

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms podcast. This is episode 2.

Previously on the Three Kingdoms, the empire was in trouble. The emperor was weak. The eunuchs were meddling in state affairs. A rebellion had broken out. Three warriors -- Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei -- had sworn to be brothers and work together to restore peace to the land. However, after some early success, their commander was framed by a wicked eunuch and removed from power. So the three warriors were on their way home when they ran into an imperial army being smacked around by the rebels. Our three heroes rode into the fray, turned away an immense rebel army all by themselves, and rescued the commander of the imperial army, Dong Zhuo, who was the governor of Hedong. However, this Dong Zhuo was an arrogant ingrate who turned his nose up at our heroes the minute he learned that they held no rank. This ticked off Zhang Fei, and he was about slash his way into Dong Zhuo's tent and kill him.

Fortunately for Dong Zhuo, and, as we will learn next week, unfortunately for everyone else, Liu Bei and Guan Yu restrained their brother.

"We can't kill him! He is a government official," Liu Bei said.

"If I don't kill this bastard and end up having to serve under him, I would never be able to stand it!"

Zhang Fei said. "You two can stay here if you wish to, but I'm going elsewhere."

"We three are one in life and in death; we cannot part from each other," Liu Bei said. "We will all go."

This appeased Zhang Fei enough for him to put his sword away, and the three brothers set out to join Zhu Jun, one of the other imperial commanders fighting the rebels. Zhu Jun treated them well, and they combined their forces and attacked Zhang Bao (3), the second oldest of the three Zhang brothers who started the rebellion.

Zhang Bao (3) was commanding some 80,000 troops stationed at a strong position in the rear of a stretch of hills. Zhu Jun ordered Liu Bei to lead the vanguard and take on the rebels. Zhang Bao sent out his lieutenant, a general named Gao (1) Sheng (4), to challenge Liu Bei's army for single combat. Liu Bei

sent out Zhang Fei, who shot out at full speed with spear in hand. After just a few bouts, Zhang Fei killed Gao (1) Sheng (4), and Liu Bei ordered his army to charge.

But just then, Zhang Bao (3) pulled out the ace up his sleeve -- sorcery. With his hair hanging down and his sword in hand, Zhang Bao (3) cast a spell that made the wind howl and the thunder roll. A dense black cloud from the heavens settled upon the field, and within this dark cloud, there seemed to be countless horsemen and infantry, sweeping down to attack the imperial troops. Liu Bei hastily retreated, his army fell into chaos, and they suffered a defeat.

Upon his return to camp, Liu Bei met with Zhu Jun to discuss how to counter Zhang Bao's (3) black magic. Their answer? Animal blood, and lots of it.

"Tomorrow, I will use the blood of slaughtered pigs, goats, and dogs to counter Zhang Bao's (3) sorcery," Zhu Jun said. "We'll order the men to hide on a hilltop, and when the rebels come, we will splash them with the blood, which will break their dark magic."

So Liu Bei gave Guan Yu and Zhang Fei 1,000 men each, and they hid on the cliffs behind the hills, with an ample supply of pig, goat, and dog blood, plus a lot of other less-than-pleasant things. The next day, Zhang Bao's (3) army came out to seek battle. They flew their banners high and banged their drums loud. Liu Bei went out to face them. When the two armies met, Zhang Bao (3) turned to his old tricks again. Sand flew in clouds, pebbles were swept along the ground, black vapor filled the sky, and rolling masses of infantry and cavalry descended from on high.

Liu Bei's forces turned and fled, and the rebels gave chase. But as soon as they pressed through the hills, trumpets blared, and a cannon shot went off. Upon this signal, the hidden soldiers let loose with the blood and filth they had collected. At this, the soldiers and horses in the air fluttered harmlessly to the earth, and they turned out to be nothing more than shreds of torn paper. The wind ceased to blow, the thunder subsided, the sand sank, and the pebbles lay still on the ground.

Zhang Bao (3) saw that his sorcery had been broken and quickly tried to retreat. But now Guan Yu

and Zhang Fei dashed out from the flanks with their men, while Liu Bei and Zhu Jun attacked from the rear. The rebels were routed. In the chaos, Liu Bei saw a banner in the distance that said “General of the Earth”. He galloped toward it. As Zhang Bao (3) fled, Liu Bei let fly an arrow, which struck Zhang Bao (3) in the left arm. But Zhang Bao (3) managed to get away. He fled into the city of Yangcheng and fortified its defenses.

Zhu Jun then laid siege to the city while sending out messengers to see how Huangfu Song, the other imperial commander leading troops against the rebels, was doing. At this time, Huangfu Song had been reinforced by Cao Cao, who, if you remember from the last episode, was a cavalry commander who did an impressive mop-up job against a group of defeated rebels. The combined army of Huangfu Song and Cao Cao was waging a huge campaign against Zhang Lian, the youngest of the three brothers at the head of the rebellion.

Zhu Jun’s messenger reported back and said that Huangfu Song had been very successful and has replaced Dong Zhuo at the order of the court, since Dong Zhuo was pretty useless and kept losing. By the time Huangfu Song had arrived at his new command, Zhang Jue, the man who had started the rebellion, had died, and Zhang Lian was leading both his army and his brother’s troops against Huangfu Song. But Huangfu Song won seven straight battles and killed Zhang Lian at the city of Quyang. Huangfu Song didn’t stop there though. He also had Zhang Jue’s coffin exhumed, beheaded his corpse, put the head on public display, and then sent it to the capital. With that, the rebel army surrendered.

For his service, Huangfu Song was promoted to General of the Flying Chariots, which was the second-highest ranking military officer, as well as the imperial protector of Ji Province. Huangfu Song then wrote to the emperor and told him about how Lu (2) Zhi (2), his fellow commander, was framed and unjustly removed from his post after refusing to give a eunuch a bribe. So Lu (2) Zhi (2) got his old job back. Cao Cao also got a promotion and was about to go assume his new post.

Upon hearing this news, Zhu Jun pressed his forces to double their siege on Yangcheng. The rebels’

situation became so dire that one of the rebel officers killed Zhang Bao (3) and brought his head to Zhu Jun. With that, the rebellion in that part of the country was stamped out, and Zhu Jun reported his victory to the court.

But before they could even schedule the victory parade, three other Yellow Turban rebels -- Zhao (4) Hong (2), Han (2) Zhong (1), and Sun (1) Zhong (4) -- had amassed tens of thousands to their banners. They started killing and pillaging, declaring that they were going to avenge Zhang Jue. So the court ordered Zhu Jun to lead his army against these new troublemakers.

Zhu Jun marched to the city of Wancheng, which had been occupied by the rebels. When the imperial troops arrived, the rebel leader Han (2) Zhong (1) went out to face them. Zhu Jun sent Liu Bei and his brothers to attack the southwest corner of the city. Han (2) Zhong (1) led his best men to the southwest corner as well to mount a defense. Meanwhile, Zhu Jun led 2,000 armored cavalry to attack the northeast corner. Worried about losing the city, the rebels quickly abandoned the southwest corner and fell back. Liu Bei gave chase and routed the rebels, who fled into the city.

Zhu Jun wasn't about to just let the rebels stay behind the city walls. His army surrounded the city and cut off the food supply. This made Han (2) Zhong (1) send a messenger out to offer surrender, but Zhu Jun refused.

Liu Bei asked Zhu Jun, "Why do you refuse to accept Han (2) Zhong's (1) surrender? After all, when the Supreme Ancestor won the empire, it was because he welcomed those who were willing to surrender."

"That was then, this is now," Zhu Jun answered. "Back then, the Qin dynasty had just collapsed and the land was in chaos. The people had no clear ruler, so it made sense to reward those who would surrender because it gave them an incentive to do so. But right now, the empire is united with the exception of the Yellow Turbans. There are no benefits to letting them surrender. It would only encourage others to rebel because they would think that if they fail, they can just surrender."

“That’s well and good,” Liu Bei said. “But we’ve surrounded the city like an iron barrel. Since they can’t surrender, the rebels will no doubt fight to the death. With that common cause, they would be a force to be reckoned with since there are now tens of thousands of men in that city with a death sentence hanging over their heads. How about if we leave the south and east sides of the city open and attack the north and west. That way, the rebels will no doubt abandon the city and flee rather than stand and fight. Then it’d be easy to capture them.”

Zhu Jun accepted this plan and pulled back his men from the south and east side of the city and laid siege to the north and west. Just as Liu Bei predicted, Han (2) Zhong (1) and his men abandoned the city and fled. Zhu Jun, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei then fell upon them. Han (2) Zhong (1) was killed by an arrow, and the rest of the rebels scattered. But just as the imperial troops were giving chase, the other two rebel leaders, Zhao (4) Hong (2) and Sun (1) Zhong (4), arrived with their forces and engaged Zhu Jun’s army. Seeing the size of the rebel army, Zhu Jun ordered his forces to fall back for the time being, which allowed Zhao (4) Hong (2) to retake the city of Wancheng.

Zhu Jun set up camp three miles from the city and prepared to attack. Just then an army arrived from the east. At the head of this army was a general with a broad open face, a body like a tiger's, and a torso like a bear's. His name was Sun Jian. He was a native of Fu (4) chun (1). He was supposedly a descendant of Sun Zi, the famous military strategist who wrote The Art of War.

We are going to pause for a little bit here to delve into the background of Sun Jian. When he was seventeen, he and his father were sailing on a river and saw a party of pirates. These buccaneers had just finished robbing a merchant and were dividing their booty on the river bank.

"We can capture these guys!" Sun Jian said to his father. He grabbed his sword and ran on to the bank, where he shouted loudly and pointed here and there as though he was directing men forward. The pirates, apparently not being particularly bright, thought soldiers were coming, so they dropped their loot and ran. Sun Jian chased down and killed one of them. This made him known in the area, and he was

made an officer.

Later, a sorcerer named Xu (3) Chang (1) started a rebellion, calling himself the Emperor of the Sun and amassing tens of thousands of men under his banner. Sun Jian and the local officials recruited about a thousand men and helped put down this uprising, killing Xu Chang and his son. For this, he was commended in a memorial to the emperor, and he received a series of promotions, ending with him being named the magistrate of Xia (4) pi (2).

When the Yellow Turban rebellion began, Sun Jian gathered up the young villager and merchants, got a troop of 1,500 veteran soldiers, and took to the field. And this gets us up to where we left off, with Sun Jian and his army coming to the aid of Zhu Jun.

Zhu Jun welcomed Sun Jian with delight and ordered him to attack the south gate of Wancheng, while Liu Bei attacked the north gate and Zhu Jun the west gate. They left the east gate unguarded for the rebels to flee. Sun Jian was the first one over the wall and cut down more than 20 rebels. While the rebels ran, their leader, Zhao (4) Hong (2), rode toward Sun Jian with his spear poised to strike. But Sun Jian leaped down from the wall, snatched the spear, and used it to kill Zhao (4) Hong (2). Then Sun Jian mounted Zhao Hong's horse and rode here and there, slaying rebels as he went.

The last remaining rebel leader, Sun (1) Zhong (4), led his men and fled out of the north gate, where they ran into Liu Bei. The rebels were not in a fighting mood and so they simply made a run for it. But Liu Bei drew his bow and dropped Sun (1) Zhong (4) with an arrow. Zhu Jun's main army swept in and slaughtered tens of thousands of rebels while countless others surrendered. With this, peace was restored to the ten counties in the Nanyang area.

With two major victories in hand, Zhu Jun returned to the capital and was promoted to the General of the Flying Cavalry and governor of Henan. He also reported to the emperor the merits of Liu Bei and Sun Jian. And here is where we see how important it is to have friends in high places. Sun Jian, who had influential connections in the capital, quickly received an appointment as commander of Changsha and

left to assume his new office. But Liu Bei, who had no high connections in the capital, was left waiting in vain.

As the days dragged on, Liu Bei and his brothers became bored and annoyed, so they went for a walk around the capital one day. By coincidence, they ran into a court official named Zhang (1) Jun (1). Liu Bei introduced himself and mentioned his contributions in pacifying the rebels. Surprised, Zhang (1) Jun (1) went to see the emperor to bring this travesty to his attention.

"The Yellow Turbans rebelled because the eunuchs sold offices and bartered ranks," Zhang (1) Jun (1) said. "They gave jobs only to their friends and punished only their enemies. That's what brought chaos to the empire. We should execute the Ten Regular Attendants, hang their heads in public, make this known throughout the empire, and then reward the worthy. That will ensure tranquility in the land."

But the eunuchs denied it all, and the emperor ordered his guards to throw Zhang (1) Jun (1) out.

But the eunuchs figured that Zhang (1) Jun (1) must have been spurred to action by people who had not been rewarded for their part in putting down the rebellion. To keep the grievances from boiling over, the eunuchs decided to throw a very small bone to a few little dogs. They handed out some minor government jobs to a list of people they considered unimportant, and of course Liu Bei was on that list. He was named the magistrate of An (1) xi (3), a county in the province of Ding (4).

Upon receiving his, umm, reward, Liu Bei disbanded the militia he had raised when the rebellion first started and sent the men home. He only retained about 20 as escorts, and went to An (1) xi (3) with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. After just a month on the job, he had won the hearts of the people in the county because he never took advantage of them (note how low the bar is and think about what that says about the level of corruption at all levels of government at this point). The three brothers lived in harmony, eating at the same table and sleeping on the same couch. When Liu Bei sat in public, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei would stand in attendance, even if it was for the whole day.

This was too good to last, though. Four months after Liu Bei assumed his post, the imperial court put

out a decree that officials who had attained their positions because of military merits are to be removed from office. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that this was the eunuchs' doing. First they doled out minor positions to appease the military officers who had been passed over for promotion. Once those officers assumed their new jobs and were out of the capital -- i.e., too far away for their grumblings to reach the ears of the emperor -- the eunuchs proceeded to take back the jobs they just gave out.

The decree had Liu Bei justifiably worried about his job. One day, an imperial inspector arrived. Liu Bei went out to greet him at the border of the county and politely bowed. The inspector, however, remained seated on his horse and simply waved his whip in return. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were not amused by this, so already this inspector is off to a bad start, and it was only going to get worse.

After he arrived at his lodging, the inspector sat in the seat reserved for the host while Liu Bei stood below attentively. After a long time, the inspector finally spoke.

"Magistrate Liu, what is your background?"

"I am descended from Prince Sheng of Zhongshan. I started fighting the Yellow Turban rebels at Zhuo (1) county and have been in some 30 engagements. I gained some trifling merit in those battles and was rewarded with this office."

"How dare you pretend to be a member of the royal house and lie about your merits?!" the inspector barked. "You're exactly the kind of corrupt official this decree is meant to root out."

Faced with this, Liu Bei could only mutter and withdrew. When he returned to his office, he discussed the matter with his secretary.

"The inspector is just putting up a pompous front to extort a bribe," the secretary said.

"I have never taken advantage of the people for personal gain. What money or gift can I muster for him?" Liu Bei said.

The next day, the inspector had the secretary dragged before him and demanded that he point a finger at Liu Bei and accuse him of mistreating the citizens. Liu Bei went time after time to ask for the



secretary to be released, but was turned away at the door each time.

Meanwhile, Zhang Fei had spent much of the day trying to wash away all this trouble with wine. Now, he was riding past the inspector's lodging when he saw about 50 or 60 old people weeping at the gate. Zhang Fei stopped to ask what's going on.

"The inspector is trying to force secretary levy false charges against Magistrate Liu," the crowd told him. "We came to beg the inspector for mercy, but he not only refuses to see us, but also ordered his doorkeepers to beat us."

Well, that was like dropping a match on gasoline. Zhang Fei, already drunk and annoyed, exploded! His eyes got big and he ground his teeth. He leaped off his horse and stormed into the inspector's lodgings. He stomped into the rear quarters, where he saw the inspector sitting on high while the secretary was tied up on the floor.

"You scum! Do you know who I am?!" Zhang Fei cried.

Before the inspector could even say a word, Zhang Fei grabbed him by the hair, dragged him outside, and tied him to the hitching post. Zhang Fei then snapped off a branch from a willow tree and thrashed the inspector until the branch broke. He then snapped off another branch and lashed the inspector till that broke. And so it went, with Zhang Fei going through a dozen or so branches.

While this was happening, Liu Bei was sitting alone and troubled. When he heard the commotion outside, he asked what was going on. His attendants told him that Zhang Fei was whipping someone tied to a post. Liu Bei hurried outside and saw that the guy being lashed was none other than the inspector. So he asked Zhang Fei what's going on.

"If we don't beat scum like this to death, what are we waiting for?" Zhang Fei replied.

At this point, the inspector cried out to Liu Bei for help. Being the kind-hearted man that he is, Liu Bei stopped Zhang Fei. Guan Yu then stepped forward and said, "Brother, for all that you have done for the court, all you got was this pitiful little posting. And now you have to put up with insults from this

inspector. A thorn bush is no place for a phoenix. Why don't we kill the inspector, ditch this job, go home, and make bigger plans for the future?"

Well, Liu Bei wasn't going to kill the inspector. Instead, he merely hanged his official seal around the inspector's neck and scolded him.

"Considering the harm you've done to the people, I should kill you. But I'll spare you for now. Here's the seal. I quit."

Now, you just know a scoundrel like this inspector wasn't going to leave it at that. As soon as he got away with his head intact, he went to the governor of Ding (4) Province to turn Liu Bei in. The governor issued orders for Liu Bei and his brothers to be arrested, but the three of them had gone to Dai Province, where Liu Hui (1), a member of the royal house, took them in.

Despite all the time we've spent talking about Liu Bei and his brothers, so far they haven't really been major players on the political scene. So we're going to leave them hiding out in Liu Hui's (1) house for a while and go see what's happening at the court in the capital Luoyang, and it's not pretty.

By now, the Ten Regular Attendants controlled everything. They executed anyone who did not submit to them. Two of the eunuchs, Zhao (4) Zhong (1) and Zhang (1) Rang (4), sent people to demand gifts from officers who had helped put down the Yellow Turban rebellion. Anyone who refused to send presents was dismissed from office. Even Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun, two of the imperial commanders who led the armies that put down the rebellion, lost their positions because of this. And that's not all. The emperor then made the eunuch Zhao (4) Zhong (1) the General of the Flying Cavalry and made Zhang Rang (4) and 12 other eunuchs marquises. In a system where eunuchs are not supposed to be allowed to hold any offices, much less join the ranks of elite military officers or the nobility, this would be considered an extremely bad idea by everyone except the emperor. The government deteriorated, and the people griped. And that means ... you guessed it ... more rebellions.

This time, the rebellion broke out in two places. In Changsha, a man named Ou (1) Xing (1) started an

uprising. In Yuyang, another rebellion started under the leadership of Zhang Ju (3) and Zhang Chun (2), no relations to the Zhang brothers who started the Yellow Turban rebellion. Zhang Ju (3) declared himself emperor and made Zhang Chun (2) his commander. A blizzard of urgent messages were sent to the court, but the Ten Regular Attendants kept them all from the emperor.

One day, the Emperor was feasting in the imperial garden with the Ten Regular Attendants when Liu Tao (2), the court counselor, showed up and appeared to be in great distress. The emperor inquired, and Liu Tao replied, "Sire, how can you be feasting with these eunuchs when the empire is in peril?" said Liu Tao.

"All is well in the land. What peril is there?" asked the Emperor.

"Bandits are everywhere and they're plundering the cities. All of this is the fault of the Ten Regular Attendants. They sell offices and injure the people, oppress loyal officials and deceive your highness. All virtuous people have left the court. Disaster is imminent!"

Faced with these charges, the eunuchs played the trump card. They pulled off their hats and threw themselves at the emperor's feet and wept.

"If the ministers cannot tolerate us, then we're doomed. Please, sire, have mercy on us and let us return to our farms. We will give up all our property to help fund the army."

This dirty trick had the intended effect, and the emperor was enraged at Liu Tao (2).

"You also have servants: Why can't you tolerate mine?!"

And with that, the emperor ordered the guards to take Liu Tao (2) away and execute him. As he was being led away, Liu Tao (2) cried out, "My death is no great loss! But pity that the Han empire, after enduring for 400 years, is fading fast!"

The guards hustled him away and were just about to execute him when another minister stopped them, shouting, "Hold it! Wait till I have spoken with His Majesty."

It was the Minister of the Interior, Chen Dan (1). He went to the emperor and asked why Liu Tao (2) was being put to death.

"He has vilified my servants and insulted me," the Emperor said.

"All the empire would eat the flesh of these ten eunuchs if they could," Chen Dan (1) said. "And yet, Sire, you respect them as if they were your parents. They have rendered no service, and yet they have been made nobles. Moreover, Feng (1) Xu (1) was in league with the Yellow Turbans. If your majesty don't come to your senses, the state will crumble!"

"There was no proof against Feng (1) Xu (1)," the Emperor countered. "Can you really say that, of these ten eunuchs, there aren't at least a couple that are loyal?"

Chen Dan (1) began to kowtow so hard that he was banging his head on the steps of the throne. In imperial China, whenever officials started doing this, it's meant as an act of insistence that the emperor take their advice. Of course, often times the emperor did not appreciate being put on the spot like this, and that was the case here. The emperor angrily ordered that Chen Dan (1) be removed and that both he and Liu Tao (2) be thrown into prison. The ten eunuchs didn't waste any time. That very night, both ministers were killed.

The eunuchs' enemies were eliminated, but there is still the matter of the two rebellions. To deal with this, the eunuchs forged an edict making Sun Jian the governor of Changsha. Remember from earlier in this episode that Sun Jian was a local military officer who led an army to join the commander Zhu Jun in pacifying the second wave of Yellow Turban rebels. After that victory, Sun Jian, unlike Liu Bei, got a plum assignment. And now he got another promotion and was sent to suppress the rebellion of Ou (1) Xing (1). Within two months, he reported that the county had been pacified. For this good work, he was named the Marquis of Wucheng, so his star is on the rise.

Meanwhile, an official named Liu (2) Yu (2) was made the imperial protector of Youzhou and ordered to lead an army against Zhang Ju (3) and Zhang Chun (2). Now Liu Hu, the man who has been hiding Liu Bei

and his brothers in his house, recommended Liu Bei to Liu Yu (2). Liu Yu was delighted and made Liu Bei his commander and ordered him to lead the troops against the rebels. Liu Bei faced off against the rebel army, and after a number of battles, he broke their spirit. When the going got tough for the rebels, their commander, Zhang Chun (2), became intolerably cruel toward his soldiers, and they turned on him. One of his officers killed him and offered up his head to Liu Bei as a sign of surrender. The other rebel leader, Zhang Ju (3), saw that all was lost and hanged himself. And that was the end of that particular rebellion.

For putting down the rebellion, Liu Yu (2) was promoted to grand commander. He then reported Liu Bei's great services to the court, which then pardoned Liu Bei for whipping the inspector. He was then named the commanding officer of Gaotang. Liu Bei's mini-run of good luck didn't stop there, though. Gongsun Zan, an official whom Liu Bei had befriended years ago, also heaped praise on what he had done to pacify previous rebellions, and for this, Liu Bei was promoted to the magistrate of Pingyuan. Pingyuan had ample money and soldiers, which allowed Liu Bei to rebuild his power base. So even though the eunuchs were still in power, at least Liu Bei has gotten his just reward for all the great deeds he and his brothers performed in restoring some semblance of peace to the land. So there's at least a little bit of justice in the world.

But ... that was too good to last. In the summer of 189, five year after when we first started talking about the Yellow Turban Rebellion, Emperor Ling was on his deathbed, and he summoned the Regent Marshall, He Jin, to make arrangements for the transition of power after his death. This He Jin was the embodiment of career advancement not through talent, but through connections. He started out as a butcher, essentially a nobody in the eye of the court. But his sister caught the eye of the emperor and was made a concubine in the emperor's harem, and later she bore the emperor a son named Liu Bian (4). Because of this, He Jin's sister was elevated to empress, and He Jin rode her coattail to power, becoming regent marshal, which is the highest-ranking military position in the government.

He Jin's sister, Empress He, had a cruel streak in her. At one time, the emperor adored another beauty in his harem, a certain Lady Wang, and she also bore him a son named Liu Xie (2). Empress He was extremely jealous and poisoned Lady Wang. After that, Lady Wang's baby came into the care of the Lady Dong.

Ok, and this next part is going to be a little confusing as we dive into the relationship between the key players in the royal household. So Lady Dong was the wife of an imperial relative named Liu Chang (2), who was the Lord of Du (2) Ting (2). The previous emperor, emperor Huan, did have a son of his own, so he ended up adopting the son of Lady Dong as his heir, and this son became emperor Ling, the emperor who has been on the throne for most of the two episodes of the story so far. When emperor Ling came to the throne, Lady Dong became the empress dowager. And now she has taken the son of Lady Wang under her care.

So what you have is an emperor on his deathbed and two potential heirs backed by, and controlled by, powerful women. On one side, you have the prince Liu Bian (4), whose mother is Empress He. On the other side, you have the prince Liu Xie (2), who is under the care of the empress dowager Dong.

Empress Dong had always tried to persuade her son, Emperor Ling, to name Liu Xie (4) as the heir to the throne, and in fact the Emperor loved the boy and was inclined to do so. When the emperor's end was near, one of the eunuchs, Jian (3) Shuo (4), said, "If you are going to make Liu Bian (4) your heir, then you must kill He Jin to prevent a coup."

The Emperor agreed, so he summoned He Jin to the palace. However, just as He Jin was about to step through the palace gates, Pan (1) Yin (1), one of his commanders, stopped him.

"Don't enter the palace," Pan (1) Yin (1) said. "Jian (3) Shuo (4) is plotting to kill you."

Stunned, He Jin rushed home and gathered the ministers to discuss how to eliminate the eunuchs. At this meeting, one man stepped forward and said, "The influence of the eunuchs dates back a century and a half. It has spread through the court like a noxious weed. How can one hope to root them out all? If

word of our plan gets out, our whole clans will be exterminated. Please consider carefully."

He Jin looked to see who had spoken these words, and saw that it was Cao Cao. Remember from earlier that Cao Cao had found great success during the Yellow Turban Rebellion and rose through the ranks. He was at this time the General of Military Standards.

What he just said, however, didn't sit well with He Jin. "What do lowly officers like you know about the important affairs of state?" He Jin reproached him.

In the midst of the confusion, Pan (1) Yin (1) arrived with news:

"The Emperor is no more," he said. "The eunuchs have decided to keep the death a secret and forge a decree for the Regent Marshal to go to the Palace to settle the issue of succession in an attempt to eliminate him. Meanwhile, they have slated prince Liu Xie (2) for the throne."

Before Pan (1) Yin (1) could even finish his last sentence, the edict summoning He Jin to the palace arrived.

Cao Cao said, "The plan right now should be to put the rightful heir on the throne first, and then deal with the traitors."

"Who dares to join me in supporting the rightful heir and slaying the traitors?" He Jin asked.

At once, an officer stepped forward and shouted, "Give me 5,000 veterans, and we will fight our way into the Palace, set up the true heir, kill the eunuchs, and sweep clean the court! Then peace will be restored to the empire."

This man was named Yuan Shao. He comes from one of the most influential families in the empire. His father was the former Minister of the Interior, and his uncle was currently the imperial commander.

Delighted by Yuan Shao's request, He Jin gave him 5,000 imperial guards. Yuan Shao donned his armor, while He Jin, accompanied by 30-some high-ranking officials, marched into the Palace. In front of the coffin of the late emperor, they placed He Jin's nephew, the prince Liu Bian (4) on the throne.

After the ceremony was over, Yuan Shao went in to arrest the eunuch Jian (3) Shuo (4). Jian (3) Shuo (4) fled into the Palace garden and hid among the shrubs, but he was discovered and killed by Guo (2) Sheng (4), one of the Ten Regular Attendants. The guards who were under Jian (3) Shuo's (4) command all surrendered.

Yuan Shao then advised He Jin to take this opportunity to wipe out all the eunuchs once and for all. But Zhang Rang and the other Ten Regular Attendants got wind of this imminent disaster and rushed in to see Empress He, who, you'll remember, is He Jin's sister.

The eunuchs said, "The plan to assassinate the regent marshal was the doing of Jian (3) Shuo (4) and Jian (3) Shuo (4) alone. We had nothing to do with it. But now the regent marshal, on Yuan Shao's advice, wants to kill us all. Your majesty, please save us!"

"Fear not! I will protect you" said Empress He, or I guess we should say Empress Dowager He, since her son had just become Emperor.

So she sent for her brother and said to him, "You and I were low-born. If not for eunuchs like Zhang Rang, how could we have ever attained this good fortune? The dishonorable Jian (3) Shuo (4) has been slain. Why must you let others push you into killing the rest of them?"

He Jin obeyed her wish. He came out and said to the various gathered ministers, "The real offender, Jian (3) Shuo (4), has met his fate. His clan will be exterminated. But we need not harm the rest."

"But if you don't root them all out now, they will be your undoing!" Yuan Shao cried.

"I have decided. Say no more," He Jin said. And with that, the ministers left.

So, as you can probably guess already, this is going to come back and bite He Jin in the rear. So let's see how it all plays out.