Light of Our Lives

by sashaprism

Summary

It is the year 1932. Seongwu is a bright fifteen-year old boy from Pyongyang. His teacher notices his intelligence, and helps him enter Gyeongseong Secondary School, one of the best secondary schools in Korea. Seougwu leaves his family home in Pyongyang and goes to live and attend school in Gyeonseong (present-day Seoul). There, he meets a boy his age named Minhyun, a Gyeongseong native, who will become his roommate, classmate, best friend, and eventually the love of his life.

Notes

Hi, my name is Sasha. There is this beautiful Onghwang 1930s Gyeongseong fic written by Id @myidheadstou. I will be translating it into English.

Start reading here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/15980579/chapters/37278380
Mother thread: https://twitter.com/myidheadstou/status/1018561638423597056
Id @myidheadstou's original writing in Korean: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2306410

Please give Id Kudos, comments, and lots of love! She put a lot into this work :)!
Inspired by 生 伴侶 ("") by @myidheadstou
Dreams of a Journey

Chapter Summary

It is the year 1932. SW is a bright young fifteen-year old boy from Pyongyang. His teacher notices his intelligence, and helps him enter Gyeongseong Secondary School, one of the best secondary schools in Korea. SW leaves his family home in Pyongyang and goes to live and attend school in Gyeongseong (present-day Seoul). There, he meets a boy his age named MH, a Gyeongseong native, who will become his roommate, classmate, best friend, and eventually the love of his life.

Chapter Notes

So there is this beautiful Onghwang (Hwang/Ong) AU in which Hwang and Ong are secondary school students in Gyeongseong (modern day Seoul) in the 1930s. It started as a Twitter thread by Id @myidheadstou (https://twitter.com/myidheadstou/status/1018561638423597056), and eventually expanded into a full-fledged historical epic titled 伴侶 (Companion for Life’). With Id’s permission I will be translating it, as it is ongoing, into English. The English title is . Id has researched and planned this epic novel meticulously. This is going to be a long journey, so hang on tight!

As we start, here are a few facts to be acquainted with as a reader if you are not familiar with old Korean culture! I hope this helps you understand this fic better. :)

Episode 1 is set during the year 1932, in Korea.
In the fic, Korea will be referred to as ‘Joseon,’ which was the name for Korea at the time.
Fun fact: the name Joseon was used from 1392 to 1897, and again from 1910 to 1948 to refer to Korea, and means ‘Land of the Morning Calm.’
Obviously, Korea was whole at this time; no North-South division (that only happened in the 1950s).

Please read the glossary at the End Notes section of each chapter, if you’re curious, for more history and information! You don’t need to, as most of the information is insinuated and contextualized into the fic, but do so at your own leisure.

Thank you for reading, and give lots of love, kudos, and comments for Id (@myidheastou)! You can find me on Twitter (@sashaprism). I will be posting updates for Light of Our Lives there, and please direct all reports of typos, errors, and other constructive criticism there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (伴侶)
Written by Id / Translation by Sashaprism
It was the day after Chinese New Year. Pyongyang Station, covered in snow, bustled with people departing and those seeing them off. Every exact hour a train left for its destination. People who laughed and cried in front of the station hurried off in a frenzy whenever the time came close to a new departure. A man ran out of nowhere and into Seongwu’s shoulder. He hurriedly ran toward his train, bumping into Seongwu in the process. Seongwu frowned at this rude intrusion, but the man had already raced meters away. Seongwu held on tightly to the hand of his grandmother, who was chaperoning him on his way to Gyeongseong*. He was already fifteen years old, and he did not want to suffer the embarrassment of being a lost child. Seongwu looked back at his nanny and uncle in between steps as he headed to the station, its gargantuan form imposing and stately before him.

They passed the great hall inside the station and walked to the platform from which Seongwu would depart. People clamored like they were in a busy market. Among them stood several station staff, clad in uniforms of murky green hue. Everything was so confusing; Seongwu felt like the world around him was spinning. Amidst all this, Seongwu’s uncle found a line that snaked into the platform. Seongwu and his family stood at the very back of the line, and soon it was their turn to enter. They showed their crisp new tickets to an attendant, and they were admitted into the platform right away.

The crowd thinned as Seongwu and his family entered the platform. Seongwu inhaled deeply; he had been holding his breath. Cold open air felt wonderful inside his lungs, especially after having been stuck within a large crowd and all of the heat it emitted. There were some twenty minutes before Seongwu’s train would depart, so they family sat down on the flat wooden benches on the platform. Seongwu placed his luggage by his feet and relaxed. Under the clear blue sky the railroad track stretched endlessly, beyond where the eye met the horizons. Seongwu’s heart started to thump inside his chest. It was his second time being on a train, but he was just as thrilled as he was the first time.

Seongwu had been on a train for the first time about three months ago. Seongwu remembered that day clearly, like it was yesterday. He remembered the chug, puff and cloud-like steam of the approaching train; ringing of the gilded bells piercing through the station; the enormous body of the train, larger even than the trolleys crossing the city; and the people boarding and taking off from it like ants. Seongwu was shocked by the seats that faced the tail of the train instead of its head, and at the unfamiliar rattling of metal beneath his feet. For a while, Seongwu had forgotten that he was on his way to take an entrance exam for Gyeongseong Secondary School,* and enjoyed, like a small child, the new sensations the train offered him. Seongwu was sure that he would enjoy his ride the second time as much as he did during his first, and thus he had no qualms about a little wait.

Seongwu suddenly felt a pang of embarrassment as he remembered how he had initially refused to go to Gyeongseong. Half a year ago, Gyeongseong was not even an option for him; he was soon due to graduate Primary School* and was preparing to go to Pyongyang Secondary School. However, Seongwu’s class teacher had seen a certain talent in him and recommended that he take an exam to enter Gyeongseong Secondary School. With this, the trajectory of Seongwu’s life changed altogether.

Gyeongseong Secondary School was one of the best schools in Joseon*, and every studious student in the country dreamt of entering it. Seongwu was one of the best students in and around Pyongyang, and the eldest son of Ong family, old aristocrats; everyone regarded him highly and held great expectations for him. When Seongwu returned home with his teacher’s recommendation letter, the entire Ong family sat around a table, discussing what needed to be done to send Seongwu to Gyeongseong. Seongwu himself did not want to leave home and go to school some two hundred
kilometers from his family. However, he could not protest when he learned how much honor it would bring his family to have a son attend Gyeongseong Secondary School. In the end, Seongwu took a train to Gyeongseong to fill out his application and take the exam to enter Gyeongseong Secondary School. Seongwu spent the entire night before the exam fully awake, gripped by anxiety, as he was not confident about whether he would pass. Seongwu remained nervous and skittish during the whole of winter break after the exam, although he knew that no one would blame him for failing to get in. Then, a few days after New Year’s day, he received his acceptance letter from Gyeongseong Secondary School in the mail. He was given a feast more lavish than any birthday dinner he ever had, and even the most distant relatives sent him messages of congratulations. These chain of events had taken place exactly a month ago.

Seongwu gathered his lips together into a tiny circle and let out a small puff of breath. It dissipated into thin air like small clouds of white smoke. His nose turned red from the cold as he waited; he tried to warm his face by covering it with his mittens packed full of thick cotton. Shuddering from the cold but still giddy, he wished for the train to arrive soon.

Finally, the rattle and puff of the train Seongwu had been waiting for started to sound from afar. Seongwu could not hide his glee as he jumped up and down and shouted: “The train is coming!”

Seongwu watched the train come to a slow halt, his arms tight around his luggage and his eyes shining with hope and wonder. The doors opened, and people descended from the train in packs; Seongwu quickly entered the train and found his seat printed on his ticket. The seats in the train were arranged in pairs, with every pair facing another in clusters of four. Seongwu did not hesitate in choosing a seat next to the window. Seongwu’s uncle chuckled, and said: “You seem way too happy, kid!” Seongwu grinned naughtily and glued himself to the window, watching the scenery outside pass by.

From time to time Japanese police officers with long swords affixed to their belts patrolled the passenger cars, but Seongwu was so transfixed by the passing landscape that he did not mind them. The only time Seongwu sat straight and away from the windows was when he had to eat from a lunch box his uncle purchased a few hours after they boarded the train.

The train sped on for nearly four hours before it arrived at Gyeongseong Station. Just like three months ago, Gyeongseong was loud and chaotic. Streetcars, cows, bicycles, and people all swirled together in a disorderly mess on the broad, open streets, and in the pit where peach trees used to be, construction to build Chejungwon* was going full force. Seongwu and his family stepped onto a streetcar going to Bukchon*.

During this time, Bukchon, or northern villages, was a name used to call areas north of Cheonggye-chun Creek(淸溪川)*. Informally, Bukchon was called ‘Joseonin village,’ or ‘village for Joseon people.’ The atmosphere of Bukchon differed significantly from that of Myeongchi-jung*(明治町) or Hwanggeum-jung*(黃金町), which sat south of Cheonggye-chun and occupied mostly by wealthy foreigners. Unlike these glitzy districts, lined with newly developed architecture and shops of all kind, Bukchon had retained its old form and air. Clusters of hanoks* had kept and treasured the
As they neared Second Street off Jongno(鐘路)*, Seongwu's uncle rang the streetcar bell. The car stopped shortly, and they hopped off; they were standing in the biggest street in Gyeongseong. Jongno's main street looked wide enough to easily fit ten streetcars side by side. With all kinds of things running on it, Seongwu felt as if the street itself was alive, breathing along with all of the people walking upon it. The Ong family crossed the main street to head north. After rows of several stupendous buildings appeared a maze of alleyways. Seongwu’s uncle, fortunately, was a long-time resident of Bukchon, and they navigated their way through them without becoming lost. Seongwu wished to be as familiar with these streets as his uncle one day. He kept his eyes wide open in an attempt to memorize their route, but the labyrinthine alleyways refused to let themselves be read into so easily.

After a series of winding paths, they arrived at a private residence Seongwu would live in for the coming years. Vines of angel’s trumpet creepers gingerly sat upon a stone wall, which was built around the house and rose about a feet over the crown of Seongwu’s head. Seongwu’s uncle knocked on the blue metal gate and shouted: hello! Seongwu heard steps from beyond the stone walls responding to it, and the gate opened smoothly, as if welcoming them. Owners of the boarding house, husband and wife called Mr. and Mrs. Chung, greeted them cordially. Seongwu’s uncle and grandmother entered past the gate first. Seongwu watched them disappear into the house, and carefully set foot into the gate himself.

The boarding house was a strange mix of Japanese and European architecture. The garden was decorated in the classic western style, while the exterior of the building looked Japanese; the bathrooms, kitchen and the stairs looked like those in European homes. Up until that point in time, Seongwu had only lived in a traditional Korean house, and he regarded the house in silent wonder. After a short tour around the house, the Chungs took Seongwu’s family to the dining room to serve them chilled green tea, so that the guests, exhausted by the afternoon heat, could cool down. Seongwu’s family, tired from their lengthy travel, rested comfortably for a while. The parties exchanged awkward first greetings.

The Chungs were an elderly couple, and they seemed gentle and kind. They explained that they began to rent out rooms to young students not only because they wanted to offer help, but also because they did not have any children or grandchildren of their own and felt lonely sometimes. They complimented Seongwu’s brightness and good looks, and told him that they were glad to have him. Their greetings were respectful and sincere, and Seongwu responded by smiling bashfully at them.

In the midst of continuing conversation, the owners started to tell Seongwu more about his future living arrangements.

“As I have told you before, two students will share a room.”

Seongwu would live with a roommate who had already moved in a day earlier. His name was Hwang Minhyun. He was the same age as Seongwu and was also set to enter Gyeongseong Secondary School this year. He was a Gyeongseong native, the youngest son of the biggest salt merchant family in Gyeongseong. Seongwu’s grandmother commented on the efficiency of this arrangement: Seongwu and his roommate would make not only wonderful friends but also resourceful schoolmates. Seongwu’s cheeks lit up in anticipation to meet his new roommate. How fun it would be to live with a friend one’s own age and go to school together!

As if they sensed Seongwu’s eagerness to meet his new roommate, the owners allowed Seongwu to go upstairs and see his room. Seongwu did not decline to excuse himself and stood up with his
luggage in each hand; his nanny followed suit. They went up the unfamiliar set of stairs. Seongwu felt each step creek under his foot, a strange sensation. At the end of the staircase was a long corridor with a large window at its end. The walls were covered in square panels of white paper, each framed in wood. Seongwu did not know whether they were walls or sliding doors. The hosts had tied a red ribbon on the handle of one sliding door so Seongwu could easily find his room. He carefully pulled at the knob, and it smoothly slid open.

The room was wide, surprisingly large; Seongwu now knew why two students were assigned to share it. A boy sat in it, his back facing the door. His black hair was neatly trimmed. Seongwu realized that this was Hwang Minhyun, his new roommate. As if he heard Seongwu recalling his name in silence, the boy turned around. His face was expressionless, and his eyes sharp, his eyelids slanted elegantly upwards. Seongwu’s first impression of him was that he was cold. Seongwu tensed, and swallowed hard.

“...Hello?” Seongwu said, his voice strained. Minhyun’s eyes slowly traveled up and down over Seongwu before he gave a response that was neither a greeting nor an answer to Seongwu’s salute.

“Hello.”

The very first conversation between Seongwu and Minhyun ended thus.

Although Seongwu was disappointed by the lukewarm manner in which his roommate greeted him, he focused on studying the space he will have to live in for a long while. The walls and ceiling were a pristine white, and the floor was covered in smooth wooden planks instead of Japanese tatami mats. Pairs of wardrobes, chests, bookshelves and low desks were arranged symmetrically in each end of the room like chess pieces. Minhyun had taken the left side of the room, so Seongwu was left with the right side. Seongwu placed his luggage on the floor and opened his new wardrobe. It smelled new. He was now ready to fill it with his clothes, just as he would fill this room with his existence.

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Seongwu’s nanny skillfully and swiftly opened his luggage and organized its contents. Seongwu had brought everything he needed: his clothes, books, school supplies, and even a stitching kit. All Seongwu could do was to sit beside his nanny and take things out of his luggage for her to fold, hang, or tuck away.

“Seongwu!”

Someone called out from downstairs. As they were almost finished with organizing his possessions anyways, Seongwu and his nanny stopped what they were doing and went downstairs. Seongwu’s grandmother handed him a package.

“Take a look, dear.”
“It’s a school uniform.”

“It’s yours.”

“We purchased it ahead of time before Seongwu’s arrival.”

The hosts smiled at Seongwu, as if blessing his future. His new gakuran* was ink-black, and Gyeongseong Secondary School’s crest was hanging proudly on the chest. At his grandmother’s prodding, Seongwu put the jacket on. The uniform was a bit large, but it did not look funny or awkward, and the fit was good enough. In his new uniform Seongwu looked like a real high school student. Everyone complimented on how sharp he looked. For the second time that day, Seongwu smiled bashfully, blushing this time.

Seongwu’s family had now safely delivered Seongwu to his new boarding house, and had seen him in his new uniform. They stood up to leave; they had to catch the evening train back to Pyongyang. They were reluctant to leave, especially because they had to leave Seongwu, a precious boy they had raised from birth. They left in peace, however, when they were reminded of near presence of Seongwu’s uncle who lived a stone’s throw from the boarding house, and with their renewed acknowledgement of their dear boy’s natural brightness. Seongwu made sure his goodbyes were cheerful and brave, and stood in the street until his family disappeared from sight. After Seongwu’s family left, the boarding house fell into a sudden silence. With this silence, a realization that he was truly alone in a stranger’s house in Gyeongseong finally hit Seongwu.

Seongwu quietly straightened out his room until sunset, when he was called downstairs to dinner. He had not shared another word with Minhyun. Minhyun continued to read his book in silence, and Seongwu glanced at him from time to time while arranging his school supplies on his low desk.

Dinner was a bountiful hotpot. A boiling pot took center of the dining table, with a few side dishes sitting around it. The hosts placed equal amounts of food on Minhyun and Seongwu’s plates.

“Minhyun, Seongwu, please enjoy.”

“Thank you.”

The first meal Seongwu had in Gyeongseong was saltier and spicier than those he was used to in Pyongyang. From time to time, the hosts asked Minhyun and Seongwu if they lacked anything, or if the food tasted all right. Seongwu replied to each of their questions cheerfully, and the mood around the table lightened.

After dinner was bath time. The hosts and students used different bathrooms. The hosts filled the bathtubs ahead of time with hot water, and Minhyun and Seongwu had to decide which of them would bathe first. Minhyun abruptly broke his lengthy silence while Seongwu was wondering if they should engage in a game of ‘Rock, paper, scissors.’

“Is it all right if we alternate turns?”

“Oh, um. Yes.”

“I’ll go first today, then. You can go first tomorrow.”

Minhyun left the room with a spare change of clothes and his bath basket, so swiftly that Seongwu did not have enough time to reply. Seongwu sighed, watching his roommate walk out the door. Seongwu was not sure if he was so terse because he was a Gyeongseong native, but Minhyun was unapproachable and distant, just like how Seongwu imagined wealthy Gyeongseong boys would be. Alone in the room, Seongwu began to worry about whether he would ever get close to Minhyun.
Even the thought of failing to strike up a friendship with him was terrifying; they would have to see each other every day unless one of them quit school and left.

Seongwu listlessly wrung his hands and twiddled his thumbs until Minhyun came back. Minhyun appeared as suddenly as he had left, opening the sliding door to their room without warning. Seongwu was unsettled by how unfamiliar Minhyun looked as he whisked away moisture from his hair with a towel.

“Go quickly before the water gets cold. You know where the bathroom is, right?”

“I do. Thanks.”

Seongwu bravely started for the bath. However, he had to pause before the bathroom door. During the day, the bathroom was flooded with daylight; but at night, the only way Seongwu could describe it was that it was frightening. The steam from hot water blurred the air, and all that lighted the bathroom were a few kerosene lamps. The bathroom reminded Seongwu of a dungeon prison, dark and damp. Seongwu hesitated, scared, almost driven to tears. As pathetic as it was, Seongwu had never taken a bath by himself.

Seongwu had many siblings. He had an older sister, two younger brothers and a younger sister. As they were a closely-knit pack, they had always bathed together. To the Ong siblings, bathing was a sort of a pastime, and they often bathed together in a boisterous bunch of children. Now, Seongwu was alone. It was not that he hadn’t expected a situation like this, but he was scared all the same. Seongwu decided to get it over with as quickly as possible, as he could not avoid washing himself. He shut his eyes, and stripped in what felt like a blink of an eye. He then washed himself carelessly and fast, taking less than ten minutes before he ran out of the bathroom again as if being chased by an invisible monster.

Seongwu dashed back to his room. When he opened the door, he was struck by how peaceful the room was, as opposed to his inner fear and turmoil. Two kerosene lamps subtly lit the large room, and Minhyun sat in silence, reading as he had been all day. In this quietness, Minhyun surely would have heard Seongwu scurrying up the stairs like a frightened puppy. Embarrassed, Seongwu closed the door quietly and tiptoed to his seat.

After Seongwu stopped his frantic movements, heavy stillness descended upon the room. To Seongwu, who was accustomed to continuous pranks and jokes of his mischievous and jovial siblings, this quietude felt almost unbearable. He felt, with his entire being, that he was far away from home, alone.

In his young enthusiasm, however, Seongwu decided that he and his roommate could not and would not stay this way forever. Soon, Minhyun seemed to flip the pages of his book haphazardly out of boredom; Seongwu took this opportunity, and spoke.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

Seongwu was at a loss for words for a few moments. He broke the silence first; now what should he say? Should he ask Minhyun his name, as they had not yet formally introduced themselves to each other? Would Minhyun be angry at the idea that Seongwu did not bother learning his name beforehand? Seongwu clutched his nervous heart, and squeaked out his first question: “What is your name?”

“Hwang Minhyun.”
The answer itself was only a confirmation of what Seongwu already knew, but Minhyun’s tone of voice was unexpectedly warm and gentle. Seongwu repeated the three syllables in his mouth. Hwang. Min. Hyun.

“What is yours?” Minhyun returned, as if he had been waiting for a chance to.

“My name is Ong Seongwu! Surname is Ong. Not Hong, not Gong, but Ong.”

“Ong? What an unusual surname.”

“I bet this is your first time meeting an Ong.”

Minhyun nodded. Upon closer inspection, Seongwu observed clamped up lips and gaze full of curiosity. Minhyun looked like a meek and innocent child while listening to Seongwu speak. Seongwu could not help cracking a smile, as Minhyun reminded him of his younger siblings back home.

“What Chinese characters do you use?”

“I’ll write it for you!”

Seongwu felt a tingle of excitement as Minhyun expressed interest in his name. He took his notebook and pen on his desk to write his name down.

“My name uses these Chinese characters.”

邕聖祐

‘Ong, meaning obstruction, Seong, meaning saint, and Wu, meaning fortune.’

Minhyun scrutinized the paper, trying to understand the character he was unacquainted with.

“I have never seen this character before. Ong.”

“Everyone says that.”

As if memorizing the character, Minhyun repeated its strokes mid-air with his fingers. When his fingers stopped moving, Seongwu gently pushed the notebook toward Minhyun. It was Minhyun’s turn.

“What about your name?”

Minhyun picked up the pen and wrote his name down, in a neat handwriting.

黃旼炫

‘Hwang, meaning yellow, Min, meaning gentleness, and Hyun, meaning brightness.’

Seongwu was surprised at the choice of characters. Gentleness and brightness. Minhyun’s name seemed contrary to the cold initial impression he gave off. Unlike Seongwu’s, Minhyun’s name consisted of easier characters, so Seongwu memorized it quickly.

“It is a good name.”

“So is yours.”
Seongwu laughed. Tense air between them loosened, and their hearts, initially stiff from awkwardness, became soft and tender, ready to open up. Seongwu mustered even more courage and turned toward Minhyun completely. He wanted to talk more with Minhyun. Minhyun seemed to feel the same, as he spoke first this time.

After they first broke their tense silence, everything was easy. They talked all night, about everything, from their families, home towns, their new living arrangements, and expectations for the new school year. When Minhyun broke off the conversation so they could salvage last remaining hours of sleep, it was dawn. They turned out their lamps and fell asleep. Just before drifting off and as his eyes fluttered shut, Seongwu thought that perhaps he could become close to Minhyun much faster than he expected.

In March, a new semester started. The entrance ceremony for Gyeongseong Secondary School's new class of freshmen was short and simple, and first period started at eight o’clock sharp. Because Gyeongseong Secondary School was already infamous for working its students like dogs, no one dared to object to or complain about this brusque start. Seongwu opened his book and picked up his pen. Now, he would have to stay alert like an owl at midnight if he wanted to survive all the weekly quizzes, end-of-the-month exams and final exams the school would throw his way. At the same time, Seongwu had to adapt to the school itself. It took Seongwu two weeks to become used to the structure of the school, his teachers, and his classmates. Only after those uneasy weeks was he more comfortable at school.

Gyeongseong Secondary School was a Boy’s school, with a five-year curriculum in compliance with educational regulations the Japanese had implemented in Joseon. There were two classes within each of the five grades. It was different from Seongwu’s previous school in Pyongyang in that his classmates were highly diverse, in both age and hometowns. It was rare for students to enter into and graduate school exactly at the right age like Minhyun and Seongwu. As such, Minhyun and Seongwu were the among the youngest students in the entering class. Most classmates were older by one or two years, and sometimes by three or four. Half of their classmates had their previous education interrupted, mostly due to their old schools closing and reopening multiple times from Japanese interference. Most of them had obtained their Primary school diplomas by the skin of their teeths. Many had worked during the day and read at night amidst difficult circumstances to get to Gyeongseong Secondary School, a gateway for success that could afford its students advantages in entering institutions of higher education. They all had one goal: being admitted to Gyeongseong Imperial University (or Keijo Imperial University, as it was called among the Japanese), or other educational Colleges and vocational schools.

As such, school life could easily have become difficult, marred by cutthroat competition. Fortunately, Minhyun and Seongwu were assigned to the same class. Seongwu felt relieved that Minhyun was by his side in an unfamiliar classroom where he had to sit among strangers. Seongwu and Minhyun had
already become quite close before the start of the semester, as they had stuck with each other like twins the week before. It was no longer nerve-wrecking for Seongwu to speak to Minhyun, and time spent alone with Minhyun in their shared room was no longer suffocating. They conversed often, mostly about mundane, everyday things. It was a pleasure to speak to Minhyun, and they felt more compatible the more they spoke. Seongwu now wanted to become Minhyun’s best friend so they could hold deeper, more meaningful conversations.

Like his name, Minhyun was gentle and kind, and Seongwu liked it. Seongwu learned of Minhyun’s acts of kindness, which seemed to flow naturally from his heart, during the second night he spent at the boarding house. He had somehow bathed on his own during the first night, but he felt like he could never bathe alone again the night after. So Seongwu asked Minhyun to stay beside the bathroom door while he bathed. At first he worried about the possibility of Minhyun thinking of him as a coward; but even if Minhyun did, Seongwu wanted him to stay all the same. Minhyun obliged without a word. Minhyun took Seongwu’s hand, and led the terrified boy to the bathroom. He considerately let Seongwu bathe first, and stood by the bathroom door the entire time Seongwu was inside. Seongwu asked him several times: *Are you there?* Minhyun never failed to reply.

This solicitude from Minhyun, which Seongwu expected to last only a few days, continued into their first school semester, and became their shared habit long afterwards.

Minhyun and Seongwu were also well-intentioned rivals. They were the only pair of the same age in their class, and they lived together. Because of that, they were often matched up to in competition, both voluntarily and involuntarily. Gyeongseong Secondary School strictly forbade any kind of aggression and mischief, so students, including Minhyun and Seongwu, often settled their scores by studying. Just as they looked dissimilar and had different hometowns, Seongwu and Minhyun differed in their favorite subjects.

Minhyun was outstanding in Japanese language (regrettably called ‘official national language’* at the time). Under Japanese rule children were forced to become fluent in Japanese even before they entered Primary Schools, and most students were proficient in it. However, Minhyun’s Japanese flowed like liquid, smoother than the language spoken by natives from Tokyo. Official National Language class revealed Minhyun’s true merit; the teacher, who was Japanese, often called on Minhyun to recite prose and poetry from their textbooks.

On the other hand, Seongwu was distinguished in Chinese and Korean language. This was because he had attended seodang* before entering Primary School as part of his early education. Seongwu was familiar with The Thousand Character Classic* and classic Confucian texts. Even while attending Primary School, Seongwu had went to seodang during his summer breaks to study. Seongwu’s parents had pressured him into such learning environment, explaining that he was obligated to learn all this as a minimum, knowing that he could not go through the entirety of traditional Korean curriculum. Back then, Seongwu had sulked at having to go to seodang, but now at Gyeongseong Secondary School, knowing a lot of Chinese gave him an edge over his classmates.

Minhyun was envious of Seongwu’s proficiency with traditional Korean principles of knowledge. Minhyun often said that Japanese was a language that he was shameful to be fluent in; he would rather choose to speak unfamiliar western languages that he stammered through like a child. Seongwu agreed with him, yet still loved hearing Minhyun recite pieces of Japanese literature during Official National Language class. In fact, it was the only reason Seongwu anticipated Japanese classes.

Minhyun and Seongwu peacefully adapted to school life, and Seongwu eased into life in Gyeongseong. Minhyun helped take care of Seongwu’s needs if Seongwu, as he often did, forgot things at home, and Seongwu filled gaps in Minhyun’s walls when Minhyun let his guard down.
They grew closer and closer as days went by.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 1:

Gyeongseong (,京城): (Wikipedia sums this up nicely) Gyeongseong was in occasional use to refer to Seoul throughout the Joseon dynasty, having earlier referred to the capitals of Goryeo and Silla. The term came into much wider use during the period of Japanese rule, because it is also the Korean form of Keijo (京城), the former Japanese name used for Seoul during the colonial rule.

Gyeongseong Secondary School (): During Japanese colonization of Korea, Korean students attended ‘Primary School’ (equivalent to elementary school) and then ‘Secondary School’ (equivalent to middle and high school, and a five-year system). Open discrimination existed between educational systems of Japanese students and Korean students; Korean students were taught less material at a slower pace, Secondary Schools Korean students attended, although rigorous and difficult, was only given value equivalent to middle schools that Japanese students attended (In Japanese education at this time, high school was a part of collegiate curriculum). Thus, after graduating Secondary Schools Korean students had to spend two more years at Keijo Imperial University if they wanted to go on to universities. Primary School (): Equivalent to elementary and middle school.

Chejungwon (,濟衆院): (From Wikipedia) Chejunwon was founded in Seoul in 1885, and is known as the first Western medical institution in Korea. It affiliated with Yonhee University in 1957, which changed its name to Yonsei University to mark the collaboration. It is now part of the Yonsei University Health System. Translator’s note*: There is an ongoing controversy on which university provided the true roots for Chejungwon; Seoul University of Yonsei.

Cheonggye-chun Creek(淸溪川)*: Cheonggyechun is an 8.4 km (5.2 mi) creek flowing west to east through present-day downtown Seoul.

Myeongchi-jung (明治町): Present-day Myeongdong (in Seoul)

Hwanggeum-jung (黃金町): Present-day Ulji-ro (in Seoul)

Hanok (): A traditional Korean house. Hanoks were first designed and built in the 14th century during the Joseon Dynasty.

Jongno(鐘路): Jongno (literally "Bell Street") is a trunk road and one of the oldest major east–west thoroughfares in Seoul, South Korea. Jongno connects Gwanghwamun Plaza to Dongdaemun.

Gakuran: Gakurans are Japanese school uniforms, with Chinese collars and often black. Translator's Note*: They were not called ‘gakuran’ until 1970s, but please excuse the
anachronism for sake of easier understanding and flow.

“In March, a new semester started” : In Korea, school years start in March and end in November or December.

“Japanese language (regrettably called ‘official national language’)” : During Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945, Koreans were forced to use Japanese, and later to forsake their Korean names for Japanese names.

Seodang : Seodangs were private village schools providing elementary education during the Goryeo (918 - 1392) and Joseon dynasties of Korea.

The Thousand Character Classic : (From Wikipedia) Chinese poem that has been used as a primer for teaching Chinese characters to children from the sixth century onward.

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Insects rose from their holes in the earth as the Vernal Equinox passed by. Freezing winter winds were gone, and students no longer shrivelled into their jackets on their way to school. Iridescent flowers covered every field, and swallows that had flown south returned to chirp away delightfully. Students began to itch in their seats with desire to escape from their classroom and into the glorious outdoors. Their school lives had stabilized, and now they were habituated to weekly quizzes and their rigorous curriculum. They gazed endlessly at Inwang Mountain and Bugak Mountain that stood like green giants outside their windows to soothe their homesickness.

Even the most indifferent of the boys, with his head haphazardly shaved out of disregard, became intoxicated in sentimental thoughts. This is to say that Seongwu, who was sensitive and emotionally delicate by nature, drowned in them. He often thought of the deep green of the hills and valleys back home. He missed Pyongyang. There, forsythias and azaleas were in full bloom on every fence, with fragrant acacias littered upon the mountains and dandelions tripping him at every step. Skylarks fluttered through the sky in pursuit of love and nightingales warbled as if chattering among themselves. Seongwu reminisced about all these precious scenes of natural beauty of his old home.

There was one thing that kept Seongwu from falling too deeply into nostalgia: a pair of swallows.
Swallows began to flap about the window of Minhyun and Seongwu’s room in an unusually consistent and repetitive manner. At first they thought the swallows were only coming and going from a nearby nest; they did not expect a pair of birds to have built one between the crack where the wall and their window met. No wonder the chirps felt strangely close; the swallows had decided the spot right beside Seongwu’s pillow was their new home. The swallows stayed for a long while in their tiny nest made of entangled twigs. Seongwu figured that they were brooding eggs, as one of them never left the nest.

It was the first time that Seongwu had an opportunity to watch birds from such proximity, and he was fascinated. He observed them with dedication, during every snatch of time he could afford. Two birds were sure about who did what. One with a shorter tail stayed inside, while one with a longer tail flew around, catching bugs and bringing them into the nest. Seongwu was not certain, but the long-tailed swallow seemed the father bird. He seemed devoted to his female counterpart, who warmed her eggs in the nest in her own quiet care for her eggs. Seongwu was touched at the sight.

Seongwu wanted to catch some beetles in the garden and place them in the birds’ nest, but he loathed bugs too much to carry it out. Instead, he concerned himself with making sure the nest did not fall from the windowsill. In the unlikely event that the nest fell out, he would be there to nurse the birds back to health. Seongwu delighted in imagining the swallows returning to him next year with a gourd seed to return the favor, just like the swallow in the story of Heungbu*. Seongwu did not covet a magical gourd seed, however; he only wished that the family of swallow would be happy and safe during their stay at their window.

The family of sparrows became a vitalizing force in Seongwu’s life at school and at the boarding house, which was, overall, repetitive and mundane. Eventually, Seongwu began to dedicate most of his time after school to sitting near the window and watching the birds’ nest. One day, Minhyun called him over and asked: “Are you watching the swallows again?”

“Yes. I cannot wait for the eggs to hatch. Do you want to see?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not interested.”

Minhyun huffed, and turned back to his desk. He looked so fresh and arrogant, but Seongwu let it go: Minhyun was a snooty Gyeongseong kid anyways. Seongwu would rather spend his time looking into the peaceful swallow’s nest than bicker with him. He wondered how many eggs they had, and how many baby swallows would hatch from them. Seongwu had once heard that bountiful harvests come when swallows bear many offspring, so he hoped for the female swallow to have many eggs under her breast. As Seongwu filled his mind with happy thoughts, Minhyun’s voice interrupted him again.

“By the way, when are you going to study for midterms?”

“Ugh.”

Seongwu’s face instantly hardened at Minhyun’s jabbing reminder. He turned to Minhyun with a distasteful expression on his face as if he had just witnessed a cockroach. He could not help but moan painfully.

“I will start tomorrow. We still have two weeks.”
“You won’t start today?”

“…No.”

Seongwu mumbled his answer. Minhyun coolly turned back to his desk, as if he was only asking an innocent question without any motive to irritate Seongwu. As time passed, though, Seongwu felt a tinge of guilt starting to gnaw at him. Eventually, he returned to his desk, and gruelingly opened his book.

“Geez, I was going to study anyways…”

At that moment Seongwu felt dejected, but the next day he could look at the swallows’ nest all day thanks to Minhyun, who goaded him into studying ahead of time. To Seongwu’s delight, the eggs had hatched during the day; as soon as Seongwu stepped inside the blue front gate of the boarding house after school, he heard a chorus of baby swallows. He ran up the stairs in a flash, and he shouted gleefully as he confirmed five baby swallows chirping from the nest.

“Look! Baby swallows!”

“So they’ve hatched.”

“They are so cute!”

Seongwu bounced up and down from where he stood, and showered the baby swallows with countless blessings they would not even understand.

“Eat a lot of bugs, and grow up to become brave adult swallows so you can come back here next year!”

Now gifted with an object of earnest affection, Seongwu’s focus shifted wholly to the swallow family. He talked about them from sunrise to bedtime. At last, Seongwu said he wanted to bring the swallow’s nest inside the room, to protect it from predators like snakes and cats. Seongwu’s worries were superfluous, born from an overactive imagination. Minhyun, who had been listening patiently, eventually reproved him.

“Leave them alone. They will manage on their own.”

“But baby swallows are so helpless when their parents are away. What if a predator preyed on them while the parents have left the nest for food?”

“They must become stronger on their own. That’s how nature works.”

“You’re heartless.”

“Don’t you know about ‘survival of the fittest?’ If they are weak, they’re meant to die; in this world only the strong survive. They have to become stronger on their own if they want to survive. Their survival depends on their own volition. You’ll solve nothing by taking their nest into our room.”

“And you think I didn’t know that?”

A sudden lump of anger surged from Seongwu’s chest. Minhyun’s speech, overlong and pedantic, seemed to disparage him. Seongwu did not like how Minhyun’s tone of voice insinuated he was an idiot. Seongwu never intended to actually move the swallows’ nest into the room; the whole idea was only a passing remark.
So Seongwu shot back a sullen retort, and turned away from Minhyun. Minhyun did not say any more. At this point, anything either of them could say would only make matters worse. They fell asleep after a lengthy, tacit confrontation.

In the morning, maddening discomfort filled the space between them. Actually, Seongwu was no longer angry at Minhyun after a good night’s sleep. His pride, however, kept him from happily approaching Minhyun first as if nothing had happened. They did not speak, and the silence continued throughout the morning. Seongwu did not greet Minhyun as he used to, and left the room with a huff. Minhyun stared at Seongwu’s back, but did not reach out to him. For the first time, they went to school separately.

Seongwu sulked all day. Minhyun pretended to not notice him, as if he did not exist in the classroom. Their classmates irritated them by saying things like: “You two finally had a fight!” and “Kiss and make up fast, because you are making us feel uncomfortable!”

Eventually, all the sullen silences and cold shoulders accumulated into an emotional battle between them; the fight was no longer about pride. Seongwu seethed with anger all throughout class; Minhyun, on the other hand, seemed to concentrate serenely on his studies. Seongwu tried to calm himself. He thought Minhyun was feigning indifference to focus on the lecture, and that he would begin to speak to Seongwu first as soon as it was lunchtime. Minhyun, of course, ostentatiously defied Seongwu’s expectations. At lunchtime, he left the classroom without a word. Seongwu had planned to reach out first if Minhyun was stubborn in his isolation, but now he was robbed of even that opportunity. Seongwu picked at his food with his chopsticks. He had lunch with other friends, but he was not as happy as when he ate with Minhyun. Minhyun only returned to the classroom moments before the bell.

Serious lecture commenced after their teacher came back to the classroom. Minhyun sat in front of Seongwu, and the back of his head was directly in Seongwu’s line of sight. Seongwu could not tell whether he was staring more at the blackboard or Minhyun’s head at this point. Seongwu’s hand, tightly clutching his pencil, trembled with rage.

Actually, Seongwu was more hurt than angry. True, he only had known Minhyun for a month and a half. Regardless, they spent all of their time together, and Seongwu thought they were close as brothers. Seongwu was disappointed that Minhyun apparently did not feel the same, especially because Minhyun was the only friend he truly trusted in a strange city called Gyeongseong he left this family for.

They stubbornly stood their grounds until the final bell of the day rang at last. Seongwu wanted to cry. He was indeed driven to tears; his eyes watered, blurring his vision. Seongwu did not want to let anyone see him cry, so he packed his book bag in a haste and hurried out of the classroom. Soon enough, someone shouted his name from behind him.
“Ong Seongwu!”

It was Minhyun. Immediately, Seongwu almost froze on the spot, but he did not want to let Minhyun have his way so easily after having Seongwu suffer all day. So Seongwu did not look back, and kept walking; but he could not keep his body from slowing down, having been reminded of how bad Minhyun was at running during gym class. Seongwu liked Minhyun so much that even in his anger and even when he felt Minhyun had wronged him, he was compelled to let him catch up.

Minhyun caught up to Seongwu after a short while, looking just the way Seongwu had imagined him to be. He looked like he had just finished a marathon. When he finally spoke to Seongwu, he was desperately out of breath.

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

“It is none of your business.”

Seongwu did not mean to, but his retort was sullen. Minhyun merely nodded at him, and pulled him towards the direction of their home.

“Let’s go home. We have to talk.”

Then, Seongwu came to a realization that Minhyun’s day-long silence was to organize his thoughts. Minhyun, now alone with Seongwu, began to tell him what he had been bottling inside. He apologized to Seongwu. Minhyun said what he said to Seongwu the day before was a mistake, and he never meant to disparage him. As soon as Minhyun said he was sorry, Seongwu felt his frustration and grudge melt away instantly like a patch of snow in the spring sun. Seongwu did not want to forgive him too easily, however, because he had struggled by himself all day. Seongwu scoffed, feigning coyness. As if he expected such response, Minhyun glanced at him before taking something out of his jacket.

“Don’t be so mad. Take this.”

“What is this?”

“...Sticky rice cake. I bought them during lunch, because I remembered you seemed to like them. A rice cake merchant passes by our school every day during lunchtime, you know.”

Minhyun explained quietly. In the paper bag a quartet of white rice cakes sat in a cluster. The rice cakes had cooled off and assimilated to Minhyun’s body temperature.

Seongwu could not stay angry any longer. His face softened, his eyes folding gracefully into a sweet smile and his lips gently stretching into a delicate crescent.

Only then could Minhyun smile.

They returned to their room together, and had an honest conversation. Usually it was Seongwu who was chatty, but today Minhyun took control. He glanced at the swallows’ nest on their windowsill and licked his dry lips.

“Truly, ‘Survival of the Fittest’ is my family’s credo.”

“Credo?”
“My family are merchants. They would sell even their souls for money. They don’t need a weak child, especially if he is not the eldest or a born successor. My parents have raised all their children dispassionately, just like lions testing their children to survive in the wilderness. If a child cannot make a contribution to the family, they will mercilessly cut him off. My family have been educating its children that way since ages ago.”

Minhyun’s voice was steady and impassive, but Seongwu felt uneasy about what he had just heard. True, the society they lived in still discriminated between firstborn and secondborn sons, but Minhyun’s family sounded like they lived in an entirely different world from Seongwu’s own. Perhaps Seongwu did not feel he was suppressed precisely because he was the firstborn son, but he knew that his family always tried their best to be fair and equal to all of the children. Seongwu could not believe the way Minhyun’s family treated him, and he was speechless at the total and complete manner in which Minhyun’s family differed from his. Minhyun continued.

“I am my parents’ third son. What could I possibly expect from them? I have no right to take over the family business, and nothing to inherit from my parents unless my older siblings pass away young. The only reason I could attend secondary school was because I was fortunately smart enough to get good grades. I am studying hard because my parents promised to send me to Tokyo to study abroad if I graduate top of my class. I hope you don’t consider me cold-hearted.”

Minhyun’s tranquil speech ended thus. Seongwu had many questions for his friend, but he did not ask them. Instead, he merely nodded at Minhyun, handing him one of the rice cakes sitting on his desk.

“What?”

“You eat it.”

“I have my own here.”

“Take it anyways. You have to study hard.”

“What about you? You don’t need to study hard?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

Just eat it! Seongwu pushed the rice cake into Minhyun’s mouth. Minhyun tried evading Seongwu’s hand by turning his head away, but soon gave into Seongwu’s playful force-feeding. Seongwu was content when Minhyun chewed on the rice cake stuffed into his mouth, sighing in jovial resignation.

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After Minhyun shared what was deep in his heart with Seongwu, their friendship underwent a delicate change. Minhyun seemed to place more trust in Seongwu, and Seongwu began to concern himself more with Minhyun’s wellness. Minhyun had looked so lonely when he spoke of his family, and Seongwu could not forget it. Minhyun had family in close proximity in Gyeongseong, but he was so much more alone than Seongwu, who had a loving family some two hundred kilometers away. Seongwu felt some kind of obligation to take care of Minhyun and stay by his side, so his
friend would never feel alone. Seongwu’s concerns quietly shifted from the swallows’ nest to Minhyun.

Minhyun was stronger than he let on, however.

Midterms were set for mid-April. Cherry blossoms were in full bloom and enticed away students who were still dizzy from homesickness. Even Seongwu faltered for a moment, but Minhyun did not so much as glance at the flowers outside. Consequently, Minhyun achieved an overwhelming victory at Midterms.

Classmates celebrated Minhyun’s hard-won first rank in class like it was their own cause. Minhyun was the youngest in the class along with Seongwu, and at the time he was also the smallest of all of them; classmates likened him to a younger brother they left at home. They often called Minhyun ‘a shorty,’ and ‘precocious baby.’ Some liked to pet the back of Minhyun’s head, comparing it to a smooth pebble. All of this teasing was harmless and innocent, and Minhyun did not seem to mind. Another reason why everyone liked Minhyun: he was broad-minded and easygoing.

Seongwu was popular with classmates in a different way. Classmates also often teased or played pranks on Seongwu, and unlike his best friend Minhyun, who was constantly calm, Seongwu responded differently each time. Sometimes he enjoyed being provoked, and sometimes he became flustered and fired back. Seongwu also liked to see others laugh, so at times he was the one instigating jokes or pranks.

Mischievousness peaked during gym, where students could move their bodies freely in comfortable sportswear. Students were made to do various workouts, running, and ball games like soccer and dodgeball. Minhyun’s ineptness was revealed instantly during their very first gym class early in the semester. Minhyun, initially expected to be perfect at everything, turned out to be exceptionally unathletic. Classmates jokingly commented that after all, God was fair. Teachers reminded Minhyun that it was okay if he did not win games and races during gym, and that participation was what was important. Despite his teachers’ encouragement, Minhyun moved lackadaisically, not masking his unwillingness to participate. In the end, after he emerged at top of class after the first midterm exam, Minhyun came up with various excuses to evade gym, leveraging his status as the top student in his class, his short stature, and his snow-white skin that implied a sort of delicateness not fit for a gymnasium full of brutish boys.

There were exactly forty students in Minhyun and Seongwu’s class, and when Minhyun did not participate in athletic activities, they could not be divided evenly in half. This became Seongwu’s pretext for ditching gym activities alongside Minhyun; by dropping out he would make the number of people on each team even again. Honestly, Seongwu was also neither talented nor interested by ball games or sports. Before school started, Seongwu used to worry about being unable to keep up with his classmates’ athleticism during gym; he now realized his worries were for naught. He was glad to have in the same position his roommate Minhyun, who could not even run properly.

Minhyun and Seongwu continued to excuse themselves from gym throughout the semester. Instead of participating, they liked to sit under a tree in a corner of the schoolyard. There, they watched their classmates chase a ball with unbridled enthusiasm while talking about nothing important at all. A typical conversation went like this:

“I wonder what we’ll have for dinner tonight.”

“I hope we have some meat.”

“I doubt it. We had meat yesterday.”
“That doesn’t mean we won’t have it again today.”

They would kill time with mundane exchanges like these until the school bell would ring. They would then leisurely return to their classroom. Life went on, simple and without turmoil.

One weekend shortly before the final exam, Minhyun suddenly rose from his seat, where he had been sitting for hours, deeply focused on his book. When asked if he was going to the bathroom, Minhyun replied that he had run out of notebooks and that he had to go out to buy some more. Seongwu’s eyes twinkled in anticipation of accompanying him, but Minhyun rebuffed him, resolutely but with a gentle smile on his face.

“I’ll end up getting lost if I take you.”

Recently, Seongwu had volunteered as a guide on their way back from Jongno. At first he was confident, but he soon lost his sense of direction in the middle of Bukchon’s labyrinthine alleyways. Minhyun then took over, determining their position in relation to the sunset and asking directions to passersby. After they came home Seongwu was downcast all evening, thinking he was at fault for losing their way back home. Minhyun had comforted him and told him it was okay, but now he seemed to want to rid himself of Seongwu’s desperate lack of directions.

So Seongwu could not insist on accompanying Minhyun; all he could do was to tell Minhyun to be careful. Minhyun left home, promising to return soon. He followed only the paths he was familiar with, and came down to Jongno without a problem. As always, Jongno was a chaotic, loud mass of confusion. Book lenders and shops that sold papers, inks, and pens lined Cheonggyechun Creek like clusters of beehives. Minhyun entered a shop he remembered to be decent.

Minhyun bought two sets of notebooks instead of just one for himself, thinking of Seongwu; they used more paper than usual during exam time. As soon as he stepped out of the shop he headed back to the boarding house. He would surely get lost in the dark, so he made it his goal to return before sunset.

Near second street that diverged from Jongno, Minhyun saw a strange-looking fellow. He was surely a normal man, seeing from the way he was dressed, but he was visibly anxious, fretting while watching the streetcars coming on going on Jongno. No one paid him any attention, so Minhyun tried to do the same, but he was disturbed by the man’s pallor. So Minhyun went back to the man, approached him, and asked:

“Is something the matter?”

“What?”

The man seemed dumbfounded at the fact that somebody spoke to him, as if he had been immersed in a world of his own. Minhyun frowned, and tried to pass him, thinking he should not have approached him anyways. Just then, the man started to talk.
“I have to get on the streetcar… but I don’t have any money.”

Had he squandered all of his money on kisaeng*s? Had he been pickpocketed? Minhyun stared at the man in confusion. It was rare for a grown adult to wander around Jongno unless he was a beggar or a homeless man. Was this man insane, unlike his proper attire suggested? The man became flustered at Minhyun's sharp gaze, and tried to explain that he was not asking Minhyun for money. Minhyun found him pitiable anyhow, so Minhyun opened his wallet. He took out some silver coins, enough for the man to pay for a two-way streetcar fare and a decent meal.

Upon receiving Minhyun’s money, the man was quite vocal about showing his gratitude, and passersby started to stare. Minhyun felt uncomfortable, and promptly excused himself. Shamelessly, the man shouted a loud Thank You to Minhyun’s back as he walked away.

Minhyun let out a long breath he had been holding only when he reached Bukchon after a lengthy jog. Minhyun kept thinking about how odd the stranger was. On the other hand, he was happy that he had helped a man in trouble; it was his first time helping someone monetarily and in such a spontaneous manner.

As soon as he returned to his room, Minhyun began telling Seongwu the minute details of his encounter with an odd stranger. Seongwu listened to his story with a sparkle in his eyes, surprised that Minhyun, usually the tacit one, was engaged in such a prolonged story. Minhyun started to feel mischievous as he watched Seongwu intently focus on his words.

“That man reminded of you, how clumsy he was. I had to help him because he was so pitiable.”

When Minhyun added this cheeky jab at Seongwu at the end of his story, Seongwu narrowed his eyes and glared at Minhyun. Minhyun smugly smiled at him, but Seongwu could not truly hate Minhyun’s saucy remarks; probably because Minhyun had committed a good deed on his little excursion to Jongno, he thought. So Seongwu just stroked the smooth mop of hair that covered the crown of Minhyun’s head, which rose just an inch lower than his own.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 2:

The story of Heungbu*: (From Wikipedia) Heungbu and Nolbu is a story written in the late Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897). The identity of its writer is unknown. The story of "Heungbu and Nolbu" reportedly took place about 200 years ago, and was passed down through generations. It is now told as a popular bedtime story for Korean children. Translator's Note: In the story, kindhearted Heungbu takes care of an injured swallow, and it returned to him the following year with a gourd seed. From the gourd comes amazing fortunes for Heungbu.
Kisaeng: (From Wikipedia) Kisaeng, sometimes called ginyeo, were enslaved women who worked to entertain others, such as yangbans and kings, during the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties. They were also courtesans, providing sexual services.
Scent of a Birthday

Chapter Summary

Seongwu proves himself as Minhyun's strongest rival at academics after the finals. Seongwu spends his well-earned summer vacation in Pyongyang with his family, but misses Minhyun. They find out each other's birthdays, and Minhyun learns something surprising about Seongwu during Christmas.

Chapter Notes

Original Chapter 3 in Korean by Id can be found here:
https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2347444

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives

(生伴侶)

Chapter 3

Originally written in Korean by Id / Translated into English by Sasha

The first semester neared its end. As the season changed, so did school uniforms. Long-sleeved Gakurans made from thick wooly fabric were put to rest in the wardrobe, and crisp, white short-sleeved shirts replaced them. Summer uniform shirt was still lined with numerous buttons, and Seongwu’s nimble fingers worked at them busily every morning.

Their windowsill, once never silent due to the chirping of a swallow family, fell quiet. After a safe and warm spring in their nest, the swallow family had flown south once the baby swallows entered early adulthood. Now, robbed of his only object of interest, Seongwu could focus completely on his schoolwork. Still, he hoped for the empty nest to fill up again next year.

Because he had faltered on his midterm exams by letting himself become distracted by swallows, Seongwu studied seriously for the finals. He wanted to recover from his mistake and pull his class rank up. Fortunately, Minhyun was always an inspiration, as he never failed to give it his all every day. They powered through difficult exam preparations, helping each other on subjects they lacked in.

Class ranks were posted two days after exam day; students gathered like clouds around the poster in the hallway. Seongwu felt the pit-a-pat of his heart as he heard his classmates murmuring at the results. Somehow Minhyun noticed Seongwu’s faint moan, and tried to comfort him.

“Don’t fret it. You tried your best, and you’ll have earned great results.”
“How would you know?”

Seongwu was afraid that he would lose all motivation if his grades were mediocre, especially because he had tried his best and studied like his life depended on it. Seongwu covered his eyes with his hands. He could not muster the courage to read the poster himself. Minhyun pushed through the crowd and to the poster on his behalf. Students who recognized Minhyun started to shout whatever they wanted to say to him, and there was a sudden, small commotion in Minhyun’s wake. It seemed Minhyun was first in class again. *What about me?* Seongwu was taken over by a maddening curiosity. He hesitantly opened his eyes and tried to peek through his fingers, but Minhyun was approaching him, so he quickly closed his eyes again. He hoped Minhyun did not see him stealthily open his eyes; Minhyun would make fun of him forever.

“Seongwu. Ong Seongwu.”

“What.”

Minhyun’s voice was full of excitement.

“You’ve ranked second. Congratulations.”

“Really?”

Seongwu ran toward the poster. Unbelievably, what Minhyun said was true. Classmates surrounded him and congratulated him. Renewed motivation surged within him as he witnessed his efforts bearing fruit. Seongwu enjoyed his classes that day without once being distracted. Minhyun saw that and commented: “You study so diligently today.”

“I’m going to work ever harder. And next semester I will be first in class.”

“Haha, I look forward to it.”

“You’d better get ready.”

The semester ended with Seongwu’s grandiloquence.

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After a week, summer break started. In every class, teachers handed out instructions for summer homework. Issued as if they were gifts, they were packed full of lists of assignments they needed to complete through the summer. Students let out surprised, grueling moans here and there. Their teacher threatened to take points off if they missed as much as one assignment.

Seongwu was among those let down by the overwhelming list of homework assignments. The fanciful summer plans he made during exam time as future rewards were going to come to nothing. Seongwu had planned to go back to Pyongyang, and spend plenty of time with his family, hiking and going outdoors. He could not take all of his books to Pyongyang, however, and looking at the list, all he was fated to do in Pyongyang was study.
Seongwu thought about his alternatives on the way home; he did not like any of them. Meanwhile, Minhyun seemed completely unfazed by this leviathan of a homework assignment list, keeping a straight face that betrayed no emotion whatsoever. Seongwu was intrigued, curious about Minhyun’s summer plans. Surely, Minhyun would not spend much time at his family home. Then what would he do?

“Are you going home for the summer?”

“For half a day or so. Otherwise, I’m staying here.”

“Only half a day? And not any longer?”

“No one will welcome me anyways. I’ll just stay here and do my homework.”

“I see.”

Seongwu nodded. Half a day. So much shorter than Seongwu had expected, even taking into account Minhyun’s uncomfortable relationship with his family. Then would Minhyun be alone the whole time Seongwu is away?

“And you’re going back to Pyongyang, I reckon?”

“Yes.”

“Through the entire summer?”

“I’m not so sure yet.”

“You always tell me you miss your family. If you’re going anyways, stay for a while.”

“If I do, then what about you?”

Seongwu asked, impulsively. Minhyun’s eyes flew open wide.

“Me?”

“When I go to Pyongyang, you’ll be here all by yourself.”

“I guess so. I’m looking forward to having the whole room to myself.”

“As if I’ll let you enjoy that!”

Seongwu pouted when Minhyun joked with a sly smile. Seongwu ended up reformulating his plan for summer break altogether. Seongwu came up with a new plan after an entire evening of grumbling labor, and declared to Minhyun: “I’ll only spend two weeks in Pyongyang!”

“All right, all right.”

“You’d better take care of the room while I’m gone!”

“And you’d better take care not to get lost in front of Gyeongseong station.”

Minhyun snickered. Minhyun still made fun of Seongwu for having lost direction in Bukchon. Seongwu countered him immediately.

“I’m going to go with my uncle, so don’t you worry!”
But life is always unpredictable, and unsuspected things happen. Seongwu was met with a disturbing news: the day before he would leave for Pyongyang, his uncle visited and told him that he could not accompany him to Gyeongseong station tomorrow because of an urgent business. Seongwu’s uncle was genuinely sorry; to relieve him of worry, Seongwu told him that he would surely be able to find his way to Gyeongseong station on his own. His uncle exclaimed *My boy is all grown up!* and proudly patted Seongwu’s head before going back home.

Despite having assured his uncle, Seongwu was still worried. He had been to both places twice, but Gyeongseong station and Pyongyang station were huge and complicated, and honestly, he was scared to go alone. Seongwu could not go to sleep, and he groaned under his blanket. Minhyun noticed him, and got up from his own bedding. He gently shook Seongwu’s shoulder.

“Are you sick?”

“Mm… No.”

“Are you sick or not?”

“I’m not sick. I’m just… I feel weird.”

“What’s wrong? You’re going to Pyongyang tomorrow. You need to get sleep.”

Seongwu sighed a tiny I will. Minhyun knew that something was off with Seongwu, and he scrutinized Seongwu’s face for clues. Under Minhyun’s persistent and curious gaze, Seongwu opened up at last.

“My uncle can’t go with me.”

“What?”

“It’s my first time going to the train station on my own. I’m so nervous I can’t sleep.”

“I see.”

Only then did Minhyun grasp the gravity of the circumstances. He thought of the many times Seongwu lost his way in the streets. As his best friend, Minhyun was right to be worried. But why had Seongwu not asked Minhyun for help yet? Minhyun felt a tinge of hurt. Perhaps he made fun of Seongwu too often. Minhyun started, making a mental note for himself to stop poking fun at Seongwu: “Your family is coming to Pyongyang station to pick you up?”

“Yes.”

“So you just need someone to accompany you to Gyeongseong station, right? Then I will go with you.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

Seongwu’s grave countenance was instantly cleared at Minhyun’s response. *Minhyun, you’re the best!* Seongwu brightened up, but upon remembering Minhyun’s constant teasing, he added: “You can’t make fun of me for not being able navigate to Gyeongseong station alone.”

“I won’t. So don’t worry and go to sleep.”

The next morning, Seongwu awoke at the rooster’s first cry, and readied himself for the travel up
north. Minhyun, who had no initial plans to go out, also rose early and dressed. Two of them left the boarding house with a bag full of snacks for Seongwu to eat on the train. Minhyun took charge of navigating their way out of Bukchon, and Seongwu followed him. Seongwu seemed excited, almost giddy.

“Shall I buy anything for you from Pyongyang?”

“No need.”

“Oh, come on. But come to think of it, what would you ever need from Pyongyang?”

Seongwu tried to think of something famous from Pyongyang to gift. All he could think of was food items he could not bring back and useless things like silk. At last he recalled something and smiled.

“Pyongyang is famous for its beautiful people. Two weeks later you’ll get a handsome boy of sweet sixteen.”

Minhyun responded with a vague expression, neither laughing nor losing temper and slightly derisive, as if looking down on the absurdity of Seongwu’s proposal. Seongwu turned away from Minhyun before the latter could refuse his offer. Soon, they were at Gyeongseong station. Seongwu took a train ticket out of his pocket, and waved at Minhyun before walking to the turnstile.

“Bye bye!”

“Be safe.”

Seongwu looked back as he passed the crowded turnstile, and Minhyun was still standing there, watching him. By now Seongwu was used to having someone see him off at train stations, but never someone unrelated to him. He was glad Minhyun came out to the station with him, but bittersweet that they had to part, even just for a short while. He promised himself he would return not a day later than his two weeks, so Minhyun would not be lonely in Gyeongseong.

Unlike Seongwu, who internally lingered, Minhyun left Gyeongseong station feeling relieved. He planned to enjoy much-needed time alone and rest fully while Seongwu, who always babbled away beside him, was away. He wanted nothing but to sleep as soon as he returned to the boarding house. Last night, Minhyun had fallen asleep later than Seongwu, and had woken up earlier. He was tired from exerting himself.

As if his tiredness had eaten away at his usual competence, Minhyun lost his way across the street from Gyeongseong station. Minhyun had not visited this area for a while because of school, and during his absence ongoing construction had changed some paths and street configurations around it. Minhyun desperately looked around for guidance, but all the small landmarks that would indicate where he was were now gone. Perhaps this was his punishment for making so much fun of Seongwu. He vowed to never poke fun of Seongwu again for getting lost so often. He circled the whole of Myeongchijung before finally finding his way back to the boarding house. By this time, Seongwu’s train had left the station, speeding toward Pyongyang.

After four hours of travel, Seongwu arrived at Pyongyang station, where he was joyfully reunited with his family. Nothing had changed in his family home from when he left. Seongwu’s grandmother had slaughtered a chicken for his return and a bowl of samgyetang, a chicken soup with ginseng, was ready once he washed his hands. Seongwu ate all of the food he was given.

After the plentiful meal, Seongwu spent time with his younger siblings, on his back on the low wooden bench in the front yard. He immediately thought of Minhyun, who would definitely scold
him for laying down right after eating. Despite the hundreds of kilometers between Pyongyang and Gyeongseong, it felt as if Minhyun was close, like he could simply walk from where he laid with his siblings back to the boarding house, just to see him. Seongwu wondered what Minhyun was doing under the same sky he was looking up to.

Seongwu thought of Minhyun that way from time to time during his stay in Pyongyang.

After exactly a fortnight, Seongwu returned to Gyeongseong. His family found it a shame that he had to leave so early. Seongwu felt the same, but he kept reminding himself of Minhyun, who was alone in Gyeongseong.

Seongwu jumped out of the train as soon as it came to a halt and the train bell rang to signal his arrival at Gyeongseong. He ran to the clock tower in front of the station, where Minhyun waited for him, apparently exhausted from the sizzling heat. Minhyun was not only one to welcome Seongwu to Gyeongseong; sweltering, hot weather embraced him. Gyeongseong was incomparably hotter than Pyongyang.

Once they came back to the boarding house, Seongwu spent better part of the day stuck to the floor, feeling like a withered spinach. In his infinite boredom, a haze of idle thoughts filled his head. He was trying to dismiss countless distracting thoughts his mind conjured up when he suddenly thought of a brilliant idea. He looked at Minhyun, a cheeky sparkle visible in his eyes. Minhyun, who was fanning himself while sitting on the floor, instinctively tensed. The only time Seongwu would look at Minhyun this way was when he was up to absolutely no good.

“Minhyun.”

“What?”

“Let’s play rock, paper, scissors. Loser has to fan the winner.”

“All right. Sure.”

“Loser has to fan the winner for three whole minutes.”

Minhyun inched closer to Seongwu, as lethargic and unenthusiastic as he was during gym classes. They placed a fan between them, and started to play. Winner of the first, deathly serious round was Minhyun, whose paper defeated Seongwu’s rock. Seongwu scowled, but started to fan Minhyun. He initially thought three minutes would be just right, but those minutes felt like a lifetime on the losing end. Seongwu persevered. He would win the next round, and Minhyun would have to return the favor. He lost the next three rounds straight, however, and his complacency was gone by the time he was fanning Minhyun for what felt like forever. Seongwu used to beat Minhyun frequently at rock, paper, scissors; but he was strangely out of luck that afternoon. In the end, Seongwu was left feeling even hotter from his exertion.
Minhyun, who was leisurely enjoying the tiny waves of breeze from Seongwu’s fanning while leaning his head on the wall, suddenly let out a strange, nasal noise. Looking at his pursed lips, Seongwu knew he was trying not to laugh.

“You just laughed at me.”

“I did not.”

Minhyun instantly put on a straight face, as if he had never laughed in his life. Seongwu knew he laughed regardless, and put down his fan.

“Another round!”

“Another one? You’re going to lose again.”

“We’re going to play until I win!”

They bickered until their hosts asked them to dinner downstairs. Their fan flapped away time and a little of the heat that filled their room like an invisible fog.

August was peak of scorching heat in Gyeongseong. Also, the month contained both Seongwu and Minhyun’s birthdays. They had not known each other’s birthdays until the hosts prepared a birthday meal for Minhyun; they were surprised to learn they had been born in not only same year but also same month. On Minhyun’s birthday, Seongwu had nothing prepared, so all he could do for Minhyun was to wish him happy birthday. This bothered Seongwu. He knew that Minhyun’s birthday had already passed, but he thought he could give a belated gift, at least. After thinking hard about what Minhyun would need, Seongwu discovered that Minhyun’s soap in his bath basket had shrunken to a tiny pebble.

Choosing a soap was harder than Seongwu expected. Minhyun had delicate skin and was sensitive to smell; it seemed difficult to please him. Seongwu smelled countless soaps until his nose was numb and chose one with an indisputably soft, inoffensive scent. He then hid it in his desk so Minhyun would not notice it. Now Seongwu was not sure how to deliver his gift to Minhyun. It was his first ever gift, and he wanted it to feel special. He did not simply want to throw it in Minhyun’s direction at a random timing; and in his worry over the manner of gifting, Seongwu had missed an opportunity to timely hand the soap to Minhyun. Seongwu promised himself that he would make a gift of it when Minhyun used up all of his remaining soap.

The day before Seongwu’s birthday, his uncle visited to give him a birthday allowance, and the hosts brought home some meat so they could prepare Seongwu’s birthday meal. Seongwu could not stop smiling; he felt like his birthday was already here. Meanwhile, Minhyun simply dragged on through his day, like he had no idea Seongwu’s birthday was tomorrow. Seongwu was not surprised. Minhyun had spent his own birthday without a single excited utterance; why would he behave any differently for Seongwu’s? Perhaps Minhyun had forgotten all about it. Seongwu did not go out of his way to remind him, however. Minhyun would find out anyways once tomorrow came.

At night, they spread their blankets on the floor. Seongwu was on his back ready to sleep, anticipating wonderful things that would come tomorrow. He waited for Minhyun to follow suit and get into bed, but Minhyun did not. Instead, he stared at the clock, lost in thought.

“Minhyun, what are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Come lay down. And turn off the lights.”
“Just give me a moment.”

Minhyun rummaged through the space under his low desk, and came close to Seongwu with something in his hands. When Seongwu asked what it was, Minhyun grinned. He then counted to three, and said: “Happy birthday.”

“...Huh?”

“It’s midnight. I was first to say it to you.”

“Wow.”

“And this is your birthday present.”

Dazed, Seongwu took Minhyun’s gift. He had no idea Minhyun would be eccentric enough to tell him happy birthday as soon as the clock struck midnight. Seongwu was truly awestruck. Seongwu was even more stunned when he opened his birthday present. Minhyun’s gift was the first print edition of *Love’s Silence and Other Poems* by Han Yong-Un*.

“Do you like it?”

“How did you find this?”

“I combed through all the bookstores on Cheonggyecheon bank.”

“My… Thank you so much.”

Seongwu hugged the book to his chest. He loved it. Seongwu looked at Minhyun with wet, wonderstruck eyes, as if deeply touched. Minhyun brushed him off, evading his gaze, his ears turning red. Seongwu was then reminded of his birthday present for Minhyun he had not yet had a chance to give. Seongwu had to give it to him now. Seongwu hurriedly took it out from under his desk.

“What is this?”

“This is your birthday present. I missed a chance to give it to you, but I’ll give it to you now.”

“Really? Thanks.”

Even though the gift was belated, Minhyun accepted it happily, a smile upon his face. At Seongwu’s goading, Minhyun’s small hands peeled away the wrapping paper. Inside was a soap, white and emanating a subtle, pleasant scent. Minhyun’s eyes filled with surprise; he had not expected his gift to be something so delicate, so considerate.

“I don’t know if you’ll like it. I tried to choose a scent you might like…”

“You chose well. I like this scent.”

“I’m glad.”

“Thanks, Ong Seongwu.”

Seongwu smiled. He was glad to have prepared a gift for Minhyun. He promised himself to do so every year. They talked late into the night about their presents for each other, and fell asleep in peace with each of their gifts next to their pillows. Seongwu’s premonition about having a happy birthday was correct; the next day, he had a supremely happy birthday.
Summer break was over, and second semester of their second year had begun. Over the summer, classmates around them had subtly changed. They acted as if they each bred a dark, violent dragon in their hearts. A boy insinuated suicide in his essay and was called to talk to his teacher privately, and another bought and read various kinds of foreign texts to fulfill his newborn intellectual thirst.

Fortunately, Seongwu was classmates with the boy who liked to buy foreign books and circulated them among friends. Seongwu could borrow and read mysterious, alien, and exquisite works by foreign greats: Rabindranath Tagore, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Rainer Maria Rilke. The bookworm classmate read his books first and passed them on to Seongwu, and Seongwu would finish the books over two or three days, sometimes staying up late into his nights to do so. Afterwards, he would join his classmate in discussing those books.

With a wonderful bookmate, Seongwu grew significantly in his love and understanding of literature as much as he grew taller. Seongwu was now a beautiful, cultured boy, with a tall, willowy figure and a healthy appetite for books to match. Western and European literature had a relatively free and unrestrained disposition compared to the Korean texts Seongwu was used to. Thus, they were a refreshing break for him, who had been educated with Confucian texts that heavily emphasized loyalty, civility, and righteousness. Foreign books not only fulfilled Seongwu’s intellectual curiosities, but also touched and nurtured his delicate emotional sensibilities.

Seongwu also liked to drop by book rental shops on Cheonggyecheon banks when he craved for old stories he heard as a child. Book rental shops cheaply lent out manuscripts of old novels, and many could afford to borrow and read them. Rental books came in variety of sorts and editions, and Seongwu enjoyed going to the rental stores and choosing from them.

One weekend, Seongwu enticed Minhyun to go out with him to one of those Cheonggyecheon book rentals. The weather was bright and balmy, and elderly storytellers were sitting on the streets, luring people with strange tales and their witty way of spinning words together. Seongwu giggled as he passed by one, surrounded by avid listeners.

“I know how that story ends.”

“Do you?”

“Mhmm. Ah, I want to spoil it for you so badly.”

Seongwu snickered at the listeners, who desperately threw silver coins at the storyteller who had stopped speaking just before the apparent climax of the story.

Before the storyteller picked up the story, they passed him and entered a book rental shop. Seongwu went to a section that housed oldest antique books and surveyed the spines. Minhyun preferred more
practical books instead of those that tickled literary fancy, and so he merely trailed behind Seongwu, seemingly uninterested.

After carefully reading the titles, Seongwu chose ‘The Story of Sookhyang,’

“‘The Story of Sookhyang?’”

“This is my favorite among works of classic Korean literature. I guess you’ve never read it?”

“No, I have not.”

“Then I shall tell you about it.”

“No, you really don’t have to…”

Pretending he had not heard Minhyun, Seongwu padded toward the counter. He handed a silver coin to the clerk and showed his student card, and led Minhyun out of the shop. Seongwu started to babble away while they walked through Bukchon under the warm sun.

“The title is ‘Story of Sookhyang,’ but to me the true hero is the character of Young Master Lee Sun. All the girls, including my sister, choose him as their favorite, too, and you’ll see there is a reason why.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, I have hundreds of things to say about him, but to put it simply…”

Lee Sun was a character that loved Sookhyang unconditionally. In the beginning of the story, he is told that Sookhyang is a disfigured woman who is blind and has no limbs, but he continues to pursue Sookhyang through all kinds of trial and hardships. He was a character that stayed faithful and responsible, regardless of the condition or state his love was in. Because Lee Sun loved Sookhyang truly, he could do anything for her. Many readers were captivated by his passion, and so was Seongwu.

“Isn’t he admirable? I also like characters like Seon-kun from ‘Story of Maiden Sookyoung,’ but Lee Sun is my favorite after all.”

“I see.”

“I wish I could be loved by someone so absolutely. I wonder what that feels like.”

“You want to be loved absolutely?”

“Sure. What, you think men are not supposed to be loved like that?”

“No, but…”

Minhyun glanced at Seongwu, and wondered how his tiny head could house so many fanciful dreams and ideas on love.

Either embarrassed at having told Minhyun his admiration for Lee Sun so enthusiastically, or mistaking Minhyun’s narrowed eyes as admonition, Seongwu suddenly pushed Minhyun away. Minhyun, who was off-guard, almost tripped.

“I didn’t ask you to love me, so don’t look at me like that.”
“Ah…”

The entire situation was totally unfair. Minhyun had merely looked at Seongwu! Having been born with intensely sharp-cornered eyes was not Minhyun’s fault. He tried to shoot back a retort at Seongwu, but quickly resigned himself to his fate. Right. Of course it’s my fault.

Second semester of second year passed, even more tranquil than the semester before it. Midterms and final exams were given in what felt like a flash, and when Seongwu came to, everything was over. Like the last semester, Seongwu was second in his class, and Minhyun first. Seongwu renewed his plans of taking over Minhyun’s throne in the coming year, and Minhyun quietly smiled.

Winter break started well after mid-December, and Seongwu decided to wait until January to go to Pyongyang, as stations would be overcrowded during holidays in late December. Naturally, Seongwu spent the end of year with Minhyun. All the bars and pubs in Bukchon were packed full of people who hoped for a wonderful new year. Unlike the adults, who talked of their lives and hopes of rightfully due independence of their country, Seongwu and Minhyun talked of Santa Claus, who purportedly lived in Europe. They were told that Santa lived close to the Northern Pole, and travelled around the world to give presents to good children on Christmas. Seongwu’s eyes watered as he spoke of how Santa always left a gift by his room when he lived in Pyongyang. He said, while lolling about on his blanket:

“Would Santa be able to find me in Gyeongseong?”

When Minhyun heard him, he almost replied, You know that Santa does not exist, Seongwu. Minhyun kept silent, though, as he came up with a brilliant idea. He pretended to agree, and said something about hoping Santa to find his way easily in Bukchon. This excited Seongwu, and he started to list things he wished Santa would bring him. Minhyun smiled mysteriously, thinking to himself that the back of Seongwu’s head, dark and round, was more adorable than ever.

Minhyun came up with a plan more elaborate than the one involving Seongwu’s birthday present. Christmas present for Seongwu was a basket of assorted snacks. Minhyun first purchased a square basket made of bamboo, and started buying snacks Seongwu often craved for in small amounts. Minhyun joined Seongwu, feigning innocent ignorance, when he prayed nightly for Christmas to come fast.

They spent the night of Christmas Eve full of anticipation for Santa. Minhyun succeeded in surreptitiously making Seongwu go to bed earlier than usual. He waited nearly two hours to make sure Seongwu was asleep, and rose from his blanket quietly. After waving a hand in front of Seongwu’s face to no response, he took his bamboo snack basket from under his desk and placed it beside Seongwu’s pillow, placing an identical one next to his own. He could not wait to see how Seongwu would respond. Minhyun closed his eyes, waiting for the morning, and Seongwu's delight,
Seongwu’s eyes flew open as soon as rays of sunlight showered into the room. He shot up, looked around the room, and spotted a box beside his pillow that had apparently been conjured out of thin air. He cried out in surprise: “Dear God, what is this?”

Silence.

“Is this real? No way…”

Minhyun almost burst out in laughter as he awoke. He pretended to be still fast asleep, and watched Seongwu move about under half-closed eyelids. Seongwu was trying to find traces Santa might have left behind. Seongwu looked around the room with harmless suspicion, and turned his focus - finally - to his present. He carefully opened the box and saw Korean traditional cookies, honey cookies, and an array of western candies. Seongwu shook Minhyun awake.

“Minhyun, wake up! Hurry!”

“Why are you yelling so loud so early in the morning?”

“Look!”

Seongwu pushed his box of sweets into Minhyun's face. Minhyun pretended to be surprised as Seongwu urged him to open his box. Minhyun suppressed laughter once more as he did. A box full of sweets that he had prepared for himself. Seongwu asked when Minhyun remained as poised as ever: “What’s wrong? You don’t like Santa’s present?”

“It’s nothing. I was just… surprised.”

Minhyun did not have the heart to say he was only trying not to laugh. Minhyun smiled, wide and bright.

“I guess he found our boarding house without a problem.”

“Aren’t you glad?”

Touched, Seongwu showed the hosts his Christmas present from Santa during breakfast. Minhyun furtively made a shushing gesture when Seongwu was not looking. Their hosts understood, and they played along, visibly doting on both Minhyun and Seongwu like their own grandchildren. And so Christmas overflowed with mutual Love, as Christ commanded to the world.

Outside, snow pure as Seongwu’s innocence fell heavily. It was a white Christmas.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 3:

Love's Silence and Other Poems by Han Yong Un : (From Wikipedia) Han Yong-un (Korean: 한용운, August 29, 1879 – June 29, 1944) was a twentieth century Korean Buddhist reformer and poet. The poems published in Han's Nim-ui Chimmuk (Love's
Silence, 1926) ... garnered much attention from literary critics and intellectuals at the time.

Translator's note: The poem Love's Silence and others by Han Yong Un are beautiful. I hope you try reading them sometime :)
Hand in Hand

Chapter Summary

Seongwu returns to Pyongyang for a brutal winter, and learns an equally brutal secret that will make him a true adult. When he returns, he and Minhyun huddle together to brace themselves against piercing cold of the remainder of winter. Seongwu gets a new school uniform.

Chapter Notes

The original writing of Chapter 4 in Korean by @myidheadstou in Korean can be found here: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2391776.

Short chapter, but I updated quick :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 4

Originally written in Korean by Id / Translation into English by Sasha

Gosh, it's cold! Seongwu yelped out. A chorus of people around him repeated the same. As if welcoming them to Pyongyang, harsh northern winds mercilessly slapped against people in the streets. Heavy snow rode on the wind. Seongwu could not tell if he was truly in Pyongyang, or if he had somehow been transported to Siberia. Coats padded with thick cotton were useless against the ironclad authority of piercing winds. Stinging cold split through layers of clothing. Seongwu’s body trembled as he exited Pyongyang station with his family. He thought, for a moment, that the air he exhaled might turn to ice mid-air. It was a brutal winter.

Seongwu had returned to Pyongyang so he could spend Lunar New Year with his family. Pyongyang, covered in layers of snow, was engulfed in an atmosphere even more frozen and immobile as that in frigid Gyeongseong. Everyone walked with their shoulders crouched forward, and people hid in buildings to escape the cold. Streets were empty, and the city eerily quiet. Only streetcars dutifully crossed the streets. Seongwu could not dare to go outdoors in this climate; his plans to play outside with his siblings were unequivocally cancelled. He tried to comfort his siblings, who were visibly upset, and hoped the weather would thaw before he had to return to Gyeongseong.

Instead of going outdoors, Seongwu spent most of his time with his siblings inside, warm and cozy. Laying on his back on the heated ondol* was true heaven, and Seongwu dozed off on it endlessly until he began to fear he would turn into a hibernating bear. He sat up, and opened the window to let in fresh air. He escaped his siblings’ pleas to stay under the blankets just a little more, and had all of them sit up straight. They reluctantly sat up and rubbed their groggy eyes. Seongwu asked them if
there was anything he could help with their homework. Instead of being pleased, they recoiled in loathing at the word ‘homework.’ Seongwu had misspoken.

As Seongwu awkwardly laughed, his youngest sister brought him a children’s storybook. It was the story of the sun and the moon, which Seongwu had also enjoyed more than ten years ago. Seongwu gladly opened the book, and slowly articulated the story written on well-thumbed pages. At first apathetic, his younger brothers also gathered in front of Seongwu and focused on the story. Seongwu’s voice, young, silvery and on the cusp of puberty, rang with the clarity of sleigh bells throughout the bedroom.

After a week Seongwu had ran out of books to read to his siblings, so he started to tell them stories about wonderful things that had happened to him in Gyeongseong. He spoke of cutthroat people who would catch weasels in their sleep, and of ghosts in the music classroom at his school. Seongwu felt like Scheherazade. And of course, the most popular of all his stories: Christmas present from Santa.

“Santa came all the way to Gyeongseong to visit me!”

“Yes?”

“Yes. When I woke up in the morning, there was a little box full of snacks next to my pillow. I know it sounds like a lie, but it’s true!”

Seongwu’s siblings were wonderstruck. As Seongwu tried to continue, encouraged by their response, his uncle, who was reading a novel in a corner, suddenly chuckled. Children turned to look at him.

“Why do you laugh, uncle?”

“It’s nothing. Keep telling them your story about Santa, Seongwu.”

Children turned back to Seongwu for more. They talked among themselves about what each of them had received as a gift last Christmas. Seongwu’s uncle said no more, and went back to his novel.

That night, Seongwu’s uncle spoke to Seongwu privately right after dinner, when his younger siblings were taking a bath. He appeared behind Seongwu, casting a dark shadow over Seongwu’s sitting form. When Seongwu turned, startled, his uncle stood there, an unusual grimness cast over his face. He closed the door, and sat down facing Seongwu. Seongwu tensed, because his uncle was generally a cheerful and kind person. Did something bad happen to his family while he was gone? Seongwu tentatively asked: “What’s wrong, uncle?”

“What’s wrong, uncle?”

“What do you want to become an adult?”

What? Seongwu blurted out. He would have never expected a question of this sort. Did he want to become an adult? Suddenly, Seongwu found himself thinking of all the childish habits he still had. Did his uncle somehow find out that Minhyun stays beside the bathroom door every time he takes a bath in Gyeongseong? There was no way for him to find out. Seongwu tried to calm his heart.

“Why do you ask? And why so suddenly?”

“Seongwu, in order to be an adult, there are certain secrets about this world you must know.”

“Like what?”

“This particular secret might be sad, and it might hurt a little. Are you willing to find out?”
“Yes, I want to know. I’m almost an adult now.”

“All right. Then I’ll tell you. Listen. You might find it hard to believe this…”

Seongwu swallowed. He was ready for this momentous secret that will apparently open a door leading to adulthood. His uncle took his hand, which was neatly placed upon his knees, and gave it a sympathetic squeeze. His lips, closed in a firm line, slowly opened.

“Seongwu, there is no Santa Claus.”

“What?”

“Santa does not exist. It’s only a fairy tale invented by the Europeans.”

Seongwu’s uncle emphasized his message by repeating it. Seongwu’s eyes flew open wide in shock, and his pupils shook in disbelief. Then what about my snack box? Seongwu whispered. Seongwu’s uncle assumed that his hosts at the boarding house may have prepared it for him, and told Seongwu to thank them once he returned to Gyeongseong. All of these words, however, crumbled mid-air before they could reach Seongwu’s ears. His uncle’s outstretched pinky brought him to reality, after Seongwu spent a few moments simply gaping at him. Seongwu’s uncle, in a low voice, asked Seongwu for a promise.

“This is a secret only adults know. Do not tell your siblings until they become adults themselves. We adults have to keep it a secret until the time is right. Okay?”

Seongwu nodded. He wrapped his pinky around his uncle’s. They shook their joined hands up and down, thrice. There was a promise.

“Now you are a real adult, Seongwu.”

Seongwu’s heart beat, fast, loud and clear. He felt the weight of the word ‘adult’ upon his shoulders. He was not a carefree sixteen-year-old child anymore. In the days their country was still called Joseon, he would have passed as a fully grown man, and probably would have married someone. It was time for him to acknowledge all truths, no matter how dark. A heroic look overtook Seongwu’s youthful face. His uncle stood up, seemingly relieved from being rid of the burden for this painful disclosure. He patted Seongwu on the shoulder, as if somberly soothing his broken heart, and silently left the room.

That night, Seongwu could not sleep. He was shocked. His tradeoff for becoming an adult hurt, and, at the same time, he was quite embarrassed. He was also confused. What was he to do now? His friend Minhyun, in Gyeongseong, would be fast asleep, oblivious from this sobering truth. Minhyun would surely still believe Santa Claus to be a real thing. Because he was uncomfortable with his own family, though, no one would have told him about it. Minhyun would also have to undergo this rite of passage to become an adult at some point, and Seongwu would have to be the messenger. Seongwu was not sure how much this would hurt Minhyun. After letting himself be taken over by deep and prolonged chain of thoughts, Seongwu decided to keep this secret from Minhyun until next Christmas.

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Seongwu, having passed his first trial into adulthood, returned to Gyeongseong a stronger boy. During his three-week vacation in Pyongyang, Gyeongseong had been compiling snow. When he arrived, the city was covered in snow that came up to his ankles; his feet sank in it every time he took a step. Seongwu carefully navigated his way out of Gyeongseong station, which was slippery and ever so chaotic. Under the clock tower was Minhyun, waiting for him. Minhyun had on a thick woolen scarf that covered all of his face save his eyes.

“Did you wait for a long time?”

“No, I just got here. Let’s go.”

Despite his claim, Minhyun had films of snow on his head and shoulders. Had the day been warmer Seongwu would have mentioned he looked like a snowman. It was too cold for a petty back-and-forth, however, so Seongwu just let it go. They brisked towards their boarding house.

Seongwu expected their room to be warm, but it was not. Harsh wind from outside crept in and enveloped them in a freezing grip. Because the boarding house was structured in a manner that mixed Japanese and European elements, they had to depend entirely on a small fire for heat instead of relying on an ondol system. Seongwu instantly missed the ondol of his home in Pyongyang. The small charcoal brazier in their room was terribly ineffective. To mitigate for lack of warmth, Seongwu rolled himself inside a blanket, and stared blankly at the red glaze of burning charcoal.

Across the charcoal fire was Minhyun. His thoughts must have been frozen in the cold, because he also stared at the fire, endlessly, vacantly. Minhyun then pulled his hands out from the blanket to bring it close to the fire, and rubbed them together. Minhyun’s hands were naturally cool in temperature, and now he had pallid fingertips. Seongwu moved to lay next to Minhyun.

“Give me your hands.”

Seongwu took Minhyun’s hands in his own. They were cold. Seongwu massaged them in his own hands. Minhyun tried to pry his hands away, but Seongwu held on, quietly admonishing him.

“When it’s cold, it’s best to warm others with your body temperature.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So stay still.”

After a while, Minhyun’s hands regained color. See? Much better. Seongwu said, triumphantly. I see. Minhyun slowly blinked.

“Shall we put our blankets together? We would be warmer if we slept right next to each other.”

Until now, they had kept a certain distance between their blankets on the floor, although no one had told them to do so. It was their way of setting aside each of their own space while having to share a room. This practice was important to them, as they each needed time spent on their own sometimes. So far, they had never ventured into that vacant space between them at night; and now Seongwu was suggesting that they break this rule. Minhyun thought about it for a moment, and agreed.

They pulled their blankets together in the middle of their room. They straightened their bedding, and placed their covers and pillows on top. The charcoal blaze was placed under their feet, as they could be easily burnt if it toppled over next to them or above their heads. Minhyun thought placing it at
their feet was as equally dangerous, considering Seongwu’s sleeping habits, and pushed it where Seongwu could not reach, even with an outstretched limb. Thus, their only source of heat became even more inefficient during bedtime.

They laid down next to each other. It was a strange sensation how they could feel each other’s breaths from so close. As if he hadn’t suggested this proximity first, Seongwu pointed to where their blankets met, and said, “Don’t cross this line, all right? You absolutely cannot.”

Minhyun stared at him, dumbfounded, but nodded in agreement anyways.

“I will never cross it.”

Despite having drawn the line first, it was Seongwu who crossed it. In the middle of the night, Seongwu awoke to noises of groaning. When he opened his eyes, he realized he had slept on top of Minhyun. Seongwu had crossed the boundary between Minhyun’s bedding and his own in oblivious stupor brought by slumber, and placed his arm and leg over Minhyun, pushing down upon him with his torso. Minhyun grumbled in his sleep like a dog in pain. Flustered, Seongwu froze where he lay for a moment, and silently returned to his own bed, painstakingly careful as to not wake Minhyun.

After a short while, Seongwu fell back asleep as if nothing had happened. He slept, until he felt Minhyun move uncomfortably under his blanket. Minhyun shot up suddenly, even before the first cry of the rooster. He let out labored breaths. Seongwu asked him, pretending that he had just been awakened by Minhyun, “What’s wrong? Could you not sleep?”

“I had a dream in which a building fell down and I was trapped underneath.”

Seongwu, knowing exactly how such dream invaded Minhyun’s peace, could not say anything. Minhyun said seriously, his hair tousled and his face gaunt from lack of rest: “It was so heavy and chilling, like it was not a dream but reality.”

“I see…”

Minhyun found it a shame that he had to wake up early on a holiday because of such nightmare. Seongwu could not meet his eyes; he would keep his inadvertent invasion into Minhyun’s sleeping space his own secret forever.

Having started their day early - albeit unwillingly - they had breakfast and went out to Jongno to order a new gakuran for Seongwu, who had shot up centimeters in height in the last three weeks. The school uniform shop was crowded, because schools would start only a weeks later. Minhyun and Seongwu had to wait in a line for a tailor to measure Seongwu’s height and the length of his limbs. The tailor used an old measuring tape, the numbers on it hazy with age and experience, to record Seongwu’s measurements. Fortunately, he had a uniforms in the right size in his inventory. When the tailor went back to the storage to fetch it, Seongwu regarded himself in the full-body mirror, enjoying a view of his slender, tall figure. Minhyun stood a few steps back to watch him twirl.

Minhyun would have never thought that those three weeks Seongwu spent in Pyongyang was enough to bring about significant change. At its end, though, Seongwu had visibly grown. When his friend appeared before him at Gyeongseong station, Minhyun felt as if he hadn’t seen Seongwu for much longer than three weeks. Of course he confirmed that this taller, more mature boy was indeed his old friend Seongwu once they returned to their boarding house, but Minhyun still felt a certain inexplicable unfamiliarity with him. That was the extent of the changes in Seongwu’s appearance. From the back, Seongwu resembled a fully grown adult. He had a svelte, lean figure, and the crown of his head easily reached beyond those of most of their classmates. His long, slender limbs, which
had grown straight and upright, were a pleasure to look at. Seongwu had not yet developed a dark upper lip or a husky voice, but Minhyun sensed that those things were also imminent.

And Seongwu, looking at Minhyun’s reflection on the mirror, thought his friend was still like a child. His growth had been consistent, but much more gradual than Seongwu’s. By now Minhyun was by no means the shortest in their class, but his growth in height was surely slower than those underwent by Seongwu and some other taller boys in class. While the tailor measured Seongwu’s longer limbs, Minhyun stood awkwardly in his gakuran that he had worn since the start of Secondary school, which still fitted him comfortably. Seongwu wondered when Minhyun would be here for a new uniform. Could Seongwu give him his if he grew out of it soon enough? While Seongwu was lost in thought, somehow believing Minhyun to stay an equivalent of a younger brother forever, Minhyun suddenly spoke, his tone quiet but laced with sentiment of a challenge. Their gazes clashed in the mirror.

“You grow fast.”

“Are you envious?”

“Well, we’ll see who would be taller only after both of us have fully grown.”

“Say that after you’ve grown taller.”

Seongwu grinned at Minhyun through the mirror. To Minhyun, the upturned stretch of Seongwu’s thin lips looked beyond cheeky, almost malicious. When the tailor returned just in time with Seongwu’s new uniform, Seongwu paid for it, and they left together. Walking along Jongno, Seongwu continued to tease Minhyun about his height.

“Don’t we look like brothers? Won’t you call me ‘hyung?’”

“Shut up.”

“My! This young master knows how to swear.”

Minhyun swallowed an exasperated sigh. When Seongwu started to be impish, he never stopped at anything; Minhyun had to invoke the virtue of patience over and over again until he did.

Seongwu was oblivious to the fact that people in the Hwang family were generally tall; not only men, but also women. Even Minhyun’s mother, who married into the family from another, was tall. Considering this heritage, it was possible that Minhyun would end up a towering man, despite his current mediocrity in stature. Minhyun somehow knew he would not fall behind Seongwu in height. If he could look down on Seongwu one day, he would return all of this indignity manyfold. So Minhyun just let Seongwu poke fun at him as much as he wanted; Minhyun would win at the end.

Minhyun smirked behind Seongwu, who had outpaced him merrily, unaware of Minhyun’s furtive thoughts.
Glossary for Chapter 4:

Ondol : (From Wikipedia) Ondol (Hangul: 온돌) in Korean traditional architecture, is underfloor heating that uses direct heat transfer from wood smoke to heat the underside of a thick masonry floor.

Translator's Note: Ondol is the one of the things I miss the most about Korea. Ondol in my grandmother's house! In winter, I would doze off on it like in hibernation.

Thank you for all your loving comments and kudos! I show each and every one to Id, and she was so happy and thankful for them.
Chapter Summary

A nightly blackout mandate is ordered on Gyeongseong; Minhyun and Seongwu find their own way of dealing with it. Minhyun thinks about his future aspirations for the first time thanks to Seongwu, and they both undergo unnerving, strange changes to their bodies and minds; they realize that they are at the cusp of manhood.

Chapter Notes

Original Chapter 5 in Korean written by Id can be read here: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2407022.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light Of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter Five

Originally written in Korean by Id / Translated into English by Sasha

Seongwu’s new gakuran smelled new, like starch. He carefully threaded his arm through the shirt so he wouldn’t wrinkle it. The newly ironed shirt fit like a glove on his thin figure. He looked into the mirror as he buttoned his shirt from the top. He softly hummed, and his fingers deftly danced on the fabric it tended to. He felt a renewed sense of excitement blooming in his chest. It was the first day of March, and everything felt new.

Minhyun and Seongwu became second years at Gyeongseong Secondary School. They were calmer than they were last year when they had just entered school. Now that they were used to their schedule, each day repeated itself. With newfound ease, they took pleasure in helping first years who became lost in the hallways.

One of the most profound changes in terms of their education was math. Starting this year, second-year students were given a supplement, commonly called ‘The Blue Note (青チャート)*.’ This supplement was a compilation of all mathematics problems a student would have to comprehend to maximize his chance of being admitted to a college or to Keijo Imperial University*. This book was meant to prepare students for heavy competition, and so it was incomparably difficult to what they were used to. Students agonized over complex equations within the new supplement, and their late-night murmurs of complicated problems dissipated dryly into the pitch-black of fertile spring nights.

Another change that Seongwu and Minhyun liked was that they given the privilege of free access to newspapers. Their hosts bought a subscription when a longtime friend opened a distribution agency
for Dong-A Daily*, and offered Minhyun and Seongwu a copy every day. Grim, gray papers were densely occupied with tiny prints. Under the date that read 'Showa Year 8' were a diverse range of articles. All sorts of reports on Korean and Japan, as well as news about unfamiliar names like Adolf Hitler, a new chancellor for Germany, peaked their budding interest in current events. The newspaper was regretfully still under Japanese censorship, but they considered themselves fortunate to be able to read news in their mother language at all.

Usually, the newspaper was crammed with bleak and grim stories. Minhyun and Seongwu liked to dream of a Utopia despite a myriad of stories of invasions and war they saw daily. They dreamed of a world in which they never knew the sadness of losing their country to another; a world without war and without Japanese policemen; a world in which they would not be discriminated against for speaking in their mother tongue or for observing their own age-old traditions. They wondered how beautiful it would be if that utopia existed on the Korean peninsula. They both had been born after the start of Japanese colonization, so they could only imagine having their country as a sovereign being, and what being free would feel like. They only knew that they had to survive with all their might if they were to see their utopia come true one day. They wanted to persevere and somehow affect a change in their world. They wished to see their Korea, free, sovereign and as beautiful as ever, before they would have to leave this world behind. They yearned to be by each other's side until that day would come.

Their enthusiasm for change was chilled unceremoniously in June, just before their midterms. The Japanese had ordered a mandatory blackout every night. This blackout was to prepare for possible night air raids by the enemy, and all of the buildings in Gyeongseong, including private residences, were to turn out all lights at night starting fourteenth day of June. Flyers were distributed as early as the beginning of June, and Japanese policemen visited all the houses in the neighborhood to order the residents to cooperate. Minhyun and Seongwu’s boarding house was not an exception.

"Why must it be now?"

Seongwu moaned under his breath, looking over his exam materials. Minhyun laughed, exasperated. There was nothing they could do about the blackout. They closed their books early and set them aside. A classmate had said that one could tape thick blankets to the windows to hide a light, but Minhyun and Seongwu did not want to go that far. There was no guarantee they would not be found out, and if they were, everyone in the house including their hosts would be arrested and taken to the Japanese Government General for contempt of law.

At the promised hour, blaring siren resonated throughout the city. Starting from those closest to the Japanese Government General building, all lights were turned off. The blackout that started from Jongno quickly spread to Bukchon. Seongwu saw the light next door go out, and blew out his own kerosene lamp. The siren continued for ten more minutes.

After the siren finally stopped, Gyeongseong was cloaked in complete darkness. A peculiar silence replaced the lights. Every living thing within the city crouched low and held its breath. Minhyun and Seongwu curled into themselves, hoping this night would pass quickly. After having been robbed of their vision, other senses were heightened, and they could hear the tiniest rustling around them. A barrage of heavy footsteps of soldiers thundered by their house. Seongwu’s body reflexively recoiled; he felt as if they could step on his very body, right here and now. His bodily flinch was born from an instinctive fear of the Japanese, who could kill and extort any time at their discretion.

Seongwu kept fidgeting out of anxiety. With his family in Pyongyang, he would have jumped into someone’s arms and begged to be held. He only had Minhyun now, and he was too proud to show Minhyun that he was scared. Seongwu hugged his knees to his chest, and buried his face on top of it.
He was overflowing with fear and apprehension, and his entire psyche shook like a frail light flickering in the wind.

Suddenly, Seongwu felt a cool hand envelop his own. Minhyun had taken his hand after quietly observing him. Seongwu would ordinarily have pulled his hand away, but he could not do so now. Seongwu could not shrug away this warmth that drew closer to him. So, Seongwu squeezed back. They stayed that way for a while, and Seongwu became noticeably less nervous. His erratic heartbeat subsided to a steady pulse.

“All right?”

Minhyun tapped on the back of Seongwu’s hand with his finger, his voice gentle and serious, instead of berating or dismissive. Seongwu nodded. Minhyun, only then, stopped counting Seongwu’s pulse in his head. He had felt Seongwu’s crazy heartbeat through his palm, and wondered if Seongwu had an illness he never knew.

What would it take to put an ever-so-sensitive Seongwu to sleep? What would distract him from the threatening existence of Japanese soldiers outside? Minhyun told Seongwu to look at the sky. The night sky above them shone in serene magnificence, its vast darkness scattered with star powder. Minhyun pointed to the North Star, Cassiopeia, and Sirius, and started to tell their stories. Seongwu listened intently, more interested than Minhyun anticipated. They looked at the night sky, remembering constellations they saw as children; Seongwu even found Altair and Vega, surprising Minhyun. At some point, they were leaning against each other.

Footsteps and yelling of the police routinely interrupted their conversation, but now Seongwu was no longer scared. Their eyes, reflecting the glorious moonlight, sparkled with vitality. The Japanese might have turned out their lamps, but would never be able to blow out the light of their lives.

The rest of their night was peaceful, tranquil like a starry world removed from the tumultuous one they belonged to. They fell asleep, leaning on each other, their hands intertwined. Until the morning, neither of them let go.

After midterms, Minhyun and Seongwu had a brief breather. Summer was fast approaching. Their uniformed lightened again, and they dug their bamboo fans out of deep corners of their wardrobes. Then they found out that this summer, besides the heat, had another problem tacked onto it: cicadas.

Cicadas were truly the loudest, most persistent nuisances they had ever come across in Gyeongseong. Several kinds of them populated the garden of their boarding house, and they took turns belting out cacophony of songs as if their lives depended on it. Minhyun and Seongwu had to endure their distracting, disastrous chorus morning, evening and night. In their presence, Seongwu’s focus kept splitting into branches and branches of daydreams. After futile attempts at focusing on schoolwork he turned to Minhyun, languidly fanning himself. Minhyun sat at his desk, his back straight and his gaze unshaken, like a man who knows nothing of the summer heat that persistently dogged him.
Seongwu was reminded that Minhyun was an outrageously dedicated student who endured all distractions and ordeals silently, and in several occasions even failed to notice that the back of his neck had turned various shades of red from his own sweat. Seongwu was imagining a future in which Minhyun announced his marriage to a textbook, when Minhyun finally turned his gaze to him. They briefly regarded each other before Seongwu looked away, flustered. Minhyun observed Seongwu’s desk. Seongwu had recently purchased a notebook he would use to write literature; it was on his desk, open and without a single trace of pen mark. Minhyun laughed.

“You didn’t even touch your new notebook.”

“I’m thinking. Thinking is what is most important to a writer.”

“How much could be possibly going on in that tiny head of yours?”

“Stories you wouldn’t even imagine.”

“I am so curious.”

“You’ll see when I win the Annual Spring Literary Contest*.”

Seongwu spoke as if he had already won the contest. Minhyun laughed, again, and put his pen down. He turned to Seongwu, chuckling, intent on humoring him.

“I must get your autograph now, if you’re to become a celebrity author.”

“Do you want it now?”

Seongwu snickered. They joked around, until Seongwu sprawled on the floor on his back. He hugged a pillow to himself, and said dreamily: “I want to be a writer, like Baek Seok*. To become a writer is my lifelong dream.”

“You will be.”

Seongwu must have discussed his dream of becoming a writer with Minhyun hundreds of times. Minhyun never tired of it, and never failed to encourage him. Suddenly, Seongwu was reminded that Minhyun never talked about his own dreams. He had mentioned short-term goals, like being first in his class, but apparently had never looked beyond those reachable trophies.

Seongwu tried to decipher the undertones of Minhyun’s countenance. He was afraid he would make Minhyun uncomfortable by asking him about his aspirations for the future. As Seongwu hesitated, Minhyun tactfully approached it first.

“What do you want to know? My own dreams?”

“Well, how did you know?”

“For what else would you hesitate, other than profound questions about me? From now on, you can just ask.”

Seongwu nodded. He was happy. Minhyun had never given anyone else permission to ask questions about his private life. Seongwu felt like he was an exception, and he liked it. Minhyun thought for a few moments, and answered Seongwu, who sat looking at him with eyes full of expectations.

“I… will be happy doing anything, except business.”

“Hmm?”
“I don’t care what I do. It just can’t be running a business.”

“Wait. That’s not what I want to know.”

At the stern resolution in Seongwu’s voice, Minhyun looked at him, as if inquiring what he had done wrong. Minhyun’s answer was not an incorrect one, but not of the kind Seongwu wanted to hear. Seongwu explained the answer he wanted, with kindness in his voice.

“What I really want to know is what you want to do, not something your parents would be okay with you doing.”

Minhyun seemed disconcerted at his request, and thought some more. It was a difficult question; the answer did not come quickly. A chorus of cicadas resounded outside as they each said nothing for a full minute. Then the cicadas suddenly stopped, and there was a rare moment of complete quiet. Minhyun took advantage of that moment to let out his answer.

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it seriously.”

“You’ve never thought about it?”

“No. We have a while until we graduate. I thought I’d become something of worth if I keep studying like this.”

“I know you will, but I wish you’d find something you like to do.”

“Haha, thanks. I’ll think about it more carefully, starting today.”

“You have to tell me when you find it.”

“You’ll be the first one to know.”

Seongwu beamed. He liked what Minhyun said last. Perhaps for Minhyun it was something meaningless and mundane to say to a friend, but Seongwu felt it was special; that he was special.

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Perhaps this delight in being special in Minhyun’s eyes was too much for Seongwu to handle. Seongwu had a strange, strange dream that night. It was four o’clock in the morning, and Seongwu awoke, a terrible chill that ran down his spine pinning him in place. He laid there for a few seconds, just blinking at the ceiling. He felt odd, uncomfortable. He tried to make sense of what he had just dreamed of: blasphemy. Immediately, he tried to expel what he remembered from his dream out of his head. He was not allowed to dream, or even think of, such things. Above all, though, he had to get up. He did not want to let Minhyun know that he, a second-year student at a Secondary School, had wet his bed.

Seongwu slowly got up, painstakingly careful not to disturb Minhyun or, God forbid, wake him up. Fortunately, his blanket was not wet. Instead, something slimy slithered down his inner thighs. Seongwu hissed, almost screamed; the sensation made all the hair on his body stand up. He crawled
to his chest as quickly as he could, and took out a fresh pair of underwear. He then moved as quietly and as fast as he could, to exit the room...

“Where are you going?”

To Seongwu, Minhyun’s voice at that precise moment planted more fear in his heart than any ghost or monster ever could. He felt as if his heart had dropped to the floor on the spot. Seongwu looked back at Minhyun; luckily, his eyes were still closed. Seongwu answered, trying his best to sound calm, “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“All right. Be careful…”

Minhyun must have been stirred when Seongwu opened and closed one of the chest drawers. Oblivious to Seongwu’s agitation, Minhyun fell back asleep. Relieved, Seongwu tiptoed his way down the stairs.

In the bathroom, Seongwu took off his clothes and splashed himself with water in haste, not knowing whether the water was cold or hot. He tried to grasp what had just happened to him. Recently, he was unsettled by a number of changes that took over his body. He always felt a coarseness in his throat, like it was always parched, and his songbird voice had gone husky. Observing his classmates, Seongwu figured out the change in his voice was just a part of growing up. But this was different; unexpected.

Seongwu looked at the liquid that had slid down his legs. It was white. What could this white stuff be? The first thought that came into Seongwu’s mind was that he must have contracted a terrible, incurable disease. But if he had, he surely would have had some sort of pain, or a warning sign, at least. He did not remember feeling sick or ill recently. Then why was this happening to him so suddenly? As if answering Seongwu’s endless string of questions, fragments of his dream slowly crept back up. Minhyun looked at him, with his sharp, elegantly upturned eyes, and his lips, which Seongwu often made fun of for looking like a girl’s he addressed Seongwu…

Seongwu internally screamed. He shoved his underwear into a bucket, and soaked it in water, frantically rubbing at it with soap. He wanted to wash away what had happened altogether. It was his very first time washing a piece of clothing with his bare hands in the middle of the night; he would never have expected to be doing this under these circumstances. Disturbed, he did not even notice the whimpers leaving his lips.

When he finally returned to the room after battling with himself in the bath, Seongwu was exhausted, and all he wanted to do was to go back to sleep and stay asleep forever. Unfortunately, sleep evaded him even after he slipped back under his blanket. Seongwu had to watch the morning creep into the room with his eyes wide open. When he rose, Minhyun was surprised that Seongwu was up before he was, and teased him about how that never happens. Seongwu couldn’t sting back. It was only a dream, after all, but he still could not look Minhyun in the eyes.

What happened that night stayed on Seongwu’s mind for a long while. He could not bring himself to tell anyone about it; it was too embarrassing. He only found out what the ‘white stuff’ was when he overheard a group of friends discussing it at school. Before, nobody, not even his father or uncle, had educated him on this subject. Seongwu was glad to be relieved of his morbid curiosity as to the ‘white stuff,’ but still felt overwhelmed and ashamed, as if his little night excursion to the bathroom had been exposed to all the world.

Although they were born in the same year and same month, Seongwu thus reached his sexual awakening before Minhyun, just as he was taller in height. Minhyun was definitely maturer in thought and behavior, but he was late in taking in knowledge on sex and other changes about to take
place in his own body and mind.

Of course, time for a shocking enlightenment came to Minhyun in due time. Seongwu realized it when a classmate brought a magazine of pornographic drawings to school. He exclaimed that he would benefit all of his classmates by sharing this ‘blessing.’ So one day, he hauled a bag full of those books into the classroom.

Just like all boys their age, Seongwu’s classmates were shell-shocked at obscene illustrations of women bent this way and that and sketched in exaggerated curves. Seongwu felt the same as he stood among them. He tried to look away, but irresistible curiosity had him looking back for more. As the boys turned page after mesmerizing page, Minhyun approached them.

“What are you doing over there?”

One of the classmates shushed him, placing an index finger over his lips. Is this some kind of secret society? Minhyun said, then his pupils shook, almost violently, as he saw what was at the center of all his classmates' fascination. Another boy reached out and pulled him by the arm into their illicit circle. Minhyun staggered into it, confused, and then stared, wide-eyed, at a book a boy was holding open.

“I’ve never seen this little fellow so happy!”

One of the boys teased him. Minhyun, his face crimson red, tripped on his own words.

“Wh, what are you talking about? What is all this you’re looking… Oh.”

Just as he began to chastise his classmates like a stern teacher, Minhyun’s eyes met with Seongwu’s. Seongwu had been observing him with keen interest, and Minhyun became flustered as he realized it. For the first time ever, Minhyun pried his gaze from Seongwu’s before Seongwu did. He mumbled something incomprehensible, and ran out of the classroom, shaking off his classmates reaching for him.

“I guess he can’t handle his happiness.”

The boys giggled. Seongwu would have laughed with them if this showdown had involved some other boy, but he couldn’t. Minhyun seemed to have been completely blind to the sort of guilty pleasure they had just discovered, and he felt that his classmates went a bit too far in teasing him. Seongwu felt compelled to follow him, and he stood up.

“Where are you going?”

“To the bathroom.”

“Just reminding you, class starts in three minutes.”

Seongwu assured his classmates he would return in time, and left the classroom in search of Minhyun. Where could Minhyun have gone? Seongwu went to a few places that Minhyun frequented, but did not see him. As he continued his search for Minhyun, a bell signaled start of classes. Ready to take some admonishing by his teacher if need be, Seongwu stealthily walked out of the building; he had just remembered a place Minhyun might be.

Because Gyeongseong Secondary School was built halfway up a hillside, some buildings were more elevated than others. The first and second building had a long, spacious space between them, and boys liked to used it to jump rope or hide from teachers. There was an overpass above that connected the first and second buildings, and Seongwu found Minhyun sitting there. Afraid they might be
found out, Seongwu surreptitiously approached Minhyun from behind him. Seongwu greeted him with a small, playful Boo!, but Minhyun did not move, his face buried on top of his bent knees.

“Hey, you alive?”

Seongwu waved his hands about Minhyun’s head, and Minhyun suddenly raised it. His face was still red.

“I see you’ve been shocked out of your mind.”

“Be quiet.”

Seongwu plumped down next to Minhyun, slung an arm around his friend’s shoulder, and broke into an impression of an adult tone of speaking.

“Congratulations, Mr. Hwang. Now you are a real adult.”

“What about that makes you a real adult? It’s pathetic.”

“What do you mean, pathetic? We humans are not so different from animals, if you think about it. We all give in to our instincts, our Mother Nature’s calling. Don’t take it so seriously, and just ignore boys who make fun of you.”

Minhyun stayed silent for a while, digesting Seongwu’s attempt at comforting him. Then he suddenly turned to Seongwu.

“When did you first find out?”

“Me?”

Seongwu looked from side to side, his large pupils searching for an answer. To be honest, it was not long since Seongwu was awakened sexually himself. He had observed the obscene materials his classmates looked at sometimes, and heard older boys at school talk about sex; that was how he initially learned about it. Then, perhaps owing to his new set of knowledge, he had this dream… Seongwu flushed, memories from that night suddenly flooding his mind. He could never, and would never, tell anyone about it. He quickly distracted himself from that thought, and said to Minhyun, like an older brother guiding him through this hazy confusion, “It’s been a while for me.”

Seongwu could not admit that he had only found these things out just a few weeks before Minhyun did.

“How? You spend all day and night with me every day.”

“There is a way to learn these things. You’ll find out when you become taller.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Minhyun listened to Seongwu’s claims, half in doubt. He looked so innocent, how he nodded his head along.

“All right, now let’s get back to class!”

Seongwu said gallantly, standing up. He stretched a hand out to Minhyun. Minhyun took his friend’s soft hand, and pulled himself up.
Bonus: Here are some photos (that I took) of what used to be Gyeongseong Secondary School (喵 ❤️). This historical site is now a library. Pay it a visit if you ever go to Seoul!
Front view of what used to be Gyeongseong Secondary School
Between Building 1 and Building 2
Airway that connects the two buildings
An adjacent sidewalk
Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 5:

* The Blue Note (青チャート) : A Japanese maths supplement book first printed in 1929. It is still being used today.

* Dong-A Daily : The Dong-A Ilbo (Hangul: 동아일보, Hanja: 東亞日報, literally East Asia Daily) was first published in 1920. It is now a conservative-leaning major newspaper with millions of circulation in Korea.

* Showa Year 8 : 1933.

* Annual Spring Literary Contest : This or other similar contest system was used to find younger, new writers in Korea since 1921. Dong-A Daily popularized such contests in 1925.

* Baek Seok : Baek Seok (born Paek Kihaeng; July 1, 1912 - January 7, 1995), was a Korean poet. He is primarily known for his folk-inspired writing style and focus on lives of ordinary citizens. He is still considered one of the most important modern poets in Korea.
Cold Front

Chapter Summary

Seongwu misses Minhyun more than ever during his summer vacation in Pyongyang. He returns with a new birthday gift for Minhyun, but Minhyun suddenly becomes cold and distant, and stops speaking to Seongwu.

Chapter Notes

For Id's original Chapter 6 in Korean, visit:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 6

Originally written in Korean by Id / Translated into English by Sasha

Summer Solstice passed by. In early July, Seongwu visited Pyongyang once more. As always, it was Minhyun who gently shook him awake early in the morning of his departure. Seongwu staggered up, only after Minhyun told him to for the tenth time. Minhyun observed him carefully, making sure to nitpick the way he did everything: washing his face, brushing his teeth, packing. Seongwu was almost annoyed with this, but he thought it was cute how Minhyun was trying to play a stern teacher. So Seongwu just ruffled Minhyun's hair with abandon, to the smaller boy's weak protest.

“Why do you do that?”

“Just because.”

“Let’s hurry. You’re going to be late.”

They still had two hours until Seongwu’s train departed, but Minhyun kept looking at the clock, grilling Seongwu about tardiness. Seongwu joked that Minhyun sounded like he’s the one getting on a train, and reminded Minhyun that it was not their first time going to the train station. Minhyun answered, his tone solemn, “Well, you’re not going alone today. You’re going with your uncle. He’s always so busy, and you wouldn’t want to make him wait for you at the station.”

“It was always my uncle who was late to the station, so why do I ...”

“I’m going with you, that’s why.”

“My uncle isn’t going to reprimand you even if we’re late.”
“But I don’t want to be late. So get ready quickly.”

Yes Sir. Seongwu buttoned his shirt in a hurry.

They left the house well after nine o’clock. By now Seongwu was used to finding his way to Gyeongseong Station, but Minhyun had made it a custom to accompany him anyways. As they headed south past Jongno, they looked on Myeongchi-jung and Hwanggeum-jung. They could not take their eyes off cultural novelties imported from foreign countries, and talked about them as they walked side by side.

Gyeongseong station’s clock tower was a monument under which Minhyun and Seongwu always separated and reunited. They had chosen it to serve as their guiding light, to ensure their reunion without failure at the same time and place, as they had no means to talk to one another when Seongwu was away. Recently, Seongwu’s uncle also began to utilize the clock tower as his designated place to meet Seongwu. He was already standing there as Minhyun and Seongwu approached the station, waving at them.

“Hello, sir.”

“Hi, Minhyun. You always go out of your way to help Seongwu.”

“No, I don’t mind it one bit.”

“Thank you, as always. Let the three of us eat together when we return.”

Seongwu’s uncle gave Minhyun a warm, friendly smile. Still, Minhyun bowed to him courteously. Seongwu wondered why Minhyun was always so stiff and formal around his uncle, who made it no secret that he liked Minhyun from the start. Seongwu just adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder, choosing not to say anything about it.

“I’ll hurry back.”

“Yeah. You go ahead.”

The train was almost due. Minhyun lightly tapped Seongwu’s back. At that, Seongwu followed his uncle who was walking ahead. From the back, Seongwu looked the same as he always did, his light and scurrying movement familiar and childlike. Minhyun chuckled to himself at the sight.

Minhyun stood still, and watched the train depart until its tail disappeared out of sight. He could now navigate his way back to the boarding house with his eyes closed, and so could Seongwu. Then why did he always feel compelled to walk Seongwu to the station every time he left for Pyongyang? Minhyun thought about why, but could not think of a reason he was satisfied with. Minhyun was surely not someone to volunteer for troublesome favors. As he crossed Jongno, Minhyun decided that it did not matter why he always walked Seongwu to the station. He did it because he wanted to, and he planned to continue doing so. Now, he would enjoy his time alone, sleeping as much as he wanted in Seongwu’s absence.

Meanwhile, Seongwu thought of Minhyun frequently in Pyongyang. He was not trying to, but his mundane life with his family constantly reminded him of Minhyun. He was not aware of it when he was with Minhyun, but he realized Minhyun had been catering to so many of his needs back in Gyeongseong. Although he was born eldest son of the Ong family, Seongwu was naturally more fit to be the baby of the family. He liked that with Minhyun, he could choose to be an older sibling or a younger sibling as he liked. Now, in Pyongyang and with his family, he had to be more responsible as the eldest, and Minhyun was not there to coddle and pamper him when he wanted to play the
Unlike most boys his age, Minhyun had a side to him that reminded Seongwu of a saint. Of course, Minhyun played around impishly when he needed to and sometimes even enjoyed playing the clown and making other boys laugh. Minhyun, however, was naturally astute and quick to comprehend any circumstance he was put in; he always knew how to behave correctly. Further, he seemed to be on another level emotionally compared to most of their classmates. Seongwu thought Minhyun's ability to understand delicate sensibilities was unusually heightened for a teenage boy's. Some of the insensitive types at school made fun of Seongwu when he talked seriously of literature, but Minhyun never did. He always listened to Seongwu’s every word, and encouraged him to elaborate on his budding thoughts and stories. Simply put, Minhyun was a wonderful friend.

Then how, and why, did Seongwu’s subconscious ever dare to dream about him in that way? Seongwu pulled his own hair in agony whenever he was reminded of that dream. He tried to forget, but more he tried, the more it seemed to come back to him. At school, he was always surrounded by and playing with other boys, so he usually did not have to think about it, even with Minhyun right by his side. Things were different now that summer vacation had begun, and Minhyun and Seongwu spent most of their time alone in their room. Seongwu was disturbed by his secret discomfort, and although he tried his best to appear normal, he could not help but feel he was being read into. Seongwu was also embarrassed at how he pretended to know a great deal about sex the afternoon Minhyun was first exposed to pornographic books. He kicked at his blanket every night when he was reminded of that encounter. Seongwu thought going away to Pyongyang would make things better, and that he and Minhyun would surely go back to the way they were once he returned.

What, then, would be a fitting gift for Seongwu's best friend? Minhyun’s birthday was the day after Seongwu was due back in Gyeongseong. Seongwu wanted to wish him happy birthday in time this year, preferably with a proper gift. Seongwu thought about the things Pyongyang’s was known for: beautiful people, silk, ginseng, and cosmetics. None were appropriate as a birthday present for Minhyun. Seongwu then thought of how happy Minhyun was when he gave him a soap for his birthday last year, and how Minhyun used it routinely. Coincidentally, Seongwu’s family decided to hold a memorial service for their ancestors in a few days. Seongwu followed them to the village market to prepare for it. The market, which opened in five-day intervals, was lined with peddlers who set up booths to sell a variety of products. After some wandering around, Seongwu stood in front of a soap booth. His uncle approached him.

“A new soap? Don’t you have many already?”

“I want to buy one for Minhyun.”

“Ah, your roommate?”

Somehow, Seongwu could not answer. He was afraid that his uncle might think the gift was not a simple gift for a friend, but something more. Seongwu’s pupils shook, despite knowing that he had nothing to hide. He laughed, sounding awkward even to himself, and saw his uncle walk away to another booth.

Seongwu examined the colorful array of soaps. Some looked dull, but had soft, pleasant scents, while others were brightly colored but barely smelled of anything. Seongwu picked a slab off the counter to smell it. He liked how it smelled like strawberries. Would Minhyun like it? Seongwu would be glad if he did, and would also take pleasure in observing his reaction if he did not. Seongwu purchased the strawberry soap, and spent the rest of his days in Pyongyang imagining the effect his soap would have on Minhyun.

Upon returning to Gyeongseong, Seongwu found that Minhyun had changed in a way he did not
understand. Seongwu, as he always did, gave him a big hello and asked him how he was, but Minhyun did not respond, as if suddenly gone mute. The reason for this change, according to Minhyun, was that he was beginning to lose his youthful voice. Claiming that he was embarrassed of how rough and coarse his voice was, and that he did not like how it broke into pieces as he spoke, Minhyun refused to talk altogether. Seongwu had gone through the same ordeal just weeks ago, but he still found Minhyun’s misery a little bit funny. Minhyun could not say a thing even when he was given a number of verbal jabs from Seongwu, and Seongwu guffawed at his silence. A new way of conversing was established between them: Seongwu spoke ninety-nine out of a hundred words they shared, while Minhyun only spoke one.

Meanwhile, it was nearing Minhyun’s birthday. The night before, Seongwu stared at the clock endlessly, wanting to be the first person to wish Minhyun a happy birthday. Because Seongwu almost never looked at the clock under usual circumstances (that was Minhyun’s thing to do), Minhyun knew he was up to something. Five minutes before the clock struck midnight, Minhyun threw a casual question Seongwu’s way.

“Why do you keep looking at the clock? Are you waiting for something?”

“Hmm? No.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s nothing. Really. Just don’t mind me.”

“How can I not, when you’re yearning so desperately for my birthday?”

“What?”

Seongwu’s eyes flew open. Minhyun sent a kindly smile at his dumbfounded face.

“I wonder why you would wait so long for my birthday.”

No way! Seongwu’s face turned into a pout. He had not expected Minhyun to read into the entire surprise. To be fair, however, Seongwu’s surprise was a bit obvious after all. Seongwu took from under his desk his present for Minhyun, although there was still a minute to go until midnight.

“Happy birthday!”

“Thanks.”

Seongwu was the first one to wish Minhyun happy birthday anyhow. Minhyun unwrapped the small package, warm anticipation lighting his face. A lovely soap revealed itself.

“You really know me.”

Minhyun grinned, remembering how he much liked the soap Seongwu gave him last year. He picked up the soap, which shone with a fresh, peachy hue, and sniffed it. Minhyun’s countenance stiffened at the unexpected scent of strawberries.

“You don’t like it?”

“I do, but I don’t think this scent is for men.”

“Men and women are supposed to use different kinds of soap at this day and age?”

“No, but… are you going to make fun of me again for liking something girlish?”
“How did you know?”

Seongwu exaggeratedly feigned surprise; Minhyun found his jest cute, but at the same time cheeky. Minhyun glared at him. When will Seongwu stop poking fun of him at every turn possible? It was absurd teasing him, a young man with a rough, husky voice, for liking something ‘girlish.’ If he could, Minhyun wanted to give Seongwu a good rap on the forehead. Minhyun calmed himself, though, as always.

“Well, I’m not in any way affected by your teasing. Thanks, though. I’ll use it well.”

Minhyun gingerly placed the soap on his desk, as if it were a precious stone.

Minhyun’s birthday was delightful. Mrs. Chung generously cooked galbi-jjim, Minhyun’s favorite dish. Seongwu enjoyed the birthday meal as much as Minhyun did. After a hearty meal, they went out to play with nearby friends that had not gone to their hometowns for the summer. They all celebrated Minhyun’s birthday together, and it was already evening when Minhyun and Seongwu returned home. Seongwu bathed first, and then Minhyun entered the bath with his new soap from Seongwu.

Minhyun carefully wet the soap. Its slippery surface was a delight to touch. The scent of strawberries slowly dissipated in the warm bath. Minhyun liked it more than he thought he would. He had initially intended to use the soap to wash just his hands, but instead he decided to lather it all over his body. Minhyun did not dislike the smell of strawberries after all. He just did not enjoy Seongwu's endless teasing him about it.

After a pleasant bath, Minhyun returned to the room. He still smelled like strawberries. Seongwu looked at his pale skin, and thought it resembled a strawberry-flavored sticky rice cake. He wanted to tease Minhyun about it—except he was sure Minhyun would fight back this time. So he aimed to tickle him instead. He sat next to Minhyun and outstretched his arm towards his abdomen... just to have Minhyun swat his hand away.

“Eh…?”

Seongwu did not know what to do. Minhyun had never done something so harsh before. Perplexed, he froze in place and tried to tell if Minhyun was angry. They often played around by tickling each other. What aspect of this innocent, mundane gesture could have offended Minhyun? Seongwu could not even guess.

“Why do you keeping touching me like that?”

A sensitive question flew into Seongwu’s face like an arrow. As if he did not even expect an answer from Seongwu, Minhyun just turned away, averting his gaze. Seongwu was shocked. He did not understand this chilly disposition Minhyun took on suddenly. Just three weeks ago, before Seongwu left for Pyongyang, they had no qualms about tickling each other. What aspect of this innocent, mundane gesture could have offended Minhyun? Seongwu could not even guess.

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Seongwu apologized, to end the confrontation. Minhyun was not done, however. He separated their beds, which they had kept together all throughout last winter and beyond. Once more, there was a distance between them they could not easily close. When Seongwu asked why they must separate their beds, Minhyun simply answered: “Because it is hot.” Seongwu wanted an explanation he could understand, but Minhyun blamed his sore throat, not giving him any more answers.

Minhyun remained the same the day after. He was cold, unreadable, and distant. Seongwu was saddened. He did not like how Minhyun did not speak to him at all, like someone who did not have
anything to say. Minhyun indeed had a sore throat from his voice changing, but the pain was surely not enough for him to stop speaking to Seongwu at all. Seongwu's recent change in voice, for one, had no effect on his talking. He was sure Minhyun was using his puberty as an excuse not to speak to him. He tried not to assume things about Minhyun, but he was already hurt.

Summer vacation suddenly turned dour, and boring, even. Seongwu suddenly shot up from his spot where he laid, lost in thought and confusion. He did not want to spend the rest of summer vacation stuck in his room with Minhyun, who would not acknowledge him and his need to communicate. Seongwu felt suffocated looking at the back of Minhyun’s immobile head, and he wanted to go outside and buy a cup of ice flakes with syrup to make himself feel better. As he got ready, Minhyun looked back at him for the first time in a long while.

“Where are you going?”

“It is none of your business.”

“I said, where are you going?”

“I’m going to have a bowl of bingsu! Is that good enough?”

“Let me go with you.”

“Why?”

When Seongwu shot back, glaring at Minhyun, Minhyun just averted his eyes again in awkwardness. He touched his hair for no reason, and hesitated.

“...You always get lost on your own.”

“So you think I’m an idiot.”

“No, it’s just... You never go out by yourself, so.”

“I can get by on my own without your help, thanks.”

Seongwu was curt in severing their conversation. Minhyun began to be obstinate then, as he stood up from his seat and readied himself for an outing despite the rejection from Seongwu. He chased Seongwu as he walked out of the house. Seongwu pretended not to notice him and only stared straight ahead, but could not keep himself from focusing all his senses on the footsteps behind him. After a while, Seongwu abruptly turned around. Minhyun stopped, frozen in place, noticing Seongwu’s wrathful glare.

“Stop following me.”

“I’m not. I’m going somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“Is it any of your concern?”

Minhyun assumed a cold attitude again, and turned away from Seongwu. He disappeared into another fork in the path they had been walking on. Seongwu scoffed, and went on his way. Strangely, though, the thought of Minhyun began to bother him more and more after they parted ways.

Seongwu looked back every three steps, but Minhyun was gone. No one was following him, even
when he had almost reached Jongno. Is it not mean of Minhyun to just disappear in such a rude manner? Seongwu had not expected Minhyun to feed him his own words, which he had spat at him out of hot temper. Seongwu let out his anger by kicking at the dirt.

Seongwu felt bored and lonely while alone in Jongno. His favorite strawberry bingsu tasted like nothing. He dug at it with his spoon, and left more than half of it as he left to return to the boarding house, not enough room in his mind to think about how wasteful that was. As he neared the boarding house, he kept wondering if Minhyun would be back home.

He was. He sat, composed and relaxed as always, except he did not look at or address Seongwu when he entered their room. They sat in silence, and thoughts after thoughts replaced spoken words. Seongwu’s tiny head whirred with speculations and theories on why Minhyun was being this way. He could not, however, dig out a clear answer.

Seongwu was not a mind-reader, and he could not determine Minhyun’s reasoning behind his behavior unless Minhyun told him. Seongwu wished Minhyun would elaborate, simple and straightforward, why he was being so distant and cold. He was bothered that Minhyun, his closest friend and confidant, seemed to be drifting away from him. Still, Seongwu was too angry and proud to speak to Minhyun first. Minhyun was first to behave petulantly, and it was only right that Minhyun thawed the newly formed ice between them.

Let’s see how long you can hold me off. Seongwu glared at the back of Minhyun’s head, unreadable as ever, and renewed his vow not to speak to Minhyun first. So a battle of their pride resumed.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 6:

Galbi-jjim : Braised short ribs! One of the best Korean dishes ever. You guys know that this is Minhyun's favorite dish of all time.

Chapter 7 (and ensuing battle of puberty) is coming soon! Thank you for reading and also for the 100+ kudos!
Secret Intentions

Chapter Summary

Emotional cold war between Minhyun and Seongwu continues. Minhyun thinks about his reasons for having been cold and distant to Seongwu, and tries to make Seongwu happy on his birthday. They develop a new way of communicating affection, and the scale slowly tips towards Seongwu.

Chapter Notes

Original Chapter 7 written in Korean by Id can be found here: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2454180.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 7

Secret Intentions

Written originally in Korean by Id / Translated by Sasha

Sparks flew from Seongwu’s eyes, only to be subdued by Minhyun’s downcast ones. This was becoming a repetitive pattern. Seongwu found himself full of determination to fight Minhyun, and then it was squashed into nothing in front of Minhyun’s stone-cold silence. In the face of Minhyun’s endless reticence, Seongwu felt like he was fussing at a wall all on his own.

Seongwu felt like he would suffocate if he had to stay with Minhyun alone in their room forever. So he made frequent little escapades to the first floor of the house, talking to the Chungs about his school life and affectionately offering to help with chores. Because they adored Seongwu like their own grandchild, the Chungs attentively listened to all of his stories and enjoyed spending time with him. Seongwu was happy he could stay close to them, but still felt a certain emptiness in his heart.
One evening, after dinner, Seongwu was aimlessly pacing about the garden. He looked at the vines of angel’s trumpets that covered the brick wall surrounding the garden, which had grown significantly over the last year and had taken over nearly half of the house’s boundaries. As Seongwu idly toyed with one of the leaves, he was called into the house by Mrs. Chung.

“Seongwu.”

“Yes?”

“Here are some plums. You go upstairs and share them with Minhyun.”

“Thank you.”

There were six plums crowded into a bowl. Seongwu took it and went upstairs. Every step climbing each of the stairs was void of any kind of anticipation. He wondered how he should address Minhyun once in their room; and before he knew it his ascent was over. He slid open the door with bravery in his heart. Minhyun did not look back despite the bang it made, as if lost deep in thought. Seongwu pulled a small table with foldable legs out from next to his bookcase, and set it up in the middle of the room.

“Hey.”

Minhyun turned to him upon being addressed in a soft voice. Seongwu threw him a plum. Kill him with kindness, let him take a plum. Seongwu added: “Madame told me to make sure you get some plums.”

He wanted Minhyun to know that he wasn’t offering him fruits because he loved him unconditionally. Minhyun blankly looked at the plum in his hand, and dragged himself to the table on his knees. Minhyun and Seongwu sat facing each other, for the first time in a long while. They both did not look at each other, but down at the plums.

The truth was, Seongwu did not particularly like fruits. He enjoyed processed fruits, like the strawberry syrup he put in his bingsu, but never felt voracious for a fresh one. He kept remembering his mother telling him to have plenty of fruits for his health, though, and at this moment he did not want to just stare at Minhyun eat a plum, so he picked one up. Seongwu bit into the flesh of it with his front teeth, like a rabbit would; it was sweat, delicious. Minhyun appeared to feel different about his.

“Eek.”

Minhyun groaned, his brows knitted as if in pain. Evidently, the one Seongwu threw him was a sour plum. Minhyun threw Seongwu a dirty look, blaming him. Seongwu waved his hand, denying the allegation.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I didn't do it.”

Minhyun swallowed the bit of plum in his mouth with great difficulty. He mumbled something about his plum being too sour, then put it down. This entire chain of response from Minhyun was hilarious to Seongwu. He tried to stifle his laughter, but could not stop a giggle from escaping his lips.

Then, their eyes met.

Seongwu lifted his head, and he was met with a full gaze from Minhyun. Minhyun was looking at Seongwu with a peculiar expression on his face. A short, tense silence lingered between them. Neither looked away.
A kerosene lamp on the tiny table was the only source of light in their room. Darkness as still as the silence between them settled inside the room. In this juxtaposition of light and darkness, each of their features looked enhanced. Seongwu looked at Minhyun and Minhyun looked at Seongwu, as if each examining beautifully drawn paintings. Minhyun was first to break away.

“I, I’m done eating.”

Stammering, Minhyun stood up and quickly left the room as if being chased. Where would he go at this time of night? Seongwu asked him before he disappeared from sight, “Where are you going?”

“To exercise.”

An answer as absurd as none at all returned to him. Recently, Minhyun started to work out, a diametric contrast to his history of being reluctant to participate in any and all gym activities at school. Of course, Minhyun did not jump from a totally unathletic boy of fifteen to one that plays football habitually in a single year; he merely engaged himself in solitary workouts like push-ups and sit-ups. Seongwu wondered if Minhyun had fainted somewhere while he was gone, and if that triggered him to work out so intensely. There was no other explanation for Minhyun’s sudden craze at great bodily health. Something must have happened while Seongwu was at Pyongyang to motivate him. Seongwu could not bring himself to ask, however; not in this awkward, sorry state they were in.

So they continued to be aloof, exchanging only the most necessary words when they absolutely had to. Minhyun kept blaming his sore throat and changing voice for his continued silence, and so nothing happened, as they neither conversed nor saw each other eye to eye. This dull, dry lifestyle dragged on, as placid as a lake on a windless day.

One evening, Seongwu picked up his bath basket to go bathing. He tucked it under one arm, and threw a towel over his shoulder. When he opened the door to go downstairs, Minhyun turned around, slow and furtive. He watched Seongwu descend the stairs for a while, and quietly followed him with his own bath basket.

Once at the bathroom door, Seongwu whipped around. He thought Minhyun was looking down on him in contempt, how he refused to recognize Seongwu in their room but never missed a chance to follow to the bathroom at bathtime. Seongwu could not fathom at all what underlay Minhyun’s behavior, which was more random and vague than anything he experienced so far in his life. A little embarrassed, Minhyun looked away, pursing his lips. Seongwu went into the bathroom and slammed the door; Minhyun sank down onto the floor in front of it.

Again, Minhyun could not say a thing to Seongwu. He wanted to; he really did. He wanted to say something, anything. When he faced Seongwu, however, he found himself at a loss for words. He could not resolve the impossible tangle that was now their relationship. Minhyun was petrified whenever Seongwu looked at him with his full, icy gaze; he just could not move. He was afraid that Seongwu would rip open his mind and somehow unearth what was hidden inside it. Within his heart was not something an ordinary roommate or classmate would keep. What he kept concealed in his mind was completely different. It was…

From beyond the door, the sound of water splashing brought Minhyun back to reality. Perhaps Seongwu was playing with his bathwater. This was possible. Seongwu loved taking baths. What quickly took over Minhyun’s head, then, was something of another dimension, of another world. Suppose things like: Seongwu’s tiny waist, the beautiful lines of his fawnlike legs, and his... round buttocks.

Damn it. Minhyun buried his face in his hands. He could not stand to stay still. Against his better
wishes, all kinds of imaginary scenes took off in flight in his mind. His face reddened in shame and guilt, and the delicate skin covered by his palms started to heat up.

Minhyun was sure something had gone wrong. His brain must have made some sort of synaptic mistake after being stuck with Seongwu in the same room all day, every day. He could not let himself fall into traps of futile delusion. He should have never allowed himself to imagine his precious friend in this way, not even once. Minhyun took a deep breath, in a desperate attempt to calm himself. He tried his best not to listen to sounds Seongwu was making inside the bathroom, and looked up and far into the night sky. He started to count stars to rid of stray thoughts in his head. One, Two, Three… Fortunately, he could quickly concentrate on his numbers, and his heart, which had been blowing up in heat, gradually relaxed. His emergency procedure was effective.

This emergency procedure was of vital importance when Seongwu, fearlessly and recklessly, touched Minhyun at random, totally unforeseeable moments. Unlike his claim that he had reached manhood faster than Minhyun, Seongwu kept playing like a little child, keeping their customary pranks always at hand. To tickle Minhyun, Seongwu ruthlessly dabbed and palmed at his sides and back, hands warm against the thin fabric of his shirt. Whenever he engaged in this bodily playfight, Minhyun put on a stern air and pushed Seongwu away from him. He thought if he did so Seongwu would understand that he no longer wanted to be a part of Seongwu's child’s play anymore, but Seongwu seemed utterly oblivious to his agony. Minhyun could not bring himself to be honest and tell Seongwu that he thinks thoughts of strange lewdness whenever this happens; Seongwu would look down on him in scorn, or even despise him. So Minhyun was out of options. All he could do was maintain his silence. As a result, misunderstanding upon misunderstanding piled up until they were put into this purgatorial battle of icy glares and terse, emaciated conversations. Minhyun was worried, for good reason. He could not avoid Seongwu forever.

As Minhyun worried himself sick, Seongwu emerged from the bathroom. Minhyun looked up when the bathroom door creaked open. Seongwu walked out of it, his skin a delicious shade of peach pink from the heat of bathwater. Seongwu quietly passed Minhyun, and walked toward the stairs. He smelled tender and soapy. Minhyun’s head turned automatically, as if bewitched, and followed Seongwu’s every movement. He watched Seongwu go up the stairs, and came to his senses only moments later.

Minhyun wobbled up from his seat on the floor. He lost all of his soul and spirit at the scent and afterimage of a slender figure his inseparable friend had left behind. All of the stars he counted thus far was for naught. Before his bath, he had to take care of his unstoppable desire, which was burning his heart and reducing it to ashes. Minhyun ran into the bathroom, locked the door, and he let the pure white of his desire burn him alive. Once he let his boiling lust erupt, a profound sense of shame took over. Minhyun tore at his hair, and after repeated denial of what had just happened, quickly washed himself off. He threw out all of the bathwater, and even scrubbed the bathtub while he was at it.

Minhyun was near a state of complete exhaustion when he was back in the bedroom. His head felt heavy, tangled and crowded with thoughts. He slipped into his blankets, and almost immediately fell asleep.

He sleeps well, thought Seongwu. Fast asleep, Minhyun looked placid. He was too adorable for someone who was so petty and mean, it was unfair. Seongwu felt it was unjust how the boy who caused such terrible agony within him was able to sleep so peacefully. Seongwu fell asleep, after tossing and turning under his blanket for a long time.
Soon, Seongwu’s birthday was fast approaching. Seongwu found himself not looking forward to it at all; he just felt gloomy and his mood remained murky. Mrs. Chung promised Seongwu that she would give Seongwu a lavish meal that consists of his favorite dishes, but even that was not enough to make Seongwu happy again. All this was caused by Minhyun alone.

Minhyun was still treating Seongwu coolly and indifferently. Seongwu at least wanted to know the reason why. Was he this way because Seongwu teased him about his strawberry soap? If so, Minhyun was the most petty, the most small-minded, and meanest person ever.

Ten minutes remained before midnight. Seongwu, not expecting anything at all, crawled beneath his blanket. He was in so much pain, thinking about what he would do if Minhyun would not wish him a happy birthday, and if, God forbid, Minhyun remained this way forever and they fell apart, becoming less than mere strangers. Seongwu’s thoughts were headed somewhere dismal, so he attempted to will himself to sleep. He covered himself entirely in his blanket and breathed slowly.

Meanwhile, Minhyun, who was watching Seongwu in secret, started to feel vexed. This was not his plan. Seongwu should not have gone to sleep so early. Seongwu usually went to bed late, and Minhyun had not expected that he would fall asleep before midnight, especially on the eve of his birthday. At this unforeseen turn of events, Minhyun started to look at Seongwu with a sense of a certain desperation. What should he do? If not now, they might never have another chance to make up. So Minhyun shut his eyes tight, took a deep breath, and called out his friend’s name.

“Seongwu.”

Silence. No answer.

“Seongwu…”

Minhyun crawled to Seongwu’s bed. He lightly shook Seongwu’s shoulder. Still, no response. With renewed purpose and some bravery, Minhyun pulled the blanket aside, uncovering Seongwu’s face. Under the quiet gloss of moonlight, a graceful profile appeared.

Minhyun just stared for a while, not another word leaving his lips. At this, Seongwu was flustered. He was too embarrassed to open his eyes now. In his head, Seongwu begged Minhyun: *Call my name again, just once more. Then I’ll open my eyes with feigned nonchalance.* As if responding to Seongwu’s silent but fervent plea, Minhyun spoke again; but this time, he stooped his head low, suspending it inches above Seongwu’s.

“Seongwu.”

Minhyun’s warn breath whiffed into Seongwu’s ear. A chill traveled down Seongwu’s spine, and he shivered, opening his eyes at once. He raised his hand to his ear by instinct and covered it. His ear was hot. He looked up incredulously at Minhyun, who was looming over him.

“Wh, wh, what…”

“You weren’t asleep.”
“You woke me up.”

“Well, sit up. I have something to give you.”

Minhyun offered his hand. Seongwu did not refuse, and took it, letting it pull him up. Minhyun’s words were sweet, and Seongwu reveled in it. Faking ignorance, Seongwu responded with sullenness in his voice.

“What is it?”

It was so obvious; what Minhyun had was a birthday present for Seongwu. Seongwu’s mood suddenly lifted itself into the heavens. Minhyun had planned to celebrate his birthday without failure, despite having been offish and careless in the recent days. Seongwu’s heart, which was frosted with wrath and melancholy, thawed immediately. He tried to stiffen his face, willing his lips, which kept stretching into a smile as if born with a will of their own, into a stubborn, straight line. Of course he was happy; but considering his past suffering, he would not forgive Minhyun so easily.

Minhyun handed Seongwu a small package he pulled from underneath his desk.

“Happy birthday.”

Even at this supernormal, mundane salutation, Seongwu’s will to keep a straight face crumbled without a trace. He could not stop himself from smiling, and he did, gloriously. He knew what his gift was as soon as he took it from Minhyun’s hands: a book. It was thin, probably a book of poems.

“Can I open it now?”

“Of course.”

“All right.”

Seongwu unwrapped the thin paper surrounding his gift. His birthday gift was a thin, brown volume, with a picture of an angel raising a finger to his lips. It was poem book by Jeong Ji-Yong*.

“Thank you so much!”

Seongwu expressed his delight without concealing any of it. Minhyun pushed something else towards Seongwu, just as he was about to be pulled into a hug. There’s more? Seongwu looked at Minhyun, waiting for him to say something.

“And this,”

Minhyun paused, choosing his words carefully.

“This is a gift of apology. I was not trying to be bad to you… Everything is my fault. I’m sorry.”

This package was smaller, but thicker than the book. Seongwu took it and unwrapped it to find a glass bottle the size of his palm. When he opened the bottle, a clean, delicate scent that reminded of him of a tranquil summer night rose from it.

“Wow, I love it!”

A prompt, innocent exclamation of wonder erupted from Seongwu. Minhyun knew he would like it; he smiled, proud of himself. Seongwu had no idea how much rigorous thinking went into choosing a scent fit for him.
“Remember this scent.” Minhyun said.

“Hmm?”

“This is my favorite scent. Take note of it, and I hope you give me a different soap next year based on your impression of it.”

Truthfully, Minhyun did not care what his soap smelled like. Strawberry, cucumber; even if Seongwu had given him a scentless laundry soap he would have been happy with it, treasured it. The reason he told Seongwu to remember the scent of his new fragrance was that he hoped Seongwu would remember him through it. Scent was one of the senses that gently burrowed into one’s memory; Minhyun wanted Seongwu to remember him, special and set apart from his other peers. It was Minhyun’s secret that this desire to be remembered was born from his wish to be distinguished from others who also loved and cherished Seongwu.

Minhyun could not tell if Seongwu was embarrassed at having teased Minhyun so frequently thus far, or if he had somehow gotten an inkling of Minhyun’s true intentions. Seongwu's cheeks were lit up, a rosy hue coloring his cheekbones. Seongwu answered, in a voice barely audible, that he would remember this scent. He held onto the bottle reverently, thinking about how he could keep the scent inside it as long as he possible.

After their touching gift-giving ceremony, they fell asleep, and on his birthday, Seongwu was happy all day. He was surrounded by his classmates, with Minhyun by his side. After a sumptuous dinner made just for Seongwu, his birthday was almost over; he spent the last moments of his birthday trying to seal airtight his new bottle of fragrance. Nothing would seal it hermetically, but Seongwu found that wrapping it three times was the most effective. He wanted to keep this bottle as long as he could. Seongwu’s reverence for his fragrance was in contrast to Minhyun’s strawberry soap, which was becoming noticeably smaller every day.

Seongwu took out his bottle infrequently, only when he wanted to remind himself of the scent. A drop would fall onto his wrist, and a colorful mix of particles catapulted themselves into the air from his pulse point. A cool fragrance tickled the tip of his nose. Seongwu loved the aroma, but also loved how Minhyun chose it for him. He could imagine Minhyun sincerely devoting himself to making the right choice, and it made his heart flutter.

Seongwu believed that he and Minhyun communicated through scents, and he loved how they shared the most instinctual and immemorial sense out of the five given to mankind. When Seongwu smelled his fragrance, he felt like he was with Minhyun. He loved this feeling, and he kept bringing his wrist up to his nose in pursuit of it. Minhyun’s scent was thus deeply sealed into Seongwu’s heart.

Of course, all fragrant flowers are visited by hungry bugs. That fall, all kinds of winged insects flew into their room. During the second semester, they could even hear moths crashing onto their window on quiet nights.
The insects that visited their room were diverse. Dayflies, mosquitoes, spiders, crickets, cockroaches. They were not new to seeing bugs, but both were untalented at catching them; so they liked to defer the task to the other. Seongwu prayed every night for many-legged centipedes to never show up to their room. Unconcerned with Seongwu’s apprehension, bugs ventured into their room fearlessly.

“Ah!”

Minhyun jumped from his seat, letting out a shriek. At this heavy scream, carried out with Minhyun’s newly gruff voice, Seongwu’s heart skipped a beat. When he asked Minhyun what was wrong, he pointed to something on the floor. It was a house centipede. Seongwu’s face turned pallid, and both of them ran to the wall farthest from the bug, attaching themselves to it.

Despite its grotesque appearance, house centipedes were often considered beneficial insects because they got rid of cockroaches and ants from the houses they occupied. Seongwu could not care less; it still looked terribly gross. What could he do to get rid of it? He would have to deal with its corpse if he killed it with a rolled-up newspaper, and he would have to go through the ordeal of carrying it to the window if he wanted to let it out of the room alive.

Who, between them, would take this troublesome task? A battle of wits ensued. Minhyun attacked first.

“I caught that mosquito the other day, so it’s your turn now.”

“I would rather die.”

Seongwu answered, his voice solemn and without a trace of irony.

“Remember you told me to call you ‘hyung?’ An older brother must be good at catching bugs.”

“I told you that? Then I redact. I’d rather be your younger brother. Your birthday is before mine anyways; you can be hyung if you want to.”

Minhyun glared at Seongwu for his sudden change of stance. Seongwu did not care if he appeared a sneak. He just wanted to have the centipede gone from his sight. If Minhyun got rid of it, he could call Minhyun ‘hyung’ right this second. Seongwu pleaded with Minhyun, who stood still as a rock.

“I’m about to die because of that centipede. I can’t move my limbs. Could you do me a favor and catch it for me, please?”

“No, today is your day.”

Minhyun was adamant. Seongwu sensed he would not change his mind. So Seongwu reluctantly picked up a newspaper on his desk, flattened it, and slowly approached the centipede. Three steps, four steps… Ahh! As if it sensed Seongwu coming towards it, the centipede moved, with a speed that Seongwu never expected. Seongwu retreated, lightening fast, attaching himself to the wall next to Minhyun again. Minhyun laughed, open and loud.

“Haha!”

“You have the nerve to laugh? We can’t go to sleep as long as that thing is sitting there.”

Seongwu threw a reproachful look at Minhyun, who only laughed at him without offering help. Seongwu then let out a deep sigh, and his shoulders drooped. Minhyun darted a glance at Seongwu’s face; it was miserable. Minhyun licked his dry lips. It was indeed Seongwu’s turn, but today he would let him off the hook.
He grabbed the end of the newspaper Seongwu was holding. Seongwu’s face lit up with anticipation; when he let go the newspaper was in Minhyun’s solid grip. Minhyun slowly walked towards the centipede. He let it crawl onto the newspaper, and let it out of the window. For someone who was so reluctant just moments ago, his actions were smooth and sweeping. Minhyun dusted the newspaper clean, and turned back to Seongwu.

“It’s done. It’s outside.”

“Minhyun, you’re the best!”

Seongwu jumped on him. Minhyun faltered when Seongwu hugged him tight, and scowled when his back was lightly punched repeatedly. It hurt.

“Eek, go away. All this is because of your strawberry soap.”

Minhyun grunted, claiming the scent of strawberries was what attracted insects into their room, the tips of his ears a burning red. What of the insects? Tonight’s offending insect was out of the room, and only Minhyun and Seongwu remained in it, fond of each other. Seongwu’s mood lightened again, and he was happy.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note for Chapter 7:

Jeong Ji-Yong is one of the most celebrated lyrical poets in modern Korean literature. His first volume of poems, graced with a cover featuring an angel holding a finger to his lips, was not published until 1935, two years after the events in Chapter 7 takes place (it is 1933). Please excuse this minor anachronism, as I wanted to make the first book gift from Minhyun to Seongwu a Jeong Ji-Yong volume for its beauty and literary and historical significance.
Unlikely Twins

Chapter Summary

During exams, Minhyun feels bothered more and more by Seongwu's presence near him and his desire to make it his own. They are pitched against each other once more during exams, and Seongwu finds out a terrible secret Minhyun had been hiding from him.

Chapter Notes

For original Chapter 8 written in Korean by Id, visit:https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2476156.

Chapter 8 is rated T.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生伴侶)

Chapter 8

Written in Korean by Id / Translated into English by Sasha

A fresh autumn breeze flew in through the cracked-open window. The wind tickled Seongwu’s bangs, which had grown long while Seongwu had neglected it in favor of school. Seongwu tried to hold onto his hair with his left hand, but silky strands of hair escaped from between his fingers and fluttered before his eyes. His promptly lost focus on the absurdly difficult math problem he was attempting to solve.

Seongwu decided to take a break; he was distracted anyways. He cupped his chin and looked out the window. The garden, which had been blossoming with cherry blossoms and angel’s trumpets, was now colorful with vibrant autumn maple leaves. At the end of the alley stood a yellow ginko tree, and the streets were lined with delicate cosmos flowers. Persimmons on the tree in their garden were ripe, their skins a delicious hue of deep orange. Seongwu could see Minhyun and himself going out with a basket and a pole to harvest them before magpies got to them first.

When he looked up, the sky was higher than ever. During the summer the clouds hung low above their heads, and sometimes Seongwu felt like he could touch them if he reached up; now, they were far away, pushing into the heavens. Temperatures fell, and so did humidity, and the air they breathed turned crisp. As an old adage goes, it was a new season of high skies and plump horses. Seongwu
thought heaven must look like the scenery in front of him. He wanted to keep it with him forever, as one would a photograph.

Seongwu’s daydream, inspired by beauty of nature around him, wad back into reality. He could not stand the continuing sound of loud, violent yelling, and he pulled the window shut. He was left alone again with his math book's brutally interrupted by a shout of a Japanese police officer from somewhere near their alleyway. Seongwu’s balloon of imagination, floating high up in the sky, popped suddenly, and he immediately plunge

Still, he could not focus. The weather outside was glorious, but he had ignore it in favor of fifty impossible conundrums. This was just torture. Seongwu had given up the idea of going out to play, but now he had no free time whatsoever, which meant he could not devote any of his time to reading novels, either.

Autumn was supposedly the best time of the year to read, but Seongwu did not have the time to finish even one book since the new semester started. To his credit, he had borrowed and started a notoriously long novel: *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The novel was split into three volumes, and if Seongwu was to really read them before he had to return them, he had to finish his homework as soon as possible. Seongwu willed himself to stay disciplined, and fixed his posture. Some twenty minutes passed after he started anew. Seongwu somehow gotten himself through many of the problems, until he hit one enigmatic number. Geometry: Seongwu’s weakest subject. He tried to read into the prompt from many different perspectives, but still did not have a clue where to start. At the same time, he lacked willpower to sit for hours and persevere through it until he earned an answer. It was time to cue the curve killer sitting next to him.

Seongwu turned to Minhyun and stared, his eyes sparkling with a want so specific Minhyun could not ignore him. “What is it?”

Seongwu grinned at Minhyun’s acquiescence, wanting to play with him. Seongwu inched toward Minhyun, and attached himself flush on his side. “Wh, what are you doing?”

This was the kind of raw, disconcerted response Seongwu had anticipated. Minhyun was taken aback, and stretched away from Seongwu. Seongwu pushed his own body against Minhyun's to scoot closer still. His skin was warm against Minhyun’s, and suddenly Minhyun could not breathe. Seongwu’s long fingers nimbly leafed through Minhyun’s workbook to get to the one problem he could not solve. He pointed to it, and looked at Minhyun full-on, an adorable pout gracing his lips. “I don’t know how to solve this one.”

Minhyun’s eyes trailed from Seongwu’s face, to his arm, and finally to his finger. He was familiar with this particular problem; it involved trigonometric ratio of a right triangle. Confusing terms like cosines, tangents, and sines were mixed in the prompt, making it look more complicated than it was. Minhyun was sure he could solve it if he took the time. “Let’s try it together.”

An open notebook sat between them, and Minhyun’s pencil moved speedily upon it, leaving traces of his solution in its wake. When Minhyun changed lines for the fourth time, Seongwu suddenly
leaned in, almost closing the space between them. To prop himself up, he placed a hand on Minhyun’s thigh. Minhyun’s hand came to an abrupt halt. This was dangerous. Seongwu was close, too close. Minhyun was already having a hard time with their shoulders touching; now he could feel every breath Seongwu let out against his neck.

“What is it? Are you stuck? I think what you did so far is correct.”

Seongwu tilted his head. Minhyun shook his. He let out a breath he had been holding, and answered, his voice barely audible.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Minhyun tried to power through the rest of the problem. It was taking longer than expected, probably because of distracting thoughts that were interrupting his train of logic. As he pursued for a solution in a hurry, Minhyun made a mistake in his calculation. Seongwu did not miss it, and he huffed out a small laugh.

“I guess even the almighty Hwang Minhyun makes mistakes.”

“Shut up.”

The tips of Minhyun’s ears turned red. He could not believe Seongwu was laughing, completely oblivious to his own misery. He crossed out the line where he went wrong, and started from where he left off, taking caution every step of the way. He soon found an answer. Seongwu exclaimed, clapping his hands together. Minhyun sighed under his breath, and asked Seongwu, who was still stuck flush on his side, “Why are you sitting so close to me?”

“Because I like you.”

“What?”

Minhyun almost dropped his pencil, and Seongwu almost screamed in laughter. Seongwu guffawed, pointing out that Minhyun looked like a surprised cat whenever his jaw dropped. Minhyun frowned upon seeing Seongwu double over in laughter, realizing what Seongwu had said was just a joke. He knitted his brows in frustration. He hated how dumb he was, how he was always fooled by Seongwu’s practical jokes and meaningless words, how he believed every single thing that fell from Seongwu’s pretty lips.

“This is not funny.”

“Sorry. To be honest, your handwriting was so small that I couldn’t see from afar.”

Seongwu apologized, pulling himself away from Minhyun. There was a distance between them again. Minhyun’s side, which had been thoroughly warmed by Seongwu’s body, suddenly felt empty. Minhyun bit his lip, not understanding what caused this sense of loss and why it lingered. Seongwu continued to babble about Minhyun’s handwriting.

“You have to admit, your handwriting is nearly illegible.”

“Well, wouldn’t you say the same for your own?”

“My handwriting is better-looking, because it is bigger than yours, and clearer.”

There was no use in comparing their hands, because they were about as equally incomprehensible. Minhyun stopped shooting back replies. Construing his silence for an admission of his loss,
Seongwu ended their encounter, with a seemingly well-intentioned encouragement.

“Good luck with the rest of your homework!”

Then he fluttered like a spring butterfly back to his own seat, having nonchalantly turned Minhyun’s heart inside out. Minhyun covered his head with his hands. Inside his head, he endlessly reproached and accused Seongwu of sabotage, destruction.

Hey, Ong Seongwu. Yes, you. Would you be able to shift your focus back to homework after falling victim to what you are doing to me?

As if an aftereffect of this little encounter between them, Minhyun had to taste bitterness of defeat for the first time during midterms. He was dethroned from his usual perch on top of his class, a place he held onto ever since he entered Gyeongseong Secondary School. It was none other than Seongwu who took over. Seongwu was so happy he beat Minhyun, his only well-intentioned rival from the beginning. Minhyun congratulated him, sincerely, with all of his heart; on the other hand, he was consumed by an incomprehensible confusion. Everything was so complicated.

His confusion came not from the fact that he missed first place. Seongwu had studied harder than anyone. As someone who watched Seongwu study on a daily basis, Minhyun recognized his efforts. Minhyun’s problem was he himself. He was frustrated with himself. He was knocked off first place because his head was constantly filled with those thoughts, and he because he had failed to control them.

Minhyun needed to establish a new measure to help himself. Counting stars and reciting the multiplication table in his head was not enough; never enough. He needed something more complicated, more difficult; something that would demand all of his focus so that the hot, hot heat rising from his stomach would be subdued.

What Minhyun settled on was the quadratic formula. He not only memorized the formula itself, but the entire process that led up to the creation of it. Whenever Seongwu touched him, tried to snuggle or lean against him, or looked at him with those sparkling doe eyes, Minhyun willed himself to think of everything he had committed to memory about the quadratic formula. This was considerably more effective than what he had been doing all along. Reciting the quadratic formula chilled his burning desire, which threatened to bubble and boil with fury for a thousand years whenever Seongwu spoke to him, looked at him, touched him.

Not knowing Minhyun’s ordeal, Seongwu became wistful about how Minhyun used to respond to his jokes and play along with him. Now, Minhyun was reactionless whatever Seongwu did. Playing pranks and teasing Minhyun had been one of the great joys of Seongwu’s life; now that it was gone, what was he to do? No matter how sad Seongwu became about this loss, Minhyun would not move to satiate him.

During finals, Minhyun’s strenuous efforts to focus despite himself was rewarded. He won back his spot as first in his class. Seongwu, who wished to hold on to his newly acquired title, slipped back to being second, having made a mistake in the exact type of right triangle problem that Minhyun had helped him with on that glorious autumn day. Seongwu could not believe how such small, minor mistake cost him so much. He would have felt better if he had no clue how to solve the problem at all. Minhyun quietly approached him, patted his drooped shoulders, and offered words of comfort. Listening to Minhyun’s serene voice, Seongwu raised his face to look at him. Somehow, Minhyun was now just as tall as he was. When did he grow so tall? Seongwu glanced at Minhyun’s wrists and ankles, which were barely covered by sleeves and hems that had apparently contracted over the last few weeks. Upon noticing little things he had recently neglected, Seongwu did not feel sorry for himself any longer. He blankly stared at Minhyun, who was staring back with an inquisitive look on
his face. Seongwu shook his head.

“Don’t mind me.”

“Let’s go home, then. I’m hungry.”

Minhyun led Seongwu home. Seongwu also noticed that Minhyun had recently started to eat more food than before. On their way home, Minhyun told Seongwu that he was so hungry he could eat second servings of everything once they returned home. Discussing what could possibly be a side dish for today, they walked side by side in the sunset. It was getting cold.

Seongwu soon started his secret operation to prepare Minhyun’s Christmas present. Minhyun sure had grown taller, but he still kept a childlike view of the world. From Chuseok on, Seongwu started to think about what his gift should be. He wanted it to be something useful in wintertime, and thought about Minhyun’s old woolen scarf. Minhyun had it when he met Seongwu for the first time, and he still used it every day. Seongwu decided on a new scarf as Minhyun’s Christmas gift, and began to look for one immediately. He wanted Minhyun’s new scarf to be as long as possible, and made of thick, warm fabric.

In his attempt to be stealthy, Seongwu accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Chung whenever they went out to shop for groceries. They shopped for food as fast as they can, and went back home first; perhaps they knew Seongwu needed time to look around the market under the pretense of accompanying them. Seongwu spent as long has he needed in the market to choose a perfect scarf for Minhyun.

The market was packed full of merchants selling winter attire and accessories. Seongwu found a scarf that was suitably warm, and long enough for his liking. He chose a neutral gray scarf for Minhyun. He took his wallet out to pay for it, and then hesitated. He would be found out if he only prepared Minhyun’s gift, because Santa Claus would never be so unfair. So Seongwu picked another scarf, which was indigo blue.

“How much for two?”

“Twenty.”

On his way home, Seongwu began to think about how to hide the scarves from Minhyun, and where he would store it until Christmas Eve. The best option seemed to be hiding them in another room, preferably in Mr. and Mrs. Chung’s bedroom. They would not deny Seongwu’s request for them to safekeep his scarves. Seongwu returned to the boarding house with a spring in his step.

Fortunately for Seongwu, Minhyun was holed up in their room when he returned. He quietly explained his plan to Mrs. Chung. She laughed, and readily agreed to safekeep his scarves in her room. Further, she promised to keep Seongwu’s Santa Claus secret from Minhyun. Seongwu thanked her.
To become a true adult, Minhyun had to realize that Santa Claus did not exist. Seongwu thought about how he would deliver this sensitive news. Seongwu spent more time debating his method of conveying this message than he did on choosing scarves. He did not want the event to turn out like his, when his uncle bluntly told him that Santa was a big lie. His uncle was solemn and serious, as if telling him an important military secret that could place the entire country in peril. In a way, this had made things more painful for young Seongwu. He thought deeply about how not to repeat to Minhyun what his uncle had done to him.

Oblivious to Seongwu’s painstaking planning, Minhyun was excited to play Santa again this year. This was his only way of getting back at Seongwu who had dethroned him during midterms. Would Seongwu scream in surprise and delight this time? Minhyun smiled to himself, remembering Seongwu on Christmas last year. Seongwu always said he took the greatest pleasure in playing pranks and teasing Minhyun, but Minhyun thought the real fun was when he was playing tricks on Seongwu. The best part of it all was that Seongwu was always totally in the dark about Minhyun’s deceptions until the very end.

Minhyun excused himself, telling Seongwu that he is going to visit his family, and went shopping for Seongwu’s Christmas gift. Same as last year, it was a bamboo box full of snacks and sweets. Last year, Minhyun had stuffed it with whatever he could get his hands on. This year, he packed it full with only Seongwu’s favorites so he would be even happier. He hid the box under his desk, and prayed for this Christmas to be as fun as the last.

On the night of Christmas Eve, their war of wits reached a peak. Both of them shrewdly watched the other, reacting to every minute movement. They were more serious than ever, so sure of the idea that the other had no clue what each of them had secretly planned.

The key to success was placing the gift next to each other’s pillows. This was the most difficult feat they had to achieve; the rest was nothing. For this to work, they had to have the other go to bed early. They recommended to one another to go to sleep, but refused to give in first. In the darkness two pairs of eyes shone furtively, looking for a crack in the other’s facade.

Minhyun was first to fall asleep. Seongwu quietly and quickly stood up, and took from his drawer his gift for Minhyun. He was more cautious than he was on that night he had a wet dream. He placed his scarves next to Minhyun’s pillow and then his own, and crawled into his blanket again, looking forward to morning. He was filled with glee just imagining Minhyun’s surprise. In all his excitement, it took a while to fall back asleep, but he did eventually succumb to deep and dreamless sleep.

Not too long after, Minhyun awoke. He had felt Seongwu moving about in the room, but did not notice that he had placed a gift next to his pillow. He checked if Seongwu was asleep, and crawled to his desk to take out two boxes of snacks. He placed one right next to Seongwu’s face, so he would see it as soon as he was up in the morning. Then Minhyun fell back asleep after imagining Seongwu’s response. He was sure Seongwu would be overjoyed, just like last time.

Soon, sunrise crept into their room and a rooster crowed from afar. Seongwu heard it and opened his eyes. He turned to see if Minhyun was still asleep; a familiar bamboo box obstructed his vision. He already knew what was in it. Seongwu screeched out: “What is this?”

At this exclamation Minhyun came to. He saw a package near his pillow, and was surprised. The only thing that was supposed to be there was his snack box.

The two of them sat still for a while, trying to grasp what had just happened. Santa Claus did not exist in this world. However, there was a gift that each of them did not prepare next to the ones of their own…
Seongwu turned to Minhyun, awkwardly. Minhyun looked shell-shocked. Their caught each other’s eyes.

“You don’t say…”

“……”

“It was you, last year?”

Seongwu’s question did not address anything specifically, but Minhyun understood exactly what he meant, and nodded his head. Seongwu sprung at him, and seized him by the collar. Seongwu's tiny fist batted at Minhyun’s shoulder, and he exclaimed in anger, “You’re evil!”

“Ah! Stop! It hurts.”

“I hope it hurts!”

Minhyun groaned. Seongwu was thin, but he had a spicy blow. Minhyun tried to stop him, but this angry, betrayed Seongwu would not succumb.

Seongwu was embarrassed. He could not believe Minhyun had been tricking him all along, enjoying his overjoyed reaction at the snack box. He remembered how after that Christmas he spoke about Santa Claus with Minhyun frequently. Minhyun pretended like he was ignorant, as if he still believed in Santa. Seongwu was overcome with a sense of betrayal. Considering his behavior starting from last Christmas to this moment, Minhyun had known all along that Santa Claus did not exist. Seongwu would have felt better if his hosts had prepared his Christmas gift. But it was Minhyun. How could Minhyun, his closest friend and confidant, toy with him like this? Seongwu was so angry that tears began to form at the corners of his eyelids.

Minhyun did not know what to do. He attempted to distract Seongwu by having him focus on his new snack box. He brought it close to Seongwu and showed him the contents.

“You love honey cookies, so I bought more of them this year.”

“……”

“You don’t like it?”

“I do like it.”

Despite his answer in the affirmative, Seongwu maintained a sullen face, and a petulant tone of voice. Minhyun realized he was not doing enough.

So Minhyun picked up the package Seongwu had prepared for him. He opened it, and saw a gray woolen scarf. When he pulled at it, it snaked out of the package. Minhyun had never possessed a scarf this long; his had always been just long enough to encircle his neck once.

“This is very long, and soft. I love it.”

Minhyun wound the scarf around his neck. He could coil it around his neck thrice and still have some length left over. He thanked Seongwu, and shot him his best smile. Seongwu’s heart thawed at the sight. Observing Seongwu’s face softening, Minhyun asked him a question he was dying to know the answer to.

“What did you get for yourself?”
“Another scarf. It’s the same as yours, except mine is dark blue.”

Minhyun almost chuckled. It was ridiculous how their thought patterns were so similar. He stifled his laughter, though.

“Dark blue. It would suit you well.”

“Would it?”

Seongwu’s answer was lukewarm. When he dallied, Minhyun went ahead and opened the package Seongwu had prepared for himself. His scarf was a hue of deep, calm indigo; not too dark, and not too soft.

“We’ll see how it suits you when you try it. Come here. I will put in on you.”

Seongwu dawdled towards Minhyun. He was still petulant, and he kept his gaze fixed on the wall farthest from him. Minhyun drew near to him, and carefully wrapped the scarf around his friend’s neck. Seongwu would not face Minhyun. His face, which Minhyun could observe from an oblique angle, appeared cold and disinterested in its absence of expression. What were his downcast eyes seeing, and what was going on in his tiny head? What could Minhyun do to ameliorate his dour mood? Even when troubling over this, Minhyun could not help but think how beautiful Seongwu's long eyelashes were. He scolded himself: now is not the time, and in no time the scarf was fully coiled around Seongwu’s neck. With reluctance and regret, Minhyun stepped back.

Seongwu had a small head, and he looked as if he was drowning in the dark blue scarf. It was not funny to look at, however, and it suited Seongwu quite well. With their matching scarves, they looked like brothers. Or would they be twins, now that they were level in height? They looked at their reflections in the full-body mirror next to their wardrobes.

“We would look like twins if we go out like this.” Seongwu said.

“Twins with absolutely no resemblances?”

Minhyun replied, affectionately. Truly, they were too different both in appearance and in personality to pass as twins, although apparently they shared some core, indispensable similarity that kept them so close together. Seongwu chortled. His mind had emptied itself of anger before he knew it, and the only thing that remained was the warmth Minhyun had wrapped around his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Note from Id:

Have you ever tried to harvest persimmons from their trees using a pole and a basket? It's surprisingly difficult. I suspect Minhyun and Seongwu would pop or drop six out of ten persimmons and inadvertently benefit the magpies standing by!
Minhyun and Seongwu continue to try to evaluate their feelings. Minhyun accidentally butchers Seongwu's haircut, and in an attempt to make up for it reveals too much about how he feels. Seongwu challenges Minhyun with the hardest question he had to answer thus far, and on an abnormally windy night Seongwu is awakened by an unlikely culprit.

Chapter Notes

For original Chapter 9 written in Korean by Id, visit: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2512425.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 9

Originally written by Id / Translated into English by Sasha

One afternoon a few days after New Year’s Day, Seongwu was busy getting ready to visit Pyongyang. Seongwu’s packing endeavors only ended when he placed a small rag doll for his sister in his luggage and finally locked it. He swiped at his forehead, which was moist with beads of sweat. Cold winds were howling outside and a freezing chill hung in the house, but he found himself heating up as he busily moved about.

Seongwu did not mind sweating, but he did not like sweat wetting his bangs. Damp hair sat heavily on his eyelids, poking at his eyes. Seongwu opened his drawer for a pair of scissors. Its blades shone in the lamplight. Minhyun noticed it, and turned to look at Seongwu.

“Scissors? At this hour?”

“I’m cutting my bangs.”

“By yourself?”

“Of course not.”
What are friends for? Seongwu looked at Minhyun, beaming. Realizing what Seongwu wanted, Minhyun quietly took the scissors from him. He was half expecting to do this when he asked in the first place.

Seongwu covered the floor with newspapers and wore a big piece of cloth around his neck to prevent a mess of tiny hairs. Minhyun brought a small broom and a dustpan. Of course he would. Seongwu shook his head in disbelief, and sat down. When Minhyun sat facing him, Seongwu gave him his instructions.

“Cut just a little off my bangs, please.”

“All right.”

Minhyun picked up the scissors. He knew he was not skilled at delicate handywork, but he wanted to give Seongwu what he wanted to the best of his abilities. He carefully started to cut off the ends of Seongwu’s long fringes. At tiny crunches the scissors made, Seongwu’s downcast eyelashes trembled. He looked scared, with his eyes shut and flinching every time Minhyun made a cut. To make him feel better, Minhyun covered Seongwu’s eyes with the back of his hand. He felt Seongwu’s eyelids relax against his skin.

Their room was silent save for the sound of their quiet breathing. Minhyun even held his breath from time to time in intense concentration, as if he were putting finishing touches on an exquisite sculpture. However, when he finished his initial round of trimming, he saw that Seongwu’s bangs were now asymmetrical. To make them even on both sides, Minhyun cut, cut some more, and cut some more again. Then he was faced with another problem: Seongwu’s bangs were now short. Too short. Minhyun thought he was just trimming the edges when he first started; those tiny cuts had become a catastrophe. Minhyun tensed, and swallowed hard. Seongwu’s eyes were still covered under his hand, his friend completely oblivious to the disaster that had befallen him.

Minhyun could not have Seongwu’s eyes covered forever. He readied himself for a few moments, and lowered his hand. Seongwu, almost excited, picked up a mirror. Then he screamed out of sheer horror and dismay.

“Hey! What have you done?”

Minhyun flinched at the shrillness of Seongwu’s voice. What could he possibly do to get out of this? He could apologize, but that would be admitting his wrong, and Seongwu would become even more upset. The best he could do was to try to make Seongwu feel better about the haircut. He brazenly said, “What do you mean? You look so handsome.”

“But this is so tacky. I look like I’m a country boy from the middle of nowhere.”

“Ong, you don’t know what it’s like to be truly stylish.”

“What?”

At Minhyun’s solemn tone, Seongwu scoffed, dispirited. His words were total nonsense.

“A truly handsome man does not care what his hairstyle is like.”

“What nonsense are you…”

“You haven’t looked at yourself closely enough. Here. Look.”

Minhyun brought the kerosene lamp on his desk closer to Seongwu’s face, blaming the darkness for
Seongwu’s initial shock at his new haircut. Seongwu eyed his reflection again. He first saw his bangs, uneven and so short that they only covered half of his forehead. Close up, he could see the unruly zigzag of his fringes even better. Seongwu pouted, about to burst into tears. He did not want to look at himself anymore, so he put the mirror away.

Seongwu’s large eyes glared at Minhyun. Minhyun did not succumb to his piercing gaze, and continued speaking as if there was absolutely nothing wrong with Seongwu’s new hair.

“I think you look better, now that everyone can see your forehead. Don’t mind your haircut so much.”

“You can say so because this is not your haircut.”

“What do you mean? I meant what I said, because you’re the most handsome boy in the world.”

“......”

“Am I always so eager to compliment you? Hmm?”

He was not. Seongwu shook his head no.

“That’s right. I won’t repeat this compliment, so listen closely. You’re handsome. I was awestruck from the first time I saw you.”

Seongwu’s face began to heat up and redden, like a ripe apple. Afraid Minhyun would see it, Seongwu quickly turned his face away from the light. Minhyun was playing against the rules. He could not just compliment Seongwu’s beauty with a straight face and get away with it. Seongwu did not dislike it. At confusing times like these Seongwu did not know how to respond to Minhyun. His sourness about his haircut was already gone, so he tried to wave away the conversation.

“I get it, so stop talking.”

“Are you sure? I’m not going to repeat what I said.”

“I’ve heard enough of it!”

Seongwu scrambled to clean up, and placed his scissors back in the drawer. Minhyun laughed, watching him scurry about. Seongwu thought it was strange how Minhyun was completely calm while Seongwu, the recipient of his praises, burned with embarrassment listening to them. Seongwu’s face still felt hot after he was finished cleaning up, and the heat lingered even after he sat down and fanned himself. He blamed the lamp for being too close to his face.

During Seongwu’s visit to Pyongyang, his family made as much fun of his skimpy haircut as they could. The jokes were seemingly never-ending, and Seongwu could not escape from them until he returned to Gyeongseong, a few days earlier than he had planned. He met Minhyun under the clock tower, and each carried one of Seongwu’s bags back to Bukchon. Around their necks were the scarves Seongwu had bought for Christmas.

Winter that year was mild, a contrast from last year’s hard frost, and their voices had stabilized while they were separated. They no longer minded the prominent bulge in their throats that moved up and down as they spoke. Unlike the hoarse, scratchy sounds they made during their process of change, their new, deeper voices were quite nice. Seongwu especially liked Minhyun’s voice. When they talked in the night and it resounded deep and low like gentle waves on a tranquil lake, he felt his ears tingle, as if Minhyun were whispering in them.
Perhaps the reason why Seongwu now felt he could hear Minhyun’s voice from so close was because Minhyun was just as tall as he was. He had been on Seongwu’s heels for a while, breathing down his neck. Seongwu had grown a little in Pyongyang, and he wished that once he returned, he would see that he was still taller than Minhyun. Minhyun’s strong frame did not let this happen, growing competitively. Their eyes became level again, just as they were when they first met.

Minhyun was no longer a small and childlike boy. As much as Seongwu’s willowy silhouette, Minhyun’s body resembled an adult’s now, and looking from afar Seongwu sometimes thought he looked foreign, like someone entirely new. Minhyun was closer to Seongwu than ever, but sometimes Seongwu thought he never felt so distant. As he walked beside Minhyun, Seongwu wondered what they would become five, ten years later.

Minhyun and Seongwu arrived at the uniform shop they frequented. The shopkeeper greeted them, recognizing them as ‘the handsome students.’ There were students in line in front of them, so they waited for their turn, idly looking around the shop. In between the full-body mirrors were tape measures, stationed there so visiting students could determine their sizes on their own. Seongwu picked up a tape that looked relatively clean.

“Shall we measure how tall we are?”

“Sure.”

Minhyun readily agreed. They measured each other, arguing pettily about standing on tiptoes. Eventually the verdict was out: Seongwu was taller by two whole centimeters. I won! Seongwu rejoiced, gathering his hands in tiny fists. He was surely taller, but he behaved the same way he did when Minhyun first met him, with innocent, childlike wonder for the world. With his new, short bangs, no one would guess that Seongwu was a third year student in Gyeongseong Secondary School.

After they were done measuring themselves they stood side by side, looking at their reflections in the mirror. Seongwu looked triumphant, having won the height war. He examined his face in the mirror, now almost completely used to his haircut. Minhyun was glad that Seongwu had forgotten his initial shock at seeing it, but felt his ears heat up and redden whenever he thought about what he told Seongwu afterwards. He repeated like a parrot how handsome Seongwu was, and at the time he was just trying to calm him down, except he truly and sincerely meant every word he uttered. Seongwu did not seem to mind it too much, so Minhyun just let it fly by, but sometimes he felt embarrassed about having inadvertently confessed how he really felt about Seongwu. Minhyun looked away from his reflection.

When Minhyun’s gaze escaped the mirror, Seongwu’s shifted to Minhyun’s likeness in it. Minhyun’s profile was neat and prim. His mouth was shut in a straight, neutral line, and Seongwu could not tell what he kept inside his mind. Seongwu could not figure out why he was so conscious of Minhyun’s presence every moment he was awake. When Minhyun was smaller, he used to think he cared about Minhyun like an older brother would, and he thought that was why he was always on Seongwu’s mind. Now that Minhyun’s eyes were level with his, he felt differently about everything. Of course there were plenty of boys that were as tall as Seongwu, but Minhyun was a being so apart from any other that he existed on an entirely different dimension.
Seongwu wondered if this was why he had that blasphemous dream about Minhyun. Seongwu had buried glimpses of that night in the deepest corner of his mind, but from time to time, when Seongwu became cognizant of Minhyun’s close presence, pieces of it as rose to the surface, fleeting like soap bubbles. Suddenly disconcerted, Seongwu willed himself to tear his gaze away from Minhyun’s reflection.

To calm himself, Seongwu tried to convince himself that his dream meant nothing, and that Minhyun only appeared in his dream because Seongwu liked his face and because there was no one around who stayed so close to him every moment of the day. Such dream, in which he kissed someone for the first time in his life, stir and meld their tongues together, and touch each other's bodies...

Seongwu almost banged his head on the mirror when the details of his dream sprung out at him; what kept him from it was the shopkeeper who finally called out their names. Seongwu bit his tongue to bring himself back to reality, and they paid for their new uniforms. Upon exiting the shop through a narrow aisle, Seongwu watched the smooth back of Minhyun’s head, reassuring himself that he would never let Minhyun catch up to him, in height or in anything else.

To Seongwu’s dismay, his growth seemed to be slowly coming to a halt. Same seemed to apply to his hair. The new semester started before his fringes could reach his eyebrows. Classmates teased Seongwu’s bangs, saying that it looked like a mouse had gnawed across it. With a touch of conscientiousness Minhyun stepped in to make sure the teasing did not last long, even though Seongwu could not be bothered by his classmates’ provocations.

What really bothered Seongwu was the changes in their curriculum. Upon entering third year, music class, previously Seongwu’s respite from rigorous academic subjects, was entirely dismissed from their schedules. It was replaced by physics and chemistry. Seongwu could not understand the logic behind this change. He wished upperclassmen could take music classes instead of lowerclassmen. Vast majority of the boys underwent changes in their voices during their first and second years in secondary school, and they were forced sing in raspy, husky voices that were painful to both the singers and the listeners. Now that their voices had matured into deeper, graceful ones, they were suddenly not allowed to sing. Besides, Seongwu loved to sing and play instruments, and he could not easily brush off the loss of music class in his school life.

As if to add to Seongwu’s misery, Physics and Chemistry gave him splitting headaches. He was intrigued by the inner workings of nature he learned during those classes, but he was not exactly born to learn the mechanisms behind them. Worse, there were tons of things to memorize and apply, which meant frequent quizzes.

Their newest task was to commit to memory the first twenty elements in the Periodic Table of Elements. Seongwu recited the symbols of each element under his breath. H-He-Li-Be, B-C-N-O, F-Ne-Na-Mg, Al-Si-P-S, Cl-Ar-K-Ca… After a few repetitions he settled into a natural rhythm. He put down his paper and laid down on his bed, rolling around while repeating his little chant. H-He-Li-Be, B-C-N-O, F-Ne-Na-Mg...

For all that, the more Seongwu repeated his periodic table, the more he was reminded of behind-the-scenes stories his teacher unleashed during class. Chemistry was difficult for most students, and to make up for it, his teacher, a naturally gifted storyteller, prepared fun historical facts and stories to retain his students’ interest. Such stories included episodes like how Dmitri Mendeleev, who formulated the periodic table of elements, lost his Nobel Prize in Chemistry by just one vote, and how Évariste Galois, who proved why the quadratic formula did not apply to the equation of fifth degree, died from a duel probably related to a love affair.

Among these stories, Seongwu was especially interested in the story of Évariste Galois, who died
from wounds after a duel. About mathematicians who studied numbers for the better parts of their lives, Seongwu thought of cold, inflexible people who would laugh in the face of mushy things like love and emotion. Story of a mathematician who threw his life away for love was in diametric contrast to Seongwu’s prejudices, and it simultaneously surprised and intrigued him, although Galois purportedly left a letter complaining why he had to die for such trifling causes like love. Seongwu was also struck by the fact that during certain eras in the past, people wagered their lives for love. How did people live during those times? Seongwu was sure that life, and especially love, would have been much more difficult than the way he knew them.

After being lost in thoughts for a while, Seongwu was abruptly gripped by a question he needed an answer to. If he and Minhyun were from Galois’ era, and if they fell in love with one person, what would have happened to them? Seongwu twisted around to look to Minhyun for an answer. Minhyun felt the inquisitive twinkle in Seongwu’s gaze, and spoke first, without looking up from his problem set.

“What is it?”

“Remember the story of Galois that we heard in chemistry class?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think we would have become if we fell in love with the same person? We would have dueled, right? I wonder who between us would have won.”

Seongwu was chortling all throughout his question. Minhyun thought for a moment, and answered, his tone firm and conclusive.

“That would never happen.”

“What? How would you be so sure it wouldn't happen? And I said, ‘if.’ Just use your imagination for once.”

At Seongwu’s push, Minhyun started to think again, with heavy reluctance. He tried to come up with an answer, but he was unable to place himself in that exact situation, even in mere thought. He simply could not imagine fighting Seongwu for the love of a third person between them. Seongwu’s hypothetical did not and could not apply to Minhyun, not unless Seongwu fell into a deep bout of narcissism and began to love himself they way he would a lover. Therefore, the scenario laid out by Seongwu was impossible.

It was infinitely easier to imagine himself dueling another for Seongwu. If someone else wanted Seongwu, Minhyun might try to kill his opponent at all costs, no matter if he had to break the rules of the duel or forsake all humane civility. This answer, though, was outside of the boundary Seongwu had set when he asked his question. So Minhyun kept trying in vain to imagine dueling Seongwu for affections of this faceless person he just could not paint in his mind. No matter how hard he tried, his imagination failed to take wing, and he found himself thinking in circles. Dueling Seongwu? Even the idea of pointing a gun at Seongwu’s face was repugnant to Minhyun. All this conjecturing was too cruel for him.

“I will try as best as I can to yield that person to you. But if you would only be satisfied by a duel, let’s just say I lost.”

“You would give up someone you love, that easily?”

“My tactic here is to not engage myself in a battle I am sure to lose.”
“And you’re not making fun of me?”

“I mean what I said.”

“Wow.”

Minhyun’s words took Seongwu by surprise. He never expected to hear Hwang Minhyun concede so easily in a verbal match. Where was the villainy Minhyun who seemed to live to tease Seongwu? Seongwu’s mood lightened from Minhyun’s unlikely answer. *Well, if you say so.* Seongwu idly remarked, and returned to his periodic table of elements. Then it crossed his mind that he and Minhyun had never talked about the idea of love or any possible love interests. He knew all about his classmates’ types, hopes, and aspirations for their future lovers or wives, but he did not know a thing about what kind of person Minhyun, his best friend, wished to fall in love with. He called out to Minhyun again. *There, Minhyun.*

“What kind of lover would you like?”

“Well… I would like someone with whom I would never be bored.”

“That’s too abstract. Try to be more specific.”

“Specific? I haven’t thought about things like a lover I never had. How about you tell me first?”

The question was thrown back to Seongwu. After a deep breath, Seongwu spoke of his ideals for a lover, which he had built in his mind over a long time.

“For me… I would like my lover to be good-looking, with clear-cut features and a delicate face that looks like it was drawn by a fine-tipped brush. And I’d like my lover to be endlessly kind and tender to me, even if cold and icy in the beginning.”

Minhyun listened attentively to Seongwu’s speech. Every word was more ridiculous than the one before. Seongwu was speaking of ideals, but Minhyun could not help but wonder if this hypothetical model of a person could actually exist. Minhyun’s realist side surfaced.

“That is extremely particular. Would anyone exist who befits those qualifications?”

“Would I not be able to find one person with these characteristics somewhere in the whole wide world? I will look far and wide, and to the best of my abilities.”

“All right, then. I wish you the best of luck.”

Minhyun could cheer Seongwu on and wish him luck as many times as he wanted, because doing so was not difficult. Still, he felt a little bitter. Seongwu asked for a specific ideal from Minhyun, and then left him with an answer so vague Minhyun could not grasp any meaning within it. Would Seongwu’s ideal exist in form of a person? No. Minhyun was sure no such person existed. Firstly, there were very few people who fell into Seongwu’s requirements for physical beauty. Even if Seongwu found someone who did, there was no way that person could satisfy Seongwu in everything else he mentioned afterward. Minhyun, childishly and perhaps spitefully, wished that Seongwu would never meet such perfection in his life. Then he realized how immature and stupid he was becoming, and changed the subject. He started with something Seongwu had apparently forgotten about.

“Did you memorize all of your elements?”

“Oh, you’re right!”
Seongwu picked up his notebook again, and started reciting again: H-He-Li-Be, B-C-N-O… His clear voice resonated throughout their room. Minhyun closed his eyes, and rode on Seongwu's rhythmic recitation. He felt as if he could commit to memory every element of the periodic table just by listening to Seongwu’s voice.

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At start of June, a rare early typhoon befell them. Air pressure remained low all throughout finals, and as soon as they finished their last exam, fierce winds blasted through the city. Leaves on fragile branches precariously quivered in the wind, and they were not alone in being shaken. Seongwu was tall, but he was rail-thin, and he had considerable trouble enduring the heavy winds. He found himself out of his elements when faced with the powerful current that blew in complete opposition to the direction he was walking in.

It was Minhyun who kept him from blowing away in the wind. Seongwu wanted to protest when Minhyun grabbed hold of him, but he could only grapple onto Minhyun’s hand when a headwind struck him in the face. Firmly holding hands, they persevered through their way to the boarding house. Only after a great struggle could they make it into the gate and into the front door. As soon as they entered the house the door was slammed shut by a slap of a crosswind.

“Eek, I hate this weather.”

“I know. Let’s hurry upstairs.”

Their walk from school to home was just fifteen minutes, but they were exhausted as though they had returned from tumultuous trip from far away. They only recovered after they washed themselves and changed into clean clothes. It was already dark outside. Winds continued to howl, rattling the windows in an ostentatious display of their powers. Seongwu trembled, surprised by the sound, and immediately became embarrassed.

“Seriously…”

Minhyun, who had seen him flinch visibly, snickered to himself. Seongwu flapped his arms, pouting and whimpering at Minhyun not to laugh at him. Somehow, this sight of Seongwu was heart-wrenching to Minhyun, so he stopped laughing and nodded.

“Do you want to go to bed early? Would you be less afraid if you were asleep?”

“Shall we?”

Seongwu felt like laying down anyways, so he readily agreed. He took his blankets out of his wardrobe and spread them in the middle of the room. Ever since that terrible period of time in which Minhyun was inexplicably dismissive of Seongwu, their beds had remained separated. Today, though, Seongwu wanted them to be together again. He tried to read Minhyun’s mood, and stealthily pushed his blankets right next to Minhyun's. Minhyun noticed his quiet movement, and stared where the edges of their blankets were touching. Seongwu quickly added:

“The wind is howling outside, and it sounds like a ghost. I’m scared.”
“There are no such things as ghosts in this world.”

As expected, Minhyun cut Seongwu’s plea short. Seongwu had anticipated this, so he did not falter. Minhyun and Seongwu had now been sharing a room for three years. Based on his experiences, Seongwu had mastered a way of talking Minhyun into things. In circumstances like these, what worked best was honesty and cuteness. Seongwu hugged his pillow to his chest, and put on a pout that he was sure to make Minhyun soft. The ends of his dark eyebrows drooped like those of a meek puppy.

“But I’m scared.”

“......”

“I’m so scared...”

“...All right. Do as you wish.”

Minhyun gave in, and Seongwu’s pout immediately transformed into a blinding smile. Pouting always worked. Having confirmed his power over Minhyun, Seongwu placed his pillow down on his blankets and laid down. Let’s turn out the light and go to sleep! Seongwu was patting Minhyun’s blanket next to him, and imploring Minhyun to hurry up and lay down next to him. Minhyun shook his head as if exasperated, and blew out the lamp. In the darkened room, Minhyun quietly approached his bed. Already on his back, Seongwu looked up to him again with those glittering doe eyes.

“Go to sleep.”

Minhyun said, his voice firm but gentle, covering Seongwu with his blanket. He wanted to cover those large, dark, staring eyes by pulling the blanket all the way to the top of Seongwu’s head, but he made himself stop at his chest.

“You’d better not cross this line.”

Seongwu said, joking, laughter inherent in his voice. Minhyun shot back jovially, "You’re the one who needs to watch out." Reminded of that night he almost smothered Minhyun in his sleep, Seongwu flinched. To cover his embarrassment, Seongwu retorted, “Who said I would cross the line? I’m going to sleep facing away from you.”

Seongwu pointedly turned away from Minhyun. The tiny, round back of his head was now all Minhyun could see of Seongwu.

What a temper, Minhyun thought to himself. He was glad, for some reason, that he could not see Seongwu’s face at this moment. Seongwu tossed in his place a few times, and soon fell asleep. Minhyun lay there, counting Seongwu’s even breaths, until sleep fell around him and he was enveloped in embrace.

A while later, Seongwu came to, a heavy discomfort pressing down on him. Something heavy and long was weighing down on his body. He tried to raise his hand and get rid of the burden that was almost suffocating him, but could not move it so easily. Seongwu forced open his eyelids, still heavy from drowsiness, and confirmed the identity of what was interrupting his night: it was Minhyun’s leg.

I told you to not cross the line, Seongwu thought in his head, and pushed Minhyun’s leg away with great difficulty. Minhyun’s frame was thick and strong, and his leg felt like dead weight on Seongwu’s body. Seongwu decided to let this little intrusion go, as this was Minhyun’s first offense and he had done the same to Minhyun a long time ago. Now free from the weight of Minhyun’s
thigh, Seongwu began to lie down again, when a strong force took hold of his body from behind. Even before he could attempt to resist, Seongwu was instantly trapped again inside the iron grip of Minhyun’s limbs.

Seongwu nearly screamed. Just in case Minhyun would wake up, he clapped a hand over his mouth and remained still. Minhyun, who had pulled Seongwu to his chest and into a firm embrace, breathed evenly and quietly; he must have moved in his sleep without realizing it. Minhyun had never done this before. Seongwu tried to get a glimpse of what was going on behind him, but the room was too dark and he could not make out anything.

As Seongwu’s head whirred, -what to do? - Minhyun unconsciously burrowed into Seongwu like a baby animal. He buried his face in the nape of Seongwu’s neck, and Seongwu could feel every feathery blow of his breaths on the sensitive skin there. Seongwu shivered at the sensation of all the fine hairs on his body standing up at once. Yet he was still, frozen in Minhyun’s embrace, unable to push him away. Seongwu shut his eyes. He could hear his own heart pounding in his ears. Afraid Minhyun might hear it too, he covered his body with his blanket. Seongwu stayed awake, until the pale blue of dawn began to settle in their room.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of the kudos, AO3 comments, mentions, and direct messages you guys sent us. They are all so lovely and are huge motivation for both Id and Sasha.

I know there are some grammatical errors in the previous episodes. I will fix them as soon as I can.
Chapter Summary

After a visit to a special teahouse, Minhyun suggests a possible future he wants to share with Seongwu. Minhyun and Seongwu discuss a controversial work of literature, and it helps Seongwu discover a poetic side in Minhyun.

Chapter Notes

For the original Chapter 10 written in Korea by Id and dedicated to Sasha, visit: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2526997.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 10 (dedicated to Sasha)

Originally written by Id / Translated by Sasha

Minhyun was leaning on something warm and cozy. It fit snugly into Minhyun’s breast, felt soft, and smelled sweet. Minhyun was comfortable and felt all of his tension melt away just being next to it. He did not want to let it go. With growing thirst, he held it tighter in his arms. If he could, he wanted to sleep this way forever.

It was his keen senses that pulled him back to reality. Something heavy was pressing down on his left arm, making his fingertips numb from having due blood cut off. Minhyun, with difficulty, opened his eyes when he decided he could not stand the tingle in his fingers any longer. When he blinked a few times, the fog that was blurring his vision lifted, and Minhyun saw the source of warmth in his arms.

‘Hold on, what happened?’

Minhyun’s eyes shot open wide in surprise. Raven-haired head on his left arm, quietly sleeping, was too familiar. Everything around him was. The only unfamiliar part of the morning was Minhyun himself, who had slept probably all night with his arms and legs entrapping Seongwu. His right arm and right leg were stretched over Seongwu’s body, and as though that was not enough, he was holding Seongwu to himself in a deep embrace.
Minhyun was astonished. He vaguely remembered holding onto something in his dream; he would never have guessed that it was Seongwu. To make matters worse, Minhyun lost track of his memory while trying to figure out in what context he grabbed ahold of Seongwu. Minhyun soon collected himself. How he got here was irrelevant; what he was doing now was. Right now Minhyun was holding Seongwu in his arms and Seongwu was fast asleep. If he could move Seongwu onto his bedding and out of his arms, he could pretend nothing had happened. For that, though, Seongwu was still too deep in sleep.

‘How long did we stay like this?’

Soft, cadenced breaths touched Minhyun’s left arm. Right in front of Minhyun’s eyes were Seongwu’s neck, long and gracefully thin. Seongwu’s neck, which was usually busy vibrating and moving all the time, was now still. Below it were skinny, delicate shoulders, and his slender arms were gathered in front of him as if in prayer. Under Minhyun’s right palm was Seongwu’s waist. Minhyun furtively lowered his hand, and stroked Seongwu’s belly. Flat stomach moved in tandem with his regular breathing as if proving he was alive. This sensation was alien to Minhyun, and startled, he removed his hand immediately. He felt as if he had done something he should not have done. He slowly removed his leg from above Seongwu, suddenly feeling discomfort over the contact between them. Burning heat spread from the tips of his ears to his neck. Minhyun took a deep breath, staring at the ceiling, and started to recite the quadratic formula in his head.

He made his way through the complicated proof, and went so far as to contents of his right triangle formulas. Fire spreading out of control in his chest somehow subsided, and he began to feel the numbness in his arm again. Yet he could not insofar as lay a fingertip on Seongwu; he just watched him sleep. He envied Seongwu for the oblivion he was immersed in.

Minhyun suddenly thought of Emperor Ai of Han Dynasty, who, according to history, cut off his sleeve with a dagger for a beloved who had fallen asleep on his arm. Minhyun thought of Emperor Ai as an example of a leader who became blinded by his emotions and made wrong decisions for his empire as a result of such blindness. It was true that after Emperor Ai Han Dynasty went into a rapid decline, obliterating itself in less than ten years. Minhyun looked down upon Emperor Ai as foolish man, but only now did he understand the feeling of doting on someone so intensely.

Some men dreamt of having all the world under their undivided command, but Minhyun did not. He was a realist, and he was not interested in matters that were out of his control or needlessly troublesome. There were many great aspects of having been born a common man. At this moment, what he liked best was not having to sleep with a dagger to protect himself against a potential assassin, and not having to wear lavish costumes with sleeves long and wide enough to be cut for a loved one who fell asleep on them. He also had no empire to govern. So as a common man, he had his right to relax.

The morning after a storm was eerily silent. Minhyun became unaware of passage of time as he endlessly stared at Seongwu’s sleeping face. He could admire Seongwu uninterrupted and in peace, as Seongwu did not try to look straight into his eyes in that way he does, say something daring, or strive to win an argument against him. At some point, Minhyun fell asleep again.

Seongwu, only having fallen asleep near sunrise, awoke long past nine o’clock in the morning. He was startled to find that he was still attached to Minhyun as he was during the night. A mundane question flickered in his mind. Did neither of them move? How did they not? Anyhow, he wanted to get up. What should he do?

Seongwu decided his best option was to copy a snake slinking out of its skin. He wanted to leave Minhyun’s limbs and his blanket just the way they were sitting, and shift out of them without having
Minhyun notice it. Seongwu moved slowly and carefully, but unfortunately his caution was not enough. Unknownst to Seongwu, Minhyun’s eyes had shot open in his desire to hold on to the warmth in his arms.

“...Ah.”

Minhyun, upon meeting Seongwu’s eyes, let out a quiet exclamation. His voice was lower than usual, having just woken up. Seongwu tried to fathom what was contained in that single syllable of sound. He could not conjecture a thing. To him, Minhyun was opaque, vague, unreadable.

“Did I wake you up? Sorry.”

“No… It’s not your fault.”

They looked away from each other. They were embarrassed and disoriented by what happened during the night. What Minhyun had done might have been just an uncharacteristically rough movement made in sleep, but Seongwu chose to stay in his embrace even when he could move away. Likewise, Minhyun could release Seongwu and distance himself from him whenever he wanted. Minhyun chose not to. The reasons why were kept a secret inside each of them. Hoping the other would not notice, they behaved like they knew nothing.

“I didn’t mean to. I guess I was cold during the night. I’m sorry.”

Minhyun started. They could not avoiding seeing eye to eye forever. His voice was calm and composed, as if he was speaking of some well-known universal truth. Internally, he had mustered great courage to do away with the terrible awkwardness between them.

“No, it’s all right. Last night was truly cold.”

Seongwu willed himself to smile, and dismissed Minhyun’s apologetic gestures. Minhyun could see, however, that he was flustered. His large, round pupils moved about listlessly. Minhyun thought to change the subject. Minhyun massaged his left arm ostentatiously.

“My arm is numb. I guess there truly are tons of thoughts in that tiny head of yours.”

“Hey!”

Even though he knew Minhyun was just teasing him, Seongwu burst into a small fit of petulance. His eyes, which were drooping until now, became pointed at the edges as he glared at Minhyun. He had to admit, though, that they were casually overlooking their predicament thanks to Minhyun’s wit. Still, the fact that they slept clinging to each other did not change no matter how unaffected Minhyun appeared, so they spent all day overly conscious of each other’s presence.

Fortunately, final exams started the following week. Their exam obligations became an effective excuse for them to distance themselves from each other. Studying proved to be the best way to stay off edge and to keep thoughts about each other from bothering them every moment of the day.

They went through finals in a fidgety, restless state. After exams, they were met with a special and exciting news. A famous poet, well known for his works of contemporary literature, had opened a tea house in the middle of Jongno called ‘The Swallow.’ Some boys headed to Jongno to visit it as soon as the exams were over.

Among the boys who went to Jongno, Seongwu especially liked the poet. Seongwu visited the tea house with both curiosity and a yearning to meet his idol. The tea house was located at an alleyway that diverged from Jongno towards Cheonggyechun. Above its door, barely wide enough for one
man to pass through, hung a signboard that read: ‘tea house.’ Unlike its signboard, which looked new and freshly painted, the interior of the tea house was cramped, damp, and shabby. Seongwu could not believe that the poets could write a single line of literature in such a despondent place, let alone run a proper business.

As if to make up for the sorry state the tea house was in, the poet Seongwu admired, along with two other authors, were there to greet the visitors personally. With cigarettes between their teeths, they treated Minhyun and Seongwu like babies. The poet seemed to perceive Seongwu, who did not mind such treatment, as a younger brother he left at home, and did not refrain from showering him with words of advice and encouragement.

“Write a lot, read a lot, and think a lot. That is the proper way to become a writer.”

The poets left autographs on Seongwu’s notebook. Seongwu felt like he was in a dream in those few hours he spent at the tea house. Seongwu babbled about them throughout their way back to the boarding house.

“As expected, his handwriting is just as bold as his daring prose. Each stroke is so powerful. And this one, his handwriting is so delicate and controlled, just like his subtle poems. He wrote this with a fountain pen, but this rather looks like it was written with a brush. Isn’t this so exquisite?”

“Sure it is.”

Minhyun chimed along to Seongwu’s chatter at appropriate times. It did not matter if he reacted to his words or not; Seongwu was busy expressing ideas that filled his heart to the brim. His praises of the poets stopped only when they returned to the boarding house. Belatedly embarrassed, Seongwu extended an apology to Minhyun.

“I’ve talked too much. Sorry.”

“Fine by me, as long as you were happy.”

Minhyun replied with a smile. He led Seongwu back to their room and slid their door open. He lit a match and ignited their kerosene lamp. Minhyun continued, pushing it toward Seongwu so the latter could continue to admire the authors' autographs.

“And I also like the poets you like. Visiting the tea house was a great experience.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.”

Seongwu took his signed notebook out of his bag and hugged it to his chest. Then he went to his bed, which he had pushed haphazardly to the side of the room in the morning, and tried to lie down. Just before he could, though, Minhyun yelled something out to him. Seongwu stopped mid-motion with a flinch.

“Seongwu, you have to wash your hands and feet before lying down on your blankets.”

“But it’s so much trouble to go downstairs.”

“Would you like me to bring you some water?”

“Really? I would appreciate it if you brought me a bucketful.”

“That would never happen in a million years, so you’d better get up.”
“You wouldn’t indulge me, even just this once?”

“As I said before, not in a million years.”

*What a vicious fellow!* Seongwu pretended to sniffle at the stern resolution in Minhyun’s voice. He put down his notebook, picked up his bath basket, and dragged himself downstairs. It was before dinnertime, so he planned to wash just his hands and feet before going up to his room again. He folded his sleeves up to wash himself with clean water and soap. When he was drying himself, he noticed Minhyun, who was standing behind him with his own bath basket in one hand and salt and toothbrush in another, waiting for his turn.

“Wouldn’t you take a bath and brush your teeth before bed tonight?”

“I’ll brush my teeth now, and again before bed.”

“What am I if you clean and scrub so obsessively?”

“You would be scruffy. Scruffy Ong.”

“Seriously, don’t just attach the first thing you think of to my family name.”

“Haha. You go upstairs.”

Seongwu went back to their room. It as a heavenly feeling, lying on his stomach on his soft, warm cotton blanket with clean hands and feet. He opened his notebook and examined the poets’ autographs once more. He soon heard the sound of their sliding door opening; Minhyun was back. He hung his wet towel on the temporary laundry line they had put up in the corner, and plumped down next to Seongwu, who was staring at his notebook again.

"Seongwu, are you so happy that you cannot stop looking at it?"

Seongwu nodded. He seemed as delighted as a child with a brand new candy, and it was rubbing off on Minhyun.

“Shall we open a tea house when we graduate?”

“Us?”

“Yes. I’ll run the business, and you can write literature by my side.”

“Well, then I’d only be taking up space in your tea house.”

“Why do you think so? We’ll be running it together. We’d just play different roles.”

Minhyun’s proposal sounded plausible, but Seongwu could not agree so readily. Minhyun noticed his reluctance and elaborated on his thoughts.

“My point is, I want you to know how I feel about you and your dream. I truly want you to become a writer, and I want to give you all the practical help I can give so you can focus on writing without having to worry about anything else.”

“I will accept only your compassion.”

“Tell me anytime you change your mind. We have plenty of time yet.”

Minhyun stood up. His words were flawlessly intrepid in tone and content. They were, indisputably,
words of encouragement from a kind friend. Seongwu sometimes thought that Minhyun was too kind, planting a desire in Seongwu to lean on him with heart of not merely a friend, but someone else, something more. Seongwu wanted hide this feeling from Minhyun. He buried his face in his pillow and nodded. Was it truly okay for them to pledge to a future together in this way? The notebook in Seongwu’s hand finally found its place away from him, on the floor.

Next to Minhyun, who supported his literary passion wholeheartedly, Seongwu immersed himself deeply in literature during the break. Seongwu read new books that were published during the semester he did not have the time to read, and got his hands on recently imported foreign books. Sometimes he wrote literature of his own. Minhyun extended his praises to even the most unrefined, raw pieces of writing he produced.

Tranquility of summer break was interrupted by the birth of a shocking serial poem, published in installments on Joseon Joongang Daily* from July 24, 1934: *Ogandol (烏瞰圖)* by poet Yi Sang*.

From its first installment, *Ogando* was impossibly cryptic. Seongwu challenged himself by attempting to decipher the code-like poem. A few classmates got together to discuss the meaning of it, but a gathering of mere teenagers was not enough to unearth the real meaning beneath the abstruse text. Seongwu even felt a chill creeping up his spine when he read it aloud. As the second, third, and more installments of *Ogando* were published, Seongwu postponed his trip to Pyongyang for the first time.

After most of his other classmates went back to their hometowns one by one, Seongwu began to spend all of his time alone with Minhyun. Unlike those with serious interest in literature, Minhyun was not passionate about unearthing the meaning behind *Ogando*, but he was still a good friend to have a proper discussion with. By this time, after nine installments of impregnable, enigmatic texts, a relatively comprehensible installment was published: the tenth, titled *Butterfly*.

I see on a ripped wallpaper a dying butterfly.

It is a clandestine mouthpiece that comes and goes from and to the otherworld.

One day inside the beard in a mirror I see a dying butterfly.

The butterfly with its sagging wings eats an impoverished dew that forms on the breath.

As I block the mouthpiece with my palm the butterfly will fly away just like I would sit down and stand up when I die.

I never let these words leak outside.

A butterfly was repeatedly mentioned in both title and the text. What did Yi Sang want to express through a butterfly? Seongwu closed his eyes and thought of each syllable of the poem, as if counting grains of rice. He conjured an image in his head.
There is a small room. Through a window in the upper half of the wall pale blue of dawn comes in and fills the room. Above it barely hangs a dying butterfly. Throughout history, a butterfly was considered an insect that connects this life and the afterlife; as such, it hangs on a rip in the wallpaper, which the poet has addressed as a secret passageway to another world. One day, the poet looks at himself in the mirror and notices that his beard has grown long. He describes the shape of his beard as a ‘butterfly.’ He describes his long, sagging tufts of hair as a butterfly’s drooping wings, and droplets of water in his beard as an impoverished dew. Butterfly lives on in the afterlife. In fact, the poet knows that if he covers his own mouth, a mouthpiece to the afterlife, and if he suffocates as a result, the butterfly will fly away from his body. The poet knows this, but keeps silent to make it his own secret.

Seongwu did not stop here. Using what he knew, he tried to flesh out his imagination. He thought of the word ‘psyche,’ which in the west had two meanings: a butterfly, or a soul. With this in mind, Seongwu surmised that the first butterfly in the poem and the second were different entities. The first was an actual insect, and the second was the poet’s soul. He conjectured that the poet was expressing his poverty through descriptions of a ripped wallpaper and a drop of dew, which implied lack of fulfillment. Enduring this harsh reality, the poet shed tears, his soul slowly dying with drooping wings. The mouthpiece to afterlife was the poet’s mouth. If the poet suffocated himself by clasping his mouth shut, his soul would fly away. But the poet chooses not to speak of this suicidal thought. Seongwu did not know why; he could only guess.

In front of the mirror is an impoverished poet, and above the wallpaper is a dying butterfly, such a lonely and pitiable scene. Seongwu thought this poem was solitary and sorrowful. He began to feel gloomy after thinking about the poem deeply. His head was throbbing from uncertainties of pursuing the meaning of something incomprehensible. Seongwu covered his head with his arms and rolled on his bed. Minhyun watched him for a while, and offered his own interpretation.

“That’s interesting. According to your analysis, there is only one way through which the poet can regain life.”

“What is it?”

“It is Eros, the other half of Psyche.”

Seongwu turned and looked at Minhyun upon this unanticipated answer. Minhyun did not notice Seongwu’s gaze, deep in thought.

“The concepts of Eros and Thanatos are opposites of each other, yet they are intimately related. They play an unending game of tug-of-war inside our minds. To seize Psyche from tipping to Thanatos, we would need the help of Eros, as if we were balancing a scale.”

“And?”

“Even in the myths, Eros saves Psyche from peril many times. In whatever trouble life throws at her, Psyche will not venture to the side of self-destruction if Eros is by her side. Agonies of life and those of death are essentially the same, and we have to exert ourselves no matter which we choose to address. Most living things choose life over death, although it was not their own will to have been born to this world. Likewise, Psyche belonging to this poet… I thought it might choose to take wing again if it was given its Eros.”

Seongwu thought Minhyun’s words were romantic. He liked the concept of duality of life and death he described. Listening to Minhyun’s words, Seongwu began to wish for the poet’s butterfly to free itself from the ripped wallpaper and soar into the sky in the name of Eros; in the name of love.
“I like your interpretation. You told me you don’t particularly like poetry, but you are impressively poetic.”

“I’m not.”

“Why do you say that? I like what you said.”

“It’s all nonsense. Forget it.”

Never. Seongwu digested all of Minhyun’s words and inscribed it into his memory. That night, Seongwu repeated Minhyun’s ideas in his mind again and again. Each time, dozens of butterflies took wing and soared up from Seongwu’s heart. Ardent flutter of wings from each butterfly made Seongwu’s body tickle all over.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 7:

Joseon Joongang Daily: Joson Joongang Daily was a Korean newspaper publication first went into circulation on November 27, 1931 until November 1937. It was noted for bold, sometimes controversial reporting and publishing choices, the most famous of which was serialized publication of poet Yi Sang's Ogamdo. It is unrelated to Chosun Daily or Joongang Daily, which are two prominent Korean newspapers in the present.

Yi Sang: (From Wikipedia) Yi Sang, or Lee Sang (September 14, 1910 – April 17, 1937) was an author of modern Korean literature. Yi was perhaps the most famous avant-garde writer of the colonial era. In his work he experimented with language, interiority, separation from inside one's self as well as the outer world. His poems, particularly, were influenced by Western literary concepts including Dadaism and Surrealism. Yi's history in architecture influenced his work, which often included the languages of mathematics and architecture including, lines, dots, number systems, equations and diagrams.

Ogamdo (烏瞰圖): Ogamdo, literally translated to something similar to 'a crow flying and looking down on earth.' Wikipedia calls it “Crow's eye view poem," and has the following description: "His literary legacy is punctuated by his modernist tendencies evinced throughout his oeuvre. His poems reveal the desolate internal landscape of modern humanity and, as in “Crow's eye view poem” (Ogamdo si je1ho), utilize an anti-realist technique to condense the themes of anxiety and fear."

Translator's note: Ogamdo is similar to James Joyce's Ulysses in its cryptic nature and repeated attempts by scholars to decipher it, and no one to date has come up with a definitive interpretation for its meanings.

Butterfly: The original poem, tenth installment in Yi Sang's serial poem Ogamdo, was written without any spaces between words nor any sort of punctuation except periods at
the end of each 'sentence.' I'd and I simplified it so it is more comprehensible.

Thank you for reading and all of your support!
A Day in the Lives of Two Young Poets

Chapter Summary

Minhyun and Seongwu explore Gyeongseong, eating their favorite snacks and pretending to be characters in a popular novel. They have arguments over what animals they each resemble, and Minhyun finally gets what he wants after an agonizing episode of an 'illness.' Seongwu begins to realize what lies at the heart of the sensations he feels when he is near Minhyun.

Chapter Notes

Original writing in Korean by Id can be found here:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 11

Originally written in Korean by Id / Translated into English by Sasha

Poet Yi Sang’s wish to take wing and soar into the heavens did not come true. His poems were considered those of an insane man. Readers of Joseon Joongang Daily sent hundreds of complaints about Ogamdo. Some went so far as to curse the newspaper to stop publishing altogether if it sought to disseminate such terrible poetry to the public. Joseon Joongang Daily, unable to handle the deluge of complaints from its readers, stopped publication of Ogamdo after fifteen installments instead thirty as originally planned.

Seongwu considered this a terrible loss. He had truly enjoyed interpreting the poems; he loved the feeling of being deeply immersed in literature itself regardless of whether he was right or wrong. He even sent a letter to Pyongyang telling his family he would not be going back this summer. What would he do for the rest of his break, then? Seongwu preferred decoding Yi Sang’s poems over grueling homework any day. He resented those who filed complaints to the newspaper to take down Ogamdo. He said, petulantly:

“Of course beautiful, lyrical poems are wonderful, but don’t we need an unapologetically savage one from time to time?”
Seongwu believed art could only prosper through diversity. Everyone pointed fingers at Yi Sang and called him a lunatic, but Seongwu did not want to do the same. Two weeks after Ogamdo’s publication was stopped, rumors floated around that Yi Sang had went away to cure his mental illness. Then was his butterfly left all by itself in his room in some corner of Gyeongseong? Perhaps the butterfly had flown away beyond the rip in the wallpaper. Seongwu did not care much about the butterfly. He prayed for the poet to have escaped so much loneliness by now.

Throughout mid-August, red mercury in thermometers never knew to stop soaring up. Boiling heat ensued. Heat wave warnings were dispersed throughout the country. Bukchon was not an exception. They kept their window open in an attempt to circulate hot air out of the room and let fresh wind in, but all it let in was burning sunlight. In this melting heat, Minhyun and Seongwu did not dare to go outside. They spent most of their time trapped inside their room.

They were both born in summer, yet how they dealt with it was completely different. Perhaps because he was from northern region of Korea, Seongwu was weak when it came to enduring heat; Minhyun was relatively better at withstanding it. Minhyun by nature did not like to express his state of suffering, and this added to his apparent endurance against sweltering heat.

Even this afternoon, Seongwu could not bring himself to concentrate while Minhyun faithfully focused on his homework. Seongwu sat in front of his desk and kept thinking about other things that were of no use for his schoolwork. He tried to daydream about his next piece of creative writing, but he tired quickly of even this. As a last resort he picked up a newspaper he had set aside in the morning to read later, in an attempt to entertain himself with worldly goings-on.

Seongwu idly waited for the sun to set, and while he did, a headline caught his eye.

*Shaved Ice Shops To Open After Strict Inspection*

This was it. Seongwu turned around, his eyes gleaming. As though he had forgotten about the heat outside altogether, he quietly called out to Minhyun, who was sitting at his desk like a stone Buddha, laser-focused on his work.

“Hey, friend.”

“What is it?”

“Since the day is so hot, wouldn’t you like some bingsu?”

“I assume *you* want to have some bingsu.”

“Yes.”

An insolent answer. Minhyun looked at Seongwu. He saw the newspaper spread open on his desk.

“You’re craving it after reading articles about epidemic preventions, correct?”

“...Right.”

“That is so you.”
“As if you don’t know me. Anyways, let’s go out. Bingsu is on me.”

At Seongwu’s cajoling, Minhyun stood up right away. He had also been thinking about something cold anyways.

Without further hesitation they took to the streets, packed full of people holding fans as if to shield themselves from the weather. Instead of venturing all the way down to Jongno, Minhyun and Seongwu decided to go to a new venue near school. The new place had a variety of fruit flavors to catch the attention of young students around.

They stood side by side under a large sign that read: Banana Water, Orange Water, and Strawberry Water, and grappled with which flavors they would go with today. Last time they chose orange, so the match was between banana and strawberry. This was an important decision to them and they argued back and forth for a while before choosing strawberry as their winner for tonight.

Shortly after their order was placed, they were served with a bowl of shaved ice and two teaspoons, followed by strawberry water of vivid red. Minhyun held the small dish above the bowl of ice and asked.

“Shall I pour it in all at once?”

“Of course.”

Without further ado, Minhyun splashed strawberry water on the ice. Lukewarm liquid settled into snowy ice, and the ice started to melt immediately. They hurriedly picked up their teaspoons, eager to taste it before it was all reduced to mere fruity water.

After just a mouthful, Seongwu felt a chill creeping down his spine. At this delicious gratification of his wants a content smile appeared on Seongwu’s face. He liked the cool and the sweet in his mouth. He considered himself fortunate to have a skillful ice shaver near the boarding house.

Like ice in spring sunlight, the bingsu disappeared fast, almost as if its existence had been in vain. They left the bingsu shop missing their ice treat already. With a cool sensation still sitting in their stomachs, they could withstand the heat a little better, so they wandered around for a while. Being in the city was fun, especially because they had not been for a long time. They only headed back home at dusk, and they ran into a glutinous rice cake merchant in one of the alleyways. Seongwu passed him by without paying him much heed, but Minhyun did not.

“How much?”

“They cost one for one.”

“Let me take ten, then.”

The merchant placed ten rice cakes into a coarse paper bag. Minhyun took it, and went back to Seongwu. Seongwu was standing a few paces away, watching him through the entire encounter.

“Were you craving rice cakes?”

“I thought they’d be good to have as a snack later tonight. Let’s share them.”
“All right.”

They started for the boarding house again. After a while, Seongwu began to speak, suddenly reminded of a thought.

“Come to think of it, you used to be so picky about food.”

“I was.”

“You eat more these days now that you’re taller. We had bingsu earlier, yet you bought more to snack on.”

“To be honest I bought these for you. You always whine about being hungry around midnight. I bought these rice cakes in hopes of keeping your noise level down.”

Minhyun spoke in a slightly scolding tone. Seongwu knew he was only joking, but couldn’t help himself throw back a retort. Minhyun himself vocally craved for food too often at night for Seongwu to stay silent on this issue.

“You say the same things every night.”

“But you’re way too loud. Don’t you feel sorry for your roommate?”

“I don’t, and I’ll be even louder from now on so you can’t focus.”

“I’ll be first in class this semester anyways.”

“We’ll have to see about that.”

They bickered throughout the rest of their way home. Dusk had fallen, and deep colors of the setting sun imbrued the sky. After dinner and a bath, they lounged freely in their room, now cooler and free from sunlight.

Seongwu took from his bookcase first edition copy of Han Yong-Un’s *Love’s Silence and Other Poems*. He had read it several times, but he enjoyed repeating it because he felt differently each time he read it again. As Seongwu read his poem book on his bedding, Minhyun sat at his desk and wrote something in a notebook. Seongwu’s ears perked up when he heard the sound of Minhyun’s pen scrape diligently on paper. Was he writing a letter to someone?

“What are you doing? I thought you finished your homework.”

“I am writing an essay.”

“You’re writing? Show me!”

Seongwu leapt up. This was an amazing phenomenon. Minhyun usually never wrote outside assignments in which he was forced to write. It was the first time Seongwu saw him write something voluntarily. Seongwu could not hide his curiosity as to what Minhyun’s personal writing would be like. Seongwu desperately wished to see it, but Minhyun kept his notebook shielded from him. He shut his notebook and made a stern face.
“I can never show you this.”

“Why? But you always read what I write.”

“Your writings are meant to be read. Mine are different. Only I can see them.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“Think of a private journal.”

Seongwu was aggrieved by this rejection. Rather than saying more, Minhyun pushed a bag of rice cakes towards Seongwu.

“Would you like some rice cakes?”

“But we had dinner not long ago.”

“Dinner is dinner, and snacks are snacks.”

“You become sneakier at changing the subject every day.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Shall we take a bite, then?”

Seongwu pushed his hand into the paper bag and took out a rice cake, incredibly malleable and about the size of half of his fist.

“It’s so soft. It must be delicious.”

They began to eat their rice cakes one by one. Unlike Minhyun, who bit on his rice cakes, Seongwu pushed a whole rice cake into his mouth. With something as big as half of his own fist inside, his mouth became full and his cheeks popped out. Minhyun watched Seongwu munching on his rice cakes and chuckled. Why do you laugh? Seongwu glared at Minhyun. Minhyun answered, his voice tinged with laughter.

“You look like a chipmunk.”

Chipmunk? Seongwu’s eyes opened wide and round from this unexpected comparison.

“What do you mean, a chipmunk?”

“What? You look exactly like one.”

“I do not! I’d say I resemble a more valiant and majestic animal. A tiger, for example.”

“Tigers have indeed gone nearly extinct in Joseon, and it surely seems like you’ve never seen a tiger in your life.”

“Hey!”

Seongwu tried to fight back by teasing Minhyun the way classmates liked to do at school, but Minhyun was completely unaffected.
“And you look like a fox.”
“I know. I like foxes.”

Seongwu lost his will to fight at Minhyun’s lack of response. While Minhyun finished the remainder of his rice cake, Seongwu started again.

“Now that I think about it, aren’t foxes and chipmunks natural enemies?”
“That’s right.”
“Then I should run away, as I don’t know when you’ll try to eat me alive.”

Minhyun raised his head and looked at Seongwu. He hurriedly swallowed the rest of his rice cake in his mouth before speaking.

“Eat you alive? How can you say such a thing?”
“What? You said we were natural enemies.”
“But when you look at us, things are exactly the opposite. I always lose to you.”
“You try to subdue me in every single arguments we have. Are you being ironic?”

Seongwu stung back, as if he had been considerably stressed by Minhyun’s litigiousness. Minhyun sighed.

“You one up me every moment to the next, and you don’t have a clue.”

Minhyun’s voice was serious, almost solemn. Seongwu’s face slowly began to heat up. He quickly cleaned up and stood from his seat.

“Anyways, let’s go back to each of our works.”

Minhyun’s gaze followed Seongwu’s back as he returned to his bedding. Ignoring it, Seongwu picked his book back up, and opened it to a random page. A poem caught his eye, the sight of it now so familiar due to Seongwu’s repetitive study of it.

Become one with me.
My love, if you wish to take my heart, take it from me who possess it,
And make me one within you.
If not, do not give me only pain and give me all of your heart,
And give me your heart from you who possess it,
So that you, my love, would become one within me.
If not, my love, return to me my heart.
Seongwu pressed the book shut. He could not finish reading this poem. Words, which had been clearly legible and easily comprehensible in his eyes, were now blurry and lost to him. His heart throbbed within him as if he had just told a lie. He became overly aware of Minhyun’s gaze as if he had just recited this poem out loud. Minhyun was not even looking towards him. It was the poet who was in love; then why did Seongwu feel this sense of embarrassment instead?

Seongwu placed his book on the floor. He could not focus on anything at all because of his heart, now violently leaping as if trying to free itself from his chest. So he chose to fall asleep. He covered himself from head to toe with his blanket. Immediately after, Minhyun asked him:

“Aren’t you hot?”

Minhyun had been staring straight ahead; how did he know Seongwu was smothering himself in thick fabric? Had he been watching Seongwu secretly? All kinds of speculations began to pop up in Seongwu’s head, with no answer in sight. So Seongwu pretended he had not heard Minhyun’s question. There was no way Minhyun could even guess how Seongwu felt at this moment; how confused, how lost. Minhyun’s face was so peaceful that Seongwu almost thought it was cheeky. Minhyun would have no idea that Seongwu was starting to feel this whole situation was unfair.

But Seongwu did not dislike it. Even if Minhyun had no idea what Seongwu felt, Seongwu could never hate or resent Minhyun for his ignorance. What words could describe this subtle feeling, this feeling Seongwu ‘did not dislike?’ Seongwu fell asleep, lost in his thoughts.

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Second semester had started. Mundane, run-of-the-mill life ensued. How wonderful it would be if something new, be it literature or music, appeared to entertain them? As if granting Seongwu’s wish, a novel with an unprecedented, revolutionary form was published.

The novel was called *A Day in the Life of Mr. Gubo, Novelist*, by Park Tae Won*. Contents of this novel was exactly what its title suggested. Its protagonist, Gubo, spends his day from morning until two hours past midnight meandering in the heart of Gyeongseong. There are no particularly interesting events to speak of; Gubo just goes out with a single notebook in hand and wanders around in every direction he can think of. That was all. Honestly, Seongwu did not find this novel entertaining. He thought it was still interesting, though, how it painted a detailed picture of Gyeongseong and Bukchon in their current states.
Because Minhyun and Seongwu frequented the Jongno-Cheonggyechun area like it was their backyard, they knew every street Gubo haunted in the novel. They thought it was fresh how places they were familiar with were described in a novel.

Weekend was approaching, and on Saturday morning Seongwu said he wanted to go out to the city. Minhyun, without a word, got ready for an outing.

They followed an alleyway in Bukchon and headed south. They passed Tapgol Park* diagonally and continued towards Jongno. Upon entering main street, they turned right and walked towards the bell tower. Jongno’s main street was still as busy as ever. Minhyun and Seongwu soon walked into the world of Novelist Gubo. Just like Gubo, they had no set destination in mind. They walked and walked, watching passersby and dynamic scenery of Gyeongseong. How Gubo had looked upon all these people with contempt and envy!

They wandered around, jumping over streetcar tracks, until they were in front of Hwashin Department Store*. Minhyun wanted to turn right, and Seongwu left. They could not part, so they had to choose one direction. As they had done when they were younger, they played a game of rocks, paper, scissors. Seongwu won, and they went left. With every step conversations between them grew deeper.

Decidedly, a major subject of discussion was the novel. Minhyun did not like it much.

“I don’t really like these portrait-type books about young, lethargic intellectuals.”

“But he showed some volition of his own in the end.”

“Right. Fortunately the ending wasn’t completely nihilistic.”

Countless people circled their ways around Minhyun and Seongwu. Streetcars continuously departed from their stations. An enormous city and life that filled it became entangled with each other and breathed together as if they were a single creature. This was a portrait of reality in which all the components of the present interlocked and cooperated without a glitch for a single purpose. These ordinary routines of a weekend were so mundane that it appeared that there was nothing to write about.

Seongwu felt differently. This world might at one point turn black and white, with people within it more like machines than human beings. This world could easily become empty and futile. However, Seongwu felt that he would be an exception to it; not only because Seongwu was a dreamful boy full of love, but also because his view of this world changed forever thanks to the existence of his companion who always silently and steadfastly walked by his side. Seongwu wanted to record every moment he shared with Minhyun in writing. Seongwu decided to treasure these autumnal memories deep in his heart.

***********************
Three months passed. Minhyun and Seongwu powered through a storm of exams and assignments; this semester was the most hectic one they had faced yet.

As always, Seongwu started to prepare for Christmas as soon as winter break began. Santa might not exist in this world, but Christmas was still one of those few holidays, up there with New Year’s Day and Chuseok, that they could enjoy. Seongwu wanted to celebrate it every change he had. Without things like holiday fun, how stiff and listless would life be?

Seongwu’s Christmas plans, however, went astray as a result of Minhyun’s sudden illness. Actually, Seongwu did not know if he could call it an ‘illness’ at all. Starting on a certain night, Minhyun started to complain of pain in his legs. This pain worsened by each passing day, and eventually became bad enough to wake Minhyun from his sleep in the middle of the night. Seongwu could not tell why Minhyun’s legs were hurting; it was not like they were hit by a streetcar or kicked by hind legs of a horse. Minhyun had walked and ran like he normally did for the past few days. Minhyun himself was also bewildered as to the source of his pain.

Pain mainly attacked Minhyun out of the blue at night. It often started with a twinge, and then evolved into a throbbing ache, sometimes bad enough to make the entirety of Minhyun’s legs numb. Only recently had Seongwu found out about Minhyun’s suffering. Minhyun suppressed any and all expression of his agony, until he inadvertently let slip a groan one night. Minhyun never wanted to show Seongwu his weak side, even if it meant being killed by his pain, but at that moment his aches had grown intolerable.

Seongwu, who had not known a thing until then, was shocked. It was Minhyun who was in pain, but Seongwu became weary and restless instead. They could not put a name to Minhyun’s symptoms, and thus did not have any medicine to apply to it; at the same time they did not want to use any folk remedies out of fear of unknown side effects. To make up for his lack of medical knowledge, Seongwu tried to ameliorate Minhyun’s pain with all his heart. He wet a handkerchief to wipe away cold sweat, and when Minhyun’s legs were achy and numb he got up to massage them regardless of what time it was.

While Minhyun persevered through throes of aches, Christmas passed. In their room, which was now equally a home to them as their family homes, they welcomed first day of the new year together. Seongwu, who refused to sleep in order to witness the first sunrise, slipped into a deep slumber around four o’clock in the morning. Minhyun watched him for some ten minutes before he fell asleep as well. When they came to, it was midday.

Perhaps because his deep sleep had refreshed him, Minhyun felt he was much freer from the pain that had refused to leave his legs for a long while. He had been almost bedridden; but now he stood up straight and tall for the first time in many hours. As his new year’s wish, Minhyun had prayed to become taller than Ong Seongwu. Apparently, his prayer was effective; Minhyun was now taller than Seongwu. Their eyes were no longer level.

Seongwu was dejected. He poured all his heart into nursing and caring for Minhyun and it turned out that everything Minhyun had gone through was mere growing pains. Seongwu wanted to demand to know how it was possible that Minhyun, who had lied on his back most of the time he was sick, not even eating as much as usual, had grown anyways. Such was the extent of Minhyun’s sudden spurt in growth. He had been more or less the same height as Seongwu, but now he was noticeably taller to even a cursory observer. Considering the fact that Seongwu was also on the tall side, Minhyun
must have had grown to approach one hundred and eighty centimeters by shot. How, and when, did he grow so tall? Minhyun had grown in what felt like a blink of an eye, leaving Seongwu was astonished.

Minhyun, on the other hand, had kept certain features from his boyhood. Although he was taller and his build heavier, his skin was still as white as ever, and he had retained some of the baby chub on his face. All at the same time, his facial features were enhanced, especially the shape of his eyes and the high bridge of his nose. He had no resemblance to Seongwu, and Seongwu actually liked how different Minhyun’s features were from his own.

After a late lunch, they relaxed in their room before heading out to Jongno. Streets around Jongno in the middle of winter were frozen solid, and people moved about on them carefully. No matter how good one’s shoes were and no matter how many cautions one took, it was impossible to avoid all patches of black ice that hid like traps on the streets.

“Ah!”

Seongwu stepped on a slippery patch of ice and wobbled, losing his balance. He tensed his body in an attempt to keep it from falling, but it was useless. He fell flat on his buttocks on the ground. It all happened so fast, Seongwu could not have helped it to save his life. Seongwu could not believe he did something stupid again in front of someone he did not wish to appear stupid the most out of everyone he knew. Seongwu prayed that Minhyun would pretend he did not see him fall, but Minhyun laughed out loud at the sight of Seongwu on the ground. A flame of rage blazed within Seongwu. He yelled at Minhyun:

“You should have caught me!”

“Then I would have fallen with you.”

“Is that really what you’re going to say?”

“I’m only joking. Next time, I will catch you.”

“Well, I am never going to fall again!”

Seongwu did not like how Minhyun treated his fall as a spectacle to laugh at. He stood up, his cheeks tinged red. He quickly dusted off dirt from his behind. Minhyun still had a silly smile on his face. Was his fall really that funny? Seongwu’s brows tightened. Minhyun just chuckled at him.

“Don’t laugh.”

“There is a reason why you fall so easily.”

“Like what?”

“You’re light as a feather. Look, your wrists are all bones.”

Out of the blue, Minhyun snatched up Seongwu’s wrist. Trapped within Minhyun’s firm grasp, Seongwu’s arm was raised to eye level. Looking at both of their forearms, Seongwu naturally observed the differences between them. Seongwu’s wrist was obviously thinner, while Minhyun’s was fit with some healthful flesh and muscle. When did this gap between them start? Seongwu pulled his wrist free from Minhyun’s clutch.

“I can watch my step. My weight has nothing to do with it.”
Cutting their conversation short, Seongwu passed Minhyun and walked ahead. Minhyun glanced at Seongwu’s back vacantly before chasing him in a jiffy.

“Wait for me!”

“Don’t stand next to me.”

“Why?”

A look of confusion clouded Minhyun’s face, but soon he grinned, having easily guessed the reason why.

“Is it because now you’re smaller than me?”

“Be quiet.”

“Haha.”

Minhyun’s merry laugh resonated through the air. Some passersby on the street turned to look at them upon hearing his warm laughter riding on cold winds. Some of them were baby-faced girl students in white jeogoris* and black skirts. Their gazes were all glued to Minhyun. As Minhyun passed these girls, their cheeks immediately took color like ripe peaches. Isn’t that man so very handsome? They whispered amongst each other.

Yes, he sure is handsome. Seongwu answered in his head. He threw a sideways glance at Minhyun, who was walking side by side with him as he always did. Minhyun rarely cared about gazes of others, and he probably thought nothing of having been a center of attention for these maidens. Instead, Seongwu was the one who was sorely conscious of such attention, as if he was not a mere friend of Minhyun’s but something else. As what?

Truth was, Seongwu already knew what this feeling was. This feeling was neither envy nor a yearning to be more like Minhyun. However, Seongwu could not bring himself to put a name to this feeling out of shyness and embarrassment. No, he could not even begin to describe it in words.

Here are some photos of Jongno (with Hwashin Department Stores in the background) in the 1930s.
Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 11:

A Day in the Life of Mr. Gubo, Novelist, by Park Tae Won: This novel was published in December of 1938. The year in Chapter 11 is 1934 (the boys are both seventeen years old), and the mention of this novel is an anachronism. However, before being published in a single volume the novel was serialized in Joseon Joongang Daily starting in 1934, so it was not weird if students in 1934 knew about the existence of this piece of literature.

Tapgol Park: (From Wikipedia) Tapgol Park, formerly Pagoda Park, is a small public park located at 97 Jongno (street), Seoul, South Korea. This park was once a site of Wongaksa (Buddhist Temple). The word tap means "pagoda", and the park gets its name from the Wongaksa Pagoda, a 10 storied stone pagoda (National Treasure No.2) located in the park. The park is still there at 2018.
Hwashin Department Store: This department store was owned by a Pro-Japanese merchant named Park Heung-Sik during the colonial era. It was burned to the ground in 1935 due to a fire, and was rebuilt. In the late 1930s it was the tallest building in Jongno, standing at 6 stories. The building was demolished in the 1970s.

Jeogori: (From Wikipedia) The jeogori (Korean: 주고리) is a basic upper garment of hanbok, Korean traditional garment, which has been worn by both men and women. It covers the arms and upper part of the wearer's body. It was in existence and use since ancient times, and during the 1930s it was pretty still widely in use.
A New Housemate

Chapter Summary

Minhyun thinks about Seongwu while he is away in Pyongyang for winter break. Minhyun and Seongwu get a new housemate; to hide his feelings for Minhyun, Seongwu intentionally behaves like he does not like Minhyun. Minhyun is met with a rejection he cannot take when Seongwu tells him not to follow him to the bathroom during bathtime.

Chapter Notes

For original Chapter 12 written by Id in Korean, go to:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 12

Originally written by Id / Translated into English by Sasha

A crescent moon lit the south sky. Under it streams of icy winds flew by, dispersing through Gyeongseong freezing cold from the north. Frosty wind tirelessly knocked on Minhyun’s window. He did not turn this uninvited night guest away. Minhyun thought that maybe, since this wind was from the north, it could tell him news about Seongwu from Pyongyang; maybe it could have brought with it Seongwu’s scent. Succumbing to his curiosity, Minhyun cracked open his window.

As if on cue, a fierce breeze of wind rushed into the room. It circled the room that was too large to be used alone, and then surrounded Minhyun, who stood leaning on the windowsill. Minhyun let it take over his body and he was soon enveloped in a sudden chill. He was not rewarded for giving away his warmth, however. He could not find any trace of Seongwu in the wind. He thought about Seongwu, who would be bracing himself against this same wind, and smiled. Minhyun shut the window; allowing the wind in had been an enjoyable deviation from his usual nighttime routine in its own way. He felt as if he had let fresh air into his somewhat lonesome heart.

A month ago, Seongwu went up to Pyongyang to spend Lunar New Year with his family. He had made plans to stay longer than usual, as he had not visited his family during the summer. How long
had Minhyun stood at the station, watching Seongwu’s take busy steps towards his train? Without Seongwu, Gyeongseong was excessively silent. Minhyun enjoyed this rare, extended time of solitude, all the while missing the chatter he was not allowed to hear for an entire month. Minhyun liked to make fun of Seongwu about his garrulousness, but in his heart he preferred Seongwu’s voice over solos of birdsong or cricket-chirps. He could not wait to hear Seongwu’s chatty accounts of his winter when they would meet again in the morning.

Minhyun closed his eyes and opened it again; it was morning. Minhyun headed to Gyeongseong station thirty minutes before the estimated arrival of Seongwu’s train. Frost from last night had glazed ice over the streets, and people and streetcars alike crawled on them. Minhyun moved carefully so he would not fall. It was surely going to be difficult walking back to the boarding house. Moreover, Seongwu was prone to wobble and lose balance on the smallest patches of ice, and Minhyun was worried about him. To prop Seongwu up every time he faltered required considerable strength. Minhyun had fortunately steadily exercised while Seongwu was gone, and had a full breakfast earlier. Minhyun was ready to catch Seongwu no matter how many times he fell; he just wished for him to appear from his platform soon. Over the years Minhyun had become used to waiting for Seongwu at the train station, but he still had no control over the tedium it entailed.

Fulfilling Minhyun’s wish, Seongwu’s figure soon appeared from afar. In a rush for some reason, Seongwu ran towards Minhyun across Gyeongseong station’s great hall. He ran as if his tail was on fire, and once he had reached Minhyun he was out of breath. Seongwu was too busy trying to breathe normally to greet him; Minhyun quietly scolded him, worried that he might faint on the spot.

“You could have taken your time.”

“I was afraid I’d keep you waiting for too long.”

It’s hot! Seongwu loosened the scarf around his neck. They each were wearing the gray and midnight blue scarf Seongwu had bought for last Christmas. Minhyun waited patiently for Seongwu to catch his breath. Seongwu cooled himself down, flapping his thick coat around him, and then stopped all movement suddenly. His gaze was at the top of Minhyun’s head.

“You… Never mind.”

“What is it?”

Seongwu evaded Minhyun’s eyes and whipped his head away. Minhyun shrewdly observed Seongwu, and easily figured out what he was going to say. The answer was within Seongwu’s eyes, which had been fixed on the crown of Minhyun’s head just moments ago.

“Haha, were you surprised that I have gotten bigger while you were away?”

“No! I wasn’t!”

“Now that you’ve overreacted, I can’t be surer of it.”

“How would you be able to judge by my reaction when I said it isn’t true?”

“Because whatever you think, shows. Always.”

Minhyun looked at Seongwu, smiling. Seongwu could not smile back. Whatever he thinks, shows? His heart dropped at those words. What is it exactly that shows? A question he dared not ask lingered inside his mouth. There was no way Minhyun knew. Restless, Seongwu tried to read Minhyun’s face. Despite Seongwu’s tension, Minhyun started to talk about something else, as
though what he said was just a passing remark.

“You know Kyuwon hyung, right?”

“Of course. What about him?”

“He’s going to live with us from now on.”

“What?”

Seongwu was surprised. Both the fact someone was moving into their house and the fact that it would be Shin Kyuwon was astonishing to him. Shin Kyuwon was a student a grade above them. Minhyun and Seongwu knew him by his name and face, but were not close to him; and suddenly he was going to be their new housemate. Seongwu had heard nothing of it until now, and he looked at Minhyun as if asking for an explanation. Minhyun added:

“You know there is an empty room on the first floor. Recently Mister and Madame started to talk about renting it out to a new student. I didn’t take them seriously; I didn’t know it would come true so soon. Anyways, when we get home Kyuwon is going to open the door.”

Seongwu nodded. He wrapped his scarf back around his neck; he was even colder than he had been now that the sweat on his body had cooled down. Seongwu’s tiny face became buried underneath his scarf. With his mittened hands, he tried to pick up his luggage, only to be stopped by Minhyun.

“You must be tired from traveling a long way.”

“Yes, but…”

“I’ll carry it.”

“I won’t object, if you really want to.”

Seongwu grinned, accepting Minhyun’s kindness. Seongwu’s luggage was thus picked up not by its owner, but by another man. The luggage was heavier than usual, and Minhyun asked what was in it.

“What’s in here?”

“This and that. Soap, and some dried persimmons you like.”

“Dried persimmons? That’s why it’s so heavy.”

“Yes. My mother was busy packing it with your shares.”

“Give her my thanks.”

Exchanging words they have not been able to share in the past month, they passed Jongno and headed towards the boarding house. They went through the blue gate they were so used to and knocked on the front door. There was a thud heard from the inside, and the front door opened wide. A familiar face greeted them.

“Seongwu, you’re here!”

“Hello.”

Seongwu pleasantly greeted Kyuwon. Although they were not properly acquainted, they had all attended the same school for three years; the three of them quickly started to get along with ease.
Friendly and animated by nature, Kyuwon easily blended into the mood of the boarding house. Originally from Chungcheong Province, he was an only child, so he doted on Seongwu and Minhyun as if they were younger siblings he never had.

Kyuwon’s room was directly beneath Minhyun and Seongwu’s. His room was initially intended for guests, but Mister and Madame ended up only using it a few times a year, so they had decided that it would be better to lend it out to a student in need. It was a sudden decision, but Minhyun did not object, and Kyuwon had been searching for a new boarding house in the area just in time. The move-in happened in a blink of an eye, and was finished a week before Seongwu’s planned return to Gyeongseong.

On the night of Seongwu’s return, Kyuwon jokingly told Minhyun and Seongwu not to run around over his roof or make strange noises. The two of them just laughed, mounting the stairs. One would expect two lads together to be boisterous and rowdy, but Minhyun and Seongwu were truly quiet; Kyuwon’s plea for them to keep the noise down had been useless. A few days later, when Mister and Madame asked Kyuwon how he liked his living arrangements, he answered that he felt as if there was no one living above him.

Kyuwon’s presence changed many facets of life at the boarding house; namely, mealtime. Normally Minhyun and Seongwu sat facing each other at the dinner table. Instead of choosing one of them to sit next to, Kyuwon pulled out a chair and sat on the side of the table between them. In this upper seat, he sometimes abruptly broke into an impersonation of their principal teacher. Minhyun and Seongwu found this mimicry so funny they had trouble eating. Mealtime suddenly became merrier than it had been.

It was nice that the mood in the boarding house was made more vivacious, but at times Kyuwon sent a chill down Seongwu’s spine by catching Minhyun and Seongwu in delicate acts of tenderness. For instance, during an evening in which dinner menu was egg drop soup, Seongwu felt his soup was bland. Kyuwon and Minhyun were focused on their food, as though they were fine with theirs. As not to bother them, Seongwu quietly looked around for salt. When he hesitated looking at a pair of shakers, not remembering which was salt, Minhyun picked up the right one and handed it to him straight away. And when Seongwu’s cup was empty, Minhyun readily filled it with water. These chains of small actions were linked to one another in amazing subtlety and spontaneity, as if Minhyun and Seongwu had choreographed them beforehand. These scenes repeated themselves daily, and Kyuwon keenly observed them; he then realized that beneath these seemingly random acts were Minhyun’s gentle and affectionate attention to Seongwu’s needs and Seongwu’s childish coquetry. Sometimes they looked like a parent caring for his baby, and sometimes like a man serving his king. If Minhyun and Seongwu had met as a man and a woman, they would have been a match made in heaven. At any rate, they were a fun sight to see from a spectator’s point of view. Kyuwon laughed, and commented, casually.

“Hey Minhyun, how fastidious you are for Seongwu. Is he such a helpless baby?”

At this, Minhyun and Seongwu halted what they were doing immediately. Not knowing what to say, Seongwu just blinked. Minhyun opened his mouth to speak, but Madame was faster.

“Leave them be. That’s just the way they are.”

“I knew because they are infamous for it at school, but I can’t help but marvel at actually seeing it with my own two eyes.”

The conversation naturally segued into the subject of ‘ordinary boys.’ Listening to the conversation between Madame and Kyuwon, Seongwu was puzzled. To these people, were Minhyun and
Seongwu strange, abnormal? Do ordinary boys have to roughhouse each other, move recklessly, and deal with every affair belligerently? If these were the standards with which normalcy for boys were judged, Minhyun and Seongwu were surely not normal. During the first and second years of school, they used to ram into each other’s bodies or tickle each other; from a certain moment, even that had disappeared from their lives. Had this change happened because they were becoming adults? Seongwu’s head swarmed with a number of speculations. Perhaps this change was brought on by Minhyun’s consideration for a sensitive, delicate literary boy that was Seongwu. If not, perhaps this change was brought on because the way Seongwu looked at Minhyun had changed.

Having delved too deeply into thought, Seongwu’s shrank in his shoulders. Having been put on a category of ‘normal’ and ‘ordinary,’ he suddenly felt like he had become an odd, strange person. Seongwu thus learned to be wary of Kyuwon. Seongwu did not want him to discover that his social persona he displayed at school and his comfortable self inside the boarding house were different. Outside, Seongwu could hide any amount of fancy he had for Minhyun, and Kyuwon should have been used to such opaque view of Seongwu. As Kyuwon moved into the boarding house, however, he could see Seongwu for what he was inside it.

Mister and Madame always doted on Minhyun and Seongwu, so they were exceptions to seeing Seongwu with his guard down. Kyuwon was different; he was truly dangerous. He found watching Minhyun and Seongwu fascinating, and he kept trying to observe them closely. Seongwu could never live with Kyuwon finding out about his feelings for Minhyun. However, as days went by, hiding his heart and masking his actions became more and more difficult.

So Seongwu decided to take drastic measures; from now on, he would act as if he did not like Minhyun at all. To carry out this plan of his, Seongwu started with rejecting small acts of kindness from Minhyun.

“I’ll do it.”

Seongwu’s answer was almost cold, frigid. Minhyun carefully tried to read into Seongwu. He tread back on his memories of their time together; there was nothing he had done to make Seongwu angry in the last twenty-four hours. Then why was Seongwu acting up? Minhyun thought long and hard, but could not think of a reason. He only realized that Seongwu was intentionally trying to push him away when Seongwu’s small rejections repeated themselves. Minhyun was confused, but he was still relaxed. He could not know what change of heart Seongwu was going through, but it would surely resolve itself in time. All he had to do was keep still, watch Seongwu quietly, and approach him with tenderness, he thought.

Minhyun was a young man who kept a calm, composed disposition at most everything life had to offer. However, he too had things he could not tolerate. Seongwu had told Minhyun to stop following him to the bathroom, claiming that he no longer needed someone outside the door when he bathed. Minhyun could take everything else Seongwu did to push him away, but this was too much. This was unfair. Seongwu had asked him to follow to the bathroom first; Minhyun had diligently done so for the past three years. Now this was almost seared into his bones as a habit. Moreover, Minhyun enjoyed sitting outside the bathroom and guarding it for Seongwu; he found pleasure in feeling a kind of arrogance that came with the idea that only he, out of everyone else in the world, could do this for Seongwu. So this was not something Minhyun could simply quit overnight.

“Stop following me.”

“Why?”

“Just! Don’t follow me!”
“I’m not following you.”

“But you are!”

“I’m not. I’m going to visit Kyuwon’s room.”

They bickered in the narrow staircase. Why did they have to argue over this? Minhyun could just let Seongwu go, but he was suddenly overcome by a sense of obstinacy. To conform to the excuse he concocted for Seongwu, he turned to head towards Kyuwon’s room at the foot of the stairs. He hid in the corner of the corridor, and waited for Seongwu to go into the bathroom. He had never felt so hurt at the sight of the bathroom door, heartlessly shut. He thought about throwing a stone at it to play a trick on Seongwu, but jettisoned the idea at the thought of Seongwu trembling in fear. Yes, he wanted to fight Seongwu on this, but he could not have him suffer.

Minhyun swallowed a sigh, and silently sat with his back leaning against the bathroom door. He planned to wait until Seongwu was done bathing, and then go upstairs before Seongwu came out of the bathroom. He lingered, telling himself just a little longer, just a little longer, until he heard Seongwu start a soliloquy.

“Hey, Hwang Minhyun.”

Did Seongwu just call Minhyun? Minhyun’s head shot up. As if confirming against any doubt Minhyun kept, Seongwu’s voice spoke again.

“...Minhyun. Are you there?”

Seongwu’s voice had significantly softened than it had been earlier, as though his frozen heart had thawed while he bathed. Minhyun thought about answering, but decided against it. Seongwu stung at Minhyun not to follow him, and now he was asking if he was there, as if he somehow knew Minhyun would follow him anyways. Minhyun thought if he answered Seongwu now, this same series of absurdity would surely happen again. Then until when should he pretend he was not there? Minhyun slowly crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“You’re not there? You’re the meanest, pettiest person ever. Evil Hwang Minhyun.”

“.........”

“You’re so mean, Hwang Minhyun. You pretended like you weren’t going to leave, but you really went away. Idiot Hwang Minhyun. Dummy Hwang Minhyun.”

From the warm bathroom full of snow-white steam, Seongwu’s babbling trickled out. A smile bloomed on Minhyun’s face. He wanted to know how long Seongwu would continue to talk to himself, but he knew if he continued to play dumb any longer he would be hated twice as much later.

“I see. Then why did you tell me not to follow you in the first place?”

“.........”

Silence ensued for quite a time. Minhyun tried his best to stifle his laughter, but he could not hide it perfectly. Eventually, he burst into laughter, and was doused with water; Seongwu had cracked open the bathroom door and splashed a bucketful at him. The room rang with the splash of water and Minhyun’s mirthful laughter. Inside the bathroom Seongwu mumbled something unintelligible, but Minhyun could not hear him. Minhyun turned his back towards Seongwu when he finally stepped out of the bathroom.
“What do I do now? My back is entirely wet.”

Seongwu, who was trying to quickly pass by, had to be stopped by the wide expanse of Minhyun’s back. Minhyun’s white shirt was soaked, and was tightly clinging to his skin. Minhyun was so into his prank that apparently he was not even feeling shame in showing Seongwu his bare skin under wet, thin fabric of his shirt. There clearly would be no one as mischievous as Minhyun in this world. Seongwu’s palm fiercely slapped down on Minhyun’s back. An evil prankster had to be punished.

“Ow! That hurts.”

Minhyun groaned, but Seongwu primly scoffed before passing him by. Seongwu walked away with his bath basket under his arm, never once looking back. Minhyun followed him like a puppy. Unaffected by Seongwu’s cold response, he ostentatiously changed his shirt in front of Seongwu, moaning all the while.

“Hey, Ong. You have a spicy blow. See, my back keeps tingling.”

At Minhyun’s continuous complaint, Seongwu felt obliged to examine his back. There was a red handprint on the flat expanse of Minhyun’s back, as if he had been stamped by something in the shape of Seongwu’s hand. Seongwu did not remember hitting him this hard. He momentarily regretted what he had done, but there was no use now; he had already slapped Minhyun’s back, and all he could do was to wish that his handprint would not turn into a bruise. Seongwu scolded Minhyun.

“There is nothing on your back. The reason why you’re hurting is…

“...Just your imagination.”

What if Kyuwon found out there was a bruise on Minhyun’s back? If he does, what excuse would they make to fool him? Countless thoughts clouded Seongwu’s head. Fortunately, despite the anxiety Seongwu felt under his gaze, Kyuwon became busy as a new semester approached. He was in the graduating class, after all, and had many things to do and tend to. Kyuwon left them with an advice to play as much as they can while playing was still possible, and withdrew his interest in observing them. So naturally, Seongwu’s resolution to behave as if he did not like Minhyun crumbled like a sandcastle in high tide. Seongwu was secretly glad, thinking he was lucky; he had only attempted laughably a few times, but pretending like he did not like Minhyun was harder than he had imagined.

Now that Seongwu was relieved from the anxiety that came with his new roommate, he wanted to enjoy his time with Minhyun as much as he could, but there was little time left. Minhyun and Seongwu also had to get themselves ready for the fast-approaching new semester. The most urgent errand they had to run was buying new uniforms.

Minhyun, especially, was in a dire need of a new uniform; he had grown bigger still over the winter break. Seongwu had grown maybe a single centimeter, but Minhyun appeared to have outgrown him; the difference in their height had widened. Seongwu, who had become accustomed over the last few years to looking down at Minhyun when they talked, had a difficult time accepting this new reality. He would feel less furious his eyes could be level with Minhyun’s, but now, he had to look up whenever he spoke to Minhyun.

So Seongwu made a bogus argument that Minhyun’s increase in height was due to the abundance of thick hair that covered the crown of his head. Seongwu would have liked to see Minhyun struggle for rebuttal, but Minhyun’s response could not have been more nonchalant.

“It is a compliment to tell a man he has thick tress of hair. Thank you.”
“But how would you explain this difference in eye level, which cannot be explained by the plenty of my hair? Would Mr. Ong Seongwu, fourth year at Gyeongseong Secondary School, know the answer to this enigma?”

“...... Shut up.”

“Haha, this young master from a respectable family of nobility knows how to swear.”

“...... Go awaaaaay.”

“Did you already forget the evening you resented me for actually going away?”

“I will not speak to you anymore, you’re so infuriating!”

Seongwu’s willful provocation ended with his own vexation. Seongwu did not know how these things had happened. How cruel destiny was to him! Seongwu reproached all the gods of this world he had never met. *I prayed to be taller than him; why did you grant Minhyun’s prayer and not mine?* Seongwu realized that this was a pitiful shifting of blame, and shook his head in an attempt to rid of hodgepodge of thoughts that gathered like heavy storm clouds within it.

“Well, it’s time to go.”

Minhyun offered Seongwu his hand. Seongwu looked down at it vacantly. A hand, always clean and rosy in color, was waiting for him. In contrast to his great height, Minhyun’s hands were on the smaller side; this was somewhat of a consolation to Seongwu. Seongwu took Minhyun’s hand. He liked the sensation of cool body temperature that touched him.

Their fourth spring semester was now only a step away.

Chapter End Notes

No glossary for this chapter.

However, Id and I have been meaning to add this explanation to a footnote for a while:

Please note that for Korean people in the colonial 1930s, Minhyun and Seongwu are both relatively well-off. As mentioned before, Minhyun comes from an affluent family of merchants, and Seongwu from a reputable (if antiquated) family of nobility from the north. Id just wanted to make sure that the readers realize that the lifestyle Minhyun and Seongwu enjoy, while it seems pretty humble, is in no way a depiction of average, common life under Japanese colonization of Korea in the 1930s; they are privileged.
The first streak of daylight shone into the room at sunrise. Minhyun rose even before the rooster’s crow and prepared himself for school. It was imperative for him to hurry, now that the time to use the bathroom, previously shared between two, now had to be split among three. Kyuwon also rose early and rushed about the boarding house.

Meanwhile, Seongwu was still deep in his dreams. He had a difficult time getting himself up in the mornings; so naturally, it became Minhyun’s task to wake him up. Over the past years Seongwu usually rose up when Minhyun called his name; now that he was accustomed to Minhyun’s efforts, calling him was not enough. As was this morning: Minhyun anxiously called his name, but Seongwu, asleep on his side, would not budge. How would Minhyun wake Seongwu, who always asked for five more minutes but ended up taking twenty?

Minhyun thought for a moment. There were many ways to wake a sleeping boy. Which was right for Seongwu? Which was not too gentle, but not too aggressive? Finally Minhyun recalled a method he had kept only in his mind for a long time. He had only executed it in his imagination before, but this morning he felt defiant enough to challenge himself to it.
Minhyun tiptoed to Seongwu’s bedding. Seongwu was completely oblivious to him, still in the clutches of morning sleep. His face, peacefully asleep, was adorably cherubic. Minhyun poked Seongwu’s cheek with his finger.

“Wake up, Ong Seongwu. It’s time for school.”

“Mmmm…”

“If you don’t wake up, I will take extreme measures.”

“Mmmmmmmm…”

Half asleep, Seongwu answered carelessly. Was Minhyun telling him to wake up? He did not have a clue what Minhyun was saying to him. Now, the only way to make Seongwu understand was to communicate through his body. Minhyun bent down, pushing his hands under Seongwu’s armpits and wounding his forearms around Seongwu’s back. Holding Seongwu tightly in his arms, he raised his upper body again.

Seongwu gasped, opening his eyes at the sensation of being lifted up. Without a chance to defend himself, Seongwu was made to sit upright. He was so dumbfounded that he could not even question his current state. Moreover, Minhyun was holding him in his arms; this made Seongwu’s head spin. What had just happened? Minhyun, upon seeing Seongwu’s face, petrified in surprise, laughed aloud.

“I see that this method is effective. I shall use it every morning from now on.”

“What, what do you mean?”

“Anyways, get ready. We don’t have much time left.”

Minhyun pointed to his wristwatch. There were less than thirty minutes before they had to leave the boarding house. Seongwu shot up from his bedding, now fully aware of his risk of being late on the first day of the semester.

They could leave for school only after thumping around the entire boarding house. They each held their black book bags in one hand, and their lunchboxes on the other. The spring morning was chilly, as the last remaining cold of the winter lingered in the air. As they started to wonder if they should have brought their scarves, regardless of how ridiculous they would have looked, they were already at the entrance to main street.

The street was filled with warm vitality of young students that occupied it. On their yet childlike faces were expectations and determinations that each of them held in their hearts. However, their studious passion was not all that contributed to the heat that warmed the street; a great part of it was caused by burning gazes from schoolgirls heading to local girls’ schools. Seongwu shrewdly noticed not only gazes that came his way, but also those that were transfixed on Minhyun. In groups of twos and threes, girls whispered amongst each other, their cheeks blushing for reasons that needed not be asked: excessive beauty possessed by Seongwu and Minhyun.

Seongwu understood the girls who stared at Minhyun. Minhyun was splendidly attractive to even Seongwu, who had spent every moment with him, glorious or unglamorous, for years. Seongwu could not begin to imagine how wonderful Minhyun would appear to strangers. Seongwu secretly wanted to disturb their gazes and tell them off to stop staring, but he would have to risk his reputation as a sane person in order to do so. Only Hwang Minhyun stayed blissfully oblivious to the persistent
glances that girls in the streets threw at him, and Seongwu’s own burning heart.

Now that they had become fourth years, they were given a new classroom. Fortunately, Seongwu and Minhyun were still in the same class. Each class year was small, and almost everyone in their class knew each other already. Even before exchanging greetings, everyone could not hide their surprise at seeing Minhyun; he had grown noticeably taller than when they last saw him. Some questioned if this was really the Minhyun they knew, and some lamented not being able to call him ‘cute’ any longer. Unlike how he was so mean to Seongwu about it, Minhyun merely smiled, keeping a modest disposition about the whole height business.

The bell rang, and it was promptly time for morning assembly. Their new teacher entered through the classroom door. He was a young man, his manner of dress refined and sophisticated. A man of an unfriendly disposition, he wrote his name on the blackboard as soon as he appeared. His name was Kimura Daisuke (木村大輔), and he was a Japanese man from Tokyo. Everyone tensed, as they only had been instructed by Korean teachers before.

Mr. Kimura taught official national language, or Japanese. From day one he chastised students in a strict tone of voice. He did not condone even the most trivial mistakes; he questioned students on whether they had been learning at all if they ever wrote wrongly a Chinese character, and sometimes even slapped their palms with a ruler.

Mr. Kimura thus became infamous for his open discrimination and harsh treatment of his students; with one exception. His attitude softened in front of one particular student: Minhyun. Among his students, Minhyun was publicly his favorite. The only reason given was that Minhyun’s pronunciation of Japanese language was impeccable. There were a few things in the Japanese language that Koreans could not pronounce correctly; Minhyun could say them exquisitely. Minhyun, however, felt that Mr. Kimura’s attention and nepotism in his favor was a burden. He did not consider being a favorite of a Japanese man a good thing. Seongwu just watched Minhyun nervously in presence of their Japanese teacher.

Unsteady days at school continued, and they felt every day as if they were walking on a tightrope. Meanwhile, Minhyun’s excellent pronunciation and beautiful voice were recognized by Mr. Kimura, and he was unofficially assigned to be a reader of poems in class. Every class, Minhyun read aloud dozens of stanzas of wakas* and haiku*. Seongwu watched Minhyun solemnly speak of the futility of time and withered love as if mesmerized.

Even today, Mr. Kimura passionately explained Saigyo*, a seminal medieval waka poet. He then had Minhyun recite two stanzas from a poem that sung about the moon. Minhyun stood up, his textbook in hand, and clearly and slowly read the poem aloud.

Even in this turbulent world, when autumn illuminated by moonlight comes

One is certain to linger, wishing to live longer

Stanza 1.

いとふ世も月澄む秋になりぬればながらへずはと思ふなるかな

Even in this turbulent world, when autumn illuminated by moonlight comes

One is certain to linger, wishing to live longer
Whenever Minhyun recited a poem, Seongwu was grateful for having been assigned to a seat behind him. If he had sat in front of Minhyun, he would not have been able to admire him to his heart’s content. Seongwu feigned nonchalance and stared at Minhyun; everything around him contributed to a magnificent vision that was Hwang Minhyun. The schoolgirls in the streets would never be allowed to see this in their lives. A petty sense of victory filled Seongwu’s heart.

At the same time, many questions surged within Seongwu. Would Minhyun ever fall in love? If he did, what would it look like? Would Minhyun, like the poem he just recited, ever stay up all night to wait for someone? Seongwu could not easily imagine Minhyun in such a state. Minhyun he had observed thus far seemed lightyears removed from fanciful romance.

Seongwu’s sense of triumph over the schoolgirls vanished like waves breaking against a rock. To Seongwu, it seemed that there was no realistic way that he and Minhyun would ever become romantically tied to each other.

‘My poor heart.’

Seongwu let out a tiny sigh. His dense, downcast eyelashes trembled like wings of a butterfly.

After many sleepless, quivering nights, Seongwu had only just acknowledged his feelings. However, mere knowledge of his feelings did not give him any means of acting on them. They were indeed living in an era of free love, but Seongwu could not ascertain whether their relationship would even be possible. What was worse, Seongwu’s love interest was someone who appeared as if he would never love anyone. Seongwu felt like he was facing a giant wall. He would feel better if he could simply snap out of his feelings, but he could not, and so he continued to sit on his unrequited crush with no end in sight.

***************

After they endured a storm of midterms, they were bombarded with homework assignments. Most
subjects only required them to solve practice problems given to them, but Japanese demanded a little creativity; students were made to write a stanza of haiku in the form they were taught in class.

Mr. Kimura commanded them to be serious about this assignment, as he planned to write their poems on tanzakus* and display them around school. Most students had never written on tanzakus except for when writing wishes on them during chilseok*; they were considerably stressed by this assignment. Minhyun and Seongwu were no exceptions.

They would have felt more comfortable if they could write a free-form poem, but they were limited to haiku, and this made things infinitely more difficult. Haiku was a form of fixed verse made some four hundred years ago in Japan, and had its own unique and particular rules. First, haikus must be in a series of five syllables, seven syllables, and again, five syllables. There had to be exactly seventeen syllables, and there had to be a certain charm in reading and pausing between phrases. Second, a haiku must contain a word signifying a season within it. These two rules had to be obeyed for a poem to be considered a haiku.

Until now, they had only read poems written by others; they had only a handful of opportunities to write one themselves. Reading a poem and writing one were completely different feats. Upon facing the blank white of their notebooks, they were overcome by a vast despair of not knowing what to do. Setting aside the complex rules they had to observe, they had no idea how to set a theme and motif for their new poem. Were they so void of inspiration because they only stayed in their room? Seongwu, who had been idly toying with his pencil, stood up.

“Let’s go out.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. I can’t stand being stuck in this room any longer.”

Let’s go out and search for our inspiration! Seongwu pulled Minhyun by the arm out of the boarding house. They searched around for a quiet, secluded place in which they could sit down and be lost in thoughts. Minhyun suggested they take a northerly route, instead of their usual southerly one, and venture to the end of Bukchon.

Following Minhyun’s lead, they walked for a while until they reached the mouth of Bugak Mountain. They had no intentions to climb the mountain, so they stopped there, and found a couple of flat rocks to sit down on. They each took a seat, with the trunk of a large cherry blossom tree between them. They had walked quickly and steadfastly, and Seongwu found himself slightly out of breath. Seongwu looked up to the sky. Cherry blossoms, which were in full bloom just last week, had mostly fallen. In their place were freshly budding leaves that framed Seongwu’s view of the sky.

Straight ahead, Seongwu could see downtown Gyeongseong. There was Bukchon, densely packed with hanoks, the Japanese General Government Building, rudely built inside Gyeongbokgung Palace*, and a few modern structures beyond Gwanghwamun Gate*. Gyeongseong stood in front of them like a painting that colorfully blended the old and the new. Seongwu took all of this in as a passing wind lifted his hair to graze gently on his forehead.

What should he write about? Seongwu looked around for a long while. Everything in this world could be a subject of his writing, but he could not write about all of it. To incorporate difficult rules of haikus into his writing, he had to be prudent.

A pink petal fluttered down on Seongwu’s lap. Seongwu caught the last piece of spring that slowly descended upon his palm. The petal was lovely, without a trace of a cut on its soft skin. Seongwu was gifted with an idea while he touched it; there was nothing more poetic yet representative of a
season. Seongwu began to write his thoughts down on his notebook, and quietly moutheed the words, trying to put them into a cadence.

Minhyun, who had been watching Seongwu, also looked up at the cherry blossom tree. Petals that had still clung to the branches lightly danced in the wind, waving the last of spring goodbye. The sky was clear, the breeze was gentle, and an adorable figure before him was absorbed in writing a poem. In front of this view, almost detached from reality in its tranquility, Minhyun relaxed his body and leaned his back against the tree trunk. As if he had forgotten all about his poetry assignment, he simply sat there, observing Seongwu.

Out of the blue, a gush of strong winds passed them by. What remained on the branches began to rustle down. Petals rained down in a baby-pink flurry around Seongwu, who was so devoted to his new poem that he himself was unaware of what fell around him. Minhyun thought that in this moment, Seongwu looked like a butterfly that folded its wings and enjoyed the sun on a flower it settled on.

Ah, the inspiration was finally here. Minhyun picked up his pen. Crisp sounds of pens scribbling on paper filled the space between them.

It was a long while later that they put down their pens. Seongwu chose every single word of his poem with unyielding consideration. When he raised his head from his notebook, his face lit from within with a sense of accomplishment, Minhyun was watching Seongwu with his chin cupped in hand. Had he already finished?

“Are you done?”

“Since a while before.”

“Can I see it, then?”

“Here.”

Minhyun acquiesced his notebook. Seongwu recited his poem, written down in a somewhat messy handwriting.

木の陰や蝶と休むも他生の縁
Resting with a butterfly
Under treesshadow
A tie from past life

“There was a butterfly around?”

How cute. Minhyun let out a chuckle. There were no insects whatsoever around them the entire time they sat on these rocks. To hide the true identity of his butterfly, however, Minhyun answered in the affirmative. Why didn’t I see it? I love butterflies. Seongwu babbled, and read the poem again. It was an elegant poem. Seongwu especially focused on the words ‘past life’ Minhyun had chosen to put at
the end of his poem. As far as Seongwu knew, Minhyun did not even believe in life after death, let alone past lives. Seongwu asked why Minhyun had written these words, and Minhyun answered that he was merely trying to fit the poem into syllabic requirements of a haiku. Considering that, ‘past life’ was a fantastic idea. Seongwu liked Minhyun’s poem.

I showed you mine, so now won’t you have to show me yours?”

“Here it is.”

Seongwu had been wishing that Minhyun would read his poem anyways. He quickly handed Minhyun his notebook. Minhyun gave Seongwu’s poem a once-over, and then read it aloud with his usual finesse.

命二つの中に生きたる桜哉

The lives of two;
And a cherry blossom flower that blooms
Between them

Seongwu’s heart sped up when a deep, poised voice recited what he had just written. Minhyun smiled and added:

“Your poem is pretty, perhaps because the world seen through your eyes is so beautiful.”

Minhyun’s compliment was beyond Seongwu’s expectations. Seongwu almost jumped from his seat in excitement, but restrained himself. He could not let Minhyun know. He willed the ends of his lips down, and feigned a casual attitude.

“Of course, because I am good when it comes to any kind of writing.”

“You’re right. Ong Seongwu is a wonderful writer.”

At Seongwu’s cute show of bluff, Minhyun just chimed in an encouragement. Normally, he would have poked fun of Seongwu, but for some reason he was not doing so. What was more, Minhyun looked happy while agreeing with Seongwu’s bravado. Taking back his notebook Minhyun handed back to him, Seongwu felt confused at Minhyun’s gaze. Minhyun, saying he liked Seongwu’s poem, looked at him as if he liked Seongwu himself.

Not able to withstand the straightforward gaze from Minhyun, Seongwu looked away. Sometimes Minhyun’s demeanor seriously confounded Seongwu. Minhyun kept pushing him into depths of delusion. Seongwu bit down on his lower lip.
In May, the Japanese enforced a blackout throughout the entire country. Uproar of sirens reverberated through Gyeongseong, and Bukchon was once again immersed in utter darkness. Dozens of Japanese policemen ran about across the alleyways. The rattle of their rifles and swords colliding against one another disturbed their nights. Nevertheless, Seongwu was not afraid of the darkness of night anymore. Minhyun was right next to him. Shoulder to shoulder, they looked up at the Milky Way lavishly embroidered across the night sky.

“Look, there, a shooting star.”

Minhyun pointed at the sky. There were two shooting stars falling across the midnight blue of the atmosphere, leaving bright traces along their wake. Seongwu quickly gathered his hands together in a gesture of prayer. He was compelled to make a wish before the stars burned out. Seongwu shut his eyes, and prayed in earnest: *Please make Hwang Minhyun like me!*

“What did you pray for?”

Minhyun, who stood with one arm on the windowsill, asked. Seongwu could never tell him the truth, so he substituted it with a half-truth.

“I prayed for me to be allowed to date.”

“...Date?”

“Yes. Free dating.”

Minhyun’s face subtly hardened; he seemed as if he did not expect for Seongwu to wish for something like this. At this, Seongwu felt his chest tighten. If Minhyun was not going to grant his wish, why would he put on a face like that? Seongwu decided to suppress himself by saying something deliberately provocative.

“I wish to do something bold, like Na Hye-Sok*. ”

“What?”

“You know, that woman who had a romantic escapade with Choe Rin in Paris, France. Maybe I wouldn’t do something so shocking, but I’d like to have a thrilling love affair of my own.”

“You surely dream big.”

“A love affair at a third country, neither related to Joseon nor Japan, with someone wonderful who has the taste I appreciate and understands me. Isn’t that romantic? Just like a novel.”

Seongwu’s voice was elevated, like he was walking within a dream. Minhyun, who listened to him patiently, quietly answered, in a tone that sounded strangely timid.

“Reality is different from novels, though.”
“Yes. So I wish for my reality to prevail over fantasy.”

Seongwu’s eyes, as he said this, sparkled like a pair of stars. His gaze was fully conveyed to Minhyun, and changed his mind, which he thought was set in stone. Whoever saw Seongwu’s eyes would want to make his reality so beautiful as to defeat novels in its pulchritude. Minhyun knew in his heart that reality could never beat fantasy; but he found himself wishing all impossible dreams and wishes to come true if that would satisfy Seongwu and make him happy.

Just as if the shooting starts granted Seongwu’s wish, Seongwu was offered a surprising proposal from his classmates near the end of finals. Somehow having gotten their hands on the news of a ‘group meeting,’ they began to goad Seongwu to join them in a meeting with girls from the nearby Geunhwa Girls’ School. It was true Seongwu wished to date, but he had not wished to date with just anyone; things were headed in a strange direction. Seongwu forced himself to laugh, and tried to wave away this proposal.

“Oh, I wouldn’t know anything about these things.”

“Ong, please. We need your face with those chiselled features. You don’t even have to do anything there. Come with us, just this once.”

No matter how many times Seongwu rejected them, they kept on dogging Seongwu about it. Seongwu would have ended these confrontations somehow if Minhyun had been next to him, but his classmates cleverly only came to beg him to join the ‘meeting’ when Minhyun was not there. Because they seemed so desperate, Seongwu reluctantly gave in.

“Okay. Just this once.”

Immediately after Seongwu’s unwilling approval was given, the date for this ‘group meeting’ was set. Next day, Seongwu was furtively given a note that contained the time and place for it. The meeting was set for the following Thursday afternoon, at a teahouse in Jongno.

Even after he gave his permission for this meeting, Seongwu could not stop worrying about Minhyun. Usually, Seongwu had shared everything about his life with Minhyun; this time, though, he could not decide if he should tell Minhyun about this meeting with girls. Up until Thursday afternoon, when all classes ended, Seongwu had not decided whether to inform Minhyun, and in the end he could not tell Minhyun a thing. For some reason, Seongwu felt that Minhyun would dislike it.

Seongwu had overlooked an important factor, however. Even before meetings or whatnot, Minhyun was hurt that Seongwu tried to separate himself from Minhyun. Until now, for years, they had been inseparable, like a needle and a thread. Minhyun failed to understand why Seongwu insisted on going out to Jongno by himself. Seongwu gave him some excuse, but it was so obviously sloppy and fabricated. What could possibly make Seongwu so intent on sending Minhyun to the boarding house on his own, and go to Jongno alone? Even as he grudgingly headed towards the boarding house, Minhyun could not take his eyes off Seongwu’s back.

Once at Jongno, Seongwu felt his heart palpitate restlessly. It was his first time being downtown without Minhyun. To add to his agitation, he was headed to a teahouse, with a purpose of being in a meeting with girls. The teahouse they were to meet was much more fabulous and sophisticated than the writers’ teahouse he had visited with Minhyun before. Unlike Seongwu, who was a little late after having to scuffle with Minhyun before leaving, the other boys were already there, sitting in a single row with nervous tension apparent on their faces. Seongwu sat down on the end of the bench they were sitting on.
To be honest, Seongwu had no idea as to what went on in a meeting. He thought of it as a group of boys and girls awkward acquainting themselves with each other, talk, and exchange love letters if they found someone they liked. Seongwu did not know anything beyond that, and he felt an instinctive fear of the unknown as he sat in silence. Seongwu did not think he would be arrested as a defier of Japanese rule or anything, but somehow he could not stop fretting.

A wind chime that hung on the door of the teahouse lightly jingled. A group of girls entered, chatting among themselves. They were the girls, students at Geunhwa Girls’ School.

One classmate, who tried the hardest to pull Seongwu into this meeting, gladly greeted one of the girls, who seemed to be the organizer for this meeting on the other side. Other than the two of them, no boy in the group knew any of the girls, and a painfully awkward silence ensued. The two organizers of the meeting attempted to lead on a conversation to elevate the mood; and they all started to talk, one by one. Seongwu just listened to the quick-fire conversation that continued between the boys and girls, looking down at his teacup.

Two of the girls on the other side of the table kept glancing at Seongwu, with gazes full of curiosity and favorable impression. Indeed, a handsome boy. The girls could not stop marveling at him. His ordinary gakuran somehow looked more glamorous than those expensive western suits. Even his silence added to his rueful beauty. The girls began to understand the conventional phrase ‘love at first sight.’

At some point, the conversation, which had continued with relative ease, came to an abrupt halt. Leveraging this moment of calmness, one of the girls gathered enough nerve to address Seongwu. Her question was a trivial one, but Seongwu, who was absently thinking about something else, did not catch what she said. Looking apologetic, he asked her to repeat her question, and the girl burst into laughter.

“I said, what are you thinking so deeply about?”

“Ah…”

Seongwu thought that if he honestly told her what was on his mind, he would surely ruin the congenial mood of the meeting the others all worked so hard to achieve. Truth was, he was thinking about Minhyun, who had a bit of a sweet tooth, because his honey citrus tea was so sweetly delicious. Seongwu was thinking about how he could bring Minhyun to this very teahouse to taste it.

Seongwu tried to wiggle out of the question, feigning ignorance, but several pairs of eyes were eagerly waiting for his answer now. Seongwu opened his mouth, trying to think of some bogus explanation for his apparent spacing out, when the faces of the girls opposite him visibly changed.

“...Ong Seongwu?”

This voice was excessively familiar. No way. Seongwu turned around, slowly, to confirm the owner of the voice he knew so well. Minhyun, his arms crossed in front of his chest, was looking down at Seongwu.

“It’s you.”

“Ah… Um, Minhyun.”

“I’m sorry to have bothered you. Have a great time.”
“No, wait!”

Minhyun coldly turned around. Even Seongwu’s classmate, who sat next to him, flinched at the icy disfavor in Minhyun’s voice. Sirens went off in Seongwu’s head. He could not let Minhyun go this way.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to leave early!”

Seongwu hurriedly got up and chased Minhyun out of the teahouse. There was no time for him to question the lack of logic in this situation. Seongwu heard his classmates call after him, but he did not have the composure to address them.

Seongwu thought he was on Minhyun’s heels, but somehow Minhyun was already meters ahead of him. Minhyun’s back, always so warm and kind, felt brusque and heartless to Seongwu at this moment. This felt like… breaking up. Seongwu stopped, and screamed Minhyun’s name.

“Hey, Hwang Minhyun!”

Seongwu’s sonorous voice rang throughout the alley, but Minhyun did not look back, as if he did not hear Seongwu calling him. Damn it! Now Seongwu had to catch him physically. Seongwu stepped forward with his right foot, in great haste. In his impetuousness, his foot was caught by a jagged stone that protruded from the ground.

“Ah!”

Seongwu yapped as he clamoured down to the ground. Around him, face down on the street, a cloud of dust settled. Ah… Seongwu felt a moan exit his lips. For a simple fall, he was hurting in so many different places. His ankle felt twisted, and the delicate skin of his knees and palms were all grazed against rough surface of the street. Blood seeped out from the rip and peel of his skin, while grains of sand pricked mercilessly at it. Seongwu raised his arms to dust himself when someone grabbed hold of his wrist. It was Minhyun. Minhyun, who was just as out of breath as Seongwu, was standing right in front of him. If he was going to return like this, why did he leave the way he did? Seongwu felt a pang of hurt.

“You…”

“I’m sorry.”

“…Is that all?”

“I’m so sorry. Does it hurt a lot?”

Minhyun looked like he was about to cry, as if he was the one who was injured. He carefully examined Seongwu. At Minhyun’s warm concern and attention, the anxious throb in Seongwu’s heart subsided. Seongwu petulantly complained.

“Can’t you see?”

“Let’s hurry home and put on iodide tinctures* on your wounds.”

“You put them on, since I got hurt because of you.”

“Of course. Again, I’m sorry.”
“Don’t ever do this again.”

“Yes. I will never desert you again.”

Deep sorrow filled Minhyun’s handsome face to the brim. Minhyun held Seongwu’s grazed hand in his own and did not know what to do. Seongwu decided to ask why Minhyun so petulantly left him the way he did at some later time. They had to hurry back home. The boarding house was about twenty minutes away on foot. It seemed close, but at the same time so far. Minhyun asked, concern lacing his voice:

“How can you stand?”

“Of course! ...Oh. Ah.”

“You can’t stand up?”

“Uh, it hurts, a little. Ah.”

Despite his confident answer, Seongwu could not move. When he put some of his weight on his ankle, he felt pins and needles in his leg. There was no way he could walk himself home.

“...It really hurts. I’m not joking.”

They had to navigate their way through intricate alleyways to get home. While Seongwu worried about how to get home, a broad back presented itself in front of him. Minhyun had crouched down into a squat in front of Seongwu.

“On my back.”

“If you can help me by holding my arm, I can walk.”

“No, it’d be better if you rode on my back.”

“What is this? You sound like someone who’d been dying to piggyback me.”

“That’s half true.”

“You’re one strange fellow.”

If Seongwu kept rejecting Minhyun’s offer, they would have stayed in that very spot hours after sunset. Seongwu’s priority was going back home to rest, so he gave in and awkwardly put himself on Minhyun’s back. This was the very first time being piggybacked by someone since Seongwu was five years old.

They silently walked home. More accurately, Minhyun walked, and Seongwu quietly let himself be carried, his chin propped on one of Minhyun’s broad shoulders. As familiar alleyways and turns appeared in front of their eyes, Seongwu felt more at ease and began to speak.

“Earlier, why did you leave like that? I felt so embarrassed.”

“Were you embarrassed? I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying you’re sorry.”

“Well...”
Minhyun hesitated.

“I don’t know. I think I was momentarily angered.”

“What made you angry?”

“Just… I wondered why you were there.”

“Am I not allowed to go out downtown without you?”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it? Was it because I went out to a meeting?”

“........”

It seemed as if Seongwu hit the nail on its head. Minhyun did not answer. At this unexpected response, Seongwu became flustered. His going out to a meeting was wrong in Minhyun’s eyes? Why? Seongwu could not connect the dots logically in his head. If he really weighed down on it, it was none of Minhyun’s business whether Seongwu went to meetings or not. Then why was Minhyun angered by it? Could it be...

“Were you angry because we didn’t invite you?”

“Are you joking? I would never go to those things if I had been invited hundred of times.”

Minhyun raised his voice. Seongwu flinched. Minhyun could have just kept his usual, placid tone.

They arrived at the boarding house. As Minhyun took his shoes off, Seongwu bobbed his feet up and down and dropped his shoes on the ground. Minhyun looked back as Seongwu’s shoes hit the ground with a thud. Minhyun felt compelled to go back and neatly arrange them in place, but Seongwu’s wounds were more important.

Minhyun climbed the stairs in twos and entered their room, then carefully placed Seongwu on the bedding he had pushed aside in the morning. He lifted Seongwu’s sleeve, and his skin was a muddle of blood and sand.

“Wait just a moment.”

Minhyun hurried downstairs, and brought water in a small bucket. He wet a towel he had hanged near the window, and gingerly wiped the red, swollen wound on Seongwu’s skin. Minhyun then picked up some cotton gauze and iodide tincture. The cold medication settled around Seongwu’s wounds. Seongwu felt stinging in that area, and in an attempt to forget the pain looked at Minhyun even more. Minhyun’s face was, to him, like anesthesia: his knitted brow, an unusual sight, dark shade that had descended on his features, and his lips, tight as if he was keeping himself from speaking. Seongwu fell into a trance-like admiration of Minhyun. As he thoroughly studied Minhyun’s face in front of him, the pain slowly receded.

“I know it hurts a lot. I’m sorry.”

“You apologized again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Such a trifling set of wounds. I care nothing for it.”
“...You said you were hurting, earlier.”

“Well, that was earlier. Hey, don’t grab me so tight.”

“I didn’t.”

It surely felt like Minhyun grabbed him tightly. Seongwu’s eyes narrowed, and returned to their usual roundness. As Seongwu watched Minhyun solemnly dressing his wounds and bandaging them, he suddenly thought of a story his old teacher had told him.

“Minhyun, what is the most dangerous thing in the world?”

“Well, I don’t know.”

“Try to guess.”

“...The Japanese Government General?”

“...You’re not wrong, but your answer isn’t what I had in mind.”

“Yeah?”

“The answer is paper. Paper that we touch every day.”

“Paper...?”

Minhyun raised his head and looked Seongwu in the eye. Under his distinct, sharp eyelids were pools full of innocent curiosity.

“A papercut hurts more, and lasts longer, than a wound from a knife.”

Just in time, Minhyun finished bandaging Seongwu’s wounds. Seongwu lifted his ankle mid-air. Firmly coiled around his swollen ankle were clean, white bandages. Rotating his ankle, now hurting noticeably less than it was, Seongwu continued.

“That makes no sense, right? So I asked my teacher further about it. He then laughed and told me: ‘what is written on paper delves deeper into the soul.’”

“He has a point.”

“Right? So as I was saying, I’m fine. These wounds are nothing. So stop saying you’re sorry.”

“All right. From now on I will only worry about you when you get a papercut.”

“I didn’t mean that!”

Minhyun chuckled at Seongwu’s indignant retort. Minhyun seemed to have returned to his normal, calm self from his bout of anger. He neatly organized and returned the iodide tincture medicine, leftover gauze, and bandages to each of their right places. Watching him clean up, Seongwu was amazed at how consistent and steadfast Minhyun was at being himself. Minhyun had in his life his own set of rules and principles, and he seemed to leave no room for exceptions and anomalies; so Seongwu was astounded every time Minhyun showed an abrupt change at the most unexpected of times. Seongwu felt puzzled again, as if he was facing a seemingly impossible riddle.
Waka : (From Wikipedia) Waka (和歌, "Japanese poem") is a type of poetry in classical Japanese literature. Waka are composed in Japanese, and are contrasted with poetry composed by Japanese poets in Classical Chinese, which are known as kanshi.

Haiku : Haiku (俳句) is a very short Japanese poem with seventeen syllables and three verses.

Saigyo : (From Wikipedia) Saigyō Hōshi (西行 法師, 1118 – March 23, 1190) was a famous Japanese poet of the late Heian and early Kamakura period.

Tanzaku : These are long papers in size 36cm * 6cm. They are used to make wishes in temples or for haiku poems.

Chilseok : (From Wikipedia) Chilseok is a Korean traditional festival which falls on the seventh day of the seventh month of the Korean lunisolar calendar, originating from the Chinese Qixi Festival. Chilseok is a period where the heat starts to dwindle and the monsoon season begins, and the rain that falls during this period is called Chilseok water.

Gyeongbokgung Palace : (From Wikipedia) Gyeongbok Palace, was the main royal palace of the Joseon dynasty. Built in 1395, it is located in northern Seoul, South Korea. The largest of the Five Grand Palaces built by the Joseon dynasty, Gyeongbokgung served as the home of Kings of the Joseon dynasty, the Kings' households, as well as the government of Joseon.

Gwanghwamun Gate : (From Wikipedia) Gwanghwamun (Hangul: 光化門; Hanja: 光化門) is the main and largest gate of Gyeongbokgung Palace, in Jongno-gu, Seoul, South Korea. It is located at a three-way intersection at the northern end of Sejongno. Gwanghwamun was first constructed in 1395 as the main gate to Gyeongbokgung Palace, the main and most important royal palace during the Joseon Dynasty.

Na Hye-sok : (From Wikipedia) Na Hyeseok (Hangul: 봉혜숙, 28 April 1896 – 10 December 1948) was a Korean feminist, poet, writer, painter, educator, and journalist. Her pen name was Jeongwol (Hangul: , 晶月). She was a pioneering Korean feminist writer and painter. She was the first female professional painter and the first feminist writer in Korea. She created some of the earliest Western-style paintings in Korea, and published feminist novels and short stories. She became well known as a feminist with her criticism against the marital institution in the early 20th century.

Iodide tincture : (From Wikipedia) Tincture of iodine, iodine tincture, or weak iodine solution is an antiseptic. It is usually 2–7% elemental iodine, along with potassium iodide or sodium iodide, dissolved in a mixture of ethanol and water. Tincture solutions are characterized by the presence of alcohol. (Translator's Note* These are widely called ' ' or 'red medicine' in Korea and are still in use).

Note from Id: Haiku Minhyun wrote was quoted from a haiku written by poet Kobayashi Issa in 1825, and Seongwu's was quoted from a haiku written by poet
Matsuo Basho in 1685.
Elegant, Neat, Clumsy, Diligent

Chapter Summary

Minhyun explains to Seongwu why he turned down all the girls that express their love for him. Minhyun then has an unexpected visitor: a girl he had rejected who returned for some revenge.

Chapter Notes

For original Chapter 14 written in Korean, visit: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2601721.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生伴侶)

Chapter 14

Originally written in Korea by Id / Translated into English by Sasha

It took more than two weeks until the bandages around Seongwu’s ankle came off. Seongwu wished to take them off as soon as possible, hating the stifling feeling of it around his leg. Minhyun, however, was adamant it had to stay on until Seongwu’s ankle was definitely healed. In the face of Minhyun’s stubborn resolution, Seongwu had no choice but to just stay still, not even allowed to touch his ankle. While the bandages were on, Seongwu’s ankle was practically inside Minhyun’s clutches the entire time. Minhyun tended to Seongwu’s ankle with utmost diligence, disinfecting it and changing the bandages every three days. Even when Seongwu sat with his legs stretched in front of him, Minhyun came to him to tenaciously examine his injured ankle. Whenever Minhyun did this the ankle felt inflamed, as if it was burning; Seongwu felt a strange sensation spread like wildfire throughout all of his body. Every day Seongwu wished for his ankle’s speedy recovery so he would be free of the suffocating bandages and Minhyun’s gaze that burned him like fire.

Seongwu could only be free from bandages by the end of June. By this time exams were already over, and summer vacation was around the corner. Seongwu had made a number of plans for the summer, and he was delighted that his injury was almost completely healed by summertime. Seongwu roamed about the streets and places he could not visit during the time his ankle had hampered him from moving freely. Minhyun was always by his side.
Minhyun and Seongwu went back to the way they were, at least superficially. Despite their tranquil surface, Seongwu kept being reminded of what had happened during the meeting with girls at Jongno. At that time they just let their little conflict fizzle out, but Seongwu still wanted to know how Minhyun found where the meeting would take place, and the exact reason why he was angry to see Seongwu there. Seongwu tried a few times to ask, but could not bring himself to actually do so. When Minhyun was dedicating himself to tending to his ankle, his face deep in solemn concentration, Seongwu just could not. Perhaps Seongwu was afraid of the answer Minhyun would give.

If Seongwu really considered Minhyun just an ordinary friend, he would have asked him without any hesitation. Seongwu could not. Thus, Seongwu clearly understood the way he liked Minhyun, and the way he looked at him. Minhyun was not just an ordinary friend. Then how should Seongwu proceed from here? Until when would he be able to play pretend that they are just friends? Would Seongwu ever be allowed to confess what he feels for Minhyun? Seongwu’s head exploded with complicated thoughts and a thousand doubts. Oblivious to Seongwu’s agony, time just went on, flowing in peace like a river.

One hot, sunny Saturday afternoon, a party was held in their village. It was for a wedding of Mr. Huh and Ms. Yoo, who lived in the easterly edge of Bukchon. Minhyun, Seongwu and Kyuwon stayed home, while Mister and Madame went to the banquet. They brought back an armful of leftover rice cakes and food; thanks to that the three students had one of the most plentiful dinners they had in a long time. They were not even slightly acquainted with the newly married couple, but for such a wonderful meal, they blessed Mr. Huh and Ms. Yoo to grow old together in prosperity and enduring love.

After they feasted on wedding leftovers, Seongwu was full. He felt as if food was stacked up to his esophagus. To add to his discomfort, he had mostly eaten greasy foods, like japchae, pan-fried cakes, and skewers of meat. Feeling bloated, Seongwu moaned in agony. He wanted to go outside and walk. Seongwu looked back at Minhyun. Minhyun had eaten just as much as he had, but he seemed completely fine; he was even popping grapes into his mouth. Minhyun had this look that made people think he would be particular and fussy about his food, but in fact he was a heavy and indiscriminate eater.

“Hey, Minhyun.”

“Hmm?”

“When you’re done eating those grapes, shall we go out for a night stroll?”

Minhyun immediately put down his grapes.

“Let’s go now.”

“Weren’t you in the middle of eating those?”

“I was just eating them out of boredom.”

“Sometimes the things you say are so bland, I can’t believe you come from a family of salt merchants.”

“My parents sell salt, not me.”

Minhyun went upstairs with Seongwu to get ready for an outing. They tied their shoelaces tight, and opened the blue metal gate to step outside.
The air had cooled, and the night was pleasant. A glorious full moon lit the alley, outshining the streetlights. Lamps lit the windows of each house, and Minhyun and Seongwu could hear the murmur of people within them speaking into the night and to each other. Bukchon’s ambience was calm, with nothing to irritate them. It was a perfect night to take a walk. Seongwu hummed as he walked.

“In which direction shall we go?”

“Let’s circle the neighborhood and turn back near Anguk-dong.”

They walked side by side, slowly. They knew by heart the alleyways they stalked daily, but under the bright moonlight they seemed different, new. Flowers shone more delicately in the moonlight than they did in the sun, and somehow they appeared prettier. Where spring cherry blossoms had left, scarlet angel’s trumpet vines crept up on every wall. Just last night the flowers were mere buds, but now they were in full bloom, as if each and every one of them restlessly strived to bloom overnight. Seongwu was touched by their vitality, and regarded them with admiration. The flowers were so pretty that Seongwu wanted to pick one and take it home, but he restrained himself. Seongwu’s gaze regretfully moved on from the flowers. Seongwu stood, as if he had forgotten how to turn around, until Minhyun laid a hand on his shoulder.

“This way.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

Seongwu turned away from the flowers belatedly. They were soon met with a downhill road. On either side of the street were high stone walls that surrounded them like great barriers. The street was dark, and no one but Minhyun and Seongwu were present. They leisurely continued their moonlit stroll, their shadows lengthening and shortening under streetlights that stood by.

After a while, they came to pass Geunhwa Girls’ School on their right. Upon seeing its building, Seongwu was reminded of something that had happened recently: Minhyun had received a love letter from a student that attended Geunhwa Girls’ School. Minhyun was in overwhelming favor of the girls around Bukchon, but it was the first time someone gave a love letter and confessed her feelings for him in a public venue. To be more accurate, it was the first time to Seongwu’s knowledge that someone openly declared her feelings for Minhyun.

Just as much as they differed in appearance, Minhyun and Seongwu each had distinct personalities. Minhyun was reticent about his thoughts, and did not like to share much of his life even to close friends. This could be surprising to people who did not know Minhyun well, as he was indiscriminately kind and friendly to everyone. Seongwu loved this about Minhyun, and even felt a little superior to his peers from the fact that Minhyun seemed to place Seongwu in a category of an exception. However, this notion turned out to be just an illusion; Seongwu had no idea that Minhyun had already received several love letters from girls he had not been aware of. What was worse, Seongwu heard of this from a classmate, not Minhyun himself. Seongwu did not even have time to feel hurt; he was taken over by a shock as if he had been bludgeoned out of the blue.

Would Seongwu have felt better if Minhyun was by nature talkative and liked to share every small thing that happened to him out of sight? Thoughts like these were all mere theories, futile and useless. Seongwu tried his best not to think much of it, but he continued to be vexed. The most recent episode was especially cruel in timing; it felt like a punishment for Seongwu’s participation in that meeting with girls in a Jongno teahouse. Rather than suffer any more in silence, Seongwu decided to just open up and ask Minhyun about it.

“Didn’t you receive a love letter last week?”
“I did, actually.”

“Did you write back? Rather, did you agree to see her in person?”

In an attempt to mask his anxiety about it, Seongwu feigned mischievousness, mimicking his classmates’ teasing demeanor. In his mind, Seongwu prayed that he would appear totally unaffected to Minhyun. Minhyun seemed a little surprised that Seongwu asked him about this particular issue, but soon retained his placid attitude.

“I already saw her.”

“When?”

At this unsuspected answer Seongwu could not help but unmask his surprise. Minhyun and Seongwu were always together, both at school and at home. When would Minhyun ever have the time to spend alone with a girl? Seongwu looked at Minhyun, eyes wide in shock. Minhyun chuckled as he answered.

“Yesterday you were on duty to clean the classroom after school. Remember how I left the classroom before you? I saw her then for a few minutes.”

Minhyun was so elusive, he was like Hong Gildong*. Seongwu had thought Minhyun was waiting for him in the first floor while he cleaned the classroom; Minhyun had taken that tiny morsel of time to see a girl in private.

“You saw her for just a few minutes, then. Does that mean…”

Minhyun finished Seongwu’s sentence, with an expression on his face that seemed to say: Why even ask?

“I turned her down.”

“As expected, you’re cold-hearted.”

Seongwu secretly let out a sigh of relief. He still felt pity for this girl he knew nothing about. There was nobody in the world who would be safe from hurt if their heartfelt confession was reciprocated with a rejection as sharp as a knife. Seeing that Seongwu appeared to worry more about the girl, Minhyun said, his voice laden with protest.

“I know best what I want. Also, I don’t want to waste time and energy on such nonsense.”

Minhyun’s voice was icy, as if dismissing the entire notion of romance as a mere absurdity. Indeed, he was lightyears from romance. Seongwu was shocked again from the clinical coldness of
Minhyun’s words. Minhyun seemed to consider dating as just a farce. To Seongwu, who considered Minhyun a latent partner in romance, what Minhyun said was a bolt out of the blue. It took Seongwu so long to acknowledge and accept his feelings for Minhyun as they were. He had just admitted to himself his longing for Minhyun, and now he was afraid that he might be yearning for someone who would not even give him a chance to communicate his love.

“Then, do you plan never to date or love?”

“Hahaha. Of course not. I’m not a monk.”

Minhyun laughed. His laughter, ever pleasant, rang off the stone walls around them. Seongwu wished to laugh with him, but he could not.

“Then why do you turn every single one of them down? Do you have a particular reason?”

“You see, dating is in vogue these days, spreading like wildfire in school. I don’t like to date that way, so unbearably light, like participating in a trend. I prefer taking my time and getting to know someone slowly. I’d like to see my love interest often from a close distance, have many conversations on various topics, and experience what this person is truly like. And then I would like to date this person heavily, seriously.”

“.......”

“Does that answer your question?”

Minhyun looked to Seongwu after his lengthy explanation. For a moment, Seongwu just stared back. There were a million things that emerged in his head about what Minhyun had said. Among them, Seongwu chose the most random thing to say out loud.

“When you turn someone down from now on, you should tell them what you just told me. Then they’d be less hurt, and have easier time giving up. How about you explain to them why, instead of just giving them a flat-out ‘no?’”

“Haha. Thanks for the advice. I’ll do that.”

With Minhyun’s hearty laughter as a turning point, the mood of their night stroll brightened again, for Minhyun, at least. Seongwu felt like his limbs were creaking against each other, like he was a piece of broken machinery. Seongwu realized that he had chosen to like someone too difficult to crack. He had no idea at all what he should do now. He forced his mouth to form a smile, and tried to laugh along with Minhyun, as if Minhyun had never received a love letter in the first place.

Another incident took place only a day after.

“Hey, Minhyun! Someone came to visit you from the girls’ school! She’s waiting for you in front of the gate!”

This message shook the entire second building. Minhyun was getting another confession, and in front of dozens of people to boot. Students stirred in anticipation, expecting a rare scandal to take place right in front of their eyes. Seongwu heard noisy murmurs that filled the hallways, and tried to hide the disquiet that appeared upon his face.

School was over, and they had to go through the gate to leave; which meant there was no way of getting around this visitor or avoid her. Minhyun and Seongwu headed towards the school gate. Boys surrounding Minhyun sent his way a mix of cheers and jeers. Well-wishers poured their blessings upon Minhyun; Minhyun just smiled, seemingly embarrassed, and said nothing. Minhyun
recognized immediately his visitor upon seeing her. It was Lee Yumi, who had given him a love letter in public recently. Minhyun never had a girl who came to him again after being rejected, but this one seemed tenacious and apparently had enough patience to try again. Minhyun calmly exhaled and approached her. Classmates quietly cheered on behind him.

Seongwu was made to watch Minhyun and the girl, trapped within the crowd of his classmates. He initially wished to run away and hide somewhere, but he was simultaneously morbidly curious as to how Minhyun would react to and handle his visitor. Ultimately, Seongwu’s curiosity had won a heated battle against his fear. Once Seongwu saw them together, however, Seongwu immediately regretted his decision to stay. Minhyun and the girl who stood facing him matched too well. The girl was pretty; no one would have objected to that. She had clear features, hair bobbed just beneath her ears, creaseless school uniform that spoke of her cleanliness, and shiny black shoes. She was quite tall, and when she stood next to Minhyun they looked like a painting. Seongwu suddenly understood why his classmates cheered for them, and started to feel diffident about himself.

As all of them watched behind a wall, the girl's high-pitched voice carried over to them.

“I’m here to confess to you again. I knew you wouldn’t relent on the first try.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

“Here is an old saying: ten strikes can bring down any great oak.”

“I am a person, not a tree.”

Yumi laughed out loud. She added how Minhyun was the most laughable when he said something goofy with his sharp-featured face. It seemed that everything was funny to her. In direct contrast, Minhyun neither moved nor laughed with her.

“A no is a no, no matter if you confess, give me another letter, or strike me down with an axe. Go back home.”

“Wow, you make it sound as if I’m trying to kill you. Now, won’t you come with me to Jongno?”

“I won’t.”

“You keep saying no, again and again.”

“Because my answer is no.”

“I feel like talking to a wall. You’re not called a stone Buddha for nothing. Tell me, can you even get it up at all?”

Yumi shouted, impishly. It was evident she was trying to make fun of him. At her words, completely unexpected to have come from a girl, Minhyun seemed to be slightly taken aback. Few of the boys who stood behind a wall to watch failed to stifle their laughter. It was interesting to see Minhyun so helpless, as he was otherwise perennially kind and friendly. Seongwu also smiled awkwardly. This seemed like a revenge for all girls Minhyun had brought to tears. Hwang Minhyun had met his proper opponent. Minhyun ran a hand through his hair, noticeably exasperated.

“...Shall I explain it to you?”

“If you can.”

Yumi leisurely crossed her arms in front of her, as if to prompt Minhyun further. Minhyun let out a
small sigh, and started to speak. To Seongwu, his words were strangely familiar; he soon recognized the speech to be the exact one from last night. What Minhyun had told him the night before as his reasons for coldly rejecting a myriad of girls was being repeated verbatim. Seongwu, who had been listening closely, almost screamed in embarrassment.

Seongwu never thought Minhyun would actually put his advice into practice. Seongwu dropped to the floor, his hand clamped over his lips. Seongwu felt a sharp stab of secondhand embarrassment as he watched Minhyun say such ticklish words of romantic ideals without an ounce of hesitation. Seongwu, from behind the wall, internally begged Minhyun to stop talking, but somehow Yumi and Minhyun were both poised and serious throughout the entire speech. Yumi listened patiently to what was the longest string of words Minhyun had spoke to her, and asked him:

“You have someone you like, don’t you?”

“........”

“Am I correct? Who is it? Does she go to my school?”

“No comment.”

“Who do you think you are, no comment? You should have told me earlier that you like someone else!”

Yumi landed a considerably powerful blow on Minhyun’s forearm. It seemed laden with emotion.

“I am very curious as to who it is. Considering the way you are, I guess you probably won’t tell me.”

“Obviously.”

“Then tell me three things about this person. Then I’ll go away and never bother you again.”

Yumi wagered, her eyes shining with curiosity. Minhyun had no reason to humor her, but he nodded, just so he could go back home as soon as possible. After all she had not asked him to name his crush; telling her three truths was not a huge burden.

“What does this person look like?”

“Elegant and neat.”

“Personality?”

“A bit clumsy, but diligent.”

“And also?”

“...Cute.”

“My God.”

Yumi exclaimed at Minhyun’s litany of praises. Yumi was by no means the only one surprised. All of Minhyun’s classmates beyond that wall behind him erupted into chaos. This was an exclusive, scandalous scoop. Hwang Minhyun had a crush! Who is this person, who was elegant and neat, clumsy but diligent, and most of all, cute? Words immediately began to disseminate beyond school walls; in three hours, it would have penetrated all of Bukchon.
Unlike his classmates, who were having a field day with Minhyun’s newly uncovered secret, Seongwu could not move from where he stood. He had assembled Minhyun’s hints into a formula, and had just deduced an answer. The answer was unbelievable. Seongwu checked his calculations again and again, making sure he had not left any possibility or theory out of consideration; he was still left with one answer that survived the conditions given. No way. There was absolutely no way. Seongwu tried to push his formula out of his mind; but with each of his heartbeats a tickling sensation spread through his vessels to all of his body. This side effect of his formula made his head spin, his vision blur and his head heat up as if in fever.

“Hey, Minhyun is coming this way. Disperse!”

Somebody yelled in haste. Classmates, who had been balled together in dozens, scattered like dandelion seeds in a blink of an eye. Amidst the chaos, Minhyun appeared. Now alone, he passed the school gate and looked around. When he found what he was looking for, he approached in that direction, his eyes gleaming in delight.

Seongwu was standing next to a tree several yards from the school gate. Not knowing what to do, he was fidgeting with his fingers, out of awkwardness or nervousness or both. Minhyun laughed quietly at his back, which seemed to advertise that he had heard and saw everything that happened between Minhyun and the girl.

“Seongwu! The conversation is over.”

“Oh, re, really?”

“Yes. She’ll probably never pay me another visit.”

As Seongwu was about to answer, he started to hiccup. Flustered, Seongwu quickly clamped a hand over his mouth, but Minhyun had already heard his hiccup.

“Haha. You’re hiccuping. And your face is red. Are you feeling ill?”

Seongwu shook his head no. Unfazed, Minhyun took Seongwu’s face in his hands. He then lowered his head and closed in. The distance between them began to diminish. Twenty centimeters, ten centimeters, five centimeters. Seongwu’s eyes shot open. He wanted to ask Minhyun what he was doing, but his entire being was frozen in time; only his hand covering his mouth tightened in place.

Minhyun’s forehead touched Seongwu’s. His forehead was cool; or perhaps, Seongwu’s forehead was too hot. Seongwu could not stand this any longer, and he closed his eyes. In the meantime, Minhyun was detached from Seongwu again. He had approached slowly, but seemed to separate himself from Seongwu faster than the speed of light. Seongwu thought Minhyun could have stayed longer if he was intent on pulling such a strange prank; he secretly longed to extend that moment in which their foreheads were together. Meanwhile, Minhyun was as serious as ever.

“You seem to have a fever.”

Seongwu could not answer his sincere concern.

“Let’s, let’s go home.”

To escape, Seongwu turned away. He rushed Minhyun to hurry back to the boarding house. They moved fast, as if race-walking. Seongwu only lowered his hands covering his face when they passed the school gate and entered an alleyway. He thought a headwind would have cooled his face, but he was clearly mistaken. Minhyun poked fun of Seongwu.
“Your face looks like a strawberry.”

“Why would you ever compare people and fruits? That’s antiquated and outdated.”

“I was only talking about the color. Strawberries are not cute.”

Hmm? Seongwu turned to look at Minhyun. What he said sounded like nonsense, but it strangely bothered him. Seongwu did not have the time to respond, however, as they were already back at the boarding house. To avoid looking at Minhyun in the face, Seongwu walked ahead of him and pushed open the blue metal gate. Minhyun, however, did not follow him. He told Seongwu that he would go out and buy some strawberries.

“Strawberries? Are you craving them?”

“You like them. You can have them while you rest.”

You only choose strawberry water when we go out for bingsu. Minhyun added, smiling. It was true, and Seongwu could not rebut him. Seongwu told Minhyun that he would wait, and entered the house. Minhyun disappeared around the corner.

Half-heartedly saying his greetings, Seongwu climbed the stairs two at a time and went up to his room. He could finally breathe now that he was alone, away from Minhyun. As his anxiety receded, the hiccuping stopped, and Seongwu was reminded of what Minhyun had said and done earlier. Seongwu wrapped his head in his hands and rolled over and over on his blanket. Seongwu had to face Minhyun when he returned; what would he do then? Seongwu did not know how to handle his heart, blowing up like a steadily growing balloon. His heart would burst if anyone as much as touched it with a dainty fingertip. Did Seongwu have a plan to deal with his own heart? He did not. Even if he did have a plan, it would be completely eradicated in front of Minhyun.

Seongwu sunk his head to his chest. He was now redder than any strawberry.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 14 Glossary:

Hong Gildong: (From Wikipedia) Hong Gildong jeon (Hangul: 홍길동전; hanja: 洪吉童傳) is a Korean novel, often translated as The Story of Hong Gildong, written during the Joseon Dynasty. Hong Gildong, an illegitimate son of a nobleman and his lowborn concubine, is the main character of the story. Gifted with supreme intelligence and supernatural abilities, he steals from rich and corrupt aristocrats, which has drawn him comparisons to famous bandits like the English folk hero Robin Hood and Australia’s Ned Kelly. Historical sources point to the existence of a bandit named Hong Gildong who was arrested in 1500, however the character's historical inspiration was the early
16th century Korean bandit and folk hero Im Kkeokjeong. Since the novel first appeared, the character of Hong Gildong has become a mainstay of Korean culture and literature. In Korea today, Hong Gildong is a common placeholder name, similar to John Doe in the United States.

Translator's note: In the original text Seongwu used Hong Gildong as a metaphor for Minhyun, who apparently goes places without having Seongwu notice.

Message from Id: Now the boys are only one step apart. Who do you think will be the one to close that distance?
Thank you everyone who reads and comments! I cannot re-comment on every one of them, but I am reading and appreciating every single one. They give me such strength. See you in the next chapter!
Proper Use for a Flower

Chapter Summary

Seongwu and Minhyun confess their feelings for each other in the what feels like worst and best of ways to Seongwu.

Chapter Notes

For the original Chapter 15 in Korean, visit: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2625313.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 15

There is a burning furnace. Recently a fissure as thin as a strand of thread appeared on its shaft, and steam is leaking from it. Hot steam escaped from the furnace heated the air above it. Amidst all the heat and pressure, countless words erratically thrashed about. As the owner of this furnace, Seongwu was disconcerted, not having learned how to temper it. He pushed down with his tongue these heated words on the cusp of explosion, and breathlessly let them out in heated sighs. Seongwu had reached his limit, and this was the best he could manage. He felt that if he continued like this, he would be swallowed whole without a trace by this furnace in his heart.

Words formed and disappeared in Seongwu’s mind, and accrued steadily in his heart. Lukewarm winds of the summer could not cool this fever; if anything, Minhyun’s scent that rode on it was coal thrown into the furnace to fuel its raging fire. There were so many things Seongwu wanted to say. If only these thousands of words could all reach Minhyun.

Difficult. Everything was so difficult. Seongwu put down his pen once again. He ripped the unfinished letter in front of him without an ounce of hesitation. It was the tenth draft of his would-be love letter to Minhyun.

Seongwu glared down at the shredded paper on his desk. Even writing the very first word felt impossible. It was much easier to write about absurd stories of fantasy and imagination. Seongwu had always been proud of his competence in stringing words together, but at this moment he was absolutely discouraged. Why was it so difficult to write honestly what he felt? Which words would
make him appear less of a fool? Seongwu pulled at his hair. He now had developed a deep respect for those girls who had written and delivered love letters to Minhyun. How were they so confident? How were on earth could they be so sure of themselves?

Seongwu felt smaller and smaller each day. Once he resolved to confess, he felt more anxious and uncertain than ever. There were so many things to take into consideration. Firstly, Minhyun could be displeased at Seongwu’s unilateral declaration of his feelings. As with Lee Yumi, the girl he had turned down in public, Minhyun’s responses to confessions from others were all coldly negative without exception. If Minhyun could be so heartless to a girl, how cold could he be to Seongwu, a boy? Seongwu felt his heart break into millions of pieces when he imagined Minhyun icily rejecting him. Seongwu was afraid to hear Minhyun’s answer. So he came up with an idea: secretly leaving his love letter behind when it was time for him to leave for Pyongyang. Minhyun would then read his letter upon returning from Gyeongseong station. In the letter, Seongwu would ask Minhyun to write back and send a letter to Pyongyang if he reciprocated Seongwu’s love, and burn the letter if he did not. Seongwu wanted to obtain Minhyun’s answer without actually facing him.

Avoiding Minhyun did not seem a proper solution, however; the idea only added to Seongwu’s distress. So Seongwu changed his plan. If he did not have the courage to face Minhyun, he would face him indirectly. Seongwu decided to confess his feelings during his bath. The bath was the only place they could be together alone, yet separated from each other. In the bathroom, Seongwu could hide his face no matter what answer Minhyun would give, and hopefully drain away any painful rejection with bathwater without the indignity of showing Minhyun his face.

Having made up his mind, Seongwu solemnly stood up from his seat. Minhyun, who was reading from his corner of the room, followed suit. Without a word, they both knew what they were going to do. They picked up their bath baskets and went downstairs.

Not a word was exchanged between them until they reached the bathroom. Even this silence was so familiar that it almost drove Seongwu to tears. Seongwu hesitated once more, at the fear of this silence turning into a sense of unease and then disappearing forever. But soon, he pushed the handle of the bathroom door. He was already here, and there was no place to run and hide. He took a deep breath and stepped into the bathroom. He could hear Minhyun flop down onto a wooden chair on the other side of the door.

It was already four years since Minhyun started to nightly guard the bathroom door for Seongwu, but he could not help but mind Minhyun’s presence once he became aware of it. Seongwu immersed himself in thought, almost forgetting to wash himself. How could he tell Minhyun how he felt simply, effectively? Again, a deluge of words flooded his mind, presenting him with choices after choices. Weighing each and every thought that came into his head, Seongwu became oblivious to the passage of time, until he was brought back to reality by Minhyun’s question.

“Seongwu, have you fallen asleep?”

“No. I’m still washing.”

“You’re taking longer than usual today.”

“Oh… I have something to think about.”

“What is it?”

“…Why are you keen to know about what I am thinking? Why do you take care of me so kindly? Why do you wait for me so patiently each and every day? Surely you do these things without any ulterior motives, but… Do you know what they have come to mean to me?”
Damn it, Seongwu let his thoughts loose, choked up by Minhyun’s attentive tone of voice. Seongwu bit his lower lip. He could not even imagine what Minhyun’s silence meant. But this was only the beginning. Now, Seongwu had to let out the truth. His heart pounded in his chest, threatening to surge up and ricochet out of his mouth. To hide his trembling, Seongwu spoke slowly.

“To be truthful, I like you. A lot. I think I like you more than my parents. This is different from mere friendship. You probably don’t know, but…”

“I know. It all shows.”

What? Seongwu’s downcast head bolted up at these sobering words. What did Minhyun say?

“I like you too. Did you not know?”

“What?”

“I liked you since quite a while ago. I can’t believe you didn’t know. I guess I must up my efforts.”

“Well, I had my doubts, but…”

Seongwu stopped himself from saying anything more by clamping a hand over his mouth. He almost told Minhyun what he should never. He did not want Minhyun to know all the theories and presumptions he thought of and distressed over on his own. That would be too big of a blow to his pride.

“You confused me!”

“I never did. I only remember treating you kindly.”

“Well, you’re kind and courteous to everyone. So I thought you were doing the same to me just because.”

“Hahaha! Seongwu, who in the world does things ‘just because?’ And I have never treated you equally with other people. Couldn’t you see that you were obviously above our classmates?”

“But…”

“Seongwu, kindness and courteousness do not come ‘just because.’”

“…….”

“Isn’t it, for everyone? What’s more, I am a merchant’s son.”

Minhyun was correct. How could Seongwu have forgotten that regardless of how distant Minhyun is from his family, he had inherited the bloodline of merchants? A moan spilled out from Seongwu’s lips. He doubted himself again and again; now his vision blurred at his belated enlightenment. On top of everything, Seongwu’s head started to hurt from this momentous revelation. Seongwu’s voice now took a reproachful tone.

“You say you liked me from a long time ago. Then why did you not tell me? You did not want to date me?”

“I did. I was just trying to get my timing right.”

“Timing for telling me?”
“Yes.”

“...When were you planning to tell me?”

“Well... Around Christmas?”

“That’s way too late! Do it now!”

“Wouldn’t that be dull? I haven’t prepared anything.”

“I feel like I’m about to die, so do it now!”

Minhyun’s voice was leisurely, as if teasing Seongwu, and Seongwu shouted back his demand. Seongwu’s voice, rising from deep in his abdomen, rang sonorously in the bathroom. Seongwu was angry at himself for brooding over Minhyun by himself until his head was driven to the cusp of explosion. He was so embarrassed. This was not fair. Oblivious to Seongwu’s burning heart, Minhyun just laughed outside the bathroom door. Even his voice was handsome; Seongwu’s heart sped up and his vision swam just by listening to it. After having clumsily shown Minhyun his heart, Seongwu was filled with a new volition: to be compensated for his inner struggles through Minhyun’s confession.

For that, Seongwu had to finish bathing first. He hurriedly splashed water onto himself. As he scurried about, the sound of water splashing could be heard from outside the bathroom. Even without looking inside, Minhyun could see exactly what Seongwu was doing, and he burst into laughter again.

“Hahaha! You told me you wanted to date provocatively, and now you want me to confess to you in the middle of a bath. Where is the romance you were looking for?”

“Is romance so important to you right now?”

Seongwu burst open the bathroom door, having washed and dressed himself in lightning speed. From his rosy cheeks rose a tiny fog of steam. Seongwu glared at Minhyun, who was doubled over in uncontrollable laughter, a rare sight. A tear shone on the rim of Minhyun’s ever so prettily folded eyelids. He seemed to have enjoyed Seongwu’s trip to heaven, hell and back all in the last few minutes. What an evil fellow! Seongwu shouted, his voice laden with adorable fury:

“I’m going to go upstairs first, so tell me properly after you’ve bathed!”

It was almost an order. Seongwu threatened as if he was going to kick Minhyun out of the room if he did not confess, and disappeared into the house. Minhyun could hear him stomp loudly as he climbed the stairs, and laughed even more where he stood.

Anyhow, Minhyun was soon hit by a realization that he was seriously underprepared. He would have never guessed his plan to confess to Seongwu around Christmas would be made imminent. What should he do? Minhyun thought that to pass Seongwu’s high and particular standards of romance he must be dressed properly and armed with a decent gift. Unfortunately, Minhyun was in his comfortable everyday clothes, with only a bath basket in his hand.

This opportunity surely accosted Minhyun out of nowhere, but his pride would not allow him to have nothing in hand for Seongwu when he confessed. Minhyun looked around, and saw lush vines of angel’s trumpets, which had been planted right before he and Seongwu moved in, covering the stone wall. He then remembered how Seongwu seemed enamoured with these flowers during their recent night stroll. Minhyun would have preferred roses, but angel’s trumpets were not bad. Minhyun bathed much faster than usual, and chose and picked the prettiest angel’s trumpet flower from the
Despite having confidently improvised on his prop, even the famous Hwang Minhyun tensed in anxiety once he stood in front of his room. Minhyun was born with a relaxed outlook on life, and he was never overwhelmed by anxiety or made mistakes during exams or important occasions out of nervousness. This time, though, he was gripped by a severe tension that was foreign to him.

Suddenly all the exams he took thus far seemed so easy. Minhyun knew his anxiety was natural, as he was facing none other than Ong Seongwu in this splendid battle of love.

Minhyun cleared his throat and opened the door. Once the door was pushed open, he saw Seongwu, who sat with his arms crossed in front of his chest. Seongwu had an austere look upon his face, but his cheeks were tinged in light pink. He was surely anticipating Minhyun. Minhyun smiled as he sat across from Seongwu. They sat alone in their room, facing each other.

An air of seriousness settled in the room. Seongwu, without meaning to, looked down at Minhyun’s hand, and had to bite his tongue to keep himself from smiling. He somehow knew that Minhyun would not come back empty-handed, but had not expected him to pick a flower for the occasion. Minhyun had improvised to the best of his abilities for nothing: Seongwu only needed Minhyun and nothing else. Seongwu desired and dream of pure, unadulterated love that transcended reality. For Seongwu, terms, conditions, qualifications, and material goods meant nothing. If possible, Seongwu wanted to see the absolute sum of love between Hwang Minhyun and Ong Seongwu, and consider nothing else, so that only unconditional love remained between them.

Minhyun held the flower out to Seongwu. To be exact, he aimed the flower at Seongwu as if requesting for a duel. Gingerly taking the flower from between Minhyun’s fingers, Seongwu waited for Minhyun to spell out his confession. Minhyun started, carefully, the air about him totally different from when he had been laughing at Seongwu in front of the bath.

“From some point in time, you budded and started to grow in my heart. Now it is time for it to come to fruition.”

“........”

“I do not believe in hollow ideals. Looking at you, however, I thought for the first time that I would like to believe in fate, and all the emotions I considered worthless before.”

Minhyun’s deep voice, leaving gentle waves in its wake, touched Seongwu’s ears. Starting from the tips of his ears, Seongwu heated up slowly, and now he was red all the way down to his neck. He looked like a strawberry. Minhyun beamed, finishing off his confession.

“Ong Seongwu, I adore you. For my sake, you become happier still.”

Something invisible exploded mid-air with a bang; it was probably Seongwu’s heart. Where had Minhyun learned to speak like that? Minhyun’s confession, recited with a single flower in hand, was better than any confession Seongwu had seen, heard, and imagined.

Seongwu was given a confession he had wanted all his life. Reality was quite unbelievable, and Seongwu severely pinched his own cheek. It hurt. He saw Minhyun become flustered at his unforeseen provocation and say something, but right now it did not matter what Minhyun said to chastise him.

Seongwu’s wish made to a shooting star came true.

Seongwu wanted to stand up and shout out in delight, but he restrained himself. Instead, he looked
up to the night sky with eyes full of wonder. Thank you, dear star, dear moon! In the middle of the sky was a dainty crescent moon looking down at him. Seongwu was glad tonight’s moon was new. If it had been a full moon instead, Seongwu would have wanted to hide in embarrassment from its bright glow.

Seongwu dried the angel’s trumpet flower Minhyun gave him and placed it between pages of the Jeong Ji-yong poem book Minhyun had gifted him two years ago. He wanted it preserved for a long, long time.

The next morning, Seongwu would normally have scurried about getting ready for his train ride to Pyongyang according to plan. However, Seongwu flung his luggage on the floor. Minhyun watched him, not knowing what to do, and Seongwu repeated again.

“I am not going to Pyongyang.”

“What about your family, then? And you purchased this ticket months ago.”

“It’s just a train ticket. I can request a refund at the station, and I can see my family during the winter.”

“Your parents must be disappointed.”

“Not really. Last time they told me to stop visiting so frequently.”

Seongwu grinned his mischievous boy grin. Minhyun knew what Seongwu was telling him was nonsense, but he could never beat Seongwu when he decided to be obstinate. Minhyun shook his head in renunciation. Now it seemed simply impossible to send Seongwu away to Pyongyang. They still had something they had to do, so Minhyun handed a shirt to Seongwu, who was still in his pajamas.

“Well, we still need to go to Gyeongseong Station. Your uncle is waiting for you.”

“Yeah. We can come back after I tell him I’m not going.”

Seongwu and Minhyun left the boarding house together. They felt as if they could navigate their way to Gyeongseong Station with their eyes closed. During all that time it took for them to become familiar with these labyrinthine alleyways of Bukchon, they had steadfastly built intimacy and affection between them. Now they just crossed a new starting line, and they were suddenly enveloped in an odd sense of unease. This was because they were thrilled about their new start, apart from how well they knew each other. They passed through Jongno in joyous peace, alternating in the lead. They were merely walking, yet they could not stop smiling.

“Uncle!”

Seongwu raised his hand to greet his uncle. His uncle waved back, then saw that Seongwu did not have his luggage with him.
“Where is your bag?”

“Mm, I am not going to go to Pyongyang.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to go. I am staying in Gyeongseong for the summer. Please tell mom and dad that I have tons of homework, won’t you?”

Seongwu flashed a charming smile. He usually spoke informally to his uncle, who was not much older than he was, but when he had something to ask for or if he was at a disadvantage, he used honorifics like he was now. Seongwu’s uncle stared, his mouth gaping. What could be wrong with Seongwu? He tried several times to tell Seongwu he had to go, but Seongwu would not relent; he soon gave up trying to persuade his nephew. Seongwu’s uncle turned to Minhyun, who stood by, seemingly absent-minded.

“Mr. Hwang, what happened to our Seongwu? What is he doing?”

“Haha…”

“Shall we get a refund for our tickets over there?”

Minhyun only laughed awkwardly. Something indeed happened to Seongwu last night, but he could not tell the truth. Seongwu tactfully ran towards Gyeongseong Station’s main building. Eventually, Seongwu’s uncle mounted the train by himself, with Seongwu and Minhyun giving him a send-off on the platform. The boys headed back to the boarding house once the train was out of sight. They walked a while, and as they were passing a bridge over Cheonggyechun, Minhyun spoke.

“I’m not sure if we can really get away with this.”

“I wanted to stay behind, so what’s the matter?”

“I feel sorry for your parents.”

“Really, it’s all right.”

“It’s not all right with me.”

“Why?”

“…Never mind. I’m all right with whatever makes you happy.”

“Right.”

Seongwu beamed. His smile made Minhyun forget all the worries in the world. *Yes. No matter what happens, everything is all right if you are smiling.* Minhyun easily shook off what worried him. It was meaningless for him to be afraid of Seongwu’s parents’ disapproval when he had only just started dating Seongwu. It was evident that he would be a marked man to Seongwu’s parents if they were found out, regardless of whether Seongwu stayed in Gyeongseong or went to Pyongyang this summer. Minhyun did not know exactly what his punishment would be for seducing a treasured eldest son of an aristocratic family. He knew it would be hefty, even if it was Seongwu who had confessed first. Minhyun vowed to become strong enough to take any blow; it was true that he had
They were eighteen, an age in which interest in dating increases manifold and desire to mimic adults 
starts to bud. Having just made himself a proper lover, Seongwu, who was increasingly concerned 
about his looks lately, wished to spend his free time like adults did. He wanted to go to cafes instead 
of bingsu parlors, and endlessly searched for new and unique things to entertain himself. 
Gyeongseong was home to all the latest styles, gadgets and trends, so it was easy to stay in vogue 
while in the city.

The most popular point of interest in Gyeongseong during this time was Myeongchijung(明治町)*. 
It was a playground for young, leisurely people. Minhyun and Seongwu only passed it when they 
came and went from Gyeongseong Station, but after they became lovers they started to visit places in 
Myeongchijung for dates. Each day, they decided on a new place to take a look around; today’s 
destination was Mitsukoshi Department Stores. They were there to see a new fruit called ‘melon,’ 
which had been recently imported from the west.

From what they heard, melon was similar to a watermelon, but with a sturdier, embossed skin. 
Apparently it was incomparably sweeter than a watermelon or a Korean melon, and was insanely 
popular in Tokyo for that reason. They could not visit Senbikiya, a famous fruit store in Tokyo, but 
they were fortunate to be able to visit Mitsukoshi instead. They passed Cheonggyechun, as loud and 
crowded as ever, and walked towards the heart of Myeongchijung. On the bustling streets were 
impeccably dressed modern girls and modern boys*. Minhyun and Seongwu blended into them.

Mitsukoshi Department Store was packed full of people. Instead of riding the elevators, for which 
they had to wait in line, Minhyun and Seongwu chose to climb the stairs. Observing the busy crowds 
on each floor, they climbed up to the fourth and highest floor. The climb was worth it; the fourth 
floor was quiet, with much fewer people. They looked around the fourth floor and went into the cafe. 
They read the menu carefully, and ordered two cups of coffee and two pieces of melon for dessert.

“You don’t like to drink coffee.”

Seongwu pointed out, whispering. Minhyun smiled and answered him.

“I feel like it isn’t so bad to practice drinking something I can’t stomach.”

“You’re still young, but you talk as if you’re an adult.”

“Eighteen years is old enough to be an adult.”

Indeed, if their country was still called Joseon, they would have been old enough to be married with 
children. In terms of appearance, they were indistinguishable from adults. Especially Minhyun, in his 
plain clothes instead of his school uniform, looked a fully matured man. He seemed more suited for a 
cafe in Joseon Hotel, instead of a more informal one in a department store such as this one. The cafe 
in Joseon Hotel was famous for being a meeting place for well-heeled families to arrange their adult
children to see each other with prospect for marriage. What would Minhyun look like, sitting across from a well-behaved and gentle young lady he would marry?

“Soongwu?”

Minhyun lightly knocked on the table. Seongwu broke from his daydream, and a cup of coffee and a sliced piece of melon was placed in front of him. It did not look particularly sweet; Seongwu played with a slice of melon with his fork. He turned it over to see its skin, colored in a peculiar pattern just as he heard.

“You aren’t eating it?”

“I was curious as to what its skin looked like.”

“Hurry and taste it. It’s something you’d like.”

“Not something you’d like?”

“If I like it, there is no way you won’t.”

Okay. Seongwu picked up a small slice of melon with his fork, and put it into his mouth.

“Wow, it’s so sweet.”

“Right?”

Minhyun, who had been eagerly waiting for Seongwu’s reaction, smiled happily. Seongwu, fortunately, was responding the way Minhyun wanted him to.

“What a wonderful fruit. It looks just like a vegetable!”

“You should know you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

Seongwu glared at Minhyun. Minhyun turned his gaze to his own melon.

Even when they ate as slowly as they could, it did not take long for them to finish a piece of melon that was small enough to fit into their hands. After they were done they naturally wanted to have more, but neither of them could voice this desire. Melon was an expensive fruit that some would never even be privileged enough to see, and rare enough for someone to mention it on their deathbed. Seongwu had never imagined that he would be able to taste the famed melon; but Minhyun had made it happen. Having a melon was really an undeserved luxury, considering Minhyun and Seongwu’s status as mere teenaged students.

It was Minhyun who suggested that they go out to have a melon. It was his way of saying thanks to Seongwu for helping him with a foreign language homework, and it was simultaneously a date. Seongwu had no way of knowing how Minhyun, who stayed stuck in their room all day, found out about the latest melon craze, but gladly followed his suggestion, wanting to taste something foreign and wonderful. He thought that maybe his acquiescence was a little shameless, but once he tasted the melon he understood why Minhyun was so keen to have it. Once they finished the melon, they drank the coffee and watched the people around them. The crowd on the fourth floor was half Korean, half Japanese, and sounds of several languages floated about them.

“Eek.”

What interrupted this foreign atmosphere was Minhyun’s childish grumble.
“Is it unsavory?”

Minhyun shook his head, despite being unable to hide the grimace on his face.

“Liar. I can tell you hate it. Why did you order something you can’t drink? It’s a waste of money.”

“I can drink it.”

“You drink it as if you’re drinking poison. See? You’re still frowning. Smile, like you usually do.”

“Stop making fun of me.”

Minhyun put on a sullen face. Seongwu snickered, thinking how Minhyun looked like a cat. He was already sulking when Seongwu had not even started with proper teasing.

“This is not even one tenth of how you make fun of me every day.”

“It is childish to make fun of someone for being unable to enjoy coffee.”

“And it is not childish for you to make fun of me?”

“Fine. No farther.”

Minhyun scoffed, looking away and primly casting down his eyes. He once again looked like a snooty Gyeongseong kid, a look Seongwu had not seen in a long time. Seongwu chuckled as he finished his coffee. Coffee was a luxury he only enjoyed once or twice a year, and he could not just let it go.

“...It tastes like bitter herbal medicine.”

“Hmm?”

“How can you like something this bitter so much?”

Mumbling, Minhyun picked up his cup and gulped down the remainder of his coffee all at once.

“Hey, hey.”

Surprised, Seongwu called out to Minhyun. Was this a part of his sulking? Minhyun had a miserable scowl on his face, having emptied his cup. Seongwu could not stifle his laughter at his handsome face scrunched in a grimace.

“Who in the world downs their coffee as if drinking rice wine?”

“It’s a liquid all the same. Does it matter if I drink it however I want?”

“Of course it matters. Look, I am sitting here across from you at a cafe. You didn’t give me even a little bit of consideration.”

“What you said is just sly sophistry.”

Minhyun seemed to feel Seongwu’s teasing was unfair. Seongwu was excited at this rate sight of Minhyun, but decided to stop teasing him, as he felt Minhyun could run out of the cafe in embarrassment any minute.

Minhyun paid for the melon. Watching him pay for the check, which was by no means inexpensive,
Seongwu was reminded that Minhyun was the third son of a salt merchant second to none in Gyeongseong. Seongwu liked to tease him for his certain weaknesses, but knew Minhyun was decisive by nature and liked to give. Seongwu thanked Minhyun, gratitude and affection apparent in his voice. Thank you! Minhyun smiled bashfully in response.

After they looked around the department store, they came back out to the streets. Sparkling streets in Myeongchijung were full of wonder, but made their heads spin because of the noise and flashing lights. They decided that today’s outing was more than enough for a date, especially since they had melon, which was their goal to begin with. They turned towards Jongno to go back home.

Like how he learned about melon first, Minhyun was good at keeping up with various interests and observing and listening to others carefully. He also liked to tell Seongwu about the stories he heard outside.

They were passing over a bridge over Cheonggyechun when Minhyun looked down at the stream below and started to speak.

“The Japanese are going to cover the creek.”

“I’ve heard. They plan to set streetcar tracks over it.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I know.”

Their conversation stopped there, and they walked for a while in silence. The mood between them had took a solemn turn, and Seongwu hesitated to speak. Minhyun broke the silence when they were back at Bukchon.

“I suppose this place will disappear, too.”

“It’s likely.”

“I hope it doesn’t go away.”

“I hope so, too. After all, this is your home town…”

“Yes, but.”

Seongwu looked at Minhyun, at the firm halt of his words. Minhyun had a serious look upon his face.

“This place has all our memories. The Japanese could ruin everything, but I hope they at least do not take away our memories.”

Minhyun called himself a realist, but at times he knew how to utter inherently romantic words. Minhyun recited them without a trace of bashfulness, and only Minhyun himself was unaware that these words made him appear a romantic through and through. Seongwu loved this unintended, warm romanticism Minhyun kept in his heart. Seongwu could not help but like this crack in the wall of rigid perfection Minhyun put forth to others.

Seongwu was gripped with a sudden burst of tenderness. He wanted to hug Minhyun tight, right here and now. However, he could not behave so indecently in an open street in the middle of day. Then would holding his hand be all right? Seongwu closed his eyes and offered his hand to Minhyun.
“I say that we hold hands.”

“What?”

“I was reminded that this moment is precious to us. We don’t know when this very street will be gone, and when we will have to leave this place behind. Won’t we regret it if we don’t even take with us a memory of holding hands and walking on this street together?”

Minhyun stood, stiffened, at Seongwu’s barrage of words. Embarrassed, Seongwu affectionately goaded him.

“So take my hand, quick!”

Minhyun’s hand wrapped over Seongwu’s outstretched hand. Seongwu felt upon his hand Minhyun’s relatively cooler body temperature.

“Your hand is fit for holding during the summer.”

Seongwu snickered. Minhyun did not return his half serious remark. He was standing with his face turned away from Seongwu. Seongwu thought he saw that the tips of Minhyun’s ears were red, but he let it pass, assuming it was just a reflection of the setting sun. Above all, Seongwu could not hide his happiness at how they were holding hands. Excited, Seongwu swung their enjoined hands back and forth as he walked.

“I feel like we have gone back to being seven years old.”

“Seven years must be your level of mental maturity.”

What? Seongwu scowled. He cleared his throat and imitated their principal teacher, as Kyuwon frequently did at home.

“You cannot simply spout whatever comes to mind, Mr. Hwang.”

Minhyun answered in the same tone:

“An old saying tells you to speak the truth no matter the circumstance you’re in.”

“Hey, have you seen a seven-year-old as handsome as me? What about my excellence in foreign languages?”

“I acknowledge that you are a born a prodigy for foreign languages.”

“What about my looks?”

“Ugliest in all the world.”

Seongwu immediately tried to pry his hand away. He firmly shook off Minhyun’s hand, but Minhyun held fast onto his hand. Seongwu struggled to free his hand from Minhyun’s grasp, but he could not escape Minhyun’s overpowering grip no matter how hard he tried.

“Let go. Why do you wish to hold hands with the ugliest face in all the world?”

“Hahaha, I settled for just hand-holding precisely because you’re so ugly.”

“What nonsense.”
Seongwu turned on his heels and started to speed towards the boarding house. Minhyun, about to be dragged along, was taken aback and let go of his hand. Their hands came untangled. Minhyun shouted urgently, as if surrendering himself.

“I was only joking. It was a joke.”

Seongwu stopped in his tracks. He turned around and glared at Minhyun; the look in his eyes was not just any old look. Minhyun reminded himself of the fact that Seongwu loved his smile, and he approached Seongwu while beaming, his eyes beautifully folded into two crescents. From between his red lips came words to lull Seongwu back to him.

“Have you not heard the saying, ‘fairest flowers die the soonest?’ Heavens envy those who are overwhelmingly beautiful.”

“But ‘ugliest in all the world?’ That was too much.”

“Would it not placate the heavens if I call you ugly?”

“Sly sophistry.”

Seongwu quoted what Minhyun had said to him at the cafe. Despite his sullen words, the look on Seongwu’s face had softened. Minhyun offered him his hand again.

“I miss your hand. Wouldn’t you let me hold it again?”

Seongwu looked at Minhyun’s face, and then his hand. Minhyun looked exuberant, with a beaming smile upon his face, and his pale, cool hand was waiting for Seongwu to take it. Seongwu feigned coyness as he reached out again.

“I’ll let it pass this time.”

Hand in hand again, they entered the narrow, complicated alleyways of Bukchon. Their trip to Myeongchijung only ended when they reached the blue metal gate of their boarding house.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 15:

Myeongchijung(明治町)* : Present day Myeongdong, in Seoul.

Modern Girl/Boy* : This term was used to denote, sometimes derogatorily, young men and women who embraced style of dress and lifestyle imported from the west.
Sasha: Sorry it took me so long to translate this one! I hope it was worth the wait!
True Hero Always Shows Up Last

Chapter Summary

Young love burgeons between Minhyun and Seongwu, and they each prepare an unforgettable birthday gift for each other.

Chapter Notes

Visit https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2667673 for the original Chapter 16 in Korean by Id.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 16

Love drew their eyes not to the text of books before them but to each other’s eyes.
- Peter Abelard

Seongwu closed his book. He was no longer interested in its contents. The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was full of wondrous events, but they could not captivate him anymore. Seongwu found no more attraction in Dorothy, the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion. It was no longer important to Seongwu whether Dorothy could return home. Seongwu slowly drifted away from his world of imagination.

A new and thrilling sensation pulled at Seongwu. It was Minhyun. Minhyun, with his powerful magic, brought an enormous whirlwind into Seongwu’s world. Unable to resist it, Seongwu was taken up in its turbulence and dropped in a place he had never been before. Seongwu was afraid that this foreign land would be dreary like the underworld, but when he opened his eyes he found himself in the sweet kingdom of love. Minhyun was its king, and Seongwu an honored guest in it. Seongwu knew he was loved when Minhyun treated and spoiled him with devotion. Seongwu did not decline anything and took everything he was offered: Minhyun’s embrace, soft and warm as a cotton blanket, the velvety looks Minhyun gave him that almost melted into drops of chocolate, and whispers of love Minhyun fed secretly into his ear.

Seongwu remembered an old saying: “Too much is as bad as too little.” In spite of its warning, Seongwu liked the overflowing abundance of Minhyun’s love. He would have felt content if he drowned in it. He wished for Minhyun to continue showering him with affection. He would take the risk of overdose any time. The entirety of Seongwu’s world was colored with Minhyun and only
Minhyun. No other magic could ever enchant Seongwu this way.

They spent years together, but their ‘friendship’ of the past and the ‘affection’ of now were entirely different. All of their daily routines changed, from morning to night. Even the most ordinary and mundane of chores felt foreign, as if they were doing them for the very first time, as if someone had turned back the clock to the very beginning of their time together.

Their wavering eyes kept colliding into each other, even when they were focused on chores and studies of each of their own. The summer was hot, but never unpleasant. Even the air they breathed was so sweet that Seongwu thought if he touched the humid atmosphere with his fingertip, drops of strawberry-flavored syrup would drip to the floor. When their fingertips touched, a thrilling current electrified them. Seongwu had only experienced this static in the dead of dry winter. Even as he withdrew his finger from the pricking sensation he could not stop smiling. Perhaps this was evidence that the two of them were meant to be, partners in destiny. Perhaps this electric tingle was proof that their pinkies were connected by an invisible, crimson thread, and fate was tickling their fingers to let them know they were at each end of it.

Minhyun was a fate that changed Seongwu’s world forever, and so Seongwu started to call Minhyun by a different name. Seongwu used to fantasize about calling Minhyun by only the last syllable of his name: Hyun. It seemed like an embarrassing thing to do, so Seongwu restrained himself time and time again; but during a certain moment in which Minhyun was so irresistibly lovely, Seongwu blurted out ‘Hyun-ah’ without realizing it. At his bashful calling, Minhyun seemed a little surprised, but soon grinned back at him. Minhyun seemed to feel that this nickname was unfamiliar, but responded to it wholeheartedly every time Seongwu let it out.

Even with this new sweetness between them, they continued to play with each other mischievously. In fact, instances of small pranks and jokes only increased. During one dinner, Minhyun got up from his seat. He had to pass Seongwu in order to get a water bottle; as he did, he furtively poked the back of Seongwu’s neck. As soon as Minhyun returned to his seat, Seongwu fought back by tapping Minhyun’s leg with his. Minhyun responded by two touches to his calf. An invisible skirmish resumed under the table. As if exchanging Morse codes, they touched each other’s feet affectionately, conveying respective meaning to each touch.

Seongwu slyly put on an act when he played pranks on Minhyun; on the other hand, Minhyun was blatantly brazen about it. Minhyun nudged, provoked, and touched Seongwu without so much as raising an eyebrow, or with a completely solemn look on his face. Others would have thought Minhyun was lost deep in thought, but really, underneath his serious countenance was endless pondering about how to tease Seongwu. Minhyun was diligent even in jest. Seongwu could not stifle his laughter, and it burst out of him like a cough.

Kyuwon, who had no idea what was happening beneath the table, stopped his chopsticks and stared at Seongwu. It was strange how he suddenly burst into laughter while eating. He asked, perplexed:

“Did you ingest poisonous mushrooms or something? Why do you laugh out of the blue?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

Seongwu answered him, his voice innocent. Meanwhile, Seongwu and Minhyun stopped playing with each other’s leg, and the dinner table returned to peace.

Kyuwon was perceptive, and he easily realized that the mood between Minhyun and Seongwu had changed. He, however, did not even imagine that they were in love; he only assumed they had become even closer. Kyuwon guessed the reason for their deeper intimacy to be the new way Seongwu called Minhyun. Regardless of whom, one would be instantly happy if Seongwu, in all his
charms, called their name by only the last syllable. In his mistaken perception, Kyuwon asked Seongwu to call him ‘Wonnie hyung.’ He said it while looking at Seongwu; but it was Minhyun who answered.

“No, hyung.”

Kyuwon wanted to demand to know why Minhyun was answering him, but decided against it, realizing the mood between them was not for him to breach. Minhyun grinned at Kyuwon and turned around, his arm around Seongwu’s shoulders. Seongwu tried to say something, but he disappeared up the stairs, pushed by Minhyun’s gentle guidance. Kyuwon was dumbfounded at what happened, but soon decided not to think much of it. Students going into the second semester of fourth year often lost their minds out of stress about grades and future career choices. What Kyuwon overlooked was that the reason Minhyun and Seongwu was out of it was not because of school or their future careers, but because of the burgeoning love between them.

Once they returned to their room, Seongwu sat, attaching himself to Minhyun. Like a content cat, he leaned his back on Minhyun and played for his affection. Minhyun eagerly participated in Seongwu’s play, and held Seongwu tightly into his chest. Now it was a custom for Minhyun to hug Seongwu to wake him up in the morning, and they were used to embracing each other. Now, Seongwu did not wake when Minhyun held him and raised him onto a sitting position; he had learned how to keep his eyes closed. Minhyun added various ways to make them open: poking, tickling, and petting insistently. The most effective way to wake Seongwu was touching his ear. Seongwu’s ears were sensitive, and he reacted instantly when they were touched. Even now, Seongwu startled when Minhyun’s hand landed on his ear. Seongwu asked Minhyun why he was touching his ear, and reminded Minhyun that it wasn’t morning. Minhyun answered: “Just because.” If he had to explain, he would have said that he felt compelled to touch something, and he wanted to enjoy Seongwu’s colorful response. Seongwu left Minhyun to play with his ear, surmising he would stop soon. However, Minhyun kept touching Seongwu’s ear with no sign of stopping; he seemed to have no intention to let go. Seongwu began to doubt Minhyun’s purpose behind it, and he sat up, glaring at Minhyun.

“You’re doing this on purpose, right? Even when you hold me in the morning to wake me up?”

“So you think I am lecherous. You’re wrong. I used to hug my youngest sister awake in the morning, and you happen to behave just like her.”

Affectionately teasing, Minhyun gingerly stroked Seongwu’s face. Minhyun’s thumb softly traced over the trio of stars on Seongwu’s cheek. The constellation of three moles on his cheek was the most singular point that made Seongwu himself. Minhyun thought for a moment how he wished to have a similar mark on his body. As Minhyun swallowed his regret, Seongwu hung his head, his face visibly flushed. There was no way Minhyun would have touched his sister in this way. Seongwu whispered: “...Then did you touch your sister like this?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You’re so mean.”

Seongwu burrowed into Minhyun’s chest. Seongwu could be held in Minhyun’s arms any time he reached out for them, and it gave Seongwu an endless feeling of stability and assurance. Minhyun smiled, slowly caressing Seongwu’s back. They were of the same age, yet when Seongwu played the baby in this way, he felt younger than Minhyun, like a much younger sibling who needed Minhyun’s hand in every little step he took.

Seongwu had many siblings, and so did Minhyun. He had two older brothers and a younger sister.
However, the Hwang siblings shared no deep fraternal love among them. This was partly because Minhyun, being the third son, did not get much attention or affection from his parents, but also because the siblings were close in age and they collided in everything they did. To be truthful, Minhyun only held his sister to wake her up twice or thrice, when they were very young. What he told Seongwu was only an excuse to hold him in the morning. It was true: sometimes Minhyun touched Seongwu with a secret, wicked intention.

However, not all of Minhyun’s thoughts were treacherous, and not all the times their skin touched were impure. Minhyun was sincere and responsible by nature. As he started to see Seongwu, he began to seriously consider his future. Until now, he thought of his future as distant and vague, like drifting clouds, but now, thanks to Seongwu, all the actions he took repetitively without knowing the purpose and meaning were organized and categorized. Minhyun could focus more easily and efficiently. He sped through the mountain of summer assignments and even started to study for the upcoming semester.

On the other hand, Seongwu, who had brought this change in Minhyun, was frustrated to no end. He wished for them to focus on each other in the few remaining days of the summer break. Seongwu wanted to admire the handsome face before him rather than his book. In spite of Seongwu’s wishes, Minhyun did not yield a minute of his rigorous study plan. Seongwu did not have the heart to tell him to stop studying so hard, so he just waited patiently. Seongwu felt his body tingle; this was unfair. Seongwu could not erase his lover’s face from his thoughts, yet Minhyun himself appeared to care nothing of it. Seongwu decided to sabotage Minhyun, whose profile in deep concentration looked annoyingly peaceful.

Seongwu, in a sudden bout of playfulness, quietly crawled to Minhyun. He leaned his head on Minhyun’s left shoulder and rubbed his cheek on it as if a puppy would. Minhyun’s hand stopped in its track as Seongwu’s soft cheek touched his shoulder. Seongwu asked, teasingly, “What’s wrong? Are you stuck? I think what you’ve done until now is correct.”

“It’s distracting how you’re next to me.”

“But you’ve done swell until now.”

“It’s different when you’re so close.”

“Indeed.”

Seongwu nodded. Seongwu knew well that there was a world of difference between being right next to Minhyun and a few feet away from him. Seongwu snickered, and raised his hand to caress the side of Minhyun’s face.

“Hyunaa.”

Seongwu drawled. Minhyun turned his head to face Seongwu. As if he had been waiting for this moment, Seongwu took Minhyun’s chin between his long fingers. Seongwu turned Minhyun’s handsome face this way and that, and exclaimed in awe: “How could you be so handsome?”

Minhyun almost burst into laughter. Instead, he put down his pen and turned his entire body to face Seongwu. Seongwu held onto Minhyun’s waist and burrowed into Minhyun’s arms. They clung to each other like a tree and a cicada. Enjoying Minhyun’s hand petting his back, Seongwu searched the surface of Minhyun’s desk for a source of entertainment. He spotted a calendar in the corner, and was reminded of how soon Minhyun’s birthday was.

“Young birthday is around the corner. Tell me whatever you need, and I’ll give you anything you
“I only want you.”

“No, not things like that.”

“I mean what I said.”

“Then I will give you what I want to give you. It will be spectacular, so you can expect greatness.”

This was Minhyun’s first birthday after they had become special to each other. Seongwu burned up with fervor to make it unforgettable. Minhyun could not even guess what precocious thoughts were inside Seongwu’s head. When with Seongwu, Minhyun could always experience something new, and could never expect what was coming. A buzzing anticipation grew inside Mihyun’s heart.

On the day of Minhyun’s birthday, however, Seongwu did not present him with anything special. He only observed their yearly custom of giving a small gift. This year’s birthday gift from Seongwu was a handkerchief. In the corner of the soft white fabric was Minhyun’s name embroidered in golden thread. Seongwu had wanted to embroider an entire poem on it, but it was impossibly expensive, and all he could afford with the money he gathered over the last few months were three letters of Minhyun’s name. Seongwu promised that he would, in some time in the future, give Minhyun a handkerchief embroidered with a poem his wrote to sing his love for Minhyun.

Minhyun was thankful for this gift and a promise from his lover, but he still could not shake off remaining anticipation that lingered. Seongwu was not one to utter idle words. There was no way Seongwu would end his celebration in this ordinary way. Minhyun’s gaze persistently followed Seongwu’s every action.

They spent the day with a group of classmates they had not seen all summer, and parted only at dusk. Their friends promised to gather again on Seongwu’s upcoming birthday, and scattered to each go back home. Minhyun was finally left alone with Seongwu. As soon as they were alone, Seongwu transformed from an ordinary friend into a lover Minhyun could not help but adore. Seongwu did not say anything; he only quietly smiled, and led Minhyun away.

They hid themselves into the gargantuan labyrinth that was Bukchon. Only three years ago, Seongwu did not know how to get from and to school and the boarding house; now, he knew every little alleyway like the back of his hand. In most of the experiences that seared the map of Bukchon into his brain, Minhyun was by his side.

Seongwu soon stopped, in a dark alley without any passersby. The only streetlamp that lighted it seemed to be dying as it slowly flickered in the darkness. Seongwu caught his breath, and spoke at last.

“True hero always shows up last.”

True hero? Minhyun tilted his head. It was Minhyun’s birthday, yet Seongwu seemed to be referring to himself as the hero. Minhyun needed additional explanation to understand what Seongwu meant. Minhyun looked at Seongwu, but he could barely read his expression. Under the murky orange light, Seongwu’s face was overcast in dark shadows. The shade made his already prominent features stand out more, but at the same time masked the expression on them.

Seongwu thought for a moment, then raised his head. A certain solemnity, like that from a hero in a tragedy, took over his handsome face. Minhyun was about to ask what he was doing, but Seongwu was faster. Seongwu took Minhyun by the collar with both hands, and Minhyun found himself
stooping forward. Seongwu’s raised his heels off the ground, and their eyes were level. Seongwu’s face came close, too close, and something warm and soft touched Minhyun’s cheek. Seongwu promptly let go of Minhyun and bolted, and started to run across the alleyway they had just crossed. Minhyun tried to grasp what had happened, and started to laugh. *Hahaha*—his sonorous laughter reached Seongwu’s ears, who was already meters away from him. Minhyun quickly began to chase him.

“Seongwu! Why are you running away?"

“Go away! Stop chasing me!”

“I can’t stop chasing you if you don’t stop!”

“What are you talking about?"

Their shouts and quick footsteps rang across the alleys. Seongwu was caught after a prolonged chase, having stepped into a dead end. It was a dark, unlit alley without a streetlamp. With each of Minhyun’s step towards Seongwu, the distance between them closed. Afraid Seongwu would bolt again, Minhyun took his thin wrist into his hand.

“What are you doing, kissing me and then bolting like that?”

“I never bolted. Let me go.”

“Then why did you start running away from me?”

“I dunno. Don’t ask.”

“Don’t say you don’t know.”

There was not an ounce of reprimand in Minhyun’s voice, but Seongwu hung his head as if he had done something wrong. He was so embarrassed, especially because Minhyun kept smiling at him. Seongwu had practiced the kiss again and again in his head, but the real thing was different. Minhyun thought if he teased Seongwu further, he could be denied looking into his pretty face forever; so he started to soothe him instead.

“This place is so dark, and I can’t see anything. There, don’t be shy.”

Minhyun’s deep, calm voice reverberated low in the dark. Responding to it, Seongwu’s heart began to flutter. Minhyun stopped speaking, and gently took Seongwu’s face into both of his hands. Minhyun raised the tiny face he loved so much to look eye to eye with Seongwu. Minhyun’s thumb brushed across Seongwu’s lower lip— a calculated movement pretending to be coincidence.

“...Won’t you kiss me again?”

Seongwu blinked slowly. At this moment, he could not think of anything else. There was an irresistible power in Minhyun’s voice, and he wanted to do what Minhyun was telling him to do. As if hypnotized, Seongwu relaxed and drew near to Minhyun once more. His thin lips carefully touched Minhyun’s cheek, and a moment that resembled eternity passed. Seongwu parted from Minhyun, regretting the space between them already, but Minhyun quickly caught up to him to close it. Minhyun bent down to leave a chaste kiss on Seongwu’s forehead. The sound of a light smooch rang in Seongwu’s ear, and his face began to heat up again.

“Let’s do the rest when we get home.”
“What do you mean, do the rest?”

Seongwu yelled in surprise at Minhyun’s sly remark. Seongwu slapped the wide expanse of Minhyun’s back, and threatened:

“You will not die easy if you so much as lay a finger on me at home.”

“Ouch, I get it.”

Minhyun always surrendered to Seongwu; he had a spicy blow. Also, Minhyun preferred seeing Seongwu beaming radiantly at him rather than glaring.

Minhyun therefore intended to keep his promise to not touch Seongwu at home. However, once they returned to their room and closed the door, Seongwu threw his arms around Minhyun’s neck and kissed his cheek again. Seongwu seemed to have forgotten all about his threat in the alleyway minutes ago. Despite all this, Minhyun easily forgave the adorable liar in his arms.

After this historical success, Seongwu began to crave for more drastic gestures of love. His greed towards it seemed endless. However, Minhyun appeared immovable, and they seemed to be stuck in light kisses to the cheek. If Seongwu had not gathered his courage to kiss Minhyun on his birthday, they would have stuck with hand-holding forever. After Minhyun kissed Seongwu on the forehead that night, he did not lay a finger on Seongwu.

Wishing to do many other things with Minhyun, Seongwu stayed in a state of heartrending frustration. The kiss he gave Minhyun on the night of his birthday was slowly disappearing beyond the horizons; Seongwu had to take some action. Seongwu began to rack his brains to come up with a way to lure Minhyun out of his cave of gentlemanly restraint. Seeing Seongwu sitting for prolonged periods of time at his desk, Minhyun felt a sort of paternal admiration for his focus, thinking that he was writing poems. In fact, Seongwu was full of delinquent thoughts about how to do this and that to Minhyun to seduce him.

In mid-August Minhyun visited his parents. He did not visit his family often, but he could not avoid going home for his mother’s birthday to keep up with the least of obligations her child. Minhyun grumbled about having to go, noting how he would only be bombarded with nitpicking scolding from his parents, and how killing time in Myeongchi Jung or Hwanggeumjung seemed more productive. Seongwu did not have the heart to agree with him and give him more reasons to skip his mother’s birthday. So instead, Seongwu prepared a cute farewell for Minhyun, who was surely feeling discomfort about his imminent visit to his parents.

Ready to leave, Minhyun looked back at Seongwu from the door.

“I’ll be going, then.”

“Wait, just a minute!”

Seongwu ran towards Minhyun, and stood in front of him. Minhyun had an inquisitive look on his
face, and Seongwu caught him by surprise. With a cheerful smack, Seongwu’s lips quickly landed on Minhyun’s cheek.

Caught off guard, Minhyun stepped back, perplexed by this out-of-context expression of affection. His ears were instantly dyed red. Seongwu grinned.

“This is my send-off for you.”

“Who sends people off like this? This is…”

“This is the way they do it in the west. I just wanted to try it.”

It was Minhyun who was embarrassed at Seongwu’s brazen words. He tried to hide that he was flustered, but was already found out by Seongwu. Seongwu laughed, and teased Minhyun, but saw him off with words of comfort. Hesitantly leaving the boarding house, Minhyun kept glancing back at Seongwu. He had no idea where Seongwu heard and digested these stories. They were in the same foreign language classes, but their teacher had never mentioned customs like these from Europe. By now they were familiar with western culture and products, but they were still mentally accustomed to Confucian ideals of chastity they had been exposed to from childhood. If Seongwu could hear Minhyun’s thoughts, he would surely make fun of him for being so stubbornly conservative, because for a Korean, Seongwu was decidedly and unapologetically open-minded. Minhyun loved that his beloved was so free and bold.

The kiss was not the first that Seongwu had given him, but Minhyun found himself touching his cheek again and again while with his parents. The warmth that had landed on his cheek like a spring butterfly seemed to linger in order to protect him. Visits to his parents were always uncomfortable and difficult, but it was somehow more bearable than any of the others in the past; Seongwu had given Minhyun strength to stand tall.

Minhyun left the house right after the meal. He wanted to return to the boarding house as soon as possible. Seongwu was waiting for him in their room, and visions of his face kept lingering in front of Minhyun’s eyes. Minhyun could not bear it; he had to see Seongwu now. There was a considerable way between Minhyun’s family home and the boarding house but Minhyun ran the entire distance anyways. He was out of breath, and he felt like his chest was going to burst open. He was used to this feeling, as he felt it every time he looked at Seongwu.

Once at the boarding house, Minhyun climbed the stairs two at a time and slammed open the door. Seongwu, who had been laying in bed with a book, shot up in surprise. Minhyun rarely ran, but he was gasping to catch his breath. Seongwu opened his eyes wide at the sight.

“What a surprise. Did something happen?”

“Seongwu.”

At this quiet, calm call from Minhyun, Seongwu looked up at him, dumbfounded. Minhyun looked solemn, like a soldier about to go to war. Minhyun drew near, and lowered himself on one knee.

“I’m back.”

Minhyun then bent down, and kissed Seongwu’s left cheek. Seongwu was mortified in the spot. At Seongwu’s lack of response, Minhyun shook his palm in front of his eyes. When Seongwu belatedly realized what had happened, he grinned like a cheshire cat. He had a brilliant idea.

To a diligent student who learns fast and well, a teacher wants to give more. Seongwu took Minhyun’s face into his hands.
“You dummy. When you return home, you’re supposed to do it on the lips, like this…”

Seongwu put his lips on Minhyun’s, and stayed. Ignoring his pounding heart, Seongwu opened his mouth slightly, and let out a red tongue. Seongwu gingerly licked Minhyun’s lower lip, and parted himself from Minhyun. Minhyun was startled, and was frozen solid for a moment. When he spoke again, he was trying to feign calm.

“...Then, I’ll try again…”

Minhyun said, his voice deep and his eyes downcast. However, Seongwu pushed him away. Minhyun looked at Seongwu, confused. Seongwu had a cheeky smile on his face, and his voice was full of mischievousness.

“You already kissed me today, so your opportunity for today has gone!”

“What? Whose rule is that?”

“Mine. Wouldn’t we be mere beasts if we did whatever we want to do all the time?”

“...All right.”

Minhyun stepped back with a tragic look upon his face. He picked up his towel and a change of clothes to go bathe. Seongwu handed him his bath basket, and added what felt like an insult to injury.

“The bathwater is still warm.”

Instead of answering, Minhyun only slammed the door shut. Seongwu laughed out loud at the sight of Minhyun’s back, reluctantly leaving for the bathroom with his bath basket. Teasing Minhyun was indeed Seongwu’s favorite pastime.

Seongwu threw Minhyun into chaotic confusion thus, teasing him with yes’s and nos; but Seongwu continued to want more from Minhyun. Seongwu wished for Minhyun to give him something bigger for his birthday. Actually, there was no need for Minhyun to take initiative. If Minhyun was too shy, Seongwu would do it.

Time passed by like arrows in flight, and soon it was Seongwu’s anticipated birthday. It began ordinarily, with Minhyun giving Seongwu a gift and a word of blessing. What Minhyun prepared this year was a small mirror that fit into Seongwu’s palm, its back decorated with jade. The mirror was obviously painstakingly crafted, and it looked expensive. Seongwu asked Minhyun why he had prepared a mirror for Seongwu, who was not even a girl, Minhyun answered:

“You are in need to realize what a beauty you are.”

The sheer impact of these words hit Seongwu like a tidal wave. Seongwu could not stop smiling thinking about them, even when he was with his classmates who came to celebrate. His classmates could only assume that Seongwu had something incredibly wonderful happen to him, as he seemed too happy, even for his birthday. However, that incredibly wonderful event had not happened yet. Seongwu could tell. Minhyun had his hands behind his back, pretending to not know anything beyond what his classmates knew; but he would begin the real thing when all of them left for home in the evening.

Seongwu was right; after all the classmates left, Minhyun wrapped his arm around Seongwu’s shoulders and led him away from the boarding house. Seongwu had led Minhyun to a dark alleyway on the latter’s birthday, but Minhyun brought Seongwu to a place bustling with crowds of people.
They were headed to the heart of Myeongchijung.

“I heard they installed lights on the fountain. I heard it was beautiful to see.” Minhyun said.

Seongwu had also heard about the new lights on the fountain in Myeongchijung. The fountain was now apparently beautiful enough for anyone to stop in their tracks and watch it in awe when the sun went down and the lights came on one by one. It was getting dark, and the lights were sure to turn on while they walked from Jongno to Myeongchijung.

Soon, Minhyun and Seongwu were in front of Mitsukoshi Department Stores. Even from afar, they could see the blinding lights around the fountain. They approached the fountain. Water was flowing out from the grey stone fountainhead, and surrounding it were elegant bronze sculptures. Between the statues were beautiful lights, and the yellow light from them spread far and wide, giving a feeling of warmth to all those who looked at it. Seongwu silently marveled at the sight. This place, which he passed unthinkingly every day, was now transformed into a fantastical, dreamy landscape by night.

Seongwu felt as if he had returned to childhood, and watched everything around him in wonder. The hot summer night deepened, and they strolled around the department store building. Each step they took together was slow and deliberate, in contrast to the passersby that buzzed and hurried around them. They felt as if they existed in a different sphere from those around them, and paid no heed to people bustling in the streets. They felt as if they were the only ones existing in this world.

Everything that surrounded them was perfect. The streets were full of warm, fuzzy lights. From the department store, almost near closing time, came the sound of classical music played on a gramophone. Water flowed from the fountainhead without pause. In the midst of these beautiful sensations, they stood, facing their beloved.

Where they stopped was a byway that diverged from the main street. In the empty, secluded alleyway, their gazes met as if they had rehearsed it. In this delicate, awestruck mood, Seongwu felt a chill creeping his spine. Seongwu entertained a dumb thought for a moment: could he die from this?

Like he and Minhyun were in a vacuum, he could not see or hear anything else. He could only see Minhyun and nothing else. When Seongwu realized that he needed nothing other than Minhyun, Minhyun drew near, tilting his head slightly. Minhyun carefully kissed Seongwu, on the lips, decidedly different from the flighty kiss he had left on Seongwu’s forehead and cheek before.

Minhyun softly bit Seongwu’s lower lip, and delved his tongue inside. At this foreign sensation, Seongwu shut his eyes and grasped Minhyun’s arm. When their tongues melded together, Seongwu’s grasp on Minhyun’s arm tightened. Relieved that Seongwu was not pushing him away, Minhyun gathered his courage and licked Seongwu’s dainty lower row of teeth before he ended their first real kiss. Minhyun was chaste by nature, and he was resolute when he parted himself from Seongwu.

Neither of them had considered what would come after their kiss. Both blushing, they stood looking away from each other. For more than ten minutes following the kiss, they could not even bear to look eye to eye. They cleared their throats for no reason, like admitting they had done something strange. What they felt was powerful, something they had never felt before in their lives, and no amount of fanning could calm the fire that burned from inside. Minhyun’s ear was about to catch on fire. He was severely embarrassed, but he wanted to go through with what he had prepared for Seongwu. That was the way he was.

“Happy birthday.”

Bashfully, they hurried back towards Bukchon. Their hands, which had only brushed against each other as they walked, were tightly bound together by the time they crossed Cheonggyechun. As they
passed Jongno their fingers were laced together, and intertwined without a crack of space in between.

Some past and present photos of the fountain in Myeongchijung (now Myeongdong) in Seoul, Korea. What used to be Mitsukoshi Department Stores still stands in Myeongdong today.
:)
Minhyun and Seongwu return to school for the second semester of fourth year. There, they are met with an unwelcome surprise.

For the original Chapter 17 in Korean, visit: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2682349.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 17

* Warning : Institutional Violence / corporal punishment.

In no time, the sky soared up again. Fleecy clouds that appeared close enough to touch became thinner, and moved farther away. Cool winds blew in place of sweltering humidity. Many living things changed in appearance, signalling another change in season. Heaps of angels trumpets that covered the stone walls outside the boarding house bloomed their last flowers before withering, and cosmos on the sidestreets waved at them in the wind. Only the sun remained, shining as brightly as ever.

Another change surreptitiously approached Minhyun and Seongwu.

School bell rang under the clear autumn sky, signalling their eighth semester at Gyeongseong Secondary School. Minhyun and Seongwu’s dreamy summer was over, and they had to return to school. They headed to school, now as familiar as home to them. They expected school life to continue as it had for the last four years, and they were not expecting of anything special. However, they realized that the peaceful, mundane school life had ended forever when they stepped inside the school gates and encountered faces they had not seen before.
Gyeongseong Secondary school looked peaceful from the outside, but each classroom was full of chaos. Students were perplexed by the sudden and drastic changes they faced. All of the faculty, including the principal, vice principal, and teachers of major subjects, had been replaced. Their teachers, who had been replaced, had taught as usual until the very last semester, and they comprised of two-thirds of all faculty. All of the administrative and educational decisions had passed to the new Japanese faculty that replaced them. Korean teachers only remained in minor subjects such as Korean language, art and music. These changes were made without a word of warning to the students, and they were confused and rueful, as they had said goodbye to the teachers they had known and loved without even knowing it. What was worse, this wave that overtook the school extended beyond overturning changes in the faculty.

“What is this?”

Seongwu blurted out in disbelief as he read their new class schedule for the second semester, taped in front of their classroom. Minhyun also read it, dismay apparent on his face. Among their usual schedule was a foreign intruder: ‘Military Training.’

“What is this?”

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“Quiet, all of you.”

Mr. Kimura, who entered the classroom belatedly, calmed the students. The students became silent, but confusion remained among them. Over forty pairs of reproachful eyes asked Kimura for an explanation. Mr. Kimura sighed deeply, and started to talk, he himself looking upset.

“I have a few things I have to tell you. First, four of you over there, won’t you help me?”

Mr. Kimura addressed four students near the door. They left the classroom after Mr. Kimura’s instruction, and returned with four large sacks. When they were opened, students gasped in disbelief. In the sacks were standard-issue training uniforms, combat boots and military hats from the Japanese Imperial Army. Kimura spoke, breaking the icy silence among his students.

“Take one of each, please.”

This was a gift no student had ever wanted. Seongwu picked up a uniform, murky green and coarse, and he scowled, as if he saw a gross insect. He wished to throw it away, even burn it; everyone in the classroom seemed to feel the same. Kimura watched his students. Kimura was usually known to be cold and conceited, but this time he spoke in a quiet, careful voice.

“In August, there was a reorganization of all school systems by the Japanese Government General of Korea. Starting this semester, all boys’ schools in Joseon will have mandatory military training for their students. Students will gather by grade levels and take two hours of basic military training each week. Again, this is mandatory for all students, with no exceptions. Even Japanese students born in Joseon are subject to this new rule.”

Students returned to their seats with each of their military training uniforms. Mr. Kimura looked at his disturbed students.

“The man in charge of your military training is not a formal teacher. His name is Inoue. He participated in the invasion of Rehe*. I met him briefly this morning; he seems to have a fiery temper, so try to follow his instructions carefully.”

Several students scowled openly; Kimura saw them, yet did not reprimand them. Even for him, a Japanese man, it was unacceptable to subject students, not even twenty, to military training. He tried his best to sound coldly official as he explained.
“You all are not even old enough to pull your weight in society, and I do not expect them to train you like actual soldiers here. The worst you will have to do is learn how to stand in formation. Incidentally, our class was assigned the first session. Think of it as a gym class of sorts. Now, I will finish morning assembly. Get changed and go down to the field.”

Mr. Kimura promptly left the classroom. Through the open door, the boys could hear murmur from other classrooms. Students still found it difficult to comprehend or accept this reality. All of them stayed confused as they reluctantly changed into training gear, awkwardly putting on ill-fitting combat boots. The murky green of militarywear suited no boy in the classroom.

All boys in fourth year gathered in the field, and they stood in haphazardly formed lines. They looked at each other and balked at unfamiliar sights. Soon, a middle-aged man in full military regalia appeared in front of them. He was small and thin, but his gaze was sharp. He had what adults called ‘eyes that have killed.’ The boys knew that this was the man named Inoue who was in charge of their military training. At his appearance murmurs among the boys subsided immediately and the field was consumed in silence. Seongwu stepped closer to Minhyun, and Minhyun secretly held his hand. Ten soldiers under Inoue’s command surrounded them. They glared threateningly, armed with actual swords and guns used in battle.

As Mr. Kimura had told them, Inoue introduced himself proudly as a part of Japanese force that established Manchukuo in China. He then went into lengthy explanation of how many Chinese soldiers he killed in battle and the types of strategies he used to lead his army to victory, followed by an impassioned speech on how splendid it was to give up one’s life for his country. Seongwu covered his mouth with one hand, feeling nausea creeping up his throat. Inoue seemed to think that students who did not pay him much attention were insolent, and his face hardened. He blew hard on his whistle, commencing the first of military training sessions in Gyeongseong Secondary School.

Japanese soldiers under Inoue’s command stepped forward. Well-trained, they gave perfect examples of standing at attention, standing at ease, and turning in all directions in unison. Inoue had the students do the same. His whistles and commands rang in the field. All motions appeared simple, but it was difficult for students, who spent most of their time at their desks, to recreate them flawlessly. Formations soon became disorderly, and some of the boys openly refused to comply in defiance.

“My lads, you need some discipline.”

Inoue had the boys face the ground, with their hands and feet on the ground and their hips raised. The field was too small for all of the students to be in this position, but he insisted that all of them comply to his order. The boys hesitantly got down. If Inoue saw a boy who visibly expressed defiance, he chased him down and kicked him. After three or four boys were kicked in such fashion, military discipline Inoue wanted was finally among the fourth year students. Minhyun glanced at Seongwu. As their position prolonged, Seongwu’s thin arms started to tremble. Minhyun wanted to hold his hand and see his face, but couldn’t. Minhyun whispered quietly.

“Lean on me. It’s all right.”

The only benefit of a tiny school field was that the boys could lean on each other without being found out. Many boys around Minhyun and Seongwu were enduring through the pain, leaning on their friends and letting themselves be leaned on in turn. Seongwu leaned on Minhyun. He knew this would make things more difficult for Minhyun, but it was the only way he could even stay up. Noticing that Seongwu was suffering, Minhyun whispered: “Let’s hold on just a little more. Can you do it?”

“Mhmm.”
Seongwu could barely answer. His arms and legs were wobbling. He just wished for this time to end. Inoue only allowed them to stand again when Seongwu thought he was going to faint. Boys stood up, their limbs trembling. As soon as they were back on their feet, Inoue asked: “Who is the valedictorian of this class?”

No one dared to answer, but their gazes betrayed the answer. Inoue saw the boys glance at one person simultaneously, and he called Minhyun forward. Minhyun picked up his heavy feet and moved forward. Seongwu’s wavering eyes followed him.

“What is your name?”

“My name is Hwang Minhyun, sir.”

“Good. Mr. Hwang, you are the student regiment commander of all fourth years.”

Inoue said, his tone surprisingly kind. They all thought this rank given to Minhyun was in words only, but Inoue took a yellow armband out of his pocket and placed it on Minhyun’s right arm.

“Mr. Hwang, do you know what regiment commanders do?”

“He… leads his regiment.”

“A regiment commander represents his entire regiment, and takes responsibility for all.”

As he finished his sentence, Inoue kicked the back of Minhyun’s calves. Minhyun’s knees buckled, and he fell to the ground. When he tried to stand again, Inoue told him to stay put, and face down again as he had been with his peers. Seongwu immediately paled; he was struck with terrible premonition on what was about to happen.

“The reason Mr. Hwang is being hit is because of all of you; so watch clearly.”

Inoue unsheathed a club that was affixed to his belt. He told Minhyun to count each of the blows he received. He spat on his palm, fixed his grasp on his club, and started to strike the back of Minhyun’s thighs. The club, carved out of impossibly hard wood, landed on Minhyun’s legs with an explosive sound of collision.

“…One.”

“Can you count any slower?”

Inoue struck again.

“Two.”

“Louder!”

Inoue shouted, frustrated; Minhyun, too, started to scream his numbers, as if lashing out in a fit of rage.

Minhyun was thus struck ten times. At ‘six,’ he was kicked in the stomach for no apparent reason. Ironically, Inoue seemed to be more angered the longer Minhyun firmly stood his ground. The club was infused with more and more power as Minhyun kept counting. Minhyun’s limbs began to tremble; even he, with his powerfully built body and innate strength, could not withstand ruthless violence for long. Another thing: Minhyun did not want to give in. This was not only about his pride;
at this moment he was indeed a representative of all his classmates. As a man of Joseon, he did not want to surrender easily to a Japanese military officer. Further, his love, Ong Seongwu, was watching him. Minhyun could not imagine what Seongwu would do in his worry if he fell to the ground. Minhyun could not bear the pain of hurting Seongwu; it might have been selfish, but he did not want to make Seongwu worry any more.

Whatever the reasons, Minhyun bit his lip as he stood his ground. He endured the violence, like a madman, disregarding the grains of sand digging into his palm and the slow, painful numbing of his feet.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?”

Someone shouted. It was Mr. Kimura who was screaming. He shook off those who tried to hold him back and ran across the field towards them. He helped Minhyun to his feet, and stood tall, looking Inoue eye to eye defiantly. Inoue must have recognized him, having met him before classes started, but he asked anyways, mockingly: “Who are you?”

“I am a teacher of these students. What in hell do you think you are doing to my students?”

“They are a severely senseless bunch, so I tried to give them some discipline.”

“They are students, not soldiers! You did not have to do this to them.”

“You seem like a dweeb who never held a gun in your life. If you are just a teacher, stay out of military training and shut up.”

Inoue took his club and pushed Mr. Kimura’s shoulder with enough force to make him stumble backwards. In spite of it, Mr. Kimura never stopped glaring at Inoue. Inoue, knowing he could physically overpower Mr. Kimura, just jeered at him. However, he stopped hitting Minhyun, aware of groups of teachers who had gathered at the school entrance to watch him, and conscious of how Mr. Kimura, a Japanese man, was vocally protesting.

“Go back to your place.”

Minhyun staggered back into formation; as he passed, classmates looked at him with worry and sympathy. To calm them, he put on a small smile as he walked. It was not difficult to find Seongwu again among crowd of classmates. Minhyun stood next to Seongwu, who was frozen solid. Seongwu was palid, and he was slightly trembling. Minhyun wanted to ask him if he was all right, but Seongwu beat him to it. Minhyun shrugged, trying to sound as serene as possible.

“I am absolutely fine. The club’s blow is stronger in sound than in force.”

Seongwu wished to take hold of Minhyun’s body that very moment and examine him, but sound of another whistle separated them once again. They could not speak, but they kept scanning each other. Countless emotions were exchanged through their eyes.

Mr. Kimura might have let himself be pushed, but his protest was effective. Inoue calmed down, and training resumed more peacefully. Because they had to conform to their two-hour quota, they were only released when they were finished learning all their standing positions.

Once they returned to the classroom in complete exhaustion, they saw Mr. Kimura, who looked severely disturbed. He paced at the front of the classroom listlessly. He asked Minhyun, who appeared visibly tired.
“Mr. Hwang, are you all right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“No, you don’t look all right. Do you want to go home early?”

“No, sir. I will stay.”

“This is not something for you to be obstinate about.”

Kimura tiredly brushed his face down with his hand. Always rather arrogant and prideful, he was acting out of character, and anxiety felt among the students intensified. The mood in their classroom was solemn and heavy, and no one dared to speak. Minutes later, Kimura started speaking, having calmed down. What he wanted to do was unveil the ugly underbelly of reality his students had not seen yet.

“As I told you, there was an extensive personnel reorganization made by the Japanese Government General in August. Most important placements in the educational department were replaced. Some of you might know already; Imperial Japan is seeking to go into war with China, using Manchukuo as their stronghold.”

“.......”

“To some insane warmongers, you are merely excellent human resources. You are young, healthy, able-bodied, and have been excellently educated. I can guarantee all of you are more equipped than imbecilic novice officers in remote frontlines in understanding strategies and operations. Students as accomplished as yourselves are rare, even in Japan. This is a problem, if you think about it.”

“.......”

“Do you know why the principal and vice principal at this school were replaced? It’s because they opposed mandatory military training. They became eyesores to Government General officers the moment they protested their policies, and were ousted by implementation of personnel reorganization plans. Actually, it’d be nice if they were only fired. You know very well how vicious Japanese Government General can be.”

“.......”

“I was with them for only a semester, but I was nonetheless a subordinate of principal and vice principal teachers at Gyeongseong Secondary School, and colleague of the fired Korean teachers. Now, I don’t even know if any of them are alive.”

Seongwu had grown attached to these teachers over more than three years, and their faces flashed before his eyes. The principal teacher Kyuwon used to comically impersonate; chemistry and physics teacher with his crazy backstories and anecdotes about famous scientists; their math teacher, always unforgiving in his summer assignments; and many more. Maybe Seongwu could never see them again. Maybe they were all dead. Tears welled up in Seongwu’s eyes.

“Are you angry? Do you feel indignant? Then survive with all your might, and give life your all. Survive, and never let them break you; and trample on these Japanese men who insult you. Don’t let any Japanese talk down to you.”

Words poured out of Mr. Kimura’s mouth; after he was done, he was still fuming out of fury and a
sense of injustice. He closed with the following remark:

“...I apologize on behalf of these idiots, including Inoue. Looking at how you feel now, I don’t think I can get anything into your heads today. Go home; I won’t count the rest of today as an absence. I am merely a teacher, but I think I have that much discretion at least. Now, I release you.”

Kimura left the classroom right away, not bothering to wait for his students to bid him goodbye as usual. They were perplexed at this fiercely emotional outburst from Mr. Kimura, who was normally known for being cold, strict, and practicing nepotism openly. Minhyun and Seongwu could not say they liked him, but they were thankful for the consideration he showed by letting them go home early. Without changing back into their gakurans, they hurried out of the classroom. It was twenty minutes before the lunch bell.

The boys left quietly through the gate in the back of the school and scattered to go home. After dark, morose goodbyes Minhyun and Seongwu were finally left alone. Their way back to the boarding house was devoid of people, due to their unusual timing. Seongwu kept glancing at Minhyun. Minhyun was pretending to be all right, but there were beads of cold sweat on his clean forehead, and he could not hide that he was slightly limping. Was there something Seongwu could do for him?

“Shall I carry your bag?”

“Why? It’s not heavy.”

“Just because…”

“I’m truly all right. Don’t worry. Do you not trust me?”

“I do!”

Seongwu waved away Minhyun’s accusation, and Minhyun smiled, taking his hand. He laced his fingers through Seongwu’s to anchor him in place.

“For me, your hand is enough.”

They held tightly to each other’s hands as they walked. They arrived at the boarding house soon; in spite of their worries that their hosts would be home, it was empty. Seongwu opened the gate with his key and they hurried upstairs.

From the start, Minhyun was infamous for being obsessively clean. He meticulously washed his hands, feet and face whenever he returned from an outing. Today, though, he had to stop at just washing his hands and feet. The pain he had suppressed was taking over his body and consuming him whole like a rogue wave.

They first took off their military clothes. Minhyun, in his discomfort, slowly stripped; meanwhile, Seongwu changed as quickly as he can and approached Minhyun. Minhyun urgently turned around, trying to hide his back from Seongwu. He repeated that he was all right, but Seongwu would not relent. In the end, Seongwu won, and Minhyun surrendered with both his hands above his head. Seongwu came to Minhyun, who was half undressed, and took off all of his clothes save his underwear. Seongwu threw the murky green mess of Minhyun’s clothing to the far corner of the room, and carefully examined Minhyun’s body. Minhyun did not want to show Seongwu his wounds. When Seongwu asked Minhyun to turn around, he did, though, reluctantly.

Seongwu finally saw what was imprinted on the back of Minhyun’s thighs; the white, clear skin there was bruised severely. Discoloration had taken over where Inoue’s club had struck. Seongwu
looked as if he was about to burst into tears. This was why Minhyun did not want to show him his wounds. Minhyun repeated again, slowly and resolutely, that he was okay. Of course, Seongwu did not believe him.

“You told me it did not hurt as much as it sounded! Do you know how severely bruised you are? If you lied to me because you wanted to be considerate, know that there is no need for that.”

Seongwu fumed while he fetched a first-aid kit. He had Minhyun lie face down on his blanket, and Minhyun did as he was told, hugging a pillow to his chest. This was unbelievably embarrassing for Minhyun. He was thankful that Seongwu was so concerned about him, but he was Minhyun’s lover. Minhyun now wanted to show his love only the best of himself, and lying prone in his underwear and revealing the bruises left where he was hit was a direct blow to his pride. However, Seongwu seemed in disbelief of Minhyun’s consoling words, and Minhyun stopped fighting him, out of fear that he might hurt Seongwu even more if he continued bluffing. Seongwu was an incredibly kind boy, who emphasized with others twice or even thrice more than boys his age; Minhyun could not look over such character.

Seongwu sat next to Minhyun, and Minhyun could hear the medicine box clicking open. Seongwu took out a bottle of iodide tincture. Minhyun buried his face on his pillow. He remembered that day Seongwu fell and his knees and palms were smashed. What Minhyun did for Seongwu then, Seongwu was doing for Minhyun now.

“I wish you wouldn’t hide your pain. Tell me it hurts when you are hurting. I am your lover, and you have no need to hide your pain from me as you do from others. Please be honest with me, no matter what it is.”

“Ouch, it stings…”

Minhyun yelped out reflexively when cold antiseptic fluid touched his bruises. Still slightly angered, Seongwu unrelentingly plastered medicine on Minhyun’s legs and cleaned his wounds. Because of the natural color of iodide tincture, Minhyun’s bruises appeared even redder. Seongwu thought he was being careful, but even so, Minhyun flinched from time to time. In spite of Seongwu’s pleading to stop hiding his pain, Minhyun was still suppressing his moans. Seongwu could see that the outline of his jaw was more defined than usual as Minhyun clenched his teeth hard. Looking at him, Seongwu felt distressed and saddened beyond words. Minhyun was also a mere human being as the rest of them were; Seongwu could not even begin to understand how he was going through so much shame and pain without so much as letting a moan slip out of his lips.

Seongwu slowly dressed Minhyun’s bruises with gauze and bandages. As his aid was almost finished, warm droplets dropped onto Minhyun’s back. Realizing they were tears, Minhyun turned back. From Seongwu’s eyes, big and clear like a calf’s, tears were falling. Minhyun tried to get up, but Seongwu held him down and shook his head. So Minhyun just turned his head towards Seongwu and looked at him. He was frustrated that he could not do anything more. He reached out and brushed the tears out of Seongwu’s cheek.

“I am the one hurting, so why are you crying?”

“I am crying because you aren’t. You’re hurting, but you are still hiding your pain.”

“I am sorry I can’t be honest. But I want you to know I am not hiding things from you on purpose.”

At this, Seongwu cried even more sorrowfully. Minhyun could not stay still anymore, so he pulled himself up. The bruises under his bandages were sore and they stung like crazy, but this was nothing
compared to the pain he felt at the sight of Seongwu crying before him. Minhyun worried more about whether Seongwu’s eyes, red from flowing tears, would sting, than his own bruises becoming swollen and festering. If his bones had broken, Minhyun would still be more concerned with Seongwu’s eyes.

“It’s all right. It’s going to be all right.”

Minhyun held Seongwu in his arms, and whispered tenderly in his ear. Minhyun’s words were gentle, but resolute, and they made Seongwu feel like everything was truly going to be all right. Seongwu’s weeping subsided slowly but surely.

Minhyun kissed his adorable beloved’s reddened eyes and tip of nose, and sought out his thin lips. Many feelings were exchanged at the tips of their sensitive, hot tongues. Minhyun felt his heart flutter, and he loved kissing Seongwu still, but he could taste the salt of Seongwu’s tears on his tongue. After lingering for a while on Seongwu’s lips, Minhyun snickered.

“I guess this is a kiss fit for a salt merchant’s son.”

“What? You know why I was crying…”

“I’m joking. It was just a joke.”

Minhyun quickly added, afraid Seongwu would go into a sulk. However, Seongwu’s lips were already sticking out in a pout. Even sulking, he was cute. Minhyun felt as if all of his pain was vanishing just by looking at Seongwu. Minhyun vowed to hold his lovely cure-all in his arms until his bruises healed. Minhyun swiped a finger across Seongwu’s lips, and promised:

“I will become stronger, so that you will never be sad.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 17 Glossary:

* Invasion of Rehe : (From Wikipedia) The Battle of Rehe (sometimes called the Battle of Jehol) was the second part of Operation Nekka, a campaign by which the Empire of Japan successfully captured the Inner Mongolian province of Rehe from the Chinese warlord Zhang Xueliang and annexed it to the new state of Manchukuo. The battle was fought from February 21 to March 1, 1933.

* Manchukuo : (From Wikipedia) Manchukuo (traditional Chinese: 滿洲國; pinyin: Mǎnzhōuguó; Japanese: 満州国; rōmaji: Manshūkoku; ”State of Manchuria”) was a puppet state of the Empire of Japan in Northeast China and Inner Mongolia from 1932 until 1945. It was founded as a republic, but in 1934 it became a constitutional monarchy. It had limited international recognition and was under the de facto control of Japan.
No Stars as Beautiful

Chapter Summary

The boys resume their normal school lives, and Seongwu, during a bath one night, discovers that Minhyun is more capable of speaking words of love than he thought.

Chapter Notes

Original Chapter 18 in Korean: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2697754

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 18

Seongwu moaned, soft and barely audible; afternoon light fell on their heads as if in blessing. Seongwu’s dense, long eyelashes fluttered and trembled, and he clenched his closed eyes even tighter, grasping onto Minhyun’s shoulder. All this, because Minhyun lightly scratched the sensitive underside of his tongue. Whenever Minhyun touched it, pretending to have done it by chance, Seongwu responded by twitching and shrinking into himself. Minhyun found this chain of reactions fascinating, and he furtively opened his eyes to look at Seongwu. Seongwu’s innocent face was reddened in a deep blush while they played push and pull with their tongues, the vulgarity of their actions surprising even themselves. Sounds of naked wetness came from where their mouths met. Flurried, Seongwu tried to pull his face back, only to be caught in Minhyun’s firm grasp. Minhyun was merciless in punishing him for trying to run away, and all Seongwu could do was to be bound within Minhyun’s hands and open himself to Minhyun, who probed deeper and deeper into him. Seongwu gasped for air. He felt out of breath, and his entire body was burning as if on fire. The kiss was so intense that Seongwu felt a sudden impulse to show Minhyun deeper, secret parts of himself, to allow Minhyun deeper inside and to let him roam as much as he wanted, to have him discover places he had never been before.

Minhyun leaned into Seongwu, putting his weight on the other boy’s body, and Seongwu’s body began to tilt backwards. Seongwu’s hand, which was grasping Minhyun’s shoulder, shot to the floor behind him to hold himself up. Minhyun stroked Seongwu’s hair, as if telling him he had nothing to worry about. Carefully, keeping their lips together all the time, Minhyun slowly laid Seongwu on the floor. His hand, covering the back of Seongwu’s head to keep it from banging on the floor, turned ravenous as soon as its task to protect Seongwu was fulfilled. Minhyun’s fingers disheveled
Seongwu’s hair as it moved down to tickle his ear.

Minhyun had only touched Seongwu’s outer ear, but Seongwu let out a long, nasal moan, whipping his head away. Minhyun’s lips pursued him persistently to resume their long kiss. Minhyun was not allowing Seongwu even a moment of freedom, and Seongwu could only groan, holding on to his arm. Seongwu’s legs twisted in pleasure, agony, or both. Everything was so easy. Emboldened by the mood between them, Minhyun placed his fingers around the top button of Seongwu’s shirt. One by one, the buttons came undone. Minhyun’s hand snaked inside Seongwu’s shirt, and swept the skin underneath. Minhyun felt under his palm Seongwu’s thin, shallow chest he had been longing so much for.

Moving lower still, Minhyun landed on the nape of Seongwu’s neck. As he licked on the delicate skin, he was interrupted by a tiny noise from the periphery of his perceptions. The sound was of quick footsteps, of someone sprinting. Minhyun tried his best to ignore it, but the sound only grew bigger and closer. It was annoying Minhyun to no end, but he tried to stay calm, as he did not want to break his focus on Seongwu. However, what he thought to be merely a passing noise ran through their gate, and into their garden. This unwanted guest let himself be known, loud and clear.

“Minhyun! Seongwu! Are you home?”

Seongwu, who was so focused on Minhyun that he had failed to notice the footsteps, gasped in surprise and pushed Minhyun away. Minhyun let himself be pushed away, but could not take his eyes off Seongwu out of regret and longing. On the other hand, Seongwu did not have the time to feel the frustration of being pulled apart from his lover; Kyuwon was stomping up the stairs. Seongwu could barely cool his flushed cheeks and button his shirt before Kyuwon barged into their room. Minhyun and Seongwu had been so lost in each other that they had not noticed the time; they awkwardly smiled at Kyuwon, who just returned home after school hours.

What happened during the fourth year military training session had spread like wildfire throughout school, and Kyuwon already seemed to know everything about it. As soon as he entered the room, he examined Minhyun. Minhyun had bandages around his thighs, but he looked well otherwise. Kyuwon had worried that Minhyun was beaten to the point he could not stand up, and he let out a sigh of relief, until he was quickly angered again after hearing Minhyun and Seongwu recount the event.

“I could set fire to the Japanese Government General building right this instant! Shall I make a bomb and send it to them?”

“Calm down, Kyuwon."

“Minhyun, you should not be calming me down. Aren’t you angry?”

“Of course I am. I feel angry and humiliated. However, you have to remind yourself that the Japanese can be cunning. They would want us to retaliate and rebel recklessly, taken over by feelings of anger and rage. We should not waste our willpower by responding to every little offense. What we need right now is perseverance, to continue living as we have been.”

Minhyun shrugged as he finished, and added to his little speech: “And what I went through today is nothing compared to what we Koreans have been collectively going through in the last twenty-five years.”

“Yes, Minhyun, you are correct. But sometimes you have to let out your anguish. Only then can you continue to protect yourself. If you need a shoulder to cry on, hyung is here!”
Kyuwon shouted exaggeratedly, punching his own outstretched chest with his fist. The somber mood suddenly turned jovial, and Minhyun and Seongwu broke into laughter. Minhyun stopped laughing first, and he said, looking at Kyuwon: “Thank you, brother, but you needn’t. Someone already cried on my behalf.”

“How?”

Not understanding Minhyun, Kyuwon narrowed his eyes in confusion. Seongwu, blushing inexplicably, hurriedly ushered him out of the room and down the stairs. Kyuwon looked back as if asking for an explanation, but Minhyun, who was half lying down on his bedding, just smiled and waved him goodbye with one hand. Minhyun planned to continue the naughty deeds he had been committing himself to as soon as the door closed.

The next day, Gyeongseong Secondary School was buzzing with students boiling with anger. They considered what happened to Minhyun as an offense to the entire student body, and fumed as if they could overthrow the school in a coup any minute. They seemed to want Minhyun to be their head in rebellion and to formulate a strategy and give them an order to act upon. However, Minhyun calmed them by resuming his routine school life as before the incident with Inoue. Minhyun genuinely believed what his classmates needed was perseverance, and continuing as if nothing had happened. This was their way of showing the Japanese that no matter how much they were trampled on and insulted, they would never fall apart.

Minhyun participated in the second military training session in the following week, and he did not forget to wear the yellow armband Inoue had given him. As a ‘regiment commander’ he stood alone as he received his training, even ahead of the front row. Minhyun did not like how he could not be next to Seongwu, but soon discovered standing in the very front was not so bad. He could stare down straight at Inoue. Minhyun and Inoue’s gazes clashed fiercely and frequently, and neither looked away first. Inoue’s gaze was uncomfortable and leery, and Minhyun did not enjoy locking eyes with him, but he liked that he could divert Inoue’s attention from Seongwu who stood behind him. Minhyun’s sturdy frame and its shadow covered all of Inoue, and Seongwu did not have to see him for most of the session. Perhaps because of this protection, Seongwu was never singled out during the training. From time to time and with endless admiration, Seongwu watched Minhyun, who stood like a great wall between he and Inoue. Minhyun was protecting him, and he looked so powerful that Seongwu forgot for a moment that Minhyun was the same age as he. Seongwu swallowed his impulse to take Minhyun into his arms in an embrace, and acted on it as much as he wanted when they returned home.

Although their first day was marred by a disgraceful incident, the rest of their semester continued without similar disruptions. Many students worried that their new Japanese teachers would be as cruel as Inoue, but they were tame and devoted to their classes. Lectures commenced as they had before the faculty reform, and students soon regained enough composure to focus wholly on their studies.

Inoue still brought his gun and sword to military training, but never repeated his violent and disrespectful behavior he displayed on his first day. He openly showed his hatred towards Minhyun, but never again exercised unnecessary corporal punishment on him. He only punished boys who did not concentrate on training by having them get down on their hands and feet, and that was the furthest he went. As the weather became colder, military training was replaced by independent study.

Mr. Kimura had also changed. He still mercilessly criticized students when they made mistakes in his class, but his demeanor had significantly softened overall. He showed concern for Minhyun until he was completely healed, and for nearly three weeks after the first day of school Minhyun was made
an exception to instances he had to exert himself.

The boys had to clean the classroom in place of Minhyun when it was his turn to be on weekly duty, but nobody dared to complain. Seongwu was glad to help, and tried to do everything he could for Minhyun. Seongwu’s exertion was especially apparent in the bedroom they shared. Seongwu kept Minhyun well-rested during the evenings, taking into consideration he did not get to rest while at school during the day. It was only that Seongwu overexerted himself and almost tied Minhyun to his bedding. Whenever Minhyun told him he was all right and tried to move, Seongwu stopped him. Minhyun was neither terminally ill nor inflicted with open wounds or broken bones, and he healed fast. Seongwu was nevertheless obstinate that he had to have his rest, reminded of the time Minhyun’s legs were in growing pains. Minhyun enjoyed Seongwu’s care and nursing, but he was soon itching to move around after prolonged sessions of forced rest.

“I want to go out and have a run around the neighborhood.”

“Not yet. You have to stay in bed and rest.”

“I’m dying of boredom. Also, I don’t think I’m digesting as well since I started lying down all the time.”

“You’re imagining things. You’re not a baby, yet you’re so whiny.”

“Of course I’m not a baby. If anything, I am taller than you and my feet have outgrown yours a long time ago.”

“Well, you’re hurting anyways, so just stay on your back and conserve your strength.”

“I have more than enough strength. What have I to conserve? If we were to go head to head now, I could easily overpower you.”

A mischievous gleam shone in Minhyun’s eyes. Seongwu looked back, noting a perky nuance in Minhyun’s voice. Seongwu slowly backed up towards the wall behind him, doubting Minhyun would actually wage a battle of strength against him at this moment. What Seongwu did not know was that Minhyun’s love of competitive sport was already turned on. Minhyun pounced on Seongwu like a falcon snatching up its prey, and in a blink of an eye they were rolling on the bedding in each other’s arms as they had done when younger. Seongwu was trying to escape, and Minhyun was trying to catch him; the winner was Minhyun, whose grip on Seongwu was tenacious. To keep Seongwu from running away, Minhyun straddled him and took both thin wrists into his grasp, holding them down on the floor. Seongwu writhed in Minhyun’s death grip, but he could not even budge.

“See? I am stronger. Admit it.”

“I get it. Just let me go.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

Seongwu’s pupils moved about busily, and Minhyun could almost hear his head whirring. Minhyun waited patiently for his answer, slightly loosening his grasp. Seongwu felt the pressure on his wrists subside, and gingerly drew his arms together to his chest. Minhyun’s hand, still around Seongwu’s arms, followed. Seongwu started to kiss each of Minhyun’s hands in turn, smooch of his lips against Minhyun’s skin light and lilting. Seongwu started to kiss all of his fingers, and kissed up his wrists. Something hot rose from Minhyun’s peripheral nerves and up to his head. Minhyun began to fear his brain melting down, and he hung his head in defeat. Seongwu saw
Seongwu must have mastered a formula for defeating Minhyun in any given circumstance. Minhyun released Seongwu’s arms and dismounted from his body. Seongwu’s wrists, which Minhyun had squeezed hard, was red. Minhyun kissed them, just as Seongwu did to him, in a gesture of apology.

They spent the rest of their evening playing with each other’s hands.

Even after the school system reform that inserted military training into schedule and replaced old teachers, weekly quizzes and exams remained unchanged. Monthly exams were followed by midterms, and midterms were followed by finals. Free time was nowhere to be found, and the only source of solace for Minhyun and Seongwu were warm baths in the evening they took daily. Because bathtime was after dinner, Seongwu longed for dinnertime every afternoon.

Seongwu was waiting for time to pass by faster with his eyes closed when Minhyun asked him: “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Who shall bathe first today? Shall we play rock, paper, scissors?”

“Shall we?”

When they were younger, it was a given that Seongwu went first; that rule was changed recently as Seongwu started to bathe alone without Minhyun waiting for him outside the bathroom. Minhyun did not care if he went first or second, so he would just let Seongwu decide his turn. It was a while until bathtime, but they jumped into a game of rock, paper, scissors right away; Minhyun emerged a winner.

“I’ll guard the door for you tonight.” Seongwu said.

“No need.”

“Why? Isn’t it frightening to be in the bath alone at night?”

“You are likely the only person who is afraid of his own bathroom at night.”

“No, I’m not! I am sure there are plenty of people who are afraid of being naked and unguarded in the dark. Also, what if someone is peeking into the bathroom to watch me?”

“That… I don’t think is something you should worry about, especially after having me stand guard at the bathroom door for years.”

“Hehe. Thank you.”

Seongwu held onto Minhyun’s arm and rubbed his cheek against his upper arm. Minhyun rarely
found himself angry at Seongwu, but at that moment he wondered if he ever could stay angry at Seongwu for long. The way Seongwu behaved around him, Minhyun could not hold onto any grudge for more than minutes.

After eight o’clock, the bathwater was heated. The bathwater was not mineral water, but it was clean and hot, and filled the tub to the brim. They would use this water for three days.

According to the results of their game, Minhyun entered the bathroom first. The wooden door closed with a thud, and Seongwu sat on the chair Minhyun used when he guarded the door for Seongwu. Seongwu talked big about being there for Minhyun, but he quickly realized how boring the task was. Seongwu rolled stones on the floor as he listened to Minhyun lathering and splashing water on himself. Seongwu kept asking, *Minhyun, are you bathing?*

“Just go upstairs if you’re bored.”

“No. I want to guard the door for you.”

“You’re just being bothersome now, so just go back to our room.”

“Mr. Hwang, what atrocious words you speak. I’m going to open the door on you.”

“If you do, you’ll be the one to feel embarrassed for being shameless.”

“Sheesh…”

Minhyun’s stern voice resonated through the bathroom, and it sounded powerful and a bit frightening to Seongwu, so he did not respond. Meanwhile, splashing ceased in the bathroom and there was sound of surface of water breaking. It seemed that Minhyun, after finishing washing his hair and washing his body with soap, finally entered the bathtub.

“Are you inside the tub?”

“Yes.”

“Is it warm?”

“Very.”

Minhyun’s voice was languid. Seongwu let him bathe in and enjoy his solitude, and did not speak again for a while. However, Seongwu’s silence only lasted some ten minutes. Minhyun had said Seongwu was being bothersome and he was trying to be quiet, but he just could not beat his boredom.

“Minhyun, what are you thinking about?”

“I’m thinking about whether you are peeping inside to watch me.”

“You think of me a shameless person.”

“You know I was only joking.”

However, Minhyun’s provocations, which put into words a deed Seongwu had not thought about, had set fire to Seongwu’s curiosity.

Seongwu turned around and glared at the wooden door. It was crafted and coated in oil by an outstanding carpenter, but it was wood nonetheless, and it slackened and contracted in its daily
exposure to hot, humid steam. Now that the door was years old, it had cracks that quite naturally occurred throughout. Under the door handle, there was a small crack that was just enough for someone’s eye to look into.

Leaning down, Seongwu peeked into the crack. His heart started pounding, like he was a child lying to his mother for the first time. The thick steam and dim light obscured his vision, but he was able to make out Minhyun, who sat in the tub with his back to the door, one white shoulder and arm slung on the rim of the tub. Seongwu was reminded again that Minhyun’s skin was whiter than most girls’.

Seongwu swallowed, and Minhyun turned his head towards the door as if he heard it. Seongwu quickly removed himself from the crack in the door and sat back down on the chair, pretending nothing had happened. Fortunately, Minhyun did not seem to notice that Seongwu was peeping, and Seongwu heard him leave the tub, and water falling to the floor.

“So soon? You haven’t been in the bathtub for long.”

“The water will chill.”

“That’s quite all right with me. I like bathing in cold water. It feels like being in a clean stream in the valleys, fresh and cool.”

“You’ll catch a cold.”

“I can drink a lot of hot tea.”

“Why make things complicated, when I can just finish bathing quickly? It’s all right with me. I don’t even like bathing that much.”

Seongwu knew Minhyun was lying. Someone who did not like bathing would never buy a bundle of irises to put in his bathwater. Regardless of what Seongwu was saying, Minhyun dressed himself and came out of the bathroom. Droplets of water clung to his hair, and Seongwu could see that he left the bathtub in a hurry.

“Get in there before the water cools.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll sit here and wait for you.”

Minhyun flopped down onto the chair. Drying his hair with a towel, he gestured for Seongwu to hurry into the bathroom. Seongwu entered it, and saw in the midst of kerosene lamps a meticulously cleaned bathroom that looked almost new.

Seongwu washed himself with soap and entered the bathtub. From time to time he talked to Minhyun who sat outside, a habit he had developed over the last four years.

“Are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“Don’t go upstairs without me.”

“I won’t.”

Seongwu carefully prodded the water with his toes. His feet slowly entered the water, and Seongwu could feel the water was neither too hot or too cool. Seongwu relaxed the rest of his body into the
tub, and when he splashed warm water onto his shoulder, the stiff muscles around it became comfortably unknotted. Seongwu leaned his back against the tub and closed his eyes.

Seongwu enjoyed the warm bath for a while, until he became curious as to what Minhyun was doing. Seongwu quietly called his name.

“Hyun-ah.”

“What.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking at the moon.”

“Is the moon the only thing you see?”

“I also see stars.”

“What kind of stars?”

“All kinds of stars.”

“I’m curious, so tell me some names.”

“Purple Forbidden Enclosure (紫微垣)*, Supreme Palace Enclosure (太微垣)*, Heavenly Market Enclosure (天市垣)*... There are so many stars.”

“Which star is the most beautiful?”

Seongwu had asked this question thoughtlessly; he just wanted to say something and anything to Minhyun. Because Purple Forbidden Enclosure was the brightest cluster visible to the eye, Seongwu thought Minhyun would choose from it. However, Minhyun did not return an answer for a long while. Seongwu thought that Minhyun was comparing and contrasting the many stars he was looking at to choose the brightest one, but Minhyun’s answer was something unexpected.

“I see no beautiful stars.”

“What?”

Water overflowed from the tub, and crashed on the floor; Seongwu had turned his body abruptly in the tub to cause a wave. Seongwu wanted to look through the crack in the door to take a look at Minhyun, but the door was too far away. He could still feel Minhyun hesitate, however, and Minhyun uncharacteristically waited a long while before he finally let out an answer.

“There are no stars as beautiful as those... on your cheek.”

No one was watching him, but Seongwu submerged himself underwater. Seongwu did not know what to do whenever Minhyun provoked him so out of the blue. Seongwu only let out his eyes out of the water, and tried to calm himself down, slowly blinking. Minhyun stood up suddenly, seemingly embarrassed.

“I’m going upstairs.”

At this, Seongwu hurried out of the water. Droplets of water dripped from his hair, nose, and chin all at once.
“No! Wait for me.”

“Then hurry. It’s nearly nine o’clock.”

“Already?”

Despite their original intention to stay just a few minutes in the bath, time had flown by. Seongwu quickly closed the bathtub lid and toweled himself dry. He threw on his clothes and opened the door. He noticed Minhyun and his red ears before he felt the cold air on his skin. Minhyun saw Seongwu exit the bathroom, but he pretended not to notice him as he stood with his hands clasped behind his back. Without looking at Seongwu, Minhyun turned towards the stairs.

“Let’s go upstairs.”

“Hehe.”

Seongwu found himself snickering as he saw that Minhyun was bashful.

“I didn’t know you liked my face this much.”

“Be quiet.”

“Won’t you say it once more?”

“I meant to say that out of your face, your cheek is the only thing worth looking at.”

“That’s not what you meant.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know.”

They jovially bickered, even when they had returned to the main building. While on their way back to their room, they ran into the hosts and was given a bunch of grapes. There was a spring in their steps as they climbed the stairs with grapes in a white porcelain bowl.

Once they returned to their room, the remainder of the evening went on as usual. They memorized words in preparation for a quiz they had the next day, and chatted about more trivial matters. Studded in between their words were sweet grapes. And at a certain moment, their gazes met midair, and they realized they were entertaining the same thought. They wished to taste something even sweeter than the grapes between them. They did not know who stowed away the small table between them.

Turning off their lamp was a tacit sign between them to manifest their love for each other. Seongwu first kissed Minhyun in a dark alleyway, because darkness helped erase his bashfulness. As soon as Minhyun turned off the lamp, Seongwu crawled on his knees towards Minhyun. He boldly wrapped his arms around Minhyun’s neck, and kissed him first.

Seongwu closed his eyes and savored Minhyun’s lips, and they tasted of sweet fragrance of grapes. Seongwu had heard that in the west, they made liquor out of grapes, and he finally knew why. He clung to Minhyun as if drunk, and he nibbled on Minhyun’s tongue as he would bite on a delicate grape. In response, Minhyun opened his lips wide as if swallowing an entire bunch of grapes, and enveloped Seongwu’s entire mouth. He greedily scanned and licked on Seongwu’s lips, teeth, and tongue. Wet, slurping sound filled the occasional gap between their mouths, and Seongwu’s ear, just as sensitive as his lips, turned crimson in a flash. Minhyun toyed with his ear, and Seongwu pulled his head away as if running away from the pleasure of it.

Their kiss was interrupted thus, but neither of them minded. The darkness intensified, and the night
was long. They turned into libertines and esthetes as they admired each other’s faces lit by moonlight, and kissed the beautiful features they could not tear their eyes from. Countless kisses as many as all stars in existence were showered upon Seongwu’s cheek, adorned with the most beautiful stars in the entire universe.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 18: Just for fun! You don't have to read this if you understood Minhyun was referring to stars in the text, but you might find this interesting if you like stars!

Purple Forbidden Enclosure (紫微垣)*, Supreme Palace Enclosure (太微垣)*, and Heavenly Market Enclosure (天市垣)* are vocabulary for Chinese Constellation system, and are parts of the 'Three Enclosures.'

According to Wikipedia, here are where the three enclosures are located in relation to modern western constellations:

The Purple Forbidden Enclosure occupies the northernmost area of the night sky. From the viewpoint of the ancient Chinese, the Purple Forbidden Enclosure lies in the middle of the sky and is circled by all the other stars. It covers the modern constellations Ursa Minor, Draco, Camelopardalis, Cepheus, Cassiopeia, Auriga, Boötes, and parts of Ursa Major, Canes Venatici, Leo Minor, Hercules.

The Supreme Palace Enclosure covers the modern constellations Virgo, Coma Berenices and Leo, and parts of Canes Venatici, Ursa Major and Leo Minor.

The Heavenly Market Enclosure covers the modern constellations Serpens, Ophiuchus, Aquila and Corona Borealis, and parts of Hercules.
Not Too Close, Yet Not Too Far

Chapter Summary

There is a poetry assignment in form of a contest at school, and Seongwu helps Minhyun write a poem of his own. Minhyun and Seongwu continue to explore each other in body and mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 19

The earth turns subtly, and it is difficult to notice on a daily basis. Yet as the earth turns faithfully eastward it brings about changes in entire seasons. Gyeongseong, where Minhyun and Seongwu stood, was no exception to changes brought on by earth’s rotation.

Observable changes in season not only manifested themselves on earth but also in the heavens. Before they knew it, constellations that had embroidered autumn skies retreated and winter stars filled the spaces they left behind. Sadly, Minhyun and Seongwu did not have the time to look up. Their eyes for each other burned hotter and brighter than any star, and they exchanged affection so fiercely that they might have had fallen in love with their own reflections in each other’s eyes.

One day as they were going home from school, Minhyun noticed that whenever Seongwu spoke, his breath remained in the air for a moment like a small cloud before dissipating. They looked like woolen clouds on a clear day as they emerged from healthfully red lips. Resembling their vivacious creator, Seongwu’s breaths in the cold changed shape and form every time. As Minhyun delved deeper into knowing Seongwu, he realized that Seongwu had many sides to him that he had not even dared to fathom before. Minhyun was lost in Seongwu and could not find his way out. Minhyun could not imagine a life without Seongwu anymore. Seongwu was the very driving force that made Minhyun’s heart beat.

As soon as they returned to their room and shut the door, Minhyun urgently sought Seongwu’s lips and took them into his own. Seongwu would never know the lengths Minhyun went to suppress his urge to kiss Seongwu every moment at school. In the privacy of their room, their kiss, lengthened by the heartrending thirst beneath it, resumed. A thrill of ecstasy and pleasure ran up Minhyun’s spine. This feeling was irreplaceable, and it kept Minhyun searching and longing for Seongwu’s lips like an addict.

Kissing made them forget the flow of time. They were alert only when Madame called for them to
come downstairs for dinner. Back on earth, they saw that it was already dusk. Only then did they change from their school uniforms into their everyday clothes.

*This is crazy*... Seongwu whispered, touching his swollen lips. He had not realized how they looked while he was kissing Minhyun, but now he could see how close to madmen they looked. Their gakurans were hopelessly disheveled. Minhyun had cleanly undone Seongwu’s buttons, but Minhyun’s own shirt was crumpled to the point of looking ragged; Seongwu had repeatedly clenched on it, and had tried to undo the buttons by force. Seongwu reminded himself to iron it later for Minhyun, only to have Minhyun misunderstand the looks he gave. Minhyun seemed to think that Seongwu was reproaching him for unbuttoning his shirt.

“Isn’t it easy to change into your other clothes now that I unbuttoned your shirt for you?”

It was a way for Minhyun to defend himself, but Seongwu took a while to comprehend the nuance behind it. Seongwu soon realized what Minhyun wanted to say, and lightly slapped him on the back. Still, Minhyun could not stop smiling.

After dinner and a bath, they sat at their desks. They had a Korean homework due next morning. Like how they had to write a haiku for Japanese class, they had to write a poem in Korean. Seongwu gladly took his notebook and pen out of his desk, but Minhyun seemed a bit troubled.

Minhyun would have preferred to observe a natural phenomenon and write a report. If he could choose a subject, he would write a report titled ‘On a Universe called Ong Seongwu,’ modelled after Copernicus’ ‘On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres.’ Minhyun wanted to pitch a new theory, that apart from Copernicus’ heliocentricism, Ong Seongwu was in fact in the middle of all universe. Meeting Ong Seongwu was indeed an impact of a lifetime for Minhyun, as much as Copernicus’ theories were a shock to the world.

This steay thought was too far off from what Minhyun had to do now. He plunged into thought, tapping his pen on his desk. What should he write about?

Seongwu was thinking the same. They listlessly stared out the window, stuck in their room like a pair of hibernating bears. The night was cloudy, and they could not see any stars. Instead, a bird started to chirp mournfully.

“A sparrow chirps... a nightingale sings...”

“What’re you doing?”

Devoid of of ideas, Minhyun began to say out loud whatever came to mind. As he scribbled on his notebook, the words closer to doodles than poetry, Seongwu looked back at him, hearing his childlike babbling. Minhyun was getting headaches, yet Seongwu’s face was only innocent.

“Are you finished with yours?”

“I wrote two lines.”

“Two lines is enough. Just turn it in.”

“But I’m not happy with just two lines.”

“I thought so.”

Minhyun nodded. Seongwu would indeed need a certain amount of writing to satisfy his delicate sensibilities; two lines would only be a beginning for him. Minhyun continued to look sullen,
however. Seongwu, in understanding of his confusion, spoke again.

“I suppose you’re having a difficult time.”

“Yes. So help me a little.”

“What would you like me to do? To become a better poet you need to read a lot of poems; shall I recite one to you like a fairy tale?”

“Your voice is too sweet. I would only fall asleep.”

“You mustn’t listen to my voice, only the poems I read.”

“How can you separate the two?”

“Why can’t you?”

Seongwu smiled coyly, as if provoking Minhyun. Seongwu was the one making things inseparable; how could he call out Minhyun for such inability? Minhyun gave up thinking and shook his head. His assignment was due soon.

“I’m concerned. I haven’t written a word. Haiku was easier; Korean gets more difficult the more you learn it.”

“It’s because Korean is a language with frequent turns and changes. But that’s what helps us express so many things in it.”

Seongwu answered, quite like a teacher. He took his sitting cushion and pulled next to Minhyun.

“Shall we see what you’ve written so far?”

“...I have nothing.”

“Not even one or two lines?”

“...Nightingale sings…”

“Haha, that sounds like something an elementary school child would write.”

“Stop making fun of me.”

Minhyun’s handwriting was unruly and uneven, unlike his handsome, level features. Seongwu looked at it and laughed. Minhyun became embarrassed of both the shape of the letters he wrote and the contents they conveyed. He covered his paper to hide them, and groaned as he took out a new one.

“All I am doing is abusing my pen.”

“Well, you need your pen to write something, so don’t put it down.”

Seongwu tenderly patted Minhyun’s back. Minhyun sat, savoring his touch, and turned to face him.

“Could I see what you’ve written? I’m curious.”

“Yes. Here it is. It’s not like what I’ve written is brilliant, though…”
Seongwu slurred and went to his desk. Seongwu handed to Minhyun the Korean notebook he so treasured.

[I cannot let myself perish.
When I welcome the crack of dawn every morning
I am given again and again dreams as many
As the stars of our milky way embroidered across the universe]

“This is wonderful. I can’t wait to see it continue.”

Minhyun wholeheartedly admired the poem. Seongwu could not smile, however, as he thought he heard envy and tumult in his voice. It seemed that Minhyun was deeper in distress than he thought. Seongwu knew he was not allowed to help Minhyun, but…

“Thank you. But Minhyun, aren’t you taking things too hard? How about you look to things near you before you think of more grandiose ideas?”

“Things near me…”

Minhyun looked around him. There was nothing special in the room he had spent the last four years of his life inside, except... Ong Seongwu.

“I see only you.”

“Please. There are people who wrote poems with only a pane of glass window as an inspiration.”

“I only see things I want to see.”

“Of course.”

Seongwu looked away, relenting to let Minhyun to do whatever he wanted. He had no more to say if Minhyun was going to play it stubborn. Seongwu moved to go back to his seat, only to be held in place by Minhyun, who reached out to him. They were suddenly so close. Minhyun took Seongwu’s face into both hands as if to kiss him, and just looked into his eyes. Seongwu asked what he was doing when Minhyun held his face in his hands and did not do or say anything. Minhyun just told him to stay put.

“I have to observe you before I think and write down my thoughts.”

“...You’re really going to write a poem on love?”

“No. A poem on praise of beauty.”

Seongwu’s face heated up. His voice turned quiet, and he started to whisper.

“You… have a talent for saying embarrassing things with a straight face.”

“Aren’t you used to it by now?”
“No, I think I’ll need another five hundred years to be immune to it.”

“Well, then I will inject you with more and more, so that you’ll develop immunity faster.”

“I refuse.”

“I refuse your refusal.”

“You just want to engage in an argument with me.”

“Wordplay, not argument.”

They bickered for a little while, until their conversation abruptly stopped. A silence replete of tension settled between them. Minhyun’s solemn gaze minutely observed Seongwu’s features. And as if he had arrived at a conclusion, he spoke, in a low tone totally unrecognizable from that he used when he was making fun of Seongwu.

“A pair of blue lakes, clear and pure through and through.”

“......”

“Does night exist to dwell on your lakes?”

“...Hey. Minhyun.”

Seongwu blushed, as he often did when they were exchanging kisses. Seongwu could not look Minhyun in the eyes; he wanted to run away. He grasped Minhyun’s arm, signalling him to stop, but Minhyun paid him no heed. Minhyun’s poem continued.

“How do I dare to impose myself as Venus and sink myself into your lake?

My love, who sleeps so beautifully,
Could I ever find words to suit you, to elevate you to the heavens where you belong?”

Minhyun grinned. He liked his poem, especially for something he conjured up on a fly. He poked Seongwu’s cheek, already a burning red, and let him go. Once the force that held his face up set him free, Seongwu hung his head on his chest. He could not breathe properly. He was sure no one else in this entire world was ever subject to such sweet song of praise from such a close distance. Seongwu was happily amazed he was the subject of Minhyun’s praises, but he was embarrassed at the same time. What Minhyun gave him was a deadly dose of affection and love, enough to paralyze his nerves and make him choke on his own breath. Minhyun had said he was a bad poet; well, he was a liar. Seongwu seriously started to question whether Minhyun really came from a family of merchants of salt, not sugar.

Regardless of what Seongwu thought, Minhyun continued, seemingly relieved from his anguish.

“Thank you. I was confident a word of advice from a real poet would help.”

“Mhmm...”

“Poetry is so difficult. I hope I don’t have to write another one ever again.”

“...Same...”

“Ong Seongwu?”
Minhyun stared at Seongwu, who was frozen in place. Afraid Minhyun would touch him again, Seongwu shook him off and went back to his seat.

However, as a result of Minhyun’s poem of praises, Seongwu’s own brain started a strike against him. Seongwu glanced at the clock. It was midnight; now his poetry assignment was due ‘today.’ Seongwu thought he had many things he wanted to write. He had forgotten all of them because of Minhyun. If his Korean grades were ruined, it would all be Minhyun’s fault.

Seongwu decided to let things take on their own course, and started to write down whatever came to mind. What was the most important to him now was finishing his assignment so he at least had something to turn in.

[I cannot let myself perish; I wish to become
Like the sun, which endlessly explodes
And burns forever.]

Seongwu wrote three lines in quick succession, and dwelled on the last line to complete them.

“How is it going?”

“Oh! Go away.”

Seongwu jumped as he noticed Minhyun, who had soundlessly approached him from behind. Seongwu hid his notebook so Minhyun could not read his poem. Minhyun, a bit thrown off from his sensitive response, slightly stiffened.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t finished, so go away.”

“I’ll just read quietly so I wouldn’t bother you.”

“No.”

“Just over your shoulder.”

“No to that, too.”

“How difficult. I get it.”

Minhyun relented without much resistance. He cleaned his own desk, and spread his bedding on the floor.

“Shall I set up your bed, too?”

“I would appreciate it.”

After setting up their bed for the night, Minhyun climbed under his own blanket. Seongwu continued to think, with a kerosene lamp on his desk as his only aid. However, no matter how much he thought and thought, the only thing that came to mind was the lines of poetry that came from Minhyun’s lips only minutes ago. They floated around like dandelion seeds in Seongwu’s heart, tickling him all over.

Stop! Seongwu shouted in his head. It was no use. He could not think straight. He felt as if his ability
to think logically had been eviscerated from him. There were nine hours until submission now; prolonging this process would only elongate his agony. Seongwu grumbled like a sick puppy. Minhyun sensed his distress.

“Are you having a hard time?”

“No, not really.”

“I think you are.”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry about me and go to sleep.”

“How could you tell me to not worry about you?”

“It’s just a writer’s block.”

“I’m anticipating the end result.”

“I will never show you my poem.”

“But if your poem is chosen as an outstanding work, all of school will see it.”

“Ugh… That will never happen.”

“It sure can.”

“Stop the wordplay.”

“This is not a wordplay, but an argument.”

“They’re one and the same.”

After that, Seongwu did not say any more. After Minhyun saw that Seongwu was focused on his work, he kept silent and cheered on his lover in his head. Minhyun turned a few times in his bed, and fell asleep. In the quietude inherent only to late hours past midnight, Seongwu finished his poem.

[I have let myself
Taste the sweetness of life.]

Seongwu closed his notebook and stretched his arms above his head. He blew out a tiny breath to turn off the lamp, and carefully waded across the room to crawl inside the blanket Minhyun set up for him. He fell instantly into a dreamless sleep as soon as his head hit his pillow.

A week after they submitted their poems, the results were announced. Hwang Minhyun had taken first place in the Korean poetry assignment. The whole school was stirred up in surprise. When the full text of his poem was revealed, the student body shook with turmoil.

Students stood in a crowd in front of the poster containing Minhyun’s poem in the hallway. Theories were abound as to what it meant. He was perhaps in love. He had said he liked someone; perhaps he had found a connection with his crush. The poem mentioned blue eyes; perhaps his lover was from the west. Classmates and friends chatted amongst themselves. Seongwu tried hard not to give
anything away, to keep a straight face. He was happy that Minhyun had taken first place, but he did
not like that his poem had become a subject of everyone’s gossip. He did not know what to feel; he
was confused. The poet laureate himself concentrated fully on the lecture, and Seongwu could not
say anything.

Seongwu somehow held himself together until the end of school. He could smile to his heart’s
content only after they parted ways with their classmates. Once they were alone, however, Minhyun
immediately began to vex him. As if he had waited for it, Minhyun started talking about Seongwu’s
poem as soon as they were alone. Seongwu’s poem had been chosen as a work of excellence, just as
Minhyun had predicted, and it shown to the entire school, which Seongwu found regrettable. He
wanted to hide the final lines of his poem, but Minhyun had already read it so many times that he had
it committed to memory.

“I suppose you are in love.”

Minhyun repeated what his classmates had told him. He loved Seongwu’s poem. He especially loved
the middle lines. Seongwu had written that his heart was smouldered with love that burns eternally
like the sun. How could any other confession of love top it? Minhyun was the only person, the one
love on the receiving end of Seongwu’s affections, and knowing this, he felt as if he could fly away
in ecstasy. He had spent all of his energy during school hours to keep himself from taking Seongwu
into his arms and kissing him senseless. He had no idea if Seongwu, who was looking away, was
aware of it.

“Don’t assume the subject of my poem to be yourself. I only wrote about the universal phenomenon
of love among mankind.”

“I guess you could interpret it that way.”

“Well, it is the poet’s interpretation, so take that.”

“I will believe what I want to believe.”

“Gosh.”

Minhyun snickered at Seongwu’s exasperation. Their conversation paused. In the silence that
revisited them, Minhyun reminded himself of Seongwu’s poem. He loved that Seongwu used the sun
as a metaphor for his love. It went perfectly well with Minhyun’s own theory that the entire universe
revolved around Ong Seongwu. Minhyun could only surmise that Seongwu was destined to be the
sun, the most important star of them all.

“If you are the sun, shall I be the moon?”

“Well, I’ve heard only beautiful people live on the moon. A fitting place for you, I guess.”

Seongwu relented too easily, apparently tired of arguing. Minhyun’s interest suddenly waned. So he
changed his tone capriciously.

“I don’t want to be the moon anymore. I change my mind. I will become something else.”

“What else?”

“Well, I don’t want to be the earth, as it is populated by evil people. I don’t like to be the moon, as it
is tethered to the earth. Mercury is too close to the sun and I would have to fear being seared and
burned, like Icarus. Jupiter shines in its grandiosity, but it is too far away. Mars is ominous because it
is red. What’s left is Venus. Yes. I will become Venus, and circle around you at a distance not too
close, yet not too far."

“Do as you wish.”

“Truly? ...Then can I take you into my arms in this very alley and kiss you?”

“Do you want to be arrested for public indecency? No way!”

“You told me to do as I wish.”

“Later I will write a poem about you, titled ‘agony.’”

“I would be overjoyed to be a subject of your poem, whether it is about love or agony.”

“Never give me the last word, will you?”


“I won’t say another word to you for the rest of today.”

Sulking, Seongwu turned on his heels. Watching him walk ahead, Minhyun thought about how he should soothe his coquettish love. Minhyun called after him to wait for him, but Seongwu only scoffed, continuing his way without looking back. Minhyun could only catch up to Seongwu when they were back in their room. Even then Seongwu refused to look at Minhyun, who sidled up to him, and focused on preparing to change out of his gakuran. Minhyun stood behind Seongwu, wrapped his arms around him and gently coaxed.

“You won’t let me see your face? Hmm?”

“......”

“Don’t play coy. Let me see your beautiful face.”

Minhyun took Seongwu’s shoulders in his hands and turned him around. With barely any force, Seongwu gave in. However, he kept on feigning his refusal to acknowledge Minhyun, testing him. Minhyun wholeheartedly obliged.

Minhyun’s finger brushed against Seongwu’s cheek. Minhyun held Seongwu’s face in his hand, so carefully as if it were a rare and precious china. The distance between them closed, just as when Minhyun had recited his praises for Seongwu. Minhyun kissed Seongwu’s handsome forehead. In succession, his kisses fell upon Seongwu’s closed eyelids, the round tip of his nose, and landed on his soft lips. Minhyun played with them, tickling them with the tip of his tongue. Seongwu lost control and opened his mouth, leading Minhyun into a deeper kiss. As if he waited for it, Minhyun turned his head and invaded into him.

As the kiss deepended, Seongwu faltered backwards. Minhyun pulled him when he pushed, and caught him when he tried to run away. To equal Minhyun’s advances, Seongwu needed a place to lean on. Fortunately, the wall was three steps behind him. Seongwu collapsed against it. The kiss resumed for some five minutes before they parted.

Free from the kiss, a restless sigh exited Seongwu’s lips. Unlike the air he breathed into the cold, the sigh was shapeless and colorless; only feverishly hot. It directly blew into Minhyun, and something volcanic gushed from deep inside him. Minhyun changed his initial plans to stop with the kiss. He held Seongwu tightly in his arms and sought out his sensitive ears. Smacks of Minhyun’s lips against Seongwu’s ears, hot and sensual, rang impossibly close. Seongwu lightly pushed Minhyun away.
“Mmm, you’re tickling me. Stop.”

“I have kissed your eyes, nose, and lips… Now I must kiss your ears.”

Minhyun answered brazenly, and bit on Seongwu’s ear, softly enough for it to be painless. Seongwu could not escape the licks, kisses and jokeful probing. The more he twisted away from Minhyun, the more Minhyun seemed to enjoy himself. Seongwu had no choice but to endure all that Minhyun was pouring into him. His temperature became hotter, and his breaths shorter. His limbs went jelly from overstimulation, and his legs were shaking out of control. Seongwu felt as if his entire body was melting into a messy pool of liquid, and soon he found himself sinking down to the floor. Minhyun would normally have stopped to examine Seongwu, but he did not. He lowered himself on one knee and continued to kiss.

With Minhyun’s weight on him, Seongwu’s body began to lean on its side. Minhyun held him so he could slowly lower himself to the floor. Smoothly, he mounted on Seongwu, who was now lying straight on his back. Seongwu let him.

As Minhyun’s lips traveled from Seongwu’s ear, to his neck, and to his clavicle, the air between them started to catch on fire. Minhyun calmly unbuttoned Seongwu’s shirt, one button at a time. Seongwu’s rail-thin torso emerged from underneath his gakuran jacket and white shirt. Minhyun swept the flat expanse of Seongwu’s chest, and stopped just above his heart. Minhyun felt the pulse of Seongwu’s heart underneath the bone and delicate skin. They realized easily that their hearts were beating fast and in tandem.

At this point, both Seongwu’s body and mind were touched. Once again, their wet tongues entwined. Seongwu furtively lowered his hand beneath as their kiss was made denser and denser. Long, thin fingers touched Minhyun’s waist. Pretending to brush against his skin by chance, Seongwu’s hand stroked and caressed. His hand traveled over the solid, well-set muscles and moved up from the stomach, to the chest, to the shoulders. Minhyun feigned nonchalance as he continued the kiss, but his grasp on Seongwu’s face was tightening. Minhyun suppressed his ragged breathing, trying to hold out, trying to not let himself give into Seongwu’s touches.

 Couldn’t we go farther? Seongwu smiled provocatively. As he could not speak, he communicated his desires through action. Seongwu raised one leg and began to touch Minhyun. With lascivious intent, he brought his knee to Minhyun’s crotch and rubbed it. At this direct attack of stimulation, Minhyun was frozen still. He tore his lips from Seongwu’s and looked away. Seongwu read from his handsome profile a volition to withstand the temptation, no matter how much of it Seongwu threw his way. Seongwu did not relent, and he continued to play with Minhyun. Seongwu could feel against his knee that Minhyun’s loins were swelling steadily.

In the end, Minhyun could not dominate Seongwu with his will to endure. He lost control, and moved farther below. He took each of Seongwu’s ankles in his hands and spread them apart. Once he was nestled between Seongwu’s thighs, he stuck their cores together. He could vividly feel their erections rub between them, clothed beneath their uniform trousers. Minhyun put them together, and moved his hips forward, as if he was inside Seongwu. Neither of them could feel the pain of abrasion against fabric, overtaken by this new pleasure they had never felt before.

Coming upon this pleasure, they started to want more and more. Seongwu let out a heated breath, thinking of something more intense. He lowered his hand and placed it around the beltline of Minhyun’s trousers. Seongwu was wanting to take them off, but Minhyun, understanding this gesture as a plea to stop, halted.

Minhyun let out labored breaths, confusion evident on his face. Everything was so perplexing. He remembered his vision turning black, and when he came to, Seongwu was under him. What he had
been doing for the last few minutes was entirely due to his instincts, not calculated, planned logic he so faithfully lived by. Minhyun had never in his life lose control in this way. His desire was about to explode out of him, but he forced it down and tried to read into Seongwu’s eyes.

Seongwu was on his back, his body bare and his shirt disheveled, his eyes somehow deeper in color. He raised a hand and caressed the side of Minhyun’s face. Minhyun was biting his lip, almost to the point of making it bleed; Seongwu was sorry for it.

“You don’t have to hold yourself back.”

Tips of Seongwu’s fingers stroked Minhyun’s lips. Minhyun opened and closed his hands in fists, and spoke with great effort, as if he was ruminating over a taboo forever forbidden to him.

“You are so thin.”

“I was born thin. Don’t mind it.”

“I’m afraid you’ll break.”

“I am stronger than you think, so you can stop worrying and go on. ...Let’s go on.”

Seongwu smiled, seemingly at Minhyun’s overworry, and took his hand. They could feel each other’s blood pumping in their veins through thin skins of their palms.

“We will go on, together.”

Seongwu started to unbutton Minhyun’s shirt, one by one, from top to bottom. At last, all of Minhyun’s strong upper body was revealed. Seongwu’s hand slowly slipped down from his shoulder to his hip.

Minhyun took Seongwu’s fluttering hand into his own. Seongwu had never seen Minhyun regard him with such sharp look. Minhyun smiled, coolly, and responded to Seongwu’s provocations.

Chapter End Notes

No glossary for Chapter 19.

Thank you for all the kudos, likes, and comments! Id and I both spend a lot of time on this fic, and we're having a wonderful time. We are happy to see you are enjoying it as much as we are. Let us know how you feel! :)


Chapter Summary

They are delirious, they are drunk in love, and they cannot have enough of all the new sensations they find within each other.

Chapter Notes

The original Chapter 20 in Korean can be found here: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/2726989.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侣)

Chapter 20

* This chapter is adult only, for explicit sexual content.

Seongwu shut his eyes, twisting his head this way and that as if in pain. A litany of moans fell from his parted lips. He was now naked as the day he was born, and he winced and flinched at every touch, his body tensing at an overload of stimulation he could not handle. Somewhere around his waist and lower abdomen tickled every time Minhyun touched him. Seongwu did not dislike the feeling; he was thirsting for more in euphoria. He felt as if his entire head was going to melt off. Seongwu clenched his teeth. Veins threatened to pop out from the back of his hands as he clutched his pillow for dear life.

Minhyun’s hands were busily coming and going from clandestine places of Seongwu’s body no one had ever had access to before. From a while ago, Seongwu was hard as he could ever be. Minhyun took him into his hand and did not let go, playing with pressure, relief, pressure, relief, again and again, on and off. Minhyun was clearly playing with him, and Seongwu began to leak clear fluid onto Minhyun’s hand, wetting the skin between his fingers. Wherever they touched was slippery with sweat.

Seongwu’s breath hitched; he wanted to go beyond this, to the next step. He wanted to let all this opaque, wet heat out of him and present Minhyun with this same blissful ecstasy. Just when he thought he could reach up and touch the sky, however, Minhyun’s hand left him. Suddenly his spirits fell, and he let out a heated sigh, his face fraught with thousands of feelings. Seongwu was
disappointed, but he knew Minhyun was up to something, and so he sat still and watched each of Minhyun’s movements.

Minhyun went to his desk and brought a small jar of cream moisturizer that he used to keep his skin, especially on his lips and the tips of his fingers, from breaking from dry chill of winter. Minhyun sought to use it for an entirely different reason now. He settled himself between Seongwu’s thighs again, and reached into his jar to scoop a generous amount of the cream on two fingers.

Seongwu could easily assume what Minhyun meant to do with a jar of cream, and he grabbed Minhyun’s hand as it moved down again.

“Wait… what are you doing?”

“What? This is the only way for two men to do it.”

“You mean I’m going to be under you?”

“What then?”

Minhyun countered; at the same time, a predatory finger prodded into Seongwu. Ah! Seongwu yelped. Minhyun’s finger burrowed in, spreading open a hole that felt so impossibly tight around it. The most strange, alien sensation attacked Seongwu, and Seongwu was immediately dazed. He could not say he was hurting very much, but what he felt was not pleasurable, either. Seongwu had thought before that if this happened, it would indeed feel odd, but he could never have imagined this feeling. Minhyun saw that Seongwu was whimpering, tilted his head inquisitively, and spoke again, picking up where he left off.

“You want me to be under you?”

“Ah… Minhyun,”

Minhyun added another finger, his tone teasing. Seongwu did not have time to call him out for being shameless; he hissed at the sensation of being opened up. Minhyun took Seongwu’s thigh in his hand and kissed the soft inner flesh to calm him down. After Seongwu became more used to the feeling of his body being spread open, Minhyun moved his hand. His finger slowly moved, leaving sticky moisture of the cream on it in its wake. Seongwu felt his body enveloped in a new, even stranger sensation and instinctively tried to close his legs and recoil into himself, only to be stopped by Minhyun’s other hand, which moved to wrap itself around Seongwu’s hard length. Seongwu closed his eyes at the heat that consumed him again.

Seongwu thought he could fall dead any minute. The situation itself was an overload of sensations for him; it was on another dimension from the moments in which he had secretly pleasured himself. It was unbelievably embarrassing to show his lover the most fragile, vulnerable parts of himself that were off-limits before. Whenever Minhyun’s eyes combed all over his body, Seongwu wanted to hide.

Minhyun, of course, forbade him from running away. As much as Seongwu was hot and bothered, twisting his waist away from him, Minhyun was just as riled up, at the cusp of explosion. Once Seongwu seemed to have been used to two fingers, he prematurely decided that enough preparation had been given for Seongwu. He withdrew his fingers from Seongwu and took his other hand away. Seongwu immediately crouched at the loss, clapping his legs together. Seongwu heard clanking of metal: the sound of Minhyun undoing his belt. This was a signal that Minhyun would now fully fledge himself to their act of love. Seongwu flinched, madly blushing, as if that sound alone was violating him.
Minhyun plastered thick, opaque cream onto himself, coating what was now fully hard down to the roots. He nestled between Seongwu’s thighs again, and Seongwu felt Minhyun’s cock touching his tensed perineum. Seongwu sharply inhaled. Minhyun caressed his stomach, helping him breathe easier. Despite this convincingly calming gesture, Seongwu could not relax easily. Minhyun waited patiently for a moment of Seongwu’s inattention, and then caught him off guard. As Minhyun’s thick length started to breach him, Seongwu whimpered.

“Ah, ah, Minhyun...”

“Shh.”

Seongwu clasped a hand over his mouth; he could not even fathom what kind of noises were spilling from his mouth. Seongwu’s gaze shook violently as it wandered around the ceiling. Minhyun pushed himself in, slowly so Seongwu would not startle, but steadily penetrating him, forcing his body to open for him. He gradually planted himself deep inside Seongwu. Seongwu felt like he was being pierced; his limbs writhed, expressing exactly what he was feeling. At one moment, eventually, his ankle hit Minhyun’s shoulder, catching the latter off guard.

Minhyun was suddenly struck with an impossible sense of absurdity. Yes, a kick in the shoulder hurt, but he was more offended that one of the most important moments of his life was interrupted. His eyes, which were boiling over with passion, coldly hardened. Seongwu noticed it, and whispered an apology.

“Sorry...”

Seongwu obviously had not kicked Minhyun intentionally; he was only writhing underneath him instinctively. It was really nothing to Minhyun, and there was no reason for Seongwu to cringe and apologize. But somehow, Minhyun could not soften himself easily. He wanted to hold Seongwu, kiss him, and tell him it was all right as he ordinarily would, but for some reason he just could not do so. The only thing that mattered was that he was halfway inside Seongwu. He teetered between reason and spontaneous emotion, and he was faltering towards the latter. He was always sure logic and reason could overpower his instincts, but that this assumption was false was being revealed in front of him. He was shocked and enraged at himself for being such animal.

Minhyun swept his hair out of his forehead with one hand. He did this when he was frustrated, and Seongwu immediately realized he was forcing down anger.

Minhyun soon regained composure and slowly buried himself to the hilt inside Seongwu with careful but steady force. Seongwu’s eyes shot wide open. He was happy he had a hand over his mouth; he would have screamed if he had not.

Minhyun moved gingerly, in shallow, gentle thrusts, to have Seongwu familiarize himself with the pain. While Seongwu was dealing with unfamiliar, distressing sensations, Minhyun seemed to have his own set of problems, and he too grunted as if he was in pain. His continued to piston inside Seongwu, making space for itself in an unimaginably tight space. Seongwu’s hair shook each time he was penetrated fully. He swallowed the moans that scratched at his throat to get out. It was more difficult to suppress them than to let them out, and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Minhyun stooped low to access him, and gently took his hand away from his lips.

“I didn’t mean to tell you to be quiet.”

“Mmmm...”

Seongwu deliriously nodded. He did not know the contents of Minhyun’s speech, only that his face
was too near. Seongwu did not know what he would do if he faced Minhyun’s beauty now, and so he turned his head away.

Minhyun threw himself into dedication for Seongwu’s body again. He took Seongwu in his hand and shook, while speeding the thrusts of his hips. He had moved gingerly in the beginning, but he gradually set a brutal rhythm as he rammed into Seongwu hard, their skin slapping together. Seongwu’s body shook violently as it took each of Minhyun’s powerful thrusts, deep and unsparing as if he had never meant to coddle and placate.

Seongwu brokenly moaned each time Minhyun pushed into him; he was overwhelmed with simultaneous sensations of Minhyun’s hand touching his shaft and his hardness pounding into him. Seongwu was hard again, leaking warm liquid all over Minhyun’s hand again. He convulsed when Minhyun swiped the tip with his thumb, and suddenly he was near climax again.

Minhyun noticed Seongwu’s state and slowed down. He lowered his body onto Seongwu’s. His elbows settled on either side of Seongwu’s face and two sleek, nude bodies intertwined. They felt each other’s hearts beating against each of their chests. Minhyun sought out Seongwu’s lips and took them into his own. He kissed Seongwu hard, messily and a bit rudely, resembling how he was breaching into Seongwu underneath. Seongwu’s litany of moans were all swallowed by Minhyun. Minhyun was still slowly going in and out of Seongwu, and his was being rubbed against Minhyun’s stomach, screaming to explode any minute. Seongwu instinctively tried to move his hand low and take it into his own hand; he needed more, more, more. Minhyun detected his hand snaking between them, and ended their kiss, lowering his own hand to take Seongwu into his hand.

Their hands met. As Minhyun’s grip enveloped him again, Seongwu’s hasty hand lost power. Minhyun layered his hand over Seongwu’s, and shook, again, tenaciously thumbing the tip. He could not take his eyes off Seongwu’s face. A look he had never seen before was upon Seongwu’s face as he writhed and convulsed under him. Their bodies were glued together still, and Seongwu’s movements were halted under Minhyun’s body that enveloped his. Asking for redemption, Seongwu tried to embrace Minhyun’s back, only for his hands to slip because of the sweat that had now completely soaked them. After leaving a few light scratches on the smooth skin, Seongwu could finally take Minhyun into his arms as he came again into Minhyun’s hand.

Seongwu threw his head back as he let out a long mewl, revealing a long throat to Minhyun, as white, hot wildfire spread over his entire body. From between his parted lips and along his chin trickled a streak of spit he could not swallow. His body tensed, unbelievably taut. His legs choked Minhyun’s waist, and he intensely tightened around Minhyun. Seongwu fought for breath, sparkling thrill of climax lingering over him. Minhyun kindly touched Seongwu until he let out every drop of semen onto his hand.

Minhyun was enthralled at the sight of Seongwu climaxing. It was simply glorious. His handsome face endlessly elevated in ecstasy, and then crumbled in waves of pleasure that accosted him. Minhyun had never even imagined the sight of Seongwu become so completely undone, and loved that Minhyun himself was the reason for his undoing. Seongwu was excited because of Minhyun, and met his peak in Minhyun’s hand. Nobody disliked the sight of their dear beloved be at a loss because of sheer passion, and Minhyun was not an exception. With much love, he sucked on Seongwu’s lower lip before letting it go shortly. Now, it was his turn.

Minhyun raised himself up, and Seongwu’s eyes opened again. His vision had blacked out like the entire world had collapsed onto itself, and now it was slowly coming back. At every corner of his body remained lingering thrill of his electrifying gratification. He was not completely relaxed, and could not move a finger. Minhyun tenderly touched Seongwu’s limp body, as if he had returned to his gentle self. This momentary softness was an illusion; Minhyun was only trying to lull Seongwu
as he was securely getting himself back into position. Minhyun was harder than he had ever been in his life after seeing Seongwu lose himself as he came, and his entire body was burning. He was sorry, yet he could not stop himself. He slung both of Seongwu’s legs over his shoulders, and began to make love to his beloved again, deep and hard.

“Ah… ah! Min, Hyun-ah, Hyun-ah…”

Each time Minhyun heavily slammed into him, Seongwu’s thin legs trembled all over. His body, which had relaxed comfortably, tensed up again. Seongwu pleaded with Minhyun, his moans viciously cut into a staccato of syllables from Minhyun’s thrusts, but Minhyun could neither see nor hear anything. Seongwu’s body quaked helplessly; he tried to keep his legs where they were, but they were losing power. As his thighs fell back around Minhyun’s waist again, Minhyun, inspired by this new ease of movement, sped his hips up.

Seongwu cried out uncontrollably, and as he found himself completely swept away by Minhyun he forgot to quiet himself. Minhyun had also forgotten all else and indulged himself into Seongwu. Their bodies were drenched in sweat, and their skin slipped against each other seductively. Where Minhyun had penetrated Seongwu a telltale sound of molten cream sloughed explicitly. Seongwu had forgotten all shame as he gasped, his hands looking for something to grab onto. He raised his arms and tried to grasp Minhyun’s shoulders, as Minhyun lowered his upper body again to take Seongwu deep into his arms. Beads of sweat that had formed upon Minhyun’s forehead dripped onto Seongwu’s cheek and rolled down to his neck, like tears. They looked at each other’s faces they were so madly in love with, and held each other in a tight embrace.

“Ah, ah, Hyun-ah, It…”

...hurts...

The last syllable dissipated inside Seongwu’s throat, as Minhyun abruptly stopped his hips just as he was about to pronounce it. Minhyun slammed himself as deeply as he could into Seongwu with all his might and came hard, his breaths rough against Seongwu’s neck. Seongwu gingerly stroked the back of his head as he reveled in the glory of it all. Minhyun rode on the remaining pleasure of it by thrusting a few more times into Seongwu, feeling utterly liberated, like he was just born again. He slipped out of Seongwu, and a stream of white sperm trickled out with him. In a flash, Minhyun was brought back to earth.

“Stay still. I will clean you up.”

Minhyun stood up to fetch two towels he had hung in the room to dry. He lowered himself onto one knee beside Seongwu, who was still prone on his back, and tenderly wiped his body, meticulously cleaning his face, arms, chest, and ass. Now that Minhyun seemed to be back to his old neat self, Seongwu whined.

“I hate you.”

“Why?”

“That was... strange.”

“You felt that way?”

“And it hurt…”

“I promise to be more careful. I’m sorry.”
Minhyun had lost control of himself because the feelings and sensations from this new deed of lovemaking was uncharted territory for him. Still, he apologized; Minhyun was sincere and earnest, even in a position of utmost vulnerability. Seongwu wanted to ask him why he was sorry, but he kept silent, as he liked the kisses Minhyun was giving him as a gesture of apology. Their tongues lightly brushed against each other before parting.

Minhyun flopped onto his back next to Seongwu only after he was done cleaning himself. Seongwu rubbed onto the remaining traces of perspiration on Minhyun’s face, and for a while the room silent save their hitched breathing that would eventually calm. Suddenly, Minhyun kissed Seongwu’s cheek three times in rapid succession. Seongwu turned his head to be met with a pair of mischievous eyes.

“Stop. It tickles.”

Seongwu lightly pushed Minhyun away, but Minhyun stuck to him persistently. Minhyun’s lips travelled from Seongwu’s cheek, lower and lower, to his chin, throat, and down to his still-thumping heart. Seongwu’s eyes wavered. He looked down at Minhyun’s tousled hair and asked:

“Really? Again?”

Minhyun looked up, smiling instead of answering, Hey! Seongwu outstretched his arms to push Minhyun away, but his wrists were only bound within Minhyun’s iron grip.

“I hope you give me a chance to make love to you again. Properly, this time.”

Minhyun sounded like he was pleading, but he was actually declaring. Seongwu knew Minhyun very well. Minhyun did not play obstinate ordinarily, but he endured to see an end to an endeavor of his choice once he really set his mind on it. Seongwu could refuse now, but Minhyun would vex him for hours, maybe days afterwards to get what he wanted. Seongwu glanced at Minhyun, who was waiting like a docile child for Seongwu’s answer. Minhyun’s eyes sparkled, like he was staring at a delicious dessert. Seongwu smiled, and conceded.

“Properly, you said.”
Air illuminating the dawn was cold. Stars that populated the night sky hid behind tufts of thick clouds, afraid they would freeze in frigid wind’s merciless blow. However, the real reason the stars hid was that they were afraid of a star that shone brilliantly on earth. All stars in the galaxy envied that single star, shining so brightly on his own, named Ong Seongwu. Flames of love burning as hot as the surface of the sun surrounded him; light emitting from him brighter than any star. The stars were disgraced by him, and soon they ran far away as the sun rose from the east. Oblivious of this turmoil in the heavens, Seongwu was fast asleep under the thick blanket of night.

Minhyun opened his eyes suddenly, surprising himself. It was not that he had a nightmare. Rather, he had a wonderful, dreamless night of sleep, and he was feeling fresh. It was quiet, and the only thing Minhyun could hear was Seongwu’s tiny breaths. A gentle, dim light of dawn was creeping through the window. Minhyun checked for the time, and looked to Seongwu’s sleeping face. Light and shadow played on the slopes and valleys of his carefully sculpted face. Seongwu was deep in sleep, as if he would stay asleep if someone carried him away. Minhyun stared in wonder for a while before taking the blanket Seongwu had kicked away during the night to cover him up to his chin, worried he would catch a cold.

As with everything else, they had to go through trial and error to become proficient at making love. Minhyun realized that to do things correctly he had to go through many tries, and he used this logic to convince Seongwu to go again, twice, thrice. Except for having gone downstairs for dinner, they held their bodies together all day, losing track of time in their pursuit of delightful mistakes and
corrections. This was not for naught; they gradually became accustomed to sensations they initially felt were impossible to withstand.

What they had not taken into account was their stamina. In the beginning they thought they would never tire like a furnace burning forever, but they were inevitably drained of energy. Minhyun could hang on, but the real problem was Seongwu. Seongwu stayed up all night sometimes before exams, but this time he could not stay awake past two in the morning. Minhyun replaced his goodnights with a kiss to Seongwu’s forehead.

Minhyun grew thirsty while waiting for Seongwu to wake, and he quietly left the room and climbed downstairs, tiptoeing like a cat as to not wake anyone in the house. Despite his efforts, the door facing the staircase flung open as soon as he reached the bottom. Minhyun was face to face with Kyuwon, who looked absolutely haggard.

“Hyung… Your nose is bleeding.”

“You bastard.”

In a rare display of vulgarity, Kyuwon swore at Minhyun, glaring at him. Kyuwon seemed to have bled from his nose all night. He held a bloodied handkerchief to his nose, his eyes were bloodshot, and his face pallid. Minhyun stiffened at this look, and Kyuwon called him into the room.

“We need to talk. Come in.”

Minhyun could not refuse, so he entered. The tiny room felt so small when two adult men sat facing each other in the middle of it. In the midst of an excruciating silence, Minhyun tried to read into Kyuwon. Kyuwon always said what he wanted, unapologetically and immediately as thoughts entered his head; Minhyun could not fathom why he was suddenly brooding on his words. Kyuwon hesitated for a long while before he spoke, reluctantly even then.

“The two of you… Since when?”

Minhyun could now see why he was so hesitant to speak. He was asking about Minhyun and Seongwu. Minhyun thought they would eventually be found out as long as Kyuwon lived under them, but he did not expect it to happen so soon. Kyuwon’s tone was careful, but not reproachful or judgmental, and so Minhyun could speak to him with relative ease.

“It hasn’t been that long since we properly started to see each other.”

“I assume you liked him before that, though.”

“Since the first time I saw him.”

“…Is there a reason you were smitten with a classmate at such a young age?”

“He was beautiful.”

“I can’t help but understand.”

Ong Seongwu was handsome. This was a truth as evident as the fact that the earth revolves around the sun. Seongwu had a charm about him that made even men swoon. It was not only the way he looked or the mood about him; his every little move exuded a loveliness that made everyone fall for him. Kyuwon also knew this, and he immediately understood what Minhyun meant; and he assumed that Seongwu held a similar feeling for Minhyun. Minhyun and Seongwu were a beautiful pair, as if the heavens arranged for their meeting. Kyuwon was torn between an urge to clap for this wonderful
union and sheer shock that made his head throb with pain.

“I’m surprised. I knew something was going on between you, but… I didn’t think it was this serious.”

“I’m sorry to have shocked you.”
“No need to apologize. However…”

“Yes, hyung.”

“Well, um…”

Kyuwon rubbed his face with his dry palm. Minhyun sat, watching him hesitate yet again.

“You know, at night… Even tiniest of sounds echo.”

“……”

“So… When you… um... make love… Please keep the noise down…”

“Hmmph.”

“Did you laugh? Is this funny to you?”

“No. I’m sorry, hyung.”

Kyuwon clutched his head, which had been aching for the last few hours. Apparently, it was true most well-behaved cats cause the most trouble. How they, always so prim and proper at school, went at it for hours! Kyuwon was so incredibly embarrassed that he could only look down and sigh. Minhyun kept apologizing, yet he seemed unable to stifle his laughter. He let out a sound that resembled a snort and that was neither a giggle nor a sob; he would have laughed loud if Kyuwon had not been there. Kyuwon chased him out of the room, as he knew nothing he could say would have any effect on Minhyun anymore. Besides, Kyuwon had said all there was to be said. He threw his handkerchief to the side and fell on his blanket. He closed his eyes to catch some sleep he lost over the night, hoping Minhyun and Seongwu would not continue making love into the morning.

As Kyuwon slept downstairs, Minhyun and Seongwu spent a leisurely weekend morning together in their room. Minhyun came back upstairs after having a drink of water, a cup for Seongwu in his hand. Seongwu was still asleep; Minhyun let time flow aimlessly, holding him in his arms. Seongwu only awoke when it was time for a late breakfast, feeling a strange sensation of tightness about his eyes. He hurriedly sought out a mirror to look at himself. Seongwu remembered shedding a few tears as they made love the night before, and now his eyes were terribly swollen. He screamed internally, covering his face with his hands. It was for naught, as Minhyun had already stared at his sleeping face to his heart’s content.

“You’re still adorable with swollen eyes, so don’t hide them.”

“Well, I don’t like the way they look, so no.”

“But you won’t be able to eat with your face covered. Food is more important than the way your eyes look. Now, let’s go downstairs to eat.”

Seongwu grunted, letting his hands down. He was already hungry, and he did not need Minhyun’s cajoling. He attempted to get up, but his legs felt like jelly. That was not all; all the muscles around his waist and back seemed to collide against each other as he tried to move. They were apparently
surprised at last night’s activities, which were completely new to them. Seongwu sat back down, unable to will himself up. Minhyun, seeing him grimace, ran to his side.

“What is it? Are you hurt?”

“My back hurts. And also my... behind... and my legs. I can’t get up.”

Seongwu began to list where he was hurting, and he looked up at Minhyun with narrowed eyes. He did not remember looking at Minhyun’s blank face with such resentment.

“This is all your fault.”

“...How?”

“How would my body last if you keep flinging yourself at me again and again?”

“That’s why we had plenty of rest in between.”

“It seems they weren’t enough, I guess.”

“Hmm.”

Minhyun began to think. Seongwu was not lasting with a few hours of rest. Then should he give Seongwu more time in between? Days? Weeks? Or should he try his best not to have Seongwu, as impossible as it seemed? Calculations without answers continued in Minhyun’s head, and Seongwu kept moaning in pain in the meantime. Seongwu complained of feeling like all of his joints were disconnected, and finally declared he was unable to go downstairs. Minhyun did not have any other choice but to head downstairs on his own. He took two bowls of rice and soup and side dishes for Seongwu and himself and then excused himself. He came back up to the room, and set up a small table with cabrioles in the room with the food. They sat on either side of it, their legs crossed on the floor, and Seongwu picked up his spoon.

Seongwu liked to pull pranks and jokes on Minhyun, but his inclinations for joviality was nothing compared to his love for when Minhyun took care of him. Seongwu decided to let himself be pampered some more, so he scooped a spoonful of rice and said to Minhyun:

“Can I have some bean sprouts?”

Minhyun looked up at him, puzzled. Seongwu eyed his spoon, and gestured for Minhyun to place bits of side dishes onto it. Seongwu often liked to play the baby as a show of affection, but now he was going all out with it. Minhyun did not dislike it, however, and he let his lips stretch into a smile. He picked up a few strands of spicy bean sprouts and placed them onto Seongwu’s spoon. Seongwu chewed his food, swallowed, and scooped up another spoonful of rice.

“Kimchi?”

“Here.”

Like this, Seongwu and Minhyun talked all throughout their late breakfast. Technically, it was closer to Seongwu giving commands and Minhyun answering them. Anyhow, Seongwu finished his bowl of rice with Minhyun’s help. Minhyun sighed as he was cleaned up.

“What did I do to deserve serving such a tyrant?”

“Are you complaining?”
Seongwu glared at Minhyun with narrowed eyes again. Seongwu grabbed his numb, aching back, exaggerating his groans. Minhyun’s gaze immediately followed, and his eyebrows drooped in remorse.

“No, sir, I am not complaining…”

“I wonder who did this to my body. Even a wild animal couldn’t have ravaged it so.”

“I apologize, and apologize again for tormenting you last night.”

“Good that you know.”

Seongwu answered, coquettishly. Happy, he laid himself down halfway on his plush blanket and hummed a song he liked. He planned to be lazy all day. However, Minhyun, who put away the food and the folded away the table, started to change into his outerwear, despite not having told Seongwu about going out.

“Where are you going?”

“To Jongno.”

“For what?”

“We’re out of painkillers. I don’t plan on having you withstand all that pain.”

“Yes, but…”

Seongwu slurred. He did not want to part from Minhyun. Yes, he was aching, but the pain was not enough to kill him, and he was willing to withstand it if Minhyun would stay by his side. Seongwu thought holding Minhyun in his arms all day would be more effective than painkillers to curb his pain, but he could not stop Minhyun as the latter was getting ready. Minhyun already had a coat and a scarf on. Seongwu looked up at Minhyun like a dog wishing to follow his master outside. Minhyun comforted him, his voice soft and low.

“I’ll bring back those honey cookies you like.”

Seongwu’s soft hair was gently disheveled under Minhyun’s hand. Minhyun waited until Seongwu gave him permission by nodding, and left the house. It had been a while since he went out by himself. He hurried to be back as soon as possible, reminding himself a list of things he needed to buy and the places he needed to stop by. Calculating how he could minimize his routes and travel time, he found his way out of the maze of alleyways of Bukchon.

Minhyun’s first destination was Hwapyeongdang Pharmacy, located on Jongno Fifth. Hwapyeongdang was one of the biggest and the most famous pharmacies in Gyeongseong during this era, and it was indeed enormous, with inventory that encompassed western and eastern medicine alike. Minhyun described Seongwu’s symptoms to the pharmacist, and he produced several pain medicine for muscle aches and joint pain. Minhyun took a while to choose, as he had little knowledge of medicine. He decided on a pack of pills from the west; there was no space in their room to heat up traditional liquid medicine, and he did not think Seongwu would want to drink bowls of bitterness. He was not sure how Seongwu would fare swallowing pills the size of a fingernail, but he figured this would be easier on Seongwu anyhow. Intending to use them to help Seongwu deal with taking the drug, Minhyun picked up a bag of dried dates. Perhaps the pain would go away soon if he could get Seongwu to concentrate on the snacks.

Minhyun’s next destination was a general goods store on Jongno Second. He sought out a section for
women’s cosmetics. On his left was Japanese white powder, perfumes and soaps; on his right were parkabun*, the first cosmetic product to be produced from Korea, as well as various creams with differing labels. Minhyun looked through them all, and picked up a jar of cream: the same kind he had emptied last night. He turned to walk to the counter, but halted mid-way. He was reminded of something he might find useful later.

He carefully scanned the store, and he found what he was looking for in a dark corner: bottles of perfumed oil, which he had heard were used by gisaengs and middle-class ladies apply on their skins to attract men. There were a deluge of different kinds of bottles littering that corner of the store, and Minhyun stooped to scrutinize them before selecting a bottle that contained almost clear, light-scented liquid.

As his last stop, Minhyun headed to a confectionary near Gwanghwamun, only to be distracted by a new Japanese bakery around the corner. He was attracted to the well-baked buns in its glass display and their delectable aroma. Minhyun entered the bakery like a boy following a pied piper, and when he was back outside he had in his hand a paper bag with sponge cake inside.

It was Minhyun’s first time trying a sponge cake, but he was excited at the prospect of Seongwu loving it. Minhyun hurried back to Bukchon, his heart beating fast yet steady. He could not wait to share with Seongwu his new things. Would Seongwu be asleep, or reading? Or would he be studying, however impossible as that seemed? When Minhyun opened the door, with his heart pounding inside his chest, he was met with an unusual scene. Instead of their bedding, there was a large rice paper spread on the floor, and Seongwu knelt in front of it with a brush in his right hand. Seongwu looked up at Minhyun to greet him.

“You’re back so early.”

“Of course I am. Were you painting?”

“Yes. Since I can’t go outside, this is the only way for me to appreciate the beauty of nature.”

“How clever you are.”

Minhyun passed Seongwu quietly as to not bother him, and went to his own desk. He placed the things he bought in town on it, and changed. He glanced at Seongwu’s paper over his shoulder and saw plum blossoms, orchids, chrysanthemums, and bamboos. Minhyun did not know much about traditional painting, but he could tell Seongwu was not bad at it.

Because Seongwu was educated at a seodang before he was exposed to western education, he had a considerable knowledge of Chinese texts as well as traditional calligraphy and painting, although he was a poor western painter. A few years back, Minhyun asked him what the difference was between western and traditional painting. Seongwu thought for a long while, and gave a long answer. Seongwu said that western paintings are faithful to their roles: to be gazed at. Thus, they were elaborate and aesthetically beautiful. Therefore, a painter had many things to consider when completing a western painting; he was bound to take great pains to create perfection and to be tortured by complicated thoughts. However, according to Seongwu, traditional paintings were based on totally different mechanisms and had diametrically opposing reasons for their existence. Traditional paintings were not meant to be gazed at; they were meant to be used by the painter as means to cultivate his psyche. A painter can unload thoughts out of his head and into the painting, stroke by stroke, and by the time he completed a painting, he could get rid of all painful or distracting thoughts. Seongwu had then laughed bashfully, guessing the reason he could not get used to colorful and intricate western paintings was that he was too accustomed to the eastern way of painting.

Minhyun soon snapped out of reminiscence. He changed into his lounging clothes and sat next to
Seongwu of the present with a paper bag of sponge cake. Seongwu looked up, his eyes sparkling at the sweetly delicious aroma emanating from it. He took the paper bag Minhyun was offering him.

“I wonder what this is.”

“This is called a sponge cake, made by the Japanese. I found it in front of Gwanghwamun.”

“Wow, a cake!”

Seongwu marvelled at the sight of it; he wanted to declare today some sort of anniversary to commemorate their trying a new kind of cake. Seongwu pushed aside his brush and inkstone and sat facing Minhyun, a square sponge cake between them. They cut the cake in half and took one of each. The cake was sublimely sweet. Seongwu was especially impressed by how soft it was, how it melted in his mouth. Seongwu ate his cake slowly, savoring every tiny bite he took. In the meanwhile, Minhyun gulped down his cake in a single bite, giving in to his disposition to speed through his food. Minhyun waited for Seongwu to finish his share of the cake and looked at the half-finished painting on the floor. Minhyun found himself particularly drawn to the plum flowers in the upper left quarter of the paper. Minhyun entertained the idea of complimenting Seongwu outright, but changed his mind when he thought of a playful question.

“Hey, I heard paintings take after the nature of their painters.”

“I suppose they do.”

“You painted those plum flowers beautifully. Plum flowers are pure, noble, and are symbols of integrity and unchanging love and devotion.”

“...Yes.”

Seongwu tilted his head in confusion. He could not figure where Minhyun was headed.

“Like your plum flowers, would you vow your fidelity and chastity to your one love all your life?”

“Ha!”

Seongwu scoffed as if at an absurdity. He did not think even to wipe the crumbs around his mouth as he laughed at Minhyun. Joseon was being overtaken by waves of liberation of women and free love; Minhyun’s question surely sounded like an anachronistic and antiquated one. However, Seongwu of course knew Minhyun meant no harm, and that he simply wanted to confirm that Seongwu held an unchanging, lifelong love for him. Seongwu went on, teasingly:

“How absurd. Your views are outdated. Times are changing.”

“They are, but…”

“Old Joseon is dead. No one will erect a statue for me or declare me a man of virtue for being chaste. Besides, you know I would put my dreams and achievements before such things anyways. And…”

“And?”

“Aren’t you the one who should be so concerned with keeping your chastity intact? You’re the one who accepted a love letter, kept it a secret from me, and then had someone declare her love for you in public.”

“But that was before I began to properly see you!”
Minhyun stared at Seongwu, flustered, as a taboo between them was so casually breached. Seongwu looked away, and bit into his cake again. He was so cheeky, how he let out everything he wanted to say to provoke Minhyun and then feigned complete innocence. Minhyun still found him irresistibly adorable, as his full cheeks, busily moving tiny lips and gathered hands reminded Minhyun of a chipmunk. Again, Minhyun was defeated by Seongwu’s cuteness even before he found time to protest. Now, Minhyun began to think he damned. No matter how prickly or cheeky Seongwu behaved, all Minhyun could feel was a nearly tearful sensation of tender affection. Seongwu was like a sponge cake; he was so addictive in his sweetness that Minhyun could not help but seek him out constantly. Hell, Seongwu was even warmer and softer, incomparably so. Minhyun began to feel afraid of what could happen if he let his greedy appetite for Seongwu run wild, and he forced down the feeling of joy that threatened to overflow him.

So the conversation ended, with Minhyun up-ended without getting an answer he wanted. After Seongwu finished his cake, Minhyun put away crumbs on the floor and cleaned the spot. He carefully approached Seongwu, who had his brush in his hand again. Minhyun was suddenly so quiet, and Seongwu was worried that his words, half a joke, might have defeated Minhyun’s spirits. So Seongwu reached out first, looped his arms around Minhyun’s waist, and held him tightly.

“Do you like my drawings of plum flowers?”

“I do.”

“Then I will present it to you as a special gift, because you are…”

Seongwu rested his face on Minhyun’s chest, feeling his heartbeats accelerate as he did. He knew Minhyun to be earnest and proper in everything he did, but still marvelled at how even his heart was so honest. Seongwu thought for a moment that he would have to endure terrible punishment if he continued to tease and torment such a sincere man. Seongwu vowed to stop playing for today. He closed his eyes and rubbed his soft cheeks on Minhyun’s shoulder, a gesture he knew Minhyun loved. If he could, he wanted to surrender not only his picture but everything he had to Minhyun. Love filled his heart to the brim, and he wanted to stay faithful to Minhyun endlessly. After all, Minhyun was…

“My undying flame.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I am late with this one! As always, thank you all for reading and commenting. I have not been able to write back on many of the recent DMs and comments, but I hope I can find the time to do so soon.
Chapter Summary

Seongwu jokes that they are about to burn themselves to the ground any minute now. Minhyun is fine with that.

Chapter Notes

For original Chapter 22 in Korean, go to:
This chapter is rated E.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 22

They shared heat and hitched breaths. Their hearts were on fire, and they felt as if their entire beings were shrouded in flames. Seongwu joked that they were about to burn themselves to the ground any minute now. Minhyun was fine with that. There was no other metaphor that could do justice to their love anyways.

Once he awakened his senses, Seongwu became impatient for more. He became addicted to a new pleasure in his life that at once hurt him and provoked him in the strangest of ways. Yes, they repeated sloppy mistakes in the beginning, but as they learned the ways of love they soon began to realize the sheer delight of touching skin to skin. Seongwu’s body burned every time he became aware of Minhyun’s presence next to him. He never hid what he felt or his desires, and often kissed Minhyun first. Then Minhyun would hesitate, as if shy, but would soon take Seongwu into his arms in a deep embrace. Minhyun always gave his best and utmost to his beloved, and he was the same way when making love.

Minhyun put his body upon Seongwu’s, true to his own passion, but never initiated things. He only responded when Seongwu approached him and touched him first, or when Seongwu started things verbally. Seongwu was not discontent about such reticence, but soon concluded erroneously that Minhyun was a person who was hesitant to give himself up to pleasures of the flesh; that Minhyun was bashful. Seongwu remembered the first time Minhyun was exposed to pornographic magazines at school and how disgusted Minhyun seemed at the time. Seongwu thought Minhyun’s unwilling
disposition to touch him grew from the same roots that made him balk at lewd pin-ups. So Seongwu doubled his efforts to say sweet nothings into Minhyun’s ears, as if in an attempt to seduce a stone buddha.

However, that was not how Minhyun felt. Minhyun was indeed a little shy, but he was not passive or half-hearted at all. Instead, Minhyun was trying his best to suppress his desires; he did not know what would become of them if he let them all out. Minhyun had seen Seongwu in pain during their first night, and he did not want to have Seongwu suffer under his ministrations of unskilled passion. He vowed to hold himself back as much as he could, and he showed this resolution through his actions without meaning to. He decreased the number of times he approached Seongwu, and he tried his best not to be carried away when kissing or making love to him. He was using what felt like an inhuman level of patience, but whenever he was about to burst open from the absurdity of it all, Seongwu called out his name. He called him, Minhyun, Minhyun, Hyun-ah- and immediately Minhyun was Odysseus, tied to the mast in the midst of a chorus of sirens. Minhyun could not resist Seongwu’s exquisite voice, and his restraint dissolved without a trace.

Minhyun would have not been in so much suffering if these irresistible temptations ended the moment they passed, but Seongwu’s mellifluous voice cut deep into Minhyun’s mind and stayed there. Seongwu’s voice resounded in Minhyun’s head no matter how many times he closed his eyes and opened them again in attempts to get rid of them, and he had to swallow lumps of burning desire dozens of time a day. Minhyun tried to pull himself together whenever Seongwu approached him, his face ridiculously innocent, and asked him for help with a math problem. Minhyun could never sate his desire by just watching Seongwu, but he had to. He found his gaze chasing Seongwu, and hurriedly shut his eyes, repeating a single word in his head like a prayer: patience.

Despite all this, Minhyun’s mind began to be colored with unadulterated desire. On what used to be a blank canvas, a crimson paint of passion flared, its tongues of flame wavering over the threshold of appropriety. Minhyun’s fortitude was rapidly eroding away like a sandcastle at rising tide. A violent storm raged in his heart whenever Seongwu touched him, or even merely looked at him. Mankind could never conquer nature, and Minhyun found himself losing. He thought he at least had his final sandcastle, however frail, to fend himself from being taken away by a rogue wave of lust, but even that was soon sieged and destroyed. Ludicrously, this final defeat was during a late night shortly before final exams.

Seongwu felt a pointed gaze from about twenty minutes ago. It started to poke Seongwu on his neck, and trickled down to his shoulders, back, and then his waist. Seongwu found himself in a mood for a joke, so he feigned complete ignorance to it. As Minhyun’s gaze intensified, Seongwu sat up straight, gluing his eyes to the book he was reading, his fingers leisurely turning the pages. Antsy, Minhyun stealthily crawled near him. Seongwu glanced furtively at Minhyun’s desk; it was cleaned, with books and notebooks on it closed and neatly organized.

Minhyun sat close behind Seongwu, their bodies almost touching. To grasp Seongwu’s attention, Minhyun gently poked the back of his neck, twice. When Seongwu still did not budge, Minhyun flattened his hand and stroked the skin on the nape of Seongwu’s neck. It was obviously evident what intent and feelings were laden into Minhyun’s touch, but Seongwu asked, his voice absurdly innocent.

“Why do you do that?”

“...Because you are so beautiful.”

Minhyun’s voice deepened after only a single pet on Seongwu’s neck. Simmering desire oozed from his voice, unfiltered. It seemed that Minhyun’s body was already engulfed in fierce excitement. It
was rare seeing Minhyun worked up like this, and Seongwu found himself unable to resist pranking him. What Seongwu wanted to do was straddle Minhyun right away, but he held himself back, swatting away Minhyun’s hand. Bigger fun, later.

“So you think you’re allowed to touch anything you want just because you find it beautiful?”

“Ah…”

Minhyun flushed, visibly flustered. He had intended to use the compliment ‘beautiful’ as a leverage, but it was only met with an ice-cold retort. Had he done something wrong? What could he have said to upset Seongwu? Minhyun’s brain whirled in his head, but he could not figure out what his crime committed against Seongwu was, nor could it come up with a way to deal with a situation he was facing for the very first time. So Minhyun blinked, and just said whatever came to mind.

“I am your one and only lover. I’m still not allowed to touch you?”

“Of course not.”

“Even though you touch me whenever and however you want?”

Minhyun pouted, protesting the unfairness. Guilty, Seongwu smiled awkwardly, looking away. He began to doubt his decision to poke fun at Minhyun, but watching Minhyun show a vulnerable side he rarely did was too fun to quit now. Seongwu decided to go on further, and took an argumentative tone, in a display of wonderful natural ability as an actor that would astonish Minhyun if he knew what Seongwu was really wanting.

“I ask to do it first when I touch you. Just now you touched me without saying anything.”

“…”

“You should declare your intentions, with words, if you want to do it. Now, tell me you want to do it.”

Seongwu’s voice softened, and he whispered his demand into Minhyun’s ear. Seongwu’s eyes gracefully folded into crescents, his lips curved into a seductive smile. Everything he could say from now on was undecidable. Minhyun’s ear began to turn scarlet.

“L… Let’s…”

“What was that? I can’t hear you.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Hmm? You have to tell me what it is you want to do.”

Seongwu grinned slyly, teasing Minhyun. Minhyun froze in place for a while, unable to say anything. Seongwu could not tell if he was just choosing his words carefully or if he was just dumbstruck. Why would Minhyun hesitate now, after all that they have done together? Seongwu still found intense affection pool in the bottom of his stomach, despite Minhyun’s goofy ineptness. Minhyun must have had bewitched Seongwu. Seongwu put words into Minhyun’s silent mouth.

“Say you want to have sex with me.”

“Hey, how can you say such…”

...embarrassing things with a straight face? Speechless, Minhyun hung his head. Now not only his
ears but also his neck and face were dyed in a deep blush. ‘Making love’ was at most what Minhyun could muster, and the unfamiliar, foreign term was only felt scandalous. The one who said it, however, laughed out loud shamelessly; Minhyun’s face, at a loss, was too adorable not to laugh at. Minhyun fanned his face for a bit, and then embraced Seongwu from behind. Seongwu was trapped inside Minhyun’s long limbs as the taller boy buried his face into the nape of Seongwu’s neck and rubbed his cheek on the soft skin there.

“Say it.”

Seongwu would not let it go. Instead of answering him, Minhyun began to nibble on the back of Seongwu’s neck with his teeth. Hot, humid breaths settled over delicate skin, and strong set of teeth gently provoked. It tickled Seongwu rather than hurt him.

“Mm, use your words. You’re tickling me.”

Seongwu bent forward, face down on his desk; Minhyun followed suit. Minhyun stuck himself to Seongwu’s back. Seongwu was trapped with no place to run. Seongwu decided to relax his body, and leaned his upper body on his desk. Minhyun pecked on Seongwu’s plump right cheek with a wet smack, and his lips soon travelled down the length of thin neck. Minhyun’s hands found their way around Seongwu’s torso, and began to undo the buttons of Seongwu’s shirt, one by one, which was primly closed up to the neck. Seongwu did not stop him. Instead, he quietly pulled his shirt down, revealing more of his bare skin. Minhyun’s lips feasted on it, and traces of rosy red formed in their wake.

“Mm… Ah… Hyun-ah…”

“......

“It’s against the rules to start without saying so properly.”

Seongwu looked back, coyly, and their eyes met. Minhyun’s gaze was full of wavering uncertainty, while Seongwu’s was overflowing of enjoyment. What an impish puck Seongwu was. Minhyun realized Seongwu had been playing with him, and this revelation provoked him. He could say it, if Seongwu really wanted him to. Stubborn iridescence glazed Minhyun’s eyes. He pulled Seongwu deeper into his arms and held his lips to his ears.

“Let’s do it.”

“Hm…”

“Sex.”

Minhyun’s voice, laden with feverish heat, delved into Seongwu’s ears. This was Minhyun’s declaration of war. Warm, wet tongue swept the round, thin earlobe, blowing hot, moist air into the ear. Seongwu was immediately seized by a fit of shivers, and he hissed, crying out Minhyun’s name.

In spite of his urgent moans, Seongwu turned his body to face Minhyun, letting him know he wanted more. Answering him, Minhyun leaned in and kissed him, properly this time. Seongwu’s arms snaked around Minhyun’s neck, and Minhyun’s wrapped around Seongwu’s shoulder. Their bodies slowly began to tilt to the floor. They held each other in their arms on the floor and indulged their lips. Their tongues latched together, wetly, as their breaths hitched. Seongwu’s hand found a way into Minhyun’s shirt, and long fingers traced over taut stomach and chest. As an extension of his prank, Seongwu playfully pinched a nipple. Minhyun opened his eyes, acknowledging Seongwu’s challenge.
Minhyun’s hand delved into Seongwu’s trousers. Already half-hard, Seongwu was taken into Minhyun’s grasp. Seongwu instinctively closed his legs as the most sensitive part of his body was wrapped in heavy heat. Minhyun gently parted his thighs, placing himself between them. He travelled lower, took Seongwu into his hands, and shook, up and down. Seongwu’s began to grow harder and bigger, and he could not help but let out a whimper. Seongwu’s chest heaved as he breathed erratically.

To regain control, Seongwu sat up and reached out to touch Minhyun, to reciprocate his touches. Seongwu’s finger hooked onto Minhyun’s belt loops, but he failed to take off his trousers, as Minhyun pulled himself away. Are you running away? Seongwu wanted to ask, but he was silenced by an almost unbearable stimulation that came from underneath. Minhyun’s large hand seemed to free him for a second, but then he suddenly took his hard length into his mouth. The heat around him was wetter, and Seongwu sucked in his breath to keep himself from screaming. Seongwu retracted the hand he had extended Minhyun’s way, and clapped it over his mouth. In spite it all, desperate moans escaped from between his fingers.

A sleek tongue sucked on him, circling around his tip. Seongwu gasped at the dizzying sensations that tingled and pinched around him. His entire body tensed, his bright eyes now shrouded in darkness of desire. Seongwu writhed as if in pain at pleasure that constantly intensified. His waist flinched in shock as he neared climax.

“Ah… Hyun-ah… I’m about to…”

Seongwu’s hand landed on the crown of Minhyun’s head, as if blessing him. He could not dare pull on Minhyun’s hair, so he stroked his head instead, pleading with him. Minhyun merely mumbled a small ‘it’s all right’ and focused on what he was doing. Seongwu’s body twisted, rapt in pleasure he could not handle.

Soon a thunderbolt of rapture went through Seongwu’s spine. Lightning struck behind Seongwu’s eyelids and all his fingers and toes curled inwards. Seongwu shuddered violently as he let his body be overtaken by a pure white heat. His eyes were shut tight, and he let out a long, rough sigh. Soon every ounce of energy left his body, and his heart began to slow down. Seongwu opened his eyes, reveling in languid satisfaction.

Minhyun swallowed, and got up. Seongwu was confused to see him cross the room, as he did when he finished making love.

“You don’t want to?”

Seongwu felt apologetic that he provoked Minhyun, and only let himself be pleased. He wanted to return everything Minhyun gave him.

“Of course I do.”

Minhyun answered him, his words laden with some kind of resolute promise. He took something from his bag and returned to Seongwu, with a bottle the size of a perfume in his hand.

“What’s that?”

“This is perfumed oil.”

“Perfumed oil?”

“Wouldn’t this be better than cream?”
Only then did Seongwu see what Minhyun intended to use the perfumed oil for. He blushed. He had never thought before he would be using perfumed oil for a purpose like this. Like the valedictorian of Gyeongseong Secondary School he was, Minhyun knew how to be creative.

Seongwu got on all fours. He did not particularly like being this way, as he felt like he was crawling like an animal. Still, it was the most efficient and comfortable. Minhyun poured oil on Seongwu’s tight entrance, and on his own fingers. The slick sensation was different from those of spit or cream.

As Minhyun said, perfumed oil was highly useful in opening Seongwu up. Minhyun’s fingers used to feel like a painful, dry breach into him, but now everything was much easier. Seongwu told Minhyun that it did not hurt, but just felt foreign. Minhyun carefully added another finger, and then a third, sliding them in and out of Seongwu. This time, Minhyun was inspired to play with Seongwu, and he bent his fingers and moved them in different, new angles to explore. Now Seongwu was opened up, his body soft and sticky… melting with Minhyun’s precise movements. Seongwu’s breath hitched retained heat again. Was this enough? Minhyun pushed, deeper than his fingertips had ever gone.

Just then, Seongwu jumped, yelping. Surprised at himself, Seongwu whipped his head back to look at Minhyun, who was also taken aback. Seongwu asked, his voice sharp.

“What did you do just now?”

“I just… pushed my fingers inside you.”

“No way. I felt… very, very strange.”

“You didn’t like it?”

“I don’t know.”

Seongwu looked away. Minhyun did not know what to do, and he just massaged Seongwu’s plump cheeks, trying to determine his next course of action. Seongwu’s body was mysterious. He was rail-thin, like a dancer, but only his buttocks retained a luscious plumpness. As Minhyun kneaded them aimlessly, Seongwu was the one who became impatient. He pressed Minhyun to hurry up and enter him.

As he unbuttoned his trousers, Minhyun gave himself away to a feeling of assurance that he would eventually find out what it was that Seongwu felt a moment ago. Minhyun was so hard from what they had been doing, almost on the cusp of explosion. He prodded Seongwu’s open hole, pouring some more oil onto himself. Minhyun was easily allowed in, and he slowly pushed himself inside until his hipbone was flush on Seongwu’s flesh.

Now that Minhyun was fully inside Seongwu, they stopped for a moment to catch their breaths. Seongwu took deep breaths to still his pounding heart, which seemed to swell up uncontrollably no matter how many times he did this with Minhyun. After Seongwu’s breathing calmed, Minhyun took his hips into his hands and started to give him shallow thrusts. His hard, heavy length moved, increasing its range of motions bit by bit. Minhyun tried to find that one place that made Seongwu yelp, knocking here and there.

“Ah… Ah!”

When Minhyun touched a particular spot, Seongwu shuddered as he had, crying out. Minhyun stopped all movement and observed Seongwu. Seongwu’s waist was shaking uncontrollably. Was he in pain? Minhyun reached out, took Seongwu’s chin between his fingers and had him look up.
Seongwu’s profile was drenched in sweat.

“Are you hurting?”

Seongwu shook his head. He spoke, without looking at Minhyun. He could not look at Minhyun.

“I’m all right, so don’t stop…”

No more words were exchanged between them after that. Minhyun’s slow thrusts picked up pace, and Seongwu’s body quaked with each powerful one. Minhyun’s lower abdomen and Seongwu’s soft cheeks slapped together. Seongwu tried to keep himself up, but Minhyun was touching him where he was almost granted rapturous pleasure, driving him mad, like tickling him all over with a feather. Seongwu’s arms lost their power and he let his elbows sink to the floor, his vision lowered. His body sprawled to the floor in steep decline. Minhyun grabbed a pillow near him to prop Seongwu up, in an attempt to make him more comfortable. He continuedcircling and thrusting his hips, and by chance, he pushed in deep, angling low.

Seongwu sobbed, moaned, and cried, letting out a sound he had never made before. Seongwu bit his lower lip. Minhyun immediately sensed it, and offered his left hand to Seongwu’s lips, to bite instead. How could I? Seongwu shook his head no. Seizing this moment of diverted attention, Minhyun shallowly stabbed at the same spot that made Seongwu tremble with overwhelming sensation of pleasure. Seongwu shivered in delight, his lithe body grappling for help and then crashing onto the floor.

Seongwu was prostrate flat on the floor, and Minhyun cautiously mounted him, chasing his own glory. His thrusts became longer, more powerful, and Seongwu tensed under him again. Minhyun’s thick tip was touching a particular spot in his lower belly, and it was tickling him unbearably. Seongwu gathered his hands in tight fists, again and again.

Minhyun went on tirelessly for a while, until he suddenly halted. This was because he was ravenously hungry for Seongwu, even when he was deep inside Seongwu at this very moment. He gently took Seongwu’s chin in his hand again and tipped it up. Seongwu strained his neck to look up, arching his back in a feline stretch. Minhyun stooped down to kiss Seongwu’s handsome forehead and sensuous lips, wet from beads of sweat. They exchanged several fleeting kisses like this. Suddenly, an inquiry entered Seongwu’s mind.

“Minhyun, how do you know how to do all this? Do you look at dirty magazines without telling me? Where did you hide them?”

At this question, completely out of the blue, Minhyun merely chuckled. Seongwu could be so oddball at times. Like now, asking such a question in such vulnerable circumstance for both of them. Instead of answering, Minhyun started to move his hips again, angling his hips to hit that spot Seongwu liked, with persistent focus. He only meant to go just a little harder, but soon he found himself pounding into Seongwu with all his might, breaching deep into his body. Minhyun admired the sight of Seongwu, who took it, opening himself up to Minhyun with such gratitude, and answered.

“I knew, without any of those things…”

“Mm, ah, Minhyun…”

“Just by looking at you.”

Seongwu could not make out most of what Minhyun said, as the latter started to put his weight onto
his thrusts. Twinge of electric currents ravaged him like a rogue wave and overtook his senses. Every nerve in his body, even those in his fingertips and toes, were filled with honeyed euphoria. Seongwu could not talk anymore, and all he could let out of his lips were a litany of breathy cries and moans that Minhyun was tearing out of him. Like this, Seongwu came again. He was secretly rubbing himself on the floor, and he let out ropes of white semen onto it. Minhyun gave him the last of his wholehearted thrusts, and he too soon came deep inside Seongwu. Minhyun then moved slowly, following the vestiges of the opaque, wet pleasure that still remained inside Seongwu. The hot, slick liquid slipped out of Seongwu and dripped onto the floor, and Minhyun gently wiped it off with a dry towel.

Unable to raise his head and look at Minhyun in the eye, Seongwu just stayed still. He was the one who initiated tricks on Minhyun, but he felt as if his teasing had all been flung back at him in a deserving payback. Seongwu covered his face with his hands, accosted by belated embarrassment. Minhyun came back to him after finishing his ritual of cleaning, and he pried Seongwu’s hands away from his face.

“You made so much fun of me for being shy, and now you’re the one acting shy.”

“I can’t help it…”

Seongwu answered, his voice growing quieter with each word. Snickering, Minhyun peppered kisses all over Seongwu’s face, eyes, nose, lips.

“Everything you do is right, with one exception: hiding your face from me.”

Chapter End Notes

No glossary for Chapter 22.

I’ll be back soon with Chapter 23!
Minhyun loved Seongwu’s face. Not only because Seongwu was handsome; there was something about his face that perfectly suited Minhyun’s taste. Although Seongwu found it unbelievably embarrassing, Minhyun liked to admire him as if he would a piece of sculpture. Minhyun truly believed that he was given two eyes so he could take in both left and right sides of Seongwu’s face, so one eye would catch things the other could miss. Minhyun was a perfectionist when it came to his appreciation of beauty.

Feeling Minhyun’s gaze on him, Seongwu stared back. He loved Minhyun’s face just as much as Minhyun loved his. Whenever there was a mock contest among peers at school for who was the most handsome, Seongwu always sincerely chose Minhyun, even when Minhyun was not among the contestants. The only answer that could ever come out of Seongwu’s mouth was Hwang Minhyun. Seongwu’s truthful admiration of Minhyun came through not words, but the way he looked at him. Minhyun loved looking into Seongwu’s eyes when he had that look. Every time, Minhyun was just as awestruck as he was the first time he saw that look on Seongwu. He could never get sick of it, ever.

Two young lovers stared at the reflections of themselves in each other’s eyes. They could see each other, clearly, at arm’s length. They knew the other would not disappear if they blinked, but they could not look away, afraid the other would evaporate like a mirage. New emotions sprung up in their eyes as their love deepened, and every moment they regarded each other became an eternity.

Suddenly they heard splash of water, and they turned their heads to the source of the sound in tandem. It seemed that something had fallen into a pot of water in the corner of the bathroom. The sound successfully distracted them from endlessly looking each other. This was a good thing. If they stayed in the bathroom a moment longer others in the house would think they had drowned in the bathtub. Moreover, they could not be found out being in the bathtub together.

Minhyun took into his hand a wooden bowl that was floating in the water to splash water on himself.
and finish bathing. Seongwu watched him pour water onto himself, and saw traces of red on the white skin. Minhyun’s shoulders and arms were full of small scratches that Seongwu’s fingertips had left. Seongwu stared at them, guilty. Minhyun quickly picked up on it. In fact, Minhyun was not hurting at all, but he started to play pretend.

“Ah, it stings.”

“......”

“It hurts, very much. Can you see? Count the red scratches. One, two, three…”

“All right. It was my bad. I’m sorry.”

Seongwu heard his whining and apologized. There was a mischievous glimmer in Minhyun’s eyes. Seongwu recognized it as the one Minhyun sported when he is thinking of ways to pull a prank. Seongwu decided to evade what was about to be flung his way, whatever it might be.

“I take it back. I am not sorry at all.”

Smiling still, Minhyun quietly waded his way to Seongwu. Seongwu tried to run away, but he had no room to retreat inside the tiny wooden bathtub. Just before Minhyun caught him, Seongwu quickly turned away, his back to Minhyun.

“I’m hurting too, you know. Look.”

Supporting himself on the edge of the tub on his arms, Seongwu raised his body above the water. His round bottom slowly emerged above the surface. Taken by surprise, Minhyun froze in his tracks. Unaware of how Minhyun was looking at him, Seongwu continued, placing his hand where he hurt.

“Here, it’s still swollen…”

“What pity.”

Minhyun overlapped his hand under Seongwu’s. A hand wrapped around a soft, plump buttock and a thumb traced over the swollen hole. Seongwu trembled at the touch, like a surprised rabbit. With a splash, he hid himself underwater. Seongwu willed his bouncing heart to calm.

“Hey… We have to finish bathing… That’s why we came here.”

“Yes, it is.”

Minhyun removed his hand as if he had meant nothing, and stepped out of the bathtub after one final splash of water on his shoulder. Seongwu watched him efficiently and quickly dry himself with a towel, embarrassed. Seongwu did try to stop Minhyun from touching him any further, but at that single fleeting moment Minhyun’s hand was on him, he had imagined doing all kinds of things with Minhyun in the bath. Seeing that Minhyun had his usual blank look upon his face, it seemed that Seongwu was the only one who thought of those things. Seongwu removed himself from the bathtub in a haste and dressed himself, to hide from Minhyun that his heart was pounding.

They left the bathroom with each of their baskets in their hands. Extending his coquetry, Seongwu bemoaned something about an ache in his back, deliberately walking slowly. Easily figuring out what Seongwu wanted, Minhyun handed his own bath basket to Seongwu. Seongwu smiled, expecting Minhyun to piggyback him. Contrary to Seongwu’s anticipations, Minhyun picked him up using both arms in a fireman’s carry. Seongwu’s body lost its sense of balance as he was picked up, and with the foreign feeling of being mid-air Seongwu grasped onto Minhyun’s shoulder. Minhyun
smiled, loving how Seongwu was holding onto him for dear life.

Minhyun walked slowly, back up to their room. Having grown used to being held up in matter of seconds, Seongwu dangled his feet. It was evident to Minhyun that Seongwu was enjoying himself, but he softly complained.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“Weren’t you expecting this?”

“No, but… Actually, I think like this better… Or not…”

Seongwu tilted his head, uttering vague words, blowing hot breaths into Minhyun’s ear deliberately to arouse him. Knowing exactly what Seongwu wanted to do, Minhyun chuckled, and laid Seongwu down onto the spread bedding in the middle of the room. In the mess of rumpled blankets, Seongwu was sat, still moist from his bath.

“You have a real talent for teasing.”

“Do I? I never thought that before.”

As a pair of thin lips uttered words of provocation, a pair of fuller lips gracefully settled on them. Minhyun slowly tongued Seongwu’s lips, feeling his loins grow heavier at the sensation of silken softness. Minhyun said, separating his lips from Seongwu’s for a moment.

“...I find it nearly impossible to hold myself back any longer. I assume you know how this feels, being a man?”

“Hmm? No, I have no idea how that feels.”

As if telling Seongwu that was not what he wanted to hear, Minhyun moved from Seongwu’s lips to his chin, letting his lips flow over the sharp jawline. He stopped on Seongwu’s chubby cheeks, where three stars were planted like a triangular constellation. Minhyun kissed each one of those moles, and sighed…

“Then I’ll let you know how it feels.”

Seongwu let out a long, breathy moan, his lips stretched in a delicate smile. On his back, Seongwu reached his arm above his head, his fingers touching the half-open sliding door. Seongwu slid it shut, and the room became once again a secret place just for the two of them.

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As they spent most of their free time joined at the hips, they began to go out much less often than before. Besides going to school, Minhyun and Seongwu rarely went out, even to Jongno, which they
used to frequent. In December, they only went out once, to buy an issue of a monthly Korean literary magazine. Their hosts grew inquisitive about their lack of going out to town, and one day Madame asked them overtly about why.

“Minhyun, Seongwu, you never go out these days. Is your schoolwork really that taxing?”

“Haha… Yes, it is.”

All they could was smile bashfully. At times like these they did not know what to say, and they ended up answering with something desperately vague. Their hosts were good people, but they were directly connected to their parents and they could not afford to speak to them truthfully about what went on in their room. They evaded further questions by retreating upstairs, using their heavy school workload as an excuse.

Truly, their exams were the biggest hurdle they had to face. Unfortunately their grades for the second semester of fourth year were essentially important, just as much as their final year grades. They had to perform as well as they had been over the years, and they were aware of it. They were in so much pain, having to stare at their books endlessly while they were inches from their beloved. Seongwu pinched his own thighs countless of times. He missed being able to touch Minhyun whenever he wanted. He wanted to take Minhyun into his arms at all times, but he could not.

Somehow, Minhyun did not at all waver. He, too, stared at Seongwu, longing for him, but once he sat down at his desk and started studying, he focused intensely on his work, not even once looking back at Seongwu. Minhyun did not refuse Seongwu when the latter’s resolve melted down and he initiated a kiss. However, Minhyun knew how to end the kiss at just the right moment to go back to his books. Seongwu cried inside when Minhyun turned away from him after a wet kiss and cleanly looked down into his notebook. How did he have so much self-control? Seongwu could neither compliment nor rebuke him for that. Seongwu miraculously succeeded, in the midst of all this, to maintain his rank. After a week of such painful restraint, the seemingly never-ending final exam period was over.

Winter break that came like a blessing after harshness of exam period was pure bliss to them. They no longer had anything to distract them, and they spent every moment for themselves, loving each other without restraint. They were happy just lying down side by side and breathing, locking eyes. Every minute, every second was euphoric. Seongwu prayed that these moments be stretched into eternity, during both Christmas and the New Years day. His hands, clasped together, squeezed one another in desperate wishfulness. If this wish could come true, Seongwu did not want anything else.

However, reality set in like lightning, breaking into their dreamy days together in which they felt like walking on clouds hand in hand. In the Chinese New Year, Seongwu had to return to Pyongyang, as he had not gone in the past summer. Seongwu did not want to go, but he could not say a word of refusal to his uncle, who visited him with the train tickets. Seongwu’s uncle looked resolute, and told Seongwu that he would not let him get off the hook again. Seongwu reluctantly took his train ticket, and it was decided that he was going to Pyongyang for the winter break.

Seongwu’s departure became an ardent parting for them. Their room was full of young lovers’ lamentable unwillingness to separate, even for one second. They were still young, however, and they were still afraid of their parents’ scolding that would befall them if they misbehaved themselves. Seongwu knew how his parents would scold him, but he was still shaken form time to time by childish impulses to do as he liked. Each time, it was Minhyun’s job to calm him down.

“You’ll come back soon, won’t you? We’re not saying goodbye forever. Don’t worry and enjoy your trip home.”
Minhyun told him, in that low, soft voice Seongwu liked, soothing Seongwu’s gloom. Minhyun even helped Seongwu pack. Seongwu could not refuse to go to Pyongyang, now that even Minhyun was in support of it. Seongwu put on his coat, scarf, and gloves, and reminded himself of Minhyun’s calming words.

White snow began to pile on the streets outside. Minhyun and Seongwu said their goodbyes in front of the clock tower in Gyeongseong Station. Seongwu kept looking back, and only disappeared into the station when his uncle belatedly urged him to hurry. Seongwu’s uncle realized that it was more difficult now to tote Seongwu around with him, how much his nephew had grown over the years. Seongwu was now full of secrets. He could still force Seongwu with him as he was still a minor, but he could not do so anymore once he became an adult. Seongwu’s uncle was suddenly filled with curiosity; what made Seongwu so reluctant to go back home? Instinctively, he guessed Seongwu had someone he liked. Under premise of a joke, he asked Seongwu a suggestive question.

“Hey, do you have a hidden pot of honey in Gyeongseong or what? You seem like you don’t want to leave. See? Even now, you’re almost walking backwards.”

“That’s not it, uncle."

“What is it, then? Hmm?”

“It’s a secret.”

Seongwu turned on his heels to face away, as if he was sulking. Really, Seongwu did not want to let his uncle see that he was flustered. Indeed, he had something much more than a pot of honey in Gyeongseong, but he could not admit it to his uncle, who was teasing him for meeting his late puberty at age nineteen. Just eight years younger than himself, Seongwu was fun to tease. The uncle continued to poke fun at his nephew, and the nephew sulked; they boarded the train together.

Seongwu watched Gyeongseong grow farther from him, and smaller, and imagined his beloved, walking away from him somewhere in the city.

Pyongyang, which Seongwu was visiting for the first time in a year, felt different. The manner in which his family greeted him, from Pyongyang station to home, was different. Now Seongwu was over eighteen years old, and was now in the graduating class of Gyeongseong Secondary School. Seongwu’s entry into the school was a cause for celebration in the entire family, and his graduation was an event just as anticipated. Each of Seongwu’s family members had expectations of what path Seongwu would choose, and what kind of future he would pioneer himself. It was only natural. Seongwu was the eldest male child in the Ong family, and he had a duty to uphold and protect his family while standing against these difficult times of oppression. So Seongwu had to wake up from his sweet dream of love and think about what concrete things he had to do after graduation.

However, the more Seongwu thought, the more his worries deepened. Surely, Seongwu had a more concrete dream than any of his classmates, and knew exactly what he loved to do. It was just that his dream seemed almost impossible to make come true. Seongwu sometimes wished he was born a selfish person who did not care what others wanted and needed from him. If he had been, he would have gone to Yonhee College and studied literature. Seongwu was not selfish enough to do so. Seongwu always thought of others before himself, and he could not shake off thoughts of his family. The world they lived in was turning crueler and more difficult to live in every day, and he could not let himself insist upon becoming a writer and eat into his family’s fortunes.

Seongwu had told Minhyun hundreds of times about his dream, but now his big talks about winning literary contests felt so distant and impossible. His dreams, once so clear as if within his grasp, dissipated every day like a mirage. Seongwu had a lot to protect, and he had to give it up to fulfill his duties. Seongwu had himself, Minhyun, and his family, and he could not give up on any of them.
Therefore, Seongwu had to let his dream go.

As if commiserating with Seongwu, cold winds blew heartlessly outside. Seongwu was lying next to his siblings on the hot ondol, listening to their quiet sleeping breaths. These sounds were not something he could hear when he was alone with Minhyun. His heart became disheveled, confused. He found his mind thrashing about, like a rowboat among violent waves. He missed Minhyun. He was in so much pain missing him with just two weeks of being separated; he vowed to demand that Minhyun take responsibility for him for the rest of his life when he went back to Gyeongseong. Minhyun would never refuse him. Seongwu could not wait to see if Minhyun would smile or grimace in jest when he promised Seongwu the rest of his life. Nights of missing Minhyun repeated themselves.

Meanwhile, talks of reality went on in Gyeongseong as well. Minhyun mostly talked to Kyuwon about his future. While Seongwu was gone, Kyuwon often called Minhyun to his room with a bottle of soju and two glasses. Kyuwon said he was going to teach Minhyun, who had never had alcohol before, how to drink. Every time they drank together, though, it was Kyuwon who became drunk faster. They were about equally as weak digesting liquor.

There was still a benefit that liquor brought them; that they could easily say things to each other they could not while sober. They spoke frequently of graduation and what they would do after. As Minhyun had not yet decided what he wanted to do, he usually listened more than he talked, and Kyuwon led the conversations with examples and stories he heard. Stories Minhyun heard from Kyuwon gave him plenty of food for thought, but what affected him the most was the story of Kyuwon himself.

Kyuwon was set to graduate in February, and he was going to attend Pyongyang Medical Professional School in March. Originally, Kyuwon intended to become an architect, but thinking that he could be more useful to the independence of his country by learning medical knowledge and skills, he changed his major last minute. His parents had also disapproved of his initial plans to become an architect. Fortunately, Kyuwon had already been accepted into Pyongyang Medical, and he was lucky to have no worries about his path upon graduation. Kyuwon laughed about his luck, but Minhyun could not even fathom how much anguish and months of thoughts were behind his smile.

Minhyun still envied Kyuwon. He did not get to follow his dream of becoming an architect, but he soon found another goal for himself and even figured out a cause to pursue it. Minhyun wondered if he would be able to make such cutting decision if he was given the choice. Minhyun realized he wanted to be free from the pressure his parents were putting on him, rather than be free to choose whatever he wanted. As he entered his fifth year, his parents’ demands were gradually becoming more explicit. They had wanted him to be a valedictorian; then they wanted him to study abroad at Tokyo, and then they wanted him to major in law or economics. Expectations deluged him without end. Minhyun did not believe these were his parents’ expectations. Rather, they were investments. His family had a tacit rule of raising children that would benefit the family, and cutting out those who could not pull their weight. If Minhyun ignored his parents’ wishes and acted on his own wishes, he was sure to be excommunicated. However, Minhyun was not happy with the path his parents suggested.

Kyuwon quietly asked Minhyun, who was deep in thought, his eyes downcast.

“So, where do you think you’ll go once you graduate?”

“I will stay in Joseon.”

“You won’t go to Tokyo? With your track record, you’ll surely be admitted into university. I know
you’re not staying here for your family, so be honest with me. Why?”

“If I go to Japan…”

There were many reasons Minhyun did not want to go to Japan. First, he was born a man of Joseon, and he was instinctively loath of the very idea of Japan. Second, he knew he had more to lose than to gain by going to study abroad in Tokyo. Japanese government did not explicitly ban Koreans from studying abroad in Japan, but created a system that put Korean students at a disadvantage. The school curriculum being offered in Joseon were full two years behind those in Japan, and so the Japanese did not recognize Korean students’ secondary school diplomas. If a student who finished secondary school in Joseon wanted to attend university in Japan, they had to transfer into a Japanese secondary school and spend two more years there. The Japanese evaluated Korean resumes strictly and ruthlessly, and only chose those who fit into their standards of loyalty to Imperial Japan to be allowed entry into universities. To Minhyun, this entire process seemed a colossal waste of money and time. He did not want to give up so much just to be able to be a university student in Japan.

More than anything, he did not want to part from Seongwu. The world that surrounded Minhyun was full of nothing but uncertainty, and the only one Minhyun was certain of was Ong Seongwu. Minhyun did not wish to sacrifice Seongwu for his own pursuit of having a place in the world. Such path was a shortcut to unhappiness for both of them.

“Seongwu will be left alone in Joseon. I can’t leave him behind.”

“Well, I knew it. I guess you’re really true to him.”

“Of course I am.”

“How confident you are, in front of someone who’s never even had a chance to date. You kids are annoying.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, hyung.”

Minhyun responded, his smile sly, and Kyuwon shook his head in exasperation. Minhyun poured the remaining liquor into Kyuwon’s glass. I can’t seem to hate you two. Kyuwon said, quietly, and emptied his glass. Hahaha- Minhyun’s clear laughter rang in the tiny room. Two young men continued their discussions of the future into the night.

Some photos of what used to be Gyeongseong Station (Now Seoul Station) taken by Id:
Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 23

* Yonhee College - Now Yonsei University. Established as early as 1885.
Neither a Spring Day Nor a Spring Breeze

Chapter Summary

Seongwu misses Minhyun in Pyongyang. After he returns to Gyeongseong, they have to say goodbye to an old friend. Minhyun takes Seongwu flower-viewing, and they discuss the weight of their love.

Chapter Notes

For original Chapter 24 in Korean follow this link:

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 24

Late winter felt like a frozen lake, and time seemed to be trapped within it. Seongwu looked at the clock, doubting whether it was ticking at all. The clock merely ticked away in response, its hands moving relentlessly. Days went by slowly, and Seongwu often thought about putting his finger into his clock and turning its hands so time would go faster. Thoughts like these did not soothe his loneliness, however, and all he could do for the moment was wait. He wondered if this was what it meant to become an adult; getting used to dark silences of the night, appeasing himself in loneliness, and bottling all of this without complaining out loud.

The night was long. Seongwu flopped down onto his blanket and closed his eyes. Best he could do now was to imagine Minhyun’s handsome face and his loving way of speaking, images of which he had stashed away precious in the back of his mind.

Although it felt like a turtle’s leisurely stroll, time went by consistently until two weeks passed. Seongwu was due to go back to Gyeongseong, finally. He started packing days ago, making sure his gifts for Minhyun were in the luggage, and headed for Pyongyang station early in the morning the day he was to leave. Seongwu’s uncle looked at him with suspicion. He wondered how his nephew came to fall in love with Gyeongseong. Was it just a part of getting older? While his uncle was deep in thought, Seongwu said his goodbyes to his family and went to his platform. He seemed excited as he showed a station attendant his ticket and walked to his train. Seongwu’s uncle watched him until he disappeared from sight, and was reminded of the time he accompanied Seongwu to Gyeongseong years ago. Back then, Seongwu had clutched onto his uncle’s sleeves, saying he could not do
without him. He was proud of Seongwu and how he no longer needed any help in getting around, but at the same time he could not help but feel a sense of loss. He guessed that this was because he rarely got to see Seongwu anymore, and vowed to see him more frequently.

Seongwu passed the crowded gates and stepped onto the platform. He sat on an empty wooden bench and watched clouds of white smoke approach from the distant mountains. Train to Gyeongseong approached fast, as if to answer Seongwu’s wish to see Minhyun, and soon landed on his platform, its loudness ringing in his ears and its heft shaking the ground. Seongwu got up from his seat and felt the sensations his train offered, which he never seemed to get used to. He was finally going to Gyeongseong.

Amidst the crowd that mounted and exited the train, Seongwu moved fast, and got on his car. He sat down in his seat and breathed, looking out his window to see a panorama of Pyongyang station. Somewhere in there his siblings were missing him already, and his parents and grandmother were praying for his safe return to Gyeongseong. Seongwu silently bid them goodbye once more, knowing he would not return during the summer. It was a secret, his and only his, that the reason for his summer absence was Hwang Minhyun.

Train to Gyeongseong ran on its tracks, over mountains and rivers. Upon arriving at Gyeongseong station four hours later, people rushed to get off the train; Seongwu was one of them. He took care not to be swept away with the crowd as he found the clock tower, a designated meeting place for him and Minhyun for years. He could easily spot Minhyun from a distance away. It would be difficult to find even five men who were as tall, young, and dressed in a long black European coat. Minhyun seemed oblivious to the fact that Seongwu was there, as he was blankly staring at the space in front of him. Seongwu’s penchant for pranks was triggered, and he smiled gleefully, like a young child, as he ran into Minhyun’s back full force.

“Hwang Minhyun!”

“Ah!”

Seongwu accosted Minhyun, looping his arms around his waist from behind. Minhyun was taken by surprise, and he yelped out as he noticed him. Seongwu laughed at him, enjoying his reaction. Minhyun turned around, clutching his chest, and saw Seongwu, with a wide grin on his face. Minhyun had waited for Seongwu at the station for over an hour, and Seongwu was brazen in pranking him. He took Seongwu into his arms and squeezed hard. I can’t breathe! Seongwu protested into his chest, but Minhyun did not let go. Of course, Minhyun planned to give it all back to Seongwu once they returned home.

Hand in hand, they walked back to their boarding house. Navigating the alleys of Bukchon, Seongwu babbled about the things he saw on the train, and Minhyun listened to him, nodding along or chipping in intermittently. When they were alone in their room at last, they began to quench their thirst for love that had plagued them for the time Seongwu was gone to Pyongyang. Minhyun saw that Seongwu’s large eyes were being filled with his reflection. Minhyun wanted to stay in there and never leave. All their senses belonged to each other.

At the end of winter break, Kyuwon graduated from Gyeongseong Secondary School. Minhyun and Seongwu bought a bouquet of flowers and went to school for the ceremony. The atmosphere at the event was ambivalent, bittersweet goodbyes and anticipation for new starts churned together. Kyuwon looked especially excited, surrounded by his family members who had come up to Gyeongseong from the countryside. He greeted Minhyun and Seongwu with a brilliant smile upon his face. A tiny bouquet of flowers looked odd on Kyuwon, who already looked like a fully grown adult; he ordinarily would have gently chastised Minhyun and Seongwu for going through the
trouble of bringing him flowers, but today he just smiled. Minhyun and Seongwu wholeheartedly congratulated him, and they were made happy just by looking at him. Seongwu promised to meet Kyuwon in Pyongyang later, and Kyuwon answered he would be happy to see them wherever they were. Lastly, he promised to write to them, and had them promise to write back.

With this, Minhyun and Seongwu said their goodbyes to Kyuwon. It was the first time Kyuwon’s family were in Gyeongseong, and he planned to take them to new places in the city for the remaining time he had. Kyuwon’s time at Gyeongseong Secondary School ended thus.

After they returned from the graduation ceremony, Minhyun and Seongwu felt not only fatigue but also a sense of emptiness. Kyuwon was now gone, and all he left to them were textbooks he used in his last year at school and his handwritten notes, which would be a great help to them in the upcoming school year.

As if to fill the space Kyuwon left behind, a pair of swallows flew into the old nest right underneath Seongwu’s window. They steadfastly fixed the old nest, damaged by time, wind and rain. The nest, once falling apart, became a comfortable home to the birds again, and soon they started to sit and brood in it. Seongwu knew they had eggs, and was happy. He was decidedly calmer than he had been years ago when he first saw swallows have eggs, but Minhyun noticed the brief look of happiness that graced Seongwu’s face. Minhyun made Seongwu happier when he suggested they might be baby swallows that grew up in that very nest years ago. They had no way of knowing, but Minhyun’s kind words tickled Seongwu’s heart like a soft feather.

As their love persisted, so did reality. Soon it was spring, but warm and fluffy landscapes unique to spring did not appear as a persistent cold loomed over Gyeongseong. Everyone kept their scarves and thick woolen shoes on late into springtime, and in the streets people tread carefully as to not slip on patches of ice. Apparently the winter was jealous of a glorious spring that would replace it. Icy winds kept swiping at their lips, trying to steal warmth from them. The lovers persevered all the more, holding each other tight.

Even with the winter cold raging full force, school opened without delay. On the first day of March, they became fifth years, in the graduating class. Their day to day life was not very different from last year’s. One difference in their curriculum was that now they had to take law and economics classes. Since there were not enough teachers to take fifth year classes, they were still under Mr. Kimura’s guidance. He seemed much more mellow than he was in the previous years, but as strict as ever when it came to academics. He dived into their textbooks starting from the first day of school, and students had to commit their full focus on learning.

Classes went on late into the afternoon, and finally the bell rang. Instead of returning to the boarding house, Minhyun and Seongwu took a stroll inside school grounds. Without people, the school was quietly bathed in crisp early spring air as it welcomed them. Minhyun and Seongwu walked through the school, reminiscing about the things they did in each nook and cranny. They ended up in the cloister between two buildings, in which Minhyun hid that day when his friends showed him lewd pinups. As soon as he saw the familiar wooden bench, Seongwu burst into laughter, and Minhyun’s ear immediately turned red. They sat side by side as they did years ago.

“Stop laughing. It was so long ago.”

“Then why are you embarrassed?”

“Because you laugh.”

“What about it?”
“It feels like you’re making fun of my younger, more immature self.”

“Make fun? No way. I’m just adoring you.”

Seongwu said, slyly, and took Minhyun’s hand into his own. With their fingers intertwined like vines, they sat and watched the shadows inch over the school grounds. They were already regretting every moment that passed by, knowing that they would not be there next spring. Spring came too slow, and was too fleeting to enjoy properly. They wished they could stop time, just for a moment, when it was the most beautiful.

“I hate that this view, too, will turn into a mere faded memory someday.”

“Same with me.”

“You know, cameras are being imported from the west. I wonder what this view would look like if we take a photograph of it.”

“Yes. I wish we have a camera.”

Minhyun looked around. Photography sounded like a brilliant idea. At the time, having photographs taken was a trend in Gyeongseong, and professional photography studios were opening downtown. Minhyun wished to take a photograph with Seongwu someday. If he could have only one photograph in all his life, he wanted it to be of Seongwu at the height of his beauty. If they could be in it together, all the better. Minhyun looked at Seongwu.

“Why don’t we take a photograph together when we graduate next year? There is a studio called Chunyeondang in Seokjung.”

“Chunyeondang… That’s very nice, but wouldn’t it be expensive?”

“It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity to have our likeness on paper, so we might as well invest in it.”

“All right. Then I’ll have to start saving for it.”

Seongwu had seen an advertisement for the studio on the newspaper a few days ago. He remembered the price for having a portrait taken. It was by no means cheap, but he liked the idea of being photographed with Minhyun. Seongwu’s heart already began to swell at the idea. He thought about the photographs he had seen in the city. Would one of them stand, while the other sit? Would they have a traditional folding screen or a european painting behind them? What if they look strange and stiff in the photograph? Would the photographer give them another shot? Pleasant thoughts continued between them, and they talked about their future photograph together late into the night.

The overlong winter disappeared without a trace in April. Air around them became warmer, and they could stand outside without crouching to retain heat. Frozen ground thawed, and all creatures living on it started to radiate energy. All kinds of trees bloomed as if in competition. Even on the puny branches of a small cherry blossom tree Minhyun and Seongwu planted in the fall of last year were tiny, pink buds.

Sadly, Minhyun and Seongwu had to let spring slip through their fingers. After midterms were over, most magnolias and cherry blossoms had fallen. Seongwu was visibly upset that he missed glorious sightseeing opportunities. I really wanted to go flower-viewing this year… Minhyun heard him sigh.

“You never mentioned you wanted to go view flowers.”

“This might be the last time we’ll see Gyeongseong in spring.”
Minhyun refrained from answering this. There was so much information condensed into Seongwu’s words, and Minhyun only knew small parts of it. Their future as a graduating class was only uncertain. They moved to Gyeongseong with pure dreams within their hearts, but they had no idea if they would be able to live them in the city after they left school. Seongwu quietly continued.

“It’s a privilege to be able to live in Gyeongseong. I can’t imagine how I’ll regret it if I missed out on spring in the city.”

“I see.”

Minhyun suddenly felt stuffy. Seongwu was not wishing for something grand; he only wanted to see beautiful flowers and landscape. Yet there was nothing Minhyun could do to grant his wish. Minhyun wished he could show Seongwu every beautiful view in the world, but he could not even show him flowers in the city they lived in. Minhyun dived deep into thought. He had to come up with some way to quench Seongwu’s thirst for sightseeing. He looked out the window in fruitless search for an answer. Would there be a neighborhood in Gyeongseong that still had flowers in full bloom? Then, something caught his eye.

“A chicken instead of a pheasant.”

“Hmm?”

Seongwu looked up at him. Minhyun seemed to have a solution in mind. Seongwu felt his heart beat faster out of anticipation. Minhyun smiled, awkwardly, and told him to wait.

What Seongwu got was below his meager expectations.

“Meh…”

“What can we do? We can’t go out far, so let’s just enjoy what we have.”

“Yes, but…”

Seongwu looked around him. Across the street was their boarding house, and behind them was a young cherry blossom tree they planted last fall. The tree was so small and feeble that it could not even provide Seongwu and Minhyun with a shade. They placed a small mat under the tree, and sat down with a lunch Madame packed them especially for this outing. No matter how much Seongwu looked around for something new, everything around him was so familiar. He sighed; what he was craving for was a new stimulation at a new place. He was thankful for what they could enjoy, but he could not shake the feeling that something was lacking. Minhyun saw that Seongwu was disappointed, and he became restless. He chose this tree in spite of its size because it still had blooming flowers on its branches, but his best strategy was not working. He carefully apologized.

“I’m sorry this is the best I can do. But after graduation, we’ll go anywhere. We can go to Baekdu Mountain, Hanla Mountain… wherever you want to go. We can see not only cherry blossoms, but also maple leaves in fall and snow in winter. Hmm?”

“Don’t you forget that promise.”

“You know I won’t forget. Don’t you worry. Now, shall we open our lunch boxes? I wonder what Madame packed for us today.”

Minhyun coaxed, opening the lid to his lunch box. They did not expect anything extraordinary, as they were only going across the street, but inside the boxes were rice balls and boiled eggs, frequent menus of picnic lunches. They at least had a proper lunch, despite sitting right in front of their
boarding house. Minhyun picked up a warm boiled egg. It was still moist, fresh out of the pot.

“Shall we start with this?”

“Okay.”

Minhyun tried to crack the egg against his lunch box, only to be stopped by Seongwu. Seongwu looked at him, with a sly grin on his face. Minhyun knew what he was going to suggest.

“Hyun-ah, wouldn’t it be boring if we ate it just like that?”

“...Sure.”

“Rocks, papers, scissors. Loser peels eggshells for winner!”

Minhyun felt once again that years spent with Seongwu was not for naught. He nodded, and played along. Seongwu won, and he squealed, throwing his arms into the air. Without a response, Minhyun just began to peel the boiled eggs. Actually, Minhyun could not care less if he won or lost, but just thankful he could peel eggs for Seongwu. Soon, he handed a white, taut eggs to Seongwu.

“Thanks!”

Seongwu took the egg from Minhyun, and began to make small bites on it, like a rabbit would. Minhyun also started to eat his egg. They were soon done with both their eggs and their rice balls. Made with glutinous rice and beans, the rice balls were sweet even without any condiments. After they emptied their lunch boxes, Minhyun and Seongwu turned their attention to the flowers above their heads. Seongwu examined a thin branch with barely a dozen flowers; he did not touch it, afraid it would break.

“This tree is so young, yet it’s doing its part blooming flowers.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I like this, but I’m still yearning for a tree overflowing with splendid blossoms.”

“...If you wanted abundance of flowers, how about those?”

“You mean the angel’s trumpets on our walls?”

Unlike the tiny cherry blossoms, angel’s trumpet creepers were in full bloom on the walls around their boarding house. Swirls of mysterious orange and yellow were facing the sky in full bloom, as if showing off their beauty. Minhyun picked one of the freshest flowers and put it behind Seongwu’s ear. The elegant flower and Seongwu’s face were quite a match. Minhyun remembered that in the old days of Joseon, angel’s trumpets were flowers given to royally appointed officers; Seongwu looked like a winner in a royal examination.

“How pretty. These flowers suit you better than the momentary beauty of cherry blossoms. These flowers will defeat even the sky, and are symbols of glory and honor. Fit for you.”

“Hmm, you’re only saying good things about those flowers. Some legends say that these flowers were born out of a woman’s rage.”

“A woman’s rage?”

“Yes. A concubine deserted by the king died, and these flowers came into existence. When I was young, I was told not to touch trumpet flowers recklessly because they have poison that makes you
blind. Of course, this wasn’t true.”

“Well, if the legend is true, it makes sense why some might think they are poisonous.”

“Wouldn’t you be scared of them? If beautiful flowers were actually poisonous, I mean.”

“I think poison suits them well. A truly lovesick person is blind in love.”

“That’s just a metaphor for love.”

“No, it is not. It’s only true.”

Seongwu was surprised by Minhyun’s unexpected answer. At times, Minhyun spoke words behind which were intentions Seongwu could not fathom. Minhyun quietly elaborated on what he meant.

“Like my love for you. I’m so deep in love that I can’t see anything else.”

Minhyun’s eyes softly folded into crescents. At this moment, no one could deny he was a man in love. Seongwu glanced at the boarding house to check no one was watching, and then moved quickly to kiss Minhyun on the lips.

“Of course you shouldn’t see anything else when you’re loving me!”

“That’s right.”

They giggled, and Seongwu reached out to take his sweet-talking lover into his arms. His fingertips touched a firm body. Minhyun lightly kissed the crown of Seongwu’s head. Silky, black hair threaded through his fingers as he caressed it.

“An old poem said: scarlet flowers do not last ten days, and a love does not last a hundred (花無十日紅 人不百日好). My love is different.”

Seongwu looked up at Minhyun. Minhyun was quoting an old Chinese poem. Having been educated at seodang in his childhood, Seongwu realized what poem Minhyun was referring to. The poem was a famous one, written by the poet Yang Man Li (楊萬里) during the Song Dynasty some nine hundred years ago. Because of its fame the poem was quoted often, but Minhyun was missing something.

“You know one thing about the poem, but you’re missing another.”

“What do you mean?”

“The lines ‘love does not last a hundred’ and ‘rule of power does not last ten years (勢不十年長)’ were added on by people of later generations. Yang Man Li’s original poem means something entirely different.”

Seongwu figured he would get his point across better if he wrote the poem down. He took from his pocket a small notebook and stubby pencil, and began to write down text of the poem he had memorized.

只道花無十日紅
此花無日無春風

It is said a flower’s bloom does not last ten days
This flower, however, needs neither a spring day nor a spring breeze to bloom

Instead of putting a period at the end of the poem, Seongwu looked into Minhyun’s dark eyes. Their gazes collided mid-air. Minhyun’s eyes, full of curiosity just a moment ago, were now overflowing with affection. Seongwu put his pencil down and stroked Minhyun’s hair, happy that he understood what Seongwu was telling him.

“How about that? Isn’t that what you really meant?”

Seongwu’s hand traced the side of Minhyun’s face, slowly caressing his handsome profile. Seongwu felt Minhyun’s warm, soft skin under his palm and reveled in the sensation.

“You’re right. That’s what I really wanted to say.”

Minhyun’s hand overlapped on Seongwu’s, and he turned his face to kiss his lover’s hand.

“I wanted to say that our flower is not one to wither after just ten days.”
Chapter Summary

Seongwu and Minhyun discuss popular hit songs about doomed love and death, and how they might apply to themselves. Minhyun tells Seongwu a shocking secret about having been engaged in an arranged marriage. Seongwu falls sick, and Minhyun carries Seongwu to the hospital; afterwards, they talk about the glory of springtime and their future together.

Chapter Notes

Long time no see :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生伴侶)

Chapter 25

As the temperature rose, tiny flowers on branches of trees around the boarding house fell to the ground in unison. Summer was coming. The sun was getting ready to heat the earth, and Minhyun and Seongwu’s clothes became lighter. As the mercury inside their thermometer skyrocketed, a messenger from Minhyun’s family started to visit more often. At first the messengers would only leave letters from Minhyun’s parents. As time went by, they started to ask Minhyun to talk with them and spent an hour or two discussing something unknown to Seongwu.

Seongwu waited alone downstairs for their discussion to be over, fidgeting nervously. Whenever a visitor from his family dropped by, Minhyun looked downcast and dispirited. Seongwu surmised that what Minhyun’s family wanted did not agree with what Minhyun wished for himself. Seongwu prayed that Minhyun would become happier, whichever path he chose. A draft of fresh wind that pushed in from the window took Seongwu’s prayer high up into the sky.

“Extra, extra!”

Tufts of paper, as many as clusters of stars in the night sky, were scattered into the air. Blackened with densely printed words, papers fell onto the streets of Bukchon. Seongwu stopped in his tracks and picked one up; Minhyun followed suit. Seongwu read aloud the biggest headline on the paper.

“Double suicide by a young intellectual couple!”
“Again?”

Minhyun said, apparently fed up with the news. True, the headline was unpleasant. There were many who were sick of seeing articles about double suicide of lovers who killed themselves lamenting their forbidden love. Despite this general ennui, people loved to gossip, and double suicide articles kept making headlines. Seongwu pushed the crumpled paper into his pocket, and resumed walking.

“I feel like I see one of these articles every week.”

“I suppose even death has become a trend now.”

Minhyun scoffed. To Minhyun, a realist with no room for ‘if’ in his life, throwing his life away for love was nothing more than a pathetic form of escapism. On the other hand, Seongwu felt a little more compassion for tragic lovers. He felt bad for them, despite not knowing them at all.

“They must have suffered a lot. I read everyone around them opposed their relationship.”

“Did the man already have a wife and children?”

“Hmm. Probably?”

“Then no wonder people disapproved of them. Looking elsewhere when one has a wife and child deserves no defense.”

Seongwu countered Minhyun’s stern tone.

“Arranged marriages are no less illogical. How is it that people have to spend their lives with someone their family unilaterally chose for them? What’s more, those marriages are arranged when they are very young. What would children know of love and marriage? I think arranged marriages are more unfair.”

“Regardless, one has to take responsibility for the relationship once married. That is a duty given to a civilized human being.”

“Wow, you sound like a Confucian scripture.”

“Do I? I think I am very open-minded.”

Minhyun said as he opened the blue metal door of their boarding house. Following Minhyun inside, Seongwu kept on talking, a word for every step leading upstairs.

“Open-minded? I used to learn Chinese characters from a very traditional teacher in seodang as a child, and he was more liberal than you are.”

“Am I that bad?”

“Yes. How did someone so young become so stiff?”

Seongwu clicked his tongue exaggeratedly. Minhyun chuckled as he pushed the door shut. He placed his bag on the floor and jovially apologized to Seongwu.

“I am so sorry I am such an incorrigible conservative.”

“You ought to see, hear, and learn a lot of new things if you want to live with a free modern-boy like me.”
“Certainly, your majesty.”

To cool themselves off from sweltering heat outside, they sat side by side, their backs leaning on their folded blankets in one corner of their room. Their conversation kept flowing, as Seongwu was delving deeply into thoughts on the topic of arranged marriages.

“I wonder why arranged marriages still exist. Times have changed.”

“Your family traditions are modern. There still are many families who arrange marriages for their children.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You're probably the only firstborn son who have not been arranged to marry. Even I,”

“...Huh?”

Seongwu felt an ominous foreboding in Minhyun’s words.

“...have been arranged to marry someone, despite being a third son.”

“What?”

Seongwu reflexively pushed Minhyun away from him, with enough force to make Minhyun’s large body lean toward the floor. Surprised, Minhyun’s eyes shot open wide, but all that filled Seongwu’s head was agony columns he read in Donga Daily and Joseon Daily. Those were stories of hoodwinked women, like that of a woman who married a man who kept hidden from her a wife and three children, or a woman who worked hard in the countryside to pay for her husband’s education in Gyeongseong, only to have him engage in an affair with a modern girl. Seongwu found himself especially commiserating with a story of a modern girl who was tricked by a man’s glossy appearance and sweet nothings to give him her all, only to become a concubine to his wife at home. Had Minhyun done the same thing to him? Suddenly, Minhyun’s brilliant words and sensual touch that made him go head over heels in love flashed through Seongwu’s head. Minhyun said things and touched him to gain access to his heart, hold his hand, kiss him, and made him give over permission to all of his body. Seongwu continued pushing Minhyun away from him, shaken to the core.

“Hey, hey, Seongwu! Wait a second!”

“You have the audacity to talk?”

Seongwu shot back, angry. He would have never imagined that Minhyun would be hiding a wife from him. Incredulity gave way to anger at having been tricked. If only Seongwu had known!

“You kissed me while being married to someone else? It was my precious first kiss!”

“Hey, Seongwu. Listen…”

“You're a good-for-nothing scoundrel!”

Minhyun looked up at Seongwu with saddened eyes, having been suddenly villainized in the eyes of his beloved. Minhyun had not had a chance to explain, and he wanted to tell Seongwu about the complete account of his engagement.

“You’re right to think of me as a good-for-nothing scoundrel, but please listen to my story.”

“All right. Go ahead.”
Seongwu crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned back, his head slightly cooled. Minhyun pulled himself together and sat up.

“She doesn’t exist anymore. She died, ten years ago, of smallpox.”

“Ah…”

“The marriage was arranged by elders in each of our families when we were five. I never saw her face. As a last courtesy my family paid for her tombstone, but my name isn’t listed on it as her spouse. That was the end of it all.”

“I see.”

“As you said, what would we, children of nine, have known? I went to her funeral not knowing whom it was for. Everything was mere formalities. All I ever did for her was wish for her peaceful rest. So don’t be so angry.”

“When was I ever angry?”

Embarrassed, Seongwu feigned calm, and Minhyun smiled slyly and began to tease him. It was one of Minhyun’s great pleasures to tease Seongwu and see him react.

“Then you were jealous.”

“I was not!”

“You learned *Doctrine of the Mean* in seodang, but did not know that jealousy was one of the seven reasons for divorce*?”

“Such outdated doctrines mean nothing to me. If you want to live by them, go back to times of Joseon dynasty.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“I am not.”

“You keep saying no.”

Seongwu whipped his head away, his well-defined profile solemn. He looked as though he would stay mad at Minhyun for a long while. Minhyun cupped his chin in his hand and admired Seongwu. When he spoke again, his deep, mellow voice tickled Seongwu’s heart.

“What do I do? A momentary slip in my speech has made my love turn away from me. Would you look at me if I bring you strawberries? Would your frozen heart thaw if we go out to Jongno for an ice coffee?”

Seongwu seemed to waver, and he slowly answered, apparently liking Minhyun’s suggestion.

“…It’s hot out, so ice coffee sounds better.”

“Good. Let’s go out, then.”

Minhyun beamed, and offered his hand to Seongwu, who took it.

Their favorite cafe in Jongno, which they had not visited for a while, was full of patrons taking refuge from the heat. Minhyun and Seongwu sat near the door, planning to drink quickly and leave.
Seongwu recognized the faint song playing on the gramophone.

"'In Praise of Death*!'"

"...They’re surely playing it everywhere. Would they play Song of Bongja and Byungwoon* next?"

“I guess.”

Despite appearing to be sick of the song, Minhyun hummed along with its melody. Watching him contradict himself, Seongwu asked quietly.

“You like this song.”

“I like it because it’s sentimental.”

“Even though it sings about death?”

“I don’t think about things like death. I just like the melody.”

Seongwu tilted his head in confusion. Everything in ‘In Praise of Death’ was pointing to death and sadness, from its rueful melody to its melancholy lyrics. How could Minhyun divorce death from it, and only think about its melody? Seongwu sat, trying to listen to the song in a different light, to understand it in the way Minhyun did. Minhyun, however, cut his thoughts short.

“I consider you to be the best singer of this melody. How about you sing it to me later when we go back home?”

“Later?”

“I love hearing you sing.”

“You said you love me write, and that you love me smile. Now you even love me singing.”

“What’s wrong with saying I like what I like? I’m honest, unlike you.”

“Ah, of course.”

Seongwu picked up his glass, unable to answer, and heard clear clanking of cubes of ice within it. He swallowed the cold coffee. The anguish he felt earlier was gone without a trace, but he could not stifle a question that bubbled up from his heart. Seongwu always had a hard time suppressing his curiosity, and he asked Minhyun right away.

“Say your betrothed was still alive; what would you have done with me?”

“You’re very confident. Are you so sure that I would have loved you even if I had a wife?”

“I have no doubt about it.”

Seongwu answered, without so much as raising an eyebrow. What Seongwu had was not a personal confidence, but an absolute assurance. Seongwu was sure Minhyun would not have the ability to deny him even if he had not only a wife, but children. Minhyun and Seongwu would surely have fallen in love, regardless of where and how they met.

Yes. They had ‘fallen’ in love. They had undeniably and absolutely fallen in love. Their senses were numbed and their judgment was clouded, as if they were trapped within a deep quagmire. There was no better expression as ‘fallen’ to describe their state. Proof was how their bodies moved around each
other, how their eyes met, how they spoke to each other, and how they touched each other with such
burning tenderness.

So Seongwu wanted to ask. ‘If’ Minhyun’s betrothed were alive, would he accompany Seongwu in
a brilliant death of love? Seongwu looked at Minhyun with a sparkle in his eyes. Put on the spot,
Minhyun was choosing his words ever so carefully. How would Minhyun answer? Seongwu
thought even the most unromantic, stiff man would surely tell his beloved that he would give his life
up.

“Seongwu, there is no ‘if.’”

Minhyun’s answer was certainly fit for a realist.

“I know you have a splendid imagination as a writer, but sometimes I worry that it feeds your fears
and makes you anxious. Won’t you look at me as I am rather than be afraid of something shapeless,
something that doesn’t exist?”

Everything Minhyun said was right, but Seongwu felt hurt, even if just a little. Minhyun loved
sentimental songs, but he did not become sentimental toward Seongwu. Why was that?

“You know what I want to hear, but refuse to say it. Can’t you just humor me? Don’t lovers tell each
other they would pluck sun and the stars from the sky for the other?”

“What use are the sun and the stars to you?”

Minhyun brushed Seongwu’s comments aside.

“Instead, don’t I know very well what you need? As I know, a love between spouses…”

“All right, I understand.”

Seongwu cut him short, sensing a long speech coming. This time, Minhyun pouted. Seeing him
droop like an abandoned dog, Seongwu carefully prodded him.

“Are you cross?”

“No.”

“You are cross.”

“I suppose you’re right, if I appear so.”

“Come on. What would I do if you get mad at me?”

“You can go ahead and call me salty.”

Seongwu could not stifle his laughter, and he snickered. He remembered calling Minhyun salty
during one of their petty arguments before, and Minhyun seemed to have taken it to heart. Seongwu
jokingly thought to himself that now it was his duty as a son of nobles to embrace Minhyun, and
extended his hand.

“Let’s go home. I’ll sing to you. That sentimental song you like.”

Minhyun took Seongwu’s hand readily, as if he had been waiting for it all along.
For a few days afterwards, a morose melody filled their room. What came after was more visits from
the messenger Minhyun’s family sent. His visits were now so frequent that Seongwu sometimes felt
like he was another inhabitant at the boarding house. They were to have a career counseling session
with their teacher regarding their future on the last day of first semester, and as it neared, the
messenger looked more grim with every visit. Seongwu never listened in on their discussions, but he
could tell Minhyun was engaged in a tug of war with his parents. Minhyun’s parents were pushing
him to go to Japan, and Minhyun was insisting on staying in Joseon. Seongwu could not do anything
to help, other than faithfully stand by Minhyun’s side every day. His wish, for Minhyun to become
happy no matter his choice, did not waver.

Seongwu wanted to stay strong for Minhyun, but his body was taken over by a sudden illness one
day. He sensed it might be food poisoning, as food spoiled easily in the hot, humid weather peppered
with intermittent showers. Seongwu’s stomach started to hurt, and soon the pain became almost
unbearable, as if his insides were twisting around themselves. He clenched his jaw, but moans of
excruciating pain kept falling from his lips. He wished to let it sit and wait for it to pass, but he could
not stand the pain. He was alone at home in the most inopportune moment, too. Minhyun had gone
out to visit his family, and their hosts were out to an afternoon service at a nearby church that
usually did not end until around dinnertime.

Seongwu clenched his stomach and tossed and turned on his bedding. Would it hurt less if he lied on
his right side? Left? Or would he feel better if he was on his back? Nothing seemed to help, and he
felt as if his intestines were severely twisted. He imagined what doctors would do with them. Would
he have to undergo surgery? Would doctors cut him open and take out his large intestines, long like a
wet rope? Seongwu tried his best to not let his thoughts roam, but he just could not stop thinking
about what would happen to him. He thought that maybe if he concentrated on his thoughts, his
body would hurt less. He closed his eyes and focused.

As he tried to become lost in thought, he heard the blue gate creak open, and then clank shut.
Familiar sound of footsteps followed. It was Minhyun. Seongwu wanted to call out to him, but could
not, as any contraction of his muscles added to his agony. Minhyun’s footsteps climbed the stairs and
approached their room, and soon he opened the door and showed himself before Seongwu. As soon
as Minhyun saw Seongwu curled into himself on the floor, the calm of his face vanished in seconds.

Minhyun scooped Seongwu up in his arms. Seongwu was sweating profusely.

“You’re home…”

“What happened? It’s only been three hours since I went out.”

“My stomach hurts a lot. Something must be wrong with my body.”

Seongwu moaned, his lips cracked. Minhyun grimaced, seeing Seongwu, who was always cheerful
and bright around him, drooped in pain. He brushed his thumb over Seongwu’s lips.

“Your lips are so dry.”

Minhyun reached for a glass of water nearby, but Seongwu stopped him.

“I don’t want to eat or drink anything. I feel like throwing up.”

“Is it that bad?”
Minhyun’s face turned grim. All they had were balms to cure external scars, and there was nothing he could to to soothe Seongwu’s pain.

“We have no other choice, then.”

Minhyun dropped his bag onto the floor, and fished out his wallet from it to stuff in his pocket. He then helped Seongwu up.

“On my back.”

“Where are we going?”

“Jejungwon (濟衆院).”

“What? How do you plan to go all the way to Jejungwon while carrying me?”

“I’ll run.”

“Easier said than done. You can’t carry me all the way to Myungryundong.”

“It’s right there if we can go past Jongmyo.”

“How would you pass through Changgyeonggung?”

“I can, if I don’t waste any more energy arguing with you. So get on my back. You’re hurting.”

Minhyun offered his back to Seongwu, kneeling with one knee. Seongwu looked at his broad back that seemed to beckon him to get on. As his pain became more and more excruciating, he could not refuse, so he carefully mounted Minhyun’s back. Supporting Seongwu’s weight with his arms, Minhyun started for Jejungwon.

Seongwu had acquiesced to Minhyun’s wishes because he insisted, but he was still worried. Jejungwon was not close to the boarding house, and despite being rail-thin, Seongwu was a fully grown adult. There was no way his weight was not burdensome to Minhyun. In spite of Seongwu’s worries, Minhyun walked without tiring for a long time. Perhaps this was a result of his frequent solitary workouts, an incredible manifestation of his willpower, or both.

Minhyun took the shortcut through Gahoe-dong and walked through the long stretch of Jongmyo, Changdukgung, and Changgyeonggung. Seongwu was still in pain, but he found himself being soothed by Minhyun’s steady footsteps and sound of his regular breathing. Minhyun kept asking if he was all right, or if he was hurting more, and Seongwu’s heart melted at this expression of kindness. Seongwu thought himself fortunate to have someone who took care of him so wholeheartedly, and burrowed into Minhyun’s shoulder. He felt as if some of his pain went away just by touching Minhyun.

When they finally arrived at Jejungwon, Minhyun did not put Seongwu down until they were well inside the building, just as silently and devotedly as he finished every deed he dedicated himself to. It was weekend, but Jejungwon was still bustling with patients and their guardians. Pushing his way through the crowd, Minhyun registered Seongwu’s name and obtained a numbered ticket.

“Hold on just a little more, hmm?” Minhyun said, wiping the cold sweat from Seongwu’s brow.

Jejungwon was the first western-style hospital to be established in Korea in the last years of Joseon dynasty. It was equipped with rooms dedicated to surgery, diagnosis and hospitalization, as well as an elaborate system for health exams and medicine prescriptions. Only problem associated with
Jejungwon was that most doctors were westerners who did not speak much Korean, but it did not deter Seongwu, whose English was wonderful, from communicating with them.

Seongwu came out with a paper with ‘gastritis’ written in big Chinese letters. Seongwu told Minhyun that a foremost symptom of gastritis was severe pain in the upper stomach. They went to the apothecary to get his medicine.

“I never felt English was special while learning it in school, but it feels wondrous to actually use it.”

“Really?”

“I see that this place needs a lot of translators. Wouldn’t it be worthwhile if I could help the sick by helping them communicate?”

“You thought about that while you were in so much pain? I’m impressed all over again.”

“Good deeds never hurt anyone.”

“You’re right.”

Seongwu was given a chewables of unappetizing black hue, with instruction to take one three times a day. Minhyun suggested that he take one immediately, and Seongwu agreed. Chewing his medicine, Seongwu grimaced at its bitter taste.

“Don’t chew it if it’s too bitter. Just swallow."

“I can’t swallow without chewing on it.”

“You’re still a child.”

“Yes, I’m still a child.”

Minhyun wore a surprised look on its face when Seongwu agreed readily to his teasing, but soon began to push it further with a mischievous smile.

“If you have a hard time chewing it, I can chew it for you and feed it to you mouth to mouth.”

“Are you insane? We’re in public.”

Blushing, Seongwu glared at Minhyun. Slightly energized, Seongwu bickered with Minhyun for a while. After they left the hospital, they decided to rest on top of a hill that overlooked Changgyeonggung Palace. A cool, gentle breeze tousled their hair, and the sky above them was surreally pure. Seongwu looked down at the palace and began to speak quietly.

“I heard there is a beautiful secret garden inside the palace.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think we’ll get a chance to see it in this lifetime?”

“Hmm.”

Minhyun did not answer. He wanted to give his beloved all that was beautiful and rare in this world, but there were many limitations and restrictions he could not overcome. As if he did not expect an answer, Seongwu merely continued.
“Does spring come to this land no more our own,”

“Isn’t that a poem by Yi Sang-Hwa*?”

“I was suddenly reminded of it.”

“Because of the secret garden, or these blooming flowers?”

Seongwu looked around him and realized they were sitting in the middle of a bed of flowers. Seeing the iridescence of these wild bouquets, Seongwu was torn. His day was warm and beautiful, just as a pleasant spring day should be, but they were still trapped within a dreary reality of their oppressed times.

“Both.”

“I can see you are upset.”

“What about you? Are you at peace? I’m not speaking of the weather…”

“Of course I’m not at peace. However, I think the spring of our times and my own spring are two separate entities. Like you said, our springtime was robbed from us. But my own spring,”

“......”

“...is right here, right now.”

Minhyun gave Seongwu a full gaze, speaking with his eyes. He was telling Seongwu that his own spring came with Seongwu, that it is beautiful, as if endless, and that his spectacular now, more a paradise than any palatial secret garden, was only possible because of Seongwu.

Minhyun picked a sweetbrier flower next to him and placed it gingerly above Seongwu’s ear.

“When did you bloom?”

Seongwu snickered, and he went along with Minhyun’s straight-faced joke.

“I bloomed a day early, knowing that you would come for me.”

“Why did nature send you here as a human boy?”

“Because there is nothing else in nature to be my mate.”

“Then did you find your mate within the humankind?”

“Isn’t he next to me right now?”

Seongwu smiled coyly, and slowly neared Minhyun. Minhyun kept his eyes on Seongwu, his gaze full of expectations of imminent pleasure. He waited for Seongwu, and soon a pair of lips, as soft as a petal fallen from a flower tree, settle on his. A sweet kiss concluded their playful exchange.

Springtime, sweet enough to obliterate pain of the flesh, was certainly with them.
Seongwu recovered fast from gastritis and went back to school, laser-focused on his schoolwork. Time flew by like an arrow. He soon received a letter from his family, and he wrote back that he would not be going to Pyongyang in the summer. He had to spend every moment of summer with Minhyun, as he did not know where Minhyun would be going after their graduation.

Seongwu’s career path was already set. He had decided to apply to a college of education in Pyongyang to become a teacher, and his application process went smoothly. Seongwu was a bit sad he could not study literature, but he quickly persuaded himself of his reality and compromised. Surprisingly, it was Mr. Kimura who openly expressed regret over Seongwu’s decision. He seemed to have expected Seongwu, talented in languages and writing, would study interpretation and translation of foreign texts or literature. When Seongwu told him about his family’s declining financial status and difficulty living through the times, he was saddened. Mr. Kimura, in his attempt to dissuade Seongwu from compromising his dream, went so far as to say he did not recommend becoming a teacher. Seongwu merely flashed an awkward smile, and his career counseling ended with a note of regretful disappointment.

On the other hand, Minhyun’s career counseling took much longer. This was because Minhyun had not decided what he wanted to do. Minhyun was meandering with his thoughts, shaken to the core over his wishes and restrictions he faced. More than anything, Minhyun wanted to stay in Joseon, but it seemed more and more impossible as time came close to graduation. When he told his parents about staying in Joseon on that day Seongwu was sick, he was almost hit by an inkstone his father threw his way. Minhyun had gone to Gyeongseong Secondary School with a goal of studying abroad in Japan in the first place; when he appeared to have changed his mind overnight, his parents began to observe his every move. Messengers from his family not only gave him his parents’ letters and tried to persuade him, but also served as a method of surveillance. Later, his family sent people in secret to Mr. Kimura, his hosts, and Seongwu, asking them to ‘help change young master Minhyun’s mind.’ Seongwu understood all of it as a part of Minhyuns’ parents’ wish to keep their son’s future as bright as possible, and he could not dare to refuse them. Seongwu even felt a pang of guilt deep in his heart, as he knew he was the biggest reason Minhyun wanted to avoid going abroad. He felt guilty about having loved the idea of Minhyun staying with him. Unbeknownst to Seongwu, however, the only thing Minhyun was constantly thinking about was how to protect Seongwu. Ong Seongwu was, above anything else including his own future, a being that trumped all in the hierarchy of Minhyun’s concerns.

Oblivious to Minhyun’s agony, Seongwu talked nonsense after he returned home from the last day of school before summer break. He spoke of getting a job as a reporter at a newspaper, as writing was all he was good at. Becoming a reporter was something most Korean writers dreamt of, but Minhyun knew too well the price and risks of writing truthfully for the public in such perilous times of oppression. So Minhyun opposed him. To Minhyun, Seongwu’s life and safety was more important than any brilliant writing that could be written for his country.

“I disagree. You can’t work for the newspaper.”

“Why? I want to publish at least one thing for my country before I die.”

“...Did you speak of your death in front of me?”

“Sorry. I was only joking.”

“Please don’t joke about your life.”

Okay. Seongwu whispered. He had not expected Minhyun to take his words so seriously.

“If you really want to write, Seongwu, become a writer of literature, not a reporter.”
“But I’ll starve to death in abject poverty if I do that.”

“Well,”

Minhyun cleared his throat, as if he was about to deliver an important and shocking news.

“I will become your… ‘sponsor,’ or whatever.”

“Haha. What a vigorous spirit you have. But Minhyun, if you want to sponsor a penniless writer, you’d have to be a filthy rich man, or even more.”

“...If I live according to my family’s wishes, I can afford a living to keep you writing and do nothing else.”

“...I don’t need your sponsorship, then. I won’t become a writer if it means sacrificing you.”

Minhyun stopped talking when he heard Seongwu say the word ‘sacrifice.’ Avoiding eye contact with Minhyun’s sharp gaze, Seongwu feigned cheerfulness as he continued.

“What about I become a teacher? Did you know that our curriculum is two years behind those of schools in Japan? They have purposefully designed our system that way so we would fall behind. I just can’t stand it. I want to help smart Korean children find their place in our society after school.”

“What a wonderful vision. You will become a great teacher.”

“So don’t worry about me, and…”

“......”

“Go to Japan.”

Minhyun did not answer. Seongwu knew he would not. Minhyun was known for his kindness, but he was stubborn as a bull. He withstood a barrage of goading from his family; he did not budge despite his parents’ attempts to humor, coax, negotiate, and even threaten him into going abroad. There was no way he would change his mind now over a word from Seongwu.

Their lamp shook precariously. Seeing Minhyun’s shadow shake with it, Seongwu bent down to examine the light, which was almost drained of oil and its wick nearly burnt out. They had to either change the oil or turn it out. It was late, and Seongwu decided for the latter. Let's go to sleep. Seongwu’s quiet voice calmly resonated in their room. Minhyun nodded, and sat himself upon their bedding, already open and inviting. Seongwu blew out the light and lied down beside Minhyun. They were living an unpredictable, tumultuous life, at times unable to see anything that would happen to them next. Still, they were happy just to be together. They embraced, their fingers tight around each other’s back in their wish to hold on to each other’s warmth.

Moonlight softly filled the space left dark by their dormant lamp. The night was clear, and Seongwu kept tossing and turning, bothered by how difficult it was for them to live fully and unapologetically in these turbulent times. He looked to Minhyun, whose sleeping features shone under the bright moonlight that flooded through their open window. Seongwu’s fingers caressed Minhyun’s cheek, his touch feather-light, as if touching a newborn baby.

“My beautiful love, how long will our love last?”
In Praise of Death: (From Wikipedia) Yun Sim-deok (25 July 1897 – 4 August 1926) was a Korean singer. She was the country's first professional soprano. Yun's most famous recording, 1926's "In Praise of Death," is considered the first "popular" (yuhaeng changga) Korean song. It was recorded in Osaka by the Japanese Nitto recording company, with Yun's sister accompanying her on piano. The song is set to the tune of "Waves of the Danube" by Ion Ivanovici. A television series was made based on her life in 2018, titled 'Hymn of Death.'

Doctrine of the Mean: (From Wikipedia) The Doctrine of the Mean or Zhongyong is both a doctrine of Confucianism and also the title of one of the Four Books of Confucian philosophy. The text is attributed to Zisi or Kong Ji, the only grandson of Confucius. It was published as a chapter in the Classic of Rites.

Seven Reasons for Divorce: This is an outdated custom used by people in the Joseon dynasty. The 'seven reasons' give a husband a right to divorce his wife. They were: 1. Not sufficiently serving her parents in law; 2. Being unable producing an heir, or a son; 3. Adultery; 4. Jealousy; 5. Disease; 6. Talking too much; 7. Kleptomania. Jealousy was probably included because polygamy was still a common method of marriage back then. This is a severely misogynistic custom, and was already out of use during 1930s. Minhyun refers to it as a joke; I don't know if I translated it to have it sound as jovial as it does in the Korean text ;(.

Song of Bongja and Byungwoon: A popular song at the time, based on a true story. Byungwoon was an intellectual man of aristocratic origins, and Bongja was a server at a cafe he frequented. They fell in illicit love, and committed double suicide.

Jejungwon (also written as Chejungwon): (From Wikipedia) Jejungwon was founded in Seoul in 1885, and is known as the first Western medical institution in Korea. It affiliated with Yonhee University in 1957, which changed its name to Yonsei University to mark the collaboration. It is now part of the Yonsei University Health System.

Changgyeongung: (From Wikipedia) Changgyeong Palace is a palace located in Seoul, South Korea. The palace was built in the mid-15th century by King Sejong for his father, Taejong. It was originally named "Suganggung," but it was renovated and enlarged in 1483 by King Seongjong, at which time it received its current name. Many structures were destroyed during Japan's multiple late 16th century attempts to conquer Korea and invade China. It was rebuilt by successive Joseon Kings but was once again largely destroyed by the Japanese in the early 20th century, but this time torn down methodically to make room for a modern park, a showplace for the empire, akin to Tokyo's Ueno Park. During the Japanese colonial period, the Japanese built a zoo, botanical garden, and museum on the site.

Yi Sang-Hwa: (From Wikipedia) Yi Sang-Hwa (1901-1943) was a Korean nationalist poet active in the resistance to Japanese rule. In 1925, assuming the identity of a nationalist poet, Lee began to write poems of defiance and resistance against colonial
rule. Because the restrictions of the times were such that he felt himself unable to express his political frustrations directly, his views tend to manifest themselves in nature symbols such as expressions of the homeland’s natural beauty and depiction of the plight of individuals, such as Korean immigrants to Manchuria, deprived of everything by their oppressors. The series of poems from this late period that include "Does Spring Come to These Stolen Fields?" (Ppaeatgin deuredo bomeun oneunga?), for example, reveal Lee’s spirit of resistance in just this way.

Here is the entirety of the poem by Yi Sang-Hwa Seongwu mentions:

Does spring come to this land no more our own, to these forfeited fields?
Bathed in the sun I go as if in a dream along a lane that cuts across paddy-fields like parted hair to where the blue sky and the green field meet.
You mute heaven and silent fields, I do not feel I have come here on my own; tell me if I am driven by you or by some hidden force.
....What am I looking for? Soul, my blind soul, endlessly darting like children at play by the river, answer me: where am I going?
Filled with the odor of grass, compounded of green laughter and green sorrow, limping along, I walk all day, as if possessed by the spring devil: for these are stolen fields, and our spring is stolen.
To the North

Chapter Summary

Mr. Kimura gives Minhyun a highly coveted recommendation letter to a Japanese Secondary School, and Minhyun's path after graduation narrows down to Japan. Minhyun and Seongwu struggle with the idea of being torn apart. Joseon, or Korea, keep suffering under imperial rule of Japan, and the plight of two marathon runners during the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games and subsequent reporting lead to a Korean newspaper's suspension. Minhyun is hated by everyone for deciding to go to Japan. On Christmas morning, Seongwu wakes to find Minhyun gone without a trace.

Chapter Notes

Here is the link to original Chapter 26 by Id: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/3024096.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

* This Chapter is Explicit.

Light of Our Lives

Chapter 26

Gray tufts of clouds obscured the sky. As Seongwu walked through the alleyways of Bukchon, cold drops of rain began to patter down. He slowed down as he approached Jongno. It was his birthday. In contrast to all his past birthdays, it was a somber one.

Seongwu’s uncle patted his back with all sympathy he could muster. He thought the reason why Seongwu was down was because he felt confused about his future after graduation. It was true, except Seongwu’s feeling of uncertainty concerned Minhyun’s future rather than his own. To appease him, Seongwu’s uncle took him to an expensive restaurant located in the busy intersection near Gwanghwamun. A chunk of meat, larger than an outstretched hand, was set on a stone grill. As charcoal under it blazed in bright orange, the meat began to sizzle. A well-cooked piece was put in front of Seongwu and he reluctantly picked up his chopsticks. Seongwu was usually ravenous for good food, and his uncle could not help but ask what was wrong.
“Uncle…”

“Yes. Tell me anything.”

“If you had a chance to study abroad in Japan, what would you do?”

“What do you mean? Of course I would grab that chance!”

Uncle’s answer was immediate and assured. To students, going abroad to study in Japan or another country was a dream and privilege only granted to fortunate few. Almost no one was wealthy enough for it, and only the smartest were chosen by schools abroad. Seongwu quietly nodded as his uncle continued on about how he would leave immediately if he was given such an opportunity of a lifetime. This was the kind of answer he expected from not only his uncle, but anyone.

Seongwu’s uncle bought him a bingsu after they finished their meal. Even when a bowl with strawberry syrup, Seongwu’s favorite, was placed on the table, Seongwu’s face was still overcast. To his uncle, he seemed ill. Ordinarily, Seongwu was talkative when he was with his uncle, but today, for the first time, he wanted to return home early. Seongwu’s uncle had no choice but to let him go. Seongwu let out a heavy sigh only when he was parted from his uncle and alone. There were too many worrying thoughts in his head. Of course, his chief concern was having to let Minhyun go. Seongwu walked back home with his head down.

Meanwhile, Minhyun was talking to Mr. Kimura in his office. Minhyun could not decipher what was going on in his mentor’s head, as he wore an opaque, neutral expression. Minhyun tried to appear calm, but his downcast eyes betrayed his anxiety. No matter how intelligent and accomplished he was, Minhyun was only a nineteen-year-old. His family’s power only magnified his lack of it. Minhyun had almost succumbed to his family’s pressure, and his near future in Japan was nearly set in stone.

“As you know, Minhyun, this is not an opportunity that comes by often. Why don’t you think positively of it?”

“...I will.”

“Here, take this.”

Mr. Kimura took from his drawer a piece of paper. Minhyun took it, his face still stiff from lack of joy. Mr. Kimura’s neat handwriting adorned the paper; it was a recommendation letter. Because Korean schools were systematically two years behind those in Japan, a Korean student needed to study two more years in a Japanese secondary school in order to attend a Japanese university. With a recommendation letter like the one in Minhyun’s hand, however, one could save one full school year. For that reason, recommendation letters were like magic, and were desperately sought after. Other would have jumped up and down in joy, but Minhyun was still unmoved. He felt even more helpless and unhappy. He did not like that he had obtained approval from a Japanese man in a Japanese way, and that he was following a path set by his family without regard to his wishes. Minhyun left the school as if he was fleeing it.

Minhyun’s footsteps wobbled, and his dark shadow followed him, erratically changing shape under the streetlights. Minhyun was overwhelmed with worry and confusion, but he had not forgotten that it was Seongwu’s birthday. He passed Bukchon and walked to a bookstore by Cheonggyechun creek where all kinds of books were stacked from floor to ceiling. He wandered inside until he found an imported book Seongwu might like. Alphabet text, almost indecipherable, filled its slightly yellowed pages. Minhyun knew Seongwu would enjoy even the headache from decoding it.
Minhyun started for Bukchon, but stopped in his tracks. He distanced himself from the crowd and sat down in a secluded spot. He took a pencil out of his bag and wrote a short letter addressed to Seongwu on the first page of the book. Dearest Seongwu, happy nineteenth birthday. Were his words enough to let Seongwu know what he felt? I love you. Not even a hundred utterances, nor a thousand, of I love you was enough. Those three words were desperately deficient to house all that Minhyun felt for Seongwu. Minhyun did not want to fill the page with sweet words that meant nothing, because he knew lies would hurt Seongwu even more. Seongwu already knew everything that was about to happen. Minhyun sat still for a long time, choosing the last words to his letter in pain.

Young lovers returned home to each other. Seongwu had gotten home first, and had time to calm himself. Minhyun had to smile painfully, exuding confusion. His upturned lips were still as beautiful as ever, but just beyond his smile was his wavering soul, quaking as if it were a candle facing a strong gust of wind. Seongwu took his birthday gift from Minhyun and hugged it to his chest.

“Thank you.”

Seongwu had wanted to say much more than simple words of thanks, but he could not, once his eyes met Minhyun’s. Minhyun’s eyes betrayed an ineffable despair, and Seongwu could tell that their inevitable parting was approaching fast. His heart sank to the pit of his stomach, but it was too early to succumb to sadness. Seongwu caressed Minhyun’s cheek, and Minhyun saw strength in Seongwu’s eyes overpowering his sorrow. They silently vowed to spend every minute together loving each other without regret. Seongwu tilted his head as he approached Minhyun, and their lips seared together in a burning kiss. Minhyun was always composed, so full of grace, but that evening, when he embraced Seongwu, he did not hide his anxiety and fear. Seongwu was scared, just as much as Minhyun was, but he could not show Minhyun he was, for he wanted to protect Minhyun.

Their last semester at Gyeongseong Secondary School soon began. Mood among students worsened day by day, as their country was suffering more and more disgrace. In August, Korean marathoners Sohn Kee-chung and Nam Sung-yong participated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics as part of the Japanese delegation as Son Kitei and Nan Shoryu. Sohn Kee-chung won a gold medal, and Nam Sung-yong a bronze medal. All of their glory was forwarded to Imperial Japan, however, and Japanese flags were held up above their heads as Kimigayo, the Japanese national anthem, blared around them. As a British silver medalist, Ernest Harper, smiled happily, Sohn Kee-chung and Nam Sung-yong hung their heads in sadness. Their sadness was contagious, and all of Korea was overtaken by sorrows of having been robbed of their country. Dong-A Daily, in a fit of anger, published their photos with the Japanese flags on their chests whited out. The Japanese Government General of Korea retaliated immediately, suspending Dong-A Daily’s publication. Censorship and restrictions upon Koreans tightened. Gyeongseong Secondary School was no exception.

Students, who picked up their pens instead of swords and guns, had nothing they could do but study. They studied hard, more for their country than for their own welfare. Their collective willpower was well-meaning, but at times it became a double-edged sword. Innocent, passionate love for their country turned into bitterness toward Minhyun. This general sentiment against Minhyun began when Mr. Kimura started to speak to him in private and when Minhyun’s path after graduation was set to Japan. Rumors that Minhyun received not only a recommendation letter but also personal help from Mr. Kimura were abound, and Minhyun began to be ostracized from his peers. Dozens of eyes that glared at him were full of confused mixtures of envy and disdain. Minhyun had to withstand all of it alone. It was a silent, lonely battle. Minhyun rolled his hands into tight fists, feigning strength, but Seongwu knew he was not all right. Seongwu sometimes hugged Minhyun’s tired back, whispering: It’s all right. Everything is going to be all right.

Despite Seongwu’s support, Minhyun deviated from his usual calm self frequently. He constantly
appeared anxious and on edge. These symptoms worsened as the year-end approached. Seongwu wondered what brought him such endless worry; Minhyun had already been accepted into a top secondary school in Tokyo. Seongwu assumed there must be some kind of unfulfilled paperwork for entry into Japan. Minhyun looked like he was waiting to leave, and Seongwu retreated further into his own secret sadness. They lived in this state of constant apprehension until cosmos flowers in Bukchon’s alleyways withered and snow began to pile in the spaces they left behind.

Minhyun and Seongwu felt as if they were trapped within a room with neither doors nor windows. Their conversations were stuck in the same pattern that repeated itself and ended early, and no matter how much they talked, they arrived at the same conclusion: Minhyun would leave. Their hearts burned with frustration, knowing they did not have the means to defy Minhyun’s family and their difficult times. They knew exactly what they were supposed to do, but they could not shake that terrible feeling of being coerced. They had not known how painful it would be to do what was against their wishes.

With overwhelming nervousness came endless draining of their strength. As if to escape reality, they delved into their studies. Hard work of preparing for the finals took things off their minds. A few weeks before final exams Seongwu received his acceptance letter from the college of education he had applied for, and he felt some of life’s weight taken off his shoulder. Minhyun congratulated him with all his heart.

And soon, they finished their last final exam. All they had left now of Gyeongseong Secondary School was their graduation ceremony a month later. Seongwu quietly began to get rid of his household items he used during his time in Gyeongseong. Unlike Minhyun, whose life was based in Gyeongseong, Seongwu had to carry all of his things back to Pyongyang. Seongwu carefully packed the poem book and cologne bottle Minhyun gave him, and placed them in the deepest, safest pocket of his bag. Minhyun handled Seongwu’s gifts with similar degree of extreme care. He set aside Seongwu’s gifts, his plum flower painting, and scarf as he went through his personal effects. Seongwu thought it was adorable how the back of Minhyun’s head appeared so gravely serious as he did so. Seongwu clung to Minhyun’s back, as if being piggybacked by him.

“If your bag was slightly bigger, Minhyun, I could probably hide in it.”

“It’d be faster if you became smaller.”

“You’d die of cuteness if I became small. You’ll have to study hard, but you’ll be distracted by me all the time.”

“Yes, but nothing would compare to actually having you there. I… nothing.”

Minhyun abruptly stopped talking, as if he thought of something not worth saying out loud. Seongwu did not know what he wanted to say, but felt no need to prod. They had no time to delve deep into depressing thoughts. They only wanted to love each other with the little time they had left to spend together. Seongwu nuzzled into Minhyun’s shoulder.
Streets of Gyeongseong were somber, devoid of their usual extravagant holiday cheer. This dark mood would continue into and through Christmas. Minhyun and Seongwu had no intention to force themselves to feel merry. They were happy just to have each other’s warmth. Seongwu thought spending a quieter Christmas was actually better for them. If everything was as decadent and cheerful as they were before, his heart could waver even more.

Everything was frozen on Christmas morning. Thermometer on the wall pointed to fifteen degrees below zero, and blades of wind sliced mercilessly through Bukchon. Minhyun braved the cold to come outside and check the mail. He was only in his lounging clothes, and he shivered violently as he looked into the mailbox, his heart mostly emptied of any hope. Everything inside was addressed to his hosts, and he almost resigned himself to disappointment as he turned away- before he saw a letter stuck inside the back of the mailbox. He pulled it out, not thinking much of it, and looked at the addressee and sender. His eyes shot open wide, and he immediately ran out of the blue gate.

“Hmm?”

Seongwu woke up later on, surprised to see that there was no one beside him. There was no note Minhyun left behind, either. Minhyun never failed to let Seongwu know of his whereabouts and destinations whenever he went outside, and Seongwu wondered where he could be. Seongwu went downstairs to ask where he had gone out to; his hosts had no idea. A seed of anxiety began to bud in Seongwu’s heart. He knew Minhyun would never leave him for good in this way, but he still could not help feeling afraid.

Seongwu paced about nervously. For hours, he could not fathom where Minhyun might have gone. He went to his friends who lived near school and home, but no one knew where Minhyun was. Minhyun had vanished as if he had evaporated into the air, and Seongwu felt himself growing more desperate as painfully long minutes passed by. Seongwu did not care where Minhyun might have went; he just wanted him to return unharmed.

As if to answer Seongwu’s ardent prayer, Minhyun returned home in the early afternoon. Seongwu was shocked to see that he appeared injured, as if someone had beat him up. Seongwu took Minhyun’s hand and led him back to their room. There was a patch of dried blood next to Minhyun’s lips, and an open, bleeding gash on his forehead. Despite all this, Minhyun seemed to be unable to stop himself from smiling, to the point Seongwu began to think that Minhyun had gone mad. Seongwu wet a clean towel and started to wipe the blood off Minhyun’s face. Frustrated, he felt words tumble out of his mouth.

“What happened to you? Who is it? Who did this?”

“My parents did.”

“Your parents?”

“Yes. I declared something shocking.”

“...Something shocking?”

“Mother, father, I will go to Pyongyang.”

Minhyun chuckled, and took a crumpled piece of paper from his jacket. Seongwu took it into his hands. It said: ‘Acceptance to Pyongyang Medical College.’ Seongwu froze.
“I waited so long for this. Others get their admission letters mid-semester, but for some reason I had to wait until Christmas to get mine. Should I consider this another present from Santa Claus?”

“What are you talking about?”

Seongwu’s eyes wavered with confusion. He spent days on end painfully watching Minhyun preparing to leave for Japan. Now, Minhyun was speaking of Pyongyang so suddenly and casually. Minhyun laughed at the way Seongwu was looking at him, his eyes demanding an explanation.

“The truth is…”

Minhyun wanted to avoid going off to Japan at all costs. His country was being ruined, and he could not imagine himself living there. Most importantly, he could not bear to part from Seongwu. He could not ignore demands from his family, however, as they could always cut him off without a penny or even kidnap him to ship off to Japan. To avoid the worst, Minhyun thought what he could do for a long time. If he wanted to make his parents give up on their wish to send him abroad, he had to do something that held about the same weight and worth as studying in Japan. What he needed was just and magnificent cause. He took hints from what Kyuwon did to make up his. From centuries ago, Koreans considered art of medicine as a great humanitarian devotion. Medicine was just the thing he needed. Becoming a doctor was a respectable career choice, and he did not have to go to Japan to accomplish it. He was exchanging weekly letters with Kyuwon, and Mr. Kimura was closer to him than he was to his family. With help of these two supporters, Minhyun secretly applied to Pyongyang Medical College, and now he had his admission letter at last. As soon as he received the letter he went to his family to notify them of his decision, incurring the wrath of his parents. Having invested much effort to send Minhyun to Japan, they were furious at what their son did behind their backs. Minhyun let his father hit him before he returned to the boarding house. Minhyun grinned as he jovially explained that the encounter ended early because he started bleeding quickly.

“Well, my parents could not stop me when I told them I’d be studying medicine. Isn’t that brilliant? What kind of parents would stop their children from saving lives?”

“...I’m reminded of what a genius you are.”

“How else would I have gotten into Tokyo’s Kaisei Secondary School?”

“Fine. You’re the best.”

“How do you feel, now that you’ll continue living with the best?”

“So so.”

“Liar.”

“Who’s calling who a liar?”

Seongwu glared at Minhyun.

“You didn’t have to keep it a secret from me.”

“I apologize, but I thought it was best to keep it from you. You’re a terrible liar. What if you ran into someone from my family? What if I was rejected from Pyongyang Medical College? I didn’t have room to take all those possibilities into account.”

“Still…”
“I’m sorry. But everything turned out well, didn’t it?”

Minhyun drew near to Seongwu. Upon his gorgeous face was a bright smile Seongwu had not seen for a long while.

“Let’s go to Pyongyang. Together.”

“...Minhyun.”

“Pyongyang is your home, and you’ll have your family there. You’ll be comfortable.”

“Of course I’ll be happy to be there, but what about you? All of your family are here in Gyeongseong.”

“I’m only a third child with no chance of inheriting the family business. Don’t worry. I’ve already searched for a way to survive. Just accept me as your boarding student.”

As you know, I don’t have a place to stay in Pyongyang... Minhyun’s voice drifted away from Seongwu, as if in a dream. Seongwu felt as if he was submerged in deep water. Droplets of tears rolled down his cheeks, washing away the worry and anguish he had suffered for months. Minhyun’s hand cupped his face and his thumb brushed over his cheek. Their eyes locked mid-air.

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“...... What’s distracting you?”

A breathy question slithered into Seongwu’s ear. Seongwu was shocked out of his wandering thoughts at the wetness in Minhyun’s voice. They began to embrace in tears after Minhyun’s shocking confession and his declaration to go to Pyongyang. The sun set in no time as they talked, and by the time stars began to light the night sky they were lying on the floor in each other’s arms. Seongwu’s entire body was drenched in tears and sweat. Seongwu answered Minhyun’s question by shaking his head, as his clothes were taken off one by one, like moulting skins of a snake.

“You should focus when engaged in naughty business.”

Minhyun reprimanded him, feigning seriousness. Minhyun wiped off drops of sweat on Seongwu’s forehead, and drew closer, melding their bodies together. Minhyun used to be so fragile, smaller than Seongwu. Seongwu used to make fun of how skinny he was, calling him a baby, a kid, and even girlish, because of how red his lips were. Now, Minhyun was larger and stronger than Seongwu, binding him tightly in an embrace without escape with his long limbs. Their chests were pressed snugly together, and they felt each other’s hearts pounding heavily. Minhyun moved his hips, leisurely. Seongwu felt him slowly piston in and out of his body, every movement and friction explicit against his skin. Seongwu closed his eyes. Now he could not be distracted if he tried.

Minhyun touched a sensitive spot deep inside Seongwu, and Seongwu let out a gasp. He quickly glanced around the room, afraid someone would hear him. Seemingly unconcerned, Minhyun raised himself into a plank and started to push into him faster.

“Minhyun, hey…”
Seongwu clutched onto Minhyun’s shoulder, pleading with him for something even he did not know he wanted. Minhyun merely whispered: “Shh. You must be quiet.”

Minhyun raised his left hand, which had been trailing all over Seongwu’s slender chest, and a finger pushed in between Seongwu’s lips.

“Don’t bite your tongue. Bite me instead.”

Even with this suggestion, Seongwu did not dare bite Minhyun’s finger. Seongwu merely swallowed his gasps and moans as Minhyun’s finger soothingly rubbed against his tongue. Every sound he suppressed was rerouted to his senses.

Seongwu raised his legs, which were barely grounded on tiptoes, and wrapped them around Minhyun’s waist. He trapped Minhyun’s body between his thighs and squeezed, as Minhyun had done to him minutes before. Incited by Seongwu’s daring movement, Minhyun’s breathing hitched. They rode to the glorious zenith together, their hands intertwined.

Seongwu was first to hit his peak, and Minhyun followed soon afterwards. Opaque, white liquid, a testament to their burning night, dripped onto Seongwu’s convulsing stomach. Seongwu stayed limp on his back, overtaken by the aftermath of his climax, but Minhyun came back to himself as if struck by lightning, and headed to a corner of their room.

Because they could not bathe late at night, Minhyun liked to keep a bucket of water in the room and use it to wet clean towels to clean themselves. He picked up two sun-dried towels and wet them, then returned to tend to Seongwu. He wiped their semen off Seongwu’s stomach, and then gingerly cleaned his brow, neck, and the back of his thighs, which were still moist with perspiration. Feeling fresh, Seongwu draped his blanket over himself again, and Minhyun crawled in next to him after cleaning himself. Minhyun took a fan he kept next to his pillow and began to fan Seongwu’s brow gently.

“You must be hot.”

“It’s okay now.”

“Really? But I still feel hot.”

“That’s because you went berserk near the end.”

“... I can’t deny it.”

“Right? I was afraid Madame would find out. What if we’re found out? Moreover, you’re injured.”

“If they find out, then we’re found out.”

“Stop being so tranquil about it.”

Seongwu shot back, his voice sullen. Indifferent to Seongwu’s dour tone, Minhyun kept peppering fleeting kisses on Seongwu’s neck and shoulders, unable to contain his affection.

“Stop it. It tickles.”

“But this shouldn’t tickle at all.”

“But it does. So stop it.”

“I’ll stop, but wouldn’t you regret telling me to? I might remind you that you’re being adored by the
best-looking man in Gyeongseong.”

“I thought I was the best-looking man in Gyeongseong. I took over your throne. I thought you knew.”

They bickered about who between them were more handsome, until they halted all movements. Seongwu took Minhyun’s beautiful face into his hands and carefully examined it. There were bruises coloring his brow, cheeks and chin. Seongwu felt his heart break over them just by looking at them.

“... I have never seen a face so ugly in my life.”

Minhyun chuckled.

“How ungrateful. Do I alone not satisfy you?”

Seongwu made a gesture of pondering over that question, exaggerating the tilt in his head and thinking about how he should further tease Minhyun. Minhyun could not help himself but adore him more; everything he did was terribly cute. Minhyun mounted Seongwu’s prone body again, laughing. Seongwu looked up at him, full in the eyes, and said, boldly:

“I'll decide, depending on how you behave.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took so long. I'll be back with Chapter 27 soon. Id and I thank you for all your support for this story.

Glossary for Chapter 26:

* Sohn Kee-chung: Sohn Kee-chung (August 29, 1912 – November 15, 2002) was a Korean athlete and long-distance runner. He became the first Korean to win a medal at the Olympic Games, winning gold in the marathon at the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a member of the Japanese delegation. He ran the 42.195 kilometres (26.219 mi) course in 2:29:19.2, breaking the Olympic record. His Korean teammate Nam Sung-yong took the bronze medal. As Korea was under Japanese occupation at the time, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) officially credited Japan with Sohn's gold and Nam's bronze in the 1936 Summer Olympics medal count. On December 9, 2011, the IOC recognized Sohn's Korean nationality in his official profile.

* Nam Sung-yong: Nam Sung-yong (November 23, 1912 – February 20, 2001) was a Korean Olympian who won a bronze medal in the marathon at the 1936 Summer Olympics, completing the run in 2 hours, 31 minutes, and 42 seconds. He was born in Junten (Suncheon), Japanese Korea and received higher education in Japan. Like the gold medalist Sohn Kee-chung, Nam Sung-yong used the Japanese pronunciation of his name, Nan Shōryū as Korea was then a part of the Japanese Empire. After the Olympics, Nam Sung-yong worked at the Korean Sporting Association with Sohn Kee-chung.

* Kimigayo: Kimigayo (His Imperial Majesty's Reign) is the national anthem of Japan. Its lyrics are the oldest among the world's national anthems, and with a length of 11 measures and 32 characters "Kimigayo" is also one of the world's shortest. Its lyrics are
from a waka poem written by an unnamed author in the Heian period (794–1185), and the current melody was chosen in 1880, replacing an unpopular melody composed eleven years earlier. While the title "Kimigayo" is usually translated as "His Imperial Majesty's Reign", no official translation of the title or lyrics has been established in law. From 1888 to 1945 "Kimigayo" served as the national anthem of the Empire of Japan. When the Empire was dissolved following its surrender at the end of World War II, the State of Japan succeeded it in 1945. This successor state was a parliamentary democracy and the polity therefore changed from a system based on imperial sovereignty to one based on popular sovereignty. Emperor Hirohito was not dethroned, and "Kimigayo" was retained as the de facto national anthem. The passage of the Act on National Flag and Anthem in 1999 recognized it as the official national anthem. (Translator's note) It is still considered controversial to play or sing Kimigayo in Korea.
Chapter Summary

Before they finally graduate from Gyeongseong Secondary School, Minhyun and Seongwu go to a photography studio to take a picture together. They attend their graduation ceremony, and exchange the second buttons of their blazers, as was the trend at the time upon graduation. A few dreamy days later, they say goodbye to Gyeongseong.

Chapter Notes

Original post in Korean for Chapter 27 can be found here: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/3066524.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives (生 伴侶)

Chapter 27

*A This chapter is Explicit.

A streetcar crossed over Jongno, racing on its tracks. Minhyun stood inside, carefully watching where it was headed, while Seongwu sat by the window. As soon as the streetcar entered Sogondong, Minhyun rang the bell on one of the walls, signaling his intent to get off. The streetcar stopped, and went on its way when Minhyun and Seongwu got off near the entrance to Sogong-dong street.

They followed a map drawn on the advertisement they found in a newspaper. A large sign that read ‘Cheonyeondang’ hung from the outer wall of a two-story western-style building. They entered it, their steps hesitant and awkward. A large crowd bustled in the building, as the building housed both a commercial studio and a school of photography. When photography was first introduced to Joseon, many believed the rumor that having a photograph taken would take one’s soul away, but soon the myth dispelled after Emperor Gojong* frequently had his pictures taken. After Haekang Kim Kyujin*, the official royal photographer, opened Cheonyeondang, first commercial photography studio in Korea, photography quickly became a well-known medium of art, and suddenly everyone wanted their photographs taken.
People stood in long lines to wait for their turn in front of the camera. Minhyun and Seongwu sat, looking around to observe them. There were many families, as well as students like themselves who wished to commemorate their graduation. They looked at the photographs that lined the hallways until they were finally called. They were led into a dark studio, curtained on all four sides. A camera stood in the middle of it, and a tall folding screen, carpet, and a European wooden chair were set up where the lens was pointed. The wooden chair was long, almost like a bench; there were still space left over on each side when Minhyun and Seongwu sat side by side.

“Please stay near the center. You can sit on the chair, or stay standing. Whatever you want.”

A photograph instructed them, leisurely changing the film. They whispered to each other, deciding what to do. They needed two poses, as they were going to take two photographs. They could take two identical photographs, but Seongwu suggested that they vary their poses. With photographs in the hallway as reference, they tried a number of poses.

“Shall we do this?”

“Yes.”

“Young men, are you ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

Minhyun answered loud and clear, his voice slightly shaking. Seongwu was nervous. Standing still, he anxiously touched the collar of his gakuran. This was not an exam, but he was still shaking. Despite his unease he could not stop smiling, however, probably because of Minhyun. Seongwu whispered to him, in his head: *I love that I get to experience something special like this with you.*

“Now, smile, bright and wide!”

“......”

“All right. One, two, three!”

A bright white flash of light exploded before their eyes, and they were surrounded by brilliant particles of light. They felt as if time had stopped. Like this, their moment became eternity.

It took about a week to process and print their photographs, and they graduated before then. It had been a while since they enjoyed boisterous mess that was school. Of course, things were the loudest right after their graduation ceremony.

“Congratulations, everyone!”

Someone’s shout rang throughout school grounds. Taking this as a signal, students, who had been standing in a neat, square formation, broke out into a chaotic jumble. Students hugged and greeted their friends, exchanging words of congratulations and joy. Gyeongseong Secondary School once
again bustled like a busy bazaar. Everything was disorderly, but no teacher would attempt to order their students back into control. The ceremony existed solely for students, who finished five grueling, tough years of intense study. Letting them be was the last goodwill teachers could offer them.

Minhyun and Seongwu joined in the unbridled festival of joy. Because they spent five years attending the same school, they were acquainted with most students in their year. It took a while for them to go around and greet each and every one of them. After about half an hour, students whose parents attended the ceremony began to leave, and Minhyun and Seongwu started to talk about going home. Girls from nearby girls’ schools who had been eavesdropping on them panicked at their conversation. They had gathered to see for the last time Minhyun and Seongwu, two boys of incredible beauty Gyeongseong would never see again. Although they were unable to confess their feelings, the girls were wishing to get second buttons of Minhyun and Seongwu’s blazer, but were hesitating out of their lack of courage. Girls poked each other to go first, and Minhyun and Seongwu understood what they were there for. Too bad, thought Minhyun, I already have someone I wish to give my button to. Minhyun glanced at Seongwu, and Seongwu returned his gaze, signaling for them to get out of this unlikely spotlight.

“Are you… Hwang Minhyun sunbaenim?”

A gruff and low voice, probably just into puberty, called out to Minhyun. Minhyun looked back, and a younger boy, his face fresh and immature, was looking up at him awkwardly.

“Mr. Kimura is looking for you.”

“Is he? I’ll be in his office in a minute.”

“Let me go with you.”

Seongwu gladly suggested, clinging to Minhyun’s arm. Truthfully, Seongwu did not like that Mr. Kimura and Minhyun were close, even though Seongwu himself was loved by Mr. Kimura in his nepotistic way, having been one of the top students in his year. This was because Seongwu thought Mr. Kimura was stubbornly high-handed and only focused on his students’ grades. He saw Mr. Kimura almost every day for two years, but this was the first time he was glad to be called by him. It was Minhyun who had to talk to him anyways, and Seongwu could just tag along and get out of the uncomfortable attention he was being paid. Minhyun and Seongwu said their last goodbyes to classmates around them and began to walk towards teachers’ building. When they were sufficiently out of sight, Minhyun boldly reached out and looped his arm around Seongwu’s waist. Seongwu gasped, and whispered angrily: “What if someone sees us!”

“Let them see us, then.”

They were leaving Gyeongseong in a few days, and Minhyun genuinely cared nothing for how others regarded them. For now, all he wanted to do was enjoy Gyeongseong freely with Seongwu by his side. They bickered playfully as they climbed the stairs to Mr. Kimura’s office.

Third floor, lined with empty fifth-year classrooms, was never so desolate. Mr. Kimura was sitting by a window, alone in silence, watching his students cheerfully moving about.

“Go inside.”

Seongwu said, pointing to the end of the hallway they had just walked, telling Minhyun that he would wait there. Minhyun nodded. When Seongwu walked away, he took a deep breath and opened the classroom door. Mr. Kimura looked at him, unstartled.
“You’re here. Take a seat.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was the first time Minhyun was seeing him since he told him about his acceptance to Pyongyang Medical School. Mr. Kimura never rebuked Minhyun for giving up Kaisai Secondary School in Tokyo and deciding to go to Pyongyang instead. Rather, he supported Minhyun for making a choice for himself, despite that the recommendation letter he had written with all his heart became useless.

“Congratulations on your graduation.”

“Thank you.”

“I saw you more often than I do my family, but now it seems we’ll drift apart like strangers again. I will be happy if you write to me from time to time. You were the most special student I had here.”

“I’m flattered, sir. I will make sure to write to you.”

“Yes. And I hope you face no more adversity in life, but if you ever need help from a Japanese national, please contact me.”

“I will, sir.”

Mr. Kimura pat Minhyun’s shoulder, as if to acknowledging the hardships he faced so far.

“Now we are finally equals. Call me the next time you come down to Gyeongseong, so we can have a drink. Not as a teacher and student, but as a sunbae and hoobae in life.”

“Surely.”

They smiled at each other. To Minhyun, Mr. Kimura was someone he felt closer to than he did to his family. Their relationship, once distant and one-sided, grew stronger after a violent incident involving Inoue, a military officer who openly beat Minhyun. A formidable trust developed between them, enough for Mr. Kimura to support Minhyun through his troubles fighting his family and deciding his future. Minhyun knew that it was difficult to meet Japanese people in Gyeongseong who were willing to reach out personally and warmly to Koreans. Mr. Kimura was Japanese, but he defied everything Japan stood for to Koreans. Even now, he extended his hand to Minhyun, asking for a handshake. Minhyun took his hand and squeezed, and their time together at Gyeongseong Secondary School was over.

Minhyun broke into a crisp smile. He only truly realized that he was leaving Gyeongseong after he bid goodbye to Mr. Kimura and the building he spent countless hours studying for the past five years. Now he could leave for Pyongyang and have his fresh start. Seongwu turned to him as he ran to his side.

“Finished?”

“Yes. Now let’s go home.”

They took the familiar route back home. They were used to seeing sunsets when they left school, but seeing the streets in broad daylight made them seem strange. Flowers and trees were hiding their buds until spring brought its warmth. I won’t see you next year! Seongwu bid even the tiniest forms of life on the side of the street an ardent goodbye.

Minhyun and Seongwu were truly alone only when they returned to their boarding house. As soon
as they entered their room, Seongwu daringly extended his open palm to Minhyun.

“Haven’t you forgotten something?”

“Ah… you’re right.”

It was time to let go of the second button of Minhyun’s jacket that Mr. Kimura helped save. Minhyun ripped it off, unhesitant, and removed stray threads on the buttonhole before handing it to Seongwu. Seongwu beamed, as now he possessed something he wanted. It was Seongwu’s turn to give his second button to Minhyun. Seongwu grabbed the button with one hand, and his jacket with the other, and pulled, only to find the act of ripping his button off incredibly hard.

“Why… why isn’t it coming off?”

Seongwu laughed, embarrassed. He did not want to appear to Minhyun as a man who could not even tear a button off his jacket. But there was something Seongwu did not know; Madame had mended his and Minhyun’s gakurans a few days before, so that they would stay fresh for a long time in their closets. All of the buttons on their jackets were held tightly to the fabric by three strands of threads. It was only natural that Seongwu had a difficult time pulling them off. Minhyun knew this, but he said nothing as he watched Seongwu struggle. The sight of Seongwu wrestling with his button was just too cute for him to spoil. Minhyun was ready to help whenever Seongwu asked for it, but he decided to wait leisurely. Seongwu pulled and picked at his button again and again, until he felt his fingers numb and finally asked for Minhyun’s aid.

“This is strange… I can’t seem to get it off. Can you do it?”

Seongwu drew closer to Minhyun, offering him his gakuran jacket which was still on him. Of course. Minhyun replied confidently, but he could not help but feel a little bit nervous. Minhyun disliked showing off physical strength, like most boys his age did, but now that Seongwu was watching, whether he ripped the button off in a single try actually mattered.

Minhyun carefully grabbed the button, and heard Seongwu swallow tensely. Minhyun drew a breath, focused, and pulled. The button came off with a snap, and Minhyun relaxed, knowing that he had succeeded. He pulled bits of threads off the button and held it up, proud as an Olympic gold medalist. Seongwu stroked Minhyun’s hair affectionately, as though rewarding him, and Minhyun smiled, content as a cat purring in the sun.

“You can keep it. I’m going to keep yours.”

“Thank you.”

They sat side by side, leaning their backs on the wall. Seongwu toyed with Minhyun’s button, absorbed in thought. Seeing how serious Seongwu was, Minhyun also looked at his button, trying to make sense of how this little thing, merely a button and nothing else to him, was regarded a treasure in Seongwu’s eyes. Of course, the meaning bestowed upon second buttons of gakuran jackets was quite special; it was the closest button to one’s heart, and keeping it was synonymous with a wish to keep one’s heart. It was a trend imported from Japan along with their culture of wearing school uniforms.

“This is just a button. I wonder who started to give it so much meaning.”

“Isn’t it romantic? I find it special.”

“The idea is unique, I’ll give you that.”
“Don’t be so harsh. I’m only happy to have your button, Minhyun.”

“I’d try harder to possess your heart, instead of a single button.”

“My heart? You’re already speaking of dissection, huh? Or have you turned into a vampire in European fables? I’m scared. I guess I’ll have to keep an eye on my heart from now so you won’t steal it from me.”

In a playful gesture, Seongwu covered his chest with both arms and turned away from Minhyun. Minhyun laughed, and inched closer to Seongwu. He gently turned Seongwu to face him, and removed his crossed arms from his chest.

“I desire your heart.”

“.....”

“But what I really desire is to conquer all dazzling feelings and sensations that electrify your heart, so that I can truly possess you.”

Minhyun’s roaming hand stopped upon Seongwu’s heart. Seongwu blushed, and he felt bashfulness take over him. Still, he had to tell Minhyun what he wanted to say. He whispered, quietly.

“I’m already all yours. Is that not enough?”

“You have no idea what it’s like. I grapple with thirst when I see you. It’s insatiable; nothing is enough, because I crave you endlessly. So I want you, constantly, ceaselessly.”

Minhyun’s palm, gently pressing upon Seongwu’s shirt, was hot. He continued speaking, his voice low and furtive.

"I can’t understand why I want to see you even when I’m seeing you, and why I want to hear your voice even when you’re speaking to me. All I know is that I’m not normal because of you. Since you caused this anomaly in me, I think you should take care of me. Could you do that?"

Minhyun spoke, his hands cupping Seongwu’s face. The mood between them became steamy within a flash. Seongwu twisted his body as a mysterious tickling sensation attacked it. Minhyun’s words and his heated gaze were overwhelming. Seongwu looked down, mumbling his answer.

“I’ll see, depending on how you behave…”

“You are the one who has my heart in an iron grasp. You are the ruler of my soul, and a god who reigns over the fire of my life. Please take pity on me, a mere helpless lamb, and refrain from giving me an uncertain answer.”

Minhyun thought it was funny how he struggled to be independent from his family for the months past. He sometimes thought he wanted to cut himself off completely from people of this world, but it was his first time wanting to be subordinated to another. Ong Seongwu was the only one he felt such a wish. With Seongwu, everything was permissible. Minhyun wished with all his heart that Seongwu would swallow him whole, that Seongwu would possess him completely. He looked to Seongwu, his eyes overflowing with desire to be had by him.

“It can’t be helped, then. I’ll have to kindly take care of you.”

Seongwu raised his hand and caressed Minhyun’s cheek. Warmth so tender rested fleetingly on Minhyun’s cheek. Seongwu looked into Minhyun’s eyes. Minhyun’s ears were scarlet, and his face
was full of impatient desire to obtain an eternal promise from Seongwu. Minhyun appeared undeniably in love. Seongwu gently placed his fingertip under Minhyun’s chin and raised his face so their eyes met fully. Minhyun’s eyes narrowed as he strong jaw moved up, but he refused to let Seongwu out of his line of sight. Seongwu kneeled in front of him as if in prayer, and looked down at Minhyun with unwavering eyes.

“I’ll take care of your heart,“

A kiss, light as a butterfly, landed on Minhyun’s lips.

“Your soul,”

“.....”

“All of you.”

Seongwu lowered his eyelids, and kissed Minhyun deeply. Their eyes closed in tandem, and they began to feel each other with only their other senses. Warmth surged around them, and Minhyun felt a rush of thrill run down his spine as Seongwu caressed him more lovingly than ever.

When Minhyun was younger, he did not know the magnitude of power love could hold. His family were cold to him, and he did not know how to let others into his heart. He only learned after meeting Seongwu how something intangible like love could change him permanently. With Seongwu, he learned how to exchange love with someone. Minhyun’s soul became shrouded in ecstasy. He had grown from a boy to a man. He forgot everything that came before he started to love Seongwu.

A searing kiss made them forget reality, and they slowly let go of their rational selves. Their kiss only paused when Seongwu’s body began to tip backwards. Minhyun covered Seongwu’s head and back with his hands and carefully laid him on the floor, mounting him. Minhyun’s heart swelled with joy that Seongwu, who was panting with a blush coloring his cheeks, was his and his only. Minhyun peppered kisses here and there on Seongwu’s face.

“Hey, that tickles...”

“It tickles? Is that all you feel?”

Minhyun looked down at Seongwu mischievously. Seongwu turned his face to the left, avoiding Minhyun’s eyes. This made Minhyun want to prod further.

“Seongwu. Ong Seongwu.”

“.....”

“You won’t answer me?”

Minhyun took his index finger and touched Seongwu’s ear. Seongwu expected him to just poke, but Minhyun’s finger pushed inside Seongwu’s ear. Seongwu’s head turned away from Minhyun following his push, and Seongwu softly laughed. With a blush all over his face and neck, Seongwu appeared endlessly languid as he did. Minhyun laughed with him, bent on teasing him further.

Without hesitation, Minhyun pushed his hand inside Seongwu’s shirt. Minhyun’s hand roamed over warm, soft stomach, and landed on the flat expanse of Seongwu’s chest. Minhyun felt Seongwu’s thudding heart through the thin skin, and noticed that it was beating fast. Minhyun’s heart, too, was beating fast and hard, pumping rushes of blood all the way to his fingertips. Minhyun pulled Seongwu’s shirt up to reveal soft skin underneath and began to plant his traces upon it.
Minhyun waited until Seongwu became a writing mess until he went lower. He unbuckled
Seongwu’s belt and pulled down his trousers and underwear. Seongwu was breathing heavy,
overwhelmed by arousal, and he was already half hard. Minhyun took him into his hand and stroked
him, and Seongwu mewed, panting as if he had just run a race.

Minhyun pushed Seongwu over the edge with his hand, and brought his bottle of perfumed oil. He
began to open Seongwu up, touching and stretching him repeatedly so as to not hurt him. Seongwu
began to relax and open like a flower before heat. Minhyun held him open, prodding him with his
fingers and pushing into just the right places Seongwu liked. Wet sounds of Minhyun’s busy fingers
and Seongwu’s gasping sobs intertwined to create a single ethereal sound. Minhyun placed himself
between Seongwu’s thighs when Seongwu became comfortable with three of his fingers. Seongwu
was ready, and Minhyun entered him, slow and gentle.

Seongwu instinctively held his breath as Minhyun carefully penetrated him. Seongwu could not get
used to this feeling of something hot and hard burrowing into his body, and he clenched his eyes
shut. Minhyun did not move, and he quietly observed Seongwu.

“I won’t move, so breathe slowly.”

“Mhmm.”

Seongwu nodded, and he took long, quiet breaths, as if medicating. Minhyun patiently waited for
Seongwu until he regained regular breathing. Seongwu became more calm and relaxed under
Minhyun’s attentive watch, and as he did, Minhyun gathered Seongwu’s shirt together. Minhyun
buttoned Seongwu’s gakuran back up to the neck, except the second button, which was already
ripped off.

“Why are you buttoning me up…?” Seongwu asked.

“I just wanted to see you,” Minhyun said, leaning down and whispering into Seongwu’s ear.
“become a mess under me in your gakuran.”

“What?”

Seongwu laughed, incredulously.

With Minhyun’s deep love for Seongwu, there came an antinomy of an impulse to destroy and
conquer. Minhyun always kept hidden the urge to somehow mess Seongwu up that sometimes raised
its head in the pit of his gut. When he saw seongwu sitting at his desk, everything about him neat and
orderly, he wanted to turn him into a mess only he was allowed to see. At the same time, Minhyun’s
rational self did not allow this decadent side of his psyche to prevail. Having Seongwu wear his
uniform tonight was the most he would allow himself to indulge in his fantasy. He would later
redeem himself by washing and starching Seongwu’s sweat-drenched shirt.

When Seongwu became well-adjusted, Minhyun bucked his hips faster and harder. His belt clanked
as he pushed forward and into Seongwu, and he took both of their belts off to throw on the side.
They landed on the floor in a messy tangle. Before Seongwu could glance at them, his body quaked
again with yet another hard thrust.

“Are you hurting?”

Minhyun placed his finger between Seongwu’s lips, preventing him from biting on his lower lip.
Minhyun slowed his movements and leaned down. Seongwu, drenched in sweat and his eyelids
drooping, wrapped his arms around Minhyun’s neck. Minhyun kissed him. Whenever Minhyun
moved, broken moans dripped from Seongwu’s lips. Minhyun swallowed them all, revelling in indulgence in Seongwu’s body.

Minhyun pulled himself up, his eyes quickly brushing over Seongwu. He was perfect: silken black hair, languid face overcast by lust, pale neck and chest peppered with red marks of love peeping out between his disheveled collars, and tight, flat stomach. Minhyun found himself fall for him all over again. Minhyun was an atheist, but in this moment he had to acknowledge the existence of an almighty God. Seongwu was His creation; otherwise, there was no other explanation for his perfection.

Minhyun wrapped Seongwu’s legs around his waist, and lowered himself again. He planted his elbows next to Seongwu’s face and pressed their chests together. Their bodies stuck together without a crack of space in between. They could feel each other’s heartbeats through their skins, and their hearts were beating in tandem.

“It feels like we’ve truly become one.”

Minhyun whispered into Seongwu’s ear. Seongwu felt goosebumps traveling all over his body. In this moment, Minhyun’s voice sounded too lewd for him to handle. He did not have the time to think deeply of it, as his body kept being ravaged with rogue pleasure he craved more and more as he was given it. Seongwu looked up to the beautiful face he loved with all his life, and asked for another kiss. Minhyun obliged, and they continued indulging each other. Minhyun’s thrusts became deeper, and he stirred the wet cave of Seongwu’s mouth as he grew impatient for release. His thrusts grew more desperate, and he touched Seongwu again as they deliriously grappled for each other.

Their skin slapped together, moist with sweat; Minhyun saw that Seongwu’s supple skin where his hips were hitting him were reddened from the friction, and reminded himself to take care of him afterwards. They were so close now. Minhyun pushed and pushed into Seongwu, to get inside deeper, until he came to an abrupt stop. He released himself deep into Seongwu, and stroked Seongwu until he met his own climax. Rough, heavy breathing filled the space between them, and they stayed still for awhile, just enjoying each other’s presence. They did not stay overwhelmed in the aftermath of fiery passion for long. Minhyun was the first to catch his breath, and he bent down to kiss Seongwu’s forehead.

“I love you.”

“Me too…” Seongwu answered faithfully, although he was unable to even open his eyes. Minhyun fell in love with him once again, and he smiled to himself, happy that they belonged to each other.

********************

Dreamy days continued until they finally had to leave. They woke early to get ready for their new voyage. Minhyun checked, not once, not twice, but three times, if they had not left anything in their beloved old room. Now cleaned out, it was tidy enough for someone else to move in immediately. Seongwu looked at it, thinking how it had not changed a bit since back when they first moved in five years ago. He looked around his room one final time and went downstairs.

Minhyun and Seongwu took a deep bow to their gracious hosts. They were like family to Minhyun and Seongwu, and they wanted to take the time and the appropriate manners to honor them. When they were about to walk out the blue metal gate, they realized how they had come to truly love their
home of five years. They promised their hosts they would visit them every time they came down to Gyeongsong, and only then could they leave.

Minhyun and Seongwu walked to Gyeongsong station, each with a luggage in hand. They went through Bukchon’s labyrinthine alleyways again, passed Cheonggyechun creek that flowed for apparent eternity, and laughed when they crossed over a bridge over it upon which they exchanged young, hopeful promises as children. They also passed Myeongchijung, their favorite spot to watch flamboyant modern boys and girls, and the photography studio in Sogongdong.

A week before, they had picked up their photographs from the studio, and they had promised to look at them on their train to Pyongyang. They walked past Gyeongsong Public Authorities (京城府廳), Daehanmun Gate (大漢門), and Seoksugung Stonewall Walkway to get to Gyeongsong Station. These streets were the same as Minhyun and Seongwu first saw them, but they had changed, from boys to men.

For the first time ever, Minhyun and Seongwu entered Gyeongsong Station together. Minhyun had come to the station many times when he walked Seongwu there, but he had never gone inside it. Minhyun stuck to Seongwu like a duckling would to its mother, and Seongwu laughed at him, finding him adorable. Minhyun appeared a bit embarrassed, but he still refused to distance himself from Seongwu beyond an arm’s length.

They showed their tickets for a train headed to Dandong, China, and passed over to their platform. The crowd thinned considerably, and they caught their breaths, and talked while sitting on an wooden bench. Soon, a jet-black steam locomotive entered the platform to take them to Pyongyang. They entered their car, and Minhyun looked around him with eyes full of wonder. Seongwu reminisced about his first time riding a train. He got on a train at least twice a year for the last five years, and so he did not feel the same degree of wonder as his first time. Mirroring what his grandmother and uncle did for him five years ago, Seongwu kindly explained the nature of things in their train to Minhyun.

The train quaked once more, and it squealed loudly, gushing clouds of gray fumes. It began to move again, and slowly pushed away upon its tracks. Soon, it was out of Gyeongsong station. As they traveled away from it, the train gained speed. Minhyun and Seongwu felt their hearts flutter, and they furtively held hands as they passed the boundary line out of Gyeongsong.

When Minhyun became used to the noise and vibrations of the train, they were in Kaesong*. They still had three stations until Pyongyang, and four hours to go. They took an envelope out, and as they opened it, their hearts thumped as though they were opening a grade report. Seongwu carefully held out two photographs with his thumb and index finger.

“Wow!”

“We have to admit, we’re quite photogenic.”

Minhyun and Seongwu leaned their heads against each other, and looked at their photographs. They felt like they could be pulled into their likeness. Somehow, they looked like strangers in print. More than anything, though, they were happy to be able to hold a precious moment in time in their hands.

“Which would you like?”

“Hmm…”

Seongwu plunged into deep thought at Minhyun’s question. They were in different poses in each of the photographs, and he had a difficult time choosing. Seongwu picked up each one and perused it.
First photograph had Seongwu sitting, and Minhyun standing beside him, and Seongwu was closer to the camera. Second photograph had both of them sitting next to each other, facing the camera straight like a pair of twins. Seongwu adored both photographs, enough to want to frame them and hang them on his wall, but he wished he could have Minhyun closer to the camera in the second photograph. Seongwu vowed they would take another photograph when they were out of university, and picked the second one.

“I’ll take this one.”

“Then I’ll take the other.”

Perhaps Minhyun had wanted the second photograph as well, but he told Seongwu he would have picked the first one even if he had a choice, because he could see Seongwu better in it. For the time left, they ate a bento they bought on the train and watched lush landscape pass by. Eventually, they fell asleep; Seongwu was first to doze off, with his head on Minhyun’s shoulder, and Minhyun soon closed his eyes, leaning his head on Seongwu’s. The sun set as they slept hand in hand, their fingers intertwined.

The train approached Pyongyang, and a foreign cityscape distinct from that of Gyeongseong welcomed Minhyun and Seongwu.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 27:

* Emperor Gojong: Emperor Gojong of Korea (September 1852 – 21 January 1919), was the twenty-sixth king of the Joseon dynasty and the first Emperor of Korea. His reign was from 13 December 1863 – 13 October 1897.

* Haekang Kim Kyujin: Kim Kyujin (1868 - 1933) was one of the first commercial photographers of Korea and was the officially appointed imperial photographer under Emperor Gojong. His commercial photography studio, Cheonyeondang, was the first of its kind to open to the public in Korea. "Haekang" is his self-given name, as old Koreans used to give themselves names to be called by friends and acquaintances without regard to age (so without using things like 'hyung').

* Kaesong: Kaesong is a city in North Hwanghae Province in the southern part of North Korea, a former Directly Governed City and the capital of Korea during the Taebong kingdom and subsequent Goryeo dynasty. The city is near the Kaesong Industrial Region close to the border with South Korea.
As soon as the train stopped, crowds of people on the platform pushed into it. Minhyun and Seongwu had to squeeze their way out of their car, like salmon swimming upstream. They expected the crowd to thin once they entered the station, but they soon found they were wrong. Pyongyang was one of the most important cities in the Korean peninsula, second only to Gyeongseong and Busan. Pyongyang Station was full of people from all reaches of Korea, as well as Manchurians, Chinese, and Russians. Thousands of incomprehensible words reverberated in the high halls. Minhyun felt as if something was muffling his ear, as if he was submerged in water. He understood why Seongwu as a boy was afraid to go to Pyongyang alone. If Minhyun as an adult was disoriented here, it surely would have terrified a young Seongwu. However, Seongwu was no longer a fish out of water, and he deftly slithered his way out to the exit. More and more people crowded around them as they neared the main gate, and Minhyun had to focus solely on Seongwu not to become lost.

As they finally exited Pyongyang Station, a panorama of the great city welcomed them beyond the metal gates. Minhyun paused, taking in this new world he was to live in. A department store with a flamboyant facade stood near a wide, western-style plaza, and people bustled upon it. A streetcar ran along the train station, and a few automobiles were running parallel to it. This scene was not very different from Gyeongseong, yet everything felt new and foreign. They were in Pyongyang,
Seongwu’s hometown.

“Welcome to Pyongyang!” Seongwu said, beaming.

They got on a streetcar and went on for about half an hour. The train which started from Pyongyang Station passed the department store and a theater, and headed for Taedong Bridge. Taedong River shone a bright orange, reflecting the sunset and illuminating Minhyun and Seongwu’s faces. The streetcar entered a large avenue and passed by a number of intersections to arrive at a small cathedral. Seongwu rang the bell for it to stop, and they got off at a streetcar stop right in front of the cathedral.

“See, you must enter this alley to get to my family home.”

“I’ll make sure to remember.”

Minhyun carefully looked around, remembering details of the street. He followed Seongwu for about ten minutes to find a crowd of people in front of the gate to a certain house. That’s my house… Seongwu whispered, perplexed, worried that something bad might have happened to his family while he was gone. Seongwu grabbed someone in the crowd that he was acquainted with and greeted him. Just as he was about to ask what was going on, someone shouted a reply: “Gyeongseong Bachelor!”

“Eh?”

Minhyun and Seongwu blurted out their reply, confused. It did not take long for them to understand what was going on. Everyone looked at Minhyun at once; the entire village had been talking about him as soon as there was news that a young man will be boarding at the Ongs’ house. The villagers welcomed the tall, handsome newcomer, complimenting his pale skin and good looks fit for a stylish Gyeongseong native. Minhyun stood among the enthusiastic crowd, not knowing what to do. Seongwu saved him from being trapped by taking his arm and escorting him into the house.

The Ong family home was a traditional hanok with roofs made of kiwa*. Within the high stone walls that surrounded the home, there were the anchae (main house), sarangchae (guest house)*, and a sadang*. One had to pass the guest house to get to the main house, which consisted of two wings, one with a living room, a drawing room, kitchen, and dining room, and the other lined with bedrooms. Seongwu’s old room, which he used to share with his uncle, was also one of the bedrooms in the main house, but Seongwu went into the guest house straightaway. Because Minhyun was moving into the guest house, Seongwu was going to live there with him.

They entered the guest room they would share, already cleaned meticulously for its new residents. When Seongwu pulled the door open, they would see the yellow floor. On the left wide of the room, there was a low chest that came up to Minhyun’s waist, and thick blankets and pillows on top of it. On the right side sat a desk they would share and a lampholder. Minhyun put his luggage down on the floor to examine the room. He had never left Korea since his birth, but it was his very first time being in a wholly traditional hanok. Also, this place was where Seongwu was born and raised. Minhyun stood for a while, immersed in layers of thought.

Once they were settled in, Minhyun and Seongwu headed to the main house to greet elders of the Ong household. Minhyun was uncharacteristically nervous, and he kept clamping and then releasing his fists, over and over. Seongwu tried to calm him down, but Minhyun just could not relax. It was only natural for him to feel that way. It would be strange for a man to not be anxious when meeting his beloved’s family for the first time.

Ong family were all sitting in the master bedroom. Seongwu’s grandmother and his parents sat in front of a folding screen adorned with black and white ink wash painting, and his two brothers and
sister sat on their side. Minhyun and Seongwu courteously greeted them, taking deep bows. Seongwu’s grandmother smiled, proud of how wholesome they looked.

“So, what family do you belong to, Mr. Hwang?”

“I am a Changwon Hwang (昌原 黃氏), Sijoong-gong clan (侍中公派), thirty-second degree. I have two older brothers and an older sister.”

“You are the youngest in your family, then. But how are you much more mature than Seongwu, our eldest?”

“Grandma!”

The mood about the room lightened in a flash when Seongwu’s grandmother teased her grandson. Once the awkward silence was broken, conversations flowed freely through dinner. A table of liquor and food was served to commemorate a happy day. Everything was delicious as they looked, and Minhyun did not refuse glasses of drinks offered to him by adults of Ong family. His face brightened in a scarlet blush after three glasses of soju, and Seongwu kept glancing at him in worry. Minhyun kept his upright posture, and answered everything the adults asked him. The questions asked were at first innocuous and cursory, like how his parents were doing, but gradually turned more personal.

“I see that you haven’t been betrothed yet. Do you hate the idea of marriage, like our Seongwu?”

“No, I am just waiting for the right time.”

“What have you to wait? You’re already of age.”

“Not all adults are mature enough because they are older. I’d like to think of marriage when I can properly care for and take responsibility for my beloved.”

“Young ones these days behave so foolishly, blinded by free love. But you are of a sound mind, Mr. Hwang!”

“Haha…”

Minhyun could not tell the truth by admitting free love was what brought him to Pyongyang, so he pushed a spoonful of food into his mouth without a reply. Seongwu, who shared the same secret, also looked away as his two brothers asked Minhyun another question. Minhyun continued the conversation seamlessly, and Seongwu saw a twinkle of light in his sister Heewu’s eyes as she watched Minhyun closely.

Dinnertime ended in jovial mood. Minhyun took the time to courteously say his goodnights before exiting the main house. Everything was perfect. He faltered as soon as he was out of eyesight of Seongwu’s family, intoxication from all that liquor hitting him in waves. Seongwu had to help Minhyun stay upright as he wavered in front of the guest house. Seongwu could smell the alcohol from Minhyun’s face and neck.

“You shouldn’t have drank so much.”

“How could I refuse drinks offered to me by elders?”

“You’re allowed to refuse things like that, you know.”

You can be too soft sometimes. Seongwu sighed. When they got to the guest house, Minhyun collapsed onto the low wooden veranda, and kicked off his shoes, something he would never do
sober. When Minhyun stumbled into the room, heated beforehand for his comfort, he felt his consciousness melt away. Seongwu moved about busily, spreading blankets on the floor and helping Minhyun lie down upon them. Minhyun blinked slowly, feeling his body limp and heavy, like cotton dipped in water. As his body eased from nervousness, drowsiness took its place and began to envelope him in its stupor.

Seongwu watched Minhyun, vowing to himself never to let Minhyun drink more than he can manage. There was another aspect of this evening that bothered Seongwu, however.

“How did you bewitch my sister?”

Seongwu asked Minhyun as he crawled in next to him, his voice playful more than accusing. Minhyun’s drooping eyelids shot open.

“What?”

“Heewu couldn’t take her eyes off you.”

“...I did nothing to her.”

Minhyun replied, his voice small but defensive.

“Of course you didn’t.” Seongwu snickered, fully enjoying teasing Minhyun, whose responses were tamed and slow in his state of intoxication.

“I will never forgive you if you touch my sister.”

“How naive can you be? I only have eyes for you.”

“Hehe.”

“Come hither, let’s play piggyback.”

Minhyun took Seongwu into his arms in a deep embrace. Seongwu understood his reference, and let out a soft laugh.

“Love song from Chunhyangga*, is it? Shall I be your Chunhyang tonight?”

“You can be anything you want, but the best you is just simply yourself.”

*Love, love, love, my love. Minhyun murmured, leaving fluttering kisses upon Seongwu’s face until he had to be told to stop. Seongwu decided he liked Minhyun drunk, but still promised himself to never let Minhyun drink again. Go to sleep! Seongwu whispered, lightly slapping Minhyun’s back. Their first night in Pyongyang thus went by, peaceful and full of joy.

Minhyun eased into life in Pyongyang quickly and smoothly. On the surface he was just a boarding student at Ong family’s house, but Seongwu thought he was sometimes received as something close to a son-in-law. He was happy that Minhyun was liked by his family, and that they got along well. Seongwu had worried about whether his younger brothers, close to age to them, would somehow clash with Minhyun, but they liked and admired Minhyun much more than Seongwu had expected them to.

When March came along they went back to school, this time not to Gyeongseong Secondary School as they had for the last five years, but to their respective universities. They had started a new life. They rose early in the morning to go to school, and it was still Minhyun who woke earlier to gently
shake Seongwu awake. Every morning, he signalled a new day by embracing Seongwu who drowsily opened his eyes, his hair a disheveled mess.

After they dressed, they walked together to the streetcar stop in front of the cathedral. A streetcar came by every fifteen minutes, and in the mornings they were always full. It was sometimes suffocating to stand in the middle of a crowded car, but fortunately for Seongwu, his destination was only three stops away from home. He stepped out of the streetcar as people eyed him enviously. He looked back at the streetcar, locking eyes with Minhyun. Minhyun looked at him, longingly, but he stuck his tongue out and ran into an alleyway. Minhyun chuckled to himself. Perhaps because he was in his hometown, Seongwu’s playfulness had doubled since they came to Pyongyang. Minhyun could never be angry at Seongwu’s antics, though, and even now, he could only adore Seongwu more, looking at how high-spirited he looked as he scurried away. The streetcar jolted forward again, and soon entered Taedong Bridge.

Minhyun gazed at the cityscape that sprawled next to the twinkling waters. Pyongyang had a similar layout to Gyeongseong. It had a wide river running through the heart of the city, and the city divided into northern and southern areas. However, Taedong River was narrower and had more bends and curves than Han River, and so the two sides of the city on the opposite side of the river felt closer together. Many crossed the river daily, and Minhyun did, too, as his school was located north of the river. This, Minhyun’s range of daily commute in Pyongyang was much greater than that in Gyeongseong, where he mostly went back and forth between Bukchon and Jongno.

“Hwang!”

Minhyun turned around as a familiar voice called out to him. It was Kyuwon, who held a bag and a book under his arm.

“Yoon hyung! I’m so glad to see you here.”

“Yes. You look unfamiliar to me, perhaps because you’re dressed like a modern boy rather than in your old gakuran.”

In fact, many young people, including Seongwu, Minhyun, and Kyuwon, were dressed like modern boys. They wore white shirts, ironed and starched, vests, and a light jacket on top, paired with long trousers and clean brogues. Minhyun did not like to wear a tie, and often left the top button of his shirt undone.

“You’re still as handsome as ever.”

“Thank you.”

They entered the university building together. Kyuwon served as a faithful guide to Minhyun, who was not yet accustomed to Pyongyang Medical College. Minhyun parted from Kyuwon only when he had to go to class. The desks and chairs in his new classroom were different in both shape and color from those he used back on Gyeongseong, and he felt as if he was in a foreign land. Soon, a blonde, blue-eyed professor entered the classroom without an interpreter and introduced himself in English; he was an internal medicine doctor from Canada. The professor began his lecture right away, and Minhyun thought of Seongwu, who was impressively fluent in English.

However, the lecture became intrepidly difficult very fast, and Minhyun did not have time to think about Seongwu anymore. He sat through multiple lectures that were equally as all-consuming, only to be freed at five o’clock in the afternoon. Utterly exhausted by the time he got home, Minhyun took Seongwu into his arms and did not let go for a long while. Seongwu caressed his back as Minhyun buried his nose into his nape and breathed in as much as he wanted. Ticklish, Seongwu flinched each
“...So, how are things over in educational university?”

“It’s not so difficult, but things are strict and serious, just like in secondary school. It feels like an extension of Gyeongseong Secondary School sometimes.”

“I’d reckon it’s not easy to become a teacher. You’ve worked hard today.”

“What about you? Did you have a hard time?”

“I was about to die because I didn’t have you.”

Minhyun played the baby, which he rarely did. He burrowed into Seongwu’s shoulder, and rubbed his cheeks on it like a young animal. Seongwu figured he was asking to be embraced and comforted, and quietly patted his back. Minhyun regained liveliness soon after.

After they eased into their schedule, they could find pockets of free time to enjoy. One warm spring afternoon, Minhyun and Seongwu headed downtown to meet Kyuwon, well-dressed. People stared at them as they passed by.

Pyongyang in the late nineteen-thirties appeared like a European city on first glance. Compared to Gyeongseong, which was a chaotic whirlwind of the past and the present, tradition and new cultures, and conservatism and liberalism, Pyongyang, a more modernized city, was freer and more open to new ideas and things. So young men dressed in western clothes were a common sight, but Minhyun and Seongwu demanded extra attention of the passersby. Kyuwon thought that this was because they now had allure of fully grown men. Kyuwon secretly missed the times when baby chub graced Minhyun and Seongwu’s cheeks, and smiled to himself.

The trio reunited, greeting each other warmly, and headed to a famous naengmyeon* house. Kyuwon led his juniors there, asserting that once in Pyongyang, one has to taste the city’s namesake Pyongyang naengmyeon. Minhyun and Seongwu did not object and just followed Kyuwon, and Kyuwon thanked them silently for their acquiescence, only to find out that it really did not matter at all to the pair what or how they ate. Kyuwon grimaced at Minhyun and Seongwu, who failed to hide loving glances between them even in front of him. To tease them, Kyuwon snatched Minhyun’s write above the table, and said, his voice theatrical: “Hey, look! I’ve caught a phoenix!”

“What?”

“Do you not know what the expression ‘catching a phoenix’ means?”

“Doesn’t it mean you’ve been extremely lucky?”

“I guess you don’t know the true meaning of the expression, then.”

Kyuwon snickered as he explained. In Korean, the word phoenix, or ‘bonghwang,’ referred to both male and female phoenix. Mythical creatures, the phoenix were famous for marital harmony, and wherever the male went, its female counterpart followed; so when one caught a male phoenix, a female naturally came with the catch.

“That’s why I likened you to a couple of phoenix.”

“Haha, thanks for such a fun lesson, hyung.”

Kyuwon sighed, seeing that Minhyun and Seongwu showed no remorse to his roundabout way of
shaming their open affection. Fortunately, their naengmyeon arrived to their table and their attention diverged from the topic.

The bowls of naengmyeon lived up to their fame. Minhyun, Seongwu and Kyuwon drank even the broth before they left the restaurant. To walk off what they ate, they went to the riverside walkways, and went up to Pubyok pavilion* on Moran Hill. They were alone in the pavilion, and they sat admiring the beautiful view of their city for a long time.

After sending Kyuwon home, Minhyun and Seongwu wandered in the city for an hour or so before they finally returned home. They bathed and spread the blankets on the floor, and lied down facing each other to talk about their day.

“I see why there’s an old saying that staying in Pyongyang is better than any kingly living. Pyongyang is so beautiful. Is that why you’re such a beauty?”

“I’d be just as handsome wherever I was born.”

“You’re right.”

Minhyun agreed seriously to Seongwu’s joke. To Minhyun where Seongwu was from was not important at all. Minhyun would have loved Seongwu even if he were not Korean, even if he were Japanese. They continued talking about things they saw that day, like songs they heard, food they had, and newly imported gadgets from the west they saw downtown. Mid-sentence, Minhyun was reminded of something that he thought was unique: kisaengs*.

Kisaengs also existed in Gyeongseong, but most of them were employed at high-end tea houses or restaurants, wearing modern-girl clothes. Some debuted as singers, devoting themselves to artistic endeavors. Ordinary people who went about Gyeongseong rarely stumbled upon kisaengs. In Pyongyang, it was different. Pyongyang was known countrywide for the beauty and finesse of its kisaengs, and they dressed in flamboyant traditional clothes. They walked in groups, wearing colorful hanbok and fancy makeup. They stood out from people on the streets who were mostly dressed in muted colors.

Minhyun said he could never be used to kisaengs’ existence and their presence in the city. Seongwu teased him, asking him whether his unease with them was because they were beautiful. Minhyun flicked Seongwu’s forehead lightly, as if telling him to stop talking nonsense. At the same time, Minhyun wanted to carry the joke further, and in a mocking voice, pretended to be a visitor to a kisaeng.

“How wicked you are! I request that you spend the evening with me, and surrender all your loving.”

Seongwu glared at the audacity of Minhyun’s joke. Minhyun had recently mimicked Chunhyangga’s Yi Mongryong courting his kisaeng girlfriend, and this was another continuation of his mischievous teasing. Seongwu still found his heart fluttering at the voice, hand, and face that delivered the ridiculous line, and decided to play along. Pretending to be a kisaeng whose company was most sought-after in Pyongyang, Seongwu swatted Minhyun’s hand away.

“I won’t, sir.”

“Why?”

“You are dirt poor, sir.”

“I know I am dirt poor, and I have nothing to give you, but is my face not enough?”
Minhyun’s face was more than enough, but Seongwu feigned lack of interest.

“Your face is not enough.”

“Them what about love? Would you be satisfied if I devote to you all of my loving?”

“If it’s your loving, I might think about it.”

Seongwu’s large pupils moved about busily, pretending to decide whether he would give Minhyun his time. Minhyun took this opportunity to mount Seongwu’s body, and he whispered into his ear, voice low and furtive.

“I am also wonderful in bed.”

“How lascivious.”

Seongwu answered, with a shrug of his shoulders. At the sight, Minhyun began to feel a pleasant heat pooling in his chest.

“Don’t you want to find out the wonders I can perform in bed?”

“Before that, I must ask you to promise me your whole life.”

“All right. I devote all of my endless love to you, and you alone.”

“You promised.”

They sealed their promise with a kiss instead of a stamp. They kissed, again and again, their lips meeting and parting fleetingly, before they plunged into a deeper, slower kiss. Seongwu’s arms twined around Minhyun’s neck. Their day was not over yet.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 28

Kiwa*: A type of tiles Koreans used on roofs of traditional hanoks.

Sarangchae (guest house)*: (From Wikipedia) Sarangbang (舍廊房) is a room located in a Korean traditional house (hanok) which served as a man’s room, used for studying, writing poetry, and leisure activities. The Koreans created the sarangbang strictly following the Confucianism principles of the Joseon Dynasty. In lower-class homes, the sarangbang is located across from the women’s space (anbang), separated with a hall called a daecheong. One of the characteristics of the sarangbang is that it usually has a separate study called a sarangchae. The sarangchae is forbidden to women and only men can enter it. (Translator’s note) In LOOL, Ong family probably does not have such strict rules based on gender. They probably just had a sarangchae because they descended from old nobility and had an old-fashioned house.

Sadang*: In a traditional hanok, Sadang is a small separate house people used to honor their ancestors and hold memorial rites during holidays like Chuseok and Lunar New
Year.

Changwon Hwang (昌原 黃氏), Sijoong-gong clan (侍中公派), thirty-second degree*: This may NOT be Minhyun's real last name.

Chunhyangga*: Chunhyangga is the most famous pansori (musical story telling) in Korea, having had considerable popularity in the country for the past century. Chunhyangga is considered to be the best pansori musically, and as a work of literature and play. The Chunhyangga is not only a story about a woman of chaste reputation, but also about resistance to the aristocracy. The story stars Chunhyang, the daughter of a gisaeng (female entertainer), who becomes the wife of a district magistrate Yi Mongryong. It is supposed that Chunhyangga has existed since before Sukjong of Joseon (1661–1720).

(Translator's note) "Come hither, let's play piggyback" is probably the most famous line from Chunhyangga, and is uttered by Yi Mongryong, the male lead of the story, when he is courting Chunhyang, the female lead and heroine.

The rough story is that Yi Mongryong, a young aristocrat living in Namwon, Korea, falls in love with Chunhyang, a daughter of a local gisaeng, when he sees her riding a swing on a spring day. He pursues her, and they fall in love, before Mongryong has to leave for Seoul. Chunhyang, left alone, is badgered and harassed by a local magistrate that imprisons her to punish her for rejecting his advances. Chunhyang perseveres, and is ultimately saved by Mongryong, who returns as a new magistrate of Namwon.

Naengmyeon*: Naengmyeon (; 冷麺, in S. Korea) or raengmyŏn (, in N. Korea) is a Korean noodle dish of long and thin handmade noodles made from the flour and starch of various ingredients, including buckwheat (, memil), potatoes, sweet potatoes, arrowroot starch (darker color and chewier than buckwheat noodles), and kudzu (, chik). Buckwheat predominates (despite the name, it is not a wheat but rather is more closely related to sorrel). Other varieties of naengmyeon are made from ingredients such as seaweed and green tea. (Translator's note) Pyongyang Naengmyeon is one of the cooking styles of the dish

Pubyok pavillion*: The Pubyok Pavilion is located on Moran Hill, in Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The structure is one of the National Treasures of North Korea. The pavilion is located on an embankment of the shoreline of the Taedong river. The site's name Pubyok means floating walls, as if the site floats on the river.

Gisaeng (or kisaeng)*: Kisaeng, also called ginyeo, were women from outcast or slave families who were trained to provide entertainment, conversation, and sexual services to men of the upper class. They were also courtesans, providing sexual services. First appearing in Goryeo, kisaeng were the government's legal entertainers, required to perform various functions for the state. Many were employed at court, but they were also spread throughout the country. They were carefully trained and frequently accomplished in the fine arts, poetry, and prose, although their talents were often ignored due to their inferior social status. Aside from entertainment, these roles included medical care and needlework. Kisaengs play an important role in Korean conceptions of the traditional culture of the Joseon. Some of Korea's oldest and most popular stories, such as Chunhyangjeon, feature kisaeng as heroines.
Chapter Summary

Summer of 1937- Seongwu becomes a teacher, and Minhyun finishes his first year at medical school on top of his class. Seongwu's sister keeps eyeing Minhyun, and Ong siblings and Minhyun enjoy a carefree summer together. Second Sino-Japanese War starts, and its effects intrude into the Korean peninsula.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives

Chapter 29

Once time came close to semester’s end, groans of agony began to fill Minhyun and Seongwu’s room. They had been confident that Gyeongseong Secondary School had prepared them to face most academic hardships, but university exams were on a wholly different level. Minhyun had to stay buried inside his stack of books he kept near his desk, and Seongwu immersed himself to study, staying awake through many nights. They were paid handsomely for their troubles; Minhyun finished his semester top of his class, and Seongwu obtained his teaching license. Seongwu was glad he could get his license quickly, but at the same time he was a bit sad that he only had one semester to enjoy being a university student.

The teacher’s training school Seongwu attended was literally a place that made people into teachers. Places like these started to be established in large numbers, as many schools were rapidly being built around Korea. Training period was six months, and the only reason Seongwu chose his school despite having been accepted by superior universities was that it was free. Government General paid all students’ tuition to satisfy the demand for teachers. Seongwu had to think of his family and its financial status, as the times got more difficult each day and his siblings became older. Seongwu persuaded himself that this was not the end of his dreams. He was young; he would certainly have a chance to live them later.

Summer was a honeyed respite for Minhyun and Seongwu. Minhyun did not go down to Gyeongseong. He still had a lot to do. Joseon’s medical knowledge was incomparably behind that of
the west, and he had to throw himself into study if they were to catch up. Pyongyang Medical Colleges professors and students went to work every day during the summer to experiment and write papers. They tried tirelessly to elevate Korean medicinal knowledge.

Seongwu spent his time more freely. He wrote in his spare time, and took care of his siblings. He wanted to spend as much time as he could with his siblings, as he was away from them for years. Minhyun joined them after he returned from work. Being four boys, they liked to play football and basketball. Minhyun and Seongwu, unlike Seongwu’s two younger brothers, were neither talented or interested in ball games, but they had fun regardless. Sometimes Heewu came out with pants on to throw balls with them.

Pyongyang was generally cooler than Gyeongseong, but they were always drenched in sweat after chasing a ball for an hour or two. Instead of waiting until bath time, Seongwu’s brothers led them to a well behind the house to splash water on themselves. Their source of water was a newly built water pump next to the well. No longer used, the well itself was covered with a wooden lid. A large washtub sat next to the pump, filled to the brim with cold water.

“Hyung, come here.”

Jeongwu, elder of the two of Seongwu’s younger brothers, called to them. He asked them to take their shirts off and bend down. Minhyun offered Seongwu to go before him, but Seongwu did not want to, opting to wait until bath time. He stepped back, waving his brothers away.

“I’m fine. I’ll just bathe later.”

“As you want, hyung. What about you, Minhyun hyung?”

“I’ll go, then.”

Minhyun seemed enthusiastic about having cold water splashed on his back. He undid the buttons of his shirt, flinging it off without hesitation. His milky skin was exposed under the hot summer sun. Jeongwu whistled at the sight of his wide shoulders and well-built torso.

“Hyung-nim, looking at your body alone, you’re material for five-star admiral.”

“You overpraise.”

“What did you do to get your build? Advise on me later.”

Minhyun agreed, and bent down. Ice-cold water was splashed onto his broad back. Minhyun let out a sobering interjection, as if he had just been awakened by a bucket of water on his face, but he still did not budge. Excited by Minhyun’s honest response, Jeongwu splashed more water on his back, laughing. Streams and droplets of clear water flowed down his back, the moisture it left behind accentuating the graceful, voluminous ridges of his upper body. Water rolled down his solid arms and dripped to his toes right underneath, and wet the ground. Seongwu could not take his eyes off him, and he stood there, watching him, hypnotized.

“Um, Seongwu…”

“Hmm?”

Seongwu heard a feeble voice calling him, and turned around. It was his cherished sister, Heewu. Heewu had come to get them towels. Seongwu noticed that she did not look well.

“Why are you so red? Let me see your face.”
“No, I won’t let you. Just please take these towels.”

“Are you ill?”

Seongwu asked his sister, concerned, but Heewu pretended to have not heard him. Hyeonwu, the younger of Seongwu’s two brothers, laughed, and began to tease Heewu.

“Seongwu, you still don’t know? How can Heewu keep a straight face when Minhyun is standing there shirtless?”

“What?”

“What are you talking about, Hyeonwu? Watch your mouth!”

Heewu shouted, her brother’s words apparently having struck home. Afraid her brothers would reveal more embarrassing things, Heewu turned on her heels and ran into the house. Her heart was about to burst anyways, in front of Minhyun, who was being doused with water while half-naked. She had seen her brothers being splashed with water several times, but for some reason she could not bear to see Minhyun doing the same. Seongwu was left with the towels Heewu had pushed into his arms.

Minhyun stood up, and Seongwu quickly threw him a towel. Minhyun wiped himself as Hyeonwu took his shirt off. Before he bent down, Hyeonwu noticed something and asked: “Minhyun, what’s this on your back? Were you wounded before?”

What Hyeonwu pointed to was a long scratch that diagonally crossed Minhyun’s shoulder blades. It was a trace left by Seongwu when they were making love earlier. It did not hurt Minhyun much as it was shallow, but since it was recently acquired, it was noticeably red.

“It's a scratch I got while playing with a cat. I’m fine.”

“A ferocious kitty, huh? It must have hurt when it scratched you.”

“Well, it did. It really did.”

Minhyun said, looking at Seongwu. Seongwu chuckled, suppressing the many words he wanted to say.

When they were alone again in their room, Seongwu embraced Minhyun from behind. Seongwu leaned his cheek on Minhyun’s back, and caressed where he had scratched. He thought about what Minhyun had said to his brothers earlier, and quietly meowed.

“Meow.”

“Hahaha!”

Minhyun burst into laughter.

“I didn’t expect you to really turn into a cat.”

“Be careful. I’ll scratch you if you cross me.”

“I will watch myself, your majesty.”

Minhyun turned his head, trying to look back at Seongwu, who was burrowing his forehead into his back.
“Anyways, about my sister.”

“Mhmm.”

“I will have to burst her bubble of delusion quickly.”

“...What?”

“She likes you too much. She’s my sister, but I won’t allow her that. You’re mine.”

Seongwu said, squeezing his arms around Minhyun’s waist. Minhyun took Seongwu’s hand into his own, feeling his warmth through the thin skin of his palm. He slowly rubbed the back of Seongwu’s bony hand with his thumb.

“How do you plan to tell her? Will you tell her we’re seeing each other? Just like that?”

“There must be another way to keep her away from you.”

“You’ll have to think about it.”

“I will find a way.”

Seongwu thought zealously about the way he should tell his sister to lay off Minhyun, late into the night. Then he thought of his uncle, and how his uncle had told him about Santa Claus, or lack thereof. How long would his uncle have spent thinking about how to tell him? Seongwu remembered how shocked he was, and found himself reluctant to put his sister through similar surprise. At the same time, he did not want to leave his sister pine away in unrequited love. Seongwu rolled around on his blankets in indecision until he eventually fell asleep.

Oblivious to her brother’s agony, Heewu persistently snooped around Minhyun and Seongwu. She made all kinds of excuses to pay visits to their room, bringing them snacks and asking them to help her with schoolwork. When she ran out of excuses, she cited boredom as her reason to come over. Seongwu still found her endlessly lovable, except that her frequent visits to the guest house was becoming problematic.

One afternoon, Seongwu was looking at Minhyun, almost salivating as he did. Minhyun was sitting upright as usual, but for some reason he looked especially delicious that afternoon. The house was quiet, as the elders and his brothers had gone out. Considering their absence an opportunity, Seongwu approached Minhyun, and sat close behind him.

“Hey, Mr. Hwang.”

“What is it.”

“Until when do you plan to play a bookworm, when I am right beside you?”

Seongwu wrapped his arms around Minhyun, his hands lustfully caressing Minhyun’s firm torso. Seongwu nibbled on Minhyun’s earlobe before he slipped his name, breathy and hazy, into his ear. This ardent seduction trickled into Minhyun’s sensitive nerves, and Minhyun closed his book. Seongwu’s hand had slithered down to Minhyun’s waist, and they unbuckled his belt. Minhyun did not stop him.

“You must be in a real rut.”

“And you’re not?”
Soon, you’ll want it more desperately than I ever did. Seongwu said, snickering. Minhyun gently wrapped his hands around Seongwu’s wrists. Just as he was about to turn around, he saw a shadow of an intruder upon their door. Before he could alert Seongwu, she shouted:

“Seongwu!”

“Ahh!”

Surprised, Seongwu screamed as if he saw a ghost. Embarrassed, Heewu opened her mouth to speak, and then saw that Minhyun and Seongwu were in an awkward position. Her curiosity trumped her embarrassment.

“What are you two doing?”

“Well, um… Minhyun seemed to have a gray hair, so.”

Seongwu was a terrible liar, and Heewu raised her eyebrows. She decided against prying. She did not want to let Minhyun see her bombard her brother with questions, and it was not why she was there in the first place. What was most important to Heewu at the moment was seeing Minhyun’s face as long as she could.

“So, what brings you here?”

“There are words I don’t understand in my science textbook.”

“Like what?”

It was Seongwu who asked, but Heewu pushed her books towards Minhyun. Heewu was looking Minhyun almost as if Seongwu was invisible.

“I don’t understand this section about gravity and universal gravitation.”

“Hmm…”

Minhyun took Heewu’s book and perused it. Paragraphs were laced with difficult Chinese characters. Minhyun thought hard about how to explain things to Heewu in terms she would understand. He wanted to pass the burden over to Seongwu, but he, too, was sitting next to Heewu, looking at him with expectant eyes. Minhyun grinned.

“Here is an example. Say I am Earth. Gravity means that Earth’s gravitational pull that stems from the core of it applies to everything on its surface. Like this.”

Minhyun, out of the blue, grabbed Seongwu’s arm and pulled him toward himself. Caught by surprise, Seongwu was pulled into Minhyun’s arms. Seongwu, as a licensed teacher, thought for a moment how ridiculous this demonstration was, but he played along anyhow. He continued, building on Minhyun’s comparison.

“Universal gravitation means that everything that exists in the universe pull toward each other. Like this.”

Seongwu wrapped his arm around Minhyun’s shoulder. He tried to keep a straight face, but he felt his lips stretch into a victorious smile. Heewu looked at them, her face slightly hardening. She had instinctively realized that something was in the air between Minhyun and Seongwu.

“You’re not helpful at all. And you both went to Gyeongseong Secondary School?”
Minhyun and Seongwu’s actions seemed to have broken the young girl’s delicate sensibilities. Heewu picked up her book, and stormed out of the room. Minhyun worried about her, wondering if they had gone too far in their joke, but Seongwu just laughed at her, telling Minhyun there was nothing more fun than teasing his siblings. Afterwards, the two of them had to try for weeks to thaw Heewu’s frozen, sulking heart.

It was soon July, the hottest time of the summer. During nights when the heat kept his siblings from falling asleep, Seongwu gathered them in his and Minhyun’s room to tell them ghost stories. Seongwu was a born storyteller, and after his stories his siblings trembled at the slightest winds that shook the branches outside. Still, his stories held a morbidly imaginative quality that had his siblings coming back for more each night; ghost stories were made a pastime more popular than board games or arm wrestling. Seongwu soon ran out of stories to tell, and he had to look for inspiration everywhere he went. Unfortunately, he found that reality scarier than ghost stories were upon them.

“Extra! Extra!”

A week before Minhyun’s birthday, Seongwu went out to downtown alone to buy him a birthday gift. A newspaper boy was throwing tufts of paper along the street, and Seongwu picked one up, assuming the front page would be meaningless gossip, as they often were recently. However, Seongwu went pale as soon as he read the headline.

The Great Empire of Japan to Declare Total War With the Republic of China

Evening papers flying off a kiosk near him. Seongwu got in line, and bought a paper. He opened it, with trembling fingers, and read the article under the same headline.

On July 7, 1937, the Republic of China carried out shooting and kidnapping of Imperial Japanese soldiers who were night-training for combat at Bridge Lugou west of Beijing. Republic of China were blatantly unrepentant over this aggression, and Imperial Japan cannot let such act of impunity go unpunished. Imperial Japan’s declaration of war is thus a just punishment, not an invasion. The Japanese Parliament has ordered a full-scale attack on 29th troop of the Chinese army, and the army of Great Imperial Japan successfully seized Beijing and Tianjin. Japanese Imperial Army is advancing toward Shanghai.

The article rambled on about good wishes for the Imperial army of Japan. Seongwu crumpled the newspaper and threw it away. War. He had a bad premonition about this one. Japan had many recent skirmishes with nations around it, but it was its first all-out war since the Russo-Japanese War thirty years ago. Fear formed a cloud around his head, blurring his vision. Seongwu tried to erase the word ‘war’ from his consciousness, as did Minhyun. They feared that the war would break into their lives if they spoke about it, and for a while, they did not talk about war. Minhyun’s birthday passed in this uncomfortable, forced silence.
Upon mid-August, however, the war was already corroding away at Korea. Before they had a chance to properly celebrate Seongwu’s birthday, air-raid drills were enforced throughout all of Korea. The scope of training had expanded, and every person was subject to it. The Japanese Government General of Korea created specific and detailed rules for Korean people. They categorized people into ages, genders, and occupations, and every person was given at least one role to play. Women and seniors were put in charge of rescue and first aid, and men over seventeen years of age became reserves for the army or police force. All public employees, including teachers, were in charge of civilian evacuations and helping firefighters.

Ong family were also a part of raid training. Minhyun, Seongwu, Jeongwu, and Hyeonwu were its main subjects. They were given identifying dog tags with their names, dates of birth, and blood types engraved on them. They could tell how serious the government was. Jeongwu and Hyeonwu constantly complained about having to wear dog tags.

“I feel like a dog wearing this thing.”

“The back of my neck itches.”

Seongwu could not agree vocally, as their older brother, but he was too angry to tell them to bear it quietly. At the moment, all they could was follow orders, as Imperial Japan was threatening them, with their beloveds as hostage. People dragged themselves to training grounds, and families, friends, and lovers turned into each other’s weaknesses.

Training sessions were forced upon them by day, and blackouts by night. After eight o’clock in the afternoon, all the lights in the cities had to go off. In murky night sky lights of combat planes outshined those of stars. Planes flew low over their heads, as if threatening, their metallic hums clear and loud. Sleepless nights resumed for a full week.

“They wouldn’t accidentally raid us, right?”

“Never. There are too many people here they wish to use as resource.”

Minhyun let out a self-mocking laugh. He wished to kindly console Seongwu, but he did not have the strength to. He had run around all day with swords and guns. He lied down right after lights out, Seongwu next to him. He silently looked at Minhyun, and then held the metal dog tag around Minhyun’s neck between his fingers.

Hwang Minhyun

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Blood Type O

Minhyun felt Seongwu toying with his dog tag, and spoke quietly.

“In the lab, we talk frequently of blood transfusions.”

“Do you?”
“Yes. Interestingly, some blood types can give, while others can’t. I am O, and you’re A, correct?”

Minhyun turned on his side, and looked fully into Seongwu’s eyes.

“I can give you my blood.”

“Really? Then I want to give you mine, too.”

“You can’t. If I receive blood from you, I will die.”

“Why? That’s unfair.”

“How would I know why we’re created this way? But isn’t it enough that I can give you my blood?”

Minhyun caressed Seongwu’s hair. For the first time, Seongwu hated that he was a type A, but did not voice his regret. It would be best if they were never in a situation in which blood transfusion was needed. Seongwu prayed for their safety in his head. Minhyun’s voice flowed mellowly between them.

“I heard a rumor that the staff officer of Japanese army in China, Dojo Hideki, is a fanatic warmonger.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. The army in China is the main force Japan is focusing on. You’d have to be a war fanatic to get to that position.”

“The war isn’t going to end until Japan takes over all of China.”

“......”

“Beijing is seized, and it’s a matter of time until other cities fall. All we can do is wish for the war to be curtailed as much as possible. I know it’s unfair, but there’s nothing more we can do.”

“Yeah.”

It was obvious what evil would afflict them as the war continued. Seongwu embraced Minhyun, wishing desperately for their safety. Another night of anxiety passed by.

After the war training sessions were over, the second semester began. Minhyun crossed over Taedong Bridge every day with his thick textbooks, and Seongwu started work again at a primary school near home. Seongwu’s acknowledged talent in languages had made him a Korean language teacher in his first year. He thought education was desperately needed for children so they could wade through these difficult times. He could not stress the importance of learning Korean enough; and he felt a heavy burden of didactic responsibility upon his shoulders. Seongwu taught children with shining eyes how to read with all his heart.

Seongwu was an enthusiastic teacher; after school hours he studied various methods of teaching to make his lessons more effective, and tried his best to get along with his pupils. He did not want to be remembered as a teacher who only taught technicalities. As if to scoff at his efforts, the Japanese
Government General sent to each school a ‘Gift from the Emperor.’

It was October, and Seongwu saw Japanese police officers walking about school. Startled, he ran to the staff room to see all the other teachers already gathered there. Two officers in uniform sat where the principal and vice principal usually sat during staff meetings. When all of the teachers were gathered, they began to explain.

“This is a photo of Tenno. Make sure you worship His Imperial Majesty every morning, and recite this Pledge of Allegiance to Imperial Japan (皇國臣民誓詞).”

They handed out pieces of paper to each and every teacher. Seongwu looked over his. Printed on the paper were the contents of Pledge of Allegiance to Imperial Japan. The contents were divided in two parts: one for adults and one for children. Seongwu was to read the children’s version to his students.

1. We are loyal subjects of the Great Empire of Japan.
2. We will unite to swear our loyalty to His Majesty the Emperor.
3. We will persevere and train hard to become a superior and strong citizens of Imperial Japan.

Japanese officers asked the teachers to explain all difficult Chinese characters and words to their pupils, and left. The assembly of teachers, however, could not get up from their seats long after they were gone. Their hands trembled as they clutched papers so laughably thin for holding such ludicrous content. The principal spoke, finally, amidst sour mood among them.

“All you have to do is just… pretend to go along with this. Please cooperate.”

No one answered, which was the utmost rebellion they could engage in. Staff meeting ended in silence, and teachers went back to their respective classrooms.

Seongwu stumbled to his classroom. The hallway leading to its door seemed impossibly long today. He had no idea how he was going to tell his pupils about what he heard in the staff room. Before he could get his emotions in order, he was already there. He took a deep breath, and pulled the door open. More than fifty pairs of eyes stared at Seongwu. The teacher is here! A lively voice of a child tickled his ears. Seongwu greeted his pupils as if nothing had happened. They looked at him, their faces full of curiosity. No one dared to ask him, but they were all expecting Seongwu to explain to them why Japanese officers were at school. Seongwu did not want to tell them what he was supposed to tell and teach them, and in an act of audacity that surprised even himself, Seongwu hid the contents of the Pledge of Allegiance.

“Well, they left me with this piece of trash.”

Seongwu exaggeratedly mimicked a Japanese officer, and his students, in the dark, just laughed at him. Because they laughed, what happened in the staff meeting seemed like a distant and trivial happening that did not matter at all. Seongwu told his pupils that they were people of Joseon, and that they must never forget that fact. This was the best he could manage that morning.

Seongwu was out of his element all day, and he was accosted by a wave of fatigue once he returned home. It was Minhyun who consoled him. Minhyun massaged Seongwu’s shoulders and limbs, and shook his head when Seongwu asked him if the medical college had been free from these visits. Japanese officers had visited every classroom and lab in the medical college to hand out flyers of the
Pledge, and threatened them to say them out loud in front of them. All classes were cancelled until every professor and student followed their orders, and classes resumed only after they read aloud the Pledge in union. There was no doubt that everyone was disturbed all day. However, Minhyun was surprisingly dignified about the whole ordeal.

“They’re just words. They can’t change us. Remember our fourth year in Gyeongseong? How everyone was so worried because we had to participate in those military drills? But everything turned out fine. They can beat us and abuse us, but we’re still us.”

“Yes, but… I just keep getting scared.”

“The Japanese are being desperate, because things aren’t going their way. They’ll exhaust themselves soon.”

“I really hope so.”

“Everything will be fine. Just as you wish them to be.”

Minhyun kissed Seongwu’s forehead as if in prayer.

Despite Minhyun’s courageous words, things went exactly the opposite way as they had wanted. The entire student body and faculty at a seminary in Pyongyang were arrested for refusing shrine worship. Sungee University and Sungsil University of Pyongyang were permanently closed, also because they refused to take part in Shinto shrine worship. When these acts of quiet rebellion in schools repeated, the Japanese Government General sent police officers to all schools throughout Korea to inspect whether their decrees were being upheld. Seongwu’s school, Daeshin School, was not an exception; a police officer was due to visit the school next week for inspection.

Seongwu’s principal and vice principal begged the teachers to comply with the rules after they were notified of the police visit. They told the teachers that the students have nowhere to go if the school was forced shut, and that the best they can do for them is keep the school open so they would be able to lead educated lives in the future. They were right. The children desperately needed schools to lead them in the right direction, and the teachers had to do their jobs, even if that meant compromise.

Seongwu rolled his hands into tight fists as he listened to his superiors. They were correct. Things like pledges were mere words, and their survival was more important than absolutism. They had to survive in order to plan for a better future. Still, he found himself questioning the idea of a better future. He could not foresee a future now; so what use was it to prolong his life? Seongwu thought about it over and over through sleepless nights, but could not come to an answer. Time passed by, indifferent to Seongwu’s agonies.

In the end, Seongwu read to his pupils the contents of Pledge of Allegiance to Imperial Japan. He apologized to them, wholeheartedly, for being a pathetic teacher who had no choice but to compromise. Children, not understanding even half of what Seongwu meant, tried to comfort him. Please don’t cry, Mr. Ong. Only then did Seongwu realize that he was shedding tears. He wiped his face on his sleeves. He could not sit there and cry forever. He had to survive to protect his pupils, his family, and Minhyun.

In spite of Seongwu’s struggles, things became worse. The war did not end in three months, as the Japanese army had promised. Newspapers clamored about how the Japanese army was winning every battle, but no one believed them, as the Japanese Government General was exploiting the public more and more as days went by. The government general established a special tax to benefit the Japanese army in Sino-Japanese War on every purchase made in Korea. Distribution of nails, and other metal products began to be heavily regulated. Millions of trees that lushly covered all of Korea
were ruthlessly cut down. Rich forests were made desolate, and wild animals disappeared. Mountains were stripped of their green clothes. The cities became somber, as streets were gradually emptied of people. Nothing stood between them and the deathly cold of coming winter.

Chapter End Notes

Notes on Second Sino-Japanese War: The Second Sino-Japanese War was a military conflict fought primarily between the Republic of China and the Empire of Japan from July 7, 1937, to September 2, 1945. It began with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937 in which a dispute between Japanese and Chinese troops escalated into a battle. The incident Seongwu reads about in the newspaper is the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, a battle between the Republic of China's National Revolutionary Army and the Imperial Japanese Army. It is widely considered to have been the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).
Reddest Camellias on Earth

Chapter Summary

Life in Pyongyang continues. Seongwu and Minhyun go skating together on Taedong river when it freezes. When at home, they read old poetry books, play with flowers, and make love. Japanese rule soon forbids Korean language from being spoken and taught in schools, and Seongwu is forced to teach Japanese language and literature instead. Soon, national mobilization of Japan and conscription for young men begin.

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives

Chapter 30

Time flew by. The winds became stronger and chillier as year-end approached. Pyongyang was frozen still. Two young lovers persevered through cold nights, holding each other tight. Wind howled outside their room, as if threatening to cut everything down.

Even Taedong River stopped flowing as the freeze penetrated into its depths. People of Pyongyang did not lose their penchant for play, and they soon started ice-fishing, sledding, and skating on it. The cold could not stop them from playing, and Taedong River turned into a giant playground. One afternoon during which even the Japanese oppression had frozen, Minhyun, Seongwu and his three siblings headed to Taedong River.

There were already crowds of people on the ice. Older men ice-fished in the middle, while children sledded around and young lovers skated hand in hand. Ong family and Minhyun were interested in skating, and sought out merchants that lent out skates for a small fee. They each held a pair of skates they rented and walked towards the riverbank.

All of them made sure to double-check the knots they tied around their ankles so they would not lose their skates, and awkwardly tottered onto the ice. There was nothing for them to hold on to, as they were skating on a frozen river. Minhyun and Seongwu awkwardly stood on ice, holding on to each
Minhyun and Seongwu kept screaming in fear. They kept falling on their buttocks and knees, like toddlers learning how to walk for the first time. Seongwu’s siblings, on the other hand, were fast to learn and they sped by freely like swallows wheezing through high branches. Seongwu and Minhyun kept trying to stand tall, but they just could not control their bodies. It was fortunate for them that they were both struggling, but at the same time a disaster. They were to each other not a stable tree trunk to hold on to, but rather a wobbling husk that made them falter even more. Seongwu felt Minhyun grab his wrist and admonished him.

“Don’t grab me.”

“Why would I grab you, of all people?”

Minhyun replied coyly, but did not let go of Seongwu’s arm. His legs were wobbling violently; he had thin ankles, and he was putting his weight in all the wrong places. Seongwu clicked his tongue at him.

“But you’re shaking like crazy.”

“...Not all those who are on their feet can skate well, though. Am I right?”

Minhyun’s eyes shone with a mischievous gleam. He pushed Seongwu’s back with all his might. Seongwu screamed, and he glided forward, out of control. Hey! Seongwu yelped, and his shout resounded around Taedong riverside. Minhyun snickered, and wobbled his way after Seongwu.

As Seongwu glided forward, he ran into someone. It was a fast, momentary collision neither party could avoid. Fortunately for the stranger, he seemed to have been experienced in skating, and he quickly regained balance to skate away. For Seongwu, though, things were different; his thin body faltered, and his hands desperately waved in the air, until he lost balance and swayed to one side.

Forgetting that he was on ice, Minhyun ran towards Seongwu in a hurry. He supported Seongwu’s entire weight with his own, wrapped his arms around him, and then let his body loose.

They fell together, silently, their limbs tangling on ice. Seongwu, who had closed his eyes in anticipation of his body hitting hard ice, was surprised to find a warm, strong body envelope him. His eyes flew open to see who his savior was. It was Minhyun, who had a frown upon his face, possibly from pain. Seongwu wondered how Minhyun, who had been laughing at him from afar, was there to catch him, but worry soon clouded his curiosity.

“Minhyun! Are you all right?”

“Yes. I’m numb in some places, but I feel fine.”

“You idiot! Why did you fall with me? You should have left me to fall on my own!”

“How could I?”

“You laughed at me when I fell earlier.”

“That was then, this is now. I caught you because I thought you might actually be in danger.”

Seongwu shot up, and he looked over Minhyun’s body, scolding him. Minhyun answered his questions serenely, and dusted ice off his coat as if he was merely getting up from his bed in the morning. Seongwu was glad he was not hurt, but still felt frustrated.
“Don’t behave to recklessly. What would you do with an injury at a time like this?”

“I don’t think I’d have been injured to the extent you imagine.”

“Well, you can never be sure of those things. Like you said, there is no ‘if.’”

Seongwu returned the words Minhyun had once said to him before. Minhyun chuckled as he sensed how sullen his lover was. He led Seongwu towards the riverbank, and they sat on a low esplanade to take their skates off. Minhyun began to excuse himself while they unlaced their skates.

“Don’t scold me so. I just didn’t want you to be hurt.”

“You only care for my body and not my heart, then. My heart suffers an injury whenever you’re hurt.”

“But isn’t a bit of a heartache better than a bodily injury and pain?”

“No. In fact, it is the opposite. I would rather be hurt myself than have you hurt. How are you so ignorant about what I want? You’re nothing but a sharp spoon.”

Seongwu took his fists and lightly knocked on Minhyun’s chest, and Minhyun pretended to be pushed away before he embraced Seongwu. He squeezed Seongwu in his arms so he wouldn’t flail his arms.

“All right, all right. You win. I’ll never put myself in harm’s way again.”

“You’d better not.”

In the end, Minhyun had to give Seongwu a pinky-promise. They returned their skates early and strolled on the riverbank while they waited for Seongwu’s siblings. For the first time in a long while, they felt free.

Christmas break was quiet and simple. Minhyun was still given a two-week break, and he shut himself in the guest house, refusing to part from Seongwu.

Minhyun, impish, kept dogging Seongwu, asking to see his bare buttocks under the pretense of checking if the sensitive skin there had been bruised when he fell on ice. Minhyun persistently burrowed into Seongwu’s side, and Seongwu retaliated, pushing his shoulders away with his foot. Despite his initial, jovial rejection of Minhyun’s advances, Seongwu found himself melting in the warmth of the well-heated guest house they occupied. Minhyun was on top of him whenever Seongwu allowed himself to be carried away in his caresses. Seongwu was amazed at how Minhyun seemingly never tired of kissing and touching him, but then he understood his eternal zeal whenever he gazed at the sheer beauty that was Minhyun’s face and he returned his look ever-so-seriously. The guest house overflowed with hours of love, with Seongwu passionately reciprocating Minhyun’s fiery ardor.

They shared more than just love between them. Old books were everywhere in Ong family’s home, as they were once a prominent family of nobility that produced many scholars and government officials through generations. Those books included Chinese character books Seongwu studied while
in seodang, Korean story books and novels, and texts of Confucian principles. Minhyun enjoyed reading them, asking Seongwu about things he did not understand. Three days after Minhyun’s arrival, they had compiled a collection of books they liked in their room. Most of them were books of old Korean poetry that colored the terse, difficult times they lived in.

Camellia flowers that bloomed in the guest house garden helped enrich their literary sensibilities. Camellias were flowers once unique to southern half of Korean peninsula, but people in Pyongyang liked to cultivate them for their beauty and oil. Minhyun liked to sit by the window to look at the red blossoms. One snowy day, he thought of a poem ‘Camellias in the Snow’ (雪中冬栢) by poet Seong Sam-mun (成三問)*.

Its grace and innocence surpasses those of a plum flower

高潔梅兄行

Would it be wrong to call it beautiful?

嬋娟或過哉

Minhyun lifted his gaze from Camellias to look at Seongwu. Seongwu was sitting in the middle of their room, drinking tea and reading a book.

“I used to think that plum flowers suited you best, but now that I think about it, Camellias are a better match for you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about out of the blue, but I can suit anything.”

“Right. Ong Seongwu is a beauty incarnate.”

“Won’t you have to think of something beyond beauty to compare to me?”

“Incomparable beauty, huh?”

Minhyun delved into thought. Seongwu moved his tea table out of the way, and he sat himself down next to Minhyun. Their eyes met, and Seongwu smiled, singing a Camellia song he used to sing as a child.

“Camellias are pretty, elegant and cute,

Camellias are strong, they bloom four seasons.

Big baby, picking camellias, pick with them

This young man’s heart, so we can love happily.”

Seongwu poked Minhyun’s chest with his index finger. Minhyun caught his hand with his own, and they played with each other’s hands for a while. Ten fingers intertwined, tickling each other. After some time, Seongwu was reminded of something he knew as a child.
“Did you know that camellias hold a lot of honey?”

“Really?”

“Yes. You can suck the honey out if you hold the stem between your lips. I used to do it a lot when I was a boy. Do you want to try?”

Before Minhyun could answer, Seongwu got up, put on his coat to go outside, and returned with five camellias from the yard. He placed the largest flower above Minhyun’s ear. The red blossom was harmonious with Minhyun’s pale skin, rosy lips, and black hair and pupils, like it was a part of Minhyun to begin with. Seongwu silently admired how he looked, and then continued with what he had intended to do with his camellias.

“Look. You take one between your lips, and then suck. Like this…”

Seongwu took a flower by its stem and placed it between his lips. Minhyun stared at him, intrigued. The flower looked as if it had bloomed from Seongwu’s mouth. Unaware of Minhyun’s thoughts, Seongwu was absorbed with wetting his tongue with sweet honey. Minhyun placed the flower offered to him on the windowsill, took Seongwu’s flower from his lips, and kissed him, deeply. Seongwu’s mouth was full of honey, and it oozed between their tongues.

Seungwu blushed like a petal as he felt Minhyun persistently lick the inside of his mouth. Minhyun initially told himself he would tease Seongwu just a little more, but soon he found himself lost in the taste of honey. They were breathing hard as their kiss grew more exquisite. They had swallowed all the honey at this point, and Minhyun carefully laid Seongwu on his back on the floor. The air between them was hot and heavy, and Minhyun looked down lovingly at his beloved.

“Shall we bloom the reddest camellias in the world tonight?”

Seongwu chuckled, brushing Minhyun’s lips with his fingertips.

“To what do you liken those camellias? Your lips are so red.”

“Your fevered breaths are red. How you breathe them out reminds me of gathered petals.”

“Haha! You should become a poet, not me.”

Minhyun was flattered by Seongwu’s compliment, but it was not the answer he wanted. Minhyun wanted Seongwu to accept the secret offer he had extended. He kissed Seongwu’s neck, and lightly bit and sucked on the thin skin there, as if urging him on. A sharp thrill travelled from where Minhyun bit all the way through Seongwu’s veins. Seongwu stifled his laughter, and just let Minhyun be. He wanted to play a waiting game with Minhyun, seeing him so impatient. Seongwu briefly entertained the thought of letting Minhyun build on his cravings, but changed his mind; Minhyun could try for a payback later, touching him in all the wrong places when he is near his climax.

Seongwu wrapped his arms around Minhyun’s neck.

“Sure. Let’s bloom those flowers.”

A sweet voice slithered into Minhyun’s ear.

“So we would overflow with honey.”

Seongwu snickered into Minhyun’s hair. Minhyun kissed the round tip of his nose and ventured
downward. Their clothes fell to the floor, one by one. Minhyun left traces of his love where his lips passed, and petals redder than camellias spread from Seongwu’s neck, to his chest, and to the rest of his body.

With the new year came a new semester. The last spell of winter cold was longer than any other year they remembered, and freezing winds slapped at them on March 4, first day of school. After seeing Minhyun off first, Seongwu left the guest house. Dae-shin Primary School, where he taught, was ten minutes away from home by foot. He pulled up the collars of his coat and hurried to school. He was excited about his new class, first grade.

As he arrived at school he found the mood was far from exciting. Teachers in the teacher’s lounge looked grim, and they were exchanging nervous and fearful glances among themselves. Seongwu realized that something must have happened. As soon as he sat down, a teacher approached him.

“Mr. Ong, have you heard?”

“What is it?”

“You have no idea yet. Here, look. This is a message we received from the Japanese government general yesterday.”

Seongwu took a small piece of paper from his fellow teacher’s hand and read it. The message was handwritten brusquely. He knitted his brows as he read:

Declaration of Third Revision to Joseon Educational Laws:

The term botong-hakgyo (普通學校; Primary School) shall be changed to Sohakgyo (小學校).

Any use of Korean language in schools is forbidden.

All Korean language and literature classes are discontinued. Japanese language and literature courses and Japanese History courses shall replace them in case of missed hours.

Seongwu's vision swim. His face was overtaken by a grimace that his colleagues were all sharing. What the Japanese government general wanted was clear. They wanted to take Korea’s soul away, along with their language.

The shock from the Pledge of Allegiance to Imperial Japan and pressure to worship Tenno had not subsided yet. Moreover, Seongwu was a Korean language teacher. A storm of emotions surged within him. He was shocked and he did not know whether he was supposed to be angry, sad, or just smile awkwardly at his colleagues. Seongwu felt more helpless than he ever had before, the very subject he taught gone in a flash before his eyes. He could do nothing.
Teachers’ meeting started in confusion. Korean teachers were given new assignments to teach Japanese. Seongwu’s notes were soon deluged with new jobs. He knew he had to move quickly and get things done, but he could not think straight. He finished teachers’ meeting, staring blankly into space.

The bell rang, and teachers got up to go to each of their classes. Seongwu stood up, slowly, listening to his chair drag on the floor. He picked up his Japanese textbook with feeble hands. His colleague patted him on his thin shoulders as he passed by, as if encouraging him. The gesture did nothing to help Seongwu.

Lethargic semesters continued. The Japanese rule had taken all enthusiasm and happiness from Seongwu’s working life. He felt he no longer could achieve anything meaningful at work, but he never let his students catch on. He taught how to read and write Korean to his students in secret, and allowed them to speak in their mother tongue during his class. He did not want to succumb to Japanese rule. He was not afraid of getting caught, either; what was wrong with a Korean teacher speaking with his Korean students in their own language?

First semester ended in fear, and before anyone could relax the government started the second military drill. Like last year’s, its scope included all Koreans throughout the country. Last year, however, the Japanese were lax in terms of recreating mock wartime situations, and people were subject to easier training not unlike the sessions Minhyun and Seongwu were a part of during their time at Gyeongseong Secondary School. People were made to run around school grounds in formation and take apart and put together replica guns. This year, things were different. The Japanese made training difficult and strict, as if they were all going to war at any minute.

School employees and public officials were in charge of protection and management of civilian population. Seongwu’s role was to guide elders and children to public evacuation centers. He sat in his classroom with his students and practiced first aid and fire drills. His students were all children of seven or eight years old, and Seongwu found himself focusing more on keeping them from spraying each other with water than with actual training.

“Squad Three, onward!”

A sharp, male voice cut through their classroom from outside. Seongwu looked outside his window to see men dressed in military uniform running by in a double-file formation. As they ran their dog tags clanked on their chests. Seongwu stood and looked at them. They were mostly young men from his neighborhood, and he knew most of them by name. Seongwu felt a stab of panic in his chest; what if Minhyun, Hyeongwu, or Jeongwu were one of them? He only calmed himself when he saw neither his lover nor his brothers among the squadron. Seongwu let out a sigh of relief.

Then, he saw, like a vision from a nightmare, Minhyun.

Minhyun was in the very back of this squadron, and appeared fully a soldier involved in the rage of war. He had on a metal helmet, with most of the green paint that once covered it now peeled away. He had dark camouflage slathered all over his face, and wore an uniform of murky green hue Seongwu so hated and black military boots that rose up to half of his calves. He held a gleaming bayonet. At some point, Seongwu realized that this weapon in his lover’s gentle hands was not a replica they used during training; it was a real thing they used in war.

Seongwu could not take his eyes of Minhyun. Minhyun must have felt his gaze, because he glanced into the window. Their eyes met mid-air. Minhyun’s eyes widened in surprise, but he regained his composure and smiled at Seongwu, as if telling him not to worry.

‘See you later.’
Minhyun mouthed these words at Seongwu before he turned around the corner and disappeared. As soon as Seongwu understood his short, tender message, Minhyun was gone. It was a fleeting encounter, less than half a minute.

Seongwu’s felt all strength drain from his legs. He faltered, and supported himself by holding on to his podium. Visions of Minhyun in full military regalia haunted him. Seongwu thought that this war could swallow Minhyun. What he saw could be Minhyun’s future. Seongwu bit his lip until he bled. He felt no pain from his cut lips, however, as the pain in his heart was greater.

Military training ended after a full week, leaving behind a ghost in form of ghastly rumors that haunted all of Pyongyang. Contents of the rumors were the kind everyone could expect, but were too afraid to say out loud out of fear they would become reality. The Japanese government general, which were strict on rumormongering, did nothing this time. There was no official notice of any kind, and no threats to catch those who spread the rumors. People trembled in this rare silence from their oppressors. Minhyun and Seongwu were calm, thinking that the government’s silence was because the rumors were simply not worth responding to. They were wrong.

In November, the Japanese government general declared that Imperial Japan’s policies of total national mobilization will apply to Korea. Cities and villages were plastered with posters that spelled out relevant decree. People gathered in front of them in dense crowds, and Seongwu, who was on his way to meet Minhyun after work, joined them. He stood on tiptoes, trying to read what was written on the poster. After a struggle through the crowd, he could read it.

Clause 1. National Mobilization means the use of all human and material resources to the most effective exertion of national power in times of war.

...

Clause 4. When at war, the government of Imperial Japan shall retain its sovereign power to conscript its citizens to participate in its mobilization.

Seongwu read the poster again and again, trying to make sense of it. Around him, people clamored in anger. Words of despair and fury whirled together in a chaotic wall of sound above their heads.

“This is an unjust law. It’s draconian!”

“So the rumors were true that they’re going to take all the able-bodied young men and use them as bullet baits!”

“Then what will happen to my son? What do I do to save my son?”

“What would I know? Your son or not, we're all going to die.”

Seongwu was suddenly nauseated. He escaped the crowd in a hurry and ran into an alley. He retched against the wall, but all that came out of his mouth was bitter acid. He laughed at himself, tiredly. Would he have felt better if he had vomited all the despair he felt?

Minhyun was waiting for him in front of the front gate to Pyongyang Medical College, pale as a ghost. They began to study the new law when they got home, combing through its every clause,
searching for a loophole. Nothing. The law was clear and they were stuck within its clutches.

The new National Mobilization law declared that Imperial Japan could use and control all human and material resources. ‘Use’ meant that they would take anything and anyone according to the needs of their warfare, and ‘control’ meant that they would mercilessly punish those who disobeyed. This was the gist of national mobilization, and the details were only there to embellish. Despite the flawlessly written statute, the Japanese justification for it was hopelessly scanty. Everything was for and by the Great Empire of Japan.

Winter that followed the new decree was unusually warm. Temperatures that resembled spring continued for days. People of Pyongyang were not in the mood to enjoy the wonderful weather outside. Despite the lack of freeze warnings and cutting winds, they seemed to have been frozen from the inside. People moved less, and rarely spoke to each other. No one ventured outside home unless in an emergency or to satisfy dire needs.

Minhyun and Seongwu kept themselves hidden, too. When winter break started, Seongwu found himself confined to their room. During the day, when Minhyun was at work, Seongwu spent his time reminiscing about their time together in Gyeongseong. Bukchon’s labyrinthine alleyways, their first kiss in front of Mitsukoshi department stores, shrouded in light, their first photograph at Sogondong…

Before bed every night, Seongwu shared his memories of his teen years in Gyeongseong with Minhyun. It was strange and fun how they had differing memories of the same event. One night, Seongwu was reminded of how immature they were at fifteen.

“You know, not everyone grows with age. I realize how immature still and thoughtless I can be, because of how this world turned out. I would never have imagined that things would take turns for worse.”

“But who could have known? It’s not your fault that you didn’t know. Times are changing, at times violently. I wouldn’t be surprised at anything that is to happen tomorrow, and I don’t want you to blame yourself for failing to predict the future.”

“Minhyun, you’re my only ally in this whole entire world.”

Seongwu took Minhyun’s face into his hands and pecked him repeatedly in quick succession. Minhyun chuckled. A warm hand carded through Seongwu’s hair. Seongwu closed his eyes, relishing this feeling. Minhyun wanted to say something nice to him, to have him feel loved, but by the time he decided on the words he wanted to say, his beloved Seongwu was already asleep. Minhyun kissed his soft forehead, and said his words of love anyways.

“I am thankful I got to meet you in this chaotic world. I would never regret being born into these turbulent times, because…”

“......”

“I saw you.”
In deep winter, Pyongyang was covered in snow again. The world became silent, like a newborn baby lost in sleep. People still continued with their lives. Crowds of people bustling in the streets resembled an army of ants from afar. Everyone kept on working hard, but the inflation rate kept soaring. Prices of daily necessities went up every day.

Price of firewood was not an exception. Before, they would buy firewood in stacks from a woodmen, but they could no longer afford to. It became Minhyun and the Ong siblings’ job to gather firewood. They went around to pick up broken branches, or went to nearby hills to cut down trees.

Cutting down trees was not an easy task. Everyone was new to using axes. Seongwu, Hyeonwu and Heewu, whose handgrip was relatively weak, could not even swing one properly. Fortunately, they had Jeongwu and Minhyun with them, and they became the designated axe wielders. Seongwu took the lead in seeking out and choosing trees to cut. This was a more important task than it seemed; the tree had to be thin enough for Minhyun and Jeongwu to cut down, yet big enough to keep the family warm for an entire week.

They carried trees chopped into logs back down to the Ong house, and then cut them up into firewood pieces in their yard. Minhyun was in charge of cutting firewood to be used in the guest house, while Jeongwu took the job of preparing firewood for the main house. Minhyun seemed lost at how to go about it in the beginning, but he quickly figured out an efficient method that worked for him. Cutting wood with a heavy axe was difficult, and beads of sweat dropped from Minhyun forehead and chin despite the cold. Heat pooled inside his body as he worked, and Minhyun pulled up his sleeves and unbuttoned his shirt. Seongwu looked at him as he sat nearby trimming thinner branches, and found himself itching for a joke.

“Dear servant, you seem full of vigor today.”

Minhyun stared at Seongwu, doubting what he heard. They looked at each other, and Seongwu winked.

“I will give you plenty of white rice today. Do you know what that means?”

“...Yes, my mistress.”

Minhyun still played along with Seongwu’s charade. That evening, Seongwu fulfilled his joke promise by filling Minhyun’s rice bowl to the brim. Minhyun smiled back at Seongwu who gave him a sly look, realizing what Seongwu was asking for. Minhyun finished all of his food that evening, and the guest house was alight with love until late into the night.

On new year’s day, they went out to see the first sunrise of the year and made a wish. Seongwu closed his eyes and prayed ardently. First, please liberate my country. Please help my family be happy and healthy. And please let Minhyun and I love like this forever. I’ll be good, so please grant my prayers! Seongwu ended his prayer with another whisper of ‘please.’ When he opened his eyes, he saw that Minhyun had been looking at him all the while.

“...What are you looking at?”

“You’re so beautiful.”

Minhyun answered without so much as raising an eyebrow. By now Seongwu was used to Minhyun’s sudden and unpredictable bursts of sizzlingly embarrassing utterances, and he merely asked him another question.
“Did you pray, too?”

“Of course. I prayed for your happiness and your happiness only.”

“That’s not fair. I want everyone to be happy.”

“You already prayed for everyone else. Also, doesn’t your happiness imply that everyone else is happy?”

Because you are a kind person. Minhyun kissed Seongwu’s brow. Seongwu smiled, feeling his beloved Minhyun’s warmth through the touch of sensitive skin to skin. Minhyun looked into his eyes again, and said, as if he needed nothing else:

“You’re all I need.”

And I only wish for your happiness.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 30:

* Botong-hakgyo (普通學校) is a Korean way of calling Primary School in the 1930s and 1940s, and Sohakgyo (小學校) is a Japanese way. They refer to the same thing, all in all.

* Seong Sam-Mun: Seong Sammun (1418–1456) was a scholar-official of early Joseon who rose to prominence in the court of King Sejong the Great (ruled 1418–1450). He was executed after being implicated in a plot to dethrone King Sejo (r. 1455–1468) and restore his predecessor King Danjong (r. 1452–1455), and is known as one of the sayuksin (, the six martyred ministers) with reference to this plot.

* The servant-mistress-white rice joke Seongwu makes when Minhyun is chopping firewood plays on the cliche six-pence stories of a strong, masculine servant being engaged in an extramarital affair with his mistress. In these stories, the mistress offers a lot of ‘white rice’ to an attractive servant in her household to be used as fuel for vigorous intercourse later.
When the War is Over

Chapter Summary

People of Pyongyang are forced to take part in Shinto shrine worship, and military conscription for young Korean men is declared. Seongwu and Minhyun decide to visit Gyeongseong, where they are advised to leave Pyongyang by Seongwu's uncle and Mr. Kimura.

Chapter Notes

Original writing in Korea of Chapter 31 can be found here: https://lovehurtsyou.postype.com/post/3242377.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light of Our Lives

Chapter 31

In the new year the Japanese began to make drastic changes to their lives. First, they rid of the Lunar New Year holidays. They set the first day of January as the only new year’s day, and demanded that people of Joseon partake in Shinto shrine worship instead of memorial services for their ancestors.

Shinto (神道) shrine worship was a big part of Japanese culture. In Shinto religion, Japanese people worshipped not only founding gods of Japanese mythology, but also countless gods of nature. Shinto was once a harmless religion based on folklore, but began to be used as a political tool after the Meiji Restoration, and slowly gained characteristics of an ideology. Therefore, obeying the Japanese government general’s demands to participate in Shinto shrine worship was not just a simple act of prayer, but an acceptance of Japan’s reign over Korea.

The Japanese government general required all government officials and public school teachers to be a part of hatsumōde (初詣), or the first shrine visit in the Japanese New Year. Seongwu, who taught at a primary school, was fortunate enough to evade this requirement as he did not work during winter break. Minhyun, however, who worked during breaks in his school’s laboratories, had to face policemen who barraged into his school with bayonets. They threatened everyone in the lab that if they did not attend hatsumōde, Pyongyang Medical College will be permanently shut down, and all of their experiments and studies will be thrown out.

On a frosty morning, dozens of professors and students walked in a single file to Pyongyang Medical College building to a shrine near Moran hills. They looked grim, as if they were being walked to an
internment camp. They climbed the steep stone steps leading halfway up the mountain until they saw the entrance to a shrine. The shrine appeared like a giant coffin behind the date. Hundreds of people were lined up to go inside.

Minhyun looked around him. The shrine was somber, shrouded in trees and darkness. There were many visitors, and Minhyun could guess their nationality when they stood in front of the shrine. Japanese people paid their respects wholeheartedly while Koreans stood vacantly and pretended to clap in pale replication of their Japanese counterparts. Not a single Korean was there because he or she wanted to. Minhyun was the same. He did not bow in front of the shrine. Japanese police officers only checked whether they went to the shrine, and did not watch them partake in worship. Their negligence was a rare gift of luck to the Koreans.

Many Japanese people had criticized the government general’s forced religious demands to the people of Korea as behind the times and fascist in nature. The Japanese government general paid them no heed. They were adamant in forcing Koreans to become a part of Imperial Japan. There were waves of strong opposition all throughout the country, but the Japanese government general used all means available to oppress them. At times, policemen arrested people in the streets to drag them to shrines for forced worship.

Minhyun had witnessed all of this firsthand, but did not want to tell Seongwu about what was happening as it was. He did not want to have Seongwu tremble in fear. So when Seongwu asked about what was happening in the streets outside, he always gave the same answer: “Everything is the same.”

One day, Seongwu suggested that he wanted to accompany Minhyun out to the city. He was aching out of boredom. He approached Minhyun, who was standing in front of a mirror, buttoning his shirt. Seongwu’s eyes reflected in the mirror above Minhyun’s right shoulder.

“Shall I meet you in front of school when you finish work?”

Minhyun thought for a few moments, delaying his answer. He, too, wished to spend time with Seongwu in the city, but his reality seemed to forbid it. Instead of an honest answer he chose to throw a question back to Seongwu.

“Do you need something from town?”

“Well, yes. I’ve been craving sweets lately. I’d like to have a few of those honey cookies. Is our favorite bakery still there?”

“Of course it’s still there.”

Seongwu smiled, and his eyes looked straight at and into Minhyun, full of expectations. Minhyun felt tiny pricks in his heart, as if it were being picked by a needle. He wanted to protect this face, this smile, this innocence. Minhyun started, gravely.

“Ong Seongwu.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll get those honey cookies for you. You stay home.”

As Minhyun’s companion living through these tough times, Seongwu understood at once what Minhyun meant, and what Minhyun must have felt as he spoke. Minhyun wished for Seongwu to never go through the same subjugation he had succumbed to. Minhyun wished for this winter break to last forever, knowing that clutches of oppression will eventually extend to schools. Seongwu kept
quiet as he looked at Minhyun, and nodded.

After Minhyun left, Seongwu hummed a traditional Lunar New Year song to himself. His song was swept away quickly by the wind. Children at play filled the streets around this time of year, but they were all gone. Sounds of sprightly steps and cheerful laughter retreated far into depths of distant memory. All that was left were a few foxtails they used to play with.

Seongwu regained his vivacious disposition by February. Japanese coercion of Korean people into Shinto worship diminished after Lunar New Year. And on Sunday, Seongwu’s uncle came to visit Pyongyang. Surprisingly, he was not alone. A young woman, dressed in modern clothes, was next to him. She was Ms. Park, and she was newly betrothed to Seongwu’s uncle. Minhyun, Seongwu and his siblings were shocked to see her, but the elders in the household seemed to have already known about her as they welcomed them as if they had expected them.

Ong family were all together for the first time in a while. A huge banquet table was served, and they all exchanged warm regards and kind words during dinner. The mood was consistently cordial and peaceful; seeking out his moment, Seongwu’s uncle asked his grandmother if he were allowed to marry Ms. Park. Matriarch of Ong family gladly gave her permission, and uncle smiled from ear to ear at his blushing bride-to-be. Seongwu and his siblings teased at them, but uncle never once struck back. He invited Minhyun and Seongwu to a place he had already set his sights on for his new life with his beloved, and they promised him they would certainly visit.

Uncle and his future bride left for Gyeongseong again the day after. Uncle complained about how he could not use his Lunar New Year breaks anymore, and Minhyun and Seongwu tried to placate him as they escorted him all the way to the station. On their way back, they imagined what their own wedding might look like. Seongwu, always the imaginative one, listed things he wanted for their wedding. He wanted a modern wedding, with one of them wearing a white tuxedo and the other wearing black. He wanted to rid of flower bouquets. Minhyun agreed with everything he said. Minhyun could not care less what their wedding had to look like; he, in fact, did not care for the institution of marriage at all. However, it had been a while since he saw Seongwu so animated, and he wanted to keep it that way. Seongwu’s gleeful suppositions continued under Minhyun’s warm attention until they got home.

In spring, which was dreamily full of blooming magnolias and cherry blossoms, a rumor started from Gyeongseong and traveled up to Pyongyang like fragrance of flowers. The Japanese government general was planning to draft young men. Sino-Japanese War was dragging on longer than anyone had expected to, so the rumor was not totally surprising. People of Pyongyang wanted to believe that the Japanese would leave Koreans be, and prayed for peace every night.

The rumor came true in May, right after midterms. One sunny morning, Minhyun saw a crowd of people gathered together bear the school gate. He saw a poster, and bumbled his way through the crowd to read it. Soon, he was face to face with a poster that declared implementation of conscription. Minhyun froze. The poster was full of blarney that justified cause of war, but no one was moved by them. Those words meant one thing and one thing only: that they were going to be drafted and dragged to war. The worst possible scenario for his future began to paint itself in Minhyun’s head. He staggered backwards.

“Minhyun.”

Someone grabbed him by the shoulder. It was Kyuwon.

“Are you all right? You’re pale as a ghost.”

Minhyun could not answer, and his gaze wavered. Kyuwon sensed that Minhyun was not all right,
and he helped him all the way to his lecture hall. Kyuwon escorted Minhyun to his seat, and they promised to meet after classes adjourned.

They met near sunset and walked along the Taedong riverside. The river was placid despite all the turmoil that surrounded their world and was about to break into it. Upon the calm waters floated a few boats, and a train thundered by on the bridge.

“Everyone’s talking about it. But then, why wouldn’t they? We’re about to be drafted into war.”

“......”

“We all should have predicted this. The war shows no sign of ending. I heard that the Japanese used two reserve armies in Korea as backup. They have one and a half million soldiers in China, but I suppose they’re desperate for reserve soldiers when people die off every day.”

“Surely. And that’s why they’re extending the draft into Joseon.”

“Yes. And what better human resources than brainy ones that do to technical schools and universities? We have had basic training, and we are all identifiable. Such an easy system for pulling us into the abyss of war.”

An uneasy silence settled between them. Minhyun stared endlessly at the red sunset, and Kyuwon also glared ahead, deep in thought. A while later, Minhyun spoke again, with a strained voice.

“Hyung, I am in so much agony. I don’t want to be drafted into war. The Japanese try to trick us using fancy words that mean nothing. What purpose would I, a Korean, serve in the war, besides being a cannon fodder?”

“I know.”

“I don’t know what to do. I just want to run away from here.”

“So does everyone.”

“I feel so helpless. Is there nothing else I can do besides run? If I run, when will the chase end? Is running away even an option? We, robbed of our country, have nowhere to go.”

“Be calm. There should be a way out. We still have time, so let’s try our best to find a way to survive.”

Kyuwon patted Minhyun’s back. He stressed that they should never despair or give up, and that Minhyun had much to protect. Minhyun immediately thought of Seongwu and looked away to hide the tears welling up in his eyes.

Minhyun went back to find the Ong family in a state of shock. They had three young men subject to the draft in their household. Pyongyang Medical College’s students were high on the priority list for conscription, and the Secondary School that Jeongwu and Hyeonwu attended was also plastered with posters looking for student soldiers. Seongwu was angry; he paced the room tirelessly.

“I don’t feel good about this.”

Minhyun wanted to make Seongwu feel better, but he had no words left to say. Minhyun found his own reality too suffocating to speak. Instead of sharing words, they held each other’s bodies in their arms to persevere through the cold night.
The next morning, Seongwu left early and headed to the educational college he had attended to inquire how he could obtain a permanent teaching position at his school. He was surprised to find that the building, usually swarming with students and instructors, was nearly empty. He looked around in confusion to find a groundskeeper he was acquainted with. They greeted each other, and Seongwu asked him what had happened.

“Did you not know? They are shutting the school down.”

“Permanently?”

“The Japanese decided to establish their own teaching college here. As you know, Mr. Ong, they train their teachers to become loyal dogs of the government and require them to work for them for five years after they graduate. The Japanese are trying to get rid of all Korean teachers in the system.”

“I see…”

Seongwu turned around, shoulders slumped in defeat. He was suddenly filled with despair. Becoming an officially appointed teacher was one of the ways Seongwu thought could get him out of trouble, but the Japanese had always sealed his way out.

Seongwu felt as if he was trapped in an elaborate snare set by his Japanese oppressors. It seemed that no one could get out of it on their own. Minhyun, Jeongwu and Hyeonwu were going to be forced to enlist soon, and there was nothing he could do to help them. If they refused to go to war, they would be sent to jail and be subject to punishment in form of torture or forced labor. Seongwu rolled his hands into fists, digging his nails into his palm. He wanted to save them.

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Minhyun and Seongwu desperately sought ways to get out of the impending storm of war alive. The more they searched, the more they confirmed that Minhyun was first on the list to be drafted. Soon, the Japanese government general declared that they would round up all men eligible for war on March 20 of the upcoming year and enforce formal military training.

Every day was spent in fear. In spite of the miserable mood that the entire Pyongyang was immersed in, Minhyun worked himself to the ground to the ground academically, sometimes spending nights in his lab. One morning, when he returned home after a night in the lab, he found three letters in the mailbox, all of them from Gyeongseong. Two were for Minhyun, and one for Seongwu. They sat together in their room, reading their letters, which asked them to come down to Gyeongseong.

“I should go to Gyeongseong soon.” Minhyun started.

“Sure. It is our city.”

“If you’re up to it, won’t you accompany me?”

“What a useless question. Of course I’ll go with you.”
Seongwu sidled up to Minhyun. Minhyun looped his arm around his waist and pulled him deep into an embrace. Seongwu enjoyed Minhyun’s warmth, rubbing his cheek on his shoulder.

“We should visit our old home.”

“Sure. I miss the Chungs. I haven’t seen them in years.”

“I will send them a letter tomorrow.”

After several letters establishing the terms of their visit, Minhyun and Seongwu was on a train to Gyeongseong a week after the start of summer vacation.

They did not have the time to properly enjoy Gyeongseong once they arrived. As soon as they stepped out of their train, they hurried to Bukchon to meet the Chungs, their old landlords. They greeted the old couple, who were almost family to them, and parted ways after promising to meet again for dinner.

Minhyun went to his parents’ house alone. His parents had sent him several letters to Pyongyang imploring him to visit them. The Hwang house was still stately. Inside the grandiose house that had always unnerved him, Minhyun sat face to face with his parents. They had aged visibly since he had seen them last. Unlike before, they openly expressed concern and desperation about Minhyun’s welfare. They had always been strict and severe with Minhyun, a prodigal son who left them. Minhyun was still their son, and the smartest one, at that. While Minhyun was searching for ways for him to avoid conscription in Pyongyang, they were doing the same in Gyeongseong, only with more fervor.

Minhyun’s parents began to plead with him. They had found a loophole in the new conscription decree. They wanted to send Minhyun to Japan, as they had wanted to years ago, to study abroad.

During this time, people of Joseon had no way out of their peninsula. The only foreign nations they could go to was Japan and Manchuria, at the time a puppet state of Japan. Some ran to Russian Yeonhaeju®, Kando®, or China, but such escapades were punishable by death without a trial. However, Korean students studying abroad in Japan were not included in the demographic targeted by the conscription decree. It was still legal yet to avoid conscription by studying in a technical school or university in Japan. Of course, this could change if the Japanese government general decided to include foreign students in Japan as targets of selective service.

“...If that happens, you can catch a boat sailing to the west from Japan. If you find it difficult to stay in Japan, run to a neutral country.”

That was the conclusion Minhyun’s parents had come to. Minhyun did not, and could not, play defiant.

Minhyun left his parents’ home, defeated, and walked along Jongno to find the address Mr. Kimura had given him. Mr. Kimura lived in an alleyway next to a Tofu house, which was emitting an appetizingly fragrant white steam. Mr. Kimura’s house was a neat, Japanese-style home. When Minhyun knocked on the door, a small woman in a kimono and a short bob grazing just below her ears opened it. In awkwardly phrased Korean, she said that she had been waiting for Minhyun.

They crossed a quiet, traditional Japanese garden with a small artificial pond and smooth stones, and went into the house. The woman led Minhyun into the innermost room on the second floor. Mr. Kimura was sitting in it, and Minhyun bowed to him. They were served a small table of fine china pieces, and soon the fragrance of green tea filled the room.
“I dare not ask how you have been. Your face is haggard.”

“I have had my share of suffering, Sir.”

“That answer is so unlike you. I can see how much you’ve gone through.”

Minhyun did not add to his mentor’s observations. There was no way he could explain the pain he harbored in his heart. Instead of offering a premature word of solace, Mr. Kimura merely poured more tea into Minhyun’s cup, and organized his thoughts in his head, feeling the warmth of his own cup in his hand. It was a while until Mr. Kimura finally broke the pained silence between them.

“I know Japan is going to collapse soon. They’re being desperate now, falsely advertising their victories, but that in itself is proof of their inevitable decline.”

“Do you think so, dear teacher? But doesn’t Japan still have an upper hand in military fronts in China? It has seized Shaanxi, Jiangsu, Hunan, and Canton.”

“How long do you think they’ll be able to keep up with all those fronts they can’t control? They bit off more than they can chew.”

“Isn’t that why they’re drafting Koreans now?”

“How big are the chances of newly drafted Koreans winning against the Chinese, battle after battle? It’s more likely that they’ll all be killed in the first battle they fight. The Chinese are led by Chiang Kai-Shek*, a certified war hero. Japan keeps ignoring him, but he is a real general, with invaluable experience under his belt. Right now China might appear to be in a pinch, but one should never undermine them.”

“......”

“Things might be much worse than you think for Japan. The government is printing news after news of Japanese army’s triumph in China, but they might as well all be lies. It is easy for them to manipulate newspapers and trick the general public. We have to be able to read between the lines of what’s advertised to be true.”

Mr. Kimura drank from his cup after a long speech. Now it was time to address what to do next.

“So, what do you plan to do?”

“Study abroad in Japan.”

“You want to pierce the heart of the enemy. But don’t you think it might be more dangerous? You know what happened during the Kanto Earthquake Massacre.*”

“The only foreign nation I can turn to as a Korean is Japan. I will have to utilize my status as a student to evade capture.”

“I know going abroad seems a better choice than being drafted. I just can’t say if that will save you, or become a mistake.”

“I think you can say the same thing about any choice I make. I want to place my bets on hope.”

“If that is your will, I will support you. I’ll search for a school that might accept you. Meanwhile, you better stay at my house in Japan.”

“Are you going back?”
“Yes. I will soon gather my things in Gyeongseong and return to Japan. Why don’t you come with me then?”

“Yes. I will speak to my parents about that.”

“I’ll await your letter. Don’t take too much time.”

“Yes, Sir.”

As he answered his teacher, Minhyun felt bitterness within his mouth. He hoped the war to be magically over, so that he would not have to write to Mr. Kimura and so that he would not have to leave his country, and his lover, behind.

As Minhyun was visiting his old teacher, Seongwu was at his uncle’s new home. It was only a room, but it was a warm nest for the newlyweds. Seongwu was given a few Korean treats he liked, and he began to discuss the future with his uncle and wife.

“I don’t think the Japanese will try to use public employees like yourself, so the real problem is Jeongwu and Hyeonwu.”

“I don’t know where I should send them. In secondary school they’re only recruiting for student soldiers now, but as soon as they graduate they’ll be eligible to be drafted.”

Seongwu’s uncle suddenly leaned across the small table and motioned for Seongwu to come closer. Seongwu leaned in, and his uncle whispered in his ear.

“I plan to tell mother and my brother over Chuseok, but I will let you in on it now.”

“What is it?”

“Seongwu, your new aunt and myself, we plan to leave Joseon.”

“Really?”

“We have no future here. You know that. Yes, it’ll be dangerous wherever we are, but wouldn’t we be safer farther away from Japanese rule?”

“Uncle… where do you plan to go?”

“Seogando*. Have you heard of Shin Heung Military School*? One of my seniors from secondary school is there.”

“Wouldn’t that be risky? Japan is lusting after not only China but also Kando* and Yeonhajeju*.”

“But we have our own army there. Military school trains independence armies. If the Japanese attack us later, we’ll deal with them then. As of now, it’s a way to avoid further oppression by the Japanese as well as help our country fight for its independence and sovereignty.”

“Dear uncle…”

“If your father accepts, and if Jeongwu and Hyeongwu agree to come, I can take them with me. You think about it too. You’re relatively safe in Pyongyang, but it’s better if we stay together as a family.”

“Yes. I will think about it.”

Seongwu nodded. Fried rice cake suddenly seemed to turn into sand in his mouth.
Within two days in Gyeongseong, Minhyun and Seongwu could foretell their future. They returned to Pyongyang with gloom cast over their heads. They feigned calm, because they were afraid that if they said their fears out loud, they would come true.

Over the long summer, the Japanese began to burden the people of Joseon with military duties. They carried out a detailed census of all Koreans that included not just their addresses, but also trivial information about their lives. As if that was not enough, the Japanese government general compiled a registry of men in late September. All Korean men of age had to go to a local civic office and submit detailed information about themselves. A murky fog of war began to loom over the sky.

Meanwhile, Kyuwon became a doctor and a lecturer at Pyongyang Medical College. He was set to graduate in February of 1941, but his accomplishments had been recognized early. This was a monumental achievement by a man of Joseon, considering the fact that most faculty at school were from the west. Kyuwon also translated medical books written in English into Korean in his spare time; Seongwu volunteered to help with it sometimes. Seongwu believed that if he kept busy, he could stand tall despite the fear and uncertainty that tormented all of them. Betraying his hopes, Imperial Japan continued their procedures for drafts quickly.

Physical examinations for those eligible for the draft was held in Pyongyang Medical College, of all places. The gate to the school bustled with more young men than it ever saw. All of them had in their hands summons to answer to a physical examination.

Minhyun underwent his physical examination in a lecture hall he once sat in for a class. He was given a simple intelligence test, and his height, weight, eyesight, and hearing were measured. A military medical officer with an armband on his right arm looked over Minhyun’s results to decide whether he was fit for war. A stamp was slammed down on his paper; Minhyun was indeed fit for war.

Until then, Minhyun had comforted himself by telling himself that his fears were merely particularly frightening pigments of his overworried imagination. He had thought that he would be able to hold himself together in even the worst of circumstances. Reality was much harsher than he imagined, though; now that he was declared eligible and fit for war, he was going to be drafted into the army of Imperial Japan. He did not want to.

Lost, Minhyun made his way through the heart of Pyongyang. He was walking through a crowded and chaotic town, but he felt as if he was standing in the middle of wuthering wilderness. In fact, he would have felt better if he were standing in unforgiving nature. He was so lost, he did not know where he was headed.

When he returned home, Seongwu wordlessly handed him two letters that had just come for him. One was from his parents, and the other was from Mr. Kimura. Without Minhyun having to explain what was written in the letters, Seongwu knew what they meant.

Minhyun stood there, looking at the white envelopes held in Seongwu’s long fingers. He could not
bring himself to take them from Seongwu. Seongwu began, quietly.

“Go.”

Minhyun looked up, his eyes widening in shock. Tears began to well in his eyes. Seongwu could not bear to look at those tears, and he cast down his eyes. He rolled his hands into fists, and Minhyun’s letters crumpled in them.

They stood awhile, without words. It was Minhyun who broke the long silence. He paced back and forth, massaged the back of his neck, and pounded his chest. It was not until later that Seongwu realized that these acts were an attempt to suppress tears.

“Seongwu. Ong Seongwu.”

“Yes.”

“...Can you be on your own for a while?”

A tear streaked down on Minhyun’s cheek. He was grimacing in unbearable pain, wanting Seongwu to hold on to him, to refuse to let him go. Please tell me to stay. Please tell me you can’t bear to be on your own. Minhyun’s entire body was pleading with Seongwu to hold him, to catch him, to never let him go.

Seongwu could not hold on to Minhyun. Minhyun’s life and welfare were in danger; Seongwu could not keep him by his side out of his selfishness. If he gave into his desires to be with Minhyun, their lives could turn disastrous. Seongwu truly loved Minhyun and he could not let him drive himself into his own death. He had to send Minhyun away to safety when he still had a chance.

“Yes. I can be on my own. So leave.”

Seongwu had practised these words dozens of times before Minhyun came home, but in spite of it he felt his voice shake hopelessly. He had wanted to let his love go with dignity and maturity, but he had failed. The words he had just uttered were too difficult to let out.

Seongwu crumbled down onto the floor, and tears deluged his delicate features as he felt his body lose all power that was left. Seongwu cried as if letting go of any and all tears out of his system. Minhyun knelt and took Seongwu into his arms, his own body shaking from devastating sadness. He caressed his beloved with all tenderness he could muster, and uttered lost words of solace.  

Don’t worry. We will surely meet again. When this war is over…

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 31:

Hatsumōde (初詣)* : Hatsumōde (初詣 hatsumōde) is the first Shinto shrine visit of the Japanese New Year. Some people visit a Buddhist temple instead. Many visit on the first, second, or third day of the year as most are off work on those days. Generally,
wishes for the new year are made, new omamori (charms or amulets) are bought, and the old ones are returned to the shrine so they can be burned. There are often long lines at major shrines throughout Japan.

Chiang Kai-Shek* : Chiang Kai-shek (31 October 1887 – 5 April 1975) was a politician and military leader who served as the leader of the Republic of China between 1928 and 1975, first in mainland China until 1949 and then in Taiwan until his death. He was recognized by much of the world as the head of the legitimate government of China until 1971, during which the United Nations passed Resolution 2758. Chiang was an influential member of the Kuomintang (KMT), the Chinese Nationalist Party, as well as a close ally of Sun Yat-sen. Chiang became the Commandant of the Kuomintang's Whampoa Military Academy and took Sun's place as leader of the KMT following the Canton Coup in early 1926.

Kanto Earthquake Massacre* : The Kantō Massacre was mass murder committed by Japanese militaries, police and vigilantes against the Korean residents of Kantō region, Japan, immediately after the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake. The massacre is also known as Massacre of Koreans in 1923. The massacre occurred over a period of three weeks starting on September 1, 1923, the day that a massive earthquake struck the Kantō region. During this period, soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army, police and vigilantes murdered Korean civilians and Japanese socialists who numbered an estimated at least 6,000. Translator's Note: One of the reasons this massacre started was that a rumor was spread that Koreans poisoned wells after the earthquake to harm Japanese civilians. Vigilantes asked people to pronounce certain Japanese words that Koreans would not be able to pronounce correctly to sort out Koreans.

Seogando* : Jiandao or Chientao, known in Korean as Gando or Kando, is a historical border region along the north bank of the Tumen River in Jilin province, Northeast China that has a high population of ethnic Koreans.

Shin Heung Military School* : This military academy was established by Koreans in the Jiandao region to nurture an army for Korea's independence. Here is a useful blog article about it: http://wsphilatelynews.blogspot.com/2011/06/south-korea-100th-anniversary-of_18.html.

Yeonhaeju* : A Korean name for Primorsky Krai (Russian: Приморский край), a federal subject (a krai) of Russia, located in the Far East region of the country and is a part of the Far Eastern Federal District. The city of Vladivostok is the administrative center of the krai, as well as the largest city in the Russian Far East.
Universe

Chapter Summary

Mr. Kimura plays a pivotal role in helping Minhyun escape the draft, and Minhyun is admitted to a Japanese medical college. Minhyun and Seongwu get married on the eve of Minhyun’s departure. Minhyun leaves for Nagasaki on February 24, 1940.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

32.

Autumn sky was blindingly pure. The sun rose high in the spotless south sky, and Minhyun grimaced as he looked up at it. He wished that it would rain instead. It was difficult to hide the gloom on his face under such bright light. He hid his dismay, as Seongwu was right next to him. He did not want to have Seongwu scared, worried or hurt, at least for now.

“Be back safely.”

Seongwu offered him a tender greeting as he finished getting ready, raising himself on tiptoes and kissing him lightly on the lips. Minhyun kissed him back, feeling their warmth transfer through their sensitive lips. Minhyun ended their short kiss first, and headed out the door. It was time to go. Seongwu heard his footsteps as he crossed the yard, and thought they were heavier than usual. Because Seongwu knew why, he stood and looked at Minhyun’s back until he turned a corner and disappeared out of sight.

In front of the cathedral, Minhyun boarded a streetcar. It crossed the Taedong and raced into town north of the river. Soon, the familiar facade of his school building was within sight. Minhyun rang the bell to get off. The ringing reverberated inside the trolley even after he was off, as if bidding him goodbye.

This was his last visit to Pyongyang Medical College. In his bag was an application to drop out of school instead of his usual textbooks and notebooks. While his colleagues walked to their classrooms, he went to the administrative office, and turned in his application to leave school while his friends took their midterm exams. He had filled out the application correctly and with care, but he hesitated to hand it in. An office staff, expressionless, snatched it from Minhyun’s hand. Processing of his application to leave school took less than ten minutes; the name Hwang Minhyun was erased forever from Pyongyang Medical College’s student roll. Without a word, Minhyun turned around and left the office. Students in similar distress, with their own applications to drop out in hand, lined up behind him.
After making his decision to leave Pyongyang during the summer, Minhyun planned his move to Japan carefully. Everything was overwhelming in the beginning, but fortunately he had wealthy parents and a trustworthy ally in an old teacher, Mr. Kimura saved Minhyun from a deluge of choices and decisions. He had not been joking when he promised to help Minhyun years ago. A number of important decisions were made under Mr. Kimura's direction and guidance.

Minhyun’s destination was Nagasaki. Nagasaki was the first city in Japan to open its ports to westerners. It therefore had a lot of western cultural influence and was relatively open to foreigners. Minhyun thought he would fare better there than in Tokyo or Kyoto, where traditions ran deep and vast majority of population were Japanese. Also, Mr. Kimura’s family home was in Nagasaki. Minhyun thought he would be fortunate just to be able to live near him, but Mr. Kimura went as far as to offer him room and board at his family house. Mr. Kimura’s favors for Minhyun continued as he volunteered to be his favorite student’s character reference. Using his status as a teacher, he helped Minhyun gain entry into Nagasaki Medical College, which was thirty minutes by foot from Kimura family house. Minhyun’s stellar records at Gyeongseong Secondary School and Pyongyang Medical College were acknowledged thanks to Mr. Kimura, and he was set to become a medical student at Nagasaki Medical College in the coming March. Minhyun’s plan to move to Japan went flawlessly.

Maybe this is fate, thought Minhyun, as he exited Pyongyang Medical College’s gate for the last time. Beneath his feet piles of dry leaves crackled as if begging him to anchor himself to Korean soil. Minhyun wanted to give in to his homeland’s temptation to stay. Despite it all he knew that he had to leave, to survive.

On the way home Minhyun stopped by Seongwu’s favorite bakery downtown. He brought home a few pieces of honey cookies Seongwu liked. When he gave them to Seongwu, who was tense in fear of a depressive mood taking hold of Minhyun, he beamed. To Minhyun, this was enough; Seongwu’s smile was all he needed. Minhyun soothed himself by indulging in the sugary texture of cookies with Seongwu.

Despite having been admitted to a Japanese counterpart, having dropped out of Pyongyang Medical College left a sediment of regret in Minhyun’s heart. For a few weeks, he was remorseful that he had dropped out, thinking that he would have felt better had he stayed at least until the end of semester. However, his thoughts quickly changed as time went by. In mid-November, the Japanese government general declared a new degree which allowed it to forcefully draft those who had not already volunteered as student soldiers. This was another plan they had forged to gather enough student soldiers when too few volunteered. Students all throughout the country revolted, but the Japanese government general, in desperate need of manpower, did not budge. Students flocked to government offices to apply for leave or to drop out of school, but none of these belated applications were accepted. Students who had not left school had no choice but to enlist. If Minhyun had waited until semester-end, he would have met the same fate. Minhyun suffered from bouts of agony. Confusion and tangled thoughts filled his head, and the only thing he could wish for his colleagues was an end to war.

Seongwu also wished for the end of war. He prayed every night that when he woke up the next morning, there would be news placed magically on his doorstep that the war was over. He knew this was only wishful thinking, but he allowed himself to dream every night. He dreamed of a miracle that would allow them to stay together, just as they had averted parting ways in Gyeongseong years ago. To his dismay, the war showed no sign of ending soon, and Minhyun’s arrangements for Japan made progress. Toward year-end, they had a date for his departure. Minhyun had bought his ticket on a dock at Taedong river, and it read:
February 24, 1940, Saturday, Noon.

Their time to part, which was only a painful yet nebulous idea until now, became reality. Over the winter, Minhyun and Seongwu spent all of their time indoors, together, in their bedroom. Like a mythical pair of lovebirds, they held onto each other’s bodies, whispering ardent and rueful words of love. They wanted to hold onto time and stop it, but they could not. Their gazes, full of longing for the other, became deeper still as the clock ticked by.

They felt utterly powerless before absolution of time, but they chose to do what they could. Seongwu did not want to let Minhyun go without a celebration of their time, and started to prepare for their last night together.

Unfamiliar objects began to appear in their bedroom. First of them were exquisite silk blankets and pillows. Hand-embroidered by his grandmother, they had been carefully stored for years awaiting Seongwu’s future wedding. Second were two red candles. They ordinarily used kerosene lamps in the bedroom, and as soon as Minhyun saw them, he deduced what Seongwu wanted to do.

Minhyun thought carefully about what he could prepare for Seongwu. After long thought, he went to a jeweler downtown and bought a pair of demurely designed jade rings. It was entirely coincidence that he ran into Kyuwon on his way out. Kyuwon looked at him, stunned, and Minhyun told him what he and Seongwu were about to do. Kyuwon fronted an exasperated look on his face before he took Minhyun by the wrist and dragged him to a department store nearby. Minhyun refused, but Kyuwon insisted that a wedding gift must be something exquisite. He bought a pair of wooden Mandarin ducks wrapped in red and blue silk, and thrust them upon Minhyun. Seongwu appeared surprised when he saw them, and Minhyun told him Kyuwon had bought them for their wedding night. Seongwu scrutinized the wooden ducks, and decided that he liked how adorable they were. He placed them in the most conspicuous place in the room.

Tensions arose as they neared their last night together. They were about to have the only wedding ceremony in their lives.

Their wedding was different, much simpler, than most weddings. Instead of a banquet, they had a small bottle of liquor and two glasses, and instead of family and friends as witnesses, they had a pair of wooden Mandarin ducks. Dressed in modern suits, they sat face to face in the middle of their room. Their wedding was neither orthodox nor formal, but they solemnly followed the procedures they had set for themselves.

First they lit their red wedding candles. They burnt in brilliance, blessing their future. Relying on that light, they swore to heaven and earth that they will only think of, cherish, and love each other and no one else. As a former designated reciter of poems during literature classes at Gyeongseong Secondary School, Minhyun read aloud the oath they had written for their wedding. His mellifluous voice, promising eternal love, enveloped Seongwu in tenderness. After Minhyun finished reciting the oath, it was Seongwu’s turn. Seongwu had waited for this moment for what felt like forever. He closed his eyes and recited the oath, which he had already memorized. He looked solemn, as if in prayer, and Minhyun could not take his eyes off him. At that moment, no saint could ever defeat Seongwu in his devotion. A light breeze from outside shook the candlelights, and a fleeting shadow colored Seongwu’s pale face. Despite the momentary darkness that inhabited it, Seongwu’s face was only full of certainty. Minhyun saw a sacrosanct nobleness within him, and felt an infinite desire to protect it.
As a last rite of their wedding, they poured liquor in each of their glasses, clinked them together, and emptied them. Their ritual was over; they were married.

After they put down their glasses, they were silent for a while, each of them choosing carefully from millions of words they wanted to say to each other. Minhyun bit down on his lower lip, out of shyness, and Seongwu fidgeted his fingers and looked away. Upon a certain moment, Minhyun decisively pushed the small table between them to one side, and sat himself near Seongwu, close enough that they could embrace.

“Ong Seongwu.”

“Yes.”

Seongwu’s eyes shone expectantly as he answered Minhyun’s call. These were the first words they were exchanging as newlyweds. Seongwu looked at Minhyun’s full lips, looking forwards to words that would flow from them, but instead of speaking, Minhyun took a pair of jade rings out of his pockets. They sparkled iridescently on Minhyun’s palm. Seongwu’s eyes grew wider in surprise.

“Will you give me your left hand?”

Minhyun asked, his tone formal and polite, and Seongwu offered his left hand to him, hypnotized. Minhyun gingerly took Seongwu’s hand, and slowly slid a ring on his fourth finger. The ring was snug. Seongwu was not used to the feeling of having something wrapped around his finger, but he liked how it felt. He looked down at his new wedding ring. Minhyun put the other ring on his own ring finger.

Minhyun took both of Seongwu’s hands into his own, and Seongwu looked up at him when he felt a gentle squeeze upon them. Minhyun had been looking at Seongwu all the while, and their eyes met, full-on. Seemingly nervous, Minhyun exhaled. Then, determined, he started telling Seongwu what he had kept in his heart for years.

“My love, my passion, my youth.”

“......”

“You are, the one and only,”

“......”

“Light of my life.”

The world fell into a complete and total silence. Time stopped its eternal flow, and the air stood still. In a mood of exquisite and foreign sensations, only Minhyun was connected to Seongwu.

Seongwu blinked, again and again, his long lashes fluttering like the wings of a pair of butterflies. Tears welled up in his deep-set eyes. Unwilling to let Minhyun see him cry, he quickly cast down his eyes.

“It’s all right. Please look at me.”

“No. I don’t want you to see me cry.”

“I won’t consider you weak even if you bawl like a baby in front of me.”

Ironically, Minhyun’s words pushed Seongwu over the edge, and he started to sob. Seongwu could
not even figure out why he was crying. Emotions that he thought resembled joy and sadness whirled in a kaleidoscope of confusion in his heart. Seongwu’s tears kept flowing no matter how many times he wiped them away. Minhyun looked at him, not knowing what to do.

“I wish you wouldn’t cry. Isn’t tonight our honeymoon night? What kind of groom cries so sadly on such a joyful day?”

“No, I will not cry. What kind of groom cries so sadly on such a joyful day?”

“Who said a groom cannot cry at his wedding? If there is such a rule, I’d rather be a bride. I’ll just be a bride and cry all I want.”

“Please don’t cry.”

Minhyun dabbed at Seongwu’s wet cheeks with his sleeves. Seongwu’s eyelids and nose were pink, and he resembled a strawberry, which Minhyun found unbearably adorable.

“You’d still have a problem as a bride. What groom would love a bride with a tearful face? Hmm?”

“You promised to love me all your life. Then you should love my tearful face, too.”

“It’s just that looking at you cry hurts me.”

When Minhyun drooped with apparent pain, Seongwu immediately stopped crying. He could withstand pain, but he did not want Minhyun to have to feel even the tiniest tinge of it. He rubbed his cheeks with the back of his hands, like a chipmunk, and Minhyun finally smiled again.

“There. Now I can see your handsome face again.”

Just then, perhaps because he had stopped crying too abruptly, Seongwu let out a loud hiccup. He hurriedly covered his mouth with his hand, but his body shook with another violent hiccup as he did.

“Haha! You’re always so unpredictable.”

Minhyun’s open laughter, a rarity in recent times, rang in their bedroom. Seongwu narrowed his eyes as he glared at him.

“Don’t laugh, or else.”

“Oh, I am so scared.”

Minhyun snickered, trapping Seongwu in a tight embrace. He looked at Seongwu’s sullen profile.

“Did you know that a kiss is the best remedy for hiccups?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It’s proven medically.”

Seongwu looked at him, incredulously, and Minhyun quickly seized his lips in a kiss. Their lips interlocked, and their breaths mingled together. Minhyun tasted the salt in Seongwu’s mouth. They were lost in a long kiss, and at some point Seongwu stopped hiccupping.

When they started quietly burning with desire for more, Minhyun stood and turned out the candles. Now that the light of their wedding night was out, they had only one thing left to do: consummate their marriage. They crawled onto the exquisite embroidered silk blanket laid out in the middle of their room.
Silvery moonlight shone through the windows, caressing their bodies. Seongwu was down on his back, and Minhyun on top of him. Eyes full of thrill and affection gazed up at him. Minhyun smiled beautifully, for his only companion for life in the entire world. They now belonged to each other forever. Seongwu raised his hand to place it upon Minhyun’s shoulder, and solemnly declared: “We are one now, even in death.”

“I suppose we’ll have to be together as ghosts, even.”

“Of course. Your soul is mine. Even if we are born again hundreds of years later, I’ll still ask you to marry me.”

Minhyun nodded at Seongwu’s resolute voice.

“Yes. Take my body and my soul, make them yours. And…”

Minhyun lowered himself onto Seongwu, pushing their bodies flush together. He nibbled on the round eartips before him, and Seongwu gasped as Minhyun’s hot breaths entered his ears and electrified him. Minhyun whispered into his ear, his voice low and full of desire.

“I, too, will have you.”

That night, Minhyun kissed every inch of Seongwu’s skin, caressing every nook of his body with his lips, taking each of his long fingers into his mouth. Minhyun seemed determined to commit every part of Seongwu’s body to memory as he touched and kissed all the places he could reach, consuming all of him. Seongwu pled with him all night to call him by his name, and Minhyun happily obliged. Fevered, ardent calling of their names rolled from their tongues all night long, even as their naked bodies tangled, intertwined, and collided in frenzy.

Young newlyweds indulged in each other’s bodies all through the night until pitch dark just before dawn crept into their nuptial room. After they made love unsparingly and without restraint, they hid under their soft blanket. A tiny world of love, in which they were the only inhabitants, was created. Their warm, nude bodies entwined, and they desperately tried to sear every sensation they felt from each other into memory.

Now they were in perfect darkness, with even the moon out of sight. Seongwu imagined how happy they would be if time froze while they held each other. He knew this was an impossible wish, but he could not stop himself from holding on to it. He suppressed a sigh as he rested his forehead on Minhyun’s firm chest. He thought of a song Minhyun liked because of its sorrowful melody, and began to sing it quietly.

O dawn, do not seek us
So that this dream of a night stays forever
Do not let the sun tear us apart
This very moment, faint as moonlight, will never be replaced
So let me embraced my love in pitch darkness
O night, do not leave my side

Seongwu closed his eyes as he felt Minhyun’s fingers gently push his hair out of his face.
On the morning of the day they had so painfully dreaded, Minhyun moved quickly and efficiently. He finished packing his luggage and checked his wallet, passport, visa and ticket. Then he had his last breakfast with the Ong family. Everyone blessed him and wished for his safety. Seongwu’s grandmother, who was increasingly lacking in energy lately, implored Minhyun to stay alive, no matter where he was. Minhyun faithfully answered her he would. Minhyun also bid farewell to Seongwu’s siblings, who he had considered his own for the years he spent in Pyongyang.

They did not have much time to be sentimental. Minhyun’s ship was to depart at noon, and they had to hurry. As they got ready to leave, Minhyun was caught hiding something in Seongwu’s desk. When Seongwu asked him what it was, Minhyun answered that it was an early birthday gift. Minhyun ushered him outside, telling him to open it after he returned home from the port.

Warm rays of sunshine welcomed them as they stepped out of the gate to Ong family home. Miracle in form of a stormy weather was not allowed to them. Seongwu thought that maybe Minhyun was meant to leave that day. Neither of them spoke as they went to the Taedong River Port in a streetcar that headed in the opposite direction they went daily.

Kyuwon was already at the port when they arrived. Minhyun was touched that he made time to see him off despite his incredibly busy schedule.

“Thank you for coming, Kyuwon. Please stay healthy.”

“Don’t you worry about me. I’ll be taking good care of Seongwu, so you just think about yourself.”

“Thank you.”

“Japan will lose this war sooner or later, and we will meet again soon. I look forward to drinks we’ll have when that day comes.”

“I do, too. Make sure you don’t forget about those drinks when we’re back together.”

The three of them walked to the edge of the dock. They could see a passenger ship anchored nearby, and really felt Minhyun’s imminent departure. Seongwu looked blankly up at the gargantuan ship, which to him felt like something from another world.

When the time for departure neared, Kyuwon took charge of Minhyun’s luggage and pushed the two of them away from dock. He was letting them spend some time alone before Minhyun had to leave. Minhyun and Seongwu walked to a shaded place where the crowd was sparse. A lush tree of plum flowers was blooming overhead, its branches heavy with open flowers. Minhyun took a flower from a low-hanging branch and placed it behind Seongwu’s ear. Then he took a long look at the flower and his beloved.

Minhyun reached out and caressed Seongwu’s left cheek. A trio of moles hid under his thumb and
emerged again. His touches continued, warm and soft like a spring breeze.

“Don’t be sick.”

“You too.”

“I will write to you.”

“......”

“I promise to come back.”

Seongwu rolled his sleeves into his hands and squeezed them. He was trying his best to keep from bursting into tears. He cried already the night before, and he did not want to have Minhyun see him cry again. He bit the inside of his mouth to keep himself from bursting into tears, but the pain pushed him over the edge, and tears began to roll out of his eyes. Seongwu cried, sorrowfully, yet he could not bring himself to beg Minhyun to stay.

“You cry so beautifully, I cannot bring myself to leave.”

Minhyun took Seongwu into his arms. He ran his hand gently down Seongwu’s back. He, too, wanted to cry, but he could not let himself. If he showed tears, it was evident that Seongwu would be doubly shocked and saddened. He suppressed the storm of emotions inside him with brute force.

Their painful farewell did not last long. The sound of boat horn resounded through the port: a signal that the ship would leave soon. Minhyun resolutely took Seongwu by the shoulders and parted him from himself. He placed a chaste kiss on Seongwu’s forehead, praying that he stay untouched by the vicious, atrocious world in which they lived.

They return to Kyuwon on the dock, holding hands. Minhyun bid farewell to Kyuwon and Seongwu for the last time, and in big strides walked onto the ship. Minhyun looked back a single time before he disappeared into the passenger ship, and when he did he saw his love, Seongwu, standing there, looking at him as if he had frozen to become a statue. Minhyun hid himself into the crowd purposefully. He thought he would only do more harm to Seongwu by letting him see more of him.

Seongwu knew what Minhyun was trying to do, but Minhyun was wrong to think that he would hurt less if he was out of sight. Now that Minhyun was out of sight, he was made to cry harder. Now Seongwu was crying like a child, out loud and wheezing. Kyuwon tried to calm him down, but he was not the one Seongwu wanted. The man whose kindness Seongwu needed was not there anymore. Seongwu’s tears fell into the cruelly placid Taedong river.

And thus, Minhyun left.

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Seongwu cried for a long time. The tumult of pain inside him only calmed after Minhyun’s ship disappeared over the horizon. Kyuwon pulled him together to send him home. Afraid that Seongwu
would cry more once he became alone, Kyuwon even bought honey cookies for him and walked him all the way back home. Kyuwon only returned home after making sure Seongwu was safely back inside the Ong family house.

The guest house, having just lost one of its masters, was desolate. Seongwu paced around the yard, unable to bring himself inside. It was still winter, but the yard was blooming with camellias. As Seongwu stood and looked at the lush clusters of camellias, he found a tiny blossom of a plum flower among them. It was solitary, but the branch upon which it bloomed appeared strong, and it looked firm enough to last for long. Seongwu looked at the plum flower blankly, and slowly walked into the guest room.

The room was cold, as if no one had lived in it for years. Seongwu felt as if he had never seen the room so empty. He walked around, running his fingertips on things and personal effects Minhyun had left behind. Then he was reminded of having caught Minhyun hiding something in his desk. He hurried towards it, and saw a package sitting neatly upon it. Seongwu opened the paper wrapping and saw three notebooks inside.

The notebooks were titled <Observation Diaries>. Seongwu’s curiosity instantly peaked; he had never seen Minhyun observe plants or insects before. He opened the notebook to see the first page, which read <Volume I: Planet> in Minhyun’s uneven hand. Had he observed stars? Seongwu began to flip through the pages.

Belying the title, contents of the notebook were of mundane, everyday life they had at Gyeongseong. They had meat for dinner. Minhyun was first in his class in final exams. Seongwu remembered that Minhyun had once told him he wrote essays, while refusing to let him read them. Now Seongwu was finally reading them. Memories of their youth, written once every two or three days by a younger Minhyun, were carefully preserved within those notebooks. Seongwu kept on reading, until he stopped at a certain page.

Year 1934, April 2. Third Year at Gyeongseong Secondary School.

… There are three tiny moles embedded on the cheek of my roommate, Ong Seongwu. I really like that. Those moles remind me of satellites that surround and protect the planet called Ong Seongwu.

When he thinks of a fun idea, he scurries towards me with his army of stars. Today, he spoke of a duel. He asked me what would happen ‘if’ we ever got into a duel. When I could not answer, he badgered me to just imagine once what would happen. After imagining what would happen, which was quite unpleasant, I came to my own conclusion and told him that I would not engage in a fight I would not win. Then he smiled his impish smile, and I knew again that I had already lost. His most potent weapon is neither guns nor knives, but his bright smile.

… I try to tell myself that I am wrong, but sometimes when I look him in the eyes I find myself expecting. Within his heart, full of dreams and love, would my share of love exist? I let myself keep a tiny sliver of hope.

Seongwu felt goosebumps run up his arm. Could Minhyun have meant to address him, when he
said ‘planet?’ Seongwu shook his head, willing himself to think of it as a coincidence. He was weary with sadness, and he could be more susceptible to confusion. Calming himself, he opened the second book, titled <Volume II: Star>. Seongwu flipped through the pages, and stopped where the language caught his eye.


… Evenings are our favorite time of the day. I especially enjoy the wait while Seongwu takes a bath. Sounds of splashing water, people wrapping up their day in the village, and the crickets chirping in the yard complete the gentle and quiet scenery of Bukchon. It is endlessly enjoyable for me to immerse myself in it while I observe stars.

There are infinite number of stars in the sky, and various kinds, too. I first thought of Ong Seongwu as a planet, but I have to correct myself. He is a star, because he emits light on his own. The source of his light is his strong, pulsating vitality, and his passion and hope fuel his fire. If there is a singular point that sets him apart from other stars, it is that he does not combust in order to shine.

Perhaps that’s why he stands out from hundreds of thousands of people in Gyeongseong. Everyone who gets to know him falls in love with him, and I, too, could not help but become attracted to him. It might appear to others that he is the one following me around, but it was I who revolved around him all this time. I could have grown sick of the status quo, and the days that repeat themselves endlessly, but I find something new every time I lock eyes with Seongwu. I plan to never leave his side until the day I die. Dear epoch that we live in, I am in desperate need of your help. I hope to continue writing this observation diary.

Seongwu’s hand shuddered violently, and he burst into tears again. Not even thinking to wipe the tears that wet his face, Seongwu continued reading. All the pages were full of love that Minhyun had left behind. Seongwu opened the third notebook, titled <Volume III: Universe>.

Year 1937, August 29. First Year at Pyongyang Medical School.

… Combat planes whoosh by in the skies above Pyongyang all night. Children have huddled together, shivering and covering their ears like scared puppies. Seongwu is deeply occupied in soothing them, and his calming words and warmth fill the room. One by one, the children fall asleep, and Seongwu, tired, has also plunged into a deep slumber. It’s just past midnight, and I am the only one awake in the room.

I have many reasons I cannot fall asleep. Of course I am afraid of being raided, but I find myself intrigued by the technology that floats chunks of heavy metal high up into the sky. We only have fighter plans now, but I suspect that after the war, flying will be a widespread practice among civilians. And one day, we will be able to leap into space.

… The cosmos has always excited my curiosity. It is an infinite space home to countless
stars. Seongwu resembles the universe. I find myself at peace so easily when I am leaning on his great and open mind. Even as my dog tag tightens around my neck like a noose, I can forget all my agony when I am in his arms. Does that make me a star, then? Could I ever become his star?

… Now I lull myself to sleep beside Seongwu, wishing to be a part of his universe in my dreams.

Every word written in the notebook was overflowing with love. Absolute love, which Seongwu had once admired in literature and had yearned for, was right there before his eyes.

Sorrow outpoured from Seongwu, viciously scratching his throat. Tears flowed uncontrollably, and he could not read anymore. Seongwu hugged the notebooks to his chest, as if they were Minhyun himself. He placed them near his pounding heart.

_Minhyun, if only you were next to me, I could let you hear how hard my heart is beating within my body. I could let you hear all of this feeling, all of my love for you, if only you were by my side..._

Chapter End Notes

Despite its sadness, Chapter 32 was one of the most rewarding chapter for me as a translator. Thank you all for reading / leaving comments.

One historical inaccuracy: active military conscription as shown in this chapter actually did not start until 1943. I’d pulled it to a few years ahead to 1940.
Minhyun arrives at Mr. Kimura's house in Nagasaki. Mr. Kimura introduces Minhyun to Seiko Kimura, his sister, and Haruna, his Roman Catholic Korean wife. The Kimuras take Minhyun out to downtown Nagasaki, and together the four of them explore the vibrant port city. After a small confrontation with an aggressive Japanese student, Minhyun blends in with his classmates at Nagasaki Medical School.

In Pyongyang, the Ong family decide to leave the city. Seongwu stays behind, and in solitude begins to write essays full of his love and longing for Minhyun.

Hi! I am sorry it took so long to translate this chapter. Work was really intense for the last month or so. Thank you for waiting for me patiently and giving me all of the love and support through curiouscat. :) I hope you enjoy this chapter too.

Are you all enjoying Minhyun's new song? I went back to Chapter 32 to read his diary entries and they were all related to the word 'universe.' :D Somehow I predicted it, I guess. Just an interesting thought.

The passenger ship glided upon the black ocean under protection of the stars above. It only stopped at Mokpo, their stop before Nagasaki. Sailors bustled on board, casting the anchor down at the harbor. Minhyun was awakened by the sound of people about outside his cabin. Minhyun, who had been asleep as if dead, laboriously sat himself up.

It was past three o'clock in the morning. Minhyun stood up, pallid as a ghost. He wanted to get some wind while the ship was docked, and opened the heavy door of his cabin. He walked out onto the deck.

He had been seasick all along, and he had not even had the time to mourn being parted from Seongwu. He could never get used to the violent tumble of his ship, which seemed to shake not only
his body but his entire soul. He wanted to retch any time he looked at wild waves crashing against the body of his ship.

Minhyun took deep breaths on the deck, and he instantly felt better. He felt the wind slap against his body, leaning on the thin iron rails. The ocean’s salty scent pierced his lungs. He had never smelled anything as strong, and thought how wonderful it would be to experience it with Seongwu. He painted a picture of Seongwu on the black surface of the seawater. Would he be asleep now, the one he promised eternity to?

He heard the crewmen shout at each other, preparing to sail again. Minhyun turned his head toward the front of the ship. Bright light accosted the right side of his face, and darkness enveloped the other, his high nose casting a deep shadow upon his cheeks. The world Minhyun was looking at was just as divided. There was the sea and the sky, indistinguishable from each other, while the port shone like a midday sun in the middle of it.

The port in Mokpo was incomparably larger than the port on the Taedong. There were a number of merchant and military ships behind and ahead of the passenger ship Minhyun was aboard. Dozens of seamen went back and forth between the ships and the port, carrying all kinds of grains, wood, and minerals on their backs. Minhyun knew exactly where those things were going: the same direction he was headed in. He felt an intense nausea once again, and he turned away from the rails, back to his cabin.

Minhyun had to pass a large parlor on the way to his cabin. There several people sitting there, mourning the mysterious voyages ahead. The space was deathly quiet, and the silence was only neutralized by the sound of music coming from a turntable in the corner.

Life, running through an endless desert
Where is it that you are headed?
What do you intend to find in this
Lonely world, this sea of pain?
Life absorbed in life,
You dance on a blade of a knife

“...Playing ‘Hymn of Death’ in a ship crossing the Korean strait. How ill-tempered.”

Minhyun smiled bitterly to himself, and went back into his cabin. The morose melody kept on playing, until the sound of boat horn drowned it completely. The ship sailed away from land, again, and the undulating black sea welcomed the shaken souls upon it.

Minhyun arrived at Nagasaki after sailing another half day from from Mokpo. He exited the ship, his face dry and gaunt. He had to stand at the port and gather himself for a while as he felt as if the ground beneath him was shaking. When the phantom of shaking ground eventually vanished, Minhyun walked into the city, close from the port. There were all kinds of people: Japanese people in kimonos and wooden clogs, Portuguese and Spanish priests dressed in black, and exotic seamen from merchant ships around the world. As he heard, Nagasaki seemed an open and vivacious city. Minhyun passed through the city, full of eye-catching trinkets, unnoticed.
Minhyun’s footsteps lightened as he relaxed a little. He looked at the new imports from the west as he walked, and remembered a few shops that Seongwu might like, so they could visit together in the future.

He bought some traditional Japanese sweets in a bakery, and took a streetcar to go to Mr. Kimura’s house. The Kimura family home was in Harukimachi, a village north of downtown Nagasaki. The village was quiet and peaceful, and Minhyun walked through the narrow alleyways that led him to the innermost part of it.

Mr. Kimura’s house was easy to find. When he knocked on the front gate, a woman with bobbed hair - Minhyun had seen her before, in Gyeongseong - opened it. In Korean with an awkward cadence, she said she had been waiting for him, and led him into the house. Mr. Kimura’s house was a two-story, Japanese-style house, with a small pond in the garden and cherry blossom tree, pine trees, and bushes of hydrangeas planted around it. Overall, the house was calm and appeared antique. Minhyun soon arrived at the main house after following a walking path made from flat, black stones.

The woman told him that Mr. Kimura was waiting for him in the sitting room. Minhyun followed her directions on how to get to it, and arrived at the end of a corridor. He opened the sliding door to see a wide expanse of the tatami floor, and Mr. Kimura seated on it in a dark blue kimono. In front of him were a small table of teaware. Mr. Kimura beamed as Minhyun entered the room.

“You must be tired, coming such a long way.”

“I am fine, sir.”

“Sit. Have a warm cup of tea.”

“Thank you.”

Minhyun picked up his teacup, and smelled the gentle aroma of green tea. They spoke for a few minutes, drinking tea, and Mr. Kimura was soon to send Minhyun upstairs to his room, commenting on how pale he looked. It was his way of letting Minhyun rest until dinnertime. As if she had waited all the while outside, the woman with bobbed hair was there when Minhyun opened the door again, and she led him to his room on the second floor. Aside from the tatami-covered floor, the room closely resembled the one he shared with Seongwu in Gyeongseong. The woman told Minhyun that she would fetch him once dinner was ready, and disappeared down the corridor.

Minhyun was left alone in an empty room. He set down his bags and sat, leaning his back on the wall. He could finally relax, and his nerved slowly began to calm. He slowly organized his personal effects until he was called down for dinner. Minhyun hurried downstairs, and when he entered the dining room, five pairs of curious eyes were on him. The tip of Minhyun’s ears reddened in his shyness.

They each sat in front of a small table with their food, and awkward greetings were exchanged. Everyone introduced themselves except Mr. Kimura. First was the woman with bobbed hair Minhyun had seen several times now. Her name was Seiko Kimura, younger sister of Mr. Kimura. Another young woman was called Haruna Kimura, Mr. Kimura’s wife. Minhyun had never imagined that his icy teacher was already married, but did not show his surprise. Another couple at the table was Mr. and Mrs. Kobayashi, family of hired help who had traditionally worked for Mr. Kimura’s family. Their meal began after all six of them became acquainted to each other.

Minhyun learned a lot about Mr. Kimura during this dinner. Minhyun had always imagined his teacher to have come from a family of intellectuals or military officials, but actually, he was the
second son of a Miso soybean paste merchants. Mr. Kimura said he became a teacher because he wanted to escape from becoming a merchant, and volunteered to work in Gyeongseong because he wanted to be far away from his family as he could. Seiko and Haruna chatted like young girls, informing Minhyun of things he had not known before. Mr. Kimura himself remained mostly silent, but he did not look displeased.

When the conversation circled back to the issue of family, Mr. Kimura told Minhyun that his parents and brother are still running a soybean paste company in Gokura (小倉). Minhyun was surprised to learn that this was not just a paste shop, but an upscale company that sold to expensive, gourmet restaurants in Kyushu (九州).

“Even today, in preparation of your visit, I got specially made Miso and the biggest snapper head I could get my hands on.”

“I see. It tastes amazing, very pure.”

“I know, right? To be honest, Miso paste can be off from Korean palate, but I keep coming back to this Miso paste because I love it.”

Minhyun whipped his head to look at Haruma Kimura who said the words ‘Korean palate.’ Was she saying she was also Korean? Minhyun would not have imagined another person from Joseon in the household. Haruna just laughed, daintily covering her mouth.

“Yes, I am originally from Gyeongseong. My Korean name is Choon-Young (春永). Because my name is so hard to pronounce, Daisuke came up with a Japanese name for me, Choon meaning spring (春), and Chae meaning plants (菜). Haruna (春菜).”

“Mr. Kimura created a name for you. That is very sweet.”

Embarrassed, Mr. Kimura coughed dryly, looking away. Minhyun marvelled at the sight. He knew that his teacher had a human side to him, but it was his first time seeing Mr. Kimura so open. Minhyun did not know that the coldest, strictest Japanese teacher had a hidden Korean lover he chose to marry and bring to his homeland. Minhyun promised himself that he would learn from the love of Mr. Kimura, his eternal teacher, and ultimately outperform him when he returned to Seongwu later.

The first dinner together ended in a cheerful mood. Minhyun was gifted with fraternal friendship that transcended a simple teacher-student and helper-beneficiary relationship and expanded into the realm of senior and junior in life. Minhyun and Mr. Kimura were finally looking eye to eye as equals.

After dinner, Minhyun spent time alone in his room. The feeling of loneliness was stark against the warmth around the dinner table. Minhyun sat with his back against the wall and looked around his room. It felt empty, even with all the furniture and his personal effects inside. This emptiness stemmed from his feelings from the lack of Seongwu by his side; Seongwu, his precious who was with him for the past eight years. Minhyun sighed. Seongwu’s absence was greater than he could control.

Minhyun took a photograph out of his pocket. Inside the small square was Minhyun and Seongwu, just over twenty years of age. He withheld the temptation to touch Seongwu’s face inside the photograph, as he was afraid that it would wear down. He pushed the photograph back into his pocket.

Minhyun then took a letter out of his bag. Seongwu must have hidden it in his bag before he left Pyongyang. Minhyun had found it while on the passenger ship, but he had left it unread because of
his seasickness. The letter was accompanied by a small bag of honey cookies Seongwu had packed for him, a package that resembled a stash of acorns gathered by a chipmunk for a long winter. Everything Seongwu did was adorable to him. Minhyun chuckled, and carefully placed the snacks on his desk before reading Seongwu’s letter.

Seongwu’s letter was full of wishes for Minhyun to be safe, in a tone of worrisome love. Minhyun sat with his back to the window, in fear that Seongwu’s wishes within the letter would escape. Not even the moon was allowed to look over his shoulder to steal his lover’s affections. Minhyun read Seongwu’s letter again and again, resting over every word and letter. His heart became heated again in confirmation of Seongwu’s love, but at the same time he felt infinitely lonely. Minhyun wanted to go back to Seongwu, now. He wanted to call Seongwu’s name, and take him into his arms to feel his warmth. He painfully missed everything about Seongwu: his kind voice that called out his name, soft hands that took his own hands to squeeze them gently.

Droplets of tears fell onto the tatami mat. Minhyun hurried put his letter away, afraid that his tears might blur Seongwu’s handwriting. He hid underneath his blanket and cried quietly until dawn crept above the horizons. Minhyun’s first night in Japan passed in loneliness.

Minhyun almost fell into traps of depression, but Mr. Kimura would not let him. Mr. Kimura took Haruna and Minhyun out the next morning to go around the city of Nagasaki and acquaint him with its culture. Seiko accompanied them, and the four of them quickly became a close-knit band that would frequently tour the city to learn its history and culture before Minhyun’s semester at Nagasaki Medical University started. They visited many sites and places of interest over a short period of time; what struck Minhyun the most was the Immaculate Conception Cathedral, better known as Urakami Cathedral (*浦上天主堂)*.

During this time, Urakami Cathedral was one of the biggest Romanesque Catholic churches in Asia. It bustled with people offering prayers early on Sunday mornings. Minhyun, Mr. Kimura, Haruna and Seiko also walked to its sanctuary to pray. Life-sized statues of various saints lined either side of the path. Minhyun, who was godless and had never been to a church, everything was new and wonderous. He was thoroughly impressed with the interior of the main temple. A giant stained glass window dominated the wall, and Minhyun stood and stared endlessly at the sunlight turning a mysterious blue as it passed through the shards of glass. It was beautiful beyond words, and the candlelit atmosphere was overwhelming. Minhyun gaped at the spectacular grandeur.

Haruna, seemingly experienced with the nooks and crannies of the cathedral, led them through the nave. She said she had been a Catholic since she was a young girl. She sat them down on a long bench. Minhyun sat there, unable to tear his eyes off the beauty of the church. When he rested his eyes on the cross that hung in the middle of the choir, European priests began to enter, and soon the bell rang from the church tower. The mass began.

One of the priests began to play the enormous pipe organ, and the sound filled the entire church. The choir sang sacred hymns in a language Minhyun could not understand despite having studied English, French and German in school. Haruna handed him a hymn book, which had the lyrics interpreted into Japanese. The original language was Italian. Minhyun quietly read them as if enjoying a poem.

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Vergin, tutto amor
o madre pia, ascolta dolce maria
la voce del peccator
il pianto suo ti muova
giungano a te i suoi lamenti
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Minhyun's first semester started on the fourth of March. Nagasaki Medical University was not far from Mr. Kimura’s house. Minhyun truly felt that he was beginning a new journey while staring at the university building, which was much larger than Pyongyang Medical College. He rolled his hands into fists and vowed to himself that he would absorb as much knowledge as possible before he could go back to Joseon. Surely, he had only come to Nagasaki to avoid conscription, but his life did not have to shrivel under the shadow of war. He would learn to the best of his abilities to he could somehow help his home country, and support Kyuwon, who was always hungry for studying something new. Seongwu would be happy, too, if he grew and became a better man.

He went into a lecture hall for his first class, five minutes before the start of class. Students were talking among themselves in the hall, and somehow, despite all of them being first-years, most of them seemed to already know each other, seated in clusters of cliques. Minhyun, not knowing or having been acquainted with anyone, chose a seat in the far back of the classroom and sat down. He wished that nobody would notice him, but unfortunately everyone in the class had their eyes on him the minute he entered.

A shadow loomed over Minhyun, and when he looked up, a male student with a particularly pointed chin gave him a once-over, his eyes full of a strange mixture of curiosity and disdain.

“Hey, you.”

“Yes?”

“Are you a Josenjin*?”

“If I am?”
The man had probably asked because Minhyun looked different from Japanese students, who comprised vast majority of the class. But Minhyun did not like the nuance beneath the word ‘josenjin.’ He knew what it implied. As Minhyun answered, the man sneered.

“Say ‘十五円五十銭 (jyugo-en gojyusen; じゅうごえんごじゅっせん).’”

“......”

Minhyun’s eyes narrowed. The phrase was comprised of pronunciation foreigners had a difficult time saying correctly, and it was infamously used by Japanese vigilantes during the Kantou Earthquake and the massacre that followed. At that time, Koreans who could not pronounce the phrase correctly were mercilessly massacred, and the river that ran through Kantou were dyes red in the blood of murdered Koreans. This was less than twenty years ago. It was evident what the man was trying to do to Minhyun. He was abusing his privilege as a Japanese man to threaten Minhyun to tell him he could die any time, like his brethren did during the Kantou Massacre.

A flame of hostility began to burn at the pit of Minhyun’s stomach. But he knew better than to act recklessly. He knew that he would only please the malice of the man in front of him if he spoke out too soon.

“Why don’t you read some more of your textbook, if you have the time to start something so petty? You wouldn’t be able to compete with me if you don’t.”

Minhyun took a book out of his bag, as if he did not find any reason to engage with the man any longer. He leisurely flipped through it, and the man took a deep breath in frustration and anger. However, before the man could do anything, the professor came into the classroom and the lecture began.

After the rigorous three-hour lecture, many classmates gathered around Minhyun. They were attracted by Minhyun’s noble dignity in the face of unwarranted insult. Most of them were foreign students, including Koreans who hid their identity at school and students from China. Some of the classmates who reached out to Minhyun were Japanese. The man who had tried to abuse Minhyun could not approach him any longer, and he disappeared out of the classroom, seething. Minhyun was thankful that these new friends approached him first; he was fortunate to have someone to band together in solidarity during these difficult times. He had started to worry that the Japanese man would continue to pester him, and he was glad to see him step back first.

When Minhyun returned to his room after an exhausting first day of school, he was about to collapse. Still, he sat himself at his desk, and began to write a letter to Seongwu. He wrote detailed accounts of about what had happened to him since he arrived at Nagasaki. Because he did not want Seongwu to worry about his school life, he bluffed about positive things that had happened to him at school. He carefully folded his letter, placed it in an envelope, and wrote Seongwu’s address in Pyongyang with his best possible hand. The next day, immediately after school, he went to the post office in the city to send his letter.

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After Minhyun left Pyongyang, Seongwu was drowning in chores and work. He had to prepare for a new semester, and he was left alone to take care of the guest house on his own. To add to his sadness, his grandmother became hopelessly ill. Seongwu tried to get his hands on the best medicine for her as he could, but his grandmother found it impossible to escape the clutches of her stubborn illness. As her condition deteriorated, the Ong family quietly began to ready themselves for a funeral. Seongwu helped with preparing for the inevitable goodbye, but he suffered relentlessly inside. Why did these misfortunes attack him all at once?

As Minhyun’s letter crossed over into Korea, Seongwu was sitting at his grandmother’s deathbed, her frail hand in his. Seongwu found himself unable to say anything; all he could do was cry. Grandmother saw the tears of her most beloved grandson, and mustered all the strength she had left in her body to speak.

“Seongwu, you are a blessed child. Everything will be well, do not worry.”

After this, grandmother’s breathing stopped abruptly. All of her senses began to disappear from her body, until she could no longer feel her favorite grandchild’s warm hand on hers. Seongwu held on to her cold, stiffening hand, and sobbed for a long time.

Kyuwon ran to Seongwu’s house as soon as he heard that his grandmother had passed away. It was pure luck that he ran into the mailman as he was exiting the Ong family house after paying his respects. With Minhyun’s letter in hand, he turned back to enter the house again. He wanted the letter to be a source of solace and joy for Seongwu, who was downtrodden and exhausted. Seongwu was still busy greeting guests to the funeral when he returned to the main house, and he quietly dragged Seongwu toward the guest house.

“I thought you’d gone home, hyung.”

“You have no idea what I have. Look at this.”

“Hmm?”

“Here is a letter for you.”

“A letter?”

Seongwu looked surprised as Kyuwon handed him a letter. Seongwu opened the envelope immediately. Minhyun’s letter was more than ten pages long, and had detailed descriptions of his life in Nagasaki. Minhyun seemed to be doing well, and Seongwu felt the burden of worry he had for Minhyun’s well-being slightly lessen. Seongwu carefully folded the letter into his mourning dress. He would take his time to peruse and enjoy the letter later.

“By the way, Seongwu, I happened to overhear the adults speaking.”

“What have you heard?”

“They seem to be planning to leave Pyongyang.”

“Ah.”

Seongwu knew that his uncle was trying to move to Seogando* anyways. His uncle was persuading his family to go with him, and now that his grandmother had passed away, his uncle’s case for leaving Pyongyang was more convincing. Besides, his brothers were about to graduate from school, and after that they could be drafted any minute. Seongwu’s parents had been considering leaving
Pyongyang for a while now, and they were having a hard time finding the reasons why they should risk everything just to stay. Yes, it would be difficult for them to adapt to a new place, but would it be more difficult than staying in Joseon?

“Are you going with them?”

“I…”

“......”

“I am going to stay here.”

“Will you be all right?”

“Of course.”

Seongwu smiled at Kyuwon as if telling him not to worry. Seongwu did not want him, or anyone, to know that the real reason he wanted to stay behind were letters from Minhyun. He knew Kyuwon was going to chastise him if he found out. Fortunately, Kyuwon did not probe. He merely pat Seongwu’s shoulder a few times, and left.

If he went to Seogando with his family, he would not be able to communicate with Minhyun. Seongwu sighed. No matter how difficult life would get in Pyongyang, he did not want to let go of exchanging letters with Minhyun; that would be more painful for him than death. He knew that he was maybe too naive, but he believed that the occupation of a teacher would be intact, even in war. He still believed that the government general was humane enough not to throw government officials, teachers and students into the battlefield. At the end of the day, what kept Seongwu going were thick envelopes from Nagasaki. His family persuaded, pled, and threatened him, but Seongwu did not back down; he would stay in Pyongyang. In the end, Seongwu convinced his parents with his argument that the entirety of Ong family’s history was here in Pyongyang, and somebody had to stay behind to protect it.

Ong family quickly readied themselves for departure, and a fortnight after grandmother’s funeral, they left Pyongyang. Seongwu promised everyone he would keep the house in good shape, so anyone could come back any time. His parents, his uncle and his bride, Jeongwu, Hyeonwu, and Heewu… His siblings kept looking back, dabbing at their tear-filled eyes. They only ran after their parents after Seongwu shouted at them: “Go!” The train for Dandong, China, carrying Ong family, finally left Pyongyang.

Seongwu was alone in the large Ong family home, which now felt empty and cold. He did not have the time to fall into a trap of sadness that solitude can bring, as Kyuwon showed up at his doorstep just a few hours after his family had left. Homeowners of the house Kyuwon was staying in had also decided to relocate to Manchuria, and the Ong family had asked him to move in to live with Seongwu.

"You wanted to enjoy this palatial home all by yourself, didn’t you?”

Seongwu laughed at that. He let Kyuwon use a spacious room in the main house, and Kyuwon quickly seeped into Seongwu’s life again, just as he had during their time in Gyeongseong. Kyuwon held Seongwu steadfast in their daily lives, and became a tree for Seongwu to lean against during hard times. He listened patiently and attentively when Seongwu talked about Minhyun. Seongwu thought that without Kyuwon, he would not have had the strength to live through that time; he would have collapsed.
Nevertheless, Kyuwon could not fill the deep void that existed in Seongwu’s heart. When the sun set and loneliness attacked him like rogue waves, Seongwu read poetry books that Minhyun had given him, or read Minhyun’s old diaries that he left in Pyongyang. Seongwu also wrote letters, pressing every drop of his longing into every letter. He wanted to just run to where Minhyun was and jump into his arms, but he could not. Instead, he wrote countless times that he loved him. Seongwu’s letters were always filled to the brim with love; he wished to send Minhyun only his love and nothing else. He did not write to Minhyun that his grandmother had passed away, and his family had left Pyongyang. He knew Minhyun would worry, and he did not want to be a burden.

When he was still not satisfied after writing a letter, Seongwu opened his notebook to write. He looked to Minhyun’s diaries as a model, and he wrote short pieces and essays that served as a response to each of Minhyun’s entries. He enjoyed going back to his old memories and retelling them. It took a long time for Seongwu to decide on a name for his notebook, and after three full days and nights he finally decided to call it…

Nocturne (夜想曲)

To the master of my yearning at night

Seongwu thought that Minhyun and Music got along very well. Seongwu loved both of them. He continued to write his nocturne at night, to someday show them to Minhyun. On the first page was the poem he had written as a Korean language assignment while at Gyeongseong Secondary School.

I cannot let myself perish.

When I welcome the crack of dawn every morning

I am given again and again dreams as many

As the stars of our milky way embroidered across the universe

I cannot let myself perish; Like the Sun,

Which endlessly explodes and burns forever,

My heart boils with the flames of love.

I have let myself

Taste the sweetness of life.

Seongwu found himself blushing, embarrassed, at the poem he wrote as a teenager in love. Despite his shame, he wrote every word of it in the first page of his notebook. As clumsy as it was, there was no other poem that held as much unbridled affection for Minhyun in its words. Seongwu denied it at the time, but now he could be honest to himself. The reason he could dream, the reason he could fall
into scalding love that burned his being, the reason he could taste the sweetness of life that left him unable to let go of it… All of it was Hwang Minhyun.

Seongwu knew his wait was not going to be easy, and that he would never be used to the loneliness, the yearning, and missing Minhyun. When he missed Minhyun so much to the point of pain, he took out a bottle of perfume he kept hidden in his bookcase. When he opened all three layers of packaging he wrapped it with to keep its fragrance intact, the bottle, as good as new, appeared. Seongwu dropped a droplet of the perfume on his wrist, hurriedly closed the perfume bottle again, and rubbed the delicate skin of his inner wrists together. The scent quietly spread throughout the room, and Minhyun’s apparition grew from it. He took Seongwu’s emaciated body into his arms, and suddenly Seongwu remembered Minhyun telling him to remember this scent. Yes, this was the kind of fragrance Minhyun liked. When he returned, Seongwu would buy him as many soaps in this very scent as he wanted, for the rest of his life.

Seongwu slipped another drop of perfume on his elbows and neck. That way, he felt like he was securely held in Minhyun’s strong arms. The scent of longing lingered on the nape of Seongwu’s neck, and it stayed there until Seongwu let himself fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 33

* **Immaculate Conception Cathedral (Urakami Cathedral):** (From Wikipedia) The Immaculate Conception Cathedral (無原罪の聖母司教座聖堂) also St. Mary's Cathedral, often known as Urakami Cathedral, is a Roman Catholic cathedral located in Motoomachi, Nagasaki, Japan. The atomic bomb that fell on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 detonated in Urakami only 500 m (1640 ft) from the cathedral, completely destroying it. As the Feast of the Assumption of Mary (August 15) was near, Mass was held on the day and was well attended. The resultant collapse and heat-wave cindered and buried all those present in the Cathedral. A replacement was built in 1959.

* **Josenjin:** This was a derogatory term / slur used by some Japanese people at the time to refer to Koreans, or the people of Joseon.

* **十五円五十銭 (jyugo-en gojyusen; じゅうごえんごじゅっせん):** This phrase was infamously used by radical Japanese vigilantes during The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 to sort out Koreans, who were considered scapegoats for the chaos that followed the earthquake. Koreans who could not pronounce the phrase correctly were murdered. Scholars estimate about 6,000 to 6,600 Koreans to have been killed in the Kanto Massacre that followed the earthquake.

* **Seogando:** (From Wikipedia) Jiandao or Chientao, known in Korean as Gando or Kando, is a historical border region along the north bank of the Tumen River in Jilin province, Northeast China that has a high population of ethnic Koreans.
The Japanese Government General implements a policy that requires all Koreans to change their names to Japanese names. Seongwu witnesses an altercation between the Japanese police and a Korean family and faints; the stranger that brings him home turns out to be a surprise visitor from the North. Upon careful consideration, Seongwu decides to leave Pyongyang.

Work is taking almost all of my time! But it's winding down, so I'll be able to translate more quickly going forward :) Thank you for being patient and staying with me and Id on this journey.

Seongwu’s quiet nocturne seeped into his nights. The scent of the perfume embraced Seongwu during his loneliest nights, while the season changed from summer to winter. Soon it was spring, and the mercury in thermometers climbed up as the days lengthened. Seongwu’s clothes became lighter, but his heart grew heavier still every night. His wait continued without any sign of an end, and as if to laugh at Seongwu’s sadness and worries, the war intensified. When Seongwu closed his eyes at night, all he could see was the uncertainty of his future. When his thoughts became too much to bear, Seongwu took out the letters with stamps of a foreign nation to read them and read them again. By then he had more than twenty letters of heartfelt love from across the sea. Seongwu found solace in each sentence of Minhyun’s letters. Words of comfort that whispered undying love gently pulled him up in his hour of despair and calmed the apprehension that sometimes threatened to swallow him whole.

Minhyun and Seongwu withstood their lengthening time of loneliness. Despite their hopes for the best, the turmoil in their world grew worse day by day. In the new year, a new law was declared for the people of Joseon to changed their names to Japanese ones. This was a strategy to wipe out their identities, and the start of a policy of ethnic cleansing. It topped off everything that Koreans had endured until now, including daily recitations of praises of Imperial Japan, forced Shinto worship, and airtight military drafting. The controversial name change policy caused an uproar not only in Korea, but also within Japan among some of the Japanese.

Seongwu and Kyuwon, still in Pyongyang, were also enraged. Their language and culture were taken from them and became forbidden, and now their oppressors were trying to take their names, and through that, their souls. They wanted to ask God, if he existed, why he was showering them
with only suffering and nothing else. They had nobody to complain to. Sorrow of losing their country crystallized as a deep resentment in their hearts. The Japanese held their fragile, defeated hearts at gunpoint. The Government General overruled all objections and the general air of opposition throughout Korea and Japan to enforce the name change policy. On February 11, all Koreans were ordered to come up with a new Japanese name and report to their local authorities.

Seongwu and Kyuwon held countless vigils to think, and think again. They had to change their names if they wished to continue to live in their homeland of Joseon. They did not know what would happen to them if they did not oblige. They were not only worried about their own safety. If they refused to follow the law, everyone around them, including family, relatives, and friends, could be endangered. Persecuting circles of family and friends for nonconformity was an effective system of enforcement adopted by the Japanese Government General. That was how they ran things, and they knew this time would not be an exception.

Countless conversations ended without a conclusion. Seongwu and Kyuwon decided to take full advantage of the six months they were given. Their decision to wait stemmed from a somewhat naive conclusion that the Japanese would not be able to enforce the law on the millions of Korean population.

Perhaps millions of their fellow Koreans thought the same thing; even in March, almost no one had changed their names. The Government General then began their tactics to enforce their policy, beginning with those who were socially influential. Kyuwon was under threat immediately. Kyuwon was a professor at Pyongyang Medical College and the head of Jahye Medical Clinic. He was not only a socially well-received doctor but also a kind of person who prioritized his patients and family over himself. Kyuwon was immediately branded as a potential insurgent, and his name was put on the list for people under surveillance.

Japanese police officers started to visit Kyuwon every few days. They threatened him at night in dark streets, and sometimes even threatened to kill his patients in front of many people. They threatened him that he would be deported if he continued to refuse to change his name, but this was nothing. Kyuwon gave in when they began to threaten to breach Seongwu’s safety. He filled out his application for a name change in the presence of Japanese officers in fear that Seongwu would be hurt, or even killed. That night, Kyuwon confessed to Seongwu that he had changed his name, his voice socked in regret and pain. Seongwu sat with him without reproach, as he knew what he had gone through in the last few weeks.

Seongwu himself was not exempt from surveillance from the Government General. He was not as influential or well-known as Kyuwon, but he was in a certain position of power that was enough to make him a person to watch. Seongwu agonized over the name changed through sleepless nights. He knew he had to comply, whether he liked or not, if he wished to continue to live in Pyongyang and teach. This was his reality. As much as he understood what he had to do, his heart would not budge. Whenever he picked up his pen to fill out the name change application, he found his right arm go limp. Seongwu postponed his name change, using the excuse that his surname was extremely rare, and that the Chinese character for it did not exist in Japanese language. He wanted to stay Ong Seongwu for as long as he could.

The Japanese Government General, however, did not have enough patience for Seongwu’s reticence. They created scenes and situations around Seongwu to force him to comply. Their methods of enforcement always involved violence without restraint. Any cruelty was fair in their game, as they did saw Koreans as neither equals nor human. The last of guilt and compassion they had for the people of Joseon was gone as if they never existed.
It was a holiday. Kyuwon and Seongwu had a late breakfast and were translating a new medical textbook. They were jolted out of focus when they heard a crowd of people murmuring among themselves near their house; a few screams cut into the noise. Their village was usually peaceful and quiet, and they immediately knew something was wrong. Before Kyuwon even started to wonder what was going on, Seongwu shot up from his seat and ran out. He was so fast that Kyuwon could not stop him.

“I’ll see what’s going on!” Seongwu shouted as Kyuwon stood in front of the Ong family home’s gate, dumbstruck.

Seongwu ran to the small vacant lot in the village, where the sound of commotion was coming from. There was a chaotic mix of people, all entangled with each other. Some were sobbing, some were bawling, and some clung to the leg of a Japanese police officer, only to be kicked off. The police officer was cursing, trying to get people from stop clinging to him. He was hitting them with a club, and Seongwu could not get near them. Confused, Seongwu quickly looked around him, and saw a group of people huddled together in a heap in the dusty core of the uproar. Seongwu ducked his head to see who they were, until his eyes met with a pair of familiar ones. In shock, Seongwu drew a sharp breath.

It was a boy, eleven years old, soon to be in fourth grade. Seongwu had taught him just last year. The boy was trembling in fear in his parents’ arms, who were trying to escape the scene while holding dearly on to their child. The Japanese officer’s club fell on their backs mercilessly. People moaned and screamed around them, and adults, children, Koreans, and the Japanese all whirled together in a chaotic mess. Seongwu thought of pictures of hell.

A gripping nausea took a firm hold of Seongwu. His face pale, Seongwu staggered backwards, his instinct drawing him away from the scene of cruel violence. He was dizzy, and he could not bear to be there. Then, he stepped into something, and turned around to see that it was a stranger.

“Are you all right, sir?”

“Ah…”

Seongwu wanted to say he was sorry, but for some reason, he could not speak. Then his vision turned black. He held his head in his hands.

“Hey.”

“......”

“Sir! Hang in there!”

Seongwu heard the stranger shout at him, but his voice drifted away, as if he was submerged underwater. Like a marionette whose strings were cut, Seongwu collapsed onto the ground. The stranger held Seongwu’s body, now as limp as a doll’s, and kept shouting something, until his voice was drowned in the noises around them. Only a cold wind carrying dirt answered his cries.

When Seongwu came to, he was at home. He could see the familiar interior of the guest house. It was dark outside, so Seongwu guessed that it had been a while since he lost consciousness. As he sat up, Kyuwon entered the room and gasped.
“You’re up! I was so worried about you. You fainted out of nowhere.”

“Hyung…”

“Don’t say anything. First, have a warm cup of tea.”

Kyuwon started to talk as Seongwu sipped on his steaming cup of green tea. In Seongwu’s town, there were a lot of Korean people who had not yet applied to have their name changed. The Japanese Government General wished to pick a family and have them punished as an example for everyone, so that the village would eventually succumb to the name change policy. They picked on a family that had openly refused to comply with the new law; when they could not have the family concede inside the house, they dragged all of them out to the vacant lot in the village to club them. People ran out from their homes when they heard the family scream, and the scene had quickly turned into chaos as some of the bystanders started to fight back with the Japanese police officers. Seongwu remembered what it was like, and how terrible it was. He wished to comfort the family and the little boy he had taught…

“Well, when you fainted, the police became distracted, so their violence stopped eventually. I don’t know if I should be relieved or more worried.”

“I see. I’m sorry to make you worry.”

“Rather than apologize to me, you should greet the man who saved you.”

Seongwu immediately knew who Kyuwon was referring to: the man he had accidentally backed into before fainting. Seongwu tried to remember his face, and realized that he had never seen the stranger in the village before. The stranger must have been from out of town. Seongwu surmised that he must be a kind man, helping to bring an unconscious stranger home.

“Amazingly, he happened to be a visitor for you, Seongwu.”

“Me?”

“Yes. He is from Seogando. He said he is your uncle’s student.”

“Really?”

Seongwu stood up and crossed over to the spare room in the guest house, where the mysterious guest was staying. When he opened the door, he saw a young man sitting in the middle of the room. Upon looking at him under a brighter lamplight, Seongwu realized that he looked young, more boy than a man. He sighed in relief when he saw that Seongwu had recovered.

They exchanged names. The guest was twenty years old, and his name was Park Ji Hoon. He had lost his parents early and had lived without settling in one place, until he went to Seogando ten years ago and stayed. He met the Ongs there, and became like a part of the family. He briefed Seongwu on how the Ongs were doing, as well as how things were generally in Seogando, and then handed Seongwu a letter from his family.

“You came all the way to Pyongyang, and you saved me… Thank you very much.”

“Please don’t mind it. Besides, the real reason I am here is…”

“......”

“In that letter. Please read it, and I beg you to make a wise decision.”
Seongwu wondered what Jihoon meant. It was his first time meeting Seongwu, yet he seemed to want a certain answer from Seongwu. What could he possibly want? Seongwu hesitantly went to his room to read the letters from his family. His yearning to see them subsided as he read their handwriting on paper.

Soon, Seongwu knew exactly what Jihoon had meant. His family wanted him to leave Pyongyang and come up to Seogando. They were worried that Seongwu was alone in Joseon, where Imperial Japan’s iron-grip colonization was the cruelest. Even with Kyuwon by his side, he did not know what would happen to him the next day. Moreover, Seongwu was Ong family’s eldest son, and a beloved child, nephew and brother. Ong family seemed to feel guilt about having left him alone in Pyongyang. A third of the contents of the letters mentioned that they lived humanely despite being in the deep mountains of Seogando, cultivating the fields and forming communities with fellow Koreans. Seongwu neatly folded the letters from his family and placed them back into their envelopes. This is what Jihoon had meant when he asked for the ‘right decision’ by Seongwu. Jihoon was not a messenger of greetings and correspondence. He was there to get Seongwu out of Pyongyang.

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Late at night, Seongwu walked into Kyuwon’s room. As if he had expected this visit, Kyuwon was awake. He closed the book he was reading as he welcomed Seongwu. Seongwu was as pale as he was when he had fainted outside. Kyuwon felt his heart ache at the sight of Seongwu, whom he loved like his own brother, ravaged in body and mind by illness. Kyuwon, without saying a word, pushed a white envelope on his desk toward Seongwu. It was a diagnosis. As a doctor, Kyuwon had written Seongwu’s diagnosis as the last parting gift, so Seongwu could use it to excuse himself from his teaching position. Seongwu had fainted in public; the Japanese Government General would not question Kyuwon’s diagnosis of a sickness severe enough to put Seongwu out of a job.

“I’m glad it’s still February, and school hasn’t started yet.”

Kyuwon swallowed the rest of what he was thinking. Seongwu would not have the chance to run if a new semester had already started.

Seongwu looked down at the crisp white envelope on Kyuwon’s desk. He knew what was inside it, and his head started swimming. Should he thank Kyuwon? Apologize to him? What was he supposed to say? A desire to flee clashed with his wish to stay behind and wait for Minhyun. Seongwu hesitated, unable to take the envelope. Kyuwon took it to force it into Seongwu’s hand, and squeezed hard, so Seongwu could not let go.

“Seongwu, I heard they will put government officials and teachers into uniform soon.”

“......”

“Are you able to withstand that? Having a Japanese name, Wearing Japanese clothes?”

No, no! Seongwu shook his head vehemently. He did not want to give up his name, his precious name that he parents had given him. He did not want to wear a Japanese uniform to school. He wanted to die just at the thought of it. How would his students look at him? How would he look at himself? He could turn to death in the unbearable reality of it all. Still, he could not stand the thought of leaving Pyongyang. He had promised Minhyun las spring that they would meet again. If he left,
and Minhyun came back… Minhyun would not be able to find him.

What was the use in living anymore? Seongwu wanted to ask someone, anyone. But before anything, Minhyun appeared in his thoughts and took over. Minhyun never failed to answer his questions. How would he answer Seongwu’s question? Did Minhyun know that his existence was the answer to all of Seongwu’s questions? The reason Seongwu held on to this ignoble, humiliating life was Minhyun. Where was Minhyun?

“Leave Pyongyang. I know what you’re thinking, but you have to survive. Go to your family before it is too late.”

Seongwu’s lips trembled like a petal in a storm. He swallowed tears as he implored with Kyuwon.

“If I leave, what about Minhyun? What if he returns while I am gone?”

“If Japan is defeated, the news will spread everywhere in the speed of light. In Seogando, and in Japan. The two of you can return to Pyongyang then.”

“Still, I promised him to wait here. If he finds that I am not here…”

“You think Minhyun will be disappointed? No. He will never be. I promise you that.”

Seongwu’s sadness turned into tears and fell onto his lap, despite Kyuwon’s comforting words. He hid his face in his hands and sobbed. Kyuwon patted his shoulders quietly.

“I know you feel unsteady. I have an idea.”

“An idea?”

“Let’s send the last letter to Minhyun. You can promise him again to meet him in Gyeongseong, where we lived together, once the war is over.”

“……”

“Gyeongseong is your city. Even if Pyongyang becomes the city of farewells, wouldn’t it be novelesque to meet again in Gyeongseong?”

“That is a good idea.”

Seongwu sniffled out an answer. Kyuwon laughed, and tousled Seongwu’s disheveled hair.

“I’m not a professor at Pyongyang Medical College for nothing.”

Seongwu was reminded of something painful only then. If Seongwu left for Seogando, Kyuwon would be truly alone in the Ong family house.

“What about you, Kyuwon?”

“Well, I’m the most famous person in Pyongyang, in case you have forgotten. But you know, this house is big and it’s going to get lonely. I have a student who is living in poverty at the moment; would you mind if I let him stay in one of the rooms? You wouldn’t have to worry about the house getting dirty; he is almost as clean as Minhyun is.”

“Of course. While I’m not here, this house is yours alone. Please do anything you like with it.”

“Thank you. Don’t you worry about me. Think only of yourself. And survive. Survive, no matter
They embraced. Seongwu whispered his thanks to his brother by virtue. Kyuwon smiled as he stroked Seongwu’s flimsy back. They did not have a drop of same blood, but they were more than family. When Kyuwon first met Seongwu, he was but a naive teenage boy, and now he was a man, embarking on a journey for his life. Kyuwon prayed for his safety and welfare, and meant every word of it.

Once Seongwu returned to the guest room, he was much calmer than he had been earlier. He sat down at his desk to write Minhyun his final letter.

Minhyun 前,

Seongwu chose his words carefully, and wrote as neatly as he could. The sound of his pen gliding and scraping upon paper filled the room. His lantern, which hung by his desk, stood steadfast despite the harsh winds outside as if not to bother him.

… I have tried my best to stand my ground here, but I have come to my limit. I am leaving Pyongyang, because departure is inevitable now. I am going to go to Seogando, where my family is. I hear that it is difficult to send and receive letters there. So, this is likely going to be my last letter to you.

… How do you think of changing our promise? Let us meet at Gyeongseong instead of Pyongyang. On the day the war is over, let us meet in front of our old boarding house with the blue gate we so loved, just like the day we first met.

… I hope our reality triumphs over any novel out there. I hope our gasping breaths and the flame of love that burns our hearts to survive this cruel, cold winds of our times, no matter how much they waver. I hope that our life and our love stay brilliant and glorious until the end.

… Minhyun, I will only think of you. I will only wait for you, in Gyeongseong, our city...

Seongwu started to cry again. His tears fell onto his desk, staining the surface. Seongwu tried to wipe his desk with his sleeve, but only his sleeves became wetter from the continuing stream of tears that fell upon it. Minhyun surely would have admonished him about dirtying his clothes. Seongwu chuckled to himself. He could not believe that he was thinking about Minhyun in these circumstances. He thought about Minhyun, what Minhyun was doing, and what Minhyun would do, all the time.

Seongwu opened his closet and pulled out Minhyun’s old gakuran, which Minhyun had left to him. Now Minhyun’s familiar scent was almost gone from the sturdy fabric, but Seongwu still liked
hugging the gakuran to himself. It felt like touching Minhyun skin to skin. Seongwu rubbed his cheek on the jacket and quietly recited the name that refused to leave his thoughts.

Minhyun.

Minhyun…

There was no answer. Only Seongwu’s feeble voice evaporated into the night. Loneliness settled in Seongwu’s heart again and lingered with the fear that threatened to consume him whole. Seongwu wept all night, silently swallowing moans of pain.

In the morning, Seongwu got up early and went to school. Seongwu carefully submitted his letter of resignation and the diagnosis from Kyuwon to the principal. He was sorry that he had to quit on such short notice just before the start of a new semester, but his principal did nothing to blame him, and processed his resignation without rebuking him. The principal knew that Seongwu had suffered in body and mind, and that he did his absolute best to be an excellent teacher. They exchanged words of encouragement and well wishes, and Seongwu left his beloved school.

After, Seongwu walked to the post office in the city. He wanted to mail his last letter to Minhyun. He had a thick stack of paper that consisted of the letter he wrote last night, and things he had written for Minhyun whenever he had spare time. He tied them together with a string twice, and then thrice. He wanted every single one of his letters to get to Minhyun safely. Seongwu took a long pause to stare at the stack of letters he had passed to the attendant before he left the post office. He could only hope that his letters, and his new promise, would land in Minhyun’s hands.

At home, Jihoon was waiting for him with a map on his desk. Jihoon seemed to be very glad that Seongwu was coming to Seogando with him. Jihoon confidently promised him that Seogando would be a better place than Pyongyang, as if Seogando was some sort of paradise on earth. Still, their way up north was not going to be easy. Their destination was Liuhe (柳河), a town in the mountains so small that some maps failed to list it. To get to Liuhe, they had to take the train to Dandong(丹东), switch to a train headed to Harbin (哈尔滨), and get off at mid-stop, at Liaoyuan (辽源). From there, they had to switch to three different southbound trains, and walk through the mountains to get to the village. Seongwu finally understood why the Japanese had not dared to invade Liuhe.

“I’m just glad that the train to Dandong is still running. If not for that train, we would have to swim across the Amrok River* at night.”

“I see.”

Jihoon warned Seongwu over and over again not to use Korean to speak once they were outside Pyongyang. Suppression of the use of Korean language by the Japanese Government General was becoming worse by the second, and sometimes people were insulted inside the trains, and even thrown off the ride if they were caught using Korea. Seongwu was reminded of a memory from his childhood. When he was a boy, he had seen Japanese police officers on a streetcar humiliating an old Korean man wearing hanbok, calling him ‘Yobo (ヨボ).’ At the time, Seongwu was a mere boy of ten, and he had closed his eyes and covered his ears in fear. He thought that the world in which he lived would become a better place when he grew into a adult, but that was not the case. Seongwu laughed to himself bitterly.

After his meeting with Jihoon, Seongwu walked back to the guest room. He stopped before he could
enter the room, and took a good look at it, from the ceiling to the floors. The room he was so familiar with felt new with the glaze of many special memories it held.

Everything his eyes touched on held a reminder of the time he spent with Minhyun. Seongwu placed his palm on one of the walls and closed his eyes, reminiscing. He remembered the first time Minhyun entered the room after leaving Gyeongseong with him, and he remembered the last night they spent together before their tearful goodbye: their only wedding night. He remembered the conversations he had with Minhyun, and the way Minhyun and he touched, naked skin to naked skin… everything came back to him, as clear as day. Nothing in the room was untouched by Minhyun. Minhyun’s breath had touched every nook and cranny of the room. Seongwu ran his fingertips upon the smooth, silk blankets and the pillows with a pair of mandarin ducks embroidered on them. He touched the red candles he had not lit since Minhyun left, and hugged to his chest the pair of wooden lovebird dolls that served as their only wedding gift. Seongwu could not take them with him. Seongwu touched everything in the room with longing, with regret, and wished for them to stay safe and still until he came back one day.

Seongwu tried to postpone his departure by a day or two, wanting to linger in his regret for leaving home, but Jihoon insisted that they leave immediately. Seongwu had to leave Pyongyang, his forever home town, as soon as he finished settling his affairs. Seongwu said his last goodbye to Kyuwon. Seongwu repeated to him, over and over again, not to forget their promise. Kyuwon nodded.

“I will see you in Gyeongseong.”

Seongwu kept looking back at his house long after he walked out its gate. He thought that the guest house, now lost to its owner, looked pitiful as it stood inside the walls of the Ong family house. I will come back. Please stay standing. Seongwu forced himself to look away as he chanted the same wish in his head again and again. As he rode the streetcar to go to Pyongyang Station, Seongwu tried to commit to memory the scenery of his city. Pyongyang was beautiful bathed in early morning light. He saw Pubyok Pavilion that he had climbed into with Minhyun, their favorite patisserie, and the Taedong River, on which they skated awkwardly together. Seongwu’s eyes became moist with tears once again as he looked at his old memories, which he could not keep, and to which he could not return.

As always, Pyongyang Station was bustling. Seongwu and Jihoon pushed their way into the platform and sat for about twenty minutes until their train approached with thick, white steam trailing behind. Seongwu would normally have been excited at the sight of a train, but now it only made him more sorrowful. Seongwu dragged his feet with his head down. Jihoon saw him, and took a firm grip of his wrist, afraid that Seongwu would be swept away by the fast-moving crowd.

Once the door to their car opened, dozens of people poured from it. Seongwu and Jihoon climbed onto their car and found their seats. As Seongwu sat down, the old chair creaked loudly. After ten minutes, the train started to move again amidst the sound of bells signalling its departure. Soon the interior of the car was filled with noises and the rattling vibration of the train. Silently, Seongwu and Jihoon leaned into their seats.

After a little while a train employee began to patrol the cars. Behind him were two Japanese police officers with bayonets. Seongwu saw them come into his car and closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep. After what Jihoon had told him, he found himself in fear of his oppressors. Fortunately, they passed Seongwu and Jihoon’s car without a word, and Seongwu quietly opened his eyes to see them pass on to the next car. Seongwu closed his eyes again, feeling drowsy as his body became less tense. He had not slept a wink overnight. He leaned his head on the rattling wall of the train, and thought it was funny how he preferred being uncomfortable at the moment. He wished to make his body as uncomfortable as possible. Seongwu crossed his arms over his chest and huddled into
Eight hours later, the train was at Dandong Station. Shortly before their arrival, Jihoon tapped Seongwu lightly on the shoulder to wake him up. Seongwu startled awake as he saw an unfamiliar landscape outside the window. They hurried off the train, and crossed over to the other side of Dandong Station to catch another train. Dandong Station was much larger than Pyongyang Station, and Chinese was plastered everywhere. Seongwu looked around himself, confused by the chaotic swirl of foreignness, until Jihoon gently took his arm to guide him away.

“We are only passing by this station. We must hurry to catch our next train.”

No stranger to Dandong Station, Jihoon maneuvered their way through the disorienting signs. They safely got onto the train bound for Harbin. The train pushed itself away from the sunset enveloping Dandong, to the north. When they arrived at Liaoyuan, their next stop. They spent a night at Liaoyuan before they continued their long, tiring journey to Liuhe. They were traveling a long way, and somehow, fortunately, they did not run into Japanese Kwantung Army, not even once.

Near the entrance of Liuhe village, Seongwu was exhausted. Liuhe’s rugged terrain, with steep mountains and sprawling fields alternating before him, took every ounce of strength he had left in his body weakened by longing and fear. Also, Seongwu had only lived in large cities like Gyeongseong and Pyongyang until that point; he was disoriented by the green, overwhelmingly rural landscape of Liuhe. The roads he walked alongside Jihoon were steep, unpaved, and eerily empty of human trace. Seongwu wondered if they were going the right way at all.

“How far are we from our destination?”

“Just a little bit more.”

Jihoon had said the same thing two hours ago. Seongwu glared at the back of Jihoon’s head with narrowed eyes. He faithfully followed Jihoon anyways, and soon, after a particularly steep heel, they came upon an unexpectedly large field surrounded by houses. Seongwu instinctively knew that they were finally in Liuhe. Seongwu paused to take a look around. The small village was protected by layers of mountains, like a castle surrounded by walls, and people had formed a community to build houses and cultivating crops to sustain themselves. Seongwu was struck by a sense of wonder as he walked quietly behind Jihoon. Some of the villagers recognized Jihoon and called out to him gladly, and…

“Seongwu!”

A voice he had not heard for a long time called his name. Seongwu put down his luggage on the ground and turned around. Jeongwu, Hyeonwu, and Heewu were running toward him. Seongwu forgot all about his rough journey to Liuhe as he smiled as brightly as the sun, and as he took his siblings into his arms all of his exhaustion melt away.

“You were doing fine!”

“You don’t know how happy we are to see you.”

“You don’t know how much we worried about you, Seongwu!”

They talked over each other as they poured out their happiness to meet again. Hyeonwu and Heewu even shed tears, especially Heewu. Seongwu was hurt to see his beloved youngest sister cry because of him, and he wholeheartedly embraced her. You must have suffered, my sister… Heewu cried and cried as Seongwu tried to comfort her, caressing her heaving shoulders. Don’t cry, don’t cry…
Seongwu repeated. But as he told his sister not to cry, he felt like crying himself.

“I can’t imagine how you suffered, all on your own, Seongwu.”

“Yes, it was a perilous journey here.”

Something that felt like ball of hot spring water threatened to burst out from Seongwu’s chest. His voice started to shiver.

“It was hard. Very hard…”

Teardrops fell, one by one, and then by twos and threes, from Seongwu’s large eyes. Seongwu burrowed into Heewu’s shoulder. He did not want to let his sister see him cry. However, Heewu, as perceptive as ever, seemed to already know. She caressed his head, and at her warm, familiar touch Seongwu began to sob, forgetting his embarrassment.

_Truthfully, Heewu, I feel like I’m going to die, even now._

What Seongwu could not say all came out of him as tears.

_My child, my sister, have you ever felt such intense pain in your heart, pain that could sever you from your life? Have you ever felt this pain, that makes you feel like you are already dead, despite being alive in body? Have you felt this pain, that makes you cling onto life, despite the excruciating torture it brings?_

It was Seongwu’s first day at Liuhe. The north sky was too blue, too pure.

This is a map of the roads traveled by our beloved Light of Our Lives characters. I hope this map helps you see the general geography that serves as our backdrop.
Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 34:

(From Wikipedia): Sōshi-kaimei (創氏改名) was a policy of pressuring Koreans under Japanese rule to adopt Japanese names. It consisted of two parts. Ordinance No. 19, issued in 1939, required sōshi, literally "creation of a family name" (氏 shi); unlike Japan, Korea had not adopted the Western practice of universally using family names (see Bon-gwan (姓 sei)).

* One historical inaccuracy: The year is 1941 in Chapter 34. Soshi-kaimei, or the name change policy, was actually implemented from the year before, in February 11, 1940, until 1945.

* Liuhe is a town well-known to Koreans for hosting Shin-heung military school, a school established to train soldiers for the purposes of Korean liberation and independence. A historical inaccuracy here, too: Liuhe is not exactly a rural field village surrounded by mountains. Id says she used the rural descriptions to make the setting
more pastoral.

* Yobo (ヨボ): Id explains that this was a derogatory term some Japanese people used to belittle Koreans. It comes from the Korean word 'Yeobo.'

* Kwantung Army: (From Wikipedia) The Kwantung Army was an army group of the Imperial Japanese Army in the first half of the 20th century. It became the largest and most prestigious command in the IJA. Many of its personnel, such as Chiefs of staff Seishirō Itagaki and Hideki Tōjō were promoted to high positions in both the military and civil government in the Empire of Japan and it was largely responsible for the creation of the Japanese-dominated Empire of Manchuria. In August 1945, the army group, around 713,000 (from a previous total of 1,320,000) men at the time, was defeated by and surrendered to Soviet troops as a result of the Manchurian Strategic Offensive Operation.
Like a Flower

Chapter Summary

In Nagasaki, Minhyun is forced to abandon his Korean name for a Japanese one; and the government begins persecuting freedom of thought.

In times of trouble, he finds solace in reading letters from Seongwu and Kyuwon, writing letters that may or may not reach Seongwu, and writing literature of his own about Seongwu. He develops a friendship with Seiko, Mr. Kimura's sister, and they bond over their shared love of literature. Germany, Italy and Japan enters into an alliance, and the state of the world becomes ever more turbulent.

Chapter Notes

Hi hi. So Id finished writing Light of Our Lives at Chapter 40. Work is taking so much of my time, and I don't want to give up hanging out with my best friend and other personal life matters completely, so I know I have been slow. I will try to speed up and bring you the remaining chapters as fast as I can.

And yes, Id is going to print Light of Our Lives in both Korean and English. She has already commissioned the book cover for the Korean version. She says she is considering a different cover for the English version at this time. The books are going to be in two volumes, each about 350 pages, give or take. She is writing six additional chapters to be printed in the book (including an epilogue and five slice-of-life chapters set in various points of time on the Light of Our Lives timeline). I'll speak to her about whether I should translate these additional chapters.

I feel like Id and I suffered some minor setbacks and some unfairness during this journey (Jeez, I sound like a phony Youtuber), but all in all, it was a crazily rewarding one, thanks to Light of Our Lives' readers. We had, and still are having, so much fun. Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 35

Like a Flower

The sun was scorching the earth from early in the morning. The heat made Minhyun sweat, even as he sat still. The seaborne wind from the Pacific was not enough to blast away the sweltering heat, and fanning himself proved futile. The best Minhyun could do was endure it. Fortunately, endurance was Minhyun’s forte. Minhyun swiped the beads of sweat off his chin and focused on the text before his eyes. He was holding a letter from his parents in Gyeongseong.
Minhyun stared at the letter, the contents of which he had already almost committed to memory. It was springtime, yet the letter contained despair that tainted the blooming softness of the season. Minhyun read the letter over and over again in disbelief. The paper was in tatters now, almost shredded; Minhyun did not know why he could not let go of it. Was it reluctance to believe, or was it guilt? Everything became a confused jumble in his heart.

It was two days before the name change deadline, and one before his birthday. Minhyun was standing in front of a forked path that could decide his fate. He could do as the Japanese commanded him to do. If he did not, he would face consequences. He could be expelled from school, involuntarily drafted, jailed, or executed… Somehow, his existence would be erased from the world.

He had to. That was the only way he could survive and see Seongwu again. He whispered to himself tiny, hesitant persuasion of his duty, in order to calm his nerves. No matter how logical he tried to be, his heart felt like it was being ripped to shreds. It beat fast and hard, as if he was being chased by a police officer with a bayonet. Minhyun placed the letter on his desk; as his hands trembled, it fell down in a crumbled mess. Minhyun thought its state reflected his own, and laughed at himself. A suffocating silence choked him. Things inside his bedroom merely looked on, failing to offer comfort or condolences.

Then Minhyun realized that he did not want any pity. He looked up; he could not stay down forever. He brushed his face down with dry hands and made up his mind. He began to contemplate how, instead of why, he had to do it. If he were to do it, he wanted to do it well. He went downstairs to speak to his unwavering advisor and supporter. It was late, but Mr. Kimura was awake. He waved off Minhyun’s apologies for bothering him at a late hour, and they sat face to face in Mr. Kimura’s candle-lit study.

Minhyun carefully showed his teacher a letter from home. Mr. Kimura seemed surprised to read the words ‘name change,’ and he furtively stole a glance to determine how Minhyun was feeling about it. Minhyun appeared calm as he asked for advice. Minhyun had never even mentioned the policy since it was enacted in February, and Mr. Kimura could only guess how much agony his favorite student had went through. Unfortunately, Minhyun’s agony was ongoing. Minhyun wet his dry lips with his tongue and began to talk about the specifics and requirements of the name change policy.

“My family has decided that my surname should be Kouhara (黄原).”

“One letter each from the surname Hwang (黄氏), and the clan Changwon (昌原).”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll become Kouhara Minhyun (黄原 旼炫).”

“This is why I need your advice. Because…”

“That name screams your Korean heritage.”

“Yes. I will be Korean until the day I die, but if I am forced to change my name, I want to make sure that I can’t be told apart from the Japanese.”

“That will be advantageous for you since you live here anyways. From paperwork alone, no one will be able to tell if you are Japanese or Korean.”

Mr. Kimura realized what Minhyun wanted. Surveillance and persecution of Korean students in Japan had become suffocatingly strict lately. To protect Minhyun, they had to use the draconian law to their advantage. First, they had to protect Minhyun’s identity as Hwang Minhyun as much as
possible; second, they had to choose a name that was not distinguishable from the Japanese people around them. They sat for a long time, trying to gather their best ideas.

“What about this?”

Mr. Kimura said after a lengthy, contemplative silence. He fetched a piece of paper and pen, and wrote down a name as Minhyun watched. The name was simple; only three characters.

黃瀬 明
Kise Akira

Minhyun narrowed his eyes. Mr. Kimura’s suggestion was not bad. The name contained the character ‘Hwang (黄),’ and it contained the meaning of ‘Hyun (炫)’ meaning ‘shine.’ Also, it was a commonplace name.

“It’s a combination of very common surname and given name.”

“Having a common name would be best if you want to fool everybody.”

“I will take this name.”

Minhyun appeared fine, almost peaceful. Yet, he could not hide the heavy, rueful aura that belied his neutral facial expressions. Mr. Kimura looked at him and silently missed the confident, powerful Minhyun he had met and taught in Gyeongseong. He merely gave his student a pat on the shoulder, and that was all he could do. He did not want to console Minhyun rashly, as he, a Japanese man, could not fully understand the turbulent, grief-stricken heart of a man who had to desert his identity in order to survive.

Once he returned to his room, Minhyun flung the piece of paper that bore his new name onto his desk. He was angry at the times in which he lived, and he was angry at himself for being unable to defy the flow of his world. He had already run from his homeland; if that was not cowardice, what was? Minhyun considered himself unworthy of feeling shame. He tore at his hair in agony. He wanted to bang his head against the wall. He knew that all of the other Korean students were feeling the same, regardless of where they were.

Minhyun opened the drawer to get to the letters from loved ones, which served as his only solace in times of difficulty. Most of the letters were from Seongwu. Minhyun must have read them dozens of times, but he felt better each time he did. Seongwu’s delicate handwriting was adorable to Minhyun, and proved to be a great source of comfort. Minhyun rested his palm on Seongwu’s densely written letter. Doing so made him feel like his palm was resting against Seongwu’s.

It was nearly three months since they could not write to each other. Minhyun was overflowing with yearning, but he was all right as long as Seongwu was safe. Still, he desires to know how Seongwu was doing. Did he arrive safely to Seogando? What was Shinheung Military School like? Was it similar to Gyeongseong Seconday School? Did Seongwu play with his students in the joyful way he did in Pyongyang? Minhyun had hundreds of questions about Seongwu’s well-being and life, and he wanted to listen to the answers in Seongwu’s warm voice, in Seongwu’s own words, in their own language.
Minhyun closed his eyes and dug through his memories of Seongwu. Seongwu’s voice played in his head, as if played from a turntable, his soft voice calling his name.

Could they meet outside a dream, in reality? The possibility of his seeing Seongwu again was diminishing by the second. Minhyun still stubbornly held on to his hope that he and Seongwu were bound by fate, that they were meant to be together again. The thick, indestructable layers of affection and trust they had built together over the years were helping him, and Kyuwon, still in Pyongyang, were an indispensable source of support.

Kyuwon was stubbornly standing his ground in Pyongyang, despite that many around him had left for foreign countries nearby. Kyuwon wrote that leaving to seek refuge in other countries was a privilege allowed only to those with a certain level of wealth. He wrote that he wanted to stay behind to help protect those for whom leaving Joseon was not an option. Minhyun knew things were difficult for Kyuwon, but still he kept writing to Nagasaki. Minhyun wrote back, expressing his concern for Kyuwon’s welfare, but Kyuwon merely laughed it off, writing back only with funny anecdotes from his classroom in Pyongyang Medical College. Kyuwon’s perhaps fabricated front of joviality only broke once, when he wrote a letter to Minhyun immediately after Seongwu’s departure from Pyongyang. In that letter, Kyuwon’s tone was more solemn and serious than Minhyun had ever seen.

Minhyun found that letter from Kyuwon. It was worn down from Minhyun’s countless touches. Minhyun loves it so; especially the last sentence Kyuwon had written in his best cursive.

Seongwu left for Seogando. Hos uncle sent someone to escort him there, so he must have arrived safely. I will let you know more when I hear from him.

I am going to stand my ground here in Pyongyang at all costs. This land is going to be filled with nothing but despair if there are no doctors around. You know more than anyone the importance of doctors at times like these.

Return to Joseon any time when Japan’s chance at winning this war declines further. I will welcome you and Seongwu with open arms. We will have celebratory drinks, just as we promised.

May angels be with you, guiding you home.

The next day, Minhyun headed out to downtown early in the morning, to Nagasaki City Hall. There were already lines of people who were there to turn in their name change applications before the deadline. Minhyun stood at the very back of the line. He did not know anyone there, and he was not in the mood to chat with strangers, so he just stood, staring at the clock tower, until he came face to face with an unwelcome presence. It was Takaki, the Japanese student who tried to pick a fight with Minhyun during his first day at Nagasaki Medical University.

“I had no idea how eager you were to be a citizen of Imperial Japan.”

He stepped closer to Minhyun, smiling. Minhyun could tell he was feeling triumphant. He could not believe this man’s eagerness to pick fights. Minhyun looked away, sick of all if it. Despite Minhyun’s open disdain for him, Takaki followed him persistently, whispering into Minhyun’s ear.
“Do you think we will accept you as a citizen of Imperial Japan, just because want to be one?”
“......”
“Even if you change your name, the way you dress, and your language, you are Korean.”

At that, Minhyun chuckled. Takaki had said something correct.

“Yes. Like you said, even if I change my name, my clothes, and my language, I will be Korean. That will never change, and I am proud of it.”

“You are proud of being a citizen of a ruined country?”

“Yes. Because my country is not ruined. You are the only person delusional enough to believe so.”

“You must be crazy. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Takaki’s face betrayed his anger, and he threw a few more demeaning words in Minhyun’s direction. A few people ahead of and behind Minhyun looked at him, and soon, he left, embarrassed. Minhyun ignored him, the fool.

After a long wait Minhyun could finally turn in his papers. Because he had taken extra care to fill out his application ahead of time, the actual process did not take long. The words of a government official who processed his paper, however, almost broke Minhyun’s heart.

“It is your birthday today.”

Minhyun had forgotten that it was his birthday. He swallowed the bitterness that pooled within his mouth. A new name on his birthday; it was such a cruel coincidence.

Minhyun headed to school right afterwards, to attend a regular gathering of Korean students in Nagasaki. The campus, usually bustling with vibrant students, was quiet, as summer break had already started. Minhyun walked, looking over shoulder every so often to make sure no one was following him. He walked until he reached a dark corner of campus with not a soul around, and entered a dilapidated building. He found an abandoned lecture room in the innermost part of the building, which students from Joseon used as their secret meeting place.

Everyone was drowning in gloom; with Minhyun, everyone there was christened with a new name. They knew it was inevitable, as the Japanese would threaten not only their livelihood but also their family back in Joseon; still, they were in deep despair. Minhyun sat down in the corner, sighing.

The topic for the day was different from what Minhyun had expected. Name change policy was not the only thing on the docket. Minhyun had not checked the newspaper or listened to the radio before he left, so he listened closely. Someone handed him a newspaper, and Minhyun carefully read the article on page one. There was a copy of the new law that was declared just that day.

Imperial Japan Announces Detainment of Political Criminals

Japanese policy of detaining and imprisoning political criminals and persecution of thought crimes had evolved from laws to maintain public order that went into effect in 1925. The 1925 laws were
enacted to punish those who denied the Tenno and the private property system. Now, the Japanese government had the power to not only censor thoughts and actions of its citizens, but also take them into custody and imprison them under the pretense of ‘preventing’ thought crimes. Now government surveillance and regulations of free thought was more proactive than ever.

“This basically gives them a justification to imprison anyone they want.”

“Yes. It is a perfectly draconian, unjust law.”

Silence swept over the room.

“Things are getting worse every day. I heard that an English student at Rikkyo University (立教大学) in Tokyo has dropped out. He was harassed severely.”

“Students from Joseon are also being watched closely in Kyoto. The secret police are following each and every one of the Korean students like their shadows.”

“Nagasaki is relatively better, but sooner or later the same will happen to us.”

“Yes. I suspect it will, soon. We should hold off on having more meetings for a while.”

“New semester starts soon anyways, so let us concentrate on our school work, and look for a time to regroup later.”

Each held in an iron grip of fear, everyone chimed in, but Minhyun just stood in his corner silently. He did not want to add to the atmosphere of terror, for himself and for others. He stayed quiet throughout the meeting and left alone.

Minhyun was in a fowl mood while he returned to Harukimachi on a streetcar. He felt like disappearing into those tangled alleyways on the side of the streets, but the luminescence of the clear summer sky followed him unrelettingly. Nothing was going the way he wanted. Reality raged at him like the feral winds and downpour of a potent storm, threatening at his very existence. After Minhyun had moved to Japan, the land everyone called a place of death, he was prepared to die. However, he could not give up his life so easily for one reason: Seongwu.

Minhyun clenched his fists. He could not collapse now. He had to be stronger, and he had to survive, and return to Seongwu. He wanted to see Seongwu again, and he wanted to fill the void of their lost years, Seongwu’s time of tears, with happiness and laughter.

********************

The moon was bright and high, its rays caressing Minhyun’s bruised heart. Minhyun opened his windows wide and looked up at the night sky. He and Seongwu were on different lands, but the sky, they shared. What could his beloved Seongwu be doing now? Minhyun combed through his memories of Seongwu, and was reminded of a waka by poet Saigyō*. Minhyun leaned back against the windowsill, closed his eyes, and recited what he remembered of the poem.

“Enchanted by moon, I wished for someone to come to me; in no time, I stayed up through the night.”

Minhyun opened his eyes and looked to the door as he clicked open. He saw Seiko in the doorway,
holding a plate of refreshments. Their eyes met, and Seiko smiled bashfully and apologized.

“I am sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“You didn’t. Please come in.”

Minhyun instantly forgave the polite, albeit uninvited, visit. Inspired by his warm reception, Seiko bravely offered the words she wished to say.

“My ears have been opened by your waka, recited so beautifully.”

“You flatter me.”

They sat face to face on the floor to eat together. Initial timidity plagued their earlier encounters were now gone, and the mood between them was natural and warm. Since he moved to Nagasaki, Minhyun had already established a reputation for never allowing intimacy to those of the opposite sex; Seiko was an exception. She was similar to Seongwu in many respects, especially in that they both loved literature and writing. Sometimes, Minhyun and Seiko exchanged their writings to read and critique.

What Minhyun wrote after his move to Japan were literary in nature, far from the entries of observant, scientific objectivity he wrote in Joseon. When emotions overtook his senses, he even wrote poems. His burning desire to see, touch, and be with his love again were cleanly put down in his notebook. Minhyun wrote as his memories of Seongwu as his sole crutch. He did not want to lose what he had left of Seongwu. Perhaps memories of Seongwu was the only thing that was keeping him alive. Minhyun did not care.

Having lived with Ong Seongwu, that was his history.

His notebooks were a testament to his history, proof that they had loved throughout their long years together. Seiko gladly became his witness. Seiko was the only person allowed to read Minhyun’s writings, and she kept him alive, by letting him talk to her about Seongwu.

“What have you written today?”

“I wrote a short poem as practice.”

戀人よさようなら

季節はめぐってくるけど

あの日の二人 星の流れ星

光っては消える 無情の夢よ

Goodbye, my love

Seasons shall return

But the two of us, shooting stars in the night
“It sounds like lyrics to a song. You could make a good song out of it by adding a melody to it.”

Minhyun laughed. Seiko was right. He could easily see his poem being turned into a song. It might become a sad song, almost as sad as ‘Hymn of Death.’ Of course, Seongwu was the designated singer for the song. As sanguine as he was, Seongwu had a talent for bringing the best out of sorrowful melodies.

“I thought this from long before, but I can’t help but think that the person who stole your heart must be extraordinary.”

“Do you think so?”

“I feel in your writing, Minhyun, your heart that misses and adores this person. I suppose this is what once in a lifetime tie (一期一会; いちごいちえ) is like. I am surprised every time I think of the two of you. Surprised that this kind of profound love exists.”

“Even that, he had taught me. I was born a cold man, not used to giving love.”

“You lie. How can such a man write prose and poems as loving as these?”

Seiko laughed, her tone modest but incredulous. Minhyun laughed with her, awkwardly. What he told her was all true, from his heart. Loving, being loved, literature, writing… Seongwu had taught him everything he knew. Minhyun tried to explain it again, but Seiko left unconvinced. Minhyun vowed to somehow get her to understand later on.

Late at night, Minhyun wrote a letter to Seongwu.

...My dear love, so precious that I hesitate to utter your name… I am afraid that the heavens, jealous of your beauty, will take you too early from me, when you are still mine to love and cherish…

At the end of his letter, Minhyun wrote a German poem that he had read recently, by Heinrich Heine*. The poem was called: ‘Like a Flower.’ He thought Seongwu, well-versed in European literature, might have already come across it. For Minhyun, he had only read it just a few days ago. Minhyun instantly fell in love with the beauty of it, and liked what it conveyed. If he could, he wished to recite it to Seongwu, with his two warm, soft hands in his own as if in prayer.

Du bist wie eine Blume,
So hold und schön und rein;
Ich schau’ dich an, und Wehmuth
Schleicht mir in’s Herz hinein.

Mir ist, als ob ich die Hände
Auf’s Haupt dir legen sollt',
Betend, daß Gott dich erhalte
So rein und schön und hold.

You are like a flower,
So sweet, beautiful, and pure;
I look at you, and
A sadness seeps into my heart.

I want to place my two hands
On your head and pray,
Praying that God will receive you,
So pure and beautiful and sweet.

God, please protect Ong Seongwu. If you need to take away my life, so be it; but preserve him the way he is, sound and in whole. Please do not let these cold winds of our times touch him; please do not let these vicious claws of foreign rule ravage him. Please deliver his tender spirit from evil, and keep it pure, beautiful and sweet.

After Seongwu’s birthday, which Minhyun spent in ardent prayer, second semester began. Some Japanese bullies heightened their discrimination of Korean students after they heard their newly changed Japanese names during role call. Minhyun did not mind, as he had more allies and virtuous friends by his side. There were sympathetic Japanese classmates who saw that the harassment he underwent, and who helped and supported him both materially and mentally. Thanks to these friends, Minhyun could focus on his studies throughout the semester.

While Minhyun wrestled with dozens of books at his desk, the international situation took turn after chaotic turn, making each next day totally unforeseeable. The Axis powers, Japan, Germany, and Italy, signed a treaty of alliance in Berlin. Japan declared itself a leader creating new order in Asia. This was Japan’s declaration of war against the rest of the world, especially the United States and the
United Kingdom. At the time, the United States and the United Kingdom were opposing Japan, particularly through supplying the Republic of China with weapons. Japan had spent colossal amounts of money and recorded more than a million casualties in the Second Sino-Japanese War, and naturally, American and British support of China was an act of antagonism to the Japanese. Now, to Japan, the campaign in China held more meaning than simply taking over China and colonizing it. Mr. Kimura explained this to be an inevitable flow of war, and predicted that Japan would target southeastern Asian nations next. Japan had already cast its die and crossed the line, and it could not stop now. If it did, it would perish.

Each day was as perilous as a moment on a tightrope. Minhyun did not know for how much longer he could endure. Every time he felt choked by uncertainty, he wrote to Seongwu. By now he was writing each day without being any proof that Seongwu would receive any of them, but he wrote passionately anyhow, hoping that per his promise, Kyuwon would someday give them to Seongwu. Letters to Seongwu formed a neat stack on the side of his desk.

It was almost Christmas, after finals. Minhyun went down to the post office to send his letters to Pyongyang. The post office was full of people holding dearly onto their own letters and packages. They all looked excited, sending gifts and good wishes to their loved ones. Minhyun felt his mood elevate just by being among them, and he did not dislike this joy he had not felt in a long time. He did not know what Seongwu was doing, but he wished that he, too, were somewhere warm and uplifting.

It took Minhyun nearly an hour to send his letters, but he did not mind waiting. On the way back home, he bought a couple of sponge cakes he would share with the Kimuras. He was in a good mood, even in the long line to get on a streetcar and inside a crowded one. His good mood continued as he returned home and thanked the Kimura family.

Perhaps because his unusual cheerfulness had distracted him, Minhyun had forgotten to look behind him. In Minhyun’s oblivion, two pairs of eyes that followed him disappeared into the night as he returned to Harukimachi.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 35:

*Waka*: Waka (和歌, "Japanese poem") is a type of poetry in classical Japanese literature. There are five principal forms of the waka: Katauta (5-7-7 in syllables); Chōka (5-7-5-7-5-7...5-7-7); Tanka (5-7-5-7-7); Sedōka (5-7-7-5-7-7); Bussokusekika (5-7-5-7-7-7).
Saigyō*: Saigyō Hōshi (西行 法師, 1118 – March 23, 1190) was a famous Japanese poet of the late Heian and early Kamakura period.

Heinrich Heine*: Christian Johann Heinrich Heine (13 December 1797 – 17 February 1856) was a German-Jewish poet, journalist, essayist, and literary critic. He is best known outside of Germany for his early lyric poetry, which was set to music in the form of Lieder (art songs) by composers such as Robert Schumann and Franz Schubert. Heine's later verse and prose are distinguished by their satirical wit and irony. He is considered part of the Young Germany movement. His radical political views led to many of his works being banned by German authorities—which, however, only added to his fame. He spent the last 25 years of his life as an expatriate in Paris.

Author's Notes (Id's comments):

I spent more time writing this chapter than any other. I had a hard time with its contents, and it became too long, so I split it in two. Chapter 36 will be uploaded later today or tomorrow. Many readers are worried what will happen to onghwang babies, but I assure you that heartache will be over in three chapters or less. So don't worry so much.

Minhyun's poem that he shows to Seiko is actually lyrics to a 1980 song called 'My Lover' by a Japanese singer Itsuwa Mayumi. Some Korean singers like Cho Yong-Pil and Na Hoon-A have recorded remakes of this song, so its melody is popular among some older South Korean people.

The translation I used for Heinrich Heine's poem 'Du bist wie eine Blume' is the one by Goethe-Institut in Korea. I heard that this poem is on a screen door in a subway station in Itaewon. I would be happy if I saw it.

Sōshi-kaimei (創氏改名), or the policy of pressuring Koreans under Japanese rule to adopt Japanese names, was enacted from February 11, 1940 until right before Korean emancipation, on August 15, 1945, as a tool of ethnic cleansing. Because it was mandatory and was enforced strictly, compliance with this name change policy is not one of the criteria used to determine whether a person was a Japanese sympathizer during the colonization. Poet Yoon Dongju's famous poem, or 'Confessions,' was written five days before he was forced to change his name to Hiranuma Doju. Here is the entirety of the poem:

가.
Confessions
Yoon Dongju

Of which dynasty is
the green-rusted copper mirror a relic
that makes the remainder of my face within it
so disgraceful?

I will let myself abridge my confession to a single line.
- During twenty-four years and one month,
  What joy have I lived for?

Tomorrow, or the day after, or on any given happy day,
I must write another line of confession.
- Then, at such a young age
  Why had I made such a shameful confession?

Every night, I will let myself wipe my mirror
With the palm of my hand, with the bottom of my feet.

Then I see in the mirror
A mournful back of a person
Walking alone underneath a meteor.

(Poem translated by Sasha)
In a Dream

Chapter Summary

Minhyun is arrested as a political criminal and is detained at Nagasaki Police Station, where he endures violence from the police. He copes by helping to treat others in his cell. Minhyun has a dream, in which he sees Seongwu.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains pretty severe institutional violence and Minhyun purposefully eating spoiled food in a prison, which lasts until about halfway point of the chapter, until the asterisk line. Please skip those parts if they would be triggering or would be uncomfortable for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 36

In a Dream

Days, neither good or bad, continued. Minhyun tried his best to live on- he gave his utmost to everything that came his way, and waited for an opportunity. By the end of the semester, one of the professors who had noticed Minhyun’s diligence invited him to his lab. The professor wanted Minhyun to become a student under his supervision. Minhyun was already interested in the professor’s specialty, so he accepted the proposal. After only a few days Minhyun was formally named as a researcher. As he had in Pyongyang, Minhyun was allowed to study and conduct research side by side.

Minhyun was delighted. His abilities were recognized by the professors, without regard to his nationality. At this rate, he could achieve everything he wanted before he had to go back to Joseon. He wrote to Kyuwon about the good news, jovially telling him to watch his place as professor of medicine in Pyongyang Medical College.

Minhyun felt his heart beat in excitement as he faced this new start. At night he promised himself that he would absorb everything he could before he returned to his homeland. He would help medicine of Korea progress; he would become someone who is never ashamed of himself; he would help the people of Joseon never suffer from discrimination again. If he would achieve these things, Seongwu would be happy. He would embrace Minhyun, complimenting him. Minhyun wished to make his time away from Seongwu worth it, so he could be recognized by Seongwu, someone whose approval mattered the most to Minhyun. Now, his opportunity was finally here. He did not need any more motivation other than imagining Seongwu’s smile.
His first day in the lab went smoothly. Minhyun easily navigated through the ambience of the lab and learned what he could.

Less than a week from the first day at work, however, a misfortune stepped in Minhyun’s way.

It was a weekday afternoon, as routine as any other day of the week. Lab doors were violently slammed open suddenly, and several police officers entered the lab. When the supervising professor asked them why they were here, they said they were looking for ‘Kise Akira.’ Everyone turned their heads toward Minhyun at once. Minhyun realized that he had been in this exact circumstance before.

The room was small, with no place to hide. Minhyun surrendered himself to the police. They took each of Minhyun’s arms. Minhyun’s professor tried unsuccessfully to step between them.

“How are you doing this to this student?”

A police officer answered, brusquely:

“It is none of your business.”

Everyone in the room became silent, unable to stop Minhyun from being arrested.

Minhyun was taken to Nagasaki Police Station straightaway. He was given no chance to protest or to excuse himself. Minhyun did not need to ask what law he was arrested under; it was the new law enacted under the pretense of preventing political criminals. Because he knew, he was less shaken, but still, he was afraid. Minhyun clenched and unclenched his fists repeatedly, feeling his palms turn moist from perspiration. He was led to an interrogation room in the basement. Minhyun gathered himself, trying not to shiver, as he entered it. It was a tiny room with its walls and the floor painted black. There was a musty smell, which Minhyun immediately recognized as the smell of blood.

The heavy metal door slammed shut. Minhyun imagined the dozens of things that could happen to him, things he had heard that the Japanese government had done to his people.

Five officers had followed Minhyun into the room. They took out wooden clubs they had affixed to their belts. Minhyun closed his eyes, and five thick clubs landed on his back simultaneously, a signal for the merciless violence to follow.

After minutes that felt like an eternity, Minhyun was kicked in the stomach, and he began to cough violently. Blood spilled from his mouth, and Minhyun felt tears in the inside of his mouth. He was now on the floor, curled into himself, as he was kicked, again and again. The officers beating him kept demanding a confession of some kind.

“I am telling you, I am not abetting you.”

“You are lying. We have evidence of your illicit communication with a Pyongyang medical professor. Do you think we don’t know of your plan to steal medical secrets from Nagasaki Medical University and supply it with Koreans to help with their resistance?”

“Josenjins are all the same. They don’t know how to thank us for the mercy we have shown them. Sons of bitches.”

It was like talking to a wall. Minhyun was not lying, but the officers would not listen. Minhyun realized that the violence against him would not end until he gave them an answer they wanted. He could not relent, however; he had not exchanged any illicit information with anyone, or had been
abetted by anyone to leak medical secrets. If he lied to make these officers happy, Kyuwon could lose his life.

Minhyun stayed silent, clenching his teeth. Someone landed a hard blow on his back, and Minhyun heard it break as he was struck with pain worse than any blow he had endured. While Minhyun tried to gather himself, the officers kicked the broken club away. They looked down at Minhyun, laughing and chatting among themselves. They looked at the clock, and placed their bets. Thirty minutes, one hour, an hour and a half... when would he faint? They sounded amused that Minhyun had held himself together until then. Minhyun was repulsed by their gazes, traveling over his bloodied skin and torn clothes.

Soon they began to hit Minhyun again, and all he could do was breathe laboriously, trying to hold onto his consciousness. His vision blurred, and he felt his senses fading. The officers seemed to have sensed his state, and they stopped moving.

Was it over? Minhyun slowly opened his eyes and saw that an officer had knelt down to face him. He was asking a question, but Minhyun could not hear what he was saying, except one word: ‘Seongwu.’

邕聖祐

‘‘Seongwu.’ What does this mean?’

“I have never seen the first character before.”

“Is this a character they only use in Joseon?”

The character Ong(邕) was not in use in Japan. It was only natural that the officers had never seen it before. Minhyun started to laugh, finding it ridiculous that the officers were struggling with a single Chinese character. The officers immediately picked up that Minhyun’s laugh was out of ridicule for them. Angry, they beat Minhyun again, until Minhyun was numb. Minhyun laughed throughout the ordeal, until he finally lost consciousness. It was funny to him that the officers could not read the character ‘Ong;’ and he could not stop laughing.

A cold breeze blew through the broken window of holding cell. Minhyun felt sharp pain, as if his skin was peeling off. He whimpered through sleep, until the pain finally woke him. It was a moonless night. Inside the dark cell were dozens of people who were thrown in after a beating, lying on the floor like cadavers. Minhyun was among them.

Minhyun gathered all of his strength to sit up. He almost screamed; every joint and muscle in his body ached. He looked around and only saw despair. Would he lose his light here? Minhyun forced himself not to think of the worst. Instead, he looked up to the window to see the tiny stars that shone beyond the bars.

Was Ong Seongwu, his star, his universe, doing well? The winds had been harsh lately, and he wished for Seongwu to stay warm. Seongwu was always prone to chills.

Minhyun painted a picture of Seongwu over the night sky, and a single teardrop formed in the corner of his eye. They were sharing a single sky; where was Seongwu underneath it? Would Seongwu be looking at the sunrise somewhere in the mountains? He missed Seongwu desperately, so much that he could not put his emotions into words.
Minhyun wanted to hold Seongwu’s hand, and take him into his arms. He wanted to lie down with Seongwu’s warm, soft body in his arms and play the baby, telling him how scared and painful his day was. Minhyun felt as if all of his pain would go away at once if Seongwu touched him. Seongwu, however, was not here. They were too far away from each other. No matter how much he missed Seongwu, he could not hear his voice or touch him. Tears rolled down Minhyun’s gaunt cheeks. He knew it was a wish that could not be fulfilled anytime soon, but he wanted to see Seongwu.

“Seongwu…”

There was no answer to the call Minhyun rasped out. Minhyun covered his face with his bloodied hands.

Minhyun sat there, helplessly, until sunrise. People in the cell began to wake up one by one. They all lamented that they had not died during the night. This was because the pain they would receive as days went by would only double.

On the other hand, Minhyun’s heart was thrashing with the desire to live. He did not know how long he could go on, but he focused his thoughts on that he was alive now. His battle would be a long one, and he could not let himself shaken by every little offense. Minhyun calmed himself.

First, he examined his body. He moved his fingers and toes, and looked underneath his clothes to determine the state of his body as accurately as possible. He was fortunate; he had no broken bones or injured joints. He still had many bruises and minor cuts, which were making his body ache all over. Minhyun decided that his priority was to protect parts of his body that were prone to injuries rather than to treat his current minor injuries. He ripped the lower hem of his shirt to wrap around his right wrist and fingers.

Someone tapped on his shoulders. The touch was so feeble and weak that Minhyun barely felt it. Minhyun turned around to see a middle-aged man who appeared to be dying. He uttered the world ‘help’ in his broken Japanese, pointing to his left hand. His hand was crushed, as if trampled on by a heavy military boot. The bones in his hand was likely broken. Minhyun knew he was not in a position to help others, but he was not the person to coldly turn a suffering man away. Minhyun ripped the lower hem of the man’s shirt, and as a temporary measure, wrapped it around the man’s limp hand, holding the muscles in place.

After they saw Minhyun dress the man’s hand, others in the cell crowded around him, asking him for help. Minhyun was taken aback. He could not help all of them. He could be taken to the interrogation room again at any time. Still, Minhyun decided to help as many people as he could. Calmly but efficiently, Minhyun began to help those closest to him.

Words spread fast inside the prison. A young Korean man who was arrested as a political criminal turned out to be a student at Nagasaki Medical School, and he was giving medical attention to those around him. The news circulated the entire prison in matter of minutes. Surveillance on Minhyun tightened immediately, as the authorities fears that he might incite a riot. Unaware, Minhyun was lost in treating the injuries of other prisoners in any way he can.

Soon, it was lunchtime. Minhyun heard a bell ring from above, and smelled food. Prison guards appeared in the stairways with big containers on their backs. They stood in front of the cells and handed out food to the imprisoned. Most were indifferent, but some sneered at prisoners who asked for more food. Only minimal amount of food needed for survival were handed out to the prisoners. Minhyun received a rice ball the size of a table tennis ball and a bowl of opaque soup.

He stirred the soup with a spoon, and froze. He realized that what appeared to be grains of rice in the
soup were not grains of anything, but maggots. Minhyun’s face hardened. As he quietly placed his bowl on the floor, a guard who had been watching him ridiculed him.

“What, you can’t drink the soup?”

“......”

“I guess you only had kingly feasts until now, seeing that you’re being picky even here. At this rate, you’ll starve to death before you’re beaten to death. You don’t want to live, do you? See, you Josenjins are so weak, that after a single beating…”

The guard ceased talking, and his eyes shot open in disbelief. Looking at the guard eye-to-eye, Minhyun scooped up a spoonful of the soup and pushed the spoon into his mouth. He chewed, intending for the guard to watch, as if he was chewing on the flesh and bones of the guard. Like this, Minhyun ate spoonful after spoonful of what was inside the soup bowl. Every time he chewed, what felt like a fishy smell ravaged his mouth. It did not bother Minhyun. At this time, all Minhyun wanted was to survive, and return to his oppressors threefold, fourfold the indignity he had been subjected to. Unable to withstand Minhyun’s simmering glare, the guard stood up, and long before his rotation time, switched out with another guard. Minhyun scoffed at him.

Soon it became apparent that the guard who was scared off by Minhyun talked to the other guards about him. No guard dared to touch Minhyun after the incident. They not only shied away from bothering Minhyun, but went as far as to treat him like a ghost, someone who did not exist.

After sunset, Minhyun looked around his cell to conduct a head count. People who had slept alongside him during the night were frequently dragged out of the cell, and many others were thrown inside. The City Hall was operating normally; then why was Minhyun stuck in the cell, untouched? Why was he an exception? It was unlikely that the officers who had arrested him the day before were repenting for their actions, or that the government had relented that Minhyun had done nothing wrong. As Minhyun st there, his thoughts branched out to remote possibilities of what was happening to him. He could not put together a feasible conclusion, however, as if he was missing an integral piece of the puzzle. He became frustrated, kept in the dark about his fate.

Minhyun’s fate only became apparent to him late at night. All lights went off, and prisoners had gone to sleep one by one. Minhyun was awake, alert, and in the middle of the night he heard footsteps in the corridors. He first thought they were guards, patrolling the prison, until someone rattled the locks of his cell and opened the door. Others sat up, weary. Late night visits usually meant an unfavorable end. Prisoners exchanged fearful glances with one another. They shivered, afraid, eyeing the guard’s every move. Minhyun kept his eyes closed. He knew without looking, that the guard was walking toward him, and that a pair of legs was already standing next to his head.

“Kise Akira.”

“......”

“Wake up.”

Minhyun slowly opened his eyes. A guard was looking down at him, his gaze steely, meant to overpower. The guard’s eyes shone intimidatingly in the darkness. Minhyun had looked into a pair
of eyes like these before. These were eyes that had killed.

Minhyun stood up. He felt his legs wobble unsteadily. He clenched his jaws to stand straight. He did not want to be dragged by the guards. He wanted to walk on his own. Other prisoners stared behind him as he staggered out of the cell, wishing a peaceful afterlife for the benevolent young man.

The long corridor felt like an unending tunnel. It was so dark that Minhyun could not see his own feet. Walking was difficult, as his legs were almost giving out and he was tense in his effort not to trip. Soon he was drenched in sweat, and his vision swam. Minhyun could not let himself collapse. He walked on, glaring at the back of the head of the guard who walked ahead.

The place he arrived was not a bloody interrogation room, nor the room where people were hanged. Minhyun winced as the brilliant sunlight pierced his eyes. His vision was completely gone for a moment; he could only hear the desperate voice calling for him.

“Hey!”

Minhyun looked up to see Mr. Kimura ahead. The officers guided Minhyun to his teacher. The distance between them closed, step by step.

As they got nearer, Mr. Kimura’s face crumpled more and more. He saw the appalling state his dear student was in, and he was enraged. Mr. Kimura wished to shout at the officers and ask what they had done to Minhyun, but he restrained himself. They were not at school, but inside a city hall in which their every move was watched. Also, he had written a character reference for Minhyun, putting his own life on the line. If he lashed out now, he could put not only his and Minhyun’s life in danger, but also those of his family at home.

Minhyun was not in a position to laugh, but he had to stifle his laughter anyways. Mr. Kimura he knew had always been taciturn and expressionless. It was his first time seeing his teacher let his emotions show in this manner. Minhyun could tell that he was seething with anger.

Suddenly, Minhyun was violently pushed forward. The officers pushed Minhyun off to Mr. Kimura, as if he was a heavy and burdensome cargo, and turned around to disappear into the city hall. Minhyun was finally free from the suffocating gazes of the officers and guards. However, he hesitated to approach Mr. Kimura, now mere steps from him. He had many reasons. Mostly, his body was drenched with blood from many different people, and he had a horrible smell on him, smell of death. He did not want to show his teacher how terrible he looked, beaten up and and bloodied. He felt ashamed. Mr. Kimura was a figure of grace in his life that saved him again and again, without regard to nationality and status. Minhyun wanted to show him only his best, and appear confident and dignified, to fulfill Mr. Kimura’s lofty expectations of him.

Minhyun looked down. Mr. Kimura ran to him to help him, probably thinking that Minhyun was faltering from the aftermath of torture. It was true that Minhyun was physically hurt, but he was more mentally injured than anything else. Mr. Kimura’s arm held him up, as if telling him not to worry. Minhyun felt through his ripped shirt the human warmth that he so craved within the bars of his cell. Tears welled up in Minhyun’s eyes again.

They quietly exited the Nagasaki Police Station. A cool, pure breeze welcomed them outside. From the direction in which the wind was blowing from, Minhyun could tell it was from the north. Was it carrying Seongwu’s breath? Minhyun inhaled deeply, and felt alive again.

“I am sorry. I was late because I had to go to Kokura.”

“......”
“I came here as soon as I could after hearing the news from Haruna, but God damn it, the Police kept telling me that there was no way they would release you.”

“...Did they?”

“I had no choice but to hand them an envelope of money. I don’t care how much I paid; I’m only happy that they let you out.”

“I am always so grateful and sorry for all you do. I am but a burden to you every time...”

“Burden? Don’t talk nonsense. Anyways, did you know that you were labeled a dangerous figure to watch, from about a half year ago? They had you under surveillance, and recorded your every move to make up a reason to arrest you. This was not a spontaneous detainment. This was planned from a long time ago.”

Minhyun nodded. He was aware from a long time ago that there were strangers tailing him. He only thought it was natural, as he was a student studying abroad from Joseon. He had not thought about the possibility that he was marked a dangerous figure. He had been complacent.

It was late at night, and there were neither passersby nor streetcars in the streets. Mr. Kimura and Minhyun walked silently. The way home, which felt brisk and short normally, felt like thousands of kilometers. Still, Minhyun felt better, almost happy. He was going home.

The Kimura family home was brightly lit. Everyone was waiting for the two of them for return, and they let out a sigh of relief and shock. Haruna and Seiko were appalled by how Minhyun looked, and did not know what to do. Minhyun was always clean and neat, but now he appeared ghastly. His clothes were ripped to shreds, his body was covered in blood, and patches of skin that were free of blood were bruised.

Mr. Kimura helped Minhyun to his room, and the rest of the family bustled to bring warm water, clean towels, iodine tincture treatment, and bandages. Since it was late and Minhyun was male, Haruna and Seiko returned to their rooms. Mr. Kimura dismissed the others, and started to evaluate Minhyun himself. He carefully took off Minhyun’s shredded clothes, and disinfected his wounds. It had been years since Minhyun last had iodine tincture applied to his body. It was still cold against his battered skin. Mr. Kimura carefully and gingerly applied it to Minhyun, and Minhyun closed his eyes. He thought of an old memory as he smelled the familiar scent of the medicine, when a drill instructor called Inoue had beat him at Gyeongseogseong Secondary School. Then, Seongwu had been the one to treat Minhyun; now, it was Mr. Kimura. The hands which treated his wounds were equally careful and warm, but Minhyun knew there was a difference between them. Was he ungrateful to think so? He silently begged Mr. Kimura for forgiveness, for being mad in the passion of young love, even in his current state closer to a cadaver than the living. What could Minhyun do about school and the lab? What if he went to school, looking like this? Minhyun chuckled.

“I cannot go to school like this. They would use my body for anatomy dissection classes.”

“Don’t even try to joke about this. Do you know what kind of danger you were in mere hours ago?”

Mr. Kimura countered Minhyun’s silly jokes with a stern tone of voice. He had been bandaging Minhyun’s legs.

“Anyhow, there is no guarantee that this will not happen again. You can’t drop out of school so easily, and I can’t just confine you to the house. I suggest that you take a rest, and determine what we should do next.”
Mr. Kimura firmly tied Minhyun’s bandages, and bid him good night’s rest before he left the room. Minhyun finally became alone, and stillness settled around him. He felt calm at his heart as he let go of his nerves that he had sharpened while in prison. Soon, a deluge of drowsiness overtook his body, and he was deep in sleep in no time.

It was an empty space. Minhyun could neither hear nor see anything. Strangely, Minhyun did not question the nothingness around him; it only felt natural. Minhyun began to walk, following his instincts. He did not know why he was walking, or where he was going, but he marched forward.

After a while, darkness crept up around Minhyun, and his vision blurred, like a thick fog was before him. The air around him turned colder, and Minhyun hugged himself with his arms. As his body started to shiver, so did his heart. He felt he was alone again, and that made him afraid. He wanted to still his fearful heart, and he recited Seongwu’s name, again and again, like a prayer. Seongwu was a symbol of love and stability to him. However, what he started to ameliorate his apprehension only magnified it. His chants of Seongwu’s name became a sorrowful resonation around him, which frightened him further. Minhyun stopped walking; he could not take another step. Minhyun collapsed, and the only thing left to him was tears.

“Minhyun.”

Then, a delicate, bird-like voice called his name. Minhyun doubted his ears; his body froze in place. Over his tense shoulders lay a soft hand. Minhyun stopped crying, and slowly turned around.

There he was, his Seongwu, looking as if he was about to burst into tears.

Seongwu appeared before him, his Seongwu, who he had so desperately yearned for. Ironically, Minhyun realized in that moment that this was a dream. This was a fantasy built by his ardent longing, a beautiful mirage.

It did not matter. Minhyun took Seongwu into his arms, desperate to not have him get away. Seongwu’s body had always fit into Minhyun’s embrace as if tailored just for him. Minhyun’s senses, numbed by the coldness around him, began to wake up one by one. Minhyun buried his nose into Seongwu’s shoulder and inhaled deeply. Seongwu’s familiar scent filled his lungs, and his warmth thawed Minhyun’s frozen body. Minhyun called his name, again, and again, and again.

“Seongwu, Ong Seongwu, Ong Seongwu…”

Seongwu caressed the back of Minhyun’s head, and answered him.

“Yes, I am here.”

Minhyun burst into tears again. His self-created fantasy was so elaborate and exquisite, so that it exactly mirrored Seongwu’s caresses, his voice, and what he would say. How happy Minhyun would be, if this was not a dream but reality? Minhyun looked into Seongwu’s face endlessly. Seongwu’s moist, black pupils looked back at him. Seongwu’s mirage looked saddened, but he did not shed tears. He softly wiped away the tears that streamed down Minhyun’s cheeks. Minhyun held onto his hand. He knew he was within a dream, but there was something he had to tell Seongwu.

“Please, please be well. I will survive and I will return to you, no matter how long it takes and no matter what I have to do. So please, do not forget me.”

Minhyun knew this was a selfish request, but he wished for Seongwu to remember him. He wished that Seongwu would never give up on their love, despite the terrible pain of loneliness that ate into their souls. Seongwu, I will find a way to return to you. Minhyun knelt in front of Seongwu,
sobbing. Seongwu tenderly embraced Minhyun, gently patting his back.

“How could I abandon you? How could I ever forget you?”

“......”

“You are the master of my heart. I will think of you, and only you, until my heart stops beating and I draw my last breath.”

Seongwu’s tranquil voice settled like a film of falling snow upon Minhyun’s heart. The turmoil that raged inside Minhyun gradually stilled. A sense of relief and security spread in his body, like anesthesia. Minhyun felt all strength leave his body, and was engulfed by sleep again.

No, I don’t want to wake up.

Minhyun tried to stay inside the dream, with all his might, but the dream faded away, slowly, becoming foggy and farther away.

Minhyun’s hair, wet from perspiration and scattered upon his forehead, were pushed out of his face. Someone was stroking his hair. It was slow and worried, reminding Minhyun of…

Before he could open his eyes, Minhyun desperately grasped the hand that was running through his hair. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised and vexed to find that it was Seiko’s write, not Ong Seongwu’s that he was holding.

“You are awake. I will go and tell my brother.”

Seiko kept herself calm, and as soon as Minhyun loosened his grip on her wrist she quickly exited the room. There was a lukewarm steamed towel next to where she had been seated.

Minhyun sat himself up, and immediately felt a scorching thirst, as if he had cried in reality too, not just in his dream. Minhyun gulped water from a cup beside his pillow, and he instantly felt more alert, and able to process his surroundings. There was a newspaper near his blanket, which had probably been placed there by Seiko for him.

The newspaper’s date read: Mainichi Times (每日新聞), December 9 1941. Minhyun determined that it had been two full days since he was rescued from prison by Mr. Kimura. Had he been out for that long? Minhyun rubbed the back of his neck, and continued reading. The headline on the front page read:

Attack on Pearl Harbor a Success… Initiative for War to Imperial Japan

By then it was a usual practice for newspapers to run cover stories on every little advance the Japanese army made in the war, so Minhyun was used to reading news of victory. But Pearl Harbor? Minhyun had never heard of such place.

… On the morning of the 7th, Japanese Marines carried out an attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, a naval base of the United States Marines. Through this attack, the United States army suffered damages to multiple battleships and combat planes, as well as many
casualties. This is an inspiring victory for Japan.

… Imperial Japan succeeded in delivering a satisfying punch to its new enemy, the United States. Japan hereby gained upper hand in the Pacific Wars.

Minhyun crumpled the newspaper. He could not believe what he had just read. While he was unconscious, the war only expanded, now involving a country across the Pacific Ocean. Minhyun felt an ominousness from the news; it could not be a good thing.

The screen door was pushed open, and Mr. Kimura appears. He was carrying a small portable table, which he placed in front of Minhyun, who was not yet well enough to get up and come downstairs for a meal. On the table was a bowl of rice, soup, and two side dishes. Mr. Kimura looked at Minhyun, trying to appraise the state he was in.

“You seemed to be in pain, even in sleep, for an entire day.”

“I see. I am ashamed.”

“I know you are well-built, but there is no dignity in the face of severe violence. I thought you needed a break anyways. I hope you will take this as a chance to rest without worrying about anything.”

“Thank you.”

“Your soup will grow cold. Eat first.”

Mr. Kimura gestured for Minhyun to start eating, and Minhyun did, after thanking his teacher again. As Minhyun ate, Mr. Kimura began to talk about overdue news.

“Do you know why I went to Kokura, the day you were dragged to prison?”

“No, I do not, Sir.”

“The men in my family received a suggestion from the government to enlist voluntarily.”

Minhyun’s hand halted, and Mr. Kimura waved off his worry.

“It was not coercion, and it was only accepting voluntary enlistment for those who wished. My family is not a military family anyways, so I told my siblings to not give it any regard, but…”

“…..”

“While I was away, my older brother had enlisted voluntarily. For our family’s honor.”

“Did he?”

“I went to Kokura to visit him, and to talk him out of it. He would not listen. He was fully immersed in the fantasy that he is an ‘honorable citizen of Japan.’”

“The government and the press run such propaganda daily. I would be surprised if people remain immune them.”

“You’re right. The Japanese government is brainwashing and deceiving its citizens by irresponsible propaganda. They control the press more strictly than ever, and distort the situation by only airing
news that they determine is favorable for their propaganda. Mainichi Times, NHK Radio, all these are mere tools.”

Minhyun nodded.

“My brother, from his birth, was chosen to lead our family business. He did attend school, but he was uninterested in academics, and focused his life on making bean paste. What would he be able to contribute to the army? This will only add to Japan’s casualties.”

“Do you think, Sir, that your brother will not return safely?”

“I am sure of it. We will receive news of his death within a month.”

_Damn it_, Mr. Kimura muttered under his breath. He seemed upset that his brother was stubbornly insisting on joining the army. Minhyun did not say more, and silently ate his food.

“Everything is becoming a mess. Japan made a huge mistake by involving America in the war. They should not be rejoicing about this raid, but they have no idea.”

“I agree with you. I don’t understand how much more they wish to expand this war into.”

“Everyone in power is out of their damned minds. They are forcing little children to recite ‘Long Live Tenno (天皇陛下万)’ every day. Need I say more? Do you think deifying a man is a sane thing to do?”

“It is not.”

“It’s all nonsense, garbage. But if anyone else besides you heard me say these things, I would be executed. I have to endure cowardly silence if I wish to protect my family, and I am beyond frustrated. I cannot speak out when I need to.”

Minhyun quietly put down his chopsticks. Mr. Kimura seemed to be referring to what happened to Minhyun a few days ago, when he mentioned his inability to speak out. Minhyun wanted to tell his teacher that he had already spoken out amply for Minhyun, and that Minhyun would never forget his kindness.

As Minhyun was about to thank his teacher again, Mr. Kimura pushed aside the table between them with sudden, swift movement, and he moved closer to Minhyun. Mr. Kimura called him, his voice quiet but firm.

“Hwang Minhyun.”

Minhyun had never seen Mr. Kimura’s face from such proximity. His eyes were glowing, like a pair belonging to a wild animal in the dark.

“Hwang Minhyun, Would you follow me, even if the road I am about to travel is an adventure neither of us have encountered before?”

Mr. Kimura was resolute. He was asking what Minhyun would do; would he follow him, or would he stay put? Minhyun smiled bitterly. Mr. Kimura’s question was needless. Minhyun was already gambling with his fate, ever since he left his country to come to Japan. Now, Minhyun knew that if he chose to do nothing, he would change nothing. If he wanted to return to Seongwu, as he promised him, he had to do anything and everything, and grab any and every change that came his way, regardless of how unlikely they were to save him.
Something in Minhyun’s eyes changed, and he answered his teacher, his voice laced with conviction.

“Yes, Sir.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sick of everything and everyone. But I still love this fic, and I love OngHwang. If you're here, thank you for reading.
Chapter Summary

Seongwu lives on without Minhyun by his side, with all his might, in Liuhe. He teaches classes from morning to night to distract himself from the pain of missing Minhyun, and on one night, he overworks himself into a severe fever. During the night gripped by illness, Seongwu has a dream of Minhyun. After he recovers, he finds that one of his favorite and most brilliant students, Park Jihoon, has something to tell him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a brief scene of one-sided, unrequited confession between Ong and Jihoon. If you are uneasy with seeing this short ongwink scene, please skip it. It is near the end of the chapter. If you're still here, thank you for reading with us.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 37

In Another Dream

Seongwu flipped the page. Before his eyes could land on the dense text again, an ensemble of birds chirped his attention away. Seongwu closed his book and opened the window. He saw a flock of birds fly by, against the clear blue sky and a fluff of cotton clouds. Seongwu leaned on his windowsill, and looked down at the serene view of his mountain village. A gentle ray of sunshine caressed his face, and a soft breeze of wind affectionately ruffled his bangs.

It was already autumn. Seongwu had arrived at Liuhe in February, and he had been caught in a whirlwind of getting used to his new surroundings. Everything around him had changed, and everything felt foreign. On top of that, he had a difficult time adapting to Liuhe’s waters, and had gone through stomach aches. Since then, he had gradually adjusted to a new environment, and a lot of what surrounded him felt comfortable now. He worked with his family tending the fields during the day, and taught his students in the afternoon. After a while, things felt routine, almost tedious.

A few weeks after he arrived at Liuhe, Seongwu became a teacher at Sinheung Military School. His uncle’s recommendation played a role, but his experiences in teaching in Pyongyang, his formal license, and that he was an alumnus of the prestigious Gyeongseong Secondary School became a bigger factor in his employment. Because there were only a few people who had received higher education in Liuhe, Seongwu was given the duty to teach not only Korean language and Japanese, but also English, Mathematics, and Science. It was not easy, but Seongwu was thankful not to have
the Japanese police watch his every move.

Still, Liuhe felt boring at times. Liuhe was alienated from the rest of the world, much like a lonely island. It took half a day to go into town, and even newspapers were hard to come by. Fortunately, Seongwu had a radio. His uncle, who was a mechanic, had made it from scratch and gave it to him as a gift. It was what connected Seongwu to the outside world, and Seongwu could listen to current affairs without having to make a trip to town. Seongwu could listen to broadcasts from neighboring states, like Russia, China and Manchuria, as well as those from home: Joseon. Seongwu turned the dial on his radio every night; it was now his hobby to listen to the changes in the world through the voices from his little machine.

During the harvest months, September and October, Seongwu was kept busy. But soon it was early winter. School sessions for children lengthened, and more adult students showed up for school. Seongwu’s adult students were those who had postponed their education to work for a living during harvest months. With this new influx of students, Seongwu was taken off all other work, and was made to focus solely on his teaching duties.

As soon as his workload narrowed to teaching alone, Seongwu took out his wedding ring, which he had hidden in his desk. He had taken it off, afraid that it would lose its shine if exposed to sun and manure during field work. Seongwu did not mind his hand becoming scarred and chapped, but could not stand the idea of a single scuff on his ring, which he considered as precious as life itself. So Seongwu had taken meticulous care of his ring, and it still shone as new. Seongwu put his ring on his ring finger of his left hand, looked at it under his lamplight, and contently smiled.

The morning after, he left the house early to prepare for classes. He taught children in the mornings, girls in the afternoons, and boys in the evening. During late nights, he taught adults who had just gotten off their shifts. His schedule was hard on his body, but Seongwu did not feel the fatigue. He felt strength surge up from his heart whenever he saw his students look at him with hope and eagerness to learn in their eyes. Also, because he taught many different classes of students, he was rarely bored.

Seongwu had many good students, but he especially liked Park Jihoon, perhaps because they endured a tough trip from Pyongyang to Liuhe together. Seongwu quickly realized why he was his uncle’s favorite student; Jihoon was smart and athletic. Jihoon was especially talented in combat, and Seongwu had been thoroughly surprised and impressed when he first saw him go through a military drill. Jihoon stood out among a crowd of fellow students, his movements like lightening.

Seongwu taught his students passionately. With his wedding ring on his finger, he somehow felt more confident. His students were focused and followed his instructions well, but they seemed even more interested in his ring. The students whispered among themselves, imaginatively guessing for the person tethered to Seongwu’s ring. Among these fanciful conjectures and theories, Jihoon silently gazed at Seongwu.
Seongwu’s ring was a symbol of joy and love for him, but the solace it provided had its limits. Late at night, Seongwu fell into an unexpected state of depression. The thick fog of his yearning for Minhyun, which had been pushed away during his busy working days, showed itself again with the ring. Deep sadness filled the empty cup of Seongwu’s heart.

It was already months since they had not been able to write to each other. Seongwu desperately wanted to write to Minhyun, but that he was in hiding in a secret mountain town stopped him. He could endanger the entire town by exposing Liuhe to the Japanese Kwantung Army. The Japanese still had a fearful presence around them, and the Kwantung Army arrested Korean and Chinese civilians at will in the cities near them. Seongwu had to give up writing to Minhyun, or even to Kyuwon.

Every day, the stack of unsent letters became taller on Seongwu’s bookcase. He wanted to give strength to Minhyun, by his words. Seongwu had somehow escaped the clutches of Japanese surveillance, but Minhyun could be facing much more oppression in Japan. Maybe Minhyun was waiting for Seongwu’s letter every waking moment.

A feeling of helplessness bore down heavily on Seongwu’s soul. Seongwu began to have nightmares. Things that he feared would come to reality took their own forms and moved in his dreams. These nightmares were often about Seongwu being arrested by the Kwantung Army and killed, the village of Liuhe becoming embroiled in war, and hearing the news that Minhyun or Kyuwon had died. Seongwu woke from these dreams terrified and in panic, and found himself drenched in cold sweat. He only came to his senses all too late, but could not stop himself from shaking, nor convince himself that everything was just a dream. He could not go back to sleep during these nights, afraid that the nightmares would come back. Sleepless nights ensued.

Because he could not sleep at night, Seongwu found it difficult to focus during the day. Fatigue settled in layers, and Seongwu sometimes dozed off during breaks at school. He wanted to sleep well, even if for a short time. Seongwu purposefully moved more during the day, to tire himself out, and to keep himself from thinking anything at all, positive or negative. Only then could he sleep at night, knocked out from exhaustion. All this abuse of his own body returned to him soon, unforgivingly.

One morning in early December, Seongwu woke up with a headache. He massaged his temples, the back of his neck, and placed a wet handkerchief on his forehead, which felt like heating up. Nothing seemed to work. He had back-to-back classes to teach, but his vision blurred. He realized he was sick, a mixture of fever and sedimented overwork engulfing him.

Seongwu eventually ordered his students to study independently. They welcomed the free study session, as Seongwu had warned that they would be tested the following week. Seongwu watched his students study on their own for a while, and saw down on an empty chair in the corner. He leaned back, and closed his eyes.

“... Mr. Ong, Mr. Ong!”
Someone gently shook Seongwu’s shoulder. At this foreign sensation, Seongwu could barely open his eyes and look at the man who woke him. It was Jihoon, staring at him with his wide eyes full of concern.

“Are you all right, Sir?”

“Oh… What time is it?”

“School is over. I told the others to go home.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Seongwu wet his cracked, dry lips and stood up, only to have his vision turn black and his body gripped in a vicious dizziness. He felt his body woosh forward as he lost his balance. Jihoon quickly held him up. Seongwu had a full fever, and Jihoon’s body felt cool against his skin.

“Sir, you have to take care of your body.”

“I know.”

Jihoon had already seen Seongwu falter, and trying to persuade him that he was all right was useless. Seongwu admitted to being sick, and leaned onto Jihoon, letting him help him up. Thanks to Jihoon, Seongwu could avoid collapsing in the middle of the street.

The Ong family all ran out in shock when they saw Seongwu return home, unconscious, on Jihoon’s back. They spread blankets in Seongwu’s room, and searched the house for medicine. Hyeonwu hurried into Seongwu’s room with a bucket of water, muttering something about how they could not afford to have their eldest brother fall sick. Heewu followed on his heels, calling for him to take the towels he had forgotten.

With all members of the Ong family inside, the room soon became crowded. Jihoon carefully placed Seongwu on his bedding and covered him with a blanket, and then realized that his role was over. He stood up, looked back at Seongwu, as if hesitating. Then he said goodbye, curtly.

“Please rest.”

“I will. Return home safely…”

Seongwu waved at him feebly. After Jihoon left, Seongwu could barely hold on to his consciousness. His siblings were all around him. Heewu kept wetting a towel with water to cover and cool his forehead, and Hyeonwu kept massaging his limbs, calling his name and trying to get him to answer; this was to keep him conscious. Seongwu could not really hear what his brother was saying, but he answered him faithfully.

A while later Jeongwu appeared with a bowl of herbal medicine. Seongwu swallowed spoonfuls of it that his brother fed him, with great difficulty. When he finished it, his siblings left the room to let him rest. Seongwu thought he would feel better if he slept through the night, but as the night deepened his felt worse and worse. Seongwu struggled to keep his eyes open. He felt as if he would die and never open his eyes again if he let them close. No matter how much he struggled, the medicine he took made his eyelids heavier still.
Seongwu could not see clearly. Everything looked like they were enshrouded in a layer of thick fog. He thought he could spot some things, but he could not tell if the things he saw were real or not. He felt like he was under an illusion that he was blind and deaf. Seongwu wandered around listlessly in pitch dark. Not knowing where he was, and where he should be headed, Seongwu marched forward.

Then, one moment, Seongwu heard a tiny sound that made him stop. It sounded like a man’s voice. Seongwu walked blindly toward the sound. As he approached the source of the sound, initially feeble and barely audible, became louder and louder, until it turned into a clear call for him.

“...Seongwu!”

Seongwu trembled, startled. It was Minhyun’s voice. Seongwu ran toward the direction of his love’s voice. As he neared it, the darkness around him became more profound and the air turned cold, almost freezing. Seongwu was only wearing his night clothes, and he soon began to shiver. He shrunk into himself as he ran.

After what felt like an eternity, Seongwu saw a distant silhouette of a man. His heart was pounding. If I run just a little more, I can see Minhyun, my Minhyun…

When he was finally near Minhyun, he was taken aback. Minhyun looked strange; different. He was wearing a white shirt and black slacks, like he used to, but he was slumped and hunched on the floor, his face in his arms and his body robbed of its magnificent power. A string of sorrowful sobs were falling from his lips.

Minhyun was crying. Minhyun, his lover, who had always been the strong one, as constant and majestic as a mountain, was crying.

Seongwu forgot all about the cold that was numbing his body, and quietly approached Minhyun.

“Minhyun.”

He saw Minhyun flinch, and then freeze, as if his breaths were stolen from him. Please look back at me. Please say something to me. Anything. Seongwu begged silently as he placed a careful hand on Minhyun’s shoulder.

Perhaps his vexed love touched Minhyun. Minhyun slowly looked up, and into Seongwu’s eyes. His face was wet all over with tears. Seongwu thought he resembled a sandcastle about to collapse.

Minhyun pulled himself up, staggering as he did, and embraced Seongwu. He buried his face into where Seongwu’s neck met his shoulder, as he liked to do, and deeply inhaled. When he exhaled a long, hot breath into Seongwu’s skin, Seongwu felt a shudder travel through all of his body. With trembling hands, he squeezed Minhyun’s back to him. He felt the familiar volume of Minhyun’s body against his own.

“Seongwu, Ong Seongwu. Ong Seongwu…”
Minhyun whispered his name into his ear endlessly. From deep inside Seongwu’s heart a hot, wet lump burst out, up to his throat. Seongwu caressed Minhyun’s head. Minhyun’s bountiful, smooth hair slipped between his fingers.

“Yes, I am here.”

With Seongwu’s calm voice as the trigger, Minhyun cried, sorrowfully, as if taking Seongwu’s share of lamentation. Seongwu’s firm-jointed fingers wiped off the tears that streaked upon his lover’s beautiful face. Minhyun’s hand overlapped over his. Minhyun promised, solemnly, his voice lower and more grounded than usual:

“Please, please be well. I will survive and I will return to you, no matter how long it takes and no matter what I have to do. So please, do not forget me.”

Minhyun was begging Seongwu not to desert him. He knelt before Seongwu, and he begged. Seongwu’s heart was being torn to pieces as he watched his Minhyun, always confident and dignified without failure, sink to his knees and plead for his love. It was Seongwu who wanted to ask Minhyun never to desert him. How could they calm the tempest of worries and apprehension that tormented them so? Seongwu embraced Minhyun, hard, his bony hand rubbing circles on his lover’s broad back.

“How could I abandon you? How could I ever forget you?”

“......”

“You are the master of my heart. I will think of you, and only you, until my heart stops beating and I draw my last breath.”

Seongwu’s lips trembled as he uttered his truth with all his might. Seongwu promised to wait for Minhyun, and his heart had not wavered. He hoped that Minhyun felt the same.

Minhyun’s erratic breathing gradually slowed, signalling that he had found his usual stability. Minhyun finally relaxed his body and pulled Seongwu into his arms. Seongwu felt his strong arms around his body, and his own pounding heart returned to its ordinary rhythm. Seongwu leaned his forehead against Minhyun’s chest and burrowed in. He felt at peace, and closed his eyes.

“...Seongwu!”

Seongwu heard a familiar voice from beside him. He twitched his fingers, and opened his eyes. Heewu’s concerned countenance filled his vision. She asked him if he was all right, and Seongwu nodded. Heewu left the room to fetch something for him to eat.

‘It was a dream, then.’

Seongwu thought to himself, and immediately felt a sense of shame. His sister kept by his side until late, and instead of being grateful to her, he was unhappy that it was not Minhyun who was taking care of him. He felt that he did not deserve the love of his sister.
Seongwu sat up, and wondered what day it was. He took his radio and dialed into a news station. Static turned into a news anchor’s voice, who spoke in Japanese about Imperial Japan’s victory in Pearl Harbor, accompanied by chaotic sound effects. In an agitated and excited voice, the news anchor shouted proudly that Japan emerged as a new world power to reckon that rules over Asia Pacific. While Seongwu was gripped by a sudden illness, the war had somehow magnified, with no end in sight. Seongwu switched off his radio.

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After his episode of severe fever, Seongwu regained his health, as if he had never been sick. On New Year’s Day he even went out with his family to make wishes for the upcoming year. Seongwu’s resolution was to learn Chinese. He could not just sit there, stuck deep in the mountains, and do nothing. He wanted to go out to the city without anyone’s help, and, if possible, visit other cities. In order to do so, he needed to learn Chinese. There were a few native Chinese speakers in town, so Seongwu learned to speak from them. After a few months of lessons, Seongwu could carry most simple conversations in Chinese. Using his new skill, he became friends with the Chinese, who had felt distant to him when he could not speak to them. Most Chinese people were open and friendly to Koreans. They shared the same enemy, Japan, and they had suffered similar pains. Seongwu became especially close to the owner of the only bookshop in his village. Because young men who spent their money on books were rare, the bookshop keeper was ecstatic whenever Seongwu dropped by. Around this time Seongwu began to copy books as a side job, whenever he could find the time.

Seongwu was a picture of rueful beauty when he sat near his window under the moonlight, writing. Men and women alike became entranced by his profile, so mysteriously melancholy. They did not care that Seongwu wore a ring on his left hand. On nights presided over by a full moon, men and women visited Seongwu to confess their love for him. Seongwu sternly turned down all of them. Only Hwang Minhyun lived in his heart, and no one else could breach in. It took endless rejections for those infatuated with Seongwu to realize that nobody could be granted entry into Seongwu’s heart, nor be regarded with a look of love by those deep-set eyes. From afar, Park Jihoon watched those who turned away with a broken heart after futilely pursuing Seongwu.

Seongwu still received the news of his homeland from time to time. Now, the Japanese were even taking pot lids from civilian homes to supplement their war efforts. Seongwu could not help but fret about Kyuwon, who was alone in Pyongyang. He wanted to at least know if Kyuwon was alive, but the reality was cruel; there was no way he could find out.

During the springtime, Liuhe became embellished all over with flowers. Pink azaleas embroidered themselves on the field next to Seongwu’s house. Even in tough times, children ran about the village in their infinite joviality, playing their innocent tunes on reeds they picked. It was an idyllic scene. Seongwu knew that such bucolic tranquility was a luxury to Minhyun, but nevertheless he wished him peace. What Seongwu was wishing for was for the Japanese to discriminate on Minhyun less. This was a result of his naive thinking that Japan, which had not been invaded in recent times, would not be attacked.
A historical incident happened overnight, jolting Seongwu out of his naivete. As the fragrance of blooming magnolias filled Liuhe, the pungent odor of bombs permeated the air over all of Japan. Seongwu learned by listening to his radio that many major cities of Japan had been bombed. Everyone was surprised, and Seongwu stayed up all night, worried that Nagasaki might be one of those cities. As soon as the sun rose Seongwu ran down into town and purchased a newspaper with trembling hands. On the front page were detailed accounts of the bombings over Japan. There was a list of cities bombed, and Seongwu read from ‘Tokyo’ to ‘Kobe,’ wishing he would not see the city of his beloved. Fortunately, Nagasaki was not on the list. Seongwu sighed in relief, and read the rest of the article carefully.

In the middle of the article he came upon an unexpected twist. Before they bombed the cities, the Allied Forces had disseminated leaflets that warned civilians of their bombings, so that civilians could evacuate ahead of time. This seemed like a practice that Allied Forces swore by to save civilian lives, and it did not seem to be limited to Japan. Would Minhyun be all right, thanks to this act of mercy, if Nagasaki happened to be bombed? Seongwu tried to think positively. He wished for Nagasaki to never be bombed, but even if it were to be, Minhyun had a way out. Seongwu walked back home, his shoulders slumped and his feet heavy.

That night, Seongwu hesitantly paced before his bookcase. During these disturbed nights, Seongwu wanted to read poems before sleep. He carefully selected his Jeong Ji-Yong poem book, delicately bulging in the middle. Seongwu opened the book to the page he knew all too well. A dried bunch of angel’s trumpet flowers were pressed between the pages. It was the very bunch of flowers that Minhyun had given to him during his first confession of love. I adore you, Minhyun had said.

Weathered by time, the flowers appeared as if they will turn to dust at the slightest touch. Seongwu ran his fingers over them, barely touching them. He could no longer find the moist freshness that they held years before, but he was proud of them for retaining their color and shape. Seongwu gently pushed the flowers aside to read the poem underneath them.

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Lake, No. 1
I can cover
My face with my two hands
But the yearning for my love
Is as big as a lake
So I can only close my eyes

The poem Seongwu now knew by heart touched the deepest, most sensitive part of his heart. Seongwu’s eyes, which resembled a pair of deep, wide lakes, brimmed with tears. His yearning for Minhyun was wider than the Pacific, and he felt as if his tears could fill up and entire ocean. Seongwu covered his face with his two hands to keep the tears from flowing, but he could not stop them from seeping between his fingers.

In deep summer, Seongwu took his students out to the mountain behind the school for a picnic. He allowed his students to sing songs when they asked for permission to do so. One of the students began to sing a song called ‘To the Sea,’ which was an ancient tune that originated from the Silla Dynasty*.

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Will our song reach the sea? Will our song reach the sea?
Our hearts run toward the sea
Over the winds, the waves, the skies
Over our hearts, our breaths
Will our song reach the sea? Will our song reach the sea?

Seongwu’s students, who lived in the mountains, longed for the ocean. Their hopes of seeing the vastness of the sea made them smile, and they invited Seongwu to visit the beaches with them when
they were free. Seongwu chuckled at them, and told them he surely will join them. His laughter still tasted bitter. The thought of the ocean reminded him of the docks of Taedong River, and his wound from being severed from Minhyun was still open and fresh. His wounded heart had a direct effect on his lectures that day.

Seongwu liked to recite poems to his students. He wanted his students never to lose their human dignity in the face of poverty and suffering, and he believed poetry was a way to keep their souls alight. Seongwu chose from classical Korean poetry and modern poetry alike, and even translated foreign poems. The poem he chose for the day was Aleksandr Pushkin’s “Even if this life deceives you…”

ЕСЛИ ЖИЗНЬ ТЕБЯ ОБМАНЕТ
Е ПЕЧАЛЬСЯ, НЕ СЕРДИСЬ
В ДЕНЬ УНЫНИЯ СМИРИСЬ
ДЕНЬ ВЕСЕЛЬЯ, ВЕРЬ, НАСТАНЕТ

СЕРДЦЕ В БУДУЩЕМ ЖИВЕТ
НАСТОЯЩЕЕ УНЫЛО
ВСЁ МГНОВЕННО, ВСЁ ПРОЙДЁТ
ЧТО ПРОЙДЁТ, ТО БУДЕТ МИЛО.
Even if this life deceives you
Do not mourn, do not be mad
If through sad days you endure
The days of joy will arrive.

The heart wishes for the end
And today is nothing but sad
But everything will vanish rather fast
And all that passes will be missed.

Seongwu felt a glare from among his students as he recited his poem for the day. There was only one student who would look at him that way: Park Jihoon. Seongwu turned his face away to the chalkboard, his moves quick and deliberate; but there was a limit to looking the other way. Jihoon’s gaze stuck to the back of Seongwu’s head, and Seongwu could feel it throughout his lecture.

Seongwu never even once looked at Jihoon during the lecture. He thought Jihoon might become discouraged, but he persevered throughout. Jihoon was ordinarily an excellent student, docile and intelligent, but recently he had changed, his innocent demeanor colored by a rather childish want to overprotect Seongwu. He followed Seongwu everywhere and and liked to gaze at him from afar, and whenever Seongwu did something clumsy, he appeared to help him. Jihoon had not learned of a way to express love yet, and this was Jihoon’s way of expressing his affection. What he harbored was closer to young love than it was to respect or admiration. Jihoon was not talented at hiding his feelings, and Seongwu, who once had suffered from what he thought of as unrequited love himself, could not avoid seeing it. His favorite student became his most difficult one.

Seongwu avoided Jihoon whenever he could. When Jihoon approached him, Seongwu did not go beyond what was needed. Seongwu thought this was for the best, but it backfired. He seemed to have added fuel to Jihoon’s fire.

One night, Seongwu was getting ready to go home after teaching night classes. That particular evening, his students were especially brimming with desire to learn, and they all had stayed in class longer than what was ordinary. Seongwu dismissed his students late at night, staying behind alone to prepare for the next morning’s classes. Seongwu sat at his desk, with a single light helping him see. As he read through class materials, someone knocked on the door, and Jihoon appeared. He had just finished his late night military drills and was on the way home. He had dropped by after seeing Seongwu’s classroom had a light on.

“You’re still here, Sir.”
“I’m getting ready to leave.”

Seongwu quietly closed his book. Jihoon approached his desk. Seongwu flinched as he listened to his pupil’s footsteps.
“I will walk you home.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

“I know it’s not an obligation. I want to walk you home, Sir.”

“...Jihoon.”

Seongwu looked up, his gaze stern and authoritative. Unlike Seongwu, Jihoon appeared relaxed, easy. He was always calm and patient, so Seongwu was not surprised, but something about his brilliant pupil was different. An air of fragile, unplaceable emotion was between them. Jihoon looked at Seongwu, resolutely, as if he was going to confess his love any moment. Seongwu broke his eyes away from Jihoon first. Jihoon had to stay in his place: a pupil.

“I’m sorry. But I can’t.”

“What do you mean, Sir?”

“I have a ring, and a master to it exists.”

“He is not here, Sir.”

Provoked by Seongwu’s unembellished rejection, Jihoon fought back. Seongwu let out a sigh. Jihoon was not wrong, but he did not know the truth.

“We are just temporarily separated.”

“For something ‘temporarily,’ your wait seems arbitrary, with no end in sight.”

“Park Jihoon.”

“I know you are suffering, Sir. You are in agony, even now. Why must you wait for someone who deserted you to survive, all by himself?”

“Stop it.”

“Your ring. Is it not a cage? To keep you from running away.”

Seongwu’s fist landed on his desk, loud and angry. He felt enraged at what Jihoon had said. He felt anger boiling over from the pit of his stomach, and he shouted, like coughing all of it out:

“Do not speak recklessly. You know nothing!”

“I apologize, Sir, if I had overstepped my line. But I only wish for you to forget him, so you can escape from your pain, your loneliness.”

Seongwu shook his head.

“Even if he died, I will never accept you. You are my student. Know your place.”

At this visceral declaration, Jihoon looked down. Seongwu could tell that he was hurt, and after minutes of agonizing silence, he apologized. Perhaps he went too far. Jihoon was only a child, after
all.

“I am sorry that I cannot reciprocate your feelings.”

“No, Sir. Please do not be sorry. It is not your fault.”

“......”

“All of it is my fault. Mine alone.”

What Jihoon said implied blame on himself; too much of it. Seongwu wanted to tell him to stop chastising himself, when Jihoon came closer. Before Seongwu could do anything to stop him, Jihoon was on his knees before him. His pupil’s hand, strong and calloused from years of military training, held onto his right hand. Jihoon had a face like that of a cherub, which often mistook him for an angel instead of a soldier. His face, so young and comely, slowly approached Seongwu’s hand. Soft, warm lips pressed against the back of Seongwu’s hand.

After a truly confusing, albeit beautiful, moment, Seongwu pulled his hand away. Jihoon pulled back, and stood up again. Seongwu felt himself blushing, his cheeks heating up. What was he to do in a moment like this? Seongwu was confused. While he sat, frozen in place and unable to reprimand or preach to his pupil, Jihoon spoke first. Quietly, he spoke his mind.

“If I cannot have your love, I’d rather you hate me. Even that would be too much grace for me.”

Jihoon smiled, bittersweetly, and turned around.

“I must walk home alone tonight, then.”

Then he silently exited the classroom. Seongwu watched him disappear into the darkness, his gaze trembling. For a while, he just sat there, not knowing what to do.

Seongwu walked home alone, and entered the Ong family home dragging his feet, his shoulders slumped. His siblings asked if he had a hard day at work. Seongwu shook his head, telling them it was nothing. He retreated to bed earlier than usual, but long after he laid his head to rest, he could not fall asleep. He tossed and turned for a long time before he could sleep. As he slipped away, he wished for Minhyun’s vision to appear again in his dreams, like that one from the night of illness, from which Seongwu could even feel his breath and touch.

Seongwu had an exact opposite of what he wish for. In the middle of the dark, silent night, Seongwu moaned in agony, drenched in cold sweat, his closed eyes scrunched as if in pain.

“...No!”

He woke, letting out a single piercing cry. He labored to catch his breath, blinking his eyes again and again to ensure that everything was just a dream. He had been in a nightmare. It was a nightmare about a bomb being dropped on Nagasaki, and hearing the news that Minhyun had died in the bombing. Seongwu covered his face with his hands. It had been minutes since he convinced himself that all of it was merely a dream, but his heart was pounding in his ribcage as if it was going to burst, and his hands were desperately shaking. Fear and apprehension clung to his limbs, like oil he could not easily wash away.

His limbs trembling, Seongwu crawled to his desk. He opened his drawer, and pulled out his bottle of perfume from deep inside it. He peeled away the layers of packaging he kept around it in hopes of
preserving it for longer, and sprayed a single drop on his left wrist. From the cold liquid, Minhyun’s scent gently bloomed. Seongwu held onto his perfume bottle like it was a rope from the sky to deliver him from evil, and leaned into the fragrance.

Anxiety begot despair, and desperation had Seongwu go back to a single memory he tried to keep hidden from his own mind. He was bothered by what happened between him and Jihoon that evening, what Jihoon had said.

It was true what Jihoon said. Seongwu would be lying if he said he was not suffering. Seongwu knew, however, that even if he had to suffer more pain and loneliness, he could not let Minhyun go. If he forsake Minhyun, he would be leaving his own soul behind. And life without a soul was no life at all.

Scent Minhyun left him with calmed his nerves. Seongwu brought himself under control again. In the night, in which everyone slept, only the rhythmic chorus of cicadas consoled him.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 37:

Silla Dynasty: (From Wikipedia) Silla (57 BC – 935 AD) was a kingdom located in southern and central parts of the Korean Peninsula. Silla, along with Baekje and Goguryeo, formed the Three Kingdoms of Korea.

Aleksandr Pushkin: (From Wikipedia) Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (6 June [O.S. 26 May] 1799 – 10 February [O.S. 29 January] 1837) was a Russian poet, playwright, and novelist of the Romantic era who is considered by many to be the greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern Russian literature. He published his first poem at the age of 15, and was widely recognized by the literary establishment by the time of his graduation from the Tsarskoye Selo Lyceum. Upon graduation from the Lyceum, Pushkin recited his controversial poem "Ode to Liberty", one of several that led to his being exiled by Tsar Alexander the First. While under the strict surveillance of the Tsar's political police and unable to publish, Pushkin wrote his most famous play, the drama Boris Godunov. His novel in verse, Eugene Onegin, was serialized between 1825 and 1832. Pushkin was fatally wounded in a duel with his brother-in-law, Georges-Charles de Heeckner d'Anthès, also known as Dantes-Gekkern, a French officer serving with the Chevalier Guard Regiment, who attempted to seduce the poet's wife, Natalia Pushkina.
August 9, 1945

Chapter Summary

Seongwu continues to teach to his heart's content, while rebuilding his relationship with Jihoon. Seongwu is pursued by many, but he cannot forget Minhyun, despite advice from his family to let him go and find a new lover. Meanwhile, the European nations of the Axis Powers fall apart, with only Japan stubbornly refusing to surrender. Seongwu hears about a weapon called 'atomic bomb' that was dropped over Hiroshima, and feels scared, but convinces himself that everything is going to be okay.

On the morning August 9, 1945, Minhyun's twenty-eighth birthday, Seongwu is in an unusually good mood, and spends his day loving and being loved by his students and family.

Chapter Notes

Warning: There is a major mental breakdown scene of a beloved character in this chapter.

Note from Id: "This chapter was the hardest piece of writing I had ever done in my life. I apologize for the delay, and thank you for reading, as always."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 38

August 9, 1945

The daybreak was silent. Everything that lived was asleep, and even the air felt still. Only darkness floated freely about the empty village. He wandered, and finally stopped in front of Seongwu's room. He slithered inside the room through the door, which was slightly ajar.

The intruder stared down at the master of the room, who was deeply asleep. Seongwu was asleep on his side, curled into himself like a fetus. His long, dense eyelashes trembled, as if he was gripped by the merciless clutches of a nightmare. The darkness reached out to cover his eyes with his palm, and Seongwu gradually ceased his shaking.

The darkness quietly lied down beside seongwu. He gently caressed Seongwu’s gaunt cheeks. Seongwu had a tiny, delicate face to begin with, and he appeared even more fragile. The trio of moles on his cheek glistened under the moonlight. When the moon hid behind a cluster of clouds, the darkness seized his opportunity to kiss Seongwu deeply. He wished Seongwu a quiet, dreamless slumber.

Even after his ardent kiss upon Seongwu, the darkness could not leave his side. He covered
Seongwu’s body with his own, like a blanket, and watched Seongwu sleep, endlessly, until a rooster’s cry was heard from afar. It was a signal that sunrise was near. The darkness pulled himself up, in haste, to leave before the sunlight could expose him. Before he left, he looked back many times, hesitating. His footsteps, which were so light and airy when he arrived, was heavier than they ever were.

Morning’s first ray of the sun shone from behind the mountains, soon reaching the valleys underneath. The darkness hurriedly covered the entire village with its cape of abyssal darkness, and then melted away into himself. Soon after, the sun rose into the sky, unveiling itself in all its majesty.

“Seongwu, wake up!”

Seongwu opened his eyes to see Heewu, who appeared excited. He had overslept, despite promising her that he would rise early.

“You said we’re going to fly kites today!”

“Yes. I did. I’ll get ready.”

“Hurry!”

Seongwu smiled and nodded. Heewu pranced out of the room. Seongwu chuckled, looking at her go, and sat up. He could not bring himself to get out of bed so easily. He had had a wonderful dream during the night, and he wanted to stay inside it. His dream from last night transported him to the most radiant time he spent with Minhyun in Gyeongseong. Seongwu was fully immersed in it, not even realizing that he was in a dream. They were standing face to face, in front of the brightly lit Mitsukoshi department store, surrounded by a beautiful melody. In the dream, Minhyun was a man, fully grown, and wearing a modern suit instead of his gakuran. He repeated his first confession made to Seongwu:

“I adore you.”

A dream is beautiful because it is a dream. Seongwu got up slowly and opened his door. His wooden door creaked as it opened, revealing to Seongwu a world covered in white. It had snowed a few days before, and the snow had not yet melted. Seongwu realized how preposterous his dream was; he had dreamt about the heat of Gyeongseong he experienced with Minhyun in the middle of a cold winter. It was time to wake up. Seongwu was met by a cold breeze of reality as he stepped outside his room.

It was Ong siblings’ first outing in a long time. To celebrate the new year, Seongwu and his siblings climbed a low mountain behind their village. Seongwu’s siblings walked ahead of him with kites in their hands. Seongwu followed them leisurely. He observed the woods around him and realized that time had once again raced by him. He remembered the spring, with new leaves budding from branches, and in a blink of an eye it was winter, with those same baby leaves shrivelled and falling, having run their course. Seongwu wondered if the passage of time would feel even faster as he aged more. Dead leaves were flung over their heads every time a gust of wind blew over the trees. Seongwu enjoyed the crunch underneath his feet that came with every step.

They arrived at a small vacant lot on the mountainside, about halfway up to the top. The lot, occupied by slash-and-burn farmers in the past, was perfect for picnics and outings, as its surface was stable and flat.

The Ong family’s four children placed their picnic baskets behind them, and stood side by side, forming a straight line. They observed the direction of the wind, and let their kites ride the wind. While his siblings’ kites rose into the sky easily, Seongwu had more difficulty letting his fly. Seongwu’s kite only succeeded in flying on its own after a brief struggle. Once it was in the air,
Seongwu let it fly high, carefully unspooling its thread. Four kites, each holding an Ong sibling’s wish, danced demurely in the wind.

“Let us make a wish for the new year!”

Hyeonwu shouted. Seongwu’s siblings closed their eyes and each prayed for their wish to come true. Seongwu also closed his eyes.

‘1945. Please let a miracle come our way.’

Seongwu’s kite, holding his earnest wish, floated higher in the clear sky as if it had been given wings through his prayer. Seongwu’s wanted his kite and his wish to make up for all of those unsent letters to Minhyun. Seongwu let his kite fly even higher.

‘I send with thee a thousand words of love. May my beloved receive them and be encouraged.’

After they finished flying their kites, and ate from their picnic baskets, Seongwu and his siblings picked dry branches around the woods to bring home to use for their fires. When they returned to the village it was noon. Seongwu spent the rest of his day in leisure, and returned to his busy, treadwheel-like days of teaching from morning to night.

Liuhe was like a pond that was completely isolated from the rest of the world. There was no foreign invasion, and no civil unrest. The mood of the village was always placid. Anyone who lived in the tumult of these times would envy the residents of Liuhe, who lived in peace and stability. Perhaps ungratefully, Seongwu felt that life in Liuhe was monotonous and dull. By then the war had become a chronic disease that infiltrated every fiber of their lives. Nobody was surprised by the hum of fighter pilots at night or the blaze of bombings from the other side of the mountains. Nobody held on to the hope that the war would end soon. All they could do was to wish for the safety of their village. All Seongwu could do was to teach his students and protecting his town. He had given up on writing a long time ago, and he could not pick up his pen again because he had no idea how to start again.

Perhaps his loss of passion for writing was a natural result of focusing so hard on survival. Seongwu was giving life his all, in the direst of circumstances. Still, he questioned himself from time to time: what he was doing, his way of life… were they truly for the best? Seongwu could not come up with an answer. Seongwu fell into the quicksand of existential doubt. He knew he would have escaped from the abyssal despair it brought him, if Minhyun was next to him, supplying him with answers that sounded so nonchalant and casual, but had the potency of helping Seongwu stand up again, no matter how hard the fall. Without Minhyun, Seongwu burrowed into himself, and his depression deepend. Seongwu began to speak less and less, and he chose time spent alone over presence of company. At times, he stayed behind at school until late nights just to be alone.

Jihoon was still guarding him by his side. After Jihoon’s confession of his feelings for Seongwu, their relationship had become awkward and uneasy. Seongwu treated Jihoon rather coldly, distancing himself from his pupil as much as he could. Despite Seongwu’s attitude, Jihoon stayed near him. Jihoon did not overstep his line as he did that night, but also did not forfeit his self-appointed task of protecting Seongwu. He merely orbited around Seongwu, keeping an appropriate distance between them. Seongwu, who had been born with the inability to cut people off cold-heartedly, left him be.
Like this, Jihoon spent a lot of time near Seongwu. Most of their time together consisted of silently sitting near each other, but Jihoon saw that Seongwu’s actions told more stories than words could ever tell. Jihoon naturally came to recognize that the ring was not the only thing Seongwu’s beloved had left him with. Seongwu’s blue scarf, a mirror with beautiful carvings of plum blossoms, and the poem books he caressed with utmost care… all of them were things that held the memory of Seongwu’s lover. Sometimes Jihoon could smell a fragrance from Seongwu that reminded him of a cool summer night. Jihoon was convinced that this scent was that of Seongwu’s man. After this revelation, Jihoon acknowledged that he had been defeated.

Jihoon swallowed his youthful, burning desire and kept it inside until it fizzled out into a tepid, undecided sensation. This process of suppressing his emotions was not easy, but his feelings slowly found their right place as time went by. Seongwu’s firm, determined stance also helped Jihoon. Without the uneasy feeling of desire between them, their relationship eventually recovered.

Jihoon limited his interventions into Seongwu’s affairs to when the latter was being clumsy, or when he had his guard down. During the winter, Seongwu was prone to fall on patches of ice on the streets. Whenever Seongwu lost his balance and staggered, Jihoon appeared out of the blue to hold him up.

The problem was that everyone noticed these interactions between them. There were many people, young, old, male, female, around Seongwu and Jihoon. They all observed with close interest what was happening between Seongwu and Jihoon. The tension between a young, handsome, but solitary elite teacher and his faithful, sincere student guarding him piqued every villager’s curiosity. The village people kept asking: Why does Seongwu reject everyone? Who has he promised an eternity to, and wishes to keep that promise by refusing to take off his ring? Curiosity became questions, and questions became rumors. These rumors were often overheard by Seongwu, while he was on duty at school. Seongwu wondered if this was another hoop he had to jump through in order to survive. He sighed, folding his newspaper in half and putting it down. With thoughts about the rumors, he could no longer focus on the dense, Chinese-filled text before his eyes.

Seongwu’s village was quiet and tightly knit, and gossip was inevitably one of the favorite pastimes among those who lived in it. Seongwu knew that trying to stifle the rumors was impossible. Conjectures, assumptions and theories formed a great ball of hearsay, and it grew in an endless cycle of self-confirmation, enlarging itself like a juggernaut of a snowball rolling down a snowy slope. Seongwu could withstand all of this, as it meant little to him, and did not let it hurt him. What hurt him was something his uncle had drunkenly uttered, during a small family gathering around the table with liquor to celebrate the Lunar New Year. His uncle’s words became a dagger, and stabbed Seongwu in the heart.

“Why don’t you let go of a lover whom you can’t even ascertain is alive, and open your heart to someone near you?”

The words ‘a lover whom you can’t even ascertain is alive’ left Seongwu with an irreparable shock. Seongwu considered Minhyun as always alive in his heart, and he had never dared to even imagine that he might have been killed. Seongwu choked at the terror of such thought. Even those who knew Minhyun were already forgetting him. Minhyun was being erased from Seongwu’s family. Seongwu fell despondent, and he could not answer his uncle.

Cruelty of winter soon passed, and the nature yawned itself awake, all the shriveled mountains, rivers, and flora painted green again. Seongwu returned to his duties as a teacher.
In just three years, the village had grown. There were many who had deserted the Kwantung army and found a refuge in Liuhe. Those ex-soldiers naturally joined the liberation army or school. Seongwu had more students to teach. It was hard work, keeping up with his increased number of students, but Seongwu did not complain. Through his new students, he could hear the affairs of other regions outside Liuhe and make educated guesses on what was happening. The amount of information he could get through his new students was still too little and fragmented; Seongwu realized that to be able to look at the bigger picture, he had to obtain more data. To do that, Seongwu went into town often, to practice his newly learned Chinese. Whenever he had time off, he went to town to buy essentials, and listened to townspeople to hear stories that the radio stations omitted in their narratives. During these outings, Jihoon volunteered to be by Seongwu’s side, to protect him. Seongwu reminisced about the time he had to leave Pyongyang when he walked the streets with Jihoon, and wondered if Kyuwon was safe.

After a walk immersed in thought, Seongwu found himself in front of a bookshop for which he was a frequenter. Jihoon entered first, and Seongwu followed. The shopkeeper, who had been dozing off crouched in his uncomfortable chair awoke and greeted them with joy. They returned his greetings, and followed him into the back of the bookshop, where there was a room the shopkeeper allowed only for them.

The room was not glitzy, but it was comfortable and cozy. Three tattered cushions were set around a small portable table. Seongwu and Jihoon sat on two of them and the shopkeeper boiled water for tea. He handed Seongwu a copy of the newspaper for the day to read while his tea infused.

Seongwu’s eyes travelled busily over the front page. The war was becoming increasingly unfavorable to Japan. China, Soviet Union, and Korea’s Liberation Army, who each had vastly different interests but shared a single goal of overthrowing Japan, were all attacking Japan’s Kwantung Army in unison. At the merciless attack of Chinese military and Korea’s Liberation Army, the Kwantung troops died off like falling leaves. In this process, many young men deserted the Kwantung Army, which greatly diminished its power. Japan’s fronts were continuously being pushed back.

Seongwu opened the newspaper to see the next page. He saw a small black-and-white photograph, and words printed in large type underneath:

Paralyzed Tokyo Ceases to Function as Capital City

The article was about the Bombing of Tokyo that had taken place a few days earlier. Seongwu skimmed over the article and turned the page. A Japanese city being bombed was not news anymore. The United States was attacking Japan with all its might, and after many American bombings rumors were abound in Manchuria and Seogando that Japan will surrender soon. Seongwu was not sure if he should believe so, because Japan seemed to be stubbornly standing its ground as of yet. Still, he felt that there was hope, an invisible flower blooming in the darkness. Seongwu had a feeling that
this year would be different. He knew that he might be wrong, but he wanted to believe in the near future. A hot cup of tea from the shopkeeper helped him calm his restless heart.

In May, Liuhe was embellished all over with wild roses. Seongwu took his students out to the mountains so they could pick wild strawberries. Because his students were all experts of local geography, Seongwu merely warned them not to stray too far, and began to pick strawberries himself. His lower back was soon in pain, as he was crouched down to dig through vines of strawberries. To rest, he broke himself away from labor and sat in a well-lit spot. He sat, with the sun in his face, surrounded by the luscious fragrance of the abundant rose bushes around him.

Seongwu was reminded of Mr. and Mrs. Chung, who he had called Mister and Madame, the owners of the room he shared with Minhyun in Gyeongseong. Around this time of the year, angel’s trumpets creeped all over the walls of the beloved house with a blue gate. Would it still look the same? Where would his gracious hosts be now? Thoughts after thoughts invaded Seongwu’s troubled mind. Seongwu was surprised that even with the queen of all flowers surrounding him, he could still fall into depths of despair. Still, the flowers uplifted his mood. Seongwu approached a bush full of roses, and reached out to pick one, to place on his desk at home, so he could look at it as a reminder of happiness. Seongwu’s bony hand held onto the stem, and pulled-

“Ah!”

A thorn pricked into the pad of Seongwu’s index finger, and a drop of blood oozed out from the cut. Having heard Seongwu exclaim, Jihoon appeared. Seongwu told him he was all right, and hid his injured hand behind his back. Jihoon opened his mouth to speak, but restrained himself. Jihoon wanted to tell Seongwu that it was all right to be taken care of; but his judgment reminded him to stay back and give his teacher distance he seemed to need.

Seongwu only attended to his pricked finger after he came home. He took his bottle of iodide tincture, gauze, and bandages. He scratched off the tiny clot of blood, which had already scabbed over the pad of his index finger, and dropped his red medicine on top of it. It stung, and Seongwu moaned in agony before he dressed his wound. Cleaning up, Seongwu remembered how Minhyun used to clean up after dressing his minor wounds back in Gyeongseong, and tried to recreate his process. He was not as efficient or as precise as Minhyun, but the act of imitating his lover brought him joy. On the other hand, it felt strange, albeit not in a bad way, remembering Minhyun through doing something he would do.

While Seongwu struggled to keep Minhyun’s memory fresh in his mind, the world took sudden turns of events overnight. Mussolini was executed, Hitler committed suicide, and Germany declared its surrender. The Manchurian radio anchor fed these shocking news into Seongwu’s radio. Now two out of three Axis countries had collapsed, and the European war was over.

It all felt like a dream. Seongwu had not expected the Axis, which seemed so convinced of its victory, would fall to ruin so quickly. Seongwu had a difficult time believing what the radio anchor said, and he ran down to town to buy a newspaper. Seongwu had not misheard, and the radio anchor had not misspoken. The war was beginning to end. albeit from far away. Now only Japan was left standing.

With the clouds of war partly cast aside over their heads, those who had moved to Liuhe vagabonds after losing their countries began to be hopeful. Their hope was not abstract and distant, as it had been, but more definite and certain. This hope elevated expatriates and those in the Korean peninsula alike.

They were at the cusp of independence. They could be free, soon.
This idea became an engine for those who had left Korea to escape persecution. Around summer, news of Bumingwan Bomb Attack in Gyeongseong reached Liuhe, adding to the hopeful atmosphere in schools and among soldiers of the Liberation Army, who were set to strike the Kwantung Army across Manchuria with Russian forces. Their last training sessions were strict and taxing, but no one complained.

Amidst this almost festive hope for freedom, Seongwu was left feeling reticent. As a teacher of those boys and men in the Liberation Army who would go into battle soon, his worry over them trumped his joy at the impending independence. Fortunately for Seongwu, one of his dearest students decided to stay behind: Park Jihoon. Jihoon argued that some soldiers should stay behind to protect the village. His decision to stay in Liuhe was met with some static among other soldiers, but Jihoon did not relent. Seongwu did not know what he meant by protecting the ‘village.’ Was it their village? Or was it something, or someone, else? Anyhow, Jihoon was taken out of the Manchurian attack. Seongwu chose not to ask him why he made such a decision.

Everything was working according to plan, and independence appeared within reach, possibly within the year. After the date of the Manchurian attack was decided, time flew by. With palpitating tension hovering over the village, an emergency news arrived, merely two days before the Liberation Army’s departure for Manchuria. United States had dropped something called an ‘atomic bomb’ over Hiroshima.

Seongwu only came upon this news in the evening. The Manchurian news anchor’s voice was laced with confusion and shock. He spoke fast, and Seongwu could not understand what had happened, even after the radio broadcast. The next day, Seongwu took some time off from school and went into town. A newspaper helped him understand the circumstances. Seongwu, for the first time in his life, read about a weapon titled ‘atomic bomb.’ A nuclear bomb was a newly invented type of bomb, differentiated from bombs of olden days in that a single nuclear bomb was enough to have an entire city in flames. The impact caused by a nuclear bomb, apparently, was so powerful that everything in its reach simply evaporates. How potent must a flame be, for everything inside it to evaporate, instead of burn? Seongwu could not believe what he had just read. It was too horrific to be true.

Seongwu put his newspaper down. He could not continue reading. His stomach was heaving, and his heart was pounding. Seongwu tried to convince himself that his apprehension came from his scientific ignorance. He did not know exactly what an atomic bomb was, or how it worked, and that was what was making him fear it. Perhaps he was worrying too much. He felt sorry for the victims of Hiroshima, but if this could end the war, more people could be freed from pain and death of war. Then why was he so full of fear, overflowing with anxiety? Seongwu rubbed his palm over his heart as he climbed the heel that led him back to his village. He knew the way home, but his feet somehow felt so heavy. A strange feeling of anxiety dashed through Seongwu’s heart.

**************************

August 9 of 1945 came soon. It was Minhyun’s twenty-eighth birthday. From the moment he rose in the morning, Seongwu was happy, almost giddy, as if the day were his own birthday. He had been feeling melancholy for the past few days; all of the gloom was gone as if it had never been tormenting Seongwu. Even his body felt light and full of vigor; because it was Minhyun’s birthday,
he figured. Seongwu opened his window wide as soon as he was out of bed. The sun caressed his face with its warm, beatific rays. Seongwu wished for Minhyun to be blessed with the same glorious weather in Nagasaki. Seongwu wished for Minhyun’s birthday to be full of light, warm, and beautiful.

Seongwu had a full breakfast before he left for school. There was a spring in his step, and he found himself even humming a popular tune that he used to hear often in Gyeongseong. A graceful smile played upon his winsome face. He ran into some of his students in the street, and they smiled back when they saw him. They told him that they were smiling because their teacher was, and that made Seongwu smile even more. Just the reminder of Minhyun was enough to fill him with joy. If he could, Seongwu would have taken a photograph of the scene on the way to school and sent it to Minhyun. Look, you make so many of us happy just by existing.

The day went smoothly. There were less students to teach. Boys over seventeen and those who had the ability to fight had joined the Liberation Army, and had just left Liuhe for Manchuria. Shinheung Military School, always bustling with students of all ages, were now occupied only by young children. Seongwu sat by his window and watched them play. If their homeland were to be emancipated, those children would live in a world vastly better than the one in which Seongwu had spent his childhood. Same went for Seongwu and Minhyun. Once Korea was independent, they could meet and stay together without anything tearing them apart. Seongwu prayed for Japan to surrender soon. When the day finally comes, Seongwu would return to Gyeongseong the first thing and wait for Minhyun. They would be reunited, and they would work hard to save money for a house of their own. How would they prepare the furniture? Ordinarily, the bride was the party responsible for household articles; would they share the burden, since they were both men? Seongwu did not mind either way. Only thing Minhyun had to do was stay safe and healthy. Seongwu would take care of the rest. Seongwu giggled to himself. Just imagining a life with Minhyun was enough to make him uncontrollably happy. Seongwu’s thin lips curved into another smile of pleasure.

Seongwu left school early that day. He had no extra work to do, and he wanted to enjoy the lovely weather by taking a walk before going home. Seongwu walked around the village to his heart’s content, taking in the beauty of the landscape around his village, and headed home only at sunset.

Thick, white smoke was steaming from the chimney of Ong family’s home. Standing at its entrance, Seongwu could see Jeongwu and Hyeonwu squatting in front of the open furnace in the kitchen, fanning the fire. Seongwu’s mother was tending to the rice cooker, and Heewu was dividing food into small dishes. The scene was touching in its innocent, loving domesticity, and Seongwu stood there, admiring it. Before he entered the house, Seongwu purposefully made a noise, signaling his entry. His siblings heard him and came to greet him, bickering with each other. Seongwu opened the door to his room and threw his bag into it. He then joined his siblings in setting up the dinner table.

When the dinner table was almost set, Seongwu’s uncle and aunt came over from their house, only a few houses down, and the Ong family began their dinner, divided around two tables.

“Ah, I almost forgot.” Seongwu’s uncle said, pointing to Seongwu’s radio near the children’s table.

“Won’t you turn on the radio for me?”

“The usual station?”

“Of course.”

Seongwu’s uncle liked to listen to the radio during dinner whenever he came over to eat. Seongwu switched his radio on, and turned the knob to tune into the Manchurian station he liked to listen to for news. The static of the radio joined the clattering of silverware, and soon a familiar voice began to
Seongwu’s eyes shot open. The dining room was engulfed in a terrible, absolute silence. No one dared to move. No one could believe what they had heard. Nagasaki was where Minhyun was.

Ong family members carefully watched Seongwu, what he would do. Seongwu was frozen in his seat, mortified, unable to move. Seongwu’s face began to take on an ashy pale tone they had never seen before. Seongwu attempted to straighten his thoughts, keep himself together. He had misheard. Manchurian radio station had made an error. As if to jolt him into discombobulation, the news anchor repeated:

“I repeat. This morning, at eleven a.m., the American Air Force dropped another atomic bomb over Nagasaki. Nagasaki was the only city that reported damage, and no other bombings took place in Japan.”

There was almost no chance that the Manchurian news station made an error, especially with transference about wartime affairs, raids, and bombings. Japan and Manchuria were separated by a great distance, but news from the Japanese islands always traveled swiftly and accurately to Manchuria, meant for Japanese residents who resided there. So if the report was correct, then Minhyun was...

“...People, animals, everything with a life... they were scorched by the merciless flame of death.”

As the Ong family sat, dumbfounded and at a loss for words, Seongwu quietly uttered his take.

“Don’t make me laugh.”

Seongwu clenched his fists. An atomic bomb? Over Nagasaki? Ridiculous. Nagasaki had never experienced a raid so far. It never even suffered a night raid. Was Nagasaki a city important enough in Japan’s war strategy to deserve an atomic bomb? Nagasaki was in far reach south from the capital city, Tokyo. What would the United States achieve by destroying Nagasaki? Hwang Minhyun had to be alive. Mr. Kimura was always a man of political clairvoyance. The two of them would surely have run far away from the city before the bombing.

Despite Seongwu’s struggles to gather himself, the radio argued against him, repudiating his every effort to convince himself of the positive.

“Everything on land was massacred, annihilated.”

Seongwu felt something drop, from his chest, to the ground. He felt warmth seeping away from his body, and his hands and feet began to tremble violently. Seongwu, who had been looking down silently for a long while, tottered to his feet. 

“Hyung...? Hyeongwu, who had been sitting next to him, called out to him, carefully and his voice full of fear and concern. Seongwu did not hear him.

“Ong Seongwu!”

Seongwu’s uncle followed him, and stepped in front of Seongwu. He looked into his nephew’s face and recoiled, startled. Seongwu’s eyes were dilated and lacking any focus. He seemed to be completely unaware of his family’s calls for him. He muttered under his breath, endlessly and incoherently, a single sentence, over and over and over again. I must go and find Minhyun. I must go
and find Minhyun. I must go and find Minhyun. To Nagasaki.

“Ong Seongwu, get a hold of yourself!”

“Hyung!”

Seongwu pushed his uncle out of his way with strength they never knew he had, and ran out of the house. His feet were bare. He ran, barefeet, through the dusty, unpaved road that led out of the village. No one knew where in his rail-thin body Seongwu was sourcing such energy from. He ran on without stopping, out of the village, and until he reached the mouth of the mountain. Under the pitch-black of the night sky the mountain was an abyss of darkness, like an open mouth of a gargantuan monster. Seongwu, as if all fear left his body long ago, jumped into that darkness. Jagged rocks and broken branches tripped him, and left bloody scratches upon his body. Jeongwu, who had narrowly caught up to him, tried to catch him by the waist, panting and out of breath. Where Jeongwu caught Seongwu was a beginning of a declining slope, and they rolled down upon it in a single heap after losing balance.

“...I must go and find him.”

“Hyung! Please!”

Seongwu was a mess, with mud all over him and dust tangled in his hair, and he kept chanting, under his breath, that he had to go and find Minhyun. Jeongwu held on to his brother with all his might, and soon, Hyeonwu joined in. Seongwu could not wrestle out of the clutches of two young men. By now he was screaming, he must go and find Minhyun; and he would not stop. It did not matter what Jeongwu and Hyeonwu were telling him. Only Hwang Minhyun existed in Seongwu’s mind. Only Hwang Minhyun, the love of his life, who had left to go to Nagasaki in search of life.

Seongwu was dragged home, with Jeongwu binding his left arm and Hyeonwu his right. Seongwu never stopped twisting and thrashing his limbs and struggling like a fish out of water, trying to escape his brothers’ clutches. The three of them barely made it back home. Seongwu’s parents, Heewu, and his uncle and aunt were waiting for them in the front yard, restlessly pacing about.

“Hey! Wake Up!”

Seongwu’s uncle took his nephew by the shoulders and screamed, in hopes that his voice would jolt Seongwu out from his trance. Despite his shout, Seongwu kept looking back and tried to escape out of the house, babbling unintelligibly. He slapped Seongwu across the face, hard. Seongwu’s head was forced to twist aside, and his incessant writhing abruptly stopped. Still, Seongwu’s uncle decided to err on the side of safety. He said, resolutely:

“We can’t let him stay like this. He will hurt himself.”

Under his uncle’s direction, Seongwu was dragged to his room by his brothers. Seongwu was thrown upon his bag, which he had haphazardly dropped into his room earlier in the evening in a haste brought on by unusually good mood.

“Take some rest.”

Seongwu heard his uncle say, more an order than a suggestion. Jeongwu and Hyeonwu stood at his door, looking back at him hesitantly. They had never seen their brother in this state, behaving in this way. It was as if Seongwu had become a foreign, wild creature, a totally different person from his usual self.

Outside, Seongwu’s uncle gestured for Jeongwu and Hyeonwu to get out. They reticently walked
Seongwu’s uncle quickly scanned the inside of Seongwu’s room to see if there was anything Seongwu could use to hurt himself, and slammed the door shut. The door, an ordinary one made with wood, somehow looked like a heavy iron door to Seongwu. Seongwu’s uncle and his brothers gathered all of their strengths to roll a heavy stone, which sat in the corner of their yard, in front of Seongwu’s door. It was big and heavy, and a single man, especially Seongwu, in his weakened state, could never move it alone.

Having come to his senses belatedly, Seongwu crawled on all fours to his door. He tried to push the door open, as he usually did, but it did not open. He heard his uncle and brothers speaking to each other outside the room. Seongwu banged on the door with his palms and screamed on top of his lungs.

“Let me out! Please! Let me out!”

Seongwu screamed relentlessly, until he could feel the pungent taste of blood in his throat. He tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. His palms were already red and swollen. Saddened by his brother’s futile attempts to get out, Hyeonwu, who was sitting just outside the door to guard the door, spoke quietly.

“I will never open the door. If I do, we are going to lose you…”

“Please, don’t do that…”

“…..”

“Please open the door. Please?”

“I am sorry, Seongwu.”

No more words were exchanged between the brothers. Seongwu had realized that no threat, scream, or pleading would free him. Seongwu sunk down onto the floor. His tears dropped onto the floor and crumbled into thousands of pieces. All Seongwu could think of was Minhyun, only Minhyun. Like a roll of film, time spent with Minhyun flashed before his eyes, from the first time he met Minhyun, in that second-floor room of their boarding house in Gyeongseong, to the last time he was held in Minhyun’s arms, on the docks of Taedong River where Minhyun walked onto the passenger ship that would carry him to another city, another life, and to his death.

Dead.

Hwang Minhyun was dead.

This was a reality too harsh for Seongwu to bear. Despite having heard the news anchor repeat several times that everything in Nagasaki had been annihilated, Seongwu denied that Minhyun was gone. Seongwu sobbed against the door. In a stark comparison to his uplifted mood in the morning, he fell into a bottomless pit of pitch-dark despair and sorrow. Seongwu cried, screamed to be let out, and cried again, all throughout the night. Seongwu banged on and scratched at the door until blood seeped out from underneath his fingernails. His plaintive cry to be let out shattered against the door and disappeared into nothingness. Like a cracked mirror, Seongwu’s heart fractured into a million pieces, and Seongwu knew that it would be irreparable, the damage forever irreversible.

After hours of futile struggle, Seongwu’s legs gave out. He collapsed on the floor. Still, he could not give up. Crawling on the floor, he cried for his brother, to let him out. His supply of tears had been depleted, and he could not cry anymore. The only thing he could let out of his throat was a series of dry, hacking cough. He curled into himself on the floor, drowning in the deluge of helplessness and
hopelessness.

Seongwu’s breaths hitched. He panted, like he had just run a race. He felt as if his throat was closing up, like he was being choked, like he was going to gasp his last breath any minute. The truth was, at the moment, Seongwu wished to die. Minhyun was no more, and the world without him was not worth living in.

Seongwu felt his consciousness leave his body, and darkness heavily descend upon him. Until his vision was colored by the last spurt of inky blackness, Seongwu thought of Minhyun and nothing else.

Ah, Minhyun, in Seongwu’s memories of him, was smiling, so radiantly, so beautifully.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 38:

* Bumingwan Bomb Attack: This was a bomb attack carried out on July 24, 1945 by resistance forces supporting Korea’s independence at Bumingwan, which at the time served as a parliamentary house in Gyeongseong. On July 24, 1945 Japanese government officials and some Korean Japanese collaborators were to gather at Bumingwan, and hold a rally that would preach the value of dying for the greater good of Imperial Japan. Three Korean independence fighters, Cho Moonki, Yoo Mansoo, and Kang Yoongook, placed dynamite bombs under the pedestal before the rally, which killed one and injured dozens, effectively putting an end to the rally before it began.

* The Manchurian attack that the Liberation Army is planning to make with the Russian Army was to be carried out on August 8, 1945.

* The United States Air Force dropped an atomic bomb over Nagasaki, on August 9, 1945, only three days after it dropped a smaller one in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Complete casualties are unknown, but estimated 140,000 people in Hiroshima as well as estimated 70,000 people in Nagasaki died upon impact. Both cities, in terms of their buildings and infrastructure, were nearly annihilated.
August 15, 1945

Chapter Summary

Despairing Seongwu vows to find whatever is left of Minhyun. Jihoon comes to Seongwu's rescue, and with the aid of Seongwu's siblings, they leave the Ong family home in Liuhe and head down to Joseon. They see surprisingly empty train stations and no Japanese law enforcement officers on their way down. They drop by Pyongyang to obtain advice from Kyuwon, and the three of them head down to Gyeongseong together on August 15, 1945, Korea's new independence day.

Chapter Notes

Hi! It took a little longer than expected for me to translate this chapter. I hope this chapter becomes a solace for those of you who were heartbroken by the previous one. Happy reading! One more chapter to go! We have come a long way, so thank you for staying with us this far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light of Our Lives

Chapter 39

August 15, 1945

In Buddhism, mankind’s pain is divided into eight categories. Four of the better known ones are that of life (生), aging (老), sickness (病), and death (死). After them comes pain of being torn from a loved one (愛別離苦). Seongwu came to a realization why the pain of bidding farewell to a beloved one came right after the pain of life and death.

Seongwu’s pain of being torn from Minhyun took over his body like a disease. Seongwu felt as if a knife was stabbing and boring holes into his chest, shredding his heart into pieces. Even after he regained consciousness, he could not move, gripped by an iron fist of overwhelming grief. The sorrowful blue light of daybreak shone into Seongwu’s eyes, inside which only despair had settled. Glistening light of life inside his clear eyes were long gone. A breeze of wind raced past his room, rattling the window panes. The erratic noise cut through the darkness and silence of Seongwu’s room. Seongwu, still on the floor, slowly blinked. He looked around his room; it was cold.

Seongwu’s eyes rested on a corner of his room. There was a shadow wedged inside it. When Seongwu gazed at it, it stared back. A piece of ripped wallpaper rembling a butterfly caught motionless in the vice grip of death was protruding from it. A sob surged up from within, choking him. He had lost his lover, caught in the chaos of the times they were born into. He had failed to protect his love. The tragedy of it all left him scarred, and a thick sediment of grief settled in his heart.
Seongwu did not want to stay distraught, however, sprawled listlessly on the floor. He wanted to give life again to the dead butterfly. Minhyun had already taught him how. To rescue Psyche from her thanatos, he needed his Eros. Seongwu decided to find his Eros, Minhyun. If he had died, he would find his body. If his body was undiscoverable, then Seongwu would find something, anything to remind himself and the world of Minhyun’s legacy. If there was nothing left of him in Joseon, Seongwu would go to Nagasaki and dig through the ruin to find something of Minhyun.

Seongwu dragged himself up. His body felt heavy, like cotton soaked in water. He staggered toward the door, and pushed it, with all the strength left in his body. It did not budge. Seongwu sighed.

Just then, he was surprised by a familiar voice from the other side.

“Are you awake, Sir?”

“Jihoon? Why are you…”

“I came to return a book I borrowed from Hyeonwu, and I found him dozing off in front of this door. He seemed to be dying to sleep in his own bed, so I offered to take his place. I didn’t know you were in there, Sir.”

Lies, thought Seongwu. Knowing Jihoon, he would never voluntarily guard a room all night without any knowledge of what was inside. He sensed that between Jihoon and his brother, a certain conversation, a deal, had taken place. Jihoon might have visited Ong family house by chance, but he was not guarding the door by it. Hyeonwu was trying to let Seongwu escape through Jihoon.

“Sir, are you all right? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

Seongwu answered, his voice small. Jihoon knew at least some of what was going on, although he did not know how much his student had seen or heard. He was suddenly embarrassed that he let Jihoon see him in this state, until his brilliant student extended him an offer that made even the sense of shame within Seongwu vanish in seconds.

“Sir, do you want to get out of here?”

“Hmm?”

“Joseon. Do you want to return?”

“…If I do?”

Seongwu felt every nerve in his body perk back to life. Jihoon added quickly to his question upon hearing Seongwu’s pointed tone in his answer. Jihoon was not the best actor. He sounded awkward, as if he had knowledge of something and was feigning ignorance.

“I am not threatening you, Sir. I was just asking you. You talked often of wanting to go back home.”

“…..”

“If you do, will you go to Pyongyang?”

“No. Gyeongseong.”

“I see. Gyeongseong.”
There was a brief silence between them. To Seongwu, it felt like an eternity. He swallowed, to quell his nervousness. What if Jihoon refused to open the door for him? Would he have to beg, on his knees, to let him out, that he would let him have anything he wanted if he did?

“Sir, I know that if I open this door for you, I am going to be chastised later by your family. I want to avoid that, and I really want to visit Gyeongseong. So… could you take me with you?”

It was a wish Seongwu could grant easily. It almost felt like something his younger siblings would ask of him. Seongwu could finally ease out of his nerves.

“Yes, let’s do that.”

With Seongwu’s permission, Jihoon stood up. He stretched, and relaxed the muscles around his wrists and ankles, which had been bored stiff from hours of sitting in one place.

“It’s been a while since I used this amount of brute force.”

Jihoon took a big breath, and began to push. Seongwu could hear him grumbling as he exerted himself. Jihoon focused all his strength in pushing, and the stone moved gradually, bit by bit, scraping the floor. Jihoon had a reputation for being the strongest in Liuhe, and he lived up to it, moving the stone that took three men in the Ong family to lift.

As the door finally opened, Seongwu carefully stepped outside. His skin was touched by the fresh air of a summer night. Jihoon handed him a water bottle, and Seongwu saw that it was one Jihoon always carried with him.

“Sir, you sound like you have a hoarse throat. Have some water first.”

Seongwu did as he was told. His felt his body wake up as he downed gulps of cool water. As he wiped away the excess water on his lips, Jihoon handed him something else. It was a plate of three rice balls. Seongwu realized just then that he was starving, and ate them gratefully. Jihoon commented, after he was done: “Heewu left them with me a short while back.”

With this, Seongwu was almost sure that Jihoon’s visit to the Ong family home was not a coincidence. Despite opposition from their elders, Seongwu’s siblings were trying to help him leave. Seongwu remembered his brother Hyeonwu’s firm voice telling him that he will not let him out, because if he did, Seongwu would be lost. Hyeonwu must have suffered from the conflict inside him between the wish to live in safety together with his big brother and the wish to let him out to quell the pain from losing Minhyun. Seongwu could not imagine how this internal battle would have tormented his little brother. He felt sorry for him more than he was grateful. Putting his shoes on, he looked to the main house, doused in darkness. Everyone seemed to be asleep. Seongwu pledged to himself that he would return to his family, and to pay his siblings back for allowing him to go. He stepped outside, not looking back.

Since their trip down to Joseon was an unplanned and sudden one, both Seongwu and Jihoon were empty-handed. They crossed over the mountain to go into downtown Liuhe, free of heavy luggage. Seongwu clenched his wallet and identification card tightly in his hand, desperate not to lose them. As if to protect its master, the ring on his fourth finger glistened in the dark.
They arrived at downtown Liuhe at sunrise. Before they could run into someone they knew, they hopped onto the train headed to Liaoyuan. They could hardly get any rest once they were on the train; they sat close, discussing what they would have to do to make it into Joseon safely. Staying on trains was the quickest, clearest option, but that, too, had its dangers, and they talked of all alternatives they could think of. Nothing was easy, and Seongwu knitted his brows in worry.

When they stepped off the train at Liaoyuan Station, they found that the atmosphere was surprisingly unthreatening. With ease that was almost alarming, they boarded the train to Dandong. They could make sense of it, as Liaoyuan was a small city that was relatively insignificant in terms of military importance.

Their apprehension completely melted away as they reached Dandong Station. Seongwu was tense and nervous as he entered the gargantuan station building, but the oppressors that he feared would stop them were nowhere to be seen. There were neither police officers who went around with their threatening clubs, nor the bayonet-armed Kwantung soldiers. The station was still bustling with people, but the mood inside it was different, lighter and freer.

Seongwu and Jihoon found themselves walking faster from the subtle excitement they felt from the station. Regrettably, they had to make a stop at Dandong. They had spent all day traveling from Liuhe to Dandong, and there were no night trains destined for Pyongyang. They had to spend the night near the station, observing their surroundings.

They were dumbfounded to see that they were not confronted by anyone the following day. As they bought the tickets, moved on to their platforms and onto their train, and sat through their six-hour ride to Pyongyang, they did not see a single Japanese soldier. Had the Japanese retreated all the Kwantung army for their campaign in Manchuria, and leave no one behind? Seongwu was confused, as was Jihoon. Only the long whistle of the train answered them.

Seongwu and Jihoon had an easier time speaking to each other, as they were not forced to use Japanese. They decided to drop by Pyongyang before they headed to Gyeongseong. They had figured that there was no rush to get to Gyeongseong, and that asking for advice from Kyuwon would be safer for them.

Pyongyang Station was scarlet in the sunset when they arrived. It had taken Seongwu five years to return home. The city had an unsettléd air about it. There were empty houses everywhere, as if people had picked up their lives and left the city for good. Seongwu took Jihoon to Pyongyang Medical College. They loitered around the entrance, wondering if the school had been shut down, until a few students showed up, on their way home. They asked the students if they knew Kyuwon, and they were told that his office was room 503.

Seongwu drew a deep breath before the door and knocked. It opened, and a face Seongwu had dearly missed emerged from behind it. Kyuwon looked haggard, but soon surprise and delight seeped into his countenance.

“God, if this is not Ong Seongwu!”

“Kyuwon.”

“You were alive! Both of you are alive! I can’t be happier.”
In his incredulity and joy, Kyuwon held onto both of them and refused to let go. Kyuwon ran his hands through Seongwu’s hair and pinched his cheeks.

“So this is not a dream.” He said. Seongwu smiled at him. He had missed Kyuwon’s voice, his fidgety way of moving; they spoke of the intimacy and familiarity he desperately missed while in Liuhe. Seongwu wanted to cry, and Kyuwon noticed it quickly.

“You don’t look too good.”

Kyuwon took his time to appraise Seongwu. His face, small and delicate to begin with, was made gaunt, and his body was even thinner than before. Kyuwon hurried getting ready to go home. He had work to do, but Seongwu was first.

“Let’s go home. I need to feed you. You must have had a tough journey here, too, Jihoon. Let’s go.”

Kyuwon stamped himself out, and they were out of the school building. Like the streets, the streetcar was nearly empty. The Taedong shone in the sunset, solitary.

The Ong family’s hanok was still there, unharmed. The old gate opened wide for its master. Seongwu and Jihoon walked into the main house, and Kyuwon into the kitchen. Seongwu looked around his house with wonder in his eyes. He had not known that he would return, but he had, finally, after such a long time. Kyuwon had taken good care of the house, and it was clean and well-maintained.

Kyuwon showed up with a small portable table with food on it. Seongwu and Jihoon quietly emptied their bowls, not having eaten properly since they left Liuhe. After they ate, they talked late into the night about how they had been and the changes in the world. Lastly, they had to talk of Minhyun.

“Kyuwon, I am sure you heard.”

“Of what?”

Seongwu could not answer; he could not speak. Seongwu’s gaze fell to the floor helplessly. Kyuwon realized what Seongwu meant. He was not surprised to hear Seongwu speak of it, and he merely shrugged.

“I doubt that clever bastard would’ve let them get to him so easily.”

Seongwu almost burst into tears. He could not understand how Kyuwon could be so optimistic, so nonchalant. How could he be? How could anyone? Was it because Kyuwon did not love Minhyun? Seongwu boiled with unspoken words of reproach, and his face was overcast with sadness.

Kyuwon stood up. He knew what Seongwu was feeling, but he could not let himself be swept away by despair. If he did, everyone would collapse like a frail sandcastle in the wave of overflowing sadness. Someone had to keep his ground, even if that entailed being hated by others. Kyuwon thought that this was his duty.

So instead of giving Seongwu flimsy words of solace, he handed his friend a stack of faded papers. Even without looking through them, Seongwu knew exactly what they were. They were letters from Minhyun, received in Pyongyang after Seongwu’s departure to Seogando.

“I hope you can find some peace reading them. Get some rest.”

Kyuwon gestured for Jihoon to follow him, and the two of them crossed over to the guest house
where Jihoon would stay. Seongwu sat there, dazed, until he came to his senses. He went to the master bedroom, clutching Minhyun’s letters to his chest.

Seongwu lighted the half-burnt red candle in the room. As it crackled, the light from it filled the room again. The room had once been a haven for Minhyun and Seongwu, and it had been kept by Kyuwon exactly as it was on the day Seongwu left it. There was the embroidered silk blankets in the closet, and the pair of wooden ducks on the desk. Everything was the same, except Minhyun was missing. Minhyun was the only thing missing.

Seongwu looked down at the bundle of letters in his hand. The name written where ‘Hwang Minhyun’ should have been was ‘Kise Akira.’ This must have been the alias that briefly replaced Minhyun’s stolen name. Seongwu ran his fingers over the unfamiliar characters. They looked infinitely awkward, despite having been hand-written by Minhyun himself. What would Minhyun have felt when he chose this name, subject to a fate that Seongwu could fortunately evade, but fell upon Minhyun with no mercy? Seongwu carefully opened the first envelope and took out the letter inside it. He choked out a sob as he saw the unruly letters that Minhyun put down with utmost care. From first letter to the last, Minhyun’s tone was consistently calm.

...My dear love, so precious that I cannot bear uttering your name… I am afraid that the heavens, jealous of your beauty, will take you too early from me, when you are still mine to love and cherish…

The notion that heaven takes the beautiful early became a curse that befell Minhyun. What was the ‘Detainment of Political Criminals’ Minhyun mentioned in his letters, and what did it entail? Seongwu’s chest smouldered with heartbreak. He could not even begin to imagine the tribulations Minhyun must have lived through. Minhyun would have been in suffering, lonely. If they had given up everything else and left Pyongyang together, they would have died together. Seongwu bit down on his trembling lower lip. There was no use in regretting the past now. As Minhyun used to say, there were no ‘if’s in this world.

The very last letter, unlike the other densely written letters, only contained a single poem. Seongwu recognized the title, written in German.

“You are like a flower…”

So sweet, beautiful, and pure;

I look at you, and

A sadness seeps into my heart.

I want to place my two hands

On your head and pray,

Praying that God will receive you,

So pure and beautiful and sweet.
Seongwu could not finish reading the poem. Tears had clouded his eyes. He wiped away at his eyes with his sleeves, but the tears continued to overpower him, and Seongwu chose to let himself cry. He hastily folded Minhyun’s letters, so they would not be stained by his tears, and in doing so, cut his fingertip with the edge of one of the pages. He felt the severe sting on his finger, and with it as a trigger, Seongwu wept openly, bawling like a child. Somehow the sting from the papercut hurt so viscerally, like he had been slashed deeply with a knife. No matter how long and hard he cried, the sadness refused to subside. Seongwu cried for a long time, hugging the last of the letters from the love of his life. The master room, once a place of love, a place Seongwu thought would be eternal, was now a place of abyssal despair. The pair of phoenix birds embroidered on the silk blankets were drenched in tears.

The next morning, Kyuwon and Jihoon saw Seongwu’s swollen eyes and sighed. Kyuwon looked at him with sympathy, although he had fully expected to see Seongwu in such a state. Defying Kyuwon’s worries, Seongwu said, bravely:

“I am going to go to Gyeongseong.”

“Today? Right now?”

“Yes.”

Seongwu’s tone was resolute, and Kyuwon stopped him.

“Wait. Could I go with you? I’m taking three days off starting on the fifteenth. Wouldn’t it be better if went together?”

Seongwu thought about it for a moment, and then nodded. Kyuwon thanked him, and let out a sigh of relief. He did not want to let Seongwu go to Gyeongseong alone. As if he understood Kyuwon’s concern, Seongwu spent the next few days in Pyongyang, quietly and calmly gathering himself.

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Soon, it was August 15, 1945, the day Seongwu waited desperately for, yet at the same time did not want to see. Seongwu, Kyuwon and Jihoon hurried to Pyongyang Station early in the morning. The station was far from the bustling hub it used to be, and they only saw small, scattered crowds here and there. They waited for their train on the quiet platform, until they saw the steam of the approaching train headed to Gyeongseong. After the usual blast of its whistles, the train stopped. Seongwu boarded the train with a trembling heart. Six hours later, he would be in Gyeongseong. The train rattled forward.

Gyeongseong had changed. That was the first thought Seongwu had as he set his foot again in the old city. Things and people that populated the familiar scenery felt strange and out of place. Gyeongseong Station was packed with the Japanese and the Chinese. They were all waiting for their departing trains, seemingly nervous, with their luggage in their hands. They used to fill the streets of Myeongchijung and Hwanggeumjung. Why were they all leaving? Seongwu exited the platform without getting any answers.
Just outside the station, things were worse. The city was empty, devoid of its former vitality. Besides the foreigners crowding in the Gyeongseong Station, there were no movements to speak of. As the three of them walked through the nearly deserted streets, they overheard a Japanese man speak.

“At noon, the Tenno spoke on the radio.”

Rather than focus on what the Japanese passerby said, they tried to decipher what they were seeing. Myeongchijung was far from its former glory, and was a place of empty streets and eerie silence. Its uproarious storefronts had all closed, and the modern boys and girls that used to clutter the streets were nowhere to be seen. Even the stock markets, which were still full of crowds of people despite wartime financial adversity, were shut down.

After they passed Myeongchijung, they came upon Gwanggyo, the bridge across Cheonggyecheon creek. The bridge was still there, untouched by the passage of hard times. The Japanese had planned to cover the creek before the war, but it seemed that they never found the time to do so. Seongwu walked across the bridge slowly, listening to the babble of the water flowing beneath him. The sound, which he remembered so lucidly, pulled from his subconscious memories of the past. With every step, Seongwu remembered the many days he had spent with Minhyun, the times he walked with Minhyun over the bridge. Fortunately, the memories of the times he spent with Minhyun were still within Seongwu, unchanged. Seongwu smiled to himself, bitterly.

Once they arrived at Jongno, their destination, they split. Seongwu said he wished to go to Bukchon alone, and Kyuwon agreed to take Jihoon on a tour of downtown Gyeongseong, while looking for a place to stay. Kyuwon also wanted to determine what was really going on in the city, and why it was so empty. Jihoon opposed this idea, concerned about what would happen if Seongwu were attacked while he wandered alone. Kyuwon laughed, and led Jihoon away. He was worried, too, but they were in Gyeongseong, their old home turf, and he wanted Seongwu to have much-needed time alone. It was all he could do for Seongwu.

By this time Seongwu had gathered enough courage within himself to begin to walk to Bukchon. Its labyrinthine complexity remained unchanged, but there was an air of loneliness in its alleyways. Seongwu saw many empty houses along the way, and there were no signs of people, as if all of them were in hiding.

Seongwu went to Gyeongseong Secondary School first. The school, once crowded with vibrant students, was empty, and the front gate was locked with a large padlock. Had the school been shut down? Seongwu peered at the white building that stood alone, locked behind bars. School without students, village without residents. Even the ricecake vendor who passed by the school like clockwork around lunchtime was gone. Ten years ago, Seongwu would never have imagined that Gyeongseong would become this way, a ghost town.

Seongwu trudged along the alleyway and debated himself on the merits of going to the old boarding house. He felt heartbreak while looking at his alma mater; he did not know what kind of pain he would feel at the house he used to share with Minhyun. Would the many memories there become shards to stab Seongwu’s heart, to injure him even more? What if someone else had moved in? What if the house had been torn down during the war? Seongwu was afraid that he would collapse completely if he were to be subject to another great tragedy. He sighed, and battled himself over and over in his head, while his feet took him to the old boarding house, as if by habit. Before he knew it, Seongwu was standing in front of the blue metal gate he had entered through thousands of times before.

Seongwu grabbed the handle to the gate, let go, and held it in his hand again. His heart was beating violently. Seongwu whimpered, shutting his eyes. He was overtaken by a desire to at least see inside
the house. There were so many things he wanted to find answers to. Did the angel’s trumpets still cover the stone walls around the garden? How big was the cherry blossom tree he planted in the corner of the garden with Minhyun? Were Mr. and Mrs. Chung still there? No, no. Seongwu told himself. He could not let himself expect more than was probable. He promised himself to leave immediately after checking on the flowers and his tree in the garden. Seongwu swallowed hard, and his bony hand clasped the handle of the blue gate again.

The gate creaked open, and Seongwu could smell the rust on its hinges. Seongwu saw that the trumpet vines were in full bloom, and that their flowers covered the entirety of the stone walls upon which they grew. The cherry blossom tree was still there, much larger than he left it, with a thicker trunk and a myriad of branches. It must had bloomed gloriously over the past spring.

Seongwu circled the house, which was silent. Were the Chungs out in town? Or had they left for good? There were many possibilities, but Seongwu could not be certain of any of them. Seongwu briefly entertained the idea of keeping his earlier promise to himself, and to leave the house right away. He decided against it, to be braver. Seongwu stood in front of the front door, and took a deep breath before he knocked. No answer. He turned the doorknob and pushed. The door, unlocked, opened easily.

Upon entering the house, Seongwu gasped. Inside the house were furniture and things he had never seen before. Perhaps some other people had lived in the house after the Chungs left during the war. Everything was in disarray, and all the drawers were half-open, articles of clothing hanging out from them. Strangely, things were mostly there, as if the people who lived in the house left in a hurry, only taking with them bare minimum of essentials. Seongwu did not see much dust around the floor, so he determined that it had not been long since the house was abandoned. Seongwu’s heart sank, in confusion and disappointment.

Seongwu stood around the living room for a while, unable to leave. He, then, had a change of heart and decided on his last course of action. He would, for the last time, take a brief look at the room he used to share with Minhyun before he would leave. He did not think he could take more than that; merely existing in Bukchon was bringing him physical aches in his chest.

He climbed the stairs, slowly, making sure to feel every step beneath his feet. Even after years of absence, his body remembered the sensation of stepping up on each of the stairs. Once on the second floor, he was again standing in the corridor he still sometimes saw in his dreams, long, and with a window at the end of it. On each side were sliding doors made of wooden frames and covered with white changhoji*. The door to his - their - old room still had a red ribbon tied to its doorknob. Seongwu pulled on the ribbon to the right, and the door slid open.

Blinding sunlight deluged into Seongwu’s eyes. Seongwu was forced to close his eyes and knit his brows to adjust himself into seeing in the brightness. He slowly opened his eyes, and he could see what was inside the large room as his vision gradually cleared. Seongwu blinked, again and again, his eyelashes fluttering frantically in an attempt to grasp what he was seeing. Something completely and totally unexpected was within his sight.

It was a man, sitting with his back to Seongwu, with his raven-black hair trimmed neatly short. He was sitting upright, facing the wall, reading a book. As though bored, the man turned over the pages of his book nonchalantly. Then he closed his book, and slowly, almost leisurely, turned his head to look back. Just like the first time they met, the man looked at Seongwu, with his keen eyes, sharp gaze. Captivated by the man’s gaze, Seongwu froze where he stood, unable to move.

“Hello.”

The man said, smiling. His eyes, sleek and almost cold to those who do not know him, softened as
they bent into meek crescents.

Was this man a ghost? Was he an illusion, a mirage that Seongwu’s mind created after being driven mad by sorrow? Seongwu stood there, looking at the man in front of him, confused, lost, incapable of making any judgments about his circumstances before the surreality of his reality. To be a ghost or an illusion, the man was too real, like Seongwu could reach out and touch him.

As Seongwu stood still, the man stood up. His jaws were more pronounced than they were before, as if he had lost some weight; however, his shoulders, broad and solid, were still the same, covered in a crisp white shirt. He slowly approached Seongwu, and stood in front of him. They stood at a short distance, facing each other.

“I was going to go and fetch you, but you found me first. Thank you.”

Seongwu could no longer think of anything else. At this moment, the man in front of him was all he could see, his everything. Seongwu hurled off everything that had been tormenting him and weighing him down. His heart, brimming over with rapturous joy, made him run toward Minhyun, his love, the love of his life. Seongwu embraced Minhyun with his arms, and clung to him, as Minhyun hugged him back tightly.

“Minhyun, Minhyun… Minhyun…”

Seongwu’s voice trembled, jumbled with sobs and a litany of Minhyun’s name. Incredulous, Seongwu touched Minhyun everywhere, trying to make sense of it all, to make sure to himself that Minhyun, finally back in his arms, was real, neither a ghost nor an illusion. Answering him, Minhyun took Seongwu’s hand, and held on fast. Seongwu felt his body’s warmth through the thin skin of his palm. This was not an illusion. This temperature, this warmth, belonged to Hwang Minhyun.

Seongwu did not want to cry anymore, but he could not help himself. Tears streamed down his cheeks like rainfall. Seongwu’s delicate face was once again drenched in tears. Minhyun gingerly wiped them away with the pad of his thumb. Minhyun felt as if his heart was being torn to pieces whenever he saw Seongwu cry, regardless of the circumstances or the reasons for his tears. He had so wished for Seongwu to be filled with laughter and nothing else when they met again. Even as a fully grown adult, Seongwu was a crybaby, Minhyun’s crybaby. Minhyun held Seongwu in his arms and against his chest tightly, so he would calm down. And from a certain moment, Seongwu’s crying subsided, and all they could hear were heartbeats that belonged to each other. How they had waited and longed for this moment! Minhyun planted a light kiss on Seongwu’s ear.

“I have returned. Finally, to your side.”

The war was over. They had survived.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary for Chapter 39:

August 15, 1945: This is the date of Korean emancipation from Japanese oppression. Japan surrendered to the United States, and the Japanese emperor did a radio broadcast
declaring Japan's surrender on this day.

Changhoji: A type of Korean paper, often used to paste on doors in hanoks (Korean traditional homes).
Chapter Summary

Minhyun and Seongwu go to Jongno to reunite with Kyuwon, and Minhyun is introduced to Jihoon, Seongwu's fiery young student. Afterwards, Minhyun tells Seongwu a long story of how he managed to survive out of Nagasaki, and of his long journey back to Gyeongseong. They make love for the first time in years, and in the light of dawn Minhyun tells Seongwu about what he wishes to do in the future.

Chapter Notes

Hi all! It's the last chapter of Light of Our Lives!

I know I took long between uploads, made some mistakes, apologized, and struggled to pick up sometimes, but we made it to the end. I am aware that this fic got some hate, too, but I thank you for believing me and sticking with me until now. I hope the payoff was well worth it!

Id and I were deliriously happy to be able to share this story with you. We enjoyed writing, translating, researching, and sharing the story, and all the love, happiness, sadness, perseverance, pain, and euphoria within it. I especially enjoyed the sheer historicity of the entire novel, and appreciated the painstaking attention to detail that Id poured into researching and incorporating history into the narrative.

More than anything, I thank you all for supporting our onghwang boys in their separate endeavors. I really hope you enjoyed the story of Light of Our Lives, and we hope to share more stories in the future.

Thanks!

Sasha

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 40

Love in Deed and Truth

A gentle wind circled around Bukchon and shook the wind chime hanging under the eaves, which jingled merrily as if welcoming a long-awaited guest. Minhyun and Seongwu sat side by side and listened together to the tinkling song of the bells.

They had not felt such stability and comfort in years. They never wanted to part again. Seongwu
wrapped his arms around Minhyun’s waist, and squeezed, as if he will never let go. He still found it unbelievable that Minhyun was in his arms. Tears began to flow from his eyes again.

“Why do you cry so much? This is a joyful day.”

“I just cannot believe it. You are right before my eyes, yet I am afraid that this is all a dream, a fantasy I created for myself. What if I am crazy?”

Fearful apprehension filled Seongwu’s eyes. Minhyun raised his eyebrows.

“I told you this before, Seongwu, but your imagination runs too wild sometimes.”

Seongwu had not changed at all; he was still Minhyun’s dear Seongwu. Minhyun smiled, and wiped away the trace of tears on Seongwu’s cheeks with his thumb.

“You can relax. This is neither a dream nor a fantasy.”

Minhyun brought Seongwu’s forehead and his together, so that there were mere inches between their lips. Minhyun whispered into his lover’s lips, which he adored with his life.

“You are not crazy, Seongwu.”

“Minhy…”

Seongwu’s call shattered inside Minhyun’s mouth, his words turning into moans. The first kiss they shared in years was the most urgent and ardent kiss they had ever shared. It was Minhyun who crossed the line first, but soon Seongwu was kissing back as if his life depended on it. His kiss was stormy, almost reckless, as if he wanted to share all of the warmth they had to keep to themselves during the years they were apart. Minhyun sat still, and let Seongwu kiss him to his heart’s content.

“I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too.”

They enjoyed the afternoon light, sitting side by side like a pair of lovebirds. The warm particles of light embraced them. Their fingers intertwined, unraveled, and intertwined again. In the midst of this bliss, Seongwu somehow thought of the promise he made to Kyuwon, to meet again in the afternoon.

“I forgot to tell you, but Kyuwon is in Jongno. He accompanied me here from Pyongyang. Let’s go to Jongno. Kyuwon and Jihoon will be waiting for us.”

“Jihoon?”

Minhyun’s eyes narrowed in curiosity upon hearing a name he did not recognize.

“He is one of my students. He came down here all the way from Liuhe.”

“I see.”

Minhyun nodded. Seongwu smiled and reached out toward him. Minhyun placed his stubby hands upon Seongwu’s bony ones. They held on tight, so they would never let each other go again.

They headed down to Jongno, just as they had as boys. The four men met in the middle of the street, which was busier than it had been earlier in the day. Kyuwon and Jihoon appeared shocked, not having anticipated seeing Minhyun. Minhyun and Seongwu grinned ear to ear.
“It has been a while, Kyuwon.”

“Minhyun!”

Overcome by emotions, Kyuwon grabbed Minhyun and began to talk, rapid-fire. Jihoon, who was a step behind, saw Minhyun and felt an instant and intense curiosity toward him. He realized as soon as he saw Minhyun that this man was Seongwu’s lover. Jihoon carefully observed Minhyun, trying to read him. He had sometimes tried to visualize this figureless man who made his teacher suffer in loneliness, but in flesh, he was different from anything Jihoon had imagined. He was tall, with sharp, alert eyes, and had a sleek facial structure, with beautifully masculine jaws. His relaxed demeanor implied good character ripened through years of adulthood. Seongwu looked happier than ever, holding this man’s hand. Jihoon was satisfied with the fact that his teacher was happy, but still did not like Minhyun. He resented Minhyun for making Seongwu cry every day while the latter spent his days in Liuhe, and then returning as if nothing had happened.

Minhyun felt the way Jihoon looked at him. The ‘student’ Seongwu had mentioned was apparently thinking of Minhyun as a rival in love. Jihoon reminded Minhyun of a fierce, feral animal, but a cub. Minhyun smiled at him.

“She honored to meet you.”

Jihoon looked down at Minhyun’s outstretched hand, and took it. Jihoon felt a strong grip, and grasped back hard himself. A slightly confrontational air was between them.

“I heard you are Seongwu’s student?”

“Yes, I am.”

Jihoon could easily tell why Minhyun mentioned the fact that he was Seongwu’s student. Upon Jihoon’s cherubic face a shadow of displeasure loomed. Seongwu saw it, and he budged in between the two. He led the rest off to eat, to a pub nearby. Kyuwon walked ahead, knowing the place well, and Jihoon, Minhyun and Seongwu followed. Seongwu felt Minhyun’s long arm snake around his waist, and he whispered his admonitions, reminding him that they were outside. Minhyun whispered back: so what? Seongwu realized, then, that Minhyun was trying to set things straight with Jihoon.

Almost oblivious to Minhyun and Jihoon’s silent struggle, Seongwu and Minhyun ate and chatted gleefully. They each talked about how they had been, about things that hadn’t fit in the letters they exchanged. Kyuwon and Seongwu led the conversation, with Jihoon and Minhyun chiming in from time to time. Minhyun was the most silent out of the four; he mostly listened, sipping water instead of liquor. The other three were anxious to hear Minhyun’s story, but Minhyun kept dodging the subject.

“I heard that the Japanese emperor went on the radio at noon.”

“Yes. No one could understand any of it, but I’m sure we’ll get our translation tomorrow or the day after.”

“I supposed it’s nothing light, if the emperor spoke directly on the radio.”

“Of course! Aren’t we already feeling it?”

Kyuwon guffawed in delight, and Seongwu raised his glass, joined by Jihoon. Minhyun smiled, looking at the three of them clink their glasses together.

Night approached as they chatted away. The four of them strolled on a busy street in Jongno.
Kyuwon said he had booked a room nearby and suggested the continue their conversation there, but Seongwu hesitated. Perhaps because he was drunk, or swept by the atmosphere in old Gyeongseong, he wanted to return to Bukchon. Minhyun understood what Seongwu wanted, and said instead: “We’ll go back to our old boarding house. How about we see you tomorrow morning near 2nd street?”

Before Kyuwon and Jihoon could protest, Minhyun and Seongwu were already walking ahead. Kyuwon told Jihoon, who stood perplexed: “That’s just the way they are.”

On their way back, Seongwu pondered if he and Minhyun had disappointed Kyuwon and Jihoon. Noticing that he had become quiet, Minhyun said, his tone laced with worry:

“Are you drunk? Sleepy?”
“I feel fine.”
“You are so quiet. I want to keep listening to you talk.”
“I’m just a little worried. Aren’t we not supposed to stay in a masterless house?”
“Whoever claims an empty house becomes its mater. Why worry?”
“You became more shameless in Japan, haven’t you?”

Seongwu poked Minhyun’s side with his elbow. Ouch! Minhyun moaned exaggeratedly. Seongwu knew he was jesting, and just walked ahead with his head held high, like an arrogant and aloof cat. Minhyun caught up to him, and whispered into his ear, as if unleashing a great secret.

“Water still runs there, you know.”

Seongwu felt his ears burning up. He covered his ear with his hand and looked back at Minhyun. Minhyun had a wide grin on his face.

“What’s wrong, Seongwu?”

Minhyun asked under a false pretense of ignorance, despite having tempted Seongwu. Seongwu turned on his heels and marched forward, adorably sullen. Minhyun prowled after him.

They lit a small candle once they were inside the dark house. They began to fill the empty space with light and their breaths. Because they had lived in the house for five years, they knew where most things were, despite the fact that there was another master living in the house while they were gone. They filled the bathtub, and had a simple yet relaxing bath time they hadn’t had in years.

As they had always done, Seongwu stepped into the bath first, and Minhyun sat outside the bathroom, leaning on the door. They felt as if they returned to their time as students in Gyeongseong Secondary School. The night sky had remained the same, littered with stars. Still, Minhyun could not find any stars that were as pretty as those on Seongwu’s cheek. Minhyun was deeply occupied in observing the stars, until Seongwu broke his chain of thought.

“Hey, Minhyun.”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask you how you returned here?”

“I contracted space through my magic powers, of course.”
Seongwu answered Minhyun’s smug joke with a splash of water against the door. Seongwu had no time for corny jokes. Water seeped out of the crack in the bathroom door and into Minhyun’s shirt. Minhyun picked the wet patch of his shirt from off his back.

“It was just a joke! How cold-hearted you are.”

“I’m serious.”

Minhyun guffawed. He adored Seongwu so much. He carefully arranged his story in his head, deciding what he should tell Seongwu.

“Here goes.”

Minhyun closed his eyes for a long moment, and began his story, without details that would make Seongwu grieve.

Minhyun spent almost two months bedridden after he was released from Nagasaki jail. Minhyun had unofficially become deceased, as there was news of him being detained, but none of his release. This was inevitable, as Mr. Kimura had bribed the jail officials secretly. Minhyun existed, but at the same time he did not.

Once out of the public eye he felt freer, but immediate limits were imposed on his life. He could not go outside, or do anything that would reveal him to the society. Mr. Kimura started to realize his plans soon after Minhyun recovered. The entire family, including Minhyun, left Nagasaki and moved to Gokura. They moved furtively, under the cover of night, without any warning to their neighbors. In Gokura, Mr. Kimura purchased an identity of a man who was leaving Japan. Minhyun was called another name, neither Hwang Minhyun nor ‘Kisa Akira,’ while he lived in Gokura as an ordinary Japanese man working for the Kimura family’s soybean paste business.

Things were not perfectly easy in Gokura, either. Gokura was an industrial city, with many factories manufacturing military goods and weapons. Most of the workers in those factories were under forced labor, shipped from parts of Korea, China and Taiwan under Japanese occupation. Some of these workers were young girls, freshly out of primary schools. Mr. Kimura found this to be repugnant, and helped hide as many people he could who had run away. This was a difficult decision by Minhyun’s dear teacher, but to Mr. Kimura thought the value of human life to be above all else. So in the beginning of 1945, there were six Korean runaways living in Mr. Kimura’s house, including Minhyun. This secret never got out due to Mr. Kimura’s careful, meticulous nature, but sometimes police officers visited his house without warning for questioning. During these visits, Minhyun hid inside empty soybean paste containers. He felt suffocated inside, but he could withstand anything. He went all the way to Gokura, and he could not die with his love of his life waiting for him in Korea. More than anyone else, Minhyun believed that the war would be over soon.

In the summer, the mood within Japan turned sour. People began to criticize their country’s blind devotion to war. The people of Japan were fatigued from years of war, which had, by that time, become the norm. There were sounds of raid alarms every morning, escape training every day, and the menacing whoosh of fighter planes overhead at night. The Japanese government paid no heed to
its people. They did not stop attempting to brainwash its people of the importance of war. While politicians and the head of military debated the merits of war, hundreds of the innocent and the young died every day.

Some cities endured dozens of air raids, but Gokura had suffered none. Still, sometimes people found warnings of raids printed by the Americans in their streets, and saw the sobering blaze of bombs from the other side of the mountains. Things were better in general in Gokura, but to live in Japan was more difficult every day. Minhyun thought about what he should do for months on end; no matter how much Mr. Kimura tried to assure Minhyun that he enjoyed having him in the family, Minhyun did not forget that he was a guest. It was time for him to leave.

In July, Minhyun met a Korean man by coincidence. He had a peculiar look about him, dressed differently, like a westerner. Minhyun usually did not start conversations with strangers, but he had to ask the man where he came from. The man introduced himself as Chang Yunho, from America. The two men talked for a long time, and the Korean man from America listened to Minhyun’s story and thought of what he could do next, and how he could help. Minhyun agreed with the man’s advice and wrote to his parents immediately. Chang Yunho volunteered to take his letter to the post office, and left Gokura.

A return correspondence from his parents arrived within days. His parents had sent an expedited letter that was more than ten pages, having suffered from their son’s lengthy silence from Japan. Minhyun read the letter many times, and went to speak to his teacher about it the next morning. Mr. Kimura appeared older and more jaded since Minhyun first met him in Gyeongseong. However, his blazing, penetrating eyes and upright posture had not changed at all. Minhyun looked at his teacher, observed him, and committed his form to memory.

“Sir, I will return to Joseon.”

Mr. Kimura sat unshaken, except his eyes widened a little.

“Will you be all right?”

Minhyun smiled at him.

“If you say so.”

Mr. Kimura nodded his approval, and said no more. Minhyun set his date of departure as one month later, and stood up.

It was Seiko who was saddened by the news of Minhyun’s departure. She wanted him to stay, thinking that it was reckless to cross the border during such an unstable time. She could not persuade Minhyun, however, as Minhyun’s volition to return to his country was so strong. She settled for giving Minhyun an Omamori (御守), which she had made with all her heart. She wished him safety wherever he would be, and he thanked her wholeheartedly.

Minhyun returned to Joseon on August 9, 1945. It was, coincidentally, his birthday. He woke up early that morning to have his last breakfast with the Kimura family. They appeared more gloomy as they wished him happy birthday. Bidding farewell to loved ones were always hard. Minhyun intentionally hurried out of the Kimura family house. The sky was cloudy, the smoke from the many factories in Gokura adding to the grayness of it. Minhyun stepped out of the Kimura family’s gate, which had protected him and shielded him from the world for years. As he walked to Gokura Port, he saw a black shadow zoom overhead like an omen. It was an American combat plane passing over Gokura.
Minhyun’s ship arrived at Busan late at night. It was his first time visiting Busan Port, which was larger than Gyeongseong Station or Pyongyang Station. The port was a melting pot of people from all over, and Minhyun had to push through the thick crowd to escape it. His trip by boat had been painful as it was the first time, and he was craving rest. Minhyun hurried out of the port, his face pale. As he walked, he overheard people talk in whispers:

“An atomic bomb has been dropped on Nagasaki!”

Minhyun stopped in his tracks. He felt a chill travel down his spine. His mind conjured the panoramic view of Nagasaki, which he had first seen on a boat. Minhyun knew how destructive an atomic bomb could be; there would be nothing left standing in Harukimachi, his home for the past five years. It was fortunate that the Kimura family had relocated to Gokura; if they had stayed, they would have all been obliterated in the searing heat of the bomb. Now two cities were burnt to the ground; a tremendous threat to the Japanese government. If they did not surrender, Tokyo would suffer the same fate. How long would Japan last? Minhyun had an intuition that its surrender was only a few days away.

Minhyun went up to Gyeongseong the next day. The city had changed, almost unrecognizably, and the air of freedom was rife in the streets. This helped Minhyun confirm his hunch about Japan’s surrender. He felt his heart flutter. Would Kyuwon and Seongwu still remember their promise to meet again in Gyeongseong? How long would he have to wait to see Seongwu and Kyuwon again?

Minhyun considered going to the old boarding house straightaway, but changed direction. There was someplace he had to be before: his parents’ home. At the Hwang family house, things were being moved, packed and emptied. Most things seemed to be destined for disposal. Minhyun sat facing his parents in the living room, where most of the old furniture was missing. Minhyun’s parents seemed relieved more than anything, to see that their son was alive.

“You must be exhausted. Like you said, we are ready to leave. We want you to come with us, your family, where you belong.”

“With all due respect, I think I will need some more time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have someone I want to take with me.”

Minhyun’s parents realized then that their son had a mate he had hidden from them until then. They were surprised that their youngest son, who always sat like a statue made of wood and stone and did nothing but study, had somehow made for himself his better half. They asked who it was, and Minhyun answered that it was a secret for now.

Minhyun spent three days with his parents. It was at times awkward, since Minhyun had left home when he was only fifteen, but mostly their time together was constructive and spent mostly on planning for the future. Minhyun’s parents wished more than anything else to learn about Minhyun’s love, but he did not inform them anything, even when his parents left Gyeongseong to head for Busan.

After his family’s departure from Gyeongseong, Minhyun was on his own again. He walked through Gyeongseong alone. The city was quiet, its breaths subdued before impending independence. Minhyun started from Gyeongseong Station, passed Myeongchijung, which sat lonely in the dark with its lights mostly off, and crossed over Gwanggyo bridge. He walked away from the babble of the flowing water and into Jongno. He passed the crossroads of 1st and 2nd Streets. He was headed toward Dongdaemun Gate, and he changed direction again, to the north. Minhyun walked into the
complicated alleyways of Bukchon, still crowded with hanoks. He saw the alleyway in which he and Seongwu had first kissed. The streetlight that had witnessed their secret was still standing. He walked on, to pass their old school. Minhyun stood in front of the closed gate for a while, and moved on, arriving at the old boarding house. The blue metal gate was slightly ajar. Minhyun pushed it open and walked in.

The house was in disarray, as if the last occupant had left in a hurry. It was highly unlikely that anyone would come back. Minhyun forgot about the hotel he planned to stay in. Minhyun settled in the old boarding house, planning to gather information on the Seogando area and leave to find Seongwu. He thought that perhaps Seongwu was trapped there; however, Seongwu had found him first, to his surprise, appearing in their old room like a miracle.

“...and that’s how I met you again.”

“It sounds like a dream.”

“Yes. Reality is always more splendid than novels. Anyhow, I am happy that we’re together again.”

The bathroom door opened, and Minhyun saw Seongwu’s clean, pure countenance in the midst of the steam. Seongwu looked just as happy as he was. Seongwu lightly kissed him on the cheek, as if rewarding him for the long story.

“It’s your turn now. Go inside, and I’ll guard the door for you.”

“Thank you, although I don’t have much trust in your capacity as a guard.”

“You’re just as mean as you were five years ago.”

“Hahaha.”

Minhyun laughed as he stepped into the bathroom. Seongwu soon heard the sound of water splashing inside. Humming, Seongwu looked around the garden, his eyes resting on the angel’s trumpets that covered the inner wall around the house. He admired them, and picked the most lush flower from the vines.

Minhyun washed himself in haste, hurrying because he hated every minute, every second he did not have Seongwu in front of him. He stepped out of the bathroom and slowly walked to Seongwu, who was standing facing the wall. When Seongwu looked back, there was a single flower sitting behind his ear. The flower was pretty, but Minhyun felt no wonder for its beauty, as it was juxtaposed against Seongwu’s face.

“I haven’t admired a flower in years. Looking at you, I feel like my eyes are truly open again.”

“I heard Japan is full of cherry blossom trees. Were they not enough for you?”

“Of course they weren’t. They are nothing compared to the most beautiful flower standing before me.”

*How could I compare you to a mere cherry blossom?* Seongwu snickered at the seriousness in Minhyun’s voice.

“Naturally, there is no flower more beautiful than I.”

“You are the king of flowers. Wherever you stand, it becomes spring.”
Minhyun reached out to caress Seongwu’s cheek. Cool fingertips brushed across smooth, warm skin. Seongwu took Minhyun’s hand in his own, his eyes sparkling.

“Minhyun.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you want to see the most beautiful flower in full bloom?”

A share of scarlet spread across Seongwu’s cheeks. Minhyun found the sight lovely. He would always welcome a seductive invitation from Seongwu. He took Seongwu’s hand and led him inside the house. They ran upstairs, into their old room.

The door slammed shut behind them. Minhyun sought out Seongwu’s lips and held them between his own. He took both of Seongwu’s cheeks in his hands, gingerly, as if Seongwu were a delicate sculpture made of marble, and kissed him, sincerely, with all his heart. Seongwu smiled as he welcomed Minhyun into his mouth, adoring how honest Minhyun was whenever he kissed him, shutting his eyes and failing to hide the heat rising from deep within him. Their breaths melted into each other, and their tongues sought and pursued one another, serving as an ignited fuse to set them on fire. Their senses, which had been asleep for years, shyly awakened in the presence of the other.

Seongwu’s long arms looped around Minhyun’s neck. In a tangle of limbs, they slowly tipped toward the floor. Soon, Seongwu was on his back on top of the blankets, which faintly smelled of soap, and Minhyun was on top of him, covering him like the night sky. Out of habit that refused to leave him years later, Minhyun examined Seongwu’s face, and marvelled at it. Seongwu’s eyes were beautiful beyond expression, because all they contained was Minhyun’s reflection. Minhyun’s movements became urgent. He had a thirst within him that could not be quenched, that burned him from within like a forest fire. He was looking at Seongwu, and touching him, but it was not enough. I need something more, want something more. What about you, Seongwu? Minhyun buried his lips into Seongwu’s neck, as if asking to know what he wanted, and indulged in the smooth, thin skin. Minhyun’s senses were captivated by the scent he had missed dearly, and the thin body he had could only afford to hold in his dreams for years on end. Scarlet flowers began to bloom on Seongwu’s skin, and Minhyun unbuttoned his shirt to gain more access. Minhyun found the body he had craved for within the open shirt. It was emaciated, slighter than it had ever been.

“Why are you so thin?”

Minhyun moaned, lamenting agony and sickness that had eaten away at Seongwu’s body. His hands aimlessly hovered above Seongwu’s chest, not knowing where to rest. Seongwu took Minhyun’s hand and squeezed it.

“Minhyun, I am fine.”

“Seongwu.”

“I am fine, so… hold me.”

“I will. I will.”

Minhyun held Seongwu tight, kissed his bony shoulder, and kept kissing him, leaving rosy petals in the wake of his lips. After a while, Minhyun sat up and admired Seongwu, who laid gasping on his back. It looked as if some flowers had bloomed on the pale expanse of Seongwu’s body, which shone bright under the moonlight.

“Blossoms everywhere, captivating me, mesmerizing me.”
Minhyun snickered, taking off his own shirt over his head. Minhyun, too, was thinner than before, but he had retained his solid frame and strong build. Seongwu took his time to admire him, until he noticed scars that littered his chest and stomach. Seongwu’s eyes shot open in shock. Minhyun’s body was pristine before he left for Japan. Seongwu lifted his hands and touched the scars, one by one, running his fingertips on the tiny dips, ridges, and faded bruises. Most of the scars looked old, but some had retained redness, like freshly inflicted ones. How had Minhyun gotten hurt? Why had he not told Seongwu about it? Seongwu felt a lump in his throat, and asked Minhyun what had happened. Minhyun, with a straight face, merely shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t remember.”

“You lie. How can you forget about things like that?”

Seongwu could not believe Minhyun. How can a man forget such intense pain that raided his body all over? Minhyun was surely lying, just to make Seongwu feel better. However, this thoughtfulness on Minhyun’s part only hurt Seongwu more. How long did Minhyun endure such pain, all alone? Seongwu felt rage boiling over him as he imagined Minhyun struggling against violence and oppression, with no one by his side. Unbearable heat from his anger ravaged Seongwu’s tender heart. I should have never let you go. Guilt and regret rose up like hot steam from Seongwu’s quaking heart and landed on the corner of his eyes.

Minhyun did not know what to do. He did not know whether he should tell Seongwu not to cry, or let him cry and just wipe the tears off his face as gently as he could. He could not tell Seongwu the truth. Seongwu could faint if he heard everything that went on inside Nagasaki City jail. Seongwu’s face was already covered in streams of tears. Minhyun carefully caressed the side of Seongwu’s face. Translucent teardrops wet his fingers.

“I do not know what to do, now that you’re crying.”

Seongwu let out a sniffle.

“Should I stop?”

At this meek question, Seongwu looked up to Minhyun. His eyes, brilliant with sparkling tears, looked straight into Minhyun’s eyes.

“I will not stand it if you stop.”

Seongwu took Minhyun’s chin by his fingers, and kissed him senseless. Seongwu bit and licked the lips and teeth he only ravaged in his dreams thousands of times over. Seongwu bit into Minhyun’s lower lip before their lips parted. Seongwu’s passion became a catalyst for Minhyun’s magnified desire. They stripped themselves of all reason, and vanished all other thoughts from their heads. They saw nothing but each other as they enjoyed the feeling of being alone together in all the world. A deep feeling of satisfaction traveled through their veins.

Thus, Minhyun and Seongwu endlessly indulged in each other, all night, coloring the daybreak with the splendid hues of their pleasure.

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Pale light of dawn crept through the windows, and onto Minhyun and Seongwu’s nude bodies. They were on their sides, facing each other, enjoying the lingering warmth sensations that filled them to the brim during the night past. Seongwu spoke quietly, his voice raspy from crying out all night.

“So what do you plan to do now?”

“Joseon will have its independence, and the Japanese empire perish. I know that there will still be dangers awaiting us in every nook and cranny of this country. Joseon, China, and Japan… this is a cursed triad that has been ill-dated for millennia. I want to escape it.”

“You mean… you want to leave?”

“Yes. I am going to go to America next month.”

America? Seongwu’s heart sank. Would they have to be torn apart again? Seongwu was instantly exploding with questions after questions. Anxiety gripped at his chest. Oblivious to Seongwu’s apprehension, Minhyun went on.

“I’m not going to just pick up and leave without proper preparations. Remember the Mr. Chang I told you about earlier? I heard from him that many people from Joseon have already moved to America and formed communities. My parents have also moved there recently. I know living abroad isn’t going to be easy, but I think I could be anything I want, especially since I am still young.”

After Minhyun’s vigorous speech, Seongwu was uncharacteristically silent. Out of habit, Minhyun scanned Seongwu’s face, which was overcast with gloom.

“Why are you worried? Did you think I would leave on my own?”

Minhyun’s stubby fingers gingerly pushed Seongwu’s bangs out of his face. Seongwu’s handsome profile was bluish in the break of dawn. Minhyun soothed him, his voice deep and comforting.

“Seongwu, I do not make same mistakes twice. I have your passage ticket as well.”

Seongwu looked up, his eyes wide in surprise. Minhyun could not bear how much he adored him. Minhyun kissed Seongwu’s forehead, blessing it.

“Let us go together. I heard that America is so vast that we can go anywhere and make a living. How about we travel to places up north? I have heard wonderful things about the aurora borealis there. I think you will love it.”

“I don’t care about the aurora borealis. You are the only thing that is important to me. I do not want to be parted from you, ever again.”

Seongwu burrowed into Minhyun’s chest, fretting. He knew that he would prefer death over being torn from this warmth again, and that Minhyun felt the same.

“I do not want to be parted from you, either. We have experienced farewell; now let us stay together until our death.”

“We shall be buried together. We cannot be apart again.”

“Yes, yes.”

“If you only knew how painfully I missed you.”

“I know. There is nothing I would refuse to fathom about you.”
Minhyun tenderly embraced Seongwu’s slender shoulders, and Seongwu’s hands settled onto Minhyun’s broad chest. Seongwu felt through the skin of his palm Minhyun’s steadfastly beating heart, which was pulsating slightly faster than usual. Racing of the heart was a symptom that only surfaced when Minhyun was with Seongwu. Seongwu was the cause of it, and Seongwu was the only one who could take care of it. Seongwu was like an absolute being, like God, to Minhyun, as he controlled Minhyun’s heart. Minhyun whispered into the ear of his sulking God:

“Thank you.”

“......”

“For surviving. For enduring everything. For loving me still.”

Seongwu’s long eyelashes fluttered. To keep more tears from escaping, Seongwu closed his eyes. He had a thousand things he wished to say to Minhyun, but all were useless when he felt Minhyun’s heartbeat against his own. In the world of a tranquil morning, all they could feel were each others’ hearts, beating in tandem.

The End

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Love in deed and truth

We should love, not in word or with the tongue, but in deed and truth.

1 John 3:18

Chapter End Notes

Notes for chapter 40:

About the Japanese Emperor’s radio appearance and Kyuwon, Minhyun, Seongwu and Jihoon ‘waiting for translations’ despite the fact that they can speak fluent Japanese: at the time, the Japanese Emperor spoke in old Japanese, which most laymen did not understand.

Omamori : (The lucky charm that Seiko Kimura gives to Minhyun) Omamori (御守 or お守り omamori) are Japanese amulets commonly sold at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, dedicated to particular Shinto kami as well as Buddhist figures, and are said to provide various forms of luck or protection.
Thank you for reading! I mean it!

Epilogue to Light of Our Lives (Minhyun and Seongwu's life in San Francisco, California) will be translated :) Stay tuned!

End Notes

Find me and follow me through corridors refectories or on Twitter at @sashaprism for updates, and Id at @myidheadstou.

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