

Ark Vol 18 C 3

Chapter 3

ACT 3 Prelude: Illusion Sonata

“The heavens are helping us.”

Jewel murmured as he looked up at the night sky. Since the early evening, dark clouds started to spread across the night sky so the lights from the stars couldn't be seen anymore. The forest was therefore so dark it was impossible to distinguish anything moving within it. While it wasn't okay for moving through the forest, it was perfect for a night attack. He felt good for some reason.

“Is that Lancel village?”

While crossing the forest, it was possible to see a faint light through the bushes. It seemed to be light coming from open doors and through windows in Lancel village. A low laugh emerged from Jewel's mouth as his goal came within sight.

“Huhuhu, that village sounds as quiet as a mouse. 1~2 hours should be sufficient.”

“Wait, why is it so quiet?”

Duke who had been observing the village narrowed his eyes and muttered.

“Didn't you film the video so that users would know we are attacking Lancel?”

“Yes, so there village is quiet because there are no users as planned.”

Jewel thought it was because of the video that no users were in the village. But Duke still looked unsure.

“No, even if the users ran away the NPCs shouldn't be this quiet.”

“That’s because the NPCs wouldn’t know. Think about it. There is no reason for the users leaving the village to give a reason to NPCs. The NPCs also can’t search the internet to watch the video. So there is no possibility of the NPCs taking countermeasures from rumours flying between users.”

“I guess, but.....”

Jewel just laughed without any worries and spoke.

“There won’t be a problem even if the NPCs sensed something. The video was only posted last night. It would be impossible to gain reinforcements during that time. Besides, look at their stupid expressions. Is that the expression of someone facing a crisis?”

Jewel pointed to the residents of Lancel wandering around the suburbs. He could find no awareness of danger in any of the residents.

“It is good to be careful but you don’t have to worry. The opponents are NPCs.”

Jewel spoke lightly as he surveyed the village.

“Duke, lead units 4,5, and 6 to the left. I’ll lead units 1 and 2 to the other side. Once the town is surrounded then we’ll attack.

A cruel light appeared in Jewel’s eyes.

“Once the battle starts then don’t spare a single one of them in the village. Then the suicide squads will move to Ark’s shop and the magic tower and will loot it before blowing them up. It is a low-level village but it is in the midst of growing so the profits should be quite good.”

The troops split up and moved according to the plan. Their goal for surrounding the village was to not allow any Lancel residents to escape. The members crept through the bushes after dispersing and moved to their target point.

‘Huhuhu, that Ark, I want to see what kind of expression you have when you come here.’

The smile never left Jewel’s face even while crawling through the bushes. After approximately 1 hour, Jewel’s group had finished surrounding the village. After taking a short break, he heard Duke’s whisper from the other side.

-Jewel, we’re ready.

A beast like smile flashed on Jewel’s mouth.

“Now, everyone attack! Wall of Flames, Fire Wall!”

Jewel stood up and waved his hand, causing dozens of flame pillars to engulf the village. The residents ran away from the flames into a barrier created beforehand. After Jewel’s pre-emptive strike, the stone wall was soon destroyed and they invaded the village. Duke also poured arrows from the opposite side and led his troops into the village.

“Let’s finish this in one breath! Everybody charge!”

“Wah ah ah ah!”

When the 500 members charged the village, it was instantly turned to fire and dust. However, it didn’t take a long time before Jewel realized something was strange.

“What, what the? What on earth.....?”

Jewel stopped attacking and scratched his head with confusion. Jewel had been firing magic blindly at the village. Not only Jewel, but the 500 members had shot various arrows and magic at the village. The constant explosion and dirt meant that it was difficult to see. But the residents showed no reaction to the attack. They acted like they couldn’t see the people attacking the village and there wasn’t any damage on their clothes. Even the swords just went straight through the bodies of the residents.

“Leader-nim, over there!”

Then one of the members shouted and pointed to the town square. Jewel reflexively turned his head and looked at the sight with amazement. Dozens of residents were running around the square. But that wasn't what caught Jewel's attention. The person he saw in the village centre wearing leather armour was.....

“.....Ark!”

Yes, the person was Jewel's enemy Ark. Jewel stiffened after finding Ark. His biggest reason to attack Lancel was to get revenge on Ark. But he never imagined that Ark would be here now. After a while, Jewel started using magic despite his confusion.

“Rise flames of a burning inferno! Take this, Hellfire!”

Huge flames signed the area from the explosion. Ark was swallowed up by the flames. No, Jewel thought the flames hit but it just went through Ark. Ark stared through the flames at Jewel and chuckled. Then Ark slowly lifted his hand which had his middle finger raised. Duke's voice shook his ears at the same time.

-We were tricked Jewel. It is a trap!

‘Trap?’

Jewel jumped and stepped backwards.

Clang, snap!

There was a sudden mechanical sound and something sprung from the ground. It was the size of a fist with letters written on the surface. Blood drained from Jewel's face as he read the letters.

Beok~ kyu!

‘That Ark bastard!’

Kwa kwa kwa kwang!

The sphere exploded and there was an enormous blast of flame.

“Ugh, Fire Shield!”

Jewel quickly used the Fire Shield to protect himself from the flames. As expected of a pioneer to be able to react so quickly with Fire Shield. But that was just the beginning.

Clang, snap! Clang, snap! Clang, snap! Clang, snap!

While Jewel was protecting himself, 100 other spheres bounced into the village. Sweat dripped down Jewel’s back and he confirmed the presence of the spheres. Needless to say, the spheres which appeared were all traps! These traps sensed the presence of people stepping on them before activating. It was the type of workmanship that Ark specialized in. But Jewel had no room to be angry. A warning emerged from Jewel’s mouth.

“Avoid it! It is a trap!”

Kwa kwa kwang, kwa kwa kwang, kwa kwa kwang!

The 100 spheres exploded at the same time and the entire village was in flames. It was a desperate attack on all the secret society members in the village. The sphere exploded before they could react to Jewel’s voice. The members quickly lost 10~20% of their health. Moreover, the flames in the village continuously did damage to them.

“Ugh, it is dangerous! Quickly escape!”

“Once we get out of here.....waaaaah!”

The one of the suicide members engulfed in flames suddenly disappeared. The ground had collapsed once he stepped on it. A trap! The bottom of the hole was a trap containing sharpened blades. The man in fell into the trap had his health quickly disappear and he died.

“U-unbelievable.....!”

Jewel looked at the suicide squad members who had fallen into disorder with an expression that indicated he was unable to believe it. It was constant traps that he hadn’t even considered! But that wasn’t the only thing that confused him.

‘T-this is.....!’

Flames were still soaring dozens of metres high in the village. But the buildings in the village were perfectly fine. No, it wasn’t just the buildings but also the NPCs going around the village calmly. Jewel knew of only one occupation which could produce this phenomenon.

‘Illusion.....this is an illusion? Then someone conjured the illusion? But.....’

Conjurers used illusion magic! However, a conjurer could only create an illusion that was several metres in size. Yet the illusion had created a whole village and NPCs who never talked. But one thing was clear in the midst of all the confusion.

‘Ark.....!’

Ark had returned to Lancel village. That’s why the battle proceeded in an unpredictable direction!

“Hehehehe!”

Huge flames and continuous screams continued over the village. Flying over the flames which rose into the sky was a chuckling bat. It was Ark’s scout Racard.

“Master, caught, they were caught. Those fools were properly caught!”

“The flames are also visible from here. What is their situation now?”

“I can’t see properly because of the flames. But judging by the smell of raw meat, quite a few of them were caught?”

“Okay, observe the situation and continue stay in contact with me.”

Ark nodded with satisfaction after listened to Racard’s message. Then he turned his head to the raccoons standing next to him and grinned.

“The traps are working well.”

“It is thanks to the materials Ark-nim brought. I’m also surprised. To think this little jewel has so much power once added to a simple device.”

The raccoon chief said while tinkering with a red gem. It was the Fire Stone Ark excavated from Hwaryong Mountain. When Ark had used the Phantom Hourglass, he also made as many as 180 Fire Stones. Ark had invested half of those stones into this operation. It was the raccoon chief who thought of adding it to the spheres. The Fire Stones didn’t cause that much damage. However, that changed once it was placed in a sphere filled with gunpowder. The explosiveness was amplified by the gunpowder and created unknown damage. Thus the Fire Stones had turned into a bomb.

“And the person with the most merit in this plan is Roco.”

The raccoon chief turned his head and muttered.

‘Indeed, this plan wouldn’t be possible without Roco.’

Ark stared at Roco. Roco was perfectly immersed in playing her harp.

“So awesome, Manager-nim!”

“You weren’t just lazing around while playing the harp!”

Sapjil and Ulmeok gave her a thumbs up and praised her. Sapjil and Ulmeok were talking about the time Roco took to learn the ‘Rhapsody Melody’ from the ghost. ‘Melody Rhapsody’ was divided into 5 movements, with each movement having an unique effect. And the song Roco was currently playing was the prelude ‘Illusion Sonata.’

-Melody Rhapsody Prelude: 【Illusion Sonata】 (Intermediate, Active)

The tragic fate of the genius musician who composed the Melody Rhapsody dwells within the ‘Illusion Sonata.’ All those who listen to such wonderful magic will be lost in a world of illusion. The people listening to such music on the battlefield will really feel like the main character of a tragedy. Illusion Sonata uses that to target the area where it can project a illusionary landscape. However, the images produced by the illusion have to actually exist. In addition, the realistic sense of the illusion will change depending on the degree of completion.

Yes, the Lancel village that Jewel’s group entered was a mirage created by Illusion Sonata.

‘The illusion seems perfect.’

Ark had seen the illusion of Lancel village that appeared not long ago. After Roco had used the Illusion Sonata, Ark had checked the degree of completion. The result was indeed amazing. Even Ark who knew about it in advance was 100% deceived by the illusion. Furthermore, there was no size limit on the illusions that Roco could create. The reason was simple. It was an illusion but the one Roco produced was different from illusion magic. To be exact, it was a hallucination not an illusion. The Illusion Sonata dragged Jewel’s group into a fantasy world and made them ‘see it as reality.’ That’s why it could show a ridiculous effect like copying a whole village. Although a Minstrel was treated as a boring profession, music was able to create tremendous illusions like this. It showed that there was more to each profession. The only downside was that the target had to be listening to the music. But that problem was easily solved with Redian using her amplification magic on Roco’s harp. Roco’s present coverage of

the Illusion Sonata was several hundred metres! Jewel's group didn't realize that they were hallucinating because of the music. Then Ark placed traps in advanced and they walked right on top of them.

"It really is rewarding watching those guys suffer."

Ark said with a smirk. Anyway, it wasn't necessary to listen to Racard's live coverage. Those guys undergoing the terrible ordeal in the fake Lancel was only 200 metres away. Therefore Ark could see the rising flames and the screams from Jewel's group. After a while, the screams seemed to decrease and Racard's voice could be heard.

"Master, I think all of them have escaped the traps."

"The damage?"

"Um, there aren't that many that burned. Around 30~40 or so?"

'It wasn't that strong.'

Ark looked disappointed after Racard's report. However Ark hadn't expected that he could deal critical damage to them like this. Even if the bombs maximized the power of the Fire Stones, they were still just traps. At the beginning quite a few of them suffered but once they grasped the situation then they managed to avoid the traps.

'Well the traps were mainly for the magicians and priests who have low health. In a war the magicians and priests have tremendous influence. I've achieved my purpose of reducing the number of priests and magicians. And the illusion hasn't been broken yet.'

"Roco, from now on maintain your maximum output."

"I understand."

Roco's fingers began to move even quicker. Her ten fingers raced like the wind over the 47 strings. Dozens of tones were created and a captivating melody flowed out. Then lights from 3~4 more Lancel villages appeared. The degree of completion of the 'Illusion Sonata' has increased and made it more welcoming.

"Hihihihi, they're overwhelmed and don't know what they're doing!"

Racard giggled as he used satellite surveillance mode to watch them. As expected, Jewel's group were in a state of chaos. But it was impossible for them to retreat now. One by one Jewel's group followed the light.

And that was what Ark aimed for.

Snap, bang! Snap, syu syu syu syuk!

The mechanical sounds rang out throughout the forest. He had placed pitfalls along that area. Those guys didn't know about the welcoming lights and just rushed in blindly. He had created a few copies of the same village. Although they weren't stupid so they didn't blindly rush into the village like before. So Ark had buried traps between the different villages. Those guys who were fooled by the lights fell victim to the traps.

'It won't deal a serious blow but the damage will cumulate. The cumulative damage will be a significant penalty when the war begins.'

His plan was to take care of the magicians and priests with traps. However, the ones in the forest weren't traps to deal damage. They were traps to make the magicians and priests consume their mana. If someone was caught in a trap than the magicians and priests would have no choice but to use magic. And even the smallest loss of mana would be helpful on a battlefield.

'They've already lost dozens of priests and magicians and they should've lost 20~30% of their mana from the traps. That will increase the chances of winning the war! Of course they will start using scouts to carefully search for traps as they move through the first but it will be good for buying some time.'

Yes, the biggest reason Ark developed this plan was to gain some time. However, that time wasn't to build up defences for Lancel village. The raccoons had already finished all the defences for Lancel.

The reason he needed time wasn't for defense preparations.....

Snap, syu syu syu syuk!

-The Poison Arrow trap has been activated. 300 damage.

“Damn, another poison!”

“Hurry up before I lose any more mana!”

“Dammit.....”

Racard's live coverage showed the real condition of Jewel's group. Of course, the ability to detect traps was one of the vocational skills of the Rangers and Hunters. However, the welcoming lights of Lancel were spread out across the forest. In other words, the spreading forest was full of traps. It would take a few days just finding all the traps in the forest. So Jewel had his warriors with high health and defense lead the group.

Since 100 spheres were triggered at the same time, quite a few magicians and priests with low health were sacrificed. But the traps in the forest had the effect of draining mana. In this situation losing mana was more threatening than losing health. Health could be restored with recovery magic but there was no way to recover mana within a small amount of time. Even if they were warriors, they wouldn't be able to use skills without mana. Skills played a huge role in battle. No matter the level difference, if no skills were available the odds couldn't be guaranteed. But despite their efforts, the warriors' mana still flew away. In fact, their mana drained even faster as they struggled blindly.

“Jewel, have you caught anything?”

Duke asked in a pained voice.

“.....I don't know. I've been using Mana Track but I can't seem to find anything.”

But Jewel's answer was also pained. Jewel's original occupation was 'Force Stalker.' The primary accomplishment of a Force Stalker was their ability to trace mana. After changing to his 2nd stage profession 'Force Officer' with the help of the alliance, this mana tracking technique was reinforced even further. Yet Jewel still hadn't found any traces of mana in the forest.

“There are 3~4 villages visible. If the illusion is of this magnitude than wouldn't there be some traces of mana?”

“I'm going crazy.”

Jewel murmured in an irritated voice.

‘Dammit, there are also people like this at Lancel.....’

Jewel had previously had members of the suicide squads hide around Lancel village. The reason Jewel had them hide beforehand was to keep an eye on Lancel. However, those guys had been caught by Shambala and were now rotting in jail. Therefore Jewel couldn't risk anyone else scouting around the area. They were trapped in the cell but he had received all the basic information so there was no reason to check again. He never imagined that a situation like this could happen. No, in fact the situation would've still been similar even if he scouted beforehand. The suicide squad members didn't just see the illusion inside the village. The illusion was made with many layers that some of them overlapped with the trees. In addition, the night was so dark that not even starlight was visible. It would be difficult for them to identify anything strange in the forest.

“Damn, I should've known that Ark would play a trick like this.....”

Then Duke spoke in a worried voice.

“Jewel, should we still proceed with the plan?”

“You want to retreat because of some traps?”

“It’s not that. You saw it as well so you know that Ark is in the village. He probably came back after seeing the video.”

“Yes, but that was one of the purposes of the video.”

Jewel murmured in a cold voice. In fact, Jewel’s goal in making Duke film the video wasn’t just to scare away users from Lancel. Jewel knew that Ark wasn’t in Lancel. That was the main reason why Jewel made the video. If Ark saw the video then he would return to Lancel village. If Ark lost his store and Lancel village then it would be a big blow to him, so he would come rushing back. And that was what drove Jewel’s strategy.

“But other users seeing the video is different from Ark seeing it. While users wouldn’t have any reaction to the rumours, Ark would move to save the NPCs of that village. Because that fellow cooperates with NPCs a lot. He could also possibly pull in other troops from different areas.”

“You still don’t understand? That is the reason why the video was posted 18 hours beforehand. Even if they were in the closest city, Ark would be able to move troops in 18 hours. He has no time to bring in reinforcements. That is why he is tying up our ankles with this illusion.”

“I guess so.”

“Besides, in the video you only commanded 200 troops. Even if Ark called in reinforcements, it would only be enough to deal with 200 troops. But there are actually 500 of us. If that Ark saw us then he would be upset and not know what to do.”

Yes, there were a few reasons why Jewel circulated the information on the internet. One was to seal off the users’ intervention in the war. Secondly, it was to call Ark back to Lancel. The third reason was to make Ark think that only 200 people were going to attack Lancel. It was a psychological war with three different effects from just one video! However, Jewel was unaware that the psychological war was destroyed by Shambala’s eavesdropping. Anyway, they were tricked and received considerable damage from the illusion but Jewel still didn’t doubt his victory.

“When we escaped from the village didn’t the illusions also increase? It is because he grasped the number of our troops too late. That fellow is intimidated. If we just manage to find the village than Ark will be finished.”

“.....We just need to find it.”

Duke kicked the wreckage of a trap which activated a short while ago with frustration.

“Damn, why is there this sweet music when I am already annoyed?”

“Sweet music?”

“What? You can’t hear it? A while ago the background music became rather sweet.”

Jewel’s eyes narrowed at Duke’s answer. In fact, Jewel always had the habit of turning on music in his room while playing the game. In order to find inspiration during this fight, he had turned on a grand marching tune. So he couldn’t hear the low music that Duke was talking about.

‘What’s with the music? Perhaps.....?’

Jewel considered something before turning off his music and listening. Then Jewel could hear the soft sound of a harp in his ear. In New World the background music would change depending on the situation. But the music right now was somewhat strange. Jewel suddenly realized something and shouted.

“That’s it, I get it now!”

“What?”

“The reason why I don’t see any traces of mana. Damn, we were tricked. The village we saw wasn’t an illusion. It is a hallucination! Stupid! That’s why I couldn’t detect any mana.”

“What do you mean? Hallucination?”

“The Minstrel. We’ve been seeing hallucinations thanks to the Minstrel’s music. Damn, there was a Minstrel who followed Ark in Lancel. It is certainly her work!”

Jewel was truly a pioneer as he figured out the entire situation from a small clue. Once he knew the skill of the opponent, it wasn’t difficult coming up with a way to handle it.

“Hearing Paralysis!”

Hearing Paralysis was a magic to stop being affected by monsters who used sound attacks like Sirens. If even one person used Hearing Paralysis then they could confirm if the village was a hallucination.

When the music was blocked off, the lights in the forest started flickering and gradually disappeared. It seemed like all the villages in the forest were hallucinations. Since he couldn’t see any villages with the hallucinations turned off, it meant that Lancel had turned off its lights and was hiding. In this situation Jewel didn’t know the exact location of the village but he just laughed.

‘Now that I know what trick he is using, it isn’t a problem to find the location.’

It was a Minstrel’s skill that was causing the hallucinations. And wherever the music reached was the skill range of the Minstrel.

‘The hallucinations began as soon as we entered the forest. And the welcoming lights appeared all over the place. If I apply the scope of the effects then it is obvious that amplification magic has been used. The range of amplification magic is a 500 metres radius. In other words, it is a 1 kilometre diameter.’

Once he grasped that then the real location of Lancel village was clear. He determined the two villages that were most distant from each other. The source of the music had to be somewhere in the centre between those two villages.

“There. There is no doubt!”

Jewel soon found the location of Lancel village. Once he figured out the place, there was no reason to rush and run into the traps. It was obvious that Lancel village was prepared for an attack. On the other hand, the suicide squad members had received quite a bit of damage before the battle even began.

“Scouts, search for traps and secure the path. The remaining members should check their equipment and recover in the meantime. Once the scouts secure the path then we will immediately attack Lancel.”

They had already made enough mistakes. No more mistakes would be tolerated.

-I understand.

Since Jewel had used Hearing Paralysis, the members answered using hand signals. Anyway, Jewel carefully rearranged the formation before finally moving through the forest. How much time had passed? Soon they passed through the dense forest and wide, flat ground appeared. There was a village situation at the top of the plains. The village looked pitch black..... Yes, it was Lancel village! They had finally found Lancel village 2 hours after entering the forest.

“We found it!”

Jewel and Duke’s eyes lit up as they looked at Lancel village. Then someone suddenly walked forward from the village. Despite the considerable distance, Jewel could still recognize the opponent. It was a wolf with a black mane flying, none other than Ark who was disguised as Dark Wolf. But there was something V shaped sticking out from his head. It was like an insect’s antennae. After seeing the antennae of an insect on a wolf, Jewel just laughed.

“Hmm, you found us faster than I thought.”

But Jewel couldn’t hear since he was deaf. Jewel released Hearing Paralysis and clenched his teeth together.

“You bastard, I’m going to start attacking now!”

“Don’t you remember I’m a lot more powerful than you?”

“Shut up, I don’t know how you knew and returned to Lancel to play such a trick but our bad relationship ends here. Lancel will die with you!”

Jewel shouted furiously. Ark just looked at Jewel and sighed before shaking his head.

“Hah, why are you so persistent that you even came this far?”

“W-w-w-what? You dare say something like that? After collecting 4,000 gold and a rare item from selling Silvana and interfering with our Seutandal conquest plan, you dare ask why I’m so persistent? What did you just say?”

“I don’t understand the meaning of your words.”

Ark looked at him with a pitiful look and clicked his tongue.

“While you have a somewhat spicy taste, you’re not worthy of being my opponent. Yet you couldn’t grasp this and still attacked? Do you want to give me even more money? Do you even have anything left to give? I’m thankful but my heart is quite troubled by it. Why don’t you just leave peacefully this time while you can?”

“W-what? This bastard.....! Talking like that.....”

Ark’s words caused Jewel’s blood pressure to ruse. But after a moment, he clenched his teeth and shouted orders.

“Attack! Kill, kill! Do whatever it takes to defeat him!”

“Wah ah ah ah!”

The 500 suicide squad members raised their weapons and rushed forward. Then Ark turned back and shouted.

“Standby!”

The lights in Lancel village turned on at Ark’s voice. When the lights turned on, Lancel village became so bright it was like broad daylight. Jewel’s eyes which had been adapted to the darkness winced from the sudden light.

Chwa, chwa, chwa, chwa, chwa, chwa!

Small screens abruptly rose in front of Ark. Inside the village surrounded by stone ways, 15 screens shot up in every direction. Ark laughed at the suicide squad members and laughed pleasantly before shouting.

“The system has signalled a green light. Action!”

“Wah ah ah ah!”

It was at that time. All of a sudden, here was a thundering shout and warriors hiding behind the stone wall stood up. Jewel’s face was dyed with confusion at the troops. The soldiers which appeared from behind the stone wall weren’t residents of Lancel. The hundreds of warriors were all users!

“Huk, this is.....”

Jewel hesitated with a perplexed expression. The secret society members had only posted the video of them attacking users 18 hours ago. It was natural for the users to become scared and leave Lancel. But what was up with all the users?

“It was quite a good idea making that video and distributing it.”

Ark laughed at his expression and muttered.

“But it’s nothing compared to the game being broadcasted.”

“B-broadcasted?”

Jewel’s face caught from different angles then appeared on the 15 split screens.