

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 8.

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Last time on the podcast, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei had just tripled-teamed Lu Bu and sent him running back into Hulao (3,2) Pass. With the tide of war turning against him and the coalition breathing down his neck, Dong Zhuo decided to move the capital from Luoyang (4,2) to Changan (2,1), which was located about more than 200 miles to the west. So he returned to Luoyang, assembled all the officials at court and told them:

“After some 200 years as the eastern capital of the Han, Luoyang has exhausted its royal fortune. In my opinion, the aura of rule has migrated to Changan. I plan to move the court there. So pack your bags.”

There were bound to be objections to this. Yang (2) Biao (1), the minister of the interior, spoke up.

“The region around Changan is in ruins. There is no reason to abandon the ancestral temples and imperial tombs here. I am concerned that this move would alarm the people. It is always easy to alarm them but difficult to pacify them. Prime minister, please reconsider.”

“This move is for the sake of the empire. How dare you oppose it?” Dong Zhuo reproached him angrily.

But another official, Huang (2) Wan (3), chimed in.

“Minister Yang (2) is correct. Back when Wang (2) Mang (3) usurped the throne, a leader of the Red Eyebrows rebels burned Changan to the ground, reducing it to nothing more than broken tiles. Also, most of the inhabitants have scattered. It is not right to abandon all the palaces here for a wasteland.”

Dong Zhuo, however, would not be swayed.

“The region to the east of the passes is plagued by rebellion, and the empire is in chaos. Changan is protected by mountains. Besides, it is near Long (3) You (4), where we can easily obtain timber, stone, bricks, and building materials. We would be able to put up palaces in about a month. So stop it with your

nonsense!”

But another official, Xun (2) Shuang (3), the minister of works, still didn't get the message, as he also spoke out against the plan.

“Prime Minister, if you move the capital, the lives of the common people will be disrupted.”

Dong Zhuo snapped.

“I am making plans for the empire. How can I be concerned with a few commoners?!”

That same day, he fired the three officials who had spoken out against the plan and reduced them to commoners. But some people still would not let the matter drop. As Dong Zhuo was getting into his chariot, two officials -- Chair of the Secretariat Zhou (1) Bi (4) and commander of the city gates Wu (3) Qiong (2) -- bowed in his direction. Dong Zhuo asked them what they wanted.

Zhou (1) Bi (4) said, “We've heard that you are planning to move the capital to Changan, so we have come to dissuade you.”

That was not what Dong Zhuo wanted to hear.

“I listened to advice from you two before and kept Yuan Shao in office. And now he has rebelled. You two must be in league with him!”

And so Dong Zhuo had his guards take them both outside the city and execute them, and then he issued the order to move to the new capital. The executions had the intended chilling effect, and all the other officials fell into line and prepared to move. But Dong Zhuo had another problem.

See, he's not just moving the emperor and the ministers of the court. He also had to move all the people in the capital, because Changan was a wasteland at that time, as multiple people had pointed out to Dong Zhuo. And without a whole city's population, there would be no infrastructure to provide for the emperor and the court. So Dong Zhuo had to move the infrastructure, i.e., the capital's residents, with him. Well, imagine moving the entire population of Washington DC to New York ... on foot. An undertaking of that magnitude is going to take time, sure, but you would also need a lot of food and

money, not just for the trip, but for getting settled in and building palaces once you get to your destination, because, again, there's not much in Changan. And Dong Zhuo was kind of short on both money and food at the moment.

His adviser Li (3) Ru (2) had a solution. It turns out that the problem wasn't all that difficult once you stop letting yourself be bound by things like morality and basic human decency.

"Luoyang has many wealthy people," Li (3) Ru (2) told Dong Zhuo. "We can seize this wealth by executing anyone linked to Yuan Shao and the rest of the rebels, and confiscating their properties."

Well, given his track record of doing things that tend to make him the common enemy of mankind, Dong Zhuo naturally loved this idea. He ordered 5,000 armored cavalry to ride through the city and round up thousands of wealthy families. They stuck flags on these prisoners' heads that read "Traitors and Rebels", and executed them all outside the city and seized their properties.

Meanwhile, the less affluent members of the city's residents were not much better off. Two of Dong Zhuo's generals, Li (3) Jue (2) and Guo (1) Si (4), rounded up millions of the city's inhabitants and drove them toward Changan. Each group of civilians was followed by a squad of 3,000 soldiers who forced them to keep moving at knife point. Anyone who moved too slowly was killed on the spot. Countless people simply fell over dead from hunger and exhaustion in ditches on the side of the road. And to make things even worse, the soldiers plundered food from the civilians and raped the women. The civilians' moans and cries were so loud that they shook the heavens.

And no, Dong Zhuo wasn't quite done yet. Before he left Luoyang, he sent out instructions to burn the entire city. Everything from civilian houses to ancestral temples to the royal palaces went up in flames. And just to ensure that he would be a threat to the living AND the dead, Dong Zhuo also ordered Lu Bu to break open the tombs of dead emperors and their consorts and loot the treasures inside. Well, the soldiers took this as a cue that pretty much nothing was sacred, so they proceeded to loot the tombs of court officials and wealthy civilians. The gold, silver, pearls, silk, and precious ornaments filled more

than a thousand carts. With the spoils of the city, as well as the emperor and the rest of the royal household, in his possession, Dong Zhuo set off for Changan, heading toward one wasteland while leaving another wasteland in his wake.

Meanwhile, back at Si (4) Shui (3) Pass, seeing that Dong Zhuo had abandoned the capital, Zhao (4) Cen (2), the lieutenant left to guard the pass, said the heck with this and evacuated. Sun Jian led the vanguard of the coalition through the pass and toward Luoyang. Meanwhile, at Hu (3) Lao (2) Pass, coalition forces led by Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei fought their way up the pass and took it, allowing the various coalition contingents to advance.

Sun Jian and his army sprinted toward Luoyang. As they approached, they saw that the once glorious capital of the empire had been reduced to a pitiful sight. The city was still in flames. Dense plumes of smoke hung all over the city and spread for miles around. Not a living thing was left, not a man, not a dog, not even a bird.

Sun Jian first dispatched his troops to put out the fire, and then sent out word for the other contingents to make camp outside the city for the time being. At this point, Cao Cao went to see Yuan Shao,

“The rebel Dong Zhuo has gone west,” Cao Cao said. “We should take this opportunity to pursue and attack his rear. Why have you not mobilized the army?”

“Our soldiers are exhausted. There is nothing to be gained by pressing forward,” Yuan Shao replied.

“But Dong Zhuo has burned the royal palaces and abducted the emperor. The whole empire is stunned and doesn’t know what to do next. At a moment like this, one battle can settle the issue. Why do you all hesitate?”

But the other coalition leaders, being the generally useless lot that they were, all were against pursuing. This irritated Cao Cao to no end.

“It’s pointless to discuss important matters with such unworthy people!” he cried. And so he took

matters into his own hands. He led about 10,000 men and his six generals -- Xiahou Dun (1), Xiahou Yuan (1), Cao Ren (2), Cao Hong (2), Li (2) Dian (3), and Yue (4) Jin (4) -- and set out in hot pursuit of Dong Zhuo.

Meanwhile, Dong Zhuo and his traveling cavalcade of horror were passing through the city of Xing (2) Yang (2). The governor of the city, Xu (2) Rong (2), came out to greet them. Li (3) Ru (2) now cautioned Dong Zhuo,

“We must guard against the enemy coming after us,” he said. “We can have Xu (2) Rong (2) set an ambush by the hills outside the city. If the enemy does pursue, he can let them go by first. Then, once we have defeated the enemy, the governor can attack and cut off their retreat. This way, no one else would dare to chase us again.”

Dong Zhuo took this advice and ordered Lu Bu and an elite squad of soldiers to bring up the rear. Soon, Cao Cao and his army caught up to them. Lu Bu laughed and said, “It’s just as Li (3) Ru (2) predicted.” So Lu Bu set up his troops in battle formation and awaited Cao Cao.

Cao Cao rode forward and cried out, “Rebels, abductors of the emperor, drovers of the people, don’t you dare flee!”

“You traitor and coward. How dare you spout such brash words!” Lu Bu shot back.

Xiahou Dun galloped forward with spear in hand to take on Lu Bu. The two had fought for only a few bouts when Li (3) Jue (2) led a force and attacked from the left flank. Cao Cao ordered Xiahou Yuan to go fend him off. But then another force, led by Guo (1) Si (4), attacked the right flank. Cao Cao sent Cao Ren to meet them. Now under siege on three sides, Cao Cao’s army could not hold its ground. Meanwhile, Xiahou Dun started to falter against Lu Bu, and he fled back to his own line. Lu Bu then directed his armored cavalry forward and sent Cao Cao’s army fleeing toward Xing (2) Yang (2).

They kept running until about 9 o’clock at night, and the scattered army finally regrouped at the foot of a barren hill. The moon was as bright as the sun on this night. As Cao Cao’s men were just about to prepare a meal, cries rose up from all sides. Xu (2) Rong (2), who had set up an ambush here on Dong

Zhuo's orders, sprang his trap and unleashed his forces. Cao Cao hastily hopped on his horse and fled. But he ran smack dab into Xu (2) Rong (2). Cao Cao turned and ran in the opposite direction. Xu (2) Rong (2) fired an arrow from behind that struck Cao Cao in his shoulder. Cao Cao didn't even bother trying to pull the arrow out, and instead just kept on fleeing around the hill. On the other side of the hill, however, were two of Xu (2) Rong's (2) soldiers lying in wait. When they saw Cao Cao's horse come near, they jumped out and stabbed the horse with their spears. The horse fell, and Cao Cao tumbled to the ground and was captured by the two soldiers.

Just as things were looking dire for Cao Cao, an officer galloped onto the scene and killed the two soldiers with two swings of his knife. He then dismounted and helped Cao Cao to his feet. It was Cao Cao's cousin, Cao Hong (2).

"I'm going to die here for sure," Cao Cao told him. "Brother, leave me and save yourself."

"No!" Cao Hong replied. "My lord, hurry and get on my horse. I will accompany you on foot."

"But what will you do if the rebels catch up to us?"

"The empire can easily do without me, but not without you, my lord."

I guess Cao Cao agreed with this assessment, because he took Cao Hong's horse and told him, "If I make it out of this alive, it will be all thanks to you."

Cao Hong then shed his armor and walked alongside the horse with his knife in hand. Around 1 a.m., they came upon a wide river that blocked their path forward. Meanwhile, the cries of their pursuers were drawing nearer.

"It must be fate," Cao Cao said. "I'm done for."

But Cao Hong (2) wasn't nearly as ready to give up. He helped Cao Cao off the horse, removed his armor, put Cao Cao on his back, and waded into the water. They had barely climbed onto the opposite bank when the pursuing troops arrived and started firing arrows from the other side. Cao Cao, soaking wet at this point, kept running with Cao Hong (2) by his side. They fled on foot for another 10 miles or so.

By now, the sun was dawning. Seeing no one in pursuit, the two paused for a brief rest at the foot of a ridge. But suddenly, they heard men shouting and saw a squad of soldiers approach. It was Xu (2) Rong (2), who had forded the river farther up stream. Once again, things were not looking good for Cao Cao.

But just as he was panicking, Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Yuan arrived with a few dozen horsemen. "Xu (2) Rong (2), don't you dare harm our lord!" they shouted.

Xu (2) Rong (2) rode toward Xiahou Dun to engage him in combat. They dueled for a few bouts before Xiahou Dun thrust his spear through Xu (2) Rong (2) and killed him. Seeing their leader slain, Xu (2) Rong's (2) men scattered. Soon, Cao Ren, Li (2) Dian (3), and Yue (4) Jin (4), each with some soldiers in tow, met up with Cao Cao. It was a sad and joyful reunion. Joyful because they had escaped, but sad because of the more than 10,000 men they had set out with, only some 500 now remained. They gathered up the remnants of their army and headed back to the coalition camps.

Having turned back Cao Cao's pursuit, and with no other coalition forces chasing him, Dong Zhuo moved on toward Changan with no further trouble. Meanwhile, back at Luoyang, the various coalition forces were stationed outside the city. Sun Jian, who oversaw the effort to put out the fire, stationed his army inside the city after the flames were extinguished. He set up his main base at the dynastic temple. He then ordered his men to clean up the debris of the ruined palace and reseal the imperial tombs that Dong Zhuo had broken into. At the Dynastic Temple, he built three straw huts and invited the coalition leaders to come and set up altars for the ancestors of the royal house and offer sacrifices and prayers.

After this ceremony was over, everyone went about their own business, and Sun Jian returned to his own camp. It was already night, and the stars and the moon were shining brightly as if they were trying to outdo each other. Sun Jian sat in the open air with his hand resting on his sword and looked up at the heavens. He noticed a mist spreading over the stars of the Constellation Draco.

"[SIGH] The Emperor's star is dulled," he sighed. "No wonder a rebellious minister is throwing the empire into chaos while the people live on the brink and the capital is a barren wasteland."

Upon this thought, tears began to swell in his eyes.

Just then, one of the soldiers by his side pointed to the south and said, “There is a colored beam of light coming from a well over there!”

Sun Jian ordered his men to light torches and dredge the well. They pulled up the body of a woman. It looked like she had been dead a while, yet there was no sign of decomposition. She was dressed in palace attire. Around her neck was an embroidered bag. Inside the bag was a small red box with a gold lock. Sun Jian opened the box and saw a jade seal. It was square in shape, four inches on each side. On the seal were the delicate engravings of five intertwined dragons. One corner of the seal had been broken off and patched with gold. There were eight ancient characters engraved on the seal that read:

“With mandate from heaven, live long and prosper.”

Sun Jian showed the seal to his general Cheng (2) Pu (3), who immediately recognized it as the Imperial Hereditary Seal. Cheng (2) Pu (3) was also apparently a bit of a history nerd, because he took this opportunity to give Sun Jian a lesson on the history of the seal. So let’s cue the flashback effect.

“The jade from which the seal was made came from the Spring and Autumn period. A man named Bian (4) He (2) saw a phoenix sitting on a rock at the foot of the Jing (1) Mountains. He presented the rock to King Wen (2) of the kingdom of Chu (3). The king split open the rock and found this piece of jade inside.”

A quick aside here: There are actually many more interesting and rather gruesome details to the legend of how Bian (4) He (2) found the stone and presented it to the king. I think it might warrant a short supplementary episode later. So stay tuned for that. In the meantime, let’s continue with Cheng (2) Pu’s (3) flashback.

“In the 26th year of the Qin dynasty (or 221 BC), a master jade cutter made a seal from this piece of jade, and Li (3) Si (1), prime minister to the First Emperor, engraved the characters on it. Two years later, while the First Emperor was sailing on Dongting (4,2) Lake, he was caught in a huge storm and his boat



was about to capsize. The Emperor threw the seal into the water as an offering to the gods, and the storm immediately ceased.

“Eight years later, when the First Emperor was out inspecting his empire, he traveled through Huayin (2,1). An old man stopped him by the road side and handed a seal to one of his attendants, saying, 'This is now restored to the ancestral dragon!' and then the old man vanished. And so, the seal was back in the possession of the house of Qin.

“The next year the First Emperor died. Later, Zi (3) Ying (1), the last emperor of Qin and grandson of the First Emperor, presented the seal to Liu Bang, the Supreme Ancestor and founder of the Han Dynasty. Two hundred years later, during Wang (2) Mang’s (3) usurpation of the throne, Empress Dowager Yuan (2) used the seal to hit two of the rebels. In the process, she broke off a corner of the seal, and it was later repaired with gold. Liu (2) Xiu (4), the founder of the Eastern Han Dynasty, came into possession of the seal at Yiyang (2,2), and it has been passed from one emperor to the next since then.”

“I’ve heard that during the chaos of the Ten Regular Attendants, the eunuchs abducted the emperor and fled to Beimang (3,2) Hills, and when the emperor returned to the palace, the seal had gone missing,” Cheng Pu said. “And now heaven has given the seal to you, my lord. This must mean you are destined to rule. My lord, you should not stay here long. Let us hasten back to Jiangdong (1,1) and lay out our grand design.”

“That’s what I am thinking, too,” Sun Jian said. “Tomorrow I will pretend to be sick and take my leave of the other coalition leaders.”

Sun Jian ordered the soldiers present to keep a tight lid on this. But, when you’ve got that many people present, somebody was bound to go off script. One of the soldiers on the scene was from Yuan Shao’s hometown. Seeing an opportunity for career advancement, he sneaked out of Sun Jian’s camp that night and went to see Yuan Shao and squealed about the whole thing. Yuan Shao rewarded him and

kept him hidden in his camp for the time being.

The next day, Sun Jian went to take his leave of Yuan Shao.

“I’ve come down with some minor illness and wish to return to Changsha (2,1), so I have come to say goodbye,” he said.

“[Laugh] I know what you are suffering from,” Yuan Shao laughed. “It’s called the Imperial Hereditary Seal.”

Stunned, Sun Jian tried to play dumb.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“We have raised our forces to rid the country of rebels,” Yuan Shao said. “The seal belongs to the Court. Since you found it, you should present it publicly to the leader of the coalition so that we can return it to the Court once we have killed Dong Zhuo. But now you are trying to abscond with it. What are your intentions?”

“Why do you say that I have the seal?” Sun Jian said.

“Where is the object you found from the well in the palace?” Yuan Shao pressed him.

“I don’t have it. Why do you insist that I do?”

“Bring out the seal at once, so you can save yourself trouble.”

But Sun Jian was going to stick to his story all the way to the bitter end. He pointed to the heavens and swore an oath:

“If I indeed came into possession of the seal and tried to keep it for myself, may I die a violent death!”

The other coalition leaders now tried to intervene. “If he would go so far as to take such an oath, he must not have it,” they said to Yuan Shao.

But now, after sitting back and watching Sun Jian paint himself into a corner, Yuan Shao summoned the squealer and asked Sun Jian, “Was this man present when you pulled the seal out of the well?”

Sun Jian was infuriated and pulled out his sword to kill the soldier. Yuan Shao pulled out his sword as well and stopped him.

“Kill this man and you will be insulting me!” Yuan Shao said. Yuan Shao’s two top generals, Yan (2) Liang (2) and Wen (2) Chou (3), also pulled out their swords. In response, Sun Jian’s three generals -- Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, and Han (2) Dang (1) -- also pulled out their blades. Things were getting tense.

The other coalition leaders now all intervened and talked the two sides off the ledge. Sun Jian then got on his horse and his army left Luoyang. Yuan Shao, however, was pretty ticked off and not about to let this go. So he sent a trusted attendant with a letter to Liu Biao (3), the imperial protector of Jing (1) Province, asking him to attack Sun Jian on his way home and seize the seal. We’ll have more on this a little later.

But first, the day after the whole brouhaha with Sun Jian, Yuan Shao received word that Cao Cao had suffered a huge defeat while pursuing Dong Zhuo. He immediately invited Cao Cao to his camp and tried to console him with a feast. After a few drinks had sufficiently lowered his inhibitions, Cao Cao began to sigh and lament.

“I sent out my original proclamation for the good of the empire, and all you gentlemen nobly answered the call. My plan was to have our forces mount a three-prong attack that would have turned the people against Dong Zhuo and ensured victory at once. But you, sirs, have stalled out of mutual suspicion and hesitation. You have greatly disappointed the people of the empire, and I am ashamed!”

Well, considering every word he said was, you know, true, Yuan Shao and the other coalition leaders had no response, and the awkward feast soon broke up. Recognizing that everyone there had their own ulterior motives, Cao Cao figured that the coalition was not going to accomplish much of anything. So he led his own forces to Yang (2) Province.

He wasn’t the only one to hop off the bandwagon. Gongsun Zan was having similar thoughts. He said to Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, “Yuan Shao is useless. Things are bound to blow up here eventually.

We should leave.”

And so they led their forces and headed back toward Gongsun Zan’s base of power in the north. When they went by Pingyuan (2,2) County, Gongsun Zan left Liu Bei in charge of the area and then went home to replenish his army. So after all that, Liu Bei and his brothers were right back where they started when this whole anti-Dong Zhuo coalition began.

So now, Sun Jian, who was leading the coalition vanguard, has gone home. Cao Cao, who started the coalition, has left. And Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, whose valor on the battlefield was instrumental in the success of the coalition so far, were also gone. If you get the sense that the coalition was not long for this world, you would be absolutely right.

Soon after our main players left the coalition camps, things went all to hell. One of the coalition leaders, Liu (2) Dai (4), asked another leader, Qiao (2) Mao (4) for some provisions. Qiao (2) Mao (4) came up with some lame excuse and refused. In response, Liu (2) Dai (4) and his army staged a surprise attack on Qiao (2) Mao’s (4) camp. They killed Qiao (2) Mao (4) and absorbed his army.

Seeing the coalition falling apart, Yuan Shao, the leader of the whole operation, said the heck with this and he took his army and left Luoyang and headed back east to his own base of power. So after a whole lot of fanfare, a few stirring battles, and a ton of backstabbing, the coalition was no more, the former capital of Luoyang was in shambles, and Dong Zhuo was still firmly in power, albeit a couple hundred miles farther west. We will drop in on Changan and see how he’s doing later.

But now, let’s turn south and check in on Sun Jian, who was on his way home. But unbeknownst to him, Yuan Shao had sent a messenger to Liu (2) Biao (3), the imperial protector of Jing (1) Province, asking him to attack Sun Jian along the way. This is the first time Liu (2) Biao (3) has appeared in our narrative, but he’s going to play a key role later on, so let’s introduce him real quick.

Much like Liu Bei, Liu Biao was a distant relative of the House of Han. In his youth, he made friends with many famous people, including seven who were particularly renowned as scholars. Together, they

were called The Eight Wise Ones of Jiangxia (1,4), which was a region in Jing (1) Province. I'm not going to bother naming the other seven guys because this is another one of those cases where the novel rattles off a bunch of names that don't matter at all to the narrative.

What does matter to the narrative, however, is the three people who serve as Liu Biao's top advisers. One was named Kuai (3) Liang (2), another was named Kuai (3) Yue (4), and the third was named Cai (4) Mao (4). When Liu Biao received the letter from Yuan Shao, he ordered Kuai (3) Yue (4) and Cai (4) Mao (4) to lead 10,000 men to stop Sun Jian.

When Sun Jian's army approached, Kuai (3) Yue (4) lined up his forces for battle and rode forward.

"Why are you blocking my path?" Sun Jian asked.

"You are a servant of Han. Why did you try to steal the Imperial Hereditary Seal for yourself?" Kuai (3) Yue (4) replied. "Leave it here now, and I will let you pass."

Well, Sun Jian didn't take the threat very well. He ordered Huang Gai forward. Cai (4) Mao (4) rode out with saber in hand to meet him. After a few bouts, Huang Gai's staff struck Cai (4) Mao (4) on the chest. Fortunately for Cai (4) Mao (4), it struck him on the chest plate and so it didn't kill him. Cai (4) Mao (4) turned and ran, and Sun Jian directed his army forward and they stormed through the blockade.

But just then, the sound of gongs and drums echoed from the other side of the hill, and Liu Biao personally led a force out to meet Sun Jian. Sun Jian bowed to Liu Biao from his horse and asked,

"Sir, we are neighbors. Why do you listen to Yuan Shao and try to coerce your neighbor?"

"You stole the Imperial Hereditary Seal. Do you intend to rebel?" Liu Biao replied.

"If I have that object, may I die a violent death."

"[Scoff] If you want me to believe you, then let me search your baggage train."

Sun Jian was not amused by this.

"What abilities do you have that you dare you to disrespect me?!" he said as he ordered his army to attack. Liu Biao immediately fell back, and Sun Jian galloped after him. But just then, hidden soldiers rose

up from the hills on both flanks, while Cai (4) Mao (4) and Kuai (3) Yue (2) arrived from the rear with their men, and they surrounded Sun Jian.

Is he going to make it out alive? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.