

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 114.

Last time, Zhuge Liang and his army had stumbled into a land of poisoned streams and toxic air as they pursued the Nan Man king Meng Huo. Fortunately for them, they ran into Meng Huo's older, and estranged, brother, who told them they could find potable water by digging wells. So they dug, except they couldn't find any water, not even after digging a dozen or so wells.

With his men in a panic, Zhuge Liang took the next logical step. He prayed. Burning incense in the middle of the night, he said to heaven, "Your unworthy servant has received the blessing of the mighty Han and has been tasked with pacifying the Nan Man. Right now, my army lacks water. If it is heaven's will that the Han shall not end here, please bless us with a spring. If the Han has run its course, then your servant is willing to die here!"

Apparently heaven was listening, because when Zhuge Liang and company woke up the next morning, all their wells were brimming with water. The troops drank their fill, and then proceeded along small trails, setting up camp in front of Bald Dragon Hollow, where Meng Huo was seeking refuge with his host, a local tribal king named Duosi (0,1).

The Nan Man scouts brought word of this to Meng Huo, telling him that the Shu soldiers appeared to be unaffected by the toxic air and poisoned springs. King Duosi refused to believe this, so he and Meng Huo went out to a hill top to take a look. But they saw that the Shu soldiers were indeed doing just fine as they were getting ready to make dinner. The sight of this made Duosi's hair stand on end as he turned to Meng Huo and said, "These must be soldiers of heaven!"

"My younger brother and I will fight to the death," Meng Huo said. "We would rather die on the battlefield than surrender!"

"If you lose, then my family would be lost as well," Duosi said. "I will slaughter cows and horses for my men. We will shirk no danger and charge straight into the enemy camp, and victory will be ours!"

So they went back to the cave and prepared their pre-battle feast. But just as they were about to head out, word came that a neighboring tribal leader named Yang (2) Feng (1) had arrived with 30,000 men to join them.

“With their help, success will be mine for sure!” Meng Huo said with delight. So he and Duosi welcomed in their guest.

Yang Feng (1) told them, “I have 30,000 crack troops. They’re all clad in iron armor and can scale mountains. They are more than a match for a million Shu soldiers. I also have five sons who are all skilled warriors and are ready to assist you.”

Yang Feng then summoned his sons, who all possessed brawny, tiger-like physiques. Meng Huo was delighted and threw a feast to welcome his new allies.

Midway through the party, Yang Feng said, “There is little entertainment to be had in the army. I have some Nan Man women who travel with my troops. They’re skilled in dancing with knives and shields. Let’s have them provide some amusement.”

Meng Huo was like, well sure, why the heck not? So momentarily, a few dozen Nan Man women, all with bare feet and hair hanging down, pranced into the tent. All the men in the tent clapped and sang along, and everybody was having a grand ol’ time.

In the middle of this captivating performance, two of Yang Feng’s sons got up to offer a toast to Meng Huo and his younger brother Meng You (1). The two of them accepted the wine and were just about to drink when suddenly, Yang Feng let out a shout, and his two sons quickly yanked Meng Huo and Meng You from their seats and apprehended them. Duosi tried to run, but Yang Feng said not so fast and caught him as well. Meanwhile, the dancing women wielded their knives and shields and held down the place, and nobody dared to come forward to help their captured lords.

So yeah, the next time one of your buddies tells you, “Hey I’ve got some hot girls who are really good at dancing with knives and shields,” just do yourself a favor and pass. If this novel has taught us one thing, it’s that performances involving pointy objects never end well.

“As the saying goes, ‘When the rabbit dies, the fox mourns,’ ” Meng Huo said to Yang Feng. “Things commiserate with their own kind. You and I are both tribal leaders, and there is no bad blood between us. Why do you want to harm me?”

“My brothers, sons, and nephews have all received the kindness of Zhuge Liang’s mercy,” Yang Feng said. “We have no way to repay him. You are a rebel, so why shouldn’t we capture you and offer you to him?”

With their leaders captured, all the Nan Man soldiers in Bald Dragon Hollow scattered and fled back to their home villages. Meanwhile, Yang Feng brought his prisoners to see Zhuge Liang. If you’re keeping count, that would make this the fifth time Meng Huo had fallen into Zhuge Liang’s hands, and the second time as a result of betrayal by his own people.

Zhuge Liang called the latest round of defectors into his tent, and Yang Feng and company knelt and said, “Our clan is grateful for your excellency’s kindness and virtue, so we captured Meng Huo, Meng You and the rest for you.”

Zhuge Liang rewarded them and then had Meng Huo brought in. So here we go again.

“Now will you submit?” Zhuge Liang asked with a smile.

“This wasn’t your doing; it was my own people turning on each other that led to this,” Meng Huo scoffed. “If you want to kill me, then kill me! But I will not submit!”

“You tried to lure me into an arid terrain and use the poisoned springs to kill me, and yet my army is fine. Is that not heaven’s will? Why must you be so stubbornly misguided?”

“My ancestral home is in the Silver Pit Hills,” Meng Huo said. “It has the defenses of three rivers and multiple passes. If you capture me there, then I and my descendants will submit with all our hearts.”

Oh dude, how many times are we going to do this? You’re 0-for-5! Just give it up. But Zhuge Liang apparently was in the mood for a little more entertainment, because he once again accepted the challenge.

“I will let you go again so that you may reorganize your forces and fight a decisive battle,” Zhuge Liang said to Meng Huo. “If you still refuse to submit when I capture you again, then I will exterminate your clan.”

Well, at least the rhetoric is getting a little tougher now. But at the end of the day, Zhuge Liang once again released Meng Huo, who bowed and left. Zhuge Liang also untied Meng You and Duosi and offered them wine and food. The two were so frightened by his presence that they dared not look him in the eye. The feasting done, Zhuge Liang gave them horses and sent them on their way. As for Yang Feng and his sons, they all got cushy government jobs for their contribution.

Meng Huo and his gang headed back to Silver Pit Hollow that night. This cave laid at the intersection of three rivers. To the north of the cave was a fertile flat plain that stretched for a hundred miles. Salt wells were located about 70 miles due west. Seventy miles to the southwest laid two of the rivers. A hundred miles to the south is another cave, called Liangdu (2,1) Hollow. This cave is big enough to have hills inside it, and it’s also surrounded by hills that contain silver ore, which has given this place the name Silver Pit Hills.

Now the novel doesn’t stop at just a description of the geography of this area. It also goes into some detail about the the culture of the people who lived here, just to show how exotic these barbarians were. So within these hills were a number of nice buildings, which served as the residence of the Nan Man king, or as the novel so colorfully puts it, their nest. One of these buildings was the ancestral shrine,

which was called the Family Spirit. Each season, the Nan Man would slaughter cattle and horses as sacrifices in a ceremony called “divining the spirits.” And sometimes these sacrifices included not only cattle and horses, but also any Riverlander or other foreigners who were unfortunate enough to be captured by the Nan Man, which really puts a damper on the local tourist trade. When one of the Nan Man people fell ill, instead of taking medicine, they would instead pray to a shaman named the “medicine spirit.”

There were no criminal laws in this area, and anyone who committed an offense was executed immediately. When the women reached adulthood, they would bathe in a stream, and the sexes mingled freely and coupled without any objections from their parents. This practice, which was called “learning the art,” probably left many a sexually repressed Han Confucian aghast, shortly before they were sacrificed to the local spirits.

In the years when the rain was good, the people planted rice. If the harvest did not ripen, they would turn to snake and elephant meat to get by. In every corner of this region, the top household was called the “chief of the hollow”, and the No. 2 household was called the “tribal elder.” On the first and 15th of each month, market day was held in Three River Town, and goods were exchanged through barter.

After that little digression, let’s get back to the matter at hand. Upon returning to his hollow, Meng Huo gathered up his clan of about 1,000 and told them, “I have been humiliated by the Shu forces, which I vow to avenge. What ideas do you all have?”

Before he was done asking the question, someone spoke up and said, “I can recommend someone who can defeat Zhuge Liang.”

This was Meng Huo’s brother-in-law, who was presently the leader of the Eight Outer Tribes and the chief of Dailai (4,2) Hollow. Meng Huo asked whom he was referring to, and he said, “King Mulu (4,4) is

the chief of Bana (1,4) Hollow, which lies to the southwest. He is well-versed in black magic. He rides around on an elephant, can control the wind and rain, and is often accompanied by wild beasts and poisonous snakes and scorpions. He has 30,000 superb warriors who are extremely courageous. Your highness should write a letter and prepare gifts, and I will personally go request his help. If he is willing to assist us, what need have we to fear the Riverlanders?"

Meng Huo was delighted to learn of this potential ally, so he sent his brother-in-law to go seek help while assigning his former host, King Duosi, to hold down Three River Town as the first line of defense.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang marched his army all the way to Three River Town. From a distance, he could see that the town bordered rivers on three sides, with a land route on the fourth side. So he ordered the generals Wei Yan and Zhao Yun to lead a battalion and lay siege to the city via the land route. When they tried to take the city, however, they were met by a hail of bolts and arrows. Turns out that these Nan Man warriors were quite handy with the crossbow, and each crossbow fired 10 bolts at once. What's more, all the arrow tips were poisonous, so anyone who got hit was doomed to a horrible death where their flesh and skin would rot away until their organs were exposed, and then they died. So basically, the same horrible death you would if you drank the water.

Unable to take the city, Zhao Yun and Wei Yan returned to camp and informed Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang got in his carriage and went to the frontlines to take a look. Upon returning to camp, he ordered his army to fall back a few miles. The sight of the Shu forces retreating delighted the Nan Man soldiers, and they just assumed the enemy was running away out of fright, so they didn't even bother putting out sentries at night.

After his army had fallen back, Zhuge Liang ordered his men to stay in their camp for five straight days, during which he gave no orders at all. Then, on the dusk of the fifth day, a light breeze started to blow, and suddenly, Zhuge Liang sent out the word: Every man is to prepare one piece of garment in two

hours' time. Anyone who doesn't have a piece of garment ready to go by the end of two hours would lose his head. So ... ok. His men weren't sure what three-dimensional chess he's playing, but who were they to question the Zhuge Liang? You wanted garments? You got 'em.

By 7 p.m., everyone was ready with their garment, Zhuge Liang now gave the next order: Take your garment and wrap up a bundle of dirt, or lose your head.

Alright, still don't see where this is going, but that sounds easy enough. So everybody got their bundles of dirt. Now came another order: Bring your bundle of dirt to the foot of Three River Town. The first to arrive will be rewarded.

So everybody dashed to the foot of the city. And now, Zhuge Liang told them to put their dirt bundles in piles and use the piles as steps to scale the city walls. Whoever makes it to the top first will be rewarded.

Now, if you only had, say, a few hundred or a few thousand men, or even 10,000 men, you would probably not make it a few feet off the ground. But Zhuge Liang had at his disposal more than 100,000 men, and 100,000 bundles piled on top of each other apparently were plenty enough to reach the top. The Shu forces stormed the city walls, catching the Nan Man forces with their pants down. Before the guards could fire their crossbows, most of them had already been apprehended, and the rest abandoned the city and fled. Their commander, Duosi, was killed in the melee. Just like that, Three River Town belonged to Zhuge Liang, and he distributed all the riches within the city to his men as reward.

The remnants of the Nan Man forces ran back to Silver Pit Hollow to tell Meng Huo that his first line of defense had fallen, along with King Duosi. Meng Huo was stunned, but before he had time to digest this news, word arrived that the enemy had already crossed the river and were now setting up camp in front of his cave.

While Meng Huo was panicking, someone walked out from behind a screen and laughed at him.

“So witless, and yet you call yourself a man? I maybe a woman, but I am willing to go out and fight for you.”

This was Meng Huo’s wife, Lady Zhurong (4,2). Her family has resided in the Nan Man region for generations and claimed to be descendants of the Chinese god of fire. She was skilled in throwing knives and never missed. Meng Huo now rose and expressed his gratitude for his wife’s offer to bail him out, and she immediately mounted her horse, rounded up a few hundred fierce warriors from her clan, along with 50,000 strong soldiers, and went out to take on the enemy.

As soon as Lady Zhurong (4,2) exited the cave entrance, she found her way blocked by an enemy squadron, led by the general Zhang Yi (2). The two sides lined up, and Lady Zhurong rode out on a curly-maned red hare horse, wearing five throwing knives on her back and wielding a long spear.

What is this? A woman warrior? Zhang Yi (2) was secretly astounded by this shocking sight. Soon, he and Lady Zhurong (4,2) were trading blows. After a few bouts, Lady Zhurong turned and ran, and Zhang Yi (2) gave chase. Hey man, did you ever stop to wonder what those short knives on her back were for? No? Well, you’re about to find out.

Suddenly, Lady Zhurong turned and flung a knife at Zhang Yi (2). Caught off guard, Zhang Yi instinctively raised his hand to try to block it. The knife lodged itself in his left arm, sending him tumbling off his horse. The Nan Man soldiers let out a battle cry and surged forward to tie him up.

Another Shu general, Ma Zhong, heard about his comrade’s fate and rushed out to save him. But he was way too late as Zhang Yi had already been seized by the Nan Man forces. Seeing Lady Zhurong sitting atop her horse in the distance, an angry Ma Zhong charged, but he stumbled right into a trap. The Nan Man soldiers used a rope to trip up his horse, and Ma Zhong went flying to the ground, at which point he too was captured alive.

Victorious, Lady Zhurong returned to the cave with her two prisoners. Meng Huo was thrilled and threw a feast to celebrate. After all, this was the first time since this war began that he actually won



something. Lady Zhurong ordered the executioners to behead the two prisoners, but Meng Huo stopped them.

“Zhuge Liang spared me five times, so it would be dishonorable of me to execute his generals,” Meng Huo said. “Lock them up in the cave for now. We can kill them after we have captured Zhuge Liang.”

His wife said fine, and then they got back to celebrating.

While the Nan Man were partying, Zhuge Liang had gotten word of this setback. He immediately summoned three generals -- Ma Dai, Zhao Yun, and Wei Yan -- and gave them each instructions. The next day, Nan Man scouts told Meng Huo that Zhao Yun was outside challenging for combat. Lady Zhurong promptly went out to answer the challenge. After they traded a few blows, Zhao Yun turned and fled. Lady Zhurong figured this might be a trick, so she did not give chase. The next day, Zhao Yun returned to challenge again, so Lady Zhurong went out again. They fought again, and after a few bouts, Zhao Yun turned and fled again, and once again, Lady Zhurong refused to give chase.

But, as she was about to go back to the cave, she was showered with a barrage of insults and curses from a squad of enemy soldiers led by Wei Yan. As soon as she rode toward Wei Yan, however, Wei Yan turned and fled. This time, Lady Zhurong gave chase, and you can probably guess how this is going to turn out.

Wei Yan galloped down a narrow mountain path. Suddenly, he heard a loud cry behind him, and by the time he turned around, Lady Zhurong had already fallen off her horse. She had fallen into a trap by Ma Dai, who tripped up her horse with a rope and captured her. When the Nan Man soldiers tried to come rescue their queen, Zhao Yun charged out and sent them scurrying instead.

When Ma Dai brought Lady Zhurong back to camp, Zhuge Liang immediately had her untied, set her up in her own tent, and wined her and dined her. You know, the typical playbook for winning hearts and

minds. Zhuge Liang then sent a message to Meng Huo, offering to return his wife in exchange for the two captured officers. There was no way Meng Huo was going to refuse this offer, so he released Zhang Yi (2) and Ma Zhong, and Zhuge Liang returned Lady Zhurong.

When he got his wife back, Meng Huo was equal parts happy and enraged, but then he got a bit of good news: King Mulu (4,4), the chief of Bana (1,4) Hollow, had arrived. Meng Huo went out to greet him and saw him seated atop a white elephant. His clothes were lined with gold and pearls. He wore two large knives around his waist, and had with him a gang of men who kept a pack of ferocious tigers, panthers, jackals, and wolves. Hey the circus is in town!

Meng Huo welcomed in his guests and then prostrated and recounted his woes. King Mulu (4,4) vowed to help him seek revenge, and Meng Huo threw a welcome party for him. The next day, Mulu led his own men and beasts out to the front lines, where he was met by an army led by Zhao Yun and Wei Yan.

As they looked across the way, Zhao Yun and Wei Yan saw that the enemy wielded strange banners and weapons. Few of their soldiers wore any clothes, much less armor. These naked warriors had crude and ugly faces. Each carried four daggers. Their army did not use drums or horns for signals, but rather gongs. King Mulu wore two knives around his waist, carried a bell in his hand, and sat atop his white elephant as he rode out from under the main banner.

"We have spent our whole lives on the battlefield, and have yet to see such a sight," Zhao Yun said to Wei Yan.

Just as the two of them were talking to each other, Mulu started uttering a strange incantation and shook his bell. A violent gale immediately kicked up, sweeping up rocks and pebbles and sending them down like rain. With a braying sound, a pack of wild beasts charged out with fangs and claws bare. The Shu soldiers were not used to this sight and could not stand their ground. As they fell back, the Nan Man

forces gave chase and pursued them all the way back to the borders of Three River Town before calling it a day.

After regrouping their forces, Zhao Yun and Wei Yan went to see Zhuge Liang and asked to be punished for their defeat.

“This is not your fault,” Zhuge Liang said with a smile. “Even before I had left my thatched hut, I had heard that the Nan Man could control wild beasts. I prepared a way to defeat them when I was in the Riverlands. There are 20 carts in our baggage train. They have remained sealed thus far. Let’s use half of them now, and save the other half for another day.”

So he ordered his men to bring the 10 red carts to his tent, leaving the 10 black carts untouched. As usual, nobody had any idea what he was up to. Zhuge Liang ordered the red carts to be opened, and inside were enormous beasts carved from colored wood, with coats of fur made from multicolored yarn and steel claws and teeth. Each of these creatures were large enough to hold 10 people.

Zhuce Liang now selected about 1,000 crack troops and gave them 100 of these wooden creatures. Inside the mouths of these creatures, they stashed fire-starting material, and then they hid the creatures within the ranks of the army.

The next day, Zhuge Liang marched his forces to the entrance of the cave. When word of this reached Meng Huo, King Mulu was like, “Pffft, I’ve got this,” so he and Meng Huo went out to face the challenge. They saw Zhuge Liang wearing a head band, clad in a Daoist robe, holding a feather fan, and seated in his carriage.

“The person in that carriage is Zhuge Liang,” Meng Huo said as he pointed. “If we catch him, then victory is ours!”

So Mulu started chanting his incantation and shaking his bell. And just like the day before, a violent gale started to whip up, and the pack of wild animals charged out again. But this time, they had a surprise waiting for them.

Zhuge Liang waved his feather fan, and like magic, the violent gale changed directions and blew back into the Nan Man's own lines. At the same moment, the Shu forces rolled out their giant fake animals. Fire was shooting out of their mouths, smoke was streaming from their nostrils, bronze bells dangled from their bodies, and they were showing some scary-looking claws and teeth. When the real animals saw this, they were like, yeah, thanks but no thanks, and instead of charging, they turned tail and ran back into the cave, taking out a bunch of Nan Man soldiers on their way.

Zhuge Liang now sent his troops crashing into the Nan Man forces, setting them to flight. King Mulu was killed in the melee, and all of Meng Huo's clansmen abandoned their palace inside Silver Pit Hollow and fled over the hills. Just like that, Meng Huo's home base belonged to Zhuge Liang.

The next day, Zhuge Liang was just about to deploy his troops to go capture Meng Huo when word suddenly arrived that Meng Huo's brother-in-law, Chief Dailai (4,2), had tried to convince Meng Huo to surrender, but Meng Huo refused. So Dailai (4,2) captured Meng Huo, Lady Zhurong (4,2), and a few hundred of their clansmen, and that he had brought all those prisoners to Zhuge Liang's camp as a present.

When he heard this, Zhuge Liang summoned the officers Zhang Yi (2) and Ma Zhong and whispered a few words to them. The two then led 2,000 crack troops and lay in waiting. Zhuge Liang then told the guards to let Chief Dailai (4,2) in. Dailai entered with several hundred prisoners and prostrated on the ground.

"Seize them!" Zhuge Liang shouted.

At that, the soldiers lying in wait sprang out and easily captured all the visitors.

“How can you fool me with this pitiful little scheme?” Zhuge Liang said with a laugh. “The previous two times when your own men betrayed you into my hands, I did not harm you, so you thought I would fall for this trick, so that you can kill me in your cave.”

Zhuge Liang told the guards to search the prisoners, and sure enough, all of them had sharp daggers hidden on them.

“You said that if I capture you in your home base, you would submit, so what now?” Zhuge Liang asked Meng Huo.

To see what excuse Meng Huo comes up with this time, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!