

World's Greatest Militia

14. Item Get

Kwang Hwi called the general in for a meeting. An old man fraught with worry stepped through the door. He had changed out of the luxurious suit from yesterday and was now wearing more modest clothing that better reflected his age.

"Did you call?" he asked.

"Were you able to get some rest?"

'As if!' The man stopped himself just short of vocalizing his sincere thoughts. He glanced over at Jackson, the man responsible for his watch. Jackson glared menacingly back at him.

"Ah...ahem. Yes, sure," he replied awkwardly. It had, in fact, been quite an uncomfortable night. He had slept next to complete strangers—something unbecoming of his rank. It was like he was back in Nonsan Training Camp. Still, it was better than being tied up and starving on the hospital floor.

"Did you call me for the trade?" he inquired cautiously.

"Naturally." Kwang Hwi showed none of the nerves the general did. He smoothly unfolded a map from his left breast pocket and turned to face the general expectantly, pressuring the man to speak through silence.

The general cleared his throat and pointed at a spot on the map. It was completely unremarkable. The map showed only a few apartments, surrounded by some small hills.

"The exact address," demanded Kwang Hwi. A hint of suspicion carried through the query.

Noticing Kwang Hwi's doubtful gaze, the general fumbled.

"While it may appear to be simply an apartment complex in a remote area, that's just a disguise. Underneath the apartments, there's an underground facility where all the equipment is stored."

"We'll know when we get there." Kwang Hwi's tone was noncommittal.

"Boss, we're ready," Jackson interjected.

"Excellent." Kwang Hwi gestured towards the general as he replied.

With a massive grin, Jackson began advancing on the general ominously. The man hurriedly jumped up from his seat in a panic. “W-what are you trying to do?!”

There was no reply. Kwang Hwi merely stared at the general with an amused expression. His eyes began darting around for the exit, but Jackson was already in front of him.

“W-wait!” He reached out his hands to push Jackson away. Jackson brushed them aside and forcefully shoved a stab vest over the man’s clothes.

“H-huh?” Realizing he was not being disposed of, he stopped resisting.

“What are you getting scared of?” Kwang Hwi’s voice had a light mocking tone. “Aren’t you a General Officer?” He clicked his tongue in admonishment.

“Let’s go, Mr. Scared General.”

The members who had been tasked with defending the base yesterday were waiting in front of the APC. Kwang Hwi had made sure to rotate his men for missions in order to ensure that everyone would get field experience. Everyone wore military uniforms, with a stab vest and a tactical vest over top. Since the monsters tended to use sharp edged weapons, a stab vest would help tremendously in avoiding fatal injury.

Jackson entered the cockpit first. “Awesome! An APC with a bathroom?” He could hardly contain his excitement. In fact, everyone, including Kwang Hwi, was the same. It was their first time entering the Namer.

After confirming everyone had boarded, Jackson closed the rear door with a clank. The interior went dark. Then, powerful lights overhead lit up.

— “Attention passengers, this is your pilot Jackson. We’ll be arriving at our destination shortly, so please buckle up and enjoy the ride.”

The trip itself was comfortable. Jackson skillfully avoided any monsters lingering on the roads by taking some detours.

Kwang Hwi looked around the interior. The members who were leaving base for the first time today seemed a bit nervous. In contrast, the experienced soldiers appeared more bored than anything. Some of them were even falling asleep.

— “We’ll be arriving at our destination in 2 minutes.”

Kwang Hwi kicked the soldiers dozing off. They arrived shortly at the entrance of an apartment complex. It was situated in a fairly remote location. Behind the apartments stood a mountain that was hundreds of meters high, like a beautiful folding screen.

“How should we proceed?” asked Kwang Hwi.

“Head inside the apartment complex. If you keep going forward, you’ll find an entrance connected to the underground parking lot.”

Dilapidated apartments greeted them on both sides as the APC slowly entered the complex. The entire complex seemed fairly old, the tallest apartments were only five stories high. Still, they didn’t look anything like the buildings ravaged by the monsters. Regardless, the entire complex looked cold and empty.

Soon, the entrance to the underground parking lot became visible. “Keep going,” the general advised.

A thick iron door blocked the vehicle’s path. Kwang Hwi determined that it was a blast door, capable of withstanding even tremendous explosions.

“Please let me go out to the front. I’ll need to verify my identity.”

Kwang Hwi nodded and the team exited the APC. His men secured the area while the two of them headed towards the security panel to the right of the door. Unlike the residential areas above, the security panel was receiving power from off the grid and appeared to be in perfect functioning order.

The general looked into the scanner while a red laser swept over his eye.

An unmanned turret came into view as the door slid open. Kwang Hwi was not surprised to notice that it had rusted past the point of use.

Overhead lights buzzed with life, revealing two rows of vehicles neatly lined on either side of the lot. On one side sat a line of Light Tactical Vehicles that could be called the Korean HMMWV. Opposite them, sat a row of K-21 IFVs.

Kwang Hwi carefully inspected each of the vehicles. As he concluded, he exclaimed aloud, “It’s just as I thought.”

The ones without weapons were still in perfect condition, while every vehicle with machine guns or turrets had rusted to scrap. Even the K-21 had holes rusted through the armor plating and its tracks were completely ruined. In contrast, the Light Tactical Vehicles were in pristine condition. Kwang Hwi’s suspicions were confirmed.

Unlike Kwang Hwi, the general's face was aghast as he saw the state of the vehicles. After what felt like an eternity, Kwang Hwi finally turned back to him.

"Ah, it's over there," he said, pointing at a large trailer at the end of the parking lot.

Kwang Hwi entered the trailer. The grey fuselage of the Heron, faintly reflecting the overhead illumination, greeted the men from the carrier compartment. Kwang Hwi nodded in satisfaction.

He carefully inspected every part of the drone. '*Well maintained. As expected of a military drone.*' Similar to the tactical vehicles outside, the Heron was in perfect working order. If Kwang Hwi could secure satellites and SATCOM transceivers, he could expand his operating range from 200 km up to 3,300 km.

"I kept my word," the general mentioned.

Kwang Hwi nodded. "Alright. A deal is a deal."

He turned around, scanning the parking lot. His eyes paused on another door at the end of the lot. Unlike the massive blast door that they had passed through, this one was small. "What's this door for?" he asked, pointing towards the end of the lot.

"That's a shelter," the general explained. "It's also used as a command and control center."

Kwang Hwi was now interested. "Can you open it?"

The general quickly walked up to the security device. So long as his safety was a priority, he was willing to cooperate with Kwang Hwi as much as possible. This time, a security code followed the retinal scan.

The door opened, showcasing a long corridor. The soldiers cut across to the other side, securing the perimeter. It didn't matter if there were any troops remaining. Without any weapons on hand, they weren't a threat. At the end of the hallway was another locked door. The general opened that one too. As promised, a large display screen greeted Kwang Hwi and his men as they entered the door at the end of the hallway. In front of it sat a row of computers. Kwang Hwi tapped at the keyboard. The display was non-responsive.

"It seems the higher ups initiated a facility lock," the general advised.

"What do you mean?" asked Kwang Hwi.

"It allows entry, but prevents system operation."

Kwang Hwi nodded. He quickly lost interest in the unresponsive system. It was unfortunate, he had hoped to use the command and control center to take over the satellite system.

“Is there an armory around here?” he asked, shifting focus.

“Follow me.”

The armory was quite spacious and well stocked, as expected of a military facility. All manners of weaponry were neatly on display. Unfortunately, as Kwang Hwi expected, most of them were rendered unusable. The saving grace was that there were a few non-lethal items that were still useful, such as smoke grenades and flare guns.

Rather than the armory, it was to Kwang Hwi’s pleasant surprise that the facility’s food storage was the biggest boon this place had to offer. The facility had clearly been designed to be able to house and feed hundreds of soldiers in worst-case scenarios and, consequently, it was filled to the brim with rations.

There was a cornucopia of food, enough to even feed the survivors they picked up alongside his men. After confirming that there were no hostiles in the compound, Kwang Hwi quickly drew up plans to put everyone to work. He silently watched his men load the supplies. Even the general was not exempt, he understood that Kwang Hwi guaranteed his safety and only that. Any resilience would be met with discipline.

“Is that everything?” asked Kwang Hwi.

“Yes. We loaded the UAV and all the supplies,” Jackson replied.

“Good. Seize all usable vehicles in the lot. There should be five or six of them that still works.” While they weren’t equipped with weapons, they were still bulletproof military grade vehicles. Planning to make a mechanized infantry unit in the future, it was certainly nice to have more at hand. The light vehicles were ideal for patrols and reconnaissance. If he mounted machine guns onto them, his men could easily subdue a few monsters.

Jackson called out from across the room. “There’s five in total, boss. Ready to go.”

“Excellent. Lead the way.”

Less than half rode the Namer on their way back. The others were needed to operate the five Korean HMMWVs and a trailer carrying the UAV.

The mission was a great success. With 1 Israeli APC, five Korean HMMWVs, and a trailer with a UAV Heron, he was riding off of waves of momentum that would lead him to greater heights.

Monsters? With enough Merit Points, they were just cannon fodder.

Military? Without their weapons, they were nothing.

At this rate, nothing would stop him on his path to creating the strongest militia in South Korea.

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15. Test Flight

The UAV whirred into action. It sped across the runway and flew straight into the sky. Excited gasps and murmurs broke out among the crowd. As there weren't many things to pass the time compared to the old days, people were starving for entertainment. *'I should bring back some books or board games,'* thought Kwang Hwi.

Despite the fact that his house had been hastily remodeled to serve as a control room, he was rather satisfied. The interior was dark and, just like the control rooms in action movies, live video feed captured straight from the UAV was showcased on large monitors mounted around the room.

"How's it looking?" he asked a pilot sitting near one of the control panels.

"Good. Reception is good and flight performance is satisfactory. All systems nominal." The pilot gently pulled on the stick as he answered. In response, the Heron began ascending, drawing more and more of the city into view. The camera mounted to the bottom rotated around, taking stock of its surroundings.

They were grim. Streets, once filled with ordinary people, were now clearly occupied by the monsters. Buildings all across the urban landscape were awash with flames.

"Hey, what's that?" Kwang Hwi suddenly interjected.

"What's what, boss?"

"Check the North-East corner. 135 degrees."

The pilot dutifully pulled on his controls and the camera swiveled to meet Kwang Hwi's demands. Keku occupied the majority of the screen, oblivious to the aerial surveillance of Kwang Hwi and his team. They filled the entire roadway and Kwang Hwi even saw a few of the Black Wolf Cavalry units he encountered at the supermarket. Although

cluttered, they were clearly walking towards an objective. They marched in unison down the road.

“It looks like at least a thousand of them in total, boss.”

Kwang Hwi nodded in acknowledgment. If the pilot was correct, this would be the biggest horde he had encountered so far.

“Where are they all going?” he asked.

The pilot frowned. “Given their current direction, it seems like they’re heading towards the university.”

“A university?” said Kwang Hwi. *‘That must mean there are survivors in the university...’*

It would certainly explain the monsters’ behavior. The campus was located in a relatively remote area. There wouldn’t be any real reason for the monsters to head there unless they had their sights set on prey already.

“The campus will be in sight soon,” said the pilot. The Heron seamlessly flew past the Keku horde. At the end of the road, a haphazard wall had been hastily erected with just about anything one could expect to find at a university. It was flanked by tall buildings on either side, blockading the road. A number of survivors were garrisoned on top of the wall, each carrying a blunt weapon.

“How long before they arrive?” asked Kwang Hwi.

“Based on their speed and distance, probably 12 minutes.”

“They’re not stealing my points. Men, move out!”

“Yes, sir!” The crew members that were gathered near him stood up and rushed off.

The student council president gritted his teeth. Originally, he was under the impression that the monsters were still quite far away. But what he, and his peers, thought they saw was very much wrong. Everyone was anxious. It had been a week since they had first encountered the monsters, but fear still gripped their hearts.

The monsters were extremely hostile and much stronger than a normal person. Those that were brave enough to stand up against them were torn apart, limb from limb. Those that tried to run away also met the same fate.

The ones who were quick and clever enough to hide survived—if only just. The student council president recalled how he had shrunk into a corner and shriveled in fear until the monsters had left.

‘I really hoped they would never return.’

He knew he couldn’t count on it. The initial peace had scarcely lasted a week. They had finished barricading the front when giant wolves appeared. It was as if they were playing with their food. If it weren’t for the fact that they had prepared a Molotov cocktail, their paltry fortress would have already been breached.

He picked up the walkie-talkie. He couldn’t hide it any longer. His voice trembled slightly as he spoke.

— “Please brace yourselves.”

Around the university, a sense of impending dread glossed over the survivors as they clutched their improvised weapons a little bit tighter. He lamented over this fact as well. With some modern weaponry, they would have been more successful in their pursuits against the monsters. That said, a dangerous firearm had little place at a university. All they could find were bows from the archery club and they had already deployed archers to the rooftops. On the wall itself, everyone was equipped with baseball bats or metal pipes with slightly sharpened edges.

— “Should we shoot now?”

He hesitated before answering.

— “Yes, please shoot.”

One of the archers perched on the rooftop drew the bow back. At the tip of the arrow, a spark of flame flickered with life just as he loosed the arrow into the sky. It arched gracefully through the sky and landed with a non-descript splash.

An explosion sounded from the target location as the oil prepared earlier combusted into flames, bisecting the road. The monsters immediately slowed down, approaching the flaming barrier with trepidation. The president’s face brightened, if only a little. *‘At least they’re scared of fire.’* His eyes wandered over the fire wall which separated them from the monsters beyond. Just as he took a brief reprieve from their difficult situation, a black shadow pierced through the blinding flames and his heart throbbed.

Four thick, heavy paws hit the ground, pushing the fire aside. Two crimson eyes were framed with a row of vicious teeth. The jet-black shadow let out a piercing howl and the student council could feel their hearts drop. It was the monster he had seen yesterday. The wolf lowered its head and, like knights dismounting a steed, the three Keku riding on its back hopped off and began advancing forwards.

"They're coming!" he heard his voice scream. More and more Black Wolves jumped through the flames, carrying Keku across the wall of fire. The archers poured arrows into the Keku to little avail. Many Keku had dozens of arrow shafts protruding out of their body as they climbed the wall at a frenzied pace.

The students who met the Keku at the top saw similar results. The Keku shrugged off their blows and caused havoc wherever they went. Despite this, the survivors were not totally helpless. The walls were still several feet tall, which bought them time. More importantly, Molotov cocktails had been prepared in advance. After seeing the efficacy of the previous ones, they didn't hesitate to prepare more.

Fire rained down onto the Keku as they scaled the walls and they recoiled from the flames. Those who were hit directly howled in pain and collapsed to the ground.

"Noooo!"

The wolf howled triumphantly and a cry of pain rang out from atop the wall. A Black Wolf had scaled the wall in moments and sunk its teeth into a student. Slowly realizing he was being taken away, the male student resisted. However, he was powerless against the Black Wolf's grip.

Red blood splattered and the student was torn into two. A sickening squish filled the air as the student was rended.

Everyone's faces darkened and fear swept through them. Their bodies froze in fear and monsters started to bounded over the walls like a tsunami. The wall of flames which had once held the majority of the monsters at bay had diminished, leaving the students vulnerable. Some of the monsters were struck and fell back down to their deaths, but many more arrived to fill the spaces left by their compatriots. The defense line was wearing thin and their supply of Molotov cocktails were quickly being depleted.

'If they keep coming, we're all going to die. I should've ran away deep into the mountains like the guy suggested yesterday.'

A Keku hand reached over the wall, interrupting his thoughts. Instinct took over and he slammed his hammer over the Keku's skull. Blood splattered across his face as the Keku's head burst like a watermelon. Its body fell into the sea of enemies and another instantly took its place.

'Dammit! How many are there?!' He had killed more than 10 of them, diligently swinging his hammer as each appeared but there was no end in sight. He grumbled, but he remained steadfast in his defense. Eventually, he would run out of energy and that would be the end for him.

"Nooo! Save me!"

Desperate screams could now be heard all around him. He wanted to help his fellow classmates, but his hands were tied. He could hardly maintain his own position, let alone help others. He glanced around furtively. There were only a few defenders left on the walls now. *'Well, at least the people on the roofs are relatively safe. Those Black Wolves are strong, but even they can't leap up a 10 story building.'*

Unfortunately, there was a limit to how much help the supporters could provide. They couldn't prevent the wall from being breached.

"Ugk!" He gasped as the hammer missed and slammed into the wall. His thoughts had distracted him, causing his swing to miss. The reverberations shook through his arms, loosening his already exhausted grip. The hammer clattered to the ground. Seeing an opportunity, the Keku clambered up the wall to find the president. It knew that the humans were rallying under his command. Without him, the university was ripe for the taking.

The president saw Black Wolves rush in below the Keku and he sensed the end was near. Even if he avoided the attack, a pack of Black Wolves were ready to tear him limb from limb. In his last moments, he couldn't repress the fear any further. He closed his eyes as tears poured out.

'Fuck.'

16. Campus Recruitment

The grunts of the monster sounded in his ears. The president was even able to smell the Keku's foul breath up close. He felt like his end was nigh as the scene imprinted itself in his memory, never to be forgotten.

He was too scared to remain standing and his wobbly legs finally gave way. With a thump, his bottom kissed the cold, hard floor. In his confusion, he didn't immediately register the sound of a gunshot. A sticky substance splattered across his face, jolting him back to his senses.

The Keku was knocked down. Having its skull crushed, black liquid spewed out like a fountain. That disgusting liquid had splashed onto his face but, strangely, he didn't mind it at that moment.

'A g-gunshot?' his mind wandered. As if proving that he had not misheard, more gunshots rang. He felt as though the threatening sounds of guns in the past were like fireworks to his ears now, brightly lighting the sky and cheering up the viewers.

The student council president rose to his feet. The formidable monsters were now being swept away so quickly that he even wondered if he was hallucinating.

"What's going on...?"

“Leader! Look over there!” A student council officer standing next to him pointed up ahead and shouted. In response, the president numbly looked over. Despite being far away, he could see a massive object in the distance. Having served the military, the president knew exactly what that thing was. It was an Armored Personnel Carrier. Next to it, he saw the Light Tactical Vehicles that were often called the Korean HMMWV. Whenever the mounted machine gun fired, the monsters would fall flat onto the ground. It appeared almost too good to be true.

“M-military?”

He recalled that the military was rendered powerless in this catastrophe. Even so, it was certainly not a bad situation. They were finally going to be saved from this nightmare. Other survivors were also shouting in joy, happy to see the APC.

“It’s the military! We’re saved!”

“Hurray!”

“Phew.”

As relief washed over him, the president collapsed onto the ground, too exhausted and spent to carry on.

“You’re permitted to use all firearms except the autocannon.”

Kwang Hwi’s order was simple: Eliminate all monsters! So, his excited men fired away, raining hell on the monsters. Unlike the earlier days, the men didn’t need to confront the terrifying creatures directly. They could safely shoot from inside the APC and the feeling was exhilarating.

Next to the APC, there were Light Tactical Vehicles that cleared the pathway. The Keku, who were able to withstand 5.56mm NATO rounds, were powerless against the stronger 7.62mm and could only fall down helplessly in front of the bullet shower.

『M240N』

『A fixed model of a general-purpose machine gun that uses 7.62mm NATO rounds. Developed by the FN corporation in Belgium, it’s a stable machine gun commonly used for military training in the USA and other countries. It can fire 550 ~ 650 bullets per minute and has an effective firing range of 800m.』

Whenever the guns fired, the monsters dropped like flies. Utilizing the frontal blade of the APC, the vehicle trampled over the monsters, leaving mangled bodies in its wake. It was excessive to use a 30mm autocannon for such a small threat.

None of the monsters could win against the APC. The Kwang Hwi Faction broke through the monster's rear line with a violent force and momentum. Sensing the change, monsters in the front line started to turn around. However, their vision was impaired by the hundreds that were flocking together. Seeing the entire scene unfold from the UAV, Kwang Hwi grabbed the walkie-talkie.

“Jackson.”

— “Roger that, boss! Firing!”

Behind the APC, there was the Medium Tactical Vehicle. Jackson was standing on the roof, holding an MK. 47 Striker AGAL Grenade Launcher. An intense explosion swept through the surrounding area. Instinctively, the Keku covered their eyes with their hands, but the shockwave tore through their useless defense and ripped apart their bodies. Chunks of flesh that were torn apart violently rained down from the sky. It was too horrible a spectacle for an average human to witness.

『You have defeated 700 Keku faster than anybody else in the world.』

『You have obtained 4500 MP.』

『You have defeated 800 Keku faster than anybody else in the world.』

『You have obtained 5000 MP.』

『You have defeated 900 Keku faster than anybody else in the world.』

『You have obtained 5500 MP.』

Notifications were appearing in front of Kwang Hwi, extending above his retina. His vision was obscured so much that he could not see anything except the prompts. A faint smile hung around his mouth. His MP was rising quickly. He couldn't ignore the amount of MP he had earned from killing monsters and completing the mission.

The battle continued, albeit one-sidedly. Naturally, the Kwang Hwi Faction was winning. In a short matter of time, the thousands of monsters were cut into half. As the soldiers fought even more fiercely, the number dwindled even faster.

A Black Wolf came into Kwang Hwi's gun sight. It resisted until the very end by erratically flinging its body all over the place. Nevertheless, it couldn't escape its fate. The asphalt road was soon littered with black blood and chunks of flesh from the monster.

“Heron #1, do you see any other monsters nearby?”

— “All clear! Boss.”

“Alright. If anything unusual happens, report back immediately.”

Kwang Hwi slowly walked up to the wall. *'Not bad,'* he complimented himself internally while moving, feeling a bit proud. People looked up at Kwang Hwi with a favorable impression, perhaps due to his help and timely rescue in a dire situation.

"I am Kwang Hwi Baek!" The eyes of the remaining survivors in the university were all on him as they looked at him with expectant and reverent expressions.

"We are an armed force based around the entire area of Dongducheon. Currently, we have dozens of survivors working together to tide over these difficult times."

Kwang Hwi explained slowly, but his voice was full of confidence. The first thing he did was to inform the survivors about the current situation.

"It is difficult to determine if the government still exists as the military and the police force are nowhere to be seen. The authorities have made no response in such dire times, which is a statement in itself." Kwang Hwi smacked his lips and looked around the crowd before continuing.

"So far, based on what has been confirmed in the military base located at Uijeongbu, all firearms have been destroyed, rendering the army useless even if they were here."

He waited for a moment to let his words sink in. He could see the fear and nervousness in the eyes of his audience, but he ignored the emotions and went on, "Desperate times call for desperate measures. Therefore, we have decided to make our own armed faction to band together and follow the most basic instinct of humanity—survival!"

The people in the university were visibly shaken by his proclamation. As they had been hiding in the university from the monsters since the beginning, they did not know the situation outside. Moreover, on the second day, all communications were cut off. While some left to go find their family members, most stayed in the university waiting for a rescue team.

"You may be surprised, or rather—shocked, but this is the reality. It's difficult to say when the rescue team will arrive. Perhaps, they will never arrive."

The crowd remained silent, perhaps too terrified to make a response. In such a large pack, not even a peep could be heard.

"Join us."

Kwang Hwi's voice shook the survivors, jolting them back to their minds. Even the survivors who were mentally exhausted pricked up their ears to listen. Everyone's heart started beating a bit faster with anticipation and hope for the future.

“Based on what you can do, we will be assigning appropriate tasks to everybody. Just know that our base is safe and there will be no monsters to haunt you at night. You can have a sound sleep.”

People started to look at the student council president. They needed someone to represent them at this moment. The president checked on everyone’s expression. While no one was speaking up, it was easy to tell what they were thinking. They wanted to stay safe from the monsters.

In front of him, Kwang Hwi and his subordinates stood tall like mountains, unshakeable and steady. The men proved they were strong, sweeping up a thousand monsters. The president organized his thoughts.

‘I feel the same way.’ While he had willingly taken the role of the student council president, he did not have the courage and ability to take responsibility for the livelihood of everyone.

“If others are fine, let’s join them.”

Even though his heart was just about to burst out from the overwhelming pressure, the president felt at ease after speaking these words. There was a sensation, as if a boulder was pushed away from his shoulders.

Kwang Hwi accepted them with wide, open arms.

“Welcome.”

In the Shinhoo University Dongducheon Campus, 70 survivors had joined the Kwang Hwi Faction. Amongst them, over half were healthy, active adults in their twenties to thirties. If trained properly, it was possible to get a decent-sized armed force.

Furthermore, the amount of talent that came from the university was an asset to be reckoned with. Students majoring in specialized fields and professors with useful knowledge were all crucial resources. Manpower was much needed in such tumultuous times.

With some reluctance, a small number of people refused to join. It was impossible to tell why. Perhaps it was because the faction wasn’t affiliated with the government or some other reasons. Many people were still stuck with the ideas of the past. Nothing could be done to wake them up to reality.

“It’s regrettable.”

Kwang Hwi didn’t stop them. There was no reason to force them to join if they didn’t want to. Doing so would only ruin the mood and atmosphere of their camp.

‘Naturally, I can’t guarantee your safety if you go alone,’ he lampooned inwardly. His militia was purchasing a bulletproof APC and military vehicles because of the monsters. Yet, these unarmed people wanted to go back home barefoot or with a bike. It clearly wasn’t a wise choice but rather a ridiculous one.

“Good luck.”

After the reluctant ones left, the willing ones remained standing there, looking left and right. Kwang Hwi got those people into the vehicles. There was no shortage of seats as he had estimated the number of people ahead of time using the UAV. On top of the added manpower, he was able to secure more food. While it wasn’t an amount that could feed everyone for more than a week, there wasn’t any good reason to leave it behind.

— “Boss, we’re ready to leave.”

“Let’s go back.”

The vehicles started moving, with the APC leading the way. It was a fruitful day with a bountiful harvest. They had absorbed an entire group of survivors, making the militia bigger. And there was even a new change.

『You have defeated more than 1,000 ‘Keku.’』

『From now on, you will receive additional Merit Points for every ‘Keku’ defeated.』

『Unlocked Artillery category for a more effective mass destruction.』

Additional MP was nice, but Kwang Hwi had also unlocked the <Artillery> category that he had never seen before. The message that appeared with it was also significant. ‘A *more effective mass destruction, huh...*’ He imagined the carnage he could cause with the new weapons. The ability he had acquired was pushing him to fight against the monsters even harder.

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17. Welcome Boys~

“What’s your major?”

“Social science.”

After confirming the student’s ID, the recruiter turned to Jackson.

“**Soldier.**”

With a mischievous smile, Jackson grabbed and pulled on the student’s hand.

“Welcome, boys~!”

“Huh?”

Hearing the foreign English words, the nervous college student tried to resist instinctively. However, he could not overpower the muscular man in front of him, no matter how hard he tried. In defiance, the student tried to kick Jackson but failed as Jackson yanked him hard. Naturally, Jackson was not only talented in shooting and firing guns from far away. He was also experienced in close combat, a soldier through and through.

“Don’t resist. You can’t **escape me**,” Jackson said while chuckling, almost like a devil.

The student was brought to the temporary training hall. A crowd of students in similar situations was already gathered here. Perhaps because they were being enlisted as soldiers, the atmosphere was oppressive. Everyone was feeling nervous for what was to come. Amongst them, there was a particular face that stood out. It was the temporary leader of the university—the student council president. Having attended the military earlier than most students, the president’s face was already masked with paint, ready for action and combat training.

‘Re-enlisted again?!’ he was crying internally though, unlike his external appearance. Unfortunately, the president majored in Chinese; therefore, there was nothing he could do under the current circumstances. Perhaps the situation would change once the militia met some foreigners. When he decided to join, he knew enlistment was an inevitability, so he wasn’t opposed as much as the rest of the students were.

“Don’t worry! We won’t shave off your hair!” Jackson said while chortling. He was having fun teasing the new recruits. They were like lambs placed in front of a wolf, just ripe for hunting.

“Now, next. Show me your student ID.” The recruiter commanded without much emotion in his voice.

The next person in line was a female student. After seeing the scene unfolding in front of her, she was quite nervous. Hearing the recruiter’s instruction, she handed over her card apprehensively.

Comparing the female student’s face with the student ID, the recruiter mumbled.

“Engineering.”

This time, another subordinate guided the female student elsewhere. Students in the STEM fields were regarded as valuable human resources in the Kwang Hwi Faction. This was mainly because there weren’t enough people to maintain the equipment, and they needed anyone who could give a helping hand.

Whether it was because she was female or an engineering student, the subordinate guided her with courtesy, showing due respect.

“Next!”

This time a middle-aged professor stepped forward, looking rather calm and composed.

“Please show us your teacher identification card.”

The middle-aged professor pulled out his ID card from his wallet.

“Dean of Food Science & Nutrition?” The recruiter gave a slightly perplexed look. It would have been easier to make the call if he was a Dean of STEM majors but Food Science & Nutrition? From a glance, the professor only looked suitable for cooking.

‘Ah, screw it!’ he shrugged it off.

“Ahem, cooking duties.”

The old professor was baffled. He couldn’t believe his ears, and his face was screaming, *‘I am the dean, but you are telling me to cook?’*

The recruiter did not care about his reaction. While he didn’t want to abuse his authority, he was the one in charge of assigning tasks.

“C-cooking duties?” The professor stuttered. It was unimaginable for him that his luck would be so miserable.

“Next!”

Amongst the students, only a few were technically skilled. Most were majoring in social sciences, and they were naturally enlisted as soldiers. What was unusual was that one of the students was an ROTC cadet. Due to this problem, Jackson had to visit Kwang Hwi to seek his opinion.

“Boss, what should we do?”

Kwang Hwi’s answer was simple.

“He’ll start out as a soldier like the rest and climb the ranks.”

Although the student partaking in the ROTC program was more talented than the others, Kwang Hwi had his own philosophy and set of rules. Knowledge that lacked experience was useless, and it was even more so in such chaotic times. Also, though

some of his subordinates had been affiliated with the army, Kwang Hwi still drilled obedience into all of them regardless. As a matter of fact, Kwang Hwi himself was a former Sergeant.

“How is the pilot?”

“We assigned him a student who’s good at playing console games,” Jackson reported.

“Good job. The boy should get the hang of it in no time. Tell the pilot to teach him well.”

Kwang Hwi had assigned the UAV to members experienced in piloting. However, he was in dire need of troops. With the addition of personnel, his combat forces could focus solely on combat missions from now on. His support squad was finally taking shape now, a significant boost to his armed forces.

“We have also secured a handful of STEM professors and students. They should be able to handle the weapon maintenance.” Jackson continued his report.

“That’s good to hear. Anything else?”

“This is a suggestion made by someone in our first batch of recruits—” Jackson put down the paper he was holding: it was handwritten with several drawings on it. “— Having marketing experience, he made these suggestions to help us grow in strength.”

“Hm?”

‘A *marketer*.’ Kwang Hwi looked at the paper with interest.

(1) Let others know about the Kwang Hwi Faction through radio broadcast.
(2) Leave graffiti everywhere in the city.— These are methods that could help publicize the Kwang Hwi Faction and rally nearby survivors. For those who cannot hear the radio broadcast, it’ll be best to proceed with (2) simultaneously.

“Not bad.” Kwang Hwi sincerely appreciated his suggestions. Although they were simple, they were like a fresh spring breeze in these apocalyptic times. They needed as much manpower as they could get, and the marketer had helped them solve that dilemma.

Given that graffiti was started by the American gangsters who used it to mark their territory, the plan was certainly not bad at all. Until now, there hadn’t been any regular patrols or rescue missions due to the lack of transportation and soldiers. However, the situation was now different since most of their problems had been resolved with the fresh injection of recruits.

While the second batch of newcomers had to undergo training, they could still defend the base. The same was true for the first batch when Kwang Hwi had gone to secure the hospital.

Kwang Hwi quickly brainstormed ideas. The vague plan he had in mind was starting to become more concrete as he thought up the details.

'If we can organize a team using the two Light Tactical Vehicles...'

A driver and a machine gunner with two people per vehicle, four in total. It was possible to organize a team with just 4-5 soldiers. And their firepower wouldn't be lacking either thanks to the machine gun mounted at the top of the vehicle. With extra seats, they could bring back the survivors. He finally decided to put the idea into action.

"Let's do the radio broadcasts first."

Kwang Hwi browsed through the [Communication/Reconnaissance] category in the Merit Shop. It took him some time to choose one because there were so many things in the shop, but he finally found something that could be used for broadcasting. Despite being an old model, it looked brand new after being purchased from the Merit Shop.

"Take this. Find some people who are good at talking and assign them the task. Make sure to share the broadcasting content with me beforehand."

"Roger."

"For the Recon Team, bring me a list of members. I'll draft up a plan."

"Yes, sir!"

Even though he could leave the task to his men, Kwang Hwi was not the type to dump his duties to others. It didn't take much time, and it was one of his responsibilities as the commander in chief. He also liked to remain in control.

"There's one more thing I forgot to mention." Jackson suddenly spoke.

"What is it now?"

"We lack electricity."

Kwang Hwi was at a loss for words. The solar PV panels installed on the rooftops of the compound were household products. With their efficiency and scale, they couldn't keep up with the increase in power usage. They needed to resolve this as soon as possible since the plan hinged on using electricity.

'I'll need to use more MP.' He was bitter at the fact that he would have to spend his hard-earned MP now. Having killed more than a thousand monsters yesterday, Kwang Hwi now had over 100,000 MP. However, as his MP increased, more useful options were available, and he needed to save up for them. Kwang Hwi's eyes naturally shifted towards the [Energy] category.

『Energy 』

『This category is currently locked.』

『This category can be unlocked immediately for 50,000 MP.』

『Would you like to unlock the Energy category?』

Kwang Hwi's finger started shaking. It was almost as if he could see the points flying away, waving goodbye.

'To think that I have to use half of what I earned yesterday, just to unlock this.'

Even so, he couldn't just leave it as it is.

'Let's unlock...'

Just as he was about to make the purchase...

"When I asked around, the people told me that there is a power plant nearby."

"A power plant!?"

Kwang Hwi shouted urgently. He was sweating due to the sudden turn of events.

'CANCEL! CANCEL!'

『You have canceled the purchase.』

Kwang Hwi sighed in relief. Thankfully, he had reacted in time, or else, he would have made a hasty decision to use his MP.

"How far is it?"

"They said it should be 30 minutes away."

"Anything else?"

According to Jackson, the power plant was operated by a private company. The facility generated electricity using LNG and solar power. It was capable of producing approximately 1700 MW of electricity at full capacity. Since the plant provided 700 MW

of electricity for 500,000 people, 1700 MW meant that it could handle more than a million people.

'If I could get it, I won't have to worry about electricity for a while.' Kwang Hwi's heart was filled with desire. This was an opportunity that he couldn't let go.

"... We must get it, at all costs."

Chapter 18. Combined Cycle Power Plant

The pathway to the power plant was blocked by mobile barricades commonly found at military checkpoints, barring their way ahead. The driver asked for further instructions from Kwang Hwi.

— "Boss, what should we do?"

"Step on the pedal and run over it."

The engine started rotating at a furious pace as the APC rushed forward like a charging bull. The barricades violently bounced off the truck, scattering like loose sand in front of the overwhelming force.

One of the barricades flew towards the side, partially destroying the guard post. The APC shook from the impact, slightly startling the new soldiers. The more experienced members closed their eyes, unfazed and steady. They showed the maturity that they forged through the blood and sweat expended in the war against the monsters.

— "Barbed-wire fence up ahead!"

Kwang Hwi looked at the screen linked to the front camera. The road leading to the parking lot was obstructed by barbed wires and Keku were dangling on it, strewn like kebabs on skewers. All of the corpses were charred black without exception. It was as if they really were barbecued.

"Stop!"

The APC slowed in a hurry, rapidly coming to a halt.

"Open the back door. We'll investigate it personally."

The sunlight gradually peeked over the men, illuminating their battle-hardened faces. The armed forces went out first, leading their inexperienced compatriots. Perhaps because of their real combat experience, the men quickly surveyed the surroundings with sharp eyes. They started to behave like true soldiers.

Kwang Hwi vigilantly approached the barbed wire fence. A blue flame erupted as if it were a warning not to come closer. It was an electric fence and a deadly one on top of that.

“Not a bad idea.”

To avoid direct confrontation, they had deployed tools to stop monsters by utilizing the abundant amount of electricity available from the power plant. Unless the monsters were capable of jumping over the fence, they would suffer a lot of damage, effectively crippling their advance.

‘They have certainly thought this through, but they’re still not invincible.’

CCTVs and intercoms were installed near the parking lot’s entrance, monitoring the vicinity. Waving his hand towards the CCTV, Kwang Hwi pressed the intercom call button.

After a few dial tones, someone picked up from the other side, but he remained silent. To break the silence, Kwang Hwi spoke first.

“Is someone there?”

— “...Are you the rescue team?”

While the person spoke in a blunt manner, one could tell he was desperate. It was understandable as no one would want to remain confined in a place, always living under the threat of monsters and fearing for their lives.

“Close.”

— “...What do you mean? Are you or are you not?”

“I’m not sure if you know, but the current government—including the military and the police—are practically gone. There is no authority maintaining the order of society.”

Kwang Hwi was slightly annoyed at the fact that he had to repeat the same story. He didn’t want to bother doing this for every single survivor he met. It’s been a while since monsters have appeared.

‘If the situation hasn’t improved over time, shouldn’t they know by now that the government is helpless? To think there are still people clueless about the reality of the situation.’ Kwang Hwi mused in his heart, lamenting the ignorance of the survivors in the wild.

“Join us, and we can ensure your safety. What you’ll be doing won’t change while being under our military protection.”

— "...We think we're safe even now."

"For now, yes. But, I doubt you can say the same for the foreseeable future."

— "Our electric fence has already killed numerous monsters. Do you not see the corpses in front of you?"

Kwang Hwi grinned.

'Are they trying to bargain their worth or simply resisting?'

It didn't matter, though. Kwang Hwi moved the smart pad next to the CCTV to show them from the control room.

"This is a footage shot from the Dongducheon downtown."

The area was teeming with monsters, they were everywhere and denied any chance of survival. There were more than just a few thousand, they were seemingly endless. While the majority were Keku, there were a decent amount of Black Wolves too.

"If all of them came here, would you be able to defend against it? With just this barbed wire fence?"

There wasn't an answer, or rather, they couldn't give an answer. They weren't clueless either and knew it was impossible to remain here and do nothing. They couldn't live on by turning a blind eye to reality.

Perhaps they could stop a few hundred monsters since they would die upon contact. But, what would happen if all the monsters concentrated towards a single point of the fence? Kwang Hwi had already experienced something similar. It was the iron gate and fence protecting his house. Realizing it was impossible to do it individually, the monsters levied their full body weight on the iron gate and fence by cooperating with their comrades.

Unable to withstand the full weight of the Keku, the iron gate collapsed, allowing the monsters to enter. While it wasn't an electric fence, would it be more sturdy than an iron gate? No. It would eventually break. Nothing could last in front of a crowd of savage monsters. They would have to counter numbers with numbers and the monsters' ferocity with their bullets.

"You should also be running low on food supplies."

While it wasn't certain how much they had stockpiled, it had been over a week. By now, their food should be rapidly dwindling. What's more, they weren't even able to secure food from outside.

“Have you changed your mind yet?”

— “...Please come inside and let’s talk first.”

Rather than cutting off the electricity, a gate slid to the side, opening a path. They were still on their guard in case it was a trap. Nothing could be left to chance in these tumultuous times. Kwang Hwi and his members entered the power plant, followed by the APC Namer.

“Over here!”

In front of the main building, there was a man waiting for them, looking haggard and downtrodden. He tried his best to appear normal, but his pallid face and emaciated body betrayed his actual situation. His getup showed how much the situation had deteriorated in the plant.

“I’m the head manager of the power plant, Yeon Ho Lee.”

“My name is Kwang Hwi Baek.”

“Please, come in.”

Unlike Kwang Hwi’s carefree attitude, his men carefully observed the surroundings. Since they were not on the same side, the men needed to be on their toes. Thankfully, it didn’t seem like there was an ambush set in advance.

After a few security checks, the men entered a large conference room right in front of the control room. In there, some people also dressed in the same manner as Yeon Ho were waiting for Kwang Hwi.

Kwang Hwi made his men wait outside. He did this to assure them that he didn’t come with bad intentions. These people weren’t a threat to him even if they all attacked at once. After both sides briefly exchanged greetings, they began to discuss the terms.

“What do you want?”

“It’s simple. I want everyone here to divide into groups to work in shifts. As for sleeping and other daily life activities, please come to our headquarters. Since this place is important for us, we’ll always have troops deployed here. Even in the worst-case scenario, I’ll make sure everyone here can escape.”

“...Is that all?”

An engineer asked in disbelief. He made a dumbfounded expression. It was as if he couldn’t believe that the terms would be so lax.

“Is there anything else we need? We came here and found people. Couldn't it be any better than the worst-case scenario? The power plant is completely fine and there are even people who can operate it. I think both sides can benefit from this relationship. After all, the best deal is one in which both parties can benefit.”

The situation was undoubtedly better than what Kwang Hwi had expected. It was really good to know that the power plant wasn't taken over by the monsters or destroyed. The engineers exchanged glances with each other in a solemn manner. It didn't take too long to arrive at a decision, however. Unless their heads were empty, there was only one path they could take. Furthermore, their combat force had already entered the facility.

“Let's join you.”

Kwang Hwi shook hands with Yeon Ho with a calm expression. He wasn't too excited as he came prepared for the worst.

“Welcome aboard.”

With this, he managed to resolve the electricity issue smoothly.

Over the static of the radio, a voice sounded abruptly, startling Soo Min on the other side of the receiver.

— “Soo Min, check.”

“Yes, boss!”

Soo Min motioned with his hand. He was prepared with a team and was standing by for confirmation. People moved in haste to test the home appliances. The devices that were not responding previously now started to work in unison, making everyone rejoice.

A cool breeze blew from the air conditioner, while the TV screen displayed a noise screen. The light bulbs emitted a bright light, driving out even the faint darkness hiding in the corners, and the people's faces gleamed along with it. They were suffering because the weather was getting warmer. It was fortunate that they could use the air conditioners and fans once again, relieving them of their worries.

One of the soldiers reported back to Soo Min saying “Everything is working fine!”

Wearing a satisfied smile, Soo Min grabbed on the radio.

“Boss, we've confirmed the power supply. It's working!”

— “Got it. Go deploy the guard squad.”

“Yes. We’ll send them out immediately.”

Soo Min headed out to the 2nd floor’s balcony. In front of the headquarters, there were members waiting for Soo Min’s command with the two Light Tactical Vehicles.

“Guard squad! Go.”

The soldiers assigned to the guard squad quickly got into the vehicles. The tightly closed gate opened and the people working near the entrance promptly moved away to make way for the incoming vehicles.

The Light Tactical Vehicles left the headquarters. Being an essential facility, it was agreed that guards would be deployed to the power plant to maintain order and be ready for emergencies. Even though Kwang Hwi only had stationed a few men alongside two tactical vehicles with mounted machine guns, he planned to defend the power plant with a stronger force once their situation improved.

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19. Trap

Following Kwang Hwi’s decision, the recon team commenced full-scale operations. However, it wasn’t at a large scale. While patrolling around the headquarters, they would eliminate the monsters. They would also search and rescue survivors at the same time. It was an excellent method to clean up and expand the area little by little. They were going to do this step by step to ensure success.

Jackson was the last person to get in the car. The recon team this time was made up of the first and second batch of new recruits—fresh out of training, with Jackson leading the group.

Jackson wasn’t typically a part of the recon team, but as the new recruits were still greenhorns and had yet to gain some experience, he was here to assist them and show them the ropes.

“Is everyone on board?”

“Yes, sir.”

Jackson picked up the radio after checking on the members of the recon team. New regulations had been added for regular check-ins when going outside.

“HQ. This is the recon team. We are ready to rock and roll.”

— “Confirmed. Recon team, deploy.”

The recon team set out on two Light Tactical Vehicles. Navigating through the quiet neighborhood, the vehicles entered the city in less than 10 minutes. A terminal appeared before them after crossing a bridge. Beyond it, large buildings stretched far and wide. It seemed to be the office district.

“Oh, around here should be fine. Let’s stop.”

Jackson got off the vehicle while holding a spray can. There was a wall with appropriate width and height conveniently on one side.

‘What should I write...?’ He thought for a moment about their recruitment notice. It wasn’t necessary to make it complicated; all it needed to do was to make everyone know that the Kwang Hwi Faction existed. By doing this, they could set the name of their faction deep in the mind of anyone who would read it. Even if they did not want to join them immediately, they could at least spread their moniker.

On the gray background of the wall, the black letters stood out like a blot on the landscape. When Jackson returned to the vehicle, the driver had already tuned into the frequency.

— “Greetings to all survivors. This is the Kwang Hwi Faction’s radio broadcast on 108.5 MHZ...”

For the past few days, the Kwang Hwi Faction had been conducting radio broadcasts regularly to attract more survivors and spread awareness. However, rather than live broadcasts, they were akin to pre-recorded messages. The content of the announcements was similar: what the monsters looked like, what the Kwang Hwi Faction called them, and an up-to-date recap of their characteristics. Through the transmission, the names Keku, Black Wolves, and Blisters were popularized. Of course, some propaganda was mixed in too.

— “The Kwang Hwi Faction regularly patrols the Dongducheon area. Our goal is to one day defeat the monsters and return to our previous way of life. We welcome all survivors! We can provide food, shelter, and security—the three most essential things under the circumstances.”

It also criticized the government, which had yet to take any action. Of course, this was done intentionally to spread skepticism among people regarding the authorities.

— “Do not expect help from the government. You must face reality. If fighting the monsters is inevitable, then you must make the most of the tools you have. You must depend on yourself. Do not risk heading to the police station as all guns have rusted.”

Jackson closed his eyes and fell into his own thoughts.

'I don't know if Mother or Father are doing well.'

Kwang Hwi, Soo Min, and the other Korean members were mostly orphans without families, so they had little to worry about. However, both of Jackson's parents were alive before the catastrophe. The monsters made him concerned about his parents, but there was little Jackson could do right now. He couldn't even contact them, nor could he travel to America.

'It might be possible later on, right...?'

Jackson believed in Kwang Hwi. Though cold on the surface, Jackson had never seen anyone take care of their people so much. It was significantly different from what he had heard from his superiors in the U.S. Army. Considering how he maintained their production of armored vehicles, they'd be able to produce helicopters and transport aircraft in the future.

— "Recon Leader, this is Ryker 1."

The sudden interruption broke his reverie as Jackson opened his eyes to the voice in his ear. Ryker 1, who was leading at the front, began to slow down. When it came to a halt, Ryker 2, who was following, was also forced to stop.

"Ryker 1, this is the Recon Leader. What's the situation?"

— "Ryker 1 reporting. There's a survivor down on the road ahead."

"A survivor? Alone?"

— "Affirmative."

"Secure the perimeter. I'll check on the survivor."

Jackson stepped out of the car. Indeed, there was a man who had collapsed on the road in front of Ryker 1. His face looked pale and close to death. It wasn't apparently whether it was from injury or an adverse health condition.

"You over there, can you hear me?"

Jackson slowly closed the distance while being fully alert. His gun aimed at the wounded as he checked his surroundings. However, the man did not reply. No, it seemed more accurate to say that he wasn't able to give a reply. His face was sweating profusely and his whole body was shivering as if he had chills.

The man's body shook violently for the last time and his arms and legs bent at odd angles, showing a grotesque appearance.

“Holy fuck!”

Jackson cursed in English due to the sudden change. He tried to keep calm at the inexplicable and spooky scene in front of him.

Black blisters pierced through the man’s clothes. The blisters, originally the size of fingernails, quickly grew and expanded throughout the man’s body, covering him entirely. The familiar shape of a human soon disappeared and only a strange creature remained in place. It was like a scene from a horror movie.

Jackson started to back away without realizing it, but he kept his aim steady. It was a familiar-looking monster: The Blister from Dongducheon General Hospital.

With a bang, the P90 in his hands started spraying bullets as flames sparked from the gun. The small caliber, high velocity 5.7mm ammunition hit Blister’s torso. With the sound of tearing flesh, a small hole was formed in its heart. The shattered black crystals broke out of its body and scattered on the floor. Following the fall of the Blister, the screeching sound of Blisters came from all directions. Jackson’s blood ran cold and his hair stood on end.

‘A trap!’

He hastily turned his body to retreat to the vehicle. However, a Blister suddenly appeared in his view. Without giving it a chance to launch an attack, Jackson pulled the trigger reflexively. The Blister collapsed, beaten down.

However, there were not merely a couple of Blisters. Rather, they numbered in the hundreds. They came running from all directions like a roaring flood. From a lightless opticians store, from a clothing store with shattered windows, from a narrow alleyway between buildings. No direction was left empty.

Jackson jumped onto the car with the utmost haste. A soldier holding a machine gun awaited orders with a panicked face.

“W-What do we do, sir?”

“Fire! Fire!”

Jackson roared at the soldier in English but soon followed it in Korean. The vehicle-mounted M240N’s muzzle lit up as the rain of bullets fell on the Blisters. Ryker 1, up at the front, also started firing its machine guns. The Blisters that could not even withstand gunfire from pistols collapsed without taking a single step further. Black crystals from the Blisters’ bodies covered the asphalt road. Though they had taken down dozens of Blisters at once, Jackson’s expression did not relax. There were more of them out there, way more than they’d ever hope to take down.

“Ryker 1, get moving! We’re getting out of here!”

— “Yes, sir!”

The engine of the stationary Light Tactical Vehicle roared as it began moving. The crystals crumbled under the weight of the wheels when they sped up. More Blisters rushed in but could not keep up with the car running at full speed. The gap widened quickly as they left the horde in the dust. Jackson gave a sigh of relief before pressing the transmission button.

“HQ. This is the Recon Leader.”

— “This is HQ. Go ahead.”

“Multiple Blisters encountered at the Woosung intersection. We made contact and are now leaving the scene.”

— “Copy that. Return to HQ under standard recon protocols. What’s the sitrep?”

“Currently, we are—”

BANG

The vehicle collided with a Blister that suddenly appeared in front of it. Ryker 2, on uneven ground, took to the air after the impact. Jackson strained to hold on to the door handle and keep himself steady. Blood began to pool in his skull with his body inverted. With a boom, the Light Tactical Vehicle landed, flipped, and skidded several meters across the ground, sending sparks flying everywhere. The screeching sound of the metal grazing the hard surface created a sharp noise.

“Euuugh…”

Jackson shook his head after the crash. Ryker 1 entered his shaky and blurry vision. Slowly, he came to realize that they had stopped in the middle of nowhere. He looked at the other soldiers. The trooper that had manned the machine gun earlier had slipped back into the car at some point and now sat slouched in the passenger seat. The driver was in a similar dazed state.

Jackson checked their pulses in a hurry. Thankfully, they were still breathing and were merely unconscious. Jackson undid his seatbelt and searched around for his gun. Fortunately, it was right next to him.

The Blister that had followed them from behind ran right past Ryker 2 and headed directly for Ryker 1. The machine gun on Ryker 1 lit up. The people stuck in Ryker 2 heard banging sounds as more Blisters swarmed around them, pounding the vehicle. Thankfully, amidst the chaos of flipping, the door was not damaged and did not open.

'Just need to hold on for a little longer.'

While the engine would likely not start, the body of the car was sturdy. Additionally, with the support fire from Ryker 1, rescue would be possible in a short time. There were already dozens of dead Blisters near Ryker 1. Jackson aimed his gun through a port in the door. It was an opening for the combatants inside to fire upon enemies outside. The monster's body that was attached to the door fell apart under his firing.

The APC Namer drove down the road at high speed. Debris and wreckages often lay on the path, blocking the way ahead. But, the APC drove on while smashing through them. Speed was its priority.

Kwang Hwi's face held a stiff expression. The rest of the crew were not much different.

"ETA 7 minutes at current speed. 3 minutes until the Heron is in the area."

"Any communications?"

"We are periodically checking in with Ryker 1 but not with Ryker 2, which has flipped over."

The screens on the inside of the APC blinked and a static noise sounded.

— "The Heron arrived at the location. Live feed connection established."

The camera, which had been panning around for some time, soon fixed upon one direction. The flickering scene displayed the situation outside. A desolate street emerged beyond the lens. Ryker 2 had been turned upside down and Ryker 1 was stopped a little way away. The Blisters were headed for the two vehicles. Ryker 1 was laying down suppressive fire with its machine gun, but their numbers did not wane. There were just as many Blisters coming out as there were being felled.

"This is HQ. Zoom out the camera."

— "Zooming out from 10x to 4x."

The camera zoomed out to increase the area in view. The surroundings that were not visible before entered the screen. Seeing the situation, the faces of the crew became grave.

— "B-Boss. Are you seeing this?"

"I'm watching."

Kwang Hwi bit his lips due at the horrible scene. The area was swarming with Blisters. It was fortunate that the recon team could not see this scene or they would have been filled with despair.

It was like a sea packed with Blisters.

— Ω —

20. Firepower

— “We’ll be engaging the Blisters soon!”

The driver gave a warning over the radio. Kwang Hwi immediately shifted to the gunner’s position and got ready for action. The remote-controlled weapon system allowed the simultaneous operation of a 30mm cannon and a 7.62mm machine gun.

The APC ran over something with a clunk. Kwang Hwi observed the surroundings through a camera mounted outside. The Blisters were running amok everywhere, their appearance alone made him shudder in disgust. Kwang Hwi squeezed his index finger without hesitation.

The yellow glow of the tracer rounds streaked out of the muzzle and tore through the monsters. Bloody flesh flew everywhere as the monsters’ bodies fell in droves.

— “This is the support team! ETA: 2 minutes!”

— “Affirmative! Current situation: our machine gun is silent and we are defending with primary arms! There’s just too many of them!”

— “We’ll be there soon! Just hold on and defend your position!”

There was a lot of chatter on the radio as the men were clamoring on the other side. The sounds of gunfire and shouting in the background also made it difficult to distinguish anything. Kwang Hwi, however, focused on firing the machine gun.

The black wall blocking the APC’s way disappeared in an instant with his incessant firing. Familiar-looking vehicles came into view as they got closer. One was overturned on its roof while the other sat perilously atop a sea of Blisters. There were dozens of monsters who were clinging to the car, trying to force themselves in. Had it not been for the bulletproof body, it would have been pierced long ago, with the people inside ripped to pieces.

Kwang Hwi turned the machine gun and aimed in the direction of the car. The monsters sticking on the Light Tactical Vehicle needed to be taken care of first before the troops could reunite.

Bullets rained in the direction of the car. To be more precise, they were aimed at the monsters surrounding the vehicle.

The bullets tore apart the monsters without mercy, shredding them to pieces. Occasionally, a stray bullet would hit the car, but the Light Tactical Vehicle was bulletproof, so it remained unaffected. It could deflect 7.62mm rounds indefinitely. Rather, those rounds would instead ricochet off and hit the monsters, causing even more damage. In an instant, ground superiority was seized and support was ready to be deployed.

Kwang Hwi, who was observing the situation with the remote camera, barked an order.

“Rescue them!”

The team promptly followed his command as the members hastily rushed out. They formed up behind the APC and their guns began firing as they cleared a path to Ryker 2. The approaching Blisters started to fall one after another and the rescue team dashed to the vehicle.

“Jackson!”

Hiding inside the vehicle, Jackson’s expression lit up with relief.

“Hurry and open up. We’re getting out of here!”

“Oh, sure!”

Jackson, who was in a relatively good condition compared to his fellow passengers, walked on his own while the driver and passengers were assisted out of their seats.

“Come on! Make it fast!”

The men providing cover fire were the last to return to the APC. Kwang Hwi pulled his trigger at the monsters rushing at their rear and created an opening. The Blisters that were attempting to close the distance were cleared in a few moments.

“Rescue complete. Is Ryker 1 capable of driving?”

— “Ryker 1 can drive!”

“Alright. We’re escaping at full speed!”

The recently arrived APC began moving again. Immediately following it was Ryker 1. The engines roared violently, but the speed was surprisingly slow.

No matter how well built the APC was, it was difficult to gain speed with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Blisters blocking their path. And that was not all.

With a bang, the APC that had been gradually gaining speed abruptly rocked. All the occupants of the APC, including Kwang Hwi, were surprised by the sudden sound. Something had collided with the APC, causing it to tilt to one side.

Loud explosions and vibrations sounded nonstop. Kwang Hwi handed over control of the remote weapons system to another member and returned to the carrier compartment.

“The Blisters are exploding, commander.”

“Exploding?”

He was right. The Blisters kept appearing from all over. They ran at full speed and slammed into the APC, exploding with loud booms. The crystals spewing out were like shrapnel that bounced off the APC. Fortunately, they weren't powerful enough to penetrate the armor of the APC, or else they would have been doomed.

‘Their heads are about 3-4 times larger,’ Kwang Hwi analyzed.

As their heads exploded, the shrapnel would be launched in all directions. Thankfully, they were easy to identify. However, the problem was that the number of exploding Blisters were increasing. The APC would be fine, but the Light Tactical Vehicle would be a concern as it could not withstand such substantial damage.

“Boss.”

“Jackson, are you okay?”

“The Blisters are **human**. They are people who have transformed.”

“...What did you say?”

“I saw it myself! A survivor we found turned into a Blister in an instant!”

Kwang Hwi's eyes darkened and his expression turned gloomy. Jackson was not one to spout nonsense. If he said something like this, it must be true.

‘Transformed people...? Then does that mean the Blister we encountered at the hospital was initially human too? But how did they transform?’

One species turning into another, there must be a cause or reason behind this phenomenon, or else it would be too mind-boggling.

'Bacteria? Infection? Bugs?'

It could be anything. But the fact that the 'suicide bombers' appeared as soon as they saw the APC was too much of a coincidence. Even if they could evolve depending on the situation, they were doing it too fast. There was only one conclusion in the end.

'A high-rank being!'

There should be an entity, like a Queen, that could artificially create and manipulate the evolution of Blisters by some means. It should have seen the APC and created a new exploding Blister, a suicide bomber.

"HQ, this is your boss."

— "Yes, boss!"

"Use the Heron to find the Blister Queen."

Kwang Hwi explained his thoughts simply and described the situation of the new breed of Blisters.

"It will look different than a regular Blister in some way. There's a good chance it's watching us, so it can't be too far away."

— "Understood."

There were no questions asked or doubts raised, only a single word of acknowledgment. As the namesake of the Kwang Hwi Faction, his authority was absolute.

The Heron, which was hovering near the APC, flew higher into the air. The video switched to infrared. As the regular Blisters had heat signatures, the high-rank being should also be detectable by its body heat. They did not have to wait long for an answer.

— "Commander!"

"Did you find it?"

— "We found something suspicious at the Dongducheon Stadium. Apart from a number of Blisters, a huge heat source was also detected."

"Good."

It was good they had the Heron. If not for the UAV, it would have been difficult to find.

“You said the Dongducheon Stadium?”

— “Affirmative. Setting the course now.”

“Ryker 1, return to HQ.”

Now that the ammunition of the machine gun had all been spent, the Light Tactical Vehicle was only a hindrance. It could not provide support, so it was ordered to return.

The APC swerved sharply. The maneuver resulted in a collision with a car, launching it into several Blisters and crushing them into meat patties.

The stadium was not very far away. On the path to their destination, the number of self-destructing Blisters increased significantly but did not cause any significant damage to the APC.

Kwang Hwi was sure this was the place once he neared it. Although the situation didn't seem to have changed much, the Blisters' movements had definitely become more urgent. The one at the rear controlling them had felt the danger coming.

— “Boss. We've arrived at the stadium.”

The shutters to the entrances were down, cutting off the path of the APC. Of course, it was futile as they wouldn't be able to stop the speeding APC.

The shutters crumpled as the APC rolled through, sending the metal debris flying. The vehicle's continuous tracks trampled over the grass field.

“Stop!”

The APC slowed down to a halt as the driver followed the command. It didn't take long to identify the high-rank being. In contrast to other Blisters, it was distinctly larger and had some recognizable facial features. However, they were unlike typical human facial features. It had no ears and instead three eyes and a single nostril and mouth.

Blister Lord! Its eyes were on the APC.

The Blister Lord's sharp screech rang out in all directions. The Blisters filling one side of the grandstand rose in unison and turned in their direction.

However, it wasn't the Blisters that caught the attention of Kwang Hwi's group.

Jackson's jaw was agape with shock and terror. He was horror-stricken by the spectacle in front of him.

“What the fuck...”

Hundreds of people hung from a pole similar to how a butcher hangs meat in a slaughterhouse. They swayed in a state of helplessness, unable to change their fates. From the back of each person, a black tube was protruding. The tubes were connected to the Blister Lord.

Boils covered all parts of their bodies, resulting in a hideous and grotesque appearance. It took less than 10 seconds for a normal human being to turn into a Blister.

While everyone was overwhelmed by the sight and felt at a loss, only Kwang Hwi kept his cool.

“Gunner! Fire the autocannon at the Blister Lord!”

Only after a short moment of daze did Kwang Hwi’s men regain their senses and responded to his orders.

“F-firing!”

The autocannon aimed at the Blister Lord. Realizing the danger it was in, the Blister Lord scrambled to get itself up.

It had tried to evade, but it was a futile effort. The cannon shell reached it in a split second.

Its left shoulder was blown off clean and the remnant pieces flew in the air, blood flying everywhere. Crystalline shards scattered in all directions. An average person would have been blown to pieces, but the Blister Lord just stared at the APC, enraged and furious.

“What are you waiting for? Keep shooting!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

The shell that followed penetrated its body, leaving a large hole. A person would have been blown away without a trace by that blast. The Blister Lord’s body was instantly covered in wounds.

The Blisters in the grandstands collapsed. However, it was definitely not a good thing. The black crystals flew into the sky as if they had wings and gathered towards the Blister Lord.

The large hole rapidly mended. The remaining crystals wrapped around the Blister Lord as if to protect it with armor. The Blister Lord’s body grew in height and became more sturdy. It was a daunting sight.

The size of the cannon shells was twice the length of an adult male hand and it could penetrate through unbelievably thick walls. However, it failed to work on the new form of the Blister Lord.

As powerful as they were, they were not as effective as before the transformation. Only the crystals from its exterior fell down, considerably reducing the damage it received.

The gunner quickly aimed at its head, but this time, the Blister Lord was ready as it raised its arms to prevent the shells from hitting its head. Unlike other Blisters, this one was at least intelligent.

“B-boss!”

“Keep firing!”

The Blister Lord that had only been passively taking fire till now raised its leg.

“Evade it! Evade!”

Before Kwang Hwi had even given the order, the driver began moving the APC in a hurry. An enormous foot missed the APC by mere inches.

The neatly arranged grass field was turned over with a crash. The ground shook as if a bomb had just fallen, wreaking havoc everywhere. One side of the APC slightly lifted due to the tremor. The seated men hurriedly grasped a handle to steady themselves.

The APC found the ground again, and its continuous tracks absorbed much of the shock, barely surviving the aftermath of the strike. Realizing that its attack had missed, the Blister Lord took a step back.

Soil rained down. The APC distanced itself from the Blister Lord with haste. Amid the chaos, the autocannon kept its aim on the Blister Lord’s head.

The Blister Lord, reaching for the APC, faltered. Even though it wasn’t able to land a critical hit, its kinetic energy was not lost.

— “Boss!”

“The preparations?”

— “Fire preparations complete! Ready to commence firing!”

21. 155 mm

“The preparations?”

— “Fire preparations complete! Ready to commence firing!”

A smile crept onto Kwang Hwi’s face. *‘It could withstand autocannon fire? Then how about this?’*

“Fire!”

— “**Danger approaching! Firing!**”

A roar sounded from the radio, giving out a warning. Kwang Hwi raised his voice and shouted a command.

“Get out of the stadium, pronto!”

— “Roger! Hold on tight!”

With its engine roaring, the APC that had been circling the stadium changed its direction. The abrupt turn caused the APC to drift in the middle of the field. The artificial grass and dirt were thrown into the air. A deep curved track was left on the ground as the showy APC pulled out from the stadium, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. The enraged Blister Lord was also mid-stride, chasing the APC.

A sharp whistling sound came from the sky. Immediately on guard, the Blister Lord raised its head. Something black was falling high from the blue sky, a sharp contrast to the bright background. Three black dots rapidly grew in size as they neared. The Blister Lord whimpered in alarm and fear of the strange objects.

Three shells simultaneously fell towards the Blister Lord.

Time on Target coordinated firing! The shells were fired so that they landed on the target concurrently by adjusting the angle of the trajectory.

Separated by fractions of a second, the first shell blast shredded the Blister’s waist to nothingness with a loud bang. Without a waist to support it, its upper body began to tip backward as it lost its balance. Two deafening booms soon followed as the projectiles lodged themselves into the body of the monster. The shells, with a 50 meters kill radius, brilliantly shattered the Blister Lord’s body into giblets. The black crystals melted away without a chance to scatter, marking the end of the Blister Lord and the fierce battle.

『You are the first person in the world to defeat a ‘Lord.’』

『You have obtained 100,000 MP.』

『All Blisters that have lost their ‘Lord’ have become incapacitated.』

The unsettling shockwave shook the APC and a dirt cloud enveloped the APC in an instant. The driver opened his eyes groggily. Though the soot obscured fine details,

faint outlines were still visible. The dust seemed to be endless, but eventually began to thin out. They weren't able to stop until they travelled a sufficient distance from the center of the blast. The thick dust finally settled and the scene of the devastated stadium revealed itself. All that remained of the stands was rubble and stones. The athletics track and the center field had been replaced by a blackened crater. The Blister Lord, with its overwhelming demeanor, was nowhere to be seen.

— “Kill confirmed on the Blister Lord. Good work, everyone.”

The men who had been tightly gripping the handles inside the APC finally relaxed and sighed a breath of relief. Sitting in the car, they were almost crushed in the aftermath of that explosion.

“Boss?”

Jackson looked at Kwang Hwi with a puzzled look. He didn't know of any equipment in possession of Kwang-Hwi Faction that could produce this level of destructive power.

Under his questioning stare, Kwang Hwi answered matter of factly.

“It's a 155 mm self-propelled gun.”

“SPG...?”

Before Kwang Hwi departed on the APC, he had hurriedly purchased an SPG from the Merit Shop and left it to the members remaining behind.

『K-9 ‘Thunder’ SPG.』

『A self-propelled gun developed and employed by the Republic of Korea. Powered by a 1000 horsepower diesel engine with hydropneumatic suspension, it has an excellent capacity for tackling rugged terrain. An automated fire control system and auto-loader allow the first shell to be fired within a minute of maneuvering into position. It boasts excellent firepower with its 155 mm howitzer main armament.』

Instead of another APC, Kwang Hwi bought this just in case. Thanks to the MP he had earned through recent achievements, he was able to afford them. Preparations also took some time as there were no trained personnel for it. But thankfully, it was ready when needed.

Kwang Hwi checked his balance. Killing the Blister Lord had initially netted him 100,000 MP. However, the actual amount earned was more than 300,000. Aside from those achievements, he was also given credit for killing ordinary Blisters.

“We're returning to HQ!”

The APC's continuous track began to move. The half-demolished stadium stood tall behind the departing APC Namer like a trophy, a witness to the battle and the destruction here.

Though there were some dangerous moments, it was not a bad day overall. All the Blisters had been eliminated and now there were only two species left in the city of Dongducheon: Keku and Black Wolves.

"Would the rest of them all die if we find and eliminate their Lords?"

"What?"

"I mean, all the Blisters were left debilitated after we killed their Lord. Then the same could also hold true for Black Wolves and Keku."

Soo Min's conjecture seemed quite plausible.

With that in mind, Kwang Hwi had begun combing through Dongducheon with the Heron. Unfortunately, all their efforts resulted in nothing. Unlike the Blisters, no 'Lord' entity for the Keku or Black Wolves could be found. Even after redoubling their search efforts and going through the area with a fine-tooth comb over several days, not even individuals of unusual size were discovered.

"That's unfortunate. If we can find their Lords, this would become much simpler."

If a Lord was found, they would simply bombard the entire area and there wouldn't even be a need to leave the headquarters. The whole Dongducheon area was within the range of the SPG.

"In the end, the only solution is the complete annihilation of the monsters."

While it would be a hassle, every single monster in Dongducheon would need to be eliminated one by one. There was a problem, however. The current method of elimination was too slow. While Dongducheon was not an enormous city like Seoul, it was extremely difficult for the existing forces of the Kwang-Hwi Faction to cover the entire area. There may be another incident such as last time.

"Is it necessary for us to do all the searching?"

Everyone's eyes turned to Jackson who had spoken. Curious, Kwang Hwi's eyes narrowed.

"So? Are you suggesting that we just bombard the whole city?"

“What? No! Just what do you think of me?”

No matter how pretentious Jackson may have been, he would never suggest leveling the whole city.

There were quite a few survivors hiding throughout the city and there were still plenty of supplies waiting for them to salvage. It would also not be viable from a humanitarian perspective. The indiscriminate artillery fire would surely blow all the monsters away, but the supplies that the Kwang-Hwi faction needed would also disappear along with the monsters.

“**Let them come.** We bring monsters to us.”

“You are suggesting we lure them out?”

“We have the SPG now, don’t we? We just have to gather them all in one place and then bombard the area until we run out of the shells.”

The usually brutish and straightforward Jackson had put forth such an effective plan. The men began to whisper among themselves in amazement.

“This came from Jackson’s big head?”

“Did Soo Min actually come up with this?”

“Oi, I can hear you all!”

It was an elementary yet practical plan: Gather as many of them and then pepper them to the heavens. The Keku or Black Wolves would be obliterated by the power of the 155 mm shells that not even the Blister Lord could withstand. Those who survived the shelling would then be finished off with primary arms.

“It would be better to plan out the operation a bit more and tune the details.”

Soo Min agreed with Jackson. Kwang Hwi also nodded.

“Lets cut the chatter and form up.”

The men who had been chatting amongst each other quickly took their positions, forming up on Kwang Hwi. The rowdy, babbling atmosphere was instantly replaced by a solemn and stern one, showcasing the strict order and discipline of the men.

22. Operation: ‘Bait & Massacre’

In the recent battlefield of the now half-wrecked Dongducheon Stadium, a black bomb fell. Destruction ensued with a loud boom, causing a shockwave to spread out from the

center. The floodlights and grandstand seating, that was somehow still standing, were flattened immediately.

Watching the events from afar, Kwang Hwi grabbed his radio.

“It’s too close.”

— “Readjusting the target.”

A few minutes later, the gunner gave another reply.

— “Ready to fire with the new corrections.”

“Fire.”

Though it was his imagination, the thunderous sound of the artillery fire seemed to be right next to him, shaking his eardrums and causing his guts to squeeze.

The second bomb fell outside the stadium, creating a mushroom cloud of smoke and dust. The asphalt debris was thrown out in all directions and the smog barred the vision of the soldiers.

— “How was that one?”

“Looks good.”

— “That’s a relief. We’ll stand by for further orders.”

Kwang Hwi turned to face the men standing at attention next to him. They were in charge of driving each vehicle.

“You saw that? That’s where it will fall, so find cover around the corners.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Everyone on board.”

The men that had been observing from outside rushed into the car. Most of the combat force of the Kwang Hwi Faction was present here, witnessing the scene and preparing themselves for the upcoming fight. They came fully prepared for this campaign.

There was the APC Namer, Light Tactical Vehicles with machine guns, and even a Medium Tactical Vehicle mounted with a grenade launcher. All combat assets except those tasked with guarding the power plant and HQ were deployed for this cleanup operation.

The Kwang Hwi Faction returned to the stadium with the armored vehicles leading. The roads were rough from all the shelling, but military vehicles were designed to be used in such conditions in the first place, so they continued without any hiccups.

Each vehicle stopped in one corner of the stadium. Their positions were some distance away from where the shells were expected to land, with a small hill on their rear.

“Everyone disembark and begin the operation!”

The men got off the vehicles and stuck close to the carrier compartment. From there, they carried out blockades and obstacles such as sandbags and mobile barricades and began to set up a defense. Most were of considerable weight and were sturdy enough to take a beating.

“Make sure they are installed properly.”

Kwang Hwi’s subordinates walked around while supervising the work and spitting out orders. There weren’t only setting up obstacles. The soldiers were also preparing to engage in battle. Ammunition was stockpiled and the medical personnel was brought into the rear just in case. They were laying the groundwork for any unforeseen accidents.

“Boss, all the preparations are ready.”

“Really?”

All that remained was for the monsters to gather and come to them.

“Jackson, you take charge.”

“Y-you want me to?”

He seemed a little reluctant, perhaps due to what happened yesterday. Kwang Hwi placed his hand on Jackson’s shoulder to encourage him.

“You’re the only one I can trust here.”

“Leave it to me!”

Jackson’s expression became firm with determination as though the hesitation he just showed was never there. Kwang Hwi pursed his lips to hold back his laughter.

“Get ready and go around the perimeter to become familiar with the roads.”

“Of course.”

With a quick salute, Jackson ran towards the Light Tactical Vehicle. He took along a new recruit who had been standing around somewhat idly. Without clearly knowing what was going on, the recruit was taken away by the veteran.

“Ahem.”

Clearing his throat to hide the smile, Kwang Hwi turned to his radio. It was time to get serious.

“Operation Bait and Massacre, begin.”

The Light Tactical Vehicle in charge of baiting sped off. With a heavy foot on the pedal, the vehicle quickly left the stadium, leaving the men in anticipation of the upcoming fight.

Kwang Hwi entered the APC. A temporary operations headquarters was set up inside: a screen connected to the UAV, a digital map showing the nearby geography, and a communication line to the SPG.

Jackson was doing a great job as bait. The operation was simple with the following steps:

1. Using information from the UAV, go to where the monsters are concentrated.
2. Draw their attention by firing the machine gun.
3. Maintain a proper gap, large enough so that the vehicle is not caught by the monsters but also short enough to not lose the monsters.
4. Attract as many of them as possible to the stadium.

Kwang Hwi looked at the screen. The UAVs were following Jackson's movements and accurately displaying the current situation. The Light Tactical Vehicle was driving around like crazy. Occasionally, there would be abandoned cars blocking the road, but Jackson's vehicle slipped past them, barely avoiding contact. The driving was even more dangerous than that of a racing maniac or a biker gang. It was apparent that Jackson was driving.

The recruit that had been dragged along in confusion was now diligently firing the machine gun towards the rear. Yellow tracers streamed towards the Keku. The monsters shot by the bullets would fall, but it didn't make a difference. Instead, the sound of the gunfire attracted more monsters to join the chase. It was evident that they were performing brilliantly and no mishaps had occurred so far.

‘That’s a lot of them.’

Kwang Hwi thought as he scrutinized the numbers of the monsters. Nevertheless, that was not all of them. It was only a fraction of what was being dragged in.

— “B-boss! ETA 3 minutes!”

“Affirmative, ETA 3 minutes.”

Communications were being made on an open channel. Members hiding behind the barricades checked their weapons. They fiddled with their equipment one last time to check for any damages. Who knew whether their last-minute check would save their lives.

The roar of an engine was heard in the distance. The familiar sound of the Light Tactical Vehicle could be discerned and the men quickly readied their guns, pointing the muzzle forward.

— “We’ve arrived!”

The vehicle leading the monsters quickly moved off to one side. Kwang Hwi and the others could see the monsters with their eyes. Their savage appearance had now become a routine to them. They were not as nervous as their first time.

“Fire!”

— “K-9 Firing!”

Shells from the SPG fell on the monsters’ heads and the dust enveloped them. There wasn’t time to even frown at the explosion. The ones lucky enough to be out of the explosive range were scampering away from the front hurriedly.

Primary arms, machine guns, and grenade launchers saturated the air with metal. The cacophony of sound almost caused everyone to become deaf. There was carnage everywhere with the blood and flesh of the monsters flying in all directions, scattering through the air and grass. The ground was dyed red with bullet shells dotting it like a painting—a bloody artwork with the bullet shells as stars and the blood as the night sky. The ferocity of the monsters died away in front of the barricade—a monster-grinding barricade.

Droves of monsters died every time a 155mm shell landed. A large hole would form in the black crowd, but it would quickly close up as more numbers filled the area. More Keku piled in from the rear as if they were attracted to their deaths like moths to a flame.

Abruptly, the machine-gun fire came to a halt. Its magazine had been exhausted as the smoke was released from the heated muzzle. There was a rare moment of relative silence. The assistant gunner next to him hurriedly pulled out a new magazine and connected it to the machine gun.

“Reloaded!”

The gunner nodded his head and loaded the chamber once more. The empty shells spewed from the side of the machine gun on to the floor as it began another round of firing. The bullets rained at the monsters like water droplets falling from the sky. The assistant gunner that helped with the reloading quickly grabbed his own gun.

There were only the screams of gunfire and monsters. Amongst the chaos, Kwang Hwi's gaze was fixed on the screen connected to the UAV as he observed the overall situation and kept close of note of everything.

“SPG, cease fire!”

— “Cease fire!”

In only a few minutes, the majority of the monsters Jackson had drawn in had been defeated. There was no need to use artillery fire on the numbers that remained. Following the SPG, the grenade launcher also stopped firing. The seemingly endless gunfire gradually subsided and the battlefield calmed down.

“Casualty report.”

— “One minor wound. No serious injury or death.”

Kwang Hwi's face creased. There should have been no monsters close enough to the barricades, so why was someone hurt?

“Who the hell was injured by an enemy with no ranged weapons?”

— “...I'll give him additional disciplinary training.”

“Straighten him out! Equipment status check.”

Reports from those in charge of the SPG, machine guns, and grenade launcher came in one by one.

— “SPG, no issues.”

— “Grenade launcher operating normally.”

Thankfully, there was nothing to worry about as everything was going smoothly, except that rookie.

“Jackson!”

— “Yes, boss!”

“Go out one more time.”

— “...Do I have to go again?”

There were still plenty to kill and they wanted to have more fun.

The streets became cleaner with each passing round. The city was still quiet, but it was certainly different from before. The Keku that would wander around the city had disappeared, as well as the Black Wolves that would search for the survivors with their keen sense of smell. By the fifth cycle, the survivors that had stayed hidden for so long came out one by one. How many times was the operation carried out? Kwang Hwi noticed that there was no need to continue as the area had been pretty much cleaned up.

『All monsters within Dongducheon City have been eliminated.』

『You are the first to acquire a city.』

『You have obtained 300,000 MP as a reward.』

『Rumors of the ‘Kwang-Hwi Faction’ are being spread slowly by word of mouth of the survivors.』

『The ‘Lord’ entities in other regions have acknowledged the existence of the ‘Kwang-Hwi Faction.’』

“Boss?”

Kwang Hwi raised his head to look at his men. Everyone acted like they were fine, but their tiredness was evident from their faces. They had definitely worked hard for it as they had been fighting intensely for three days. There were no fatalities or serious injuries, but the physical and mental fatigue had built up due to the long fight.

“Dongducheon City is now in our hands. If we continue eliminating monsters like this, we’ll be able to reclaim our lives. We will once again live as we had back when there were no monsters.”

None of the men thought Kwang Hwi’s words were nonsense. They may have had such thoughts before joining the Kwang-Hwi Faction, but they had experienced fighting back against the monsters several times now. The monsters they had once feared were shot and killed by their own hands. There was no other armed force like them in the world. As their arsenal become larger and more powerful, someday they would be able to drive out the monsters completely.

“Good work, everyone. Let’s go back!”

“Yes, sir!”

23. Secure Dongducheon City

— “Greeting to all survivors. This is the 108.5 MHZ Kwang-Hwi Faction broadcast.”

Kwang Hwi raised the volume of the radio that had been quietly playing in the background. Yesterday evening, a new message had been added to the repeating broadcast and he wanted to review it.

— “We will start with the good news first. As some of you may already be aware, all the monsters in Dongducheon City have been wiped out. Over the past several days, the Kwang-Hwi faction has mobilized all of its forces to combat and subdue the Keku, Black Wolves, and Blisters. After yesterday’s final battle, we have confirmed that there are no more monsters remaining in the city. We, the Kwang Hwi Faction, will be beginning operations for rescuing survivors starting tomorrow. We offer safe passage, food, and shelter. We look forward to welcoming the new survivors who’ll be joining us.”

Kwang Hwi’s eyes turned to the map and he studied it while thinking about his next steps.

‘It’s going to get very busy tomorrow.’

They had resolved a troubling issue and now it was time to taste the sweet fruits of their hard labor. Dongducheon was now in their hands in all of its entirety, including the land, supplies, and survivors. Taking in and absorbing all of these would let the Kwang Hwi Faction undergo rapid growth. They will be like a carp leaping through the Dragon Gate, becoming a hegemon of the area.

‘We will have to move the HQ to the city hall. It’s in the center and can also represent our status and authority.’

Though it was unfortunate that the headquarters had to be constructed and established in the city, it had to be done. Thinking ahead into the future, it would be best to make the city center the hub for operations. For the numerous survivors and supplies that would be coming in, it was necessary to have an appropriate building for that purpose.

Dongducheon City had many buildings still standing. There wasn’t any need to expend resources and manpower on constructing a new building to house people. Practicality was one of the most essential principles to follow in this brutal era.

Along with it being an ideal location, defending the city was significantly easier too. Using the densely packed buildings as corridors, shipping containers could be moved to barricade roadways. The narrower pathways could be blocked with garbage. As for his former headquarters, he could repurpose it for farming and station a permanent security force. They had a whole plan prepared that uses their resources more effectively.

‘We’re going to need a lot of troops to defend an entire city.’

While it was uncertain how many survivors would be rescued, they would try to enlist every able bodied-person into their ranks. Even though they valued skilled workers, soldiers were vital to protect them.

Early the next morning, all the members gathered after a well-earned rest. The members were divided into two large groups. One was tasked with rescuing survivors and the other was responsible for securing supplies.

“Did everyone listen to the broadcast last night?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Today’s mission is critical. As we roam through Dongducheon City, we will scoop up survivors and salvage supplies. There may be survivors that are not willing to cooperate. If you meet them, take appropriate measures. Everyone is to treat this mission seriously!”

“Understood!”

The members, who were all lined up, all responded with vigor. The rest period had done them wonders and they were reinvigorated. Kwang Hwi grinned in satisfaction at their enthusiastic response. Morale was indispensable, especially now. For some reason, he was feeling positive since he woke up. And now, he believed there would be good results today.

“All aboard!”

The crew boarded the vehicles with well-practiced movements. The drivers that were waiting inside all started their engines in unison. It was as if a slumbering beast was woken up, ready to pounce. Each vehicle was also equipped with a loudspeaker system. In an effort to reach out to people hiding in the apartments, they would act like the salesmen knocking on their doors, promoting their shelter and name.

— “Rescue team is ready to be deployed.”

— “Salvage team ready to go.”

“Everyone, let’s rock and roll!”

The vehicles departed the base in a long line. As they approached the city, the rescue team split into smaller groups and spread out like a bee swarm, covering the whole city. They turned on their loudspeakers and the broadcast from the Kwang-Hwi Faction rang out across the whole city.

— “All monsters within Dongducheon City have been eliminated. The Kwang-Hwi Faction offers safety to all and doesn’t discriminate between the weak and strong, the skilled and unskilled, or the men and women. To all survivors, you do not have to be afraid; we offer food, medical care, and shelter.”

People that were in hiding began to emerge one by one. There were those who had heard the radio broadcast, those who had seen the graffiti on the wall, and even those who had just learned of the situation from the loudspeakers.

“O-over here! Here!”

A window on the third floor of a shopping mall slammed open and a teenager showed himself, waving his arms. He even held a white cloth in one hand. Hearing his shout, the vehicle that was passing in front of the mall stopped. Two rescue workers disembarked and entered the building.

For a while, the men were on full alert as there was a chance the survivors could be hostile. Thankfully, their worries were unfounded, and the survivors were very cooperative. Tears were shed by the survivors that had been holing up in a PC Cafe in the same building. It showed how desperately they clung to the hope of rescue. Seeing the soldiers, they were relieved of their fears. If it were a normal occasion, they wouldn’t have even batted an eye. But, no one else could reassure them more than these soldiers at the moment.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“Thank you, sir!”

“Let’s get in the vehicle first. If you have any possessions, you can bring them with you. Don’t worry, you’ll be safe.”

Fully packed vehicles returned to base to drop off the survivors. Then, they were once again sent out to continue the rescue missions. The salvage team was also busy during this time. Starting at the L-Mart that had been raided previously and then moving on to the larger department stores of Dongducheon, they scoured the whole area clean. Mobilizing all available vehicles and personnel, looting operations were repeatedly carried out.

“Don’t leave anything behind, take everything! Food, clothes, toiletries, beds and similar furniture, grab it all! Understood?”

“Understood!”

“Commence operation!” Kwang Hwi roared out instruction after instruction. He was supervising this mission seriously to avoid any possible mishaps.

“Roger that!” The men barked back. They exuded an aura of true soldiers now, having gone through flames of war.

The supermarket, which had been silent all this time, became noisy again. Occasionally, the survivors that had been hiding within the supermarket would stumble out, their faces lit up with hope. The salvage team would pass them onto the rescue team. The whole militia worked like the gears of machinery, rapidly fulfilling their duties.

While his men were busy working, Kwang Hwi was inspecting the Dongducheon City Hall that would soon become his new headquarters. The inside of the city hall was clean and tidy, and there was almost no sign of any attack on the building. It was as if this area was located in a different world than the one they were currently in. Corpses of people were rarely spotted. There were still some rotting bodies outside, but none inside the building.

“Set up the situation room.”

Having finished searching, the men hurried to the basement to organize the command center. After cleaning off the dust that had settled there over time, they brought in communication equipment and began installing them. They even prepared a chair for Kwang Hwi. He felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders when he sat down. Reports were constantly coming in over the radio from the crew.

— “Rescue Team 2, five survivors rescued from zone 32. We’ve exceeded the capacity of our vehicle and will be returning to the base.”

— “Salvage Team 1, H-Mart has been cleaned of supplies. Moving to the next target.”

Of course, not everything went smoothly.

— “This is Rescue Team 5! We’ve encountered some survivors, but they are refusing to join us. Waiting for orders, commander!”

A situation occurred in which the rescued survivors did not want to join. Kwang Hwi gave his orders without any hesitation.

“Stick to the plan. Evict them.”

— “Roger that! Evicting!”

Dongducheon City was now the territory of the Kwang-Hwi Faction. Those that did not acknowledge it could not be left alone. It would be a fool’s dream to think that they could enjoy peace at the expense of others.

— “Who the hell are you?! It’s my house and I will live here! ...Wait, please stop!”

A resident's voice could be overheard on the radio. He shouted at the soldiers at first but quickly changed his tone when he saw that they didn't care about his protest.

— "Suppress him!"

Following orders, those who refused to join the militia were driven out of Dongducheon. Those with a rebellious attitude were responded to in kind with guns. Even the aggressive ones turned docile when confronting a muzzle.

"The situation room and the relocation of the HQ are almost finished."

"Excellent. Now, start working on fortifying our position."

Containers were transported to the downtown area. The reach stacker began diligently building up a container wall. The abandoned cars that were littered everywhere also became building materials. After flattening them, they were piled up outside the wall as an extra layer of defense. Troops were deployed to guard key locations. They were rapidly laying out the framework for their future well-being.

The day ended as darkness engulfed everything, only to be pushed away by the following sunrise. All roads except those intended to be used by the Kwang-Hwi Faction were blocked. Warning messages were posted all along outside the wall.

Kwang Hwi and other key members gathered at Dongducheon City Hall.

"Thanks to everyone's hard work, we were able to relocate the HQ successfully."

Thunderous applause followed his comment. They were appreciating their leader's foresight, their comrades' hard work, and, most of all, their own diligence, courage, and bravery. At the same time, they were hoping that this shiny moment was the start of their future and were encouraging themselves not to be afraid of any challenges they would face on their path of survival.

"Now then, shall we check on the results?"

Kwang Hwi gave Soo Min a look. Soo Min stepped forward, holding a piece of paper.

"In total, we found 210 survivors in the city, of which 200 joined the Kwang-Hwi Faction."

The faces of the members present darkened. Originally, Dongducheon had a population of 50,000 to 60,000 people. While 210 survivors was not a small number, it was a far cry from the original population.

"Our numbers have increased greatly. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of the salvage team, there are enough essential supplies, such as food, to meet the spike in demand."

Some of the men who were in charge of the salvage team grinned. The acknowledgement of their arduous labor made them proud.

“How many new recruits will we get?”

“We finished the assessment three hours ago. I believe around a hundred of them will be fit enough to be trained as combat troops.”

“A hundred people...”

It was similar to the last time. On average, around half of them could be drilled into combat troops. This was good enough since they also needed people to produce other goods and maintain their equipment.

“How would you like to proceed?”

“We’ll start training all of them at once.”

Soo Min gave an understanding nod. He recognized the challenge they had to face in defending the entire city.

“We will begin the training tomorrow and...”

Before Soo Min had even finished speaking, a notification popped up.

『The number of combat troops has exceeded 100.』

『Commencing Second Stage.』

‘What?’

Kwang Hwi didn’t even get a chance to turn his head and make sense of the situation before his surroundings began to blur. The familiar scenery disappeared and only a white space remained. It was just like the first time he used the Merit Store.

— Ω —

24. Command System

『Command System has been unlocked.』

『Using the system interface, you can now manage and supervise the members of the Kwang-Hwi Faction.』

Before Kwang Hwi could understand what was going on, another screen popped up in front of his eyes.

『Combat Force Info』

★Title★

Kwang-Hwi Faction (No Symbol)

★Commander-in-chief★

[Absolute Leader] Kwang Hwi Baek

★Controlling Area★

[HQ] Dongducheon City, Gyeonggi Province, Republic of Korea

★Total Force★

155 (+1)

★Equipment★

[Operating] K-9 SPG

[Operating] APC Namer

[Operating] 4x Light Tactical Vehicles

[Operating] Medium Tactical Vehicle

★Divisions★

Dongducheon City Security Team

Power Plant Guard Squad

Farmland Guard Team

Recruit Training Center

『You can check the location and current status of the members and equipment in real-time.』

The Total Force category started to shine brightly as if it were asking to be clicked. Kwang Hwi drew his finger towards it, giving it a tap. The list collapsed, revealing even more information. It felt like opening a folded bamboo scroll, unfurling it to reveal the contents within.

★Total Force★

155 (+1)

Kwang Hwi Baek

Commander

Soo Min Lee

Absolute Loyalty

Good

Dongducheon City Hall, Situation Room

Jackson Turner

Absolute Loyalty

Good

Dongducheon City Hall, Situation Room

...

The names of all the members in the Kwang Hwi Faction were displayed on the screen. Not only did it include his subordinates from Africa, but also the newest recruits. It was a comprehensive list, indeed.

『Name, relationship with the commander-in-chief, health status, and their current location will be displayed in respective order.』

『This will enable more efficient management and control.』

While his oldest comrades had 'absolute loyalty' towards him, the new recruits were only 'normal', as should be expected.

"I think I get the gist of it."

It wasn't that difficult to comprehend, after all. With an intuitive interface, even if he didn't understand something, the system would explain it in great detail.

It was truly an astonishing feature that even allowed him to know ahead of time if anyone harbored ill intent toward him. On top of that, it was possible to find their current location without using tracking devices or UAV. This would be especially useful for commanding a large number of troops, truly a god-send.

『You can designate a symbol of power.』

『Imagine the desired symbol to have it drawn.』

『Once designated, the symbol of power will automatically be imprinted on all weaponry and vehicles.』

'Oh, right!'

Kwang Hwi had been neglecting it for a while, mostly due to his hectic schedule. The notification reminded him just in time. Every group had a symbol to represent themselves, even African warlords used them. He went into deep thought until an image suddenly popped up in his mind: a majestic, fierce lion with a fluttering mane.

'Not bad.'

He didn't know why, but he really liked the image. It showcased his ambition of being a ruler and the majesty associated with it. The picture was drawn right before his eyes and, somehow, it looked exactly the way Kwang Hwi had imagined—dignified and splendid.

『Would you like to designate this symbol?』

『Once designated, the symbol of power will automatically be imprinted onto all weaponry and vehicles.』

Kwang Hwi nodded. He was very satisfied with the result.

『As a reward for entering the Second Stage, you have obtained 100,000 MP.』

『Engraving symbol on all equipment.』

Before he realized it, the white space disappeared and Kwang Hwi's body returned to the Situation Room.

“Uh, huh?”

The surprised men hastily stood up, looking around vigilantly. Something was being drawn on their guns. It was as if there was a laser hidden from their eyes, shooting through the void and rapidly carving a symbol. And this was not all. On their military vest, the same symbol was being engraved: a lion with its mane fluttering.

Kwang Hwi quietly watched the scene unfold. He heard a small commotion from outside as well. Everyone was dumbfounded by the event. Everything purchased from the Merit Shop was now being branded with the new symbol. Guns, military uniforms, tactical vests, vehicles, APC, and SPG all had the same symbol!

『The symbol representing the Kwang-Hwi Faction have been engraved on all equipment.』

“Commander, what is...?”

“This is the symbol we'll be using from now on.”

“A symbol, an emblem of sorts?”

The curious men looked at their equipment. Once again, all equipment had the same symbol engraved. This included the bulletproof helmets, combat boots, knives, and even their bullets! The members who were quick to understand carefully asked.

“Is this perhaps your ability?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah, I see.”

The men easily accepted the truth when they heard it was due to their leader as it was not the first time they had witnessed something like this. They believed nothing was

impossible for him. Seeing them settle down, Kwang Hwi opened his mouth to discuss their future strategy.

“There’s still a lot of things we need to do. Only Dongducheon City has been cleared so far. Other areas are still being overrun by the monsters. There may even be stronger foes we have yet to face.”

The battles so far had been smooth. However, they couldn’t let themselves be caught off guard. They had to be on their toes and prepare for the worst.

“Remember, we have only won a single battle, not the war. The struggle has not ended yet. There’s much more to come.”

His men nodded with a solemn expression, understanding the gravity of the situation. Well, the mood did not last for too long. Jackson, clueless to the situation, spoke in a carefree manner.

“Come on, boss. Don’t worry. We will be alright, just like we have been so far!”

Soo Min, who had not interjected until now, glared at Jackson.

“Jackson, you’re the biggest problem.”

“What?”

“Can you please be more serious?”

“What did I do this time?!”

Kwang Hwi and his subordinates shook their heads at the familiar scene.

“Stop it. It’s hurting my head.”

『Merit Points: 800,000』

After the brief meeting ended, Kwang Hwi opened the Merit Shop. It was time to go on a shopping spree and he was going to purchase some new equipment.

『APC Namer』

『Would you like to purchase?』

『Medium Tactical Vehicle』

『Would you like to purchase?』

In an instant, half of his Merit Points disappeared. Kwang Hwi did his best to soothe the agony he was feeling. Now that they had grown in size, he had to get more transport vehicles. Otherwise, it would be too cumbersome to move around.

『Purchase complete.』

Now, he had two APCs and five Medium Tactical Vehicles, bringing up their transportation resources to suit their numbers. After purchasing all the equipment he needed, he had exactly 400,000 MP left. Since he had already prepared guns and combat gear for the new recruits, he could spend the rest on other things.

‘Should I buy another SPG?’

SPGs boasted overwhelming destructive power in numbers. The South Korean military sought after producing 1,000 SPGs to bolster their firepower and carried out projects to improve the older models, signifying their importance and effectiveness. If their weaponry had not been corroded, the situation would have never turned this bad. Once a dozen cannons were lined up, the monster horde would have been easily wiped out. After a moment of thought, Kwang Hwi closed the Merit Shop.

‘I don’t need to buy anything immediately.’

He didn’t lack firepower. Thus, he had the leisure to purchase it when the need arose. Kwang Hwi chose to delay the purchase in case he needed to buy other resources.

[▲ Dongducheon City]

Kiii.

The faces of the people who were running for their lives distorted with hopelessness and fear. A burst of low, shrieking laughter could be heard behind them. They were sweating profusely after running for hours.

A man at the rear turned around to look. Not too far away, there were monkey-like monsters chasing after them. They were jumping over rooftops and using utility poles to launch themselves into the air.

“Shit.”

A curse naturally spat out from his mouth. He turned around, thinking they had lost them. However, their plan evidently didn’t work.

‘At this rate, everyone will be in danger.’

The distance was quickly shortening as the monsters closed in on them.

'200 meters... 120... 80...'

Soon, it would be near impossible to lose their pursuers. They had to somehow buy some time to give them that last bit of hope. If they continued like this, even that bit of hope would be lost to the fangs of the monsters.

"Everyone, just run without turning back! I'll buy us some time!"

"Y-you can't!"

The man stopped running and ignored what others said behind him. He mentally prepared himself for a final showdown.

'Just run faster!'

He aimed his crossbow at the monkeys and pulled the trigger. The arrow pierced the closest monkey, setting off a jet of blood. The monkey, with its small body frame, was unable to withstand the brunt of the force and was flung to the other side. Having an arrow penetrate the heart, it couldn't have survived and died with one hit.

Seeing the swarm rush forward, the man narrowed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and continued to pull the trigger, quickly firing arrows non-stop. The enraged monkeys continued running towards him, not caring one whit for their fallen brethren; they weren't scared at all. The monsters he had hoped to stall were already nearing him.

With such a short distance left, the man could not keep his composure and his perfect accuracy was affected. Thus, a few arrows missed their targets. Soon, he had no more arrows left. Without hesitation, the man threw his crossbow. The unlucky monkey who was hit on the face shrieked and faltered. Using that window of opportunity, the man started sprinting again.

"Brother! Please hurry!"

Sensing a monster right behind him, the man dropped down in a hurry and rolled on the floor. The monkey's sharp claws swiped across the air and a few strands of hair that could not escape its trajectory were cut off. His knee scraped against the asphalt floor several times and started to sting. However, ignoring the pain, the man quickly got back up and ran towards Dongducheon.

"Brother! Just a bit more! Please, run just a bit more!"

The colleagues he had urged to leave first were waiting for him. They each held weapons such as iron pipe spears, fire axes, and kitchen knives. All of them had determined looks while cheering him on.

"You idiots! I told you to leave me behind!"

Reuniting with his colleagues, the man scolded his comrades. However, they only responded back with smiles, warming his heart.

“How could we leave you behind, brother? If we’re going to die anyway, it’s better to do it together.”

“That’s right! We’re only alive thanks to you!”

“It’s not too late, so—”

Before he could finish his sentence, a dozen monkeys caught up to them, baring their fangs. It was far too late to escape now.

“It’s too late, brother.”

“Haa... Ah, screw it!”

The man reached out to his waist and took out his weapon. Pressing a button, the baton extended. The two groups stared at each other. Even though there were some meters in between them, he knew such distance could be narrowed in an instant.

Saliva drooped from the mouths of the monkeys as they stared at their prey. It appeared as if their sharp claws had become even more razor-sharp. Sensing his body tensing up, the man took a deep breath to calm down. It wasn’t like there wasn’t any hope. Since their bodies weren’t immune to sharp blunts, it was possible to defeat them. The problem, however, was that they were extremely agile and greatly outnumbered them. The size of the swarm was three times their group.

The man noticed that the monsters were about to make a move, so he spoke to warn everyone.

“Everyone, get ready...”

The abrupt roaring sounds of an engine throttling at full speed drew his attention. The man trailed off and didn’t finish his warning as a result. He looked sideways toward the origin of the noise. The accosting monkeys naturally followed suit.

“Huh?”

Kiii?

Spotting the group, Jackson blinked in wonder. But soon after, he waved his hand in excitement and smiled brightly. He was just as clueless to the dire situation as usual.

“Hey, man.”

25. Call for Help

Spotting the group, Jackson innocently waved his hand.

“Hey, man.”

“...Hi?”

Those who had escaped from Yangju City absentmindedly greeted Jackson. They were weirded out by his enthusiasm. After all, these were chaotic times, and anything that appeared too good to be true should be avoided.

“Something wrong?”

Jackson asked with eloquent Korean, startling the audience. They didn't even have time to react after seeing a burly foreigner speaking their language so fluently.

‘Is he insane? Does he not see the monsters in front of him?’

The leader could not hide his bewilderment. The man appeared oblivious to his surroundings. He even wondered if he was just playing tricks.

“There are monsters, as you can see.”

“Oh.”

Jackson grinned and beckoned to his comrades. The soldiers inside the carrier compartment pointed their guns from the vehicle. The leader could not believe his eyes at the spectacle. There were guns and they weren't rusted like the ones he saw at the police station.

‘Where did they find such weapons?’

The monkey monsters looked at the new group, sensing the situation was becoming unfavorable for them. At this moment, both parties were bewildered.

“Fire.”

With a command from Jackson, the oh-so-familiar sounds of gunshots rang out. Feeling surprised and surreal, the leader took a step back. Unable to do anything, the monkeys were rapidly shot down.

Seeing a few charging at him in desperation, Jackson drew his gun and aimed. It was an accurate one shot one kill. The monsters fell short of escaping and all were eliminated.

As relief washed over them, the survivors collapsed onto the ground. They had mixed feelings at the moment. The sudden reversal of the situation overwhelmed them. The leader gulped as the guns pointed at the monsters were now being pointed towards them. Jackson asked them sternly, his previous lax attitude complete vanishing.

“This area is controlled by the Kwang Hwi Faction. What business brings you here?”

“Kwang Hwi Faction?”

The whole ordeal made the head of the leader spin. He stopped his colleagues from brandishing their weapons, not that it mattered. It was an unfavorable fight. The opposing side was armed, pointing their guns from inside a military truck. Even if they wanted to, they couldn't do anything to these soldiers with just blunt weapons. Before they could take a step forward, they would be drilled with holes.

“We came from Yangju City and were being chased by those monkey monsters.”

Jackson's eyes narrowed at the answer and he deliberated over it for a while.

‘Yangju is...’

Yangju was a city south of Dongducheon.

“Please discard your weapons. I'll contact my superior.”

“Alright.”

The leader signaled everyone to lower their weapons carefully. Jackson picked up the radio after seeing everyone was unarmed.

“Boss, Jackson speaking.”

Kwang Hwi quickly responded.

— “Did something happen?”

“We've encountered survivors from Yangju City: a small group of five.”

— “Bring them with you.”

“Roger. We'll return immediately.”

Jackson beckoned to the survivors.

“Let's go.”

The survivors boarded the Medium Tactical Vehicle with nervousness. Their weapons were discarded on the ground, but no one thought of bringing it with them. Kwang Hwi Faction did not collect weapons and it was pointless to amass them when they had guns anyway. The soldiers gave the survivors a cold glare. As always, they were fully alert.

“Now, now! Let’s go back!”

Jackson sensed the tense air and opened his mouth to ease both parties. The Medium Tactical Vehicle turned and headed to the Dongducheon City Hall.

“Hm?”

“Was there something like that before...?”

The survivors thought aloud while feeling perplexed. There was a solid wall erected at the entrance to the city, a barrier built to ward off monsters. It was freshly made, less than a week old, and surrounded the entire city that Kwang Hwi Faction had acquired.

On the gray wall, there was a symbol of a fierce lion with its mane fluttering drawn on it alongside a warning notice.

Kwang Hwi Faction’s Controlled Area

Stop immediately! Be unarmed and follow our instructions!

The truck momentarily paused at a routine checkpoint. Everyone’s attention was focused on the guard standing on top of the wall. Jackson hollered at him from inside the vehicle.

“Open up.”

“Greetings, Major Jackson! Opening!”

Being one of the few high-ranking officers in the Kwang Hwi Faction, everyone knew Jackson. The guard promptly saluted and followed the order.

Once the door was half-open, the Medium Tactical Vehicle entered the city. It was relatively quiet here, aside from the few guards on duty. The roads were clean of monster carcasses. In less than five minutes, another wall came into view that blocked their path and, just like the outer one, the inner wall also had guards deployed on it. The inspection quickly ended. This was primarily due to the fact that Jackson was the sole Black American in the Kwang Hwi Faction and they could identify him from afar.

“We’ve already received orders from HQ. Please enter.”

A guard reported to Jackson while making way for the vehicle. Beyond the wall, an entirely different scenery came into view. While there weren’t many people, it looked like

civilians were walking on the roads. The people neither looked mistreated or starving. It was evident that they had a decent life and it was almost as if they had entered a small town from the times bygone.

Naturally, there were no monsters or their corpses in the picturesque scene, a testament to the strength of the faction. Occasionally, there would be discolored bloodstains on the streets, which the civilians mopped. The survivors from Yangju City looked at the scenery as if they were country bumpkins who were visiting a city for the first time. What's more, the city even had electricity. It was the complete opposite of what they experienced at Yangju.

The Medium Tactical Vehicle came to a screeching halt in front of the Dongducheon City Hall. A group of soldiers were there to meet them, likely informed of their arrival ahead of time. Jackson led the Yangju survivors out of the vehicle and into the building.

"Follow me."

While following Jackson, the survivors saw the APC and SPG stationed at the parking lot.

"Boss, this is Jackson. I've brought the survivors."

"Come in."

Kwang Hwi greeted the survivors while comfortably reclining in his seat. Soo Min was standing right behind Kwang Hwi. Chairs were prepared ahead of time for the survivors.

"I'm Kwang Hwi Baek, the commander of the Kwang Hwi Faction."

"Nice to meet you. My name is Sang Woo Hong."

"I've heard that you came from Yangju City. Is that true?"

"Yes."

The leader did the introduction and told his story. He recounted how the city was suddenly attacked by monkey monsters and how people were utterly massacred. The policemen tried to take action but couldn't do much without their weapons. In the end, they were effortlessly slaughtered.

"That's why the five of us looted the hardware store to arm ourselves. At first, we somehow managed to survive for two weeks in the city. But as time went by, without any help, we realized it was only getting dangerous, so we fled."

"And you were chased by these monkey monsters?"

Kwang Hwi tapped his finger on the table. Based on the story, Yangju City was occupied by a different type of monster, referred to as the 'monkey monster'. Using their small and agile bodies, these beasts would launch surprise attacks from blind spots. Their claws were their primary weapons, and some could even paralyze its victim.

"How many are there?"

"We don't know..."

The survivors had no way of knowing the monsters' numbers. They didn't have the necessary equipment for this. In contrast, Kwang Hwi Faction had the UAV.

'Yangju City, huh? There must be at least a few thousand.'

A rhythmic tapping sounded in the room as Kwang Hwi organized his thoughts. He then raised his head.

"Do the monsters eat people?"

"Eh? No. Even though they kill people, they don't eat them."

"So, they don't eat people..."

It was unexpected or rather shocking information, to say the least as the Keku and Black Wolves ate people. Kwang Hwi had thought that the monkeys would do the same.

"There's something else that's pretty strange, too."

"Strange, you say?"

"Two days before we fled the city, the monsters captured the people and took them somewhere. They killed the men who resisted and seized the powerless women."

"I understand."

Kwang Hwi signaled to Jackson, who took the survivors and left the office. After an aptitude test, the survivors would be assigned new jobs. Kwang Hwi thought they were suited to be soldiers. They had to be experienced in combat to flee from a city overrun by monsters. On top of that, all of the men were healthy adult males.

Soo Min, still standing behind him, asked Kwang Hwi.

"Boss, what do you plan to do?"

"First, let's check what's going on."

There was no reason for Kwang Hwi to take any immediate action. They were still in the process of converting Dongducheon City into a fortress and needed a few more weeks to train the new recruits. It was not the right time to visit Yangju City.

“Then, I’ll deploy the Heron first.”

“Alright.”

Just before Soo Min was about to leave the office, the radio on the table sounded.

— “Southern Wall Security Team reporting! A number of unidentified monsters are approaching from Yangju City!”

26. Yangju City

A shrill siren rang on the outer wall, alerting the men. The sharp warning signal sounded far and wide.

“This is not a drill! It’s the real deal! Hurry!”

The Captain hastily shouted at the top of his lungs. The soldiers ran around diligently, preparing the ammunition they needed in advance. Boxes filled with magazines were distributed to each point. The men checked to make sure the crew-served weapons were functional so that they could provide support fire when needed. The Captain surveyed the proceedings with an eagle eye as he barked an order through the radio in his hand.

“Report!”

— “Mortar operating normally.”

— “Grenade launcher operating normally.”

The Captain raised his binoculars. The monkey monsters menacingly crowded the roads, approaching steadily. There were undoubtedly over a few thousand. The artillery fire data calculated from the observation device were sent to the computers attached to the mortars.

“Are the mortars ready?!”

— “Data received! Ready to fire!”

“Fire!”

With the green signal from the Captain, the soldiers quickly inserted the shells and backed away. All mortars fired at once. Immediately after it fired, the men inserted a new cartridge, their swift motions showing their training beforehand.

Loud explosions broke out in the middle of the horde. A destructive fire enveloped the area. Those who were at the center died before they could even scream. Chunks of flesh splattered across the sky, painting a bloody landscape.

Only now did the monsters understand that they were being attacked and scattered. Instantly hiding in the houses and buildings located on either side of the road, the monsters continued their advance. This smart trick made the mortar attacks less effective compared to before. Observing the situation, the Captain issued new orders.

“Prepare object 1 ~ 15.”

— “Trigger ON! Explosives ready!”

“Blast ‘em away!”

— “5! 4! 3! 2! 1! Firing!”

The buildings beyond the outer wall started to crumble simultaneously. Surprised by the collapse, the monsters scurried to escape, but it was far too late. Large blocks of concrete fell above their heads, blocking their advance. Unable to do anything, the monkey monsters were crushed. White dust clouds enveloped the area and vision of it became hazy.

— “Objects blasted.”

The Kwang Hwi Faction had already prepared for such a situation. Their simulation results showed that hostile forces could avoid direct confrontation by using structures outside. At first, the popular idea was to clear away any building that could be used to hide. But, Kwang Hwi cooked up another devious plan.

He thought of letting the enemies hide in the buildings first. When they felt safe, he planned to activate the explosives that were prepared ahead of time, burying them along with the buildings. His scheme had worked perfectly.

The number of monkeys was drastically cut down as most were crushed to death. Those who couldn't hide anymore charged towards the outer wall as a last-ditch move. The grenade launcher fired away, dashing their hopes. Even though they had dispatched sandbags below the wall, aftershocks still shook the grenade launchers.

The limbs of the monkey monster flew into the air as they were swept away by the bombardment, a testament to its destructive power. Meanwhile, the persistent ones that

survived entered the rifle range. The soldiers, who had been patiently waiting, aimed and pulled their triggers.

Machine guns and assault rifles fired in unison, launching a hailstorm of bullets. The monsters that came close crumbled away one by one. Some managed to climb onto the wall, but they were drilled with holes by the soldier's focus fire. The mortars that were firing occasionally went completely silent at this moment. This was because the soldiers in charge of operating them had grabbed their primary arms. Brass shells rolled on the floor haphazardly.

The Captain clicked his tongue. At a glance, the battle appeared to be an overwhelming victory for the Kwang Hwi Faction. However, from a cold, objective perspective, he knew they still had a long way to go. The monsters that broke past the carpet bombing from mortars and grenade launchers were only a few hundred. In response, the soldiers became too nervous and wasted a lot of bullets. While it was fine to squander some, it was difficult to tell what could happen, so they should be prepared for any emergencies. Who knows, one more bullet in the chamber could save their lives. It was a battlefield after all, not some playground or simulation.

“Cease fire!”

“Ceasing fire!”

After thousands of monkeys were slaughtered, the gunshots gradually died. The vicinity became silent, except a few nervous gasps here and there.

“Report casualties.”

Each team reported back immediately. Naturally, there were none. After confirming the reports, the Captain changed the radio channel. Connecting to the Situation Room, he spoke to Kwang Hwi.

“This is the Southern Wall Security Team. We've eliminated the monkey horde. Over.”

— “Copy that. Good work, everyone. I'm sending civilians to clean the area.”

Kwang Hwi and the Captain both spoke in a solemn manner.

“Affirmative, commander. Thank you for your hard work.”

Above the Captain, the Heron flew, capturing the whole scene.

『You have defeated 3500 Monkeys faster than anybody else in the world.』

『As a reward...』

Kwang Hwi flicked his finger and the notifications blocking his view disappeared. While he couldn't get the reward for the first kill, he got plenty for killing en mass.

“Command System.”

This was the function he recently unlocked after entering the Second Stage. Among the categories, Kwang Hwi looked at the ‘Divisions.’

★Divisions★

Dongducheon City Security Team (▼Details)

Power Plant Guard Squad

Farmland Guard Team

Recruit Training Center

He clicked on the detail button. From there, he found a sub-category called “Southern Wall Security Team” under the Dongducheon City Security Team. The names of soldiers deployed to the Southern Wall were all displayed from top to bottom.

“Yong Seok was there, huh?”

Yong Seok was one of the highest-ranking officers in the Kwang Hwi Faction. Below him, other soldier's ranks were displayed in order.

Yong Seok Ma

Absolute Loyalty

Rational

Southern Wall Command Center

Choe Sang Lee

Loyal

Nervous

Southern Wall

Woo Jung Kim

Loyal

Nervous

Southern Wall

Chul Min Park

Loyal

Nervous

Southern Wall

Yu Jun Lee

Normal

Nervous

Southern Wall Portable Restroom

...

'Their loyalty went up.'

Kwang Hwi certainly remembered that just yesterday, most of his men were 'normal'. But today, they suddenly became 'loyal'. Kwang Hwi quickly understood why as it was not that complicated.

'It must have been due to the recent confrontation with the Monkeys.'

After going through a real battle and surviving the ordeal, their sense of belonging to the faction went up. Having an absolute victory must have affected them too. Kwang Hwi carefully checked everyone's loyalty. All of his direct subordinates had 'absolute loyalty'. Those who joined his group after the appearance of the monsters all had at least 'normal' loyalty. Thankfully, no one had 'distrust'.

【Loyalty Description】

Absolute Loyalty

Follows any orders. Will never betray.

Loyal

Follows most orders.

Trusts in the commander and superiors.

Normal

Will follow orders.

Distrust

Does not trust the commander.

Dissatisfied and could potentially cause a coup d'état.

It was a considerable advantage to be able to see the loyalty of the troops as a coup or possible disobedience could be prevented in advance. This was a real monitoring system, eliminating any uncertain factors.

'Of course, it's not like I would ever let a coup d'état take place. I must thwart any such attempts beforehand'

While Kwang Hwi was still in Africa, he was the second-in-command of the mercenary group. He had plenty of experience in dealing with those under him and knew how to lead stubborn men. Seeing their boss lost in thought in the Situation Room, the subordinates carefully called out to him.

"Boss."

"Hm?"

“The Heron will arrive at Yangju City shortly.”

“Connect to the screen.”

The screen in the Situation Room showed the full view of the city. Monkeys were bustling in there. Initially, the city belonged to humans. But now, Monkeys were the ones who walked down the streets or peeked their heads outside the buildings. It almost looked like a settlement of monsters.

“Switch to infrared.”

“Heron switching to infrared.”

The pilot changed the camera mode and a black and white world came into view.

“It can’t detect any heat signatures?”

“The camera is operating normally.”

The Monkeys, giving off no heat signatures, were marked in black. The Heron hovered around Yangju for a long time and no other heat sources were detected, excluding the occasional campfires. They were unable to find any survivors, either.

‘The other survivors mentioned seeing people being dragged elsewhere. That means the Monkeys must have taken them somewhere deeper. But why?’

The situation in Yangju was far worse than Dongducheon. Looking down from the sky, there were more Monkeys than all the monsters combined in Dongducheon. The whole area was teeming with them. They lived in groups inside buildings previously used by people and dozens patrolled the streets. They had a system of their own. The Monkeys carried weapons and there were even ones who appeared to be in charge. It was like a bee colony, with everything in order.

27. Bombardment

“The meeting will commence now.”

Kwang Hwi attended the meeting with his subordinates. The screen displayed videos and images taken from the UAV over the past few days.

“After observing Yangju for several days, we have concluded that the number of ‘Monkeys’ in the city is size-four.”

“Size-four?”

His subordinates could not hide their shock. Size-four meant that their numbers exceeded ten thousand. They recalled how they killed thousands of monsters in Dongducheon and felt a bit proud and accomplished. In comparison, tens of thousands was a completely different ball game.

“Their biggest trait is their ability to reproduce. The population is increasing by hundreds—if not thousands—every day. While they initially maintained their power around Yangju City Hall, their forces have started branching out everywhere as the days go by.”

It would have been better if they were expanding with their existing numbers. If that were the case, they would have thinned out to cover a larger area. The problem was that their population density continued to grow and they were using their newborns to expand their territory. It allowed them to maintain their hold over the regions they were extending their operations to.

Two pictures were then shown side by side, providing a comparison to the viewers.

“These pictures were taken three days ago and this morning, respectively. Yangju City Hall and the east are both occupied by Monkeys.”

“Hm.”

“This is a bit...”

The gathered men lamented at the scene. The white areas were dyed in black. Without a doubt, the black dots were Monkeys. They were spreading like a locust swarm, rapidly engulfing everything. The eastern side of Yangju was much larger than the entirety of Dongducheon, but it was still conquered in a matter of three days. This matter could not be taken lightly.

“For us, this means that we need to move quickly because...”

A new image was displayed. It showed the administrative districts of Dongducheon and Yangju, where West Dongducheon met East Yangju.

“Once the Monkeys completely capture Yangju City, we’ll need to face them at two fronts.”

“It will only get harder the longer we drag this out.”

“Correct.”

The fortification of Dongducheon City was finally finished. It had no weakness and was able to defend against an attack even if it were from two directions. However, that was only against forces as big as size-three.

“What if we were attacked from two fronts by a size-four?”

No one replied as the implications were clear. While Kwang Hwi Faction grew in magnitude recently, there were only 155 people at the end of the day, nowhere near the humongous scale of the Monkey horde.

Based on the Korean military standards, they were equivalent to a company. But, it wasn't like the entire company was defending a single area. Instead, they were evenly divided into a few groups, each responsible for its own zone. In the worst-case scenario, they could deploy the SPG to defend against a size-three attack. But, beyond that?

“Even now, there is a size-three horde moving northward. They will engage us from the South. At this rate, we're going to have size-three attacks on a daily basis near the Southern Wall.”

“We'll strike first.”

Everyone looked at Kwang Hwi.

“How is the Heron?”

“It's operational. The engineers that joined recently are taking good care of it.”

The Heron was instrumental. Ever since they had acquired the Heron from the underground base, it had been deployed every day for recon missions. It should have been damaged from overuse, but the engineers were making sure it was in pristine condition.

“We'll deploy the SPG.”

The men exclaimed. In hindsight, the men forgot the Kwang Hwi Faction had an effective long-range weapon. The SPG's maximum range was 40 km and the distance between Dongducheon and Yangju City Hall was within 18 km. Even without lifting a finger, they could effectively strike the Monkeys and lay waste to their numbers. All they had to do was deploy the Heron to acquire firing data.

“That's right, we have an SPG!”

“But boss, will one SPG be enough?”

With a clang, Kwang Hwi stood up and headed towards the window. He pulled back the thick curtains, allowing sunlight to pour in.

『K-9 'Thunder' SPG.』

『A self-propelled gun developed and employed by the Republic of Korea. Powered by a 1000 horsepower diesel engine with hydropneumatic suspension, it has an excellent

capacity for tackling rugged terrain. An automated fire control system and auto-loader allow the first shell to be fired within a minute of maneuvering into position. It boasts excellent firepower with its 155mm howitzer main armament.』

『Would you like to purchase?』

'I'll buy it.'

『Purchase complete.』

『Please select the area to deploy the SPG.』

Kwang Hwi chose the City Hall's parking lot, right next to the first K-9 SPG.

『Deployment finished.』

Above the empty space, an imposing SPG was constructed. On one side of its main body frame, it had the Kwang Hwi Faction's symbol. The soldiers who were passing by glanced at it. While it was amusing at first, they had grown accustomed to the scene, so the men continued on their way without overreacting. Naturally, the subordinates present in the room saw it too. Kwang Hwi gestured towards the parking lot with a nod.

“Now, we have two.”

While Kwang Hwi wanted to purchase as many SPG as he could, he only had enough points to buy one. With the remaining MP, he had to purchase the necessary ammunition. Otherwise, the weapons would just be paperweights.

“First of all, we'll deal with the size-three horde approaching from the south.”

“Roger!”

The men left the conference room with bright faces, except for one.

“Boss.”

“What is it, Soo Min?”

“As you are well aware, the SPG will only buy us some time. The biggest issue right now is dealing with the Monkey's abnormal fertility. We have to solve this problem somehow.”

“Naturally.”

“Do you have some plan in mind?”

Kwang Hwi realized Soo Min had misunderstood him.

“I think you have the wrong idea.”

“Eh?”

“After we take care of the size-three horde, we’ll attack their base.”

“By base, do you mean... Yangju City Hall?”

“Mmm.”

Soo Min’s face became pale at the confirmation.

“T-then, we may kill all the survivors in Yangju along with the supplies.”

Kwang Hwi turned around to look at Soo Min and showed a determined look. Soo Min gulped quietly at his resoluteness.

“This is also the safest method possible.”

In the current situation, the Monkeys exceeded size-four. No matter how well the operation was planned, casualties could not be avoided. In layman’s terms, a single soldier had to fight against 150 Monkeys. While it was essential to secure supplies and save survivors, it was more important to minimize the damage Kwang Hwi Faction would face.

“Soo Min, you must remember this: we are a militia and our main objective isn’t to save civilians. It’s to ensure the safety of those in the Kwang Hwi Faction.”

“U-understood.”

“Increase the frequency of radio broadcasts. Try to inform the people of Yangju City so that they can at least prepare for it.”

After saluting, Soo Min left the room. Kwang Hwi looked away, towards the window once again.

“Please move out of the way! The vehicles are passing by!”

Soldiers carrying traffic rods cleared the area near the SPG and those passing by hastened their steps to move aside. After confirming no one was nearby, the drivers started the engines to move the SPG forward.

The continuous tracks of the vehicle rotated and the 47-ton heavy metal behemoth raced ahead. The Light Tactical Vehicles that were on standby quickly cut in front to

lead the way. The SPGs were headed towards the Dongducheon High School near the City Hall. The soldiers who were contacted in advance were waiting there with the gates wide open. The school was usually used to train new recruits. Now that the training was over, it was empty.

The SPGs were parked in the middle of the schoolyard. Dust smoke rose into the air, following their halt. The UAV in the air checked on the Monkey horde's location and sent the data to the SPGs.

“Coordinates confirmed!”

The supporting ring fell, lifting the 8-meter long gun barrel. The automatic loading system inserted the shell while the soldiers finished loading it with gunpowder.

“SPG 1 loaded!”

“SPG 2 loaded!”

After confirming that both SPGs were loaded, the commander shouted.

“Fire!”

“Fire!”

A cloud of gas gushed from the gun barrel along with fine dust particles. While the frame shook from the recoil, it quickly recovered its balance. The shell instantly covered the 10 km distance and fell right above the size-three Monkey horde.

Wrapped around the explosion, the simian monsters vanished without a trace. Soon after, the asphalt road, which was previously covered in black dots, revealed itself. Flesh was glued to the floor from the intense heat, creating a grotesque scenery.

After reloading, new shells were fired with a loud roar, recreating the same scenery a bit further down the road. The SPGs continued shooting. Every minute, it fired 2 ~ 3 rounds or approximately 120 ~ 180 shells an hour. The Monkeys tried to escape from its firing range, but the SPGs immediately corrected its trajectory towards the most concentrated areas. Whenever the SPGs were pushed back from the recoil, they would quickly come back to their original position.

『You have defeated 4000 Monkeys faster than anybody else in the world.』

『As a reward...』

『You have defeated 4500 Monkeys faster than anybody else in the world.』

『As a reward...』

『You have defeated 5000 Monkeys faster than anybody else in the world.』

『As a reward...』

Kwang Hwi's MP quickly rose as the constant announcements made him feel dizzy. He decided to just close his eyes so that he couldn't see the alerts.

“Stop firing!”

The gunshots, which could be heard at set intervals, all stopped. The Heron hovered around the surroundings to check on the status of the enemy. The rain of steel brought about complete devastation. Buildings that could be seen occasionally were all destroyed without mercy and there were no Monkeys left alive.

— “Annihilation confirmed!”

“Ammunition report!”

“SPG 1 has 38 left!”

“SPG 2 has 39 left!”

The maximum loading capacity they had was 48 shells, and they did not even use half of it.

“Monkeys usually live inside buildings. Rather than shooting towards the ground, focus on destroying those constructions.”

“You are absolutely right, sir.”

The commander agreed with Kwang Hwi's words. If they took down the buildings, they could effectively reduce the number of Monkeys.

“When should we resume firing?”

“Hm...”

Kwang Hwi checked his watch. While he had told Soo Min not to show pity, he didn't want to cause unnecessary civilian casualties. That's because they had to integrate the survivors into the Kwang Hwi Faction in order to grow.

“Continue firing tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock. Until then, have the SPGs reloaded and let the soldiers rest.”

“8 o'clock tomorrow, affirmative.”

This gave the survivors a 12-hour leeway. While some may say that it's not enough, it was better than shooting without warning. In this do-or-die era, they had already shown enough tolerance.

“Keep the radio on. Is there still nothing?”

“Last time, it definitely caught something!”

A young man was tuning the radio with a solemn expression. He didn't care about his lamenting companion right next to him.

“Why are you doing something so pointless? Didn't I tell you to trust me? The underground warehouse is filled with food and we can survive here for years to come.”

“Are you going to live here forever? You should at least know what's going on out there. And what are you going to do about the monsters roaming around?”

— “Gr*** to ***vors...”

“Huh?”

Abruptly, there was some static, and then came a distorted voice from the radio. The man hastily adjusted the frequency. The faint voice became more and more distinct.

— “Greetings to all survivors. This is the Kwang Hwi Faction's radio broadcast on 108.5 MHZ.”

“I found something!”

Even the grumbling friend quickly approached the radio. It was the first radio broadcast they had heard in a month, so he was also curious.

— “Kwang Hwi Faction have fully secured the entire Dongducheon City. We are now waiting to reunite with the nearby survivors. We provide food, shelter, and safety from monsters.”

“Kwang Hwi Faction? What kind of army is that?”

“I'm not sure. Dongducheon is... north, right?”

“Yeah.”

The two chatted but did not miss the crucial details. Food and shelter were provided alongside the protection from monsters and such.

— “A monster called ‘Monkey’ was found in Yangju City. Their numbers are rapidly increasing and have completely taken over Yangju City Hall and the eastern side of the city.”

“It’s the same monsters we met on the first day, right?”

“I mean they’re calling it Monkeys, so probably?”

— “We have confirmed that Monkeys are approaching our territories in Dongducheon, and we plan to annihilate the horde with our K-9 SPGs.”

“SPG?”

The two men looked at each other with disbelief. The horde had thousands of monsters, and they wanted to raze them all. But the more surprising news was that...

— “Kwang Hwi Faction plan to bombard a portion of Yangju tomorrow morning at 8 o’clock. It is to curb the Monkeys’ rapidly growing population. The survivors in the vicinity should leave the city or evacuate underground if possible.”

“Don’t we need to run away too?”

“What are we going to do about the monsters outside?”

“...Fuck, you’re right.”

28. Rain of Steel

[07:57]

[07:58]

[07:59]

[08:00]

As soon as the hour hit 8 o’clock, an alarm went off. Kwang Hwi looked at the commander and calmly issued an order.

“Begin.”

“Yes!”

The Heron, which was deployed earlier, hovered above Yangju City. It had already sent the coordinates for the first target. The commander held onto the radio and contacted the troops.

“SPG-1, report. Did you confirm the coordinates?”

— “This is SPG-1. Affirmative, we’ve confirmed the coordinates. Ready to fire.”

“Fire away!”

— “Firing at designated coordinates!”

A loud roar rumbled through the open window, shaking its frame. The shell soared through the sky, reaching its designation shortly after. The patrolling Monkeys looked up at the incoming foe, fully alert. A black silhouette covered their vision as the shell crashed into the ground.

Swarms of Monkeys instantly disappeared in the detonation. The fire raged devastation as the sharp screams filled the air. Others were dazed at the sight of it. In the blink of an eye, the companions that were standing in front of them had disappeared. Soon after, the monsters urgently bawled and scurried away. They flocked into the buildings without hesitation, as if rehearsed beforehand.

Identifying the buildings packed with the most Monkeys, the UAV sent firing data to the SPGs. Once received, the coordinates were automatically punched in. Having patiently waited for its turn, SPG-2 raised its head, like a sleeping behemoth opening its maw. Its next target was a four-story building in the shopping district. The 155 mm shell was already loaded inside.

— “SPG-2, ready to fire!”

“Bring them hell!”

The SPG trembled as it sent off the explosive. Shells flew high into the air at set intervals. This was K9 SPG’s Multiple Rounds Simultaneous Impact feature. In MRSI mode, the K9 could fire three projectiles in under 15 seconds, allowing for quick response at demand.

— “MRSI completed!”

“Be on standby.”

On the screen, a white dust cloud rose from the shopping district. The first shell blew away the roof while the other two flattened the entire building. The monsters hiding inside didn’t even have a chance to escape. It was like a rain of doom falling on them.

— “Target eliminated.”

— “Received new coordinates!”

With the Heron’s guidance, the next target was quickly selected. The automated fire control system calculated the trajectory and made appropriate adjustments. A new shell

was inserted with the autoloader. The weaponry once again proved that although physically weak, humans were still at the top of the food chain.

— “Ready to fire!”

“Fire!”

SPG-1 continuously fired, unloading its burden. Once again, the shells hit the building with high precision. The windows were shattered and concrete blocks were thrown out in all directions. The building trembled under the might of artillery fire.

Sensing danger, the Monkeys immediately jumped outside the building, but it was futile. The place was already collapsing, annihilating their hopes. It was a difficult situation to run away from, after all.

The Heron captured all of that from the sky above and sent new coordinates. Another shell landed, right above the escaping Monkeys. The asphalt road overturned and the simians were swallowed up in dust clouds. The frantic Monkeys hurried to hide in a different building. Still, they were bombarded with new shells and buried alive in a matter of minutes.

Similar scenes repeated several times. It didn't matter whether they hid or ran away. In the end, they all met their fate and died. Realizing that peril existed regardless of where they holed up, the Monkeys started moving towards the south.

SPG-1 fired a shell towards the expected pathway with the Heron's assistance. While the Monkeys were trying to minimize the damage, they had a habit of moving in groups. Explosions continued to engulf them, killing multiple at a time. SPG-2 focused on firing on buildings, even if only a single Monkey took refuge there. This was just in case there were babies or injured monsters.

Back in the Situation Room, all the data gathered over the past few days was presented.

“72nd building in 16th street, Monkeys confirmed 3 days ago!”

“102 Star Hills Apartment, Monkeys sighted yesterday!”

“Deokjeong Elementary School, 4 days ago!”

“... 2 days ago!”

“We've confirmed yesterday!”

The members present in the Situation Room were hard at work. Even though there may not be a Monkey in the building, they had to demolish the ones that the monsters had previously accommodated. The number of targets kept increasing with each report.

The Star Hill Apartment crumbled helplessly while an elementary school sunk. But soon after, the SPGs that were firing in turn went silent.

— “SPG-1! No ammunition left!”

— “SPG-2 has also exhausted all its shells!”

“Boss. We’ve received reports that our SPGs have consumed all of their ammunition.”

Kwang Hwi checked the time. Morning had barely passed since they began the operation. It may have been a short operation, but the results were satisfying.

“Restart after 3 hours.”

“Understood.”

The radio broadcasts resumed after being suspended for a while. It touted the power of Kwang Hwi Faction and did not forget to warn others of another artillery attack.

— “We will temporarily stop bombarding the city between 10 AM and 1 PM. If there are any survivors nearby, please escape Yangju City or hide in underground shelters.”

“What are you doing?”

The man looked at his friend, dumbfounded. His friend, with a blank expression, flung a backpack towards him. A jerky wrapper was sticking out through the zipper.

“Did you take a good shit? Here, I packed a bag for you.”

“A bag...? I mean, what are you doing?”

“Can’t you tell? I’m preparing to head outside.”

For emergencies, they had already prepared two bicycles and placed it at the entrance that was connected to the ground level.

“Are you crazy? What about the monsters on the surface?”

“Just listen to this first.”

The man received a radio from his friend. From it, he heard a familiar voice from yesterday.

— “At 8 AM today, Kwang Hwi Faction conducted a military operation around Yangju City. Utilizing K-9 SPGs, we have killed a number of Monkeys in the Deokjeong area. We are confirming that Monkeys are running away from Deokjeong...”

“It’s saying that the Kwang Hwi Faction is sweeping up the monsters with artillery shells, so it’s the perfect chance to make a run for it.”

“Stop spouting non—”

“We don’t have much time left. If we hadn’t slept in, we could have left comfortably by now.”

The man wanted to stop his friend, but before he knew it, he was being dragged away. As the door to the ground level opened, their noses were pricked by the thick smell of gunpowder. It was more than enough to make them frown. There was even a faint smell of cooked meat mixed amongst it as if someone had held a barbecue party here.

“I’ll take the lead, so follow me.”

“...Sigh.”

The two men carefully observed the surroundings. They couldn’t be lax just because of an announcement that they couldn’t verify.

“Nothing, right?”

“I think so.”

They checked one more time before riding their bikes. The familiar shrieks that had haunted their ears before had disappeared without a trace. The silence even unnerved them a bit. The buildings that were perfectly fine a few hours ago were all flattened and, between the gaps of the wreckage, a Monkey arm was sticking out. The entire road was littered with the flesh, presumed to have belonged to the simian monsters. The flat highway had large craters in it. The whole scene appeared to be taken from a post-apocalypse movie.

“Why are there so many cra—”

A shrill screech sounded in his ears as the man swerved sharply. A black shadow passed right by his nose. A hot sensation of pain came belatedly and beads of blood dripped from his nose to the pedals. The man was left petrified at the sudden ambush.

The Monkey, who missed, screeched louder. In response, cries could be heard from everywhere. The two men felt like they were in the middle of a jungle, amid hungry predators thirsting for their life.

“Yo! Step on it!”

The men pedaled with all their might—their lives hinged on it, literally. The bicycles started to pick up speed. It was certainly fast, but the two couldn’t relax as they could still hear loud squeals right behind them.

“This was your idea of a perfect chance?! A perfect chance to die?!”

“Shut up and keep pedaling!”

Their quarrel didn’t last long because they were greeted by a new group of Monkeys up ahead. They did not look very well, though, as their bodies were scarred by shrapnel and some even had one or two limbs missing. The problem, however, was their numbers. There were more than ten. With menacing glares, the Monkeys blocked the road. Even if they had some minor or severe injuries, it wasn’t going to be easy to confront them.

“Fuck!”

“Hey! What are you going to do about that?”

“What else can we do?! Just break past them!”

If they turned here, they would be cycling around Yangju. By then, more monsters would pick up their trails and they would lose all chances of escaping. As the distance narrowed, they could smell the foul breath from their gaping maws. The two friends closed their eyes. It was too late to avoid the clash now.

‘It’s either do or die!’

“Argggh!”

They roared at the same time. It was their last-ditch move, a gamble with their lives, and it worked magnificently. As if their bodies had emitted an intangible shockwave, the Monkeys that were standing in line were sent flying. They flew through the air before crashing into the walls of buildings. Others were skewered by the steel bars jutting out from the road, like a monster kebab.

In the empty road, the two bicycles passed by safely. Not feeling the expected crash, the two men opened their eyes, nervously.

“W-what?”

Some Monkeys were still falling from the sky. The monsters tried their best to do something, but they couldn't defy gravity. The lucky ones received grave wounds, while the unlucky ones died immediately.

Seeing the head of a primate crushed like a watermelon, one of them cringed. It was not something he would have liked to see and almost fell off his bicycle as a consequence.

Maybe, they were surprised at the death of their comrades? Nevertheless, the Monkeys behind them slowed their pace. Having already gone through a catastrophe, they were rather wary of any unusual happenings.

"They must have given up the chase!"

"Hell yeah! I thought we were going to die!"

Abruptly, a wristwatch beeped, breaking their joyous cheering. Seeing it, the man's face became pale with fright.

"What's wrong?"

"It's time."

"Time for what?"

"Time for the artillery attack to resume."

Right after he spoke, a sharp sound pierced the sky above, bringing his fears to reality. A black shell was falling directly above their heads.

"Fuck."

After restocking ammunitions, the SPGs spat fires once again. Kwang Hwi's gaze was fixed on the screen. The Heron was displaying two civilians that had barely escaped the SPG's attack. An explosion erupted behind them, almost making the two men lose their balance. However, they quickly regained their senses and continued their getaway. The Monkeys chasing them from behind were caught in the explosion and died.

"Jackson."

"Yes, boss."

Kwang Hwi gestured towards the civilians on screen.

"Use the transport vehicles and rescue those two men."

“I’ll do so immediately.”

It was more of a coincidence that Kwang Hwi had found them. Before they resumed firing, he had spotted a small horde of Monkeys. Tracking them down, he saw the two men.

“Can we review the video footage taken just now?”

“Yes, we can.”

On another screen, a video was put up, replaying the scene right before the two civilians were supposed to crash into the Monkey horde. However, the monsters were suddenly thrown into the air, preventing the expected catastrophe.

The video was enlarged, showing that the bicycles never collided with the Monkeys. Even if they did, it didn’t make any sense. Instead of knocking out one or two Monkeys, the bicycles should have flipped over.

Instead, the entire horde was thrown away violently as if they were hit by an invisible force. The thin bicycles did not have the mass of an armored vehicle. Therefore, it was highly likely that the civilians did it. Aside from himself, they were the first awakened ability users he had seen.

— Ω —

29. 1+1=3

“Please come in and relax.”

The two men looked around anxiously. They were tense because they were suddenly asked to meet the leader of the Kwang Hwi Faction. Chuckling, Jackson guided the two men to the office.

“Boss, I’ve brought the survivors.”

Kwang Hwi stood up from his seat and reached out his hand to greet them. He didn’t act high and mighty after gaining a bit of power. Moreover, he knew he had discovered an unpolished gem.

“Nice to meet you. I’m the leader, Kwang Hwi Baek.”

“H-hello, I’m Jin Hyun Park.”

“My name is Seung Chan Jeon.”

Kwang Hwi began the conversation with a light topic to ease the tension in the room. It seemed to work, as their stiff expressions gradually softened. Now that they were relaxed, he began discussing the main topic.

“If it weren’t for our UAV, we wouldn’t have found you two. You see, we just happened to watch over a small Monkey horde when we discovered that you were in a pickle.”

“We’re grateful as we were only able to survive thanks to you.”

“I’ll be straightforward. Has either of you awakened an ability?”

“An ability?”

“What’s that?”

The two men stared at each other, puzzled. Kwang Hwi scrutinized them, but it didn’t seem like they were acting. They really didn’t know what they were capable of.

‘Maybe it was their first time using the ability.’

“Please take a look at the screen over there.”

Jin Hyun and Seung Chan looked at the screen where a video was being replayed. It was footage the UAV took a few minutes ago. The two men were frantically pedaling for their lives. A horde of Monkeys appeared in front of them, barring their path ahead. Right before clashing, the primates blocking the road were pushed away as if they had crashed onto something.

“...My eyes weren’t deceiving me?”

“I believe one of you has awakened.”

“One of us?”

Kwang Hwi nodded.

“Seeing that you came to Dongducheon, may I assume that you are willing to join the Kwang Hwi Faction?”

“Eh? Ah, yes.”

“While I can’t tell which one of you awakened, it’s certainly a handy ability. I personally find it fascinating. I would love to have you both join the Kwang Hwi Faction. If you join us, we’ll treat you better than any ordinary civilians.”

Jin Hyun and Seung Chan looked at each other to confirm their intentions.

'It should be fine, right?'

'It doesn't look like a bad deal.'

While protection was attractive, it was even better to be scouted into a powerful army. If the men were in their 40s to 50s, they might have had a different opinion, but they were currently in the prime of their youth and were full of vigor and ambition. The feeling of being recognized moved them.

"I won't mistreat you even if you don't have any abilities. The courage you showed while escaping the city has really moved me. I'll do my best to help you get the job you want."

Kwang Hwi made such an offer because he was confident that one of them was an ability user. He knew they wouldn't be intrigued if he brought nothing to the table. Additionally, it was a good deal for the two men.

"It's certainly appealing. I won't be in my right mind if I don't accept it."

"But, sir Kwang Hwi? How do you know we have an ability? Even for us, it's unbelievable."

"I, too, have an ability, albeit different from yours. You can say that it's a gut feeling."

"Y-you are also an ability user?"

Kwang Hwi purchased a gun from the Merit Shop, the sidearm Glock 17 he had distributed to all members. Jin Hyun and Seung Chan were amazed to see a pistol appear out of thin air. It was like a fascinating magic trick, captivating the audience.

"So this is how the Kwang Hwi Faction gets their guns...!"

"Wow, what a cheat. This is too OP!"

"What do you think? It might sound like bragging, but there aren't that many groups like us that could fight against monsters. In many ways, I think it'll be good for you to stay here."

After a moment of silence, both spoke at the same time.

"Alright, we'll join you."

Kwang Hwi reached out both of his hands. Jin Hyun and Seung Chan took them without hesitation. Since they were becoming a member of the militia, they had to stick to the etiquette.

"Let's go to the training room."

The two new entrants were directed straight to the training room. They were going to find out which one of them had awakened. There were shooting targets installed throughout the room. Was it because they were being evaluated? The two men became fidgety once again.

“Please don’t worry too much. Just as I said before, I will not mistreat or ignore the one without an ability.”

Kwang Hwi spoke firmly as he didn’t want them to misunderstand his intentions. Upon hearing his guarantee, Jin Hyun and Seung Chan did their best to relax. Kwang Hwi had nothing to lose. If one didn’t have an ability, he could appoint him as a normal soldier.

He gave a bit of simple advice as it was nice to have more ability users. He couldn’t have enough of them.

“You don’t need to think too hard. Speaking from experience, just ask yourself what kind of ability you have and simply wish to use it. I got an immediate reaction from doing so.”

“Then, I’ll have a go at it.”

Jin Hyun stepped up first. He was a healthy, muscular male. Shutting his mouth and closing his eyes, he tried to focus his attention.

‘What’s my ability?’

Surprisingly, an image was drawn in his mind. He could tell how to use it and how powerful it was. Jin Hyun raised his hands as if he was possessed.

Kwang Hwi, who was standing behind them, felt a strong gust of wind blow through his hair. The targets that were within 100 meters all fell down. They were set to do so after receiving a fixed amount of force. Realizing he had succeeded, Jin Hyun’s face lit up.

Kwang Hwi clapped his hands.

‘He’s able to push away objects with a strong gust of wind. If so, he must be the one who sent the Monkeys flying.’

Seung Chan tapped Jin Hyun’s shoulder.

“Congrats.”

Despite his words, there was faint darkness lingering on his face. It seemed like his expectation of having an ability was crushed. He couldn’t help but feel a bit down at the revelation.

“Seung Chan, why don’t you give it a try too?”

“Eh? But Jin Hyun already...”

“Just do it. Who knows.”

Jin Hyun cheered his friend up. After hesitating for a moment, Seung Chan stood up from his seat. Perhaps because he had made up his mind, he looked more determined and focused. The targets were raised again. Jin Hyun, who had already succeeded, whispered.

“Concentrate. It seemed to have helped.”

“Concentrate, huh?”

After having closed his eyes for a while, Seung Chan reached his palms towards the target. Unexpectedly, something really came out from his open palms. The target, which Seung Chan had reached out to, was torn into pieces. It became mangled after being cut by an invisible blade.

“Huh?”

Everyone watching was amazed.

‘I thought only one person awakened, but to think both were ability users?! I’ve hit the jackpot!’

Seung Chan, who was looking at his palm as if it were possessed, grabbed Jin Hyun’s arm and pulled him in.

“Jin Hyun, let’s do it together.”

“Together?”

“Yeah, together.”

Jin Hyun was dragged next to Seung Chan. He didn’t know why his friend was acting like this, but he didn’t mind.

“We’ll do it together at once.”

“3, 2, 1. Now!”

A strong wind gushed from the hands of the two and the shooting targets shot up into the sky. The plants and flowers nearby were also helplessly plucked from the ground. Anything that wasn’t firmly fixed was dragged into the raging wind. A small hurricane swept through the training room.

The hurricane tore the shooting targets into shreds. The flowers, which were helplessly sent airborne, were also ripped apart. Kwang Hwi, including others, was dazed by the hurricane. However, the two men who started the hurricane were panicking.

“S-stop!”

“How do you stop it?!”

The hurricane whirled for a good while until it eventually died out. Luckily, it stayed in one spot, minimizing the damage. As if they had committed a grave sin, Jin Hyun and Seung Chan apologetically lowered their heads.

While the damage was minimized, the training room was left in shambles. The shooting targets that were sent into the air crashed onto the floor and crumpled. Boxes that were not cleared away spilled out their contents. The aftermath left everybody in disarray.

“Boss! Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine.”

In addition, soldiers rushed in thinking that something had happened because of the clamor.

“W-we’re sorry.”

“We didn’t mean to...”

Amidst all of this, Kwang Hwi was smiling.

“Don’t be. This is really great!”

“Eh?”

While having two individual ability users was like winning the lottery, the combination of their powers wasn’t like $1+1=2$. Instead, it was more like 3, or perhaps even more. The Kwang Hwi Faction had won the jackpot and gained immense power from what was a mere coincidence.

“I’ll be blunt with you two.”

“Y-yes!”

Kwang Hwi looked at Jackson. Gazing at his boss, Jackson grinned sheepishly. He immediately knew what his boss wanted.

“Jackson, I don’t need to tell you, right?”

“Yessir. I’ll turn them into strong and unbelievably perfect soldiers.”

“I trust you.”

Jackson walked up in front of the two men.

“Men, follow me.”

Not knowing what was going on, the two flustered men fell into step behind Jackson. Seeing this, Kwang Hwi did his best to hide his smile.

For three days straight, the SPGs bombarded Yangju City. Loud artillery fires would start sounding early in the morning, but none of the members gathered at the Situation Room thought twice about it. While it was annoying at first, they had gotten accustomed to it in two days.

“How’s the current situation?”

“We’ve destroyed everything in the east. There may be a handful of Monkeys hiding under the wreckage, but most were eliminated.”

East Yangju was utterly demolished. Shells were frequently reloaded and exhausted soldiers were rotated so that they could fire non-stop. Due to the constant deafening noise, some civilians who lived nearby complained of headaches. The number of Monkeys seemed to have dropped from a size-four to a size-three scale.

“In the south, our recon team is on the move. Thankfully, it seems like only a small number of Monkeys escaped there. Once in a while, a size-two horde would appear, but they’re quickly being suppressed.”

Kwang Hwi did not rule out the possibility that Monkeys could escape to the south. To prevent this, aside from the SPGs, he had dispatched mortars and other weaponry to the south.

The mortar team had even secured a separate temporary foothold there. Their primary purpose was to stop Monkeys from entering or leaving the area by using 81 mm shells. While not as strong as their 155 mm counterpart, the 81 mm weapons were sufficient enough to blast away the simians.

As long as the soldiers responsible for the mortars were not tired, it had the advantage of firing shells rapidly. In return, the UAV pilots moved around without a rest. The barrage of shells fell from the sky like rain. As a result, the Monkeys could not leave the city.

At first, a small group of Monkeys attacked the mortar team. Still, they could not remain standing in the face of the Kwang Hwi Faction's bulletproof vehicles and machine guns. Separately, a search team surveyed the area with the APCs. They created a racket and lured the Monkeys nearby.

With distorted faces, the monsters charged in, only to be greeted by grenade launchers. Before they could cross the line, the majority died. The lucky ones managed to scratch the vehicle's body frame, but their claws snapped. The Namer was an overwhelmingly powerful vehicle. With its help, the search was quickly over.

"Boss, it's over."

"Good work."

The SPG that fired the last shell lowered its head. While he needed to reload it, he had been overspending MP over the past three days. They also had to maintain the SPGs before reusing it.

"Keep focusing. It's almost o—"

His sentence was abruptly cut off by something shattering the window. Something had entered the Situation Room: a Monkey.

— Ω —

30. Attacked

The window was smashed to smithereens and something rolled on the floor. It was a Monkey. Its eyes glowed with a menacing gleam as it were looking for a victim. Unfortunately, he had walked into the wrong hood as armed soldiers filled the room.

『You are the first person in the world to defeat a 'Half Flying Monkey.'』

『As a reward...』

Before the Monkey could do anything, a barrage of bullets pierced its body. After being showered by a hail of lead, the corpse was in tatters.

"Cease fire."

Kwang Hwi looked at the mangled Monkey carcass on the floor. At first, he thought it was something else. But he had to change his opinion soon after. While it had a Monkey head, it's body looked like a human. On top of that, there were wings on its back.

It was indeed a sight that would make one shudder in disgust. It was almost as if it were a Monkey and human hybrid. 'Hybrid? It can't be...'

Kwang Hwi remembered the testimonies of the survivors Jackson had brought back from Yangju.

“The monsters captured the people and took them somewhere. They killed the men who resisted and seized the powerless women.”

After mulling over it for a while, his eye twitched. It was horrifying to even imagine what could possibly have happened. The mere notion of it gave him chills. His train of thought was interrupted by an urgent voice on the radio.

— “A large group of flying Monkeys are appearing at HQ! Cannot identify exact numbers!”

“Commander!”

“You must escape!”

The men grabbed Kwang Hwi’s arms in a bid to escort him to a safe location. However, Kwang Hwi waved at them to stop.

“Shut up and go out. We need to kill these moths.”

“B-but.”

“Now!”

His subordinates rushed out of the Situation Room while he stayed inside. Kwang Hwi raised his gun. There were mutant Monkeys with wings flying in the sky. Kwang Hwi fired. The head of the mutant that was attacking the security team abruptly flew backward. With half of its head crushed and black blood oozing out, the Monkey collapsed onto the floor, lifeless. Kwang Hwi flicked his gun elsewhere.

Every time his gun rang, another mutant would perish. It didn’t matter whether bullets punctured their cheeks or foreheads, they all died with a single shot. After quickly suppressing multiple hybrids, Kwang Hwi grabbed the radio.

“Get inside the buildings to neutralize their flying ability.”

The soldiers that were caught unprepared started to counter-attack. Following Kwang Hwi’s command, they hid in structures or vehicles nearby. From inside, they began unloading their guns at the horde. Although it was not easy to keep up with the flying Monkeys, the men never stopped firing.

It became much louder outside. The sirens, gunfire, and shrieking Monkeys were all mixed together, piercing everyone’s ears. They had to shout even when talking to someone next to them.

— “HQ! This is the Outer Wall Security Team. We can hear gunshots and the siren from here. Do you need reinforcements?”

— “Immediately...”

Kwang Hwi quickly interjected into the radio.

“This is your commander. Do not come to the HQ! It may be a diversion! Maintain your current position and prepare for any possible offensive!”

— “U-understood.”

The superiority the Monkeys had gained from the surprise attack lasted only for a moment. The half-breeds were quickly being swept away. While their ability to fly looked threatening, their weaknesses were evident. Their gliding speed was slow, and, due to having a similar physique as an average person, one or two bullets could incapacitate them. Moreover, they had limited means to attack.

On the other hand, the Kwang Hwi Faction had adequate ranged attack capabilities. Once the element of surprise was taken out of the picture, they were superior. And to prove that point, one by one, the mutant Monkeys fell from the sky. Yet, Kwang Hwi wore a grim expression.

‘Something is strange.’

The ambush was sudden and the mutant Monkeys created from breeding with human females were appalling. But amid all this chaos, it was clumsy. It almost felt like a piece of the puzzle was missing. As if on cue, a roar was heard from the sky above. Kwang Hwi turned around and looked up.

“There it is.”

A giant monster was falling from the sky. It’s blood-red fur stood out like needles, looking hideous.

‘Rather than a monkey, it’s more like a gorilla.’

The monster fixed his gaze at Kwang Hwi. He could feel intense hostility from its stare. It was as if the beast knew who the leader was. Kwang Hwi quickly grabbed the M32A1 next to him. It was the revolver-type grenade launcher he previously used.

He fired and a grenade went off, exploding on the monster’s chest. The gorilla was pushed back slightly from the force. Kwang Hwi continued to pull the trigger and the rounds quickly left the cylinder. The chain of explosions continued. While there were no critical hits, the shock sent the gorilla further away. Eventually, the monster landed in a small forest right next to the Dongducheon City Hall.

The ground trembled as a shockwave overturned the soil. Trees were knocked down and thick clouds of dust rose into the air. Nearby mutant Monkeys and soldiers, who were fighting each other, both fell over due to the small earthquake.

The enraged gorilla started causing a ruckus. Not finding its target nearby, it vented its anger on the landscape. The chipped trees were wholly flattened by its weight. Kwang Hwi hurriedly ran outside. Conveniently, there was the APC Namer in front of him.

— “Boss, please teach that uncultured monster some manners!” said Jackson.

“Always a pleasure.”

Grinning, Kwang Hwi got in the gunner’s position. He was welcomed by the automated fire control system. On-screen, there was the giant gorilla who was demolishing the forest. Focusing on his target, Kwang Hwi grabbed the stick.

The 30 mm autocannon rotated. The gorilla was still charging and laying waste to the forest, carving a path for itself. All the while, it had not realized that the gun was aimed at it. The crosshair was aligned with the gorilla’s chest.

Kwang Hwi gently pulled his finger. A large hole was pierced into the monster’s chest as a witness to his gentle squeeze. Blood trickled down the wound.

Despite the fatal blow, the gorilla continued to run wild. It plucked utility poles and trees from the ground and threw them at the APC. Jackson, who was piloting the vehicle, quickly maneuvered away. The utility pole struck the ground, missing its target. Kwang Hwi promptly followed the first shot with the second and third shells.

Before the heavy shell bounced off the ground, it drilled more holes in the gorilla’s body.

It kneeled onto the floor, failing to even scratch its prey. Its shoulder bone and muscles were exposed, while the contents of its abdomen and chest were spilling out. The blood rivulet started to dye the soil red. When Kwang Hwi thought it couldn’t possibly be alive, a notification appeared in front of him.

『You have defeated the ‘Red Monkey Lord’ .』

『You have obtained 100,000 MP.』

Only then did Kwang Hwi stopped firing. The system was his best companion, after all.

“Death Confirmed!”

— “Nice shot!”

The mutated Monkeys that raided the HQ were also almost cleaned up by now. Their limp bodies were littered everywhere. A small stream was formed from the black blood

oozing from their bodies. Gunshots rang sporadically, the men making sure the monsters stayed dead.

“This is HQ. Security team, report!”

— “All hostiles were eliminated! A small number of mutants ran away, while around ten civilians were injured.”

“What about our combat force?”

— “Three have minor wounds while one has serious injuries. The wounded were relocated to the hospital to receive treatment.”

Kwang Hwi quietly let out a sigh of relief. Thankfully, no one died. While they were ambushed, the Monkeys were unexpectedly weak, lessening their threat.

— “HQ. This is the Southern Wall Security Team!”

“Speak.”

— “We’ve engaged with a size-three horde that descended from a nearby mountain. Luckily, no one was injured and the monsters were all eliminated.”

“Roger. Stay on alert. Hostiles at HQ were also eliminated.”

— “Understood.”

Kwang Hwi then changed the channel. The search team sent to Yangju was using a separate radio network.

“Search team, report on the operation.”

From the radio, disorderly noises could be heard. It was the engine sound of the APC and gunshots from the machine guns. It seemed as if they were fighting the monsters.

— “This is the search team! We have entered Yangju City Hall and are currently engaging against the Monkey horde. However, they are being suppressed without an issue!”

“Copy that. Prioritize the safety of all members.”

— “Affirmative. We’ll report back once we’ve secured the location.”

As soon as Kwang Hwi got off the APC, his subordinates gathered around him. They were here to confirm his well being. He was their mental support, after all.

“Boss! Are you okay?!”

“We thought something happened because we couldn’t find you.”

“I’m fine, so don’t worry. Instead, report back to the Situation Room. We still need to secure Yangju City.”

“Roger that!”

After responding loudly, few men headed back into the city hall. They were now relieved after seeing him unhurt with their own eyes.

“As for the rest, clean up this mess. If you were injured, don’t be stubborn and immediately head to the hospital.”

There was nothing more stupid than leaving a treatable injury unattended.

‘The mercenaries in Africa were like that.’

“Move!”

The rest dispersed at his behest.

With the repeated sound of bullets being fired, the machine gun rained hell at the horde. As the windows of city hall shattered, chunks of flesh splattered from within. The Monkeys that were preparing for a surprise attack flew out while bleeding profusely. In a role reversal, the hunters had become the prey at this moment.

A mutant swung its claws at the gunner. The gunner lowered his head in a hurry to dodge the incoming strike. The razor-sharp claws grazed the bulletproof helmet, almost causing him to meet his maker. There wasn’t time to be terrified, though.

The gunner turned his machine gun, links and empty cartridges poured out. After being shot in the wings, the mutant fluttered and fell to the ground. It tried its best to stand up, but its vision was filled by the APC’s continuous tracks.

The mutant could not withstand the iron hulk that weighed several tons. As it was crushed underneath the vehicle, its flesh scattered everywhere, creating a grotesque scene. The autocannon fired and the walls of city hall crumbled like tofu, just like its defenders. It had no difficulty in penetrating the thick walls. Concrete boulders rolled onto the floor due to the overwhelming power.

“City hall, 3F! Size-two Monkey horde spotted!”

The Monkeys started pouring out of the broken windows and walls. The Medium Tactical Vehicle packed with heavily armed soldiers stopped. Bullets greeted the Monkeys that had just landed, dashing their hopes.

The Monkeys died before they could even scream. Instead of a neatly organized flower bed outside the government building, deep craters formed where they landed. Soo Min was issuing commands inside the APC, keeping the whole situation under control.

‘Their resistance is weakening.’

In the beginning, hundreds were pouring out at once. But now, it was reduced to a few dozen. It was evident that their forces were depleted. After all, they had been bombarded by SPGs and mortars for days.

“All soldiers, disembark!”

Finally, the order was given. The soldiers, who had been waiting for the command, immediately jumped out of the vehicle. The convoy covered every point to guard against a possible surprise attack. Even if they had cut down their numbers, they couldn't be lax now.

The infantry entered the building in a hurry. The place revealed itself in its entirety, showing how it was ravaged by shells and bullets. Monster carcasses were lying everywhere.

The infantry split into smaller teams. Each team surveyed the building to see if there were any remaining monsters. Hidden Monkeys were routed out by the soldiers one by one.

“Ugh.”

An infantry member opened a door and immediately fell on his back. A small needle was sticking out from his neck.

“Neurotoxin! It's a Monkey!”

His companion quickly grabbed him by the bulletproof vest and dragged him away. Another soldier threw a grenade and closed the door. An explosion erupted inside the room as the iron door shook violently.

The men opened the door once again. One of the subordinates holding an Ultimax machine gun pointed the muzzle through the gap. The Monkey, who had already died from the explosion, had some bonus bullets added to its body.

“All clear!”

The last member of the team quickly drew a circle with a spray can. It was to indicate the room was clean. They then moved on to the next office and knocked on the door.

“Is anyone inside?”

“W-we’re here!”

“Please help!”

The soldier cautiously opened the door. Survivors, who appeared to have been tied by the Monkeys, were wriggling on the floor. Seeing the soldiers, they burst into tears.

“W-we’re saved! Saved!”

After confirming there were no Monkeys nearby, the men cut the ropes. Once they were freed, the survivors rubbed their sore wrists and ankles.

“Rescued 20 survivors in the 2F. We’ll escort them out.”

— “Roger. There are still a lot of monsters inside. Prioritize the safety of all soldiers.”

After a few minutes, Yangju City Hall was thoroughly combed through. Spare vehicles, which had been brought just in case, were packed with survivors. As for the soldiers, they were taking a short break outside.

“Major Soo Min.”

“What’s the matter?”

“...There is something you must see.”

Soo Min followed the soldier to the city hall’s underground parking lot. As they got closer, a foul stench overwhelmed their noses. The men guided Soo Min to a subterranean bunker that was used as a shelter in case of emergencies. Those who were guarding the entrance greeted Soo Min. His face became contorted as he bore witness to a gruesome spectacle.

“...Shit.”

A pile of corpses could be seen inside. There were women who had their stomach split open. The floor was drenched in an unidentified liquid that couldn’t be distinguished as either blood or urine. Babies were abandoned in one corner.

“These babies are...”

The soldier could not finish his sentence due to grief, disgust, and anger. Soo Min went to inspect the babies himself.

“Ugh.”

The babies had a monkey head and a human body, similar to the mutants the men saw outside. The only difference was that their bodies were much smaller, with either one arm or leg shriveled up badly. It appeared to be deformation caused by cross-breeding.

Now they knew why the women were dragged away: to procreate mutant Monkeys. It seemed the situation was worse than they had initially thought.

“For now, take pictures and report them back to the commander.”

“...Okay.”

『Gyeonggi Province’s Yangju City was added to the Controlling Area category.』
『It is strongly suggested to deploy troops in the area. If troops are not deployed, other forces may take over the territory.』

— Ω —

31. Who are you again? (1)

“It’s over.”

Just in time, the search team that had entered the Yangju City Hall reported back.

— “HQ, this is the search team. We have fully secured Yangju City Hall and found 50 survivors.”

Soo Min, who had taken charge of the team instead of Kwang Hwi, spoke.

“Any injuries?”

— “Except for the one who got paralyzed by a Monkey, everyone else is fine. The poisoned individual is receiving first aid treatment as we speak.”

“Alright. Return to HQ.”

Watching over the city hall video footage from the Heron, Kwang Hwi ordered the men to come home. Initially, they were planning to use Yangju as a forward operating base. However, their plans changed once the monsters had resisted them inside the city hall. The autocannon had demolished the building with its 30 mm shells.

‘We need to find a new checkpoint.’

『Combat Force Info』

★Title★

Kwang-Hwi Faction (View Symbol)

★Commander-in-chief★

[Absolute Leader] Kwang Hwi Baek

★Controlling Area★

[HQ] Dongducheon City, Gyeonggi Province, Republic of Korea

Yangju City, Gyeonggi Province, Republic of Korea

★Total Force★

157 (+1)

★Equipment★

[Operating] 2x K-9 SPG

[Operating] 2x APC Namer

[Operating] 4x Light Tactical Vehicle

[Operating] 2x Medium Tactical Vehicle

★Divisions★

Dongducheon City Security Team

Power Plant Guard Squad

Farmland Guard Team

Recruit Training Center

There was a knock on the door. Kwang Hwi closed the Command System in front of him and refocused his attention on the visitor.

“Come in.”

The office door opened slowly and a subordinate carrying documents carefully approached Kwang Hwi.

“Commander, here are the reports.”

“Good work.”

Kwang Hwi meticulously inspected the papers. The documents contained fine details of what the Kwang Hwi Faction had obtained from securing Yangju City. As the commander, he only needed to concern himself with the overall situation and let his underlings do the rest.

Rescue Report

Yangju Armed Forces Hospital – 50 people.

Yangju City Hall – 50 people.

Yangju City – 10 people.

“This time, half of the survivors are army surgeons and military soldiers who were hospitalized. A comprehensive report of each individual is listed on the following page. Please view them at your leisure.”

Kwang Hwi flipped a page. Their name, military rank, and position were all there in detail. There were five army surgeons and the rest were hospitalized soldiers or hospital employees.

“How are they doing?”

“The hospitalized survivors all have some modicum of injuries. Some people were already ill, while others received theirs from Monkeys.”

“We should treat them with care.”

“Yes. Thankfully, it doesn’t seem like anyone has any serious wounds.”

It was fortunate there were no grievous damages or losses. No matter how many medical personnel and supplies the Kwang Hwi Faction had, it was challenging to recreate the capabilities of past medical services. It did not only depend on these factors as there was a lot more involved behind the scenes.

“It’ll be best to incorporate all the survivors from the Armed Force Hospital into our military and have the rest plow the farmland.”

Kwang Hwi’s former base was currently idle, so his private land had been repurposed into farmland. While they had plenty of food right now, they couldn’t push aside cultivating the land. It wasn’t like food grew in a matter of a few days, so they had to prepare in advance.

“Do you want to train them immediately after they get back to their feet?”

“Why not?”

“As you say. I’ll have it taken care of.”

Miscellaneous reports followed after, such as their former lifestyle or rusted ammo they carried with them. There was also good news, though. SPGs, which had been under maintenance due to overuse, had returned to operational status. After confirming the reports, Kwang Hwi changed the topic.

“How is the training coming along for the two?”

“You mean the hurricane duo that recently joined?”

“Hurricane duo?”

Kwang Hwi shook his head in amusement. It was a strange nickname that was indeed one of its kind.

“Many people were impressed by the hurricane they created at arrival. Therefore, the men are now calling them the hurricane duo.”

The ‘hurricane duo’ were practicing their ability at Dongducheon Training Center. They chose the location for having a sparse population around. Besides, there was no need to worry about collateral damage as it was close to the mountain range and was far from the city. Jin Hyun and Seung Chan, who were facing each other, shouted at the same time.

“One, two, three!”

With a swish, a small tempest formed at the empty lot. Small tree branches that were planted ahead of time rose into the air and were torn to fragments. It was not just some simple gale as each stream of wind was as sharp as a blade. Once sucked in, most life forms would perish within.

The two friends glared fiercely as they focused on controlling the hurricane they had created. Now and then, the situation took a dangerous turn. The hurricane would climb the mountain, only to change its course and head towards Dongducheon City Hall. Whenever that happened, beads of sweat would drip from the two men who would try their best to twist its direction.

They could have caused an unintentional coup d’état with their attempts. The raging storm gradually subsided under their guidance. After confirming that it had disappeared, the two men flopped onto the floor, too tired to remain standing.

“It’s like taming a wild horse.”

“I agree.”

While it wasn’t easy to control the hurricane, they were getting better at it with each attempt. It was as if some horse had stepped on a nail and went on a rampage, rather than letting go of the reins. Naturally, it was exhausting trying to deal with that.

“Even though I saw it last time, it still amazes me.”

Jin Hyun and Seung Chan scrambled to their feet. Kwang Hwi, who had just arrived, looked at the two with delight. He was satisfied with their earnestness and hard work.

“Greetings, commander.”

The two men raised their right hands to salute. Although they were previously known as survivors, they were now Kwang Hwi Faction’s recruits. Thus, they had to treat Kwang Hwi with the utmost respect.

“At ease.”

Even after Kwang Hwi had told them to relax, the two only lowered their hands. They stood upright like a spear, waiting for orders. It seemed like military discipline had been drilled into them, and quite thoroughly at that.

‘Seems like Jackson overdid it once again.’

Considering Jackson’s personality, their reaction was natural. Only Kwang Hwi and his subordinates treated him like a naive kid. When it came to disciplining underlings, no one else was stricter than Jackson.

“Have you gotten familiar with your abilities?”

“Yes! We need more practice, but we’re getting accustomed to it.”

“That’s good to hear. I look forward to your performance.”

Kwang Hwi patted the duo’s shoulders, but his eyes suddenly became sharp. Seeing Kwang Hwi reaching out for his leg holster, Jin Hyun and Seung Chan looked at him with surprise. In a flash, Kwang Hwi held a pistol in his hand.

“B-Boss?”

The two men panicked as they called out to Kwang Hwi, but his gaze was fixed on the mountain. He was fully alert as if facing some grave danger.

“Who’s there?”

The two men, who belatedly realized there was a trespasser, also hurried to pull out their pistols wrapped around their waist. Regardless of rank, all members of the Kwang Hwi Faction were given sidearm.

“Come out! If you won’t, we’ll open fire!”

Despite the warning, the mountain forest remained still and silent. Seung Chan and Jin Hyun even wondered whether there really was someone out there. Just when they had that suspicion, Kwang Hwi pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit a tree, forcing the hiding people to step out. The duo's intuition was proved false as the black shadows revealed themselves. Kwang Hwi squinted his eyes; the people who had emerged all looked shabby. It almost made the ones who were rescued after a month look like some sort of nobility.

Their clothes were ragged, covered in dirt. Most of their skin was exposed and their faces looked miserable from the hardships. Even a young child looked like he was in his thirties. Some of them were holding onto rocks as substitute weapons. From their mouths, Kwang Hwi could only hear an unfamiliar Korean accent.

"P-please, do not kill us!"

"W-we're only trying to run away from the monsters!"

Jin Hyun and Seung Chan's mouths gaped. They couldn't hide their curiosity and one of them gave voice to his thoughts.

'Are these people...'

"North Koreans?"

"I think so."

Kwang Hwi grabbed onto his radio and sent an order to the Situation Room.

"Commander speaking. Send one support team to Dongducheon Training Center."

In less than two minutes, a loud engine noise could be heard from afar; it was the Light Tactical Vehicle.

"Boss! Where are you?!"

Without saying a word, Kwang Hwi shot a bullet into the air. A gunshot rang and the surprised North Korean defectors flinched. After identifying the location from the noise, the support team rushed to the scene. One of the best veteran soldiers greeted Kwang Hwi.

"Greetings, commander. I'm Hu Seok Oh, a Sergeant leading the support team."

"Sergeant Oh, guide these people to the temporary relief center."

"These people are... understood."

After identifying the North Koreans, the Sergeant moved quickly. Following the protocol, the soldiers checked to see if the defectors carried any weapons. After doing so, they gathered them to make sure no one would wander elsewhere.

“Everyone! Please follow the instructions. There is no need to be afraid or nervous.”

“HQ, this is support team 3. We need one town bus.”

— “This is HQ. Your location?”

“Entrance to the Dongducheon Training Center.”

— “Affirmative. It’ll be there shortly.”

With a concerned expression, the defectors obediently followed instructions. Their eyes were fixated on the guns each soldier carried. It was typical for people to be scared of strangers carrying around weapons. At the very least, most would get nervous. Yet, the defectors were showing signs of relief, contrary to what might one think. Kwang Hwi was able to get a rough idea of North Korea’s situation from this; they were in the same plight as the South.

“...Seems like we won’t have time for breaks.”

He wanted to leave the HQ for a while, but it seemed like he had to return just after 10 minutes.

Kwang Hwi gathered his most trusted men when it was long past sunset.

“Have you found out anything about the runaways we found this evening?”

“They lived near the border. After the monsters appeared, the North Korean military issued evacuation orders to a nearby military base. Unfortunately, even that base was attacked.”

“Was the military unable to stop the monsters?”

“Yes. Just like us, all of their weapons were destroyed.”

“Figures.”

Beside the handful of special forces, the ordinary soldiers in North Korea were far worse than South Koreans. It was questionable whether the famished and inadequately equipped North Korean soldiers would be able to kill even one Monkey. Most were probably swept away by the monsters.

“How do you plan to deal with the defectors, boss?”

“We’ll accept them.”

Having anticipated such an answer, the subordinates nodded. Kwang Hwi Faction had to keep expanding its size. That way, they could train more soldiers and maintain a powerful combat force.

“Like the survivors in the Armed Force Hospital, there are many in poor condition. Additionally, we need to teach them our language to communicate properly.”

“In the morning, train them like the hurricane duo. In the afternoon, teach them our language.”

“Understood.”

“I think that’ll be enough for the defector issue...”

Kwang Hwi looked at one person.

“In Ho Kang.”

“Major In Ho Kang, reporting!”

In Ho sprang to his feet with a stiff face. He was responsible for rebuilding Dongducheon as a fortress.

“If monsters, not the North Korean turncoats, came to our Dongducheon Training Center from the mountains this time, everyone would have been in trouble.”

Unable to respond, In Ho lowered his head. The incident proved that the fortification process was not complete. They were fortunate to have defectors instead of monsters and had discovered an unexpected weak point. Perhaps the mutant Monkeys Kwang Hwi previously encountered came from the mountain range after taking a detour.

“Don’t forget this mistake.”

“Yes! Understood.”

Kwang Hwi ended his scolding with a light warning.

Even if his subordinate had made a mistake, it was his responsibility to check on it. After all, he was the leader and was responsible for their actions.

‘It’s my fault too.’

Kwang Hwi waved at his subordinate to sit.

“We’ll block the roads to the mount—”

A loud, whirring sound interrupted their meeting as everyone looked outside the window.

— Ω —

32. Who are you again? (2)

From above, a strong gust of wind blew against the trees planted in the ground. A colossal helicopter blocked the sky, letting everyone know of its presence.

“It’s fucking big.”

The gathered men nodded, seeing eye to eye. As Jackson stated, it was an unbelievably big helicopter. Kwang Hwi focused on the barely visible fuselage and found a red star was imprinted on it.

“It’s the DPRK’s helicopter.”

“DPRK?”

The helicopter didn’t seem to have any mounted weapons or rockets. Hovering at a low altitude, it didn’t look like it had any intention of attacking. At such heights, it was even possible for the Kwang Hwi Faction to shoot it down.

— “Boss. Reporting from the Situation Room. We’ve received communications from the unidentified helicopter.”

“What are they saying?”

— “They have stated zero intentions of engaging in a battle with us. Instead, they have surrendered.”

“First, have them land on the Dongducheon Training Center.”

— “Copy that.”

While Dongducheon High School was closer, the SPGs were still deployed there. Therefore, the next empty lot available was the training center. Over the radio, Kwang Hwi overheard the exchange of words. An unfamiliar voice with a thick accent agreed to the request.

“Let’s head to the training center.”

“Yes, sir!”

Peeking out from the vehicle, the traffic controller raised his traffic rods. As the Light Tactical Vehicle headed toward the training center, the traffic controller swung his rods without a rest.

Seeing that, the DPRK transport helicopter slowly followed behind the vehicle. Upon arriving, the dark training center brightly lit up. The chopper carefully descended after securing visibility. A dust storm was swept away by the strong breeze. In the meantime, armed soldiers were arriving one after another, encircling the newcomers.

— “Team 2 has arrived at the north.”

— “Team 8 has arrived at the south. Dispersing troops.”

— “Team 9, ETA one minute.”

Kwang Hwi had his subordinates manage the troops. Numerous assault rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, and an autocannon were all aimed at the helicopter. It was impossible to get away after being exposed to such a level of firepower.

As the rotor slowed its rotation, it came to a complete halt. The door on the side opened under the watchful eyes of the soldiers. DPRK pilots, who were wearing dark green military uniforms, revealed themselves.

“We’re unarmed!”

After coming down the stairs, the pilots raised their hands and turned around. Forget the gun; they didn’t even have a knife. The pilots were totally weaponless. Kwang Hwi picked up the loudspeaker.

“Approach slowly!”

After the pilots widened their distance from the helicopter, Jackson walked up to it. A single team covered his back, vigilant against any sudden change. After inspecting, Jackson reported back.

— “Boss, the helicopter is clear.”

“Copy that.”

Kwang Hwi walked up to the pilots.

“A-are you the commander of the ROK Armed Forces?”

“While I am Korean, I am not affiliated with the South Korean military.”

“What do...”

“Who are you?”

“W-we are pilots, part of the helicopter unit...”

Their story was similar to the defectors found earlier today. Without warning, all their weapons had turned into scrap metal. The only thing left intact was the transport helicopter without mounted guns.

Hiding in a secluded place, the troops held out for a while. Despite their efforts, though, the monsters somehow found them and raided their base. They could only last for so long. Once their last line of defense was breached, the few pilots ran away using the helicopter. While deciding where to go, the men saw the city light and crossed the border.

“P-please save us. We won’t do anything bad.”

“We will even give this helicopter. So, please accept us.”

Kwang Hwi glanced at the chopper.

‘Mi-26’

Amongst the mass-produced helicopters, it was the biggest model that had similar transport capacity as the U.S. C-130. It could load up to 20 tons, twice as much as the famous Chinook.

If used for transporting soldiers, up to 90 people could board it. Just to operate this beast, five pilots were needed. It was a Soviet transport helicopter that highlighted its beauty and massive size. While Kwang Hwi had heard North Korea was operating a few, it was his first time seeing one.

“We’ll accept you only if you work for us.”

The pilots briefly glanced at each other. Naturally, they had already prepared their answers.

“We will fully cooperate.”

“Please leave it to us!”

Soo Min urgently walked up to Kwang Hwi. He frowned, having his back against the pilots and intentionally spoke with a loud volume.

“Boss, they are North Koreans. Even though they are saying they’ll be of service, there’s a good chance they’ll change their mind depending on the situation.”

Hearing that, the surprised pilots rejected the notion at once. They were flustered as they spoke.

“T-That’s not true! We will never betray you!”

“I-I will even sacrifice my life to express my loyalty!”

Kwang Hwi deliberately made a solemn expression. While the two were acting, the North Koreans looked like they were about to wet their pants. As the overwhelming silence continued, the pilots became even more desperate.

“Then, let’s do this. If you complete the task, we’ll accept you as one of us. You’ll need to receive some training, but it won’t be too difficult for you soldiers.”

“W-What should we do?”

“Shout out loud so everyone here can hear. Say ‘Kim Jong-un is a bitch’ loud and clear.”

“...”

Not only were the North Koreans silent, but even Kwang Hwi’s subordinates and other men also could not hide their astonishment. Even so, he was looking at the pilots with a calm expression.

“What are you doing?”

“B-but.”

“So, you want to die?”

Kwang Hwi reached out for his Glock wrapped around his waist.

“K-Kim Jong-un! How dare you look down on our general...”

A gunshot rang and a pilot collapsed onto the floor. Blood trickled down from the bullet hole in his forehead. Kwang Hwi turned around to the other pilots. The silence pressured them and they gulped their saliva.

“... Kim Jong-un is a bitch.”

“Louder!”

“K-Kim Jong-un is a bitch!”

“One more time!”

“Kim Jong-un is the son of a bitch!”

Perhaps they were under the heat as they added more insult. Kwang Hwi, including others, nodded with satisfaction.

“Boss, I’ve recorded them.”

Jackson, who had returned, gave Kwang Hwi a camcorder. It had perfectly captured the scene where the North Korean pilots slurred at the North Korean leader. Although it was uncertain whether or not Kim Jong-un was still alive, the pilots could not betray him anymore.

“Welcome, soldiers. Jackson, I’ll leave them in your care once again.”

“Yes, sir!”

Jackson led the surrendered pilots away, and they followed his footsteps with a look of defeat. No matter the circumstances, betraying their country would be a blemish on their hearts.

“Soo Min?”

“Yes, boss!”

“Tell the engineers to look at the condition of the helicopter.”

“Understood.”

It was a helicopter larger than the Chinook. While it would be difficult to deploy it for battles, it was perfect for transporting troops. It could even carry more than half of all forces in the Kwang Hwi Faction.

“I’ll leave all the matters to you, Soo Min.”

“Have a safe trip. We should be able to complete the fortification process by the end of the day.”

Kwang Hwi was the last person to get in the APC. All other members were already on board. He was greeted by an ample empty space.

— “Our commander is in. As of now, our vehicle is Turtle-1.”

The rear door closed after his entry. The faint vibration caused by the engine could be felt from the seat.

“Move forward.”

— “Orders received.”

The Light Tactical Vehicles led the way. Immediately following it was the Namer Turtle-2. Turtle-1 quickly trailed behind. In the rear, Medium Tactical Vehicles and large box trucks joined the ranks. In the carrier compartment, the grenade launcher was mounted alongside fully armed soldiers.

Kwang Hwi Faction’s destination was the 26th Division’s military base located at Yangju. It was not too far from Yangju City Hall and was not explored yet. They were also scheduled to visit the medical unit nearby.

— “We’ll arrive at our destination shortly.”

The front gate, which should have been tightly shut, was wide open. As if there was a battle here, many of the obstacles were destroyed and the guard post was already demolished. Traces of blood were left on the ground, evidence of some fight taking place not too long ago.

Kwang Hwi Faction passed through the wide-open gate. Even after entering the army base, the APC did not have to worry about being attacked by the Monkeys. All vehicles stopped at the large military training grounds.

“Let’s do it.”

Armed soldiers left the transport vehicles and got going. They were tasked with dispersing to find the survivors and supplies.

— “Boss! We found them!”

“What did you find?”

Immediately, the men had dug up edible supplies. Most of the food stored in the Post Exchange and cafeteria was rotten, but military MREs were perfectly fine. Being made for emergency consumption, they were not affected by the weather. Having such a long shelf life, MREs had many uses. Even so, the men did not only retrieve food.

— “We’ve found soldiers hiding inside.”

“Soldiers?”

Some troops were also found hiding in the warehouse that was transformed into a temporary shelter. As if there were a high-rank officer amongst the survivors, the radio became loud.

— “Oi, where did you come from?! I’m a Major General!”

‘Why am I getting this feeling of déjà vu?’

Although Kwang Hwi Faction wasn’t associated with the ROK Armed Forces, the person in question was a two-star general. The situation could quickly deteriorate as the men had all served the military once. Kwang Hwi promptly issued an order.

“Subdue them.”

— “Yes!”

Their indecisiveness completely disappeared as the men brilliantly restrained the Major General and others.

When they tried to stand their ground, the men fired into the air. The noisy Major General stopped resisting at once. Kwang Hwi sent out the vehicles to carry food and survivors.

— “Boss, this is Team 12.”

“Team 12, report. What’s the sitrep?”

— “We’ve checked the Air Defense Team, but most of the equipment was out of commission. Even the M61 Vulcan and K30 Biho were unusable.”

“It’s unfortunate, boss.”

Kwang Hwi’s subordinate let out a sigh, looking extremely disappointed. Anything considered as a weapon was rusted, and there was no exception.

— “However, it seems like the anti-aircraft radar is fine. We would need additional people to check on it.”

Kwang Hwi’s face became bright at the surprise. It would be great if they could acquire at least an anti-aircraft radar. Just a few days ago, they didn’t even know how a DPRK helicopter had approached them.

“Copy that. We’ll send some technicians, so be on standby.”

The engineer sitting inside the APC stood up. She was a precious member of the Kwang Hwi Faction.

'Would there be any user manual guide lying around?'

After some time, reports came in one after another.

— "Boss, this is Team 7. We found a group of Light Tactical Vehicles. They are fully operational."

— "Commander, we have secured some bulletproof vests and combat gear used by the military police."

— "Secured radio equipment from the Information & Communication Center. Returning shortly!"

— "Team 2, reporting! None of the ammunition is usable."

— "Multiple corpses... found at Maintenance Depot."

"Collect all the bodies and cremate them. That's the least we can do out of respect."

— "Yes!"

The search continued throughout the morning. In the meantime, the transport truck made multiple trips from the Dongducheon HQ. There were a lot of supplies that were unearthed and had to be preserved.

When the search was completed to a certain extent, Kwang Hwi ordered the men to block the entrance to the 26th Division base. Eventually, it would act as a replacement headquarters to the destroyed Yangju City Hall. The doors were closed and the broken chains were replaced. On top of that, a warning was also posted.

Warning!

This facility is under the control of the Kwang-Hwi Faction.

Trespassers may be attacked.

In the afternoon, they all headed to the 26th Division's boot camp located elsewhere. A small group of survivors was found there, as well. They were a mix of civilians and soldiers. Somehow, they managed to make a spear out of iron pipes, but in front of Kwang Hwi Faction's guns...

"We surrender!" was the natural and only response possible.

Unfortunately, aside from human resources, there wasn't much else to gain. The bulletproof vests they wore were damaged beyond repair by the Monkeys and they barely had any food left. In a single day, Kwang Hwi Faction had plundered all of the 26th Division. It wasn't until late at night that they were able to return to the headquarters.

