

## **Apocalypse 961**

### Chapter 961: The Cabin

"Absolutely! I love it!" Kisha almost squeaked, her eyes scanning every corner. She couldn't believe they had finished the cabin in just a single day. Though the space was small, the craftsmanship was impeccable; she couldn't find a single flaw.

"I'm glad you like it..." Duke murmured as he slipped an arm around her small waist and pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. He couldn't stop the smile tugging at his lips, seeing Kisha so genuinely delighted made every bit of effort worth it.

The cabin wasn't grand like the villa or the quarters in the hidden base, but it was warm, cozy, and they knew it was theirs. A place that belonged only to the two of them.

Wherever they went, this little cabin would follow, and even if it was just a temporary residence inside the territory space so they could maximize their time, it still filled them with a quiet sense of comfort.

"Alright, let's wash up and sleep," Duke said softly as he guided Kisha to the small bathroom. Inside was a simple shower, a toilet, a sink, and a mirror, nothing extravagant, but enough.

The reason Duke hadn't washed up here earlier was simple: when he went back and was about to bathe, the cabin didn't exist yet.

While Kisha was outside discussing the rental feature in the territory interface with Aston and Tristan, and consulting 008 about buying the Lightbrain communicator blueprint, Duke had taken the chance to call Mike, Grant, and Marcus for help.

After washing up, he'd led them into the forest to cut tree logs. And while Mike, Grant, and Marcus had awakened abilities, their stat growth as support-type superhumans was still closer to ordinary humans compared to Duke.

So, while Duke felled trees with almost frightening ease, the three men struggled through a single trunk at a time.

Once the trees were cut, Duke stored the logs in his Space Ring before pulling Hugo and the others from the biogas project for a while. He asked them to help strip the bark from the logs and carve the edges so they could fit together neatly for the cabin walls and roof.

Fortunately, there were plenty of them, and most were already used to hard labor, so the work didn't strain them too much.

In return for their help, Duke shared some Spiritual Water from the Spiritual Spring, along with spiritual vegetables, fruits, and a portion of Scarlet Honey. He didn't want them to feel like they were being ordered around or treated as slaves.

More importantly, these resources would help temper their bodies; even if they never awakened in the future, their physiques would still grow far stronger than ordinary humans. They might not notice the changes now, but someday, when they stood beside normal people, they would finally realize just how powerful they had become.

After hours of working with Hugo and the others, Duke called in some of his most trusted people, along with Marcus, Mike, and Grant, to help assemble the cabin since Hugo and his team's access around the territory was still restricted.

While they worked on the structure, Duke dug a pit behind the cabin to serve as a temporary waste pit connected to the toilet and used water from the cabin.

While the logs were being stacked one after another, they layered hay under each one to seal any gaps, then cut openings for windows and the door.

Once everything is done and the cabin has been built, Duke moved inside to arrange the cabin's appliances, a task made effortless by his Space Ring. It was almost like he was playing a Sims game: he could select and place anything wherever he wanted without difficulty.

He then set up the bed with fresh sheets and pillows. From the nearby flower field, he enlisted Daisy's help to dig up some beautiful plants, transplanted them into small pots, and placed them inside as indoor decorations. He even added knitted crochets from the villa to the dining area, giving the space more color and warmth.

Only when he was satisfied with the cabin's interior did he step back and leave, returning to assist Hugo and the others with the remaining work for the Biogas Project.

After Hugo and his team helped Duke process the tree logs, shaping them into straight, clean pieces, they received the resources he had given them. At first, they didn't feel much difference, likely because, since the territory's upgrade, the Spring Water now flowed throughout Kisha's territory.

Even though Hugo and his team had restricted access to certain areas, the irrigation system carried the Spiritual Spring Water everywhere, so they had already long been experiencing its effects.

It wasn't until they cooked the spiritual vegetables that Duke had provided for lunch that the changes became noticeable. These vegetables were now far more advanced than before and were around Grade C to Grade B in spiritual purity, which made their effects much more potent. As they ate, the team could feel their bodies subtly tempering, becoming stronger and more resilient than before.

And although spiritual water flowed throughout the territory via the irrigation system, it wasn't as pure as the water directly from the Spiritual Spring. The irrigation water was still somewhat diluted.

However, as the Spiritual Crystal Gatherer collected and amplified the spiritual energy within the spring, the overall output would increase. Over time, this would mean that the water distributed across the territory would become much purer, carrying the full strength of the spring's spiritual energy.

Perhaps they hadn't fully realized the changes, having been drinking the spiritual water for so long, but the effects became unmistakable when they tasted just a spoonful of the Scarlet Honey.

A euphoric warmth surged through their bodies, making them moan involuntarily in pleasure as their sensitivity skyrocketed. Their eyes rolled back, gasps escaped their lips, and surprised reactions followed as if they had just been given a taste of heaven itself. In that moment, they felt Duke's generosity deeply.

By the time lunch was over, every bite they had eaten was infused with spiritual energy, leaving them brimming with vitality. Their productivity skyrocketed, and the Biogas Project had now surpassed the 88% completion mark.

Thanks to their effort, they were ahead of Duke's deadline, which allowed him to pull them away to assist with other tasks. Had they been behind schedule, he wouldn't have dared redirect them; their focus would have remained solely on the Biogas Project.

Watching the results of Duke's hard work and the others' efforts, while listening to him recount everything, while she took a shower, Kisha couldn't help but chuckle.

She suddenly realized she hadn't checked on the spiritual vegetables and fruits for some time, having been caught up with so many other tasks. She had almost forgotten that time inside her territory passed much faster than in the outside world, which meant the crops had already undergone significant changes, including improvements in their grade.

With that in mind, she realized that if she decided to sell these upgraded crops in her Sales Channel, she could easily raise the prices.

And if she did, although the profit might not be immediate, she could easily recover the 500,000,000 system points as long as she kept restocking her store in the Sales Channel.

Continuous updates would keep customers returning, gradually building the store's reputation until it climbed to the top of the rankings. As her store leveled up, its visibility would increase, eventually reaching even the higher realm.

After Kisha finished her shower, Duke took a quick one as well. Together, they drew the blackout curtains, plunging the cabin into complete darkness so they could rest more comfortably. They then settled onto the bed, and Duke scooted closer, scooping her into his arms. He breathed in her scent and felt her warmth as sleep gently claimed him.

After a restful eight hours of sleep, Duke and Kisha woke up. By then, Hugo and the others were already resting in their usual spots. Since the Biogas Project had begun, they rarely left the territory, preferring to sleep nearby, often in hammocks or tents set up in the forest close to where they were building the compost bins.

Marcus and his grandchildren, however, still ventured outside the territory space occasionally returning to the villa in HOPE Base. With the crops and animals largely self-sufficient, they didn't need to constantly monitor them, allowing them to maintain the villa and keep it clean.

When Duke and Kisha woke, most of the others were still asleep, and the outside world remained dark. Duke chose to sit by the Spiritual Spring to meditate and practice his Aura, while Kisha immediately went to check the territory warehouse where Marcus had stored all the spiritual crops.

Sure enough, she noticed that the most recent harvest had received a grade upgrade, with most crops at Grade C and some reaching Grade B. Since the territory upgrade, the farming land had also expanded, giving Marcus more plots to cultivate. As a result, the warehouse was now filled with numerous large baskets of crops, reflecting the steady increase in their yield.

### Chapter 962: Third Mana Circle

Kisha listed several big baskets of Spiritual vegetables and fruits in her store, knowing they were highly sought-after resources in the cultivation world due to their rich spiritual energy. Naturally, the higher the grade, the higher the price. Before listing them, she sent 008 to conduct some market research in the store from the higher realm, checking other stores she couldn't access to get a sense of the going rates for crops of similar grade.

While 008 was researching, Kisha turned her attention to experimenting with the Teleportation Scroll she had inscribed back in Maple Leaf Town. Instead of using it on herself, she picked up a branch from the ground.

Carefully, she inscribed the coordinates on the scroll and explicitly specified the branch as the target, ensuring she wouldn't accidentally teleport herself. Once the inscriptions were complete, she tore the scroll's seal and watched as the branch vanished before her eyes.

Moments later, the branch reappeared at the intended location, completely unharmed. Its flawless arrival confirmed that it hadn't experienced any distortion in space or time during the teleportation, which meant that her Teleportation Scroll had been a success.

Now, what Kisha wanted to improve in her Teleportation Scroll was the comfort of the teleportation itself. She didn't want to endure the same discomfort she had experienced with the Teleportation Scroll she bought from the system mall, which had left her feeling dizzy and felt as though she had been pulled in every direction.

While it hadn't felt like she was being torn apart, it was as if her body were experiencing a localized earthquake. Such intense discomfort made continuous teleportation almost unbearable, and far worse than the worst jet lag.

After confirming the Teleportation scroll worked, she immediately pulled a table and chair from her inventory, set them down, and began inscribing a new Teleportation Scroll. Since her first attempt was successful, she followed the same thought process, only this time, she added a few intricate modifications.

Those extra layers, however, demanded far more mana than she expected. She ended up draining almost her entire reserve, using all 800 points of her mana just to complete the inscription.

The problem was clear: she still couldn't compress the arcane patterns. Without compression, the inscription required an enormous amount of energy. If she could refine the structure, simplify the flow, and condense the runes, she would significantly reduce the mana cost.

But achieving that would require more trials, more combinations, and more experimentation.

But she also refused to compromise on her standards. After all, there would be times when she would use her own Teleportation Scroll, and she had no intention of enduring the same discomfort she had experienced with other Teleportation Scrolls.

She wanted her scroll to be far superior, smooth, reliable, and comfortable, and no matter how difficult the process, she wasn't willing to cut corners.

With the spark of inspiration still fresh, though she wasn't entirely sure how to execute it yet, Kisha could only make small adjustments each time and observe the results. So she immersed herself in her experiments.

Each time she finished inscribing a Teleportation Scroll, she would take a ten-minute break, sipping a vial of the black liquid to recover her mana. Once her strength returned, she would stand, pick up the same branch she used earlier, and test the newly inscribed scroll to see whether it functioned properly.

If it worked, she used the successful formula as her base before adding another slight modification. Afterward, she would attempt to compress the stable runes, condensing them into a tighter, continuous line, almost like turning separate strokes into a single flowing cursive thread.

The more unified the inscription, the less mana it would require. Step by step, refinement by refinement, she continued pushing toward that goal.

'This is so much harder than inscribing a combat-type magic scroll... but that only means it'll be worth far more once I sell it. So I just have to work harder. Fighting!'

Kisha encouraged herself, imagining the day she would display this new kind of magic scroll in her store. It would be the first of its kind on the market. If she compared it to Earth's transportation, the Teleportation Scroll that 008 bought from the system mall was like an old, rickety car on the verge of breaking down, which was slow, shaky, and uncomfortable.

But the scroll she aimed to create?

That would be the equivalent of Japan's high-speed bullet train, swift, smooth, and impossibly steady, gliding forward without a single jolt. No discomfort, no dizziness, no motion sickness. That was the level of refinement she wanted to achieve.

Because of that, she knew she would have to price it high. And even if mages in the Fantasy World eventually discovered her Teleportation Scroll, she wasn't worried about them reverse-engineering it.

She used an ancient Arcane Inscription long lost to time, along with her own unique variations. Even if someone could decipher fragments of the ancient runes preserved in historical records, they would never fully grasp her complete formula. They could attempt to replicate it if they dared, but doing so would come with risks, and she doubted anyone would succeed.

But as she inscribed her fifth Teleportation Scroll, a sudden jolt shot through her chest, making her flinch violently in her seat. She slammed her hand on the table. "Ugh!" Kisha groaned, clutching her chest as her heartbeat thundered violently, feeling like it might burst through her ribs.

"Ugh... my mana..." Kisha groaned, nearly collapsing to the ground. She braced herself with one hand, her body trembling in pain. Veins bulged on her forehead, and the whites of her eyes gradually reddened as more veins crept into view.

She bit her lower lip, stifling her gasps and screams, unwilling to alert Duke, who was meditating at the Spiritual Spring. Fortunately, she was far enough away that he had yet to notice her struggle.

Kisha realized her mana pool had suddenly expanded, and her mana heart couldn't handle the sudden surge of power as her mana was spiraling out of control. The only way to stabilize it was to expand her mana heart's circle from two to three; otherwise, her heart might shatter under the strain.

Grimacing through the pain and gasps, she forced herself into a cross-legged position on the ground, steadying her breathing as she sank into meditation. Slowly, she began regulating the chaos of her mana's movement in her heart and veins, soothing her wild mana.

Once her heartbeat and energy started to align, she carefully guided her mana to form a new circle. To ensure the third circle was stronger and sturdier than the first two, she had to pour every ounce of her mana into it, and this is her only hope of reinforcing her collapsing mana heart and bringing her rampaging power back under control.

But as her mana surged wildly around her mana heart, Kisha couldn't help but cough up blood, her eyebrow twitching in pain. She didn't move, though, focusing entirely on guiding her mana to form the third circle.

Creating this third circle was far more difficult than the first two, because the threshold was higher, and it represented the peak of low-level mages. It was a true bottleneck.

She had assumed she wouldn't need to form another circle for several days, giving herself time to prepare. But perhaps it was her relentless exhaustion of mana that triggered the current chaos because her mana pool had dwindled to almost nothing.

She then replenished it with the vial of black liquid, repeating the process multiple times. This sequence gradually forced her mana pool to expand, accommodating more mana to prevent it from emptying entirely. Unintentionally, she had pushed her mana heart to respond to the constant strain, leading to the dangerous surge she now endured.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as if thousands of needles pricked her skin, and a sensation like ants crawling beneath her flesh made her shiver with discomfort. But she had to endure it; any sudden movement could disrupt the flow of mana in her mana heart, and instead of forming her third circle, her mana heart might explode like a bomb.

She forced herself to remain as still as water and as calm as a pine tree.

She inhaled deeply through her nose and exhaled through her mouth until the air from her lips turned to steam. Her blood felt like molten magma coursing through her veins, and soon, steam began rising from her entire body.

Still, she kept her eyes closed, focusing entirely on the swirling energy within her chest. Her mana started to coil and twist around her heart, and the third circle began to take shape. Every fiber of her concentration was devoted to keeping it stable and forming it perfectly.

A sudden air current swirled around her as tiny sparks of electricity sizzled along her body, and a surge of energy shot upward. The disturbance was so intense that even Duke felt it from where he was meditating, a restless unease crawling through him.

Chapter 963 Third Mana Circle 2

His thoughts immediately went to Kisha. Rising to his feet, he moved toward her, only to find her sitting cross-legged, calm amidst the chaos, while the table and chair she had been using earlier were blown several meters away, along with her magic parchment.

Luckily, Kisha had the habit of always capping her ink before continuing with her inscription; she had long feared knocking it over during her inscription. That precaution prevented the Dragon's Blood ink, which was incredibly expensive and volatile, from spilling on the unfinished Teleportation Scroll and potentially triggering an explosion from a failed inscription.

Her foresight meant that even as the air surged violently, blowing away the table, chair, parchment, and quill, the ink remained unscathed, and she could continue focusing on her end, her meticulous habit saving her from disaster and overthinking.

Feeling the surge of energy gathering around Kisha, Duke stayed perfectly still a few meters away from her, his senses sharp as he guarded the area to make sure no one came close enough to disturb her.

This wasn't the first time he had seen her like this, far from it. It had happened so many times that he already knew the drill. And yet, no matter how familiar the scene became, the worry in his chest never faded.

He knew how extraordinary Kisha was. She grew stronger at a pace that left even him breathless, and he pushed himself just as hard so he wouldn't fall behind, so she wouldn't end up needing to protect him instead.

But moments like this, when Kisha willingly placed her life on the line just to break through and grow stronger, always made his heart lodge itself in his throat.

He couldn't get angry at her for it, though. It's not as if she could choose when breakthroughs came. Plans always shifted, and no matter how much she prepared, she could never predict the sudden changes triggered by forces outside her control, just like now.

"Hang in there, baby..." Duke murmured, his voice soft as his eyes fixed on Kisha's pale, sweat-soaked face. He could tell she was struggling, fighting to keep the raging energy inside her under control.

The surge was so intense that it created gusts of wind, swirling around her like a miniature storm. Her hair floated weightlessly, purple lightning crackled across her skin, and thin streams of steam rose from her body.

But what worried him most was the nature of the energy itself. It wasn't spiritual energy, nor was it aura. Duke recognized this energy all too well; this was the same mysterious power that had surfaced when she nearly died last time, when her veins bulged and burst one after another and droplets of blood appeared as two energies clashed violently inside her, each fighting for dominance.

The memory made his stomach twist. And now, seeing the signs again, he feared the same nightmare was about to repeat itself.

What frustrated Duke the most was knowing he couldn't do anything, nothing but watch. All he could do was stay alert and make sure no one came close enough to distract her, because even the slightest disturbance could shatter her concentration and ruin everything she was trying to achieve.

So he lowered himself to the ground, sitting cross-legged in front of her, and began drawing spiritual energy into his own body.

If Kisha was pulling mana from the environment to form her third circle and permanently expand her mana pool, then she needed absolute focus; she had to draw only mana, including mana with elemental properties, without accidentally pulling spiritual energy that might clash violently inside her.

By cultivating spiritual energy himself, Duke could divert some of it away from her, preventing it from interfering with her process. In a way, they were cultivating together, and it was beneficial for both of them, especially now, when Kisha's body was like a magnet, drawing in every type of energy around her.

Forming the third circle required far more mana than she currently possessed, and the bottleneck was far more difficult to break through than the previous two.

Kisha felt her mana circle rotating steadily around her mana heart, spinning like a perfectly aligned wheel. The third circle was nearly complete; she could sense it. All she needed to do was keep the flow of mana steady... and not allow anything to disturb the formation.

But then she suddenly coughed up another mouthful of blood. Her spiritual energy had begun circulating on its own, swirling around her dantian, rushing through her meridians, even brushing dangerously close to her heart.

'Not good...' Kisha's expression tightened. She needed to separate her mana from her spiritual energy immediately. If they mixed again, two completely different energies with vastly different properties, they would collide violently inside her, just like last time. And this time, the consequences could be far worse.

'Was it really true that they had completely different properties?' Kisha questioned herself as her mind raced. 'Spiritual energy comes from heaven and earth, the very essence of life itself. But isn't mana also drawn from the environment, only imbued with elemental attributes?'

'And who's to say spiritual energy doesn't have elemental properties as well? Aren't there countless cultivation arts with elemental attributes, like the Fire Fist-Palm Sutra?'

Her thoughts spiraled deeper. 'If that's the case... then maybe they aren't entirely different after all. Maybe the gap between them isn't as big as I thought. Could I merge them? Or, if fusion is impossible, then at least make them work together?'

'Wait, if I remember correctly, I've already been using my three energies in harmony for quite some time now, everything flowed smoothly inside me until now, when I started forming the third mana circle. Could it be... that maintaining the balance was the only way?

Her mind churned restlessly as her body trembled, the spiritual energy inside her shifting wildly as if rearranging her very core.

Now that she thought about it, she couldn't let her spiritual energy interfere with the formation of her third mana circle, but at the same time, she couldn't ignore it and focus solely on her mana.

If she wanted to maintain balance while her aura protected her dantian, meridians, and mana heart, perhaps she could attempt something ambitious: form her third mana circle while elevating her spiritual energy to the next level to match it.

With that decision, she stopped overthinking and simply acted.

Her aura became the mediator, keeping both energies in line as she worked. As she continued, she even began tempering her body to help strengthen her aura to the next level alongside her mana and spiritual energy.

After all, if she neglected her aura, no matter how strong her other energies became, it might not be able to contain and harmonize them, especially if they grew too powerful to be controlled.

Duke opened his eyes again, sensing a shift in the energy swirling around Kisha. It felt as if the energy itself were being drawn toward her, like a magnet, all the spiritual energy being pulled relentlessly. The wind whipping around her intensified, carrying with it thicker steam and crackling lightning that danced across the air that came out of her body.

He furrowed his brows but instinctively took a few steps back; the force of the energy was building into something like a storm, overwhelming even from a distance.

'What's happening?' he murmured, his gaze tracing Kisha's face. Sweat drenched her features, yet she no longer looked as pale as before. That small sign of strength gave him a sliver of reassurance.

He stayed patiently where he was standing, no longer sitting cross-legged in meditation. Now, his sole focus was to guard her. If he tried to meditate amidst such turbulence, it could backfire; his own spiritual energy might be disrupted by the pull of the storm, causing more harm than good.

Even Bell and Zeus had been alerted by the intense energy condensing in the area, so they both rushed toward Kisha, but neither approached recklessly. Bell stopped the cannonball-like dog, which was as big as a bear, from charging forward.

"Zeus, do not come inside, or Master will get hurt," Bell warned through their mind link.

"But... Master..." Zeus whined, eager to get closer, but the thought of Kisha being harmed halted it in its tracks. It lowered itself to sit on its hind legs beside Duke, and it also decided to stand guard.

Bell perched calmly atop Zeus's head, closing its eyes as if unconcerned, but in truth, its senses remained fully alert, monitoring Kisha's situation and ready to react at the slightest sign of danger.

Not long after, it felt as if the wind had suddenly exploded, nearly throwing Duke, Zeus, and Bell several meters back, even though they were already keeping a safe distance from Kisha.

Thick steam erupted alongside the gusts of wind, and streaks of lightning zipped through the charged air. Zeus's fur bristled on end from the static, while Duke remained unaffected, as his own affinity for lightning shielded him.

#### Chapter 964: Stronger

Still, he could feel the intense condensation of energy and the remnants of the explosion of energy that hung thickly in the air. Instinctively, he lowered himself into a cross-legged position and began to meditate, drawing the excess spiritual energy into his body to strengthen himself.

When Duke opened his eyes, he met Kisha's gaze, and she greeted him with a wide, unguarded smile, her joy radiating from the successful formation of her third mana circle.

She had wanted to leap into his arms in celebration, but when she saw him still meditating, drawing in the excess energy her body had expelled during the process, she stayed silent. She knew this was beneficial for him, too; absorbing that energy would temper his body, strengthening his aura.

So she waited patiently. Duke thought that his meditation lasted only about half an hour, but in reality, while he lost himself in the process of absorbing the energy like a sponge, Kisha had been waiting for him for three hours straight.

She couldn't help but marvel again at how effortlessly he absorbed the mixture of spiritual energy and mana from the excess energy that her body expelled, and growing stronger as he tempered himself without her assistance.

"Done?" Kisha asked the moment Duke opened his eyes. She could feel the subtle shift in his aura, the unmistakable sign that he'd grown stronger. Without wasting a second, she pulled up his status window to check the changes, and then quickly checked her own.

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[Duke Winters]

Level 4 (Exp: 3,480/12000 X 0.0)

Strength: 400

Stamina: 400

Defense: 400

Agility: 400

Mental Capacity: 400

Charm: 400

Leadership: 400

Aura: 10

Title: None

Skills: Ice Spear Level 3, Fire Ball Level 3, Fire Meteor Level 2, Lightning Strike Level 2, Lightning Rain Level 2, Ice Storm Level 1, Lightning Ball Level 1, 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)

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[Kisha Aldens]

Level 4 (Exp: 4,460/12000 X 0.0)

Strength: 391

Stamina: 481

Defense: 681

Agility: 391

Mental Capacity: 1381

Charm: 731

Leadership: 1281

Luck: 751

Mana: 1682 (+841)

Spiritual Energy: 1682 (+841)

Aura: 18

Devotion: 710

Authority: 4

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 4 (5 SP for 20 seconds of continuous use and 1 SP per second), Perception Level 2, One Body Level 2, Rainbow Cube, Lion's Roar, Telekinesis Sub: Energy Burst Level 1, Survival of the Fittest Level 1

Passive Skill: Healing Dome Level 4, One Man Team, People's Heart, Likability Boost Level 1

Talent: Close Combat, Heightened Senses

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

Ability: Telekinesis (Mental)

Profession Proficiency: Intermediate Inscrber, Beginner Alchemist

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Kisha gasped when she saw the changes. Duke's aura had nearly doubled, and only now did she realize that many of his skills had leveled up as well, becoming even more powerful. It must have been the aftermath of their battle in Maple Leaf Town.

He had unleashed one Area of Effect skill after another, like 'Fire Meteor', 'Lightning Rain', 'Ice Storm', and so many more, that he'd practically hit the ceiling and pushed his abilities to the next rank.

When she compared his status window to hers, she didn't feel left out at all. Many of her own skills had leveled up, too. After forming her Third Mana Circle, her mana pool had expanded dramatically, her total mana had doubled, and finally exceeding a thousand.

With this much mana, she would have far more freedom and precision when inscribing magic scrolls, especially teleportation scrolls. She no longer needed to be overly cautious or conservative, worrying that she might run out of mana. Now she could modify arcane runes however she wanted without holding back.

But after comparing her stats with Duke's, Kisha realized something: because they had only just leveled up before coming to Maple Leaf Town, her attributes hadn't changed much yet.

Still, now that their strength cap had increased, their stats would definitely rise again after a few more battles, especially once they started eliminating higher-level zombies. Level 1 zombies were nothing to them now.

Even so, Kisha had to admit that if she didn't compare herself to Duke, she would genuinely feel powerful thanks to her cheat, 008. But when she did compare... Duke's potential was downright monstrous.

He was basically a walking cheat himself. Sometimes she even felt a little jealous. But the moment she remembered how strong she had become in this life, the jealousy faded. Unlike her past life, where she couldn't even hope to match him, now she could finally stand beside him as an equal without feeling inferior.

With that thought warming her chest, Kisha smiled brightly and jogged over to Duke just as he exhaled the last wisp of steam from his mouth, settling the newly tempered energy inside his body.

"Yes, wifey. I feel... stronger," Duke said with a grin, flexing his fingers as he examined his hand. "The Aura running through my body felt different now; it was denser and sharper. I can feel the subtle change."

He hadn't been completely sure whether the excess energy Kisha's body expelled would actually benefit him. He had simply followed his instinct and absorbed it. But now, seeing the results firsthand, he couldn't help feeling fascinated, and a little amazed.

Seeing Duke so fascinated, Kisha leaned closer with a bright smile. "Wanna check your status window and see exactly what changed?"

She didn't even wait for his answer. Instead, she scooted right up to him, summoned the status window, and granted him access to see it. Duke didn't have the ability to view his own status window as freely as she could; after all, it wasn't part of the territory interface. Even if he now had full access to her territory interface, this particular feature remained separate because it was part of 008's system, so she had to manually share it with him each time.

After seeing his own status, Duke lit up like an excited puppy with a wagging tail. Kisha patiently explained every change, even reminding him of his previous stats so he could compare them properly.

Watching him beam with such pure joy, she deliberately avoided mentioning her own improvements; she didn't want to dampen his enthusiasm, or worse, trigger his tendency to push himself to the extreme just to catch up.

Knowing Duke's temperament, the latter was far more likely. So instead, she showered him with praise, and honestly, she didn't mind. Seeing him this happy made her heart feel warm.

"Are you happy?" Kisha asked softly once she finished the explanation.

"Yes, wifey, I'm so happy," Duke replied as he wrapped his arms around her waist. "It feels like I didn't just luck out with my wife; following you really blessed me in more ways than one." His smile was wide, his eyes sparkling with childlike delight.

"Hm? This is your own hard work. Don't compliment me and pin this on me, it's all you," Kisha said softly. And she meant it.

In her past life, she and Duke never crossed paths this early. By the time she finally met him back then, he was already a powerhouse, a man who had clawed his way to the top and built his own base from nothing.

Whether she was in the picture or not, Duke would have become strong, one of the strongest in the apocalypse.

If anything, she was the one who lucked out in this life. Meeting him early had saved her from countless hardships, letting her avoid tragedies she once had to endure. Running with Duke didn't just protect her; it helped her grow faster, stronger, steadier than before.

But she didn't bring any of this up. The last thing she wanted was for Duke to feel sorry for her. She was fine now, more than fine, and she didn't want to stir his possessiveness or jealous streak by mentioning her past life again.

If she talked about it too often, he might start asking questions about who she loved back then, or what kind of relationship she had. And the truth was... her so-called lover in that lifetime wasn't worth a second of Duke's worry. He was a scumbag, nothing more.

Thinking of him, and of that fake best friend who betrayed her, Kisha felt a chilling sharpness flash through her eyes. She still owed them a debt... not for herself, but for Duke. They were the reason Duke died in her past life, and she hadn't forgotten.

Kisha had already dealt with Lisa. Some might think she was cruel for letting Lisa die when she could have simply walked away and left her to fend for herself. After all, being alone in the apocalypse was almost a death sentence.

But Kisha knew Lisa too well, if she survived, she would come back stronger, more twisted, while clinging to the nearest powerful backer just to hunt Kisha down. Leaving her alive would've only invited disaster.

#### Chapter 965 Spiritual Fruit's Prices

Kisha was not the type to leave loose ends, especially now that she had more people to protect. In the apocalypse, mercy without caution was nothing but a loaded gun pointed at your own back.

Cruelty, at times, was survival.

Everyone had their own agenda now, and Lisa, with her vindictive nature, was exactly the kind of person who would crawl through the mud just to strike back.

So why leave danger alive?

Kisha chose the simplest, safest solution: end the threat before it grew teeth. She even gave Lisa a chance, more than she deserved. Kisha let her believe she still had hope of survival, a chance to change.

But Lisa proved her right in the worst way. Kisha had left a Scarlet Bee behind to observe her, and it faithfully transmitted Lisa's words and plans straight to Bell. Every intention... every scheme to try to kill Kisha again.

Given all that, who could blame her?

And now that Lisa was gone, Kisha knew she would deal with that treacherous couple sooner or later. They'd better pray they never crossed paths with her again, because she would make them pay for the life they stole from her in her past life. This time, she didn't even need to wonder what kind of people they truly were; she had already seen their real faces before she died.

They were masters at pretending: weak, harmless, kind... the type who hid behind the masks of "friends" and "family" to manipulate others into doing their bidding. And Kisha, like a fool, had walked straight into their trap. She protected them, provided for them, shielded them from everyone who tried to warn her.

And what did she get in return?

She even dragged Duke into her mess and got him killed. Then she died, too, after building a safe haven that they enjoyed. They worked her like an ox until she had nothing left to give, and when she was no longer useful, they killed her.

They feared that if they didn't get rid of her soon, people's loyalty would shift to her, that she might take the leadership of the base and let all the good things finally, rightfully, fall into her lap.

But she couldn't really blame anyone before; she had been blind to seeing these people for who they truly were. Who knew when the two had secretly hooked up behind her back? Or perhaps they had been involved long before, using her all along to do their bidding.

And she had been foolish enough to follow them. Because of that, those who opposed them had died one by one, while she still naively believed these were just unfortunate accidents.

After all, in the apocalypse, life and death were unpredictable; no one could say when or at whose hands, or claws, someone would fall to the ever-growing horde of zombies.

Now that she was reminded of that treacherous couple, Kisha found herself looking forward to the moment she would finally meet them and exact her revenge. If fate didn't bring them before her in this life, she wouldn't go out of her way to hunt them down; they could consider themselves lucky then.

But if they crossed her path, it would only mean that fate itself was urging her to settle the score, and she would not hesitate. Just thinking about it, the corner of Kisha's mouth curled up into a small, almost mischievous smile.

"Wifey, what's got you so happy? Hmm?" Duke suddenly tightened his grip on Kisha's waist as he watched her.

He had just soaked in the joy of his newfound strength, seeing the changes in his stats with his own eyes, when he noticed his little wife looking like she was plotting something. He could only feel a pang of sympathy for whoever she had in mind.

Not that he thought Kisha was bad, far from it. He had been with her since the start of the apocalypse and had grown to understand her temperament and the way she handled challenges.

If anything, he admired her skill at navigating this harsh world, especially knowing she had endured so much before. Part of him felt sorry for her past struggles, yet he also respected how she had never turned dark despite them. He knew, without a doubt, that anyone she was scheming against must have truly deserved it.

And whoever those people were, he would surely help his wife get her revenge.

"It's nothing important," Kisha said, shaking her head with a sweet smile as she pushed those thoughts away. Then, effortlessly shifting the mood, she added, "It's already late. How about we have our early lunch? Hmmm?"

She looped her arms around Duke's strong, sturdy waist. There was no fat to pinch, just hard, sculpted muscles, but she loved every inch of him. In her past life, she could only admire his body from afar, but now, having the freedom to hug him whenever she wished, Kisha pressed herself against him with a radiant smile, feeling pure joy from ear to ear.

Seeing Kisha like that, Duke couldn't help but grin smugly, feeling her hands brushing against his waist and muscles. "Alright, let's cook. What do you want to eat?"

He started leading her away, but before heading back to the cabin, he guided Kisha to where the table and chairs had been blown over. Then, Kisha stored the table, chairs, and inscribing tools into her inventory with ease.

Then, clinging to each other like conjoined twins, they walked back to the cabin. Although it was lunchtime in the territory space, it was still dark in the outside world.

Hugo and his team had already woken up and were hard at work on the biogas project. Duke hadn't arrived to help, but the team continued diligently, with no complaints or requests for rest this time.

So, Kisha and Duke could relax, knowing everything was under control.

When they returned to the cabin, Duke immediately seated Kisha on the small counter in the kitchen before pulling out a few spiritual fruits directly from the territory's warehouse. The sight of the fruits reminded Kisha of what she had been doing earlier.

While Duke went to the sink to wash them, Kisha opened her Store on the Sales Channel again, while waiting for 008 to return from its market research.

"Host! I'm back!!!" 008 suddenly chimed inside her mind.

"How was it? Did you get the data?" Kisha asked immediately, her expression brightening as she perked up in anticipation.

"Yes, Host. As expected, the higher the grade of the spiritual fruit, the more expensive it is. Right now, there are very few high-grade fruits being sold, which is why it took me a while to gather accurate pricing information."

"The spiritual fruits most commonly found in the market are Grade D and Grade C or below. There are occasional Grade B fruits, but they're always sold out the moment they appear, usually only a dozen at most, and the restocking period takes months."

"It's extremely difficult to cultivate spiritual trees that can bear high-grade fruits in the Cultivation World. Most cultivators need to set up spiritual-gathering arrays around the trees to raise the fruit's grade, and they also have to use spiritual fertilizers and various other nutrients to prevent the grade from degrading over time."

"And even then, a spiritual tree takes years to bear fruit, sometimes even decades. That's why high-grade spiritual fruits are so expensive..." 008 explained, pausing briefly as if to catch its breath before continuing.

"And so, the prices actually range from 5,000 system points to 10,000 system points, and that's only for Grade C spiritual fruits. Grade B fruits cost double that amount," 008 reported, its voice dropping to a whisper.

"Wait, what?!" Kisha's eyes widened. "Doesn't that mean we've basically been giving away our spiritual fruits and vegetables for free this whole time?!"

"Well, Host... I actually suspect that the ones selling the high-grade spiritual fruits and vegetables in the market got them from us. That's probably why they can restock only after several months; they're creating deliberate scarcity. It's classic hunger marketing. They have access to higher realms, so it's easy for them to sell those products at sky-high prices while sourcing them cheaply from a lower realm like ours."

Kisha could practically picture 008 pouting like a wronged child as it continued, "So essentially... they're making a killing because of us."

It wasn't as if 008 hadn't done its homework before listing their products, it did. The problem was access. Viewing the stores in the higher realms required 008 to spend a ridiculous amount of system points, while the higher-realm owners with high-level stores enjoyed free access to all lower-level shops. That was their privilege as high-level merchants.

Because of that, they could freely browse the lower-level markets, buy items for cheap, and then resell them to higher-realm customers at premium prices. After all, those higher-level stores had better visibility, better promotions, and appeared at the top of the system's marketplace.

With the sheer wealth of the customers in those realms, no one had the time or patience to scroll all the way down the list to look for smaller or lower-ranked shops.

#### Chapter 966: New Marketing Strategy

Now that Kisha thought about it, they had sold hundreds upon hundreds of spiritual fruits, all of which were gone the moment she restocked them. She realized that only a few were probably real customers, while the rest were higher-level merchants from the upper realms, reselling the fruits at a premium.

She couldn't do anything about it; it was just business. But then a mischievous grin spread across her lips as an idea struck her.

"Then, if they're selling our produce at sky-high prices, let's price ours even higher. That way, if they try to undercut us or charge more than our set price, their regular customers will notice the sudden change, and it could disrupt their operations."

"Eventually, it would either push the merchants to come to us to discuss wholesale pricing so they could profit from our products, or the customers would do their homework, find the real source, which is us, and buy directly from our store."

"That way, we earn more system points. After all, we just spent 500,000,000 system points earlier, and we need to recoup that by selling more items," Kisha explained, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

"So far, this is the only solution I can think of. Besides, I've already been planning to increase our product prices anyway, so this is the perfect timing. We can treat the previous prices as promotional rates for opening the store on the Sales Channel."

"Even if the prices go up, the quality has already been tested by our customers, and we've built a small but loyal customer base. Plus, what we're selling isn't ordinary grade, so they'll have options they can't easily find anywhere else."

Besides, because her newly opened store had strong sales data, the system had been giving her excellent visibility over the past few days. That's why her items were even appearing on the front pages of the System Mall.

Although the System Mall takes a 20% cut from every sale made there, she could treat that 20% as part of the price increase instead of letting other merchants profit from her produce.

In this way, the system earned from the cut, and her products received additional promotion. While system promotions are automatically determined by the algorithm based on store performance, it was still helpful, and she could expect a good return.

Even though she wasn't yet offering wholesale options to other merchants, she could selectively work with bigger or trusted stores, treating it as another form of promotion.

It's like how a farmer sells their crops to a supplier for quick cash, and then the supplier sells them to a supermarket for better sales, greater visibility, and more customers. But in her case, she planned to take advantage of the System Mall's promotions over the next few days, attracting customers from the higher and middle realms directly to her little store.

If that didn't suffice, she could offer her products at wholesale prices to higher-level merchants a few times, letting them distribute the products so more people would become aware of them. Once she decided to stop wholesale selling, customers would naturally come back to her original store to purchase the products themselves.

It wasn't that she didn't want other merchants to profit from her, but if she wanted to earn more than before, she had to raise her prices; otherwise, the other merchants would simply take the gains.

In business, such practices were normal. Smaller merchants lacked the networks and capital to handle large-scale sales, so they relied on bigger merchants to buy their products, recoup their initial investments, and let the bigger merchants to shoulder some of the risk.

After all, not every wholesale item can be sold, and success depends on marketing, connections, and promotions. That's why many preferred wholesaling their goods; they simply didn't have the capacity to take bigger risks.

Kisha, however, was different. Even though her store was low-level, she could bear the risk herself, since she provided her own products with nearly zero investment. Even if some items lingered unsold for a while, they wouldn't spoil.

So, she could simply wait for customers to come to her, or let interested merchants offer higher wholesale prices if they wanted to collaborate. That way, she wouldn't lose out while still putting in the work herself.

After all, she needed to ensure her people grew stronger, which required more resources, meaning more system points she could use to buy anything she couldn't produce herself in the future.

"Host, that's a brilliant idea! Should we price our products, especially the spiritual crops, the same way as the higher-level merchants in the higher realm?" 008 asked excitedly, practically buzzing with enthusiasm. After all, the more it earned, the more system points it gained, boosting its ranking. It would never say no to selling higher-priced products like those top-tier stores.

"Yes," Kisha replied calmly, already starting to list the spiritual fruits and vegetables in her store.

[Would you like to list Spiritual Cabbage on the Sales Channel?]

[Yes] or [No]

Kisha unhesitatingly clicked 'Yes', but when the prompt [Please set the Price of the item] appeared, she suddenly paused. She remembered a conversation she had with 008 after seeing the Scarlet Honey sell like hotcakes. She had considered setting some items up as a timed bidding instead of a fixed price.

What if she tried it now?

After all, almost everything she sold was rare, especially the Scarlet Honey. She had acquired the last Scarlet Queen Bee alive in the entire realm, from lower to upper levels, so it was impossible to find it elsewhere.

If she set it up for bidding, even starting with a few units, the limited supply could drive demand sky-high. Previously, she had sold Scarlet Honey for 1,500 system points and raised the price a few times. Now, with a bidding system, the competition could not only double the price but possibly push it even higher than she expected, classic hunger marketing in action.

"Host, you're turning into quite the money grubber..." 008 snickered, though it didn't argue with Kisha's plan, after all, it remembered her mentioning this idea before.

"Look who's talking, you're the real money grubber," Kisha shot back with a grin.

Instead of setting a fixed price, she waved the price-setting prompt aside and clicked the three dots labeled [More].

Then, a dropdown menu appeared with several options:

[Set Price]

[Set To Bidding]

[Enter Promotion]

[Set For Free]

After seeing the dropdown menu, Kisha raised an eyebrow at the "Enter Promotion" and "Set For Free" options. She realized it was probably the first time she had clicked the three dots beside the pricing, as she usually set prices directly without hesitation. But she didn't dwell on it for long. Instead, she clicked "Set To Bidding", and a new input box appeared:

[Bidding Starting Price]

Thinking back to the prices 008 had mentioned for how much higher-level merchants were selling her produce, Kisha carefully decided on the starting bid:

[Initial Bidding Price: 8000 system points]

A prompt followed:

[Would you like to set a Bidding Price Ceiling?]

[Yes] or [No]

Kisha clicked "No", allowing the customers to raise the price however they wanted. If an item sold for a high amount, the merchants who had been buying her products would surely notice that she was aware of their premium pricing. Sensible merchants might even contact her directly for collaboration and adjust their own prices accordingly.

This approach also meant she wouldn't need to restock constantly. By setting the bidding end time, she could create scarcity, increasing customers' drive to win the items, especially if they desperately wanted them.

[Set the End of The Bidding]

[3 days]

[Do you wish to set automatic restocking when the same items are available in the inventory?]

[Yes] or [No]

Seeing this option, Kisha raised an eyebrow. It meant she wouldn't need to restock her store manually all the time, and since she was setting a daily restocking, it would make her items feel like rare treasures or high-grade commodities. Her original idea had shifted slightly because of this feature, but the core concept remained the same, so the change didn't really matter all that much.

Kisha happily clicked Yes and soon repeated the process, setting almost everything in her store to bidding, including the scrolls. This way, she wouldn't feel pressured to constantly restock or spend most of her time inscribing new scrolls just because the previous ones sold so fast.

Instead of ending the scrolls' bidding at the end of the day, she set them to last for seven days. This gave her more time to rest and focus on other things instead of hiding away in her territory just inscribing magic scrolls.

For teleportation scrolls, which would be restocked biweekly, she kept the same schedule. For Scarlet Honey, spiritual fruits, crops, and other high-demand items, she set the bidding to end every three days.

She had considered daily bidding, but realized that would only slightly raise the prices each time, giving merchants little incentive to compete aggressively. A three-day cycle would generate more excitement and demand, making the strategy far more effective.

#### Chapter 967: Duke's Business Advise

"Let's run a few rounds of bidding first, then list the lower-grade items in the store at the same prices as the same grade items in other high-level stores," Kisha suggested. "That way, only the higher-grade products will be up for bidding, making them feel more valuable to the customers."

She continued by organizing the lower-grade crops and items, like Grade D and below. Since the upgrade to her territory space, the grading for her crops and produce had increased, leaving her with the limited lower-grade items from before. Once those sold out, she could focus entirely on her new higher-grade crops.

Kisha applied the same strategy to her seafood, listing them as normal items that didn't require bidding, but raising their prices tenfold. This allowed customers with limited budgets, who couldn't compete with big buyers in the auctions, to still purchase something. That way, no one could accuse her store of being unscrupulous.

As soon as she updated the rules in her Sales Channel store, messages began flooding in, one after another. Some even went so far as to leave negative reviews, which made Kisha's eyebrow twitch in irritation.

She wasn't surprised; she had expected some backlash whenever she made changes. But to think that people would go this far just because she raised her prices and switched most of the highly sought-after items to bidding? Many were displeased, and their frustration spilled over onto her store.

What frustrated her even more was that the majority of these messages weren't from ordinary customers; they came from other merchants in the Sales Channel, clearly owners of higher-tier stores.

While some buyers were unhappy, 008 had checked and confirmed that most of the commotion was stirred up by rival merchants who had benefited from her success for a long time. They saw her rule changes and price adjustments as a threat to their own profits and retaliated by leaving scathing reviews. Kisha felt her mood sink further into frustration.

Having negative reviews on her store could seriously impact her ranking, and, by extension, her business. In the Sales Channel, reviews were crucial: most customers checked them before making their first purchase to gauge the merchant's integrity and confirm that the product met expectations.

After all, refunds were nearly nonexistent, and even when available, the process was so slow and cumbersome that few buyers bothered to use it. The refund system seemed designed more to discourage customers than to help them. Because of this, shoppers relied heavily on reviews to avoid the hassle and frustration of a bad purchase.

Duke, who had just turned away to wash the spiritual fruits, immediately noticed Kisha's growing coldness. In the brief moment it took him to peel and rinse the fruits, her mood had already shifted, and seeing her so distant and withdrawn left him feeling helpless and worried. He didn't know how to lift her spirits.

Finally, he spoke softly, trying to reach her. "Wifey, what's wrong? You can talk to me... maybe I can help. After all, two heads are better than one," he said, looking at her with earnest concern.

Kisha's eyes drifted up from the review section and met Duke's worried gaze. Only then did she realize how tightly her brows had creased, and how cold her expression had become, her displeasure nearly impossible to hide.

She considered brushing off his concern, forcing a calm smile, and insisting she was fine. But then she remembered: Duke was a businessman through and through. Before the apocalypse, he had sat at the very top of the pyramid, where everyone bowed before him, hailed as a prodigy in the business world.

If she couldn't think of a way to handle these merchants, why not ask Duke for his opinion? After all, why exhaust her own mind when the perfect strategist was right beside her?

Besides... he had offered to help anyway.

With a small, playful smile, Kisha looked at Duke and asked, "Hubby, if I remember correctly, you're a savvy businessman admired by many. So I'm guessing you know quite a bit about how both your online and physical stores operate, right?" she probed.

Hearing Kisha's compliment, Duke couldn't help but grin from ear to ear. The commanding, domineering CEO of the past was gone; now he looked more like a big, happy puppy, wagging an invisible tail at Kisha, silently asking for more praise.

"Yes, wifey," he said, his eyes sparkling. "I personally check the operations of selected stores, especially the ones that aren't meeting their quotas or performing poorly. That way, I can see the issues firsthand and come up with solutions before things get worse... That includes the online stores, so I'm fairly familiar with their operations and how to work around the problems."

Duke carefully cut the fruits into bite-sized pieces, arranged them neatly on a platter, and placed it in front of Kisha with a warm, eager smile. Seeing his enthusiasm, Kisha couldn't help but pop a piece of pineapple into her mouth.

"Why do you ask?" Duke added, leaning over the counter just enough to reach her comfortably, his gaze gentle and curious as he watched her.

Kisha swallowed the sweet, juicy pineapple and grinned at Duke, feeling like she'd just found the answer to her worry. She couldn't tell him directly about the Sales Channel store, mentioning it would mean unraveling a web of complicated issues, so instead, she framed it as a hypothetical scenario.

"So, what would you do," she asked, leaning slightly forward, "if a competitor came into your store, or even your online store, and left fake reviews to tarnish your products? And then some customers, unaware of the truth, believed it, and your store's reputation got ruined... what would you do?"

Duke straightened up and fixed Kisha with a steady gaze for several seconds, making her gulp, as if he could see right through her. Then he crossed his arms over his chest, pondering aloud.

"Well, that's a competitor's usual tactic, to tarnish a rival's reputation so customers turn to them instead. Sometimes," he drawled the last words, stretching them out deliberately, "they don't stop at ruining someone's image, they even have the audacity to advertise their own products in the reviews for comparison..."

In truth, Duke deliberately drew out his explanation. He enjoyed watching Kisha's eyes widen in anticipation, her expression so adorably eager that he couldn't resist teasing her a little.

"Then? What do you do after?" Kisha leaned in closer, eyes bright with anticipation, completely unaware that Duke was teasing her just a little. Duke couldn't help but chuckle softly, reaching out to ruffle her hair.

"Then why do we even have to prove ourselves? By the time all that happens, some customers will have already tried our products, and their experience will speak for itself. There's no better proof than genuine customer feedback. Those who were swayed by competitors' claims will eventually realize they were misled, and when they see the truth, they'll come back."

"The best part? By then, the people who trusted the competitors will have experienced the empty promises firsthand. They'll be the ones to reveal the truth, and the one who started the false claims will end up taking the brunt of the backlash."

"Meanwhile, we, who were the real victims, won't just regain our reputation; our returning customers will feel foolish for doubting us, and they'll likely become our most loyal supporters."

"All we need to do is focus on being the best, on results, packaging, presentation, everything. That's how we let our work speak for itself."

Duke explained his strategy to Kisha step by step so she could understand how he approached these situations.

After all, Duke dabbled in so many industries that he didn't have the time, or the luxury, to focus on just one product. He had faced this kind of mudslinging with more than one of his ventures, and if he let it get to him, he'd only stress himself out for no reason.

Instead, he chose to focus on improving his products to be the best in the market and let the customers speak for him. Trying to clean up the mess caused by others would be a waste of time, time that could be better spent on things that actually mattered.

Hearing Duke's perspective, Kisha felt enlightened. She realized he was right. After all, it wasn't the first day her store had opened; she already had a solid following of genuine customers who didn't rely solely on product reviews. Sure, some might be displeased by the sudden price change at first, but they would get used to it over time.

Even if they looked elsewhere, even in higher realms, they wouldn't easily find anything comparable to what she offered. Maybe something similar existed, but it would be like finding a needle in a haystack. Eventually, they'd realize just how valuable her store really was.

And when that happened, price would be the least of their worries. Their focus would shift to demand and the fear that someone with deeper pockets might outbid them. That competitive drive would only push them to pay more, which meant Kisha would ultimately gain more in the long run.

#### Chapter 968 Customers From Another World Reaching Out

Besides, with so many customers who had already used her products, whether it was the scrolls, the scarlet honey, the spiritual fruits, or others, they knew firsthand how effective they were. Just as Duke had said, even if some were temporarily swayed by fake reviews and bought from other stores, they would instinctively compare the results.

Once they noticed the difference, they would undoubtedly come back and likely be the first to call out the fake reviewer. By then, some might even help her track down the source of the anonymous fake reviews, especially if those leaving them were afraid of being identified.

So instead of worrying about fake reviews or temporary customer dissatisfaction, she knew it was better to focus on increasing her inventory and improving the quality of her products. Quality would always speak for itself. Take her Stamina Booster, for example, yes, similar products could be found in the system mall or in higher-realm shops, giving customers plenty of choices. But that was exactly why improving her own formula was the key.

And it wasn't impossible. She already had the recipe, and in fact, the current version of her Stamina Booster was far better than the one she used to buy from the system mall. She had been receiving more positive feedback lately, too, perhaps because she used Spiritual Spring Water during the creation process, which clearly made a difference.

And speaking of Spiritual Spring Water, she knew she wasn't the only one who could sell it, but when it came to quantity, she had the advantage. 008 had mentioned before that most sellers only had a very small supply because spiritual energy took an extremely long time to condense into water.

It could take years, even decades, much like how spiritual fruits are formed. So anyone who managed to obtain Spiritual Spring Water treated it like a rare treasure.

But she had plenty. And as her territory space continued to evolve, the spiritual energy within the spring only grew denser, increasing the potency of the water. That alone could further enhance the quality of her Stamina Booster.

In fact, she wondered if in the future, she could replace the ordinary water in all her concoctions with Spiritual Spring Water instead. If she did, not only would their quality and effects improve, but there was also a real possibility of gaining additional, unexpected benefits.

Thinking about all these possibilities lifted Kisha's mood, and when Duke saw her smile again, he felt relieved. After handing her some fruit to snack on, he returned to his own work. He placed the clams in a basin of cold water, sprinkled in some rock salt, and left them to purge the sand. Then he began peeling and washing the vegetables, slicing them neatly before setting them aside.

Next, he picked up the peeled potatoes and shredded them into thin strips to make potato pancakes. He wanted to keep himself busy in the kitchen, giving Kisha the space to focus on her own tasks.

Although Kisha never said anything outright, Duke could tell she was keeping certain secrets from him. But he wasn't in any rush to uncover them. He might never learn the full truth, not even in his lifetime, and that was fine. What mattered to him was that Kisha felt his sincerity and his love.

If one day she chose to tell him everything, he would welcome it. But if she didn't, he understood it was only because she wanted to avoid complications... or maybe even protect him. As long as he knew that Kisha loved him, that was more than enough.

While Duke was busy in the kitchen, trying out the recipes he had learned from Hugo and the others, Kisha went back to her Sales Channel. She continued organizing the items she planned to list and started checking the incoming messages.

As for the scolding and rude comments, she didn't even bother responding. Instead, she immediately banned those users from participating in any future bidding or purchasing her products and then blocked them from sending her messages ever again. Her decisiveness was so abrupt and firm that the people on the other end were left stunned, completely caught off guard.

At first, all they could do was rage, while cursing Kisha and hurling angry words from behind their screens. But once the anger faded, regret settled in. They all knew the value of Kisha's products; they had experienced the results for themselves.

Now, being blocked meant losing access to one of their most reliable sources of rare resources, resources they depended on to grow stronger.

Everyone who could access the Sales Channel had a system like 008. They came from different worlds, planes, and realms, each carrying their own destiny. They were considered the "chosen ones" of their respective worlds, geniuses with the potential to surpass the rest. Their advantage came from their systems and from being able to obtain resources far beyond what their worlds could offer.

Yes, there were countless shops in the Sales Channel, billions, even, but how many were like Kisha's? Her store was a treasure trove, the kind that only appeared once in a lifetime. Losing access to it felt like losing a priceless opportunity... and none of them knew what kind of extraordinary products she might release in the future.

And if the customers weren't system users, then the only other ones who could access the Sales Channel were the Gods and Goddesses. But beings like them would never bother opening shops; they already possessed countless treasures in their own realms. If they browsed the Sales Channel at all, it was usually out of curiosity or entertainment.

Because of that, Kisha didn't worry about them. Deities tended to frequent the highest-tier stores anyway. She suspected she had already attracted a few constellations as customers before, but she wasn't sure whether they were powerful, high-tier beings or lower-tier gods from lesser worlds like hers. Either way, they were the least of her concerns right now.

Take her combat-type magic scrolls, for example. Plenty of customers had bought them, and only those who had used them truly understood how different her products were from the rest.

One of those customers, a user named Crusader who had previously purchased Kisha's Lightning Combat-Type Magic Scroll, was the first to step forward and show support.

...

[The Crusader: Hello, Merchant. You don't know me, but I bought your Lightning Combat-Type Magic Scroll before, and it saved my life. I even bought a few more, like your Wind and Fire Combat-Type Magic Scrolls, and they're now stored safely in my inventory in case I have to fight those aliens again. Please don't worry about those fake reviews. I'll leave a few more positive reviews to help raise your rating.]

[The Rogue Blender: Hiyo! I just wanted to ask if you could lower the price of the Grade D Spiritual Fruits? I'm having a hard time earning system points right now because the missions my system is giving me are insanely difficult. I've used your Spiritual Fruits before, and they really helped me get stronger. Just a few more, and I think I'll be able to break through.]

[The Rogue Blender: But like I said... I don't have enough system points at the moment. If you're willing to do credit, would that work? I can only afford them at their previous price right now. I'm really sorry if I sound pushy. I'm just in a tough spot. I'm currently fighting the Demon Army, and my team and I are at our limit. Breaking through is our only chance to survive. I hope you can consider it.]

[Merchant's Association of Mingdu: Hello, fellow merchant. We're reaching out to discuss a potential collaboration. Do you have time to talk?]

...

Reading through all the messages, a few stood out to Kisha, enough to tempt her to respond. It reminded her once again that the people buying from her came from vastly different worlds. Fighting a Demon Army? That was something she had only ever seen in TV dramas or read about in novels. The realization sent a strange thrill through her.

The user named "The Rogue Blender" had even attached a picture of their current situation. In it, dozens of people huddled together, many of them in terrible condition. Some were missing an arm or a leg, but

those were not clean cuts from a blade, but limbs that looked brutally torn off, with bone jutting out while blood soaked the remaining flesh.

Others had their stomachs ripped open, and several wounds were shrouded in thick, black miasma, most likely demonic energy. Because of that corruption, the injuries looked as though they were already beginning to rot.

The people in the picture wore robes of different styles, just like those of the cultivation worlds she had read about in novels. Some wore white robes, now stained red with blood and mud. No matter how long Kisha looked, they all appeared utterly beaten down, their hope fading with every passing moment. Perhaps this was their last chance to turn the tide.

Chapter 969: Merchant #841273

Seeing this, Kisha couldn't help but recall her own past lives, the moments when she had been surrounded by endless waves of zombies. Back then, hope had felt distant, her body and mentality worn down from fighting, dying, and starting over again, as though she were trapped in an unending cycle of torment.

Those nightmarish memories tightened her chest, and her heart ached for the sender of the message and the image, for she understood all too well how desperate their situation truly was.

「On the Other Side」

"Senior Brother... we can't hold on much longer. The Demon Army is closing in, and we've already lost so many of our allies..."

A girl of about sixteen broke down as she spoke, her voice trembling with sobs. "Elder Martial Brother died buying us time to escape. We couldn't even bring his body back. And so many of the elders... they perished in this war. What are we supposed to do?"

She looked to the man beside her, but he only stared blankly into the distance, as if seeing something no one else could. To the others, he looked utterly hollow; he looked just like a man who had lost all hope.

After all, this Demon invasion had come without warning, and in its wake, countless members of their sect, and their allied sects, had fallen.

Or rather, the disaster hadn't been sudden at all.

Behind the scenes, a handful of members from various sects had secretly banded together to form a cult, one devoted to resurrecting the Demon Lord. They had betrayed their allegiances and loyalty to their sect, convinced that demons were inherently superior to humans. No matter how far humans cultivated, they believed they would always remain weaker than demons, who were born with stronger physiques and superior spiritual roots.

Driven by that belief, they sought demonic cultivation. Yet trapped in human bodies, they couldn't simply cross over; the transformation of one's physique and spiritual roots was no easy feat. Still, they believed the demons possessed methods to grant them what they lacked.

They had already reached the limits of human cultivation. Immortality felt impossibly distant for them, and their bottlenecks unbreakable. But, if they became demonic cultivators, they believed their ceiling would be the heavens themselves, their former limits nothing more than relics of a weaker past.

So they made a pact.

In exchange for resurrecting the Demon Lord, the demons promised them greater power and the chance to surpass their former selves. In return, they became the demons' spies, agents of chaos scattered throughout the Murim world, sowing destruction while carefully evading the scrutiny of their own sects.

Because of this, it became increasingly difficult for the righteous sects to detect any demonic activity within their territories. Meanwhile, the demonic forces grew stronger in the shadows, and the gate to the Demon Realm slowly weakened, unnoticed by all. The spies embedded within the sects concealed every sign, covering up disturbances before they could draw suspicion.

So when the gate to the Demon Realm finally burst open, the righteous sects across the world were caught completely off guard. Countless smaller sects were slaughtered and were reduced to nothing more than nourishment for the Demon Lord's growing power. Many never even had the chance to understand what was happening before they were killed.

The mid-tier and major sects had no choice but to form alliances, desperately holding back the demonic tide while they regrouped and searched for a way to fight back. Even then, betrayal struck from within. Cult members who had long since fallen to the demonic path turned their blades on their former comrades, stabbing them in the back at the most critical moments.

"The Rogue Blender" was an inner disciple of one of the largest sects, but he hadn't started that way. Once, he had been nothing more than an outer sect disciple with no resources, forced to survive under the ruthless, dog-eat-dog rules of his world. Back then, he lived cautiously, never daring to provoke anyone. With his mediocre strength, a single misstep would have meant instant death.

Everything changed when he obtained a system. Only then did he glimpse the light of opportunity and gain the chance to claw his way upward.

Though he appeared unremarkable on the surface, he actually possessed a divine spiritual root, one capable of propelling his cultivation forward in great leaps and bounds. Unfortunately, he had never been given the chance to realize that potential.

Born in the mortal world with no powerful backer, he was looked down upon at every turn. Even when he was brought into the path of cultivation, the senior who recruited him simply dumped him into the outer sect and promptly forgot about him.

After countless twists and turns, and after growing stronger through the system, he believed he might finally reach immortality—the ultimate goal every cultivator chased. But before that dream could take shape, the Demon invasion erupted without warning, catching everyone off guard.

The system immediately issued him a mission: fight on the front lines and kill as many demonic creatures and demonic cultivators as possible. To him, it felt no different from marching straight toward death.

Demonic cultivators were far stronger than righteous ones. Their advantage lay not only in their superior physiques, but in the very nature of their power. Their chaotic spiritual energy originated from chaos itself—born of savagery and slaughter. As a result, their techniques focused on berserk states, raw strength, and physical enhancement.

Human cultivators, on the other hand, relied largely on mystic arts—formations, spells, elemental techniques, and intricate skills. While these arts were complex and visually dazzling, filled with elaborate movements and refined techniques, their lethality often paled in comparison to the brutal efficiency of demonic arts.

Only sword cultivators could truly face demonic creatures and demonic cultivators head-on—and even then, victory was never guaranteed. That was one of the main reasons so many cultivators eventually turned to demonic arts and switched allegiances.

Yet within the system mall and the Sales Channel existed Mystic Arts just as lethal as demonic techniques. The problem was that most of these powerful cultivation manuals had vanished long ago. During the great war between the Immortals and the Demons thousands of years earlier, those manuals were either lost to time—or deliberately destroyed.

Many believed the demonic forces had erased them out of fear. If those techniques resurfaced, the disciples of once-illustrious sects and ancient families might rise again and wipe the demons out for good. And so, what remained in the cultivation world were only the weaker, diluted arts—mediocre remnants compared to the devastating techniques that had been lost to history.

As a system holder, "The Rogue Blender" had the potential to obtain those lost cultivation manuals. The problem was that he didn't have enough system points—and those ancient manuals, long lost to time, could now only be purchased through the Achievement Shop. Worse still, he hadn't even unlocked access to that shop yet.

Even so, the cultivation manuals and arts he acquired from the system mall were far from weak. They allowed him to grow rapidly, becoming much stronger in a short period of time. Because of that, he was hailed as a rising star and eventually sent to the front lines to fight the demons.

But facing a demonic general was far more than he could handle.

That was how he ended up in his current predicament—surrounded by the bodies of hundreds who had fallen, with only a handful left alive. And even those survivors were barely holding on. To make matters worse, he had exhausted most of his remaining system points, spending them on supplies in a desperate attempt to keep his people alive.

"Don't cry... it's not like we've lost yet," The Rogue Blender said to his junior sister, his voice hoarse.

Yet as he spoke, his eyes dimmed. Kisha still hadn't responded to his message. It felt as though his heart had sunk into an abyss, a cold certainty creeping in that this might truly be the end for them.

Ding!

[You have a new message.]

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Hello everyone! I'm really sorry for the sparse updates lately. Quite a lot has happened, and I've been extremely busy.

I just wanted to give you a heads-up that from December 15 to 20, I may not be able to update at all. I've been invited to attend the WSA award ceremony, and I've heard that the website may be blocked there. I'll try to find a workaround so I can still write and update if possible, but I wasn't able to prepare a stockpile in advance due to everything that's been going on.

That said, after December 20, I'll be doing mass releases. It may not be a huge amount, but I hope it can make up for the missed updates.

Thank you so much for all the love and support, especially to my most loyal and supportive readers! 💎

And thank you for the gifts and the Golden Ticket as well. I truly appreciate them, and they made me very happy!

Chapter 970: Trade

The moment he saw the notification, his eyes brightened once more. His junior sister barely reacted. It wasn't the first time she'd seen him shift from despair to sudden excitement in the blink of an eye. She was long used to his strange behavior, used to him producing unfamiliar items out of nowhere, used to his emotions swinging without warning.

Exhaustion finally caught up with her, and she slumped to the ground, pressing a hand to her pounding head as she tried to rest.

Meanwhile, "The Rogue Blender" wasted no time and opened the message.

[Merchant #841273: Hello. I just read your message and found your world very intriguing. I understand your current situation. However, as a merchant, I cannot offer my products at a reduced price...]

Seeing this, "The Rouge Blender's" eyes dimmed once more, and his shoulders slumped as if his spirit had already left his body. His heart felt icy, a chill that made it hard to read further. But what had he really expected?

Merchants were known to be cold, calculating, measuring worth only by profit and gain. Without enough system points, he had nothing of value to offer, nothing that could sway them.

Then, just as he was about to sink further into despair, a new notification chimed.

Ding!

[You have a new message]

[Merchant #841273:

However, I could propose an equal exchange, something fair for both sides. This way, I can help you, and you can provide me with what I need. We could form a trade: I'll give you a large basket of high-grade Spiritual Fruits, ranging from Grade C to Grade B.]

[Merchant #841273: From what I've heard, you might have Alchemy manuals, recipes, mystic cultivation manuals and arts, cultivation techniques, or even spiritual herbs. No matter what you can offer, I'll take it. On top of that, I'll include some Spiritual Spring Water, Stamina Boosters, magic scrolls, Scarlet Honey, and items that could aid in recovery.]

[Merchant #841273: How does that sound? If it doesn't work for you, just let me know.]

After reading everything Kisha had sent, "The Rouge Blender's" eyes dilated, trembling as a mix of excitement and disbelief coursed through him. His whole body shook, and for a moment, he wondered if he was imagining things out of desperation.

He rubbed his eyes, blinked rapidly, and looked back at the chat interface, it was still there, the words unchanged.

Hope and exhilaration bloomed in his chest. He immediately began checking his inventory to see if he had what Kisha was asking for. When he realized he didn't have enough, he started waking up his sect members, many of whom were still gloomy, and some had already lost hope, resigned to their fate in the cave where they had been hiding.

"Wake up, all of you! Hurry!" "The Rouge Blender" shouted, shaking his junior sister awake. His eyes sparkled with a mix of desperation and excitement as he leaned closer. "Junior sister, you're an alchemist! I know you have spiritual herbs and alchemy manuals with you, right? Bring them out, quick! I need them now, and I promise, I'll make it worth your while afterward!"

"Senior brother, what are you doing right now? Are you high, or have you completely lost it?" The junior sister looked at The Rouge Blender with a mixture of skepticism and exhaustion. In the end, she let out a deep sigh and shrugged; there was really no better solution, and the oppressive gloom had already sapped her morale.

As a support, she couldn't fight; if they died, what use would her manuals or spiritual herbs be? She was already missing some crucial herbs, and with what little remained, she couldn't even craft basic healing pills, let alone rejuvenation or dispelling remedies that might help the injured or those poisoned by the demonic energy, as they were slowly rotting while still alive.

"Alright... take everything. Just take my magic pouch." The junior sister tossed her pouch to her senior brother before slumping back, closing her eyes as if surrendering entirely. After all, what use was an alchemist without her ability to craft pills?

Without a hint of embarrassment, "The Rouge Blender" took the magic pouch and, using his junior sister's imprint, emptied its contents. There wasn't much left inside, just the remnants, but even so,

there were still plenty of herbs, alchemy manuals his sister had received from her master, and a few leftover pills, some harmless, some poisonous.

None of the manuals contained mystic arts, so they weren't of critical importance, but he carefully cataloged everything. He took photos and made a detailed list, sending them to Kisha in case she wasn't familiar with the items. Alongside the list, he included a few low-tier spiritual weapons.

The others he had called barely glanced at him, dismissing him as hopeless and clinging to delusions. Only his junior sister responded, while the rest looked like walking corpses, lost in despair.

[The Rouge Blender: Merchant sir... if I may be presumptuous... I could still get more of these items for you, but... could we perhaps trade a bit more? I mean... could I request some additional things? I understand if you don't have them, but I just...]

[Merchant #841273: Wait... you want me to use my system points to buy what you need from the system mall in exchange for your trinkets?]

[The Rouge Blender: I...]

[Merchant #841273: Fine. I'll put it on credit instead. But understand this: if you fail to pay on time, I'll consider it a loss, blacklist you permanently, and never trade with you again. In return, I want more cultivation manuals. The higher the grade, the better. And before I accept anything, I will personally inspect the goods. I don't deal in junk. As I said, I may be a merchant, but I'm not heartless enough to ignore a desperate plea. So don't lie to me.]

[The Rouge Blender: Oh my god, thank you! I'll treat you like my ancestor! Let's bind this deal with a system contract. That way, neither of us can go back on our word, and you can monitor my credit at any time. As long as I survive this and we drive the Demon Army back to where they belong, I'll scour the entire world for anything you want — manuals, artifacts, anything!]

「On the Other Side」

Kisha felt a surge of satisfaction as she read the reply. The sudden epiphany left her in a far better mood than before. Truthfully, even if the other party ended up defaulting on their debt after surviving this

crisis, she wouldn't consider it a loss, not when what she truly wanted wasn't the credit, but the knowledge.

She was particularly interested in the alchemy manuals. After all, she already possessed one, but what she valued most were the recipes. Buying those directly from the system would cost a small fortune, and even though she now had a good amount of system points, who would ever turn down free resources?

Besides, the reason she had deliberately mentioned alchemy manuals wasn't just for trade leverage. She wanted to compare the alchemy she had mastered that came from the fantasy world with the methods from the Murim world.

If she could study both, there was a chance she could merge the two systems, refining them into her own unique techniques and creating new recipes using whatever ingredients she had on hand.

That possibility alone made the trade more than worth it.

Besides, even the most common spiritual herbs from the Murim World would be valuable to her. She could simply plant them in her territory space and let Daisy take care of them, Daisy was exceptionally skilled at nurturing plants, keeping them healthy and thriving.

With Daisy's expertise and the abundance of spiritual energy in her territory, Kisha doubted that a single herb would fail to grow. Not only could she use the herbs to create more products for her store, but it would also be a guaranteed profit. No matter how she looked at it, this was a win-win situation.

When the other side sent her the picture of the items along with the inventory list they were willing to trade, Kisha's eyes lit up and her lips curled into a delighted smile. She carefully went through the list, checking each item's description provided by the system before making her selections.

What made her especially happy was that the trade even included some pill recipes. They weren't high-tier, but they were still useful, and among them was an Alchemy Manual from the Murim World. She felt elated, realizing she no longer needed to buy it from the system mall.

Since she had already mastered Alchemy from the fantasy world, learning a different type of Alchemy would only broaden her perspective and expand her creative possibilities.

She could adapt the ingredients based on what was available, cross-reference the effects of each ingredient from both worlds, and swap out those with undesirable side effects. This way, she could create pills and potions that maintained high quality, offered better results, and minimized negative side effects.