

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 87.

Last time, Cao Cao and Sun Quan were engaged in a fierce battle on the river banks near the key location of Ruxu (2,1). Sun Quan, in an attempt to rescue the trapped officer Xu Sheng, stormed into the enemy lines, but soon found himself enveloped. The veteran general Zhou Tai fought his way out but then had to go back in to find Sun Quan. The first time he found Sun Quan, he tried to take the lead and fight their way out, but lost Sun Quan in the chaos. So Zhou Tai went back in again and again found Sun Quan.

“My lord, you go in front this time, and I will follow close behind to help you break out!” Zhou Tai told him.

So they switched places, with Sun Quan leading the way and Zhou Tai right behind him to cover his back. This time, they managed to break through together, but boy did Zhou Tai pay for it. He suffered several stab wounds from spears, and a number of arrows had pierced his heavy armor. But still, they were free, and now the general Lü Meng came to their rescue with a fleet of ships, and they hurried Sun Quan onto one of the ships.

“Thanks to three valiant tries by Zhou Tai, I was able to break free,” Sun Quan said. “But Xu Sheng is still trapped in the center. How can we save him?”

“I will go in again to save him,” Zhou Tai said.

Without hesitation, he galloped back into the fray with spear in hand. Moments later, he and Xu Sheng both emerged, both bearing severe wounds. Lü Meng helped them onto the ship while his troops kept the enemy at bay on land with a barrage of arrows. Now, when people talk about feats of valor and courage in the novel, the episode that people mention first and most often is Zhao Yun slicing through Cao Cao’s army at Changban Hill with Liu Bei’s infant son strapped to his chest. But I’ve got to say, what Zhou Tai just did -- fighting through Cao Cao’s army three times to rescue Sun Quan

and then going back in again to rescue a fellow officer despite already being wounded -- should rank right up there, too.

At the same time Zhou Tai was doing his heroic deeds, at another part of the river bank, the Dongwu general Chen Wu was engaged in a fierce fight against Cao Cao's general Pang De. Lacking reinforcements, Chen Wu fell back to the mouth of a canyon, where the path became thick with trees. Chen Wu now tried to turn around and fight Pang De some more, but just as he turned, his cloak got snagged on a tree branch. Entangled, Chen Wu could not raise his weapon to defend himself, and he became an easy kill for Pang De, who showed no mercy.

Meanwhile, things were getting a bit dicey for Sun Quan again. He had made it to the relative safety of Lü Meng's ships, but once Cao Cao got wind of this, he personally led his troops to the bank of the river and had them fire arrows at the ships. Lü Meng's men fired back, but soon they were out of arrows. So, now what?

Just as Sun Quan and company were panicking, help arrived in the form of a fleet of Dongwu ships. These were under the command of Lu (4) Xun (4), who was married to the daughter of Sun Quan's brother Sun Ce. His ships carried 100,000 men and plenty of arrows, which they used to shoot back Cao Cao's troops. They then stormed onto shore to give chase. This turned the tide in Dongwu's favor, as they put a real hurt on Cao Cao's army and managed to recover thousands of horses.

Despite snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, Dongwu took some heavy losses of its own in this one. Word soon reached Sun Quan that two veteran officers, Chen Wu and Dong Xi, were among the slain, one dying on the battlefield and the other drowning when his ship capsized in the last episode. A grief-stricken Sun Quan sent men to recover both officers' bodies and buried them with honors.

That sad business done, Sun Quan held a banquet to thank the general Zhou Tai for saving his life, again. It's easy to forget because it was kind of a footnote way back in the novel, but Zhou Tai had actually saved a young Sun Quan before, rescuing him from a rebel attack while wearing basically nothing at all. That rescue, just like this one, resulted in Zhou Tai suffering numerous injuries.

Personally pouring wine for the man, Sun Quan put his hand on Zhou Tai's back and said, with tears rolling down his face, "You risked your life to save me twice and suffered dozens of spear wounds. You have so many injuries that your skin looks like a carving. What else can I do but show you a kinsman's kindness? What else could I do but place in your hands a high command? You are my most deserving vassal. I shall share every glory and success with you!"

Of course, when Sun Quan asked what else could I do, one reasonable answer would be: Stop putting yourself in harm's way. I mean, Zhou Tai wouldn't have had to fight through the enemy lines three times to save him if Sun Quan had not charged into the thick of things in the first place. I mean, you are the lord of the Southlands. What were you doing in the middle of a scrum on the battlefield anyway? I understand the idea of showing courage to spur on your troops, but in the chaos of a melee, any one of the thousands of spears and arrows flying around could have killed you and ended the whole operation right there. Do you see Cao Cao getting himself into this? No! Cao Cao had stashed himself safely on top of some high grounds, from where he could give orders. Some of you may remember that one of Sun Quan's advisers had even lectured him about this after he had gotten too close to the action once before, leading to the death of one of his bodyguards. I guess some people just don't learn.

Still, despite this, what Sun Quan did next showed why he was considered a wise lord and why his men would risk their lives for him. After his speech, Sun Quan ordered Zhou Tai to disrobe and show everyone his wounds. His skin and flesh were crisscrossed with cuts and slashes. Sun Quan pointed to

each and every cut and asked Zhou Tai how it happened. After Zhou Tai recounted the circumstances by which he received that particular wound, Sun Quan would order him to drink a cup of wine. As you can imagine, that was a lot of drinking, and Zhou Tai ended up totally hammered. From that day on, Sun Quan also gave Zhou Tai his own canopy, allowing him the honor of using it wherever he went so as to remind everyone of the service he had rendered.

This emotional scene, however, was followed by the doldrums of a stalemate that lasted more than a month, as neither side could dislodge the other. Sun Quan's top advisers now suggested that they sue for peace so as to avoid a drawn-out war and preserve both the army and the civilians. Sun Quan agreed and sent a message to Cao Cao requesting a truce in exchange for Sun Quan sending annual tributes to Cao Cao. For his part, Cao Cao also realized that a quick victory was not possible, so he agreed, on the condition that Sun Quan withdrew first.

So Sun Quan left the generals Jiang (3) Yin (1) and Zhou Tai to defend Ruxu (2,1) and led the rest of the army back home. Cao Cao left Cao Ren and Zhang Liao to defend Hefei and led his troops back to the capital Xuchang (3,1). And so after all that, neither side really gained much of anything.

After Cao Cao returned to the capital, many of the officials at court soon revived talks of proclaiming him the King of Wei, a promotion from his current title of the Duke of Wei. As we mentioned a couple episodes earlier, this would essentially put him a half step away from taking the emperor's throne for himself. One official was against it, but everyone told him, "Did you not see what happened to Xun (2) Yu (4)?"

In case you forgot, Xun Yu was one of Cao Cao's most senior advisers, but he was dead set against Cao Cao becoming the Duke of Wei, which angered Cao Cao so much that he ordered Xun Yu to commit suicide. But apparently this official learned nothing from that, as he declared that even if the

coronation of Cao Cao was inevitable, he would have no part of it. Word of this soon reached Cao Cao, and he had the guy imprisoned. When that didn't shut the guy up, Cao Cao had him beaten to death.

After that little display, no one else dared to speak up against making Cao Cao the King of Wei. So in the fifth month of the year 216, court officials submitted a memorial to the emperor, declaring that Cao Cao's virtue and service had surpassed even the greatest statesmen of old, and that nothing short of declaring him a king would do. The emperor, of course, did not dare to say no to anything where Cao Cao was concerned, so he ordered an edict to be drafted proclaiming Cao Cao as the King of Wei.

But when the edict went out, Cao Cao declined the honor. The emperor offered it again, and again Cao Cao declined. The emperor then offered it a third time, and Cao Cao begged off for a third time. It was only after the fourth proclamation that Cao Cao begrudgingly accepted. See, he didn't really want to be the King of Wei, but the emperor insisted, time and again, and after all, how many times could a loyal servant of the throne say no to his majesty's wishes?

So now Cao Cao was a king, and that title came with certain privileges, just like when he became a duke. The kingship meant he could wear an imperial headdress adorned with 12 strands of jade beads. He could also ride around in a gilded chariot pulled by six horses, which was a couple horses more than what your run-of-the-mill chariot. On top of that, he also got an imperial carriage with royal regalia. And he began building a palace for himself outside the city of Yejun (4,4).

But with imperial perks also came imperial headaches, like naming a successor, because hey now that you're king, that title is hereditary. So Cao Cao had five sons in all, though none with his first and "official" wife. One of his concubines bore him his eldest son, but that son was killed years ago helping Cao Cao escape an uprising by Zhang Xiu, who was ticked off that Cao Cao had the audacity to sleep with his widowed aunt. So that left Cao Cao with four sons, all by another concubine, to choose from for his successor.

Among these four surviving sons, Cao Cao's favorite was the third son, Cao Zhi (2). This Cao Zhi was very smart and could produce wonderful writings at the drop of a hat. In fact, we've been introduced to his work before. Remember that Bronze Bird Tower Rhapsody that Zhuge Liang used to rile up Zhou Yu back in episode 54? That was one of Cao Zhi's poems. In fact, historically, Cao Zhi, like his father, is regarded as a great writer of the time period, and we'll get a chance to witness some of his literary genius later on in the novel.

Cao Cao's fondness for Cao Zhi was unsettling for his eldest son, Cao Pi (1). Now, we were introduced to Cao Pi back in episode 41, where we saw him snatching up the wife of one of Yuan Shao's sons for himself. Now, Cao Pi was worried about his standing as heir. Traditionally the title of heir to a throne should go to the eldest son, but as we have seen, successions are fraught with uncertainties and nothing is ever done until it's done, and it's troubling if your dad is showing clear favoritism toward one of your younger brothers.

So Cao Pi asked one of his father's senior advisers, Jia (2) Xu (3), for ideas, and Jia Xu taught him a trick or two. Whenever Cao Cao set out for a military campaign, all of his sons were required to see him off. On such occasions, the third son, Cao Zhi, would wax poetic about dear ol' dad's accomplishments and virtue. On the other hand, Cao Pi would simply shed tears and bow, displaying such sincere sadness at his father's parting that even those around him would feel a bit depressed. This led Cao Cao to suspect that Cao Zhi was filled with more flattery than sincerity, and that Cao Pi was the more genuinely filial son. Cao Pi also helped himself by bribing Cao Cao's personal attendants and had them sing his praises to their master.

All this left Cao Cao in a quandary, and he could not make up his mind as to which son to name heir. So one day, while Jia Xu was standing by, Cao Cao asked him, "Whom should I name as my heir?"

To this, Jia Xu gave no answer. After a little awkward silence, Cao Cao asked him why he did not respond.

“I was deep in thought just now, and thus could not answer,” Jia Xu said.

“What were you thinking about?” Cao Cao asked.

“I was thinking about Yuan Shao and Liu Biao and their sons.”

When Cao Cao heard this, he laughed out loud. When he stopped laughing, he decided that the eldest son, Cao Pi, would be his heir.

So what just happened here? Well, if you would recall, both Yuan Shao and Liu Biao, once powerful warlords who were vanquished by Cao Cao, decided to bypass their elder sons and make their younger sons their heir instead. In both cases, that decision led to internal strife and even outright war among the siblings, creating the opening Cao Cao needed to swoop in and wipe out the whole lot of them and take their territories for himself. So Jia Xu was saying, in a sort of roundabout way, that making the eldest son the heir was the smart play, and Cao Cao, reminded of his enemies' follies, agreed.

In October of the year 216, five months after Cao Cao became king, his royal palace was completed. As part of the landscaping, Cao Cao sent men out across the realm to collect rare flowers and fruits to be transplanted to his garden. One of those requests for indigenous plant life went to the Southlands, from where Cao Cao wanted sweet oranges. At this particular time, Sun Quan was temporarily showing respect to Cao Cao, so he ordered 40-some loads of oranges be sent to Cao Cao's palace at Yejun. The oranges traveled via the third-century version of UPS, which is to say, carried by a bunch of porters on bamboo poles across their shoulders, which was as backbreaking a job as you can imagine.

So this group of poor schlubs were lugging these oranges to Xuchang. At one point on their journey, they were resting at the foot of a mountain when they were approached by an older man who was blind in one eye and crippled in one foot. This man wore a gray Taoist robe and a bonnet of white vines.

Bowing to the porters, the Taoist priest said, "You guys must be tired. How about letting me help you carry a load for a while?"

The porters, of course, were too happy to accept this generous offer. So the priest helped carry each load for a mile-and-a-half. Once he was done carrying a load and gave it back to a porter, however, the porter would notice that the load was now noticeably lighter. All the porters were surprised and confused by this, though probably not complaining too much. When the priest took his leave, he told the man in charge of the porters, "I am from the same hometown as the King of Wei. My name is Zuo (3) Ci (2), and my Taoist name is Master Black Horn. When you get to Yejun, please convey my best wishes to him."

With that, the priest gave a flick of his sleeve and departed.

The porters pressed on, the rest of their trip made much easier by the mysteriously lighter loads on their shoulders. They offered up the oranges, and Cao Cao personally cut into one to sample it. But wait, what's this? When he opened up the fruit, it was completely empty. There was just the peel, no flesh. Hmm, so this is why the loads were lighter.

Alarmed, Cao Cao questioned the porters, and they told him about their encounter with Zuo Ci. Cao Cao was understandably skeptical because, right, some half blind, half-crippled priest magically sucked the flesh out of all 40-some loads of oranges. Right, sure. Now where are my executioner's?

But just then, the doorman came and said that a priest calling himself Zuo Ci was outside requesting an audience. Cao Cao summoned him, and as soon as the priest came in, the porters were like, "That's him! That's guy!"

"What wizardry did you use to steal the flesh from my fruit?" Cao Cao asked.

"How could such a thing be possible?" Zuo Ci replied with a laugh. And to prove that such a thing was in fact not possible, he took a few of the oranges and sliced them open, and every one of them was fleshy and sweet.

Ok, so now Cao Cao grabbed a few and sliced them open himself. But every one that he cut open was nothing but an empty shell. Now totally freaked out, Cao Cao granted Zuo Ci a seat and asked him about this. Zuo Ci, though, said he wasn't gonna talk without some meat and booze first, and Cao Cao obliged. Zuo Ci then proceeded to astound Cao Cao by drinking a stupendous amount of wine without being the least bit drunk and ingesting a whole goat without being full.

Taken aback by this display, Cao Cao asked Zuo Ci how he came to possess such magic.

"I studied Taoism for 30 years in Emei (2,2) Mountain in the Riverlands," Zuo Ci told him. "Then one day, I suddenly heard a voice from inside a rock cliff calling out my name, but I saw no one there. This went on for a few days. Then one day, a sudden thunderbolt from heaven shattered the cliff side, and inside, I found three volumes of a divine text, titled 'Avoidance Days, Text of Heaven.' The volumes were titled Avoidances of Heaven, Avoidances of Earth, and Avoidances of Men. The Avoidances of Heaven teaches you to climb into the clouds and ride the winds. The Avoidances of Earth teaches you to walk through rock. The Avoidances of Men allows you to move freely across the realm, shapeshifting, and taking an enemy's head with a flying sword or knife."

Well, this sounds awesome, and now Zuo Ci offered to share his secrets with Cao Cao.

“Your Highness has reached the pinnacle of ministerial office, so why not retire and come with me to Emei (2,2) Mountain?” he said to Cao Cao. “I will give you the sacred texts.”

“I have long wanted to retire at the peak of my career,” Cao Cao replied, “but alas, I have yet to find the right person to assist the court.”

To this, Zuo Ci smiled and said, hey you know what? I know a guy who would be perfect for the job. He lives in Yi Province. You might’ve heard of him. His name is Liu Bei and he’s related to the emperor. I think you should yield your title to him. In fact, I insist. If you don’t, then I’m going to use one of those flying swords I just told you about and take your head.

Well, you can imagine how well Cao Cao reacted to this. Enraged, he declared, “You must be a spy for Liu Bei!” So he ordered the guards to seize Zuo Ci, who just laughed nonstop.

Well, let’s see how long you’ll keep laughing, Cao Cao thought. He had a bunch of jailers pin Zuo Ci to the ground and start beating him with staves. The jailers beat him as hard they could, and Zuo Ci did stop laughing, but it was only because he fell asleep. Cao Cao, now even more angry at his ineffectual punishment, had his men throw Zuo Ci in chains and a cangue and locked him in a jail cell. But as soon as he went inside the cell, all his restraints fell off, and Zuo Ci just lounged on the floor, with not even a scrape on him.

Well, if torture doesn’t work on you, let’s see how you handle starvation and thirst. Cao Cao told his men to not give Zuo Ci any food or water. This went on for seven days, but far from famished, Zuo Ci’s cheeks actually gained a healthy blush. When the guards told Cao Cao about this, Cao Cao questioned Zuo Ci, who told him, “I can go decades without food and be fine, or I can eat a thousand goats in one day and be ok.”

So Cao Cao was now at a loss for what to do with this cryptic but obviously powerful wizard. But he had something else to worry about that day. He was holding a big feast at his palace, and all the

court officials were coming. So Cao Cao tried to forget about Zuo Ci for a few hours to entertain his guests. But as they were drinking, they got a party crasher. And of course it was Zuo Ci, who strolled in while wearing wooden clogs on his feet, which, as you can imagine, made a lot of noise as he walked in and stood in the center of the banquet hall, leaving all the attendees shocked and puzzled.

“Your Highness’s table is furnished with fish and meat to treat the officials,” Zuo Ci said to Cao Cao, “and there is an abundance of rare delicacies. Is there anything you are missing? I can get it for you.”

Cao Cao tried to use this opportunity to stump the priest.

“I want dragon liver for a stew. Can you get that?”

“That’s easy,” Zuo Ci said. He then picked up a brush and drew a dragon on a white wall. When he was done drawing, he waved his sleeve, and just like that, the belly of the dragon opened up. Zuo Ci now reached into the belly of this two-dimensional drawing of a dragon and pulled out a liver so fresh that it was still dripping blood.

Cao Cao, however, refused to believe what he just saw. “You must have hidden the liver in your sleeve beforehand,” he said, an accusation that was probably almost as preposterous as pulling a bloody liver out of a picture of a dragon.

Sensing that Cao Cao needed more convincing, Zuo Ci said, “Right now the weather is frigid and all the plants are dead. What kind of flowers does your highness prefer? Just ask.”

“I want nothing except a peony,” Cao Cao answered.

Ok, not a problem, Zuo Ci said. He took a large flower pot and placed it in the middle of the hall and sprayed water on it. Momentarily, a peony sprouted up and two blossoms burst open.

This little trick astounded all the officials, and they invited Zuo Ci to sit and dine with them. The next course brought to the tables was minced fish, which prompted Zuo Ci to observe that if you are going to make minced fish, you must make it with perch from the River Song (1).

“The River Song is nowhere near here; how can we get fish from it?” Cao Cao said.

Not a problem, Zuo Ci said again. He then asked for a fishing rod and cast his line into the fish pond outside the hall. Moments later, he pulled out dozens of large perch.

“These were already in my pond,” Cao Cao said.

“Why does Your highness lie?” Zuo Ci said. “All perch have only two cheek pouches, except for the perch from the River Song, which have four.”

So the gathered officials examined the fish that Zuo Ci pulled out of the pond, and sure enough, they all had four cheek pouches.

Well, so now that Zuo Ci had emptied Cao Cao’s fish pond, we might as well cook his catch and enjoy. Zuo Ci now said, “To poach these fish, you need to use purple sprout ginger.”

Oh wait, let me guess, you’re going to get that for us, too, right? Let’s get this over with. Zuo Ci asked Cao Cao for a golden basin and covered it with his robe. After a few moments, the basin was filled with purple sprout ginger. Zuo Ci presented the basin to Cao Cao, but as Cao Cao reached in to get some ginger, he felt something else in the basin. He pulled it out and it was a book, and not just any book. It was ... his book. This was the New Work of Cao Cao, the same unpublished work that he had burned back in episode 74 after being told that someone had said he plagiarized it from an anonymous author from antiquity. As Cao Cao flipped through the book, he saw that it was indeed his work, word for word. This left him very puzzled.

While he was pondering that, Zuo Ci grabbed a jade cup, filled it with wine, and offered it to Cao Cao.

“If your highness drinks this wine, you shall live for a thousand years,” Zuo Ci said.

Will Cao Cao drink the wine offered to him by the mysterious priest who has threatened to chop off his head with a flying sword? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.