

## The World 261

### Chapter 261: Journey Back (5)

Leon's POV

The journey out of the Great Forest turned out to be surprisingly smooth, with the Treants no longer obstructing our path or causing us to lose our way. Maybe my defeat of the three Dryad leaders earned me a bit of favor—if that's what it took to get us out without further hassle, then so be it.

Our traveling group had a new addition: Aegis. She still wasn't talking. Maybe she was struggling to accept that she'd be living with me, especially since I'm a guy and I "stole" her Princess. Whatever the reason, she kept her silence as we walked together.

Finally, after what felt like an endless stretch of forest, we emerged into the open air. It didn't take long to find Maya—she was camped out just beyond the forest's edge. Her tent was set up behind her, and she was busy cooking something over a crackling fire.

"Your Majesty..." Aegis's voice was tense as she braced herself for battle, her grip tightening on her spear.

"You don't need to worry, Aegis," Artemis said calmly, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "She's with us."

Aegis lowered her spear at that.

We approached Maya, who was already on her feet. The moment she spotted us, her face erupted into a warm, radiant smile. Her silver hair glistened in the sunlight, swaying with every enthusiastic movement.

"Welcome back, Master and Princess Artemis!" Maya exclaimed, her voice filled with genuine joy as she performed a deep, graceful bow. Her silver hair cascaded around her like a shimmering waterfall. "I've prepared a feast for you. I figured you'd be ravenous after that grueling journey."

"Oh yeah? Great job, Maya," I said, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her into a heartfelt embrace. My lips brushed against hers in a tender kiss.

"Wha...?!" Aegis gasped, her eyes widening in disbelief at the intimate display. "W-What are you doing, kissing another woman that isn't the Princess, right in front of the Princess?!"

Maya, finally noticing the new addition to our group, turned her gaze towards Aegis. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Who is she, Master?"

"This is Aegis. She's going back with us to the human land to learn more about it," I explained, my voice steady.

"Hmm... So, is she going to become one of your women as well, Master?" Maya's tone carried a mixture of curiosity and a hint of teasing, as if she was already imagining the possibilities.

"W-Wha...?! What are you saying?!" Aegis stammered, her voice quivering with fury. "I have absolutely no intention of becoming one of his women! I would never accept that!" Her eyes blazed with pure, unrestrained anger, her fists clenched so tightly her knuckles turned white. If she were blushing, I might have called her a tsundere, but this was raw, natural hate.

"You don't need to worry about Leon having too many women, Aegis," Artemis said, her voice soothing.

"B-But Your Majesty, he's cheating on you..." Aegis's voice trembled, a mix of outrage and disbelief shaking her words. Her face twisted in frustration, as if she couldn't fathom the idea of such an arrangement.

"Well, he's not exactly cheating," Artemis said with a nonchalant shrug. "I mean, she was the first one before me, and I'm sure there are plenty more who were ahead of me and became Leon's women. To put it another way, I'm not officially the legal wife if Leon decides to marry the girls he's been with in order. I'm up against some fierce competition, like a princess from a massive kingdom.

So, you get the idea. In the end, I might just end up as one of his mistresses."

"I-I can't allow you to be just pushed down to the level of a mistress, Your Majesty," Aegis said, her voice trembling with a mixture of shock and indignation. "T-There's no way... You're meant to be our next Queen!"

"Well, Leon will just become King of both the Kingdom of Bethlan and the Elven Kingdom. That's all there is to it," Artemis declared, her tone so casual it was as if she were discussing the weather. "Which, I suppose, is one step forward toward your ultimate goal, isn't it, Leon?"

"Yes, that's right," I replied. Artemis knew I wanted to have the world in the palm of my hands. Owning both Bethlan and Elvenia was definitely a step in the right direction.

Aegis stayed silent, clearly reluctant to go against Artemis. She had a massive crush on her and a deep admiration for her as their Princess. Whatever Artemis decided to do with her life, Aegis had no say in the matter.

"Well, discussing something like that isn't exactly appropriate here," I said, my tone firm yet casual.  
"Let's have some food first, and then we'll head back to Academy City."

"You've got that right, Leon," Artemis responded.

We settled in for a meal, savoring each bite with a sense of calm before the inevitable journey. Once we finished, we made our way to the teleportation circle, an ancient and arcane structure that would whisk us away to Academy City. I had expected the journey to be more arduous, given the rarity and taboo of teleportation circles in this world.

Their very existence was shrouded in secrecy, so finding one seemed almost too easy. But perhaps that's precisely the point—sometimes, the most valuable things are hidden in plain sight, where you least expect them.

After a while, we arrived at our destination. The area was a small, nondescript patch of plains—barely noticeable but just enough to be slightly off the radar. It wasn't exactly hidden, but it wasn't flaunting its presence either. Its proximity to the Great Forest provided a natural barrier, deterring most from venturing too close.

Only the bravest of adventurers might dare approach, driven by the lure of potential slaves or the thrill of danger.

The teleportation circle itself was invisible to anyone without a sharp eye for mana. Only someone with a keen perception of mana could see the intricate markings etched into the ground. Fortunately, I had that advantage.

"What should we do next?" I asked Artemis, my gaze still fixed on the hidden circle.

"Step on it, and I'll recite the spell to activate it," Artemis said with a determined look.

We followed her instructions, positioning ourselves on the glowing teleportation circle. Artemis began channeling her mana, and her voice erupted in an intricate chant. The incantation was in a language ancient and cryptic, far beyond my understanding. It felt like an ethereal, untranslatable whisper of forgotten times. Did every teleportation circle require such elaborate spells?

The recitation went on for what felt like an eternity, almost a full minute of arcane mumbling. The spell was lengthy and complex, and while I could vaguely grasp its rhythm, understanding or memorizing it was impossible. I recognized the sound but couldn't replicate it, not without knowing the language.

After the spell concluded, a brilliant surge of light exploded from beneath our feet, enveloping us in a dazzling, all-consuming glow. The sensation was overwhelming, like being yanked through a cosmic tunnel, every fiber of my being swirling in a maelstrom of energy. When the brilliance finally subsided and my vision cleared, I found myself in a room that was both familiar and unexpected.

"This is..." I began, trying to take in the sudden shift in our surroundings.

"The student council's council room," Artemis answered, her voice echoing with a mix of satisfaction and relief.

We had been teleported straight back to the academy, and not just anywhere—into the heart of the student council's inner sanctum. The unexpected location was a bit of a surprise, but given that we had made it back to the academy, it was a fortunate outcome.

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After some time, I finally trudged back to my dorm room, exhaustion tugging at my every step. Aegis and Maya had headed to the Leonamon with Artemis, who was helping them conceal their demi-human features—those telltale ears and horns that would instantly label them as slaves in the eyes of many.

"Tomorrow marks the start of the second semester, huh?" I muttered to myself, staring at the empty room. The thought of what the new semester might hold was both exciting and nerve-wracking. I didn't know exactly what to expect, but I was prepared to dive into it headfirst.

Hmm... Now that I think about it, it's been ages since I last saw Shredica. I wondered if she'd finally had her meeting with the Headmaster and got the nod to rise above the bronze rank. I'd need to catch up with her tomorrow and see where she stands.

The next day dawned, marking the beginning of the second semester. The campus buzzed with the same kind of chatter and anticipation as before, but with a renewed energy. I made my way back to my familiar seat, greeted by the sight of my usual classmates. My friends, who had stuck with me through thick and thin, were there, and so was Hereon, still maintaining his usual aloof demeanor.

But despite my eagerness to reconnect, Shredica was conspicuously absent. I'd been looking forward to seeing her again, but she was nowhere to be found. Maybe she was under the weather? Doubtful—she had the tenacity of a cockroach, after all.

"Okay, class, settle in," Professor Irene's voice sliced through the murmur of the room. She cast a brief glance my way before quickly averting her gaze. "You might be wondering why one of your classmates is missing." Her eyes flicked back to me. "That's because Shredica received a special recommendation directly from the commander. She's been promoted to Magic Knight.

From now on, Shredica is no longer a cadet but a fully-fledged Magic Knight."

The revelation hit me like a thunderbolt.

Chapter 262: Epilogue 5 - Meanwhile, Shredica... (1)

Day of the Starry Knights' Debut

Shredica's POV

Today was the day I'd finally meet with the Headmistress, a meeting I'd secured as my prize for winning the King's Game. My main request was to stop the Administrations from blocking my progress and finally let me out of the bronze class.

I walked to the Headmistress's office with Professor Irene by my side.

"The Headmistress is already waiting for you inside," Professor Irene informed me.

"Are you not coming in with me?" I asked, expecting her to help with the conversation.

"This is a private matter between you and the Headmistress, so it's only right that I stay out," she replied.

That made sense. "Thanks for all your help so far," I said, acknowledging her support.

"It's fine. This is the only way I can really help you. Once this is sorted, you'll finally climb up the rankings. It kind of saddens me that you won't be in the bronze class anymore. But even though I won't be your homeroom professor in the silver or gold classes, I'll still be around to teach some of your subjects," she said, her voice tinged with a mix of pride and melancholy.

"Well, since I've done all I can, I'm heading out now." With a final nod, she turned on her heel, her footsteps echoing down the corridor as she walked away.

I watched her retreating figure, the sound of her footsteps fading before I finally gathered the nerve to knock on the heavy oak double doors.

"Come in," a surprisingly soft and youthful voice called out. I was expecting someone with the voice of an old woman, so the soft and youthful tone caught me off guard. I guess the Headmistress's position had made me assume there was an elderly woman behind the door.

"Excuse me," I said, pushing open the door. The moment I stepped inside, the rich, musty aroma of old books enveloped me, mingling with the faint scent of polished wood.

"Welcome, Miss Shredica," the Headmistress greeted with a warm smile. She was an exceptionally beautiful woman, her maturity evident but far from elderly. She looked to be in her early thirties, or perhaps even younger. Her golden hair cascaded in soft, lustrous waves, and her striking green eyes gleamed with a sharp, penetrating intelligence.

She rested her chin on her hands, leaning slightly forward as she scrutinized me with an understanding gaze.

"I've heard about your situation. You want to climb the ranks, correct?" she asked, her voice smooth and confident.

"That's right," I replied. "I was hoping you could address the Administration's interference that's blocking my progress to the top."

The Headmistress flashed a knowing grin. "You don't sugarcoat things, do you?" she said, her tone laced with a touch of amusement. "I understand your frustration. The prejudice against those without skills is so extreme it borders on racism, despite everyone being of the same race. People with inflated pride view your kind as nothing more than insects."

That kind of mindset is utterly unforgivable and needs to be dismantled. That's why I made the decision to admit skillless students this year. I had hoped for more than just two, but I suppose that was a bit too optimistic."

Administrators, especially, were the epitome of prideful arrogance. They resented the very idea of skillless students moving beyond the bronze ranks. They were already bitter about having permitted skillless admissions in the first place, so naturally, they were determined to keep them confined to the lowest tier.

"I guess there really isn't much we can do about the Administration," the Headmistress said with a heavy sigh, her shoulders slumping slightly. "Even though I hold the highest authority in the academy, convincing them to just accept this situation is another matter entirely."

"Is there anything you can do about it?" I asked, my voice tinged with desperation.

"Well, I can... but it's going to be a tough battle. It'll take at least a year to get them to stop obstructing you," she admitted, her eyes reflecting the weight of her words.

"A year?" I repeated. That was an agonizingly long time to wait.

"Well, yes. I can force them to stop blocking your progress by turning up the heat even more. That means I'd have to admit a larger number of skillless students into the academy," she said with a thoughtful frown. "To do that, we'll have to wait until the next school year."

"Is there any other option?" I asked.

The Headmistress shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid not," she said, her tone heavy with finality.

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That was a crushing blow. No matter how much I'd worked and fought, it felt like I was still stuck in the same frustrating place. The sting of disappointment settled deep, leaving me grappling with the reality that I was no closer to reaching the higher rankings.

I started feeling a twinge of sympathy for Mr. Leon. Despite all his "help," I hadn't achieved what I wanted from his assistance.

As I pondered this, I realized it had been ages since I last saw Mr. Leon. I wondered what he was doing now, or where he might be. Knowing him, he was probably lounging around as usual, doing nothing of consequence.

In the midst of these thoughts, a strange emotion surfaced.

"I kind of miss Mr. Leon..." The words escaped my lips before I could even process them, and I stopped dead in my tracks. "No." I shook my head firmly. This was an unnecessary feeling. I couldn't afford to let it sway me.

While thinking that, however, I felt eyes on me suddenly.

Not just one pair of eyes, but many, all trained on me. I subtly scanned the crowd, careful not to let my gaze shift too obviously, and saw a cluster of suspicious figures observing me with unsettling intensity.

The number of them was overwhelming. What were they planning? It felt as though any sudden or unusual movement from me might trigger them to pounce immediately.

I had to stay calm and avoid giving them any cause to act. I was confident I could escape, but not with so many of them effectively surrounding me. I could fight if I had to, but that wasn't ideal—I was seriously outnumbered.

As I continued walking, I noticed them moving in sync with me, closing the gap. I had no clue what had drawn their attention, but it was evident that I was in a dangerous situation. I needed to time my escape perfectly to avoid their watchful eyes.

Right in front of me, there was a corner. I could use it to my advantage to shake them off. As I rounded the corner, their sight was briefly blocked, giving me the crucial moment I needed. I darted down another alley, hoping to lose them.

"She's gone! Find her!" I heard one of them yell, their voice tinged with frustration. I immediately activated all the skills I'd honed from my training, slipping through the shadows with practiced stealth. I was confident that I wouldn't be spotted. I had to be.

But just as I was feeling secure, my confidence was shattered. Emerging into the alley I thought would be a safe haven, I found myself abruptly face to face with a woman blocking my path, her presence an unexpected and unwelcome obstacle.

"I'm very sorry for bursting your bubble, but you have to die, Miss Shredica," she said with chilling resolve. Her hands gripped two kukris, the cold metal gleaming ominously. It was clear from the start that she wasn't here for a friendly chat.

I quickly drew my gun and unleashed a volley of bullets towards her. But her movements were a blur—she darted and twisted with breathtaking agility, using the narrow walls of the alley as springboards to evade every shot. Each bullet seemed to miss her by mere inches as she closed in on me.

With a sudden burst of speed, she lunged forward, kukris still poised behind her back. In one fluid motion, she leapt into the air, her blades slicing through the air with deadly precision as she brought them down towards me.

I unsheathed my blade and swung it up just in time to block the oncoming kukris. The moment they struck, the sheer force of the impact jolted through me, like being hit with a sledgehammer. It was all I could do to prevent being cut in half. The crushing pressure sent a violent tremor up my legs, making my knees buckle and quiver.

With a ruthless precision, the woman shifted her strike to the side. My unsteady stance left me vulnerable, forcing me to brace myself with my blade as best I could. The impact was so forceful it sent my weapon skidding across the alley floor with a clatter that echoed loudly against the narrow walls.

Before I could recover, I felt a sharp, searing pain slam into the side of my head. She had seamlessly followed her kukris with a devastating kick. The jarring blow made the world around me spin, and I felt my consciousness slipping away, drowning in the haze of shock and pain.

Chapter 263: Epilogue 5 - Meanwhile, Shredica... (2)

Before my consciousness fully faded, I managed to grasp my knife and drive it into my leg, the cold steel slicing through flesh to keep me awake.

"Ngggh!" The searing pain erupted through my leg, a fiery jolt that made me clench my teeth and fight through the agony.

"Oh..." the woman observed with a mix of surprise and intrigue. "You're using a knife to stave off unconsciousness. Quite the tactical move. But are you sure that's a smart idea?"

It wasn't. I was acutely aware of that. By stabbing my leg, I had sacrificed my speed and mobility, but without that desperate measure, I'd have been finished.

I rotated the knife in my hand, preparing for the next move, and dropped into a fighting stance.

"What's that going to do?" she sneered, her eyes narrowing.

"How about you find out?" I retorted.

We both lunged at each other with lightning speed. She swung her kukris at my upper body, aiming to cleave me in two. I dropped to my knees, skidding across the floor, and aimed my knife at her leg. The blade met her tough clothing, unable to penetrate. In a seamless motion, she ran up the wall and executed a high backflip, her movements fluid and precise.

During that brief moment, I snatched my blade back and rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding her descending kukris. She landed with a crash, her kukris smashing into the floor where I had been just seconds before, sending shards of debris flying.

I charged at her with my blade ready, aiming to strike before she could recover. But just as I closed in, she swung one of her kukris to block my attack. Her grip faltered, and one of her kukris flew from her hand, clattering to the ground with a metallic echo.

"Why are you suddenly so fast?" she exclaimed, her eyes widening in shock.

It wasn't that I was moving faster; it was my ability to adapt to my opponents. That was how I was trained. Every movement, every attack, I learned and adjusted to. However, this adaptability only worked if the enemy stuck to predictable patterns. If she changed her strategy, it would take time for me to adjust, and that moment of uncertainty could be deadly.

"Well, either way, you're done," she said with a confident smirk.

As I'd anticipated, she immediately switched to a new attack pattern. Her remaining kukri spun like a blur around her arm, and in an instant, she was moving with a blinding speed.

"What?!" I gasped, struggling to track her movements. How could she be this fast? If I could just manage to keep up and evade her strikes, I might adapt. I needed to stay on her heels.

"You're really doing a good job dodging," she said, her tone a mix of respect and challenge.

Despite my best dodging efforts, it wasn't flawless. Her kukri found gaps in my defense, leaving stinging, shallow cuts across my skin. Each slice sent a sharp, searing pain, marking me with its relentless precision.

I tightened my grip on the knife and focused on her movements. She was fast, but if I could predict her next move, I might gain the upper hand.

She came at me again, her kukri slicing through the air with deadly precision. I ducked and rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding a slash aimed at my neck. As I came up from the roll, I lunged forward, aiming for her exposed side. She twisted away at the last second, and my blade grazed her arm, drawing a thin line of blood.

"Impressive," she hissed, her eyes narrowing. "But not enough."

She retaliated with a flurry of attacks, her kukri flashing in the dim light. I danced around her strikes, feeling the rush of air as her blade missed me by mere inches. My heart pounded in my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins. I could feel myself adapting, my movements becoming more fluid, my reactions quicker.

In a desperate attempt to break her rhythm, I feinted to the left, then darted to the right. She hesitated for a split second, just enough time for me to close the distance. I slashed at her leg, and this time, my blade found its mark. She let out a grunt of pain and staggered back, favoring her injured limb.

"You're persistent," she spat, blood trickling down her leg. "But you're still no match for me."

She launched herself at me with renewed fury, her attacks more erratic and wild. I parried her strikes, feeling the impact reverberate through my arms. Sweat dripped down my face, mixing with the blood from my wounds. I couldn't keep this up forever. I needed to end this.

Summoning every ounce of strength, I blocked her next strike and twisted my wrist, disarming her. Her kukri flew out of her hand, clattering to the ground with a metallic echo.

Before I could finish her off, she executed a perfect backflip, her body arcing gracefully through the air. She kicked my hand mid-flip, sending my blade flying once again. As soon as she landed, she followed up with a punch aimed straight at my face. I barely managed to block it, feeling the impact reverberate up my arm. I retaliated with a punch of my own, aiming for her midsection.

Now we were locked in hand-to-hand combat. I wasn't complaining. Aside from blademanship and marksmanship, this was another of my specialties.

She dodged my punch with a quick sidestep, her eyes gleaming with excitement. She countered with a sharp jab aimed at my ribs, but I twisted my body just in time, her fist grazing my side. I retaliated with a swift kick to her midsection, but she blocked it with her forearm, the impact reverberating through both of us.

We circled each other, both breathing heavily, sweat trickling down our faces. The tension in the air was palpable. She lunged at me again, this time with a feint, and I almost fell for it. At the last second, I ducked under her swing and delivered an uppercut, making her stumble back a step.

"Nice try," she smirked, wiping a trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth. "But it's going to take more than that to beat me."

"Bring it on," I growled, feeling a surge of adrenaline.

We clashed again, trading blows with relentless intensity. Her punches were swift and precise, each one aimed to exploit any opening in my defense. I countered with powerful strikes of my own, aiming to wear her down. Every hit, every dodge, and every block felt like a high-stakes dance, neither of us willing to give an inch.

She caught me off guard with a sudden knee to the gut, knocking the wind out of me. I doubled over in pain, but as she moved in for the finishing blow, I swept her legs out from under her, sending her crashing to the floor. She recovered quickly, rolling to her feet and launching herself at me with renewed fury.

Our movements became more desperate, more brutal. She landed a solid punch to my jaw, making stars explode in my vision. I shook it off and answered with a roundhouse kick that connected with her shoulder, sending her spinning. She was back on me in an instant, her fists a blur as she aimed for my head.

I managed to deflect most of her strikes, but a few slipped through, each one stinging like hell. I responded with a flurry of punches, driving her back. We were both battered and bruised, but neither of us was willing to back down.

With one final, simultaneous strike, we both connected solidly, sending each other reeling. We stood there for a moment, panting heavily, staring each other down with fierce determination.

"Why are you making this so complicated?" she said, her voice dripping with irritation. "If you'd just drop dead right now, we wouldn't be stuck in this exhausting charade. Besides, even if I lose here, you're still fucked. You're wanted for being part of an insurgent group. Most of the Silver Blades have either been caught or killed, so there's no escaping now. Maybe I can make an exception.

How about you kneel down and suck my foot, and I'll capture you alive? What do you say?"

How did she know I was with the Silver Blades? Not that it mattered at this point. I raised my middle finger and said, "Fuck you."

"Heh. Figured as much," she said with a smug grin before launching toward me with another surge of speed.

Her speed was overwhelming, and I was barely keeping up. She danced around me, her fists connecting with painful precision. Each punch felt like a hammer blow, sending shockwaves through my body. I tried to block and counter, but she was too fast, too relentless.

"Had enough yet?" she taunted, landing another brutal hit to my ribs that made me gasp for air.

I stumbled, struggling to find an opening. Every move I made was met with a swift, punishing response. Blood trickled down my face, and my vision blurred. I couldn't keep this up much longer.

Then, just for a moment, I saw it—a small opening. Summoning every bit of strength I had left, I twisted my body and threw a punch with all my might. The air seemed to tremble as my fist cut through it, aiming straight for her.

The impact was explosive. She staggered back, her eyes wide with shock before she crumpled to the ground. The force of my punch had knocked her out cold. I stood there, panting heavily, my vision darkening at the edges.

With the last bit of my strength spent, I collapsed beside her, the world fading to black as exhaustion claimed me.

Chapter 264: Epilogue 5 - Meanwhile, Shredica... (3)

I struggled to maintain my grip on consciousness, biting my lip until I tasted blood. My ears were filled with a constant, deafening ring, and my vision was a swirling mess of colors and shadows. It felt like a miracle I hadn't completely blacked out yet.

Suddenly, the sound of approaching footsteps cut through the haze.

"It seems you're in quite a predicament," a woman's voice said, smooth and calm. Through my blurry vision, I couldn't make out any details about her. All I knew was that she was a woman from the sound of her voice. "Do you want me to help you? Say yes if you do, or no if you don't."

I was at a loss for words, struggling to find my voice.

"You can't speak anymore, I see," the woman said, her tone both gentle and pragmatic. "Here's what you can do: if you want my help, just squeeze my hand. If you don't, then leave it."

She lowered herself to the ground beside me.

"The magic and royal knights have been scouring every nook and cranny, hunting down any Silver Blades members they can find. We've uncovered crucial information about your group and are dedicated to rooting you all out. Even if you manage to escape now, you won't be able to evade us forever. You probably know that already, don't you? So why not take my hand?"

I can offer you safety, but there will be a price to pay."

She extended her hand towards me, her fingers reaching out with an almost magnetic pull.

"Come on now, Miss Shredica. Let me help you," she said gently, her voice carrying a soothing yet commanding tone.

I recognized her voice through the haze of pain and disorientation. With a flicker of desperate hope, I managed to squeeze her hand. The world around me faded to black as I lost consciousness.

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"Ichinose-kun..." My voice was barely a whisper, hoarse and strained. I hadn't meant to speak, but the name slipped out nonetheless.

The rain pounded relentlessly around me, drenching me to the core. My clothes clung tightly to my skin, weighed down by the relentless downpour, while my hair hung in heavy, wet strands.

In front of me stood a vehicle. I had never seen anything like it before—it was enormous. Enormous didn't quite capture it; it was massive. Oh, right. I remembered now. Back in my old world, a century ago, there were vehicles called trucks.

In the era I was in now, trucks or any wheeled vehicles were relics of the past. Seeing something like this was a jarring surprise.

But more pressing was the question of why I was here, and why I was staring at a vehicle that should have been obsolete for a hundred years.

It was then that I saw something horrifying. A boy with black hair lay crumpled on the ground, drenched in a pool of his own blood. The sheer amount of blood was so overwhelming that his face was almost unrecognizable. But I couldn't shake the feeling that this might be the Ichinose-kun whose name had slipped from my lips.

The road was smeared with dark streaks of blood, painting a gruesome picture of what had happened. It was clear that the truck had struck him, sending his body sliding across the pavement, which explained the bloodstained ground. The truck itself had smashed into a nearby post, and inside it, a lifeless man lay slumped over the wheel.

My vision swam, and the scene before me felt like a heart-wrenching nightmare.

"A-An... ambulance. L-Let me call an ambulance..." My voice was barely audible, hoarse and trembling, as though I had only just learned how to speak. My hands scrabbled in my pocket for my device, but the rain had turned it into a useless lump of waterlogged plastic. The device, covered in buttons, slipped through my fingers as I frantically pressed them, but nothing happened.

"Aaaaah! Why now?!" My voice shattered with panic. With no other options, I staggered toward the boy. My knees buckled as I saw his mangled body. "No... Ichinose-kun..." My voice came out in ragged, gasping sobs as I took in the horrific sight.

His bones were crushed, his flesh ripped open with jagged edges, revealing bone fragments beneath. Blood flowed freely, pooling in grotesque puddles around him. The sight was a nightmare, but I couldn't pull my gaze away.

"No... Nooo!" I shook him desperately, my heart pounding in my chest. He didn't move, but his labored breaths were a small, fragile sign of life. His eyes moved slightly, but that was all he could manage.

"Please, Ichinose-kun... Stay with me...!" I begged, my voice trembling and barely more than a whisper through my choking sobs.

He didn't respond. His body lay motionless, and his eyes, though barely alive, locked onto me with a haunting, vacant stare.

"Why... Why did you save me?" I cried out, my voice breaking with the weight of my anguish. "Why did you pull me out of the way?! If you hadn't...!"

Was I the reason for his death? The fragments of memory were fragmented and blurry, but it seemed like I was the cause.

Ichinose-kun's mouth quivered slightly, but no sound emerged. His eyes remained locked on mine. Was he etching the image of the woman responsible for his death into his memory? Did he harbor resentment towards me? Maybe that was why he kept haunting my visions.

Soon, the light in his eyes faded, and Ichinose-kun was gone.

"I-Ichinose-kun? I... Ichinose... Tsubasa! Nooo...! Don't leave me...!"

Please..." My desperate cries reverberated through the rain, but no one heard my anguished screams. The rain drowned out everything.

The scene shifted. I found myself looking worn out and defeated. My eyes were hollow, my hair a tangled mess. It felt like a long time had passed since Ichinose-kun's death. I recognized this scene—I had seen it in my dreams not too long ago.

The bell rang, and I quickly got up from my seat, slinging my bag over my shoulder. Just as I was about to head for the door, someone grabbed my arm.

"...What?" I snapped, turning to face the person who had stopped me. She was glaring with a fiery intensity. I recognized her now—her name was Asada Kaori-san, from my dreams.

I remembered feeling jealous of her, though I couldn't recall why.

"How dare you show your face at school after what you've done? Don't you feel any guilt? Shame? You're the reason he's dead!"

I shrugged her off, trying to ignore the burning anger in her eyes.

"I don't want to talk to you."

"You're truly shameless..."

"Shameless, huh? Who's really the shameless one here? Who's truly responsible for your childhood friend's death?"

"What do you mean? You're the reason he died!"

"Oh, is that so? Well, if you insist on placing the blame solely on me, then so be it. But do not forget, you too carry a burden of guilt in this matter."

With that, I walked out of the room, my footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. After a short distance, I crumpled to the floor, unable to hold back the tears any longer. The ache in my heart was relentless, like a jagged blade twisting deeper with every sob. What was this excruciating pain?

I couldn't remember much about Ichinose-kun, but it was clear now that he had been incredibly important to me. The fact that I could cry for him proved how deeply he had touched my life. I couldn't recall the last time I had shed tears.

I wondered what had happened to me—what had turned me into this unfeeling shell who couldn't even muster a smile, who found comfort only in the scent of blood and the rush of killing. What had corrupted me so completely?

I remembered my name now. My real name. It wasn't Shredica. Shredica was just a name they had given me. My real name... yes, my real name was...

No... I couldn't grasp it anymore. It was right on the tip of my tongue, just out of reach. Why couldn't I remember it? What... was my name back then?

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I woke up to a strange ceiling overhead. The bed beneath me was unexpectedly soft and comforting. My surroundings were unfamiliar, and a sense of confusion washed over me. Why was I here?

"You're awake," a soft voice said nearby. I turned my head to see a woman standing beside me. She had a striking presence—her dark skin glowing softly in the dim light, and her well-built frame suggesting strength and calm.

"Who are you?" I croaked.

"I'm a captain of a magic knight unit. The name's Laurel. This is the Vice Commander's room," she said with a calm, authoritative tone. "I'm here to keep an eye on you until she arrives. Oh, never mind, she's here now."

Miss Laurel stepped out, her footsteps light yet purposeful, and soon returned with a woman in tow. The moment I saw her, a spark of recognition ignited in my memory—she was the Vice Commander of the Magic Knights.

"You..." I managed, the word slipping out in a breathless murmur.

"We meet again, Miss Shredica," Vice Commander Veronica Eclair said, her voice smooth and composed.

Chapter 265: Epilogue 5 - Meanwhile, Shredica... (4)

"You've been out cold for three days straight," Miss Veronica said, her voice edged with concern as she studied me closely. "Is there something wrong with your body?"

"No," I replied, though I found it odd that my body felt unusually fine despite the prolonged rest.  
"Anyway, why did you save me, Miss Veronica?"

"There are a few reasons, but the main one is that you're an incredibly valuable asset. I can't let someone with your skills just be killed," she said, her voice steady and assertive. "I need someone with your abilities to carry out some crucial tasks for me."

"Why...?"

Miss Veronica glanced over at Miss Laurel, her eyes flickering with an unreadable expression before she turned back to me. "Miss Shredica, would you be interested in joining the Magic Knights? Specifically, in the same unit as mine?"

My eyes widened in shock. The offer was so unexpected, it felt almost too easy. No, there had to be a catch. The real question wasn't how the opportunity landed in my lap but why.

"Why?" I asked, my voice tinged with suspicion.

Miss Laurel took over, her tone low and serious. "You probably don't know this because the royal knights and the Magic Knights are keeping it a secret, but there's a lot of turmoil at Milham Castle. The Commander is rapidly losing her standing among the Magic Knights and the nobles. Her influence is waning. Some even suspect she's been using her skills to manipulate the royal family."

Miss Veronica continued. "And because of that, we need more capable allies."

"Allies?" I echoed.

"There's a looming war between humans and demons," she explained, her eyes sharp with intensity. "The Demonic Kingdom is making strategic plans, and the Empire is already positioning itself. We're seeing signs of unrest worldwide. Rumor has it that the Elven Kingdom and the Beast people are preparing for conflict as well. Even the criminal networks in the underworld are buzzing with activity."

The world is inching towards another massive war. That's why we need to gather as many allies as possible."

Both of them had used the term "allies" repeatedly, and it was clear from their tone that they weren't referring to me as the ally they needed.

"By 'allies,' you don't mean me, right?" I asked, a note of suspicion in my voice.

They exchanged a look, then turned back to me and nodded.

"You're just a piece of the larger equation. We do need you as an ally," Miss Veronica said.

"What do you need from me then?" I asked, seeking clarity.

"It's quite simple, Miss Shredica," Miss Veronica said, her voice calm and measured. "You just need to do something for us."

"What is it?" I asked, trying to remain composed.

"We need you to retrieve an item that's crucial for summoning heroes from other worlds. This summoning is supposed to happen when the kingdom is in grave danger, and the current situation is the perfect time for it. If you agree to help us with this, I'll speak to my sister and see about getting you promoted to the Magic Knights and assigned to my unit."

The other-worlder heroes—those summoned from another realm to this world. That was exactly why I had my sights set on becoming a Magic Knight. If there was a spell powerful enough to bring others from another world here, then surely there was something that could send me back to Earth.

Becoming a Magic Knight would give me access to that kind of knowledge, and this opportunity felt like a golden ticket.

It was almost too good to be true. As much as I wanted to seize it, I couldn't ignore the nagging suspicion that there was something more behind this offer. Why me? Surely, there must be a reason I was singled out for this task. It felt like there was a hidden agenda or some deeper purpose that went beyond mere coincidence.

"Don't worry, Miss Shredica. Right now, you're one of the Silver Blades, but if I assign you as a Magic Knight, you'd become my secret agent embedded within their ranks. Agree to this, and we'll stop hunting you. I can't promise the same for the others, though. This offer stands only if you accept."

Truth be told, I couldn't care less about the Silver Blades. My stint with them had been brief, and my concern was limited to just a handful of members. The rest of them? I had zero interest. Still, a part of me hoped that Miss Arianne, Miss Claire, and the Leader were safe. It was odd to feel any attachment to people I barely knew, but maybe some fragment of my humanity was starting to resurface.

Starting to... resurface? Why do I feel like I was just a regular human from the start? Could it be those dreams that keep invading my mind? Is that the cause?

Miss Veronica's voice cut through my daze, pulling me back to reality. "So, do you agree or not?"

I blinked, trying to shake off the confusion. "Why do you need me in particular?"

Miss Veronica leaned forward, her gaze sharp and calculating. "It's straightforward. The relic you're tasked with retrieving can only be obtained by someone like you—someone skillless. Of all the skillless individuals, you're the standout. You have the necessary ability and the tenacity to go to any lengths when properly incentivized. That's why I've chosen you as the best candidate for this mission."

"I still don't trust this, honestly. I don't even think you're someone to be relied on," Miss Laurel said, her voice sharp with skepticism. Her eyes bore into me, as if trying to gauge my sincerity. "But you're definitely better than that guy named Leon. There's something about him that feels like it's beyond our control."

"Mr. Leon? No way. He's just another skillless and nowhere near as ambitious as I am," I shot back, trying to dismiss her concern with a wave of my hand.

"Maybe you think so, but there's definitely something fucking eerie about him," Miss Laurel pressed, her tone a mix of frustration and unease.

I had to admit, she had a point. There was an unsettling vibe about Mr. Leon, but he couldn't possibly be someone out of control. After all, I had managed to manipulate him before—though it was with some dirty blackmail.

"Well, all that aside, welcome to our ranks, Miss Shredica. It's not official yet, but you're a magic knight now," Miss Veronica said.

I couldn't quite muster up the enthusiasm I was supposed to feel. Part of me should have been thrilled—after all, I was climbing the ranks faster than I'd ever imagined.

It felt like I'd been handed a top position without the sweat and struggle I'd imagined would come with it. This wasn't the climb I'd envisioned, where every step was earned. Yet, as I considered it, I had to admit that, despite my reservations, this wasn't a terrible outcome.

With that, I officially became a magic knight.

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Earth - 2012, Gregorian Calendar

Akane's POV (Shredica from Earth)

The school bell rang, its shrill sound slicing through the air and pulling me from my daze. I hastily grabbed my bag and slung it over my shoulder, ready to escape the confines of the classroom. Just as I reached the door, a firm grip seized my arm, yanking me back.

"...What?" I snapped, twisting around to see who had stopped me. It was Asada-san, her eyes blazing with fury. She was the childhood friend of Ichinose-kun, who had died just a week ago.

"How dare you show your face at school after what you've done?" she hissed. "Don't you feel any guilt? Shame? You're the reason he's dead!"

I shrugged her off, a mix of annoyance and cold indifference in my eyes.

"I don't want to talk to you."

Her eyes flared with fury. "You're truly shameless..."

"Shameless, huh? Who's really the shameless one here? Who's truly responsible for your childhood friend's death?"

"What do you mean? You're the reason he died!"

"Oh, is that so? Well, if you insist on placing the blame solely on me, then so be it. But do not forget, you too carry a burden of guilt in this matter."

With that, I walked out of the room, my footsteps echoing in the empty hallway.

That's right, I wasn't the only one to blame here. She was just as guilty. Kaori had abandoned him too. It wasn't solely my fault. It wasn't... entirely my fault.

No. It wasn't.

But as much as I tried to convince myself otherwise, the brutal truth was that Ichinose-kun's death was my fault. If I hadn't been so distracted, if I had noticed the approaching truck, he'd still be alive.

It's not fair, Ichinose-kun... I know I'll never be able to forget you, no matter how hard I try. You're going to haunt my thoughts for the rest of my life.

After stumbling a short distance from the classroom, I collapsed to the floor, the weight of my guilt too heavy to bear.

Chapter 266: Chihara Akane (1)

Earth - 2012, Gregorian Calendar

Akane's POV (Shredica from Earth)

I left class for the day, feeling that I wouldn't be able to focus or absorb anything in my current state. With a heavy heart, I decided it was best not to attend school and instead made my way to the place where it all happened.

The memory of that day was burned into my mind with brutal clarity. I could still vividly see the truck hurtling towards me, its headlights glaring as it appeared from the corner of my eye. There was no time to react; it was already too close. I felt a sudden, forceful shove that yanked me out of the truck's path.

In that jarring moment, our positions were reversed, and instead of me taking the hit, he was struck by the vehicle. The memory was as vivid and piercing as if it had happened just moments ago.

I stood by the side of the road, my eyes fixed on the exact spot where everything had changed.

"You're not being fair, Ichinose-kun... I can't just forget you after something like this..." I murmured, my voice breaking. "I love you. Please come back. Please..."

The ache in my chest was almost unbearable. As much as I longed to join him in death, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"You're being so unfair... I want to be with you, but I can't. If I did, I'd just be squandering the life you saved. That's why you're not being fair..."

I gritted my teeth so fiercely that blood began to ooze from my gums, the metallic taste sharp and bitter. No matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise, he wouldn't come back. He wouldn't return to me. But I was prepared to wait for the day we could be together again, even if it meant waiting for years.

However, as I clung to that thought, the world around me suddenly shifted.

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The next day, I was met with shocking news. The TV was on when I was about to head out to school, despite my lack of energy. The screen was filled with urgent updates.

"An unexplained phenomenon has struck a local school in X Prefecture, causing the sudden disappearance of several students and a teacher. The incident began yesterday with a blinding flash of light that engulfed everything, consuming the entire area. When the light vanished, the classroom was left empty. Kijima-san is on the scene with the details. Kijima-san?"

"Yes, thank you. As you can see, this classroom might look ordinary, but it was the site of an extraordinary event that led to numerous disappearances. The incident occurred yesterday at 2:35 PM. We've confirmed that 27 people are missing, and their current location is unknown. The entire phenomenon was captured on camera, and we can now show you the footage of the event as it unfolded."

The news broadcast was gripping, displaying footage of the bizarre incident with a chilling clarity. A blinding flash of light exploded within a classroom, consuming everything in its path. When the blinding glare finally faded, the room was left eerily empty.

"You can see in this footage that a sudden burst of light erupted from inside the classroom, spilling out into the hallway and briefly overpowering the camera," the man on TV explained. "When the light disappeared, all the students and the homeroom teacher were gone."

I recognized the speaker instantly—it was the Vice Principal of my school.

The following scene matched his description perfectly. The footage captured a classroom bathed in an intense, pulsating light that swallowed everything before plunging into silence. Akane's pulse quickened as she recognized the classroom—it was the very room I was supposed to be in at that exact moment.

"Can you tell us what happened here, sir?"

"Uh, we don't really have a clear explanation ourselves," the teacher being interviewed said, his voice tense. "The students and the teacher were suddenly engulfed by a blinding light, and then they just

vanished without a trace. Investigations are ongoing, but it seems this might be beyond the police's reach.

"We've decided to consult a ufologist because we suspect this could be linked to alien activity."

The scene then cut to another person.

"Do you believe this could be the result of an unidentified or alien phenomenon?"

"I don't personally buy into UFOs or aliens, but with all the evidence piling up, it might just be the work of extraterrestrials," the ufologist said, his tone measured and analytical. He seemed to be the specialist the teacher had mentioned, but my focus was elsewhere.

"We are committed to doing everything possible to locate the missing individuals and return them to their families as soon as we can," he continued, his voice resolute and urgent.

The scene cut back to the interviewer, who faced the camera with a somber expression. But my attention was drawn elsewhere—something strange in the sky.

"There aren't any clear variables that can explain what happened at the school, but it might be a major case of an alien invasion. Speculation about aliens has been growing, and some believe they're already making their way to Earth. We could be on the verge of an interplanetary conflict—or maybe it's something else entirely, like a strange, natural phenomenon."

"Uh, Kijima-san, what's that behind you?"

"Huh?"

The interviewer's gaze shifted skyward, and the camera followed. High above, an unsettling phenomenon unfolded—an immense, swirling vortex of dark, pulsating purple. Jagged bolts of lightning, flickering in the same unsettling hue, crackled around it, casting an eerie, almost hypnotic glow. It wasn't just a bizarre sight; it was an omen of something deeply unnerving.

I rushed outside, and the scene was even more striking from the street. The vortex was so colossal it seemed to dominate the skyline, a swirling maelstrom that threatened to consume everything in its path. It felt like the world was on the edge of a catastrophic event, and this swirling anomaly was just the beginning.

Many people were staring up at the vortex, their expressions a mix of awe and apprehension. They treated it like a rare celestial event, almost as if it were an eclipse. But I knew this wasn't some harmless spectacle. This wasn't a cheerful cosmic anomaly.

Suddenly, a piercing scream cut through the murmur of the crowd. The scream came from someone who had first noticed something unsettling—something dangerous. From the depths of the vortex, something began to emerge. And it wasn't pretty.

"W-What the hell is that?!" someone shouted, panic evident in their voice.

It felt like I was watching a scene from a horror movie, but this was all too real. Something was definitely coming out of that vortex, and it was far from reassuring.

A colossal insect burst forth from the vortex, its carapace a vibrant, hellish red. Its grotesque head, crowned with menacing antennae, hung ominously above the city, surveying the chaos below with predatory intent. As it hurtled downward, its full, horrifying length was revealed—a gargantuan centipede that seemed to stretch endlessly.

It was so immense that it looked capable of tunneling through the earth, its segmented body extending well beyond the surface.

The sheer scale of the creature was staggering, and its presence caused immediate panic. People screamed and fled in every direction, their terror manifesting in chaotic, frantic movement. I was swept up in the stampede, my heart racing as I joined the desperate exodus. This monstrous centipede was descending upon us, ready to wreak untold havoc.

But as I ran, it became clear that this nightmarish arrival was just the beginning of an even greater horror.

I looked up, and the sky was ablaze with chaos. Multiple vortexes spun wildly, tearing through the atmosphere like gaping wounds. I halted in my tracks, mesmerized by the apocalyptic spectacle unfolding above. It felt like watching the very fabric of reality being shredded open, revealing the apocalypse in all its fiery, destructive glory.

The vortexes weren't just swirling chaotic clouds; they were gateways to pure terror. Each one disgorged colossal centipedes, their grotesque bodies slithering down with disturbing speed. The city below was engulfed in panic, people screaming and fleeing from the monstrous centipedes that rained down upon them.

And then, the horror escalated. From one of the vortexes emerged a figure unlike anything I had ever seen. A woman descended with an aura of malevolence. Her horns curved menacingly from her head, and a sinuous tail snaked behind her, its movement sinuous and unsettling. In her hand, she wielded a trident wreathed in crackling, fiery energy that cast an eerie, flickering light.

Her skin was an intense, vivid red, not tanned but glowing with an ominous, infernal hue. She descended with an air of dark power, as if heralding a new, terrifying era.

"Greetings, mortals of this wretched world. I am Satania, one of the seven deadly sins, and I am Wrath incarnate!" Her voice boomed with an infernal resonance, echoing through the air and shaking the heavens. "We, the fiends of Hell, have descended to seize this world for our dominion. Bow before us, for we seek world domination! You, pitiful insects, surrender your realm unto us.

Should you dare to resist, we shall grant you the battle you seek! Henceforth, this world shall be ours to command, and you shall be but mere slaves to our dark will!"

It was at that moment that the Gregorian Calendar came to an end.

Chapter 267: Chihara Akane (2)

Three months later.

The world had plunged into chaos, suffering on a scale previously unimaginable. In these three days, the global economy had disintegrated, vital infrastructures lay in ruins, human resources were devastated, and humanity had faced a shattering defeat against the Demons.

A brutal war had erupted between the Demons and Humans, and the humans had been spectacularly vanquished. Humanity's arsenal—tanks, helicopters, fighter jets, and even nuclear weapons—had

proven utterly impotent. None of their formidable weaponry could even scratch the immense centipedes tearing through cities.

But it wasn't just the centipedes that had spilled from the portal. Gargantuan bats and a swarm of colossal insects had also emerged, their sheer size and ferocity amplifying the devastation.

Survivors had clung to life by taking refuge in the dim, claustrophobic confines of the subways. I was among them.

"Many countries have fallen," someone said, their voice trembling with fear and desperation. "It seems like it's only a matter of time before the Demons conquer the entire world. What the fuck do we do?!"

"Don't be a fucking idiot!" another voice erupted, sharp and defensive. "The United States hasn't fallen yet, and plenty of other countries are still fighting back! If we wait for rescuers, we might be able to reach a place that's still holding out against the invasions!"

"Safe places? Are you out of your fucking mind? Those portals have spread across the globe. Do you really think we can escape total destruction even if we get rescued?!"

"It's better than rotting away in this filthy subway!" someone argued, their voice a mix of desperation and hope. "I heard they have an underground facility that can keep those fucking centipedes out!"

"But do you really think they'll save us?!" another voice shot back, filled with dread.

The atmosphere was thick with tension. People were on edge, their anxiety and fear intensifying as the world seemed to unravel before their eyes. I wasn't completely overwhelmed, though. Maybe it was because I had a burning resolve to survive. I had sworn to myself that I wouldn't die. Dying now would feel like betraying Tsubasa-kun.

He had saved me, sacrificed himself so I could keep living. I couldn't waste the chance he gave me. I refused to let myself be another casualty.

Suddenly, the radio crackled to life, filling the air with a burst of static. It was an old device, set up to catch any transmissions from rescuers calling for survivors.

"For all survivors in the area, at around 10 P.M., we will be flying overhead to search for you. Make sure to reach the highest point of your building. I repeat, for all survivors in the area, at around 10 P.M., we will be flying overhead to search for you. Get to the highest point of your building. Good luck."

The announcement pierced through the tension.

"Thank god! They're finally coming for us!"

The seven other survivors, excluding me, erupted in celebration. They hugged each other tightly and cheered, their faces lit up with a rare flicker of hope. I, however, couldn't share their optimism.

These people were deluded if they thought their troubles were over just because of that announcement. Didn't they realize that getting to a building before rescue was even possible was a huge challenge? The nearest building was about a kilometer away from this subway. Plus, we had to hold out until 10 P.M. We still had to survive against the Infected, those twisted beings tainted by the Demon Virus.

And who knew if the rescuers themselves would make it through the flying giant locusts and bats that dominated the sky?

But being that pessimistic wasn't going to help. I couldn't afford to stay in that mindset. I had to survive too. These people were as desperate as they were because they, too, wanted to live.

At 4 P.M., we decided to leave the subway. The air outside was stifling, thick with decay and the scent of death. The heat was oppressive, and the sky was a sickly, blood-red hue, casting a hellish glow over the desolate landscape. The devastation stretched as far as the eye could see, a haunting reminder of the world that once was.

It was hard to believe that this barren wasteland was once the vibrant Earth I had known for 18 years.

"Now, all we need to do is get to that building over there," one of the survivors said, pointing to a distant structure barely visible through the haze. It was the only building still standing amidst the destruction.

"It's a long way off," another added. "But if we keep quiet and stay out of sight, we might make it without drawing the Infected's attention."

We moved cautiously, each step measured to avoid drawing the Infected's attention.

The Infected were those who had been ravaged by what we dubbed the Demon Virus. This plague had surged forth following the declaration of war by Satania, a woman who had claimed the title of Wrath of the Seven Deadly Sins. Alongside her, the other Six Deadly Sins had descended upon us: Lucielle of Pride, Beelzebub of Gluttony, Asmodeus of Lust, Morsea of Greed, Levi of Envy, and Belphegor of Sloth.

These seven, branding themselves as the Seven Princesses of Hell, had set the world ablaze with their unrelenting destruction, leaving Earth shattered and decimated.

The Demon Virus took hold when someone was exposed to a surge of demonic radiation, or if they were scratched, bitten, or if any fluids from the infected entered their mouth, eyes, or any other vulnerable opening. If any of these scenarios occurred, infection was a certainty.

Once the virus took root, you'd instantly transform into a Demon Zombie, or more simply, an Infected. The symptoms would kick in the moment you came into contact with the virus.

The infection advances through four horrifying stages.

Stage one initiates with the infected becoming increasingly agitated and experiencing slight vision problems. Their neck begins to itch persistently, driving them mad with discomfort. It's a prelude to the more grotesque changes to come.

Stage two ramps up the torment. The neck grows inflamed, a deep, angry red, and the itchiness becomes unbearable. Black, sinewy fungus begins to creep over their fingernails and toenails, turning them an eerie, pitch black. The nails grow at a feverish pace, while the redness spreads and the skin acquires a harsh, leathery texture. They're gradually morphing into something far more demonic.

Stage three ushers in a disturbing transformation in diet, with the infected now ravenously consuming live animals. Their skin morphs into a full, leather-like armor. Vision deteriorates to a horrifying range of either blurry, infrared, night vision, or complete blindness. The skin darkens to a sinister, deep red, while the irises and pupils turn an unsettling, ghostly white.

Their hairline recedes rapidly, marking the point of no return where their humanity is completely eroded.

Stage four is the final, grotesque metamorphosis into a full-fledged Demon Zombie, stripped of all traces of their former selves.

Unlike typical zombies, Demon Zombies are a twisted blend of monster and human, each one sporting a grotesque mix of traits and powers. Their appearances are as varied as they are horrifying, from misshapen, tentacled horrors to nightmarish beasts with unnatural limbs. Others sprouting extra limbs or eyes.

Despite their monstrous forms, they retain that mindless, zombie-like drive, which is why we still label them as Demon Zombies.

To avoid succumbing to the same fate, we drape ourselves in thick, heavy clothing—fabric tough enough to withstand the tearing claws of the infected. Our heads are shielded with reinforced helmets and face masks, designed to block any vile fluids that might attempt to breach our defenses.

We've also outfitted our gear with camouflage, hoping it will blend us into the chaotic, apocalyptic landscape and keep us hidden from the nightmarish gaze of Demon Zombies and their Demon Monsters.

"It looks like we're in the clear for now. No monsters or Infected around," one of the survivors announced, his voice a mix of relief and tension. He was on lookout duty, his sharp eyes scanning every shadow and movement for any sign of danger. His vigilance was crucial; he'd give us a shout if anything popped up, so we could get ready for a fight.

For now, it was still 4 in the afternoon, and the monsters and Infected were keeping a low profile. But as soon as night fell, they'd swarm the area.

"We don't have much time, though. Nightfall's coming fast," another survivor pointed out. "Goddamnit! If they had given us this announcement earlier, or hell, if they'd scheduled it for the morning or afternoon, maybe we'd have had more time. But no, they had to dump this shit on us at fucking 10 P.M.!"

"Shhh! Keep it down, or we'll attract their attention," another survivor hissed urgently.

So far, we hadn't been spotted by the zombies, but I wasn't fooling myself into thinking this would be a smooth ride. The journey was far from over, and our destination was still a long way off. This was just the beginning of a brutal and relentless struggle.

Chapter 268: Chihara Akane (3)

Nightfall had descended with an eerie sense of foreboding, signaling the rise of the Demon Zombies. Their guttural growls slithered through the darkness, merging with the thunderous roars of Demon Monsters. As the ominous sounds intensified, the remaining survivors scrambled for the scant safety of hideouts where the likelihood of encountering these monstrosities was reduced.

"Fuck, they're coming...!" one of the people I was with yelled, his voice cracking with terror.

In an instant, I saw them emerging from their concealments. Enormous, grotesque zombies stomped forward, their growls reverberating through the ground and causing it to shudder beneath their weight.

The sheer number of them was overwhelming. It seemed we'd have to carve our way through this monstrous tide. I drew the katana from my back, feeling the sharpness of the blade as it glinted in the dim light, and braced myself for the confrontation. The pistol in my hand had been my lifeline for the past three months of the Demonic Ruination, and it was ready for action once more.

"Raaaaaaah!" The roar shattered the night, making us turn to see a hulking, bulging Demon Zombie charging toward us. Its physique was grotesquely immense, muscles straining and red veins throbbing beneath its mottled skin. It charged with a bone-shaking force, the ground quaking with each of its thunderous steps.

Other nightmarish Demon Zombies joined the fray—one with slithering, writhing tentacles, and another with grotesque, membranous wings unfurling menacingly.

"Incoming!"

We all snapped into battle mode, adrenaline surging as we prepared for the inevitable clash.

I surged forward, charging straight at the colossal zombie while the others took on the less intimidating threats. I couldn't fault them for their caution—they clearly didn't want to risk getting pulverized by those massive, bulging arms. We hadn't exactly formed a cohesive unit; we hadn't even exchanged more than a few words.

We'd only come together by chance over the past week, and it showed in our lack of coordination.

"Shoot it! Shoot it down!" one of the survivors yelled, desperation in his voice as he aimed his rifle at the Winged Zombie. The Winged Zombie, however, was as elusive as a shadow, dodging bullets with a dragonfly's uncanny speed. In a horrifying instant, the shooter's head vanished as if it had been snatched away.

"Wha...?" another survivor stammered, eyes wide with shock. The head of the man fighting the Winged Zombie had simply disappeared. It quickly became apparent that something far more sinister was at play. "It's fucking invisible!?" he shouted, his voice a mixture of terror and disbelief.

Our attention snapped to the new threat. The Invisible Zombie had materialized briefly, taunting us with a mocking gesture before licking its hands and vanishing back into invisibility.

"Stay alert! There's an invisible one!"

We refocused, keeping our eyes on both the massive monsters before us and the elusive, invisible threat.

I managed to slice into the thick, muscular arm of the enormous zombie, but the blade didn't cut through completely due to its sheer bulk and dense muscle. The Demon Zombie retaliated, swinging its enormous fist toward me. I quickly abandoned the katana, now lodged halfway through its arm, and drew my pistol.

I fired rapidly, the sharp crack of gunshots piercing the night air, each explosion sending gunpowder swirling through the atmosphere.

The colossal zombie barely flinched as my bullets hammered into it. Its immense bulk continued its relentless advance, its arm retracting before swinging toward me with crushing force. I nimbly dodged, the air whistling past as its massive fist grazed where I'd been.

A sharp prickling sensation on my left side jolted me. I fired a shot blindly, and the Invisible Zombie emitted a pained groan, confirming I'd hit it. But that didn't mean it was down. I continued to shoot, each bullet ripping through the air with a sharp crack, reloading and firing again as I danced around the enormous zombie's sluggish punches.

Its slow speed allowed me to evade its blows, but the constant pressure kept me on high alert.

"Aaah! No...!" A piercing scream cut through the din of battle.

From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the survivors ensnared by the tentacled zombie. Its grotesque appendages coiled around her, squashing her in a nightmarish embrace.

"N-Nooo! Help... me!"

The tentacled zombie's grip tightened with terrifying force, turning her face a ghastly blue as the life drained from her. The sickening crunch of bones breaking under the pressure filled the air, her eye sockets leaking dark streams of blood as her skull splintered.

The horrific sound of her bones snapping and popping echoed around us until she was crushed to death, her head hanging limply as the last of her life slipped away.

"You bastard...!" one of the survivors roared in rage. He drove his spear through the tentacled zombie's head with a fierce thrust, the creature's grotesque form convulsing before going still. He wrenched the spear free and delivered a brutal kick to the now lifeless body, his anger palpable.

"Keep your eyes open! There are three more!" another survivor shouted, his voice strained with urgency as he pointed out the remaining threats.

One of the survivors, however, broke into a terrified scream and fled in panic.

"Aaaaaah! I can't do this...! I just can't...!" he howled, his voice breaking as he ran for his life. That was a deadly mistake. The winged zombie, with its blindingly fast movements, dove down and snatched him out of the air. "Aaaah, noooo!"

The flying zombie soared high above, its monstrous claws gripping its prey. Up there, it began to tear into him with brutal efficiency.

"Aaaah, n-noooooo! Noooooooooooooo!"

His screams dwindled into the distance as the zombie carried him off into the sky. Blood rained down in a macabre drizzle, staining the ground below as the monster feasted on its victim.

Seeing the carnage around me, a suffocating sense of hopelessness gripped me. There were only two Demon Zombies left, but the battle was turning increasingly brutal. These weren't the last of the

demons we'd face on our path to that building. What if I met my end before even reaching it? The dread clawed at me. What if I was doomed to die here, only to rise as one of those nightmarish monsters?

The despair was almost too much to bear. For three months, I'd been surviving alone, and I knew just how bleak things could get. So many had chosen to end their own lives rather than face becoming a monster. They wanted to die as humans, with a shred of dignity.

No, that was weak and foolish of me.

I couldn't afford to give up here. I had made a promise to myself that I wouldn't let the life that Ichinose-kun—no, Tsubasa-kun—had saved go to waste. I was going to survive this, no matter what.

With that resolve burning in my mind, I swiftly reloaded my gun and resumed firing at the invisible Demon Zombie. Thanks to the blood now coating its form, I could finally make out its shape. I kept my shots steady and relentless, while also evading the massive zombie's swinging fists. As one of its colossal hands slammed down onto the ground, I seized the opportunity.

I yanked the katana free from the flesh, and with a powerful push, I sliced through the huge hand, severing it completely.

"Graaaah!"

The cry of agony from the hulking monster fueled my determination. I bolted toward the now-visible Demon Zombie, knowing that decapitating it would be straightforward. I struck with precision, sending its head flying as blood sprayed in a crimson arc from the stump of its neck. Without missing a beat, I moved behind the remaining massive zombie, launching myself into the air.

My katana plunged into the back of its head, the blade cutting deep towards its mouth. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to finish it off.

The zombie, its remaining arm flailing wildly, tried to grab me from behind. I leaped clear, narrowly avoiding its grasp. It spun around, charging at me with a roar, its arm pulled back to deliver a crushing punch. I jumped back, dodging its attack, all while firing relentlessly with my pistol.

The other survivors joined in, their bullets tearing into the monster's massive, quivering bulk.

"Raaaaagh! Raaaaah!" The zombie roared in agony as the relentless barrage of bullets battered it. Weakening rapidly, it finally collapsed to its knees. Seizing the opportunity, I dashed behind it, yanking the katana from its skull. I plunged it back in with a fierce thrust. The beast convulsed one last time before going limp and crashing to the ground.

To our dismay, the relentless barrage of gunfire had drawn the attention of a whole new wave of Demon Zombies, and they were coming in fast. From the horizon, a massive, grotesque horde emerged, their hungry eyes glowing with malevolence as they surged towards us.

"Shit...!"

"We're screwed! There's no way we can handle this fucking mess!"

"Run, goddammit! To the building!"

In sheer panic, we sprinted for our lives. The image of the approaching army of horrors fueled our desperation as we raced towards the safety of the building, our only hope in this nightmarish fight for survival.

Chapter 269: Chihara Akane (4)

We managed to escape the horde by hiding in crumbling structures, but not without losses. One of the survivors was killed by a Demon Zombie Dog that appeared out of nowhere and took him out instantly. Now, only four of us remained. To make matters worse, we were practically surrounded. Our chances of survival had plummeted from slim to none in just a few hours.

"Damnit! How the fuck are we supposed to get out of this mess?!" one of the survivors shouted, pulling at his hair in sheer desperation.

It was already 7 P.M., with only three hours left until our scheduled rescue. But that seemed almost impossible, given how far we were from safety.

"We're going to die..." another survivor murmured, tears streaming down his face. He was sobbing uncontrollably, having just watched his lover be torn apart right before his eyes.

"We have to keep moving if we're going to make it to the building," said one of the survivors, the calmest of the group. His demeanor was unshakable, and his strength was evident. He didn't appear to be from an Asian country—thanks to the Ruination, people from all over had mixed together, and race no longer mattered.

He looked like a battle-hardened veteran, his uniform bearing the marks of countless conflicts. Among us, he was the strongest.

"If you want to just roll over and die, then go ahead!" shouted the survivor who was sobbing uncontrollably. His voice cracked with panic. He primarily used a rifle, which was nearly useless against Demon Zombies unless equipped with explosives. "Did you not see Mia? She was ripped apart! I couldn't do anything to help her!"

If we step outside, we'll end up like her! I'm not ready to die yet!"

"Shut up, you fucking piece of shit," snapped another survivor. His blonde hair was streaked with dirt, and his face was covered in piercings. Tattoos sprawled across his body, and although he had a slim, unmuscular frame, it was clear he had a different kind of strength. "Do you have any idea how many people have suffered because of spineless idiots like you?! It's your fucking fault your girl died!"

If you want to live, get over it and move on! Or do you want me to put a bullet in your head to shut you up and use you as bait so we can escape? Hell, that's actually a fucking good idea. Sacrificing you might buy us some time to reach the building. You're useless anyway."

As he spoke, he pressed the gun's barrel against the sobbing survivor's forehead.

"W-What?! No... I don't want to die yet...!" the terrified man pleaded, his voice trembling.

"That's not for you to decide," he snarled, his voice dripping with cold menace. "I should have done this earlier to secure my own survival."

"T-This is murder, you know? Do you really think you can just walk away from something like that?" the terrified man stammered.

"Hahaha! Murder? Law? Do you think any fucking laws still matter in this shithole of a world? You're fucking naive!" he laughed, his voice slicing through the tension as he pulled the trigger.

In a swift, decisive move, the military man shoved the gun away from the terrified survivor's forehead.

"What the fuck, old man? Why'd you stop me?" the attacker roared, frustration boiling over.

"Killing someone and using them as bait isn't the answer," the military man replied, his voice steady and commanding. "If we want to survive, we need to maximize our chances and keep every option on the table."

"Fuck that!" the man snapped back, his voice sharp and filled with rage. "Do you think I want to drag around a useless dead weight like him? This guy is a fucking liability. We should just kill him! There's no reason to hesitate—we're talking about our survival here!"

His words reverberated through the room.

"Hey, you. The oriental girl," the man said, his voice slicing through the tension like a knife. "You think it's wise to kill someone and sacrifice them if it boosts your chances of survival, don't you?"

Everyone turned to look at me.

"I can see it in your eyes," he continued, his voice cutting through the dim light. "You've been surviving alone for the past three months, probably teetering on the edge of sanity. That kind of isolation breeds a fierce instinct for self-preservation. Even before the Ruination, you were driven by this extreme need to stay alive. You tell yourself you can't die yet.

Those eyes—those are the eyes of someone determined to cling to life. I'd wager that if you thought killing someone would boost your chances of survival, you'd do it without a second thought."

He was right about one thing. I had an overwhelming sense of self-preservation. I didn't want to die—it was a promise I made to myself. I couldn't waste the life Tsubasa-kun had saved. I had to stay alive. But that didn't mean I was willing to kill someone just to keep breathing.

I turned my gaze away from them, offering no clear response. My silence was as ambiguous as it was telling.

"Tsk. Boring," the man said with a sneer. He finally dropped down, sitting cross-legged on the cold, grimy floor. "So, how the fuck are we getting out of this mess?"

That was the burning question hanging in the air. Outside, the mob of zombies pressed against our sanctuary, a seething mass of rotting flesh and hunger. We were trapped in a dilapidated structure, its crumbling walls barely holding back the relentless tide of monsters. If we didn't make a move soon and head toward the building, there was no telling when the next rescuers might come.

It could be a year, or we might never see another chance. I wasn't sure I could endure this hellhole for much longer.

"I don't think they'll ease up unless we wait here until morning," the military man said, his voice tinged with desperation. "But by then, it'll be too late." His eyes were shadowed with the weight of the situation, reflecting the grim reality that our chances were slipping away.

"With less than three hours until the rescuers arrive, we need to reach the building by exactly 10 P.M. or we'll lose this chance forever. So here's the plan: we sacrifice that useless fucker over there. Shove him out into the horde, and we'll get a brief respite before those monsters tear him apart, his flesh ripped to shreds. It's a fucking brilliant idea."

"Don't do that...! I don't want to end up as zombie chow just so you assholes can survive!"

"That's right. We don't have to sacrifice anyone to survive," the military man said firmly.

"Then what the fuck are we supposed to do? Are we just going to rot here and do nothing?" the tattooed man shouted, his voice cracking with frustration.

I remained silent, a spectator to their heated argument. There was no way I could bust through the swarm of Demon Zombies outside—my strength alone wouldn't cut it.

"Does anyone have any flares or smoke bombs?" the military man asked urgently. "If you do, hand them over. We might be able to use them to create a diversion."

"What the hell would those fucking things do against the zombies outside?" the tattooed man barked back, his tone dripping with skepticism.

The military man stared him down, unwavering. "Flares and smoke bombs can create confusion and buy us time. The zombies are drawn to light and movement. We can use that to our advantage."

The tattooed guy scoffed. "Great, so we throw some fireworks and hope they get distracted long enough for us to slip by? That's your grand plan?"

"It's better than sitting here waiting to die," the military man retorted. "Unless you have a better idea, shut the fuck up and start looking for those flares."

I glanced around at the others. Desperation was etched on their faces. We were running out of time.

"Here," I said, reaching into my backpack and pulling out a couple of flares. "I have these. It's not much, but it might help."

The military man took them with a nod of gratitude. "Good. We'll need everyone to be ready. Once the flares go off, we move fast and stick together. Got it?"

The man with the piercings sneered but didn't argue. He knew as well as we all did that it was our best shot.

The military man turned to me. "You're going to be at the center of this. You seem to know how to handle yourself. Stay close, and if anything happens, we cover each other. Understand?"

I nodded, my grip tightening on my weapon. "Understood."

"Alright, everyone," he said, his voice taking on a commanding tone. "Get ready. We move out in five."

I gripped my gun tightly, feeling its cold weight in my hands. The others did the same, their faces set with grim determination.

"One... two..."

The military man's hand tightened around the door handle, the flare poised and ready.

"Three... four..."

We exchanged glances, our eyes filled with the shared tension and resolve.

Then...

"Five!"

With a sharp jerk, the military man threw open the door. The flare arced through the air, its bright, blinding light cutting through the darkness outside. The sudden illumination made the horde of Demon Zombies turn their attention toward us, their groans and screeches growing louder.

As the flare flared up, the military man led the charge, shouting over the chaos, "Move! Now!"

We surged forward, our hearts pounding in sync with the desperate rush. The zombies, momentarily disoriented by the flare's light, swarmed towards it, creating a small but crucial gap in their ranks.

Chapter 270: Chihara Akane (5)

We managed to break free from the horde, but the flare that had drawn their attention gave us only a brief window to escape. We'd be chased again soon, but there was no time to dwell on it.

"Run! Run as fast as you can and don't look back!" the military man shouted, his voice urgent.

Hordes of zombies were closing in on us, but the military man used the remaining flares to push them apart, creating a gap for us to sprint through.

The building was in sight, close enough that we could clearly see it now. We were almost there. Zombies that came too close were either shot or hacked down.

If it weren't for the overwhelming swarms, we might have made it without such a frantic struggle.

When we reached the entrance, we were met with a massive obstacle.

"Arggh! ArrrrrrrrrrrrrrggghhH!"

A colossal, menacing Demon Zombie blocked our path. It was gargantuan, far larger than the hulking zombie I'd fought earlier. Its skin was a ghastly purplish-blue, mottled and slimy, and its eyes burned with a deep, sinister red. A wicked horn jutted out from the center of its forehead, emphasizing its horrifying appearance as the embodiment of a Demon Zombie.

"Shit! What the fuck is that?!" the tattooed man exclaimed, his voice trembling with shock.

I could understand his reaction. This was something beyond words, an indescribable horror that left us all stunned.

But there was no time to think. If we didn't get inside now, the zombies chasing us would catch up.

"I don't have any more flares..." said the military man.

That left us with no choice but to take down this monstrous creature.

The Demon Zombie finally caught sight of us and unleashed a deafening roar that shook the ground beneath our feet.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The military man charged forward, his rifle blazing with gunfire. But the creature barely flinched. The others joined in, their bullets piercing its flesh only superficially. The shots did little more than make a dent in its grotesque hide.

"I don't think we can take down that fucking monster with just this!" the tattooed man yelled.

"This is hopeless! We're going to die!" the terrified man screamed, his fear palpable.

The military man, while keeping his rifle trained on the Demon Zombie, dashed toward it, deftly evading the beast's massive, slow-moving fists. Each thunderous strike sent shockwaves through the ground, causing it to quake violently beneath our feet, making it nearly impossible to maintain our balance.

Finally, the military man reached a spot directly beneath the Demon Zombie. With its fists failing to reach him, the creature attempted to crush him with its enormous, gnarled feet. The military man dodged the stomps with agile precision. Seizing the moment, he drew a machete from his side and slashed at the Demon Zombie's foot, the blade biting into its thick, grotesque flesh.

"Raaaaaaaaah!"

The Demon Zombie emitted a low, guttural groan, its monstrous form shuddering from the impact. The military man's attack had clearly struck a nerve.

"It didn't slice all the way through, huh?" the military man grunted, his voice strained but determined.  
"But targeting its Achilles tendon should make moving a real bitch for it now."

He yanked his machete free from the Demon Zombie's foot, then quickly swung the blade toward its other foot.

"Raaaaah!"

The machete didn't penetrate as deeply this time, but the blow was enough to stagger the Demon Zombie. The massive creature wobbled, then crashed onto its back with a thunderous thud, its grotesque limbs flailing helplessly as it struggled to rise.

"He's strong..." I muttered to myself, awestruck by his sheer power. It wasn't entirely surprising, considering he was a veteran soldier, but witnessing it up close was something else. I'd never seen a veteran soldier fight in person, nor even online, and watching it unfold right before my eyes was mind-blowing. The intensity, the precision—it was beyond anything I could imagine trying to replicate.

"Hurry...! We don't have much time...!" he shouted, urgency dripping from his voice as he dashed into the building. Behind us, the Demon Zombies were closing in fast, their grotesque forms lumbering closer by the second, their guttural growls echoing through the night.

We sprinted towards the entrance, adrenaline pumping through our veins. As soon as we were inside, we slammed the door shut with a resounding thud. We grabbed anything and everything we could find—desks, chairs, cabinets—and piled them against the door, creating a makeshift barricade.

The pounding and scratching from the other side intensified, but our blockade held, keeping the nightmarish creatures at bay.

"Phew..."

We all exhaled deeply, the tension melting away as we took stock of our narrow escape. That had been incredibly nerve-racking. I'd faced countless dangers before, but this was the closest I'd ever come to death.

"Alright, the next step is to get to the top," the military man said, his voice calm and commanding despite the tension.

He was right. This wasn't over yet. We had to scale the building and make our way up to the rooftop.

"The elevators are probably out of commission," he continued. "So we'll need to take the stairs. First, let's check this floor for anything useful. And watch out for the windows—don't get too close. The Infected might spot you, smash through the glass, and come flooding in. Luckily, it looks like survivors were here before us and barricaded the windows."

Still, stay clear of them and don't wander around carelessly."

We followed his instructions and began searching the floor. The terrified man was visibly shaking, his hands fumbling as he tried to find anything of use. His timid nature made his efforts seem even more desperate. The tattooed man searched as well, though with noticeable reluctance. After a thorough but fruitless search, we had no choice but to move on.

The ominous growls of zombies echoed through the walls, so close we could almost feel them vibrating. It was clear that zombies were not only on this floor but likely above us as well—probably extending up through several more floors.

"Get ready..." the military man said, his voice low and steady, preparing us for the next fight.

As we cautiously ascended the stairwell, the sound of growling grew louder, more aggressive. The oppressive atmosphere made each step feel like a descent into hell. With each floor we climbed, the sounds of the undead grew closer, their hunger almost palpable.

We finally reached the next floor, and the scene was grim. The corridor was littered with debris, broken furniture, and the scattered remnants of what used to be a barricade. The faint, flickering light from a single dying bulb barely illuminated the darkness.

"Stay sharp," the military man warned as we pressed forward.

Suddenly, a loud crash echoed from the end of the corridor. A massive Demon Zombie, even more grotesque than the last, burst through a wall. It was a hulking monstrosity with sickly green, pulsating veins running across its body. Its eyes glowed with an eerie yellow light, and its mouth was a gaping maw of dripping, venomous fangs.

"Shit! Not another one!" the tattooed man swore.

The Demon Zombie charged at us with an earth-shaking roar, its enormous fists smashing through the debris like paper. We barely had time to react. The military man fired his rifle, the shots echoing through the narrow hallway. Each bullet struck the Demon Zombie's hide with a sickening thud, but it barely flinched. Its thick, rotting flesh absorbed the impact with horrifying ease.

In a desperate bid to create some distance, I grabbed a nearby fire extinguisher and hurled it at the Demon Zombie. The explosion of white foam was momentarily blinding, but it only seemed to anger the beast further. It roared in frustration, swinging its massive arms and sending chunks of the floor and walls flying.

"Get the fuck out of the way!" the military man shouted. He lunged forward, weaving between the Demon Zombie's wild swings. He managed to close the gap, dodging a particularly vicious swipe that cracked the floor beneath him. With a determined grunt, he thrust his machete upward, aiming for the exposed underside of the Demon Zombie's chin.

The machete sliced through the Demon Zombie's flesh with a sickening crunch. The beast let out a deafening screech, stumbling back and clutching its mutilated face.

The tattooed man and I used this moment of distraction to our advantage. I pulled out a makeshift molotov cocktail from my backpack and tossed it at the Demon Zombie. The bottle shattered against the creature's chest, the flames quickly spreading across its oily skin. The fiery blaze illuminated the dark corridor, casting eerie shadows that danced along the walls.

The Demon Zombie roared in agony, its movements becoming increasingly erratic. The intense heat and flames seemed to weaken it, its monstrous frame swaying unsteadily.

"Push forward!" the military man ordered, his voice strained but commanding. "We need to get to the rooftop before more of these fuckers show up!"

We raced past the burning Demon Zombie, its screams of pain echoing in our ears. As we ascended the next flight of stairs, the sounds of the creature's desperate thrashing faded behind us. We knew that the fight was far from over, but for now, we had bought ourselves a precious moment of respite.