

Apocalypse 1516

Chapter 1516: Going all out

"So this is the Phantom-Eyed Sand Fox? It's quite beautiful."

A deep, muffled voice echoed through the room. The speaker—a massively obese woman—held the level-seven lifeform in her chubby hand, making it squeak in distress. No matter how it struggled, it couldn't break free.

Following the arm upward, one would see a mountain of a woman.

"Sister Bo, uh... be gentle. You're going to crush it to death," a man behind her pleaded, sweating profusely. He wanted to intervene but didn't dare, hovering anxiously instead.

"It's just a fox. So what if I crush it?" The woman snorted dismissively, shaking the fox in the air several times. The Phantom-Eyed Sand Fox visibly weakened under her monstrous grip, its struggles growing feeble.

"Vice-Chairman Li, this is something the God Hall requested. If you kill it, it won't be easy to explain," said a man entering the room—none other than Wen Yan, leader of Pin Palace.

The obese woman—Bo Jie—glanced at him sideways and sneered. "Call me Sister Bo!"

Wen Yan was old enough to be her grandfather, yet he showed no offense. Instead, he nodded. "Fine."

Bo Jie ignored him, tossing the half-conscious fox to an underling before lumbering over to the only stone stool in the room—the rest of the seating being wooden chairs—and plopping down with a thud.

Wen Yan sat in the center, leisurely sipping tea before addressing Bo Jie. "Sister Bo, why didn't your chairman come?"

"Busy." Bo Jie had somehow procured a roasted pig leg and was gnawing on it messily.

"So you have full authority to make decisions on his behalf?" Wen Yan pressed.

"Yeah." Bo Jie gave a simple reply.

Wen Yan sipped his tea, deep in thought.

"Sister Bo, I'd like to ask—I once met your former Vice-Chairman Leng. How is he these days?"

"Dead."

The Soul Merchant, now allied with Pin Palace, could no longer maintain its usual secrecy. Many things had become common knowledge, like how their chairman was still referred to as "The Great Chairman," his true name unknown. The vice-chairmen were now Yang and this woman, Li Bo. But what happened to the previous vice-chairman, Leng Ran, who had once ranked among the top fighters in the country?

Dead? Wen Yan pondered. It was possible, but how? Did he clash with the Great Chairman? Or had the Great Chairman himself been replaced? Why else would two new deputies be groomed while the old ones were discarded?

Minutes later, as Wen Yan mulled over these questions, footsteps approached, and a disheveled old man entered.

Wen Yan immediately stood.

This man was not God Hall's enigmatic Director, but their undisputed second-in-command—a research prodigy on par with the Director himself.

With the Director shifting focus to cultivation over the past year, the God Hall's scientific endeavors had fallen entirely under the control of this man—Dr. Ziche.

As the Court's second-in-command, his word was law unless the Director intervened. His authority far surpassed Bo Jie's in Soul Merchant. If Bo Jie claimed she could make decisions for the Great Chairman, Wen Yan had doubts. But if Dr. Ziche said the same? He'd believe it without question.

"Dr. Ziche, please, have a seat."

The old man grunted but didn't sit. Instead, he walked to the center of the room, where the Phantom-Eyed Sand Fox and its symbiotic mutated buckthorn lay bound, listless despite having regained consciousness.

"A level-seven Phantom-Eyed Sand Fox with a level-seven symbiotic lifeform... barely acceptable."

Dr. Ziche muttered to himself, poking at the creatures with visible dissatisfaction.

Wen Yan watched, wondering—Was a level-eight specimen what he wanted? But even if level-eight symbiotic pairs existed, capturing them would require the combined efforts of the Great Chairman, the Director, and himself.

"Old man, can you finally produce a stable level-eight product with these things?" Bo Jie asked between bites of her pig leg, utterly unconcerned with decorum.

Dr. Ziche squinted his eyes.

Yes, he was unkempt—most people of his rank and evolution level wouldn't tolerate such filth. But every waking moment was devoted to research.

Yes, he was eccentric—his status allowed him to disregard social niceties.

But that didn't mean he was stupid or would tolerate disrespect.

The two God Hall guards accompanying him scowled, warning Bo Jie to watch her tone.

Though Cloud Peak had also attacked God Hall, their losses paled compared to Soul Merchant's. Their silence over the years was strategic—a reflection of their nature.

They looked down on Soul Merchant.

And now, this obese woman dared provoke them? Unacceptable.

"Fighting? That's my favorite." Bo Jie tossed the nearly bare pig leg aside and stood, her massive chest heaving as she summoned two colossal round-headed war hammers from her spatial storage—each the size of a desk. Even her enormous frame seemed dwarfed by them.

"Enough!"

Wen Yan snapped. Neither Bo Jie nor Dr. Ziche seemed to take him seriously. Their factions—Soul Merchant and God Hall—didn't hold Pin Palace in high regard either. The alliance's recent joint hunt of a level-nine lifeform had ended with Pin Palace getting the short end of the stick.

Now, facing the two deputy leaders, Wen Yan's pent-up frustration erupted.

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"We are allies. We must respect each other. If you believe this alliance is unnecessary, then

leave!"

He stood, hands behind his back, nearly shouting at them.

Seeing their stunned expressions, he lowered his voice but kept his tone icy.

"Don't overestimate your factions. If the Great Chairman or the Director truly believed their factions were invincible, they wouldn't have sought an alliance with Pin Palace. Let's be frank—weren't we all driven from our homes by Cloud Peak? Are we stray dogs now, fighting over scraps?"

Bo Jie and Dr. Ziche glared, but Wen Yan didn't flinch.

"Don't like what you're hearing? Unhappy? Want to kill me? Fine. Let's fight. But afterward, if you're beaten so badly even your mothers wouldn't recognize you, you'd better tuck your tails between your legs and behave!"

Wen Yan's uncharacteristic outburst took aback Bo Jie and Dr. Ziche.

Bo Jie might be crude, and Dr. Ziche was socially inept, but they both knew—while the Pin Palace was the weakest of the three factions, Wen Yan's strength was nearly on par with the Great Chairman and the Director. His performance during the level-nine lifeform hunt had been terrifying.

Dr. Ziche was no fighter—despite being an eight-star evolved, his job wasn't combat-oriented, much like Liu Zhenghong. A seven-star fighter could likely take him in a duel.

But Bo Jie was different—a pure warrior, battle-hardened, a classic post-apocalyptic evolved who'd clawed her way to eight stars through sheer combat.

She knew she was no match for Wen Yan. His outburst might be insulting, but it didn't change the facts.

This was the apocalypse. Wen Yan had insulted them, but he was stronger. They had to swallow it—unless they wanted to fight.

"Let's focus," Wen Yan said coldly, returning to his seat.

The others sat as well, though their expressions remained defiant.

"A few matters," Wen Yan began, his anger subsiding now that he'd taken control. "First, the deadline for our initial agreed-upon delivery is approaching. Are both factions prepared?"

"Soul Merchant is ready," Bo Jie said, picking up her discarded pig leg and resuming her feast.

"We are as well," Dr. Ziche nodded.

"Second, regarding the division of territory within our tripartite zone, we proposed three plans. Which do you prefer?"

The three factions had each claimed prime locations in the northwest, forming a triangle. The interior was to be shared, with each faction developing its own periphery.

However, due to terrain, resource distribution, and other factors, a simple three-way split wasn't feasible. Each faction had its own agenda, coveting the richer zones. Wen Yan had proposed several allocation plans, each with pros and cons, for consideration.

"Our Great Chairman prefers the second plan. If you disagree, the third is acceptable—but not the first," Bo Jie said bluntly, quoting her leader verbatim.

Dr. Ziche frowned. "The third."

Wen Yan nodded. The third plan disadvantaged Pin Palace the most, but he didn't argue.

"Third, regarding joint exploration—should we prioritize the Secret Realms or the dungeons?"

All three factions bore grudges against Cloud Peak. After a thorough analysis, they concluded that Ye Zhongming and Cloud Peak's rapid rise was largely due to their early access to secret realms, which still provided abundant resources.

If Cloud Peak could do it, why couldn't they?

They'd tried before, but unlike Cloud Peak, they hadn't encountered an easy secret realm. Now, united and capable of slaying level-nine lifeforms, shouldn't they be able to conquer a secret realm or one of Earth's mysterious dungeons?

But to Wen Yan's surprise, Bo Jie and Dr. Ziche gave the same answer: We'll discuss it later.

Wen Yan nearly cursed. Now was the perfect opportunity! But he quickly realized—after obtaining resources from the level-nine lifeform, both factions felt empowered enough to explore alone.

He seethed silently. Pin Palace might seem prestigious, ranked among the nation's top factions, but the northwest's resources were unevenly distributed. Pin Palace's reputation rested largely on Wen Yan and his battle beast, "Thousand Year." Their overall strength lagged behind the other two. Exploring a secret realm alone was too risky.

But if they refused to cooperate, there was little he could do. Suppressing his frustration, he continued.

"Then the fourth matter—"

Before he could finish, Bo Jie suddenly stiffened, spat out a mouthful of chewed bone, and rummaged in her cleavage, pulling out a palm-sized jade tablet.

Wen Yan swallowed his reprimand.

That was a Synchronized Jade—a long-range communication device. A pair of these jades could transmit written messages instantly between them via blood inscription. Higher-grade jades had greater ranges.

Though functionally limited, such tools were invaluable in the apocalypse. Pin Palace didn't have any, and Bo Jie's blue-grade jade likely had a range exceeding a thousand kilometers—enough to connect Pin Palace, Soul Merchant, and God Hall.

Bo Jie's expression shifted drastically as she read the message.

"Sister Bo, what's wrong?"

Wen Yan knew something major had happened. Nothing else would rattle this brutish woman.

Dr. Ziche also watched Bo Jie intently.

"Near our base... Ye Zhongming, the King of Cloud Peak, has been spotted..." Bo Jie sounded dazed. She couldn't fathom why their greatest enemy would suddenly appear here.

"How many with him?!" Wen Yan's expression darkened. If Cloud Peak had mobilized en masse and located Soul Merchant's camp, they could wipe them out in one strike.

Pin Palace might be next.

This was catastrophic.

"Only... a handful of subordinates. None of his core members. No battle beasts either. The message says Ye Zhongming tried infiltrating our base but was discovered by Vice-Chairman Yang. They're fighting now!"

Wen Yan and Dr. Ziche didn't speak, but their eyes gleamed.

"The Great Chairman orders—whether this is a trap or not, we must attempt to kill the King of Cloud Peak. You're to come with me immediately. Our base will activate the 'U-shaped Wormhole' to transport us. Another wormhole will fetch the God Hall's forces."

The news was so sudden that even the unflappable Wen Yan hesitated. After half a minute of deliberation, he agreed with the Great Chairman.

Ye Zhongming's appearance here was bizarre. Even if it were a trap, the worst-case scenario was Cloud Peak launching a full-scale assault, possibly with allies like Beast Villa, the Resistance Zone, or Deacon Water's forces.

But if all three factions united, they could fight a decisive battle!

With home-field advantage and superior numbers, why fear him?

"Mobilize all our warriors!" Wen Yan barked. Pin Palace sprang into action. Moments later, a black vortex appeared over the lake outside their base, and countless Pavilion soldiers poured into it.

Simultaneously, deep within a mountain base, squads of God Hall warriors—accompanied by bizarre battle beasts and massive cages—marched through another vortex, teleporting over a thousand kilometers away.

The combined forces of Soul Merchant, Pin Palace, and God Hall—mobilized for a single man.

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Vice-Chairman Yang wasn't feeling great.

It wasn't that he thought he was losing—rather, he couldn't shake the feeling that the King of Cloud Peak wasn't fighting at full strength.

At first, he thought it was just his imagination. But as time passed, it became increasingly clear: this guy was toying with him.

When Vice-Chairman Yang arrived, he hadn't brought many people. Even with the Soul Merchant squad left behind to guard Ye Zhongming and the others, his forces numbered fewer than fifty. Ye Zhongming's side, even counting the largely non-combatant "livestock," had more bodies than his own.

But after a short skirmish—especially after the distress signal was sent—Ye Zhongming and his people began to retreat.

Vice-Chairman Yang knew he'd do the same in their position. The Soul Merchant's base wasn't far, and if they kept fighting, they'd only be slaughtered by the arriving reinforcements.

Yet, as they retreated, Vice-Chairman Yang noticed something odd.

The dozen or so elite evolved under Ye Zhongming were protecting the "livestock," while Ye Zhongming himself was covering their retreat.

At first, it didn't seem unusual. Soon, Vice-Chairman Yang realized that if Ye Zhongming had wanted to, he could have held them all off.

With that kind of power, why not crush them outright? The suspicion gnawed at him.

No matter how he racked his brain, it never occurred to him that Ye Zhongming was using himself as bait—lingering just enough to keep Vice-Chairman Yang tracking him.

An hour of fighting and retreating passed. Then, Ye Zhongming sensed it—a monstrous killing intent coalescing in the direction they'd come from, surging toward them like a tidal wave.

Ye Zhongming surveyed the terrain. They were in hilly woodland—not the ideal place for his plan.

If he was taking this risk, he wanted maximum payoff.

The enemy was arriving faster than he'd expected. It seemed Soul Merchant, Pin Palace, and God Hall were dead set on capturing him, mobilizing an army of this scale so quickly.

That level of killing intent could only come from hundreds of thousands of gathered warriors.

Ye Zhongming launched a sudden, ferocious assault.

In one move, he killed five of the enemy evolved. Vice-Chairman Yang immediately changed tactics, no longer engaging directly but trailing at a distance, waiting for an opening while coordinating with the approaching reinforcements.

As they crested a hill, Ye Zhongming saw that Vice-Chairman Yang's group had fallen over five hundred meters behind. He quickly gathered his people and pulled out a hand-drawn map.

"My team will take you to safety. See that hill? Go around it, then follow this route. They'll get you to Cloud Peak."

The Chameleon operatives would follow his orders without question. Ye Zhongming was only explaining to Xiao Hua, Wang Xiaorui, and the others to ease their minds. Their part in his plan was over—what came next was his fight alone.

"But we—"

"I'm not asking for your opinion." Ye Zhongming cut Xiao Hua off without hesitation, then handed the map to the Chameleon squad leader.

"Stay safe, boss." The squad leader, thrilled to have fought alongside Ye Zhongming, accepted the order without question. Worry? None.

To them, Ye Zhongming was invincible.

With that, he led his team and the women away. Ye Zhongming turned and climbed back up the hill. Vice-Chairman Yang, now within a hundred meters, halted.

Ye Zhongming's sudden earlier assault had left a deep impression.

When Ye Zhongming drew his blade, Vice-Chairman Yang and his men instinctively retreated.

"Y-you can't escape!" one of the Soul Merchant members shouted, though his bravado rang hollow.

None of them wanted to keep chasing, but without orders to retreat, they had no choice.

"Our army is coming! Surrender now if you know what's good for you!"

The cringe-inducing line made Vice-Chairman Yang and the others want to crawl into a hole.

Is this a bad movie? Are we playing cartoon villains now?

Ye Zhongming smirked and swung his blade.

Vice-Chairman Yang and his men scrambled back dozens of meters.

But the strike merely carved a deep fissure into the ground where they'd stood.

"Cross this line, and I'll stop holding back."

With that, Ye Zhongming sat cross-legged on the ground, watching as spectral undead began crawling out of the gouge left by the Undead Sand Moon Blade.

Vice-Chairman Yang's face burned with humiliation. He knew he'd lost face in front of Ye Zhongming, but he could do nothing—the King of Cloud Peak's sudden burst of power had undeniably surpassed his own.

The undead emerging from the fissure were low-level, easily dispatched by Vice-Chairman Yang's forces. They hacked them apart with extra fervor, as if imagining they were Ye Zhongming himself.

Ye Zhongming watched calmly, his expression unreadable, keeping the Soul Merchant members on edge. In truth, his mind was already on the next phase of his plan.

I need to hold out until we reach the plains. I need to draw as many enemies there as possible. That means I have to reach that spot.

A location marked itself in his mental map.

A glance over his shoulder confirmed that the Chameleon team and the women had already rounded the distant hill, vanishing from sight. The timing was perfect. Ye Zhongming stood and gestured at Vice-Chairman Yang before sprinting down the hill.

After hesitating, Vice-Chairman Yang gritted his teeth and led his men across the line.

The chase was back on.

When the Soul Merchant squad realized Ye Zhongming was now alone, they relayed the news.

Deep within the approaching tide of soldiers, a ten-meter-tall black twin-bodied elephant strode forward, each step covering fifteen meters.

Clad head to toe in iron armor, the colossal beast resembled a moving metal fortress, its footfalls shaking the earth.

On its back, an exquisitely crafted wooden pavilion was anchored to the armor, its sides draped in pale blue gauze. The intricate carvings and patterns on its pillars made it a sight to behold.

Nearby evolved frequently glanced at it, their expressions a mix of awe, envy, and curiosity.

It was impossible to ignore—this twin-bodied elephant was an eight-level lifeform, and the pavilion housed the leadership of the tripartite alliance.

The same figures who'd been negotiating at God Hall—Wen Yan, Bo Jie, and Dr. Ziche—were present, along with several others.

Two stood out most: a gaunt man wearing a mask, sitting silently in a corner, and a jovial, rotund middle-aged man with a ruddy complexion.

The masked man's prominence came from the three men and one woman seated before him, along with Dr. Ziche. Even his chair was specially designed.

This was none other than the God Hall's enigmatic Director.

As for the portly man, his unassuming appearance was itself a surprise.

He was the Great Chairman of Soul Merchant.

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No air of mystery, cold cruelty, or venomous gaze—just an ordinary, slightly dull-looking middle-aged man.

On appearance alone, no one would connect him to the atrocities of Soul Merchant.

"Latest report: Ye Zhongming's followers have vanished. Only he remains within our tracking range."

The Great Chairman spoke cheerfully, as if discussing the weather.

"Given his strength, he could have defeated Vice-Chairman Yang, yet he chose not to. Instead, he's been leading my men on a chase. It's clearly a trap—though using himself as bait is quite the gamble."

"So... do we take the bait?"

The question came from the Pin Palace's steward, one of their two eight-star evolved besides Wen Yan himself.

The Pin Palace had fallen behind in overall strength compared to the other two factions. Without their veteran-level-eight battle beast, Thousand Year, they'd likely drop out of the national top ten rankings soon.

It wasn't that they'd weakened—others had simply grown stronger faster.

"Whether we take the bait or not, the answer lies in analysis."

The Director's voice was measured, unhurried.

"We can confirm Ye Zhongming has set a trap, using himself as bait to lure us in for a devastating strike—perhaps even annihilation."

He stood and walked to the pavilion's center, his restrained aura revealing his own peak combat prowess since shifting focus from research.

"So what is the trap? I'll propose a theory, then everyone can contribute. Together, we'll deduce his plan!"

The Director raised a finger.

"A dungeon."

Everyone knew he didn't mean the apocalyptic zones from the sky, but natural death traps—treacherous terrain, hordes of zombies, etc.—that could devastate an army.

"Large-scale traps. Magic crystal traps, landmines, that sort of thing," Bo Jie offered, sounding more coherent than usual—perhaps because of the Great Chairman's presence.

Nods all around. That was plausible.

"Gene lifeforms. Lots of them."

If crystal weapons were possible, Cloud Peak's other specialty—gene lifeforms—had to be considered.

"Teleportation gates," Wen Yan said. "Multiple intelligence reports suggest Cloud Peak possesses long-range teleportation devices, much like the Great Chairman's U-shaped Wormholes. They could flood the area with troops at a moment's notice."

More agreement.

"Weapons of mass destruction. Years ago, Cloud Peak used a bomb to wipe out tens of thousands of zombies in one strike," said the lone woman among the God Hall's three men and one woman.

"Could it involve secret realms? Does Ye Zhongming have a way to dump us all into one?"

"Might native secret realm forces be lying in ambush, coordinating with Cloud Peak's army?"

"Ye Zhongming is close to Deacon Water. Could the Five Ring Money have secretly allied with Cloud Peak? Or has Thousand Beast Villa made a breakthrough, giving him the confidence to face us head-on?"

"By that logic, the Resistance Zone might have joined, too. The Freedom Army was originally part of the S Zone!"

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Ideas flew thick and fast as they brainstormed every possibility.

Ye Zhongming's plan, though carefully laid, had one rough spot: how to lure the enemy in.

But with no better option than using himself as bait, he'd gambled on their willingness to take the risk.

Now, the leadership of Pin Palace, Soul Merchant, and God Hall had easily discerned his intent. The only question was: what form would the trap take, and could they withstand it?

"Look here—this is a map of the area."

The Director had prepared in advance. A large map was spread on the central table, and everyone crowded around to study it.

"After learning of Ye Zhongming's appearance, the Great Chairman, Wen Yan, and I contacted all nearby outposts and conducted aerial reconnaissance. We found no dungeons capable of threatening our million-strong army, nor any sign of Cloud Peak or allied forces lying in wait. In short, Ye Zhongming truly came alone."

Though they'd suspected as much, the leaders couldn't help but admire Ye Zhongming's audacity.

The Great Chairman chuckled, drawing all eyes.

"The Five Rings wouldn't ally with Cloud Peak. I know them and Cannibal Chain too well—they'd never abandon the entire forest for one tree. As for Beast Villa's so-called breakthrough? Impossible. Their entire foundation is the Beast Pool equipment, which is notoriously hard to upgrade. Even if they profited from the level-nine hunt, one upgrade wouldn't let them produce a battle beast army capable of threatening us anytime soon. And the Resistance Zone allying with Cloud Peak? More likely, they'd ally with us. Their grudge against Cloud Peak is no smaller than ours. Our scouts confirm no major troop movements from their side either."

Wen Yan nodded. "Ye Zhongming's secret realm access is no different from ours—via secret realm keys. He can open a portal for himself, but dumping us all inside is impossible. That possibility is eliminated. As for WMDs, it is unlikely. If he had those, he wouldn't need to fake a retreat. He'd just wait for us and bomb us to oblivion."

With the three leaders' analysis, only one possibility remained: Ye Zhongming planned to teleport Cloud Peak's main force in.

Having deduced his scheme, the leaders' faces lit with excitement. A golden opportunity had fallen into their laps!

Chapter 1518: Huge battle on the wilderness

"We know Cloud Peak has teleportation equipment, but it is unclear whether they can move such a large force at once. If we assume they can, then once the enemy appears, we might face the combined forces of Cloud Peak, Beast Villa, Deacon Water's troops, the Resistance Zone, and possibly even many native secret realm warriors."

Under the Director's and Wen Yan's silent urging, the Great Chairman delivered the final summary.

"Since we've confirmed Ye Zhongming must be using teleportation to summon his army, there are only two possibilities. First, the equipment is on him. Second, it's hidden nearby, controlled by others, and Ye Zhongming is leading us straight to it."

"Based on Ye Zhongming's current escape route, we've determined that regardless of where the teleportation equipment is—whether on him or with others—the optimal summoning point is this plain! The open terrain allows for an efficient deployment of forces. In contrast, fighting in hills or forests would disadvantage them, not us."

"I must say, Ye Zhongming's plan is well-crafted. Cloud Peak's army might indeed have the strength to swallow us whole this time. But the King of Cloud Peak has made one fatal mistake!"

"He's overconfident—so much so that he's using himself as bait alone. This situation will persist until he reaches the plain. And that's where our opportunity lies: we won't let him... reach it safely!"

"Kill him, and no matter how many troops they teleport in, they'll be doomed to fail!"

"Since he's offering himself as bait, let's devour this delicious lure! Gentlemen, the operation to assassinate the King of Cloud Peak begins now!" The Great Chairman laughed, his tone tinged with madness.

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Ye Zhongming continued his measured retreat, occasionally turning to strike down pursuers.

The Soul Merchant squad, initially fifty strong, had already lost over a dozen members. Yet the survivors stubbornly pressed on.

They had no choice—their mission was to track Ye Zhongming's movements at all costs.

Vice-Chairman Yang, however, remained eerily calm. Even as his men fell, he showed no agitation. Instead, he closed the distance, as if no longer fearing Ye Zhongming's counterattacks.

Ye Zhongming quickly noticed the shift in behavior. After a moment's thought, he abruptly accelerated, shaking off his pursuers within minutes.

Vice-Chairman Yang hesitated, then ordered his men to follow the trail he left while he sped ahead alone.

The plain wasn't far now. Ye Zhongming surveyed the terrain from a hilltop—a few more slopes, a low mountain pass, and he'd reach the open fields. The valleys and woods between lacked proper paths, but for an eight-star evolved, such obstacles were trivial.

When Vice-Chairman Yang's demeanor changed, Ye Zhongming decided to reach the plain as fast as possible.

A bad feeling gnawed at him.

As he descended the slope, that feeling materialized.

To his left, a faint glowing door appeared. From it emerged a man and a beast—both eight-star equivalents.

The moment they stepped through, the door vanished.

"Fixed Teleportation? You're really going all out."

Ye Zhongming looked at the gate and said.

Ye Zhongming recognized the skill—a signature ability of a "Bead Teleporter," with a cooldown exceeding ten thousand hours. Essentially, they could only use it once a year.

This skill allowed precise teleportation to a marked location, with the option to return within the skill's duration.

Simple in concept, but invaluable in practice.

Ye Zhongming remembered a faction with such a teleporter in his past life. Whenever the cooldown ended, they'd orchestrate high-risk missions—raiding dungeons for treasures guarded by powerful creatures.

Each use of the skill guaranteed priceless rewards.

Now, it was being wasted on chasing him.

From Ye Zhongming's perspective, at least he found this a waste, as he didn't believe this man could kill him.

"God Hall, Tong Lu. This is my partner, Nether Tiger."

The man introduced himself coldly.

Before Ye Zhongming could respond, Tong Lu added, "Killing you justifies any cost."

With that, he leaped onto his beast's back and charged.

Ye Zhongming's eyebrows rose as he observed Tong Lu and his mount merging during the charge. Tendril-like appendages sprouted from both their bodies, interweaving to fuse them into a single entity. Within breaths, the tendrils had encased Tong Lu's legs, hips, and lower torso.

The transformation didn't stop there. Tong Lu's exposed face and hands morphed—fangs protruded, claws replaced fingers, his upper body swelling with grotesque muscle.

What the hell is this?

Under normal circumstances, caution would dictate retreat. Prudence was paramount when facing an unknown ability, especially one from the God Hall's labs.

Yet Ye Zhongming didn't retreat. Instead, he activated his buff field and swung the Undead Sand Moon Blade—Thousand Seal Blade Strike.

The bad feeling had solidified. A lone elite appearing, with Vice-Chairman Yang in close pursuit—those factions were making their move.

Ye Zhongming was powerful, but not invincible. Without Yellow Ball, Yangos, or female guards by his side, being surrounded by elites posed a genuine threat.

This man's sole purpose was to delay him. More would follow. Ye Zhongming needed a quick, decisive strike—to break free and send a message.

So he struck with everything he had.

Countless blade shadows merged into a thunderous arc.

When it came to brute force, Ye Zhongming feared no one.

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This wasn't arrogance.

Between his buffs, bloodline, elemental spirits, and the countless body-enhancing potions he'd consumed, Ye Zhongming's physical stats bordered on transcendent.

His Clear Body—a passive from the Thousand Blade Saint—boosted defense and recovery. Celestial Body, a rare constitution, enhanced nearly every attribute.

Wielding the purple-grade Undead Sand Moon Blade, tempered by the Weapon Nurturing skill, Ye Zhongming could clash with anyone.

Tong Lu clearly hadn't expected this response.

The fusion ability—Soul Bond—was the God Hall's crowning achievement. In the face of Cloud Peak's famed gene warriors, the God Hall believed this technology represented humanity's pinnacle.

It was a symbiotic enhancement for both evolved and beast, built on advanced gene-editing and cross-species compatibility—far superior, in their eyes, to Cloud Peak's crude modifications.

The transformation was jarring. Most opponents, unfamiliar with it, would retreat. Tong Lu assumed Ye Zhongming would do the same.

But Tong Lu wasn't afraid either. He'd long despised the so-called King of Cloud Peak, thirsting for revenge since Cloud Peak's raid on God Hall's outpost.

Weaponless, Tong Lu sprang forward, his body arching to let the Nether Tiger take the lead.

Behind him, a spectral projection of the tiger emerged—only its head replaced by Tong Lu's own.

The grotesque apparition lasted an instant before detaching and hurtling toward Ye Zhongming's blade light.

The collision produced no deafening crash, no blood spray—just a space distortion as energies clashed.

The blade light hesitated, then sheared through the tiger's shadow.

Tong Lu screeched, his and the Nether Tiger's claws slashing to intercept the remaining energy.

This wasn't a simple swipe—it was a skill. Their claws gleamed, leaving afterimages in the air.

Thud.

The half-man, half-tiger hybrid crashed to the ground, rolling once before regaining footing.

Shallow wounds marred Tong Lu's head and chest, the Nether Tiger's forehead similarly split. Blood seeped.

Tong Lu's right hand was unscathed, but his left claws had been sheared off. The Nether Tiger fared worse—both forepaws were half-severed, leaving it whimpering in agony.

A single strike had crippled the God Hall's elite duo.

Ye Zhongming stepped forward—only to sidestep abruptly as a bolt of cold light grazed his previous position.

A glance uphill revealed Vice-Chairman Yang, now wielding an ornate crossbow.

The Soul Merchant's deputy had arrived.

He knew letting Ye Zhongming kill Tong Lu would mean losing his trail for good.

Now, Vice-Chairman Yang fought desperately—shooting bolts while charging downhill, simultaneously hurling objects from his spatial storage.

White spheres, resembling golf balls, bounced erratically in his wake. With each bounce, they expanded. By the time Yang reached the battlefield, they'd grown to over 1.5 meters in diameter.

Ye Zhongming had tried to finish Tong Lu, but the man proved slippery. Even under gravity field suppression, a surprise skill and defensive equipment barely kept him alive until reinforcements arrived.

The entire exchange had lasted mere seconds. Dodging bolts while launching two attacks was already impressive from Ye Zhongming.

On reaching the fray, Vice-Chairman Yang roared. His skin turned corpse-blue, a stench of rot filling the air as he transformed into a fanged revenant—his Stiff Corpse job.

With a wave, two thick green mist streams enveloped him—Corpse Toxin Armor, a passive defense skill.

Against Ye Zhongming, survival took priority over victory.

The enlarged spheres now burst, releasing clusters of floating eyeballs—five per sphere, dozens in total. These eyes instantly covered the area around.

The eyes swiveled, locking onto Ye Zhongming before firing pale beams. Despite his speed, several connected.

The beams carried no damage, only a potent slowing effect—one even Ye Zhongming couldn't resist.

Seizing the chance, Vice-Chairman Yang regrouped with Tong Lü.

"Can you fight?"

"Have to. Four minutes left till the deadline."

Their exchange was frantic, interspersed with ranged attacks against the slowed Ye Zhongming.

From Tong Lu's arrival to now, barely a minute had passed. His defeat came too swiftly—without Yang's intervention, he'd be dead.

The God Hall warrior, once dismissive of Ye Zhongming's reputation, now understood the insurmountable gap.

But... how could they last four minutes against such overwhelming odds?

"Use everything. If we can't hold, we retreat—regardless of the timer."

Vice-Chairman Yang refused to believe failure would cost their lives.

Tong Lu nodded. Ye Zhongming, though slowed, had begun systematically destroying the eyeballs—one strike each. In the seconds they'd spoken, half were already gone.

Tong Lu produced a jade bowl from his space storage, his expression pained, before he hurled it forward.

The bowl inverted midair, descending toward Ye Zhongming as golden light erupted from its surface.

A gold-grade equipment.

Not to be outdone, Vice-Chairman Yang's abdomen convulsed violently. His jaw distended grotesquely as he vomited—each heave birthing a 50-centimeter-tall green zombie.

To stall Ye Zhongming, both elites had gone all out.

Chapter 1519: Huge battle on the wilderness

Inside the pavilion atop the twin-bodied elephant, the scene had changed. Only the God Hall's Director and his female subordinate remained seated, while the others had vanished.

"Boss, why didn't you send me earlier? I should've been the most suitable to pin down Ye Zhongming."

The woman wasn't strikingly beautiful, but her fair skin and large, lively eyes gave her an ethereal quality.

The Director gazed into the distance, seemingly unhurried.

"Our God Hall has been silent for too long. It's time the world remembered us."

Confusion filled the woman's eyes. She didn't understand her boss's meaning.

"Some things are better left unknown for now. Knowing might only bring despair."

Accustomed to her boss's cryptic ways, the woman didn't press further. She finally understood why the Director—once obsessed with research—had recently shifted focus to personal power, frantically studying professions and skills, splurging on equipment and scrolls, even occasionally purchasing battle beasts despite the God Hall's self-sufficiency.

Perhaps this unspeakable matter had driven his choices.

"Ah Xiu."

The Director suddenly called her name.

She looked up.

"If you were to take my place one day, could you handle it?"

"Me?!"

The question shocked her. Never had she considered this possibility.

"I couldn't!" Flustered, she waved her hands. "Boss, you'll always lead the God Hall!"

The Director smiled. His mask suddenly animated, expressions flickering across its surface. Ah Xiu gasped—she hadn't known the mask could do that. The series of surprises left her dazed.

"Hypothetically." The Director pressed for an answer.

"If... if someone must succeed you, among your guards, I'm neither the strongest nor command the most forces. I lack technical knowledge—just an ordinary evolved. I'm the least qualified. Brother Tong Lu has the highest Soul Bond compatibility, formidable with Nether Tiger. Or Brother Silver—he understands technology and is powerful himself, having absorbed the most genes without rejection. Once fully assimilated, he'd be our mightiest warrior. Actually, Brother Cheng Ou fits best—steady, mature, a rare perfect blend of defensive and support professions. With him, battles can't be lost. He's well-liked, even friends with Dr. Ziche—they drink together often."

She counted on her fingers.

"Dr. Ziche could too, though he seems uninterested in leading, content with research as long as it's funded. A true mad scientist."

The Director chuckled and motioned her closer. She knelt beside his chair as he rested a hand on her head.

"They all seem more suitable than you, yet each has fatal flaws." His gaze swept over the advancing army.

"Dr. Ziche aside—he simply doesn't want the position. Silver might become our greatest warrior, but remember, Ah Xiu, I'm a scientist too. Both Dr. Ziche and I believe our technology, while perhaps the world's best currently, is far from perfect. Silver... can't break free from the Wheel's technological constraints. Maybe none of us ever will."

Ah Xiu gasped, staring at her boss. The God Hall's most promising technology—rejected by its creator?

"Not surprising. All science builds upon foundational knowledge. Why have we—Cloud Peak, top foreign labs—achieved such leaps post-apocalypse? Because Earth's science had already accumulated to a certain level. Add unlimited test subjects and zero ethical constraints, and here we are."

"But compared to the Wheel's technology, ours is still primitive. We haven't surpassed it—at best, we've glimpsed the path. Silver is, at most, a prototype."

Ah Xiu fell silent, her mind reeling.

She still didn't understand why her boss was telling her this. Was something happening to the God Hall? To him?

The immediate crisis was Ye Zhongming's sudden appearance. Could this operation fail?

She didn't deny the King of Cloud Peak's strength, but against the combined might of three factions, countless eight-star evolved and level-eight battle beasts—even with three heads and six arms, he couldn't win.

Forced to deploy his forces in unfavorable terrain, he'd face crushing defeat. Cloud Peak might even be wiped from the region.

She couldn't fathom her boss's apparent fear.

Unperturbed by her expression, the Director continued, "Tong Lu is too reckless and glory-seeking. The first to engage Ye Zhongming should've been us veterans—like in games, not seeking solo kills, just stalling for reinforcements."

"But in this world, neither Wen Yan, the Great Chairman, nor I wanted to be first. Why? Too dangerous! None wanted to face the King of Cloud Peak at full strength, all preferring to follow and reap benefits, even at the cost of underlings. When someone had to go, we were going to draw lots—until Tong Lu volunteered. What does that tell you? He wanted to prove he could match Ye Zhongming, maybe even dreamed of killing him for fame. Such men make decent officers but terrible commanders—they'll get everyone killed."

Chapter 1519.5- Huge battle on the wilderness

Without waiting for a response, he accelerated, "Cheng Ou is marginally qualified, but too cautious—adequate for maintaining stability, but lacking initiative. Professionally constrained from becoming the organization's spearhead. Under him, the God Hall wouldn't decline rapidly, but in the apocalypse, stagnation equals death. Slow extinction."

Ah Xiu agreed with the analysis but still felt unqualified.

"You? Perhaps not the strongest, most ruthless, or popular, but precisely your mediocrity makes you perfect—you have no glaring weaknesses!"

Dizzy, Ah Xiu wondered if this was praise or criticism. Her mediocrity qualified her for leadership?

"Of course, 'mediocrity' is in quotes—highlighting your lack of flaws. Your advantage is irreplicable—you're a pure, unmodified evolved. Our technology hasn't touched you, giving you stable, predictable potential. If our tech advances, we can augment you later. If it proves obsolete, you're unaffected. I've been grooming you as my successor from the start."

Stunned, Ah Xiu gaped. She'd been the chosen heir all along?

"I have some time left. Don't worry—I'll teach you leadership. But remember these points now!"

Accustomed to obedience, Ah Xiu focused intently.

"First, our technology, however imperfect, remains our core. You must control it absolutely. Not being a researcher, you'll need their absolute loyalty. Currently, that's Dr. Ziche. I'll secure his allegiance, but if I'm gone and he betrays you—kill him."

Ah Xiu's heart pounded.

Dr. Ziche—since Dr. He's death, was the only peer to the Director. And her boss spoke of killing him so casually.

"Second, take this." The Director produced a box containing several hard drives. "Our core technology. The third drive has my hypotheses and preliminary models based on... certain inspirations from there. Future research directions. If you lead, don't let others sway you."

He pointed skyward—the technology originated from space.

"Third, start cultivating loyal, talented subordinates. Here are two eight-star evolution potions for winning loyalty, and two soul-binding scrolls—use wisely."

More items filled Ah Xiu's hands, deepening her confusion.

"Fourth, this is the Lifeblood of the Heavenly Speech Demon Vine. When necessary, claim it."

Ah Xiu recoiled, refusing.

This was the Director's personal battle beast—no lab product, but painstakingly cultivated, an exceptionally rare plant-type battle beast ranking just below Beast Villa's Chisel Tooth on the battle beast charts.

"Take it!" The Director's voice hardened. "Use it when I die or disappear."

"Finally, most crucially—remember you're my chosen successor. Anyone opposing you is your enemy, even if I recant. Eliminate all enemies by any means!"

Rising, the Director gazed into the distance. "Naturally, I won't oppose you. I mean any surviving 'brothers' post-battle, those who support you may live. Those who don't—die. Remember this, Ah Xiu."

"Boss, what exactly..." She had to ask. Everything felt surreal.

After hesitation, the Director admitted, "I am preparing for my end, but not because I'll die. I've received something that may take me... elsewhere. Whether I survive there is uncertain. Just precautions."

"What did you receive?"

"An admission ticket."

"I've said enough. Perhaps when you're strong enough, you'll receive one too."

As he spoke, the Director's body began emitting a deep, subdued glow.

"I don't know if the Great Chairman or Wen Yan will go all-out against Ye Zhongming, but I intend to. If I can't handle a regional opponent, what hope do I have against unknown future adversaries?"

"Come, Ah Xiu. Let's meet this legendary King of Cloud Peak! Perhaps I'll die today—then the God Hall is yours!"

Taking her hand, the Director laughed heartily at teasing his subordinate. In a flash, they vanished—along with the twin-bodied elephant and its exquisite pavilion.

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The golden bowl had enlarged by the time it reached Ye Zhongming, now big enough to engulf a person.

Though unfamiliar with this high-grade equipment—his past life's experience didn't extend to such rarities—Ye Zhongming recognized its threat.

The eyeballs were fragile, immobile, easily destroyed. Yet their slowing beams persisted.

Even slowed, Ye Zhongming's speed allowed him to shatter most eyeballs quickly. But the golden bowl descended too fast—before he could eliminate all debuffs.

A gold-grade artifact demanded respect.

Unavoidable, so Ye Zhongming braced himself. Ye Zhongming stood still; as long as he didn't move, the slowing effect became negligible.

He stowed the Undead Sand Moon Blade, drawing Wind and Thunder instead—the secret realm's divine weapon to counter this unknown threat.

Yet before he could strike, the bowl teleported, encapsulating him instantly!

Simultaneously, Vice-Chairman Yang's vomited zombies surrounded the bowl, spewing dark green fluid that obscured its golden glow.

"Meet the Human Refining Furnace, King of Cloud Peak!" Tong Lu sneered viciously.

Chapter 1520: Huge battle in the wilderness

Ye Zhongming was surrounded by pitch-black darkness, unable to see anything, but his body distinctly felt a rising heat.

The temperature climbed rapidly, and in the brief moment it took him to adjust to his surroundings, he was already in pain.

Ye Zhongming possessed two superior physiques and had consumed vast quantities of various potions, making his physical resilience and defensive capabilities almost inhuman.

For someone like him to feel pain, one could only imagine the intensity of the scorching heat he was enduring.

There were no visible flames—only an invisible, searing heat. In the darkness, Ye Zhongming faced an assault of terror.

He didn't know what this thing was that could suppress him so thoroughly.

Ye Zhongming didn't know the correct way to counter it. In this situation, the only thing he could do was use his strongest attack to break free.

Wind and Thunder, lit up in his hands.

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Seeing the small zombies drench his Human Refining Furnace in venom, Tong Lu shot a displeased look at the heavily panting Vice Chairman Yang beside him.

“What's your problem? Don't trust me?”

Just as the God Hall's director had assessed, Tong Lu was a man who loved the spotlight—overconfident, boastful, and utterly convinced of the power of the weapon he had unleashed. He had forgotten entirely that if Vice Chairman Yang had not arrived on time, he might not have even had the chance to use this equipment.

If one understood this equipment, they might somewhat comprehend Tong Lu's attitude at this moment.

The Human Refining Furnace was a gold-grade item—and a one-time-use gold-grade item at that. Following the basic principles of equipment, one-time-use items generally possessed power comparable to non-consumable items of the next grade, sometimes even surpassing them.

The one-time-use gold-grade Human Refining Furnace had power on par with purple-grade equipment, if not stronger.

No wonder Tong Lu was brimming with confidence. He had volunteered to be the first to confront Ye Zhongming due to his possession of this item.

If he couldn't win, he'd unleash the Human Refining Furnace—problems that couldn't be solved otherwise would be solved this way.

But he had underestimated Ye Zhongming's strength and nearly didn't even get the chance to use it.

However, just because he believed it would work didn't mean others shared his confidence. Vice Chairman Yang had just experienced the might of the Cloud Peak King firsthand and didn't think a single piece of equipment could subdue, much less kill, him.

So, he unleashed his ultimate move, intending to strike Ye Zhongming hard the moment he broke free.

Vice Chairman Yang also hoped to kill Ye Zhongming, but he was far more pragmatic than Tong Lu. He would use everything at his disposal—if it worked, great; if not, it would at least buy time to hold Ye Zhongming off until reinforcements arrived.

Hearing Tong Lu's rebuke, Vice Chairman Yang steadied his breathing before replying, "You're right. I don't trust you. In fact, I wouldn't trust your director either if he thought a single piece of equipment could kill the Cloud Peak King, who has dominated the apocalypse for over five years."

Tong Lu's eyebrows shot up in anger. Ignoring his own injuries, he was about to lecture Vice Chairman Yang on the might of his equipment.

But at that moment, his pride and joy—the gold-grade Human Refining Furnace, which he believed no one could break—exploded with a deafening crash, shattering into pieces and revealing a scorching-hot Ye Zhongming inside.

A trickle of blood seeped from the gaps in the armor on Ye Zhongming's arm.

Tong Lu's mouth hung open in shock before he let out a heart-wrenching roar.

His trump card—his only means of dealing a fatal blow to Ye Zhongming—had just been destroyed.

The Cloud Peak King looked somewhat disheveled, but it didn't even seem like a minor injury—at most, it was superficial.

However, the sudden splash of venom from the destroyed Human Refining Furnace caught Ye Zhongming off guard, forcing him to gulp down two antidote potions hastily.

Seizing the opportunity, the small zombies launched their attack, rushing at Ye Zhongming with startling speed as he reeled from the successive assaults.

Vice Chairman Yang ignored Tong Lu's howls and began retreating, moving at a steady, measured pace away from the battlefield.

Ye Zhongming was furious.

He had used Wind and Thunder to unleash a skill, channeling his full strength to cleave through the gold-grade Human Refining Furnace. Though it might have looked effortless, it was anything but.

The furnace's durability was impressive. Even though he shattered it in one strike, the recoil was tremendous. The confined space amplified the shockwaves of his own power, which he had to endure.

Coupled with the furnace's extreme heat—though brief, it was intensely damaging. Ye Zhongming was left severely uncomfortable, his body suffering significant harm.

Then, he hadn't expected venom to attack him the moment the furnace broke.

For Ye Zhongming, this venom wasn't lethal—it couldn't even sustain a lasting impact on his combat ability. The antidote potions he carried could neutralize the toxicity completely.

But all of that took time. For a brief moment, the venom affected him, leaving him unprepared to dodge the small zombies.

When they collided with him, the small zombies exploded.

The combined force of the blast and the venom sent Ye Zhongming flying several meters before he crashed to the ground.

It had been too long since anyone had knocked Ye Zhongming down. These two eight-star evolved working together had managed it.

But... that was all they could do.

Ye Zhongming sprang up instantly, his fury driving him to activate a teleportation skill. Before Tong Lu could react, he was right beside him.

The Nether Tiger, unlike its master, wasn't mourning the loss of the equipment. Its reaction was faster than Tong Lu's—it opened its maw and lunged at the enemy. This was the best counter it could muster in such a short time frame.

Ye Zhongming didn't even dodge. His weapon swung toward Tong Lu, whose hands were just beginning to rise—half a beat slower than his battle beast.

Thud!

A head flew into the air.

One of the God Hall director's personal guards had been slain by Ye Zhongming.

After the sword strike, Ye Zhongming's other hand came down on the Nether Tiger's head. The

Battle beast had clamped its jaws onto Ye Zhongming's body and was exerting force when this seemingly light punch—actually carrying the weight of a thousand pounds—landed.

The Nether Tiger let out a pained cry as its body crumpled to the ground.

Meanwhile, the Wind and Thunder blade in Ye Zhongming's other hand traced an arc through the air before plunging straight down, impaling the Nether Tiger.

In its death throes, the level-eight warbeast, along with its lifeless master, crashed into Ye Zhongming. As Wind and Thunder claimed its life, its head slammed into Ye Zhongming's body, sending the Cloud Peak King stumbling back several steps.

The corpses of man and beast collapsed onto the wasteland. The first of the three major factions' elites sent to intercept Ye Zhongming had fallen.

At this moment, there were still a full two minutes left before the time limit set by the three leaders for stalling him...