excitement to start immediately. Seongwoo hyung and Jaehwan-nie hyung went for something darker-hued with Tia noona and Jinwoo hyung taking the reins, while Woojin-nie hyung and Minhyun-nie hyung went for some lighter with Ryewoon hyung’s supervision.
“Wow, you outdid yourself this time around,” Aron hyung inspected Woojin-nie hyung’s ash-grey hair color.

“Yeah, well, I do have to give their stage justice, don’t I? Your concept would knock everyone out, that’s for sure. I can’t wait!” K noona laughed after they everyone was finished with their makeover.

When Lee Daehwi saw Hwang Minhyun and Kim Jonghyun’s looks, he got the gist that the Hwanggallyang and Angel Leader was out to get everyone with their visuals alone.

Jonghyun knew that their ace under their sleeves was the visual aesthetics and stage design. Sure, the others had an idea on what everyone came up with but sketches and verbal description does not measure up to seeing the aesthetics come to life and compliment the stage concept in such an immaculate way that everything works with each other splendidly.

The others soon tried to come up with a name for their team—

“Well. We’re not gonna do something worse than ‘Knock’, so give your best shot,” Seongwoo rolled his eyes at ‘Open Up’ Team’s new name. The Fantagio trainee almost died laughing at Daniel’s offended expression when he heard of what they came up with.

After almost thirty suggestions, half of which sounded wrong in Ong Seongwoo’s ears and the other half sending him rolling on the floor or cringing at the absurdity of the name, Jonghyun decided it was time to step up.

“Gugmin-ui adeul.”

Pause.

“That’s the most dramatic group name I’ve ever heard. And…I like it! We’ll go with that!”

The time-traveler smiled at the memory.

Nations’ Sons.

Even with the odd interludes of just having fun, their week had to be the most jampacked one since the beginning of the show. But Jonghyun was pleasantly surprised at how all the teams were faring. They went into the vans parked in a line outside the dormitories. Donghan waved at him from ‘I Know You Know’ Team’s vehicle and Jihoon hugged him from behind before rushing towards ‘Oh Little Girl’ Team and high-tailing away in the black sedan. The car ride was the noisy and did not let up for three hours, which is what the Angel Leader needed so he could think in peace while the others were distracted with Ong Seongwoo’s antics.

He had a meeting with the leaders of the concept teams earlier that morning during breakfast about stage designs. He never forgot what he learned from the stage technicians future Kwak Aron hired for his idols and artists’ live stages. Old Man Jaesuk of HMG Media’s Stage Production Team was a veteran in theatrical stages and the man, even in his age, was as wily as ever in designing the best stage designs that he had ever seen. And because of the man and his team, idols from HMG Media were known to have the best and unique stages in history. He got an earful from the man when the raining stage of Seongwoo, Jihoon, and Jaehwan was aired and he learned how important stage designs truly are.

“They are the visual aspect of the whole concept. Even if you have the most handsome man on
Earth performing on stage, a dull stage set reduces the performance to something that is easily dismissed. That’s why a stage must be as good as the song and artist performing in it, if not more so. However, treating stage designs callously would only endanger the artist and the people behind him.”

Jonghyun could not sleep that night because his sleep was plagued with nightmares of his friends injuring themselves in his stage designs which was why he dragged the leaders of each concept out to talk to them. Daniel and Donghan stayed quiet while Jiseong hyung and Sewoon-nie was very surprised as he tried to warn them of the stage design and its effects.

Produce 101 had used some confetti in the group battles and there’s ‘Downpour’ stage, but that was in the finale and the vocal performance was only focused on vocals and there were minimal movements from the trainees. This time though, the Angel Leader was worried that accidents would happen if they weren’t very careful.

“I really have to stress the importance of safety here,” Jonghyun warned. “Stage effects may look cool and amazing but they’re also a hazard if not treated as that.”

Jiseong hyung, a member of the ‘Ninano’ Team of ‘Downpour’ Stage agreed whole-heartedly. He was part of ‘Downpour’ Team’s raining stage and even with harnesses he was still wary of slipping off the elevated platform and breaking a leg or something.

And now that he knew the full extent of the Angel Leader’s stage design for ‘Showtime’, as he told them one by one in secret so as to keep surprises within the concept team plus Kim Jonghyun, he was both overcome with awe and fear. Because ‘Showtime’ had the most dynamic stage out of all the concept teams, not counting the fast-paced choreography and formations. Even Jonghyun-ah was anxious of their stage, and that was saying something because ‘Never’ had the most intricate dynamics he had ever seen.

And Yoon Jiseong didn’t even know the full extent of the top-tier ‘Never’ Team’s stage just like everyone else outside of the said team. Still, from ‘Downpour’ and now ‘Showtime’ stage, Jiseong knew better than to disregard the Angel Leader’s reminders.

Jonghyun sighed. Idols knew that every stage is a risk and the trainees knew that as well. He told ‘Never’ Team exactly what to expect on stage and to say they were stunned was an understatement. But not in the way he expected.

Before they went to the dressing room, he led them to the stage and just let them see what Mnet did for the concept evaluations stage.

Daehwi did an excellent rendition of Kim Samuel’s iconic “Oh my god!” and Jaehwan looked dumbfounded.

“Whoa.”

Minhyun simply had no words for it.

Ong Seongwoo had many things that he liked for these evaluations. There were the benefit points plus a live stage and MV, all of which he wanted to win with everything that is in him, the fan-meeting where they did a cover of a controversial song in heels and made it their own, the brainstorming session where he got to show one of his many talents in visual styling that he discovered from his inspiration in the Nation’s Visual Director, and his new hairstyle which
frankly made him look ten times hotter than his popular slicked-back look as the Kings’ Center.

Then the stage design got him so fired up in acing his performance with ‘Never’ Team.

But for the life of him, he didn’t like how they were grouped in the dressing room for the concept evaluations. The Kings’ Center glared at the tenth trainee—he was counting so he’d know just exactly who to ban from the dormitories—dearly wishing for the comeback of partitions to divide the groups and give them some semblance of privacy because he wanted to grant Kim Jonghyun’s visual direction for ‘Never’ the privilege of surprise.

And if a certain Hwanggallyang said he being a “dramatic assbutt”, yeah well, even foxlike emperors lie.

Still, Seongwoo was about to explode in fury when Jonghyun-ah was dragged again by Park Jihoon towards the far side of the room where Lee Gunhee was nursing his hand from accidentally touching the hot curling iron. Their leader wasn’t even done with their makeup when he got called like he was a harried supervisor trying to keep his company afloat with how incompetent his people were.

Daehwi pouted. “Why are we grouped like this again?”

The question of the night, Seongwoo thought as he tried not to frown too much lest he ruined Jonghyun-ah’s work.

They were in a dressing room that was almost the same size as the training room. It was like they knocked down the walls and doors and joined everything in one. The room was spacious enough to house seventy people and they did to a point because there’s just so many people inside.

The setup was even crazier. Rows upon rows of clothes in suit bags lined the wall in the farthest part of the room in a U-formation. Each clothes rack had their teams written on a piece of cardboard pinned above the rod. Two long tables with numerous boxes brimming with beaded jewelry and beautiful accessory pieces were placed on one end. Shoe racks filled with shoes of different styles, from colorful sneakers to leather loafers in muted browns and shiny ebony, were on the other end.

With thirty-five trainees, a few makeup noonas and hyungs, and numerous staff members roaming around, it was a miracle no one bumped each other so far. It was also a wonder that the groups had retained some surprise by dragging their ensemble racks to barricade the others from peeking in.

‘Never’ Team was the last one to come in and get into their outfits. Seongwoo had the chance to glimpse at Daniel-ah’s broad shoulders and a hint of black before he disappeared around the corner. Minhyun-nie rolled their clothes rack and shoes towards the farthest left corner of the room where a couple of vanity tables were lined along the walls. Jihyun noona greeted them with a wave before she pushed a resigned Jonghyun towards them.

“Don’t make that face, Jonghyun-ah. You can practically do anything here so be a dear and try to manage for a while, hmm? We’re a bit understaffed at the moment so—”

“Understaffed? Still?”

The makeup artist nodded, “Cost-cutting,” before she pushed a metallic box to a surprised Guanlin and waved them goodbye.

He knew there was going to be some trade-offs for the stage design and effects installed in it. Mnet wasn’t a network that was brimming with funds in the first place, even with the considerable
addition of rich sponsors and shareholders. Even Pledis didn’t have that much to start with and Jonghyun wouldn’t pretend they had more.

He was aware that the stage designs were costly and he was still surprised at how Pledis pulled everything off in less than two weeks, but the bottom-line was that there would be some financial drawbacks in the other aspects of the show. The Angel Leader was just thankful that aesthetics was one part of the show that was heavily undermanned and that he had a few things up his sleeve that he could certainly do to even out the odds.

Jonghyun had to give the staff of Produce 101 and Stylenanda credit, though. He expected the fashion company to encounter some problems in bringing the ensembles on the day of the performance but Stylenanda was impeccably on time and they did not slack off.

It was difficult to try to come up with thirty-five ensembles in three days, much more if those ensembles had to have some similar foundation to the teams they would be assigned in without having to lose individuality of the ensemble for each trainee that he modified from the general concept of each team. All the while, the ensemble should still maintain the sense that they were a group and not a bunch of people who had different styles but were grouped together. If they wouldn’t plan this well, the aesthetics would feel like an explosion that was an eyesore.

But Stylenanda delivered.

“Whoa, they’re so soft!”

The Angel Leader critically eyed the finishing details and the fabrics used and was satisfied that Styling Director Kim Heejung and her team of extraordinary stylists managed to come up with such quality pieces in a limited time frame.

The styling director had some doubts on some of the pieces that were planned by the trainees and Kim Jonghyun agreed to a point because some were too extravagant to make or acquire in weeks and they only had days. So, they, and a couple of stylists from her team, made alternatives in the case that they were unable to sort out the styling in time.

He was impressed with beautiful fabrics of silk and velvet and sturdy denims with a burst of color, fancy detailing of gold and glittery silver and fun yet avant-garde abstract statements; even the accessories matched up to their concepts and Kim Jonghyun was really happy with the outcome as he hollered to an excited Seongwoo to take care of the fabric when changing or he’d rip off the detailing.

Jonghyun proceeded to start with the hair and makeup of his team. He began with Daehwi’s hairstyle, taking out a tub of—

“Wax?”

“Trust me.”

An hour later, Daehwi ate his words back.

Jihyun noona returned to their team, looking harried and frustrated for some reason, before she stopped in her tracks, blinking.

“Well, you definitely outdone yourself this time, Kim Jonghyun.”

The aesthetics of ‘Never’ was dramatic. There were no other words for it. Hwang Minhyun and Ong Seongwoo’s visuals were out of this world. Lai Guanlin was a visual masterpiece. Kim
Jaehwan pulled no stops in showing his dramatic side. And the new faces of Kim Jonghyun’s team were absolutely beautiful.

Visuals. All of them, the makeup artist barely prevented herself from rolling her eyes in fond exasperation because if there was something the so-called Angel Leader was best at, it was his dramatic flair for stunning visuals, goddamn.

Lee Jihyun was half-joking at this point. “You sure you don’t want to join my aesthetics team after Produce 101?”

The Angel Leader smiled.

Park Woojin was a fast learner and he prided himself for that. And from what he learned in his stint in ‘Never’ Team and some moments back in ‘Get Ugly’, it was better to just go with the flow that was the Angel Leader Kim Jonghyun. Or maybe it was a hurricane? A soft gust of the wind, maybe? He’s not entirely sure but he had a feeling that after seeing ‘Never’ Team’s concept styling, he just knew he was far better off going with the flow than getting struck dumb by Jonghyun-nie hyung.

And yet he could not forget how cool ‘Never’ Team in their visual concept looked like when they stood beside each other in front of the mirror. It was “eye-gasmic” to the ‘Get Ugly’ center and he still did not know how Jonghyun-nie hyung was able to make them look so good and he and Daehwi were the only ones stunned to silence. Seongwoo hyung took one look at his façade and carefully preened his hair. Minhyun-nie hyung and Jaehwan-nie hyung were impressed but not surprised, as did Guanlin-nie. Then he remembered that the former three were part of the Kings Team and Guanlin was the center of Manhwaa Team.

It was gratifying to feel the others staring at him. Donghyun-nie hyung’s jaw was dropped unattractively, much to Youngmin-nie hyung’s amusement. The other teams stopped for a second to let their ensembles sink in. It was a good thing that the cameramen left after fifteen minutes of shooting them looking at the racks and gasping repeatedly at the shiny accessories. At least they didn’t take a video of them wearing their ensembles, that would’ve ruined the surprise.

And it wasn’t that the other teams did not slay their concept styling well. It took Woojin a moment to stop staring at the other teams and their amazing visuals. Jonghyun-nie hyung also had a hand on all the teams as the Angel Leader was part of the creative process and also lent a hand to the haggard stylists.

Still, Woojin was convinced he reached his daily quota of getting blown away by Kim Jonghyun.

Only for his conviction to be rudely pushed away by said Angel Leader-slash-Nation’s-Visual-Director’s work with the stage design.

Because, apparently, aesthetics ain’t just enough for the guy.

BoA sunbaenim went up stage and greeted the one thousand fans who were able to get a ticket for the show. The Nation’s Representative stood up on a side platform as she welcomed the audience with her customary pleasantries. Still, the trainees were caught up on the covered-up stage. The trainees did a brief soundcheck before they went to the dressing room to change so they had no idea what it would look like behind the black curtains. ‘Never’ Team saw the new stage layout but it must’ve changed now to cater the first performers of the show.
“And now, let’s welcome the first team— It’s ‘Showtime’!”

As soon as she said the concept song’s name, the curtains fell down with a swoop.

Park Woojin choked on his breath.

Lee Daehwi’s jaw dropped.

Kim Jaehwan did not blink.

Hwang Minhyun had a long-suffering expression on his face.

Kim Jonghyun had a satisfied smile on his face.

"Here we go," He murmured.

Thousands of colors burst forth from the seams of the curtain fabric as they took in the first stage of the night.
Three hours after the Concept Evaluations and Hwang Minhyun was done with everyone. Which was a first for the Hwanggallyang because he had a considerably long thread of patience and he prided himself for that. Constantly dealing with people like Choi Minki was a chore that most people would refuse to touch without the right amount of compensation like, say, a hundred million won, but because he was a simple guy that deeply respected his borderline-saintly leader, he tried to ease poor Jonghyun’s load and reined Minki and their Pledis dongsaengs in to the best of his abilities (to no avail). Still, the exposure to such “extreme environments” made him more resilient than most. Thus, having to deal with Minki and Dongho fanboying and Daehwi having a nervous breakdown should have been a manageable task.

Wrong.

That was before he found out how potent the full power of Kim Jonghyun’s visual ingenuity truly was.

“I know I shouldn’t be surprised because you’ve done so many things already, but this?” Daehwi wildly gestured at the fancam footage of ‘Open Up’ stage playing in the tablet. “Seriously hyung—you’ve outdone everything else! Everything was so amazing! Our stage even had those lights!”

“It’s not that big of a deal—” The Angel Leader interrupted.

“Finish that sentence, I dare you,” Seongwoo hyung brandished a finger while batting away Minhyun’s hands from his hair.

Damn, he really hoped that was the extreme of what the Angel Leader could do because if there are more tricks up his sleeve, he might as well take up classes in emergency rescue because he just had to resuscitate quite a few trainees after being slayed by the damn stages.

Hwang Minhyun was nice, he was practically second to the angelic leader but at that moment he just wanted some moments of peace. So, he threw the infuriatingly nonplussed leader a scathing glare.

“Yah, Jonghyun-ah, are you trying to kill us?”

The Angel Leader looked at him with wide eyes. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Minhyun felt blood rush up his face in frustration.

Jonghyun was absolutely clueless in matters that were mutually exclusive of fashion sketches, being an idol, and all-around leader stuff. And frankly, he was getting tired of asking the same question for hours. So much for patience, he groused.

The worst part about it was the fact Jonghyun-ah truly had no idea on what he just did.

“Like, how the heck did you do it? ‘Downpour’ stage was awesome but that was just because you did way more than we expected since you took my suggestion way too seriously. Not that it was a bad thing because you just made impossible things possible but the concept evaluation stages…”

He trailed off at the memory of what happened hours prior to him having an existential crisis and everyone still reeling from the knockout they received from the Nation’s Stage Master.
The quarter-disbelieving, quarter-impressed, and half-resigned expression on Park Jihoon’s face was so hilarious it took everything in Minhyun not to laugh. He understood the Wink Master’s exasperation with Kim Jonghyun’s near-impossible stage design. The idol-turned-trainee got everyone’s attention in his visual direction and he still had proof of Jonghyun-nie hyung’s talent in aesthetics in the form of crumpled fashion sketches and freaking diagrams comparing symmetry of accessories with the accents in the model’s pants.

Stage design was a wholly different, and yet the Angel Leader gave more than what they asked for.

Seongwoo and Jaehwan were struck speechless.

Woojin just broke the record of not blinking for a minute and a half.

“Isn’t there anything Jonghyun-nie hyung can’t do?” Lai Guanlin sighed, dead-tired all of a sudden.

The Hwanggallyang was thinking the same thing with everyone else. He knew what their stage was going to be after ‘Oh Little Girl’ and during the car ride, their leader talked about what their stage would look like in a visualization that sounded both amazing and complex that it took them a while to digest. Still, the gist of the stage was easy enough to decipher and Minhyun nodded at the explanation of Jonghyun-ah making them practice two formations, one for evaluations and the other for the stage.

The other teams stayed mum about their stage so they were left in the dark of what is to come. It was an experience though, guessing on what the other stages would do and trying to outdo each other. Few minutes before the show started and they were stuck on whether or not ‘Open Up’ Team would have beds or cages.

After ‘Downpour’, he felt like he had no definite reason on getting surprised once more.

Well, consider him blown away by what the Angel Leader had in-store for them.

Minhyun was seated on the fourth row of seats once ‘Showtime’ left for their stage. The sequence of stages was done by drawing lots, with Jiseong-ie hyung getting first and Jonghyun-ah taking the last slot.

“And now, let’s welcome the first team—it’s ‘Showtime’!”

‘Showtime’ was a burst of color and it was fantastic work.

Iridescent giant disco balls with crystal facets throwing off every imaginable shade of blue, red, green, purple, and yellow as they swirled and spun above the stage in an infinite play of lights that expanded far beyond what the eye can see and created a multicolored holographic dance floor. That was just the lights. The stage design was in slightly-muted darker shades to compliment the lights. It was reminiscent of retro dancefloors in the 1980s, with strings of lights hanging above the façade of the stage and boombox-themed sculptures surrounding the stage. Multicolored stairs were lighted behind the stage leading to the bedazzled mic stands stood in a line across the platform.

The lights flashed bright, almost blinding them when the camera focused on the lights, before it dimmed to show the black screen that flashed the title of the song in a giant funky font of metallic red and blue. The stage lights went wild as the mic stands slowly went down and disappeared below the stage.
Ten seconds later, the seven mic stands had seven people standing behind it.

“Whoa,” Justin murmured.

“They look so hip!” Kenta exclaimed.

“Can I buy those jackets?”

The aesthetics of ‘Showtime’ Team was cool and hip, the kind that you see in high-fashion magazines but cannot be pulled off in real-life. But these guys owned them as the camera focused on each member when they introduced themselves and turned to show their outfits to the excited crowd. The first time Lee Daehwi saw ‘Showtime’ Team backstage, he wanted to join them because their looks were so cool.

But under the lights and the fantastic stage design, they rocked the stage.

The appropriately-named “It’s” Team went for glittery jackets and funky styling as the recurring theme of the group. Yoon Jiseong went to a complete transformation from the Meme King of Produce 101 to the idol Jiseong in his two-layered striped white and black long-sleeved shirt beneath a black bomber jacket with shimmering sequined roses patterned all over the back.

Kim Seonglee channeled his charismatic persona in a white statement shirt donning Queen of Pop Madonna’s iconic 80’s look underneath his black denim jacket and metallic green pants. Park Woodam was a stunner in his swept-up hairstyle, smoky eyeliner, and a heavily-studded red leather jacket with metallic chains and rings in an avant-garde ensemble.

The eccentric-looking accents of the team was chic and cool. Noh Taehyun was mesmerizing in a show-stopping all-pastel blue ensemble with a sequined aviator jacket and chains that reached down his abdomen.

Woo Jinyoung practically shoved his aegyo face away and was sexy in a retro-styled V-neck button down popped open, tasseled blazer, and the graphic metallic yellow eyeliner that made his eyes. Yoo Seonho made a comeback of his ‘Sorry, Sorry’ look but was ten times better with his wavy curls swept to the side and shimmery glittery eyeshadow complimenting his tinsel faux fur sweater and patterned metallic yellow bling-bling pants. Kim Samuel knocked them all out with black collared-blazer, red ripped jeans, and the heart-shaped glasses.

The Nu Disco-genre banger began strong and ended spectacularly. He knew that ‘Showtime’ had the two of the best vocalists in the competition with Woodam and Seonglee hyung taking the main vocal positions of the team and that was discounting the fact that Taehyun-nie hyung and Seonho-yah were vocalists themselves, but they did not disappoint. Seonho showcased his vocals well, much to his relief because he was slightly worried about the byeongari adjusting to a very different concept after mastering the choreography of ‘Never’.

Seonho was in his element, Minhyun smiled.

Jiseong hyung and Jinyoung hyung delivered a well-rehearsed exchange of rap verses in the comical way that only the two trainees could do. Then there was the dance line with Taehyun-nie hyung and Samuel taking the reins in the breakdown. Samuel was the best center for ‘Showtime’ and he had no other options that could do the iconic chorus than the Brave trainee.

Bang!

The psychedelic lights show in the screen burst into ribbons of color as the team had thousands of glittery confetti and sparks fell on them in coordinated sequences with the lights flaring different
colors as the final chorus of the song finished with a literal bang.

Daehwi looked mesmerized by the color show as they watched the same performance repeated twice, one with twice the speed and the other with focused fan-cams aimed at each member.

The curtains closed and the Minhyun was reminded of the dramatism of theatre plays wherein there was a short interlude between acts. It was like that with the feeling of anticipation as they waited for the glimpse of the next stage design. ‘Showtime’ Team returned in the room and piled at the back of the room, sweaty and heavily-breathing but grinning so wide as they accepted the greetings from the others graciously.

“Hyung!”

Samuel-ah and Jiseong hyung hugged a laughing Kim Jonghyun tight as they thanked the Angel leader profusely for the colorful stage design before going back to their seats.

Beside the Angel Leader, Minhyun heard Seongwoo whisper to them, “If that’s the trend your stage designs would go, Jonghyun-ah, I wonder what you’d do for the others.”

Seongwoo was right. They did not expect ‘Showtime’ stage to go the way it did. They were blown away by the colors, lights, and the ensemble that worked seamlessly together.

Minhyun shook his head.

The Angel Leader started with a bang.

And Minhyun was left with the impression that by the end of the night he’d be left fumbling with his consciousness.

“Second team, ‘I Know You Know’, come on up!”

The curtains opened.

Kim Jaehwan’s jaw dropped.

‘I Know You Know’ was the antithesis of ‘Showtime’ because the team’s stage was the epitome of the “sexy flower-boy” theme. The previous performance was hyped to the smallest fraction of the stage but this stage design was subtle in hype themes and overflowing in prince-like idol charisma.

Everything was pink and flowery.

“That’s a lot of flowers,” Woojin-nie whistled lowly.

“I know, must be thousands,” Daehwi whispered in shock.

“Where did they get so many roses?”

Placed above the stage were thousands of pink gossamer ribbons placed in a wide circle with one end pinned on the ceiling and the rest swaying gently back and forth, creating the illusion of an aged willow tree and its elongated leaves dancing in the spring breeze as they shelter the hidden world of nature’s mystery and beauty.

Giant chrysanthemums and roses of different shades of pink, white, blue, and indigo hung from the ceiling in a masterful sequence of flowers as they completed the picturesque scene of a park with
two white benches and Victorian lampposts in the middle of spring while the CGI showed a beautiful cherry blossom tree in the screen with petals from the blossoms floating down. The loud colors of electric blue and siren red were gone and in its place were graceful fairy lights of pinks and white intertwined in vine-like trails lining the façade of the stage to emphasize the stage like it came from a fairy tale.

And the platform was raised to show the princes of the story.

“Their style is impeccable,” Minhyun-nie hyung commented.

“Impeccable? They look like freaking princes!”

“Boys Under the Moon” looked mesmerizing in silk shirts and leather pants but what made their visuals amplified further were the accented ensembles and beautifully-crafted accessories like the chandelier ear threaders in Kim Donghan’s left ear and the thin silver chain surrounding his neck to add accent to his coral-pink ensemble. The enchanting ruby-red glass flower accessory pinned behind Ahn Hyeongseop’s right ear was a show-stopper against his white silk shirt and black leather pants.

“Hyeongseop-ie hyung made a comeback,” Justin said, remembering what his fellow Yuehua trainee had as a concept for the magazine photoshoot.

Kim Donghyun’s tall façade created a beautiful silhouette of silver silk shirt and pale pink leather pants accented with flowing trails of thin chains encircling his waist and down his legs. Kwon Hyunbin reclaimed his throne as the Visual Prince of Manhwa Team in his windswept blond hair, pink silk shirt with embroidered flowers running down the sides and sleeves, and the pretty rose-tinted glasses placed on his aquiline nose.

Joo Haknyeon’s stunning auburn hair and sharp, almost cat-like eye makeup contrasted well with the bright sheen of his silver silk shirt. Kim Taedong was handsome in his coral-accented silver shirt and layered chains hanging off his neck and wrists. Even with visual killers like Donghan-nie and Hyunbin-nie, Ha Seongwoon took everyone’s attention. The center of ‘I Know You Know’ embodied the charismatic prince to a T with an all-white ensemble with coral and pink embroidery on the right side of the shirt and ran down his pants in a waterfall of colors.

The performance was beautiful and elegant. Seongwoon-nie hyung took the first verse of the song and at that point Minhyun knew that the song would take on a higher note than what the original key was. ‘I Know You Know’ had parts that can be raised an octave higher but the original members did not go down that path due to their lack of vocalists.

This time though they had the Ardor & Able trainee to do the high notes and he did spectacularly as the center. The vocal line did the parts justice as Donghyun-nie gave a softer version of Lee Woojin’s past lines. Haknyeon-nie was a surprise because his vocal color adjusted well to the song. Hyunbin-nie and Hyeongseop-ah divided the rap parts of the song and the contrast between their timbre was music to the ears. The dance line took the attention, though, because of Donghan-nie, Taedong, and Center Ha Seongwoon’s sharp yet flowing movements during the killing parts.

The stage was elegant and the pink sparks and confetti shaped like cherry blossom petals rained down on them as the song came to a close.

Because Kim Jonghyun the stage director wasn’t playing around.

The other trainees were excitedly talking about the first two stages of the night. Some of them
began asking questions to an amused Kim Jonghyun because, really, how the heck did the _Angel Leader_ do it?

Jaehwan met Guanlin’s half-amused gaze with one of his own.

How, indeed.

“*Let’s spice the evening up with the next concept—Let’s welcome ‘Open Up’ Team!*”

Beside him, Woojin- nie hyung muttered a hissed curse.

Daehwi _hyung_ didn’t even look like he was breathing at all!

And he knew exactly why.

‘Open Up’ was what Guanlin would dub as the “*Sexy Bandit* Kang Dongho of Concept Evaluations”, the sexy, mysterious, dramatic, and seductive stage that everyone was waiting for. As soon as he saw the final lineup of the team, he just knew that they were in for a treat. Banding together the sexiest trainees of _Produce 101_ in one team was a surefire way to hype the stage up.

The stage felt like a dream sequence. The stage was dark, almost forbidding with its eerily bluish-violet fog crawling over the floor in a perfect mix of theatric dramatism and the wildest fantasies brought to life. The CGI on the screen was alluring in the hypnotic dark-colored smokes dancing and writhing their way around each other in a miasma of colors. Hanging high above the rafters were silver fairy lights intertwined around the rails of the cages suspended above the stage like stars shedding illumination over the white silk curtains split in the middle and the antique-looking bed with gothic-inspired steel bedposts placed a few feet to the right to complete the stage aesthetics.

What took their attention though was the entrance of ‘Open Up’ Team.

The stage went black, CGI on the screens dimmed to a cool and dark shade of purple, and the only source of light were the fairy lights that suddenly turned from silver to a mesmerizing shade of magenta. The fog only added to the mysteriousness as the silhouettes of seven men standing in a straight line was the only thing visible in the dark stage.

Then the first note of ‘Open Up’ started.

The stage lights flashed bright.

And Lai Guanlin just knew the team was their toughest competitor yet.

“*Knock*”, regardless of what Seongwoo _hyung_ thought of the team’s name, lived up to their expectations as the sexy team of Concept Evaluations. Clad in silk coats and white undershirts, they were the epitome of sexiness and the subtle accents in Kang Dongho’s sequined-accented black long coat that reached down mid-thigh, the faux-fur lining on the collar of Kim Yongguk’s ash-grey jacket, and Kim Sanggyun’s asymmetric dress shirt underneath the deep purple coat ensemble.

The _hyungs_ of the team had the trademark soft hair color that Guanlin recognized from one of K noona’s works. Kang Dongho and Kim Sanggyun opted for a dark color while Kim Yongguk forwent his previous red color to a more muted blue shade.
The contenders for the visual member in the team went towards the other four members of “Knock”. Choi Minki may have looked like a fairy with his soft features and small stature but the Pledis trainee knocked them back in the sexy concept with his tousled hairstyle, intricate-looking ear cuffs, and smoky eye makeup amplifying his visuals in the unbuttoned dress shirt and rose-embroidered silk jacket. Takada Kenta was unique in his cappuccino-colored hair, dark eye makeup, silk black turtleneck, and multiple ear threads dangling from his left ear.

Then you have people like Bae Jinyoung and Kang Daniel—

“What.”

“Is that...a lip ring?”

Seongwoo hyung absolutely looked green in envy as the camera panned to show the two center members of the now spearhead formation.

Bae Jinyoung wowed everyone since the promotions of Unit Three and it seemed like being surrounded by visuals rubbed off on the trainee so well that the once shy C9 Entertainment trainee was practically nonexistent in how Jinyoung projected himself. He was mesmerizing dressed in a black tasseled silk coat with velvet trimmings. The trainee’s visuals went up to the next level with the dazzling chain choker and the sultry eye makeup.

Kang Daniel was, without any doubt, the center of ‘Open Up’. The Fancam King was the fixed pick of the team and he exceeded expectations for the sexy concept. Dressed in a chic embellished black collared coat and ankle boots, Daniel hyung went full-on with the aesthetics. His trademark blue-tinted hair was changed to an ashy-blonde color, which greatly complimented his black outfit. Daniel hyung made a comeback with a shiny lip ring and icy-gray eye contacts.

And that was just the first few seconds of the song. The sexy concept was embodied by how their visuals worked with the message of the song and Guanlin felt awe at how skillfully crafted the visuals were.

The vocals and choreography were on point. Kang Daniel started off great, hyping up the crowd with his sensual icy stare making a comeback from ‘Sorry, Sorry’, then Kim Yongguk knocked them with his honeyed voice and dark tousled hairstyle that worked really well with the bluish-purple fog. Takada Kenta’s awesome makeup and vocals was far better than ‘Downpour’, hands down.

“Is it just me or did the cameraman just got even better?”

The hushed realization of Woojin-nie hyung dawned on them. Daehwi was struck speechless while Jaehwan-nie hyung concentrated on the TV screen to notice the differences between the previous evaluations and this one. The camera dynamics truly was phenomenal as the multiple shots of the stage, from above down to a moving camera panning the stage in a semi-circle, took the thrill of watching the performance even higher.

The side-shot of Takada Kenta was stunning.

Guanlin didn’t even need to look. He knew exactly who was somewhat responsible for the superb camerawork.

Kim Sanggyun was the best rapper for the concept. Almost provocative, the Hunus Entertainment trainee was unabashedly unapologetic in being the sexiest he’d ever been in the rap parts of the song. Guanlin felt proud that he voted for the talented rapper for ‘Open Up’; he could not think of
anyone better. Bae Jinyoung, damn, the guy just found his niche in the competition. The center of Unit Three outranked most in visuals and it showed really well as he had his profile shot back-to-back with Choi Minki.


The NU’EST hyungs were absolutely amazing in the stage. Kang Dongho was the main vocal of the team, reaching high notes with impeccable stability. His visuals were nothing to dismiss, the camera panning on his Sexy Bandit stare reliving his most viewed fancam in the group battles.

But Guanlin could admit, even with bias towards his Dongho hyung, that Choi Minki killed the concept far better than Dongho hyung did. Minki hyung looked every bit like a dark prince in heavy eyeliner. Everyone thought that the least likely to fit the sexy concept was the star of ‘Replay’—

Boy were they so wrong…

Minki hyung should be called Sensual Prince for everyone’s sakes because Guanlin would bet his whole life savings that the prettiest hyung of Produce 101 would launch a thousand GIFs after this.

“That focus!”

“Cutie Minki, who?” Seongwoo hyung laughed uproariously as the camera zoomed once more on the burgundy-lined smoky eyes and the littlest smirk tilting his corner lip up.

After the high note in the bridge, the stage lighted up more than ever as they laid down on the floor and a shower of glittery silver confetti and sparks slowly fell down on them.

There were no dramatic bangs at the end of the stage, no beautiful petals raining—no, after thanking the audience, they all lined in a straight line and the stage dimmed as the screen showed the title of the song in silver cursive against the dark canvas before it went pitch-black.

Silence.

Then, “Can we even beat them, Jonghyun-nie hyung?”

The Angel Leader turned to meet the imploring gazes of his teammates with smile but he did not say anything.

And Guanlin knew where Minki hyung learned the same devilish smile that made the audience scream themselves hoarse.

The Cube trainee was brimming with excitement at the thought.

At this point of time in the evaluations Ong Seongwoo felt like ants were crawling inside his pants. The previous three stages were amazing and he was doubtful he’d do as great of a job as the others did in their concepts. ‘Showtime’ was so bright that there were literally spots in his eyes after the performance. ‘I Know You Know’ was graceful, elegant, and so fucking pretty that the team looked like princes in a fairytale. Then there’s ‘Open Up’ stage whose main purpose was to knocked down everyone’s self-esteem to a new minimum.

That was the only time he regretted helping Daniel pick his own accessories. Dammit, he didn’t even know lip rings could make you look like that.
Issues on lip jewelry put aside, Seongwoo really felt threatened about his team’s standing in the evaluations. Hailed as the “team to beat”, ‘Never’ had plans for the stage design and they sounded cool when their leader summarized the plan to them. Unfortunately, sketches don’t necessarily visualize the whole thing in real time. And Jonghyun-ah summarized the killing part as a “light show”.

And the guy followed it up with a “Just don’t be scared, okay? They’re harmless from a distance.” Right. Don’t tell the overly-paranoid guy the “light show” plan and yet ask him to stay pansy-dandy during the performance.

His imagination was running wild at this time because the previous stages were so awesome.

So, yes, Ong Seongwoo was feeling a multitude of emotions as they waited for ‘Oh Little Girl’ Stage to be set up. Don’t get him wrong, he trusted his leader far too much than what he should allow from a person he only met a few months ago. The guy never gave him a reason not to. Since the group battles, Jonghyun-ah tirelessly worked to make all stages shine and still kept the credit to himself until Jaehwan-nie spilled the beans during the last eliminations. What he didn’t trust was himself not mucking up their stage. There was so many at stake in these evaluations: live stages, proceeding to the final twenty, a freaking music video—it was all so new and exciting and he was banking on his team winning the prestigious music video award.

And they’d get that if he could just stop shaking.

A hand pressed on his arm.

“Calm down, Seongwoo-ah,” The center of ‘Never’ was facing ahead but he felt eyes on his face as the Hwanggallyang tried to ease his nerves. “We’ll do fine.”

Ong Seongwoo had few people he truly trusted in Produce 101 and Hwang Minhyun was one of them. He nodded and focused on the next stage.

He was glad he did because—

“Let’s welcome the fourth concept—come on up, ‘Oh Little Girl’ Team!”

“Oh my, that’s…” Minhyun-nie trailed off.

“The cutest stage you’d ever seen?”

He nodded, entranced.

‘Oh Little Girl’ was an intriguing mix of the cute yet sexy bubblegum, unicorns-just-farted-and-still-everything-is-so-damn-pretty concept of ‘I Know You Know’ and the epitome of seductiveness ‘Open Up’. A masterful work, Seongwoo noted, as the sweet and dreamy concept of ‘Oh Little Girl’ was shown for the first time.

Everything was so bubbly and sugary-sweet. Placed above the stage were thousands of vibrant balloons and streamers placed on the steel rafters with beautiful mixes of medium to bright colors like clementine orange, flamingo pink, mint green, and icy blue in a beautiful illusion of spring and summer colors swirling together into one. The stage paraphernalia was bright and cheery with bright blue arm chairs lined in two rows at the far left of the stage, giant asymmetric wall pieces and columns encapsulating the center stage in a V-formation, and the stage floor lighted up in a
patchwork of LED lights forming beautiful moving Mandala patterns. The trademark diamond center where the confetti and sparks usually fell had marquee signs with the title song sparkling loudly in swirly fonts.

The CGI on the screen went wild, bursting with so many colors and animations that it temporarily blinded him for a moment. The spinners above activated and a rainbow of colorful confetti rained down as the platform went up with the team standing in a straight line, looking like models in a catalog magazine.

The aesthetics of “Slate” was what Ong Seongwoo would call a “sexy avant-garde yet obnoxiously cute” concept.

The visuals of the team were amazing.

Lee Gunhee looked sexy and sweet dressed in blue plaid choker blazer and black pants with his hair parted and slightly slicked back to give. Leader Jung Sewoon had a chic transformation from his Ponyo image to a flower-boy idol with his ash-gray hair color, slightly rouged lips, soft doe-eye makeup, and the slim ear threaders in one ear. His outfit of animal print silk shirt and ripped denim jeans increased his visuals even further.

Lee Woojin fitted the concept well not only because of his age but also because of how his visuals worked with the styling. Dressed in a graphic dress shirt under a pink blazer, the youngest trainee of Produce 101 embodied the cute concept well with his smiling eyes. Lim Youngmin was a surprise to everyone with his crimped blonde hair and gradient eye makeup. The rapper was decked out in a mix of sunset orange and daybreak pink with his comfortable-looking jumper and eccentric-looking sneakers.

The visual knockouts belonged to the last three members of ‘Oh Little Girl’. Huang Justin did not hold back in the aesthetics. Seongwoo knew that the Yuehua trainee was practically Jonghyun-ah’s apprentice in aesthetics direction and Justin did an excellent job in emulating the Nation’s Stylist’s footsteps. Dressed in an icy blue double-breasted jacket with pink and white trimmings, Justin looked phenomenal in light brown Ombré hairstyle with bangs falling over his gold-spectacled eyes. Park Jihoon…well, Seongwoo had a perfectly good reason why he felt threatened by the visuals of the Maroo trainee and the rest of the Kings and Unit Three, and this is exactly why.

The guy was sporting bubblegum pink hair. Bubblegum pink! And he still made it look damn good! Jihoon was in an all-navy blue ensemble with graphic statements printed at the back of the jacket to give the spotlight to his unbelievably pretty face and daring hair color.

Then the camera panned to focus on the center trainee.

At first, he had doubts about the Yuehua trainee taking center position for the team when there were people like Jihoon, Sewoon, and Justin in the team. But now that the concept and stage design had been revealed, the Fantagio trainee had no more doubts on the matter. Lee Euiwoong was the center of the concept and he would bet all of his Kings’ team members that Jonghyun-ah had something done about it, damn the man!

Lee Euiwoong shed off his mop-style hair and went for a windswept look parted one-fourth to the side to add volume and dimension and highlight the peach eye makeup and tinted lips. His youthful face was accented further with the hot pink denim jacket with strategically-placed glittery flower designs and the startling electric-blue eyes and eye makeup.

So, the only thing Ong Seongwoo can do was throw a disbelieving stare towards Kim Jonghyun.
“You’re not a makeup artist in disguise, right?”

Beside him, Minhyun rolled his eyes. “As if that’s the extent of Jonghyun-ah’s aesthetics skills.”

“Unbelievable.”

The vocals and choreography were on point. Huang Justin was charming with the vocals and Lee Woojin did well as the cute *maknae* of the team. Youngmin-nie embodied the concept far better than anyone expected and Jung Sewoon and Lee Gunhee were amazing as the main vocals. Jihoon and Euiwoong were the most eye-catching, though. The trademark wink Jihoon threw on the camera and the way Euiwoong delivered his rap on the first verse of the song was fast and impeccable.

The finale was bright. As the final chorus came up, the confetti and pyrotechnics activated with the lighted-up balloons, throwing the stage in so many beautiful colors.

After ‘Oh Little Girl’, Ong Seongwoo had one thought: The four stages were amazing.

But…

There’s a glint in his leader’s eyes that was telling him to buckle up tight.

And he was so all for it!

Kim Jonghyun stood up from his seat and said, “It’s time.”

Kang Daniel had very high expectations for ‘Never’ Team. How could he not? The team had the highest-ranked trainees in the competition, not to mention talented ones and the guys who had always been in everyone’s radars since the beginning like Lee Daehwi and Park Woojin who were intimidatingly good since the auditions, Lai Guanlin who skyrocketed from his fancam in ‘Boy in Luv’, and of course, the four out of six of the *Kings*.

He was slightly bummed out that he wasn’t part of the team for this evaluation.

He wasn’t a hypocrite so when he was asked by Jinyoung-ie if there was another team he wanted to be in, he confidently said that ‘Never’ was his second choice. Dongho hyung only nodded, unsurprised because most of the trainees wanted to be in that team as well.

And tonight, he was dearly reminded, multiple times really, that Kim Jonghyun had superpowers.

Sure, ‘Showtime’ was bright, ‘I Know You Know’ was elegantly pink, ‘Oh Little Girl’ had the cute concept down to pat, and their stage was amazing and sexy—

> “And now for the last team, ‘Never’—It’s showtime!”

Then came ‘Never’ stage.

“Damn.”
Minki hyung was stunned speechless.

Jihoon-nie could not take his eyes away from the stage.

Well, neither could he.

‘Never’ stage was magnificent. It took Daniel a moment to adjust his eyes to what he was seeing but when it did, the only thing that registered in his fried brain was lights.

Thousands of them.

Hundreds of lanterns were hanging high above the stage, emitting fiery balls of beauty against the backdrop of stars in the midnight sky. The fairy lights weaved around the façade of the stage turned a pulsing golden hue, contrasting brilliantly against the candle-lit lanterns as the audience wowed at the illusion of falling stars. The fog was crawling at a fast pace on the ground, making the stage look alit in fire as the stage floor activated red, orange, yellow, and black lights in a swirl of colors meeting at the epicenter where the platform was. The screen showed a stunning CGI of Steampunk-inspired vintage clocks whirring into life as the hands passed each hour backwards with an ominous ding.

It was stunning. There were no props like beds, boomboxes, or giant walls, but the stage looking like a galaxy of stars on fire took their breaths away.

The clocks stopped.

The platform slowly rose up, the mechanical ticks rang through the silenced crowd, amplifying the sound with the hushed whoosh of air coming for everywhere, blowing the fairy lights and lanterns in a twirling motion with each caress.

He had no words for the visuals of ‘Never’ Team.

The first time he’d seen the team’s full ensemble was in the dressing room like everyone else and he was stunned the first time. It was his second time to see the team and he realized Jonghyun-nie hyung was right.

“No matter how stunning you look, it’ll never hold a candle to how the stage transforms you.”

Because under the stars, ‘Never’ Team looked like kings.

“Nation’s Sons” embodied fire and gold in their embellished glittery blazer jackets and stunning accents.

“Jaehwan-nie hyung looks so cool!”

Kim Jaehwan looked regal in his ruby-red velvet blazer with embroidered gold thread weaving from his left collar down to the hem. The Kings’ Main Vocal’s aesthetics was amplified with his chocolate brown tousled locks and heavy eye makeup lining his amber-hued eyes. He raised a hand to slightly wave at the fans, showing off the stunning ring piece with a threaded chain connected to the clock-inspired cuff links around his left wrist.

“Whoa…Is that really Woojin-nie?”

Park Woojin was a stunner in red-and-black ensemble with red and orange wavy patterns running
over the black expanse of the black blazer. His ash-gray hair style parted to one side was softly brushing over the matching steel gray eyes and tinted lips. The dancer was wearing a gold velvet choker and accented metallic gold belts and chains outlining his pockets. The silk black eye patch on his left eye only made the gray eyes look even more enthralling.

Daniel expected that Lai Guanlin and Ong Seongwoo would have the dramatic aesthetics of the team. And the two visuals did not disappoint. Heck, this may be their best visual concept yet!

Lai Guanlin truly was the Dark Prince of Manhwa Team with his black blazer with gold trimmings spiraling on the thick lining of the jacket. Guanlin opted for shimmery gold highlights teasing through the strands of his dark hair, complimenting the brown-eyed gaze and glittery eye makeup well.

Ong Seongwoo went for an elegant avant-garde look with a tousled comma hair look with one side pinned using a rhinestone-encrusted barrette on his hair. The Kings’ Center went with a red-and-gold theme with his gold blazer decorated with ebony sequins in an asymmetric design and the beautiful black tight pants softly outlining his body. His dramatic eye makeup highlighted the startling icy-blue gaze and handsome smirk.

At this point, the cameramen must’ve found the visual stunners of the team (as if they could even pick, Daniel rolled his eyes) and focused on the three trainees at the middle.

Lee Daehwi looked mesmerizing in an all-black ensemble of velvet choker blazer jacket and silk shirt half-untucked in his leather pants. His hair was slightly waxed to part softly at the middle with black tendrils of shimmering hair falling over the burgundy-lined dark gaze. The ‘Nayana’ center met the cameras and threw a sultry wink at the screaming audience.

Kim Jonghyun was the opposite of Daehwi in every way. Whereas the younger trainee went for the dark and dangerous concept, the Angel Leader looked truly like an angel in his visual aesthetics. Dressed in a white blazer with elegant gold and orange accents, the Angel Leader looked beautiful with his sterling-silver curled locks swaying slightly with the wind and the lights glinting off the glitter lining his sparkling eyes.

The camera panned to the center of ‘Never’ Team.

“The heck—” Minki hyung gaped.

“Argh! Minhyun-nie hyung’s wrecking our visuals!”

“Is this the reason why contact lenses are a must in stages? If that is so, I’m buying them in bulk next time,” mused Kenta.

Daniel was kind, patient, practically an angel for those who knew him, but damn the inferiority he was feeling right now because ‘Never’ Team and Hwang Minhyun looked like that.

The Hwanggallyang looked ethereal in gold-embellished red velvet choker blazer and tight-looking leather pants emphasizing the slenderness of the visual trainee. What took their breath away was the camera focusing on the emotion-filled rose-colored eyes lined in dramatic gold eye makeup and the blonde locks swaying with the wind.

As if in slow motion, the camera panned slowly from left to right, taking in the visuals of the top-tier team.

Yep, so unfair.
The choreography was complex yet elegant, powerful yet soft, and Kang Daniel was mesmerized. He knew that the team wouldn’t have any problems in the performance. Heck, ‘Never’ was the only one who did so well that the producers didn’t have anything bad to say! So, his expectations were at an all-time high. But, somehow, the stage made the choreography even more epic.

The vocals were on point. Seongwoo hyung showcased his vocals and acting well in the emotion-filled piece. Daehwi and Minhyun-nie hyung were the soft vocal tandem that no one expected but worked incredibly well together. Jaehwan-nie, he had no words for, because the guy practically had the higher parts down to pat. It was like the song was made exactly for a balladeer like Kim Jaehwan, and with the poignant message of the song, it was heartbreakingly beautiful.

The rap aspect of ‘Never’ was dramatic and emotional. Kicking off the first rap verse, Woojin-nie’s signature husky tone rang true in the speakers as he told a love lost. Guanlin-nie’s rapping tone and visuals were on par with his pronunciation, making his voice even more of a treat than his incredible face and aesthetics.

The second verse was the beginning of their descent to what he’d like to call “Kim Jonghyun Intoxication”.

“Oh my god!”

“He just hugged Jaehwan-nie hyung!”

“That was freaking sexy!”

“I can’t believe Jonghyun-nie hyung smirked like that!”

Daniel’s eyes were popped wide open. So that’s the reason why Seongwoo hyung was so stingy about Jaehwan-nie’s part in the second verse, the Fancam Master thought with chagrin.

They thought that was the end of the surprises.

Well, until the killing part of Kim Jaehwan, that is.

The audience gasped.

“Whoa!” Minki hyung almost fell out of his seat if not for Dongho hyung’s intervention.

Daniel felt his eyes pop out in shock.

The weird-looking contraption—a twelve-foot wide circle of pipes that had holes drilled along its length—where the confetti and sparks came from that Jonghyun-nie hyung called “gerb spinners” emitted short, pulsing sparks before falling in long streams of golden sparks like it was raining golden stars.

‘Never’ Team sang and danced beautifully at the center of the waterfall of sparks continuously streaming downward in a ring of sparks, surrounding their forms in gold and white and silver. The contrast with the red, orange, black, and yellow of their ensembles was so beautiful it took their breaths away.

They looked like they were lit on fire.

The camera panned from above, below, and directly in the faces of the “Sons of the Nation” curtained by the golden sparks still falling in streams.
Everyone was silent before Dongho hyung coughed in amusement.

“Now I understand what Jonghyun-ah was doing all along.”

Daniel shrugged. “Slay with music, kill with visuals.”

At this point, the Produce 101 trainees were uncertain on who’d win the live stage and music video.

But for Kang Daniel, he had a very good guess on who’d get the votes.

It was one in the morning already, way past curfew and half the trainees asleep in their bunkbeds like normal people do at the late hour, but it felt like ‘Never’ Team was still on high from the sugar rush brought by copious amounts of sweets and energy drinks.

“I’m so nervous for the online voting, hyung,” Daehwi wrung the blanket in his hands. “I mean, ‘Open Up’ Team won the onsite votes. Are we even going to win the online votes?”

It had been a day and a half since the Concept Evaluations and the impending results of the online votes would be said in a few hours. Frankly, Minhyun was fine with anyone winning. All teams had a fair chance because the stage designs and concept were on par with each other. But not for ‘Never’ Team because his teammates wanted to win badly.

The morning after evaluations was noisy as the staff made them do some games to increase the footage for the next episode. Minhyun was all for it because the others looked too morose and distracted. Even Jonghyun-ah was not his usual smiling self, eating the barest minimum for him not to nag. The Hwanggallyang knew something was wrong with his leader and asked him about it the soonest he could.

While the others were preoccupied with setting a game plan for the charades game, Minhyun pulled Jonghyun away from the others.

“You okay?”

Jonghyun-ah smiled. “I’m fine, just feeling tired. The Concept Evaluations took a lot from me, I have to admit.”

“Hmm.”

Minhyun wasn’t stupid but he did not push the leader even more. He’d seen how the leader broke once after being pushed one too far. He wouldn’t be the reason for it again.

Minhyun sighed before wrapping an arm around an upset Daehwi. “Don’t think about the results of the votes, okay? You all did really well in the stage. Kept your composure up even with the sparks raining.”

Seongwoo snorted. “Not really. Just bluffed into making everyone think I knew what the hell was happening.”

Woojin-nie interrupted from the top bunk, munching on a bar of chocolate. “Yeah, Jonghyun-nie hyung just explained them by saying it was a ‘lights show’. Kinda hard to imagine what that would look like. He should’ve just said ‘raining fire’, much easier to comprehend.”
Woojin shook his head at the memory. During the performance, it took him a few seconds to adjust to the lanterns and fairy lights before he got into his performance mode. That was nearly dislodged, however, when he saw sparks falling towards him as he turned and looked up. He saw the others jerk in surprise but they kept the show up so he followed their lead.

But after the final pose, he had a few more seconds to marvel at the falling stars from the midnight black ceiling.

Jonghyun-nie hyung certainly outdid himself in the Concept Evaluations.

Sure, he was disappointed that they did not win the onsite evaluations but Woojin was hoping that they’d win the online votes in the first place. The hundred-thousand points was a big boon, true, but he doesn’t know when he’d get to shoot a music video, especially with the friends he found in ‘Never’ Team. He wasn’t as optimistic as Donghyun-nie hyung that he’d win and be part of the next I.O.I so the chance of immortalizing the grandest stage he’d ever been in with a music video that would be placed in streaming sites for the years to come appealed to him far more than the live stages.

“Let’s see the team rankings for Concept Evaluations!”

The screen flashed to show the teams.

Beside him, Justin gasped.

“At fifth place, we have ‘Showtime’ with 274 points,” Polite claps ensued. “Followed by ‘Oh Little Girl’ with 385 points,” Sewoon-nie hyung smiled. “In third place, we have ‘I Know You Know’ Team with 418 points—”

BoA sunbaenim cut off her announcement. Everyone tensed as the last two slots at the top was blanked out.

“We have two teams as contenders for first-place team: Future EDM ‘Open Up’ and Deep House ‘Never’.”

Woojin felt eyes on them.

The Nation’s Representative looked at the screen. “Let’s see the results.”

Another flash and the names were completed.

Daniel hyung looked stunned. Seongwoo hyung looked downtrodden at the results but hid it well behind his happy-go-lucky façade as the winning team turned surprised gazes at them. ‘Open Up’ Team won the onsite votes with only five votes more than their 567 points, much to everyone’s surprise.

Woojin wasn’t deaf. He heard the other teams talking about ‘Never’ and with them placing only second in the onsite votes stunned them to silence.

BoA sunbaenim smiled. “Congratulations ‘Open Up’ Team and to all the teams in the Concept Evaluations. You’ve all done well in each of your concepts but only one team can win the onsite votes. But that’s not the end of the evaluations.”

Everyone stood up straighter.

“As of this moment, online voting is now opened. The Nation’s Producers are given thirty-six
hours to vote for the best concept team. International lines will be opened for the last six hours of the voting period,” At this, Woojin noticed Jonghyun- nie hyung startled expression. “We’ll be announcing the winner in two days. But now we have to see the individual rankings of each trainee.”

BoA sunbaenim showed the pyramid of blank boxes in the screen. “The benefit of 220,000 points goes to ‘Open Up’ Team —I’ve informed you that it won’t automatically be distributed amongst the members, yes?”

Daniel hyung tensed.

“Twenty thousand points will be awarded to each team member except the ranked-first trainee who will receive a hundred thousand benefit points,” BoA sunbaenim smiled at her cue card. “So, starting now, the Nation’s Producers’ individual votes for each of the thirty-five trainees will now be revealed.”

The trainees groaned.

“The first-ranked team who received the benefit points, please reveal their individual rankings as well.”

The screen blinked once then twice.

Woojin was fixated at the rankings. The first thing he did was search for his name and his team’s. He placed 8th with Donghan- nie hyung and all the ‘Never’ hyungs placed within the Top 11 positions. Daehwi-ah was at 19th place and Guanlin-nie placed at 24th. Relatively high in the ranks, by the looks of contentment in the two makanes of ‘Never’, but Woojin still felt a bit cheated that his dongsaengs did not place in Top 15, at least. It just showed him that the competition took a few notches up because the rest of Top 11 were the so-called crème a la crème of Produce 101.

The second thing he noticed were the question marks on eight name boxes—

For ‘Open Up’ and the Rank 1 trainee.

BoA raised an eyebrow in amusement. “The overall rankings of the first-place team, ‘Open Up’, along with the Rank 1 trainee were held, it seems. Second place is Maroo Entertainment Park Jihoon yeonsusaeng followed by Pledis Entertainment Hwang Minhyun yeonsusaeng with fellow Pledis trainee Kim Jonghyun following at 4th place…”

The emcee began reading the names of each trainee from the highest place to the lowest. Minhyun- nie hyung looked stunned to silence as he ranked third for the evaluations. Jaehwan- nie hyung and Seongwoo hyung exchanged meaningful stares with each other before the two Kings approached a pale-faced Hwanggallyang.

“So, now, the hidden ranks will be revealed one by one starting from the seventh place of the first-place team.”

The main dancer of ‘Never’ expected the ranks of ‘Open Up’ to go the way it did. Kim Sanggyun filled the seventh place in the team and 26th in overall ranking. Takada Kenta and Kim Yongguk had consecutive places with the former taking 20th and the latter placing 21st. Bae Jinyoung had 76 votes and placed at 15th.
Then it was down to the last three members. After a tension-filled silence, Choi Minki tied with Ahn Hyeongseop at 6th place with 94 votes. Daniel hyung looked shaken as he realized he could either get 1st or 4th, tying with the Angel Leader himself.

“The first-place trainee is—”

“Not today.”

“It will be revealed in the next ranking announcement.”

Daniel hyung looked absolutely cheated.

Woojin wasn’t looking at the others. He was staring at the back of a shaking Kim Jonghyun.

Jonghyun had been having conflicting thoughts since the onsite rankings were announced. He was getting used to the fast pace of Concept Evaluations that the moment he saw the drastic changes in the rankings, he panicked. Because the threat of the final line-up of Wanna One was drawing closer and closer and the original members were so widespread in the ranks that he truly felt fear for the first time. Daniel and Jihoon had the same ranks, which was a small relief to the time-traveler, but Jiseong hyung placing 22nd? Guanlin at 24th? Him placing 4th instead of 11th?

Suddenly, the chances of him debuting in Wanna One was not a far-away notion anymore.

And he didn’t know what to feel.

The thoughts he had repressed the moment he ranked 14th at the finale rushed back to the forefront of his mind with an explosive vengeance, temporarily rendering him speechless. He ignored the odd expression on Guanlin’s face as he faced the demon that had been one of his darkest and longest enemy and companion.

Pride was and will always be his downfall.

The Angel Leader felt like it was his thousandth time asking the fates why he was sent back to Produce 101. Was it penance for his sins or a convoluted trophy prize for successfully alienating everyone he loved? Like a carrot being dangled in front of a starving bunny, the lost chance of being in world where he was part of Wanna One was suddenly within his grasping distance. He got over it, he cursed the heavens, and came to terms with it, but goddammit this competition was truly making him lose his goddamn mind.

He didn’t realize that the temptation was dragging him inch by inch and it was almost too late before he realized that his noble agenda had strings attached to it. Attached to the same dark place he thought was gone for good.

The shock of realization was enough to paralyze anyone, even someone like him, especially when his thoughts went towards a final line-up where he was the final member of Wanna One, maybe even placing first instead of Kang Daniel, before he slammed them shut with the force of a sledgehammer ramming into his body.

Kim Jonghyun wanted to cry, he truly did, but his years as a president was heavily ingrained in his psyche that all he could do was try to keep breathing. It wasn’t working. Pushing his way out of the
He needed a place to breathe.

Jaehwan was a worrier. Anyone who knew him well enough would know that about him. And right now, he was so worried the first thing he’d do to the Angel Leader when they find him was wring his stupid neck and throw him in the river.

It had been two hours since Jonghyun-nie hyung rushed out of their dormitories like he was being chased by hellhounds. He stood up to follow, Seongwoo, Guanlin, and Daehwi soon following, when Minhyun-nie hyung stopped him from doing so.

“Let him be,” His voice was soft. “Jonghyun-ah just needs space.”

“But he looked so pale—”

Minhyun had a sad smile on his face. “Let him be,” He repeated. “Jonghyun-ah’s a lone and independent person. His problems are only his to solve as long as he can do it. He wouldn’t appreciate any help from anyone.”

“That’s…messed up.”

“After eight years of being under one roof with Kim Jonghyun, we learned to give him the little privacy he deserved. Heaven knows everyone we knew intervened in his life more than what anyone should’ve done.”

It was quiet for a moment before Guanlin spoke, an odd expression on his face. “Even you?”

Minhyun grimaced. “Yes, even me. Jonghyun gave far more to us than what we gave to him. A little space is the least we can do.”

Jaehwan’s fears were not assuaged. He waited for the leader to return while the others succumbed to slumber at two-fifteen in the morning. But the guy did not return. The main vocal silently went down the bunk bed and searched for the missing Angel Leader.

It turned out to be difficult to search for Kim Jonghyun. He knocked softly on the other dormitories, half-hoping someone would answer and half-hoping no one would because he felt guilty for waking them up. Sanggyun hyung peered out the door of ‘Open Up’ dormitories, blinking blearily at him.

“What—”

“Is Jonghyun-nie hyung in there?”

“No? Wait, why—”

“No reason, hyung,” Jaehwan whispered, almost halfway out in the hallways. “Good night! Sorry to bother you.”

Jaehwan felt hopelessly worried as Seongwoon-nie hyung looked confusedly at him before replying a negative. Jiseong hyung haven’t seen the guy in hours and Youngmin-nie hyung last saw the Angel Leader in the cafeteria. At this point, he was debating on whether or not to alert the staff about the missing trainee but something in his gut told him Jonghyun-nie hyung would never
forgive him for that.

It was a quarter-past three and it was when a tired and frustrated Jaehwan saw the said person, sitting underneath a fire extinguisher in the abandoned fire exit near the past ‘Sorry, Sorry’ dormitories, looking at his watch like it held all the answers to the questions of the world.

Jaehwan stopped a few feet away when—

“Not sleepy?”

He jumped. He met Jonghyun-nie hyung’s eyes and recoiled.

He’d never seen such a desolate expression on the Angel Leaders face before.

He hesitated for a second before rushing towards the leader’s side and wrapping his arms around a startled Jonghyun. The tension in Jonghyun-nie hyung’s body told Jaehwan that what Minhyun-nie hyung said was true but that expression in his dull eyes told him far more than what any wish for privacy could ever say.

“Jaehwan—”

“Shh.”

“But—I can’t—”

Jaehwan tightened his hold. “You don’t have to say anything, hyung. Someone I admire once said that sometimes being there is enough.”

Jonghyun-nie hyung tensed even further. It was quiet and cool, the early morning breeze from the opened fire exit door softly pushing his hair in front of his face. But he just held on, even when his hair poked his eyes. It felt almost like an hour before he felt the weight of the Angel Leader slumping on his form.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the early morning, lost in thoughts.

It was when a surprised Jihoon saw them piled on the floor that they were roused from their thoughts before rushing towards their dormitories, the morning alarm blaring over their heads.

Jaehwan did not speak about the night before and he stayed silent as the Angel Leader smiled at the rapid-fire questions from Daehwi and giving a half-truth about needing some time alone and sneaking out to do some exploring. It was a variation of the truth and Jaehwan confirmed them the same after being questioned. Daehwi and Woojin believed him, but the others didn’t. Seongwoo hyung and Minhyun-nie hyung, in particular, were staring at him in suspicion but also kept quiet.

He felt like that moment when the Angel Leader let down his barriers for a little while was something that he would keep a secret for the rest of his life. The only thing he could do now was pray that Jonghyun-nie hyung would find peace within himself.
Kim Jonghyun felt so unstable these days that he went out of his way to keep some distance away from others. Or, tried to. But as much as he tried, he couldn’t leave everyone to their devices because there was much to do and so little time. So, the best thing to do, really, was to keep his composure up at all times so as not to worry everyone else.

His consequent breakdown early this morning with Jaehwan as his witness felt like the proverbial feather dangerously tipping the boulders off the cliff. He loved the singer to bits but the guy was relentless in his staring, like Jaehwan was willing him to spout all his secrets the moment those imploring puppy eyes were trained in on him.

Even with the meaningful stares, Jaehwan kept their secret “moment” together. Whenever the topic was brought up, courtesy of Park Jihoon and his sometimes-nosy questions, Jaehwan remained calm and unbothered as he answered the queries with a straight face. It did not fool Jihoon, Donghan, Seongwoo, and Minhyun, however. The former three were just a tad too sharp not to notice certain things about his fabricated half-lie.

“A meeting? Early in the morning?” Minhyun raised an eyebrow. “Jaehwan, if I were to ignore Seongwoo’s notoriety of sleeping like the dead during morning alarms, you’re the next most difficult person to wake up.”

Jihoon can give Seongwoo a run for his money when he’s curious enough to pester anyone to madness, Donghan was pushy when needed, and it was just absurd that his Minhyun wouldn’t catch any oddities. It was half-baked at best but the others took their finger out of the pie so that counted as a small success for him.

Still, there was just too much happening at the same time that he didn’t know where to look or what to think—the ominous final ranking, future endeavors, what would happen to him after *Produce 101?* —it was just too much. This wasn’t even his time and his stay in this time was uncertain.

He contemplated many times if he should just let his guard down but that was the one thing that he wouldn’t allow himself to do: the timeline was shifting too fast, there were barely any similarities with the time he came from, and telling somebody of his predicament would only make the problem escalate to uncharted territory. And with the competition weeks away from ending… Jonghyun didn’t want to think of the consequences if he were to blurt that out in a very bad moment.

The reactions of everyone after the Concept Evaluations did not help lighten his load. The trainees were skirting around the issue of ‘Never’ Team not winning the onsite votes but the atmosphere between them and ‘Open Up’ turned sour when the talks reached their ears. The once-close teams barely stayed in a room together, the hyungs of the team shrugging apologetically at the mortified maknae line busting out the doors as if hellhounds were on their tails.

Daehwi looked offended when Jinyoung rushed out the room, going after Daniel who was followed by Jaehwan, Minhyun, and Seongwoo. With both teams having adjacent practice rooms, it became difficult for Jinyoung and Daniel to avoid a determined Seongwoo and Jaehwan but it also became difficult for the rest of ‘Never’ Team who all felt slightly detested by the closest team to them.

Minki, who was more emotionally-controlled than Dongho, tried to explain their centers’ side
when he visited ‘Never’ Team’s practice room—

“They’re feeling guilty, Jonghyun-ah,” He said with a grimace. “The others…they’re not helping with talking about,” Minki gestured to the confused faces of Guanlin and Woojin. “your team deserving to win last night instead of…” He trailed off.

His brother didn’t need to finish his explanation. Jonghyun needed do something. During lunch time, he all but dragged the Fancam King and the Perfect Idol Visual towards a silenced ‘Never’ table, pushing down a quiet Daniel to the empty seat beside Woojin and seating in front of the ‘Open Up’ leader while keeping a firm arm around a stiff Bae Jinyoung. Dongho and Minki took their cue and pushed another table towards them and piling on the steel benches, their trays clanking against the table as they sat around Minhyun and Guanlin.

The two teams were seated in two adjacent tables that were slightly pushed together to keep the conversations easier to do in the noisy cafeteria (not that there was much difference when all the trainees sat close to each other) but his team was silent as they observed the uncharacteristic attitude of Daniel and Jinyoung. Dongho and Minki rolled their eyes but continued eating their breakfast in amicable silence. Sanggyun-nie shifted uncomfortably on his seat while Woojin trained his eyes on his plate of rice, not meeting anyone’s gaze lest he got singled out.

Daniel opened his mouth to speak but Jonghyun had enough of everyone at this point.

“Don’t apologize, Niel-ah. You all deserve to win first.”

“But, hyung, what they’re saying is true—”

The familiar red haze slowly clouded his mind—

Bang!

The silence was deafening as Jonghyun shakily loosened his hold on the steel spoon and softly placed it away from the metal tray.

Voice light and even, he went for an encouraging smile. It must’ve looked a bit too forced but he had to nip this in the bud. “Niel-ah,” Jonghyun was very aware of the dozens of eyes aimed at his form. “There’s nothing to be regretful about your performance. ‘Open Up’ Team lived up to and exceeded everyone’s expectations, even mine, thus you all are more than entitled to the onsite benefit points.”

I need to drill this in further, the Angel Leader thought.

“I couldn’t have done better than what you all did in that concept. You must be proud.”

Daniel’s eyes were watery but his smile was as bright as the sun.

To their surprise, Daehwi burst out into tears, punching Jinyoung’s arm while repeatedly lambasting his friend’s stupidity before focusing on the red-faced but smiling Daniel and giving the same talk.

Soon, the rumors died down and Jonghyun felt contented that some of the trainees came up to apologize to the ranked-first concept team. The Angel Leader was even prouder of his team. He knew that Seongwoo, Woojin, and Daehwi felt saddened by the results even if the two trainees won’t admit it but they were classy and mature enough to be sport about it.

It also helped that Minhyun raised everyone’s hopes up with the possibility of ‘Never’ getting the
highest online votes and making an MV out of it.

“Think about it,” The Hwanggallyang’s voice was cheery and optimistic as he wrapped around an arm around Seongwoo and Daehwi in their late-night practice. “We’d shoot an MV and get full creative rights for ‘Never’ if we win! The possibilities are endless!”

Guanlin frowned. “What exactly does ‘sole creative rights’ mean?”

They all turned to a quiet Angel Leader sipping on his bottled water. The leader looked up from his sketchbook (or what Daehwi reverently called “The Book of Magic”) with a raised eyebrow. Jonghyun shrugged, “It means that we would have a say to any publishing deals or exploitation of the copyrighted music, not only the producers, lyricists, and publishers. A fair cut of the royalties would be given to us, if we were to win, thereby establishing our names in the copyright association.”

The others looked stunned at the weight of responsibility that would be given to the winning team for the online votes. At first, they were starstruck with the MV and benefit points so they went to practice the song in case they won, as per Seongwoo’s adamant refusal to rest more than a few hours, much to the other trainees’ disbelief.

“Practicing doesn’t stop even when you debut,” He shouted indignantly at an incredulous Daniel. “Well, what would you do if you won the MV? Sit still and look pretty?”

That prompted the rest of the concept teams to match ‘Never’ Team’s fiery determination in practicing till their bodies could dance it perfectly in sleep.

Still, even with their determination to win two hundred and twenty thousand points, they didn’t know the extent of what they’ll win in the online votes. Woojin thought it was a far bigger prize than a Mnet stage and with the same benefit points to be awarded for the highest-ranked team—well, it would be a hard pill to swallow if they won’t win. Seongwoo and Jaehwan looked shockingly pale but still determined, Guanlin and Daehwi had awed expressions on their faces, and Minhyun tried to keep his smiling personality but was also having some difficulties not letting the possibility of them winning the MV prize get into his head.

So, with only hours before the winner of the online votes were announced, it took quite a while before everyone got to sleep. The morning after wasn’t much better. They were woken up by the alarm earlier than usual. At five in the morning, the ‘Nayana’ track blared piercingly out the speakers, jolting Jonghyun out of his sleep. The Angel Leader gasped when he caught a glimpse of the clock above Seongwoo’s bed before cursing out a storm and hurrying up to go to the toilet to freshen himself up.

He felt so dead tired that he slept through his standard wake-up time, which was so unlikely to happen that it unsettled him more than he thought it would. Minhyun, who also noticed the unusual time the Angel Leader woke up in, brought up the topic in the cafeteria.

“Have a rough night?” Minhyun leaned it to whisper.

“I slept in a little bit.”

Minhyun raised his eyebrows. “It’s been a while since you did that,” Then he shrugged before biting into his sandwich. “Not surprised, though. You’ve been doing a lot these past few weeks—soon, you’re going to crash and burn.”

The tone was light but the Angel Leader caught the worry beneath the casual statement. The others
were unaware of his mini slip-up, dismissing his rough visage as a by-product of his tireless work in the Concept Evaluations. Breakfast was louder than usual. The trainees were hyped with the online rankings and the MV prize that it was the only thing they could talk about. Seongwoo was discussing their chances while chewing on his meat, much to Minhyun and Daehwi’s disgust.

“We’re so—” Chomp. “Gonna win, I just—” Swallow. “Know it.”

Seongwoo’s prediction was the general consensus amongst the other teams. With how close of a difference ‘Never’ Team had lost against ‘Open Up’ Team in the onsite votes, chances were leaning towards their win in the online votes. However, Jonghyun knew that online votes ran differently from onsite. With how vastly contrasting the opinions of the larger demographics of viewers actually were, from both Korean and international viewers, there was also a large chance that other teams would win.

Jonghyun couldn’t care less.

Whoever wins had his support.

They were summoned in the auditorium at two o’clock dressed in their Produce 101 uniform and sticker. The segment would be televised, as explained by BoA sunbaenim, because the ranks and number of votes were removed an hour before the final voting and only their names and company remained for the suspense. Thus, no one knew who ranked first in the online votes nor the team who was first and would be awarded the benefit points and MV.

Ballsy move for Mnet, Jonghyun thought.

“The rankings were different for the online voting, even I was surprised,” BoA sunbaenim started. “Ranks are placed in percentage instead of number to visualize the weight of votes placed on each trainee over the total amount of votes amassed in 36 hours from both Korean and international voters.”

The screen blacked out before showing five blanks with percentages beside it.

Jonghyun sharply inhaled.

The blanks looked intimidating enough but the numbers took his entire attention—

“Shit,” Seongwoo cursed. “32%”

“That’s quite a lot,” Minhyun said.

The percentages of the last two teams were near to each other, the fifth place getting 9% while fourth place inching at 10%. The top three places had substantially higher values: third-ranked team had 22%, second-ranked team had 27%, and the top team had 32%.

“Let’s reveal the teams, shall we?”

The screen blacked out for almost five seconds. Jonghyun feared that they’d hold off the announcement again when—

Daehwi gasped.

The teams’ names were shown on most of the blanks.
And the Angel Leader just stared at the top two lines void of any name.

“At fifth place, we have ‘I Know You Know’ Team with 9.07% of the total votes. Then, we have ‘Showtime’ with 10.31% of total votes, followed by ‘Oh Little Girl’ with 21.18% of total votes—”

“And we have ‘Open Up’ Team and ‘Never’ Team battling it out for the highest-ranked team for the online voting period.”

As Jonghyun predicted, which was a testament to how intrigued and nervous he felt whenever the Nation’s Representative held the suspense quite longer than his nerves needed it to be, BoA sunbaenim did not announce it yet.

Instead, she recalled the rankings from the onsite votes but with the names of two certain trainees from ‘Open Up’ Team, who was placed first in the Concept Evaluations, missing in the pyramid.

“Last evaluations, the announcement of ranks of the final members of the first-ranked team were withheld to everyone. But the secrecy have been held far too long. Today, we will announce the rankings of the final two members of the first team for Concept Evaluations.”

The camera panned to show Dongho’s face in one half of the screen and Daniel’s face in the other.

“But first, let’s hear from the trainees who could be placed first in the Concept Evaluations: Pledis Entertainment Kang Dongho yeonsusaeng, how does it feel to be either placed in Rank 1 or Rank 4 for the Concept Evaluations?”

Dongho got the mic from the staff and hesitantly answered. “Excited and happy that the Nation’s Producers loved our performance. Without them, we wouldn’t have the energy to give our all, anyway, so they did so much for us and I am very grateful.”

Slightly longer than what he expected from his brother but it appealed to emotions, which was a smart move to do especially in a drama-fueled survival show, Jonghyun nodded in approval. Daniel’s message was roughly the same as Dongho’s, only he added his thanks to his team’s perseverance and finished his statement with a special mention to his mother and fans.

BoA sunbaenim did not hold the announcement further. As soon as Daniel finished his speech, she revealed the placements.

“With 101 votes, and ranking fourth in the evaluations, we have—Pledis Entertainment Kang Dongho yeonsusaeng. And placing first is MMO Entertainment Kang Daniel yeonsusaeng with 158 votes!”

The trainees erupted into cheers. The results were expected, really. Kang Daniel truly deserved the Rank 1 place after his fancam from ‘Open Up’ went up to almost ten million in the first few hours it was uploaded in Naver, thereby cementing his name as the Fancam King of Produce 101.

Seongwoo and Jiseong hyung were loud as they cheered like proud mothers while Woojin and Guanlin opted to reach out and softly pat Daniel’s shoulder in congratulations. Jaehwan, Jihoon, Jinyoung, and Minhyun stood up from their seats to briefly hug the trainee. Daniel, who was seated two places to the right, was grinning so widely that Jonghyun couldn’t help but smile. He met Daniel’s gaze with a soft smile.

Good job, Jonghyun thought, pride filling his whole being.

Daniel’s eyes, if possible, brightened even further. Daniel ignored everyone and jumped off his seat to hug him tight. After recovering from the surprise of a muscle pig ramming into his body,
Jonghyun chuckled before hugging Daniel back.

“You did well, Niel-ah. I told you that you can do it.”

Jonghyun felt his affection for the trainee soar high when he heard him whisper, “Couldn’t have done it without you, hyung. Gods, I love you so much, hyung. Thank you for everything. We debut together, okay?”

The Angel Leader smiled. “Of course, you will. That, I have no doubt.”

His dongsaeng was just too adorable sometimes.

BoA sunbaenim was smiling from ear to ear as she praised all the trainees for their dedication in giving their best in every stage. Jonghyun was wholly in agreement.

His trainee kids are just amazing.

“Congratulations to the trainees for a job well done! The Nation’s Producers have shown their support for you because of your tireless dedication to performance. Now, let’s see the results of the online votes.”

“The online votes for the Concept Evaluations was the highest reached number of votes in the whole Season 2 of Produce 101, After 36 hours, the total number of votes reached—any guesses?”

“8,000,000?”

BoA sunbaenim looked very amused at Seongwoo’s guess. “Fortunately, we went higher than that. As of 12 p.m. of June 4, 2017, the number of votes reached 49,637,256 votes in total tally.”

Silence.

A blink.

Then chaos.

Daehwi started, “The fuck—”, before Woojin slapped the ‘Nayana’ center’s mouth.

“Forty-nine million!”

“Whoa! That’s—insane!”

It truly was. The number was outrageously big, which proved his earlier statement that the international votes would tilt the whole show sideways. Jonghyun was dwelling on the fact that future Wanna One and all the trainees would get much more famous now, if that was even possible since Wanna One was the most famous debuted group from a survival show in half a decade. And because of the influx of fans from all around the world that will have a say in how Produce 101 ends, their fame after the show would be massive.

“Yes, yes,” BoA sunbaenim laughed. “It is amazing, indeed. The number of votes is a testament to the love that your fans worldwide have given you. Now, let’s go back to the final rankings of the day.”

The pyramid of onsite votes shimmered before the list of teams and their percentages for the online votes faded into existence.

“We have two teams vying for first-ranked team: the sexy stage ‘Open Up’ and the dramatic
performance from ‘Never’ Team. Let’s hear from the centers of the concept teams: Kang Daniel yeonsusaeng, you’ve ranked first in the onsite votes and you also have the chance to become first in the online evaluations. How do you feel about this?”

Daniel was still giddy from his Rank 1 in the onsite voting and he was positively beaming as he faced the cameras and thanked the fans and team in such an exuberant way that was unusual for the cool guy. Seongwoo was positively shaking from trying not to laugh while Minhyun and Jaehwan was done with the antics of the Kings’ Center.

Then the spotlight was turned towards Minhyun.

“Hwang Minhyun yeonsusaeng, you earned a new name to add to your numerous titles,” BoA sunbaenim looked very amused at the redness creeping up Minhyun’s face and ears. “You have earned Hwanggallyang as part of the Kings’ Team and now you are being called as the ‘Prince of Time’—”

Seongwoo choked a laugh.

“—What can you say about the massive reception your stage had earned from the fans?”

Minhyun was still beet-red but did not shy away from smiling beautifully at the camera, grabbing the microphone handed by Daniel, and thanking their fans and his team for their very strong teamwork. “We worked hard to put a beautiful stage to give justice to the lyrics and choreography our producers and choreographers have put their hearts into and I sincerely thank them for making a masterpiece in the first place.”

Then he faced him.

Jonghyun froze.

“And I thank our leader-ah for being the best leader for ‘Never’ Team, surpassing his responsibilities as a leader and doing so much more, not only for our team but for the rest of the teams who called for him.”

Jonghyun breathed.

BoA sunbaenim nodded but her gaze was sharply aimed at the Angel Leader. She knew exactly what Hwang Minhyun was referring you. She saw the sketches, too, and safe to say, was astounded. Kim Jonghyun was on a whole different level, she thought with no small amount of wonder.

“A beautiful message from our centers. Now, let’s see the top-ranking team from the online votes...”

The screen went a bright blue, showing a myriad of patterns that momentarily blinded him, before blinking.

The final two teams were announced.

Seongwoo choked.

“With 27.16% of total votes, we have ‘Open Up’ Team with ‘Never’ Team taking the first rank with a whopping 32.28% of total votes in the online voting. Congratulations!”

Seongwoo and Daehwi were teary-eyed as they received the encouraging cheers from the others.
Daniel and Minki hugged Minhyun and Jaehwan, who both had their jaws dropped in shock, while Jihoon, Dongho, Gunhee, and Justin went to a smiling Guanlin and Woojin and congratulated them.

Jonghyun watched his team in pride. He was very proud of what his team achieved and was happy they got the MV prize that they had been wanting since it was announced to them. He knew it meant a lot to his members after they opened up last night about how winning the online votes would be the greatest achievement ‘Never’ Team would have as a whole team.

They got their wish. Now, it was time to show them what ‘Never’ Team could do.

Jonghyun glanced at the smiling Hwanggallyang.

_Hwang Minhyun had always been more than an idol_, the CEO time-traveler smiled. He’d show everyone what Minhyun was capable of.

“Congratulations to ‘Never’ Team,” BoA sunbaenim clapped. “A job well done! Now, for the final ranks, we’ll have the benefit points awarded accordingly.”

Seongwoo was grinning as he leaned in to whisper, “At this point, I don’t care about the points.”

Daehwi and Jaehwan exchanged a glance before smacking their hyung on the head.

Jonghyun snorted. That was unlikely but Seongwoo was still high from the excitement of winning the online votes. The rankings were close but not too low of a difference which was a win for the _Angel Leader_ since the small discrepancy between votes only proved that there was no drastic favoritism from the fans towards his members.

Guanlin took seventh place in the team, taking up a tenth of the percentage of votes for ‘Never’ Team, while Daehwi took the sixth place with twelve percent to his name. Both _maknaes_ were happy with the results and the twenty-thousand benefit points. Jaehwan was ranked fifth in the team with thirteen percent, earning him pats from everyone, and Seongwoo ranked fourth at fourteen percent, to both the vocals’ contentment at the results.

Then it came down to three.

Woojin was shocked at placing third at fifteen percent but his reaction paled in comparison to Minhyun-nie’s when he placed first on the team with eighteen percent.

“Congratulations, trainees! You’ve done a wonderful job in the Concept Evaluations! We’ll see each other again at the end of the week! In the meantime, promotions would resume and some surprises are on the way…”

BoA sunbaenim ended the results with a cheery goodbye before leaving the stage. The reminder of the impending eliminations dulled the atmosphere a bit but everyone pushed their dark thoughts away in favor of dwelling at the good news of _Produce 101_ taking the world by storm once more.

The trainees shuffled out of the room in groups, their voices joining in the cacophony of conversations, all discussing the results of the online votes. Most of them went to his team to congratulate them on the MV and his members were just basking in the attention.

“What are your plans for the MV?” Seonho was practically jumping on Minhyun’s back in excitement.
The rest of the trainees turned to face him.

Jonghyun let loose a little. He smirked.

“Oh, don’t ask me,” Voice mild and calm, with a tiny hint of teasing, he raised an eyebrow towards a certain Hwanggallyang, ignoring the daggers shooting through his frame.

Samuel gasped as he turned slowly. “It’s you, hyung?”

“Uh—”

Jonghyun was kind and patient. Jonghyun would give up everything for his brothers. But at that moment, he let his brothers descend upon a panicked Hwang Minhyun, asking tons of questions at the same time, while he stayed back to watch the chaos unfold.

He never said he was petty.

The MV matter was temporarily pushed back for the set of planned activities for the day. They were supposed to be free to go out the compound since it was a Sunday morning but with new plans of promotional activities and a couple more surprises that they needed to prepare for, they couldn’t leave the dormitories.

After the announcement on online votes, they were ushered by the staff to one of the training rooms. The previous room of ‘If It Was You’ Team was changed to accommodate a long table placed along the mirror-side of the room. Above the table were the concept team shirts neatly folded and stacked. The staff asked them to change in their team shirts and instructed them to go to the main training room afterwards before leaving the room with the cameramen soon following.

“I wonder what game we’re going to play,” Daehwi said.

One of the staff’s surprises was a few games for them to play to pass the time. Jonghyun knew better though. Produce 101 staffs were preparing something so they had to be kept distracted. He knew he should be wary but Jonghyun couldn’t find it in him to be bothered.

Besides, playing games seemed like a good way to distract himself as well.

“The Muscle Man game again?” Jaehwan said.

The other trainees soon joined their group. Daniel grinned when he caught the ends of their conversation. “Perfect. I haven’t showed my strength yet.”

Jinyoung rolled his eyes. “What strength? Jihoon-nie hyung can beat you with his eyes closed.”

They looked at the unassuming Wink Master who looked adorable cute in his overly-large white ‘Oh Little Girl’ shirt and cheeky grin.

Daniel, the tall, muscled trainee that he was, backed down immediately.

Jonghyun then noticed Woojin was looking around in confusion.

“Are you alright, Woojin-nie?”

“Where’s Seongwoo hyung?”

Minhyun, who was standing beside him, also looked around.
“Jiseong-ie hyung’s not here too.”

It wasn’t only Seongwoo and Jiseong hyung who were missing. Jonghyun noted that other trainees were also missing. Donghan-nie and Taedong-ah were shouting over the noise, looking for Hyeongseop. Minki’s slim form was also not seen amongst the black-clad members of ‘Open Up’. And Euiwoong kept on asking where Gunhee was.

“Where the heck could they be?” Donghan groaned.

The mystery was soon answered when they entered the main training room. The first thing they noticed was how open the room was. On usual days, there were camera paraphernalia placed on the corners to take video footage of the trainees while they were practicing. This time though, only two cameras were placed on each length of the room, which made a lot of room for them to move.

The second thing they noticed was—

“No.”

Jaehwan backed off like he was stung.

“I can’t deal with more planks!”

The main vocal’s hysteric were mirrored by the other trainees. In the middle of the room were blue rubber mats placed in two long lines and two chairs. The missing trainees were at the end of the room, watching them pile into the room in amusement.

Seongwoo and Jiseong hyung were the hosts for the first game. The Elephant Stick Game was fun and somewhat, er, more modest than the other two games they played afterwards.

“Each team have two representatives,” Seongwoo explained as the emcee of the segment. “One of the players must turn ten times and walk on the carpet,” He toed the blue rubber mat. “And must go to the chairs where their teammate is seating and put lipstick on their teammate.” At this, Hyeongseop was used as guinea pig and sat still as Seongwoo painted his lips a bloody red color.

“Let’s begin!” Jiseong hyung, the other host, grinned before calling out the first two teams to play.

The Elephant Lipstick Game was fun to do. Daehwi chose him as his partner and Guanlin chose Woojin. The ‘Nayana’ Center had excellent sense of balance and did not trip as much as Yongguk and Seonho did so they aced the first round of the game. Guanlin was taller and heavier than Daehwi so his momentum was harder to control but he soon went back on track, hastily drawing on Woojin’s lips and missing some parts but admirable did a better job than Jinyoung did.

Jaehwan did not even blink when he picked a wary Minhyun.

The next few minutes where nothing but chaotic.

Justin was cackling in glee when he picked a resigned Sewoon as his partner and proceeded to draw on the vocal’s whole face with obscenely cute hearts and Pororo characters. Bae Jinyoung got his revenge on Daniel when the Fancam King admitted that he helped Seongwoo in his plan of wearing high heels in their ‘Joker’ performance in the last fan-meeting.

“That’s…”

Jaehwan chuckled nervously. “Jinyoung-ie was really out for blood.”

Minhyun had no words.
Samuel showed everyone why some of the SEVENTEEN guys were still wary of the trainee with the small stature as he decided not to only draw on Taehyun-nie hyung’s face but also switching teams and helping Haknyeon draw on Donghan’s face. Jaehwan practically scared everyone with his laugh. Even Gunhee, who was a certified Kim Jaehwan-fanboy, was thrown off-guard.

“I so don’t want Jaehwan-nie hyung as my partner,” Daehwi cringed as the piercing cackle of the main vocalist stabbed the air mercilessly.

The hosts were hyped up with the game that they decided to join as well. Jiseong-ie hyung got painted by his teammates while Seongwoo decided not to pick.

“Run.”

The mad expression on Ong Seongwoo’s face was terrifying.

“No way! I’d pick Jaehwan-nie hyung over Seongwoo hyung any day,” Woojin yelled as he and the rest of ‘Never’ started running away from a cackling Seongwoo.

The game ended with all of them having some kind of drawing on their face, neck, hair, or collar.

“Blech! I ate some lipstick, hyung! Ugh, disgusting!” Daehwi coughed and glared at an unapologetic Seongwoo. “I hate you so much.”

The next game was charades which was a common and straightforward game.

But because it’s the Produce 101 version, it was anything but straightforward. The rules were simple enough but everyone made it a lot more complicated than it is. Hyeongseop and Gunhee were the hosts for the charades game and that went downhill, fast. They were free to choose their members which made things more chaotic. Minhyun watched as Jonghyun was placed in the middle for all the trainees to bid on. It was funny as Jonghyun exclaimed that he felt like a prized chicken as the Angel Leader’s previous teams and classes tried to group themselves with him. The “Squirtle Squad”, which was composed of the maknaes of Produce 101, and led by Park Jihoon was victorious in getting Jonghyun in their team, to the ire of the Kings’ Trio.

The next rules, well—

“It’s a free-for-all! Anyone you want to challenge, it’s a go from us!” Hyeongseop looked positively devilish.

It was annihilation at this point. With the combined intellect and strategy of Lee Daehwi and the Angel Leader, it was a landslide win.

The third game was…

Jonghyun didn’t want to think about it.

He should’ve expected that it would be headache-inducing, what with Minki being the mastermind of the mixed version of the Bring Me game, I Spy, and Truth & Dare.

The games ended at around six in the evening, just in time for dinner. The cafeteria was noisy when the trainees went inside for a well-deserved meal. The aroma wafting from the buffet section reached the noses and half of ‘Never’ Team bolted towards the growing line to save them a place.

Jonghyun, Daehwi, and Guanlin opted to look for a place to sit. The far-most table at the left side of the cafeteria was the best place for them to chat without being overheard while staying within
the circle of trainees and staff that occupied only half of the room.

The other four members reached them with all their food in the trays. Soon afterwards, they ate silently to savor the food they were practically inhaling.

Then Woojin looked up.

“Uh, ‘Never’ Team, please proceed to training room D after dinner.”

The staff member left as soon as the message was said.

“Why are we being called?”

Seongwoo had the same thought as he did.

“MV.”

It has been a while since Kang Dongho felt years older than his current age and it was not a good feeling at all. At first, he thought that the wild atmosphere in *Produce 101* would settle down to a more manageable degree (and to a sound frequency that was tolerable for cranky humans like him), but it turned out to be hopeless. After the fiasco that was Concept Evaluations, they had severely cut down resting hours after the show producers doubled the promotional activity. Why, this morning they were woken up by the damn ‘Nayana’ alarm again (“That’s two days in a row!”, Kenta sobbed as he tried to put his head through the shirt sleeve.). ‘Open Up’ Team was the first one to arrive in front of the building before going to the cafeteria led by a female staff.

He noticed that the there were only three long tables in the room. At the end of each table near the door were placards with numbers printed on it.

“You’ll be divided by promo unit. If you do not belong to any unit, you may seat anywhere. We’ll be doing a reshuffling soon.” Then she left.

“Reshuffling? What does that mean?”

Dongho slowly shook his head side to side. “We’ll think about that later—let’s get breakfast.”

They were greeted by familiar faces during breakfast when the eliminated trainees joined them in their meals. It was a happy moment for everyone as their friends were with them once more. He saw Jung Jung hugging Justin and Jang Moonbok exuberantly greeting his ‘Boys and Girls’ Team. Seo Sunghyuk joined ‘I Know You Know’ Team, to the team’s excitement.

Dongho, however, noticed the glaring difference in their numbers when he noticed quite a few faces missing.

“Yehyun-nie’s not here,” Donghan frowned.

“So is Eunki hyung,” Samuel added.

Their confusion must’ve shown in their faces when Jung Jung shrugged, elegantly stuffing his face with bread. “We were called once more for the promotions—contract and all. I found out from our manager that some trainees were not allowed to come back.”
“Why?” Taehyun-nie hyung leaned in.

“The contract was—what’s the word—nulled? I don’t know if that’s the right word but the bottom line was that they won’t be promoting now but will join the final concert.”

“What?”

Samuel and Jinyoung looked stunned at the news while Donghan and Taehyun were taking staring at the Chinese trainee as if he was dropped off from the sky.

“That must be the reason why some of us did not come back,” Donghan mused after snapping out of his reverie. “Their companies must be planning their debut and they’re practicing now, so to speak.”

“That’s amazing! Now all of us will debut together!” Samuel grinned.

Dongho was the only one unsurprised but then he knew about this even before anyone else, and that counted Jonghyun-ah, Minhyun-nie, and Minki-yah. He didn’t know what his brothers were talking about with Aron hyung but he had his priorities placed on the future of NU’EST so that was the core of most of their conversations together. He relayed his relief that their activities in Produce 101 would end after the final lineup was announced, only to find out from Aron hyung that Produce wanted to hold on to them as long as they could.

“Why else would you think differently? The initial contract, the one you signed before the show aired, was that all activities of Produce 101 trainees would end once the final lineup was announced and debuts. They would be announced at the final episode but the debut part? Well, that changes things a bit,” He said in one of his weekly calls with the guy.

At first, he thought that the “debut” part pertains to having their first stage at M! Countdown so he was slightly worried at NU’EST’s halted promotions if they had to wait for I.O.I to debut. Producing an album is hard work as it is; adding choreography, concept, MVs, pre-debut promotions, and a heck load of guesting would seriously be troublesome.

His worries were slightly abated when Aron hyung clarified that they didn’t have to wait that long because a “debut” doesn’t have to be a Mnet stage. Aron hyung told him that Sajangnim was one of the more vocal presidents who supported a special concert for the debuting lineup immediately after the finals together with the trainees of Produce 101, to satisfy the “debut” clause of the contract without compromising other companies’ plans for their trainees after the show.

But he was still worried because that was still some time away and Dongho was itching to go back to Pledis.

The staff entered the cafeteria, followed by the cameramen. Oddly, the teachers and BoA sunbaenim were absent for today’s announcement.

“We’ll have all the trainees in one group now,” A lanky staff with an overbite spoke through the mic. “Promo units will remain as is, but Groups 1 and 2 will be integrated into the promo units.”

The male staff member began rattling out the new unit groups, giving some time for the trainees to go to their teams before calling out a new name. Samuel and Donghan looked overwhelmed at the influx of trainees joining Unit 2 but pointed stare from Woo Jinyoung snapped them from staring too much at the trainees joining their unit. The others units were on the same page as them. He saw the surprised expression on Justin’s face when six trainees joined their roster, upping their numbers to fourteen instead of fifteen because of Kim Taemin’s glaring absence in the promotions.
“Jihoon-nie, Daniel hyung, and Jinyoung-ie looked incredibly alone in their table,” Taehyun hyung murmured.

Dongho looked to his left. He was right. Park Jihoon, Bae Jinyoung, and Daniel were the only members of the original Unit 3 sitting at their table. The hyungs of their unit were not present that morning and it didn’t take him long to realize that it’s not just Jaehwan-nie, Seongwoo-yah, and Jonghyun-ah were absent but also Guanlin from their unit and Minhyun-nie and Daehwi from Unit 1.

“Yeah, well, it’s the MV shooting for ‘Never’ Team today,” Donghan shrugged. “I saw them going into a van a few hours ago.”

“A few hours ago? It’s just seven.” Taehyun hyung raised an eyebrow. “What time did you wake up, hyung?”

“Hmm, a quarter past two, I think? I couldn’t sleep.” Donghan nodded.

The units were finalized soon after. Unit 1 had the most additions—Trainees from the variety promotions like Lee Woojin, Jang Moonbok, Lee Euiwoong, Kim Yongguk, Lee Gunhee, and BNM Boys Kim Donghyun and Lim Youngmin joined Kenta, Justin and the others.

Unit 2 had eight new trainees and Dongho observed that the groupings were more predictable. Kim Sanggyun and Kim Taedong joined their unit first, followed by Seo Sunghyuk, Park Woodam, Kim Seonglee, and Yoo Hoseong. The addition of Ha Seongwoon and Joo Haknyeon roused some whispers as the two famous trainees from ‘I Know You Know’ Team walked towards their team.

“This is interesting, hyung,” Samuel said. “Look at how we’re grouped.”

Samuel was right. The units were not certain of their concept when they were grouped for the first promotional activity. Not until the magazine concepts which cemented their image with the different concepts they were going for.

*Will it change now?* Dongho was not as certain as he was before.

Unit 1 was known for their flower-boy concept and most of the new trainees truly embodied that, such as the older BNM trainees and Lee Woojin. Then there was their unit that now had the so-called sexy trainees like Kim Seonglee and Kim Taedong, which made sense because that was the image of Unit 2 since the beginning.

His theory of a possible concept change grew stronger at the completion of Unit 3.

The last unit was the most diverse promotional team—and the fewest, as well.

Joining the highest-ranked trainees in the whole season were Kwon Hyunbin, Park Woojin, Yoo Seonho, Yoon Jiseong, and Choi Minki. Even with the absence of Woojin, as he was part of ‘Never’ Team as well, the remaining four trainees who sat beside Jihoon and Daniel were… unexpected.

Hyunbin would’ve done better in their unit, and so would Minki-yah. But then Choi Minki could be in any team due to his unique ability to fit in any concept. Jiseong hyung fit the prince-like visuals of Unit 3 but his penchant for variety and utter cuteness was a definite Unit 1-characteristic that it took him a while to see the MMO trainee together with Bae Jinyoung and his intense stare. Seonho, too, would have been a shoe-in in any unit but he suits the flower-boy concept to a T.

The least unexpected member was Park Woojin, but then that was obvious since the trainee had
been grouped with everyone in Unit 3 sans Jinyoung and the BNM trainee fit each team he’d been in admirably well.

*It’d be interesting to see what concept they’d come up with,* Dongho thought as he watched Daniel take the lead as the de-facto leader of Unit 3.

The morning of the MV shoot went topsy-turvy for a certain Ong Seongwoo the moment Jonghyun left him as the temporary leader of ‘Never’. The *Kings’ Center* thought it was all a joke, because, seriously, even Daehwi would’ve been the better choice for it, but no, Jonghyun-ah gave him the responsibility and hightailed away to find their director, with Minhyun and Jaehwan running after him with the MV concept sketches in their hands.

He was so tempted to follow and be in on the planning but they needed to prepare for the MV. Jonghyun-ah had to go and Minhyun-nie, too, but Jaehwan was faster than him and went for the last place.

So, now he was the leader of ‘Never’ and he felt so out-of-place. It was the first time he was appointed a leader of a group, even if it was temporary, and Seongwoo just knew he was not cut out for it. The moment the three left, it descended into chaos and anarchy (or what he imagined was chaos and anarchy, so what? Sue his worrier of a self!).

Daehwi was brattier than usual, asking where Jonghyun-ah because it was his turn for the styling. Guanlin was quieter than usual as he sat on the makeup table, very discomfited at the absence of their leader and the two hyungs that he depended on. Woojin was gone to bring them breakfast because they left too early for Jonghyun to even prepare their food.

Which confused him dearly because, why does Jonghyun have to do *everything* in this competition?

The guy would practically be dead on his feet if he wasn’t as stubborn as a bull.

Sadly, his frustrations came up last night, after the final polishing of the storyboard for their MV. Two weeks of brainstorming and preparation with Director Yoo Sungkyun and his team of writers and creative directors, watching Jonghyun-ah and Minhyun-nie debate on how the story should end, getting a major crash course on visual and aesthetics direction from the *Angel Leader* himself —and yet Jonghyun’s still working on being a staff as well as a trainee.

Ha Seongwoon was right (which badly grates his nerves)—the world’s full of incompetent fools. Ugh.

He doesn’t know if Mnet’s suffering from working with a few brain cells, but the guy’s just a trainee like them, even if he had angel-like (insufferable, too) qualities and so many unique talents hidden under his sleeve.

Woojin came up to him, shielding the sunlight with his hand. “Hyung! You’re up first for your scene!”

“Yeah, yeah,” He sighed. “You’re next to Daehwi for styling. Wait for Jonghyun-ah and the others to come back.”

Fates help them when the *Angel Leader* leaves them for good.
Woojin was having a crisis in keeping his composure up for his MV scene. He knew the gist of the story of what Minhyun-nie hyung, Jonghyun-nie hyung, and the rest of the creative directors and writers built for weeks. But the night before was the first time he heard the MV concept in full.

And was astounded at how beautiful it was.

Minhyun-nie hyung was blazing with excitement and enthusiasm as he explained the story.

“So, we have come up with a solid idea for the MV. Granted, the song relies more on the lyrics than the choreography, we tried to incorporate both since they were synonymous to each other—and vital to the storyline that we are going for.”

“Time,” Minhyun-nie hyung had a soft smile on his face. “That’s the main concept of our MV. Time…and how it destroys and heals at the same time.”

Daehwi frowned. “That’s oddly vague, hyung. I thought we’re going for heartbreak or self-realization.”

“Well, it was Jonghyun-ah’s idea—”

“Why not do both?”

Everyone looked towards the end of the table. Jonghyun-nie hyung had thousands of emotions warring in his face that it took Woojin’s breath away.

“Time...” The Angel Leader took a deep breath. “Time can do so much more than pass. It destroys massive human constructs like civilizations and technology and sometimes; it fades away relationships and connection, it gives one a pretense of hope for a past that will never come back. But it also heals wounds unbounded by the human plane, it cleanses the sickness of one’s soul, it forgives, it brings contentment and love of oneself, it brings hope for a future—so many things can time bring, so why not try to show it?”

Woojin had nothing to say to that.

Director Yoo Sungkyun smiled at how the flow of the MV went, barely making any major change in the storyline because he was confident that it was the best concept that they could possibly come up with for ‘Never’. The creative writers were talented in showing how the concept would come to fruition. They had different scenes of all seven of them, one or two members, and various shots where he was alone.

Just to complete the setting of seven men trying to cope with what time had left for them to face.

It was beautiful.

Which was why he was terrified of messing up his scenes. He had to give justice to his part, he just had to.

“You have the most heartbreaking scene, Woojin-ssi,” Director Yoo Sungkyun called out in his megaphone after calling a cut for the scene. “You must feel what it is like to feel the pain of loss.”

How the hell am I supposed to do that? Woojin was out of his wits at this point. He was taking longer in the room scene and it was past eleven in the morning already and they were barely halfway through the scenes. What made the pressure increase was the presence of his teammates in the room, all watching silently as the director began to shout instructions that barely made sense to him.
Pain of loss.

Goddammit, he lost loved ones in the past years and yet the emotion that he was showing was not enough for the directors and producers, who also happened to be the producers of their song, Triple H sunbaenims.

Shit, he can’t—

“Director-nim, can we have a short break?” A calm voice came from the back of the room.

“We’re losing daylight, Jonghyun-ssi,” The director urged. “We need to finish by sunset.”

“I know, sir. I am next, yes?” Jonghyun-nie hyung did not wait for an answer. “I’ll be quick in my scenes. Please.”

The director reluctantly agreed. “Alright, five minutes, tops. Minhyun-ssi, we’ll shoot yours now—the balcony scene for your reference—and then the hills scene with Guanlin-ssi…”

Jonghyun-nie hyung gently dragged him outside the house they’ve been shooting in since early this morning. The sun was high in the sky and the heat was made bearable with the last of the spring breeze flowing gently in the air.

The view was breathtaking. He was still caught up with the fact that they were not in Seoul, but in Jeju. They were standing up on the hill, overlooking the white shore of the beach and the splitting of the sky and the sea far in the distance. The hills were green and full of life, the trees dancing slightly with the breeze as its flowers were taken by the wind in a beautiful circling of nature. The manor house was a private vacation home of one of Produce 101 directors’ contacts and was hidden from the general public. It took almost three hours of driving, cycling, and walking before they reached the house, but the view was more than worth it for their struggles.

He just wished he was given more inspiration from Jeju to do his task.

“Are you alright, Woojin-nie?”

“…I don’t know.”

The main dancer of ‘Never’ waited for the Angel Leader to tell him that it was okay to mess up, that he’d do much better, anything to boost his confidence up—

Instead, he got a story.

“You know I would’ve done the same expressions that you did.”

Woojin frowned. “But, hyung, they were terrible! I looked like I didn’t know what I was doing!”

“Exactly,” The quiet voice pierced through his heart. “Many would agree that you looked a bit lost, yes, but I’d argue: How do you portray loss, exactly? Crying? Screaming? Going insane? Being catatonic? Doing everything at once? I’ve known people who cried till their bodies ran out of water but I’ve also known people who felt like the world just ended and wanted to live the rest of their lives in a hole underneath the ground.”

The Angel Leader smiled wryly. “I’ve also known people who tried to move on with their lives, moving forward one step at the time while holding their pain inside, all the while impatiently waiting for their hearts to burst so they let it out once and try to forget they’ve ever felt pain, even for a short while—Just like an ordinary day for them. So, which one is it? None of them are the
same and yet they all felt the pain of loss.”

Woojin tried to breathe. He was losing.

“What are you then, _hyung_? Where do you lie in those?”

It was a very long silence.

Woojin bit his lip, worried that he might have breached a wall that was not meant for him to touch.

“Hyung, I—”

“All of them.”

Woojin hitched a breath.

“Or maybe none of those, I don’t know,” Jonghyun- _nie hyung_ lightly shrugged. “Loss is such a confusing concept that even I have no default reaction to it. I can cry and scream, be catatonic, ignore the rest of the world, make jokes and feel okay about it—Huh,” Then he chuckled, the soft laughter ringing through the air. “Funny thing that. Even at the face of loss, I’m still not sure of what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Oh, well, that’s life.”

The silence was peaceful and comforting, which gave Woojin the chance to think about everything he had heard. But the only thing that registered in his head was—

_Jonghyun-nie hyung’s human._

Woojin was one of the many trainees who had put the _Angel Leader_ on a pedestal because of what he had done to the stages of _Produce 101_, but mostly because of his admirable mindset of unity and keeping them _all_ afloat in the raging waters of the idol world. He was a unique man who had an unfortunate past as the leader of NU’EST but came down from his high level of being an idol to become a trainee once more and be their guide, mentor, and the anchor of their ship.

But he’s also just like them. He felt pain; he felt defeat; he felt loss—and yet, he did not complain. Not once did he abandon them. He shouldered everyone on his shoulders without no one keeping his head afloat.

And it pained Woojin so much that no one would see him like this, that no one would _help_ him.

*I’ll save you before I drown._

He had to tell _his hyung_, to reassure him that he _sees_ it now, that he can _help_—

“Jonghyun- _nie hyung_—”

“I know what you’re going to say, Woojin- _nie_. It’s okay—well, no, I wasn’t doing fine, but now I feel...okay, contented; I’m _coping._”

Then the _Angel_—no— Kim Jonghyun, just Kim Jonghyun, turned to face him. His silhouette was like molten gold with the sun shining against his back.

“Don’t let Sungkyun _hyung’s_ words bring you down. He means well and just wants to make this MV as beautiful as the story behind it. Just show him your constipated face and that’ll do the trick.”
Woojin burst out laughing. “Hyung!”

Woojin felt his affection for the cute onibugi leader swell up enormously as Jonghyun-nie hyung chuckled good-naturedly. “Kidding, just—well, I might be telling the truth but it’s your call if you’re gonna do it.”

They were soon joking and having a good time in their break. Woojin knew that they exceeded the five-minute mark but no one came to interrupt them as they laughed hysterically at the memory of Seongwoo hyung’s face when he woke up to find they were going to Jeju.

Jonghyun-nie hyung sighed before standing up from his slumped position. “Well, we’ve had quite a long break already. Come on, Minhyun might be having an aneurysm right now and I’d regret it if we miss that.”

Woojin shook his head. “Minhyun-nie hyung does look funny when he’s all purple.”

Woojin slung both his arms around his leader’s waist as they walked up the hill towards the mansion, chatting idly and just taking their time to enjoy the scenery. Soon they were a few doors away from the set when Jonghyun-nie hyung stopped him from walking.

“Hey, before you walk in there, I just want to tell you one last thing.”

“What is it, hyung?”

“Don’t let anyone tell you what to feel, okay? We all feel loss differently, don’t let them dictate your emotions for you. Only you know what you feel. And maybe that’s what was missing for director-nim. Tell him what you feel. Let your emotions shine through your eyes as you look in that camera.”

“Let the world see in your world, even for a short while.”

And Park Woojin just did that.

This is for you, Kim Jonghyun. You may not show the pain you feel, but I will.

Let me save you from drowning.

Even for a short while.

The MV photoshoot was one of the stressful things Lee Daehwi had experienced in his short life. And he had experienced some rough patches along the way so that was saying something.

He thought that the story of the MV was beautiful and amazing and all the good adjectives he could possible put to describe it. It only sunk into him that he’d be facing so much more when he stepped into his scene: a very bright room of yellows, whites, and so much pink with the sunlight throwing off light against the steel barriers of his jail cell.

“This is some messed-up shit,” Daehwi murmured as the clanking chains rang in the room.

“And action!”

Daehwi had no problems projecting his emotions. He had always been a very emotional person, preferring touch and a kind word to boost him up. But he can also sympathize with the struggles Woojin-nie hyung and Guanlin-nie faced in their solo scenes. Both had to be taken away from their
scenes because it was too much.

At first, Daehwi did not understand. *I mean, how hard could it be? It's just acting!* But it seems that he overestimated his ability to cope up in his task when faced with his demons. It took every inch of his willpower not to break down crying in front of everyone.

*Keep your shit together, Lee Daehwi, Triple H sunbaenim’s right there!*

Breathing deeply, he faced the cameras, trying to portray his desperation while keeping his sadness down to a minimum.

It took only ten minutes to shoot all his solo scenes and yet the ‘Nayana’ Center felt so discombobulated by the whole thing that it seemed like it lasted a whole day. Daehwi left the room in a rush, thankful that no one stopped him, and went to the bathroom to breathe.

It was insane that a vacation home should have toilet rooms that have *cubicles* in it but the person who owned the mansion must’ve had parties all the time if he or she had to built large lavatories for guest. Daehwi shook his head, his mind was a mess. Mindful of his makeup and ensemble, he wetted his handkerchief and softly pat the damp cloth on his forehead.

“Are you alright, Lee Daehwi-ssi?”

Daehwi jumped and bumped his leg on the sink. He wanted to curse the throbbing pain but he couldn’t because Hui *sunbaenim* was standing right in front of him.

“Sorry I startled you. I—I just wanted to check if you were okay.”

*Omo, this is so embarrassing.*

Face red, he hastily bowed in thanks, all the while praying he wouldn’t make a fool of himself.

“Ah, thank you, *sunbaenim*. I am okay. Just needed to freshen up.”

The tall idol looked unconvinced but did not push. Daehwi bowed once more in thanks and walked towards the door to run away and never come back when—

“Hey.”

“For the record, you did a really good job in your scene. I couldn’t have envisioned an emotion for my lyrics better than what you did.”

His face couldn’t have been redder as he bowed again and bolted away, praying that he didn’t embarrass himself even more.

He reached the foyer scene and bumped into Jaehwan- *nie hyung*.

“Where were you?”

“Lavatories, *hyung*. Why? Do I have to tell you *every* place I go to?”

“Tsk. You’re such a brat, Hwi-ah.”

Oddly enough though, he felt light.

It was just one in the afternoon and Hwang Minhyun was out of his wits. The MV shooting was
fun, if he were to discount the times that they had to take breaks because the acting was taking a
toll on them psychologically. When Woojin looked frustrated at showing the right emotions for the
scene, he felt guilty for pushing the storyline through with the creative writers. Admittedly, the
story had a dark sense to it and not everyone would appreciate it at first but Minhyun felt it was the
perfect atmosphere for such a dramatic song full of pining and regret. He wanted this storyline so
badly that he had to show it to Jonghyun-ah before anyone else.

“It’s beautiful, Minhyun-nie.”

“You don’t think it’s a bit...much?”

Jonghyun shook his head. “No. These emotions are exactly what the song needs.”

His leader approved of the script and that gave him confidence to present it to the director. The
brainstorming started and everyone was in on it. The only major adjustment was Jonghyun twisting
the story to surround a single concept and solidify the timeline flow. He thought it would be
heartbreak while Jaehwan thought it should be a happy message but Jonghyun knocked them
speechless once more when he decided to merge both into a deeper and more beautiful aspect.

*Jonghyun-ah really pulled through*, he thought.

Still, his members were not faring in their individual scenes as well as they did in the choreography
scene and the group shots. He watched as Guanlin tried to understand what the director wanted him
to do for his scene but even from afar, Minhyun could definitely see that Guanlin was trying to
show emotions that he never felt before. He was one of the youngest in the competition and his
part was too deep for him to truly understand. It was a good thing that Jaehwan came to the rescue.
The main vocal asked for their scenes to be changed and the director agreed.

Their *maknae* trudged towards him with a downtrodden expression on his face.

“I’m sorry, hyung, I messed up.”

Minhyun rubbed his *dongsaeng’s* back. “It’s alright, Lin-ah. But I should be the one saying sorry
to you. It was inconsiderate of me to place you in a situation that you are not comfortable with. I
apologize.”

“It’s okay, hyung,” Guanlin smiled tremulously. “I’ll do better in my new scene.”

“I have no doubt you will.”

They watched the proceedings underneath the shade of the tree as Jaehwan entered the scene in
similar clothes as Guanlin and acted the scene out.

“And—cut! Good work, Jaehwan-ssi!”

“Hyung.”

Minhyun turned to loom at Guanlin’s side profile. “What is it?”

“We’re doing it, right?”

“Doing what right?”

Guanlin gestured the happenings on top of the hill where Jaehwan was running up the grassy
terrain and a cameraman was following his steps, taking video of vocal’s every movement.
“Facing our fears. That’s what this MV is about, right? Trying to live by with what time that we have left?”

That stopped Minhyun short.

The way Guanlin phrased it was almost the same as what the concept was all about, but still so different that Minhyun wondered why he never thought about it before.

*Live by with what remaining time we have left.*

The small enigmatic smile of Jonghyun-ah suddenly appeared in his mind.

*Whatever remains time has left for us to live by.*

In a way, it was truer than what he envisioned it to be.

“Yes.”

Minhyun then faced ahead, wondering if this MV was the depiction of the core of their souls.

The final scene ended for Kim Jonghyun and he was happy with how their MV shoot ended. The individual scenes were shot first, which took a while to finish, but the choreography and group shots were a blast to film. Maybe it was the idea of not being alone that loosened the tension in his members or the fact that they won’t have to act solo and be alone that helped pick their mood up, but Jonghyun was happy everything ended on a great note.

The writers were a delight to work with and the staff were nice and helpful in setting up the scene. Even though they didn’t have many people in the aesthetics department, Jonghyun was grateful for the support they got from *Stylenanda* and various other sponsors he had yet to know. Triple H *sunbaenims* were very supportive in the direction of the MV as they realigned some scenes to fit the atmosphere of the verses and chorus. Sungkyun *hyung* was always professional and a no-nonsense guy but he kept his strict attitude to a comfortable level for the trainees, to which Jonghyun was very thankful for.

So, the shoot was a success and the production staff decided to do an early dinner picnic outside the mansion home and overlooking the sea and do some sight-seeing before they go back to Seoul in six hours. Their meals were mostly seafood like shellfish and tuna, roasted chicken, traditional Korean dishes, and persimmons. Lots and lots of persimmons. They were full after an hour and went about their ways. Most of the staff went down the hill to do some sight-seeing or go to some local bar to drink some alcohol. Triple H *sunbaenims* needed to leave for another schedule but did not move an inch while congratulating them for a job well done.

“It was truly beautiful,” HyunA *sunbaein* gushed. “I cried in the end!”

Daehwi looked so happy he was about to burst.

“You were all like the characters in the story. You should be proud,” E-Dawn *sunbaenim* added with a smile.

“Congratulations,” Hui *sunbaenim* quietly said before the three artists left in their car.

Jonghyun turned to his team. “Do you want to go somewhere? I know a few good places for us to hang out.”
But, to his surprise, everyone declined his offer.

“It’s peaceful here,” Minhyun said.

“I just want to savor the place more,” Daehwi answered. “This is our first MV location.”

“Nah, we’re fine with staying here, hyung,” Jaehwan smiled.

Jonghyun conceded. Minhyun and Jaehwan ran towards the top of the hill to see the last view of the sunset. Guanlin, Daehwi, and Woojin took the blankets used for the picnic and laid it on the grass to watch the first stars blinking into the darkening sky.

Jonghyun, however, had someone he needed to talk to.

He found Seongwoo standing on the balcony, looking up at the night sky. Jonghyun hesitated by the doorway.

Seongwoo had always been a complex person, full of multifaceted personalities that it took him quite a while to pinpoint what Seongwoo showed and what he really thought. He was a troublemaker and a court jester with his unique ability to attract, amuse, and annoy people all at the same time. Most people would find his humor off-putting but they couldn’t deny the charm and wit that Ong Seongwoo dealt with the finesse of a rampaging rhinoceros.

However, Jonghyun was not most people. He knew Ong Seongwoo was more than his sarcastic comebacks. He was compassionate but is easily angered, forgiving but can notoriously hold a grudge, humble but competitive, too rebellious for Jonghyun’s blood pressure but would not jeopardize his career over stupidity—Seongwoo was just a man that had many complicated thoughts but had simple principles in life.

But what leaves the funny Ong with only a few friends he can truly turn to was his difficulty when it comes to opening up towards others.

Which was why he had to prod Seongwoo now before he burst and it won’t be pretty.

Jonghyun grimaced.

Exhaling once, he walked towards the railing, placing himself a foot away from a brooding Seongwoo.

“How much do you like?”

The Kings’ Center stared at him like he was crazy. “What?”

Jonghyun smiled. Seongwoo still hasn’t changed, he thought. “The stars. I asked you which one you liked.”

“What does it matter?” His tone was sharp. “Stars are stars. I see nothing different.”

“Hmm. What about constellations?”

“Again, I don’t see the point in this—”

“That’s Ursa Minor, see that cluster of stars right there? That’s Ursa Minor. Now, Gemini is a bit tricky to sight but if you know where to look, it’s as bright as day,” Jonghyun laughed at the pun. “Then there’s Orion, he’s fairly easy to locate what with those three stars of his as his belt...”
Jonghyun prattled on and on about the constellations found in the night sky and those that had still to come up sometime in the evening, but Seongwoo did not speak. He only listened.

Soon, a roughened voice said, “They still look like random dots to me, like what kindergartens do when they’re given a pencil to stab the paper with.”

“But it made you relax, yes?”

No answer.

But Jonghyun took that as a yes.

“What’s bothering you, Woo-yah? I know you’ve been out of it since you came out of your scene, pale and slightly shaking.”

“You caught that, huh,” Seongwoo scoffed. “Should’ve known. You do have a knack for taming rabid animals.”

“Seongwoo—”

The visual whirled around to face him, his expression as cold as a slate of ice. “This is what you wanted, right? For me to open up? Well, here’s me opening up!”

Jonghyun rubbed his temples at the numbing pain of migraine coming back. “Breathe, Seongwoo-yah. Breathe.”

The defensive posture shattered and in came the defeated expression that the visual had been trying to hide from everyone else. “I’m a mess, Jonghyun-ah. My head’s full of demons that I can’t run away from and I feel so angry.”

Seongwoo clenched his fists. “All the time. Why is this? Why am I so easily affected by everything that I immediately lash at the first person who did me wrong? I scared them, Jonghyun-ah. Daehwi-nie and Lin-nie, Jaehwan-nie and Minhyun-nie, too. I try to make everyone laugh, but I just feel—feel—”

“Dead. You feel dead.”

Seongwoo bowed down. His voice was gruff and shaky. “Yeah, that.”

“Why? Why am I like this? Please tell me.”

Jonghyun wanted to cry. He truly did. Seongwoo’s emotions ran deep and the pain and desolation in his voice was so heart-wrenching that the only thing Jonghyun wanted to do was hug him and never let go.

But that won’t go well now, especially when Seongwoo needed all the reassurance that he could get.

“You feel angry because you want to feel. But mostly, you feel sad.”

“Sad?” The visual trainee repeated the word like it was foreign to him. “Why the hell should I be sad? I’m fulfilling my dreams, aren’t I? I’m getting attention from fans and I will debut as an actor soon, with or without winning Produce 101. Blessings after blessings are coming for me and the last thing that I should do is be sad about it.”

Oh, Seongwoo-yah…
“You don’t have to feel okay all the time, even if you’re at the top of the world. It grounds us, you see, to more important things.”

Being one of his artists in his past, Jonghyun grew closer to Seongwoo after the years they had been together in one company. And Jonghyun was slowly reaching the core of the younger Seongwoo’s problems that the same person in front of him was suffering from.

“Minhyun told me. About your impending debut as an actor even if you wanted to be an idol instead.”

“Of course, he did.”

Jonghyun noted the tempered vitriol in his tone. “He was worried about you, Woo-yah. I’ve been trying to bring the topic up but it felt wrong of me to do so. So, I waited for you to tell me. It may not be the way I imagined it but I’m glad we’re getting to talk about this now.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t care,” Seongwoo growled. “I just hate being so prickly all the time. I get set off and lash at people. They think I’m being funny but the truth is that every insult I said was because I meant it. Doesn’t that sound wrong to you?”

Jonghyun sighed, looking up at blurry sky. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean you should feel scared of yourself. You feel frustration because you’re chasing a dream you’ve always wanted but is kept from you by people who believe they know you better than you know yourself. That’s why you’re sad, and when you’re sad, you get angry.”

“It’s frustrating. This is why I lashed out at Minhyun and Jaehwan last night. They knew I was a ticking time bomb and yet they placed me in a position that would wreck me even more. And, goddammit, I feel so betrayed.”

At that moment, Jonghyun felt so bone-tired.

“I would not disvalue Minhyun’s wish to give the MV concept for ‘Never’ by saying he did wrong in agreeing with the scenes but I also would not commend the insensitivity in his actions. But, frankly, I think we needed this more than we thing, Woo-yah. We need to face them sooner than later.”

It was quiet for a while.

“Thanks. I really needed to get that out of my chest. Don’t worry, I’m not a ticking time bomb anymore—or I don’t feel like one right now, so that’s a victory for me. It’s true, what he said about me being an actor instead of an idol. He told me to make sure the company sees that I can do both.”

“And why not do it?”

“And risk my money and career? I don’t think I am at the position to say something to my boss at the moment, what with me having less than a year of being their trainee.” Then Seongwoo let out a sardonic smile. “Sometimes I wish I picked a company that had more idols than actors. That way they won’t have a choice.”

“It’s sad that things, sometimes, don’t go our way, but that’s why there is time, I guess. It reminds us how little seconds we have to dwell in the past and so much hours left for us to enjoy life the way it should be celebrated.”
Seongwoo hmm-ed in reply but opted to stare up at the sky. It was dark now, and the stars were shining brightly against the midnight canvas of celestial creations. Across the distance, they heard their teammates yelling as they played a game of tag before the staff arrives to pick them up for the airport.

“I wonder what time has to say about us humans.”

“Time doesn’t talk, Seongwoo.”

Seongwoo quirked a small grin. “I know, but humor me in this one. Would he think us of us as stupid monkeys trying to cheat him? Or that we’re smart to work with him instead of against him? I think I like the ‘monkeys’ idea. I may not agree with Seongwoon hyung but even he had his moments of intelligence—there’s a lot of incompetent fools in the world, and time must be so done with us mucking everything up.”

“How about you? What do you think?”

“I think he’d be furious and proud.”

“That’s two contrasting emotions. Why?”

Jonghyun thought.

“Furious, because humans kept meddling with him, but also proud, because there is still reverence in treating him as an infinitely constant and ever-dynamic part of life.”

Seongwoo grinned. “Yeah, you can’t just meddle with time. That’s messed up. Even with my regrets in life like joining Fantagio or eating eomma’s favorite dish without permission won’t make me do such a thing when there are drastic consequences involved.”

Seongwoo brushed his shirt down to fix the creasing before looking up with a grin on his face. “I’m often rash but I’m not stupid. Come on, Jonghyun-ah. This is too much drama for my taste. The staff are here, let’s pack our bags.”

The visual center waved at him before going inside the mansion, yelling at the others to pick their asses up and help him pack their bags and prepare their documents.

While Jonghyun stayed in his place.

_You can’t meddle with time._

“What do you want from me?”

He looked up at the stars, at the _Ursa Minor_ constellation.

_I still have a purpose, right?_

The star at the end shone brightly in the night sky.
They returned to the dormitories at three in the morning. It was still dark outside and the air was chilly but they were not tired enough to sleep when they reached their room. They got their rest on the plane and the high after a successful MV shoot was still felt. To pass the time before breakfast, Daehwi hyung opted to play with the board game they bought in one of the kiosks in the airport while the hyungs went about their ways. Seongwoo hyung was browsing the web with their in-dorm tablet while Jaehwan-nie hyung was playing with cards, which Guanlin thought was definitely illegal but who’s awake to see them at three in the morning, anyways?

Minhyun-nie hyung and Jonghyun-nie hyung dragged Woojin-nie hyung to the infirmary for an overdue check-up after he got infected with shingles weeks before the ‘Never’ performance. Jonghyun-nie hyung realized the early symptoms even before Woojin-nie hyung did and sent the confused dancer to the infirmary for vaccines to stop the rashes from becoming worse. The disease was prevented from getting more severe and as a result, Woojin-nie hyung had to take longer rests during the practices. Still, he wasn’t lagging too much behind due to their leader’s insistence to utilizing any time they had wisely since they got grouped for the evaluations. Despite the early prevention, there was still ugly red rashes so the BNM trainee had to wear a pirate patch on his left eye. But that didn’t deter the rapper from performing the ‘2x’ version of ‘Never’ and the fancams.

By the time they had to film the MV, the scarring was mostly gone and the little scab left could be edited digitally. It was a good thing the clinic was open 24/7 since injuries were common to them. After an hour, the three hyungs returned, lugging pink plastic bags from the convenience store. Jonghyun-nie hyung pulled out cold-cuts, sandwiches, fruits, and packets of instant coffee, tea, and chocolate powders.

“Whoa! Where did you get so many foods?”

Minhyun-nie hyung jabbed a thumb in the Angel Leader’s direction. “This idiot left us in the infirmary when Woojin-nie’s stomach grumbled,” Said starving trainee blushed at the snickers from his teammates. “An hour after, he’s back with his haul.”

“An hour?” Seongwoo hyung snickered. “What took you so long? Convenience store is just fifteen minutes away!”

The leader of ‘Never’ Team put his hands on his waist in mock offense. “Why, I never! I bought you food—which costed me sixty thousand won, by the way—and this is how you repay me? Ungrateful brats, the lot of you. Why, if I didn’t love you that much, I’d leave all of you to starve…”

The affection in his hyung’s voice ruined the disgruntled expression he was going for. The others were cackling like hyenas, finding the whole thing very funny. Guanlin won’t be surprised if they just woke up the whole dormitory building because of Ong Seongwoo and Kim Jaehwan’s combined donkey-slash-hag-like laughter. Woojin-nie hyung just shook his head at the hyungs’ antics and checked his bag of medications with one hand while holding the onibugi stuff toy the main dancer bought in Jeju in the other hand.

Guanlin saw Daehwi’s starry-eyed stare towards the Angel Leader. Heck, he could definitely see the hearts flying out of the ‘Nayana’ Center at this point, to Minhyun-nie hyung’s amusement.

The ‘Never’ dormitory was soon filled with the aroma of microwaved rice meals and the bitter sharp scent of freshly-prepared coffee. Jonghyun-nie hyung pulled out of his blankets and piled the
dishes on the floor.

“Jaehwan-nie hyung, can you pass the chicken?”

“Hey, where’s the soy sauce?”

“What the—Hey, you just finished my chocolate milk!”

“Oh, is that what it is? I thought it was my coffee!”

“Argh!”

Guanlin ignored everyone else. He asked their leader to pass the salt. The Angel Leader nodded before reaching over the picnic blanket to get the condiment with his right arm.

And that’s when Guanlin saw it.

Jonghyun-nie hyung’s long sleeves slightly rode up as he reached the salt and with how they were slightly seated away from the others, only Guanlin saw the furious red rashes and purple bruises marring the forearm of the Angel Leader.

“Here you go, Lin-Lin. Eat well, okay?” Jonghyun-nie hyung smiled kindly before he focused on his soup.

“Thank you, hyung.”

Guanlin forced himself to look away. His mind was running wildly and he desperately wanted to ask—but he didn’t say anything.

It was too early for a confrontation and with how notoriously stubborn Jonghyun-nie hyung was when it came to his welfare, it’d be easier to pull one’s teeth than pull the truth out of the Angel Leader. And with the MV shoot fresh in their minds, the Dark Prince of Manhwa was wary of opening another can of worms.

As the day passed by, and with the distraction of promo units and live stage practices, he still couldn’t help but glance at the covered forearm in worry.

Hyung, what are you hiding?

The promotion practices were going as well as expected, even though it took Jaehwan a little while to get used to the new members of Unit 3. They decided to eat breakfast with the other trainees even if they ate already.

“Because food is food! You just can’t pass up free food,” Seongwoo was aghast at the suggestion of skipping food freely given.

In a group, they went towards the cafeteria for breakfast and stopped short at the new table formations and the familiar faces million about, people that were not supposed to be there but was eating with everyone else.

“Is that Seonglee-yah?” Minhyun-nie hyung gasped.

The vocalist from ‘Downpour’ Team was truly there, seated beside Donghan in the middle table, chatting like he had always been there.
Daniel came up running to them. “I’m so glad you’re all here! Promotions are coming and we so need your help!”

Without any other explanation, Daniel grabbed Jonghyun-nie hyung and Woojin-nie’s forearms and dragged them to the table nearest the window and farthest from the food table. Minhyun-nie hyung rolled his eyes and went with Daehwi towards what he deduced as Unit 1’s table. Guanlin hugged him before going towards a waving Samuel at Unit 2’s table.

This would be interesting, Jaehwan thought.

Jihoon-nie and Jinyoung-ie immediately latched themselves on Jonghyun-nie hyung, blabbering about all the stages they planned for the fan-meet in two days. Minki hyung was chatting with Seonho and Hyunbin-nie. Seongwoo hyung and Niel-ah were exchanging stories about what they did yesterday while Jiseong hyung reacted in the right places.

“Jeju? You went to Jeju?”

“Yeah,” Seongwoo hyung grinned. “Surprised the heck out of me when they said we weren’t going to film here. Didn’t believe them at first, but then I saw we were nearing Gimpo Airport so, we rode the earliest flight.” He shrugged.

Jaehwan faced the last member of Unit 3. Woojin-nie was seated beside him, looking a bit overwhelmed at the noise coming from their team. He couldn’t blame him though, even Jaehwan felt slightly out-of-place. Not that he had any opinions about the addition of Jiseong-ie hyung, Seonho-yah, Minki hyung, Hyunbin, and Woojin-nie in their unit; he just needed some time to acclimatized with the changes, like what Woojin was doing.

They started the planning in main training room so all the units could fit in. Daniel was the de-facto leader of Unit 3 when they were gone for the MV shoot and he handled all the suggestions for the fan-meet.

“We decided for a sexy performance,” Daniel said. “Sort of like to finish the fan-meet trilogy of Produce 101 trainees with a bang. And what better way than to show everyone what Unit 3 is known for?”

Seongwoo hyung winked. “I like how you think, Niel-ah. This will be the biggest fan-meet ever and with our new members,” The Kings’ Center was grinning broadly. “Well, we might as well show everyone that we’re like the Ocean’s Eleven!”

Jinyoung rolled his eyes. “How fitting for you, hyung, ‘cause you look like you belong in the ocean.”

Seongwoo scowled.

Jaehwan shook his head in exasperation. He truly didn’t want to know why the two visual trainees were always at each other’s throats. Beside him, Seonho asked, “Are they always like this, hyung?”

“Like rabid mutts,” Jihoon interrupted. “It started back when Seongwoo hyung planned our ‘Joker’ stage, then Jinyoung-ie took his revenge by monopolizing everyone’s time, which, you know, Seongwoo hyung wouldn’t like because he just had to be in on everyone’s business…Then came the stage and the heels—”

Jaehwan shivered at the memory. Those were dark times, indeed.
“You look like a pufferfish with your small face!”

“Psh. Hit me more, will you, hyung? That’s weak, even for you.”

“—Yeah,” Jihoon shrugged. “We consider Jinyoung-ie and Seongwoo hyung as frenemies most of the time.”

“That’s…messed up.”

“You’re such a—a—”

“Pathetic, hyung. Just pathetic.”

Jaehwan smiled weakly as he wrapped an arm around the stunned Seonho. “Welcome to Unit 3.”

Yoon Jiseong thought that he would feel like an outcast in the last unit. And why wouldn’t he think that? The moment his name was called amongst the list of trainees now listed as part of Unit 3, he was filled with confusion. He did not stand up the first time he was called because he thought he was placed in Unit 1 with Huang Justin and Lee Gunhee. Then the staff called him once more and that’s when he realized he was really placed in Unit 3. Dread filled his mind, even as he grinned and smiled at Daniel’s excited face.

Even with only half of the original team present for the reshuffling, Unit 3 still looked absolutely intimidating and powerful.

There was Kang Daniel, yes, the so-called Fancam King due to his ability of staying in the trend charts with his performance. Even though Niel-ah was his “child” because they belonged in the same company and Jiseong practically took care of the trainee in his mother’s stead, he was a bit wary of being grouped with him as well. He had no doubt that Niel-ah would conquer the idol world someday and the fact that he was starting great as one of the most popular trainees of Produce 101 only made him prouder of the kid but he had quite a bit to live up to, now that he was a part of Unit 3.

The two youngest trainees, the maknaes of Unit 3, were the first two reasons why Yoon Jiseong thought the staff people must be out of their minds when they grouped him with them.

In terms of visuals, Bae Jinyoung and Park Jihoon were the ultimate aces of Unit 3, the Yin and Yang of Visual Duality, with the former as the center of Unit 3 and the one who supposedly launched a thousand fan-sites for his fancam in their fan-meet stage while the latter already had a thousand fan-sites dedicated for him and is continuing to grow more with each stage Park Jihoon did.

And both maknaes were talented enough to live up to their hyungs, the Kings themselves.

When they found out about how the units were grouped for the first promotional activity, the only thought many of them had was—

The Kings are back.

After all, what are the odds of having four out of six being grouped in the promo unit? Not much, they deduced. The only viable answer for it was that the producers wanted to emulate the popularity that the legendary team had during the Group Battles. And with two of the former Avengers added in as well, Unit 3 was the crème a la crème of the promo groups.
The *hyung* members of Unit 3 were the people he was both excited and nervous to work with.

Kim Jaehwan was a familiar trainee for him due to them being in the same team for the Positions Evaluations. Even if Jaehwan was very down-to-earth and funny (except when he’s madly scheming your demise), ‘Downpour’ Team never forgot that the independent trainee was also a *King* like Minhyun-*nie* and Donghan-*nie*. And with such vocal prowess, it was no wonder that Jaehwan caught the love and attention of the *Nation’s Producers*.

The last two members of Unit 3 were the oldest, and in his opinion, the most experienced and most versatile in the team. Belonging to the top ranks, Ong Seongwoo belonged to the higher-class trainees since his auditions and the funny Ong did not have a rank lower than rank eleven. A highly adaptable trainee, Seongwoo can practically fit any concept, vocal-wise, dance-wise, and performance-wise. Not to mention the *Kings’ Center* had variety skills and looks in spades; he was not crowned Rank 1 visual for nothing.

Then there’s the *Angel Leader* himself, whose talents were vastly ranged and had such unique skillsets that he could be an idol and PD-*nim* himself if he wasn’t contracted to be a trainee of *Produce 101*. He may not have a kingly name from his ‘Sorry, Sorry’ stint, but he didn’t need the recognition.

Kim Jonghyun was on a different league all on his own.

And with such a summary of skills from the highest-ranked trainees in the group, Yoon Jiseong knew he had his work cut out for him if he wanted to contribute something to such a cohesive unit.

“*It feels weird,*” Kwon Hyunbin whispered to him when they were left to their devices. It was their break and the other members were gone to get some snacks from their dormitories.

“What’s weird?”

Hyunbin wrapped his arms around his knees. “*Settling into Unit 3. But it’s not a bad weird, either. It’s just…How do you join a group that’s a group already?’*

Hyunbin’s thoughts were in-line with his but to Jiseong’s pleasant surprise, it wasn’t that difficult to stay within the team. With Jihoon and Jinyoung’s pushing, Daniel took the leadership position in lieu of Jonghyun-ah’s absence and he did absolutely well. The *Fancam King* was efficient in planning for their fan-meet, making suggestions for their performance and even devising a rough plan for the aesthetics, with the help of Jinyoung, Woojin, and Minki.

Daniel sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. “Uh, well, I can’t deny that Jonghyun-*nie* *hyung* rubbed off of me.”

Even with his surprise at Kang Daniel, who was notorious in being a consistent jeans-and-a-shirt type of guy (or without any shirt if he could get away with it), planning their wardrobe of all things, it didn’t live up to the amazement he felt watching the *Angel Leader* at work.

He knew about Jonghyun’s prowess (heck, he was one of the first who knew about the ‘Showtime’ Stage for the Concept Evaluations and he was still not over it) but the thought process, the behind-the-scenes for creating a stage design and aesthetic concept—that, he had never seen before. So, he was curious on what the team dynamics truly were and was excited for the rest of Unit 3 to come back from their MV shooting.

And he was left in awe.

Daniel gave the leadership to Jonghyun and the *Angel Leader* immediately went to business.
“So, our plan is to bring back the sexy, bad-boy image of Unit 3 from the ‘Tarantallegra’ performance, yes?”

They all nodded.

“In your mind, what stage would be the best to show that?”

Seongwoo and Daniel were fixated with the idea of doing another Super Junior Performance while Jaehwan and Jinyoung wanted to try another one of the newer idol groups like Monsta X or VIXX. Hyunbin and Minki wanted to do a ballad ("No crazy choreography, hyung, please!” Hyunbin groaned.) and Seonho was in agreement but wanted to do an acoustic cover instead of orchestric accompaniments.

Yoon Jiseong was deliberating on the suggestions made by his dongsaengs and was about to agree with Seongwoo’s suggestion when—

“I think we should do a NU’EST song.”

Silence.

Jiseong swore he heard someone gasp.

That’s…an…amazing…idea…

Jihoon looked smug at the reaction of everyone. “Why do you all look surprised? You want the sexy, bad-boy image, right? Why not cover our NU’EST sunbaes?”

Seongwoo was spouting his ideas faster than ever. “Of course! NU’EST sunbaes have incredible songs and choreography! Heck, they also have the sexy concepts down, too! Why didn’t I think of that? Because, really, what better way to channel the sexy bad-boy image than cover a song of our sunbaes?”

Immediately, the wind swept the other way around. The others forgot prior suggestions as they were hyped at the idea. Daniel grinned and high-fived Jihoon while Jaehwan had an uncharacteristic smirk on his face as he seconded the suggestion. Woojin had a serene smile on his face.

Everyone began to discuss the interesting idea, pitching in their penny on the choreography and song division.

“We’ll be halving the parts into two because we’re eleven and NU’EST sunbaes are only five…”

In the midst of the discussion, Jiseong noticed two certain trainees were quiet. He looked at the two members of NU’EST in their team.

Choi Minki had a conflicted look on his face as he stared at Jihoon and Seongwoo like he wanted to strangle and hug the visual trainees at the same time.

The Angel Leader had the strangest expression on his face.

Yoon Jiseong resisted the urge to smile.

It’s rare when you get to surprise the Angel Leader.
The promotion planning was one of the most fun yet headache-inducing moments in Kwon Hyunbin’s time as a Produce 101 trainee. And that was saying something since being a trainee in the show wasn’t exactly a peaceful walk in the park.

The others were fun to watch, though. Guanlin was familiar to him, as well Jiseong-ie hyung, Jinyoung-ie, Seonho-yah, and Minki hyung—but the others, not so much. So, he had some misgivings at first but that went right out the window when he saw how, er, enthusiastic (or crazy, his mind whispered) his new teammates were.

The voting on which NU’EST song they’d be performing was brutal.

Unit 3 was divided into four factions (of war): ‘Action’, ‘Sandy’, ‘Climax’, and ‘Overcome’. Jinyoung-ie and Seonho-yah immediately voted for ‘Action’ because they wanted to do a sci-fi concept. ‘Sandy’ team, however, which was composed of Jiseong hyung and Jaehwan-nie hyung, was adamant that they’d do the summer-vibe pop song and vetoed against ‘Action’. ‘Climax’ team had some sway when Minki hyung voted for it.

The visual member of NU’EST shrugged. “I’m curious on what you’d do in the choreography.”

“I’d be happy to choreograph, hyung. It’d be fun, that’s for sure.” Daniel grinned, high-fiving Minki hyung as he jumped into ‘Climax’ team faster than they expected. He was in agreement with the hyungs, though. ‘Climax’ had a vibe to it that Hyunbin really liked.

The last team scared them a little bit because Seongwoo hyung looked a bit too manic as he pushed ‘Overcome’, Jihoon-nie and Woojin-nie backing the trainee up.

“What the hell are you talking about? ‘Overcome’ is the sexiest song we could ever do!” The Kings’ Center was all but foamed at the mouth.

The center of Unit 3 was not convinced. Jinyoung-ie rolled his eyes. “And what? Body rolls, again? You’ve been doing that in your sleep. How many more do you need?”

Seongwoo hyung sputtered in disbelief.

Daniel hyung raised his hand, trying to restrain Seongwoo hyung from strangling a smug Bae Jinyoung. “Whoa, whoa, don’t get me wrong, I’m all for any of the songs.”

Jaehwan-nie hyung slowly shook his head. “Sorry, I still like ‘Sandy’.”

That started the petition of everyone on their chosen songs. Everyone was passionate in their songs that it didn’t take long before their voices rose up and caught the attention of the two other units. Since it was practice time, they were left to their devices and was free to roam around. Soon, the other units joined their circle, curious on what was happening in Unit 3.

They must’ve looked like a circus act but the others were too interested in the argument to even notice how his hyungs were fighting like cats and dogs.

“What! A NU’EST song?” Daehwi shrieked. “Why didn’t we think about that?”

Immediately, Seongwoo hyung zoned in on the ‘Nayana’ center. “No! Don’t even think about it, Lee Daehwi! It’s our idea so we’re going to cover NU’EST sunbaes, not you!”

The other units joined in on the argument, either voting on the song choices or suggesting other songs for them to perform. By the end of the fiasco, they had three whole albums to choose from, which made his members frantic in pushing the song they wanted to the others to increase the
votes.

Interestingly, the members of NU’EST had contrasting ideas as well.

Minhyun-nie hyung turned to look at Minki hyung. “What did you vote for?”

“I went for ‘Climax’.”

“Interesting.” The Hwanggallyang pursed his lips. “I think I’m with Seongwoo-yah in this one.”

The Kings’ Center was unbelievably smug.

Dongho hyung decided to throw his two cents in. “I want to see what Unit 3 can do with ‘Action’ though.”

Obviously, the true members of the idol group held so much sway in the decision-making. After quite a few jumping band-wagons, only ‘Climax’, ‘Action’, and ‘Overcome’ were left.

The final decision depended on the last trainee of the unit.

“What do you think, Jonghyun-nie hyung?”

The Angel Leader frowned for a moment before tearing off four pieces of paper and writing on it. He rolled each piece and gently put the papers in Woojin-nie’s cupped hands. They waited, tensed in anticipation, as their leader picked off a paper and rolled it out, the words showing to them.

Jonghyun-nie hyung raised an eyebrow when Seongwoo hyung and Jihoon-nie cheered at what was written in the paper.

Yoo Seonho knew that doing a NU’EST song would be critical in their performance. Heck, they’d be performing the song with NU’EST’s JR and Ren themselves and he was both excited and terrified about it. As soon as their leader finalized the song choice via picking lots, they went straight to work.

‘Overcome’ was one of the more dramatic pieces of NU’EST with such lyrical dynamics and choreography that for someone who wasn’t a dancer, he would definitely feel slightly overwhelmed. The corner of the room was cleared out for their team as the rest of the trainees lined up against the mirror and watched the NU’EST hyungs dance to the song.

It was an eye-opening experience. All the trainees of Produce 101 were used to watching the choreography and listening to the song on their tablets so having the chance to watch the idols perform in front of them was amazing. Minki hyung was slightly hesitant to do a demo of ‘Overcome’ but with the Angel Leader’s pushing and Minhyun-nie hyung and Dongho hyung joining them, they performed one of the best NU’EST songs of all time.

Jiseong hyung was mesmerized at the performance. “Is this what it feels like to watch an idol group rehearsing?” He whispered to Daniel hyung.

Seonho observed his hyungs. It was apparent how debuted idols performed; they had charisma even in sweats and hoodies, their gestures showed they were used to holding the camera’s gaze, and the moves were sharp. Heck, Dongho hyung was still singing after their killing point dance!

At the end of the performance, Unit 3 was itching to learn the choreography, the song, everything!
“Yah! Stop dragging me, Park Jihoon!”

Yep, they really wanted to learn the dance.

Meanwhile, Choi Minki was having a blast as he started teaching his team on the lyrics of ‘Overcome’. Jonghyun-ah divided Unit 3 into two and he was put in-charge of handling his vocal parts and Aron hyung’s. It took quite a while before they got the division right since they did quite a few switching of parts. So, now he had Jiseong hyung sharing his parts while Seonho and Jihoon had Aron hyung’s parts and some of Minhyun’s in the bridge part.

Jonghyun-ah had the bulk of their team in his hands as he handled the choreography. Since Jaehwan, Jinyoung, Seongwoo, and Daniel had the bulk of Dongho-yah and Minhyun-ah’s lines, they were frequently placed at the center and had to master the choreography first before the vocals. The song was designed only for five people so his leader had to modify a lot in the formations on-the-spot. To no one’s surprise, Jonghyun’s doing well in arranging everyone to highlight each line that their team would deliver.

His team learned their parts within an hour and joined Jonghyun’s choreography team. It was so easy for Choi Minki to slip in the choreography of his group and he found pleasure in watching his team have fun in doing the choreography too. It was fortunate they were eleven so the formation looked balanced on both sides, like a phalanx of monster visuals for them to take in.

Jinyoung starting the song was a good touch as well, because he was the famous center of Unit 3 and it was quite poetic that he’d start ‘Overcome’ with such an intense gaze on his face as he stared at the mirror.

Jonghyun was an efficient teacher. Not that he didn’t know that but it was enlightening to witness his brother at work in teaching their dongsaengs. Minki was having a déjà vu watching the leader. Instead of the faces of Daniel and Seonho, he saw the faces of Minggyu-yah and Seokmin-nie learning the choreography of ‘Action’ back in Pledis.

“Turn your head to the right, Hyunbin-ah.”

“Ne, hyung.”

“A bit of flare right there, Hwan-nie.”

“OK, hyung.”

A grunt. “Why does it look so easy but it’s not?”

Daniel did the complicated move as he jerked his arms outward before grinning at a frustrated Seongwoo. “Because it is.”

“What? Seriously?”

“No.”

Seongwoo scowled.

Jonghyun has never changed, Minki smiled, not at all bothered that they have been practicing for four hours already, without rest.
Hwang Minhyun’s eyes kept coming back to the unit practicing at the end of the room. In his peripheral vision, he saw the rest of his unit also watching Unit 3 learn the choreography of ‘Overcome’. It was quite a baffling experience for the Hwanggallyang as he listened Seongwoo sing his lines at the chorus and watch Seonho and Jihoon do the iconic body rolls. It wasn’t bad per se but it took all of his conscious thought not to sing or dance to the song.

SEVENTEEN covering their songs wasn’t new to him but watching his new dongsaengs doing well in mastering the song was…nice. He had been observing the team since they brought their choice performance to everyone’s attention. To his surprise, Unit 3 was planning to choose between the songs suggested and they were all their songs.

The song choices were interesting. ‘Action’ and ‘Sandy’ were the complete opposites while ‘Overcome’ and ‘Climax’ had some similarities in how the song goes. But that was where similarities end: ‘Overcome’ had a powerful choreography whereas ‘Climax’ had a more, flowy vibe to it. He wasn’t surprised when Minki-yah voted for ‘Climax’; he was right, it would be interesting to see what their Produce 101 dongsaengs can do for the choreography. After all, Unit 3 had some of the best dancers in the competition and with Seongwoo-yah, Daniel-ah, Woojin-nie, Jihoon-nie, and Jonghyun-ah in the same team, they could create a new choreography for it.

However, he felt that ‘Overcome’ had the power that Unit 3 can showcase. As he looked at each member, the Hwanggallyang just knew it was the song for them.

When Jonghyun picked the song, he smiled.

Unit 3 will knock everyone off with their rendition.

But now as he watched bits and pieces of the new formations and revamped choreography slowly being formed before the polished chorus part was shown in all its power as the trainees of Unit 3 made little to no mistakes and gave their all, Seongwoo’s voice soaring high—

Minhyun felt his heart stutter as he came to an epiphany.

NU’EST weren’t failures after all.

And he felt light.

“You all I need.”

Minhyun smiled as the others cheered uproariously when Jinyoung finished the song.

Yes, the lightest he had been in years.

The day passed quickly for Park Woojin. Promotional practice went well until the early afternoon but the staff reminded them of the live stage the following day. Woojin had to backtrack because he truly forgot that they had a live stage, too. From all the exciting moments the past few days he felt slightly pulled off-kilter as the momentum of the MV shoot and the promotional practice was halted to make way for M Countdown.

Jonghyun-nie hyung left Jiseong hyung in-charge of Unit 3 as the members of ‘Never’ and ‘Open Up’ went out to practice for the live stages. Dongho hyung suggested that both teams should practice in one room instead so that if their unit needed any help they could be easily found since
they’re staying in one place. Seongwoo hyung immediately agreed, to their leader’s amusement. ‘Never’ went without a hitch since they had been practicing the song for weeks (Seongwoo hyung and Daehwi were relentless) but they had to do the stage choreography because the gerb spinners and pyrotechnics used in the Concept Evaluation stage would be used for M Countdown. Their aesthetics would be the same so the wardrobe was set already.

Frankly, this felt like somewhat of a break from dancing to ‘Overcome’ for hours and Woojin felt it was a good sort of break, like a fun exercise as he slipped into the choreography and formation seamlessly. It took no time at all before they polished any mistakes, however miniscule it was, so as to perform their best in the special stage.

But, after that, members of Unit 3 immediately went to practice ‘Overcome’. It was funny, really, watching the hyungs wrangle time from Minhyun-nie hyung and Dongho hyung for help during their practice break.

“Yah, Ong Seongwoo! You do know what break means, right?”

But the Kings’ Center wasn’t deterred and Minhyun-nie hyung had no choice but to follow. Woojin knew that his new unit was very enthusiastic in their fan-meet performance that were trying to squeeze some practice anywhere they went, even while eating their lunch. His team was either watching the dance practice he filmed for them as reference or dancing in their seats as the track played in the earphones that they were listening in.

Woojin did not join the hyungs for additional practice with Minhyun-nie hyung and Dongho hyung. Instead, he opted to wait for Jonghyun-nie hyung to return from break.

The BNM trainee frowned in thought. Woojin had been observing the Angel Leader since their talk in Jeju and Jonghyun-nie hyung admirably looked fine after the emotional breakdowns ‘Never’ Team had in their MV scenes.

But that was what he thought before he caught Guanlin and Jonghyun-nie hyung talking.

He took a short bathroom break before they started practice and was about to leave the cubicle when he heard voices.

“…practice?”

Woojin raised an eyebrow. That was Guanlin.

“It’s fine. I still can’t believe we’ll be performing NU’EST for the fan-meet.”

It’s Jonghyun-nie hyung.

“I’m so jealous, hyung,” He heard Guanlin whine. “I want to perform ‘Overcome’ too!”

A laugh. “You’d need to ask Taehyun-nie hyung about it.”

“He was all for it, said he wanted to do ‘Face’ but Dongho hyung said no.”

There was some shuffling. There were some squeaks and soon he heard water running.

Woojin felt guilty of eavesdropping and decided to leave for good. He was about to push the flush down to signal that there was another person in the room when—

“You might want to wash that arm of yours, hyung.”
He stilled.

“Oh? What do you mean, Lin-nie?”

Woojin leaned further. The Angel Leader’s light tone was deceiving but he knew there was something going on that he needed to look further into.

There was a hardened edge to Guanlin’s tone. “You know what I mean, hyung. I saw your arm. It’s covered in bruises.”

Silence.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, it’s fine now. Just got into a little accident in the airport, I’m sure you remember.”

“Funny. You don’t look like you’ve been mauled from bumping into a wall.”

Woojin knew he was dangerously leaning against the cubicle door but he had to catch his teammates were talking about. He vaguely remembered the incident in Gimpo airport wherein the Angel Leader crashed into a panel wall hiding the men’s lavatories from public view when they were hurrying to go to the boarding gate after looking for Daehwi and Minhyun-nie hyung.

Jonghyun-nie hyung said he was fine after Jaehwan-nie hyung tried to check his arm for bruising.

Apparently not everything is what it seems.

He heard a door open and with a jolt, he realized the next cubicle was about to be occupied when —

“Hyung.”

The deep voice of Lai Guanlin rang through the room. But what he said reverberated in Woojin’s heart.

“You know we’re here for you, right? I may not know what’s happening with you, hyung, but it must not be good if you’re refusing to tell us. Don’t worry, I did not tell anyone and I won’t push you further, hyung, I respect you too much to disrespect your privacy. I just wanted you to know that.”

There was no answer. He heard the door softly close as Guanlin left. The cubicle next to him closed with a schlock but he did not hear anything else.

The lavatories were quiet, the only sound came from the growl of the plumbing above them. Five minutes after, the door opened and the Angel Leader left.

Woojin followed a while later, mind whirring.

The BNM dancer couldn’t concentrate during practice. He still tried to make it look like he knew what he was doing as he danced to the clock formation of ‘Never’ and joined in the small bantering between his teammates but his eyes kept on getting dragged towards the long-sleeved shirt under the Produce 101 jersey. It wasn’t unusual for Jonghyun-nie hyung to wear sleeved shirts and if he did not hear Guanlin’s accusations he’d be blind to the situation.

But now that he knew his leader was hurt, he was itching to check the sleeved arm.

It was difficult, though. Guanlin cornering the Angel Leader must have roused caution in
Jonghyun-nie hyung because he did not act any different when Seongwoo hyung playfully slapped Jonghyun-nie hyung’s left forearm or when Jaehwan-nie hyung roughly bumped into the leader’s right forearm during the second rap verse. From Guanlin’s description of the arm looking like it was mauled, he expected a wince at least; but the Angel Leader was adamant that no one should know of his wounded state.

And Park Woojin was getting desperate.

He tried to ask Guanlin but the Dark Prince was acting normally, laughing and joking with Jinyoung and Kenta hyung, and asking him about what he had heard wouldn’t go over well. Then he tried to tell the hyungs, any of them, but they were preoccupied in practicing for the live stages or the fan-meet. The closest he came to was Jiseong-ie hyung but that was a miscalculated move he did because he was not able to bring the situation into light and the oldest member of Unit 3 went hysterical because he thought Jonghyun-nie hyung was going to die.

Safe to say, Jonghyun-nie hyung went even more guarded after getting cornered.

At that point he was ran out of ideas. Telling someone who’d overreact was a big no-no—he didn’t want another Jiseong-ie hyung episode—and alerting Minhyun-nie hyung, Minki hyung, or Dongho hyung felt wrong to him because he was left at a disadvantage and truly did not know what Guanlin saw so telling some sort of refurbished story would only put the situation in a more terrible light, stressing the leader even more if the NU’EST hyungs did corner him when he did all he could to avoid attention at all costs.

Despite his worries, Woojin was serious when he promised to help his leader in any way he can and throwing Jonghyun-nie hyung under the bus rubbed off of him the wrong way.

As if the heavens had heard his prayer, his chance to check on his hyung came in the form of Kang Daniel.

They were back to Unit 3 practices and was nearly done with mastering the choreography of ‘Overcome’. His unit mates were brimming in excitement when they finished the choreography and wanted food as reward.

“But you just ate dinner—”

“We’re hungry, hyung,” Seonho whined.

Jonghyun-nie hyung laughed when the Fancam King begged him for meat and shaved ice cream. “Alright, alright, I’ll buy some meat. But no ice cream, you need your voices in good condition.”

Unit 3 cheered.

The Angel Leader looked at the time. “Hmm, it’s past nine already. I guess I’ll be back after an hour. Make sure you all start practicing your parts and we’ll check when I come back—”

Now, Park Woojin!

“I want to come, too, hyung!”

Jonghyun-nie hyung raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think they’d allow two trainees out the dormitories, Woojin-nie.”

Woojin would have backed out but his gut was telling him to push, push, push.
The BNM dancer pouted. “But I want to pick the meat, hyung. I know which ones are the best!”

To his relief, Jihoon backed him up. “It’s true, Jonghyun-nie hyung,” The Wink Master nodded. “Woojin-nie’s choices in meat are good.”

The leader looked surprised at Jihoon’s interjection and relented. Woojin sighed in relief when he was allowed to come get the meat. He thought that would be the end of it when Minki hyung protested, saying he also wanted to come. Minki hyung did not take a no for an answer and pushed past the incredulous leader, muttering about Jonghyun-nie hyung’s incompetence in picking meat.

Woojin was just glad he won’t be alone in getting the leader to open up. Jonghyun-nie hyung’s incredibly stubborn when he wanted to and it takes an equally-stubborn person to contend with that.

His eyes immediately met Guanlin’s.

*I’ll take care of, hyung, Lin-nie.*

He hoped the maknae understood.

“So, what are you going to buy, Minki yah?”

They were perusing the meat shelf displayed in the shop Jonghyun-ah once visited for their impromptu sleepover party. The choices were adequate; there were marinated beefs, spiced pork, grilled chicken, some ox tail soups, minced liver, and so many more to choose from. Choi Minki knew his brother was terrible in picking meats, either they were too salty from being marinated too long or they were a bit chewy from being undercooked, so he had to salvage their money somehow.

Besides, he can’t just let Jonghyun-ah spend thousands of won again when he had earnings of his own that can contribute to the expenses. Being the only two trainees in the team who had income, it was only fair that he pitched in some money for them.

He chose spicy and roasted chicken and pork belly while Jonghyun-ah bought beef.

“Beef, Hyun-ah? Isn’t that a bit expensive?”

The leader waved a hand. “It’s fine. I had some savings left for us to indulge, just this once.”

Minki wanted to tell him that it was the fifth time he treated his members but decided not to. Jonghyun-ah was just generous like that.

They paid for the meats, rice, and soup and waited for Woojin-nie to come back from the convenience store. The dancer wanted to buy menthol patches for sore muscles and some sweet snacks for dessert. He originally wanted to go with Woojin for safety reasons but the trainee hastily refused, saying that it wouldn’t take long to buy what he needed. Minki shrugged and let the boy go after giving money for him to buy for the rest of the team.

“What’s taking him so long?” Jonghyun wondered.

As if on cue, they saw the masked boy in a blue windbreaker walking towards them.

“Who’s that with him?”
Accompanying Woojin was an old lady. She looked nice, her smile was warm and accommodating. But her eyes were pinned on the person beside him.

The old lady reached them and patted the cheek of the shocked *Angel Leader*. “*Omo*, I am so glad you are alright, child. You frightened my Ggoma when you fell down in front of our house. Why, this man,” She waved to an expressionless Woojin. “led me to you when he told me he knew you.”

“I—I—I am okay, *halmeoni* and I sincerely apologize for disturbing your night but this is not necessary—”

The soft tone hardened. “Well, I’ll be the judge of that, young man,” She put her hands on her hips. “I may need to see that arm of yours.”

Minki’s eyes widened when the ever-so polite Jonghyun took a step back, cradling his right arm in his left.

*What the fuck is going on?*

The *Angel Leader* smiled beautifully. “I really am fine, *halmeoni*.”

“I’d believe that when I see for myself.”

Jonghyun looked so cornered that Minki was momentarily afraid that the leader would bolt away and leave them there. But he knew that Kim Jonghyun learned well to respect elderly and do what he can do for them to the best of his abilities. The old lady wasn’t pushing any boundaries, she just wanted to see his arm for some reason, so refusing *halmeoni* wouldn’t go over well in Jonghyun-*ah’s* moral compass.

He was right when the *Angel Leader* slowly reached his right arm towards *halmeoni* and pushed the sleeves up—

His breath hitched.

It was a terrible sight. Marring the tanned skin were harsh lines of red and pulps of blue, green and purple bruises across the small expanse of the limb. Minki was very alarmed to see icky white fluids flowing on some parts of the unhealed wound. There were still some opened wounds exposing pink flesh underneath.

It looked like the arm fought with the concrete road and lost spectacularly.

The old lady peered closer and tsk-ed. “You told me you dressed the wound up, young man. Come, we’ll go to my house—”

Minki glared at Woojin when he interrupted. Woojin was undeterred by the glare, however, his eyes shooting straight into the *Angel Leader*.

“We’ll be fine, *halmeoni*,” The *BNM* trainee spared the kind lady with a smile. “We can’t stay outside for too long. Our aunt would look for us soon.”

Aunt? What lies did Woojin tell the old lady? Minki was surprised when the old lady just smiled in acquiesce, patting the young trainee’s arm and fussing over Jonghyun-*ah* one last time before waving them goodbye.

Woojin’s amicable smile disappeared the moment *halmeoni* left.
“We’re talking about this, hyung. Let’s go.”

Choi Minki was very familiar with the red-hazed emotion of anger. He was angry about a lot of things and his emotion spectrum was ever swinging from one extreme to another that it wasn’t new for him to hear about others commenting that he was somewhat bipolar. He wasn’t, he checked. He was just incredibly emotional.

Which somewhat led to him crying his anger out at Kim Jonghyun.

The sight of his injury snapped his well-kept negative emotions to get out in a flurry of tears and expletives. He kept his worries about *Produce 101* and NU’EST’s future, his frustrations at Pledis Entertainment, his anxiety at their possible disbandment, his fear of Jonghyun and Minhyun leaving NU’EST because of their booming success with the other trainees—it was too much.

He had to let them out and the infirmary was a good place to do so.

The moment they stepped into the compound, Woojin all but dragged the *Angel Leader* by his good arm towards the infirmary. Any protestations were met with such an acidic glare that Jonghyun-ah kept his mouth shut lest the unassuming dancer lashes out at him.

The nurse was horrified at the gruesome arm and immediately asked what happened.

“I fell, noona. I slowed my fall and I scraped my arm against the concrete. I tripped on my own feet. I think I’m more tired than I thought,” The *Angel Leader* sheepishly smiled to the incredulous expression of the nurse.

“Hmph,” The nurse scowled. “You trainees think you’re invincible but you’re also human. Pushing yourselves to the point of exhaustion is so frustrating.”

Jonghyun shrugged. Huffing, the nurse brought antiseptic solutions, gauze, and bruising creams. It was silent in the cold room; the only sound came from the clinging of the forceps against the metal bowl.

The two trainees quietly watched the procedure. The nurse sensed there was something amiss but her code of ethics prevented her from prying. She quietly left the room to give her patient and the two other trainees some privacy.

“Hyung. What happened?”

Jonghyun sighed, running his fingertips on the white gauze on his forearm. “You heard me explain. I fell, end of story.”

Minki didn’t know what to believe anymore. Jonghyun may be clumsy to the point that accidents were a norm for the *onibugi* leader, but from being tired? He knew the leader for eight years and he could count on his hands the number of times Jonghyun fell due to exhaustion.

Were they truly pushing him to the point he couldn’t stand on his feet?

Minki felt waves of guilt, regret and anger wash over him. Anger not at his leader, but at himself. Here he was, letting his leader work as an aesthetics director, stage planner, idol, and trainee all into one that he did not even ask if he was *fine*. He just assumed that Jonghyun, kind and strong Jonghyun, can handle everything without trouble. Maybe it was how he accepted that the leader wouldn’t accept any help in the first place, but it still did not justify his callousness in dismissing
his brother’s troubles as something superficial and can be handled in a swift manner.

He couldn’t help. He burst into tears.

Jonghyun’s eyes widened, brown irises glinting under the light. “Minki-yah—”

“You’re lying, Jonghyun-ah,” He softly said, voice shaky with repressed bawls. “I know you.”

The leader slumped.

He sighed heavily, rubbing his palms over his face. “I’m not lying…well, sort of. I did not fell out of clumsiness, I blacked out.”

Woojin frowned. “Blacked out? How can you black out, hyung?” Then his eyes widened. “Wait, are you sick?”

“I don’t feel sick so I don’t think so. I really think I was just so tired that time from all the activities that my body couldn’t handle the stress anymore.”

Woojin looked guilty for one second before he relented with a sigh. The BNM trainee did not fuss over the leader like the others but Woojin stood closer to Jonghyun-ah like a sentinel watching over his charge. To Jonghyun’s disappointment, they were unwavering in their decision to tell the others.

“We don’t have to tell the others, I’m fine—”

Woojin was uncharacteristically brusque. “Anesthesia’s addling your brain, hyung. You’re talking nonsense.”

“But—”

“We’re telling them or so help me, I’d throw you to the ground myself and tell Aron hyung you fainted.”

That ended all discussions.

They arrived to practice room ‘D’ and watched Unit 3 practicing the choreography with the vocals. Hyunbin was the first to see them and alerted everyone else. They cheered at the sight of plastic bags filled with delicious meat and cakes and immediately stopped the practice.

They all sat in a circle as Jaehwan and Jiseong hyung readied the paper plates and cups for them. Soon, they were eating with gusto since the practice took quite a lot from them.

Jihoon spoke around the piece of beef he was chewing. “You took a long time, hyung. Where did you buy the meat?”

“Same place where you liked the galbi, Hoon-nie.”

Jaehwan raised an eyebrow. “The one near the coffee shop? That’s only a fifteen-minute walk.”

Minki and Woojin met the leader’s eyes before looking away.

“Hyung?”

“I—well, I got into an accident a few days ago and had to visit the infirmary.”
Silence.

Minki noticed how Jiseong-ie hyung’s gaze immediately zoned in on the hidden injured arm.

The others stopped eating, eyes wide in worry.

“Hyung, what happened?” Seonho gasped, scandalized at what he heard.

Jonghyun looked so pale and unwilling that Minki was wrecked with guilt once more for pushing the leader, but he had to. He made a terrible mistake not checking on the welfare of his brother and he’d be damned if he wouldn’t tell the kids who were always trying to take care of the leader during the times that he, Minhyun, and Dongho were not around.

Gasps were heard when the exposed arm was shown to everyone. Even if the wound was covered in white gauze, the amount of bandage used to wrap the arm to prevent wound infection was upsetting.

At the shocked expressions, Jonghyun smiled comfortingly. “It’s fine, just a scratch. I fell on the road and used my arm to soften the blow. It was concrete, though,” Daniel winced. “So, it scraped my skin off.”

“But why would you faint, hyung? Are you sick?”

Seonho’s comment of sickness only unsettled everyone and the worried faces turned to one of alarm and worry.

“No, no, I’m not sick! I was just tired and my body gave up on my heavy weight.”

The attempt at humor did not lighten their concern over the leader. Seonho and Hyunbin accepted the reason but not without making Jonghyun-ah promise not to overexert himself again. The others, though, had more intense reactions.

Daniel and Jaehwan waited no time before flying to Jonghyun-ah’s side and checking for more injuries. Jinyoung and Jihoon were clinging to the leader’s left side in a move reminiscent of how Seonho clings to the hyungs. Seongwoo went to Woojin’s side and quietly asked the details of their trip and the state of the wound.

Away from the group was Jiseong hyung who had a dark scowl on his face which meant that he was not in a good mood.

Minki tried to appease the hyung. “He’s fine now, Jiseong-ie hyung—”

“I find that hard to believe,” His voice was soft but the tone was as cold as winter. “I’ve witnessed Jonghyun-ah sick once, you remember,” Minki winced at the memory of his leader’s pallid skin and shivering form. “Woojin told me about the arm so I tried to find out if it was the truth.”

“Yes, I remember Jonghyun getting scared because you were accusing him of dying.”

It was silent for a moment as they watched Jonghyun-ah laugh with the others when—

Jiseong-ie hyung’s voice went lower. “Sometimes you need to unsettle someone who won’t talk for them to tell you what you want to hear.”

Minki gulped. Jiseong-ie hyung was sometimes a wolf in sheep’s clothing. “An act, then?”

A curt nod. “I learned what I needed to know in the end, anyway.”
“And?”

Yoon Jiseong’s answer would haunt him in his sleep.

“We need to watch out for Jonghyun-ah. He’s not okay.”

Unfortunately for the others, they had no chance to grill the Angel Leader more questions. The fan-meet was only a few days away and they still had a lot of things to do. Jonghyun allowed his dongsaengs and hyungs to fuss over him when they can, albeit reluctantly, because he knew they would only be pushier and he didn’t need more stress than usual. The fan-meet was looming so close that he had no time to create a visual concept for them.

_I guess it’s back to the basics_, Jonghyun sighed.

He contacted Aron hyung for help in the visual department since Stylenanda wouldn’t be sponsoring them for this fan-meet because it was happening so abruptly. He couldn’t blame the representatives of the designer line. Mnet was truly cutting everything close to fit the limited time they had as Produce 101 trainees.

Jonghyun felt the impending close slowly squishing his airways. But he knew he had to hold on further because the finale was close and he wanted to give the best stage ever for the last aired episode. Maybe it was his pride talking but he started with a bang and he wanted to end with something much louder than that.

So, he pulled some strings to allow them to be styled like how they did before any sponsors came into the picture.

The practices and his planning were halted to a stop, however, when he reached the cafeteria during breakfast. Only to see the screen was flashing blue.

Signifying that the eliminations were today.

Jonghyun felt his heart stop.

The other trainees were in hysterics.


“Wah,” Minhyun threw the blue screen a scoff. “Mnet’s really doing a surprise elimination. I can’t believe it.”

He could somehow sympathize with the others. Eliminations usually happen at the end of the week, so as to have the viewers a stable list of trainees. It wouldn’t do for the producers of the show to receive angry emails about missing trainees and whatnots in the aired episode.

That’s not the case now. The show must’ve cut the voting last night.

Nevertheless, the eliminations were happening today and he needed to keep his calm in check.

Jonghyun felt clammy and feverish as he tied his blue necktie on top off his Produce 101 uniform. The second-to-the-last eliminations would start in an hour and the Angel Leader was handling the pressure far worse than what he threatened himself to do. After the little scare he had two days ago, he wanted to show a calm visage to everyone but mostly ‘Never’ Team. His team was distressed
enough as it is, since the past few days were filled with so much drama, that he didn’t to have them worried about him again.

Collapsing once was enough for Kim Jonghyun.

He entered the auditorium with a heavy heart and shaky palms. He threw the sincerest smile he could muster towards a nervous Minki and a pale Guanlin before seating between Seongwoo and Minhyun. Daniel, Jinyoung, Seongwoon-nie hyung, Hyunbin, and the BNM Boys were closely seated them. The newly-blonde Fancam King flashed a thumbs-up before facing the stage. Jonghyun was envious of Daniel’s ability to bounce back to a normal state with all the craziness happening around them.

The trainees’ entrance was a faster affair, what with only thirty-five trainees remaining, and the Angel Leader was terrified of the aspect that sooner than he like, only twenty of them would be left in the competition. Out of all the eliminations back in his past, the cut-off after Concept Evaluations was the most heart-wrenching for him. Group Battle Evaluations did not leave such an impact on him as Concept Evaluations.

He thought he’d be eliminated after Positions Evaluations but was given the chance to proceed to the next evaluations and at this point, he developed more than a rudimentary attachment to the trainees he only met a few months ago. The final results were painful, yes, he won’t deny it anymore, but he was also looking at the silver lining for NU’EST, even if Minhyun would be gone for a year and a half. So, the eliminations after Concept Evaluations gutted something in him back in the past and he knew it’ll be the same for him in this timeline because at this point, he just knew that what he did for all the concept stages may truly not be enough to save everyone.

Even though most of the trainees in Top 35 did debut with or right after Wanna One such as JBJ, RAINZ, duos like MXM Boys and Euiwoong x Hyeongseop, and soloists like Samuel and Sewoon, the fact still remained that he felt like cheating for taking the other trainees’ chances of getting into the finals when it wasn’t even his to take.

Now…it would be harder because he grew closer to the trainees and their unity in the visual concept planning only formed stronger attachments between them. Heck, he invested so much on them, and they in him, that the thought of eliminating even one sent a bitter taste to his mouth.

BoA sunbaenim entered the stage in a ruby-red frilly blouse and chic black pencil. Sparks fell on her entrance, similar to what happened to the concept stages, and Jonghyun felt a jolt of amusement the Mnet was truly trying to lure viewers in with more dramatic scenes for a good TV.

Like what you have been doing, his mind supplied. And he conceded to that with a raised glass of champagne.

The Nation’s Representative addressed the crowd with light pleasantries.

“It’ll be a very exciting night for all of us,” She began. “But before anything else, I give my congratulations to the first-ranked teams and the Rank 1 trainees for the Concept Evaluations,” The camera panned to Daniel and Minhyun’s faces. “They achieved the highest votes in the onsite and online polls, with only few percentage differences between them—”

“But will it be enough to be saved from elimination?”

The cheers immediately died down.

“Oh, have faith on the Nation’s Producers,” The emcee smiled. “Their very strong support
garnered a huge difference in ratings from the last evaluations. As of June 3, 2017, TV ratings of *Produce 101* Season 2 skyrocketed to an overwhelming 7.36% audience share nationwide, almost 20% higher than ratings during the Positions Evaluations—"

What? That *high*? Jonghyun really wanted to know what story Mnet fashioned for them to get such amazing ratings.

“—and all concept teams ranking within Top 10 of *Naver* and *Daum*’s trending videos and ranking within Top 100 of *YouTube*’s trending list in many countries.”

“*YouTube*?” Seongwoo choked in disbelief.

Everyone was in a state of shock at this point, even him, because the only thing he could think about was—

*We did that.*

It truly was a big achievement for the show. Reaching different platforms that may not be prevalent in Korea but was one of the main sources of entertainment for roughly 70% of the world’s population was something he never expected. Heck, even debuted idols that have large fanbases now did not achieve such a huge popularity on a pre-debut promotion. A pleasant surprise, indeed.

“So, we’ve been doing this tradition of guessing the number of votes the Rank 1 trainee got for the evaluations. Anyone wants to guess?”

“4,000,000 votes!” Seonho shouted.

“Close, but it’s higher than that,” BoA *sunbaenim* smiled. “We’ve reached *way* higher than that.”

“As of June 3, 2017, Rank 1 trainee achieved 5,549,851 votes—”

That roused both excited and dreading expressions on the trainees’ faces because getting five million votes was just…huge.

“I’ll be damned,” Seongwoo cursed, eyes blown wide in astonishment.

*Wait, June 3?*

Dongho caught up immediately. He sat up. “It’s not over yet.”

“It’s June 7 now—” Minhyun gasped.

“—And as of midnight of June 6, 2017, the highest ranked trainee has 8,043,045 votes in total tally.”

Jonghyun nodded. It was understandable. After opening the international lines for the evaluations at the same time local lines were open, it was no wonder the votes of the Rank 1 trainee blew up to a number nearing ten million.

Frankly, he was surprised it wasn’t more. Heck, their stages had raining sparks, fog, and freaking boombox contraptions that move so *his* trainees should have the best number of votes.

The *Angel Leader* snorted.

He’s going absolutely barmy from the ridiculous train of thoughts in his head.
Good, just in time for the eliminations, his mind supplied.

“Unfortunately, we would only pick twenty trainees for the finals.”

The trainees were shocked and dismayed but reined their expressions in.

There were no benefit points to be awarded this time, since it was given already, but it did not lessen the scary experience of the eliminations. Funnily enough, it was worse. It seemed like the script writer decided to shake things up a bit more and asked BoA sunbaenim to go batshit crazy with Top 20 and shuffle the presentation arrangement of the trainees.

“Damn, this would be nerve-wracking,” Minki sighed.

Minhyun kept his aloof expression up but he was cursing up a storm under his breath and away from the mic. “Yeah, sure, forget about order, who cares?” He muttered. “Chaos, random calling of trainees, anarchy, pigs flying in drones—What’s the difference?”

Seongwoo was red in the face from trying not to laugh at the upset expression on Minhyun’s face. The other trainees were on the same page and tried to hide their wariness at the implication of randomization in calling the ranks. Fifteen minutes later, Jonghyun was at a loss. He knew he looked like a gaping tuna but he didn’t give a shit about the cameras.

Top 20 was…

Huh.

Unexpected.

“Let’s begin with…” BoA sunbaenim looked over the cue card. Her eyes brightened. “Ah, let’s go with Rank 12!”

Seongwoo raised an eyebrow. “That’s…bold.” The Kings’ Center wryly commented on the emcee’s randomly chosen rank.

“This trainee was stunning in his concept team, garnering hundreds of fans to his name with the beautiful and dramatic stage of ‘Never’. At 7,000,432 votes—”

He heard Jaehwan whisper, “Seven million, already?”

“That’s only a bit over a million vote-difference from Rank 1,” Minhyun frowned.

“—Brand New Music Entertainment Park Woojin yeonsusaeng.”

The BNM trainee looked dazed as he went towards the twelfth seat lighted by the spotlight. It went as crazy as he thought it would be. BoA sunbaenim called Rank 19th next, as if she was building up the suspense by starting off with a number that was a rank lower than the coveted Top 11 and then announcing a rank higher than Top 20, which was the last place.

“With 5,523,790 votes, our Rank 19 goes to—Starship Entertainment Jung Sewoon yeonsusaeng.”

Jung Sewoon went forward to claim Rank 19, to everyone’s surprise because the trainee was almost always in the higher ranks since the beginning.

“Rank 15. With 6,764,550 votes and having one of the most viewed fancams for the Concept Evaluations as the main vocalist of ‘Open Up’ Team, Rank 15 goes to—Pledis Entertainment Kang
Dongho yeonsusaeng.”

Dongho barely moved from the range of rank positions and the vocalist looked relieved at that realization. He went towards the lighted chair, patting Woojin and Sewoon’s shoulders as he passed by. Jonghyun looked at the three filled positions and raised an eyebrow.

“Let’s go with something a bit higher—Rank 9.”

Beside him, Minhyun looked like he was having a conniption in his head.

“With the technicolor stage of ‘Showtime’, this trainee showed impeccable dance skills and idol aura as the center. At Rank 9 with 7,671,104 votes—Brave Entertainment Kim Samuel yeonsusaeng.”

Samuel stood up from his seat between Jihoon and Seongwoo, accepting the pats of encouragement from his teammates before seating on the third level of the pyramid.

“At Rank 16, we have one of the members of the popular Kings’ Team and now belonged to the beautiful concept stage of ‘I Know You Know’. With 6,522610 votes, we have OUI Entertainment Kang Donghan yeonsusaeng.”

He stood up to clap for his dongsaeng, the rest of Kings and his concept team standing up after him. Donghan was blushing as he went up the stage, thanking his fans and doing his killing point dance in ‘I Know You Know’.

Seongwoo had a minute frown on his face. “Sixteen? That’s too low for him.”


Seongwoo looked offended but did not deny anything. It was true that there was some friendly competition between Seongwoo and Donghan after the two dancers got split and had the best roster of dancers in their teams. But as much as the Kings’ Center denies it, their maknae was one of the few who got Ong Seongwoo to let loose. From Minhyun’s amused expression, Seongwoo did not fool him.

The ranks went crazier as the names were called one by one, which really didn’t help a certain Angel Leader’s promise of a stress-free weekend. So much for that, Jonghyun sighed.

Cube Entertainment Yoo Seonho was called for 17th place, three places higher than his last rank, while Pledis Entertainment Choi Minki sat on the 11th seat, four places higher his last two ranks. The Sexy Prince of ‘Open Up’ had a special VCR of the most popular GIFs made by the fans and everyone went wild at the amazing cuts while Seonho had his meme face screenshots shown on the screen, to everyone’s amusement. Yuehua Entertainment Ahn Hyeongseop went down to 18th place, a fact that a lot were stunned to realize, but it paled in comparison to the reaction of everyone when—

“At 14th place—” BoA sunbaenim faltered as she raised an eyebrow. “This trainee captured the hearts of everyone from his rap in ‘Fear’ and now belonged to the high-ranked team ‘Never’—”

Minhyun’s eyes widened as he turned to stare at him. Jonghyun felt eyes on him. “Is it—?”

“—At 6,821,450 votes, Cube Entertainment Lai Guanlin yeonsusaeng.”
It was difficult to paint the expressions on the rest of ‘Never’ Team as their maknae went up the stage with a bright smile and a light jump to his feet. Daehwi and Woojin were shocked at the vast difference of ranks (‘Ten ranks? That’s insane,’ The ‘Nayana’ Center exclaimed.). Minhyun, Seongwoo, and Dongho looked saddened but did not say anything.

**MMO Entertainment** Yoon Jiseong went four places higher at 13th rank while **Ardor & Able** Ha Seongwoon was the current highest ranked trainee at Rank 8. The ‘Showtime’ Leader did the request for him to do the facial expressions he did for the concept stage that made him trend in network polls. The center of ‘I Know You Know’ sang the high notes of his concept as thanks for his fans.

“At Rank 7,” The trainees leaned in. Jonghyun felt a slight chill crawl up his spine because this was his past rank for the Concept Evaluations. “With 8,001,307 votes, this trainee had been making waves since the legendary stage of the Kings’ Team and now as one of the kings of ‘Never’ Team—”

“I think it’s me,” Jonghyun murmured.

Seongwoo scoffed.

“With 8,001,307 votes, we have—Independent Trainee Kim Jaehwan yeonsusaeng.”

Jaehwan went up the stage with his different teams cheering him on. BoA sunbaenim was especially interested on the killer high note the vocalist did for ‘Never’ stage that many of the fans thought was very dramatic because the rain of sparks fell when he reached the note. Jaehwan turned red but sang his high note.

While the trainees were preoccupied with Jaehwan’s singing, Jonghyun observed the occupied seats on the pyramid. On the lowest level, only one seat remained empty whereas the top levels were blank and intimidating. The emcee may have called everyone in random but she still retained the suspense by holding back in calling out most of the ranks in Top 11. But with most of the ranks after Top 11 called already, it was time for the showdown.

Rank 10 went towards **Brand New Music Entertainment** Lee Daehwi which started dismayed reactions from the trainees. Jonghyun could relate to them because in a short while, the once-slated to be Rank 1 trainee since the auditions slipped lower and lower after each evaluation—A fact that none of them found comfort in. Daehwi raised his head up and smiled towards the camera, thanking his fans and his parents for supporting him even from afar.

“For Rank 6 position, this trainee caught massive attention from the Nation’s Producers since his stint with the legendary Kings Team—”

Seongwoo leaned towards them, voice in a whisper. “It’s only the four of us left,” As if in cue, Daniel looked back to meet their eyes, worried gaze running over them.

Minhyun weakly replied, “Yeah.”

“—and made waves in social media with his fancam in dance team ‘Get Ugly’—”

Seongwoo grew paler by the second.

“—and as the charismatic and handsome vocal in the highest-ranked team in the online votes, ‘Never’ Team—With 8,004,704 votes, we have Fantagio Entertainment Ong Seongwoo yeonsusaeng.”
Seongwoo exhaled sharply before standing up and winking at them. Shoulders relaxed, he all but sauntered up the stage with the swagger that only the Triple Threat Ong can do. BoA sunbaenim was particularly interested in Seongwoo’s viral fancam in ‘Never’ wherein he flirted with the camera throughout his performance and ended the stage with a flourishing bow, a sultry yet dramatic stare and a hundred thousand views in less than two hours. Seongwoo looked pleased as he repeated the iconic dance and his wink while grinning at the hollering trainees watching him. Seongwoo thanked his fans before seating in the 6th seat, right in the third level of the pyramid.

After Seongwoo left, Jonghyun felt the trainees tense. Minhyun slightly fidgeted but did not move further in case the camera caught onto his discomfort. Below him, he saw how still Jaehwan and Jinyoung were. Daniel and Jihoon were faring slightly better but not that much.

“Since we will only get the Top 20 trainees for the finals—”

The Angel Leader could practically smell the tension.

“—We only have six places to fill.”

The remaining five chairs on top of the pyramid and the last chair on the bottom level were lighted up.

“We’ll start in Rank 5.”

At this point, Jonghyun asked the fates to give him this ranking. He didn’t want nor need any more fame. He loved his fans, both from his past and this timeline, and he knew he’d love his fans in any timeline, but he knew this was not for him. His talk with Seongwoo opened up some things for him. Besides, taking another rank within the Top 3 would only put him on a tighter noose with the management because he would be forced to do much more.

He agreed with styling the future Wanna One for their first exclusive edition with Stylenanda because he had some sketches done already for each theme. He knew Styling Director Kim Heejung noona went with his plan to go incognito because his reputation preceded his odd conditions, a few of which ran through the lines of “No one can know”.

But now with Stone Music’s proposal of contributing with either future Wanna One’s discography or the planned NU’EST’s comeback album collaboration between the company and Pledis (“That’s if you don’t get within the Top 11 ranks—But I highly doubt it,’ Stone Music PR Manager added.), Fantagio offering a script for an up-coming drama about the struggles of trainee life, and a possible collaboration with the next season of Produce 101 as the aesthetics director would only complicate things further.

It would change everything.

You can’t meddle with time.

Seongwoo was right. Even if he was not referring to the same thing, the principle remained the same.

Jonghyun shook his head.

He’d deal with everything after the eliminations.

“—This trainee was a crowd favorite since the beginning, placing high in the ranking visuals and his performances. Known first as the handsome trainee of Avengers’ Team’s ‘Boy in Luv’ performance in the group battles and one of the members of the famous promo unit 3 with his
fancam amassing millions in the ‘Tarantallegra’ performance—”


Jinyoung calmed down enough to breathe. On the other hand, Jihoon tensely sat on his seat, the camera panning to show his calm face to the crowd and the viewers. But the Angel Leader knew Park Jihoon more than most of the people in the room and he knew Jihoon was not as calm as the others think.

“With 8,005,216 votes, Rank 5 belongs to…C9 Entertainment Bae Jinyoung yeonsusaeng.”

The trainees clapped as Jinyoung went up the stage to take the mic from the emcee and thanked his supporters for the massive number of votes given to him. Jonghyun was truly happy for their maknae because he was slowly showing his personality to everyone. The Angel Leader was just glad he got the kid to be more comfortable with himself.

Then BoA sunbaenim shook the eliminations up a bit more.

“Let’s do this a bit differently.”

Jonghyun developed a healthy amount of trepidation towards the innocent-looking blue cue card every evaluations period where the “surprise rules” were written and every elimination result, which is self-explanatory—

But, fucking hell, when she put the card in her jacket, Jonghyun felt a different type of fear shot up his spine, which was far more dangerous.

BoA sunbaenim had a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I will be calling the names of the trainees that are within the Top 20…and the trainee that is now in Rank 21.”

Goddammit.

“The trainees within Top 21 are the following, in no particular order: Maroo Entertainment Park Jihoon yeonsusaeng—”

Jihoon’s relieved face panned on the screen.

“—Brand New Music Lim Youngmin yeonsusaeng—”

Youngmin’s calm expression was added in the six boxes on the screen.

“—Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng—”

Jonghyun did not look up at the screen, afraid of what his expression looked like.

“—Cre.ker Entertainment Joo Haknyeon yeonsusaeng—”

Cheers erupted from the other side of the room.

“—MMO Entertainment Kang Daniel yeonsusaeng—”

Daniel’s tensed shoulders slightly relaxed.

“—and Pledis Entertainment Hwang Minhyun yeonsusaeng.”

Minhyun took a deep breath.
BoA sunbaenim smiled. “These are the last trainees in the Top 21. Congratulations! Now, let us find out the ranks. In Rank 4—” She stopped.

Jonghyun felt worried when the unflappable BoA looked shocked at the result.

She composed her expression immediately. “In Rank 4,” She repeated. “We have the trainee whose fame surpassed what any other trainee had achieved. Ranking high since the Group Battles, the member of the legendary Kings team made the headlines for his talent and charisma in ‘Fear’ and ‘Never’. Earning the name ‘Nation’s Stylist’, this trainee’s visionary styling captured the attention of the producers. With 8,010,104 votes in total tally, we have…Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun yeonsusaeng.”

The cheers were deafening as Jonghyun came up the stage. The Angel Leader was mostly pleased at the result, thanking the fates that he didn’t rank first for the evaluations.

Less for him to worry about, Jonghyun smiled in relief.

He thanked the fans and his team for a job well done, and relented on BoA sunbaenim’s request for him to perform his iconic part in ‘Never’. Jaehwan went down from his seat and joined him in the rap verse since it was technically both their parts. The Angel Leader was so happy with his placement that he did quite a few fanservice to his fans by maintaining eye contact with the camera and doing the step with a little more enthusiasm.

Jaehwan was so red in the face afterwards, to the amusement of everyone in the room.

The rankings were expected for once and Jonghyun was truly pleased at how the rankings for Top 3 went. Jihoon took third place with a few hundred votes above his own, to everyone’s surprise. The Wink Master gave more fanservice by presenting a new aegyo move he invented before twisting it to a sexier rendition. Minhyun took second place and Daniel ranked first, which made Jonghyun very happy.

The two centers only had a ten-thousand difference but no one could contest their eligibility as Rank 1 and 2. Minhyun thanked his fans, ‘Never’ Team, Unit 1, and his family for the support before doing fanservice by copying Jihoon’s iconic aegyo moves, to said originator’s amusement. Daniel, on the other hand, was the renowned Fancam King through and through. His fancam in ‘Open Up’ was the highest amongst all the fancams since season 1 and the trainee capitalized on that by making a tribute to his killing point dance while staring straight at the camera.

Beside him, Jihoon was hooting at the sexiness of his hyung.

Rank 20 went to Youngmin which surprised most of the trainees. Haknyeon had been one of the consistent top trainees and his elimination from the competition roused some disbelief in the trainees. In his position high above the pyramid, all Jonghyun wanted was to rush down and be with the other trainees.

As soon as BoA sunbaenim said goodbye, he ran down the steps and went to his trainees.

It was a bittersweet moment for everyone, knowing that they’d see each other in a few days but a boundary remained between the eliminated trainees and the final 20. Jonghyun went to Justin, his two apprentices in design since the first promotional activity, and rose his spirits up.

“Don’t cry,” Jonghyun said in broken Mandarin. “You will reach your dreams soon. You never know, maybe it’s just waiting around the corner.” He said, remembering the Chinese trainee’s success as one of the most popular idols in Mainland China.
“Thank you, gege. Take care, okay?”

Hyunbin was next. The YG trainee was teary-eyed but still optimistic as he refused to say goodbye.

“There’s the fan-meet, still, hyung. And I won’t miss out on performing with Unit 3. Jinyoung-ie and I were betting on Seongwoo hyung tripping.”

Seongwoo heard the statement and slapped the tall trainee on the arm. Jonghyun smiled as the funny Ong inconspicuously wiped a tear away.

The trainees all went to him, either to thank him or just receive comfort. Gunhee was bawling but was thankful for the experience he learned from Jonghyun. The other trainees said their goodbyes and hugged him tight before moving on to the others. Jonghyun comforted as many trainees as he could.

Minki was having a really bad night. He woke up sweating and pale from his dream-filled sleep of weird memories that he was sure did not happen. He rubbed his temples, wishing the sudden migraine to leave him. It was still dark out and the rest of ‘Open Up’ Team were still asleep. The clock on top of Jinyoung’s empty bed pointed at half-past three, an ungodly time for him to be awake, but he was awake now and wouldn’t be falling asleep anytime soon.

The Sensual Prince of ‘Open Up’ sighed and went down the bunkbed, pausing to put an additional blanket on top of Daniel’s shivering form. It was a cool night for spring so they opted to turn the cooler off and let the natural breeze through the windows. He went to the bathroom to relieve himself before sitting on the bed opposite Daniel’s, which happened to be Sanggyun’s previous bed.

It was an emotion-filled night for everyone. They lost three members in one night: Yongguk, Sanggyun, and Kenta. Their maknaes were so sad that it took a while before they got to sleep. Dongho was softly snoring in the bottom bunkbed nearest to the door, cuddling on the stuff toy Kenta gave him before he left. Daniel was hogging Sanggyun’s blankets and Jinyoung did not come back when he went out to go find someone. Minki was certain the trainee either went to ‘Oh Little Girl’ Team or ‘Never’ Team.

The visual trainee looked up at the ceiling. He was still in awe of his place in the Top 11. It has been a while since he placed within the coveted ranks due to the abundance of talented trainees in the competition. But at a loss, too, because fifteen trainees were eliminated so swiftly.

There were times when he felt like he cheated his dongsaengs of their place. He was a debuted idol and no matter how many times they joined trainee survival shows like this, it would remain that way as long as their contract stood. So, they were not trainees like the HOTSHOT boys and Samuel-ah, but they were still in the competition.

Minki wondered if any of his Produce 101 friends thought badly of him for usurping their place.

He sighed once more. It was pointless to dwell on things that have past, he told himself.

Readying himself to sleep on Sanggyun’s bed (he just doesn’t have the energy to climb back up on his bed), he fluffed the pillows and smelled the musky scent of the trainee’s cologne.

Then he felt it.

The bad feeling that woke him up.
Choi Minki sat up straight. His gut was churning and a bitter taste settled in his mouth.

His gut only supplied one name.

*Jonghyun.*

He never failed to listen to his instincts. Minki pushed the door open with a bang and ran down the hallways as fast as he could, thanking the heavens that *Never* Team’s dorms were the nearest to them. It took little time for him to reach the door and push it open.

The room was dark and the only sound was coming from the soft *whoosh* of the breeze from the opened windows. Minki took careful steps into the room to check on the beds.

The first he saw was Daehwi sleeping on the bottom bunkbed nearest to the door. Jaehwan occupied the top bunk. Seongwoo and Woojin were placed next to them and both were dead to the world. Guanlin was across them, softly snoring, and Minhyun was above him even if the *Hwanggallyang* was wrapped up like a cocoon under his blankets.

The last bunkbed was empty.

Jonghyun was not here.

Minki stepped closer to the lone bed. The sheets were not done which meant that the leader left in a hurry.

Reaching out to tip the sheets over, he felt something wet. It was too dark to see but as he ran his hand over the bed, he felt the wet region, trailing along the bed and stopping at the ladder.

He pulled his hand back and jerked at what he smelled.

The liquid smelled like iron.

Minki turned and was about to search for Jonghyun when he saw a soft orange light coming from the bathroom door. He knocked, voice shaken.

“Jonghyun-ah, it’s me, Minki, I just came to check up on you. Are you feeling okay?”

No answer.

Minki felt a cold draft creep up his spine.

He tried again, leaning closer to the door as if to whisper. “I saw the bed, there’s blood on it. What’s going on, Hyun-ah?”

No answer.

The cold was getting higher.

He knocked slightly louder, voice urgent. “I’m coming in, Hyun-ah. Don’t come at me if I see something you wouldn’t want me to see.”

Minki said that as a threat to make Jonghyun move and open the door, like he was supposed to do when his privacy was at stake.

But to his increasing worry, the door remained close.
He didn’t wait for any answer and turned the knob, roughly pushing the door open and momentarily wondering why he was met with no resistance.

The small washbasin was overflowing with water but he didn’t take notice of it.

The still form of Kim Jonghyun lying on the cold slippery floor took over his mind.

“Jonghyun-ah!”
The sensation started slow, as if something was poking him on the head with a blunt stick. It wasn’t painful but it was irritating. He tried to swat whatever it was that was poking him but only felt air.

*Migraine*, his brain suggested.

But it wasn’t.

He knew it wasn’t.

This happened before but he couldn’t remember—

Why can’t he remember?

It stopped.

Then returned for a second time…

Third...

Fourth...

And more times than he could count as the repetitions got longer and the interval went shorter.

Then it stopped completely for a second before it returned with the crashing chorus of his insides screaming, squelching against the force of—he didn’t know what—

It was only pain that registered in his mind.

It was abrupt and jarring, sending him into a world of agony as he bent over in pain. He was screaming and must’ve woken his team and the whole compound by now but he couldn’t stop.

It wasn’t a lance of pain targeting at one point but thousands of lances aiming to run the arrowheads through his head with utmost fervor, alternating such masterful synchronization of unending pain and a second of merciful reprieve before it started again.

The pain intensified, prying and pulling his mouth open even if he didn’t want to…

No. The kids will hear—

He didn’t know when it will stop or if he was dying but he knew he wanted to.

It was too much.

He opened his mouth to scream.
The lances suddenly stopped. He was breathing heavily; his cheeks were wet from the tears pulled from his eyes. He swallowed the sob raising up his throat. The pain was gone as soon as it began, like puppets cut off their strings that went away with each breath.

His skin was all but crawling back into his body, an awful background to the cacophony of silence in his head and the creeping coldness and numbness up his body. His instincts should be telling him something, anything at all, but it was silent.

His head was silent.

Which scared him more than anything because it has never been this silent.

Footsteps.

He froze.

“Jonghyun. Wake up.”

He knew that voice. He knew that voice. But it couldn’t be! He was back in ‘Never’ dormitories, waiting for his watch to vibrate because he didn’t want to sleep in again. He just saw him before he went to sleep in his team’s room. But that voice, deeper and sounding more tired than his younger self should ever be but still the same fond exasperation tinging the rebuke in Minki’s tone.

It shouldn’t be possible, but he knew it in his heart.

He was back.

He was in his timeline again.

How—

“We haven’t got all day and you’re just here lazing around? We still have to devise the contract signing for the trainees, plan creative storylines for the next comeback, directors’ meeting, the mergers—are you even listening to me? We don’t have time to deal with your moping around—Are you awake? Jonghyun-ah—”

Minki? You’re here? Help me, the pain’s too much…

Then he heard a different voice: soothing, gentle, with a bit of wryness to their tone but still a very familiar voice that clicked in his brain.

Minhyun?

“It wasn’t just meant for us. We fought. Grew apart. Went out on our own ways. We haven’t talked in years. And a large part of me don’t want to…”

What? Wait. Minhyun? What is this? This isn’t what he remembered—

The ringing was unbearable. The blackness in his vision started to shake.

Then he heard it.

That voice.
“—I cannot break anyone without breaking the law. But what is the law without anyone to break it? The industry’s darker than even you and I could realize. Sometimes…we just need to pull a few fingers…to see farther than most…”

It’s starting.

What? No. No! You can’t make me! Please! Anyone! Save me…

“Hyun-ah?”

He screamed.

Kang Dongho had a horrible awakening when he heard loud yells. Disoriented, he peered through the dark. He saw Daniel’s distinguishable messy hair seated up on the bed near the window. Jinyoung was also present in the room and the frustration evident on his face proved that he was not hallucinating. The maknae of ‘Open Up’ grunted in frustration as he kicked his blankets off and stomped towards the open door before closing them, shoulders bristling in irritation.

“What’s happening.” Daniel grumbled, rustling his hair in confusion.

“I don’t know,” Jinyoung scowled. “Let’s wait for Minki hyung to come back, I’m too tired,” was the muffled reply from the maknae after he laid facedown and smashed his face on the pillow. Daniel stayed still for a moment before he, too, succumbed to his fatigue.

But Dongho remained awake. He knew something was up. With how each concept team was housed, there was only one team placed nearby them whilst the others were in another building altogether. His sleep-addled mind snapped back into focus when Minki and Jaehwan barged into the room.

The main vocal of ‘Never’ proceeded to shake Daniel so hard he could hear the tired pants coming from the trainee. Jinyoung, who was a light sleeper, woke up immediately and immediately focused on the ruckus happening a few feet away from him.

“Jaehwan hyung? What—What are you doing—Hey! Stop!”

Dongho’s focus came back as the red-rimmed eyes of his brother overtook even his peripheral vision.

Wait, crying?

The main vocal of ‘Open Up’ only caught few intelligible words as Minki soon started crying as he tried to tell the story as to why he was awake at such an hour and with a trainee from another team.

“—awake—an hour ago—hic—blood—so—sniff—much blood—I can’t—too much—Jonghyun-ah—”

Dongho sat up immediately, blood frozen cold. “Jonghyun-ah? What happened to Hyun-ah?”

Minki did not explain further. Without prompting, he fled the room, his footsteps heavy against the hard floor. Dongho did not question further. He knew something was terribly wrong and that his leader was in the middle of it. He ran after Minki. Jaehwan, also crying, frantically dragged Daniel
and Jinyoung out of their beds, confused but even more wary at what happened in ‘Never’ Team.

He arrived at the scene in such a short time and yet Dongho felt like it took much longer than that. It was pandemonium; the dormitory of ‘Never’ Team was packed with staff members flitting in the scene and running in and out the room. Minki was at the door, arguing heatedly at one of the male staff members who was blocking his way. The room was dark, the blinds shut securely in their clasps and no cameras were filming the scene. The staff gathered at the doorway saw them coming and tried to shoo them away.

“You are not needed here. We’re handling it as we speak.”

Dongho’s nerves were frayed with anxiety so he did not hold back in being timid. He glared angrily; propriety be damned. “That’s one of our members in there.”

The staff shook his head. “I understand, but the rules say that trainees are not allowed to—”

“Let them in.”

They turned to a masked female staff walking purposefully towards them. The male staff frowned. “But the rules—”

“One of their members was found unconscious and bleeding,” She snapped, voice sharp as a knife. “At your watch! If the trainees were not able to reach you in time, we may be facing a different situation right now because you have blood in your hands and a body to bury in the ground.”

Behind him, he heard a hitched breath. The staff backed away with a quiet “Yes, ma’am.”

“Protocols are void now.” She then turned towards them and nodded. “You may get in but do not tell the other trainees. We’ve kept the situation as tight as we could, only your team and ‘Never’ are in-the-know.”

Daniel looked sour at the condition but reluctantly accepted it, his worry at the state of the Angel Leader outweighing the unfairness of not telling their other friends about what happened. They were allowed in the room and immediately went towards the trainees huddled in the corner.

Minki was shaking as he stepped in the room. “I—I can’t—”

“Hyung?”

The conflicted expression on his brother’s face was painful to see. He tried to reach out but Minki took a step back.

“I—I’ll go to Jiseong hyung.”

With a last look thrown at the lone bunkbed to the right of the room, he fled the scene as fast as he could.

Dongho let Minki go tell the other trainees. He couldn’t give a shit at what the staff says. He knew their friends deserved to know, and with how decided Minki was in not entering ‘Never’ dormitories with them, he hoped he would have the right judgment in calling Pledis and Aron hyung before the media reach them first.

Dongho observed everyone.

They all looked terrible. Daehwi was silently crying, and from the redness of his eyes it seemed
like he hasn’t stopped in a while. Woojin was sitting against the wall, eyebrows almost sticking together in a furrow, glaring at something on the floor that they couldn’t see. Guanlin was almost catatonic, barely moving when Jaehwan reached the circle and hugged him to his chest. Seongwoo nodded at them when they arrived but did not spare any words as he tried to calm Daehwi by softly patting his back. Minhyun looked like he aged years but was trying to keep everything together as best as he could.

Jinyoung went towards Seongwoo and Daehwi and the Kings’ Center accommodated the upset trainees in his embrace, softly murmuring words to them that he could not hear. Daniel sat beside Woojin, confused and distressed beyond belief.

Minhyun went towards them, dark circles under his eyes prominent in the pallor of his skin. “What a wake-up call, right?”

The attempt at humor was so dry it felt grating and harsh.

“What happened, Minhyun-ah?”

The Hwanggallyang’s voice sounded disconnected and airy, like he was telling a story from a distant dream. “I don’t know when it started but the screams were everywhere. That was what woke me up. I thought I was dreaming at first or that I missed the alarm, but it was far worse,” His voice went to a whisper.

“It was terrible, so terrible. Daehwi turned the lights on and we saw the blood.”

He pointed at the bunkbed above the cabinet and nearest to the bathroom. There was no foam nor sheets left, only the bedframe was seen, but Minhyun was staring at the space like it haunted him.

“I’ve never seen so much blood, not in real life. Jaehwan tripped over Guanlin and started hyperventilating. He couldn’t breathe so I used a paper bag. Daehwi noticed Jonghyun-ah was missing and went to look for him,”

The next words chilled him to the core.

“The next thing I knew Daehwi started screaming. It was so loud and he was crying—we all rushed to the bathroom and saw Minki-yah cradling Jonghyun-ah who was unconscious under the shower.”

“It was him; he was bleeding so much I didn’t know where it was coming from—Jaehwan ran out of the room—,” Minhyun broke off to take a deep, shuddering breath.

“Then the staff came in. Seongwoo and Woojin called them. Jonghyun-ah was put in a stretcher—the white sheets turned red—”

Minhyun wrung his hair and pulled hard enough to hurt but he was unfazed at the pain.

The Hwanggallyang did not speak anymore and he sat on the floor beside Daniel, looking at the staff barging in and not seeing anything.

Jonghyun-ah.

Please pull through.
At five o’clock, ‘Never’ Team dormitories was knocked off its saddles. Only ‘Open Up’ Team and the staff knew. Two hours after, nothing was ever the same because everyone now knew what happened at half-past three a.m. in the ‘Never’ Team dormitories and Park Woojin could only try and ride the pandemonium that arose among them. Woojin felt like the chaos was being cranked up on the knob, increasing by the hour and there was no stopping it.

*Produce 101* was in disarray that their morning wake-up call was not the ‘Nayana’ alarm but the news of *Pledis Entertainment* Kim Jonghyun’s accident.

The room was swamped. The trainees, all disheveled and running with Jiseong hyung in the lead, barged into the room. With the room only having the capacity to comfortably cater ten people at most, the staff soon filed out the room and did not say anything about the blatant disregard of their order to maintain the accidents under wraps. Soon, the remaining twenty trainees in the competition were trying to find out what happened from the concept team.

Not all his teammates wanted to talk: Daehwi chose to remain silent beside Samuel, Jaehwan-nie hyung was just recovering from his breakdown and was staying a few feet away from everyone, and Guanlin had been tight-lipped since the moment they turned on the lights and saw their leader’s unconscious form. Thus, the responsibility fell upon the shoulders of the Seongwoo hyung, Daniel hyung, and Jiseong hyung.

Seongwoo hyung recounted his involvement first.

“Daehwi was the first to wake up,” At this, the ‘Nayana’ center slumped even more against Samuel’s form. “He saw Jonghyun-ah and Minki-yah first and called our attention to them. We seated Jonghyun-ah against the wall and tried to wrap his head with the dirty jersey shirts we had. Minhyun-ah and Minki-yah carried him towards Daehwi’s bed,” He pointed towards the bed frame nearest to the bathroom. “Woojin and I—” The *Kings’ Center* sighed shakily. “We ran and called the staff rounding the corridors near the main halls. They called the ambulance a few minutes later. Then ‘Open Up’ Team arrived.”

They turned to face a grief-stricken Kang Daniel.

“Minki hyung and Jaehwan-nie hyung woke us up,” He said. “Staff hyungs didn’t want us to know but one of the noonas said protocol’s gone now because he could’ve…”

Daniel hyung did not finish the statement. They knew what he was trying to say.

No one spoke for a long while, caught up in their thoughts and worries, all centered on the Angel Leader who could be fighting for his life at that very moment.

“So, what do we do now?”

Everyone looked up to shifting Samuel.

“This,” Samuel said. “This isn’t some minor injury anymore. *Pledis Entertainment* is within their rights to pull out Jonghyun-nie hyung, if not all of NU’EST hyungs.”

Woojin turned to look behind him where the door was—the same door where Minhyun-nie hyung, Dongho hyung, and Minki hyung left to meet the *Pledis* representatives before going to the hospital. The others did the same when they realized how close they were to losing the four trainees they all look up to.

*And wasn’t that a scary thought?*
“Then we’ll do our damn best.”

Everyone turned to look at the person beside Woojin.

“Whether our hyungs finish Produce 101 with us or not, they did so much to help us towards where we are now.” Jihoon said.

“As for Jonghyun-nie hyung,” His resolute tone became more subdued. “He’ll live. The guy's too good to die in such a stupid way, really,” A few chuckles. "Whether he stays or go, however, is out of our hands. There’s nothing we could do but support their decisions.

Besides, he gave us more than the edge of having just an improved style. And I don’t know about you, but no unfortunate happenings could stop me from making Jonghyun-nie hyung proud.

He gave us a stage. Our stage. And it’s about time we damn well give him a show.”

Breakfast was not as noisy as it usually was. The other trainees arrived mid-way through the meal and joined their units in the long tables. The current twenty trainees still in the competition was gladdened to see their teammates but it was still a somber affair. Seeing their reserved countenance, their fellow trainees got curious. Jiseong hyung was delegated as the spokesperson because he was the only one who knew the full story and Daniel was relieved that he was excused from retelling the newly dubbed “The Accident”.

Soon, the story spread like wildfire and everyone knew. Daniel felt bad that Jonghyun-nie hyung’s moment of weakness was being broadcasted like that and he hoped the staff had the common sense to let go this situation go and not put it in the next episodes as part of the drama.

He didn’t know what he would do if Produce 101 violated Jonghyun-nie hyung’s privacy like that.

The staff stuck to their moral compass this time. There were no camera staff, no filming devices, no aesthetics team roaming around with their brushes and makeup trolleys—it was just them, for once, and he appreciated the small time they had to forget their idol trainee persona.

Even for a little while.

But even without Produce 101 staff watching their every move, he still felt unsettled. ‘Never’ Team and NU’EST hyungs were excused from breakfast today so the unit groups were incomplete. Unit Three had half of their numbers missing and their absence had never felt so worrying as it did now.

But he had to remain calm. He had Seonho, Jihoon, and Jinyoung to watch over. He couldn’t afford to break down now.

The quiet atmosphere was broken by the cafeteria doors opening.

It wasn’t the director or BoA sunbaenim.

It was Woojin.

And he looked pissed.

The BNM trainee didn’t dawdle. He went straight for the far end table where Unit Three was seated.
“Woojin?”

The BNM trainee snatched a chicken leg off Jihoon’s plate and tore the meat in an aggressive manner. Jiseong hyung pushed forth his questioning.

“You’re back early. I thought you were in the hospital with your teammates—”

That seemed like the wrong thing to say. If Woojin could spit fire, he would’ve torched the whole building from his anger alone. He went on a tirade, full of spite and fury, as he brought forth a “hyung” and “stupidity” in the sentence. Most of the words used would have brought the attention of the camera crew down on them, all for the drama that would jeopardize their reputation in the show, but Woojin—calm, kind, happy-vitamin Park Woojin—was too angry to care.

“Wait!” Jiseong-ie hyung frantically waved a hand to stop Woojin from talking. “What are you talking about?”

As if on cue, they heard voices coming from the hallway.

A group of voices centering on a familiar one, tired and weary but still emitting the same happy disposition just by his speaking voice.

“I’m famished! Let’s eat!”

Woojin’s eyes narrowed into slits, glaring at the group of trainees entering the cafeteria room in twos.

He brandished a forefinger. “That.”

Daniel felt happy, elated, and so many good emotions he felt overwhelmed by them. But he also felt the beginnings of worry claw in his heart.

“Jonghyun-nie hyung?”

The ‘Get Ugly’ center had many things to say and none of them were nice. His mother taught him to remain calm at all situations and to always be nice and courteous, that he should never open his mouth if he had nothing nice to say. He was an obedient son but now he just wanted to strangle a certain Kim Jonghyun from Pledis Entertainment, injury be damned.

The BNM trainee glared at the leader timidly eating soup a few tables away while accepting the mother-henning of Jiseong hyung, Seongwoo hyung, Minki hyung, Minhyun-nie hyung and half the trainees of Produce 101 with the typical dignified and calm persona of Kim Jonghyun.

He sat with Unit Two, watching from afar.

Because he was upset, so upset.

“But—But—Why is Hyun-ah here?” Taehyun-nie hyung, who was seated a table away, frowned in confusion. “Shouldn’t he be in the hospital?”

Woojin fumed at the reminder.

The rapper of ‘Never’ didn’t know what to do but he had to do it. He wouldn’t forget the look of confusion and utter panic in Minhyun-nie hyung’s face when he asked him to watch over the team.
“They need you now, Woojin-nie. I’ll take care of your hyung, you take care of the team.”

How the hell was he supposed to that?

Minhyun-nie hyung must be out of his damn mind for asking him this. Seongwoo hyung or Daehwi would’ve done better; they’re the assertive ones, those who won’t take no for an answer.

But he couldn’t give up—not on Minhyun-nie hyung, not on his team, not on Jonghyun-nie hyung.

But that doesn’t mean he’s not mad.

It was outrageous and so Jonghyun-like that it wasn’t surprising at all how the Angel Leader decided to ignore that he just got sent to the hospital for the sake of not causing any problems for his team because he was unable to perform with them.

Halfway through breakfast ‘Never’ Team was excused for reasons unknown. Woojin knew the staff wanted to keep everything quiet so he kept quiet. The others trailed after the staff member, ignoring the eyes that followed their departure. Daehwi and Guanlin were flanked by Jaehwan-nie hyung and Seongwoo hyung, as they were the remaining older members of the team, while he remained at the back, watching over his team and making sure no one was lagging.

An onlooker might say that the oldest must take care of the youngest but Woojin begged to differ. One thing he learned from Produce 101, and in joining the industry as a trainee, was that every man was for himself. It seemed like they reached a sense of camaraderie and responsibility towards one another, but in the end, in the face of possible debut and future success in the cruel idol industry, one had to think of himself above the others.

He thought everyone in the competition was just that; a competitor blocking his way towards debut under the management of the biggest media conglomerate in South Korea. He thought everyone were just snakes in sheep’s clothing; using the fondness of the Nation’s Producers by molding an image of a cute and innocent trainee starved for affection.

Kim Jonghyun changed that insight, not only for him but for all the people he took under his wing, trainee or not.

Woojin bit his lip before he followed his team, praying that nothing else will go wrong.

‘Never’ Team reached the hallway going towards the infirmary and rushed towards the sickroom, footsteps thundering through the hallways. Before entering the infirmary, they were stopped from entering by a staff who said they had to wait for Jonghyun-nie hyung to come out the room after his final check with the nurse.

“Kim Jonghyun will be waiting for you in the infirmary. Please wait for the nurse to allow you to enter the room.”

It did not sink into them for a minute or two—that the trainee was dismissed from the hospital after the blood they saw in the bathroom.

“Dismissed?” Seongwoo hyung was spitting fire at this point. Jaehwan-nie hyung grabbed the trainee in warning. Seongwoo hyung breathed deeply before he lowered his tone. “He was bleeding, sir. He had a wound on the head. How can they bring him out the emergency room?”

He had to give credit to the staff member for remaining calm in the face of a livid Ong Seongwoo, even if the sympathy he felt was half-hearted at most. The staffer explained so many medical terms, all of which went over Woojin’s head.

“"
“A superficial wound,” Daehwi repeated the words in a detached tone like it was taking him a long time to wrap his head around it. “Head wounds bleed more than most parts of the body. He’s suffering from a concussion…”

The statement was left hanging.

Jaehwan-nie hyung frowned. “But still. That doesn’t mean he should be released from the hospital. Besides, shouldn’t concussions be treated there?”

The staff, who still did not leave from his place, answered Jaehwan-nie hyung’s question—which did not help the situation in the slightest, Woojin gritted his teeth.

“Kim Jonghyun decided to leave the hospital and recover within the dormitories. He also stated that he wished to perform in the live stage and fan-meet tomorrow.”

Silence.

*Left* the hospital?

The staff hyung must have sensed the animosity and quickly left the scene.

“How—how far can someone push himself—before he just…*stops*?”

Guanlin scowled darkly, answering Jaehwan-nie hyung’s horrified whisper. “To the point of near incapacitation if Kim Jonghyun had any say about it.”

That did not ease their worry at all.

The hyungs of ‘Never’ Team did not reprimand the trainee of his lack of honorifics as the situation was severe enough without adding any more drama to it. They were seated in the rickety chairs outside the infirmary at nine in the morning, worried out of their minds at the condition they found the leader in.

More importantly, however, was the fact that Jonghyun-nie hyung managed to convince the staff to *still* let him perform, to Jaehwan-nie hyung’s unending frustration.

The first thought that came into his head was “Why?”.

Why was hyung in the compound’s infirmary instead of the emergency room? Concussion? That simple?

Heck, his mother would’ve confined him in the hospital for a scratch on the arm!

A dark foreboding thought suddenly occurred to him.

Did Jonghyun-nie hyung decide to risk his health for *them*?

*No, he wouldn’t do that.*

His thoughts were put to a halt when the infirmary doors slowly opened, like it was the opening act for the grand performance. The first people to come out were the staff of *Produce 101* hurrying down the hallways, talking rapidly on their phones or ear-ins. The next were men dressed in formal coats. They were listening to a familiar figure leading the group—

“Aron-nie hyung!”
The *Pledis* representative gave them a weak smile and a nod before leading what could be some of the other representatives from their company.

Minhyun-nie hyung, Minki hyung, and Dongho hyung were still absent.

The last person to come out the infirmary was—

Kim Jonghyun came out with a wide grin and beamed at them. “I’m famished! Let’s eat!”

Woojin felt his fingers curl around his spoon at the memory. In the background, he heard a gentle laugh come from two tables away as a certain trainee avoided the train of food from getting into his mouth.

He tried to let go of the anger he was feeling. Breathing exercises help when you’re seeing “red”, a guidance counselor from his high school said.

*Doesn’t work*, he cursed in his mind.

It was like nothing went wrong—like everything was alright. The moment he went out the doors was a nightmare brought to life. The staff must’ve been so preoccupied in the chaos brought upon an injured trainee while under their watch or that they couldn’t possibly give an ounce of care to what said trainee looked like, but damn, it was like the leader came out of a battlefield.

Jonghyun-nie hyung’s clothes were spattered with flecks of blood of various sizes, more gruesome than the last. The jersey was suspiciously wet and had a yellow-brownish stain running parallel on the abdominal region.

Antiseptic, his mind supplied. The one that Minki hyung poured in his haste to stave the wound on the head.

The sight of white gauze clinically wrapped around his leader’s head made his head spin. But what upset him the most was that he was smiling and laughing and just emitting fucking bright dandelions because of how cheery he was!

Yes, Park Woojin was upset. He tried to stay mad, tried to give the cold shoulder to his stupid hyung, but it made him feel like he was kicking a furry and defenseless puppy. Despite the feeling that he just committed a grave sin, he soldiered on and gave the most scathing glare he could give without crossing the boundaries of insolence.

“Hello, Woojin-nie,” A beatific smile lit up the *Angel Leader’s* face. “Come. Let us eat—”

“Stop.”

Everyone froze in their steps, bodies tensed.

“Woojin?”

“You lied to me. You said you were fine.”

He left before getting an answer, running away—any place where he couldn’t look at Jonghyun-nie hyung in the eye and feel like shit.

The memory of the bruised arm and the bloodied clothes cemented its place on the forefront of his mind.

*It’s not like it would make a difference*, Woojin bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.
When did hyung ever do something for himself?

A hand closed around his fist. He looked up to face a frowning Jihoon.

“Let it go, Woojin-nie.”

A flash of red clouded his gaze. “Oh, so you’re also part of Daehwi’s ‘Let’s leave Jonghyun alone’ too?” He felt his overwhelming anger simmer just under the surface of his skin, but he was too angry to care. “I thought you’d be the first person to agree with me. Guess I was wrong, huh?”

“I didn’t say that,” Jihoon’s tone was even and calm. “But stabbing him with your glares won’t make the situation solve itself.” His bright eyes were solemn. “I’m not saying that hyung is not blameless, but we have no choice but to trust him. He says he’s okay, then he surely must be, yeah?

So, we’ll just have to watch over him, make sure he stops before his body reaches its limit. Plenty of rest, too, and fluids. Less time for fan-meet practice—damn, that’s in two days! Oh well, we’ll fare okay, Jonghyun-nie hyung created the ‘Tarantallegra’ stage within a shorter time than what we would be working on…”

The Maroo trainee continued to outline what they should do to fit both ‘Overcome’ practices and the M! Countdown stage practices around the lessened time of their unit’s leader. The other trainees, who were paying attention to Jihoon’s cheery temperament, nodded in agreement and immediately helped in constructing the tight timeline, even if they did not belong to ‘Never’ Team or Unit Three.

“After all, a good stage is what matters, that’s what Jonghyun-nie hyung always say,” Donghan-nie hyung shrugged. The others agreed profusely at the statement.

Woojin froze.

He was horrified beyond belief.

They severely underestimated the power—the trust—that Kim Jonghyun held within the trainee camp. The same power and trust they placed on him. And for them to let go of their common senses, to choose being blind and trust that someone’s okay when it’s so obvious that they’re not just because they need Jonghyun-nie hyung—

What the hell are we doing?

After the news of a certain onibugi leader getting hospitalized got spread out and the subsequent return of said leader from the infirmary, all eyes went towards ‘Never’ Team, and by association, ‘Open Up’ Team and the newly arranged Unit 3. The others tried pretending that they were concentrating for the fan-meet and live stages but the hastily thrown glances in their direction proved otherwise. Daniel could only be thankful that the stares slowly decreased once their workload consumed the little time that they had.

Kang Daniel watched as his fellow trainees divided themselves into groups, most of whom were practicing for the fan-meet while the select few practiced for the live stages. He was with ‘Open Up’ Team, polishing the choreography to fit the M! Countdown stage. The progress was fast for their team, so they had time to alternate between ‘Open Up’ practices and the fan-meet performances.

It was a good thing they got to prepare for the live stages before the fan-meet performances got
added in their tight schedules because everyone was rushing to finish before the soundcheck tomorrow morning.

Unit Two was the nearest to them and from what the Fancam King saw, they were doing well. Out of the three, they had the largest number of trainees and with so many people in one performance, they had to cater to all the specialties each member had to offer. Taehyun-nie hyung and Dongho hyung came into agreement that they do a Dance-Hall mashup of Billboard hits of the year.

To everyone watching, it felt a collaboration of the best dancers and singers in the competition.

“Wah,” Minki hyung slowly whistled. “I’m shocked.” The visual trainee jumped as Taehyun-nie hyung did a flip before jumping into the complex choreography.

A few meters away Unit One was as busy as the previous unit. They prepared a Shinhwa medley of ‘Perfect Man’ and ‘Wild Eyes’ for the fan-meet, complete with the legendary chair choreography and raining backdrop. It was a great idea since the choreography was legendary.

Not everyone agreed, though.

Justin and Gunhee wanted to petition the comeback of literal rain from the ‘Downpour’ stage but Minhyun-nie hyung put his foot down because it was dangerous to dance on a slippery stage.

Gunhee hesitated but Justin was determined to push through. “I understand, hyung, but we talked to Daehwi and the others, and they wanted to try.”

“Try?”

Nearby conversations were slowly stopped as they looked over the commotion in Unit One. It wasn’t even a yell but the quiet coldness in the Hwanggallyang’s voice rose everyone’s warning bells. Daniel began to worry as the other hyungs made their way into the crowd. He prayed nothing bad would happen despite the high tension between the hyungs of Produce 101.

“The raining stage only happened because we’re only standing. And you did not think of what would happen if you danced on the stage while it’s wet? You don’t find hospitals appealing, do you?”

Beside him, Jinyoung winced. The others fidgeted as they realized the intention behind the evened words, feeling very uncomfortable at the situation they were in.

“Minhyun,” Dongho hyung frowned before gesturing towards the mic attached to his jersey uniform.

Others are listening.

“We don’t have the means to fully produce a stage like that, especially with the time we are given,” Minhyun sent a warning glance towards the main vocal of ‘Open Up’ but acquiesced to the reminder by muffling the device with his handkerchief.

The leader of Unit One was calm and serene, yet his voice was hard. “Better to stick with what we have and do good with it than try to do bigger with so little to go on and fail in the end.”

Minhyun-nie hyung was considerate in his wording but the statement was clear.

We’re not here for anyone’s whims.
Jinyoung winced once more.

“I see your point, hyung, but I think we can still do this—”

“If you both want to go on about this, talk to Jonghyun-ah.”

The two maknaes of Unit One, as well as the eavesdropping ‘Open Up’ Team, turned to look at the busy Angel Leader calling directions at the end of the room, simultaneously trying to arrange a new formation layout with Jaehwan-nie hyung and Daehwi for the modified ‘Never’ stage on Mnet Countdown! while guiding the remaining members of Unit Three in the ‘Overcome’ choreography.

Minki hyung took a step forward, “Minhyun-ah. Stop.”

“Talk to me about what?”

At this point, most conversations stopped to listen. Daniel winced as the small circle that Unit One and ‘Open Up’ Team formed parted like the sea to welcome the presence of the Angel Leader. Kim Jonghyun was at the spearhead position, standing in his white jersey uniform, with the other members of ‘Never’ and their members from Unit Three flanking him.

“What was it that you needed me to hear?”

No one spoke. Justin bit his lip in hesitation and slowly shook his head after their unit leader threw a chiding glance at him. Unfortunately for Minhyun-nie hyung, Jonghyun-nie hyung was not as oblivious as he thought.

The Angel Leader smiled brightly as he kneeled to sit beside the Yuehua trainee. He gently put an arm around Justin and asked the same question. Poor Justin, Daniel pitied his situation as the Hwanggallyang had a pinched look on his face. Justin did not speak at first but with coaxing from Jonghyun-nie hyung, he soon relayed his thoughts about Unit One’s fan-meet stage.

In Mandarin.

Daniel raised an eyebrow.

Most of them must’ve looked weird on camera. It wasn’t surprising for the Chinese trainees to slip into their mother tongue. Heck, he frequently heard Guanlin struggling between languages and confusing them all in the process. So, it shouldn’t be new to them.

What made everything surreal was that Jonghyun-nie hyung seemed like he understood everything. Kenta hyung was gaping at the conversing trainees in shock. On the other hand, Yongguk hyung was nodding as if the world is right for once. It would’ve been funny if the situation wasn’t tense as it was.

“How did hyung learn a language?” Jinyoung whispered.

“When did he even have the time to learn?” Sanggyun hyung wondered.

They were right, though. Kim Jonghyun was one of the busiest trainees in the competition, if not the busiest one. After the Group Battles, it felt like Jonghyun-nie hyung was fired loose, resembling a wayward firecracker that had multiple flash points and kept booming on their faces at every turn. Every week it seemed like there were surprises from the Pledis trainee that no one, not even his NU’EST members, truly expected.

Kang Daniel shouldn’t be surprised but even the most composed person would have made a
reaction by now.

“So, you want to have the raining effect for the Shinhwa medley?” Jonghyun-nie hyung said in Korean. “Are you sure you are up to it? It can be dangerous. It will be different for you than what happened in ‘Downpour’. There won’t be any harnesses involved. Every move you make must be calculated or you’ll be in a neck brace after. Can you still say you want this?”

Gunhee gulped nervously.

At this, Daehwi decided to speak up, “I was the one who initially wanted this, hyung. I wanted a great stage for Unit One but now I realize that I may have been hasty in my decision. I’m sorry for pushing this through.”

Jonghyun-nie hyung shook his head and patted Daehwi’s back. “No, you have nothing to be sorry for. It takes a great mind to think ahead and take risks like this. You just needed to back your idea up, Hwi-ah. Besides, I just laid out what you should watch for. That doesn’t mean it’s impossible.”

At this Gunhee looked up, hopeful, “Really?”

“Really.”

Instead of fearing the wrath of the Hwanggallyang, Jonghyun-nie hyung smiled serenely.

“I can’t make it rain like before—but you’d have the stage that you want.”

The expression on Hwang Minhyun’s face was priceless. Immediately, Unit One surrounded Jonghyun-nie hyung, excited at the new plan for their fan-meet stage. The other trainees soon left, in a hurry to finish their rehearsals and glad the altercation was stopped. But the anticipation was still there; after all, ‘Downpour’ rain was making a comeback, and this time, it’ll be grander than before.

He had issues about it, though.

A fact that some of the trainees shared with him.

Daniel heard Guanlin murmur, “Jonghyun-nie hyung’s doing too much.”

“I’m scared he’d crash from the bulk he’s carrying,” Hyunbin worriedly replied.

“You mean us, right?”

The YGK+ trainee did not speak.

He didn’t need to.

They weren’t wrong, Daniel thought.

It was obvious to anyone who was looking that Kim Jonghyun has not reached his optimum strength yet; last night’s accident was a testament to that. He did not look good either. With eyes shadowed by circles underneath and his skin a shade or two paler than his natural coloring, Jonghyun-nie hyung looked almost emaciated in his physique.

Daniel brought the topic up before they started rehearsing.

“Hyung, are you okay? You look…” He gestured helplessly.
The absentminded gaze immediately sharpened into focus. A wide grin encompassed his face. “I’m okay, Niel-ah. I can catch up with you, guys.”

“But—Shouldn’t you be resting for now? You just came from the hospital.”

The grin slowly faded into a small restrained smile. “I’ll just rest tonight. For now, we have many things to do. We can’t afford to slack.”

As if you’ll be slacking so much as you slaving off for us, Daniel wanted to say but feared of his hyung’s reaction. After all, Kim Jonghyun was notoriously hard-headed. Whatever he wants, he does everything to get it.

Jonghyun-nie hyung was struggling to even move his body to the spinning motions of ‘Never’. Several times he caught Seongwoo hyung, who was nearest to the Angel Leader in the pre-chorus formation of ‘Never’, looking worried as their leader stumbled, multiple times at that.

But he did not stop the rehearsals, which should’ve been suspicious because if there was anyone who was protective of the Angel Leader, it was Ong Seongwoo. So, when the Kings’ Center looked the other way and continued to dance like nothing happened, it raised his worries even more.

The same instance also happened in Unit Three’s ‘Overcome’ practice. Since he was in ‘Open Up’ Team with Jinyoung-ie and Minki hyung and they had to prepare for the live stages, they couldn’t stay with their unit for too long. So, he was forced to watch from afar.

The most painful part in those is that Jonghyun-nie hyung never stopped, even to rest.

“We did good, team! Let’s do it one more time, yes?”

“Hyung…”

“Are you tired, Seonho-yah? We can take a short break if you need one.”

“Uh, no, I’m good…”

A laugh. “Okay! The maknae has spoken. Let’s do this one more time! Let’s go!”

There were groans of protests before the familiar tune of ‘Overcome’ blasted through the speakers.

Kang Daniel kept his eyes focused on the mirror as best as he could, but his eyes always trailed over ‘Never’ practicing a few feet away from them. He watched as Guanlin look over the hyungs for help, only to receive none. Seongwoo hyung looked pissed but did not talk, Jaehwan was looking down on his feet, and Minhyun-nie hyung looked like he wanted to say something that is not nice but barely prevented himself from doing so.

As if that wasn’t enough, a staff approached the Angel Leader regarding the concept stage and aesthetics for the fan-meet and live stages. The Hwanggallyang opened his mouth to say something, probably to stop the staff from hounding the overworked leader even more, but a warning glance from the Angel Leader zipped everyone’s mouths before he followed the staff out. Five minutes later Jonghyun-nie hyung was back to rehearse. A few seconds into the song and another staff called him out the room. The Angel Leader only smiled and acquiesced to the summon.

Jinyoung was there to watch the whole thing happen.
“This isn’t right. Why is hyung being like this? He’s not well yet he’s going to do the aesthetics and stage design again?”

“Jinyoung, cameras.”

Jinyoung didn’t speak but his eyes betrayed his emotions.

He saw all this in the six hours they’ve been practicing. Jonghyun-nie hyung was being stretched thin, even if everyone was not calling him out—all because they were trying to avoid stressing him out even more, however messed up that is.

Fine.

If they won’t move, he will.

After all, Pledis Entertainment Kim Jonghyun was still a trainee like them, no matter how the whole show tries to elevate him every week into something more.

Unconventional as it seems, he’d do his best to even out the load. Let Jonghyun-nie hyung be mad at him but Daniel was just tired of pitying the Angel Leader’s state of priorities and tired of just seating back while he burned himself to death.

And he knew just the exact person to go to.

He stood up from his seated position and walked determinedly towards the person who can possibly even out the odds.

“I’m in.”

It was past three in the morning and Lai Guanlin was suffering through a multitude of emotions, none of which were happy nor nice. He wanted to direct all his frustrations towards the Angel Leader, but he couldn’t help but blame himself, too. He knew something was wrong with Jonghyun-nie hyung—heck, he was the first to even see the evidence—and yet he didn’t do anything. Instead of doing something, anything, to keep the leader under constant watch and stop him from inevitably breaking down from the pressure he was being exposed into, he let others do it for him by acting like nothing’s wrong.

He was frustrated and angry at the leader for keeping so many things to himself, but he should’ve known better. Kim Jonghyun was one of the most closed-up people he had ever met and from his experience of being in the same team as the Angel Leader, he should’ve pushed further.

But he couldn’t.

For the life of him, he couldn’t disregard his overwhelming respect for the guy even when all he wanted to do was wring Jonghyun-nie hyung’s neck for the leader’s utter stupidity.

He tried to ask; he truly did. As soon as the Angel Leader went on a bathroom break, he left ‘Never’ Team and followed him. He was making progress and he was close to the truth—because damn it, that wound couldn’t be caused by a fucking bump on the wall! —when he saw Jonghyun-nie hyung’s face.

Conflicted. Hurt. Scared. Hopeless. And so much confusion, so much…
It felt like he was committing a grave sin for pushing someone who was already teetering on the edge and for all the good that it would do if he did push, push, push until his hyung gave in:

What then?

It’s one thing to help someone, but what if that person doesn’t want to be helped?

Lai Guanlin was a coward.

He was a coward because he could’ve pushed forth but instead, he pulled back.

He looked away.

Fortunately, Woojin-nie hyung heard them and now his hyung knew something was wrong, too. He saw the ‘Get Ugly’ center come out of the lavatory a few minutes after Jonghyun-nie hyung went out to join them in the rehearsals. Based from the time the dancer went out, the Dark Prince knew Woojin-nie hyung heard what they had talked about.

Unlike him and his cowardice, Woojin-nie hyung did something about it.

The BNM trainee went out of his way to alert the hyungs. It was a good first step forward, he wanted to say to Woojin, and Jiseong hyung found out. The other trainees were disturbed at how frantic Jiseong-ie hyung was when he cornered the Angel Leader but Guanlin was relieved. So damn relieved because that’s two more people who knew and Guanlin breathed a little bit better.

He began to hope. He began to feel a little tingling in his heart, slowly pushing him to be braver, to try, just try, and help Jonghyun-nie hyung, one step at a time.

Far away from Woojin-nie hyung and Jonghyun-nie hyung, he approached Hyunbin-nie hyung and Daehwi-yah, whom he both knew better than the others, and brought them up as casually as possible.

“Uh, Hyunbin-nie hyung, have you ever been injured after practice?”

“Practice? Certainly not idol practice, but runway practice? More times than I can remember! Why? What brought this on?” The YGK+ trainee asked. Then his handsome face morphed into horror. “Wait—are you injured, Lin-ah?”

Then, he watched Woojin-nie hyung tell more people—from Jaehwan-nie hyung to Youngmin-nie hyung, then to Daniel hyung and Taehyun-nie hyung—and felt so disappointed, so downtrodden when the hyungs just took everything with a grain of salt.

You don’t look like you’ve been mauled from bumping into a wall.

The memory of the blotched limb, red and green and yellow in so many places it looked like a rainbow of pain, should’ve been enough for him to alert the staff before the injury became severe enough to lead to drastic consequences. But he kept mum on his knowledge of Jonghyun-nie hyung’s physical state, hoping that his projected cool façade won’t fool the more perceptive trainees; that, somehow, with some intervention of sorts, they’ll see how bothered he truly was with his Jonghyun-nie hyung’s condition and do something about it because he was scared.

He feared doing something for his hyung’s sake because he didn’t want to disappoint anyone, especially Jonghyun-nie hyung.

Don’t worry, I did not tell anyone, and I won’t push you further, hyung.
He was a fool.

*I respect you too much to disrespect your privacy.*

He realized too late how far Jonghyun-nie hyung’s aversion to letting *Produce 101* staff intrude on their daily affairs had affected him and the rest of the trainees.

Still, at the rate the ‘*Never*’ hyungs were going, it would take a few more months before they reconcile, a month if they’re lucky. And they didn’t have a month because the fan-meet and the live stage is tomorrow. They needed to show a united front onstage. But if they’re not even talking to each other, and from what Seonho told him during lunch Minki hyung and Jiseong hyung were also stepping over eggshells like the Kings, then it would influence their chemistry in the performance.

There was some progress, though. It seemed like the hyungs realized that there were more important things at stake.

“Okay. That’s it.”

“We’re not in the mood for any of your games, hyung,” Jaehwan-nie hyung groused.

“Do you see me laughing?”

At this, their leader spoke, “Woo-yah, don’t speak to Jaehwan-nie like that—”

“You’re one to talk,” Seongwoo hyung frowned. “You’re the reason why everyone’s acting like this, Jonghyun-ah. So, stop and listen.”

Everyone looked up from their slumped positions, surprised and wary at the threat beneath Ong Seongwoo’s words. The Fantagio trainee had his arms crossed in a familiar gesture that spoke of his discomfort at his words and his determination to push his message through. Their practice room was an amalgamation of ‘*Never*’ Team and Unit Three trainees that didn’t belong in the two concept teams that would perform in the live stages, so they had large space after they all moved to separate rooms.

Even with the spacious area, Guanlin felt claustrophobic as the atmosphere went heavier. He shifted closer to Seonho and Jiseong-ie hyung.

No one spoke as they waited for the two Kings to stop their stare down.

The *Kings’ Center* conceded with a sigh.

“Look, I’m tired of us skirting around each other, okay? We’ve been like this since yesterday and it’s driving me crazy. The best thing to do is hit the issue at the heart.”

The *Kings’ Center* marched over the seated Kim Jonghyun with a hard expression on his face. Seongwoo hyung’s back was towards them so they couldn’t see his face. So, everyone was surprised when the infallible Ong Seongwoo, the prankster of *Produce 101*, fell over a stunned Kim Jonghyun, crying.

Seonho’s eyes were wide in shock. “Oh—”

The *Angel Leader* let out a soft chuckle as he patted Seongwoo hyung’s hair. “Is this what you meant with hitting the issue at the heart?”
Seongwoo hyung, who was slumped over Jonghyun-nie hyung’s lap, buried his face while keeping his arms around the leader. “Well, it worked, didn’t it?”

That broke the tensed atmosphere. Guanlin still didn’t know how it exactly happened but five minutes after they were having a crying party with a confused yet sympathetic Jonghyun-nie hyung in the middle of the circle. Daehwi and Seonho were hugging the Angel Leader while Minki hyung and Jiseong-ie hyung stood like guardian angels behind the Jonghyun-nie hyung. Jaehwan-nie hyung did not cry but he was gripping their leader’s hand tightly.

“Woojin-nie?”

The BNM trainee was standing beside Minhyun-nie hyung, face conflicted.

“Promise me first, hyung, that you’ll put your health first and foremost.”

Jonghyun-nie hyung sighed. “I can’t promise that, but I will rest when I must.”

That cemented their arguments, to Guanlin’s relief. Their final practice was the most lighthearted they’ve ever been since the accident. They were able to work more effectively and polished their performance as best as they could. At that point, Guanlin started having an internal crisis, debating with himself and his morals on the peace and privacy that NU’EST JR, the leader of a debuted idol group of six years, protected above all—over the welfare of Kim Jonghyun, a quiet Produce 101 trainee who went out of his way to help anyone in need, and who happened to be the person who needed help the most.

And how messed up was that, right?

He glanced at the bed where Jonghyun-nie hyung was sleeping. The soft breaths of his ‘Never’ teammates resonated through the quietened room, softly lulling him to a false sense of calmness—

Because this was the scene before they found Jonghyun-nie hyung, the same Angel Leader sleeping in the same bed, bloodied and unconscious.

It made him sick that Jonghyun-nie hyung probably wasn’t the only one who was also at war with himself.

He wondered how many more idols were stuck in a limbo between who the others wanted them to be and who they truly are.

He was pulled out of his reverie when he heard the beds creak.

Someone was awake.

“We need to talk.”

Guanlin froze as a shadowed form made his way on the bunkbed across him. The maknae of ‘Never’ team hastily closed his eyes and deepened his breathing when Minhyun-nie hyung paused in the middle of the room, hoping that he wouldn’t get caught in his eavesdropping.

For a second he wondered if he’d always be eavesdropper and if he was cursed to always be one.

“You should be sleeping. We have a big day tomorrow.”

“We’re not talking, Hyun-ah. How do you expect me to sleep?”

Kenta hyung saying he had big ears didn’t seem funny anymore.
“Can I go there?”

In his peripheral vision, light came from the top bunkbed. “Come on,” Guanlin heard the laughter in Jonghyun-nie hyung’s voice. “Like old times, yeah? Scared of the dark and all.”

“Oh, shut up. Shove over, I can’t move.”

Guanlin couldn’t help but smile. The friendship between Minhyun-nie hyung and Jonghyun-nie hyung was unmatched, even if they weren’t grouped together. He hoped that his two hyungs would stop feuding with each other.

“Whoa, dude, you feel light! And you don’t have much fat in your stomach either.”

“Yah, stop poking me—”

“Shh! The kids are sleeping!”

Minhyun-nie hyung hissed. “And is it my fault, dumbass?”

There was a bit of scuffle as Guanlin listened fervently. It soon became silent as the two trainees lowered their voices to stop them from laughing too loudly.

“But seriously, I hope you gained weight, Minhyun-ah. I promised your mother you’d gain what you lost since Produce started.”

A quiet second, then, “I could say the same thing to you.”

“I’m fine—”

_Creak._ “This again?”

The tone was so dry and disparaging that Guanlin prepared himself to intervene. The _maknae_ of ‘Never’ Team slowly turned to his side, flinching at the springs creaking in protest. He opened one eye to watch the two hyungs talking to each other, the moonlight shining through the window.

Minhyun-nie hyung was facing him and the expression on the visual’s face was heartbreaking.

“Why—Why can’t you tell me? You’ve been like this since—since—”

“Since I bled all over the floor?” Minhyun-nie hyung flinched. “You don’t have to treat me like glass. I can handle what happened to me.” The soft laughter of Jonghyun-nie hyung only made them feel bad.

Minhyun-nie hyung shook his head once. “Don’t distract me. You know what I mean, Jonghyun. You’re my friend, my brother, and I’m deeply worried of how you have no regard for your health. No, _all_ of us are worried, that’s what we’ve been trying to tell you, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“I do listen—”

“No, you don’t.” He sighed. “Please, just tell me. I care for you, Hyun-ah. I hope you understand that.”

It was silent, too silent. Guanlin had to lean closer to the bedframe to be able to hear the whispered conversation.

“I’ve been having dreams.”
“Dreams.”

“I know, it sounds stupid, but I haven’t been myself lately. Lost quite a few hours of sleep everyday just to deal with the madness inside my head,” He chuckled. “That’s why I’ve been trying to be active, combatting the war in my head using distraction and all.”

The Angel Leader’s tone was light, as if having nightmares were the norm for him. Minhyun-nie hyung, however, was not amused.

“Get a good sleep, Hyun-ah. If you’re still having nightmares, I’ll keep watch over you, believe me. Minki and Dongho would do a rotation with me if that’s what it takes to keep you healthy and sane. In addition to that, good meals. No more bad food. I’ll keep watch over your meals because you need to get better. Any concussions?”

Guanlin listened to them quietly bantering with each other, dearly hoping that all will turn out well. Because he knew Jonghyun-nie hyung better than he realized. As much as there was a truth sewn in his statement, there was also lies seamlessly weaved in between the threads.

“Ah, I’m so excited for the fan-meet!”

Kwon Hyunbin smiled at Seonho and put an arm around the byeongari trainee to keep him from falling off his seat. They were waiting for the others in Unit Three to come to the dressing room, but they didn’t have to wait long. Jihoon was next to arrive, then Jinyoung and Woojin. A few minutes later, Jiseong-ie hyung and Daniel hyung entered the room in a mad flourish. The dressing room of Unit Three was soon filled with trainees coming in and out the room. Only a few trainees haven’t arrived yet, and most were anticipating the arrival of the NU’EST hyungs.

The YGK+ trainee was one of the first to arrive in the venue and was very surprised to see hundreds of fans waiting for him to come out of the car. Until now he wasn’t used to such fame and publicity, even if they were given a heads-up of a grand entrance for the sixty Produce 101 trainees yesterday afternoon.

All of them were undoubtedly excited because it was a good chance for them to show off their visuals and charisma while entertaining the fans as they walk down the aisle. It was like the carpet ceremony they did prior to the show’s airing but with more sophistication because they would be doing it again but without the uniform get-up, much to everyone’s silent relief. To add to the excitement, they were given early dismissal passes just to prepare themselves for the fan-meet event. Immediately, the trainees who belong to the same companies banded together to plan for the aesthetics that they would do.

Hyunbin was left with the other solo trainees, which gave him time to think about the new progress of Produce 101 in terms of promotion. Since the show was nearing the final episode, they were gearing the trainees towards both local and international stardom. As far as he knew there were no survival shows that held fan-meets for the fun of it. Financial stability was needed first and foremost, the other factors like reputability and relevance follow second. Produce 101 wasn’t a typical survival show, which made it a good investment for most sponsors, but Hyunbin was very much aware that the first season of Produce 101 was noteworthy because it got some hype from the fresh concept.

But from what they got in the first season it should not be enough to do huge promotional activities
like this.

Which fell on the second option: *Produce 101* got more than enough hype from the current season. A fast check on *Naver* answered all his questions.

*Mnet’s ‘Produce 101 Season 2’ Gears Up for Second Fan-Meet of the Season; Fans Eager to See the New Promotional Units*

June 6, 2017 15:41 KST

Reality survival show ‘Produce 101’ kept the fans engaged in their male trainees with powerful stages and excellent promotions. With the success of their first fan-meet in Yes24 Live Hall and the variety and radio guesting, the show is preparing for a larger audience.

The fan-meet would include the Top 60 trainees, thirty of which were reshuffled into the three established “promo units”. RBW Entertainment Lee Gunhee joined Unit One with Pledis Entertainment Hwang Minhyun and Brand New Music Lee Daehwi while Ardor & Able Entertainment Ha Seongwoon joined his labelmate Noh Taehyun in Unit Two. Popular trainees Cube Entertainment Yoo Seonho, YGK+ Kwon Hyunbin, and Brand New Music Park Woojin will be part of Unit Three with MMO Entertainment Kang Daniel and Maroo Entertainment Park Jihoon, led by Pledis Entertainment’s Kim Jonghyun.

Fans of ‘Produce 101’ have been anticipating the new “promo units” and their planned performance since their magazine promotions with 10+ Star Magazine and Stylenanda. The exclusive magazine sold 10,000 copies in a day. The fans are expecting an explosive performance from the most beloved trainees of South Korea this coming Friday at 9 am at Olympic Hall, Seoul.

Produce 101 airs every Friday at 23:00 KST on Mnet.

Various articles were released throughout the week, some of them hyping up the M! Countdown stage of ‘Open Up’ and ‘Never’ but most were looking forward to the fan-meet and the reshuffled units. Hyunbin knew he shouldn’t feel pleased that the fan-meet was taking the attention off the first-ranked concept teams, but his thoughts was all put on the fact that he would get to perform again in front of his fans and his friends. Dongho *hyung* was right; the stage was an intoxicating experience. He couldn’t get enough of it.

His guilt was somewhat eased because he wasn’t the only one who felt that way. Most of the trainees were hyped up with the fan-meet and they heavily prepared for the stage performances even with the little time they had. Practices late into the night just to nail the choreography, minimal bathroom breaks for vocal and rap training—they were on an adrenaline rush not unlike the ones they feel during evaluations. Still, this felt bigger than any performance he did on the show because there won’t be any ranks or votes involved.

Just the fans and the stage.

So, Hyunbin practiced and gave it his all, thinking of the fans that spent their money and time to
see them perform. It was a stressful three-day experience, but he was very grateful that they did not crash and burn midway through—all because they have a very good support system. Whenever rehearsals were tough, the trainees went to the experienced hyungs for guidance. HOTSHOT hyungs and NU’EST hyungs knew exactly what to say when they felt jittery and nervous, when they felt hopeless and downtrodden. One of the things he learned in his Produce 101 experience was that not only the most talented was cut to be an idol, but also the most determined. But with a mental and emotional support, either from family or friends, the most determined would outlast even the most talented of all.

The idol hyungs knew how important camaraderie was in the industry and imparted that to them. Hyunbin greatly appreciated how they put them under wing, like how a master cared for his apprentices. But the Visual Prince of Manhwa Team couldn’t help but worry for the hyungs who took a step further to teach them like the unpaid trainers they truly were.

Especially a certain Angel Leader, the most hyung-like of them all.

He frowned in thought. The one who prepared the most for this fan-meet was Jonghyun-nie hyung. He wasn’t blind; he could tell by how frequent the staff pulled their leader out from practices. The production team must be planning something big for the fan-meets, and with Jonghyun-nie hyung’s track record on stage production and aesthetics (‘Downpour’ would always precede any stage before the Concept Evaluations) he was their go-to man.

Two days ago, Jonghyun-nie hyung was gone for the morning, much to Minhyun-nie hyung’s worry. He came back after lunch and was vague about his whereabouts, giving them a small smile before dismissing any more questions with a shrug (Minhyun-nie hyung was not pleased). The mystery continued to pile up throughout the day—men in suits talking to the leader during their fifteen-minute breaks, staff members suddenly appearing during rehearsals to observe them perform the choreography, unknown women taking their measurements—it wasn’t until they saw a familiar face that some of the pieces fell into place.

It was during their final soundcheck yesterday. They were undoubtedly excited to see the stage design because Jonghyun-nie hyung kept his mouth shut (even with the pestering from the Squirtle Squad) and was disappointed to see the stage covered in white tarpaulin.

“So unfair,” Seonho whined.

The leader only smiled.

Their performance check went well. There were some slight hitches in the flow of choreography and vocals since their vocalists were a bit hoarse from the past performances but overall, they were given the all-clear with a few reminders. Tired, they shuffled back to the dressing rooms to eat, only to stop short at the sight of a familiar man calmly seated on the couch, waiting for them to arrive.

“Mr. Hae?! You’re here!” Seongwoo hyung shrieked.

Jaehwan-nie hyung winced in pain. Hyunbin was just guiltily relieved the designer was already deaf. He looked over the BNM trainee to his right. Woojin was gaping at the smiling old man.

The Kings’ Team swarmed towards the man, Seongwoo hyung and Daniel hyung leading the procession, and greeted Mr. Hae with enthusiasm. The designer was calmly receiving the exuberant hugs from Minki hyung while Jonghyun-nie hyung translated for them in sign language. The other half of Unit Three was standing awkwardly at the doorway as they silently watched the happenings. Minki hyung saw Jihoon and Seonho looking confused and called them to meet the
designer.

Safe to say the maknaes were shocked to meet the person who made the aesthetics of the legendary stages of this season.

The two other units soon arrived in their room and had similar reactions (Daehwi’s was the best, by far) to Mr. Hae and his magic design catalogue. All the while Hyunbin couldn’t help but wonder at how the presence of the designer answered some of his questions. Jonghyun-nie hyung may be keeping the fan-meet stages a secret from them but the intent was clear—

The Angel Leader was planning another Kings stage.

And he couldn’t wait.

His musings were cut by someone opening the door.

“Hyung? Is that you? You look—Wait, what are those?!”

At one glance at the Pledis Entertainment trainees standing just under the bright fluorescent light, giving him and Seonho the chance to see exactly what Jonghyun-nie hyung prepared for them—

“Whoa.”

The devilish smirk on the Angel Leader’s face was almost frightening.

“Let’s get to work.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!