

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 28.

Last time, Liu Bei had convinced Cao Cao to let him take an army and go intercept Yuan Shu, who was on his way to join up with Yuan Shao. But soon after Liu Bei left the capital Xuchang, Cao Cao regretted his decision and sent his general Xu (2) Chu (3) to ask Liu Bei to turn around. When Xu Chu caught up, Liu Bei told him thanks but no thanks. A commander in the field doesn't have to follow an order from his lord, so what are you going to do about it, aside from turning around and going home?

Well, Xu Chu, who was not exactly the brightest light bulb on Cao Cao's staff, thought to himself, "The prime minister has always been on good terms with Liu Bei. Besides, he didn't order me to come start a fight. I'll just relay his message and figure it out from there."

So Xu Chu took his leave and went back to tell Cao Cao what happened. When Cao Cao heard the report, he couldn't decide how to proceed. His advisers Cheng Yu and Guo Jia, however, were sure this was a sign that Liu Bei has turned on him.

"I have my officers Zhu (1) Ling (2) and Lu (4) Zhao (1) with him, so Liu Bei might not dare to turn on me," Cao Cao said. "Besides, I have already issued the order; I cannot take it back." And so he decided to let Liu Bei go.

A poet later wrote about Liu Bei's exodus:

The soldiers packed, the horses fed, the hero dashed away;

But ever sacred to his mind was the jade-girdle decree.

The iron cage broken, a tiger loose again;

The metal lock sprung, a dragon once more freed.

When Liu Bei arrived at Xu Province, he was welcomed by the general Che (1) Zhou (4), whom Cao Cao had left in charge of the province. After the welcome banquet, people from Liu Bei's former staff, guys like Sun Qian (2) and Mi (2) Zhu (2), came to pay their respects. Liu Bei also went to see his family, which had remained behind in Xu Province when Cao Cao brought him to the capital.

At the same, Liu Bei also sent out scouts to see what Yuan Shu was up to. They reported back that Yuan Shu's life of excess had turned off Lei (2) Bao (2) and Chen (2) Lan (2), two of the few officers who had remained in his service. So those two abandoned him and went to join up with bandits. With his forces dwindling, Yuan Shu wrote to Yuan Shao, saying he was willing to cede the throne to him. Yuan Shao agreed and told Yuan Shu to go join him. So Yuan Shu had packed up his army and his imperial regalia, and he was now approaching Xu Province on his way to Hebei (2,3), Yuan Shao's base of power.

Upon receiving this intel, Liu Bei ordered Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhu Ling (2) and Lu (4) Zhao (1) to lead 50,000 troops to intercept Yuan Shu. They ran smack dab into Yuan Shu's vanguard, led by the general Ji (4) Ling (2). Ji Ling was the guy who led a previous invasion against Liu Bei. Well, Zhang Fei did not forget about that, and when he saw Ji (4) Ling (2), he didn't even bother with the typical, "surrender now" routine. He just rode forward and started fighting. Within 10 bouts, Zhang Fei, with a loud roar, stabbed Ji Ling and killed him, and Ji Ling's army fled.

Yuan Shu now personally came up to meet the enemy. Liu Bei divided his army into three forces, with Zhu Ling and Lu (4) Zhao (1) on the left, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei on the right, and Liu Bei himself in the center. When the two sides faced off, Liu Bei scolded Yuan Shu:

"You traitor! I am here by the emperor's decree to take you down! If you surrender now, you might receive some leniency."

"You mat weaver and sandal peddler! How dare you disrespect me so?!" Yuan Shu shot back, and he directed his army to charge forward. Liu Bei ordered his men in the center to fall back, while his

flanks charged out and slaughtered Yuan Shu's army. Bodies of Yuan Shu's men covered the field, and their blood flowed like rivers. Countless survivors simply fled. And just to make sure everything that could go wrong for Yuan Shu did go wrong, his provisions were then stolen by his former officers-turned-bandits Lei (2) Bao (2) and Chen (2) Lan (2).

So now Yuan Shu was in a real pickle. He couldn't go forward to join up with Yuan Shao. He thought about going back to his former base of power, Shochun (4,1), but was afraid he would be harassed by bandits again now that his army has been shattered. So he holed up in the city of Jiangting (1,2). All he had with him now were about 1,000 men, most of whom were old and weak. It was midsummer, and they soon ran out of food. All they had left were about 30 pecks of wheat, and Yuan Shu, in a display that seemed to contradict everything we know of his character as described in the novel, gave these last few morsels to his soldiers rather than to his own family, and numerous members of his own clan ended up starving to death.

One day, Yuan Shu simply could not swallow the rough grains anymore, so he asked his cook for some honeyed water to quench his thirst. His cook answered, "There is no honey, only blood."

Upon hearing this, Yuan Shu sat up on his bed, let out a big cry, and fell to the floor. He then spat up a huge amount of blood and died.

So much for his imperial ambitions. But our pretender to the throne did get his own poem to go out on.

In the last days of Han weapons clashed in every quarter,  
The misguided Yuan Shu, lost to all sense of honor,  
And forgetting the service rendered by his forefathers,  
Madly aspired to declare himself Emperor,

Resting his outrageous claim on the possession of the Seal,  
And arrogantly boasting he had the design of Heaven fulfilled.  
In the end he begged for a little honeyed water but was denied;  
Alone, on his bed, he spat blood and died.

So after Lu Bu exited stage left two episodes ago, we have now seen the demise of another major player, and he certainly will not be the last. After Yuan Shu's death, his nephew packed up his family and escorted his coffin toward Lujiang (2,1), but along the way, they were all slaughtered by a Han official named Xu (2) Qiu (2). Xu (2) Qiu (2) brought the imperial hereditary seal to Cao Cao, and Cao Cao rewarded him by making him the governor of Gaoling (1,2). From that point on, the seal belonged to Cao Cao.

When Liu Bei heard that Yuan Shu had died, he sent a report to the court and a letter to Cao Cao. He then ordered Zhu Ling (2) and Lu (4) Zhao (1), the two officers that Cao Cao had sent along to keep an eye on him, back to Xuchang. But he sent them back alone, minus the 50,000 soldiers that Cao Cao had given him. Those men would stay and defend Xu Province, and, coincidentally, give Liu Bei an army to call his own. He then personally went out of the city to spread the news to the people who had fled before and during the battle, and convince them to return to their homes and trades.

When Zhu Ling and Lu (4) Zhao (1) returned to Xuchang and told Cao Cao that Liu Bei had kept the 50,000 soldiers, Cao Cao was irate and was about to have these two executed for not keeping Liu Bei in check. But Xun Yu intervened and pointed out that since Liu Bei was the one in command, there was little these two officers could do. So Cao Cao spared them.

But what to do about Liu Bei? On that point, Xun Yu suggested that Cao Cao write to Che (1) Zhou (4), the guy he put in charge of Xu Province, and instruct him to eliminate Liu Bei, and Cao Cao heeded this advice.

When Che (1) Zhou (4) received the secret order from Cao Cao, he summoned Chen Deng (1) to discuss how to proceed.

“Simple,” Chen Deng said. “Right now Liu Bei has left the city to bring the people back to their lands. He will be back any day. You can lay an ambush by the outer wall of the city and pretend to be welcoming him back. When he approaches, you can kill him with one swing of your sword. Meanwhile, I will direct our men on top of the city wall to keep his army at bay with arrows.”

Che Zhou agreed and proceeded as Chen Deng suggested. There was just one minor problem: In case you forgot, Chen Deng, even though he officially worked for Cao Cao, was in his heart loyal to Liu Bei. So he went home and told his father Chen Gui (4) about this, and his father told him to go let Liu Bei know.

As Chen Deng was out looking for Liu Bei, he ran into Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, who were coming back to the city ahead of their brother. As soon as Chen Deng told them what was afoot, Zhang Fei wanted to go settle things with his spear, but Guan Yu said, “Che Zhou has set an ambush. If we just charge in there, we will fall into his trap. But I have a plan. Tonight, we will pretend to be an army sent by Cao Cao to Xu Province and lure Che Zhou out of the city to welcome us. Then we can kill him.”

Pretending to be an army sent by Cao Cao turned out to take no effort at all, since the soldiers that Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were leading were, in fact, an army sent by Cao Cao, so they had all the right banners and uniforms. Around 11 o'clock that night, they arrived at the city gate and asked to be let in. When the guards asked who they were, they answered that they were being led by the general Zhang Liao and that Cao Cao had sent them to reinforce Xu Province.

When the guards reported this to Che Zhou, he was in a bind. He summoned Chen Deng and said, "If I don't go out and welcome them, they might suspect something is up. But if I do go out, it could be a trap."

So Che Zhou went to the top of the wall and said to the army outside, "It's hard to identify you in the dark. Wait until dawn."

But a reply came back: "But Liu Bei might find out by then. Hurry up and let us in." And then a chorus of shouts rose from the army outside, demanding to be let in. This forced Che Zhou's hand. He had no choice but to don his armor and hop on his horse. He called up 1,000 men, opened the gate, crossed the drawbridge, and shouted, "Where is General Zhang?"

But there was no Zhang Liao anywhere in sight. Instead, amid the flickering light of the torches, he saw Guan Yu galloping toward him with green dragon saber in hand.

"You deceitful bastard! How dare you try to kill my brother?!" Guan Yu shouted as he neared.

Che Zhou was stunned. He managed to fight a few bouts before turning around and trying to flee back into the city. When he got back to the drawbridge, however, arrows flew down at him from atop the wall, on the order of Chen Deng. So Che Zhou turned and tried to flee around the city, but Guan Yu caught up to him and cut him down with one stroke. Guan Yu then chopped off his head and shouted to the guards on the city wall: "Che Zhou was a rebel! I have slayed him! You are all innocent. Surrender and you shall be spared!"

At this, all the soldiers in the city laid down their arms, and order returned.

In the morning, Guan Yu went out to meet Liu Bei with Che Zhou's head in tow. He explained what happened, and Liu Bei was unsettled.

"What will we do if Cao Cao comes looking for revenge?" he said.

"Then Zhang Fei and I will take him on," Guan Yu replied.

Well, in any case, it was too late for regrets. Liu Bei proceeded to enter the city, whereupon he was greeted by the city's residents all kneeling along the side of the street. When he arrived at the administrative office, he went looking for Zhang Fei. Well, guess what Zhang Fei had been up to. While Guan Yu was out greeting Liu Bei, Zhang Fei took it upon himself to go slaughter Che Zhou's entire family, which, yeah, was just a little excessive.

"You've killed Cao Cao's trusted general. He will not let that go," Liu Bei said to his brothers.

"I have an idea," Chen Deng said. "The only person that Cao Cao fears is Yuan Shao, who now controls four provinces, has millions of troops, and many advisers and officers. Why don't you write to him and ask for help?"

"I have never had any interaction with him," Liu Bei said. "Besides, I just defeated his cousin. Why would he want to help me?"

"There is a man here whose family has been connected to the Yuans for three generations," Chen Deng said. "If you get him to write the letter, Yuan Shao will definitely come."

The man Chen Deng was referring to was named Zheng (4) Xuan (2), a reputed scholar. He was so learned and refined, that even the servant girls in his house could quote from the *Book of Odes*, a famous literary work. He had actually served as chief of the Secretariat at the Han court, but decided to quit his job and go live in Xu Province amid the chaos caused by the eunuchs. When Liu Bei was temping as protector of Xu Province, he treated Zheng (4) Xuan (2) like his teacher.

So now Liu Bei and Chen Deng went to see Zheng (4) Xuan (2) to beg him to save their butts. Zheng Xuan agreed and wrote a letter for Liu Bei. When this letter reached Yuan Shao, he read it and then said, "Liu Bei wiped out my cousin; I shouldn't help him. But since this request comes from Zheng (4) Xuan (2), I cannot refuse."

So he assembled his officials to discuss mounting an expedition against Cao Cao. But one of his advisers, Tian (2) Feng (1), was against the idea.

“We have waged war year after year,” Tian (2) Feng (1) said. “The people are exhausted and the storehouses are empty. We cannot mobilize a huge army right now. You should first report your victory over Gongsun Zan to the emperor. If Cao Cao denies us access to the emperor, then we can formally protest, station troops at Liyang (2,2), enlarge our fleet on the Yellow River, replenish our weapons, and send crack troops to entrench along the borders. Within three years, we will be able to take power.

However, another of Yuan Shao’s advisers, Shen (3) Pei (4), disagreed.

“My lord, with your military skills and might, you have pacified the entire northern region. Taking on Cao Cao is as easy as turning over your hand,” Shen Pei said.

And then two more advisers joined in, and the four guys went back and forth, disagreeing over whether to attack now or play the long game. And Yuan Shao, being his indecisive self, did not know what to do. Just then, two more advisers -- Xu (3) You (1) and Xun (2) Chen (2) -- arrived.

“These two men are very knowledgeable. Let’s what they say,” Yuan Shao said.

When Yuan Shao asked these two, they responded simultaneously:

“My lord, you have the numbers and the strength to prevail. You should mobilize against Cao Cao.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking, too,” Yuan Shao said. So he began making preparations for war. First, he sent a message back to Liu Bei, telling him to get ready. He then rounded up his advisers and generals and mobilized 150,000 cavalry and 150,000 infantry and moved toward Liyang (2,2). Before he set out, one of his advisers suggested that he should first send out a declaration listing Cao Cao’s many wicked deeds so as to justify his coming war. Yuan Shao agreed and delegated this task to Chen (2) Lin (2).

It’s been a long while since we mentioned Chen Lin. He was once first secretary at court and an adviser to the regent general He (2) Jin (4) before He Jin ignored his advice, brought about his own



demise, and started all the chaos that engulfed the empire. When Dong Zhuo came to power, Chen Lin decided to flee the madness at court by moving to Ji (4) Province, where Yuan Shao employed him as Master of Documents because Chen Lin was renowned for his writing skills.

When Chen Lin received the order to write the denunciation of Cao Cao, he picked up his brush and within minutes, he had completed the task. This denunciation was quite long and thorough, so I won't bother reciting the whole thing here. Instead I'll post a link to the full text with the post for this episode on the website. But in summary, it basically compared Cao Cao to previous Machiavellian figures that had usurped power at the Han court, going all the way back to the wife of the Supreme Ancestor. It then denounced not only Cao Cao, but also his forefathers, starting with his grandfather, who was a palace eunuch. You can just guess the kind of the venom one could spew at a eunuch. Suffice it to say, this manifesto was long, harsh, and very well-written, filled with literary flourishes and zingers against Cao Cao and his whole clan.

Yuan Shao was very pleased upon reading the piece, and he ordered his men to distribute it throughout the land so that everyone would know what an evil bastard Cao Cao was and what a great guy Yuan Shao was for taking on this scumbag who came from a long line of scumbags.

It didn't take long for this document to make its way to Cao Cao. When it arrived in the capital, Cao Cao was laid up in bed with a horrible migraine. When he read the manifesto, its words were so powerful that they made him quake to the bone and he broke into an icy sweat. But this apparently also had the totally unintended side effect of making his migraine disappear.

Feeling better, Cao Cao leaped to his feet and asked who had written the manifesto. When told that it was Chen Lin, he laughed.

"Such great literary style is nothing without the military strategy to back it up," he said. "Chen Lin's writing is indeed powerful. Unfortunately, Yuan Shao's military chops cannot match it."

So Cao Cao assembled his advisers to discuss how to counter Yuan Shao's coming attack. When Kong Rong, the former governor of Beihai (2,3) who's now an official at court, heard about this and came to see Cao Cao.

"Yuan Shao is very powerful," Kong Rong said. "We cannot fight him; we should sue for peace."

However, Xun Yu dismissed this.

"Yuan Shao has nothing. Why should we sue for peace?" he said.

"Yuan Shao controls vast territories and a huge population," Kong Rong said. "He has cunning strategists like Xu (3) You (1), Guo (1) Tu (2), Shen (3) Pei (4), and Feng (2) Ji (3); as well as loyal officials like Tian (2) Feng (1) and Ju (3) Shou (4). His generals Yan (2) Liang (2) and Wen (2) Chou (3) are the equal of an entire army, while his other officers like Gao (1) Lan (3), Zhang (1) He (2), and Chunyu (2,2) Qiong (2) are all famous warriors. How can you say he has nothing?"

But to this, Xun Yu simply laughed.

"Yuan Shao's troops are numerous but disorganized. Tian (2) Feng (1) is rigid and insubordinate; Xu (3) You (1) is more greedy than smart; Shen (3) Pei (4) is arbitrary and inept; Feng (2) Ji (3) is resolute but ineffective. These guys cannot tolerate each other and are bound to quarrel. Yan Liang and Wen Chou are mere brutes who can be captured in a single battle. As for the rest of the mediocrities, even if there are a million of them, they are of no concern."

This rebuke silenced Kong Rong, and delighted Cao Cao. "It is as you said," he told Xun Yu. He then started to hand out orders. First, he ordered two officers, Liu (2) Dai (4) and Wang (2) Zhong (1), to lead 50,000 troops and carry Cao Cao's own banners to go to Xu Province to attack Liu Bei. This Liu Dai (4) used to be the imperial protector of Yan (3) Province, but when Cao Cao took over that territory, Liu Dai surrendered to him and Cao Cao kept him on as a low-level officer. So now he's sending him and Wang Zhong to basically serve as a decoy and keep Liu Bei at bay.

But one of Cao Cao's advisers, Cheng Yu, had his concerns.

"Liu Dai (4) and Wang (2) Zhong (1) might not be up to the task," he told Cao Cao.

"I know they are not a match for Liu Bei," Cao Cao said. "I'm just sending them there as a decoy."

He then told Liu Dai and Wang Zhong, "Do not advance rashly. Once I defeat Yuan Shao, I will send another army to take care of Liu Bei."

Meanwhile, Cao Cao himself led 200,000 men and headed toward Liyang (2,2) to face Yuan Shao. The two armies set up about 30 miles apart, entrenched behind high walls and deep moats, and settled in for a stalemate that saw no fighting at all from August to October. As it turned out, Yuan Shao's advisers were indeed squabbling among themselves. Xu (3) You (1) wasn't happy about Shen (3) Pei (4) being given command of the army, while Ju (3) Shou (4) was pouting about Yuan Shao ignoring his ideas. So they took to quarreling with each other rather than thinking about advancing on Cao Cao's forces. And by now, Yuan Shao was having second thoughts about this invasion business and also did not really want to press the issue.

This got to the point where Cao Cao said the heck with this. He left Zang (1) Ba (4), one of Lu Bu's former generals who had surrendered to him, to keep an eye on Qing (1) and Xu Province. He ordered Li Dian to garrison on the river and put Cao Ren (2) in command of the main army, which was stationed at the key location of Guandu (1,4). With these arrangements in place, Cao Cao led part of his army back to the capital.

We'll leave Cao Cao and Yuan Shao in their stalemate for now and check in on Liu Dai (4) and Wang Zhong (1), the guys Cao Cao sent to Xu Province to make Liu Bei think Cao Cao was there in person. The two of them stopped 30-some miles outside of Xu Province and set up camp. In the camp,

they flew Cao Cao's banners, but they did not dare to advance. All they did was send out scouts to Hebei (2,3) to see what was going on between Cao Cao and Yuan Shao.

For his part, Liu Bei wasn't quite sure what Cao Cao was up to, so he didn't dare to make a rash move either and also settled for sending out men to see what the situation was in Hebei. After this went on for a while, Cao Cao suddenly sent a message ordering Liu Dai and Wang Zhong to attack. Well, neither of these guys were particularly eager to go take on Liu Bei and his brothers.

"The prime minister has ordered us to attack; you may go first," Liu Dai told Wang Zhong.

"But the prime minister sent the order to you," Wang Zhong said.

"I am the commander; I cannot go first," Liu Dai replied.

"Well, how about we both go together?"

"How about we draw lots and see which one goes first?"

Wang Zhong was amenable to this last suggestion; that is, until he drew the short straw. But with no choice, he could do nothing except take half the army and set out to attack Xu Province. When Liu Bei heard this news, he met with his adviser Chen Deng (1).

"Yuan Shao has stationed his forces at Liyang (2,2), but his advisers are squabbling and they have not made a move forward. I don't know where Cao Cao is. I've heard that his banners have not been seen in his army at Liyang, and yet we see his banners here."

"Cao Cao is very tricky," Chen Deng said. "Hebei is more important to him, so he would no doubt personally oversee the defense there. He's intentionally not showing his banners there and is instead showing them here as a bluff. I am guessing he's not here."

Liu Bei now turned to his brothers and asked, "Which one of you wants to go find out for certain?"

Zhang Fei volunteered first, but Liu Bei said no, on account of his ill temper.

"Even if Cao Cao is here, I will capture him!" Zhang Fei protested.

"Brother, let me do it," Guan Yu said.

"I would feel better if you go," Liu Bei answered, and he sent Guan Yu out with 3,000 men.

It was a cloudy, early winter day, and snow flurries were falling as the two sides lined up. Guan Yu rode out with saber in hand and demanded to talk to Wang Zhong.

"The prime minister is here," Wang Zhong told him. "Why don't you surrender?"

"Please ask the prime minister to come out and meet me. I have something to say to him," Guan Yu said.

"[Scoff] Why would his excellency want to speak to you?" Wang Zhong scoffed.

That ticked off Guan Yu, and he galloped forward to fight Wang Zhong. But after just a couple bouts, Guan Yu turned and fled, and Wang Zhong gave chase. As soon as they went behind a hill, however, Guan Yu turned around, let out a big yell, and charged back at his pursuer. Wang Zhong, not surprisingly, was no match and now it was his turn to turn and run. But Guan Yu switched his saber to his left hand and used his right hand to grab Wang Zhong by his belt and yanked him off his horse. Guan Yu then stuck Wang Zhong across his own saddle and returned to his lines. Seeing their leader captured, Wang Zhong's soldiers scattered.

Guan Yu brought Wang Zhong back to Xu Province and dragged him in front of Liu Bei.

"Who are you? What is your rank? How dare you impersonate the prime minister?" Liu Bei asked.

"I dare not," Wang Zhong replied. "I was ordered to put on a front. His excellency is not here."

Liu Bei then ordered his men to give Wang Zhong clothes and food and lock him up to be dealt with when they have captured Liu Dai as well.

"Brother, I knew you were hoping to resolve things peacefully," Guan Yu said to Liu Bei. "That's why I brought him back alive."

“Yes. I was afraid that brother Zhang, with his explosive temper, would kill Wang Zhong. That’s why I did not let him go,” Liu Bei said. “Killing these kinds of people brings little good; leaving them alive might help us resolve things.”

“Since brother Guan has captured Wang Zhong, let me go bring you Liu Dai alive as well!” Zhang Fei said.

“Liu Dai used to be the imperial protector of Yan (3) Province,” Liu Bei said. “When we battled Dong Zhuo at Hulao (2,3) Pass, he was one of the lords present. And now he’s leading the vanguard. You cannot underestimate him.”

“He’s nothing to worry about!” Zhang Fei said. “I’ll just bring him back alive like brother Guan did.”

“If you kill him, it’s going to spoil my plans.”

“If I kill him, then you can have my life to make up for his!”

With that guarantee from Zhang Fei, Liu Bei was satisfied. So he gave Zhang Fei 3,000 men as well and sent him out.

Meanwhile, back in Liu Dai’s camp, after he heard that Wang Zhong had been captured, Liu Dai decided to just stay in and not go out to give battle, no matter how much Zhang Fei challenged him and cursed him. In fact, when Liu Dai heard that it was Zhang Fei out there, it only further deterred him from going out. After a few days of this, Zhang Fei had a stroke of genius.

To find out what brilliant idea he came up with, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.