

ソードアート オンライン

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川原礫

ホープフル・チャント



SWORD ART ONLINE HOPEFUL CHANT

- Short Story -

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[Gsimenas (Dreadful Decoding)]

- STORY -

Hopeful Chant (ホープフル・チャント, Hōpufuru Chanto) is an extra story written by the author of the Sword Art Online light novel, Kawahara Reki.[1] The story was distributed as a present to visitors of Sword Art Online The Movie -Ordinal Scale- in Japan in the third week of the official cinema release between March 4 and March 10, 2017

"Team B, Team C, prepare for a Party Switch!"

Shouted Asuna, raising the 《Wintry Stroke +2》 rapier in her right hand high. Reflecting the light of torches burning on the dungeon wall, the blade shined bluish-white. The six members of Team C, who were confronting a large monster at the end of the passageway, called out "Roger!", "Okay!"; the five members of Team B under Asuna's command also gave strained answers from the rear.

Floating Castle Aincrad fortieth floor, Labyrinth Tower twenty-third floor.

Being the sole passageway to the next floor, the Labyrinth was, inevitably, about a hundred metres high. The number of floors inside it depended on the design theme, but, in general, there were quite commonly about thirty floors. This tower should also be a little less than eighty percent covered already. The topmost floor, where the Floor Boss awaited, was steadily getting closer.

Boss monsters, the greatest hurdle in clearing the game on each floor, were predicted to be outstandingly powerful at the quarter points: the twenty-fifth floor, the fiftieth floor, and the seventy-fifth floor, while the bosses every ten floors followed them power-wise. Meaning that once they defeated the fortieth Floor Boss, the next hurdle would be the fiftieth floor..... The fiftieth floor made up the midpoint of the floating castle.

An even fiercer fight than that of the twenty-fifth floor probably awaited them there, but if they could break through it, the clearing of Aincrad will have crossed the turning point. One year after this death game started, the final goal of clearing the game, which had been awfully despairing so far, and the release of all players into the real world would finally be faintly in sight.

So, they were not having a hard fight at a place like this. They were going to break through something as measly as the mid-boss and find the route to the topmost floor before the day was over.

The monster they were currently fighting was, befitting the 《Prison》 design theme of the fortieth floor, a massive jailer. Its proper name was 《Ruthless ^{cruel jailer chief}Warder Chief》.

Although humanoid, it was, of course, not a human; all of its skin was dark red, its bizarrely large and long arms were grasping metal rods with countless thorns, and beyond its steel mask shined eyes of muddy yellow.

Its attack patterns were simple, consisting solely of brandishing its metal rod with all its might, but the power of even a single attack was large, therefore the attackers couldn't get in close. However, during the battle that continued for close to twenty minutes, they were finally able to grasp all of its patterns, thus they were going to press on at once when they stepped forward during the next Switch.

Having decided on this, Asuna stared at the Warder Chief, who had raised his metal rod high overhead.

"Team C, on the count of 3! 2, 1....."

In response to the monster's roar that was similar to the hitting of a bass drum,

"Zero!"

Asuna's shout overlapped it.

The huge metal rod coming horizontally was met by Team C's leader's glaive, glowing with a green light effect. The other five also combined their multicoloured single-strike Sword Skills.

An intense sound of impact roared throughout the passageway and the Warder Chief, who had its metal rod repelled, was taken aback. The six members of Team C were similarly pushed backwards. The two high-power attacks collided and both were knocked back.

This knockback was the crux of 《front-back^{Switch} alternation》, the most fundamental and essential technique in SAO.

In order to exchange places with comrades through Switching, it was necessary to force a break in the battle for a fixed time. In the case of a Switch between two partners who worked smoothly, a moment's worth of interruption created by guarding against the enemy's strong attack or forcing it to guard against theirs was sufficient, but in the case of a six-member party changing places in its entirety, a so-called Party Switch, it

was essential to produce a break that lasted at least three seconds.

The knockback created by all the members combining their Sword Skills against the enemy's full swing greatly staggered the Warder Chief, but the six of them were also pushed back nearly five metres. However, that was the plan. A sufficiently long break that came about due to months of special practice.

"Team B, forward!"

Giving instructions in a loud voice, Asuna kicked off the dungeon floor.

Breaking through the rigid members of Team C, she went to the forefront.

The Warder Chief had yet to recover from its backward-bent state. Sharply drawing the rapier in her right hand, she executed a three-hit combo Sword Skill, 《Triangular》, at the monster's weak point, the knees. The first of its two HP bars was eliminated with a cracking effect, reaching the second one.

"Durudaran!!"

A roar of anger in monster language surged out as the jailer recovered from its backward-bent state. This was the critical moment.

"Segro, Muldar, draw its aggro from the front! The attack pattern might have changed, so focus on defence. Fultz, to the right; Sanza and Nautilus, spread out to the left!"

After she gave her instructions as fast as she could, the two Team B tanks, raising their large shields, leapt in front of the Warder Chief and simultaneously engaged their provocation skill, 《Threatful Roar》. The yellow eyes that had been glaring at Asuna turned toward the two men.

During that opening, Asuna met up with the mace user Fultz and went around the monster to its right.

On the opposite side, the spearman Sanza and the one-handed sword user Nautilus spread out—

Or should have. However.

Only the large-built Sanza, gripping a cross-spear, broke into a run, while the swordsman with a shield that was supposed to support him was nowhere in sight.

In the case of Warder Chief's narrow-range attack, the two tanks pulling the aggro could just withstand by guarding, but in the case of a horizontal swing wide-range attack, the four attackers would also have no choice but to defend or dodge. If there were a lot of space in the area, it would be possible to dodge with a backward step, but this passageway was only six metres-wide. The jailer's horizontal swing attack would reach from one edge of the passageway to the other, thus it was necessary to guard with either a shield or a weapon.

A rapier was a fundamentally inappropriate weapon for guarding, but Asuna's beloved sword was not bound by that. She had turned her first beloved sword, the 《Wind Fleuret》, into raw materials and had a Dark Elven blacksmith craft it into a sharp sword, the 《Chilvalric Rapier》; her 《Wintry Stroke》, born again from the raw materials the rapier was turned into, boasted attack power and durability that would be unimaginable from its delicate appearance, and could easily use its sides to guard against an attack from a measly mid-boss.

Yet, Sanza's cross-spear, despite having no shortcomings in attack power and reach, had a wooden handle and thus lacked durability. He was advised time and time again to change to a full-metal lance-type or halberd-type weapon, but due to seemingly having a strong obsession, he didn't comply.

Right now, even Asuna understood that such an obsession could bring forth a power that didn't appear on a status window, and he could withstand the enemy's area attack if he had a swordsman with a shield with him. The formation was based on that conclusion. However.

"Nautilus, what happened!?"

She shouted, sensing that some trouble had occurred without looking behind her, but there was no answer. She considered whether she should call someone from Team C, but they had exhausted themselves fighting and were now using potions to recover. If she forced them to join the battle with low HP, it could turn out bad.

".....Sanza, retreat!"

Shouted Asuna, grinding her teeth. A spear was a weapon proficient at debuffing, so it couldn't be helped that the burden on the tanks would increase if he were gone. The four of them had to hold out somehow until Team C recovered, then once again execute a Party Switch and investigate why Nautilus couldn't move.

Having heard Asuna's instructions, Sanza made a regretful expression for a moment. He and Nautilus had just risen to the guild's First Army together on the fortieth floor, and were full of hope that they would definitely be picked as members for the Floor Boss clearing. His chagrin at retreating without getting to do anything was understandable, but that eagerness backfired at that moment.

A moment quicker than the spearman could fall back.

"Diruaah!!"

The Warder Chief, roaring at its loudest, held its huge metal rod horizontally, close to the floor.

"Area attack! Low guard!!"

The moment Asuna shouted this, the at least thirty centimetre-wide metal rod came attacking with a roar. Asuna and Fultz on the right wing, as well as Segro and Muldar in the centre, narrowly succeeded in guarding against the fan-shaped sweep attack.

However, Sanza, who hadn't managed to retreat in time, pierced his spear into the floor to guard—

And the black metal rod of its handle was cruelly broken.

"Guaah!"

Suffering a hard blow to his waist, Sanza was blown away. He crashed into the wall right behind him and collapsed onto the floor. One of her party members' HP bars, displayed on the left side of Asuna's view, swiftly decreased by over thirty percent.

"Darurururu....."

Letting out a weird laugh, the Ruthless Warder Chief turned its face toward Sanza.

Some of the jailer monsters loitering on the fortieth floor known as the prison floor had a troublesome algorithm known as 《Bullying》. As that name, which was English for 《tormenting the weak》^{yowaimono ijime}, implied, it was a trait of ignoring the usual hate value and aiming for players who had collapsed and couldn't move or who had suffered a debuff.

"Shi....."

Asuna attempted to attack the Warder Chief in order to prevent the final blow on Sanza, but, due to crouch-guarding against the large blow, she had been imposed a short-term rigidity and couldn't move her legs. The tanks Segro and Muldar were similarly unable to stand up.

"Sanza, run!"

She shouted earnestly, but perhaps because he suffered from a weak stun due to enduring consecutive high-damage attacks, Sanza remained collapsed. Aiming for the defenceless back of the spearman, the jailer raised its weapon overhead. On the atrociously designed metal rod, a venomously vivid violet light appeared. A Sword Skill— could possibly cause death in a single attack if it landed a direct hit.

A chilly shiver ran through Asuna's entire body.

"Duruah!!"

The certain-kill metal rod, swung down with a roar—

Bounced back due to a slash that even the eyes couldn't catch, from a figure that rushed in from the back of the passageway like a hurricane.

Just as she had reasonably thought that Nautilus had finally returned, Asuna's intuition denied this possibility.

The dash speed, the power of the slash - both of them were impossible for a beginner like Nautilus. Asuna knew this presence from before.

The swordsman, who had offset the mid-boss's Sword Skill with a regular dash attack rather than a Sword Skill, turned to Sanza as his hem fluttered, and shouted.

"I'll take over the left! You fall back and heal up!"

Having pulled up Sanza by the arms, he had Sanza fall back. At the remark of the swordsman who was trying to cover the opening left by two people, not only the members of Team B, but also the ones from the Team C, who were currently healing, caused a stir, but there was no one to object. All of them knew. The power of the player who joined them at the spur of a moment.

Shutting out the many emotions sweeping over her heart, Asuna shouted.

".....I am counting on you!"

The black-clothed swordsman gazed at Asuna for just a moment from within his slightly long forelocks, and nodded.

From then on, the sense of the battle's stability felt as if their enemy were not a mid-boss on the foremost lines of the Labyrinth, but a field Mob on a floor way below.

This was only natural, seeing as the swordsman, with machine-like swift and accurate movements as well as superhuman foresight, crushed almost all of the attacks the Warder Chief let out. Even the two tanks joined in on the attack midway through, thus the second HP bar very rapidly whittled away and, in less than a mere five minutes, the formidable Ruthless Warder Chief's huge figure dispersed throughout the dim Labyrinth.

With a gallant sound effect, the result screen was displayed and the members of both parties let out grand cheers, but Asuna didn't feel like joining them.

"Recover your HP."

Giving instructions to her comrades in the area, she left the circle. She stepped up to the black-clothed player further down the passageway, who was putting his longsword away into a scabbard on his back.

She had instantly gone through at least ten different patterns for calling out to the man, but what left her mouth was the most dull and uninteresting phrase.

"I appreciate the support."

Then, the player turned about a hundred and sixty degrees and gazed at Asuna from a slight angle.

"Oh well..... I had to go through here anyway."

At his somewhat reserved-mannered reply, she felt a prickling pain in her chest. It had been close to half a year since they disbanded their group, but there was still no sign of his pain disappearing.

Quelling the emotions inside her with a deep breath, Asuna greeted her former partner and the only solo player currently among the Clearers, Kirito, with her eyes.

".....You're still going further ahead?"

Upon being asked, the swordsman calmly nodded as if he felt no fear in stepping forth into an unexplored area by himself.

"Yeah, since I want to find the boss room soon."

"I see..... be careful."

"Thanks, you too."

The swordsman lightly waved his hand without giving a smile, once again turned his back to her, and his figure disappeared into the darkness of the passageway. Having waited until the faint footsteps disappeared, Asuna slowly turned back.

Suddenly, the ache in her chest turned into an intense urge, and she choked.

She wanted to throw away the cape dyed in the white and red colours of her guild, throw away the sigil ring she wore on one of her right fingers, and go after Kirito. She wanted to shout 'I've withdrawn from my guild, so form a duo with me again' to that nostalgic back.

However, she couldn't allow herself to do that. Because the one who chose to break the duo she had with Kirito all the way to the twenty-fifth Floor Boss battle, and to join the emerging guild 《Knights of the Blood》, was Asuna herself.

Somehow quelling her urge and converting it into a sigh, Asuna returned to her guildmates. She had to ask the newbie of Team B, Nautilus, why he had ignored the order for the Party Switch.

However, before Asuna could find Nautilus, she heard a sharp voice from the group.

"Hey, you, why didn't you Switch!?"

The voice that didn't even try to hide its anger belonged to Sanza. When she approached them in a half-run, the large spearman, grasping the cruelly broken cross-spear handle in his left hand, had lifted a thin player by the nape with his right hand.

"Stop it!"

Having quickly forced her way through and made Sanza release his hand, Asuna stood before Nautilus.

The face that still retained some boyish features—though he would have probably been older than Asuna, in her third year at middle school, at the time he logged in—was more than half hidden by his fluttering, decayed-leaf-coloured hair. His eyes were downcast, but his mouth was mortifyingly distorted and his tightly squeezed fists were trembling slightly.

Having once again looked at the HP bar displayed under the player name 【N a u t i l u s】, she saw that it had barely decreased and had no debuff icon. Meaning that the reason for not abiding her instructions for the Switch was neither damage nor a debuff.

"In the end, we defeated the monster and we have no intention of condemning you here."

Asuna addressed Nautilus, his eyes still cast downward, in a whisper.

".....But, for a party battle, the most important thing is tightly-knit cooperation. I need to hear the reason you were unable to act according to my instructions."

The moment she said this, Nautilus looked at Asuna's face for just a moment, and said in a creaky voice."

"Even I..... tried to step forward."

Once again casting his eyes down, staring at his own boots—

"But, my legs..... just wouldn't move."

Taking her eyes off the guild member who shut his mouth as if he had nothing more to say, Asuna spent a moment thinking, then gave an instruction to everyone.

".....We will now be returning to town for the day. Formation D number two; do not let your guard down till we leave the Labyrinth."

The players who had finished recovering swiftly formed a line. There were four formations for moving in a dungeon: one for speed, one for defence, one for exploration, and one for levelling; number two was the one that focused the most on safety by placing the tanks and scouts in the front and back.

After looking at the passage leading to the upper floor once more, Asuna raised her right hand and waved it forward.

"Move out."

The headquarters for the Knights of the Blood guild was located on the thirty-ninth floor, not far off the foremost line.

Today was the 15th of October, 2023; the town opening occurred a week before, on the 8th of October, so with that in mind, they had just moved in from a lower floor.

Having disbanded her party in the main town of the fortieth floor, Asuna was about to carelessly indicate the twenty-fifth floor, the previous location of their headquarters, as her destination at the Teleport Gate, but voiced the correct destination at the last moment and teleported one floor below.

The main town of the thirty-ninth floor, 《Nolfret》, was a typical "town in the countryside of a fantasy world" with no special features to speak of. It had plenty of trees and waterside scenery, and the red roofs on every house were also lovely; Asuna by no means disliked it, but it had few restaurants and bars, thus it couldn't really be called popular among her guild members.

The guild headquarters was a rural mansion, standing at the outskirts of the town of Nolfret in obscurity; when it was announced that the guild would be moving from the metropolis of 《Giltstein》, the main town of the twenty-fifth floor, to this place, none of the members were able to surmise the guild leader's intentions.

However, they all understood his reasoning by the time they moved over.

The field beyond the gate very near their headquarters was abundant in ore and herb collection points, as well as seething with 《awfully firm but weak》-type monsters most suitable for battle practice, and monsters that dropped high-quality leather and scales. For the headquarters of a developing guild that pursued the main guilds of the Clearing Group—recently, it was frequently shortened to 《Clearers》—there wasn't really a more appropriate place.

'I wonder how on earth the leader managed such a lucky find despite not really going out much..... ', Asuna thought as she passed through the gate of the two-storey mansion.

Atop the front door fluttered the deep-crimson guild flag with an undyed crest that consisted of the three letters 《KoB》, the abbreviation of 《Knights of the Blood》, the guild's English name, along with crossed swords. Passing beneath it, she entered the mansion, went up the stairs at the front of the hall, and came to the guild leader's room at the northern tip of the second floor.

Upon checking the time and knocking on the door, the reply "Come in" came instantly.

"Excuse me."

She bowed and entered. The approximately ten-jō⁽¹⁾-wide room was dim, with the red of the setting sun shining in from the south window. A huge desk, close to two metres wide, was placed near the window and a man was sitting there with the sun shining from his back.

Standing in front of the desk made of extravagant, solid mahogany wood that cost who knows how many cor, Asuna once again lowered her head.

"I shall report on today's floor clearing efforts."

"Mmhm."

The man, who had nodded and raised his head, had long, steel-grey hair tied behind him and was wearing a deep crimson robe on his slender and tall figure. He was probably aged around his late twenties and his composed demeanour was more like that of a scholar than a swordsman, but the light dwelling in his brass-coloured eyes was sharper and more solemn than anyone's.

His player name was Heathcliff. He was a bigwig who raised the late-starting Knight of the Blood into one of the core guilds of the Clearers in merely half a year since founding it. Although the man called 《Commander》 by the guild members was adored—or more like worshiped by the other guild members, Asuna always felt like she was suffocating when she stood before this man.

After sucking in some of the cool, dry air and calming down, she opened her mouth.

".....We have arrived at the twenty-third floor of the fortieth floor Labyrinth. Although the mapping is completed to about seventy percent, I believe we will be able to find the boss room tomorrow or the day after that."

"I see, thank you for your work. Are KoB^{we} moving ahead of all the others?"

"That was the case until today, but....."

After stammering for a bit, Asuna added an explanation.

"During the battle against the mid-boss-class monster on the twenty third floor, an issue came up and we received aid from a passing player. We pulled back after the conclusion of the battle, thus, currently, that player is ahead of us, I believe."

"Hmm. The DKB?"

As Heathcliff mentioned the name of the 《Dragon Knights Brigade》, the oldest yet biggest guild among the Clearers, Asuna quickly shook her head.

"No..... a solo player."

At that moment, the guild leader nodded with a faint wry smile.

"I see, so it's him. He seems to be improving his skills even more, huh..... I wonder if I should try to invite him once more right about now."

"I believe that would be pointless."

"If you say so, Asuna-kun, I shall wait a bit for now."

With his smile having disappeared, Heathcliff laced his fingers atop the desk.

"Setting that aside..... what was that issue that occurred during the battle? Seeing as it was enough to make you interrupt the battle, I assume that it wasn't something trifling?"

Asuna hesitated on how to answer him. Heathcliff wasn't the kind of person to pointlessly raise his voice and be angry without it showing on his face, but, at the same time, he was a complete pragmatist. She couldn't say that there was no chance of him making a heartless decision if he knew about Nautilus's 《condition》.

However, she couldn't just remain silent. Today, because Nautilus had been unable to move, Sanza's life was exposed to danger. In the death game of SAO, where the total loss of one's HP would result in their death in real life, the safety of the players had to be treated as the utmost priority. Not only for the sake of the other members, but for Nautilus himself as well, she had to share information.

“.....As a matter of fact.....”

In a few minutes, Asuna finished explaining everything that had happened during the fight against the Ruthless Warder Chief and Heathcliff closed his eyes, muttering "Hmm.....”

He instantly raised his eyelids, and his brass-coloured eyes stared at Asuna.

"Was today Nautilus-kun's first time participating in clearing the Labyrinth?"

"Yes. Because he had moved up to the First Army, along with Sanza, only last week."

Nodding, Asuna glanced outside the window. In the front yard of the mansion, four or five players were practicing coordinated action.

Currently, the KoB guild had a total of twenty-six members. Eighteen of them were members of the First Army's A, B, and C parties, while six had become members of the Second Army in no time since joining the guild. One of the two remaining members was Commander Heathcliff, who basically only took part in Floor Boss battles. The other was Daizen, a cheerful man, but he had been entrusted with single-handedly managing the guild's resources, thus he also barely took part in battles on the front lines.

Team A's leader was a two-handed sword user named Godfree, Team B's leader was Asuna, and Uzala, a glaive user, was entrusted as the leader of Team C, which was formed at the same time as the guild moved its headquarters; adding Daizen to the group, the four of them were the players managing the guild. Nautilus and Sanza's promotions were a result of the discussion among these four people; as a general rule, Heathcliff would not say a word about party compositions.

"I see..... —In the battles before now, Nautilus-kun had no problems with fighting?"

At this new question, Asuna nodded a second time.

"Yes..... Though, today was his first time fighting against a large, mid-boss-class monster. So, it's only natural to end up cowering....."

As Asuna naturally stuck up for Nautilus, Heathcliff's eyes looked at her face with a compelling force, as if they were magnets.

"If it were merely a case of cowering, it could probably be resolved with practice, but..... the problem could be a bit more deep-rooted."

"What do you have in mind.....?"

"It could be that Nautilus-kun has a slight FNC."

The moment she heard that term, Asuna inhaled sharply.

FNC was an abbreviation of FullDive Non-Conformity; as the name implied, there was some sort of flaw in the NerveGear connecting with the user's brain. With a severe case of FNC, it would be impossible to Dive into a virtual world, nor be trapped in this death game in the first place, but even if Diving itself were accomplishable, there were cases of players having problems with their avatar's sensations or movements.

Asuna's friend, a player named Nezha, also had a case of slight FNC which resulted in a flaw in his perspective, thus making him unable to fight in close combat; having switched over to being a chakram user due to Kirito's recommendation, however, he had become a valuable long-range attacker in SAO and his name was even tied to the Clearers at present.

However, even if Nautilus's condition was the result of FNC, it was highly likely that he wouldn't be able to just cope with it by changing his build.

"But..... what kind of FNC would he have to be unable to move his legs only in specific situations.....?"

When she asked dumbfoundedly, Heathcliff put his pointed chin atop his linked hands and answered, barely moving his mouth.

"The NerveGear reads the motion commands sent out by the brain, converts them to digital code, and transmits them to the avatar in the virtual world. However, you see,

the human brain is quite complicated..... it isn't rare for there to be conflicting commands sent simultaneously."

"What do you mean.....?"

"For example, try imagining a scenario of jumping out of a burning building to escape from it. There is a safety mat on the ground and you won't die if you fall on it. But, despite knowing that, it's not like everyone can immediately jump out. On the one hand, reason commands you to jump down, on the other hand, the instinct of self-preservation commands you to remain on the spot."

".....But, in a situation where you would burn to death otherwise, wouldn't you choose to jump out in the end?"

"In the real world, that would probably be the case. At the final moment, the sense of reason dwelling in the cerebral neocortex, the highest-ranking centre of the brain, would overcome one's instincts dwelling in an older part of the brain. However, in the case of a virtual avatar, unless the NerveGear converts the brain's commands into code, you cannot move. If there were a problem with the conversion process or matching, and one's instincts rather than reason end up taking preference....."

".....In a battle against a boss, the avatar could end up unable to move.....?"

At Asuna's words, Heathcliff gave his assent. A composed voice flowed out from his mouth, hidden by his bony hands.

"In that case, it's highly likely that the problem wouldn't be solved by simply getting used to fighting. Because it wouldn't eliminate the instinct of getting away from danger, you see..... —If you conducted some special tuning to the NerveGear to amplify motion commands, it's possible that you'd be able to move then, but....."

"In our situation right now, it would be impossible to do something like that....."

Asuna muttered, and Heathcliff raised his face, blinked a few times, and nodded.

"Yeah, you're right. Nevertheless, this is nothing more than my conjecture in the end. It is possible that, with experience, the problem will be resolved. —Asuna-kun, how would you evaluate Nautilus-kun's abilities?"

At the sudden question, Asuna also blinked before answering.

".....I believe he has a good sense when it comes to Sword Skill activation speed and accuracy. Despite breaking his posture, he practically never messes up the activation and he is also earnest and has never skipped out on training or meetings."

"I see..... In that case, it wouldn't be futile to try to solve the problem. I'll leave dealing with him to you, Asuna-kun."

Although these words were half-expected, she still didn't think she'd be entrusted with the decision so easily, thus Asuna faltered.

If Nautilus were truly afflicted with light FNC, she didn't want to just use that as pretext to oust him. However, on the other hand, as a sub-leader, Asuna had the responsibility of protecting the lives of her guild members. Pragmatically, if Kirito hadn't happened to have come by during the battle against the Warder Chief today, the glaive user Sanza's life could have been lost. She couldn't allow such an accident to occur in the upcoming battle against the Floor Boss.

After shaking free from her hesitation that lasted a few seconds, Asuna answered.

".....I will not have Nautilus participating in the fortieth floor boss battle. After getting past the floor, I will investigate his condition again and think of some counter-measures."

"Hmm. Understood. Let's go with that."

Nodding, the guild leader returned his gaze to his hands.

There were tens of piles of parchment on the large, mahogany desk, and while looking at them, Heathcliff typed on his holo-keyboard with extreme speed. He was constantly gathering the latest intel on the hundreds of players aiming to join the clearers, organising that info, and considering new players to invite day after day. The reason why the Knights of the Blood grew into a top-class clearing guild in merely half a year was due in no small part to Heathcliff's ability at intelligence.

However, it seemed he had no intention of turning the guild into a huge organisation like the DKB or the former Aincrad Liberation Squad. Asuna and the other sub-leaders

also agreed with the idea to aim for a guild of a select few that would be small-yet-effective, but specifically because of that goal, she couldn't help but imagine ousting a player as troublesome as Nautilus.

'I won't make it before the boss battle on this floor, but when we get to the next floor I do want to have a proper talk with him and find a solution to his problem.'

Deciding this in her heart, Asuna gave a bow and left the commander's room behind her.

"Shittt.....!"

Cursing in a low, angry voice, Nautilus swung a small dagger downwards with all his might.

The sharp tip of the sword went towards his knee, covered in black leather pants—and just as it was about to be pierced, it was blocked by a violet barrier. The Anti-Criminal Code, effective only in the so-called 《Inner Area》, activated and obstructed his attempt at self-injury.

The event was repeated two... three times. Of course, the Code wasn't broken by this and the blade did not reach his leg. Nevertheless, he earnestly continued moving his dagger. The violet flash flickered over and over again in a dim inn room.

His party was disbanded at the fortieth floor Teleport Gate plaza and it seemed that the majority of his comrades had returned to their guild home one floor below, but, not feeling like joining them, he wandered around town and plunged into a cheap inn that caught his eye. The new home of the Knights of the Blood was far more elegant than their previous base in an inn on the twenty-fifth floor, but not big enough to be able to supply all twenty-six members with a private room, thus Nautilus stayed in a room that he had to share with three others who joined the guild at the same time. The cross-spear user Sanza was among them; if he returned there now, it would undoubtedly lead to a talk about the recent battle. He was determined to avoid that.

However, his self-loathing wouldn't disappear just because he shut himself in an inn room alone, thus he ended up impulsively pulling out his dagger.

"Shiit.....!"

His dagger, having been swung down and repelled by the barrier for the umpteenth time, fell out of his right hand and made a dry sound as it landed on the floor.

There was no point in this action at all—after all, even Nautilus understood that it was no more than a farce to make excuses to himself. If he truly wanted to hurt his

legs, he could just do it in the Outer Field with no Anti-Criminal Code active, rather than an inn in town. SAO allowed dealing damage to oneself in the Outer Field and, although there was probably no one to have tested this, it should be possible to commit suicide as well.

However, despite not being able to forgive himself that much, he did not have that much courage either.

Even if he did try it, Nautilus's avatar would probably end up unable to move once his HP was on the verge of becoming zero. Just like when he was ordered by the raid leader to Switch in the battle against the Labyrinth's mid-boss.

The fact that his avatar's movements sometimes became dull in states of danger was already known to him before he joined the Knights of the Blood— since the time he first fought against monsters in the Outer Field. However, believing that the issue would be resolved with time and experience, he, obviously, did not consult his other guild members, but neither did he consult even with his childhood friend, whom he valued more than anyone. In fact, in battles against regular monsters nowadays, his condition did not manifest itself even when his HP decreased.

Though, the 《Ruthless Warder Chief》 they fought today was different from any enemy he had fought till now.

A huge build that nearly touched the high ceiling of the Labyrinth. A spiky metal rod that looked like it could crush players wearing even the heaviest equipment in one strike. Yellow eyes seething with anger beyond the mask whose design made it look like a prison cell—

'That thing is trying to kill us'; Nautilus felt this so much that it hurt.

Of course, all the monsters he had encountered thus far were trying to do the same, but, after all, they were nothing but lumps of polygons moving according to the commands of their program. However, he couldn't think of the Warder Chief as anything but a being that was trying to massacre the players, no, the people before it by its own will. The moment he perceived the monster as such, Nautilus's legs..... far from just them, his arms, torso, and even eyes became stiff as if they had been petrified, making him unable to move at all.

Even that atrociously huge jailer was no more than a mid-boss guarding the

passageway. In that case, just how terrifying a being was the Floor Boss?

Nautilus had left the 《Town of Beginnings》 on the first floor about half a year after the death game began. Yet, that didn't mean he had just spent that half a year waiting for help in an inn. He had been earnestly practicing Sword Skills in a deserted training field at the outskirts of the town.

Although in SAO, which used a combination of a level/skill system, stats like vitality,^{HP} strength,^{STR} and agility^{AGI} could only be raised by fighting against monsters, earning experience points, and levelling up, the proficiency of each skill was not bound by that. For example, in the case of the One-Handed Sword skill Nautilus had chosen, if he earnestly used 《Vertical》, a basic technique that was available from the start, on empty air in a training field, despite the rate being slower than if he had been using it in actual battle, his proficiency would rise bit by bit and, eventually, the next Sword Skill would become usable.

The reason for using such a tactic, which seemed like knocking on a stone bridge before crossing it, was because there had been quite a few players who had gone out to the fields, overestimating the skills they had honed before the world was turned into a death game, and were killed by the weakest-class monsters due to careless mistakes.

He earnestly continued practicing against a humanoid dummy for six months, and when he raised the proficiency of his One-Handed Sword skill to 150, unlocking the four-hit technique 《Horizontal Square》, Nautilus finally left the town. He cowered even in his first battle against an actual monster, but, knowing that he could easily defeat it with a powerful sword skill that did not suit his level, his fear faded and, through radical leveling that even exhausted the farming grounds, he finally reached the point where he could see the backs of the top players.

No, since he was even scouted by the KoB, a clearing guild based on the principle of having only a select few members, he should even be able to say that he had succeeded in joining the top players, even if his absolute stats weren't on the level of a true front runner.

And yet, to think that in a battle against a mid-boss at best, he became unable to move in an unsightly manner.

"..... Why....."

His raised, empty right hand feebly hit his knee, along with this hoarse voice of his.

With things like this, he would be unable to fulfil his promise. The precious promise he exchanged with his childhood friend, more precious to him than anyone else, the day he discovered that they were involved in a death game—the promise that 'I will protect you and ensure that you return to the real world'. The reason why he continued practicing against a humanoid dummy despite being laughed at as a coward by unknown players was because he couldn't leave his childhood friend on the off-chance she died because of that.

As he sat on the inn's hard bed, head hanging way down in shame, a light sound reached Nautilus's ears. It was the ringtone for a friend message.

There was but one player Nautilus had registered as a friend. He opened his main menu and displayed the newly-arrived message.

After continuing to stare at the short letter for more than ten seconds, Nautilus slowly rose from the bed, picked up the dagger on the floor, and left the room.

The main town of the fortieth floor, 《Jaileum》, was once a huge jail lore-wise; enclosed from all four sides by stone walls at least twenty metres tall, the entire town was dim. The illumination was scarce even at night, and each time the iron bars, still remaining at various places, opened and closed, a jarring sound was created.

Having returned to the Teleport Gate plaza from the inn, Nautilus looked around the square space with grey stone paving. There was quite a bit of pedestrian traffic before six in the afternoon, but he found the figure he was looking for, wearing a white, hooded cape, in the northwestern corner and approached it in a half-run.

"Yuna, what's up."

He called out at the female player who turned around and lightly puffed her cheeks in displeasure.

"Don't you 'what's up' me when I went out of my way to see how you were doing."

"Eh..... it's just that it's rare to see you coming to the foremost lines..... Besides, this town doesn't look like a place you'd enjoy, Yuna."

After staring at Nautilus as he retracted his head while making excuses, "Eh-kun, you're still the same as always even after becoming distinguished, I see.", she said as she gave a smile inside her hood. Called by a nickname based on his real name, Nochizawa Eiji, Nautilus retracted his head even further.

Yuna was his childhood friend that had Dived into this world with him. Her real name was Shigemura Yuuna; they lived in the same neighbourhood and went to the same kindergarten, elementary school, and middle school. Yuuna then went to an all-girls school, thus they ended up going to different high schools, but because both of them liked games, they continued their friendly relationship thereafter.

Eiji had a liking for her ever since kindergarten, but whether it was because she was too close to him or because he simply lacked the courage, he had been unable to open his heart to her. When he invited her with, "Let's play SAO together", it was due in part to feeling that he would be able to confess if he were in a completely virtual world created by the NerveGear.

In the first place, since Yuuna had been learning to play the piano and classic guitar ever since childhood, her favourite game genre was onge⁽²⁾ and she didn't seem to have much interest in MMORPGs; he invited her mostly because he had nothing to lose, but, to his surprise, she accepted the invitation. There were musical skills in SAO as well, and it seemed that this was what drew Yuuna's interest in the game.

The next issue was how to obtain the expensive hardware, as well as the software of which merely ten thousand units (nine thousand if you excluded the units that beta testers had priority in purchasing) were available during the initial sale; the former was solved by making use of the money he had been saving since childhood, but as for the software, he was in a predicament where he couldn't buy it even though he wanted to. He participated in every single raffle to buy it from a net shop, but all of his entries were unsuccessful, thus he was resolved that his only other option was to stand in line at a retail store all night, but a lifesaver came from a place he didn't even think of.

Yuuna's father was the professor advising Kayaba Akihiko, the developer of SAO and the NerveGear, during his days as a student and had been helping him with research into FullDive technology. Eiji, who knew that the professor was a teacher at a technical

institute but didn't even consider the possibility that he had such connections, went to thank Professor Shigemura for obtaining two SAO packages for him. On top of it having been years since they had last met directly, the professor dearly loved his only daughter, thus Eiji felt greatly stressed during their meeting.

And so, on the 6th of November, 2022.

Eiji and Yuuna, who logged into SAO from their own rooms, discovered that Professor Shigemura's disciple, Kayaba Akihiko, turned their virtual world that should have been overflowing with dreams and hopes into a death game with no escape.

Close to a year had passed since that day.

Having promised to the frightened Yuuna in the central plaza of the Town of Beginnings that, "I will protect you and ensure that you return to the real world", Eiji strived to practice Sword Skills in order to accomplish this and became a member of a clearing guild named the KoB. He was also selected to become a member of the First Army's parties and came much closer to his final goal of clearing the death game with his own hands—the moment he thought this, it ended with today's disgrace.

Despite not having met with Yuuna/Yuna for the past three days, Eiji/Nautilus looked away from the face of his childhood friend, unable to smile as he always would. He attempted to shake off the gloom lurking in his chest somehow, but before he could do that, a worried voice came to him.

"Did something happen, Eh-kun?"

".....I keep telling you to stop calling me that in town."

Answering with his face still turned away, he deeply inhaled some of the virtual air and, after calming down his emotions to some extent, gave a short answer.

"I kinda made a bit of a blunder in the battle, you see."

"Hmmp, and so you're so depressed because of that."

"I-it's not like I'm depressed or....."

Stopping Nautilus mid-sentence by going around him to face him from the front, Yuna

lightly poked his chest with her index finger.

"How many years do ya think I've been lookin' at your face, Eh-..... I mean, Nau-kun. Today's depression is about level 7."

".....What kind of scale is that on.....?"

"Ten grade."

Answering with an impish smile, Yuna moved her hand inside the leather bag on her waist and took out a somewhat biggish glass bottle.

As the multicoloured candies inside of it would come out very quickly, he reflexively ended up raising his palms. Yuna swung the bottle and an orange candy fell onto Nautilus's hands.

"Lick it and cheer up."

"..... I'm not a kid anymore....."

Despite complaining, he put the candy in his mouth and, contrary to the colour, tasted the bittersweet flavour of strawberries.

Ever since childhood, Yuna—Yuuna always had some fruit-flavoured throat lozenges in her pocket, and when Eiji was angry or dejected, she'd give him a piece. Even after coming to Aincrad, it seemed that this trait of hers remained unchanged.

Once she returned the bottle into her leather bag, Yuna said in her usual big-sister-like tone.

"Nau-kun, you're still a nobody in the guild, so isn't it only normal that you make mistakes? The KoB isn't that kind of thick-headed guild to not forgive a single mistake from a newbie. Just be careful not to repeat the same mistake next time."

The smile on Yuna's face was exactly like Yuuna's smile in the real world.

The NerveGear reproduced the player's physical appearance, so it was only natural, but it seemed the scan of the player's face by microwaves wasn't perfect, and he had heard there were plenty of players who felt some subtle differences between the looks

of their avatars and their actual bodies. Eiji himself felt that Nautilus's face looked more timid than his actual self did and was a bit discontent with that, but the reproduction of Yuna's face could be said to be flawless.

Looking at the face of his childhood friend, whom he had been unable to confess his feelings for during the nearly one year since coming to the virtual world, he felt his emotions becoming just a bit lighter, yet some anxiety that he couldn't wipe away continued to remain in his chest.

It was true that Nautilus had committed but one mistake in today's Labyrinth battle. However, because of that mistake, the weapon of Sanza, a glaive user who was promoted to the First Army along with him, was broken and the man himself had barely avoided death. What's more, the condition of his body freezing up when he felt danger would likely appear again after today as well. He did not even know the means to be able to conquer this state.

".....You don't know, Yuna; the pressure of the foremost lines."

Having ended up replying so while chewing his candy, he suddenly shut his mouth.

During the time he was training his One-Handed Sword skill, the two had lived in the same inn— though, of course, in separate rooms— but after Nautilus joined the KoB, they separated; Yuna was currently renting a room for one person in the main town of the tenth floor. Before he knew it, she seemed to have even acquired the Dagger skill and started doing some safe farming to earn her living expenses, but, honestly feeling anxious even about that, he kept asking her, 'Please don't go out into the Outer Field'.

However, having known her for a long time, Nautilus could easily imagine that the seemingly obedient yet strong-willed girl also wished in her heart to fight at the foremost line herself.

Despite showing a gloomy face for but a moment, Yuna instantly turned it back into a smile and spoke.

"That might be the case, but I can at least cheer you up, Nau-kun."

Before he could reply, she took a step back and removed the white hood she always wore.

Her rather short hair, swaying due to the dry autumn breeze, was light brown like milk tea. It was not a colour present in the default colour set, but there were proportionately rare hair dyeing items that could dye one's hair to such a bright colour, though even Nautilus didn't know where Yuna had acquired one.

As he instinctively became worried about what she planned to do in a plaza with so many people, Yuna walked along the wall, pulling Nautilus by his hands, and approached an NPC orchestra standing in a corner of the plaza.

The trio, carrying instruments that looked like a violin, cello, and an oboe, were playing a calm, nocturne-like melody. There was no game-like BGM in SAO, but—supposing that music was played in fields and dungeons in a VRMMO, it would end up raising the question of who was playing it—in towns, NPC orchestras like this one played music day and night as a replacement for BGM.



Yuna stood next to an NPC with a short mustache, playing a woodwind instrument, and placed her hands on her chest.

She closed her eyelids and, after several deep breaths, opened her mouth—

She began singing at a volume that had no chance of being overwhelmed by the three instruments.

The moment the carefree mezzo-soprano resounded throughout the Teleport Gate plaza, the majority of players hurriedly moving back and forth stopped. The conversations and footsteps that had drowned out the NPC orchestra's performance slowly disappeared, and only Yuna's voice flowed lightly through the now silent plaza.

The lyrics were in Japanese and it seemed to be a song about the evening spectacle and the feelings of people following the road home. Most likely, Yuna herself added words to the nocturne played by the NPC orchestra.

Tens of players became lost in her beautiful yet lonely song, kindling feelings of nostalgia. The scene both moved and surprised Nautilus.

It was one thing for the Town of Beginnings on the first floor, with nothing but people on standby with too much time on their hands, but this was the foremost line. Of course, there were quite a few tourists, but even players from the Clearers, who used every second to vigorously push forward to clear the game, were enraptured by Yuna's voice, some having closed their eyes, some slowly swaying. He could see members from the DKB, the largest guild, 《Divine Division》, the next-in-power guild, 《Fuurinkazan》, the emerging samurai guild, and even members from the KoB, his own guild.

When the song that lasted just under two minutes ended, a round of applause arose like ripples. Even the NPCs continuing to play their instruments seemed to be sending looks of praise at Yuna... this was, of course, just his imagination, but the tens of players continued clapping even as Yuna gave them several bows. Eventually, the claps seemed to change, urging her for an encore, but Yuna put her hands together as if saying sorry and quickly escaped from the plaza while pulling Nautilus by his arm.

Blindly walking through the narrow back lanes, she stopped at an empty corner and took a big breath, releasing his hand.

"Ah, that was tense!"

As Yuna shouted this while pressing on her cheeks, Nautilus called out to her with a wry smile.

"What are you saying now of all times; weren't you the one who suddenly started singing, Yuna?"

"But I didn't think so many people would gather."

"They would gather, of course... Yuna, were you always that good at singing?"

He asked, still surprised, and ended up getting lightly glared at by Yuna, who had once again put on her white hood.

"Are you praising me with that? Or ridiculing me?"

"P-praising, of course."

As Nautilus answered in a panic, Yuna said, 'Then it's alright', with a smile.

".....I've been learning to play the piano and guitar all this time, but I actually preferred singing. What's more, not singing classical songs or operas, but girls' pop or anime songs."

"O-oh....."

Nautilus, who had no clue about this even though he had been with her since they were children, stared fixedly at Yuna's face with a new surprise.

".....So, those throat lozenges you're always carrying around are actually used to care for your throat..... —Do your old man and mother know about that?"

When he asked, Yuna leaned on the bars near the road and slightly shook her head.

"I tried talking with my mother just once. I said that I wanted to quit the piano and guitar and go to a vocal school. When I did, she told me, 'if you can persuade your father yourself' But, in the end, I couldn't tell my father. Because ever since I was child he would always tell me that, if I were doing music, he'd only allow classical."

Remembering the strict-looking appearance of Professor Shigemura, Yuna's father, Nautilus silently nodded. Indeed, when he had come to visit Yuna at her home in his elementary school years and played games in the living room, he recalled that the professor seemed to have vaguely shown an expression of displeasure. Although called a researcher on Brain-Machine Interface technology, the professor's speciality was, in the end, electrophysiology, and he shouldn't have had any ideas of applying that to games.

".....When you return to the other side, be sure to tell your old man."

When Nautilus said this, Yuna gave a faint smile as she answered.

"Mm..... if we return, right."

"We will. I'll make sure to bring you back."

Nautilus proclaimed, shaking off the anxiety about his 《condition》, and he raised his head in an attempt to get closer to Yuna.

At that moment, he noticed that an unfamiliar icon had lit up below his HP bar. He had no memory of a musical note shining yellow.

"Huh, what's this buff....."

As he inclined his head, beyond the icon displayed on his overlay, Yuna smiled impishly.

"That is the 《Protection of the Sound of the Wind》. It gives a bonus to defence, poison resistance, and stun resistance."

"Wha..... Yuna, why do you....."

'Know that', just as he was about to finish his question with that, he realised. Such a buff icon undoubtedly did not exist when he left the inn, thus there was only one situation where he could have gained a buff since then.

"Ah, don't tell me..... it was because of your song, Yuna.....?"

He asked, filled with even more doubt, and his childhood friend smiled under her hood.

"Correct! It's the effect of my Extra Skill, 《Chant》."

"Chant..... Extra Skill.....!?"

As Nautilus was surprised, wondering when she acquired such a thing, Yuna suddenly spoke with a serious look.

"You know, Nau-kun..... I was thinking about aiming to become part of the Clearers too. Since there're practically no players who have acquired the Chant skill, even someone as bad at fighting as me could surely be of use."

The electronic sound of her alarm pulled Asuna from the abyss of her shallow sleep.

She stopped the alarm by hitting the button through guesswork and once again buried her face into her pillow. After fighting the temptation to fall asleep again for about thirty seconds, she somehow managed to wake up.

Her small room on the second floor of the guild headquarters was illuminated by the light blue moonlight. The time was still one o'clock in the morning. After dinner, she accompanied the guild members on their experience point ^{levelling} earning then took a nap for just two hours after returning, thus her head felt heavy, but, having resolved herself, she got down from the bed.

In the real world, just imagining the trouble of getting herself dressed that awaited her would make her want to go back to bed, but, luckily, in Aincrad, it was possible to change from her sleepwear to her battle equipment with just a few taps on her window.

After confirming the additional weight of her 《Wintry Stroke》 on the left side of her waist, she quietly left the room.

The Knights of the Blood had decided to set their departure time for the floor clearing work to eight o'clock in the morning, earlier than that of the DKB and the Divine Division, thus there were practically no members staying up late. With silent steps through the still-as-death corridor— though it was impossible to catch the sound of Asuna's footsteps through the doors without having raised one's Straining skill— she descended the stairs and headed outside the mansion.

Under the bluish-white moonlight coming from the aperture of the outer circumference, it seemed that the entirety of the floor was peacefully sleeping. However, monsters that made late night walks dangerous loitered around the fields, thus there were some players venturing out to fight them.

Aiming not for the Teleport Gate plaza but, rather, to step outside through the nearest gate, Asuna equipped a deep gray hooded mantle and, having hidden her red and white costume, began running along the unpaved path.

The design theme of the thirty-ninth floor was still unknown even after the floor was cleared. If the main town were a 《prototypical fantasy RPG-style rural town》, then the fields and dungeons were designed in the literal sense of the words, and the Floor Boss was a mid-size dragon of classical design.

Daizen, a guild member well-versed in numbers, said at the party after the floor was cleared. ‘Why, 39 appears to be the first 《uninteresting number》, which of course makes it an especially interesting number, because it is the smallest number to have the property of being uninteresting.’—it seemed this was a joke introduced in a book by a certain mathematician.⁽³⁾ It was unclear whether this was the actual inspiration for the thirty-ninth floor, but it indeed lacked individuality and thus, conversely, its tranquil meadows and forests stood out in Aincrad; running through them took twenty minutes.

Having arrived at a gently hilly area stretching out in the northeastern part of the floor, Asuna came to a stop and strained her ears.

She didn't have the Straining skill, but faint metallic sounds touched her ears. She dashed towards them right away.

During the daytime, this hill was a safe place where only the weakish ^{Nepenthes} plant series of monsters would sparsely pop up, but Asuna had acquired intel that this aspect undertook a complete change at night. Before she could run even ten metres, a blue light that looked like heat haze shimmered in front of her, slightly to her right. It was the effect for a monster resurging.

What appeared was a bat-like monster with a body that had swelled out perfectly round like a balloon. Even with its wings extended, its size was only about sixty centimetres, but four fangs glistened in its large mouth, and long talons grew from its wings. Its proper name was 《Balloon Roussette》.

The moment the balloon bat popped up, its huge ears began moving restlessly. Bat-type monsters were practically all 《blindsense-type》 creatures that could even sense players behind them, thus it should have already sensed Asuna behind it, but there was no sign of it coming in for an attack. It faced the same direction Asuna was heading, flapped its wings, and flew away in a straight line.

Running for tens of seconds in pursuit of the Balloon Roussette, she saw a new light halfway up the hill that stood along her path. It wasn't the effect of a monster resurging this time, but a vehement silver flash. It was the light effect of a Sword Skill. Next, several fragmentation effects flickered simultaneously.

She approached while reducing her speed, and the Colour Cursor of the player engaged in battle was displayed. It had neither the name, nor level, nor even a guild tag, but nevertheless, Asuna already knew who that person was.

Stopping about twenty metres away from him, she watched over the battle.

Fighting solo was a one-handed sword user, wearing a black coat that seemed to blend in with the dead of the night. Using his shield-less left hand as a balancer, he continued to brandish the sword in his right hand as if he were dancing. Even the balloon bat that Asuna had been pursuing attempted to attack the swordsman while, *kiikii*, letting out a cry, but it was repelled by a slash with godlike speed and was entirely unable to get close.

The Balloon Roussette was a monster with high evasion abilities but no troublesome special abilities like poison or breath attacks; alone, it was quite easy to fight, but it had but one special trait: its 《link range was abnormally large》. Practically the entire hilly area fell into this range, thus, if you fought a Roussette somewhere on the hill, every single monster of the same class would gang up on you.

Meaning that if you didn't have the power to exterminate them faster than the speed of their resurgence, sooner or later, you'd be surrounded by a large number of bats and end up unable to move. In SAO, where you absolutely couldn't allow yourself to die, the biggest danger was to lose your path of retreat. In that sense, the bats on this hill should have been one of the worst kinds of monsters to fight, but the black-clothed swordsman did not appear to have the slightest consideration for the possibility of falling under siege. On the contrary, he was using the trait of the Balloon Roussettes to link up with their kin from a wide area to gather up the monsters, thus continuing his super-high-efficiency farming.

As Asuna watched on, the swordsman, having decreased the HP of the three bats to half with just regular attacks, invoked the area of effect Sword Skill 《Horizontal Square》 with superb timing.

A vivid light blue light ran through the darkness, drawing a square parallel to the

ground. Right after that light scattered, the bats also broke into blue particles and dispersed.

Although not that formidable by themselves, Balloon Roussettes were monsters living on the thirty-ninth floor, which was nearly the foremost line. Despite their HP by no means being small, the swordsman defeated all three of them at once; however, without assuming any triumphant pose, he nimbly returned to his stance.

A new bat was approaching from the west side of the hill. If he struck it, the wide-range link would be invoked again, resulting in the second and third one coming at him.

—'At this rate, this won't end for a while, huh..... '

Asuna muttered in her chest, wondering whether she should come again another day; just then.

The swordsman sheathed his weapon in the scabbard on his back and, after making a skillful action of turning around while back-dashing, began savagely running to where Asuna was. Having run twenty metres in one breath, he decelerated while scraping the grass with his soles.

"Let's move away a bit."

Despite her wearing a dark mantle to blend in with the darkness, it seemed that he had noticed her presence long ago. As the swordsman once again began running after whispering quickly, Asuna hastily began pursuing him. Turning around, she saw that the balloon bat behind her, having lost track of its enemy, was staggering to the left and right.

Of course, there were several bats popping up ahead of them as well, but the swordsman skillfully ran around their perception range and finally stopped in front of a long and narrow rock towering at the edge of the hilly area.

Bathed in the moonlight and gleaming bluish black, clear water gushed from the side of the approximately three metre-high rock. The water flowing along the rock formed a small spring on the ground, around which lovely white and blue flowers were swaying because of the wind.

The black-clothed swordsman, gathering the spring water with his hands, drank it with gulps coming from his throat. Getting his fill after drinking for more than five seconds, "Buhah!", he took a breath.

Seeing the swordsman—her former partner Kirito wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his coat in profile, Asuna had to endure two urges.

The first was the simple desire to drink her fill of the spring water that seemed strangely tasty.

The other was the impulse to place her hands on her waist and scold him with, "You sure are indecent; at least use a cup!"

Until half a year ago, she would have said that with no restraint. However, Asuna was no longer Kirito's partner. As one of the leaders of the Knights of the Blood guild, it wasn't her place to act high-and-mighty with a player from outside the guild.

Whether or not he saw through these thoughts of hers, Kirito turned around and finally smiled.

"It's tasty, y'know; Asuna, you should try some too.

His smile and manner of speaking were unchanged from the times they had formed a duo together; only the shadow dwelling in his black eyes wasn't there before.

The change in Kirito's mood came about around June this year, after about two months had passed since his duo with Asuna was dissolved. Even Asuna couldn't easily approach him when he was giving off a stinging aura as if it were an invisible damage zone, and an extremely perilous-looking light dwelled in his eyes. During Floor Battles, he would recklessly use Sword Skills, seemingly being glued to the boss as if he had absolutely no fear of dying—no, it was more like he was even wishing for that; even the veterans of the Clearers feared this attitude of his.

Asuna didn't know if something had happened to Kirito. She had only asked him once indirectly, but he just shook his head slightly without answering her.

If she were to ask the info broker Argo, she would probably learn of his circumstances, but she couldn't do that either. Having dissolved their duo and chosen to join the KoB, she had no right to pry into matters that Kirito wouldn't talk about on his own.

After four months, it seemed that Kirito's behaviour had calmed down to some extent. However, Asuna felt that there was still a deep wound inside him even now. It seemed as if he were punishing himself with the way he went deeper into the Labyrinth than anyone else at noon and holed up at spots where there was the danger of accidentally dying for some high-risk solo farming at night.

Taking her eyes off her former partner, Asuna lightly shook her head.

".....I'm... not thirsty."

Without waiting for his response, she continued with a question.

"Is this a safe zone?"

"Yeah, monsters don't seem to come out at the area around the spring."

Having answered thus, Kirito sat down on one of the rocks encircling the spring and once again let out a breath. No matter how mentally exhausted a person was, their avatar's complexion wouldn't change, but feeling that his cheeks, basking in the moonlight, were abnormally pale, she ended up scolding him unconsciously.

"Even if there's a safe zone, farming solo like that is reckless. If you fumble a single Sword Skill, you'll be vulnerable to a stun due to suffering consecutive attacks.

"No worries, I've taken enough of a margin."

".....How high is your level?"

This was, essentially, an ill-mannered question, but Kirito answered, giving a light shrug.

"I just recently went up to 57....."

"Fif....."

She became speechless before she knew it.

The standard safety margin for the Clearers was the floor number + 10 levels. The

current foremost line was on the fortieth floor, thus, although slightly dependent on the build as well, level 50 was required. Actually, the average level of the top players was around that number; making use of the strength of her beloved sword, Asuna herself had reached 53, but even in the KoB, excluding their commander Heathcliff's level, hers was the highest.

However, Kirito even surpassed Asuna by four levels. It was certainly a fact that solo play was the most efficient way to earn experience, but his level-up speed was so abnormally fast that it couldn't possibly be explained away by just this. Most likely, he had been conducting high-risk farming like what she had seen this night for the entirety of the past several months.

'Why are you going so far..... ', Asuna swallowed down these words.

Instead, following Kirito's lead, she shrugged and sat down on a nearby rock.

".....In that case, I can understand how you were able to deal with the 《Warder Chief》 today..... no, yesterday. Thanks for that..... Thanks to you, we were able to get by without casualties.

"Oh, well....."

Lightly moving his head to the left and right, Kirito said this as if it were nothing.

"I'm glad that I wasn't a hindrance..... Did you come all the way out here at a time like this to say that? Actually, who told you that I was here?"

"I bought info on the latest high-efficiency farming spots from Argo-san. There were four of them, but knowing your preferences, Kirito-kun, I figured you'd be here."

With his second question answered, Kirito gave a faint, forced smile.

"An insight, huh....."

"I suppose..... But, I didn't just come here to say my thanks. I want to talk to you, as a fellow member of the Clearers, about the next Floor Boss battle....."

As Kirito inclined his head, Asuna told him about today's affairs.

Nautilus's disobedience to her order, and the crisis that struck Sanza. The possibility of a light degree of FNC that she had talked about with her commander, Heathcliff. And, the party composition for the upcoming fortieth Floor Boss battle.

Truthfully, she probably wanted to depend on Kirito for this as well. Because, as a solo player, Kirito had no relation whatsoever to the KoB's internal issues.

However, dealing with Nautilus was too heavy an issue for Asuna, who was inexperienced as a leader. Holding her knees atop the rock, she muttered as if half speaking to herself.

“.....I did tell the commander that I will not allow Nautilus to participate in the next boss battle, but I'm actually not so sure if that's a good choice. Of course, I do intend to search for a proper solution when the battle is over..... but, if I use his FNC as a pretext to exclude him even once, I don't feel like I'd be able to build up mutual trust with him a second time.....”

Even when Asuna finished talking, Kirito continued to keep his mouth shut for a while.

Unable to bear the silence any longer, she was about to apologise for bringing up an unreasonable discussion; at that moment.

"So that's why your cooperation was so disordered, huh..... I did think that it was an unusual Switching mistake for the KoB."

Turning his eyes towards the imposing Labyrinth tower in the distance, Kirito began speaking.

"If Heathcliff's the one saying that, umm..... the fact that Nautilus has light FNC is probably true. I'm sure the guy himself is aware of this to some extent. As he got over that handicap and became strong enough to be scouted by the KoB, his strength should be the real deal..... But."

For a moment, he stopped talking and his blacker-than-the-night-sky eyes looked at Asuna.

“.....If he were a solo player and stepped out into the Outer Field, knowing that there was the possibility his legs would become unable to move, the only one to die if he lost to a monster or PK would be himself. But, if he's fighting as a member of a guild..... a

party, he would even expose his guildmates to danger. I believe that, until the problem is resolved, he should pull out from clearing the game of his own accord, and if he can't choose to do this himself, the leader should force him to."

For the Kirito that Asuna knew, his words sounded too strict. However, seeing a tinge of pain stain his face as if he himself were hurt by his own words, Asuna did not say a thing for a while.

In the field late at night, only the gentle sound of water falling down a spring resounded. The spray effect drifting in the air disappeared moments after sparkling blue due to reflecting the moonlight.

She wanted to know what had happened to Kirito four months ago. She once again felt a strong urge to ask, but was still unable to do so. Instead, Asuna mentioned the name of the chakram user who had overcome his FNC handicap due to Kirito's advice one day.

".....If Nautilus converted from a shield and sword user to a throwable weapon user like Nezha-san, I wonder if his condition would disappear as well....."

"..... I don't know about that....."

The black-clothed swordsman inclined his head.

".....In Nezha's case, his FNC was just a subtle disorder of his sense of perspective. But, as far as I've heard, Nautilus's condition is worse. Just because he's in the rear doesn't mean he'll never be targeted by the boss, and if some henchmen suddenly appear, he'll have to deal with them himself. I don't think that becoming unable to move when you're in a pinch is a problem that can somehow be solved by just changing your build."

Having her thoughts from the conversation with Heathcliff formally put into words, Asuna felt the difficulty of solving the problem and had no choice but to nod in silence.

Just as she had thought, she couldn't allow Nautilus to participate in the fortieth Floor Boss battle that would probably take place several days later. However, as soon as the next floor opened up, she had to talk with him personally and find a basic solution.

Having decided thus, Asuna stood up.

"Thanks for the counsel. Sorry for interrupting your farming."

Thanking Kirito, who still sat on his rock, she took a step backward.

'As an apology, I'll treat you as much as you want', these words went up her throat, but she forced them back. Kirito also stood up, gave a short "No problem" answer, and looked around his surroundings.

The hilly area was dotted with the Colour Cursors of repopped balloon bats. Facing the swordsman who seemed to be intent on return to his farming, Asuna was somehow able to voice out a single phrase.

".....Don't be too reckless, okay."

'Yeah', Kirito's back as he nodded, taking his leave, had already blended in with the darkness and disappeared. After waiting until his cursor disappeared, Asuna turned around and began running towards the main town.

When she arrived at the town gate without having caught the attention of any monsters, the time was past two o'clock in the morning.

Asuna knew that she would lack the sleep to take part in today's game clearing if she didn't hurry to bed, but, nevertheless, she didn't feel like returning to her guild headquarters like this, so she continued randomly walking along the stone-paved road.

Before long, she could see the Teleport Gate plaza of Nolfret in front of her. In addition to the fact that it was an unpopular floor, it was this late, thus there seemed to be no more than about five or six people, players and NPCs alike, there.

".....?"

However, noticing that the player Colour Cursors remained motionlessly in one place, Asuna inclined her head.

When she entered the circular plaza, a faint sound of music reached her ears. The NPC

orchestras, always present in the Teleport Gate plaza of every floor, were playing an orchestral piece with their instruments at a slow tempo and moderate volume. Both the players and the NPCs seemed to have gathered in front of the orchestra.

Passing-by NPCs would frequently listen to the performances of the NPC orchestras, but why were even players doing so? The orchestra's repertoire consisted of only two or three songs, thus people should have ended up getting completely used to hearing them by the week after the town opening, and there shouldn't be anyone stopping for it.

Feeling even more confused, Asuna went towards them, keeping her footsteps silent.

After taking a few steps, she once again noticed something. What she heard wasn't just the orchestral music. She also heard a whisper-like singing voice on top of it.

Having joined the small crowd, what Asuna saw was a sole female player standing in line with the NPCs from the orchestra and singing, her hands placed on her chest.

She wore her white hood low over her eyes, thus only her mouth could be seen. However, the song flowing from it was more beautiful than any song Asuna had heard in Aincrad till now, despite its volume being suppressed to the limit. It was the first time she had heard those lullaby-like lyrics, thus they were probably original ones written atop the NPC orchestra's tune by the female player herself.

Looking to the side, she saw that not only green-cursored players, but even some yellow-cursored NPCs had shut their eyes, attentively listening while swaying their bodies. Asuna also closed her eyelids and listened to the clear whisper that sounded as if the moonlight had turned into a voice.

Currently, there was very little player-made entertainment in Aincrad. It was only natural, as this was a death game where escape was impossible, but close to a year had passed since the game began, so it was true that there were more and more people who sought comfort and enrichment in «living» in this world. Lately, she would happen to see not-so-few players fishing at a safe waterside, or players raising pets.

With this much ability, she would have gathered a larger audience and even found some players who'd give her tips if she had sung at daytime in a large city, like the Town of Beginnings, or Giltstein on the twenty-fifth floor, rather than in such a declining town at such a time.

Perhaps— she had a different goal than just having her songs heard.

With this thought, Asuna attempted to speak to the female player, who gave a quick bow after finishing her lullaby.

However, the girl quickly passed through the crowd with her head still lowered, speedily crossed the Teleport Gate plaza, and disappeared into the blue portal without stopping.

As the NPC orchestra began playing the same tune from the start, the yellow-cursored NPCs turned and began walking away; the three players present there also moved their bodies slightly, as if having woken up from a dream. Asuna called out to the one closest to her in a whisper.

"Excuse me....."

The hammer user, who looked quite high-leveled despite not being a Clearer, turned around and inclined his squarish head.

"Hm?"

"Umm, the person who sang just now, does she always sing here around this time?"

"Is this your first time meeting 《Uta-chan》 ?"

"Uta..... san? Is that her name?"

Having his question answered with a question, the hammer user slightly shook his bullneck.

"No no, 《Utachan》 , as in the abbreviation of 《^{Uta}Song Enchanter》 . Since no one knows that girl's player name, that's how we fans have been referring to her. Well, right now, it kinda turned into 《Uta-chan》 like a nickname.⁽⁴⁾

"Song..... enchanter....."

When she repeated the unfamiliar term, the man finally said with a smile.

"Try looking at my HP bar."

As told, she focused her eyes and a single unfamiliar icon appeared below the man's bar. The icon with a violet-shining musical note as its design was probably some kind of buff, but she didn't know its effect. Looking at her own bar, she found no icon there.

"When you listen to a single one of Utachan's songs from start to finish, you get a buff, which depends on the song. That's why she's the Song Enchanter..... Ah, but don't get the wrong idea. We weren't here because of the buff, but because we like the girl's singing."

The other two players, who came up to the hammer user unnoticed, also gave deep nods. One of the two, a tall and thin rapier user, opened his mouth.

"That girl always sings at Teleport Gate plazas late at night, but she changes the floor and doesn't give any notice in advance. What's more, she only sings three songs each night. So, you'll have quite the hard time if you want to hear them all. Like, you'll have to predict the floor she'll appear on, or split up to wait for her at different places."

"I've heard that last evening she sung at the Teleport Gate plaza of the fortieth floor, but she usually has her live performances late at night."

It seemed that the men were taking pride in being her core fans, but Asuna's interest lay only in 《Utachan》 herself.

No matter how good one's songs were, it couldn't have given a buff system-wise. Meaning that the girl should have some special skill.

Thinking about it this far, she finally recalled. Who knows how many months in the past—when she was still in a duo with Kirito, she had heard about the existence of a skill that seemed to work like that.⁽⁵⁾ It was an Extra Skill, a skill that could only be obtained by fulfilling some special requirement; its name, if she recalled correctly..... was 《Chant》 .

At the time, Asuna had also considered learning that skill, but she didn't think she had the courage to sing in front of a large crowd of people, thus it ended on that note. If the white-hooded girl had acquired 《Chant》 , she could be singing late at night in front of a very small number of players to raise the proficiency of her skill.

"Well, if you want to listen to Utachan's songs as well, we wouldn't mind welcoming you into our group, ya know?"

It was a mystery how the hammer user had interpreted Asuna's silence as he said this, but, very soon, the third man, a short dagger user, poked his associate at his sides.

"O-oi, this gal..... I mean, this person's guild tag... is KoB."

"Geh, you serious..... Ain't that a Clearer guild?"

Squabbling in a whisper, the three of them simultaneously stepped back.

"W-well then, we'll be....."

"Yeah..... thanks for the info."

Having raised her head, Asuna thanked them, and the three disappeared into the Teleport Gate while saying things like, "Oh, no worries" and, "Well then".

Looking around the plaza where there was no longer anyone but the NPCs from the orchestra, Asuna sat down on a bench beside the wall and replayed 《Utachan's》 whisper in her mind.

The English word *e n c h a n t*, which meant 'to cast magic' or 'to bewitch', should be derived from 'reaching ^{e n} inside one's heart by ^{c h a n t} song'. Which meant that the strange nickname the trio had given the girl, 《Song Enchanter》, was unexpectedly accurate.

Raising her head and looking towards the northeastern part of the floor—the place where the black-clothed swordsman should still be farming bats, Asuna had a thought.

'Someday, I want to listen to 《Utachan's》 singing again, together with Kirito.'

Asuna's wish was granted unexpectedly quickly.

The following day, the KoB force led by Asuna encountered Kirito while exploring the topmost part of the Labyrinth, then returned to town upon reaching the boss room with him. After dissolving the party, Asuna went to the thirty-sixth floor in pursuit of Kirito; she found him stopped at the edge of a large crowd of people listening to 《Utachan's》 relaxed, beautiful voice and stood next to him.

《Utachan》 had changed her simple hooded cape from yesterday into a white feathered hat and blue dress, while the black-clothed swordsman's profile as he listened to her song looked more calm than she remembered seeing the past few months.

However, 《Utachan's》 full-blown performance in Aincrad lasted only that day and the next one. Among the endless, daily fighting, Asuna ended up forgetting about the girl, who disappeared unnoticed, and only got to meet her again and learn her real name two years and seven months later.

16th of October, 2023.

Summoned to the commander's room after breakfast, Nautilus was informed by the commander of Team B, Asuna, with the guild leader Heathcliff watching over them, that he would be taken out of the First Army until the battle against the fortieth Floor Boss ended.

'I'll be fine; the problem won't happen again', he pleaded with utmost effort, but they did not accede and, after he left the commander's room, all the members were informed of the temporary change to the party composition while Nautilus rushed out of the guild headquarters as if he were running away.

He wished to open up to Yuna, tell her everything, and have her console him, but he couldn't do that. He took off his conspicuous KoB uniform and replaced it with a plain, brown leather armour that he had hidden in his storage, then walked around town with no goal in mind; even when night came, he didn't return to the headquarters and instead secluded himself in the same place as yesterday: a cheap inn on the fortieth floor.

That evening, Nautilus found out that the boss room in the Labyrinth had been discovered via a message sent by the guild to every member.

On the following day, the 17th, the boss was scouted and a strategy meeting was held; at nine o'clock on the morning of the 18th, the assault group party of forty-eight people, chosen from over a hundred Clearers, left the town of Jaileum in order to subjugate the Floor Boss, 《Bracken the Prison Warden》. All Nautilus could do was send them off while hiding in a corner of the Teleport Gate plaza.

The raid party didn't go by foot, but instead teleported using the 《Corridor Crystal》 provided by the KoB.

Ever since around the thirtieth floor was passed, single-use 《Teleport Crystals》 began to be occasionally—and this was undoubtedly rare—dropped, but Corridor Crystals, which could teleport a group to a chosen point, were such super-rare items that it was questionable if even a single member of the entire Clearing group would

get one of them as a drop during the time it took to clear a floor. Naturally, most of the major guilds seemed to be stocking them as one of their most important supplies, but the KoB alone used them unsparingly, when they anticipated a difficult boss, to prevent the group from getting exhausted before the battle.

Meaning that Heathcliff and the other leaders had concluded that the boss of the fortieth floor, which Nautilus didn't even get to see, was that formidable. With that in mind, gazing at the members of the subjugation force stepping into the flickering blue teleporter one after another, he saw that they were all elites gathered from the top players of each guild. Among them was the black-clothed solo player who had come to their aid in the battle against the Warder Chief the other day.

Forty-eight players was the upper limit for a raid party system-wise; of course, it was possible for even more people to enter the boss room. Actually, it seemed that the subjugation of the twenty-fifth floor's boss was done with the first ever 2-raid in SAO, that is to say, a formation of ninety-six players.

However, when there were too many people in the room, it would get hard to coordinate them all, and also, the upper limit for the number of people that could be teleported with one Corridor Crystal was forty-eight, thus it was decided to form a carefully selected 1-raid party for this subjugation. 2 parties from the KoB, the same as with the DKB and Divine Division, would be participating, but Nautilus could not join them.

And, he did not know whether he'd have the chance to participate in future boss battles either.

Among the cheers of the players crowding the plaza, the final member of the subjugation party teleported away and the blue Corridor disappeared. Nautilus suppressed a sigh and was about to leave the plaza.

Just as he was about to do so, somebody tapped him on the shoulder from behind.

When he turned around hastily, standing there he saw his childhood friend, wearing a white hood on her head.

"Yu..... Yuna, how.....!?"

The reason for Nautilus's surprise was because he wasn't wearing his usual white-

and-red Knights of the Blood uniform, but rather, his brown leather armour. However, Yuna smiled as if saying that such a disguise was pointless.

"I sensed your dejection, Eh-kun."

"I-it's not like I'm dejected....."

Noticing that he ended up giving practically the same response as the one he gave three days ago, he pondered on how to explain away the situation, but then Yuna pouted beyond her hood.

"Eh-, I mean, Nau-kun, you haven't replied to any of my messages since the day before yesterday. Wouldn't you think that something was wrong?"

"If you used Friend Tracking, you'd have found out that I was in town....."

"Weren't you the one who kept saying, 'Even the area inside a town can't be called absolutely safe', Nau-kun."

With this pointed out, he could only nod with his mouth shut.

Since a few months ago, the PKers, or player killers, had been getting more active; their modus operandi were extremely varied and wide ranging, and it seemed that they also had ways to kill in the Inner Area. Truthfully, Nautilus wanted to live in the same room with Yuna, but he couldn't propose such a thing when he had yet to even confess to her, and, due to having little experience with farming monsters, he didn't have the funds to just leave the guild headquarters and rent a two-person room.

If he could land the last attack on the milestone that was the boss of the fortieth floor, acquire a rare item from it as a Last Attack bonus, sell the item, and instantly become very rich, then Yuna could..... he had considered such a scenario just a little bit in a corner of his mind. However, because he had been removed from the First Army, this dream of his remained but a dream.

".....Sorry for not replying. I kinda had this and that going on....."

It seemed that Yuna had guessed what 《this and that》 was from Nautilus's appearance and the fact that he wasn't participating in the Floor Boss subjugation party. Her smile disappeared as she slowly nodded, then she gave a faint smile as if

sympathising with him.

"For now, let's go out for a meal. There apparently are some stores with surprisingly tasty food even in this town."

The place that Yuna took Nautilus to was a small open-cafe facing the plaza of Jaileum's western gate.

In Jaileum, where practically all the stores and restaurants reused former cells, the doors and windows had iron bars and the walls and ceiling were composed of deep gray stones, so when you had a meal inside, you'd feel as if you had become a prisoner rather than being a customer. However, the seats on the outside terraces had a somewhat better environment and, just as Yuna had told him, the taste of the food wasn't so bad, thus Nautilus was finally able to calm himself down a little bit.

"Considering the price, it was relatively tasty, right?"

As Yuna, having finished her pancakes with fruit sauce just like that, smiled on the other end of the table, Nautilus also nodded with a smile.

"Yeah, the croque monsieur I ordered isn't half bad either."

"Really? We should have done halvesies."

Saying this, she glimpsed at the plate in front of Nautilus that was still half full.

".....You can have it."

With a forced smile, he pushed the plate away; Yuna said, "Yay, thanks, itadakimasu!", then quickly took the fork and knife into her hands.

After gazing at the face of Yuna, who gave a happy look upon stuffing her cheeks with melted cheese and white sauce, Nautilus pushed away his hesitation and brought up his topic.

"Say, Yuna..... about what you said before, that you had your eye on joining the

Clearers.....”

"Nmm?"

After waiting for Yuna to finish chewing, he continued.

“.....I do indeed believe that the 《Chant》 skill has potential. You can never have enough buffs, and if all you need to do is to be within range to hear the song, you should be able to cast it on a considerable number of people at once.”

"I know right? I believe that, if they all packed in tight, it wouldn't be impossible to buff a full raid at once.

"Y-yeah. Though..... still, I don't know about stepping out onto the front lines..... Of course, I do intend to protect you, but I don't know what's going to happen on the battlefield. At the very least, I cannot.....”

'Protect myself' were words that he was unable to voice out.

Because just before he could, a player rushed in from the gate towering to the west of the plaza, shouting in a loud voice.

"S-somebody.....! Somebody, please help us!"

Having reflexively risen from his seat, Nautilus saw a man wearing full-body leather armour and wielding a curved sword.

For a moment, he thought that the Floor Boss subjugation party that had just departed might have run into some trouble, but that couldn't have happened. The subjugation party that teleported through a Corridor Crystal wouldn't be returning through the west gate, and he had no recollection whatsoever of having seen the man's face before.

The man's leather armour, unlike that which Nautilus used for disguise, was high-class enough to be used even on the foremost line, but it was damaged all over; he must have suffered considerable damage. Also, there was a black short-spear still stabbed into the man's back.

"Oi oi, are you alright!?"

His HP should have stopped decreasing when he entered the Inner Area, but a nearby player rushed over to the man and pulled out the spear.

The plain yet somewhat ominous design looked familiar to him. It was a weapon carried by a 《tormentor》 -type monster that infested the fortieth floor's dungeons. That is to say, the leather-armoured man was not attacked by PK.

Thinking, 'In that case, there's nothing to worry about anymore, since the man has entered the Inner Area', Nautilus was about to sit down on his chair once again. However, the curved sword user, who didn't care about the damage he had received, once again shouted, straining his voice.

"Fi..... Five of my comrades were imprisoned in the field dungeon and are being chased around by an army of Mobs! They won't hold out for very long..... Somebody, please come with me to help them!!"

At those words, the ten players in the western gate plaza gulped.

In the dungeons on the 《prison》 -themed fortieth floor, a pain in the ass 《imprisonment trap》 would be encountered frequently, and even Clearers had difficulty with them. Generally, there was a gimmick to disarm the trap located somewhere in the locked-in room, but it was common that it couldn't be used unless the monsters that surged up upon the trap being triggered were defeated.

Most likely, the curved sword user's party failed to deal with the group of monsters and the man alone escaped through some means. However, even in such a case, there still was a means of emergency escape.

Nautilus, who ran up to the curved sword user with Yuna, took out a hi-potion from his belt pouch and, handing it over to the man, asked.

"What about Teleport Crystals!? If you're fighting on this floor, you must have at least one of them!?"

However, the curved sword user shook his pale face.

"No dice..... Among the Mobs that surged up, one was able to cast a Silencing debuff and we became unable to use Crystals! I myself just got out of that debuff at last....."

Once again, tension ran through the players in the area.

In the early days of the death game, the 《Silencing》 status seemed like a debuff that merely impeded communication among players, but ever since various crystal items ^{Crystals} began appearing as drops, it suddenly joined the ranks of brutal debuffs. All Crystals, such as the Healing Crystal, Antidote Crystal, and Teleport Crystal, could only be used by uttering a voice command with them in hand. Meaning that the Silencing debuff could practically be called a Crystal sealing debuff.

That was essentially why players fighting on the foremost line should always have a 《Cough Potion》 in reserve, to be able come out of their Silenced state, but—.

As if having guessed Nautilus's momentary thought, the curved sword user moaned.

“.....None of us have a Cough Potion. We never expected a Mob that could cast Silencing to appear.....”

'If you're going out into the Outer Field on the foremost line, at least have the decency to read the strategy guide distributed free of charge!' were words that Nautilus forced himself to swallow down. It was pointless to say that now.

If what the man was saying were true, they had to form a rescue party and go out right now or the five imprisoned men would be in danger.

Surveying the merely ten players who had gathered in the area, he saw that more than half of them were upper middle-ranked players aiming to join the ranks of the top players, just like the curved sword user, but among them, just two men wore mainly red Japanese-style armour. He didn't even need to look at the Takeda crest on their guild tag to know that they were members of a Clearer guild named 《Fuurinkazan》. Most likely, only the upper-ranked members participated in the raid party to subjugate the boss, while the others stayed in town.

Although they weren't selected, they were still Clearers, thus their levels should be around 50, the safety margin. Nautilus was level 48 himself, thus with the three of them, it was hard to conceive that they'd be beaten by a field Mob.

“.....You guys, can you come with me?”

At Nautilus's question, the two members of Fuurinkazan hesitated for a mere moment, but they both nodded. Additionally, five or six other men, "We're coming too!", also came forward.

".....Alright."

Helping up the curved sword user, whose HP had recovered, Nautilus himself stood up and quickly operated his equipment figure. His plain leather armour for disguise changed to his vivid, red-on-white-background formal equipment set from the Knights of the Blood, causing a large stir among the players.

"It's the KoB!", "We can do this!"; stopping such comments with his back and taking a step forward, Nautilus looked at Yuna beside him.

"Yuna, you wait here. Don't worry, I'll help them out quickly and will be back then."

At those words—

Yuna shook her head conclusively.

"I'm going too."

"Wha....."

Before Nautilus could say a thing, Yuna's right hand operated her own window. The light of an equipment change flashed under her white cape and, once it disappeared, she grandly opened up the cape with her arms.

What appeared from inside was a vivid, royal-blue dress, entirely unlike the plain, deep red tunic she had been wearing till now. Despite being cloth armour, its golden frills and buckle indicated that it was a rare piece of equipment with high defence.

Additionally, a white lute appeared in her left hand, a dagger on the right of her waist, and a pure white, feathered hat on her head. Her outfit made her the very image of a troubadour.

Having changed, Yuna firmly declared while tipping up the brim of her hat.

"I can't use a sword, but I can support everyone with my songs. I'm by no means going

to get in the way."

"S-song.....?"

A man from Fuurinkazan repeated dumbfoundedly, but then, as if having realised something, he shouted.

"Y-you mean..... the 《Chant》 skill that's become the talk of the town lately.....!?"

Yuna affirmed this, and, "Ooooh!", such cheers surged up. Even the curved sword user looked at her as if she were a goddess of salvation as he shouted, "Please, help us!"

Nautilus no longer had the words to restrain his childhood friend, who once again nodded firmly.

Splitting into two parties, five people each, the rescue group stepped into the Outer Field from the western gate.

The field of the fortieth floor was largely a dreary wasteland. A steep wall of rocks formed a maze-like terrain and it was quite hard to see anything ahead.

Running through wasteland beside Yuna, Nautilus stared at the back of the curved sword user, who was leading the parties.

As a matter of fact, until leaving the town, he harboured just a slight doubt that the man could have been a member of a PK group. It was the typical modus operandi of PKers to give some plausible reason to lure players into the Outer Field.

However, seeing how the man was so awfully desperate that he kept running while tripping up numerous times, it was impossible to believe that this was an act. Besides, PK groups basically did not take action on the foremost line. Because even those guys knew that, in terms of pure fighting power, they were no match for players from the Clearers.

Eventually, the half-collapsed, ruin-like silhouette of their destination came into sight. That was probably the field dungeon in question. The curved sword user turned around while running and shouted.

"Just a bit more!"

"Let's hurry!"

Yuna shouted back and raised her running speed.

Hastily chasing after her, Nautilus once again caught sight of his childhood friend.

On the move, he confirmed... that Yuna's level was already over 40. She seemed to have raised it, either by joining farming parties on a lower floor or doing some solo levelling or some other means, but it was not something that she could have accomplished with just ordinary effort. Meaning that Yuna was serious. With her 《Chant》 skill in hand, she intended to join the ranks of the Clearers.....

If he couldn't stop her determination, he had to always be with her to protect her. There was but one way to do that. He had to get Yuna to join the Knights of the Blood—there was no other way.

Considering the rareness of the 《Chant》 skill, he didn't expect the guild leader Heathcliff or commander Asuna to say no to her. Once this rescue operation was over, he should quickly bring Yuna to the guild headquarters to meet with the guild leader. If he could fight with Yuna, there was no doubt that he wouldn't end up cowering before monsters.

".....Yuna."

Facing the back of his childhood friend, running slightly ahead of him, Nautilus called out to her in a very low voice. It seemed to have blended in with the footsteps of the ten people, thus not reaching her, but despite that, he felt new strength welling up inside his body.

The field dungeon where the curved sword user's comrades were imprisoned was the ruins of a prison, just like the main town. However, its residents weren't NPCs, but monsters. Having encountered some kobold-types and some slime-types on two occasions but crushed them without a problem, the group arrived at the central portion of the dungeon approximately eight minutes after leaving through the western

gate.

The end of the large passage was closed off by sturdy-looking iron bars and, from inside, they could hear the screams of players and the roars of monsters overlapping disorderly metallic sounds; the so-called sounds of battle.

"They're still alive.....!"

The curved sword user leapt at the iron bars. Beside him, Nautilus also peeked inside through the opening of the bars.

The stone-paved room was quite large; it seemed it could be twenty metres from left to right, and thirty metres long. Its top was open and bright, but since the left and right walls were also more than ten metres high, it would probably be impossible to climb up even if you were to grasp the small bars here and climb them.

Five players were clustered on the right side of the large room, fighting almost the same number of demi-human monsters. The tubby and small monsters, wearing leather armour with tattered hoods and gripping deep black short spears, were undoubtedly tormentor-class monsters.

If a player were around level 40 and had knowledge of the monster's attack patterns, then it wouldn't be much of a problem to beat, but the reason why they hadn't been exterminated even after more than twenty minutes was because tormentors weren't just small fry Mobs.

Beside the wall furthest down the large room, he could see a large figure that was probably over two metres-high. Undoubtedly, that was the boss monster of this field dungeon. The small tormentors were the boss's minions and were probably the 《infinitely resurging》 type; even if you defeated one, another would instantly spawn. The fighting power of the five men locked inside and the repop rate of the minions had ended up balancing each other out; they defeated one after another of them, but were unable clean up.

Luckily, the boss monster inside had yet to begin moving, thus the guys wouldn't be wiped out so easily at this rate; however, one couldn't view this too optimistically. Slowly, the accumulating damage would result in them using up their healing potions or their coordination would fall apart due to mental fatigue, thus the moment the balance would be broken would definitely come at some point.

"Where is the device to open the iron bars!?"

Shouted Nautilus, and the curved sword user pointed at the boss monster that was striking a daunting pose beside the wall deep inside.

"There's a lever that looks like one behind the boss! But if they get close the boss will probably begin to move..... I managed to just barely escape right before the bars closed."

Hearing his words, one of the Fuurinkazan members standing behind him, a giant wearing a towel twisted into a headband, moaned.

"Meaning, for us to come to their rescue, the guys inside have ta get close to the boss and operate the lever....."

The other, a scrawny sasumata user, also nodded.

"But, that's a gambit. Most likely, the bars will only open up for two or three seconds. Once the boss begins to move, it will be considerably difficult for all of them to escape at once."

An accurate analysis that only a member of the Clearers could provide. Like the two of them said, once the boss was turned ^{aggroed} aggressive, controlling the situation would become challenging. It wasn't impossible for even more people to get trapped inside if they attempted to rescue all of them untactfully.

If there were such a danger, it would be better—

".....Let's defeat the boss."

At Nautilus's words, the players around him and in the rear were stirred up. The five who were not Clearers,

"B-but, we don't really have experience fighting against bosses....."

Said this, but he turned around and made an earnest speech.

"Don't worry, I and the two guys from Fuurinkazan shall take the boss's aggro. This is the boss of a field dungeon close to town, and we have fifteen people if you include those inside the room, so, if all of us are over level 40..... no, over 35, it should be enough."

At these words, the curved sword user added his desperate voice.

"I beg of you, save my buds! If it gets dicey, you can jus' run away!"

"..... B-but....."

The five men exchanged glances, but it seemed that they couldn't take the final step.

At that moment, Yuna, who had been observing the course of events from a short ways away, called out to the curved sword user.

"Umm, could you call the people inside to come closer?"

"Wha? Y-yeah....."

Nodding, the curved sword user gripped the iron bars with his hands and took in a deep breath.

"Ooi, I've come to save you! Can you get closer to us!?"

Then, the five people who were locked in the room began moving bit by bit along the wall while fighting against the tormentors. After backtracking approximately fifteen metres in thirty seconds, they moved the battlefield in front of the bars.

Looking at them up close, the exhaustion of the five men was evident. Their HP bars were all below seventy percent, and their movements were lifeless. The passage that Nautilus and the others were in was right in front of their eyes and noses, but indestructible iron bars separated the two groups.

Even if they got the five to move here, in order to raise the iron bars, they had to operate the lever behind the boss monster. Unable to fathom Yuna's intention, Nautilus was about to face his childhood friend, but before he could do that, he heard a light sound.

Yuna was playing her small lute. Atop the uplifting chords, she added her sonorous singing voice.

The five men fighting against the tormentors were unaware of the 《Chant》 skill. So, it was only natural that they became confused when Yuna suddenly began singing, but as if getting new energy from her voice, the five men regained their vigour for battle. With their swords and axes flashing, the HP of the monsters began to visibly decrease.

Compared to the time she sung in the Teleport Gate plaza of Jaileum, Yuna's singing voice was more comforting, bewitching, and serene. Nautilus felt something hot welling up from the depths of his body. This wasn't the effect of a system-wise support. It was the power of Yuna's song itself, with no relation to the Chant skill.

Until now, Nautilus/Eiji had always thought of Yuna/Yuuna as merely a being he had to protect. But... he was mistaken.

Yuuna had far, far more power and potential than Eiji had thought. About as much as the leader of the Knights of the Blood's Team B, Asuna..... No, even more than that. The power to encourage all the players trapped in Aincrad, to give them hope, to lead them.

Before he knew it, tears welled up in Nautilus's eyes. The song ended in merely thirty seconds, but he felt like he had heard it for tens of times longer.

The moment that Yuna played the final chord with her lute, a yellow icon lit up below Nautilus and others' HP bars.

"Oooh!"

Hearing such cheers from the other side of the bars, he turned to them and saw that the HP bars of the five men were gradually recovering. Having lowered her lute, Yuna shouted.

"The ^{regen} HoT will continue for one minute! Clear out those small fry and operate the door's lever!"

"Ou!"

The five men, responding with a war cry, activated their Sword Skills one after another and annihilated the tormentors. Immediately, new resurgence effects appeared all over the large room, but the five men charged towards the boss without any hesitation.

The moment they came within ten metres of it, the large boss monster reacted.

"Dirararaaah!!"

Bellowing, it brandished its terrifyingly huge axe over its head.

Its figure, its head hidden by a steel mask, was undoubtedly in the same class as the Warder Chief they had fought in the Labyrinth tower. Recalling his memories of that time, his legs felt numb for just a moment, but Nautilus shook off his fear by stamping down on the stone paving.

Four of the five men charging forward caught the boss's attention and lured it to the left. The remaining man jumped at the lever sticking out of the wall deep in the room, and pulled it down as if hanging from it.

'Gogoon!', a solemn sound roared and the iron bars before Nautilus began rising. Starting at that moment, he began counting the seconds.

Upon them having risen up halfway, the curved sword user passed under the bars as if he could wait no longer. Nautilus and the others followed suit. Once all ten of them had entered the large room, standing in the lead, the headband-wearing man from Fuurinkazan brandished his iron club overhead and shouted.

"Alriiight, we're goin' innnn!!"



"Ou!!"

Responding to him by thrusting his one-handed sword, Nautilus charged at the boss together with the two red-armoured men. As they narrowed the distance, a double HP bar appeared over the head of the boss who wore an iron mask. The proper name displayed was 《Feral ^{savage jailer chief}Warder Chief》. Undoubtedly, it was the same type of monster as the 《Ruthless Warder Chief》 they had fought at the upper part of the Labyrinth.

Continuing his count, Nautilus glanced behind him and met eyes with Yuna, who had changed from her lute to her dagger and was running, with her pure white cape fluttering. This was probably the first boss battle for Yuna, but she gave him an encouraging smile.

Responding with a firm nod, Nautilus increased his speed even more.

From behind the four men pulling the boss, he shouted in a loud voice.

"We're taking the aggro!"

Running through the center of the group of four that quickly split to the left and right, he activated his charging technique, 《Rage Spike》. From a charge that seemed like he was creeping along the ground, he stabbed with all his might. The tip of his sword deeply pierced the boss's left knee, the boss's roar of anger shaking the air.

Once again, a chilling feeling ran through his body and he felt that his consciousness's connection with his avatar was fading away. However, he clenched his teeth to resist the unintended rigidity and prepared for the boss's counterattack.

"Dararuwah!!"

The Warder Chief brandished his two-handed axe high. Nautilus gazed at the bulky blade, used its angle to predict the trajectory of the slash, and, matching the timing, leapt away. The axe pierced deeply into the stone paving, momentarily halting the boss's movement.

Making use of that time, Nautilus gave instructions to the curved sword user who had regrouped with his comrades.

"We'll defeat the boss, so you handle the minions!"

"G..... Gotcha, we're counting on you!"

The moment the curved sword user who shouted this began running in order to pull the aggro of the five newly-resurged tormentors, the iron bars behind them once again closed. If the count that Nautilus had continued in a corner of his mind was correct, the time until it closed was merely twenty seconds. Just as he thought, it would be hard for all fifteen of them to escape with a single use of the lever. He had no choice but to trust himself and his allies, and defeat the boss.

To the left and right of the Warder Chief that pulled its axe from the floor, the players who joined the rescue party in town, as well as Yuna, divided into groups of three and spread out. At the front, Nautilus and the two from Fuurinkazan took up positions. If the three clearers continued pulling aggro and left the attacking to the groups at the sides, although it would take time, they should be able to safely beat it. Luckily, the Warder Chief-type attack patterns were ingrained in his head.

Before the huge jailer brandishing its axe bellowed once again, Nautilus shouted.

"Vertical slash coming! Vanguard, when the axe gets stuck in the floor after evasion, one Sword Skill!"

Immediately afterwards, the monster once again swung its two-handed axe down with a roar, but its target, the sasumata user, dodged it by a wide margin. The moment the axe sunk into the floor, Nautilus and the towel headband-wearing man, as well as two others from the left and right, pounded the monster with their Sword Skills. Blue and yellow flashes gushed out, and the Warder Chief's double HP bar's first bar visibly decreased.

—We can do this.

—Even I can pull this off.

Regripping his sword, Nautilus focused all his senses on the huge jailer before him.

* * *

Just as Asuna had evaluated him in front of Commander Heathcliff, in a narrow sense, Nautilus's battle abilities had practically reached the level of the current top players of the Clearers.

However, Nautilus lacked absolute experience. The same applied to the members of the emerging Fuurinkazan guild.

They were not aware. That there was a correlation between the size of a dungeon boss's room, the boss's size, its attack patterns, and the number of minions.

Although the Feral Warder Chief was large, it was only a little over two-metres tall. It seemed far smaller when compared to dragon- or golem-type boss monsters, its attack pattern only consisted of physical attacks with its axe, with no area of effect breath or shock wave attacks.

Therefore, if they had been players with sufficient knowledge and experience, they should have felt it the moment they saw the thirty metre-long boss room and its master. That a danger corresponding to the size of the room was hidden within it.

* * *

Eight minutes had passed since they entered the room, and the battle against the boss was going according to Nautilus's plan.

The three clearers with more than enough HP and defence continued coping with the Warder Chief's attacks and, upon getting an opening, Sword Skills were launched at it from the left and right without a moment of delay. Focusing on safety, their attacks were limited to two-hit ones that wouldn't leave them open, thus it had taken some time, but no one had suffered any lethal counterattacks so far.

Even the five infinitely resurging minions continued to be dealt with by the curved sword user's party, which had now returned to its original six-man composition, without any errors, thus they weren't allowed to approach the nine people battling against the boss. At present, no one seemed to have suffered the troublesome 《Silencing》 debuff.

Having reached the boss's second HP bar and cut it down by fifty percent to yellow, Nautilus was convinced of their victory.

He had been assailed by an unpleasant feeling at first, but since the battle was going according to plan, the phenomenon of his body becoming unable to move had not occurred. The responsibility of being the leader and, most of all, the presence of Yuna had been giving him strength.

He had been unable to participate in the Floor Boss battle, but he was able to splendidly command a large force of fifteen people in a sudden rescue mission. When Asuna learnt of his achievement, even she should change her thoughts about him.

"Alright..... just a bit more! Everyone, do your best!!"

At Nautilus's words, his comrades responded vigorously.

Evading the two-hit attack unleashed by the boss from the left and right; counterattacking in kind with a two-hit technique, 《Snake Bite》. The Warder Chief's HP bar was changing from yellow to orange.

Seeing this, the sasumata user from Fuurinkazan faced Nautilus and shouted.

"At red, the attack pattern could change! Should we temporarily stand back!?"

"No, Warder Chief-types shouldn't have a change in pattern!"

Answering thus, Nautilus guarded against the boss's kick attack with the shield in his left hand. The moment the boss's posture crumbled, the attackers pounded away at it with their Sword Skills from the left and right. Its HP bar was reduced even further, the remaining twenty percent entering the red zone.

He prepped his shield just in case, but, as he thought, and just like with the Feral Warder Chief's superior version, the Ruthless Warder Chief, there was no sign of its attack pattern changing. The simultaneous attacks ended with the second blow; concluding thus, Nautilus raised his voice.

"I'm focusing on the last and going in!"

However.

His voice was drowned out by a new sound.

Throughout the boss room, a metallic sound as if rusty iron were being rubbed resounded many times over. When Nautilus reflexively looked aside, what plunged into his sight was a hair-raising spectacle.

All of the iron bars on the wall, which he had only thought of as mere ornaments till now, slid up and, from inside the dark passage inside, small monsters jumped down into the large room one after another. They were the same type of Mob as the boss's tormentor minions, but the weapons they were gripping in their hands looked much more ominous, as if they were large, cleaver-like hatchets.

The number of Mob reinforcements that appeared from the holes in the wall had reached fifteen or sixteen. Adding the minions that had surged up from the very beginning, they totaled twenty. Their number was far from what the curved sword user and his group could handle alone.

There was no choice but to split the nine people fighting the boss into two groups. Having had this thought for a moment, Nautilus was about to instruct the attackers on his left and right to switch to dealing with the reinforcement Mobs.

But, the moment his attention strayed from the boss for an instant—

"Oh crap, an area of effect....."

He heard the towel headband-wearing man say. Right afterwards, the Warder Chief, gripping its large axe with both hands, made a full rotation with its body as if it were in shot put. The huge tip of the axe assailed them at such a low trajectory, it was as if the monster were trying to scoop out the ground.

"Uaah.....!"

Shouting this, Nautilus was somehow able to guard against the attack with his shield, but it was blown away along with his body, and he fell on his behind. The postures of the two men from Fuurinkazan had also been broken, and even five of the six attackers at the monsters' sides had suffered a direct attack from the axe and fallen on the ground. Luckily, no one had suffered instant death, but the five of them were

enveloped in light green spark effects. That was the effect of a movement ^{stun} impossibility no, a paralysis.

The only one who had managed to evade the grand, unknown technique, which the boss unleashed now of all times, was Yuna. Holding the dagger in her right hand in a resolute stance, she searched her waist pouch. What she took out was a small bottle filled with a yellow liquid—an abnormal state recovery potion.

Paralysis, unlike stuns, which only lasted three seconds, was one of the worst debuffs, continuing for six hundred seconds. In order to recover from it, the only choices were to drink a recovery potion or use a super-rare Purification Crystal. But even Nautilus as a Clearer did not have the latter.

Yuna threw the potion to a nearby man and looked at Nautilus, as if asking for instructions.

In front of him, the Warder Chief, who had recovered from the rigidity after his area of effect attack, was slowly getting up.

'What to do..... should we give up on subjugating the boss and escape with Teleport Crystals? No, the paralysed five can only use their dominant hands slowly, thus they won't be able to use crystals right away. If we leave just those five behind, they will undoubtedly be wiped out.

As Nautilus's thoughts came to a halt, even more despairing voices reached his ears.

"Uwaah..... Not good.....!"

"S-Silencing....."

Looking behind himself, still on his back, he saw that the curved sword user's six-man party was encircled by the twenty tormentors. It was a state of complete siege.

For the moment, they had their backs against the wall, but they were unable to guard against the waves of spears and hatchets, and their HP was visibly decreasing. The reason why their screams stopped was undoubtedly because they had all suffered the Silencing debuff. With this, they became unable to escape even through the use of Teleport Crystals.

Though, if the six of them made an emergency escape, the twenty tormentors would all descend on Nautilus's group and the boss battle would become the last thing on their minds. However, the same conclusion would arise if the six of them were wiped out instead. And this scenario would certainly come in a few minutes..... no, in tens of seconds.

Nautilus once again looked at Yuna.

Below his mantle, his left hand moved of its own accord and gripped the rectangular Crystals—the valuable-as-cubs-to-a-tiger Teleport Crystals in his second belt pouch.

In their current state.

In their current state, Nautilus and Yuna alone could still escape from this peril. The players left behind, including the two men from Fuurinkazan, would probably be wiped out, but he could still avoid the worst development that was the death of Yuna.

That's right, he had to at least protect Yuna. He had promised, no matter what happened, to protect. Even if the others would die, he'd protect Yuna..... at least Yuna...

"Yu....."

With a hoarse voice, Nautilus was about to call out to his childhood friend.

However, as if having predicted what he was going to say, Yuna firmly shook her head, and shouted.

"Eh-kun, I'm begging you, defeat the boss..... save everyone!"

And so, she switched her dagger to her lute and began running, with her white cape fluttering. Towards the six encircled men.

"Th..... There's no use; Yuna, stop!"

Nautilus desperately attempted to hold back his childhood friend. Although the stats of the minion Mobs were nothing special individually, the tormentors numbered twenty. The situation would not be overturned just by Yuna coming to their aid.

At that moment—

Yuna began singing while playing her lute.

It was a brighter, as if the light of the sun were turned into sound, and even more heroic song than the one she sang when she cast the ^{regen}HoT on everyone.

Though, a buff this late could not possibly overturn the situation.

Having thought that for a moment, Nautilus was engulfed by a new shock.

The tormentors, who had been trying to wipe out the curved sword user and his friends, had all stopped attacking and turned around.

The countless, small eyes gleaming from within their hoods all focused on Yuna. Noisily, the short spears and deba bōchō knives were refocused on a new target.

This song wasn't a buff. It was a song meant to increase the Hate value of monsters. Singing while running, Yuna was trying to pull all the minions onto herself.

As Nautilus unconsciously stood up, a huge shadow engulfed him. Even the Feral Warder Chief boss stepped forward to chase after Yuna.

"Like hell we're letting you!"

"Your opponents are us!"

The two members of Fuurinkazan, who had regained their footing from the shock of guarding against the grand technique, dealt heavy blows on the boss's legs with their iron club and sasumata. "Dyurah!!", bellowed the Warder Chief, who once again changed its target.

Despite knowing that he was within range of the boss's attacks, Nautilus was unable to move his eyes away.

The twenty tormentors flooded towards Yuna as she continued her song while running. Her white hat and blue dress were obstructed by the countless trembling

spears and knives, making him unable to see her.

With her cloth armour, Yuna would probably be unable to hold out for even thirty seconds if all those monsters concentrated their attacks on her. Enduring a feeling of uneasiness as if his insides were being cut open, Nautilus called out to the two members from Fuurinkazan.

"I..... I'm begging you! Please go save Yuna.....!"

However, despite a deep sense of anguish appearing on their faces, the two did not move from that spot.

"We can't! We have to dispose of this guy first!"

"If we don't defeat the boss now, we'll be wiped out!"

Shouting thus unanimously, they activated their Sword Skills. The boss's roar overlapped the sound of impact.

Their decision was probably correct. Yuna pulled away all the minions in order to buy time for Nautilus and the others to defeat the boss. They couldn't waste even a single one of the tens of seconds she had given them.

But, despite understanding this in his head, Nautilus couldn't turn around to face the boss.

Yuna's voice as she sung, encircled by the tormentors, was interrupted. She had undoubtedly suffered the Silencing debuff. With this, Yuna was no longer able to escape with a Teleport Crystal.

—Protect. I'll protect Yuna.

"Yuna——!"

Shouting so much that it strained his voice, Nautilus kicked off the ground to help his childhood friend.

Charging at that many monsters alone, even Nautilus as a Clearer wouldn't get out unscathed. He could end up basked in the monsters' concentrated attacks and die.

But, if that had any chance of saving Yuna.

If, in the worse case, he ended up dying with her—

Nautilus's decision and resolution.

Were betrayed by himself.

Gakun, as if struck by a petrification debuff, his legs..... no, his entire body became unable to move. It was the exact same phenomenon as three days ago, when he didn't follow the instruction to Switch at the upper part of the Labyrinth.

—Move! Move move!!

—I'm not fucking scared of dying! If I can't protect Yuna, there's no fucking point in me living on!!

Shouting this within his mouth that he was unable to move, he desperately tried to move his body forward. But, as if his soles had become glued to the stone paving, his legs did not move one bit.

Sensations from his entire body began to fade. All the colours faded and the sound went away.

In his monochrome vision, he saw something vivid flying in an arc from beyond the group of densely-packed tormentors. The object that descended and fell down just a bit away from him was a glass bottle packed with colourful candies. Yuna had thrown it to Nautilus.

In the centre of his mind, he heard the voice of the person he treasured more than anyone.

—Eh-kun, sorry. I won't be able to cheer you up anymore.

—Whenever you feel like crying, lick one of these and keep going.

—Knowing you, Eh-kun, I'm sure you'll be fine.....

Behind him, the Feral Warder Chief, having suffered a fierce attack from the Fuurinkazan members, made a bulky sound and scattered light as it burst and dispersed.

At that same moment, a meager light gleamed from beyond the group of tormentors. The luster soared up with the breeze and dissolved into the blue sky.

* * *

On the same day as the battle against the boss of the fortieth floor, during a rescue mission taking place at the same time, the only victim was Yuna.

There were very few people who knew the whole story about the battle, but the danger that the 《Chant》 skill had of its user being targeted by all Mobs within its area of effect was spread widely among the players, and, during the approximately one year till the game was cleared, no one ever used 《Chant》 on the foremost lines.

After the battle, Nautilus withdrew from the Knights of the Blood guild and disappeared from the foremost line. The next time he appeared in front of players from the Clearing group was two years and seven months after that day.

Waking up from his shallow sleep, he saw a white light flickering on the left side of his vision.

When he placed his fingertip at the corner of his eye, a tear spilled from it, went along his cheeks, and fell to his neck.

After lightly shaking his head and putting a lid on his memories of the distant past, the now twenty-year-old Nochizawa Eiji slowly got up.

In the room that was by no means large, he only heard the sounds of the air conditioner and the exhaust from the servers. The sunlight coming from beyond the white curtain was still bright. It seemed he had ended up dozing off while organising the data for the 《plan》 in the laboratory.

The still-equipped wearable AR terminal, the 《Augma》, sensed Eiji waking up and rebooted from its sleep state. The windows for his scheduler and the weather forecast were displayed in his vision one after another, and, finally, a single girl appeared, sitting at the work desk a slight ways away from him.

Her slender body was enveloped in a black and purple dress of futuristic design. Her straight, pure white hair was so long it dangled down the edge of the desk, and her legs, enveloped in black tights, were slender like those of a fairy.

Having raised her eyelids, the girl sent the gaze of her strange, red eyes at Eiji, and smiled sweetly.

"Eiji, you're finally awake."

The moment he heard that clear voice and saw her well-featured face, he felt a sharp pain run through his chest.

Nevertheless, having returned the girl's smile, Eiji spoke.

"Good morning, Yuna."

"'Good morning' is the greeting for mornings. It's already 15:27, you know."

The girl, who replied without a moment's delay, had a face that looked exactly like that of his no longer living childhood friend, Shigemura Yuuna.

But Yuna, no, Y U N A, wasn't Yuuna. She was an AI whose appearance was an accurate reproduction of Yuuna's, for the sake of a certain goal—a 《plan》 .

Professor Shigemura Tetsuhiro, Yuuna's father, as well as the creator of Y U N A and the Augma, saw Y U N A as nothing but an AI data crawler that had the same face as his daughter. However, Eiji was still unable to make that distinction. Despite knowing in his head that she was no more than a tool for the sake of reviving the actual Yuuna, whenever he saw this face, he became a bit attached to it.

Y U N A was holding a large glass bottle on her lap. Inside, there were numerous, sparkling candy-like things.

Both the glass bottle and the candies, just like Y U N A, were not physical objects. They were the cornerstone of the 《plan》 — a visualisation of data fragments of Yuuna collected from the memories of SAO survivors. The moment that bottle was filled to the brim, Yuuna would return to Eiji.

The one who had earnestly begged the professor to materialise the pieces of memories as candies inside the bottle, despite there essentially being no need to visualise them, was Eiji. However, Y U N A didn't understand exactly what the things she was gathering were. As an AR idol, the girl, whose personality was set in a way so that she'd only want to sing, had no need to know the contents of the 《plan》 , but, nevertheless, whenever Eiji saw Y U N A holding the bottle of candies with great care, he felt sentiments that were close to pity.

".....Have you grown to like them that much, Yuna?"

When asked, the AI girl smiled innocently.

"Yeah, they are pretty after all."

"Is that so..... well then, we need to gather even more of them, right."

Smiling once again, Eiji stood from his chair and moved in front of the window.

In the process of gathering memory pieces from the survivors, Eiji had already used forceful measures many times over. In order to increase the sense of fear needed for a memory scan as much as possible, he had resorted to physical means in addition to the AR attacks, but considering the laws of the the real world, he was obviously committing the crime of inflicting bodily injury. Since the police were probably not incompetent, the criminal investigation would undoubtedly reach for him in the not-so-distant future.

However, that was a trivial matter. If Yuuna could be revived with Eiji going to prison, he'd spend any number of years there. Because Yuuna was never able to leave that prison dungeon on the western part of the fortieth floor of Aincrad alive. Having been unable to fulfil his vow to protect Yuuna, it was only natural for Eiji to throw away anything he had if it were for her sake.

..... Yuna.....

Without voicing it out, he muttered the name of his childhood friend.

The late spring sky he could see through the curtain was light blue and hazy.

He felt that its colour was quite similar to that of the sky he saw that day.

(The End)

Sword Art Online Aincrad Arc –Chronology

< Light Novel Version >

2022

- 11.06 - Sword Art Online official service begins.
- 12.02 - Kirito and Asuna meet at the Labyrinth of the 1st Floor
- 12.04 - 1st Floor cleared
- 12.08 - Kirito and Asuna meet the blacksmith Nezha at Urbus, the main town of the 2nd Floor.
- 12.14 - 2nd Floor cleared.
- Kirito and Asuna meet Kizmel, an NPC Dark Elf knight, in a forest on the 3rd Floor.
- 12.21 - 3rd Floor cleared.
- 12.23 - Kirito and Asuna create the gondola 《The Tinel》 at Rovia, the main town of the 4th Floor.
- 12.27 - 4th Floor cleared.
- 12.31 - 5th Floor cleared.

2023

- 03.XX - Kirito and Asuna dissolve their party.
- Asuna joins the rising guild 《Knights of the Blood》 .
- 03.31 - 25th Floor cleared.
- The guild 《Aincrad Liberation Squad》 annihilated.
- 04.08 - Kirito joins the small-scale guild 《Moonlit Black Cats》 .
- 06.12 - Moonlit Black Cats annihilated in the 27th Floor Labyrinth.
- 10.15 - The Knights of the Blood party led by Asuna encounters Kirito in the 40th Floor Labyrinth; Asuna's first encounter with Yuna at the Teleport Gate plaza of the 39th Floor late at night.
- 10.16 - Boss room discovered in the 40th Floor Labyrinth.
- Nautilus informed about being sent back to the Second Army by Asuna.
- Kirito and Asuna listen to Yuna's song at the 36th Floor Teleport Gate plaza.
- 10.17 - 40th Floor Boss strategy meeting held.
- 10.18 - 40th Floor Cleared.
- Yuna dies; Nautilus leaves the Knights of the Blood.
- 12.24 - Kirito battles against the event boss 《Nicholas the Renegade》 at the

《Forest of Wandering》 on the 35th Floor.

2024

- 01.XX - 50th Floor cleared.
- Kirito obtains the one-handed sword 《Elucidator》 .
- Kirito acquires the Unique Skill 《Dual Blades》 .
- 02.23 - Kirito meets Silica at the 《Forest of Wandering》 on the 35th Floor.
- 03.06 - Kirito and Asuna have a dispute on the method of beating a boss on the 56th Floor and engage in a Duel.
- 04.11 - Asuna encounters Kirito at Danac, the main town of the 59th Floor, and has a nap beside him.
- Inner Area murder incident in Marten, the main town of the 57th Floor.
- 06.24 - Kirito visits Lisbeth's Smith Shop in Lindarth, the main town of the 48th Floor.
- 06.25 - Kirito obtains the one-handed sword 《Dark Repulser》 .
- 08.XX - The PK guild 《Laughing Coffin》 annihilated by a subjugation party of the Clearers.
- 10.18 - Kirito hunts down the S-class food-use monster 《Ragout Rabbit》 on the 74th Floor.
- Kirito invited to come to Asuna's house in Selmburg on the 61st Floor.
- 10.19 - Kirito defeats the 74th Floor Boss, 《The Gleam Eyes》 , with his Dual Blades skill.
- 10.20 - Kirito has a Duel against Heathcliff, the commander of the Knights of the Blood, in Collinia, the main town of the 75th Floor, and loses.
- 10.23 - Kirito marries Asuna.
- 10.24 - Kirito and Asuna move to a log house on the 22nd Floor.
- 10.30 - Kirito and Asuna meet Yui in a forest on the 22nd Floor.
- 11.05 - Kirito and Asuna fish for The King of Lakes on the 22nd Floor.
- 11.06 - Kirito and Asuna summoned by Heathcliff.
- 11.07 - Sword Art Online cleared.

Notes

1. ^ A jou (畳) is a traditional Japanese unit used for measuring the size of a room. It is equal to 1.653 square metres (the size of a Nagoya tatami mat).
2. ^ Onge (音ゲー, lit. sound + an abbreviation of the English word "game") is a genre of computer games that are based on music and rhythm.
3. ^ Referencing The Penguin Dictionary of Curious and Interesting Numbers by David Wells.
4. ^ The original abbreviation of 歌エンchanター (uta enchanta) was 歌chan (uta chan), but since the -chan- from enchanter kinda sounds like the -chan honorific, the original nickname ended up as ウタちゃん (Uta-chan), where -chan- now serves as the cutesy honorific. Thus, I rendered the former as Utachan, and the latter as Uta-chan with a hyphen.
5. ^ Allusion to Material Edition 21 (SAOP 4.2).



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