

Apocalypse 1646

Chapter 1646: Dragon Spirit Saint Bone

Among Cloud Peak's many battle beasts, the one most adept at expressing emotions through facial expressions was undoubtedly Teacher Park's Three-nosed Elephant.

That fellow, though its intelligence had declined after a severe head injury—making it childlike—had an incredibly vivid range of expressions on its elephant face!

To put it simply, joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness—every emotion could be conveyed so clearly that anyone could empathize just by looking.

Next came Yangos and Yellow Ball.

As for those with expressionless faces, there were plenty. But the Undead Dragon-fish undoubtedly took first place.

It couldn't be helped—as an undead creature, it simply lacked the biological functions to form expressions.

Yet just now, on that still-incomplete face, the Undead Dragon-fish had clearly smiled.

Mockery, scorn, ridicule, disdain... it was all there.

The sight filled Cloud Peak's members with delight, while Hidden Snake Journey's people paled in horror.

The Mercury Centipede reared half its body up, its head pointed toward the Undead Dragon-fish as it let out a sharp, piercing shriek.

It was afraid.

The Mercury Centipede was far from a top-tier battle beast. Its combat style and skill potency relied entirely on its evolution level. Its current strength was likely only due to being nurtured in a Miniature Beast Pool.

When it realized its full arsenal of attacks hadn't killed its opponent, it panicked.

The Undead Dragon-fish moved.

Instinctively, the Mercury Centipede dodged to the side.

But nothing happened. The Undead Dragon-fish merely flicked one of its skeletal wings.

A wave of laughter erupted from Cloud Peak's side.

Many among Hidden Snake Journey averted their eyes.

They all knew—this battle was over. If nothing else, in terms of mentality, Little Adam's meticulously raised centipede had already lost.

The Undead Dragon-fish flashed that smile again and waved its tattered claw.

This blatant provocation enraged the Mercury Centipede. It sprayed venom once more, then transformed into a silver streak of lightning, renewing its assault.

The venom corroded the Undead Dragon-fish's flesh, turning it into pools of pus that dripped down its body—a horrifying sight.

At the same time, the number of wounds on its body multiplied, as if all its newly grown flesh was being scraped away.

Yet the Undead Dragon-fish stood unshaken. At a certain moment, it suddenly reached out and seized the Mercury Centipede in its claw.

The level eight multi-legged creature was flung into the air like a silver whip.

The Mercury Centipede struggled, but after a few casual shakes from the Undead Dragon-fish, it went limp.

"Get up! Get up! Do you want me to kill you?! Kill this monster! One more attack and it's finished!"

Little Adam clung to desperate hope, convinced the Undead Dragon-fish was at its limit. He believed his battle beast could still win if it just held on a little longer.

But this delusion was crushed by the Undead Dragon-fish's next move.

It slammed the Mercury Centipede to the ground, then stomped on it with its massive body. Instantly, the once-dominant opponent crumpled like paper, its supposedly indestructible silver exoskeleton proving fragile as cardboard.

Fluids oozed from the cracks in the centipede's shell and its mouth. By all logic, it shouldn't have survived.

The Undead Dragon-fish grabbed the dying centipede, tore open its maw, and split its body in two.

Then, it rummaged inside, doing something indiscernible, before rubbing the corpse against its own body.

Both Cloud Peak and Hidden Snake's Journey watched in bewilderment, trying to decipher what the Undead Dragon-fish was doing.

"It's smearing the centipede's venom onto its own bones."

Though Red-Hair had temporarily lost her mental link with the Undead Dragon-fish, they were still the closest of partners. She was the first to understand her mount's intentions.

Since the Undead Dragon-fish was doing this, there had to be a reason. No one questioned why— instead, they pondered the implications of its earlier performance.

The Mercury Centipede's strength was far from as lacking as it had seemed. Against any other battle beast besides the Undead Dragon-fish, such an effortless victory would've been impossible.

That included Yangos and Yellow Ball.

Yet the Undead Dragon-fish had done it. Why?

On the surface, it seemed simple and brutal. But upon closer thought, one could grasp the terrifying prowess it now possessed.

To accurately seize the lightning-fast Mercury Centipede mid-movement required vision and reflexes beyond ordinary battle beasts.

And how much did the Undead Dragon-fish weigh now, with its partially regrown flesh? Aside from the White Cave Crystal, its body consisted of little more than sparse meat.

How heavy could those be? Certainly not enough to crush a level eight creature with a hardened exoskeleton through sheer weight alone.

So where did the difference lie?

The answer came quickly.

Its bones!

Those once-blackened bones—now being polished with the corpse of a peer!

Dragon Spirit Saint Bones?

Yangos propped itself up, its expression complicated as it stared at its companion. It uttered a term from its memory—a power exclusive to the royal lineage of dragonkind!

Ye Zhongming and the others turned to the foul-mouthed dragon.

"Among the dragon monarchs, there exists a unique innate ability—one only certain pureblooded royals can manifest."

Yangos' tone was uncharacteristically solemn.

"This ability is called Dragon Spirit Saint Bones. When a royal with this power suffers severe injuries, they can activate it during recovery, transforming their bones into Spirit Saint Bones. The method involves slaying another creature and using its life energy to drastically reinforce their skeletal structure, resulting in a body far more formidable post-recovery—even surpassing the bone strength of their actual evolution level."

Yangos watched as the Undead Dragon-fish discarded the desiccated centipede husk and strode down from the energy arena. Instinctively, it bowed its head slightly.

Was this thing some deceased royal ancestor of my kind reborn?

"Stronger bones naturally mean a stronger body. Among dragonkind, any royal who awakens this one-time ability will, upon using it, surpass all others of their race in physical might."

The dragon's explanation ended there, but four words echoed in everyone's minds:

Surpassing dragonkind itself!

Dragons were already the most physically formidable mutated lifeforms. To exceed them—just how monstrous would that be?!

"Beast battle—victory goes to Cloud Peak! Per the rules and the opponent's reward enhancement, the rewards are: Battle Beast A8-tier, and Cloud Peak B8-tier!"

Chapter 1647: Bonus Match

Cloud Peak has won three consecutive matches!

Victory may be routine for Cloud Peak, but being in a foreign land, enduring long journeys and battles—even facing challenges from level-nine lifeforms—has made everyone feel it hasn't come easily.

Now, overcoming these trials, especially the constant provocations from a twisted little brat like Adam, makes the triumph all the more satisfying.

Two glowing orbs, just like before, appeared before Red-Hair and Ye Zhongming.

These were the rewards.

This time, Ye Zhongming casually retrieved the team reward first. Given its lower tier, he didn't expect anything particularly outstanding.

And indeed, when he saw the reward, it confirmed his expectations.

"Cloud-Parting Flowers."

"Food, for battle beasts. When a land-based battle beast consumes the Cloud-Parting Flowers, it gains the ability to fly—'Aerial Toss Strike.'"

"'Aerial Toss Strike': When using this ability, the battle beast grows a pair of wings with no offensive power but also indestructible. It rapidly ascends into the air and unleashes one of its innate skills, with the power increased to 110% of its ground-based usage."

A 10% power boost, usable upon activation—sounded decent, but just decent. Cloud Peak had plenty of battle beasts with far stronger skills, so it was natural for Ye Zhongming to be unimpressed.

That said, the item wasn't bad. Strictly speaking, it was quite good because not every battle beast gained a new ability with each evolution. This reward would automatically grant them one.

Of course, there were limitations. Battle beasts with exceptional talent—those that gained new abilities with every evolution—couldn't use it.

Ye Zhongming also possessed the Ability Extractor profession, further diminishing this reward's value to him.

After a moment's thought, he stored the skill scroll in his spatial equipment to hand over to Xia Lei later for distribution based on contributions and needs.

Red-Hair then revealed her reward, and Ye Zhongming's eyes widened slightly despite his initial lack of expectations.

"Golden Dragon Coiling Reins!"

A beast equipment item!

It was actually a beast equipment item! Ye Zhongming quickly took the long, rope-like gear from Red-Hair and scrutinized its description.

"Golden Dragon Coiling Reins."

"Ability 1: Synergy. When the user and the battle beast equipped with the reins fight together, the power of their skills increases by 10%."

"Ability 2: Shared Pain. Both the equipped battle beast and the user can share each other's damage, with adjustable ratio."

"Ability 3: Resonant Strike. When both parties' injuries exceed 50% of their maximum endurance, they will receive a prompt to unleash a randomly generated joint human-beast attack skill."

"Ability 4: Thread Extraction. The battle beast can absorb the golden threads coiled on the reins at a critical moment, temporarily elevating its strength by one evolution level for three seconds."

Afterward, the Golden Dragon Coiling Reins are permanently destroyed."

These were the item's full abilities. After reading them, Ye Zhongming found it quite impressive—almost too good for a reward of this grade.

Perhaps battle beast rewards were simply better than those for evolved.

However, the description also stated that the Golden Dragon Coiling Reins were exclusively for the Undead Dragon-fish, which disappointed Ye Zhongming slightly. Because, barring any surprises, once the Undead Dragon-fish completed its evolution, it would become a level-nine lifeform—meaning the final self-destructive ability of this beast equipment would be unusable.

For a level-eight lifeform, gaining three seconds of level-nine power could be a game-changer in critical moments, turning the tide of battle.

But since it was restricted to the Undead Dragon-fish, it was a shame.

With the battle over and rewards examined, Ye Zhongming and Cloud Peak waited to enter the next scenario. But the prompt never came.

Just as impatience began to set in, the system's voice suddenly rang out.

"Cloud Peak Manor has achieved a 3-0 victory and obtained special privileges. Please choose whether to proceed with a bonus match!"

Both Cloud Peak and the silently brooding Hidden Snake Journey were stunned.

Even as the victors, Cloud Peak had no desire for a bonus match. Battles always carried risks, and no one could guarantee absolute victory—not even Cloud Peak, fresh off a flawless win.

"Bonus match rewards will be enhanced from the previous baseline. You may choose between quality upgrades or quantity doubling."

A single sentence, and hearts began to race!

The earlier rewards, while not top-tier, had been quite decent.

If they could double the quantity or improve the quality, even Ye Zhongming would be tempted.

"What are the match conditions?" Ye Zhongming asked.

Better rewards usually meant higher risks.

"Details will be provided after selecting the bonus match."

This kind of answer didn't surprise Ye Zhongming too much.

"I agree."

After only a slight hesitation, Ye Zhongming accepted.

He wasn't acting recklessly. Hidden Snake Journey seemed to have no more aces up their sleeve, while Cloud Peak still had its strongest fighter—Ye Zhongming himself—yet to take the field. As long as the Wheel Space didn't pull any tricks, their chances of winning exceeded 90%.

Hidden Snake Journey, however, was in a far worse position. They weren't fools—they knew they stood no chance against Cloud Peak. The prospect of a bonus match filled them with bitterness.

Only Little Adam, with his gambler's mentality, showed a flicker of anticipation.

"There are two bonus match formats."

"First: Select one of the previously unchosen battle types."

"Second: Engage in a full-team battle."

"I choose the first," Ye Zhongming answered swiftly.

The options presented by the Wheel Space made victory seem all but assured.

"Please choose between a solo battle or a five-person battle."

"Solo battle."

"You have the right to select your opponent."

"I choose Adam."

The exchange between Ye Zhongming and the Wheel Space concluded in mere seconds. On the other side, Adam's voice cracked with panic. He screamed shrilly, but it was futile.

He even tried refusing to enter the energy arena. But after delaying too long, the Wheel Space threatened to declare his forfeit—and death—forcing the reluctant little boy to step inside.

"I don't care who you are! If we end this in a draw, I can compensate you with treasures! My—"

Before he could finish, the countdown ended.

Ye Zhongming closed the distance in an instant, pressing the barrel of his Harvester Mimicry Shooter against Adam's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet was only green-grade, but enhanced by gun skills and fired from a purple-grade weapon, its power was nothing to scoff at.

Adam shrieked, his hands flailing as if to push Ye Zhongming away.

The bullet left the barrel, on the verge of embedding itself in the little boy's forehead—

Then, impossibly, it reversed course and flew back out!

Chapter 1648: S Grade Reward

Ye Zhongming struck immediately, not just to secure better rewards, but also to prevent the little boy from reacting and using his trump cards.

Judging by Adam's attire and temperament, Ye Zhongming suspected the boy likely had powerful backers. Otherwise, given his age and personality, it was improbable he could lead a team this far.

Since his advantages were likely granted by others—probably close relatives—they must have given him life-saving measures. Though Ye Zhongming wasn't afraid, killing him would be troublesome. If the boy had some turtle-shell-like defense, not only would the best rewards be forfeited, but it might even result in a draw.

The King of Cloud Peak had chosen the bonus match to gamble for premium rewards, not to play a game of attack and defense.

So he opted for a blitzkrieg, using a ranged weapon to kill Little Adam instantly.

Yet what Ye Zhongming feared still happened.

The bullet he fired eerily reversed course.

Little Adam, overwhelmed by the attack and terror, collapsed unconscious. But before him, a swirling vortex of multicolored energy appeared.

A voice emerged from within.

"I don't know who you are, but if you're an evolved, I hope you'll hear me out."

Ye Zhongming lowered his gun slightly.

He noticed the energy vortex wasn't just emitting sound—it had also enveloped the little boy.

"Adam is my child. Perhaps he has offended you, or you covet something he possesses, driving you to kill him. But none of that matters. Spare him, and you may take all his equipment, weapons—everything. Then come to Lake Superior and seek out us, the Hawkins couple. You'll gain unimaginable riches. I swear this on the honor of the King of Naka."

"If you still insist on attacking my child, you'll incur the curse of the King of Naka. My wife, the great Valkyrie of Amos, and I will hunt you to the ends of the earth, ensuring you suffer every torment this world offers. Believe me."

The voice ceased. The multicolored vortex began fading—clearly, the unconscious boy was losing the protection that had deflected the fatal strike.

Ye Zhongming's expression didn't change. He teleported forward, severing Adam's head with Wind and Thunder.

A piercing shriek erupted from the nearly vanished vortex—a woman's voice—then cut off abruptly. A second later, as the vortex dissipated completely, the same voice returned.

"I will find you. And kill you."

Then, all vanished, leaving only the energy arena.

Ye Zhongming looked down, his mind roiling.

Because he realized—the little boy's corpse was gone!

Within this unique space, this so-called King of Naka—or the Valkyrie of Amos, who'd screamed—had the power to retrieve bodies?!

Suddenly, Ye Zhongming recalled fragments of intel overheard from North American survivors while awaiting the Mountain King Crown's activation. Rumors spoke of a formidable faction near Lake Superior's U.S. shoreline. Could they be the boy's backers?

Though shocked by the ability to extract corpses from this space, Ye Zhongming felt no fear. At his current strength, no one on Earth could intimidate him.

The reward prompt arrived. As Hidden Snake Journey's remnants were ejected, Cloud Peak erupted in cheers.

No choice—Ye Zhongming's reward was S-tier.

Killing the boy within a minute should've granted an S- reward, but the bonus match upgraded it to full S-tier.

The glowing orb differed from prior ones—larger, brighter.

Reaching in, Ye Zhongming retrieved a jade ruyi scepter.

Snow-white except for its tip, which gleamed translucent emerald like imperial jade.

"Auspicious Ruyi."

The name made Ye Zhongming's brow twitch.

Had the Wheel Space studied Chinese culture?

"Auspicious Ruyi (Purple)."

"Ability 1: Blessing of Will."

Every 3,000 hours, the scepter may bless a target, initially enhancing a chosen attribute by 20%. Duration increases with stored energy, up to 30%."

"Ability 2: Nectar's Baptism."

Every 3,000 hours, by expending stored energy, it can purge abnormal statuses. If the scepter's energy exceeds the negative energy, complete cleansing occurs. Otherwise, effects are mitigated proportionally."

"Ability 3: Nurture of All Things."

Can accelerate a lifeform's growth span instantly. Magnitude scales with energy invested."

"Ability 4: Tranquil Focus."

Grants crafters 1%-10% increased success rates. Efficiency correlates with energy expended. Base energy requires 5,000 days storage. Every additional 1,000 days boosts success rate by 1%."

"Ability 5: Soul of Divine Bestowal."

Releases the emerald essence at its tip to bestow sentience upon equipment, granting limitless potential. One-time use. Afterwards, the scepter degrades to blue-grade, losing two random abilities. Remaining effects halve."

This was an S-tier reward?!

Ye Zhongming struggled to articulate his feelings—not disappointment, but sheer awe.

Though this purple-grade item had fewer abilities than peers, each was extraordinary.

Attribute boosts, status cleansing, life acceleration, crafting enhancements—any single effect would spark frenzied bidding. Yet here they coexisted.

Of course, their potency was balanced by the scepter’s need to accumulate energy over prolonged periods—a significant limitation.

What captivated Ye Zhongming most was the final ability: Soul of Divine Bestowal.

It brought to mind a certain enigmatic equipment in his possession—one whose purpose still eluded him. Using this ability would unveil its secrets.

But activating it would cripple the scepter’s other functions. The trade-off caused the King of Cloud Peak to pause.

As the energy arena dissolved, a gate materialized in its place—swinging open.

Chapter 1649: Death Staircase

Far from the location of the Mountain King Wheel, there was no ice or bitter wind—only the clear, rippling waters of a lake and the lush greenery filled with birdsong and floral fragrance.

Yet amidst this picturesque scenery, there lay an enormous, terrifying crater. Like a festering sore, it marred the pristine landscape.

Upon closer inspection, at the bottom of the crater lay a woman, her eyes open but vacant as she stared at the sky.

The sound of light footsteps made her pupils tremble slightly, but she made no other movement.

"Amos, it's time. The people from Treasure Island are here."

A man clad in white armor knelt beside her on one knee, gently caressing her beautiful face.

After a long pause, the woman finally whispered, "Is Adam taken care of?"

The man nodded. "Yes."

For some reason, his eyes held not only grief but also an indescribable strangeness as he answered.

Without any visible effort, the woman slowly sat upright, her movements stiff and deliberate.

"I want revenge."

Her voice was calm, betraying no emotion. But the man, who knew his wife intimately, understood that her heart was now consumed by hatred. She needed an outlet.

"So do I. But we can't." The man stood up. "Amos, you know where our power comes from. The one who killed our only son may not be our match, but we don't have time to hunt him down."

"The source of our strength requires us to fulfill other obligations—ones we already agreed to."

Amos's expression flickered slightly. She lowered her gaze to the bottom of the massive crater she had created, where remnants of terrifying energy still lingered.

"Let's go, Amos." The man extended his hand. "Whoever killed Adam is no ordinary person. We can be certain he'll head there too. All we need to do is wait."

"Are you sure?"

Amos looked up at her husband.

"I'm certain." The man lifted her tenderly into his arms. "We were the first to use the entry passes. By then, we'll be even stronger than we are now. We'll wait for him in the arena... and kill him!"

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After passing through the gate, Cloud Peak arrived at a mountainside.

Everyone was certain this was no longer the Wheel Space—at least, not the previous enclosed dimension—because from here, they could see the full silhouette of the mountain peak.

At its summit, a massive wheel shimmered brilliantly.

"The ring-shaped mountain path is twenty meters wide and perfectly symmetrical. Every five hundred meters, there's a stone staircase leading to the summit. Each step is a two-meter by two-meter square. Currently, we can't ascend—blocked by an invisible force."

After listening to Xiao Min's report, Ye Zhongming nodded.

The team had rested and regrouped before passing through the gate to arrive here. They soon realized that, whether due to timing or other restrictions, they were now confined to this ring-shaped mountain path.

"Rest here for now. Stay alert."

After issuing the order, Ye Zhongming checked on the Undead Dragon-fish, which had fallen into deep slumber after its victory, and the still-unconscious Talking Lady, awaiting the next prompt from this space.

However, after two hours of tense waiting, what arrived wasn't the opening of the space, but another team.

Governor Spade's faction.

Given the peculiar circumstances, both sides immediately assumed defensive postures upon sighting each other.

Governor Spade's massive, mountain-like body stared in their direction for a full thirty seconds before he finally waved his team back, maintaining a safe distance.

Everyone understood: if the order of arrival here was determined by the time taken to pass the trials, then the first team to reach this place was either the strongest or among the strongest. Without knowing what lay ahead, reckless action was the least wise choice.

Thus, Governor Spade retreated, and Ye Zhongming refrained from provoking conflict.

Both sides waited, anticipating the next "game."

Soon, a third team appeared—an entire army of mechanical combat puppets. After observing for a long time, Ye Zhongming found no trace of any actual evolved among them, which immediately raised his guard.

Like before, this all-mechanical force appeared on the opposite side of Cloud Peak. After a tense standoff, they withdrew to one section of the ring-shaped path.

Then came the fourth, fifth, sixth...

Cannibal Chain, Gyanendra, and the foreign faction, the Motley Crusaders, arrived in succession, ranking fifth, eighth, and tenth, respectively.

As more and more factions appeared along the ring-shaped path, Ye Zhongming suddenly asked Xiao Min, "How many stone staircases lead up the mountain?"

Xiao Min froze for a moment before answering promptly, "Seven."

Even those who hadn't fully grasped Ye Zhongming's implication now understood.

With over fifteen teams already present—and possibly more to come—but only seven paths upward...

Who would ascend?

Everyone wanted to go up, and no one would willingly yield their path to others. So then...

Sure enough, when the number of arriving teams reached twenty, the Wheel's announcement sounded.

"Now begins the Death Staircase Contest."

A single sentence sent waves of tension through all factions on the ring-shaped path.

Contest. Death.

Two words made it clear: the surrounding factions were now their enemies.

The two leaders of Cannibal Chain, who had been standing near Ye Zhongming, exchanged bitter smiles.

They had hoped to cooperate with Cloud Peak. Now, the best they could hope for was to avoid attacking each other.

But since the Wheel's rules weren't fully announced yet, they held onto a sliver of hope—what if collaboration was still possible?

"The paths to victory are few. Here, there are only seven."

"To reach the final summit, you must pass through these staircases. Each can accommodate only one faction. Securing passage rights is the sole method."

"Passage rights can be obtained by fulfilling one of the following conditions:"

"1. Occupy a staircase uncontested for five minutes."

"2. Repel five attempts by other factions to seize it."

"3. Eliminate over 5,000 rival evolved in the contest."

"4. Be among the last seven surviving factions."

As the rules were announced, every faction fell into contemplation. Though seemingly straightforward, these rules contained exploitable nuances that could make the coming battles much easier.

"The Death Staircase Contest begins in thirty seconds. The final seven factions to secure passage rights will receive rewards upon reaching the summit."

"30... 29... 28..."

Chapter 1650: Raging Skyfire

Battle cries erupted from the other side.

Since Cannibal Chain flanked Cloud Peak on one side and Governor Spade on the other, while competition existed with the former, outright conflict wouldn't break out unless absolutely necessary. As for Governor Spade's side, wary of Cloud Peak's first-arrival status, the massive leader hadn't targeted them even as the staircase battle commenced post-countdown—at least for now.

"Boss Ye!"

The shift in address reflected Ruan Xiao and Wu Xiu's current mindset.

Cannibal Chain was indeed formidable, their collective magic attacks potent enough to unsettle even Ye Zhongming.

But ultimately, those were skills—bound by cooldowns and mental energy constraints. Cannibal Chain's wealth allowed them to equip their ranks with identical magic skills, amplifying power through synergy.

Yet they couldn't possibly endow every member with high mental energy reserves or cooldown-reducing gear and potions.

In short, Cannibal Chain's short-term burst was terrifying, but sustained combat was their weak spot—not fatal, but a prolonged fight would drastically diminish their effectiveness.

The Death Staircase Contest perfectly exploited this vulnerability.

Twenty factions had survived rigorous trials to reach this point. None were pushovers, even if individually weaker than Cannibal Chain.

The Wheel Space's rules were clear: only one faction per staircase. Thirteen would be eliminated.

While the rules didn't specify elimination consequences, deaths during the struggle were inevitable. The final survivors might well be just seven factions—the rest, if not annihilated, reduced to remnants.

Facing this, Cannibal Chain urgently needed reliable allies.

Five minutes might seem brief, but in the apocalypse, where every evolved was superhuman, battles—especially in confined team-scale zones—were brutally decisive.

Five minutes could see thousands of evolved perish.

And how many had Cannibal Chain brought?!

"Cooperate with us. Name your terms. At the summit, we'll assist your Mountain King Wheel bid."

As Cannibal Chain's deputy leader (Ye Zhongming wasn't sure of her exact rank), Wu Xiu demonstrated exemplary leadership—fighting fiercely when advantageous, yet pragmatic enough to cut losses when necessary.

Ye Zhongming agreed.

Confident in Cloud Peak's ability to secure a staircase alone, he knew the toll would be steep. Desperate factions wouldn't shy from confrontation when cornered.

Casualties were inevitable.

An alliance with Cannibal Chain offered mutual benefit—and a chance for Cloud Peak to eliminate rivals.

"Magic scrolls."

Two words conveyed Ye Zhongming's admiration for Cannibal Chain's mage corps.

Good things belonged in one's own pocket.

Wu Xiu responded briskly, as if anticipating this demand.

"I'll try—quantity and tier both."

Ye Zhongming nodded silently.

A specific promise would've rung hollow—accumulating enough scrolls for their mage corps was a Herculean task even for Cannibal Chain.

"Try" carried more sincerity than numbers.

Ye Zhongming's gaze fixed on the nearest stone staircase.

"This one?"

"Agreed."

Wu Xiu immediately signaled her forces to charge the occupied passage.

Cooperation didn't mean outsourcing their battles.

From his vantage on the ring-shaped path, Ye Zhongming glimpsed distant clashes—too chaotic to identify participants.

"Xia Bai, take two squads and Yangos there. Hold back—keep that passage contested without securing it."

With only seven staircases, Cloud Peak and Cannibal Chain claiming two required strategy.

Prioritizing Cannibal Chain's capture first, Ye Zhongming aimed to seize another for Cloud Peak later.

Full commitment now might leave Cloud Peak vulnerable elsewhere—a risk not worth taking.

Keeping a second passage in flux was ideal—secure one ally's path first, then pivot.

Cannibal Chain's ranks erupted in brilliant flames.

Not Fireballs this time, but Raging Skyfire—a wind-fire hybrid spell using air currents to amplify flame's reach and area damage at the cost of single-target potency.

Perfect for the current scenario.

The staircase's occupiers, Red Death (named as a counterpart to the Black Death, with the apocalypse's virus turning humans into "red" zombies), had established a strong defensive position after weathering two assaults.

Three more repelled attacks would grant them passage rights.

Then the sky turned crimson.

As flames cascaded down, Red Death's gaunt leader looked up, fear flashing before battle-hardened resolve took over.

Barking orders in an obscure tongue, he rallied dozens of evolved who raised their hands, emitting black sand that linked into a net.

With a thrust toward the heavens, the leader launched the sand—

—just as the inferno descended. “