

Ark Vol 21 C 3

Chapter 3

ACT3 Smuggler's Pass

Hwiiiiing!

Cold wind raged around the valley like a piece of ice. Snow was piled up from a snowstorm that ended a while ago but the wind blew it everywhere like a storm. In the midst of this white storm was a black wolf.

"Phew....."

The black wolf, also known as Ark, sighed.

"I expected it but this really is no joke."

Ark said as he looked at the area where he had to cross. Ark was currently in a deep valley halfway up a mountain. He was also grabbing protruding stones on a cliff like someone rock climbing. It wasn't just Ark stuck on the cliff. Shambala, Lariette and 200 chosen people from the expedition force wearing thick fur followed Ark. All of them were using gear to grab the protruding rocks. But recently those protruding rocks couldn't be seen at all.

"We can't move this way anymore."

Ark examined his map and the surrounding terrain before shaking his head. Then he turned his eyes to a cliff opposite him that was dozens of metres away.

"Racard, check the cliff on the other side."

"Okay."

Racard emerged from Ark's thick fur from changing into Dark Wolf. He flapped his wings and flew to the other cliff before returning after a while.

"I checked it. There is a way to move down on the opposite cliff."

"I'm glad. I was worried we would have to turn back. Shambala."

Ark turned around and grabbed the rope that Shambala pulled out of his bag. Ark then tied the rope firmly to a stone nearby and gave the other end to Racard.

"Find a suitable rock on the other side and tie it firmly."

"I understand."

Racard flew to the other cliff while holding the rope. The snowstorm was intense and he couldn't check it fully but the rope stretching between the two cliffs seemed to tighten. And Racard immediately flew back.

"That's it. I tied it firmly so it won't come loose."

Ark pulled the rope several times and confirmed the weight that could be safely held by the rope. There was a loud roar in the distance. The winds that blew in the valley were so rough that anything would shake. No, if it was already a different rope then it would've probably already been broken. However, the rope Shambala carried was a magic item with high durability so it didn't break that easily.

"It is windy so only 1 person should move at a time. I'll move to the other side first to check it out."

"Yes, please be careful."

Larriette blew out a white breath as she replied. Ark nodded before using the rope to move to the other cliff.

Ku ku ku ku, ku ku ku ku!

It happened when he was 2/3rd of the way there. All of a sudden the entire mountain seemed to shake.

“Again! Everybody stick closely to the cliff!”

Shambala shouted as he clung to the cliff. In fact, this was a snow covered mountain and light earthquakes occurred a few times. But even a light earthquake was a tremendous threat to the people on the cliff. Small stones falling from the cliff above them could deal huge damage. Dozens of people without any rope had previously been hit on the head and lost their lives. But fortunately that unhappy accident didn't occur this time.

“Phew, we survived that one.”

Ark holding onto the rope as well as Shambala, Lariette and the 200 troops sighed with relief. However, this time the problem wasn't the rocks falling from the cliff.

Ku ku ku ku, ku ku ku ku, ku ku ku ku!

“What the? There's no shaking so where is this sound coming from?”

Ark tilted his head to one side and looked at the cliff. Shambala who was surveying the area paled and cried out with a stricken look.

“Ark, the valley!”

Ark reflexively looked and he also paled like Shambala. A huge tidal wave was pushing through the valley at tremendous speed towards Ark. The huge tidal wave consisted of snow and rock! That's right. The snow piled up on the upper reaches of the valley had collapsed, causing an avalanche. Ark who confirmed the avalanche quickly moved his eyes to the other side of the valley. It would take at least 3~4 minutes to reach the other side of the valley. That was enough time for Ark to be turned into finely minced meat.

“Damn, it’s already late! Everybody climb up as much as possible before the avalanche hits!”

Shambala shouted and the soldiers quickly ascended the precipice with their gear. However, Ark who was dangling from the middle of the rope stared blankly.

“Oh my god, the destination is right in front of my nose……!”

A voice filled with exhaustion flowed from Ark’s mouth. Ark thought back to yesterday evening when he had received the information from Lariette.

“Please explain more!”

The scene had returned to yesterday evening when Ark had grasped Lariette’s hand. Ark quickly dropped his hands and the two people blushed……

Anyway, Lariette explained the secret passage in detail.

“The minstrel called it Smuggler’s Pass.”

“Smuggler’s Pass?”

“Originally smugglers use this pass to move items between Schudenberg and the Sinus Principality. So it was called Smuggler’s Pass.”

“Anyway, it is possible to go beyond Pabiun Fortress using this passage?”

“Yes. I guess but……”

Lariette sighed as she looked through her memory and shook her head.

"I said that but I don't remember too well."

"You don't remember? What?"

"It's been two years since I've gone through that path so I don't remember the whole way. It was also summer when I went through there. The path is also quite steep so at least 20 of my colleagues had died. The minstrel said that Smuggler's Path is a dangerous place where the smuggler had to risk their lives. I don't know what it will be like in winter....."

"That isn't a problem."

Ark said with flames in his eyes. If the Bristania expedition took the leadership then Haverstein would be replaced as commander. Then Ark's monopoly rights would fly away. Ark would have a huge amount of stock and go bankrupt. It wasn't simply the game that he would become bankrupt in. He would also become bankrupt in reality. It was a problem with his life at stake! He had to do everything possible to pass through Pabiun Fortress. He couldn't hesitate in the game just because there was a risk of dying.

"I'll take care of the rest so Lariette-nim should just tell me what you remember."

Ark listened to Lariette's expression and indicated the location on the map of the Albana Mountains. Ark was able to figure out the approximate route of Smuggler's Pass.

'But I can't just go there blindly with only Lariette-nim's words. I have to gather information about the surrounding terrain.'

"Summon Demon, Racard!"

Ark gave the map to Racard and said.

"Check the terrain carefully and mark any difficult spots on the map."

“What? You want me to fly around the freezing snowy mountains?”

“If you complete this well then I’ll give you one holiday whenever you want.”

“Really?”

“This is important.”

“Understood!”

Racard flew towards the mountains with an expression filled with desire for a holiday. Ark’s life was valuable so he needed to check the route meticulously. If Ark died several times then he could recover the stats lost. But if he incurred a debt and became bankrupt then he wouldn’t be able to recover. That’s why Ark meticulously checked everything despite not having much time. It was quicker than having to turn back several times. Once again, Ark would become bankrupt if the Bristania expedition was in charge. And the time remaining was 6~7 days. If the Schudenberg expedition captured Pabiun Fortress in 2~3 days then they would take a few days to move to the Silrinad.

‘The expedition could use the Smuggler’s Pass to capture Pabiun Fortress. The problem is that there are only four days left. If a problem occurred on Smuggler’s Pass then everything would be finished. There is only one chance. Despite the urgency in my heart, I have to collect as much information as possible to increase the chances of success.’

This was Ark’s judgement. So he impatiently waited for Racard to return. After 12 hours had passed, Racard tearfully returned with a runny nose.

“Ohh.....c-cold, everything seems to be frozen.”

“Did you examine it?”

“I-I checked it. There is a lot of snow piled up but Master should somehow be able to move to the other side of the mountain. Well, that’s by my standards. The places that I saw are indicated separately.”

Racard replied as he handed back the map. He opened the map and saw the new route that Racard drew. The parts that Lariette couldn't remember and had been left blank were connected with dots.

'Okay. I've secured the necessary information!'

Ark immediately visited Haverstein with the information.

"Viscount-nim, I have a way to solve this!"

"A way? What are you suddenly saying?"

Haverstein asked. He was still worrying about the news that Bristania was marching towards Silrinad.

"A way to capture Pabiun Fortress."

"Capture Pabiun Fortress? What is it?"

Haverstein hurriedly asked. Ark opened the map on the table and summarized Lariette and Racard's information. Haverstein frowned at the map before he looked towards Ark.

"This is.....smugglers? Smuggler's Pass?"

"Did you know about it?"

Haverstein stared at Ark with an astonished expression before shaking his head and saying.

"No, I've heard of it before. That there was a secret route smugglers used to travel between Schudenberg and the Sinus Principality somewhere in the Albana Mountains. The border guards

searched for a few years but they couldn't find anything so I thought it was just a rumour.....it really exists? Where did you get this information?"

Should he say that a minstrel in a tavern gave the information? Judging by Haverstein's anxious expression, he couldn't joke around at a time like this.

"I got my hands on it accidentally."

"The route drawn on this map is really Smuggler's Pass?"

"Yes. The person who told me is reliable and I confirmed the information using my pet."

"If you say so then I'll have to trust you....."

Haverstein sighed as he looked at the map again and muttered.

"Like I said, the border guards investigated for a long time before dismissing it as rumours. That's because the Albana Mountains are so steep that it is impossible to think there is another route other than Pabiun Canyon. Moreover, winter is when the Albana Mountains is the most dangerous. It will be impossible to move 30,000 troops through Smuggler's Pass."

"Moving 30,000 troops isn't necessary."

Ark answered bluntly.

"What do you mean? There are tens of thousands of monsters stationed at the fortress. In order to fight against them....."

Haverstein spoke before suddenly closing his mouth. It was because of Ark's response. His expression cleared and he nodded.

“The method you mentioned.....”

“Yes. Currently the expedition can’t penetrate Pabiun Fortress because of the monsters stationed there. But to be precise, it isn’t because of the ‘monsters.’ The problem is that the Black Obelisk Forest would resurrect the killed monsters.”

That’s right. The monsters from Pabiun Fortress had received considerable damage from the expedition’s attacks. But the reason it didn’t fall was that the black obelisks restored the monsters after a period of time. The effects of Earth Blast lasted 24 hours so the monsters could be restored in time. Even if the Gripper died while using Earth Blast, they would just be restored so the situation repeated again and again. It might seem weak but it was a successful defense tactic. There was no doubt that someone was controlling the monsters.

‘The Black Obelisk Forest had deliberately been placed to the rear of the fortress so it isn’t possible to stop the resurrection. It’s also impossible for the users to go behind the fortress. It isn’t perfect but the movements could be controlled to some extent.’

It was unthinkable. But Ark had already heard from Global Exos that users were involved with the enemy. Then wouldn’t it be a user controlling the monsters in Pabiun Fortress?

‘But a user wouldn’t know about Smuggler’s Pass.’

Ark moved his finger along the line drawn on the map and smiled. He could use it to bypass the fortress and move to the Black Obelisk Forest.

“If we blow up the Black Obelisk Forest then the problem will be easily solved.”

Ark had thought of a plan the moment he received information about Smuggler’s Pass. Of course the black obelisks would just be restored. However, the time it took for the black obelisks to be restored was incomparable to the resurrection time of monsters. The court magicians determined that it took about a week to ten days to appear again after it was destroyed. They could wipe out the monsters and capture Pabiun Fortress in that time. Once they occupied the fortress then the resurrection of the obelisks wouldn’t be a problem anymore.

“But there will be quite a few monsters at the Black Obelisk Forest.....”

“Draw them out.”

Ark pointed to Pabiun Fortress on the map and said.

“Those who died in the battle yesterday will be restored by now. As you know, the number of monsters for each black obelisk is fixed. In other words, if those guys don’t die again then no more monsters will emerge from the Black Obelisk Forest. If the expedition force rallies all the troops and attacks Pabiun Fortress then all the resurrected monsters will attack.”

“You want us to attack the fortress until all the monsters leave the Black Obelisk Forest?”

“Yes. The Black Obelisk Forest is approximately 1 kilometre away from the fortress. You can just arrange the siege weapons and stay behind them to minimize the damage while attacking the monsters.”

“Certainly.....”

Haverstein murmured in a cheery voice. So a plan was developed to capture the impregnable fortress. But the success of the operation depended on one important prerequisite.

“In the end, the issue has returned to the starting point. If there are fewer troops then it will be easier to make it through Smuggler’s Pass. It will also take a minimum of one day to capture Pabiun Fortress after the obelisks were destroyed. In order to reach Silrinad before the Bristania expedition, you’ll have to get through Smuggler’s Pass and destroy the obelisks within three days.”

“It is possible. No, I’ll make it possible.”

“Then you will go?”

“If there is a warrior more reliable than me in the expedition then I will concede it to them.”

“.....Isn’t that impossible?”

Haverstein smiled and murmured. At the same time, an information window appeared in front of Ark.

-The Expedition’s Commander has accepted Ark-nim’s strategy.

* Art of Communication increased by 30.

* Political Power increased by 20.

* Achievements increased by 500.

-The Expedition Army’s Crusade (Event Quest)

+ Sub Quest: Blow up the ‘Black Obelisk Forest’ operation

The Schudenberg expedition has been blocked by monsters and is unable to cross the border to the Sinius Principality. Ark-nim has proposed a new operation and the Expedition Commander Haverstein accepted.

Operation Overview: Use the secret route that smugglers use to travel between Schudenberg and the Sinius Principality to bypass Pabiun Fortress and destroy the Black Obelisk Forest before the monsters can be restored. While the special attack corps is approaching the Black Obelisk Forest, the expedition army will attack Pabiun Fortress to draw the attention of the monsters.

Once Haverstein accepted Ark’s proposal, it was immediately registered as a sub quest. Of course, this mission wasn’t one that Ark could do alone. So Haverstein summoned the unit leaders and explained Ark’s plan. However, Haverstein’s decision was received with backlash from the leaders.

“You’re leaving such an important mission to the one in charge of supplies? It is ridiculous!”

“Even if he is the one who came up with the plan, this is too excessive!”

“Yes, a warrior should take over this mission!”

When the strategy was explained and Ark was designated the one in charge, the leaders immediately made a disturbance. The users also opposed it. This was a huge mission concerning the fate of the expedition. If the operation leader completed it successfully then they could get enormous achievement points. The users couldn’t give up such a chance. But Haverstein asked the room with a fierce expression.

“Do you really think Ark doesn’t deserve the mission?”

“Of course!”

The leaders answered simultaneously.

“Look again and answer. Do you really think there is anyone better than Ark?”

The unit leaders started at Ark after hearing the same question. In the next moment..... Their eyes widened with shock.

“Of course since he is a merchant.....heok, what, what the?”

“T-that was Lord Ark.....then Lord Ark is.....”

The leaders stuttered with a stunned expression. They looked at the place Ark was standing just now. But Ark wasn’t visible when they looked again. He had changed into a wolf with black fur. From Schudenberg to Seutandal, there were no users in New World who didn’t know the name Dark Wolf after he defended Lancel from the bandit group.

“He is Dark Wolf.”

Haverstein smiled and replied. The users’ doubts were also calmed after Dark Wold’s true identity was revealed.

“The ones that played a key role in the Bristania expedition were Bread and the magician Redian. But Schudenberg also has a warrior comparable to them. That person is Dark Wolf. Do you think there is anyone more qualified than him?”

The leaders all closed their mouths. After that the establishment of the special forces was quickly conducted. There was significant achievement points involved so there were many eager applicants.

‘But there is a time limit so it isn’t possible to take a lot of troops. 300 people should be suitable. We also have to quickly go through Smuggler’s Pass so the users should be at least level 300.’

Ark carefully looked around the troops and selected 300 people to share the quest with. It was a situation which emphasized speed so they also couldn’t bring many supplies. Equipment and food necessary for hiking was required. But there was one essential item that couldn’t be omitted.

-Starlight Bomb (Special)

A special bomb developed by the Magic Institute with Holy Power inscribed on it. It particularly exerts a strong power over enemies with the demonic attribute. The development isn’t perfect so it will take a significant amount of time for the bomb to blow up. But it has a strong explosive force that is capable to destroying the black obelisks. So it can be utilized to destroy the black obelisks.

“The fate of Schudenberg expedition lies with you.”

Haverstein said after handing over the Starlight Bombs to Ark. But the destiny of the Schudenberg expedition had never been on Ark’s mind.

'I'm only interested in protecting the money! I can't forgive any monsters that interfere in my business! I will blow all of them up!'

A motivated fire was kindled in Ark's eyes.

After that it was like a documentary on human victory. Ark's kindled motivation quickly disappeared in the snow covered mountains. Even the smugglers avoided these mountains during winter. The place was more dangerous than Ark expected. The piles of snow created an illusion of the ground only to discover there was a crevasse. There were also occasional earthquakes which caused falling rocks to smash the head of the special forces. 10 hours after entering Smuggler's Pass, the 300 members had been reduced to 200. Without Lariette's information and Racard's scouting, the 200 hundred remaining members probably would've been killed.

'This operation has to succeed no matter the cost!'

Ark reiterated again with clenched fists. And they finally reached the last checkpoint of Smuggler's Pass after all that suffering.....

'Did I come all this way just to die so absurdly?'

Ku ku ku ku, ku kwa kwa kwa kwa!

Ark stared at the huge grey monster of snow. The problem wasn't dying. If Ark died here then the strategy would fail. In summer, this valley was a place where the road below could be used. But the accumulated snow meant that they had to use a rope to move between cliffs. If Ark died here then the rope would snap and the method to move to the other side would disappear. Racard would also disappear when Ark died so he couldn't retrieve the rope. The operation would be halted. In the end Haverstein would have his Commander position taken away. And Ark would have too much stock and would become bankrupt. If he had no money then his mother couldn't even go to the hospital anymore.

'No. I can't let that happen! I can't die like this!'

Desperation ignited in Ark's eyes.

'What.....there must be some way!'

Ark considered all the possible measures. Was there a quick way to return to the cliff and avoid the avalanche? He couldn't be swept away from the avalanche. Should he grab the hand glider from Radun to run away?

.....There must be some way to escape the avalanche.

Should he grab the rope tightly and pray?

.....As long as the rope wasn't swept away by an avalanche.

Every possible suggestion ended in him being buried by the avalanche.

'Is there really no way?'

Ark worried like crazy. Then sparks flew in Ark's head as he clenched the rope firmly.

'Wait? Yes, that's the way.....!'

Now wasn't the time to worry about whether it was possible or impossible. As soon as Ark came up with the idea, he took out his sword and started cutting the rope. The rope had a durability bonus so it didn't break easily. But the rope finally snapped after a few more attempts. When the rope snapped, Ark was swung towards the other cliff. If Ark crashed into the cliff then he would be squashed like a ripe tomato!

"Now's the time. Riposte!"

Ark used Riposte the moment he was about to hit the cliff. Riposte pushed the enemy back 10 metres. However, it was impossible to force the rock wall back. Instead, the force of the rope's swing and Ark's body caused him to stop moving. Then the avalanche was almost upon him. Ark was still clinging to the rope!

"If I stay here I'll die! Sprint!"

Ark grinded his teeth together and shouted. He turned his body and used Sprint to run up the cliff. Ark hung onto the rope while running up the cliff. That's right. That was the method Ark came up with. It was a technique to use run up the cliff while hanging onto the rope!

"Damn, it's still lacking a bit!"

The speed of the avalanche was faster than Ark's Sprint. The avalanche rumbled and got closer to Ark. The size of the avalanche was also larger than Ark imagined. Despite using Sprint and running with the rope, the height of the avalanche was still higher. Just before Ark was about to be swept away by the avalanche, a skill popped into his head.

"That's right, Jump!"

Ark stepped on a stone and shouted. The power surged into his thighs and he jumped up 10 metres. Ark grabbed a protruding stone close to him as the avalanche passed right underneath him. Sweat flooded down his back like a waterfall.

"I-I lived....."

"Damn, that guy really has a long life."

Shambala laughed and muttered from the cliff opposite to Ark. Anyway, Ark had managed to avoid being killed by the avalanche. After the crisis was over, Ark connected the rope again and Shambala, Lariette and the other members climbed over. After that there were no more problems. Once they moved to the cliff, the path was not a relatively gentle slope. When they walked a little further along the slope, a message window appeared in front of them.

-You have exited the Albana Mountains. -You have entered the Pabiun Canyon area.

“Finally.....!”

“We’ve gone through Smuggler’s Pass!”

The tired soldiers cheered as they saw the message. Shambala rolled his stiffened shoulders and muttered.

“The only thing left is to find the Black Obelisk Forest.”

“Not yet.”

“What? Not yet?”

“There’s one place I have to visit prior to that.”

Ark smiled and moved forward. Shambala, Lariette and the other special forces followed him. Then the snow on the ground suddenly moved and an eyeball popped out. It was similar to the eyeball stuck to Ark. The eyeball looked in the direction that the special forces had disappeared.