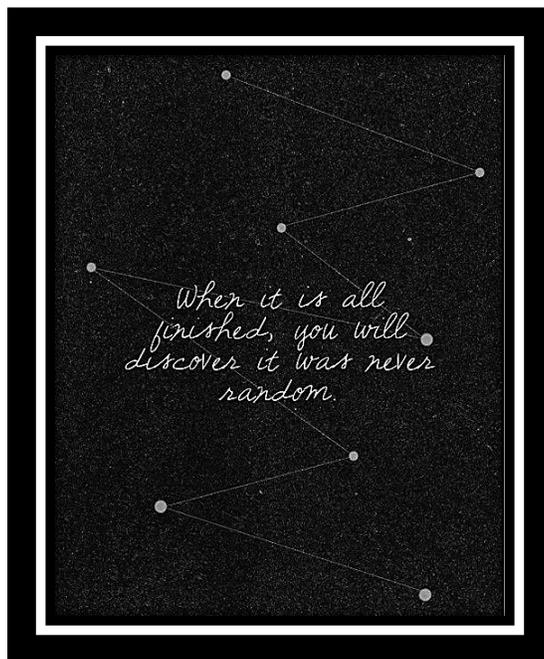


NEVER RANDOM



UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL - 3:40 A.M. – SAFFIRE’S ROOM

WHY was he still up and somewhat functioning? Just like he’d experienced during comeback rehearsals, new videos and days on the road, Kim Hyun Joong had lapsed from exhaustion into insomnia. It was a feeling he was familiar with, but had hoped wouldn’t besiege him here. With dozens of paper cranes completed, conversations about his schedule (or lack thereof) with his manager over, he’d wandered the halls of the quiet sleeping hospital, contemplating his past and more importantly, his future.

Finding himself back on the VIP wing, he stood at the foot of Saffire’s bed, revisiting a nagging question in his mind, over and over again . . . *In what ‘other’ world did the mind float off to when trapped in a coma?* Without concrete answers, it seemed to be popping up whenever another hour passed without any significant change in either sister’s condition.

It was nearly 4:00 A.M. and she didn't look any different than she had earlier at 4:00 P.M. What clue told him she was awake? Able to hear? The dilemma with Saffron was the same, but chattering to her, (no matter what the hour) came naturally. However, here with Saffire . . . awkwardness immediately set in. The pit in his stomach would not be denied.

In the few days since she'd been hospitalized he'd relieved JJ several times, but not really done much but doze off and on to the normal rhythmic sounds of her machines, and his friend's choice of classical music to help soothe her, wherever it was the brain had taken her.

Now, that JaeJoong was gone, here in the new ward, amongst all the trappings of a classical genius, the sterile, yet cozy atmosphere of the large room should've eased his anxiousness some. Instead, it only served to make him more determined to make some sense out of what the future would hold for them.

To anyone on the outside looking in, this probably seemed like the most dramatic beginnings of a Korean Drama. Korean/American born twin sisters . . . separated for years . . . now lying comatose in adjoining hospital rooms. Were the Idols who loved them really their husbands? Or would they awake to find out it was all a dream?

It was so unimaginable to comprehend, it was almost comical. But, here they were. Saffron would wake up to find him faithfully beside her. Saffire . . . who had gambled with her future . . . could awaken alone without her Prince Jae. And, the plot would thicken.

Thinking back, what role had he played in this drama, to bring them where they were today? He could've stepped in sooner, not belittled his friend's feelings or forced him to evaluate his past vs. his future. Yet another dilemma he'd spun a million different ways since the accident, trying to de-villanize himself.

"I shouldn't have questioned your love for him, Saffire. Mianhae."

Studying her bruised and somber face as she slept, the weight of his responsibility in JJ's absence became glaringly clear. Reaching around her, he carefully placed a small paper crane on

the side table, hoping when she woke up and saw it, it would serve as a symbol of his desire to finally make peace.

This was not the time for anger. It was a time for contemplation. Of thinking back and wishing he could reset the past, throwing caution to the wind, where both sisters were concerned. Wasn't that what Uncle had strived for in his final hours and even after death? If he didn't do anything else, Young Jae Ryu had finally convinced him that he couldn't live without his Hani. JJ knew it about Saffire as well. So, why had he run?

Backing into the easy chair beside the bed, he dropped down, his gaze wearily roaming the four walls. Both sister's rooms were identical in size, circumference, and style. Saffire's however was chock full of children's hand-drawn pictures, various stuffed animals, balloons, colorful scarves, trinkets, and her most prized possession . . . her violin.

In her own classical circle, this 'Princess' of music was well-loved. Standing over her, two long days ago, JJ had promised never to leave her again. Now, even if he could be convinced to return, could he tear her away from these precious children, or the music that defined her soul? By the same token, she didn't really fit into his world either. His unpredictable lifestyle, made up of sleepless nights, days on the road, crazy fangirls, and total lack of privacy. For all the talk about fairy tales . . . he feared, she already suspected . . . that theirs was an ill-fated love story, headed for an unhappy ending.

"Aishhh," he whispered, "I know what you're thinking. It's complicated. You have your career, he has his. Hell, we ALL do. But, that doesn't mean we can't fall in love and stay committed. We're human, yah? JJ hyung is the only one you need in your life Princess. He loves you, and Sienna." Scooting closer, he toyed with the strings on the violin propped up against the night table, plunking each one individually before picking it up and cradling it in his arms like a guitar. Strumming it quietly, he sighed. "Listen Saffire . . . I know you can hear me. Without you and Saffron, JJ and I are lost. This will be over soon. And, you'll wake up to all the people who love and adore you. Including me."

Hand to his heart, he pounded his chest, the guilt washing over him again. *What if he was giving her false hope and Jae didn't return? He couldn't let that happen. If he had to leave*

Saffron, and go back to get him . . . Kim JaeJoong would be present to serve out his promise.
Hearing the air pump rise and fall with each breath she took, he forced down his tears.

Returning the violin to its original position he leaned over, shoulders drooped brushing a lock of blonde hair away from the oxygen mask covering her face. “Wae? (WHY) didn’t you tell him Saffire?” A familiar voice behind him startled the Idol out of a weary state of desperation.

“I’ve been asking her the same thing for years now.”

With his thoughts and words still hovering in the air about them, Joong circled slowly, the hair on his neck bristling at the sight of Junsu, knowing it was only a matter of time before they would come face-to-face. *Why of all times, did it have to be now?*

Laying his jacket at Saffire’s feet Junsu bowed politely to the friend he hadn’t seen in nearly three years continuing, “I overheard what you said. But, honestly hyung, I’m only here as a friend.”

“Really?” *Why didn’t he believe that? So, what if he was laying all his cards on the table now (after the fact) trying to be the ‘nice’ guy? The damage had already been done.*

Jerking Junsu back toward the now open doorway Joong’s disappointment in his friend’s excuse was evident. “Her mother told me everything, and Sienna’s not yours! So, stop acting like it. You’re a selfish son-of-a-bitch! Why don’t you get the hell out now, before she wakes up? She has all the support she needs without you.”

Sighing, Junsu responded calmly, realizing in the wake of both girl’s conditions, Kim Hyun Joong was suffering in his own private hell. “I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t see it that way, but I’m on my way back to Korea shortly. I just stopped in to see her one last time and say my good-byes.” Making his way back toward the bed he spoke over his shoulder quietly, “Regarding JJ . . . she had her reasons.”

Lightly patting her ankle, he ignored Hyun Joong’s figure looming behind him. “Get well soon Fire. I have to go. It’s for the best.”

Even though he had two more days left before he absolutely needed to be back, taking up residence at Kyong's with Sienna would only split his already cracked heart wide open. After overhearing Hyun Joong's one-sided conversation, it was even clearer to him that he needed to walk away now . . . and on the way back to Korea, he would make sure to let JJ know his new family needed him.

He wasn't the S.O.B., his friend thought he was. He was the loser. The loser in a war he'd never been able to win. Why he'd fought so hard he would never understand. Lifting his jacket, he sped to the partially opened doorway, aiming only in keeping some modicum of dignity, before breaking down in the hallway, alone.

* * * * *

PHYSICALLY and emotionally drained Joong, yawned stepping from Saffire's room to stretch his legs and relieve himself before returning to his wife's bedside. Being a man was tough. Tough to know when to stand up . . . even tougher to know when to step back.

Young Jae had helped drag a young, scrappy Kim Hyun Joong through the pitfalls of puberty and on into adulthood, when his real father had given up hope. And, in the midst of his painful past he had befriended the enigmatic Trot singer. The Cup of Hotness Café had been his sanctuary when the streets turned cold. And, along with the warmth of a newfound 'family', had come a, skittish, wiry kid by the name of Kim JaeJoong. They became fast friends, around the tables at the café, unafraid to share their experiences from the streets and behind the microphones of S. Korea's booming KPOP phenomenon.

Never judged, or told they weren't worthy, the man they came to refer to as 'Uncle', urged them on, helping to usher them into a world of music they'd never experienced before.

Years later, in the prime of their lives, how could Kim Hyun Joong (who'd often dreamed of being a family man), turn his back on his life-long friend . . . Kim JaeJoong. *Did he always LIKE what he did? No. Did he always SUPPORT what he did? No. But, just as Uncle had taught them to do, he always LOVED him through it. So, this situation would be no different.*

Pulling out his cell, he was convinced it was time to have a serious heart-to-heart with the Prince of KPOP himself. Running on adrenaline, tea, apple juice, and prayer, what he wouldn't give for some spicy ramen about now. Headed for the nurse's station one finger on the CALL button of his phone, the buzzer sounded on the intercom. Wondering who else was showing up in the wee hours of the morning, he glanced up ready for a conversation, until the double doors opened, ruining any chance for his appetite.

NURSES STATION

DESPITE the time, Ian appeared crisp and polished in his designer suit, marching emphatically through the door like he owned the place. Even though he was hard to miss, Hyun Joong, ignored the haughty American, smiling wanly, as he greeted the young nurses, fishing Godiva chocolates from his pocket and laying them across the counter.

“Gamza for your hard work ladies.”

Clapping her hands like a fangirl, nurse Baker gushed, “Oh, how sweet Mr. Kim. How'd you know they were my favorite?”

Taking no time to intercept Hyun Joong conversing with the staff, Ian's handsome face wore a pinched, and sour expression. *Could the f'ng night get any worse?* Scowling at their interaction, he knew if he had his way, firing the private nurses and putting in his own staff would be the first thing on his agenda come morning. As far as he was concerned, this was the pesky Idol's last day by Saffron's side. He didn't know how but, he was going to prove the son-of-a-bitch WASN'T her husband, once and for all!

Slamming his briefcase on the counter to get their attention he barked, “I would like to know what happened to Saffron's things when she got here.”

Wondering who died and made him boss, three sets of tired eyes turned in his direction, the small Asian nurse answering dryly, “Things? I'm not sure what you mean Mr. Carver.” Not liking the overbearing man, she played dumb, puffing out her chest, feeling brave with Kim Hyun Joong standing at the counter.

Hating her attitude Ian's brows snapped together. "You know EXACTLY what I mean . . . NURSE SIMMONS." Staring at Hyun Joong he directed his words back to the nurse. "Her PERSONAL things. Phone, purse, the jewelry she was wearing."

Glancing at each other, the other nurse took over, explaining like she was talking to a two-year-old. "I'm sorry sir, but Mrs. Kim's personal belongings were given to a family member in Emergency when she arrived. I thought you were already informed of that."

Tapping the countertop in aggravation, Ian's voice continued to rise. "Quit calling her that! Everyone here knows she goes by Saffron Ryu." Still glaring at Hyun Joong, he stepped closer to the shorter man, hoping to intimidate him if nothing else. "What I want to know is WHO was the family member? A name dammit." His face flushed and fuming at the stupidity and incompetence of the night staff, clearly what he should be doing was buying the f'ng hospital, 'cause obviously it was run by morons.

Not backing down, Hyun Joong smiled broadly. "Aish man . . . it's the middle of the night, and this is a hospital. No need to yell. I got both girl's belongings. Is there a problem?" Nodding his head, he silently assured the nurses he would take care of the big, blustery, 'ignoramus'.

"Yeah there IS a problem. I'm her fiancé, we both know it . . . and it's my responsibility to take care of her stuff, I . . ." Hesitating he watched the nurses back away into a small office, twittering quietly between them. "You know what? Doesn't matter, I don't have to justify my reasons. Especially not to you."

Losing what little patience he had left after so many hours without real sleep, Joong got even closer to Ian's face. Close enough to smell the strong coffee he'd had earlier, mixed with an overbearingly, garish aftershave.

"Yah, I think it's about time we talk and get some things straightened out. Don't you, MR. CARVER? Let's take it to the waiting room and quit disturbing the staff." Strolling away he expected Ian to follow. This was a moment he would cherish in the future.

4:00 A.M. - SAFFIRE'S ROOM

IT wasn't practical to think it would be snowing in the Spring . . . yet . . . with a brilliant sun, blinding her, a mystified Saffire stood on the rooftop patio, watching the large, airy flakes float down around her like so many crystalized diamonds. A faint chorus of violins filled the air, making her wish her own instrument was on hand, so she could join in.

But . . . something was off. She was neither cold nor hot, no frosty expression of air surging from her lungs . . . and why of all places was she perched at the edge of Young Jae's townhouse roof, engaged in a mid-day weather analysis? Where was he anyway?

With questioning eyes, she scanned the landscape of the city below, bits and pieces of childhood memories cropping up one by one. Playing her first memorized Aria; setting the small wooden table with good china and dolls for an afternoon tea party she knew only Uncle would appreciate. And, then there was the night-time star gazing. Warm summer evenings, barefooted with ice cold lemonade, curled in his lap, picking out the brightest constellations in the sky.

Still confused, she fought to recollect how she'd gotten here. Not remembering the stairs, or even seeing her feet cross in front of her, it was almost as if she'd miraculously appeared out of thin air. As her head dipped further and further over the side of the brick building, a loud voice could be heard below.

“GET OUT OF THE WAY!”

What WAS that? Spinning around, her long blonde hair shifted from side-to-side with the weight of her glance.

“She's dropping fast. GET THEM OUT OF HERE.”

Who? There was no one here but her. Suddenly the soft music stopped, and overwhelmed by a loud clap of thunder she gripped the waist high railing attempting to keep her balance and not tumble over the side. Blinking rapidly, she could swear she heard someone say, “We're losing her.”

Losing who? Wasn't she alone on the roof? Surely, they weren't referring to her? She wasn't lost. She was right here where she belonged. Amongst the things she loved, waiting for the one person who affirmed her . . . made her feel special.

The large snowflakes began dissipating around her bare feet, the rays of sunlight looming larger and brighter by the second. *Was she floating? Was that even possible?*

“Uncle? Are you playing jokes on me again?” Her voice timid in the midst of more thunder and the crackling of lightening forced a re-evaluation of her reasons for being there. *Dreaming, of course. That was it. A dream. She would wake up any moment and find herself snuggled between the sheets, little Sienna at her side, snoring lightly.*

Trying in vain to turn away from the brilliance of the sun in her face she shivered, despite its increasing heat, hoping with all her heart she'd only left the drapes open in her bedroom, and was being flooded with morning sunlight.

“ONE MORE TIME.”

Why was someone shouting beside her bed? Had she drifted off without locking the front door as well? How irresponsible of her.

SAFFRON'S ROOM

TWITCHING uncontrollably, Saffron struggled to open her mouth to complain about the noises making it impossible for her to stay asleep. Unable to place exactly what was going on, it sounded like a wayward dinner cart, careening down bare floors, smashing from one side of a room to the other, accompanied by pounding footsteps and loud yelling.

Attempting to open one eye, she cursed under her breath at the inability of her body to respond to simple commands. *Where had everyone gone that had been talking to her earlier? Vaguely remembering kind voices that sounded like Mother, and . . . Ian, was it really him she heard as well? Something about getting better? Coming home. Why? She couldn't remember what had happened. They talked like she was still in a hospital.*

Her clouded thoughts making it difficult to bring simple bits of information to the forefront it did make sense that the noises in the hallway could be a crash cart. Obviously, someone was in cardiac arrest.

Taking in a deep breath, she began to wonder who it might be. Grateful, it wasn't her . . . *THAT would be awful . . . to be trapped in this body, unable to let anyone know she was having a heart-attack.* She really just needed another blanket, some peace and quiet, and maybe even a drink. But, her finger wouldn't respond to search out a call button for assistance, and she was too tired to care. Drifting off, after the shouting subsided she slipped in and out of consciousness, grappling with the notion that at any moment, the darkness imprisoning her was about to shatter.

SAFFIRE'S ROOM

SUDDENLY and without warning, it happened. There was no waking up, no sunshine streaming in through the glass, no sweetly sleeping toddler beside her. In their place . . . a sensation of ultimate finality. A peace surpassing any other feeling she'd ever experienced in life. A calm resolve to finish out a journey that had taken her to the top of her world and then some.

"I think she's gone. Record the time." *There it was again . . . that sad, cracked voice making senseless statements.*

"Uncle? Is that you?" Up ahead, a figure emerged in the tunnel of light. "I . . . I thought it was weird you weren't here." Running senselessly, she bolted into his arms unconscious of the weightlessness of their bodies, clinging to one another.

"Saffire . . . my dear sweet Fire. Don't. Don't stay close. I shouldn't have gotten involved. You don't belong here. Go back. Go back now." His voice tender but stern, Young Jae cringed, holding her at arm's length, his ethereal face sad. "I thought I knew what was best for you, but it's not this. Sienna, and Saffron. They can't go on without you. But, me? I'll be here forever."

"What do you mean?" Puzzled at his reluctance to accept her, Saffire's smile waned. "I've missed you soooo. Where's Auntie Saffron, and . . ." Looking out over his shoulder toward the glistening white light she felt a prickling against her leg. Her attention drawn downward, there

was ‘She-Devil’, curling around one ankle, nudging as she purred gently, almost as if acknowledging the fact that Saffire wasn’t welcome.

“OH. Kittyyyy . . . My sweet, kitty. Even you’re here to greet me. Mmmm,” Hauling her into both arms, her lips found the soft fur of the black cat calming, until with one wail, ‘She-Devil’ proved herself the adversary yet again, leaping away across Young Jae’s shoulder, and off into the void.

“I told you.” Shaking his head in despair the elder man nodded in the direction of the rooftop whispering, “It’s not your time. PLEASE, YOU NEED TO WAKE UP.”

“HOLY SHIT. SHE’S BACK!”

The noise, it was so loud . . . where was the quiet essence of violins? Soft feathery light snow-flakes? Feel of fur against her cheek? Was there shouting? Applause? Had she finished a concert? And, Sienna? Where was her child?

Still unable to open her eyes, or lift her body from the hospital bed, Saffire let the whirlwind of sounds blast her senses until she feared she would be sick. Whatever had happened, it felt like a half-ton truck had rolled across her chest. *And, was it impossible for ANYONE around her to speak quietly???*

SAFFRON’S ROOM

“YOU NEED TO WAKE UP.”

“I’M AWAKE UNCLE!”

Nearly ripping the IV out of her arm, Saffron jolted up in bed, flinging both eyes open, her heart pounding erratically out of her chest. The IV bag twisted violently in her ascent back into the realm of consciousness, she half-expected to see either St. Peter or the Grim Reaper standing beside her bed. But, all that met her was the vast expanse of a dimly lit room, with quiet music playing in the background. It didn’t look like Heaven or Hell. But, then again . . . she’d never visited either, so how would she know.

It only took a few seconds before it became clear that focusing on anything other than the lump of her body beneath a white blanket was going to be difficult at best. Timidly touching what seemed to be her leg she pinched it lightly through the coverlet, feeling the odd sting of pain. *Well, that was good. Pain meant life. Somewhere, she was awake and alive.*

3:00 P.M. - GANGNAM, S. KOREA – JAEJOONG'S PENTHOUSE

IT was late afternoon and Kim JaeJoong, (who hadn't slept solid in days), fought the beginnings of a well-deserved nap, crossing both arms over his chest, feet propped on the back cushions of the leather couch, cat in his lap. *Work could wait. DAMMIT. There was that nagging feeling again, like something was totally out of whack in the Heavens. Almost as if Uncle Ryu were poking him like he always did when he knew he'd fucked up and done something stupid.*

Figuring he'd recognized the source to deal with later, he shut his tired, blood-shot eyes, the sounds of classical music pouring quietly through his ears, denying the inclination to remove his earbuds before drifting off. Funny, but ever since walking out of Saffire's hospital room, he'd been unable to think, or focus, without the soothing calmness of her favorite playlist of classical violin music. Today was no exception.

As his breathing slowed, he felt himself easing into the depths of an endless void, landing with a thud on the snowy streets of Gangnam's familiar south side. Beside him, the vision of a beautiful tall blonde, dressed all in white. Arms out as if waiting for a hug, she grinned, revealing small, smile wrinkles around her perfectly formed lips. A warmth growing inside his aching heart, told him he knew her. He was certain of it in fact.

"It's about time you got here." Her voice like the tinkling of ice against glass, her warm fingers reached forward, cupping his flushed cheeks lovingly. "I'm lost, and I could use some guidance. Piggy-back please."

A curtain of snowfall descending around them, he hoisted her to his back, reveling in the weightlessness of her body. Moving like one, he propelled them toward the outline of the Cup of Hotness Café. *But, how did he know that was where she wanted to go? There didn't seem to be anywhere else. It was dark, the street was deserted.*

Arms wrapped around his neck, her breath was feathery light in his ear as she cooed, “Even a bitch deserves to be loved Prince Jae.”

Then it hit him . . . “PRINCESS.”

* * * * *

STARTLING himself out of what could only be described as the ‘dream from hell’, JJ bolted from the couch, his earbuds ripped from his ears, cat JiJi shrieking as she flew from his lap.

“DAMMIT. What the hell was that all about anyway? Mianhae JiJi, appa’s losing it.” Leaning over he lifted the cat from the sanctuary of his feet, scratching her grey head with one hand, and rubbing the sweat from behind his neck with the other.



“It was her. I swear it. She was asking me for help.”

Hearing his cell go off on the pillow of the armchair he was uncertain what to do with the overwhelming feeling of abandonment coursing through his veins. Snatching it quickly, he stared blankly into the blinking screen.

Hyun Joong? Ani. He didn’t want to deal with him right now. Grappling with the idea that all Joong was going to do was berate him yet again for leaving he let the call go to voicemail. Like he didn’t already know he’d been an asshole!

Seconds later, cruising toward the kitchen for a drink, the blinking started again. Only this time it was a text message, he was unable to avoid seeing.

I’M SAVING MY BREATH 4 WHEN U GET HERE. SAFFIRE FLATLINED A FEW MINUTES AGO & WE ALMOST LOST HER. GET UR ASS ON A PLANE RIGHT NOW, OR I’M COMING BACK TO GET U MYSELF. DON’T MAKE ME SORRY WE’RE FRIENDS.

WHAT THE FUCK? FLATLINED? That meant died! SHE DIED. In the middle of his mid-after-noon nap? No wonder he’d been sensing something was wrong. Had God been trying to tell him through the dream?

Still not wanting to hear the pain or anger in his hyung’s voice, he texted back immediately, reassuring him he would be there as soon as he could get his things together and get away.

* * * * *

THE next phone call, came as he scurried around the penthouse apartment gathering clean clothes, scribbling notes to the housekeeper, and making sure JiJi had enough food and water until morning.



“I can’t talk right now. Busy.” About to hang up, his manager’s voice interrupted him.

“Wait . . . hyung . . . This is important. I just got the script for a new drama. Maybe later? I can bring it over with some beef and see what you think. It’s a good fit.” Despite understanding why JaeJoong probably wasn’t interested in talking or eating beef right now, he tried being persuasively upbeat and positive.

“Ani. I’m on my way back to L.A. In fact, pass on it. And, cancel my interview on KBS next week. I might be gone for more than a few days.” His voice curt and raw, JaeJoong didn’t want to spend any more time discussing his plans outside of the trip, not with anyone. Not even his manager.

“Wha? Wae? Something happen?”

“De. It’s Saffire. I nearly lost her today. Mianhae. Gotta go. And, hyung. Try not to let Neitzen’s or ‘Allkpop’ get wind of this will ya? Tell KBS I’ve got laryngitis or something. Reschedule further out. It’s not like we haven’t dealt with this kind of shit before. I’ll text you when I get there.”

* * * * *