

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 39.

Last time, Cao Cao had just put another smackdown on Yuan Shao when he was distracted from his work by news that Liu Bei was trying to make a sneak attack on his capital Xuchang. So Cao Cao quickly turned around and met Liu Bei en route. Liu Bei won their first clash, but then was met with silence from Cao Cao's camp the next two days, which made him very suspicious.

Liu Bei did not have to wait long for his fears to be justified. Word soon came that his officer Gong (1) Dou (1) had been ambushed while delivering provisions and was presently surrounded by Cao Cao's troops. So Liu Bei quickly dispatched Zhang Fei to bail him out. Just then came word that a force led by Cao Cao's general Xiahou Dun had sneaked around Liu Bei and was on its way to attack Runan (3,2), Liu Bei's home base.

"If that is the case, I am under siege from front and back, and I have no way home!" a concerned Liu Bei said. So he sent Guan Yu off to protect Runan.

But within a day, word came that Runan had fallen to Xiahou Dun and that Liu Pi (4), the guy Liu Bei had left in charge, had fled the city and that Guan Yu was now trapped by Xiahou Dun's forces. Just as Liu Bei was panicking, more bad news arrived: Apparently Zhang Fei, who had gone off to save Gong (1) Dou (1), was now also trapped.

Liu Bei was now in a huge bind. He wanted to retreat, but he was afraid Cao Cao would attack him if he did. Just then, his men reported that Cao Cao's general Xu Chu was now challenging for combat outside the camp. With everything else going on, Liu Bei did not dare to answer the challenge.

The next morning, after what seemed like the longest night, Liu Bei ordered his men to eat a full meal and then they began to pull out, with the infantry leading the way, followed by the cavalry, while they kept up appearances in the camp to make the enemy think they were still entrenched.

A few miles out of camp, however, just as Liu Bei's forces were going around a hill, the hillside was lit up by torches, and a loud shout rang out from atop the hill.

"Do not let Liu Bei escape! The prime minister has been waiting right here!"

This threw Liu Bei into a panic and he was looking for a way out.

"My lord, do not worry. Just follow me!" his trusted general Zhao Yun said.

Zhao Yun then wielded his spear and carved a path through the enemy, while Liu Bei followed closely behind with his twin swords. In the midst of battle, Cao Cao's general Xu Chu arrived and engaged Zhao Yun in a heated duel. From the rear came two more of Cao Cao's officers, Yu (1) Jin (4) and Li (2) Dian (3).

Seeing how dire the situation was, Liu Bei did what he has tended to do best when he has gone up against Cao Cao -- turn tail and run. He ran and ran and ran, until the shouts from behind gradually faded away, and Liu Bei kept fleeing deeper into the mountains by himself.

He kept going until the next morning, when suddenly he ran into a squad of soldiers. Liu Bei panicked, but then he recognized that this was Liu Pi (4), the man he left in charge of Runan. Liu Pi could not hold out against Xiahou Dun's siege of the city, so he fled with about a thousand riders to meet up with Liu Bei, with Liu Bei's family in tow, as well as Liu Bei's advisers Sun Qian (2), Jian (3) Yong (1), and Mi (2) Fang (1).

"Xiahou Dun's forces were too much, so we had to abandon the city," they told Liu Bei. "The enemy pursued us, but fortunately Guan Yu arrived to keep them busy while we escaped."

"Where is Guan Yu now?" Liu Bei asked.

"General, let's keep moving and worry about that later," Liu Pi (4) said to him.

So they got back on the road. But within just a few miles, they heard the sound of a drum and saw a squad of enemy troops dash out in front of them, led by the general Zhang (1) He (2), who had newly abandoned Yuan Shao and joined Cao Cao.

“Liu Bei, dismount and surrender right now!” Zhang He shouted.

Liu Bei was just about to turn and run in the other direction when he saw a red flag waving at the top of a hill. At that signal, another detachment of Cao Cao’s troops showed up from a valley, led by Gao (1) Lan (3), another of Cao Cao’s new acquisitions.

Cut off in both directions, Liu Bei looked to the heavens and shouted, “Heaven! Why must you make me suffer so?! With things as they are, I might as well die!”

So Liu Bei pulled out his sword and tried to slit his own throat, but Liu Pi (4) hurriedly stopped him.

“My lord, allow me to fight to the death to help you escape!” Liu Pi (4) said. He then rode forth to take on Gao (1) Lan (3). But within just three bouts, he was cut down.

Liu Bei was just about to go and take on Gao Lan himself when suddenly, the rear of Gao Lan’s troops began to fall into disarray. A warrior dashed through the enemy ranks, and where his spear flashed, Gao Lan was stabbed off his horse. Liu Bei steadied his gaze and saw that it was none other than Zhao Yun.

Liu Bei was delighted to have somebody with actual skills at his side. Zhao Yun first scattered the remnants of Gao Lan’s troops, and then turned in the other direction and threw himself at Zhang He. After about 30 bouts, Zhang He faltered and ran. Zhao Yun tried to seize the momentum and storm his way out, but Zhang He’s troops managed to hold their lines at the mouth of the canyon, and the road was too narrow for Zhao Yun and company to storm through.

Just then, more help arrived in the form of Guan Yu, who led his son Guan Ping (2), his loyal follower Zhou (1) Cang (1), and 300 soldiers. So now it was Zhang He who was being besieged from both sides, and he retreated. So Liu Bei managed to escape from the canyon and found a strong point in the hills to set up camp.

Liu Bei then sent Guan Yu to go look for Zhang Fei. Zhang Fei had gone to rescue the officer Gong (1) Dou (1), who had been ambushed while transporting provisions. By the time Zhang Fei got there,

Gong Dou had already been killed. Zhang Fei fought off the enemy forces and gave chase, only to be surrounded by another detachment of enemy troops. Fortunately for him, Guan Yu ran into some of his men along the way and hurried over to scatter the enemy and rescue Zhang Fei. The two of them then went back to meet up with Liu Bei.

There was not much time to catch their breath, however. Word soon came that the main body of Cao Cao's army was in hot pursuit. So Liu Bei ordered his advisers to accompany his family and go on ahead, while he himself stayed in the rear with Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun, fighting as they fled to slow down the pursuit. Once Liu Bei managed to put some distance between himself and the pursuing troops, Cao Cao was content to call off the hounds. So FINALLY, Liu Bei could breathe easy.

But Liu Bei was once again in a sorry state. He had fewer than a thousand men with him, and they fled harriedly until they reached a river. They had ask the locals to find out that they were on the banks of the Han (4) River, and Liu Bei ordered his men to set up camp and rest. When the locals heard that Liu Bei was in their neck of the woods, they presented him with goats and wine, so Liu Bei and company sat on the beach and ate.

As they ate, Liu Bei sighed and said to his officers and advisers, "My friends, you have the talent to serve a king. Unfortunately, you have followed me, and my rotten luck has brought you all down with me. Today, I have nothing, not even ground to stand on. You all should leave me and go serve a more enlightened master so that you may distinguish yourselves."

When they heard this, all of his men covered their faces and wept.

"Brother, you are mistaken," Guan Yu said to Liu Bei. "Back when the Supreme Ancestor was fighting for control of the empire, he suffered numerous defeats, but then with one triumph, he succeeded and established a dynasty that has endured for 400 years. Victory and defeat are common in war. You should not let it shake you."

The adviser Sun Qian (2) now chimed in. "There is a time for victory and a time for defeat," he said. "You should not lose heart. We are not far from Jing (1) Province, where Liu Biao (3) reigns over nine districts and has a strong army and ample provisions. Besides, he and you are both members of the imperial clan. Why not go seek sanctuary with him?"

"I fear he might not take us in," Liu Bei said.

"I am willing to go talk to Liu Biao and convince him to come to his borders to receive you," Sun Qian said.

This cheered up Liu Bei, and he sent Sun Qian off to Jing (1) Province right away. When Sun Qian arrived and met with Liu Biao, the latter asked, "Sir, you are in the service of Liu Bei. What brings you here?"

"Lord Liu is a hero of the land," Sun Qian replied. "Even though he has few soldiers and warriors, he still aspires to sustain the royal house. In Runan, Liu Pi and Gong Dou, even though they had no familial ties with Lord Liu, were willing to fight to the death for him. Your lordship and my master are both members of the imperial clan. Right now, my lord has just suffered a defeat and is thinking about seeking refuge in the Southlands with Sun Quan. But I told him, 'You should not abandon your family to join up with strangers. General Liu of Jing (1) Province welcomes men of talent, and capable men flock to him as the river flows to the east. Not to mention the fact that he is your kinsman.' So my master has sent me to convey his respects and to learn your will."

Upon hearing this, Liu Biao was delighted.

"Liu Bei is my brother," he said. And just a note here, he is using the word "brother" loosely as a term of affection for a kinsman. "I have long wanted to meet him but have not had the opportunity. If he is willing to join me now, it would be a great fortune!"

However, not everyone present shared his enthusiasm, especially not Cai (4) Mao (4), one of his top officers.

“My lord, you cannot!” Cai Mao said. “Liu Bei first served Lü (3) Bu (4), then served Cao Cao, and most recently served Yuan Shao. None of those stints ended well. That is proof enough of his true nature. If you take him in, Cao Cao would surely move against us and we would be forced to fight. Why not cut off Sun Qian’s head instead and send it to Cao Cao. He would surely reward you.”

At this, Sun Qian said sternly, “I am not the type who fears death. My master is loyal to the country, unlike the likes of Cao Cao, Yuan Shao, and Lü Bu. When he served them, it was only because he had no choice. You, General Liu, are his kinsman, which is why he has come all this way to join you. How can your man speak such slander out of jealousy for men of talent?”

This convinced Liu Biao, and he admonished Cai Mao. “My mind is made up. Say no more,” he said. So Cai Mao went away embarrassed and grumbling.

Liu Biao then told Sun Qian to bring word to Liu Bei that he was welcome. He then went 10 miles out of the city to welcome his kinsman. Liu Bei greeted him with great respect, and Liu Biao answered in kind. After all the introductions, Liu Biao brought Liu Bei and company back to Jing (1) Province and set them up in lodgings.

Now, as for Cao Cao, when he heard that Liu Bei had run off to Jing Province and joined up with Liu Biao, he wanted to attack, but his adviser Cheng (2) Yu (4) was against it.

“We have not yet rid ourselves of Yuan Shao’s clan,” Cheng Yu said. “If we attack Jing Province now and Yuan Shao rises again in the north, then the outcome would be hard to predict. Let’s return to Xuchang and let the army rest. Come spring, we can first defeat Yuan Shao and then take Jing Province. That would ensure victories in the north and south in one fell swoop.”

Cao Cao agreed with this advice and returned to his capital. The winter passed uneventfully, and before you know it, spring had rolled around. We are now in the year 202, and Cao Cao began to plan another military campaign. First things first though: He put the general Xiahou Dun and the adviser

Man (2) Chong (3) in charge of the newly conquered Runan to keep Liu Biao (3) at bay. He also left his kinsman Cao Ren (2) and his top adviser Xun (2) Yu (4) to defend the capital Xuchang. Then, he led the bulk of his army to Guandu, where they prepared to invade Yuan Shao's territory.

As for Yuan Shao, his condition had slightly improved over the winter, and he immediately began discussions of invading Xuchang. But his adviser Shen Pei told him, "Our army's morale still has not recovered from last year's defeats. Right now we should fortify our defenses and build up both our army and our civilian population."

Just as they were talking about this, though, word came that Cao Cao had brought the fight to them and that his army was on its way to Ji (4) Province, where Yuan Shao was located.

"If we wait until the enemy is at our gates before resisting, it will be too late," Yuan Shao said. "I shall personally lead the army out to meet them."

His third son Yuan Shang advised against it.

"Father, you have not yet recovered from your illness; you should not go on distant campaigns," Yuan Shang said. "I am willing to lead the army to face the enemy."

Yuan Shao granted his request and also dispatched messengers to the other three provinces under his command, telling his other two sons and his nephew to mobilize their forces and converge on Cao Cao.

Yuan Shang, however, was feeling pretty cocky after he slayed one of Cao Cao's B-list officers in the previous year's battle. So he did not bother waiting for the reinforcements before leading several tens of thousands of troops to the city of Liyang (2,2) to face Cao Cao's vanguard. The vanguard was under the command of Zhang Liao, who, unfortunately for Yuan Shang, was no B-list officer. Yuan Shang couldn't even last three bouts against Zhang Liao before turning tail. Zhang Liao directed his troops to sweep in and give chase. Yuan Shang could not hold it together and ran all the way back to Ji (4) Province.

News of his latest setback gave Yuan Shao another shock, and his illness flared up again as he spat up a large amount of blood and passed out. His wife, Lady Liu (2), quickly helped him to his bed. By now, Yuan Shao was on the brink of death, so Lady Liu hurriedly summoned the advisers Shen Pei and Feng (2) Ji (3) to his bedside to discuss plans for after his death. At this point, Yuan Shao could not even speak; he was only able to gesture.

“Can Yuan Shang be your successor?” Lady Liu asked him.

Yuan Shao nodded, and Shen Pei wrote his will for him right there. After that, Yuan Shao flipped over, let out a loud cry, spat up more blood, and died. Thus ended the life of the man who at one time looked to be the odds-on-favorite to emerge as the ultimate victor in the power struggles that had engulfed the land. A poet later wrote of Yuan Shao:

From a noble line honored for generations
Sprang a youth of unrestrained ambition.
He collected three thousand retainers all in vain
And his mighty armies brought him no gain.
No glory for this sheep in tiger’s hide!
No triumph for a chicken with phoenix plume!
The saddest part of this pathetic end:
Both brothers of this fallen house were doomed.

After Yuan Shao’s death, Shen Pei took charge of his funeral. Lady Liu, meanwhile, revealed her dark side. Aside from her, Yuan Shao had five concubines, whom he favored. With him out of the way, Lady Liu had all five of them killed. She didn’t stop there either. Now that she had sent them off to the afterlife, she wanted to make sure they didn’t hook up with Yuan Shao there, so she shaved off their

hair, slashed their faces, and mutilated their bodies. So yeah, she was something real special. Even her son Yuan Shang got into the act. Fearing that the concubines' families would, you know, take exception to what his mom did, he had them all arrested and executed. Like mother, like son, I suppose.

On the political front, Shen Pei and Feng Ji announced Yuan Shang as the commander-in-chief and protector of the four provinces that his father had commanded. They also sent messengers to deliver the news of Yuan Shao's death.

At that moment, Yuan Shao's eldest son, Yuan Tan (2), had already led an army out of his home base of Qing (1) Province. When he got the news of his father's death, Yuan Tan met with his advisers Guo Tu and Xin (1) Ping (2).

"My lord, if you are not at Ji (4) Province, Shen Pei and Feng Ji would no doubt make Yuan Shang the heir to your father," Guo Tu said. "You must hurry to Ji (4) Province."

Xin (1) Ping (2), however, advised caution.

"Shen Pei and Feng Ji must have a plan in place already. If we rush to Ji Province, we would run into trouble."

"What should I do then?" Yuan Tan asked.

"We can station the army outside the city and observe the other side's movements," Guo Tu said. "And I shall personally go see what the situation is."

Yuan Tan agreed, so when they reached Ji Province, Guo Tu went into the city and met with Yuan Shang.

"Why is my brother not here?" Yuan Shang asked.

"He is sick and thus stayed in camp and cannot come see you," Guo Tu replied.

“My father’s will named me as his heir and promoted my eldest brother to General of Chariots and Cavalry,” Yuan Shang said. “Right now Cao Cao is encroaching on our borders. Please tell my brother to serve as the vanguard, and I shall send troops to back him up.”

“But your brother has no able strategists in his ranks,” Guo Tu said. “We would like to ask for Shen Pei and Feng Ji to accompany our army.”

“I require their counsel day and night; how can I let them go?” Yuan Shang said.

“What about one of the two?” Guo Tu haggled.

Well, Yuan Shang was kind of backed into a corner since he couldn’t very well refuse after he had asked Yuan Tan to be the vanguard. So he told his two advisers to draw lots to see which one would have to go with Yuan Tan. Feng Ji drew the short straw, so he left with Guo Tu to deliver the seal and cord of command to Yuan Tan.

When they got to Yuan Tan’s camp, however, it was clear to Feng Ji that Yuan Tan was feeling just fine. So yeah, if you are Feng Ji, you’re probably thinking, “Uh oh. This does not bode well.” But he was already there, so he had no choice but offer up the seal and cord to Yuan Tan, informing him of his, umm, promotion.

Yuan Tan was irate when he learned that instead of heir, he was just some two-bit General of the Chariots and Cavalry. He wanted to execute Feng Ji, but Guo Tu said to him in private, “With Cao Cao encroaching on our borders, so it’s best to keep Feng Ji here to set Yuan Shang’s mind at ease. Once we have defeated Cao Cao, then we can fight over Ji Province.”

Yuan Tan took his advice and moved his army out toward Liyang (2,2) to face Cao Cao. Yuan Tan sent one of his top generals out for combat, but Cao Cao sent out Xu Huang, and within a few bouts, Xu Huang cut down his foe. Cao Cao’s army seized the momentum and charged, and Yuan Tan’s troops were routed.

Yuan Tan gathered his troops and fled into Liyang and then sent a message to Yuan Shang asking for help. Yuan Shang talked it over with Shen Pei, and then they sent a meager 5,000 troops. Even this pitiful excuse of a relief force did not make it to Liyang. Cao Cao got word that reinforcements were coming, so he sent his generals Yue (4) Jin (4) and Li (2) Dian (3) to ambush them on the way and killed them all.

Inside Liyang, Yuan Tan heard that Yuan Shang had sent just 5,000 men and that they didn't even make it to the frontlines before being defeated. He flew into a rage and cursed Feng (2) Ji (3), Yuan Shang's adviser who was an unwilling tag-along on this campaign.

"Please allow me to write to my master and beg him to come in person to help you," Feng Ji said.

Yuan Tan told him to write the letter. When this message arrived at Ji Province, Yuan Shang consulted Shen Pei, who said, "Yuan Tan's adviser Guo Tu is very crafty. Previously, they left here without starting a fight only because Cao Cao's army was at our borders. If Yuan Tan defeats Cao Cao, he would surely try to take Ji Province from you. Let's not send any help and use Cao Cao to eliminate your enemy."

Yuan Shang took this suggestion and refused to dispatch any relief force. This, of course, did not bode well for Feng Ji. In fact, when the messenger went back to Yuan Tan and told him that no help was coming, Yuan Tan got mad again and immediately had Feng Ji executed. So yeah, tough luck there, buddy.

Killing Feng Ji may have quelled Yuan Tan's anger temporarily, but he still had the problem of being trapped inside Liyang. He now started entertaining thoughts of surrendering to Cao Cao. Spies in his ranks soon delivered this intel to Yuan Shang, and NOW, Yuan Shang was singing a different tune. He talked to Shen Pei and said, "If Yuan Tan surrenders to Cao Cao and they join forces to attack us, Ji Province will be in danger."

So Yuan Shang left Shen Pei and the general Su (1) You (2) to defend the province, while Yuan Shang himself prepared to lead an army to go rescue Yuan Tan. I'm sure Feng Ji appreciated this.

Yuan Shang asked his officers who wanted to be the vanguard, and the brothers Lü (3) Kuang (4) and Lü (3) Xiang (2) volunteered. So Yuan Shang gave them 30,000 men and sent them off to Liyang.

When Yuan Tan heard that help was finally on the way, he cheered up and abandoned thoughts of surrender. Instead, he readied his troops inside the city, while Yuan Shang stationed his army outside the city, so that they can help each other.

Within a day, more help arrived. Yuan Xi (1), the middle brother, and Gao Gan (4), their cousin, arrived at the head of another army. So now, the Yuan brothers had three armies. Unfortunately, they were not very good armies. They went out to fight Cao Cao every day, and got beat every day. This went on for a while, and by the second month of the year 203, Cao Cao was ready to put an end to this. He divided his army and attacked all three of the Yuan forces, and whipped them all. The brothers and their cousin abandoned Liyang and fled, and Cao Cao chased them all the way to Ji Province.

When they fled back to Ji Province, Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang entered the city to oversee its defense, while Yuan Xi and Gao Gan set up camp about 10 miles from the city and made enough noise to keep the enemy from being able to focus on laying siege to the city. This actually proved pretty effective, as Cao Cao attacked for days and could not take the city.

Cao Cao's adviser Guo Jia now suggested a different tact.

"Yuan Shao elevated his youngest son above his eldest, and the brothers are fighting with each other for power," Guo Jia said. "If they are pressed too hard, they will band together and help each other. But if they get some breathing room, they will turn on each other. Why not move our army toward Jing (1) Province to attack Liu Biao for now. Once the situation with the Yuan brothers changes, we can then attack and take care of them once and for all."

Cao Cao agreed with this suggestion, so he left another adviser, Jia (3) Xu (3), in charge of Liyang and put his kinsman Cao Hong (2) in charge of Guandu. Cao Cao then led the bulk of his army toward Jing Province.

Sure enough, almost as soon as Cao Cao left, the Yuan brothers started plotting against each other. To see how they will express their brotherly love for each other, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.