

IRON DYNASTY

Chapter 4: To Survive or to Perish

“Ideals are full, but reality is bony.”

Xiao Ming still remembered—back in school, this was his mentor’s favorite saying.

Now, he was confronted with the harsh reality of that phrase.

Looking at his situation objectively—his fief was dirt-poor, barely any better than primitive society. Most of the farmland belonged to the aristocratic clans, leaving the commoners as nothing more than exploited laborers.

Even with the Science Crystal, changing things here would be an uphill battle.

His inherited memories made one thing clear—Da Yu looked peaceful on the surface, but in reality, it was teeming with hidden unrest.

Time was not on his side.

Xiao Ming wasn't a warlord, but if he wanted to protect his land, stay out of Da Yu's political chaos, and avoid getting his head chopped off by his power-hungry brothers and uncles, he had to develop his fief.

It was a paradox—difficult to do, yet absolutely necessary.

“Clang... Clang... Clang...”

Leaning against a stone bridge in the prince's residence, deep in thought about his fief's future, Xiao Ming was suddenly startled by the urgent ringing of a bell from the direction of the city gate.

“Barbarians.” His heart tightened.

This bell was equivalent to a beacon alarm, a signal from the city's defenders warning of an enemy invasion.

And judging by how frantic the ringing was, it had to be the northern nomadic raiders.

In Da Yu, the tribes of the northern grasslands were collectively called the "Grassland Barbarians." They were similar to the historical Xiongnu, Turkic, and Mongol peoples—their role in history remained unchanged.

Every autumn, when horses were fat and strong, they would raid the Central Plains, pillaging and looting. For the past three years, these barbarians hadn't invaded his territory.

But this year, they had returned.

Recalling the devastation they wrought three years ago, Xiao Ming shivered—even the memories of their destruction were terrifying.

This was no game.

In the era of cold weapons, nomadic cavalry had an overwhelming advantage—fast, mobile, and deadly skilled with bow and horse.

And yet—his six prefectures combined didn't even have a hundred cavalrymen. He was forced to rely on defending the city.

A sense of fear crept over him.

"This isn't a simulation. If I die, I die for real. There is no respawning." But then he gritted his teeth. "I've already died once. Why should I be afraid of dying again?"

Clenching his fists, he roared "Qian Dafu! Prepare the horses!"

"Qian Dafu!"

A moment later, Qian Dafu came running, his round body panting heavily.

“Your Highness! The horses are ready! I’ve taken all the silver I could carry! The alarm came from the North Gate—if we leave through the South Gate now, we can still escape!”

Xiao Ming almost staggered in disbelief. So this old man had been preparing to flee?

“Idiot!” Xiao Ming cursed, kicking Qian Dafu’s rear—sending him stumbling forward. This was something the old Xiao Ming used to do when angry, and he instinctively followed suit.

Qian Dafu blinked in shock. This wasn’t like his master at all.

Before, even the mere rumor of a barbarian raid would make the prince scream about running back to Chang’an.

Three years ago, he had actually fled—only to be dragged back and whipped by Emperor Xiao Wenxuan himself.

The Emperor had warned him: “If you ever abandon your fief again, I will personally execute you!”

Qian Dafu suddenly understood—Xiao Ming wasn’t being brave; he was just afraid to go back to the capital and die.

Thinking quickly, Qian Dafu suggested, “Your Highness, we don’t have to go to Chang’an—but what if we hide in Prince Wei’s fief?”

Prince Wei was Xiao Wenxuan’s third brother—Xiao Ming’s uncle.

His fief was just south of Xiao Ming’s lands.

Back when the imperial fiefs were being assigned, Prince Wei had enthusiastically pushed Xiao Ming’s territory to be the first line of defense against the northern barbarians.

The man was ruthless—and definitely not reliable. Even a fool like Xiao Ming could tell his uncle would never shelter him.

“No. I’m going to the city walls.”

Qian Dafu’s round face paled in terror. He collapsed to the ground, grabbing Xiao Ming’s legs, and cried hysterically

“Your Highness, please reconsider! Blades and arrows know no mercy! If anything happens to you, how can I face Consort Zhen?”

Xiao Ming glared at him. “Qian Dafu, you were my mother’s bodyguard. Yet you’re this cowardly? How do you expect to help me achieve greatness? Is this how a prince’s steward should act? If we lose the fief, where will you and I even stand?!”

Qian Dafu froze.

In all his years serving Prince Qi, he had never heard him talk about achieving greatness.

The only things he ever talked about were, how beautiful women were, how amazing Chang'an was, how poor and wretched his fief was.

But today, his words felt... inspiring?

Xiao Ming shook him off and strode toward the main gate.

His heart pounded violently—this was thrilling to say, but now he actually had to follow through.

At the gate, Lu Luo stood waiting with a small bundle.

Beside her was another young woman in a purple dress—this was Ziyuan.

Compared to Lu Luo's delicate, southern charm, Ziyuan was pale-skinned, slender, with elegant features and a fierce glint in her eyes.

She had just returned from a shopping trip outside the estate—only to arrive just as the barbarian invasion began.

“Your Highness.”

Both Lu Luo and Ziyuan bowed. The steward had ordered them to flee with the prince to Prince Wei's fief.

Looking at the two beautiful maids, Xiao Ming sighed internally.

“What a waste. Who knows if I'll even come back from this?”

Without warning, he smacked both of them on the butt, then leapt onto his horse and galloped away toward the North Gate.

Lu Luo and Ziyuan's faces turned bright red with shame and fury. By the time they snapped out of it, Xiao Ming was already gone.

Qian Dafu finally caught up, just in time to see Xiao Ming riding off. Without hesitation, he leapt onto a horse and galloped after him.

Lu Luo, still flustered, grew pale. She thought they were abandoning them. But Ziyuan remained calm.

She looked at Qian Dafu and asked, "Steward Qian, are you leaving us behind?"

Qian Dafu snapped, "Leave you behind?! His Highness must be insane—he's actually heading to fight on the walls!"

"What?!"

Ziyuan covered her mouth in shock. Even she had never imagined this useless prince would fight.

Lu Luo, on the other hand, breathed a sigh of relief. Her eyes flickered.

“Could it be that I was right about him all along?”

Meanwhile, Qian Dafu had no time to think. Spurring his horse, he raced toward the North Gate.