

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is Episode 1.

Before we dive in to the narrative, we're going to begin with a poem. This is a common technique in ancient Chinese literature. The poem at the beginning of a long epic often provides a meta view of the saga that is about to unfold. So keep the images and ideas from this poem in mind as we progress through the story of the Three Kingdoms.

The song goes:

O so vast, O so mighty, The Great River rolls to sea,  
Flowers do waves thrash, Heroes do sands smash,  
When all the dreams drain, Same are loss and gain.  
Green mountains remain, As sunsets ingrain,  
Hoary fishers and woodcutters, And some small rafts and calm waters,  
In autumn moon, in spring winds, By the wine jars, by porcelains,  
Discuss talk and tale, Only laugh and gale.

Chapter 1: In the peach garden three men of valor swear brotherhood; by slaying the rebels the heroes record their first feat

Ever since antiquity, domains under heaven, after a long period of division, tend to unite; and after a long period of unity, tend to divide. For instance, the Zhou dynasty lasted almost 800 years, from 1046 to 256 BC. Nearing the end of the Zhou, however, seven kingdoms sprang up and made war on each other until the kingdom of Qin prevailed and founded the Qin dynasty. This was the dynasty that gave China its first emperor. But the Qin dynasty only lasted 15 years, and when it fell, the kingdoms of Chu and Han battled for control of the realm, and Han emerged victorious.

The rise of Han began when, according to legend, Liu Bang, the man who would become its first

emperor, slew a white serpent to signify the beginning of his uprising. Liu Bang would go on to unite the country under his rule, found the Han dynasty in 202 BC, and become referred to by posterity as the Supreme Ancestor. You will hear that title come up from time to time as various characters in the novel refer back to the great deeds of the first emperor of the Han dynasty.

The empire created by the Supreme Ancestor was handed down through successive emperors for two hundred years, but these rulers became less and less supreme, until in 9 A.D., a court official named Wang Mang usurped the throne. Wang Mang's rule, however, only lasted 14 years before Liu Xiu, one of many descendants of the royal house of Han, overthrew him and resurrected the Han Dynasty. The Han dynasty that came before Wang Mang's usurpation is commonly called the Western Han, while the Han dynasty that followed the usurpation is called the Eastern Han. These designations are based on the relative geographic locations of the two dynasties' capitals. The Western Han had its capital in Chang'an, or present-day Xi'an, while the Eastern Han had its capital in Luoyang, which is to the east of Chang'an. You can see both of these capitals on the map provided on the website.

After the Han dynasty was resurrected by Liu Xiu, it reigned for another two hundred years until the days of Emperor Xian, at which point it split into three parts, and this was known as the Three Kingdoms. The seeds for the fall of the empire, however, were planted much earlier, during the reigns of the two emperors who directly preceded Emperor Xian. These two were Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling, who ruled around the middle of the second century.

So what went wrong? Well, Emperor Huan ignored the good people of his court, and instead trusted the Palace eunuchs. Now, if you are familiar with Chinese history, or the history of just about any other culture whose governing apparatus included eunuchs, then you probably know that any time eunuchs start wielding a lot of power, trouble isn't far behind. At least that's how the narrative goes. And so it was the case here.

After Emperor Huan died, Emperor Ling ascended to the throne. During this time, eunuchs were

abusing their power and meddling in the affairs of state. The emperor's top two advisers -- the Regent Marshall Dou Wu and the Imperial Guardian Chen Fan -- devised a plan to eliminate the eunuchs, but somebody broke the first two rules of fight club and word of their plot got out. The two advisers were executed by the eunuchs instead, and the debacle left the eunuchs even more powerful than before.

Ok, so all of the stuff we just covered gets us up to where the saga really starts: the year 168, or, according to the traditional Chinese way of date-keeping, the second year in the era of Established Calm in the reign of Emperor Ling. But, we'll go with 168 A.D. This was when the strange omens began.

On the day of the full moon of the fourth month, Emperor Ling went to the Hall of Virtue to preside over state affairs. As soon as he sat down on the throne, however, a rushing whirlwind sprang up in the corner of the hall, and from the roof beams floated down a monstrous black serpent, which coiled itself on the throne! The Emperor fell in a swoon. Those nearest him hastily picked him up and carried him to his palace, while the courtiers scattered and fled. The serpent soon disappeared. But there followed a terrific tempest, thunder, hail, and torrential rain, all of which did not stop until midnight and wreaked havoc on countless buildings.

Two years later, the earth trembled in the capital Luoyang, while along the coast a huge tidal wave rushed in and swept away all those who dwelled by the sea.

More strange omens came ten years later, in 178 AD. Some hens apparently turned into roosters. Then, at the new moon of the sixth month, a long wreath of murky cloud wound its way into the Hall of Virtue. The following month a rainbow was seen in the Dragon Chamber. That same month, away from the capital, a part of the Yuan Mountains collapsed, leaving a mighty rift in the flank.

Now, from our perspective, there's probably a perfectly reasonable, scientific explanation for all these things. But this was a time of superstitions, and such things are seen as signs of heaven's displeasure with things on earth. So Emperor Ling issued an edict asking his ministers for an explanation

for the strange omens. Court Counselor Cai Yong wrote a memorial -- which is basically a well-crafted essay. Cai Yong's memorial said bluntly: "Falling rainbows and sex-changing birds are brought about by the meddling of empresses and eunuchs in state affairs."

The Emperor read this memorial, let out a deep sigh, and got up to use the bathroom. Meanwhile, Cao Jie, the Chief Eunuch, read the memorial and told his fellow eunuchs. As you can imagine, they weren't too pleased with Cai Yong. When an opportunity presented itself, they levied a trumped-up charge against him, drove him out of the court and into retirement.

After this, the eunuchs grew bolder. Ten of them, rivals in wickedness and associates in evil deeds, formed a powerful faction known as the Ten Regular Attendants. One of them, Zhang Rang, wielded such influence that he became the Emperor's most honored and trusted adviser. The Emperor even called him "Foster Father". So the corrupt state administration quickly went from bad to worse, and the country became ripe for rebellion and was plagued by brigands and bandits.

At this time, in the county of Julu, there were three brothers: Zhang Jue, Zhang Bao, and Zhang Lian. The oldest, Zhang Jue, was a scholar who had failed to place high enough in the imperial exam to earn a government position, so he turned to practicing medicine instead. One day, while collecting samples in the mountains, Zhang Jue came across a venerable old man. This old man's eyes were bright and emerald green. He had a youthful complexion and walked with a staff made from the hardened staff of a goosefoot plant.

The old man led Zhang Jue into a cave and gave him three volumes of The Book of Heaven. "This book," said the old man, "is the Essential Arts of Peace. With the aid of these volumes, you can convert the world and rescue humankind. But if you turn to wickedness, rest assured, you will suffer the consequences."

Zhang Jue bowed humbly, took the book, and asked his benefactor for his name.

"I am the Immortal Hermit of the Southern Land," the old man replied and vanished into thin air.

So Zhang Jue studied the book eagerly and worked day and night to turn its teachings into practice. Before long, he learned how to summon the winds and command the rain, and he became known as the Mystic of the Way of Peace.

In the first month of the first year of the reign of Central Stability, or the year 184, the land was besieged by a terrible pestilence. Zhang Jue distributed magical remedies to heal the afflicted, and soon he began calling himself the Wise and Worthy Master. He was obviously a very humble man. He amassed 500-some disciples, who, like their master, could write charms and cast spells, and they spread throughout the land.

With his followers growing by the day, Zhang Jue organized his disciples into thirty-six circuits, the larger with ten thousand or more members, the smaller with about half that number. Each circuit had its own chief, who took the military title of General.

These disciples were basically telling people that an apocalypse was coming. They said a new cycle was dawning and would bring universal good fortune to the members of their sects. They told people to write the name of the first year of the new cycle on their doors. They said that this new cycle would be marked by the sky turning yellow and the fall of the Han dynasty.

So if the Han isn't going to be in charge anymore once the clock strikes midnight, who will? Considering the titles that he has been taking for himself, was it any surprise that Zhang Jue thought that it should be him? As the number of his supporters grew, so grew his ambitions. He sent one of his followers to secretly bribe the eunuch Feng Xu, one of the Ten Regular Attendants, so that they would have a supporter inside the palace. Zhang Jue then said to his brothers, "The heart of the people is the most difficult thing to obtain. But the people are with us now, and we must not miss this opportunity to seize the empire."

So they began to prepare. They secretly made numerous yellow flags and banners and selected a

date to start their uprising. Then Zhang Jue sent a disciple with a letter to the eunuch Feng Xu to tell him of their plans.

But, Zhang Jue's HR people apparently didn't do a very good job of screening their candidates, because this disciple promptly betrayed him and reported the whole thing to the court. Upon hearing of the plot, the Emperor dispatched the Regent Marshal, He Jin, who quickly arrested and beheaded the man that Zhang Jue had sent to bribe the eunuch. The eunuch Feng Xu and many others were also thrown in prison.

With their plot uncovered, the Zhang brothers had no choice but to mobilize their forces immediately. So they -- surprise surprise -- took up rather grandiose titles: Zhang Jue called himself the General of Heaven, Zhang Bao the General of the Earth, and Zhang Lian the General of Mankind. They put forth a manifesto that said: "The fortune of the Han is exhausted, and the Great Sage has appeared. Discern the will of Heaven, people, and walk in the way of righteousness, whereby alone you may attain peace."

The brothers found plenty of supporters. People everywhere bound their heads with yellow scarves and joined their army. This would become known as the Yellow Turban Rebellion, one of the bloodiest revolts in history. When you count all the people who died in the battles and the resulting famines, it is estimated that as many as 7 million people might've died.

With people flocking to his banner, Zhang Jue was soon leading an army of nearly half a million, and the government troops melted away at a whisper of his coming. He Jin, the Regent Marshal and Guardian of the Throne, asked the emperor to immediately send out an edict telling all corners of the empire to prepare to face the rebels. In the meantime, three Imperial Commanders---Lu Zhi, Huangfu Song, and Zhu Jun---were dispatched at the head of elite troops in three different directions.

Meanwhile Zhang Jue led his army into Youzhou, which is in the northeastern region of the empire. The Imperial Protector of Youzhou was Liu Yan, a member of the Imperial House. When he heard that the

rebels were approaching, Liu Yan summoned his commander, Zhou Jing, to discuss what to do. Zhou Jing said, "They are many and we are few. We must enlist more troops." Liu Yan agreed, and he put out notices saying Uncle Liu wants you for the Han army.

One of these notices was posted in the county of Zhuo, where a hero lived. This man was not particularly fond of book-learning. But he was liberal and amiable, albeit a man of few words, and he hid his feelings under a calm exterior. He had always had high aspirations and befriended men of valor throughout the land. He was about 5 foot 11, which was fairly tall in those times. His ears were long, with the lobes touching his shoulders, and his hands hung down below his knees. His eyes were very big and prominent, and he could see backward past his ears. His complexion was as clear as jade, and he had rich red lips.

His name was Liu Bei. He was a descendant of one of the sons of the fourth emperor of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Many years ago, one of his ancestors had been the governor of the county Zhuo, but lost his rank because he was remiss in his ceremonial offerings. So this branch of the imperial house had remained stranded in that county, gradually becoming poorer and poorer as the years rolled on. Liu Bei's father, Liu Hong, was a scholar and a virtuous official but died young, leaving his wife widowed and his son fatherless. As a child, Liu Bei gained a reputation for being extremely filial toward his mother.

At this time the family had sunk deep into poverty, and Liu Bei made a living by selling straw sandals and weaving grass mats. His family lived in a village near the main town in the county. Near the house stood a huge mulberry tree, and seen from afar its curved profile resembled the canopy of a chariot. Noting the luxuriance of its foliage, a soothsayer had once predicted that one day a man of distinction would come from the family that lived near the tree. When he was a kid, Liu Bei played with other village children under the tree, and he would say, "When I am emperor, this shall be my chariot!" Upon seeing this, his uncle said, "This is no ordinary child," and he often helped out Liu Bei's family financially to keep them from being truly destitute.

When Liu Bei was 15, his mother sent him traveling around the empire for his education. He became friends with the likes of Gongsun Zan, who would go on to become one of many warlords in the last days of the Han dynasty. For a time Liu Bei called Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi his masters. This Lu Zhi, we should note, is the same Lu Zhi who is one of three imperial commanders out fighting the Yellow Turbans at the moment.

When the Yellow Turban Rebellion broke out, Liu Bei was already 28 and back home scraping out a living by selling sandals and mats. When he read the recruitment notice, he let out a sad sigh. Suddenly a rasping voice behind him cried, "You're a man! Why are you sighing instead of doing something for your country?!" Liu Bei turned around and saw a man who was about 6 foot 3, with a head like a leopard's, large eyes, a swallow-pointed chin, and whiskers like a tiger's. His voice was like thunder and his movements were like a galloping stallion. At once Liu Bei saw he was no ordinary man and asked who he was.

"Zhang Fei is my name," the stranger replied. "I live near here where I have a farm. I also sell wine and butcher pigs, and I like to meet men of valor. I saw you sigh just now as you were reading the notice, so I inquired."

Liu Bei replied, "I am a member of the Imperial House, Liu Bei is my name. And I wish I could destroy these Yellow Turbans and restore peace to the land, but alas! I have no means."

"I have the means," said Zhang Fei. "I can use it to recruit a local militia and we can do great deeds together. What do you think?"

Liu Bei was delighted at this, and the two went to the village inn to discuss their plans over wine. As they were drinking, they spotted a tall man pushing a hand-cart. He stopped at the threshold of the inn, entered, sat down, and called for wine. "And be quick!" he added. "I am in a hurry to get into town and offer my services to the army."

Liu Bei looked over this man. He was huge -- standing 7 foot 2. His beard was one and a half foot



long. His face was red like a date, with deep red lips. He had eyes like a phoenix's and fine bushy eyebrows like silkworms. His whole appearance was dignified and awe-inspiring.

Presently, Liu Bei walked over, sat down beside the stranger and asked his name.

"I am Guan Yu," he replied. "I am a native of the east side of the river, but I have been on the run for some five years, because I slew a local ruffian who used his wealth and power to bully people. I heard they were recruiting soldiers here, so I have come to join the army."

Liu Bei then told Guan Yu his own intentions, and all three of them went to Zhang Fei's home to talk over the grand plan. Zhang Fei said, "The peach trees in the orchard behind the house are just in full bloom. Tomorrow we shall make a sacrifice there and solemnly declare our intention before Heaven and Earth, and we three will swear to be brothers, join our strengths and hearts, and then embark on our great task." Both Liu Bei and Guan Yu immediately replied, "So shall it be!"

The next day they prepared a black ox and a white horse for sacrifice. Beneath the smoke of the incense burning on the altar, they bowed their heads and recited this oath: "We three---Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei---though of different families, swear brotherhood, and promise to work together to one end. We will rescue each other in difficulty; we will aid each other in danger. We swear to serve the state and save the people. We ask not to be born on the same day, but to die on the same day. May Heaven, the all-ruling, and Earth, the all-producing, read our hearts. If we turn aside from righteousness or forget kindness, may Heaven and Mankind smite us!"

They then rose from their knees. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei bowed before Liu Bei, recognizing him as their eldest brother, and Zhang Fei was to be the youngest brother. This solemn ceremony performed, they slew other oxen and threw a feast, to which they invited the villagers. Some three hundred joined them, and all feasted and drank deep in the Peach Garden.

The next day they mustered weapon, but lamented the lack of horses. Soon, though, they received the news that two horse dealers had arrived with a drove of horses. "Heaven has smiled upon us!" said

Liu Bei. The three brothers went forth to welcome the merchants. They were from Zhongshan and went north every year to buy horses. They were on their way home because of news of the unrest. The brothers invited them in and served them wine. Then Liu Bei told them of the plan to pacify the rebels and protect the people. The merchants were delighted and were willing to give the brothers 50 good steeds, along with 500 ounces of gold and silver and 1,500 pounds of steel fit for the forging of weapons. The brothers expressed their gratitude, and the merchants took their leave.

Blacksmiths were then summoned to forge weapons. For Liu Bei they made a pair of vintage swords. For Guan Yu they fashioned a long-handled, curve blade called the Green-Dragon Saber, which weighed a full 120 pounds. And for Zhang Fei they created a 10-foot spear called the Serpent Halberd. Each brother also had a helmet and full armor made. When the weapons were ready, the militia, now some 500 strong, marched to Commander Zhou Jing, who presented them to Imperial Protector Liu Yan. After the introductions, Liu Bei mentioned his ancestry, and Liu Yan was delighted, immediately calling Liu Bei his nephew.

A few days later, scouts reported that the a Yellow Turban chieftain, Cheng Yuanzhi, was on his way to invade the county with an army of 50,000 rebels. Liu Yan ordered Zhou Jing to lead the three brothers and 500 troops to go take on the rebels. Liu Bei and company joyfully led the vanguard and marched to the foot of the Daxing Hills, where they met the rebels.

The rebels wore their hair down, flying about their shoulders, and their foreheads were bound with yellow scarves. When the two armies had lined up opposite each other, Liu Bei rode to the front, with Guan Yu to his left and Zhang Fei to his right. Raising his whip, Liu Bei began to reproach the rebels, shouting, "Rebels and traitors! Why don't you surrender now?" This ticked off the rebel leader Cheng Yuanzhi. He sent out a lieutenant, Deng Mao, to open the battle. Zhang Fei rode out at once, his serpent

halberd poised to strike. Just one thrust and Deng Mao rolled off his horse, pierced through the heart. At the sight of this, Cheng Yuanzhi himself whipped up his steed and rode toward Zhang Fei with sword raised. But Guan Yu, swinging his green-dragon saber, charged at Cheng Yuanzhi. Upon seeing this, Cheng Yuanzhi froze in fear, and before he could defend himself, the great saber fell, cutting him in half.

Later, someone commemorated the triumph with a poem:

Two heroes new to war's alarms,  
Ride boldly forth to try their arms.  
Their doughty deeds three kingdoms tell,  
And poets sing how these befell.

Seeing their leader chopped in half, the rebels dropped their weapons and fled. Liu Bei led his troops in pursuit. Innumerable rebels surrendered, and Liu Bei returned with a total victory. Upon their return, Liu Yan personally met them and distributed rewards for the troops.

The next day, letters came from Gong Jing, the Imperial Protector of the Qing province, saying that help was urgently requested as the rebels were laying siege to the main city and that it was about to fall.

"I will go," Liu Bei said as soon as he heard the news. And he set out at once with his own soldiers, reinforced by a body of 5,000 under Zhou Jing. The rebels, seeing the reinforcements coming, split their forces and the two sides engaged in fierce fighting. Liu Bei's forces were comparatively small and thus could not prevail. So they retreated some ten miles and made camp.

"The enemy outnumber us," Liu Bei said to his brothers. "Only with the element of surprise can we attain victory." So they prepared an ambush. Guan Yu led 1,000 men and hid on the left of the hills, while Zhang Fei led 1,000 men and hid on the right. When they hear the gongs beat, they were to charge out to support the main army.

The next day, Liu Bei and Zhou Jing led their troops and advanced while beating drums and making all kinds of noise. The rebels came forward to meet them. Liu Bei suddenly retreated. Thinking this was their chance, the rebels pressed forward. As soon as they went over the hills, however, Liu Bei's army beat the gongs to spring the trap. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei poured out from right and left, and Liu Bei wheeled around to rejoin the fray. Under siege on three sides, the rebels suffered heavy casualties and fled to the walls of Qingzhou City. But Imperial Protector Gong Jing led a militia out to join the fight, and the rebels were routed and many were slain. Qingzhou was no longer in danger.

A poet later praised Liu Bei thus:

Though fierce as tigers soldiers be,

Battle are won by strategy.

A hero comes; he gains renown,

Already destined for a crown.

After the celebrations for the victory were over, Commander Zhou Jing wanted to return to Youzhou. But Liu Bei said, "We are informed that Imperial Commander Lu Zhi has been struggling with a horde of rebels led by Zhang Jue at Guangzong. Lu Zhi was once my teacher, and I want to go help him."

So Zhou Jing led his troops and returned to Youzhou, while Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei led their own army of 500 to Guangzong. They found Lu Zhi's camp, were admitted to his presence, and explained why they had come. The Commander was delighted and asked them to remain with him while he made his plans.

At that time Zhang Jue had 150,000 troops faced off against Lu Zhi 50,000, and neither had the upper hand. Lu Zhi said to Liu Bei, "I am able to surround these rebels here. But the other two rebel brothers, Zhang Bao and Zhang Lian, are entrenched against Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun at Yingchuan. I will give you a thousand more troops, and with these you can go to find out what is happening, and we can

then pick the right moment for a concerted attack."

So Liu Bei set off and marched as quickly as possible to Yingchuan. At that time the imperial troops were successful in their attacks, and the rebels had retreated to Changshe, where they made camp among the thick grass. Seeing this, Huangfu Song said to Zhu Jun, "The rebels are camping in the field. We can attack them by fire." So the Imperial Commanders ordered every man to cut a bundle of dry grass and lie in wait. That night a strong wind whipped up, and at the second watch -- or around 9 p.m. -- the imperial troops started a blaze. At the same time Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun's troops attacked the rebels and set their camp on fire. The flames rose to the heavens. The rebels were thrown into great confusion. They had no time to saddle their horses or don their armor, and simply fled in all directions.

The battle continued until dawn. Zhang Lian and Zhang Bao, with a group of fleeing rebels, found a way out. But suddenly a troop of soldiers with crimson banners appeared and blocked their path. Their leader was a man about 5 foot 6, with narrow eyes and a long beard. He was Cao Cao, a man from Peiguo who holds the rank of Cavalry Commander.

So we're going to hit pause right in the middle of the battle here and give you a quick primer on Cao Cao's background, because he's going to be a key figure in our story. His father was named Cao Song, but was not born into the Cao family. Cao Song had been born to the Xiahou family, but he had been brought up by the eunuch Cao Teng and thus took that family name.

In his youth, Cao Cao was fond of hunting and delighted in songs and dancing. He was resourceful and full of guile. An uncle, seeing the young man so unsteady, used to get angry with him and told his father of his misdeeds, and his father would scold him. Cao Cao, however, devised a scheme to deal with this. One day, when he saw his uncle coming, he fell to the ground and pretended to have a seizure. The uncle ran to tell his father. His father hurried over to check on Cao Cao, but found him to be perfectly fine.

"But your uncle said you were having a seizure. Are you feeling better?" his father asked.

"I have never suffered seizures or any such thing," said Cao Cao. "But I have lost my uncle's affection,

and he must have therefore deceived you."

After this episode, whatever the uncle might say of Cao Cao's faults, his father paid no heed. So the young man grew up licentious and uncontrolled. A man of the time named Qiao Xuan once said to Cao Cao, "Rebellion is at hand, and only a man of the greatest ability can succeed in restoring tranquillity. That man is you." And He Yong of Nanyang said of Cao Cao, "The Han dynasty is about to fall. The one who can restore peace is him and him alone."

And we have one more tale foretelling Cao Cao's prominence in our saga. He once went to see a wise man named Xu Shao to inquire about his future. "What manner of man am I?" Cao Cao asked. The seer made no reply, and again and again Cao Cao pressed the question. Then Xu Shao replied, "In time of peace you are an able subject; in time of chaos you are a crafty hero!" Cao Cao rejoiced upon hearing this.

Cao Cao graduated at age 20 and earned a reputation for piety and integrity. He began his career as the Commanding Officer in a county within the Capital District. In the four gates of the city he guarded, he hung up clubs of various sorts, and he would punish any breach of the law, no matter the rank of the offender. One night, while on patrol, Cao Cao saw an uncle of a powerful eunuch walking the streets with a sword, which was against the law. He promptly arrested the man and gave him the beating that the law prescribed for the offense. After that, no one dared to break the law again, and Cao Cao's fame began to spread. Soon he became a magistrate of Dunqiu.

At the outbreak of the Yellow Turban rebellion, Cao Cao held the rank of General and was ordered to lead 5,000 cavalry and foot soldiers to join the battle at Yingchuan. On his way, he happened upon the newly defeated rebels, so he blocked their path and routed them, slaying thousands and capturing countless banners, drums, and horses, along with huge sums of money. However, Zhang Bao and Zhang Lian managed to fight their way out and fled. After meeting with Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun, Cao Cao left to pursue the fleeing rebel leaders.

Meanwhile Liu Bei and his brothers were on their way to Yingchuan. When they heard the din of battle and saw flames rising high toward the sky, they hastened their march. But they arrived too late, as the rebels had already scattered. Liu Bei met with Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun and told them of Lu Zhi's intentions.

"The rebel power is broken here," the commanders said, "but they will surely make for Guangzong to join Zhang Jue. You can do nothing better than hasten back."

So the three brothers retraced their steps. Half way to Guangzong, however, they saw a party of soldiers escorting a prisoner in a cage-cart. When they drew near, they saw that the prisoner was none other than Lu Zhi, the man they were going to help.

Liu Bei hastily dismounted and asked what had happened. Lu Zhi explained, "I had surrounded the rebels and was on the verge of smashing them when Zhang Jue summoned some of his supernatural powers and prevented my victory. The court sent down the eunuch Zhuo Feng to check on my progress, and he demanded a bribe. I said, 'Even the army is short on provisions. Where am I supposed to find a gift for you?' He left with a grudge and reported to the court that I was hiding behind my ramparts and would not give battle and that I had demoralized my army. That angered the court, so they sent Dong Zhuo, commander of the imperial guard, to replace me, and I have to go to the capital to answer the charges against me."

Upon hearing this, Zhang Fei flew into a rage and wanted to kill the escort and set Lu Zhi free. But Liu Bei checked him. "The government has its due process," Liu Bei said. "You must not act rashly!" The escort then moved on with Lu Zhi.

At this point, Guan Yu said, "Since Commander Lu has been arrested and someone else put in charge of his army, there is no point in us going back there. Why don't we return to Zhuo county instead."

Liu Bei took his suggestion, and they set off toward the north. Two days later they heard the thunder

of battle behind a stretch of hills. Hastening to the top of the hill, they saw an army of government soldiers being routed, and behind them they saw the countryside was full of Yellow Turbans advancing toward them. On the rebels' banners were the large words "The General of Heaven".

"It's Zhang Jue! Let's attack immediately." Liu Bei said to his brothers, and they galloped out to join in the battle. Zhang Jue had just routed Dong Zhuo and was in hot pursuit. Suddenly he saw three men slashing through his army and throwing his ranks into confusion. Zhang Jue's troops ended up retreating some 15 miles.

Having fought off the rebels, the three brothers rescued Dong Zhuo and returned with him to his camp. "What offices have you?" Dong Zhuo asked. "None," replied they. Upon hearing this, Dong Zhuo slighted them.

After Liu Bei left Dong Zhuo's tent, Zhang Fei was furious. "We just fought a bloody battle and rescued this bastard, yet he dares to disrespect us! Only his death can soothe my anger!" At that, Zhang Fei stomped toward Dong Zhuo's tent with sword firmly in hand.

Are we about to see Dong Zhuo's head roll? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms podcast.