

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 3.

Before we pick up where we left off, I have a quick programming note for those of you who haven't seen it on the website yet. I have decided to scale back the length of the episodes. Each of the first two episodes came in at nearly 40 minutes, and it felt long when I was writing them, recording them, editing them, and listening to them. When I am talking from a script for a long time, I have a tendency to fall back into reading rather than talking, and I want to avoid that. So I am going to try to keep future episodes to between 25 and 30 minutes. I think that will make the episodes easier for me to produce and result in a better product for you. It does mean that it will take longer to get through the whole novel, but hey, when your project starts out being at least a three-year commitment, what's a few more months?

So anyway, back to the story. At the end of the last episode, we were knee-deep in palace intrigue as a power struggle had broken out at the very top of the empire. Emperor Ling had just died. He had two sons, and both of them were just kids at this point. The eunuchs were planning to make one son, prince Liu Xie (2), the heir, but the regent marshal, He Jin, the brother of the empress, beat them to the punch and declared her son, prince Liu Bian (4), the new emperor. He Jin was going to kill all the eunuchs because they were plotting to kill him. But the eunuchs' silver tongue charmed the empress, and in a moment of "What the heck were you thinking?!", He Jin was persuaded by his sister to not exterminate the eunuchs, even though that would have been the sensible thing to do to political rivals who were, you know, trying to kill you.

He Jin will regret that decision soon enough, but for a day at least, it was fast times in the Han court for members of the He faction. He Jin and his sister, now the empress dowager, wielded the real power behind the throne. He Jin was named Chair of the Secretariat, a powerful position, and all his allies received high offices.

This, as you can imagine, had their rival faction concerned. At the head of this faction was empress dowager Dong, who was the mother of the emperor who just died. She had taken the other prince, Liu Xie (2), into her care years ago after his mother was poisoned by Empress He. Seeing her rivals now sucking up all the political power, empress dowager Dong summoned Zhang Rang and the other eunuchs.

"I was the one who first recommended He Jin's sister to the late emperor," she told them. "But now her son is on the throne, and all the officials are their friends. They have too much influence. What should I do?"

"Your Highness should go to court and oversee state affairs from behind the curtain," Zhang Ran replied. "Make prince Liu Xie (2) a lord, give your brother Dong Zhong (4) a high rank and control of the army. And entrust us with important tasks. That will put you in control."

Now, when Zhang Rang said the empress dowager should preside over state affairs from behind the curtain, he was not just speaking metaphorically. In ancient China, women were not supposed to appear in the court and discuss politics. However, like most other societies throughout history that had such gender-based taboos, just because women were not supposed to have political power, it didn't follow that they had no political power. In fact, when there was a young emperor on the throne, often times the empress dowager was the one pulling the strings. But when these powerful women appeared in court, to avoid shocking the stodgy sensibilities of the court ministers, they would often sit behind a curtain that hid them from view. It's kind of silly since everybody at court knew what was going on, but I guess it's a matter of out of sight, out of mind.

So the next day, Empress Dowager Dong did the curtain thing and declared that the prince Liu Xie (2) will be the Lord of Chenliu. She named her brother Dong Zhong (4) the General of the Flying Cavalry and gave him control of the military. She also allowed Zhang Rang and company to resume their meddling in

state affairs. So just two days -- TWO DAYS! -- after He Jin had spared their lives, the eunuchs had already undermined his power.

This countermove obviously did not sit well with Empress Dowager He, so she invited Empress Dowager Dong to a banquet. In the middle of the banquet, Empress Dowager He rose and offered a cup to her guest and said, probably in the most passive-aggressive tone possible, "We're women. It's not appropriate for us to meddle in state affairs. Remember how a thousand people in Empress Lü's (3) clan were exterminated because she held power. We should be content with our palatial pleasures and leave politics to the ministers. That would be a boon for the empire."

So who was this Empress Lü (3) that got her whole clan wiped out? She was the wife of Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty. After Liu Bang's death, she became the power behind the throne and filled the ranks of government with members of her own clan, with the idea that her family would eventually supplant the Liu family. However, after she died, the tables turned, her clan came out on the losing end of a political struggle and was wiped out.

So not too surprisingly, Empress Dowager Dong became enraged at this piece of no-doubt well-meaning advice from her rival.

"You poisoned Lady Wang out of jealousy. And now, just because your son is on the throne and your brother is in power, you think you can speak to me with such insolence?! It would be no trouble at all for my brother to chop off your brother's head, you know."

And the conversation went downhill real fast from there, with lots of name-calling going back and forth, before Zhang Rang and the other eunuchs persuaded the two to retire to their palaces.

But Empress Dowager He was not about to just let this go. She summoned He Jin that night and told him what happened. He then gathered the three top ministers to discuss what to do.

The next morning at court, a minister, no doubt acting on He Jin's orders, submitted a memorial to the emperor. This memorial said that because Empress Dowager Dong was only the foster mother of the Lord of Chenliu, it's not proper for her to live in the imperial palace. She should be immediately moved to her native fiefdom of Hejian(2,1). This would, of course, remove her from the protection of her allies in the capital.

At the same time that Empress Dowager Dong was being removed from the palace, imperial guards surrounded the home of her brother to confiscate his seal of office. Knowing that all was lost, he committed suicide. The guards did not disperse until they heard his family wailing over his death.

So Empress Dowager Dong's faction had fallen. But what about the eunuchs Zhang Rang and Duan (4) Gui (4), who had been the ones that advised her to make her doomed play for power in the first place? Well, like rats and cockroaches, men like them seem to have a innate talent for surviving mass extinctions. With their patroness now gone, the two eunuchs set to work weaseling their way into the good graces of their former rivals. They heaped extravagant gifts on He Jin's younger brother, He Miao (2), and his mother. That convinced the two of them to put in a good word for the eunuchs with Empress Dowager He, and she took them under her protection. So, once again, Zhang Rang and company were back on the winning team and scheming and plotting just like before.

In the sixth month of that year, He Jin took a page out of his sister's playbook and had the exiled Empress Dowager Dong poisoned. When her body was brought back to the capital for burial in the imperial tombs, He Jin called in and said, "Uh yeah, I woke up with a real bad headache. Can't come in today. Sorry," and skipped the funeral.

But these actions would have consequences. One day, Yuan Shao went to see He Jin and said, "The eunuchs Zhang Rang and Duan (4) Gui (4) are spreading rumors that you were responsible for Empress Dowager Dong's death and that you're trying to usurp the throne. If you don't take this opportunity to

get rid of them, they will come back and bite you down the road. Remember Dou (4) Wu (3) and Chen (2) Fan (1), advisers to the previous emperor. They wanted to eliminate the eunuchs, but their plan leaked out and they paid with their lives. Right now you and your brother have many capable officers under your command. If you call on them, it will be easy to rid the court of the eunuchs. This is an opportunity from heaven. Don't miss it!"

"Hmm. Let me think it over," said He Jin, being his typical indecisive self.

While He Jin was taking his sweet time trying to make up his mind, his servants overheard the conversation and informed Zhang Rang, who then passed it on to He Miao, along with more gifts to ensure that He Jin's brother would speak up for the eunuchs.

So He Miao went to speak with his sister.

"The general is the main backer for the new Emperor, but instead of showing mercy and kindness, he is planning a slaughter. If he kills the eunuchs without cause, it may cause unrest."

The empress dowager agreed. A little later, when He Jin came to tell her of his plan to kill the eunuchs, she argued with him.

"It's been the tradition of the Han dynasty that eunuchs manage palace affairs. The late emperor just died, and you're already trying to kill his old servants. This is disrespectful to our ancestors."

So He Jin, flip-flopping yet again, murmured his agreement and left. When he saw Yuan Shao again, Yuan Shao eagerly asked what the plan was.

"The empress dowager will not allow it. What can I do?"

"You can summon warriors from around the empire to lead their forces to the capital and wipe out this scourge. Then, it won't be up to the empress dowager anymore."

"That's a great idea!" said He Jin, changing his mind yet again. So he ordered that armies from around the empire be called to the capital.

However, secretary Chen Lin objected.

"You must not! Right now by virtue of the emperor and the army under your control, you can do as you please. With that kind of power, taking down the eunuchs would be like burning a hair over a furnace -- easy. You just need to act swiftly, and the empire will be with you. On the other hand, if you bring armies from the provinces to the capital, you're gathering all these daring warriors in one spot, and they all have their own agenda. That's like gripping your own weapon by the sharp end. Not only will the plan fail, but it will also cause chaos."

"That is the view of a bookworm!" He Jin scoffed.

Just then, someone suddenly clapped his hands and laughed.

"Why do we even need to sit around and talk about this? Solving this problem is as easy as turning over your hand!"

Everyone turned and saw that it was Cao Cao who had spoken, and he continued.

"The eunuchs are a disease that has lingered for ages, but it has gotten this bad because the emperors have shown them misguided favoritism and given them too much influence. If you want to bring them down, then you just need to eliminate their leaders. For that, a mere jailer would be enough. There's no need to bring in troops from the provinces and cause chaos. If you try to wipe out all the eunuchs, the plan will most certainly leak out and fail."

These words, though, fell on deaf ears. He Jin reproached Cao Cao, "Do your sympathies lie with the eunuchs?!"

So why would He Jin suspect this? Well, one, he's an idiot. But two, remember that Cao Cao's father was adopted by a eunuch, which was exactly the most prestigious of ancestries. So what He Jin just said was kind of a knock on Cao Cao's heritage. Upon hearing this remark, Cao Cao took his leave. As he walked away from the meeting, he sighed to himself:

"The one who throws the world into chaos will surely be He Jin!"

Meanwhile, He Jin dispatched secret letters to commanders stationed around the empire,

summoning them to the capital. One of these summons went to Xi Province, where the army was under the command of an old friend of ours -- Dong Zhuo. Remember that this was the guy who was sent to replace one of the imperial commanders during the Yellow Turban Rebellion, but he lost every time he took the field and once had to get bailed out by Liu Bei and his brothers. But when he found out that they didn't hold any office or rank, Dong Zhuo slighted them, and that almost made Zhang Fei kill him. He lived, though, and kept losing, so much so that he was replaced in the field.

After a failure of that magnitude, you would expect for there to be consequences. But Dong Zhuo bribed the eunuchs and they saw to it that he was let off the hook. Not only that, later on, thanks to his connections at court, he was actually promoted time and again, all the way to imperial protector of Xi Province, where he commanded a force of 200,000. Basically, Dong Zhuo was the shining example of failing upward in the Han court.

Considering his character and the size of the army at his command, it shouldn't surprise you to learn that Dong Zhuo often entertained the idea of making a play for ultimate power. So when he got the letter from He Jin saying, "Hey, bring your ginormous army to the capital," Dong Zhuo was overjoyed. I mean, He Jin just gave him all the excuse he needed to not only go to the capital, but bring his military with him. So he left a son-in-law, Niu (2) Fu (3), in charge of the province, then quickly gathered up his army and set out. He took with him four generals: Li (3) Jue (2), Guo (1) Si (4), Zhang (1) Ji (4), and Fan (2) Chou (2).

Dong Zhuo also had with him an adviser who was also a son-in-law, Li (3) Ru (2). And Li (3) Ru (2) cautioned him, "Even though we have been summoned, there are still a lot of vagaries. We should first submit a memorial that clearly states our intentions? Then we can proceed."

Dong Zhuo took this advice and sent the following to the court:

"Your servant has heard that the continuing rebellions in the empire owe their origin to Zhang Rang and the Regular Attendants of the Inner Bureau, who act counter to all that is proper. The best way to

stop a pot from boiling over is not to keep scooping water out of it, but to put out the fire. Removing an abscess may be painful, but it's better than leaving it and nourishing the disease. Therefore, I have been so bold as to lead an army toward the capital. With your permission, I will remove Zhang Rang and company from power. May heaven bless the empire."

When He Jin received this memorial, he showed it to the court ministers. One of the ministers, Zheng (4) Tai (4), cautioned him:

"Dong Zhuo is a wolf. If you let him into the capital, he will surely start eating people."

But He Jin dismissed this advice. "You're too suspicious. There's no point in discussing important matters with you."

But Lu (2) Zhi (2), the man who was replaced by Dong Zhuo in the field against the Yellow Turbans, chimed in:

"I have long known Dong Zhuo's true nature. He looks innocent but is vicious at heart. If you let him in, calamity will follow. We should turn him away so as to avoid chaos."

Yet again, He Jin ignored this advice. Upon seeing this, Zheng (4) Tai (4) and Lu (2) Zhi (2) both resigned. More than half of the ministers followed suit, deciding to get out before things got bad. He Jin, undaunted, sent a welcoming party to meet Dong Zhuo at Lake Sheng (4) chi (2) outside the capital, and Dong Zhuo stationed his forces there for the time being.

The news of a massive army marching toward the capital quickly reached Zhang Rang and the other eunuchs. They gathered and decided that it was either He Jin or them at this point. So they laid down an ambush of fifty armed guards at the Gate of Grand Virtue outside the Palace of Happiness, the residence of the empress dowager. Then they went in and told her, "The regent marshal has summoned troops from the provinces to the capital. He means to exterminate us. Please have mercy!"

"Well, you can go apologize to the regent marshal and beg for his forgiveness."

“If we go to his home, we’ll surely be killed. Your highness, please summon the regent marshall to the palace so we can apologize to him here. Otherwise, you might as well kill us right here right now.”

The empress dowager fell for it and summoned He Jin. As He Jin was about to head to the palace, secretary Chen (2) Lin (2) tried to stop him.

“This summon must be the work of the eunuchs. You can’t go. If you do, there will surely be trouble.”

“But it’s a summon from the empress dowager. What trouble could there be?”

At this point, He Jin’s officers are probably just doing facepalms left and right. I mean, how dense can you be, right?

“Our plan has leaked out. How can you even think of going to the palace now?” Yuan Shao said.

Cao Cao chimed in, “If you want to go, then you must get the eunuchs out of the palace first.”

He Jin laughed. “That is the view of a child! I hold power over the empire. What can the eunuchs do to me?”

“Sir, if you must go, let me and a squad of armed guards go with you, just in case,” Yuan Shao pleaded.

He Jin agreed to this, so Yuan Shao and Cao Cao each gathered 500 of their best men and put them under the command of Yuan Shao’s younger brother, Yuan Shu (4). Yuan Shu donned his armor and led the troops to the outer gates of the palace compound. From there, Yuan Shao and Cao Cao, both wearing their swords, escorted He Jin to the empress dowager’s residence. Here, however, an officer from the Interior Bureau announced, “The empress dowager only summoned the regent marshall. No one else may enter.”

Cao Cao and Yuan Shao had no choice but to wait at the entrance, since this IS the residence of the empress dowager, after all. So He Jin went in alone and strutted to the Gate of Grand Virtue. Suddenly, Zhang Rang and Duan (4) Gui (4) jumped out, and their followers surrounded the stunned He Jin.

Zhang Rang scolded He Jin: “What crime did the Empress Dowager Dong commit that you had to

poison her? And then you dared to pretend to be sick and skip her funeral! You were a butcher, a nobody. We raised you up and brought you fortune and honor. But instead of trying to repay our kindness, you want to kill us. You call us filth. But if we're filthy, then who's clean?"

He Jin panicked and tried to find a way out. But all the palace gates had been shut, and now, the eunuchs' armed guards sprang out from hiding and cut him in half.

A poem later bemoaned:

Closing the days of the Hans, and the years of their rule were near spent,
Stupid and tactless was He Jin, yet stood he highest in office,
Many were they who advised him, but he was deaf as he heard not,
Wherefore fell he a victim under the swords of the eunuchs.

So the moral of the story here seems to be that: To get your own poem in this novel, you either have to be really kickass, like Liu Bei and his brothers, or a complete dunce, like He Jin.

Meanwhile, He Jin's officers were still waiting outside. After a while, they shouted, "General, your carriage awaits!"

At this, an object flew over the wall and landed on the ground. The officers looked and saw that it was He Jin's head. Zhang Rang then read a decree out loud: "He Jin was conspiring to rebel. He has been brought to justice, but his followers shall be spared."

Well, that's very generous of the eunuchs, but He Jin's followers were in no mood to return the favor, especially after seeing their general's head being slinged over the wall.

"The eunuchs have assassinated a top minister! Who will come with me to kill these villains?!" Yuan Shao shouted. Then one of He Jin's generals, Wu (2) Kuang (1), set fire to the gate, while Yuan Shu (4)

and his force of a thousand men stormed the palace. Wherever they went, they killed every eunuch they could find, no questions asked. Yuan Shao and Cao Cao broke into the inner chamber, where four of the regular attendants were cornered and cut to pieces.

By now, the palace was engulfed in flames. Four other regular attendants, Zhang Rang, Duan (4) Gui (4), Cao (2) Jie (2), and Hou (2) Lan (3), abducted the empress dowager, the emperor, and the Lord of Chenliu, and fled out of the back of the compound toward the North Palace.

While this was going on, Lu (2) Zhi (2), who had resigned from his post, was still at home and hadn't left the capital yet. When he heard about the palace uprising, he put on his armor, grabbed his spear, and rushed to the palace. He saw the eunuch Duan (4) Gui (4) dragging the empress dowager along, so he shouted: "Duan (4) Gui (4), you traitor! How dare you?!" Duan (4) Gui (4) turned and ran, while the empress leaped out of a window and was rescued.

By this time, general Wu (2) Kuang (1) had slashed his way into the inner chamber, where he found He Jin's brother, He Miao, with sword in hand. Remember that this He Miao had taken a ton of bribes from the eunuchs and played his part in letting them sweet-talk their way back into power. This was not lost on He Jin's men.

"He Miao conspired to kill his own brother! He should die with the others!" Wu (2) Kuang (1) yelled. Others present shouted their agreement. He Miao tried to flee, but it was too late. They surrounded him and cut him to smithereens.

This, though, was not the end of it. Yuan Shao ordered soldiers to go track down the family members of the Ten Regular Attendants and kill every last one of them. In the slaughter that followed, many innocent men were killed simply because they had no beard, which made the rampaging soldiers mistake them for eunuchs.

So FINALLY, He Jin's officers have done what he should have done a long time ago -- purge the

eunuchs from the palace. So ... good job everybody. High-fives all around. Let's go down to the corner inn, crack open a few jars of Maltsai, and take tomorrow off. ... Wait, what's that? The palace is still on fire? Well, throw some water on it and let's go. What? The leaders of the eunuchs are still unaccounted for? Well, I guess we'll have to send some troops out to look for them. Hey, now that I think about it, has anyone seen the emperor? Anyone? No? What about his half-brother, the Lord of Chenliu? No? Well, hmm...

So what DID become of the eunuch Zhang Rang and the royal siblings? Find out in the next episode. In the mean time, be sure to drop by our website at 3kingdomspodcast.com, spelled with the number 3, and let me know what you think of the show so far. I have also been posting maps of the key locations mentioned in each episode, and for this episode, I've also posted some links to additional information about eunuchs in ancient China and why it was SO hard to get rid of them.

Thanks for listening. See you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.