

## **Apocalypse 1696**

Chapter 1696: Fight back if hit

The scene fell into silence.

The situation on the light screen was clear—everyone could see it.

Yet at the same time, no one truly understood.

The Guardian Beast's strength was undeniable. They had watched it being selected, upgraded, and forcing Gyanendra to back down.

And under the Difficulty Surge Card, its power had doubled.

Nearly everyone believed this was a place where those who stepped forward would never return—that this Guardian Beast was already beyond what human evolved could handle at this stage.

But...this woman holding a cat had ended the battle so quickly?

How long had it even been?!

Just how strong was she?!

Amidst their shock, the most exceptional evolved began analyzing and assessing the Talking Lady's strength and combat style.

Cloud Peak was no different. Most couldn't decipher much, only knowing that the Talking Lady was a mental-type lifeform. Yet everything that had just happened completely overturned their understanding of such evolved beings.

After reaching level nine, it seemed the Talking Lady's skills were no longer purely mental-based!

"They still are."

Ye Zhongming answered the question in everyone's minds.

"Whether it's her whispers, humming, or screams—they're all manifestations of mental attacks. The same goes for the black cat's meows. The difference is, after reaching level nine, their power has ascended to a level we can't even fathom. If I'm not mistaken, those crystals are a materialized form of psychic energy."

In that short time, Ye Zhongming had seen the black cat and the Talking Lady use at least eight skills—five from her, three from the cat.

The black cat's meow, claw projections, and the final spinning charge.

The Talking Lady's crystal spike, crystal imprisonment, crystal detonation, wound-tearing, and that final skill that yanked out the Guardian Beast's soul.

Eight skills, flawlessly coordinated, leaving the Guardian Beast utterly suppressed.

Of course, this didn't mean they were overwhelmingly stronger than the Guardian Beast. Mental attacks were inherently unpredictable—if the target's mental resilience were lacking or far inferior to the attacker's, they'd end up restrained and unable to fight back.

This Guardian Beast was likely a pure physical combatant, weak in mental defense.

The Talking Lady's power was staggering. Ye Zhongming glanced at Red Hair beside him, prompting a faint smile from this nearly-human puppet.

"If suppressed, victory is easy. If not suppressed, danger lurks at every turn." Red Hair tilted her head. "Did I use the idiom right?"

The nearby Cloud Peak higher-ups chuckled. They understood her point.

The Talking Lady was undoubtedly powerful, but her strengths and weaknesses were too pronounced. Against a foe resistant to mental attacks, her combat efficiency would plummet, easily dragging her into a grueling battle.

The reason they didn't say she'd outright lose was that the black cat, while also psychic-based, excelled in direct combat—its agility and speed were unmatched, leaving few able to keep up.

In short, The Talking Lady had clear pros and cons, but defeating her was still an immense challenge.

Yet Red Hair's words suggested she had some confidence.

Ye Zhongming's gaze drifted to the motionless Undead Dragon-fish. Once it awoke, it would surely be level nine—likely a top-tier one at that, having inherited the legacy of a lifeform on par with the Holy Father.

After Cloud Peak's challenge, it was the Mechanical Genius's turn. He also chose not to purchase anything, instead conquering the Cannibal Chain's planet in one go.

The third round ended amid such breathtaking scenes.

A new round was about to begin.

In the first three rounds, though both Cloud Peak and the Mechanical Genius faced challenges, they remained in the lead. The other factions had their wins and losses, but with each passing round, their hopes of victory dwindled.

The Cannibal Chain struck the crystal. Having opted for a full-team battle last round, they now advanced only two steps, landing on Bright Star No. 8—Cloud Peak’s territory. After paying the toll, they settled there, seemingly content to watch the battle unfold from the sidelines.

Next was Greater America. The crowd’s barely settled nerves tensed again. Last round, Greater America had struck hard at Cloud Peak. Would they do so again this round? Keep targeting them?

From Bright Star No. 13, Governor Spade didn’t use any cards. Instead, he advanced two stars, landing on Bright Star No. 15—another Cannibal Chain territory.

Wu Xiu shrugged helplessly. This stretch—from Bright Star No. 12 to No. 20—had three of their stars: No. 13, 15, and 17. Greater America had already taken No. 13, and now they occupied No. 15. Next round, they’d likely target No. 17.

The Cannibal Chain’s second-in-command regretted not purchasing stronger Guardian Beasts earlier, like Cloud Peak had.

The tolls paid to pass their ally’s stars pained Wu Xiu. If not for Ye Zhongming’s promise to reimburse her afterward, she might’ve been tempted to challenge them once or twice.

As expected, Spade chose to challenge—with his full team—and won, even purchasing a new Guardian Beast.

This stretch was critical to his plan of crushing Cloud Peak, so he’d spare no effort in setting up obstacles. Yet this round, he remained silent.

The Talking Lady's appearance had shaken him deeply, leaving him uncertain.

After Greater America, it was Cloud Peak's turn again.

If the previous round had merely piqued the crowd's interest, now, as Cloud Peak stepped up, excitement surged.

Would Cloud Peak...continue down this death-path set by Greater America, Gyanendra, and the Mechanical Genius?

Ye Zhongming stood before the stone platform, hammer in hand.

As if aware that everyone was watching through the light screen, he paused before lifting his head, just enough to let the spectators see his face.

"This Star Path has all sorts of strategies, cards, alliances, and schemes."

His wrist twisted, rotating the hammer without striking yet.

"But in the end, do you know what this game is really about?"

Faced with the Cloud Peak King's sudden question, the crowd exchanged puzzled glances.

Ye Zhongming sighed.

"Still don't get it? Fine, I'll tell you."

A level nine demon crystal appeared in his hand.

"It's about...money."

With that, he swung the hammer.

The Soaring Crystal landed precisely on Bright Star No. 15—Greater America's position last round.

"At Cloud Peak, I've always taught my comrades one thing: If you're hit, hit back."

As Ye Zhongming's voice faded, the spatial announcement boomed—

"Cloud Peak has activated the Major King Card!"

Chapter 1697: Major King Card

For a moment, many people's hands trembled slightly.

The use of the Minor Joker Card began with Cloud Peak, and now the Major Joker Card was the first to be played by Cloud Peak again!

In this life-or-death battle, not everyone had the courage to throw out their trump cards one after another, especially when not even half the rounds had passed.

Amidst the shock and sighs, everyone began to speculate: Why had Cloud Peak used the Major Joker Card now? Had they found a way to secure victory in one move?

Once this thought emerged, many felt restless. Would they be among the ones Ye Zhongming had chosen?

And what exactly was the Major Joker Card?

The condition for purchasing the Major Joker Card was owning and using the Minor Joker Card. Currently, apart from Cloud Peak, only Greater America and the Mechanical Genius met this requirement.

Greater America had already finished their turn without using it, the Mechanical Genius hadn't reached his turn yet, and Cloud Peak was in between.

If they hadn't used it, it would've been fine—but now that they had, everyone couldn't help but feel that Cloud Peak hadn't recklessly played this one-time-use card. The timing was impeccable.

Of course, retaliation was inevitable after using it.

"Cloud Peak's Major Joker Card effect is—Multi-Card Combo!"

"Please select the base card."

"Cloud Peak has chosen the base card—Shared Fate Card!"

"Please select three factions as targets for the Shared Fate Card."

"Cloud Peak has selected the Mechanical Genius, Gyanendra, and the Women Guard as targets."

"Cloud Peak chooses to pay the toll fee."

"The Major Joker Card has the highest priority. All cards used by Cloud Peak this round will take full effect, and the effects on the targets cannot be exempted."

"The toll fee has doubled due to the Difficulty Surge Card and increased by an additional one-fifth due to the Commission Card."

"Cloud Peak has completed payment. The Mechanical Genius, Gyanendra, and Women Guard must now pay their toll fees."

A series of announcements left everyone stunned, especially the named factions: the Mechanical Genius, Gyanendra, and the Women Guard. They felt like disaster had struck out of nowhere.

Due to the Major Joker Card's supreme priority, the unchosen factions couldn't use exemption cards. This meant they had to pay the same exorbitant fee as Cloud Peak—an astronomical sum.

The Mechanical Genius remained silent inside his mechanical war puppet, his expression unreadable.

Gyanendra had already paid a steep toll fee earlier. Though he had earned some income and would benefit slightly from the Commission Card (taking at most three-fifths of the transaction), he now had to pay more than double his previous fee!

The Women Guard's side was dead silent.

They were already nearly broke. Though the exact amount wasn't yet known, it was undoubtedly beyond their means. What could they do? Trade equipment?

If possible, they would've rather chosen to fight than be humiliatingly drained like this.

Being unable to resist sometimes felt worse than death.

"Ah—!"

A sharp scream shattered the brief silence.

It was the Mechanical Genius's signature shrill voice.

He spat out a rapid, furious stream of words—an extremely long sentence in what some recognized as Berber, an ancient Moroccan language. Though obscure, many knew of it.

No one understood what he said, but it definitely wasn't anything polite.

After two more sharp curses in the same language, the Mechanical Genius was cut off by the spatial voice.

"Cloud Peak has completed payment. Other factions must pay within five minutes."

"This isn't fair!"

Some of the Women Guard shouted.

But the space ignored them, coldly continuing the countdown.

With only one minute left, it seemed the three factions—Gyanendra, the Mechanical Genius, and the Women Guard—still hadn't paid. Some cursed in frustration, while others desperately scrambled for solutions.

But clearly, this was unavoidable.

Cloud Peak's use of the Major Joker Card at this moment had one clear purpose: another round of elimination.

"What happens if we don't pay?"

Suddenly, Ella, one of the Women Guard's leaders, asked.

This time, the space answered: "Elimination."

"What if we pay part but not all?"

Another leader, Gianna, followed up.

But the space didn't respond, only restarting the countdown—30 seconds remained.

The Women Guard gritted their teeth and began paying.

They wouldn't give up until the last moment!

The other two factions did the same. The Mechanical Genius, still cursing, paid because—like Cloud Peak—he was one of the top contenders for victory.

But double the toll fee for a top-tier Guardian Beast wasn't easy to cover. By the end, even the Mechanical Genius's voice had changed.

"Time's up."

The space's simple four words silenced all factions once more.

"The Mechanical Genius has paid in full."

"The Women Guard failed to pay the full amount, short by 15%."

"Gyanendra failed to pay the full amount, short by 27%."

Not paying meant elimination—but what about partial payment?

The space soon provided the answer.

Amidst the screams of many women, the space began forcibly "collecting" the debt.

One Women Guard warrior rapidly aged, her hair turning white and her body withering into a frail old woman. Then a second.

Screams erupted, but nothing could stop it.

The space drained the life energy of 29 Women Guard warriors before deeming the 15% deficit settled.

The Women Guard's founding was already a tragic tale, and like the Female Guard, these warriors shared deep bonds. Watching their comrades wither away plunged them into grief, with some openly weeping.

Ye Zhongming remained silent. Though he couldn't see, Gianna and Ella's fragmented words gave him a rough idea of what had happened.

Gyanendra's side suffered even worse. The space seized his mechanical assets—one after another, they exploded, sometimes taking their evolved operators with them. With his forces already depleted, Gyanendra closed his eyes in agony.

Now, he and his remaining men were combat-ineffective and penniless. With several rounds left, defeat seemed only a matter of time.

The Women Guard's losses were smaller, but as the weaker faction, they, too, had effectively lost the competition.

A single Major Joker Card had nearly knocked two factions out of the running.

The Mechanical Genius had paid in full, but he was likely drained of resources and would have to fight barehanded from now on.

As everyone calmed down and analyzed the situation, they realized: Cloud Peak, as the "banker," had indeed dragged two factions down—but they hadn't gained much either, having paid the same exorbitant fee.

The only real beneficiary seemed to be... Great America.

Chapter 1698: After the calm

But was Great America happy?

At the very least, nothing could be discerned from Spade's expression.

Indeed, before him now lay four rewards—one each from Cloud Peak, the Mechanical Genius, Gyanendra, and the Women Guard.

These items would drive any force on Earth into a frenzy, let alone him. If taken outside, they could propel Greater America to become the most powerful faction in North America—perhaps even the entire planet.

They might even give Spade himself a chance to spin a level-nine wheel!

Yet, he simply couldn't muster any excitement.

He knew that Gyanendra, no matter what cards he still held, had virtually no chance of turning the tables.

The Women Guard? Even worse. They were already weak, and now, with many of their members forced to pawn their equipment, they were in a far worse state than Gyanendra, who still had two trump cards tucked away.

The Cannibal Chain was Cloud Peak's ally, leaving only himself and the Mechanical Genius to oppose them.

But... Spade inwardly scoffed. These toll fees were indeed astronomical, but their value only mattered outside—here, they were useless. What good were they now?

With the Women Guard's fall and their hopes of victory dashed, alliances no longer mattered. Their remaining cards or hidden aces would undoubtedly be used for self-preservation, just to survive the ten rounds and make it out alive.

As for Gyanendra? That old fox had never truly cared about their alliance, and Spade was no different. At this point, he'd settle for the man not causing trouble.

The biggest wild card—the one Spade truly cared about—was the Mechanical Genius. The entire purpose of this alliance had been to join forces with him, topple Cloud Peak, and strengthen Greater America in the process, closing the gap in Bright Star ownership before their final showdown.

Yes, Spade had always planned to exhaust the Mechanical Genius while crushing Cloud Peak, ensuring his own victory in the end.

Why had he chosen to ally with the Mechanical Genius over Cloud Peak, despite both having the same number of Bright Stars? Aside from racial and geographical biases making the Mechanical Genius feel like a "kinder" target, there was also the fact that madmen were rarely as cunning.

But now, the Mechanical Genius had been bled dry by Cloud Peak. From here on out, he'd have to challenge at every step, including Greater America's Bright Stars.

Forget whether the Mechanical Genius could survive this attrition; the real crisis was that Greater America's Bright Star count was now at risk of rapid depletion.

Before, the only threats were Cloud Peak and the Cannibal Chain seizing his stars. Now, the Mechanical Genius, the Women Guard, and even Gyanendra had been added to the mix.

If Spade could still smile after all this, he'd have to be utterly heartless.

After Cloud Peak came the Women Guard; they advanced one step and chose to challenge, seizing control of Bright Star No. 10 from the Cannibal Chain. But it was clear to everyone that their morale had shattered. The sight of their aged, withering comrades gnawed at their resolve like a relentless tide.

When the Mechanical Genius struck next, he also landed on Bright Star No. 10. The Women Guard, penniless and unable to purchase a Guardian Beast, handed the star to him effortlessly, deepening their despair.

As the new round began, the Cannibal Chain advanced leisurely, drawing little attention. But when Great America's turn came, even the despondent Women Guard and the indifferent Cannibal Chain perked up slightly.

Last round, Ye Zhongming had played his ultimate card—the Major Joker—shattering the fragile Western alliance and knocking two factions out of contention. Now, as the mastermind behind it all, what would Spade do?

Would he also... play his Major Joker Card?!

The answer was: No.

Greater America simply advanced from Bright Star No. 17 to No. 19.

It was clear Spade had originally aimed for No. 18, which belonged to the Women Guard. With the alliance dead, there was no reason not to take it.

But for some reason—perhaps distraction or demoralization—his Soaring Crystal veered off course, landing on No. 19 instead.

That star belonged to Cloud Peak.

Spade cursed his rotten luck... and then paid the toll.

The move left many baffled—and contemptuous. The Mechanical Genius, in particular, was livid.

He'd been counting on Great America to seize Cloud Peak's star, weakening a direct competitor while forcing them to buy the most expensive Guardian Beast at max level. Even if Cloud Peak landed there later, they'd be crippled. *Ra NoBEs*

But instead, this fat bastard had chosen to pay—even at more than double the usual cost!

The Mechanical Genius unleashed a torrent of curses.

Spade remained unmoved.

As the shock subsided, many realized the truth:

Great America had given up.

At first, no one had noticed due to sheer inertia. Spade had been the most active player, forming alliances, flinging cards left and right, acting like the undisputed king. Even in recent rounds, he'd suffered no major losses, remaining one of the top three contenders for the Mountain King Crown.

But once the mental gears turned, the picture became clear.

Great America had avoided losses, but with a third of the rounds gone, Cloud Peak and the Mechanical Genius still held strong in star counts. Trailing by half, Spade's chances of catching up were slim. To win, he'd have to take down both superpowers alone—a near-impossible feat.

As the saying went, wastelanders would fight tooth and nail for anything valuable—but they were also the first to cut their losses when odds turned hopeless.

"Live to fight another day" wasn't just a saying in the Chinese zone; the whole world understood it.

Greater America had just secured a windfall. Even after paying Cloud Peak's toll, how expensive could the remaining Guardian Beasts be? If luck favored him in later rounds, he could target the Women Guard or the Cannibal Chain, or simply buy his way through. By Round 10, even without the crown, he'd walk away filthy rich.

This fat bastard really knew how to quit while he was ahead.

That was the conclusion many reached.

After Greater America, it was Gyanendra's turn. After Cloud Peak's brutal strike last round, the West Asia Saint was effectively out of the running. His team's strength could no longer secure victory—or even guarantee survival.

If he failed to last until the final round, the wheel's whims might simply erase him.

Just as everyone assumed he'd play it safe, picking the easiest stars to cling on...

Gyanendra taught them all a lesson in madness.

Chapter 1699: Crazy

When people are in despair, no matter how unorthodox or absurd their actions may seem, it's hardly surprising, because those words are no longer sufficient to describe them. Perhaps only the simplest yet most intense term, madness, can fully capture the human psyche in such moments.

Just like Gyanendra at this very instant.

Afterward, Ye Zhongming would sometimes recall this moment, initially unclear why the West Asia Saint had chosen this path. But as he gradually heard more rumors about the man, he began to understand.

This was a common occurrence, yet one that played out in nearly every waking moment.

Gyanendra had hit a bottleneck in his development in Western Asia.

One step further, and he would reach nine stars—but his resources were nowhere near as abundant as the other ruler of Western Asia.

People, money, materials, equipment... everything was lacking. The lead in reaching nine stars had already slipped from his grasp.

This was one of the reasons he had come to East Asia seeking opportunity.

Originally, he had believed it would be an easily obtained stroke of luck.

But reality dealt him a crushing blow.

Not only had he failed to gain extra advantages, but upon returning, he found the situation drastically changed. His influence in Western Asia hadn't expanded—it had shrunk further. He no longer had much confidence in competing with the other titan.

After shrewdly liquidating his assets and assembling this current team, Gyanendra had come to vie for the Mountain King Crown with a gambler's mentality.

He had hoped this would return him to his peak.

Yet now, the situation had pushed him to disappointment once more—even despair.

He began to doubt his own job deeply.

Hadn't he foreseen some of this? Under the heaven-sent opportunity of not having to fight desperately against factions like Cloud Peak, shouldn't his precognition have allowed him to secure victory with relative ease?

So why had things turned out this way? Nearly half the rounds had passed. He had used his hard-earned, precious cards—yet the result? His own Bright Stars dwindled while the leaders remained firmly ahead.

If he lost this time, forget escaping—even if he did, he'd likely be left with nothing but himself.

At this stage of the apocalypse, losing one's faction meant losing any chance to stand at the world's pinnacle!

For someone like Gyanendra, accustomed to towering above others, this was utterly intolerable.

Thus, despair slowly crept into his heart—first turning his eyes red, then freezing his heart, and finally... driving his consciousness into madness.

"Gyanendra has activated the Super Misfortune Card. Targets: Cloud Peak, the Mechanical Genius, and Greater America."

"For the next three rounds, targets cannot use any cards and will suffer a random negative status."

"Gyanendra has activated the Annihilation Card. Each round, a random Annihilation Thunderstrike will attack a Bright Star and all life upon it. If the Guardian Beast or faction on the star cannot withstand the strike, the Bright Star will be destroyed."

"Gyanendra has activated the Minor King Card. Card effect: Overclock! Enhances a selected card's effects and adds a random additional ability."

"Gyanendra's Overclock target is the Annihilation Card. Annihilation Thunderstrike damage increased by 50%, with unenhanced effects applied to adjacent Bright Stars."

After this rapid-fire announcement, there was no silence—only fury and upheaval.

What the hell was this old bastard trying to do?!

Three cards in a row—all rare and valuable—thrown out at once. This was even more ruthless than Cloud Peak's move.

Sure, Cloud Peak had used the Major King and Shared Fate Cards, but they'd targeted factions already gunning for their destruction. They hadn't touched the Cannibal Chain—they distinguished friend from foe.

But Gyanendra? Look at his targets: two of them were allies he'd just made agreements with.

Fine, verbal agreements in the apocalypse meant little—self-preservation came first. But the Annihilation Card? That was indiscriminate! Aside from Gyanendra's own Bright Star, every other star was a potential target!

This wasn't just striking back—it was attacking everyone. No distinction between friend or foe.

And the Overclock Card? On its own, it might've been harmless. But applied to the Annihilation Card? It was like pouring gasoline on a wildfire.

Gyanendra's madness wasn't just in burning through every card he had left—it was in the fact that he didn't even spare himself.

The Annihilation Card made him immune, but not the Overclock-enhanced effects. If the additional strikes hit his own Bright Stars and his Guardian Beasts failed to defend them? They'd be obliterated too.

Gyanendra already had the fewest Bright Stars. If luck turned against him in the remaining rounds, losing a few more to these strikes—plus those taken by others—could mean instant elimination.

Sure, more stars meant higher chances of being hit—but even if Cloud Peak or the Mechanical Genius lost a few, they'd still outnumber him. With over forty stars each, even losing two per round would leave them ahead.

Ruthlessness toward others was one thing, but this level of self-destruction? This combo was indiscriminate slaughter. Didn't Gyanendra realize he might be the first to fall?

And the wheel space hadn't stated that card effects would vanish if the user died. Even if Gyanendra were eliminated, the Annihilation Card would keep wreaking havoc—this was spiting the world from beyond the grave.

But the most terrifying part? Something no one dared dwell on.

What did "cannot withstand the Annihilation Thunderstrike" mean? Who could withstand it? How powerful were these strikes? Failure meant instant elimination.

This was Round 4. Seven Annihilation Thunderstrikes remained, each hitting three stars. That meant 21 Bright Stars at risk. Statistically, every faction would likely be hit at least once, facing sudden death.

Before, even without the grand prize, survival had been possible. Now? Death loomed over everyone. Even if victory became possible again, the odds of annihilation were higher.

Gyanendra instantly became public enemy number one. Even leaders like Ella and Spade, who rarely cursed, hurled the vilest insults at the Western Asia Saint.

Ye Zhongming, however, furrowed his brow, rapidly analyzing the possibilities this indiscriminate assault created. Finally, he sighed. He had to admit—Gyanendra's move had dragged everyone into the abyss. The 80% advantage Ye Zhongming had secured with his Major Joker had been reset to a 50-50 free-for-all.

The King of Cloud Peak could only lament: When humans succumb to certain states, they truly cast all restraint aside.

For example... madness.

Chapter 1700: Where did money come from?

When it was Cloud Peak's turn, unease filled everyone's hearts.

Including Ye Zhongming.

If it were just the Annihilation Thunderstrike alone, he wouldn't be overly worried. Based on the wheel's tendencies, this thing definitely couldn't instantly wipe out multiple teams—it should be resistible, though undoubtedly powerful and difficult to withstand.

Ye Zhongming wasn't afraid of difficulties. Neither was Cloud Peak.

But this trial wasn't just about overcoming obstacles—it also included something akin to a "luck test," an unpredictable element no one could account for.

Yes, what worried Ye Zhongming most wasn't the Annihilation Thunderstrike, but that Misfortune Card.

Who knew what tricks the wheel would pull, what kind of bad luck would befall Cloud Peak?

Now, with Gyanendra in his frenzied state having just taken his turn, Cloud Peak's move carried far too many unknowns.

Every person, every faction, was watching Cloud Peak. Even as enemies, they couldn't help but feel that the final stretch of the Mountain King Plate struggle had turned into Cloud Peak standing alone against everyone.

Look at what they were enduring—Difficulty Surge, Commission, Nebula, Misfortune, Replacement, Annihilation...

Who could remain composed under the effects of so many cards? It seemed only this Eastern faction could.

Now, they were about to move again. Would the Annihilation Thunderstrike strike them?

Ye Zhongming lightly struck the Soaring Crystal, advancing just one step to Bright Star No. 16—Mechanical Genius's territory.

The thunder everyone feared and yet anticipated didn't fall, but the wheel's voice still rang out.

"Misfortune Card target Cloud Peak is affected by misfortune. This round, they cannot choose to challenge and must pay the toll fee, which is doubled from the original amount."

Originally, the toll on this stretch was already doubled, plus Gyanendra's 20% commission. Now, doubled again—even if the Mechanical Genius's Guardian Beast weren't strong or high-level, the fee would still be astronomical.

After Cloud Peak's earlier "harm-others-without-benefiting-themselves" Shared Fate move, did they even have money left?

No money would mean paying with their members' lives.

Amid the wheel's announcement and the Mechanical Genius's raucous laughter, Cloud Peak... paid up.

No penalties followed—proof they'd coughed up the full amount.

Many were disappointed.

They'd truly hoped Cloud Peak would suffer.

Ella gave a bitter smile and resignedly struck the crystal. The stretch from Bright Star No. 12 to No. 20 was treacherous for Cloud Peak, but for the Women Guard? It was a descent into hell. (ÅNOBĚŠ

Broke, they'd have to challenge any star they landed on—and this stretch's difficulty was doubled.

No. 12... belonged to Cloud Peak.

The battle was grueling.

The Women Guard were competitors to all factions here. Their destruction should, in theory, be something everyone wanted.

But now, with their competitive chances all but gone, attitudes toward them had shifted.

After all, the Women Guard's reputation in the Americas—aside from that aspect—was fairly decent.

Some might look down on them for it, but they didn't shun interaction or trade.

If they bowed out now, it wouldn't be a bad outcome.

With even potential threats to their interests gone, people naturally grew more tolerant. Such was human nature.

So when they saw the Women Guard fighting desperately, many—especially the Americans—felt a pang of pity.

In the end, the Women Guard won, but at great cost. Their numbers had sharply dwindled.

It was clear to all: one or two more battles of this intensity, and they'd be wiped out.

"Cloud Peak... what level are your Guardian Beasts?"

Ella clutched her ribs, where a bone-deep gash bled. With all their potions traded as toll fees, the Women Guard had nothing left for quick healing.

"...All level five."

Ye Zhongming hesitated before answering.

"Impossible!"

"Filthy liar!"

"That would cost a fortune!"

"But... is it possible? Their earlier stars really were all maxed out..."

Debate erupted across the stars.

The top players, however, already believed it was true.

They just didn't understand—how was Cloud Peak so rich?!

The suspicion was reasonable. Everyone was in the same wheel space. Guardian Beast costs, toll fees, and card prices—they all had estimates. Cloud Peak's forty-plus stars, each with a Guardian Beast, were already a massive expense. Upgrading all to level five? An astronomical sum. Even with earnings from star adventures, it couldn't possibly cover it.

Savings? The only explanation, but that puzzled them too. Everyone's wealth was limited, constantly spent on power growth. Even if they'd saved, it couldn't be much.

And don't forget—Ye Zhongming had just paid a steep price to drag three factions down.

So... theories emerged. Spade and Gyanendra even rummaged through the toll chests, soon finding something peculiar.

"What is this?"

They scrutinized it but couldn't identify it. Yet its abundance suggested it was Cloud Peak's form of payment.

Ye Zhongming chuckled, offering no explanation, and instead said to the Mechanical Genius: "Your turn. Everyone, watch for the thunder."

Yes, after the Women Guard, the Annihilation Thunderstrike still hadn't appeared. Now, with the Mechanical Genius's move, it was inevitable.

As Ye Zhongming watched the Mechanical Genius's war puppet strike the Soaring Crystal on the light screen, he felt a twinge of emotion.

Those items from the destroyed Blue Realm—remnants of a fallen dimension—could be used as currency here, and they weren't cheap.

That was why Cloud Peak seemed to have endless funds.

Otherwise, even Ye Zhongming couldn't have afforded max-level Guardian Beasts on every star!

Speaking of luck, Cloud Peak's was holding strong this time.

The Soaring Crystal flew, landing on a star as the space announced:

"Misfortune Card target Mechanical Genius is affected by misfortune, bearing all negative status effects for this round."

Meaning? Every active debuff—Difficulty Surge, Nebula, etc.—would now target the Mechanical Genius alone this round!

And don't forget—the Mechanical Genius was the last to move this round. Since the Annihilation Thunderstrike hadn't struck yet...

When the Mechanical Genius reached his new star, thick, twisting bolts of lightning came crashing down from above!