

Apocalypse 1721

Chapter 1721: Spare the rod, spoil the child (1)

The battlefield was eerily silent, with only various energies and lights flickering faintly.

Yet everyone knew that if either side made any further aggressive moves, an all-out battle would inevitably erupt.

Why was Ye Zhongming acting so domineering? It didn't align with his usual style.

Because deep down, he was wary of these two level-nine lifeforms.

They weren't enemies—in fact, before Death King Tree and Talking Lady evolved to level nine, they had even been friends. To some extent, they had served as Cloud Peak's enforcers and test subjects.

But everything changed once they reached level nine. Whether it was Talking Lady or Death King Tree, though they hadn't turned against Cloud Peak, they had begun displaying a certain arrogance—a dignity and temperament befitting apex lifeforms.

This wasn't inherently wrong. Any lifeform that reached the pinnacle of their planet would naturally exude such an instinctive aura.

But!

They had failed to consider one thing—

Reaching the top of the planet only meant status, not invincibility.

These beings, neither friends nor enemies, yet neither obedient nor predictable, were far too dangerous to have lingering near Cloud Peak.

Ye Zhongming hated this feeling.

But would he distance himself from them—or even kill them? Unless absolutely necessary, that was something he would never do.

Deep down, Ye Zhongming still wanted them to belong to Cloud Peak. If not that, then at least maintain a good relationship so they could lend aid in critical moments.

To achieve this, the most crucial thing was to make them fear him. At the very least, make them wary.

And that was exactly what Ye Zhongming was doing now.

Of course, this wasn't just an empty bluff. To make others fear you, you had to possess the power to back it up. Did Ye Zhongming have it? Did Cloud Peak?

Others might not be sure, but every member of Cloud Peak—including Ye Zhongming—firmly believed they did.

Even if Death King Tree and Talking Lady had just evolved to level nine (with Demon King Tree's unique physiology making her especially formidable), even if the Saint Father were to rise from the dead, Cloud Peak was confident they could kill him.

It would just come at a cost.

So when Ye Zhongming roared those words, his primary intent was intimidation. But if a fight did break out? He wouldn't mind.

Cloud Peak had slain more than one or two level-nine lifeforms. He had the confidence.

Even if he was facing both Death King Tree and Talking Lady (plus her black cat), the same principle applied.

If he couldn't gain two allies, then level nine magic crystals would suffice.

"Heh, Ye—" Demon King Tree chuckled dismissively, about to say something—

But in response, Ye Zhongming suddenly lunged forward. From a distance, he lightly leapt into the air and threw out a seemingly effortless punch.

The abruptness of Cloud Peak's King taking action caught both Death King Tree and Talking Lady off guard.

Though they were evolved lifeforms at their core, their intelligence was extremely high. They understood their own value.

Cloud Peak might be the strongest faction in the region, but they weren't without enemies—quite the opposite, in fact. Their enemies were formidable. Moreover, Ye Zhongming was in the process of advancing toward becoming a nine-star evolved. To do that, he needed to kill other level nine lifeforms—and they were the ones who could help him most.

So when Ye Zhongming issued his threat, they took it seriously—but they weren't afraid.

Thus, Death King Tree acted flippant, while Talking Lady furrowed her brows, her black cat baring its teeth.

But Cloud Peak's King attacked too suddenly—no hesitation, no negotiation. Just action.

Death King Tree was caught off guard.

People often casually threw around the term "level-nine lifeform," but when actually facing one? That was when you realized how terrifying they were.

Being suddenly attacked was unexpected for Death King Tree. She didn't think Ye Zhongming had any reason to strike.

But now that he had, she immediately counterattacked.

She didn't dodge—instead, she charged straight at him.

Death King Tree's body was no different from that of a normal human woman, appearing tiny compared to the close-combat robot. The fist of Ye Zhongming's machine was nearly half her size, and with the added momentum of descending from above, it seemed visually impossible for her to block.

Yet the newly ascended level-nine lifeform showed no fear. She didn't even use a skill—just swung her own hand, meeting Ye Zhongming's punch head-on.

Normally, this wouldn't be an issue. Despite her small stature, Death King Tree's body was incredibly tough, far sturdier than a mental-type lifeform like Talking Lady. Even after reaching level nine, the latter's body was "hardy," but she still wasn't a physically oriented fighter.

Just as Death King Tree was about to teach this strange machine a lesson—

The fist that seemed about to strike suddenly split open, releasing a barrage of circular shuriken that filled the space in front of her.

Each was razor-thin, with lethally sharp edges, yet large, about 70 centimeters in diameter.

Ten blades, leaving the Death King Tree no room to dodge.

Le Dàyuán, protected by the Shengyuan Team, had also arrived on the battlefield. Seeing this, he nodded approvingly.

As expected of someone with near-perfect synchronization. Even in his first battle, he controls the machine as if he's practiced dozens of times.

Death King Tree truly couldn't evade. But she didn't panic.

Her outstretched fist exploded without resistance, releasing over a dozen supple vines that lashed out, striking the incoming shuriken and scattering them away.

But before she could react—

A shadow shot up from beneath her.

Death King Tree's instincts flared. The same ultra-fine tendrils that had once breached Cloud Peak's defenses shot out, weaving into a seemingly fragile net.

The shadow—a kick from the robot's foot—slammed into it the next second.

It didn't break through, but the force sent the Death King Tree slightly upward.

Somehow, while the fist had just split open to fire the shuriken, the robot's body had already twisted mid-air, using its sheer size to deliver a "rising kick" from below.

In the opening exchange, Death King Tree was at a disadvantage.

Anger flared in her. She wanted to counterattack—

But then she sensed danger below again. Instinctively, she ascended higher.

As a level nine being, she could now defy many natural laws.

A cold glint shot up through the gaps in the net, narrowly missing her foot.

The follow-up to the "rising kick" missed.

But Ye Zhongming, still controlling the robot, used the metal spike extending from the machine's toe to hook onto Death King Tree's root-web. With a powerful twist of its torso, the robot flipped upright—

And from the edges of its chest, four beams of light fired instantly, striking the Death King Tree's upper body!

Chapter 1722: Spare the rod, spoil the child (2)

Death King Tree was sent tumbling uncontrollably backward.

Her stylish leather outfit now had four holes, revealing patches of reddish human skin beneath.

Almost simultaneously, the close-combat robot retracted its foot from the web. As Death King Tree reeled from the hits, she suddenly unleashed countless rapidly extending vines, stabbing toward Ye Zhongming's position.

Pfft— A faint wisp of blue smoke erupted from the robot's back. The machine, which had been hovering mid-air as if seated, suddenly shot forward, dodging the incoming vines. At the same time, one of its hands slid down its leg and retrieved a dagger—at least 1.2 meters long—from a hidden compartment.

Using its remaining momentum, the robot lunged, slashing horizontally at Death King Tree's neck.

The vines, missing their initial target, abruptly changed trajectory, thrusting toward the robot. If both attacks connected, the two would form a closed loop in mid-air.

The robot's legs, now fully retracted, swung backward, knees bending until its feet faced directly behind. Then, the lowest layer of metal plating on its feet peeled away, as if shedding skin.

The two detached metal plates immediately began spinning wildly, positioning themselves above and below the robot's back, intercepting the pursuing vines.

Death King Tree's vines extended from her hands. As Ye Zhongming's dagger slashed toward her, she tilted her head—and two beams of light shot from her eyes, forming a green mist in front of her body.

The dagger pierced the mist but stopped after penetrating only a short distance.

But this "dagger" (which would be a full-sized sword for anyone else) wasn't the robot's only weapon.

Its other arm had already swung around, aiming a devastating punch at Death King Tree's head.

The sheer size of the close-combat robot gave it an overwhelming advantage in reach.

Death King Tree's foot-tendrils whipped upward, weaving another fine, delicate net above her. The robot's fist struck the web but failed to break through.

Yet the assault didn't stop. The robot's massive foot—now "shed"—swung back around. Though Death King Tree's small frame made direct hits difficult, the foot suddenly launched several hidden projectiles from its surface.

The projectiles streaked through the air, leaving blue trails before striking the Death King Tree's unprotected lower body.

Then, small explosions erupted.

Brilliant blue energy, shaped like tadpoles, burst from the impact points, rapidly spreading across Death King Tree's body as if trying to encase her entirely.

By now, Death King Tree had been hit multiple times in this short exchange. What had started as mild irritation was now boiling into genuine fury.

Her eyes glowed green. Her leather outfit strained against her expanding form, exposing the parts of her body that hadn't fully humanized.

She was about to go all out.

The sky, once clear and blue, began tinting green. Cloud Peak veterans who had fought Death King Tree in the haunted city recognized this—the prelude to her ultimate skill, "World Nature."

But then—

The gathering green haze scattered inexplicably, vanishing without a sound.

Even Death King Tree froze in confusion.

Skill activation was a smooth energy-release process. Disrupting it always carried backlash. Death King Tree was no exception—the abrupt cancellation of World Nature sent a ripple of disruption through her body.

The effect was minuscule, but against an opponent like Ye Zhongming, even that split-second falter created an opening.

The green mist blocking the dagger thinned instantly. The blade pierced through, its razor edge slicing across Death King Tree's face, leaving a 15-centimeter gash.

The wound wasn't deep, not even bleeding, but the fact that it could easily cut a level-nine lifeform's skin spoke volumes about the dagger's sharpness.

Meanwhile, the blue "tadpoles" clinging to Death King Tree's body suddenly contracted, adhering tightly to her. A series of pained grunts escaped her lips—her Xinjiang-accented voice strained.

The spectators below had no idea what was happening, still stunned by the dizzying exchange of attacks and counters. In mere seconds, two beings—neither capable of true flight—had executed an aerial duel of staggering complexity.

And the tide had turned unexpectedly fast. Cloud Peak's fighters had faith in their king, but none expected him to suppress a level-nine lifeform so effortlessly.

Only Le Dàyuán watched with feverish excitement, ordering data collection while explaining to the others:

"The pilot's neural fusion enhances combat performance exponentially. Every strike—fist or foot—exceeds Zhongming's natural capabilities. At his current eight-star level, the robot's body can fully unleash his power!"

"That's a hydrogen-powered rocket booster. Meant for limited flight, but repurposed for mid-air dashes? Brilliant!"

"Hah! The foot shields—ghost-gold composite with engraved magic crystal circuits. Designed for defense, but offensively? Even better."

"Four micro-explosives. Merit-system ordnance. Underwhelming against level-nines, but they'd shred level-eights."

"Now this is nasty—'Blue Sea Ghost Mines.' Penetrate first, then release energy projectiles that inflict paralysis, agony, and maddening itchiness. Best part? They disrupt the target's internal energy flow! That's why 'World Nature' fizzled!"

"And that 'simple' dagger? Zhongming forged it specifically for this robot before leaving. Purple-grade. Minimal skills—all focused on piercing and sharpness. Perfect fit!"

After gushing over his creation's performance, Le Dàyuan paused, frowning.

"But... something's off. Even caught by surprise, Death King Tree's counterattacks feel... sluggish. Weak. You see it too, right?"

No one answered. They were too busy watching the sky, where Ye Zhongming, piloting the close-combat robot, was now overwhelming the level-nine Death King Tree with a barrage of ruthless strikes.

Chapter 1723: Spare the rod, spoil the child (3)

Four cables extended from the shoulders and legs of the close-combat robot, now firmly latched onto Death King Tree. Every attack from Ye Zhongming's control sent her flying, only to be yanked back by these cables.

Smacked away, dragged back.

Smacked away again, dragged back again...

Death King Tree was like a punching bag, battered back and forth by Ye Zhongming's robot without any chance to retaliate.

Neither of them were flying lifeforms. No matter what tricks they used to stay airborne, they would eventually fall.

When Death King Tree crashed to the ground, nearly buried by a brutal kick from the robot, both sides finally stopped.

Death King Tree's vines stood rigid around her, ceasing their flailing. Ye Zhongming's robot stood motionless, head lowered, arms hanging limp. The surrounding soldiers held their weapons, breaths held—

The scene was eerily tense.

Everyone knew the truth: despite the ferocity of the fight, neither side had used their trump cards. Death King Tree's World Nature had been interrupted, and she hadn't even resorted to her other abilities, let alone her true form, which should have been her ultimate state.

In other words, both had been holding back.

Death King Tree's vines could counterattack at any moment. Ye Zhongming's fists could drop at any second.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"Do you think I can kill you?"

The two exchanged words in an instant. The robot's massive foot slowly lifted.

Death King Tree climbed out of the crater, staring up at Ye Zhongming.

The cockpit opened. Ye Zhongming leaped out. Everyone expected the two powerhouses to face off directly—

But the moment his feet touched the ground, he blitzed forward, appearing in front of the black cat in a flash—and punched down.

"I hate your eyes. Learn respect. Learn fear."

Cloud Peak's King spoke calmly, but his aura sent a surge of adrenaline through every Cloud Peak fighter.

Only their king could—and would—dare speak like this to a level-nine lifeform.

Neither Talking Lady nor her black cat had expected Ye Zhongming to turn on them after fighting the Death King Tree.

Didn't he fear provoking two level-nines at once? No—three!

Even if Cloud Peak were strong, facing three level-nines simultaneously would be a nightmare.

Even if they won, half of Cloud Peak would die.

Talking Lady firmly believed her living value to Cloud Peak far exceeded her dead one.

Yet Ye Zhongming attacked anyway.

"Prepare!"

The order didn't come from Xia Lei—but Le Dayuan.

Not overstepping, but out of sheer concern.

The close-combat robot was a weapon of immense versatility and power, amplifying the pilot's strength.

But the toll it took was equally immense.

Stamina, mental energy—drained like a vampire's feast.

The state of previous high-sync pilots after use was proof enough.

Ye Zhongming was different—his physique surpassed theirs, and his sync rate was near-perfect.

But that fight, though brief, had been brutal.

The exhaustion had to be severe. What condition was he really in?

Le Dayuan understood Ye Zhongming's reasoning. If these two level-nines weren't broken now, they'd become unstable variables—a potential catastrophe for Cloud Peak. ~~But~~

He had to act.

But whether it would work? Le Dayuan had no confidence—hence his desperate order.

Not that Cloud Peak's fighters needed prompting.

A sea of targeting lasers already covered Death King Tree's body, dots and lines painting her in crimson.

More weapons—without laser guides—were also locked onto her.

Cloud Peak would not allow Death King Tree to join Talking Lady.

"Damn you all," Death King Tree cursed—but stood perfectly still.

Neither had gone all-out earlier, but she knew: Ye Zhongming had made his point.

Twice during that fight, she'd felt death's touch—once when pinned underfoot, and earlier, when hit by those four projectiles.

She didn't know how, but she was certain: if Ye Zhongming had wanted, she'd be dead now.

It defied logic, yet Death King Tree wasn't surprised. She remembered—he'd beaten her before, back in her city, while weaker. So doing it again? Not strange at all.

The only thing she didn't understand was why, mid-fight, her body had suddenly felt heavy, her strength incomplete, as if something was suppressing her.

And Ye Zhongming's strikes—so damn hard. Even now, certain prominent areas throbbed painfully.

She tugged her torn leather outfit aside, checking.

...Still intact. Good.

Meanwhile—

Ye Zhongming's fist descended toward the black cat, his body a blur. At two meters away, he vanished, reappearing right where the cat had been—

BOOM!

The ground cratered.

A miss.

Even with Ye Zhongming exiting the cockpit close to Talking Lady and attacking at full speed, the cat had just barely dodged, the fist grazing its fur.

Talking Lady, now enraged, opened her mouth—a sonic attack gathering—

But Ye Zhongming's foot stomped down first.

A dull thud reverberated.

Talking Lady's attack was choked off. Her face flushed, her body hunched as she staggered back.

Then she saw them—black orbs rolling at her feet.

Magic crystal grenades.

The explosion came instantly, followed by a mountain-sized shadow crashing down from above.

Its target?

The black cat, mid-leap, screeching as it coiled for a counterattack.

The mountain slammed onto it, burying it alive.

Chapter 1724: Come hand in hand

Talking Lady froze—not just because the black cat had been crushed beneath a mysterious mountain, but because the barrel of Ye Zhongming’s sniper rifle was now pressed against her forehead.

A terrifying aura radiated from it, making her blood run cold.

As a unique evolved lifeform, Talking Lady had always prided herself on her composure.

Yet now, her eyes were filled with panic.

This wasn’t her battlefield.

As a top-tier mental-type variant, her greatest strengths were interference and control. She was meant to drown enemies in waves of zombies and mutated beasts, not fight alone.

Without an army to ensure her safety, she was, at best, half of her true self.

She had always believed that with the black cat by her side, even as a "half-complete" entity, she could face any foe—even Ye Zhongming, who had suppressed her before.

But the result was clear: she had been crushed again, this time without even a chance to fight back.

Why?

Talking Lady didn't understand. But as a variant lifeform, her instincts were simple: fear the strong, brutalize the weak. And right now, she was terrified—terrified of the bullet in that gun, the one that could end her life.

She had once believed her living value outweighed her dead one. But now? Two level-nine magic crystals—hers and the black cat's—might be far more tempting to Ye Zhongming, who was desperate to reach nine-star evolution.

The thought sent a shiver down her for the first time.

Her knees weakened.

Let's be clear: Talking Lady wasn't noble.

Yes, she was intelligent—far smarter than most evolved beings, even surpassing many human survivors.

But at her core? She was still a variant lifeform—a level-nine zombie.

Her high intelligence allowed her to understand fear and submission.

And right now, Ye Zhongming's overwhelming strength forced that understanding upon her.

She wouldn't grovel like a tamed beast, but she could lower her head. She believed Ye Zhongming would understand.

And he did.

The moment she bowed, his rifle lowered.

"Hunt with me. Bring me ten level nine magic crystals, and you can go wherever you want. But our previous agreement still stands."

Talking Lady nodded immediately.

Ye Zhongming then turned to Death King Tree.

"I'm different from her. I'll stay here. Hong is my... let's say 'good friend.' You? You're my mating partner."

Ye Zhongming resisted the urge to roll his eyes. With a wave of his hand, the mountain vanished. The black cat wasn't dead—but it was badly mangled, its body dented in multiple places, bones shattered. When it looked at Ye Zhongming now, even its pride was less than Talking Lady's—only fear and submission remained. It didn't dare move. ฅ

"Sister Red, had enough fun watching?"

Cloud Peak's King called out irritably, earning Liu Zhenhong's signature laughter in return.

"Not bad, Little Ye~"

With that, Liu Zhenhong quickly approached, followed by a team of about a hundred.

Ye Zhongming scanned them. Aside from the guards he had assigned to protect her, there were core members from the teams that had left the city with her, a seven-member Chameleon squad, and twenty gene warriors.

The masked Chameleon squad saluted Ye Zhongming silently before retreating.

"Sister Red—" Ye Zhongming frowned, about to lecture her, but Liu Zhenhong cut him off with a grin.

She knew what he wanted to say.

Death King Tree was powerful, but Ye Zhongming had arranged defenses around Liu Zhenhong and Le Dayuan strong enough to hold off a level-nine long enough for reinforcements.

Killing or kidnapping them inside Cloud Peak Villa? Nearly impossible.

Clearly, Liu Zhenghong had chosen to follow Death King Tree out for "fun." Ye Zhongming's frustration was justified.

"Look what I got you, Little Ye~" Liu Zhenghong said playfully, opening her palm to reveal two level-nine magic crystals.

Before Ye Zhongming could speak, she continued.

"And I brought some old friends."

She called out toward where she had come from. Soon, everyone—including Ye Zhongming—felt multiple surges of immense energy.

It was a deliberate signal: no hostility.

Moments later, a group of evolved riders atop warbeasts slowly came into view.

"Deacon Tong, Deacon Water, Deacon Bai, Director Ouyang, Brother Daqian, Commander Mu, General Manager Wu Xiu, Manager Ruan Xiao, and... Boss Wang Hanran?!"

Ye Zhongming's shock was uncontainable.

The leadership of two of China's most powerful commercial organizations had all gathered here!

Behind them were representatives from Thousand Beast Villa and the Resistance Zone—Li Daqian and his son Li Zhizhong, as well as Commander Mu and his daughter Mu Xinfei.

This lineup meant almost every allied faction leader outside Cloud Peak was present.

Something big was happening.

Their gazes when they looked at Ye Zhongming? Complicated.

Earlier, they had encountered Death King Tree and Liu Zhenghong, witnessing a level-nine hunting exhibition, with Death King Tree as the main attacker and Cloud Peak teams assisting.

The scene left the leaders dumbstruck.

Why? Because it was too overpowered.

Having a level-nine like Death King Tree as an ally was terrifying enough. But they had clearly seen that Cloud Peak's teams hadn't even exerted full effort—just played supporting roles. And according to intel, these weren't even Cloud Peak's main forces.

Liu Zhenghong's group also included unmoved gene warriors and a squad carrying strange, box-like magic crystal weapons...

If Death King Tree plus a few ordinary teams could hunt level-nines, how strong was Cloud Peak at full power?

But the real shock came when they arrived at Cloud Peak's base, witnessing Ye Zhongming solo two, no, three level-nines—and winning effortlessly.

The result left them stunned, forced to sigh in resignation: "We all live in the same country. How is the gap this huge?"

Under such overwhelming displays of power, every leader present greeted Ye Zhongming with respect.

What else could they do? Strength spoke for itself.

The arrival of these VIPs was a major event for Cloud Peak—they represented half of China's power structure. Ye Zhongming immediately arranged accommodations and personally escorted them into the villa.

That night, a lavish banquet was held in their honor. After food and drinks, Ye Zhongming, Xia Lei, and other high-ranking members led the faction leaders into a private meeting room.

Outside the villa, a 500-meter perimeter was cleared. Countless Cloud Peak guards sealed the area in layers.

Chapter 1725: Head to the stars

At first, no one in the room spoke, and Ye Zhongming waited quietly for them to begin.

Seeing their solemn expressions, Ye Zhongming grew increasingly certain that this matter was of grave importance.

Li Daqian and Deacon Water were more familiar with Ye Zhongming than the others. After exchanging glances, the former cleared his throat and spoke slowly:

"Zhongming, while you were away competing for the Mountain King Wheel... something happened."

Ye Zhongming raised an eyebrow and nodded, signaling Li Daqian to continue.

The leader of Thousand Beast Villa took a sip of the drink on the table, feeling a surge of warmth rise from within—undoubtedly one of Cloud Peak's special concoctions.

"Have you noticed? The spokesperson system has stopped functioning simultaneously. All of us—every spokesperson chosen by the extraterrestrial races—have lost contact with the skies."

Ye Zhongming hadn't realized this yet. In his heart, he had always rejected forming alliances with any of the alien races. His involvement had been limited to completing their missions and exchanging points for resources.

He had assumed there were simply no new missions lately—it hadn't occurred to him that all communication had been severed.

"The reason?"

If everything had been normal, this wouldn't have happened. Since they had come to him, they must have uncovered some information.

"At first, we didn't know either."

Deacon Water was the one who answered. "We also thought it might just be a temporary halt in missions. But you know, every spokesperson's relationship with their celestial patrons is different. Some factions have ways to reach out actively."

"Like us, Five Ring Money." Deacon Ouyang sighed.

Among those present, he was the oldest and the first to realize something was wrong.

"Many mercenary groups owe their growth to the support of the extraterrestrials. Over time, they develop a dependence. When contact was lost, they desperately searched for answers."

Throughout the room, only one person spoke at a time while the others listened intently.

"Since you weren't here, after Deacon Ouyang realized something was amiss, he informed us. It took some time, but we confirmed it—everyone had lost contact." RANÖβĘŠ

Commander Mu puffed on his pipe; Cloud Peak produced the tobacco inside. Nowadays, Puxing Town wasn't just a trading hub—it housed many of Cloud Peak's factories, including those producing luxury goods like alcohol and tobacco, which held little strategic value.

"So we searched for the cause. By sheer luck, after gathering intelligence and reaching out to other factions, we pieced together a conclusion."

Wang Hanran, the enigmatic leader of Cannibal Chain, had an unremarkable appearance. Rumors claimed he wore many faces, and no one knew if this was his true visage.

"This item—does Leader Ye possess it?"

With a flick of his wrist, Wang Hanran placed an object on the table before Ye Zhongming.

The King of Cloud Peak's pupils contracted. He nodded.

It was that thing—the eerie, inexplicable admission ticket.

"When the extraterrestrials severed contact, no one noticed. It was silent, without warning. That's abnormal. There must be a reason. After realizing it, we suspected something had slipped our attention—something tied to this event. Eventually, we sat down, discussed, and recalled everything. And we discovered... most spokespeople—"

Deacon Tong's voice remained soft, but his expression was unprecedentedly serious.

"—and by 'most,' I mean those with long-standing or close ties to their celestial patrons—had received an admission ticket, either as a mission reward or a direct gift."

Ye Zhongming's face remained impassive, but inside, fury simmered.

His admission ticket had been stolen.

In other words, the Taros Red Dwarves had never given him one.

Ye Zhongming admitted his relationship with his alien race was strained, but Cloud Peak had completed every mission they issued. By all logic, if every faction received one, why exclude him?

Yet they had.

"At first, no one knew what it was. We investigated, even reaching out internationally. Fortunately, a merchant convoy returning from Southeast Asia brought back crucial information."

"About these admission tickets."

Wang Hanran's words suggested this was firsthand intelligence obtained by Cannibal Chain. At this stage, only organizations like Cannibal Chain and Five Ring Money had the reach to gather intel beyond China's borders.

"Your admission tickets—were they all given to you?" Xia Lei suddenly interjected, surprising the others. Then their gazes shifted to Ye Zhongming.

Xia Lei's implication was clear: Cloud Peak's ticket hadn't been a gift.

"I see. Please continue."

Judging by their reactions, Xia Lei had her answer and gestured for Wang Hanran to proceed.

The leader of Cannibal Chain spoke gravely:

"We all know the aliens are bound by certain rules preventing them from descending to Earth. But those rules likely have a counterpart—restrictions targeting Earth's evolved."

"In other words, the core of the intel I obtained can be summed up in one sentence: They can't come down... but we can go up!"

The moment these words left Wang Hanran's mouth, the room fell into a heavy silence.

Whether it was Ye Zhongming, Xia Lei, Guang Yao, Mo Ye (hearing this for the first time), or the Five Rings Money deacons and Commander Mu (already informed), everyone was stunned.

Shock. Disbelief. Dread. Unease.

Go... to the stars?

None of them—not even Ye Zhongming, who had long sought to unravel the apocalypse's mysteries—had seriously considered confronting the aliens directly.

Now, suddenly, the question loomed urgently before them.

"Additionally, while the intel didn't state it outright, our analysis suggests that to ascend, one must not only possess this admission ticket but also meet a minimum requirement."

Xia Lei and Ye Zhongming exchanged glances, already guessing the answer.

Wang Hanran nodded, exhaling heavily.

"Yes. Nine stars. One must become a nine-star evolved... to even have a chance of ascending!"

"And why we're here—"

Without giving Ye Zhongming time to process, Wang Hanran's tone sharpened.

"—is to ask you, the King of Cloud Peak, the strongest among us, to be the first to see what lies above!"