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Songbun

by

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Our Dear Leader has announced revisions to the *songbun* system to improve the coordination of Korean society to repel the invasion from the South. All *songbun* records will be consolidated in a new state office, the Ministry of Genealogical Records. All persons, except for those with Hostile *songbun*, will have the right to apply for revision of their *songbun* based on war service.

It is untrue that the Wavering Class will be reclassified as Hostile. The despicable scum of Seoul, worse than dogs, spread this lie to weaken our *Juche* spirit. The major classes will remain as:

Elite

Core

Basic

Wavering

Hostile

THREE MONTHS BEFORE LAUNCH DATE:

A cool wind swept from the East Sea over the top of the launch tower at Musudan-ri Rocket Launch Centre. Lee Ha Neul shivered in his grey vinylon jacket as he looked down at the massive rocket.

His jacket bore the logo of the National Aerospace Development Administration. It was a dark blue globe with the constellation Ursa Major, the Administration's Korean name, and the English acronym "NADA" in white. A foreign languages student had told him that "NADA" meant "nothing" in Spanish. Ha Neul did not know if that was true or not.

It was October, merely three months before Dear Leader's birthday. Technicians scurried around both the base and the top of the tower, working on the rocket and the spacecraft it carried.

Cho Yoon Ah, Director of the Cosmonaut Office, gripped the collar of her black wool coat. Slender and beautiful, with straight teeth and unblemished skin, Yoon Ah was a woman of the Pyongyang Elite. She had grown up with food, housing, health and dental care, education, clothes, shoes, jewelry, hair stylists, and cosmetics that most Northerners could never have. Her great-grandfather had fought alongside President Kim Il Sung, and her parents were high-ranking officials of the State Commission for Science and Technology.

"Cosmonaut Lee, let's inspect the spacecraft," Yoon Ah said.

The Chollima 1 spacecraft, named after a mythological flying horse, looked like an ancient Russian Vostok, a silver spherical crew module attached to a cylindrical service module that carried an engine.

The crew, consisting of a sole cosmonaut, would ride in the crew module, with the service module propelling the spacecraft through its orbits. Then the crew module would jettison the service module and descend to Earth.

"I don't have enough training to fly this spacecraft," Ha Neul said.

"You're a pilot. That's enough," said Yoon Ah. "Let Mission Control fly the spacecraft for you by remote control. Just sit back and enjoy the ride. The only time you have to do anything is when the radio control does not work. Then we authorize you to take control of the spacecraft. However, there is only a small risk of that happening."

"I don't think the risk is small. We rushed construction of the spaceship without any of the original designers or engineers," Ha Neul said.

She pulled him aside, away from the technicians. "No more excuses. Dear Leader is counting on you to succeed on this mission."

"I don't want to fly any more. I just can't," Ha Neul pleaded.

Yoon Ah scowled at him. "Don't say that! Your parents bribed the doctor to destroy your psychiatric assessment."

Ha Neul gasped. "It's destroyed? Gone?"

"Don't tell anyone."

"Thank you, Director Cho."

"Don't thank me. Thank your parents. They paid two hundred United States dollars. At least pretend to be happy."

When Ha Neul didn't respond, Yoon Ah continued. "Korea is the happiest country on Earth. We have nothing to envy in the world. Our people have no mental weakness. Anyone who shows signs of mental illness is a traitor. You know the penalty for treason. Now the record shows you have no mental illness."

Ha Neul nodded silently. He knew that Dear Leader never made mistakes and wanted his people to learn from him. Like a good parent, Dear Leader rewarded and punished his children. If Ha Neul succeeded in every task, he would be promoted to Hero Cosmonaut, and his family would join the Elite and live in a luxury apartment in Pyongyang. But if he made one mistake, he and his family would be sent to a prison camp. They would die within two years.

Yoon Ah softened her tone. "Comrade Cosmonaut Lee, think of the rewards. You'll get a photo op with Dear Leader, and your *songbun* will be raised to Elite. You will get anything you want: food, clothes, luxury apartment. You can do it!"

Flight Director Jang rushed onto the platform. He was a tall, distinguished-looking man in a blue business suit and tie. Jang, a former Air Force Colonel, learned aerospace engineering in Russia and thus escaped the purge of all staff who had trained in China.

"Comrade Cosmonaut Lee, Comrade Director Cho, listen to me! I have received an order from Dear Leader!" Jang shouted.

Ha Neul and Yoon Ah quickly stood at attention, like soldiers under inspection. Jang stared sternly at them.

"Comrades, Dear Leader has told us the objective of the Chollima 1 space mission," Jang announced.

Ha Neul took a deep breath. The mission objective had been secret. Not even he knew what it was. Was it for scientific research? Was it for military intelligence?

"Your spaceship will broadcast Dear Leader's theme song from space. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has selected a radio frequency and told all foreign countries to listen to it during your flight. The whole world will hear Dear Leader's theme song from the heavens."

Ha Neul's stomach grumbled.

"Dear Leader has given us so much," Jang said. "The least we can do is to broadcast his song to the heavens on his birthday."

Jang clicked his heels, turned away, and marched to the technicians.

Yoon Ah turned to Ha Neul and said, "This is a great honour!"

Ha Neul walked away and looked over the railing of the tower. He stared down at the ground, a great distance below. He closed his eyes, gasped, and teetered as he gripped the railing.

Yoon Ah pulled him back and pushed him into the elevator of the tower.

As they rode down, Yoon Ah said, "The past month of training has been strenuous. Start your leave now. Get some rest. I've arranged for Flight Sergeant Park Bon Hwa to fly you to Onsong. It's faster than taking the train."

Ha Neul nodded. Park had been his co-pilot during the War of Chinese Aggression. Now he was Cho Yoon Ah's assistant and Ha Neul's babysitter.

Flight Sergeant Park Bon Hwa, a pilot with a perfect flying record, would be a better cosmonaut than Ha Neul. But their ancestors' *songbun* decided who would stay on Earth and who would fly in space.

Bon Hwa had the rough look of people raised on rocky, infertile farmland. Like most peasants, he was shorter than the Pyongyang Elite because he had eaten smaller food rations all his life. Since his village had no dentist, his teeth remained yellow and crooked. He was born to toil hard and die young so the Elite could enjoy life. However, he took advantage of the wartime turmoil to rise in social status.

Bon Hwa flew the old L-39 training airplane higher into the clouds. Sitting beside Bon Hwa, Ha Neul felt a shiver run down his spine.

"We're going too high," Ha Neul protested.

"There's no problem, Ha Neul," Bon Hwa replied, addressing him by his given name, a sign of their close friendship from the war. "The sky is clear again. I haven't seen a foreign plane for a long time."

In the past, only men with Elite *songbun* could be pilots. However, the Southern War killed most of the country's pilots, and the government was desperate to replace them before the inevitable war with China. The Air Force quietly took trainees with Wavering to Core *songbun*,

men like Ha Neul and Bon Hwa. They trained as postal pilots and flew mail across the country. By classifying them as civilians, the government fed them smaller rations than military pilots got. However, the Air Force held all civilian pilots in reserve.

When the War of Chinese Aggression broke out, the Air Force pushed them into service. They had minimal peacetime flight experience and no military training. As Korean troops pushed into China, Ha Neul and Bon Hwa flew supplies to them.

Although the Chinese retreated on the ground, they fought fiercely in the air. The new Chinese Chengdu J-60 stealth fighters decimated the Korean MiG-29's, antiques from the twentieth century. The Koreans flew transport missions without fighter support. Chinese fighters, anti-aircraft guns, and missiles easily shot them down.

The transport planes flew in groups. Ha Neul and Bon Hwa watched in terror as their comrades' planes exploded and crashed all around them.

Two months after the war started, the Chinese surrounded the entire Korean invasion force at Helong. No supplies could reach them by ground. Dear Leader ordered the Air Force to fly supplies to the trapped Koreans twenty-four hours per day.

On one mission, twenty planes took off for Helong. Only one plane, flown by Ha Neul and Bon Hwa, returned to Korea. They repeated the mission the next day.

On their last mission, Ha Neul froze at the controls on the return to Korea. Fear gripped him. He sweated, and his heart beat rapidly. He felt a cramping feeling in his chest. His stomach hurt.

As his mind went blank, he gripped his side-stick and plunged the plane into a dive.

"Lee, what are you doing?" Bon Hwa yelled.

Ha Neul said nothing.

Bon Hwa pushed the priority button to lock out inputs from Ha Neul's side-stick, grabbed his own stick, and forced the plane to climb.

By sheer luck, the Chinese anti-aircraft guns missed them. Bon Hwa flew the plane back to Korea.

Ha Neul never flew an airplane again.

Dear Leader declared victory over China the next day. Ha Neul did not know how the entrapped Koreans could have defeated China, since none of them ever returned home. Everyone

gossiped that Dear leader had unleashed secret miracle rockets on China, but nobody knew what had actually happened.

Before the war, Dear Leader hired Chinese engineers to build Korea's first spaceship. He distrusted the Chinese but used them because they were cheaper than the Russians. When war broke out, he killed the engineers, leaving the National Aerospace Development Administration with nobody experienced in building a spacecraft for humans. Nonetheless, Dear Leader insisted that his people launch a cosmonaut into space for his fiftieth birthday.

Eight fighter pilots, each with Elite *songbun*, had survived the war. NADA conscripted them into cosmonaut training. Five of them died in explosions on the launch pad. The remaining three stole airplanes and defected to the South. Despite their Elite *songbun*, they didn't want to die for Dear Leader's birthday.

Cho Yoon Ah, Director of the Cosmonaut Office, had to find replacements. She looked for military transport pilots. Only Lee Ha Neul and Park Bon Hwa had survived the war.

Bon Hwa had inherited Wavering *songbun*. His great-grandfather, a Southern soldier, was captured during the Fatherland Liberation War. Southern prisoners had Hostile *songbun*, but he partially redeemed himself by spitting on a photo of Syngman Rhee, the hated first president of the South. For this act, the government raised his *songbun* to Wavering. Bon Hwa had a perfect flight record, but his Wavering *songbun* made him unsuitable to be a Hero Cosmonaut.

Ha Neul had better *songbun*. Both of Ha Neul's parents had Core *songbun*, two classes above Bon Hwa's. However, they were not born that high, a secret the family kept to itself.

"Ha Neul, do you want to fly the plane for a minute?" Bon Hwa asked. "You won't know if you can do it until you try."

"Okay," Ha Neul muttered.

"I've shifted control to your side-stick. Go ahead."

Ha Neul gripped his side-stick. The old memories came back. His heart pounded, and he breathed heavily. He felt a heavy weight pressed against his chest, and he sweated.

He pushed the plane into a steep dive.

Bon Hwa pressed the priority button, regained control of the plane, and pulled it up to a level flight.

"Ha Neul, remember what I taught you," Bon Hwa said. "Imagine the plane landing

safely. Imagine you are the pilot who lands the plane without trouble."

Ha Neul imagined himself at the controls of a plane.

"What is the weather like in your perfect flight?" Bon Hwa asked.

"It's good," Ha Neul muttered.

"Tell me more," said Bon Hwa.

"There's no rain and no wind resistance. The sun is behind me, not in my eyes. There's enough light for me to see ahead."

"Perfect conditions for a perfect landing. Think of the runway."

Ha Neul forced himself to see a runway in the distance.

"What is it like?"

"Long, straight, paved. Hah, better than the airstrip in China."

"Are there any vehicles or aircraft in the way? Is it clear for landing?"

"It's clear for landing."

"Approach the runway," Bon Hwa urged. "Gently point the nose to the runway. Lower the landing gear. Check your speed. Check your altitude..."

Ha Neul imagined landing the plane smoothly. He imagined the sun's warmth on his face as he walked unharmed to the airport terminal.

He breathed normally again and sighed in relief.

"Good, you are learning to visualize. I used the technique when infiltrating the American Zone," Bon Hwa said. "You can do it, but you've got to learn to do it without my coaching. I can't be with you all of the time."

Ha Neul nodded.

Bon Hwa said, "It won't be long until we reach Onsong. You'll see your parents in no time."

Ha Neul's mother wore a blue blouse made of Chinese polyester. The blouse symbolized her family's rise in wealth and *songbun*. Ordinary Koreans wore clothes made of vinylon, the shiny synthetic fibre made from limestone, anthracite, and polyvinyl alcohol. Vinylon was a stiff, coarse fabric that deformed and shrank easily.

Mother's family originally had Hostile *songbun* because they owned land before the Fatherland Liberation War. The government exiled them to a dirt-poor farm near China. The

location was a punishment intended to prevent them from escaping to the South. However, it became an unintended blessing during the Arduous March, when local authority collapsed. Her father earned a small fortune by smuggling Chinese goods to sell to the Elite. He bribed several state officials to change his *songbun* records from Hostile to Core, a difficult task when three state offices kept *songbun* records and auditors cross-checked them to find fraud. Mother continued the smuggling business, though she switched to Russian goods during the War of Chinese Aggression.

Mother asked Ha Neul, "Did you have any, uh, problems concentrating on your training?"

Ha Neul paused before answering, "No."

Mother grimaced. "You must overcome your fear. Our family has toiled to better itself. My father saved thousands of won to give us Core *songbun*. We finally got meat in our rations."

Ha Neul nodded and looked at the photo of his maternal grandfather wearing a green *hanbok* and smiling as he held up a tin of pork.

"You will become the first Korean to fly into space," Mother said.

"Uh, wasn't Yi So Yeon the first Korean in space?" Ha Neul said.

"Don't mention that Southern snake again!" Mother scolded. "She was a puppet who rode with the Americans and Russians. You will be the first *free* Korean to fly in space. Dear Leader will pose for a photo with you, and our *songbun* will be raised to Elite. We'll finally be allowed to live in Pyongyang. We'll get an apartment with its own washroom, and it might even have a flush toilet."

Mother's voice grew excited. "Our daily food ration will increase to three hundred grams per person! A whole one hundred grams of that will be meat! We'll get two grams of sugar on national holidays! Imagine that!"

The lights in their apartment flickered and blacked out. They relit a few seconds later.

"And in Pyongyang, we'll get electricity for eighteen hours per day," Mother continued. "So much depends on you succeeding in our country's first space mission! Ha Neul, you cannot fail!"

Ha Neul's father, who had been sitting with his newspaper, stood up. "Son, think of the rewards of being photographed with Dear Leader when you return."

Father pointed at a photograph of Dear Leader surrounded by vinylon factory workers.

Father stood three paces behind Dear Leader.

"It is a great day when Dear Leader poses for a photograph with you. Because my father was born in the South, I inherited Wavering *songbun*, but after Dear Leader posed for a photo with me and the other workers, my *songbun* increased to Core. Then I could finally marry your mother."

Father was an accountant at a vinylon factory. The factory managers enriched themselves by embezzling and using the funds to smuggle Russian electronics into Korea. Father enriched himself by taking bribes to cover the managers' thefts. Since he and the managers added a small portion of their smuggling profits into the factory's income, their factory seemed like the most productive vinylon factory in Korea. Thus Dear Leader came to congratulate the workers and their bosses, and everyone's *songbun* went up.

All of Ha Neul's relatives had done desperate things to improve their *songbun*. Now it was his turn.

Like all Korean families, they had Dear Leader's portrait hanging on the wall. Ha Neul felt Dear Leader's piercing eyes stare into his mind. Dear Leader could see his fear and disloyalty.

Ha Neul sweated and felt his stomach churn.

The lights went out for the evening.

ONE MONTH BEFORE LAUNCH DATE:

A grey-haired man with eyeglasses climbed out of Chollima 1's crew module and walked to Flight Director Jang.

"Comrade Communications Engineer Hong," Jang said, "can the Chollima play the song?"

Hong shrugged. "We may have a problem, Comrade Flight Director. The Chinese didn't complete the spaceship before they were, uh, removed. We've finished their work, but we still have trouble with the on-board broadcasting system. The radio uplink from the ground to the broadcasting system is erratic. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

Jang grunted. "If necessary, can the cosmonaut manually activate the player and broadcast the song to Earth?"

Hong smiled proudly. "*That* part of the system works. *I* built the on-board playback

mechanism."

"Well, at least we Koreans can build a tape recorder," Jang said. "We may have to depend on Cosmonaut Lee to broadcast the song. Let's go and see how the flight simulation is going."

The spacecraft simulator rocked gently back and forth. Inside, Ha Neul gazed at the images of Earth projected on the fake window.

Outside, Yoon Ah and Bon Hwa looked at the monitor showing Ha Neul's vital signs.

"You're breathing too quickly," Yoon Ah said over the radio. "Calm down."

"Temperature is okay, but heart rate and blood pressure are high," Bon Hwa said.

"Cosmonaut Lee, please relax," Yoon Ah urged. "Let Mission Control do all the work."

Ha Neul moaned over the radio.

They watched the simulator rise languidly. Bon Hwa shook his head.

"This simulator can't provide weightlessness. We need a reduced gravity aircraft," Bon Hwa said. "Well, at least it won't upset his stomach."

"I feel sick," Ha Neul said.

Jang and Hong arrived. The Flight Director looked at Ha Neul's vital signs and frowned.

"Is he in any condition to carry out orders from the ground in case of emergency?" Jang asked.

"Let's try," Yoon Ah said, handing a microphone to Jang. "What do you have in mind?"

Jang said into the microphone, "Cosmonaut Lee, this is Flight Director Jang. Do you read me?"

Ha Neul moaned.

Jang shook his head. "Comrade Cosmonaut, there has been a malfunction in the uplink to the broadcast system. I authorize you to take manual control of the ship. Press the play button of the audio player."

No sound came from the simulator.

"Did he press the button?" Jang asked.

Hong looked at the monitor. "No, he did not."

"Cosmonaut Lee, do you acknowledge my order?" Jang said.

Again, no sound came from the simulator.

"His heart rate and blood pressure are sky high," Bon Hwa reported.

"Get him out of there," Yoon Ah ordered.

The technicians opened the simulator's door and pulled Ha Neul from his seat. He looked relieved to get out.

"How could anyone get nervous riding a children's toy?" Yoon Ah complained.

The simulator was a ride from Rungna People's Pleasure Park. It did not simulate the G-force, weightlessness, or movements of actual space flight. But it was the best simulator NADA could get. Dear Leader had killed the Chinese before they could build a simulator.

"The simulated images of Earth were very frightening," Ha Neul said.

"I know training is difficult, but on the day of the mission, you have to stay calm," Bon Hwa said. "Think of your family."

Ha Neul looked down at the floor. He would panic in space and bring shame and Hostile *songbun* to his family.

"Cosmonaut Lee, you could not even press a button, the simplest task possible!" Jang scolded. "Do not embarrass Dear Leader! The consequences of failure are unspeakable. Do you acknowledge?"

"Yes, Comrade Flight Director," Ha Neul stammered.

After dinner, Ha Neul and Bon Hwa watched videos of Russian, American, and Chinese space flights in the cosmonaut lounge. Dear Leader banned ordinary Koreans from watching foreign space flights; Koreans did not need to know that foreigners had technology more advanced than theirs. However, Yoon Ah used her Elite *songbun* to get the videos from the State Commission for Science and Technology.

"Look how easily these foreigners fly in space," Bon Hwa said. A Russian cosmonaut waved at his TV audience as his spaceship blasted off. "Imagine yourself like him."

Ha Neul closed his eyes. He saw himself riding the rocket, smiling at the camera, calmly reporting on his ship's systems to Mission Control.

"Can you see yourself flying into space like him?" Bon Hwa asked.

Ha Neul nodded silently.

"Good," said Bon Hwa. "You must learn to visualize without me. I will not be with you in the spaceship."

"But you will talk to me from Mission Control, won't you?"

Bon Hwa shook his head. "No, I won't be there either. There will be ten foreign

journalists in the Media Office. Regulations require a military officer of sergeant's rank or above to monitor them. All such officers except me will be either guarding the launch centre or marching in Dear Leader's parade. I will be at the Media Office."

"Oh," said Ha Neul.

"I have to go home now, while the trams still get electricity. Continue practicing visualization without me."

Bon Hwa went home, leaving Ha Neul alone to watch the videos. A half hour later, the blackout began, shutting off the lights and the video player.

His concentration crumbled. The lounge was like a tomb, all dark and silent. He thought only of plane crashes and dead pilots.

Ha Neul remembered Bon Hwa had saved his life by taking control of the plane as they returned from China. Since then, he could not calm down without Bon Hwa urging him.

Without Bon Hwa, he would fail in his mission and disgrace Dear Leader in front of the entire world. He would be dead without Bon Hwa.

LAUNCH DATE:

January 8, *Juche* 122: the entire nation celebrated Dear Leader's fiftieth birthday. In Pyongyang, fifty thousand people sang and paraded through Kim Il Sung Square. At Musudan-ri, a sole cosmonaut, Ha Neul, blasted into space on different mission to honour Dear Leader.

The amusement park ride was nothing like real space flight. Ha Neul thought the G-force and violent shaking would tear his body apart. He urinated in his spacesuit.

The Chollima 1 spacecraft separated from the Unha-10 rocket. As the booster fell into the East Sea, Chollima 1 went into a low-Earth orbit.

The weightlessness turned his stomach. Ha Neul forced himself not to vomit.

He looked out the window. Chollima 1 flew one hundred and seventy kilometers above the Earth, about the same altitude that Gagarin had flown, seventy-two years earlier. Ha Neul thought of the distance between him and the ground. A new jolt of fear ran through his body.

At Mission Control, Yoon Ah stared at the cosmonaut's vital signs on a monitor. "He's hyperventilating. We better calm him down before Dear Leader watches the flight. Where is Dear Leader now?"

Jang looked at the TV. "He's still at the parade."

They watched a computer graphic of the flight on the large screen. Chollima 1's orbit stabilized.

"Given the time and budget, we're extremely lucky," Jang said. "The flight is as good as any by another country."

Ha Neul moaned over the radio.

"But we can't have our cosmonaut whimpering like a dog when Dear Leader watches the flight," said Yoon Ah. "He needs to behave like a national hero."

During the second orbit, Flight Director Jang's cell phone beeped. He read the email and grabbed a microphone.

"Attention, all staff," he said. "Dear Leader will watch the flight thirty minutes from now."

The Mission Control crew murmured. Yoon Ah ran to Jang. "That's an hour earlier than we expected."

"Lunch with the Cabinet ended early," Jang explained. "He's running ahead of schedule."

"We better test the broadcasting system *now*," Yoon Ah said.

Jang went to Hong. "Let's run a test. Play the song."

Hong nodded and pressed a button.

Nothing happened.

"Hey, Hong, what's going on?" Jang asked.

Hong looked worried. "The uplink failed. The ship's broadcasting system isn't receiving our signal."

A drop of sweat flowed down Jang's forehead for the first time. "If we can't get the song playing, we'll all be punished." The Flight Director swayed.

Yoon Ah suggested, "Can we play the song from here, feed it into the Korean Central Television signal, and fake a broadcast from space?"

"The government has told the foreign countries to listen for the song," Jang said. "They will report that no broadcast from space occurred. Our own people won't know the difference, but Dear Leader receives foreign news. He'll know what the foreign countries think of our failure."

"Then we have to depend on Cosmonaut Lee," Yoon Ah said.

Ha Neul moaned over the radio.

Jang said, "This is Mission Control to Chollima 1. Chollima 1, do you read me?"

Ha Neul moaned again.

Jang and Yoon Ah watched the video feed from the spaceship. Ha Neul looked stricken with panic.

"He never got cured," said Yoon Ah.

"That didn't matter as long as Mission Control did everything for him," Jang said, "but now, he's on his own."

Jang said, "Mission Control to Chollima 1. Chollima 1, do you read me?"

"Aaack -- yes!" Ha Neul replied.

"Cosmonaut Lee, I need you to test the broadcasting system. Press the 'play' button. That is all you have to do."

They watched the video feed. Ha Neul did not press the play button. They could see the fear in his eyes.

"Are we going to crash?" Ha Neul asked.

Hong said, "Director Jang, tell Cosmonaut Lee that the on-board playback mechanism will work. It will not fail! I personally tested it twenty times. He can have confidence in it."

"I don't think it matters if he thinks your machine works or not," said Jang.

Yoon Ah looked at the monitor showing Korean Central Television. Dear Leader's limousine drove towards Ryongsong Residence.

"Can we send the KCTV signal to the spaceship?" she asked.

"Hong, get to it," Jang ordered.

On the Chollima's video monitor, the scene suddenly changed from Mission Control to the Ryongsong Residence. Ha Neul watched in disbelief as Dear Leader got out of his limousine and walked through the grounds of his palace.

Why are they showing me Dear Leader's birthday news? Ha Neul wondered.

Instead of the news announcer's narration, Yoon Ah's voice came with the news video. "Cosmonaut Lee, this is Director Cho. Look at the TV news. Dear Leader has gone home. He will watch the space flight soon. Do your duty! Do not embarrass Dear Leader!"

Ha Neul sweated and panted as he watched Dear Leader stroll through the gardens of Ryongsong Residence. Dear Leader's smile inspired both love and terror.

"All of us depend on you. Your family depends on you," Yoon Ah urged.

I can do it without Bon Hwa, Ha Neul silently told himself. I must do it without Bon Hwa. I need to prove to Bon Hwa that I can do it.

Ha Neul closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He saw himself as a heroic cosmonaut. He imagined pressing the button, hearing the song play, bringing the ship back to Earth, and shaking hands with Dear Leader.

He smelled the fragrant flowers that the Youth Corps would give him at welcoming ceremony. He tasted the salty pork that would come with his increased rations. He felt his mother's warm embrace as they moved into a luxury apartment.

Jang's cell phone beeped. He looked at the email and frowned.

"Damn, we've run out of time," he muttered.

Jang stood at attention and said, "Comrade Cosmonaut Lee, Dear Leader orders you to play his theme song on the designated frequency. Perform your duty to the Fatherland."

No sound came from the spaceship.

Then Ha Neul broke the silence. "Flight Director Jang, I acknowledge the order and will perform my duty. Glory to Dear Leader and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea!"

Yoon Ah gasped and cried with joy.

Ha Neul pressed the play button.

The song "Kim Jong Un, We Follow Only You" played.

Ha Neul sighed in relief. He heard people applauding in Mission Control.

All over the Earth, foreigners heard Dear Leader's song from space. The Korean Central News Agency announced, "Today, the Korean people, led by their Dear Leader on his birthday, began their conquest of space. The radio signal of Dear Leader's theme song will travel into the cosmos forever, symbolizing the eternal spirit of the Korean people and the *Juche* Idea."

Ha Neul orbited the Earth four times. KCNA bragged, "Under Dear Leader's guidance, Cosmonaut Lee completed one orbit more than did John Glenn, the Yankee aggressor pilot who

attacked Korea in the Fatherland Liberation War."

The crew module separated from the service module, descended back to Earth, deployed its parachutes, and landed on the Chaeryong Plain. According to KCNA, "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has a terrain of mostly hills, mountains, and valleys. Its plains are few and small. Landing a spaceship on a plain was a triumph of Dear Leader's technology and science."

Ha Neul smiled for the TV cameras as the ground crew helped him out of the spacecraft.

Two days later, Dear Leader visited Musudan-ri Rocket Launch Centre. Dear Leader promoted Ha Neul to First Lieutenant and pinned the Hero Cosmonaut badge to his Air Force uniform. Again, Ha Neul smiled for the cameras.

The most important event of Dear Leader's visit came next. All the Mission Control crew gathered on the auditorium stage for a group photo with Dear Leader. They wore their best clothes and red Dear Leader lapel pins.

Dear Leader stood to Ha Neul's left. To Ha Neul's right stood Bon Hwa and Hong. Ha Neul had insisted that they stand with him in the front row. Jang relented and let the two low *songbun* men stand beside the Hero Cosmonaut.

After the photographer snapped the photo, everyone cheered. They jumped up and down and waved their arms above their heads, as if they were at Dear Leader's birthday parade.

Dear Leader smiled and waved at them, overjoyed by their love for him. But they were also cheering for themselves. Their *songbun* had just increased.

Bon Hwa grinned. "Remember me if you get to hire staff. I want to work for a national hero. The guy who won the Olympic Gold Medal for archery is on the Olympic Committee now. His personal secretary gets two hundred grams of pork per day. Two hundred grams!"

"I'll get you a job, Flight Sergeant," Ha Neul said. "I'll call you when I settle into Pyongyang."

Ha Neul left to catch the train to Onsong. Although he had flown in space, he preferred to travel by train.

Ha Neul and his parents moved from Onsong to Pyongyang. Their apartment had its own

bathroom *and* a flush toilet. Clean water flowed from the kitchen faucet. The elevators worked. Electricity ran until twenty-three hundred hours, when the day's TV broadcast ended. They each received three hundred grams of food per day. Pyongyang was paradise.

Mother hummed the children's song, "We Have Nothing to Envy in the World". She had finally regained the status that her ancestors lost. The family was Elite again.

Just like in Onsong, Dear Leader's portrait hung in the living room. But now, they also hung photos of Dear Leader in their bedrooms, in the kitchen, in the small hallway, and on the closet doors. Dear Leader looked at them everywhere.

They owed everything they had, from the food they ate to the clothes they wore, to Dear Leader. Putting his picture all over their apartment was the least they could do to thank him for his generosity.

One night, the TV announcer ended the day's broadcast by saying, "Think about serving Dear Leader in all your achievements. Good night and sleep well."

But when Ha Neul fell asleep, he did not think of Dear Leader. He dreamed about himself, Hero Cosmonaut of Korea.