

Climb, Sisyphus

The smell hit them first.

A crisp, almost burnt, savory scent that only belonged to meat: brisket, rib, belly, and whatever other part they could tear off a cow or pig to eat on a table grill.

Then it was the lights, next the sound, and last, the disgustingly moderately warm temperature. It was the type of warmth that stuck to your skin just enough to make you uncomfortable, but not enough to make you work a sweat.

“Hey, where do you wanna sit?” Min-jae poked his companion in the shoulder, finger almost hitting bone with the strength he put in it. The black mask pulled over his mouth and nose muffled his voice. Hyun-soo noticed, however, that even with the masks both of them were wearing, everyone in the restaurant still stared at them—save for a kid who only spared them a glance, more attracted to his greasy tablet than them.

The restaurant full of strangers whispered behind their hands, eyes wide and sparkling with fascinated curiosity. Some slid their phones out of their pockets, placing them on the metal tables, ready for the moment that either one of them, or both, would pull their masks down.

“*Hyung*, I told you we should’ve just eaten at my place.” Hyun-soo hissed a whisper. Min-jae stepped back as if he had just been slapped, clutching his imaginary pearls.

Min-jae cleared his throat, rolling back his shoulders, “No, that’s boring.” He curled his fingers around his friend’s bicep, “Come on, let’s go sit—” A cheery ringtone pierced the air, evoking a scowl to appear on Min-jae’s face.

“*Aish*.” Min-jae cursed under his breath, pulling out his phone and holding it to his ear. He let the caller speak for about five seconds before he hung up, powering off his phone and

putting it back in his pocket. “I don’t know why they’re fussing so much, we’re even wearing the sponsored outfits they told us to wear.”

“We should’ve brought a manager.” Hyun-soo mumbled. Controlling assholes.

“Whatever, let’s go sit at the back.” Min-jae rolled his eyes, dragging him to the furthest corner of the restaurant. It was shadowed due to a broken light panel, giving the illusion that it was cooler than the rest of the establishment.

Before they even had a chance to seat themselves, butts just brushing the cushion of the bench seat, a waitress flew to their side like an opportunistic fly. She appeared in her late twenties, with messy hair tied back into a bun, and two menus in her manicured hands, pink claws scratching the plastic covering. “Welcome!” she greeted, then handed them the menus. “Here. Feel free to tell me if you need anything else!” she grinned, and Hyun-soo noted a missing tooth—it reminded him of when younger Min-jae used to have a missing tooth.

“Thank you.” Min-jae grabbed the menus, shooting Hyun-soo a questioning look when all he did was stare blankly. She bowed to them, almost going the full ninety degrees, and shot upright in the next second. Both returned the gesture with a subtle nod and redirected their attention to their menus.

She remained at their side, hands clasped in front of her and heels rocking back and forth. Hyun-soo spared her a glance, and regretted it, as she dared to cross the line that everyone in the restaurant had been afraid to cross, “Um, I’m sorry, but can I have your autograph?”

Hyun-soo strained a chuckle, gently closing the menu and setting it aside, “Sure.”

“Ah. thank you!” she pressed her hands together and clapped her fingers, then reached down to search through her apron pockets while the two men smiled at her. She dropped a pen and a wrinkled receipt in her search.

“You know, this restaurant already has our autograph.” Min-jae boasted, resting his cheek on one fist as his elbow set on the table. His free hand pointed to a framed photograph hung on the wall next to the entrance; it was accompanied by framed pictures of other men and women.

“Yes, I saw,” the waitress’s eyes lit up when she found a notepad, “I heard a lot of famous people come to this restaurant so I decided to work here.” She lent it to Min-jae along with a black pen.

Min-jae ran the pen across the paper, forming an exaggerated appearance of his name that was almost illegible, then passed it to Hyun-soo.

Hyun-soo wrote in small font, sparing no time, before giving the notepad back to the waitress when he was done. “Thank you!” she bowed, passing ninety degrees, and ran off to a group of waiters huddled together by the kitchen door. Chatter erupted amongst them, intermittently interrupted by a loud giggle or short-lived squeal, as they occasionally peeked at the two men.

“We should’ve eaten at my place.” Hyun-soo sighed, holding the back of his neck as he stretched it to the left and then to the right.

“That’s no fun, besides,” Min-jae opened his menu, both elbows now resting on the silver surface, “we need to remind fans that we’re still alive.” he scrunched his nose, the black mask slipped off the hook of his chin and pushed into his bottom lip. He yanked it off and threw it on the little space he had next to him. Hyun-soo followed his senior’s lead, pocketing his mask in his sponsored—brand-name—denim jacket. Both ignored the flurry of clicks, and incidental flashes, that pursued, which lasted for less than three minutes.

“They know we’re alive.” Hyun-soo pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, colors pulsed in the endless darkness, foreshadowing a headache. “Whatever, let’s just order

the usual.” he jerked the menu out of Min-jae’s grasp, deaf to his protests, and called to their waitress.

“Are you ready to order?” she practically teleported to their table.

“Uh, yes, can we have the Deluxe Plate?” Hyun-soo ordered, passing her the menus and reclining against his seat, head resting against the vinyl wall. Its chill reached through his hair, flowed through his skin, and eased the growing tension in his brain’s center.

“Woah, good job, Hyun-soo.” Min-jae grinned, giving him two thumbs up, “Oh! And can we also have two pints of draft beer and four sojus?” he added, one foot jackhammering against the floor. Hyun-soo’s eyelids flew open, he leaned forward, gripped the table, and stared wide-eyed at his friend.

“Yes, don’t worry, I’ll get all of that for you two!” she winked, dashing off as Hyun-soo opened his mouth, a futile hand reaching after her.

“*Hyung!*” Hyun-soo turned to Min-jae, his right hand grabbing his senior’s forearm. “I thought you said you weren’t getting drunk tonight.” he groaned—any tension that’d been released before returned with greater strength. Hyun-soo could only hope that it wouldn’t explode into a headache, that it would hold itself back and remain in its place.

“You said you weren’t getting drunk,” Min-jae raised both of his hands in a defensive stance, pulling his arm out of Hyun-soo’s grasp, “I never made a promise like that.” he laughed, appearing only more delighted when a scowl darkened his friend’s face.

“You know I don’t like it when you get drunk.” Hyun-soo sighed, he placed his elbows on the table and rested his brow against the side of his palms, fingers curled in.

“You always say that, but you never tell me why.” Minjae wagged his finger at him, squinting. It turned his eyes into abysmal pools, losing any reflection of Hyun-soo.

“Why else?” Hyun-soo scoffed, he lifted his head and froze at Min-jae’s expression, “You pass out and I have to carry you home.” he decided to avoid his gaze and stare at the grill top. Hyun-soo intertwined his hands underneath the table, clipped fingernails digging into his knuckles. He relaxed only when the golden band around his ring finger sent a dull pain through his arm.

“Just call a manager, you don’t have to carry me home.” Min-jae waved him off, observing him for a minute, and when his friend didn’t say anything else, he leaned over and nudged shoulders. “But thank you.” he sang. His words lingered in the air, the childish tone perked up the corners of Hyun-soo’s lips.

“Whatever.” Hyun-soo blew a raspberry.

“Ah!” Min-jae pointed at him. “Come on, don’t be mad at me, huh? Huh? Huh?” he pulled Hyun-soo towards him, rubbing his head violently against his junior’s.

“*Hyung*, stop!” Hyun-soo protested, but a subtle laughter diminished the frustration in his voice. “I’m not mad at you.” he confessed, pushing Min-jae away. His senior let him.

“Good, good.” Min-jae nodded, shutting his eyes and framing his chin with two fingers, acting as if he had just solved a cold case. He didn’t maintain the act for long. Min-jae erupted into loud, rich laughter, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. His sudden outburst called the attention of the entire restaurant, every wave of laughter that shook his body captivated them.

“Stop laughing, *hyung*,” Hyun-soo hit Min-jae’s shoulder, hard enough to hurt but not enough to cause any actual damage, “people are going to think you’re crazy.” he hit him again when Min-jae didn’t listen.

“Ow! Okay, okay, I get it.” he tried to reel himself in, flipping his hand and fully covering his mouth with his palm. When his laughter had mostly subsided, and only the sporadic giddy breath was left, Min-jae added, “Hyun-soo, people already think I’m crazy.”

Hyun-soo frowned, “Well, maybe you shouldn’t put your heart into every single thing you do.”

“I don’t know how I could handle it otherwise.” Min-jae scoffed, not bothered enough to specify what ‘it’ was. “Besides, other people like it when I act like a fool.” he smiled. Whatever laughter that had previously danced in his eyes and shaken his body dwindled into nothingness, like a dying flame would.

“We should’ve-” a knot formed in Hyun-soo’s throat, it thinned his voice and transformed it into a whine.

“We should’ve eaten at your house, yes,” Min-jae huffed, “I know.” he furrowed his eyebrows. They were dark and full, but not full enough to be called thick.

Hyun-soo couldn’t stop himself from thinking how he had always liked his eyebrows. That and the basic emotions Min-jae could distinctly define with them: happiness, anger, sadness. Fun fact? His senior could never really hide what he was feeling, and that only made him sparkle brighter.

Hyun-soo opened his mouth but clamped it shut when he saw their waitress approach with two large platters balanced between her hands and shoulders; one full of drinks and the other filled with plates of raw meat, unseasoned and seasoned, and side dishes. “Here you go! Enjoy!” she chirped, missing tooth exposed when she smiled so wide the corners of her mouth reached her ears.

“Thank you.” both nodded their heads, she returned it with a bow and left. The two separated the portions of meat and side dishes, Min-jae took most of the alcohol, and Hyun-soo took more of the side dishes, but the meat was evenly divided.

“Thank you for the food.” Min-jae mumbled, wiggling from side to side as he grabbed the silver tongs and threw slices of meat on the grill. The moment they sizzled and popped, fat and natural oil frantically jumping in the air, Min-jae grabbed a bottle of soju and uncapped it in one swift motion. He poured it in a shot glass and took a quick swig, hissing and shaking his head right after.

“Already? You haven’t eaten yet.” Hyun-soo chastised. His eyes lingered over Min-jae’s hands as they seized another bottle and prepared another shot. Hyun-soo’s gaze followed the trajectory of the shot glass, and then the course of the clear liquid in it—watching as Min-jae’s Adam apple bobbed when he swallowed. When Min-jae met his gaze after another drink, his junior turned away and watched the meat transform from red to honey brown for the next three minutes.

Hyun-soo rolled his eyes, when he decided it had cooked enough, and answered late to a question no one asked, “Whatever.” he picked up his chopsticks and nipped at the side dishes, “Do what you want.” Sighing, heavy enough to rattle his body, he slid a piece of meat off the grill and directed it towards his mouth.

Min-jae grabbed his wrist, pork belly hanging in the air, blew on the still crackling meat and wrapped it in lettuce. Only then did he let go, humming and grinning, “You’re going to burn yourself, be careful.”

“Mm.” Hyun-soo gave a single nod and shoved the lettuce wrap into his mouth. When he was done eating it, he stared at Min-jae, crossing his arms. Min-jae took three shots to notice the

latter's staring, raising his eyebrows and swallowing the rest of the alcohol that was still in his mouth.

"What?" he asked. Hyun-soo jerked his head at the rest of the meat on the grill top, some had their corners burnt black. "Oh." he put down the shot glass in his hand and wrapped more meat in lettuce, placing one bundle in Hyun-soo's mouth as he prepared the rest.

Hyun-soo smiled, watching as Min-jae gently blew at every piece of meat he seized and tucked into a lettuce leaf. "*Hyung-*" Hyun-soo tried to say when he was finished eating, but a feminine voice interrupted him.

"Excuse me." it was a girl with an oversized, black button-up tucked in her black slacks and a notebook in her hands. Her long hair pooled on her shoulders and her heels clicked when she approached them, only stopping when her thighs hit the table. "Hi, I just wanted to ask for an autograph." she presented the notebook, the corner of a photograph peeking through the pages. She looked at Min-jae, then Hyun-soo, and then settled her focus on Min-jae when he reached his hand out for the notebook.

"We'd love to!" he said. She jumped with glee, a small one, and shoved the notebook into Min-jae's hand. It was only stopped by the arch of his thumb and pointer finger, cover and pages bending. He winced but didn't say anything, placing it down on the table and opening to an empty page. Like he'd done with the other girl, his strokes were long and slow, finishing with heart at the end of his tacky signature.

Min-jae slid the notebook across the table to Hyun-soo, the photograph in between the pages flying out and landing on the bench seat. Hyun-soo picked it up; it was the two men, next to four others, when they looked younger, had roughed up and spiky hair, and had much brighter



and softer eyes. He slipped it back in the notebook, and quick, small strokes and a firm period later, he passed it back to her.

“Thank you! Fighting, Olympus and congratulations on twenty years!” she cheered, running off to join her friend group that were halfway through the restaurant’s exit. Hyun-soo noticed that the restaurant was practically empty except for them and a handful of strangers on the opposite side of the room.

“She must’ve been a pre-break up fan.” Min-jae said, wistful eyes lingered over the door then were drawn to the two empty soju bottles. “It’s been sixteen years since it’s just been the two of us.” he took a shot, a trickle of clear liquid ran down his chin and dripped onto the table. It beaded up and warped the silver surface, making it appear as if the table was protruding in that single spot. Hyun-soo wrinkled his nose in distaste.

“You know, I saw on the news that Jin is-” Min-jae started, wiping the soju residue off.

“We shouldn’t talk about them,” Hyun-soo massaged his temples, “someone might hear us.” he dropped his hands, then brought them together to fiddle with his ring—twisting and turning it. 18k gold wrapped in diamonds, so polished it could almost reflect Hyun-soo.

“Sure.” Min-jae’s eyes followed his fingers for a second, then they turned their attention to the untouched draft beer. His hand practically shot out for it, appearing desperate, and lifted it to his lips, tilting his head back as he chugged it.

“Stop.” Hyun-soo reached for his wrist, while his free hand wrestled for the half-finished draft beer. He managed to steal it from a flushed Min-jae, extending it far out of the drunk’s reach.

“Hey!” Min-jae shouted, voice echoing and snapping heads in their direction, “Give it back.” he held out his hand, voice low.

“*Hyung.*” Hyun-soo pleaded, but it came out more like a whine than an assertive reproach. Adding to the tension in his head, butterflies sprouted in his stomach and fluttered around. He tightened his grip around the glass handle.

“Park Hyun-soo, I won’t ask again.” Min-jae’s body was fully turned towards him now, his left leg tucked underneath his body and left hand latching onto the top of the cushion seat. He reminded Hyun-soo of a rabid dog, eyes glazed over and the center of his face scrunched up into a snarl.

“Fine.” Hyun-soo shoved the beer glass into Min-jae’s chest, some of the liquid sloshing over the top and staining the middle of his shirt. “You always do this.” he felt childish even as he said it. His ears burned and he turned away from his senior, running his fingers through his stiff hair.

“What do I always do?” Min-jae asked, cursing under his breath as he grabbed some napkins and patted his shirt with them. He didn’t look at Hyun-soo, but Hyun-soo looked at him, and his junior could see Min-jae’s eyebrows furrow and his mouth twist.

“Get drunk, then forget everything.” Hyun-soo grumbled, his heart pace picked up till it pounded hard against his ribcage. The *thump-thump* resonating in his ears and stuffing his mind to a point he couldn’t properly think.

“I’m not going to forget.” Min-jae scoffed, crumpling the napkins and throwing them on the table. He lifted his head to look at Hyun-soo, crossing his arms with his body still facing his junior.

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m no- What am I going to forget, then?”

“Just, ugh- Nothing!” Hyun-soo turned away, his voice was thick with irritation and that bitterness made tears well up at the corners of his eyes. He rubbed his face with his hands, and when he dropped them he made eye-contact with the framed photo of them next to the exit.

“Tell me.” Min-jae rested a hand on Hyun-soo’s shoulder, and the latter directed his gaze at him. Min-jae’s face was red, whether it was from the frustration or the alcohol, his junior couldn’t tell. Maybe it was both. Anyhow, clearly he was smashed because his words were curving with a slur.

Hyun-soo felt he shouldn’t talk, his hands were sweaty, and no matter how much he rubbed them up and down his thighs, they wouldn’t dry. “Nothing, you just get all angsty and start spouting bullshit.” he gave in when Min-jae’s eyes bore a little too deep into his soul.

“Hah.” Min-jae breathed out, facial features relaxing into his neutral expression, “Hyun-soo, you’re so dramatic.” he pursed his lips, facing away from his friend, he rubbed the top of an empty soju bottle with his thumb. A small laugh escaped Min-jae, perking up the corners of his mouth.

“Whatever.” Hyun-soo shrugged, stifling a sigh of relief. The butterflies went to sleep and his heart calmed, easing the tension in his head somewhat.

“And childish.” Min-jae added.

“*Hyung.*” Hyun-soo scoffed, but a smile betrayed his annoyance.

“And sensitive.” he continued, voice falling to a whisper. Hyun-soo frowned. “And obsessed with soccer, and the best vocalist I’ve ever met, and surprisingly weak for someone who works out, and-” Min-jae’s voice picked up, getting louder the more he listed attributes about Hyun-soo.

“*Hyung!*” his companion interrupted, every butterfly awoke, his heart was racing again, and that stupid tension returned with full force. “Don’t say it.” he urged, right hand tugging the jacket of Min-jae’s left arm. Yet, even as he begged with every fiber of his being through his eyes, his curled fist, and his words, it was useless from the dreamy, passionate look Min-jae focused on him.

“Hyun-soo, I love you.” Min-jae whispered. It was almost inaudible, but for Hyun-soo it felt like he had shouted it for the entire world to hear. The metaphoric dam of tension burst open in Hyun-soo’s head, metastasizing into a lethal headache—the pain spread throughout his body and transformed the fluttering butterflies into skittering, pinching beetles, while his heart squeezed with every beat.

“No, you don’t.” Hyun-soo shook his head, backing up as Min-jae’s head fell forward into his hands, he curled his body in and pulled up his knees onto the bench. It looked like he was prostrating to Hyun-soo. “Not like that.”

“Yes, I do.” Min-jae said, voice muffled through his hands. Hyun-soo could see the sides of his face moisten as his tears were pushed aside. “I do love you that way- I’ve loved you that way for the past twenty years.” he lifted his face at the last sentence, voice loud and clear. Hyun-soo twisted his ring, looking around the restaurant. Fortunately for him, the place was practically empty save for some staff.

Unfortunately for Hyun-soo, that staff seemed interested in what Min-jae had to say, stopping what they were doing but not turning towards them.

“Why? Why am I not allowed to love you like-” Hyun-soo muzzled him with one hand when he saw one of the waiters approach. It wasn’t the girl from before, instead, it was an older man with salt-and-pepper hair who arched an eyebrow at them.

Maybe Hyun-soo's mind was playing tricks on him, but the man's eyes glinted with unnatural aggression, the hands tucked into his apron seemed to shadow clenched fists, and the whispering behind the waiter only grew louder. Fear joined his headache as he pictured tomorrow's headlines: "Olympus members caught in homosexual love affair," or "Olympus Hyun-soo betrays wife and kid with fellow member," or "Breaking news: what everyone already knew has been confirmed, Olympus is gay," and other titles more hostile than the previous one.

"Is everything okay here? Do you two need anything else?" the waiter asked, wide-eyed at Min-jae slobbering snot and saliva all over Hyun-soo's hand.

"Yeah, he just gets really emotional when he's drunk." Hyun-soo faked a laugh, the beetles tussled and turned with his queasy stomach.

"Ah, I see." the waiter chuckled, reaching over to pat Hyun-soo on the shoulder, "Don't worry, I have friends that are still like that even after turning fifty." he said and then left to join the rest of the staff in cleaning up the place. Hyun-soo was relieved when he saw the old man shake his head at his co-workers when they asked him questions.

"Why can't I love you?" Min-jae asked, voice small, he had removed himself by force from Hyun-soo when the waiter left. Min-jae grabbed some napkins and covered the latter's hand with them, looking guilty at the mess he created. Tears still welled up on his face, moistening the lining of his eyes.

"You already know why." Hyun-soo pulled his hands away, wiping them and becoming more delicate when it came to polishing his ring. Min-jae stared at the golden band, biting his lip and looking away when Hyun-soo finished. "You need to stop doing this, if people find out we'll be in trouble."

“No one cares about some has-beens... and it’s 2024.” Min-jae grumbled, rubbing his face with his sleeves and cleaning his snot with napkins. “I don’t even know why you got married.” he added, sounding like a child who’s candy had been stolen.

“Shut up.” Hyun-soo pinched his nose bridge, a long breath leaving his body, “And we’re not has-beens.” now that it’d been done, the beetles in his stomach disappeared and his headache eased up. Hyun-soo looked at the slumped over Min-jae, his shoulders were pulled in and his head was hanging. It made him look smaller.

“I got married because I’m in love, okay? Okay?” he repeated when he received no answer from Min-jae. Hyun-soo was satisfied when his senior gave a subtle nod. “Whatever, we should get out of here.” he stood up and hooked his hands under Min-jae’s armpits from the back, lifting him up.

“We have a concert in two days and your face can’t get any puffier.” Hyun-soo shuffled them out of the seats. Min-jae gave in and helped himself stand up on his own, when they moved towards the register, he held onto the corner of Hyun-soo’s sleeve.

Hyun-soo let him, maneuvering the whole ordeal of paying with only one hand before heading towards the exit. Min-jae wobbled behind him, holding tight that little sleeve corner.

“It’s okay, you’ll get over it.” Hyun-soo whispered. He wouldn’t. He knew that. Hyun-soo pulled his arm forward, gentle, Min-jae’s tug easily detached. Then he brought his arm back to slide his hand into Min-jae’s, “Let’s go.”

Hyun-soo opened the door, the fresh spring air washing away the stench of meat.