

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 4.

When you are done with this episode, be sure to drop by our website, [3kingdomspodcast.com](http://3kingdomspodcast.com), spelled with the number 3, and check out supplemental materials like maps of the key locations mentioned in each episode and links to additional information. That's [3kingdomspodcast.com](http://3kingdomspodcast.com), spelled with the number 3. While you are there, leave me a comment and let me know what you think of the show so far.

Also, we are now listed in the iTunes store. Just search the podcast section for Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Ok, so over the first three episodes, we've covered one of the bloodiest rebellions in world history, palace intrigue, a power struggle at the top of the governing apparatus, and a bloodbath at the imperial residence. But compared to the rest of the novel, all of that has just been akin to the first few episodes of a new TV show -- ok but not great material whose main purpose is to set the stage and establish the characters so we can get to the really good stuff, and we are going to start getting into that good stuff in this episode. I mean, so far, the most powerful people in our story have been a dim-witted ex-butcher and a bunch of castrated cretins, and they pretty much took each other out. Well, starting with this episode, the main players are about to get more legendary and the stories more memorable.

But first, we still have some loose ends to tie up, like a missing emperor, a missing lord, and the eunuchs who absconded with them. We left off last time with the eunuchs killing He Jin, which prompted his officers to storm the palace, set it on fire, and kill every eunuch they could find. In the chaos, the two eunuch leaders, Zhang Rang and Duan (4) Gui (4), abducted the young emperor and his even younger half-brother, the Lord of Chenliu, slipped out of the palace, and headed toward the Bei (3) Mang (2) Hills outside the capital.

Back at the palace, once the great eunuch extermination campaign had wound down, Cao Cao directed an effort to put out the fire, asked the empress dowager to temporarily oversee things, and sent out troops to look for the missing eunuchs and royal siblings.

Around 9 o'clock that night, one party of soldiers caught up to the fleeing eunuchs on the bank of the river. Cornered, Zhang Rang threw himself into the water and drowned. I'm sure he will be missed. Duan (4) Gui (4), though, kept running, and the soldiers gave chase.

Meanwhile, the emperor and the Lord of Chenliu were hiding among the weeds nearby, but they weren't sure who these soldiers were, so they didn't make a sound until the men had scattered. The young boys stayed in their hiding spot on the riverbank until about 1 a.m. By now, they were shivering from the cold, wet from the dew, and starving. They wept in each other's arms, all the while trying to muffle their cries because they were afraid of giving away their location.

"We can't stay here," the Lord of Chenliu said. "We need to find another way out."

So the two kids tied their clothes together and used it as a rope to pull themselves up the riverbank. But then they found themselves in a thicket of thorn bushes. It was dark, and there was no path to be found. They started to despair, but just then, thousands upon thousands of fireflies sprang up around them, gathered in front of the emperor, and lit their way.

Taking this to be a sign from heaven, the boys followed the fireflies. Gradually, a road appeared. They followed it and walked until around 3 a.m. By now they were too footsore to go on. They saw a heap of straws on the hillside, so they walked over and collapsed on top of it.

In front of this heap of straws was a farm house. The farmer who lived there had dreamed that night that two red suns had set just behind his house. He woke up with this alarming omen rattling around in his head. So he threw on his coat and went outside to look around. He saw bright red light shooting up from the heap of straws, so he hurried over and found two boys on the pile.

"Young men. Whose kids are you?" he asked them.

The emperor was too afraid to answer, but his brother pointed at him and said, “He is the emperor. There was trouble at the palace. We were caught up in the chaos and fled here. I am his brother, the Lord of Chenliu.”

Astonished, the farmer fell to his knees.

“Your majesty! My name is Cui (1) Yi (4). My brother, Cui (1) Lie (4), used to be the minister of the interior, but he retired to this place because he was disgusted with the eunuchs.”

Cui (1) Yi (4) then helped the emperor and his brother into the house and served them food and drink on his knees.

Let’s leave the imperial siblings there for a minute and check in on the guys out looking for them. On the riverbank, the eunuch Duan (4) Gui (4) had tried to run when he saw the soldiers coming. But the troops’ leader, Min (3) Gong (4), caught up to him and grabbed him.

“Where is the emperor?” Min (3) Gong (4) demanded.

“We ... we were separated. I ... I don’t know where he is.”

That was the wrong answer, as Min (3) Gong (4) killed Duan (4) Gui (4) right then and there, cut off his head, and hanged it from the neck of his horse. He then sent his men out in all directions to search for the emperor while he himself searched along the road.

Eventually, he came upon Cui (1) Yi’s (4) house. Cui (1) Yi (4) went out to see who it was and saw a guy on a horse with a head hanging from the horse’s neck. That’s not something you see every day, so Cui (1) Yi (4) inquired, and Min (3) Gong (4) explained why he was there. Cui (1) Yi (4) then led him inside to see the emperor, and servant and master wept at the sight of one another.

“The country cannot be without its ruler,” Min (3) Gong (4) said. “Your majesty, please return to the capital.”

Well, you weren’t going to just ask the emperor to walk back to the capital. But since the imperial litter wasn’t parked outside, so he had to slum it. Cui (1) Yi (4) had only one skinny horse on his farm, and

that served as the emperor's ride, while the Lord of Chenliu shared Min (3) Gong's (4) horse. After just a mile or so, they ran into several hundred soldiers, led by Yuan Shao and several other court officials. After more tears were shed, they first sent someone to ride on ahead back to the capital with Duan (4) Gui's (4) head for public display. Then they upgraded the emperor and his brother to business class, giving them a couple of horses fit for imperial posteriors, and set off for the capital. As this ragtag group moved, one couldn't help but be reminded of a children's limerick that had circulated in the area at one point. The limerick said

The emperor doesn't rule; the lord no office fills;  
But a magnificent cavalcade rides from Bei (3) Mang (2) Hills.

This *magnificent* cavalcade had not gone far when suddenly, they saw a huge army coming toward them. This army boasted so many banners and kicked up so much dust that it blocked out the sun and the sky. All the officials turned pale, and the emperor was scared out of his wits. When the army drew near, Yuan Shao rode out and asked, "Who goes there?"

A general emerged from under the shadow of an embroidered banner and yelled, "Where is the emperor?!"

The emperor trembled with fear and could not even speak. His brother, however, rode to the front and said, "Who are you?"

"Dong Zhuo, Imperial Protector of Xi Province."

"Have you come to protect the emperor or to abduct him?"

"I am here to protect."

"If that is the case, he is right here. Why have you not dismounted?"

Dong Zhuo hastily got off his horse and kneeled on the left side of the road. The Lord of Chenliu then eloquently praised him for coming to the emperor's rescue. Dong Zhuo was surprised to see the young

child carry himself so well, and at that moment, he started to toy with the idea of giving the emperor the boot in favor of his half-brother. We will hear a lot more about this in a little bit, but for now, Dong Zhuo and his army escorted the royal siblings back to the palace, where many more tears were shed upon reuniting with the empress dowager.

So let's pause and look at where things stand after one night of chaos: The emperor and his half-brother, the only other person with a potential claim to the throne, were both just kids. The emperor was just 13 years old at this point, while his brother was 8. And then among the grownups, He Jin, the most powerful court minister, was dead. His brother, who shared control of the military, was dead. Their rivals for power, the Ten Regular Attendants, were dead. THIS was the very definition of a power vacuum. Meanwhile, Dong Zhuo, a guy who has been described as a wolf, was now in the capital with a giant army. What's more, thanks to some good timing, he had the prestige and political capital that came with quote unquote rescuing the emperor. So the political situation hasn't exactly improved after what happened overnight, has it? In fact, as we will soon see, it just got much much worse. Oh, and to top it all off, while they were wiping the blood off the walls and assessing the damage to the palace, they discovered that the Imperial Heritage Seal, the symbol of imperial power that has been passed from emperor to emperor for generations, has gone missing. And nobody had thought to buy personal property insurance. It just hasn't been a very good 24 hours no matter how you look at it, and the worst was yet to come.

Dong Zhuo now stationed his army just outside the capital. Every day he marched through the city accompanied by a squad of heavily armored soldiers. As you can imagine, this sight made people rather uneasy. Dong Zhuo also came and went as he wished at court, with no concern for any rules of propriety. Furthermore, he induced the soldiers from the armies of He Jin and He Miao to serve him, which

increased his military power.

All of this was bound to cause talk among the ministers. One day, Bao (1) Xin (4), the commander of the rear army, came to see Yuan Shao.

“Dong Zhuo must be up to no good,” Bao (1) Xin (4) said. “We need to get rid of him, soon.”

Yuan Shao, however, was reluctant.

“The court has just regained some stability. We can’t make any rash moves yet.”

Bao (1) Xin (4) then went to see Wang (2) Yun (3), the minister of the interior, and said the same thing to him.

“Let us talk it over,” Wang Yun said.

Recognizing that nobody was in any hurry to do anything about Dong Zhuo, Bao (1) Xin (4) led his troops out of the capital and went to the Tai Mountains.

Just as Bao (1) Xin (4) suspected, Dong Zhuo was indeed up to no good. One day, he had a private chat with his adviser and son-in-law, Li (3) Ru (2).

“I want to depose the emperor and put the Lord of Chenliu on the throne. What do you think about that?”

“Right now, the court has no leader. If we don’t act now, we’ll miss a golden opportunity. Tomorrow, let’s assemble all the court officials in Wenming (1,2) Garden and discuss this matter. If anyone opposes, you can execute them to demonstrate your might.”

This idea suited Dong Zhuo, so he held a big banquet the next day and invited all the officials. And since they were all afraid of Dong Zhuo, everyone showed up. Dong Zhuo took the opportunity to put on some airs. He waited for everyone else to take their seat, and THEN he rode up to the garden, dismounted, and entered the banquet hall with his sword in tow, which no doubt put the already fearful officials even more on edge.

After three rounds of wine, Dong Zhuo stopped the festivities and said sternly,

“I have something to say. All of you, be quiet and listen.”

The banquet hall fell silent, and the officials listened intently.

“The emperor is the master of all. If he lacks strength, he cannot fulfill his duties. The current emperor is a weakling and pales in comparison to the Lord of Chenliu, who is intelligent and eager to learn. I want to depose the emperor and elevate the Lord of Chenliu in his place. What do you think?”

The banquet hall remained silent. No one dared to utter a word of dissent.

But then, someone pushed his table aside, walked out to the center of the hall, and shouted,

“No! No! Who do you think you are?! How dare you say such things? Our ruler is the son of the late emperor, and he has done nothing wrong. How can one talk of deposing him? Are you trying to usurp power?!”

Dong Zhuo, enraged by this rebuff, looked to see who it is that had dared to challenge him. It was Ding (1) Yuan (2), the imperial protector of Jing Province.

“Those who are with me will live; those who oppose me shall die!” Dong Zhuo said as he pulled out his sword and made for Ding (1) Yuan (2). But just then, his adviser Li (3) Ru (2) spotted a man standing behind Ding (1) Yuan (2). This warrior struck an imposing and threatening figure, and at this very moment, his hands clenched his halberd and his eyes blazed with anger. Sensing trouble, Li (2) Ru (3) quickly intervened.

“A banquet is no place to discuss state affairs. Let’s wait till tomorrow to discuss this.”

Dong Zhuo backed off, and the guests managed to persuade Ding (1) Yuan (2) to leave. Once he was gone, Dong Zhuo pressed the issue again with the remaining officials. But now Lu (2) Zhi (2) spoke up.

“You are mistaken, illustrious sir. If we look to precedents for what you are proposing, during the Shang dynasty, the minister Yi (1) Yin (3) locked the emperor Tai (4) Jia (4) in the palace because he was unwise, and did not let him out until he had changed his ways. Earlier in the Han dynasty, the Lord of

Changyi (1, 2) committed some 3,000 misdeeds in just 27 days on the throne, and that was why the regent marshal Huo (4) Guang (1) deposed him. But right now, although the emperor is young, he is intelligent and has committed no wrongs. Sir, you have been the imperial protector on the frontiers, far from the capital, and you have no experience in state administration. Nor have you the talent of Yi (1) Yin (3) or Huo (4) Guang (1). How can you try to impose your will on this matter? As the sage said, 'Only with Yi (1) Yin's (3) purpose can one act like Yi (1) Yin (3). Otherwise, such a deed is treason.' "

Dong Zhuo took this about as well as he took Ding (1) Yuan's (2) objections. He drew his sword again and was about to kill Lu (2) Zhi (2), but a couple other ministers stepped in.

"Minister Lu (2) is respected throughout the empire. If you kill him, it might cause tremors all around the country."

So Dong Zhuo held off, and now Wang (2) Yun (3), the minister of the interior, tried to defuse the situation.

"An issue as important as deposing and anointing an emperor should not be decided after we've all been drinking. Let's discuss this another day."

All the guests took this opportunity to scatter. Displeased, Dong Zhuo stood at the gate with his sword drawn and watched as the ministers left. Just then, he noticed a man galloping back and forth outside the gate with halberd in hand.

"Who is that?" Dong Zhuo asked Li (3) Ru (2).

"That is Ding (1) Yuan's (2) adopted son, Lü Bu. Sir, you should stay out of his way."

Dong Zhuo heeded this advice and went into the garden. But the next day, Ding (1) Yuan (2) led his army outside the city and challenged Dong Zhuo to battle. Angered, Dong Zhuo called up his army and went out with Li (3) Ru (2) to meet the challenge.

When the two sides had lined up across from each other, Dong Zhuo could see Lü Bu riding out to the forefront with Ding (1) Yuan (2), clenching his halberd and looking every bit the warrior. His hair was



arranged under a handsome headdress of gold, and he donned an embroidered cloak bearing the pattern of a thousand flowers. He wore a pheasant-tailed helmet, a breastplate, and a gleaming jade belt with a lion's head clasp.

Ding Yuan pointed at Dong Zhuo and scolded him:

“What great misfortune has befallen the country! First, the eunuchs meddled in state affairs and pushed the people to the brink. And now, you, without even the least bit of accomplishment to your name, dares to talk of deposing the emperor. You’re nothing less than a rebel!”

Dong Zhuo was just about to respond, but Lü Bu was already galloping toward his lines. Dong Zhuo hastily fled, and Ding Yuan’s army charged forward and won the day. Dong Zhou’s forces fell back ten miles before they could hold up and make camp.

After pulling his soldiers back together, Dong Zhuo called his officers to his tent.

“Lü Bu is really something special. If I could have him in my service, I would be invincible.”

Upon hearing this, one of Dong Zhuo’s generals, Li (3) Su (4), stepped forward and said,

“Worry not, my lord. I am from Lü Bu’s village and know him well. He is brave but not wise. Offer him a little benefit, and he will forget honor. With just a few words, I can persuade him to come over to our side.”

“Really? What will you tell him?”

“I have heard that you have a horse named Red Hare that is one of the finest and fastest steeds ever bred. Give this horse and some precious objects to Lu Bu to move his heart, and I will also add some persuasive words. I guarantee that he will turn against Ding (1) Yuan (2) and come join you.”

So what Li (3) Su (4) is proposing sounds like a pretty good bargain, right? A horse and some pocket change to not only get yourself a badass warrior, but to take him away from your enemy. But showing how shortsighted he really is, Dong Zhuo hesitated. He really liked that horse and wasn’t sure he could bear to part with it.

“What do you think?” he asked Li (3) Ru (2).

“My lord, if your aim is to conquer the world, what is a mere horse to you?”

This brought Dong Zhuo to his senses, so he gave Li (3) Su (4) the horse, a thousand ounces of gold, ten strings of beautiful pearls, and a belt decorated with jewels. With all this swag in tow, Li (3) Su (4) headed toward Lu Bu’s camp. When he got near, he was picked up by one of the pickets. He asked them to tell Lu Bu that an old friend had come to see him. Upon hearing this message, Lu Bu called for Li (3) Su (4) to be brought to his tent.

“My brother! How have you been?!” Li (3) Su (4) said as he bowed.

“It’s been too long since we last met. Where are you now?”

“I am a general in the Imperial Tiger Army. I was thrilled to hear that you were a strong supporter of the throne, so I have come to present you with a fine horse befitting your valor. It can travel 300 miles a day and treats rivers and mountains as though they were level plains. Its name is Red Hare.”

Lu Bu asked his guards to bring the horse over. From head to hoof, the horse bore the red of a glowing sun and did not have even a hair of another color. It measured ten spans from head to tail and eight spans from hoof to neck. When it neighed, the sound filled the air and shook the oceans. Someone once wrote a poem praising this horse:

Mark ye the steed swift and tireless, see the dust, spurned by his hoofs, rising in clouds,

Now it swims the river, anon climbs the hill, rending the purple mist asunder,

Scornful it breaks the rein, shakes from its head the jeweled bridle,

It is as a fiery dragon descending from the highest heaven.

Lu Bu was delighted with the horse and thanked Li (3) Su (4), "How can I repay you for giving me such a creature?"

"I am here out of honor. I seek no repayment."

And then the two proceeded to drink. After a few cups, Li (3) Su (4) said, "Although I haven't seen you much, I do often see your honorable father."

"Brother, you must be drunk. My father has been dead for years. How could you have seen him?"

"Hahaha. No. I am talking about imperial protector Ding."

"Oh, him! Yes. [Sigh] Yes, I am in his service, but it is only because I have nowhere else to go."

"Brother, your talent is higher than the heavens and deeper than the seas. Who in all the world does not bow before your name? Fame, fortune, glory. They are all yours for the taking. Why do you say that you can do no better than to serve under someone else?"

"It's only that I can find no worthy master."

"The clever bird chooses the branch on which it perches, just as the wise officer chooses the master he serves. When the opportunity presents itself, you must seize it, or you will regret it later."

"Brother, you are in the government now. Who do you think is the true hero of the land?" Lu Bu asked.

"I scorn everyone at court except Dong Zhuo. He alone respects wisdom and reveres scholars; he is fair in handing out rewards and punishments. He is destined for greatness."

"Hmm. I've long wished to serve him, but I fear there is no way."

Upon hearing this, Li (3) Su (4) laid out all the other swag that he had brought with him.

"What is all this?" Lu Bu asked.

Before he answered, Li (3) Su (4) asked Lu Bu to send away the attendants. Once they were alone, Li (3) Su (4) delivered his recruiting pitch.

"My lord Dong Zhuo has long respected your name. He was the one who asked me to bring you these, as well as the horse."

"He is so good to me! How can I repay him?"

“Look, if a useless fool like me can be a general in the Imperial Tiger Army, who knows what honors await you?” Li (3) Su (4) pressed.

“I just wish there was something I could do for him as an introductory gift.”

“Oh, but there is, and it’s easy. It’s just that you won’t do it.”

Lu Bu knew what he was getting at. He pondered silently for a long time, and then he said,

“What if I killed Ding (1) Yuan (2) and brought his soldiers over to Dong Zhuo?”

“Brother, if you can do that, there could be no greater service. But such a thing must be done quickly.”

Lu Bu then promised his friend that he would go over to Dong Zhuo the next day. With this, Li (3) Su (4) took his leave.

Around 10 o’clock that night, Lu Bu walked into Ding Yuan’s tent with sword in hand. There, he found his master and adopted father reading by the light of a candle.

“My son, what brings you here?” Ding Yuan asked.

“How can a man like me possibly stoop to be your son?!”

“Why this change of heart, my son?!”

Lu Bu didn’t even bother answering. He stepped forward before Ding Yuan finished speaking, and with one swing of his sword, Ding Yuan’s head fell to the ground.

Lu Bu then called for the attendants and sent word to the soldiers in his camp, “Ding Yuan has dishonored himself, so I killed him. Those who want to follow me, stay. Otherwise, go.”

Upon hearing this news, most of the soldiers scattered.

The next day, Lu Bu, clutching Ding Yuan’s head, went to see Li (3) Su (4), who led him to see Dong Zhuo. Dong Zhuo was delighted and welcomed him with wine. In a great show of respect, Dong Zhuo was the first to bow, and he said

“Sir, your coming to me is like the gentle dew falling on parched grass.”

Lu Bu then asked Dong Zhuo to sit while he bowed and said,

“If it’s agreeable to you, sir, please accept this bow and be my adopted father!”

Now considering what Lu Bu just did to his previous adopted father -- see that head without a body over there? -- you would have to think that Dong Zhuo would be incredulous at this request. You would think that he would probably stammer something along the lines of, “Geez, I’m flattered, but you know ... let’s just be friends.”

But instead, Dong Zhuo was only too happy to call Lu Bu his son and bestowed upon him silken robes and a suit of golden armor. So not only is Lu Bu either oblivious or audacious enough to offer to call Dong Zhuo dad moments after handing him the head of his previous adopted father, but Dong Zhuo is stupid enough to let him. You get the feeling that these two guys really do deserve each other.

Still, there is no denying that the two of them together made a formidable team. After getting Lu Bu, Dong Zhuo’s power and influence grew rapidly. He made his brother commander of the left army and the Marquise of Hu (4). He made Lu Bu the marquise of Luoyang, commander of the capital district, and commander of the cavalry. He also reserved some pretty impressive titles for himself: the minister of works, grand commander, and commander of the front army.

Seeing Dong Zhuo’s power growing by the day, his adviser Li (3) Ru (2) urged him to depose the emperor sooner rather than later. So one day, Dong Zhuo held a banquet in the capital and invited all the ministers of state. And just to show that he’s not messing around, he ordered Lu Bu and a thousand armed soldiers to stand ready next to him. The feast began, and after a few rounds of wine, Dong Zhuo stood up, drew his sword, and said,

“The emperor is weak and cannot fulfill his duties. I shall therefore follow the examples of Yi (1) Yin (3) and Huo (4) Guang (1) and reduce him to the Lord of Hongnong (2,2), and raise the Lord of Chenliu to the throne. Whoever opposes will be executed.”

Note how different Dong Zhuo’s tone is this time versus the last time he raised this issue. The

previous time, he still at least put up the pretense of asking what the ministers thought of his plan. This time, though, with all the military power in his hands and with Lu Bu and his armed guards standing by, Dong Zhuo didn't even pretend to ask. He was just telling the ministers that THIS was how it was going to be.

Well, the ministers had seen this play before, and the man who stood up against Dong Zhuo the last time he tried this stunt ended up losing his head. So everyone was too afraid to speak up this time.

All except one. One man stepped forward and stood firm.

"The emperor has only recently assumed the the throne, and he has done no wrong," he said. "To set him aside for a commoner is an act of rebellion!"

So who is this that dares to challenge Dong Zhuo? And will he succeed, or will he lose his head too?

Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.