

## **Apocalypse 1511**

### Chapter 1511: Camp near destruction

The rain and wind stopped by dawn, leaving every tree washed clean.

In this vast woodland—almost a forest—lived numerous evolved. Some strong, some weak, but all shared one common trait: they couldn't leave.

The hunting grounds, the wheels, the fertile soil, the clear streams—even the trees themselves—were their lifelines.

A modest waterfall cascaded over a bare, two-hundred-meter cliff in a secluded corner.

Three directions were blocked: two by high-level mutated creatures' territories, the third by a small but deadly dungeon.

This place was practically forgotten.

Yet now, it buzzed with activity.

Perched in the canopy of a massive tree, concealed by thick branches, Ye Zhongming observed the scene below—women and children.

At a glance, he could tell they were all evolved. Most were five-star, with five or six at six-star. One woman, clad in silver-grade gear, even reached seven-star.

Besides them, a dozen children—ages seven to their teens—played quietly by the waterfall's pool. But whether working or playing, all moved in near silence, voices hushed.

This was a camp.

A sanctuary for escaped meat pigs of Soul Merchant.

The woman called Xiaohua had led him here.

Now, gagged and bound to the tree trunk, her head rested beside Ye Zhongming's hand, ready to be crushed at any moment.

Ye Zhongming pointed at the seven-star woman washing a child's hair, glancing at Xiaohua for confirmation. Receiving a nod, he continued watching.

Several wooden huts lined the pool's edge, housing the fifty-plus inhabitants.

According to Xiaohua, they'd all fled Soul Merchant. Initially, over two hundred, many had died during the escape or while securing this hideout.

How they'd "sacrificed," Ye Zhongming could guess.

After breakfast, half the women dove into the pool, hunting blue fish—low-level but tasty, their staple food. Apart from some that remained to watch, another group foraged nearby for edible plants and mushrooms.

Hunting was beyond them. As Xiaohua explained, most only had evolution levels—no bloodlines, skills, or jobs. Poorly equipped and inexperienced, confronting high-level mutated lifeforms meant suicide.

To evade Soul Merchant, they'd chosen this barren refuge. Xiaohua and others ventured out to survive, adapting to the apocalypse while scavenging skill scrolls, bloodline crystals, and gear to bring back.

But Soul Merchant had placed bounties on them. Recognized, they'd be captured and returned. Some small factions, lured by their high evolution levels, risked sheltering them, hoping to train them into warriors.

These factions were Xiaohua's targets—to infiltrate, learn, and then bring knowledge and hope back to camp.

A desperate plan but necessary. Staying meant slow death; leaving meant danger. Three groups of fifteen had been sent out. Each time, fewer than five returned.

The seven-star leader, Wang Xiaorui, was the sole survivor of the first group. She'd returned repeatedly, bringing half the camp's supplies, and was elected leader.

Now, including Xiaohua, only nine remained active outside.

Though his heightened mental energy, it suggested that Xiaohua spoke the truth but Ye Zhongming still chose to come here and verify it personally. After the groups dispersed, leaving the camp lightly guarded, he knocked Xiaohua unconscious and infiltrated.

With his strength, no one can spot him here.

At a hut's rear, he eavesdropped as Wang Xiaorui and two others processed mushrooms for drying.

They were much more relaxed in the hut and spoke normally.

"With today's haul, we might avoid hunger if the fish are plentiful. But rain often drives them deep. Winter's coming—I don't know if we'll last."

One woman deftly trimmed mushroom stems and tossed them into a wooden bowl on the side.

"Xiaorui, it's been days since any sisters returned. I'm worried."

The second woman looked up at their silent leader.

"Have faith." Wang Xiaorui paused. "Last time, Mengmeng brought a job advancement scroll, three pieces of equipment, and food. Before that, Xiaohua returned with two skill scrolls, a six-star potion, and eight pieces of equipment."

"These didn't come easy. They're out there fighting for every scrap. We'll just wait."

Silence followed. However harsh, this life beat being Zero's meat pigs.

"As winter nears, food will vanish. If we find no solution by then, we leave."

Wang Xiaorui's declaration hung heavy. She was the leader and had to find a solution for her sisters. Warmer months allowed survival here, but winter's bite would force them out. The fish in the pool would disappear, and they would have to leave if they wanted to survive.

"But where would we—?"

The person didn't continue, but the three of them understood. As Soul Merchant's fugitives, everyone wanted to capture them for the bounty. Without strength, the open world meant death. Even if they could get far from here, where could they go?

"Xiaohua mentioned a country ranking," the first woman ventured. "The top faction is Cloud Peak. Their leader, Ye Zhongming, commands a seven-star guard unit—Female Guards. Rumor says they're Soul Merchant escapees, too. Maybe... we could join them?"

The discussion that followed gave Ye Zhongming an odd sensation. He hadn't expected to overhear his own name.

By now, he believed Xiaohua. Her cooperation likely stemmed from his overwhelming power, threats, and the camp's dire straits. Hearing his hatred for Soul Merchant, she'd gambled on his mercy.

As Ye Zhongming prepared to wake Xiaohua for introductions to Wang Xiaorui, who she mentioned knew all the secrets of Soul Merchant—a commotion erupted.

The foraging women came sprinting back, pursued by thunderous footsteps.

Chapter 1512: New Saint

The commotion quickly alerted those left in the camp. Wang Xiaorui was the first to rush out, leaping onto a rooftop to survey the situation. She soon spotted her panicked companions fleeing back.

"Adou, go call everyone back!"

With their makeshift oxygen gear and evolved physiques, these non-combatant "meat pigs" could stay submerged for an hour.

The woman named Adou immediately sprinted toward the pool and dove in.

Ye Zhongming, who had already identified the approaching threat, shook his head slightly at Wang Xiaorui's order.

These women truly lacked experience.

Without even identifying the enemy, she'd ordered the retrieval of submerged teammates—a clear tactical error.

The camp's isolation provided safety, but there were no escape routes during attacks. Their only retreat was the pool itself.

The correct move would've been to assess the threat first. If mutated lifeforms attacked, they should abandon those who were fleeing and hide inside the pool to see if they could hide from the trouble. If humans came, leave the submerged hidden, sacrificing the rest to protect them.

But gathering everyone? For what? A fight? It was suicide for these untrained women.

Perhaps due to the noise, Xiaohua gradually regained consciousness. Seeing the emergency, she struggled violently, muffled cries escaping her gag as she desperately signaled Ye Zhongming.

When the gag was removed, she didn't scream but pleaded quietly: "Please save us. You said you sympathize! They can't fight—most don't even have weapons. They won't survive. Please!"

When Ye Zhongming remained impassive, she gritted her teeth. "Then, at least free me. I have to help my sisters."

"Even if you help, assess the situation first. Do you know what's chasing them? Mutated lifeforms or evolved? Charging in blindly just means dying pointlessly. You won't even be able to help them."

Ye Zhongming's tone was exasperated.

He did pity these Soul Merchant escapees—his female guards' connection fostered that—but their sheer ineptitude frustrated him.

Xiaohua fell silent, focusing ahead. "Mengmeng?"

Concentrating, she recognized one of the fleeing women—another sent out to adapt. She wasn't as strong as Xiaohua and only evolved one level to six stars. Her equipment wasn't as good but was slightly better than the other sisters.

Why was she back now?

Hearing the name, Ye Zhongming recalled the earlier conversation. This woman had recently returned. Coming back so soon meant...

The pursuers soon became visible—a dozen five-meter-tall ogres wielding massive clubs. Most had single heads (levels 5-6), but two bore twin heads (level 7).

This area was ogre territory, but Ye Zhongming had noticed their territory expanding outward, leaving this sector abandoned.

Why would they appear now?

Then he noticed their blood-red eyes and sluggish movements—even if they were furious, this was a very unnatural state. They weren't fast too.

To him, these ogres posed zero threat.

To these women, they were unstoppable demons.

"Mengmeng must've led them here!" Xiaohua gasped.

"She was followed, but not by ogres." Ye Zhongming unfastened her bonds while she was confused.

"Go help them. I'll check the rear." Without explanation, he vanished into the trees.

Xiaohua hesitated only moments before leaping down to join her sisters.

The slow ogres allowed her to meet up with her sisters easily. By the time they regrouped, most fisherwomen had surfaced.

"Mengmeng? Xiaohua? Why are you two together? What's happening?" Wang Xiaorui was stunned to see both sisters return simultaneously.

"I encountered them on my way back. Prepare to fight!" Mengmeng panted, drenched in sweat from the frantic retreat.

Wang Xiaorui knew questions could wait. Survival meant eliminating these ogres.

The odds weren't hopeless—they could manage with her, Xiaohua, and Mengmeng- two seven stars and one six stars. Others could distract the weaker ogres, giving them a chance.

"Xiaohua, we take the twin-heads. Everyone else with weapons support Mengmeng against the rest. Non-combatants, hide!"

In crisis, Wang Xiaorui's external experience showed. She assigned targets cleanly before charging.

Xiaohua followed, scanning futilely for Ye Zhongming.

He'd fled—that was understandable.

Though only twin-heads appeared, their kind included eight-star triple-heads. It was normal for him to find that dangerous and then choose to leave.

She felt no resentment, only gratitude—he'd released her in time to fight. If not, she wouldn't be here to fight alongside her sisters. Without this, her next visit back might've found corpses.

Chapter 1512.5- New Saint

Focusing, she extended her razor nails—with her bloodline still on cooldown, her job was all she had.

The ogres quickly bumped into the charging women. They roared, raising the giant clubs made from entire trees and swinging them at the women.

Wang Xiaorui proved why she was the only one who survived outside from the first batch—not only did she not dodge, she picked up her speed. She glanced past their club strikes to stab a twin-head's thigh with her green-grade daggers.

Small wounds appeared, but only a bit of blood flowed. This green-grade weapon couldn't break its defense at all.

Wang Xiaorui was shocked. But her movement didn't slow. She kicked off its leg to dodge another attack before lifting off from its stomach to get near its chest.

While rising, she started to glow. When she reached the highest point, she was as bright as a small sun.

Then, defying physics, she changed trajectory mid-fall, slamming into the ogre's chest.

To ensure the safety of the camp, she used her trump card, her job "Scorching Igniter".

The collision produced a muffled boom. Wang Xiaorui scoffed and dropped from the sky, her radiance extinguished.

Her basic-grade skill was strong, but she couldn't one-shot a same-level ogre, which is renowned for defense.

The injuries were severe, but they weren't fatal.

Seeing her land, that ogre swung its club at her. As the weapon landed, several club shadows formed around which covered the region.

Mutated lifeforms had skills, too.

They clashed. The sounds weren't loud, but after the ogre was sent a few steps back from the recoil, Wang Xiaorui was half laying on the ground. Her body was covered in blood.

She wasn't dead, but to block the ogre's strike, she tanked it with her weapon. Her arms were broken, and many of her bones were too.

This camp leader had lost her fighting strength.

Meanwhile, Xiaohua faced another seven-star ogre. She adopted totally different tactics against her twin-head—staying low, exploiting speed to lace its legs with venomous slashes.

Her sharp claws had poison, and she relied on her speed to leave wounds on the ogre's legs. Her gold-grade belt had mostly support skills. The only offensive trait was to worsen wounds. This made it even more unbearable for the ogre.

The giant body meant that it wasn't agile enough to turn and attack Xiaohua. The two skills it threw out weren't useful either.

Very quickly, its injuries were so bad that they couldn't support its body. The ogre knelt on the ground and was unable to move.

Abandoning it, Xiaohua rushed to Wang Xiaorui's side. Wang Xiaorui had lost her combat strength and was facing fatal threats.

Ye Zhongming would've approved—incapacitating the enemy was enough. There was no need to kill it now.

It wasn't that Wang Xiaorui had made a wrong choice. If she was Ye Zhongming, that would be a good one, as he could easily kill them. But she underestimated her strength which caused her to get countered and badly injured.

With their best fighters occupied, it didn't mean that the weaker ogres weren't a threat. On the contrary, they had a huge advantage. Although Mengmeng was a six-star evolved, her allies couldn't block these attacks. The moment they clashed, the humans collapsed. If not for Mengmeng who blocked and saved the flames, some of these women would have already died.

"Forget me... break out..."

Wang Xiaorui watched as Xiaohua carried her back and told her to abandon her. She knew that after she lost her combat strength, the camp had no chance of winning. Resisting now was foolish.

The best solution was to break through and hope for more of them to survive.

"Live well in the future."

Memories of Soul Merchant's horrors flashed through Wang Xiaorui's mind. Death seemed good if her sisters were able to survive and live a better life.

"Sister Rui, hold on. We have helpers!" Xiaohua blurted out. She was sure that Ye Zhongming had left, but deep down, she hoped for a miracle.

Wang Xiaorui smiled weakly and didn't say anything. She knew that her sister was trying to console her.

"Ah!"

A scream pierced the chaos—a sister had tripped, and an ogre grabbed her. The fear of death caused her to scream, and she was in total chaos.

This signal caused the other women who fled Soul Merchant to lose their will to resist. They retreated even though the area behind was a dead end.

Wang Xiaorui shut her eyes. It was over.

"Don't kill them. They're worth more alive than these lumbering ogres."

A new voice froze the battlefield. Ogres halted; women clustered in confused dread.

"Resistance is pointless. Your escape already displeased me. Disobey further, and I'll gladly feed you to those fellows."

A convoy of advanced vehicles rolled into view. A man in a black leather cloak lined with gold stood atop the lead car. He crossed his arms and got close to the woman.

At his sight, several women began trembling violently, teeth chattering as they whispered three words:

"Saint Ao Cha."

Chapter 1513: Capture Ye Zhongming to be pig meat

"Hello, it's me!" The man shuffled his feet on the ground and looked around with interest, seemingly indifferent to the group of women gathered there.

Xiaohua held Wang Xiaorui in her arms, staring at Saint Ao Cha with utter despair in her heart.

This man had recently risen to prominence within Soul Merchant and was notorious for his cruel methods. Despite his constant smiling and seemingly friendly demeanor, he showed no mercy when it came to torture, earning him the nickname "Ao the Devil."

Not only that, his strength was exceptional—an eight-star—and he was rumored to possess a bizarre and powerful bloodline.

If it had been anyone else sent to capture them, they might have fought back, hoping for a miracle. But with Saint Ao Cha here, they stood no chance.

"Life in the guild might not be the most humane, but compared to the outside world, it's much better," Ao Cha said casually, though his real purpose was to check for any escapees. He pointed at a nearby pond, and several of his subordinates immediately jumped in to search.

"You know, at the beginning of the apocalypse, I even ate human flesh—not to mention maggots and other things. I tasted many things for the first time," Ao Cha said, shaking his head as he approached Xiaohua.

He had watched the entire fight between her and Wang Xiaorui from behind and was somewhat impressed.

"You two are quite good. How about joining me? Let's talk?"

The hatred the "meat pigs" held for Soul Merchant was immeasurable. Once selected as meat pigs, whether they begged, resisted, or even surrendered, no one cared. Their only purpose was to serve as snacks for mutated creatures or as outlets for others' frustrations. Now, they had another use—as test subjects.

Soul Merchant established laboratories where they conducted various experiments on them, including fertility, recovery, limb regeneration, and more.

Due to their increasing evolutionary levels, the meat pigs were no longer fed to mutated creatures. Soul Merchant had begun trying to turn them into long-term food suppliers.

For example, cutting off a piece of flesh or drawing several bottles of blood—these still contained energy. The flesh and blood were used to create feed for mutated creatures, allowing their energy reserves to grow steadily.

As for the meat pigs, their lost flesh and blood would regenerate after simple treatment.

No one could endure such an inhuman existence. So, this group of meat pigs—the highest-level escapees from Soul Merchant—had seized an opportunity to flee collectively.

They would rather die than continue living as before.

But what if they didn't die?

The meat pigs resisted because they knew being captured meant returning to an inhuman life. But what if that wasn't the case? What if they became the ones in charge?

Ao Cha's seemingly flippant words gradually eroded the resistance in many of the women's hearts.

"You're lying!"

A woman suddenly stood up. She had been injured in the earlier fight, half of her body bleeding. "If we go back, we'll still be your tools for venting, food for those monsters! Nothing will change! Sisters, let's fight! Dying here is better than suffering back there!"

"I didn't ask you to speak," Ao Cha said lightly, stomping his left foot. A sharp stone spike erupted from beneath the woman, piercing her from below and protruding from the top of her head.

The woman's eyes widened as she glared hatefully at Ao Cha before dying.

"Ah Ru!"

Many of the women cried out in grief.

"I'll say it again. Those with decent strength can choose to follow me, become my subordinates, and no longer be meat pigs."

As he spoke, his gaze settled on Xiaohua and Wang Xiaorui—the only two women here who had caught his eye.

"Who do you think you are? Ye Zhongming? Forming the female guard?"

Xiaohua sneered, her words stabbing Ao Cha's heart like a knife.

Cloud Peak and Ye Zhongming were taboo topics within Soul Merchant. Even though the higher-ups strictly forbade discussion of them, whispers still spread among the lower ranks.

And in the eyes of many Soul Merchant members, these meat pigs weren't even human, so they never bothered hiding such talk from them.

After escaping, Xiaohua and the others had lived outside long enough to hear rumors about the feud between Cloud Peak and Soul Merchant. With the recent commotion of the faction rankings, the origins of the female guards had become a frequent topic of discussion.

As a Saint, Ao Cha was well aware of these things. Hearing those two names wiped the smile from his face.

"Do you really think Cloud Peak is the number one faction in the country? Let me tell you, that's just the Five Ring Money propping them up! Now, the God Hall and our Soul Merchant have allied. Do you know what we've gained in such a short time? See these ogres behind me? These are the God Hall's creations! Once we complete the fusion, Cloud Peak will be wiped out. That Ye Zhongming you idolize and the female guards you can't forget will be captured and turned into meat pigs," Ao Cha said coldly. "I hope you live long enough to see your idols humiliated."

"You want to capture Ye Zhongming and turn him into a meat pig?"

Almost as soon as Ao Cha finished speaking, a voice rang out from behind their ranks, questioning Soul Merchant's Saint in a strange tone.

Ao Cha whirled around and saw a man standing just thirty meters away, someone who hadn't been there moments before.

"Who are you?"

Ao Cha couldn't sense any strong aura from this person, but how could an ordinary person just appear here in the apocalypse in this dead-end place?

Chapter 1513.5- Capture Ye Zhongming to be pig meat

Moreover, Ao Cha detected a strong scent of blood on him.

Then, Ao Cha suddenly remembered something, his face darkening as he asked, "Where are the people we left behind? Where's Pizai?"

The man reached behind his waist and pulled out a head, tossing it in front of Soul Merchant's ranks.

"Pizai? This him?"

Ao Cha glanced at it—it was indeed his right-hand man, a seven-star evolved, his top fighter. And now, he was dead.

"Who the hell are you?!"

Ao Cha knew things wouldn't end peacefully today and signaled his subordinates to prepare.

"Go to the underworld and ask Demon Gold, Abyss Mountain, and Bei Zi."

Hearing this, Ao Cha's eyes widened in shock, his pupils nearly splitting. Instinctively, he uttered a name, just like the women earlier.

"Ye Zhongming?!"

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When Ye Zhongming appeared, Xiaohua's face lit up with joy.

She knew that if this man had returned, he would surely help them. At the same time, she kept whispering to Wang Xiaorui, "He's our savior."

Despite her joy, Xiaohua was still worried. She knew this man was strong—strong enough to defeat her effortlessly—likely an eight-star evolved, the same level as Ao Cha.

But Ao Cha had brought many subordinates while this man was alone. The situation was still dire.

Xiaohua quietly prepared herself for battle.

They would still have to fight desperately.

But when Ao Cha uttered the name "Ye Zhongming," Xiaohua's mind went blank for several seconds before she could think again.

Him? Ye Zhongming? The King of Cloud Peak? The leader of the number one faction in the national rankings? The one the female guards swore loyalty to?!

Why was he here? Why was he disguised as a lone wanderer in the apocalypse?

The name Ye Zhongming caused an uproar among both the women and the Soul Merchant members.

These people followed Ao Cha and knew far more than the average Soul Merchant member. They were aware of some of the guild's history. Though Soul Merchant now boasted ten Saints and three deputy leaders, claiming to be at its peak, the truth was that its golden age had been early in the apocalypse, when its leaders were among the strongest in the country, feared by all.

Yet even then, Cloud Peak and Ye Zhongming had crushed them, sending Soul Merchant into hiding and cementing Cloud Peak's dominance in the minds of its members.

Of course, no one in Soul Merchant would ever admit this.

Over the past two years, the Soul Merchant had quietly rebuilt, waiting for the right moment to take revenge. But Cloud Peak's growth had been staggering—from a small faction with a few strong individuals to a superpower that now topped the national rankings.

Soul Merchant had no choice but to bide its time—until this three-way alliance. In a short period, the guild had gained the opportunity it had dreamed of, its strength growing by leaps and bounds. After successfully hunting a level-nine creature, they had gained enough benefits to produce two more eight-star evolved—Ao Cha being one of them. Combined with the three eight-star leaders they already had, they now had five.

There were even rumors that they had purchased level-eight battle beasts from God Hall—more than five of them!

Soul Merchant had reached its peak!

As for Cloud Peak and Ye Zhongming, while Ao Cha and the other new Saints acknowledged them as a superpower, they weren't convinced of their superiority. Boasting about defeating Ye Zhongming wasn't enough—they wanted to capture him and the female guards and turn them into meat pigs.

Ao Cha had gotten carried away, spouting the same rhetoric he used when bragging with the other Saints. And now, against all odds, Ye Zhongming himself had heard it.

Facing Ye Zhongming, Ao Cha felt fear.

Reputation was everything. Though they talked big behind closed doors, facing the man himself brought back memories.

Ye Zhongming had been an eight-star evolved for a long time, one of the earliest in the country. His achievements were legendary—leading the kills of two level-nine creatures, one of which was the country's strongest mutated lifeform, the Armor King.

Ao Cha might be arrogant, but he didn't think he stood a chance against Ye Zhongming.

But!

Right now, Ye Zhongming was alone—no Xia Bai, Red Hair, Yellow Ball, or all-seven-star female guard. Meanwhile, Ao Cha had two level-seven ogres, a seven-star subordinate, over a dozen six-stars, and even more five-stars.

With their help, could he challenge the King of Cloud Peak?

It was a huge risk, but running wasn't an option. Fighting might give him a chance, and if he could kill Ye Zhongming... the rewards...

Just the thought made Ao Cha's blood boil.

High risk, high reward. Let's do it!

Without hesitation, Ao Cha roared, "Kill!" and charged with his men.

Ye Zhongming smirked. His body blurred, and suddenly, he was atop the head of the nearest level-seven ogre—the one Xiaohua had immobilized earlier.

The beast, still ferocious, swung its club at its head, but Ye Zhongming was already gone.

With a single step, Ye Zhongming launched himself forward.

The ogre's head split open, blood and brain matter spilling out.

The other head seemed fine at first glance, but a closer look revealed a bloody hole in its forehead, leaking a greenish-white fluid.

The ogre swayed, then collapsed.

Ye Zhongming was already in front of the second level-seven ogre by then. He appeared above its head without any visible movement and delivered a kick.

The massive skull was sent crashing into its other head, both exploding like watermelons.

Using the momentum, Ye Zhongming drew the Undead Sand Moon Blade and casually swung it a few times. Every ogre around him was cleanly bisected, the cuts identical.

Those watching could only wonder—how had he done it? The ogres had been at different distances and positions.

When Ye Zhongming landed, the first ogre's corpse had just hit the ground.

Ao Cha and his men froze.

Too fast! Ye Zhongming's speed and lethality were beyond comprehension.

It drained all their courage to resist in an instant.

The Soul Merchant members were cruel, but facing Ye Zhongming was like facing their natural predator.

They had stopped, but Ye Zhongming hadn't. He moved again, covering several meters in a flash, appearing right before the Soul Merchant's ranks.

From his chest, over a dozen black shadows shot out, embedding themselves in the members' bodies—even Ao Cha couldn't dodge!

Chapter 1514: Women wanting to join

Just like Ye Zhongming killing the ogre, those black shadows were too fast.

Saint Ao Cha had already activated his bloodline—Molten Torch—transforming his body into something resembling a lava beast. His skin turned into charred stone, with no visible bones or organs inside, only red magma.

His head was the same, with only pitch-black eyes remaining.

His clothes couldn't withstand the high temperature and turned to ashes, which explained why Ao Cha only draped a gold-grade black cloak over himself.

The Molten Torch bloodline was an explosive-type bloodline. Originally, Ao Cha had planned to stall Ye Zhongming for as long as his bloodline lasted while his subordinates looked for opportunities to deal heavy damage to him.

At first glance, this approach seemed backward—shouldn't it be the others stalling while Ao Cha attacked?

But Ao Cha Shengzuo had no choice. Seeing how effortlessly the King of Cloud Peak had killed a level-seven ogre made it clear that, apart from himself, no one here could withstand even a single move from Ye Zhongming.

His plan was sound, but those black shadows delivered a harsh wake-up call.

For a moment, Ao Cha thought he was doomed.

The Molten Torch bloodline was indeed powerful, with strong burst damage and decent defense, but Ao Cha didn't believe Ye Zhongming would have no way to deal with him. If these black shadows were the means to counter them, then...

However, he and his subordinates felt nothing after being struck by the shadows, not even pain.

Many looked down at their chests, where a small black sphere was embedded. If not for its strange patterns, it would have looked no different from a glass marble.

But when they tried to knock it off with their hands or weapons, Ye Zhongming's attack arrived.

Blades flashed, ghostly and unpredictable.

Ao Cha knew the black spheres couldn't be anything good, but he had no time to deal with them. With just a single swing of Ye Zhongming's weapon, two of his subordinates were killed. If he didn't intervene, all his men would be dead in seconds.

The Soul Merchant's method of nurturing Saints was to provide them with all necessary resources, but the Saints themselves were responsible for their subordinates. However, each Saint received different allocations. Every so often, the Ten Saints would undergo a comprehensive ranking—those at the top received more resources, while those at the bottom got less.

Why was Ao Cha the first to evolve to eight stars? Because he ranked second in the last evaluation, earning him priority access to an eight-star evolution potion.

The men he brought with him were his elite subordinates. He had already lost his strongest fighter. If the rest died too, he would likely drop to the bottom three in the next evaluation.

The Molten Torch bloodline was excellent in every way except for one—it slightly reduced the user's speed. Ao Cha was already slower than Ye Zhongming, and now he could barely even touch his shadow.

All he could do was watch as Ye Zhongming avoided direct combat with him and instead slaughtered his subordinates one by one.

Ao Cha roared in fury, continuously attacking Ye Zhongming with earth spikes, but to no effect—Ye Zhongming dodged them effortlessly.

On top of that, Ao Cha could spew magma pools from his palms and mouth. These abilities were deadly in close combat, catching opponents off guard, but as long-range attacks, they were far less effective.

He watched helplessly as his men were nearly wiped out.

Ao Cha was furious but hadn't lost his senses. Seeing that he couldn't stop Ye Zhongming, he immediately turned and charged toward the fleeing "livestock."

You kill my men? Then I'll kill the people you're protecting.

This tactic worked. Ye Zhongming stopped his assault and closed the distance slightly.

Ao Cha was pleased with his countermove.

"You think I can't kill you?" Ye Zhongming frowned, watching Ao Cha approach the women.

The Undead Sand Moon Blade vanished from his hand, replaced by a strangely shaped firearm.

When this weapon appeared, Ao Cha sensed overwhelming danger, his entire body freezing in terror.

His moving body suddenly dropped to the ground as a bullet grazed his scalp, sending searing pain through his now stone-like head.

Ao Cha knew he had just narrowly escaped death.

He didn't understand—what kind of weapon was that? How could a single shot carry such terrifying power?

But before he could find an answer, Ao Cha felt a crushing force slam into his back, plunging his vision into darkness and halting his thoughts.

His bodily functions were severely damaged, and his bloodline deactivated, reverting him to his original form. Covered in blood, his nose and mouth bleeding profusely, he was left powerless to resist.

Silence fell over the surroundings.

Ever since learning this man was Ye Zhongming, whether it was the Soul Merchant members or the escaped women and children, everyone had expected Ye Zhongming to win and Ao Cha to lose.

But no one imagined Ao Cha would lose so decisively, so helplessly.

A gunshot, a dive, a single kick...

This... was almost comical!

Were the gaps between eight-star evolved really this vast?

Ao Cha, now unconscious, could answer that.

That shot was no ordinary bullet, and that firearm was no ordinary weapon.

If Ao Cha hadn't dodged, he might have been instantly killed. The fact that he avoided it at all was a testament to his strength. But after dodging, he left himself wide open—there was nothing he could do.

Even if a nine-star evolved had been in his place, taking a direct stomp from Ye Zhongming while defenseless would have severely injured them.

Ye Zhongming stepped on Ao Cha and turned to the remaining Soul Merchant members, gesturing downward with his gun.

Immediately, they dropped their weapons and pressed themselves to the ground, surrendering.

If Ye Zhongming could defeat Ao Cha so easily, killing them would be like slaughtering chickens. Surrendering at least offered a slim chance of survival—resistance meant certain death.

Ye Zhongming glanced at Ao Cha, who was starting to regain consciousness, then slammed the butt of his gun into his head, knocking him out again.

He then walked over to the surrendered Soul Merchant members and called over Xiao Hua, who was still in shock.

"Take them aside one by one for interrogation. Cross-check their statements later. Kill anyone who lies."

After announcing the questions he wanted answered, Ye Zhongming showed no concern about the unrestrained prisoners rebelling. He walked away and picked up several black spheres from the ground.

Chapter 1514.5- Women wanting to join

The campfire illuminated the entire campsite, casting a red glow over the excited faces of the women.

After taking a healing crystal given by Ye Zhongming, Wang Xiaorui's injuries had improved significantly. Though she still couldn't fight, she could move freely now.

This was thanks to a seven-star evolved's robust physique, and the crystals' potent healing properties left behind by Teacher Park's skills.

The Soul Merchant members had already revealed everything Ye Zhongming wanted to know. None dared to lie—though the method of separate interrogations wasn't novel, it was effective. To survive, they even provided detailed accounts.

However, none of them lived to see the next sunrise. After the interrogation, Ye Zhongming handed them to the women for disposal.

How deep was the hatred the "livestock" held for Soul Merchant? The brutal executions made it clear.

Beside Ye Zhongming lay Ao Cha, still unconscious. As an Eight-Star evolved, he would wake within half an hour unless lethally injured. Ye Zhongming repeatedly knocked him out, only allowing him to stay awake long enough to witness the slaughter of his men.

Like many of her sisters, Xiao Hua gradually snapped out of the bloodlust-fueled cruelty. After washing off the blood in a nearby pond, she returned and sat beside Ye Zhongming.

Despite owing their rescue to him, none of the women dared disturb the solemn King of Cloud Peak—except Xiao Hua, who had interacted with him the most.

They idolized Cloud Peak, and to some extent, Ye Zhongming himself, but they were too afraid to approach him, worried they might provoke his anger.

Years of torment had stripped these women of their confidence, leaving only hesitation and timidity.

"Here."

After killing the Soul Merchant members, the black spheres detached from their bodies. Having seen Ye Zhongming collect them earlier, Xiao Hua gathered the ones from the corpses and brought them to him.

Ye Zhongming took them without a word and stored them away.

Xiao Hua opened her mouth but hesitated, finally blurting out, "What are those?"

Seeing her awkward, almost fawning expression, Ye Zhongming was reminded of the female guards in their early days—Xiao Min and the others had worn the same look.

But under Xia Bai's ruthless leadership, they had channeled that ferocity into their collective style.

"Origin Spheres. They... have many uses," Ye Zhongming answered briefly.

He had crafted seven pieces of purple-grade equipment using materials from two level-nine lifeforms. After leaving three with Deacon Water, Li Daqian, and Commander Mu, he still had four left. Aside from the gauntlet used to kill Veterinarian Meng earlier, he had utilized two more today: the Greed Bracelet on his left wrist and the Reaper Shooter—a fusion of the Crystal Energy Gun and the Earth Sniper Rifle.

The black spheres released before the battle were an ability of the Greed Bracelet—Essence Plunder. When activated, the bracelet would fire Plunder Spheres that attached to targets. Upon death, the spheres would absorb 10% of the target's total energy before detaching as Origin Spheres.

The amount of energy plundered depended on the user's evolution level, increasing by 5% per star.

This was equipment usable only by Seven-Star evolved or higher. At Seven Stars, the plunder rate was 5%.

The Plunder Spheres could be dodged when fired, but could not be removed once attached.

The Essence Plunder skill had no cooldown, but the spheres took time to generate—one every five hours. The Greed Bracelet could store up to 100 spheres.

Once plundered and transformed into Origin Spheres, they could be used for evolved absorption, equipment crafting, beast rearing, energy device replenishment, and more.

This was the might of purple-grade equipment—unpredictable and immensely powerful.

The spheres could target both humans and mutated lifeforms.

In Ye Zhongming's eyes, this ability alone made the Greed Bracelet worthy of its purple-tier status.

"Origin Spheres," Xiao Hua repeated, nodding before falling silent again.

"You can keep the equipment from those Soul Merchant members. Aside from the two level-seven magic crystals from the ogres, the rest are yours too."

Ye Zhongming ate absentmindedly, his mind occupied with planning. He spoke these words without much thought.

The best equipment among those Soul Merchant members was only green-grade, which held no appeal for Ye Zhongming. As for the ogre magic crystals, aside from the two level-seven ones, the rest were too low-level and too few in number to be worth keeping. He might as well let the women have them.

Instead of being pleased, Xiao Hua's face fell with disappointment.

"You... are you going to the Soul Merchant's base?"

Ye Zhongming turned to her, his gaze sharp.

Knowing something was one thing—voicing it was another.

The questions he had asked the Soul Merchant members and Wang Xiaorui earlier all pointed to one thing: he was searching for their base.

"We... can help." Xiao Hua mustered her courage and finally voiced what she and the others had discussed.

They wanted to join Cloud Peak.

But they knew—what was Cloud Peak's status now? What level were its members? How could a group of strangers who didn't even know how to fight measure up, trust issues aside?

But the apocalypse was harsh. Having finally seen hope, how could they let it slip away?

To join Cloud Peak, they had to prove their worth.

And Ye Zhongming's search for the Soul Merchant's base? Even the dullest among them could guess his intentions. An opportunity had presented itself.

A dangerous one—many of them might die—but they couldn't let it pass.

After discussing it, they sent Xiao Hua to persuade Ye Zhongming.

"We drew a map based on what we know. We... came up with a plan. Maybe... it could work."

Chapter 1515: New deputy

Moving through the forest, Xiao Hua and the others were in much better spirits than before.

For the first time, they felt what true hope was like.

Ye Zhongming had agreed to their proposed plan, and, in return, promised that after this mission, the women and children would be allowed to join Cloud Peak.

However, the plan still required some outside help.

Red Python Rock was a human settlement established after the apocalypse. Due to topographical changes, a rock formation resembling a crimson python had emerged, with three rare spinning wheels clustered beneath it. Over time, this had grown into a small town of tens of thousands, with nearly twenty thousand permanent residents.

The entire town was abuzz when Ye Zhongming arrived with Xiao Hua and the others.

By this point, Ye Zhongming was no longer alone. He had summoned an operational team from the lurking Chameleon unit—tasked with ensuring his safety—forming a small but formidable squad of about a dozen.

In terms of numbers, they were nothing special. But their strength was intimidating.

Three seven-star evolved, the rest all six-star!

This kind of power was on par with the upper echelons of major factions.

Thus, although many coveted the high-value "livestock" captured by this bounty hunter team called "Golden Bones," no one dared make a move—especially since this was the fringes of the Soul Merchant's territory. Many feared provoking the giant.

What if this "Golden Bones" team had ties to Soul Merchant?

Still, some couldn't suppress their greed.

Three groups attempted to strike on their first night in Red Python Rock.

The first group was the largest but had lower evolution levels. They attacked, hoping to overwhelm with numbers, only to be slaughtered within minutes.

The second group consisted of assassins who tried to take advantage of Golden Bones' post-battle fatigue. They infiltrated—and never came out. After an hour of silence, the watching townsfolk understood.

The third group struck at dawn. Their strategy was sound: a seven-star defensive evolved charged the front door, a ranged attacker provided suppressing fire from a vantage point, and another seven-star agility evolved flanked from the rear to sow chaos.

Though few in number, their tactics and class synergy were impeccable. Observers thought they stood a chance—if the tank could hold off two or even three of Golden Bones' seven-stars, victory was possible.

But the tank failed.

Two seven-star dagger-wielders carved him into pieces in under a minute.

A single bullet from inside the house blew the ranged attacker's head off mid-shot.

The flanker? Like the assassins, he vanished without a trace.

After that, no one dared challenge this mysterious bounty hunter team.

When force failed, diplomacy followed.

At sunrise, a delegation arrived at Golden Bones' camp, politely requesting an audience with their leader. To Ye Zhongming, they spun tales of danger, but the message was clear: This mission is deadly—you need us.

Ye Zhongming refused.

But as they packed to leave, the town's chieftain intervened, bluntly demanding a cut of the profits. If Ye Zhongming agreed, Golden Bones would forever enjoy a 20% discount on all supplies, lodging, and goods in Red Python Rock.

Ye Zhongming studied the chieftain—a burly man dressed like a barbarian from some fantasy game—and asked seriously, "You really want to come with us?"

When the chieftain confirmed, Ye Zhongming smiled and agreed.

As the chieftain and his men set off with Ye Zhongming, many townsfolk watched enviously.

This was the privilege of power. Though no one dared attack Golden Bones directly—their strength made the cost too high—a simple threat had secured the chieftain a share of the spoils.

"Brother, why insist on delivering these women to the Soul Merchant in person?" the chieftain asked as they marched, eyeing the "livestock" bound in special ropes. "Just send word, and they'll come collect."

"I have my reasons," Ye Zhongming replied with a faint smile.

The chieftain studied him. "If there's profit, don't forget your old brother here."

Ye Zhongming nodded. "I won't. But whether it's good for you... I can't say."

The chieftain's suspicion deepened, his gaze drifting to the cart pulled by mutated beasts. On it rested two crates—one large, one small—their contents a mystery.

Wisely, the chieftain didn't pry further.

"Speaking of Soul Merchant..." he mused, shifting topics. "They were just rumors before, but now they've risen right beside us. Feels strange."

He was a talkative man, filling the march with complaints.

"With Pin Palace in the west, Soul Merchant in the east, and God Hall in the north, those three major factions have formed an iron triangle. The territory inside? Either you surrender or get wiped out. We're lucky to be on the edge."

Noticing Ye Zhongming's attentive silence, he grew bolder.

"Honestly, it's all Cloud Peak's fault. If they hadn't started expanding and forming alliances, Pin Palace wouldn't have copied them, recruiting God Hall and Soul Merchant. And let me tell you—those last two? Not good people. These women? They're for that kind of use!"

"What kind?" Ye Zhongming asked.

The chieftain hesitated. "Ah, forget it. In this damned world, what's the point of judging? Take the money and move on."

Changing tack, he added, "Rumor says God Hall is experimenting at Great Tso Lake, creating level-eight mutated lifeforms. If true, eight-star potions might hit the market soon. I'd better start saving."

Chapter 1515.5- New deputy

Ye Zhongming nodded, recognizing the chieftain's probing.

After three days in the wilderness, they encountered a Soul Merchant convoy, which transported them to a guarded compound.

Through the building's windows, a cluster of structures loomed on the horizon. Was that the Soul Merchant's base?

Half a day later, a delegation arrived—unexpectedly led by a deputy chairman.

The chieftain, who'd earlier called the Soul merchant "not good people," now fawned like a kitten, his obsequious smile never fading—a masterclass in adaptability.

The deputy chairman—referred to as Vice-Chairman Yang—carried himself with authority. After a cursory inspection of the "livestock," he ignored the groveling chieftain and fixed his gaze on Ye Zhongming.

"Is there something else you should be telling me?"

Ye Zhongming's intel didn't include this deputy chairman—likely a recent promotion during the Soul Merchant's disappearance. Even the chieftain had mentioned their leader had changed.

Without a word, Ye Zhongming signaled his men to unload the two crates and open them before the crowd.

"Saint Ao Cha?!" The chieftain recoiled in shock. He'd guessed many things—but not that the crates held corpses.

Just days ago, Ao Cha had resupplied at Red Python Rock!

Vice-Chairman Yang strode to the smaller crate, kneeling to examine Ao Cha's body closely—even stripping the dead man's equipment.

The corpse had been specially preserved, showing no decay—a technique Soul Merchant also used to maintain post-mortem appearances.

After a long inspection, Yang stood, his expression grim.

He paced briefly before locking eyes with Ye Zhongming again.

"Explain. And don't lie. If I catch you in a lie, you'll lose more than your reward—you'll lose your life."

Ye Zhongming shrugged. "We were tracking bounties, found a runaway woman, followed her to a hideout. When we arrived, it had already been attacked. The women were unconscious, and these men—"

He gestured at the corpses. "—were all dead."

A flicker of confusion crossed his face.

"What is it?" Yang pressed.

"The women weren't knocked out. It was more like... a shockwave or gas. I questioned them—they don't remember anything. Didn't even see who did it."

Yang studied him for a long moment before closing his eyes in thought.

He believed Ye Zhongming.

Ao Cha's throat bore a clean, even cut, indicating he'd been executed while restrained. No signs of struggle.

The possibility of a sneak attack was ruled out—a warrior of Ao Cha's caliber would have reacted, even if ambushed.

Which meant whoever killed the others and captured Ao Cha was far beyond this "Golden Bones" team's capabilities.

They'd simply stumbled upon a windfall.

Just then, Yang's subordinates returned from interrogating the women. Their report matched Ye Zhongming's account.

Though Yang's expression darkened, he showed no urge to avenge Ao Cha.

He knew his limits. If Ao Cha's killer was beyond him, revenge was suicide.

His duty now was to report Ao Cha's death and deliver the corpses to the chairman. The "livestock" were secondary.

"Give them their reward," Yang ordered, preparing to leave with the bodies and women.

But Ye Zhongming stopped him.

Yang turned, cold. "I'm in no mood for games. Push me, and you die."

Unfazed, Ye Zhongming pointed to the distant buildings. "Is that Soul Merchant's base?"

Yang's eyes narrowed at the audacity.

"Is your chairman there now?"

Ye Zhongming continued, ignoring the rising hostility. The chieftain tugged at his sleeve, trying to save him from suicide.

One of Yang's men started to speak—

Ye Zhongming flicked a finger.

The six-star evolved collapsed, his words dying with him.

The sudden murder stunned the room. Only Yang remained composed.

"So you're here for trouble. Even Ji Ruiguang wouldn't dare act so boldly here!"

His hand shot up, a claw-shadow streaking toward Ye Zhongming's throat.

Ye Zhongming's blood surged.

This was how a true expert reacted—no hesitation, just lethal intent at the first sign of threat.

With an uncanny shift, Ye Zhongming evaded, his blade flashing upward as an energy field enveloped them, disorienting foes while empowering himself.

"You're Ye Zhongming?!"

Yang recognized the Undead Sand Moon Blade, the Moonlight Field—signatures of the Cloud Peak King. Though Ye Zhongming had altered his appearance, his techniques betrayed him.

Hearing the name, the chieftain shrieked and fled.

Everyone knew the enmity between Cloud Peak and Soul Merchant. If Ye Zhongming were here, only one outcome awaited: war.

Though shaken, Yang fought back fiercely. Intricate patterns shimmered across his armor, deflecting the deadly slash.

The two clashed in close quarters, each seeking an early advantage.

At their level, gaining the upper hand in the opening moments often decided the battle. Their duel became a blur of precision and lethality.

Meanwhile, the Chameleon squad engaged Yang's escorts.

Having freed themselves, the women armed themselves with gear from a space ring Ye Zhongming had given Xiao Hua and joined the fray.

A Soul Merchant member fired a distress signal.

Watching it arc into the sky, Ye Zhongming smiled oddly.

Half the plan was complete.

Now, it was time to see how enticing this "bait" truly was.