

CASTLE OF BLACK IRON

Chapter 20: Ambitions of the Youth



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For Zhang Tie, the two-day holiday passed by quickly. As his dad had to work on Saturday, Zhang Tie would always spend the day making rice brew with his mom. Their rice brew store could sell five to six mugs of rice brew each week. Although it was a small income, it could still improve the family's standard of living to a degree.

Rice brew was a traditional food for Chinese clan and was easy to make. Its raw material was mainly rice. The processing method was also simple — First, wash the rice and then put the rice into a pot and boil until it is almost fully cooked. Remove the rice from the pot and dry them. Seal it tightly in clay pots with sugar, honey, and yeast solution to naturally ferment them. In a month, you could open the clay pots and eat it. Well-made rice brew remained fragrant, sweet, and soft and had the glutinous texture of rice. Being rich in nutrition, it tasted sweet and could fill people's stomach. Besides, it smelt like an intoxicating wine, which made people cool down, decrease the chance of heat stroke, and made the intestines and stomach hydrated. Zhang Tie and Zhang Yang grew up eating their mom's rice brew.

Although the process was simple, each step needed to be meticulously done. The reputation of the Zhang family's rice brew among the neighboring blocks and frequent customers has been gradually accumulating over the past dozen years.

Zhang Tie and his mom made seven jars of rice brew after a day's work on Saturday. They made the rice brew and moved them into the warehouse behind the courtyard. Then Zhang Tie rode a modified three-wheeler to purchase rice and 2kg of sugar. Whenever they finished making rice brew on the weekends, their rice bag would be almost empty; therefore, each weekend, Zhang Tie would purchase rice at the rice store and 2kg of sugar on his way back. Curiously, Zhang Tie found that the price of rice rose a bit that day from 4 silver and 45 copper coins per 25 kg of rice from last weekend to 4 silver and 58 coins per 25 kg of rice this weekend. It was almost an increase of 3% within one week.

Zhang Tie was startled. He was extremely sensitive to the changing prices of living necessities. Zhang Tie remembered that the price of rice in Blackhot City has remained unchanged since he was in middle school three years ago. How could it rise so sharply within a week?

"Alas, Zhang Tie, we have no choice either. It rose when we purchased it two days ago. We have to live!" The boss of the rice store started to complain to him, "70 percent of the rice in Blackhot City is brought from outside. Those farming villages and planting areas surrounding Blackhot City can never ensure that there's enough food to supply the city. We have no solution since the price of rice is determined by the big business groups. Besides rice, the price of wheat flour has also risen in the past couple of days. You can check it out in other stores, some of them even sell rice at a higher price..."

As Zhang Tie had been acquainted with the owner of the rice store for many years, he knew that the diligent and shrewd Chinese boss didn't tell a lie. Additionally, rice prices in Blackhot City were almost the same in each store with only one to three coppers difference at most for a bag of rice in different stores. If any store sold a bag of rice five copper coins higher than the other stores, it would have no guest.

Zhang Tie bought three bags of rice for the price of 4 silver and 58 copper coins each. He loaded the 75 kg of rice onto his small three-wheeler that was a modified secondhand bike with the addition of a bag and a wheel. Besides its ugly look, it could only carry limited loads. Three bags of rice plus the weight of Zhang Tie was already its limit. Before loading the rice bags, Zhang Tie carefully inspected the seams and thread ends on the bags to ensure that there were no traces of leakage or being sewn a second time. He then became reassured. Zhang Tie knew there were some bad rice store owners and grains businessmen that would always lessen the real weight of the grains through the usage of tricks like replacing good-quality grains with bad-quality grains or filling the bag with sand. He came to this conclusion through his years of experience in purchasing rice. As the old saying went, "Kids in poor families grew up faster!"

After purchasing rice, he bought 2kg of sugar at a grocery store that was close to the rice store. He then rode the three-wheeler back home. As expected, after the price of rice rose by 3%, the price of sugar also rose even more sharply. Last week, the price of raw sugar was 91 copper coins per kilogram. This week, it has risen to 1 silver coin per kilogram. It was the same in the surround stores, thus he bought 2kg of sugar and put them in the cloth bag of holding that hung on one handle of the vehicle. He then rode the ugly-looking, modified, second-hand three-wheeler and returned home unsteadily.

Returning home, he explained the situation of the rising prices of rice and sugar to his mom and gave the remaining coins back to her. Thinking for a while, the mom gave 10 copper coins to Zhang Tie as spare money. In response to this, Zhang Tie grinned, "Thank you, mom! You're much more generous today. You usually give 5 copper coins at most."

Mom heaved a deep sigh and frowned, "Now that the price of both rice and sugar have increased, we have to increase the price of our rice brew since our

profit was already thin. If we don't increase the price, we will not be able to continue our business any longer; however, if we do that, we may lose some of our frequent customers! Alas..."

Seeing his mom frowning, Zhang Tie was moved, "Mom, trust me. I will let you and dad live well in the future. I have already changed!"

"Mom knows our small Guoguo has already grown up, totally different now!" smiling, his mom stretched out her hand to touch Zhang Tie's head.

Getting another meaning of the two words "grown up", Zhang Tie became bashful again, "It's not what you're expecting mom. I mean, I ..."

"Well, well. Mom knows our Guoguo has already grown up. You're an obedient and good kid. Oh! Hurry up and send this rice soup to Grandma Teresa. You won't be able to arrive there today if you leave too late."

Zhang Tie was interrupted by his mom and then loaded the remaining three jars of rice soup onto the ugly pedal tricycle and hurried towards a direction. Being impulsive, he almost poured out the secret of the Castle of Black Iron; therefore, he blamed himself in his mind. If his parents knew of this secret, they would be worried about him. Besides, their family would have to assume unpredictable risks. Riding the tricycle, Zhang Tie made the decision to keep this a secret deep in his heart. He considered that if he was capable enough to keep this secret, he could directly bring benefits to the family, and they would never need to worry about him. He stuck to the idea that the fewer people that knew about this secret, the more beneficial it would be to his family.

As an emerging industrial city, Blackhot City had no deep historical background. At the beginning of its development, convenient urban traffic was one of its focal points. Hence, it had many broad roads, arterial roads, sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and road for vehicles. The road was even clearly

divided for the bicycle lane and the normal road for vehicles. Zhang Tie rode the modified, second-hand tricycle on the bicycle lane, ringing the bell. He admired the buses that drove on the road. It was always his dream to own a bus, so as to enjoy a ride around the city with his family members or a beauty like Miss Daina.

Steam engines have already been eliminated for almost a hundred years prior to the Catastrophe. It was said that human beings had already invented various advanced machinery equipment and technologies before the Catastrophe, some of which were like myths for Zhang Tie. For example, various aircraft flying in the sky, ships that could still be started without fuel after hundreds of years, vehicles that could carry human beings to the stars, equipment that could easily realize communication between two people more than one million kilometers apart, horrible weapons that could destroy a city, perhaps even a country, when it blew up, and so on. His teachers would always sigh when they mentioned them. As a listener, Zhang Tie was always dazzled by it. Human society before the Catastrophe was really unimaginable. However, after the Catastrophe, human beings lost everything magnificent. Being frustrated, they fetched steam engines from historical wastelands and revitalized them from the simplest condensing-type steam vacuum suction pump to the most sophisticated high-pressure steam turbine. They made humans gradually powerful in this age that was utterly different from any age before. As a result, human society developed quickly, much like the minibuses with small delicate two-level steam engines that moved forward and backward in a straight line as it sped through the city.

In Blackhot City, commoners used their feet or the urban public traffic system to get to their destination, while some blue collar workers might own a personal bicycle. For instance, Zhang Tie's family modified such a weird two-hand tricycle for the sake for delivery. However, rich men always owned a bus that was worth more than a thousand gold coins. For those people, a bus was

not just a tool used for travel, it was also a symbol of social status and power. So many years have passed, and yet the number of privately owned buses in Blackhot City was no more than a thousand. People who could sit inside these privately owned buses were either rich or nobles. At least in the middle school that Zhang Tie attended, he had not found a single student whose parents or teachers owned such a vehicle. Even Captain Kerlin, the most terrifying one-eyed man, would have to go to work for fifty consecutive years without eating or drinking in order to be able to afford a bus.

Almost everything that Zhang Tie had learned at school in regards to machinery and tools was related to various steam engines. As a man born with the desire to be free, the 15-year-old boy possessed two dreams: marrying Miss Daina and owning a beautiful private car. He had always dreamt of driving Miss Daina to a peaceful and beautiful place and making piston movements with her like a moving steam engine. Incidentally, he would also like to check the quake-resistance of the tires and the seats.

Immersing in his “wild ambition”, the youth rode the tricycle quickly in the city. Half an hour later, he arrived at Grandma Teresa’s orphanage before 6:00pm...