

YANG SU

*There's
Something
Wrong
with
the Chief*

DU ZHU YOU BING



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DU ZHU YOU BING

NOVEL

1





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There's Something Wrong with the Chief Vol. 1

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Chapter 1:

The Coolness of Fresh Rain

A FRESH RAIN had just fallen, leaving the stone path wet. The trafficker ordered the children to squat beneath the eaves, where they waited for the matron to fetch them. Occasionally scraping the mud from his feet, Xiahou Lian stood among them. Strapped securely to his ankle was a dagger for self-defense, a gift from Uncle Duan before Xiahou Lian had left home.

Xiahou Lian was handsome, particularly his eyes, which were as striking as his mother's; they shone like stars in the night sky, sparkling and luminous. Many young girls had tried to engage him in conversation on the journey here, but he'd ignored them. In his eyes, he was different from the shortsighted girls who thought that being sold into the Xie household would mean food to eat and clothes to wear. Those with a bit of ambition even dreamed of climbing into the lord's bed. Not Xiahou Lian, Qiye Garden's youngest assassin. He wasn't here to be a servant—he was here to kill.

With his chin propped nonchalantly on his hand, Xiahou Lian swept his gaze around the alley. It was early morning, and the area was quiet and deserted but for a couple of beggars squatting at the entrance, heads bobbing as they dozed. At least one of those beggars had to be connected to Qiye Garden. Once Xiahou Lian successfully infiltrated the Xie household, he would find a note tossed over the wall naming his target. Someone might even sneak to his window in the middle of the night to reveal the Garden's mole. Although he'd never before taken part in any assassination mission for Qiye Garden, his mother often told him bedtime stories of Garden assassins blending into the streets, then striking without warning, elusive as night.

The trafficker came closer to count the children. Xiahou Lian kept his eyes lowered and held his breath, squatting obediently. That was how an assassin should be: forever inconspicuous.

Two matrons and several young maidservants opened the door and stepped out. The trafficker flashed a smile and approached them. “They’re all here—good, nimble children. Just five copper coins a child—the best price in Jinling.”

The head matron instructed the children to stand at attention, inspecting each for deformities, and for missing limbs, eyes, and noses. After a brief negotiation with the trafficker, she ushered the children into the Xie household.

Xiahou Lian had sharp ears. He heard the trafficker weigh the silver in his hand, then grate, “Penniless paupers!”

The matrons’ and maids’ coats showed signs of fraying. A woman in the very back even wore a coat sporting a conspicuous patch. Only the head matron wore slightly better garments, a jade bracelet adorning her wrist.

“Hey, you in the gray coat. Come here,” a voice suddenly called out. Xiahou Lian looked up to see the head matron gesturing at him.

He walked over, and the matron shoved him toward the woman in the patched coat. “This child looks bright enough. Take him to your place. Let no one claim that the mistress neglects the third young master.”

“Matron Liu, could we have one more child?” the woman pleaded. Her face was gaunt, and her mouth bore deep wrinkles, resembling a walnut soaked too long in water. “The mistress sent away two of our maids, and now

all the courtyard has left is me and one young girl. It's not enough to manage."

The matron snorted coldly. "The third young master is just one little child. How many servants could he need? Should we send the entire estate to look after his whims? The Xie household is vast, and every corner requires attention. We've purchased only a few children, so be grateful you're getting one. You dare to ask for more?"

"I wouldn't dream of it! Please don't be upset, Matron Liu. One is more than enough." The woman quickly bowed in apology and grabbed Xiahou Lian's hand to take her leave.

Her callouses scraped Xiahou Lian's palm, but he was used to that discomfort. His mother's hands, worn from years of wielding a blade, were even rougher.

"You can call me Aunt Lan. What's your name?"

"Xiahou Lian," he replied timidly, assuming the expression of a well-behaved child.

"'Lian,' as in what?"

"As in, 'Amid the vast green wilderness, a shadow falls between the rippling waves.'" ¹

Aunt Lan looked at Xiahou Lian in surprise. "You know poetry?"

Xiahou Lian was caught off guard. He'd forgotten that trafficked children came from poor families; they probably couldn't even recognize

written characters, let alone recite poetry. He quickly followed up with a lie. "I heard someone say it once. It's the only line I know."

Aunt Lan smiled. "It's good to know poetry. Our young master Jinglan loves to read. If you can recite a few lines, you're sure to win his favor. Can you read? Have you studied before? The *Hundred Family Surnames*, the *Thousand Character Classic*—have you read those?"

If erotic albums and saber manuals counted as reading... "I've read a bit. I can write my name."

Aunt Lan gently patted Xiahou Lian's hand, her smile warm. "That's amazing already. I can only read a few numbers myself."

As they traveled, they encountered numerous other maids and servants. Aunt Lan always paused at a distance to greet them or swerved to avoid them altogether. To Xiahou Lian's confusion, however, the other maids and servants seemed to ignore Aunt Lan entirely.

Ahead, two young maids chatted. "I heard our lord is returning to the estate tomorrow. The mistress is overjoyed! Today, we'll need to quickly tidy the lord's room."

Aunt Lan greeted the maids as she and Xiahou Lian passed by.

"What's the mistress so happy about?" one was asking. "I heard the lord got sent back because he offended the palace's Wei-gonggong. We should be careful in case disaster comes knocking!"

"Really, why would the lord go out of his way to offend Wei-gonggong?" the other maid responded. "That's just asking for trouble."

As their voices faded, Xiahou Lian lowered his head and continued walking. Eventually, a round-faced maidservant who looked around thirteen or fourteen years old approached to greet them. "Auntie! I came out to meet you. Hey, how come you only brought back one little boy?"

"Come here, Xiao-Lian. This is Lianxiang-jiejie," Aunt Lan said.

"Hello, Lianxiang-jiejie," Xiahou Lian greeted her obediently.

Lianxiang shot Xiahou Lian a dissatisfied glance. "What can one little boy do to help? We'll have to look after *him*. The first wife is being unreasonable! She expects us to handle cleaning, laundry, and weeding every day. Must we learn to duplicate ourselves?"

Aunt Lan stopped Lianxiang, shaking her head. "That's enough. The three of us will be more than adequate to serve our young master. Why are you here? How could you leave the shaoye alone in the house?"

"It's fine. He's taking a nap."

Aunt Lan seemed to remain anxious, and the three quickened their pace. The walk to Qiuwu Courtyard passed through what seemed like the entire estate, and their surroundings grew increasingly rundown with each step. Finally, they caught sight of the corner gate leading into Qiuwu Courtyard. Just before they entered, a boy's shout and the loud crash of pots and pans from within greeted them.

"Give me back my book! Give it back!"

Aunt Lan and Lianxiang rushed into the courtyard with Xiahou Lian following close behind. A small, messy area unfolded before him. Inside, several servants had pinned a half-grown boy to the ground. The boy's

clothes were muddy and torn. Beside the group stood a second boy with a chubby face, large ears, and pale skin. His nose and ears were as round, shiny, and plump as meatballs. Everyone else Xiahou Lian had seen since arriving at the estate was scrawny and thin; it was as if all their missing weight was amassed in this one boy.

Like many wealthy youths of the time, the plump boy—clearly conscious of his appearance—wore powder and greasepaint, though he'd gone a bit overboard with them. The overwhelming scent of powder engulfed Xiahou Lian as he approached, making his head spin.

“What do you mean, ‘give it back’? The book is mine to begin with! It’s still mine even if I tire of it and throw it away. Who gave you the right to pick it up and read it, you mutt?” The fat boy ripped the book in his hands to shreds, sneering. “You pathetic piece of trash. You think you can read? What—are you hoping to take the imperial exams? Dream on, you son of a whore maid. You’ll be a servant for the rest of your life!”

The other boy roared and thrashed. His face was flushed crimson, eyes bloodshot. “I’ll kill you! *I’ll kill you!* How dare you say that about my mother?!”

Lianxiang and Aunt Lan knelt on the ground, knocking their heads against it. “Da-shaoye, please let San-shaoye go!” they cried. “Please let him go!”

“Get out of my way! Quick, men, check to see if he’s hidden any more of my books! Tear everything apart! Leave no stone unturned!”

The servants complied, ransacking the entire courtyard. They even tore apart the straw paper in the latrine. Soon, a heap of shredded paper formed

in the open yard. There were barely any books to be found; even combined with the latrine paper, they made only a meager pile.

The third young master stared blankly at the mound of shredded paper, then slowly lifted his gaze to stare coldly at the fat boy. “If I ever rise to power, I swear I’ll ki—”

Before he finished the word, a servant kicked him to the ground and laughed. “You think you’ll ever hold power? You’re destined to spend your worthless life wallowing in the mud! Nothing is going to change that!”

Squatting by the wall, Xiahou Lian seethed with fury. His hand instinctively reached for the dagger tucked in his boot, then paused. *No*, he thought. *An assassin must not reveal himself.* Taking a deep breath, he forced his hand away and quietly shrank back, harmless as a quail.

The fat boy crouched in front of the third young master and scooped a handful of paper from the ground. He grabbed the other boy’s face in his left hand and shoved the scraps into his mouth. The third young master struggled fiercely, but the servants held him down, laughing as choking coughs racked his body. Lianxiang and Aunt Lan tried to rush over, but the other servants stopped them, forcing them to watch as he sprawled on the ground.

“Listen here, Xie Jinglan. Your whore of a mother took advantage of my father while he was drunk—that’s how you came to be. A lowly mutt like you, dreaming of reading and becoming an official? Give it up. My mother only allows you the title of ‘shaoye’ out of kindness. Keep stepping out of line, and I’ll kick you and your doddering maid out to scrub chamber pots for a living.”

The fat boy tossed a handful of paper scraps into the air. They fell like snow, cloaking Xie Jinglan's face. Then the entire group walked away, roaring with laughter. Aunt Lan and Lianxiang helped Xie Jinglan to his feet and brushed the dirt from his clothing, their eyes brimming with tears.

"How can Da-shaoye be so awful to San-shaoye? He threw away those books; our San-shaoye merely salvaged them from the storeroom. Yet Da-shaoye tore them to shreds!" Lianxiang exclaimed indignantly. Noticing Xie Jinglan's silence and pursed lips, she softened her tone. "San-shaoye...maybe you should give up on reading. Ugh. No paper, no ink, and now no books. Let it go."

Xie Jinglan ignored her, but he stood up to stop Aunt Lan when she grabbed a broom to sweep the scraps away. "Don't. Bring them inside. I can reassemble them."

"But they're in shreds and all from different books. Can you really put them back together?"

"I can. Leave them and let me."

"Ah, right. The child I brought back today can read, so he can help you, Shaoye. Xiao-Lian, where are you? Come greet the young master."

Upon hearing this, Xiahou Lian hurried over and bowed awkwardly before Xie Jinglan. When he came close, he finally got a good look at the young master. Even the dirt smudged over his face could not conceal the beauty of his features. His gaze resembled a serene autumn lake, but his complexion was pale and sickly, as if he wasn't eating well.

So, he's girly. No wonder he'd lacked the power to fight back. All the men in Qiye Garden had bodies as robust as steel. When they undressed,

they revealed solid muscles honed by years of training. Xiahou Lian had spent years on the mountain, surrounded by battle-hardened warriors who'd clawed their way back from the jaws of death; he'd never seen a young master so frail and weak. A flicker of disdain sparked inside him.

Xie Jinglan lifted his eyes to glance at Xiahou Lian. The latter's hair was disheveled, his face caked with brown and black streaks—he looked like a mud-covered monkey. Xie Jinglan couldn't help but frown. “Who's that? I don't want him. Send him back.”

Xiahou Lian said nothing.

Chapter 2: Exploring the Library

ALTHOUGH XIE JINGLAN might have been a young master in name only, he was arrogant by nature. He wholeheartedly believed that he would one day crush the main courtyard's young master beneath his heel; it was only a matter of time. As soon as he rode his horse through the streets after conquering the imperial examinations, members of the Xie family would kneel before him, weeping and begging for his forgiveness.

When he was abused, he choked down his mouthfuls of blood and broken teeth and envisioned the glorious future that lay ahead. His anger unappeased, the teeth and blood roiled inside him, sparking a slew of twisted daydreams. It was not Mencius's teachings of "conquering others with virtue"² that filled his head but the words of Sima Qian: "A gentleman does not fear serving his revenge ten years cold."³

If Xie Jinglan wished to stand above all others, the imperial exams were his only option. The Xie family descended from a long line of scholars; the family had served as officials for generations. Alas, the family's talents had waned by the time the current patriarch, Xie Bingfeng, took over. Despite a lifetime of tireless effort, Xie Bingfeng rose only to the sixth rank within the Censorate. Nevertheless, he followed the teachings of the esteemed Confucian scholar Dai Shengyan, serving as an honest, upright official whose extensive knowledge and integrity earned him a commendable reputation.