

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 27.

Last time, the emperor had issued a secret decree to his brother-in-law, Dong (3) Cheng (2), asking him to find a way to get rid of Cao Cao since Cao Cao was turning into yet another imperial puppet master like the guys before him. Dong Cheng was stumped, though, and he fell asleep while thinking about this matter. And he left the decree on the table. When his friend Wang (2) Zifu (3,2) came to visit, he saw the decree.

“You are planning to kill the prime minister!” Wang (2) Zifu (3,2) said to a panicked Dong Cheng. “I’m going to turn you in!”

“If you do that, the Han is done for!” Dong Cheng said with tears in his eyes.

“I was just kidding,” Wang Zifu said. “My family has received the Han’s benevolence for generations, how can I not be loyal to the court? I am willing to lend you a hand and kill the rebel.”

“If that’s the case, it would be a boon to the country!” Dong Cheng said.

“Then let’s write a secret pledge declaring our loyalty to his majesty, no matter the danger to ourselves or our clans,” Wang Zifu said.

Delighted, Dong Cheng fetched a length of white silk and wrote his name first. Wang Zifu then added his name. After this, Wang Zifu said, “General Wu (2) Zilan (3,2) is a close friend of mine. We can bring him in on this.”

“Of all the officials at court, only Zhong (3) Ji (2) and Wu (2) Shuo (4) are my confidants,” Dong Cheng said. “They will definitely help us.”

While they were discussing this, Dong Cheng’s servants reported that his two confidants had come to visit.

“Heaven is on our side,” Dong Cheng said. He instructed Wang Zifu to hide behind a screen for the time being and then welcomed his two friends in. After tea was served, Zhong (3) Ji (2) asked Dong Cheng, “Were you as outraged as I was about what happened during the imperial hunt?”

“Yes, but what can be done about it?” Dong Cheng replied, playing coy.

“I swear I will kill that rebel! It’s just that I have no one to help me,” Wu (2) Shuo (4) said.

“To rid the country of this evil, I would die without regret,” Zhong (3) Ji (2) said.

At this moment, Wang Zifu jumped out from behind the screen and did his, “Aha! So you two are conspiring against the prime minister” routine. But the two officials were not afraid at all.

“A loyal official does not fear death!” Zhong (3) Ji (2) said angrily. “Better to die in service of the Han than to flock to the rebel like you do!”

Dong Cheng broke up the charade and laughed. “We were just about to go see you two about this matter,” he said. “Wang Zifu was just kidding.” He then pulled out the blood decree for his friends to see. Upon reading it, Zhong (3) Ji (2) and Wu (2) Shuo (4) wept nonstop. Dong Cheng then asked them to sign their names to the pledge. Once that was done, Wang Zifu went and fetched his friend Wu (2) Zilan (3,2), and he did likewise. With five names now on the pledge, Dong Cheng set up a banquet in his private quarters for his fellow conspirators.

As they were drinking, servants reported that Ma (3) Teng (2), the governor of Xiliang (1,2), was outside asking to see Dong Cheng. Dong Cheng told his attendant to relay to Ma (3) Teng (2) that he was ill and could not see guests. But when the attendant repeated this to Ma Teng, he flew into a rage.

“Just yesterday I spotted him leaving the palace in a fine robe and girdle! Why does he now pretend to be sick?! This is not just a social visit. Why does he refuse to see me?!”

So the doorman went back in and told Dong Cheng this, and Dong Cheng had no choice but to ask his companions to wait in the back while he went out front to see what Ma Teng wanted. After exchanging courtesies, Ma Teng said,

“I am about to return to Xiliang (1,2) after an audience with his majesty, and I have come to take my leave of you. Why did you try to turn me away?”

“I came down with a sudden illness and was not able to welcome you at the gate. Please forgive me,” Dong Cheng answered.

“You don’t look sick,” Ma Teng said.

For this, Dong Cheng had no reply. Ma Teng now gave him a dismissive wave of the sleeve, got up to leave, and sighed, “[Sigh] You are not the one to save the country!”

When he heard this, Dong Cheng stopped Ma Teng and asked him what he meant by that.

“I am bursting with anger over what happened at the royal hunt,” Ma Teng said. “You are the emperor’s in-law, and yet you’re drowning yourself in women and booze instead of thinking about eliminating the rebel. How can you be the one to save the royal house?”

Well, Dong Cheng was still not quite sure if Ma Teng was being sincere or just leading him on, so he played coy.

“Why do you say that, sir? Prime minister Cao is a capable official that the court can lean on.”

This just made Ma Teng even angrier.

“You actually think Cao Cao is a good man?!!”

“[Lightly] The walls have ears. Please lower your voice,” Dong Cheng said.

“You are a coward! There is no point in discussing important matters with you!” Ma Teng snapped as he turned to leave again.

By now, Dong Cheng was certain Ma Teng was being honest, so he decided to let him in on the secret. He brought Ma Teng to his study and showed him the blood decree. When Ma Teng read it, his eyebrows stood up, and he bit his lips in anger so hard that his mouth was bleeding.

“Sir, if you decide to move, I will mobilize the army of Xiliang to help you,” he said.

Dong Cheng then introduced him to the rest of the gang, and Ma Teng added his name to the pledge. And then he cut his hand, dripped the blood into a cup of wine and swore an oath: “We shall honor this pledge with our lives!”

The Klingon-esque ceremony done, Ma Teng suggested that they needed to get a total of 10 people in on the operation. Why 10 exactly, I’m not sure. Maybe it’s something like Ocean’s 11, but in any case, everyone agreed they needed 10, but who else could they bring in?

“Truly loyal and honorable men are few and far in between,” Dong Cheng cautioned. “If we bring in the wrong person, it will do us in.”

Ma Teng asked Dong Cheng to fetch the roll of the court officials to scan for names of people they could trust. When he got to the section of officials who were part of the imperial clan, he clapped his hand and said, “Why don’t we ask him?!”

“Who?” everyone else asked.

“Liu Bei, the imperial protector of Yü (4) Province,” Ma Teng answered.

“Hmm. Liu Bei may be the imperial uncle, but he’s in the service of Cao Cao,” Dong Cheng said. “How could he be willing to do such a thing?”

“The day before, at the hunting grounds, when Cao Cao was stealing the congratulations for the emperor, Liu Bei’s brother Guan Yu tried to kill him,” Ma Teng said. “Liu Bei stopped him. It’s not that Liu Bei doesn’t want to kill Cao Cao; it’s just that he’s worried that Cao Cao has too many supporters and that he’s not strong enough to pull it off. If you ask him to join our plot, he would surely agree.”

“Nonetheless, we should not rush this,” Wu (2) Shuo (4) said.

After that, the meeting broke up and everyone went their separate ways. The next night, under the cover of darkness, Dong Cheng went to see Liu Bei, with the blood decree in tow. When the servant announced Dong Cheng’s visit, Liu Bei came out to the front door to welcome him and invited him to a small guest room, where they sat while Guan Yu and Zhang Fei stood behind Liu Bei as usual.

“Imperial in-law Dong, what brings you here at this time of the night?” Liu Bei said.

“If I come here in broad daylight, Cao Cao might get suspicious, so I came at night,” Dong Cheng answered.

After Liu Bei served wine to welcome him, Dong Cheng asked, “A couple days ago, at the imperial hunting grounds, when General Guan tried to kill Cao Cao, you, sir, waved him off. Why?”

This question caught Liu Bei off guard. “How, how do you know about that?”

“No one else but I saw it,” Dong Cheng said.

Well, there was no use denying it, so Liu Bei said, “My brother was enraged by Cao Cao’s display of disrespect for his majesty.”

When he heard this, Dong Cheng covered his face and cried.

“If the court officials could all be like General Guan, we would not need to worry about the lack of peace in the land!”

Now it was Liu Bei’s turn to play coy.

“With Prime Minister Cao at the helm, why would we need to worry about peace in the land?”

This angered Dong Cheng, and he stood up.

“You are the imperial uncle! That’s why I am pouring my heart out to you! Why do you speak so insincerely?”

“I was worried you weren’t being sincere, so I tested you,” Liu Bei said.

Dong Cheng now showed him the blood decree, and Liu Bei reacted with the same mixture of sadness and anger as others before him. Dong Cheng then showed him the pledge with the six names.

“Sir, since you all are trying to kill the rebel, how could I not do what I can to help?” Liu Bei said. He then added his name to the list.

“Once I find three more people to bring us to 10, we can make our move,” Dong Cheng said.

“We need to proceed slowly and carefully; this must not leak out,” Liu Bei cautioned. They then talked until about 3 a.m. before Dong Cheng took his leave.

After this meeting, Liu Bei, who was already wary of Cao Cao possibly wanting to do away with him, was even more on guard. Remember, Cao Cao had been advised that Liu Bei was a hero of the times and that he would become a threat eventually, so there’s basically a ticking clock here on Liu Bei’s head. For his part, Liu Bei tried to do everything he could to dispel the notion that he may be harboring greater ambitions than he was letting on. He even went so far as to pick a patch in his garden and start growing vegetables and tending to them himself, which was something that no man of his status should dirty their hands with. Even his own brothers asked him why he was doing this menial labor instead of paying attention to the affairs of the state. His answer? “You won’t understand,” after which Guan Yu and Zhang Fei said nothing more of the matter.

Then, one day, while Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were out, Liu Bei was watering his vegetables when two of Cao Cao’s generals, Xu (2) Chu (3) and Zhang (1) Liao (2), came in with a few dozen men.

“The prime minister would like to see you,” they told Liu Bei.

“Why?”

“We don’t know. He just ordered us to come invite you.”

Liu Bei had no choice but to go with them to Cao Cao's residence. As soon as he saw Liu Bei, Cao Cao laughed.

"A fine thing you've been working on at home!"

This remark made Liu Bei turn pale. Cao Cao grabbed his hand and led him into the rear garden before adding, "It must not be easy to learn how to grow vegetables."

Ooooooh, you mean that other thing; I mean, the only thing, yeah, that. Liu Bei finally breathed a little easier and replied, "It's just something to kill time."

"I was just now admiring the plums on the branches," Cao Cao said. "It reminded me of when I was marching against Zhang Xiu (4) last year. At one point on the way, we were short on water and all the soldiers were thirsty. A sudden idea came to me. I pointed with my whip off in the distance and said, 'There is a forest of plum trees up ahead.' The thought of the plums made the soldiers mouth water, and that quenched their thirst. Now that I see the plums again, I can't help but think back. And I just happened to have some wine warmed up, so I wanted to invite you to this little gazebo to catch up."

This explanation put Liu Bei at ease. He followed Cao Cao to the gazebo, where a table had already been set up with a plate of plums and a bottle of warm wine. The two sat facing each other and started drinking.

After a while, storm clouds suddenly gathered, and the sky was about to open up any second. An attendant pointed to the heavens and noted that the clouds had formed what looked like a dragon suspended on the distant horizon. As they leaned against the balcony and looked on, Cao Cao asked Liu Bei,

"My lord, do you know the many manifestations of a dragon?"

"Not in detail," Liu Bei answered.

“A dragon can enlarge or shrink itself. It can surge or lie beneath the surface of the water. When it is large, it can create clouds and spew mist. When it is small, it can conceal itself from view. When it surges, it soars in the upper reaches of space. When it hides, it lies beneath the breakers. Right now, in the fullness of spring, it is the time for the dragon to transform, just like a man with the ambition to reign over the land.

“A dragon is akin to a hero of this world,” Cao Cao continued. “My lord, you have been everywhere. Surely you must know the heroes of this world. Please tell me who they are.”

“How can my mortal eyes recognize a hero?” Liu Bei said.

“Please, do not be so humble,” Cao Cao pressed him.

“Thanks to his majesty’s kindness, I have been serving at court, so I really haven’t had the chance to meet the heroes of the land.”

“Even if you haven’t met them, surely you know their names.”

“Yuan Shu in Huainan (2,2) has ample troops and provisions. Could he be called a hero?” Liu Bei asked.

“[Laugh] He is a pile of dry bones in the grave; I will capture him sooner or later,” Cao Cao laughed.

“Yuan Shao in Hebei (2,3) comes from a family that has held high office for four generations and numerous officials have served them. Right now he has a firm grip on Ji (4) Province and has many capable men under him. Could he be called a hero?”

“Yuan Shao looks fierce but his courage is thin,” Cao Cao laughed again. “He likes to plot but cannot make a decision. He holds back when the stakes are high, but would stop at nothing for small gains. He is no hero.”



“There’s a man whose reputation stretches across the land. What do you think of Liu Biao?”

“Liu Biao is all reputation and no substance. He’s no hero.”

“What about Sun Ce, who is leader of the Southlands and just entering his prime?”

“Sun Ce is just trading on his father’s name. He’s no hero.”

“What about Liu Zhang (1), who reigns over Yi (4) Province?”

“Even though Liu Zhang (1) is connected to the royal house, he is but a watchdog. How can he be counted as a hero?”

“What about the likes of Zhang Xiu, Zhang Lu (3), or Han (2) Sui (4)?”

“[Laugh] Such petty mediocrities are not worth mentioning,” Cao Cao clapped his hand and laughed some more.

So Liu Bei has just run through what basically amounted to a who’s who of the various warlords still out there at this point. Keep those names in mind. We haven’t dealt with all of them yet, but we will. Cao Cao, however, has dismissed them all as not worthy.

“Aside from those people, I really don’t know anyone else who might be called a hero,” Liu Bei said.

“To be a hero, one must have a determination to conquer, a mind filled with brilliant strategies, an ability to encompass the realm, and the will to make it his,” Cao Cao said, explaining his criteria for what makes a hero.

“Who can live up to that description?” Liu Bei asked.

At this, Cao Cao pointed first at Liu Bei, and then at himself.

“The only ones in the land right now who can be called heroes are you and me,” he said.

This caught Liu Bei off guard, since he just realized that Cao Cao had not been fooled at all by his pretending to be a man with no ambitions. This realization startled him, and he dropped his chopsticks to the ground.

At that very moment, the sky opened up, and a loud thunder ripped across the heavens.

Liu Bei calmly bent down and picked up his chopsticks.

“I was startled by the thunder,” he said.

“How can a man fear thunder?” Cao Cao laughed.

“Even the great sage Confucius became agitated in a thunderstorm, so how can I not fear it?” Liu Bei replied.

This answer was apparently enough to satisfy Cao Cao, and he let his suspicion drop.

This episode is among one of the most memorable of all the stories from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, and someone later wrote a poem about it:

Liu Bei was sheltered in the tiger's lair.

Cao Cao, dropping two names, gave him a scare.

Seizing on the thunder as the cause

Was a perfect ploy to negotiate the pause.

Just after the thunderstorm stopped, two men stormed into the garden with sword in hand and pushed their way past the attendants to the gazebo. It was none other than Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.

They had been sharpening their archery skills outside the city. When they got home and found out that Liu Bei had been escorted to Cao Cao's residence by armed soldiers, they immediately went there to see what was going on. When they heard that Liu Bei was in the rear garden, they stormed in, thinking he was in danger. But now, they saw that Liu Bei and Cao Cao were seated across from each other and drinking. So the two took their place behind Liu Bei, resting their hands on their swords while they stood.

When asked why they had come, Guan Yu replied, "We heard that your excellency was sharing a drink with our brother, so we have come to provide some entertainment with a sword dance."

Cao Cao laughed and said, "This is not a Hongmen (2,2) Feast. We have no need for Xiang (4) Zhuang (1) and Xiang (4) Bo (2)."

A timeout is needed here for background information. The phrase Hongmen (2,2) Feast is an allusion to a famous story from the time before the founding of the Han dynasty. Liu Bang (1), who would go on to found the Han and become revered as the Supreme Ancestor, was at that time competing with another powerful leader named Xiang (4) Yu (3) for control of the realm, although they had not broken out into open warfare quite yet.

One time, Xiang (4) Yu (3) invited Liu Bang to a feast at a place called Hongmen (2,2). One of Xiang Yu's advisers secretly plotted to assassinate Liu Bang at this feast. To do this, he told Xiang Yu's cousin, Xiang Zhuang (1), to perform a sword dance during the feast. That would give him an excuse to wield a weapon so close to the guest of honor. During the dance, when the opportunity presented itself, he was supposed to kill Liu Bang. But Xiang Yu's uncle, Xiang Bo (2), was a friend of Liu Bang's and was in favor of keeping the peace between the two sides. Xiang Bo sensed that there was something fishy about the entertainment, so he got up with his sword and turned the solo performance into a duet, and basically took away any potential opportunity for Xiang Zhuang (1) to make his move. Eventually,

people on Liu Bang's side caught on, and they whisked him off to safety. So basically, when someone calls an event a "Hongmen (2,2) Feast", it means it's a trap. Keep this in mind, because this will not be the last feast at Hongmen that we will encounter.

Ok, back to story. After Cao Cao assured Liu Bei's brothers that there was nothing fishy going on here, everyone breathed more easily, and Cao Cao offered wine to Guan Yu and Zhang Fei as well, and they thanked him and accepted. After the feast was over, Liu Bei took his leave.

"We were worried to death," Guan Yu told Liu Bei as soon as they left Cao Cao's home.

Liu Bei then told his brothers about what happened with the chopsticks, but they didn't quite understand. So he explained, "The reason I took up gardening was to make Cao Cao think I had no great ambitions. I never expected him to finger me as a hero. That startled me and made me drop my chopsticks. I was afraid that would arouse his suspicions, so I used the thunder as an excuse."

"Brother, you are truly wise!" Guan Yu and Zhang Fei said.

The next day, Cao Cao invited Liu Bei to go drink with him again. As they were drinking, one of Cao Cao's advisers, Man (2) Chong (3), came by. Cao Cao had sent him to check on the progress of the war between Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan, and he had returned with news: Yuan Shao had defeated Gongsun Zan. Liu Bei, who had been friends with Gongsun Zan, immediately asked for details.

"Gongsun Zan was losing the war, so he built a wall around his position. Behind the wall he constructed a tall tower, which he dubbed Yijing (4,1) Tower," Man Chong reported. "In this tower, he stored 300,000 measures of grain. But his soldiers had to constantly go in and out of this fortification. Whenever some are trapped outside, his officers would ask him for permission to go rescue them, but Gongsun Zan steadfastly refused. He said, 'If we rescue even one person, then everyone who goes out

to battle would just pin their hopes on being rescued instead of fighting to the death.’ So when Yuan Shao’s army arrived, many of Gongsun Zan’s men surrendered.

“With his forces depleted, Gongsun Zan wrote to Xuchang begging for help, but his messenger was intercepted by Yuan Shao’s men. Gongsun Zan then wrote to the bandit leader Zhang (1) Yan (4), asking him to come help, using fire as the signal. But this message was also intercepted by Yuan Shao. So Yuan Shao started a fire outside the fortification to lure Gongsun Zan out, at which point Yuan Shao wiped out most of his army.

“Gongsun Zan retreated back to behind his walls, but Yuan Shao had his men tunnel under the walls, all the way to the foot of the tower. They then set the tower on fire. With no way out, Gongsun Zan first killed his own wife and children, and then hanged himself. Their bodies were all consumed by the blaze.

“Now, Yuan Shao has subsumed Gongsun Zan’s forces and his strength has grown substantially. His cousin Yuan Shu, meanwhile, had alienated all of his own officials with his dissipated lifestyle and his utter lack of concern for his army or his people. With everyone turning against him, Yuan Shu offered to cede his throne to Yuan Shao. Yuan Shao asked for the imperial hereditary seal, so Yuan Shu is going to personally deliver it. He is about abandon Huainan (2,2) and flee to Hebei (2,3). If those two join up, it would be difficult to make a move on them anytime soon. Your excellency must act right away.”

Man Chong’s report made Liu Bei sad over the death of his old friend Gongsun Zan, who had at various times helped Liu Bei advance his career. Liu Bei was also worried about what became of Zhao (4) Yun (2), one of Gongsun Zan’s valiant warriors who had hit it off quite well with Liu Bei. But it wasn’t all bad news. Liu Bei saw that the situation presented him with an opportunity to get out of the capital. He rose and said to Cao Cao,

“If Yuan Shu is going to join Yuan Shao, he must pass through Xu Province. I would like to lead an army there and intercept him. We would capture Yuan Shu for sure.”

“Propose it to the emperor tomorrow, and then you may go,” Cao Cao said.

The next day, Liu Bei made the proposal to the emperor at court, and Cao Cao put him in command of 50,000 men. He also sent two of his own officers, Zhu (1) Ling (2) and Lu (4) Zhao (1), to accompany Liu Bei and his brothers. When Liu Bei took his leave of the emperor, his majesty saw him off with tears in his eyes.

Liu Bei then returned home and immediately got his gear ready and set off at once. When Dong (2) Cheng (2) heard the news, he chased three miles outside the city to catch up to Liu Bei to bid him goodbye.

“Please wait patiently,” Liu Bei told Dong Cheng. “I will definitely find a way on this trip to fulfill the decree.”

“Please be careful and do not disappoint the emperor,” Dong Cheng replied.

After they parted, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei asked Liu Bei why he was in such a hurry to set out on this expedition.

“I am like a bird in the cage, a fish in the net,” he told them. “This expedition is like releasing the fish back to the sea and the bird back to the heavens. I will no longer be confined.”

And so he told his brothers to make sure Zhu Ling (2) and Lu (4) Zhao (1) kept up the pace of the march.

Meanwhile, back in Xuchang, Cao Cao’s advisers Guo Jia and Cheng (2) Yu (4) had just returned from taking count of provisions when they heard that Cao Cao had sent Liu Bei off to Xu Province with an army. They hurriedly went to see him and ask why.

“It’s to attack Yuan Shu,” Cao Cao told them.

“Previously, when you made Liu Bei the imperial protector of Yü (4) Province, we had advised you to kill him,” Cheng Yu said. “Your excellency refused. And now you’ve given him an army. It is like releasing a dragon back to the ocean or a tiger back to the mountains. How will you be able to control him in the future?”

“Even if your excellency won’t kill him, you shouldn’t have let him go,” Guo Jia added. “As the ancients said, ‘Loosen up on your enemy one time, and you will regret it forever.’ Please reconsider.”

Their words made Cao Cao go, “Doh!” And he immediately ordered Xu (2) Chu (3) to lead 500 soldiers to catch up to Liu Bei and ask him to return.

As Liu Bei was traveling, he suddenly saw dust being kicked up in the distance behind him.

“This must be Cao Cao trying to chase me down,” he told his brothers. So he ordered his army to entrench and set up camp. Liu Bei took a seat in the middle of the camp, with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei flanking him with weapons in hand.

When Xu Chu arrived, he found waiting for him a well-organized, entrenched army. He dismounted and went in to see Liu Bei.

“What brings you here?” Liu Bei asked.

“General, the prime minister ordered me to come ask you to return for further consultation,” Xu Chu said.

“As the saying goes, ‘A general in the field may ignore his lord’s command,’ ” Liu Bei said. “I have already talked with the emperor and his excellency about the matter. There is nothing else to be discussed. You may return and convey my answer to the prime minister.”

So is Xu Chu going to take no for an answer, or will this have to be settled on the battle field? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.