

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 72.

Last time, the Zhu family was riding high in their war against the Liangshan bandits. They had won two major engagements, and then got some reinforcements from a Major Sun Li, who proceeded to help them win another battle and capture another Liangshan chieftain. The next day, the bandits came back and were attacking on four sides. The three Zhu brothers and their arms instructor led four columns of men out to meet the enemy, but suddenly, they saw their own home burst into flames.

As we rejoin the action, we are going to do one of those TV tropes where you end one episode on a cliffhanger and start the next episode in a seemingly completely unrelated setting. We are going back in time, to more than a month earlier, and we are no longer outside the Zhu Family Manor. Instead, we are at the beach, or thereabouts.

On the eastern coast of Shandong Province, there was a prefecture called Dengzhou (1,1). Outside the prefectural seat, there was a mountain that was filled with wild animals that often attacked people. Most recently, the troublemaker was a man-eating tiger. And since he was missing a guy who could kill tigers with his bare fist, a Black Whirlwind who could take out a whole den of tigers singlehandedly, or even just a guy whose nickname boasted of beating tigers, the prefect ordered the local hunters to go kill this beast. Even the families that lived around the mountain had to join the effort, and they all risked canings if they failed to deliver.

At the foot of the mountain lived two brothers who were hunters by trade. The elder was named Xie (4) Zhen (1), and the younger brother was named Xie (4) Bao (3). Their parents had passed away, and neither brother was married. They were very skilled fighters and both wielded two-pronged steel pitchforks. All the hunters in the area deferred to them. For their skills, they were given some colorful nicknames. The elder brother Xie Zhen was called the Two-headed Serpent, while the younger brother Xie Bao was called the Twin-tailed Scorpion. They were both tall and stout. The elder brother Xie Zhen had a purplish complexion, broad shoulders, and a narrow waist. The younger brother Xie Bao had a

round face and dark skin, and tattoos of flying demons on his legs. When possessed by anger, he was inclined to pull up trees, shake mountains, and turn the earth and sky upside down. So you know, stay on these guys' good side.

After receiving the prefect's command to hunt down the tiger, Xie Zhen and Xie Bao went home and prepared their snare-bows, poisoned arrows, and other booby traps. They put on their leopard-skin trousers and tiger-skin vests, armed themselves with their two-pronged pitchforks, and went into the mountain to set their traps. Then, they climbed into a tree and waited.

One day passed, and nothing happened. So they retrieved their traps. The next day, they brought some food with them and went back into the mountain to wait some more. As evening drew near, they set up their traps again, and again waited in the trees until 5 a.m., but again, nothing happened. They then moved their traps to the west side of the mountain and waited there until dawn, but to no avail. They had a deadline of three days to bring down the tiger, so they were getting worried about being punished by the prefect.

On the third night, they were again waiting in the mountain. By the time 3 a.m. rolled around, they were getting tired, and so they leaned up against each other and started to doze off in the tree. But they had barely closed their eyes when they suddenly heard one of their traps go off. They leaped down, grabbed their pitchforks and started searching. They saw a wounded tiger that had been struck by one of their poison arrows, rolling around on the ground. As they approached it, however, the tiger saw them and started to run off with the arrow still lodged in its body.

Xie Zhen and Xie Bao gave chase. As they got halfway down the mountain, the poison kicked in, and the tiger let out a dying roar before tumbling down a hillside.

"I recognize this place," the younger brother Xie Bao said. "This is the backyard of Old Squire Mao's (2) residence. We can go down to his house to ask him for the tiger's body."

So they went down the mountain to Old Squire Mao's home and knocked. Dawn was just starting to break. A workhand went in to inform Old Squire Mao about his visitors, and after a long while, the old squire came out.

Xie Zhen and Xie Bao put down their pitchforks and greeted the squire.

"Sir, it's been too long since we last saw you. Please excuse our intrusion," they said.

"What brings you guys here this early?" the old squire asked.

"If it weren't important, we would not dare to disturb your slumber," the elder Xie Zhen said. "But we've been given a deadline by the prefect to hunt down a tiger. We waited for three days, and this morning around 5 a.m., we got one. But it rolled down a hill into your backyard. We would like to trouble you to let us back there to retrieve it."

"Oh, no problem at all," Squire Mao said. "Since it's in my backyard, then you guys can sit for a while first. You must be hungry. Go have some breakfast first."

He then told his men to set up some breakfast and invited his guests to eat. Xie Zhen and Xie Bao ate, and then got to their feet and said, "Thank you so much. And now we hope you can take us to get our tiger."

"No worries," the old squire said. "Since it's in my yard, it's not going anywhere. Have some tea, and then we'll go."

The Xie brothers did not dare to go against their host, so they sat back down and drank the tea that the workhands brought out. And now, Old Squire Mao said they could go get the tiger. He led the two brothers to the back of his estate and told his workhands to get the key to open the lock on the door to the backyard. They got the key, but it refused to turn.

"We haven't gone back there in a long time, so the lock must be rusted," Old Squire Mao said. "Go get a hammer and break it."

A workman did as instructed and broke the lock and unlatched the chain on the door. They went into the backyard and started searching near the hillside. But there was no sign of a tiger.

“Are you guys sure you didn’t make a mistake?” the squire asked the Xie brothers. “Doesn’t look like it rolled into my yard.”

“How could we have made a mistake?” Xie Zhen said. “We grew up around here. We know whose property it was.”

“Well then, go search for yourself,” the old squire told them. “If you find it, just carry it away.”

The Xie brothers looked around. Suddenly, Xie Bao called out, “Brother, come look at this. The grass over here has been rolled flat, and there are some blood stains. So the tiger must have been here. Old squire, your men must have moved it.”

“Don’t speak nonsense,” Squire Mao scoffed. “How could my people know that a tiger was back here? And how could they move it? And you saw just now that we had to break the lock to come in here, and we came in with you. Don’t make wild accusations.”

“Sir, you must return that tiger so we can report back to the prefect,” Xie Zhen said.

“You two are so unreasonable!” the old squire said. “I treated you to wine and food, and now you’re accusing me of hoarding your tiger.”

“Look here!” Xie Bao said, starting to lose his patience. “Your family also received the same orders from the prefect, but you guys couldn’t bring down the tiger. And now, after we succeeded, you are trying to steal credit for our work, while we two get a caning.”

“Why is it my concern if you get a caning?” the old squire retorted.

And now, both brothers glowered and said, “Do you dare to let us search your place?”

“Is this my home or yours?!” the squire said. “I am entitled to my privacy. You beggars have no manners whatsoever!”

But Xie Bao now forced his way into the parlor and searched the place. When he found nothing, he got pissed and started smashing stuff. Xie Zhen also joined in the fun.

“Xie Zhen and Xie Bao are robbing me!” Squire Mao shouted.

After smashing some tables and chairs, Xie Zhen and Xie Bao saw that the squire’s men were all prepared for trouble, so they stomped out while cursing, “You stole our tiger! We’ll see you in court!”

Just as they walked out the front door, they saw a few riders approach, accompanied by an entourage. Turns out, their leader was Mao (2) Zhongyi (1,4), the squire’s son. Xie Zhen told him, “Your family’s men stole our tiger, and your father refused to return it and even threatened to beat us.”

“Those country bumpkin workhands don’t know any better,” Mao Zhongyi said. “They must have lied to my father. Don’t get mad. Come back inside with me, and I’ll get your tiger back.”

The Xie brothers thanked him and followed him back inside the manor. But as soon as the doors closed behind them, Mao Zhongyi shouted, “Seize them!”

Before the Xie brothers could react, about 30 men stormed out, and Mao Zhongyi’s entourage also joined in, and they bum-rushed the two brothers and tied them up.

“My family shot a tiger last night,” Mao Zhongyi told the brothers. “So why did you guys come here claiming it’s yours? And you used the opportunity to steal our stuff and destroy our property. I must turn you into the authorities and rid our prefecture of this scourge.”

So, as it turns out, Mao Zhongyi did indeed steal their tiger once it rolled into his backyard. In fact, he was just coming back from the prefecture, where he had turned in the tiger as his own and was returning with some cops to arrest the Xie brothers for trespassing, destruction of property, and whatever other charges he could pile on. And not being the brightest bulbs, the two brothers played right into his hands.

Old Squire Mao now had the brothers stripped, bound, and taken to the prefecture, along with the loot they had supposedly stolen and all the furniture that they did in fact smash up. As it so happened, Old Squire Mao's son-in-law was a clerk at the prefectural courthouse, and he had already talked to the prefect. As soon as the Xie brothers were brought before him, the prefect ordered his men to beat them, demanding that they plead guilty to the charges of trying to steal the Mao family's tiger and stealing and breaking their stuff while threatening them with weapons. After sufficient torture, Xie Zhen and Xie Bao broke and confessed to the phony charges. The prefect then put them in cangues that weighed 25 catties and locked them up in the dungeon.

But the Mao family wasn't done yet. When they got home, they started talking and decided that they could not allow the Xie brothers to ever see the light of day, or there would be hell to pay. So they talked to the son-in-law magisterial clerk again and told him to arrange for an ... umm ... unfortunate accident to befall the Xie brothers while they're in prison. The Mao family, meanwhile, would make sure the prefect had sufficient reasons to look the other way. Just another day in the ancient Chinese legal system.

After they were dragged into prison, the Xie brothers were first taken to see the warden. Now, this warden had some fresh silver from Old Squire Mao rattling in his pocket, so we know how this was gonna go.

As a jailer brought the new prisoners over and told them to kneel, the warden barked, "So, you two are the ones they call the Two-headed Serpent and the Twin-tailed Scorpion?"

"Those are just some nicknames people gave us," said Xie Zhen, the elder brother. "We have never harmed any good people."

"Well you two animals are in my hands now! I'm gonna chop off one of your serpent heads and one of your scorpion tails. Men, take them to the dungeon!"

A jailer brought the Xie brothers to their cells. When no one else was around, this jailer whispered to them, "Hey, do you guys recognize me? I'm your brother's wife's brother."

"But we don't have any other brothers; it's just the two of us," Xie Zhen said.

"Are you not Major Sun (1) Li's (4) brothers?"

"Major Sun is our cousin, but we have never met you. Are you Yue (4) He (2)?"

"Yes, I am Yue He," the jailer said. "My older sister is married to Major Sun. I am a jailer in this prefecture. Because I'm a good singer, everyone calls me the Iron Whistle. Because I also like to play with weapons, Major Sun taught me some moves with the spear."

And by the way, this Yue He's name literally meant Musical Harmony, so it's little wonder that he was a good singer. He was a very clever guy and thoroughly versed in music. He easily learned any instrument he picked up. He was very detail-oriented, and also loved martial arts. He knew Xie Zhen and Xie Bao were men of valor, so he wanted to save them. But he knew he couldn't do it alone.

"Listen to me," he told Xie Zhen and Xie Bao. "The warden has taken Squire Mao's bribe, so he's going to try to kill you for sure. What should we do?"

"Since you brought up Major Sun, then we need you to deliver a message to someone," Xie Zhen said.

"To whom?"

"We have a female cousin, the daughter of our father's younger sister. She is married to Major Sun's younger brother. Right now, they live about 3 miles outside the east gate. Her name is Gu (4) Dasao (4,3). She and her husband are running a tavern, a slaughterhouse, and a gambling den. In a fight, not even 20 or 30 people could get anywhere near her. And even her husband, Sun Xin (1), is no match for her. She's really close with us. Also, our mother is Sun Xin and Sun Li's aunt, so they are our cousins, too. If you can deliver a secret message to her and let her know what's happened to us, she will come rescue us for sure."

“Got it,” Yue He said. “You guys just rest easy.”

He then went and got some steamed buns and meat and snuck them to the Xie brothers. Next he locked the cell door and told another jailer to keep watch while he went to run an errand. He then made straight out of the east gate and went about 3 miles. In the distance, he saw a tavern. By the front door hung butchered carcasses of oxen and sheep. In the building in the back, there were a group of gamblers. Inside the tavern a woman sat by the counter. She had thick brows and big eyes, a round face and round waist. Her head was adorned with unusual looking hairpins, and earrings dangled from her lobes.

Yue He figured this was Gu Dasao, the Xie brothers’ cousin, so he greeted her and asked, “Is this the Sun household?”

“It is,” she answered. “Would you like wine? Or are you here to buy meat? If you want to gamble, please take a seat in the back.”

“I am the younger brother of Major Sun’s wife.”

“Oh, it’s you, cousin Yue! I should’ve known. You look just like your sister. Please come in and have some tea.”

Yue He sat down, and Gu Dasao asked him what he was doing there. He recounted the trouble that her cousins were in, and Gu Dasao immediately started bemoaning their situation and told her staff to go find her husband, Sun Xin (1). A few workers went off, and soon, Sun Xin came in.

So this Sun Xin came from a military family that had transferred to this Dengzhou (1,1) Prefecture, and that’s how he and his elder brother Sun Li came to be here. His brother was the better fighter, but this Sun Xin also picked up some of his brother’s skills, especially with the spear and the short steel rod. Because of their weapons of choice, the locals here compared him and his brother to Yuchi (4,2) Gong (1), a famous Tang Dynasty general who also used a spear and a ribbed steel rod. Sun Xin’s nickname



was Little Yuchi (4,2), and his brother Sun Li's nickname was "Sick Yuchi" because he had a yellow-ish complexion.

Anyway, Gu Dasao told her husband the news, and Sun Xin said, "In that case, please have cousin Yue He go back to the prison first and take good care of them, while you and I discuss how to save them."

"Whatever you guys need from me, I will do my utmost," Yue He said.

Gu Dasao now treated him to wine and food and handed him a bundle of small pieces of silver, saying, "When you get back to prison, please distribute this among the other jailers so that they would take good care of my cousins."

Yue He thanked her, accepted the silver, and then went back to the prison to apply the proper lubricant to the wheels of justice.

Meanwhile, Gu Dasao asked her husband Sun Xin if he had any ideas for how to save her cousins. He told her, "That Old Squire Mao has money and connections. He's afraid that if your cousins get out, they would go settle the score with him, so he must be dead set on killing them in prison. There is no other way to save them except to break them out of jail."

"Then let's go tonight," Gu Dasao suggested.

Sun Xin chuckled and said, "You are so rash. We need to have a long-range plan. Where will we go after we break them out of jail? Besides, we can't pull this off without my brother and two other men."

"Which two other men?"

"That uncle-and-nephew tandem who are addicted to gambling, Zou (1) Yuan (1) and Zou (1) Run (4). Right now they are robbers operating on Cloud-Climbing Mountain. I'm best friends with them. If we get their help, then we will succeed for sure."

“Cloud-Climbing Mountain isn’t far from here,” Gu Dasao said. “You should go tonight to invite them here to discuss this.”

So Sun Xin set off right away, while Gu Dasao told her staff to butcher a pig and start preparing a feast. Around dusk, Sun Xin returned with two men. The leader was named Zou (1) Yuan (1). He’s been a gambling addict since childhood, and before turning to banditry, he had been an idler. Despite his ... umm ... new career path, this Zou Yuan was loyal and generous, and he was a good fighter with a stubborn streak. On the jianghu scene, they called him the Dragon from the Forest.

The other man was Zou Yuan’s nephew, but he was actually about the same age as his uncle. His name was Zou Run (4). He also resembled his uncle in appearance. He was born with a tumor on the back of his head, so everyone called him the One-Horned Dragon. When he got into heated arguments, he would often headbutt people. One day, as he was doing this, he rammed his head into a pine tree and snapped the tree in two.

Once these guys were introduced, Gu Dasao invited them to the back room and told them what the mission was. Zou Yuan told her, “Even though my gang has about 90 people, only 20 of them are trustworthy. Once we do this job, we won’t be able to stay here anymore.”

Zou Yuan then laid out a plan for what to do after the prison break, and Gu Dasao declared, “That’s perfect! If anyone dares to say no, I’ll run them through with a spear.”

“But there’s another thing to worry about,” Zou Yuan said. “If we do save them, we will probably have some troops from the prefecture after us. What should we do?”

That prompted another round of discussion, and soon, they had a plan. They then drank for half the night, and Zou Yuan and Zou Run stayed at the tavern.

The next morning, a few men in a carriage pulled up outside the headquarters of the prefectural garrison. The men asked to see the major Sun Li. Soon, Sun Li came out. He was a tall man with a

yellow-tinged complexion and a full beard. He was quite an adept archer and rider. He wielded a long spear, and had a ridged steel rod hanging from his wrist.

The men with the carriage told Sun Li that they worked in his younger brother Sun Xin's tavern. Sun Xin had sent them to the garrison to tell Sun Li that Sun Xin's wife Gu Dasao was on her deathbed and wanted to see her brother-in-law and his wife right away so she could have a few final words.

Sun Li was alarmed and immediately told his wife, Lady Yue (4). She got into the carriage, and he followed on horseback with a dozen or so militiamen as they set out at once for the tavern. They arrived around lunch time, and Sun Xin was waiting outside to greet them.

As Sun Li followed his brother inside, he asked Sun Xin what was ailing Gu Dasao.

"It's a very peculiar ailment; let's talk about it in the back," Sun Xin said. He then told his men to take Sun Li's soldiers over to the tavern to have wine, while Sun Li and his wife took a seat. After a good while, Sun Xin came back and said, "Brother, sister-in-law, you can go in now."

So Sun Li and his wife went into a backroom, but saw no one there.

"Where is my sister-in-law?" Sun Li asked.

Suddenly, Gu Dasao stomped in, followed by the bandits Zou Yuan and Zou Run.

"Sister-in-law, what's ailing you?" Sun Li asked.

"Brother-in-law, my respects," she said. "I am suffering from a need to rescue my cousins."

"Well this is strange. What cousins?"

"Brother-in-law, don't play dumb. You live in town. How can you not know that they are my cousins. Are they not your cousins, too?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Which cousins?"

"The situation is urgent, so I'll be blunt," Gu Dasao explained. "Xie Zhen and Xie Bao have been framed by the Old Squire Mao who lives at the foot of Cloud-Climbing Mountain. He's going to have them killed sooner or later. I have already discussed the matter with these two heroes here, and we are

going to break them out of prison. But once this thing blows up, I'm afraid it might cause trouble for you, so I pretended to be sick to bring you here to tell you. If you are not willing to do this, then we will go ourselves. Right now the government is lawless. Those who run away are fine, but those who stay behind will get prosecuted. As the old saying goes, 'Those closer to the fire gets singed first.' If you go to jail because of us, there would be no one to bring you food or rescue you. So, what is your will?"

Sun Li was understandably taken aback. First of all, hold on, how are these guys related to me again? And secondly, you're going to do what?!

"I'm an officer in this prefecture; how can I do such a thing?" he said.

"If you refuse, then you and I can fight to the death right now!" Gu Dasao declared as she whipped out two sharp knives, and Zou Yuan and Zou Run also pulled out daggers. Unlike everyone else in the room, Sun Li's wife, Lady Yue, was not a fighter, so she was left stunned and speechless.

"Sister-in-law, hold on!" Sun Li shouted. "Don't be so rash. Let's talk this through and think about the long game."

"Brother-in-law, if you refuse to help, then send your wife away first, and then we will mount the rescue," Gu Dasao said.

"Even if we are to do this, you have to let me go home and pack up and check out the situation first to make sure our information is correct, and then act," Sun Li pleaded.

"Your brother-in-law Yue He was the one who alerted us," Gu Dasao said. "We can mount the jailbreak AND pack at the same."

Left with no wiggle room, Sun Li sighed and said, "Since all of you are committed, how can I refuse? Otherwise, I would end up going to jail because of you. Fine, fine, fine. We will do as you planned."

To see where this plan will lead, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we'll see how this detour dovetails back into Song Jiang's war against the Zhu family. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!