**Chapter 22: At the temple (2)**

‘White.’

Even in her black nun's robes, white was the first thing that came to mind when I saw her.

Snow-white hair, pure white skin, a white tail that twitched and flicked, and white cat ears, every color that makes up her is white, except for her eyes, which glowed red as if dipped in blood.

'Why is she here? Does she belong to the temple?’

The white priest Serif in front of me looked exactly like the wand-wielding beastwoman I'd met when I was transported to the Labyrinth.

‘She stopped a sword-wielding beastwoman and a shield-wielding beastwoman who tried to hit on me.’

I hadn't recognized Serif then, as she wore the gear of an ordinary explorer, but she was a member of the Temple.

'A fairly high ranking one, too.’

– This time, Serif Adeline, who will confirm your blessing, showed her face in an unusual way due to an event linked to the Explorers' Association. Normally, explorers below the advanced level would not even be able to see her. It is a great blessing to be able to see Her. So please never be rude.

Apprentice Priest Sorvel repeated those words steadily as they made their way to the appraisal room.

That meant that the Serif was someone of considerable standing in the temple.

"Nice to see you again Ms. Cat. No, Serif Adeline."

I’ve been sharp with her then, a result of a gross misunderstanding, but now he had nothing against her.

And to top it off, she was in the clergy, and she was able to subdue flirtatious women?

As a ninth-time attempted rape survivor, I'd say she was almost Diana-safe.

Booooooooooo!!!

"HIT⋯?!"

"⋯⋯?"

The thought was quickly drowned out by a tremendous vibration and a startled groan.

What the hell was that sweet moan?

Serif's fluffy feline ears twitched, and her fluffy tail twitched in surprise.

Worst of all, Serif's expression suddenly turned to one of utter panic.

Her pupils fluttered wildly back and forth like an earthquake, the tips of her eyes focused on me.

"Isn't that the sound of 'that'?"

"I don't know what 'that' is, but please don't tell me⋯ I don't know anything about women's masturbation devices⋯!"

"Oh, right. I'm sorry, I'm confused. By the way⋯ I guess that holier-than-thou priest was just a perverted vixen in the face of his libido after all⋯ I'm suddenly feeling pretty good about myself for having been defeated by it all along."

Behind me, I could hear Grumpy and Jeremy talking quietly.

That's some crazy shit, what are you saying in front of a higher power, you uneducated bitch-

"That's not what it is! Please don't get the wrong idea!"

Hearing the little voice, Serif shouted, her skin flushing red to the tips of her hair.

She hastily untied the necklace and held it in her hand. In her hand, the necklace was still vibrating.

-Bam!

"I apologize for my party members."

I clutched Grumpy and Jeremy's heads and bowed my head towards Serif.

"⋯⋯hmmmmm. No, I'm the one who's embarrassing myself, I'm glad to see. Yeah. You're here to confirm the details of the blessings and curses, right, all three of you?"

Serif smiled, accepted the apology, and rambled on, still slightly flushed with embarrassment.

"We are."

"Good. Very well, whoever wants to come first, please do."

"Well, I'll go first, if you don't mind, big brother!"

"Uhhh. Sure."

Jeremy looked quite urgent. Well, he had good reason to be.

"⋯To confirm a blessing or curse, I need to touch you closest to the heart."

"Ah. Right."

With that, Jeremy turned to face Serif.

"No, Jeremy⋯"

"What, brother?"

"Well, look down at you."

"⋯⋯? ⋯ah."

Looking at the large udders that had sprouted on her flat chest, Jeremy turned around quietly, looked up at the sky with tears in her eyes, and muttered

"No⋯no⋯no⋯I⋯I'll be strong⋯"

I know. You didn't choose it, but it's your fate. Think of your girlfriend and suck it up.

"Well, then, let's get started."

With a strange ringing sound, a dazzling light emanated from Serif's hand that was pressed against Jeremy's back.

“Oh, my God…such a curse, ah, no, how can this be such a blessing…?”

 "⋯⋯"

Serif seemed to be stunned by the blessing's shocking content, not in a mocking way, but purely in awe.

In fact, it's safe to say that anyone who isn't shocked by the content of that blessing doesn't have a human heart.

"Confirmed, please wait a moment."

Serif pulled her wand out of thin air like a knight in shining armor, flicked it once, and a piece of paper and pen flew out of nowhere and began writing down the contents of the blessing.

Serif handed the paper to Jeremy, who checked it over and fell silent in shock, as if he'd been shot in the head.

"Why, what's written on it? Can I have a look?"

"⋯⋯Yes. Look."

Grumpy looked at the paper, quite curious about the contents of the blessing.

"Hmph-!"

"⋯⋯"

She immediately turned her head away to stifle her laughter.

"⋯You can look at it too, big brother."

I checked the paper Jeremy handed me. I was curious to see if there was a difference between the temple appraisal and the status window.

[◆ Blessing of male rejection, female acceptance]

- Changes from male to female.

– It becomes stronger faster in proportion to the size of the lost male organ.

 "⋯Is this the end?"

"What? Uh, yeah. That's all."

It's not very descriptive. My status window was four lines long, with a clear description of the level-up efficiency.

‘It's weird to think she didn't say that on purpose, there's no reason for that.’

Can't the temple's blessing appraisal provide more detailed information than the status window?

"Then I'll be next, because I felt a tingling sensation when I came out of the labyrinth?! ⋯⋯Maybe? Anyway, it's an unconditional blessing."

Grumpy turned to Serif with a smug look on her face.

"Well, then. I'll check it out."

Another flash of light enveloped them both.

"Oh."

Grumpy opened his mouth a little, as if this was quite an experience.

"⋯Confirmed, here's your paper."

Serif wiped the sweat from her brow and handed the paper with the blessing to Grumpy. It seems that verifying a blessing was quite a laborious task.

"Wow, look at this, master, I got two blessings!"

With a big grin on her face, she scurried over to me and showed me the paper.

[◆ Wind Blessing]

- Your hearing is developed. Affinity with wind spirits increases.

[◆ Thief's Step Blessing]

- You can focus your mind and hide your tracks for a short time. Cooldown: 1 hour.

Grumpy blessing is poorly described. At this point, it's safe to say that the status window is superior to the temple's appraisal abilities.

For reference, my status bar lists her new blessings as follows.

[◆ Thief's Step Blessing] NEW!!!

- Focus your mind and become completely invisible for 10 seconds. Cooldown: 1 hour.

"The second blessing is the new one you've gained this time. The first blessing was probably obtained in the previous Labyrinth Walk, but you didn't check."

"Uh, is that true?"

Grumpy grabbed the back of her neck, as if she hadn't realized she had a blessing.

It is real. The last time I checked her status window, the Wind Blessing hadn't been marked NEW.

But the new Thief's Step Blessing was marked.

‘Maybe old blessings don't get marked NEW.’

Jeremy, who had gotten his first blessing this time, was also marked, and I was also marked when I checked the status window to see if I had gotten the Blessing of the Vicious Struggle.

"⋯?"

I asked, suddenly realizing that I had missed something.

‘When I first checked the question mark blessing, it didn't have the ⋯ NEW marker?’

Then I thought, when did I get this blessing?

Right after I was transported into the Labyrinth?

No, I must have gotten the Blessing of the Vicious Struggle around the same time, but it was marked.

When I synchronized?

If I got it then, it would’ve been marked.

⋯Then, there's only one answer left.

‘⋯From when I was on Earth?’

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

"You're up next!"

"⋯⋯Ah. Uh, yeah."

Grumpy’s words instantly brought me back to reality.

"⋯Are you okay, your complexion is incredibly bad, are you uncomfortable, is there a recovery potion here⋯"

"⋯I'm fine."

She stopped me from opening the potion bottle.

Putting aside the chaotic speculations floating around in my head, I turned to face Serif.

"So..."

Serif raised her hand mechanically, as she had done before, but then she turned to stone.

Serif's eyes vibrated wildly, locking onto my chest. His tail and ears wagged gently.

"⋯? What's wrong?"

"⋯aah. Back, back, back, back!"

Serif yelled, his face bright red.

"Yes."

I thought that didn't apply to me because I was a man, but apparently not.

I turned around without a word, and soon felt a warm hand on my back. Along with a mysterious sensation as if a mysterious light was entering my body.

I could hear Serif's strange exclamation from behind me.

From the small voice, I couldn't tell if she was surprised to touch my back, or if she was surprised to see the blessing.

I wonder how many minutes passed like that.

Five minutes? Ten? Somehow, it took me longer to react than the previous two.

She kept her hand on the same spot on my back the whole time, so that's where the heat was coming from. It felt weirdly sweaty.

"That bitch! That bitch! That scheming bitch!"

"⋯⋯"

I glanced over to see Grumpy crossing her arms and glaring at Serif with a fierce expression.

Jeremy looked at me with a pitying expression.

I lowered my head, and the blinding glow faded.

‘It's a blessing I can't even see in the status window, so maybe the appraisal process is more complicated than other blessings.’

I waited patiently for a bit longer. Another ten minutes passed, at which point I couldn't help but speak up.

"Hey-"

"Phew, I just finished appraising, here's your paper."

Serif held the paper out to me as if she'd been waiting.

When I glanced at her, I realized that Serif's face and even the backs of her hands were stained red. Her tail seemed to twitch strangely.

I nodded approvingly and checked the paper.

[◆ Blessing of Vicious Struggle]

- Increases physical abilities just before death.

It wasn't what I had hoped for, but it was what I had expected.

"Is this the end?"

"Eh? Ah, yes. It's a tricky blessing to use. You have to be on the brink of death to activate it⋯These kinds of blessings and curses are often generated based on your experiences in the Labyrinth, and it sounds like you've been through a lot."

"Yeah, well."

When I was blessed with the Blessing of Vicious Struggle, I almost died in the Labyrinth.

Even now, I would have died if the armored knight hadn't saved me.

'She didn't even notice the question mark blessing based on her reaction.’

It didn't seem like a bad guy who checks for blessings and then deliberately withholds them. It was a genuine lack of awareness.

'What is this blessing?’

"You three are lucky, it's very rare to find explorers who only have blessings, especially low-level explorers."

"Lucky⋯lucky⋯lucky⋯lucky⋯yes⋯"

"If you can find the apprentice priest who accompanied you as you left the temple, you'll receive five silver coins for reporting the blessing. All three of you, of course."

"Yay!"

In the end, I didn't find out the identity of the question mark blessing.

But I did get something.

A creepy speculation and five silver coins.

Nothing extraordinary happened, and all I got was a small gain compared to my caution.

'⋯Still, it's not a bad harvest.’

A speechless Jeremy and a grinning Grumpy, who had sped up her pace at the thought of getting paid, were about to leave the appraisal room.

"Wait."

Serif's voice stopped me in my tracks. I didn't stop of my own volition. For a moment, my body went rigid.

What the hell.

I instinctively reached for the axe, but my body didn't move an inch. I couldn't even lift a finger.

My spine went fucking cold. What the hell is going on here?

KEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

Thump!

The door slammed shut. Grumpy and Jeremy had already left, leaving me alone in this room.

"You know, there's something I wanted to ask you."

It was a sweet, sticky voice that didn't belong to the nun who had been touching my back and admiring me earlier.

I rolled my eyes and looked at the voice's owner.

A red tongue darted out, moistening her full lips and ruby-red eyes stared back at me.

With a flick of her tail and a mechanical grin, Serif stepped forward, her face as hard as stone.

"May I have a moment alone⋯with you?"

Boo-boo-boo-boo-boo.

She clutched the frantically vibrating necklace in her hand.