

Apocalypse 1621

Chapter 1621: Father's request

Ye Zhongming moved at blinding speed. From the moment he charged, his plan had been clear. As he neared the behemoth's head, the Soul Shattering Bone Staff in his hand erupted with a searing beam. He reserved only a sliver of mental energy for emergencies, pouring everything else into this soul weapon forged from the bones of an unknown Level 9 lifeform.

Trapped from the waist down, the Type V entity couldn't dodge. Its colossal size granted it unmatched strength and devastating offense, but no agility.

To it, Ye Zhongming was little more than a pesky fly—easy to overlook.

The beam slammed into its head with brutal force. Even a structure as massive as a skyscraper would have reeled from the impact. Chunks of stone exploded outward, and the two gigantic flails, driven by momentum, lifted momentarily before crashing back down.

Ye Zhongming felt drained, but rest wasn't an option. He kicked off the creature's body, launching himself to eye level with the Type V cavalry. The barrel of his Harvester Mimicry Shooter jammed directly into the wound left by the bone staff.

Then—armor-piercing shot.

The ammunition? Blue-grade micro-engraved rounds.

Once he pulled the trigger, he never stopped.

Shot after shot. Skill after skill.

To the Type V stone knight, Ye Zhongming might as well have been a fly, and his weapon a needle.

But Ye Zhongming was no ordinary fly, and the Harvester was no mere needle—it was a purple-grade weapon, second only to seven-colored-grade arms. Coupled with skills and high-level ammunition, the Type V's head jerked violently backward under the barrage until—CRACK—it shattered completely.

Ye Zhongming went flying, caught mid-air by Xia Bai. The impact sent the Female Guard captain off-balance, forcing Red Hair and Xiao Min to leap up and steady them. All four tumbled to the ground in a heap.

When they rose, Ye Zhongming's armor lay in pieces, its surface smeared with blood he'd coughed up.

In its dying moments, the Type V knight had swung its flail. Despite dodging frantically—even using Blink—Ye Zhongming had been grazed.

That glancing blow alone had caused this.

But at least it was over.

The Type V's remains collapsed into a mountain of rubble, with no higher-tier monster emerging. The trial, it seemed, had ended.

A collective sigh of relief swept through the survivors as they turned to treat the wounded. Thankfully, Cloud Peak's warriors were high-level and well-equipped; though injuries were severe, no further deaths occurred—a small mercy in this brutal fight.

Ye Zhongming and the others took time to restore stamina, mental energy, and wounds. Dozens, however, were too severely injured to fight for days. Combined with the fallen, Cloud Peak had lost nearly 10% of its combat strength.

Facing the unknown path ahead, confidence wasn't as high as when they'd started.

Ye Zhongming, being the highest-level and strongest, recovered first. As he stood, he noticed Old Man, the sole survivor of his squad, sitting nearby with a dazed expression.

This time, the entire Old Man Squad had perished—except their leader, who'd seen his members as his children.

Ye Zhongming understood his grief.

"Maybe we really shouldn't have come in," Old Man murmured when he noticed Ye Zhongming awake. The King of Cloud Peak had no words of comfort—just a pack of cigarettes. He remembered the man's habit.

After a long drag, Old Man suddenly said, "I want to live."

Ye Zhongming studied this middle-aged man. In another life, he might have been collecting pensions, watching wrinkles form, surrounded by grandchildren in peaceful retirement.

Now? He wielded a blade, fighting monsters for survival.

His body no longer aged, but his world had been irrevocably shattered.

"One of my men said he had a kid in Feng City, back in the country. I want to see that with my own eyes."

Ye Zhongming had heard countless similar claims across two lifetimes—some true, most false. He'd grown numb to them. But here, in this deadly space, surrounded by the rubble of Level 9 entities, he felt a prick of sympathy.

"Can you find them?"

"I kept his blood. Oh, and that guy saved for three years to buy some useless 'kinship locator' from a washed-up alchemist. Knew he was getting scammed, but bought it anyway. Thing only works within 500 meters."

Old Man laughed bitterly, recalling how desperate his squad had been upon hearing about the device. If not for that, his comrade—roughly equal in strength to himself—might still be alive.

Ye Zhongming shook his head. In a megacity like Feng City, 500 meters was worse than finding a needle in a haystack. More likely, the person was dead or long gone.

Still, he pressed a healing potion into Old Man's hands.

"Whether you live depends on fate now."

Old Man rubbed his eyes, whispering to Ye Zhongming's retreating back, "I'll repay you." Too quiet to be heard—not out of insincerity, but lack of confidence.

"Boss." Xiao Min approached. "We cleared the rubble. Found a few things."

Relatively unharmed, she'd led a team to sift through the debris. Ye Zhongming had only hoped for clues, but they'd struck actual loot.

Beside the now-filled pit, several objects stood out.

The largest was a crate full of stones.

Picking up a few, Ye Zhongming immediately noticed their difference.

At a glance, they resembled ordinary rocks, but closer inspection revealed intricate patterns on their surfaces, their texture unnaturally smooth.

Given the sheer volume of rubble from the Type V's remains, this crate's few hundred stones were a minuscule fraction.

After brief examination yielded no insights, Ye Zhongming stored them for later.

The other two items were more intriguing.

One was a bizarre metal sphere, roughly three meters in diameter, its surface studded with buttons and a display screen.

"Human Refining Furnace!"

That was the name that popped into Ye Zhongming's mind upon claiming it—ridiculous, but undeniable.

Setting it aside for now, he turned to the third item:

A stone statue.

And its likeness?

The very stone cavalry they'd just fought.

Chapter 1622: Lava Hell

The first thing Ye Zhongming felt upon seeing this object wasn't joy, but wariness.

To be honest, even during the Ocean King Crown challenge, he hadn't experienced this level of unease. Back then, his evolutionary level was lower, yet his confidence had been unshakable. But here, with the Mountain Crown Wheel, the very first trial had left him feeling pressed.

And now? He stood one step away from Nine Stars.

This unease manifested most concretely in the statue before him.

He picked it up, examining it far more carefully than the stones or the Human Refining Furnace. Ye Zhongming wanted to unlock its secrets.

But to his disappointment, he couldn't discern its purpose. No matter how he probed, the stone statue remained unresponsive.

"Boss, do we press on?"

Xiao Min's question gave Ye Zhongming pause.

He understood her concern. There was no fixed timeline here—no destination to reach, no mandatory tasks to complete. Just forward movement through this expanse.

If time weren't a factor, waiting a few days for the wounded to recover would restore Cloud Peak's combat strength.

But no one knew the true nature of this roulette space. What if, during this delay, someone else seized the Mountain Crown Wheel first?

The decision rested on Ye Zhongming's shoulders.

"We move."

He sighed inwardly but gave the order.

Advancing now carried risks—but compared to the risk of losing the Mountain Crown Wheel, it was a necessary gamble.

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While Cloud Peak's team marched onward with trepidation, similar scenes played out across this space. Battle seemed omnipresent.

Gyanendra watched wearily as waves of stone cavalry pressed closer. Reluctantly, he ordered the new combat machines in his ranks to unleash their primary attack. Each use required two hours of recharge, meaning his team would lose its most potent area firepower for that duration.

But did he have a choice?

Facing stone cavalry that had already reached Level 8 strength, the answer was clear.

A storm of firepower erupted, vaporizing the surrounding enemies. The team even let out a brief cheer—the prior battle's pressure had been crushing.

Gyanendra, however, showed no relief. His eyes remained locked on the post-battle rubble, just as Cloud Peak's members had done earlier.

When the fragments began moving, he closed his eyes in resignation.

The first barrier, and already he had to play his trump card. The road ahead would be brutal.

For the first time, the Saint of West Asia questioned his decision to compete for the Mountain Crown Wheel.

A Level 9 Type V stone cavalry slowly took form.

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Ruan Xiao and Wu Xiu were eating peculiar beans.

The beans were crimson, about the size of broad beans. The two consumed only three each before carefully storing the rest in an ornate little box.

"I have twenty-one left," Ruan Xiao remarked abruptly, watching the temporarily quiet battlefield.

Wu Xiu nodded. "Twenty-three here."

The two highest leaders of Cannibal Chain exchanged a wry smile.

"Magic Beans are our organization's highest secret," Wu Xiu explained quietly. "They can replace many potions—even some skill scrolls, in our latest breakthroughs. But production remains pitifully low. We each brought thirty-five into this space, and already, we've burned through over a third... just to survive the first barrier."

Had Ye Zhongming been present, he would have been stunned.

In fact, any evolved hearing of the Magic Beans' effects would feel bone-deep shock.

Just as the world had once reacted to Cloud Peak's crystal weapons and gene lifeforms, these beans represented a paradigm shift.

Ruan Xiao's mind briefly wandered. What was Cloud Peak doing now? Were they, like his team, bracing for a Level 9 entity's emergence? Or had they already cleared this trial, moving on to the next?

A colossal silhouette shattered his thoughts.

Beside him, Wu Xiu and all Cannibal Chain fighters raised glowing hands. Elemental energy coalesced into a gigantic flaming phoenix overhead.

The Magic Beans had restored their strength.

Now, battle awaited.

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Big Z, his face paint smeared and jester's garb in tatters, gasped hoarsely as he stared at the oncoming stone tide.

Despair settled in.

His team served Governor Spade, and the mountainous man had treated him well, replenishing lost troops, even elevating Big Z to Eight Stars.

The Z-Type Vengeance Squad was Spade's loyal hound.

Yet no one had anticipated that inside the Mountain Crown Wheel's space, factions would be separated. They hadn't entered alongside Spade.

Though Big Z's personal combat power was decent, his team's overall strength was mediocre. Now, facing just a few Type IV cavalry, their formation had collapsed entirely.

Against such overwhelming numbers, losing formation meant only one outcome: slaughter.

Here, there was only forward—no retreat.

With a roar, Big Z charged.

Ten seconds later, the Z-Type Vengeance Squad was wiped out.

Outside, the black portal leading to their camp vanished, leaving only the eternal snowstorm.

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The Motley Crusaders, the Women Camp, and Governor Spade—every faction competing for the Mountain Crown Wheel faced the same trial.

Some endured. Others, like the Z-Type Vengeance Squad, perished instantly.

This was the price of contending for a ruler-grade artifact—the highest-grade equipment on Earth. Such treasures weren't meant for ordinary hands. Only the elite of the elite had any right to participate.

The rest? They became stepping stones, though few realized it, clinging to hopes of luck or overestimating their strength.

The result?

Extinction. A final farewell to this cruel yet vibrant post-apocalyptic world.

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Unaware of the outside world's struggles, Cloud Peak trekked through the frozen wasteland for nearly two hours before the scenery shifted abruptly.

"Lava... fields?"

Chapter 1623: Lava Hell

Before them lay a scene utterly different from the icy wasteland they had just traversed.

The ground was rough and fissured, glowing cracks revealing churning magma beneath. Jagged rocks, the same despair-inducing gray-brown as the cracked earth—like dried tree bark, littered the landscape.

The biting cold was gone, replaced by scorching heat and the acrid stench of sulfur, potent enough to daze anyone with a single breath.

In the distance, geysers of magma erupted sporadically from the ground, each outburst raising the temperature and intensifying the noxious fumes. Farther still, an eternally active volcano spewed thick ash clouds, its slopes rivers of molten rock, turning the entire mountain into a giant, burning torch.

This was a place that instilled dread at first glance.

Ye Zhongming took a deep breath and stepped forward first.

For an ordinary person, a few breaths of this air would trigger coughing and tears; prolonged exposure would lead to unconsciousness, and without immediate treatment or escape, death.

But for evolved, it was manageable, though with the toxin concentration slowly rising, Cloud Peak needed to move quickly.

"What kind of trial awaits us here?"

Ye Zhongming pondered as he led the group forward.

The answer came from beneath the ground.

A creature of rock and magma, its body wreathed in flames, rose before them. Its fire-wreathed fists were its weapons.

"What the hell..."

A Youth Army soldier couldn't help but mutter.

This flaming stone giant, though not as tall as the Type V stone knight, radiated the same level of power.

Level 9!

Since when did spatial trials start at Level 9?

Ye Zhongming didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But what he did know was that they had to attack.

Facing a Level 9 threat, Ye Zhongming, along with Red Hair, Xiao Min, and Xia Bai—all Level 8—charged as the spearhead, while the Female Guard provided support. The Youth Army remained in reserve.

The battle beasts, still useless in combat, could only watch from behind.

The flaming stone giant, standing ten stories tall, was met with Ye Zhongming's Thousand Seal Slash, countless slashes carving deep into its chest.

Shards of rock and fire scattered, but the wounds were quickly sealed by flames, making it impossible to gauge the damage.

Red Hair and Xia Bai struck next, spear and scythe slamming into the giant's body, forcing it back two steps. Yet again, flames and debris flew, but the effect remained unclear.

The giant's fire-trailing fist came crashing down.

BOOM!

The group scattered as the punch slammed into the ground, the shockwave rattling even the Female Guard and Youth Army further back.

Such was the might of a Level 9 strike.

"Fire-elemental attack power."

Xia Bai, who had hovered closest to the fist thanks to her flight ability, analyzed it best.

"Tremendous force, with extreme acceleration in the final moments."

Red Hair, having nimbly dodged, drove her weapon into the giant's heel as she spoke.

"Defense is average, but the flames seem to have regenerative properties."

Ye Zhongming, having evaded the punch, landed and slashed at the opposite heel.

"Watch its other hand!"

Xiao Min, aware of her slightly lower combat prowess, had hung back, wielding two thick, tube-like devices.

One fired a diamond-shaped metal projectile—tethered by a tough beast tendon—straight at the giant's head.

The second shot struck the other hand, the impact strong enough to rival Xia Bai or Red Hair's blows, forcing the giant's limbs off course.

The missed magma spray from its palm incinerated a distant boulder instantly.

Ye Zhongming's eyes narrowed. That magma's corrosive power meant even a glancing hit would severely injure any of them.

"Xiao Min and I will hold it off—you attack!"

Ye Zhongming tossed the Staff of Nature to Xiao Min and leaped toward the descending fist.

"Boss!"

The Female Guard warriors stiffened in alarm.

Ye Zhongming was among the strongest Level 8 evolved, capable of holding his own against Level 9 foes briefly.

But the power gap was undeniable. Even if this flame giant was weaker than a true Level 9 lifeform, it still outmatched him.

Especially in raw attack power.

For him to stand his ground like this—was he staking everything?

The fist collided with Ye Zhongming.

The entire team stopped breathing.

CLANG!

Ye Zhongming dropped—but not at the bone-shattering speed everyone expected.

Instead, he descended steadily, landing on his feet.

"The boss's shield!"

A Youth Army soldier spotted it first—the subtle motion of Ye Zhongming lowering his arm, the small round shield now visible.

"Shilan Defense Shield! Defense: 12,000."

"Ability 1: Loyal Bulwark. When activated, blocks all attack types, negating damage up to twice its defense value. Residual force is evenly distributed across three seconds in three increments!"

Ye Zhongming had used this newly forged purple-grade shield to absorb a Level 9 strike, dispersing the remaining force in three manageable bursts.

He had withstood a Level 9 attack unscathed.

For a moment, the team stared in awe—then erupted in cheers.

Chapter 1624: Lava Hell

Perhaps Ye Zhongming's successful defense infuriated the flaming stone giant. With a soundless roar, it spewed waves of magma, blanketing the surrounding area, primarily targeting Ye Zhongming.

Xiao Min rushed over, and soon, Ye Zhongming, Xia Bai, and Red Hair regrouped. The Water Bottle Protection activated, its massive translucent form clashing against the molten onslaught.

Then, three figures darted out. Ye Zhongming leapt first, slashing at the stone giant once more.

Seeing its attack blocked again, the enraged giant swung its fists wildly, this time with greater momentum.

Ye Zhongming raised his shield a second time.

Simultaneously, he downed a potion.

BOOM!

The deafening impact rattled eardrums. This time, Ye Zhongming really did go flying, crashing to the ground like a broken kite.

Many clenched their fists, jaws tight, unsure how to react.

But to their shock, the King of Cloud Peak—whom they expected to be grievously wounded—sprang back up, completely unharmed. He even tapped his round shield tauntingly at the stone giant.

"Shilan Defense Shield. Defense: 12,000."

"Ability 2: Reverse Conduction. When struck, channels the force back through the wearer's own conductive abilities (e.g., Satan's Absorption, Earth equipment effects). Cooldown: 3 hours. Cannot reflect attacks exceeding 3x the shield's defense. If exceeded, automatically switches to Loyal Bulwark and triggers its cooldown."

Ye Zhongming had conductive abilities, allowing him to redirect the force into the ground, unharmed. The reason he'd been knocked down earlier? His feet weren't grounded at the time.

Frustrated by its failed assaults, the stone giant finally lost its temper. It clasped its hands together, molten rock dripping from its fists.

Then, it spat a glob of magma onto its palms, igniting them into towering flames.

With a violent motion, it separated its hands, weaving a bizarre, glowing pattern mid-air. The energy within swelled uncontrollably, sending waves of dread through the humans, who instinctively retreated.

The pattern completed in an instant.

The giant hurled one hand forward—a monstrous fire beast surged toward Ye Zhongming.

On the other hand, a second beast followed.

Xiao Min dashed to Ye Zhongming's side, raising the Staff of Nature.

Anyone could tell—these flame beasts were the stone giant's ultimate skill.

Ye Zhongming studied the incoming beasts, sensing their energy, then shoved Xiao Min aside.

The Staff of Nature was loaded with the highest-tier elemental gem, making the Water Bottle Protection's defense nearly impenetrable—if it weren't for its inherent limits.

But Ye Zhongming knew.

It wouldn't hold.

Against other elements, the barrier might've endured. But fire and water were opposites—when one overpowered the other, the defeat was swift and absolute.

Ye Zhongming's eyes narrowed.

This thing... wasn't a true Level 9 lifeform. Compared to evolved, it lacked combat instinct!

BOOOOM—!

The first beast collided with the Water Bottle Protection.

Opposing elements clashed, unleashing a cataclysmic shockwave. The Female Guard and Youth Army were sent sprawling, their defensive gear flaring up as it absorbed the brunt of the blast.

The translucent maiden's silhouette trembled—then shattered.

Ye Zhongming kicked the Staff of Nature back to Xiao Min and—without moving an inch—raised his shield again.

For the third time.

The team's initial fear had turned to anticipation.

The second beast engulfed Ye Zhongming whole.

Silence.

The flaming monstrosity, having swallowed him, seemed to rear back in triumph—

—until its body abruptly shrank, vanishing within seconds.

Everyone stared in disbelief.

Ye Zhongming reappeared, completely unscathed.

"Look at the boss's shield!"

Someone shouted. The once-plain shield now glistened like shimmering sand.

"It's... the same color as that beast," muttered the same sharp-eyed Youth Army soldier.

Before anyone could confirm, the beast rematerialized above the shield, now charging straight at the stone giant!

"Ability 3: Retribution. Once every 1,000 hours, the wearer can absorb an attack (up to five times the shield's defense) and reflect it back at the attacker. If the attack exceeds 5x defense, residual force affects the wearer."

Return to sender.

This ability was the rarest and most dreaded in defensive gear. In his past life, Ye Zhongming had only heard rumors of such an effect, always with strict limits.

But his shield's threshold was absurdly high, making it unbelievably potent.

Since Ye Zhongming wasn't hurt, the beast's attack hadn't exceeded 5x the shield's defense.

The flame beast slammed into the stone giant, blowing a massive chunk off its torso.

Ye Zhongming smirked—and charged again.

Despite its injuries, the giant refused to relent, hammering at Ye Zhongming with wild, furious strikes.

Ye Zhongming danced around it, shield raised, their clashes ringing across the battlefield.

Finally, the giant staggered.

Its body swayed—then collapsed, crumbling into burning rubble.

Red Hair, Xia Bai, and Xiao Min halted their assault, panting heavily. While Ye Zhongming tanked every hit, they'd relentlessly hacked at the giant. Even the Female Guard had landed two critical strikes.

Under their combined assault, the flaming behemoth had fallen.

And of course, the Shilan Shield's fourth ability had played a pivotal role.

Chapter 1625: Another way to pass

"Ability 4: Thorns of Retribution. When attacked, reflects 10% to 50% of the damage back to the attacker. Consumes the wearer's mental energy. At 10% reflection, mental energy consumption is 10% of the wearer's total. Each additional 10% reflection increases consumption by 5%. Duration: 30 minutes. Other shield abilities are disabled during this time. Cooldown: 5 hours. The reflection percentage can only be set once per cooldown period."

This ability was clearly the shield's most significant asset in prolonged combat—its essence, one might say. Reflecting damage to the attacker, up to half of the original force, meant that every strike the enemy landed would harm themselves as much as their target. If the attacker's own defenses weren't high enough, they wouldn't even need to be defeated—they'd destroy themselves first.

After activating this ability, Ye Zhongming set it to reflect 50% of the damage. Every time the flaming stone giant attacked, it inflicted equal harm upon itself. Since it wasn't particularly defensive to begin with, it weakened rapidly. Combined with the assaults from Red Hair, Xia Bai, Xiao Min, and the Female Guard, Cloud Peak's victory was hardly surprising.

The team let out a collective sigh of relief. The day's trials had left them exhausted, and victory was the only thing that could momentarily make them forget it.

But then, the shattered, burning rubble began to coalesce.

Soon, over twenty smaller flaming stone giants appeared.

If every member of Cloud Peak had ten thousand mythical beasts running through their minds at this sight, they could've flattened this entire space with sheer frustration alone.

One Level 9 was gone... but twenty Level 8s had taken its place.

And if that were the case, would Level 7s and 6s be far behind?

Compared to the stone cavalry they'd faced earlier, these flaming stone giants were the complete opposite!

"Follow me! Don't focus on killing—we're breaking through!"

Ye Zhongming made the call immediately.

All signs indicated that this trial was the reverse of the one on the icy plains. Cloud Peak could stay and fight their way through, but casualties would be inevitable.

What if the next trial was the same? Would they let this place whittle them down bit by bit, draining their combat strength?

The Youth Army was the hope of the future, and the Female Guard was the foundation of the present—both were core forces of Cloud Peak. Ye Zhongming refused to let them be wasted here.

Since they couldn't afford a direct confrontation, their only option was to charge forward.

Another concern weighed on Ye Zhongming: the toxic fumes in the air were rapidly intensifying. Prolonged exposure could poison the entire team.

Under Ye Zhongming's lead, the group surged forward, engaging the flaming stone giants in an instantaneous clash.

Cloud Peak had no shortage of high-level combatants, though the restrictions of this space had crippled their battle beasts. Against these Level 8 flaming stone giants, the team struggled somewhat.

But thanks to Ye Zhongming's overwhelming personal strength, as well as Xia Bai, Xiao Min, and Red Hair's ability to hold their own against two stone giants each, plus the collective might of the Female Guard and Youth Army, the formation held steady. When necessary, even Yangos and Yellow Ball—relying purely on physical prowess—could contribute.

Ye Zhongming also didn't hesitate to expend resources. The Staff of Nature, for instance, was repeatedly activated, shielding one flank of the formation while the others pressed forward.

Every time they killed a flaming stone giant, more—but weaker—miniatures spawned, chasing after Cloud Peak. As the team fought its way forward, it left a trail of fire giants in its wake. The battle beasts, lacking combat skills, ran at the front, guarded by the Youth Army, while Ye Zhongming and the Female Guard periodically turned to engage the pursuers.

By the time an hour had passed, all the Level 8 flaming stone giants had been slain—but the number of enemies hadn't decreased. Instead, it had grown, with even the lowest-tier variants now appearing.

Ye Zhongming sprinted ahead, sitting down to gulp recovery potions. As the strongest fighter, he'd borne the brunt of the most dangerous clashes, leaving him drained. He needed to recover quickly for the battles ahead.

As for the possibility that not annihilating all the stone giants might forfeit rewards, he no longer cared.

But just as he closed his eyes to rest, he felt a disturbance beneath him. Ye Zhongming rolled aside instinctively, just as a fist-sized geyser of magma erupted from the ground.

Some of the molten spray splashed onto him, sending white-hot agony through his nerves. It dawned on him: the dangers of this hellscape weren't limited to the stone giants. Random magma bursts were now part of the equation.

He relayed the warning to the team immediately.

Knowing was one thing. Dodging was another.

They'd entered an unstable zone of the molten hellscape. Magma vents of all sizes burst open without warning. Even with their heightened evolved senses giving them a second or two of forewarning, avoiding direct hits was possible—but splashes were inevitable. The searing pain was enough to make even the sturdiest warrior shudder.

The biggest problem, however, was that these sudden eruptions disrupted Cloud Peak's formation, allowing the flaming stone giants to close in.

The fighting grew even fiercer.

And casualties began to mount.

Given Cloud Peak's status and strength in the national region, they rarely faced such grueling odds. The team's pace slowed further, and the stone giants encircled them multiple times, forcing Ye Zhongming and the Female Guard to fight tooth and nail for every inch of progress.

This brutal chase lasted over three hours—until, at last, the team stepped into a misty, water-filled zone.

Behind them, the molten hellscape vanished as if it had never existed, and the remaining stone giants disappeared with it.

If not for the team's battered state, they might've doubted whether any of it had happened at all.

Had they passed? Completed the trial?

"So... leaving that 'zone' counts as clearing it?"

Xiao Min murmured, a hint of amazement in her voice.

"Boss, look—that must be the reward."

A Female Guard warrior at the rear called Ye Zhongming over, pointing to a clearing not far ahead.