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*Three Bold Spirits Plight Mutual Faith in the Peach Garden;
Heroes and Champions Win First Honors Fighting the Yellow Scarves*

HERE BEGINS OUR TALE. The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been. In the closing years of the Zhou dynasty,¹ seven kingdoms warred among themselves until the kingdom of Qin prevailed and absorbed the other six. But Qin soon fell, and on its ruins two opposing kingdoms, Chu and Han, fought for mastery until the kingdom of Han prevailed and absorbed its rival, as Qin had done before.² The Han court's rise to power began when the Supreme Ancestor slew a white serpent, inspiring an uprising that ended with Han's ruling a unified empire.

Two hundred years later, after Wang Mang's usurpation, Emperor Guang Wu restored the dynasty, and Han emperors ruled for another two hundred years down to the reign of Xian, after whom the realm split into three kingdoms.³ The cause of Han's fall may be traced to the reigns of Xian's two predecessors, Huan and Ling. Huan drove from office and persecuted officials of integrity and ability, giving all his trust to his eunuchs.⁴ After Ling succeeded Huan as emperor, Regent-Marshal Dou Wu and Imperial Guardian Chen Fan, joint sustainers of the throne, planned to execute the power-abusing eunuch Cao Jie and his cohorts.⁵ But the plot came to light, and Dou Wu and Chen Fan were themselves put to death. From then on, the Minions of the Palace knew no restraint.

On the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the second year of the reign Established Calm (Jian Ning),⁶ the Emperor arrived at the Great Hall of Benign Virtue for the full-moon ancestral rites. As he was about to seat himself, a strong wind began issuing out of a corner of the hall. From the same direction a green serpent appeared, slid down off a beam, and coiled itself on the throne. The Emperor fainted and was rushed to his private chambers. The assembled officials fled. The next moment the serpent vanished, and a sudden thunderstorm broke. Rain laced with hailstones pelted down for half the night, wrecking countless buildings.

In the second month of the fourth year of Established Calm an earthquake struck Luoyang, the capital, and tidal waves swept coastal dwellers out to sea. In the first year of Radiant Harmony (Guang He) hens were transformed into roosters.⁷ And on the first day of the sixth month a murky cloud more than one hundred spans in length floated into the Great Hall of Benign Virtue.⁸ The next month a secondary rainbow was observed in the Chamber of the Consorts. Finally, a part of the cliffs of the Yuan Mountains plunged to earth.⁹ All these evil portents, and more, appeared—too many to be dismissed as isolated signs.

Emperor Ling called on his officials to explain these disasters and omens. A court counselor, Cai Yong, argued bluntly that the secondary rainbow and the transformation of the hens were the result of interference in government by empresses and eunuchs. The Emperor merely read the report, sighed, and withdrew.

The eunuch Cao Jie observed this session unseen and informed his associates. They framed Cai Yong in another matter, and he was dismissed from office and retired to his village. After that a vicious gang of eunuchs known as the Ten Regular Attendants—Zhang Rang, Zhao Zhong, Feng Xu, Duan Gui, Cao Jie, Hou Lan, Jian Shuo, Cheng Kuang, Xia Yun, and Guo Sheng—took charge.¹⁰ Zhang Rang gained the confidence of the Emperor, who called him “Nuncle.” Court administration became so corrupt that across the land men’s thoughts turned to rebellion, and outlaws swarmed like hornets.

One rebel group, the Yellow Scarves, was organized by three brothers from the Julu district—Zhang Jue, Zhang Bao, and Zhang Liang. Zhang Jue had failed the official provincial-level examination and repaired to the hills where he gathered medicinal herbs.¹¹ One day he met an ancient mystic, emerald-eyed and with a youthful face, gripping a staff of goosefoot wood. The old man summoned Zhang Jue into a cave where he placed in his hands a sacred book in three volumes. “Here is the *Essential Arts for the Millennium*,” he said. “Now that you have it, spread its teachings far and wide as Heaven’s messenger for the salvation of our age. But think no seditious thoughts, or retribution will follow.” Zhang Jue asked the old man’s name, and he replied, “The Old Hermit From Mount Hua Summit—Zhuang Zi, the Taoist sage.” Then he changed into a puff of pure breeze and was gone.

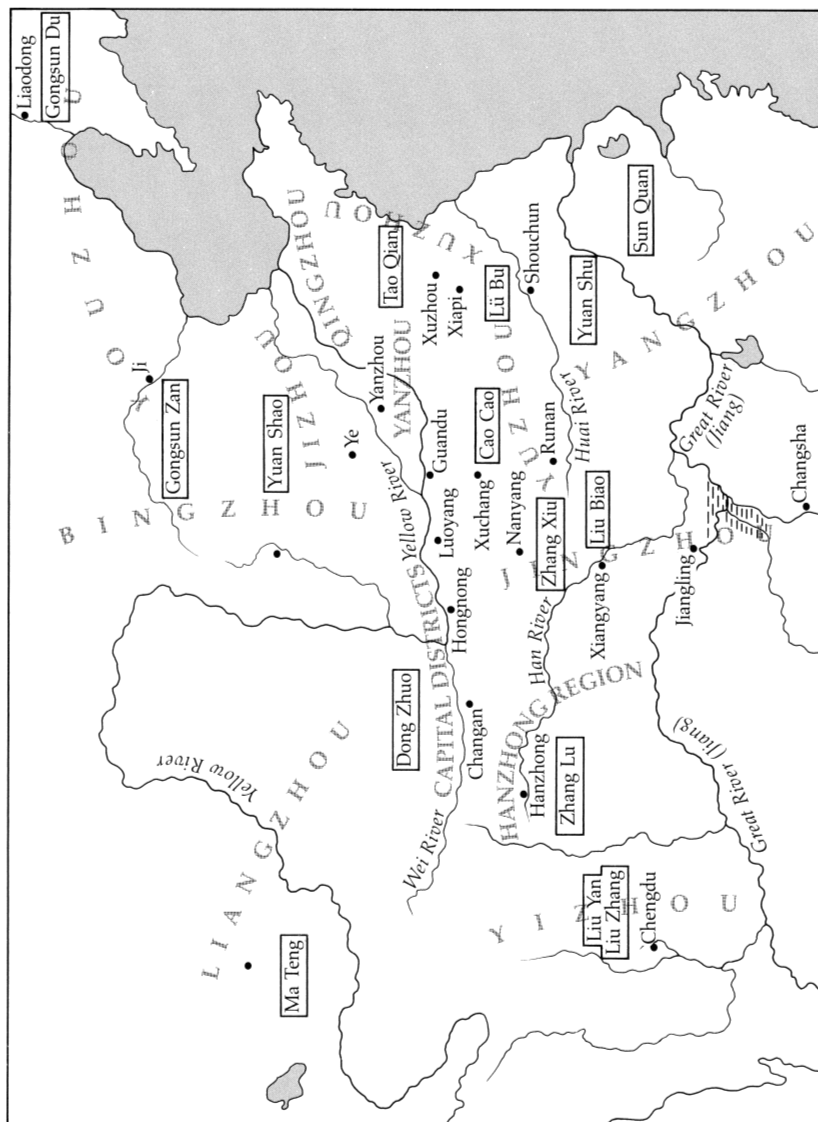
Zhang Jue applied himself to the text day and night. By acquiring such arts as summoning the wind and invoking the rain, he became known as the Master of the Millennium. During the first month of the first year of the reign Central Stability (Zhong Ping),¹² a pestilence spread through the land. Styling himself Great and Worthy Teacher, Zhang Jue distributed charms and potions to the afflicted. He had more than five hundred followers, each of whom could write the charms and recite the spells. They traveled widely, and wherever they passed, new recruits joined until Zhang Jue had established thirty-six commands—ranging in size from six or seven thousand to over ten thousand—under thirty-six chieftains titled general or commander.¹³

A seditious song began to circulate at this time:

The pale sky is on the wane,
Next, a yellow one shall reign;
The calendar’s rotation
Spells fortune for the nation.

Jue ordered the words “new cycle” chalked on the front gate of every house, and soon the name Zhang Jue, Great and Worthy Teacher, was hailed throughout the eight provinces of the realm—Qingzhou, Youzhou, Xuzhou, Jizhou, Jingzhou, Yangzhou, Yanzhou, and Yuzhou. At this point Zhang Jue had his trusted follower Ma Yuanyi bribe the eunuch Feng Xu to work inside the court on behalf of the rebels. Then Zhang Jue made a proposal to his two brothers: “Popular support is the hardest thing to win. Today the people favor us. Why waste this chance to seize the realm for ourselves?”

Zhang Jue had yellow banners made ready, fixed the date for the uprising, and sent one of his followers, Tang Zhou, to inform the agent at court, the eunuch Feng Xu. Instead, Tang Zhou reported the imminent insurrection to the palace. The Emperor



MAP. 1. Provinces (*zhou*), districts and towns, and military leaders at the end of the Han dynasty. The leaders' names appear in boxes. Source: Liu Chunfan, *Sanguo shihua* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1981), p. 21.

summoned Regent He Jin to arrest and behead Ma Yuanyi. This done, Feng Xu and his group were seized and jailed.

His plot exposed, Zhang Jue mustered his forces in great haste. Titling himself General of Heaven, his first brother General of the Earth, and his second brother General of Men, he addressed his massed followers: "Han's fated end is near. A new sage is due to appear. Let one and all obey Heaven and follow the true cause so that we may rejoice in the millennium."

From the four corners of the realm the common folk, nearly half a million strong, bound their heads with yellow scarves and followed Zhang Jue in rebellion, gathering such force that the government troops scattered on the rumor of their approach. Regent-Marshal He Jin appealed to the Emperor to order every district to defend itself and every warrior to render distinguished service in putting down the uprising. Meanwhile, the regent also gave three Imperial Corps commanders—Lu Zhi, Huangfu Song, and Zhu Jun—command of three elite field armies with orders to bring the rebels to justice.

As for Zhang Jue's army, it began advancing on Youzhou district. The governor, Liu Yan, was a native of Jingling county in Jiangxia and a descendant of Prince Gong of Lu of the imperial clan. Threatened by the approaching rebels, Liu Yan summoned Commandant Zou Jing for his estimate of the situation. "They are many," said Jing, "and we are few. The best course, Your Lordship, is to recruit an army quickly to deal with the enemy." The governor agreed and issued a call for volunteers loyal to the throne.

The call was posted in Zhuo county, where it drew the attention of a man of heroic mettle. This man, though no scholar, was gentle and generous by nature, taciturn and reserved. His one ambition was to cultivate the friendship of the boldest spirits of the empire. He stood seven and a half spans tall, with arms that reached below his knees. His ear lobes were elongated, his eyes widely set and able to see his own ears. His face was flawless as jade, and his lips like dabs of rouge.

This man was a descendant of Liu Sheng, Prince Jing of Zhongshan, a great-great-grandson of the fourth Han emperor, Jing. His name was Liu Bei; his style, Xuande.¹⁴ Generations before, during the reign of Emperor Wu, Liu Sheng's son, Zhen, was made lord of Zhuolu precinct, but the fief and title were later forfeited when Zhen was accused of making an unsatisfactory offering at the eighth-month libation in the Emperor's ancestral temple.¹⁵ Thus a branch of the Liu family came to settle in Zhuo county.

Xuande's grandfather was Liu Xiong; his father, Liu Hong. Local authorities had recommended Hong to the court for his filial devotion and personal integrity.¹⁶ He received appointment and actually held a minor office; but he died young. Orphaned, Xuande served his widowed mother with unstinting affection. However, they had been left so poor that he had to sell sandals and weave mats to live.

The family resided in a county hamlet called Two-Story Mulberry after a tree of some fifty spans just southeast of their home. Seen from afar, the mulberry rose tall and spread broadly like a carriage canopy. "An eminent man will come from this house," a fortune-teller once predicted. While playing beneath the tree with the boys in the hamlet, young Xuande often boasted, "When I'm the Son of Heaven, my chariot will have a canopy like this." Impressed by these words, his uncle Liu Yuanqi remarked, "This is no ordinary child."¹⁷ Yuanqi sympathized with the impoverished family and often helped out his nephew. At fifteen Xuande was sent away by his mother to study, and Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi were among his teachers.¹⁸ He also formed a close friendship with Gongsun Zan.

Xuande was twenty-eight when Governor Liu issued his call for volunteers. Reading the notice in Zhuo that day, Xuande sighed heavily. "Why such long sighs?" someone

behind him asked brusquely. "A real man should be serving his emperor in the hour of peril." Xuande turned and faced a man eight spans tall, with a blunt head like a panther's, huge round eyes, a swallow's heavy jowls, a tiger's whiskers, a thunderous voice, and a stance like a dashing horse. Half in fear, half in admiration, Xuande asked his name.

"The surname," the man replied, "is Zhang; given name, Fei; style, Yide.¹⁹ We've lived in this county for generations, farming our piece of land, selling wine, and slaughtering pigs. I seek to befriend men of bold spirit; when I saw you sighing and studying the recruitment call, I took the occasion to address you." "As a matter of fact," Xuande answered, "I am related to the imperial family. My surname is Liu; given name, Bei. Reading of the trouble the Yellow Scarves are stirring up, I had decided to help destroy the bandits and protect the people and was sighing for my inability to do so when you came by." "I have resources," said Zhang Fei, "that could be used to recruit in this area. Let's work together for the cause. What about it?"

Xuande was elated, and the two went to a tavern. As they drank, they watched a strapping fellow pushing a wheelbarrow stop to rest at the tavern entrance. "Some wine, and quickly—I'm off to the city to volunteer," the stranger said as he entered and took a seat. Xuande observed him: a man of enormous height, nine spans tall, with a two-foot-long beard flowing from his rich, ruddy cheeks. He had glistening lips, eyes sweeping sharply back like those of the crimson-faced phoenix, and brows like nestling silkworms.²⁰ His stature was imposing, his bearing awesome. Xuande invited him to share their table and asked who he was.

"My surname is Guan," the man replied. "My given name is Yu; my style, Changsheng, was later changed to Yunchang.²¹ I am from Jieliang in Hedong, but I had to leave there after killing a local bully who was persecuting his neighbors and have been on the move these five or six years.²² As soon as I heard about the recruitment, I came to sign up." Xuande then told of his own ambitions, to Lord Guan's great satisfaction.²³ Together the three left the tavern and went to Zhang Fei's farm to continue their discussion. "There's a peach garden behind my farm," said Zhang Fei. "The flowers are in full bloom. Tomorrow let us offer sacrifice there to Heaven and earth, and pledge to combine our strength and purpose as sworn brothers. Then we'll plan our course of action."²⁴ Xuande and Lord Guan agreed with one voice: "So be it."

The next day the three men had a black bull, a white horse, and other offerings brought to the peach garden.²⁵ Amid the smoke of incense they performed their ritual prostration and took their oath:

We three, though of separate ancestry, join in brotherhood here, combining strength and purpose, to relieve the present crisis. We will perform our duty to the Emperor and protect the common folk of the land. We dare not hope to be together always but hereby vow to die the selfsame day. Let shining Heaven above and the fruitful land below bear witness to our resolve. May Heaven and man scourge whosoever fails this vow.

So swearing, Xuande became the eldest brother; Lord Guan, the second; and Zhang Fei, the youngest. After the ceremonies they butchered the bull and spread forth a feast in the peach garden for the three hundred local youths they had recruited; and all drank to their heart's content.

The next day they collected weapons, but they wanted for horses. Two visitors whose servants were driving a herd of horses toward Zhang Fei's farm provided the solution. "This must mean that Heaven is with us," said Xuande as the three brothers went forth

to greet the men, Zhang Shiping and Su Shuang, two wealthy traders from Zhongshan. Every year, they said, they went north to sell horses; but this year they had had to turn back because of the Yellow Scarves. Xuande invited them to the farm, where he set out wine and entertained them before revealing his intention to hunt down the rebels and protect the people. The visitors were delighted to support the cause by supplying the brothers with fifty fine mounts, five hundred ounces of gold and silver, and one thousand *jin* of wrought iron to manufacture weapons.²⁶

After bidding the traders a grateful farewell, Xuande had the finest smith forge for him a pair of matching double-edged swords; for Lord Guan a Green Dragon crescent-moon blade, also known as Frozen Glory, weighing eighty-two *jin*,²⁷ and for Zhang Fei, an eighteen-span spear of tempered steel. He also ordered full body armor for each of them.

At the head of five hundred local youths, the brothers presented themselves to Commandant Zou Jing. Jing brought them to Liu Yan, governor of Youzhou, before whom the brothers gave account of themselves. When Xuande mentioned his royal surname, the governor was delighted and acknowledged him as a nephew.

Some days later it was reported that the Yellow Scarves chieftain Cheng Yuanzhi was advancing on Zhuo district with fifty thousand men. The governor had Commandant Zou Jing lead the brothers and their five hundred against the enemy. Eagerly, Xuande took his company to the base of Daxing Mountain where he encountered the rebels, who as always appeared with hair unbound and yellow scarves across their foreheads.

The two forces stood opposed. Xuande rode out, Lord Guan to his left, Zhang Fei to his right. Raising his whip, Xuande cried out, "Traitors to the Emperor, surrender now!" Enraged, Cheng Yuanzhi sent his subordinate commander Deng Mao into the field. Zhang Fei sped out, leveled his eighteen-span serpent-headed spear and jabbed his adversary through the chest. Seeing Deng Mao tumble dead from his horse, Yuanzhi cut toward Zhang Fei, slapping his mount and flourishing his blade. Lord Guan swung out his mighty sword and, giving his horse free rein, rushed the foe. Cheng Yuanzhi gulped with fright and, before he could defend himself, was sliced in two with a stroke of Lord Guan's weapon. A poet of later times praised the two warriors:

Oh, what a day for gallantry unveiled!
One man proved his lance and one his blade.
In maiden trial their martial force was shown.
A thrice-torn land will see them gain renown.

Their leaders slain, the rebels dropped their spears and fled. Xuande pursued, taking more prisoners than could be counted, and the brothers returned triumphant. Governor Liu Yan met them personally and rewarded their soldiers. The next day Liu Yan received an appeal from Governor Gong Jing to relieve the rebel-besieged city of Qingzhou. Xuande volunteered to go there, and Liu Yan ordered Zou Jing to join him and his brothers with five thousand men.

As the rescue force approached Qingzhou, the Yellow Scarves divided their army and tied up the government troops in a tangled struggle. Xuande's fewer numbers could not prevail, and he had to retreat some thirty *li* where he pitched camp. "They are too many for us. We can win only by surprising them," Xuande told his brothers. He had Lord Guan and Zhang Fei march off with one thousand men each and conceal themselves along both sides of a hill.

The following day Xuande and Zou Jing advanced noisily but drew back when the enemy gave battle. The rebel horde eagerly pursued, but as they passed the hill the gongs

rang out in unison. From left and right, troops poured down as Xuande swung his soldiers around to resume combat. Squeezed between three forces, the rebels broke up and were driven to the very walls of Qingzhou where an armed populace led by Governor Gong Jing met them. After a period of slaughter the Scarves were routed and the siege of Qingzhou was lifted. In later times a poet praised Xuande:

Seasoned plans and master moves; all's divinely done.
 To one mighty dragon two tigers can't compare.
 At his first trial what victories are won!
 Poor orphan boy? The realm is his to share.

After the governor had feasted the troops, Commandant Zou Jing wanted to return to Youzhou. But Xuande said, "We have word that Imperial Corps Commander Lu Zhi has been battling the rebel chief Zhang Jue at Guangzong. Lu Zhi was once my teacher, and I'd like to help him." So Zou Jing returned to Youzhou with his men, and Xuande headed for Guangzong with his brothers and their five hundred men. They entered Lu Zhi's tent and, after the customary salutations, explained their purpose in coming.

Lu Zhi rejoiced at the arrival of this relief and took the brothers under his command. At this time Zhang Jue's one hundred and fifty thousand and Lu Zhi's fifty thousand were deadlocked at Guangzong. "We have them contained here," Lu Zhi said to Xuande, "but over in Yingchuan, Zhang Jue's two brothers, Zhang Liang and Zhang Bao, are holding out against our generals Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun. Let me add one thousand to your company. Then go and investigate the situation there and fix the time to sweep the rebels out." On Lu Zhi's order, Xuande rode through the night to Yingchuan.

Meanwhile, checked by Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun, the Yingchuan rebels had retreated to Changshe, where they hastily built a campsite near a field. "If they're by a field," General Huangfu Song said to Zhu Jun, "we should attack with fire." They ordered each soldier to lie in wait with unlit torches of straw. That night the wind rose. After the second watch the government soldiers burned the camp.²⁸ Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun attacked the rebels' stockade as flames stretched skyward. Without saddling their horses or buckling their armor, the rebels fled panic-stricken in every direction. The slaughter continued until morning.

Zhang Liang and Zhang Bao were in full flight when their fire-decimated forces were intercepted by a contingent of men with red flags flying. The leader of this new unit flashed into sight—tall, narrow-eyed, with a long beard. This man's rank was cavalry commander. His surname was Cao; his given name, Cao; his style, Mengde. Cao Cao's father, Cao Song, was originally not a Cao but a Xiahou. However, as the adopted son of the eunuch Cao Teng he assumed the surname Cao. Cao Song was Cao Cao's natural father. In addition, Cao Cao had the childhood nickname Ah Man and another given name, Jili.²⁹

As a youth Cao had loved the hunt and delighted in song and dance. He was a boy with ingenious ideas for any situation, a regular storehouse of schemes and machinations. Once Cao's uncle, outraged by his nephew's wild antics, complained to Cao's father, who in turn reproached Cao. The next time the boy saw his uncle, he dropped to the ground and pretended to have a fit. The terrified uncle fetched the father, who rushed to his son's side only to find him perfectly sound. "Your uncle told me you'd had a fit," said Song. "Has it passed?" "Nothing of the sort ever happened," responded Cao. "My uncle accuses me of everything because I have lost favor with him." The father believed the son and thereafter ignored the uncle's complaints, leaving Cao free to indulge his whims.³⁰

At about that time a man called Qiao Xuan said to Cao, "The empire is near ruin and can be saved only by a man capable of dominating the age. You could be the one." On another occasion He Yu of Nanyang said of Cao Cao, "The house of Han is going to fail. Yet I feel certain this is the man to steady the realm." In Runan a man named Xu Shao, known for his insight into human character, refused to give Cao a reading. But pressed repeatedly, the man finally spoke: "You could be an able statesman in a time of peace or a treacherous villain in a time of chaos." This prediction pleased Cao immensely.

At twenty, Cao received his district's recommendation for filial devotion and personal integrity, and this led to his initial appointment to the palace. Later, he was given command of security in the northern half of the district where the capital, Luoyang, was located. On assuming office he had a dozen decorated cudgels placed at the four gates of the city. They were to be a sign that any violator of the laws, however high or mighty, would be punished. One night the uncle of the eunuch Jian Shuo was seen going through the streets carrying a broadsword. Cao, making his nightly rounds, apprehended him and had one of the bludgeons applied. Thereafter no one dared to break the laws, and Cao Cao's prestige increased. Later he was made magistrate of Dunqiu.

During the Yellow Scarves uprisings the court elevated Cao to the rank of cavalry commander, and it was in this capacity that he led five thousand mounted warriors and foot soldiers to the Yingchuan district. He encountered the routed troops of Zhang Liang and Zhang Bao and cut off their retreat. In the ensuing fray his men took ten thousand heads as well as flags, banners, gongs, drums, and horses in large numbers. Zhang Liang and Zhang Bao, however, managed to escape after a desperate struggle. Cao presented himself to Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun, the imperial field generals, and then went after the two rebel leaders.³¹

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Meanwhile Xuande and his brothers neared Yingchuan, hurrying toward the roar of battle and the glowing night horizon. They reached the scene only to find the rebels already scattered. Xuande presented himself to Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun and explained why Lu Zhi had sent him. "Zhang Jue's two brothers are done for by now," said Huangfu Song. "They'll be taking refuge with Jue at Guangzong. That's where you are needed." Xuande accepted the order and led his men back. En route they came upon some soldiers escorting a cage-cart holding none other than Lu Zhi as prisoner. Amazed to find under arrest the commander whom he so recently had been serving, Xuande dismounted and asked what was the matter. "I had Zhang Jue surrounded and nearly defeated," Lu Zhi explained, "when he prevented our victory by some kind of magic. The court sent the eunuch Zuo Feng from the Inner Bureau to investigate. He was only looking to get paid off, but I told him that with supplies exhausted we had nothing to spare for the imperial envoy. My refusal only angered him. He bore the grudge back to court and reported that I was weakening morale by keeping on the defensive and not engaging the enemy. The court sent Imperial Corps Commander Dong Zhuo to relieve me and return me to the capital to face charges."

Outraged by this treatment of Xuande's former teacher, Zhang Fei moved to cut down the guard and rescue the prisoner. But Xuande checked him. "The court will see to it that justice is done" he said. "Better not act rashly." They let the escort pass. "With Lu Zhi arrested and replaced," said Lord Guan, "we have nowhere to go but back to Zhuo district." Xuande agreed and began marching north. But on the next day they heard a great tumult beyond a hill. Xuande and his brothers climbed to high ground. A beaten Han

army came into their view. Behind it, hill and dale swarmed with Yellow Scarves bearing banners that read "Heavenly Commander." "Zhang Jue himself!" cried Xuande. "Let's attack at once."³²

The three brothers swung their men into fighting position just as Zhang Jue was beating down the forces of Dong Zhuo, Lu Zhi's replacement as Imperial Corps commander. Carried by their momentum, the rebels drove hard until they ran up against the brothers. A murderous clash followed. Jue's men were thrown into confusion and had to retreat more than fifty *li*. The brothers rescued Dong Zhuo and saw him back to his camp. Zhuo inquired what offices they held but, upon learning that they were commoners without position, disdainfully refused to acknowledge their service.³³ The three started to leave the camp with Zhang Fei grumbling, "Is that how the wretch treats us for risking our lives to save him? Then I'll have another kind of satisfaction!" Bent on revenge, Zhang Fei turned and stamped back toward Dong Zhuo's headquarters, a sword in his hand. It was a case where, indeed:

Status is what counts and always has!
Who needs to honor heroes without rank?
Oh, let me have a Zhang Fei straight and true,
Who'll pay out every ingrate what he's due.

Did Zhang Fei kill the Imperial Corps commander?

READ ON.