

The Path Through The Grasslands [Chp. 7]

A few days after the excursion with his father, Jin rode out to the railway workers' residence for supper. Young Song wanted to read his new story. "Be sure you're not followed," he said mysteriously, "it contains state secrets." Jin was already downing a celebratory glass of Qingdao when Young Xi, Han's wife's daughter, opened to a soft knock at the door. Young Song stood in the doorway, his cheeks flushed with cold, wearing an olive Army tunic under his open Army coat and holding a black plastic briefcase.

"Welcome to our wretched hovel, honored Commissar," Young Xi laughed. She was nearly a head taller than he but only half as broad across the shoulders.

Young Song stepped into the apartment and glared. His whiskers seemed a few hairs thicker than when Jin had last seen him. "Good, good," he growled absently. Young Xi laughed again, revealing a row of white even teeth. Jin was impressed with Song's costume and manner. He would

have to invite him to join the Party. Soon. As Old Sui had asked.

They rinsed down a banquet of pork, green beans and rice with plenty of expensive beer, then stopped to rest. Han passed around a pack of Marlboros. At last Song extracted a hand-written document from his briefcase and took his stance beside the wardrobe. With legs apart, hair tossed back and broken nose in the air, he looked ready to take a great leap upward among the soiled plates and glasses on the dinner table.

"Wait," Old Han said. Signaling everyone to rise, he and his son moved the table and chairs to clear a stage. They positioned Song in the middle of the floor under the buzzing fluorescent lights. Song raised his hand.

Before he could utter the first word Young Xi cried "Wait!" and ran into the bedroom. Old Han refilled their glasses and pointed the mouth of the bottle at Young Song. Song shook his head. Beads of sweat were clinging to his brow. Young Xi reappeared with a leather belt. With a low giggle she wrapped it around Song's waist, cinching in the loose Army tunic.

"Good," Old Xi said, "that's a true old-style soldier."

"We don't have a real Army belt," Young Xi said.

"No problem," Song said, sweeping back his hair and wiping his forehead. "OK, let's go." He took a breath.

"The Path Through The Grasslands. Above the green treeless steppes of Inner Mongolia, clumps of cloud browse on the spring wind like blue sheep. The wind blows chill, and where Heaven dips low a million lights flash on bending blades. Sweeps of light form and disappear amid the cloud-shadows as if marking the steps of a drunken monk. The green vastness of the grasslands, rolling past the limits of the world to Ulan Bator, Lake Baikal and Siberia, seems to lift and heave like the Eastern Ocean, but no Soviet trawlers plow the swells, no People's Navy patrols the shores and no barges haul the coal gouged from the bowels of Dongsheng County. There are no grazing herds, save for the azure flocks overhead, nor tents of nomad warriors competing in feats of horsemanship while their leaders treat with envoys of the decadent Han. Here there is only a ribbon of road losing itself in the mottled prairie like a strip of discarded magnetic tape." Song looked up.

"Interesting," Old Han said.

"Very good," Old Xi said. "Go on." She went in the other room and fetched her sewing.

"After more than an hour of hypnotic travel, during which the small black Volga at times seems becalmed in a green sea, the road ends abruptly at a high gate in a barbed-wire fence. Two soldiers stare at the Volga as if they have never seen a car. Their beltless, wide-skirted tunics, red-banded hats and black dacron slippers are the

same as those of the millions of other soldiers of the Liberation Army (how many millions is a state secret), but slung from their shoulders, instead of Type 53 rifles, which were Chinese copies of the ancient Moisin-Nagant commissioned by the czars, and instead of standard-issue Type 56 automatic rifles or Type 68 or Type 73 automatic rifles, which were merely advanced versions of the Type 56, hang newly issued, extremely lightweight submachine guns, specially manufactured for elite corps. Yet as if these soldiers still inhabited the era of the Cultural Revolution, they wear no badge of rank—only the absence of hip pockets on their tunics betrays their inferior status—nor do any pins, patches, crests or other insignia reveal to which service they belong, in which campaigns they have served or for which military, moral or political virtues they have earned official recognition.”

Jin snorted. Some secrets.

“The fence runs in both directions beyond the curvature of the earth. The compound it encloses is immense. The soldiers open the gate on presentation of appropriate passes, to which they add another vermilion stamp. On the other side of the gate the ribbon of hardtop gives way to a gravel track that arcs through glistening meadows and disappears behind a gentle rise.

“Our distinguished inspector (we cannot reveal her name) speeds along the trail in the black Volga, the gravel

resounding like machine-gun fire in the wheel wells. After an hour she arrives at a second gate, and after another half-hour, a third. Both are guarded and both require scrutiny of her papers. Curiously, each set of guards seems redder-cheeked, bushier-browed and taller than the last, as well as more heavily armed. Those at the second gate wear sidearms at each hip (vintage Type 54 and Type 59 pistols, copied from old Makarov and Tokarev models) and Type 56 carbines slung from their shoulders (distinguishable from the Soviet SKS by their folding spike bayonets); those at the third wear Type 68 rifles across their backs (recognizable by their gas regulators) and hold Type 56 rifles at their hips (the folding bayonet and stock being minor improvements on the eternally glorious Avtomat Kalashnikova obrazets 1947). In addition the new submachine guns hang across their chests, as though the guards were ready to aerate the little Volga and its very important passenger at the first whiff of offense.

"After another twenty li the car approaches a fourth gate, but this one is a full seven meters high and flanked by towers mounted on steel trestles. The barbed-wire fence, also seven meters high and topped by glinting razor wire, leads the eye into the distance in both directions, but now the distance is measured by towers at two-li intervals. Maybe twenty li away, the towers turn a corner

and march along the horizon, indicating a knowable limit to the operation's domain.

"A guard at the fourth gate takes the inspector's papers from the driver and climbs the left-hand tower. Up in the tower the inspector can see an officer in hat and dark glasses, a telephone receiver pressed to his ear. Twenty minutes later, an open Jipu command car comes into view, raising a plume of dust as it rises and falls with the swelling meadows. When the Jipu lunges to a halt on the other side of the gate, a remarkably attractive, remarkably tall young officer, also wearing dark glasses and dressed in a well-pressed (though unmarked) tunic complete with hip pockets, hops out and slips through the gate. Offering the inspector a blinding smile, he shakes her hand through the open window of the Volga.

"He looks at her papers and asks about her trip, tallying the inked stamps of the interested bureaus and commissions as well as those of the preceding stations of the compound. Handing back the papers with a salute, which the inspector finds remarkably engaging, he bounds back into the command car and waves to the guards. They slide open the gate and the Volga rolls into the next ring.

"The track is powdery, almost smooth. It runs level, climbs, then dips again. The inspector and her driver roll up the windows to shut out the wake of dust that hides the surrounding territory from view. After about twenty li

they lurch to a halt beside the empty command car. As the dust thins, the inspector can see a low brick building, probably an office, behind which lie two more brick buildings, possibly a barracks and a mess hall. Two hundred meters farther on stand two enormous sheds like airplane hangars, one with doors open and appearing to house a motor pool, the other closed and possibly abandoned. The inspector recalls that the earliest East Wind rockets (copied from Soviet originals by the old Second and Third Ministries of Machine Building) may have been tested here in the fifties and sixties.

"There is no one in sight. The inspector checks her watch and finds it has stopped. Maybe the soldiers are sleeping. At the far end of the yard, an abandoned backboard with its netless hoop clings to the white hem of sky. Maybe the soldiers have been sent home. A remnant of dust hangs in the air like a ghost."

"Who is she?" Old Xi asked, her eyes on her sewing.

"The inspector? She's a sort of finance officer," Song said. "It's OK, Old Jin," he added. "I didn't borrow your sister. The inspector is not in the 27th Army."

Jin said nothing. Song continued. "Her escort bounds out of the building and opening the door of the Volga, welcomes the inspector to 'Operation Spring And Fall.' Taking her arm he leads her to a hall like the first-class waiting room of a train station. Massive rectangular

armchairs upholstered in soiled beige fabric and crowned with white tidies (incongruously embroidered with 'Double Happiness') stand against the walls in stolid pairs. Her escort pours a cup of hot tea-water and offers a small plate of cookies.

"The inspector sips her tea-water. The concrete floor smells freshly mopped. Apart from the lace tidies the only decorations are a stain in the shape of jellyfish descending from the ceiling and a row of portrait-sized rectangles whiter than the surrounding dingy whitewash. What has happened to Marx & Sons? After another hour the officer returns and asks the inspector to surrender any cameras, tape recorders, paper or writing implements she may have brought. 'I am here to inspect this operation and report to the highest organ of the state,' she says. But she hands over a fountain pen and the copybook she has drawn from her handbag. The officer leaves again.

"Refreshed from her journey, the inspector reviews her mission. This is not easy. After two plane flights and the drive, she has lost track of the six directions and is not even sure she is still in China. Her shoes are dusty, her floral-pattern suit feels less than fresh and her underwear needs to be adjusted. Her unwashed finger carries a last cookie crumb to her tongue.

"At last a different officer arrives, dark-browed, firm-chinned and almost unnaturally broad-shouldered. He

is still more attractive than the officer in the command car, as well as somewhat older. His bearing is princely, his ears long, his lips glow like vermilion and his eyes are the eyes of a scarlet phoenix. The inspector braces herself against his approach and mechanically presents her hand. His is fleshy and warm, yet muscular, dry, firm. He welcomes her to 'our op.' He leads her back to the yard, where her former escort is leaning against the command car, hands in his pockets, chatting nonchalantly with her driver. He now appears quite ordinary, not especially good-looking, even rather crude and immature. The inspector is embarrassed for him and when he sees her he sidles away from the Jipu. The older officer hands her into the passenger seat. They tear exuberantly past the basketball hoop and twin hangars and race a dozen li to the top of a rise, where across a shallow valley, nearly lost in the whitish haze, the inspector sees yet another fence punctuated with towers.

"Is it twenty li away? Fifteen? Shouting over the din of the motor, she asks the officer where he comes from. He smiles and shakes his head. A military secret. She asks whether the steppe spirit comes naturally to him or only through long cultivation. He laughs regally and his phoenix eyes flash. They hurtle down the contour of the valley, leaving a ridge of dust in the air that curves like the skeleton of a dragon.

"The next gate lies around the corner in the direction of the now sinking sun. The inspector tries to guess the perimeter of the fifth barrier. They head more or less south for several kilometers, frequently losing sight of the fence as they drop into swampy pans and shadowy tunnels of dry reeds. They turn west and after a time finally come in sight of the gate, but the inspector is surprised at how much time passes before they reach it. Her calculations were off, and the officer smiles knowingly when he sees her looking at her watch. It has stopped.

"When the command car halts at last, she sees that the gate is twenty meters high and is backed by a second gate of equal height. The coils of razor wire atop the twin fences glow like gold in the low sun. Unlit searchlights gleam like silver drums atop the towers, which are also equipped with mounted Type 54 heavy machine guns, modeled on the Soviet DShK M1938/46.

"The inspector prepares for another initiation. An officer slowly descends the metal stairs of the near tower, his steps resounding like cymbals. His long legs are encased to the knee in shiny leather boots—he looks like a giant crane—and as he approaches the car, the inspector notes his astonishingly long arms, white-jade skin, heroic, caterpillar brows and ruby lips. Her heart beats against her ribs like a captured sparrow. It is impossible to say how old he is. She watches him grip the hand of his

colleague, smiling and saying something she does not understand. In his other hand he holds a Type 59 pistol, which he waves towards the tower. The officer behind the wheel takes the inspector's papers out of his tunic. The long-legged officer looks at them absent-mindedly, uttering soft snatches of strange jargon, which the inspector takes to be Mongolian, Manchu or Korean. It is definitely not Russian or Japanese. She wonders whether this stop will include a restroom or a meal.

"Suddenly the long-legged officer thrusts her papers into his tunic and motions towards the gate with his pistol. The inspector moves to obey, but stumbles as she steps down from the vehicle. The officer seizes her arm. She looks up at his swallow's cheeks, his dragon's eyes and his smile as splendid as Wang Lu Falls, as splendid as the Silver River had tumbled through a rent in Heaven's floor. She feels his grip on her arm as a sickening heat burns in the pit of her belly and a slow shiver spreads like cold molasses down her thighs."

"She must be very tired," Old Xi said, "after her trip."

Jin glanced at the kids. They were transfixed.

"Right," Song said. "Extremely tired. Still holding her arm the officer walks her to the gate. It opens with a squeak and a hum, which the inspector seems to hear with her internal organs. She looks down a road that fades into

golden haze. She dares not turn but hears the gate roll closed behind her and hears the other officer start the command car. Her feet feel far away as she walks, as if they belonged to another, and her arm is an insulated cable connecting her to the officer. The gentle fingers of his enormous hand transmit his vital energy to her shoulder, her heart and each of the Seven Glands, quickening them as it flows and collecting somewhere below the House of Water. The time passes in tumultuous silence and the haze has dissolved the horizon on all sides, but still she walks into the two-headed shadow of herself paired with the heroic officer. The shadow lengthens before them and the inspector imagines that soon it will circle the whole planet.

"Suddenly the officer drops her arm. The separation is like an electric shock. The inspector feels as though her inner fire, roaring comfortably for hours, has died into ashes. The officer turns to face her and she sees out the corner of her eye that the gate is only a few li behind. 'I'm not cleared to go any farther,' the officer explains, gesturing at the towers, over which the sun now stands like a Heavenly Guardian. 'You go on alone. I'll meet you here at 2100 hours.'

"The inspector resumes her journey. All around her the steppe undulates in the haze, glimmering where the breeze kicks down the blades. She feels the grief an

asteroid must feel when it flings free of its orbit into space. Her gyroscope barely keeps her upright and she catches herself falling forward only to discover that the path has begun to climb. After a while she looks back. Her escort is nowhere in sight. The road behind her narrows to a point. The twin towers stand like painted peaks in a lake of gold.

"After a shorter interval an erratic vibration begins in the interior of her body, perhaps in the Lower Stove. It spreads into her belly and bowels, dilating the capillaries and turning the wheels of the Seven Glands. A tepid shudder runs through her, her breath comes quick and shallow and she begins to perspire. She decides to turn back. She'll tell them she fainted, lost her way, forgot her pen, forgot her malaria pills. She feels as though her viscera were dissolving."

"Kids, you should go do your homework," Old Xi said.

"I don't have any," Young Xi said.

"I did mine," Young Han said. "Can I watch TV?"

"Yes," Old Xi said, "just keep it down."

"But a Communist fears neither difficulty nor death," Song continued. "She puts one foot in front of the other until a few minutes further on, a neon-pink glow begins to play along the rim of the rise. It is too sharply drawn to be the rim of a cloud. Breaking into a trot, she realizes that the glow lies due east, directly opposite the sunset.

How could that be? Has she come to a place where one sun rises as the other sets? Do twin suns portend a change of dynasty? Did Yi the Archer fail to put out the last of the nine rival suns?

"She ignores the saliva collecting in her mouth and the small convulsions in her limbs. She starts galloping up the trail, her dusty shoes beating like feeble mallets on the hollow ground. A wind comes over the rise, chilling the sweat that glues her hair to her temples. At the crest of the hill she stops, her lungs burning. She gasps. A vast crater opens at her feet. Its green sloping walls create a natural stadium. Stretched out before her on the floor of the stadium lies a colossal, radiant mass. Its upper reaches, on a level with her eyes, blaze fuchsia under the sun's last rays, while its shaded sides glow lilac-blue. The inspector gazes, fascinated. She picks out gigantic arms, titanic buttocks, elephantine feet bobbing in the breeze. A balloon in human form. A thin mane of hair clings to the tip."

Jin smiled and looked at his fellow celebrants. He had understood. Young Song was brilliant. A balloon in the shape of the Chairman.

"The inspector throws her hand in the air for joy. She feels like weeping, like laughing, like eating a ten-course feast, like writing an essay or engaging in sexual intercourse. Her throat tightens—"

"Just a minute, Young Song," Old Xi said. "What kind of yellow garbage are you reading? Young Lin, you should go to bed."

"My ma, I already know these words," Young Xi said. Jin smiled at her reddening cheeks and black, defiant eyes. Her name was Lin? Xi Lin?

"Young Song," he said with a grin for Young Xi, "our Chinese language abounds in other expressions you could use."

"OK, I'll change that," Song said. "Her throat tightens when she sees the wires staked to the ground that hold the balloon in place. She starts down the steep trail, walking and falling and sliding, her heart and soul shrinking in the chilly breeze. 'So, this is Operation Spring and Fall,' she says aloud. 'How ridiculous—a blimp in human form!' Tears trickle down her cheeks.

"When she reaches the floor of the crater, she walks underneath the balloon, stooping under the slope of its chest. She shudders, having feared tight places from the time she was trapped in a tunnel as a child, but she advances until her head strikes a shadowy, persimmon-colored nipple. She presses her hand to it and finds it unexpectedly firm and supple, as soft as silk and strangely warm. A vibration runs through it, maybe from the wind in the guy wires. She cannot clearly distinguish the vibration from the trembling in her fingers, but she seems

to hear a rushing sound coming from somewhere inside the balloon. The print left by her hand shines with a nacreous dampness. Suddenly afraid, she scrambles from underneath the chest and rests her hand on one of the guys. The western flank of the balloon is now lotus-root gray.

"A girdle of webbing, which reminds her of the nets used in Army training, encloses the balloon's middle. She shivers in the chill and grips the webbing, cautiously setting her foot on the bottom rung.

"`Ei! Don't move or I'll shoot!' barks a high-pitched voice from overhead.

"The inspector makes herself small. Her eyes dart left and right. The voice erupts again in a trailing whine foreign to North China.

"`Ei, Comrade, let go of the strap and step away from the vehicle. You hear? I said step away!'

"About fifteen meters up a tiny head is visible against the starless violet sky.

"`Comrade,' she cries, oddly relieved, 'it's OK, I have permission to look around, OK? We can chat a little. Have an informal discussion. Didn't someone tell you I was coming? I'm climbing up, OK?'

No response. She places her foot on the next rung of webbing.

"`Stay where you are. I'm telling you, I'll shoot. You think I don't have a gun? You should see the guns I've

got up here! Now tell me, what's your name, who sent you? You have your papers?'

"`You only need to know one thing: I report to the highest organ of the state. Shoot me and the leaders will be very unhappy. I'm coming up to inspect, OK?'

"A high-pitched laugh. 'How the dog barks! I know all about the highest levels. A pack of incorrigible factionalists, double-dealing revisionist renegades and conceited bureaucrat-capitalists. Well, that's OK, I won't shoot you yet. Now or later, what does it matter? As our Great Leader and Teacher used to say, "Men die every day." Come up. Maybe I remember something about an inspection.'

"The inspector climbs the ladder of webbing. When she reaches the balloon's forearm, sweat is breaking out around her eyes and her underwear is sawing into her skin. She perceives the tiny figure of the sentry perched on the balloon's expansive back. She hauls herself over the arm but dares not stand. She looks up towards the sentry. A powerful electric lamp, possibly the headlight of a truck, bursts on her eyes. She drops her head. In the oval of glare that surrounds her, the balloon glows like a peach.

"The high-pitched voice cries out, jovial and harsh: 'OK, comrade. Time for your security check. First, your papers.'

"`The guard unit has my papers,' the inspector says, her eyes still on the skin of the balloon.

““The guard unit has my papers,”” he mimicks. ‘What about me? I’m a guard unit too. Look, comrade, no papers, no visit. Do you expect to report on a classified research project with no papers? I should shoot you right now. As a spy of the social imperialists. Or the bourgeois liberals. But I won’t. We’ll skip the papers for now. Unbutton your jacket, take it off slowly and shake it.’

“‘But comrade, it’s cold. I’m overheated and there’s a breeze.’

“‘You could be carrying a gun, a knife, a bomb. Or degenerate literature. Look, no search, no visit. Will you give up your mission because of a little physical discomfort? What kind of Communist are you? I assume you’re a Party member. Take off the jacket.’

Old Xi stood up. “Ei, sorry, Young Song, but it’s time for my favorite program. Sorry, Old Jin, Old Han, you’ll have to finish this somewhere else.”

“What program is that?” Han asked. Jin glanced at Young Xi, who sat flushed and motionless, her arms folded across her chest.

“I don’t know yet,” Old Xi said.

“No problem,” Han said. He stood and yawned, stretching his arms over his head. “Where should we—”

Jin considered. Xingxing needed to sleep. People’s Park was closed and too cold. The station, maybe? Old Hun

might log them in, but their presence would be easy to explain.

Young Song shrugged. "We don't have a rec room at our dorm. The city workers' center?"

"I don't trust that caretaker," Han grinned. "People are very suspicious now. They enjoy the turmoil. It gives them an excuse to hate people."

They accepted Jin's suggestion and rode downtown unchecked by public security. The compound gate was unlocked. The evening programming at the TV and radio stations was still in progress and the presses were pounding at tomorrow's Daily. They kept their coats buttoned as they took their seats at the table in the cameramen's room.

"Well," Song said, blowing a stream of vapor at the ceiling, "the inspector has reached the center of Operation Spring And Fall. The secret weapon system turns out to be a blimp in human form. Just as she starts to climb on top of the blimp to look it over, a sentry stops her. He has ordered her to strip so he can search her."

Jin smiled broadly at Song and proffered a pack of Spring Cities. Glaring fiercely, Song took a cigarette. Han nodded and grinned, but Jin could not tell if he got the joke. All three lit up. With smoke still pouring from his nose and lips, Song set his cigarette on the ashtray

and bent over the manuscript, burying his hands in his pockets.

"She does as ordered, still kneeling on the springy skin of the balloon. The air pierces her blouse and underwear, and her sweat turns chill. She holds up her floral print jacket in the spotlight, shows him both sides and pulls the sleeves inside out.

"`Now the trousers.'

"`Comrade, I'm afraid I'll catch cold.'

"`No problem, I have lots of medicine, both Western and Chinese. If you feel cold, just remember the Long March and our soldiers buried in snow on the Tang Ling Mountains.'

"She slips off her shoes, holds them up and dances them in the spotlight. Coolness bathes her feet. She unbuttons her trousers and slides them over her hips. She finds her change purse in her pocket and sets it beside her shoes. The guard screams.

"`Ei! Halt! What's that little black thing?'

"`It's my change purse, comrade.'

"`Open it.'

"She holds the purse up to the spotlight and opens it on its hinge. Worn aluminum coins gleam like small moons and the edges of bills peek from the inner pocket.

"`What's in it?'

"`Just some people's money, comrade.'

“‘No foreign exchange?’

“‘Sorry.’

“‘Count it up.’

“‘Comrade, it’s cold.’

“‘Count the money.’

“She slides the coins into her palm. ‘Twenty-eight fen,’ she calls out, then unfolds the tiny jiao notes from the bulky ten yuan bills. ‘Fourteen jiao,’ she says, leafing through the paper, ‘and one hundred twenty yuan.’

“‘One hundred twenty yuan! So much! Is that your salary?’

“‘I can’t say, comrade.’

“‘Classified, right? OK, but at your age and grade, that must be two months’ pay. Put it back and toss me the purse,’ the guard snaps. ‘Aim for the light.’

“‘But why, comrade?’ the inspector asks, shivering. ‘It’s very cold.’

“‘Security tax,’ the guard snaps. ‘You might write on the paper. There might be invisible messages on it. You might try to bribe someone or change it on the black market. Or it might be counterfeit. Counterfeiting is a serious crime.’

“‘Will I get it back?’

“‘When you leave the operation,’ the guard promises, ‘you’ll get it all back and more.’ The inspector rises on her knees and tosses the purse toward the headlight. The

light swings away and she feels even colder. She hears the guard muttering to himself as he hunts for the purse along the balloon's hip. She pulls her jacket over her shoulders and huddles on her knees.

"`OK, found it,' she hears him say. The spotlight returns. 'What, are you praying? We'll have no superstition here. Take off that jacket.' The inspector sits back on her heels, dressed only in her underwear, socks and scallop-collared blouse.

"`The blouse, off with it!' She obeys. 'Now the socks!' Quickly done. 'Underwear, top!'

"`Comrade, you see I've brought nothing. Are you trying to kill me?'

"`Stop whining! Where's your Revolutionary spirit? Can't you feel the heat from skin of the vehicle?'

"She peels her underwear to her shoulders. The air pours over her skin like an icy river. She pulls her arms from the sleeves, shakes the limp garment in the spotlight and sets it aside. In a hurry she tears her underwear bottoms over her hips and down her legs. She wraps her arms around her knees. Shivering, she calls out, 'Comrade! May I put on my things?'

"`You think I'm an idiot?' the guard screams. 'I know about your little hiding places! Take it off!' She rises and reaches around her back to unfasten the old-fashioned brassiere. She hugs her shoulders. Where skin touches

skin, she lives. But the air sucks heat from her body like a vacuum pump.

"`The shorts! The shorts!' Now, Cicada Affixed!' the guard calls. `On your stomach! Arms forward, slide them under the straps, lock them in front of your face! Good. Don't move.'

"The inspector presses herself into the balloon, squeezing her thighs together and drawing in her arms. A perceptible warmth emanates from the interior. The skin bounces at the guard's approach and glows magenta under his lamp. The inspector flicks an ant from her wrist.

"`Good thing I keep a supply of these around,' he says, his weight swaying slightly, `protection from grease, sweat, body oils and now Ai Si disease. Don't move!'

"She feels the muzzle of a pistol at the base of her skull. The guard completes his search in about three minutes and rocks back on his heels. The inspector rises to her knees. A search like this, she thinks, should be performed by a woman. Still, security is security.

"The guard grips his searchlight between his knees while he peels the rubber glove from his hand. He is really no bigger than an old woman. As the inspector pulls on her underwear, she glimpses the barrel of a rifle over his shoulder, which she recognizes as the new 5.56 mm automatic, said to be accurate, lightweight and easy to

operate. His padded figure bulges with Army-issue pouches and bandoleers.

"`Did I pass?' the inspector asks.

"`Not really,' the guard laughs. 'The glove, you know. No transmission of essence. It doesn't help me cultivate immortality.'

"The inspector climbs to her feet, giddy with fatigue and the motion of the webbing under her feet.

"`Up there,' the guard says, shining his light at the side of a pink hill. They climb from the blimp's forearm to its hip. 'Keep your feet on the straps,' he says. The inspector advances in a crouch, scraping her shins when her shoes slip through the webbing. The sky is black and the stars have begun to mass on the heavenly battlefield.

"`How long have you been assigned to Spring And Fall?' the inspector asks.

"`Ah, since the beginning,' he says. 'More than ten years, maybe.'

"The inspector is surprised, but says nothing. She stops and leans on the slope of hip. Her arms and legs are shaking.

"`What is the range of the vehicle?' she asks. Her shadow outlines a red-bordered doorway in the pink wall. If she fell through—

"`The range, that's not a simple matter,' the guard says with a chuckle. 'It's complicated. Do you want to

fly high or low? By night or by day? Do you want to go north or south? With the jet stream or against it? What time of year do you want to travel? What armaments, what cargo do you plan to carry? Theoretically the vehicle could go on until the end of time and beyond. But things change. We don't know much about it. We don't know how the skin will respond to exposure to cosmic rays.'

"Unaided by the spotlight, the inspector crawls over the hip. She feels neither hot nor cold. Overhead the sky is plastered with stars like the ceiling of a temple about to collapse of its own weight. The balloon bounces under her feet as the guard climbs up beside her. He flashes the spotlight in her eyes.

"'We'll go sit down, OK? Drink some tea-water. I'll cook you some medicine.'

"When the breeze relents, the inspector becomes aware of a fulsome odor. She wrinkles her nose. The guard laughs.

"'Over there. Be careful what you say.' He plays the spotlight over the magenta buttocks. The light catches a metal structure, a ribbed funnel rising between the domes. The guard leads the way. The inspector winces at the odor. She has an impulse to seize the guard from behind and throw him down with a stranglehold on his collar, but he might simply bounce to his feet, pistol in hand. They have begun to descend when he shines the light on the funnel. It

looks like the nozzle of an East Wind 5—the fatherland's ultimate weapon.

"'It's great,' the inspector says. She hears a hollow, rushing sound in the funnel. Then the breeze dies down again and the putrescent, greasy odor strikes her full in the face. Tears spring to her eyes.

"'Down here,' the guard says, pointing the light down the crevice between the funnel and the balloon's upper thigh. He scampers down the crevice like a monkey, leaving the inspector alone with the stars.

"'What is that smell!' she cries. She wipes her cheeks on her sleeve.

"'As I said, be careful what you say,' the guard calls from below. 'Keep in mind the Party's great achievements!'

"As the inspector climbs downward, the odor becomes excruciating. It clings to her skin, to the nylon webbing and to the long wiry hairs that jab at her through the gaps in the webbing. At each rung, she stops and wipes her palms on her trousers. She feels hot. Throat and nostrils burning, sweat beading on her greasy skin, she climbs blindly until the coppery wall of the crevice begins to reflect a faint light. She steps down to the metal mesh floor of a rosy chamber lit by a small flame.

"The inspector blinks. The flame burns at the end of a tube suspended over a control panel. The walls must be the balloon's inner thighs. An aluminum railing bounds the

rear of the chamber, beyond which she can see nothing. The guard squats in the corner beside a tea kettle sitting on a burner. In the faint golden light the inspector sees that the guard is quite elderly, even antique, with pendulous ears and creased, spotted skin. He is no bigger than a child. The steppe climate and the fumes exuded by the balloon must have damaged his health, if not his brain. The inspector wipes her face on her sleeve.

"`It's hard to believe, I know, but you get used to it,' the guard says with a cheerful drawl. `Welcome to the cockpit. Have a seat. Your face is as red as a peeled plum.'

"The inspector squats on a low stool. Her face is burning, but she still wants to question the guard about the balloon's fuel capacity, structural cruising speed, flight time to maintenance ratio, and of course, its range and payload.

"`Where do you come from?' the guard asks as he unties a cloth sack.

"The inspector hesitates. `I was born in the Northeast,' she says.

"`Mm, I know many good people from the Northeast,' the guard says. `But now you live in Beijing. That's good.' He spoons some crushed bark into a bowl. The jet of steam from the kettle gathers force. The guard pours water into the bowl and stirs the mixture clockwise.

"`How much fuel can the vehicle carry?' the inspector asks.

"The guard appears not to hear. Maybe he's a little deaf.

"`I guess your father was in the Army,' the guard says, peering into the bowl. `I guess he served under Lin Biao.'

"The inspector says nothing. Her identity is classified information. She repeats her question."

"Young Song," Jin said with a grin, "are you sure you didn't borrow my sister? You know our father fought with Lin Biao. I was born in the Northeast, too. Not that I mind."

Song reddened. "Everyone served under Lin Biao," he said. "He was vice-chairman, minister of defense and the Chairman's designated successor."

"True," Jin said.

"`I heard you the first time,' the guard says irritably. `It depends what you mean by fuel. Maybe we'll talk about it later.'

"The inspector feels a tingle race over her body. She feels giddy.

"`What else do you want to know?' the guard asks. The inspector counts her questions on her fingers. Her boss is particularly interested in cost projections: for design, construction and testing of the prototype; for construction

of the fleet; for arming and maintaining the fleet; for training crews.

"The guard hands her the steaming bowl of medicine. The inspector sees a silver East Wind 1 on his collar, the symbol of the Second Artillery Corps. She takes the bowl on her lap and inhales the pungent vapor, less offensive than the rotten air of the cockpit.

"'I'm afraid you don't understand,' the guard says, leaning against the railing. 'Operation Spring And Fall is very cheap. There's no budget for it at all. All the parts are Chinese-made, with no foreign avionics. We use cannons and bombs from the air force, borrow Sea Eagle missiles from the navy and we have a special Army unit for security. Other parts and armaments were contributed by friends in the various machine-building ministries.' The guard pauses and grins playfully. 'The balloon itself, well, I guess you could say it was donated by a small rural factory in Hunan. Do you play bridge?'

"The inspector shakes her head.

"'A pity,' the guard says. 'Maybe we'll play something else.'

"The inspector sips the medicine, which tastes even bitterer than it smells. She tries to identify the flavors. After the unpleasantness of the search, she distrusts the guard's ministrations.

“‘I think I know your father,’ the guard says.
‘You’re in the National Defense Industries Office, right?
What do you think of the new director? A good man. He
understands the need to build up the civilian economy. To
save money in the Army while maintaining unity and
stability. He’ll appreciate Spring And Fall when you
explain it to him.’

“The inspector says nothing. She fears her rising
fever will disrupt with her mission. She grips the seat of
the stool with both hands.

“The guard stands over her. ‘You’re young,’ he says,
his wrinkled eyes and low spotted forehead hovering near.
His skin and clothing stink of the balloon. ‘I’m very old,
older than you can imagine. You’re from the Northeast.
I’m from the Southwest. You’re tall and graceful like a
willow, while I’m small and stout like a bear, not to say a
pig.’ He giggles. In addition to the stench, the
inspector detects stale tobacco and coffee on his breath.
‘I think that’s very interesting,’ he says.

“‘I’m not so young,’ the inspector says, yawning
sleepily. ‘I’m more than forty. I have three children.’

“‘No problem,’ the guard says. The inspector stares
into the tangled swamp of twigs, bark and seeds in black
liquid. ‘Opposites attract,’ he says. ‘You should not be
too stingy. Even saliva contains yin essence.’

"The inspector's consciousness shrinks to the point of a needle. She hears herself ask, 'What is the intended target of the vehicle?'"

"The guard chuckles. 'What does it matter?' he asks. 'East or west, what does it matter, as long as we have enough guns? Our Sea Eagle missiles can destroy any aircraft sent against us. They will also be useful against air defense and other surface targets. This is what I call "people's war in modern conditions."'"

"The inspector feels the guard straightening her legs. She is lying on the mesh floor. She must have fallen from her stool. The guard has spread his padded coat over her body like a quilt. A lumpy pouch supports her head. The guard is now wearing a soiled lab coat. The inspector closes her eyes.

"She dreams she is standing on the side of a mountain. Below her a young man climbs vigorously towards her among the boulders, his quilted coat open, his long hair lifting like a raven's wings at the sides of his high forehead. He halts beside her, lips pursed, a large mole on his chin. 'Big Brother,' she says. His black eyes answer, 'No. You must raise your level.'

"When she awakes, the sky is still dark, the gas flame burns at the end of its tube and the cockpit is still engulfed in odor. With a painful effort (her muscles ache as if she has been beaten) she sits up. The guard is

absorbed in a game of cards. He takes up a hand and fans it before his eyes. The other three hands lie face down under a pistol, a magazine and a commando knife. He throws down a card, muttering at his invisible opponents, then scrambles around to the next position.

“‘The sweetness of certain triumph,’ the inspector says huskily. Her mouth is dry but her temperature is down. The herbs must have helped. The guard appears not to hear.

“‘I have to meet my escort at the gate,’ she says. ‘I’m already late.’

“‘It doesn’t matter,’ the guard says without looking up. ‘He doesn’t really expect you.’

“The inspector hears a rushing sound, pitched low like water in a pipe.

“‘Will you drink something?’ the guard asks absently, his eyes on his cards.

“‘Aiya, I’d rather wash,’ the inspector says. ‘I want to scrub my skin, shampoo my hair and scour the inside of my nose and mouth.’

The guard chuckles, his eyes on his cards. ‘Don’t be disrespectful.’

“‘I’ll have to burn these clothes,’ she continues, ‘and find a new pair of lungs. Do you think I can get them at the Friendship Store?’

"`Just how sharp is that nose of yours?' the guard asks. 'Not too sharp, I think. Otherwise you would know that this odor is the sweetest of perfumes, an incense worthy of Heaven. The fragrant breath of the Buddha, the crystalline essence of the Yellow Emperor.' He laughs to himself.

"`What's in this blimp, anyway?' the inspector asks. 'In other countries airships are filled with hydrogen or helium, and hot air balloons are heated with natural gas. Why does Spring And Fall give off such a stench?'

"The guard shrugs, a smile on his sagging lips. 'Hydrogen is extremely dangerous. One tracer and the vehicle ignites. Helium is extremely expensive. As for natural gas, OK, we use it, but not just to generate heat.' He studies her for a moment with probing eye, then returns to his cards. 'China's wealth is in her people,' he adds enigmatically.

"The inspector grasps the railing and pulls herself to her feet. She turns to the control panel.

"`Maybe you'll explain how it works,' she says. 'That will help me make a good report.'

"`OK.' The guard glances at his cards and stows them in his breast pocket. Aiming his lamp upwards at the nozzle's housing, he points out the steel chains that run from the base of the housing down to the control panel. Three wheels are mounted on the face of the panel.

“‘It’s extremely simple,’ he says. ‘I designed it myself, and I’m just an old cadre from the Stone Age. Up top is the valve box. The three chains are controlled by the three wheels. The left and right wheels control the vehicle’s pitch and yaw. They move the nozzle up and down, left or right, and so on. It’s so simple even I can drive it. So there are no training costs at all. The middle wheel, well, can you guess what the middle wheel does?’

“‘I don’t know,’ the inspector says. ‘If you control direction with the left and right, you can also control elevation, so maybe you control speed with the middle. That means controlling the fuel supply, right? The middle wheel must regulate the fuel injector.’

“‘I see you haven’t understood a thing,’ the guard laughs. ‘Be careful. Only revisionists underestimate the people. But for someone who understands nothing, your guess is a good one. The fuel injector, OK, not bad. I’ll have to remember that. But I’ll tell you. It’s exactly the opposite. Can you guess? No? The middle wheel controls—the stopper. Is that clear? The stopper. Now that you’re awake you should drink some more medicine.’ He empties the bowl over the railing.

“While the guard turns up the gas stove, the inspector continues to study the control panel. Mounted above the wheels are several gauges, two of which are temperature gauges. One reads five degrees, the other forty-five.

"Oh! Your mother!" Han cried. He threw back his head and laughed in a high, sharp cackle, beating both hands on the table. His laughter rattled against the whitewashed walls. Jin smiled and nodded. Han's face darkened and still he cackled and panted, his eyes filled with tears. "I get it," he gasped, wiping his eyes, "I get it." He cackled again. Two technicians were standing in the doorway.

"Good, you're quicker than our inspector," Song said to Han. "But remember, she's just a finance officer."

"What is it?" the technicians asked.

"Old Han is enjoying a little joke," Jin said with a tight grin. A big joke. A blimp in the shape of the Chairman. Covering Heaven.

The technicians remained in the doorway. Young Song read on. "'Yes, the stopper was a problem,' the guard says. 'What material could endure the balloon's exhaust? The nozzle was no problem, we got it from your director's former ministry, but the stopper was a real puzzler.' He spoons crushed leaves into the bowl. The inspector studies the compass. It seems to indicate that the balloon is now pointing east or west, while she had thought its head lay to the south. The ball in the compass jiggles, no doubt on account of the vibration from the nozzle.

"'In ancient times they were made of jade,' the guard says. 'But only in Heaven could you find a jade thing big

enough for Spring And Fall. We thought of asking our African friends for some ivory. But ivory is only as big as an elephant's tusk and it quickly degrades in an active organic environment.' He pours boiling water over the medicine.

"The inspector peers at the altimeter. Why does it read two thousand meters? Are they so high above sea level? No, they're not. And why does the air speed indicator read eighty kilometers per hour? Is a big storm blowing over their heads? Impossible. She can see a wedge of stars in the gap between the balloon's thighs.

"So ivory was out. What was I to do? I spoke with your father's friends in the General Rear Services Department. I said, "I'm just an old cadre, I don't know too much. But I think ceramic can hold even molten steel. Let's make a ceramic stopper!" It's the only custom part in the Operation, and we paid for it from the Chairman's posthumous royalties from his books. Here, your medicine is ready.'

"The inspector sits on the metal mesh floor, leaning against the rail. 'He'll kill me yet,' she thinks. She sips the bitter fluid while the guard returns to his cards. Shivering, she looks down at the ground. A tiny light catches her eye. Aiya! She suddenly realizes that the balloon is high in the air. A wave of fear seizes her. Is this madman stealing the blimp? Is he planning to sell it

to the Vietnamese? To Ne Win, our comrade-in-arms in Burma, or to Kun Fa, the elusive Thai warlord? To Iraq or Iran? What payload are we carrying, anyway? Are we off to blackmail India, Japan, South Korea? To reunify the sacred fatherland? Or are we escaping to the Soviet Union, like that double-dealing renegade and traitor, Vice-Chairman Lin?

"The inspector tries to remain objective. She knows she is ill. She must survive to file her report. She tells herself that this is only a test run.

"'Where are we going?' she asks calmly. The guard does not look up from his cards.

"'Where are we going?'" he repeats in a distracted drawl. 'East or west, what does it matter, as long as we get to Heaven? The world is round.' He plays and scoots over to the next hand. 'You drive a big blimp the way you cook a small fish. It doesn't do to pay too much attention.' He plays, then picks up the next hand and smiles. 'Maybe we'll seek immortality in the eastern islands,' he says, 'like the First Emperor. Or maybe we'll bombard the headquarters.'" He pauses, counting to himself. 'Or maybe we'll go to Paris for breakfast. I could go for a a fresh croissant. Our "Journey To The West.'" He briskly lays down a card, then takes up the next hand. 'Wherever the wind blows, that's where we go.'"

Song looked up. His mouth was compressed in a frown, but his eyes shone with high spirits.

"That's it?" Han asked, "that's all? She doesn't figure out what it is? You're not going to tell us where they're headed?"

Song shook his head.

"Thanks, we're going now," one of the technicians said. "Good luck."

"Thanks for listening," Song said. "Let me know if you have any suggestions." He looked at Jin and Han.

"I liked it very much," Jin said. "Are you saying there's a sexual aspect to the personality cult? I've never heard it discussed in Party documents. Maybe that's your state secret. You could make a valuable contribution, though someone might say your ideas are decadent and Western. Like the so-called alienation theory." Jin started to light a cigarette, but his hands were shaking. "Besides," he added, "I know, speaking for myself, that the Chairman is always present. His shadow is always overhead, blocking the sun." His eyes filled with tears. "He was a man, a great man, true, but still a man. But he underwent a terrible inflation. Maybe that's why you wrote about a balloon." Jin smiled at Song and Han and wiped his eyes. "Good work," he said.

They went out to the courtyard. The gravel crunched underfoot. Old Han lay his hand on Jin's shoulder. It was

late. Public security officers would ask what they were doing in the street. As Jin pedaled home, his eyes blurred with tears, he felt as if he were floating.