

Comrade Jin

by

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Cast Away Illusions and Prepare for Struggle [Chp. 1]

Jin waited in a whitewashed office, tapping a scuffed shoe on the concrete floor. Who did these people think they were? Hadn't they heard of the Party's call for reform of cadre work style? He checked his watch, then looked again at the young man with bangs and a thin black tie who served as receptionist. The rude child. Slumped over a book, never turning the page and never offering Jin a cup of tea-water from the red thermos bottle that stood on the tea-table. Aping the youth of the capital. Would Xingxing grow up to be so antisocial? Maybe the fashion would change in another decade. The Five Stresses. Stress manners, morals, discipline. And so on.

The kid said the cadre was on the telephone. Jin strained his ears but could hear no murmur of conversation. Only an occasional engine racing in a distant part of the factory. And the somnolent clack-clack of a typewriter. After a time the boy stepped into the neighboring office, then reappeared, waving Jin impatiently inside. Jin popped up from his chair. Waiting For The Cadre. Our national pastime.

"Jin Wuming, Reporter, Baoding TV," the boy read from Jin's card. The cadre raised a puffy, mottled face like a dried-up orange. He was a small man, underfed as a child, maybe, or maybe a Southerner. He seemed drunk or dazed. A paperclip was embedded in his forehead. The little puffed-up bureaucrat. A pitcher of beer at lunch, followed by his Article 43. The telephone stood placidly at his elbow.

Jin took a seat and looked around. Certificates of merit covered the walls, embellished with red sunrises. The National Silver Medal, framed and mounted on green baize. A calendar that had not been changed in three months, showing a pale beauty in a cream-colored shift perched on the saddle of a motor scooter. Against a green park in midsummer. Not bad. Her tresses framed her chin and round black eyes, while her fingers circled a bottle cocked on her thigh. Heijiu Cola. What a coincidence. Jin smiled and turned to the cadre. He seemed to have

gathered his wits. Which were apparently held in place by the paperclip.

"Comrade Secretary," Jin began with a grin.

"Deputy," the cadre said. "Deputy secretary. Comrade Secretary isn't here." He bobbed his mottled head towards a closed door.

"OK, Comrade Deputy," Jin said. "Have you eaten yet? I've come to confirm our plans. Day after tomorrow at eight, right? Fifth day. We meet with some of the workers. Set up the equipment. Today I just want to walk around the shop floor and labs." He paused. "Maybe your helpful assistant could take me around. Or the factory manager. Old Liu. I've known him for years."

"Ah, sorry," the cadre said, returning Jin's grin. "It's not so simple."

Jin's jaw tensed. He glanced at the closed door, the calendar, the certificates, and began to fidget with a rubber band.

"Would tomorrow be better?" Jin asked. "Morning or afternoon?" The cadre said nothing. Jin looped the rubber band around finger and thumb and plucked at it quickly. "Look, I'm trying to cooperate," he said, "in the spirit of unite as one and look to the future. In the spirit of five fingers, one fist."

The cadre shifted in his chair. Beads of moisture formed on his temples. Watching him, Jin too felt wretched

and hot, though he was not yet wearing his winter underwear. It was only a week after National Day, two days before Double Ten. He glanced down at his finger, turbaned and empurpled by the rubber band.

The cadre squirmed. "It's complicated," he said.

Jin felt his pores open like a hundred flowers. Complicated, indeed. Smash bureaucratism! Smash the revisionist clique within the Party! A drop of sweat left a shining path down the cadre's orange cheek. A bulky pen, worked loose by his wriggling, prepared to take a great leap from his pocket. Just as the pen dropped, the rubber band on Jin's finger snapped, striking the wall behind the cadre's head. The cadre ducked and the paperclip fell from his forehead, evoking a small yelp as it grazed his nose.

"Draw tight the bowstring of class struggle!" Jin laughed. Then, leaning forward, as the cadre settled himself: "Look, comrade. It's very simple. In China, there is the Yellow River. North of the river, Hebei province lies. Hebei has a capital called Shijiazhuang, where the Hebei Province Grain And Oil Company brews a drink called Heijiu Cola. Heijiu's invigorating formula and musky flavor have made it the favorite of China's Olympic team. Ge Hong developed the recipe from herbs picked on the side of Qingxu Mountain, and the black-haired people prefer it to Coca Cola. It's isotonic, if you know what that means."

"You should go there," the cadre said, flushing darkly.

"Where?" Jin asked.

"Qingxu Mountain. To shoot your ad. You can show people stopping along the path to admire the North China Plain and swig Heijiu Cola."

"Very clever," Jin said, "but for now we prefer to shoot here. Three ministries have approved this project, including your own." He waved at the certificates.

"Sorry, there's no way."

"Why, is the project canceled?"

"Mm," the cadre said. "It's not clear."

"Did someone call you?"

"Not me."

"OK. Good. Well, I see you'd rather celebrate the founding of the Nationalist dictatorship than participate in developing the fatherland's productive forces. You don't mind if we say so on the evening news?"

The cadre shrugged. Jin studied his slit eyes, his nose cut short with a scalpel. The autumn moon over Emei Mountain. What would Sun Wukong do? Leap up on the desk, twittering madly. Drag him through the air to the factory floor. Dazzle him with the play of his golden cudgel.

Jin motioned with his head at the closed door. "I want to talk to the branch secretary," he said.

The cadre, frowning, rose from his chair and hovered on his knuckles over the desk. Beads of sweat clung to his forehead. His eyes showed no expression. Jin was not even certain he was breathing. "I told you he's not here," the cadre said.

Jin shook his head and turned with a grin to the wet-haired model on the calendar. "Look," he pointed gaily, "even the Goddess of Beauty drinks Heijiu Cola." The cadre stared. "It doesn't matter," Jin said. "But I think it was our secretaries who set the walk-through. They had an understanding. Between big fish. Our bosses. Not that you're a small fish," he added.

The boy with bangs brought in a tray and placed it on the tea-table, flashing Jin a glance of scorn as he withdrew.

"Please sit," the cadre said, his lips twitching, "please sit and drink a cup of tea."

Jin flapped his hands in protest. "Sorry," he said, "I should return the car. Madam Manager. As you know," he grinned, "nowadays, the hen crows the dawn."

"It doesn't matter," the cadre said with a grin, mopping his brow. He came from behind his desk and took Jin's arm. Yes, he was a head shorter, and his white quilted underwear covered the tops of his shoes like an early snow. "It really doesn't matter," he said again,

offering Jin a cigarette. When they parted he took Jin's hand in a damp, firm grip and pumped it again and again.

A few minutes later Jin and Zhao, Jin's driver, were racing in a silver Nissan down Build Socialism Road. On the radio a synthesizer zipped and zinged like a machine gun. Jin glared at the sycamores lining the road, their dry leaves hanging like stiff rags. Soon the Siberian winds would descend like an avenging horde on the North China Plain, thrashing the cities and villages and stripping the dead leaves from the trees.

"That bureaucrat-capitalist monkey," Jin muttered, "that little monkey with a hat." Usually, when Jin showed up as an advertiser, cadres and managers welcomed him as a comrade. O TV gods! Help us make more money! What was this little revisionist trying to hide? An independent kingdom? A bureaucrat-capitalist club? Something was rotting in Danmai. Jin looked out the window as they passed a woman on a bicycle. Her pouchy face was red with effort. She looked as though she had been on the road for days. A pilgrim from Xi'an. A Journey To The East.

"Hey, it's late!" Zhao shouted over the radio, now blasting a vacuous ditty from Taiwan. Last year's attack of spiritual diphtheria, for sale in every small shop in Baoding. "Let's stop by the market, OK?"

"OK." Jin checked his watch. Army issue, a gift from his father. He would still have time to play with Xingxing

before dark. Practice dribbling, passing, shooting. Xingxing could already get past him. It was amazing.

Zhao swept through a red light and double-parked on the corner beside a three-wheeler loaded with golden apples. Jin thought of the summer of 1967, when for one blissful morning, at the corner of Bounteous China Boulevard and Vanguard Road, the red traffic light meant Go. Following Zhao, he plunged into the stream of afternoon shoppers.

As Jin had been reporting for weeks, the season's crops were superb. Through eddying arms and bodies, he glimpsed blood-red tomatoes, flame-colored persimmons, and ears of corn tasseled with red silk. He saw garlic shoots as green as summer reeds, squash in shades of earth and dry leaves, spotless yellow bananas from the Philippines, fist-sized oranges from Guangdong, and locally grown yams with mauve skins. There were mounds of pork, shredded or hacked into chunks, and chipped enamel pans of porcine entrails. And there was cabbage. Cabbage stacked like pig iron, cabbage ranged like artillery shells, cabbage laid course upon course in pale vegetable walls. It hovered in fortified temples behind peasants rapidly handing it over tables, and it loomed in funerary towers that pushed against the metal roof overhead. In the spreading gloom, the cabbage took on a milky luminosity. It would outlive winter in closets, under beds, and in shallow holes dug in

the frozen ground. As Comrade Deng has said, Our future is bright. The responsibility system had aroused the peasants' boundless enthusiasm, and for now they could set their own prices.

Jin bought some garlic shoots and a chicken. Tonight's dinner. Young Zhu would approve. As he inspected the plucked bird, a swollen-cheeked woman in a plaid quilted coat stood by holding the handlebars of her bicycle. She nodded at the whiteness of the skin and the pliant firmness of the flesh, smirking at Jin as if she recognized him. Jin did not recognize her, though he might have seen a picture of her. The station's public personalities, especially Comrade Yin, received a stream of letters from women reporting injustices they had suffered and their efforts to improve their lives. Usually they sent photographs. If no one answered, they would write again with clumsy sarcasm, blaming Yin and the others for the selfishness that menaced New China.

Back in the street, Jin found a peasant and his solemn, sun-burnt daughter or granddaughter lining the trunk of the Nissan with cabbage. The girl's hair smelled of stale sweat. When the lid of the trunk would no longer close, Zhao told her to lay the remaining heads on the seat. "No," she protested. "It's too clean." Zhao laughed and said something to the girl's father or grandfather, a man with a face as black as an African's,

who answered in dialect. Zhao chuckled and climbed into the car.

"You bought a chicken? Mm, good," Zhao said. He switched on the radio and the headlights. "There's a young bride from the village," he began. Jin knew the story. Zhao knew he knew. "Her mother-in-law sends her to market for a chicken. The girl picks out a young cock and pays the money, and the peasant trusses it up. Halfway home she starts to worry, she's just a new bride, maybe she was too free with her mother-in-law's money. So she trots three li back to town. Sweating like a horse, she faces the peasant, yanks the chicken from her basket, and brandishes it in his face. The chicken squawks and flaps. The girl raises her chin and says to the peasant, 'Mister, mister, ah, you just sold me this chicken — are you sure it's fresh?'" Jin laughed, convulsively gripping the bird in his lap. Zhao wailed again, "'Are you sure it's fresh?'" Jin shook his head and squeezed the chicken again, tears springing to his eyes.

Jin and his family had finished their evening meal. Before Young Zhu called them in, he and Xingxing had kicked the ball across the dusty courtyard until it was too dark to see. Long passes through the chilly twilight. Xingxing was quick. He could be the Sun Wukong of sports. It was

time for him to do his homework, but he and Young Zhu and Old Ba were engrossed in a costume drama that was showing on Hebei TV. It was set in the Warring States period, so the men wore topknots and beards and colorful robes.

At a knock on the door, Jin opened to Liao and Hao, old friends who worked at the battery factory. Old Ba had said at dinner that their second son had been assigned an apartment. They had probably come upstairs to celebrate. Jin asked whether they had eaten and invited them to sit at the table, but they preferred the bed along the wall. It offered a better view of the braceleted warriors.

"A glorious victory!" Young Zhu said to Hao. "What clever generals you are!" Young Zhu sat upright in her chair, holding Jin's eye.

"Clever hare digs three burrows," Old Hao said, her cheeks flushing red. "We lobbied the neighbors, the factory cadres, even the branch secretary. Finally the mountain moved." She laughed happily.

Xingxing laughed too. The boy loved jokes, even when he could not understand them. At seven, his golden, peach-shaped face was just like his mother's.

"Now we just need doors and windows," Liao said, baring his gray teeth in a smile as he stroked the tops of his long thighs.

"Uncle Liao, you should hold a banquet for the whole floor," Young Zhu pursued. "We'll light firecrackers."

Liao bared his teeth again and continued rubbing. Hao's small feet bounced in the corner of Jin's eye. Scarcely taller than Xingxing, she was as round as a tennis ball. Both she and Liao were now supervisors. Jin offered Liao his packet of Spring City cigarettes, then lit one for himself when Liao declined.

"Nothing's settled," Liao said modestly. "Don't forget. Elephants die for their ivory."

Jin blew a tusk of smoke at the ceiling. "One of the station comrades may be able to find you a door," he said. "I'll ask."

"It's like a second wedding," Young Zhu said. "My ma, wouldn't you give a banquet if we found a new apartment?" Old Ba began clearing the table. Jin watched her with a twinge of pity. If they moved she would leave many memories behind. If they stayed she would always sleep on the narrow bed along the wall, next to Xingxing's cot. Jin pointed Xingxing to the bedroom.

"A Party member is the first to bear hardship and the last to enjoy a soft bed," he said to Old Liao. "The first to serve the people, and the last to eat chicken."

"Chairman says," Young Zhu laughed. "Anyway, you weren't exactly in the rear of our attack on that chicken."

"Ah, so tonight you ate chicken," Liao grinned.

"He's not joking," Young Zhu said. "He's utterly devoted to others with no thought of self when it comes to finding us a new apartment."

"A genuine Lei Feng," Old Hao chuckled.

"The question is," Liao asked, raising a dark finger, "how was it cooked?"

"You were thinking of a place in the information workers' building, right?" Hao said. Leaning against the cupboard, Jin saw her glance at Old Ba, who looked away and said nothing. Jin laughed uncomfortably.

"Maybe I'm a little conservative," he said to Liao, tapping his ashes to the floor. "I don't think we're badly off. You have your son's entire family. For example. But a new apartment means more to Zhu than immortality, the principles of peaceful coexistence, or the final realization of Communism. I'd like a new apartment, too. I just don't want Xingxing to grow up surrounded by so-called Party intellectuals."

"You mean you won't move to the information building?" Zhu asked, her eyes on Old Hao. "This is news, Reporter Jin, and it's not good." Old Hao laughed.

"I mean it's better for him to grow up among the masses," Jin said, his cigarette dangling from his lips. "Class love is deeper than the sea. Xingxing should share the workers' life style." When Old Ba finished wiping the

table, Jin knelt to snap the legs in place. He slid the table behind the wardrobe.

"Good, good," Liao said, nodding judiciously.

Young Zhu turned to him. "Uncle Liao, don't you think Young Xing should learn from the Party?"

Jin took up Ba's washrag and began wiping down the top of the cabinet. Ba set bowls and chopsticks in the pan and went down the hallway to the washroom.

Liao nodded solemnly. "The Communist Party is good," he said.

"No Communist Party, no New China," Hao added with a grin. "The Party is our mother and our father."

Young Zhu laughed sharply and turned to Jin. "See? The laboring masses agree with me. Besides, I'm the laboring masses too. Anyway, Xingxing doesn't have to go to a Party school. His grandfather can get him into an Army school."

"Same thing," Jin said without looking up. His hand stopped. He pictured his friends from elementary school running through a gray twilit field. Late fall. The cold air burned their lungs as they stumbled over furrows in pursuit of sparrows. His high school friends in olive tunics lounging in the principal's office. The floor covered with black and white husks.

"Don't you like the Army any more?" Young Zhu asked. "The Army that fed you and clothed you? You didn't mind

the Army when we named him." She turned to Old Liao. "Yuexing. 'Victory over Vietnam.' When we crushed the puppet aggressors."

"Right," Jin said bitterly. "The so-called defensive counterattack on Liang Shan. When the minister of defense confessed that our Army can't meet the demands of modern war."

"The people love the Army," Young Zhu said.

"And the Army cherishes the people," Old Liao said.

"Like lips and teeth," Old Hao said, white teeth gleaming.

"OK, fine, let your boyfriend put him in an Army school," Jin said. "Why don't you ask him for a new Army apartment while he's at it?" His face was hot. The "boyfriend" was an Army captain Young Zhu had met at a wedding. He was apparently a missile specialist who had just returned from Iraq or Iran. He held forth all night about what people ate, how they dressed, and how they trooped to the mosque to report to God each morning and night. Like here during the time of the Gang of Four. Young Zhu had chattered about him for a week.

"You're ridiculous," she said, her face like new brick.

"Aiya!" Jin said. "Maybe our uncle and aunt don't want to hear this discussion."

"They're part of the family. They don't mind."

Looking up Jin saw Xingxing standing in the doorway.

"My ba is a good Party member," Xingxing declared to Hao. "My ma says he eats chicken heart and soul."

Xingxing smiled expectantly.

Jin flushed and turned to Zhu. She met his eye with defiance, though she glowed almost purple red from her neck to her hairline. Jin turned away. Back in feudal times, warriors conspired around a fiery urn.

"How clever he is," Hao said. "What a quick tongue!"

"He is clever," Old Ba conceded. "He even studies foreign speech in school."

"He's his mama's good little cadre," Jin said. "Come here, you monkey." He picked Xingxing up, caressing his fine arms and mussing his hair. "Tell Uncle Liao how you will to serve the people when you grow up," Jin said. Aiya. He sometimes asked Xingxing questions just to hear his voice, as bright and clear as a brass handbell.

"I don't know," Xingxing said with a smile.

"Fine then, good," Liao said. He levered his long frame from the bed. "OK, it's late. The young scholar should sleep." With Xingxing in his arms, Jin followed Old Liao to the doorway and was followed by Hao. "Save your steps," Liao said.

"Uncle Liao, Aunt Hao, come back soon," Jin cried after them.

Hao's laugh reached him from the dark hallway.

"You're too good," she cried.

After tucking Xingxing into his cot, Jin lay on his back, staring up at the dark ceiling. Zhu was a shapeless shadow against the windowshade.

"Turtle's head," Jin muttered in disgust.

"Who, Uncle Liao?"

"Uncle Liao? Sorry, I was just thinking of that little cadre. Qi Mu. 'Deputy Party Secretary, Office of Information, Ministry of Chemical Industries Baoding Film Factory.'"

"Oh, the Heijiu ad. Did you shoot today?"

"No. A little Grade 20 cadre, who knows no more about Marxism than he does about nuclear physics, who probably can't borrow a knife to sharpen a pencil, was guarding his master's independent kingdom as if it were the Western Paradise. I'm thinking of investigating."

"I thought it was all set up."

"It was."

Zhu slid under the quilt and lay on her back. "Who sent you there?"

"Young Shi made the appointment. I'm sure Old Sui talked to them beforehand. Our great leader and teacher. Our Komissar."

"So who's the turtle's head?" Zhu said as she fluffed up the quilt. She rolled towards him, pinning his hand to

his hip. "I'll bet he knew the shoot was canceled when he sent you."

"That's ridiculous," Jin said, rolling away and pulling the quilt with him.

"Ridiculous? Was it ridiculous when he sent you to shoot that chicken shop? Was it ridiculous when he put your cannery story on the shelf, after six months of work? He's just chewing you up before he swallows."

"Ei, the hen crows the dawn," Jin said. "Please leave the conspiracies to us good Party members."

He rubbed his eyes. It was true that Old Sui shelved his report on the new equipment at the cannery. Seeking truth from fact. Interviews with retired workers. One had lost three fingers in a chopper. Another was badly burned when the latch burst on an ancient steam oven. The retired workers praised the new equipment, but Old Sui criticized the report. "Unnecessary preoccupation with past mistakes, at odds with the spirit of unite as one and look to the future." What was Zhu getting at?

"Young Zhu, I know you have a fishbone in your throat."

"Sorry, but I just don't like to see Old Sui chopping my husband to bits. Maybe you don't mind. But I mind. You should be friendlier to him. Did you give him anything for National Day? You should unite with the others at the station. Be both red and expert."

"You want me, a Party member, to bribe my own Party secretary. That's not exactly the policy for strengthening socialist civilization. Come on, Xuehong. I've only lost two stories all year. That's much better than the Chairman's seventy-thirty record."

"And now this ad. Maybe some official has a grandson who wants to be a reporter."

"That's ridiculous," Jin said. He looked at the dark ceiling. It was ridiculous. No mighty personage would covet his position at the station. Baoding TV was not Central TV, or Tianjin TV, or even Hebei TV. But the mere thought of the social ladder's higher rungs, lost in the rainbow-tinted heavens, where clouds of German, Swiss, and Japanese appliances floated amid glowing showers of jewelry and watches and foreign exchange currency ("It's OK if some people get rich first," says Comrade Deng), seemed to quiet Young Zhu's argumentative fervor.

"You should ask for a new apartment," she said, her voice muffled by the pillow. "Ask Old Zhao about the information building. Ask Old Sui. Show him you're not his enemy."

"Xuehong," Jin said, reaching for her shoulder.

"Xuehong."

"You should visit your father," she murmured. "I hear they're building some new houses for the Army. Not far

from South Gold Village. You should ask your father to help us."

"My father has nothing to do with new houses. He's retired and probably doesn't even know who's building them. I don't want to bother him. He's very busy with calligraphy. Besides, maybe the houses don't even belong to the 38th Army. In any event, we're not an Army family. And the Army schools are no good. We've talked about it enough, OK?"

"I think a logistics commander might know something about new houses," Xuehong said softly.

"No more than a missile captain," Jin said. "God willing."

Jin said nothing more and Young Zhu soon was breathing evenly. Jin gazed at the glow along the windowshade, his heart beating like a captured sparrow against the cage of his chest. Young Zhu seemed to see him as one of the Heavenly Kings, guarding the Western Paradise from intruders. As if his sole goal in life were to thwart her modest search for happiness.

He struck the bed with his fist. That turtle's head. Tomorrow he would start his investigation of the bureaucrat-capitalist club within the Party branch at the film factory. He would have to find a contact in the Ministry of Chemical Industries. On the other hand, if Young Zhu's fears proved correct — if Baoding TV's Party

Branch Secretary Sui had sent him to look for fish in a tree — he would march boldly forward, fearing neither hardship nor death, and that monkey with a hat, that bureaucrat-capitalist revisionist feudal quack would soon learn whether a one-time educated youth and son of the People's Liberation Army, a veteran of the Fourth Revolutionary Civil War and the Battle of the Western Suburbs, who had climbed the mountain and dropped down to the village, who had made Revolution with the workers, peasants, and soldiers and had tempered himself in the fires of class struggle — Old Sui would learn whether such a man still smelled of his mother's milk, or whether he was a prince and heir of the proletarian dictatorship, fiercer than a boar, more savage than a wolf, with a jackal's fangs, an elephant's trunk, a bear's back, and a tiger's loins, ready to wage ruthless, tit-for-tat struggle against capitalist tails and traitors to the fatherland.

Take your time, Old Jin. Now who's ridiculous? Old Sui is a mediocrity, nothing more. Petty, vindictive, cautious, slavishly attached to the rich and powerful. But no traitor. Closing his eyes, Jin inhaled slowly and deeply. Take socialist modernization as the key link. Slowly and deeply he exhaled. His chest seemed to expand. Soon it became a vault of stone through which his breath swirled like a cloud of dust, beneath which flowed a black and placid river. The river wound languidly under the

stone arches deep beneath the North China plain. On the bank of the wide river, dwarfed by the stone arches, stood a walled city. Jin saw a multitude of people churning in a wide street like a flooded river contained by cliffs. The crowd heaved and tossed against walls of buildings dyed red by the sun. As Jin tried to keep his feet, he felt himself slipping in an acrid detritus, and looking down he saw that the street was carpeted with rotting cabbage. Trucks were scattered like boats on the human waves, mired in people as if in mud, Army trucks mounted with loudspeakers and cameras. Looking up, Jin saw guerrillas lobbing grenades from balconies, while soldiers ducked into smoking alleys. He looked up again as a shadow darkened the buildings, extinguishing one by one the reflections of the sun in the upper windows. The Chairman was right, he heard himself say. Class struggle indeed persists. Throughout the entire socialist era.