

Bang Tong

“Linked Stratagems”

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Execution: *ChuNam*

Format: *Analysis*

Scale: *Methodology Scaling*

Subject: *Pang Tong*

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Categories:

° Resilience & Shielding & Adaptability & Foresight

° Alignment & Complexity & Effectiveness & Efficiency & Execution

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Context: After taking control of the young emperor Liu Bian, Cao Cao manipulated the imperial authority to oppress the court. He held dominant power over crucial policies within the feudal apparatus. At this point, Cao Cao relocated the capital to Xuchang, which bordered Jingzhou.

The Importance of Jingzhou:

“During the Eastern Han dynasty, China was divided into thirteen provinces, among which Jingzhou lay in the south. It encompassed regions corresponding to modern-day Hubei, Hunan, Guizhou, and Jiangxi, with its administrative seat located at Nanyang (Wan City – the place where Emperor Guangwu of Han rose to power).

Situated at the confluence of the Yangtze River, Jingzhou bordered Yangzhou to the east, Yizhou to the west, Jiaozhou to the south, and Yuzhou to the north. It was the second-largest province after Yizhou. Strategically, Jingzhou occupied a position of paramount military importance, especially in its northern commanderies such as Nanyang, Nan Commandery, and Jiangxia.

Beyond its geopolitical significance, Jingzhou also held great economic value. Enriched by the alluvial deposits of the Yangtze River and its tributaries, the land was fertile and highly suitable for agriculture, livestock raising, and water resources. Its central location and plains terrain further made Jingzhou a bustling hub of both production and trade.

In every era, Jingzhou remained a prosperous land. Even in the late Eastern Han, when the imperial court declined, warlords carved up territories, and warfare was unending, Jingzhou continued to maintain relatively stable development compared with other regions.

For this very reason, Jingzhou also became a densely populated region, capable of both recruiting soldiers for warfare and mobilizing labor for production".

In order to seize Jingzhou, Cao Cao first had to capture Nanyang – the territory of Zhang Xiu. Zhang Xiu's strategist, Jia Xu, who had formerly maintained ties with Cao Cao, advised him to surrender, for if Cao Cao were to launch a campaign, the fall of Nanyang would only be a matter of time. Zhang Xiu accepted this counsel and submitted. Meanwhile, Cao Cao used the pretext of conquest to conceal his true intentions of drilling troops and indulging his own lust—specifically, his desire for

Zhang Ji's widow, who was also Zhang Xiu's aunt. Because of this vice, Cao Cao nearly lost his life in Nanyang.

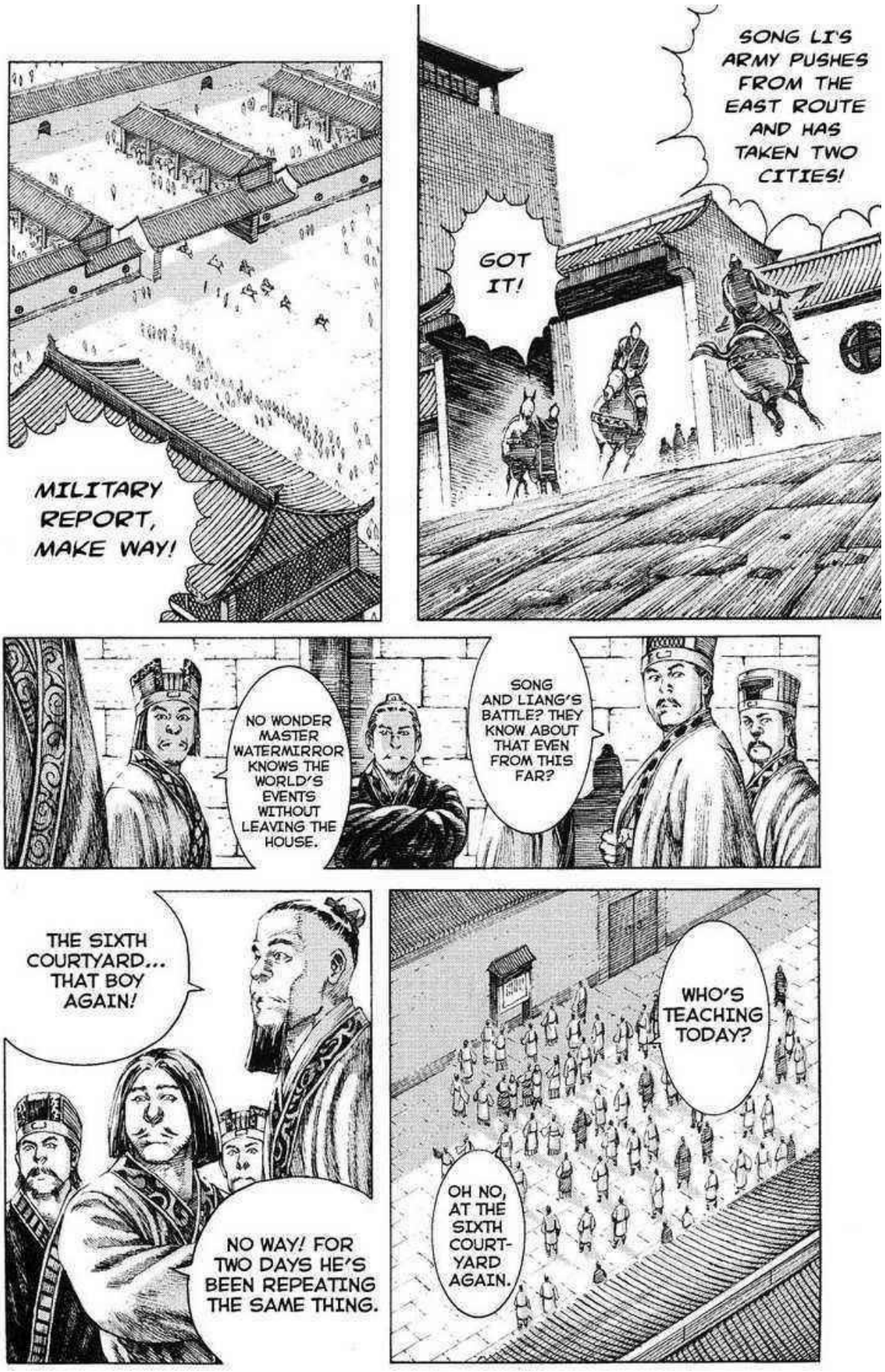
Returning to Pang Tong's plan, it consisted of one stage of preparation followed by the implementation of the larger strategic deployment.

Preparatory Stage: *Strategic Layout.*

Very long after receiving the title "Young Phoenix" from Master Water Mirror, Pang Tong still had no intention of leaving the Water Mirror Academy to find a lord for himself. Instead, he remained at the academy to teach strategy to advisors from many different warlords. Each day, he would lecture the same lesson over and over, to the frustration of his students.

Purpose 1: To engrave into their minds a key philosophy of warfare, and at the same time to lay down the path for his own future.
Purpose 2: To train and filter out those advisors suitable for his Linked Stratagems.
Purpose 3: To improve the thinking of a group of strategists whose perspectives on warfare were stagnating – this served as an educational role (Pang Tong at this stage was acting like a lecturer).

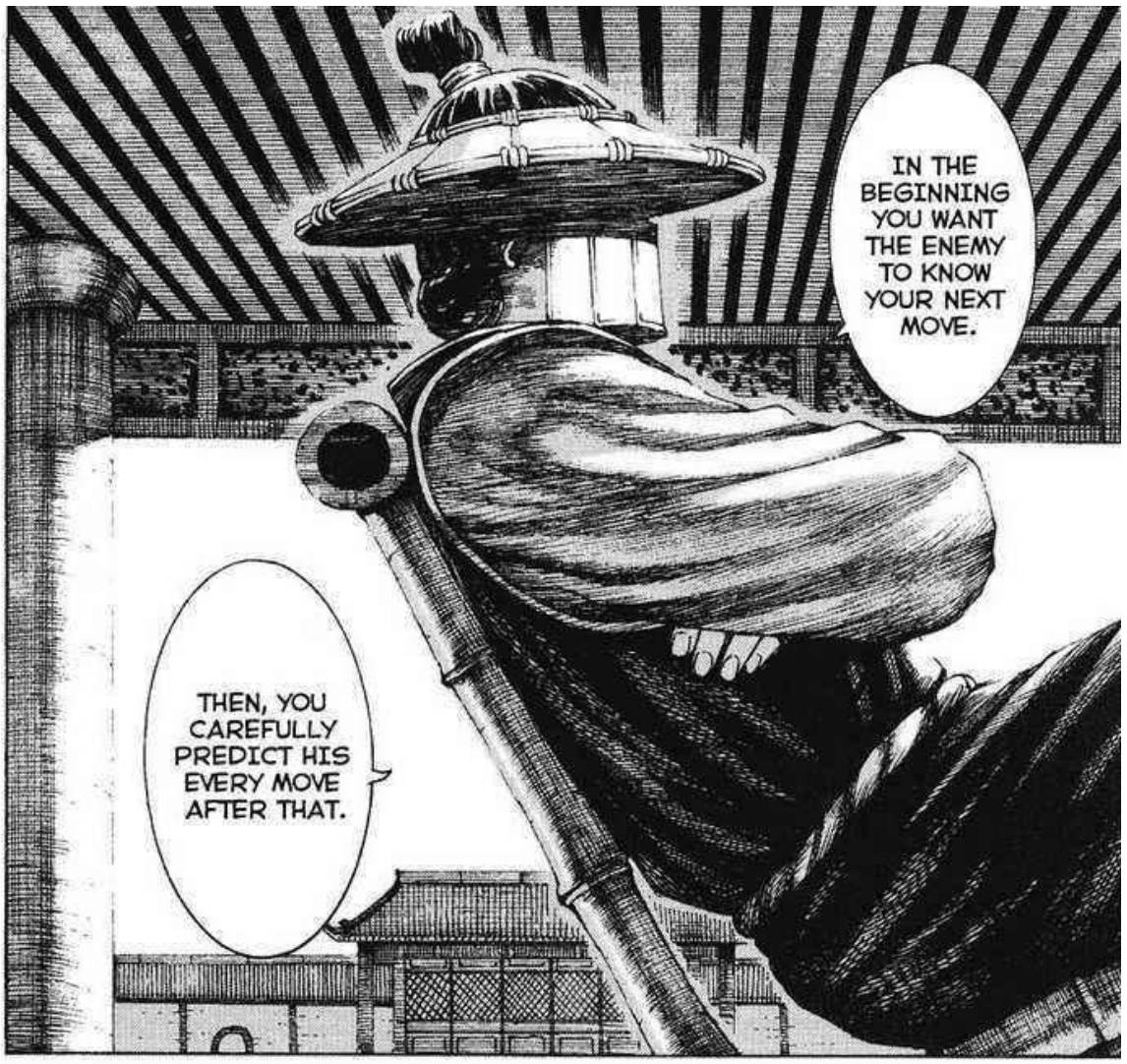
Purpose 4: By remaining hidden within the academy, Pang Tong could make use of the Water Mirror Academy's intelligence-gathering capabilities to keep track of events and choose the right timing to execute his plan, as well as to select the most suitable lord for himself.


MILITARY REPORT, MAKE WAY!
GOT IT!
SONG LI'S ARMY PUSHES FROM THE EAST ROUTE AND HAS TAKEN TWO CITIES!
NO WONDER MASTER WATERMIRROR KNOWS THE WORLD'S EVENTS WITHOUT LEAVING THE HOUSE.
SONG AND LIANG'S BATTLE? THEY KNOW ABOUT THAT EVEN FROM THIS FAR?
THE SIXTH COURTYARD... THAT BOY AGAIN!
NO WAY! FOR TWO DAYS HE'S BEEN REPEATING THE SAME THING.
WHO'S TEACHING TODAY?
OH NO, AT THE SIXTH COURT-YARD AGAIN.

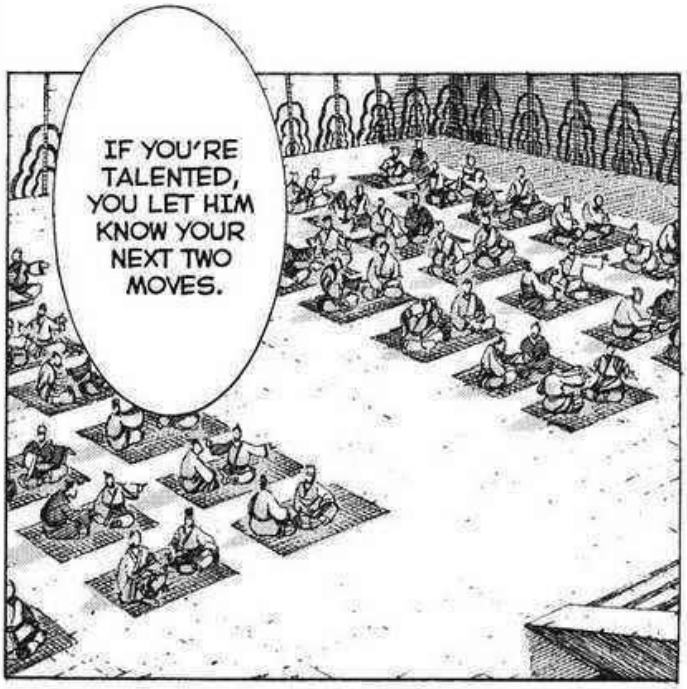
* The superfast intelligence-gathering network of the Water Mirror Academy.


NOT... NOT AGAIN.
MISTER FLEDGLING PHOENIX, CAN YOU TEACH US SOMETHING NEW?
YOU ALREADY TAUGHT THIS LESSON ... YESTER-DAY.
NO, I'LL KEEP SAYING IT UNTIL YOU PEOPLE UNDERSTAND.

* Pang Tong repeated the same lecture over and over.


IN THE BEGINNING YOU WANT THE ENEMY TO KNOW YOUR NEXT MOVE.
THEN, YOU CAREFULLY PREDICT HIS EVERY MOVE AFTER THAT.


IF YOU'RE REALLY TALENTED, YOU LET HIM KNOW YOUR NEXT THREE MOVES.


IF YOU'RE TALENTED, YOU LET HIM KNOW YOUR NEXT TWO MOVES.

* Pang Tong’s strategic philosophy.


NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHY I WAS RELUCTANT TO LEAVE SCHOOL?


BUT IT'S JUST A MOTLEY CROWD; NO HOPE OF ACHIEVING GREATNESS.


SO YOU TOOK UP TEACHING WHILE WE WERE ALREADY OUT HERE FIGHTING FOR OUR LIVES.
NO WONDER YOU WERE ABLE TO GATHER ALL THESE MINOR WARLORDS AS WELL.


IF YOU LET ME GO, THERE JUST MIGHT BE SURGING WAVES.
THIRD, WITHOUT PREJUDICE, EVEN SURGING WAVES CAN HELP THE SAIL.


WITH IMPERIAL HAN IN THEIR HEARTS, EVEN SMALL RIVERS CAN MERGE INTO A GREAT SEA.

* The reason Pang Tong stayed at the academy was to teach.

During his lectures, although many students showed dissatisfaction, out of respect for Pang Tong’s talent, they continued to attend regularly. Among them, Chen Nan — strategist of Song Li’s faction — and Dong Zhong — strategist of Liang Bing’s faction — were the two most deeply influenced by his teachings. The two originally belonged to opposing camps and were caught in the midst of conflict. At the very time they both attended Pang Tong’s lessons, on the battlefield Song Li’s forces were gaining the upper hand against Liang Bing, having already seized two fortresses.


WE MEET AGAIN, ADVISOR DONG.
GENERAL CHEN, I ALMOST DIDN'T RECOGNIZE YOU WITHOUT YOUR UNIFORM.
TODAY WE SHOULD TALK ONLY OF ACADEMICS, NOT OLD GRUDGES.
YES. UNTIL ANOTHER DAY IN BATTLE.
MILITARY REPORT, MAKE WAY!
MAKE WAY!
THAT FLAG MEANS OUR SIDE CONTINUES TO BE AHEAD.
ONCE I RETURN I'LL SURELY TURN THE SITUATION AROUND.

Taking advantage of the ongoing conflict between the two factions, Pang Tong pointed out the flaws in both strategists' strategic thinking, and then, through his unmatched powers of persuasion, convinced them to set aside their rivalry and cooperate against Cao Cao.


IF EVERYONE ALREADY UNDERSTANDS, THEN WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP?
SONG LI ARMY'S GREAT GENERAL, CHEN NAN
LIANG PING ARMY'S ADVISOR, DONG XIANG
IF CAO CAO IS DEFEATED, THE OTHER TROOPS WOULD RETREAT TO WUYIN. WE MIGHT AS WELL PREPARE AN AMBUSH.
IF WE HEAD STRAIGHT FOR XUDU, WE'LL RESCUE THE EMPEROR IN NO TIME.
YES, STILL THE WAY OF CONFUCIUS.
THEN IT'S TIME FOR US TO TAKE ACTION.
LIANG AND SONG ARMIES WOULD FIGHT TOGETHER TO ELIMINATE A TRAITOR, I BET ONE DAY THE WORLD WOULD ...
YOUR STUDENTS?
HAHA. THE MASTER IS GOOD AT LEADING ONE ON STEP BY STEP.

Next, Pang Tong traveled to Xu Province to persuade Lü Bu to capture Hua Tuo and use him as leverage to force Xiao Meng into impersonating Zhang Xiu's aunt—waiting for the moment when Cao Cao summoned her, in order to assassinate him. (Hua Tuo was affiliated with the Sima clan, while Xiao Meng herself was an assassin trained by them. Earlier, Lü Bu had been injured in his battle against Zhang Fei, and thus summoned the most renowned physician under Heaven, Hua Tuo, to treat his wounds. From my perspective, there is no solid evidence that Pang Tong had foreknowledge of Xiao Meng's survival or her captivity under Lü Bu—thus, to claim that Pang Tong knew she was being held in Xu Province lacks foundation. The most reasonable conclusion is that Pang Tong persuaded Lü Bu to cooperate in an assassination plot against Cao Cao, and only by coincidence discovered that both Xiao Meng and Hua Tuo were there. Exploiting the situation, he convinced Lü Bu to seize Hua Tuo, thereby coercing Xiao Meng into the assassination. Compared to a typical assassin strike, placing Xiao Meng in disguise as Zhang Xiu's aunt—taking advantage of Cao Cao's notorious lust—was far more feasible for bypassing his vigilance.)

Following this diplomatic maneuver in Xu Province, Pang Tong relied on the extensive intelligence network of the Water Mirror Academy to locate

Zhao Yun's pastry shop (I prefer calling him by this name), where he hired him as another assassin to eliminate Cao Cao. Pang Tong first secured Zhao Yun's service with a generous payment, then subtly manipulated him with a truth known to almost everyone: "The Sima clan is being exploited by Cao Cao and will inevitably collapse." Zhao Yun, driven by the wish to save the household that had once sheltered him, agreed to the task—unaware that he was walking straight into Pang Tong's trap. Upon arriving at Nanyang, Zhao Yun realized that Pang Tong had not only hired him, but also deployed multiple other assassin groups for the same mission.

The final step: capturing Jia Xu, who was stationed on the outskirts of Nanyang, to prevent him from sabotaging the entire stratagem.


DON'T WORRY, NOT GOING ANYWHERE.
GET HIM.

Main Phase: *Strategy Execution.*

Cao Cao's main army advanced toward Nanyang, outwardly under the banner of conquest, yet in truth Zhang Xiu had already submitted the day before. Upon entering Lushui, Cao Cao was cordially received by Zhang Xiu. At that very moment, however, a report arrived: a separate force was advancing toward Xiahou Dun, who was encamped outside the city. Simultaneously, Cao Cao was unexpectedly targeted by a hidden archer.

The situation immediately became entangled, as Cao Cao's officers accused Zhang Xiu of scheming an assassination attempt. In order to pacify the turmoil, Cao Cao declared that under such circumstances, even if Zhang Xiu were foolish, he would not dare to act so rashly. Consequently, Cao Cao withdrew his army to Luoyang to prevent tensions from further escalation.

Meanwhile, among the assassins lurking in the shadows, discord erupted. They argued fiercely over who had fired the arrow. In reality, they did not belong to the same faction—each had been secretly hired

by Pang Tong from different organizations, and thus there existed virtually no trust among them.

All of this had long been foreseen by Jia Xu.

First step: He persuaded Zhang Xiu to submit to Cao Cao, for the disparity in troop strength between the two sides was far too great.
Second step: He deliberately dispatched a detachment outside the city of Nanyang.
Third step: Once Cao Cao’s main force entered the city, Jia Xu ordered that detachment to mislead the couriers, distorting the intelligence before it reached Zhang Xiu. In doing so, he provided the leverage that reinforced Cao Ang’s plan, thereby enabling them to reap the greatest possible advantage.


IN PRAISE, ZHANG XIU WILL CONTINUE HIS POST AT NANYANG.
THANK YOU, SIR MINISTER OF WORKS. PLEASE COME IN FOR A MEETING.
OH, WHERE IS JIA XU?
HE LED A TROOP TO GUARD THE OUTSKIRTS.
DID ALL OF YOUR MEN COME?
HAHA, I NEEDN'T WORRY KNOWING THAT HE IS IN CHARGE.
I WILL COME SOON AFTER.
SHOO

* Jia Xu led his troops outside the city.


GUARDS! PROTECT OUR LORD!
WAIT! THIS... THIS IS NOT MY DOING!
THE ASSASSIN'S ARROW CAME FROM ZHANG XIU'S CROWD.
REPORT! AN ARMY HAS APPEARED ON THE OUTSKIRTS, HEADING TOWARD GENERAL XIAHOU.
AND THERE ARE THREE MORE TROOPS WITH UNKNOWN INTENTIONS!

* One army was advancing toward Xiahou Dun, while three others remained unaccounted for in their movements.


YOU GIVE CAO CAO HIS ENEMY ZHANG XIU WITHOUT ANY CASUALTIES.
I WONDER, DID YOU COME UP WITH THIS IDEA TO WIN HEARTS AND MINDS FOR CAO CAO EVEN WHILE HE'S BEING TARGETED?
I WILL NEVER BE AS SCARY AS A MONSTER LIKE YOU.
THE DARK ARTS OF WAR; EVEN THIS TRAINING IS RATHER INTERES-TING.
YOU MEAN MY DIRECT-NESS,OR MY LOOKS?
BOTH...
AND I WONDER, WHAT KIND OF MAN WILL CAO CAO BECOME AFTER YOU JOIN XUN YU AND GUO JIA?

* Pang Tong confirmed that everything had been within Jia Xu's plan.

Cao Ang's Stratagem

Step One: After Cao Cao's army entered the city of Lushui, Cao Ang arranged for an assassin to make a feigned attempt on his father's life. He then coordinated with Jia Xu to falsely accuse Zhang Xiu of orchestrating the attack.

Step Two: According to the prearranged scenario, Cao Cao would withdraw his forces to Luoyang, deliberately refraining from further investigation. This would plunge Zhang Xiu into a state of confusion, compelling him to frantically prove his loyalty. The operation thus served two purposes: training Cao Cao's troops and enabling him to identify and eliminate dissenters within Zhang Xiu's ranks.

Outcome: Lushui fell into chaos. Zhang Xiu, in fear and desperation, brought his generals and family into Cao Cao's camp as hostages.

At this very moment, Pang Tong's plan was set into motion.

Knowing that Cao Cao’s cavalry had been dispatched outside the city, Pang Tong and Zhao Yun devised a plan to infiltrate Cao Cao’s camp under the cover of night, disguised as a supply convoy. However, the challenge remained daunting: even with the cavalry absent, the disparity in strength was still overwhelming. Moreover, Cao Cao’s troops had recently undergone rigorous training specifically designed to counter night raids and sudden incursions. To make matters worse, Zhang Xiu—who served as Cao Cao’s rear guard—was now being manipulated under Cao Ang’s stratagem. Should open conflict break out, Zhang Xiu would undoubtedly launch a relentless pursuit to prove his loyalty, plunging the situation into even greater peril. It was at this moment that Zhao Yun conceived of a possibility: within Cao Cao’s forces, there might exist infiltrators secretly aligned with Pang Tong.


WHAT'RE YOU HINTING AT?


WHO'S OUR INSIDER?


OUTSKIRTS OF LUYANG.
THE CAO CAMP


PEOPLE OF THE HU CLAN HAVE ALWAYS SOLD OUT THEIR MASTERS.
YOUNG... YOUNG MASTER, STOP KIDDING AROUND...


HOO, YOUR TALENTS ARE WASTED IN THAT BAKERY OF YOURS.

As Zhao Yun had anticipated, the infiltrator within Cao Cao's forces was Hu Xani — the Yuan general who had been sent by Zhang Xiu into Cao Cao's camp as a hostage.

Step One: Pang Tong ordered the allied armies to hover menacingly around the outskirts of the camp. In turn, Hu Xani would deliver a report to Cao Ang, claiming that an enemy force was preparing to strike at the encampment.


BUT, ARE WE REALLY THE TARGET?
ZHANG XIU'S GENERAL
HU JU ER
OH?
I MEAN THE ENEMY ON THE OUT-SKIRTS.
OH, YES.


HOW ABOUT THE TERR-AINS?
THE MAP ISN'T DONE YET. BUT I FIGURE THEIR NUMBER WON'T BE SMALL.
THEM... ON THE OUTSKIRTS, THEY SHOULD BE AFTER LORD CAO. WE MUST TAKE CAUTION.
YOU PEOPLE KNOW THIS REGION BETTER. GO DEFEND AGAINST THEM.
CAO ANG, OUR GENERALS HAVE ALL BEEN SENT TO GUARD THE OUTPOSTS, RIGHT?
YES, AND THEY CAN'T RETURN IN TIME.
WE DON'T HAVE MANY GENERALS. I HOPE GENERAL XIAHOU WOULD SPARE US SOME HELP.

Using the pretext of lacking manpower, Hu Xani skillfully deceived Xiahou Dun and Cao Ang, forcing them to release the generals who had previously been detained during the purge (a scheme originally devised by Cao Ang to identify those dissatisfied with Cao Cao under Zhang Xiu's command). To prevent any unforeseen incidents, Xiahou Dun personally accompanied Hu Xani, directly overseeing his every move.

From a subtle remark made by Cao Ang, it became clear: Hu Xani was the very man who had taken the initiative to capture Zhang Xiu's aunt and present her to Cao Cao. Earlier, Cao Cao had received a report claiming that Zhang Xiu had "offered up his aunt and a general" as hostages. In truth, Zhang Xiu had only surrendered Hu Xani and was entirely unaware of Cao Cao's peculiar desires. It was Hu Xani who orchestrated the abduction of Zhang Xiu's aunt, feigned being coerced, and continued infiltrating Cao Cao's ranks in order to execute Pang Tong's scheme.

That scheme involved relaying information to Zhang Xiu, exploiting his resentment to incite him into mustering his forces and launching an assault on Cao Cao's main encampment — precisely at the moment

when Xiahou Dun's core troops had been lured away, leaving them unable to provide timely reinforcements.

What is remarkable is that Pang Tong had already accounted for the possibility of this strategic arrangement collapsing. Without the "synchronization" of intelligence between Zhang Xiu's camp and Cao Cao's, the entire plan would have been impossible to carry out. Pang Tong clearly understood that Cao Cao would keep secret both his own improper intentions toward Zhang Xiu's aunt and the claim that Zhang Xiu had "offered up his aunt and a general" in order to win favor.

If such information were to leak, the honor of both men would be utterly ruined. In particular, should Zhang Xiu learn of Cao Cao's designs on his aunt, he would fight recklessly to the death. In that case, even if Cao Cao succeeded in seizing Nanyang, both his reputation and his army would suffer grievous losses. Not to mention the risk of a third power launching an opportunistic strike amidst the turmoil — scenarios which Cao Cao absolutely wished to avoid.

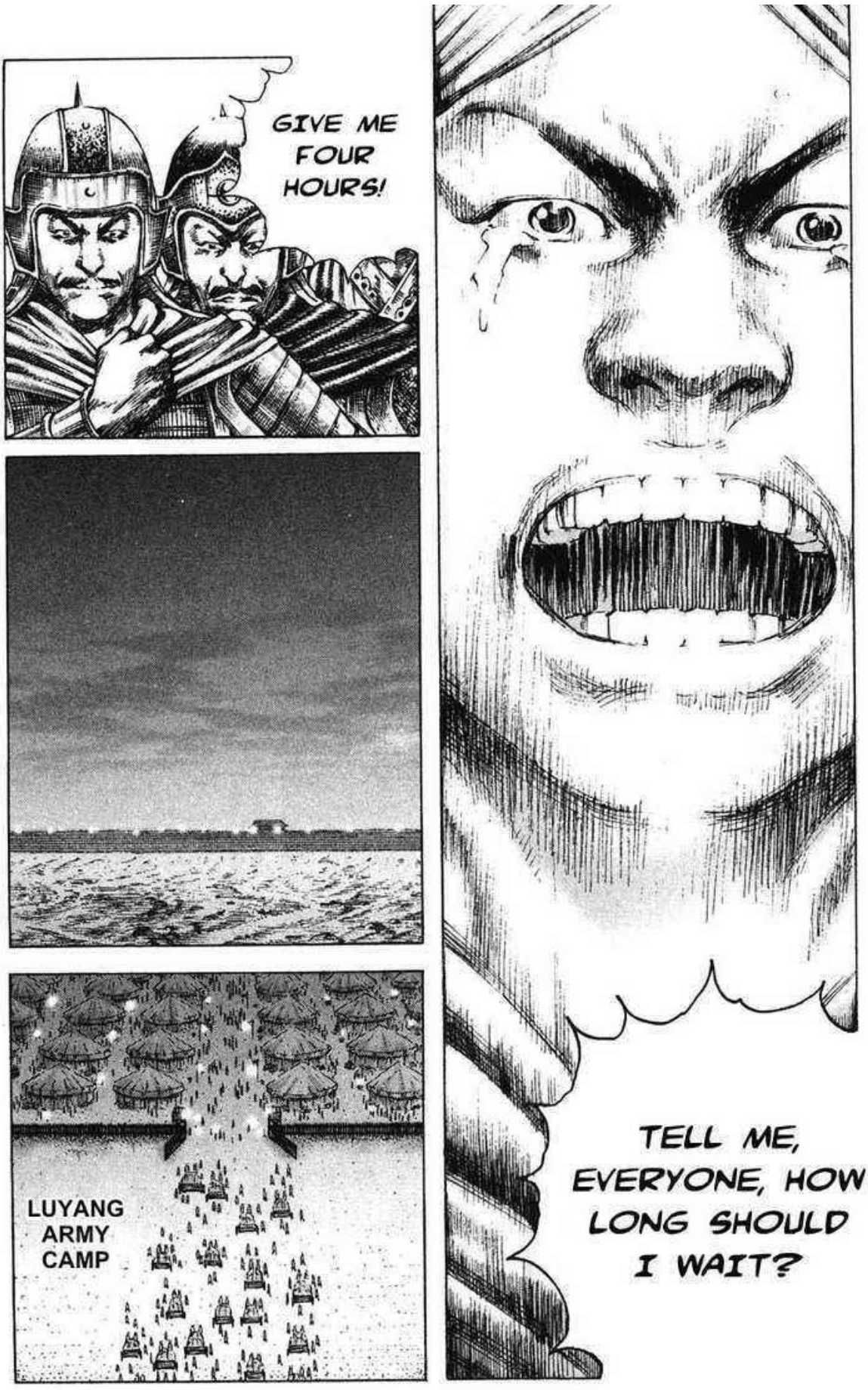
For this very reason, Pang Tong had no fear that Hu Xani's deception would ever be exposed — for he was supremely confident that Cao Cao would go to any lengths to conceal this shameful secret.


OH YES, HU JU ER,
HOW ABOUT WE RELEASE ZHANG XIU'S MEN, AND LET THEM PROVE THEIR LOYALTY TO US.
THEN I MUST ACCOMPANY THEM TO MAKE SURE.
MY FATHER APPROVES OF YOUR PERFORM-ANCE.
DO WHAT? CAO ANG, WHAT DID HE DO?
HAHA, UNCLE DUN, YOU SHOULD GO ASK MY FATHER YOURSELF.
I WILL DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO PLEASE MY LORD.

* Cao Cao Ang’s implied words.


DAMN CAO CAO! THAT SON OF A BITCH!
MY LORD! WE CAN'T LET THIS GO!
CAO CAO'S MEN HAVE NO REGARD FOR US. THEY JUST BARGED IN AND TOOK YOUR AUNT...
WHAT ABOUT HU JU ER?
REPORT!
HU JU ER DOESN'T DARE TO OFFEND CAO CAO, BUT HE SECRETLY DIVERTED CAO CAO'S MAIN FORCE, AND HOPES THAT YOU, MY LORD, WOULD USE THIS OPPORTUNITY WELL.
MY LORD, CAO CAO'S ARMY HAS SENT BACK OUR GENERALS THEY HELD!


GOOD! TELL THEM TO WAIT FOR MY COMMAND!
HELL! I SNATCH YOUR MOTHER, BUT YOU STILL HAVE TO PLAY NICE WITH ME?
WHERE'S THE LOGIC? ASK JIA XU FOR WHAT?
MY LORD, WE SHOULD DECIDE AFTER JIA XU COMES BACK.
HE WOULD SURELY HAVE A BRILLIANT IDEA TO RESOLVE THIS ISSUE.
MY LORD, JIA XU PROPOSED THE SURRENDER, LIKE HE'S GOING TO HELP!
MY LORD, OUR MEN ARE STILL ARMED AND READY, WHAT'RE WE WAITING FOR?


GIVE ME FOUR HOURS!
LUYANG ARMY CAMP
TELL ME, EVERYONE, HOW LONG SHOULD I WAIT?

*Zhang Xiu's response.

On another front, Hu Xia'er secretly hid Zhang Xiu's aunt elsewhere, then brought Xiao Mang (disguised) to Cao Cao's camp.

That evening, a transport convoy—actually a group of assassins disguised and infiltrated—arrived. On one hand, this group intended to assassinate Cao Cao, on the other, they sought to set fire to the southern granary of Cao's army. A variable arose when Zhao Yun encountered Xiao Mang, shocked that he was still alive. Zhao Yun decided to abandon his post and rush toward Xiao Mang. This accelerated the assassins' actions, leading to the ensuing chaos.

Zhao Yun hastily chased after Xiao Mang and accidentally collided with Dian Wei (Cao Cao's fierce general).

Back to the situation at the outskirts of Lucshui city. Hu Xia'er went ahead to guide Xiahou Dun's army in their campaign against the suspicious enemy forces. Based on his previously displayed loyalty, along with his familiarity with the local terrain, Hu Xia'er successfully manipulated Xiahou Dun's forces. He reported that the battle situation was urgent, and they needed to rush to the outpost before the enemy.

Thus, Hu Xia'er persuaded Xiahou Dun's troops to abandon their supplies in order to maximize marching speed. Then, he led them into a "shortcut" which was muddy and overgrown, slowing their pace. Here, thanks to his mastery of the terrain and careful training, they firmly held the initiative (the ones once captured by Cao Gang and later released to atone for their crimes). Moreover, Hu Xia'er and his men acted as the vanguard scouts, which meant his starting position was always ahead of Dun's army. With the advantages of distance and experience in moving through swampy ground, Hu Xia'er easily shook off Xiahou Dun's forces to continue Pang Tong's plan.

From the edge of the forest, Xiahou Dun saw a faint flicker of fire in the distance. At first, everyone assumed it was the enemy's torches, but Xiahou Dun immediately realized the entire army had fallen into a trap. That man Hu was actually a spy from a third faction; his purpose in leading the way was not to find the enemy, but to drive Dun's army straight into the ambush of the opposing side.

At this moment, Xiahou Dun also realized: the enemy forces loitering around the camp earlier were merely bait, intended to lure him away from Yushui Pass and drag his troops toward Luoyang.

Pang Tong had predicted that Cao Cao would not personally accompany the troops to Luoyang, but would remain at Yushui Pass. Cao Cao's purpose was to mislead Zhang Xiu, making him believe that he had left so as not to pressure him, while in truth Cao Cao remained behind to carry out his dark designs against Zhang Xiu's aunt.

From the moment Dun led the main force to Luoyang, Yushui Pass had been left completely empty.

As soon as he saw the plan succeed, Hu Xia'er immediately signaled the allied lords lying in ambush nearby to begin their assault. He himself, along with his troops, circled back to seize the supplies that Xiahou Dun's soldiers had abandoned earlier.

Meanwhile, the situation at Yushui Pass grew even more disastrous. The northern granary had already been set ablaze. Ironically, at first Cao Gang couldn't even distinguish whether this was a real raid or just a training drill. After all, the original purpose of coming to Nanyang was precisely to train the ability to respond to sudden enemy assaults. Because he still hadn't shed that mindset, when the sudden strike came, Cao's troops were completely flustered, unable to adapt in time. By the time they realized it was genuine danger, the flames had already erupted

violently. All of it had been foreseen and accounted for in Pang Tong's anticipations.


IF THIS IS ANOTHER DRILL THEN IT HAS GONE TOO FAR!
I WOULDN'T DARE MAKE UP SOMETHING LIKE THAT. THIS IS FOR REAL!


RIGHT, RE-DEPL-OYED...


WHAT'S THE SITUATION AT THE BACK CAMP?
IT'S FINE OVER THERE, BUT THEY'RE NOT ENOUGH TO HELP US!


THE FIRE IS JUST THE PRELUDE.


THEN GO REQUEST FOR HELP FROM THE MIDWAY CAMP!
HURRY! GET WATER FROM THE RIVER PASS!

Since the main force had been lured away by Hu Xia’er, there were no longer enough troops in the camp to put out the fire. Cao Gang was forced to order his attendants to call for reinforcements from the other garrisons. Yet, the very moment the order was issued, the next nightmare descended.

From the southern gate, the group of assassins had already stirred chaos throughout the camp. At first, Cao’s soldiers still clung to the hope that reinforcements from nearby camps would soon arrive to their aid. But instead of reinforcements, what answered their signal for help was a sudden assault launched directly by Zhang Xiu himself.

The situation quickly spiraled beyond control. Cao Gang immediately ordered his soldiers to abandon the firefighting efforts and concentrate all remaining forces on defending the southern gate. But before they could even regroup, a squad of archers from the transport convoy raised their bows and fired straight at Cao Gang. These were the assassins who had infiltrated earlier—responsible not only for the turmoil at the southern gate but also for setting fire to the northern granary.

Assailed from both directions, Cao's troops had no choice but to huddle into a desperate defense. Meanwhile, on the other side of the camp, Xiao Mang launched his assassination attempt against Cao Cao. A single stab to the shoulder left him gravely wounded, forcing him to retreat… The first step of the entire plan had thus been accomplished.
=> *"There is only one type of stratagem: first, let the enemy know your initial move, then carefully predict their subsequent steps".*

In Pang Tong's Linked Stratagems, every single element of the arrangement was meticulously orchestrated, each move carefully calculated to guide and exploit all available forces in order to achieve maximum benefit.

In the first stage, three figures "danced" upon the chessboard: Cao Cao, Zhang Xiu, and Zhao Yun. Each stood at a different pole within the scheme.

First was Cao Cao—the one at the very center of the entire power-struggle conspiracy. He and the forces under his command were the "main course" of this campaign, every stratagem ultimately aimed at him.

Hint & Trap: Through Hu Xia'er, Pang Tong released a message that a shadowy plot was targeting Cao Cao, supposedly orchestrated by some unidentified faction. In truth, this was his way of "revealing" the actual objective to Cao's forces—indeed the target was them—but cleverly twisted into a trap, waiting to observe how they would respond.

Next was Zhang Xiu—the catalyst for an unexpected leap forward, catching Cao's army completely off guard. Pang Tong already knew of Jia Xu and Cao Gang's plans, yet still allowed them to proceed smoothly for one reason: only when Cao Cao was certain he had successfully gained the upper hand over Zhang Xiu would Zhang Xiu's sudden rebellion deliver a devastating blow that left Cao's forces no time to react. Clearly, Zhang Xiu was an indispensable link in this opening phase.

Hint & Trap: Pang Tong had Hu Xia'er reveal to Zhang Xiu the entirety of Cao Cao's dark scheme, skillfully stoking the fury hidden deep within his heart, thereby luring him into raising arms in revolt. Apart from Zhang Xiu's aunt being personally delivered to Cao Cao, Hu Xia'er laid bare the whole truth, even deliberately exposing the purpose of provoking Zhang Xiu's uprising for all to see. Proof of this lies in the fact that after realizing Zhang Xiu's intent, several advisors urged him to wait for Jia Xu's return before making a move—clearly they had also perceived the

“deliberateness” of the tale. Yet rage had clouded his reason: Zhang Xiu ignored their counsel and resolved to throw his full strength against Cao Cao.

Finally came Zhao Yun—the agent meant to dismantle, root and branch, the political structure that Cao Cao had painstakingly built. In truth, Pang Tong did not need Zhao Yun to assassinate Cao Cao, for besides Zhao Yun’s own skill, he also had Xiao Mang and a squad of elite assassins… The attempt on Cao’s life would proceed with or without Zhao Yun. But Pang Tong still arranged for Zhao Yun to appear at the southern gate at the precise, preordained moment. The true intent lay in using Zhao Yun to confront Dian Wei. (Pang Tong knew of the enmity between Zhao Yun and Dian Wei back from Xu Province—he knew Zhao Yun had sworn to slay him. Always prioritizing thoroughness in his plans, Pang Tong had investigated the connection between Zhao Yun and Dian Wei, specifically in this instance:


IT'S JUST... JUST LIKE...
FIGHTING MYSELF.

Both Dian Wei and Zhao Yun were stunned by the strange resemblance: from their sensory deficiency—the inability to feel pain—to their fighting styles, they were almost identical. It was hard to convince anyone that all of this was merely a coincidence.

*Hint & Trap: Pang Tong directly revealed to Zhao Yun the plan to infiltrate Cao Cao's camp, disguised as a transport convoy, to cause chaos. The crucial point was that Pang Tong had complete control over the timing, ensuring Zhao Yun and Xiao Mang would certainly cross paths.

According to the plot: the convoy was scheduled to enter the camp at a precisely calculated moment. At the same time, the carriage carrying Xiao Mang was also arranged by Pang Tong, as Hu Che'er would swap Zhang Xiu's aunt with Xiao Mang before the servants brought her to Cao Cao. Thus, Xiao Mang's audience with Cao Cao must take place before or at the same time the assassins cause a disturbance. The reason is: when the assassins act, Xiao Mang must immediately assassinate Cao Cao and use the ensuing chaos to escape. If the chaos erupts first, Cao Cao will be on high alert, and the soldiers will tighten their guard, significantly reducing the chances of success. Therefore, strict control of the timing is mandatory.

The time difference was almost zero, and the tasks of both Zhao Yun and Xiao Mang were directed toward the same goal—assassinating Cao Cao. Therefore, the possibility of them clashing was extremely high. And when that event occurs, the progress of the entire plot will be accelerated even more. In particular, the simultaneous presence of two "Handicapped Warrior" members right next to Cao Cao's death would immediately point the knife of responsibility towards the Sima family.

=> Applying his strategic philosophy to them, Pang Tong revealed the first step of the plan to each individual separately, then quietly observed their subsequent moves.

In the next step, Pang Tong and the alliance observed the situation on the outskirts of Yushui Pass. Seeing that everything was going according to his calculations, Pang Tong began to deploy the next part of the plan.

According to Pang Tong’s calculations, after their defeat at Yushui Pass, Cao Cao's army would inevitably retreat to Wu Yin to regroup. This was their fatal weakness. By setting up an ambush there and waiting for Cao Cao's army to arrive, the alliance could concentrate all their forces to deliver a decisive blow.

Once Cao Cao was blocked at Wu Yin, the alliance would ride on the victory to advance straight to Xudu, rescuing the emperor from Cao

Cao’s army. At that point, Cao Cao would not only lose military authority but also his most important "tool" for manipulating the imperial court.


IF EVERYONE ALREADY UNDERSTANDS, THEN WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP?
SONG LI ARMY'S GREAT GENERAL, CHEN NAN
LIANG PING ARMY'S ADVISOR, DONG XIANG
IF CAO CAO IS DEFEATED, THE OTHER TROOPS WOULD RETREAT TO WUYIN. WE MIGHT AS WELL PREPARE AN AMBUSH.
IF WE HEAD STRAIGHT FOR XUDU, WE'LL RESCUE THE EMPEROR IN NO TIME.
YES, STILL THE WAY OF CONFUCIUS.
THEN IT'S TIME FOR US TO TAKE ACTION.
LIANG AND SONG ARMIES WOULD FIGHT TOGETHER TO ELIMINATE A TRAITOR, I BET ONE DAY THE WORLD WOULD ...
YOUR STUDENTS?
HAHA. THE MASTER IS GOOD AT LEADING ONE ON STEP BY STEP.

Setting: The Sima Clan's Residence. After the clan members were captured and interrogated by Cao Cao's forces, Sima Yi concluded that Cao Cao had begun to doubt the Sima family's loyalty. He also mentioned a letter that urged the Sima family to cooperate in overthrowing Cao Cao. From this, Sima Yi deduced that Cao Cao's army must have heard a rumor of betrayal, which led to the entire Sima family being taken for interrogation.

This was a low-level tactic of sowing discord, but it struck a fatal weakness: the Sima family had trade relations with almost every major power in the land, including Zhang Xiu. The letter sent to Sima Yi even contained a veiled message that Zhang Xiu would launch a campaign against Cao Cao. At first, Sima Yi did not believe this was possible. It was only after he met with the messenger that he realized the insidious conspiracy of the mastermind behind it.

Previously, Sima Yi remained skeptical. But based on the information he obtained, he understood that Cao Cao's death would be orchestrated for the "Handicapped Warrior" to carry out. When that happened, the Cao army headquarters would believe the rumor was true.

The close relationship between the Sima family and the "Handicapped Warrior" only added weight to the accusation. If Cao Cao died at the hands of this organization, the world would believe that the Sima family, unable to endure exploitation, had plotted to assassinate their lord. Sima Yi predicted that once the mastermind struck, many others would follow suit.

Sima Yi's uncle had suggested reporting the rumor-monger to the headquarters. However, the situation was extremely unfavorable, as the anonymous person had provided too much detailed information. The individual specified: the bakery of Zhao Yun—a former leader of the "Handicapped Warrior"—and an individual hiding next to Lü Bu who was skilled at using beauty to approach targets. Officially, both had left the organization, but in reality, they were still secretly carrying out missions.


ONE HANDICAPPED WARRIOR OPENED A BAKERY IN LUYANG.
ANOTHER ONE RESIDES AT LU BU'S CAMP.


ONE TARGETS ALL EVIL MEN WITH HIS DAUNTLESSNESS;
THE OTHER TARGETS ALL LUSTY MEN WITH HIS BEAUTY.
HA!
YOU DON'T HAVE TO LAUGH, BUT LISTEN TO MY NEXT JOKE.
THE TWO OF THEM MAY APPEAR TO HAVE LEFT THE GROUP, BUT THEY'RE ACTUALLY WORKING ON ANOTHER SCHEME.
NOT FUNNY AT ALL. HOPE YOU HAVE SOMETHING BETTER, MISTER.
THE REASON BEING, THE SIMA CLAN HAS SUFFERED GREAT LOSSES DUE TO CAO CAO'S GREEDINESS.

The messenger also warned that it was not guaranteed someone at the bakery would betray Zhao Yun for money, nor was it certain that a person named Hua Tuo would come forward to accuse Xiao Mang. Despite the lack of any guarantees, Sima Yi understood that the issue had become too serious to be taken lightly.


I CAN'T GARANTEE THAT SOMEONE FROM THE LUYANG BAKERY WON'T TESTIFY AGAINST HIS BOSS LIAOYUAN HUO FOR MONEY.
AND I ALSO CAN'T GARANTEE THAT A MAN NAMED HUA TUO AT LU BU'S SIDE WON'T TESTIFY THAT THE PERSON IS XIAO MENG.
IS THERE ANYTHING MORE AMUSING?

The question is: Who is the anonymous person?

The answer is: Pang Tong.

Only he would know that Zhao Yun opened a bakery in Luoyang and that Xiao Mang was hiding in Lü Bu's camp in Xuzhou. Moreover, he was the one who personally recruited them both for this campaign. The sole purpose was to drive a wedge between Cao Cao and the Sima family.

=> From this, it can be seen that Pang Tong has implicitly suggested Sima Yi's first move in the second phase.

Back at Yushui Pass, Zhang Xiu led his troops directly into the center of the camp, then dispersed them everywhere to hunt for Cao Cao. At the same time, Cao Ang also commanded a unit to rush in as reinforcements, making the battle extremely chaotic. The fierce duel between Zhao Yun and Dian Wei also concluded, with Zhao Yun claiming a hard-fought but well-deserved victory.

Rewinding to the moment Cao Cao was just assassinated: After the act, Xiao Mang quickly fled as Zhang Xiu's forces arrived. Had it not been for the fierce protection of Xu Chu, it is likely that Cao Cao would have died long ago. From Xu Chu's analysis, Cao Cao suddenly realized the presence of the "Handicapped Warrior," and immediately connected

them to the Sima family, believing them to be the masterminds behind it all.

Without debating right or wrong, that hypothesis was “validated” by the throbbing wound on Cao Cao’s shoulder. Although Xu Chu bore a personal grudge against the Sima clan and his words might have been exaggerated to pin more blame, what explanation could be more reasonable than his?

Even though Cao Cao had yet to personally confirm whether those two truly were "Handicapped Warrior” the seed of doubt had already been sown. Regardless of how much Xu Chu might have embellished, the mere fact that he risked his life alone to shield Cao Cao against countless troops was enough for Cao Cao to decide to trust him this once.


HAHA, IS THAT FUNNY?
WHO KNEW... MY LORD, WENT TO PLAY WITH, WOMAN INSTEAD.
THAT WOMAN, AMAZING; ENEMY, ARRIVES, IMMEDIATELY, ESCAPES; SKILLED.
LUCKILY, I CAME IN TIME, OR ELSE, MY LORD, WOULD NOT BE, LAUGHING AT ALL.
XU CHU, WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
SHE, IS DEFINITELY, NOT, FROM THE ZOU CLAN.


MY FATHER (XU LIN) KNEW ZHANG JI WELL; HIS WIFE, I HAVE SEEN BEFORE.
THAT WOMAN, ALSO REFINED, BUT, NOT ZOU.
MY LORD, LET ME, TELL YOU ANOTHER, JOKE, TO CALM YOU.
THERE IS, A FOOL, WHO THOUGHT, WITH A, GOLD-LAYING HEN,
HE CAN, MAKE IT, LAY GOLDEN EGGS, AS LONG AS, HE CAN, CONTROL IT.
THEN THAT MEANS...


HEAVEN IS JUST; AND UNDER THE LIGHT OF DAY, HE WOULD BE EXPOSED, TO MANY WITNESSES.
WHO KNEW, THIS HEN, TURNED OUT TO BE, A TIGER, WHO HAS, A CRIMINAL PAST.
THAT YEAR, WHEN MY FATHER, DEMANDED MONEY FROM HIM, HE BROUGHT ON HIS OWN DEATH. SAME, AS TODAY.
BESIDES THEM, EVEN MY LORD, AND I, HAVE SEEN.
FOUGHT ME, AT TANXIAN.
YOU HAVE, SEEN HIM, AT PUYANG.
WHO?

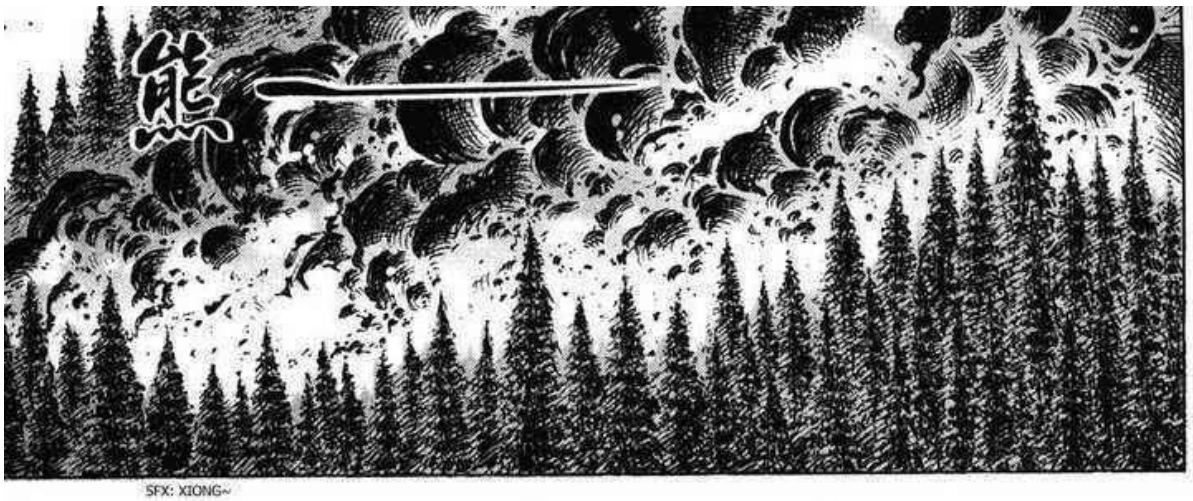

THINK, WHOSE ORDER, IS THAT WOMAN FOLLOWING?
MY LORD, THE HANDICAPPED WARRIORS, MADE A MOVE.

* Xu Chu’s veiled accusations were aimed at the Sima clan.

Horror followed horror, and Xiahou Dun’s army was now trapped in a sea of fire. According to Pang Tong’s plan, Liang Bing set the forest ablaze, cutting off Dun’s retreat. In front and to the left, ambush troops lay in wait, ready to strike at any moment. Faced with such peril, Dun was forced to steel his resolve and lead his men in a desperate charge to the right.

Yet, according to the map, that direction was a land of death. To take a detour would mean at least three days’ march, but all provisions had already been tricked away by Hu Xani. The soldiers, starving and exhausted, could not endure for long — within days, the army would collapse even without an enemy’s pursuit.

Pang Tong, grasping Dun’s psychology, had foreseen that he would not dare to break headlong through the ambushes. Though there was a chance to carve a path, the price would surely be heavy casualties, leaving the force too weakened to relieve Cao Cao at Yushui Pass. To preserve his numbers, Dun placed all his hopes in fortune itself, and — despite the mortal peril — drove his troops into the deathtrap, seeking a “perfect path to survival.”


熊

SFX: XIONG~




ONE TROOP TO THE LEFT, AND ANOTHER IN FRONT OF US.


GENERAL XIAHOU, CAN YOU SEE IT?

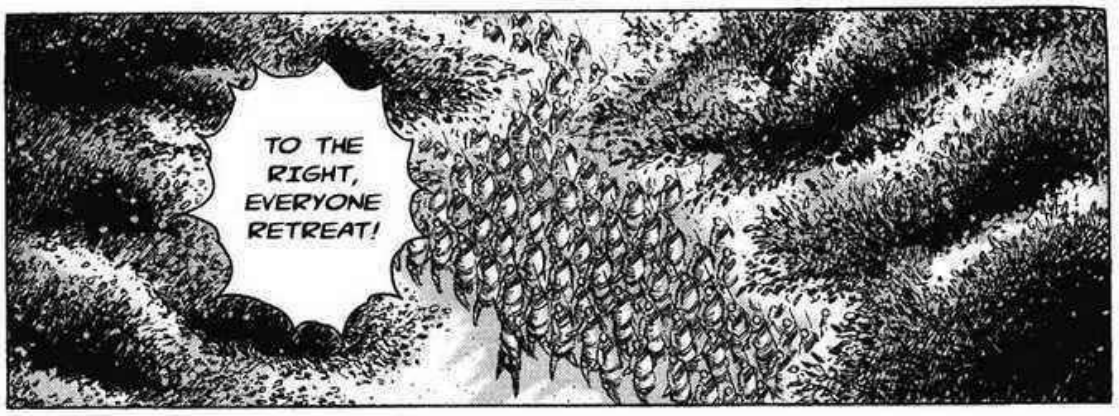


SCANNER: HMM, WONDERLAND SCANNING GROUP
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CHAPTER 191 DESERVE TO DIE OR NOT

第一百九十一回 該不該死




TO THE RIGHT, EVERYONE RETREAT!


THE MOST IMPORTANT THING RIGHT NOW IS TO PRESERVE OUR FORCES IN ORDER TO SAVE A MAN. DO AS I SAID AND GO RIGHT!


MASTER DUN, ACCORDING TO THE MAP WE CAN'T TRAVEL IN THAT TERRAIN. IT'LL TAKE AT LEAST THREE DAYS FOR US TO GO AROUND!
HOW WILL WE LAST THREE DAYS WITHOUT OUR MILITARY SUPPLIES?




HEAVEN, THE BET IS ON!

* Xiahou Dun staked everything on his gamble of chance.

In a life-and-death battle steeped in intrigue, any wager on luck could only open the door to unfathomable nightmares. Pang Tong knew well the nature of Xiahou Dun: his loyalty to Cao Cao was not merely that of a vassal to his lord, but akin to the bond of blood kin. It was precisely because he understood this that Pang Tong instructed Liang Bing to deliberately leave one path unsealed.

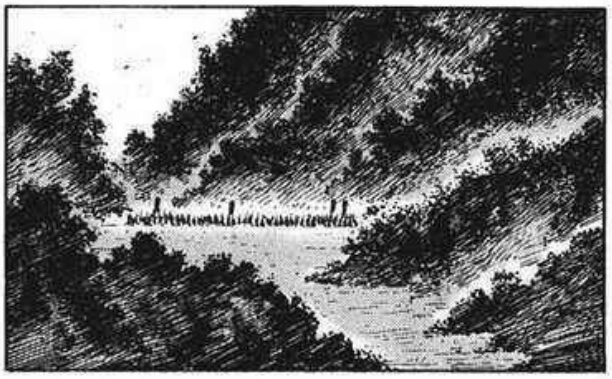
On the surface, it seemed the only road to survival. In truth, however, it was a merciless trap: for the more Xiahou Dun believed he could preserve his strength to rescue Cao Cao, the more inevitably he would choose to step into it.

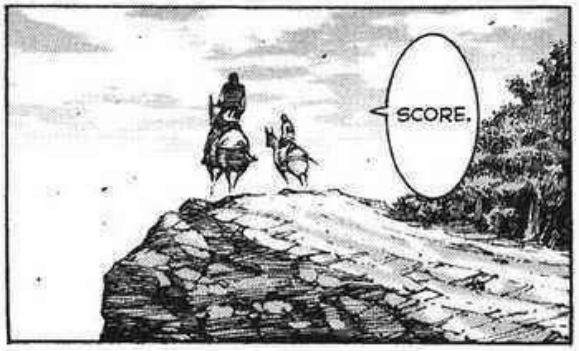
Though he vaguely sensed the looming danger, the situation left him with no other choice. When Dun led his troops into the deathtrap, Liang Bing's advantage was maximized, exactly as Pang Tong had arranged. To lure the enemy into an illusion of hope, to make them willingly tread the path to their own destruction — that was the absolute victory, a triumph won without expending soldiers or strength. All that remained for Liang Ping was to wait for the enemy's inevitable collapse.

=> Xiahou Dun knew the second step, yet he could not resist.


MY LORD, THEY HAVE BROKEN THROUGH.


MEMBER OF ANTI-CAO ALLIANCE
LIANG PING
PANG TONG HAS ALREADY PREPARED FOR THAT. WE WON'T INCUR ANY CASUALTY IN THIS BATTLE.
ONCE THEY ENTER THAT HOPELESS TERRAIN, THEY WILL RUN OUT OF RATIONS IN THREE DAYS, THEN DISPERSE.




SCORE.


WE MIGHT AS WELL WAIT A LITTLE LONGER.

At Luoyang, Pang Tong personally led an army to assault Cao Cao's main camp. With the coordinated support of Song Li and the allied lords converging from all directions, Cao's forces, already weary, could no longer resist; the surrounding camps fell one after another. Pang Tong had long foreseen the possibility that Cao Cao might break free from the encirclement at Yushui Pass — but even should he return to Luoyang, it would already be too late. The fortresses on all sides had fallen into enemy hands, and once more Cao Cao would find himself trapped within the crushing grip of the allied warlords.

Meanwhile, at Yushui Pass, Cao Ang hastily led his troops to the rescue, but in the end was struck down by an arrow loosed from Zhang Xiu's bow. His death plunged Cao Cao into unspeakable grief, yet he was forced to wipe away his tears and flee, clinging to the last thread of survival for his army.

Through the harrowing night, when all seemed lost, Cao's forces unexpectedly found a glimmer of hope. After Cao Cao's escape, Xiahou Dun was fortunate enough to discover a source of provisions. Though he had chosen a perilous path, there were still villages in the area. Reluctantly, Xiahou Dun sacrificed the reputation that Cao Cao had

painstakingly built; he ordered his soldiers to plunder grain for use and storage. Once again, miraculously, Cao's army clawed its way back from the brink of annihilation.

With Cao Cao's flight, Zhao Yun and the team of assassins had fulfilled their mission. Gravely wounded, Zhao Yun could no longer move, forced to lie still and await his recovery. The assassins began dividing their spoils — yet Xiao Wang's band vanished without a trace. Given his avaricious nature, there was no way he would willingly abandon the wealth he had risked his life to seize; his disappearance only deepened the mystery.

Before anyone could grasp Xiao Wang's sudden move, a terrifying twist struck: the true identity of Zhao Yun as leader of the "Handicapped Warrior" was exposed. Apart from him and Old Ma, only Xiao Wang knew this secret — just as the messenger had once warned Sima Yi: "I cannot be certain there won't be someone who betrays Zhao Yun for money." Those words had foretold a tragedy. For a greedy man to abandon the spoils he had risked his life to gain, there was but one explanation: he had been bought with a far greater sum. It was almost certain that Xiao Wang had already betrayed them. At that moment, Old Ma was struck with horror: they had fallen into a trap.

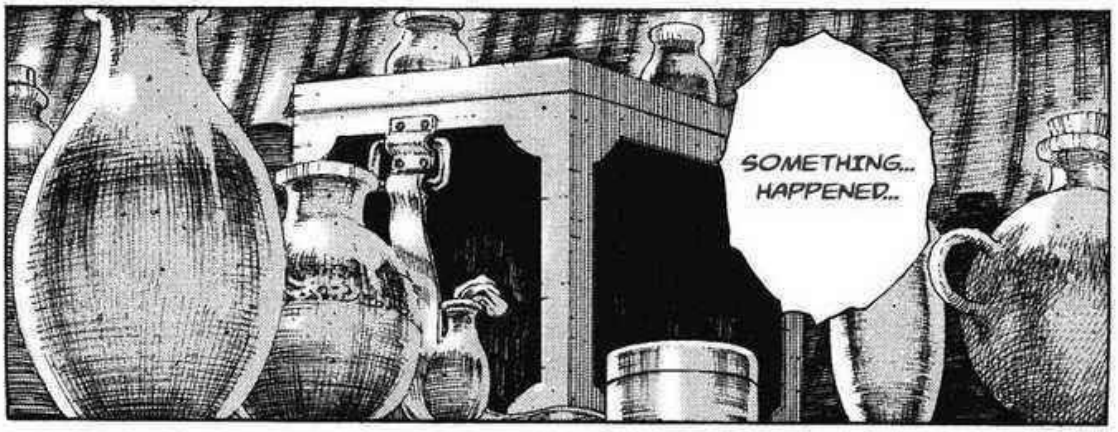
From the very start of the campaign, Zhao Yun had concealed his identity solely to spare the Sima clan from reprisal. Yet once his identity was revealed, the outcome no longer mattered — the Sima family would inevitably bear the consequences. If Cao Cao survived, he would surely harbor resentment, viewing the presence of two "Handicapped Warrior" at Yushui Pass and the wound he suffered as proof of rebellion. And if Cao Cao perished, news that the “Handicapped Warrior” had taken part in the ambush would inevitably spread, and then all the charges would descend squarely upon the Sima clan.

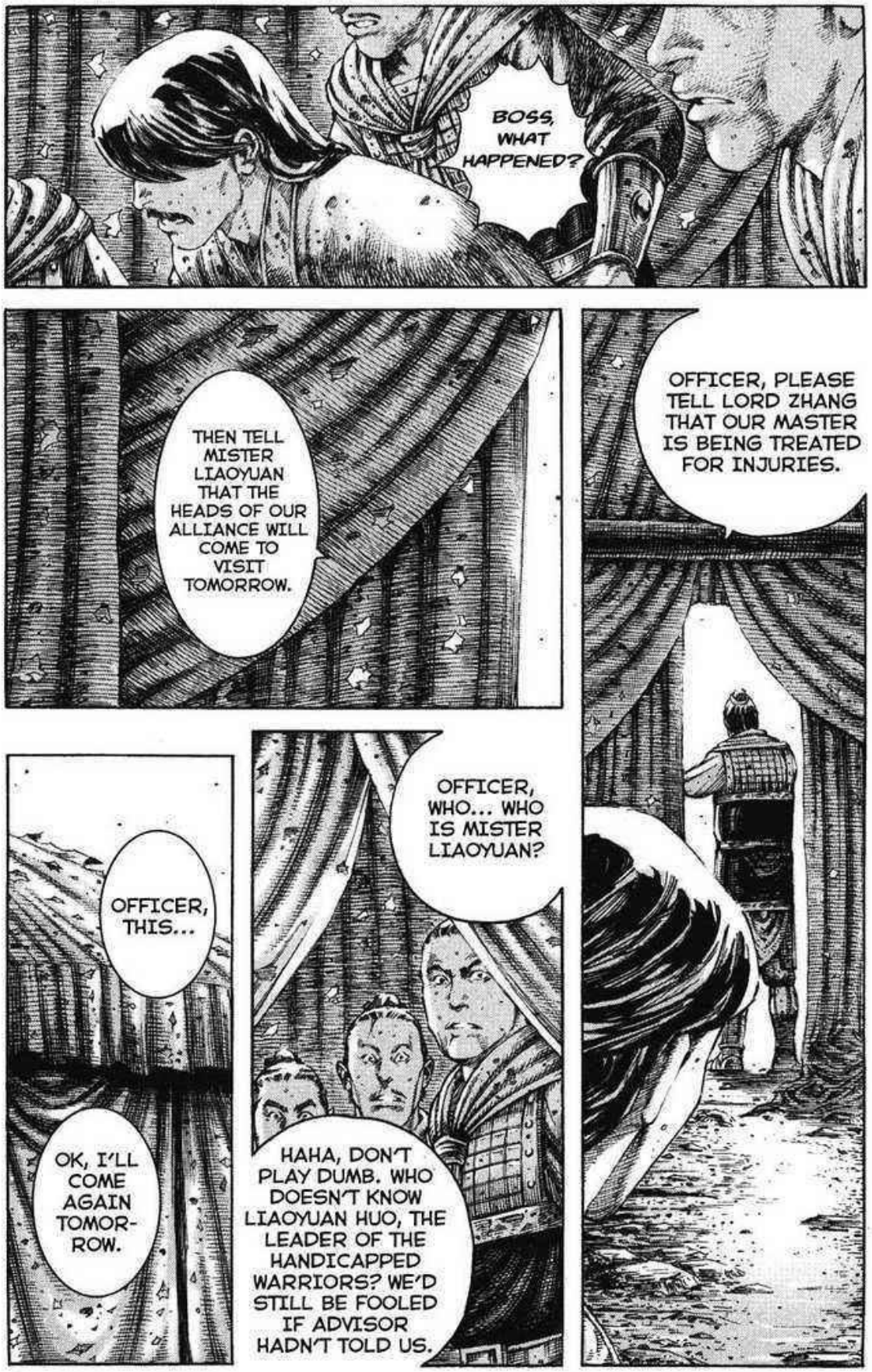

NOT A SOUND FROM HIM, THAT'S SCARY.
I BET HE'LL BE UP AND RUNNING IN A FEW DAYS.
ZI!
ZI!
OLD MA.
SPEAK.
MAYBE HE RAN AWAY?
I COUNTED, AND ONLY WANG'S GROUP IS GONE.
HE'S ALWAYS AFTER MONEY, SO WHY WOULD HE DO A JOB FOR FREE?

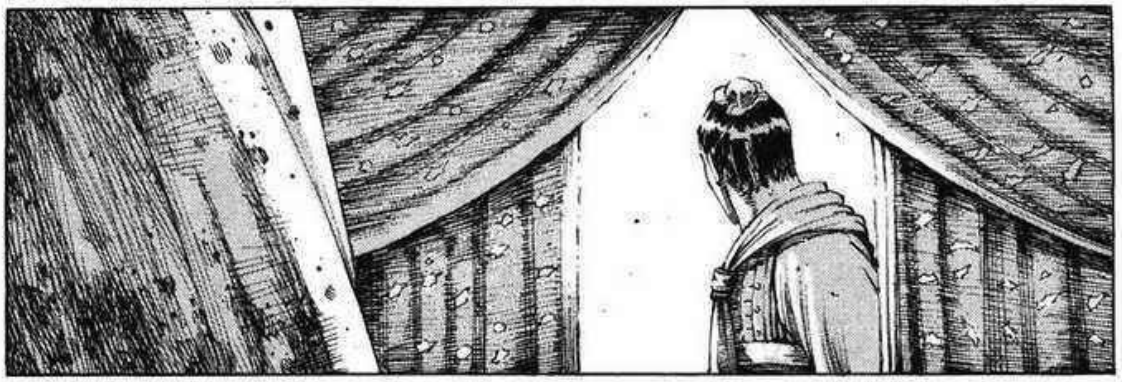

OF COURSE THEY'RE CLOSE. HE'S THE ONE WHO RECOMMENDED MISTER FENG.
THEY ALREADY KNEW EACH OTHER BEFORE THIS?
YEAH, AND HE'S BEEN ACTING WEIRD. HE CLOSES HIS PAWN SHOP OFTEN.
OH, I THINK HE'S PRETTY CLOSE TO MISTER FENG.
CAN NEVER BE TRUSTED.
HOO~ A "FORTUNE-TELLER",
BOSS!
MA...


RUN...


RUN
AWAY...


SOMETHING...
HAPPENED...


BOSS, WHAT HAPPENED?
THEN TELL MISTER LIAOYUAN THAT THE HEADS OF OUR ALLIANCE WILL COME TO VISIT TOMORROW.
OFFICER, PLEASE TELL LORD ZHANG THAT OUR MASTER IS BEING TREATED FOR INJURIES.
OFFICER, THIS...
OK, I'LL COME AGAIN TOMOR-ROW.
OFFICER, WHO... WHO IS MISTER LIAOYUAN?
HAHA, DON'T PLAY DUMB. WHO DOESN'T KNOW LIAOYUAN HUO, THE LEADER OF THE HANDICAPPED WARRIORS? WE'D STILL BE FOOLED IF ADVISOR HADN'T TOLD US.




IDENTITY...
EXPOSED...

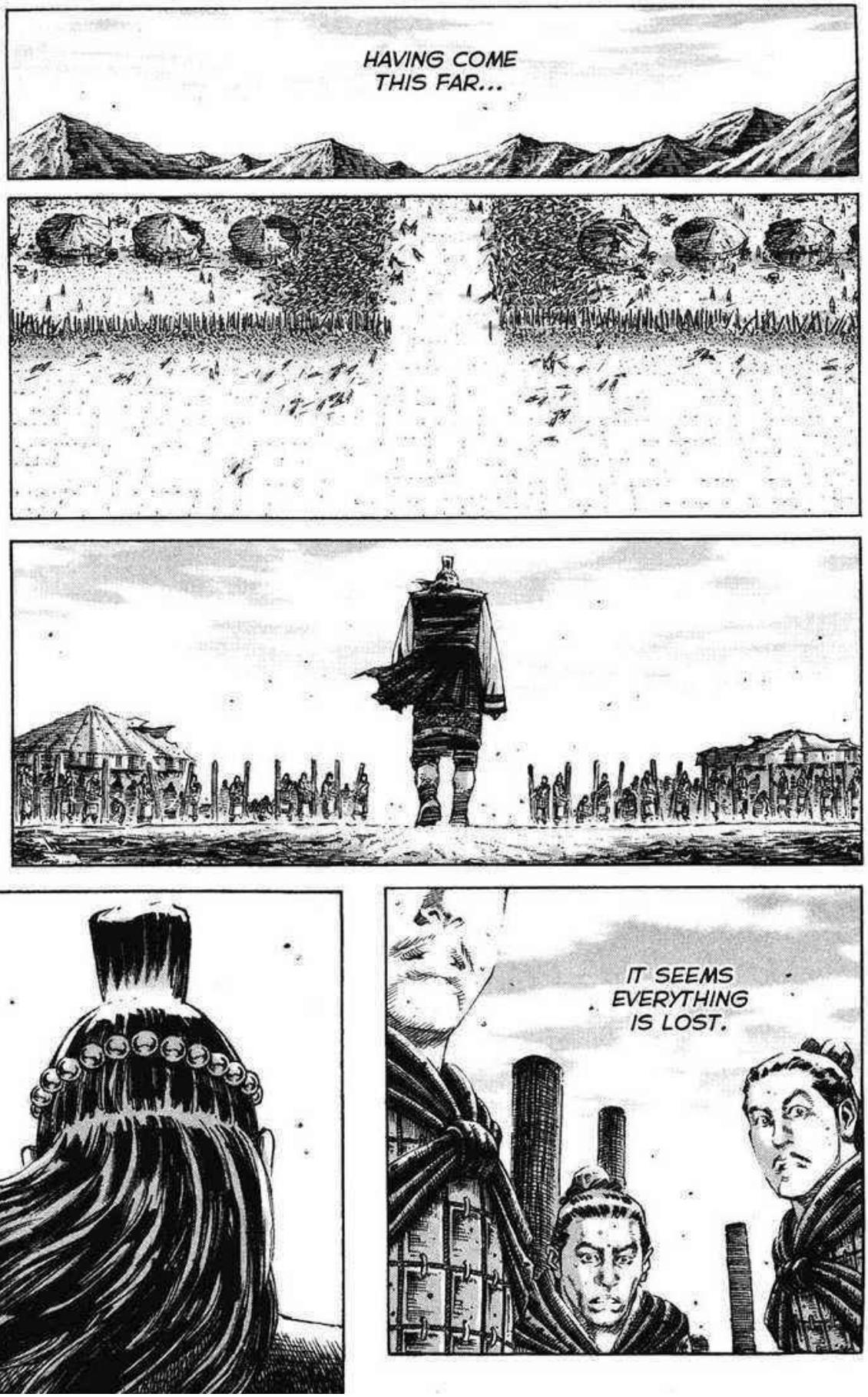

WE FELL FOR IT!

After the flames of war subsided, Pang Tong finally released Jia Xu. Gazing upon the devastation at Yushui Pass, he could only sigh in bitter sorrow. The entire political arrangement he had crafted to draw Zhang Xiu into Cao Cao's camp had now been reduced to ashes.

Meanwhile, Zhang Xiu, having received aid from the coalition of lords, fell into a dangerous illusion: believing the path he had chosen to be righteous. In truth, the coalition's support was nothing more than a ploy to drive him into peril on their behalf. What followed was even more decisive — Pang Tong's very presence shattered the bond between Zhang Xiu and Jia Xu, leaving Zhang Xiu completely ensnared in Pang Tong's manipulation, no longer under Jia Xu's influence. In this move, one could say, Pang Tong had effectively removed Jia Xu from the game.

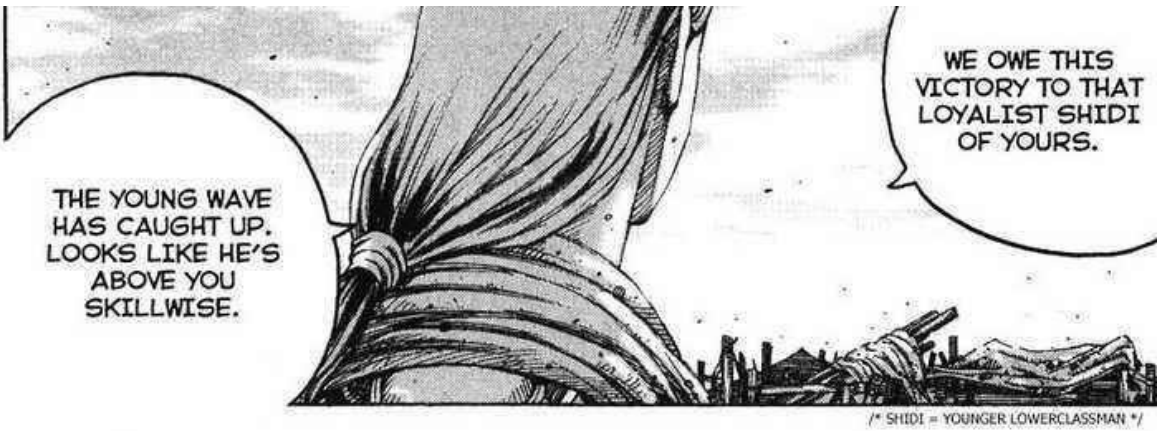
=> At their meeting on the outskirts of Nanyang, Pang Tong candidly admitted that he feared Jia Xu might turn to Cao Cao. That admission was itself a declaration: at all costs, he would not allow Jia Xu to serve under Cao. Pang Tong even went so far as to lay bare his schemes directly before Jia Xu. Yet, though everything was made plain, Jia Xu

could do nothing to alter the situation — he had no choice but to resign himself.


HAVING COME
THIS FAR...
IT SEEMS
EVERYTHING
IS LOST.




JIA XU, I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD.
BUT CAO CAO IS STILL ALIVE...
FOOL.
SO WHAT? MY ARMY IS UNSTOPPABLE, AND WITH THE HELP OF THE ALLIED FORCES NEARBY, IT ONLY STRENGTHENS MY RESOLVE.
ARE YOU LAUGH-ING?
NONONO... I'M HAPPY FOR YOU, MY LORD.



/* SHIDI = YOUNGER LOWERCLASSMAN */










YOU'RE DONE HERE.
JIA XU,
ADVISOR...
EVERY NEW SOVEREIGN BRINGS HIS OWN COURTIERS.
HOO~
WAY TO GO, SIXTH.

For the moment, the situation of Cao Cao and Xiahou Dun had eased somewhat, yet their honor could never be restored. Cao Cao was branded a lecher, Xiahou Dun derided as a mere brigand. Such stains would likely cling to them for the rest of their lives. If you have ever closely followed the shifts of the political arena, you would understand how crucial reputation is to a statesman. This was precisely one of Pang Tong’s most sinister moves — driving the reputation of Cao’s forces down to the very depths.


DIDN'T EXPECT YOU TO COME UP WITH THIS IDEA AFTER LOSING THE MILITARY GEAR.
YOU PLAY THE PERVERT, AND I'LL PLAY THE ROBBER.
A-MAN, SOMEBODY MUST BE HELD RESPONSIBLE.
FINE. MILITARY LAW CANNOT BE BROKEN.
OUR REPUTATION DIDN'T COME BY EASY. ONE MISTAKE AND WE BOTH RUINED IT.

From afar, Pang Tong and Liang Bing observed, unable to withhold their admiration for Xiahou Dun's quick-witted mind. Even when pressed to the brink of annihilation, he remained calm, swiftly devising a countermeasure to shift the tide. From the formation of "encirclement without assault" that Liang Bing had carefully arranged, Dun quickly discerned that the enemy's numbers were few, relying only on stratagems to force him into a deathtrap. Realizing this, he immediately turned the tables: ordering his troops to plunder grain from four villages, both relieving the desperate shortage and stockpiling provisions for a defensive stand while awaiting reinforcements.

Fortune, it seemed, also favored Xiahou Dun. By this bold step, he not only escaped peril but preserved his army intact, enabling him to march in time to relieve Cao Cao. With provisions secured and his forces unbroken, Liang Bing dared not launch a reckless attack. Thus, the grand design Pang Tong had laid out suddenly took a turn beyond his expectations.

According to the prior arrangement, the coalition of lords had secretly set an ambush at Wu'an. (To recall: after surveying the situation at Yushui Pass, Pang Tong deduced that if Cao Cao were defeated, he would

surely attempt to retreat through Wu’an. Thus, Pang Tong immediately ordered the allied forces to hastily conceal themselves there, awaiting his prey to fall into the net.)

At this time, Wu’an was held by Yu Jin — a general renowned for his mastery of military strategy and his exceptional adaptability. Pang Tong was well aware of this, and thus gave strict instructions: under no circumstances were they to launch an attack rashly.

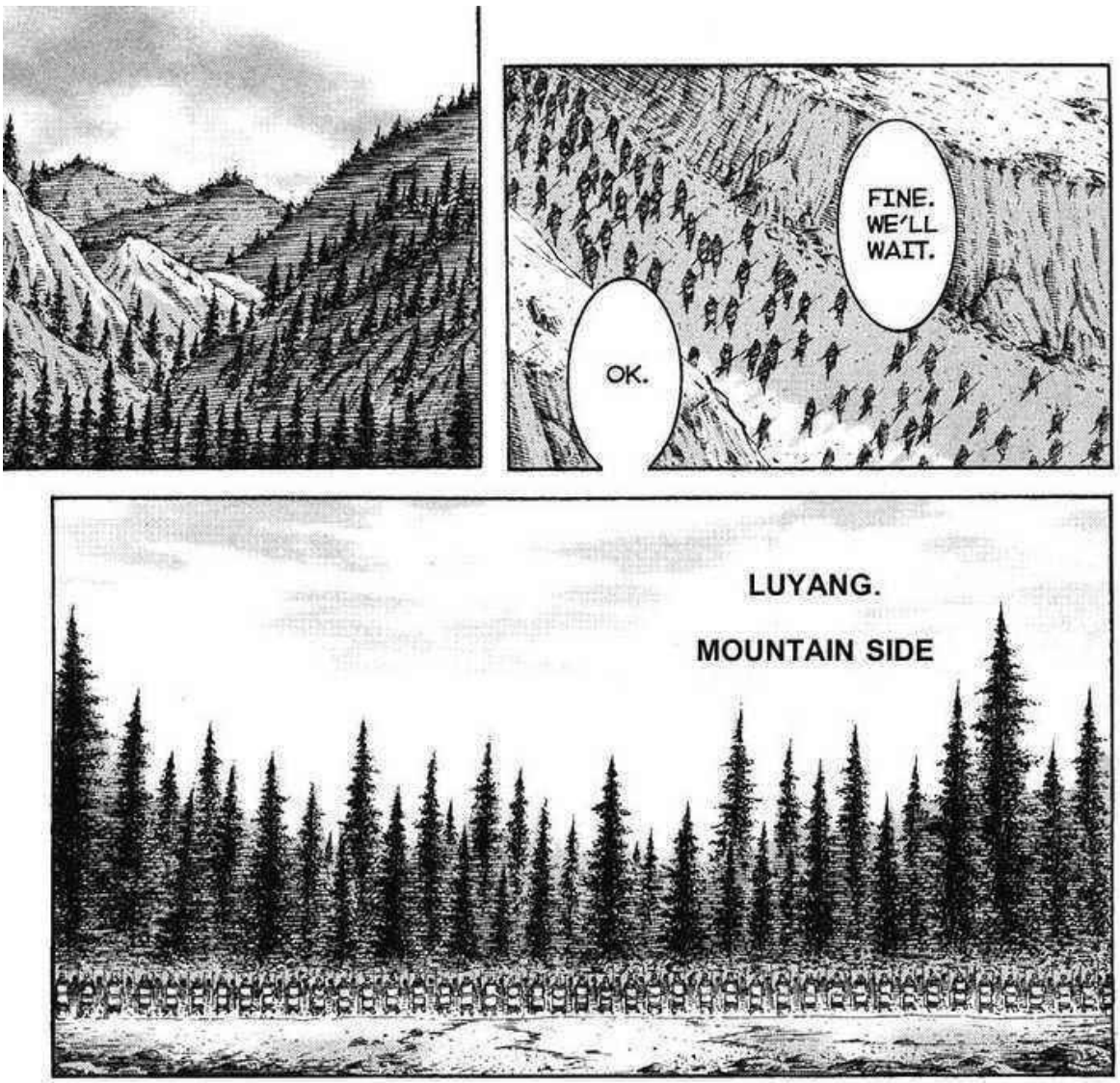
He then entrusted Chen Nan with a secret shipment taken from Zhang Xiu, commanding him to deliver it to Song Li — the man in direct charge of the ambush at Wu’an. As for Pang Tong himself, he would personally proceed to Hanoi to meet with Sima Yi.

At Wu’an, Li Dian noticed that the intelligence reports, normally arriving every three watches, had suddenly ceased. He concluded that Cao Cao’s main camp must have been attacked and urgently called for reinforcements. Upon hearing the news, Yu Jin felt uneasy and firmly refused to move before the truth was clear. But Li Dian, hot-tempered as ever, cast aside all warnings and personally led his troops to rescue Cao Cao.

Unexpectedly, every move was already within Song Li's sight. He immediately dispatched a detachment to circle behind and cut off Li Dian's supply lines. Just as Pang Tong had foreseen: with his fiery nature, Li Dian would surely rush out at the first alarming report, leaving Wu'an's defenses weakened by half.

Yet Pang Tong had given strict orders: "Unless victory is assured beyond doubt, you must not recklessly raise your troops." Thus, Song Li restrained himself, holding back from making a premature strike.
At this moment, Chen Nan arrived as instructed, joining Song Li to carry out the next step of the plan. The shipment Pang Tong had obtained from Zhang Xiu consisted of Cao's military uniforms. Chen Nan's soldiers donned the captured attire, disguising themselves as routed Cao troops fleeing toward Wu'an in search of refuge. Once they were admitted into the camp, that would be the very moment for Song Li to unleash his ambush.

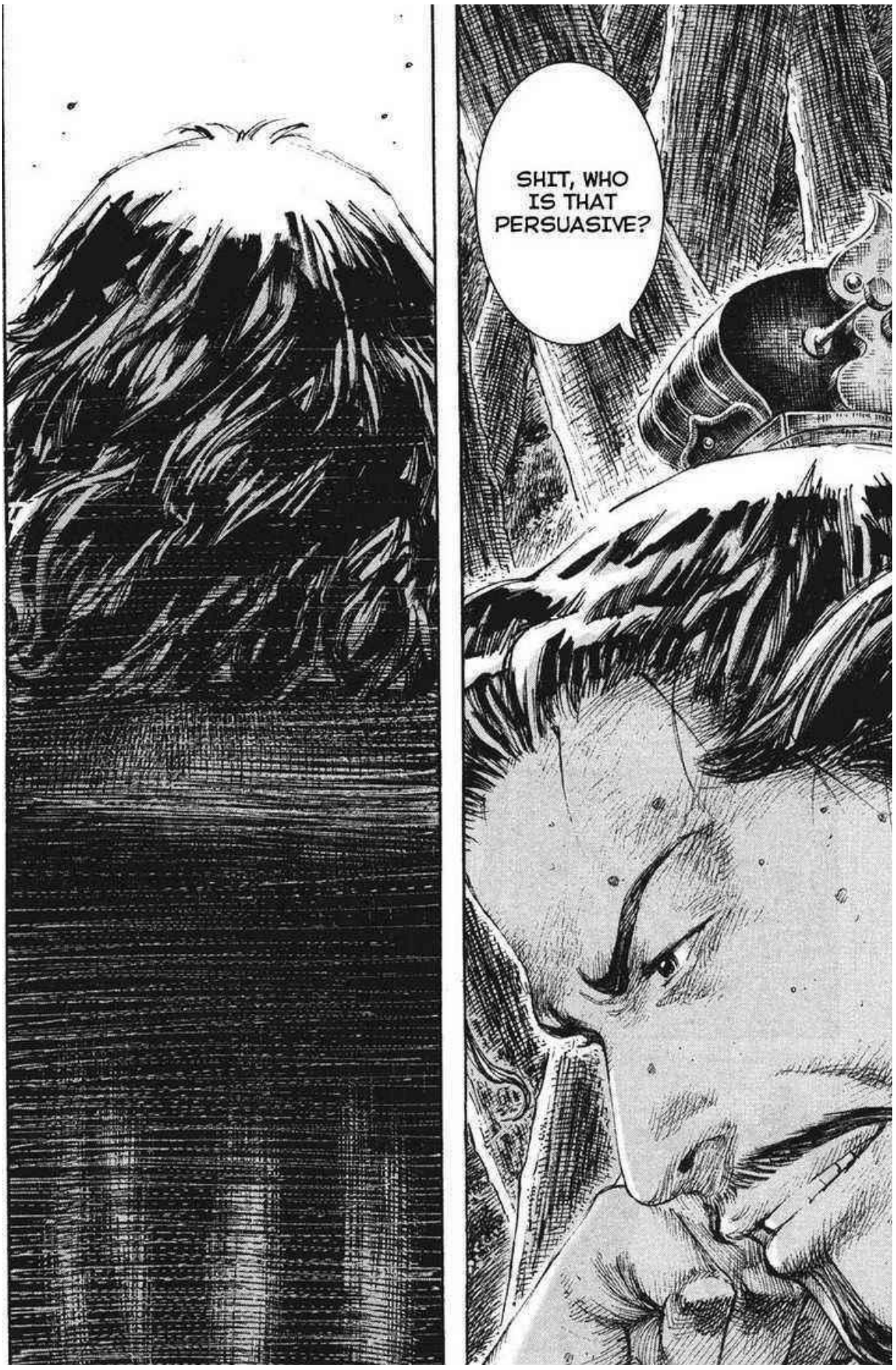
Meanwhile, in the treacherous mountains of Luoyang, Cao Cao found himself besieged on all sides. At last, he began to realize just how terrifying the mastermind behind all these schemes truly was…


FINE. WE'LL WAIT.
OK.
LUYANG.
MOUNTAIN SIDE
IF I WERE THE VICTOR, I WOULDN'T STOP NOW, BUT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE ENEMY'S LAPSE INSTEAD.
WHILE WE'RE TRAPPED HERE, OUR RATIONS COULD ONLY LAST US FOR AT MOST TWO DAYS.
IF I'M NOT MISTAKEN, WUYIN'S REINFORCE-MENTS WILL ARRIVE SOON.


LI DIAN IS AN IMPATIENT MAN; HE'LL BE LURED OUT SOON.


SUPPOSE WE THINK ABOUT THIS FURTHER. IF THE ENEMY MINGLES WITH OUR DESERTERS, AND BECOMES THE INSIDER AT WUYIN...
IN OTHER WORDS, YU JIN WOULD THEN HAVE TO DEAL WITH BOTH EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ENEMIES.
THAT LEAVES ONLY HALF OF THE FORCES AT WUYIN. IT WOULD SAVE THEM A LOT OF TROUBLE IF THEY DECIDE TO ATTACK.


SO HE'S ON ZHANG XIU'S SIDE.
MY LORD, I FOUND OUT THAT THE ONE HAVING US SURROUNDED IS "STRONGHOLD MASTER" LIANG PING.
IF LIANG PING HAS SENT TROOPS, WHY WOULD SONG LI, HIS OLD ENEMY, STAY PUT?
IMPOS-SIBLE...
WHY WOULDN'T THEY, IF THERE'S SOMETHING IN IT FOR THEM?
WE TRIED TO ACCOUNT FOR ALL POSSIBILITIES, BUT WE MISSED THIS.
IF I'M NOT MISTAKEN, THEY HAVE BECOME ALLIES AT SOME POINT.


SHIT, WHO IS THAT PERSUASIVE?

The coalition army numbered barely two-tenths of Cao Cao's forces. Thus, every decision had to be made with utmost caution. Pang Tong's strategy revolved primarily around the principle of "alliance" — using comrades as pillars of support, each compensating for what the other lacked. Most crucial of all was to earn recognition from one's allies; only when acknowledged would they devote themselves wholeheartedly to the plan for the sake of the greater good.

Since his diplomatic mission to Xuzhou, Pang Tong had persuaded Lü Bu to send Xiao Meng to assassinate Cao Cao. Later, Hu Xani delivered messages urging Lü Bu to raise his forces. Pang Tong knew well that, even with Lü Bu's lack of prudence, vague appearances alone would never convince him to openly oppose Cao Cao. Thus Pang Tong arranged for him to witness one shocking result after another — outcomes impossible to deny.

Lü Bu's role in the plan was to ensure that Cao Ren in Tan County could not send reinforcements to Wu'an — for once Lü Bu raised his banners, he would seize the chance to strike at Tan. As for Yuan Shao, Pang Tong had accounted for him as well; the reason he chose this very moment to attack Cao Cao was that Yuan Shao had already dispatched an army against Gongsun Zan, led by Yuan Fang — a fellow disciple of Pang Tong.

The next stage of the plan began — Liu Biao, a member of the imperial Han clan, had agreed to cooperate with Pang Tong. With his support, the coalition's strength now doubled that of Cao Cao's forces.

At Henei, the Sima clan convened a secret council to discuss delaying the supply of provisions to Cao Cao's army, in accordance with the letter's demand. Fearing that his ties with the "Handicapped Warrior" might be exposed, Sima Yi had no choice but to comply. Yet he was completely unaware that this matter had already been revealed long ago.

At Wu'an, Yu Jin had just received a group of routed soldiers who came seeking refuge. Chen Nan's scheme succeeded beyond expectation: after entering the main camp, he reported the situation of Cao Cao being besieged, subtly provoking Yu Jin to march out for rescue. Thus, the plan for Song Li to seize Wu'an was set into motion.
As anticipated, Li Dian, hot-tempered as ever, ignored military orders and led his troops out, only to fall into a deadly ambush. Though he barely managed to reunite with Cao Cao, his forces not only failed to provide aid but became a burden instead. The provisions, originally

sufficient for two days, now proved inadequate with the addition of Li Dian's defeated remnants.

In the face of despair, Cao Cao's forces were forced to retreat southward. Yet this, too, had already been foreseen by Pang Tong. Gifted in reading the elements, he had precisely calculated the moment when the winds would shift, then set fire to block their path of retreat. With the southern route sealed, Cao Cao's army had no choice but to flee north—toward a narrow mountain pass.

At Xiang County – Upon hearing the grim news about Cao Cao, Cao Ren immediately tightened control over the populace. Soldiers were dispatched to arrest anyone acting suspiciously, while rumors were suppressed to prevent panic within the city. In secret, Cao Ren and Cao Cao's trusted aides discussed plans to mount a rescue. Yet their greatest concern was clear: if reinforcements left the city, Lü Bu, Liu Biao, and Liu Chong would surely seize the chance to launch an assault.

It was from this very point that Guo Jia perceptively realized the truth: Lü Bu and the two Lius already shared hidden ties. And the mastermind pulling the strings behind them—none other than Pang Tong. For this

reason, even Xun Yu, despite his long-standing rivalry with Guo Jia, was forced to set aside his prejudice and take the initiative to cooperate.

Meanwhile, Cao Cao found himself in a life-or-death predicament. The narrow mountain pass that served as his escape route had already been lined with ambushes laid by Liang Bing. From both sides of the cliffs, volleys of arrows rained down without pause. With the treacherous terrain blocking any retreat, Cao's troops had no choice but to hurl themselves forward with all their strength.

Yet just as they reached the exit, Zhang Xiu's main force suddenly surged forth, joining the ambushers from behind to form a deadly pincer. The Cao army was trapped in a desperate situation—no path to advance, no road to retreat.


BROTHERS, WORK WITH ZHANG XIU!
SHOUTING: KILL~
殺
HAHA, ZHANG XIU ARRIVES JUST WHEN WE RUN OUT OF ARROWS!
SHOUTING: KILL~
殺

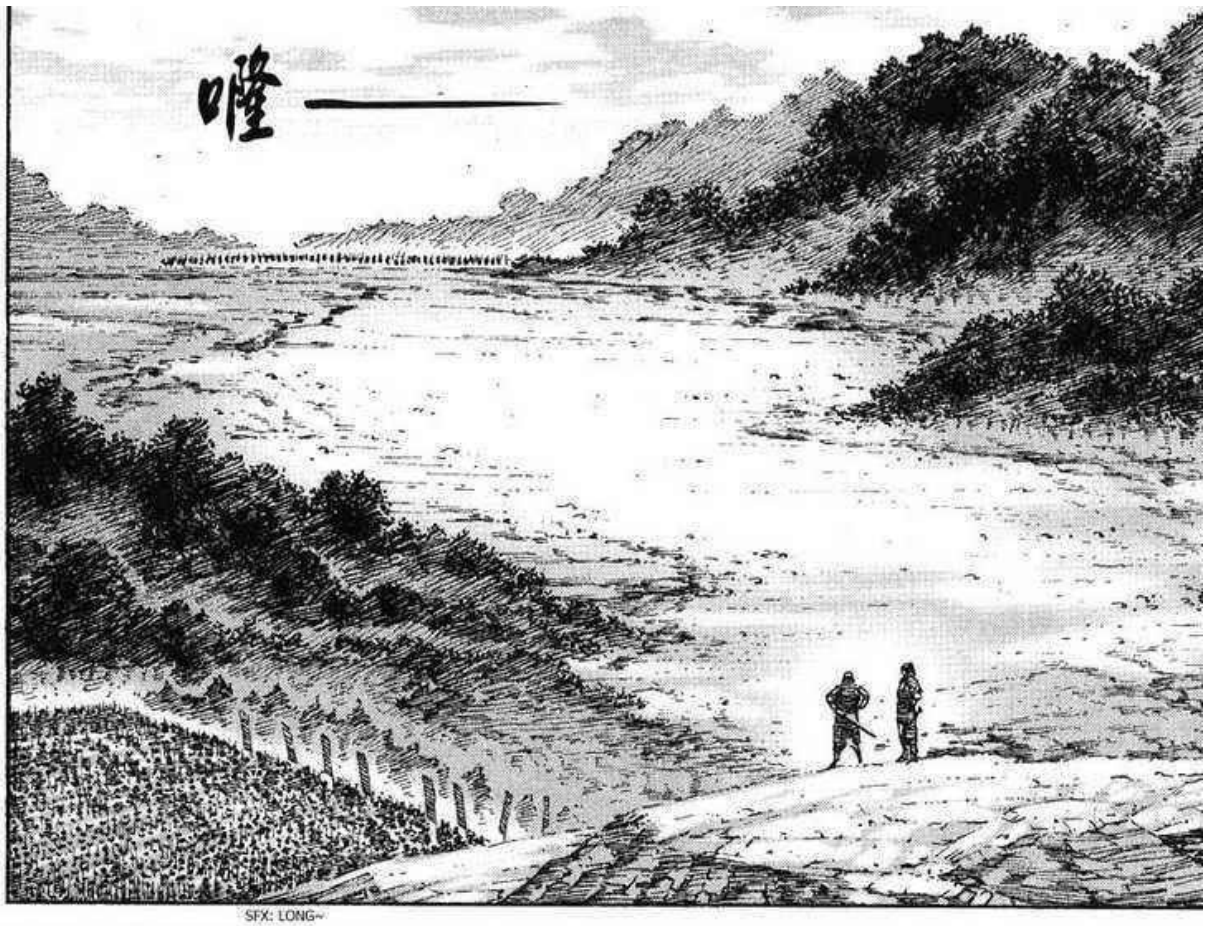
To break Pang Tong's "Linked Stratagems," Xun Yu carefully assigned duties to each member of Cao Cao's high command, ensuring every task suited their individual strengths. As for himself, he took on the responsibility of confronting Lü Bu directly.
(Note: Since this document focuses on analyzing Pang Tong's "Linked Stratagems" rather than the entire Nanyang campaign, the strategies of Xun Yu and Guo Jia are treated in a simplified manner.)

At Wu'an, believing the time ripe, Song Li was convinced that Chen Nan's plan had succeeded. He immediately ordered an assault on the city. Yet unbeknownst to him, Yu Jin had already exposed Chen Nan's true identity not long before. Not only that, Yu Jin had cleverly turned the tables, seizing control of Chen Nan's entire band.

The truth was that after Li Dian was lured away, Yu Jin had already discerned the plot behind the scenes. Contrary to enemy expectations, he did not march to Cao Cao's aid; instead, he secretly summoned soldiers from nearby garrisons, concentrating them all at the main camp. The force that Chen Nan had seen leaving was merely a small detachment, deliberately released by Yu Jin to deceive Song Li. The core of Yu Jin's army remained fully intact.

As a result, Yu Jin's strength did not diminish—in fact, it doubled compared to before. Meanwhile, the coalition's numbers were only a fifth of Cao's army to begin with, making the disparity between Song Li and Yu Jin overwhelming. Through this stratagem, Yu Jin turned Pang Tong's trap into a net that instead closed upon Song Li.

Had Song Li truly absorbed Pang Tong's warning—"Only attack when victory is assured"—this disaster might have been avoided. The meaning of Pang Tong's words was not merely about certainty of success; it was a deeper admonition: before acting, one must eliminate every possible path to failure and never allow impatience to dictate decisions. But Song Li and his confidants, overconfident because of Chen Nan's infiltration, neglected the most critical step—verifying the truth for themselves. This very complacency led them, and their army, straight into the snare Yu Jin had prepared.


噔——

SFX: LONG~


HAHA, LI DIAN HAS BEEN LURED OUT.
ZHANG XIU'S GENERAL
HU JU ER
LET'S SEND A DIVISION TO CUT OFF THEIR SUPPLY LINE.
ANTI-CAO ALLIANCE MEMBER
SONG LI


WITH LI DIAN GONE, THEIR FORCES AT WUYIN WOULD BE HALVED.
BY NUMBER WE'RE AT FULL ADVANTAGE. A SURE WIN.
I SAY MISTER FENG IS BEING TOO CAREFUL.
IF THAT'S TRUE IT'D BE DIFFICULT FOR US TO TAKE WUYIN.
BUT ADVISOR INSISTED THAT WE NOT ATTACK UNLESS WE'RE ABSOLUTELY CONFIDENT.
DON'T WORRY, MY SUBORDINATE CHEN NAN HAS NOTHING BUT PRAISES FOR HIM. THIS WON'T STUMP HIM.
REPORT. GENERAL CHEN NAN IS HERE.


YES-SIR.
THERE ARE SOME CLOTHING ON THE CARTS. TELL TEAM TWO TO PUT THEM ON.


MASTER SAID, LET ME ENTER THEIR CAMP BEFORE SENDING TROOPS.


HAHA, IF SOMETHING HAPPENED AT CAO CAO'S MAIN CAMP, IT CERTAINLY IS ABOUT TIME FOR THE DESERTERS TO GET HERE.


CHEN NAN, WHEN DID YOU SURRENDER TO THE CAO CROOK?

*Before Chen Nan even arrived, Song Li and Hu Xani had already shown their rashness—nearly disregarding Pang Tong's instructions altogether. The irony was that both of them knew full well that Yu Jin was a formidable general, skilled in the art of war. And yet, they were so overconfident as to believe he would simply fall into their trap—even though even Hu Xani himself had noticed the critical flaw.

Song Li, like a hare caught in a tiger's jaws, was utterly crushed by Yu Jin's forces, leaving him no option but to flee. Yu Jin seized the momentum and pursued relentlessly, driving Song Li into the forests where he sought refuge with Liang Bing—only to stumble upon Cao Cao himself in flight. Trapped from both front and rear, Song Li's troops were annihilated.

Liang Bing, emboldened only by Zhang Xiu's backing, dared to stand against Yu Jin. Yet by this point, the situation at Luoyang had already spiraled completely out of control—while Pang Tong, still in Henan, remained unaware of the dramatic turn of events.

At Henei, the Sima clan had long since devised a plan to eliminate Cao Cao. Every detail had been arranged with precision, awaiting only the right moment to rise up and sweep away Cao's faction. Once the Henan uprising succeeded, rebellion was certain to ignite across the realm—and the essential precondition was none other than Cao Cao's death at Luoyang.

Pang Tong understood everything, for he himself was the instigator. He personally came to the Sima residence, both to observe Sima Yi's arrangements and to warn him against playing any tricks behind his back.

At Xuzhou, Hua Tuo was deliberately released with a deeper purpose: he would return to denounce Xiao Meng before Cao's faction, thereby forcing the Sima clan to follow the very path Pang Tong had laid out. At the same time, this served as proof to Lü Bu that everything was proceeding according to Pang Tong's design, compelling him to march against Cao.

In addition, the evidence tied to the events at Luoyang made the figure of Xiao Wang nothing less than a second set of chains—subtly arranged by Pang Tong to keep the Sima clan firmly under his control.


FORTUNE-TELLERS ALWAYS HAVE FORESIGHT.
WHAT? THEY ALREADY SENT THE NEWS?
IT'S ALREADY OVER.
XIAO... XIAO WANG?
THAT XIAO WANG HAS SENT US A LETTER.
WITH THE PROOF OF YOUR DIRTY BUSINESS AT LUYANG, XIAO WANG BLACKMAILS US TO HELP. SINCE THE PROOF IS IRREFUTABLE, EVEN IF WE MANAGE TO ESCAPE, IT'LL BE FOR NOUGHT.

At the beginning of chapter 198, there is a very interesting saying.

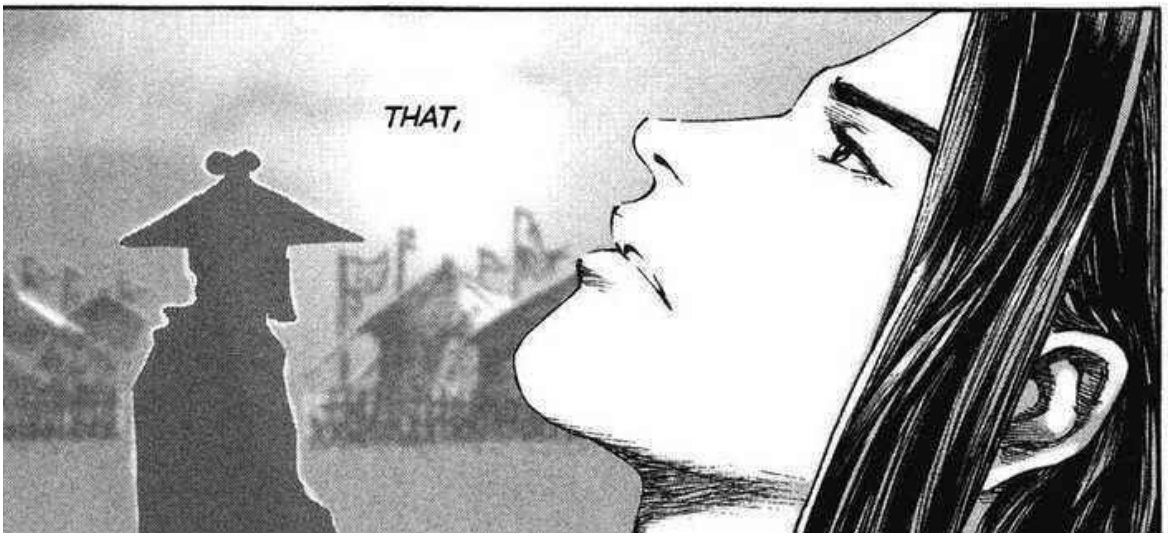

TO MAKE THE ENEMY SLACK, YOU MUST MAKE HIM FORGET.
CAO CAO'S TERRITORY IS NOT FAR AHEAD. DOCTOR HUA, PLEASE HURRY.
AS COLLEAGUES WE DON'T WANT TO SEE YOUR OUTSTANDING MEDICAL SKILLS GO TO WASTE EITHER. PLEASE HURRY.
IF IT WASN'T FOR EVERYONE'S COURAGEOUS EFFORTS, I DON'T KNOW WHEN I'LL BE ABLE TO...
THE FEMALE HANDICAPPED WARRIOR WENT AFTER CAO CAO.

Beyond the purposes already mentioned, the reason Pang Tong lived in seclusion for so many years was precisely to make Sima Yi gradually forget his existence. From the very beginning, Pang Tong's true target was none other than Sima Yi—the one who held real power within the Sima clan, the true leader of the "Remnants," and above all, the man who once defeated him in the riddle contest at Pingyang. That impression was deeply etched into Pang Tong's memory.

He understood clearly that ever since the Sima clan submitted to Cao Cao, the only figure capable of turning the tide was Sima Yi. Compared to the uncles and elders of his clan—men driven solely by profit, bearing more the likeness of merchants than of statesmen—Sima Yi was truly a brilliant political seedling. Only by controlling and exploiting this man could Pang Tong fully harness the value of the Sima clan in his plan to overthrow Cao Cao.

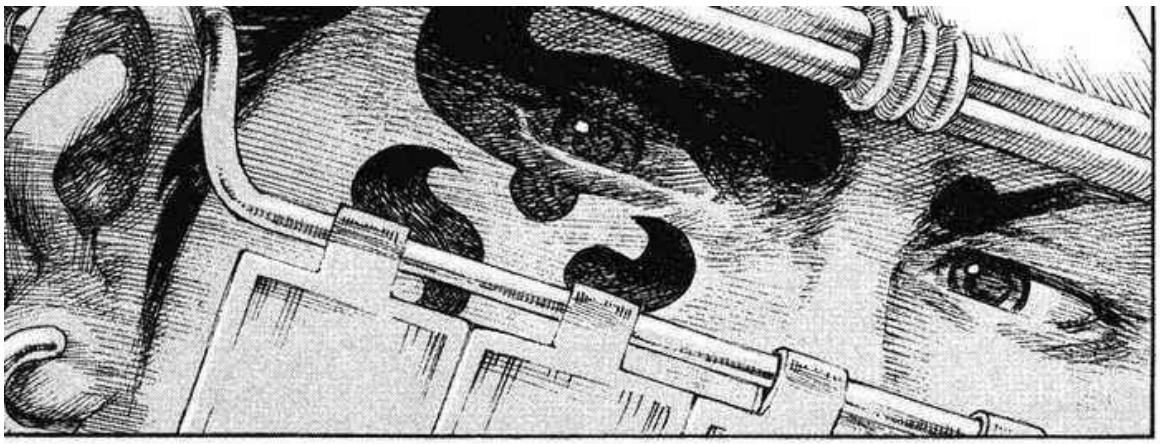
Thus, making Sima Yi "forget" his existence was akin to casting a veil over the entire chessboard. Only then could Pang Tong calmly arrange each trap, weaving them together into a complete strategic situation. Once Sima Yi saw through his train of thought, the entire game would no longer proceed so smoothly.

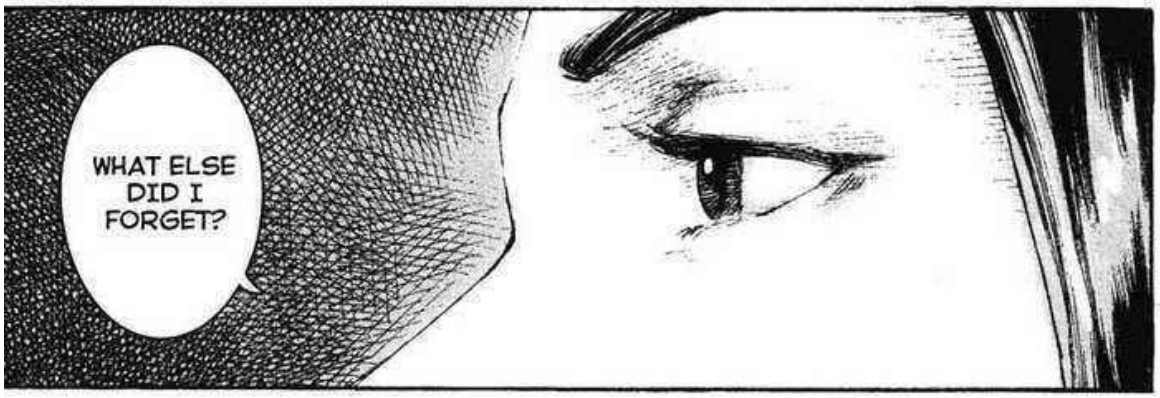

TIRED? TAKE A BREAK.
BUT IT WOULD BE DISASTROUS IF I DON'T STAY CLEAR-HEADED.
YOU THINK I DON'T WANT TO?
SOMEONE SKILLED AT CALCU-LATION...

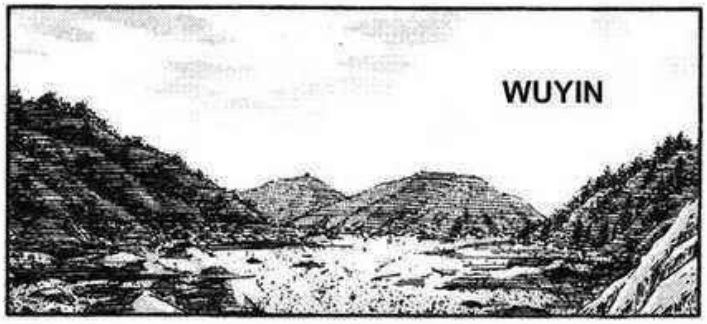

THAT,

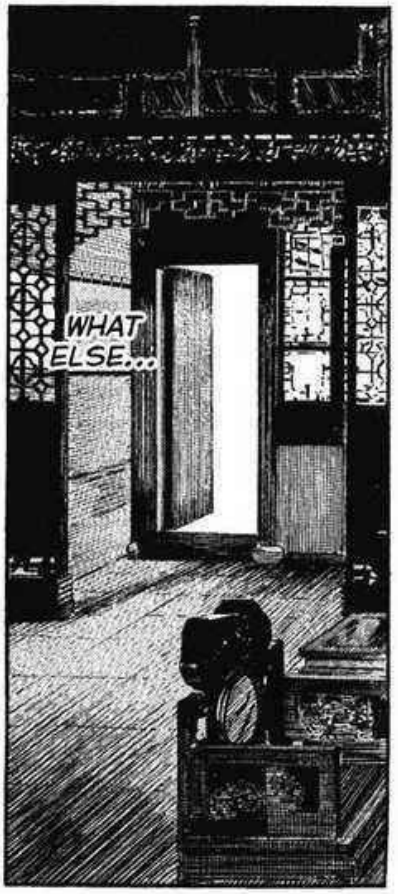

THAT MAN WHO WAS STUDYING THE PUZZLE AT PINGYANG BACK THEN...


I'M REMEMBERING THIS AGAIN AFTER MANY YEARS.




WHAT ELSE DID I FORGET?


WUYIN


WHAT ELSE...


YU
JIN!
YU
JIN!

* Sima Yi remembered, but it was already too late.

“What else did I forget?” — Indeed, Sima Yi had forgotten.

Although he had once spoken directly with them, Pang Tong knew full well that calamity would soon befall the Sima clan — yet he gave no warning. The new leader of the “Remnants” was Xu Ding, eldest son of Xu Lin, a plant secretly embedded within the Sima household by Xun Yu.

Had the Sima clan remained obedient, Xu Ding might have set aside his hatred—his father, Xu Lin, had been assassinated by the “Remnants” at Sima Yi’s command—in order to preserve their shared interests under Cao Cao’s banner. But once the Sima clan revealed their true ambition to rebel, Xu Ding seized his pretext. He moved swiftly, annihilating the entire family, then diverted their grain supplies to Cao Cao. The tragedy traced its origin back to Pang Tong’s letter.

At the gates of Henei, Sima Yi still believed everything was unfolding in his favor. At first, he relied on his clan’s covert influence to seize control of the city garrison, while his uncle was to lead troops to storm the enemy encampment inside. Yet his uncle had already been slain by Xu Ding, and his men slaughtered.

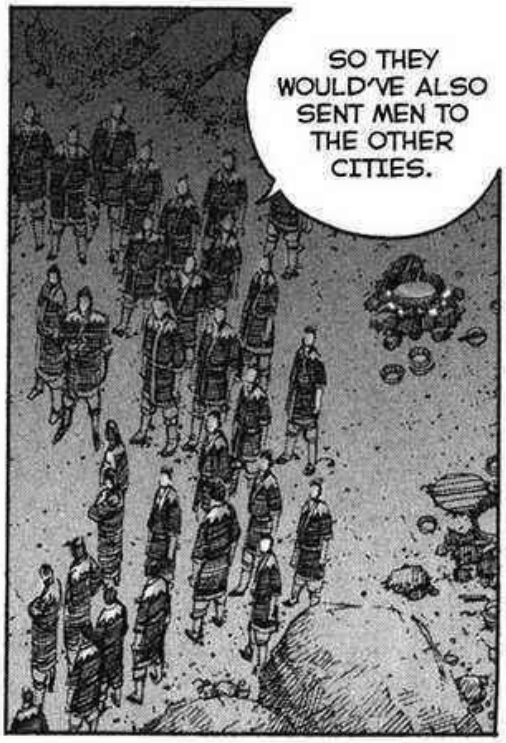
While Sima Yi awaited the signal, a grain convoy entered the city—outwardly bearing the Sima family's banner, but in truth already under Xu Ding's command. According to the Sima plan, this supply was meant to cut Cao Cao off from reinforcements. Instead, Xu Ding secretly dispatched the grain to rescue Cao Cao, undoing the plot at its roots. Like a line of falling dominoes, Sima Yi's scheme collapsed one after another. With the convoy clearing the way, Cao's soldiers slipped into the city through the southern gate. Within moments, Hanoi was drenched in blood.

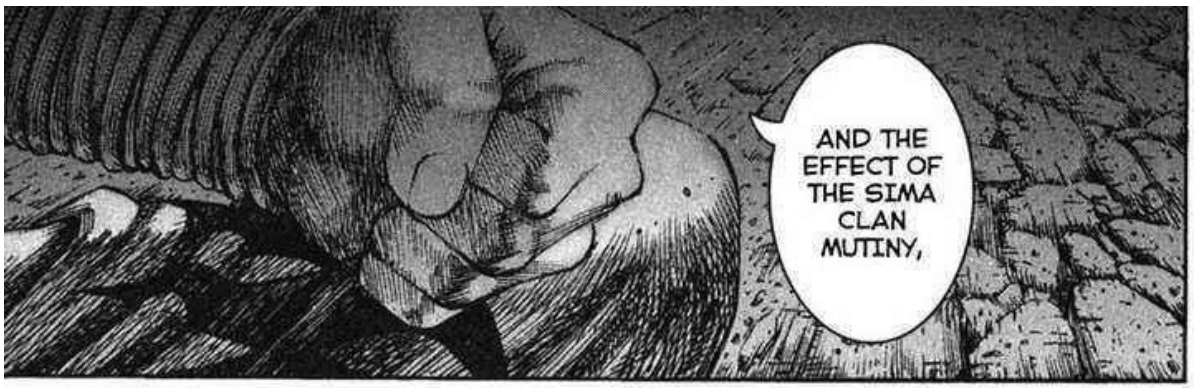
Because the uprising originated with the Sima family—a clan of great influence and connections—the flames of rebellion quickly spread to the satellite cities. To extinguish the revolt at its source, Cao Cao was forced to split his forces, weakening the troops originally meant to hold off Lü Bu by more than half. At that very moment, the first effect of releasing Hua Tuo revealed itself, spurring Lü Bu to march out.

As for the Sima clan, once their usefulness was spent, they were discarded like weeds. Their fate could be summed up in a single word: annihilation. Both the main city and its satellites were put to the sword, the entire clan butchered without mercy.

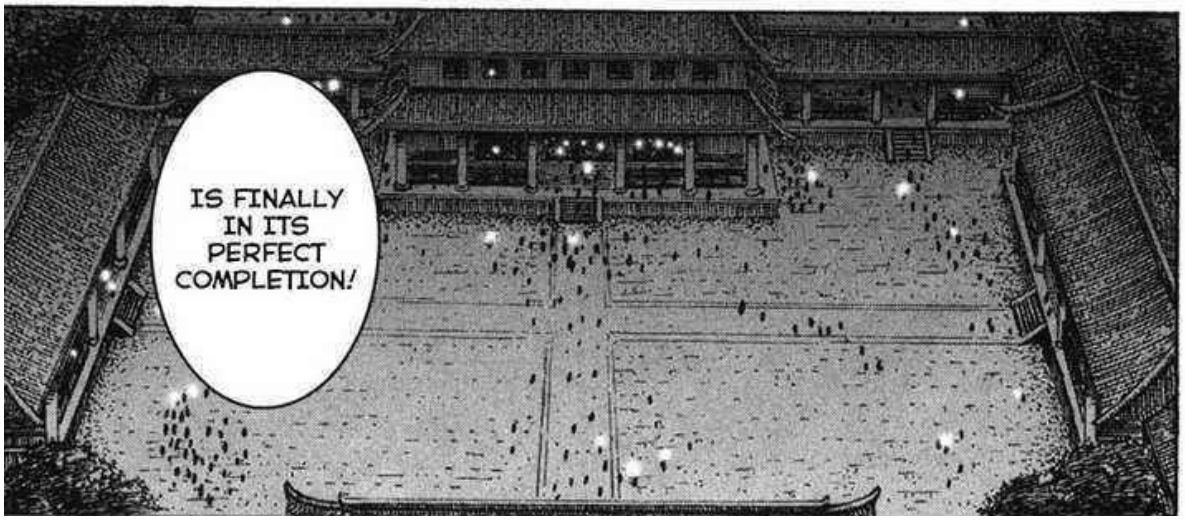

WERE SENT BACK FROM CAO'S ARMY.


IN THAT CASE MORE THAN HALF OF THEIR TROOP WON'T BE DEALING WITH LU BU.
HUA TUO'S RETURN IS TAKING ITS INITIAL EFFECT.


SO THEY WOULD'VE ALSO SENT MEN TO THE OTHER CITIES.


AND THE EFFECT OF THE SIMA CLAN MUTINY,




IS FINALLY IN ITS PERFECT COMPLETION!

At Luoyang, both Liang Bing and Song Li were annihilated. Yet this loss did little to affect the larger situation, for the true mainstay of Pang Tong's strategy remained Liu Chong and Liu Biao. At this point, the advantage lay with them: Xiahou Yuan himself admitted that Cao Cao's current forces were insufficient to withstand Liu Biao.

To break the deadlock, Xun Yu employed a perilous move. He sought out the emperor, petitioning that Lü Bu be granted an official title, thereby exploiting the instability of Xu Province to bind Lü Bu under the yoke of the court. At the same time, Xun You personally went to persuade Yuan Shu. His argument was razor-sharp: Yuan Shu's self-proclamation as emperor was an act of high treason, and sooner or later the entire realm would denounce him. The only reason he remained safe thus far was because Cao Cao's infamy had drawn all condemnation toward the Cao army. But should Cao Cao perish, public outrage would inevitably shift onto Yuan Shu. At that point, countless factions would rally under the banner of "eliminating the traitor" to march against him. Such reasoning filled Yuan Shu with dread, forcing him to raise his troops against Lü Bu.

=> Lü Bu was pinned down, unable to march against Cao as Pang Tong had planned.

The western fortress had fallen.

Pang Tong was certain that the grain in Cao Cao's possession would last no more than a month. He also foresaw that Xun Yu would attempt to lure Yuan Shu into attacking Xu Province, thus pinning down Lü Bu. This revealed the second layer of Pang Tong's intent in drawing Lü Bu into the game: once Yuan Shu and Lü Bu wore each other out, the threats from the east and the south would both be weakened. That would pave the way for Pang Tong, after defeating Cao Cao, to absorb all of Cao's remaining power.

Perhaps the most sophisticated element was the "strategic deception": Pang Tong tricked his peers and the scholarly elite into believing his actions were a mere prelude to paving the way for Liu Bei, a figure widely respected throughout the land.

His Method.

Proactively Eliminating Cao Cao:

In the eyes of the world, Cao Cao was the paramount traitor, controlling the emperor and manipulating the court, much like Dong Zhuo in his

time. Eliminating him was seen as ridding the Han Dynasty of a great scourge.

Avoiding Direct Warfare:

Cao Cao commanded a powerful army so vast that even Lü Bu dared not face it directly. Thus, the complex battle formations Pang Tong arranged were seen by his peers at the Water Mirror Academy as a clever way to compensate for their lord's limited troop numbers. Even Jia Xu, who was on the front lines, didn't realize until the raid on Yushui Pass was over that the army was, in fact, an alliance of Pang Tong's pupils.

Playing on Common Political Perceptions:

Pang Tong expertly played on the common belief that few would dare to directly confront Cao Cao. The powerful forces who could were either preoccupied or hesitant:

Lü Bu: Once failed to trap Cao Cao at Puyang and was not ready for another direct clash.

Yuan Shao: His strength was formidable, and he had a tradition of supporting the Han, but was fully focused on dealing with Gongsun Zan.

Other Liu Clan Branches: All were influenced by Cao Cao's dominance, but no faction was willing to sacrifice its own interests to oppose him.

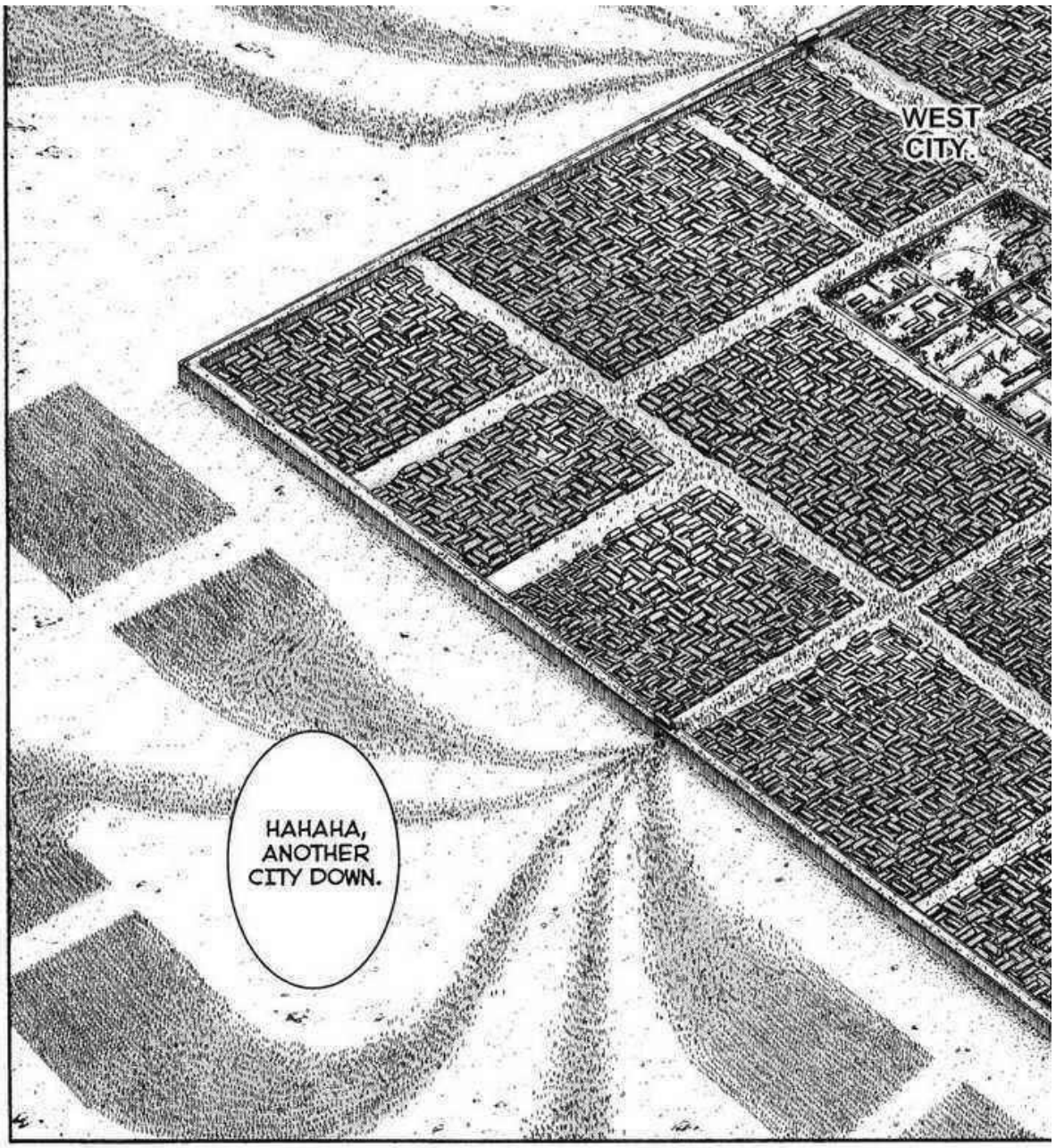
Liu Bei: As the publicly recognized Imperial Uncle, he carried the aspirations of the people of Xuzhou, a place that had suffered from Guo Jia’s massacre. Although he no longer governed Xuzhou, most of his soldiers were from there, and their hatred for Cao Cao ran exceptionally deep.

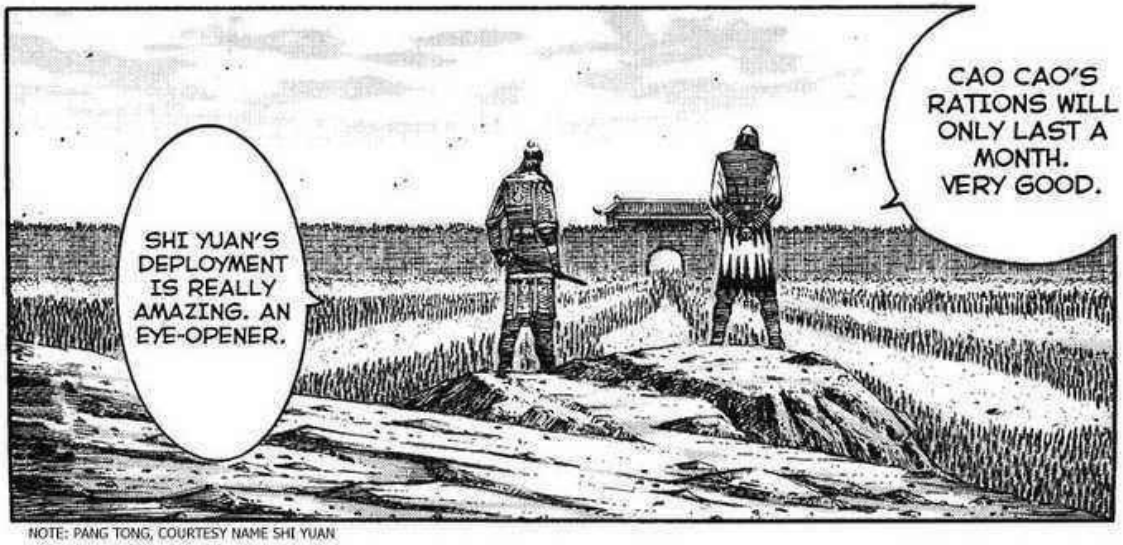
The Smoke and Mirrors Tactic:

One of Pang Tong's key objectives was to firmly convince his peers that Liu Bei was his master. The entire campaign was framed as "assisting the Han and purging traitors," with the cooperation of Liu Bian and Liu Chong further cementing this theory.

Before the Xuzhou campaign, Liu Bei had never had a true strategist. Pang Tong's long-term seclusion and sudden re-emergence made the scholarly elite believe he had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to serve Liu Bei. In this way, all of Pang Tong's deeper plans were hidden behind a mask of "dedication to the Han Dynasty" and "loyalty to the Imperial Uncle Liu."

This is where Pang Tong's true cunning is revealed, and the truth becomes clear: Pang Tong's master is Liu Chong.





NOTE: PANG TONG, COURTESY NAME SHI YUAN


EXPEL THE TIGER AND EAT THE WOLF; LU BU AND YUAN SHU WILL SOON START A FIGHT THAT WOULD LEAVE BOTH SIDES IN RUINS,
LIU CHONG'S SUBORDINATE
LUO JUN
SO ONCE WE FINISH CAO CAO THE THREATS FROM BOTH THE EAST AND SOUTH WOULD BE RELATIVELY EASED. THAT'S THE BEST STRATEGY.


PEOPLE AT THE SCHOOL OF WATER MIRROR MIGHT HAVE THOUGHT YOU WERE INTENDING TO HELP LIU BEI.


IN ORDER FOR THE LIU CLAN TO RETAKE THE WORLD, EVERYTHING MUST BE TAKEN CARE OF. AND NOW MASTER AND THE REST MIGHT SUDDENLY REALIZE THE TRUTH.


OUR LORD IS BACK!


HAHA, A MISDIREC-TION; UNAWARE OF THE ORIOLE BEHIND.


LORD LIU!
LORD LIU!
THERE ARE MANY ABLE MEN IN THE WORLD; HOW CAN ONE CLAIM THERE ARE ONLY TWO GREAT RULERS?
CHEN KINGDOM'S LIU CHONG IS A BRILLIANT AND WELL-LOVED RULER. HE WILL MAKE SOMETHING OF HIMSELF ONE DAY.



NOTE: LIU CHONG IS EAST HAN EMPEROR MING'S SON "WEST PRINCE OF PEACE" LIU XIAN'S GREAT GRANDSON, LATER CROWNED PRINCE OF CHEN, SETTING THE TERRITORY AT CHENJUN



Back when he was at the Water Mirror Academy, Pang Tong always yearned to test his wits against Zhuge Liang. When he heard that Zhuge had chosen Liu Bei as his master, Pang Tong was determined to find another person with the surname Liu to prove that ZL's judgment was not superior to his own. After many years of searching, he finally chose Liu Chong—a man worthy of having Pang Tong stake his entire plan on. After thoroughly discussing everything with Liu Chong, Pang Tong left the academy.

While teaching, he intentionally showed favoritism to Chen Nan and Dong Xiang, thereby pulling Song Li and Liang Ping into an alliance of lords against Cao Cao. In Pang Tong's eyes, this alliance was merely a vanguard to pave the way for his grand scheme, but it held three crucial values.

First, using the alliance to launch a preemptive strike would wear down Cao Cao's military strength, creating an opportunity for Liu Bian and Liu Chong to act. Second, it would lay the groundwork to easily persuade Liu Bian to cooperate against Cao Cao. Third, it would conceal Liu Chong's true identity, making his peers at the Water Mirror Academy (such as Jia Xu, Xun Yu, and Guo Jia) believe that he was clearing a path for Liu Bei's advancement.

This was an extremely shrewd move born out of sheer necessity. If Liu Chong's true identity were exposed, the enemy would surely target him. Given that Liu Chong's main camp was close to Tan County, Cao Ren would undoubtedly march to besiege him, forcing Pang Tong into a difficult choice. His options would be either to release Cao Cao to ransom Liu Chong's life or face a path of "mutual destruction". The situation, however, heavily favored Cao Cao's side. Even if a mutually destructive outcome were to occur, Cao Cao's forces were overwhelmingly superior to Liu Chong's, and Cao Ren could seize Liu Chong's camp before Liu Bian could even provide reinforcements. Therefore, Pang Tong could absolutely not allow Liu Chong's identity to be revealed.

Despite a few setbacks in the final stages, Pang Tong still considered the campaigns in Nanyang and Luyang a success. He did not lose a single soldier of Liu Chong's, and by relying only on the meager forces of the allied lords, he was able to push Cao Cao to the brink of death, while successfully paving the way for Liu Bian and Liu Chong to launch their offensive.

From the very beginning, Lü Bu had been embedded with a number of special functions on the chessboard. His role was not only to threaten

Cao Cao from the outside, but also to serve as bait—scattering the attention of the command at Tan County and making it difficult for them to discern Pang Tong's true intent. Later, upon discovering Xiao Meng's existence, these calculations evolved into many more intricate layers, rendering the entire layout even more sinister and complex.

Pang Tong persuaded Lü Bu to let Xiao Meng disguise himself as Zhang Xiu's aunt in order to assassinate Cao Cao. Afterwards, he repeatedly displayed his ever-changing strategies, striking first at Cao Cao to prove to Lü Bu that the idea was entirely feasible. He deliberately emphasized that if a decision was not made swiftly, the immediate benefits would vanish, forcing Lü Bu into a position of readiness. At the same time, Pang Tong led the Tan County headquarters to believe that if they rashly dispatched troops to aid Cao Cao in Luoyang, Lü Bu would seize the opportunity to strike.

Winning over Lü Bu also meant executing a flawless deception against Xun Yu. As a fellow disciple, Pang Tong understood clearly how Xun Yu employed people and grasped his way of thinking, so he deliberately laid before him the "most viable" option. According to Cao Ren's assessment, the dangers lurking over Tan County came from three forces: Lü Bu, Liu Chong, and Liu Bian. Among them, the easiest to deal

with was Lü Bu—not because he was weak, but because he did not bear the surname Liu. Liu Chong and Liu Bian were both of the imperial clan; aside from sheer force, they could not be legitimately touched. Imperial authority could not be used as leverage either, for their very existence was the guarantee that the young emperor could still sit on the throne. Furthermore, their joint action against Cao Cao was, in the eyes of the world, done under the banner of “eliminating tyranny for the sake of the emperor.” Thus, Xun Yu could only choose to target Lü Bu—and this was exactly what Pang Tong desired. Once Lü Bu’s role as “bait” was fulfilled, the Liu clan alliance would seize the chance to attack, “sweeping forward like a blade through bamboo.”

Xun Yu lured Yuan Shu into striking Xu Province. This campaign, however, unintentionally created an opening for Liu Chong: when Lü Bu was forced to resist, both sides would inevitably suffer mutual damage, while Liu Chong would gain more time to absorb Cao Cao’s forces and consolidate his own foundation. Together with the “time bomb” known as the Sima family, Cao’s army was nearly destroyed from within.

At Xun Yu’s residence, Sima Lang (elder brother of Sima Yi) arrived to strike a deal, using the name of the Sima clan to persuade an ally in Yuzhou to divert grain supplies in support of Cao Cao. What he needed

was for Xun Yu to mediate, so that Cao Cao would once again place his trust in the Sima family. Faced with urgent circumstances, Xun Yu was forced to nod in agreement, for he understood well that Sima Yi must still be concealing another scheme—one that might well be powerful enough to turn the tide of the entire situation.

Meanwhile, after seizing the Western City, Liu Chong immediately issued an order to rally all those who still held loyalty to the Han dynasty. Thus, his forces were reinforced with no small number of men. Not stopping there, with his rising prestige, the seven regional warlords in turn expressed their willingness to cooperate with him, causing his power to swell to the point that even Cao's army trembled in fear. Yet, at the height of this momentum, Liu Chong made a fatal mistake. Pang Tong repeatedly warned: "Under no circumstances are you to take in anyone from the Sima clan". And yet, out of misplaced compassion, Liu Chong admitted the remnants of the Sima clan into his camp—a disastrous decision beyond measure.


OUTSIDE WEST CITY
LIU CHONG'S MAIN CAMP
MERCY FOR ANOTHER? OR FOR ONESELF?
THOSE INSIDE THE CITY WHO ARE LOYAL TO IMPERIAL HAN HAVE SURRENDERED.
THE SEVEN WARLORDS WITHIN THE PROVINCE HAVE ALSO DECIDED.
FLAG READS: LIU
THEIR TROOPS HAVE JOINED OURS, AND ARE AWAITING ORDERS.
AND THERE IS ANOTHER GROUP THAT WE MUST TAKE IN.
YOU MEAN...
VERY GOOD. OUR PRINCIPLE IS TO ACCEPT ANYONE WHO SUPPORTS HAN.


ADVISOR WOULD NOT TAKE IN SIMA CLAN'S SERVANTS?


YES. WE DID THEM WRONG.
WE MUST REGARD THEM LIKE HONORED GUESTS, AND TREAT THEM WELL.


I NEVER OWE OTHERS.


YES. THEY FOUGHT ALONGSIDE WITH US, BUT SADLY BECAME OUR SHIELD AND ENDED UP LIKE THIS, SO I...


SO MANY HAVE COME; OUR LORD REALLY DOES HAVE PEOPLE'S SUPPORT.
WE HOPE TO HAVE YOUR CONTINUED GUIDANCE, ADVISOR.
A WISE MOVE? OR A MISTAKE?
HEY, DON'T WANDER AROUND!
HA, THE SO CALLED KINGDOM TO THE NORTH REFERS TO THE KINGDOM OF CHEN.
I'M SORRY, BUT THIS MAN IS A FOREIGNER, SO..
FOREIGNER? WHAT A MEDLEY MOB.
HAI.


HAI?

In Pang Tong's grand design, Zhang Xiu was nothing more than a minor piece on the chessboard. Once he had outlived his usefulness, he was cast aside and handed over to Liu Biao as a mere "bonus gift." It was in this desperate situation that Jia Xu seized the chance to wrest back command into his own hands.

Elsewhere, thanks to grain supplies secured from the merchants of Yuzhou, Sima Yi succeeded in persuading Guo Jia, thereby regaining his standing within Cao Cao's ranks. The final move in his plan to reverse his fortunes was none other than the assassination of Liu Chong. Pang Tong had long foreseen the possibility that Sima Yi might escape Xu Ding's pursuit. After all, as the mastermind of the Sima clan, so long as he lived, the family still had a chance to rise again. Thus, it was certain he held in his grasp a few secret means of preserving his own life.

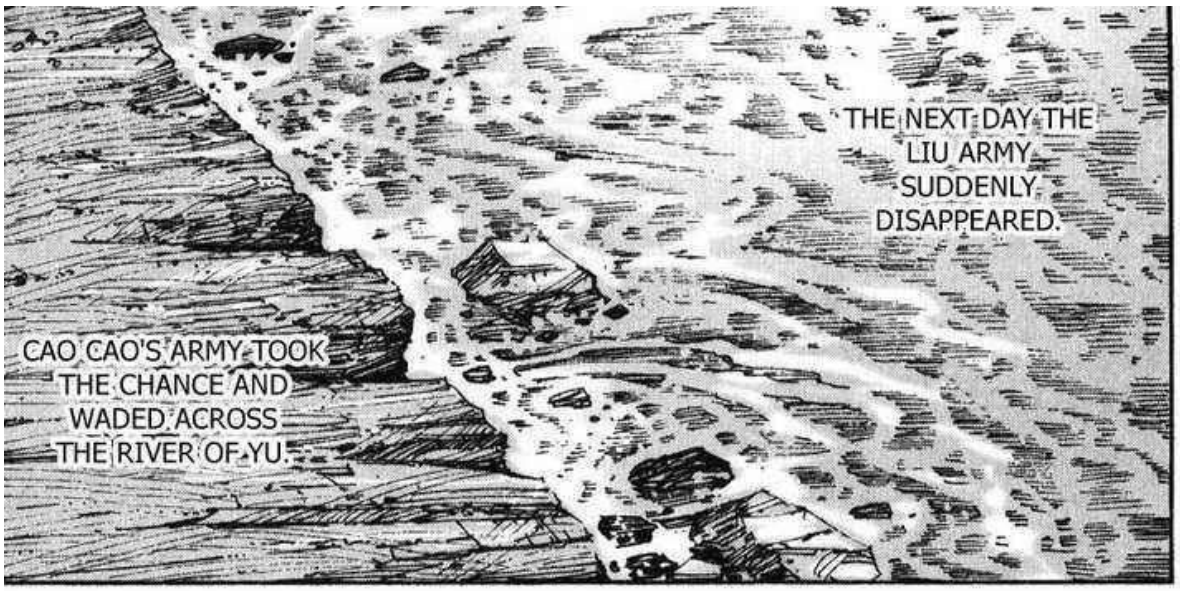
To win Cao Cao's trust once more, Sima Yi was compelled to deliver an achievement weighty enough to atone for his past failures. Merely supplying grain would not suffice. As a family of merchants, the Sima clan could neither provide military reinforcements nor financial aid, for their headquarters had already been destroyed. The most viable path left

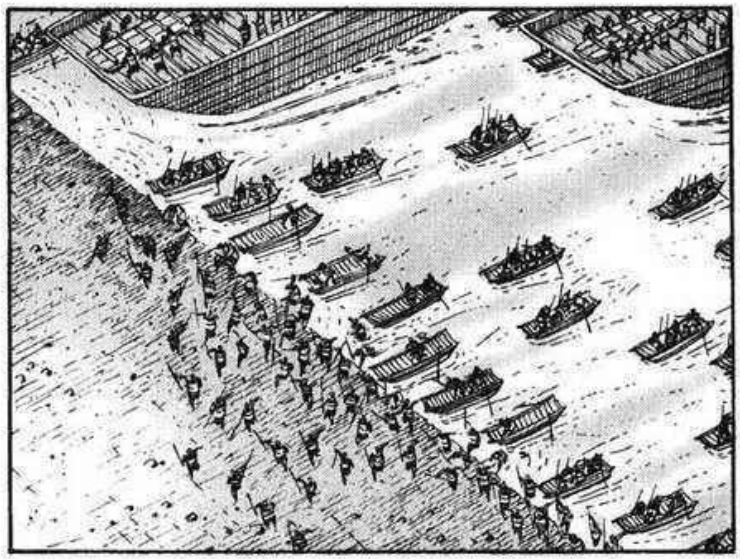
was assassination. Under the guise of Sima clan remnants, Sima Yi could secretly infiltrate assassins into Liu Chong's grand camp, awaiting the opportune moment to strike him down.

The result:

Liu Chong was assassinated. The Liu forces, like a headless serpent, collapsed into uncontrollable disarray. And with it, Pang Tong's grand design crumbled to ruin.


BESIDES, IT IS TRUE THAT THE LIUS ARE FAMOUS FOR THEIR INDECISIVENESS; IF LIU CHONG FAILS, OTHER CLANSMEN WOULD NOT HELP EXCEPT RETREAT TO SAFETY.
YOU THINK CAO CAO WILL BE DEFEATED BY THIS? THIS MAN HAS A POWERFUL ARMY AND NUMEROUS COMMANDERS, NOT TO MENTION HIS OWN EXTRAORDINARY TALENTS.
GOOD THINGS COME TO PATIENT MEN. LIU CHONG COULD ONLY START AN UPRISING BUT COULD NOT UNIFY THE CLANS, ALL BECAUSE HIS REPUTATION IS NOT GREAT ENOUGH.
IN ORDER TO WIN AGAINST POWERFUL ENEMIES, WE MUST TRULY CALL FORTH ALL OUR CLANSMEN.
SO IT IS HIM!
I HATE LU BU AS WELL, BUT NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO FIGHT HIM.
SECOND MASTER, LOOK!

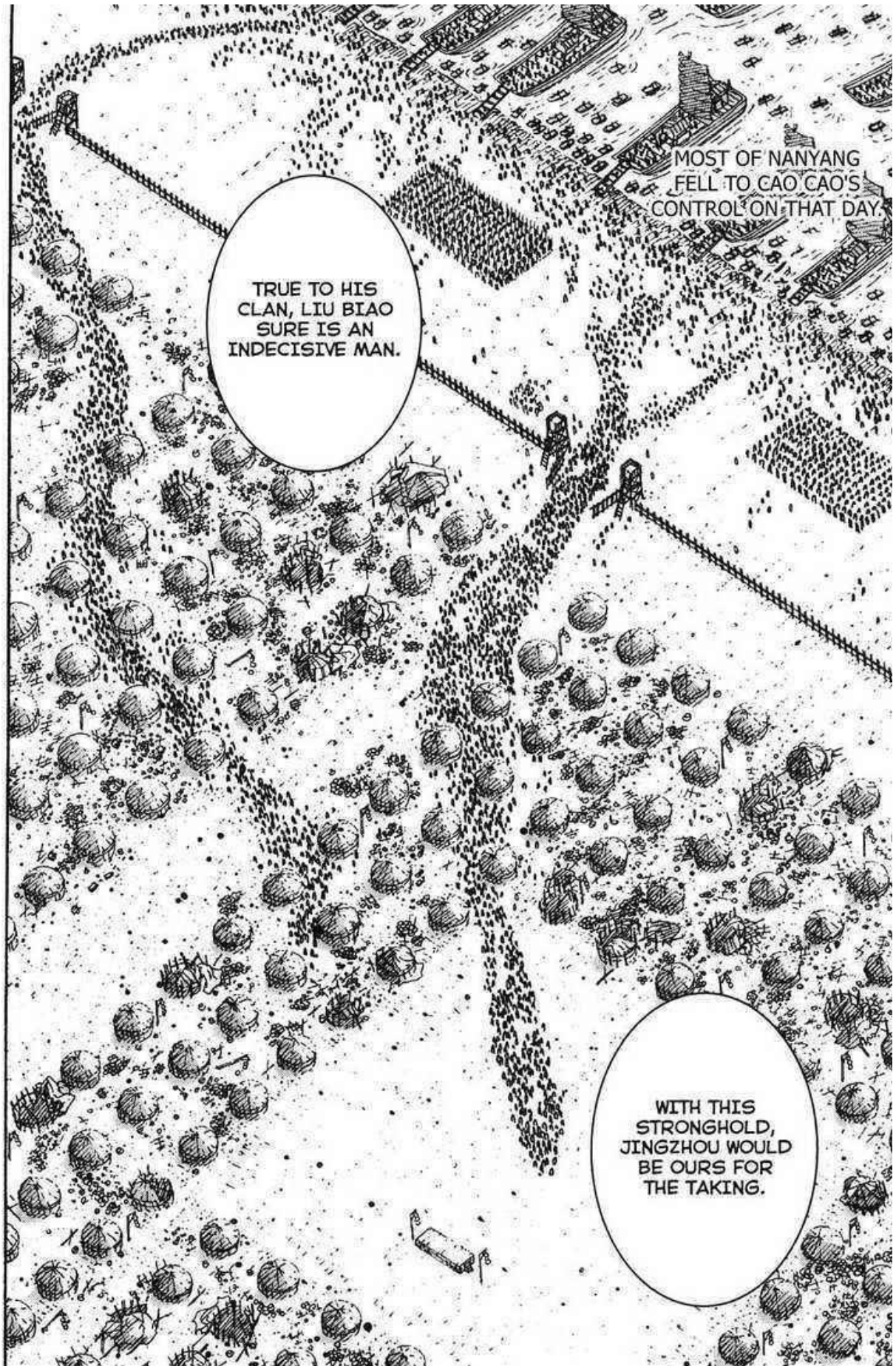

CAO CAO'S ARMY TOOK THE CHANCE AND WADED ACROSS THE RIVER OF YU.
THE NEXT DAY THE LIU ARMY SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED.



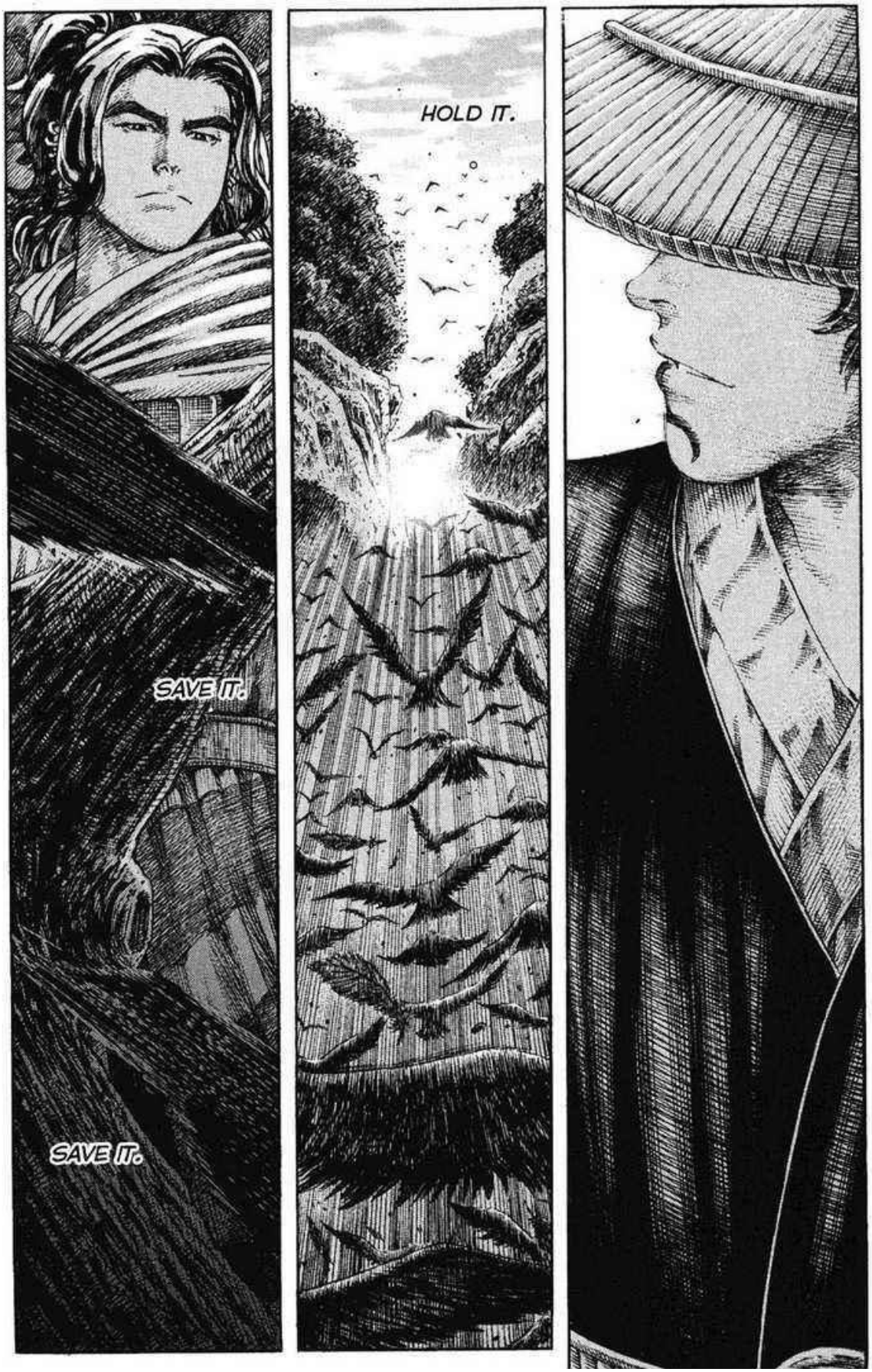

SFX: SHA~


RIGHT FLANK, PREPARE TO TAKE OVER THE MAIN CAMP.


LEFT FLANK, TO THE REAR CAMP.


MOST OF NANYANG FELL TO CAO CAO'S CONTROL ON THAT DAY.
TRUE TO HIS CLAN, LIU BIAO SURE IS AN INDECISIVE MAN.
WITH THIS STRONGHOLD, JINGZHOU WOULD BE OURS FOR THE TAKING.

In the end, Pang Tong did not lose because of lack of talent or strength, but because he chose the wrong master. A pity indeed…


HOLD IT.
SAVE IT.
SAVE IT.