

Apocalypse 1561

Chapter 1561: Cloud Peak's battle beasts went crazy

Ye Zhongming's hair turned half-white almost instantly!

Liu Zhenhong was greatly alarmed. She and several researchers beside her reached out to try to push Ye Zhongming to help him break free from this state, but were stopped by Ye Zhongming's gaze.

The current King of Cloud Peak could no longer speak, and his body was immobilized.

After he raised Lan You and activated the Gardener skill, instead of the expected dramatic plant transformation, an extremely strong suction force was generated.

Ye Zhongming had encountered similar situations before, but what was absorbed was usually the energy of the evolved themselves, or in more terrifying cases, their mental power.

However, when Lan You emitted this suction force, Ye Zhongming realized it was absorbing his life force.

Ye Zhongming couldn't see the changes in his hair, but he could see his exposed hands.

The skin there quickly lost its luster and began to develop fine wrinkles and faint spots.

At the same time, his body sent out signals—a wave of weakness began to surge, with an increasingly intense trend.

All of this made Ye Zhongming instantly aware that his life was draining away.

Yet, he wasn't overly panicked. He believed the absorption rate would take some time before it became a real problem, and he could handle it.

However, the drastic change in his hair had greatly alarmed Liu Zhengong and the others.

Apart from his own sensations, there was another reason Ye Zhongming stopped Liu Zhengong and the others—Lan You was undergoing changes.

With underdeveloped roots, Lan You's sprout was also small and fragile, looking delicate.

Previously, it had grown only three centimeters in a year.

But now, in less than ten seconds, it had shot up over ten centimeters!

In other words, ten seconds had surpassed more than three years of growth!

At the same time, Lan You's sprout itself had changed, developing spiral patterns in a somewhat bloody red color.

The fact that changes were occurring proved Ye Zhongming's skill was taking effect.

However, he wasn't sure whether this absorption was temporary or permanent.

Ye Zhongming's mind raced as he decided his next move.

If he stopped now, the absorbed life force would definitely not return, and his strength would significantly decline—perhaps even a drop in his evolution level.

If he didn't stop, at this rate, it might not be long before his life force was drained entirely, leading to death.

Ye Zhongming believed that, given his possession of a second life, the second option better served his interests.

Of course, it was uncertain whether the second life could restore the vitality lost from this situation. Ye Zhongming would have to gamble.

He chose to gamble.

He would rather lose the bet and live on as a feeble old man than play it safe and become a middle-aged or elderly man stuck at a seven-star or even lower evolution level, unable to recover.

Moreover, he had a feeling things wouldn't be so simple.

Ye Zhongming continued to age, and Lan You continued to grow. From the moment Ye Zhongming began channeling energy until now, nearly half a minute had passed. Ye Zhongming had gone from looking like a man in his twenties to one in his fifties or sixties. Liu Zhengong and the others watched in panic. Normally calm and decisive, she was now at a loss.

Meanwhile, Lan You had grown over a meter tall, no longer a tender sprout but with a thicker trunk and branches.

At this moment, no one else in the mountain stronghold knew the King of Cloud Peak was in extreme danger. They continued their work as usual.

Chapter 1561.5- Cloud Peak's battle beasts went crazy

The Beast Camp—the newest department in Cloud Peak—was overseen by Yuanyuan, the granddaughter of Li Daqian.

Her body, far more mature than her age, made the young girl appear like a teenager. At this moment, she was holding a stool, washing a strange little creature in a large basin.

It was a one-month-old level-five Lion-Nosed Hound pup.

Lion-Nosed Hounds were tamed monsters. Their levels were generally low, with adults only reaching four or five. Their combat ability was weak, even among peers; they were relatively feeble.

However, these monsters, only slightly larger than domestic dogs, had one outstanding ability—an extreme sensitivity to smells.

Liu Zhenghong said these creatures could distinguish tens of thousands of scents and remember them firmly. Under favorable weather conditions, their sense of smell could detect scents up to a hundred kilometers away! Even in the most complex environments, Lion-Nosed Hounds could easily locate the source of a remembered scent within twenty or thirty kilometers.

The Beast Camp wasn't just about training qualified mounts. Ye Zhongming intended to build it into a multifunctional mutated-life camp, and these Lion-Nosed Hounds were one of the functional beasts.

The pup's mother lay obediently beside the large basin, watching Yuanyuan, whom she was already familiar with, bathe her offspring. If the pup misbehaved, she would nudge it back with her large, sensitive nose.

Yuanyuan laughed beside them, carefree.

In the same room, several attendants from the Thousand Beasts Villa who had come with her were treating a mutated gorilla injured during training. Its abdomen was wounded, and they were cleaning the injury and applying powder beside its contracted owner.

The gorilla grunted; the wound no longer hurt, and it even enjoyed being pressed and prodded by these people. Its owner watched and smacked its head in exasperation.

Outside, many others were handling various tasks related to the beasts. The Beast Camp was now fully operational.

With the recent opening of the passage to Black Dragon City and rumors of an upcoming expedition, the Beast Camp was slightly busier than usual.

Suddenly, the usually peaceful and docile tamed beasts all turned to look in one direction, standing up in unison.

The scent-sensitive Lion-Nosed Hound beside Yuanyuan sniffed the air, and its blue eyes tinged with red—a sign of anger or battle readiness.

"What's wrong, Big Nose?" Yuanyuan reached out to pet the usually affectionate dog, but suddenly, the Lion-Nosed Hound grabbed its pup in its mouth and ran madly in one direction.

The basin overturned, spilling water everywhere.

By the time Yuanyuan chased outside, the Lion-Nosed Hound was already gone. She saw all the beasts in the Beast Camp going berserk, running in the same direction, ignoring their owners' and caretakers' shouts and attempts to stop them.

The Beast Camp was instantly in chaos. Yuanyuan and the other evolved stood bewildered, unsure of what was happening.

The same phenomenon occurred elsewhere. Little Tiger had been feeding his mount when the usually obedient creature suddenly broke free and vanished, leaving him staring at the food in his hand. He took a bite and muttered, "Not spoiled, still tasty."

Meanwhile, the beasts that had returned with Ye Zhongming—Yellow Ball, Yangos, the ice bird, and others—immediately rushed toward the testing grounds.

Except for those not in the stronghold, all the beasts ran toward the testing grounds. These mutated creatures seemed frenzied, with some of the larger ones crashing through buildings as they ran, collapsing countless structures in Cloud Peak's interior.

These mutated creatures belonged to the stronghold, most with owners. Even those in the Beast Camp without contracts had dedicated caretakers, yet none obeyed.

The beasts' sudden movement triggered Cloud Peak's defense system. Various defensive weapons aimed at the running creatures, but since they were part of Cloud Peak, the high-clearance defense troops didn't dare fire without orders from above.

But how could the higher-ups agree? These beasts included their own treasures!

Thus, the beasts collectively rushed to the testing grounds where Ye Zhongming was.

The female guards and other core members who had noticed the anomaly had already gathered around Ye Zhongming, fearing the frenzied beasts might harm him.

Yet, upon arriving, the beasts gradually calmed down, softly calling out in a manner resembling their usual affectionate or playful behavior with owners and caretakers.

Liu Zhenghong and Xia Lei, who had rushed over, exchanged glances before looking at Yellow Ball and Yangos, the "boss-level" beasts in the stronghold. After receiving confirmation, they ordered the fighters to step back.

Once the humans retreated, Yangos, the ice bird, Yellow Ball, the Three-Nosed Elephant, Nine Treasures, and other level-eight creatures took the innermost positions, closest to Ye Zhongming. Whether land, sky, or underground creatures, they all stood quietly on the ground, even the usually noisy evil dragon was now silent.

The next circle was occupied by level-seven creatures, followed by level-six, level-five, and so on.

The hierarchy among the beasts was even stricter.

"What's happening?"

Little Tiger, who had just finished eating beast rations, arrived muttering in disbelief, though it was unclear whom he was asking.

Xia Lei, Mo Ye, and others were equally confused. Seeing Ye Zhongming aged beyond recognition, they were filled with worry.

Le Dayuan had also arrived. Staring anxiously at Ye Zhongming, he exchanged words with his wife and likewise chose to respect Ye Zhongming's decision.

"Not sure, but it must be related to the Lan You plant. It's growing rapidly and emitting intense life energy. This energy might not affect us, but it seems highly beneficial to these beasts. Look at Yangos—if there weren't benefits, would it sit so properly like a schoolboy? It's always either flying or lying down otherwise."

Liu Zhenghong could only offer this analysis to explain the situation.

"But Zhongming's condition..." Xia Lei didn't care about beasts or life energy—her only concern was whether her man was okay.

Liu Zhenghong hesitated before replying, "Xia Lei, I truly don't know. At this point, we can only trust Little Ye's ability and luck."

Her words made even the less fragile Miya tear up.

"Let's wait and see. We should have faith in him." Le Dayuan couldn't bear it and comforted everyone.

Ye Zhongming's consciousness remained clear. He knew all the beasts currently in Cloud Peak—likely over twenty thousand—had gathered around him. He could sense the collapsed buildings nearby.

He could even keenly detect that beneath the stronghold, the Rat King and his consort had led their rodent army here, disregarding Cloud Peak's warnings. In the distant sky, a flock of passing mutated flying creatures was also speeding toward them, no longer fearing the dense array of demon crystal cannons on the city walls.

Even farther away, mutated creatures were growing restless.

He knew it was because of Lan You. Back in Black Dragon City, buried within the walls as a sprout, it had attracted a level-nine creature. Now, under the open sky with no obstructions, no energy-absorbing base, and having grown to this state, the peculiar waves it emitted were bound to drive many creatures wild.

However, Ye Zhongming didn't know the exact reason for this frenzy.

Twenty full minutes had passed since he activated the Gardener skill.

Lan You had grown to two meters tall, its trunk now as thick as a bowl. The earlier leaves had become branches, and a small green tree was taking shape, though its roots hadn't expanded much—only thickening slightly.

The life energy it emitted grew even more intense. Yangos and the other beasts wore expressions of intoxication, as if immersed in an extremely comfortable environment.

Ye Zhongming had aged to resemble a man in his seventies or eighties—hair and eyebrows entirely white, body hunched, skin withered. His life was in its final stages.

Liu Zhenghong and the others, who had initially insisted on respecting Ye Zhongming's decision, grew increasingly uneasy. They couldn't be sure Ye Zhongming would truly be unharmed. Xia Lei and the rest began considering forcibly stopping this process.

Even if Ye Zhongming never recovered, it was better than losing his life.

Ye Zhongming also regretted his choice. He realized that Lan You's absorption of his life force showed no signs of stopping after all this time—in fact, it seemed to be increasing!

He could feel his life nearing its end, his body on the verge of exhaustion.

Had he made the wrong choice?

Ye Zhongming's arm had been holding Lan You aloft—its sprout was too small initially, requiring him to raise it. But now, with his strength fading, he could no longer support the grown Lan You. With a thud, it fell to the ground.

The roots, pressed into the earth by the now-heavy trunk, instantly burrowed underground, vanishing instantly!

Chapter 1562: Rat King's death

This change made the already poised Cloud Peak members halt their actions.

The Lan You was transplanted here from Black Dragon City with soil still attached to its roots, but once removed from the ground, the soil turned to dust.

Fearing that this lifeform might possess other peculiar traits, Ye Zhongming had no intention of planting it directly in Cloud Peak during his experiments.

Truly uncertain whether it would bring fortune or disaster, Ye Zhongming dared not let it take root and sprout recklessly in Cloud Peak.

Yet now, whether he liked it or not, it had already embedded itself in the soil here.

Whether human evolved, the battle beasts, or Ye Zhongming himself, all of them, after the initial shock, began observing and sensing the changes.

Other lifeforms might not have noticed, but Ye Zhongming immediately realized that once the Lan You's roots entered the ground, the rate at which it drained his life force slowed.

Was it... absorbing energy from the soil instead of him?

Ye Zhongming couldn't be sure, but this was his only guess.

The situation reached a stalemate. Ye Zhongming's aging gradually slowed, giving him time to observe what would happen next.

He knew that if the Lan You could grow by absorbing energy from the soil, it wouldn't have grown only three centimeters per year in Black Dragon City. This situation was likely only temporary.

It was no wonder he thought this way—the Lan You's previous performance in Black Dragon City had been unimpressive.

Perhaps because Ye Zhongming's remaining life force was so scant, Lan You's drain on him weakened further. At one point, he found he could move again, though his body was still too weak to muster much strength.

But being able to move his hands was enough.

He began releasing Fertile Soil from his storage.

At this point, he wasn't sure whether the country specialty would have any effect on the Lan You, but out of desperation—and given its absorption of earth energy—he decided to try.

Hoping for the best, Ye Zhongming scattered all the Fertile Soil he had accumulated over time.

The country specialty was highly effective in accelerating plant growth. With so much Fertile Soil applied, the Lan You immediately underwent a visible transformation.

It began growing rapidly, even faster than when it had absorbed Ye Zhongming's life force. Its trunk thickened, branches sprouted, and lush green leaves unfurled.

Ye Zhongming never loosened his grip, maintaining the activated skill the entire time—after all, the Lan You had already stopped draining his energy.

Now, the Lan You grew explosively, adding half a meter in just over ten seconds. The life energy it radiated intensified, causing many battle beasts to tremble slightly.

Among the outermost ranks of battle beasts were those of lower levels—around three or four stars. These were either species with limited specie potential, kept at Cloud Peak for specific utility, or those with unique abilities but extremely slow evolution rates. Some had only recently arrived and hadn't yet benefited from the nutrient-rich feed.

Though positioned on the fringes, they still absorbed ample energy. When the Lan You entered its second growth spurt, releasing even denser energy, many of them fell into deep slumber, beginning their evolution.

Their owners or caretakers watched in ecstatic disbelief.

Some belonged to the female guards, support-type battle beasts that struggled to evolve. Their sudden advancement brought rare smiles to the usually stern-faced female warriors.

Liu Zhenghong and her researchers immediately began observing these battle beasts, even cautiously drawing blood from less critical specimens.

Many evolved who witnessed this turned their gazes back to the Lan You, their eyes alight with new understanding.

Energy that could directly trigger evolution in mutated lifeforms? This... was utterly unheard of.

The phenomenon was bizarre, its mechanisms unknown, but it was undeniably a boon for Cloud Peak.

Those rejoicing weren't just the battle beasts' owners—Ye Zhongming, the primary victim, also felt relief.

He discovered that some energy was being fed back into him during this phase of Lan You's explosive growth.

This wasn't an illusion. Ye Zhongming watched as the skin on his hands grew visibly younger. The Cloud Peak warriors watching him closely nearly wept with joy—their leader, who had aged into his seventies or eighties, now looked decades younger, closer to sixty.

This meant Cloud Peak's king was regaining his life force.

Feeling the energy flowing back, Ye Zhongming knew he had gambled correctly. The Fertile Soil did affect the Lan You, and its intense catalytic effect caused the plant to release excess life energy back to him.

However, just as he thought this process would continue, after a few more minutes, his appearance restored to that of a man in his forties, the energy feedback slowed. So did the Lan You's growth.

By now, it stood about five meters tall, its trunk over half a meter thick, with a distinct canopy of emerald-green leaves and branches. It resembled an exquisitely carved sculpture of green jade.

But anyone could see its growth had decelerated.

Ye Zhongming sensed it too—the energy feedback dwindled, nearly stopping altogether.

Panic set in. If this stopped, would the Lan You resume draining his life force?

Yet he had no more Fertile Soil to offer. The Lan You's appetite seemed bottomless. What could he do? Release the skill and end this? But he was only middle-aged now—much of his life force remained unreturned. Abandoning the process now would be a waste.

Indecision invites calamity. Ye Zhongming knew this well. If the situation were irreversible, he'd have to cut his losses. A middle-aged state was still far better than the elderly one from before.

So he prepared to deactivate the skill.

But beneath the ground—unseen by anyone—something entirely unexpected occurred.

Chapter 1562.5- Rat King's death

The Lan You's rapid growth, fueled by the Fertile Soil, wasn't limited to its visible parts. Its root system had expanded even more dramatically underground.

From its seedling stage, the Lan You's roots had always been far more developed than its upper body. Once its roots took hold in the soil, especially with the Fertile Soil as fertilizer, they grew thicker and longer, spreading in all directions, each tendril absorbing energy from the earth.

The energy in the surrounding soil paled in comparison to that of a high-level evolved like Ye Zhongming, so the vast root network became the key to sustaining Lan You's growth.

Yet beneath the testing grounds, the soil wasn't empty. It teemed with life—mutated rats.

Previously, Ye Zhongming had forbidden these creatures from burrowing under the mountain villa. The Rat King and his mate wouldn't dare disobey.

But the Lan You's energy fluctuations proved too tempting. Disregarding the ban, they tunneled underground toward it.

Of course, the Rat King and his army hadn't lost all reason. They dug deep, avoiding damage to Cloud Peak's defenses, and limited their tunnels to a few passages to prevent collapses.

By the time they reached the area beneath the Lan You, the battle beasts above had already been absorbing energy for some time.

Underground, barely any energy seeped through. Unwilling to accept this, the Rat King attempted to communicate with Ye Zhongming mentally. When that failed, impatience won out. He ordered his elite forces to dig upward, breaching the surface.

The Rat King reasoned that even if Ye Zhongming found out later, he wouldn't punish them too harshly. As part of Cloud Peak, they deserved their share of energy just like the other battle beasts.

So the Rat King's elite mutated rat army began tunneling upward furiously.

What happened next filled the Rat King with instant regret.

His forces never broke through to the surface. Instead, they encountered Lan You's descending roots.

When the first rat accidentally brushed against a root, tragedy struck.

The roots came alive, surging from all directions, piercing the rats' bodies. Even a five-star mutated rat lasted mere seconds before being drained into a desiccated husk.

The Rat King's elites were the cream of his army—many were five-star, six, or even seven-star rats. They quickly noticed the anomaly. At first, they tried fleeing, digging in other directions. But the roots were everywhere, inescapable.

Forced to fight, the mutated rat army resisted.

Yet their efforts were futile. Even seven-star rats could destroy nearby roots, only for new ones to sprout instantly. The underground dominators stood no chance—the Lan You's roots slaughtered and absorbed them en masse.

Though only a fraction of the rat army had come, they were all elites, numbering over 100,000. Their mass deaths replenished the energy the Lan You had nearly exhausted from the Life-Nourishing Soil.

Aboveground, Ye Zhongming, on the verge of giving up, suddenly felt the energy feedback increase again. He paused his decision to end the skill.

Unaware of the cause, he couldn't pass up this unexpected boon.

Watching the Lan You resume its frenzied growth, the surrounding evolved finally relaxed. At least for now, their leader seemed likely to recover fully.

While Ye Zhongming's situation improved, the Rat King's worsened.

His forces were being massacred. Within minutes, most mutated rats had been drained into lifeless husks.

Now concerned only with survival, the Rat King fled with his remaining 10,000 subordinates.

As a high-level mutated lifeform, it raced through the tunnels swiftly, soon escaping the dug-out area.

The Rat King and his mate allowed themselves a sliver of relief, planning to return to Cloud Peak aboveground. They'd explain the situation to Ye Zhongming and investigate what had annihilated their elites.

But their relief lasted barely ten seconds.

Tender, milky-white roots burst from the surrounding soil, attacking the last of the mutated rat army.

Skills erupted underground, causing tremors noticeable even to those above. Ye Zhongming and the battle beasts sensed the disturbances but assumed that Lan You caused them. With Ye Zhongming still not fully restored, no one investigated.

The Rat King and his mate—both eight-star beings—fought desperately as they fled, their numbers dwindling rapidly.

These two mighty survivors of the apocalypse now faced their greatest existential threat.

They unleashed every skill, blasting open new tunnels. Their eight-star strength carried them far beyond Cloud Peak's borders—kilometers away in mere moments.

For underground combat and escape, their speed was astonishing.

The roots seemed to thin—they were nearing the edge of the Lan You's range.

But at that moment, two roots, far thicker than the others and tinged red, slithered through the soil like vipers and struck.

The Rat King and his mate thrashed wildly, but resistance was useless. Five minutes later, they joined their subordinates as dried husks.

The mighty eight-star rulers of the underground had met their end through sheer misfortune.

The energy from two eight-star beings propelled the Lan You into another growth spurt, its height now nearing eight meters!

The energy it radiated triggered evolution in five- and six-star battle beasts!

Of the nearly 20,000 warbeasts present, how many were seven- or eight-star? The vast majority now entered an evolutionary state.

The spectacle was awe-inspiring, leaving Cloud Peak's members speechless.

Ye Zhongming recovered all his lost life force, even absorbing some excess energy.

He considered ending the skill now, avoiding further risk, but then realized he couldn't deactivate it.

Instantly, heaven became hell again.

After all this, was he still doomed to be drained into a withered corpse?

Chapter 1563: More reinforcements

Ye Zhongming was no longer in his previous weak and feeble elderly state but had returned to his normal form. He began attempting to break free from the control actively.

However, to his frustration, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't free himself from Lan You's branches. It was as if this thing needed his skills to absorb energy.

"Boss! Zhongming! Little Ye!"

Shouts came from outside. Seeing that Ye Zhongming seemed motionless, the others from Cloud Peak were urging him to give up quickly.

What they didn't know was that Ye Zhongming couldn't break free at all.

For a moment, Ye Zhongming felt as if his hands had grown together with Lan You.

Forcing himself to stay calm, Ye Zhongming knew it wasn't yet time to despair. The reason he hadn't mentally summoned Red Hair to come and chop Lan You down was that he noticed something: among the leaves of Lan You, which had now surged to a height of fifteen meters, a small number of white flowers had bloomed.

The vibrant green and pure white formed a striking contrast.

Flowers?

This was what Ye Zhongming was concerned about now.

Lan You was flowering?

The mystery of this plant had already given Ye Zhongming a "personal" experience. He was curious—what would happen after it bloomed?

Ye Zhongming knew that speculating here wouldn't yield any answers, so he began observing the reactions of the battle beasts around him. This was the most direct way.

Yellow Ball, Yangos, Three-nosed Elephant, Jiubao were all battle beasts Ye Zhongming was very familiar with. He saw them lying quietly with their eyes closed, breathing rhythmically as if asleep.

Compared to before, their breathing had quickened slightly.

This meant they were now absorbing more energy than before.

It seemed that after Lan You bloomed, the energy it produced had increased.

At the same time, now that he had returned to his peak condition, Ye Zhongming also noticed changes underground. Red Hair relayed the deaths of the Rat King couple and the mental communication they had sent earlier to the Cloud Peak King.

Lan You's roots could kill and absorb level-eight lifeforms?!

Ye Zhongming was utterly shocked. It had just grown from a small seedling to its current size—how could it already possess such formidable power?

Even if the Rat King couple weren't among the most powerful in the Cloud Peak faction, they had an army of 100,000 underlings. Together, even Yellow Ball or Yangos would have had to tread carefully around them. How could they have been killed so easily and turned into energy for this tree?

Ye Zhongming began to feel worried.

If these roots ran out of things to absorb underground, would they suddenly surge to the surface?

There were over 20,000 mutated lifeforms around Lan You—nearly all of Cloud Peak's battle beasts were gathered here. If the roots killed them all, Cloud Peak's strength would instantly drop by a third!

And what if Lan You's roots weren't just interested in mutated lifeforms? What if they targeted evolved humans, too? Given how effortlessly it had killed the Rat King couple, wouldn't all of Cloud Peak be in danger?

This was something Ye Zhongming could not tolerate.

He decided to take action.

If Lan You had only demonstrated its ability to enhance battle beasts, Ye Zhongming would have absolutely chosen to have Red Hair chop it down and burn it. Because this was a ticking time bomb—who knew when it might bring disaster to all of Cloud Peak?

Compared to its benefits, Lan You's potential threat was far more alarming to Ye Zhongming.

But now, the tree had bloomed. Would it bear fruit? If just the energy it emitted could have such a powerful effect on warbeasts, what about the fruit it produced?

Could it be some kind of divine fruit for mutated lifeforms?

With this speculation, Ye Zhongming became reluctant to destroy the tree simply.

He chose another approach.

Ye Zhongming cast a skill on Lan You.

Intelligence Mark!

This was one of the abilities granted to him by the Nature Essence.

This ability allowed Ye Zhongming to bestow medium-level intelligence upon a mutated plant and... gain control over it.

The cooldown was long, but Ye Zhongming rarely used it.

This was also why he hadn't panicked earlier—he couldn't break free from Lan You's hold on his hands, nor could he stop the Gardener's Cultivation skill. However, Intelligence Mark was an ability that could be used alongside other Gardener skills.

After using Intelligence Mark, Ye Zhongming felt uneasy. He couldn't guarantee whether this skill would work on the mysterious and powerful Lan You.

Then, changes began. Ye Zhongming felt his mental energy pouring wildly into Lan You's trunk.

A herd of mythical beasts stampeded through his mind.

First, it had absorbed his life force—now it was absorbing his mental energy?

Ye Zhongming might not claim to be the strongest in combat, but the Cloud Peak King was a monster when it came to mental energy.

His mental energy surged into Lan You's body like a tidal wave. Both Ye Zhongming and the other Cloud Peak members noticed the mysterious tree trembling slightly. Moments later, the trembling intensified.

At first, Ye Zhongming didn't understand what was happening. He thought it was the same as before—Lan You was simply absorbing life force to enhance itself, and now it was doing the same with mental energy.

Chapter 1563.5- More reinforcements

But soon, he realized that a faint connection had begun to form between him and Lan You.

Unlike the earlier sense of unity, which had felt more like a connection to his lost life force, this was a genuine link, similar to the ones he shared with Red Hair, Yellow Ball, or Yangos.

However, this connection felt very rough and met with significant resistance.

Ye Zhongming even sensed that Lan You was developing its own intelligence!

This couldn't be allowed!

Ye Zhongming knew that if this plant, already formidable by instinct alone, gained independent thought, Cloud Peak's battle beasts and evolved humans might truly be in danger.

He actively increased his mental energy output, charging against the "obstructions."

Thanks to the Soul Refining Technique and his previous massive mental energy boosts, the Cloud Peak King's mental reserves were as vast as an ocean.

He maintained this for over fifteen seconds while being drained and actively expending energy. When only a tenth of his mental energy remained, he clearly felt the obstructions shatter under his assault!

Ye Zhongming and Lan You, now awakened to intelligence, formed a partnership.

Despite Ye Zhongming's immense mental reserves, he hadn't gained full control over Lan You. But their relationship had become very close.

Lan You would generally comply with Ye Zhongming's words as long as it didn't involve life-or-death conflicts.

At the same time, Ye Zhongming learned many things.

First, he confirmed that Lan You was not an Earth-native lifeform but originated from a mysterious world full of vibrant colors, just like the light it had emitted earlier.

As a seed, it had arrived on Earth alongside the secret realm keys, landing atop Changbai Mountain, where it took root and sprouted.

Second, it wasn't inherently a carnivorous plant that fed on the life force of mutated beings. Like Earth's plants, it relied on absorbing water, sunlight, and nutrients from the soil to grow. The reason it had absorbed Ye Zhongming's life force and drained the lives of the Rat King couple and their 100,000-strong rat army was because Ye Zhongming had used the Gardener's Cultivation skill on it.

Abnormally rapid growth required an abnormal price. For ordinary plants, Ye Zhongming only needed to expend mental energy. But Lan You was too special, its life level too high, forcing him to pay with his life force—and even then, he couldn't break free.

Now that the Cultivation skill had ended, Lan You no longer needed to absorb vast amounts of energy to sustain its growth. It could simply absorb nutrients normally.

Additionally, the multicolored energy it emitted had an incredibly nourishing effect on mutated animals. This was one of its inherent traits. Under normal growth conditions, this energy wasn't particularly strong—its function was somewhat similar to Bug Emperor Honey, promoting and accelerating the evolution of mutated lifeforms. But it couldn't instantly grant them the ability to absorb massive energy and evolve immediately. What had happened today was entirely due to special circumstances.

This wasn't hard to understand. Lan You used this method to attract mutated lifeforms to live and nest near it. Their waste and secretions would enter the soil, becoming fertilizer that, in turn, nourished it. Essentially, this was a small, mutually beneficial ecosystem.

It was only the unusual nature of the energy that made it so astonishing.

Finally, Lan You had bloomed, and it could bear fruit. But it couldn't reproduce—because there were no others of its kind here, it couldn't propagate through root matching.

If it couldn't find others of its kind, it would eventually reach its evolutionary limit and split itself in two. Though this would reduce its power, it would create a new individual, allowing the species to avoid extinction through separate growth and absorption.

Right now, Lan You was still far from reaching its peak state.

These flowers—and the fruit they would eventually bear—were merely signs that Lan You had reached the first major stage of its growth. They didn't hold much substantive significance.

Of course, this was from Lan You's perspective. Like the energy it emitted, the flowers and fruit were means to attract mutated lifeforms—just that the flowers and fruit provided higher-tier energy, capable of drawing in more advanced lifeforms to nest nearby.

Having figured all this out, Ye Zhongming lowered his hands, feeling pleased.

He knew that the enormous price he'd paid for this tree had already been worth it.

From now on, Cloud Peak's human evolved would have the Extreme Light Training Platform and Bug Emperor Honey to boost their strength, while the battle beasts would have Lan You. Cloud Peak's overall combat power would undoubtedly experience a leap forward, and this would continue indefinitely.

Seeing Ye Zhongming's hands leave Lan You, everyone sighed in relief. At the same time, the still-conscious high-level battle beasts—those at levels seven and eight—noticed that the energy they could absorb had become faint. They stood up and looked at the white flowers on Lan You's branches.

"Little Ye, can I eat these flowers?" Yangos, who stood taller than Lan You, looked down at the tiny flowers, drooling.

It could sense that these flowers, minuscule to it, contained energy it desperately craved.

But Yangos wasn't stupid. It knew this thing wasn't ordinary. Though it hadn't witnessed the underground slaughter of the Rat King couple, the dragon instinctively sensed the tree was dangerous and didn't recklessly approach the flowers.

Moreover, Yangos was well aware of Cloud Peak's rules. Something this valuable couldn't be claimed without permission—doing so would invite punishment.

In all of Cloud Peak, only one person had the authority to decide: the king of this place, Ye Zhongming.

At that moment, the Cloud Peak King looked up at Lan You's canopy, counting the flowers.

After absorbing nearly all of Ye Zhongming's life force, the life force of 100,000 high-level mutated rats, and the energy of two level-eight lifeforms... it had only produced fifteen flowers?

Even knowing these flowers were precious, Ye Zhongming found it hard to believe that this massive tree, fifteen meters tall with a canopy covering over a thousand square meters, had only bloomed so few.

Was it proportional to its height? Fifteen meters meant fifteen flowers?

After communicating with Lan You, it turned out this was exactly the case. Ye Zhongming could only stare in speechless exasperation.

After some consideration, Ye Zhongming leaped up to Lan You and plucked five of the small white flowers.

Up close, he saw that each flower had only three petals, with no stamens at the center—likely because these flowers couldn't reproduce. But then, how would the fruit form? Ye Zhongming didn't understand.

Then again, there were too many inexplicable things in the apocalypse, let alone from an extraterrestrial lifeform like this.

"Little Ye, hurry up and give me two!" Yangos flapped its wings, begging.

Ye Zhongming ignored it.

Five flowers, three petals each—only fifteen petals in total.

Ye Zhongming distributed them among the conscious high-level warbeasts, giving each a single petal. For these creatures, whose bodies were measured in meters, the tiny petals were almost comical as they carefully placed them in their mouths.

But every battle beast that ate a petal immediately felt a surge of tremendous energy enter its body. They quickly lay down to absorb it—even the previously demanding Yangos.

Everyone was amazed by the potency of these petals.

The only pity was that Red Hair and the Undead Dragon-fish showed little interest in the petals. The energy didn't seem to have much effect on them.

"Little Ye, are they that precious?" Liu Zhenhong looked up at the remaining ten flowers.

Ye Zhongming nodded, also gazing at the flowers. "I suspect that once they bear fruit, the fruit might allow level-six lifeforms to evolve directly. Three might even push a level-seven to evolve. As for whether they can make level-eight evolve, that's hard to say. After all, reaching level nine isn't just about energy."

Chapter 1564: Youth Army

"Give me two flowers!"

Liu Zhenhong's eyes sparkled. She was currently troubled by the Death King Tree's evolution, which might give her a whole new perspective.

"Since Lan You is so beneficial, we should think of a way to shield it. That way, too many mutated creatures won't be drawn to it."

Little Tigerr stood nearby, watching his mount absorb energy with closed eyes, while suggesting Ye Zhongming.

Back when Lan You was still a sapling, it had already attracted the attention of two level nine creatures—the Human-Bear King and the Snow Wolf King. Now that it had evolved to its first stage, blossomed, and borne fruit, its allure to mutated creatures would undoubtedly be even stronger.

The location of Cloud Peak wasn't the frigid northern wastelands but deep within the heart of the country's territory, where the number of mutated creatures far surpassed that of the north. If they all came here to cause trouble, no matter how strong the villa's defenses were, they wouldn't be able to hold out.

The others agreed, having witnessed firsthand its attraction to battle beasts—it was indeed something that could drive mutated creatures mad.

But unexpectedly, Ye Zhongming shook his head.

He pointed to the sky and said, "Look."

Everyone followed his finger and saw a flock of flying creatures circling hundreds of meters above. These were the same ones that had been drawn by the scent earlier, but upon reaching the vicinity of Cloud Peak, they hadn't dared to descend. Instead, they patrolled the skies.

"Mutated gray geese. Their levels are decent—the highest is seventh, while the rest are fifth or sixth."

Everyone had sharp eyes and quickly discerned the levels of these flying creatures. They spoke casually about it, as fewer than thirty of them posed no real threat to Cloud Peak.

"Lan You constantly emits energy. Yangos, Yellow Ball, and others actively came here to evolve, clearly benefiting from it. Yet, these gray geese didn't lose their minds and recklessly swoop down. Why do you think that is?"

Faced with Ye Zhongming's question, everyone exchanged glances, knowing it likely came down to whether the attraction was strong enough. But Lan You was indeed a divine entity capable of directly evolving level five and six creatures, creating a contradiction.

"Boss, are you saying that if you stop casting skills on Lan You, this tree won't emit large amounts of energy anymore?"

Gan Lan, who was at the villa today, thought for a moment before speaking up.

Ye Zhongming nodded. "You could say that, at least at its current stage of evolution. Under normal circumstances, Lan You's energy is relatively mild and won't drive creatures mad. Just like these gray geese—even though they rushed here eagerly, sensing an intense desire, they didn't recklessly charge Cloud Peak's defenses. They've even flown farther away now that Lan You has returned to normal. Their wariness of the villa and us outweighs their longing for the energy."

"Then we just leave it like this? What if a level nine creature comes one day?"

Little Tiger was still a bit uneasy. He was acting like a miser, terrified of anyone coveting Lan You—after all, he fantasized about riding a level nine war beast across the battlefield.

Ye Zhongming smiled without answering, while the others also stayed silent, giving Little Tiger odd looks.

Then everyone went about their business—some chose to stay with their battle beasts, some returned to work, some gathered to plan the next hunt, and some, with nothing else to do, simply waited to see what level the battle beasts would reach upon waking.

Little Tiger was dragged away by Candy, still looking confused. He lowered his head and asked his girlfriend where he'd gone wrong.

Candy rolled her eyes at her stubborn, inflexible boyfriend and said, "Did you forget we were just discussing when to go kill a level nine?"

Hearing this, Little Tiger gasped and smacked his own head. "I'm so stupid! Right, if a level nine creature really comes, wouldn't that be perfect? The villa's defense system alone would give it hell, and with our people and beasts, we could totally kill it!"

Candy said, "Took you long enough! Lan You is in the training ground, near the back mountain. If a level nine creature wants to get there, land-based ones would have to break through the front gate—the most fortified part of the villa—and they'd be half-dead before reaching Lan You. And if a flying level nine comes? Even better! Cloud Peak's anti-air defenses and air force would shine, plus there's Yangos, Icebird, Red Hair, Sister Xia Bai—they'd ensure it never leaves alive."

"And underground!" Little Tiger's eyes gleamed as he added, "Lan You even killed the Rat King. If any blind fools try to tunnel in, they'll regret it!"

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Ye Zhongming waited at Cloud Peak for a day until Yellow Ball, Yangos, and the others finished absorbing the energy from Lan You's petals and awoke. Through communication, he learned that Yangos and Yellow Ball were now infinitely close to level nine. But to cross that threshold, they needed to comprehend something on their own.

This was the evolution lock placed on mutated creatures—just like the people of the Blue Realm, they didn't need potions to evolve but had to break through their limits step by step, achieving progress beyond human understanding.

Once they awoke, Ye Zhongming immediately returned to Black Dragon City. After meeting with Elder An and the others, he set out with the female guards.

Over five hundred teenagers were accompanied by Xiao Xuan—a youth army Ye Zhongming called the Youth Army.

Ever since learning this man was the Cloud Peak King, over ten thousand children aged ten to sixteen had signed up. Some factions even proactively sent eligible youths from their own forces to join Cloud Peak, hoping that once these kids became official members, they'd reap some benefits, just like the factions in Ying City had once done.

The northern wastelands lived up to their name. Beyond Black Dragon City, the temperature dropped rapidly, with thermometers showing it had already fallen below -30°C.

And this was before even crossing the border—the latitude wasn't particularly high, nor was it the coldest time of year. This temperature was terrifying.

Even though evolved had high adaptability to temperature, in this environment, they still had to bundle up in thick fur coats.

Yangos in the sky had been complaining nonstop about the cold. Icebird, however, thrived in such conditions—even diving into a cold storm earlier and emerging unscathed, leaving the Black Dragon City kids dumbstruck. Their fear of Icebird now surpassed even that of the devil dragon, much to Yangos's displeasure.

Ye Zhongming bringing these hopefuls out didn't mean they could rest easy, assured of a future in Cloud Peak. They had to pass a trial—only those who survived would earn the right to join the nation's top faction.

Chapter 1564.5- Youth Army

As for the criteria for passing... it was simply staying alive.

Ye Zhongming distributed simple gray-grade equipment and weapons to the kids, dividing them into ten squads of about fifty each.

From the moment they left Black Dragon City, the ten squads began hunting, scouting, cooking—any task that needed doing, they had to do it. Ye Zhongming, the female guards, and the hundreds of battle beasts were their "masters" to serve.

This wasn't bullying but tempering.

If these had been kids from peacetime, all five hundred would've been dead within a day. But these children had survived five years in the apocalypse—some as young as five or six when it began, the oldest barely over ten. Many had survived alone.

Underestimating them would be a grave mistake.

Any one of them likely had more blood on their hands than the most notorious killers of peaceful times.

Their youth had left them lagging in evolution, but that didn't mean they weren't adapted to this era.

After two days, the youth corps had fewer than ten casualties, half of whom would recover after a few days of rest. Only five had died.

But starting on the third day, when Ye Zhongming assigned specific hunting targets, casualties skyrocketed.

Before, they could hunt anything edible, so naturally, they targeted low-level, easy prey.

Now, Ye Zhongming assigned targets above their evolution level, drastically increasing the difficulty.

Each squad was assigned a few female guard members, not to rescue them in danger but to record their performance. Even if someone died right in front of them, the observers wouldn't lift a finger.

By day's end, deaths soared—over forty didn't return, and more than a dozen were left permanently disabled. Without special jobs to heal their injuries, they were effectively crippled.

The next day, deaths dipped slightly to twenty, but another dozen-plus were severely injured and had to withdraw. And this was with Cloud Peak providing full medical care to the wounded—otherwise, the numbers would've been higher.

In just four days since leaving Black Dragon City, the five-hundred-strong force had been reduced by a fifth.

That night, Ye Zhongming gathered the remaining kids around a fire, scrutinizing each face before telling them they could quit now. They'd be sent back to Black Dragon City at dawn with the severely injured.

Not everyone had nerves of steel, even among these apocalypse-hardened youths. They were beginning to realize that joining Cloud Peak—the nation's top faction—and following Ye Zhongming—the nation's top evolved—came at a price. Their aspirations were grand, but achieving them meant walking through the gates of hell.

Life in Black Dragon City couldn't compare to Cloud Peak, but at least there, they could survive by inertia—unlike now, facing deadly mutated creatures daily, teetering between life and death.

One by one, over fifty hands rose.

Ye Zhongming nodded, having them step forward. They were given warm tents, sweet porridge, perfectly roasted jerky, and even a silver-grade piece of equipment.

But many began crying as they ate, some wailing loudly.

They knew they'd been eliminated and missed perhaps the greatest opportunity of their lives to rise above.

But there was no helping it—they were afraid of death.

At dawn, the fifty-plus were sent off with the wounded. The injured would be cared for in Black Dragon City, given light work. Some outstanding performers had already been noted—they'd join Cloud Peak's logistics.

For the remaining 340-plus youths, Ye Zhongming showed them what those who'd left had dreamed of—evolution potions.

Over 320 received potions matching their levels, but seventeen or eighteen didn't. Ye Zhongming called them out, lining them up at the front.

"You won't receive potions. You've been eliminated."

At Cloud Peak King's words, the kids were stunned.

One bold soul stiffened his neck and demanded to know why. Ye Zhongming signaled to a subordinate, who pulled out observation records and explained.

These kids had all made "mistakes" at critical moments.

Mistakes like avoiding battle, slacking off, or... harming their comrades.

"Cloud Peak warriors are ruthless—to outsiders. But your ruthlessness was turned on your own," Ye Zhongming said simply before flicking his wrist. Six of them instantly lost their heads—they'd deliberately caused comrades' deaths in battle.

"The rest of you, walk back to Black Dragon City on your own."

With that, Ye Zhongming left, leaving the shivering youths feeling like they'd been cast into hell.

In truth, they'd been rejected not just by Cloud Peak but also by Black Dragon City.

Another new day arrived, with the 320-plus youths having evolved. The highest among them was now five-star.

Ye Zhongming rewarded the top performers with better equipment.

And a new mission began.

Five more days passed, reducing the 320-strong force to just over 300. However, their average evolution level had reached five stars, with standouts like Xiao Xuan hitting six stars.

These kids had never imagined that they'd match the core members of Black Dragon City's major factions in less than half a month.

Ye Zhongming gathered them once more, distributing new equipment and potions. The top performers received higher-grade gear and potions, and Xiao Xuan got a blue-grade item and intermediate potions.

"What comes next will be your final trial. Those who pass will officially become members of Cloud Peak."

Chapter 1565: Sneak attack

In the northern lands, a unique type of temporary structure existed called an underground ice house.

Because of the cold storms, when temperatures plummeted at night, evolved would dig into the snow and hide in snow caves, which provided warmth and effectively shielded them from ice storms.

Over time, in higher latitude regions, some evolved began constructing underground ice houses along frequently traveled hunting routes using blocks of ice. These ice houses were exceptionally sturdy, offering protection from ice storms and attacks by mutated creatures.

Beneath the seemingly endless ice plains of the northern lands, there were numerous safe points—these underground ice houses.

At that moment, near the foot of the mountains on the backside of Mount Kas, many people were staying in a row of five connected underground ice houses, waiting to endure the approaching night.

The next day, they would reach the assembly point before heading to the Collapsed Canyon north of Black Dragon City, where they would fight to the death against those from the country.

They had long coveted the fortified city of Black Dragon City. There, the weather was relatively warm, resources of mutated creatures were abundant, and several naturally formed hunting grounds were at just the right distance.

That place was far more suitable for human survival in this post-apocalyptic world.

Capturing it would make life easier and less prone to death. And with it as a springboard, they could even reach the warmer southern regions.

This time, the mighty King Meibuning would personally lead the expeditionary force, with evolved humans from surrounding settlements joining in. The number of seasoned warriors alone exceeded fifty thousand.

What qualified as a seasoned warrior? Those with relatively complete jobs and skills, extensive hunting experience, and an evolution level surpassing four stars.

Compared to the population of Black Dragon City, the number of these warriors might not have seemed large, but each was a fearless and valiant fighter, hardened by bitter cold and death, nothing like the weaklings from the country who only knew how to hide behind high city walls.

Fifty thousand of them were more than enough to crush five times or even more opponents from Black Dragon City.

"Hey, old Barry, couldn't you have gone outside to piss? We didn't want to smell your piss all night while we slept!"

A man with a flushed face from drinking had yelled at another man in the corner who was relieving himself, his breath reeking of alcohol. His tone had been teasing, as if he wasn't really telling the man to go outside but just trying to get a laugh from the others.

"Damn it, you wanted me to hold it in?" The man called Barry had retorted indifferently. After finishing, he deliberately turned around, aimed his lower half at the twenty-some people in the ice house, and then provocatively flipped off the man who had spoken.

The ice house had immediately erupted in laughter and chaotic whistling.

"Look, she is embarrassed!"

Everyone had turned to the only woman among the group of twenty. Leaning against a block of ice, she had been chewing on a piece of half-raw meat still streaked with blood. The so-called "embarrassment" had just been a blood smear on her face.

Most of the men in the ice house had tasted this woman before, but that had been two years ago, when she was just a two-star evolved human who had joined this team called Ural.

Low level, weak, and quite pretty—in a survival-of-the-fittest team where no one cared as long as no one died, her fate had been predictable.

Back then, almost every man on the team was intimate with Nova.

Chapter 1565.5- Sneak attack

She had resisted, but it had been futile. Eventually, she accepted it and started charging for her services. Some refused to pay and even beat her for it, but she endured. Still, some evolved humans would give her a few magic crystals or look out for her slightly during hunts.

Over two years, Nova evolved from a two-star to a six-star evolved.

Within the entire Ural team, her strength ranked in the top ten.

She was no longer someone to be trifled with.

Those who had taken advantage of her in the past, as long as they couldn't defeat her, now had to give her a monthly tribute of demon crystals. Otherwise, Nova would find excuses to beat them up, leaving them injured during hunts or even unable to hunt for a while.

In this brutal post-apocalyptic world, it was almost a death sentence.

Even after the Ural team's leader tried to mediate, it had little effect—after all, he hadn't intervened back then and had even taken advantage of her himself.

Ultimately, Nova reduced the amount of demon crystals she demanded each month, but payment was non-negotiable. The men accepted it—what else could they do if they couldn't beat her?

"Popov, do you want to hand over two extra level five demon crystals next month?"

Nova had narrowed her eyes and glared at the man.

Popov had immediately shut his mouth.

Nova spat, tossing the meat onto the ground, and coldly walked out of the ice house.

Even if she no longer cared who took her body, she still wouldn't relieve herself in front of so many people. She needed to take care of it before nightfall.

The air outside was cold but refreshingly crisp.

Nova squatted behind a snow-covered rock, but she heard faint footsteps approaching within seconds. A cold glint flashed in her eyes as she pulled a hidden belt from her waist.

She was going to teach these disgusting opportunists a lesson they'd never forget.

Without even pulling up her pants, she leaped out from the side, her whip lashing toward the source of the sound.

But in the twilight, her eyes widened in shock—no one was there. Only a pair of boots stood propped up by thin sticks, controlled by a young child at least ten meters away.

In this post-apocalyptic world, even the sudden appearance of a seemingly harmless child meant danger was near.

Nova tried to retract her arm, but it was too late.

From beneath the snow beside the rock, a figure burst out. A flash of blade light severed Nova's arm.

Her silver leather armor might as well have been paper—it offered no protection.

The pain hadn't even registered yet, but the sight of her detached arm sent panic surging through her. She instinctively tried to scream, but before her mouth could open, a silver streak shot through it and exited the back of her skull.

The lower half of Nova's face was now a gaping hole.

As the blade and silver light struck, the child who had used the sticks to distract Nova darted forward, catching the severed arm midair before lunging again to steady the collapsing body. A dagger appeared in their hand, smoothly and swiftly plunging into the woman's heart to ensure her death.

The entire sequence took barely two seconds.

The blade-wielder landed—it was Xiao Xuan, who had followed Ye Zhongming. He signaled into the distance, and from a snowdrift emerged an archer holding a green bow. Behind him were nearly fifty youths, gliding silently on snowshoes.

Reaching the underground ice house Nova had just left, ten of the youths split off while the others took positions near the remaining ice houses.

Xiao Xuan scanned his companions, then yanked open the ice block sealing the entrance. Two ranged fighters immediately aimed their bows and crossbows inside, unleashing a rapid barrage of attacks.

The battle erupted without warning.

Four or five of the evolved inside died instantly, caught off guard by the sudden assault at close range.

After the arrows came a volley of skills hurled inside, then, the rest of the youths produced heavy hammer-like weapons and smashed the ice house's roof.

The coordinated assault was seamless. The ice house collapsed.

The evolved inside weren't about to be crushed to death—they burst out, only to be met with another wave of attacks.

Few had survived the initial assault unscathed, and as they emerged one by one, the waiting youths cut them down. Only a handful managed to break free.

The skirmish drew attention from the other ice houses. Their occupants rushed out to investigate, only to be ambushed by the waiting youths. Soon, all five ice houses were embroiled in combat.

Numerically, the Ural team held an overwhelming advantage. But the surprise attack had halved their numbers before they could react. By the time they regrouped aboveground, the youths had already withdrawn, retreating swiftly without hesitation.

The Ural leader surveyed the carnage. There was no way he'd let these attackers escape. He ordered pursuit.

After a few hundred meters, he called for a halt—the distinctly Eastern features of their foes reminded him of Black Dragon City.

He commanded a retreat.