

Apocalypse 1666

Chapter 1666: Bright Star use (2)

"Next, the third faction to clear the Death Staircase—Cannibal Chain—shall strike the Soaring Crystal."

Just as everyone wanted to observe the Women Guard's situation on the Bright Star, the space denied them the opportunity, immediately calling upon the third qualifying faction, Cannibal Chain, to step forward.

Wu Xiu and Ruan Xiao, having witnessed the Women Guard's results, felt considerably more at ease. Ruan Xiao strode out first, picked up the stone hammer at the platform, and even glanced back at Ye Zhongming's group before swinging it.

The Soaring Crystal flew through the air, soon landing on the third star, one position behind where the black woman from the Women Guard had struck.

"The hammer is peculiar. The force application is unusual," Ruan Xiao suddenly remarked. Ye Zhongming nodded in agreement.

This was Cannibal Chain's way of tipping off Ye Zhongming. It didn't matter if other factions overheard—better that than letting Cloud Peak walk into a trap.

When prompted to choose between Purchase or Challenge, Cannibal Chain naturally opted for Purchase.

A saying from the pre-apocalypse era—"Any problem that can be solved with money isn't a real problem"—found its perfect embodiment in Cannibal Chain. Ruan Xiao began pulling out items from his spatial equipment one after another.

No demon crystals—just equipment, materials, scrolls, potions...

This went on for a full five minutes!

Other factions stared in disbelief as Ruan Xiao emptied one spatial ring after another, switching to a third.

The only impression this left was sheer, unfathomable wealth.

After the first spatial ring was emptied, Ye Zhongming signaled his team to stop keeping track.

He had already realized: Ruan Xiao was essentially dumping his 'junk'.

Not that these items were literal garbage—they were simply things without immediate use or yet to be identified (like certain herbs or materials).

Since most weren't high-value, quantity compensated for quality, hence the five-minute spending spree to purchase the Bright Star.

Cannibal Chain's entire force was then transported onto their conquered star.

Next up was the fourth faction, Motley Crusaders.

Having learned from Cannibal Chain's tip about the hammer's odd mechanics, their representative practiced a few swings before striking, achieving a better result than Women Guard by landing on the fifth Bright Star.

Each entrance had only ten stars before the chaotic central zone. Reaching the fifth in one go was impressive.

The fifth faction was Gyanendra himself.

He personally stepped forward, struck the crystal, and landed on the sixth star. Like the others, he chose Purchase—but his method was the polar opposite of Cannibal Chain's.

He offered a single item, and it was enough.

No one caught what it was—not even Ye Zhongming—only a fleeting black glint, vaguely diamond-shaped.

For one object to secure ownership of what was likely the most expensive Bright Star so far, it had to be extraordinarily valuable. Based on previous factions' expenditures, it was worth at least one eight-star evolution potion.

"That old fox is really willing to splurge," Xiao Min muttered, curling her lip.

After the West Asian Saint settled on his star, it was Mechanical Genius's turn.

Even now, Ye Zhongming hadn't located this bizarre faction's controller. The combat puppet that should've housed him showed no visible entry points.

This was an opportunity to expose their leader, but disappointment followed.

The space allowed the combat puppet itself to strike the crystal, bypassing the need for a human representative.

Ye Zhongming's instincts prickled. This faction was bound to pull something unexpected.

Sure enough, after the puppet struck the crystal to the eighth star, the space posed the usual question:

Purchase or Challenge?

Mechanical Ghost chose the latter.

Challenge!

Then, their entire mechanical army materialized on the Bright Star at once!

"That's impossible!"

Cloud Peak's soldiers erupted in uproar.

How could the entire faction appear before completing the Challenge? Normally, only purchasing or succeeding in a Challenge allowed that!

Shouldn't Mechanical Ghost's controller have appeared alone, like Great America's black man?

Before vanishing, the lead combat puppet housing Mechanical Ghost twisted slightly toward Cloud Peak, as if delivering a message.

Ye Zhongming smirked coldly. He understood the taunt.

It was a mockery—of others' stupidity, and a provocation aimed squarely at Cloud Peak.

"Normally, this would be impossible," Ye Zhongming said, watching the Bright Star swarm with unknown creatures ready to clash with the mechanical army.

"But since it's happening, there's only one explanation."

He pointed at the mechanical legion. "These are all considered his equipment by the space."

The revelation stunned many.

A single person, commanding an entire mechanical army, all classified as his gear?! What ability—job, bloodline, or skill—could enable this?

Ye Zhongming could rival this in sheer numbers—with war beasts like Yellow Ball, Icebird, Yangos, even Red Hair, his undead puppet army, Ball Ball, lightning sand creatures from his bloodline, the Explosive Mechanic, puppets, and more.

But in raw power, they fell short of Mechanical Genius's combat puppets.

Those ancient-seeming puppets likely matched Yangos, Yellow Ball, or Red Hair, while the rest outclassed undead/lumbering puppets.

"He chose Challenge on the eighth star—why is he so smug? Why taunt us?"

"Because he's laughing at others' stupidity. Testing if we grasp his meaning."

Ye Zhongming's gaze swept the starfield. "Look at all these Bright Stars. If each must be purchased, would anyone have enough resources?"

The question silenced Cloud Peak's fighters.

Right—even at one eight-star potion per star, how many would it take to reach the Mountain King Crown at the center?

If stars grew more expensive and trials harder, then challenging early stars to conserve resources for later, tougher purchases was the correct strategy!

The earlier factions... might've blundered badly.

Just as this realization dawned, Ye Zhongming delivered the twist.

"He thinks himself clever. But this time? He's still a fool."

Chapter 1667: Bright Star use (3)

"Brother Ye, I don't really get it..." Xiao Xuan scratched his head, confused by Ye Zhongming's words. In his view, Mechanical Genius's choice wasn't wrong—

Choosing to fight when it's easy and buy when it's difficult seemed like a clear strategy. Why would the boss call it stupid?

Ye Zhongming chuckled while watching Mechanical Genius's ongoing battle and explained: "Many things aren't black and white. They're not just one or two."

"Often, it depends on the situation. Our Cloud Peak warriors have many strengths—bravery, fearlessness, loyalty, obedience... But as we grow, there will be times when I or the captains can't always be by your side to give direct orders. In those moments, you'll need to assess the situation yourselves and choose the best solution."

Many, especially the young fighters of the Youth Army, froze momentarily before focusing intently on the task at hand.

They understood—this was the boss training them for independent operations, even leadership roles in the future.

Ye Zhongming pointed at the Bright Star where the deceased black warrior had fallen: "You all saw that monster. How strong was it?"

"Very strong. Didn't you say it was level eight?" a Youth Army member answered.

Several Female Guard fighters stifled laughs.

"Was I wrong?" The young fighter, realizing his mistake, scratched his head sheepishly.

"Beyond level eight. It was very close to level nine," Dai Zhi stated.

Their experience and skill allowed them to estimate the Nether Moth's strength at a glance.

Ye Zhongming agreed.

"If the Bright Stars' difficulty progresses step by step, and the early ones are already this tough, the later ones will be far worse. At first glance, challenging the easier early stars to save resources for later purchases seems logical—but that's precisely the problem."

He paused, watching the battle on the Bright Star. Mechanical Genius was indeed skilled, controlling his mechanical army with precision, already gaining the upper hand.

Yet, the star's native lifeforms were equally formidable. Despite losing ground, they fought fiercely, having already destroyed over ten combat puppets.

"I believe the final trial won't be something you can buy your way through."

Everyone nodded. The last challenge for the Mountain King Crown would never allow purchase—that would render previous trials meaningless and defy the wheel space's nature.

"So it'll be extremely difficult." Ye Zhongming sighed faintly. "Facing such a final test, what should we do?"

Without waiting for answers, he continued: "We must conserve strength for that ultimate battle."

"If we emulate Mechanical Genius and challenge early stars, with our strength, we'd win—but to what standard? How many challenges? Once we enter the chaotic central zone, do we just buy? What if we run out of funds after a few purchases? Fight every star manually?"

Each question plunged Cloud Peak into silence.

For an ultra-wealthy faction, these concerns would be irrelevant—they could just buy their way to the final trial.

But reality was harsh. Each Bright Star's price was exorbitant. No faction, not even Ye Zhongming and Cloud Peak, could afford to purchase them all.

Currently, Ye Zhongming was strapped for resources—most materials went into equipment, magic crystals, and potions were invested in the Youth Army, and the rest of their assets remained at the mountain villa.

This created a dilemma:

They couldn't rely solely on money, yet needed to preserve strength for the final showdown. What then?

"There's no perfect solution, but we can keep things within our control."

By now, Mechanical Genius's battle was reaching its climax. Victory seemed certain.

"We can't emulate Mechanical Genius by sending our entire force into challenges—only individuals can enter. Using myself as the benchmark, I'll gauge our opponents."

Ye Zhongming pointed again at Great America's failed star: "If I faced that creature, I'm confident of victory—especially since I can bring Yellow Ball, Yangos, even Red Hair. At worst, I'd sustain minor injuries, easily treatable with potions and healing crystals. So if our Bright Star is of this difficulty, we'll challenge it."

"Other factions all chose to purchase, so we can't judge their stars' difficulty. Only Mechanical Genius challenged—his was the eighth star. There, the enemies weren't individually strong, but their numbers are overwhelming. If I entered that challenge... honestly, I wouldn't be certain of victory. Even with a 70% win rate, I can't guarantee the extent of post-battle damage."

Hearing this, the Youth Army erupted in murmurs. They'd known the challenges were tough, but not this tough. Even their boss, with Yellow Ball, Yangos, Icebird, Ball Ball, and Red Hair, couldn't guarantee victory?!

"Yet I don't want just to purchase outright. We need to save funds for stars we absolutely can't defeat. So what do we do?"

Ye Zhongming scanned the Youth Army's youthful faces.

After a few seconds of silence, a voice piped up:

"Lower the difficulty first, then challenge."

Ye Zhongming smiled approvingly at the speaker—a rare female Youth Army member nicknamed "Sister Hui" (not due to age, but because she'd taken care of several younger members). Those few called her that, so the others followed.

"Correct. Lower the difficulty. For stars we can't confidently conquer unscathed, we spend just enough to reduce the challenge to a winnable level—then fight!"

Chapter 1668: Xia Bai fights

"Cloud Peak, please strike the Soaring Crystal."

As Mechanical Genius's forces annihilated the lifeforms on their Bright Star, mist enveloped the star's surface, blocking outside observation while the system prompt sounded.

Ye Zhongming stepped forward instinctively, only for Xiao Min to grab his arm.

"Boss, you shouldn't go for the first round."

"I'll do it."

The first statement came from Xiao Min, the second from Xia Bai.

Xiao Min's action reflected the collective will of the Female Guard.

Their duty was to protect Ye Zhongming, though the vast power disparity often rendered their protection... unconventional.

This reality frustrated many female warriors, yet they remained powerless to change it.

However, given any opportunity, they would fulfill their duty, keeping Ye Zhongming out of danger.

In this scenario, the Female Guard saw no need for Ye Zhongming to act. They could handle it.

Wasn't this just using wealth to lower challenge difficulty? They had money—they were among Cloud Peak's wealthiest. Their equipment, potions, and scrolls were all provided by the faction. Their protective role meant they couldn't hunt as frequently as combat teams.

Similarly, after battles, the minor loot Ye Zhongming overlooked became their spoils. During breaks, they sometimes hunted or trained together, keeping their gains.

Moreover, on missions with Ye Zhongming, the Cloud Peak King treated these life-risking warriors exceptionally well. As a top-tier craftsman, his gifts were invaluable—many Female Guard members had so much spare gear they couldn't carry it all.

Here, all that meant currency. With these resources, the Female Guard felt confident in alleviating Ye Zhongming's burden.

Even if Ye Zhongming could clear the trial, who could guarantee he'd emerge unscathed? Or avoid exhausting critical skills and trump cards? Better to conserve whenever possible!

This mindset emboldened Xiao Min to stop Ye Zhongming.

Xia Bai's statement was even more direct.

If any Female Guard member could reassure Ye Zhongming, it was undoubtedly Xia Bai.

As if fearing refusal, the Female Guard immediately handed their magic crystals, spare gear, and other items to Xia Bai, clearly appointing her as Ye Zhongming's substitute.

"By the rules here, Nine Treasures should be transported with me if I enter," Xia Bai argued, speaking more than usual to justify her participation.

Ye Zhongming shook his head. "Nine Treasures never entered this space. It likely won't appear."

"Then these will suffice." Xia Bai shook the spatial rings on her fingers and body—ten in total, packed with the Female Guard's contributions.

Seeing Ye Zhongming hesitate, the Youth Army also "generously" donated their meager possessions to Xia Bai—though compared to the Female Guard's "little rich women," their offerings were paltry, albeit earnest.

Ye Zhongming sighed, then relented—but instructed that if the Soaring Crystal landed beyond the fifth star, she should spend heavily to reduce difficulty.

Xia Bai stepped out of the energy dome toward the stone platform.

Now, only Cloud Peak and the initially failed Great America remained in the arena. Observing Cloud Peak's actions—and piecing together snippets of conversation—Great America quickly grasped their strategy and attempted to emulate it.

But their wealth-gathering efforts paled in comparison. In this apocalyptic era, "every man for himself" wasn't just a saying—it was survival.

Most members resisted contributing. Governor Spade couldn't force compliance here, resorting to persuasion, veiled threats, and promises to scrounge together meager resources—nowhere near Cloud Peak's stockpile.

Xia Bai tested the stone hammer's weight before striking the Soaring Crystal. The projectile flew through the seventh entrance, passing multiple stars before settling on the seventh Bright Star.

Her dissatisfied expression was unmistakable.

The system prompted her choice: Challenge or Purchase?

Xia Bai first selected Purchase, methodically submitting items while mentally tracking the difficulty reduction.

She didn't recklessly challenge at high difficulty. Only after calculating a roughly 50% reduction did she stop, triggering the system's judgment:

"Purchase failed."

Xia Bai was instantly transported onto the Bright Star.

Cloud Peak's atmosphere grew tense.

No one knew what awaited her—this uncertainty bred unease.

"Equivalent payment provided: 48.6% of purchase price. Twinborn Voidbeast's strength reduced by 48.6%."

The announcement echoed universally. Many Cloud Peak members looked to Ye Zhongming, but even he didn't recognize the "Twinborn Voidbeast."

"Look! Nine Treasures! And... what's that?!"

Before the Youth Army member finished shouting, everyone saw it—Nine Treasures' massive form materialized beside Xia Bai. But something was off.

The giant earthworm was lying atop another mutated earthworm, both bewildered by the sudden environment change. Recognizing Xia Bai, Nine Treasures slithered over eagerly, nuzzling her affectionately.

The other earthworm—a pristine white, level-eight variant—instinctively adopted a defensive stance until Nine Treasures' tail smacked it dismissively. With a few chirps, the 10-meter-long creature meekly approached Xia Bai, bowing like a bride meeting in-laws.

The scene stunned onlookers.

Had Nine Treasures been... mating freely before getting summoned?!

"Who told me Nine Treasures was female?" A Female Guard warrior whispered sideways.

"Aren't earthworms supposed to be hermaphrodites?!" A Youth Army member blurted after several stunned seconds.

Chapter 1669: Protector Beast

Nine Treasures' sudden appearance on the Bright Star with its mate instantly lifted the spirits of all Cloud Peak members.

Two level-eight mutated lifeforms, combined with Xia Bai—one of the strongest eight-star evolved — formed a trio that radiated reassurance.

Even against this unknown monster with nearly halved strength, let alone a level-nine lifeform, these three could put up a formidable fight.

Ye Zhongming's tense expression relaxed noticeably.

A guaranteed victory was far preferable to uncertainty.

No matter how thoroughly they'd analyzed the situation earlier, reality remained unpredictable. Any unforeseen mishap would spell disaster.

But now, with this lineup, there should be no issues.

Sure enough, when a two-headed, four-winged, four-armed flying monstrosity appeared, Xia Bai—supported by Nine Treasures and the snow-white level-eight mutated earthworm—completely overwhelmed the creature.

However, the battle wasn't without its heart-stopping moments. The Twinborn Voidbeast possessed a bizarre short-range spatial teleportation ability, launching unpredictable attacks that kept Xia Bai and the two earthworms on their toes.

But Xia Bai thrived on adversity—her attack power escalated with each injury, eventually overwhelming the Voidbeast.

Notably, the presumably female white earthworm proved unexpectedly formidable. Hailing from icy tundras, it wielded ice-based skills with breathtaking mastery. Its physical resilience was equally astounding. When the Voidbeast's first teleportation strike wounded Xia Bai, this earthworm tanked the onslaught, buying Xia Bai crucial recovery time. From that moment onward, they dominated the fight until securing the kill.

"Hey, Little Ye, this one's not bad. I'm kinda into it," Yangos remarked, licking its draconic lips with its forked tongue.

Ye Zhongming shot the vile dragon a sidelong glare and sternly warned, "Don't covet your friend's mate!"

Yangos scoffed but added, "It reminds me of my kin—the Frost Dragons."

"You've remembered your past?" Ye Zhongming's eyebrows shot up.

If the dragon could recall its origins, it might provide crucial clues about the wheel—or even the apocalypse itself.

But Yangos shook its head. "No, just a feeling."

Yellow Ball rolled its canine eyes nearby, radiating a "Then why even bring it up?" vibe.

With Xia Bai's successful challenge, Cloud Peak's entire force was transported onto the Bright Star. A brief flicker of darkness later, they found themselves on a stunningly beautiful planet.

No blue skies or white clouds—instead, vibrant hues painted the atmosphere. The air was sweet, the soil fertile, teeming with vitality.

Were it not for the Voidbeast's gory corpse, this place would be paradise.

Ye Zhongming scanned the surroundings but found no trace of other factions. It truly felt like an alien world.

Everything felt unnervingly real.

Maintaining defensive formations, Cloud Peak fanned out in a circular search pattern from their arrival point.

Within minutes, they discovered a structure.

A Gothic-style cathedral, predominantly white and blue, adorned with dazzling gemstones atop its spires, exuding opulence.

After cautious reconnaissance, they entered—only to find the lavish interior completely empty, save for a massive flat crystal panel etched with bizarre patterns.

The luminous crystal bathed the interior in soft light. The patterns depicted unfamiliar mutated lifeforms—animals, plants, energy entities, mechanical, and undead beings.

At the top loomed a nine-headed dragon whose mere illustration radiated terror, though Yangos insisted it wasn't draconic.

After extensive scrutiny yielded no insights, the crystal suddenly flared to life.

The previously static patterns now glowed vividly, each creature portrait accompanied by an empty energy bar beneath it.

"Guardian System activated. Factions that have obtained Bright Star ownership via purchase or challenge may acquire guardian lifeforms depicted here by submitting equivalent payment. When the energy bar is filled, the guardian beast awakens as the star's protector."

Cloud Peak members stared, baffled by the guardian beasts' purpose.

"Each Bright Star accommodates only one guardian beast, but guardians can be upgraded up to five times via equivalent payment. Upgrade costs scale with the guardian's base strength and upgrade tier."

The instructions were clear, yet the system still hadn't explained why they should acquire these guardians.

"Guardian beasts serve as sole protectors when human factions depart their Bright Stars. When other factions attempt passage, they must either challenge the guardian or purchase transit rights, with proceeds going to the star's owners. If a guardian is defeated in combat, star ownership transfers to the challengers."

Surveying the thousands of patterns, Ye Zhongming felt a headache brewing.

Since when did wheel trials need such convoluted mechanics? Was this some kind of mercenary summoning system?

Just as confusion peaked, the wheel's final announcement dropped, leaving everyone speechless.

"When all factions complete their Bright Star trajectories via purchase or challenge, occupied stars will form a new pathway. Each surviving faction will strike the Soaring Crystal ten times based on their star ownership count. The faction securing the most stars wins ultimate victory—and claims the Mountain King Crown."

Chapter 1670: Choose which

The wheel's rules left Ye Zhongming and the others in contemplative silence.

They couldn't yet determine whether these rules favored or disadvantaged them.

The immediate advantages they could identify were:

The Mountain King Disk wouldn't require a final, inevitably brutal challenge—good news for those prioritizing rewards.

Despite Ye Zhongming's current resource scarcity, his status as a top-tier craftsman meant his remaining materials could be rapidly upgraded. In critical moments, they might even sacrifice high-level gear to secure more Bright Star ownership. After all, compared to the Mountain King Disk—a ruler-grade equipment—other gear took lower priority.

Yet, disadvantages existed too. If any faction possessed overwhelming wealth, they could purchase numerous Bright Stars. During the rearrangement phase, they might even buy out guardians originally belonging to others.

As before, purchasing and challenging were directly linked. More money meant more purchases, fewer challenges, and better-preserved strength. Even if funds were exhausted by the end, they'd retain combat-ready forces.

Clearly, the rules disadvantaged poorer factions.

For Cloud Peak to emerge victorious, they'd need not just top-tier combat power but also luck—avoiding others' Bright Stars, reaching their own, or encountering weakly upgraded guardians would be crucial.

Ideas flashed through their minds, though they knew gaps remained. The rules' flexibility suggested untapped strategies they hadn't yet uncovered.

Now, Cloud Peak faced a decision: whether to purchase this Bright Star's guardian.

"After reaching the center, all Bright Stars will be scrambled. We don't know if peripheral stars differ from central ones," Xiao Min mused, studying the crystal's intricate patterns. "If they do, we should buy cheaper, weaker guardians. If not, we'll need careful consideration."

"We should've struck the Soaring Crystal softer," a Youth Army member grumbled. "We could've claimed more stars early, then coasted to victory during the final ten rounds."

Many nodded, but Ye Zhongming shook his head.

"The central zone's stars are public territory," Dai Zhi explained. "Whoever arrives first gains initial advantage. Later arrivals must either pay tolls (which go to the occupying faction) or challenge

guardians. In public zones, slower movement with ample resources makes sense to claim more stars. But early on, speed is key."

The complainers realized they'd oversimplified things.

"There's more," Ye Zhongming added, memorizing the patterns—each likely representing real creatures. "Purchasing versus challenging hinges on balancing strength and wealth. Claiming numerous stars without combat prowess or funds achieves nothing but losses."

"Alternatively," he continued, "racing to the center while conserving resources, then dominating the final ten rounds, is equally valid."

"Of course, with sufficient strength or wealth, one could methodically conquer most stars for guaranteed victory."

He left unspoken the uncertainty: no faction could confidently assess whether they possessed such overwhelming advantages. Neither Mechanical Genius nor Cloud Peak could.

Thus, the paradox remained: secure more stars now, or prioritize speed and conservation?

The crystal panel displayed ten rows of patterns with varying counts:

Bottom two rows: 142 each (neatly aligned)

Next two: 118 each

Following two: 86 each

Seventh row: 61

Eighth row: 49

Ninth row: 34

Top (tenth) row: 12

Above these, a separate triangle housed six elite guardians—the nine-headed dragon plus five others.

Total: 854 guardian options.

Energy bar lengths scaled dramatically—top-row requirements tripled the bottom's, while the elite six demanded staggering amounts.

Suddenly, a seventh-row pattern flickered and vanished.

Though Cloud Peak maintained composure, shock rippled through them.

One faction had already chosen—triggering a cascade as others followed suit.

Ye Zhongming remained patient. With 854 options, he doubted anyone would splurge on the elite six yet.

Then came a surprise: someone selected a top-row guardian (only twelve available)—a massive early investment. Who'd gamble so boldly? Mechanical Genius?

After observation, Ye Zhongming made his move—selecting a fifth-row pattern.