

The World 271

Chapter 271: Chihara Akane (6)

I panted heavily as I sprinted toward the door. Just as I burst through, it slammed shut behind me, the deafening sound cutting off the relentless moans of the zombies right on my heels. The three men with me had managed to close it just in time.

We all gasped for breath, our chests heaving as we tried to steady ourselves.

"We just need to go up one more floor, and we'll be on the rooftop," the military man said, his voice strained but resolute. "We only have to endure one more floor, and then we'll survive this."

"How much time do we have left, oriental girl?" the tattooed man demanded.

"One hour before 10 P.M.," I panted, struggling to catch my breath.

"Given how things are going so far, I think we'll make it. Our timing will depend on the situation on the next floor," the military man said, his eyes darting nervously as he assessed the group. "Do you all want to take a breather now, or should we press on?"

"I think it's smarter to keep moving," the terrified man said, his voice shaky. "We can rest once we're on the rooftop."

I agreed with the plan. When the military man's gaze turned to me, I gave a firm nod.

"Alright. We'll head to the next floor now. Is everyone ready?"

We all nodded in unspoken agreement, silently acknowledging that he would take charge. It felt natural, given his extensive experience and his role as a veteran soldier. His authority was palpable, and it was clear he knew how to lead us through the chaos.

"Are you holding up alright?" the military man asked, his eyes scanning me with genuine concern.

"Yes," I said.

"You must have endured a lot to survive this apocalypse at such a young age. I'm guessing you were still in high school when it all started," he said, his voice carrying a mix of sympathy and admiration.

"...Well, I was in my third year of high school when it happened," I confessed.

"I see," the military man said, his gaze softening with a hint of sympathy. The way he looked at me was reminiscent of how a father might gaze at his daughter—tender and protective. It was a stark contrast to my own father, who was nothing more than a scumbag. I was relieved he was already among the infected.

"I bet you and my daughter would get along famously if you two ever met," he added with a wistful smile.

His expression made it seem like he was seeing his daughter in me. I couldn't relate, though. My own father was so vile that, if I had to imagine someone in that role, it would probably be this tattooed man.

"I didn't have a daughter myself, but I kind of wish I did," the terrified man said, his voice cracking with a mix of sadness and longing. "Mia didn't want one, though. She thought a child would be a hassle. And honestly, she probably didn't want a child with me because she wasn't really committed to our relationship. I mean, she was cheating on me with another man.

It's not surprising—I was just a low-salary worker with no future. Who'd want to marry someone like that if they didn't want their life to turn to shit? But if I survive this mess, I'd want to get married and have a daughter. It'd be a nice change. I wish there was a paradise far away from this hell."

"Save the sob story for later. It's getting fucking annoying," the tattooed man said sharply, his patience wearing thin. "If you want to escape this hellhole and live a different life, focus on surviving first. Stop wasting time thinking about shit that doesn't matter in this fucked-up world."

That's right. As much as the tattooed man was a complete asshole about it, he made a solid point. There was no time to dwell on "what ifs" or fantasize about idyllic scenarios in this apocalyptic nightmare. Being optimistic was fine, but being so optimistic that you ignored reality was a waste of breath. We hadn't even made it out yet. We didn't know if there was a paradise left in this world.

If there was, that would be nice, but right now, it felt like nothing more than a distant dream.

"Enough with the chatter. We need to focus on the task at hand—getting across this floor and reaching the other side."

The reason we had to navigate to the other side of the building was due to its bizarre, labyrinthine design. Each floor forced us to traverse the length of the building to reach the stairs going up. It was an odd setup, but I guess many employees didn't give a thought about the stairs thanks to the elevators. Too bad those elevators were useless now.

Although the electricity was still running, using the elevator with such unreliable power was too risky. That's why we had to cross this floor to find the next set of stairs.

"Okay," said the military man, his voice steady as he headed for the stairs. He ascended and, upon reaching the top, grabbed the door knob and turned it just enough to peer through the narrow gap. We didn't need to see more to know how many of those zombies were on this floor.

"Fuck," cursed the tattooed man, his frustration evident. "Have they turned this place into a whole damn colony?"

"Shit. What the hell? How many of these fuckers are there?" he added, his voice tinged with disbelief.

The Demon Zombies were so densely packed that they were practically climbing over each other. The first floor had none at all, and the second floor had just one massive Demon Zombie. By the third floor, their numbers began to increase slightly, with more showing up up to the fifth floor. On the sixth floor, their numbers surged dramatically, only to decrease again on the seventh.

The eighth floor was a nightmare, requiring us to use distraction tactics and navigate around them just to reach the next set of stairs. Now, on the ninth floor, the sheer volume of them was overwhelming. From where we stood, it was clear just how bad things had gotten.

"We can't fight this many..." the military man said, his voice heavy with resignation. Even he was starting to grasp the severity of our situation. "Wait. Look over there. It seems like they're only clustered in this section of the floor. The other side doesn't have nearly as many."

I hadn't noticed it at first, but now that he pointed it out, he was right. The Demon Zombies appeared to fill the building, but that was just the view from where we stood. If you looked closely, you'd see there was a significant amount of space behind the horde.

"What the fuck do we do?" the terrified man stammered, his voice quivering as he shook in his boots, clearly overwhelmed by the chaos.

"Get these bastards to move away from this section and shove them over to that part of the floor so we can find a way around them," the tattooed man ordered, his voice steady and commanding despite the situation.

"They don't look like they could even scratch our protective gear, so it should be safe to push them aside and navigate around them. We can handle this," the military man added, his tone firm and reassuring.

"Now let's go!" the military man shouted, his voice echoing with urgency.

With a collective heave, we slammed the door open with all our might, using the momentum to force the cluster of Demon Zombies back. The groaning creatures staggered, their grotesque forms momentarily disoriented by the sudden shove.

We immediately sprang into action, the air thick with the stench of decay and the screeches of the Demons. Weapons were drawn and our protective gear clattered as we engaged the horde. Each swing of our blades cut through the air with a brutal efficiency, and the sharp crack of our firearms punctuated the chaos.

The Demons, disoriented and reeling from our initial push, began to regroup, their numbers still overwhelming but their movements becoming more erratic.

Our strategy was clear: keep the pressure on them, push them back further into the corner, and create a path for us to advance. As we fought, the floor beneath us became slick with blood and the remnants of the Demons, adding a layer of treacherous footing to our struggle. With every step, we maneuvered carefully, eyes scanning for the next threat as we fought our way forward.

We finally found a slight gap and seized the opportunity, rushing through it. We made it to the other side, though there were still plenty of Demon Zombies left behind. With the way clear for now, we decided to head straight for the door.

It didn't dawn on us that the door might not open as easily as it had on the other floors. We were so accustomed to smooth progress that we didn't anticipate any problems.

"Fuck...! It won't open!" the tattooed man shouted, panic creeping into his voice.

The Demon Zombies were closing in fast. We were on the verge of being surrounded.

The military man used his body to slam into the door, shattering it. But in doing so, we lost our chance to block the horde with it.

"Head for the rooftop!" he ordered urgently.

We scrambled up the stairs, finding the door to the rooftop easily accessible. The three of us rushed toward it, but the zombies were closing in fast. If we didn't get the door shut soon, they'd be on us, turning our escape into a dead end.

It was then that...

"Eh?"

The tattooed man suddenly kicked the terrified man, who was still struggling to pass through the rooftop door and was lagging behind, right into the waiting horde of zombies. The Demons immediately swarmed over him, tearing him apart with brutal efficiency. His protective gear proved useless as they crushed his bones and shredded his flesh.

He was devoured alive, his screams echoing through the chaos. Blood gurgled from his mouth as the zombies feasted on him.

The tattooed man slammed the door shut and quickly secured it with a rusty metal bar, bending it into place to lock it firmly.

We were safe for the moment, with nothing left to worry about except waiting for the rescuer.

But my mind was struggling to process what had just happened.

Chapter 272: Chihara Akane (7)

"Phew, that was close, wasn't it?" the tattooed man said nonchalantly, his tone suggesting he saw nothing extraordinary about what had just happened.

The military man, finally breaking free from his shock, marched over and seized the tattooed man by the collar. With a powerful shove, he slammed him against the wall, the impact echoing through the room.

"Why the fuck did you do that?!" he demanded, his voice a low growl of fury.

"Come on, now. I saved our asses, didn't I? So why the hell are you so pissed instead of showing some fucking gratitude?" the tattooed man retorted with a smug grin. His expression made it clear he had absolutely no remorse for his reckless actions.

"You just fucking killed him, you bastard," the military man growled, pressing his face so close that their noses were almost touching. "You destroyed the hope of a man who just wanted to survive! You killed him!"

"I did no such thing," the tattooed man replied coolly. "He died at the hands of zombies. I didn't spill a single drop of his blood. How can you blame me for his death?"

"You kicked him toward the horde! If you hadn't done that, he might still be alive!" the military man shot back, his anger boiling over.

"If I hadn't kicked him, it would've been too late to close the door," the tattooed man countered, his tone unwavering. "If I hadn't done it, those zombies wouldn't have stopped at the stairs; they'd have come straight to this rooftop. Do you really think we would've survived if I hadn't acted? There's no way in hell."

He was right, even if his actions were unforgivable. If he hadn't kicked the terrified man into the horde, the zombies would've been right on top of us, and we'd never have had a chance to close the door. Without his brutal decision, it would've been a dead end for us, and the infected would've swarmed the rooftop.

The military man understood that now, but he couldn't bring himself to forgive the tattooed man for what he'd done.

"I would never sacrifice a comrade just to save my own ass," he said through gritted teeth, his voice tight with anger.

"We're not comrades. Can you ditch your military mindset for a second? Do you honestly believe that teamwork and camaraderie mean a damn in this fucking hellhole of a world? You might be older, but you're still too naive to see that."

The military man's face darkened with barely contained fury. He lowered his head, his jaw clenched tightly, then drew back his powerful arm and swung his fist toward the tattooed man. The tattooed man didn't even blink as the massive fist hurtled toward him. Instead of landing a hit, the fist smashed into the wall beside his head with a bone-jarring thud.

The impact left a spiderweb of cracks in the wall. Only then did the military man finally ease his grip on the tattooed man's collar.

"There's only a few minutes left before 10 P.M.," the tattooed man said, his voice cutting through the tension with grim urgency. "We need to stay sharp for those giant bats. Use the flare gun when the time comes so the rescuers can spot us at the last moment. We don't want to attract those fucking giant bats."

He jabbed a finger toward the flare gun resting on the ground, its metal catching the last glimmers of fading light.

Just then, the sound of helicopter rotors began to slice through the night, their relentless whirring growing louder and more insistent, vibrating through the air like a pulse.

"Here it is!" the tattooed man shouted, excitement in his voice as he pointed to the distant helicopter slowly descending.

"Point it upward and shoot!" the military man commanded, his voice urgent.

I followed his instructions, aiming the flare gun skyward and pulling the trigger. The flare shot into the night, a brilliant streak of light cutting through the darkness, as if tearing a hole in the inky blackness.

"I think they saw it," the tattooed man said. "Fuck, after three long months, I'm finally getting the fuck out of this hellhole."

I was honestly relieved myself. For the first time in what felt like ages, I felt my knees nearly buckle from the weight of the relief. The sound of the helicopter's rotors was deafening now that it was so close. The air around us felt heavy, almost suffocating, from the churning of the helicopter's blades. A figure, clearly one of the rescuers, leaned out and shouted down at us.

"There are three of you?!" he yelled over the roar. "Oh no, that's a problem! We only have room for one more person!"

"What?!" the military man shouted back, his voice a mix of anger and disbelief. "You're telling me that only one of us can get on that fucking helicopter?!"

"It's unfortunate, but yes, only one of you can board!" the rescuer's voice cut through the chaotic whirring of the helicopter blades, a harsh reality against the backdrop of desperation. "We've been picking up survivors all along the way. If you don't make a decision on who gets on, we're fucking leaving without you."

The military man's eyes locked onto me.

"Fine then. At least you can go," he said. "One of us is getting on this helicopter, and it looks like it's going to be you."

"Get moving then, or we'll attract the bats!" the rescuer urged, urgency lacing his tone.

I stared at the man. "Are you absolutely sure about this?" I asked. "There's a real chance you might not escape, especially since the only other route is through that door, which is packed with zombies. Do you really want me to be the one to go up there?"

He hesitated, his gaze dropping as he fumbled in his pocket. Slowly, he pulled out a golden chain. When he opened his hand, a small locket lay nestled in his palm. He opened the locket and stared at the contents for a long moment, his expression haunted. Then, he continued, his voice thick with emotion, "...I can't bear the thought of watching someone who reminds me of my daughter die.

I don't want to relive the moment I lost her. I might not have been able to save her, but if I can save someone who looks like her, it might make things a little better."

I honestly didn't know how to respond. The words felt stuck in my throat. My own fractured relationship with my father had left me with no positive memories of father figures, and I struggled to connect with them. Yet, his pain was palpable, and though I couldn't fully empathize, his intentions were clear.

"You might not have been able to save your daughter, but you've saved me," I said, my voice steady but soft. "That alone shows that you're a great father." I attempted to muster a smile, but it came out as a strained attempt, my lips struggling to curve upwards.

The military man stared at me, his eyes widening in shock. Then, his expression softened, and a genuine smile spread across his face. "Thank you for saying that," he said, his voice carrying a note of heartfelt relief.

I glanced up, realizing that I was now the only one left to make it out. I was about to climb the rope ladder that had been dropped by the helicopter when a guttural groan pierced the air behind me.

"Do you really think I'm going to stand by and let my chance to escape this shithole slip away just because she looks like your daughter? Fat fucking chance!"

I spun around, my heart pounding, to see the tattooed man, his face twisted in a sneer, driving a knife deep into the military man's back. The blade sank with a sickening squelch.

"Nngggh?! You...!" the military man gasped, his voice choked with pain and shock.

"Shush! Let the virus work its way through your body. The blade I just shoved into your back is the same one I used on those infected. You know what that means, right? It means the virus is now coursing through your veins," the tattooed man said, his grin stretching wider with malevolent glee.

"Go up, now!" the military man shouted at me, his voice hoarse with desperation.

"Oh no, you don't!"

The tattooed man yanked the blade out of the military man's back with a sickening squelch and swung it at me. I barely dodged the initial strike, but he swiftly redirected his attack, the edge of the blade slicing through my arm. The sharp sting of pain flared as blood oozed from the small cut, trickling down my skin.

"Got ya!" the tattooed man jeered, his voice dripping with malice. "Now both of you are definitely dead."

As I staggered, still stunned from the cut, he shoved me roughly aside and scrambled onto the rope ladder. His movements were swift, almost triumphant.

"Now go up! I'm the one escaping from this shithole!" he taunted, his voice echoing with cruel satisfaction. The helicopter's blades roared to life, and it began to pivot away, the noise deafening as it ascended into the sky.

Meanwhile, I could feel the virus starting to course through me, a chilling, unsettling sensation spreading through my veins like icy tendrils.

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I could feel the virus surging through my veins, a searing sensation that dulled all my senses. My vision blurred and twisted into a grotesque shade of purple.

"Aaargghh!" A tortured scream erupted behind me. I whipped around to see the military man in the throes of transformation. "I... I can't... that man... that man betrayed..." His voice gurgled, blood pouring from his mouth with each agonized word.

His muscles strained grotesquely, bulging and turning a sickly gray.

I was succumbing to the same fate. My eyes felt like they were about to explode, blood gushing from my mouth in a hot, viscous torrent. I vomited the bloodied liquid as I crumpled to my knees, my body wracked with the horrific changes.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaargghhh!" I screamed as the virus invaded my brain. I felt it tearing through my flesh, ripping it apart and replacing it with a grotesque, demonic tissue. My veins darkened, pulsating a sickly shade of purple, while my hair shifted from the roots to the tips, becoming a dark, unnatural shade of purple.

I fought with everything I had to suppress it. I struggled to stop my thoughts from spiraling out of control. My head shook violently, my teeth clenched hard enough to hurt, and I did everything in my power to hold on to sanity. But it was futile.

Through my distorted, purple-tinted vision, I watched as the military man's grip faltered, and the locket he was holding fell from his trembling hand.

"Ahhh...! Aaaah...! Raaaaagh!" His voice had twisted into a guttural, demonic snarl. His eyes, his voice, his entire body—everything had undergone a grotesque transformation. The sheer volume of the virus coursing through him must have been immense, accelerating his change far beyond mine.

He turned towards me, his eyes glowing with a menacing, blood-red light.

"Raaagh!"

He didn't recognize me as one of the Demon Zombies yet, since my transformation was still in progress. With a primal roar, he charged at me. His massive fist, already formidable when he was human, was now grotesquely swollen. If that fist connected with my head, it would surely send it flying.

But just before his colossal fist could smash into my face, he abruptly halted. The fist hovered inches away, its massive shadow threatening to engulf me. Then, with a jarring motion, he spun around, his gaze locked on the helicopter soaring above.

"Grrr....!"

He stepped back, gathering momentum, and then launched himself forward. His leap was explosive, propelling him high into the air with terrifying grace. He covered the distance between the building and the helicopter in a single, monstrous bound, vanishing into the sky with ease.

Before he could reach the helicopter, it retaliated with a barrage from a gatling gun. The relentless bullets pummeled him, but taking down a Demon Zombie with mere firearms was no easy feat. He pressed on, crashing into the helicopter with bone-shattering force. The impact was devastating, sending the helicopter into a fiery explosion that lit up the night sky.

The wreckage plummeted to the ground, only to erupt once more in a blinding fireball.

I watched the chaotic scene unfold, the flames painting the night with their violent glow. My vision, now tainted in a sickly purple haze, distorted the view into a twisted, surreal nightmare. I collapsed onto my back, the relentless fire casting flickering shadows as I lay there.

I had no idea who I was or what I had become. I only knew that I had been walking non-stop, with no sense of where I was headed. It felt like I had been alive for... I didn't know anymore. Days and years had blurred together.

Strangely enough, I never felt hungry. I didn't get tired either. Sleep was unnecessary. I couldn't speak, and I could only act on my instincts.

Wherever I was, it was cold. Snow blanketed everything around me.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered by loud explosions. The blasts echoed all around, and I felt the shockwaves ripple through the air toward me.

I could hear planes roaring above—fighter jets, maybe? They might have been coming to rescue survivors. But no, that couldn't be right. The apocalypse had raged on for years. More likely, the remnants of humanity were still locked in a desperate struggle against the demons, trying to fend off the ongoing chaos.

The explosions were growing louder and closer, each blast shaking the ground and sending icy tremors through my body.

A gnawing dread took hold. Was I destined to be obliterated without ever being noticed? I didn't want that.

My body seemed instinctively drawn to the explosive sounds, compelled to move towards them.

But there was another force within me, a powerful drive urging me to escape. It was as if an invisible hand of self-preservation was pushing me away from the danger. I couldn't fully grasp why I felt this way, but the intense urge to get away was undeniable and overwhelming.

Instead of joining the other Demon Zombies and moving towards the explosions, I ran away from them. Even though my movements were sluggish and unsteady, I kept running.

Behind me, explosions continued to erupt as fighter jets relentlessly bombed the area. I ran and ran, driven by a desperate need to escape, until I reached the edge of a cliff. Below me stretched an ocean of ice, so frigid that the water had frozen solid.

I was left with only two choices: face the relentless bombing or take a deadly plunge into the icy abyss.

I jumped off the cliff just as an explosion erupted behind me. It seemed I had made the decision to leap at the last possible moment before being engulfed by the blast.

My body plunged toward the frozen ocean below, and then, with a jarring impact, I crashed into the ice.

Jessica's POV

I was a scientist, born in the 73rd year of the Ruination Calendar on the island known as Hope. This island was humanity's last bastion, a sanctuary where the remnants of our species had managed to survive the relentless devastation.

Hope was the final stronghold fighting back against the demons that had waged war on humanity 98 years ago. I dedicated my efforts to developing a cure for the virus unleashed by the ruination, striving to save what was left of our world from the horrors that plagued it.

It was now the 98th year of the Ruination Calendar. Had we stuck with the Gregorian Calendar, it would be the year 2110. The Gregorian Calendar ended in 2012, replaced by the Ruination Calendar. Nearly a century had passed since the ruination, and with 98% of Earth ravaged, humanity had been forced to retreat to this isolated island.

Once barren, the island had become a beacon of hope. We rebuilt from the ashes, repopulating until around 7,500 people called it home. Now, humanity was pushing the boundaries further, creating artificial islands using a specialized sand developed by our team of scientists, of which I was a part.

With a staggering 1:10 ratio of men to women, harems had become the norm, making polygamy a standard practice in this era.

Even with this widespread acceptance, I remained single. The reason was simple: I couldn't bear the thought of sharing my love with a man surrounded by a harem of other women. I clung to the monogamous ideals that my parents had taught me. Now, approaching thirty and still without a partner, my colleagues were relentless in their pressure for me to find someone.

They warned that if I didn't act soon, I might miss my chance at marriage entirely.

It was a rule that women should marry before the age of 30. Younger women had higher fertility rates, leading to more children and boosting the chances of ensuring humanity's future. Moreover, if a man died, the woman was still responsible for finding a new partner to continue producing offspring. This was crucial for maximizing human reproduction and keeping our species thriving.

"That's why you need to consider it now before it's too late," urged my colleague, one of the persistent voices pressuring me into marriage. "You're a stunning woman, and it would be a shame not to use that. Plus, you're approaching thirty, right? It's going to get harder to find a match as you get older."

"I'm not interested in marrying a man who's already juggling three other wives, Evan," I replied, my eyes scanning the devastated area where the Slayers—a group renowned for their Demon Zombie battles—had unleashed their bombs last week. The landscape was a grim, bombed-out ruin, a stark contrast to how it had looked before the destruction.

"We're in the 22nd century now," Evan said, frustration edging his voice. "Why the hell are you still clinging to the idea of monogamy?"

"Because that's what my parents believed in. They stayed faithful to each other," I said, my gaze fixed on the screen. Suddenly, something emerged from the sea, drawing my attention. "What is that?"

"Hmm? What's what?" Evan asked, peering over at the monitor I was watching.

The drone's camera closed in on the strange figure rising from the water. As the image sharpened, it revealed a woman with vibrant purple hair.

Chapter 274: Shredica (1)

2nd Month, Year 98th of the Ruination Calendar

Jessica's POV

"You saw a woman emerge from the water in the area we bombed last week?" Minerva asked, her voice steady but laced with disbelief. She was a grizzled veteran, approaching 60, with a mechanical arm gleaming under the dim light and an eyepatch covering her missing eye. Her rugged appearance and the metallic clink of her prosthetic contrasted sharply with her intense gaze.

"Are you absolutely sure you didn't see wrong, Jessica?"

"I didn't," I replied, hitting the button on my computer to replay the footage. "This footage shows the area before it was bombed. As you can see, it was crawling with infected. Then, just minutes later, the Slayers arrived and started the bombing. You can clearly see in the footage that when the explosions began, the infected surged toward the source of the noise.

Infected are drawn to sounds, so that's expected. But what's odd here..."

I pointed at the screen, highlighting the anomaly.

Minerva's eyes locked onto the screen where I pointed, and her gaze widened in shock. "What?"

"Exactly," I confirmed, pointing at the footage. "Instead of charging towards the explosions like the others, this one actually veered away from them. It even jumped off the cliff as if it was desperately trying to escape the bombing."

The infected on the screen wasn't lured by the chaos—it was running for its life, clearly trying to evade the destruction.

"How could this happen? Could it be a survivor?" Minerva pondered aloud. "No, it's been years since we declared humanity extinct on the main islands. There's no way a survivor could still be there. So, what is it? A demon, perhaps?"

No, it's acting with a level of self-preservation that demons don't usually exhibit. It can't be a demon, either. Then what the hell is it?"

"That's why I need you to go back and retrieve it," I said firmly. "If it's alive, that's fine. If it's already dead, that's fine too. The only thing I need is the body."

.I want to dissect the body and find out what caused this infected one to behave so differently, to actually flee from the explosions.

"You want me to go back and retrieve it?" Minerva asked, her voice sharp and edged with skepticism.

"Yes," I confirmed, my tone steady. "If I can analyze it, we might uncover something crucial that could potentially lead to a cure for the infection."

Minerva eyed me with a sharp, doubtful gaze. "Do you really believe that? You've been chasing a cure for, what, five years now? And yet, you haven't made any significant progress. Maybe you should focus more on finding a husband instead of wasting time on a cure that might never materialize."

"Finding a husband isn't on my radar right now," I countered, my voice steady and resolute. "My priority is to develop a cure to halt the infection and the ruination. It's vital for preserving our species, and I'm committed to that goal."

"Personally," Minerva said, her voice tinged with a mix of concern and resignation, "I don't really want a cure if it means sacrificing my daughter's happiness."

"My happiness is in finding a cure to save humanity," I stated with unwavering resolve.

Minerva's gaze fell on me, her eyes clouded with sadness and concern.

Minerva's POV

The sky stretched out in a brilliant, unblemished blue, while my fighter aircraft tore through the expanse with a steady roar. Below, the ocean mirrored the same boundless blue, stretching out to the horizon. Other fighter aircraft flanked me, cutting through the air in tight formation.

"We're closing in on the area," I transmitted over the radio. "Be on high alert. We have no idea if there are still any infected in the vicinity."

"Yes, Captain," the other Slayers responded in unison.

We finally reached the site of last week's bombing. What was once a flat, icy plane had now become a dilapidated, crumbling wasteland. The area looked worse for wear, a desolate stretch of ice and rubble.

We hovered our fighter aircraft above the island before descending to the ground. As soon as our boots hit the snow, it crunched beneath us with a satisfying, crisp sound.

"Okay, Jessica, I'm on the ground. Where exactly did you spot it?" I asked through the radio.

"It's over there," Jessica's voice crackled in response. "Out past the cliff, in the ocean below."

"It looks like whatever you found there isn't around anymore," I said, peering down at the ocean. All I could see was a vast, unbroken expanse of blue, stretching endlessly.

"Her body might have sunk to the bottom of the ocean," Jessica's voice crackled through the radio.

"Do you really think the body of an infected will help in finding the cure?" I questioned, my tone skeptical. "It seems like a risky endeavor for something that might not be worth it."

"Mother, in all my years, I've never seen an infected make a decision to save itself," Jessica shot back. "Have you ever witnessed anything like that?"

"I haven't, but staking our survival on one infected doing something out of the ordinary is a dangerous gamble," I said, my gaze fixed on the vast, unyielding ocean below. "What if we dive in and come up empty-handed, with nothing that could advance our cause?"

"There's no way to guarantee we'll find anything unless we take the plunge," Jessica countered, her voice steady and resolute.

"That's true, but I'm still not sure it's wise to return here," I said, the waves shimmering under the sunlight as I stared down at them. "I'm going in. Amanda, are the suits ready yet?" I inquired through another radio channel.

"Yes, they're on their way down now," came the quick response.

Suddenly, three bulky mechanical suits descended from above, landing heavily on the snowy plains below. These suits were the same ones we'd used for battling Demon Zombies in the past. Nowadays, we rarely donned them, preferring instead to integrate mechanical enhancements directly into our bodies, making us more agile and powerful.

The mechanical suits were cumbersome and less efficient compared to our personal enhancements. I lost my arm back in my first year of fighting Demon Zombies, and after that, they outfitted me with a mechanical arm, which proved invaluable in combat.

So why were we donning these suits now? It was simple: we couldn't traverse the icy ocean with just our bare bodies. We needed protection from the harsh elements and potential dangers lurking beneath the surface. That's why the mechanical suits were necessary for this mission.

"Alright, let's suit up, ladies," I said. The other Slayers responded with a crisp "Yes, Captain!" and the three of us began the process of donning our bulky gear.

The suits were ridiculously heavy. This was the part that sucked the most. All the mobility I'd honed in military training felt useless once I was encased in this bulky armor.

"Okay, let's go." I gave the command, and we leaped from the cliff into the icy ocean below. The moment we hit the surface, the ice shattered with a violent crack, sending chunks of it scattering.

"Report back if you spot anything," I instructed the others as we plunged into the freezing water.

The other two Slayers split off in different directions, their lights piercing the murky darkness of the water.

"This place feels incredibly eerie," I muttered to myself. "Where the hell did that infected end up?"

The water was thick with sediment, making visibility almost zero. I had a sinking feeling that locating the infected might take months, or even years. It was a daunting task from the start, but knowing my daughter, she wouldn't stop until she got what she needed. And if finding that infected was what she wanted, then I had to help her find it.

It was then that—

"What the...?!"

Huge, sinuous tentacles suddenly surged into my field of vision. I flicked my light in their direction and came face-to-face with a gargantuan octopus. Calling it big was an understatement; this fucker was massive.

I struggled to fend off the tentacles, but my mechanical suit was proving to be utterly useless in this watery nightmare. Slow on land, it was even more sluggish underwater. The tentacles wrapped around me with relentless force, dragging me inexorably toward the octopus's gaping maw.

"Fuck! Eject!" I yelled, and the suit's rear panels blasted me out with a sudden jolt. As I was flung free, I was immediately hit with the biting cold of the water.

Fuck. Am I really going to die here?

I tried to swim, but the freezing water drained my body heat almost instantly. My limbs felt numb, and my consciousness was beginning to slip away.

Just before it fully overtook me, I caught sight of someone swimming toward me through the murky depths.

I woke to the crackling sound of wood burning. My eyes fluttered open, and I focused on the scene around me. A campfire blazed beside me, casting flickering shadows on the ground, and I noticed my clothes had been replaced with something else.

"Where... am I?" I murmured.

I remembered someone saving me, but the details were hazy. Then I saw her, sitting across the campfire. Her hair was a striking purple, and her eyes matched, radiating an otherworldly beauty.

She was devouring something, and my eyes widened as I realized it was a massive tentacle, skewered and roasted.

Chapter 275: Shredica (2)

"Uh, are you the one who saved me?" I asked her.

The woman whipped her head around to face me, her purple eyes locking onto mine with a predatory glare. Her stare was intense, almost like she was sizing me up. This woman was anything but ordinary.

"Thank you," I said, trying to show my gratitude.

"Grrr..."

The woman let out a low, throaty growl that seemed to vibrate through the air. As I had suspected, she was infected, but she wasn't lunging at me or baring her teeth. Her demeanor was oddly calm compared to the other infected.

Jessica had been right. This woman might be humanity's hope. Jessica had seen it, and now I could too. Here was an infected who not only exhibited self-preservation but also demonstrated the capacity to save someone and resist the urge to devour human flesh. It was both eerie and intriguing.

"...Can you... understand me?" I asked carefully, my voice barely above a whisper. I didn't want to alarm her.

The woman growled at me again, her eyes burning with intensity. Despite her fierce glare, the sight of her cheeks bulging comically with the tentacle in her mouth was oddly humorous.

After a tense moment, she gave a slow nod, confirming that she could understand me. This was... incredibly fascinating. Though she probably couldn't speak.

"Do you remember who you are?" I asked, my voice tentative.

With her teeth clamped onto the tentacle, she shook her head. So, she didn't remember herself, huh?

Suddenly, she stood up, her movements sharp and deliberate. She fixed her gaze on me for a moment before her eyes darted to an unusual direction. Her focus seemed distant and then, with a purposeful gesture, she pointed toward it. Turning back to me, she let out a low, guttural groan, clearly signaling me to follow her.

I rose and followed her lead. We emerged into a desolate area, strewn with rubble and the shattered remnants of structures that once stood tall. The place we'd been earlier was a cramped, cave-like nook filled with debris. It appeared to be man-made, though I couldn't shake the feeling that it might have been crafted by the infected.

"Grrr...!" she growled again. She sniffed the air, her head swiveling as she surveyed the area. She began to circle around, as if tracking something unseen.

"Um, is there something you want to show me?" I asked her.

"Graaaa!" She turned to me, letting out a fierce growl.

"I'll take that as a yes," I replied. As I followed her, I couldn't help but notice that her behavior seemed almost human. Despite the unmistakable aura of infection and her guttural growls, her actions were strangely reminiscent of a person, not a mindless monster.

After a while, we finally arrived at our destination. The scene that unfolded was tense: two familiar faces, the Slayers I'd been with, and one more—Jessica.

"Mother!" Jessica's voice cracked with shock as her eyes flew open wide at the sight of me. Her gaze quickly shifted to the woman standing in front of me. "Y-You found her!"

"I'm not sure about that. It's more like she found me," I said, trying to keep my tone neutral.

"Grrr!" The woman let out a deep, menacing growl at Jessica. Immediately, the other Slayers snapped into action, their guns drawn and aimed at the woman with a sharp, lethal precision.

"N-No! Don't do that!" I shouted, stepping in front of the woman and stretching my arms out protectively. "This woman saved me. You can't point a gun at someone who's saved me, can you?"

The two Slayers exchanged puzzled glances. Confusion etched across their faces, they couldn't wrap their heads around the idea. After all, this was an infected, a being that shouldn't and wouldn't save anyone, much less think about doing so. I could almost hear their thoughts: Why would she say this infected saved her?

"She... saved you?" Jessica's voice trembled with wide-eyed disbelief.

I nodded firmly. "While I was searching for her in the depths of the ocean," I explained, "I got caught by a large octopus. I was as good as dead, if not for her."

Jessica stared at the woman with a look of sheer astonishment. "Incredible. An infected that can actually save someone! This is monumental for humanity! This changes everything! With this, I can finally begin to unravel the virus's mysteries and understand how it transforms people into Demon Zombies.

If I can uncover why this particular infected behaves so differently from the others, it could provide crucial insights into the virus and potentially lead to a cure! You've brought me extraordinary news, Mother!"

"Jessica," I said, my voice carrying a note of reprimand, "you shouldn't treat someone like they're merely a tool. Didn't I tell you that before?"

"I know, Mother. And I'm sorry for that," Jessica said, her voice a mix of shock and apology. "I never imagined you'd stand up for an infected like this. It looks like you've finally come around." Her smile was a blend of relief and triumph.

She was right. I hadn't believed Jessica when she claimed that this woman could be a beacon for humanity's hope. Now, though, I saw it clearly. No, more than seeing—I believed in this woman. She wasn't just a potential cure; she was the very essence of hope for our future.

The woman didn't seem to care about trailing behind us. She appeared calm, though she kept growling softly to herself. The others seemed to want to keep their distance from her, but given that she was still one of the infected, I couldn't really blame them.

The ship Jessica arrived on was an enormous battleship, so massive it could easily pass for a floating hotel. It boasted a fighter aircraft hangar, and my jet was securely housed within its cavernous interior. The sheer scale of the battleship was impressive, dwarfing everything around it.

The woman's gaze roamed over the interior with evident curiosity. Her purple eyes widened with intrigue, reflecting the intricate details and immense size of the battleship. It was clear that the vast expanse and the high-tech environment held a strange allure for her.

"Do you like what you're seeing?" Jessica asked, her voice carrying a hint of curiosity.

"Grrr...!" The woman growled in response, her irritation clear. It was as if she didn't want to engage with Jessica. Jessica took a step back, her face falling into a sad expression. It was evident that she was a bit hurt by the woman's refusal to connect.

Despite her standoffish demeanor, the woman wasn't going berserk like most infected would. She remained eerily calm, maintaining a level of control.

"Well then, I suppose we should head back to Hope," Jessica said, her tone shifting to businesslike. The battleship began to move slowly at first but then surged forward with sudden speed, heading towards Hope Island, the last bastion of humanity.

Jessica's POV

This was a truly monumental moment for humanity, I thought, as I peered through the double-sided mirror. On the other side, the infected was moving around the room with an unsettling curiosity.

She was doing things no Demon Zombie would normally do: sitting cross-legged on the floor, scanning her surroundings with wide, inquisitive eyes, nodding and shaking her head as if trying to understand something, and even scratching at her hair with an oddly human-like manner. To me, she looked more like a newborn human discovering her environment than a zombie.

It had already been five months since we found her. We had named her Shredica, a blend of "Shred" from her transformation and "Dica" to give her a personal name.

Shredica had been staying in the white room, not sleeping—something she clearly didn't need—but strangely, she continued to eat, even though she had no biological need for food. Whenever she wanted to eat something, she would growl, which seemed to be her way of communicating.

I was examining the data collected from the room's monitoring systems. Her statistics were all within the normal range for an infected, aligning with what you'd expect. She appeared human in many ways, but the fact that she was infected was undeniable, with blood samples proving as much. So why was she so different from the others?

It also appeared that this woman was from the era when demons declared war on humanity—back in 2012, according to the Gregorian calendar. She looked like she had witnessed everything from that tumultuous time. Had the passage of a century since then so drastically altered her? She had been infected for around 100 years, but that didn't seem to be the sole reason.

We had found other infected individuals who had been afflicted for the same length of time, yet none exhibited the unique behaviors that Shredica displayed.

"Have you learned anything yet?" Evan asked, his eyes fixed on the double-sided mirror.

"Not yet," I replied. "But maybe I'll find something if I can just—"

A sudden click interrupted me.

I turned to look at Evan. One of his arms was positioned behind him, clearly having done something with the door. My suspicion grew.

"Evan, why did you lock the door?"

Chapter 276: Shredica (3)

"Evan, why did you lock the door?"

I asked him, my voice edged with tension. He remained silent, his gaze fixed on me with cold intensity. My hand slid cautiously to my back, where I grasped the taser, preparing for whatever might come next.

"I'm getting impatient, Jessica," Evan said, his voice thick with frustration. "Do you have any idea how many years I've spent trying to win you over? It's been five long years. In that time, I've had five other women, and honestly, I could have lived with that. But I can't stand the thought of you becoming someone else's."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, confusion mingling with fear.

"I'm going to take matters into my own hands, Jessica," he said with a chilling calmness as he started to strip off his clothes, revealing his muscular form.

"You're joking, right?" I asked, struggling to keep the fear out of my voice.

"I know there are laws against forcing a woman to become someone's property, but if I fuck you enough to make you submit to my dick, then you'll be mine willingly, won't you?"

The cold, predatory gleam in his eyes was terrifying. He wasn't joking at all.

"You're delusional," I said, my voice quaking with a mix of terror and disbelief.

"I might be," he said, his voice dripping with menace. "Who wouldn't go crazy after being ignored by you for so many years? I've wanted to fuck you since college. Remember those days? I was practically crawling out of my skin, desperate to fuck you. I wanted to make you surrender to my cock so badly.

The only thing that held me back was our so-called friendship. But now? I'm losing my mind. I can't stand the thought of your beauty fading with age and stress, and I sure as fuck won't let anyone else touch you. So before anyone else gets the chance, I'm going to take what's mine."

He moved toward me with a predatory slowness, and I retreated until my back pressed against the cold wall. My hand tightened around the taser, and I pointed it at him, my heart pounding with a mix of fear and raw adrenaline.

"Stay where you are and don't come any closer!" I shouted, trying to keep my voice firm.

Evan tilted his head slightly, a smirk playing on his lips. "What's that going to do? You do realize I've trained in self-defense, right? Especially with small-range melee weapons. Do you really think a taser will make any difference?"

"Kh..." I clicked my tongue in frustration. Of course, I knew that already.

"Well, if you understand that resistance is pointless, why don't you just let me do it? I'm sure you'll enjoy being fucked by me."

He started closing in on me again. I swung the taser at him desperately, but before I could make contact, he delivered a sharp kick to my hand, sending the taser flying across the room with a clatter.

"I told you, resistance is futile. Why can't you get that through your head?!" His voice was filled with cruel satisfaction as he advanced and slammed a powerful punch into my gut.

"Guh...!"

The force of the punch expelled all the air from my lungs in a painful whoosh. My vision blurred as my knees gave way, and I crumpled to the floor, collapsing onto my knees, struggling to catch my breath.

"I don't want to hurt you more than necessary, so I suggest you stay still," he said, his voice a low, menacing growl.

He climbed on top of me, his hands rough and invasive as he began tearing at my clothes. But then, he paused, a sinister grin spreading across his face.

"Actually, I like seeing you in that lab gown. Maybe I'll leave you just like this," he mused, his eyes glinting with dark amusement.

His hands roamed over my breasts, groping them through the fabric. "These breasts are a real pleasure to touch," he said, licking his lips with a twisted satisfaction. "I've fantasized about touching them and burying my face in them. Feeling them now is incredible. You're a G-cup, huh?"

As his hands roughly groped my breasts, squeezing and pawing at them like they were his to claim, I glared at him, my eyes burning with hatred.

"You scum..."

He chuckled darkly, his eyes glinting with twisted pleasure. "Yeah, that's exactly what I like," he taunted. "I want to see that fierce look in your eyes disappear, replaced with submission. I want to see you crumble under my dick. The more you resist, the sweeter it'll be when I finally break you."

Pinned beneath him, his weight pressing me into the floor, I couldn't move. His strength was overwhelming, crushing any hope of escape.

A tear slipped down my cheek as I resigned myself to the situation.

"Just... do whatever you want. I don't care anymore."

"Huh... You crumbled so fast... so boring," he said with a hint of annoyance, his hands moving eagerly towards my crotch. Just as his fingers neared their target, a loud crash echoed through the room.

"W-What the?!"

I snapped my head toward the noise and watched in stunned disbelief as Shredica burst through the double-sided mirror, shards of glass flying everywhere.

"W-What the fuck?!"

Shredica let out a fierce growl, her stance impossibly poised and ready for combat—a stark contrast to the usual disarray of an infected.

"What the fuck?!" Evan shouted, his face a mix of disbelief and rage. "I'm not fucking scared of a fucking zombie!"

With a snarl, he charged at Shredica, his leg swinging in a high, powerful kick aimed straight at her head. Shredica reacted with lightning speed, her arms moving with a fierce precision to block the strike. The impact resonated with a sharp thud, and her growl reverberated through the room, a low, menacing sound that sent a shiver down my spine.

"Grrr...!"

Evan's eyes narrowed, his frustration boiling over. "You damn freak!" he spat, quickly shifting his stance. He threw a barrage of punches, each one aimed with deadly intent, but Shredica was relentless. She blocked each blow with a calculated precision that seemed impossible for an infected. Her movements were swift and fluid, her body responding with an eerie grace that contradicted her appearance.

Shredica countered with a powerful swipe of her clawed hand, aiming for Evan's midsection. He barely dodged in time, the sharp claws slicing through the air where his torso had been just moments before.

"Fuck!" he cursed, stumbling back. He quickly regained his balance, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "You think you can take me on, bitch?"

With a roar, Evan lunged forward again, this time aiming a brutal knee at Shredica's gut. But Shredica was faster. She sidestepped the attack and, in one fluid motion, grabbed his outstretched leg and twisted it with inhuman strength. Evan's face contorted in pain as he was lifted off his feet and slammed into the ground with a bone-rattling thud.

"Gah...!" he grunted, the air forced from his lungs as he hit the floor.

Shredica didn't give him a moment to recover. She pounced, her claws gleaming in the dim light as she aimed for his throat. Evan barely managed to roll out of the way, her claws sinking into the floor instead, tearing through it like paper.

He scrambled to his feet, his cocky demeanor now replaced with genuine fear. "What the fuck are you?!" he gasped, backing away as Shredica slowly rose, her purple eyes glowing with a cold, deadly intent.

"Grrr...!" Shredica growled, her voice low and menacing, a promise of violence to come.

Evan looked around frantically, searching for something—anything—that could help him. But Shredica wasn't going to let him escape. She stalked toward him, each step deliberate and threatening, her claws flexing as she prepared to strike again.

In a final, desperate move, Evan grabbed a nearby metal chair and swung it with all his might. Shredica raised an arm to block the blow, the impact barely making her flinch. She then swiped the chair out of his hands with a quick, powerful motion, sending it crashing against the wall.

Evan's bravado evaporated as he stared at Shredica, his fear evident in every wide-eyed glance. The monstrous infected before him was a nightmare made flesh, and the last remnants of his confidence crumbled. His breaths came in short, ragged gasps as he looked for any possible escape.

"Fuck this!" he spat, the words more for his own sake than anyone else's. He turned on his heel and bolted for the door, practically tripping over himself in his haste to get away. His hands fumbled with the

door handle for a split second, the cold metal slippery in his sweaty grip, before he managed to yank it open.

Without a backward glance, Evan darted out of the observatory room, his footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. Shredica didn't chase. She merely stood at the doorway, her eyes following his retreat with a chilling calm.

Chapter 277: Shredica (4)

The media on Hope Island were battering the research facility's doors, their relentless knocking echoing through the halls. News of an infected individual attacking a facility member had spread like wildfire. I knew exactly who had leaked the information—it was Evan himself.

My mother stood by the window, her eyes fixed on the throng of reporters camped outside. The sight of their flashing cameras and shouting voices created a chaotic buzz that seemed to seep through the glass.

"It looks like this mess won't blow over anytime soon, unless you make a statement, Jessica," she said, her voice edged with frustration.

In contrast, Shredica sat slumped in a chair, her gaze wandering aimlessly around the room. Her detached expression was a stark contrast to the frenetic energy outside, and I couldn't help but focus on her forlorn demeanor.

"You have to believe me, Mother. She didn't go berserk. If anything, it was the opposite—she saved me."

Mother's eyes locked onto mine, her expression a mix of concern and restrained fury. "I believe you. And I can't forgive Evan for trying to harm you. But as much as I'd like to tear him apart, we're powerless against the media. It's only a matter of time before the authorities step in. The only thing keeping them at bay is my position as the captain of the Slayers.

Without that privilege, they'd already be breaking down the doors and swarming this place."

A heavy silence fell between us.

"We need to do something about this," my mother said, her voice tight with urgency. "Obviously, I don't want anything happening to Shredica. She's been a savior to both of us. But my power alone won't cut it with the authorities. If only we could somehow make her speak..."

I fell silent, torn. There was a method—a way to make her appear more human, less like an infected. But using that method on someone who had saved me from being raped was something I wasn't willing to consider.

Just then, the phone rang, its shrill tone slicing through the tension. Shredica's head snapped around, her growl a mix of confusion and agitation. My mother hurried to the phone, her face a mask of focused determination as she answered the call.

I didn't need to hear the conversation or know who was on the other end of the line; the fury etched on my mother's face made it all too clear.

"You've got to be kidding me?!" she barked into the phone, her voice trembling with anger. "She's not infected! Didn't I make that clear before?! Stop with these ridiculous accusations and leave us the hell alone!"

Her voice reverberated violently through the room, a stark contrast to the tense silence that had settled before.

"Your son tried to rape my daughter!" she screamed, her voice cracking with emotion. "And Shredica saved my daughter from that monster! Has your son turned into an infected?! No, he hasn't!"

The silence that followed was suffocating, as if the very air had thickened with dread. When the call ended, my mother's shoulders sagged, and a heavy, defeated sigh escaped her, the sound echoing in the stillness like the final note of a dirge.

"The mayor has made his final verdict," she said, her voice drained as she set the phone down with a dull thud. "He wants us to publicly present Shredica and prove she's not infected. If we can prove she's human, she'll be released, and her actions will be classified as self-defense and justice. Additionally, Evan will be charged with attempted rape and sentenced to six years and one day.

But if she's found to be infected, she'll face immediate execution."

I fell silent.

"If we don't comply, we'll be arrested for obstruction of justice."

"H-How much time do we have?" I stammered.

My mother glanced at Shredica before answering. "About a week."

There was only one week left.

My fingers danced across the laptop keyboard, racing to put together a plan. It was a high-stakes gamble, but it was the only shot I had to save Shredica.

The laptop was connected to a complex device, its array of wires snaking across the desk. I was in the process of uploading data into the device—a hypnotic contraption capable of manipulating memories. Once someone wore it, I could tweak, erase, or implant memories with precision.

This method had a dark history. It was first used in the 80th year of Ruination to create superhuman soldiers, embedding memories of lifetime training into their minds. My late father had once experimented with it, but the project was ultimately deemed a failure.

The device was a marvel of twisted engineering. It was a complex assembly of circuits, sensors, and neural interfaces, each meticulously designed to interface with the human brain. The core of the device was a sleek, metallic helmet fitted with electrodes and microchips that would map and interact with neural pathways.

As I continued the upload, I could almost feel the hum of the machine resonating through the room. The device operated on advanced neuro-synchronization technology. Once activated, it emitted a series of controlled electromagnetic pulses.

These pulses were fine-tuned to align with the brain's natural electrical activity, creating a feedback loop that allowed for precise manipulation of cognitive functions.

The core principle behind this hypnotic device was to reprogram the neural connections responsible for memory and perception. When someone wore the helmet, it created an artificial neural network overlay. This overlay could rewrite or erase specific memories, implant new ones, or even alter the perception of reality.

By interfacing directly with the brain's synaptic processes, the device could effectively 'reset' a subject's identity or make them believe they were something they were not.

In Shredica's case, the device could be used to mask her infected status. By altering her memory and sensory perceptions, it could make her believe she was fully human, effectively convincing those around her that she was not infected. The device would simulate human experiences and memories, erasing the corrupted ones that revealed her true nature.

This might work—well, in theory anyway. I had no way of knowing if it would be effective. My father had failed, and I certainly didn't trust myself to succeed where he hadn't. I doubted that I could achieve what my father had been unable to.

The reason for his failure was that those who underwent the experiment had their minds shattered. They went insane. Despite the failure, the experiment did produce some results. The subjects acted according to the memories they were given, moving as if they were trained soldiers.

Their bodies were sluggish, though, because they weren't actually soldiers and couldn't physically perform as their memories suggested. Still, the concept my father had developed did have some merit.

It ended in a catastrophe. The subjects went on a rampage, brutally massacring everyone involved in the project, including my father. Thankfully, they were killed afterward.

Now, not only was I recreating the experiment, but I was also on the verge of potentially causing an even greater disaster than the one before.

I continued to refine the plan, aware that the stakes were high and the potential for failure loomed large. The theoretical basis for the hypnotic device was grounded in the manipulation of neural pathways through implanted memories. The core idea was to create a synthetic form of muscle memory by encoding false experiences into the subjects' brains.

The device worked by emitting a series of targeted electromagnetic pulses, designed to interact with specific neural circuits associated with memory and cognition. Once a subject wore the device, it would synchronize with their brainwaves, allowing for the implantation of detailed, fabricated memories.

In theory, these memories would override existing ones, creating the illusion of a lifetime of training and expertise.

However, the original experiment faced critical issues. The neural disruption caused by the device's intense pulses often led to cognitive dissonance and psychological fragmentation. Subjects experienced severe mental distress and disorientation, eventually resulting in complete mental collapse.

The device induced an altered state of consciousness where the subjects' motor functions did not align with the fabricated memories, leading to physical sluggishness and a lack of coordination.

Despite these failures, there was a glimmer of success. The subjects demonstrated an ability to perform actions consistent with the implanted memories, albeit with limited effectiveness. This suggested that while the device could not fully integrate new memories into functional behavior, it did have a significant impact on their perception of their capabilities.

As I reviewed the data, I meticulously adjusted the settings on the device to minimize potential cognitive damage. I recalibrated the electromagnetic frequencies to reduce the risk of mental disintegration while enhancing the clarity of memory implantation.

The challenge was to balance the intensity of the pulses to ensure that they were potent enough to induce the desired changes without pushing the subjects' minds to the brink of insanity.

After five days of sleepless nights, I finally got it done. My desk was littered with empty coffee cups, a testament to the relentless work. Without pausing, I set to work, attaching the device to Shredica's head and activating it.

Chapter 278: Shredica (5)

I carefully positioned the device on Shredica's head, ensuring that the electrodes made precise contact with her scalp. The device's intricate network of wires and sensors began to hum softly as it powered up. I initiated the sequence, watching as the device's display lit up with complex patterns of shifting lights and data streams.

The device, a high-tech amalgamation of neuro-stimulation and memory modulation technology, was designed to interface directly with the brain's neural pathways. Its primary function was to alter memory encoding and retrieval processes. The settings were calibrated to access and modify the regions of the brain responsible for memory formation and cognitive functions.

I adjusted the parameters on the control panel, setting it to overwrite Shredica's memories with the specific data I had prepared. The system was programmed to penetrate the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, areas critical for memory and decision-making.

As the device activated, a low-frequency pulse began to permeate her brain, intended to facilitate the insertion of the new memories while erasing existing ones.

The device emitted a soft, rhythmic pulse, its frequency carefully tuned to avoid any detrimental effects. The data streams were processed in real-time, with the device mapping Shredica's neural activity and ensuring the memories were integrated seamlessly. I monitored the progress through a series of holographic displays, checking for any anomalies or irregularities in the data.

"RAaaaaaaaaaAAaAaaaaaaaaaaggghhhhhhhhHhHhhhhhhhhh!!!"

Without warning, Shredica's scream erupted, a guttural cry that seemed to tear through the very fabric of reality. The sound was raw and visceral, an anguished howl that filled the room. Her veins, sickly purple, bulged and throbbed grotesquely beneath her skin, pulsing with a dark, unnatural energy.

"GRaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaHhHhhhhhhhhh!"

As Shredica's scream echoed through the room, the device continued its relentless operation, sending pulses of data directly into her brain. The information was meticulously encoded into electromagnetic signals, designed to interface with the synaptic connections in her cerebral cortex.

The device worked by gradually rewriting her memories, threading new neural pathways that would overwrite her previous identity.

Her brain, now receiving a flood of artificial stimuli, was being bombarded with carefully crafted memories, each one designed to reinforce the new identity I needed her to adopt. The process wasn't just about altering her thoughts; it was about restructuring her very essence, molding her cognitive functions to align with the persona I was implanting.

Shredica's eyes fluttered as the device forced her brain into a hyper-receptive state, making it easier for the information to be absorbed. Her pupils dilated unnaturally, a sign that the neural synapses were firing at an accelerated rate.

The machine's algorithms monitored her brain activity in real-time, ensuring that each memory was seamlessly integrated without triggering a cognitive dissonance that could lead to mental collapse.

Her breathing grew ragged, and her body convulsed as the implanted memories began to take hold. The device's sensors detected the minute changes in her neural chemistry, adjusting the flow of information to prevent overload. It was a delicate balance—too much data, and her brain would reject it; too little, and the process would fail.

The hypnotic state induced by the machine allowed the information to bypass her conscious defenses, embedding itself deep within her subconscious. As each memory was implanted, her brainwaves shifted, reflecting the growing influence of the new identity.

The feedback loop between the device and her brain ensured that any resistance was swiftly crushed, reinforcing the hypnotic suggestion that these new memories were real. The brain's plasticity—its natural ability to adapt and reorganize—was being ruthlessly exploited to forge a new version of Shredica, one that might just be able to pass as human.

After that, Shredica slumped, her body going limp like a puppet with its strings cut.

I had no idea if it worked, and no clue if this was even a good idea. All I could do was pray that it would go as planned.

Minerva's POV

The authorities arrived at the lab, clad in hazmat suits and armed with electric batons. These batons, designed to subdue zombies, were originally meant for the Slayers but were now in use by the authorities as well.

"Ma'am Minerva Fischer, we're here to take you, your daughter, and the accused infected," one of them announced. "Since there's no definitive proof yet of whether she's infected or not, all three of you will be cuffed. This is standard procedure, especially given your extended contact with the suspected infected."

The hazmat team moved in, securing my wrists behind my back with the cuffs. Jessica offered no resistance and allowed them to cuff her without a fuss. Shredica shot a fierce glare at the hazmat team, who tensed at her intense stare. Though they were wary of her intense stare, they eventually managed to cuff her as well, seeing that she made no attempt to resist.

They led us to the car that would transport us to the hearing, chaining our cuffs to the vehicle to limit our mobility.

"I don't think this is really necessary," I protested.

"Sorry, but we're taking precautions," one of the hazmat-clad officers replied.

Finally, we arrived at the courthouse, where the hearing would decide if Shredica was indeed infected. Jessica, who had dark circles under her eyes, seemed to have been working hard on something, so I wasn't too worried. My concern wasn't entirely gone, but I had to trust in whatever she had done. Shredica, unusually subdued, was glaring at everyone instead of her usual growling.

"Are you sure she won't try to bite us?" one of the hazmat personnel whispered.

"She can't reach us, so we're probably safe. Probably."

They remained cautious, their nerves evident.

We exited the vehicle and made our way into the courthouse. The moment we stepped inside, a wave of eyes turned to stare at us, the buzz of murmured conversations filling the room.

"Is that the infected?"

"Looks like it."

"Her hair is so purple. There's no way she isn't infected."

"The Fischers really are a threat to humanity. First, that incident in the lab where they turned normal humans into superhuman soldiers, and now they're bringing an infected onto Hope Island? This is absurd."

Everyone here was high-class. Even in this apocalyptic world, society maintained its hierarchy. There were clear distinctions between the high, middle, and low classes. Eventually, the three of us were led to our seats, surrounded by authorities clad in hazmat suits.

They were keeping us in because they were terrified we might be infected, and Shredica could wreak havoc. If the infection spread on this island, it would definitely mean the end of humanity.

On the other side sat the mayor and his son, Evan—the same bastard who tried to violate my daughter. I glared at him with all the fury I could muster, wanting nothing more than to smash his skull in with my metallic arm. But acting on that impulse would only make things worse, leaving me seething and conflicted.

The room fell silent as the judge, a stern-looking woman with graying hair pulled back into a tight bun, banged her gavel. Her voice echoed through the courtroom, cutting through the tension like a knife.

"This hearing will now come to order," she announced, her tone leaving no room for nonsense. "We are here today to determine the status of the accused infected. The decision we reach will impact not just those present, but the entire population of Hope Island."

She glanced over her glasses at us, her gaze lingering on Shredica before shifting to the mayor and his smirking son. "The prosecution may present its case."

The mayor's attorney stood, adjusting his suit with an air of superiority. "Your Honor, the evidence against the suspected infected is overwhelming. Her appearance and behavior all point to the undeniable conclusion that she is, in fact, infected. Allowing her to remain on this island poses a significant risk to everyone here."

He directed his gaze at Shredica.

"While she appears incredibly docile now, it is crucial to remember that she, or rather 'it' now, attacked Mr. Evan Wright. Although Mr. Wright managed to escape, the mental trauma inflicted on him demands that 'it' be executed. Not only for that but also for being an infected."

The mayor's attorney continued, his voice dripping with contempt, "The incident with Mr. Wright is a clear indication of the danger 'it' poses. We cannot afford to be complacent, especially when the safety of everyone on this island is at stake. The nature of these creatures is unpredictable, and we must act decisively."

The judge nodded thoughtfully. "Does the defense have anything to say in response to these accusations?"

I stood up. "Your Honor, Mr. Evan Wright tried to violate my daughter, Jessica, and Shredica intervened to defend her. That's a clear case of self-defense, isn't it? It doesn't mean Shredica is a Demon Zombie. I believe Mr.

Wright is making a fuss because he didn't get what he wanted."

The attorney sneered. "That's a lie, as far as I'm concerned. If it wasn't a Demon Zombie, then how do you explain its ability to fight off Mr. Wright? He's trained in self-defense from military school and has mastered both defensive and offensive techniques. You know this because you, too, learned these skills in military school.

Shouldn't a so-called 'normal' person be unable to hold their own against someone with such advanced training if they weren't infected with enhanced strength?"

"That's only natural," I said, then turned to the judge. "Because Shredica is a superhuman soldier."

Chapter 279: Shredica (6)

The entire courtroom fell silent after my revelation. It was so quiet that you could practically hear a pin drop.

"D-Did she just say that the infected is a superhuman soldier?" someone finally broke the silence.

Superhuman soldiers were part of a project designed to create fighters capable of effortlessly taking on Demon Zombies and potentially standing toe-to-toe with Demon Monsters like the enormous centipedes, giant bats, and demon hounds. My husband had once been involved in this project, but it ended in disaster. The researchers, including my husband, had been massacred by their own creations.

The project had been put on hold after that catastrophe. However, the government's desire for its continuation led to a new team of scientists taking over. Despite their efforts, progress remained slow compared to the advances my husband had achieved.

If the superhuman soldiers were successfully developed, they would likely be hailed as saviors. They could become a beacon of hope for Hope Island and potentially bring an end to the Ruination. This is why the courtroom was filled with astonished faces, including the mayor's and the judge's.

"T-That's a lie!" Evan shouted, leaping out of his chair and pointing at me. "I've known from day one that she's infected! She's just a random zombie found in the area bombed by the Slayers! Can't you see it in her appearance? She's a fucking zombie through and through! Look at that hair!

There's no way a color like that could belong to a normal human! And she can't even speak—she can only growl!"

"He's right," someone else chimed in. "There's no way she could be normal. Just look at her hair. Even the roots are purple."

"Purple is usually a demon color. Maybe Mr. Wright's son is onto something."

"We can't afford to be too hasty."

"But it's possible her hair is like that because of modifications done to her body. If she really is a superhuman soldier, that could explain it."

"It would be a shame to have a superhuman soldier and then just discard it. I don't want to see a potential asset thrown away."

"We have no way of knowing for sure. Mr. Wright could be right, but Miss Fischer might also be telling the truth."

The people in the courtroom were now divided, struggling to decide which side to take. I had deliberately revealed Shredica as a superhuman soldier to provoke this reaction. These high-class individuals were notorious for their ambition—not only did they want to extend the survivors' influence beyond Hope Island, but they also aimed to reclaim the mainlands using superhuman soldiers.

They were power-hungry, grimy politicians at heart.

"I'm telling you all, she's lying! Can't you see? She hasn't spoken a single word!"

Shredica simply glared at him.

"See! Look at the way she's staring at me! She's eyeing me like I'm just a piece of meat! There's no way she's a normal human!"

Evan kept shouting, his voice rising with each word, but Shredica just glared at him, unfazed.

"She's not normal! She can't even talk, and her hair—it's fucking unnatural! That can't be—"

"Shut up!"

Shredica suddenly spoke up. I could hardly believe my ears. I had thought she couldn't speak, so I stared at her with wide eyes. Jessica was surprised too, but her shock was more subdued compared to mine. Was this a result of the days she'd been working without sleep? How did she manage it?

"It worked, Mother..." she said in a whisper.

"D-Did she just speak?"

"Then she's not infected?"

"So she really is a superhuman soldier?"

The people were bewildered. Evan was utterly confused and in shock.

"N-No, this can't be right. There's just no way...! I saw her! She was only growling and acting like an infected. There's no way she could... How could she speak?!"

Evan was now shouting at the top of his lungs. At that moment, the balance shifted in our favor. The game-changer was Shredica speaking.

The hearing dragged on for hours, but by the end of the day, there was little they could prove to label Shredica as infected. The session concluded with Evan being convicted of attempted rape and sentenced to six years and a day in prison. Even the mayor's attempts to intervene fell flat.

With Shredica now viewed as a superhuman soldier by the public and even the high-class elites, the mayor's influence was rendered useless.

We returned to the laboratory afterward. Shredica didn't utter another word. She only spoke those two words, and that was it. Jessica glanced at Shredica, her expression thoughtful yet troubled.

"Mother, I genuinely think that Shredica is going to become the savior of humanity." she said. "I genuinely think that."

She reached out a hand and cupped Shredica's cheek with it.

"She will be our hope."

Jessica's POV

100th Year of the Ruination Calendar.

Two years after that hearing.

"Shredica." I called out to the woman with purple hair, who was practicing outside the laboratory. She was a stunning woman with an expression of perpetual anger, though it was just her natural scowl. She was always frowning. The woman was engaged in target practice, her focus intense.

"Hello, Jess," she replied, her voice devoid of emotion. Her eyes were cold and unfeeling, giving off a sense of someone who was battle-hungry and yearned for war.

"What are you doing? It's already night," I said to her.

She smirked, a terrifying sight that I'd grown accustomed to. "The battle is tomorrow, right? I need to be ready."

"You know you shouldn't overdo it, especially with the battle coming up. You should take a break now and then. It's only been a week since the last campaign to reclaim some areas on the main islands."

"I don't need rest."

"Yeah, that's true," I conceded. "But you should rest regardless. Then again, I can't exactly stop you, can I?"

Shredica glanced at me, her eyes cold but determined. "The island we reclaimed isn't the only thing we're going to take back, Jess."

She was right. Just last year, we'd launched a campaign to reclaim not only the islands but all the continents. Shredica had been the main force behind it. Just last week, we'd finally secured one of the most strategically valuable areas humanity had been aiming for.

But of course, taking over the island was just the beginning. We planned to build facilities there, like laboratories and military camps, to strengthen humanity's fight against the demons. We'd also start working on creating more superhuman soldiers. Right now, Shredica was still the only one of her kind.

When the authorities asked me how I'd created her, I told them she was the result of my father's work, who managed to avoid going insane from the experiments. They seemed skeptical but didn't press the issue, thankfully.

"Well, since you're done, why don't you join us for some food?" I asked her.

"I'll be there after I practice a bit more," she replied.

Shredica wasn't exactly the sociable type. I wondered if this was her nature even before the Ruination, back when she wasn't infected. Despite her lack of social skills, she showed respect in her own way. Though she appeared cold, I could tell she saw me as more than just a stranger, and even had some regard for Mother.

I told her to think of me as a sister, and while she glared at me like she didn't appreciate the suggestion, she didn't argue. I think she took my words to heart, at least.

Interestingly, Shredica didn't eat human flesh or anything else related to what infecteds typically consume. She ate like a normal person, despite not showing any real sense of hunger. Her eating habits seemed to stem from the memories implanted in her brain, which reminded her that she was once a regular human who had become a superhuman soldier.

Her speech patterns had improved significantly. Initially, she spoke with a slouch and struggled to form coherent sentences. She even bit her tongue once while trying to talk. However, with the right amount of teaching from me, she managed to get the hang of it and now spoke in full sentences.

I attempted to teach her mathematics and science, but she seemed to grow bored quickly and didn't pay much attention. It was clear she'd been a slacker even when she was a regular human.

Despite her current state, she was still a normal human once. I couldn't help but worry about her venturing into dangerous places.

Suddenly, she stopped shooting her gun. "Jess, you don't need to worry about me. I can handle myself." She tried to smile, but it looked strained. She wasn't used to smiling, and it came off as comical, which made me laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing at all," I said, wiping away the tears forming in the corners of my eyes. "I just think you're cute, Shredica."

It was true. Despite being a zombie, she didn't act like one. I thought of her as a sister.

'I wonder what kind of person you were when you were still human?' I thought to myself as I stared at the stars.

Chapter 280: Fourth Campaign (1)

Shredica's POV

I had this unsettling sense that who I was now wasn't truly the same person I used to be. My memories felt like they belonged to someone else, as if they were artificially constructed. Yet, despite this dissonance, it didn't seem to trouble me as much as I'd expect.

I woke up, my gaze fixed on the expanse of blue sky above. The gentle roar of the aircraft carrier slicing through the air was a comforting hum, while the rotors' soft whirring created a serene, almost hypnotic backdrop. The cold surface beneath me pressed pleasantly against my back, and I felt a profound sense of relaxation. I closed my eyes again, letting the tranquility wash over me.

"Shredica." A voice sliced through my haze from above. I blinked open my eyes to see a face blocking the sky, its shadow falling across my face like a heavy curtain. "Are you just going to lie here while we're strategizing our approach for the fourth area?" she demanded. "We've been holed up in the planning room, debating every detail of our next move, and you're just sprawled out, drifting off."

Are you so sure we'll crush this campaign like we did the last one that you can't be bothered?"

I rolled onto my side, shutting my eyes once more.

"Don't ignore me!" she snapped, her voice piercing through the haze.

I pressed my hands over my ears, trying to block her out.

"I said don't ignore me."

With a resigned sigh, I shifted onto my back and met her gaze, her eyes sharp and unwavering.

"I won't stop bothering you until you stop ignoring me," she said firmly.

Another heavy sigh escaped me. "I don't want to go. I just want to rest."

"Just because you're the strongest among us doesn't give you the privilege to laze around like this," she huffed, her irritation clear. "If you keep slacking, I might just surpass you as the strongest. My kill count is almost as high as yours now."

"I don't mind if you take it from me," I said, meeting her gaze. "As long as I'm part of this battle, that's all I care about."

"You really are heartless for a human, aren't you?" she taunted, her smirk widening as if she'd just won a major victory. "But then again, that's only natural. You've been subjected to experiments since birth and never known human love, unlike me, who's been showered with it."

That's right. I had memories of that, didn't I? As a child, I'd faced countless deadly situations. I was raised as a soldier, someone trained to take down anything that crossed my path.

"If you keep this up, you'll stay a virgin forever, you know?" she said with a mischievous grin. "I'm sure your weapons won't be able to keep your nights warm forever." She paused, then turned away, her voice dropping to a whisper that I could still clearly hear, "I'm not that different, though..."

With that, she walked off, leaving me with her words echoing in my mind.

"Warmth, huh?" I thought, feeling a vague sense of familiarity, but I couldn't quite place it.

The fourth area.

It was a bleak, desolate expanse, littered with the skeletal remains of once-bustling buildings and tangled wrecks of vehicles strewn haphazardly across the road and corners. This was our battleground for the day: to purge the Demon Zombies and Demon Monsters. It was the fourth campaign in our relentless struggle to reclaim the main islands.

I trudged down the empty street, the echoing crunch of debris beneath my boots mingling with the haunting silence. The other three women flanked me, including the one who had just spoken to me.

"Keep your eyes peeled. An infected could be hiding around any corner," she said, her voice sharp and commanding. She carried herself like a seasoned commander, though I wasn't sure if she officially held that position. I had no intention of following her orders without question.

As we moved cautiously through the debris-strewn streets, I couldn't help but notice the tension in the air. Every shadow and rustling sound set our nerves on edge. The woman who had taken charge kept glancing around, her eyes sharp and scanning every corner for potential threats.

One of the other women, her face partially obscured by a helmet, broke the silence. "Do you really think this area will be as bad as the last one?"

The woman in charge glanced at her, her expression unreadable. "Every area is different. We've had to adapt to each one. Don't let your guard down just because the last area was cleared quickly."

The third woman, who hadn't spoken yet, whispered, "I've heard rumors that this area is crawling with stronger demons. We need to be extra careful."

I stayed silent, my attention split between the conversation and the eerie stillness of our surroundings. The constant threat of an ambush was palpable, and the faint, distant groans of demons only heightened the sense of urgency.

The woman in charge turned back to me, her gaze penetrating. "You're awfully quiet. Anything to say?"

I met her stare, unflinching. "Just trying to focus on not getting killed."

She smirked, a glint of something dark in her eyes. "Good. Because that's exactly what you should be doing. Stay sharp, and we'll get through this."

Three hours later.

"Why is it so eerily quiet here?" one of the women asked, her voice laced with apprehension.

"Something doesn't add up..." the one in command replied, her gaze piercing through the unnerving stillness. "According to the report, this area should be crawling with demons. So why is it so damn peaceful?" She turned her sharp eyes toward me, as if I might have an answer.

I was just as clueless. This was my first visit to this area, and I'd heard the same alarming reports about it being overrun with demons. The question gnawed at me too.

"Well, I suppose it makes our job easier," she said, though her words felt hollow against the backdrop of the unsettling calm.

That night, I kept practicing, each gunshot tearing through the silence, the echoes reverberating off the crumbling walls around us. The air was thick with unease, the quiet almost suffocating despite the lack of any infected in sight. It was as if the very atmosphere held its breath, waiting for something to happen.

But I pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on the familiar feel of the weapon in my hands, the way the trigger gave under my finger, the recoil that traveled up my arm. The campaign wasn't over yet, and I knew there were battles still to be fought.

In the midst of my focus, a voice cut through the darkness, sharp and insistent.

"Your time's up," she said, her voice cutting through the night air with authority. "You should get some rest now."

"I don't need it," I replied, not bothering to look back.

"You really are an odd one, you know that?" she said, settling onto a log beside the fire. The flames crackled and danced, casting flickering shadows across her face, cutting through the chill of the night. "But I suppose it makes sense. You were born different from the rest of us." Her gaze held a mix of curiosity and challenge.

"Since you're not interested in heading back inside to rest, and it's technically my watch, I figured I'd stick around too. I don't want you stealing my job, so it's probably better if I ask something to avoid any awkward silence. Is that okay?"

"As long as you don't bother me too much, it's fine," I replied, my eyes never leaving the target as I continued my focused practice.

"Alright then..." she began, her voice softening as she looked into the fire's glow. "What do you think of this area?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"Like, what's your general vibe about this place? Do you sense something off, like something doesn't quite add up? Or maybe you feel too safe, almost like it's a trap?"

"Why are you asking questions you can answer yourself?" I shot back.

"Because I want your opinion," she replied, her tone firm. "An opinion—meaning a belief or judgment without absolute certainty or positive proof."

"I know what an opinion is," I said. "I'm asking why you need mine."

"Because I want to hear how you see things," she insisted, leaning in slightly. "I want to understand your take on this area, what your instincts are telling you."

I wasn't entirely sure what she was getting at, but I shared what was bothering me about this place. "If I had to give my take, I'd say this place is heavy with demonic essence," I said.

"So, you're feeling it too, huh?" she said, nodding as if she was expecting it. Her gaze shifted toward one direction. "And I can feel it coming from there..."

I could feel it too—no, more than that, I could see it. A red, raging demonic presence was emanating from that dilapidated mansion perched on the hill.

"Looks like we know where we're headed tomorrow," she said.