

## Apocalypse 1726

Chapter 1726: You are most suitable

Though Ye Zhongming understood their intentions, hearing those words still left him feeling somewhat uncomfortable.

"Send him up to the skies"—that phrasing... sounded rather ominous.

However, perhaps because this decision was too important for these allies, they hadn't considered any alternative interpretations.

"Why should my Zhongming take on such a dangerous task?"

Xia Lei, sitting beside him, expressed clear dissatisfaction, leaning forward with a dangerous glint in her eyes as she stared at Wang Hanran.

Though Ye Zhongming was the King of Cloud Peak and the only one who could formally engage with someone of Wang Hanran's status, everyone knew Xia Lei's unique position in Cloud Peak. She wasn't just Ye Zhongming's woman—she was the de facto ruler of the villa. Faced with her displeasure and questioning, Wang Hanran nodded apologetically before continuing.

"There are many reasons, but the most important ones are these."

"You'd better convince me."

Xia Lei leaned back in her chair, arms crossed.

Wang Hanran smiled patiently. "First and foremost—strength. Everyone seated here is a true powerhouse of the Chinese region, a ruler of their own domain, commanding thousands and wielding the authority of the apocalypse."

Though this sounded somewhat arrogant, it was essentially the truth.

Just Cloud Peak Villa and the two major commercial organizations alone controlled half of the Chinese region's wealth. And in the apocalypse, wealth was synonymous with power.

"Yet we all must admit—you, Mr. Ye, are the strongest. No one denies this, correct?"

Wang Hanran glanced around the room.

Everyone nodded in agreement, including the two Five Ring Money deacons who weren't particularly fond of Ye Zhongming.

Perhaps before today, they hadn't fully grasped the extent of his strength. But after witnessing him solo three level-nine lifeforms, they were convinced.

This was absolute power.

Not convinced? Could they fight three level nines themselves? Even one at a time?

No. Unless absolutely forced, they wouldn't even dare face a single level nine alone.

So, calling Ye Zhongming the strongest? That was an indisputable fact.

"This matter is indeed dangerous. We don't know what awaits us in the skies. But we have no choice—if any of us went, the chances of success would be even lower." RĀNOBĚs

"You still haven't answered my earlier question. Does being strong mean you deserve to die?" Xia Lei tapped the armrest lightly.

"Please allow me to continue." Wang Hanran pressed on. "Our ultimate goal is to uncover what's truly happening—even the truth behind the apocalypse. Naturally, we must pursue the method with the highest chance of success. And without question, Mr. Ye is the highest chance."

"Additionally!"

Wang Hanran raised a finger. "Comprehensive ability."

"Your overall capabilities are unmatched. You're not just an elite warrior—you're also a master craftsman, possess plant-controlling abilities, and... an exceptional merchant."

In the apocalypse, merchants were never just merchants. In this regard, Ye Zhongming had undoubtedly found the perfect balance.

"But most importantly, you possess an intangible quality that draws others to you."

Here, Wang Hanran sighed, his expression complex.

There was no denying that Ye Zhongming's current status was heavily tied to his craftsmanship profession and his ownership of two top-tier laboratories.

Most people had gathered around him for benefits.

Profit above all—this was true in any era.

But let's not forget—why had Ye Zhongming reached the pinnacle of craftsmanship? Why had the heads of those two labs pledged their loyalty to him?

Luck? Yes, that was certainly part of it. But ultimately, it was a reflection of personal charisma.

This, too, was a talent—one that Wang Hanran firmly believed in.

"I truly can't think of anyone more suited than you to be the first to ascend."

He glanced at Xia Lei, as if to say this was only part of the answer, then continued:

"Next—resources."

"To ascend, one must first become a nine-star evolved. And who currently holds the most level nine magic crystals? That would be you. Wu Xiu told me—your gains within the Mountain King Wheel were substantial."

Inside the Mountain King Wheel, Ye Zhongming had obtained six level-nine magic crystals. Combined with previous acquisitions and recent Cloud Peak hunts, he now had enough to spin a level nine wheel once.

The others? Did they have enough? Clearly not!

Ascension required reaching nine stars—but if they couldn't even spin a level nine wheel, it was all meaningless. Ye Zhongming was the only one among them who could do so now, making him the optimal candidate.

"There's one more point—the Resistance Zone has already spun a level nine wheel once."

The Cloud Peak members froze, unsure how this was relevant.

Ye Zhongming was equally puzzled. He studied the Cannibal Chain leader, thinking that while Wang Hanran was a friend, he wasn't like Li Daqian or Commander Mu—those were staunch allies, enemies of his enemies. The Resistance Zone, naturally, was his enemy.

But Cannibal Chain and Five Rings Money were different. They were commercial organizations, adhering to merchant principles—maintaining ties with all factions, treating everyone as "friends."

Their closeness to Cloud Peak was simply because Cloud Peak brought them greater profits. But Ye Zhongming didn't believe they would abandon or oppose the Resistance Zone over it.

Wang Hanran sighed again.

"The Resistance Zone... is a very unique organization. Or rather, the Five Key Alliance is extraordinary. I believe Mr. Guang Yao and Commander Mu understand this."

Guang Yao and Commander Mu nodded in agreement.

"Under normal circumstances, everything would remain as it was—the Resistance Zone would stay a trading partner. But now, things have changed. They've spun a level nine wheel. Though they didn't obtain a nine-star evolution potion, they did acquire a powerful weapon."

"Before this, we'd never heard they'd stockpiled enough level nine magic crystals. This in itself is suspicious. Considering they've always been the apocalypse's 'prophets'... could they have advantages we don't in reaching nine stars or ascending?"

The room fell silent, acknowledging the possibility.

"The Resistance Zone has never been benevolent. Their silence was only because you suppressed them, Mr. Ye. But now? If they produce the first nine-star evolved, their first move will be to unify the Chinese region! Countless will die—including everyone here."

Wang Hanran's expression hardened, his tone resolute.

"We all wish to maintain the status quo, preserve our authority, and continue living well in this apocalypse! So even without the matter of ascension, we cannot allow the Resistance Zone to grow stronger."

"Thus, Mr. Ye—you are our hope."

"To help you reach nine stars as soon as possible... we've brought you a gift."

With that, Wang Hanran placed a small box before Ye Zhongming.

Chapter 1727: Payment

Ye Zhongming reached out and opened the box. As expected, it contained level-nine magic crystals—but the quantity was...

Fifteen.

To be honest, this was somewhat unexpected.

Based on the information he had, his allies shouldn't have been able to gather this many level nine magic crystals.

Li Daqian? Or Commander Mu?

At most, they could contribute a few. The rest must have come from the reserves of the two major commercial alliances.

It seemed he had underestimated them. Quietly, they had nearly gathered enough for a full spin of the level nine wheel.

"These magic crystals should be of help to you..." Wang Hanran hesitated, his expression uneasy, even nervous.

"We... we suspect that your villa possesses someone with the ability to reduce the cost of wheel spins—cough—or exclude certain rewards, perhaps even control the pointer."

Within Cloud Peak, only core members knew of Ye Zhongming's Exclusion Technique, an overpowered ability that was strictly guarded from outsiders.

Cloud Peak frequently traded in potions. Ordinary people wouldn't think much of it, assuming the villa was simply lucky, either spinning batches of evolution potions at lower costs or "acquiring" them from other evolved. Some even believed Cloud Peak was simply discounting high-level potions they had no use for.

But organizations like Cannibal Chain and Five Ring Money, with their sharp commercial instincts, meticulously tracked potion trade volumes. From this, they deduced that someone in Cloud Peak—likely Ye Zhongming himself—must possess a unique wheel-spinning ability.

Considering Ye Zhongming's rise to power, they were over 80% certain the ability belonged to him.

Otherwise, the King of Cloud Peak today might have been Liu Zhongming or Wang Zhongming, not Ye Zhongming.

Keeping this knowledge secret allowed them to negotiate slightly lower prices in potion trades, especially for low-level potions, Cloud Peak cared little about. But voicing it outright? Not only might it anger the King of Cloud Peak, but future trades—especially high-level potions—would likely become more expensive.

The reason was obvious if one thought about it...

But these were extraordinary times. To persuade Ye Zhongming to ascend, Wang Hanran had no choice but to lay it bare.

"If you or your subordinates possess such abilities, the success rate of wheel spins would naturally be higher, perhaps even requiring fewer magic crystals. That makes you... The most suitable candidate."

Ye Zhongming raised an eyebrow but didn't react angrily. This golden finger, obtained on the first day of the apocalypse, was indeed a power that could inspire greed. If revealed when he was weak, he would have been captured. But now? No one could touch him. At most, this knowledge would only inspire greater awe—and among allies, it posed little harm.

"I'll accept these. Thank you."

The King of Cloud Peak's response made the others exchange wry smiles.

Deacon Water shrugged at Wang Hanran's glance, as if to say, "See? I told you."

Wang Hanran then produced... a sheet of paper.

"If you agree to ascend and pave the way for us, we naturally have a responsibility to ensure you're fully prepared."

Before arriving, these leaders had gathered near Cloud Peak to discuss this very matter.

Deacon Water, who knew Ye Zhongming well, had warned them: The King of Cloud Peak would demand a king's ransom. The fifteen magic crystals, while precious, wouldn't be enough.

When asking for a favor—especially one involving life and death—they had to be ready to pay dearly.

Besides, from another perspective, level-nine magic crystals were just the baseline, not the real reward for such a perilous mission.

Ye Zhongming skimmed the document and immediately grasped its contents.

The list was staggering in both length and value. Just from this sheet, he could see their sincerity.

"We know you're a top-tier craftsman, so we've prepared top-tier materials. How you combine them is up to you. If you need anything else in this regard, we'll do our best to provide."

Wang Hanran spoke lightly, but inwardly, he was wincing in pain.

Most of these materials came from Cannibal Chain and Five Ring Money. The other factions had, at most, contributed materials from level-nine lifeforms—but those alone wouldn't have swayed Ye Zhongming. The two commercial giants had to fill the gaps.

This section was what intrigued Ye Zhongming the most.

The materials listed were the highest-grade he had ever seen.

His current stock of level nine magic crystals came from the Secret Realm, the Mountain King Wheel, and only a few from actual hunts. Thus, Cloud Peak's level-nine materials didn't match the number of magic crystals.

But this list? At a glance, it contained materials from at least ten level-nine lifeforms.

Calling this a treasure trove was no exaggeration.

Instinct told him he could use these materials for over twenty refinement attempts... all for purple-grade equipment!

The exact success rate was uncertain, but it would guarantee at least five purple items.

"We've also included specialties from other regions and nations, along with some rare curiosities. We hope they interest you."

Ye Zhongming nodded. Beyond materials, the list included many exotic items—some plant-based, others region-specific.

There were even oddities whose purposes eluded him.

"Naturally, we won't skimp on warbeasts, mechanical fortresses, Exquisite Floating Balls, and the like. If you leave for the skies, Cloud Peak's safety must be ensured. Beyond our full commitment to defend this place, these will bolster the villa's strength."

These contributions clearly came from Li Daqian and Commander Mu. Since Cannibal Chain and Five Ring Money had shouldered the bulk of the list, the others had to chip in.

"Mr. Ye... are you satisfied?"

Wang Hanran watched the King of Cloud Peak nervously, awaiting his answer—acceptance or refusal.

There was no denying that the level-nine magic crystals and this list would tempt anyone under normal circumstances. But ascending to the heavens? Even a fool knew the risks. Refusing to preserve his life would be perfectly reasonable.

The King of Cloud Peak sat in thought. Under the expectant gazes of all, he finally spoke:

"If you agree to one more condition... I'll do it."

## Chapter 1728: All prepared

Wang Hanran carefully examined Yang Feng's condition. The attack from the recently killed level eight marine prey had given him quite a scare, as he feared something might happen to his long-time companion.

Fortunately, thanks to Yang Feng's energy-based constitution, the effects of physical attacks were minimized. Though injured, the wounds weren't too severe and would heal with a day's rest.

Yang Feng affectionately nuzzled its master before lying down at Wang Hanran's feet to rest.

"Captain Xiaopeng, where is our target this time?"

Accompanying the leader of Cannibal Chain was Xiaopeng, the head of Cloud Peak's First Division.

Compared to when the division was first established, Xiaopeng had gained some weight and was no longer the ordinary evolved struggling to survive. Now, he governed a territory even larger than Cloud Peak's headquarters. Beyond his direct combat teams, he commanded over 50,000 warriors in the coastal region, making him the undisputed ruler of this area.

In fact... Wang Hanran still remembered the shock he felt upon arriving here. He had never realized that Cloud Peak had already extended its reach into the ocean.

Literally into the ocean.

Even in peacetime, the ocean was called humanity's last hunting ground, as it contained the richest natural and biological resources on Earth, not to mention its vast expanse compared to land.

After the apocalypse, the abundance of marine life naturally led to an abundance of mutants, turning the ocean into a true forbidden zone for humans.

Back then, not even Cannibal Chain—let alone the Resistance Zone—could do anything about the ocean. Aside from a few isolated coastal cities, there were no human settlements within 100 kilometers of the shoreline.

The frequent marine beast tides were simply beyond any human faction's ability to withstand.

Yet who could have imagined that Cloud Peak's First Division was established right on the coast? Not only had it survived, but it thrived. Not only did it maintain normal operations, but it also turned the nearshore waters into a hunting ground, even building a fleet that, while not massive by pre-apocalypse standards, was nothing short of miraculous in the current era.

Now, with Xiaopeng's coordination, elite members of Cannibal Chain, alongside a combat team and a magic crystal weapons team from Cloud Peak, were hunting level-nine lifeforms in the ocean.

A few days prior, they had successfully hunted a level nine mutant coral, securing a precious level nine magic crystal.

Casualties? Zero.

This was partly due to the coral's limited mobility, but any lifeform that evolved to level nine was undoubtedly formidable. Even if someone could challenge it underwater, they'd still face the inherent difficulties of aquatic combat.

Truthfully, even if Wang Hanran himself—fully equipped and with Yang Feng—entered the water, he wouldn't stand a chance against a same-level ocean mutant, let alone a level-nine.

This was the fundamental difference between land and sea.

But Xiaopeng could do it. Or rather, Cloud Peak could do it—because of one item.

The Ocean King Crown!

Wang Hanran knew of this equipment. Through this cooperative mission with Cloud Peak, he also learned that it was a ruler-grade item with nine abilities, some still sealed. 九种能力

Just like the Mountain King Crown that the King of Cloud Peak had recently obtained.

One of the Ocean King Crown's abilities was called "Abyssal Domain." It transformed a portion of the surrounding ocean into a special space.

The seawater remained, but its resistance vanished, allowing land-based creatures marked by another ability, "Sea King's Mark," to exist and fight within this space as if on land.

This was the key reason they had so easily slain the level nine mutant coral.

Though Wang Hanran had been astonished by everything he'd witnessed these past few days, he was gradually growing accustomed to it. What truly impressed and humbled him, however, was Ye Zhongming lending the Sea King Crown to Xiaopeng.

This was a seven-colored-grade equipment—at least, that's what Wang Hanran and everyone else believed, even if the crown wasn't fully awakened yet.

Rumors said that since Xiaopeng wasn't its true owner, he couldn't unleash some of its abilities. But even so, its power was staggering.

Putting himself in Ye Zhongming's shoes, Wang Hanran knew he could never entrust such a priceless treasure to someone else.

Not even as a loan.

As Xiaopeng detailed the next target's location, appearance, habits, and Cloud Peak's unique threat assessment, Wang Hanran's mind drifted back to the condition Ye Zhongming had set at Cloud Peak Villa.

Hunt level nines.

The reason? He needed more level-nine magic crystals to ensure he could spin the wheel for a nine-star evolution potion.

No one objected to this.

Based on their earlier estimates, Cloud Peak likely had around ten level nine magic crystals. Combined with the fifteen they'd contributed, that was only enough for two spins.

Two spins were far too few to guarantee a nine-star potion. It made sense for Ye Zhongming to ask everyone to help hunt more level-nines for additional crystals.

What Wang Hanran hadn't understood at first was why Ye Zhongming had split them into seven hunting teams, including Cloud Peak's own forces.

Wouldn't it be easier to pool all their strength and focus on hunting level-nines together?

Initially, the leader of Cannibal Chain couldn't comprehend this. But after arriving here with Xiaopeng and effortlessly slaying a level-nine lifeform alongside Cloud Peak's team, he finally understood. It was possible.

Now, faced with the task of procuring three level-nine magic crystals within a month, what had once seemed impossible to Wang Hanran now felt entirely achievable.

What he didn't know, however, was that Cloud Peak's stockpile of level-nine magic crystals wasn't as limited as he assumed. Ye Zhongming's request for joint hunting wasn't just about securing the nine-star potion—it also served a personal agenda.

By pairing these top-tier experts and their elites with Cloud Peak's forces, the King of Cloud Peak had formed seven hunting squads.

In fact, if not for wanting to minimize casualties, he could have assembled ten such teams.

Each of the seven squads was tasked with obtaining three level-nine magic crystals, totaling twenty-one. Combined with Cloud Peak's existing stock and the allies' earlier contributions, Ye Zhongming would have enough for five spins of the level-nine wheel.

With his Super Elimination Technique, this virtually guaranteed at least one nine-star potion. But Ye Zhongming was aiming for two.

He didn't want a companion to join him in the heavens—he wanted Cloud Peak to retain the world's most formidable combat power during his absence.

Only then could he leave with peace of mind.

A month later, all seven squads returned to Cloud Peak Villa via teleportation arrays, delivering their harvested level-nine magic crystals.

After dismissing the others to rest, Ye Zhongming took the crystals and left with the Female Guard.

Everyone knew: when the King of Cloud Peak returned, the first nine-star evolved of the Chinese region would be born.

Chapter 1729: Nine stars

Before the level-nine wheel, several people stared at the panel in prolonged silence. After a long while, one of them finally spoke slowly, "Let's begin."

Another person nodded, took out some magic crystals, and was about to place them into the slots.

"Wait."

A voice suddenly interrupted, causing the person to pause.

"Zhang Hetai, do you have an objection?"

Wen Zhong frowned, turning his head to look at Zhang Hetai, the scar between his brows appearing somewhat menacing.

Ji Ruiguang sighed inwardly.

Ever since Wen Zhong narrowly escaped death in that incident, he had become overly aggressive.

Clearly, he hadn't negotiated terms properly with Zhang Hetai.

The stocky Zhang Hetai placed his hands on his waist, touching the belt fastened there, and smiled.

"Commander Ji Ruiguang spinning the wheel first—I have no objections. The contributions of Zone C to the Resistance Zone are evident to all. Even though they didn't obtain the nine-star evolution potion, they still acquired an outstanding weapon."

Wen Zhong grew impatient, tugging at his collar. "What exactly are you trying to say?"

Ignoring him, Zhang Hetai continued, "The demon crystals in our hands—some were obtained through hunting, but most came from... above."

"That's because we completed their missions!" Wen Zhong's tone had already turned hostile. No one wanted to hear "nagging" at the moment when they were seconds away from possibly obtaining a nine-star evolution potion—especially when that nagging was clearly ill-intentioned.

Zhang Hetai shook his head. "Let's not kid ourselves, shall we? My dear Commander Wen, you may have survived last time, but did your brain get damaged in the process?"

"Do you want to duel me?"

"Haha, not interested!" Zhang Hetai was delighted to have provoked Wen Zhong. "If missions of that difficulty could really reward level nine demon crystals, then nine-star evolved would be crawling all over the Chinese region by now!"

Wen Zhong had no rebuttal because Zhang Hetai was speaking the truth.

He took a deep breath and said solemnly, "You didn't refuse either."

"Correct." Zhang Hetai nodded in acknowledgment. "I didn't refuse, and I had no reason to. I'm no moral saint—I don't have ideological purity."

"Then why the hell are you spouting nonsense?!" As Wen Zhong spoke, he moved to place the demon crystals into the slots.

But a hand firmly gripped his wrist.

Wen Zhong could have dodged, but he chose not to—he was afraid the other man might snatch the level nine demon crystals already in the slots.

"Don't push your luck!"

He issued Zhang Hetai a final warning.

"The rules need to change!" Zhang Hetai stood his ground.

"Bullshit!"

"The demon crystals belong to everyone. We can't just take turns spinning the wheel, because who knows when we'll gather enough level nine crystals again? I propose that if the nine-star potion is obtained this time, Commander Ji should take it!"

Zhang Hetai's words stunned both Ji Ruiguang and Wen Zhong. The former retracted the foot he had stepped forward to intervene with, while the latter flew into a rage.

"We already agreed!"

Indeed, they had previously discussed taking turns spinning the wheel. Ji Ruiguang, as the supreme commander and leader of the strongest zone, had contributed the most level-nine magic crystals—it was only natural for him to go first.

Wen Zhong was next, having obtained the second-most level-nine crystals. In terms of qualifications and connections, he also ranked above Zhang Hetai.

After Ji Ruiguang obtained the weapon from the level-nine wheel, the entire Resistance Zone had secretly mobilized to hunt level-nine lifeforms. After over a month of effort, three level-nines were killed, and combined with the remaining stock, they finally had enough for another spin.

Landing the nine-star potion would be ideal, but even other rewards would be acceptable. Regardless of the outcome, the zones that had already taken their turns would assist the others in hunting for more level-nine crystals.

Despite past failures, Ji Ruiguang had reestablished himself as the Resistance Zone's strongest in recent years. No one opposed—or even had the right to oppose—his turn to spin the wheel.

But the agreed-upon order—Wen Zhong second, Zhang Hetai third—was now being challenged. Moreover, Zhang Hetai's tactic was clever: he didn't demand the second spin for himself but instead pushed all benefits toward Ji Ruiguang.

Clearly, he didn't trust Wen Zhong—or simply refused to submit to him.

Would Ji Ruiguang object? Faced with the temptation of the nine-star potion, the commander's silence spoke volumes.

Wen Zhong trembled with fury. He wasn't afraid of Zhang Hetai, but if Ji Ruiguang sided against him, he would be powerless.

"Fine! If that's how it is, then no matter what we obtain, it goes to Commander Ji! We'll pour all our efforts into elevating him to nine-star evolved."

Zhang Hetai's expression stiffened slightly, but he nodded in agreement.

Ji Ruiguang smiled gratefully at both men and stepped up to the wheel. Gazing at the now-familiar rewards, he gave it a spin.

Everyone watched the pointer nervously, unsure where it would land.

Every reward on the level-nine wheel was unique—once obtained, it would disappear from the panel. Thus, the odds of success this time were slightly higher than before.

However, a one-in-nine chance still seemed too low to Ji Ruiguang. During his last spin, he had used an extremely rare Success Rate Boost Scroll, locking onto the nine-star potion for a near-20% success rate—and even that had failed.

Coupled with the fact that all the remaining rewards were excellent, Ji Ruiguang was actually the calmest among them.

But as the pointer slid across the panel, slowing gradually, even Ji Ruiguang grew tense—because... it looked like... it might just... land on it!

When the pointer finally stopped, everyone froze for two full seconds. Then, whether it was the usually ruthless Zhang Hetai, the temperamental Wen Zhong, or the steady Ji Ruiguang, all of them erupted into roars of exhilaration.

Nine-star potion!

They had spun the nine-star potion!

After the initial euphoria, Ji Ruiguang's hands trembled as he retrieved the potion. Wen Zhong and Zhang Hetai watched with burning envy.

But they didn't dare act. Against anyone else, they wouldn't have hesitated to strike—but not against Ji Ruiguang. They knew he had undoubtedly prepared countermeasures.

Just then, the heavily guarded perimeter outside suddenly grew chaotic. Ji Ruiguang swiftly stashed the potion in his spatial equipment, while Zhang Hetai and Wen Zhong assumed defensive stances.

Had some fool actually come to steal the nine-star potion? The audacity!

When the source of the disturbance drew closer, they realized it was a high-ranking intelligence officer, his expression unreadable.

"What's wrong?"

Ji Ruiguang knew this subordinate wasn't one to act rashly. Such behavior meant something major had happened.

"Commander, all of our carefully cultivated 'eyes' in Cloud Peak Villa over the past few years... have been eliminated." The officer panted as he delivered the news. "They exposed themselves to relay one final message."

"What message?" The commanders tensed, sensing what was coming.

"One day ago... Ye Zhongming reached nine-star evolved."

Chapter 1730: Another nine stars

Fat Sheep Tavern

This was the most notorious pleasure den in Tang City—a place where anything you could imagine was available, as long as you had the magic crystals to pay for it.

On normal days, thanks to Tang City's unique geographical location and the peace agreements between its major factions, the prosperity of this bustling metropolis was concentrated within this small three-story building. Stepping inside, if not for the weapons and equipment on the evolved and the blood that might still stain their hands, one might almost feel transported back to the peaceful era.

Today, the tavern was just as lively, with alcohol consumption far exceeding the usual. Yet, surprisingly, everyone remained sober, and not a single dispute had broken out.

Because today, there was only one topic of discussion.

Nine-star evolved!

Yes, humanity's first nine-star evolved had been born.

At least, that's what the people of the Chinese region believed—that their homeland's nine-star evolved was the world's first.

The mindset of a great nation persisted even in the apocalypse. And with scattered news trickling in, this mentality had subtly been elevated to unprecedented heights, far surpassing even the peaceful era.

The figures in these stories were naturally led by Ye Zhongming of Cloud Peak Villa and its allies. Their exploits beyond borders had already become the stuff of legend.

West Asia, Russia, North America—they had turned them all upside down. More importantly, they hadn't suffered losses but had instead made others eat humble pie.

As long as one had no conflict of interest with Cloud Peak, they were nothing short of heroes.

And was Tang City an enemy of Cloud Peak? No. It was practically a free city, as unrestrained as the name "Fat Sheep Tavern" suggested.

"Hey, what do you think Cloud Peak's Boss Ye will do first now that he's become the first nine-star?"

"What will he do? Knowing Boss Ye's temperament, he's definitely going to clean house—wipe out everyone who's ever crossed him. Sure, he's famously good to his own people, but to his enemies? He's the type to bide his time for revenge and then exterminate them without mercy. Mark my words—the Resistance Zone, God Hall, and those factions are in for a world of hurt."

"Second Fatty, if that's the case, the first to suffer won't be the ones you mentioned, but that place on Cloud Peak's bounty list. Rumor has it it's still around, untouched by Cloud Peak."

"True. But that place is too far. I doubt Boss Ye would waste time and effort on it—the cost-benefit ratio's too low. If he leads his people to hunt level-nines across the Chinese region, Cloud Peak might even get its second nine-star evolved."

The crowd nodded in agreement with Second Fatty's reasoning.

In the apocalypse, grudges were a minor concern. Power—that was the ultimate goal of every individual and every team.

"Personally, I hope Boss Ye doesn't focus on domestic affairs. Why not go wreak havoc on those foreign scum instead? Otherwise, the Resistance Zone is doomed, and our Tang City... heh."

This remark cast a brief silence over the drinking evolved in the tavern's first-floor hall, with only the pounding music still vibrating in their eardrums.

Indeed, why was Tang City so prosperous, dubbed the second safest post-apocalyptic city after Ying City? Because it was a nexus where several Resistance Zones and rising factions of the Chinese Top Ten intersected. Though not allies, these factions had jointly cleared the city of mutant life, reinforced its foundations, and ensured it remained free from all threats except those from the sky—all for the sake of trade and resupply.

Thus, Tang City flourished—a transit hub, a trading post, a resting place, a den of indulgence, a haven of comfort...

But if the Resistance Zones fell, would Tang City retain its current status? That was far from certain.

"Perhaps... the emergence of another nine-star evolved would be a better outcome."

A voice broke the silence, drawing all eyes toward a dimly lit corner of the hall where the speaker's face was barely visible.

"Balance—at any time—is a system that benefits the majority more than absolute dominance."

"Because when an individual or faction grows so powerful that no one can oppose them, the rest either die... or are enslaved."

The words were heavy. Many disagreed inwardly but found no rebuttal.

They weren't Cloud Peak's enemies, but neither were they its friends. If the Chinese region remained with only one nine-star evolved for too long... the situation might indeed tilt toward absolute dominance.

Some were already imagining it—Ye Zhongming, the strongest in the Chinese region, visiting every major faction, demanding level-nine magic crystals. Comply and live; refuse and be annihilated...

"Don't worry too much. From what I know, Ye Zhongming only evolved to nine-star less than ten days ago. In such a short time, what can he accomplish? And as of earlier today... a second nine-star evolved has already appeared."

The hall fell dead silent. Even the music stopped.

"Who?!"

"Who's that badass?"

"What's going on?"

"Spit it out, kid!"

If not for Fat Sheep Tavern's strict rules, these evolved would have already rushed over to grab the speaker by the collar.

After all, among those drinking here were quite a few faction leaders—including one super expert, an eight-star evolved ranked in the Chinese region's top fifty!

The man in the corner drained the red liquid from his glass before leisurely answering:

"Commander Ji Ruiguang."

The crowd erupted—some cheering, others skeptical. But gradually, one sentiment prevailed:

This was good news for Tang City.

Someone proposed a toast to Ji Ruiguang becoming the Chinese region's—no, the world's—second nine-star evolved, which was met with enthusiastic cheers.

But just as glasses were raised to lips, the tavern's doors burst open as a man stumbled inside.

"Well, if it isn't Rat Master? What's got you in such a panic? Did Ye Zhongming come knocking?"

Some recognized the newcomer—a low-level evolved who made a living selling information, with connections far beyond his strength.

"Ji... Mu... Mu—" Rat Master gasped for breath, amplifying the laughter that had started at the joke about Ye Zhongming's arrival.

"Ji Ruiguang and Mu Hanyi—both nine-star now!"

The hall instantly fell silent again.

Thanks to the widely circulated rankings, everyone knew who Mu Hanyi was—the leader of the Glory Army, one of the Chinese region's most mysterious experts.

"Wasn't Mu Hanyi supposedly killed in a clash with Cloud Peak? Or died hunting level-nines? Everyone said he was dead!"

Someone voiced skepticism.

"Dead my ass! He's alive! And a nine-star now—confirmed! He evolved around the same time as Commander Ji Ruiguang, just slightly later than Ye Zhongming."

The crowd believed it. Such news couldn't be fake—there was no point. Moreover, Ji Ruiguang's ascension had now been corroborated by two sources.

The man who had first broken the news about Ji Ruiguang stood from his corner and strode toward the exit. But before he could leave, the tavern doors burst open again.

"Rat Master! Another update!"

This was one of Rat Master's subordinates, handing his boss a slip of paper.

The commotion made even the departing man pause, as did everyone else, their gazes locked onto Rat Master.

A full ten seconds later, Rat Master finally croaked out a sentence, his voice hoarse and stammering:

"Cloud... Cloud Peak... has... another... nine-star."