

LOST TO LIGHT

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English Translation Sample

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CHAPTER 1

Maybe Not Yet?

The meeting room at Ultimate Wolf was freezing cold, like a fish freezer. Goosebumps prickled all over my arms and legs even though the temperature in Thailand today was thirty-two degrees Celsius.

I was shorter—uh, I mean, smaller—than the other guys in the group, which made me feel like I'd been shrunk into a pug-wolf in a pack of K9 dogs. Every one of my bandmates looked defeated today, utterly drained of life, nothing like the people in our latest music video playing on the screen. And now there were only three members left in the group: me, Yangyang, and Seo Kangjun. As for the other two, who knew where they'd disappeared to.

"I don't think this is going to work."

The chairman's chair at the head of the table swiveled around, revealing our tall chairman, handsome as an actor. Honestly, Hia Tian was handsome enough to play the male lead himself. I'm not sucking up. I mean it. The chairman of Ultimate Wolf was named Tian, and all of us called him Hia Tian or Boss Tian. Everything Boss Tian touched turned into a hit—teen series, movies, dramas, survival shows. You could call him one of the golden-handed star makers of this era. Looking at his track record, Hia Tian was only one step away from becoming a true entertainment mogul in the Thai industry.

And that one missing step was... my boy group.

Which was why netizens still made fun of him to this day.

I had no idea what had gone wrong. I never understood it. Why hadn't the label's rookie T-pop boy group taken off? It couldn't be our looks. Sure, maybe I was a little less handsome than the others, but every one of my bandmates was top-tier. Any of them could have been the visual of the group.¹ And if anyone said we couldn't sing, I'd fight them to the death. I was a competition singer! I'd won everything from the subdistrict level all the way to nationals! It wasn't because we couldn't dance either. Our choreography was fucking difficult, designed to stand out. The music video budget was insanely extravagant. But somehow, when you shook all those ingredients together... we flopped.

"I guess I have to admit my own skills weren't enough," Hia Tian said. "The shareholders are unhappy and don't want me to keep the group going. It's a waste of money. Honestly, I'd hate to let it go too. But now there are only three members left, so I'm asking you: do you still want to keep fighting?"

The three of us looked at one another like the three Spider-Men in that famous internet meme. Truthfully, we'd already talked about the fact that our group probably wasn't working out. I had to

take singing gigs at saeyid birthday celebrations. Seo Kangjun sang at weddings. Yangyang had acted in a vertical web series that somehow became the most successful thing any of us had done, so he was thinking of becoming a full-time vertical-series actor. The two of us agreed he should go get himself a decent career rather than lock arms with us and drown together. Seo Kangjun might have to stop working too, because Korean men had to serve in the military by law.

That left me.

I didn't have to do military service because I'd spent three years in Territorial Defense training with my head shaved short. I'd just graduated from university. My family didn't own a business. I had no inheritance. All I had was the dream of becoming a singer. I'd been determined to do this for years. Giving up now would piss me off so badly it hurt.

After Yangyang and Seo Kangjun told Hia Tian what they wanted, they left the meeting room. Our boy group was over. But I stayed sitting exactly where I was. I couldn't let go. I was sad. I wanted to cry. I wanted to be dramatic. I still didn't want Hia Tian to disband the group!

¹ Visual: the member with the most striking appearance, who serves as the face of the group and immediately draws the public's attention; usually known for an attractive, memorable image.

"You're the only one left, Jeng. What are you going to do?"

"I still want to keep going. The first song didn't blow up, the second one didn't survive, but maybe the third one will, Hia."

I refused to believe I would never succeed. Maybe it just wasn't my time yet, right? If I quit now, my chance of success would be zero. But if I kept trying, maybe that chance would increase. And I think Hia Tian felt the same way, because the light came back into his eyes. Then he slapped my shoulder three times so hard I nearly collapsed.

"That's what I'm talking about! How can we give up? Thanks for still wanting to fight with me. But first, we have to understand that the market has changed. Our competition isn't just boy bands from other labels anymore. This industry is hotter than a Thai barbecue grill because an insanely powerful competitor has appeared."

"Who, Hia?"

"Butterbear."

"..."

Th-that's... genuinely powerful!

"Every song is a hit. Concerts, fan meets, overseas jobs. Not to mention every kind of Butterbear merchandise and collaborations with all kinds of brands. The shareholders want us to become as popular as Butterbear. Right now the teenage fan market is surrounded by other groups already. If you still want to continue, we have to find a new route. Maybe we even need to target

primary school and kindergarten kids. We need the baby-toothed teenagers to become our fans. It has to be a fever on the level of Paper Planes' 'Song Yang Bad, Sad Yang Boi.' Understand, Jeng?"

Ah... that really was powerful too! Paper Planes fever had been a phenomenon.

"Y-yes? Yes, I understand!"

I understood. That didn't mean I could do what they did. What the hell was I supposed to compete with? I didn't have Paper Planes' cool bad-boy look, and I wasn't cute and cuddly like Butterbear. I was just Jeng, an aggressively ordinary guy. What kind of phenomenon was I supposed to create in the entertainment industry? Did I have to go to Korea? If getting your face done could make you famous, my group would've been famous ages ago. Every member could've been a leading man.

Except me.

"But there's an even bigger problem."

That wasn't big enough already?

"What is it, Hia?"

"Right now, you're the only member left... If you still want to continue, we need more members. And they can't be ordinary. They have to stand out, speak multiple languages, have special talents, unusual hobbies. That's what it takes for a group to become popular. Looks alone don't sell anymore."

It felt like Hia was indirectly telling me that a guy like me, whose only good point was his voice, wasn't going to survive. My looks didn't make the cut. My height didn't make the cut. Hurry up and find some better people to save yourself.

"Okay... so when are you opening auditions?"

"That's the problem. We probably can't hold auditions. People are already yelling at us to stop. Fans complain we're wasting money and time and that we'd be better off spending it developing our actors. The shareholders don't want any more investment. I had the team write a song for our group, but the shareholders said it wouldn't become a hit if we sang it, so we should give it to one of the label's leading actors instead. I managed to hold them off for one more month. If we can't find members within a month, then we disband. The song goes to someone else."

Hia looked genuinely hurt. I thought we felt the same way, even if our positions were slightly different. I was the singer who had flopped. Hia was the investor who had flopped. Together, we were a matching pair of failures who still wanted to keep fighting.

"Then where are we supposed to find people?"

"No idea. Anyway, good luck. I believe you can do it."

"Huh? Me? You mean I'm the one who's supposed to find them?"

"Yep... I'm busy. I have to prepare a new series. If you need anything, ask my assistant. I've told him to help. He's happy to."

"Hiaaaaaa... Hiaaaaaa..."

"Why are you dragging it out like that? Keep going and it won't sound like hia anymore, it'll sound like you're cursing."

Hia was still Hia. The one who was screwed was me!

The assistant he was talking about was P'Sean. He wore a suit and leather shoes, styled his hair back off his forehead, kept his face perfectly expressionless, and never spoke more than five words at a time. A freezing aura surrounded him as if he wanted to keep everyone away. His whole personality felt like he'd walked straight out of a mafia movie. Every time he looked at me, my back got clammy and my hands started shaking. It was already an achievement if I could manage a wai to him without fainting first. Was I really supposed to have the courage to ask that man for help?

I walked out of the meeting room looking like half my soul had been sucked away. At least I knew Hia Tian couldn't bring himself to let go of the label's first boy group either.

All along the office hallway were posters for dramas and series, each covered with the faces of the label's actors. There were photos of huge award wins too. It was the Hall of Fame² I'd always dreamed my group would someday have a place in.

But where was I supposed to find new bandmates within one month? I thought until my head nearly exploded and still came up blank. Maybe I could do what those TikTok creators³ did these days and interview random people in Siam? But if someone who looked like me walked up and invited people out of nowhere, I wouldn't look friendly. I'd look like a scammer. Or maybe I could call some old friends? Back in high school, I'd done everything—singing competitions, dance covers. My dance skills weren't anything special, but every group needed a main vocal⁴!

That was me.

² Hall of Fame: a place or listing that records names in recognition of famous people, outstanding achievement, or excellence in a professional field.

³ TikTok creator: a creator who makes short-form video content on the TikTok platform.

⁴ Main vocal: the primary singer in an idol group or band, usually the member with the strongest vocal ability and technique.

Maybe I should call an old dance-cover teammate first. I had no idea whether he still wanted to be an idol. I hadn't spoken to him in forever. Once we reached Grade 12, everyone got busy preparing for university entrance exams. All I knew was that he'd gotten into a university somewhere in the Northeast, and after that we'd lost contact. He was handsome. He danced well. His face had good fortune written all over it. Every girl in school screamed for him. If I got him into the group, we'd definitely survive. His skin was so bright and clean he looked like he bathed three

times a day. My mom once said he looked like Tik Jesdaporn. Please, please, please still be using the same number!

"Hello?"

Aaaaaah, he answered! Mean! MEEEEAN!!! My beloved friiiiiend!

"Meeean! It's meeeee! Do you remember me? Jeng! Jeng!"

"I remember... yo—"

"How've you been? Doing okay?"

"I'm fine. And yo—"

"I've missed you so much. Remember when we used to cover NCT? You were the main dancer. You were the best dancer, so you covered Mark. I was Jaehyun."

"I remember... it's just—"

There was hope! He hadn't hung up. He wasn't interrupting me. He wasn't pretending not to remember. He didn't think I'd called to sell insurance or recruit him into an MLM.

"So right now I'm a singer with Ultimate Wolf. You know the label? They make tons of series and movies. They win awards all the time. They're putting together a boy band and I'm in it, so I'm calling to invite you. We wouldn't just be doing dance covers for school festivals, Christmas, Science Day, Children's Day, Sports Day anymore. You'd get to perform on a T-pop stage! Go on TV! Perform at national-level concerts! You wouldn't have to steal your dad's suit to dance in anymore. A stylist would tailor one for you!"

"Yo so bhagava araham samma-sambuddho..."

Chanting? Was Mean at a temple? I vaguely remembered he was pretty devout. He gave alms every morning, went to the temple on every Buddhist holy day, went to chant on New Year's Eve, and ordained during summer break.

"You can finish praying first. I'll call again after you get back from the temple. Why are you there so late? Is there a temple fair?"

"If you wait until I get back from the temple to call, you probably won't get to call at all..."

"Huh?"

"Layman Jeng, I have ordained and entered beneath the saffron robes^s. It would probably be inconvenient for me to join your group."

Boooooong...

It was like a temple bell had exploded right beside my ear. Ah... Mean—no, Monk Mean—had ordained!

"You—uh, Venerable—um, Luang Phi? Venerable Friend? You ordained! I'm sorry. I didn't know. I should've called sooner."

"It's all right. I ordained quietly and didn't tell anyone. I'm glad you called, Layman Jeng, but I can't talk much longer. I need to go to evening prayers. If you're free, come make merit at the temple sometime."

"O-one last question, Venerable Friend. Um... how long have you been ordained, and are you planning to disrobe? I mean, I can wait..."

"I ordained right after graduation. Originally I planned to stay for only one rains retreat, but somehow it's been two years. I haven't thought about disrobing. Being a monk has brought me a great deal of peace. I can focus my mind on myself and live with nature. If you're interested, Layman Jeng, you could try ordaining for one rains retreat first. A forest monastery is good. You might discover a new path in life that is peaceful but happy."

I called to recruit him into my band. Not only could he not accept, he turned around and invited me to join the carrot club—uh, I mean, become a monk! Oh God, this was so fucking sinful. Joking about monks and holy things. Sadhu! Your little child didn't mean it!

5 Ordination as a Buddhist monk or novice. The term kasavapath refers to the robes of Buddhist monks, traditionally dyed with natural astringent substances in yellow or jackfruit-heartwood tones.

"Thank you very much, Venerable Friend, but I still can't renounce the worldly life. I still want to be a singer. Let me chase my dream first. If I run into any problems, I'll call for advice. And if I debut, I'd like to invite Venerable Friend to sprinkle holy water on me before I go onstage."

"Of course, Layman Friend. May you succeed. Sadhu."

My main dancer had been lost to Buddhism, and he was happier than he'd be joining my T-pop group too. I didn't have that many friends to begin with. Who else was there? Who elseeeee?

Chat! Chat, the guy from music club. I remembered he'd competed on some rapper show. He got eliminated in the first round, but at least he'd had airtime! He also ran a YouTube channel for his own rap music. His name was Chat, but his rap name was Chase the Rapper.

My fingers immediately searched for his channel. Maybe he'd already become a nationally famous rapper. If I couldn't get a main dancer, a main rapper would still be good! Songs these days needed rap sections. Luckily I remembered that his channel had an extremely weird name. There was a contact number. But the most recent video he'd uploaded was one year and six months ago. Tens of thousands of views. Fuck, that was still more than my group's songs.

"Hello?"

His voice was still ridiculously handsome. The only reason he'd been less popular than Mean—sorry, Venerable Friend Mean—was that he was just a tiny bit less handsome and liked making those try-hard poses he claimed were part of his rapper style.

"Chat!"

"What the fuck? Who are you, calling me just to insult me, you animal?"

"Chaaaaat! I'm saying your name, not swearing at you. Listen properly, friiiend. It's me, Jeng! Jeng from Class Five. Remember? We were in the same club. I did singing competitions, and you went on that rapper show."

"Ohhh, Jeng! Sorry, my hearing's not great. Haven't slept much lately. What's up, bro? How've you been?"

"I'm good. What's up, bro? Yooooo!"

"Yooooo! Yeah, yeah, yeah!"

The bastard even sang it back and rolled his tongue or did some other rapper thing I couldn't identify. Still, I felt like I was on the right track. Chat definitely still had enough passion to join my band.

"Waaah! Waaah! Waaah!"

Wait... that was starting to sound wrong.

"Chat, what's that noise?"

"Oh..."

"Daddyyyy! The baby's crying! Feed the baby some miiilk!"

Clear. Crystal clear. A woman's voice like that. A baby's voice like that...

"Okay, Ma! Daddy's coming. Add me on LINE and we'll talk later, Jeng. I have to go see the baby."

"When the hell did you have a kid?! No, wait. C-congratulations, man."

"Thank you! My wife is Jan-Jan, remember? The girl from the top class I was chasing. Our baby's two months old. When the kid's a little bigger, I'll take you out for food. Yo, yo!"

"Uh... sure."

After hanging up on Chat, I just stared into space. What the hell had happened? I hadn't contacted my friends for only a year or two. The main dancer had become a monk. The main rapper had become a father.

And I had become insane!

My head was going to explode. Where the hell was I supposed to find the remaining members?

Was Jeng finally going to turn into Jeng-the-Flop for real?

No. No way. I refuse the name Flop! I'm going to be famous. I'm going to be P'Jeng. I'm going to be Oppa Jeng. I want my own fanchant⁶. I want people shouting Jeng's name! I want concerts. I want fans. I want to succeed. I don't want to become some former singer nobody remembers!

I REFUUUUUSE!

⁶ Fanchant: a K-pop fan culture in which fans shout short phrases—such as members' names or declarations of love—during gaps in songs or rap sections to encourage the artists onstage.

If tricks don't work, use tactics. If magic doesn't work, use superstition!

My life was completely boxed in from all eight directions. Talent alone clearly wasn't going to be enough. Something made me think of the Golden Toad Goddess shrine near my university. I remembered a university friend saying the fortune-teller there was an old Chinese uncle who was incredibly accurate. I'd never believed in fortune-tellers, but today, even if I had to storm a graveyard and challenge a ghost, I'd do it if it could make my group famous.

I'd heard the shrine's name plenty of times but had never been there. Who would've thought it would be this fucking desolate in person? And apparently desolate wasn't enough, because an icy wind blew past and raised goosebumps all over me. It was only four in the afternoon. Why was it so gloomy? Inside the shrine stood a toad statue dressed in red Chinese robes, flower garlands hanging around its neck. The incense burner in front was full of old sticks, as if no one had visited in ages.

"Sh-should I go in?"

"Go in."

"AAAAAH!"

A hoarse whisper beside my ear made me jump out of my skin and leap away. When I turned to see who had spoken, I found an old man standing there with long white eyebrows and a long white mustache, as if both had been bleached.

"What's a young fellow like you getting so scared about? What a weak heart."

"S-sorry..."

Fuck. I thought he was a ghost.

"Go on. Go pay your respects. First time here, right?"

"Yes... I-I came to have my fortune told."

"What do you want to ask about?"

"Work."

"Ah. Pay your respects to the Goddess first."

I followed the old man inside. He walked so slowly I was afraid he'd fall over. My arms and legs felt awkward as hell as I watched him open a cabinet, take out incense and a lighter, and light the sticks for me. There was also a plaque with a prayer so difficult to read sitting in front of the toad statue. I performed every step of the ritual with complete sincerity, hoping the Golden Toad Goddess would help me succeed, find people to join the group, and finally become famous.

"What you're looking for isn't far away. But if you search in the wrong place, you won't find it. Go look somewhere no one would think to look. Go meet them somewhere no one would ever think to meet them."

"Excuse me?"

I whipped around to stare at the old man's face. Was this the fortune-telling uncle my friend had mentioned? And what did that mean? Go look somewhere no one would think to look? Why did that sound suspicious as hell?

"If I find them, I'll become famous, right?"

"If you find them, maybe you'll become famous."

Hope flared inside me like someone had struck a match!

"If you don't find them, maybe not yet."

...and then ten Bangkok Metropolitan Administration fire trucks dumped water on it at the same time.

"Huh? What? What does that mean?"

Why did this sound like a blind-box prophecy? I could answer that myself without Grandpa's help.

"You young fool, learn to interpret things! Even when people ask for lottery numbers, nobody gives the numbers straight. It depends on fate. Whoever's lucky gets lucky. Your luck is your own. Understand?"

"Uh, then... Grandpa, could you—"

"Who are you calling Grandpa? Do I look that old?"

Like he could collapse and depart this world at any second.

...That was the voice in my head, which I still had enough control not to let escape my mouth.

"No, I misspoke. I was startled. Actually, Uncle—"

"What?"

"Ha ha ha, sorry. Dust allergy. Cough, cough. P'... P', could you say that one more time? I didn't catch it. Let me write it down."

Before I left, I didn't forget to put a hundred-baht note into the donation box for the Golden Toad Goddess. Sadhu. This was money from the saeyid birthday gig for Grandma Kim Huay the other day. I'm betting everything I have on you, Goddess. Please help me. Please!

Now that I'd received this priceless prophecy, half of me believed it and half didn't. "Go look somewhere no one would think to look. Go meet them somewhere no one would ever think to meet them." Where was that supposed to be? Why did it sound like I needed to go to a graveyard? That was way too scary. I wanted to find another fortune-teller, but the famous accurate ones were insanely expensive. I hated wasting money. I barely had any work, so I had to be frugal.

I figured I'd have to interpret it the way Grandpa—uh, that P'—had told me. Maybe it meant I should look somewhere no one would expect to find singers or idols who shared my dream. The

only places I could think of were where young people hung out: Siam, Emsphere, Banthat Thong, fairs, Central Ladprao, universities. Or I could look for people with huge Instagram followings, internet idols, cover singers, auditions. Which meant those were exactly the places I absolutely should not go.

So where was I supposed to go?

Exactly. Where? What weird place could I go and actually find the right person? And how was I supposed to do it? Looking like this, if I walked up and invited someone into a band, they might think I was a scammer trying to take their money. I thought until my head nearly split and still couldn't come up with anything. All I could do was flop onto my bed, grab my phone, and mindlessly scroll my timeline. Nothing but political news. Was I supposed to find my bandmates at Parliament? That would be way too out there.

I rolled onto my right side in case that activated a few more brain cells. Nothing inspiring there either. Just the district Facebook page telling people to come do free aerobics in the public park to exercise, lose weight, and fight disease.

"It rains every other day. Who the hell still wants to go do aerobics?"

I put my phone down and sighed.

Wait.

Could this be the first place fate wanted me to go? Because surely nobody would go do aerobics in the rain!

I immediately rolled back over, grabbed my phone, checked the date, time, and place, and burned them into my memory.

See you at the aerobics court!

CHAPTER 2

The Teenagers' Favorite Dancer (?)

This was new. Like, brand-new. Completely, insanely new.

It wasn't even the full moon of the twelfth lunar month, yet the water was already overflowing the banks. Men and women, we're all having such a good time doing aerobics by the canal. Having fun at what hour, exactlyyyyy? Half the court was flooded. The second I stepped onto the aerobics court, I wanted to step right back out, turn around, and go home once and for all.

I hadn't done aerobics since primary school, and even then it had been in PE class, not at an outdoor court in a district public park. I wasn't against the activity or anything. It just might not be my style. How was I supposed to find a new bandmate at an aerobics court like this? Look left: an uncle. Look right: an auntie. In front: an ama. Behind me: an a-pek. I'm not discriminating against older people. Everyone has their own strengths. But my group was a T-pop boy band. If you couldn't picture it, think BUS, PROXIE, or LYKN. How was I supposed to invite grandpas and grandmas to become T-pop singers?

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

The crackling speakers made me jump. It was too late to move away now because people had surrounded me from every direction. Believe it or not, this many people had actually come out to do aerobics. Every time anyone moved, the standing water splashed. My legs were already streaked with mud.

"Let me hear the teenagers!"

"HEY!"

Wh-what the hell was that?!

A tall, slim guy appeared onstage by leaping so high it looked like he'd been launched by a concert lift. Then he spun around, winked, pointed straight ahead, and froze in an idol pose before the aerobics music started.

Wait. Was that actually PROXIE's "Bad Shawty"?! And the aerobics leader was dressed so much like an idol. His hair was styled ridiculously cool, he had a playful smile, and he kept flirting with his eyes like he was performing at a concert rather than standing on an aerobics court.

"Come on, everyone! If you know the lyrics, sing along. If you know the dance, dance with me. And the VIP tickets right up front, right against the stage—you've got to dance harder than everyone else! Hands up! Ah, ah, raise those armmmmms! Let's count. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Now pose!"

And everyone posed together. Some flashed peace signs, some lifted a leg, some jumped. I was the only one standing there stunned because one grandpa was jumping with his entire life. Ah... Grandpa, don't jump! You're going to break a leg!

So I ended up being the only one frozen in place, completely lost among the aerobics-court fandom, until the auntie beside me nudged my arm.

"First time here? Everyone's like this when they start, dear. Practice often and you'll get good. These things come with experience."

Then the auntie demonstrated a whole sequence—spin, leg lift, arm flick. And her outfit was no joke either: tennis skirt, bright pink sneakers, heart-print socks, fluorescent T-shirt, a wide-brimmed hat, plus stickers on her face like the ones I'd seen people wear to Korean concerts.

"Teenagerssss! The next move is a little harder, but I know everyone can do it! Come on, everyooooone, get readyyyy! Count! One, two, three, four, then five, six, seven, eight! Great job!"

Then the dance leader did a flipping spin, earning cheers from the "teenagers" in their fifties, sixties, and seventies around me. Seriously? Even I couldn't do that move. It was fucking hard. All I could do was raise my arms and rotate them, wave them back and forth, step left-right-left, forward and back, copying everyone else. And when the dance ended, everyone else was still standing around chatting and laughing while I was basically a dog panting itself to death.

"Great job, teenagers! See you next tiiiime! Don't forget to take care of your health!"

"Nong Fong, Auntie wants a hi-touch!"

"Of course! Anyone who wants a hi-touch, line up like usual. And please post on Facebook and invite more people to come exercise with us!"

What?! A hi-touch?!

And then I witnessed a hi-touch session on an aerobics court. Everyone lined up to slap both hands with the aerobics leader named Fong. I'd seen this kind of thing at fan concerts and fan meetings, but I'd never imagined I'd see it at an aerobics court. Everything was new. Everything was mind-blowing. This was nothing like the aerobics I understood. All I could do was ask myself again and again: had the aerobics-court industry really come this far?

Where the hell had I been?

Or could this be the first member the Golden Toad Goddess had sent me?

His face was decent. His height was workable. His dance skills were anything but ordinary, and he could even flip. He dressed like he was ready to step onto a T-pop stage, as if every day were concert day. And then there were those fan-entertaining skills I didn't have. He'd been surrounded by people asking for hi-touches and photos for ages, and his smile never disappeared.

This was... a real idol!

I hurried to join the line, intending to be the last person for a hi-touch. I waited until the rest of the aerobics-court fandom had gone home so I could invite this guy into the group. Our palms slapped together, but instead of letting go, I grabbed his hand and held on.

"Uh... what?"

"Can I talk to you for a second? My name's Jeng. Are you interested in becoming an idol?"

¹ Hi-touch: a fan-service activity especially popular in K-pop and idol culture. Fans line up and pass the artists one by one, exchanging close-up high-fives in greeting.

"Huh? What idol? Let go. Why are you holding my hand? It's only a hi-touch. You slap hands. Slap hands."

I immediately released him. My heart was pounding now. The first step on the road to success was right in front of me!

"Ah, sorry, sorry. I'm looking for members for a group. You'd be perfect! Interested in debuting as an idol?"

"How much is the audition fee?"

"Uh, there isn't one. You're accepted. Join the group. No audition needed."

The guy in front of me raised an eyebrow, looking like he didn't believe a word.

"What's the group called?"

"It's still a secret right now."

"Which label?"

"Uh... I'll tell you if you agree."

"Where's the company?"

"I'll take you there once you definitely agree to join, but it has to stay secret for now."

I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to tell the public about our group yet. I figured it should stay secret until we had all the members, so we could reveal everyone at once. When I first signed with Hia Tian, the label had said the same thing. So this was probably the same.

"Fuck, you're obviously a scammer! Are you trying to trick me into working at some call center? I'm calling the police."

He grabbed his bag and backed several steps away from me, then actually twisted around and started running. No. You cannot run! Hope of all humanity, come baaaack! I immediately sprinted after him like my life depended on it.

"Heyyyyy, wait! It's not like thaaaaat! Who could I possibly scam looking like this? Pant, pant. You—stopppp!"

"Pant, pant. Then stop following me! Pant, pant. I don't know you! What thief is going to tell people he's a thief? I don't believe you!"

"I really am a singer! Look first. Here—this is my group photo. That's my face. Pant. You—stop. I—I can't breathe."

I held my phone out for him to see. Fuck, when had this suddenly turned into us using the roughest possible "I" and "you" with each other? Still, he slowed down and stared back and forth between my phone and my face. I'd set a photo of myself from our first debut as my phone wallpaper. I was extremely proud to display my own handsomeness.

"Did you use Meitu? Your face looks way too handsome in this."

"Makeup! Uh... maybe a little retouching."

"Jeng is your name? 'Jeng'?"

"Jeng. It's pronounced Jeng."

"What's the group called again?"

"Smart Bomb."

"That name is fucking old-fashioned."

Ow. Stabbed straight through the heart.

"Is that the Ultimate Wolf logo?"

"Yeah..."

"Holy shit, you definitely are a scammer! This label only makes series. There's no way they have some group called Smart Bomb."

Sad. So sad. Do not ever say that where Hia Tian can hear you!

"They do. It's just not famous... If you don't believe me, Google it."

"Don't come any closer yet. Move back."

I obediently stood still while he took out his phone and searched Google. At least my face existed on the internet! Hia Tian had held a huge press conference for my group too.

"Holy crap, it's real... So you're asking me to join your group? The members are all this handsome? I'm going to be in a group with guys like these?"

He looked so dazzled that it gave me a sharp pain in my chest. Totally different from when he said I'd used Meitu!

"No... none of them are left. It's just me."

"..."

"If you join, it'll be you and me... two people. You're the first person I've invited."

"What part of the two of us is 'smart'? Look at usssss. How did you even get into that group?"

"I sell my voice. Main vocal."

"Yeah, makes sense. You couldn't even keep time doing aerobics."

You bastard. It was my first time! How was I supposed to dance as well as you?

"That's why I'm asking you to join the party. You can be the main dancer. I think you'd work. When you were dancing, you looked fucking Smart Bomb."

"Then why are you the one recruiting me? Shouldn't it be staff or scouts or something?"

"I'll be straight with you. The company cut the group's budget. My label president said he has an insanely good song already written for us, but if we can't find enough people within one month, they're giving it to one of the label's leading actors instead. I want to try as hard as I possibly can. I don't want to regret not trying."

"So you're inviting me into a group that's about to go bust?"

"Don't think about it like that. It hasn't gone bust. It's just beginning. Why don't we start together? When we succeed, we'll have a story to tell about everything we went through. Think about it. One day we'll win a national award, stand onstage, and tell everyone we met at an aerobics court. How fucking cool would that be? Anyone can become an idol. Anyone can have their talent discovered, even on a flooded aerobics court. If someone's meant to be a star, they'll shine wherever they are. We'll become legends of the T-pop industry!"

"Have you ever thought about how fucking embarrassing it'll be if we don't get famous? People will say a guy like me belongs nowhere but an aerobics court."

"Listen. I'm telling you, you're fucking good. When you dance, when you entertain people—so what if it's an aerobics court? You're not scamming anyone. You're not cheating anyone out of money. And you've got tons of people coming to dance with you. The court is this flooded and almost a hundred people still came to see you. The auntie next to me dressed like she was going to a Korean concert. The grandpa in front of me danced like he'd forgotten he was old. Then people lined up for your hi-touch. You think something like that happens easily? When I first debuted, I didn't even have this many people coming to see me. I believe that if the two of us combine our power, we can do it!"

"Shit... I feel like you're selling me a dream and trying to recruit me into an MLM downline."

Yes. You understood perfectly.

"I promise I'll do my absolute best for our group. Smart Bomb Generation Two has to become famous!"

"I still haven't said yes..."

"Come on, say yes! The company has practice rooms too!"

"Really... but I still have to take aerobics gigs. I probably can't practice every day."

"That's fine. I still have to take singing gigs at saeyid birthday parties too. And I don't even know if Hia Tian is paying us."

"No pay?... Uh, good luck, man. I'm leaving."

He started walking away again. I lunged forward and grabbed a fistful of his shirt to stop him. Why was finding the first member this hard?!

"Heyyyyy! Life is an investmenttttt! Once you're famous, you'll earn it backkkkk!"

"Those words are coming from a guy whose group has already flopped spectacularly! What the hell am I supposed to believe? Even MLM people show you someone who made billions! Let go of me!!!"

"Before someone makes billions, they have to go through hardship too! I promise our group will become famous. I had my fortune told. He said we'll definitely make it if we find the right members."

"And how the hell do you know I'm the right one? I've never passed an audition in my life."

"Why? I think you're good."

"The first place scammed me out of the application fee. The second place, I made the final round, but the label had a kid with connections, so they kicked me out. I competed on a survival show too, but the production team told me I had to be eliminated because there was a label trainee they wanted to push for debut. Then they said they'd let me compete on another show instead, promised they'd help... but I don't want to go anymore. Why does chasing a dream have to be this exhausting?"

Fuck. I hated things like that so much. It was blatantly disrespecting someone's dream. If you weren't born rich, singing lessons, dance lessons, practice rooms—all of it was fucking expensive. And if you had to audition or compete on a show, that cost even more. Especially if you came from another province: travel, accommodation, clothes, hair, makeup. Even my house wasn't that far from Bangkok and I'd still spent a fucking fortune.

"I get you. My family isn't rich either. Maybe I've just been luckier because I've never been scammed and never had some connected kid steal my spot. But I haven't succeeded either. I think this is probably the last chance of my life, so I want to do the best I can. I don't want to regret not trying... I can't guarantee whether we'll become famous. But I won't take advantage of you. I won't lie to you. And I promise you won't be the only one who's tired. I'll be tired with you. I'll struggle with you until we become famous."

"You..."

"If I break that promise, may lightning strike me!"

CRACK!

"Ah—FUCK! I haven't even done anything yet! Why the hell did lightning strike nowwww? Listen, that has nothing to do with me. It's nature. It's rainy season. Don't reject me yet!"

"Ha ha ha ha! You asshole, you're hilarious."

"I'm not selling comedy. I sell my voice."

"Fine. I'll join the party with you."

"Really? You mean it? FUCK YESSSSS!!!"

I couldn't hold back. I launched myself at him and wrapped an arm around his neck. My first member! Thank you, Golden Toad Goddess! I've got a main dancer nowwww!!!

"Stop shaking my heaaaaaad!"

"AAAAAH! Smart Bomb has a member nowwww!"

"You animal! Let gooooo! Dude, it's rainingggggg!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! It's rainingggggg!"

"Follow me!"

I ran after my first bandmate to escape the rain. We didn't make it in time. The rain soaked us through, and in the end we had to stand shivering under the lean-to awning of a shop that wasn't open today.

"My name's Fong. What's your name again? Jong? Jeng?"

"Jeng. My name is Jeng. I haven't gone bust yet!"

Then he held out his fist and bumped mine. Fuck, that felt good.

"Thanks, man."

"Thanks for asking me. So what's your next move? Where are you finding more people?"

"Don't know. Haven't thought about it yet."

"You don't have a plan?"

"Nope... you're the first person I found."

"Fuck this, I quuuuit!"

"Don't quit yetttt! I've only got one head, so I can't think of much. Now that I've got you, our ideas are guaranteed to flourish. One person loses his head, two people die as friends."

"I don't want to die yet. You die first."

"Fong, my beloved friiend!"

"Who the hell is your friend?!"

Even though he kept complaining, in the end he gave me his number and exchanged LINE contacts with me. He agreed to become part of Smart Bomb Generation Two, and he even agreed to help me figure out how to find more members!

Jeng was going to shine again!