

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 27.

Last time, the authorities caught wind of the identities of the gang that hijacked Governor Liang's birthday gifts. Pretty soon, a militia was headed to East Bank Village to arrest Chao Gai and company. But Chao Gai got a heads up from the magisterial clerk Song Jiang, and an assist from the constables Zhu Tong and Lei Heng, who were leading the militia sent to arrest him. With key members of justice system actively sabotaging said justice system, it should surprise no one that the outlaws managed to slip away. When we left off, Chao Gai and company had fled to Stone Tablet Village, the home of the three Ruan brothers, but the prefect was ordering the inspector He Tao to chase them down.

So He Tao went to round up his men, but when he started talking to them about the mission, many of them were less than eager.

"That Stone Tablet Village and the surrounding waters are right up against Liangshan Marsh," they told He Tao. "It's an endless stretch of channels with thick reeds. Who would dare to go after bandits there without a large force of men and boats?"

So He Tao went back to the prefect and asked for reinforcements, to which the prefect said, "How about I give you a capable deputy and 500 soldiers?"

Five hundred against seven sounded like pretty good odds to He Tao, so he went to round up his own men, along with the 500 additional soldiers, and prepared their weapons. The next day, they got their paperwork and set out.

Meanwhile, after burning down his own estate, Chao Gai and his Daoist priest friend Gongsun Sheng were on their way to Stone Tablet Village with about a dozen workhands. On the way, they ran into the three Ruan brothers, who were coming back to see if they needed help. So the whole group went to Stone Tablet Village and set up shop in the home of Ruan Xiaowu, the middle brother. The gang of seven now huddled to discuss seeking refuge with the bandits on Liangshan.

Wu Yong said, "Right now Zhu Gui (4), the Dryland Alligator, is running a tavern at the mouth of Li Family Lane. He's welcoming men of valor from all over. Whoever wants to join must first go see him. Let's prepare some boats and put all our stuff on them so that we have a gift to offer him when we ask for an introduction."

Just then, a few fishermen came and told them that the authorities were headed this way. Chao Gai sprang up and said, "If those bastards catch up with us, then we'll never get away!"

"No sweat," said Ruan Xiao'er, the eldest Ruan brother. "I'll take care of them. I'll drown most of them and stab the rest."

Gongsun Sheng, though, said, "No need to panic. Watch what I can do."

Chao Gai now told Liu Tang, the Red-Haired Devil, and Wu Yong to go on ahead and take the loot and everyone's families to near Zhu Gui's tavern and wait. Chao Gai and the rest of the gang would trail behind and deal with the pursuers. So Wu Yong and Liu Tang set out with two boats, along with a few men to row them. Then, Chao Gai gave the two younger Ruan brothers some instructions, and they each rowed off in a small boat.

Meanwhile, He Tao and his soldiers were approaching Stone Tablet Village. Along the way, they seized every boat they came across and had some soldiers who knew how to swim steer them. So now they were approaching the village on land and water.

When they entered the village, they first went to the home of Ruan Xiao'er, the eldest Ruan brother. With a shout, the troops stormed inside, only to be greeted with an empty house. So He Tao questioned some of the neighbors, who told him that Ruan Xiao'er's two brothers were both living on the surrounding waters, which could only be reached by boat.

He Tao said to his deputy, "These waters are full of channels and inlets, twisting paths, and ponds and pools of unknown depth. If we split up to search for the bandits, we might fall into a trap. Let's leave the horses here at the village and have all the men get on the boats."

So the deputy and the soldiers all got on the boats, which totaled more than 100. And they rowed out into the waterways in the direction of Ruan Xiaowu's home.

They had not gone for two miles when suddenly, the sound of singing drifted out from a thicket of reeds and rang across the water. The soldiers stopped rowing and listened, and here's what they heard:

In the reeds all my life I fish,
Rice and hemp no planting would I do;
Cruel and corrupt officials I kill them all,
To show the emperor I'm loyal and true.

He Tao and all his men were taken aback by those words. In the distance, they could see a single man, singing while he rowed toward them on a small boat. Some of He Tao's men recognized that this was Ruan Xiaowu, the middle brother. So He Tao gave a wave of his hand and ordered his men to charge forward. When he saw this, Ruan Xiaowu let out a raucous laugh and cursed, "You filthy corrupt officials are so bold when it comes to stepping on the common folk! How dare you come mess with me?! You're plucking a tiger's whiskers!"

He Tao's men now let loose a barrage of arrows, but as soon as he saw the arrows leave their bows, Ruan Xiaowu picked up his oar and did a somersault into the water. By the time He Tao and company reached his boat, there was no sign of him. So they pressed on in search of their prey.

After passing a couple more channels, they suddenly heard a shrill whistle from the reeds. The boats spread out, and in front of them came a small boat rowed by a single man. This guy was wearing a black

straw hat and a green cape made from coconut husk. In his hand he held a spear shaped like a brush pen. As he rowed, he sang these lines:

In Stone Tablet Village I was born,
I have always liked to kill,
He Tao and the deputy's heads I'll lift
And present them to the emperor as my gift.

Oh boy. That sounds like more trouble. Some of He Tao's men also recognized this guy. It was Ruan Xiaoqi, the youngest of the Ruan brothers.

"Everyone, charge forward and arrest that bandit! Don't let him get away!" He Tao told his men.

When he heard this, Ruan Xiaoqi laughed and cursed, "Bastards!"

Then, with one push of his spear, he turned his boat around and headed into a small channel. The soldiers pursued, making lots of ruckus as they gave chase. But Ruan Xiaoqi's boat glided across the water as if it had wings, and he whistled as he kept going deeper into the channel.

As He Tao and his men continued to give chase, they noticed the waterway getting narrower and narrower. So He Tao told his men to steer their boats near shore. There, he disembarked and took a look around from the bank. As far as his eyes could see, there was nothing but reeds, with no sign of a land route. He Tao was now feeling rather suspicious and could not make up his mind whether to keep going. So he tracked down a few villagers nearby and asked them for directions. They told him, "Even though we live here, there are lots of nooks and crannies that we don't know about."

Well, that wasn't helpful. He Tao now ordered his troops to dispatch two small boats to go check out the route ahead. Each boat carried a few men, and they rowed into the thick reeds and soon vanished from sight.

Four hours later, neither boat had returned.

“Those guys are so dense!” He Tao lamented. So he sent another two boats carrying five men. Those guys rowed off into the reeds, and another two hours later, none of the four reconnaissance boats had returned.

So ... now what?

“All those guys are veteran soldiers who know protocol,” He Tao said. “Why haven’t any of the boats come back to report? Who knew that all these troops that I’ve brought would be so helpless?”

By now, daylight was starting to bleach out of the sky. He Tao figured that just staying here by the bank of a small channel wasn’t going to accomplish anything, so he decided to go have a look for himself. He picked a small, fast boat and brought a few veteran soldiers with him. With He Tao seated at the front, this boat headed deeper into the channel.

After a couple miles, the sun was now hugging the western horizon. He Tao and company suddenly spotted a man walking along the bank, carrying a hoe.

“Hey you there!” He Tao shouted from the boat. “Who are you? What is this place?”

“I am a local farmer,” the guy replied. “This is called Deadend Ditch. There’s no way out.”

“Have you seen a couple boats come through?” He Tao asked.

“Are you after Ruan Xiaowu?” the farmer asked.

“How did you know?”

“They’re fighting in the woods up ahead.”

“How far away?”

“Just up ahead. You’ll see it soon.”

He Tao ordered his men to press on so they could back up their comrades. He also told two men to go ashore. But no sooner had those two guys set foot on land did the farmer raise his hoe and send both men tumbling back into the water.

Surprised, He Tao leaped to his feet and was just about to go ashore himself. But just then, his boat suddenly started rocking side to side. A figure darted out from underwater, grabbed He Tao's legs, and gave them a hard tug, sending him into the water head first.

The rest of the guys in the boat panicked and tried to flee, but the farmer from the bank had by now leaped onto the boat and started swinging his hoe at their heads. Every blow found its mark, crushing the soldiers' skulls.

Meanwhile, He Tao had been dragged out of the water and onto shore, where his shirt was pulled off and used as a rope to tie him up. The guy who had captured him was none other than Ruan Xiaoqi, while the farmer slash head-smasher was the eldest brother, Ruan Xiao'er.

The two brothers now cursed He Tao to his face, "We three brothers are natural-born killers. Who the hell do you think you are? How dare you come to arrest us?!"

"Heroes, please!" He Tao pleaded. "I'm just following orders. I had no choice. Otherwise how would I dare to come arrest you? Please take pity on the fact that I have an 80-year-old mother at home, with no one else to look after her. Please spare my life!"

Oh and by the way, the 80-year-old mother at home thing? He Tao didn't have an 80-year-old mother at home. That's just the standard plea for mercy in Chinese stories like this, and we'll see it a couple more times in this novel.

"Let's tie him up and throw him into the boat for now," the Ruan brothers said to each other. As for the bodies of soldiers whose heads they smashed in, they just tossed those into the water. Then, at the sound of a whistle, four or five fishermen appeared from the reeds and hopped on the boat. Ruan Xiao'er and Ruan Xiaoqi each steered a boat, and the group headed out of the channel.

Meanwhile, the soldiers that He Tao had left waiting by the bank back up the channel were still just sitting around, twiddling their thumbs, wondering what the hell happened to He Tao. It was now about 7 p.m., and the night sky was filled with stars. The soldiers stretched out on their boats, trying to catch a breeze, but all of a sudden, the breeze turned into a strange gale. Pebbles and sand flew into the air while the waves crashed. Dark clouds gathered overhead, and the thick reeds swayed back and forth amid the strong winds. The gale was so powerful that it cut the ropes that were holding the ships in place.

As all the soldiers covered their faces to avoid the winds, they heard a sharp whistle from behind. They turned just in time to see a fiery glow in the reeds across the way, heading toward them.

“We’re done for!” the men shouted in a panic.

There were about 50 boats in all, and all of them were being blown around so hard by the winds that they were crashing into each other, unable to move away. By now, the fiery glow was near. Turns out these were a flotilla of small boats, bound together in pairs and loaded to the brim with reeds and brushwood that were crackling with flames. With the wind at their back and also propelled from their underside by swimmers, the fire boats sped toward the government fleet, which had now clogged the narrow channel to the point where they could not get away.

There was nowhere to hide. In the blink of an eye the fire boats had crashed into their targets, setting the fleet ablaze. The soldiers tried to jump onto shore and flee, but they were surrounded by reeds and marsh, with not even a sliver of solid ground. And soon, even the reeds on shore had caught on fire. Trapped amid the wind and fire, the soldiers scrambled for whatever inch of muck they could find for a foothold.

From the flames, a speedy small boat now appeared, carrying two men. One stood on the back of the boat and rowed, while the other, dressed like a Daoist priest, sat in the bow, holding a shimmering sword and shouting, "Spare no one!"

As the soldiers in the muck panicked, two guys emerged from the reeds on the east side, leading four or five fishermen and wielding knives and spears. At the same time, two other guys, also leading a few fishermen, emerged from the reeds on the west side, hoisting long fishing hooks. The two groups converged on their hapless victims, and within moments, scores of soldiers laid dead in the soggy mire.

So the group from the east was led by Chao Gai and Ruan Xiaowu, while the group from the west was led by Ruan Xiao'er and Ruan Xiaoqi. And the priest on the small boat was Gongsun Sheng. Those five heroes, along with about a dozen fishermen, made quick work of the soldiers, who were now all fish chum.

All, that is, except for He Tao, who was still tied up in the bow of a boat. Ruan Xiao'er now tossed him onto shore and cursed him.

"You bastard! You're a good-for-nothing from Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture who leeches off the people. I was going to cut you to pieces, but we need you to take a message back to your boss at the prefecture. Go tell that crook that the three heroes of Stone Tablet Village -- the Ruan brothers -- and Chao Gai, the lord of East Bank, are not to be trifled with! We won't come bother you, and you better not come to our village to throw your life away. If we get pissed off, even if that Premiere Cai Jing came in person, I would riddle his body with holes, much less some two-bit prefect. We'll let you go; don't you dare come back! And tell that damn prick of a prefect to not come looking for death either! There are no roads out of here, so we'll take you a ways."

Ruan Xiaoqi now threw He Tao back into a boat and went back out to where the water met the road.

"Follow this path, and you'll find your way out," Ruan Xiaoqi said.

But before he let He Tao go, he added, "We've killed all your men, so how can we let you go home unscathed? It would make that damn prefect laugh at us. I'll have to ask you to leave your ears as proof against that!"

Before He Tao could even mutter an objection, Ruan Xiaoqi pulled out a sharp knife and, with two quick motions, sliced off both of He Tao's ears. He then untied He Tao and sent him on his way, with blood dripping down his face.

Now that that's taken care of, Chao Gai, Gongsun Sheng, the three Ruan brothers, and the dozen or so fishermen who joined their ranks boarded five or six small boats and left Stone Tablet Village. They rendezvoused with their comrades Liu Tang and Wu Yong at the mouth of Li Family Lane. Remember that Liu Tang and Wu Yong had gone ahead with all their riches. After sharing the tale of how they had dispatched the government troops, Chao Gai and company headed to the tavern run by Zhu Gui, the scout for the bandits on Liangshan.

When he saw this big group of people show up at his tavern, Zhu Gui was at first surprised, but then delighted once Wu Yong had explained who they were and what they were doing there. Zhu Gui welcomed them with a feast, and then shot a whistling arrow across the water as a signal for his comrades to send a boat. When a bandit lackey appeared, Zhu Gui sent him back to the stronghold with a letter, informing the chieftains that a big entourage of heroes had showed up, hoping to join the gang. He then got back to feasting with Chao Gai and company.

The next morning, Zhu Gui fetched a large boat and ferried Chao Gai and his friends across the water. As they approached, they could hear the drums and gongs from the opposite bank, and four scout boats appeared, carrying seven or eight sentries. Zhu Gui explained what the deal was and sent them on their way.

The entourage disembarked at Golden Sand Beach. Chao Gai told the group's family members and the fishermen who had accompanied them to wait there, while he and his six sworn brothers went up the mountain to meet the chieftains. A few dozen bandit lackeys came down to escort them to the mountain pass that defended the stronghold. Outside the pass, the bandit chieftains, led by Wang Lun, the White-Clad Scholar, welcomed them, and Chao Gai and company hurriedly returned their greetings.

"I have long heard of Chao Gai the Heavenly King," Wang Lun said to his guests. "Your great name has long thundered in my ears. We're fortunate to receive you at our humble abode today."

Chao Gai replied, "I am just a crude, uneducated man, coming to seek refuge. I am willing to serve as your pawn. Please do not refuse me."

"Say no such thing," Wang Lun told him. "Let's go to our small fortress and then discuss it."

So they headed up to the main fortress, where they convened in the Hall of Honor. Wang Lun insisted time and again that Chao Gai and his brothers take the seats on the raised platform, which was a position of honor. After much back and forth, Chao Gai and his brothers sat down in a row on the right, while Wang Lun and the other chieftains sat on the left. After they all greeted each other, they sat down as host and guests, and Wang Lun told his men to start playing music to welcome the visitors. He also sent some men to arrange for quarters for the other members of Chao Gai's entourage.

Then, the welcome feast began. Wang Lun had his men slaughter two oxens, 10 sheep, and five pigs, and everyone ate and drank while the music blared. As they feasted, Chao Gai recounted the whole story of how he and his brothers came to be there.

As Chao Gai told his story, though, Wang Lun sat and listened quietly. Every so often he gave some brief, noncommittal answer, but his mind was clearly elsewhere. When night fell, the feast concluded, and Wang Lun and the chieftains saw Chao Gai and company to their quarters back down at the foot of the mountain, beyond the pass.

After the two parties bid each other good night, Chao Gai was in a jovial mood. He said to his brothers, "After what we've done, where could we have gone to find a refuge? If not for Chieftain Wang's kindness, we would be done for. We must not forget to repay him!"

That remark drew a chuckle from Wu Yong.

"Professor, why are you chuckling?" Chao Gai asked. "If you have thoughts, please do share."

"Brother, you are a straightforward man," Wu Yong said. "You think Wang Lun will take us in? Even if you can't see into his heart, his demeanor alone said plenty."

"What about his demeanor?"

"Did you not notice how, early on during the feast, he actually showed some sincerity in conversation. But then when you started talking about how many government soldiers we killed, how we released He Tao, and how heroic the Ruan brothers were, his demeanor changed. Words were still coming out of his mouth, but you could tell that he was very uneasy. If he actually intended to take us in, then he would have already discussed where we would be in the pecking order. As for the other chieftains, Du Qian and Song Wan are a couple of boors. What do they know about how to treat a guest? But now, Lin Chong. He used to be a drill instructor for the imperial guard in the capital. He's a big-city guy, very polished. He's only accepted the fourth chair here because he had no choice. I noticed that Lin Chong looked rather put out when he was watching how Wang Lun was answering you. He never stopped glaring at Wang Lun. I think he wants to help us, but he's in a difficult position. I can throw out a few words to set them against each other."

"Our survival is completely reliant on your wise strategies, professor," Chao Gai said.

The night passed uneventfully. The next morning, the attendants told Chao Gai that Lin Chong had come to pay them a visit.

"This is exactly what we want," Wu Yong told Chao Gai.

So the seven brothers went outside to welcome Lin Chong and invited him into their quarters to chat. Wu Yong came forward, bowed to offer his greetings, and said, "We imposed too much on your generosity last night. We must apologize."

"It is I who must apologize," Lin Chong said. "Though I longed to show my respect, I was not in a position to do so. Please forgive me."

"We may be untalented," Wu Yong replied, "but we're not made of wood or stone. How could we not be sensible of your kind intentions? We're extremely grateful."

Chao Gai now asked Lin Chong time and again to take the seat of honor, but Lin Chong refused and insisted that Chao Gai take the seat instead, while he placed himself in a subordinate position, and everyone else sat down as well.

"I have long heard of your great name, but never expected that I would get to meet you," Chao Gai said to Lin Chong.

"When I was in the capital, I never failed in courtesy to my friends," Lin Chong replied. "I now have had the honor to make your acquaintance, but have been unable to behave as I wished. So I have come to express my regret."

"Thank you so much for your sincerity!" Chao Gai said.

Wu Yong now chimed in and said to Lin Chong, "I had long heard about your valor when you were in the capital. But what happened between you and Gao Qiu that led to your being framed? I also heard that later, it was again his scheme that tried to burn you to death at the feed depot at Cangzhou (1,1). Who directed you to this place?"

"Whenever someone mentions my run-in with Gao Qiu, my hairs stand up on end!" Lin Chong said angrily. "And yet, I cannot avenge myself upon him! So I sought refuge here on the recommendation of Lord Chai (2)."

“Are you talking about Chai Jin, the man they call Little Whirlwind on the jianghu scene?” Wu Yong asked.

“The very same.”

“I’ve often heard people say that Chai Jin is generous, honorable, and welcoming to heroes from all over,” Chao Gai said. “They say he’s a descendant of the emperor of the previous dynasty. It would be a treat to get to meet him.”

Wu Yong now cut back in and said to Lin Chong, “Given Lord Chai’s sterling reputation, how could he be willing to recommend you for this place if you did not possess uncommon martial skills? I’m not exaggerating when I say that Wang Lun should have yielded the top seat to you. All in the land would agree with that, and it would be in keeping with Lord Chai’s recommendation.”

“Professor, you think too highly of me. I had committed a capital offense and sought refuge with Lord Chai. It’s not that he didn’t want to keep me, but I was worried I would cause trouble for him, so I willingly became a bandit here. Who knew that it would be a dead end?! I don’t care about the pecking order. It’s just that Wang Lun is insecure and two-faced, making it hard to get along with him.”

“But Chieftain Wang seems so so friendly,” said Wu Yong, playing dumb. “What makes him so narrow-hearted?”

“It’s our fortune to have all you heroes coming to join us,” Lin Chong said. “It would be to our mutual benefit. It would be like embroidering flowers on brocade or bringing rain to dried sprouts. Yet, Wang Lun is consumed with jealousy and is afraid that you would overshadow him. Last night, when you told him about how you all killed some government soldiers, he became uneasy and started looking like he wasn’t going to let you stay. That’s why he put your guys in quarters down here, outside the mountain pass.”

“Well, if that’s how Chieftain Wang feels, then we should leave and seek another home rather than wait for him to kick us out,” Wu Yong said.

So will they stay or will they go? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we see more fallout from their slaughter of government troops. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!