

Apocalypse 1671

Chapter 1671: Card reward (1)

The creature was a heavily scaled, mutated lifeform, roughly the size of an adult male elephant, relatively small among the vast array of lifeforms depicted.

Beyond its scales, this creature possessed a pair of sharp, curved horns, a protruding snout filled with razor-sharp teeth, and an overall muscular build. The thick scales didn't give it a cumbersome appearance; instead, it looked agile, clearly a terrifying entity excelling in both speed and physicality.

In the apocalypse, evolved particularly feared this type of creature.

Ye Zhongming had his reasons for choosing a fifth-row lifeform.

First, he couldn't be certain about the guardian beasts' exact strength. Apart from the energy bars, the patterns provided no descriptions—everything was guesswork.

Under these circumstances, selecting lower-tier guardians might result in insufficient strength, failing to intimidate others when collecting "toll fees" later. That would be handing out free gifts.

Second, Ye Zhongming wanted to gauge the cost range of these guardians. Mid-tier selections should logically have mid-tier prices.

Of course, this wasn't absolute, but it was the only viable approach.

One could estimate based on energy bar lengths, but what if those lengths were merely conceptual rather than concrete indicators? Ye Zhongming trusted the conventional assumption that mid-tier guardians would have mid-tier prices.

Following Cannibal Chain's example, he fed unused items into the guardian's energy bar, watching it fill gradually.

Cloud Peak's members observed intently, finding the process fascinating in itself.

Soon, the energy bar neared capacity. After inserting one last piece of useless level-eight material, the pattern flashed—the guardian vanished.

"No reaction?" Xiao Xuan remarked when nothing seemed to happen post-disappearance. Others frowned, equally puzzled.

Only Ye Zhongming suddenly turned to look behind the group.

The guardian stood there calmly, observing them with composed detachment.

This startled Cloud Peak thoroughly.

The Bright Star's uniqueness had lulled them into dropping their guard, assuming they were alone on the planet and safe inside this structure.

No sentries had been posted—who knew the guardian would materialize silently at their rear?

Ye Zhongming attempted various methods to command the guardian but received no compliance. Its eyes showed understanding—it simply chose not to obey.

This was unavoidable. After all, it wasn't his battle beast. Its mere presence here sufficed.

Though uncooperative, the creature radiated formidable energy—likely no weaker than level eight.

Yangos clamored to spar with it, but Ye Zhongming stopped him. Provoking unknown rules would be unwise.

While uncontrollable, Ye Zhongming received prompts about upgrades. As per the space's rules, this guardian could be upgraded five times.

Without overthinking, Ye Zhongming chose to upgrade it once.

After surrendering roughly one-third of the guardian's original purchase cost in equivalent items, the wheel space confirmed the upgrade's success.

Temporarily dubbing this a "Level 1 Guardian", its current form far surpassed its initial state.

Quantifying the improvement was impossible, but instinct told Ye Zhongming that while the base form posed no real threat, defeating this Level 1 Guardian would now require serious effort.

After consideration, Ye Zhongming proceeded with a second upgrade...

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"Please strike the Soaring Crystal again."

The stone platform reappeared before the structure. This time, when Xia Bai moved to act, Red Hair intercepted, insisting on handling the second challenge herself.

Ye Zhongming glanced at the still-incapacitated Undead Dragon-fish, concerned.

But under Red Hair's insistence, he relented.

Armed with spatial equipment borrowed from Xia Bai, Red Hair struck the Soaring Crystal, sending it flying beyond their Bright Star.

Once it entered space, the sky transformed into a star map, allowing Cloud Peak to track the crystal's trajectory.

Following Ye Zhongming's instructions, Red Hair applied moderate force. After passing three Bright Stars, the crystal collided with one of the reward cards they'd observed earlier.

The card shrank rapidly, streaking back to Cloud Peak's Bright Star and landing in Ye Zhongming's palm.

Without inspecting it, Ye Zhongming kept watching as the Soaring Crystal continued past one more star before settling on a new one.

Like viewing 4K footage, Cloud Peak watched Red Hair get drawn into that star. After purchasing a set quota, her challenge began.

Her opponent resembled a demon king—humanoid but bulkier, with a grotesque head, wreathed in ice-blue flames, wielding twin whips.

Glimpses of its limbs revealed skin in stark contrast to its flames—a reddish-brown hue.

Though this monster's strength was reduced by 54%, it immediately humbled the observers by sending Red Hair flying within ten seconds. While not fatal, the damage was severe.

Red Hair's current power far exceeded ordinary eight-star evolved beings. Only a level-nine entity could overwhelm her so thoroughly. Did this half-weakened monster still retain level-nine strength?

"Something's off," Ye Zhongming murmured before falling silent, his expression grave yet not overly worried.

"Did it open with its ultimate move?" Xiao Min, an eight-star evolved being with sharp instincts, ventured this theory based on her combat experience and understanding of Red Hair.

"Look! Sister Red Hair is counterattacking!"

Many Youth Army members—who feared the icy Xia Bai, distrusted the scheming Xiao Min, and avoided the stern Dai Zhi—adored Red Hair for her approachable, gentle demeanor.

Now, witnessing her counterattack, they erupted in excitement.

"Red Hair has grown stronger."

This came from Xia Bai.

On the Bright Star, Red Hair gripped her spear as her crimson hair elongated, coiling around the shaft. Molten lava seeped from the weapon, igniting her hair, then her entire body.

The screen now showed two flaming figures in a face-off—one ice-blue, the other blazing red!

Chapter 1672: Card reward (2)

Xiao Min's assessment was validated—Ye Zhongming shared the view that the mutated lifeform had unleashed a killer move, catching Red Hair off guard.

Red Hair's current condition appeared stable, her momentum undiminished.

Yet Cloud Peak members worried—would her earlier injuries compromise the coming battle?

With the Undead Dragon-fish unable to assist, could Red Hair truly prevail alone under such circumstances?

Unaware of what befell Great America after their failed challenge, Cloud Peak harbored dual anxieties:

Concern for Red Hair's safety

Apprehension about Cloud Peak's fate

At this moment, no one—not even Ye Zhongming—could intervene. The battle rested solely on Red Hair's shoulders.

The magma engulfing Red Hair maintained fluidity—flowing from spear to burning hair, then across her body before cycling back to the weapon through her hands.

Her features and crimson armor became indistinguishable, leaving only a humanoid fire-wielder gripping a spear.

The ice-blue monster differed—its flames seemed innate, like a second skin. Though similarly wreathed in fire, its terrifying visage remained visible beneath calm, steady flames.

Visually, their clash was spectacular.

The monster's flaming whips lashed out, trailing star-like embers that swelled into fireballs mid-flight, blanketing the sky like spectral will-o'-wisps.

Red Hair reacted—her spear thrust diagonally skyward, vibrating at near-invisible speeds. Countless afterimages materialized, rapidly forming a spear-wall defense.

These spectral spears then launched like bullets, intercepting both whips and ghostly flames.

The collision erupted into hybrid blue-red pyrotechnics—a firework display against which both combatants vanished, only to reappear amidst the explosions.

Spear and whips wove intricate patterns through the fading sparks, igniting new bursts with each exchange as close-quarters combat commenced.

Every evolved recognized this as the deadliest form of battle—one misstep meant death.

Cloud Peak collectively held their breath, fearing Red Hair's injuries might compromise her endurance.

Despite the crystal-clear visuals, the combatants' blistering speeds and entangled movements made assessing advantages impossible—until...

A magma eruption from Red Hair's spear met a fireball burst from the monster's torso, forcibly separating both.

Red Hair staggered before steadying herself—her exhaustion palpable despite invisible panting.

As flames dissipated, her scarred armor revealed the truth: even its self-repair couldn't disguise her disadvantage.

The monster fared no better—its torso riddled with magma-bored holes, flames extinguished, body pierced clean through.

Red Hair's extinguished flames deepened Ye Zhongming's concern—a potential signal of impending collapse.

Yet despite apparent distress, Red Hair advanced. Her hair elongated as thorny brambles sprouted from her back and feet. Raising her spear, she hurled it with full force.

The monster, unprepared for disarmed combat, momentarily faltered. Its whips wove a defensive net that caught the projectile, drawing sighs from Cloud Peak's ranks.

Then—detonation.

The spear exploded into molten shrapnel, forcing the fire-wreathed monster back despite its own flame affinity.

But its instincts screamed danger—something terrifying approached from below and behind.

Even at half-strength, this elite lifeform reacted flawlessly:

Flames erupted from its back, forming a billowing cape that arced protectively downward as it leaped skyward, seeking shelter within its own fiery mantle.

Ye Zhongming couldn't help but admire the elegant counter.

What the monster couldn't see mid-combat was the thorny net converging from both directions—a gigantic bramble mousetrap snapping shut!

"Sister Red Hair's seed ability!" a Youth Army member recalled her signature move—surreptitiously planting thorn seeds that sprouted combat vines.

Previously auxiliary, these vines now manifested a devastating technique.

As the monster ascended into its flame cloak's protection, Red Hair materialized above—winged and cold-eyed.

A downward palm thrust unleashed a magma tsunami, hammering the monster into the closing trap.

Razor-sharp thorns transformed into spears mid-penetration, impaling the creature before detonating into a molten coffin.

Red Hair landed as the magma sphere struck the ground, splattering fiery residue. Only the monster's now-shattered skull remained, rolling briefly before dissolving into ash.

Challenge complete—Red Hair victorious!

Chapter 1673: Card reward (3)

Just like the first time, the entire Cloud Peak team was transported to this brand-new Bright Star.

Due to Red Hair's unique physiology, conventional healing methods had limited effect on her. Though everyone could see she wasn't in great condition, they could only rely on her natural recovery and selected restorative items.

After exchanging glances with Red Hair, Ye Zhongming felt slightly reassured.

Red Hair had grown tremendously stronger. Though injured and exhausted, her overall condition remained stable.

Thinking back to her "creation" from the blood pool years ago, the Cloud Peak King couldn't help but feel deeply moved.

This Bright Star was already within the chaotic central zone, but its scenery was completely different from before.

Some say human imagination knows no bounds.

To some extent, this is true—there's nothing humans can't conceive.

Yet imagination ultimately relies on people's knowledge, education, experience, and life context—it requires a foundation.

Just like how most post-apocalyptic lifeforms are named based on their resemblance to Earth's creatures.

Now, seeing this new Bright Star, Cloud Peak members realized imagination does have limits. Some things simply can't be imagined out of thin air—they'd never conceived a planet could be like this.

Vegetation, soil, atmosphere, sky, colors...

Everything was utterly alien to Earth.

Many couldn't help but think: So this is how the world could be, too.

"Let's go. Over there."

Ye Zhongming pointed, and the group spotted a familiar structure identical to the one on the previous Bright Star.

Entering, they found the expected crystal panel—but with one new addition.

A star map.

The complete map of the Mountain King Wheel's spatial layout, they'd seen earlier from space.

"Look here—and here! You can see people!"

"Here too!"

Many Youth Army members, though already competent fighters, still lacked composure due to their age. Novel sights easily excited them.

Ye Zhongming and the others naturally noticed too.

On this star map, certain Bright Stars were illuminated—clearly the occupied ones.

Upon closer inspection, each occupied star's small image showed slowly shifting scenes—people, beasts, and mutated lifeforms.

For evolved with sharp memories, these were instantly recognizable as the guardian beasts from the crystal panel's selection.

For example, the speed-type lifeform from Cloud Peak's recently conquered star appeared alongside Xia Bai's image.

"So this shows everyone's choices and occupied stars?"

Xiao Min smirked derisively, resentful yet helpless toward the roulette space's antics.

It always knew how to push buttons.

Can't see other areas from a Bright Star? No problem—here's a star map showing everyone's progress.

This invisibly piled tremendous pressure on every faction.

In this perilous trial, such pressure could either motivate and unlock potential or become the final straw that breaks a team.

Ye Zhongming analyzed the straightforward map:

Most factions now held one Bright Star. A few, like Mechanical Genius, already controlled two, both within his original pathway. Clearly, he'd chosen to occupy as many stars as possible.

Meanwhile, factions like Cannibal Chain—who'd promised to help Cloud Peak secure the crown—opted for rushing straight to the center.

This made sense—minimal effort now, then simply adjusting their Soaring Crystal strikes during the final ten rounds to fulfill their pledge by not competing.

Naturally, if opportunity arose, Ye Zhongming believed Cannibal Chain would seize the crown, then sell it to Cloud Peak at a heart-stopping price.

Some factions mirrored Cloud Peak's approach—entering the chaotic zone but progressing only one or two stars.

Now came the guardian beast selection.

First, Ye Zhongming examined their acquired card.

"Multi-Purpose Discount Card."

The mundane name belied its significance. The wheel space was playing games again.

The description confirmed Ye Zhongming's suspicion.

This card offered discounts in two scenarios:

Purchasing Bright Stars (one-time use)

Buying guardian beasts (reusable at new stars)

Discount rates varied—Ye Zhongming's card showed 8.6, indicating a 14% discount.

Were all factions' discounts equal? Unlikely. Probably earlier acquirers got better rates—something only Cannibal Chain could confirm later.

With this card, Ye Zhongming unhesitatingly selected a fourth-row guardian beast pattern and upgraded it immediately.

After paying the substantial cost, he mentally calculated the price difference between rows, establishing a baseline.

"Purchase complete. You may strike the Soaring Crystal anytime—this applies to future Bright Stars as well. Alternatively, you may explore the star for local specialties. There's no time limit to reach the central zone."

Chapter 1674: First resource point surprise

"Exploring Bright Stars is also an option?"

This thought had crossed people's minds before, but on the previous Bright Star, they hadn't noticed anything worth exploring—just flowers and grass as far as the eye could see.

"Another multiple-choice question," Ye Zhongming sighed, his gaze falling outside the building.

The wheel space stated there was no time limit, but the choice was yours to make.

A faction could explore the Bright Star—but this was an entire planet! How long would a thorough exploration take? While it might not be as ecologically complex as Earth, it certainly wouldn't be small either.

Factions choosing not to explore could use that time to rapidly occupy more Bright Stars, inevitably leading others to failure.

Yet if they didn't explore and the Bright Stars truly contained valuable items—things that could significantly enhance a faction's strength or serve as equivalent payment for purchasing stars and guardian beasts—the situation would be entirely different.

Just as Ye Zhongming—and likely everyone else—was wrestling with this dilemma, the space's voice, tempting as a devil's whisper, sounded again:

"Spend equivalent payment to purchase a navigation map marking the locations of valuable items on the Bright Star."

Ye Zhongming couldn't help but laugh bitterly. The wheel space was blatantly tempting them.

Now he knew many wavering factions would stay to hunt for extra rewards.

The space was practically shouting: Short on funds? No problem! Buy this map, and you'll have a chance to earn what you need for stars and guardians.

How could factions ambitious for the Mountain King Crown resist such temptation?

The public star zone in the central area contained numerous Bright Stars—no one could buy them all. But with these navigation maps pinpointing local specialties, victory suddenly seemed within reach.

With another sigh, Ye Zhongming chose to purchase.

A sleek, cylindrical object appeared in his hand, featuring a red button. A light press projected a virtual holographic star map before him, displaying hundreds of glowing dots—clearly marking valuable items, with a single green dot indicating their current building.

"Let's check the nearest spot," Ye Zhongming said.

The star map showed no changes in other factions' statuses—clearly, the Bright Star's specialties lured all. This slightly eased Ye Zhongming's mind. His sole purpose here was the Mountain King Crown. With the Ocean King Crown already in his possession, the powerful synergy of the three ruler equipments made this a must-win endeavor.

Had any faction ignored the specialties to occupy stars rapidly, Ye Zhongming would have been forced to follow suit. Otherwise, falling behind would render any found specialties meaningless.

He refused to believe these specialties' combined value could surpass the Mountain King Crown—otherwise, this entire trial would be a joke.

The nearest resource point wasn't far—just twenty minutes at Evolved's pace.

A small grove awaited them... truly small, with only five or six trees. Yet each stood tall, resembling decades-old Earth trees. While not spectacular, they weren't shabby either.

"Are those... Golden Elm Oaks?"

The Female Guard, primarily tasked with protecting Ye Zhongming, weren't materials experts. Xiao Min sounded uncertain.

"They are Golden Elm Oaks!"

Ye Zhongming's eyes gleamed.

These existed on Earth but were extremely rare, found only in small quantities in tropical regions.

Nearly every part of Golden Elm Oaks was valuable. Their trunks, while too soft for construction, emitted a special fragrance when burned that accelerated evolved beings' physical and mental recovery. Higher-grade trunks produced stronger effects—level six could double recovery rates, while level eight tripled them.

Just this made them immensely valuable. In Ye Zhongming's past life, a one-hour Golden Elm Oak incense stick equaled a common silver-grade equipment's price.

Though their wood was soft, the leaves boasted exceptional toughness—perfect base material for protective gear.

But most coveted were the fruits. These miraculous berries progressed through four stages:

Red stage (cherry-sized): Can be inlaid into socketed equipment to grant special abilities.

Green stage (larger): Become incredibly hard—when processed and fired from projectile weapons, they deliver massive damage with unique effects.

Grey-white stage (pre-ripening): Prime ingredient for instant-recovery potions.

Yellow stage (ripe): Superb consumables that temporarily boost overall strength—level six fruits increase power by ~10%, level eight by ~20%, lasting 10-15 days.

This was essentially a side-effect-free, ultra-long-lasting berserk potion.

But the true value lay in the permanent residual effect—after the duration ended, a percentage (up to 50% in one case, which Ye Zhongming knew) would remain permanently.

Each grade's fruit could only provide one residual boost, but stacking all eight grades could permanently increase strength by ~20%!

Ye Zhongming never expected the first resource point to deliver such an incredible windfall!

Chapter 1675: Waging war to sustain war

The Golden Elm Oaks were indeed a pleasant surprise, but as the team approached these large trees, a dark cloud emerged from above.

For Cloud Peak members, whose combat instincts were second nature, they immediately prepared for battle.

It was a swarm of flying, mutated creatures averaging around level six, resembling ladybugs. However, compared to Earth's ladybugs—about the size of a child's fingernail—each of these was as large as a traditional Pu'er tea cake.

"There are level sevens—be careful!"

While Ye Zhongming remained silent, Xiao Min took command. Under her orders, the team formed a defensive formation. When the swarm closed within a hundred meters, Cloud Peak launched its assault.

Skills, crystal weapons, and ranged equipment rained down, illuminating the surroundings with energy bursts. The constant collisions sent many of these mutated creatures plummeting to the ground, their fluorescent green bodily fluids splattering upon impact.

However, the situation wasn't ideal. These creatures' defenses were unexpectedly high. The swarm numbered at least ten thousand, yet Cloud Peak's first full-force ranged attack eliminated only about a tenth of them.

The initial volley was always the most concentrated—subsequent attacks would inevitably decrease in intensity due to cooldowns, reloading, and varying attack speeds.

Given the circumstances, melee combat seemed unavoidable.

Engaging flying enemies of unknown abilities in close quarters would likely increase casualties.

Seeing the first wave fall short, Ye Zhongming, Yangos, Yellow Ball, Nine Treasures, Xia Bai, and other level-eight combatants stepped in.

Their intervention immediately shifted the momentum of the battle. Though the swarm was vast, its highest-level members were only level seven. Under Yangos's dragon breath, Yellow Ball's AoE skills, and other large-scale attacks, the creatures fell in droves.

By the time the remaining few hundred broke through to Cloud Peak's lines, the outcome was already decided.

Ten minutes later, the battle concluded with Cloud Peak's casualties in the single digits, and no fatalities.

"Consider this a specialty, too," some warriors joked while collecting demon crystals.

The ten-thousand-plus level-six demon crystals alone were a considerable haul. Combined with the creatures' sturdy shells—valuable materials—the total worth was even higher.

Unfortunately, due to the overwhelming attacks of top-tier fighters, few shells remained intact.

With the resource point's defenders eliminated, Ye Zhongming's group approached the Golden Elm Oaks. Knowing they'd never return, they opted for a scorched-earth approach—stripping every fruit, plucking every leaf, and even cutting down the branches.

By the time they finished, over an hour had passed.

Away from the central building, they couldn't check the star map for other factions' progress. Suppressing his thoughts, Ye Zhongming led the team to the next resource point.

The first harvest had indeed left him impressed with the wheel space's generosity, enough to purchase a low-tier guardian beast.

If they looted all these resource points, how much could they amass?!

But that was just a fleeting thought. Clearing every resource point would take so long that others would've bought up all the Bright Stars, potentially trapping them here indefinitely.

Focusing on the five nearest resource points around the building, Cloud Peak spent roughly ten hours, averaging two hours per location.

The yields varied: one slightly surpassed the Golden Elm Oaks, three fell short, and the fifth—costing them a battle beast—only provided common materials.

Realizing the randomness of these explorations, Ye Zhongming made a decisive call: return to the building and press forward.

Back inside, the star map revealed most factions hadn't progressed—except Gyanendra's team, which had already claimed three central-zone Bright Stars.

Different factions, different priorities. Every choice had its logic.

The Soaring Crystal was struck again, this time by Xia Bai.

With their recent gains, Ye Zhongming instructed a further reduction in difficulty. After a substantial equivalent payment, Xia Bai and the two giant earthworms entered the challenge.

However, as they ventured deeper into the star zone, the challenge difficulty scaled accordingly. What would have reduced difficulty by 60% earlier is now only achieved at 51%.

Fortunately, Xia Bai's personal strength and the white level-eight mutated earthworm's prowess carried them through—albeit with some effort.

This Bright Star's environment was another breathtaking novelty, but structurally identical to the last: same central building, same crystal panel, same star map.

And, of course, another navigation map to purchase.

Ye Zhongming selected a guardian beast, upgraded it, and then led Cloud Peak to clear nearby resource points.

This time, they looted seven before moving to the next star. After another purchase-and-challenge cycle, they claimed four more.

The number of resource points targeted per star varied, partly due to distance, but more importantly, Ye Zhongming was calculating the value.

Deeper progression meant higher Bright Star purchase costs, as each challenge demanded greater payments to offset rising dangers.

Combined with guardian beast expenses, Ye Zhongming maintained a clear cost benchmark in mind.

His resource point raids were calibrated to this standard.

He was waging war to sustain war.

Each star's plunder funded the next star's conquest!

This approach essentially forfeited long-term wealth accumulation on any single star. His goal wasn't riches—it was Bright Stars. It was the Mountain King Crown!

Amidst temptations of limitless resources, Ye Zhongming's discipline held firm. Cloud Peak obeyed without question, ensuring his will was executed flawlessly.

Other factions? Not so much.

By the time Cloud Peak claimed their eighth central-zone Bright Star, the star map revealed a stark divergence in progress among the competing teams.