937 Episode 55 Giant Tree (3)

"Heewon-ssi."

"Let go."

"No."

Jung Heewon glared at the forest with reddened eyes. I understood her feelings.

The corpses of the incarnations were strewn around the forest. Tree roots had burst through the ground, burrowing into the corpses like tentacles, sucking up their nutrients. Through this nourishment, the forest was growing in real time.

"Please calm down. I'll find a way."

Jung Heewon's eyes were gradually becoming filled with madness. She had acquired the 'Mad Butcher' trait. And Mad Butchers aren't good at controlling their emotions.

I had planned to use [Incite] if necessary, but unexpectedly, Jung Heewon's eyes were slowly regaining their composure.

[Character 'Jung Heewon' is strongly affected by your words and actions.]

"Understood. It'll only be for a moment."

It was unexpected. I felt like she could rush into the forest to rescue Breaking the Sky Sword Master at any moment. Perhaps this had something to do with my understanding of the characters.

In any case, I had gained some time, so it was time to explore the forest.

I summoned Heir and immediately brought up a story about the 'King of Fear'.

[The story, 'Friend of All Narratives' sings with his eyes closed.]

As the story's song filled the area, the story of Breaking the Sky Sword Master could be felt throughout the forest.

No matter how many times I thought about it, the conclusion was clear.

「Breaking the Sky Sword Master became 'fear'.」

All fear is rooted in stories. The 'Alien Traffic Light' was the same, as was the 'Festival Tunnel'.

So, could 'existence' also become 'fear'?

Considering that the foundation of existence is story, it wasn't impossible. For example, even the aliens possessed a clear sense of self, yet within the realm of fear, they reigned as 'fear' as a phenomenon. The problem is, this isn't a place of fear.

[The D-Coin is responding to your story.]

I felt the fragments of the 'D-Coin' writhing at my fingertips.

A thought suddenly occurred to me.

The D-Coin is a substance made from my brother's flesh and blood. Yet, beyond that forest, I sensed a power identical to this D-Coin.

"It seems someone fed the Breaking the Sky Sword Master some D-Coins."

"D-Coins?"

"Yes, a lot of them."

The D-Coin fundamentally contains the power of 'Kim Dokja of the Snowfield'. This is why skills and items enhanced with D-Coins gained abnormal powers.

「Then what would happen if you fed that 'D-Coin' to an incarnation?」

All beings are made of stories, so eating a 'D-Coin' would strengthen the being's stories.

The problem lies in the situation where this strengthening exceeds a critical threshold. If the D-Coin-enhanced story ran wild within the incarnation, becoming so powerful that it manifested outside of the incarnation.

"Who did this?"

"Probably them."

The moment I looked up into the sky, a familiar star twinkled.

[The constellation, 'Master of Baekrokdam', smiles sinisterly.]

[Many constellations condemn the impulsive actions of <Tamra Junggong>!]

As expected, it was the constellations within <Tamra>. The one responsible for this incident must be the master of that Baekteukdang.

"Breaking the Sky Sword Master! Where are you! We're here!"

"Find Breaking the Sky Sword Master!"

The incarnations who had been subjected to my [Incite] finally arrived in the forest. Perhaps the [Incite] had weakened, their eyes now glowed with a deeper greed than before.

「This is a chance to acquire a large amount of D-Coins and tribute.」

Even without using [Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint], their inner thoughts were palpable.

Ultimately, this was the current state of Murim. A Murim devoid of agreement and consumed by capital.

"Hey, hey, don't push!"

At that moment, several incarnations stepped into the forest. At the same time, as if waiting, stems stretched out and engulfed them.

"Kwaaaaah! What the heck!"

The captured incarnations were instantly stripped of all their D-Coins.

"My, my coins!"

"Ugh!"

The incarnations, drawing their weapons, swung their swords, and the stems instantly pierced their torsos. Screams erupted from all directions.

"This is a cursed forest!"

"Damn it, the headquarters of the Tamra Heavy Industries is contaminated with fear!"

With this, the rules of the forest became clear.

One, this forest takes the D-Coins from intruders. Two, this forest annihilates the presence of hostile intruders.

A fear of utterly ordinary logic, and that's why I couldn't understand it.

The 'fear' born from the story of the Breaking the Sky Sword Master was so simple?

"Is that the 'Breaking the Sky Sword Master'?"

The ascended beings who had been observing the situation nearby appeared one by one.

"A forest that absorbs D-Coins. How interesting."

The ascended from each company were gathering in front of the forest. They had already acquired sufficient tribute for their 'ascension'.

Someone I recognized.

"That means clearing this forest will yield a massive amount of 'D-Coins', I suppose."

Reinheit, having recovered from the blow he received from Jung Heewon, was leading the group of ascended beings.

"Anyway, that's interesting. The story of becoming a tree."

The story of Reinheit, the Lord of Paradise Castle, was activated.

"As it happens, I possess a similar technique."

Reinheit's skin hardened like the epidermis of a tree. Powered by Paradise's 'perpetual motion machine', his massive body began to grow, extending its roots into the ground. Soon, the tree transformed into a humanoid giant.

[The story, 'Giant Tree of the Forest' begins its storytelling.]

The giant tree's feet, reminiscent of massive tree roots, began to advance into the forest.

"All, follow the Lord of Paradise!"

The horde of ascendants, recklessly destroying the forest, advanced, and more and more people were flocking into the forest. Some were after our tribute.

Whether to save Breaking the Sky Sword Master or to protect us, we had to enter the forest.

"Heewon-ssi, as you know, this forest is a trap."

The incarnations trapped in this forest will become its sacrifice. The vast amount of D-Coins will be absorbed by Breaking the Sky Sword Master, and ultimately, it will become the portion of <Tamra Heavy Industry>. Of course, that was only if no one had been able to interpret this 'forest'.

「As long as this forest is 'fear', there must be a way to interpret it.」

It would have been easier to clear the level if I had the 'King of Fear' mode, but for now, I had to delve into the interpretation myself.

"Before we begin, let me tell you a few things."

I continued, rummaging through my coat.

"Judging by the energy I sense from the forest, the inside is likely similar to a 'Fear Realm'."

The most important aspect of a Fear Realm was 'abnormal status'. This forest, in particular, was characterized by a 'natural disaster level' of fear. Considering the forest's unique location, the likelihood of contracting a mentally polluted status effect was extremely high.

[Would you like to use the 'Limited Edition Random Relic Box' item?]

"Yes."

It was finally time to use the item I had received from Bihyung when I made the contract.

Limited Edition Random Relic Box. It's random, but in reality, these types of draw items in the <Star Stream> had predictable outcomes.

[The relic of the Wei Ingeum constellation appears!]

As expected, two low-grade relics appeared.

[You have acquired two relics, 'Ambassador's Rosary'.]

At this point, I was beginning to suspect that Ambassador had entered into a merchandise contract with the <Star Stream>.

"Dokja-ssi, that item."

"Yes, that's right."

Ambassador's Rosary.

Unlike the items obtained from the Ambassador's statue at Dongdaemun Station, this item was a true 'relic'.

Moreover, it was an 'anti-demon' item that I needed immediately.

"It's a set item with the sack I gave you earlier."

At my words, Jung Heewon fumbled around in her pocket and pulled something out. Seeing the item she handed me, I was startled and asked,

"You still have it?"

"It's the first item you gave me, Dokja-ssi."

She took out the 'Spirit of Mission's Giant' that I'd procured for her early in the scenarios. Jung Heewon still kept the piece of cloth, now too embarrassing to even call it a giant.

A strange feeling of guilt washed over me.

"Would you mind giving it to me for a moment?"

I took the scepter and used some of the 'D-Coins' on it and the prayer beads.

[Enhance the item using 100,000 D-Coins!]

[The item, 'Great Master's Scepter', evolves into a holy relic!]

[All stats of the 'Great Master's Scepter' are greatly enhanced!]

[The appearance of the 'Great Master's Scepter' changes!]

The scepter, having absorbed a large amount of D-Coins, transformed into a white coat.

Jung Heewon beamed and accepted the scepter.

"It looks just like your coat, doesn't it?"

Jung Heewon lightly put on the scepter. Fortunately, it fit Jung Heewon's body perfectly.

"It suits you well."

Following this, she put on the enhanced Great Master's Prayer Beads on both wrists, and a miraculous light began to swirl around Jung Heewon's body.

[A powerful anti-demon aura protects the user!]

I nodded.

With this level of armor, even entering the forest would be safe for a while. It'll be alright.

"What about you, Dokja-ssi?"

"I'm fine."

"Nothing like that. Just sleep. Use one of the lords, Dokja-ssi."

"I'm really fine. I have strong willpower."

"It's a pack."

We entered the forest straight away. The branches that spotted us flew into the air. The moment Jung Heewon drew her sword and tried to counter them, stories bloomed all over her body.

[The story, 'Disciple of the Breaking the Sky Sword Saint' begins its storytelling.]

For a moment, the flying branches flinched and then returned to their original position.

「Disciple of the Breaking the Sky Sword Saint」.

It was the story that Yoo Joonghyuk had.

"It seems she recognizes you, Heewon-ssi."

We used [Way of the Wind] and immediately ran through the forest path.

How long had we run along the path swept by Reinheit's giant tree? The roar of the vanguard soon drew near.

That's when an ominous feeling of foreboding struck me.

"Heewon-ssi, wait—"

The scent of stories had changed on my nose. The forest's 'pattern' had shifted.

The moment Jung Heewon turned to me, a large number of stems burst from the ground, entangling Jung Heewon and me.

"Ah."

I tried to break the stems with brute force, but they wouldn't break.

It was impossible. Even without using a special 'mode', I could now exert strength comparable to that of a great-grade.

After struggling for a while, Jung Heewon said,

"It won't break."

Jung Heewon's current strength was comparable to that of most constellations. But even Jung Heewon couldn't break the vines?

"Over there, over there!"

Just then, I noticed the vines swaying against the tied cage.

The potent incarnations were approaching.

Their objective was obvious, even without asking.

What could I do?

I sighed lightly, and just as I was about to activate 'Demon King of Salvation' mode,

"We'll rescue them!"

The men quickly rushed over and began swinging their swords at the vines entangling me and Jung Heewon.

"They're tough to cut!"

"Keep cutting at the same spot! We'll get there!"

The vines, which wouldn't break on their own, were instantly severed when several joined forces. It was a bizarre occurrence. Incarnations, barely above the initial rank of great-grade, were cutting a vine that even I and Jung Heewon couldn't?

Even stranger was their attitude.

"Great Swordsman, are you alright?"

For some reason, they seemed genuinely delighted to have saved us.

"Save the Breaking the Sky Sword Saint!"

A forest story could be heard sporadically amidst the chants of the advance guard.

「"If one tree can't make a forest, how many trees does it take to make a forest?"」

We mingled with them and advanced toward the center of the forest. Soon, the sound of weapons began to be heard. A fierce battle was raging just ahead.

"I'll break through!"

"Everyone, fall back!"

"The left is dangerous! Support from there!"

A massive thicket enveloped the center of the forest. Thorny vines protruded through the thicket like tentacles, engaging in a fierce battle with the incarnations.

Reinheit, who was dealing with the large central thicket, shouted,

"I'll break through the center, no matter what! Take care of the smaller bushes! I'll risk my life to open the way!"

The one there was undoubtedly one of the Ten Evils—Reinheit, the Lord of Paradise.

"We must save Breaking the Sky Sword Saint!"

But the man shouting this seemed genuinely there to save Breaking the Sky Sword Saint.

"Breaking the Sky Sword Saint! Breaking the Sky Sword Saint is inside!"

It was strange. The incarnations gathered here were all affiliated with different corporations. They had simply entered the forest to acquire more D-Coins, to steal tribute from others.

"We're advancing! Watch your step!"

So what exactly was this scene?

"Ahhhh!"

The incarnation at the forefront, fighting the thornbush, was seriously injured, and another couple of incarnations rushed in to save him.

"Huh! Get out of the way quickly!"

An incarnation swung their sword and died. Another incarnation threw themself at them to protect them.

"I will be your shield!"

The incarnations who had bravely charged into the bushes met a gruesome end. The upper body of an incarnation, torn from its waist, rolled on the ground.

Before their last breath, they muttered something with a rapt expression.

"No! I'll die! Kill me first!"

Jung Heewon, who had been watching blankly, stepped forward and grasped the hilt of her sword. I instinctively grabbed her wrist.

"Heewon-ssi."

Startled, Jung Heewon turned to me and sheathed her sword again.

[The story, 'Regret, Pipe, Obsession' interrupts its storytelling.]

I saw a faint emotion flicker in her eyes, then disappear.

I got goosebumps.

A status abnormality so powerful that even Jung Heewon, wearing the Samyeong Daesa's holy relic set, found it difficult to touch.

"Protect each other! We can win if we fight together!"

Listening to the deeply elated cries of the incarnations, I thought about the master of this forest.

「What kind of person was Breaking the Sky Sword Saint?」

Breaking the Sky Sword Saint. The strongest Transcendent and Yoo Joonghyuk's teacher. Heir to [Breaking the Sky Swordsmanship] and the god of the <First Murim>. A descendant of the extinct Giant God Clan.

「How can you call a place with only trees a forest?」

With every step toward the forest's center, her voice seemed to echo in my ears.

「Even if not a single blade of grass grows on this land.」

Perhaps this was the answer given by the Breaking the Sky Sword Saint herself.

The answer of the transcendant, who had long and deeply pondered the meaning of Murim.

「If a group of people with the same beliefs unite.」

An unprecedented fervor welled up deep within my heart. It was a feeling not only I but also any martial artist in the First Murim would feel.

「Only then does this place become 'Murim'.」

People, consumed by an unnatural madness, blindly saved each other and died.

Only then did I realize the true nature of the abnormal state that befell this forest.

「This forest forces 'negotiation' upon those who enter.」