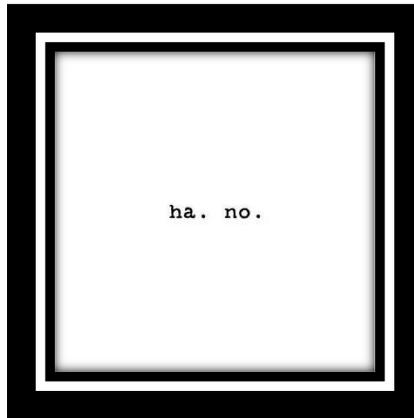


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MARCH 11th - 11:45 A.M. - CUP OF HOTNESS CAFE, - L.A., CA

WHAT is the saying about assumptions? ‘They make an ass out of you and me . . .’ Were assumptions about to be the rule of the day? Two idols ‘assuming’ a child belonged to them . . . ‘assuming’ time stood still while they were in the military . . . in turn allowing them to ‘assume’ they would be on the favorable side of a reconciliation . . .

So many variables, so many outcomes. So many hearts beating at different speeds. What were the odds they could drop whatever hurts they clung to and ALL converge at the same intersection?

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UNPREPARED for the meeting of a lifetime, Kim Hyun Joong, (still reeling from the sight of his ‘Oh hani’ playing mommy to a little Asian girl, and ‘God-only-knew-what’ to Ian), watched as she headed toward what seemed to be an office door.

Suddenly spurred on by the knowledge that, (hands down) he wasn’t leaving L.A. without reclaiming her, his body began moving away from the chair he was clutching. Apparently, fighting for her once had not been enough. Now, he needed to fight again.

Eyes keenly focused on his goal he didn't hear or notice JJ behind him until a calming voice and large hand to his shoulder stopped him.

“Hyung. Wait. Not the time. Remember your reputation . . .” His tone low, but still loud enough to be heard above the cackling crowd, was oddly convincing. “There’s photographers and she doesn’t even know you’re here. How about we get a drink first? I know I could use one.”

Blinking as he contemplated his friend’s words, Joong knew he was on the wrong side of his emotions if he gave in to his frustration and disappointment now. *What had he expected? She was going to fly into his arms in a misty cloud of colors, a chorus of Angels at her back? Yeah. Maybe he was the one spending too much time in Drama-Land.*

Stopping mid-step, he swiveled . . . straight into the grinning face of JJ’s girlfriend from hell, Nyoko. *Where was a forgiving God when you needed him most?*

“Drinks, YES! That’s a great idea. Do they even have anything else but coffee and champagne in this little place? And, by the way Jae . . . where IS my drink? You didn’t get it, did you? Oh well, I’ll do the bubbly, it’s okay. Joong, oppa . . . you, coming?”

Joong OPPA? By the time she quit jabbering, Saffron had disappeared into the office, Ian was mocking photographers with the little girl that suddenly (in the light) looked surprisingly like JJ and he was feeling nauseous.

Renewed anger surrounding his already peaked face, he pushed the annoying woman aside on his way toward the coffee bar growling, “Get her away from me JJ before I do something I’ll regret, and it won’t be over Saffron.”

Red-faced and glassy-eyed, Hyun Joong stomped away, trying to hold his emotions in check muttering under his breath, “Stupid, fucking son-of-a-bitch Ian. Am I really that babo, (STUPID)? Should’ve never fallen for her, it’s HyeSu all over again . . . Why do I let JJ talk me into shit like this? It’s his damn fault. Shouldn’t be here. GOD, I hate my life sometimes.”

Mixed up in his own unexplainable emotions, JJ more than sympathetic to Hyun Joong’s plight, glanced over at Ian and Sienna one last time before encouraging Nyoko on across the room.

“Go get you some champagne Koko. In fact, get me one too. And, leave Hyun Joong alone. Please.” *What else could he do? His hands were tied as well. Saffire was already AWOL, Saffron was inaccessible, and thankfully no one knew their idol status yet. They were temporarily safe.*

SAFFRON

SLIPPING inside the private office bathroom Saffron stood for a moment, relieved to be out of the limelight, even if only for a few moments. Outside the door she could hear a wave of female voices, ‘ooo’ing and ahhh’ing’ loudly as they chattered over what sounded like Ian’s interaction with Sienna.

Could she not leave the man alone in a room for a second? Sienna was nothing but a chick magnet. It didn’t matter whose arms she was in. Even Kyong found it difficult to keep woman at bay when he took her anywhere.

Chuckling, she swiped lipstick around her lips carefully, blotting quickly with a tissue.

“Mewwww . . . mewwww . . .”

“Oh shit. She-devil. Where the hell are you? You better not have peed in my office.” Out the bathroom door like a flash, she flew around the tiny office in search of the café’s newest employee. Perched between her half-opened laptop the tiny kitten wailed incessantly, hoping for a rescue.

“Dear Lord. There you are.”

Lifting the lid, she slipped the ball of black fur out from her prison within. Stroking the kitten’s baby soft head, she scolded her lovingly, “What am I gonna do with you? I TOLD Saffire you’d be the death of me! But, noooo, SHE didn’t listen. Never does, said you’d be good for us, Sienna loves you . . . Blah, blah, blah. Here you are already causing trouble. Now, back in the bed with you . . . I’ve got things to do. And, STAY away from my desk. Unless you’re gonna do my work for me.”

Finding herself smiling, she dropped She-Devil carefully back down into the confines of the kitty bed. In the final remaining minutes . . . obviously, her father was watching down on them.

Making her way back out into the room, (just as she expected) she wasn't startled to see Ian cradling Sienna's wiry form in the crook of one arm, basking in the impromptu photo-op, a crowd of women and teenage girls gathered about them like fish to a baited hook.

What she didn't know however, was the spontaneous attention was just enough time to give Ian (the 'man of the hour'), the perfect opportunity to devise a plan for the closing moments of the opening . . . AND . . . relegated to watching from the bar, was the one man who could impact her very next second!

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STEPPING to the microphone, Saffron cleared her throat. Tired, but pleased, she smiled scanning the semi-crowded room, readying herself to deliver her appreciation and thanks.

Able to push aside her emotional struggles yet again, clearly the morning had been a rousing success. To include her amazing new staff, business friends, partners, and family had only served to make it that much more special.



Accustomed to exuding poise and clarity in public speaking, this time she found herself at a loss for words. Blushing, her head dropped, her eyes misting with tears. This opening had been highly personal and close to her heart, (like everything else associated with the day so far).

At that very moment, Saffire appeared in the open doorway, seeing Ian making his way across the floor, little Sienna clutching the pen from his jacket pocket squealing in glee. *What the hell was he up to?* Not wanting to spoil Saffron's final remarks, she pulled up short at the small guest table, readying herself to take Sienna and make a run for it.

Ignoring all decorum, a grinning Ian met Saffron face-to-face, tugging the microphone from her fingers. Dismissing Saffire, glaring at him from the table beside the stage, he hoisted Sienna

closer to his chest. Her tiny hands craving the large noisy ‘toy’ she leaned in, forcing him to scold her cheerfully. “Whoah, there little one. I need to make an important announcement.”



Taken aback by his playful demeanor, Saffire tapped her foot impatiently, continuing to watch as her sister willingly turned over the mic, stepping back away from the duo. But, her continued, good-natured smile lent itself to the theory that she too was ‘waiting Ian out’, in hopes he’d get on with whatever he’d interrupted her for and let her finish.

“So, um . . . gather round everyone. This has been an amazingly great event. Wouldn’t you say Button?” Turning to Sienna he winked, kissing her nose lovingly. “And, I know Saffron is getting ready to wrap up the festivities and thank everyone involved, however . . .”

In the pause, Saffire’s eyes flew from Saffron, to the crowd, and back around to Saffron again. *The son-of-a-bitch! Why did he always steal her thunder like that? Why in the hell wasn’t she saying something?* It was time to take Sienna away from him and give sister back her dignity.

What happened next could only be described as catastrophic. Well, maybe not a ‘true’ catastrophe like an earthquake, fire, or tornado . . . but in Saffire’s eyes it might as well have been.

Dropping to one knee, Ian stood Sienna beside him, and without batting an eye, pulled a ring from his jacket pocket announcing into the microphone at the top of his lungs, “I love you Saffron Ryu. Always have . . . Will you marry me?”

And, pandemonium erupted.

NO! IAN, YOU ASSHOLE. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? AND, WHY DO YOU HAVE MY CHILD WHILE YOU’RE DOING IT? Unable to move her feet forward to claim her daughter, Saffire stood glued to a spot by the table, fingers digging into the sides until it felt like she drew blood.

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BEFORE she could come to her senses, Saffron’s face took on a plastered, camera-ready smile, not daring to ignore the fact that the press was still in attendance. Previously focused on ‘NCT’, now they were focused on her, a kneeling Ian, a massive diamond ring, and Sienna . . . the child who didn’t even belong to her.

“I . . . I . . . Oh my. This is so unexpected Ian.” *Why was she was allowing him to put the ring on her finger? Was it just for show? Of course. She would get him alone later and make herself clear there WOULD be no wedding. Especially not now.*

Standing tall, Ian smirked making sure (just like earlier) the photographers got exactly the ‘appropriate’ pictures . . . kissing her cheek, Sienna snuggled between them. Not only was this the perfect opportunity to get more publicity for the café, it would secure his future as the romantic, caring, and loving ‘family-man-to-be.’ She might not be pleased now, but she would thank him afterward.

In his own defense he wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment kind of guy. His original plan had been to set up an intimate candle-lit dinner for two, with lobster tails and wine, for later that night. Meaningful enough to sweep her off her feet. There would be Japanese lanterns on the beach overlooking the ocean, and a violin trio. But . . . he’d been called away to an emergency meeting in Australia the day before, so instead of waiting . . . (right here, right now, with everyone watching, including his nemesis, Kim Hyun Joong) the timing seemed so much more appropriate and fun.

DECEASED YOUNG JAE RYU AND AUNT SAFFRON

RECONCILIATION? After what he’d just witnessed? Not likely. He’d gotten his hopes up for nothing. Hands behind his back, Uncle Young Jae’s spirit paced back and forth across the expanse of heavens, his white hair standing on end.

“I KNEW IT. That, blankety-blank Ian Carver.” Shouting, he heard his deep voice reverberate around him, talking to the cad on the ground below. “NO, you can’t marry her . . . She’s in love with someone else. What’s the matter with you? I can’t allow it. I WON’T.”

Were his daughter's deaf, dumb AND blind? Surely not. They were only steps away from their destiny and still it had all gone wrong. Aunt Saffron had said Fate controlled them now. So, where was she? Sleeping somewhere in the heavens, while all hell was breaking loose down below?

“UGH.” Grunting with dissatisfaction, he looked around quickly before shutting his eyes attempting to ‘think’ himself into the confines of the café. *After all, he was a ghost. Crossed over or not, he still had powers. Besides, who would care?*

Thirty seconds, that’s all he needed. Just like he’d done outside the drinking tent, tripping the girls so they couldn’t walk alone through the snow. Or letting ‘She-Devil’ lose to run rampant through the crowded dining upsetting Saffron so Joong would have to save her. Not to mention, his best ploy yet . . . making himself visible to the sleepy Idol to enlist him in a most crucial conversation. *Yes, another thirty seconds, could finally change their lives for good.*

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HEARING Young Jae halfway through another tirade against the powers that be, for allowing Ian’s proposal to happen, Aunt Saffron waved one hand in front of his closed eyes, hoping to get his attention. *What in the world was he doing?*

“You can stop now.” Calling him out like she would a child clearly, he hadn’t been here long enough to understand the way things worked. “I saw what just happened. I pay attention. You aren’t still trying to reinvent yourself, are you? I told you, you’re powerless. It will work out the way it’s supposed to.”

Cocking one eye open, Young Jae scowled, feeling the weight of his celestial body grind to a halt. “You’re just saying that to pacify me. Leave me alone, I’ve got work to do.”

“NO, YOU DON’T.” Sensing his impassioned outrage at the situation, she repeated herself again . . . “And, I do know it will work out. I’ve been here several decades already. It might look impossible right now . . . but, you’ll see.”

See what? What was he supposed to do, sit back and watch his family self-destruct? What purpose had he had in life then? To build a café where strangers could be happy? NO, he wasn't going to settle for that being his only legacy.

“Those are MY girls down there . . . they were my life, not the café.” Clutching his chest, he groaned in pain, as if still harboring a heart.

“Young Jae. Despite what you think, you have no more life.”

The previous exasperation in her voice gone, Aunt Saffron gripped his slumped shoulders fixated on the state of his soul. *Why did he fight so hard? Even coming on board, he couldn't accept the fact that those he loved, lived on without him. Able to make their own decisions (and if need be), suffer the consequences.*

Like a punch to the gut, the battered spirit sighed, rolling his eyes fretfully. As usual, his elder was right again. “You’re a favorite up here Auntie. Can’t you put in a good word for me? Please?”

“Favorite?” Slapping his arm gleefully, she tried desperately not to laugh. “There ARE no favorites UP HERE. We’re all in the same boat. Do you think I don’t know what you’re going through? You and your ‘situation’ caused me much the same pain, for quite some time.”

Heaven was a place for truth. Shocked to find out his own actions had, had the same effect Young Jae gulped guiltily. “Mianhae. Is that why I’m already here?”

“Of course not. But, I had no say in the matter. It was just time. Everything has a season. It was your season to come be with me and those who came before us. And, look what joy you’ve brought. Humpf, until now. Stubborn man, so stubborn.”

Unable to give up pleading his case, the stubbornness she acknowledged, rose up yet again. “But, my girls need to be happy. I can’t let them settle like I did. You have to know that much, at least. Saffron can’t marry Ian, she has Hyun Joong. Look how he came running the minute JJ asked him. And, my little Sienna needs her appa (DADDY). Her REAL daddy, not some absentee ‘wanna-be’.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk . . .” Clucking her tongue, the elderly woman smirked only slightly. “I thought you liked Junsu.”

“That wasn’t funny, not to mention, Maud and Serae went to a great deal of trouble to get the boys here.”

Aunt Saffron claimed to understand, but did she really? Since coming here, he’d spent most of his time watching over his family. And, without specific orders to do so. It was his mission. It had been since the moment he’d taken his final breath. Why, since God had allowed him to start this . . . was he seemingly pulling the plug? It didn’t make any sense.

“I’m going to find a way. Watch me.”

Peering past her formidable shape, he willed the heavens to part, giving him access to the disgusting scene continuing to play out beneath them. *If it took rolling into a ball and falling from the sky to get their attention, then by God that’s what he’d do!*

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