

IRON DYNASTY

Chapter 3: Even the Landlord's House Has No Surplus Grain

"Your Highness, you've just recovered from a serious illness—you should be resting in bed."

An urgent set of footsteps approached. Xiao Ming looked up to see an elderly man with a round face and large ears, dressed in a blue round-collared robe, hurrying toward him. The man bowed deeply before speaking.

This was Qian Dafu, the steward of the prince's residence. In reality, he managed nearly all affairs within the estate.

Xiao Ming trusted Qian Dafu completely. Before he was sent to his fief, Qian Dafu had been Consort Zhen's most trusted guard. She had sent him to accompany Xiao Ming so he would have someone reliable by his side.

“It’s fine, it’s fine.” Xiao Ming waved a hand dismissively. “Prepare a carriage. I want to take a trip into Qingzhou City.”

“This...” Qian Dafu hesitated but knew that his master had always been stubborn and temperamental. Not daring to disobey, he called for servants to ready the carriage.

At the main gate of the estate, a somewhat worn-out carriage was already waiting. The carriage was small, little more than a wooden box on wheels.

It was embarrassingly shabby for a prince of his status, but Xiao Ming understood—this was the best the estate’s finances could afford.

His fief consisted of six prefectures, Qingzhou – where the Grand Governor’s Office was located, Laizhou and Dengzhou – on the eastern peninsula, Yizhou – to the south, Cangzhou – to the north, Yanzhou – to the west.

On paper, six prefectures seemed like a lot, but in reality, his territory was quite small. For comparison, the Fifth Prince, Xiao Quan, governed sixteen prefectures in Shu. Xiao Ming was practically a poor farmer in comparison. To make things worse, none of his six prefectures were wealthy.

According to Da Yu's classification, Upper Prefectures were equivalent to modern-day direct-controlled municipalities, Middle Prefectures were like regional cities, Lower Prefectures were like county-level towns.

Of his six prefectures, only Qingzhou was considered a "Middle Prefecture"—the rest were all "Lower Prefectures."

The situation in Cangzhou was particularly dire. Every year, barbarians from the northern grasslands raided the land.

Three years ago, their cavalry had pillaged all the way to Dengzhou before finally retreating.

With peasants too poor and fearful to farm, tax revenue was abysmal.

Yet, Xiao Ming still had an army and government officials to support—his fief's financial situation was bleak.

Even the previous Xiao Ming, despite being reckless, understood the struggles of his fief.

If not for occasional silver sent by Consort Zhen, he would have starved long ago.

As the carriage left the prince's residence, it traveled slowly along Qingzhou City's streets. Xiao Ming lifted the curtain, carefully observing his domain.

The city spanned 20 li (10 km) north to south and 20 li east to west. It had four city gates and was divided into 36 residential wards (坊区).

On both the east and west sides, there were two marketplaces: East Market and West Market.

The residential wards resembled modern housing districts—each ward was enclosed by a wall, with houses scattered inside, all uniform in size, resembling a grid of tofu blocks.

As his carriage passed one of the residential wards, three young men basking in the sun suddenly bolted, disappearing inside.

“Prince Qi is coming! Run! Run!”

Xiao Ming bitterly smiled—clearly, these were people who had been bullied by his past self.

However, his focus was not on their fear—but on their tattered, patchwork clothing. From the perspective of a modern man, these commoners looked no different from beggars.

Reaching East Market, Xiao Ming stepped out of the carriage and strolled into the bazaar. Qian Dafu hurried after him, his eyes constantly scanning for potential dangers.

East Market and West Market were equivalent to modern-day farmers' markets. Yet, as Xiao Ming walked through East Market, he found very few goods for sale.

Most stalls only had wheat, soybeans, millet, clay pots, fabric, and woven baskets. Compared to the bustling markets of Chang'an, this was pitifully underwhelming.

After browsing East Market, Xiao Ming visited West Market—it was no different. Overall, Qingzhou City was economically devastated.

And this was supposed to be the wealthiest city in his entire fief.

After spending the entire morning touring the city, Xiao Ming's stomach growled.

It was time to return for lunch.

“Your Highness, this humble servant personally prepared vinegar-fried celery and steamed white bread for you!”

After starving all morning, Xiao Ming finally had a meal. According to his inherited memories, this was considered a luxurious meal.

Qian Dafu rubbed his hands eagerly, his Adam's apple bobbing as he stared at the food hungrily. This was the reality of his fiefdom—severe material shortages.

It wasn't a matter of money—even if he had silver, there was nothing to buy. Just being able to eat a full meal was already a blessing. Eating this kind of meal once in a while was tolerable—but having it every day was unbearable.

Despite his title as a prince, his standard of living was worse than a modern wage slave.

If he was hungry, he could only eat boiled amaranth or boiled spinach—there was no cooking oil for stir-frying.

The vinegar-fried celery today was a rare treat, which explained why Qian Dafu had proudly presented it like a treasure.

“How rare, how rare,” Xiao Ming forced a smile, taking a bite of the steamed bread and celery with tears in his eyes.

Back in the modern world, vinegar-fried celery was his most hated dish. Now, it had become a luxury.

He had thought being transmigrated meant enjoying a good life—but even a landlord’s house had no surplus grain.

Over the next three days, Xiao Ming visited several county towns near Qingzhou. What he saw was even worse—most towns were just mud-brick walls enclosing a few straw huts.

The peasants were barely surviving, and hunger was rampant. Compared to them, he was already living in luxury, eating steamed bread.

Along the roads, he often saw villagers digging wild vegetables to stave off hunger.

In one night, he had arrived in Da Yu, with no grand ambitions. But seeing his fief in such a sorry state, even worse than modern slums, was infuriating.

Back in school, his favorite games were territory-building simulations—watching a barren land develop into a thriving city was immensely satisfying.

Now, he had a real fief—and it was in shambles. How could he tolerate this?

Besides, the local noble families ran unchecked, and northern barbarians constantly threatened the land.

Kicking out the barbarians was impossible for now, but developing his land, fortifying cities, training soldiers, and making the people prosper— that, he could do.

If not for defeating the noble families, then at least for a steady supply of eggs and occasional grilled meat.

Otherwise, what was the point of being transmigrated if he was just here to suffer?

His first challenge was clear— Agriculture.

If the peasants stopped working for the aristocrats, they could weaken noble power and rally behind him.