

The Bloody Palace of Hei Long

by

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A light fall of snow dusts the mountainous landscape. Near the summit of a jagged mountain two men in leather armour, one on a bay pony the other on a shaggy dun, ride up a narrow road cut into the granite cliffs. Between them, head bent, long black hair hiding his scarred face, walks a tall, lean youth. The horsemen lead him like a performing bear, each holding the end of a thin chain attached to metal bracelets on his wrists. Strapped to his back, like a haversack, is a bamboo chair and seated in it is a small hooded figure.

Ahead of them loom the dark walls of a fortress built into the mountainside.

“They’ve seen us, Yan,” Zan Feng, the rider on the bay, says to his colleague and points ahead, “Look, a welcoming party approaches.”

He looks down at the chained man trudging next to his pony and grins, “Ready yourself Jian, soon you’ll face Hei Long, the warlord you’ve taunted for so long.”

Calmly, the riders rein in their mounts and wait for the six horsemen to reach them.

Lei Jian, the chained man on foot, looks grimly ahead. The burden on his back is nothing compared to the weight in his heart as he stares at the fortress ahead.

Its walls are constructed from the shiny blue-black rock of the mountain. Painted on them, in huge red lacquer letters, are the names of every nobleman felled by the swords of warlord Hei Long’s soldiers. It is these scarlet characters, gleaming on the dark stonework that earned Hei Long’s fortress its name, ‘Bloody Palace’.

Those walls are impregnable. They’ve never been breached and no prisoner has ever escaped from the dungeons under the fortress, the only reminders of their existence are screams of agony echoing across the valleys.

Today he will enter those gates, an unarmed captive, and face Hei Long, the warlord, a tyrant who hates him and has put a price on his head.

The six horsemen, swords drawn, stop in a line in front of the small party, blocking the road.

“In the name of Hei Long, warlord of this province, I, Wei Gang, order you to drop your

weapons,” Says the leader, a sour wolfish man with eyes as black and devoid of expression as the stone of the mountain, “Obey, or the snow will run red with your blood.”

Feng sees they have no option. He unsheathes his sword and surrenders it, blade pointed towards his own throat, into the outstretched hand of Wei Gang.

“Do as he commands, Yan,” he urges and the other reluctantly gives up his weapon.

“We come in peace,” Feng continues, “Emissaries from the court of Lord Jun Min. We request an audience to discuss trade and bring a gift from our lord for Hei Long.

Gang’s wolfish face remains impassive, but there is a sneering tone in his voice, “Save your words for when you have audience with my lord. We would’ve cut you down and left you to rot on the roadside, but we know how much Hei Long enjoys interviewing travellers himself.”

The five with him chuckle softly at his words.

It is not a reassuring sound.

The travellers are escorted to the gates surrounded by their mounted escort, two in front, one either side and two behind. At their approach, the portcullis lifts and the great wooden doors open.

Inside the fortress there are few armed men. The travellers aren’t surprised. The hamlets they’ve passed through have been agog with the news that the warlord’s troops are out raiding, gathering supplies from neighbouring farms for the winter months.

Their escort dismounts in the courtyard. They order Feng and Yan to do the same. A cowed old man and a skinny boy lead their horses away. Judging from their wretched demeanour and thin ragged dress, they seem more slaves than servants or retainers. Most of the people they see inside these stark walls look downtrodden and miserable.

Seeing the men dismounting, the hooded figure slips from the bamboo chair and lands lightly behind Jian, the human pack horse. The hood falls back, revealing a female face, beautiful and very young, with skin as soft and delicate as a cherry blossom. Long dark lashes frame jade green eyes and her hair is a shining mass of raven silk, twisted into a coil, held in place by a single long sliver of bamboo that acts as a pin.

Gang rudely seizes the clasp at the front of her cloak and rips it open. Small and slender as she is, she hides womanly curves under the folds of the heavy outer garment. She is clad in a silk shift. About her neck and wound around her waist are strings of iridescent oval beads.

Feng turns cold eyes on Gang, “You presume to sample our lord’s gift to Hei Long?”

At the mention of his warlord's name the man hurriedly lets the cloak fall back in place and steps back from the girl.

He cannot resist saying with a sneer, "We can wait. When Hei Long tires of her we will have his leavings."

Surrounded by their armed guard, the four are marched across the courtyard to a massive wooden door. In the weak light, the scarlet lacquer characters decorating its dark panels resemble congealing blood.

A barked command from Wei Gang and they are admitted to the grand hall of the Blood Palace.

They wait at the foot of a crimson dais while Gang sends a messenger to notify the warlord of their presence.

The hall begins to fill as curious people file in to see what the commotion is about.

The hubbub of conversation stops abruptly as Hei Long makes his appearance and stalks toward his throne on the dais.

Although it's twelve years since he slew his uncle and seized power, he's still an impressive figure. He's huge and hulking as a bear, but the muscles of the warrior who once led his army on raids, have now degenerated into soft fat from a life spent drinking, feasting and enjoying the depravities that his power affords him.

He settles his bulk onto the throne and surveys the gathering in the hall with beady eyes.

Finally he stares at the four standing before the platform.

He smirks. His wide, thin lipped mouth in his mottled fleshy face, the pudgy jowls and great double chin remind Jian of a toad.

"State your business in my land." Hei Long rasps.

"Lord Hei Long we bring a gift from Lord Jun Min and an offer of trade."

Feng's words make the warlord throw back his head and laugh loudly.

"It is well known that Jun Min is ailing, on his deathbed. What can he have to give or trade? I take whatever I want and destroy that which I don't need?"

"My lord is recovered. He desires the return of his daughter, Yèyīng, who was treacherously brought here by his eunuch while he was ill," Feng explains. "The eunuch persuaded Yèyīng to accompany him to the mountainside to gather medicinal herbs to cure her father. Then, fearing that if Jun Min died, your armies would overrun his lands and slay his people, the traitor delivered the princess to you in exchange for his own safety."

"Yes," Hei Long chuckled, "The eunuch told me Jun Min calls his daughter 'little nightingale' because she sings so beautifully. I am disappointed. She hasn't sung for me yet,

but she will. I have methods to help her find her tongue.”

His henchmen titter. Hei Long’s methods for helping people find their tongues are notorious. Feng’s mouth sets in a grim line as Yan draws the hooded girl forward.

He removes her cloak so the warlord can see her youthful beauty. Hei Long’s appetite for maidens, the younger the better, is well known.

“This is Zhu Lan. She is but fourteen years, younger even than Yèyīng. Jun Min offers her in exchange for the safe return of his daughter.

Little Zhu Lan stands before the warlord, infamous for his sadistic illtreatment of young concubines, and blushes prettily. She removes the bamboo pin from her lustrous hair, lets it tumble about her shoulders, fingers the beads at her throat and smiles naively.

The warlord looks mightily amused, his little eyes disappear in folds of waxy flesh and he giggles.

“Bring forth Yèyīng,” He claps his hands, “Let her father’s emissaries see how safe I keep her.”

Two servants enter. Between them, slung on a pole, they carry a gilded cage. Inside the cage is Princess Yèyīng.

Jian’s fists clench around the chains fastened to his wrists. He rages inwardly that the warlord publicly humiliates the princess in this way. It is obvious he has no respect for Jun Min, he intentionally shows his contempt and insults him by mistreating his daughter.

Feng remains calm. His voice when he addresses Hei Long shows no shock at what he’s seeing.

“My lord, Jun Min knows your sworn enemy is the bandit, Lei Jian, who outwits you and makes you and your men look fools at every turn. You wish to make him suffer for the humiliation he’s caused you, therefore you’ve put a bounty on his head.”

Hei Long glares at Feng. Mention of the daring young bandit leader always puts him in a foul temper.

“Like you, my lord, Jun Min desires revenge,” Feng continues, “He wishes to punish the treacherous eunuch who tricked his daughter and betrayed his trust.”

Feng puts his hand under Jian’s chin, forces his head up, so his long hair falls back and the warlord can see the distinguishing scar on his cheekbone.

“My lord, this ruffian is the bandit, Lei Jian, your sworn enemy.”

People stare incredulously.

“How can this be?” They mutter.

They cannot believe it’s the daring young bandit chief, the elusive Lei Jian, the brilliant

escape artist, standing meekly before them in chains.

Hei Long stares at the mark on the youth's face. He knows this youth really is Jian and his eyes glitter with hatred.

"We offer you Lei Jian in exchange for the traitorous eunuch," Feng says.

"Very well," Hei Long says, "Where is my new eunuch? Bring him forward."

There's scuffling, a high-pitched voice raised in protest as the wretched fellow, who was trying to sneak out of the hall, is dragged back and brought before the dais.

"Well, should I send you back to Jun Min, who is recovered and eager to be reacquainted with you?" Hei Long asks, enjoying the man's obvious terror at the thought of facing the master he betrayed.

The eunuch looks at Feng and Yan and smiles an oily smile.

"My Lord," He squeals, "Why should you do a deal with an weak, ailing old man? Why not keep all of us?"

Hei Long chuckles at this. "You're a clever rascal, far too valuable to lose."

He smirks at Feng and Yan.

"You've brought me my enemy in chains, and little Zhu Lan as a plaything. What is to stop me keeping the princess and the eunuch and executing you two?"

As he utters those words the gathering sees the warlord rise from his throne. His mouth opens as if in surprise. Then his head parts from his body, flies up from his shoulders, and hits the ceiling over the dais.

Hei Long's body slumps back onto his throne. It sits there for a couple of seconds, blood spurting upwards from the severed neck and then it topples to the floor with a thud.

Gang points at Jian, but it is not an accusing finger he points but the bloody stump of his wrist.

"My sword," He splutters, "My hand.." He collapses to the floor, blood pouring from the stump, as his sword, still clasped in his severed hand, flashes through the air and slashes the sword hand off the soldier next to him. People dive for cover as the ghastly sword swings in a wide arc, scything through the air.

It is Jian who controls the grisly blade. He used his chain attached to his wrist to disarm Gang. Whirling it like a lasso, he flung it at his enemy's sword arm, letting it coil around the man's wrist before pulling it sharply back towards himself. The fine metal links cut into Gang's flesh and cleanly removed his wrist, still clutching the sword.

Jian cuts down the soldiers, his fist gripping the thin chain attached to his wrist and whirling

it like a lasso. Little Zhu Lan stands tall in the chair slung on Jian's back. In her hand is the long bamboo hairpin. She plucks beads from the string about her waist and uses the bamboo pin to flick them through the air with deadly accuracy. The beads are the waxen cocoons of hornets which feed on the nectar of the poisonous xei cactus flower. As the beads hit the soldiers a deadly toxin is released, paralysing the victim, turning his muscles to stone. Feng and Yan pick up the slain soldiers' swords and leap through the crowd dispatching the men Zhu Lan has rendered into human statues by cutting their throats.

Soon the Bloody Palace truly lives up to its name and there are only unarmed civilians cowering in the hall. Jian leaps up on the dais and addresses them.

"Do not fear," Jian says, "We will leave now and you are free men. Bar the fortress doors behind us. When Hei Long's raiding parties return, let no man enter. If the soldiers cannot get back into the palace it will be easy for me and my men to pick them off and rid the countryside of their evil.

Until then, you will find that Hei Long has stored plenty of food in this palace and you will not go hungry."

Feng finds a key hidden on the warlord's body, unlocks the cage door and frees Princess Yèyīng from her humiliating imprisonment. Her eyes glisten as she looks at her rescuers.

"Lei Jian, I am ashamed that my father sent you here in chains to barter for my release."

"Do not be ashamed, Princess," Jian reassures her, "It was my idea to pose as a wretched captive. It was the quickest way to gain access to Hei Long's palace and set you free."

Feng clears his throat and points to a plump figure, frozen in the act of running away by one of Zhu Lan's toxic hornet beads.

"Er, Princess, what would you like us to do with the eunuch who brought you here?" He asks,

"Shall we take him back to your father's palace to receive the punishment he deserves?"

Princess Yèyīng sighs, "I know my father as a merciful man. I do not wish to see him behave otherwise. We will not take the eunuch with us."

Jian's sword flashes, blood spurts for the last time and the travellers and the princess leave the Bloody Palace and do not look back.

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