

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 66.

Last time, we left off with Sun Quan and the Dongwu forces bogged down outside the key city of Hefei (2,2), which was being defended by three of Cao Cao's veteran generals -- Zhang Liao, Li Dian, and Yue (4) Jin (4). Sun Quan had just lost a battle, and one of his bodyguards was killed in the fighting, which made him very sad.

After Sun Quan returned to camp following his defeat, one of his top generals, Taishi Ci, came to see him with a plan.

"One of my soldiers, a man named Ge (1) Ding (4), has a sworn brother who is a stablehand for Zhang Liao," Taishi Ci said. "The stablehand was admonished by Zhang Liao and is holding a grudge, so he sent word to us tonight that he's willing to start a fire in the city and assassinate Zhang Liao. I would like to lead some troops to back him up."

"Where is Ge (1) Ding (4) now?" Sun Quan asked.

"He has already sneaked into the city," Taishi Ci answered. "I would like to take 5,000 soldiers on this mission."

However, one of Sun Quan's advisers, Zhuge Jin (3), advised caution. "Zhang Liao is crafty. He might be prepared. We must not act rashly," he said.

However, Taishi Ci insisted on going, and Sun Quan, lusting after some revenge for his dead bodyguard, signed off on the mission, so Taishi Ci took 5,000 men and waited for the fire from inside the city.

As for his inside men, Taishi Ci's soldier, Ge (1) Ding (4), had sneaked into the city with Zhang Liao's troops after that day's battle. He found his sworn brother, the stablehand, and hashed out the plan.

“I have already sent word to General Taishi Ci, and he will bring backup tonight,” Ge Ding said.

“How do you intend to proceed?”

“The stable is relatively far from the center of the army,” the stablehand replied. “I’ll set the horse feed on fire. You go out and start yelling that the troops inside the city are rebelling, and I will assassinate Zhang Liao in the chaos. Once he’s dead, the rest of the troops will flee.”

And so it was settled. That night, Zhang Liao returned to the city fresh off his victory and rewarded the troops, but he also ordered that they must sleep in their armor.

“We just won a battle today, and the enemy has fallen back a good distance. Why do you not allow the men to remove their armor and rest?” his staff asked.

“A commander must be neither too happy about victories nor too concerned about defeats,” Zhang Liao said. “What if Dongwu tries a sneak attack while our guard is down? We must be even more careful tonight than usual.”

Well, turns out he was right. Zhang Liao had barely finished speaking when a fire broke out in the rear of his camp, accompanied by cries of rebellion. Urgent reports streamed in, one after another. Zhang Liao quickly mounted his horse, summoned a dozen or so officers to accompany him, and stood on the main street.

“The situation sounds dire! We must go investigate!” his men said.

“It’s impossible that the entire city would be rebelling,” Zhang Liao said. “This is just the rebels trying to startle our soldiers. If anyone panics, execute them at once!”

Momentarily, the general Li Dian arrived with the two conspirators in tow. Zhang Liao interrogated them, and they fessed up. Once he learned all he wanted to, Zhang Liao had the two men executed on the spot.

Just then, the sound of war drums rose up from outside the city, and the roars of men shook the ground.

“This must be the conspirators’ backup,” Zhang Liao said. “Let’s play along.”

So Zhang Liao told his men to start a fire just inside the city gates and make a lot of ruckus about a coup. He then opened the gates and lowered the drawbridge.

Outside, Taishi Ci saw the gates open and figured that everything was going according to plan, so he galloped into the city ahead of his troops. But as soon as he passed through the gates, he heard a loud explosive from atop the city wall, and he was greeted with a shower of arrows. By the time Taishi Ci managed to stop and turn around, he had already been struck numerous times.

As Taishi Ci fell back outside the city, the enemy officers Li Dian and Yue Jin were hot on his tail. Taishi Ci lost most of his troops, and the rest fled back to camp. Li Dian and Yue Jin pursued all the way to Dongwu’s camp, and only turned back when Dongwu’s troops came out to meet them. So the attempted coup ended in another victory for Zhang Liao.

The failed coup was costly for Dongwu. Not only did they lose a few thousand soldiers, they also saw Taishi Ci return with serious injuries. When Sun Quan saw the arrow-ridden Taishi Ci, he felt even worse than he did earlier in the day. Now, his top civil adviser, Zhang Zhao, suggested that he call off the siege. Sun Quan agreed and took his army back to the cities of Nanxu (2,2) and Runzhou (4,1).

By the time the Dongwu forces were moving out, Taishi Ci’s condition had turned critical. Sun Quan sent Zhang Zhao to look in on him. When he saw Zhang Zhao, Taishi Ci shouted out loud:

“A man in these chaotic times ought to make an everlasting name for himself with his sword! Alas, my ambition will go unfulfilled! Let death come!”

After that, he died. Taishi Ci was just 41 at the time. While we haven’t mentioned him much in our narrative lately, we should remember that he was a key player in the Southlands earlier in the novel.

He fought Sun Quan's mighty brother, Sun Ce, to a standstill before joining Sun Ce and helping him carve out his own little piece of the empire.

When Sun Quan heard about Taishi Ci's death, he was beside himself with grief. He ordered that Taishi Ci be given a lavish burial and took Taishi Ci's son into his own home to raise.

While Sun Quan licks his wounds, let's jump back to Jing (1) Province, where Liu Bei was riding high after having conquered four counties in the southern and western regions of the province. When Liu Bei got word of Sun Quan's setback, he consulted with Zhuge Liang.

"I was studying the stars last night," Zhuge Liang said. "I saw a star crash from the heavens in the northwest. This must signify the death of a member of the imperial house."

Just then, the proof arrived. A message came from the city of Xiangyang that Liu Qi, the son of Liu Biao, the former ruler of the province, had died of illness. This news made Liu Bei weep bitterly. Now, some of his tears could be due to genuine sadness for the passing of a kinsman who had stood by him in his time of need. But let's also not forget that Liu Bei had been staking his claim to legitimacy in the province on the argument that he was helping Liu Qi rule the land that he had inherited from his father Liu Biao. In fact, that was the argument Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang had used to forestall Dongwu's claim on the province.

"Life and death are preordained," Zhuge Liang said as he consoled Liu Bei. "My lord, you should not take it too hard and risk damaging your health. We must tend to the business at hand. We need to send someone to guard the city of Xiangyang and oversee the funeral."

"Whom can we send?"

"None but General Guan would do."

So Liu Bei sent his brother Guan Yu to oversee Xiangyang. He then began to worry about the inevitable consequences of Liu Qi's death.

"Now Dongwu will surely come to demand that we return Jing Province. How should we respond?" he asked.

"If they send someone here, I will have an answer for them," Zhuge Liang said.

Sure enough, two weeks later, an envoy from Dongwu was knocking on their door, and it was Lu Su. Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang went out of the city to welcome him. After exchanging greetings, Lu Su said, "My lord heard that your nephew had departed this world, so he prepared a little present and sent me here to convey our condolences. Commander Zhou Yu also sends his regards to you both."

Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang thanked him and accepted the gifts, and then they sat down to the requisite welcome banquet, but Lu Su got right down to business.

"Imperial uncle, you had previously said that if Liu Qi died, you would return Jing Province to Dongwu. Now that he has passed on, may I ask when you can officially return it to us?"

"Please, have some wine, and we can talk about it," Liu Bei answered.

So Lu Su obliged him with a few cups of wine, and then brought up the topic of returning Jing Province again. But this time, before Liu Bei could answer, Zhuge Liang's expression changed and he said sternly:

"My friend, you are being unreasonable and forcing me to speak plainly! Since the Supreme Ancestor founded the dynasty, it has endured to this day. Unfortunately, treacherous contenders have risen up and claimed pieces of the empire for themselves, leaving people throughout the realm to pine for the day when the rule of heaven is restored under the rightful sovereign. My lord is a descendant of a prince and the progeny of an emperor, not to mention uncle to the current emperor.

Is he not in line to get his own territory? Besides, Liu Biao and my lord were kinsmen. What is wrong with one kinsman inheriting the enterprise of another?

“Your master is the son of a minor official from a little town who rendered no service to the court. It’s only based on sheer military force that he has seized the six districts of the Southlands, and yet he is still not content and dares to make designs on land that belongs to the Han. The ruling house is named Liu. If my master, who is also named Liu, doesn’t get to claim territory, where do the Suns get off trying take a piece of land?

“Furthermore, during the Battle of Red Cliff, my master expended much labor, and our men fought hard. Dongwu did not win that battle by itself. If I had not summoned the southeastern winds, how could Zhou Yu have tasted the slightest bit of success? If the Southlands had fallen, not only would the two Qiao (2) ladies be residing in the Bronze Bird Tower now, but even your own family might not be safe. My lord did not answer you just now because he expected that a high-minded man like you should understand such things without them being spelled out. How can you be so oblivious?”

This little spiel from Zhuge Liang left poor Lu Su speechless. After a brief silence, he muttered, “There is some truth in your words, but ... it puts me in a difficult spot.”

“How so?” Zhuge Liang asked.

“Back when the imperial uncle was in dire straits, it was I who brought you, Master Zhuge, to see my lord. Later, when Zhou Yu wanted to attack Jing Province, it was I who talked him out of it. Then, when you promised to return Jing Province upon Liu Qi’s death, it was I who vouched for you. If you do not make good on that promise now, what am I going to tell my master? My lord and Commander Zhou would surely be angry. It’s of little consequence if they kill me, but if they decide to take up arms

over this, then the imperial uncle would not be able to rest easy in Jing Province and would become an object of ridicule.”

But to this, Zhuge Liang scoffed and said, “Cao Cao controls an army of a million and acts in the name of the emperor. If I am not afraid of him, what is Zhou Yu to me? BUT, to make it easier for you, I will ask my lord to write a document stating that we are borrowing Jing Province as our temporary base, and that once we have taken other territories, we will return it to Dongwu. How does that sound?”

“What territories do you intend to take before returning Jing Province?” Lu Su pressed.

“We cannot make a move on the North right now,” Zhuge Liang replied. “But the western region of the Riverlands is being governed by a weak ruler in Liu Zhang (1), and my lord will make a move on that territory. Once we have the Riverlands, then we will return Jing Province.”

So this was obviously more stalling from Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, but Lu Su, unable to outtalk or outwit Zhuge Liang, had no choice but to accept this amended agreement. So Liu Bei personally wrote up the IOU and signed it. Zhuge Liang then signed it as a guarantor, but then he said to Lu Su, “Since I serve the imperial uncle, it hardly makes sense for me to be the guarantor for him. Might I trouble you to sign as well, so that this would satisfy your master?”

“I know the imperial uncle is a man of honor and compassion who will not let me down,” Lu Su said as he signed the document and stashed it away.

After the banquet ended, Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang saw Lu Su off at the docks. As they exchanged parting words, Zhuge Liang fired one last salvo.

“My friend,” he said to Lu Su, “When you see your master, speak well of us, and don’t get any ideas. If he rejects our agreement, then I will stop being nice and take away all of his territory, too. Our two sides should be on friendly terms, or that traitor Cao Cao would make fools of us all.”

So Lu Su got back on his boat. Before he went to see Sun Quan in Nanxu (2,3), he stopped by the city of Chaisang (2,1), where Zhou Yu was recuperating from his injury. When Lu Su told him what happened and showed him the document, Zhou Yu could only stamp his foot.

“My friend, you have fallen for Zhuge Liang’s trick! They may call it ‘borrowing,’ but they’re just squatting. They say they’ll return Jing Province once they take the Riverlands. But who knows when they would actually take the Riverlands? If they don’t take it for 10 years, are we supposed to wait 10 years? This document is worthless. And you! How can you sign as guarantor for them? When they refuse to return the territory, this will cause you trouble when our lord gets angry at you.”

This admonishment left Lu Su dumbfounded for a good while. And then, he muttered, “Uh ... I don’t think Liu Bei would betray me ...”

“[Sigh] My friend, you are an honest man. But Liu Bei is a crafty old owl, and Zhuge Liang is a wily scoundrel. They are not trustworthy like you.”

“Then ... what should I do?”

“You were my benefactor once, and I will always remember your kindness in sharing your grain with me, so of course I’m not going to abandon you. Don’t worry. Just stay here for a few days. We will think of something once my spy returns from the northern bank of the river.”

So Lu Su stayed, but he could not help but worry. After a few days, Zhou Yu’s spy returned with word that the Jing Province city of Gong’an (1,1) was decked out with ceremonial flags, a new grave was being built outside the city, and Liu Bei’s troops were all wearing mourning clothes.

“Who died?” a surprised Zhou Yu asked.

“Liu Bei lost his wife, Lady Gan,” the spy answered. “Her funeral will take place shortly.”



“That’s it!” Zhou Yu said to Lu Su. “I have a plan that would deliver Liu Bei and Jing Province into our hands with no effort at all!”

“What is your idea?”

“Now that Liu Bei has lost his wife, he will no doubt remarry. Our lord has a younger sister. She is a tough, brave woman with a retinue of several hundred females who carry swords, and she has a chamber filled with weapons. She is a woman to outman any man. I will write to our lord and advise that he send a matchmaker to Jing Province to convince Liu Bei to come south to marry our lord’s sister. Once we lure him to Nanxu (2,2), instead of a wedding, he will be thrown in prison. Then we can exchange him for Jing Province. Once Jing Province is in our hands, I will have other plans, and you will not be involved in any way.”

Lu Su thanked Zhou Yu for this plan to bail him out. So Zhou Yu wrote a letter and sent Lu Su to deliver it to Sun Quan in Nanxu. First, Lu Su told him about the whole “borrowing Jing Province” agreement and showed him Liu Bei’s document. Sun Quan was, just as Zhou Yu predicted, incensed.

“You are so muddle-headed!” he admonished Lu Su. “What’s the use of such a document?!”

“My lord, here’s a letter from Commander Zhou,” Lu Su replied. “He says this plan will ensure the return of Jing Province.”

Sun Quan read Zhou Yu’s letter and nodded in agreement, and his anger vanished. He then began to mull over whom to send as a matchmaker. Suddenly it came to him.

“None but Lü (3) Fan (4) can take on this task,” Sun Quan thought to himself.

Lü Fan was one of the Southland’s veteran civil advisers. Sun Quan now summoned him and said, “I recently heard that Liu Bei lost his wife. I have a younger sister and hope to marry her to Liu Bei so that we will be forever joined by marriage and work as one to defeat Cao Cao. You are the only one who can serve as matchmaker. I hope you will go to Jing Province and convey my wishes.”

A quick note here: The role of matchmaker was extremely important for ancient Chinese marriages, and to be a matchmaker between statesmen was, as you can imagine, a great honor. Lü Fan accepted the order and sailed to Jing Province with a few attendants.

On the other side of this marriage proposal, Liu Bei was presently caught up in a melancholy spell as he mourned his dead wife. One day, he was making small talk with Zhuge Liang when he got word that Lü Fan had arrived.

As soon as he heard this, Zhuge Liang smiled and said, "This must be Zhou Yu's trick to get Jing Province. I will hide behind the screen and eavesdrop. Whatever Lü Fan says, just roll with it. Put him up in the guest house, and then we'll discuss it."

After Zhuge Liang made himself scarce, Liu Bei invited Lü Fan in and offered him a seat and tea.

"What brings you here?" Liu Bei asked.

"Imperial uncle, I recently heard that you lost your companion," Lü Fan said. "I have a good marriage prospect, so I decided to risk arousing your mistrust and come to play matchmaker."

"[Sigh] To lose one's wife during middle age is a grave misfortune," Liu Bei lamented. "My wife's body is not even cold yet; how can I think about remarrying so soon?"

"A man without a wife is like a house without a beam," Lü Fan countered. "One cannot abandon this fundamental relationship in middle age. My master, Lord Sun, has a younger sister. She is beautiful and worthy, and can serve you as a proper wife ought to. If our two sides can be connected by marriage, then the traitor Cao Cao would not dare to set his sights on the South. This would benefit both of our states, so I hope you will let go of your doubts. The only thing is that our queen mother, Madame Wu (2), adores her daughter and is loathe to send her away. So we must request that you come to the Southlands instead."

"Does Lord Sun know about this?" Liu Bei asked.

“If I had not first presented this idea to my lord, how would I dare to come suggest it to you?”

“But I am already past 50, and my hair is turning gray. Lord Sun’s sister is in the prime of her youth. I am afraid it would not be a good match.”

“Lord Sun’s sister may be a woman, but she has a stronger will than a man. She often says that she would not marry anyone who is not a hero of the land. Your name is known all over. This is the ideal match, as they say, of the beauty and the gentleman. A slight difference in age cannot stand in the way of that.”

Upon hearing this, Liu Bei asked Lü Fan to stay the night so that he could think it over. He then treated Lü Fan to a feast and put him up in guest quarters.

That night, Liu Bei went to see Zhuge Liang.

“I already know why Lü Fan has come,” Zhuge Liang said. “I have consulted the Book of Changes and divined great fortune and prosperity for you, my lord. Send the adviser Sun Qian back with Lü Fan to meet with the Lord of Dongwu and come to a verbal agreement, and then pick a date to go there for the wedding.”

“But this is a trick by Zhou Yu to do me harm. How can I venture so lightly into such danger?”

At that, Zhuge Liang laughed out loud. “Zhou Yu may have devised this trick, but can he outwit me? I will just use a little scheme to foil Zhou Yu, help you get your wife, and make sure that nothing happens to Jing Province.”

Despite such confident assurances, Liu Bei remained undecided. But Zhuge Liang did not even bother waiting for him to make up his mind, and instead sent the adviser Sun Qian on ahead with Lü Fan. Sun Qian went to the Southlands and met with Sun Quan, who assured him that he was totally sincere about the marriage proposal.

When Sun Qian reported back to Liu Bei and told him that his future brother-in-law was eagerly anticipating his arrival, Liu Bei was still suspicious and did not dare to go. But Zhuge Liang kept egging him on, and offered further assurances.

“I have already devised three schemes,” Zhuge Liang said. “None but Zhao Yun can carry them out.”

So he called Zhao Yun close and whispered in his ear, “Escort our lord to Dongwu. Here are three small silk pouches, each containing one scheme. Open them in order.”

Zhao Yun took the small silk pouches and kept them under his clothes. Zhuge Liang then sent word back to Dongwu that everything is set and that we were on for a wedding. So in the 10th month of the year 209, Liu Bei, Zhao Yun, and Sun Qian took about 500 men and set sail aboard 10 fast ships toward Nanxu, leaving Zhuge Liang in charge of affairs in Jing Province. But on the journey, Liu Bei was still feeling unsure about this whole thing.

When their boats docked outside Nanxu, Zhao Yun opened the first silk pouch as Zhuge Liang had instructed. He then handed out some instructions for the 500 soldiers and sent them on their way. He told Liu Bei that he should first pay a visit to the old Mr. Qiao (2). This Mr. Qiao was the father of the two Qiao ladies who were famous for their beauty and, more importantly, were married to Zhou Yu and the late Sun Ce. So old Mr. Qiao was the father-in-law of the former ruler of the Southlands, and for simplicity sake, we'll call him State Elder Qiao.

State Elder Qiao happened to live in Nanxu, so Liu Bei brought a bunch of presents and went to see him. Once there, Liu Bei told him all about how Lü Fan had gone to Jing Province to play matchmaker and how Liu Bei was now here for the wedding. Meanwhile, Liu Bei's 500 soldiers, all clad in festive red, spread out through the city to buy various supplies while making it known to every man, woman, and child on the streets that Liu Bei had come to Dongwu to marry Sun Quan's sister.

When Sun Quan heard that Liu Bei had arrived, he instructed Lü Fan to go welcome him and put him up in a guest house. While Liu Bei went to take a rest, State Elder Qiao went to see the queen mother, Madame Wu, to offer his congratulations. Now, remember that this whole “lure Liu Bei here with a fake marriage proposal and imprison him” idea was concocted behind Madame Wu’s back, so she was completely in the dark about this.

“What are you congratulating me on?” she asked State Elder Qiao.

“Your precious daughter has been betrothed to Liu Bei, and he is already here. Why are you still playing dumb?” State Elder Qiao said.

Wait, my daughter is what now? Oh boy, we are gonna have fun watching Sun Quan explain this one to mom. To see how this family drama will play out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!