# 3 - Curse...?

‘This… isn’t going to be easy…’

At first, I thought it would be a simple curse that only made me feel pleasure from trivial things related to the opposite sex.

But it seems what I gained from the curse wasn’t that simple. ‘I didn’t expect this…’

It wasn’t just Stella.

Just touching Uriel made me feel that unknown sensation.

It was definitely less than with Evan, but there was a huge difference between not feeling anything at all and feeling something, however slight.

The former would have allowed me to know exactly what kind of curse it was, but the latter made it difficult to accurately grasp the nature of the curse placed on me.

Besides…

“…Should I tell her about this…?”

“Still, it’s Aria’s body, wouldn’t hiding it be worse…?”

From the conversation between Stella and Uriel, it seems something strange is engraved on my body.

The Succubus Queen’s curse, and something strange engraved on my body.

The two seemed to be debating whether to tell me or not, but I couldn’t help but notice just by listening to their conversation.

If I were Aria as I’ve been portraying her, even if I knew more about demons than the other kids, I would still know less than the kids who directly sought advice and heard stories about them.

But as someone who knows the in-game settings and most of the knowledge, I couldn’t possibly not know after hearing just that much.

‘Damn it…’

Of all things, it seems the *yin* mark, practically a symbol of succubi, was engraved on my lower abdomen, specifically where the uterus is.

At that point, it’s safe to say it’s a curse related to sex.

The only problem is, as I said before, I don’t know exactly what kind of curse it is.

If it were the kind of curse that only made me horny for Evan, I could just ask him to undo it.

‘Ah, or is it not…?’

If it were that kind of curse, then I would essentially have to… Ugh…

Um…

‘Ugh, damn it…!!’

Thinking about it makes my head hurt. I really don’t know what to do.

‘I am interested, but…’

Being interested is a little different from wanting to do it. No, it’s a lot different.

Just thinking about me fawning over Evan gives me goosebumps all over my body.

In the first place, doing such a thing is absolutely not in line with the concept of this Aria, it’s like an NG in a movie.

I’ve been doing so well so far, do you think I’m going to undo it just because I got cursed?

No way.

‘I’d rather suffer in silence.’

I thought so and shook my head wildly.

Stella and Uriel, who didn’t know much about my inner thoughts, were looking at me strangely, as if I had suddenly gone crazy, shaking my head wildly after asking them to hold my hands.

‘M-Maybe I should ask Stella and Uriel…?’

Just being with the two of them already makes me feel like my body is heating up again.

Maybe I should ask them because the curse is making my body… ‘Ah, no, that’s even worse!!’

I’d rather cling to Evan than cling to the two of them, who only think of me as a friend, saying my body is hot. Wouldn’t that be even more wrong?

I have an image that I’ve built up so far, so it wouldn’t be that big of a problem, but they would think I’ve changed because of the succubus’s influence.

‘Is solving it alone the answer?’ Thinking about it makes me feel lost.

Until now, my whole body was filled with Holy Power, so there was no room for such desires, and I never had the time to feel pleasure as a woman…

‘No, is that not true…?’

If the pleasure I gained from pain was sexual pleasure, then I should say no, but if it wasn’t…

Anyway, until now, defeating the Demon King and saving this world was a higher priority for me, so I wasn’t interested in it at all.

However, even if I wasn’t interested until now, if the curse makes me feel like I’ll go crazy if I don’t solve it, wouldn’t it be better to take the plunge, even if it’s a little scary?

“[C-Could… could you both leave for a moment…?]” I need some time to think.

No, not just a moment, but a long time.

Unlike Evan, whom I had to push away myself, the two of them fortunately read my mood and left, saying they would call me later when I felt better, and opened the door and left.

I watched the two of them leave the room, sighed, and then used Holy Power to look at my body.

Holy Power was uniquely capable of this. I could see my body in 3D.

In the first place, it’s not an ordinary ability to be able to see 360 degrees around me, but…

Since I’m using Holy Power to look around, I guess it can’t be helped, but…

If I do this, I can quickly catch any mistakes I make, but… ‘…I can’t do it…’

Not in Valencia’s guest room, of all places… ‘After all, pleasure is pain…’

Pleasure from pain is the best. Not this embarrassing stuff… Haa…

“Aria… is she going to be okay…”

Stella and Uriel, who had come outside, had worried expressions as they recalled Aria’s appearance just now.

The influence of the curse was definitely there.

They didn’t know what kind of curse it was, but the magicians speculated that Aria was now experiencing a completely different world than usual.

To that extent, the curse cast by the powerful Succubus Queen, even at the cost of her own life, would be an enormous curse.

Frankly speaking, they even said not to take it strangely no matter how Aria changed, and to accept that it was unavoidable because of the curse.

“How was it?”

As soon as Stella and Uriel came out, Evan approached and asked.

Of course, Stella and Uriel had only approached and held out their hands, and had to accept the eviction without saying anything else.

Aria wouldn’t have done that to make them feel bad, so there must have been something so shocking.

“Why did she ask us to hold her hands…”

“Hands… is there something there? Maybe she can’t use Holy Power anymore…”

“That’s probably not it.” Evan said with certainty.

He couldn’t help but be sure.

Holy Power was definitely flowing well inside Aria’s body.

The Demonic energy that maintained the curse was pushing back Aria’s Holy Power and settling in deeply, but apart from that, she was just a normal Aria.

“Rather than just thinking in that direction… we need to think about what is most fatal to Aria.”

The most powerful and desperate curse that the Succubus Queen could cast on Aria.

A curse that would be desperately overwhelming for Aria to accept. And that’s something that can be found out by holding hands.

Holding hands…

“Hmm… I didn’t feel anything when our bodies touched each other, so it’s not like it causes a curse when bodies touch…”

“Me neither.” “Me too.”

The three of them didn’t feel anything special when they touched.

But if Aria’s eyes widened as if she felt something as soon as she held their hands…

“What do you feel when you hold hands?” “Um… the other person’s warmth?”

“Isn’t it just the sensation of hands touching each other?” “The sensation of touching, sensation? Wait, sensation?” Sensation.

Stella’s eyes widened at those words.

Aria’s appearance when she let out a soft groan when she held hands with them.

And if they were to pick the most desperate thing for Aria… ‘N-No way…’

Stella’s face turned pale as she thought of the possibility.

They didn’t know what kind of personality the Succubus Queen had since she had already disappeared, but if they knew the principle of using the Saintess’s power, there was the most powerful curse she could cast.

The moment she thought about that curse, Stella’s face turned pale. “Sensation… amplification…”

It’s not limited to other things.

From simple touch… to the pain Aria would feel.

What if all of those were amplified to an enormous level?

If Aria’s expression hardened because she thought that the pain she had to endure had risen to a level she could no longer handle.

Then they could fully explain Aria’s reactions to them. “Sensation amplification… you say…?”

Evan’s expression also gradually hardened as he heard those words.

Sensation amplification is one of the most common techniques used by succubi when they steal essence, but,

It was the worst curse for Aria, who always suffered pain during treatment.

# 4 - Curse...?

“… It’s not impossible.”

Valencia, after hearing Stella's conjecture about the curse, said with a cold sweat, agreeing that it might be true.

As he said, it wasn't an impossible guess, so Stella, Uriel… and Evan nodded as if they expected it.

"No way… then…"

"In effect, you'll have to stop using the Saintess's power to heal someone. You're already enduring a level of pain that's hard to bear, but if you feel pain that could be several times worse… it won't stay at the physical level anymore."

At that point, Aria's soul might even be damaged.

A terrible curse that could leave her unable to recover, mentally dead.

That amplified sensation, which would be quite frightening even to an ordinary person, was no different from sealing the Saintess's power, which involved pain.

Just healing a cut would feel like stabbing and gouging that part with a knife, so how much worse would it be to heal severed limbs or burns?

Perhaps the dizzying pain felt just by starting treatment would make her faint on the spot.

It would be a relief if she just fainted.

Even now, the pain is too great for a girl named Aria to bear… I couldn't believe that I had committed an act that would multiply that pain.

"That's an absurd curse…"

Of course, it wasn't certain, but the content was so credible that they had no choice but to believe Stella's guess right away.

Otherwise, there was no way Aria would show such unfamiliar behavior, like flinching or groaning when holding hands.

“… I’m sorry. If I had finished it off for sure there…” Evan said, bowing his head as if blaming himself.

Stabbing the heart and spreading Holy Power throughout the body was certainly a good method, but Evan had a better method.

Using 『Heaven's Wrath』 like when he burned the Succubus Queen's body would have been one of those methods.

It wasn't impossible to kill the Succubus Queen in one blow so that she couldn't do anything else.

After all, if he had just unleashed a powerful technique with the momentum to blow Aria's body away, without thinking about Aria, she would have been annihilated without even having time to cast a curse.

But Evan couldn't do that.

He had honed his sword this far only to protect Aria, and now it was impossible for him not to think about Aria.

At least for Evan.

Knowing that, and being able to understand Evan well enough, they just didn't say anything.

Aria was that important to them.

"Then what should we do? We have to undo Aria's curse quickly…"

“… I hesitate to say this, but I wonder if it might be better to retire the Saintess as is.”

Valencia said, bowing his head slightly with a pitiful expression.

Valencia, who had witnessed with his own eyes on the front lines how much Aria had suffered, couldn't let her subjugate the Demon King even if it meant undoing the curse again.

Everyone in this world should be grateful to her.

For Aria, who alone endures and perseveres, taking the place of the suffering of all those who suffer from the Demon King…

It might seem like too much, but at least Valencia thought it was natural.

But…

"Lord Argent…"

“… I know the situation is not easy.”

Valencia wasn't a fool who didn't know reality.

Sometimes you have to abandon ideals and act realistically.

No matter how pitiful Aria is, in this situation where all of humanity, all living things in this world, are in danger beyond Aria, it was inappropriate to say that Aria had worked hard so far, so let's let her rest now.

If Aria doesn't participate in the Demon King subjugation here and rests, all of humanity will be destroyed.

In the end, Aria would be in endless pain as well. "Really… it's the worst."

Valencia sighed.

It was true that he always respected and appreciated Aria, but that made it even more painful that it was impossible to say that he wanted her to rest in the current situation.

We had to subjugate the Demon King as soon as possible and bring peace to the world.

Definitely.

“… By the way, what happened to the village?” Uriel asked Valencia, as if suddenly remembering. Valencia replied in a tone that told her not to worry.

"It's okay. I told the people of the territory with evidence that it was caused by a Demon King Army executive. Although that happened, we will be able to maintain the relationship for the time being, even if it's just as a temporary measure."

But that relationship won't last long either.

No matter how much a Demon King Army executive was behind it, it was still true that someone from the Matimos Tribe had committed the crime.

Unfortunately, no one remembers that the Succubus Queen caused the chaos by casting mental confusion throughout the territory in order to escape this time, so there were many who couldn't believe that the Demon King Army executive caused this incident.

It wasn't like the situation would change if they didn't believe it, so it was closer to just letting it go.

It was obvious that this would eventually cause trouble.

"Anyway… then all that's left is the Trial of Courage that the Saintess mentioned."

“… To be honest, I thought we would face a Demon King Army executive after completing the Trial of Courage…”

“Fortunately, it wasn’t that difficult of a fight this time…” Rather, it ended in vain.

However, the curse that the last Demon King Army executive left on Aria was such a great curse that it was no exaggeration to say that this battle suffered the greatest damage.

In effect, one force called the Saintess had disappeared.

"Now all that's left is the Demon King… I don't know what will happen."

Valencia, who didn't know much about the Demon King, could only tell them to go ask Argent directly.

So…

"Go to Argent when all preparations are complete." "Argent…?"

"Yes. Argent will know well. Where the Demon King is, and how to catch the Demon King."

That was all he could say right now.

‘Ah, no…’

This is really not it.

While I was starting to comfort myself, the thought that came to my mind was, do I have to weaken this curse this far?

‘No, that guy… what kind of curse did he put on me?’

When I touch it myself, nothing much changes, so it doesn't seem like a curse related to amplified senses.

When I touched Evan's hand, I felt a strange feeling as if I had become a female who loves males…

What should I say, really… it's like when you see something of your taste and imagine it, you feel a tingling sensation in your lower abdomen.

I only touched Evan, but I felt that, so I couldn't stand it.

If I keep living like this, it seems like it will be difficult to be with Evan, so I have to find a solution somehow…

‘It’s difficult…’

I sighed deeply, lying face-up on the bed.

Actually, as I said before, I decided to try it once and touched it for a while… but I quickly lost interest thinking this wasn't it.

I didn't touch it for that long, but I think I touched it enough to feel it.

I don't know the method, but even so, the sensation I feel is suspiciously weak, so one thing is certain.

Just from the fact that I don't feel much when I touch it, I could tell that the curse that the Succubus put on me wasn't a simple curse like amplified senses.

‘Too bad.’

If it was that curse, the pain would have increased that much, so every time I healed someone, I would have felt pleasure that was incomparable to what I had felt so far.

To be honest, it's not like I didn't expect it… Ahem…

‘Ugh… then what is it really…?’

But to say that she cast another curse… she wasn't the type to cast another curse, so it didn't make sense.

That's because I know best that she's not the type to cast other curses besides this kind of curse.

I know her well… but if that's not it, then there's no point in knowing her well, right?

‘What the hell did that guy put on me…?’ It's absurd…

She should have at least told me before leaving. Anyway, Succubus are all rude.

Sigh.

# Curse...? (Intermission)

In the end, without uncovering anything about the curse, we started moving to find the location of the Trial of Courage.

The only fortunate thing was that Valencia was right about there being a resident who knew the local geography well.

I didn't know because it wasn't in the game, but I really didn't expect them to actually exist…

'He really found it…'

Even while looking at the map of this area, I was purely amazed.

The map was almost identical to the one I saw in the game. For me, who had spent countless hours mastering the game and could pinpoint locations just by looking at the map, finding the location was no longer difficult.

'Once we finish the Trial of Courage, is the only thing left really the Demon King…?'

Now, the only thing left is the Demon King.

We need to subjugate the Demon King as soon as possible, so it would be best to finish the Trial as quickly as possible.

Evan had become incomparably stronger than at the beginning, but he hadn't undergone his final awakening yet, so subjugating the Demon King was impossible.

Moreover, now subjugating the Demon King wasn't the only problem; there was an even bigger issue.

'Now it's really a time attack…'

The fight against the Demon King had completely turned into a time attack.

Now that all the Demon King Army executives had been defeated, there was a possibility that the monster would become alarmed and attack first.

It might seem like it doesn't have much intelligence, but like a Demon King, it is highly intelligent and very wise.

'However… from its perspective, it's probably still too early.'

In the game, it basically only reveals itself as the final boss after you've finished about third grade, but surprisingly, we're still only in second grade.

It probably figured that it couldn't act rashly, even if Evan hadn't completed his final awakening, because it hadn't fully recovered its power.

And in the game, there's an extremely low probability of this happening, so there's usually no need to worry…

'But this is reality.'

In the game, if it just attacked, the only downside was that you couldn't load and would see the ending, but you could just reload the file and it would be fine. But this is reality.

If you die, there's no save or load, you just die.

To prevent that from happening, it was essential to undergo the Trial of Courage as quickly as possible, so that Evan could handle it even if such a thing happened.

Because he changes after receiving it.

I didn't know what kind of Trial the Trial of Courage would give, or how much Evan would grow from that Trial, but…

"...Are you sure it's okay to wander around…?"

Stella, seeing me so insistent on finding the Trial of Courage, asked with a worried expression.

Not only Stella, but everyone who was with me was worried about me.

Just a few days ago, I had my body stolen by the Succubus Queen, my limbs were cut off, and I was cursed, so they were very worried.

Well… I appreciate the concern…

'But I can't just keep saying "I don't want to wander around because of the curse, waah" forever.'

Well, wandering around doesn't make my whole body tingle or give me strange sensations of pleasure.

It seems that my curse only activates when it's 'limited' to other people. Even so, it's still an absurd curse.

A curse that makes you feel sexual sensations just by touching someone, it's clearly trying to turn me into a pleasure-crazed pervert.

'If it was going to make me such a pervert, it should have amplified my senses for sure.'

If my senses were amplified, the pain I feel would also be amplified, so it probably decided that wouldn't work and changed it to a different curse.

The Succubus Queen is capable of that.

Of course, she doesn't know my tastes, but she probably judged me to be a very holy Saintess with a strong spirit.

She probably judged that after seeing that I didn't surrender to any pain. Well, considering what I've done so far, it's a natural judgment.

After seeing my relationship with Evan, and after checking everything so far, she probably judged that it was impossible to break me with sensory amplification, so it would be better to use Evan.

Driving someone with a strong spirit into a corner by using the people around them.

It's definitely a reasonable judgment.

If I were really a Saintess from a fairy tale or the Bible, trying to break me by using Evan would be the closest thing to the right answer.

In fact, for this girl "Aria" that I'm playing, it's the most shocking method.

Only…

'Too bad, too bad…'

The reality is that I'm just a crazy bitch who wanted sensory amplification. In a way, the Succubus Queen was really amazing.

She didn't intentionally do it, but the result was that she didn't give me any particular advantages while simultaneously confusing me mentally.

'Ugh…'

Even now, it's hard to walk with Evan, so I'm walking a little further away. Just being with Evan makes my body heat up and I can't stand it.

Evan seems to be feeling sorry for me, thinking that I hate him.

I'm sorry, but this isn't the kind of thing I can explain… As it's limited to humans, the curse is much… unbelievably powerful.

I'm barely holding on with Holy Power, otherwise I would have lost my mind and attacked Evan, Stella, or Uriel.

Not being attacked, but me attacking them directly.

What's even more absurd is that this curse isn't limited to just one person.

It's on everyone who's close to me, in other words, everyone in the Hero party.

She's really meticulous.

'That's absolutely not allowed…'

It's not a question of whether I'll just let it go because I think it's because of the curse.

I just can't stand the thought of me doing such a thing… I absolutely can't stand it.

"By the way, Aria." "[Y-Yes?!]"

Ah, oops.

Was I too flustered?

Evan seemed startled by my flustered Thought-form and blinked, then asked cautiously.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" "[Yes, it is.]"

"But this is…" I know.

This is…

"That… a valley…" The Cliff of Lament.

The snow created by the 'Beast of Freezing Cold that Calls for the End' had melted and disappeared, so it had become an ordinary cliff, but they seemed to not understand why we had suddenly come to this place.

Well, of course.

"[The Trial of Courage is in this place.]" Because this is the right place. "Eeeeh?!"

"That's a really surprising fact. Can I go back?" "…"

Why is everyone reacting like that? "Um… Aria?"

"[Yes?]"

"D-Do you know how to get in…?" That's already decided.

You can tell just by the name Trial of Courage. "[You just have to jump off.]"

You won't die if you jump.

It's a Trial, there's no way you'd die from falling, that would be a really stupid dungeon.

Of course, there's ancient magic to prevent falls below.

The only reason they haven't found it until now is how can you find the exact location in this wide Cliff of Lament and jump into the area where the dungeon exists?

And that's…

'I can see it, I can see it~'

It's a sad story for the developers who prepared the trick, but I can see that bridge very well.

For me, who uses Holy Power to step around and understand the surroundings, there's no way I can't see this bridge.

If you know the approximate location in the wide Cliff of Lament through the map, finding the invisible bridge is nothing.

"[It's here.]"

The diving spot for jumping off is made up of an invisible bridge.

In the game, if you find the exact location and walk into the air, you can climb onto the invisible bridge.

If you jump off, you'll fall for a long time and eventually arrive at the Trial of Courage.

In other words,

"Y-You want us to jump off here…" "Ah, haha…"

"Wow…"

Evan, Uriel, and Stella looked at me with complicated expressions, wondering if they really had to jump off.

Don't you believe me?

Don't you believe what I'm saying?

I can't help it… I have to show you…

If you don't believe me, you'll see my corpse explode and die. I went up onto the bridge.

"A-Aria?!" "Noooo… Eeeh?"

Everyone was flustered as they watched me standing confidently in the air. I knew it, no one believed me.

"[Come when you're ready. I'll go first.]" I said that and jumped off.

What a bunch of cowards.

Invisible paths are such a common and cliché element. 'No, was that only the case where I was?'

Anyway, even so, seeing the Hero party not being able to jump off here, they must all be chicken.

It seems that the nickname of our Hero party should now be 'Shelter for Super Cowards'.

# 1 - Trial of Courage...?

After throwing myself into the deep darkness for what felt like dozens of seconds, I began to slow down as I approached the ground.

By the time I reached the bottom, my speed had completely diminished, allowing me to land safely as if in zero gravity.

‘Hmm.’

That's a bit disappointing.

If the ancient magic doesn't work... ‘Ah, then the others would die.’ Can't have that.

I might just be looking for a thrill, but it could cause lasting mental anguish for the others, so it's best not to entertain such unsettling thoughts.

‘They're coming down soon.’

I can feel them descending, having jumped shortly after me.

Hmm, maybe we should change 'Shelter for Super Cowards' to 'Shelter for Cowards.'

Super cowards wouldn't even have considered jumping. "Whoa…! I, it really is slowing down…"

"Phew…"

"T, that's a relief…"

Stella, Evan, and Uriel muttered as they landed.

"[Welcome,]" I said with a grin, but they didn't seem too pleased.

"It really is 'Trial of Courage' in name and deed. How are we supposed to get back up?"

"[You'll be sent back up if you clear the Trial. Probably,]" I replied. "It's amazing how you know these things sometimes…"

Stella looked at me suspiciously, but what could I do?

This information is only known to me, after all… I've been brushing it off as a Divine Revelation, but I don't know how long that'll last.

I might have to reveal my true identity soon.

Even if that happens, I don't want to reveal who I really am… ‘Or do I?’

Well, unless there's a big reason I can't say, they're smart enough to realize I must have a reason for keeping quiet.

They're considerate and kind, so they probably won't ask even if they're curious.

I'd prefer it if things stayed that way. "So there really is a Trial…"

Evan looked up at the Trial of Courage, sweating. He didn't seem to expect this kind of Trial either.

‘Trial of Courage… a Trial that shows the current challenger what they need the most courage for, and tests whether they can overcome it or not…’

In fact, if you can overcome this Trial, you'll become so brave that you can handle almost anything with a yawn.

It's not called a Trial for nothing. "[Shall we head in, then?]"

"W-wait a minute… let's rest a bit…" Stella said, her face pale.

‘Ah, I didn't think about Stella.’

She may look like that, but she's a mage.

Unlike Evan and Uriel, who are swordsmen, and me, the Saintess, Stella is just a regular mage, so she's bound to get tired walking around like this.

That must be why she wants to rest…

‘If that's the case, why didn't she just fly…’

We didn't come here to fight, so why insist on walking? "[Should I help you?]"

"N, no… I don't want to use Holy Power for something like this…" Stella said, looking like she was about to throw up.

I don't know if she realizes how unconvincing she sounds with that expression.

Anyway, Stella's begging for a break, so I can't refuse.

Besides…

"[Indeed… when you enter the Trial, you'll have to face the situation you least want to face… or a situation that requires a great deal of courage, so it's best to prepare yourselves mentally in advance,]" I said.

I need to constantly tell myself that I can do it.

As for me… I don't know what kind of Trial I'll face, but considering I find even pain enjoyable, I doubt it'll be anything too difficult.

I feel surprisingly detached.

But the others might be different… so I decided to postpone entering the Trial.

After some time passed, Stella's complexion returned, and everyone finished preparing themselves.

We stepped into the Trial of Courage. "A-are you sure this is okay…?"

"We're not going to die during the Trial, are we…? I'm so nervous after coming down that cliff…"

Everyone seems to have gone crazy after entering the deep underground. It wasn't this bad even at the cliff where we got stranded in our first year. Is it a natural reaction to falling into an even deeper place than that?

But the atmosphere felt more serious back then… Besides…

‘Only Evan and I fell back then…’

I can understand Stella and Uriel's reactions to some extent. […Those who have set foot in the Trial of Courage.]

As soon as we stepped inside, an ancient statue greeted us, its green eyes glowing.

[From now on, I shall test the courage you possess…]

At the statue's words, everyone swallowed nervously, their faces tense.

What kind of Trial will it be… can I really do it… I guess that's what they're thinking.

I'm just looking forward to seeing what kind of Trial it will be. ‘Please let it be something easy…’

In the game, the Trial was about writing down your resolutions, so it was a complete freebie, but this is reality.

If you go in for the Trial, you'll face the moment when you need the most courage.

When that will be… I can't figure it out no matter how hard I try. How can you know that about yourself?

You only know when the situation arises. So, all I can do is beg for something easy. [I shall now begin the Trial.]

The moment the statue said that, a pillar of light rose where we were standing.

"[May you… take a step forward,]" I sent out a Thought-form, and the giant pillar of light engulfed us.

Then, I lost consciousness.

.

.

.

"Ugh…"

My consciousness flickered, and when I opened my eyes again, I saw an unfamiliar ceiling.

…

… Huh?

An unfamiliar ceiling? "What."

I sat up.

There's no way I should be able to open my eyes.

I shouldn't be able to hear either, but I can feel it instinctively. The fact that I can hear.

And…

‘Th-this sound…’

I think I can hear the sound of someone showering in the distance, but is it just my imagination?

More importantly, where am I right now? I quickly looked around.

In a luxurious room with low lighting, I was sitting on a large bed.

And…

‘Wh-what is this outfit?!’

I was wearing a thin outfit that barely covered my body, so revealing that you could see my underwear.

‘B-but my body hasn't grown much…’ Damn it.

If I'm wearing something like this, my body should at least have grown.

Ah, no, that's not it…

‘Wh-why am I here doing this?!’ I was genuinely flustered.

Where I am, what kind of clothes I'm wearing… why I'm here doing this.

And…

‘Wh-who the hell is showering over there!!!’ The shadow doesn't look like a woman at all. It looks like a man with a good body.

At that moment, I sensed it.

No matter how I think about it, my situation is really… Really, really, really, really screwed.

Really, utterly screwed. ‘R-run? Run away?!’

No matter how you look at it, this is that. It's right before that!

I'm about to be done in!!!

‘If I run away…’ Wait a minute.

Courage…?

The moment when I need to muster courage…

The moment when I need to muster the most courage in my life…

…

…

‘Shit, was that it!!!!!’ I finally understood.

I'm about to be caught by Evan.

And the moment when I need to muster the most courage in my life is none other than…

‘Before having sex with Evan?!’ It's absurd.

If Stella, Uriel, or even Evan found out about this Trial, I wouldn't be surprised if I died of embarrassment on the spot.

As I sat on the bed, trembling and wondering what to do, Click!

The door opened.

"Phew… sorry to keep you waiting, Aria." A soft, mellow voice that tickled my ears.

I turned my head with trembling eyes.

A handsome white-haired man, whom I knew very well, was approaching me, barely covering his lower body with a bath towel.

"E-Evan…"

When I asked in a trembling voice, Evan scratched his head, trying to ease the awkward atmosphere, thinking I was nervous.

"I was too nervous… so I came out a little late… haha…" "H-haha…"

I couldn't help but laugh awkwardly as well. ‘You son of a bitch………’

His body is unnecessarily good.

He has everything, and now he's trying to take me too. ‘I give up…’

Please save me, Trial. Please… damn it…

I begged the Trial of Courage, but it was no use. It seems I'm really screwed.

# 2 - Trial of Courage

What on earth was going on?

I looked up at Evan in front of me, beads of cold sweat trickling down my face.

'Judging by the fact that I can see...'

Could it be after I subjugated the Demon King?

Otherwise, there's no way to explain why I can see, so I have to assume that's the case.

More than anything...

'Considering the relationship between Evan and me, there's no other explanation...'

If so, should I assume this is the best-case scenario for the future?

Or is this just a scene the Trial Dungeon is showing me, the most anxious and fearful scenario I can imagine?

'Seriously, this is insane...!'

I just want to find the bastard who created this Trial Dungeon and give him a piece of my mind.

Even so, the moment they show me as the most courageous in my life isn't just any situation...!

'E-Evan and I are about to do it...!!'

What's even more absurd is that I'm already prepared, wearing only a gown that barely covers my body.

It's a ridiculous situation, but...

'Yeah... for me, it might be the moment I need the most courage in my life...' I've always been confident when throwing myself into danger.

What humans fear most is the disappearance of their very existence due to death, and the pain that comes with it.

Both are terrible, but unfortunately, I don't have that kind of fear.

Since I don't die, I don't fear death, and I even find pleasure in the pain that comes with it. For me, the fear of death is essentially a meaningless illusion.

So, if there's a moment when I need the most courage... 'Heh, this is something else...'

I'm acknowledging the Trial Dungeon. It's a strange moment, indeed.

"Aria?"

As I kept staring up at him, Evan gently approached me and took my hand.

I flinched, but since Evan and I are already lovers... or maybe even married, Evan didn't seem to mind.

'He's not the type to push things just because we're dating...' I know Evan's personality well.

So, we've already done this countless times, right? "Are you okay?"

He even stroked my forehead with one hand while holding my hand, seemingly unaware.

"You're the Saintess, so you shouldn't have a fever... but if you're sick, you have to tell me. We don't have to do it today."

Ah, no.

Um...

'Sh-should I... refuse...?'

I briefly considered it, but then a possibility flashed through my mind, and I closed my mouth tightly.

'This is... a Trial...'

And it's about whether I can accept having a relationship with Evan. 'Wh-what the heck...!'

The Trial of Courage is supposed to test whether I have the courage to move forward, no matter what happens, no matter what fearful situation arises.

I mean, it's not like I wanted pleasure or pain that's incomparable to anything I've experienced, and it's not like I'm particularly afraid of anything, so I know there's no suitable Trial to give me.

But this is too much...!! "I, I..."

How should I answer?

Seeing my hesitation, Evan made a quick decision and chuckled. "I guess it's hard for you right now."

"Evan...?"

"I'm sorry. I think I was only thinking about myself."

Evan said that with the awkward smile I often saw on his face. The clumsy side he always showed me.

Even though he had already subjugated the Demon King and seemed to have grown into a handsome man after quite some time, he didn't feel unfamiliar.

'That's the Evan I know.'

An unnecessarily kind Hero.

A cliché-ridden guy with a Hero's personality that seems straight out of a textbook, but that's why I can't hate him.

A foolish guy who was willing to give up his own life to save me. And I didn't dislike that about Evan.

During the time we spent together... I didn't care who I used to be anymore, and there was no reason for me to return to a place where no one was waiting for me.

The traces I left behind as 'Aria' in this world had come back to me so strongly.

The scales in my heart were now tilting towards this world, not the real world.

'Ah... I see.'

What the Trial of Courage is showing me.

At first, I wondered what was going on, but now I understand why this Trial came to me as the Trial of Courage.

This Trial wasn't just telling me to have a physical relationship with Evan.

I thought it was a Trial about my possible aversion or fear of having a relationship with a man, since I used to be a man, and even though I've lived as the Saintess for a considerable amount of time, that doesn't mean I wouldn't have those feelings.

But that wasn't it. 'I... couldn't decide.'

I was in an ambiguous state.

I hadn't properly thought about the feelings Evan had shown me.

I hadn't thought about what my own feelings were, or what feelings I had for Evan.

That's why this Trial was showing me this situation. As if telling me to make up my mind now.

That was the "courage" I needed to have now. 'What's so difficult about it?'

I already know what's more important to me now, don't I? I don't want to give up this relationship.

Stella, Uriel, and the people around me, and the people of the Holy Kingdom too.

I don't want this world I live in to be destroyed. At first, I lived just to feel good and not die.

But as I met many people and experienced many things, I realized that I was slowly changing.

So, there's only one thing I need to do now. Don't run away.

Fight back.

"Wait a minute..."

I grabbed Evan's hand as he was about to lie down on the bed as if running away.

"A-Aria?"

Then, I carefully lifted it up. 'Was Evan's hand like this?'

Maybe it's different now since more time has passed since then. But even though this Evan in front of me isn't real...

'I hope my sincerity gets through.'

I looked at Evan and slowly moved closer. "A-Aria?"

Evan, who was sitting on the bed, looked flustered as I suddenly got closer. It was only natural since I had never been so proactive before.

In fact, it was obvious that both Evan and I had a hard time approaching each other, so Evan's reaction didn't seem strange at all.

"Evan..."

A delicate and wistful voice, one that was hard to believe came from me, echoed in the room.

What should I do to show my feelings? It was simple.

I looked up at Evan.

I slowly approached his slightly parted lips, as if he was flustered.

As I got closer, I wrapped my arms around Evan, feeling his firm back. It was a sign of training.

Did he not stop training even after subjugating the Demon King? I smiled and moved even closer.

"W-wait a minute... aren't we too close...?!" What.

Is he making a fuss about being close with just this much?

Wasn't he planning on doing something even worse than this from now on? "Weren't you planning on doing something even worse...?"

"Ugh... th-that's..."

Evan turned his head away.

"But I... we were supposed to make a baby today... and..." "You're making excuses, unlike you."

Oh, what should I do? Why is he so cute?

I didn't expect this cute reaction, but seeing his face flushed and him rambling, I can't help but feel overwhelmed.

'I, I really like him.'

What should I say... I suddenly realized that. There's no more hesitation.

"Evan."

I said words that I never thought I would say in my life. "I love you."

I haven't even said that to the real him yet.

I never thought I would say these words in a Trial. Why is that?

'Ah...'

I feel dizzy after saying those words. 'Evan...♡'

An unknown sensation flowed through my entire body.

I felt a sticky sensation from below. "...Aria."

Evan, after confirming my sincerity, narrowed his eyes and slowly kissed me.

There was no reason to refuse. I kissed Evan as he was...

...

...

...

"...Huh?"

When I came to my senses, I was back where we had started the Trial.

My whole body was hot, and the strange sticky sensation was still there, but I was sure that I had returned.

I got up from my seat with a dazed expression. Was it all a wet dream ending?

Is this for real??

Really???

'No.'

No, of course, I knew that the situation was a dream.

But still, cutting it off at that moment was too much, you son of a bitch. "[You, you son of a bitch!!!]"

Kaaaaaah!!

I thrashed around in a frenzy, shaking my body from side to side. I should be grateful that no one woke up.

# 3 - Trial of Courage

Trial of Courage.

A simple trial that only tests the courage of the one undergoing it. Naturally, failure here doesn't result in the trial-taker's death.

Of course, just because it doesn't take lives doesn't mean it's easy. It usually involves an experience that is mentally exhausting, even traumatizing.

If one's mental fortitude isn't strong enough to overcome it, their mind will break down before they can pass the Trial, rendering them useless.

If the Trial of Strength simply tests the trial-taker's strength through a golem, the Trial of Wisdom drops them into a world of illusion, testing their ability to understand the situation they are in and how to act.

And the Trial of Courage… as the name suggests, it brings the moment when the trial-taker needs the most courage from a future where all possibilities exist and tests them.

Naturally, the situation will be urgent and desperate. In a way, it could be called a mentally lethal Trial. “… Ugh…”

Evan opened his eyes. ‘Kh… Haa…’

His whole body ached.

His vision was blurry and stained red, and his head felt like it was about to split open.

He felt intense pain all over his body, and his arms and legs wouldn't move as he wished.

“Ah…”

Supporting himself with the Holy Sword, he managed to rise to his feet, and his surroundings slowly came into view.

Collapsed ruins, withered land… a sky as dark as pitch. An overwhelming Demonic energy that inspired despair. ‘Demon King.’

Evan looked around with trembling eyes.

Countless people lay on the ground as gruesome corpses.

And… ‘This is…’

A familiar scene.

Just by looking at the collapsed buildings, Evan could tell where he was. ‘The Academy…?!’

Only then did Evan understand the situation. Stopping the Demon King was impossible.

Unable to halt its advance, it had finally reached the Academy in the heart of the Empire, devouring even the students.

Chunks of flesh and pieces of organs scattered about, unable to find their owners, blood splattered everywhere, and corpses mangled beyond recognition.

Only the torn Academy uniforms indicated that the victims were Academy students.

“Ugh…”

Evan had seen many corpses before.

Mostly ones he didn't want to see… He had seen all sorts of terrible sights with Aria dying, but this was too much.

‘How… could this…!’

… Evan, are you awake…? “Estel…?”

I'm glad you're alive… but you've been unconscious for too long… Estel's voice was filled with pity.

“What, what happened…?”

The Demon King has become uncontrollably strong. The Demon King, who spread throughout the world, has destroyed all the countries.

“…”

Humanity, no, the world is on the verge of destruction.

The only reason this place still remained was because Argen Isis, one of the strongest archmages, was protecting it.

But even that was not enough to overcome the Demon King's overwhelming power.

“Then…”

You know it too, right? It's just us now.

Stella, Uriel… everyone at the Academy. Valencia too…

Even Argen… “Aria…”

What happened to Aria?

The thought suddenly occurred to Evan, and he asked Estel. However,

Aria… was devoured… into that abyss of hell.

The abyss of hell.

In effect, it meant that she had been eaten by the Demon King.

Even the Saintess, with her powerful Holy Power, was no match for the Demon King who had swallowed the continent.

“Ah…”

Evan wore a blank expression. ‘What is this…’

Evan gripped the sword tightly. There was nothing more he could do.

It was as if the situation was telling him that. ‘Is this hell…?’

The moment the Demon King invaded this place, we missed the initial response, giving the Demon King time to grow.

Unlike the Demon realm, where there was almost nothing to eat, this place was a world full of life, with things for the Demon King to consume in order to grow.

The Demon King devoured life in an instant, then devoured even the continent, and relentlessly stretched out, finally invading the continent where humans lived.

It was far from enough to stop the Demon King, who had already grown strong.

We were pushed back, pushed back, and pushed back again. Only then did Evan begin to grasp the situation properly.

In that short time, humanity had come to an end. Evan gritted his teeth.

‘What can I do?’

What could he do in this situation? ‘Goddess…’

Evan felt like offering a prayer.

Was this situation, this catastrophe, what she had wanted? ‘Of course not.’

Despair filled Evan's eyes.

His body was battered and bruised, and although he had magic power left, he didn't think he could defeat the Demon King with it.

It was a complete defeat. Humanity's defeat.

Hope had faded.

Evan hung his head low.

Evan…?

“I'm sorry, Estel… I… don't think I can save the world…” And then he collapsed on the spot.

Normally, he would have rushed towards the Demon King, even knowing that it meant certain death.

But now, he didn't want to do anything.

Whether he died here now or later, it was all the same in the end, and nothing would come of wielding this meager amount of magic power.

‘If only I had achieved complete awakening…’ The final awakening.

If he had achieved the final awakening, which was no different from ascending to the realm of a demigod… could he have stopped the Demon King?

It was the first time he had ever felt so resentful of his own incompetence. Although it would be the last.

‘Aria…’

Aria suddenly came to mind. What had happened to Aria?

He remembered her being devoured, but Aria was immortal and wouldn't normally die.

No, perhaps even if she was the Saintess, as long as her opponent was the Demon King, who was at the opposite end of the spectrum…

‘No matter how much light there is… against strong darkness…’

Of course, having a small light in the pitch-black darkness was completely different from having none, but even that became meaningless if the light became too small.

She would be constantly eroded and eventually completely devoured by the Demon King and die.

Even if she lost all her Holy Power, she would come back to life as long as her Holy Power welled up again.

She was probably repeating death infinitely.

If Aria gave up there… she would face complete death by ceasing to think.

But if it hadn't been long since she was devoured… “Yeah… rather than doing nothing…”

Evan rose from his spot.

At least he wanted to see Aria.

Even if she had been devoured, Aria might still be alive. The thought gave him strength in his legs.

Barely managing to stand up, Evan moved his trembling legs towards where the Demon King was.

One step, two steps.

The Demon King was slowly approaching Evan, and Evan was approaching the Demon King, so the two were rapidly closing the distance.

The closer he got, the more Evan felt something was wrong. […Van……ge…t…ou…]

“This voice…”

There was only one person who could send such a voice. Evan rushed towards the direction of the voice.

[Ev… voi… he…ar…] “Aria! Aria!!!”

The closer he got, the more he felt the dense Demonic energy pressing down on his body.

Demonic energy so thick that ordinary people would have their bodies melted away just by being here.

But Evan couldn't stop.

Estel shouted at Evan, who was running aimlessly towards the voice.

Evan? Evan?! What are you doing…! “Aria, Aria is alive!”

No sooner had he said that than the Demon King's massive body appeared. Seeing it, Evan swallowed hard.

Whether he approached or not, the Demon King was only focused on increasing its size.

“Aria is… where…”

Evan's eyes gleamed as he looked around.

A place where faint Holy Power was concentrated.

Seeing the Holy Power leaking out little by little, Evan rushed towards it.

It's, it's dangerous to go near…!

Estel cried out urgently, but Evan had no intention of backing down. If not now, there would be no chance.

Evan instinctively knew that.

“Estel, get a grip…! I'm going to gather my strength now…!” What?!

Evan said that and gathered his magic power.

Then, the Holy Sword converted it into Holy Power, and a pure white light burst forth.

“Give Aria… back…!!”

Evan swung the Holy Sword, which contained most of his power, accurately towards the place where he felt the Holy Power.

At that moment, Splat!

The Demon King's body burst open.

…?

The Demon King reacted.

And…

“[E… van…]”

Inside, Aria, who was being eroded by Demonic energy and dying, was smiling weakly.

“[You're finally… looking at me…]” “Ah…”

Aria was still alive.

# 4 - Trial of Courage

“Kuh…!”

Aria's condition was, to put it mildly, not good.

Evan wanted to pull Aria out of the Demon King's body right away, but he had used up a lot of his strength in the previous attack.

Fortunately, even the Demon King was weak against Holy Power, so when attacked with powerful Holy Power, it had trouble regenerating that area.

If that was all, it would have quickly recovered with more overwhelming Demonic energy, but it was different now.

Aria was directly scattering Holy Power around inside the body, interfering with the recovery, so it was able to maintain its condition.

"I'll get you out of here soon…!"

The best thing to do is to get Aria out of here first. Evan judged so, but Aria answered with a small smile. “[Please don't, Evan.]”

“… Aria?”

“[Even if you save me here, the Demon King will still be here. Or rather, it will become even stronger. If even I, who am interfering with Holy Power, disappear… that is.]”

Evan's expression hardened at Aria's words. She was right.

In the first place, it was difficult to get her out, and even if he did, there was no other way to stop the Demon King, so all they could do was watch the world perish with their own eyes.

But… so what?

"Are you saying we should give up like this?! Leave you… leave you there and run away…?!"

Evan gritted his teeth and shouted at Aria. He couldn't do that.

There was nowhere to run anyway.

The continent was being devoured by the Demon King.

Soon, the Demon King, who had rapidly increased its power, would devour the entire continent, and could cross the ocean to other continents.

In other words, it was only a matter of time before the world would be destroyed.

“[… Calm down, Evan.]”

Aria replied to Evan, who was bursting with resentment, with a sad Thought-form.

It wasn't to insult his will to save at least the person he loved, since there was nothing more he could do.

Aria had called him here to talk about the last resort. “[There is… a way.]”

There is a way.

At those words, Evan, who had been crying and despairing, raised his head and looked at Aria.

“[I can't do it alone. Evan… and whether this succeeds or fails, you and I will probably die. Not even our souls will be left… we won't even go to the afterlife and will disappear as we are.]”

Evan's eyes widened at that.

He could see why Aria had called him here.

Because it was something she couldn't do alone, and to get his consent.

Aria… was willing to choose a path of complete annihilation, with no future, to save everyone living in this world.

“[What will you do…?]”

Aria's question echoed in Evan's ears. What to do.

Would he try a way to save this world by sacrificing his life with her, or would he barely preserve his ugly life and face death together when the world took its last breath?

'Ah…'

Evan sensed it.

This world exists to see his will and the courage to carry it out. But it was definitely a world with possibilities.

Evan looked down at his hands.

He didn't think this place was virtual. Everything felt so real.

The places wounded by the Demon King still felt unbearably painful.

Annihilation.

Evan knew what that word meant.

Not just the death of the body, but the death of the soul itself.

What humans fear more than the pain of death is the disappearance of their very existence.

Fear of the unknown, what happens when I disappear… that unknown evokes fear of death.

But…

Evan clenched his fist.

'If I'm going to die whether I step up or not…' Walk the path where hope exists.

Or face the ending of being violated by the Demon King. The path to take was decided from the beginning.

“… I'll do it.” Evan decided.

And he understood.

That this place would be his grave.

And he believed that his sacrifice would allow future generations to rebuild this empire, and even this world.

“[… Are you really okay with this? If you use this method…]” “You know, Aria.”

Evan smiled.

Although he couldn't keep his promise to protect Aria.

But Evan wasn't so weak that he would abandon his duty because he couldn't keep such a personal promise.

He had always thought that even if he failed to protect Aria, he had to fulfill his duty as the Hero.

Perhaps that's why he was chosen by the Holy Sword and became the Hero. He was just unbearably angry at himself.

That this situation… that the reality that Aria's attempt to die together, sacrificing her own life, was the last resort.

'At least… if only I could die alone…' He had promised to make Aria happy.

Far from making her happy, he had made her live a life stained with pain and sacrifice, and even to the end…

Did he deserve to love Aria, who was being completely deprived of the opportunity to be happy?

No.

No matter how he thought about it, he didn't. Evan made a pitiful expression.

“… I'm sorry.”

Evan reached out his hand.

He stroked Aria's hair, who was still unable to open her eyes.

“[… You don't have to be sorry, Evan…]” Why did it have to be like this?

Evan knew the answer to that. It was a simple answer.

Because he was weak.

Because he was weaker than the Demon King who had devoured this world. There was only one way.

Only one way.

'Even if I burn my whole life… is it not enough?' Evan hung his head.

He wanted Aria to live.

Was even that too much to ask? Evan gritted his teeth.

Really, is there really no way? Really…

Do we all have to die like this… “[… Evan…?]”

…

… Strange.

Aria's Thought-form was clearly audible.

It should have been a small, fading Thought-form, but what happened? It was then.

"This is…"

Light was bursting out of the necklace around Evan's neck, who had been hanging his head.

This was… the Necklace of Inheritance, wasn't it?

A necklace with the Thought-form of past Heroes sleeping inside.

The Holy Power that was left had been used up when he was subjugating the Magic beast, so it was a necklace with nothing left but Thought-form.

'How… did…'

Evan's thoughts didn't last long.

The light that suddenly burst out of the necklace blocked his vision.

Soon, the light spread out greatly and covered the world that seemed so real.

In the completely white world, Evan entrusted himself to the gradually fading senses.

[… Serious error occurred in the Trial.] [Thought-form intrusion, warning.] [………]

[Warning… warning…]

It was the moment when he was about to come to his senses at the alarm ringing in his head.

"You can stay still."

Evan's body stiffened at the voice that calmed him down. A familiar voice he had heard somewhere.

Evan could instinctively recognize who this voice belonged to. “… Me…?”

It was his own voice.

The previous Hero he had met when he regained some of his memories not long ago.

The Hero, who he didn't know why he looked like himself, was standing in front of him.

"Finally, this time has come."

Soon, his vision completely disappeared, and Evan opened his closed eyes again.

What he saw was a completely white space.

And…

"Nice to meet you, Evan."

The previous Hero in the necklace. No,

"Should I call you the future me? Or should I call you the past me?"

The Hero continued with such incomprehensible words and closed his eyes slightly.

"You couldn't hear everything back then."

"That's because you weren't qualified back then. I didn't expect you to grow during the Trial."

The Hero smiled.

"This must be all thanks to her. She's really… an amazing child." She must be referring to Aria.

But Evan still couldn't understand what he was saying.

"The memories must have been passed on unconsciously. Maybe… the memories that sometimes come to mind made you uncomfortable."

“… So that was your doing.”

"Yes. And… now all the conditions are met."

A Hero with a shabby appearance, but a strange man who could instinctively know that he was his future self.

"I'll explain everything from now on." What happened.

And…

"What happened to Aria."

Why he came to exist in the necklace.

# 5 - Trial of Courage

"Hmm. It's been a while since I've seen myself like this." A shaggy beard, a face withered and aged by hardship.

According to him, even though there wasn't much of an age difference, he looked decades older on the outside.

"This version of me...?"

"And it's also a strange feeling. I'm clearly the same person, yet... how different can we be?"

'What is he talking about...'

He was clearly saying he was looking at himself, but he was seeing him differently from how he saw himself, which Evan couldn't understand at all.

"..."

But now wasn't the time to talk about such things. "When does the story begin?"

"Right... it's best to start the story soon. We don't have much time." The man made a wistful expression and then began to explain.

About the story of a man he didn't want to know, but had to know.

Evan stared blankly at the man in front of him. "You want me to believe that...?"

An expression of shock as if he couldn't believe it.

Even so, Evan, having heard the story of a future he didn't want to imagine, was at a loss for words.

"It couldn't be helped. Your mental strength had to be strong in order for you to fully accept these memories."

The man, no.

"Are you... alright?" Himself.

Evan could be sure that what was in front of him was himself.

The stories he told himself were all absurd, but that was why he had to believe them.

Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain the abnormal power he possessed and the feeling of memories that didn't come to mind.

"History has already been repeated once. Only for this moment." The Future Hero who had lost everything.

Who would want to believe that it was himself? But Evan believed it.

No, he had to believe it.

"You'd understand, right? Why I acted this way." "... Yeah, I can't not know."

The man in front of him was definitely himself. That's what his mind was telling him.

He was certain that if it was himself who had finished thinking about Aria, he would have done the same.

"It's a relief, though. I was worried that the future might change drastically just by the existence of the Necklace of Inheritance changing."

Of course, the future had changed because he had intervened.

"Originally, that Magic beast in that bitter cold wouldn't have died like that. It would have been incredibly difficult to catch."

It resulted in countless sacrifices.

And Aria had once again sacrificed herself to undo those sacrifices, but.

As Future Evan, it was a terrible memory he never wanted to think about again.

The Saintess who died and was resurrected thousands of times to save thousands of people.

Of course, because she saved them all at once, he didn't know until then that it was an absurd thing to do.

Aria endured the pain as if it were natural.

He knew she had performed a miracle, but he had no idea how heavy a burden Aria had taken on with that miracle.

That's why he regretted it.

He couldn't stand how disgusting he was.

So, by drawing out all the power remaining in the Necklace of Inheritance, he drew out the Holy Power remaining in himself and made the current Evan use a technique that he couldn't use.

It was all his doing.

"Aria..."

"Yes. Aria dies. Due to the Demon King who attacked while we were off guard... that is."

Evan recalled the future shown in the Trial of Courage he had just undergone.

Of course, Future Evan explained that the future was the worst of the worst, but it was still dizzying to think about.

No, if you look at it from the point of view of dying with Aria, it would be more comfortable than being sent alone to sacrifice yourself.

But in the end, the world was destroyed anyway.

The future where the Demon King launches a surprise attack.

So quickly were his subordinates defeated that the Demon King risked his life to cross over to the continent early and build up his power.

As soon as he recognized the Demonic energy, he moved to that place, but it was already too late.

The Demon King recovered his power and tried to destroy the world.

The Future Evan, who had not awakened, defeated the Demon King with the gap created by Aria's sacrifice.

"I wanted to change this present."

The Future Evan, who had belatedly completed his awakening due to Aria's death, made a wish while immersed in guilt and sorrow.

To be able to go back to the past with the memories of the present.

But the Goddess, who said she would grant all wishes, could not accept the offer.

Sending him back to the past, especially with all these memories, was impossible with her power.

If that were possible, she wouldn't have been able to do anything until the situation got this bad, the Goddess said in a sad voice.

Hope was dashed.

He looked for a way to return to the past.

He constantly searched for and researched ways to return to the past, borrowing the power of Stella, who had become a great mage of space.

If he could go back to the moment Aria disappeared and beat the Demon King instead, he felt like he could be satisfied.

The desire to marry Aria, to be connected to each other, didn't matter. As long as Aria was alive, that was enough.

"... I remembered it there." Necklace of Inheritance.

This Necklace, made with ancient and supreme magic, can contain Thought-forms in a space that transcends time and space.

Until now, the Thought-forms of past Heroes had flowed in and were dormant.

This was a place where only Heroes could enter.

But…

'I'm… a Hero…' Evan, he was a Hero.

The moment he recognized that, Evan made a wish.

To be able to enter the Necklace with all the memories of the present and all the power he possessed.

Evan…

At that time, the Goddess called his name in a sad voice. But Evan had already made up his mind.

This world without Aria had no meaning. That's how he ended up inside the Necklace. "Now all the conditions are met."

The mental maturity of the current Evan. The three Relics collected by Aria.

The memories of the future that he possessed.

Everything needed to avoid being defeated by the Demon King was gathered.

He had finished laying the foundation for a new, undetermined future where Aria would not die.

Future Evan turned his head and faced the current Evan with a serious expression.

"Listen carefully, me." "..."

"Once you complete this Trial, you will... take all of my memories. And you will complete your final awakening."

Evan's eyes widened at those words.

Originally, all of this was due to the fact that he was defeated because he had not completed his final awakening due to the Demon King's early attack.

If he knew what was going to happen and completed his final awakening, it meant that he could defeat the Demon King in reverse.

"Don't worry about your personality changing. You are you and I am me." "Yeah. I don't care. As long as I can save Aria."

"... Right. That's not important."

Future Evan chuckled at the current Evan's words. "I'll explain what to do from now on."

What to do was simple. "Strike first."

"What?"

"You can't lose to the Demon King once you've completed your final awakening. Especially that Demon King who is still building up his power in the Demon realm."

If he was already swallowing up the continent, it would be a fight where you would have to be prepared to die together, but if he was still recovering his power in the Demon realm, there was no need to worry at all.

So just go and slice up the Demon King. That's it.

Future Evan was saying that.

Evan blinked at the ridiculous plan.

"Really... is that all I have to do?"

Future Evan continued, as if asking the obvious.

"Yes. You'll know the location and how to get to the Demon realm if you accept all my memories."

"You…"

Evan looked up at his future self with a trembling voice. Future Evan chuckled and raised his hand.

"I'm definitely myself... but you look so young. Is this what it feels like to raise a disciple?"

"..."

"Please."

Please save Aria.

Aria, who only knows how to sacrifice herself. Please make that poor child happy.

"I believe that you... can definitely do it, that you will definitely do well." ""Because I'm me.""

With those words, Future Evan disappeared. Soon after,

Crackle…! "..."

The world loses its shape.

The pure white space cracked and split, and then an even more intense light covered Evan.

Evan entrusted himself to the light and closed his eyes, accepting the memories flowing into his head.

# Trial of Courage (Intermission)

When I came to, I was back at the Trial grounds where I had thrown myself. "..."

Evan stared blankly at the high ceiling, seeing nothing.

As he sorted through the dizzying memories flooding his mind, Evan organized what he needed to do.

'Aria...'

Aria was in all his memories.

Until the very end, with the people and friends of the whole world, and... 'To save me...'

The memory of her sacrificing her life to save him.

Evan understood why he shed tears every time he awakened.

Everything, including the memories of his future self, had become completely his own.

Evan... you...

Estel immediately sensed that something was different about Evan.

The magic power had increased to an extent incomparable to before the Trial, and there was a different atmosphere...

This power is... Estel's eyes widened.

The Holy Sword had changed.

As its user, Evan, achieved his final awakening, the weapon had also evolved to match him.

Could it be... "You're right, Estel."

He had succeeded in his final awakening. And...

"I know what I have to do." To defeat the Demon King. Evan rose from his spot.

There was no time to delay.

He had to head to the Demon realm. "...Hasn't everyone woken up yet?"

No, wait... Didn't Aria wake up...?

At Estel's words, Aria flinched. Evan didn't miss it.

No, he couldn't miss it.

Having completed his awakening, if he couldn't even perceive such a small movement, he would have to return the title of awakened Hero.

But...

'She wants to hide it.'

Evan thought that Aria wanted to hide the fact that she was awake.

He didn't know why, but he wasn't the type to pry into something she wanted to hide, so Evan pretended not to notice and replied to Estel.

"Probably not. If it were Aria, she would have said she was awake..." Is that so...?

Perhaps thinking there was some truth in Evan's words, Estel didn't pay any more attention to Aria.

However, even Evan, with his superhuman senses, had missed something. 'Ugh...'

She was too embarrassed to show how excited she was.

If he had examined Aria's body more closely, he would have noticed not only the exposed vulva on her abdomen, a trace of the Succubus Queen's curse, but also something flowing down below.

But he didn't, because he realized Aria wanted to hide it and immediately turned his head away.

Aria probably hoped he would never find out.

"..."

Stella and Uriel were speechless for a while.

What happened inside must have been different for each of them, so there might have been stories to tell, but they had experienced such shocking things that they couldn't bring themselves to open their mouths.

'Hmm.'

Having barely calmed myself down, I leaned back against the backrest as if nothing had happened and let out a sigh.

I couldn't stick close to Evan, lest the curse flare up again. 'Damn curse...'

I hope that Trial wasn't triggered by the curse.

...

That couldn't be the case.

Even though the Succubus Queen hadn't fully completed her awakening and left a curse that I, as the Saintess, couldn't undo, the Trial and the curse were distinctly different.

Besides, the curse hadn't been triggered by being close to Evan or touching him during the Trial, so there was even less chance that the Trial was caused by the curse.

But...

'Did I, did I really try to do it with Evan...?'

When I was undergoing the Trial, even though I knew it was a Trial, it was impossible to approach it thinking, 'It's just a Trial, so it doesn't matter.'

No matter how realistic the sensations were, if I realized this wasn't reality, sacrificing my life wouldn't be a big deal, right?

But then it couldn't be called the Trial of Courage.

In other words, I didn't allow Evan to touch me to overcome the Trial... 'Did I, did I willingly allow Evan to touch me...?'

It felt like a dream, but it was so vivid.

Even now, I couldn't forget Evan's large, firm, and broad body. It was driving me crazy.

Even while riding in the carriage, I kept looking at Evan.

Since I was only subtly scanning the surroundings with my weak Holy Power, there was no way Evan would notice.

'Something... seems different...?'

Evan had changed after undergoing the Trial.

Before, he was still a Hero with a youthful feel, but now he looked like a veteran Hero who had already experienced everything.

It was strange to think that he had changed just by completing the Trial of Courage.

'He's become even more handsome, damn it.' Had I already fallen head over heels?

I couldn't even see Evan's face properly, but just because his atmosphere had changed, I thought he had become more handsome. I even wondered if I was going crazy.

Besides, it seemed like I wasn't getting anything out of completing the Trial, so it would be stranger if I wasn't annoyed.

'I'm going crazy...'

I wanted to slap my forehead and sigh right away, but if I did that while facing each other, Evan would obviously worry.

I must never... let him find out that I had a Trial where I tried to have a child with Evan or anything like that.

Never...!!

.

.

.

As soon as the carriage arrived at the Archduke's mansion, Valencia and Lucia greeted us.

"Thank you so much."

As Evan bowed his head and said that, Valencia let out a hollow laugh. "You broke the wall."

"Yes."

"...Equal to me, no... A wielder of the Holy Sword broke the wall... You seem to have become stronger than me already."

The gaze that looked down on Evan was long gone.

"The word 'talent'... wouldn't be appropriate. Talent is a word used to refer to those lower than oneself."

"..."

Valencia silently extended his hand.

"I look forward to working with you. Hero."

"I look forward to working with you, Archduke."

The two monsters shook hands and exchanged greetings. "What will you do now?"

"I plan to go and catch the root cause of everything."

At that, Valencia's eyes widened. "The Demon King... you mean?"

He didn't expect the story of the Demon King to come up so suddenly.

Of course, the Demon King had to be defeated, but there was a major problem with that.

"The path to the Demon realm is not yet known."

"No, I have already found out how to get to the Demon realm. It has to be now."

What did that mean?

Valencia was dumbfounded, but at the same time, he continued to speak in order to stop Evan, who had already made up his mind.

"Are you really sure? The Demon King is a dangerous being." "It's okay. If it's not now... this world will perish."

The story Evan told with a wistful look was shocking to everyone.

"Wh-what...? Wait a minute. Isn't there still time left? More than that, how did you..."

"I'm sorry. It's too complicated and long of a story to explain... I don't think I can tell it here right now."

There were too many things to explain.

And it wasn't a story that could be told in this place. "...I'll go too."

"It's okay, Archduke."

"No, if you're going to defeat the Demon King, shouldn't I, a Sword Master, also step up?"

"It's really okay. I'm not saying this without knowing my place." Above all, Valencia had something he had to protect.

"You have to protect Lucia." "..."

Valencia looked at Evan with complicated eyes.

After a while, Valencia sighed and continued to speak.

"I understand. But can you at least let me hear the story? What happened... and how you broke the wall in such a short time. You have that much time, right?"

"Of course." Evan nodded.

After all, there was one more person he had to explain to in another place. "I won't make the same mistake this time."

He tried to solve it alone and perished.

Now, he could no longer stand by and watch the Hero, no... the Saintess, sacrifice and solve everything alone.

"There's no time to delay. Let's leave right away."

Originally, the idea of attacking the Demon realm first was impossible.

Unlike the demons, who were beings from the Demon realm that crossed over to this place, we couldn't know their location.

But... wasn't there one person who was caught by the hair while crossing over from the Demon realm to this place?

There was a hint there. "Let's go."

How to get to the Demon realm. Evan knew it very well.

It was such a clear answer that he wondered why he hadn't thought of this method.

"To Argent Academy." Maleficent.

Argent, who defeated that person, would know. About the path to the Demon realm.

# 1 - Promise

So, Valencia, and…

“You just had to follow, didn’t you…” Valencia muttered with a sigh.

“I want to go with Aria, Sister…” “I’m sorry, Saintess…”

“[It’s alright. I like being with Lucia too.]”

Lucia looked up at me, her eyes shining brightly at my words. Lucia is cute.

I felt so frustrated that I couldn’t see, at least I could roughly distinguish voices through Thought-form…

The fact that I could only see Lucia’s cute appearance in 3D modeling, and even that unrendered, was just despairing to me.

But is this really okay?

“Won’t the Archduke’s estate be empty? Are you sure it’s alright, Teacher?”

“…Before, I was too busy stopping Magic beasts, but now the North is peaceful. It’s fine for the Archduke’s estate in the peaceful North to be without its master for a few days.”

“I guess… that’s true.” Uriel nodded.

The usual high-tension Uriel was nowhere to be found.

Were the things she faced in the Trial that shocking?

At least Uriel seemed to have regained some composure, but Stella still couldn’t seem to shake off the shock…

‘Seriously, what did you guys experience…?’

If it messed them up to this extent, it must have been something so big that even squeezing out all their mental strength and courage wouldn’t have been enough.

‘I wish something like that had happened to me instead…’

I was the only one who had gone through something I couldn’t even talk about.

It really was an incredible Trial.

…

In a different sense.

Anyway…

“It’s not far to the magic circle, so please wait a little longer, Saintess.” “[Thank you, Valencia. Teleportation fees must be quite expensive…]”

Unlike other places, the Archduke’s estate, which had been responsible for the safety of the North, didn’t have much money, so using the teleportation magic circle wasn’t easy for Valencia either.

Especially if the Archduke’s estate was paying for everything.

“It’s alright. More than anything… my disciple, who has surpassed me, is telling me that I must do this, so I can’t not believe it…”

Valencia, who had declared that I was equal to or better than her…

I reflexively turned to Evan, but he didn’t seem to care. ‘Whoa…’

He’s really changed a lot…

When we first got on the carriage and were moving to the Archduke’s estate, he was so focused on the fact that I had undergone such a Trial that he didn’t pay attention, but looking at him now, it’s unbelievable.

‘Something… seems very different…’

As we rode in the carriage towards the magic circle to return to Argent Academy, the changes were clearly visible.

If he had changed this much after entering the Trial of Courage, there was essentially only one explanation.

‘Did he really succeed in awakening?’

If his personality had changed after entering the Trial, it meant that something significant had happened inside.

For Evan, there was essentially only one possibility.

Moreover…

‘The magic power I feel is different…’

I could clearly feel Evan’s inherent essence, but it was completely different from the immature Evan I had known.

Considering his personality from earlier, and the way he seemed so experienced, it felt like he had been through this many times before…

Yes, he felt like a veteran who had been through thick and thin. I don’t know what happened in the Trial of Courage, but…

‘The power I feel from the necklace has weakened.’

It’s a ridiculous idea, but could the Thought-form of the previous Hero have flowed into Evan?

If so, a point of contention arises as to whether we can still view “Evan” as “Evan”…

‘But considering his affection for me and the occasional actions he shows, it seems like it’s still Evan…’

He took care of me first earlier, didn’t he?

Even though he seemed incredibly rushed because we needed to return to Argent Academy as soon as possible, he didn’t forget to take care of me.

‘What happened…’

If it was a Trial that could change him so much, and even lead to awakening, it must have been an incredible Trial.

In addition to that, Stella and Uriel were also in unusual states, probably because they had successfully passed the Trial.

It might be good to expect the two of them to advance in their cultivation soon.

Especially Stella…

‘Is she really going to evolve into a Great Mage…?’ Was the Trial that big of a deal?

Well, it’s not easy to accept a Trial as a Trial.

Even I, for example, thought it would be okay to mingle with Evan, thinking, “It’s just a Trial anyway~”.

I was aware that it was a Trial, but I couldn’t act with the thought that it didn’t matter because it was just an illusion.

Therefore, the fact that I thought it was okay to do that… thing with Evan meant that I had essentially accepted Evan.

‘Sigh…’

It always comes back to this thought. Why did I really do that?

It’s still absurd no matter how much I think about it. “Ugh…”

I turned my head towards the window, pretending to look outside, and tried to clear my thoughts.

Of course, everyone knew that I was blind, so they were puzzled when I suddenly turned my head towards the window.

…

Just ignore it… Sigh…

“Are you… serious…?”

As soon as Evan entered the Headmaster’s office after returning to Argent Academy, Argent asked him if he was out of his mind.

He didn’t seem to be trying to insult Evan.

Rather, it was closer to genuinely wondering if he was serious, so he had an incredulous expression.

Of course, Evan wasn’t the type to lie about something like this. Argent knew that fact well, so he was making an absurd expression. “If that’s true, then it’s a really big problem…”

Evan nodded at those words.

It was only after hearing the full explanation that I understood why Evan was moving so urgently.

Me too.

‘I’m going to die…?’

To be precise, the Demon King would launch a surprise attack and grow too quickly, to a level we couldn’t handle, and devour the continent.

I made an “ah” expression.

‘The Demon King’s surprise attack… I didn’t think about it…!’

I simply didn’t pay attention because the probability was too low.

There was one thing I, who claimed to be a stagnant water, no, Wonhyo’s skull water, had forgotten.

‘The more quickly you deal with the executives before the scheduled time, the higher the probability…!’

The future had already changed beyond recognition.

I had thought that the story was no longer flowing as I knew it, so I considered it unnecessary and only used it for reference, but I had forgotten one important point.

The possibility of the Demon King launching a surprise attack was too high in the future of this world that I had built.

I had caught too many executives too early.

Even the Succubus Queen was originally supposed to be caught in the second half of the third year, so I had committed an even more foolish act.

‘So, me sacrificing myself at that time to prevent the destruction must have been that…’

I had ruined the future I could have prevented because of my stupid thoughts, so I probably just sacrificed myself since I wouldn’t feel any pain anyway.

I might have had hope that I could return if I died.

Even now, I wouldn’t be unable to sacrifice myself if I had to.

There’s no one else who can stop it besides me anyway, so if that’s the case, then…

‘I do hope that at least Evan survives…’ Not just Evan.

Isn’t it okay to hope that the people who have become so precious to me will survive?

I smiled inwardly. ‘Evan…’

How much do you even like me?

He even regressed once, or rather, it’s a bit different from regressing… Anyway, researching and understanding the characteristics of the necklace and using it was an achievement made by Evan’s persistence.

A way to save the world without anyone dying.

It was something that even I couldn’t have come up with.

‘He’s really… an amazing guy.’ I suddenly had that thought.

If he’s such a dedicated person who would do anything for me, and so kind that he wants to save the world…

He’s full of plot armor… and he’s a Hero who’s stronger than that Archduke.

He’s a Hero, strong, will have a lot of money for the rest of his life, kind, and dedicated to me.

In modern times, people would call him a top marriage prospect… He literally has no flaws.

‘Ugh…’

No, what am I thinking…

‘I said I’d give you an answer after catching the Demon King…’ I shook my head.

Of course, I had already accepted Evan once, but even so, accepting his confession in this situation would be crazy.

I had also asked him to give me an answer to his confession after defeating the Demon King.

So…

‘Not yet…’ Not yet.

Not… yet.