

Keyboard Immortal

Chapter 12: Keeping Mum

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Chu Zhongtian fell silent upon hearing his wife's words. The founder of the Zhou Dynasty, Emperor Taizu, had lost his sons to the war that founded the empire. Taizu's younger brother offered his second son—the current King Qi—to Taizu for adoption.

However, Taizu sacrificed his own life in a bitter fight to defeat an expert from the foreign tribes. Mindful of the instability of the newly-formed Empire and the tender age of his adopted son, Taizu nominated his younger brother as his successor with his dying breath. This led to the rise of Emperor Taizong.

Inheriting the will of Taizu, Emperor Taizong conquered vast swathes of land, greatly expanding the territories of the Zhou Dynasty. The many battles—and the injuries which he suffered—took their toll on his physical body, and he reached his limit prematurely. When it was time to choose an heir, he was put in a bind.

By convention, the throne belonged to Taizu's lineage. He had only assumed the crown because King Qi had been far too young to govern. Now that King Qi was a grown man, it was only right for him to pass the throne to him.

But greed lurks in the hearts of all men. Even though King Qi shared Taizong's blood, he had been adopted by Taizu, and thus Taizong did not see him as his own son. As such, he favored his own eldest son, King Jin, instead.

Taizong hatched a clever plan. He issued an edict, declaring that the first of the two to reach the Earth Immortal stage as the successor to the throne.

King Jin, as the eldest son of Taizong, was naturally older than King Qi. He also enjoyed the full backing of Taizong, which granted him far more resources for cultivation. It went without saying that King Jin was the first to reach the Earth Immortal stage, and succeeded his father to become the incumbent Emperor Gaozong.

This decision caused much controversy, as many older subjects in the imperial court were loyal to Taizu's lineage and supported King Qi's right to rule. To placate them and avert a civil war, Taizong hinted that King Qi could one day succeed Gaozong when he passed on.

A hundred years had passed since then, and Gaozong was nearing the end of his life. The issue of succession came up once more, and Gaozong chose to proclaim his own son as the crown prince. King Qi's followers were upset by this pronouncement, and

were infuriated that the designated crown prince was far less talented than the prodigious King Qi.

Despite their opposition, Emperor Gaozong had ruled for a hundred years, and had consolidated great power and influence during his reign. Clashes had erupted between both factions in recent years, both openly as well as covertly.

The Chu clan, through its dominance in both the salt trade and the arms trade, had unbelievable wealth that rivaled that of a country. Given the significant resources at its disposal, it was inevitable that both factions would seek to win their support. However, Chu Zhongtian had taken a fiercely neutral stance, as he had no wish to embroil the Chu clan in the current war of succession. In response, the Imperial faction had intensified their overtures, and were pushing to cement an alliance through marriage.

Chu Zhongtian and his wife had been deeply troubled by this matter because the Chu clan, unlike other clans, harbored a huge secret. Furthermore, Chu Chuyan had a huge role in the business empire of the Chu clan. If she were to be married into the Imperial faction, the Chu clan would risk being swallowed whole.

Chu Chuyan was aware of what was at stake, so she proposed taking the initiative to hold an open selection for her spouse. She chose the most useless fellow in the city and rushed through the marriage ceremony in order to crush any ideas that the Imperial faction or King Qi's faction had in mind.

This sequence of events had led Qin Wanru to suspect the culprit who ruined the spirit creek had been sent either by the emperor or by King Qi.

"Regardless of who the culprit is, we have troubling days ahead of us," Chu Zhongtian said gravely. "Sang Hong is going to take over as the governor of Linchuan Commandery."

Brightmoon City was under the jurisdiction of Linchuan Commandery.

Qin Wanru exclaimed in astonishment, "Vice Minister of Finance, Sang Hong!"

The Minister of Finance was one of the Nine Ministers that managed the finances of the empire, with the Vice Minister of Finance as the second-in-charge. Sang Hong, who supervised the salt and arms trade within the empire, was an aide to the emperor. It was clear he was being assigned to the Linchuan Commandery in order to deal with the Chu clan.

"I've heard rumors that he's a callous person who has no qualms killing his kin if he needs to. Many noble clans have fallen apart due to his intervention. I fear that our Chu clan is in grave danger," Qin Wanru remarked worriedly.

Seeing the traces of fear streaking the face of his usually headstrong wife, Chu Zhongtian embraced her and said, "We'll deal with it accordingly when it comes our way. Our Chu clan is no pushover! Sang Hong is no more than an eighth rank; let's see who gets the last laugh!"

Qin Wanru rolled her eyes at her husband. "Is his cultivation the only thing that matters? Great Bandit Chen Xuan of the Hidden Dragon Mountain is no more than a sixth rank, so why haven't you managed to eradicate him even after so many years?"

Chu Zhongtian harrumphed coldly. "That Chen Xuan is a sly fellow. Every time I rush over after receiving news of him, he disappears without a trace. I suspect he has an insider within this city that has been tipping him off, or else I would have caught him long ago!"

A thought popped into Qin Wanru's mind. "That gang of bandits illegally peddles salt and plunders passing merchants, killing them in cold blood. We should toss the matter into Sang Hong's hands. He won't be able to turn a blind eye to this matter as the governor."

Chu Zhongtian's eyes lit up as well. "What a wonderful idea! That reminds me, I heard that the merchant convoy of the Yu clan is heading over to Brightmoon City. We have to inform them of this matter lest they get ambushed by Chen Xuan's group—yowch ouch ouch ouch..."

Before Chu Zhongtian could finish, Qin Wanru grabbed his ear tightly, saying, "You are just worried about their matriarch, Yu Yanluo, aren't you? She was the number one beauty of the capital back then. I know that you shamelessly courted her before, only for her to end up marrying the Cloudmidst Duke. Are you thinking of rekindling the spark between you two?"

Chu Zhongtian desperately pleaded for mercy, "My dear wife, they have already been married for so long. How could I possibly bear such intention toward her? You mustn't spout such nonsense!"

However, Qin Wanru still refused to release her grip, sniffing coldly instead. "I heard that the Cloudmidst Duke recently passed away in an accident. Doesn't that mean that Yu Yanluo is single now?"

Chu Zhongtian's eyes lit up. "Is that true?"

Skewered by his wife's murderous gaze, he quickly changed his tone and said, "My dear wife, doesn't the fact that I'm ignorant about her affairs show that my eyes have never been on her? Besides, you know the current circumstances I am in. How could I have any intentions towards her?"

Seeing the hurt look on Chu Zhongtian's face, Qin Wanru hurriedly released his ear. "Husband, I'm sorry."

Chu Zhongtian shook his head. "No, I'm the one who has let you down."

Qin Wanru hated to see her husband so downcast, so she quickly changed the subject. "Where did Chuyan go?"

Chu Zhongtian replied, "She's bringing the young miss of the Pei clan around the city."

Qin Wanru furrowed her brows. "As someone from the Pei clan, she's probably a member of King Qi's faction. I can't help but think that she has darker intentions in mind for suddenly choosing to study at Brightmoon Academy."

Chu Zhongtian chuckled in response, "Rest assured! Our daughter is a smart child, she knows what to do."

Qin Wanru harrumphed. "Pei Mianman might be young, but she has the face of a cunning vixen. Those peach blossom eyes of hers seem to be constantly seducing the men around her. I don't like her."

Chu Zhongtian burst into laughter. "Are you worried that she would snatch your daughter's man?"

Qin Wanru chuckled at the thought of Pei Mianman falling for Zu An's witless features. It was inconceivable! "I would celebrate if she took that scoundrel away from Chuyan!"

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"Achoo~"

Zu An suddenly let loose a powerful sneeze. He wondered which young miss or madam was currently thinking of him.

"Young master, have you caught a cold? I'll find some thicker clothes for you to put on right away!" Before Zu An could react, a young man had already wrapped a robe around him.

The stupefied Zu An took a closer look at the young man before him. He appeared to be fourteen or fifteen years old, and was dressed in a set of blue clothes. His hair was tied into two buns on top of his head. Together with his large eyes, they lent him a docile, youthful look.

"Wait a moment, who are you?"

"Young master, you're teasing me. This servant is your study companion!" the young man replied with a flirtatious smile.

"Study companion?" Zu An was flabbergasted for a moment, but concluded that it had to do with him attending the Brightmoon Academy. He was just heading to one of their clan's subsidiaries. Was it really necessary to assign him a study companion?

Looks like the Brightmoon Duke's estate is indeed needlessly rich. Yeap, just how I like it.

"What did you call me earlier?"

"Young master?"

"I can't hear you. Louder!"

"Young master!"

"Not bad, not bad. Lad, you have a bright future ahead of you."

Joy blossomed on Zu An's face. Nothing had gone his way since his transmigration. He might be the son-in-law of a Duke's estate, but not a single person respected him, let alone addressed him as 'young master'.

Finally meeting someone who treated him with respect soothed him from head to toe.

"What's your name?"

The youth jolted into attention and replied anxiously, "Young master, my name is Cheng Shouping."

"What ping?" Zu An thought that study companions usually had characters like Fu (Fortune), Wang (Prosperity), or Cai (Money) in their names. At the very least, they would go with something that was easy to remember like Wah On. Who in the world gave this fellow such a weird name?[1]

"Cheng Shouping, derived from 'guarding one's lips like a tightly corked bottle'. It's a name that the Master bestowed on me!" He puffed out his chest proudly.[2]

"Not bad, you were worthy enough to be granted a name by your Master." Zu An wasn't familiar with the customs in this world, but he reckoned it a huge honor to be given a name by one's master. Take Zheng Chenggong from his timeline, for example. After he was bestowed a surname by the emperor, everyone began addressing him by the honorific 'Lord of Imperial Surname'.

“Young master, you flatter me. I was deeply favored by the Master while I was working for him, but one day, I found myself transferred to the kitchens. I was afraid I might have unintentionally offended the old master somehow, but now that I have been assigned as young master’s study companion, I finally understand my Master’s intentions! He must have been trying to temper me by putting me through adversity, so that I would be ready to take on a greater cause when the need arises!” Light glittered in Cheng Shouping’s eyes at his passionate proclamation.

“Wait a moment...” the more Zu An listened to Cheng Shouping’s story, the more bizarre it sounded. He was well aware of how others in the Chu Estate thought of him, and yet, this fellow thought that this assignment was an honorable job?

Looks like he’s not a very bright lad.

Besides, this fellow had started out working by Master Chu’s side, so how did he end up being transferred over to a place like the kitchens?

Zu An let the matter drop. He was more interested in his own affairs. “It seems like you have been in the Chu Estate for quite some time. You should know a few things, right?”

Cheng Shouping thumped his chest and said, “That goes without saying! From the old master down to the servants working in the Chu Estate, no one keeps any secrets from me!”

Zu An needed to know more about the Chu Estate. He had only arrived here two days ago, yet so many were already plotting his demise, and he had no idea what the root cause of it all was. He was acutely aware of the perilous position he was in.

He mulled for a moment before asking, “Do you know why the Chu clan chose me as their son-in-law?” This was what bugged him the most. Chu Chuyan, from her background down to her appearance, was impeccable, whereas Zu An, from every perspective, was useless trash through and through. It should have been impossible for their paths to have ever crossed, but in a mysterious turn of events, they had become married to one another. This reeked with suspicion.

Cheng Shouping seemed bewildered by Zu An’s question. “Isn’t that because of young master’s devilishly handsome looks?”

Zu An’s eyes shot wide open. It would seem that Cheng Shouping shared some of his talent for earnestly spewing nonsense. “Ahem, ahem. While what you’re saying makes perfect sense, is there no other reason behind it?”

“None at all. The young miss chose you because of your dashing looks back then.”

Don’t you have a shred of self-awareness in you at all? There’s nothing you have that can be called a strength other than that! Cheng Shouping was careful not to allow even

a sliver of his inner thoughts slip through his mask. His expression was as earnest as it could get.

“You’re saying that the young miss chose me personally?” Zu An astutely picked out the crucial information hidden amidst Cheng Shouping’s words.

“Yes, that’s right. Madam wasn’t satisfied with her decision and had implored her to reconsider her options,” Cheng Shouping replied.

Zu An hurriedly interjected, “You don’t need to say anything unnecessary to me.”

He had presumed that Chu Chuyan had been forced into marrying him by her parents; that would explain the dissatisfaction and killing intent she had directed toward him. However, what Cheng Shouping said earlier disproved this.

But why would Chu Chuyan choose him as her spouse? That young miss’ eyes were as sharp as they could get!

Pui pui pui! She must have fallen for my dashing looks and desired a taste of my body!

1. This is a reference to a Hong Kong movie, Flirting Scholar, where the main lead enters the House of Wah as a study companion to the two young masters of the house.

2. Shou means ‘guard’ and ping means ‘bottle’