

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 16.

Before we get going, I've got a status update for you. According to the progress bar on my e-book version of the novel, we have covered just shy of 10 percent of the book. So we are looking at roughly 150 episodes when this is all said and done, which, as I expected at the beginning of this project, would take about four years at the pace I'm going. So let's not waste any time and get back into the story.

Last time, a famine forced Cao Cao and Lu Bu to temporarily halt their war against each other for control of Yan (3) Province. But Cao Cao was itching to fight someone, anyone, so he decided to take on a ragtag group of Yellow Turban rebels occupying the region of Chen (2), which laid to the east of where Cao Cao had stationed his army. The first battle was an easy rout for Cao Cao. The next day, the rebel leaders Huang (2) Shao (4) and He (2) Yi (2) personally led their forces to meet Cao Cao. After the two sides lined up, a warrior from the rebels' side came out on foot to challenge for combat. His name was He (2) Man (4). He wore a yellow headdress and a green jacket, and he wielded an iron staff.

On Cao Cao's side, Cao Hong said, "Whatever you can do, I can do better," and he hopped off his horse and came out on foot as well, with his saber in hand. The two fought for more than 40 bouts without a clear winner. At that point, Cao Hong turned to a bit of trickery. He pretended to lose and turned and ran. He (2) Man (4) gave chase. But as Cao Hong fled, he was dragging his saber on the ground behind him. When He (2) Man (4) got close, Cao Hong suddenly turned, flicked his saber up from the ground, and swung it at He (2) Man (4). The blade found its mark, and Cao Hong quickly added another blow to finish off his foe.

Capitalizing on the momentum, Cao Cao's general Li Dian galloped into the enemy lines. The rebel leader Huang (2) Shao (4) was caught off guard, and before he knew it, Li Dian had captured him alive. Cao Cao's army now swept in and scattered the rebels, seizing countless gold, silk, and grains.

The other rebel leader, He (2) Yi (2), fled with only a few hundred riders by his side. As they fled

toward a nearby hill, an army suddenly appeared from behind the hill. At its head was a warrior of imposing stature. He stood more than 6 feet tall and had a thick waist. With blade in hand, this warrior blocked the fleeing rebels' path. He (2) Yi (2) wielded his spear and rode forth to fight this guy, but was captured alive after just one bout. The rest of the rebels all dismounted and surrendered. The warrior ordered that they be bound and penned up near the hill.

Meanwhile, one of Cao Cao's officers, Dian (3) Wei (2), was pursuing the rebels and arrived at the hill. The warrior and his men went out to meet him.

"Are you guys rebels, too?" Dian (3) Wei (2) asked.

"I have captured hundreds of rebels," the warrior answered.

"Well then, why don't you hand them over?"

"[Scoff] I'll hand them over if you can defeat my blade."

Dian Wei did not much like this answer, and he was never one to back away from a fight, so he hoisted his twin halberds and answered the challenge. The two fought from morning till noon, with neither gaining the upper hand. After a brief respite, the warrior again came to challenge for combat, and Dian Wei answered it again. This time, they fought till dusk, and they only stopped when their horses were too exhausted to continue.

Dian Wei's soldiers quickly reported this development to Cao Cao. Surprised that someone could prove to be such a match for his prized warrior, Cao Cao came with his other officers to check this out for himself. The next day, the warrior returned to issue another challenge. Cao Cao was very impressed by this guy's appearance, and so he ordered Dian Wei to pretend to lose. Probably grumbling under his breath, Dian Wei fought with the warrior for about 30 bouts before retreating into his own lines. The warrior gave chase all the way to the entrance of Cao Cao's formation, and was only turned back when the arrows started to flow.

Cao Cao then immediately ordered his army to fall back a short distance, and then had his soldiers lay

down a trap. They secretly dug a pit, covered it up, and hid some men armed with hooks nearby. The next day, Dian Wei, accompanied by about a hundred riders, went back out to meet the warrior, who laughed and mocked him, "You've already lost once. How dare you come again?"

The two tangled yet again, and once again, after a number of bouts, Dian Wei fell back. The warrior gave chase, and sure enough, he fell right into the pit. Cao Cao's men then fished him out with their hooks, tied him up, and took him to see their master. Cao Cao, though, immediately left his seat and waved off the escorts with some stern words along the lines of "How dare you mistreat our guest like this?" Cao Cao then personally untied the warrior, gave him a new outfit, offered him a seat, and asked him for his name.

"My name is Xu (2) Chu (3)," the warrior said. "When the bandits started coming around here, We organized our clan, which numbered in the hundreds, and sealed ourselves up in defense. One day, when the bandits tried to attack us, I ordered my men to gather a lot of stones, and I personally hurled them at the enemy. Every one of my throws found its mark, and that sent the bandits away. Another time, when the bandits came again, we were short on food, so we negotiated with the bandits to exchange some of our oxens for their grain. So they delivered their grain and drove our oxens out of the hill, but the oxens turned around and tried to go back. I grabbed two cows by their tails and pulled them backward for 100-some paces. The bandits were so stunned that they didn't even dare to take the oxens. Because of this, we've been able to keep the peace around here."

The tales of rock hurling and ox tail pulling impressed Cao Cao.

"I have long heard of your name," Cao Cao said. "Would you be willing to surrender to me?"

"I am," Xu (2) Chu (3) said, and then he and the hundreds of people from his clan all pledged their allegiance to Cao Cao. Cao Cao made him a commander and rewarded him handsomely. He then executed the captured rebel leaders, and peace was restored to the region.

When Cao Cao returned home from this easy victory, he was greeted by the two generals he had left behind to guard his base, Cao Ren and Xiahou Dun, and they had good news for him. Their spies had reported in recent days that Xue (1) Lan (2) and Li (3) Feng (1), the two men Lu Bu had left in charge of Yan (3) Province, were letting their soldiers leave the city to loot the surrounding areas, leaving the city lightly defended. And since Cao Cao's army is on a roll right now, one battle ought to be enough to secure victory. Cao Cao wasted no time and steered his forces toward Yan Province. This sudden arrival caught Xue (1) Lan (2) and Li (3) Feng (1) off guard, and they had no choice but to lead a force out of the city to meet the enemy.

"Allow me to go kill these two as an introductory gift for you," Xu (2) Chu (3) said to Cao Cao, who was delighted and said ok.

Xu (2) Chu (3) then rode out, and Li (3) Feng (1) went out to meet him. As soon as their horses got close, however, Xu (2) Chu (3) swiftly cut down Li Feng. Xue (1) Lan (2) fled back into his lines, but when he tried to run back into the city, Li Dian had already cut off his path of retreat at the drawbridge. Xue (1) Lan (2) did not like his chances against Li Dian, so he turned and fled toward the wilderness instead. But from behind came another of Cao Cao's officers, Lü (3) Qian (2), who dropped Xue (1) Lan (2) with an arrow. The rest of the enemy forces disintegrated, and Yan (3) Province once again belonged to Cao Cao.

As soon as Cao Cao retook the city, his adviser Cheng (2) Yu (4) pushed for him to advance on Puyang (2,2), where Lu Bu was stationed. So Cao Cao immediately set out again. When his army arrived at Puyang (2,2), Lu Bu wanted to personally go out to meet them, but Chen Gong tried to talk him out of it.

"You cannot go out right now," he said. "Wait until all our forces have gathered."

But Lu Bu, thinking himself invincible, scoffed at this and dismissed the suggestion. When he went out to meet Cao Cao's army, Xu (2) Chu (3) rode out to take him on. After they had fought for 20-some bouts without a winner, Cao Cao said, "It will take more than one man to defeat Lu Bu." So he ordered Dian Wei

to lend a hand, and so now it was two against one. Soon, Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Yuan charged out from the left wing, while Li Dian and Yue (4) Jin (4) charged out from the right wing to join the scrum. Now it was six against one, which hardly seemed sporting but that hardly mattered. What mattered was that Lu Bu could not hold his own against six stout warriors, so he turned and headed back toward the city.

But he was in for a rude surprise. Remember Tian (2), the local rich guy whom Lu Bu had asked to pretend to be Cao Cao's inside man to lure Cao Cao into a trap the last time they met? Well, Tian (2) was watching from the city walls, and when he saw the tide turn against Lu Bu, he ordered the men to pull up the drawbridge. When Lu Bu shouted for them to lower it, Tian (2) shouted back that he had already surrendered to Cao Cao.

Lu Bu cursed the traitor, but to no avail. All he could do was lead his army toward the city of Dingtao (4,2). Meanwhile, inside Puyang (2,2), Chen Gong had gotten word of the coup, so he quickly opened the east gate and escorted Lu Bu's family out of the city. And if you are Lu Bu's family, you probably couldn't help but notice that the guy has a nasty habit of leaving you behind when things go south.

In any case, while Lu Bu fled, Cao Cao entered Puyang as the victor. He was in such a good mood that he even forgave Tian (2) for his past deception. One of his advisers, Liu (2) Ye (4), now told him to keep up the heat on Lu Bu.

"Lu Bu is like a fierce tiger," Liu (2) Ye (4) said. "Right now he's on the ropes. Don't give him any breathing room."

So Cao Cao left Liu Ye (4) behind to watch over Puyang, while he led his army and advanced on Dingtao (4,2). At the moment, not only was Lu Bu in the city, but so were his nominal masters, Zhang Miao (3), the governor of Chenliu Prefecture, and his brother Zhang Chao (1). But Lu Bu was missing a number of his top officers, as Gao Shun (4), Zhang Liao, Zang (1) Ba (4), and Hou (2) Cheng (2) had all been sent out to find food for the army and had not yet returned. When Cao Cao's army arrived, there was no attack for days, and Cao Cao ordered his forces to fall back for 15 miles and set up camp.

This was all happening right in the middle of harvest season, and so Cao Cao ordered his soldiers to cut the grains from the nearby areas for food. When Lu Bu heard about this, he led his army out of the city to put an end to this, but as they approached Cao Cao's camp, they noticed a thick stretch of woods to the left of the camp. Having previously fallen victim to Cao Cao's trickery, Lu Bu was a little paranoid about an ambush being set up in those woods, so he turned his force around and retreated. When Cao Cao heard about this, he told his officers,

"Lu Bu thinks there's an ambush in those woods. We can put up a lot of flags there to increase his suspicion. There is a long dike to the west of the camp. It is dry and is a perfect place to hide a force. Tomorrow, Lu Bu will definitely come to set fire to the woods. When he does, the force from the dike will cut off his retreat, and we shall have him then."

So Cao Cao only left about 50 people in his camp to keep the drums rolling. He also ordered his soldiers to round up a bunch of villagers from nearby and forced them to stay in the camp to make noise to keep up the appearance that there's an army there.

When Lu Bu returned to the city and discussed the situation with Chen Gong, Chen Gong warned him against underestimating Cao Cao's knack for deception, but once again, Lu Bu dismissed this advice.

"I will attack him with fire. That will break his ambush," Lu Bu said. So the next day, he left Chen Gong and Gao Shun to man the city, while he himself led the bulk of his army out toward Cao Cao's camp. In the distance, he saw flags waving in the woods, so he pushed his army forward and set fire to the woods, only to discover, to his surprise, that there was no one there.

Just as Lu Bu was about to turn and head into Cao Cao's camp, drums suddenly started rolling. While Lu Bu was trying to figure out what's going on and what to do next, a force came out from behind the camp. Lu Bu gave chase, but at the sound of an explosive, the soldiers hidden in the dike all sprang out. Xiahou Dun, Xiahou Yuan, Xu (2) Chu (3), Dian Wei, Li Dian, and Yue (4) Jin (4) all made straight for Lu Bu. Well, Lu Bu had already gotten a taste of this before, and he knew he wouldn't be able to hold up

against all six of these guys, so he turned and fled. But one of his officers, Cheng (2) Lian (2), was shot down by an arrow from Yue (4) Jin (4), and two-thirds of Lu Bu's army was lost.

Some of Lu Bu's soldiers fled back into the city to bring the bad news to Chen Gong. Since most of the army that had been defending the city was now gone, Chen Gong figured the city was a lost cause, so he and Gao Shun hurriedly abandoned it and fled with Lu Bu's family in tow. Cao Cao now directed his army toward the city, and they easily breached its defenses. With all their fighting men gone, Zhang Miao (3) and Zhang Chao (1) realized the jig was up. Zhang Chao (1) slit his own throat, while Zhang Miao (3) fled to seek sanctuary with Yuan (2) Shu (4). With this, all their territory now belonged to Cao Cao, who set about repairing the city and putting the people at ease.

Meanwhile, as Lu Bu was fleeing, he met back up with his various officers who had been out looking for food, and Chen Gong and company had joined up with them as well. Lu Bu gathered his tattered forces near the ocean and started talking about mounting another attack against Cao Cao. But Chen Gong was against it.

"Right now Cao Cao has all the momentum, so we cannot fight him at the moment," he said. "Let's first find a place to call home, and then settle this score."

"I'm thinking of joining up with Yuan Shao again. What do you think of that?" Lu Bu asked.

"We can send someone to Yi (4) Province to feel him out first," Chen Gong said.

So Lu Bu sent a messenger, but the message he brought back was not encouraging, to say the least. While Lu Bu and Cao Cao were facing off, Yuan Shao had gotten word of their battles. One of his advisers, Shen (3) Pei (4), said to him, "Lu Bu is a jackal. If he controls Yan Province, he would no doubt have designs on Yi (4) Province. We should help Cao Cao attack him so as to protect ourselves." Yuan Shao took this suggestion and ordered his top general Yan (2) Liang (2) to lead 50,000 men to help Cao Cao.

Lu Bu was stunned at this news and asked Chen Gong what he should do.

“I’ve heard that Liu Bei recently took control of Xu (2) Province,” Chen Gong said. “We can go join him.”

It’s not like Lu Bu had a wealth of options here, seeing how he had previously worn out his welcome with so many of the other warlords. So he and his entourage made for Xu Province, and the news quickly reached Liu Bei.

“Lu Bu is one of the most valiant warriors of our time,” Liu Bei said. “We should go welcome him.”

But Mi Zhu, one of his advisers, disagreed.

“Lu Bu is a wolf,” he said. “You cannot allow him to stay. If you do, he will harm you.”

“But if it wasn’t for his attacking Yan Province, how could we have lifted the siege on our own province?” Liu Bei said. “Right now he is a difficult spot and has come to seek sanctuary with me. How could he have other designs?”

“Brother, you are truly too kind,” Zhang Fei said. “Even so, we must be prepared.”

So Liu Bei led his staff and went out to greet Lu Bu. They met up 10 miles outside Xu Province and rode back into the city side by side. After the formalities, they all sat down, and Lu Bu said,

“After Minister Wang Yun (3) and I worked together to kill Dong Zhuo, I’ve suffered the misfortune of the coup by Li Jue (2) and Guo (1) Si (4), which forced me to bounce around the region to the east of the passes. Most of the lords in the region have turned their backs on me. Recently, when I saw that Cao Cao had dishonorably invaded Xu Province and that you were trying to save Tao Qian, I decided to help by attacking Yan Province so as to divide Cao Cao’s forces. But instead I fell for his tricks and suffered heavy losses. So now I have come to seek refuge with you, sir, so that we may draw up grand plans together. What do you think?”

“Imperial Protector Tao recently passed away,” Liu Bei said. “Because no one has been named to



succeed him, I have been temporarily overseeing things here. But fortunately, you are here now, and it's only right that I should yield control to you."

With that, Liu Bei presented the seal of office to Lu Bu. Just as Lu Bu was about to accept the seal, he looked up and noticed that behind Liu Bei stood Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, and neither of them were looking particularly pleased at the moment, and you can't really blame them considering how hard everyone had to work to convince Liu Bei to take the stupid seal in the first place, and now he's trying to give it away to the first guy who came along.

"I am but a brute. How can I serve as the head of the province?" Lu Bu said with a fake smile on his face.

When Liu Bei tried again to yield control of the province, Chen Gong intervened.

"A more powerful guest should not oppress his host. Sir, please do not be suspicious of our intentions," he said.

At this, Liu Bei stopped trying to give up control of the province. He held a feast to welcome Lu Bu and arranged for quarters for him. The next day, Lu Bu held his own banquet to thank Liu Bei, and Liu Bei attended with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. In the middle of the banquet, Lu Bu invited Liu Bei to the rear chamber, where he instructed his wives and daughter to come out and bow to Liu Bei to show their gratitude for his giving them sanctuary. Liu Bei kept insisting such a gesture was not necessary, but Lu Bu persisted

"There is no need to decline their gesture, my worthy younger brother," Lu Bu said.

Well, that "worthy younger brother" line was perhaps intended to be a term of endearment, but it certainly did not come off that way to the ears of one person in attendance.

"My brother is a member of the royal house!" Zhang Fei shouted with eyes widened. "Who the hell are you, that you dare to call my brother your 'younger brother'?! Come, come! I shall fight 300 rounds with you!"

Liu Bei immediately told Zhang Fei to shut his mouth, and Guan Yu dragged him out of the room. Liu Bei then apologized for Zhang Fei to Lu Bu, blaming it on the wine. Lu Bu merely responded with silence, and the banquet soon broke up. But it didn't end at that. When Lu Bu was seeing Liu Bei out, Zhang Fei came by on his horse with his spear in hand, shouting, "Lu Bu! Come fight 300 rounds with me!"

Liu Bei immediately told Guan Yu to go calm Zhang Fei down, and the party ended like that. The next day, though, Lu Bu came to take his leave of Liu Bei.

"I am grateful that you, sir, have taken me in," Lu Bu said. "But I am worried that your younger brother cannot tolerate me. It's best that I should go seek refuge elsewhere."

"General, if you leave, it would be a great crime on my head," Liu Bei said. "My brother is too brash and offended you. I shall have him apologize to you another day. There is a hamlet nearby named Xiaopei (3,4). I used to station my forces there. If you do not think it too beneath you, you could temporarily rest your army there. I would supply you with all your needs. What do you think? "

Lu Bu thanked Liu Bei and led his army to settle in Xiaopei (3,4). Meanwhile, Zhang Fei got an earful from Liu Bei. Nonetheless, the situation had come to a peaceful resolution for the time being.

This is the first time in a while that we haven't been in the middle of a battle between somebody, somewhere. So it's as good a time as any to pause and briefly take stock of where we are and where we've been.

We are now at about the year 194 A.D., which is 10 years after our story got started with the Yellow Turban Rebellion. It's kind of amazing that it's only been 10 years, considering how much has already happened. We started with a mass uprising that was suppressed in a series of battles in which many of our main characters first began their climb to prominence. But to put down the widespread rebellion, the court had to order local municipalities to recruit their own militia, laying the groundwork for the emergence of regional power centers.

We then had a succession battle for the throne between rival factions at court, with a group of eunuchs manipulating both sides to their own advantage. The reign of the eunuchs came to a bloody end, only to be followed immediately by the bloody reign of Dong Zhuo, who had designs on the throne himself. A bunch of regional officials weren't so keen on those designs, and they formed a coalition against Dong Zhuo in the year 190. This coalition did force Dong Zhuo to move the capital from Luoyang to farther west, to the ancient capital of Changan. But after the coalition forces took Luoyang, they started squabbling amongst themselves, and soon the coalition fell apart.

So now, Dong Zhuo was still in power, but as a result of the coalition against him, you had all these regional military leaders with their own armies, and once they no longer cared about their common cause, many of them started carving out their own territories, usually through force. And with the court too weak and distracted to do much about this, it's pretty much a case of the inmates running the asylum, dog eat dog, might makes right. You know, just pick your cliché.

But the good times did not last long for Dong Zhuo. Just three years after he rose to power, he was done in by a scheme hatched by Wang Yun (3), one of the ministers of the court. Using a pretty girl named Diaochan (1,2), Wang Yun managed to turn Dong Zhuo's adopted son Lu Bu against him, and Lu Bu conspired with Wang Yun to kill Dong Zhuo. But they botched the post-Dong Zhuo purge and invited disaster upon themselves when they refused to grant amnesty to four of Dong Zhuo's lieutenants. As a result, these guys, led by Li Jue (2) and Guo (1) Si (4), raised an army, marched to the capital, killed Wang Yun, and seized control of the emperor and the court.

Meanwhile, in the provinces, we see several major centers of power starting to form. One is Yuan Shao, the descendant of one of the most illustrious families of the court, and he is building his base of power in Yi (4) Province. Another is his cousin, Yuan Shu, who is based in Shocun (4,1). In the South, you have Liu Biao, a distant relative of the royal house who is reigning over Jing (1) Province, and next to him is the family of Sun Jian, a great warrior who was killed in a battle with Liu Biao's forces. And of course,

we have Cao Cao now rising quickly in stature, with his power base in Yan (3) Province. And in Xu Province, Liu Bei just kind of lucked into control of the province, and quite reluctantly, he would have you believe. And now Lu Bu, who has been on the run since Dong Zhuo's former subordinates sacked the capital, is with him, for better or for worse.

Whew! Quite a lot of twists and turns so far. But really, you haven't seen anything yet. After all, the novel IS called the Romance of the THREE Kingdoms, and right now, we still just have one kingdom, albeit a very troubled one. Next time, we'll go back to the capital and look in on the emperor and the court that is being controlled by the former associates of Dong Zhuo. Spoiler alert: Things are about to get even more chaotic. So tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.