

I. Dynasty 16

Chapter 16: 4 Families Disputes

“In that case, Qin Mu is even more duty-bound. Your Highness, as long as our Qin family doesn’t suffer losses, we will do our best.”

Qin Mu put on a righteous and solemn expression.

However, in his heart, he knew that if this coal stove could be successfully sold, it might bring substantial profits to the Qin family.

Seeing Qin Mu trying to monopolize the opportunity, Wang Shijie was not pleased. He said, “Brother Qin, isn’t this a bit too greedy? How can your Qin family take all the opportunities for yourselves?”

Then, Wang Shijie turned to Xiao Ming and said, “Your Highness, my humble family also has a horse team. While Qin Mu handles the waterways, there are still some places his routes can’t reach. Our Wang family can help Your Highness cover those areas.”

“That’s right, our Sun family also has a horse team,” Sun Dong chimed in.

Wei Qing and Qin Mu exchanged glances, their expressions slightly displeased.

As the four of them argued, Xiao Ming observed them carefully, feeling secretly delighted.

It was clear that Wang Shijie and Sun Dong were supporting each other, while Qin Mu and Wei Qing stood together.

This showed that the four prominent families of Qingzhou were not a united front. On the surface, they appeared harmonious, but beneath the surface, they were scheming against each other.

Xiao Ming wasn't afraid of them fighting—he was afraid they wouldn't fight. This way, he could profit from their conflicts.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, stop arguing. You are all my most trusted people, and I don't want to favor anyone. Here's my idea: since all four of your families want to take on the coal stove business, why not compete fairly? I don't care how much you sell it to others for, but whoever offers the highest price to buy the coal stoves from me will get the deal."

Xiao Ming's eyes gleamed as he continued, "To ensure fairness, tomorrow each of you will prepare a sealed letter with the price you're willing to pay to buy the coal stoves from me. We'll open them publicly, and the highest bidder wins. How does that sound?"

"That's a fair method. Your Highness is wise," Wang Shijie said, bowing to Xiao Ming but shooting a challenging glance at Qin Mu.

It was a clear message: "Who's afraid of whom?"

"Then let's do as Your Highness suggests!" Qin Mu refused to back down.

Xiao Ming was inwardly delighted. Initially, he hadn't held much hope for the coal stove, but now that the four families were fighting among themselves, he could gain a bit more advantage.

"To help your four families understand the convenience of the coal stove, take this sample back and demonstrate it to your households," Xiao Ming said, maintaining a calm and composed demeanor to avoid revealing his thoughts.

Wang Shijie bowed to Xiao Ming and instructed his servants to carry the stove away.

The other three also bowed and left.

"Your Highness, should we have the craftsmen start making the coal stoves now?" Chen Wenlong asked with a smile.

He had watched the entire process. Initially, Wang Shijie and Sun Dong had dismissed the coal stove as worthless, but Qin Mu's greed had caused a rift among the four families, who usually acted in unison.

Xiao Ming glanced sideways at Chen Wenlong. "What do you think? You won't have much free time from now on."

"Your Highness, I'm not afraid of being busy. I'm afraid of being idle," Chen Wenlong said, seizing the opportunity to show his dedication.

Xiao Ming nodded. "Once the silver comes in, we'll start working on the hydraulic lathe workshop."

After dealing with the coal stove matter, Xiao Ming returned to the prince's residence under Lu Fei's protection.

Meanwhile, Wang Shijie, carrying the coal stove, also returned to the Wang family. Because of this, the four families gathered again at the Wang residence.

"Shijie, are you saying this thing was made by the Machinery Department under His Highness's orders?" Wang Chengchou asked, looking at the burning coal stove.

"No doubt about it. Moreover, such a thing hasn't been seen anywhere else in the Great Yu Empire," Wang Shijie replied.

"Master Wang, this coal stove burns coal. What do you think?" Qin Chuanyun asked. He was Qin Mu's father.

Wang Chengchou gently stroked his beard. Qin Chuanyun's use of the title "Master Wang" pleased him. Although the title was merely an honorary one bought by wealthy merchants, it still provided some comfort in a society where merchants were looked down upon.

"This coal stove is indeed quite interesting. It's very convenient for boiling water, cooking, warming wine, and heating. Moreover, the flame can be easily controlled. Most importantly, it doesn't easily go

out. When the coal briquette at the bottom burns out, you just replace it with a new one. If you want, the stove can keep burning indefinitely.”

“Master Wang makes a good point. Having something like this in the house during winter would be quite nice,” said a thin, elderly man sitting beside Qin Chuanyun. He was Sun Dong’s father, Sun Yuanzhi.

“Since everyone agrees that the coal stove is good, let’s follow His Highness’s suggestion. Each of our four families will write a sealed letter. This way, we won’t have to argue over who gets to manage the coal stove business,” Wei Qing’s father, Wei Hong, said loudly. He and Wei Qing were quite alike—both were red-faced men.

At Wei Hong’s words, the courtyard fell silent. The four families eyed each other, each with their own thoughts.

The coal stove had been burning in the Wang residence since it was brought in. Wang Chengchou had already made up his mind. “In that case, I won’t keep you all any longer. Tomorrow, no matter who wins the right to manage the coal stove business, I hope we can all remain on good terms.”

“In that case, we’ll take our leave,” Wei Hong was the first to stand and bid farewell.

Sun Yuanzhi and Qin Chuanyun followed suit.

Once everyone had left, Wang Shijie said, “Father, this coal stove is indeed great, but I don’t think its price will exceed three taels of silver.”

Wang Chengchou chuckled. "You say three taels, but this time, even if it costs five or ten taels, we must secure the management rights for the coal stove."

"Why?" Wang Shijie asked, puzzled.

"Let me ask you, what does our Wang family sell?" Wang Chengchou asked, looking at his son with a mix of exasperation and expectation.

"Coal..." Wang Shijie suddenly realized. "Father, are you saying that if the coal stove becomes widely popular, our coal business..."

Wang Chengchou laughed heartily. "Exactly! I just counted—if the coal stove burns for a day, it requires at least six coal briquette. If every household in the Great Yu Empire starts using coal stoves, our Wang family could become as rich as a nation!"

Wang Shijie was stunned for a moment, then burst into laughter. "Father, the Prince of Qi is truly our lucky star!"

Wang Chengchou smiled, stroking his beard, but then his expression turned serious. "Shijie, there's something you need to discuss with His Highness alone."

"Father, please instruct me," Wang Shijie said respectfully. He had always been somewhat afraid of his father.

“Whether our Wang family or another family manages the coal stove business, it doesn’t affect us much. What matters most is the business. Look, the honeycomb briquette sent by the Prince of Qi are very uniform—the size, shape, and position of the holes are all consistent, perfectly fitting the coal stove. If they’re even slightly off, they won’t fit. Moreover, these coal briquette are made by crushing coal and then binding it together, making them very hard to produce.”

“Are you saying I should try to find out from His Highness how these coal briquette are made?”

“No, the Prince of Qi is doing this for profit. I want you to buy the method for producing these coal briquette!” Wang Chengchou’s eyes burned with ambition.