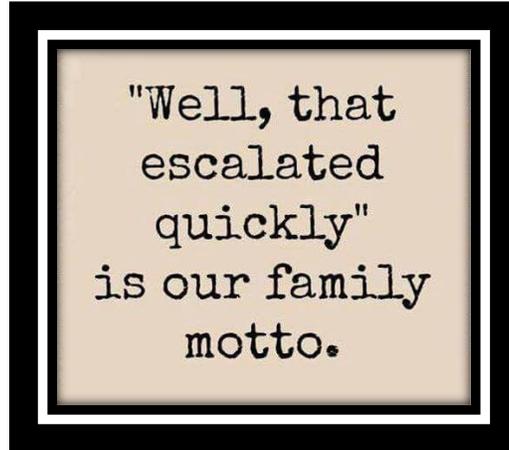


FAMILY MOTTO



DECEASED YOUNG JAE AND AUNT SAFFRON

JJ's private jet slipped into the cloud cover, leaving L.A. behind. Unable to comprehend the situation evolving below him, Young Jae skirted in circles above the plane attempting to get answers before anyone in the heavenly realm knew his whereabouts.

If the tip he'd received was indeed true, Kim JaeJoong had deserted. Plain and simple. Flew the coop. Left his precious daughter and granddaughter when for all practical purposes they needed him most. Feeling the void where his heart had been, the spirit plummeted down to earth, choking in the heat and dust of the surrounding desert.

What was happening? Was he being punished for stepping outside his boundaries? Sent to purgatory to live out his eternity?

Scoffing, "Humph! Purgatory . . . that's only a myth concocted to keep spirits in line," he struggled to his feet, shielding both eyes from the blinding sun. But, for some strange reason it seemed uncommonly real. Tapping the folds of his white linen trousers the dust billowed about him in tiny puffs, drifting to the toes of his bare feet. *OUCH. The sand was HOT.*

“TELL ME THIS ISN’T REAL?” Squealing at the realization his body appeared flesh and blood solid, he bounced from one foot to the other darting to a small patch of broken-down tumbleweed.

“AUNT SAFFRON!” His furtive wail for assistance was met with the silence of his surroundings, split only by the nearby squawking of a lone bird. “SAINT PETER?” Swiveling from side-to-side, his resolve fading quickly in the direct heat, he gave in, requesting an answer from the ‘MAN’ himself.

“GOD! What am I doing here?”

Within seconds, a celestial host of Angels drifted down around him, their brightly smiling faces radiating clarity, Aunt Saffron among them.

“How does it feel to be human again?” Sniffing with pleasure her buxom chest rose and fell methodically. “Does it make you feel more powerful? Better able to manipulate the lives of those around you?”

Her questions rang empty around him, as suddenly he began to see the truth in what he’d been attempting to do, both past and present. He had lost his faith in the higher-ups. Even in God himself, thinking he alone could turn the tables on his family’s calamities. *Boy, had that been wrong!*

“Nooo.” His voice timid, truthfully, he was a nobody in the grand scheme of things. He’d used his ‘position’ to make deals with not only his peers, but God as well. Now he was screwed.

“Then I suggest you take advantage of Gods grace, and come back to your station.” Aunt Saffron put an encouraging arm around his slumped shoulder. “Yes, Young Jae, JJ has taken himself out of the equation. We all know. The news spread through the hosts like wild-fire. Everyone’s looking out for you, despite what you think. There will be a reckoning, and soon. But, you MUST stay focused.”

“Yes. I know.” Fearful of the consequences if he disagreed, Young Jae attempted a weak smile asking hesitantly, “So, I don’t have to stay down here?”

“Of course not. Being human is temporary. You’ve been in that ridiculous body before, and it failed you. Come back to eternity and be happy. Your unfinished business here isn’t going to affect you there. Not unless you continue to let it.”

MARCH 12th, 2017 – 11:00 A.M. – GANGNAM, S. KOREA – JJ’S APT.

A collection of clothes scattered across his king-sized bed, were the only indication that Kim JaeJoong had recently traveled. His apartment still neat and tidy after a ‘once over’ by the housekeeper, was indicative of his new life, post-military.

The drone of the near scalding shower, pounded red rivulets down over the curve of his back, pooling in puddles around his feet. Blood, sirens, and the blank faces of white-jacketed doctors distracted him to the point of frustration.



How was it possible to have rigidly sat glued in his bucket seat for a fourteen-hour flight home, and not slept a wink? Even now, at the mercy of heat and steam he felt like a drug addict on crack. Eyes wide open, skin crawling with nervous goosebumps, begging his body for at least some modicum of peace.

He deserved every ounce of what was yet to come. Hyun Joong’s bitterly, incensed text message said it all. He was lower than a worm. There was no where to turn to escape his own pervasive hell. No melody, song lyrics, or family members could save him now.

Dropping to his knees in the slick shower, one hand on the knob, he flipped from hot to cold, howling at the shock to his system, avoiding himself at least a momentary release. When he’d tortured himself enough, with luck . . . he might regain some semblance of sanity.

SAME DAY – UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL - L.A., CA

WHAT seemed to the hospital staff like a collection of misfits, turned out to be a culmination of the Ryu sister’s support network, reigning down on them like cinders from a burning fire. Appearing simultaneously, (each with their own agenda, emotions, misconceived notions and options), they rattled through the hallways, bags in tow, straight from LAX.

No sooner had the announcement come through that VIP hospital benefactor Kyong Ryu's daughters should never have been placed in 'general' population, ICU . . . then the 4th floor was a buzz with activity. Now, (in lieu of the mishap) before any more damage was done to further compromise the relationship of one of their most important donors, the scuffle to transport was immediate.

V.I.P. FLOOR

“WHAT do you mean I have to have PERMISSION from the family? I'm her fiancé dammit.”

It wasn't hard to miss Ian's low boisterous voice harassing yet another floor full of hospital staff. Flying away from the elevator, clutching his jacket so tightly the veins popped across the back of his hand, the tall millionaire was certain this place was nothing short of deliberate in not allowing him access to Saffron.

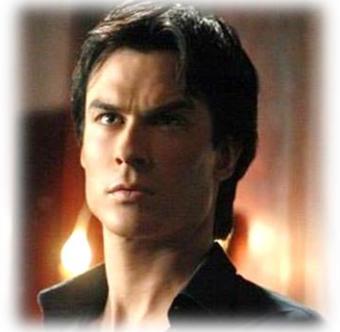
The young, sallow-skinned Asian nurse at the front desk coiled back at his thunderous demand to see someone in charge. On his heels, a distraught Sandra, her greyish blonde hair pinned to a tight bun at the base of her neck, eyes swollen from crying. It was impossible to rein in the garish man who seemed intent on wrecking everyone and everything in his path to get a straight shot to her daughter.

“So sorry. He's just extremely upset.” Murmuring to the desk nurse she made a vain attempt to reach out to Ian before he lunged full force into the woman's petrified face. “Ian, calm down. Kyong will be here shortly and then we'll get this all figured out. I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding.” Her fingers shaking nervously, she was aware that when Kyong arrived, not only could the situation heat up instead of cool down, but Ian himself would no doubt take control.

“Should I call my supervisor?” the girl whispered, her eyebrows raised. “If he's family, I can't deny him access, but I don't have any proof or paperwork.”

“I SAID I AM HER FIANCE. PERIOD! Are you deaf?” With the weight of his entire body behind him, Ian flattened both his palms down on the wooden desk top, glaring into her round eyes, the blood boiling through him.

“He is. He totally is.” Sandra confirmed, shaking her head agreeably. “They just got engaged right before the accident. Just like us, he’s been out of the country.” Hoping to get her to agree without a supervisor or assistance from her ex-husband, Sandra tugged lightly at his shirt sleeve. “Ian. I don’t think your status is in question. If you’ll calm down. I’m sure we can work it out.”



It didn’t matter to Ian what the hell was in question. Having gotten the news, he missed his entire business conference, immediately flying all the way back from Australia after just arriving, only to find Saffron and Saffire in a coma, Sienna prepared to leave the hospital, and he . . . denied access to any of them. Someone’s head was about to roll.

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IF the circumstances hadn’t been so dire, it would’ve almost been comical. Hearing Ian shouting from the hallway, Maud gripped Hyun Joong’s hand tighter, urging him toward the staircase instead of the elevators. “Ani. Not that way, he’ll rip us all a new one if he knows you’re here.”

She didn’t need WWII erupting in the middle of the hospital VIP ward. JJ’s choice to bail had been hard enough on her heart, and knowing what she and Serae had done to get the Idols preferred status was the closest she’d ever come to jail-time in another country. Now, on top of everything else, Ian was going to throw a hissy fit and make matters worse.

“I’m not afraid of him. So far as anyone here knows, we’ve never even met.” Joong grinned hearing the door slam behind them, echoing in the empty stairwell. “Turn around, let’s go back. There isn’t anything he can do or say to me I haven’t heard before.”

Stopping the middle-aged woman midway down the stairs beside him he hugged her randomly. “Gamza Auntie. For everything. The girls are lucky to have you on their side.”

“Aishhh, stopppp.” Blushing, she allowed his strong arms to momentarily hold her. “Ani, they’re lucky to have YOU.” Leaning away, she smoothed both hands down the front of her cotton slacks muttering, “JJ’s just confused. Don’t hate him too much.”

His expression going blank and then dark, Hyun Joong struggled to find the right words to respond. “I can’t talk about it right now.”

“Arasseo. Well. Ian’s going to find out about you being here sooner or later anyway, so I guess it’s back into the warzone we go. Sure, you want to deal with him like this?”

“De. Let’s get it over with.”

“Forget Heechul, you always WERE my favorite.” Snickering, the greying Korean woman hustled him back toward the steel door. “When we’re done here, why don’t I take you to Saffron’s place?”

SAFFIRE’S ROOM

STANDING over Saffire’s newly acquired bed on the VIP floor, Kyong tapped his fingernails against the heart monitor stand, Junsu perched beside him.



“Except for the bruising, she looks pretty normal.” His observation, (coming on the heels of hearing the distasteful details of the accident) flowed out without much thought.

“She does. Thank God.” Nodding, Junsu concurred with the man he had learned to tolerate over the last several years since Sienna was born. “Color’s good. She seems to be breathing okay. She’ll come around. I’m sure of it. Our Fire’s one tough cookie. Not one to let some stupid accident keep her down for long.”

“I damn well hope so. That baby girl needs her.” Flinging one arm about Junsu’s shoulder Kyong blinked away the prickling of tears. “I can’t even imagine what COULD have happened. To ALL three of them.”

“Ani. Me either. Thanks again for contacting me. Just glad I managed to get leave time to come.”

“Yep, me too.”

The whoosh of the breathing machine the only other sound in the room, Kyong went silent. He of all people knew, if there was one thing Junsu had always been to Saffire it was trustworthy and dependable. This was where he needed to step it up and prove how much he loved her once and for all. Why the other damned Idol wasn’t glued to her side was beyond comprehension. And, if he really took the time to think about it . . . surely, he’d be on the first plane out of L.A. looking to kick his arrogant ass!

“Need a place to stay?” Turning slightly, he smiled . . . his face kind.

“Yeah, I guess. Haven’t had time to check on hotels in the area yet, just wanted to come straight here.”

“Ahhh, well, it’s settled then. You can stay over at my place on the beach. It’s not far. Perfect timing too. Sienna’s being released early this evening. When we’re done here we can head over, give you a chance to drop off your things and grab a bite to eat.”

“Gamsahabnida. Appreciate it sir.” The flight had been excruciatingly long and Junsu was tired and stressed. Didn’t matter how Saffire looked physically, being comatose was a serious matter, and he wanted to be rested when they returned. She and Sienna would need him now more than ever.

“Anything to help.”

Kyong’s demeanor upbeat, he hoped having Junsu around would circumvent the issues he knew were forthcoming with Sandra and especially Ian. It had been no secret when Ian arrived he

was not only loud and obnoxious to the staff, but went down the hall, insisting Saffron was HIS fiancé, ordering everyone around him to cater to his needs. If it was going to continue, he had his work cut out for him.

“I’ll leave you alone for a few minutes son. I’m sure you have some things to tell this pretty girl now that you’re finally here.” One more pat to Junsu’s back and Kyong was headed out to the hallway to find Sandra and . . . ultimately Ian.

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“**AISHHH**, what have you gone and done to yourself now Fire?” Scared to take himself to the level of anguish he’d experienced hearing the news, Junsu folded over Saffire wanting only to protect her, some way . . . somehow. “Guess you’re gonna get that well-deserved break you keep asking for.” Biting his lower lip, all he could conjure up was their last Facetime talk. Seeing bits and pieces of JJ dotting to top of her desk, hearing the sadness in her voice when he’d begged her to contact him. *So, why wasn’t he here?*

“Where IS he Fire? I know he loves you as much as I do.” Picking up her limp finger he studied the perfectly manicured pink nails, noticing how for once they weren’t bitten nervously to the quick. Too long for violin playing, obviously she’d had them done before the opening. “Are you with him in spirit right now?” *What a stupid question.*

Mentally kicking himself, he didn’t know exactly where the brain went when comatose, but he knew she could hear him. He should be telling her to wake up, get well, go home to Sienna . . . AND . . . forget JJ. But, as hard as he tried to force the words from his mouth, they wouldn’t come. Not even knowing when she would wake up, or if he would still be here, what purpose would it serve to toot his own horn. She’d turned him down any number of ways, three years ago, when JJ left for the army and even more recently after the baby was born. He was the sucker. A sucker for loving her, and now a sucker for still wanting it all.

NURSE’S STATION

“OH hello Mr. Kim, you’re back.” More than excited that Saffron’s husband had finally showed up to handle the tall, obnoxious man pressuring her for special treatment, the young nurse smiled broadly.

“Anneyeong nurse Simmons. Is there a problem?” Smirking at Maud out of the corner of one eye, Hyun Joong twisted the silver wedding band on his ring finger brazenly. *Let the son-of-a-bitch say something!* Nodding toward Ian’s figure he sighed, as if already bored with the disruption. “He’s family. It’s okay for him to go in and see her.”

“Huh?” Sensing the presence of another body beside him, Ian backed away from the desk his dark brows creasing in renewed distaste. *Why was he not surprised the f’ng Idol was here?* Glancing up at the hall cameras he suddenly realized everything he’d just said and done was being taped. That was annoying.

Attempting to change his demeanor he cracked a weak smile, his expression changing from fury to confusion. Swiveling in front of a speechless Sandra he extended one hand in greeting, knowing full well who he was talking to. “And, you are?”

Gulping loudly, Sandra grappled for the back of his shirt, begging Hyun Joong with her eyes, not to cause a scene. Not that she thought he would. But, Ian . . . she wasn’t so sure of.

“Hyun Joong, Kim Hyun Joong. Pleased to meet you. Ian, right? You own the café with Saffron?” Bowing slightly, a twinkle in his tired, eyes Joong knew he finally had the upper hand.

“Yesss, and how is it that you know I’m FAMILY?” *HAH, bastard wasn’t getting off the hook that easily.* Ian knew damn well how this pitiful excuse of a man knew he was family. Their exchange at the Opening had been more than galvanizing.



Raising his eyes at Sandra, Hyun Joong shook Ian’s hand firmly. “I’m family too.” And, with that pulled away, directed his gaze back to the nurse, slapping the desk top firmly. “Go ahead, and let him in. I’ll be back later to check on Saffron.”

Sandra, stunned at his ‘take-charge’ attitude, dipped her head thankfully, not particularly wanting to deal with Ian’s temper alone. Even Maud had managed to stand quietly in the background, a look of smug satisfaction across her face. *What did they both know that she and Ian didn’t?*

Pushing the access button to the double doors, the young woman motioned Ian and Sandra through, waving at Hyun Joong’s retreating figure. “See you later Mr. Kim. We’ll keep a good eye on the Mrs. while you’re gone.”

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