

Apocalypse 1711

Chapter 1711: Big gains (2)

"Skill: Tracking."

A simple name paired with a straightforward description.

"Every 100 hours, the skill user gains 3 seconds of target search and lock-on capability within a 5-kilometer range."

When Ye Zhongming read this description, he couldn't suppress the smile on his face.

At first glance, this ability might seem unremarkable—just a radar-like function that modern technology could replicate.

But that interpretation would be far too narrow.

The Tracking skill, while seemingly simple, was incredibly powerful. The key lay in its description: search for targets! How? Essentially, it functioned like a search engine—within a 5-kilometer radius, anything the user wanted to find could be located!

Whether it was materials, mutant lifeforms, or even a specific enemy, if it existed within range, it could be found.

This was practically omniscient vision.

Crucially, anything within range would be detected without fail. No hiding spot, stealth skill, or concealment equipment could evade it.

Additionally, it allowed for target locking, meaning Ye Zhongming could launch attacks at will, especially with firearms, giving the King of Cloud Peak an innate and absolute advantage.

Xia Bai, Xiao Min, Dai Zhi, and the others watching nearby shook their heads in awe. This ability was truly game-breaking.

Ye Zhongming immediately learned and mastered the skill, though he soon discovered some limitations.

Many skills and equipment had surface-level descriptions, with finer details—like cooldowns, damage resilience, and other base stats—only revealed upon acquisition.

Tracking was no exception. After learning it, Ye Zhongming realized:

It consumed massive amounts of mental energy. This wasn't an issue for him—his mental reserves could sustain over a hundred consecutive uses... if not for the 100-hour cooldown.

It strained the user's vision. Each use inflicted temporary damage to eyesight, with longer search times worsening the effect. The maximum damage occurred at the full 3-second duration.

Fortunately, this damage wasn't permanent and could recover.

Testing the skill, Ye Zhongming searched for Ella, the Women Guard leader who had just left. Instantly, his vision transformed—distant landscapes became grids of intersecting lines, with Ella's figure appearing at the edge of this pattern.

An impulsive urge struck him: to take a shot at her. Not out of malice, but sheer curiosity about the skill's limits.

Though Ella was within the 5-kilometer range, a snow-covered hill obstructed the direct line of sight. Normally, even with a sniper rifle, aiming would be impossible.

But with target locking, he could attack without line of sight.

At that moment, Ella whirled around, scanning the empty ice plains behind her. Her abrupt movement alarmed Gianna, who immediately went on alert, assuming danger was near.

But after a thorough search, she found nothing but snow and wind.

"What's wrong, dear?" Gianna asked, genuinely puzzled. The rest of the Women Guard also sensed no threat.

Ella shook her head, murmuring, "Nothing."

But internally, she was unsettled. She'd felt it—a piercing, amplified sense of danger, as if a level-nine mutant lifeform had locked onto her from point-blank range.

The intensity made her question if it was just exhaustion playing tricks on her.

Ye Zhongming, having spared her, rubbed his eyes. The 2-second search had inflicted moderate strain. Based on his recovery rate, without potions or healing skills, his vision would fully restore in about 2 minutes, with negligible downtime.

Fully grasping the skill's potential, Ye Zhongming turned his attention to the crystal.

A bloodline!

And a high-grade one at that!

This aligned perfectly with his earlier speculation—though he hadn't expected it to be max-level outright.

"High-Tier Mountain King Bloodline."

"Requirements: Male, strength-based evolved, heavy weapon proficiency, gold-grade or above heavy weapon, exceptional physique."

Like the Tracking skill, the description was brief, but the implications were monumental.

Judging by the name and prerequisites, this seemed like a burst-type bloodline. In reality, the High-grade Mountain King was a sustained-combat bloodline, making it even more terrifying.

It embodied the essence of a super-soldier with bloodline augmentation.

Such a potent bloodline demanded an equally formidable vessel.

A male proficient in heavy weapons, excelling in strength and stamina, with gold-grade gear—was that hard to find?

Perhaps. The "exceptional physique" requirement was the toughest hurdle. But for Ye Zhongming? Money solved everything. Cloud Peak had the resources to scour the nation for permanent stamina potions.

As he examined the bloodline crystal, another realization struck: all core members already had bloodlines, and bloodlines couldn't stack. He needed someone without one to inherit this.

Which brought him to Ocean-Shattering Quake—the staff he'd just acquired. Did it qualify as a heavy weapon? If so, he could cultivate a devastating frontline juggernaut.

With this exhilarating plan forming, Ye Zhongming finally unsealed the certificate, the last reward aside from the crown.

"Father of Puppets."

The name gave no immediate clues, but the description sent his heart racing.

"No matter how willful a war puppet may be, it shall acknowledge you as its father. You may bestow upon them a father's glory, power, and even life, though not without personal cost."

Clearly, this was another item whose full effects would only reveal themselves upon use.

But even this cryptic, almost divine proclamation made one thing clear:

Ye Zhongming would become the sovereign of war puppets, capable of reshaping their very existence.

Chapter 1712: Big matters in the country

Wu Xiu and Ruan Xiao stood on a hillside, watching the Cloud Peak team gradually disappear from view, their hearts filled with complex emotions.

If not for this Mountain King Wheel journey, they might never have truly understood Cloud Peak's strength.

Because only enemies could deeply experience it, and they were not Cloud Peak's enemies.

"We thought we already held them in high regard, but seeing it firsthand... these people are terrifying."

Wu Xiu's status in the Cannibal Chain was practically second only to the top leader, and the Cannibal Chain was one of the most powerful organizations in the post-apocalyptic world. This spoke volumes about her insight and standing.

Yet even someone like her had lost count of how many times she'd made such remarks. One could imagine the shock this journey with Cloud Peak had inflicted on her.

Ruan Xiao nodded, sighing helplessly. "Now that Ye Zhongming has obtained the Mountain King Crown, along with excellent rewards and the addition of two level nine lifeforms, the top spot on the national rankings will never change hands again."

Wu Xiu couldn't agree more.

Even now, she found it hard to believe that the Mountain King Wheel trial space—where factions like Gyanendra and Great America had fallen—had failed to push Ye Zhongming to his limits. She truly didn't know how to describe her feelings.

All she could say was: Ye Zhongming was too strong. Cloud Peak was too strong.

The two teams returned to China together, rested briefly in Black Dragon City, then departed simultaneously, parting ways after leaving the cold region.

Though the Cannibal Chain hadn't obtained the Mountain King Crown, they had still gained much. Aside from their final rewards (third place after Cloud Peak and the Mechanical Genius), they received three valuable items: a purple-grade piece of equipment, a job scroll, and a mid-grade bloodline crystal.

Even for the Cannibal Chain—second only to Cloud Peak in wealth—Wu Xiu and Ruan Xiao, with their vast experience, were highly satisfied.

Moreover, by playing it safe on the Star Path, they not only secured the compensation promised by Cloud Peak but also acquired many other valuable items.

There had been sacrifices, but the gains far outweighed them.

This trip had been worth it.

"Any news?"

Ruan Xiao was Wu Xiu's subordinate, here primarily to assist.

The Cannibal Chain's commercial network spanned the entire Chinese zone and even extended abroad, so their intelligence network was formidable, on par with the Five Rings Money and superior even to Cloud Peak.

"Over this period, we've received thousands of messages. After filtering, five require our immediate attention and decision-making."

Ruan Xiao had memorized all the summarized reports at a glance.

"First, an internal matter: one regional manager and three district managers have died. Upon returning to headquarters, we'll need to elect replacements. The boss wants us to consider suitable candidates during our journey for later discussion."

Wu Xiu's eyes narrowed. "Who died? How?"

A regional manager held the same rank as Ruan Xiao—an absolute heavyweight within the Cannibal Chain. Such a death was no small matter.

"The newly appointed Central Zone manager. Cause of death: unauthorized challenge against a level nine lifeform, resulting in defeat. Two of the three district managers also perished in that battle."

"Idiot!"

Anger flashed across Wu Xiu's face.

This Central Zone manager had been close to her—part of her faction. Dying in violation of company rules meant she couldn't escape blame.

Moreover, with such a major incident, her faction would likely lose control over the Central Zone position, drastically weakening her influence within the Cannibal Chain.

Though Ruan Xiao had obeyed her throughout this trip, Wu Xiu knew he wasn't her ally—he was the boss's trusted confidant.

"Second, during this period, we've confirmed five level nine lifeforms were killed: two by Cloud Peak, one by the Resistance Zone, one by Five Ring Money, and one by us."

Ruan Xiao frowned. "But reports also indicate that several monitored level nine territories have entered a 'silent state.' We can't confirm specifics yet."

A "silent state" meant no activity from the level nine lifeform within its territory, suggesting either migration or death.

If killed, the perpetrator remained unknown.

"How many regions show this silent state?"

"...Seven."

Wu Xiu and Ruan Xiao exchanged glances, seeing mutual shock and confusion.

Seven regions. If all these level-nine lifeforms had migrated simultaneously, that was impossible—some must have been killed.

But how? By other level nines? Or human evolved? If the latter, this was extraordinary—it implied an organization with top-tier national strength had remained completely hidden.

Both sensed something unusual brewing.

Another anomaly: Cloud Peak had killed two level nines without Ye Zhongming present?

"Continue," Wu Xiu sighed.

Ruan Xiao nodded. "Third, our old rivals Five Ring Money, have launched three large-scale operations—a rare move. They succeeded in the southwest and northwest but failed in the north."

Wu Xiu chuckled. "They've finally succumbed to ambition. Restricted by us in the China and suppressed by Cloud Peak, they're now eager to expand beyond borders—transitioning from merchants to a full-fledged army."

The two largest commercial organizations had diverged sharply in direction after six post-apocalyptic years.

While the Cannibal Chain remained "armed merchants," Five Rings Money was shedding its mercantile identity.

"Fourth, regarding Cloud Peak: the boss has confirmed that both Liu Zhengong and Le Dayuan's labs have recently achieved breakthroughs, producing powerful new creations. The level nine kills are related. He wants us to investigate specifics before personally visiting Cloud Peak to discuss comprehensive collaboration."

Ruan Xiao handed Wu Xiu a note—about a hundred words in the boss's handwriting.

"Now the fifth."

As she read, Wu Xiu wondered what Cloud Peak's new creations could be.

"The Resistance Zone has spun a level-nine wheel."

Wu Xiu's head snapped up. "What?!"

Ruan Xiao confirmed, "Yes. They obtained a weapon from it—one that defies science."

Chapter 1713: Big matters in the country (2)

The higher the level of the wheel, the better the items on it. At lower levels, the wheel still had many very ordinary or even useless items.

But on higher-level wheels, especially those above level seven, even if evolved don't spin evolution potions, the other rewards are still very good.

For example, on level-eight wheels, gold equipment has already appeared, along with some excellent jobs and skill scrolls, etc.

And on level-nine wheels, every single item was a premium product.

The golden battleship that descended from the sky on the first day of the apocalypse was one of the reward items on certain level nine wheels.

Evolved on Earth have now begun hunting level-nine lifeforms, but because it requires extensive preparation and a long recovery period afterward, progress has been slow. So far, only Cloud Peak has been able to guarantee more than two hunts per year.

However, this refers to Cloud Peak under Ye Zhongming's leadership. As for the fact that Cloud Peak has completed two hunts recently despite its king clearly being in the Mountain King Wheel space—this in itself is highly unusual, and there's no answer for it yet.

Even so, there's no news of Cloud Peak spinning a level-nine roulette wheel. Yet now, the long-quiet Resistance Zone has actually taken the lead?

And even obtained a powerful weapon?!

Wu Xiu, as a top executive of the Cannibal Chain, understood the implications of this event all too well. Simply put, it could disrupt the balance.

A weapon surpassing Earth's technology—unlike those proxy rewards given by the alien races in the sky—is a treasure produced from the highest-level roulette wheel. Its power goes without saying.

Once this weapon is operational in combat, the Resistance Zone's progress in hunting level-nine lifeforms will accelerate, increasing the speed at which they obtain level-nine demon crystal. In other words, the time until they produce their first nine-star evolved will become very short.

If this continues, the power dynamics in the country's regions will become unbalanced in a very short time.

Cloud Peak's undisputed lead is something everyone has begun to accept. Perhaps due to Ye Zhongming's personality or other inexplicable reasons, Cloud Peak hasn't shown strong aggression. Their attitude toward other factions isn't exactly warm or friendly, but they're not hostile either, nor do they seek to annex or plunder others without cause.

Why do the Five Ring Money and Cannibal Chain both prefer doing business with Cloud Peak? Because Ye Zhongming is a top-tier craftsman, always possessing high-quality goods. Because Cloud Peak once occupied a secret realm, granting them rare materials and items. Because Cloud Peak has two of the most advanced laboratories in the apocalypse, producing endless innovations.

But another crucial point is that Cloud Peak and Ye Zhongming, though they may occasionally reveal their edge, most of the time do not exhibit greed or aggression toward other factions' territories. Instead, they adopt an attitude of mutual development.

Cloud Peak's current sphere of influence is vast, and in the beginning, they did adopt a "submit or die" stance. But afterward, they settled down, engaging in trade and cooperation with their neighbors, promoting a "you prosper, I prosper, everyone prospers" mentality. They even allowed other factions to enter the secret realm for adventure while it was still accessible.

Aside from a few top-tier, high-precision treasures—whether crystal weapons, gene warriors, or high-level equipment crafted by Ye Zhongming—anything could be exchanged as long as you had items of equivalent value.

But the Resistance Zone is different.

They were once incomparably powerful, with several divisions dominating the entire country's regions. When the Cannibal Chain conducted business, they couldn't avoid the Resistance Zone—not only did they have to pay taxes, but trade caravans would often go missing.

Wu Xiu and the other Cannibal Chain executives knew exactly who was behind it.

Perhaps it wasn't ordered by the Resistance Zone's top brass, but rather the actions of lower-level individuals driven by greed and lack of oversight. Yet afterward, the Resistance Zone's leaders couldn't have been unaware.

They chose to allow it tacitly.

Later, they provoked Cloud Peak and were thoroughly beaten in a series of conflicts, suffering heavy losses.

With the entire country's regions losing their counterbalance, both the Cannibal Chain and Five Ring Money truly flourished during that period, becoming super factions.

Now that the Resistance Zone is showing signs of resurgence, Wu Xiu and the Cannibal Chain naturally don't want to see it.

If forced to choose, they'd rather see Cloud Peak and Ye Zhongming become invincible than the Resistance Zone.

"Do we know what it is exactly? How long have they had it?" Wu Xiu asked.

Ruan Xiao's expression was grave. "We sacrificed one of our undercover agents to learn that it's a weapon that can be installed on a war fortress. Its power is immense—during its first test, it instantly killed a level eight lifeform and three seven-level lifeforms nearby. Based on this benchmark, it's

estimated that even a level nine lifeform would face lethal danger if hit. As for how long they've had it, that's confirmed—over a month.” RANΘΞΞ

If a level eight lifeform couldn't resist at all, then even if it couldn't kill a level nine in one hit, it would still inflict severe damage. Even as a support weapon, it would make hunting level nine lifeforms much easier.

“We'll use Cloud Peak's teleportation channel to return to headquarters!”

Wu Xiu closed her eyes, thought for a few seconds, and immediately made her decision.

“But that teleportation is absurdly expensive! For so many of us, it'd be a sky-high price! And once we use this channel, the general location of our headquarters will be exposed to Cloud Peak!”

Ruan Xiao was shocked and hurriedly tried to dissuade her.

Wu Xiu shook her head slightly.

“At this point, we can't afford to worry about that. I have a very bad premonition.”

What exactly she foresaw, Wu Xiu didn't say. Ruan Xiao opened his mouth but didn't ask.

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“Sister Lei, maybe we should...” Though Little Tiger’s eyes had been replaced with Lucy’s Tears, he still habitually covered one with a black eyepatch. He said it made him look more intimidating, which annoyed Candy so much she often pinched him for it.

As he spoke, he made a slashing motion across his neck.

Xia Lei gritted her teeth, hesitated for a moment, then shook her head in resignation.

“Forget whether we can even kill her—even if we could, how many losses would we suffer? I don’t want Zhongming to come back and see those of you who’ve been with him since the beginning of the apocalypse dead. Besides, it hasn’t come to that yet. Even though this person... she did help us kill two level nines. Let’s wait and see.”

Beside Little Tiger stood Mo Ye, Guang Yao, Tong Hu, and others. Almost all core members who weren’t out on missions had gathered here—a room full of eight-star evolved.

“The Resistance Zone is getting restless, and those guys we should’ve dealt with long ago are becoming more brazen. The Saint Light Hall and the West Asians have actually joined forces, occupying our teleportation channel. And... if we keep tolerating this, morale will waver, and the team will be hard to lead.”

Liang Chuyin's personality made her a staunch advocate for action in any situation. If she hadn't matured over time, she would've long dragged Little Tigerr, Tong Hu, and the others into a fight on her own.

Xia Lei rubbed her temples, feeling a headache coming on. She knew she had to make a decision soon, or the situation would only worsen.

Just then, noisy sounds came from outside, and the expressions of all core members in the room changed.

Was that troublemaker causing problems again?

But the next second, the noise outside turned into increasingly loud cheers.

The core members were stunned at first, then all realized at once—they rushed out of the room in a frenzy!

It must be... their king had returned!

Chapter 1714: Big matters in the country (2)

At this time, Cloud Peak had undergone some changes since Ye Zhongming left.

The most obvious one was that the defensive array had been deactivated.

The King of Cloud Peak noticed this immediately upon his return.

However, he said nothing.

Because aside from this, most other things remained the same, especially the familiar faces, which filled Ye Zhongming with warmth and reassurance.

Perhaps the deactivation of the defensive array was only temporary, just for maintenance or upgrades.

The cheers of Cloud Peak's warriors, initially confined to certain areas, soon spread throughout the entire mountain villa. Unless one were deaf, even those deep underground in the laboratories would have heard it.

Ye Zhongming jumped down from Yellow Ball's back and was the first to walk through the villa's gates.

Facing him, Xia Lei led a group of core members forward, her eyes shimmering with emotion. She first looked her man up and down, then stepped forward and gave him a fierce hug.

"The days of living like a widow end today."

A whisper so faint only he could hear it reached his ears, leaving Ye Zhongming both amused and exasperated.

After Xia Lei, Liang Chuyin, and Miya also threw themselves into his arms, seeking solace for their longing.

Then came the boisterous Little Tiger, Tong Hu, and others, all insisting on hugging Ye Zhongming. Even the usually composed Guang Yao and the rest joined in, leaving Ye Zhongming both delighted and helpless.

The excitement lasted for a while. When Le Dayuan, who had rushed over upon hearing the news, arrived, the clamor resumed.

Surrounded by everyone, Ye Zhongming glanced around, his eyes filled with questions, but he said nothing. After a while, as the initial excitement of the reunion settled, he and the core members returned to his villa.

Almost all of Cloud Peak's leadership, except those away from home, had gathered here.

"Where's Sister Hong?"

Almost as soon as everyone had taken their seats, Ye Zhongming asked the question weighing on his mind.

Some core members were indeed absent, but Liu Zhenhong and Le Dayuan absolutely should not have been among them! Unless Ye Zhongming had given permission, neither of them was allowed to leave the villa freely. Normally, if one of them went out, Ye Zhongming himself, along with a main combat

team and the Female Guard, would personally accompany them. If Ye Zhongming were unavailable, their protection would consist of at least two main combat teams, two operational squads from Chameleon, and the strongest core members.

But now, while some core members were absent, the most powerful—Xia Lei, Liang Chuyin, Mo Ye, Little Tiger, Guang Yao, Sheng Yuan, and others—were all here. So, who was protecting Sister Hong?

Ye Zhongming was certain Liu Zhenghong had left—otherwise, she would have appeared.

The King of Cloud Peak grew serious because Le Dayuan and Liu Zhenghong were practically the foundation of this place, second only to himself.

Xia Lei sighed. "Sister Hong really isn't here, but don't worry—she's fine... probably fine."

The first part of her words eased Ye Zhongming's tension slightly. He knew Xia Lei was reliable—if she said Sister Hong was fine, then she was. But the "probably fine" immediately darkened his expression.

"Let me explain."

Le Dayuan took over, rubbing his receding hairline—which even becoming an eight-star evolved hadn't stopped—before speaking. "Our Old Liu went out with the Death King Tree."

"The Death King Tree woke up?" Ye Zhongming raised an eyebrow.

"Yes." Le Dayuan nodded firmly. "Successfully evolved to level nine."

Ye Zhongming rested his fingers on the chair, saying nothing.

He could see the current state of Cloud Peak. The Death King Tree's awakening clearly hadn't caused any disasters—Cloud Peak remained unharmed. That lifeform, so determined to become human, hadn't resorted to extreme measures despite reaching the pinnacle of strength.

Of course, before leaving, Ye Zhongming had anticipated this scenario and discussed countermeasures with Liu Zhengong and Xia Lei. He didn't know if they had been used.

When it came to level-nine lifeforms, Ye Zhongming never assumed anything could fully restrain them. That was why he had brought the Talking Lady back this time, though for certain reasons, she hadn't entered the villa. Still, at Ye Zhongming's signal, she could arrive swiftly to counterbalance the Death King Tree.

"Before, its long slumber during evolution was partly due to our modifications." Le Dayuan glanced at Ye Zhongming before continuing. "A while ago, the Death King Tree's body suddenly underwent drastic changes, nullifying all the measures Old Liu had implanted."

Ye Zhongming knew this had been part of the plan—if possible, they had hoped to delay the Death King Tree's awakening until his return.

"The transformation didn't last long—just over an hour—but during that time, nothing external could be introduced into its body. We could only watch as it completed its evolution."

Many present had witnessed it firsthand, and their expressions grew complicated at Le Dayuan's words.

It wasn't hard to imagine—the evolution of a level-nine lifeform, if not earth-shattering, would at least involve violent energy fluctuations.

(The Talking Lady was an exception—she was special.)

"After evolving, its mood... was unstable." Le Dayuan shook his head. "Thanks to Old Liu and your efforts, the Death King Tree's evolution toward a human—or at least a humanoid—form was quite effective. But it wasn't complete. Its head and torso were nearly perfect, indistinguishable from a human's. Only the tree bark still clinging to its limbs couldn't be removed."

Ye Zhongming's lips twitched. He could almost empathize with the Death King Tree's frustration.

"At first, it wanted to vent its anger. But even if you weren't here, did it really think Cloud Peak would be an easy target? Even for a level-nine lifeform!"

As he spoke, Le Dayuan's earlier worry and helplessness gave way to pride, reflecting his absolute confidence in Cloud Peak.

"After a brief clash—and considering their past good relationship—the Death King Tree calmed down. It talked with Old Liu, and we don't know what was said, but then it took Old Liu and a team of gene warriors out of the villa, refusing to let anyone follow. Five days later, they returned with the corpse of a level-nine lifeform."

Xiao Min, Dai Zhi, Xia Bai, Red Hair, and others listened as if hearing a fantastical tale. The Youth Army's young leader, Xiao Xuan—attending such a high-level meeting for the first time—looked utterly dumbfounded. He felt his six-plus years in the apocalypse were nothing compared to this.

Also, which gene warrior team was that?

"Old Liu told Xia Lei to send people to accompany her and the Death King Tree, saying they needed to hunt more level-nines to extract certain genes for the final modifications. After discussion, we sent Tang Tian, Young Master Yun, Ah Yang, and Gan Lan's teams with them."

"A few days later, they returned with another corpse, also level nine. They stayed in the lab for a while, doing who-knows-what, then left again about five days ago."

Once Le Dayuan finished, Sister Rong, in charge of Cloud Peak's defenses, added:

"We don't know what's up with the Death King Tree. After evolving to level nine, it basically has a human body, but when moving, root-like tendrils still extend from its feet into the ground. They look thin and soft, but their attack power is terrifying, and they trigger our defensive array's counterattacks. After some damage, we had to deactivate the array temporarily. Otherwise, every time it comes back, it'd cause unnecessary losses. Some parts, we can't even repair ourselves."

After listening, Ye Zhongming fell into silent contemplation. No one dared disturb him.

A few minutes later, the King of Cloud Peak abruptly changed the subject.

"The Resistance Zone spun a level nine wheel and obtained a weapon that can be installed on a war fortress. They also attacked a secret surveillance post set up by Chameleon near their territory."

Chapter 1715: Good thing (1)

Chameleon reported directly to Ye Zhongming. In his absence, the heads of its two departments - the Intelligence Division and Operations Team - had the authority to make decisions independently.

Only matters involving Cloud Peak headquarters, or situations too significant for the two leaders to decide alone, would be escalated to Cloud Peak and Xia Lei for joint discussion.

Of course, the routine intelligence reports sent to Cloud Peak every few days remained unchanged, as did the protection details for key support personnel like Le Dayuan, Liu Zhenghong, Park Xiuying, Candy, and others.

No one knew which operatives Chameleon assigned to protect these individuals, but they would intervene whenever Cloud Peak's combat teams encountered threats beyond their capability.

So far, none of Cloud Peak's VIPs had faced dangers requiring such intervention, so their protectors' identities remained unknown.

Upon hearing this news, Xia Lei and the others first showed shock, then murderous intent rose on their faces.

Though Chameleon operated separately from headquarters, they shared Cloud Peak's lineage. An attack on them meant an attack on Cloud Peak.

"Which zone?" asked Guang Yao, who originated from the Resistance Zone. Though he'd severed ties, his hatred remained, making him the most knowledgeable about Resistance Zone affairs.

"Zone C."

Chameleon's surveillance post had specifically monitored Zone C.

"Severe casualties?" Xia Lei knew her man would handle strategic decisions - her role was managing the aftermath.

"A dozen personnel, plus equipment losses."

Many Chameleon outposts contained valuable teleportation devices, as everyone knew.

"Boss, let's fuck them up!" Tong Hu thumped his chest, eyes blazing with eagerness.

Little Tiger chuckled nearby. When Ye Zhongming glanced over, his subtly extended finger retracted lightning-fast, as if he hadn't just prodded Tong Hu into speaking up.

Facing the heated atmosphere, Ye Zhongming didn't immediately decide. Frowning in thought, he asked: "What gave the Resistance Zone the courage to provoke us? Just one weapon from the wheel? Is it truly that powerful? Then why attack a minor outpost instead of striking Cloud Peak directly?"

No one could answer these questions.

"The Saint Light Hall allied with West Asia's Holy City to seize our teleportation point there," Xia Lei suddenly interjected, stroking her pale fingers. ㄟㄣㄣ

Ye Zhongming nodded, understanding her implication about potential connections between these events.

"Have all Saint Light Hall mercenaries working for us returned?" Ye Zhongming quickly identified the key issue - whether their withdrawal was systematic would yield completely different answers.

"Some left, some stayed," answered Liang Chuyin, who managed Puxing Town affairs. The answer provided no clear conclusion.

Without teleportation devices, rapid deployment to Central Asia became impossible. Was this simply to block Cloud Peak's expansion there, or were there other motives?

Ye Zhongming couldn't immediately discern the truth.

Seeing his silence, Xia Lei proceeded to report recent developments.

"The Five Ring Money wants to meet me... in the Five Rings Money manner?"

Though phrased awkwardly, everyone understood. Currently, while nominally unified, the Five Ring Money essentially operated as several autonomous directors cooperating rather than competing.

Under this structure, even business with Cloud Peak was conducted individually unless involving collective resources. A unified negotiation demand like this hadn't occurred in years - moreover, they specifically requested Ye Zhongming personally, willing to wait for his return.

"I wasn't gone long, yet the entire country seems turbulent," Ye Zhongming joked lightly, though he resolved to thoroughly analyze Chameleon's less critical reports later, searching for hidden patterns.

The country indeed seemed to harbor undercurrents.

"Let's discuss something positive." Ye Zhongming clapped, dispelling the somber mood. "Didn't you prepare any surprises while I was away?"

Laughter followed as everyone looked to Xia Lei and Le Dayuan - this was their domain.

"Shall I begin?" Xia Lei gestured to Le Dayuan, who smiled and waved her on.

"First, I downsized staff."

Ye Zhongming blinked while others chuckled, enjoying his reaction.

"Or more accurately, streamlined."

"Explain."

Xia Lei straightened slightly. She'd previously discussed this with Ye Zhongming, but postponed due to other priorities.

"I intended to wait for your return, but circumstances forced early implementation."

"First, external pressures." Xia Lei raised one finger, explaining to both Ye Zhongming and others. During the restructuring, she'd been uncompromising in reorganizing Cloud Peak's combat teams. While her authority and loyalty ensured smooth implementation, some core members had reservations - now was her chance to clarify.

"As the apocalypse progresses, Cloud Peak stands at the summit, but competitors are closing the gap. With you increasingly occupied by personal power development and losing our Secret Realm backup, our advantage has been shrinking recently."

"Time gives them hope to catch up."

Everyone listened attentively. Regarding grand strategy, few at Cloud Peak excelled - besides Ye Zhongming, only Xia Lei and Guang Yao stood out, with Mo Ye and others slightly behind. Chief Ah Tao showed promise but lacked sufficient Earth experience to contribute meaningfully.

"If defining eras, we're now entering the level-nine phase - the most critical period. Falling behind now would negate all previous advantages overnight, allowing others to surpass us."

"We have many allies but more enemies, plus coveted resources. Falling behind would bring catastrophic consequences!"

"Previously, we over-relied on you single-handedly pulling us forward. But as Cloud Peak grows larger and members stronger, our king tires. Our progress slows."

"Now we must contribute our own strength - not just ceasing to be 'burdens' but actively propelling my man, your leader, to nine-star level."

"To become... the first nine-star evolved!"