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# Yu Hang: The House That He Built

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The Peace Town was in trouble recently.

Inn-keeper Ma looked up at the sky, where dark clouds were gathering, and seemed to catch a whiff of foreboding in the air. He was the owner of the town's largest inn, and also ran the local bank, making him a worldly and shrewd figure. Moments ago, Butler Zhao of the nearby Wanzhu Villa, along with four robust men had hastily left his place. They were going from door to door, inquiring whether any stranger had recently appeared in town. The old master of Wanzhu Villa, Zeng Hao, was widely known as a benevolent gentleman, having contributed to the founding of both the local alms house and school. Rarely seen in town himself, he delegated most affairs to Butler Zhao. Rumour had it that Zeng was once a legendary figure who had withdrawn from the martial world, and all his household staff were trained in some form of kung fu. A few days earlier, the villa had been infiltrated by unknown assailant, and a fatality had occurred, alongside the suspected theft of a treasured heirloom. As for potential suspects, Inn-keeper Ma thought of a young man who had stayed at his inn two months before. The lad was unlike the usual travelling merchants and peddlers; though he laughed cheerful, he remained ever guarded, revealing nothing of his origins and insist that he was just a wanderer. He lingered in town for about a week before vanishing. Like many young men, he whiled away his nights in the company of courtesans—but something wild in his gaze marked him as different. Perhaps that was why the most famous local courtesan, usually so adept at playing coy, had been completely smitten by him after just two rounds of wine, forsaking her usual feints and coqueties.

A few days earlier, Butler Zhao had stood grim-faced in the garden of Wanzhu Villa, inspecting the remains left by the intruder. The formation of boulders and bamboo, designed as a defensive array, had been broken. A massive severed head—belonging to the powerful Kunlun slave who had guarded the entrance to the secret vault—was perched atop a Lake Tai rock. The cut was clean, blood trailed to the lake's edge. The headless body was fished out and laid in the grass, awaiting burial with the head. Remarkably, the corpse hardly had other wounds, death must have come from a single strike. The act of displaying the head was deemed a flagrant provocation. The heirloom sword that had been guarded within the vault was, of course, no longer in place. The incident was immediately reported to the old master, Zeng Hao. In a low voice, Zhao ventured to ask whether an old foe or their descendant had returned to seek revenge. Zeng shook his head heavily. "Few blades I've seen in my life are this swift. Losing A' Li is one thing, but the fact that no one else sensed the intruder... he must have had excellent lightness kung fu skills and precise formation-breaking knowledge. A true expert. He did not kill wantonly, but took the sword. Perhaps he had long been plotting its theft. Or perhaps he's luring us to pursue him.

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Either way, don't jump to conclusions. Ask around. First, see if any new faces have appeared in town. Second, check if similar items have gone missing in the martial world. Third, send word to Lord Ghost Flute to return and deploy his tracking defences.”

Over the following two weeks, Butler Zhao gathered a wealth of information. Several sects had thefts in recent months, often involving weapons of great symbolic or ancestral value, but all of them were too embarrassed to announce their loss publicly. The Tianyin Pavilion reportedly lost a Guqin capable of launching concealed weapons. The Sea Dragon Clan's leader found his two war hammers vanished without a trace. Most bizarre of all, the Lord of Penglai Island had the soles of his feet flayed, which were rumoured to be maps of treasure caves scattered across coastal waters. Descriptions from witnesses increasingly aligned. A sketch was drawn, matching the youth Inn-keeper Ma had once suspected. Thus, a loose network was formed among the victims to pool resources and broaden the search, which finally led them to a cave on Mount Miaoyou.

The cave, part-natural and part-carved, showed signs of habitation. Giant stalactites rose like clouds frozen in motion, some branching like coral. Traces of pigment could be seen on the walls, glinting under oil-lamp light. Inside the cave divided into several more rooms and tunnels, making a strangely ideal shelter. No one knew how the young man had found such a place. Still, fearing that any one party might claim revenge and keep the stolen goods for themselves, it had been agreed that no one would enter until all had arrived. But by the time they broke through the defences and entered the “main hall,” the young man had already slipped away through an underground stream, leaving behind a trail of “evidence” strewn haphazardly across the cave floor.

Old master Zeng Hao's eyes immediately fell upon the family sword—passed down for generations—gleaming coldly in the light, discarded at the side. He retrieved it with shaking hands and placed it reverently into a wooden case. The hilt, however, remained missing. Others fared no better: most of the recovered items were unrecognisable, altered beyond their original forms. A red-robed Guru found his Kapala bowl filled with purple riverworms paint, smelling foul and fishy. On the walls were wild, entangled brushstrokes, more like sword forms than art, flowing left and right, as if exploring some martial philosophy. The strokes were bold, sometimes delicate like blossoms on an ancient tree, sometimes perilous as if tilting the scales of heaven. All present silently agreed: this young man, origin unknown, appeared to be absorbing the strengths of every sect to forge a path of his own. Two fragile girls from Tianyin Pavilion burst into sobs at the sight of their shattered Guqin. They quickly gathered the pieces into a white silk bag embroidered with Eight Immortals. The ancient instrument had been torn apart, the only part the thief seemed to want was the mechanism that launched hidden weapons. “Catch him! Quickly!” someone cried. Seeing that the treasures that their sect had valued had turned out like this, every one's rage was such that all rushed to pursue the thief. But the cave was a labyrinth. They split into teams, agreeing to fire a signal flare if any caught sight of him.

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Several nights later, Zeng Hao's party finally encountered the enemy beside a waterfall. “Young man, return my sword hilt!” the old master bellowed, voice ringing with inner strength. Butler Zhao opened his iron fan and stepped forward to strike. The Tianyin disciples raised their twin jade flutes and began to play; the haunting melodies summoned venomous insects from the undergrowth. The young man, calmly roasting fish over a bonfire, seemed unsurprised. With a flick of his blade, he scattered sparks to burn the attacking worms, and in one smooth motion, slashed at the Tianyin girls' hands. He was so fast, no one saw him draw the blade. The women barely dodged in time. As their flutes dropped, Zhao's fan met the attacker's blade with a metallic clang, and he staggered back, a notch appearing on his iron fan. Zeng Hao, sensing danger, planted his feet and unleashed a powerful palm strike, but the youth spun away, leapt backwards, and reached into a bush with his left hand, hurling six red dice-sized objects at the old master. Each targeted a different pressure point of his palm. “A trap! Poison!” Zeng shouted, covering his mouth and nose while warning his comrades. The objects embedded themselves in a nearby tree, forming a hexagon and shaking the branches. Zhao cautiously examined them: six intricately carved red wooden flowers, as hard as iron. Then he saw old master's face darken. The wood had come from the hilt of their family sword. “Hahaha!” the youth suddenly burst into laughter, gleeful like a boy who'd just pulled off a prank. He leveraged his blade tip against the ground and somersaulted backward—vanishing into the waterfall. They lunged forward, but not even a scrap of his clothing remained. “Have a look at my catapult, the fish is left for you!” he called from the darkness, just before the roar of water drowned him out. The Tianyin disciples found a silk wire in the underbrush, taken from their Guqin, and used to launch darts. Everyone stood stunned. After such a meticulous and daring heist, they'd expected a grand conspiracy, yet in the end, it all seemed... a game. What they recovered, after all their effort, was nothing like what had been taken.

The next day, they sent a large party downstream to look for the young man's body. Nothing. Whether he had died or escaped, no one could say. Zeng Hao, meticulous as ever, kept the six red wooden flowers close, studying them again and again, smiling and weeping all at once. He couldn't let it go. He stationed men in the cave to keep watch and report regularly, hoping to catch the youth if he ever returned. But one day, a message failed to arrive. Zhao sent a party to check, and found that the guards and every item in the cave had vanished without trace. Rumours of unrest continued to drift through the martial arts world, yet another clan's treasured heirloom had gone missing.