930 Episode 54 8 years ago (1)

「So, who exactly is 'Kim Dokja'?」

—Great Dokkaebi Halong.

\*

Management Bureau's Korean Peninsula branch.

Bihyung was constantly sweating profusely, bowing his head to his superior on the screen.

—So you're saying you abused your 'probability-appropriate judgment' without even receiving permission from your superiors?

The great dokkaebi's voice was sharp. Bihyung calmly responded.

[It was a likely situation. If we had left it as it was, the 'New Murim District' would have been destroyed by the probability aftermath. It was unavoidable for the proper progression of the scenario.]

For the proper progression of the scenario. Could there be a more plausible excuse for a dokkaebi who was running the scenario?

Great dokkaebi Halong licked his lips with a disapproving look and said.

—<Veda> will absolutely not tolerate this.

[What can we do if they don't? Even if they are a giant nebula, they have no right to interfere with the administration's affairs.]

—It's not that simple, Bihyung.

Of course, Bihyung understood why Halong was troubled.

The great dokkaebis are the closest thing to being the 'next Dokkaebi King'.

All their actions are directly linked to their own future glory, and because of this, the vain great dokkaebis often make choices that conflict with each other in the same scenario.

This was the case with the 'New Murim District'.

「Eliminate the 'New Murim District' recorders.」

「Indifference to the Great Nebula's interference with the scenario.」

The two great dokkaebis gave conflicting orders, and Bihyung followed the first. This was because it came from his direct superior, the great dokkaebi 'Baram'.

As a result, the great dokkaebi Halong was somewhat resentful of Bihyung for disobeying his orders.

—Who defeated Agni?

[It's an incarnation called Cheon Inho.]

—Cheon Inho?

Upon hearing the name, Halong pondered something and then asked.

—Could it be that the 'Evil Sophist' was involved?

[No. There's no evidence of direct involvement from a high-level Recorder of Fear.]

But Halong still seemed suspicious.

[As you may know, he's one of the incarnations who used to operate under the name 'Kim Dokja'.]

—There must have been so many of them. Anyway, if someone strong enough to defeat Agni is strong enough to rise to the higher-level scenarios, there's a chance they'll be promoted sooner or later.

[It will be.]

—Watch closely. <Veda> might contact you again.

[Does this mean <Veda> will once again throw in probability?]

—Since they lost one of the Lokapala, it's not impossible.

[He defeated Agni according to the scenario's legitimate probability. The Great Nebulae would no longer have any justification for interfering with the sub-scenarios.]

—What?

[Encouraging newly blooming stories from being trampled by other 'giant stories'. Isn't that the duty of our storytellers?]

Bihyung absentmindedly remarked, then was startled by the fact that he had said so himself.

Halong, his eyes narrowing even more, asked back.

—Since when have you been concerned with such things?

[I'm sorry.]

—Just do what you're told. If you keep doing this, you'll be fired.

When did he begin to consider the true nature of a storyteller? He doesn't know. Perhaps it was when he first met him at Geumho Station, or when he saw him scribbling down the story of the ground rats, ignoring both dokkaebis and constellations. Or else—

「[Until my last breath, I will speak of you.]」

Perhaps it was because he happened to glimpse a story fragment floating around in the 'Fear Realm'.

「"I wanted to see your story through to the end."」

Bihyung couldn't understand why his voice remained in that story. Why, what, for what reason, and to whom had he spoken?

[Are you alright?]

A spirit with a worried expression approached from behind the disconnected screen. Bihyung shook his head, shaking off his thoughts, and answered.

[It's alright. What can they do up there? This is our responsibility.]

[What about the postponed scenario?]

The main scenario, originally scheduled to proceed, was pushed back due to Agni's excessive probability.

[Resuming in the afternoon.]

The final scenario of 'New Murim District' will soon begin.

Bihyung muttered, peering at the screen on the other side with a confused look.

'I've done enough, you rascal.'

On the screen, a blond man, supporting his colleagues as they walked, suddenly looked back at Bihyung and locked eyes. Knowing it was an illusion, Bihyung held the man's gaze for a long moment, a bitter smile forming on his face.

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After defeating Agni, we returned straight to the mansion.

"So this was master's residence."

Jung Heewon surveyed the mansion of Breaking the Sky Sword Master with a mixture of emotions.

All the way back to the mansion, Jung Heewon briefly recounted the events that had transpired. While the story was exactly as I'd read from the records of "

'Bicheonhori', hearing it from Jung Heewon's own lips felt new.

"I'm sorry I'm so late. I should have come see you sooner."

"No, Heewon unnie."

Kyung Sein quickly waved off Jung Heewon's apology. Watching their conversation after so long, I, too, felt a strange sense of emotion. Come to think of it, these two have been friends ever since Geumho Station.

Jung Heewon was even Kyung Sein's favorite character while reading.

Eight years ago, that was definitely the case.

"When I first heard the rumors about the Light Sword Emperor, I thought it might be you."

"…"

"You were busy trying to rescue Breaking the Sky Sword Master, right?"

From what I heard, Jung Heewon had been working to rescue Breaking the Sky Sword Master, who was imprisoned underground in the 'New Murim District' for the past several months.

"Yes, but ultimately failed."

Is destroying the 'orbital elevator' related to that?"

Jung Heewon nodded with a grave expression to my question.

"Yes, that's right."

"But it was too dangerous. The orbital elevator…"

Jung Heewon's eyes lit up at my words.

"Does Dokja-ssi know the true nature of the 'Orbital Elevator'?"

"I heard it's a passageway for ascending to a higher scenario."

The chosen ascenders ascend to a higher scenario via the 'Orbital Elevator' when the Ascension Ceremony begins. That, as far as I knew, was the reason for the 'Orbital Elevator's' existence.

"That's a true explanation, but it's not the whole story."

Jung Heewon, after hearing my words, stared at the sky beyond and added,

"The ascenders have all trained their stories and incarnations to the limit through 'D-Coins'. Their bodies, trained through unnatural means, are practically extremely condensed 'D-Coins'."

I had a rough idea. That's because I'd heard similar information from Cloud Mountain in the archives.

"The constellations of the higher scenarios consider the ascenders as 'well-groomed prey'."

"So, all the ascenders who ascended..."

"Not all of them, but I heard that most are captured by 'Giant Nebulae' and have their 'D-Coins' extracted."

It was horrific. In other words, the Ascendants here were nothing more than a sort of intermediary, transporting the condensed 'D-Coins' to the higher-level scenarios.

"So you destroyed the 'Orbital Elevator' on the Ascension Platform?"

"Yes. If we destroy it, the city's attention will be drawn to it. The constellations in the higher scenarios would naturally focus on restoring the orbital elevator, and I believed I could use that opportunity to rescue the imprisoned Master."

"But it didn't work out."

"Yes."

The reason for Jung Heewon's failure was simple: the constellations' response was too swift. The moment they recognized Jung Heewon's presence, they immediately mobilized the 'Recorders of Fear', dispatched Agni, one of the Lokapalas, and even unleashed [Fate].

There couldn't have been a more precise and powerful response.

Even if Yoo Joonghyuk had been there, not Jung Heewon, he wouldn't have survived.

"If you hadn't come, I would have died. Thank you again."

Jung Heewon's bow felt strangely unfamiliar, so I smiled awkwardly.

"It took eight years..."

Jung Heewon, who somehow heard those words, raised her head and looked at me silently.

[The story, 'Regret, Exhaustion, Obsession', mutters.]

What kind of story is that?

"I've finished organizing the dorm. You two, please rest inside for a moment."

Namgung Myung emerged from the inner courtyard and guided us to our quarters.

Jung Heewon and I were both exhausted from our confrontation with Agni. It was time to take a break for the next scenario, whether it was by consuming the 'Daehwadan' or the 'Essence of the Elaine Forest'.

[The 'Main Scenario' will resume in 8 hours.]

Just then, a scenario alarm sounded.

We had just finished a tough battle, but it wouldn't give us any time to rest.

[Your wondrous achievements are being spread throughout the <Star Stream>.]

[The constellations, impressed by your efforts, have donated a total of 24,000 D-Coins to you.]

Soon, the other great constellations will learn of Agni's defeat.

<Veda> had sacrificed a great deal of its fortunes in this incident, so it couldn't intervene again. Nevertheless, there were still many powerful enemies left in this city.

The good news is that whoever the enemy is, we're not alone anymore.

"Before that, first, can I join the company?"

Kyung Sein paused at my words. Then Jung Heewon chimed in.

"Oh, me too."

Kyung Sein looked back and forth between me and Jung Heewon several times, her expression looking as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

"Are you really going to join our company? Both of you?"

Kyung Sein, her eyes wide as lanterns, stammered and asked again. Jung Heewon and I exchanged glances and nodded again.

Kyung Sein looked at us with a complex expression and said,

"But you two would be treated much better if you joined another company."

Her expression seemed happy, sad, and perhaps even worried.

I added, trying to keep her from feeling too burdened.

"I think this is the only company that will accept us now, right?"

"Huh?"

"It seems you've already forgotten who we just beat up."

Kyung Sein's eyes widened faintly at my words.

"I think we should be begging you to accept us, right, Heewon-ssi?"

"Yes. I beg you, Sein-ah."

Kyung Sein bit her lip and lowered her head.

"Even if you two come, I won't be able to help you in any way. Just like back then, and…"

"Sein-ssi."

I interrupted Kyung Sein and lightly placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you for being alive."

My gratitude was sincere.

A reader whose only source of information was reading a single novel had survived through 70 scenarios. I knew better than anyone how difficult that was.

Kyung Sein, who had been staring blankly at me, wiped her eyes and smiled bashfully.

"Everything has changed, but you, Sein-ssi, seem to be the same as you were eight years ago."

I smiled back at Kyung Sein, then suddenly realized something and asked,

"Sein-ssi, but is it okay for you to call me by 'that name'?"

When I met Kyung Sein recently, she called me 'Cheon Inho'.

"I heard from Gungmyung-ssi that saying that name feels uncomfortable."

I glanced at the logo engraved on their backs.

<■■■ Company>

The word that goes in that '■■■' must be 'Kim Dokja'.

If I'm right, Kyung Sein was hesitant to call me by that name for some reason.

"Ah... Myeong-i mentioned it."

Kyung Sein slowly lowered her head and replied.

"That's right. Saying that name isn't easy."

For a moment, her eyes seemed to sparkle with something like pure white snow.

"Every time I say that name, I feel a strange, uneasy feeling inside, should I say... So, I tried not to call that name if possible."

Kyung Sein raised her head again, her eyes clear.

"I don't know why, but ever since you defeated the 'Flame of Purification', I don't mind calling that name anymore."

Since I defeated Agni?

[Your wondrous achievements are widely known in the region.]

[The constellations that praise you await your next move.]

Perhaps it has something to do with the story I built in this scenario.

[The story, 'He Who Witnessed the Truth of the Stars', growls.]

「He Who Witnessed the Truth of the Stars」 was a quasi-mythical story obtained after defeating Agni.

Since we have a contract with Bihyeong, I should soon be able to upgrade this story to 'mythical' level with the help of the Management Bureau.

But before that, there was something I needed to know.

"Sein-ssi, would you please tell us now?"

"Yes?"

"What happened eight years ago?"

"Ah..."

It was time to really listen.

What had happened to Kyung Sein and her companions over the past eight years?

Why were they torn apart, and she was left here alone?

Kyung Sein, who had been hesitating, slowly spoke.

"That's right. It's you, Dokja-ssi, who deserves to know."

Of course, I had a hunch.

Perhaps this story had something to do with why she feared the name 'Kim Dokja'.

"This might be a long story, is that alright?"

"It's alright."

Kyung Sein paused for a few breaths before speaking again.

"Eight years ago, on that day when Dokja-ssi disappeared and the Fear Realm was destroyed..."

But why?

"Someone came to see us."

I'd only heard a few words, but suddenly, it felt as if cold snow was falling all over the world.

Kyung Sein began to speak in a voice that seemed to dream of that day.

"He said he came from the 'Snow Field'."