

## **Apocalypse 1501**

### Chapter 1501: Evolution craze

Li Daqian had previously sold materials from a level nine lifeform, which gave everyone the illusion that this was how such things should be traded.

However, they overlooked why Li Daqian had traded the materials directly.

Because... he couldn't process them.

The Thousand Beast Villa's strength lay in their breeding and utilization of battle beasts. Their core was their large-scale beast-pool equipment, but they were far weaker in other areas. After all, both energy and resources were limited—they couldn't excel at everything.

Thus, when a level-nine lifeform's corpse fell into their hands, they would think to dissect and sell it piece by piece to maximize profits.

But Cloud Peak was different. Leaving aside Liu Zhenghong's Gene Life Laboratory's demand for such precious experimental materials, just considering Ye Zhongming—a top-tier smith—the value he could extract from a level-nine lifeform's corpse was something non-production job evolved could never comprehend.

This was similar to the relationship between nations before the apocalypse. For a long time, the country had been the world's supplier of raw materials. Its vast territory and abundant resources provided rich natural and human resources, which were exported to developed nations at low prices, relying on sheer volume for meager profits.

However, once those raw materials reached those nations, they were processed into finished products and sold back to the country at prices many times higher.

There was no helping it—the technological gap ensured that the backward side would inevitably be exploited.

This situation only improved slightly right before the apocalypse, but in high-tech fields, the country still remained dependent on others.

Ye Zhongming and Li Daqian's positions were reversed. Ye Zhongming possessed the "high-tech," so naturally, he would sell higher-value finished equipment, which would yield far greater profits than selling raw materials.

But this left Li Daqian, Deacon Water, and Commander Mu in a difficult position.

They wanted to vent their frustration at Ye Zhongming but had no grounds to do so. If they were in his shoes, they'd likely do the same. However, this method of transaction carried too many uncertainties. What would the equipment Ye Zhongming crafted look like? What abilities would it have? What level would it be? Would it even suit them? All of these were questions.

Most importantly—what would the price be? They didn't doubt that Ye Zhongming would deceive them by passing off non-level-nine-material equipment as the real deal. But equipment made from level-nine materials would undoubtedly be exceptional—gold-grade at minimum, likely purple-grade. Ye Zhongming certainly wouldn't sell it cheaply, so could they even afford it?

This loss of control was deeply uncomfortable for these powerhouses.

"There will be three pieces of equipment. I can't guarantee their level, but they'll definitely be high-quality. When the time comes, you can choose whichever one you like, and we'll discuss the price based on the equipment's quality."

Ye Zhongming's words put a definitive end to the matter.

The three leaders had no choice but to accept it.

However, Li Daqian made another request—he wanted to purchase the flesh and blood of the Nine-Winged Crow.

After some consideration, Ye Zhongming agreed.

If Li Daqian had asked for the flesh of the Armor King, he would have refused outright. The Armor King's body was small, with very little flesh, making every pound extremely precious. But the Nine-Winged Crow was different—it was enormous. Ye Zhongming estimated it weighed over several dozen tons, most of which was flesh. Given that, selling some to a heavily depleted ally wasn't unreasonable.

After some haggling, Li Daqian obtained one ton of Nine-Winged Crow flesh in exchange for 300 level-five giant bears, 200 level-five mutated black apes, and responsibility for taming 500 of Cloud Peak's battle beasts in the future.

The former would bolster Little Tiger's Vanguard Battle Squad, while the latter would join the newly established Battle Beast Battle Squad.

In addition to Li Daqian, Commander Mu and Deacon Water also negotiated some collaborations and trades with Ye Zhongming, each securing what they needed.

With their gains mostly satisfactory, the three forces departed, agreeing to return to Cloud Peak once Ye Zhongming finished crafting the equipment. Now, the four factions had allied, and Ye Zhongming would establish teleportation arrays between them for easier travel.

What remained was cleaning up the battlefield and dealing with occasional monster disturbances.

Not all monsters obeyed the deer-like commander, especially the high-level and flying ones. After the Nine-Winged Crow's death, the commander's control over monsters had significantly weakened.

The overwhelming scent of blood constantly attracted monsters to the area, forcing Cloud Peak to collect demon crystals and materials while fending off these uninvited guests. The two battlefields tied up four of Cloud Peak's brigades.

At times, the skirmishes escalated beyond sporadic clashes. The largest wave saw over 100,000 monsters arriving to feed. Two of Cloud Peak's battle squads fought at full strength for nearly a day before repelling them. A level-eight flying monster even appeared, engaging in a fierce two-hour aerial battle with Yangos before being slain. The badly injured dragon was furious until Ye Zhongming promised it a feast of Nine-Winged Crow flesh, at which point it brightened up and devoured nearly two tons in one go—making Ye Zhongming raise his eyebrows in disbelief.

In the end, the dragon was so stuffed it couldn't even fly, lying on the ground groaning.

Meanwhile, the undead dragonfish that had consumed the Nine-Winged Crow's inheritance orb hovered silently above the valley. Unlike the Death King Tree, it hadn't lost consciousness. Instead, it remained connected to Red Hair as before. But everyone knew it was transforming.

The most obvious change was its body.

It hadn't been resurrected, but its body had doubled, now sporting two new skeletal wings on each side. Its bones had taken on a strange tricolor scheme—black, red, and white—making it far less aesthetically pleasing than before.

Yet the aura it emitted made it clear—it had grown vastly stronger.

Only after Cloud Peak finished cleaning the battlefield did the undead dragonfish begin to move slowly, indicating that the absorption of the inheritance was nearing completion. It would likely finish entirely soon.

After digesting the Nine-Winged Crow's flesh for several days, Yangos felt its strength had greatly improved. Once the entire force returned to Cloud Peak, it sought out the fully transformed dragonfish for a sparring match—politely, of course, to ensure Red Hair wouldn't interfere.

Chapter 1501.5- Evolution craze

The two flying creatures took their fight to the mountains behind Cloud Peak, and the commotion could be heard all the way back at the mountain. They returned hours later—the dragon bruised and battered, the dragonfish struggling to stay aloft.

As for the result? Yangos claimed it was a draw, but those who knew the dragon understood—it had definitely lost. It would've bragged nonstop if it had been an actual tie: "What's so great about inheriting a level-nine legacy? It still couldn't beat Grandpa Dragon!" But since the dragonfish couldn't talk, the dragon could say whatever it wanted.

The Cloud Peak members who guessed the truth were stunned. Red Hair was already second only to Ye Zhongming in Cloud Peak. Before, with the dragonfish's assistance, even Ye Zhongming had struggled against them. Now, with the fish-dragon surpassing Yangos, could they challenge their leader if they teamed up?

Everyone was curious, but they also knew Red Hair—now almost indistinguishable from a human—was utterly loyal to Ye Zhongming and would never do such a thing. But every group had troublemakers, and Cloud Peak was no exception. Little Tiger, for instance, kept egging Red Hair on to fight Ye Zhongming with the dragonfish.

Red Hair didn't get angry. She just smiled and asked, "If I bring the dragonfish, does that mean Master can bring Yellow Ball and Yangos? If so, we'd definitely lose. If not, it'd mean we need to team up just to match him. Doesn't that already answer who's stronger? Besides, have you ever seen Master go all out? He can hold his own against dozens of level-eight monsters without faltering in that state. His strength is beyond question."

Little Tiger shrank back, finally understanding Ye Zhongming's power—peerless among those of the same level, his strength bordering on level nine.

With victory came the spoils.

This battle was the single most profitable engagement in Cloud Peak's history.

According to the tally, Cloud Peak had obtained the corpses of two Level 9 lifeforms. After processing, they acquired two level-nine magic crystals, 35 tons of flesh, and over 1,000 materials (mostly from the hundreds of remaining feathers on the Nine-Winged Crow)

Additionally, Cloud Peak's forces had slain 62 level-eight monsters, which gave them 62 level-eight demon crystals and 5,000 materials. Their massive bodies provided vast amounts of flesh; they gave Li Daqian just a fraction.

1,906 level-seven monsters, a staggering 270,000 level-six monsters, and millions of level-five and level-four monsters.

Faced with such gains, radicals like Little Tiger, Young Master Yun, and Tong Hu even suggested wiping out the remaining forces of the monster commander. After all, the survivors of this battle were the true elites—almost no level-fives remained, with most being level-six or higher. The number of level-sevens even exceeded Cloud Peak's haul, making it no surprise they were tempted.

Even the more conservative members, like Guang Yao, Mo Ye, and Sister Rong, were tempted.

Launching a war turned out to be so profitable! Just this one battle ensured most of Cloud Peak's evolved could advance to six stars—already two levels above the post-apocalyptic average!!!

It was terrifying.

They refused to believe even the Pig-Raising Soul Merchant, superpowers like the Resistance Zone and Glory Army, or even the God Hall (rumored to rival Cloud Peak's tech) could match this!

As for the level-seven demon crystals—after distributing some to captains—they could fully upgrade the female guards.

An entire battle squad of 7-star evolved? The thought sent shivers down even Cloud Peak's own spines!

Most of the top 30 in the national rankings were 7-star evolved. If the female guards were included, Cloud Peak would dominate the list!

As for 8-star evolved? Cloud Peak was about to experience another surge. All core members would receive a potion, as would outstanding fighters or those with special statuses (like Xiao Min).

Once that happened, the number of eight stars that evolved in Cloud Peak would shock half the nation!

A single word surfaced in many minds—invincible.

Perhaps, once everyone had evolved, Cloud Peak would truly stand above the entire nation, with no rivals left.

And that was just in terms of evolution levels. Once Ye Zhongming turned all those materials into equipment? An all-green-grade brigade?

The core members didn't even dare dwell on it—the thought felt unreal.

Of course, gains came with losses.

In this battle, Cloudtop had expended 20,000 crystal grenades, nearly all micro-carved bullets, specialty ammunition, artillery shells, rockets, arrows, and other consumables. They used hundreds of thousands of demon crystals drained from weapon usage, over 20% of war fortresses damaged, and tens of thousands of pieces of equipment rendered unusable. Over 2,000 battle beasts were lost, and countless disposable personal items were used up.

And then there were the casualties.

Though the final battle didn't last long, Cloud Peak still suffered heavy losses: Over 5,000 evolved killed, and nearly 1,000 were permanently disabled (forced to retire from combat).

The total losses were over 1/20th of their 100,000-strong force.

This was Cloud Peak's heaviest loss since its founding.

High-level evolved weren't spared either, and three seven-star captains were killed. There were over 100 six-star warriors who were killed or disabled.

Thankfully, no core members were lost. The worst injuries were to Tong Hu and Little Tiger, who only took two days to recover.

The casualty list was grim, but this was a decisive victory overall. Cloud Peak's atmosphere remained jubilant, with spontaneous celebrations everywhere.

But some were still busy:

The Gene Life Lab was buried in experiments, with researchers working nonstop for days on the flood of monster corpses and materials.

The logistics department cataloged gains, managed inventory, and handled the fallen comrades.

And Ye Zhongming—turning magic crystals into evolution potions.

Spinning high-level wheels nonstop for three days, he finally used up all the crystals, yielding:

15 eight-star potions

592 seven-star potions

Too many six-star potions to count

When he returned to Cloud Peak, the manor witnessed its largest evolution frenzy ever!

Chapter 1502: Country shock

The battles within the secret realm remained unknown to outsiders. Although the news would inevitably leak eventually, for now, allies like Deacon Water, Commander Mu, and Li Daqian strictly ordered their subordinates to maintain secrecy.

However, their arrival in Ying City had been witnessed by too many people. Observant individuals would inevitably deduce that something significant had happened. Moreover, Cloud Peak possessed a secret realm, which was already common knowledge. Since the three forces had gone up the mountain without accomplishing anything visible before leaving, there was only one explanation—this operation had taken place within the secret realm.

Cloud Peak had a history of initiating large-scale battles. Among the many speculations, this was undoubtedly one of the possibilities.

Gradually, some vague information began to spread. Many factions had pieced together clues and deduced that Cloud Peak had once again completed a large-scale hunting operation.

The only uncertainty was the scale.

While Cloud Peak quietly carried out batch evolutions while Ye Zhongming remained immersed in crafting equipment, and the two major laboratories worked silently to produce results—

An event suddenly occurred that thrust Cloud Peak into the spotlight.

The new national rankings were released. Though only one list was published—the National Comprehensive Power Rankings—Cloud Peak had astonishingly claimed the top spot!

It had to be noted that since the inception of the national rank. At the same time, while other lists had seen significant fluctuations, the number one position in the National Comprehensive Power Rankings had never changed!

The Resistance Zone—always the Resistance Zone!

They had always been first!

The Glory Army was the only faction qualified to challenge them, yet they had been firmly suppressed beneath them.

As for the others—the Soul Merchants, Five Ring Money, Cannibal Chain, Pin Palace, Cloud Peak, and the like—none had ever stood a chance.

Yes, the Resistance was divided into four regions, now largely operating independently. Zones C and T maintained the Resistance's original structure, while Zhang Hetai of Zone G had established his own system. Zone S—where Mu Xinfei and her father were based—had become enemies with Zone G. Moreover, since Zones C and T had ignored their pleas for help when Zone G encroached on their territory (even taking advantage of the situation themselves), their relationship had deteriorated to estrangement.

But in the rankings, they were still counted as a single entity, making their collective strength overwhelming.

For the first time, the Resistance Zone had lost its position as the nation's number one faction.

The one above them? Cloud Peak.

In the previous rankings, Cloud Peak had only been fifth. How had they suddenly leaped to first place?

Given Five Ring Money's increasing authority in these rankings, while ordinary evolved might question it, the factions on the list believed it. If Five Ring Money ranked them this way, there must be a reason.

But what was the reason? Had Ye Zhongming evolved to nine stars?

Impossible! Everyone knew how powerful level-nine beings were. Aside from the Thousand Beast Villa's single kill, no other faction had been confirmed to have achieved such a feat. And killing one level-nine lifeform meant little—they'd need to kill at least ten, plus have incredible luck, to obtain a nine-star potion.

If not nine-star evolution, then had they acquired a level-nine battle beast?

This was more plausible. But who? The fire dragon? Or Yellow Ball?

Many naturally thought of Cloud Peak's recent mysterious operation. Gradually, a consensus formed— Cloud Peak must have achieved something monumental in the secret realm, reaping unimaginable rewards.

The National Power Rankings now stood as follows:

Cloud Peak

Resistance Zone

Glory Army

Thousand Beast Villa

Pin Palace

God Hall

Soul Merchant

Cannibal Chain

Five Ring Money

Black Star

The top nine were all regulars on the list, having remained since the first edition. Black Star was a newcomer, rising after the fall of No Man's Land.

The sudden shift was shocking because this ranking had historically seen the least changes.

No matter how tightly information was controlled, news of Cloud Peak's secret realm battle leaked after the second ranking was released.

The second ranking published was the Country Mutated Lifeform Rankings. The creature in first place... was no longer the Armor King. It had disappeared entirely from the list.

Rumors spread that Ye Zhongming had taken the Armor King into the secret realm and killed it, along with another native level-nine lifeform, securing immense benefits—hence Cloud Peak's rise to the top.

This naturally sparked a new wave of speculation.

Only then did Five Ring Money release their usual commentary on the rankings. Regarding Cloud Peak, they summarized:

\*"The secret realm battle allowed Cloud Peak, in alliance with three major factions, to reap unimaginable profits. After this battle, Ye Zhongming himself and other Cloud Peak members will leap forward in their evolutionary paths.

Additionally, congratulations to the female guards for becoming an all-seven-star combat unit! However, we have decided not to include individual rankings for female guard members in the solo power list."\*

The explanation was brief, but it answered many questions. Now, everyone knew—Cloud Peak and the three factions had indeed entered the secret realm. They had slain level-nine lifeforms—two of them indeed!

This news was explosive. The revelation that the female guards were now an all-seve-star unit was even more shocking. At the very least, it confirmed that Ye Zhongming had obtained a massive quantity of seven-star evolution potions.

In an era where the average evolved was only at four stars, the emergence of an entire brigade of seven-star evolved was nothing short of earth-shattering.

Cloud Peak, of course, also received these two rankings. In fact, before their release, Five Ring Money had even reached out through Deacon Water to explain that due to unavoidable leaks, they had chosen to publish first to maintain credibility—hoping Ye Zhongming would understand.

Deacon Water privately explained her situation as well. Her establishment of an independent faction had been exposed due to this operation, reducing her influence within Five Ring Money. Without her special relationship with Director Tong, she might have already been pushed out of the inner circle.

Ye Zhongming wasn't overly concerned. Cloud Peak had long passed the stage where fame made them a target. Being ranked first was fine. Let the world know their strength—it didn't matter.

Chapter 1502.5- Country shock

He remained calm, but the rest of the nation's factions were anything but.

Through intelligence from Chameleon, Deacon Water, Commander Mu, and others, it became clear that Cloudtop's successful hunt had stirred the entire nation into action.

The Resistance Zone, already on the verge of splitting, reunited. Zhang Hetai, Wen Zhong, and Ji Ruiguang met at Sharp Peak Mountain and resolved to maintain its unity. They even sent word to Commander Mu, hoping he would set aside past grievances and reunite the four regions.

When Commander Mu—still harboring resentment—refused, they promptly announced the expulsion of Zone S from the Resistance Zone. Commander Mu responded the next day by renaming his faction the Daybreak Resistance Army.

This wasn't the end. After excluding Commander Mu, the newly unified Resistance Zone announced a strategic alliance with the Glory Army and Black Star, encompassing over a dozen factions from the national rankings.

The nation was shaken once more.

Many saw this as a direct response to the alliance between Cloud Peak, Thousand Beast Villa, the Daybreak Resistance Army, and Deacon Water. The nation's second, third, and tenth factions had joined forces to oppose the coalition of the first, fourth, and fifteenth!

Commander Mu's Daybreak Resistance Army had been ranked fifteenth.

There were chain reactions.

To preserve its neutrality, Five Ring Money announced that Deacon Water had left the organization—her alliance with Cloud Peak was a personal decision, unrelated to Five Ring Money.

Deacon Water had been kicked out.

But Ye Zhongming knew this was merely a necessary measure—a commercial organization's way of maintaining client trust. For a long time to come, Deacon Water would still maintain close ties with Five Ring Money.

Another explosive piece of news arrived before people could process these expulsions and alliances.

God Hall, Pin Palace, and Soul Merchant had also allied!

The fifth, sixth, and seventh-ranked factions in the National Power Rankings had joined forces!

With this, every super faction in the top ten—except the commerce-based Five Ring Money and Cannibal Chain—had formed their own alliances.

When Ye Zhongming learned of this, he could only shake his head wryly. He had merely called on some allies for help, yet it had triggered a nationwide wave of factional alliances.

Looking at these alliances, there was a clear pattern—birds of a feather flocked together. Pin Palace, God Hall, and Soul Merchant were hardly benevolent organizations.

With the nation's factions now divided into three major blocs—whether the Resistance Zone's alliance or the Soul Merchant's coalition—neither had good relations with Cloud Peak's alliance. Clearly, they would need to be cautious moving forward.

However, Cloud Peak and Ye Zhongming's concerns did not materialize. These alliances did take action—but their target wasn't Cloud Peak.

Perhaps spurred by Cloud Peak's success, both alliances launched large-scale operations quickly—their goal? Level-nine lifeforms.

With its overwhelming strength (reportedly commanding over three million evolved), the Resistance-Glory Army-Black Star alliance targeted a mid-northern city inhabited by a level-nine lifeform.

The exact details were known only to participants, but the outcome was clear—the alliance had won. They successfully killed the level-nine lifeform and cleared the city of all mutant life.

Piecemeal reports indicated that the Resistance Zone, Glory Army, Black Star, and other factions had mobilized a million-strong force and fought for three days to achieve this.

With so many factions involved, secrecy was impossible. The results quickly spread: over three million magic crystals of various levels, and the corpse of a level-nine lifeform. The cleared city became a jointly managed stronghold.

Of course, losses were heavy. Whispers claimed the million-strong army had suffered over 30% casualties, including high-ranking commanders from both the Resistance Zone and Glory Army.

Li Daqian's Thousand Beast Villa had killed a level-nine by targeting a pregnant one—a stroke of luck. Cloud Peak had succeeded by pitting two level-nine lifeforms against each other.

Neither could be considered a true, direct challenge to a level-nine lifeform.

But the Resistance Zone alliance had faced the highest-level existence head-on—and triumphed.

The other alliance—God Hall, Soul Merchant, and Pin Palace—also launched a large-scale operation. Reports indicated they hadn't deployed as many evolved but had mobilized vast numbers of mutated lifeforms (undoubtedly God Hall's doing). They targeted an extremely resource-rich dungeon, home to a level-nine monster.

They, too, succeeded—at a steep cost.

Rumors claimed that figures like the Holy Saint's branch leaders had died, though this remained unconfirmed.

Faced with these two alliances' back-to-back victories against level-nine lifeforms, Ye Zhongming appeared unfazed on the surface, but inwardly, he was deeply moved.

These factions had profound foundations, each possessing trump cards for survival in the apocalypse. Normally, they avoided such costly endeavors, but the power they unleashed was truly fearsome when pushed to the brink—when they went all out.

Ye Zhongming had never imagined that his large-scale hunt, intended solely for Cloud Peak's development, would trigger such a chain reaction. Not only had it created a tripartite division of power in the nation, but it had also spurred humanity to bare its fangs at level-nine existences.

Humanity's march toward nine-star evolution had accelerated...

Although both alliances suffered heavy losses this time, it was also a form of resource concentration. A select few would monopolize the benefits. While each faction might weaken overall, these individuals would only grow stronger.

Cloud Peak's advantage remained clear—on a macro level. But other factions were rapidly catching up at the pinnacle of the pyramid. A silent competition had formed—to see who would reach nine-star evolution first!

As intelligence reports detailed the two alliances' large-scale relocations, each consolidating their own regions, Ye Zhongming realized his rebirth had drastically altered the apocalypse. None of this had happened in his past life. He didn't know if this was good or bad—nor did he care. All he knew was that he stood at the nation's summit. His task now was to maintain that position and crush all opposition when the time came.

As storms gathered over the nation, Ye Zhongming prepared to face them.

While the nation underwent upheaval, the Blue Secret Realm reached its end. The already fractured world entered its most unstable phase, with space trembling incessantly—annihilation was imminent.

The demon monster commander sought out Ye Zhongming—it was time to bring its forces over.

Ye Zhongming's gaze fell upon a newly crafted map of the nation, sweeping over the territories of the two alliances...

#### Chapter 1503: Bounty

The fact that there had been no conflict between Soul Merchant and the Glory Army in the past two years didn't mean Ye Zhongming had forgotten about them. On the contrary, it was precisely because these forces—who would have normally besieged Cloud Peak—had either disappeared or kept their distance for so long that made the situation particularly abnormal.

Cloud Peak's continuously growing strength was undoubtedly a major reason they hadn't caused trouble, but it couldn't be the only explanation.

The reality was this: if Cloud Peak ever became weaker than those factions, they would undoubtedly seize the first opportunity to eliminate this enemy. If Cloud Peak grew stronger, they might not act immediately, but alongside their hatred, greed would emerge—another driving force compelling them to strike.

Therefore, peaceful coexistence was impossible. Both sides were merely recuperating and building strength for now, but conflict was inevitable in the future.

As Cloud Peak gradually became prominent, Ye Zhongming often reflected on these old adversaries. Chameleon had a long-term mission: collecting intelligence on them. Ye Zhongming wouldn't claim to be the most knowledgeable about Soul Merchant and the Glory Army, but he was among the best-informed in the post-apocalyptic world.

When the monster commander proposed cooperation in the secret realm, Ye Zhongming's first thought was to redirect the calamity—to drive the invading monsters toward his enemies.

But now, with the emergence of these two alliances, Ye Zhongming had to consider the potential consequences of such a move carefully.

Before the alliances formed, ten million monsters would have been an insurmountable challenge for any faction. Even Cloud Peak, with its gene warriors and crystal weapons, wouldn't dare claim it could face such numbers.

Dealing with five million monsters was one thing; ten million was entirely different. When numbers reached a certain threshold, each additional million might require double the previous effort to counter. This was the qualitative change brought by sheer quantity.

But now, with alliances in place, what if they managed to handle ten million monsters? Wouldn't that mean handing them ten million demon crystals?

This was a very concerning matter that weighed on Ye Zhongming's mind.

The Blue Secret Realm grew increasingly unstable, and the monsters' migration was imminent. He needed to make a decision soon.

To gather information, Ye Zhongming utilized every available channel. Chameleon, Cloud Peak's own intelligence network, operated at full capacity. Five Ring Money, Cannibal Chain, and even small-time information brokers received secret commissions from Cloud Peak.

Intelligence was one of the most valuable commodities in a world without networks or telephones.

After compiling intelligence from all sources, Ye Zhongming gradually formed his plan.

The Resistance Zone-Glory Army-Black Star alliance was formidable. Individually, none of these factions could match Cloud Peak, but combined, they far surpassed Cloud Peak in sheer numbers of evolved. Moreover, the Resistance Zone and the Glory Army were the most well-established factions from the beginning of the apocalypse. Their alliance would compensate for each other's weaknesses, leading to rapid progress in many areas.

In truth, while others might not realize it, Ye Zhongming understood clearly: Cloud Peak's current position as the number one faction in the national rankings was largely due to Five Ring Money's emphasis on evolution levels, equipment quality, and similar metrics. This wasn't wrong—these were the most critical factors in the apocalypse.

However, in other areas—such as industrial infrastructure, controlled territory, population, resources, traditional technological capabilities, and talent—Cloud Peak lagged far behind the Resistance Zone and even the Glory Army.

There was no helping it. Those factions had known about the apocalypse in advance and made preparations. They had inherited the most from pre-apocalyptic civilization.

If "comprehensive" strength were truly evaluated, Cloud Peak would need at least five more years to catch up.

Now, these two factions had joined forces. The synergy in these areas would undoubtedly unleash tremendous power, driving progress across the board. With other factions adding their strengths, this alliance had already surpassed Cloud Peak's coalition in overall power, claiming the top spot.

Intelligence also indicated that they had mobilized a million evolved for a single battle—and this was with limited preparation time. Given more time, their numbers could multiply several times over.

Ten million monsters? With their full strength, they could probably handle it.

They might suffer heavy losses, but the sheer number of demon crystals would allow them to recover and advance further.

Clearly, directing the monsters into their territory wasn't a viable option.

That left only the Pin Palace-Soul Merchant-God Hall alliance.

In his heart, Ye Zhongming was more inclined to deal with them first.

After all, he had despised Soul Merchant even in his past life.

This time, their alliance and subsequent consolidation had also exposed their primary operational regions.

Ye Zhongming studied the map for a long time before making his decision. Then, he turned and entered the warehouse filled with materials. Now was the time to craft equipment.

Faced with the establishment of the two alliances and their shocking, high-profile actions, Cloud Peak—the very faction that had triggered this chain of events—remained eerily silent. Many found this strange. Shouldn't they be responding to such targeted alliances?

Whether it was the Resistance Zone, the Glory Army, Pin Palace, or Soul Merchant, none of these factions wanted Cloud Peak to dominate unchallenged. They all harbored hostility toward Cloud Peak.

Yet Cloud Peak stayed silent, offering no reaction—not even their affiliated teams within their territory made moves.

Just as people wondered if Ye Zhongming had lost his nerve, Cloud Peak suddenly issued a bounty.

Previously, Cloud Peak had once released a bounty that shook half the nation—a call for any information on the "Assassin Heart" organization. The highest reward was a six-star evolution potion, with the lowest being a three-star.

That had happened two or three years ago, and many had profited greatly from it.

Now, Cloud Peak had publicly announced a new bounty.

This one wasn't targeting any individual or faction. Instead, it was a... materials bounty. And it was issued through Five Ring Money, making it public across the entire nation.

Cloud Peak listed over a hundred types of materials, ranked by value. Every faction that received this bounty list was stunned—even the leaders of the Resistance Zone, Glory Army, and Pin Palace.

Because the total value of all the materials listed in this bounty... exceeded the worth of three eight-star evolution potions.

Chapter 1504: Frenzied collection

True powerhouses like Ye Zhongming, Ji Ruiguang, Zhang Hetai, and Mr. Wen were already advancing toward nine-star evolution. But for others—even those ranked on the country leaderboard—many were still locked in life-and-death struggles just to obtain a single eight-star evolution potion or hunt equivalent-level mutant lifeforms. For one level-eight demon crystal, they might lose countless subordinates and spend weeks recovering from injuries.

Yet now, a seemingly within-reach opportunity had appeared—provided they possessed the top two materials on Cloud Peak's bounty list.

The hardened beak of a mutant lifeform called "Beautiful Tea Zhu'an," requiring thirty units, was ranked second. The first was a bamboo membrane called "Fishscale Bamboo," requiring three square meters.

Anyone who could provide these two materials in the specified quantities would receive an eight-star evolution potion!

Many were ecstatic. While few had heard of the top-ranked Fishscale Bamboo—even with the rough descriptions and sketches provided—the second-ranked Beautiful Tea Zhu'an was familiar to most. It was an annoying urban-dwelling mutant bird with low combat power but an ear-piercing screech. The moment it detected humans in its territory, it would shriek relentlessly.

In cities, such cries inevitably attracted hordes of zombies and other mutants.

With its incredible flight speed—screaming and fleeing before retaliation—humans found it infuriating yet nearly impossible to deal with.

But!

Once its value skyrocketed to the level of an eight-star evolution potion, "impossible" was no longer an option. Even if it required piling up corpses to achieve.

Beyond these two most eye-catching items, the other materials on the list also became hot topics. In peaceful times and the apocalypse, ordinary people and low-tier evolved were the majority. They had their own wisdom—they knew items worth eight-star potions were beyond their reach. Their focus was on the other materials.

Materials ranked third to tenth were each worth a seven-star potion.

Eleventh to forty-first: six-star potions.

Forty-second onward: five-star potions.

Every material had specified quantities, collection methods, and quality standards—clear enough for even a fool to understand.

Some materials were unheard of, but their descriptions or sketches looked familiar. Some even recalled seeing them before!

Instantly, the entire nation mobilized. Honest evolved hunted materials for rewards. Dishonest ones—Cloud Peak's enemies—also scrambled to find them, if only to deny Cloud Peak their acquisition.

Everyone understood: these materials were undoubtedly for Ye Zhongming's equipment crafting. Some might even be used with level-nine materials—like those two eight-star potion-worthy items.

Thus, conventional hunting decreased during this period as a nationwide scavenger hunt began. Cloud Peak's deviousness lay in not only listing the materials and their descriptions but also setting acquisition

deadlines. Only those who delivered within the timeframe would receive their rewards. Otherwise? Tough luck.

Naturally, people weren't happy. But what could they do? The buyer made the rules.

Of course, given the nation's vastness, even disseminating this list through Five Ring Money took time. Thus, the notice clarified that acquired materials could be handed directly to Five Ring Money or Cannibal Chain, who would deliver the corresponding potions—except for the top ten (seven-star and eight-star rewards).

Those had to be sent to Cloud Peak via the two merchant organizations' channels. The deliverers would even receive escort protection and could evolve at Cloud Peak under the villa's security.

Once this bounty was announced, many saw it as a direct response to the two alliances.

"You form alliances? So do we. You kill level-nines? So do we. Now I'm offering bounties worth over three eight-star potions—why don't you try matching that?"

That was the public perception. But Ye Zhongming swore this had nothing to do with anyone else. These were purely materials he and the faction needed.

Most were indeed for Ye Zhongming's projects, including some to complement level-nine materials. But others were for different purposes—like Candy's needs, blueprints from recruited smiths, or Liu Zhenghong's research. The top-ranked Fishscale Bamboo membrane? Sister Hong had specifically requested it after obtaining a sample.

With Cloud Peak's generous fees, Cannibal Chain and Five Ring Money worked efficiently. Starting the day after the bounty's announcement, materials began flowing into Cloud Peak in exchange for potions—so swiftly that some suspected the merchants had stockpiled them beforehand.

Five Ring Money updated the acquisition progress daily, ensuring everyone knew which materials were still needed. This minimized wasted effort, though delays were inevitable. Still, the daily updates served as proof that Cloud Peak wasn't renegeing.

Wealth moved hearts. Driven by evolution potions, the nation's evolved worked with startling efficiency.

7 days after posting: Half the materials acquired.

15 days: Two-thirds claimed.

1 month: Only the 1st, 5th, and 10th bounties remained. The rest—including the second-ranked Beautiful Tea Zhu'an—were completed.

Faced with this, even Cloud Peak members who'd initially doubted their leader's "wasteful" spending were convinced.

If nothing else, the time saved alone justified the potions. Had Cloud Peak gathered these materials themselves, it might have taken years—with no guarantee of success.

With that time, hunting a few more level-eight lifeforms would've been far easier.

Leaving it to Five Ring Money or Cannibal Chain? A joke. Their prices would've exceeded this bounty's cost, and who knew how long they'd have taken.

On the 35th day, the 5th and 10th bounties were claimed. Only the top-ranked Fishscale Bamboo remained elusive.

That same day, Deacon Water, Li Daqian, and Commander Mu arrived at Cloud Peak via teleportation gates, each bringing entourages.

They'd received notice:

Their equipment was ready.

Chapter 1505: Three piece purple

Deacon Water had been in high spirits recently. Though she'd been "expelled" from Five Ring Money, it wasn't an actual falling out—with Director Tong's backing, her ties to the organization remained intricate.

Five Ring Money took a pragmatic view of her independence as a commercial entity.

On the surface, it might seem like a split, but Five Ring Money had always operated as a coalition of five autonomous leaders. Deacon Water had simply taken that autonomy further.

In the rankings, Five Ring Money played up its "heavy losses" to emphasize neutrality, feigning a tragic decline in the next edition.

But in truth, they weren't opposed to Deacon Water's departure—it set a precedent. Perhaps others could follow, retaining the Five Ring Money brand while operating independently for even greater profits.

Moreover, with Cloud Peak now ranked first nationally and Deacon Water as their ally, maintaining this connection through her was simply good business.

The separation had gone smoothly, with no losses—only benefits. And thanks to her proximity to Cloud Peak, Deacon Water's forces had claimed seven bounties: three five-star potions, two six-star, one seven-star, and... one eight-star.

Yes, Deacon Water had completed the second-ranked Beautiful Tea Zhu'an beak bounty!

This was a windfall for a newly established faction—even with her accumulated resources and Director Tong's covert support. Previously, she'd relied on Ye Zhongming for equipment and potions. Now, her ranks boasted an additional eight-star and seven-star evolved, marking a qualitative leap. Her power would grow even if she traded the eight-star potion for other resources.

Thus, her radiant demeanor upon arriving at Cloud Peak was unmistakable.

Commander Mu's situation was less enviable. His bold rebuke of the Resistance Zone's expulsion and founding of the Daybreak Resistance Army meant an irrevocable break with the other three zones. His enemies could now freely encroach on his territory—or attack outright. His fledgling force couldn't withstand such pressure. He refused to squander his hard-earned assets.

This visit served two purposes: inspecting the equipment and negotiating relocation near Cloud Peak's sphere of influence.

Relocating an entire zone was no simple troop movement—it was a logistical nightmare fraught with apocalyptic risks. His plan? Borrow Cloud Peak's teleportation equipment to transfer critical personnel and resources first safely. He just didn't know what price Ye Zhongming would charge.

Li Daqian remained the calmest. Though he'd claimed no bounties, he had no pressing needs from Cloud Peak. Thousand Beast Villa's unique geography and its top-ranked battle beast, Chisel Tooth, made it virtually unassailable.

After he fed his war beasts the eight-star and nine-star flesh from Cloud Peak, many showed clear evolutionary signs—soon, they'd recover to pre-secret-realm strength.

Still, he hoped to negotiate for more high-level monster flesh... and visit his granddaughter.

Yet all three were disappointed to find themselves greeted not by Ye Zhongming but by Xia Lei.

"Where's Zhongming?" Deacon Water had little fondness for this woman—inflexible and domineering, far less approachable than Ye Zhongming.

Commander Mu and Li Daqian were equally surprised. Ye Zhongming wasn't one to stand on ceremony, even as the leader of the top faction. With equipment this powerful, wouldn't he want to negotiate personally? Dealing with Xia Lei—notorious for her ruthlessness—was far less appealing.

"Seems I'm not a welcome sight." Xia Lei smiled, gesturing for them to sit before taking the head seat.

After the secret realm battle, her position in Cloud Peak was unshakable. Her combat prowess inspired awe, and her decisiveness earned respect. Even her bloody reputation had softened.

"I had matters to discuss with him," Deacon Water muttered just loud enough to be heard.

Xia Lei smirked. She knew Deacon Water's aloof nature—this sudden girlish act wasn't fooling anyone.

Ignoring the ploy, she waved her hand. Three items appeared on the table.

The trio's gazes locked onto them instantly.

A white robe, a jade intertwined blue and red pendant, and a bronze mace.

"Relic Robe. Amplification Pendant. Resonance Mace."

Xia Lei's voice snapped them from their trance. Their breathing hitched.

Chapter 1505.5- Three piece purple

The equipment had to be extraordinary for these leaders to lose their composure.

And they were. All three were... Purple-grade.

Though they'd anticipated Ye Zhongming's craftsmanship with nine-star materials, seeing Purple-grade gear firsthand was still staggering.

Could Ye Zhongming mass-produce Purple Grade now? Just how strong had Cloud Peak become?

But cooler heads soon prevailed.

Nine-star materials were exceedingly rare. Counting Li Daqian's kill, Ye Zhongming's two in the secret realm, and the two alliances' recent hunts, only five existed nationwide.

After accounting for failures, Ye Zhongming's stock—his two kills—likely barely sufficed for these three items.

What they underestimated was Ye Zhongming's crafting mastery.

Purple grade was the highest craftable tier without blueprints. Normally, success rates for such gear didn't exceed 5%—perhaps 10% for elite Smiths.

But Ye Zhongming was a Top-grade Smith with a prefix job and the Smith's Heart. His actual success rate defied expectations.

These three pieces? He'd only failed five times—unprecedented luck.

"Could we hear their attributes?" Commander Mu tore his gaze away, addressing Xia Lei, who was enjoying their reactions.

The others nodded eagerly.

Xia Lei understood. Even for faction leaders, Purple Grade was mythical.

"Let's start with this." She lifted the smallest item—the pendant.

"Amplification Pendant."

"Tier 1 Amplification: Wearing it passively boosts bloodline abilities, job skills, and other effects by 10%."

"Tier 2 Amplification: Activatable. Adds another 10% to the above, plus 10% to summon stats. 3-day cooldown."

"Tier 3 Amplification: Every 100 days, gain a third 10% stack to all categories."

"Tier 4 Amplification: Sacrificing all previous boosts, amplify one selected skill by 300% for 3 minutes (sustained) or one use (instant)."

"Tier 5 Amplification: Ultimate mode. 300% boost to ALL abilities for 1 minute. The pendant is destroyed afterward."

Though its five abilities seemed fewer than some Gold or Blue-grade gear, the implications were terrifying.

Tier 1-3 offered stacking 21-33% boosts for routine combat. Tier 4 traded versatility for a 300% single-skill nuke.

Not including cooldown, it would take three days for Little Tiger's revenge eye to reach three hundred percent. This one was instant.

And Tier 5 which was the most shocking as it could save a life. A triple-stat do-or-die trump card.

If Ye Zhongming wore this... The three of them didn't dare to imagine.

The trio exchanged glances, their earlier camaraderie evaporating as none of them wanted to give this piece up.

A Purple-grade accessory that could be worn without swapping out for other pieces of equipment was priceless.

"Now, the next piece." Xia Lei savored their expressions. She'd coveted these, too.

"Relic Robe."

"Fading: Randomly gain 5-50% of the robe's original lifeform's defense for 1 hour. Daily cooldown."

"Brilliance: Every 10 days, synchronize with the lifeform's abilities for a matching power surge. Timing is unpredictable. The synchronizing timing will take place anytime during the cooldown period."

"Rebirth: Upon critical injury, fully heal for 2 hours before reverting to 80% of original wounds."

"Hope: Every 20 days, upgrade one skill's tier or double its effect if maxed."

"Legacy: When the robe is irreparably damaged, permanently retain the last-used ability's effect as a permanent skill."

The second Purple-tier item left them even more breathless.

If the pendant was exceptional, the robe was revolutionary.

Only Brilliance puzzled them—what did "ability resonance" entail?