

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 28.

Last time, Chao Gai and his six sworn brothers were on the lam after their heist came to light. They slaughtered almost every last one of a 500-men government force sent to arrest them. Then, they fled to the bandit stronghold on Liangshan, hoping to find refuge there, just like Lin Chong the Panther Head did after his run-ins with the law. And just like Lin Chong, they had to deal with the two-faced antics of the bandit leader, Wang Lun, who jealously hoarded his power and position against any newcomers who might overshadow him.

As we resume our narrative, Lin Chong was paying a visit to Chao Gai and friends, and Wu Yong, the smart one among Chao Gai's entourage, had just said that they should leave instead of waiting for Wang Lun to kick them out.

"Heroes, please do not harbor such thoughts," Lin Chong told them. "I know what must be done. I was just worried that you all might leave. That's why I came so early to talk to you. Let's see how he treats you today. If he says the right things, unlike yesterday, then it's fine. But if he says so much as one wrong word today, I'll take care of it."

"Chieftain, we are extremely grateful for your immense kindness!" Chao Gai said.

But Wu Yong kept up his charade a little longer, saying, "How can we allow Chieftain Lin to quarrel with his brothers because of us? If they'll have us, then we can stay. If not, then we would leave."

"Sir, you're mistaken!" Lin Chong retorted. "As the ancients said, 'The astute and the gallant each cherish their own kind.' What use is that filthy churl to anyone?! Please do not worry!"

And with that assurance, Lin Chong got up and took his leave. Chao Gai and company saw him out, and he went back up the mountain.

Not long thereafter, a bandit lackey came down with an invitation, telling Chao Gai that Wang Lun wanted to feast with them at the waterside pavilion in the fort on the south side of the mountain. Chao Gai told the lackey to relay to Wang Lun that they would be there soon.

Once the messenger left, Chao Gai asked Wu Yong what they should expect from this banquet. Wu Yong smiled and said, "Brother, don't worry. You might even get to be the master of the fort. I think Instructor Lin is intending to have it out with Wang Lun today. If he hesitates, I'll give him a push with a few words. You guys should all stash weapons on you. When you see me stroke my beard, that's your signal to help him."

By mid-morning, Wang Lun had sent three or four messengers to repeat the invitation. So Chao Gai and his six brothers got ready and went up the mountain. As they approached, they saw Song Wan, the third chieftain, riding toward them. With him were bandit lackeys carrying seven sedan chairs. They beckoned Chao Gai and company to get on the chairs, and then carried them toward the waterside pavilion. They arrived at a scenic spot, disembarked in front of a pavilion, and were immediately greeted by all the chieftains. They entered the pavilion and sat down as hosts and guests, with Wang Lun and his four chieftains on the left and Chao Gai and his six brothers on the right.

The bandit lackeys now started pouring wine. After a few rounds and a couple courses, Chao Gai began to make conversation with Wang Lun. But whenever Chao Gai brought up the matter of him and his brothers joining the gang, Wang Lun changed the subject. While this was happening, Wu Yong glanced over at Lin Chong and saw that he was seated sideways on his chair, glaring at Wang Lun.

They drank until noon had passed. Now, Wang Lun turned and told some of his lackeys, "Bring the stuff." A few men went off and returned momentarily. One of them was holding a big tray, on which sat five giant pieces of silver.

Wang Lun now rose to his feet, raised his cup to Chao Gai and said, "I am extremely grateful that you heroes have come here in the name of honor. Regrettably, our small fort is only a swampy marsh,

not fit for real dragons like yourselves. I have prepared this meager gift. I hope you will accept it and find a bigger place to call home. When you have found it, I will send men to offer our services.”

Chao Gai replied, “I have long heard that your great stronghold welcomes men of talent, so we have rushed here to join you. If you cannot tolerate us, then we will take our leave. As for the treasure you are offering, we will never dare to accept it. I’m not bragging, but we still have some spending money. Please take back your generous gift, and we will take our leave.”

“Why do you refuse the gift?” Wang Lun said. “It’s not that we cannot tolerate you heroes. It’s just that we lack quarters and food. I worry that we would ruin your future prospects and then it won’t look good. That’s why I do not dare to keep you.”

But before Wang Lun finished his spiel, Lin Chong’s eyes grew wide and he roared from his chair, “When I came to join you, you used these same damn excuses! And now, Brother Chao and these heroes have come to join us, and you are giving them the same runaround. What’s the deal?!”

Wu Yong quickly chimed in and said to Lin Chong, “Chieftain, please calm down. We should not have come and driven a wedge between you guys. Chieftain Wang is giving us gifts and travel money to leave; he’s not kicking us out. Please calm down. We’ll just go.”

“His is a smile with a hidden blade,” Lin Chong scowled. “His words are pure, but his deeds are dirty! I cannot let him get away with it!”

Wang Lun now barked at Lin Chong, “Look at this bastard! He’s drunk again and saying nasty things about me. You forget your place!”

That was perhaps not the wisest thing for Wang Lun to say at that moment, as Lin Chong flew into a rage and barked back, “You’re an impoverished scholar who failed the government exam, and you have no talent! How can you be the leader of this stronghold?!”

Wu Yong now said to Chao Gai, loud enough for everyone to hear, “Brother, our arrival has caused this quarrel. Let’s go find some boats and leave right now.”

So the seven of them got up and looked like they were about to leave the pavilion. Wang Lun, however, tried to keep them, saying, "At least wait until the banquet is over."

But as far as Lin Chong was concerned, the banquet WAS over. With one kick, he sent the table flying to one side. He then leaped to his feet and pulled out a shimmering knife from under his robes.

Seeing this, Wu Yong stroked his beard. Immediately, Chao Gai and Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil walked over to Wang Lun and boxed him in, acting as though they're trying to hold him back, all the while saying "Please don't quarrel!"

At the same time, Wu Yong grabbed Lin Chong with one hand and said, "Chieftain, you mustn't act rashly!"

Gongsun Sheng also chimed in with a half-hearted, "Please don't destroy your harmony on account of us."

Meanwhile, the three Ruan brothers held back the other three chieftains, Du Qian, Song Wan, and Zhu Gui. All to preserve the peace, of course. As for the bandit lackeys, they were so stunned by this development that they just stood still, watching with mouth agape.

Despite everyone present saying he shouldn't act rashly, Lin Chong was going to do just that. He grabbed Wang Lun by the collar and cursed him.

"You are a poor village bookworm. You only got here because Du Qian helped you. And Lord Chai Jin gave you so much help, so much money, not to mention his friendship. Yet when he sent me here to join you on his recommendation, you tried to pull out every excuse in the book! And now, with all these heroes coming to join us, you're trying to send them away. Do you think this mountain belongs to you?! You are nothing but a thief, jealous of men of talent! Why should we keep you around?! You have neither talent nor tolerance. You cannot be our leader!"

The other three chieftains wanted to intervene, but they were all blocked by the Ruan brothers and did not dare to move. Wang Lun tried to run, but oops, his way out was blocked by Chao Gai and Liu Tang, who were, you know, just trying to make peace.

Seeing that things were coming to a head, Wang Lun shouted, "Where are my men?!"

Well, he did have a few confidants nearby, and they did think about coming to his aid. But one look at Lin Chong's ferocious face made them reconsider, so nobody was coming to help Wang Lun today.

Lin Chong now tightened his grip on Wang Lun, cursed him again, and then with one thrust, drove the knife into his chest. Wang Lun crumbled to the floor of the pavilion. But before his life could even bleed out completely, Lin Chong had cut off his head with a swift swing of the knife and held the head in his hand.

By now, Chao Gai and company had pulled out their weapons as well, just in case anyone tried anything. But the sight of their former leader's bloody head dangling from Lin Chong's hands was enough to send the other three chieftains, Du Qian, Song Wan, and Zhu Gui, to their knees.

"Brother, we are willing to serve you!" they said in one voice to Lin Chong.

While Chao Gai hurriedly helped them to their feet, Wu Yong lifted Wang Lun's chair from the pool of blood it was standing in and put it down next to Lin Chong, asking him to sit.

"If anyone dares to disobey, may they share Wang Lun's fate," Wu Yong shouted. "Instructor Lin shall be the new leader of the stronghold!"

But Lin Chong shouted, "Sir, you're mistaken! I did what I did today for the sake of honor to you heroes! I have no designs on the leadership. If you let me take command today, it would make me the laughing stock of all the heroes of the land. If you try to force the mantle of leadership upon me, then I'd rather die! I have something to say. Will you all listen?"

Umm, you're the guy who just knifed the former leader and is standing in a puddle of his blood, holding his head, so yeah, of course we'll listen.

Lin Chong, still gripping his knife, pointed at everyone and said, "I came here as an exile from the imperial guards, and today, all these heroes have assembled in the name of honor. Yet, Wang Lun's heart was narrow and jealous of men of talent, so he tried to find some excuse to send them away. That is why I had to kill him, not because I wanted the leadership. I could never have the brains and courage to repel the government's armies and destroy the evil ministers around the emperor. But now we have brother Chao Gai. He is honorable and generous, with ample wisdom and courage. He is known and respected everywhere. How about, for honor's sake, we make him the leader of the stronghold?!"

"You're quite right," said everyone, either out of sincere agreement or just out of a lack of eagerness to disagree with the guy holding the knife.

"No, you must not," Chao Gai said. "By tradition, 'the guest must not exceed his host.' I may be strong, but I just arrived here. How can I dare to assume command?"

But Lin Chong now pushed Chao Gai down onto the command chair and shouted, "What's done is done! Please do not refuse. And if anyone refuses to obey, then they will follow Wang Lun's example."

After a few more rounds of "I would rather die than to take command!" and "I would rather die than to not have you take command!", Chao Gai finally relented and assumed leadership. Lin Chong now ordered everyone to kneel and offer their respects. He then told the lackeys to go set up another feast in the main fort. Oh and mop up all that blood and dispose of the headless body while you're at it. He then sent men to summon all the bandits on the mountain and told them to assemble in the main fort.

The chieftains then rode back to the Hall of Honor, where they asked Chao Gai to sit down in the big chair and then lit a pot of incense. Lin Chong then said, "I am but a crude man who can handle a few weapons. I have neither knowledge nor talent, neither wisdom nor skill. Today, our stronghold has been blessed with all these heroes, and our principles have been made clear. We cannot carry on casually like we used to. Professor Wu Yong here should be our military strategist and command our forces. He must take the second seat."

Wu Yong replied, "I am but a village scholar. I do not possess any great talent. Even though I've read some military classics, I have made no contributions yet. How can I dare to be seated before you?"

"It's done; no need to refuse," said Lin Chong, not willing to do this back and forth with every damn chair in the room. So Wu Yong relented.

"Mr. Gongsun should take the third seat," Lin Chong then said.

"No that would not do," Chao Gai spoke up. "If you keep giving up your spot, then I must give up mine."

"Brother, you're mistaken," Lin Chong said. "Mr. Gongsun is known across the jianghu scene and is adept at deploying armies. He possesses divine strategies and power over the wind and the rain. Who can be his equal?"

Gongsun Sheng said, "Even though I have a few little tricks, I don't have any great talent. I do not dare to supercede you. Please take your seat."

"Your talent was obvious enough in your recent victory," Lin Chong said. "A steady tripod vessel must have three legs. So please do not refuse."

In the end Gongsun Sheng also relented and assumed the third seat. Lin Chong was going to keep going down the line like this, but now, Chao Gai, Wu Yong, and Gongsun Sheng said enough was enough.

"Because you said that a steady tripod vessel requires three legs, we three did not dare to disobey," they told Lin Chong. "The three of us have already taken seats above you. If you keep yielding, then we really must take our leave."

So the three of them now took hold of Lin Chong and practically forced him into the fourth chair, and so he finally relented.

"Next we must have the chieftains Du Qian and Song Wan take their seats," Chao Gai said, referring to the former No. 2 and No. 3 guys.

But Du Qian and Song Wan had other ideas. With Wang Lun's fate still fresh on their minds, they were thinking, "Our skills are meager; we best not get too close to them. We might as well do them a favor."

So they forcefully refused to take their seats, instead making Liu Tang take the No. 5 seat, followed by the three Ruan brothers. Then, Du Qian took the No. 9 spot, Song Wan took the 10th seat, and Zhu Gui brought up the rear at No. 11.

And so the new pecking order was established, and then all 700-some bandits on the mountain came and paid their respects to the new bosses. With all the men standing at attention, Chao Gai declared, "Hear me, everyone: Today Instructor Lin tabbed me to be the leader of the stronghold, Professor Wu to be the military strategist, and Mr. Gongsun to share the power of command. Instructor Lin and the other chieftains will also help manage our stronghold. You all will remain in your posts, taking care of all matters on the mountain and defending all the forts and beaches. Do not slip up. Let's all work as one, in the name of honor."

The men all went huzzah and went about their business. Chao Gai then arranged for quarters for the Ruan brothers' families. He also brought out all the loot from his heist, along with the money from his own estate, and used them to reward all the bandits up and down the chain of command. Yeah, honor is great, but nothing helps a new leader shore up support among the rank and file like honor combined a wad of silver. Oh, and just in case you thought Chao Gai and friends were the "rob from the rich and give to the poor" type of bandits ala Robin Hood, let me just point out that all the loot from the heist were now either lining their own pockets or filling the pockets of their new lackeys as a means of securing the men's loyalty. Well, I guess some of those bandits used to be poor, so it sort of is giving to the poor? Sure, let's go with that, because the novel certainly is.

Anyway, this generous redistribution of wealth slash purchase of loyalty was followed by the offering of sacrifices to heaven and a feast that lasted deep into the night, which was followed by another feast the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day.

When they weren't feasting, Chao Gai, Wu Yong, and the other chieftains were making plans to prepare for any trouble from the authorities. They took stock of their supplies, shored up their defenses, and made extra weapons and armor. They also prepared boats large and small and trained their men for fighting on the water. And according to the novel, all the chieftains got along smashingly and were as tight as blood brothers.

Seeing Chao Gai and company get their families settled in reminded Lin Chong of his own wife back in the capital. He had never forgotten her, and yet he had not had any recent word of her fate. Seeing that Chao Gai was indeed a generous and honorable man -- in other words -- Lin Chong finally could envision himself staying here long term, he said to Chao Gai, "Ever since I came here, I've been wanting to bring my wife here, too. But I kept putting it off because I could not get along with Wang Lun. She's still adrift in the capital, and I do not know her fate."

"Brother, since you have a wife in the capital, then why not go bring her here so you can be reunited?" Chao Gai said. "Quick, write a letter and send someone to go get her. Then you won't have to worry."

So Lin Chong wrote a letter and sent a couple trusted lackeys to deliver it and to bring back his wife. Less than two months later, the two lackeys returned, but Lin Chong's wife was not with them. Instead, they brought bad news.

"When we got to capital, we found the home of your father-in-law," they told Lin Chong. "There we heard that your wife had been pressed by Marshal Gao to marry his son. She refused and hanged herself instead. That was a half year ago. Your father-in-law was consumed with grief and fell ill, and he died

half a month ago. The only person left from your family was the maid, Jin (3) Er (2), and she got married and is living with her new husband. We confirmed all this with the neighbors.”

This news brought Lin Chong to tears, and Chao Gai and company shared in his lament. It wasn't the news he wanted, but one side effect of this is that Lin Chong now no longer had any lingering worries. Meanwhile, everyone got back to preparing for an attack from the authorities.

Sure enough, that attack was coming. One day, while the chieftains were discussing business in the Hall of Honor, a lackey came and reported, “The prefect of Jizhou (4,1) has sent 1,000 men this way. They are coming on more than 400 boats and are currently docked in the waters around Stone Tablet Village.”

Chao Gai was greatly alarmed and consulted with Wu Yong, but Wu Yong just smiled and said, “Brother, no need to worry. I will take care of it. As the old saying goes, ‘When water comes, stop it with earth; when soldiers come, meet them with generals.’ ”

And by the way, that old saying basically means something to the effect of rolling with the punches, as in it doesn't matter what the enemy brings, we'll have an answer. So Wu Yong began to craft that answer. He summoned the three Ruan brothers and whispered something in their ears. Next, he did the same with Lin Chong and Liu Tang, the Red-Haired Devil, followed by Du Qian and Song Wan. And everyone went off to do as they were instructed.

Let's now skip on over to the other side of the marsh and peek in on the government troops that were heading toward Liangshan. The prefect of Jizhou had sent a thousand men under the command of Huang (2) An (1), the District Garrison Commander, and a high-ranking police officer from the prefect's office. They commandeered a bunch of boats from the area and deployed them in the waters around

Stone Tablet Village. They divided this fleet into two forces and set out to attack the marsh around Liangshan.

The garrison commander Huang An led his force onto the boats and they did the usual waving of banners and shouting of battle cries as they advanced toward Golden Sand Beach, where, if you remember, boats approaching Liangshan always docked. As they approached the beach, they suddenly started hearing mournful notes floating across the water.

“Are those horns?” Huang An asked. He divided his fleet into two and went into the reeds to investigate. I’m sure everyone watching at home is going, “No! Don’t go into the reeds!” But alas, it’s too late, they were already in there.

In the distance, they saw three boats approaching, each carrying five men. Four of the men on each boat were rowing with double oars, while the fifth stood at the front of the boat. Each person standing was wearing a red bandana and a red silk tunic, and holding a barbed spear.

Someone in Huang An’s fleet recognized those three men who were standing on the boats as none other than the Ruan brothers. So Huang An ordered everyone to charge and arrest them. So 40-some boats let out a loud battle cry and charged. Meanwhile, the Ruan brothers let out a loud whistle, and their three boats retreated.

Commander Huang waved his spear and shouted to his men, “Focus on killing these bandits! I will reward you handsomely.”

So as the three small boats fell back, the government’s fleet followed behind and let loose a hailstorm of arrows. But the three Ruan brothers went into their cabins and pulled out shields made from fox pelts, which effectively blocked the incoming arrows while their boats continued on.

The chase had gone on for about a mile when suddenly, a small boat caught up to Huang An’s fleet. It was a couple of his own men from the other force that went into reeds.

“Stop giving chase!” the messengers said. “Our group went into the reeds and got slaughtered, and they took all our ships.”

“What happened?!” a stunned Huang An asked.

“We were advancing when we saw two small boats in the distance, each carrying five men. We pursued with everything we had, but less than a mile in, seven or eight small boats suddenly came out from some of the small surrounding channels, and arrows flew at us like swarms of locusts. We turned around, but when we reached a narrow outlet, there were 20 or 30 men on both banks, and they had stretched a rope across the water. When we approached the rope, they rained down stones and blinding lime on us. So all the soldiers had to abandon the boats and swim for their lives. We managed to escape, but when we got back to shore, our land forces were gone. All the horses had been taken, and all the men who were watching the horses were dead in the water. We managed to find this little boat near the reeds and came to warn you.”

When Huang An heard this, he groaned. He quickly waved a white flag to signal his fleet to stop advancing and regroup. But no sooner had his ships stopped and turned around did they see that the three boats they were chasing were now advancing on them, followed by a dozen or so other boats. The men standing at the front of these boats were waving red flags and whistling, while their boats flew across the water.

Huang An hurriedly ordered his fleet to line up and prepare for battle. Suddenly, an explosive sounded from the reeds, and Huang An found his fleet surrounded by red flags. Meanwhile, the men in the oncoming boats were shouting, “Huang An, leave us your head!”

Huang An panicked and ordered his boats to row to shore. But from the surrounding channels, 40-some small boats appeared and showered his fleet with arrows. Huang An pressed on amid this onslaught, and managed to get out with only three or four small boats.

Huang An now leaped onto a faster boat. When he turned around, all he saw was his own men jumping into the water in desperate attempts to stay alive. Some were taken with their boats, and most of them were slaughtered.

To see if Huang An gets out of this with his head still attached, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we see more consequences ripple out from Chao Gai and his friends' actions. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!