936 Episode 55 Giant Tree (2)

"Over there."

I entered the auction house with Jung Heewon. Faint remnants of sparks lingered in the auction house square.

[The 'Probability Appropriate Determination' has now ended.]

I remembered that the last time I entered, a 'Probability Appropriate Determination' had occurred at the request of the recorders.

"S-Save me..."

Was there a fight here too?

Stalls were scattered everywhere, and weapons were strewn about.

Among the dead incarnations sprawled out, eyes closed, others were lying dead, attempting an ambush.

"Keuk."

One of the assassins, slain by Jung Heewon's blade, rolled back his eyes and died.

"Don't let your guard down."

I nodded, watching Jung Heewon brush away her bloodied sword.

「It's no different from 'proving worth'."」

Perhaps all 'scenarios' are ultimately variations on 'proving worth'.

As long as we live within this story, we must forever prove ourselves, yet perhaps we meet our end without ever proving anything.

And every failure becomes a story.

"But why are you here?"

"To find out the value of my story."

We gathered useful items throughout the auction house and made our way to the center. There, I found the item I was looking for.

「Settlement Scale.」

A device that values ​​'parts' from the Fear Realm and exchanges them for 'D-Coins'. The scale was clean, indicating the 'personality compatibility assessment' had been completed.

I left Jung Heewon, who was puzzled, behind and approached the scale. This time, a pair of eyes sprouted from the scale stared at me again. I met their eyes, plucked a strand of hair, and placed it on the scale.

[The corresponding part? What is the appraisal result? 10,000 D-Coins? It is.]

This time, the appraisal result was the same. Jung Heewon, who belatedly realized what I was trying to do, spoke.

"Dokja-ssi, that thing?"

"Yes. I'm going to exchange D-Coins now."

"Do you know what that is? It's a suspicious device at first glance."

Jung Heewon was right. I still don't know for sure what this 'scale' is connected to.

The scale eye that had actually checked my hair had been trembling unusually for a while.

I said, without taking my eyes off the scale eye,

"This is the only way for now."

I immediately pulled out the hair.

"Aren't you pulling out too much?"

A clump of hair came out.

Fortunately, Cheon Inho had a lot of hair, so pulling out a few dozen strands wouldn't be a problem.

I placed the hair straight on the scale.

[Appraising 255 parts of the same type.]

[The total appraisal results for this part is 2,550,000 D-Coins.]

"I guess I need to extract more."

"How about just cutting them off? That'll pull out the hair roots."

"Uh..."

I hadn't even considered that.

"Turn around here."

Jung Heewon lightly ran one hand over my head, then swung her cool sword, snipping off every last bit of my hair. In an instant, the severed hair scattered into the air.

Jung Heewon nodded, seemingly satisfied.

"It's a bit neater now."

I gathered the hair with [Way of the Wind] and placed it on the scale.

[Appraising 1,408 additional parts of different sizes.]

That was when faint sparks erupted from the scale.

[Your actions affect your 'fate'.]

The 'Unchangeable One' spoke.

[Fate], with its uncertain form of justice, is difficult to modify, but there are ways to circumvent it without modification.

And my plan was to exploit this very vulnerability of [Fate].

「Kim Dokja of the 'New Murim District' will lose his 'precious thing'.」

When I first confirmed that [Fate], I remembered what I had said.

「"You don't seem to understand, but hair is inherently precious."」

The sparkling hair began to be literally 'calculated'. The stories, scattered in light, flowed into the mouth of the scale.

Ultimately, the definition of 'preciousness' differs from person to person.

And in this <Star Stream>, that definition is based on the 'stories' accumulated by each individual.

[You have lost something precious!]

[Your 'fate' is about to be realized.]

At the same time, messages from the Recorders echoed through the air.

[The 'Recorders of 'Fear' who bestowed your 'fate' are suffering a major blow!]

[Some 'Recorders of Fear' are objecting to the 'fate's' realization.]

[The probability of the <Star Stream> is shifting!]

[Your fate is only partially realized.]

Is this how it will be?

It was a shame.

Despite my past remarks, 'hair' isn't truly precious to me.

Still, the fact that the influence of [fate] has weakened was enough of a result.

[Settlement complete.]

But the moment I was about to take the D-Coins before me, I felt as if something was watching me from the vast expanse of space within the jaws of the settlement scale.

[The constellation, 'The Oldest Liberator', looks at you.]

I jerked, raising my head.

That was just...

Tsutsutsutsutsu!

Sparks swept through the air again, perhaps because the exchange of too many D-Coins had disrupted the probability of the incident.

[Some 'Recorders of Fear' have pointed out the probability of this incident.]

[The Administration Bureau is not responding to this request.]

However, this area has already been 'determined as probable', and no further probability reviews will be initiated under the same pretext.

Even if a request were made, Bihyung would block it.

"There it is!"

I saw a crowd gathering from afar. Incarnations rushing to take the tribute from me and Jung Heewon.

I collected the D-Coins in front of them, as if to show off.

[You have acquired a total of 10,040,600 D-Coins.]

This is only a small amount in D-Coins, but if converted to actual coins, it's impossible to even guess how much it would be worth.

The incarnations, their eyes widening, stopped one by one.

"What... how much is that?"

Large amounts of wealth arouse desire in people.

"That's ridiculous—"

However, when the amount far surpasses what ordinary humans can imagine, people tend to feel awe rather than greed.

Not even a hundred thousand, not a million, but ten million D-Coins.

[The constellation, 'First Heavenly Demon', is astonished by your wealth!]

[The constellation, 'Emperor of Power', is greedy for your wealth!]

Even the constellations were astonished, and silence fell over the area.

[Everyone in the area is temporarily overwhelmed by you.]

Even the Ascended at the back of the crowd stared blankly at me.

I grinned and spoke to them.

"So many of you came here just to catch me."

I summoned some D-Coins into my palm and waved them gently.

"Do you want them so badly?"

I swung my arm with all my might, scattering 10,000 D-Coins worth of goods into the air. The incarnations gaped in amazement, watching the coins scatter like snow.

"Pick them up!"

Several incarnations frantically reached for the coins.

I looked down at them from the platform and said,

"If you pick them up now..."

[Exclusive skill, 'Incite Lv.???', activates!]

"You'll have to live your whole life bending over."

The incarnations reaching for the floor hesitated and raised their heads. I continued, stomping on the coins as if to show them off.

"You'll never escape those damned 'coins'."

Under the influence of [Incite], some of the incarnations trembled, others lowered their heads.

And others protested strongly.

"What do you want me to do?"

"We have no chance of ascension anyway! If we don't collect at least some coins—"

I nodded and accepted the words.

"I know. You'll feel like nothing."

The martial artists who had been shouting fell silent one by one.

"To survive in this damned city, you need at least a lot of coins. In this world, everyone lives for themselves. That's what you all think."

"That—"

"But is that really what you truly mean?"

A chilling silence descended upon the room.

[The constellation, 'First Heavenly Demon', listens to you.]

[The constellation, 'Emperor of Power', listens to you.]

[The constellation, 'Last Ark', listens to you.]

[The constellation, 'Protector of the Jangpanpa', listens to you.]

The incarnations, and even the constellations that intuitively perceive the scenario, were listening to me.

"This is not the Demon Realm. This is not Earth, <Asgard>, or <Olympus>. This is—"

I looked around the street.

Atop the ruined streets stood towering humans, no longer leaning on each other.

"This was once Murim."

My brother named this place the 'New Murim'.

"Until the companies showed up and cut down all the trees."

A city born from the destruction of the forest.

A base for humanity to reach the constellations of the higher scenarios.

"Remember why you gathered here. Was it to earn coins? Was it really the reason you chose 'Murim' over other constellations—was that really it?"

Even if it wasn't D-Coin, coins can be collected anywhere.

Yet, among all the cities, they chose 'Murim' and settled here.

「The incarnations who settled in Murim once dreamed a similar dream.」

A romantic city where one could learn martial arts, practice repeatedly, and attain enlightenment, reaching one's ultimate self. That was Murim.

"So? What do you want us to do now?"

An ascendant shouted.

"What difference does it make just because you say so? This is already a city ruled by coins! A world ruled by constellations, by nebulae! No matter how plausible you may sound, that fact remains!"

"It can be changed."

"Impossible! No human can stand against the corporation and the constellations—"

That's right. This is an impossible dream.

"Constellations, nebulae, corporations. Are they really that great?"

That was the case until just a few days ago.

[The story, 'One Who Witnessed the Truth of the Stars', begins its storytelling.]

A story was being told.

A story of a mere human breaking a star, of defeating Agni of the great <Locapala>, of revealing the true nature of the stars to the world unfolded before my eyes.

"Ah, ahh—"

Some groaned at the story.

"Huh—"

And others were gripped by fear.

Even so, everyone was reading the story, their eyes riveted.

In the end, it was stories that moved people. They made them fight against despair, they persevered on the edge of a precipice.

"Remember. There was a time when you, too, did not bend."

Of course, I didn't believe the incarnations would be persuaded by this. Like the residents of the Recycling Center, their emotions would be fleeting.

Still, what I needed now was that 'moment'.

"There was a time when you, too, did not kneel before the constellations, and did not despair in the face of overwhelming power."

If only I could remind them, even for a moment, of the forest they had lost.

"We have already been defeated!"

And then a voice was heard.

"What does the Small Alliance want us to do?"

It was a small but powerful voice, like an echo from an ancient forest.

All the incarnations in the hall turned to where the voice had come from. To my surprise, the examiner who had pointed me out and fled earlier was standing there.

I looked down at him for a moment, then turned to the crowd.

"You were the ones who lost, not 'Murim'. So, please uphold the 'covenant' of Murim."

Covenant. Some looked puzzled at those words, while others tilted their heads in confusion.

I looked at them and added,

"Please protect the one who upheld the convention of Murim to the end on your behalf."

At that moment, everyone's expressions became similar.

At least one person, someone in this Murim who had upheld their own convention to the end.

Everyone here knew that name.

"Breaking the Sky Sword Master."

Someone muttered, and someone else answered.

"Come to think of it, Breaking the Sky Sword Master is also on the list…"

It wasn't the influence of [Incite]. A long-standing nostalgia for Murim was spreading through the crowd like a ripple.

"But even that Breaking the Sky Sword Master was defeated by the constellations—"

"Back then, didn't the constellations attack all at once? Now, one of them is gone. And then there's that small thief."

"If only we could rescue Breaking Sword Master now…"

Many of them had been saved by Breaking the Sky Sword Master. Some owed their lives to her, others attained enlightenment.

Those who respected and revered her spoke up, one by one.

"Where is Breaking the Sky Sword Master imprisoned?"

"Find Breaking the Sky Sword Master! We must protect her!"

The ascended chanted as if to dissuade them.

"Everyone, wake up! You are— AAAAAH!"

Someone's blade pierced the ascended celestial's back.

"Find Breaking the Sky Sword Master!"

Jung Heewon and I leaped through the chaotic auction hall and onto a nearby tower. Watching the crowds of people moving through the auction house in search of Breaking the Sky Sword Master, Jung Heewon asked,

"Have people really changed?"

Even amidst this, I looked at the incarnations frantically picking up the D-Coins dropped by the dead incarnations and answered.

"Would people change just because they heard a few words?"

A single story cannot change the essence of existence.

Existence is a collection of stories, and countless stories are needed for a single soul to change.

"Everyone is just swept along by fleeting emotions. Most likely, their goal is to seize the Breaking the Sky Sword Master's offerings or to steal the coins of the dead incarnations and run away."

"Then why, Dokja-ssi—"

"I wanted to give them a justification. A justification that they could still live as martial artists."

With a more powerful [Incite], I might have been able to persuade them. But perhaps the reason I ultimately didn't do so was because I, too, wanted to believe in the 'romance' of martial arts that Namgung Myung spoke of.

[The constellation, 'Emperor of Power', savors the nostalgia of martial arts.]

[The constellation, 'First Heavenly Demon', reminisces about the old Murim.]

[The constellation, 'Last Ark', feels a strong longing.]

The gazes of the constellations, radiating bright light in the sky, all turned to one place.

Jung Heewon, who had been observing the direction of the light from the top of the tower, finally seemed to grasp my intention and spoke.

"So that's what you were after."

I nodded.

I don't know if there's still any 'romance' left in this Murim.

However, one thing is certain: there still exist constellations that consume that 'romance'.

"It seems Breaking the Sky Sword Master is over there."

"It's on the <Tamra Middle School> side."

I activated [Way of the Wind] and moved there with Jung Heewon.

All along the way, we encountered people chanting the name of Breaking the Sky Sword Master.

"Still, it seems many people remember Master."

"It can't be helped."

Breaking the Sky Sword Master Namgung Minyeong was the very embodiment of romance in Murim.

The most powerful transcendant. A ruler of Murim who, despite possessing such immense power, didn't wield it easily.

"Breaking the Sky Sword Master! Save Breaking the Sky Sword Master!"

"Over there!"

Yoo Joonghyuk once asked Breaking the Sky Sword Master,

"With such immense power, why don't you rule Murim? If you step forward, wouldn't Murim be unified?"

To this, Breaking the Sky Sword Saint replied,

「"Disciple. If everyone must submit to a single justice, can it be considered right, even if it's a compromise?"」

Finally, we arrived at the crowded headquarters of <Tamra Heavy Industries>.

"What is that... what is it?"

As Jung Heewon asked, a loud alarm bell rang in my head.

Leaves had completely covered the entire area, including the company's headquarters. Beneath those leaves, the incarnations possessed by the constellations were rolling on the ground in a horrific state.

I stepped forward as if to protect Jung Heewon and said,

"Heewon-ssi, please step back for a moment."

Jung Heewon stared ahead with trembling eyes. Perhaps she had sensed what this 'forest' was.

「Can a single tree become a forest?」

The answer to that question was perhaps right before my eyes.

And for the first time, I thought about the 'tributes' in this scenario.

The scenario likely arbitrarily measured the strength of the incarnations and assigned them the number of 'tributes'. My offering was 100. Jung Heewon had 40.

And Breaking the Sky Sword Master—

+

Breaking the Sky Sword Master Namgung Minyeong — 500.

+

A forest made of a single tree.

The moment I sensed the story embedded in the foliage, I had to accept reality.

「If only one justice becomes a 'world', can it still be called justice?」

A gurgling sound accompanied the sound of the forest before my eyes.

[A natural disaster-level fear has appeared in the 'New Murim'!]

The god who had long protected Murim had become the fear of this world.