**Chapter 289: Black Cat and White Cat (3)**

For a moment, I was bewildered by the appearance of the two cat-person sisters when they were young.

—Stop right there! You damn brats!

Behind them, a woman with an enraged face chased after the two with a roar.

The girl and the woman seemed not to notice us as they rushed past.

"It seems they can't see us."

"This is still the surface of the mental world."

This place is the surface of the mental world. The sea of unconsciousness that hasn't properly taken shape yet.

No matter how powerful a dream demon is, all they can do on the surface of a mental world is imprint a faint erotic sensation, like adding salt to seawater.

To exert proper influence, one must go to the center of the mental world.

Wooong—

The dream demon's horn resonated again, leading us forward.

I sailed through Serif's mental world, using the horn as my sail.

Idelbert, nestled in my arms and looking around Serif's mental world, turned her gaze somewhere toward the surface.

—Serif. Hide here.

—W-what about you, sister?

—That bakery woman is stupid, so if I take a few hits, she'll calm down on her own. If I get hit a little, we won't have to worry about retaliation either. You need to wait here quietly, okay?

—B-but...

—Listen to your sister. Serif is a good girl, right? Understand?

—Y-yes...!

The two sisters, unable to endure hunger, had stolen bread and were running away from the bakery owner who was chasing them.

To hold back the owner, the older sister placed her younger sister in a trash can and alone drew the attention of the enraged bakery owner.

She fled with incredible agility for a child, but she was still just a child after all.

—You damn brat!!! Interfering with an adult's business!!!

-Thwack! Thwack! Whack! Whack!

The older cat sister, caught in the hands of the enraged woman, was soon seized by an adult's hands and beaten mercilessly like a dog on a hot summer day.

The sister groaned "ugh" and "kugh" from the incoming punches, but she was still smiling slightly.

That belligerent smile contained confidence that she wouldn't submit to the likes of them and satisfaction from protecting her younger sister.

—S-stop it!

That smile cracked when her younger sister jumped out of the trash can and charged at the bakery owner.

—Huh, w-what's this!

The white cat girl clung desperately to the bakery owner's leg that was about to stomp on her sister's abdomen.

No matter how much the leg was swung, she clung desperately, as if determined not to let the sister be hit, causing the adult to spew curses.

—Kugh, you damn brats. If you do this again, I'll beat you to death!

Eventually, the exhausted bakery owner left the back alley with a curse and a thick glob of spit.

—Ugh...

—Sister, are you okay?

The younger sister shed tears looking at her sister who was covered in bruises and filthy from rolling in the dusty ground, but the sister shouted first.

—I told you to wait quietly, so why did you come out! It was dangerous!

—B-but. I don't like... seeing you get beaten like this... waaah...

—......

The corners of the older sister's mouth twitched as she looked at her adorable younger sister who began to shed tears like chicken droppings.

Unable to scold her sister who had risked herself for her, the older sister tightly embraced her lovely younger sister and began to groom her with "wararara."

Lick. Lick.

As the short tongue wiped away the tears that flowed down her cheeks, the younger sister stopped crying and felt the warmth of her sister's affection.

And seeing her sister's many wounds, she began to lick them too.

I turned my gaze away from that scene and glanced at Idelbert, who was embarrassed.

Apparently, this wasn't a simple hallucination but a real experience.

"...You were close."

"...We were. Back then."

Is this the hallucination Serif wanted to see?

To be with the kind sister from the past, not the sister with whom her relationship had soured in reality?

As I was pondering such thoughts.

Paaaaat—

—Oh, sister! Light is coming from my tongue!

—Uh... w-what is this...?

Dazzling divine power began to pour out from young Serif's entire body as she licked her sister's wounds.

"Until the temple noticed that divine power."

Serif's divine power, which awakened by chance while trying to heal her sister's wounds, instantly changed the environment for the two sisters.

Eventually, several silhouettes of priests who obviously looked extraordinary appeared and lured the two sisters to the temple with the promise of food, clothing, and shelter.

"They are the source of all evil. The high priests brainwashed by the worshippers of envy. Because they noticed Serif's existence, we ended up going to the temple."

Wooong—

The dream demon's horn resonated again and vibrated. It was evidence that we were smoothly entering the center of the mental world, like a sailboat catching a favorable wind.

As we headed toward the center of the mental world, the surrounding scenery began to change in more detail.

What followed was the appearance of fresh young girls, growing gradually from their adorably chubby forms.

The two girls, on the boundary just before growing into beautiful women, were adapting quite well to life in the temple.

—Sister. This problem is solved by doing this, then this.

—Little sister. Number studies are meaningless. If you know how to manage subordinates well, annoying tasks will be taken care of automatically.

—To handle subordinates as you say, you need to have this kind of knowledge as a foundation. Let's solve the next problem too.

—Yaaaaaaawn...

There was the scene of Idelbert stretching with a yawn and Serif struggling to keep her sister focused on studying in the temple library.

—Bang, bang-bang, then swiftly dodge, and bang-bang again. Bang-bang-bang. Is that difficult, little sister?

—Heck, heck... I'm having trouble just maintaining my stamina while running... I can't do that kind of thing like you, sister...

—Eventually, we'll have to be tested in the Labyrinth to become high priests and paladins. In the labyrinth, I can't stick close to you to protect you. Come on, raise your fists. Let's go again!

—Uweeeeeee...

Idelbert helping with her sister's endurance training as she held her guard up, and Serif nearly collapsing from exhaustion, panting heavily.

We navigated through the mental world where the sisters' memories floated around.

Then suddenly, a familiar scene caught my eye.

On the 16th floor of the Labyrinth, the vegetation in that tropical climate was stained red, and many people were engaged in fierce battles with monsters attacking from the ground and the sky.

In the center of the battlefield where numerous priests and paladins were dying, the two sisters were present.

"It's a melee."

"It was chaos. We were ambushed just as we were taking a break."

A surprise attack by a swarm of wyverns, notoriously difficult monsters even among those in the 16th floor.

Moreover, there were several wyverns mixed in that could handle magic, making it difficult to avoid damage even for the past Idelbert.

"That was when I noticed the suspiciousness of the high priests."

Looking at Idelbert, who was murmuring calmly, she continued to speak while gazing at the battlefield scenery.

"To be more precise, it was the day when the awkwardness I had felt until then became more certain. I sensed very faint magi from their fingertips and at the end of that magi were monsters rushing in to devour it, leading their packs. They deliberately leaked magi to lure the monsters."

-Slash!

Idelbert burst a magi-stained wyvern with her fist, barely saving Serif who was about to be swallowed by the monster's mouth.

Even in her bloodied state, Serif tightly embraced her sister who had come to save her and poured out healing miracles.

"Each time we entered the labyrinth, that trick was repeated, and as we gained experience and grew stronger, we also grew tired. Our mental strength was gradually shaken by the many deaths, which became a good gap for the envy worshippers to attempt brainwashing."

After the battlefield scene came a joyful banquet and feast.

Though restrained as befitting church members, in the feast where the joy of overcoming hardship could be felt, the high priests under the control of envy worshipper Karelos showered the two sisters, the stars of the banquet, with words of praise.

—Well done. You two are truly the hope that will lead the next generation!

—Blessings to the noble saint! Cheers to the strong saint's paladin!

—May the Earth Mother's grace be with the talents that will lead the future!

The magi carefully hidden behind those sweet voices and applause resonated wonderfully in the ears of the two sisters, drenched in fatigue.

The sisters, who once had to steal bread in back alleys just to feed themselves, had now grown splendidly to become known as a saint and a paladin, receiving everyone's praise and congratulations.

The high priests who tried to enchant people, gaslight them, and implant their minds with brainwashing to use them according to their tastes smiled sinisterly.

"I didn't question my immediate doubts directly, but clung to vague circumstances and sharp senses to pursue my questions."

However, because doubt had already blossomed in Idelbert's heart, she couldn't take their sweet words at face value.

"Eventually, I discovered that the high priests and even their successors around them were dominated by envy worshippers, and I was convinced they would repeat such actions in the future."

Idelbert's principles of action were similar then and now.

Does it pose a danger to her precious younger sister?

The brainwashed high priests continuously put Serif and Idelbert in manageable levels of danger and slowly worked on brainwashing them.

For Idelbert, they were like deadly poison that clouded Serif's judgment and made her fall into brainwashing.

On behalf of her sister, who failed to notice this, the older sister raised her fist.

"I killed them the very day I decided. As they were dying, they asked how I had figured it out. I told them to eat shit and then smashed their heads."

The sharp and keen atmosphere emanating from Idelbert could be felt just as it was.

Perhaps because we were in a mental world, the scenery she was looking at seemed to faintly appear in my mind as well.

In the temple engulfed in flames, Idelbert stood majestically after smashing the heads of the high priests.

—Sister, why...?

The sister did not answer her younger sister's hollow murmur.

—Sister, please say something. Hmm...? Why, why did you do this...?

"I hoped Serif would feel betrayed and grow. Stupidly, at that time, I thought it was for Serif's benefit."

The older sister didn't attempt any dialogue and simply walked away from her beloved younger sister.

"Serif, wounded by me, no longer depended on anyone. It was the catalyst for her to develop her own judgment. She became wary of others and kept only those who would act solely for her benefit by her side. Getting more obsessively drawn into faith wasn't good, but...I had to understand that much."

Is it because of that day when Serif strangely isolated herself from her surroundings and smiled while hiding her true feelings from others as much as possible?

"It was also good from a macroscopic perspective. When the temple's saint is wary of others, the chances of falling into danger are significantly reduced."

Cases like the current Jellicy or Cleassia were good examples.

Even if Cleassia were to approach Serif similarly to Jellicy, Serif wouldn't easily open her heart to others.

It might have been betrayal as a younger sister, but with Serif holding the position of a saint and potentially being exploited by various factions, her sister couldn't protect her forever.

The older sister wanted her fragile younger sister to be able to survive against beasts baring their teeth even outside the fence that was herself.

"Still, I was anxious, so after changing my profession to explorer, I occasionally sponsored Serif or helped her unknowingly. Well, I was found out soon enough...When we met again later, we could no longer go back to how we used to be."

A crack began to form in the memories of the two people, starting to split.

The joyful memories of Serif and Idelbert that had been floating in the mental world were no longer visible.

I continued through the empty mental world where memories of the two sisters had disappeared and asked.

"...Do you regret it? The past events?"

"...All choices in the world leave lingering attachments."

Decisions once made cannot be reversed.

So much time has passed that regret remains only as lingering attachment.

Idelbert looked back and gazed at Serif trapped in a mixture of her own lingering attachments and the envy worshipper's illusions, faintly visible in the distance.

Next to Serif, who was smiling brightly, the illusionary Idelbert was grinning and ruffling her hair vigorously.

"That girl just...wanted something like that..."

In a voice that seemed to recall memories that could never be retrieved again, I finally couldn't hold back and said.

"You can change it."

"...What?"

"Even now... you can take it back."

I firmly grasped Idelbert's hand and called out as I moved toward the deepest part of Serif's mental world.

"Talk. Both of you. Start with a conversation. Don't avoid it because it's scary; tell each other the stories you didn't know about each other."

"...But..."

"Words won't come out easily. It'll be awkward, uncomfortable, and the atmosphere will be unpleasant. But that's all the more reason to speak. Keeping it bottled up inside will only become a poison that gnaws at your endless attachments."

Without conversation, people cannot live.

Haven't I already seen the results of the absence of dialogue?

Diana and Ellie, the mother and daughter, were the same.

If you only keep things in your heart without voicing them, it will someday create division.

"Talk about everything in your heart—lingering attachments, regrets, hopes, all of that. Talk about your everything. So that the other person can know your everything."

"......"

"It starts with talking. What comes next can be dealt with later. You promised before entering this place, didn't you?"

—Please have a proper conversation, both of you, and clear up any misunderstandings.

When I spoke with a winking smile, Idelbert, who had been wearing a complicated expression, regained a slight smile.

"...You thoughtful disciple."

"I'm a thoughtful disciple who even looks after my master's family matters. Ugh—"

As I chuckled while being put in a headlock with a large bosom pressing against my cheek.

Wooong—

The dream demon's horn, also pressed against Idelbert's breasts, resonated intensely, and the surrounding scenery began to change again.

Warm weather, gentle sunshine.

The place with a breeze gently touching the forehead and the sounds of small animals chirping was...the Earth Mother Order Valerus Branch.

Though brief, having been trained by Lilith to play the role of a dream demon somewhat decently, I instinctively felt that this was the very center of Serif's mental world.

"Oh, Lady Idelbert...?! And even Sir Balkan...?!"

When a female priest with an unfamiliar face called our names in a surprised voice, Idelbert tilted her head and looked at me.

"They recognize us this time?"

"We've come to the central part of the mental world, and depending on whose mental world it is, for someone of Serif's caliber, it's not that surprising. We should be able to touch things too, I think. See?"

As could be seen from Bunny's empty mental world and my own mental world filled with precious people, each person's mental landscape was different.

Moreover, the current Serif is experiencing the illusions of the envy worshipper, making it even more exceptional.

I gently stroked the hair of the still surprised female priest and asked.

"Excuse me. Do you know where Serif is?"

She's not a real person but merely a figure drawn from Serif's mental world mixed with envy illusions, so it doesn't really matter if I'm impolite, but I still maintained minimum courtesy.

"Ah, um... I-if you're looking for Serif, she just went with the two of you... toward the garden... hmm...?"

We passed by the female priest, whose face had turned bright red, and headed to the temple garden. Fortunately, the perceived distance wasn't far.

This is both Serif's mental world and an illusion manipulated by the envy worshipper to show everything Serif desires.

I spotted a well-ripened, soft and ample Serif enjoying tea time at a table in the garden.

Next to the swaying white cat tail was, of course, Idelbert and...

"...Huh?"

"Two...disciples?"

A gleaming man in Earth Mother Order paladin armor.

It was me, wearing a sparkling helmet, who had become a paladin escorting Serif along with Idelbert.