

## **Apocalypse 1626**

### Chapter 1626: Engraving Machine

Once again, there were three items.

A box, an object, and a sculpture.

Ye Zhongming opened the box. As expected, it was filled with the same brown stones that made up the flaming stone giants. The surfaces were too rough to discern any patterns, but they were smooth to the touch, neither scorching hot nor strangely cool.

The quantity was roughly the same as the stones obtained from the icy wasteland trial, suggesting this was a standard reward for each stage.

Not wasting time inspecting them further, Ye Zhongming turned to the second item.

In the first trial, the second reward had been the bizarre "Human Refining Furnace", which he hadn't had time to examine. Now, he was genuinely curious about this one.

"Engraving Machine!"

This was a peculiar device with a circular platform and sixteen mechanical arms, each tipped with sharp alloy needles of varying thicknesses. Beside it were high-tech buttons with an unmistakably advanced aesthetic.

Human Refining Furnace. Engraving Machine.

Was there some connection between these two?

Ye Zhongming glanced at the swampy, lake-filled terrain ahead and ordered the team to rest and recover. He wanted to study these two items—if they could be utilized, the journey ahead might become easier.

As for whether this place would allow Cloud Peak's warriors to rest... that was a concern for later.

The third item, the flaming stone giant sculpture, was simply stored away without a second thought.

Retrieving the Human Refining Furnace from his spatial storage, Ye Zhongming placed it beside the Engraving Machine and began his examination.

The morale of Cloud Peak's forces wasn't low, but it wasn't high either. They had lost more comrades, and everyone was injured. The magma burns hadn't vanished with the molten hellscape—instead, they continued to fester, the lingering toxins resisting even healing potions and crystals.

Though the pain had been lessened, the wounds wouldn't fully heal immediately. The persistent, gnawing discomfort served as a constant reminder of the uncertain path ahead.

The Female Guard women comforted the more emotionally shaken Youth Army soldiers. Over time, the two groups had grown close—the youngsters treated like little brothers by these battle-hardened

women. To outsiders, they were ruthless killers, but here, they radiated a maternal warmth that even they themselves thought had long vanished. This camaraderie did much to lift the team's spirits.

Despite the casualties and injuries, every member had grown stronger through these trials. The Youth Army, in particular, had matured significantly, shedding the forced ferocity they'd adopted in Black Dragon City and replacing it with a quiet, lethal composure. Their eyes now gleamed with the unyielding focus of true elites.

Though their numbers had dwindled, these young warriors had surpassed the average combat prowess of Cloud Peak's forces in just two battles, becoming fully-fledged mainline fighters.

"Swamps, puddles, lakes, reeds... What's next? Mud men?" Xiao Min, on guard duty, muttered as she surveyed the terrain ahead.

"The terrain's rough. If we rush, we'll break formation." Xia Bai rarely spoke, so it was Red Hair who replied.

They had recovered the fastest, their injuries being relatively light.

"We'll fight our way through."

Xia Bai's voice was flat, but the other two were used to it. The fact that she'd spoken at all was a rare concession.

"This is so much harder than the Sea King Wheel trial." Xiao Min sighed.

"We're also much stronger now." Xia Bai's fingers twitched, her battlelust barely restrained. She was the only one who hadn't treated her injuries—in fact, she resented her body's natural healing, as it would "weaken" her combat efficiency later.

"Does that mean the Heavenly King Wheel will be terrifying?" Xiao Min giggled, her eyes gleaming with the same eager bloodlust as Xia Bai's.

"I'm more interested in the abilities that'll unlock when all three ruler artifacts are gathered."

"That's just because you have faith in the boss."

The exchange drew a flicker of amusement from Xia Bai—until she suddenly whirled around, sensing an odd energy fluctuation from Ye Zhongming's direction.

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Ye Zhongming stared at the stone cavalry before him, his lips twitching.

After some time studying the Human Refining Furnace, he'd discovered it was a device for crafting puppets—but with strict limitations.

It could only produce puppets from pre-set templates.

At first, Ye Zhongming had no idea what these "templates" were—until he recalled the two sculptures. Placing the stone cavalry statue and the flaming stone giant statue inside, the furnace's available templates jumped from zero to two.

But templates alone weren't enough. Materials were required. The core component was the stones from the two crates—one per puppet. The rest included magic crystals and various category-restricted items.

For example, crafting a stone cavalry required materials from riding-type lifeforms, binding agents, and special additives.

The specific items weren't fixed, but the categories were—the resulting puppet's strength scaled with the quality of materials and magic crystals used.

Ye Zhongming happened to have all the necessary materials. Eager to test the results, he inserted the components and a stone, initiating the refinement process.

The process was swift and smooth. After a burst of flames, the furnace opened—and out came a stone cavalry.

Yes, it appeared.

If Ye Zhongming hadn't looked down, he might've missed it entirely.

What the hell? A lapdog cavalry?

Not even a large breed—just a medium-sized one at best!

A quick assessment confirmed it: this was a trash-tier stone cavalry, barely Level 3 in strength.

And he'd used top-tier materials for this! Including some Level 9 components just to see the effects!

Wasting materials that could've crafted gold-grade equipment... for this?!

Today might just be the most humiliating day of Ye Zhongming's career as an Artisan.

But after a brief moment of disappointment, he controlled the Level 3 stone cavalry, directing it onto the Engraving Machine.

Chapter 1627: Slimes

The sixteen mechanical arms hummed to life, shifting from their original aligned positions into a staggered arrangement. They first circled the stone cavalry twice before rapidly closing in, their high-speed movements tracing intricate patterns across its body.

One after another, mysterious engravings began to appear—simple lines at first, but under the precision of the sixteen arms, they transformed into esoteric symbols brimming with hidden meaning.

Without warning, the arms halted and returned to their starting positions.

The engraving process, which had consumed a Level 7 demon crystal, was complete.

Looking at the stone cavalry—unchanged in size but vastly stronger—Ye Zhongming finally grasped the true purpose of the Human Refining Furnace and Engraving Machine.

The rewards from the two trials shared a clear theme: they granted the means to manufacture two types of puppets.

Admittedly, their base strength was low. Even after engraving, the stone cavalry only reached Level 5—a decent asset for ordinary post-apocalyptic factions, but far below Cloud Peak's standards.

Ye Zhongming could only hope these stone cavalry shared their "original's" trait—merging into stronger forms upon death.

After calculating his remaining materials, he produced several more stone cavalry units and had them engraved.

He needed to test whether these constructs could truly replicate the fusion ability.

But he didn't mass-produce them. If his theory proved wrong, those high-tier materials and demon crystals would be wasted.

When ten stone cavalry and ten flame giants marched in formation behind Ye Zhongming, the battle-hardened warriors of Cloud Peak stirred with excitement.

Not fear—awe and anticipation.

If these puppets truly mirrored their templates' abilities, Cloud Peak might soon gain two formidable new forces.

"Let's move."

Ye Zhongming gave the order to advance. The team had rested for over two hours—miraculously undisturbed.

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Despite the extended break, Cloud Peak remained the first faction to enter the third trial within the Mountain Crown Wheel's space.

It wasn't until an hour later that other teams began trickling in.

Yet while Cloud Peak considered their losses severe, others had fared far worse. Even the strongest factions arrived battered and diminished.

Many hadn't cleared the second trial at all. After two stages, over half the participating forces had been eliminated—the Mountain Crown Wheel's space ruthlessly culling humanity's elite.

And with the unknown horrors of the third trial and beyond, more would perish. Had they known the cost, many might never have come.

One thing was certain: whoever claimed the Mountain Crown, the North American continent's elite forces would be decimated by a third or more.

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Cloud Peak's third trial enemy: Slimes.

Unlike the stone cavalry and flame giants, these creatures spawned at varying levels—from Level 5 grunts to a Level 9 monstrosity—ambushing from all directions and plunging Cloud Peak into a desperate battle.

The difficulty had spiked dramatically. Not only in numbers, but in tactics.

These slimes were ranged attackers.

They kept their distance, hurling globs of acidic sludge at Cloud Peak's formation. Despite their muddy composition, their projectiles hit like cannonballs.

Level 5-6 slimes lobbed their shots in arcs, giving some reaction time.

Level 7+ slimes fired straight like arrows—fast and brutal.

Level 8 slimes added toxins—not instantly lethal, but enough to cripple combat efficiency.

The Level 9 Slime Overlord, positioned farthest back, alternated between artillery-like mud blasts (capable of maiming even Seven-Star evolved with non-fatal hits) and high-angle sludge barrages that rained down like bullets, stripping a third of the durability from green-grade armor in one volley.

Caught off guard, Cloud Peak suffered more casualties in the first ten minutes than both prior trials combined. Only after Ye Zhongming desperately deployed the Staff of Nature and disposable defensive gear did the situation stabilize.

Cloud Peak adapted quickly:

Ye Zhongming focused on neutralizing the Level 9's attacks.

Others defended while counterattacking during the slimes' cooldowns.

Though the slimes attacked fiercely, their intervals between strikes created openings:

The Level 9 Overlord attacked once every five minutes.

Lower-tier slimes had 10-15 second pauses.

Thankfully, their defenses were weak, far inferior to the stone cavalry or flame giants. Even Youth Army members could one-shot them with full-force strikes.

The battle settled into a grueling rhythm:

Cloud Peak defended, seizing chances to retaliate.

The slimes attacked relentlessly.

A war of attrition—who would break first?

"I'll handle the big one. Xiao Min, Xia Bai, Red Hair—lead teams to assault different flanks!"

Ye Zhongming realized their current strategy was unsustainable. While he tanked the Overlord's blows, keeping everyone clustered left too many vulnerabilities.

Splitting up was the answer:

Ye Zhongming would draw the Overlord's focus.

The others would exploit their superior individual strength to pick off isolated slimes.

A Youth Army detachment, Yangos, and Yellow Ball would guard the battle beasts.

Losses were inevitable—but necessary.

The moment Cloud Peak divided their forces, Ye Zhongming became the Overlord's sole target, with several Level 8 slimes joining the assault to "protect" their leader.

Pressure on the rest of the team eased dramatically.

Female Guard warriors fought independently, using terrain and the slimes' chaotic positioning to slaughter them efficiently.

Within thirty minutes of the third trial's start, the tide of battle turned in Cloud Peak's favor.

Chapter 1628: Surprising helper

Ye Zhongming dodged an attack from the level nine slime but failed to account for several level-eight ones. Struck by the viscous yet immensely powerful mud clumps, his body briefly lost balance, sending him sliding far across the swamp.

A tingling numbness spread through him but quickly faded.

Looking down, he saw that his armor was damaged in multiple places, allowing the toxic mud to make contact with his skin.

Without overthinking it—his physical constitution made such toxicity negligible—he rolled with the momentum, evading subsequent attacks, and continued charging toward the level nine slime.

Not only did Ye Zhongming know that getting close to the level nine slime would secure victory, but the slime monster itself was also aware. Once this human closed the distance, it would mean its demise. Thus, the moment Ye Zhongming entered a 500-meter radius, it began consciously summoning its subordinates for assistance.

Originally, the battlefield had revolved around the Cloud Peak forces, with slime monsters encircling and attacking the humans. Even after the Cloud Peak members dispersed their assaults, the focal point had scattered but never concentrated on a single individual.

Until now.

Ye Zhongming became the sole target worthy of attack in the eyes of all the slime. Despite the Cloud Peak's near-thousand-strong force slaughtering them, the slime showed no fear, all rushing toward Ye Zhongming. The moment the King of Cloud Peak entered their range, they would unleash their attacks on him.

The Cloud Peak fighters quickly noticed this shift and pursued, hacking and slashing at the slime monsters. But the sheer number of enemies made it impossible to eliminate them all in a short time, no matter how fiercely they fought.

No matter how powerful Ye Zhongming was, he couldn't withstand the combined assault of so many monsters.

The Cloud Peak warriors grew frantic, unleashing their most devastating techniques.

Though the slimes' numbers dwindled rapidly, the attacks on Ye Zhongming couldn't be immediately halted.

As he charged forward, Ye Zhongming relied on speed to evade, resorting to the teleportation skill from his spatial equipment when dodging became impossible. By the time he closed to within 300 meters of the level nine slime, all his teleportation skills had entered cooldown.

During this time, he had even stopped bothering to evade attacks from level-five or six slime.

After advancing another 30 meters, Ye Zhongming suddenly sensed something amiss.

The level nine monster hadn't attacked for a long while. Based on its earlier frequency, it should have struck about two minutes ago.

While continuing to dodge, Ye Zhongming glanced at his primary foe and saw that the slime monster was... eating.

Its meal? The smaller slime monsters around it.

A foreboding feeling surged within him. Ye Zhongming knew this behavior meant the level nine creature was either enhancing its strength or preparing a special attack.

Sure enough, after devouring an unknown number of its kin, the level nine slime's body swelled considerably. It bloated grotesquely before spewing a torrent of mud straight at Ye Zhongming.

Between it and Ye Zhongming stood many other slime monsters. The attack was a horizontal spray, and the first victims were its own kind.

Against the assault of their king, the lesser slime monsters stood no chance—instantly annihilated. Some of the mud dissipated, but the remainder hurtled toward Ye Zhongming with terrifying speed.

Faced with the overwhelming area of effect, Ye Zhongming knew evasion was impossible. Instead, he pulled out the Staff of Nature, slotting in a top-grade water-element gem to summon Water Bottle Protection, hoping the energy shield would block the attack.

Countless mud projectiles slammed into the barrier. The incredibly resilient shield dimmed rapidly, signaling its impending collapse.

The level nine creature's mud spray lasted at least ten seconds. The lesser slime monsters had endured only a second of it, while Water Bottle Protection held for a mere three seconds before shattering.

Ye Zhongming had no time to replace the gem in the Staff of Nature. He could only dodge as best he could while activating his shield's defensive ability to protect himself.

His speed was exceptional, and he had begun moving sideways even before Water Bottle Protection failed. For an evolved, this timing should have been sufficient.

Yet, despite his efforts, the sheer breadth and speed of the mud spray meant some of it still grazed him.

His body was sent flying as if struck by a massive hammer.

Bright, startling streaks of crimson marked the trajectory of his flight.

Instances where the King of Cloud Peak was injured were rare, and bleeding even rarer. This level nine creature's attack was horrifyingly potent.

After unleashing this devastating strike, the level nine slime monster was visibly drained. It glanced in Ye Zhongming's direction before slowly retreating, its kin forming a protective circle around it.

Chapter 1628.5- Surprising helper

It wasn't truly fleeing—merely creating distance to prepare for the next phase of battle.

Xia Bai and Red Hair charged forward. The low-defense slime monsters, no longer focused on them, couldn't hold the two women back. They quickly closed in on Ye Zhongming's position, even using their own bodies to block incoming mud attacks from other directions.

"I'm... fine."

Ye Zhongming's slightly hoarse voice rang out behind them. The King of Cloud Peak had already risen to his feet.

"Let's kill it together. The others can handle their own battles."

Seeing that the distance to the level nine creature had once again widened to over 400 meters, he spoke to the two women.

Ye Zhongming had no macho pride, especially not now.

As long as the target could be killed, he wouldn't hesitate to attack with three people—or thirty thousand.

Thus, the assault on the level nine slime shifted from one person to three.

Sensing the danger, the slime let out a shrill cry and continued its retreat. Though its speed was laughably slow compared to evolved, it persisted stubbornly.

It was buying time.

It was confident its next attack would claim at least one life.

Ye Zhongming remained at the center.

Blood still seeped from his wounds.

The level-nine slime's mud had breached his defenses, and the toxins within were inhibiting his regenerative abilities.

For the illustrious King of Cloud Peak, such wretched states were exceedingly rare.

Gasping heavily, his body wracked with pain, Ye Zhongming's gaze remained unnervingly steady. He seemed even faster and more agile than in his uninjured state, weaving through the lesser slimes as he closed in on his target.

The presence of Red Hair and Xia Bai halved the attacks directed at him.

400 meters, 300 meters, 200 meters... the distance shrank rapidly. Without concentrated fire, Ye Zhongming could cover hundreds of meters in an instant.

Compared to his earlier struggle, the difference between having allies and fighting alone was stark.

The two powerful helpers threw the slime monsters into disarray. Their low intelligence left them unsure how to handle this new threat.

When they focused on one target, the other two would rush their leader. Shifting focus only allowed the first to advance.

Attempting to attack all three simultaneously proved ineffective—Ye Zhongming and the others maintained steady progress.

The retreating level nine slime noticed this and adjusted its strategy, dividing its forces: half targeting Ye Zhongming, the rest harassing Red Hair and Xia Bai.

The situation stabilized slightly, slowing the trio's advance. Seizing the opportunity, the level nine slime resumed consuming its kin, preparing its next attack.

Ye Zhongming had survived the last assault thanks to three factors: the lesser slime monsters and Water Bottle Protection absorbing some damage, his purple shield and Black Dirt Shield combined with Earth Armor mitigating more, and his own monstrous physique enduring the rest.

Even so, he had been severely injured.

If Xia Bai or Red Hair were to take such a hit, survival wasn't guaranteed.

The trio intensified their assault, slaughtering swathes of slime monsters to close the distance.

Ye Zhongming, now closest, reached within 100 meters of the level nine creature. Red Hair and Xia Bai weren't far behind.

As the distance shrank, so did the gap between the three humans.

Just as the level nine slime finished devouring its kin and unleashed another devastating spray, Red Hair and Xia Bai suddenly positioned themselves directly behind Ye Zhongming. Though spaced apart, the three humans and the slime monster now formed a straight line.

Ye Zhongming raised the Staff of Nature—recovered despite his injuries—reactivating Water Bottle Protection to shield himself and the two women behind him.

A mocking glint flickered in the level nine slime’s eerie eyes. This time, no lesser slime monsters stood between them, and the Staff of Nature’s shield was noticeably dimmer—its super-grade gem exhausted, now relying on an advanced-grade one at best.

It was certain this injured human couldn’t withstand the attack.

Oddly, the same mocking expression flashed in Ye Zhongming’s eyes.

Less than three seconds into the level-nine slime monster’s spray, something plummeted from the sky like a meteor, crashing squarely onto its gelatinous body.

The impact flattened the creature into a puddle of ooze.

A level nine life form, no matter how poor its defenses, wouldn’t die so easily. Its body began reforming, moments away from full recovery.

But then, a voice it would remember in its final moments rang out:

“Stinky mudball, taste Dragon Grandpa’s slap!”

## Chapter 1629: Intersecting caves

Yangos couldn't use his abilities, but he could still fly.

While Ye Zhongming drew the attention of all the slime monsters, and the disabled war beasts were left unattended, the vicious dragon quietly took to the skies.

Here, the battle revolved solely between the level nine slime and the King of Cloud Peak. No one paid attention to anything else—not the other areas, not the other lives. Not even the Cloud Peak fighters already engaged in combat were of concern to the slime monsters, let alone Yangos, who had been lingering on the battlefield's periphery.

The only thing they cared about was protecting their king.

So Yangos not only took off into the sky but did so completely unnoticed.

The cunning creature flew high, making it difficult to spot amid the chaos of battle unless someone deliberately looked for him.

While the slime monsters failed to notice, Ye Zhongming certainly did. Yangos was his war beast, and the two shared an extremely close bond. The moment the dragon successfully positioned himself above the level nine slime monster, Ye Zhongming immediately adjusted his strategy. He, Xia Bai, and Red Hair appeared to be frantically closing in, but their true purpose was to monopolize the slime monsters' attention—all to ensure Yangos could deliver the final blow at the critical moment.

Had this been any other level nine life form, Ye Zhongming would never have attempted this. Relying solely on physical strength, Yangos—despite being of the dragon race—stood no chance against an opponent a level higher.

But this slime monster was different. It wasn't a complete life form to begin with, fighting mostly on instinct like ordinary mutated creatures. It might have possessed a sliver of intelligence, but not much.

Its defenses were weak, and its offensive methods were limited. As long as Yangos could get close, Ye Zhongming was confident the dragon could at least severely wound it, creating an opportunity for him.

And indeed, Yangos dealt the slime a fatal strike. Cursing nonstop, he lashed out with his tail and claws, tearing chunks of mud from the creature's body. The level nine king, despite its higher rank, was powerless to resist.

The surrounding slime monsters, afraid of harming their king, didn't dare attack, allowing the vicious dragon to rampage unchecked.

Between his foul-mouthed insults—which the slime couldn't understand anyway (or it might have died of rage)—and his relentless assault, the nearby evolved could only watch helplessly as Yangos pummeled their king, one claw strike after another. With no enemies attacking them, they had gathered around the level nine slime but hesitated to strike the dragon for fear of collateral damage.

Ye Zhongming signaled, and the Cloud Peak forces resumed their attacks. Enemies that didn't fight back were nothing but living target practice. If Yangos killed the level nine slime, there was no guarantee the lower-level ones wouldn't revert to aggression, which would spell trouble.

The battle ended when Yangos' wing strike scattered the last remnants of the level nine slime's body. Despite his outwardly furious demeanor—as if he'd annihilate the creature any second—the dragon had actually been holding back, only delivering the killing blow after Cloud Peak's forces had nearly wiped out the other slime monsters.

"Stinky mudball, now you know your Dragon Grandpa's power!"

Yangos planted his front claws on his hips like a shrew, his face twisted into a fierce scowl. He even spat at the defeated slime monster, leaving everyone's faces twitching in disbelief. No one knew where the dragon had picked up such vulgar mannerisms—it was downright... baffling.

"It seems things went as we expected."

During the team's rest, Xiao Min observed the flame stone golem and stone cavalry, which had grown to roughly level six strength.

These two puppets, created by Ye Zhongming, had been killed early in the battle—their strength was no match for so many slime monsters.

However, they soon began reforming, merging from ten into one and gaining a significant power boost.

Though the remaining flame stone golem and stone cavalry were now battered and heavily injured, they weren't dead. Even more astonishingly, their bodies were slowly repairing themselves.

It might take many hours for them to fully recover, but such an ability was rare among puppets.

Facing the unknown trials ahead, Ye Zhongming began crafting more of these puppets after tending to his own injuries. Materials from his spatial equipment were consumed like flowing water.

He used up almost everything usable, leaving only a small reserve. He planned to see if rewards would appear after the third trial. If so, they'd likely be slime monsters—he intended to create some of those as well. Their defenses might be lacking, but their ranged attacks were quite effective.

After a brief rest, the team pressed forward. Without the slime monsters, they suddenly found the swamp's scenery rather pleasant.

Once they left the area, the anticipated rewards appeared.

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While the Cloud Peak team was distributing their rewards, something was happening outside—unseen by them or any other evolved who had entered the Mountain King's Wheel space.

The black passageways in the now-empty camps had retracted toward the mountain. Some had vanished entirely, while others remained, moving irregularly and intersecting haphazardly. Each passage rose, crisscrossing with others and stretching into the sky.

From a distance, it resembled a head of tangled, unruly hair.

No one could discern the purpose of these interwoven passages.

Upon closer inspection, it became clear that all the passages originated from the mountain's peak, where an inconspicuous wheel had appeared. Its surface was obscured by a layer of grayish material, making it hard to see clearly.

Then, at a certain moment, the material suddenly glowed. A crack formed, shedding fragments and revealing a jade-smooth wheel beneath.

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The rewards for the third trial numbered four—one more than before.

There were no stones this time, only a box of wet mud. No statue, but a soft, gummy candy-like mud sculpture.

In addition, there were two other rewards: an exquisite makeup box and a bizarre, root-like object of unknown origin.

The moment Ye Zhongming and the Cloud Peak team received their rewards—before they could examine them closely—the space trembled violently. Then, about a hundred meters away, a black energy gate appeared, identical to the one they'd entered through earlier.

They exchanged glances, unsure whether to approach it or wait.

Fortunately, the choice was soon made for them.

A figure emerged from the black void.

Chapter 1630: Six methods

Apocalypse Gachapon

In the apocalypse, unexpected situations almost always mean accidents—and accidents often signify battle and death.

So when this person suddenly appeared, Cloud Peak's forces immediately attacked.

There would be no allies here.

Not even the Cannibal Chain.

On the path forward, no one was a friend.

Even if the Cannibal Chain had previously cooperated well with Cloud Peak.

At least half of the Female Guards struck, while the rest took a step forward, assuming defensive stances.

A barrage of attacks instantly covered the exit of the black void, along with the first person who had stepped out.

But then, an energy shield appeared, effortlessly blocking the onslaught. The combined skills and strength of hundreds of fighters were halted without so much as a tremor in the barrier.

Even Ye Zhongming couldn't have done this. If so many Female Guards attacked him at once, he wouldn't dare face them head-on.

This could only mean one thing: the rules forbade it. Attacks were not allowed.

The person who had appeared was clearly terrified, standing frozen for a long moment. Through the energy shield, everyone could see the sweat on his forehead.

Suddenly, he staggered forward, nearly falling, before catching himself after a few steps. Behind him, a bare-chested man shoved him aside and stepped out.

Then came more evolved, war beasts, and machinery. Knowing the energy shield protected them, they stopped just inside it, refusing to step beyond.

Xiao Min waved her hand, and a squad of Female Guards charged forward. The distance was negligible—they reached the energy shield in seconds. Realizing skills were useless, they swung their weapons, only to be blocked again. Unfazed, the female warriors threw their bodies against the barrier, but it still held firm.

The energy shield divided the evolved into two distinct factions.

Laughter erupted from the unknown force on the other side, amused by the Female Guards' futile attempts to breach the shield.

The squad returned empty-handed. Xiao Min didn't order further action—the next move was Ye Zhongming's decision.

Ye Zhongming said nothing, simply watching and waiting.

About ten minutes later, no more evolved emerged from the black void. A force of roughly four thousand stood opposite Cloud Peak, advancing at a measured pace.

"Selection trial begins. Please choose a method."

A stiff, metallic voice echoed through the space, familiar to those who had entered special zones before.

"Method One: Peaceful Negotiation. Both parties may negotiate for one side to voluntarily withdraw from this trial. The withdrawing party will face no penalties and will receive rewards based on their performance in the first three trials. The remaining party gains no rewards but may proceed to the next trial."

The voice paused, as if giving both sides time to consider.

Both the newly arrived force and Cloud Peak found this method peculiar. Was this a chance for regret?

And "negotiation" felt like a joke. Who would willingly back out after coming this far?

"Method Two: Selective Trial. Both parties will compete via methods determined by the space. The losing party faces no penalties but receives no rewards upon exiting. The winning party gains certain rewards."

"Method Three: Arena Duel. Both parties will compete in individual or squad matches. The winner proceeds to the next trial with superior rewards. The loser is ejected from the space but still receives some rewards."

"Method Four: Elite Duel. Each side selects one representative for a decisive battle. The winner gains superior rewards and proceeds. The loser is ejected with no rewards."

"Method Five: Team Battle. Both parties engage in full-scale combat. The winner receives substantial rewards and advances. The losing leader may surrender when necessary, ending the battle, but is ejected with no rewards."

"Method Six: Luck Trial. If both parties choose this, they will undergo tests of luck. The winner gains exceptional equipment and proceeds. The loser is ejected and suffers random penalties."

The voice listed all six methods in one breath, leaving everyone slightly dazed.

Unlike written conditions that could be studied at leisure, this was an auditory test—a challenge in itself.

Though evolved had excellent memories, processing and analyzing the options on the spot was still taxing.

Whispers broke out. On Cloud Peak's side, only the younger fighters murmured softly, while the Female Guards remained expressionless.

The opposing force, however, descended into chaos. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, voices loud and overlapping.

"Silence!"

A single shout instantly quieted the newcomers. Cloud Peak heard it too, though many wore odd expressions—because the voice sounded... childish.

Sure enough, a figure barely over a meter tall stepped forward, clad in golden armor and wielding an equally golden halberd.

Blond hair, fair skin, a child's voice, and a halberd twice his height—it was a surreal sight.

"Please select a method. Time remaining: five minutes."

The space's prompt tightened everyone's nerves.

"Who's in charge over there? Come talk to me."

The child—who looked no older than seven or eight—walked to the edge of the energy shield and shouted at Cloud Peak.

Ye Zhongming rubbed his chin, smirking as he approached.

The two studied each other through the barrier.

Up close, Ye Zhongming was struck by the child's—if he could even be called that—stunning beauty. Exquisitely sculpted wouldn't be an exaggeration. In peacetime, a single photo of this pretty boy would've driven women wild online.

"I'll give you one chance. Choose Method One—withdraw. That way, you'll live."

Had an adult said this, Ye Zhongming wouldn't have batted an eye. But hearing it from a kid who barely reached his waist, he couldn't help but laugh—a silent, upward twitch of his lips.

Yet this faint smirk ignited the child's fury.

Pointing his halberd at Ye Zhongming, the boy shrieked in his high-pitched voice:

"You ignorant fool! Your mockery enrages me! Now I revoke Method One! I choose Method Four—Elite Duel! I'll kill you myself!"