

## I. Dynasty 209

### Chapter 209: Old Friends

“Your Highness, it’s me, Qin Rui!”

Qin Rui beamed with delight, sauntering toward Xiao Ming with a paper fan in hand, the picture of an old friend reunited.

Back when Xiao Ming had roamed Chang’an’s streets, he’d had a tight-knit circle of pleasure-seeking young nobles—Qin Rui among them. Five years apart hadn’t changed Qin Rui one bit. He still looked like a man hollowed out by wine and women, though the dark circles under his eyes had deepened.

Clearly, some habits died hard.

As Qin Rui approached, Xiao Ming gave him a once-over. “What a coincidence, running into you here.”

“Coincidence? Your Highness, this is fate!” Qin Rui chuckled before sighing theatrically. “Though now, as Prince Qi, your victory at Cangzhou has made you renowned across the land. Compared to you, I’m but a fading shadow.”

“Nonsense,” Xiao Ming said. “Back then, I told you all that no matter where I went, I’d remember our bonds. Why bring up Cangzhou? Between us, there’s no need for such formality.”

The words warmed Qin Rui's heart. "With that from you, Your Highness, all those times we braved life and death together—scaling mountains of blades, crossing seas of fire—were worth it. Now that you've returned, we'll still follow your lead."

Qin Rui had a silver tongue. Their so-called "life-and-death" adventures had amounted to little more than carousing and bullying commoners.

But Xiao Ming couldn't very well bring up those unsavory memories now. Qin Rui's phrasing deftly honored their friendship without provoking ire.

As they chatted, reminiscing, Qin Rui gradually slipped back into the easy camaraderie of their youth.

"Your Highness, every year at this time, we'd accompany you to the Autumn Festival by the lake. Who'd have thought that upon your return to Chang'an, we'd meet here again, as if our hearts beat as one? This time, we must revel to our hearts' content before leaving."

One of Xiao Ming's goals in returning to Chang'an was to reconnect with his old circle.

Though these men had been the worst of wastrels—street thugs in silk robes—there was no denying the depth of bonds forged at thirteen or fourteen.

As the saying went: There are no closer ties than those between men who've served together or whored together. They'd done plenty of the latter.

More importantly, these ne'er-do-wells all came from influential families. Only those with powerful backing dared run amok in Chang'an.

For Xiao Ming, reviving these connections was a safer move than tangling with the old foxes of the court.

Besides, many of these nobles now held minor posts. Qin Rui, for instance, worked under his father, Qin Chengming—Director of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, overseeing the empire’s handicrafts: small-scale weaving, spinning, papermaking, and more.

For Xiao Ming, handicrafts were the next step in Qingzhou’s economic revival. Sooner or later, he’d need to deal with the Court of Imperial Sacrifices—and Qin Chengming’s archives held records of nearly every workshop in the empire: their types, locations, and output.

Such intelligence was invaluable. Understanding Great Yu’s current handicraft landscape would let him tailor Qingzhou’s development strategically.

“Of course. The poetry contest is the liveliest spot at Qujiang Lake now. It’s about time—let’s head in,” Xiao Ming said.

Qin Rui grinned. “One moment, Your Highness. I’ve two others with me—Zhu Yushu and Du Boyuan. You haven’t forgotten them, have you?”

“They’re here too?”

Xiao Ming’s heart leaped. The four troublemakers of Chang’an were reuniting.

“Naturally. After you left for Qingzhou, the three of us still...” Qin Rui trailed off with a leer. Xiao Ming smirked in understanding.

“Perfect. Bring them over.”

As Qin Rui scurried off, Xiao Ming rifled through his memories of Zhu Yushu and Du Boyuan.

Zhu Yushu’s father was the Censor-in-Chief—overseeing officials, managing imperial archives, and drafting edicts.

Du Boyuan’s father commanded the Imperial Guard, responsible for palace security and deeply trusted by Emperor Wenxuan.

One controlled the censors—the empire’s watchdogs, akin to modern anti-corruption bureaus. The other held the keys to the palace’s safety.

Controlling the latter meant holding the lives of everyone in the palace.

No wonder the princes had been vying for Du Heng’s favor. Yet the man remained cautiously neutral.

Xiao Ming couldn't help but marvel—this might be the one decent thing his predecessor had done, even if unintentionally.

Of course, friendship with the sons didn't guarantee influence over their fathers. But it was a foothold.

Qin Rui soon returned with two men—one tall and gaunt, the other short and rotund. The former was Zhu Yushu; the latter, Du Boyuan.

"Your Highness, we've missed you terribly!" they exclaimed in unison.

Birds of a feather, their personalities mirrored Qin Rui's—brash and unrestrained.

"Pingshan. Hongzhi." Xiao Ming clasped his hands, addressing them by their courtesy names.

"Your Highness!" They bowed before straightening, and the four burst into laughter as if no time had passed.

Zhu Yushu, like Qin Rui, fanned himself with exaggerated refinement. "Hongzhi and I were just saying we ought to visit you. To meet here is fate! With the four terrors of Chang'an reunited, the city had better brace for stormy weather."

“Pingshan speaks truth,” Du Boyuan chimed in. “Since you left, those pretentious scholars have humiliated us time and again. But now, with your poetry famed across Chang’an, Your Highness must help us settle scores!”

Xiao Ming clasped his hands behind his back. “Nothing simpler. Tonight, we crash this poetry contest.”