

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 32.

Last time, Yuan Shao had mobilized his forces to attack Cao Cao, who responded by leading an army to meet Yuan Shao's vanguard at the city of Baima (2,3). However, Cao Cao's operation ran into a roadblock by the name of Yan Liang, Yuan Shao's top general who easily slayed two of Cao Cao's lesser officers. Feeling the need for a little more firepower, Cao Cao sent a messenger to the capital to summon Guan Yu.

When Guan Yu received the order, he went to inform his two sisters-in-law, who reminded him to try to find some news about Liu Bei on this trip. Guan Yu then took his leave, grabbed his green dragon saber, hopped on his Red Hare horse, and led a few riders to Baima to see Cao Cao.

"Yan Liang killed two of my officers and his valor is hard to match," Cao Cao said. "That's why I have invited you here to discuss how to deal with him."

"Allow me to observe him first," Guan Yu said.

Cao Cao had just laid out some wine to welcome Guan Yu when word came that Yan Liang was challenging for combat. So Guan Yu and Cao Cao went to the top of the hill to observe their enemy. Cao Cao and Guan Yu both sat down, while all the other officers stood. In front of them, at the bottom of the hill, Yan Liang's army lined up in an impressive and disciplined formation, with fresh and brilliant banners and countless spears.

"The troops from Hebei are so strong and valiant," Cao Cao said to Guan Yu.

"In my eyes, they look like mere mud hens and clay dogs," Guan Yu answered.

Cao Cao then pointed and said, "The one under the canopy, wearing the brocade robe and gold-trimmed armor and wielding the knife, is Yan Liang."

Guan Yu took one look and said to Cao Cao, "In my eyes, Yan Liang is offering his head for the taking."

"Do not underestimate him," Cao Cao cautioned.

But Guan Yu now rose up and said, "Though I am untalented, I am willing to charge into the midst of his army to take his head and offer it to your excellency."

"There is no kidding around in the army," Zhang Liao said, "Please do not act rashly."

But Guan Yu swiftly mounted his steed and dragged his saber behind him as he charged down the hill. His eyes were wide open and his eyebrows bristled as he dashed through the enemy formation. Wherever he went, the enemy soldiers parted like waves smashing against a rock. Guan Yu made straight for Yan Liang, who was still standing under his canopy. When he saw Guan Yu charging toward him, Yan Liang was just about to ask him who he was, but the Red Hare horse was so fast that Guan Yu was already upon Yan Liang. With Yan Liang caught off guard, Guan Yu's saber fell and cut him down. Guan Yu hopped off his horse, cut off Yan Liang's head, and flew back on his horse and rode out of the enemy formation as if no one was around.

Yan Liang's troops were stunned to see their commander dispatched so easily by Guan Yu, and they fell into disarray. Cao Cao's army took this opportunity to attack and killed innumerable enemy soldiers while seizing countless horses and weapons.

When Guan Yu galloped back to the top of the hill, all the officers heaped praise upon him as Guan Yu presented Yan Liang's head to Cao Cao.

"General, you are truly an immortal!" Cao Cao said.

"This is nothing," Guan Yu said. "My brother Zhang Fei can obtain top enemy generals' heads in the midst of an army ten times that size, as easily as taking something out of a sack."

This answer alarmed Cao Cao, and he turned and instructed those around him, "From now on, if you ever meet Zhang Fei in battle, do not underestimate him." In fact, he ordered everyone to write that on the underside of their lapels to make sure they remembered.

While Cao Cao was busy warning his men about Zhang Fei, the remnants of Yan Liang's defeated army were fleeing home when they ran into Yuan Shao and the main army. They told Yuan Shao that some guy with a red face and long beard and wielding a giant saber had stormed into their formation and slayed Yan Liang. Stunned, Yuan Shao asked who this guy was.

"This must be Liu Bei's brother Guan Yu," Ju (3) Shou (4) said.

An irate Yuan Shao pointed at Liu Bei and said, "Your brother killed my prized general. You must be a collaborator. What's the point of leaving you around?"

So Yuan Shao ordered his men to take Liu Bei outside and execute him. But Liu Bei calmly said, "My lord, how can you throw away our acquaintance based on a one-sided story? Since we were separated at Xu Province, I haven't even heard whether my brother Guan Yu is still alive. Many people look alike. Is everyone with a red face and long beard to be Guan Yu? Why not look more into this first?"

The easily swayed Yuan Shao was easily swayed by these words, and he chewed out Ju Shou, saying, "I listened to you and almost ended up killing an innocent man." So he asked Liu Bei to return to his seat and help him figure out how to avenge Yan Liang.

At that moment, a man entered the tent and said, "Yan Liang was like a brother to me. Now that he has been killed by Cao Cao, how can I not avenge him?!"

Liu Bei looked and saw a man standing about 6 feet tall, with a long, flat face. This was none other than Wen (2) Chou (3), Yuan Shao's other top general.

Yuan Shao was delighted by Wen Chou's eagerness. "None but you can avenge Yan Liang," he said. "I will give you 150,000 troops. Cross the Yellow River and attack Cao Cao."

But Ju (3) Shou (4) was against this.

“The best thing to do now is to stay entrenched in Yanjin (2,1) and send a corps to Guandu (1,4),” he said. “If we cross the river too rashly and something goes wrong, the troops would not be able to get back over.”

But Yuan Shao was hostile toward the idea.

“The likes of you are sapping our troops’ morale!” he said angrily. “If we keep delaying, we will never achieve our goal! Have you not heard of the saying that speed is of the essence in war?”

Thus scolded, Ju Shou walked out of the tent and sighed, “The leader is willful, the troops are ambitious, the Yellow River flows on and on. What power have I to change things?” After this, Ju Shou began to pretend he was sick and declined to join in discussions about the war.

Meanwhile, Liu Bei said to Yuan Shao, “I have not had the opportunity to repay your lordship’s kindness. I would like to accompany General Wen, in part to repay your kindness, and in part to find out the truth about Guan Yu.”

Yuan Shao was delighted and agreed to let Liu Bei accompany Wen Chou in the front of the army, but Wen Chou was not receptive to the idea.

“Liu Bei has suffered one loss after another; having him along is not good for the troops,” he said. “If your lordship wants him to go, then I will give him a detachment of 30,000 men and let him bring up the rear.”

So Wen Chou set out with 70,000 troops, followed by Liu Bei at the rear with 30,000 men.

Back behind the lines on Cao Cao’s side of things, having seen how easily Guan Yu slayed Yan Liang, Cao Cao came to respect him even more. He sent word to the court to heap upon Guan Yu the title of the Marquis of Hanshou (4,4) Precinct and to send him the seal of office. Suddenly, word came that Yuan Shao had dispatched Wen Chou to cross the river, and that they had already occupied

Yanjin (2,1). So Cao Cao first sent men to evacuate the residents of that area and move them west of the river. He then personally led an army to go meet the enemy.

As they set out, Cao Cao sent out word that the vanguard would serve as the rear instead and that the army's provisions would go in front of the procession while the troops followed. This was against the conventions of warfare, and the officer Lu (3) Qian (2) raised concerns.

"What is the purpose in having the provisions go in front of the troops?" he asked.

"When the provisions are in the rear, they've been raided a number of times," Cao Cao said. "So I'm putting them at the front."

"But what if we run into the enemy head on and they seize the provisions?" Lu (3) Qian (2) asked.

"We'll worry about when the enemy gets here," Cao Cao answered, which was not a particularly comforting response. Still, the prime minister had spoken, so the army set out, and Cao Cao sent the supply train on ahead to the banks around Yanjin (2,1), while Cao Cao led the army in the back.

Sure enough, shouts and cries soon rose up from the front of the procession, and a scout reported that Wen Chou had arrived on the scene with his forces, and Cao Cao's troops had abandoned the supply train and scattered. The troops in the back were still a ways off and weren't going to get here in time.

Cao Cao pointed south and said, "We can temporarily seek shelter on that small hill there." So everyone sprinted up the hill. Cao Cao then ordered his men to let down their armor and take a brief rest. Oh and while they were at it, let their horses off their reins to go graze.

Soon, Wen Chou's army arrived, and Cao Cao's officers all asked him to give the order to retrieve the horses and retreat to Baima (2,3). But Xun Yu quickly shushed them. "This is the perfect lure. Do not retreat," he said.

Upon hearing this, Cao Cao smiled and quickly flashed Xun Yu a look. Xun Yu caught his meaning and said no more of the matter.

As for Wen Chou, he had already seized the supply train, and now he was directing his men to go seize the horses. His army soon fell into disarray and began to trample each other, despite Wen Chou's attempts to keep them in line by yelling at them. Seeing this, Wen Chou turned and retreated. Now, Cao Cao pointed from the hill and said, "Wen Chou is one of Hebei's renowned warriors. Who will go capture him?"

At this, two officers, Zhang Liao and Xu Huang, galloped out together and yelled for Wen Chou to stop. Seeing the two approach, Wen Chou put aside his spear, grabbed his bow and arrow, and fired a shot at Zhang Liao. Seeing this, Xu Huang shouted, "Watch out for arrows!" Zhang Liao quickly ducked, and it was just in the nick of time, as the arrow struck the tip of his helmet and took off the little ornamental tuft. Zhang Liao continued to give chase, but the next shot from Wen Chou struck his horse in the face. The horse tumbled forward and threw Zhang Liao to the ground. Now Wen Chou galloped toward him to finish the job, but fortunately for Zhang Liao, Xu Huang hurried forward with his battle axe to engage Wen Chou. After the two fought for a bit, Wen Chou's army caught up. Figuring he could not stand against the enemy, Xu Huang retreated, and Wen Chou gave chase along the river.

Just then, about a dozen riders appeared, with their banners flapping in the wind. The general in the front galloped near wielding a saber. It was none other than Guan Yu and he shouted for Wen Chou to stop. The two warriors exchanged blows, but within three bouts, Wen Chou began to lose his nerve, so he turned and ran along the riverbank. Guan Yu, however, had the faster horse since, remember, he was riding Red Hare. He soon caught up from behind and with a wave of his saber, he cut down Wen Chou.

When Cao Cao saw this from atop his hill, he directed his forces to sweep down and attack. Most of the enemy soldiers were forced into the river, and Cao Cao recovered all of his supplies and horses.

While Guan Yu rode to and fro in this melee, Liu Bei arrived on the opposite bank with his 30,000 men. His scouts reported that the red-faced, long-bearded man had killed Wen Chou as well, so Liu Bei hurriedly rode forward to take a look. On the other side of the river, he spotted a group of riders darting here and there, with a banner that read, "Guan Yu, the Marquis of Hanshou (4,4) Precinct".

Liu Bei secretly uttered a thanks to heaven in his mind. "So, my brother really is with Cao Cao!" he thought. He was just about to call out to Guan Yu, but Cao Cao's forces were sweeping in, so he had to fall back with the rest of his troops.

Later, when Yuan Shao arrived at Guandu (1,4) with reinforcements and set up camp, his advisers Guo (1) Tu (2) and Shen (3) Pei (4) went to see him and said, "Now Guan Yu has killed Wen Chou, too. Liu Bei is still acting like he doesn't know anything."

"How dare that big-eared scoundrel!" an irate Yuan Shao said.

Moments later, Liu Bei arrived in camp, and Yuan Shao immediately ordered the guards to execute him.

"What offense have I committed?" Liu Bei asked.

"You told your brother to kill yet another of my top generals. How can you claim innocence?" Yuan Shao said.

"Before you kill me, hear me," Liu Bei said. "Cao Cao has always been wary of me. Now he knows I'm with you, and he's afraid that I would help your lordship. So he intentionally had Guan Yu kill your generals so as to anger you. He's trying to use you to kill me. Please, think about it."

And once again, Yuan Shao was swayed by whoever had the last word. "You're quite right," he told Liu Bei. And then he turned toward his advisers and said "You guys almost saddled me with the reputation of killing a worthy man!" He then dismissed them and asked Liu Bei to sit with him.

Liu Bei thanked Yuan Shao and said, "I have received great kindness from your lordship and have not been able to repay you. I would like to send a trusted man to deliver a secret message to Guan Yu

to let him know where I am. He would then surely come at once to serve your lordship in killing Cao Cao and avenging Yan Liang and Wen Chou. What do you think?"

"If I can get Guan Yu, it would be worth 10 times more than Yan Liang and Wen Chou!" a delighted Yuan Shao said.

So Liu Bei wrote his letter, but he wasn't quite sure whom to send as the courier. Meanwhile, Yuan Shao ordered his forces to fall back to Wuyang (3,2), where they set up camps that ran for miles and made no advances. Seeing this, Cao Cao ordered Xiahou Dun to lead a detachment and guard the strategic location of Guandu, while he himself led the rest of the arm back to the capital Xuchang.

Once he was back in the capital, Cao Cao threw a feast to celebrate, where he invited all the officials and lauded Guan Yu's performance. He also said to the officer Lu (3) Qian (2), "When I put the supply train at the front of our procession, it was to lure the enemy. Only Xun Yu understood my thinking." To this, everyone responded with praise for Cao Cao's genius.

In the middle of the feast, a message arrived that an uprising of Yellow Turban rebels had broken out in the region of Runan (3,2), led by Liu (2) Pi (4) and Gong Du (1,4). The rebels apparently were out of control, and the general Cao (2) Hong (2) has had no luck in putting them down and was requesting assistance.

When he heard this, Guan Yu said, "I would like to do what little I can to help defeat these rebels."

"But you have just done a great service and have yet to be rewarded. How can I send you out again so soon?" Cao Cao said.

"If I sit around for too long, I get antsy. I don't mind going on this expedition," Guan Yu said.

Cao Cao consented and gave Guan Yu 50,000 men. He also sent along Yu (1) Jin (4) and Yue (4) Jin (4) as lieutenants, and they set out the next day. After they left, however, Xun Yu said to Cao Cao in private, "Guan Yu always harbors thoughts of returning to Liu Bei. If he hears news of his brother, he would no doubt leave. You cannot allow him to go on any more campaigns."



“Hmm. Once he returns from this expedition, I will no longer let him on the battlefield,” Cao Cao said.

As Guan Yu approached Runan (3,2), he had his army set up camp for the night. That night, pickets caught two spies and brought them in to see Guan Yu. Guan Yu immediately recognized one of them. It was Sun Qian (2), one of Liu Bei’s advisers from Xu Province. Guan Yu immediately dismissed everyone and asked Sun Qian (2), “I have not heard anything about you since we were separated. How did you come to be here?”

“I fled Xu Province and drifted around Runan,” Sun Qian said. “Fortunately, Liu Pi (1) took me in. General, how did you come to serve Cao Cao? What of Lady Gan (1) and Lady Mi (2)?”

Guan Yu recounted what has happened, and Sun Qian said, “I have recently heard that Lord Liu is with Yuan Shao. I’ve been meaning to go join him, but haven’t had the chance. Liu Pi (1) and Gong (1) Du (4) have pledged their allegiance to Yuan Shao and want to help him attack Cao Cao. It’s fortunate that you are here, so I had someone show me the way and pretended to be a spy to come tell you this: Tomorrow, Liu Pi and Gong Du will pretend to lose the battle to you. You should escort the two ladies and go to Yuan Shao with all due haste to reunite with Lord Liu.”

“Since my brother is with Yuan Shao, I will definitely go see him immediately,” Guan Yu said. “But I have slain two of Yuan Shao’s generals, which might complicate things.”

“Then let me go check out the situation and let you know,” Sun Qian said.

“Nothing can stop me from seeing my brother again, not even death,” Guan Yu said. “But I must return to Xuchang first and take my leave of Cao Cao.”

So that night, Guan Yu secretly sent Sun Qian out of his camp. The next day, Guan Yu met the rebel leader Gong Du (4) on the battlefield.

“Why did you turn your back on the court?” Guan Yu asked.

“You have turned your back on your master. How dare you lecture me?” Gong Du said.

“How did I turn my back on my master?”

“Liu Bei is with Yuan Shao, and yet you are serving Cao Cao. Why?”

Guan Yu made no answer and instead wielded his saber and galloped toward Gong Du. Gong Du immediately retreated, with Guan Yu giving chase. When Guan Yu got near, Gong Du turned and said, “Do not forget your old master’s kindness to you. You should advance at once. I will let you have Runan.”

Guan Yu caught on and played along, directing his troops to charge forward. Liu Pi (1) and Gong Du (4) put on a good show and ordered their men to scatter. After securing the region and restoring order, Guan Yu returned to Xuchang, where Cao Cao met him outside the city and rewarded him and the troops.

After the celebration banquet, Guan Yu returned home and called on his sisters-in-law. Lady Gan asked him, “Brother-in-law, did you find out anything about the imperial uncle on your campaign?”

“Not yet,” Guan Yu answered.

After he took his leave, the two ladies wept bitterly in their quarters, saying, “The imperial uncle must be dead! Our brother-in-law is likely withholding the truth from us to spare us grief.”

As they were weeping, however, one of the old soldiers who accompanied Guan Yu on the expedition heard them and said from outside their door, “My ladies, please do not cry. Lord Liu is currently with Yuan Shao in Hebei.”

“How do you know?” they asked him.

“I heard it from someone on the battlefield when I followed General Guan on the expedition.”

The ladies quickly summoned Guan Yu and chewed him out.

“The imperial uncle has never wronged you,” they told him. “But now, because of the kindness that Cao Cao has bestowed upon you, you have forgotten your past oath. Why did you not tell us the truth?”

Guan Yu kneeled and said, “My brother really is in Hebei. But I did not tell you yet because I was afraid word would leak out. This matter takes time and cannot be rushed.”

“Brother-in-law, please do hurry,” Lady Gan said.

And so Guan Yu began thinking about how to leave Cao Cao, but the whole affair has left him restless.

Well, judging from the words of the old soldier, Guan Yu was obviously not the only one on the expedition to discover Liu Bei’s whereabouts. The general Yu (1) Jin (4), who served as Guan Yu’s lieutenant, also found out that Liu Bei was in Hebei, and he reported this to Cao Cao. Cao Cao then sent Zhang Liao to go feel out Guan Yu.

Guan Yu was sitting alone when Zhang Liao entered. Zhang Liao did not try to beat around the bush. “Brother, I heard that you found out Lord Liu’s whereabouts on the expedition. I have come to congratulate you!” he said.

“What is there to congratulate me about?” Guan Yu answered. “Even though my old master is still alive, I cannot see him.”

“Brother, how does your relationship with Lord Liu compare to our relationship?” Zhang Liao asked.

“You and I are friends,” Guan Yu said. “But Liu Bei and I are not only friends, but also brothers, and not only brothers, but also lord and servant. There is no comparison.”

“Right now Liu Bei is in Hebei. Do you intend to follow him there?”

“I will never go back on what I have said before. My friend, please relay my intentions to the prime minister.”

When Zhang Liao relayed these words to Cao Cao, the latter said, “I have my ways of making him stay.”

Meanwhile, back at Guan Yu’s residence, while Guan Yu was thinking, attendants came and said an old friend was there to see him. When this “old friend” came in, however, Guan Yu did not recognize him and asked who he was.

“My name is Chen (2) Zhen (4),” the visitor answered. “I am in the service of Yuan Shao.”

Guan Yu was surprised and immediately dismissed the attendants. He then asked Chen (2) Zhen (4) what he was doing there. Chen Zhen took out a letter and handed to Guan Yu. It was from Liu Bei, and it read:

“You and I swore an oath in the peach orchards and pledged to die together. Why have you turned your back on our pledge and cut off our bond? If it’s fame and fortune you’re after, I am willing to offer up my head to accommodate you. Who can write all that he wishes to say? Unto death I will abide by your instructions.”

When Guan Yu finished reading the letter, he wept bitterly. “It’s not that I didn’t want to find you, brother! I really did not know where you were. How could I ever turn my back on our oath for fortune or fame?”

Chen Zhen now said, “Lord Liu is eagerly waiting for you, general. Since you have not turned your back on your old vows, please go see him soon.”

“In this world, a man stands between heaven and earth,” Guan Yu said. “One who does not end as he began is not a real man. I came here on clear terms, and I cannot leave in any other way. I shall

write a letter and trouble you to deliver it to my brother. Allow me to take my leave of Cao Cao, and then I will escort my sisters-in-law to see my brother.”

“But what if Cao Cao refuses to let you go?” Chen (2) Zhen (4) asked.

“I would rather die than stay here any longer.”

“Then please write your letter right away so as not to keep Lord Liu waiting.”

So Guan Yu wrote the following reply to Liu Bei:

“I have heard that honor brooks no reservation, nor does loyalty respect death. I have read the classics since my youth and am roughly acquainted with the proprieties. When I reflect upon the story of Yang (2) Jue (2) Ai (4) and Zuo (3) Bo (2) Tao (2), I cannot help but sigh and be moved to tears. When I was defending Xiapi (4,1), we had neither stores within nor reinforcements outside. I would have fought to the death, but I had been entrusted with my two sisters-in-law and therefore did not dare to sacrifice my body in the line of duty and in the process break your trust. So I temporarily subjugated myself with the hope of reuniting with you again. Only recently in Runan (3,2) did I learn of your whereabouts. I shall personally take my leave of Prime Minister Cao and return to you with my sisters-in-law. If I harbor any stray intentions, may the gods strike me down. I open my bosom to you, yet the pen and silk can hardly express my loyalty and sincerity. Humbly awaiting the time when I can bow before you, I submit this for your examination.”

A side note here. In his letter, Guan Yu made a reference to the story of Yang (2) Jue (2) Ai (4) and Zuo (3) Bo (2) Tao (2). These two were ancient figures renowned for their fraternal devotion to each other. I will do a supplemental episode about them soon, but for now, just know that these guys were the model for bromances.

After Chen Zhen took the letter and left, Guan Yu went to the inner residence to tell his sisters-in-law what happened. He then went to Cao Cao's residence to take his leave. Well, Cao Cao had been expecting this, so he had his men hang up the sign on the gate that indicated he was not receiving visitors. Guan Yu had no choice but to go home. Once home, he ordered the attendants who had been with him since the old days to start preparing the carriage for the road. He also sent out word to the servants that anything given to him by Cao Cao was to be left behind; not a single item was to be taken with them.

The next day, Guan Yu once again tried to visit Cao Cao, but was once again turned away by the sign on the door. After a string of unsuccessful visits, Guan Yu took a different tact. He went to see Zhang Liao at his home instead to try to get some intel on what's going on. But won't you know it, Zhang Liao was conveniently under the weather and also not receiving visitors.

Well, by now it was crystal clear to Guan Yu what's going on. "This is an attempt by Prime Minister Cao to not let me go," he thought to himself. "But my mind is made up. There is no keeping me here."

So he wrote a letter to Cao Cao, which read:

"In my youth, I served the imperial uncle, and we swore to live and die together. Heaven and earth can bear witness to our oath. Previously, when Xiapi (4,1) fell, I had three conditions for my surrender, and you were kind enough to grant them. Now, I have learned that my former master is in Yuan Shao's army, and it has made me think of my oath, which I cannot turn my back on. Even though your recent kindness has been immense, I cannot forget the oath of allegiances of old. Therefore I submit this letter for your eyes to bid you goodbye. If I have not yet repaid your kindness in full, I hope I will be able to do so in the future."

The letter written, Guan Yu sealed it and sent a courier to deliver it to Cao Cao's residence. He then put all the gold and silver that Cao Cao had heaped on him into storage and sealed the doors to

the store room so that no one may enter. He then hanged the seal of office that he received when he was named the Marquis of Hanshou (4,4) Precinct in his living room. All these gestures, of course, were to show that he was leaving without owing anything to Cao Cao. He then escorted his sisters-in-law into the carriage, and then mounted the Red Hare steed and picked up his green dragon saber. Accompanied only by the attendants from the old days, they set off toward the north gate.

So Guan Yu is off to meet Liu Bei. But how will Cao Cao react? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.