

Unfathomable 671

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"No please, No!"

"S-show mercy, Aaaa..."

Screams of thousands of people echoed through the city. Even if they attempted to run there was nowhere to go. A giant black shroud surrounded the whole city and whoever got close was shredded by unspeakable shadow horrors that resided in it. There was no escape and soon only a handful of nascent soul masters remained.

The crunching of bones and flesh being devoured by strange beasts was everywhere. Even when some of the demonic creatures were defeated they were quickly replaced by a new one. Soon even the stronger experts were starting to fade away, even without the Demonic Emperor's involvement there was no way for them to survive.

"H-how could this be possible?"

"Was the Azure Dynasty infested by demonic cultivators from the start?"

"This can't be happening, please Emperor show mercy... I'm willing to submit!"

The group of masters were unwilling to die, even if they were backed into a corner they grasped for any possibilities. Perhaps if they became slaves of these demons here they would be able to survive. It was better to join up with a demonic cultivator and form a slave contract. To these people that wished for immortality, survival was at the precedent of their existence.

"Hm... you wish to surrender and become my slave?"

"Yes, Honored Azure Dragon!"

"What are you..."

"Shut up, we must submit! Do you want to die like the rest?"

"Our brother is right, our allies are all dead, only we remain, if we perish here then how will our families survive?"

All of the survivors had one thing in common, they were all leaders of their own clans or sects. If they were not around to manage their factions they feared that they would crumble instantly. Their families and lines could be usurped by other branches which would make this whole undertaking a huge mistake. Perhaps they would have to perform some vile acts for these demonic beings but it was better than death.

"Please Emperor, we submit!"

The group shouted out while bowing. They were surrounded by a swarm of strange creatures. Some of them had huge mouths lined up with teeth the size of swords. Others were made out of a tar-like substance that consumed all it touched. It was as if every person that was devoured caused a multiplication of these horrors and now there was nowhere to hide.

“Do you wish to submit? Very well, offer up your souls to me for the binding contract!

“Of course...”

The old man that convinced the others to submit floated up into the sky with his guard wide open. Long Qing who had long revealed his demonic appearance, smiled widely. His large clawed hand moved forward while he performed some sort of demonic technique.

“Wait, that’s not a soul-binding art... what is he doing?”

One of the other elders that was somewhat aware of demonic arts noticed that something was off. Before he could shout out to warn his current ally it was already too late. The large demonic appendage shot out at the elder’s chest and pierced right through it. Soon all of them were looking at the man’s vitality being sucked away.

“H-he is devouring him...”

“Honorable Emperor, why?”

“What do you mean, why? I don’t need your loyalty, the only thing you are good for, is to be sustenance for my immortality! How do you think this dynasty has survived for over a hundred thousand years!”

“It... it couldn’t be... You’ve been robbing people of their longevity and adding it to your own?”

“I see that at least one of you has some intelligence but it’s already too late. Your life is forfeit and not even by stupid brother will be able to save you now.”

“Brother? The Golden Dragon?”

“Yes, he has been a thorn in my side for a long time. Luckily people like you exist, willing to do anything just to get some crumbs from me.”

The cogs in their brains started turning as they all realized that they joined the wrong side. It seemed that Long Dong, the current Emperor’s younger brother, had actually rebelled against the demonic beings. Either this or they were both evil cultivators just having a spat. The truth was unclear but if they ever wanted to figure it out, they needed to free themselves.

“No please, we don’t wish to continue, there must be another way...”

“Truly pathetic, even in your last moments you still wish to bargain but you will not talk your way out of this predicament, your death is all that matters... Die!”

Long Qing who had turned into a strange dark blue demon with webbed wings and glowing eyes pointed out. A massive aura that none of these people here could fathom pushed them down into the ground. There was nothing they could do, their Qi was being blocked by the overwhelming demonic energy. Even if they managed to escape from this area they would soon succumb to the thousands of demonic beings everywhere.

With indignation in their eyes, they could only look up at the massive surge of energy coming their way. The Emperor that they wished to gain favor with started turning into an even uglier being with tentacles

on his face. It didn't seem that he was even human at this point and soon they would become part of this mass of evil.

"Don't fall to the demonic corruption, stay strong and never surrender!"

However, before they gave out their last breath something magical occurred. An opening in the shroud from the top was blasted through. It was followed by a torrent of golden light that descended down into this place. The light pushed the darkness away and allowed them to see the well-lit blue sky before.

"T-there is someone in that pillar of light..."

"Could it be?"

The nascent soul masters that didn't pass out yet could see the descent of a might master. He was clad in golden armor and surrounded by strange angelic beings. The warmth that his spiritual energy emitted tickled their beards as they felt power returning back to their bodies. The evil energy was being driven back and even the demonic creatures were running to not get engulfed by the radiant light.

"So... You have come, my brother! Do you pity these idiots so much just to come here? They betrayed you, why would you aid such trash?"

"They had made the choice only due to faulty information, if they knew the truth, they would have never joined you, my brother!"

"Hah, are you sure? If I offered them their lives now, they would instantly stick their swords into your back! You are too gullible and that's why you will never win, my younger brother!"

"We shall see! Not everyone is as power-hungry as you! There is still a goddess in people's hearts and I will help it blossom!"

"Pathetic words, only the strong will survive, compassion is just a way for the powerful to feel better about themselves! It's a luxury of the strong!"

The group of masters started to get off the ground while listening to the two masters have a strange conversation. The whole battle was stalled but not like they could interrupt the only person that was willing to help them. As it continued, they started to feel immense shame at trying to form a contract with the demonic cultivator.

It was true that to conserve their lives and prestige they would have no trouble stabbing their current savior in their back. While some of them were about to turn over a new leaf, others just looked for the best moment to escape. With the holy energies filling the air and the decline of demonic Qi, they could feel their power resurfacing.

"We are done talking, do you really wish to help these fools that would not think twice of betraying you? Then, protect them with your life!"

"Stop!"

Yet before they could initiate their escape all hell broke loose. In just a fraction of a second, the Azure Emperor pointed his many tentacles at the group on the ground. A massive surge of demonic energies

appeared along with a strange phantom of a monster behind the Emperor. It was probably his soul beast that looked like a humanoid with webbed wings and the face of a squid.

A ball of hateful energy was sent flying in their direction and they were far too weak to defend themselves against it. But right as they were about to die, their savior appeared. The man known as the Golden Dragon put himself in the middle of the attack and took the brunt of it. Everything went black as a giant explosion rocked the entire city turning it to ash. Soon all of them started passing out with the only thing remaining in their minds being the gallant image of Long Dong, their protector.

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“Hey, watch it, if you drop them they might wake up!”

“Forgive me senior sister, this one elder is surprisingly plump...”

A strange scene was taking place as a group of passed-out people was getting dragged onto a teleportation gate. Some were being flown out with the help of flying swords, others were getting carried manually by members from the United Element Sect. It was quite the undertaking and only possible due to one man that was hovering up in the sky.

Zhang Dong was rubbing his eyebrows as he was finally able to dispel the illusion that he created. Thanks to techniques from this and the other world he was able to pull the residents of this city into a grand play. The whole massacre wasn't real and everything that transpired had happened inside of these people's minds.

No one had died and most of the commoners had been moved into his medallion for the time being. They would need to be transported into the real dimensional regalia to let others think that this city had actually been destroyed. Some of the cultivators would be left alone and freed to go spread the word.

‘I hope this works, as long as these people believe that their lives are at stake, they will not work with the Long Clan.’

The perception of these people had been that he was in cahoots with Wang Long. Now on the other hand they would be convinced otherwise. Without any help from these masters, his borders were secured and the Long Clan would need to move in, otherwise, the war would quickly snowball into something they can no longer control.

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“Huh? What? I'm alive?”

“Oh, you are finally awake.” Please your wounds haven't healed yet but thanks to the honorable Golden Dragon, all of the demonic Qi has been removed from your body.”

“Demonic Qi? Golden Dragon... now I remember...”

An old man rubbed his head that felt like it was on fire. Around him, he could see a few other familiar faces that had stood by him during the last battle. All of them were confused as they found themselves in an undisclosed location without knowing how they got here. The people around them didn't seem too strong or like they belonged to any of their allies.

"I remember now, both the dragons fought each other and there was a large wave of spiritual energy, we must have lost our conscienceless at that time."

"Elder, you managed to survive?"

"Yes... who would have known that the Emper... no, I won't call him that anymore, that bastard tried to kill us all!"

Of the twenty or so nascent soul masters that were there, only four were in this room. It seemed to be some type of large hospital with some other survivors here and there. Some were walking around and chatting, while others were still sleeping. One thing that was of note, was that all of them were fine. None had any deep wounds and radiated strange divine energy.

"This spiritual energy..."

"I see that you have noticed, honored elder. It's all thanks to the Golden Dragon."

"Yes... it is very reminiscent of his energy, he must have used his healing arts on all of us..."

Soon the group of survivors started getting together. It didn't take them long to realize that they were now in a nearby city, just a few hours of flight away from their old base. Apparently, after the battle was over, the angelic beings that were flying around with Zhang Dong carried them over to this city. They were all placed in the city hospital and finally woke up after a day or two had passed.

"This can't be real... was the dynasty build on demonic practices?"

"It is the truth... I woke up half a day before you and made my way to the city. Nothing remains of it, it turned into nothing more than a giant hole..."

"This is indeed troubling, what should we do? Will the other branch families believe us?"

"What if they knew this?"

"You don't mean?"

"I'm afraid that might be the case..."

The four let their heads down while trying to figure things out. It was possible that the other branch families were working together with the Long Clan and had left them all to die there. However, it was also possible that no one actually knew the truth. If nothing had gotten out for a hundred thousand years, it could mean that the Long Clan's demonic background ran deep.

"Could Long Qing truly be immortal?"

"I don't know but that form and demonic Qi, he must have lost his mind a long time ago... no one can live that long and retain their sanity."

All of them nodded and also found themselves referring to the Emperor without his title. After what he had attempted to do, they wanted to distance themselves from him as much as it was possible. If what they saw was the truth then all of their clans were in danger.

“What should we do? That monster will probably silence our families, while both of the brothers are fighting, we must escape...”

“Escape where? Should we seek shelter in the West or the East?”

“I for one trust in the Golden Dragon...”

“I’m not sure, he might be the same as his brother but... at least it’s better than dying.”

“I’m not sure if the Heavenly Crane Sect can defend itself against something like that... the United Element Sect on the other hand...”

All of them started nodding and agreeing. When they needed help only one person reached out to them and was able to survive. They didn’t really judge Zhang Dong on the basis of his virtues but by his strength. With that amount of power that he had shown them, it was possible to fight against that monster. They were masters at the apex and couldn’t even lift a finger. To survive this along with their families they needed to hug the thighs of the only person capable of standing up against the evil emperor.

“We must act swiftly.”

“Aye, I have some family in the West region, I’ll contact them and ask for a way in...”

“I don’t think they will allow us into their midst without a binding contract but that’s better than working with that monster.”

“I agree, we must depart!”

The four elders found all the survivors that belonged to their factions before departing the city. After discussing the situation they turned into streaks of blue light in the sky. The only thing on their mind was survival which could be only achieved by quickly leaving the middle regions.

“Are they finally gone?”

“Yes sir!”

“Good, we shall return to the extraction point, be sure to remove the traces of us ever being here!”

Unbeknownst to the elders that flew away, the hospital staff in the city started acting strange. They quickly exchanged their white robes for dark ones and their faces became covered by masks. Their leader removed a strange medallion from his neck which he pointed at the hospital area. It soon started glowing and within a flash, a group of passed-out people appeared.

They were wearing the exact same white doctorly robes this group was before. Without saying much they soon disappeared after their part of the mission was complete. Now that the nascent masters had taken away everyone that was involved in the illusory formation their job was done.

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“When you said to let those people go I wasn’t sure what to think of it, but now I understand. Will they not see through the illusion eventually?”

“Perhaps but a mind is a fickle thing, it will show us what we want it to show. As long as they believe that there is something unnatural to the Emperor’s power, they will not be able to see through the deceit.”

“It does seem so, their branch families are in an uproar, the spies that we planted are only fanning the rumors and the elders we released will just confirm it...”

“As long as it gives us some time, it’s enough the wall is almost finished and the attacks have ceased.”

“That is true but what should we do with the others?”

“We’ll have to have them stay in the Dimensional Regalia for now, we can’t have people that have perished from demons appearing again.”

“Haha, they did seem confused at first but after getting some free pills and accommodations they turned over a new leaf.”

“How reasonable.”

Zhang Dong chuckled while talking with his grandfather. Other elders were here as well and they were all discussing the recent event. After assembling the large illusory formation some things had changed on the battlefield. A lot fewer branch families from the Long Clan were taking part in the offensive. After word got spread that the Azure Emperor was a demonic cultivator and it was confirmed by some reputable elders all hell broke loose.

After the little trick he pulled on the nascent soul masters they did all the work for him. He had been able to judge their personalities with the illusory formation and also the system. They were in a way the most gullible and distrustful ones from the bunch. He was sure that they would start spreading rumors about Long Qing’s true demonic form.

At first, he wasn’t sure if it was a feasible plan but he made it into a possibility while avoiding too many deaths. Perhaps the residents of that city were now stuck inside a pocket dimension but it was better than getting killed in a war. He was able to reduce the size of his enemies and also spread discourse in their ranks.

Even if someone examined if these elders had their memories tampered with, no one would find anything. The illusion was so real that it was indistinguishable from reality. All of what they saw was real to them and this was enough to help spread the rumors. Some people were already rushing into the Western region after their belief was shaken.

‘There was no trust between them in the first place so this isn’t that strange.’

The branching families of the Long Clan didn’t really know their Emperor. He was like a god living on Mt. Olympus, there was nothing tangible in their relationship. They had been always treated as second-rate citizens by the main family. The only reason that they continued their alliance was due to the difference in power and the possibility of advancement. Now that they were offered nothing more than death, they could only turn to their recent enemy.

“What should we do with the refugees, some of them are powerful but I’m unsure where their loyalties lay...”

“As long as it's not with Long Qing it will suffice, we can't just have them on our side unmanaged...”

“We will use the ankle bracelets to keep track of them.”

“Ah yes, the slave bracelets!”

Zhang Jin nodded at the mention of this device. It was similar to a slave collar but was placed out of sight on a person's ankle. It would let the cultivators retain some amount of dignity. If they were forced to wear collars around their necks it could complicate things.

“Well then, things are progressing smoothly...”

“Is something wrong?”

“Not really but usually when things go too well...”

“You worry too much, after the activation there will be no way for those Long Clan bastards to sneak into our lands! This will give us enough time to reinforce our borders and finally, we will be able to go on the offensive!”

Zhang Dong nodded while looking at the map before him. The first part of the plan was almost over but this was just the beginning. Without having to worry about their borders they would be able to strike back. Amassing a greater force to conquer was the next step that he was not that willing to take.

Yet to end this conflict sooner he had to strike the iron while it was hot. The Long Clan was probably ill-prepared for an internal revolt that had now started. This was a chance for his side to take over, waiting too long would only allow his enemy to take control of the chaos, and this was something that he couldn't allow.

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“Don't let them activate it!”

“It's too late!”

A blue shield of light pushed up into the sky. Instantly it stopped many projectiles that slammed against the protective energies. The tremendous explosions would have leveled any average building in one hit. Yet, the barrier of light stood strong without buckling under the pressure.

With the shield standing strong the ships firing could not get to the generators on the other side. Soon the people that were ordering the bombardment realized that it was over. Their projectiles couldn't make it over to the other side but they, on the other hand, could be hit.

Large cannons on the walls of the stronghold they were trying to besiege took aim. Previously they had been almost successful in clearing them all out but some were still operational. With the blue shield between them, even these damaged cannons would be able to give them hell.

“R-retreat!”

It was too late, some of the blasts connected with the ships that had their own barriers already depleted. This army had given it all to shut off these structures before it was activated and had lost their

wager. Now they were unable to cause any harm to their enemies but the other side could blast them to Kingdom Come.

“They are retreating! Should we form a pursuit unit?”

“No, we have achieved our goal, the great wall has been created and it will never fall!”

People on the other side cheered while watching the mass of ships retreating. The great wall of spiritual energy could be seen on both sides and reached deep underground as well. There was only one way to get in and that was through a stronghold and destroying one would probably not be enough. As long as the other castles remained intact the great formation would persist. Only after multiple ones fell would it be possible to get through.

‘At least that’s the theory, I am not sure how strong the Azure Emperor is or what their real trump card is...’

Zhang Dong in the disguise of Lei Yinglo was floating up in the sky. He helped defend this location while Zhang Zhi and Huo Qiang were doing the same in other regions. This was a combined attack of the branching families performed at multiple fronts. After his last ploy, the enemy army had lost a lot of good soldiers.

The infighting helped them tremendously and now the barrier was there. Anyone that wished to travel to the central region would have to go through one of the strongholds which his sect controlled. It worked both ways, all trade routes from the west that existed were now removed. Even though the central region was one of the most lush in the Empire it imported a lot of resources from the larger regions.

‘If the Heavenly Crane Sect decided to cut them off, we could slowly squeeze them dry... but those guys could see it as a chance to strike a deal with the Long Clan, that is if I let them...’

The Eastern region was supposed to be neutral during this conflict. If they started aiding the Long Clan they would automatically become the enemies of the United Element Sect. Zhang Dong hoped that he had shown enough of his hand for them to reconsider.

‘I don’t think they will make any decisions unless I or the other side sends them an ultimatum. They should also realize that if they try to curry favor with the Long Clan, they will be used as replacements for these branching families...’

After seeing how the Long Clan does things it was obvious that they didn’t like to get their hands dirty. Their branching families were in an uproar after the news of the Emperor being a demonic being had started spreading. Some recordings of his illusion were skillfully pushed to some of the intelligence agencies working there. He was convinced that it would not go anywhere but thanks to this little trick he was finally able to create his great wall.

‘They should remain neutral but perhaps I need to send them a warning.’

Even if he was on good terms with the Heavenly Crane Sect, it was important to make them aware of the line they should not cross. If they aided the Long Clan in any way, they would be considered enemies. In the north as well as in the south regions of the empire his clan’s borders connected to the

Heavenly Crane Sect. The Emperor resided in an oval region in the center that didn't stretch out fully to the north and neither the south.

If the Heavenly Crane Sect decided to become his enemy, then he would need to fight them in those two regions. This was also why this wall was created, now even if the two teamed up, they would be able to easily get into his lands. Then there was also the hidden ally that was down in the south.

Argus and Lucius were still searching for parts of their holy equipment. They would not shy away from entering the central region to do so. The West was already opened to them and they were also allowed to search the East. Some new parts were discovered but with time they would have to move towards the central region.

'They will be a good distraction when the time comes...'

While his mind was torn with ways of winning this war he was brought back to reality by the victorious shouts of his sect brothers and sisters. They were cheering as their mission was now done and they had been victorious. Everyone was going to get some merits that could be turned into cultivation resources. All of them took one big step towards immortality and more power.

'I wonder what these people are really fighting for... for their families or just for selfish gain of power?'

Even after spending more than ten years in this world he still didn't understand these people. To this day, gaining more power was only a means to an end. If he could just relax in a normal-sized home with his family and was left alone, then he would stop fighting. He didn't even know if he wanted to provoke the one that created this world out of fright.

What if fighting was meaningless and he would just lose the short time he was given in this world to spend with his family? What if it was better to just live out his days and perish like everyone else? Maybe dying wasn't the end and his life would continue in another strange world filled with adventure. However, what would a place like that be without his wife or children?

'I must get around that time-stopping ability before it's too late...'

Thus as his work was done, Lei Yinglo disappeared from the battlefield. Perhaps if he needed a secret identity again, his old persona could appear again as he was now considered an ally of the sect. Zhang Dong in his true form on the other hand returned to the dimensional regalia to ponder the elements and time. When the time for the last battle came he needed to be prepared.

Soon days turned into weeks and those into months as another year went by. A lot of changes took place after the appearance of the great wall which was named the Elemental Barrier after their sect. Many people were enraged by its appearance as they weren't able to reach their families in the central region. They weren't given a choice to complain as anyone willing to join the Long Clan was not allowed out.

No one expected such a drastic split to occur and neither that the Unlimited Elemental Sect was capable of producing such grand structures. It had become painfully obvious that the Golden Dragon was not in any way inferior to the Azure one. Soon more people started congregating in their cities and the armies continued to grow.

The Heavenly Crane Sect was put in a bad spot but it managed to remain neutral. They had been sent an ultimatum from both sides and decided to not join up with anyone. This of course soured their relations with the Long Clan but allowed them to conserve their forces. The East side was forced to create its own barricades in case of an invasion and thus weakened the central region even more.

No one knew who would attack who. Only the masters of the Western region could relax as their barrier could not be broken. A few attempts of bombarding or slamming powerful techniques at it were taken. Yet with the possibility of boosting the defenses in a desired location through the faction system and also teleporting, it was impossible for the Long Clan to get through.

It seemed that neither side was able to produce any substantial damage. The United Element Sect remained passive while the Long Clan even started sending out some of their own troops to test the defensive formation. No one knew what would happen but rumors of a counteroffensive were spreading. Sooner or later one side would complete their preparations and break this stalemate.

When this happened, all hell would break loose. The borders were devoid of life and the cities were deserted by their inhabitants. No one was willing to live close to the strongholds on either side. They knew that something was coming, two dragons could not exist so close to each other. This stalemate was nothing more than two giants throwing small jabs at each other before finally going in for the haymaker.

‘Warning warning, large structure approaching...’

“So it begins... I will have to work with what I have...”

Zhang Dong brought up his map as Bob informed him about the movement near the border region. Previously small skirmishes took place with the Long Clan’s flying armada being forced to return. Yet he knew that it was all just a test. They were trying to figure out the defensive limitations of the great elemental barrier. Several key strongholds were being approached by a swarm of large flying ships. It was a united attack bent on getting this large wall down.

“I bet they intend to push forward here after the barrier breaks... Well, I better not keep my brother waiting then...”

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“Open up the gates! The Emperor has made a verdict. The one called Long Dong has brought great shame to the Azure dynasty and needs to be punished for his actions. He is guilty of colluding with demonic cultivators that have sought to destroy peace in these lands!”

A loud voice echoed throughout all the lands as a man spoke out. Long Shen was his name and he was the oldest of the three children from the royal line. Behind him stood Long Fengge the youngest son and Long Yanyu the middle child. All of them had gathered for this announcement before the great shield behind which the United Element Sect forces were gathered.

“It is an undeniable fact that he worked together with the Demonic Cultivator known as Wang Long. The Emperor has deemed him guilty of treason but sees it fit to give his brother a way to defend himself! As long as he relinquishes his title of Golden Dragon and submits himself to the Empire’s forces, we shall guarantee the life of anyone that was bewitched by his techniques!”

The speech was quite long and painted Zhang Dong as a demonic cultivator without mercy. His name was associated with the likes of Wang Long who was known to have been responsible for destroying the Soaring Dragon Sect along with performing other atrocities while fleeing to the northwest demonic island.

“Do those idiots actually think that we believe any of that hogwash? The Patriarch isn’t a demonic cultivator at all. The fight against the Demon Emperor Wang Long was well documented!”

While the one-sided speech continued the people on the other side of the large barrier started complaining. Some of them had even been during the fight in the demon city, others were there when the Demi-Human Emperor and his forces attacked. The Long Clan wanted to pin all the deaths on their Patriarch and the people here weren’t taking it well. All they wanted to do was fire back but had to wait for their leaders to make a decision.

“That is why we urge you to stop this facade and open the gates! We will swiftly deal with the evil demonic cultivator referred to as the Golden Dragon and see to it that he doesn’t harm any more innocent people!”

The more the speech continued the more the people on the other side of the barrier got angrier. The man that was being discussed could hear everything that was being said. He along with a few others were looking at a holographic image in the middle of the table that represented the oldest son of the Azure Emperor. The man was wearing a very traditional-looking armor set composed of shiny blue scales.

“What are they trying to achieve with this statement?”

“Maybe they want to assess our troops? The Emperor’s name carries a lot of weight even to this day... It hasn’t been long since we grasped enough power to suppress them, some of our people might not be able to refute their claims...”

“Destroy their dantians if such people appear! How could we allow those kinds of individuals inside our sect!”

“Now calm down Liena, no one is breaking ranks yet.”

Zhang Dong calmed down his wife while Zhang Jin chuckled. The three along with a few other elders like Feng Maling were all gathered here. Huo Qianf and Zhang Zhi on the other hand were directly at the area where the speech was taking place. If an attack occurred they would be there to counter the armies with their own power.

“Dong’er is right, these are just standard tactics to lower the morale of the opposing troops. They probably hope for someone on the inside to revolt and perhaps disable the barrier for them. However, do you think our people are so weak or dumb to trust in them?”

Liena along with the others nodded and looked to the hologram. There they could see that the speech was ending but no one paid much attention to it. Instead, the troops that were stationed there started shouting profanities at the man in the armor.

“Go screw yourself and bring your daddy here!”

“Yeah, is the Emperor too scared to face us?”

“He isn’t our Emperor! Zhang Dong is the true leader, stop lying the demonic cultivators are you!”

“The great sect leader would never do such a vile act, It’s all lies and you shall pay for them!”

“Yeah! They must pay! Down with the tyrant!”

“The Azure Dynasty deserves to crumble!”

Everyone on the side of the Western region started shouting. They weren’t taking any of their rhetoric, not even one person paid attention to the sweet words and promises of treasures. The Long Clan tried to entice them with various boons if they decided to make way for their armies but at this point, no one could believe the Azure Dynasty anymore. Their movements had been erratic during the large crisis and the opinion of the people had shifted.

‘They won’t be able to get in through the front door... will they commence with their siege then?’

While the others were looking at the holographic image of the enemy army, he was examining his own system map. Thanks to it he could see the entire border region along with the placement of the enemy armies. While Long Shen and the siblings were at the central stronghold other forces were moving to other locations as they spoke. It was clear that they were all waiting for a signal to attack.

It wasn’t that hard to figure out how this defensive formation worked. It operated on the same principle as any other similar formation. While it stretched through a large area with many strongholds generating power to keep it running, there were a few core regions. To destroy this the Long Clan wouldn’t need to destroy all the castles, they just needed to contend with a handful.

‘I guess they figured it out before even giving it a first try, this is disheartening.’

Zhang Dong frowned as he hoped to at least waste some of the Long Clan’s resources during a prolonged defense. This formation had five core locations that needed to be protected. If they all were captured and disabled by the enemy, the entire structure would collapse. A core location could be swapped out but would require some time to recalibrate the barrier.

Thus he expected his enemies to attempt to capture a few of the strongholds first before discovering this fact. As it stood now they had successfully identified the correct locations and were waiting. If they managed to weaken all five of them at the same time, then the wall would collapse.

“This is all just a distraction, their true aim is to get to the key locations. During the speech, their forces have been trying to approach us... I guess we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

He stood out from his seat which was somewhat more extravagant looking than the others. Even though he didn’t wish for it his wife forced him to distinguish himself from the other elders. Perhaps if it was in the past he would have disagreed with her but at a critical juncture where he was going against the Azure Emperor, his image also mattered. If he was to replace the old leader then he needed to also act one. After all of this was over and people settled down, then he could try introducing some slow changes.

“Where are you going?”

“Hm? I’m going to go join the others?”

“You can’t!”

“I can’t?”

“Listen to your wife, it’s too soon for the Patriarch to show himself. You could be walking right into their trap.”

Before he could take his leave to aid his soldiers he was stopped by his significant other. She wasn’t alone as his grandfather also stepped up to go against his decision. When looking at some of the other elders they averted their gazes but also seemed to agree with the two.

“You don’t want me to participate?”

“That would be the correct decision, you can’t risk your life at this stage of the conflict. The Azure Emperor hasn’t even appeared.”

“Dear, as the sect leader you must limit your actions, let the other warriors gain the glory while you prepare yourself for the real enemy, the Azure Emperor.”

“I see... and all of you agree with them?”

After hearing his wife also being against his involvement he turned to the other elders. All of them nodded and were in agreement. This was not the time to push their trump card onto the battlefield. Zhang Dong was the strongest weapon that they had. Someone as strong as him should not act unless it was truly necessary.

“Patriarch, it’s too dangerous. Our enemies know of your ways, this could all be an elaborate trap. We can’t ignore the Long Clan’s craftiness, they have existed for hundreds of thousands of years. The Golden Dong Palace that is now in our possession was once in theirs.”

“That is a good point...”

No one really knew what the enemy's true trump card was. The Azure Emperor was still a mystery and some caution was advised. Even though some of his forces were sacrificed to the war effort it was better than having him go down during the beginning phases of this war. There were many nascent soul masters willing to prove their might and letting them pave the way was something that he needed to contend with. It was impossible to save everyone and going off by himself would eventually get him killed.

“If everyone thinks so, then for now, I’ll return to my cultivation chamber, I’m sure my grandfather and my lovely wife will be enough to lead the attack.”

“I’m glad that you understand.”

Liena was happy and relieved that Zhang Dong decided to go with their advice. However, to their dismay, he was already thinking about potentially getting out there in his previously retired persona. The last time he went outside no one discovered his trick and thus had no reason to doubt in his words. As long as Zhang Dong the Golden Dragon didn’t appear on the battlefield, the Long Clan would have no

reason to implement any potential grand traps. This would allow him to minimize the casualties while also helping him keep an eye on the enemy movement from a closer location.

'I guess it was a good moment to revive Lei, there will be more work for the demon hunter...'

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"So you have chosen to stand with the demon? Are there no honorable warriors left? Will you all just stand by while our Empire crumbles in a mindless sea of carnage?"

Long Shen who was acting as the leading general proclaimed after his long speech had ended and no gates were opened. The other side wasn't budging at all, no one was willing to join their side. Usually, the name of the Azure Emperor was enough to open all doors before them but this time around, they were getting nothing else than animosity.

"Stop babbling nonsense, if you cared about the Empire you'd have helped us against the demi-human scourge!"

"That's right, where were you and that Azure Emperor of yours when our family members were being devoured by those monsters?"

"My entire family was killed by blood-sucking monstrosities and you did nothing! Now you want to spout some nonsense about honor? Go screw yourself!"

"Screw the Azure Emperor and the Long Clan!"

"Yeah! Screw them!"

A large number of angry voices echoed back at the end of the speech. Many people that were here were ones that joined up with the United Element Sect after losing their loved ones to the other invading Empire. Before Zhang Dong interfered in the city raids, millions of people had already perished. At that time there just wasn't enough manpower to defend the whole western region.

The only one that could have pulled it was the Long Clan and they had ignored the plight of the people that were now blaming them for the deaths. The United Element Sect's chosen method was impeccable. People that could betray them would not be allowed to participate in the border defense. There was no possibility of their own forces joining the other faction but this was not set in stone for the other side.

Long Shen's speech was interrupted by the shouting and the sound magnified in various ways. The Long Clan was still only a clan and not a sect, they did not really allow outsiders to be part of their inner core. They still somewhat relied on forces from branching clans to assist them in large skirmishes like this. Their rule had been unopposed for millenia and thus they had grown somewhat ignorant.

"The Azure Emperor is a monster and so is anyone who follows them!"

"No one wants an incompetent leader to rule over us, now is the time for change. We need someone like the great leader Zhang Dong who actually cares about us instead!"

"Yeah, down with the tyrant the old dynasty needs to end for the Empire to be reborn!"

While this didn't sound like anything new and the members that belong to the Long Clan didn't take it to heart, some of the people there did. Branching families had heard about the accusations of demonic origins. A secret investigation had also been launched into the debacle with the secret base. It had vanished just like some of the surviving elders had said and was filled with a strange veil of darkness.

Some believed it to be trickery, others to be the truth. Now that they had all gathered here for another confrontation, it was hard to distinguish who was in the right without proper evidence. Yet the seed of doubt for their overlords had been already planted and by the looks of things, they were still getting pushed around like slaves. Even now their formation had the branch families in the front while the main Long Clan was sitting in the back inside massive aerial vessels.

"Very well, in the name of the Azure Emperor, you will all be punished! If you won't listen to reason then you will be forced to yield!"

The speech was over and no resolution had been reached. The large armada that was on the other side of the barrier advanced forward while the flagship remained behind. This flying fortress was more similar to the golden palace in size. It wasn't as bulky but seemed to possess a large number of cannons and space for the Long Clan members to reside on. Many nascent soul masters were residing there along with the Emperor's children.

Soon the battle would commence and to no one's surprise Long Shen along with his siblings wouldn't be taking part. After the attempt at opening the gates had failed the oldest son was replaced by an elder of equal strength. While the Long Clan wasn't as big as a large sect, it made up the numbers with quality. There were multiple such masters gathered here and they would not go down easily.

'Hm... they started advancing on the other fronts too, they are going for the joint attack.'

Zhang Dong was looking at his system map while residing at another location. Long Shen's speech had been broadcasted everywhere and also to this stronghold he was now residing. He had been told by his wife and grandfather to remain in the dimensional regalia. Instead of listening to their plea, he had decided to join the border defenses as his alter ego, Lei Yinglo.

'The main base is being defended by Huo Qiang so it should be safe, at his level he won't go down to anyone besides the Azure Emperor himself. Zhi might be a bit weaker but he should be fine too and Liena is also there, she should be fine...'

He was the only one that was getting left out of the picture. His position on the chessboard was that of a king. A king should not move too willingly to expose himself to the enemy as if he died, then it all would just crumble. While he felt bad for deceiving his friends there was no danger of this happening if his enemies didn't actually know who he was.

'They would certainly pile up here if they knew about it but, they won't know or even think that I'd pull a stunt like this...'

From his perspective, the Long Clan probably thought of him to be similar to their leader. An Emperor did not put themselves in danger if it wasn't necessary. The thought of endangering their lives just to save some extra lives was preposterous. No Emperor or king would care about their subjects to this extent. Some even believed that they were the main focal point of their own country. What was the point of protecting it, if the Emperor got killed?

Thanks to the common sense of this world he had been given a safety net. No one would think that he was the Patriarch but just a regular elder that happened to be on the level of the others. His position was still a bit special and not everyone trusted the man called Lei Yinglo. After his work during the establishment of the other stronghold, he gained some fame but there was still some work left until he was seen as a core member of this sect.

‘I can keep watch over everything here and transferring my voice through the faction system won’t be a problem, no one will realize that I’m at this location.’

Thus began his plan of helping his sect to win this battle. Yet this would not be one of those quick battles that he was used to, instead, a prolonged siege was taking place. Both sides started pelting each other with various attacks from a somewhat safe location. It was a trial of attrition that continued for many hours until turning into days.

Even though the spirit bullets were flying back and forth, nothing else but the ground below them was taking damage. Both sides had very strong protective barriers and could not break through them. The flying ships had the advantage of being able to move so each time they had become low on energy, they were just swapped out for new vessels. The side with the strongholds on the other hand was just constantly receiving attacks. It seemed that the enemy’s tactic was quite easy.

“Elders, if this continues we might not hold out for that long...”

“It does seem so, where there any orders from the supreme elders?”

“No, they told us to hold out for now until they gather enough information for a counter-attack.”

After a few days of the continued siege, a problem arose. Most believed that the grand barrier was big and strong enough to last through any attacks even if they took weeks or months. Yet their enemy was the Long Clan, their flying ships were a lot more powerful than they had anticipated and one major flaw in this type of defense arose. As long as the other side could circle out their weaponry, sooner or later this side would become overwhelmed. Unless they supplied the shields with unlimited energy, it just wasn’t sustainable.

“Do they at least know how much time we have?”

“Some say, that we have around a month’s time until the shields become too weak to hold, writhing that time we must come up with a solution.”

The Long Clan was in a more favorable location with a giant spirit vein inside the central region. They could route all that spiritual energy into their flying armada to replenish its energy. With a constant stream of new flying monstrosities on their side, the energy resource they were using was practically unending. If something wasn’t done about it, then soon one of the core points of this formation would break and then they would lose their advantage over their enemy.

‘It’s good that they don’t know who I am...’

Zhang Dong thought to himself while coming up with a solution to the problem. His side didn’t want to give up the defensive advantage by sending in their own ships to chase the Long Clan armada. Their side was probably already waiting with a counter-offensive if they attempted to push in. While throwing

everything into the battle could produce results, a lot of lives would be lost. The only other option would be to somehow cut off their enemy's supply lines.

"Could I propose a solution to our problem?"

"Elder Yinglo? Could there be something that we missed?"

He was not alone in this place and this time around he wasn't playing on going in solo either. While it was possible for him to just teleport behind enemy lines, battling all those nascent soul masters by himself would be draining. It was possible for the Azure Emperor to be waiting for such a tactic.

"What if I told you about a way of getting around their defenses? If all goes well, then we will be able to strike at their backs when they least expect it."

"Oh? Such a way exists?"

"Yes, what we can do is..."

Thus he started explaining his new battle plan, while it had some problems it was better than just waiting here. Before their defenses became overrun by their enemy cannon fire, they would cut off their never-ending supply of energy.

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"I still can't believe we are doing this... can they really not see us?"

"Would they let us be here if they did?"

"Hey, shut up you two, and get a move on, it's no time for chatter! We need to complete the mission, place the devices in the correct locations just like the elders told us!"

"Forgive us, senior sister!"

A small group of hooded figures were sneaking around the ground. Above them, the loud explosions of spirit cannons were successfully masking their speech as they maneuvered around the raging battlefield. Sparks of leftover spiritual energy rained down on them like drizzle but they were well protected by their clothing and special hiding technique.

They were all shrouded in some sort of darkness, as long as they kept to it, there was no way of them being discovered. The man responsible for this was hidden away somewhere in the middle and concentrating. Thanks to his technique many core formation warriors were able to move around this place freely and were about to finish their mission.

'They won't know what hit them.'

Zhang Dong thought to himself while looking up. There right above him was the colossal fortress in which the Long Clan was hiding. After realizing that the shield they assembled wouldn't last the continued blasting, he came up with a solution. Instead of pushing in with the sect's limited forces, he decided to create a funnel of energy below the armada. His teleportation feature allowed him to create a smaller temporary teleportation gate on the other side of the shielding formation. Through it he moved in some of his troops that were now setting up their counter.

‘I don’t feel the presence of the Azure Emperor nor that of his wife... though she was previously able to hide her true form from me, so I have to take that into consideration.’

When he was in the Azure Palace, his older brother showed some mild care for his children. While he was allowed to teach them a lesson, their relations weren’t that bad. If he managed to capture them alive, then they could probably act as a bargaining chip to hasten their surrender. Yet, he couldn’t see those old elders give up their position in the Empire. Playing second fiddle to a sect of upstarts was not something they would do. Long Qing was still part of the Long Clan and probably carried the same sentiments.

‘He acted very relaxed and confident back then, but that could have been before he identified me as a threat to his position. I don’t think he will step down without putting up a fight but perhaps if I have his children, he’ll back away.’

His current intention was not necessarily to win this conflict, at least not at this very moment. His life would be long and he had not aged a day since arriving in this world. He had a good five hundred years in him until his body would start showing signs of aging. His brother on the other hand didn’t have that much time as long as a non-involvement agreement could be established, it would be fine.

What he needed now was just more time to master his strange cultivation realm and for that he needed the Long Clan to back away. There were a lot of holes in his plan as he wasn’t sure how deep those family ties were. Then he also needed to catch at least one of those kids before he could start bargaining with his current enemy.

‘For all I know they might not even be inside that flying fortress, it wouldn’t be strange for them to have teleported back to their main city to seek shelter.’

His thoughts continued to bug him while this area was being outfitted with traps. Two other regions had been worked on beforehand and now he found himself together with Huo Qiang against the main fortress. His identity remained hidden for the time being and his wife wasn’t here. Liena was probably the only person that would be capable of reading his mannerisms but she was further to the north protecting one of the other core structures.

“Elder, we are done.”

“Good, let us return before they realize.”

Finally, after days of preparing all the traps were ready. Soon their plan could bear fruit and the joint operation could commence. Thanks to Bob who could forward all information almost instantly to everyone at the same time, it was easy to start the push. He and the other cultivators that took part in the initial mission moved back to look at the fireworks.

The unsuspecting people from the Long Clan and their branch families had a rude awakening as they saw a light show from down below. First, all the devices that were placed and looked like boxes covered in magical runes started glowing. They connected to each other with glowing straight lines to produce a giant magical circle underneath. A purple glow encompassed multiple regions as the first effect took shape.

Something akin to a gravity field was formed that started to pull all the flying vessels down toward the ground. Thanks to Zhang Dong's knowledge of the Dao of gravity and the inclusion of magics from another world, it was possible to trap his enemies here. Now that this magical trap had been activated it wouldn't be easily destroyed. It was powered by the large defensive formation and directly connected to it.

"Now is the time, give it all you got, brothers and sisters, to me!"

Huo Qiang led the vanguard forward as they burst forth from the main defensive stronghold. Previously they would be unable to chase down the attacking armada that could easily outrun them while pelting them with a mass of spirit bullets. Now while they were trapped in the gravitational trap, they could not move and were also being pulled in the direction of the stronghold which was in possession of many large cannons.

Zhang Dong wasn't far behind but his main role was protecting the gravity trap which he was the focal point of. If he strayed too far then it would lose some of its pulling force. This was required to affect the large Long Clan flying stronghold that was slowly being yanked over in his direction. It was their main priority and after the other side was caught in the trap, their side began to charge.

Zhang Dong tried to help as best as he could while protecting the formation from various energy blasts. Many large formations taking the forms of turtles to defend him were also in the way. Getting through all of it would take some time and this was not something the Long Clan had plenty of. Their ships could not move at all, they were like sitting ducks just waiting for their shields to be blasted through.

On his system map, he could see the same actions being taken at the other locations. There weren't any huge flying strongholds like the one here. Even without his help, his people were able to keep at it. This didn't mean that there weren't any casualties along the way. It was a war between two powerful factions and no one was willing to give their enemy an inch.

For him who could see his faction population on the system window, it was maddening. He had to sit there without being able to do much while his people were being killed or injured. Before the massive fortress in the air was breached he couldn't really move. Huo Qiang, Zhang Liena, and Zhang Zhi were battling it out on their own fronts and needed to contend with their own powers.

He had to somewhat stay true to his promise of not getting involved in the border dispute. If he just activated his full power the Long Clan would more than likely target his position. Having a clear shot at the enemy leader was not something they could ignore. Perhaps they would even use this massive fortress of theirs as a battering ram, however, as it looked his involvement wasn't needed.

'It seems that they really weren't expecting this turn of events, just a bit more and we can blast through their defenses.'

While the huge formation that was around the borders was being boosted by various treasures and even somewhat by a spirit vein, the other army wasn't. They only had flying ships with engines that were not built to get bombarded by countless spirit blasts from cannons. Now that they were forced in range of them, they were getting blasted to smithereens and soon some of them started to crash down to the ground.

“That’s it, they are faltering don’t let up, focus fire on the main stronghold, pull the Long Clan bastards out of there!”

Even now the enemy clan was using the branch families as cannon fodder. A regiment of their ships was creating an auxiliary defensive formation. They were taking the brunt of the attacks while the people from the Long Clan tried to pull away from the gravitational attack. All their cannons were aimed directly at the ground but it wasn’t that easy to get rid of the magical lines. Zhang Dong was keeping his shadowy techniques alive which made it quite difficult to pinpoint the true location of the weak points.

‘Are they going to use their large cannon?’

As a last-ditch effort to get out of there, the large castle-like structure transformed some of its towers into a massive cannon. The sound of it powering up produced a lot of static noise and was hard to miss. It was pointed directly down and at his immediate location. Clearly, his enemies had pinpointed the man responsible for it all and were dead set on killing him.

‘Oh?’

‘Protect the Elder, don’t let them destroy the gravity trap!’

Before he could do something about it, a large group of flying ships gathered around him. There were various models that he remembered drawing up in his spare time as well as some that he had never seen before. These probably belonged to some of their allies from other sects that decided to join them in this defensive battle.

They were all there ready to take the massive cannon blow by themselves. They all knew that if the elder controlling this grand magic fell, then their plan would go up in smoke. The other side on the other hand didn’t look that united. Some of them were trying to escape to the sides while others continued with the battle. There was a stark difference between the leadership of these two sides and soon it would be made obvious which had the advantage.

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A blast of swirling light shot forth and collided with a large blockade of defensive formations. It looked like a giant snapping turtle with a spiky shell after multiple smaller such formations connected with each other. Even though the creature looked massive it started crumbling under the pressure of the spiritual energy.

“We have to hold!”

“Give it your all, even if it kills you!”

Some of the cultivators inside the formation cried out in pain. Others spit out a copious amount of blood while trying to remain conscious. Nevertheless, none of them relented and even if their bones were broken or cultivation was shattered, they would not let this attack get through to the elder down below.

The man they were trying to protect was shrouded in a sphere of dark purple light. He was the central node of the whole trap formation that was created under the Long Clan’s flying stronghold. If his technique was interrupted then their plan would quickly go up in smoke. The warriors of the sect fighting this war knew the stakes and they were unwilling to give in while victory was at their fingertips.

Yet, it didn't seem that they would be able to last through this massive blast of energy. This flying fortress was massive and so was the main cannon it wielded. The energy it produced was far outside what a group of cultivators creating defensive formations could combat.

"It won't hold..."

The nascent soul master that was the focal point of this large turtle caught up some blood while speaking. He and a handful of other early-stage nascent soul masters had recently been able to push into this realm. This was only possible thanks to their sect and mostly the Patriarch who was able to push people through the threshold through a strange cleansing technique.

All of them felt grateful and wished to repay the kindness that was given to them. In their minds, there was no reason for their leader to do such a thing. Other masters in larger sects usually kept such techniques hidden and only aided their closest aids or even took them to the grave. Even if they were in the same faction, it was hard to trust anyone. Only after this sect was established were they able to look past such things, to the point of sacrificing it all.

The crumbling turtle gave out a massive roar as everyone inside of it pushed themselves further. Some were even able to advance through the threshold of their previous cultivation realm in a last-ditch attempt at victory. Their struggle bore fruit as somehow they were able to last through the blast that left a giant gaping hole in the glowing turtle's spiky shell.

"It didn't go through, the trap persists!"

They cheered when they realized that they had managed to last through the blast of energy without affecting the elder's concentration below. Their voices quickly went quiet as they saw the massive cannon charging up again. It was already a miracle that they managed to block the first one, a second one would cleanly go through the damaged defensive formation.

They turned to the sky to see if some help was coming. Their biggest asset, Huo Qiang, was already being contested by ten nascent soul masters. His soul beast was tussling with a mass of others. It would be impossible for him or any other to make it in time. It would take several minutes to restore the gap in the shell but they only had a few seconds of time before the cannon recharged.

The cannon fire from their own stronghold wasn't able to get through the flying fortress's defenses. It looked bleak for the people below, if they didn't move out of the way then their lives would be forfeit. There was not enough energy to block another shot. If they moved from this spot, their elder that was concentrating below them would be hit instead. He was known as a strong man but even he wouldn't last through it. When he died or got injured their trap would be gone and the counterattack of their enemies would shred them.

A decision was made by the people inside. They would sacrifice themselves for the cause. Even if they saved themselves, the enemy armada would be unleashed and their back would be open while they fled. Either they died, or everyone else would. There was a slight hesitation at first but in the end, they all came to the same conclusion. It was better to die for the sect that treated them well than to live as ants as they did before joining up with them.

"Remember us!"

“For the sect and for the future!”

“Take care of my family...”

All of them were resolute and gathered their energies for one last blast. Perhaps this would give the other elders enough time to do something about this cannon, each second mattered and they were convinced of this worthwhile sacrifice. However, something threw a big wrench into their plan and it was in the form of a giant beam of light coming from the side of their own fortress.

“Huh?”

They all gasped as they saw something drill itself against the protective barrier of that massive fortress. The beam that was charging up started faltering as the owners of the floating castle needed to reroute all energy toward their own defensive formations. Even with that they were unable to fully counter this massive attack that continued to blast away.

“Is that?”

“Did the Patriarch come to aid us? But he was supposed to remain at the sect...”

“No, it’s not the Patriarch... it’s his soul beast!”

A large golden dragon appeared out of nowhere and passed through the barrier. It was clearly Bahamut, the beast that belonged to the United Element Sect’s leader. The people here didn’t really know that the dragon had become its own being that could act independently. To their knowledge, it would be impossible for these soul beasts to form at such a large distance from their main sect.

Yet, their leader was not there and his spiritual essence was missing. How he was able to control this creature at this distance was unknown to them but now they were saved. The golden dragon tossed itself into the battle as it continued to blast the enemy fortress with forceful ranged attacks. It had more firepower than the average flagship of a grand sect and much more maneuverability.

The course of the battle shifted almost instantly as the dragon arrived. The tired soldiers that almost died while protecting the gravity trap now had enough time to regain their footing. The large turtle that they previously formed was restored. After using some recovery pills on the injured members inside, all was well again and the counter-offensive began.

‘Good that I called Bahamut over, no one said that he couldn’t help out with the cause.’

Zhang Dong was still sitting below in his lotus position. He had predicted that something could go wrong and had his familiar wait in hiding. Thanks to the sudden attack some of the cannon had been damaged. It was time to push through and board the main structure of the Long Clan.

‘I must pull them in a bit closer, those other ships don’t matter, all I have to do is to get into that thing before they run away...’

The battle continued and for the time being he had to remain on the ground. The closer the enemy armada got to the center of the formation, the greater the gravitational pull became. Soon they were forced to move away from their ships that became nothing more than unmoving targets for the spirit cannons.

‘They really don’t care about those branch families, do they?’

To no surprise, the cultivators that belonged to the branching families attempted to retreat into the largest fortress. It at this point in time had not yet fallen and was the only thing that could protect them from the cannon fire. Yet, when they approached it, their bodies were repelled by the defensive formation. It seemed that the only people that could go through it were members of the main Long Clan.

Such behavior was something that he expected but their using their allies as meat shields blatantly was not something that even Zhang Dong expected. The Long Clan leaders probably had their reasons for it but it made them look immoral and instantly lowered everyone's morale.

“T-the main clan has abandoned us!”

“How could this be? After all we sacrificed for them?”

To a lot of people here fighting for the Long Clan was their ticket to immortality. They knew that there were no guarantees given and that the road would be bumpy, but they at least expected them to give them some aid in a situation like this. Now it became clear that the Long Clan only acted tough when they were greatly superior to their opponents. In a case like this where things were more disadvantageous they would retreat.

‘Here they come, time for phase two!’

Zhang Dong watched his people fight for the future of their sect with their lives on the line. On the other side, the Long Clan and their branching families could not be any more divided in their goals. Thanks to such a disbalance he would be able to achieve victory here as now he could activate the true trap.

As he was sitting there the purple light expanded in the form of various shadowy and purple tentacles. These were thicker than trees and numbered in the thousands. They quickly wiggled up to grasp the flying fortress that had arrived before him. Incorporating some techniques from his old enemies was quite handy and even though this made him look like some kind of demonic cultivator, it was needed to disable this flying fortress.

“Just like we planned! Board their fortress!”

Huo Qiang, the acting general shouted out. In both his hands he had a charred corpse of a nascent soul master. After tossing them to the side he turned into a shooting star. To someone like him that liked to battle strong foes, there was almost no greater gift than the Long Clan. His aim was the oldest son of the Emperor whom he considered to be the number two of that faction.

Yet before he could storm the castle a massive surge of azure flames exploded from within this structure. It brought with it a surge of unprecedented spiritual energy that forced even someone like Huo Qiang to back away. Soon the flames were followed by a beastly roar that sounded similar to that of a dragon...

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“Has the Azure Emperor come himself?”

“Why would he appear here now, is it to protect his children?”

The people from the united element sect were stunned at the scene that was playing out before them. Just a moment ago it looked like they would be able to board the inside of this flying fortress and get to the Long Clan members hiding inside. The gravitational formation had spawned some dark tentacles that clung to the huge structure and pulled it down to the ground. Escape was now impossible, or so they thought.

Almost at the same time as the defensive shield wavered a spike in spiritual energy occurred. They all backed away out of fright of an explosion happening but instead were greeted by a ferocious draconic roar. From within the fortress, a large blue dragon emerged that was around the same size as its golden counterpart that belonged to the United Element Sect's Patriarch.

It was preceded by an azure column of flames that reached the sky and created a fiery twister. This surge of energy started pushing everything away while creating a momentary safe spot in the middle. Even when someone like Huo Qiang who practiced the dao of fire tried to get closer, he was burned by these strange flames. No one could get close and had to watch the giant dragon rise up while spreading its wings.

'These flames aren't regular flames, they affect the soul as well...'

Zhang Dong, who was below the large fortress, started analyzing the situation. The draconic beast that he was looking at was more than likely the soul beast of the Azure Emperor. While he had not seen it before, the spiritual energy signature that it was giving off, was identical to the Emperor's.

'I don't feel his presence, did he just send out his beast instead of coming here himself?'

Most people were starting to panic. No one expected Long Qing's soul beast to appear and it wasn't even the only one there. Right behind it was a smaller version of the blue dragon that had one person standing on top of its head. It was the oldest child of Emperor Long Shen. The other three that had previously been here with him were missing.

'They are either attacking the other locations with their armies or returned home before this battle started...'

He had to at least give it to Long Shen. The man had stayed together with his troops without running away. For a moment he expected to see an elder replacing his position while he fled even before the whole battle started. Instead, he was together with his father's beast that looked only similar to his own.

'They must somehow force their soul beasts to look the same through their cultivation technique, maybe that's why they also confused me with being part of their clan.'

Bahamut the golden dragon looked somewhat similar to the azure being. They weren't a palette swap but were both western dragons with wings coming out of their backs. Both of them were staring at each other as the battle was paused. The azure flames that were swirling around were making it troublesome to move forward as they burned more than just flesh.

Luckily, the golden dragon that was on the side of the United Element Sect was similar. Its master had mastered the Dao of the souls which meant that it was capable of contending with these strange flames. It gave out a loud roar as it produced a counter technique. A lightning storm of pale golden light was formed in an instant and it flew at the swirling inferno.

These two spiritual forces collided with each other while everyone else just watched. A shower of lightning bolts descended on the entire fortress that was being shrouded in blue flames. The Azure beast on the inside opened up its wings to rouse the flames. They engulfed the entire space and became thicker but it was not enough.

“The lightning attacks, they are erasing the flames!”

One of the elders participating in the battle shouted out. After a moment the enraged flames started vanishing. With each strike of lightning and thundercrack, they were thinning out. The whole golden storm moved over the stronghold to engulf it and the battle raged on.

‘They are about equal...’

While the other sect members couldn’t really see what was going on, Zhang Dong could tell that Bahamut wasn’t truly winning. Both forces were canceling each other out, for every bolt that landed on the flames more were born to counter it. The two massive dragons were now in a bout of endurance and nothing else. Their powers were suspiciously equal and even after a prolonged exchange a victor was not arising.

‘Wait, what is that Long Shen doing? Is he trying to escape?’

In the turmoil, he could see the smaller dragon move somewhere. He finally left his position as the trapping formation had done what it was created for. However, it was already too late. When he arrived behind his golden dragon the other side was already activating a teleportation technique. They were using the Emperor’s beast as a distraction while escaping along with the other Long Clan members.

‘I should have acted sooner, they are actually doing the sensible thing and escaping...’

It seemed that his enemies weren’t as stupid this time around. The moment they were convinced that there was no way of winning, they started escaping. Various teleportation talismans were being used and to his surprise, they weren’t being blocked by the formation he created. It was created with the talismans the branch families were using in mind. This was a new batch and they were clearly superior in all aspects.

‘They just left them all here...’

While the main Long Clan that was stationed on the stronghold escaped, the branch families that were stranded in the flying ships weren’t as lucky. They were in possession of the older version of the talismans that could be blocked. They could only look from the sidelines as their allies fled and they were left here at the mercy of the United Element Sect.

“Don’t think that this will change anything. Your deeds will not go unpunished! The whole Empire will know of your demonic nature!”

Long Shen’s voice echoed through the whole battlefield before he vanished. His soul beast disappeared along with him but the flames that were being produced by the larger azure dragon were still there. It was staying there to act as a distraction and a shield. Even though Bahamut was close to breaking through, he would be unable to shatter the flames in time. Their main foe had managed to escape but this wasn’t all.

“My brother, I might have underestimated you but... this won’t happen again! I will see you soon, so until then, please try to stay alive, Ha ha ha!”

Zhang Dong that was still in the form of Lei Yinglo was stared at by the Azure dragon. The beast started to suddenly talk in the voice of his older brother, Long Qing. He was somehow able to see through his disguise while no one else could. After a few words the being he was controlling also started to fade away but before fully leaving it did leave a parting gift.

“Everyone, retreat, that stronghold is going to explode!”

He quickly shouted at everyone as he noticed an internal problem with the fortress. It was self-destructing and it wouldn’t take more than a few seconds for the engine to blow up. Everyone retreated at the call out from the elder. Some nascent masters moved forward to shield their weaker juniors and it was the same for Bahamut. His wings spread to all sides as it began producing a massive shield to protect everyone that was behind it.

The fortress that was brought down to the ground exploded with a resounding boom. It was as if they had expected this outcome beforehand. Perhaps while their stronghold was under the gravitational pull, they had already evacuated their soldiers. This explained why the teleportation talismans were used in unison.

Yet not everyone was saved, the people belonging to the branch families that were behind this blast were getting burned alive. His forces were defending against the blast that was before them, there was no time for anyone to look at what was happening behind this evaporating stronghold.

‘Hold it together...’

Zhang Dong strained his power as he tried to contain the blast together with Bahamut. Both of them were the closest to the initial detonation with Huo Qiang up in the air where he previously slaughtered a few nascent soul masters. Everything was quickly swallowed up by the bright blue explosion of azure flames that attempted to burn through the souls of everyone here.

‘I need to protect their souls or they will all die, the spirit energy contained in this blast is just a distraction.’

The real attack was hidden inside of the explosion and loud noise. Normally everyone would protect themselves from the overloaded Qi but not be aware of the underlying soul attack. Luckily for everyone here, Zhang Dong was a specialist when it came to souls. Thanks to his quick reaction he was able to douse these azure flames that were trying to burn through.

They didn’t seem to discriminate between anyone. The leftover branch family members belonging to the Long Clan could not protect themselves from this strange attack. For a moment he expected them to have some sort of shielding that would allow them to persist but they started dropping like flies.

‘Damn bastards don’t even care about their allies!’

He was enraged at the sight of people losing their lives. His side was safe from the adverse effects of the soul attack and only suffered some minor cases from the spike in spiritual energy. The branching clans on the other hand were getting wiped out. It was so bad that for a moment Zhang Dong wondered if his older brother was trying to eradicate these side clans and then pin it all on his faction.

To protect his own people his form expanded into a golden haze. His true form had to be exposed as without it, using his holy energies would be impossible. The light surrounded everything and pushed the flames away to cancel their adverse effect. Soon the area returned to normal but the sight that remained was anything but regular. A large hole where the stronghold was pulled down was now there and large groups of collapsed cultivators were everywhere.

‘...’

He was speechless at the sight of the soulless husks on the ground. The inclusion of soul arts complicated things but it was also too late to turn back. Now that such a large number of his foes had perished, his side had an advantage that needed to be used.

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“Hey, there are some survivors here!”

“How many are there?”

“Not that many, not more than ten made it out alive...”

“If it wasn’t for the Patriarch, a lot of us would have perished with them.”

“So this is how the Long Clan does things?”

“Yeah and still those idiots flock to them ... “

Two soldiers were pushing some rubble out of the way to get to the survivors. What they found was not for the faint of heart. The people that were within the blast zone of the explosion had their souls destroyed. Their bodies looked like dried-up husks and several of those were on top of one survivor here.

“The people on top must have used something to protect this person...”

“Family?”

“Perhaps...”

One of the soldiers noticed a medallion around the woman’s neck that had survived the explosion. Three other people with similar accessories were on top of them. It seemed that they tossed themselves on top of her to protect her soul from getting devoured.

“Could have been their child or perhaps a sibling?”

“Such a terrible fate to be betrayed by your allies... will the world finally listen?”

“What do you think? They’ll try to pin the blame on us, I bet they’ll say that our Patriarch did it all just like the last time!”

“They have no honor or pride.”

One of the soldiers spit to the side while the other gently carried the survivor onto a floating platform. This platform produced a blue shield of light to protect the injured woman. It was a special stretcher that on the inside also produced golden light of healing to stabilize this patient. In the distance, similar

devices were used to carry out the handful of survivors that could perhaps give some insights into the current Long Clan strategies.

Even though they were being rescued their status was still that of a prisoner of war. Perhaps after the betrayal from their side, it would be easier to convince them of the Long Clan's devil-like nature. Yet, the fear of the old monster that had ruled over these lands for millenia was strong. It wouldn't be that easy to change the mind of the citizens that grew up on the fact that the Long Clan was the strongest of them all.

"That is true but will anyone believe us?"

'That's a good question...'

Zhang Dong hovered up in the sky while looking around the area. His attention focused on the conversation of these soldiers. He was far up in the air but this didn't stop him from using his senses to listen in. It brought a question to the forefront about how others would see this confrontation. Would they believe that the Long Clan abandoned their branching families or not?

'Our side recorded the whole exchange but they'll just say that we tempered with it or created some type of illusion. There are many ways of spinning it but one thing is clear, they have lost this battle and were forced to retreat...'

Although the Long Clan would probably deflect all accusations of their cowardly behavior, one thing could not be denied. The Behemoth that towered over the Empire for countless ages had been vanquished in an open field. Even though most of their army was made up of branching clans and mercenaries willing to risk their life for resources, they had lost.

'Those clans will think twice about involving themselves in this conflict now.'

Zhang Dong knew that the people from this world were not that brave. Cultivators calculated their chances of victory and usually only engaged in combat if they were confident in winning. The ones that arrived at the pinnacle of power were not there due to their bravery but their caution. This war which was supposed to be an easy victory had become a lot messier.

'The Emperor's dragon was seen by everyone, they probably won't be able to deny that.'

With the appearance of the Azure Dragon beast, it was clear that this was not an easy battle. If the Emperor had to get involved to save his children, the sides had to be somewhat equal. Most of the experts would take this time to reevaluate their decisions and steps. Siding with the United Element Sect had become a valid tactic that could prove very profitable.

In the end, the cultivators just wanted one thing, more cultivation resources to fuel their neverending desire for power and immortality. If the Long Clan actually fell during this conflict, the rewards that could be gained would be massive. They had hundreds of thousands of years to reach this point and were probably hiding a lot of secrets.

The ancestor of the Azure Emperor was supposed to have been a true immortal that ascended. To push into that fabled realm a lot of people would risk their lives. Masters that were close to their death could see this as a chance for them to live a bit longer.

'It will take a bit longer for those old hidden foggies to come out, one won battle won't change much, this war is only beginning...'

Zhang Dong brought up his system window and clicked over to his map. There he could see the entire wall that was created on the western border. It was mostly in a shade of green with a few spots being orange and the spot he was in now, was the same. The color represented the damage that the formation suffered. It shifted to yellow from green and then over to orange with red being the last one. If the fight continued for longer then red would be all that was left.

'It held up and they have all retreated after their main fortress fell...'

After analyzing some combat data it was revealed to him that this area was a decoy. They were probably expecting to pull most of the defenders out from the other regions here. With most of the firepower drawn in the direction of their flying fortress the other ship fleets would have time to blast through one of the other walls.

However, after it was destroyed the other ships in the other areas started to retreat. There were probably many reasons for the retreat, one of them perhaps being the betrayal from the Long Clan's side. The more the trust wavered, the better it became for his side of the equation. Now it was up to him to decide on the next step. Would they give their enemies time to recover or push in while they were winning?

'If I wait too long they will eventually recover and the next time it might not be as easy...'

Information was key and now the Long Clan had a lot of it. The next time they came here they would probably expect him to be somewhere on the battlefield. He had hoped to remain hidden as Lei Yinglo but could not keep his form during the explosion. The soul energy and aura of golden thunder clearly belonged to him. Perhaps even the Azure Emperor would be there to catch him when he revealed himself.

'They certainly don't care about their soldiers as much as I do. Launching a sneak attack during the confrontation could work and they probably do something about the gravity trap the next time around.'

He could not count on the same tactic working twice. Now that his enemies knew about the gravity energy and also about his shadowy technique that he implemented into it, they would certainly try to do something about it. Zhang Dong was not out of options though. They had no idea about his system and he could use it to create better-placed teleportation spots at the border region. Defending this area for some time was possible and perhaps he wouldn't even need to participate.

'Hm... what should I do...'

"Senior brother, watch out!"

"Huh?"

"I tried to stop her but she came through!"

"Uh..."

His thoughts were interrupted by Huo Qiang who shouted in his direction. The person he was pointing to was flying his way and she didn't look happy. Those furrowed brows made her usually cute face look ferocious. It was like a demon was coming his way and he had no place to run.

"How dare you lie to me!"

"I uh... please calm down my wife we are still out on the battlefield, what if there are any Long Clan survivors..."

"Then they will have to wait for you to explain yourself."

Zhang Dong started backing away while Liena flew over to his location. The other sect members bowed their heads at the arrival of their matriarch and soon started listening in to the conversation. When arriving she was screaming out at the top of her lungs which made things somewhat obvious. To not have their private life be exposed, Zhang Dong quickly created a barrier to block out sounds from getting out.

"You were supposed to remain at the sect, what were you thinking? Disguising yourself as an elder? How long have you been doing this for?"

"I uh... it wasn't that long..."

"It wasn't? So if I look up your fake name in the records, I won't find anything interesting?"

"Why would you do that dear... How about you calm down and we discuss things somewhere private."

"Calm down? You want me to calm down?"

He had made a grave error in his wording. His lovely wife, who was usually calm, collected, and cute, started shouting at him. It was hard to refute her claims as he had done the things that she mentioned. Without telling anyone he endangered his life but the biggest problem was this, it was the lack of trust.

"Do you really trust us this little?"

"No, I was just worried that more people would die... please understand."

After a little back and forth the shouting stopped. The crux of the issue was his lack of trust in his people that usually depended on his overwhelming might to get things done. He had come here to finish the battle faster and to conserve lives. While his plan had worked, if his enemies were able to figure out his true identity, this whole thing could have ended with a tragedy.

"No more lies from this point on, will you promise me this?"

"Of course!"

Liena squinted while Zhang Dong tried to put on his poker face. Her face moved in quite close to look for nervous ticks but there were none. Even though he just went through a large-scale battle, the fear he felt now was greater than he had when the flying stronghold was exploding.

'I'll be sleeping on the couch for a while...'