

Ark Vol 12 C 1

Chapter 1

ACT 1 Pets will grow with food and affection?

“Eh? What is this?”

Perplexity rang out through the dark cave.

“It was clearly here.....”

Ark looked around with confusion. He checked the features, looked at the map and thought back through his memory. It was impossible he went to the wrong cave. But he couldn't find a passage no matter how hard he looked. There were just rocks blocking the front.

“What on earth is going on?”

Ark sat down with a frustrated expression and was locked in his thoughts. Ark was currently located south of the capital city of Schudenberg Kingdom, Selebrid. There was a reason Ark left his new business in Lancel village and came all the way here to visit the organization with a long history in assassinations, the Dark Brothers. The trials which appeared in front of Ark.....he determined that the quests and needed the Dark Brothers' help in order to succeed. Of course, gathering forces inside a game wasn't an easy task. But not long ago, Ark had helped suppress a rebellion which increased his intimacy with the Dark Brothers. He also grasped the situation in the Netherworld and came up with a justification to convince the Dark Brothers.

‘It the negotiations proceed as I expect then it will be possible to succeed!’

However there was an unexpected hitch in Ark's plan. He gained entrance to the Dark Brothers' hidden stronghold Salrin's Towers through the secret passage connected to Nabein's hideout and the location to receive assassination requests. That was also the cave where Ark was currently sitting. But it wasn't there. The passage which was clearly there before wasn't visible anymore.

'It is impossible to move the towers and everybody inside.....so why is the entrance blocked? Did something happen in the meantime? Maybe they fled because their home base was found by a professional hunter organization.....'

If so, it was quite frustrating.

'No, it can't be that.'

Ark shook his head. The Dark Brothers had been active in the darkness for hundreds of years. If there were serious friction with users or another NPC organization then Selebrid which was close by would be buzzing like a beehive. However, he visited Selebrid before coming here and it was quiet.

'Then the Dark Brothers didn't suddenly flee somewhere else. They're still here. They just blocked the entrance for some reason. But if they blocked the entrance then how would the hundreds of people in their organization leave? In other words.....there is another passage!'

A smile formed on Ark's mouth.

'I don't know why they're hiding the entrance but I won't back off just from this.'

That's right. Although the entrance was blocked, their home base was still around here so the assassins would scout the forest. Of course, they used 'Stealth' in avoid to avoid most people's eyes. But it didn't matter if they could hide using 'Stealth.'

"Radun, search the area using Stalking."

Ssak ssak, ssak ssak ssak ssak!

When Ark exited the cave and gave the order, Radun instantly jumped down from his waist. Then it raised its head and searched the area with its tongue.

-Radun has used 'Stalking.'

Within an hour, the footprints of all the life forms passing through the forest were found. As expected after activating the skill.....no, more footprints appeared than he expected. Thanks to that Ark's expression became even more frustrated.

'That's right, this area is south of Selebrid.'

Of course there would be a lot of movement of users and NPCs. On the other hand, Radun's stalking couldn't specify a particular target and could only search for all the traces around. There were dozens and even hundreds of footprints all over the place so it was impossible to find the assassins' traces.

"Unbelievable."

Ssak ssak? Ssak ssak ssak ssak?

Its skill had succeeded so Radun waved its tail expecting a compliment. However Ark had sighed so Radun's eyes seemed to convey 'Dad, did I do something wrong?' Ark laughed bitterly and stroked Radun's head.

"No, you did well. It's just troublesome seeing so many footprints."

'But it did not help? Right?'

"It's still better than having no clues."

'I'm sorry, Dad. I'm a useless snake.'

Radun was almost in tears at this point while Ark continued stroking its head. If Dedric or Razak saw this scene, they would complain but it was a common scene. His ten fingers would become sore from scratching. Sometimes it would become so sore that the senses in the fingers would dull. Therefore Radun's affection for Ark was always at 120%! Now he could guess what Radun was saying just by looking in its eyes. Of course, whether it was painful or not everybody needs 10 fingers.....

‘Well, I can’t just sit here staring at the footprints so I should look everywhere else.....’

Ark sighed and moved his body.

“Eh?”

Ark looked at the footprints and suddenly realised something strange. So far, Ark had never questioned the footprints Radun found. Thus he had never worn a doubtful expression. However, he realized something after seeing hundreds of footprints gathered in one place.

‘.....Some of the footprints look slightly different!’

Wasn’t it like looking for objects in a hidden picture? The first time it was hard to see the different before after a while it started to become noticeable. Ark was the same. Once he noticed that the footprints were different, the differences were clearly revealed.

‘That’s right, there are many different types of shoes in New World. And the physique of the user or NPC wearing the shoes is also different. It is natural for the footprints to look different depending on the physique and shoe type. If that’s the case?’

A scene he saw in a foreign drama flashed through Ark’s head. It was the US drama popular in a long time ago, CSI! In that show, the crime scene investigators looked at the killer’s physique, personality, habits etc. in order to figure out a lot of information. He remembered a scene where the investigator was smug and said ‘A footprint is like a second fingerprint.’

Couldn’t that also be applied to New World?

‘This isn’t CSI but I should be able to figure out some basic information.’

Ark surveyed the footprints again thanks to his idea and made some deductions.

“Let’s see.....the depth of this footprint is shallow but the form is still intact. It’s clearly a cloth shoe so the profession should be magician or merchant? On the other hand, this footprint is quite deep. They should be wearing clunky shoes with a lot of weight so it should be a warrior or knight profession. I’m looking for an assassin so they should be wearing leather shoes. It isn’t here. Radun, please search a little bit more.”

Ssak ssak? Ssak ssak ssak!

Radun suddenly became lively at Ark’s command and moved around while shaking its tail. And it found even more footprints in the surrounding area.

“Okay, this is it! For sure!”

Ark used the conclusions he previously figured out to eliminate the footprints one by one. He was looking for footprints that seemed to be from leather shoes. But leather shoes were worn by a lot of regular NPCs and users. Ark also wore leather shoes. However, Ark was looking for footprints with a narrow stride. Normal NPCs and users would not leave a narrow stride in the mountains. If such a footprint remained then it was likely.....

“It is because when scouting, they want to make as little sound as possible while using ‘Stealth.’ The Dark Brothers are the only ones who would use ‘Stealth’ in order to scout. Then I’ll start the chase!”

Ssak ssak, ssak ssak ssak ssak!

Ark used amazing forensic techniques! Radun watched the process and looked at Ark with even more admiring eyes. Then a new information window appeared with lively sound effects.

-Your pet Radun has gained a new expertise from its Master.

The pet’s understanding and application of various skills is poor. So it will not raise the skill through repeated uses unlike a user. In order to raise the skill proficiency of your pet the Master must understand the skill and then pass it onto the pet, stimulating their growth. Ark’s understanding of Stalking has reached the conditions needed to raise Radun’s stalking to a higher rating.

However, the proper training needs sincere affection to accomplish. In order to raise the skill levels of your pets, you need to pay a certain number of affection points.

Would you like to raise Radun's Stalking to intermediate?

"Eh? What is this?"

Ark read the information window with shocked eyes.

"My understanding is necessary to raise my pet's skill levels?"

In fact, in the meantime Ark had been having some doubts about the skills of his pets. Each of his pets had two types of skills. For example, the first type is the fixed skill such as 'Radun transform.' This skill was a special skill that was learnt after Ark fulfilled specific requirements. It was finished and it was impossible to have any further types of growth. And the second type was general skills. Radun's Stalking, Razak's Shield Stroke and Dedric's Taunt were all skills that could raise its proficiency. In the pet skill's information window, they showed up as beginner which meant they had growth potential. But no matter how hard he looked, the skill proficiency did not increase.

'It's definitely strange. Those skills are still beginner but they should've increased to intermediate a long time ago. I can't even see how much the degree of skilfulness is rising. Is some other condition necessary?'

Ark couldn't understand that part. Now that question had been answered after seeing the information window. His pets didn't have the ability to think for themselves which was required in order to raise the skills. Without a proper education, naturally they wouldn't learn anything about their skills. Love and patience was required for education. That's why Affection was necessary in order to educate his pets!

"So this is how to use Affection!"

Ark's eyes brightened. Among his stats, Knowledge of Ancient Relics played an important role in identifying information about ancient languages and artefacts. Flexibility helped with evasion and alleviating fall damage, Art of Communication persuaded NPCs while Resilience reduced the damage

from blunt objects. However, he hadn't been able to figure out the role of Affection. He vaguely guessed that it applied to his relationships with his pets. But looking back, wouldn't that already be used by the 'Loyalty' stat? Furthermore, his Affection stat was high but Dedric still had a rebellious quality. In the end, affection did not affect his relationship with his pets. So Ark thought Affection just had a symbolic meaning.

'But Affection is like bonus skills points for my summons!'

Yes, if the pets didn't have enough affection for their Master then there was no reason for them to learn the skills. Raising the skills was meant to help their Master. In other words, they raised it in return for their Master's affection. Therefore the information window explained that Affection was necessary to raise the skills.

'Ha, there are no useless stats in New World.'

"Stat information window!"

Character Name Ark Race Human Alignment Good +400 Fame 9,125 (+ 500) Level 284 Profession Dark Walker Title Cat Knight, Caretaker of the Abandoned, Jackson's Hero, Great Adventurer Health 4,460 (+150) Mana 4,450 Spiritual Power 200 Strength 563 (+28) Agility 723 (+55) Stamina 843 (+20) Wisdom 107 (+10) Intelligence 862 Luck 103 (+30) Flexibility 115 Art of Communication 46 Affection 167 (+10) Resilienc 320 Special stat: Knowledge of Ancient Relics 138

'Affection 167.....damn, if I had known about the effects of Affection.....then Razak's and Dedric's skills would already be intermediate.'

It was unfortunate but luckily he knew it now.

"Okay, Radun's Stalking. Rating up!"

He used 50 points of Affection in order to raise Radun's knowledge of the skill. After seeing its Masters serious attitude, Radun was dedicated to learning.

-The 'Stalking' skill has risen to intermediate.

Stalking (Intermediate, Racial special skill): Radun has mastered the new application for the skill and will be able to take advantage of the colours. The search range and duration of use has been extended. After following its Master's keen sense of observation, Radun will be able to grasp simple information after observing the target footprint.

Additional Intermediate Effect: Sharp Reasoning.

If this skill succeeds then simple information about the target will be grasped.

Ssak ssak, ssak ssak ssak ssak!

After the rating increased, Radun examined the footprints with more intelligent (?) eyes. The footprints were dyed in colour and were now easy to distinguish. The footprint Ark looked at was black. The information window divided the colours of the footprints.

-You have searched for information about the target tracks.

'Thief? If I followed those footprints then I would've gone to the wrong place!'

Ark had almost followed the footprints of a thief. Perhaps he used 'Stealth' to hunt which is why that type of footprint formed. Naturally it wasn't the target Ark was looking for. Ark could now grasp the footprints more easily thanks to Radun and searched the forest again.

-You have searched for information about the target tracks.

“This is it! Radun, track this footprint!”

Radun turned around at Ark’s command and travelled through the dark forest. In the evening light, the red footprints were clearly visible thanks to Radun. He followed the footprints and arrived at some rocks.

“Isn’t this quite far away from the caves they were previously using? Anyway, the footprints have disappeared so there must be a secret passage leading to Salrin’s Towers.

Ark carefully looked over the rocks. Eventually he put his hand in a crevice and was able to grasp a handle shaped object.

‘I’ve found it, this device clearly opens the door!’

Cheng kang-!

Suddenly a sharp dagger passed next to his ears and produced sparks on the rocks. Ark flinched and when he turned around, some branches were shaking. The hazy shape moving looked like a 1900’s star craft vehicle moving in stealth mode. Then a mocking voice seemed to ring out through the whole forest.

“Go back. This is not a place where anyone can enter.”

It was a veiled threat on his life! But Ark just smiled and stepped forward.

“I’m Ark. I came because I have some business.”

“.....Ark?”

He heard the awestruck voice before there was a sudden moment of silence. Then the branches above him shook and a masked man dropped down. He looked at Ark for a while before running up and shaking his hand.

“It really is Ark-nim. How long has it been?”

“.....?”

“It’s me. I was number 358.....”

The masked man laughed after Ark stared at him with confusion. Now Ark could recall where he heard the voice of the masked man. It was the Dark Brothers assassin Ark and the rehabilitation members had rescued when he was attacked by rebels. After Ark confirmed it, number 359 stuck his chest out firmly and spoke in proudly.

“Hey, everybody came out and greet him. This is the Truthseeker I mentioned, Ark-nim!”

After his words, 10 other assassins appeared in the forest. In fact, Ark had been concerned after he found the passage to Salrin’s Towers was blocked off. However there seemed to be no need to worry based on the assassin’s attitude. After checking Ark’s status, the assassins were still friendly to him as shown when they kneeled down.

“We didn’t know you were coming. Please forgive our rudeness.”

After his name was revealed, the assassins treated him with a lot of respect. Meanwhile, number 358 manipulated the handle to open the passage and guided Ark in.

“Are they.....?”

Ark asked after seeing the assassins close the passage from the outside. Their standard looked higher than the previous assassins. Number 358 took out a torch and then answered.

“Ah, Ark-nim wouldn’t have seen them. They are the members under my direct control.”

“Direct control?”

“Previously I told you I was called number 358 right? Look at this. I’m now number 206. After being promoted, I was given control over my own unit. It’s all thanks to Ark-nim.”

358.....no, number 206 pointed to a number written on his forehead. Probably the number stamped on the Dark Brothers was a sign indicated their name and job title. The lower the number meant a higher position. When number 206 fought while Salrin’s Towers was ran over by rebels, he helped Ark prevent the rebellion and was promoted.

“Congratulations.”

“No, compared to Ark-nim there is still a long way to go.”

Number 206 blushed and scratched his head. The assassin was surprisingly innocent.

“But it took a while to find you. Why did you close the previous passage?”

“Huh? Didn’t you get the message?”

“What message?”

Ark asked with confusion and number 206 tilted his head to the side before replying.

“We closed the previous passage right after Ark-nim left. I thought that Leader-nim would definitely contact you.....maybe he forgot because he’s too busy these days.”

‘What the? That Shambala.....’

Ark became sullen at number 206’s words. Of course Ark didn’t receive a message from Shambala. It wasn’t that Shambala was too busy to get in touch, but that he probably did it intentionally. It was impossible to increase his intimacy with a NPC if Ark was there. Perhaps he was anxious Ark would increase his intimacy with Isabel when he had to leave Salrin’s Towers for a while.

‘That brat, don’t you trust you friend?’

But honestly Ark had no right to complain. In fact, his purpose in visiting Shambala and Isabel was to coax the Dark Brothers into a war. After he left here, Ark never bothered to contact Shambala either. He would be scrutinized too closely if Shambala accompanied him. Ark had been treated like a human for the first time by Shambala.

“By the way, you really are a descendant of the Truthseeker. We worked for a long time to hide that secret passage.....if there were more people like Ark-nim in the world then we would go out of business.”

Number 206 murmured as he opened another hidden door in the cave. The security was so much stricter than before that Ark asked in a doubtful voice.

“Why did you need to close the previous passage?”

“The surrounding area has become too noisy these days.”

Number 206 sighed and explained. The problem was Alan. Although Alan and Nabein’s revolt was suppressed thanks to Ark, Alan firmly grasped the location of Salrin’s Towers. Furthermore, Alan now held a grudge towards the Dark Brothers. The Dark Brothers couldn’t rule out the possibility that Alan had leaked their location to some government.

“If you look at the history, there have been a few nobles in the Schudenberg Kingdom who have been assassinated by the Dark Brothers. If they know the location of Salrin’s Towers then it will be a problem. In addition, the war between the Three Kingdoms has ended so there are a large number of soldiers sweeping the surrounding area for thieves.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Ark nodded and number 206 continued.

“Recently a lot of foreigners have also travelled in this area.”

That's the nature of online games. Over time, there were bound to be a lot more high level users. New World had already been commercialized for 1 year, so most users would've already left the beginner regions like Jackson and were now concentrated in Selebrid.

"Then if the existing location is closed, how will you receive requests?"

Ark tilted his head to one side and asked. In New World, NPCs also had to eat to live. In other words, an assassin received assassination requests in order to earn money. But wouldn't shutting down the existing meeting place interfere with the business? Wouldn't they have to scatter hidden directions to another location? Of course, whether an assassin ate or not had nothing to do with Ark. So he just asked the question without thinking but it was a surprisingly serious concern. Number 206 replied in a careful tone which wavered for a moment.

"The requests.....aren't accepted anymore."

"An assassination organization isn't receiving assassination requests?"

"As you already know, the Dark Brothers organization is a descendant of an eastern race that lost its home and wandered around. Only a few of our ancestors survived by the time they reached this continent. That was when assassination became the Dark Brothers' fate."

"Yes, I've heard that story before."

"But now our home isn't lost anymore, it is this continent. Without anyplace to return to or any moral obligations, we've taken root in this continent. But if we stick to assassinations, after hundreds of years only the foreigners will be left."

That's why Isabel an elder of the Dark Brothers had been seeking an alternative method for a long time. And the catalyst for this was the appearance of the Deliverer Shambala. Isabel decided to place the fate of the Dark Brothers into Shambala's hands. Shambala was looking for a way to end the dark history of the Dark Brothers in order to lead it into the sun. In order to do that, he judged that the bloody nature of the Dark Brothers should be erased.

“So now the Dark Brothers won’t take assassinations anymore?”

“But the elders are stubborn.....”

Number 206 let out a sigh.

“There’s a problem.”

“Yes, that’s why Leader-nim decided to stop what he was doing and return to the tower.”

“So Shambala is in Salrin’s Towers right now?”

Ark’s forehead wrinkled. Ark had deliberately not contacted Shambala before he came here. Of course, Shambala’s help was necessary when considering Ark’s purpose. But his problem was that Shambala was extremely picky. In addition, he would clearly be able to see through Ark’s proposal. So he had wanted to recruit the innocent Isabel while Shambala was away. If Isabel was convinced that Shambala would have no choice but to go along with Ark. But now Shambala had already returned to Salrin’s Towers.....

‘Damn, I know that Shambala’s personality and he probably won’t be willing to cooperate.....’

Ark was worried until he noticed something in number 206’s words.

He didn’t know everything, but the current state of the Dark Brothers was clearly complicated. The art of diplomacy was to catch your opponent’s weakness. There might be a chance for Ark to persuade them.

“I don’t know everything but it sounds like some problems have occurred. I never thought something bad would happen to the Dark Brothers so soon after I left. I might be able to help you so could you elaborate on the matter?”

Ark spoke gently and the voice rattled on.