

## Apocalypse 911

### Chapter 911 Limitations Of One's Awakened Ability

Sparrow glanced at the STAU, who appeared weak, but then a thought struck him: another way to turn his 'Space-Type Awakened Ability' into an offensive weapon.

Judging by the corpses scattered around, it was clear they had died from a lack of oxygen. He recalled what the STAU had mentioned earlier: that his space lacked air and couldn't sustain life.

He hadn't considered it before, but perhaps the sudden disappearance of their enemies earlier was due to the STAU panicking.

Still, it seemed they had forgotten just how formidable their own teammates were. Aside from the newcomers, these were fighters who had stood alongside Kisha in far deadlier battles, against zombie hordes and mutated zombies, so reckless attacks from desperate enemies were unlikely to faze them much.

It was true Sparrow had been thrown into the air, but his 'Whirlwind' kept him unharmed. Although the enemy had managed to blow apart the 'Earth Wall' that was serving as their defensive line, but Vulture and Evelyn, both are like living tanks, still held the front.

Clyde and Reeve had stopped their attacks, not wanting to risk hitting their allies since their offensive abilities were mostly wide-range. Still, they trusted that once the enemy got close, they could switch to close combat, a skill that was hardly their weakness.

Meanwhile, Vulture was already preparing an 'Earth Spike', planning to turn the breach in his wall into a trap, drawing the enemy into one spot to finish them off in a single strike. But before he could execute it, the STAU panicked. It wasn't entirely a bad thing, though, because in his panic, the STAU had also stumbled upon a way to protect himself from certain enemies.

They would no longer be as helpless as they once believed. If they wished, they could kill as many enemies as they wanted, and that thought was actually much scarier. Inside their Space, no living creature could survive; there was no air, and most would suffocate within minutes.

Their deaths would be as agonizing as drowning, and Sparrow had already witnessed it in the way the people on the ground perished.

After mulling over this for a moment, while the survivors were still too stunned to process what had happened, Sparrow barked sharply, “Now that we’ve dealt with the hostile forces, focus on the incoming zombies so we can leave ASAP!”

“Sir, yes sir!” came the unified reply as everyone regrouped and spread out once more to handle the zombie threat.

This time, they didn’t practice hand-to-hand combat. Instead, those with awakened abilities unleashed their powers to kill as many zombies as possible, while Vulture and Sparrow stayed behind once again.

Then, turning to the leader of the survivors from the warehouse, he asked with a sinister grin that could freeze the bravest heart, “Do you think I’m ruthless and cruel?”

The leader swallowed hard, a lump in his throat, before shaking his head. “Too much kindness only invites exploitation,” he replied after a pause. “It turns you into everyone’s doormat. Ruthlessness is necessary to keep people in line and disciplined.”

He spoke with the conviction of someone who had lived long enough to see the truth for himself. Over the years, he had endured betrayal, humiliation, and countless disappointments.

Experience had taught him that excessive kindness was nothing more than naïve optimism, the belief that kindness would always be repaid in kind. But human nature was not so pure.

Even the gentlest soul could turn vicious in an instant, especially when their own interests were at stake.

The leader believed that kindness was valuable, but ruthlessness had its place too—and only someone who had led others would truly understand the need to balance the two.

Hearing this, Sparrow's smile widened. He turned his gaze back to the battle raging in the parking lot, where a horde of zombies had been drawn in. Yet he felt no worry, only the satisfaction of having stumbled upon an unexpected prize.

He hadn't expected to find someone so interesting here. If he and his people hadn't arrived in time, these survivors would likely have been killed or enslaved, and it would only have been a matter of time before they perished.

But this man, the leader of this group, was clear-headed, steadfast, and unafraid to voice his thoughts. He could see beyond any façade, and Sparrow knew his addition to their base would surely please the Young Madam.

With a smug smile, Sparrow gave his order.

"Take your people and load up those cars and trucks the fools brought here."

He gestured toward the vehicles their earlier enemies had used to haul supplies from the supermarket, still parked in the middle of the lot.

Sparrow took care to avoid scratching the cars; the ones their enemies had brought were all heavily modified. They had reinforced grills over the windows and windshields, and heavy metal bumpers in the front, looking like those of triangular snowplows, perfect for pushing through zombie hordes.

With vehicles like these, the survivors could have reached the base even without Sparrow's escort. More than that, adding these modified cars and trucks to the base's fleet would be a huge advantage.

Perhaps they could even apply the same upgrades to other non-armored vehicles, reinforcing them with grills and protective plating to extend their lifespan. Extra shielding over the windshields could ensure they wouldn't shatter easily, even during heavy impacts while plowing through the undead.

Armored cars didn't require much modification beyond windshield reinforcement, but these adaptations could make a world of difference for standard vehicles. The more Sparrow thought about it, the more certain he became that these cars had to make it back to the base. And the best people to bring them there were these very survivors.

After hearing Sparrow's words, the leader of the survivors glanced at the modified vehicles and nodded, quickly understanding what Sparrow wanted him to do. He turned to the group he was leading.

"Everyone, get in the cars! We're leaving!"

Then he looked back at Sparrow and asked, "Sir, may I know your name?"

"Sparrow," he replied simply, giving a short nod to signal the leader of the survivors to run for the modified cars.

Without further delay, and with Clyde and the others clearing the way, the convoy surged forward, plowing through the horde. Some of the zombies gave chase, following the fleet of reinforced vehicles into the street, only for Clyde to meet them head-on. With a crushing burst of gravity, he flattened them to the pavement.

Then, as if testing a new idea, Clyde shifted his power. Instead of increasing gravity, he stripped it away entirely. The nearest zombies suddenly rose from the ground, flailing helplessly in midair, their arms clawing at nothing.

No matter how they struggled, they couldn't stand or escape. Even Clyde's own teammates paused, staring in shock as the undead drifted around them like fish in a glass tank.

The fleeing survivors glanced back toward the supermarket just in time to witness half the zombie horde floating in the air, before, without warning, Clyde slammed them down. The impact sent a spray of blood misting through the air like rain.

With this method, Clyde realized it was far more efficient. He no longer had to pour most of his spiritual energy into forcefully crushing his enemies with overwhelming gravity. In that moment, he grasped the true essence of his power.

Instead of brute-forcing it, he decided to ride the natural tide of gravity. Once again, he stripped the gravity away from the zombies around them, leaving his teammates with nothing to do but watch in stunned silence as the undead drifted upward, higher and higher, like morbid confetti.

When they reached the desired height, Clyde restored gravity, adding just a touch more weight.

Boom.

The impact shattered the horde upon the ground, killing them instantly. It was terrifyingly effortless.

“Damn! That’s OP!” Keith shouted in surprise. A power like that was a game-changer, and if Clyde could control gravity, it didn’t just apply to what was around him. It meant he could use it on himself... and fly, just like Kisha.

“Looks like we gained more from this trip than we expected,” Sparrow remarked as he watched the scene unfold. He was genuinely pleased to see his teammates pushing the boundaries of their awakened abilities.

After all, their powers had no fixed limits; the only real boundary was their imagination. The broader their perspective, the more they would discover about what they could truly do, day by day.

Seeing Clyde’s formidable display of power, the other awakened ability users felt a surge of adrenaline flood their veins. Their spirits ignited, and they fought with renewed strength, each one aspiring to stand on the same level as Sparrow, Clyde, and the other captains.

Elemental fury rained down on the incoming zombie horde, searing flames scorched the undead where they stood, razor-sharp wind blades sliced them apart, and jagged earth spikes erupted from the ground to impale them. The horde never even had the chance to get close.

## Chapter 912 Stop

Not long after, they wrapped up the fight, wiping out the zombie horde that had been drawn to the supermarket. It took some time to collect the crystal cores from the corpses, but they weren’t about to leave them behind.

If others stumbled upon them, it would only be handing over free profit. Besides, now that crystal cores had become a form of currency, they had far more value than just being used to grow stronger.

With that in mind, Sparrow and his team spent another two hours clearing the area and harvesting every last core before finally driving out of the supermarket. Since they were already on the outskirts of the city, it didn't take long before they reached the highway, and from there, the journey became far smoother and less taxing.

From time to time, a few zombies wandered onto the road, but Sparrow simply ran them over without a second thought.

Most of the abandoned cars along the highway had already been bulldozed aside, leaving a clear path ahead. All Sparrow had to do was follow it. There was no need to take an alternative route; he knew they could handle whatever dangers lay ahead, and besides, he wasn't familiar with the side roads anyway. For now, this route was their only option.

They drove straight from City B to the farthest location on their list, which was Maple Leaf Town. The plan was to tackle the farthest target first, then head to Gale City, and finally return to City B.

Maple Leaf Town's mission took priority over Gale City's; according to the information that was given by Adam's team, a mutated zombie there had drawn dangerously close to the shelter.

Even more disturbing, it was suspected of herding survivors and might feed on them one by one, as if rationing its food supply. That level of intelligence alone meant it would be far more formidable—and harder to kill—than any mutated zombie they had faced before.

Since they were already nearing Maple Leaf Town and night was falling, they decided to stop at a small village. Pushing farther in the dark would be suicidal; the night brought an even deadlier level of danger, so they could only find a resting place.

Sparrow drove into the small village's entrance, unsurprised to find no survivors, only zombies wandering aimlessly through the streets. He brought the truck to a stop and turned to the others.

"Alright, everyone—clear the area, take out the zombies, and set up camp for the night. We move again first thing in the morning!"

"Yes, sir!" everyone responded in unison. While the rest spread out to hunt down the zombies, Sparrow took his time scanning the surroundings, and Vulture stepped out of the truck to join the sweep.

Clearing the village was crucial; if even a few zombies remained, they could cause trouble in the middle of the night.

One by one, the team eliminated every zombie inside and outside the village. After extracting the crystal cores from their brains, they hauled the corpses beyond the village's outer part and set them ablaze, ensuring the stench wouldn't linger near the camp.

While most handled the disposal, Grandpa and Grandma Alden, along with the STAU's, checked each house. The village's homes were built with sturdy brick walls, but their flimsy doors and windows offered little protection, unsurprising, given that most residents had been elderly or children.

Fortunately, every roaming zombie had been dealt with, removing the risk of one breaking inside and disturbing their rest later.

They searched the houses for untouched supplies, but found none. The villagers had mostly relied on freshly harvested vegetables from their gardens and the livestock they raised.

Grandma and Grandpa Aldens discovered little of value as they searched from house to house, only a broken vat where water used to be stored, and an empty rice vat.

It seemed that during the villagers' struggle against the zombies, the ceramic utensils had been shattered beyond use. The furniture was worn out, the futons damp and moldy, and many doors were creaky or even damaged.

It was clear there was nothing salvageable here. The vegetable gardens had long since wilted, and as for the livestock, most pens contained nothing but bones, while any mutated animals had already wandered off long ago.

Grandpa Alden let out a heavy sigh, his heart heavy at the sight of the village's tragic end. He and his wife were already well into their later years, and most of the zombies they had put down here had been the elderly and children, a sight that gripped his heart with sorrow.

Yet, there was nothing he could do to change it, so he could only sigh again. His wife, sensing his downcast mood, gently patted his back in silent reassurance.

Finding nothing worth salvaging inside, the couple stepped back out and began setting up a campfire. Cooking indoors wasn't an option; the stench of decay was overpowering inside, and the cramped interiors made it uncomfortable.

They had eaten a cooked lunch earlier and were now down to only nine pre-cooked meals per person. Since they had the time, they decided it was best to prepare more food now.

The STAU's took out ingredients from their storage space—meat, vegetables, spices, and even cookware—and began helping Grandpa and Grandma Alden prepare the meal.

One washed the vegetables while the other cut the meat into portions. Meanwhile, the rest of the team, having just finished burning the zombie corpses, explored the village and discovered a well.

They first checked its cleanliness, and upon finding the water clear, they used it to wash away the grime and zombie blood that still clung to them from the supermarket battle up to now. They hadn't had the chance to clean up earlier, so the cool water was a small relief.

However, they were well aware that the well water could not be used for drinking. Their City Lord had warned them that all natural water sources were now contaminated.

Unless it came from a water-type awakened ability user or bottled mineral water, it was unsafe to recklessly drink anything else, especially for ordinary humans, who risked turning into zombies if infected. Only once they discovered a way to completely cleanse and filter out the zombie virus from a water source would they be able to drink freely again.

After washing up, they regrouped and organized a defense perimeter with a rotating guard schedule. The rest split into tasks—some pitched tents while others cleared out nearby houses. Those who preferred security chose to sleep indoors, while others opted for tents to avoid the moldy, musty stench lingering inside the buildings.

While tents were being set up and houses cleaned, another group assisted with cooking. Off to the side, several members trained quietly, focusing on calming their spiritual energy and strengthening their foundations in preparation for a safe breakthrough.

The awakened ability users who felt on the verge of leveling up were the most eager to train, and no one disturbed them. In fact, their comrades proactively stood guard to ensure their concentration remained unbroken; after all, the stronger their teammates became, the better it was for everyone.

Among those consolidating their spiritual energy and foundation were Clyde and Reeve, both already at the bottleneck to Level 1. Despite regularly consuming Scarlet Honey, their advancement took longer than expected, perhaps because they were both irregular awakened ability users, or maybe because their foundations weren't yet stable and sturdy enough.

They took their time to properly consolidate and strengthen their base before attempting the breakthrough. Though their progress was slower than others, their strength was undeniable; few could match them in combat, and that reliability was one of their greatest assets.

Sparrow, perched on top of the truck, kept his gaze to the side, quietly observing everything happening around the village. Vulture soon returned from helping with the cleanup, the grime and dirt already washed from his body.

"You should take a rest and stop carrying all the weight on your shoulders," Vulture said, giving Sparrow a reassuring pat. He knew Sparrow wouldn't say it out loud, but ever since the Young Madam had entrusted him with leading the group outside, Sparrow had been pushing himself hard, determined not to fail or disappoint their Young Madam and Master.

Vulture also recognized that, when it came to intellect, Sparrow was sharper than he was, which was why he didn't mind following his lead. They were partners, after all, and where Sparrow lacked, Vulture filled in.

Though not as smart as Sparrow, Vulture had a strong gut instinct that often came in handy in dangerous situations.

Because he relied more on instinct than strategy, he didn't carry the same heavy sense of responsibility. If Sparrow was like an arrow aimed to pierce through any obstacle, Vulture was more like the wind, moving with the flow and adapting as it came.

Vulture felt the need to remind Sparrow to breathe every now and then, or else he'd be consumed by the weight of his own responsibility and the pressure he placed on himself.

#### Chapter 913 Evolved?

Sparrow smiled but stayed silent. He knew his partner was only worried about him. Despite the way they bickered like cats and dogs, Vulture was the closest brother he had among all their comrades. Sparrow understood that this concern came from genuine care, and it made him feel seen and looked after.

But right now, he only wanted to be of use to his Master and the Young Madam. To him, stopping, even just to catch his breath, felt dangerous, as if the world might shift again in that instant. He feared stagnation, knowing it could leave him vulnerable to mutated zombies or other superhumans who might one day threaten the HOPE Base.

After all, he'd already come face-to-face with death once, brought to the brink because he'd let his guard down and grown arrogant about his own abilities.

Now, more than anything, he wanted to grow stronger and become truly useful. Seeing this determination, Vulture could only shake his head and quietly watch over his brother.

The two of them observed as the village bustled with activity. Before long, Grandma Aldens finished cooking a hearty spread of beef with broccoli, chicken soup, shredded cabbage with pork, and perfectly steamed rice. The mouthwatering aroma instantly stirred everyone's appetite.

Grandpa Aldens helped by serving the rice and ladling the dishes for the warriors. Those who had gotten their share found comfortable spots around the campfire, eating with gusto. With no limits on portions, they ate until they were full.

The people who had been training nearby quickly realized how hungry their training had made them. The energy they had burned while steadying their foundations left them famished, so they joined the

line without hesitation. Many chose to sit close to the serving area so they could grab a second helping faster than the rest.

Vulture hopped down from the top of the truck to join the line, and Sparrow followed shortly after.

After the first batch finished eating, those assigned to guard the perimeter swapped places with them, lining up for their turn at the meal. Grandma and Grandpa Aldens were also sent to eat early, while members of the first batch who had finished eating took over serving food to the others.

Once the second batch was done, some warriors took on the task of washing the dishes. They didn't use water from the well; instead, water-type awakened ability users conjured clean water, which was collected in drums and metal pails provided by the STAU. Since these utensils were used for eating, they couldn't risk washing them in contaminated water.

Two warriors were assigned to wash the plates, bowls, and utensils with dishwashing liquid diluted in the conjured water. Others handled rinsing them; each item was washed twice in clean water before being set on a rack to air-dry. Once dried, the STAUs stored everything back into their Space.

Once the cleanup was finished, everyone settled down to rest. Keith personally helped his grandparents into their tent, making sure they were comfortable.

Since they were already old, he brought out a thick cushion, a comforter, and pillows from the STAU's space, ensuring they had everything they needed for a good night's sleep. As for himself, he set up in the tent right beside theirs, sleeping inside a sleeping bag so he could respond quickly if anything happened during the night.

Ironically, Keith ended up sleeping like a log, while his grandfather, who was a light sleeper, was the one who would have noticed trouble first. Grandma Aldens, on the other hand, slept soundly, wrapped in the soft comforter and blankets that made her feel as if she were floating on clouds.

By the time she opened her eyes the next morning, the camp was already a hive of activity. People were taking down tents and extinguishing the campfire. Thankfully, nothing major had happened during the night.

A few stray zombies had wandered close to the perimeter, but they came in ones or twos and were dealt with easily by the guards. With no real threats, most people slept deeply until it was time for their rotation.

In the morning, Grandma Aldens rose early and set up the cooking utensils again. She prepared a simple breakfast, toast, soft-boiled eggs, and sliced fruits like bananas, apples, and other nutritious options.

The meal was kept simple so there would be fewer dishes to wash, and it could even be eaten on the road as they traveled. Eggs, after all, were a great source of energy and nutrients, though they might cause a little extra gas; it wasn't anything worth worrying about.

Grandpa Aldens helped his wife by cutting the fruit, while Keith boiled the eggs in a large pot over a gas stove. The STAU's took out the fruits for serving, this time choosing the Spiritual Fruits Kisha had given them.

She had instructed that the warriors should eat these from time to time to help increase and purify their Spiritual Energy, making this the perfect opportunity to include them in the meal.

Once the preparations were complete, Grandma Aldens handed each warrior five slices of toasted bread, two large bananas, an apple, five eggs, and whatever else she had on hand, practically stuffing their arms full. Before long, while many were still eating, everyone climbed onto the trucks, and they set out on their way.

By lunchtime, they arrived at Maple Leaf Town and decided to eat the pre-packed hot meals stored in the STAU's Space, avoiding the need to cook. Sparrow parked the truck just outside the town, and they quietly ate their food.

Once finished, Sparrow moved ahead to scout the area first, while the others stayed alert, patrolling the outskirts to assess the situation within the town.

After leaving the others in Vulture's care, Sparrow leapt from rooftop to rooftop, scanning the area ahead. The town was larger than he had expected; it was already on the verge of being recognized as a city, with tall buildings scattered around.

It looked as if it had been in the process of being redeveloped into another metro hub before the apocalypse struck. Even now, he could see its untapped potential.

Using his 'Hawk Eyesight', Sparrow searched for Adam's camp from a distance. It took considerable effort before he finally spotted it. To his surprise, the group had chosen to settle in a kindergarten.

Though small compared to high schools or universities, it offered several advantages: it was situated in a lightly populated area, bordered by a playground and a forest at the back, perhaps chosen to give the children peace and freedom.

The school's grounds were well-suited for defense, with reasonably high walls that would deter intruders, a sturdy sliding gate, and a spacious yard. A platform had even been built along the walls, allowing lookouts to see beyond and monitor zombie activity outside.

The main building itself was two stories tall, modest in size, but large enough to serve as a secure shelter.

He didn't head straight to the shelter. Instead, he remained still on a rooftop, shrouded by his 'Cloak of Darkness', blending seamlessly into the shadows as he scanned for anything unusual.

For a long moment, nothing stirred. He was just about to pull out his walkie-talkie to signal his team to move in when movement caught his eye, a shadow emerging from beneath the playground slide.

It crawled out like a cockroach before darting to the side, skirting along the walls in a wide circle. The guards stationed above never noticed it; it stayed perfectly within their blind spots. The creature paused occasionally, sniffing the air like a hound.

Its body was pitch-black, as if charred, the skin rough and scaly. Long, curved nails tipped its limbs, and its face was short and stout like that of a dog.

No matter how Sparrow examined it, it didn't resemble a zombie. It looked more like some twisted canine, and although it didn't perfectly match the illustration from the mission notice, there was just enough resemblance to make him uneasy.

'Did it... evolve?' Sparrow wondered, eyes locked on the creature. Without looking away, he pulled out his walkie-talkie and spoke in a low, firm voice.

"Everyone, store the truck back inside the Space and move on foot. I've got eyes on the mutated zombie, and I don't want to alert it. Travel as silently as possible. Head northwest until you spot an ENX building—I'm on the roof. Find good cover below; no need to come up. I'll give further instructions once you're in position."

He kept the device close, his gaze never leaving the mutated zombie. If it really had evolved again, it would be stronger than they had anticipated, too strong for him to take on alone. He would need the whole team to bring it down.

Until then, the last thing he could afford was letting it know he was there.

Sparrow kept perfectly still, tracking the creature's every move. So far, the mutated zombie hadn't made any attempt to attack. Instead, it prowled around the perimeter, sniffing the air and scraping its claws along the ground, almost as if it were marking its territory like a dog.

#### Chapter 914 Where Are The Zombies?

'Is it sniffing for the humans inside?' Sparrow's mind raced, trying to piece together the creature's behavioral pattern. It seemed to be deliberately holding back, resisting the urge to strike, as though it were rationing its prey.

But why? Was it waiting for more survivors to arrive, fattening the shelter's numbers so it could feast on a larger meal later?

Sparrow didn't understand, but something about its behavior was undeniably strange. The creature crawled back into the shadows from where it came, its gaze fixed on the shelter.

Even Sparrow felt his skin crawl under that watchful stare. If it was observing like this, did it deliberately let Adam and his team leave without interfering? Why? Could it be that it wanted Adam to bring back more people?

If so, it might already know Adam's routine; perhaps it had seen him return with more survivors before. That would mean it considered Adam's group a reliable source of food, leaving them unharmed when they went out, while keeping a close eye on those inside as if guarding against any escape.

If that was true, then this mutated zombie had grown far more intelligent than he expected.

Dread washed over him in waves. Sparrow realized he might have real trouble fighting, let alone killing, this mutated zombie. Judging by its build, he suspected it possessed not only intelligence but also speed and perhaps even heightened senses.

It wasn't just because it looked vaguely like a dog, but because it behaved like one, marking its territory, patrolling with intent. If his guess was right, getting too close might alert it instantly.

The only reason it hadn't noticed him yet was because he was perched atop a tall building, far away. No matter how sharp a creature's sense of smell, it couldn't track something hundreds of meters off.

But if his theory held true, they wouldn't be able to approach without arousing suspicion. And if it fled? Without knowing where it went, they could be ambushed at any moment, a far more dangerous prospect than facing an enemy whose location was known.

Sparrow's mind was racing, but his gaze never strayed from the mutated zombie. Then, movement caught his attention; several people emerged from the shelter, armed and ready.

They split into two groups, each taking a different route to patrol the perimeter. Their intent was clear: to ensure no zombies crept too close, giving them time to prepare in case of a zombie horde came too close.

It was a sound strategy... except they didn't realize they were already under the watch of a mutated zombie. Hidden from sight, the creature tracked their every move. It even shifted in its hiding place, muscles tensing as if ready to spring at any moment.

But when it saw the patrol merely circling the area instead of retreating, it seemed to relax again, settling back into the shadows.

Sparrow kept his eyes on the scene for nearly an hour, unmoving, until the faint crackle of his walkie-talkie broke the silence.

"Captain, over..." Vulture's voice came through the static.

Sparrow pressed the button to reply. "I hear you, over."

"Captain, we're in position. Give the order whenever you're ready."

But before Sparrow could respond, he caught a subtle shift; the mutated zombie's head twitched, its gaze scanning the surroundings as if it had heard something. Sparrow froze, holding his breath, his thumb hovering over the button, unwilling to make another sound.

Sparrow finally spoke into the radio after calming down, his voice low and firm. "Vulture, pull everyone back fifty meters. We've got a situation. I'll keep monitoring here, wait for my signal."

As the words left his mouth, the mutated zombie rose to its feet, scanning its surroundings with deliberate movements. A cold thought crept into Sparrow's mind—could it hear their voices, or was it somehow picking up the radio frequency? He didn't know, and he had no intention of finding out the hard way.

If the creature realized powerful superhumans were nearby, what would it do—attack head-on, or vanish into the shadows? A direct fight would be dangerous, but at least it would be straightforward. If it fled instead, lurking unseen while waiting for the perfect moment to strike... that would be far worse.

Understanding Sparrow's intent, Vulture immediately relayed silent hand signals to his team, ordering a retreat. He didn't call back over the radio. If Sparrow was being this cautious, it meant the situation was serious.

Asking them to fall back could only mean one thing: Sparrow feared the mutated zombie might detect their presence too soon, ruining any chance of a well-planned strike.

Without hesitation, Vulture's squad moved with quiet precision, retreating the way they had come. Though it had taken them an hour to reach this position, they ensured their steps were silent and deliberate, avoiding unnecessary noise.

Every zombie they'd encountered on the way had been quietly dispatched, not just for safety but to clear an escape route, one they might need if things went wrong.

Vulture gave a sharp hand signal as his eyes swept the surroundings. The others understood instantly. Fred's team moved first, slipping out like a stream of ants into the narrow alley, each step measured and silent.

They advanced with the precision of a covert operation, checking every corner to ensure no zombie lurked nearby. Behind them came Clyde's team, then Rakan, while Vulture brought up the rear, glancing over his shoulder at intervals to make sure nothing was following.

Evelyn took the lead ahead of Fred, acting as the team's shield. Her body was encased in sturdy metal, impervious to any zombie's bite, ensuring that even a surprise attack wouldn't break their formation.

Behind her, Fred had slung his assault rifle over his back, keeping a dagger ready in his grip for close combat. The rest of the team was equally prepared, their awakened abilities primed for use should a zombie suddenly lunge from the shadows.

Fortunately, their earlier silent movement had kept them unnoticed, and no undead had been drawn to their position. They made steady progress, retreating without incident. Only when they were safely fifty meters back did Vulture risk reaching out to Sparrow over the radio.

"We're fifty meters back," he said quietly. "Hiding behind the building."

Before answering, Sparrow kept his eyes fixed on the mutated zombie. Only after a moment did he press the button on his radio and reply, "Got it. Remain in position." He hadn't noticed any movement from the creature, which meant it hadn't picked up on anything unusual in its surroundings. Gradually, its tense posture eased, suggesting it was no longer on high alert.

That, in turn, told Sparrow something important—it might not be an experienced fighter. Instead, it gave off the impression of a creeper or ambusher, the kind that waited patiently for the perfect moment to strike.

Was that why it was targeting this shelter? Not because it lacked other food sources, but because there were no strong fighters inside—no awakened ability users to threaten it—making the people easy prey to herd and trap?

Sparrow couldn't be sure, but if his speculation was correct, then perhaps they still had a chance against this mutated zombie, even after its evolution. The real problem, however, was figuring out how to engage it in a fight without letting it escape.

Should they set a trap? And if so, what kind of trap? Could it detect the scent of an awakened ability user... or perhaps sense danger itself?

Sparrow pondered for a long while until he saw the mutated zombie move again. At the same time, the people who had gone out to patrol the perimeter were returning inside after confirming there were no zombies nearby.

Now that he thought about it, this place was surprisingly calm, almost too calm. On his way here, he'd noticed how few zombies there were in the area. Even Vulture and the others had managed to reach him within an hour while keeping their movements tightly controlled and making almost no noise. That had only been possible because of the unusually sparse zombie presence.

It wasn't that Sparrow had simply grown accustomed to the overwhelming hordes in City B. Even if this place was called a town, it was a promising, fast-developing area on its way to becoming a city, which meant it should have had at least a few million residents and businesspeople. So where were the millions of zombies?

Was this mutated zombie keeping them at bay?

After all, this wasn't his first time encountering a mutated zombie. He already knew that high-level ones could control lower-level zombies. So was that the case here? If so, where was it hiding the rest of the zombie population? And why was it keeping them at bay? Was it to prevent them from touching the people it had marked as its own food source?

The more Sparrow thought about it, the more he realized that the situation in Maple Leaf Town wasn't as simple as it seemed.

#### Chapter 915 A Psychopath Zombie

Could it be that the zombies here had migrated, just like what he and the others witnessed on their way to City A's hidden base? But as far as he knew, those migrating zombies always returned to where they came from, so that didn't seem to fit. Or... could it be that something had driven them away?

Sparrow forced himself to stop thinking—there was no way to confirm whether his suspicions were correct or not, and dwelling on them would only mess with his mind. Instead, he focused on the scene before him.

He noticed the mutated zombie make its move just as the patrol team began retreating back into the shelter. It slipped through the area with unsettling precision, navigating every blind spot as if it already knew them by heart.

Its movements were deliberate, almost practiced, like it had studied the guards' habits and behavior, allowing it to approach the shelter's wall without drawing a single glance.

Sparrow considered taking the shot. But if his suspicion was right, that this creature had undergone another evolution, a sniper's bullet might do little more than scratch it... or worse, give away his position.

Even beneath the charred skin, the sun's glare revealed a scaly, armor-like texture, gleaming like steel. No... sniping might not be the best option.

Without anyone noticing, the mutated zombie crept close and yanked a guard from the wall. The man's eyes widened in shock, but his voice failed him; no cry for help escaped in time. Everyone's attention was fixed on the patrol party that was returning from outside, leaving him unseen and unheard.

"You've worked hard. Please rest inside for a while and leave the rest to us," one of the guards nearest the gate said with a smile. He scratched the back of his head with one hand, while the other gripped the shotgun slung over his shoulder.

"Eh?! Are you one man short?" One of the patrol teams that came from outside noticed something was off; no one was manning the guard platform in the corner. That spot was almost in their blind spot, so it could have easily gone unnoticed.

But one of them happened to know the guard assigned there and wanted to check on him. Looking toward the platform, he was startled to see it completely empty.

The other guards who heard him turned to look. That position did indeed face the forest and was in everyone's blind spot, making it easy to overlook whoever was stationed there. "Eh?! He might have gone to the toilet. I heard him earlier saying he had diarrhea," one guard guessed after a moment's thought.

After all, they were a small but tight-knit community of survivors; everyone knew each other well and was on friendly terms.

So, it wasn't surprising that they casually chatted about small things, but none of them knew that the man they thought had gone to the toilet was, at that very moment, being dragged into the forest by the mutated zombie.

Even Sparrow had lost sight of the creature, which made him curse under his breath.

The worst part was that the zombie hadn't killed its prey yet. The man's muffled protests were met only with silence, save for the low, guttural growl of the creature hauling him away from the wall. His wide, terrified eyes locked on the shelter's wall, now growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

He didn't understand why he couldn't move or shout. His body felt completely paralyzed, yet the zombie hadn't even bitten him, so it couldn't be the virus. The fear was overwhelming, sinking into his every muscle and nerve.

He wanted to scream, to fight back, to do anything, but nothing responded. Tears welled up and spilled down his cheeks, and seeing this, the mutated zombie's growl deepened, its breathing turning heavy, almost eager, as if it was savoring his helplessness.

It was terrifying to imagine that this mutated zombie might harbor some twisted, perverse ritual for how it "dined" on its prey, deliberately letting fear seep into every pore, forcing its victim to drown in hopelessness and helplessness before finally devouring them. As if terror itself could somehow make the flesh taste sweeter.

And maybe... that wasn't so far-fetched.

Before it turned, this creature had been a deranged psychopath, a convicted serial killer who had escaped from prison. He was infamous for torturing his victims slowly, relishing every moment of their agony, keeping them alive just long enough for his victim to wish for death... only to deny them that release. The more they writhed and begged, the more euphoric he became.

Now, that same monster wore a zombie's skin. And as it began regaining fragments of intelligence, it was no surprise that some of its old sadistic habits still lingered—twisted and amplified in its new, inhuman form.

The mutated zombie dragged its victim deep into the forest, disappearing into its hidden lair. Back at the shelter, no one had any idea what had happened. Sparrow, watching helplessly, knew he could do nothing to stop it now. Instead, he grabbed his walkie-talkie.

"We have a situation," he said, his voice low. "We might need to head to the shelter and warn them, but without alerting the mutated zombie."

The radio crackled before Vulture's voice came through. "So... we just run straight to their shelter?"

"No. We pretend to be passing by," Sparrow replied after a moment. "That thing is too slippery and too cautious. If it realizes we're after it, it might do something... unpredictable. Something we can't guard against."

Vulture's tone was skeptical. "Is it really that formidable?"

Sparrow's gaze darkened. "None of the mutated zombies we've faced have been this intelligent. None... except maybe one. The one Young Madam Kisha fought inside our base, back when someone failed to awaken their ability."

Hearing this, and remembering that event, Vulture's expression darkened. Among them, Kisha and Duke were the strongest fighters they had, but even Kisha had nearly lost to that one zombie.

It wasn't just fast; it knew how to feint, how to fight like a trained human. The memory of that battle could still make his skin crawl, and if Sparrow was comparing this mutated zombie to that one... it meant they were in for a very difficult fight.

"Alright," Vulture said grimly. "I understand. How do we approach?"

"You and the others, head straight to the shelter," Sparrow ordered. "I'll keep watch from here and alert you if anything goes wrong. Make sure to check for any other entrances or exits before taking up your posts. Guard the shelter while the rest prepare to move out at a moment's notice."

He set the walkie-talkie down and turned his gaze back toward the forest. The mutated zombie still hadn't emerged, meaning it was still taking its time with its prey.

As soon as Vulture received the order, he raised his hand in signal. The rest of the team immediately focused on him, reading the hand gesture, and moved with flawless precision, like seasoned police or army veterans. They advanced in tight formation, silent yet deliberate, making their way toward the shelter.

When they finally came into view, the guard stationed atop the platform caught a flicker of movement. "What was that?" he muttered, pulling out his binoculars. His voice rose with sudden excitement. "Are those army troops? Or a special squad?"

His outburst drew the attention of the others, who quickly grabbed their own binoculars. In the distance, they spotted a group dressed in sleek black military-style uniforms, each bearing a crest on the chest, though the details were hard to make out.

They moved like soldiers, but the figure leading them stood out: his attire was different, save for the coat's design and the same crest emblazoned in the familiar spot.

"I... think so?" one of the men replied uncertainly, lowering his binoculars for a moment before looking again.

That's when they noticed the man at the front, carrying an enormous hammer strapped across his back. It was even larger than a sledgehammer, and judging by its solid build, it had to be heavy. Yet the man ran with it effortlessly, as if the weight meant nothing.

## Chapter 916 The Situation

The sight lit a spark of excitement among the guards, like wanderers spotting an oasis after a long trek through the desert.

Moments later, Vulture and his team reached the front of the shelter.

"Who are you people?" one of the guards called out, his tone sharp but wary, clearly trying to ensure they weren't a threat.

"We came from City B's HOPE Base. We're here at Adam's request..." Vulture explained openly, holding nothing back. After all, it was the truth, and it was impossible these people weren't already aware of Adam's plans.

Sure enough, once his words settled, the crowd exchanged glances before one of them stepped forward toward Vulture. In response, Vulture retrieved a copy of the mission notice, one that had been entrusted to the STAU for safekeeping, and handed it over.

The guards carefully examined the document, confirming that their leader had indeed issued a bounty to eliminate the mutated zombies threatening their hunting grounds and, more importantly, their very lives.

After inspecting the notice, the guard who had stepped forward glanced back at his comrades inside the gate before shouting, "Open the gate and let them in!"

The heavy gates creaked open, and the guards ushered Vulture and his team inside. Still, the guard leading them couldn't help but eye the newcomers with curiosity; the way they carried themselves, the

sharpness in their eyes, and the sheer aura they exuded made them seem formidable, almost intimidating.

Once Vulture and his group crossed the threshold, the gates closed firmly behind them. Without wasting time, Vulture gave a subtle signal, and his team moved swiftly, stepping onto the platforms and assuming vigilant positions.

Their disciplined actions, however, made the shelter's residents tense up instantly. To the onlookers, it seemed less like guests entering peacefully and more like Vulture's group was staging a takeover of their shelter.

But before anyone could speak, Vulture cut in firmly. "There's a situation. We should discuss it inside, and in the meantime, let my people guard the perimeter. That way, the mutated zombie won't get close to anyone inside the shelter."

His words struck like a hammer. At once, the crowd trembled. They had been pretending not to know, putting on brave faces, but deep down they were all painfully aware of the lurking horror nearby.

That was why Adam had placed a bounty at HOPE Base in the first place, desperate for outside help. Now, with Vulture openly confirming it, their carefully constructed façade began to crumble. Fear gripped their hearts, stripping away the mask of strength they had clung to, leaving them feeling exposed... and terribly vulnerable.

When Adam left, everyone had already resigned themselves to the possibility of death. That was why he had hidden rations in the most unexpected corners of the shelter, emergency supplies for anyone who might escape if disaster struck.

The people here had long been aware of the mutated zombie's presence, but fear kept them silent. They dared not acknowledge it openly, afraid that any sign of awareness might provoke it into a massacre. After all, their shelter was filled with vulnerable children and the elderly.

Most of the young ones were children from the kindergarten. Their parents had rushed here at the start of the apocalypse, clinging to the faintest chance of survival.

Many children had perished in those chaotic first days, yet some lived thanks to the courage of their teachers, men and women who, with remarkable bravery, shielded the children or lured the zombies away to buy them time. The parents then secured the kindergarten as their refuge.

Among the survivors were also grandparents, who had been visiting that day, bringing snacks and lunchboxes. The teachers prioritized them too, unwilling to abandon anyone under their care. Many of the teachers themselves were parents, and that maternal instinct drove them to protect the children with everything they had.

Because of these sacrifices, many of the young survived. But not all. Some children were infected. And in a shelter where a single zombie could doom them all, there was no choice but to kill the ones who turned.

Parents who could not bear it often chose to leave with their child, only to die outside the gates. Others stayed and fought on, driven by desperate hope that one day, an antidote might be found.

Yet, hope was a cruel thing. An antidote was not something that could be created in days or even months. And so, the survivors lived on, scarred by grief, forced to witness this brutal cycle of loss and sacrifice again and again.

Just when they thought the worst of their torment was over, another blow came. A month later, they discovered that the zombies were evolving, growing stronger, and that the town could no longer provide enough supplies without forcing them to pass through the most dangerous zones.

The breaking point came when one parent's son, who suffered from heart disease, urgently needed medicine. Their local hospital had none; the facility had been under reconstruction before the apocalypse, part of the town's plan to upgrade into a city. With no options left, Adam's team made the painful decision to venture farther.

Their destination was City B, the nearest major city to the Port City. Known as a bustling business hub and home to several government offices, it offered their best chance of finding the boy's medicine, along with badly needed supplies and, hopefully, firearms for protection.

But who would have thought their desperate search would lead them to stumble upon the base in City B, only to discover its newly opened trade route for outsiders? There, they realized everything they

could ever need was available, as long as they could pay with crystal cores. For a brief moment, hope bloomed. They thought they had finally found a way to survive.

Yet that hope was quickly shadowed by a terrifying truth: the zombies were evolving. Suddenly, it made sense why so many high-risk danger zones surrounded their area, why scavengers who ventured in rarely returned alive.

Their visit to HOPE Base gave them the answers; they learned not only of mutated zombies but also about many things they should know, and so, they realized that a mutated zombie had been watching them all along, herding them like sheep trapped in a pen.

Adam's instructions were clear: they had to act as if they knew nothing, hide their fear, and focus on protecting the children while he and the others sought help.

HOPE Base's warriors were rumored to be powerful, most of them awakened ability users, and Adam believed they were their only chance. Since then, everyone had been clinging desperately to that fragile hope.

And now that the very people they had been waiting for had finally arrived, relief hit them so hard it almost brought them to tears, joy mixed with trepidation.

When Vulture suggested they speak inside, the crowd instinctively parted, opening a path for him and his group. Their second-in-command—the one who held authority whenever Adam was away—personally led them deeper into the shelter, straight to the former principal's office.

Once a place of learning, it had since been converted into their meeting room, chosen for its soundproof walls that promised their discussions would remain a secret.

The second-in-command guided Vulture to the head seat, a symbolic gesture of respect. Beside him stood only Rakan and a handful of his subordinates, acting as his personal guard. Their intimidating presence wasn't accidental. Vulture had chosen them for this entrance deliberately, following Sparrow's advice: they needed to project strength.

The goal was clear: HOPE Base had to be seen as both powerful and fearsome. Only then would shelters like this one surrender their allegiance willingly, not as burdens clinging like parasites, but as subordinates pledging loyalty. To achieve that, intimidation was necessary. Fear would lay the foundation, and from there, respect would follow.

After a brief silence, Vulture finally spoke. "As I mentioned earlier, we came here to help clear out the mutated zombie. But it seems there's... an issue."

He pulled out his walkie-talkie, pressed the button, and spoke into it. "Sparrow, we're inside. Tell me, what happened that required us to come in?"

The radio crackled before Sparrow's voice came through. "Good. Earlier, while keeping watch, I saw the mutated zombie circling the shelter right under everyone's noses. It's grown so familiar with the guards' rotations and the people's behavior that it acted with sheer arrogance; it even dragged a guard off the wall in broad daylight and pulled him straight into the forest."

"That alone shows how confident it's become. And the worst part? It didn't kill him immediately. Instead, it dragged him away slowly... as if savoring the hunt, feeding off the terror it left behind."

As Vulture lifted his gaze, he caught sight of the second-in-command trembling like a leaf, his face pale as paper. Even some of his most trusted people wore the same stricken look.

Sparrow's voice came again, calm but heavy with weight. "So, I suppose what we're dealing with is no ordinary mutated zombie, but an intelligent one. As I recall, the Young Madam marked these types as a top priority for elimination; they're the closest to evolving into a Zombie King if left unchecked."

#### Chapter 917 Ancestor Stop Working

"And judging by the unusually low number of zombies in this area, my speculation is that this one is already halfway there... controlling the surrounding horde according to its will, keeping them from getting too close to the shelter."

He let his words hang in the air, forcing everyone to grasp the gravity of the situation. The silence that followed was suffocating, and even Vulture—usually steady as stone—felt unease coil in his chest.

"Are you certain?" Vulture asked, his voice low and husky, the weight of his seriousness cutting through the room.

"Seventy percent," Sparrow replied without hesitation. Then, in the same measured tone, he continued, "Given how this mutated zombie moves, thinks, and reacts, it no longer fits the information Adam and the others provided in the mission notice."

"We can assume it hasn't just grown stronger and faster, but it has also become more intelligent. Which means this isn't something we can take down on our own. We'll likely need the Young Madam's help to eliminate it."

He paused briefly before pressing on, his words as casual as if he were commenting on the weather. "Until she receives the message and responds, our priority is to protect this shelter, keep it from being overrun, and prevent a massacre."

"If this creature truly is as intelligent as it seems, once it realizes reinforcements have arrived, it may lash out, send a zombie wave in fury. If that happens, we'll have to hold the line as best we can. And should the Young Madam choose not to intervene, which is unlikely, then we'll have no choice but to handle it ourselves... but the casualties will be high."

After all, a Zombie King—or even the possibility of one—meant disaster. Such a creature could command a horde and unleash a wave powerful enough to topple a shelter of this size with ease.

If what Sparrow said was true, then they were already as good as dead. Fear drained the color from everyone's faces, and the second-in-command's mouth opened and closed soundlessly, unable to form words as the weight of that possibility crashed over him.

It was only after a long, suffocating silence that he finally managed to speak, his voice hoarse with desperation. "Is... the Young Madam you're talking about the City Lord of your base? Is she strong?"

It was as if all his hope now rested on the unknown strength of HOPE Base's City Lord.

Hearing this, Vulture grinned as if Sparrow's grim words about their chances of dying on this mission hadn't registered at all. "She's stronger than all of us combined," he said with pride, his tone swelling as though he were boasting about himself.

The second-in-command, however, looked unconvinced. To him, Vulture's words sounded more like empty comfort meant to soothe their fears. After all, how could anyone feel reassured when Sparrow had already crushed their hopes with the harsh truth?

But why had Sparrow revealed it so openly? He could have easily sent word back to their base in secret and let the Young Madam deal with the threat discreetly, avoiding unnecessary panic. Yet he chose not to.

The reason was simple: he wanted them to feel the weight of reality, that their lives were already dangling over the grave, and facing this mutated zombie was a risk no bounty could justify.

But more than that, this was a chance to let their City Lord's strength be known. If they fought here, if Kisha's power was displayed in full, the survivors themselves would spread the story.

That way, HOPE Base's reputation would travel far and wide, and everyone would learn that their City Lord and Vice City Lord were not people to be trifled with. After all, if HOPE base claimed such strength on their own, it would only sound like bragging.

But if others spoke of it as witnesses, the story would carry weight. People would believe it, and they would think twice before trying to scheme against HOPE Base. In this way, the shelter would not only understand how grave their situation truly was, but once the threat was resolved, they would feel an even deeper gratitude toward HOPE Base.

In short, it was another layer of psychological warfare, a carefully placed reminder to ensure these people understood exactly who they were dealing with.

"Alright, we'll go with your plan. Everyone's already in position—if there's any movement here, we'll let you know," Vulture replied. After that, Sparrow fell silent, likely trying to connect with the base to get Kisha's opinion on the matter.

At that moment, however, Kisha was still inside her Territory Space. These days, she spends more and more time there; it was simply the most efficient way to maximize her efforts. By now, she had produced an abundance of Stamina Boosters and Magic Scrolls, enough to fully stock her Sales Channel Store.

Currently, she was taking a rare moment of rest, watching Marcus work on the farm. He was busy harvesting chilis and chili peppers of various types, including a few rare strains of Spiritual Chilis. Since these crops were especially valuable in extreme cold weather for their ability to warm the body, Kisha decided to lend a hand, carefully picking the Spiritual Chilis herself.

"City Lord, you don't need to lift a hand. Let us handle the work," Marcus said, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the towel draped around his neck. He stretched his back and rolled his hips a few times to ease the ache from working nonstop.

Nearby, some of the women from Hugo's team were also busy harvesting the crops.

"Don't mind me, I'm just doing this to de-stress," Kisha replied casually. Her words puzzled them. To the others, farming was hard labor, a livelihood, and the source of their food.

But for someone like Kisha, who had the luxury of time and resources, farming was also a way to clear the mind and find calm. There was a quiet joy in planting, nurturing, harvesting, and finally tasting the fruits of your own effort, an experience far more fulfilling than simply buying something others had grown.

By now, Kisha was already wondering what dishes she could make with the freshly harvested chilis. Soon, however, she grew tired of picking them by hand. Settling herself at the side of the field, she shifted her approach, using her telekinesis instead.

In an instant, dozens of chilis began to float gently into the air, moving swiftly yet precisely under her control. The work became astonishingly faster. Within just an hour, she had cleared several acres, not only of chilis but also of leafy greens, eggplants, and other crops.

Her single effort far outpaced the yield of more than a dozen workers combined, making her contribution both efficient and overwhelming in scale.

Marcus glanced at Kisha with mixed emotions, a wry thought crossing his mind.

'Ancestor, please stop working... if you keep this up, I'll lose my job. You're making me feel useless.'

He looked around and noticed that most of the fields were already cleared, ready for new seedlings to be planted. With a more diverse selection of vegetables, they could cultivate a wider variety of crops.

His gaze shifted toward the rice paddies he had planted earlier. Deciding to tend to them, Marcus went to the irrigation system and opened the channel, letting water flow steadily into the field. Kisha, curious, watched him closely. Other than the rice, there was nothing else in the paddies.

Fortunately, inside her Territory Space, she never had to worry about pests or insects destroying the crops; the farm space had its own natural pest-repelling mechanism. Still, she walked over to Marcus and made a suggestion.

"Why don't we raise some conch, loaches, small fish, or even crabs in the rice fields? They'd enrich the environment, fertilize the soil with their waste, and help keep it soft as they move around."

Everything she mentioned was indeed beneficial; most farmers used such methods to naturally control pests and maintain their fields. But here, where no insect dared to touch her crops, her proposal almost sounded unnecessary.

But for Kisha, it wasn't just about improving the rice paddies; the conches, loaches, crabs, and fish raised there would have a unique taste of their own. She imagined that after a few days, she could enjoy some of them herself.

After all, such food wasn't easy to come by anymore and could even be considered a rare delicacy in certain provinces.

Her mouth almost watered as she thought of it: tender conch simmered in creamy coconut milk with plenty of garlic, ginger, and just the right kick of chili; stir-fried crablets crisped to perfection; and fresh, savory crabs. The thought alone made her crave it, and she realized it had been far too long since she'd last enjoyed such dishes.

Thinking about Kisha's proposal, Marcus stood by the open irrigation channel, weighing it over. He was no stranger to her idea; in fact, it reminded him of how they used to farm.

They would raise crabs in the rice paddies and let ducks roam freely to feed on locusts, keeping the pests under control.

#### Chapter 918 Can't Allow To Happen

After all, a single female locust could lay nearly two hundred eggs, and if left unchecked, their numbers could explode in just a few days.

Marcus also knew that once pesticides were used, the crops never tasted the same. Sometimes, the bitterness lingered in the grains and vegetables, no matter how well they were cooked. Naturally grown produce, on the other hand, always had a fresher, more wholesome flavor.

"I think that's a good idea," Marcus said. He wasn't merely humoring Kisha; he genuinely believed it would help them. Once the paddies were irrigated, they could leave most of the work to nature; there would be little need for constant supervision.

The soil on Kisha's farm was naturally fertile, requiring no extra fertilization, which meant one less worry for them.

Still, Marcus knew the real reason behind Kisha's suggestion—she simply wanted to enjoy the conches, loaches, and other small fish that could thrive in the paddies. And as far as he was concerned, indulging their Young Madam's cravings was something he'd gladly do.

"We could even put in some frog eggs," Marcus added with a small smile. "They'd roam the paddies naturally... and besides, frogs are considered exotic food. Many people would enjoy them."

But after he said that, Marcus noticed Kisha's face twist in discomfort.

'Could it be... Young Madam is afraid of frogs, like most girls? That's unexpected,' he thought, watching her avert her eyes as though she didn't even want to picture them.

Catching the knowing smirk on Marcus's lips, Kisha quickly clarified. "It's not that I'm scared of frogs. I just... can't eat them. I don't even know when I developed this aversion, but every frog reminds me of a bullfrog. And just imagining eating one makes me think of their bumpy, boil-like skin." She stuck out her tongue in disgust, shuddering at the thought.

Marcus chuckled at the sight. This was the first time he had ever seen Kisha show such a strong aversion to anything. He had grown so used to seeing her as flawless, an untouchable figure, almost divine, the kind of perfection that only their Vice City Lord could rival.

To them, the two were like gods who had descended to redeem the people. Yet now, watching Kisha wrinkle her nose in disgust, Marcus was struck by how human she seemed, just like them. And that small glimpse of vulnerability made him feel unexpectedly closer to their Young Madam.

"But I think you made perfect sense. We could raise those frogs here and deliver them to the Supply Center, see if people want them out of novelty, curiosity, or even genuine craving. After all, with the apocalypse forcing everything around us to evolve and mutate, most frogs outside have likely already turned into something we can't just eat at will." She shrugged, unconcerned.

She didn't need to eat the frogs herself; Marcus could still cultivate them in the paddies and let them grow. Once they matured, it would take only three months inside her Territory, equivalent to just three days outside, for the frogs to multiply. Alongside them, the conches, loaches, and crabs would also thrive, giving them plenty of options.

With several acres of rice paddies, they could even divide them up: one acre for loaches and conches, another for crabs, another for frogs.

"Oh, and what about crayfish?" Kisha added suddenly, the thought sparking in her mind. "They're in the marsh, but paddy-grown crayfish have a different taste."

"We can add all of them if you wish, Young Madam. There's more than enough space in the rice paddies. After all, nearly half of the farm is devoted to rice and wheat, while the rest is for vegetables. This way, we'll have everything we need," Marcus said—and he was right.

Kisha nodded. "Alright, let's cultivate all of them. Right now, we only have a limited variety of meat and food in the market. By increasing the options, we're not only giving people more choices but also boosting their morale."

"If they're happier and more motivated, they'll work harder to earn work points to buy these foods. In the end, it's a win-win for everyone." She murmured the last part to herself, though Marcus still heard it.

With that, Kisha, Marcus, and the others—Gant, Mike, and Daisy—began gathering the eggs of the creatures they had discussed. Since Hugo's team couldn't pass through the farm's boundaries, the task fell on them.

Some headed to the marsh to catch crayfish, carefully setting aside the ones carrying eggs to be placed in the rice paddies, while the rest were gathered to be cooked. After all, they had nearly forgotten about the crayfish, and with their population thriving, it was the perfect time to enjoy a feast.

After collecting the crayfish from the marsh, they ended up with twenty-four large baskets, the same kind Marcus usually used for harvesting crops. Each basket was as big as a drum and packed full of crayfish without eggs.

They had carefully separated those carrying eggs, which filled another fifteen baskets. Kisha helped them bring these back to the paddies, releasing the egg-bearing crayfish to roam freely until the eggs hatched.

Once the young emerged, the adults that had already spawned would be gathered and cooked, while the smaller crayfish would be left to grow on their own. With no natural predators in the paddies, the young would thrive safely and mature in time.

After gathering the crayfish, they went on to collect loaches and conches from the same marsh. The marsh within Kisha's territory had expanded in size, and one of the reasons she wanted to transfer some of these creatures into the paddies was to better monitor their growth and maturation.

Harvesting them from the marsh itself would have been difficult, especially since Gant oversaw so many aquatic creatures from the whole Territory, which was by no means bigger than what Mike oversaw, that he couldn't possibly keep an eye on every corner.

He had even neglected the marsh for some time, allowing its inhabitants to multiply unchecked. But that oversight now turned into a blessing; there was such an abundance of loaches, conches, and other creatures that they could stockpile plenty in the warehouse while still enjoying a steady supply for their meals and then for the paddies.

After gathering everything, Kisha and the others released the tadpoles, crabs, loaches, conch eggs, and more into the rice paddies. Hugo's people looked on in astonishment. They had no idea where Marcus and the rest had managed to collect so many creatures, but since they were deep in the forest, they simply assumed Kisha's group had found them nearby and didn't question it further.

Instead, they joined in, helping to scatter the creatures across the paddies. Just then, a chat message from Keith suddenly appeared in front of Kisha, pulling her attention away.

[Keith: Sis, we've run into a situation and need your opinion...]

[Kisha: What happened?]

[Keith: We've just arrived at Maple Leaf Town, Adam's shelter, and the intel we gathered from one of the mutated zombies has changed. It looks like this one has become even more intelligent.]

[Keith: What's stranger is that the town is almost empty. There are barely any zombies around, not even other mutants. From what we can tell, this single mutated zombie might be the only one left here, and it's been controlling the others to keep them away while it quietly herds the survivors inside, picking them off one by one.]

[Keith: That's the conclusion we reached after investigating the area. Captain Sparrow is keeping watch from a distance, but he couldn't reach the base through the radio; the signal just won't go through. Luckily, I'm here, so I was able to contact you right away... hehe.]

[KeithL ★>d(,,·ε'-,,)∩☆]

Reading Keith's message, Kisha's brows furrowed. She couldn't help but recall the incident when Duke had nearly lost his life fighting two mutated zombies. Back then, after Duke killed one, the other devoured its fallen companion's crystal core and instantly evolved into something far stronger.

If what Keith said was true, then could this mutated zombie have done the same—consuming its own kind to grow stronger? That was the only explanation Kisha could think of for such rapid evolution.

After all, Adam and his group had only recently arrived at HOPE Base. Even if the intel they had gathered on that mutated zombie was already a few days old, it still seemed impossible for it to evolve this quickly under normal circumstances.

What troubled her even more was the behavior of the lesser zombies. Normally, low-level zombies were mindless wanderers, swarming toward any shelter once they sensed survivors.

Yet here, none were approaching Maple Leaf Town. There were no signs of other mutated zombies either. That could only mean one thing: the creature had already consumed the rest, becoming the strongest among them, and now it was acting as their leader.

But to control that many zombies... it could only mean this monster was on the verge of evolving into a Zombie King. The very thought made Kisha's heart skip a beat. That was something she absolutely couldn't allow to happen.

#### Chapter 919 Preparing To Fight

[Kisha: Alright, I'll head over immediately. If the zombies attack, just stall for time. No matter what happens, avoid fighting that mutated one, just push it back and keep your distance.]

[Keith: Understood, Sister. I'll inform the others right away.]

Kisha absolutely couldn't allow them to engage the mutated zombie head-on. If it was close to becoming a Zombie King, then it was likely far stronger than any of them.

The chaos it created wasn't random; it was playing with the survivors, treating their struggle as nothing more than entertainment through the twisted intelligence it possessed. From her experience, no Zombie King was ever ordinary; they were always powerful, cunning, and nearly impossible to deal with.

And if this creature was already capable of targeting its own kind to evolve and commanding lesser zombies, then Kisha could only assume its strength was already at least level 6 or 7, well above her or Duke's current level, no matter how many stat buffs the system had granted her.

Even if it was only in the early stages, around level 3 to 5, it would still be a nightmare. After all, zombies were inherently stronger than humans; one at the same level as her would already be as dangerous as something one or two levels higher.

What if Vulture and the others recklessly engaged such an opponent? They would be slaughtered before they even understood how they died. Yes, there were many of them, and they were all talented awakened ability users, but most were only at level 1, while even Sparrow and Vulture had barely reached level 2.

Against that mutated zombie, they would be nothing more than newly sprouted flowers cut down at the bud. Kisha refused to let that happen. She had raised this squad from nothing, pouring in resources, effort, and time to nurture their growth.

Fortunately, Sparrow had the foresight to report the situation instead of taking it into his own hands. Otherwise, if Kisha were to learn that her people had died alongside those from Maple Leaf Town's shelter, she would have been furious.

The loss would have been devastating. More importantly, these weren't just subordinates anymore; they were her people, her growing family. And anyone who dared harm them was daring to harm her.

After organizing her thoughts, Kisha left Marcus to finish the remaining work and made her way toward Duke. Though she was strong, she knew she couldn't take on this mutated zombie alone; she needed to fight side by side with her husband.

The last time, even the mutated zombie from the chemical factory, one that was also on the verge of evolving into a zombie king, had nearly overwhelmed them, forcing them to expend tremendous effort to bring it down.

This one, however, was different. A mutated zombie capable of commanding thousands, if not millions, of its kind could only mean it was far stronger than the last. She would need to prepare herself carefully.

After leaving the rice paddies, Addison walked toward the wide open space where Duke and the others were still working on the biogas project. They were now assembling the main gas chamber, and most of the work was already complete.

Days had passed outside, but inside the Space, more than a month—perhaps even two—had gone by with nonstop effort. Naturally, the project was already 60–70% finished.

Engineer Steel and his team were also close to completing the machine that would filter impurities from the biogas and refine it into biomethane, which could then be divided into clean fuel for cars, generators, and other machinery, as well as directed into the gas grid to supply electricity for the entire base.

Fortunately, the required materials for making the machine were readily available. Unlike the Advanced Solar Panel Blueprint Kisha had provided, which demanded rare resources, the converter machine only needed solid engineering and common materials.

With Engineer Steel's brilliant design and the blacksmiths helping to forge large casings and other components, the construction process was running smoothly. Still, their responsibility was limited to the converter itself, which was far more straightforward compared to the demanding workload on Duke's side with the biogas chamber and the whole biogas project.

Technically, the timing worked out perfectly; by the time Duke and Hugo's people finished the biogas project, Engineer Steel would also have completed the converter on his end by then. Once connected to the main electricity line, the system would provide a steady power supply, with the Lightning Converter Machine serving as backup.

Unlike generators, the Lightning Converter relied on rechargeable batteries that could be slotted into a port to activate. This meant that if the main line ever failed, the base could immediately switch to battery power while repairs were underway.

With this setup, they would never have to endure intermittent electricity again, something especially crucial during periods of extreme heat.

"Alright, once we've finished building the main gas chamber, we'll run leak tests before connecting all the tube lines from the compost bins!" Duke instructed, his voice steady despite the fatigue weighing on him.

He paused for a moment, wiping the sweat from his brow as he surveyed the progress. He had been working tirelessly alongside Hugo's team, driven by the urgency to complete the project.

The temperature was already climbing again, and unlike the last burst of extreme heat that only lasted a single day, he feared the next wave could drag on much longer. If that happened, their people would desperately need electricity, not just to power air conditioning to survive the scorching heat, but also to run heaters when the extreme cold inevitably returned.

With this system in place, they could prevent unnecessary deaths and ensure the community's survival through the harsh cycles of the new world.

While Duke was busy working, he suddenly felt a hand wrap around his strong waist. He instinctively glanced down, and his stern expression softened into a warm smile. "Wifey, what are you doing here? Do you miss me?" he teased, slipping an arm around her before hesitating.

Remembering the sweat on his skin and the dirt on his hands, he stopped himself. He didn't want to soil Kisha's clothes—or worse, make her recoil from his sweaty scent. A flicker of insecurity crossed his face.

Noticing his hesitation, Kisha's lips curved into a mischievous smile. Instead of pulling away, she leaned closer and deliberately inhaled his scent, making Duke stiffen on the spot. "No worries," she teased lightly, "you still smell nice... just a little more masculine."

Before he could react, she playfully smacked his rear. Duke jumped in surprise, staring at her in disbelief. But before he could complain, her playful gaze hardened into seriousness. "Let's go," she said firmly, tugging at his arm. "We need to level up as soon as possible. There's a strong mutated zombie waiting for us to kill."

Duke glanced back at Hugo as Kisha pulled him away, leaving only a quick instruction. "Hugo, take over for now and continue with the plan. I have something important to attend to."

Seeing Duke being dragged off and their Young Madam wearing such a serious expression, Hugo immediately understood the weight of the situation. He gave Duke a firm nod, silently reassuring him before turning back to oversee the construction of the gas chamber.

After pulling Duke away, Kisha led him to the Spiritual Spring. They sat cross-legged together, and she handed him 800 crystal cores to consume. By now, their experience multiplier had reached its peak, and after days of training, they had already stabilized their cores and strengthened their foundations, making them ready to start leveling up.

More than that, the Spiritual Crops and the Spiritual Spring itself had refined their energy, making their spiritual energy purer than before. As a result, they needed less energy to wield their awakened abilities, and each strike they unleashed carried far greater force, every blow packed with a stronger punch than before.

After giving Duke his share of crystal cores, Kisha placed the remaining pile on her lap. One by one, she popped them into her mouth like pieces of candy. Gradually, she started filtering the raw energy and guiding the refined spiritual energy from the crystal cores to flow into her energy core.

She focused carefully, ensuring not to make any mistakes, but thanks to her Aura, which naturally helped direct the energy, the process had become smoother and far easier for her.

Duke experienced the same. He could feel his Aura assisting in circulating the purified energy throughout his body, making the absorption effortless. Together, they continued to consume crystal cores as if they were nothing more than sweets.

The moment each core touched their tongues, it melted like jelly, leaving behind a faint sweetness that made the process surprisingly pleasant.

Perhaps it was best not to think too much about the origins of those crystal cores. As long as they didn't dwell on that detail, they could almost enjoy the experience without any trace of disgust.

#### Chapter 920 Kisha and Duke Reaching Level 4

When Kisha consumed her hundredth crystal core, she paused to catch her breath. A heavy exhale escaped her lips, releasing a faint steam laced with spiritual residue. Her body flared with heat for a moment before her temperature gradually cooled.

Duke mirrored her actions, exhaling the same way, and then the two of them continued consuming more crystal cores. With every bite, they could feel their spiritual reserves expanding. Once full, those reserves could then be pushed further, allowing them to level up and grow stronger.

But when Mike happened to pass by and saw Kisha and Duke snacking on crystal cores as if they were nothing, he froze in shock. He, too, was an awakened ability user, and he knew firsthand how difficult it was to direct and filter the tainted spiritual energy inside the crystal core.

Normally, it required painstaking effort and long hours of refinement before it could be safely absorbed into one's energy core.

Carelessly devouring crystal cores like that was extremely dangerous; at best, their spiritual energy could spiral out of control, and at worst, their bodies could explode from the overflow.

There was also a third, far more terrifying possibility. If the virus-laden energy from the cores wasn't properly purified or filtered, it could disrupt the delicate balance of the virus already within their bodies.

Instead of being refined into power, that unfiltered virus could accelerate the infection, directly turning them into mutated zombies. So far, this remained only a theory Kisha herself had once mentioned, since it hadn't actually happened yet.

Typically, such a risk only existed during the initial awakening phase. Once someone had fully awakened, they no longer turned; even if bitten, their immunity was greatly enhanced.

Still, the danger wasn't gone entirely. There remained a chance, however slim, that an awakened could succumb to the virus. And if they did, they wouldn't become ordinary zombies. They would transform into high-level mutated ones, living disasters no one could hope to control.

Fortunately, that danger was still only a theory, for now. Even so, the sight of Kisha and Duke casually munching on crystal cores made Mike's chest tighten with worry. He dared not go near them, though.

Interrupting their training could disrupt the flow of spiritual energy, cause their spiritual energy to deviate in their meridians, and even stall their advancement. All he could do was swallow his words and watch, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, as the two of them went on.

To his disbelief, it even looked like Duke and Kisha were competing to see who could devour the crystal cores the fastest.

Truthfully, even after becoming husband and wife in the apocalypse, Kisha and Duke still carried that subtle rivalry between them. It wasn't as blatant as in Kisha's previous life, but perhaps it was already etched into their very bones—an instinct to outdo one another.

So when one of them began devouring crystal cores at an alarming pace, absorbing spiritual energy like a black hole, the other instinctively followed suit, refusing to be left behind. They ate faster and faster, their competition escalating in silence.

Meanwhile, Mike stood behind them, gasping in horror, like an ant scalded on a hot pan. He wanted desperately to intervene before disaster struck, but he dared not disrupt their cultivation.

In the end, he was the one suffering most, nearly collapsing from sheer stress as he watched.

After consuming their two hundredth crystal core, a surge of hot steam burst from Kisha and Duke's bodies. They paused, checking their energy cores to make sure they weren't overheating, an overload that could cause their brains to explode.

But nothing seemed wrong. The steam wasn't from overheating; it was the result of spiritual energy continuously surging through their meridians. The relentless flow flooded them with excess energy, and their bodies instinctively released steam to regulate the pressure, expelling the tainted remnants from the crystal cores along with it.

Since the impurities were being forced out naturally, their bodies were adapting on their own. Relieved, Kisha and Duke resumed without hesitation. After all, they didn't have the luxury of dawdling; their people in Maple Leaf Town were still waiting.

Three hundred... four hundred... the numbers kept climbing until Kisha and Duke had swallowed seven hundred and eighty-nine crystal cores, leaving only eleven left. By then, the steam coming out from their bodies had grown so thick it resembled a dense fog, completely engulfing the space around them.

Mike's nerves were stretched to the breaking point. He couldn't help but move closer, terrified that at any moment his Young Madam and Master might either explode from the excessive spiritual energy or transform into something monstrous.

But the instant he reached out and brushed the fog, he recoiled in pain. The steam wasn't ordinary; it scalded his skin like boiling magma, forming a blistering barrier a full meter thick that concealed Kisha and Duke from sight.

His anxiety only deepened. He wanted to call for help, but there was no one else to rely on, and disturbing them now could prove disastrous. All Mike could do was clench his fists, hold back his panic, and pray desperately that the two would endure.

On her 793rd crystal core, Kisha suddenly heard the sharp chime of a system chat notification. She cracked her eyes open, only to widen them in alarm at the message flashing before her.

[Keith: Sister! The mutated zombie has triggered a zombie wave!!!]

[Keith: We managed to barricade the place, but it's not enough... we can't hold out much longer. I don't think we'll last until tomorrow when you arrive...]

Kisha's heart tightened. How long had she and Duke been inside the Territory Space cultivating? An hour? Two?

She couldn't tell.

Time flowed differently here, faster than in the outside world. If they had been devouring crystal cores for ten hours inside, then only about an hour had passed outside... and already the mutated zombie had noticed Vulture's people in the shelter.

Her expression darkened. Was it because the creature finally saw Vulture and the others as a threat? Or had it simply grown bored of toying with the townspeople, now choosing to unleash its fury in earnest?

If that was the case, then Kisha truly didn't have much time left. She forced herself to keep devouring crystal cores while giving a quick mental command to 008.

"008, search the system mall, or any available sales channel. I'll need an item ready the moment I finish here."

Her tone was firm, leaving no room for delay.

Beside her, Duke noticed the subtle agitation in her expression and frowned. But since Kisha hadn't spoken aloud, he chose not to ask. If she didn't explain, it only meant one thing: she wanted them to finish leveling up as quickly as possible.

Understanding this, Duke simply pressed on with his cultivation, matching her urgency in silence.

Soon, a brilliant light burst forth, piercing even the thick steam that surrounded them. The moment they swallowed and digested the 800th crystal core, a violent surge of spiritual energy flooded their bodies.

Their energy reserves swelled, their cores thrummed with raw power, and they felt as though every vein and meridian was being reforged. It was a mix of searing warmth and sharp pain, as if their very cores were reshaping and expanding.

But instead of panicking, Kisha and Duke stayed focused. They carefully guided the raging energy to flow smoothly, keeping it from going haywire, shielding their cores and meridians with their aura.

Moments later, the surge steadied. Their breakthrough was complete. Both felt their bodies grow lighter, stronger—unshackled, as if a new threshold had opened before them.

Without hesitation, Kisha checked her status window. She needed to know was her newfound strength was enough to stand against the mutated zombie terrorizing the Maple Leaf Town?

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[Kisha Aldens]

Level 4 (Exp: 0/12000 X 0.0)

Strength: 391 (+90)

Stamina: 4811 (+90)

Defense: 681 (+90)

Agility: 391 (+90)

Mental Capacity: 1381 (+90)

Charm: 731 (+90)

Leadership: 1281 (+90)

Luck: 751 (+90)

Mana: 841 (+90)

Spiritual Energy: 841 (+90)

Aura: 13

Authority: 3

Title: 100th Life (additional 10 stat points in all stats), City Lord (See Description...), The Hope of Humanity, Commander of a Thousand, A True Ruler, The Philanthropist, The Leader of the New World, The Merchant

Skills: Telekinesis Level 3 (5 SP for 20 seconds of continuous use and 1 SP per second), Perception Level 1, One Body Level 2, Rainbow Cube, Lion's Roar, Telekinesis Sub: Energy Burst Level 0, Survival of the Fittest Level 0

Passive Skill: Healing Dome Level 3, One Man Team, People's Heart, Likability Boost Level 0

Talent: Close Combat, Heightened Senses

Gift: Phoenix's Nirvana, Eye of Truth Level 2

Ability: Telekinesis (Mental)

Profession Proficiency: Intermediate Inscraper, Beginner Alchemist

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[Duke Winters]

Level 4 (Exp: 0/12000 X 0.0)

Strength: 400 (+120)

Stamina: 400 (+120)

Defense: 400 (+120)

Agility: 400 (+120)

Mental Capacity: 400 (+120)

Charm: 400 (+120)

Leadership: 400 (+120)

Aura: 5

Title: None

Skills: Ice Spear Level 2, Fire Ball Level 2, Fire Meteor Level 1, Lightning Strike Level 1, Lightning Rain Level 1, Ice Storm Level 0, Lightning Ball Level 0, Absolute Zone Level 0, Movement Manipulation Level 0, Time Manipulation Level 0

Talent: Multi-faceted

Gift: Tyrant

Ability: Elemental (Lightning, Fire, Ice), Absolute Zone (Mental)