

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 84.

Last time, after Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang gave Dongwu another runaround over Jing Province, Sun Quan said enough was enough and demanded that his top commander Lu Su do something. Lu Su decided to invite Guan Yu, the guardian of Jing Province, to a banquet on Dongwu's side of the river, where Lu Su would press for the return of the province, and if Guan Yu refused, Lu Su would unleash an ambush to kill him.

Guan Yu was not blind. He knew it was a trap, but perhaps blinded by pride, he decided not only to attend the banquet, but to only take a handful of men with him. On the morning of the feast, Lu Su's men spotted a single boat, manned by just a few people, coming toward them in the distance. The boat bore a red flag that flapped in the wind, and the flag displayed the giant character for Guan. As the boat drew closer, they saw Guan Yu sitting on board, dressed in a green battle robe and sporting a blue-green head scarf. Next to him was his faithful follower Zhou (1) Cang (1), who carried his Green Dragon Saber. Behind them stood eight or nine stout men, each wearing a broadsword around his waist.

Lu Su was taken aback, partly by Guan Yu's awesome appearance and partly by how few men he had brought with him. I mean, I know this guy is not dumb. He knows he's walking into a trap, right? Well, in any case, Lu Su welcomed Guan Yu into the banquet hall and the wine began to flow. But even as he raised his cup to toast Guan Yu, Lu Su was so intimidated that he dared not look Guan Yu straight in the eye. For his part, Guan Yu simply talked and laughed like nothing was going on.

After they had been drinking for a while, Lu Su got down to business.

"General, I have something to say, and I hope you will lend me your ear," Lu Su said. "Previously, the imperial uncle asked me to vouch for him to my lord so that he may borrow Jing Province as a

temporary foothold. He promised to return it after he conquered the Riverlands. Now, he has the Riverlands, but Jing Province still has not been returned. Isn't he breaking his promise?"

"This is a state matter and should not be discussed at a banquet," Guan Yu said.

But Lu Su was not going to be dismissed so easily.

"My lord only has the piddly region of the Southlands, and yet he was willing to lend Jing Province to your master when he had just been defeated and had nothing," Lu Su said. "Now that your lord has Yi Province, it's only right that he should return Jing Province. Even though the imperial uncle has agreed to give back three counties, you, general, refuse to obey. How is that right?"

"At the Battle of Red Cliff, my brother personally braved slings and arrows to lead the destruction of the enemy," Guan Yu said. "How can such merits go unrewarded? How can you come and ask for that territory now?"

Well, first of all, it's a little bit of an exaggeration to say Liu Bei braved slings and arrows at the Battle of Red Cliff, because from what I can remember, he pretty much just sat and watched as Zhuge Liang gave out orders, and then sat and watched as his generals did the fighting. Second, it's a huge overstatement to say he led the destruction of the enemy, since, hello, Dongwu did do the bulk of the Cao Cao-busting. But what's a little revisionist history between frenemies squabbling over territory?

"You're mistaken," Lu Su pressed. "After your master was defeated at Changban (2,3), he was at the end of his rope and was about to flee far away. But my lord took pity on him and sacrificed his own territory to give your master a foothold so that he may accomplish something in the future. But the imperial uncle has failed to reciprocate this kindness, and he has failed to maintain friendly relations. He already has the Riverlands, and yet he still hoards Jing Province. Such greed and betrayal would be ridiculed by everyone in the realm."

Before Guan Yu could respond, his officer Zhou Cang, who was standing nearby, holding Guan Yu's saber, shouted, "Land under heaven ought to go to the virtuous! How dare Dongwu try to claim it all?!"

At this, Guan Yu's face changed colors. He stood up, stomped over to Zhou Cang, snatched his saber out of Zhou Cang's hands, stood in the middle of the hall, and admonished Zhou Cang sternly, "This is a state matter. How dare you interrupt?! Leave at once!"

Zhou Cang caught his master's meaning and immediately walked out. He went straight to the river bank and waved the red flag. This was the signal to the reinforcements that were waiting on the other side of the river. Guan Yu's son Guan Ping and 500 soldiers immediately set sail on 10 fast ships, darting across the river.

Meanwhile, back in the banquet hall, Guan Yu held his saber in his right hand and took Lu Su's hand in his left.

"Sir," Guan Yu said as if he was drunk. "You invited me to a feast today, so please do not mention Jing Province again. I'm drunk, and I don't want to damage our old friendship. I shall invite you to a banquet in Jing Province another day, when we shall discuss this some more."

As he spoke, Guan Yu started walking out of the hall, but he did not let go of Lu Su's hand. Lu Su, by this time, was scared out of his wits, and who can blame him? Here was the slayer of Yan Liang and Wen Chou, the guy who stormed through five checkpoints and killed six officers in a matter of a couple days, standing inches away from him with his killing machine in hand.

As the two of them approached the river bank, Lu Su's generals Lü Meng and Gan Ning were lying in wait nearby, ready to spring their ambush and attack. But when they saw Guan Yu walking hand in hand with Lu Su and his saber, no one dared to make a move, since if fighting broke out, Lu Su was likely to be the first one killed.

So Guan Yu dragged Lu Su all the way to his boat, and only then did he let go and went aboard. Standing on the bow of the boat, Guan Yu bade Lu Su goodbye. Lu Su could only stand there and look on, dazed and confused, as Guan Yu's boat sailed off with the wind.

So later on, this incident would come to be known as "Attending a banquet with a lone saber," although I guess this was technically not true, since Guan Yu had about 10 guys with him. But minor details like that cannot stand in the way of glorifying heroes and demigods. A poet later praised Guan Yu thus:

Less than men to him were the officials of Dongwu;

Alone, he faced them down right at their feast.

By this display of his heroic vein,

Lin (2) Xiang (4) Ru's (2) feat did he surpass.

And like I said in the last episode, if you forgot about the reference to Lin Xiangru, you can consult the second half of supplement episode 3.

So anyway, while Guan Yu headed home, Lu Su, once he snapped out of his daze, discussed what to do next with the general Lü Meng. They decided to ask Sun Quan to mobilize his army and attack Guan Yu.

When word of what had transpired reached Sun Quan, he was once again irate. But just as he was talking about invading Jing Province, he got an urgent report that Cao Cao was marching toward the Southlands again, this time with 300,000 troops. Sigh. C'mon, didn't we just do this seven episodes ago? This is getting tiresome. But obviously, the invasion plans have to be put on the backburner once again, and Sun Quan moved his forces to the key locations of Hefei (2,2) and Ruxu (2,1) to prepare to repel Cao Cao.

But all this preparation was for naught, because Cao Cao wasn't coming after all. So what happened? Well, Cao Cao had every intention of marching South again, but then one of his military aides wrote him a note that basically said, "Yes, you did use military might to overwhelm your enemies in the past, but the two main enemies that are left, the regions of Dongwu and Shu, are not so easily conquered. So instead of another war, why not lay down your arms for a while and focus on building up the civil government by promoting scholars? Basically, get your house in order and wait for the right opportunity before you attack Dongwu and Shu."

Cao Cao was quite swayed by this argument, and he called off the invasion of the Southlands. Instead of military spending, he pumped money into education and courting scholars for civil service. But this wasn't all that he was doing. A group of his supporters began talking about how maybe the Duke of Wei wasn't enough of an honor for him anymore, and that he should now be promoted to King of Wei. This would basically put him a half step away from being the emperor's equal in theory, and in practice, it would be the last step before he became emperor himself.

One of Cao Cao's longtime advisers, Xun (2) You (1), was dead set against this.

"Lord Cao has been elevated to the Duke of Wei and received the nine dignities; that is as high as he should go," Xun You said. "It is wrong to raise him to the level of king."

So if you remember, Xun You's cousin, Xun Yu, another of Cao Cao's longtime advisers, had similar objections when Cao Cao was angling to become the Duke of Wei. Cao Cao was so miffed that he pushed Xun Yu into committing suicide. Well, he now had a similar reaction to Xun You.

"Does he want to follow Xun Yu's lead?!" Cao Cao said angrily.

When those words got back to Xun You, he became so worried and angry that he fell ill, and after 10 days or so, he died at the age of 58. And just like his cousin, his death earned him a pang of regret and a fancy funeral from Cao Cao, who had no shortage of either. Cao Cao did, however, give up on talks of becoming the King of Wei, for now.

While the eager kingmakers were temporarily rebuked, Cao Cao still cast a very long shadow over the emperor. One day, Cao Cao entered the palace with his sword by his side -- a privilege that had been granted to him for his good work, umm, defending the throne. The emperor was sitting with Empress Fu (2), and when they saw Cao Cao coming, the empress quickly got up, while the emperor was so scared that he couldn't stop shaking.

"Sun Quan and Liu Bei have each carved out a corner of the empire and cast off their allegiance to the court," Cao Cao informed the emperor. "What should be done about this?"

"I ... I will leave it for you to decide," the emperor said, trembling.

This remark made Cao Cao rather angry.

"If outsiders hear such words from your majesty, they might think I am bullying you!" he said.

"If you are willing to support me, I would be most fortunate," the emperor said. "Otherwise, I trust to your kindness to let me alone."

This response ticked off Cao Cao even more, and he shot the emperor an angry stare before he stomped out seething. After he left, the emperor's attendants said to their lord, "We've heard that the Duke of Wei wants to declare himself king. He will surely usurp the throne soon."

This made the emperor and Empress Fu weep loudly, but then the empress had an idea.

"My father Fu (2) Wan (2) has long wanted to kill Cao Cao," she said. "I shall write a secret letter to him."

Oh great, another conspiracy on Cao Cao's life. And the last one went so well, too.

"Dong (3) Cheng (2) allowed his secret to leak out and brought calamity upon himself," the emperor cautioned, referring to his former brother-in-law's failed coup. "If this leaks out, too, then both you and I are doomed."

“But we’re sitting on pins and needles day and night,” Empress Fu said. “Death would be preferable to living like this! Of all the eunuchs, only Mu (4) Shun (4) is loyal and trustworthy. Let’s have him deliver this letter.”

So they summoned the eunuch Mu (4) Shun (4) and dismissed everyone else. The royal couple then cried bitterly and told Mu Shun, “The traitor Cao Cao wants to be the King of Wei. It’s only a matter of time before he usurps the throne. We want to order the imperial father-in-law Fu (2) Wan (2) to make secret plans to eliminate him, but all of our attendants are the traitor’s loyalists and cannot be depended upon. We want to send a secret letter from the empress to her father. We know you are loyal and honorable, and that you will not disappoint us.”

Mu Shun also wept and said, “I have received great kindness from your majesty, so how can I dare to not repay you with my life?! I will go at once.”

So Mu Shun took the letter and hid it in his hair. Now men of this time had long hair, which they wore up in a bun. So Mu Shun hid the letter inside his bun and put his hat back on. He slipped out of the palace and went to see Fu Wan.

Fu Wan recognized his daughter’s handwriting, so he knew the letter was real. He told Mu Shun, “Cao Cao has many people on his side and cannot be eliminated quickly. The only way is if Sun Quan in the Southlands and Liu Bei in the Riverlands mobilize their troops. Then Cao Cao would no doubt personally lead his forces to meet them. Then, we can turn to the loyal officials at court and devise a plan to attack Cao Cao from both sides. That is our only chance.”

“In that case, you should write a reply to the emperor and empress and ask for a secret decree,” Mu Shun said. “Then you can send messengers to Dongwu and Shu to arrange for them to wage war on the traitor and rescue his majesty.”

Fu Wan did as he suggested and wrote a letter, which Mu Shun again hid in his hair bun and under his hat. Mu Shun then headed back to the palace.

But of course, nothing gets by Cao Cao's eyes and ears these days. Someone had already reported to Cao Cao that something fishy might be going on, so when Mu Shun returned to the palace, Cao Cao was waiting by the gate.

"Where did you go just now?" Cao Cao asked.

"The empress is sick, so I was sent to fetch the doctor."

"Where is the doctor then?"

"He's not here yet."

Cao Cao was too wily for this. He immediately ordered his men to search Mu Shun. They frisked him, but found nothing. They were just about to let him go when an inopportune gust of wind blew his hat off. That made Cao Cao go, hey wait a second. He called Mu Shun back and searched his hat. But again, they found nothing, so they gave him his hat back.

But this was where Mu Shun screwed up. When he took the hat, he held it with both hands and carefully placed it on his head backwards, which of course was all sorts of suspicious. Cao Cao immediately caught on and ordered the guards to search his hair. And NOW, they discovered the letter. One look at the letter, and Cao Cao was irate. He arrested Mu Shun for interrogation, though Mu Shun would not give him anything.

Still, with the letter in hand, Cao Cao didn't really need anything else to take action. That night, he sent 3,000 armed guards to surround Fu Wan's residence and arrest everyone inside. Within the house, they discovered the letter from the empress. Cao Cao then had Fu Wan's whole family thrown into prison. At first light, Cao Cao sent the general of the Royal Guard, Xi (1) Lü (4), to the palace to confiscate the empress's seal and cord, her symbols of authority.

The emperor was in the main hall of his palace when he saw Xi (1) Lü (4) storm in with 300 guards.



“What’s going on?” the emperor asked.

“By the order of the Duke of Wei, I have come for the empress’s seal,” Xi Lü answered.

The emperor immediately knew that the conspiracy had leaked, and he could feel his heart sink and his stomach churn. Xi Lü entered the private quarters, where Empress Fu had just gotten up. Xi Lü ordered the person in charge of the seal to bring it out. When she heard this, the empress knew things had gone south, so in desperation, she hid inside a false wall the behind the main hall.

Momentarily, Hua (2) Xin (1), the imperial secretary, arrived with 500 more guards. They stormed into the private quarters and asked the servants where the empress was. All the servants said they didn’t know, so Hua Xin turned the place inside out. When this produced no sign of the empress, he suspected that she was hiding in the walls, because apparently, a false wall was quite a common architectural feature. So Hua Xin ordered the guards to break down the walls, and sure enough, they found the empress behind one of them. Hua Xin showed her no respect, as he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her out from her hiding place.

“Please spare me!” the shivering empress begged.

“Go talk to the Duke of Wei yourself!” Hua Xin scolded her, as the empress, barefoot and disheveled, was hustled away by two guards.

So let’s pause talk about this Hua Xin character a little bit. We first mentioned him in episode 69, when he was in the service of Sun Quan in the Southlands. Sun Quan sent him as an envoy to Cao Cao to deliver a message that was meant to keep Cao Cao at bay. Cao Cao, trying to lure Sun Quan into a false sense of security, kept Hua Xin in the capital and gave him a high office. Well, apparently that was enough to convince Hua Xin to switch sides and really serve Cao Cao.

But according to the novel, one should not be surprised by this, because Hua Xin’s past indicated that he was the sort of person who would do such things for fame and advancement. Hua Xin had

always had a great reputation as a scholar, and he was good friends with two other respected scholars of the time, and together, they were known as a dragon. The other two scholars were the tail and midsection of the dragon, while Hua Xin was the head. I guess they were kind of like the Voltron of Chinese scholastic achievement.

But one day, while tilling the soil in a garden, Hua Xin and one of his Voltron friends unearthed a hunk of gold. Now, his friend just kept digging and ignored the gold, because hey, when you're an extremely learned man, precious things like gold are just so vulgar and it's beneath you to even give it a sideways glance. But Hua Xin was apparently not above a sideways glance. In fact, while his friend kept digging, Hua Xin picked up the gold and looked at it for a bit before dropping it back down to the ground and resuming his work. Well, surely that's not such a great offense, you might say. But in this time and place, and in the company that he was with, it was.

On another occasion, Hua Xin again revealed his true self to this friend. While they were sitting together and reading, they heard a lot of commotion outside, and they could hear that it was a man of importance passing by in his carriage. His friend remained seated and did not budge, but Hua Xin dropped his book and went out to take a look.

On account of these two occasions, the friend concluded that he did not care for Hua Xin's character and soon ended their friendship. This friend eventually moved to some distant hinterlands, where he always wore a white cap and lived and slept upstairs in his home, never allowing his feet to touch the ground so as to make the point that he never served the kingdom of Wei (4), which -- hey spoiler alert -- is going to be the kingdom that takes the place of the Han. Hua Xin, meanwhile, pursued career advancement by attaching himself to Cao Cao, and now, he has gone so far as to come arrest the empress on Cao Cao's behalf. As we move forward in the story, we'll see that he comes to play a rather key role in Cao Cao's administration.

But for now, Hua Xin was busy taking the empress to see Cao Cao. As they walked out into the main hall, the emperor wrapped his arms around the empress and wept.

“I have my orders from the Duke of Wei,” Hua Xin barked. “Let’s go!”

The empress cried and said to the emperor, “Our time together is over!”

“I don’t even know how much longer I have to live,” the emperor replied, which is just flat out sad coming from the supposed ruler of the land.

That was all the goodbye they were afforded, as Hua Xin and the guards hustled the empress away while the emperor beat his chest and wailed. Seeing Xi (1) Lü (4), the general of the Royal Guards, standing nearby, the emperor cried out to him, “Sir, how can such a thing come to pass?!”

And that’s when the emperor collapsed to the floor in tears. Xi Lü ordered the attendants to pick him up and help him to his private quarters.

Meanwhile, Hua Xin brought the empress to Cao Cao, who fumed at her.

“I treated you all sincerely, and yet you tried to kill me! If I don’t kill you, then you will surely kill me!”

But Cao Cao had a special death for her, not just your run-of-the-mill beheading or poison or hanging. He ordered the guards to drag her outside and beat her to death with staves, which they promptly did. That was not the end of it, though. Cao Cao then had both of her sons executed. To top it all off, that night, Fu Wan, Mu Shun, and their families, totaling 200-some people, were executed in public, which sent shockwaves through the court and the civilian population alike.

Later, a poet lamented the situation thus:

As Cao Cao stands first in cruelty,

So stands Fu Wan in loyalty.

Pity the royal couple torn apart by fate,

Envy a married pair of low estate.

The heartbroken emperor did not eat for days after Empress Fu was executed. Cao Cao now went to see him and said, "Your majesty, have no worries. Your servant harbors no ulterior motives. My daughter is already a concubine of yours. She is a worthy and filial woman, fit to be made empress."

Well, the emperor was in no position to disagree, so on New Year's Day of the year 215, he proclaimed Cao Cao's daughter his new empress, which absolutely no one dared to oppose.

Having his daughter named empress elevated Cao Cao's prestige and power to even greater heights, but he wasn't satisfied yet. He gathered his officials to discuss how to conquer Dongwu and Shu, and it was suggested that he should talk about this with his two most senior commanders, Xiahou Dun and Cao Ren. So Cao Cao summoned them both from their postings immediately.

That night, Cao Ren arrived first, and he went to Cao Cao's residence to see him. Cao Cao had just finished drinking and had fallen asleep. His Mad Tiger general Xu Chu was standing guard by the door to his chamber. Cao Ren, a kinsman who had been close with Cao Cao since forever, wanted to go in to see Cao Cao right away, but Xu Chu blocked his path.

"I am a member of the Cao clan!" Cao Ren said angrily. "How dare you stand in my way?!"

"General, even though you are family, you are still an officer stationed to a provincial post," Xu Chu said. "And even though I am not family, I am presently guarding the inner sanctum. Our lord has fallen asleep drunk, and I dare not allow anyone in."

These words were enough to turn Cao Ren away. When Cao Cao woke up and heard what happened, he sighed and said, "Xu Chu is a truly loyal officer!" So hey, more brownie points for Mad Tiger.

A few days later, Xiahou Dun also arrived, and now he and Cao Ren met with Cao Cao to discuss where to invade first.

“We cannot attack Dongwu or Shu quite yet,” Xiahou Dun said. “The best thing to do is to first pacify Zhang Lu in Hanzhong, and then turn our victorious army to attack Shu. That would allow us to triumph in one fell swoop.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Cao Cao said. So he gave orders for his troops to march west toward Hanzhong. The generals Xiahou Yuan and Zhang He led the vanguard, while Cao Ren and Xiahou Dun brought up the rear and oversaw the supply train. Cao Cao himself, along with all the other officers, led the middle portion of the army.

Word of this quickly reached Hanzhong, where Zhang Lu and his brother Zhang Wei (4) discussed how to respond.

“There is no terrain more treacherous in Hanzhong than at Yangping (2,2) Pass,” Zhang Wei said. “We should build a dozen or so camps on the left and right sides of the pass to face the enemy. Brother, you stay here at Hanning (4,2); just send me plenty of provisions.”

Zhang Lu agreed to this plan and sent the generals Yang (2) Ang (2) and Yang (2) Ren (4) to accompany his brother to Yangping (2,2) Pass. To see how this fight will turn out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!