

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 35.

Previously, we left off with Guan Yu having reunited with Zhang Fei, as well as three of Liu Bei's former advisers, Sun (1) Qian (2) and the brothers Mi (2) Zhu (2) and Mi (2) Fang (1). After a night of teary celebration in the hamlet of Gucheng (3,2), Guan Yu prepared to set out the next day for Runan (3,2), where he was told that Liu Bei had gone off to. Zhang Fei wanted to come along, but Guan Yu told him, "Stay here and protect your sisters-in-law while Sun Qian and I go find our brother."

Zhang Fei complied, and Guan Yu and Sun Qian set off with a few riders in tow. When they arrived at Runan, they were greeted by the two men currently in control of the region, Liu (2) Pi (4) and Gong (1) Dou (1). But they had some bad news.

"The imperial uncle stayed here for a few days," they told Guan Yu, "but when he saw that we had insufficient troops, he returned to Hebei to consult with Yuan Shao."

Well, that's a downer. And c'mon, Liu Bei! What the heck are you doing? How's your brother supposed to track you down if you won't stay in one place? Guan Yu was disappointed by this news, but Sun Qian consoled him.

"There's no need for consternation," Sun Qian said. "We will just have to travel a little farther and go to Hebei to send word to the imperial uncle and tell him to meet us at Gucheng (3,2)."

Guan Yu agreed, and they returned to Gucheng. When they told Zhang Fei what happened, Zhang Fei wanted to accompany them to Hebei, but Guan Yu once again told him to stay put.

"This place is our foothold," Guan Yu said. "We cannot abandon it lightly. I will go again with Sun Qian into Yuan Shao's territory and look for our brother and bring him here for a reunion. You stay and guard the city."

"But brother, you killed Yuan Shao's top generals Yan (2) Liang and Wen (2) Chou (3)," Zhang Fei said. "How can you go to see him?"

“No worries. I will proceed as the circumstances dictate,” Guan Yu answered. He then turned to his faithful follower Zhou (1) Cang (1) and asked, “How many troops does Pei (2) Yuanshao (2,4) have with him?”

“About four or five hundred,” Zhou Cang said.

In case you forgot, Pei (2) Yuanshao (2,4) was a bandit leader and a friend of Zhou Cang’s who ran into Guan Yu in the last episode. He wanted to follow Guan Yu as well but was told there was no room in the entourage, so he had to stay where he was and wait for Zhou Cang to come get him once Guan Yu found a place to call home. Guan Yu now decided that it was time to bring him in.

“I am going to take the backroads to go find my brother,” he told Zhou Cang. “In the meantime, you go collect Pei (2) Yuanshao (2,4) and his men and come here via the main road.”

So they headed off in different directions. Guan Yu and Sun Qian took about 20 riders with them and headed toward Hebei, the region controlled by Yuan Shao. When they approached the border, Sun Qian cautioned Guan Yu.

“General, you should not enter this territory lightly. Rest here for now. Let me go see the imperial uncle and plan our next move.”

Guan Yu agreed and sent Sun Qian on ahead. Meanwhile, Guan Yu led his followers to a nearby farm to seek lodging for the night. An old man with a walking stick came out to greet them. After Guan Yu introduced himself, the old man said, “My last name is also Guan. My name is Guan (1) Ding (4). I have long heard of your great name. How fortunate that I get to meet you.” Guan Ding (4) then called for his two sons and told them to pay their respects to Guan Yu, and then they welcomed him and his men into the farm.

Meanwhile, Sun Qian went alone to Ji (4) Province to see Liu Bei and bring him up to date.

“Jian (3) Yong (1) is also here,” Liu Bei told Sun Qian. “Let’s invite him here secretly to talk this over.”

Shortly thereafter, Jian (3) Yong (1) arrived to discuss how Liu Bei could extricate himself from his current situation.

“My lord,” Jian Yong said. “Tomorrow you should go see Yuan Shao and tell him that you want to go to Jing (1) Province to convince Liu Biao (3) to join forces with him against Cao Cao. You can then use that opportunity to leave.”

“That’s a great idea!” Liu Bei said. “But will you be able to follow me?”

“I have my own ways to extract myself,” Jian Yong answered.

So the next day, Liu Bei did as Jian Yong suggested and went to see Yuan Shao.

“Liu Biao reigns over Jing Province, where he has crack troops and ample provisions,” Liu Bei said. “We should ask him to join us against Cao Cao.”

“I have often tried to convince him to do that, but he has not been willing to ally with me,” Yuan Shao said.

“He and I are of the same clan,” Liu Bei said. “If I go talk to him, he would not refuse.”

“If we can get Liu Biao on our side, it would be much better than having Liu Pi (4),” Yuan Shao said, and so he ordered Liu Bei to go to Jing Province. But then Yuan Shao added,

“I recently heard that Guan Yu has left Cao Cao and wants to come to Hebei. I shall kill him to avenge Yan Liang and Wen Chou.”

“But your lordship had previously said you want to have him in your service, which is why I summoned him,” Liu Bei said. “Why do you now want to kill him? Yan Liang and Wen Chou are like two deers, while Guan Yu is a tiger. How can one regret losing two deers to gain a tiger?”

Upon hearing this, Yuan Shao laughed and said, “Actually, I really covet him. I was just teasing. You may send another message to summon him here at once.”

Well, whether or not Yuan Shao was really kidding, I don't even know by this point, considering how much the guy's intentions change on a whim. But in any case, Liu Bei suggested that, hey, Sun Qian would be the perfect guy to go summon Guan Yu, which coincidentally gives Sun Qian an excuse to get out of town. Yuan Shao was delighted and said ok.

After Liu Bei took his leave, Jian Yong came in to see Yuan Shao and said to him, "Liu Bei does not intend to return from this trip. I am willing to go with him, partly to help convince Liu Biao and partly to keep an eye on Liu Bei."

Yuan Shao consented to this and ordered Jian Yong to accompany Liu Bei. Of course, any keen observer was probably thinking, "Wait a minute. Jian Yong used to serve under Liu Bei at Xu Province. He is basically Liu Bei's man. Why would you send him, of all people, to go keep an eye on Liu Bei?"

One of those keen observers, the adviser Guo (1) Tu (2), picked up on this and told Yuan Shao, "Liu Bei's last trip to bring Liu Pi (4) to our side hasn't yielded any results. And now you are sending him and Jian Yong to Jing Province together. They would not return."

However, Yuan Shao refused to listen. "You are too suspicious," he told Guo Tu. "Jian Yong knows what he's doing." At that point, Guo Tu could do little but sigh and leave.

Meanwhile, Liu Bei sent Sun Qian out of the city first to report back to Guan Yu. He and Jian Yong then took their leave of Yuan Shao and left. When they arrived at the border of the province, Sun Qian met them and brought them to the farm where Guan Yu was staying. It was a dramatic scene, as Guan Yu met Liu Bei at the door and prostrated on the ground. They then held each other's hands and wept nonstop.

After this emotional reunion, Guan Ding (4), the owner of the farm, brought his sons out to meet Liu Bei, and Liu Bei asked what their names were.

“This man shares the same last name as me,” Guan Yu told him. “He has two sons. The elder is named Guan Ning (2) and is a scholar. The younger one is named Guan Ping (2) and is a warrior.

Guan Ding (4) then chimed in, “It is my humble wish that my younger son accompany General Guan. Would you allow it?”

“How old is he?” Liu Bei asked.

“Eighteen,” the old man replied.

“Since that is your generous intent, and since my brother does not have a son yet, what do you think about him adopting your son?” Liu Bei asked.

Guan Ding was delighted because, hey, one fewer mouth to feed and one fewer kid to put through college. He told Guan Ping (2) to bow to Guan Yu and call him father, and call Liu Bei uncle. With this impromptu adoption completed, Liu Bei and company quickly packed up and left, out of fear that Yuan Shao would have one of his frequent changes of heart and send troops after them. Guan Ping went with them, and Guan Ding saw them off.

Once they were on the road, Guan Yu told them to head toward the mountain where Zhou Cang (1) had gone to fetch his old comrade Pei (2) Yuanshao (2,4) and his group of bandits. But along the way, they suddenly saw Zhou Cang approaching. He was injured and only had a few dozen men with him. Guan Yu introduced him to Liu Bei and then asked what happened.

“A lone warrior arrived at the mountain before I got there,” Zhou Cang said. “He fought with Pei (2) Yuanshao (2,4) and killed him after just one bout. All the rest of the men surrendered to him and he has occupied the stronghold on the mountain. When I got there and called out for the men to come over to me, only these guys dared to come; all the rest were too afraid to leave. It was too much to bear, so I fought that guy, but he beat me time and again and stabbed me three times with his spear. So I have come to tell you.”

“What does that warrior look like? What is his name?” Liu Bei asked.

“He had a formidable appearance, but I do not know his name,” Zhou Cang answered.

Well, such an insult could not be allowed to go unanswered. So the traveling party continued toward the mountain stronghold, with Guan Yu leading the way and Liu Bei bringing up the rear. With the slayer of Yan Liang and Wen Chou getting his back, Zhou Cang shouted insults from the foot of the mountain. Soon, the warrior in question, with armor donned and spear drawn, galloped down the mountain side with his men.

But before the two sides came to blows, Liu Bei rode out and shouted, “Is that Zhao Yun?”

When that warrior heard this and saw Liu Bei, he quickly dismounted and prostrated on the ground. It was indeed Zhao Yun, the gallant warrior who had once served Liu Bei’s friend Gongsun Zan (4) and had quickly become a favorite of Liu Bei’s.

When Liu Bei and Guan Yu inquired how Zhao Yun had come to be here, he answered, “After I took my leave of your lordship, Gongsun Zan ignored good advice and brought about his own defeat and death. Yuan Shao asked me numerous times to go serve him, but I figured he was not one to make good use of talented men, so I did not go. Later, I wanted to go join your lordship at Xu Province, but then I heard the province had been lost, General Guan had joined Cao Cao, and your lordship was with Yuan Shao. I wanted to come join you on several occasions, but I was afraid Yuan Shao would take offense. So I have been drifting all over, with no place to call home.

“When I happened to pass through here, Pei Yuanshao tried to take my horse, so I killed him and used this place as a temporary refuge. Recently, I heard Zhang Fei was in Gucheng (3,2) and thought about going there, but haven’t gone because I didn’t know whether the intel was true. What great fortune it is to meet your lordship today!”

Liu Bei was ecstatic to see Zhao Yun, and he relayed his own sob story since their parting, and then Guan Yu shared his sob story.

“As soon as I saw you,” Liu Bei told Zhao Yun, “I did not want to let you go. And now we have the great fortune to meet again!”

“I have been all over looking for a worthy master,” Zhao Yun said, “and yet I have never met anyone like your lordship. Now that I can serve you, it has fulfilled my life’s aspirations. I will never regret it, not even if my heart’s blood should stain the ground!”

The mutual admiration session thus concluded, Zhao Yun immediately burned the stronghold and led his men to accompany Liu Bei toward Gucheng. When they arrived, Zhang Fei and the Mi brothers greeted them and welcomed them into the city, where they all bowed to each other. Liu Bei’s two wives recounted Guan Yu’s experience since their separation, and Liu Bei could not help but be moved. Oh also, it’s really nice to see you, too, honey.

With the teary reunion over, it was time to throw a huge party. Liu Bei and company killed some cattle and horses for the occasion. First, they offered thanks to heaven, and then they rewarded all their soldiers. Liu Bei was ecstatic about reuniting with his brothers, getting basically everybody back from the old days for the reunion tour, and getting some new faces, like Zhao Yun, Guan Ping, and Zhou Cang. So everybody drank and feasted for days. It was such a great party that someone later wrote a poem to commemorate the occasion:

Like severed limbs, three brothers torn asunder;
With scant words and little news of one another.
But now the liege and his men renewed their ties,
Like tiger winds and dragon clouds joining in the skies.

So at this moment, Liu Bei had with him Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Sun Qian, Jian Yong, Mi Zhu, Mi Fang, Guan Ping, and Zhou Cang, along with about 4,000-some troops. It’s not much of an

army, but it's something. Liu Bei's intent was to abandon the town of Gucheng and set up base in Runan (3,2). Coincidentally, the two guys currently holding that region, Liu (2) Pi (4) and Gong (1) Dou (1), sent a messenger to invite Liu Bei and company to join them. So the party shifted to Runan, where they concentrated on growing their troops' numbers and making plans for the future.

Meanwhile, back in Hebei, Yuan Shao was waiting for news from Liu Bei on his mission to talk Liu Biao into siding with him against Cao Cao. Yuan Shao waited, and waited, and waited, and when he still heard nothing, he knew he'd been had, and he was not amused.

Yuan Shao wanted to mobilize his forces to attack Liu Bei, but his adviser Guo (1) Tu (2) told him, "Liu Bei is of no concern. Cao Cao is our strongest foe and must be dealt with. Liu Biao might be in control of Jing (1) Province, but he's weak. On the other hand, Sun Ce of the Southlands dominates an area that includes six districts. He has numerous advisers and warriors. We should form an alliance with him to attack Cao Cao together."

Yuan Shao agreed and sent his aide Chen (2) Zhen (4) to go see Sun Ce. It's been a while since we mentioned Sun Ce, so let's have a refresher. After his father had died some years earlier, the eldest son of Sun Jian (1) borrowed troops from Yuan Shao's cousin, Yuan Shu (4), to conquer the Southlands, which is the region immediately south of the Yangzi (2,3) River.

His main conquest was completed by the year 196, which is about four years before where we are now in the novel. And Sun Ce has done pretty well for himself since then, building a strong army and stockpiling provisions. In 199, Sun Ce seized two more districts, and after this, his power had never been greater.

Sun Ce then sent one of his top advisers, Zhang (1) Hong (2), to the capital Xuchang (3,1) to report his victories to the court, aka Cao Cao. Cao Cao, seeing how strong Sun Ce had become, sighed and said, "One cannot take a lion head on." So Cao Cao resorted to a little diplomacy by marriage. He

arranged a union between the daughter of his cousin Cao Ren and Sun Ce's youngest brother, Sun Kuang (1). Cao Cao also kept Zhang (1) Hong (2) in the capital for the time being.

Sun Ce then pushed his luck even further and asked to be named grand marshal. This, however, Cao Cao would not grant. Sun Ce held a grudge and started to entertain thoughts of launching a surprise attack on the capital.

But not all of Sun Ce's officials bought into his foreign policy. Xu (3) Gong (4), the governor of Wu (2) County, secretly sent a message to Cao Cao saying, "Sun Ce is bold and ambitious. He is like Xiang (4) Yu (3). The court should summon him back to the capital to receive laurels and keep him there instead of allowing him to remain in a remote military post where he might become a real problem."

So Xu (3) Gong (4) compares Sun Ce to Xiang (4) Yu (3), and you might be asking who is Xiang (4) Yu (3). He was a renowned warrior who lived in the time period between the Qin and Han dynasties. He was actually THE dominant warlord during the transition period between the two dynasties. The fight to control the whole country eventually came down to between him and Liu (2) Bang (1), the Supreme Ancestor. Xiang (4) Yu (3) actually had Liu (3) Bang (1) on the ropes for a while, but then lost everything in one decisive battle and took his own life.

In any case, Cao Cao never got to read this letter. Xu (3) Gong's (4) messenger couldn't make it across the river before he was picked up by Sun Ce's patrols. They brought the messenger in front of Sun Ce, who was irate upon reading the letter. He had the messenger executed, and then summoned Xu (3) Gong (4) under the pretense of some concocted business. As soon as Xu (3) Gong (4) arrived, Sun Ce had him strangled.

Now, with the way such things are typically done, the entire family of the guy plotting rebellion is executed as well. In this case, however, Xu (3) Gong's (4) family managed to flee and disperse. Among them were three of his retainers, and they weren't about to let their patron's death go unavenged. All they needed was an opportunity.

One day, Sun Ce and some of his men went out to the hills for a hunt. The men flushed out a large deer, and Sun Ce galloped into the hills after it. As he was giving chase, he suddenly noticed three men in the woods, holding spears and carrying bows and arrows.

“Who are you?” Sun Ce asked as he pulled up his horse.

“We are soldiers from General Han (2) Dang’s (1) detachment,” they answered. “We are hunting deer.”

Thinking they were his own men, Sun Ce paid them no mind and was just about to continue his pursuit when one of the men tried to stab him in the left leg with a spear. Caught off guard, Sun Ce pulled out his sword and took a swing at the guy. But just then, the blade of his sword fell off, and all Sun Ce had in his hand was the handle. Another of the men, meanwhile, had fired an arrow at Sun Ce, and it struck him in the face.

But remember that Sun Ce was a guy who once yelled an enemy officer to death while literally squeezing the life out of another, so he wasn’t about to go down this easily. He pulled the arrow from his face, pulled out his own bow, and returned it back to sender. The arrow found its mark, and the target collapsed to the ground. His two comrades, however, started stabbing at Sun Ce wildly with their spears while shouting, “We are retainers of Xu (3) Gong’s (4)! We have come to avenge our master!”

At that moment, Sun Ce had no weapon with him, so all he could do was to use his bow to deflect the blows while retreating. The two assailants kept coming, and Sun Ce, as great a warrior as he was, could not dodge this constant assault, and he was stabbed quite a few times. Even his horse was injured.

Just as things were looking grim, reinforcement arrived in the form of a detachment of troops led by Cheng (2) Pu (3), one of Sun Ce’s veteran generals.

“Kill them!” Sun Ce shouted to his men.

Cheng Pu and his soldiers immediately pounced on the two assailants and cut them to pieces. But when they turned to tend to Sun Ce, they saw that the damage had been done. Sun Ce’s face was covered in blood, and he had suffered serious injuries. Cheng Pu cut up a cloak to bandage his wounds and quickly escorted him back to Wu (2) County to recover.

For their near success in ambushing the leader of the Southlands, Xu Gong’s retainers earned themselves a poem to go out on:

Smart and brave though Sun Ce be,
Trapped and injured on his hunt was he.
By three knights who paid in death what honor owed,
Whose feat would impress even Yu (4) Rang (4) of old.

So another side note is in order here: The last line of the poem references Yu (4) Rang (4). This is a man from the end of the Spring and Autumn period. I’ll probably do a supplemental episode on his story at some point. For now, just know that he was renowned for his courage and relentlessness in trying to avenge the death of his master. So it’s a great honor for the three retainers to be compared to him.

Alright, moving on. So Sun Ce is laid up in bed with some pretty serious injuries. He sent for the renowned physician Hua (4) Tuo (2), who had once saved one of his general’s lives. But Hua Tuo had gone off to the central region of the empire at the time, and the best they could do was to bring his disciple to treat Sun Ce.

The disciple treated Sun Ce and then told him, "You were struck by a poisoned arrow, and the poison has already spread to your bones. You must rest peacefully for a hundred days before you can recover. If you get agitated, it will become life-threatening."

So, guess what Sun Ce's Achilles' Heel was? That's right, he was an extremely impatient man. So it's going to be a real test for him to remain calm and rest peacefully for three-plus months. He managed to do this for 20-some days, but then a source of agitation arrived in the form of a messenger that Zhang (1) Hong (2) had sent from the capital. Sun Ce naturally wanted to know what's going on in Xuchang, so he summoned the messenger and questioned him about the court's opinion of him.

"Cao Cao is very wary of you, my lord," the messenger said. "And all of his advisers respect you greatly, all except Guo (1) Jia (1)."

Well, Sun Ce's attendants were probably frantically gesturing and winking at this messenger at this moment, trying to tell him to ixnay on the Guo Jia-ay. But it was too late.

"What did Guo Jia say about me?" Sun Ce asked.

The messenger did not dare to reply, but this only made Sun Ce angrier and he demanded an answer, so the messenger had no choice but to come clean.

"Guo Jia once told Cao Cao that your lordship is no concern, that you are reckless, always ill-prepared, all brawn and no brain, and sure to die at the hands of a scoundrel."

Now I don't know why this messenger didn't just make up something less incendiary, but Sun Ce exploded upon hearing this.

"How dare that fool rate me so?! I swear I will capture Xuchang!" he said. So he immediately began to discuss mobilizing his army, his injuries be damned.

His top adviser, Zhang (1) Zhao (1), tried to talk him off the ledge. “The physician had instructed your lordship to rest in bed for a hundred days,” Zhang Zhao (1) said. “Why do you put your invaluable self at risk for a mere moment’s rage?”

Just as they were speaking, word came that the messenger Chen (2) Zhen (4) had arrived on behalf of Yuan Shao. When he saw Sun Ce, Chen (2) Zhen (4) told him that Yuan Shao intended to form an alliance with him to attack Cao Cao. Sun Ce was delighted, and the next day, he gathered all of his advisers and officers at the city tower to throw a welcome banquet for Chen Zhen.

While the banquet was going on, suddenly Sun Ce noticed that all of his people were whispering in each other’s ears and then they all started to head downstairs. When Sun Ce asked his attendants what’s up, they told him, “An immortal is passing by, and everyone wants to go show their respect.”

Sun Ce got up, leaned over the railing, and looked down. Below, he saw a Taoist priest cloaked in crane feathers and holding a staff made of goosefoot wood. The priest was standing in the street while all the commoners were offering up incense and prostrating themselves on the ground before him.

“Who is this sorcerer?!” Sun Ce asked angrily. “Go arrest him at once!”

“His name is Yu (2) Ji (2),” his attendants told him. “He resides in the East. He has come to the Southlands to distribute potions that have remedied ailments of all kinds. People call him an immortal. Please do not disrespect him.”

But this only made Sun Ce angrier. “Go arrest him and bring him here at once!” he shouted. “Whoever disobeys my order shall be executed!”

His attendants had no choice but to go downstairs and hustle Yu (2) Ji (2) up to see Sun Ce.

“You crazy priest!” Sun Ce scolded him. “How dare you fan the flames of men’s ignorance?!”

“I am but a humble Taoist priest from Langya (2,2),” Yu (2) Ji (2) answered. “During the reign of Emperor Shun (4), I was collecting herbs in the mountain when I discovered a sacred text near a spring in Yangqu (2,1). It’s called *The Millennium: Purification and Guidance*. It had a hundred some volumes, all dealing with ways to treat illnesses. After discovering this text, I have devoted myself to spreading its influence on behalf of heaven and have helped tens of thousands of people, all without accepting the smallest gift from anyone. How can I be misleading people?”

But Sun Ce was unconvinced. “If you have not accepted anything from anyone, then where do you get food and clothing?” he said. “You are like the Yellow Turban leader Zhang (1) Jue (2). If I don’t kill you today, you will no doubt become trouble later!”

At that, Sun Ce ordered his men to execute Yu (2) Ji (2). But Zhang Zhao (1) intervened and said, “Priest Yu (2) has lived in the Southlands for decades and has never caused any trouble. We must not harm him.”

“I can kill these sorcerers is like a butcher kills a pig or a dog!” an unmoved Sun Ce said.

But at this point, all of his officials began to beg him to spare Yu Ji, and Chen Zhen also joined in the chorus calling for leniency. Although he was still pretty steamed, Sun Ce had no choice but to yield. But he didn’t let Yu Ji go. Instead, he ordered that the priest be thrown in prison for now. And with that, the party broke up.

As you might imagine, Sun Ce is nowhere near done with Yu (2) Ji (2). To learn the priest’s fate, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.