

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 41.

Last time, Cao Cao had just chased off Yuan Shang (4) and captured Ji (4) Province, the former power base of the Yuan clan. He executed Shen Pei, the adviser to the Yuans who had put up a dogged defense of the city. Cao Cao was just about to enter his newly conquered prize when he saw that his troops had captured Chen Lin, the man who once upon a time had written a decree for Yuan that badmouthed Cao Cao and his forefathers. You can refer back to post on our website for episode 28 for a link to the full text of this denunciation.

“When you were writing that declaration for Yuan Shao, you could have just stopped at denouncing me. Why did you have to drag my forefathers into it, too?” Cao Cao asked Chen Lin, who replied:

“The arrow had been loaded and the bowstring pulled back. I had no choice but to fire it.”

Cao Cao’s men wanted him to execute Chen Lin for writing all those nasty things about his ancestors, but Cao Cao spared him on account of the fact that he was a writer of a rare caliber. In fact, Cao Cao kept him on as an aide. So once again, Cao Cao is showing magnanimity and mercy to his enemies, even the ones who trolled him and his family.

While Cao Cao was busy being a gracious winner, his eldest son was busy inside the city. Now remember that Cao Cao had a son before, but he was killed on one of Cao Cao’s campaigns. But Cao Cao also had multiple sons by his second wife, and the oldest of those was named Cao Pi (1). When Cao Pi (1) was born, there was a purplish cloud that was as round as a chariot’s canopy hovering over his room for a whole day. A fortuneteller saw this and said to Cao Cao in private, “This is the aura of an emperor. Your son will know unnamable honors.”

At the age of 8, Cao Pi could write literary compositions that showed great talent. He was knowledgeable of things modern and ancient and was skilled at riding, archery, and was fond of sword fighting. I don't know about you, but by now, when I see the novel spend so much time talking about a character's auspicious birth and childhood accomplishments, I think, "Hey, this guy might be important one day." So stay tuned.

At the time Cao Cao conquered Ji Province, Cao Pi was 18 years old. Instead of staying at his father's side, he had gone on ahead with his personal guards to Yuan Shao's residence. There, he entered the house with sword in hand. An officer told him that Cao Cao had decreed that no one shall enter the Yuan residence, but Cao Pi dismissed him and stomped into the private quarters.

There, Cao Pi saw two women clutching each other and weeping. He was just about to kill them both, because, hey, what can be easier than killing defenseless, crying women? But just then, a red light flashed before his eyes. So he held back his sword and asked the women who they were.

One of them answered, "I am General Yuan Shao's wife, Lady Liu (2)."

"Who is she?" Cao Pi asked as he pointed at the other woman.

"She is Lady Zhen (1), wife of Yuan Shao's second son, Yuan Xi (1)," Lady Liu replied. "Yuan Xi is stationed at You (1) Province, and she did not want to go to such a distant place, so she stayed here."

Cao Pi pulled Lady Zhen closer, lifted back her disheveled hair, and wiped her soiled face with his sleeve. He saw that she had skin as fair as jade and a face as fresh as a flower, possessing such beauty that she could topple kingdoms with but one glance.

Cao Pi now turned to Lady Liu and said, "I am prime minister Cao's son. I will protect your family. Do not worry." And then, he sat down in the room with his hand on his sword.

Now, back to Cao Cao. As he was about to enter the city, Xu You, the adviser who defected from Yuan Shao, rode up near him, pointed at the city gates with his whip, and shouted to him, "Cao Cao, if not for me, you would not be able to enter this gate!"

Now, what Xu You just did was very disrespectful and very out of line considering he was speaking to the prime minister and calling him by his name instead of "your excellency" or even just "sir." But Xu You dared to take such liberties because 1) he did play a key role in Cao Cao's victories over Yuan Shao, and 2) he and Cao Cao went way back. So Cao Cao simply laughed off Xu You's remark, but Cao Cao's officers were not so pleased.

In any case, Cao Cao arrived at Yuan Shao's residence and asked if anyone had been there. The guard at the door told him, "Yeah, your son is inside."

Cao Cao was not happy about this, so he called Cao Pi outside to admonish him. Lady Liu went out with Cao Pi, paid her respect to Cao Cao, and said to him, "Only your excellency's son could have been able to protect my family. I am willing to offer Lady Zhen to serve in his household."

Cao Cao summoned Lady Zhen outside so he could get a look at her. Beholding her beauty, he said, "She is truly worthy of being my son's wife." So he ordered Cao Pi to marry her, which, I'm sure he did QUITE reluctantly.

With the city firmly under his control, Cao Cao now, get this, went to Yuan Shao's grave to pay his respects. There, he prostrated on the ground, cried, and mourned Yuan Shao -- quite a show for someone who, you know, helped send Yuan Shao to said grave.

In between sobs, Cao Cao turned and said to his followers, "Back when my friend Yuan Shao and I started the rebellion against Dong Zhuo, he once asked me, 'If we cannot prevail right now, what region would you choose to hold?' I turned the question around and asked him what he would do. He said, 'To my south, firm possession of the Yellow River. To my north, security against the rugged

regions of Yan (4) and Dai (4). If I can get the desert people on my side, then I can turn my attention to south of the river and vie for control of the empire, and might well succeed.'

"I then answered him, 'I would employ men of wisdom and energy, and guide them with my light. Then I can accomplish whatever I set my mind to.' [Sigh] These words seems like they were spoken just yesterday, and yet, my friend is now dead. I cannot help but weep!"

Upon hearing this, everyone present sighed. Cao Cao then gave Yuan Shao's wife, Lady Liu, gold, silk, and grains as a gift. He also sent out the order that because of the warfare they had to endure, the residents of the Hebei region were exempt from taxes that year. So yeah, nothing buys popularity like a tax cut. Cao Cao then wrote a report to the court, in which he named himself imperial protector of Ji Province.

One day, while Cao Cao's general Xu (2) Chu (3) was entering the east gate, he ran into Xu You, and Xu You started on his, "You won't be coming through this gate if not for me" spiel. But while Cao Cao might've humored Xu You, Xu Chu was in no mood for his shenanigans.

"We officers risked life and limb to conquer this city. Where do you get off boasting?!" he said angrily.

But this just egged on Xu You, who obviously did not know the temperament of the guy he was speaking to.

"Your kind are just a bunch of oafs! You are nothing!" Xu You said.

Well, he was asking for it, and he got what was coming to him. Xu Chu, enraged, pulled out his sword and killed Xu You on the spot. He then cut off Xu You's head and brought it to Cao Cao.

"Xu You was too disrespectful, so I have killed him," Xu Chu said.

"Xu You and I are old friends; that's why we tease each other," Cao Cao said. "Why did you have to kill him?"

Cao Cao then gave Xu Chu a severe tongue-lashing and, well, let him go on his way. He then ordered a fancy funeral for Xu You. So yeah, maybe Cao Cao was not so fond of his “old friend” after all.

Cao Cao then sent men out to look for talented men from around the province. Some of the civilians recommended Cui (1) Suo (3), a cavalry commander who had tried time and again to offer advice to Yuan Shao. But Yuan Shao kept ignoring him, so Cui (1) Suo (3) pretended to be sick and stayed home. Cao Cao appointed him as an aide to the assistant inspector of Ji Province.

“I looked at the registers yesterday and saw that there is a population of 300,000 here; that is quite a substantial province,” Cao Cao said to Cui (1) Suo (3).

Cui (1) Suo (3), however, admonished him.

“The empire is going to pieces, the nine provinces have been torn asunder, the Yuan brothers are quarreling, and the fields are littered with the bodies of the people of this province,” Cui (1) Suo (3) said. “Yet, instead of looking into the social and moral problems and trying to alleviate the crisis, your excellency’s first task was to calculate what the province may yield. How can the people of this province place their hopes on you then?”

When Cao Cao heard this, he quickly thanked Cui (1) Suo (3) for pointing out his misplaced priorities and treated him as an honored guest.

Having solidified his hold on Ji Province, Cao Cao now sent out scouts to see what Yuan Tan had been up to. At the time, Yuan Tan was raiding various cities in the region. When he heard that Yuan Shang had fled to Zhongshan (1,1) after being defeated by Cao Cao, he attacked his younger brother. Yuan Shang had no heart for battle at this point, so he fled to You (1) Province to seek refuge with Yuan Xi (1), the middle brother. What was left of Yuan Shang’s army surrendered to Yuan Tan, who now harbored thoughts of retaking Ji Province.

So when Cao Cao sent messengers to summon Yuan Tan, he refused to go. Enraged, Cao Cao wrote to Yuan Tan again to tell him that, yeah, the wedding is off between you and my daughter. Cao Cao did not stop there, of course. He also mobilized his army and headed to Pingyuan, where Yuan Tan was based.

When Yuan Tan heard that Cao Cao and his army were on the way, he sent a messenger to Liu Biao, the imperial protector of Jing (1) Province, to ask for help. Liu Biao consulted with Liu Bei, who was presently staying with Liu Biao.

“Cao Cao has recently conquered Ji Province and his army is on a roll,” Liu Bei said. “The Yuan brothers will soon fall into his hands. There is no point in trying to save them. Besides, Cao Cao has often entertained thoughts of invading Jing Province. We should strengthen our army and see to our own defenses instead of making any rash moves.”

“But how should I go about declining Yuan Tan’s request for aid?” Liu Biao asked.

“You can write to the Yuan brothers in the guise of trying to help them make peace with each other, and indirectly decline,” Liu Bei suggested.

So Liu Biao did as he suggested and sent letters to both Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang. The letters basically said, “Hey guys. You should really worry more about Cao Cao than about fighting each other, so kiss and make up.” They said nothing about lifting finger to help anyone. When Yuan Tan got the letter, he knew that Liu Biao had no intention of sending any troops to his aid. Figuring that he was no match for Cao Cao, Yuan Tan abandoned Pingyuan and fled to the city of Nanpi (2,2).

Cao Cao chased Yuan Tan to Nanpi (2,2). It was the middle of winter, and it was so cold that the waterways had become frozen and the ships carrying Cao Cao’s provisions could not move. So Cao Cao ordered the local civilians to break ice and pull the ships. When this order went out, however, the civilians began to flee because, hey, who wants to do that, right?

Cao Cao was fuming when he heard this, and he wanted to arrest the civilians and execute them. When the civilians heard that, they went to Cao Cao's camp to turn themselves in. But Cao Cao said to them, "If I do not kill you, then my orders will carry no weight. But at the same time, I cannot bring myself to do it. So hurry up and go hide in the hills. Do not let my soldiers catch you."

Touched by his mercy and compassion, the civilians went away with tears in their eyes. So Cao Cao earned himself a little street cred for being merciful and compassionate, which was a pretty good scam considering he was sparing the civilians from his own deadly orders.

When Cao Cao got to Nanpi (2,2), Yuan Tan led his troops outside the city to meet him. Cao Cao rode out to the front lines, pointed at Yuan Tan with his whip and scolded him.

"I treated you well. Why did you betray me?"

"You have encroached on my territory, seized my cities, and you owe me a wife!" Yuan Tan retorted. "How can you say that it is I who have betrayed YOU?"

Cao Cao did not take kindly to that and sent Xu Huang out for combat. Yuan Tan sent one of his generals out, but within just a few bouts, this guy fell victim to Xu Huang's axe, and Yuan Tan fell back inside the city while Cao Cao ordered his troops to surround the city.

Trapped and panicked, Yuan Tan now sent his adviser Xin (1) Ping (2) to see Cao Cao to -- get this -- offer his surrender once again. But yeah, Cao Cao was not biting this time.

"That brat Yuan Tan keeps going back on his word; I cannot trust him," Cao Cao told Xin Ping. "Your younger brother Xin Pi (2) has already received a key role on my staff. You should stay with and serve me as well."

"Your excellency is mistaken," Xin Ping said. "I have heard that the servants shares in his lord's glory and humiliation. I have served the Yuans for a long time. How can I turn my back on them?"

Knowing that he could not convince Xin Ping to stay, Cao Cao sent him back to Yuan Tan. When Xin Ping told Yuan Tan that Cao Cao would not accept his surrender, Yuan Tan got angry and took it out on Xin Ping.

“Your younger brother is serving Cao Cao now. Are you harboring divided loyalties?”

Xin Ping was so indignant over this accusation that he fainted. Yuan Tan instructed his attendants to carry Xin Ping out, and soon thereafter, Xin Ping died, which made Yuan Tan regret his poor choice of words.

His other adviser, Guo Tu, now said to him, “Tomorrow, drive all the civilians out of the city, and have the troops followed right behind them, and we will fight it out with Cao Cao.”

Yuan Tan took his advice. That night, his troops rounded up all the civilians of Nanpi (2,2) and forced them all to take up arms. The next morning, they threw all four gates of the city open. The civilians led the way, with the troops right on their heels. With a loud cry they stormed out of the city and made for Cao Cao’s camp. The two sides scrummed until noon, and the battle had not yet been decided, although the bodies of the dead were littered across the field.

Seeing his troops struggling to achieve clear victory, Cao Cao galloped up to a hilltop and personally beat the drum to spur on his men. The sight of their commander beating the drum inspired Cao Cao’s troops, and they surged forward and routed Yuan Tan’s troops. Countless civilians were killed in the process.

In the midst of this chaos, one of Cao Cao’s generals, Cao Hong, was storming through the enemy ranks when he ran into Yuan Tan. Cao Hong raised his blade and started hacking away, and that was all she wrote for Yuan Tan.

Seeing his side fall into disarray, the adviser Guo Tu tried to run back into the city. But Cao Cao’s general Yue (4) Jin (4) caught sight of him and shot him with an arrow. Guo Tu and his horse both fell



dead into the moat. Unlike other advisers of Yuan Shao's, I can't say I exactly feel sorry for this guy since all we've seen him do is offer up one terrible idea after another.

After winning the battle, Cao Cao and his army went inside Nanpi to restore order. Just then, another army arrived, led by two lieutenants who were serving under Yuan Xi, the middle brother. Cao Cao led his troops out to meet them, but were greeted not with arms, but with surrender. Cao Cao rewarded both of them with titles of nobility, which he was obviously handing out quite liberally these days. At the same time, Zhang (1) Yan (4), the leader of the Black Mountain Rebels, which was another faction that was operating in this region, also came to surrender at the head of an army of 100,000. Cao Cao rewarded him with a generalship.

Now, as for Yuan Tan, Cao Cao ordered that his head be hung outside the north gate as a warning and decreed that anyone who dared to shed a tear for him shall be executed. Well, one person showed up in mourning clothes and wept under the head, so the guards arrested him and brought him to Cao Cao. This turned out to be Wang (2) Xiu (1), the assistant protector of Qing (1) Province. He was the guy who, in the last episode, had tried to convince Yuan Tan to not turn against his brother but was ignored.

"Do you know about my order?" Cao Cao asked Wang Xiu (1).

"I do," Wang Xiu answered.

"Do you not fear death then?"

"I received my office from Yuan Tan when he was alive. It would be disloyal of me if I do not weep for him. If I forsake loyalty for fear of death, how can I go on living? If I may be permitted to bury his remains, I would die without regret."

At this, Cao Cao remarked, "There are so many loyal men in Hebei. It's a shame the Yuans did not know how to use them. If they did, I would not dare to set my sights on this region."

So Cao Cao ordered that Yuan Tan's remains be buried, and he treated Wang Xiu (1) as an honored guest and made him an officer. Cao Cao then asked him, "Now that Yuan Shang has gone off to join Yuan Xi, how should I go about defeating them?"

But to this, Wang Xiu made no answer.

"A truly loyal official!" Cao Cao said. So he did not put Wang Xiu on the spot any further and instead posed the question to his adviser Guo (1) Jia (1), who suggested using the officers who defected from the Yuans to attack the Yuans. Cao Cao followed this advice and sent three armies under the command of the six officers who had defected to attack You (1) Province. At the same time, he also sent another army to Bing (4) Province to attack Gao (1) Gan (4), the Yuan brothers' cousin.

At You (1) Province, when Yuan Shang and Yuan Xi heard that Cao Cao's troops were on their way, they figured they won't stand a chance, so they abandoned the city and fled to Liaoxi (2,1) to seek refuge with the Wuhuan (1,2), a northern borderland tribe that was kind of its own independent kingdom.

After they left, the imperial protector of You Province, who is not important enough for me to bore you with his name, gathered all the provincial officials and declared that they must all make a blood oath to join him in surrendering to Cao Cao. Anyone who dared to say no would be executed. So they were going down the line, with each man slicing open his hand or arm to drip blood and swear an oath. When they got to the assistant protector, Han (2) Hang (2), he threw down the sword and shouted, "I have received great kindness from Yuan Shao and his sons. Now, in their hour of demise, I have neither the wit to save them nor the courage to die for them. I am lacking in loyalty! But to surrender to Cao Cao is more than I can bear!"

Everyone turned pale at this declaration, but instead of killing Han (2) Hang (2), the imperial protector simply said, "To achieve great things, one must have the highest ethical principles. Our

success does not depend on any one man. Since Han (2) Hang (2) has such lofty principles, let him do as he pleases.” So the protector simply had Han Hang removed, and then he went outside the city to surrender to Cao Cao and got himself a nice generalship, which Cao Cao was also liberally handing out.

Just then, however, Cao Cao got word that the assault on Bing (4) Province was not going well, as Gao (1) Gan (4) was mounting a stiff defense at Hu (2) Pass. So Cao Cao went in person. Once there, he gathered his staff to discuss strategy. His adviser Xun (2) You (1) suggested that they send someone to pretend to defect to Gao Gan.

So Cao Cao summoned the brothers Lü (3) Kuang (4) and Lü (3) Xiang (2), two officers who had defected from the Yuan brothers. He whispered something in their ears and sent them on their way. They led a few dozen soldiers and went to the foot of the pass and shouted, “We used to be officers of the Yuans’. We surrendered to Cao Cao only because we had no choice. But Cao Cao is treacherous and unreliable, and he has used us ill, so we have returned to serve our old master. Please let us in to discuss in detail.”

Gao Gan was naturally suspicious of this, so he only let the Lü brothers in to hear what they had to say. The brothers shed their armor and left their horses behind and entered the pass, where they told Gao Gan, “Cao Cao’s troops have just arrived. You should raid their camp tonight before they get settled. We are willing to lead the way.”

Gao Gan was duped and delighted. So that night, around 9 o’clock, he set out with about 10,000 men, with the Lü brothers leading the way. As they neared Cao Cao’s camp, loud roars suddenly rose up from behind, and enemy troops appeared from everywhere. Realizing he’d been had, Gao Gan tried to fall back to the pass, but it had already been taken by Cao Cao’s officers Li (2) Dian (3) and Yue (4) Jin (4). Gao Gan managed to fight his way out and fled toward the territory of the Xiongnu (1,2), a

large group of nomadic tribes to the north whom the Han empire has typically regarded as troublesome barbarians. Cao Cao had his troops block the pass and sent men after Gao Gan.

When Gao Gan reached the Xiongnu's borders, he happened upon their khan. Gao Gan dismounted and kneeled in front of the khan, telling him that Cao Cao had seized his territory and was now after the Xiongnu's land. He asked the khan to help him reclaim his domain and protect the north.

The khan, however, was not convinced. "There is no bad blood between me and Cao Cao, so why would he invade my territory?" he said to Gan Gan. "You right trying to incite a feud between us!"

So he told Gao Gan to get lost. With nowhere to turn up north, Gao Gan headed toward Jing (1) Province to seek refuge with Liu Biao. But he never made it. Along the way, he was killed by a district commander, who sent his head to Cao Cao and earned himself a nice title of nobility.

So, now both You (1) and Bing (4) Provinces were Cao Cao's hands, but Yuan Shang and Yuan Xi were still at large and hiding with the Wuhuan (1,2) people. Cao Cao talked to his staff about possibly attacking the Wuhuan (1,2), but many of his officers advised against it.

"Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang have been defeated, decimated, and exiled to the distant desert," they said. "If we go west to attack them, Liu Bei and Liu Biao might take this opportunity to attack Xuchang, and we would not be able to get back in time to save the capital. The best thing to do is to end this campaign and return to Xuchang."

The adviser Guo Jia, however, went against the grain. "You are all mistaken," he said. "Although our lord's prowess is feared throughout the realm, the desert tribes will not be prepared because they think they are too far away. If we attack while their guard is down, we will surely succeed. The Wuhuan have received kindness from Yuan Shao, so we must eliminate his two sons. As for Liu Biao, all he does is talk. He knows his own talent is not enough to keep Liu Bei in check. If he gives Liu Bei an

important task, he would lose control over him. But if he gives Liu Bei a small task, Liu Bei would refuse. That is why although the country may appear to be vulnerable while we go on this long expedition, there is actually little risk.”

Cao Cao approved of this analysis and pressed his army forward. As they traveled, they encountered only endless stretches of yellow sand with sudden windstorms and treacherous terrain that challenged both men and beast. Cao Cao began to think about turning around, so he consulted Guo Jia.

At that moment, Guo Jia, unaccustomed to the harsh climate, had fallen ill and was resting on a cart. Cao Cao wept and said, “It’s all because of my desire to conquer the desert that you have had to traverse this difficult terrain and came down with this illness. How can I live with that?”

“Your excellency has showered me with such kindness that even my death cannot repay but a fraction of it,” Guo Jia said.

Well, this was all very touching and all, but Cao Cao’s army was out in the middle of nowhere in the desert, and the guy who talked him into coming here was sick. So what is he going to do? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.