

Ark Vol 3 Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Lord of Darkness, Valderas

Move the cannon, aim, and FIRE!

When the black fireball hits its mark, it crushes the annoying monsters crawling around in an instant as it scatters them. Since it has a long range as well, even the monsters that looked like specks, far into the distance, were no problem.

Should he say that it felt like he was playing an FPS (First Person Shooter) game? His stress and fatigue flew away in an instant.

When he saw the message that 5 contribution points and EXP were added per monster, he had thought it was trifling, but he could fire the scorch cannon ten times in 30 minutes. The monsters destroyed in just one shot would range from a minimum of dozens to over a hundred, so his contribution points and experience went up like crazy. With 2 from killing Narak and 1 from the the sub-quest, Ark had gone up 3 levels and was now level 75. Shambala also leveled up similarly, while the low-leveled JusticeMan, Roco, and the other Militia went up by at least 5 levels.

Had the level 30 players ever leveled up this astonishingly fast? The Militia were touched so deeply that they couldn't get over it for awhile. Ark's contribution points also went up from 9,000 to 18,000 in the blink of an eye.

- Ark's current contribution is 18,560. You are in 21st place.

'My ranking went up by 40 in an instant!'

He had finally started catching up to the players in Platoon 1. Alan was still leading the contribution ranking, however, the difference that had

been 4 times as great had shrunken to 2 times. It felt like the fog had cleared, allowing him to glimpse the summit of the mountain at last.

'I don't know if I can beat Alan, but I might be able to get into the top 10.'

"You've worked hard. Rest a while."

Having reached the castle, Ark dismissed Group B and was heading to the Lord's Castle to report the result. However, while passing the square, he heard a ruckus off to the side. Turning his head, he saw the players from Group A, who had failed the operation and returned to gather there. Unlike when they had confidently departed, everyone was surrounding and glaring at Alan, Andel, and the rest of Platoon 1. He happened to meet them just as he was curiously thinking about what happened to Group A. Ark pushed through the crowd to survey the situation.

"If you've got a mouth, say something," snapped a Warrior.

"Just how are you going to take responsibility for this?"

"How is this my responsibility?"

"What?"

"I never carried out the operation arbitrarily. I always went forward while discussing it with the leaders of Platoons 2 and 3. Don't you think you're forcing it a bit by putting the blame for failure only on me?"

Alan held his head high and answered with an arrogant expression. The gathered users argued as though they couldn't believe their ears.

"We're not acting this way because we failed the quest!"

"That's right, because of the magic bomb that you threw, 6 people from our raid died!"

"Ours lost 7. Even our raid leader died!"

If you pieced together their words, it came down to this. As everyone had expected, Group A had easily reached the scorch cannon. Then they attacked the 300 monsters head-on. Their fighting forces were nearly equal, but as soon as the totally unexpected mini boss 'Gun Captain Najak' showed up, Group A was pushed back.

Alan was for

ced to call a retreat. The enemy was stronger than he thought, so he was going to raise their stats with food and individual buffs before attempting an all-out attack again. And as Alan planned, at first Group A unleashed a fierce assault as they pressed back the enemy. The problem was 5 minutes later...

Players suddenly began to go on a rampage. Hexed with Confusion, they went around casting their skills everywhere.

The 'Howling Seasoned Chilies' Ark had substituted in were showing their colors. But there was no one in Group A who knew they would fall into Confusion. It was because they had never heard of getting a hexed from eating normal food. In any case, thanks to everyone going crazy, Group A took an enormous blow. Truthfully, up to this point, it wasn't Alan's fault.

However, before the Confusion wore off, the magic bomb's time reached its limit. Finally breaking free from Confusion, Alan had two options. To embrace the bomb like some kind of heroic trooper and die alone. Or, he could ensure his own survival no matter who else died.

'The choice Alan made is obvious even without seeing it.'

The Health of the players were already reaching rock bottom because of the Confusion. Since a bomb exploded in their midst, the result was obvious. 15 killed, with dozens more hurled into critical condition. The shocked Group A immediately retreated and the sub-quest ended in failure.

"We understand that it was an unexpected situation. But there was a lot of damage from you, the so-called Commander, throwing the magic bomb. That's definitely your responsibility!"

"Then what was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to embrace the magic bomb and die or something?"

"What?"

"The people who died just didn't have any luck."

Alan was smart. This may be a game, but he wasn't able to lead this many people simply with his high level. He needed wit, leadership, and charisma for it to be possible. Alan was equipped with all of it. As though that wasn't enough, he got one extra, unnecessary thing. The greatest disadvantage of those who think themselves clever; pride. Truthfully, no matter who looked at it, Alan was in the wrong. However, he didn't apologize. It was because of his pride that stuck

with him to the end. It was the reason the players were angry. And, once the rage burst through the floodgates, it swelled uncontrollably.

Those of merit attract undue attention and envy. In order to command others, one cannot help but gain an egotistic side.

Alan has lived this way until now; there had been small complaints, but nothing had become too great of a problem. However, Alan's recent, rapid rise to fame had started drawing much jealousy. And, now that there was an excuse, people were attacking Alan left and right.

'This is why I don't like players.'

Of course, he disliked Alan even more. At first place in contribution, Alan was also firmly seated at first place in the players that Ark disliked. Thus, Alan's plight was Ark's joy. A wicked smile spread over Ark's lips.

'I worked so hard for this, it would be a shame to let it pass with just an argument. Now, shall we properly kindle this fire?'

"Dedric, this is a special task."

Ark summoned Dedric and whispered into his ear. Dedric's eyes sparkled as he pricked his ears.

"Oooh, as expected of Master! What a truly underhanded— I mean, awesome, idea."

"Think you can do it?"

"Just leave it to me, something like this is welcome any time."

Dedric smiled with a strange expression as he crawled low along the ground. Crawling between the feet of the noisily arguing players, Dedric was as nimble as a cockroach. In such a manner, Dedric crept past the players and leapt to attach himself to the rear of Alan's white horse. That was when a rough holler exploded out.

"Shut the fuck up, you bastards! Do you know who you're fucking with? You think I'm some pushover because I stayed quiet? You guys should just move as you're told! Dammit, do you think that I, Alan, would deal with bastards like you if not for the experience and contribution?"

The clamoring players suddenly quieted. Alan shook his head with a flummoxed expression. "N-no. I didn't..."

"This bastard, is that how he thought of us?"

"I can't believe my ears, seems like he's under the delusion that he can do anything he wants after being on TV once?"

"On TV, he said this and that about other people's help... so his true self was like this."

Players muttered in dejected voices. Even the women, who had always blindly taken Alan's side, whispered as they glanced at him disappointedly. Just then, another shout burst from Alan.

"I told you to shut up, you damn wenches shut up too! You wretched bitches, I put up with your annoying squawking and chasing after me, but you're betraying me now? Go to hell!"

"Wh-what? Bi-bitches?"

"Alan, that's too much!"

As the girls started to boil, the boys sprang up to shout insults at Alan. With a shaken expression, Alan backed up while shaking his head.

"N-no, it wasn't me who said that!"

"Are you thinking of treating us like idiots 'til the end? Who else is there but you, huh?"

Alan whipped his head around to see, but Dedric had already been unsummoned and had returned to the Netherworld. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Alan was suddenly stamped as someone with a dual personality.

"He has revealed his true colors at last."

"Sheesh, there's even guys like him?"

"What an unsociable jerk. I won't take your fucking orders anymore."

"Such a disappointment. I didn't know he was such a person. Let's go."

The players quickly scattered, as if they didn't even want to talk about it anymore. As though he didn't quite understand the situation, Alan was left with a dumb look. 100 people had been gathered around him, but now there were only fifteen players left.

'So pitiful. Well, he did do something worth becoming that pitiful...' After leaving the square with the others, the corners of Ark's lips rose slightly. 'That's why you have to mess with people secretly.'

It's not like he didn't think he went too far, but he hadn't made Dedric tell untruths. The Alan Ark knew, at least, was a two-faced bastard for sure. There was no need to feel something like shame when telling people about the truth, right? Granted, he didn't expect Alan would fall to the ground with something like this. But the players had abandoned him, so his contribution points that had been endlessly soaring up would inevitably falter.

'This is the start. Alan, you've made an enemy of me. Don't think that'll end with just this. Someday I'll expose your true identity in front of Lariette.'

Ark was growing more wicked day by day.

"Ark, I heard the news from Sir Cross. You did it!"
The young Lord rejoiced as he ran over and took Ark's hand.

"Not only did you stop the scorch cannon, you actually seized it! You have done us a great deed indeed. No words of praise are enough. We must immediately inform the residents of your heroic accomplishment. Raymond, write up a notice to put onto the message board."

"Yes, sir." Raymond beamed as he raised his pen.

"N-not at all. This mission was not something I did on my own. If not for the help of the Guard, Militia, and the crewmen of the Silver Arrow, I wouldn't have been able to do anything. That's why they are essentially the ones who completed the mission. If you are putting up a

notice, please put their names rather than mine." Ark spoke humbly as refused the honor.

Just a few minutes ago, he had witnessed the fall of Alan, whose popularity had been flying sky high. Granted, half of it was Ark's work, but regardless, it had happened. Someone who sticks out draws attention. It didn't just apply to Alan. The object of envy soon becomes the object of bitter jealousy. Alan had the level and organizational power to deal with such attention, but the interest of other players was a considerably uneasy element for Ark. He could easily become the target of a Chaotic player, and it was obvious that many limitations on his actions would follow him. He wanted to avoid at least that at all costs.

'I'll just take the profit without sticking out.' That was the goal Ark had made while participating in this quest.

Having no way to know such inner thoughts, the young Lord nodded, deeply touched.

"I believe the fact that I have been of help, is a sufficient reward in itself."

"As expected of Ark! No need for a price on a good deed? You are truly a person who is like the crystal of chivalry. To be sure, that's why Father was able to trust you and entrust the keepsake to you. I understand, if you truly mean it, there's no helping it. Raymond, list on the notice that this operation was succeeded by the actions of the Guard, Militia, and the crew of the Silver Arrow, as Ark requested. Is that fine?"

"Yes, thank you." Ark grinned as he brought up the main subject.
"Actually, I came to show you this, my Lord."

Ark held out the parchment he had obtained after killing Gun Captain Narak.

- You have checked the contents of 'Written Instructions Stamped with Master of Darkness Valderas' Approval.'

It told of the Gun Captains of the scorch cannons, Narak and Najak.

You idiots, what the hell are you doing that's taking over a week?!

Due to your incompetence, our Great Master Valderas has decided to personally lead the Demonic Army towards the front line. And, by demonstrating the Great Power of Darkness in person, He will annihilate each and every one of the weak Humans.

You two, move the scorch cannons to the location marked in the enclosed map before the full moon rises. As soon as Great Master Valderas arrives, we will assault Jackson Castle along with the scorch cannons.

"Valderas!" Exclaimed the young Lord in astonishment.
"Is it a name you've heard of?"

"Yeah..." The young Lord put a hand to his forehead as he rambled on with his inner musings. "I have seen the name in an old document kept inside the castle. I heard that Valderas was the one who ruled the current Jackson territory before the Dark Ages as a warrior of the legendary Draconians. It it said that he was an excellent Lord, but once the Dark Ages began, he suddenly transformed into a vanguard of the darkness and terrorized the continent. Then the 7 Heroes soon appeared, and I heard Valderas disappeared along with the Power of Darkness."

"How did someone who disappeared hundreds of years ago—?"

"There's no way to tell. Perhaps..." The young Lord continued speaking in a severe voice. "I am only saying this because it is you, but truthfully, ever since the unidentified Army of Darkness attacked Jackson, there has been much a lot of uneasy talk going around. The alarm that the darkness of the Dark Ages may be awakening is spreading dramatically. The Dark Fog covering Jackson shares many similarities with the Power of Darkness that can be found in the records of that time. It is part of the reason why the 3 Great Guilds sent volunteer troops so swiftly. Because if this matter is truly related to the Army of Darkness, then it is no ordinary problem."

"Then?"

"Of course, it's still too early to conclude that the Dark Ages have come again. As I said, Valderas was a descendant of Draconians who originally ruled Jackson. There's the possibility he was hiding somewhere and attacked Jackson to reclaim it again. However, there is no doubt the situation is more severe than expected."

Cross and Raymond also exchanged words with grave faces.

"According to the records of our documents, Valderas is said to have strength that rivals the force of a single army division. The renowned Heroes who acted in the Dark Ages lost their lives at his hands."

"I didn't think it would end like this..."

"We have no time. The full moon is rising tomorrow."

"There are still two days before the Kingdom's reinforcements are expected to arrive, but the castle walls are already too weakened to

resist due to the continuous daily monster attacks. If they come in to attack the castle, Jackson will take irrecoverable damage, even if we are victorious in the battle."

"We must stop them from reaching the castle at all costs."

There was no doubt that the parchment heralding Valderas' appearance was set to announce the final battle. In other words, that meant Valderas was the C++ quest's final boss!

He would surely be stronger than any boss that Ark had faced before!

"My thoughts exactly, we simply must stop Valderas from arriving here, at all costs. There are two days until the reinforcements arrive, if we can hold him for two days, it will be our victory."

"Of course. It won't be an easy battle if the opponent is Valderas, but, thankfully, we have the written instructions brought by Ark, so we know the enemy's route. Also, one of the scorch cannons has even fallen into our hands. If we mobilize the scorch cannon and all our forces to ambush the route they're taking, we have a good chance of success."

The young Lord nodded his head as he grabbed Ark's hand.

"As you heard, all of this is your accomplishment."

- By supplying decisive information that will influence the result of the war, your contribution has risen by 3,000.

A very welcome message popped up with cheerful sound effects.

"The upcoming fight will be longer and more dangerous than any of the battles before. However, we can win this fight if we hold on for just two more days. Furthermore, the accursed darkness that has covered Jackson will be lifted as well." The young Lord spoke with a voice of resolve. "Sir Cross, prepare the necessary supplies at once and discuss the details of the operation."

"Yes, sir!"

Cross ran out hastily. Then, after about an hour has passed, Raymond announced the Lord's mobilization order in the square. At the same time, a quest window popped up before every player in Jackson.

Heroes Assembly!

*Sub-quest : The Final Battle

The Lord of Darkness, Valderas, is leading the Demonic Army towards Jackson Castle. If Valderas reaches Jackson, it will receive an irreparable blow. Therefore, the Lord has decided to concentrate all his forces to ambush their movement route in order to stop their advance.

This operation is a general mobilization issued by the Lord's command; all garrisoned players must participate. There are 2 days until the Kingdom's reinforcements arrive—if Valderas' advance is stopped or if he is defeated before then, Jackson's garrison will win. The final battle with Jackson's life on the line is starting now. Raise your swords and defeat the darkness!

(All players participating in this operation will get 50 additional contribution for every monster they kill. All players who participate in damaging or slaying Valderas will get an increase in contribution points. In addition, all players who successfully complete the quest

will get a calculated increase in contribution points.)

Difficulty: C++

It was decided that the operation area would be a valley several kilometers from Jackson Castle. It was good terrain for performing a pincer attack after pushing back the monster army. The players who had accepted the quest and gathered at the operation area were the combined Platoons 1, 2, and 3, but barely numbering 100. There had been a little over 140 people in the beginning, but while constantly fighting and undertaking Operation Bomb the Scorch Cannons, some 40 people had perished.

In addition, they weren't grouped as one, as they had been before. With their trust towards the central point Alan broken, the players had all split into parties.

It wasn't all Alan's fault that the raid had broken up. This quest gave more contribution points than any before. Also, this was the final battle that marked the finale of the quest. It was now time to get more points than anyone else, rather than stay alive. It was inevitable that they would challenge the operation in parties rather than a raid.

"Each monster gives 50 additional contribution."

"At best, even we might make it into the best 10."

"This is our last chance to turn the tables. No need to pay attention to the others. Since this is the last anyways, take care of the people in our party only."

"Cleric-nim, do not use recovery magic on other parties and save your Mana."

The players were busily whispering amongst themselves in groups of twos and threes.

Ark was busy in his own way because there were more people he had to tend. "Once the battle starts, there won't be time to survey the situation. The ones in the most danger will be the low-level Militia. You earned quite a lot of contribution from the scorch cannon, so you absolutely mustn't be too greedy for contribution. Do you understand? Surviving is most important."

"Yes, understood."

Roco also nodded with a totally nervous expression. With Platoons 1, 2, 3, the Militia, the Jackson Guard, and even the Sylphid Knights, the headcount was nearly 179. In addition, the young Lord was mapping the details of the operation and conveying it to the players. However, it was certain that once the battle broke out, the players would act on their own, blinded by the experience and contribution.

In the end, only you can take responsibility for your own life.

Of course, it was the same for Ark. The only thing he could do for the Militia was to give them food that raised their maximum Health by 300. Once the battle started, he wouldn't have the time or the inclination to help others.

'A battle where you have to improve your results with your ability alone!'

It was actually the situation Ark had hoped for.

"What are you going to do?"

Ark looked at Shambala, who was sitting with a relaxed face.

The promise with Shambala was that he would help until the end of the event quest. But Ark had given him the item he wanted after Operation Bomb the Scorch Cannons had ended. Snake had already thrown up everything within its belly. It was a shame to let the item take up a space in his bag, and Ark had judged that he had done as much work as promised. And also, if he really had to say it, he didn't want to keep Shambala tied down with such terms because he, personally, really liked Shambala. Of course, no matter how much Ark liked him, he hadn't shaved off even 1 Gold from the 300.

"I'm not all that interested in the contribution, but... I'll do it with you. 'Cause it's fun to fight alongside you."

It appeared that Shambala also liked Ark quite a bit.

"It's the Demonic Army!"

Just then, the Magician who had been on watch with Night Vision shouted from one side.

Ark also used Eyes of the Cat as he turned his gaze. A thick swarm of monsters were coming into the valley. Shadows, Avengers, Hiptons... but they were on a completely different level from the monsters they had faced before. Players and NPCs, alike, saw that, while the monsters looked the same, their levels and equipment were all different. The monsters coming into the valley were all draped in durable armor, and they were also twice as large in size.

The faces of the players hardened like stone.

'Level 100 monsters are mixed in too.'

The levels above the monsters' heads were a whopping 90~100!

The players were mostly level 70~80. Only Platoon 1, commanded by Alan, maintained an average level of 80, but even then, they couldn't display 100% of their ability due to the influence of the Dark Fog. On the other hand, the monsters received the darkness attribute bonus, and, considering the levels alone, the difference between the two groups was enormous.

However, Ark's drive was surging up instead. Ark's level had finally reached 75, but calculating in the darkness attribute bonus, his stats were at level 97. There was no difficulty in hunting them even if he didn't make a party.

'Alright, it's worth doing at this level. There isn't even a penalty for not being in the raid. The higher the level, the higher the base contribution points should be. No, let's not worry about other people. My goal is Alan alone. My contribution is still nearly 20,000 away from his. What will determine how much I can reduce that difference in this battle is currently my skill.'

Like a predator watching his prey, Ark gripped his sword as he readied his body. A short while passed, and the Demonic Army had approached until they were right in front. Suddenly, a resonant hoofbeats rang throughout the valley as a group charged towards the Demonic Army. The group shooting forward with their spears erect was Jackson's elite force, the Sylphid Knights.

"It's the decisive moment. FOR JACKSON'S PEACE!"

"WOOAAH, FOR JACKSON'S PEACE!"

"Kekeke? A-ambush!"

"Humans are here, stop them!"

The Shadows at the forefront burst out in shock as they raised their shields. Metallic sounds rang out as spears and shields collided. Taking hits from the accelerated spears, the Shadows went flying everywhere.

They were indeed Jackson Province's ultimate corps, the Sylphid Knights! They fully paraded the skills that had cut off the monster supply route as they went around the province separately during the quest's progression. Once the Sylphid Knights charged, the Demonic Army's formation broke instantaneously.

Cross sprang up as he raised his sword. "Now's the time, attack the flanks!"

"WOOAAH!"

The players hiding in ambush along the flanks of the valley poured out. As players cast their top skills simultaneously, the dark field brightened like daylight. The skills used by the players were mostly offensive skills, but buffs or assisting magic casted by Magicians or Priests were numerous as well. With the effect of the AOE curse skill used by the Demonic Army overlapping on top of that, colorful message windows popped up like crazy before Ark's eyes. There were so many that it was impossible to tell who had used what skill, whether it had applied to him, or if that was a buff or a curse.

But Ark didn't pay any attention to the messages. "The effect will disappear since the curses and buffs will mostly cancel out anyways. No need to pay attention to other things. No matter how many

enemies there are, my opponent is only the one in front of me anyways!'

He didn't even summon Dedric. With countless players around, he had to restrict his skills — there was a great danger of taking an attack from a player who mistook Dedric for a monster. He broke away from the Militia and the Guard too. He had come this far receiving their help out of necessity, but, right now, everyone was a teammate and also competition. In the end, you could only ensure your life with your own skills.

'I'm definitely more comfortable alone. Whether I die or live, it's my responsibility.'

That's right, this was originally Ark's fighting style.

Ark concentrated all his attention on just his sword and the monster before his eyes.

"Kekeke, Human! Die!"

"Shut up and die, DARK BLADE!"

Ark narrowed the gap between them in an instant and struck the throat of the charging Shadow. Unleashing continuous roundhouse kicks at the staggering Shadow, its Health fell by 70% as it collapsed limply. When he loosed another Dark Blade on top of that, the Shadow shrieked as it disappeared.

'I've gotta defeat as many enemies as possible from the start.'

If a drawn-out war began, only the strong monsters would be left. If the players swarmed in then, of course it would become difficult to get points. So he had to secure his contribution by killing even one more monster at the very beginning, even if he had to abuse his Mana.

'Riposte!'

Ark parried the attack flying in at him as he immediately chained with Counter Attack. As the chain skill activated, the Shadow went flying. Thanks to that, three to four monsters all fell over. Ark immediately ran at them and swung his sword left and right.

Po-po-po-pow!

The continuously bursting critical hits!

The Shadows who were wearing plate armor posed no problem for Ark. The weak points revealed by Eyes of the Cat were the joints of the armor, where defense didn't apply! Having reached the peak of accuracy, Ark's sword furrowed into the joints as if being sucked in and dealt critical hits. Wearing the heavy plate armor, the monsters' reaction speed was slow. Also, other status abnormalities registered frequently from his kicks. Moreover, the Dark Blade that occasionally shot out ignored defense altogether. The armor meant nothing to Ark.

His counter attacking strengthened as he blocked the attacks rushing in from all directions. The fighting instinct that he had repressed for a while due to watching out for the Guard and Militia revived. His entire body's senses sharpened as vigor surged forth.

"So you crawled out to die, Human!"

The lizard-riding Avenger's breastplate sparkled as it thrust its sword. Ark twisted to slide past the sword, then stepped onto the lizard to spring up. Soaring into the sky, Ark's heel kick plummeted straight down and slammed into the top of the Avenger's head. Reeling with a stun hex, the Avenger lost its balance and rolled off. The finisher was the Double Critical Chance made possible by its defenseless state!

Ark wasn't one to miss that chance. His sword slid in between the armor with a metallic hiss, cutting the Avenger's throat.

Shambala's skill was so compatible with Ark that it was surprising. When Shambala attracted the enemy's attention with 'Blink,' the rate of hexes with Ark's kicks increased greatly. Also, since both of them had professions that could use the Backstab effect, monsters fell into critical condition in just three to four hits if they attacked from the back and front.

Even while unleashing a combo attack like that, the two didn't need words. If Ark moved first, Shambala naturally fell into step with him, and vice versa. That special "something" only two people trained in martial arts could share was between them. They bore down upon the monsters like fish in their element.

However, the overall battle situation was inching towards the Demonic Army, bit by bit. The power balance had tipped because supporting fire from the Mana-depleted Magicians and Archers died down after several minutes of battle, and the Warriors were also collapsing one after another. But there was a greater reason.

'That bastard Alan...!'

Alan's party, which was in fact the strongest in the garrison, did not go forward aggressively. Since the beginning of the fight, they posed at the outskirts and were assuming a wait-and-see approach. Even when

the party right next to them was annihilated, they simply sat back and watched. Since he wasn't the commander anymore, his attitude was totally unconcerned.

That attitude of Alan's suddenly changed when flames filled the valley.

Shhriiieek! BOOOOOM!

The black fireball crossed the valley and fell onto the valley. Enormous flames flared as monsters were instantly melted down.

"IT'S THE SCORCH CANNON!"

The tiring players burst out in cheers as they turned their heads.

The scorch cannon stood high on a faraway hill. The scorch cannon had positioned itself and was beginning to let loose supporting fire at last. Finishing its recharging, the scorch cannon spewed flames again. Every time that happened, the Health of the monsters, who were packed in like sardines, plummeted.

Alan's party ran into battle right after that.

"Now's the time, attack! Judgement of the Sacred Earth!"

Charging down the valley, a flashy halo swept out with Alan at the center. AOE magic that dealt Holy damage to all monsters of the darkness attribute!

In a single blow, the scores of monsters with their Health at nearly rock bottom could not endure the ceaseless damage and exploded. It wasn't just Alan. The party members who leapt into battle with him

cast AOE skills like crazy with the Mana they had been saving up. 'Arrow Shower,' which poured forth countless arrows like a rain from the Archer, the Magician's 'Inferno' that enveloped a space of 10 meters in flames, the Warrior's 'Shock' that struck a maximum of 8 monsters with the shield in one blow!

All of them were skills that sucked an enormous amount of Mana — their Mana already depleted, the other players could only look on dumbly.

'Alan, you bastard, so you were aiming for this after all.'

Ark ground his teeth with an enraged expression.

The majority of the monsters had lost at least 70% Health from the scorch cannon and the players' attacks. With AOE magic piled onto them layer by layer, there was no way the monsters could withstand it. One AOE magic brought down scores; Alan's party was accumulating an outrageous amount of contribution.

Even after that, the battlefield was dominated by Alan.

'So there's a reason why people followed Alan even while cursing him.'

His first sight of the Holy Knight Alan's fighting really took the cake.

"Immortal Aura!"

As Alan used a Holy Knight exclusive skill, his surroundings were enveloped in white light. It was an aura that reduced the damage his party members took from darkness attribute monsters by 30%. Moreover, though normal Paladins could only use one aura, the Holy

Knight could stack them. Afterwards, Alan used an aura called 'Celestial Light' and Mana recovery speed increased by 30%. As a result, the Mana of Alan's party didn't decrease by much even as they cast skills. Simply being in Alan's party gave you this much of an additional effect. The fact that Platoon 1 players had held the best 10 in contribution all this time was a completely inevitable result. That was why Alan had been able to command the volunteer troops despite the mishaps.

Was that all? Astride a horse, Alan even had mobility. He ran faster than anyone to the place where the scorch cannon had fired and cast his AOE skill. Capable of taking down five Shadows in 2~3 minutes, Ark and Shambala also had an extremely fast hunting speed, but they couldn't compare to Alan, who melted down scores in a single blow.

'Are these the Holy Knight skills I've only heard of?' It felt like a wet blanket was being thrown over his motivation. 'So there was a secret to his 40,000 contribution points. Dammit. If it's like this, it's obvious I can't catch up with him even if I fight to the death. I'm pissed, but only Alan can hunt like that.'

If the Dark Walker was a profession that specialized in soloing and PVP, then the Holy Knight was one that specialized in group battle. With their profession characteristics, there was no way Ark could win against him in a group battle. Moreover, Alan had now broken up the raid and had parted from other players. There was really no reason for him to play the hypocrite and let them secure contribution. Because of that, he indiscriminately strutted around the battlefield as he indifferently fired skills on monsters that another player had reduced to half Health. Even the Shadow that Ark had beaten into critical condition collapsed from one of his AOE skills.

'Dammit, my fighting drive is really being put out.'

"DAMN IT, that's too much!"

"The cheap bastard, coming out like this! Let's go before Alan takes it all!"

The players raged at Alan's outrageousness, but there was no way to stop him. Also, a chance to win the losing battle appeared as a result of Alan's actions, so there was no use cursing him either.

'Still, for Alan to be the one getting the most contribution...'

Right when Ark was bursting in anger—

GRRRR, ROAAAR!

A roar exploded from the rear of the Demonic Army. At the vibrations that shook the area, everyone's attention turned to the direction from whence the sound had come. The monsters that had been pressing in ceaselessly parted to the sides as an enormous monster appeared. A monster, 20 meters in height, with its entire body covered in black flames! The demon was a dragon from the waist down and had the appearance of a human from the torso, which was covered with red armor.

"GRRRRRR, LAUGHABLE SCUM. YOU DARE TO BLOCK MY WAY..."

Tongues of black flames flickered out every time he opened his mouth.

A red message popped up before Ark's eyes.

- The boss monster 'Lord of Darkness Valderas' has emerged!

'Valderas! That guy is...!'

Every player halted and stared at Valderas.

"I WILL RECLAIM MY TERRITORY AND DRINK OF YOUR FLESH AND BLOOD!"

An terrible energy befitting of his size poured from his flashing eyes. An overwhelming existence that silenced the battlefield instantaneously! But the emotion that flared into the players' eyes was not just horror. Their happiness was greater instead. A certain number of enemies had to be defeated for Valderas to appear. It meant the quest was entering its final stage.

Now, if they just took down Valderas, the quest that had gone on for 3 days would end. Regardless of their ranking, the people who survived until the final battle had accumulated a lot of contribution points' if they just defeated Valderas, they would be rewarded for their 3 days of effort.

"You get contribution points just from hitting Valderas!"

"Let's defeat Valderas and finish the quest!"

"Concentrated attack!"

People pressed forward like a swarm of bees.

"That bastard is the evil that threw Jackson Castle into despair!"

The Sylphid Knights and the Guard also raised their long swords high as they charged. Countless magic strikes and arrows bombarded him and Warriors surrounded Valderas, swinging their swords.

But Valderas was ridiculously strong. Even after taking countless attacks, there wasn't even a sign that his Health had dropped at all. Enveloped in black flames, even curse magic didn't work on Valderas.

"FLIES!"

Valderas swung an enormous iron mace. The durability of steel shields became 0 in an instant and broke. The Warriors who lost their shields were hit by the iron mace and were flung away. Ark used that chance to approach Valderas' rear and thrust with his sword. Contribution would be awarded if he just dealt damage. He couldn't just sit around and watch.

"Dark Blade!"

A Backstab and a critical hit ignoring defense! But Valderas didn't even turn his head. It wasn't even an attack worth his attention. Rather, the black flames encircling Valderas dealt Ark damage when he successfully attacked.

- You have taken 100 damage from Valderas' 'Bastion of Corrupt Flames.'

- You have caught a 'Burn' and will take 10 damage every 10 seconds for 1 minute.

"Holy shit!"

It meant he would take 160 damage every time he unleashed an attack. To say that contribution points would be given every time you damaged Valderas, it seemed there was no such thing as free in the world after all.

"GRRRRR, DID YOU BLOCK MY WAY WITH SKILLS AMOUNTING TO JUST THIS?"

Valderas swung his iron mace like a windmill.

A gale was swept up as Valderas dealt enormous damage to all the players surrounding him. But, the attack did not end there. Then Valderas opened his maw wide and black flames spewed out. The special skill of the Draconics, Breath!

Four Warriors who were reduced to just 50% Health from the horrible AOE attack fell over without even a chance to pull out recovery potions. If they were level 70~80 Warriors, their Health should be at least 1,000 at 50%. Moreover, they were wrapped up in plate armor so their defense should be over 200. Even so, they couldn't take two hits and collapsed. Ark had rapidly unleashed evasive maneuvers but he also took considerable damage. When the Warriors fell over limply, the morale of the players plummeted.

"Damn, how the fuck are we supposed to win against a demon like this?"

"Recovery magic can't even keep up with the damage we're getting while attacking!"

"But the Magicians and Warriors have it better! Our arrows aren't even hitting him altogether!"

But there was one, sole exception.

"Holy Sword!"

Alan ran in as he swung his flashing sword. As he struck the demon with the sparkling sword, Valderas seemed to take quite a shock as his Health decreased noticeably. Alan cast Holy Sword onto all of his party members and lashed out at Valderas.

Once Holy Sword was used, Valderas' auto counter skill was nulled, too.

"A Holy Knight indeed!"

"Dammit, I should've joined Alan's party after all."

"But there's a way to block that auto counter!"

The Magicians cast Water magic all at once. If Water offensive spells were used against the flame shielded Valderas, he took damage, as slight as it was. And if Water magic was cast onto a sword, they found out that the flame counter was nulled. But most of the Magicians were out of Mana and couldn't grant that magic effect to more than a few people.

'Dammit, to think that I have to sit and watch, leaving that lump of experience and contribution...'

Having to watch Alan excitedly attack Valderas, Ark's insides burned. Moreover, he even had to watch Platoon 1 and Andel raise their contribution, so his innards were about to turn to ashes. But, there was no other way.

A formation where Alan's party and the few high-leveled players with the magic effect besieged Valderas and the rest of the players blocked the minions pressing in from their surroundings was naturally formed.

Like it or not, they could only help Alan since the quest had to be defeated first.

"Anyways, there's a chance to win!"

"If we have Alan and the scorch cannon, we might even be able to win!"

After several minutes passed, Valderas's Health fell to about 50%. No matter how impressive a boss he was, he couldn't withstand more than 30 players gulping down recovery potions like water as they attacked like crazy.

At last, the scorch cannon's recharging was finished as well. A laser-like light extended from the scorch cannon and took aim on Valderas, the players backed away like an ebbing tide. Simultaneously, the fireball flew through the air and landed a direct hit on Valderas.

BOOOOM!

"Good shot!"

"It may be a boss monster, but it should've taken a lot of damage!"

The players shouted with excited voices. But the sight of Valderas that emerged afterwards made their faces pale.

"H-how could this be—!"

"Didn't he recover Health instead?!"

Surprisingly enough, Valderas' Health had recovered to 70% again.

"N-no way, can he even absorb flame damage?"

They realize too late. The black flames enveloping his body even stronger than before, Valderas smiled faintly.

"GRRR, YOU ROTTEN HUMANS! AURA OF BLACK FLAME!"

- Valderas has used 'Aura of Black Flame.'

All monsters within 100 meters of Valderas will receive the 'Bastion of Black Flame.'

All the monsters pressing in around them were wrapped in black flames, like Valderas.

"Dammit, fucking ridiculous! All the monsters have the Bastion of Black Flame?!"

"Now we can't even use the scorch cannon!"

Even though it was useless against Valderas, the scorch cannon had been protecting the players from the Demonic Army onward. It was thanks to the scorch cannon that Alan's party was able to focus on Valderas. But if all the monsters received the protection of flames, the scorch cannon would really be rendered useless. There was no way the players could block the Demonic Army since they took damage with every attack.

"BURN IN THE FIRES OF HELL, HUMANS! FLAME RAGE!"

Valderas jeered at the shocked people yet again as he used a skill. The entire valley shook as if there was an earthquake as the ground split right open. Then, hundreds of flames surged from the rift and exploded when they collided with players. The flames flying around were the size of tennis balls. They weren't so fast that body motions polished in the heat of battle couldn't avoid them, but it was almost impossible for ordinary players to avoid flames of this speed. There was nothing more to be said about the Warriors wearing heavy plate armor. The low-leveled Militia group took even more severe damage. Roco took a hit from the flames right off the bat, and JusticeMan was helping another person when he collapsed from a hit to his back. Players at level 80 lost 30% of their Health in a single blow. Of course the level 30~40 Militia would perish with one hit.

There was nothing Ark could do, even as he watched them fall.

'Dammit, something like this—!'

The defensive formation collapsed in an instant. The Demonic Army or Valderas were no longer the problem anymore.

"RETREAT, ALL HANDS RETREAT!"

They heard Cross' scream from afar. He had ultimately judged that the damage would only worsen in their current state. But even retreat was already impossible. They had made a circular formation in order to pour concentrated fire onto Valderas and were buried within hundreds of Demonic Army monsters. As they watched their teammates falling over one by one, the same message popped up before every player.

Annihilation and quest failure!

'No fucking way. There's no way to win with Valderas having 100% resistance to fire!'

Ark dodged the successive balls of flame as he clenched his teeth.

'That 100% fire resistance, it's an option attached to a Legendary item. If it's not an item, then that resistance can only be defeated in the underwater world. Flames would be no good there, but here...'

It was then. Ark recalled the map that had been attached to the written instructions.

'That's right. Up this valley, there is...!'

Ark summoned Dedric as he rolled on the ground.

"Dedric, fly! Raymond is controlling the scorch cannon. Go to Raymond and tell him to smash a fireball into the river bank!"

"What? What the hell?"

"Shut up and just do as I say! There's no time!"

As Ark screamed, Dedric floundered as he flew to the scorch cannon.

And then several minutes later, when half of the forces had fallen from Valderas and the Demonic Army's flaming attacks, the scorch cannon suddenly rotated towards the North. Then a roar sounded as a fireball shot out.

Watching the fireball disappear into the darkness, Ark's eyes flashed.

'It's a success. Now we just have to hold on!'

And, a short while afterwards, he felt a vibration at the bottom his feet. At first it was a barely noticeable, small vibration, but it soon became violent enough to make his body shake. Ark dodged the flying flames as he opened his bag.

"Sharkman's Shackles!" Ark rapidly changed his shoes and shouted at Shambala. "Shambala, grab onto me!"

"What?"

Slipping past flames with qigong, Shambala spoke incredulously. The vibrations seemed to grow stronger, then suddenly, a roar burst from up the valley with a rumble.

ROOOAAR, CRAASH!

"Water? How?"

Players, NPCs, and even Valderas and the monsters all halted and burst out in astonishment. An enormous amount of water shook the earth as it rushed in. Located up the valley was the river where the steel-armored merchant ship sent by the Merchant Guild had sank. Having confirmed on the map that came with the written instructions, Ark had blown up the bank between the valley and the riverside with a fireball. Of course, the overflowing river water followed the slope and rushed down into the valley at an enormous speed.

'If this isn't underwater, than all I have to do is make it underwater!'

The enormous water attack rushed in, uprooting rocks and trees!

Naturally, you would take enormous damage if hit head on. Players paled immediately as they fled in every direction. Then Ark spotted Andel among the panicked players. For a moment, a wicked gleam flashed from Ark's eyes.

'Andel! It seems your fate is to die at my hands after all!'

"Snake, I have a request. Do you think you can move?"

The limp Snake raised its head high and nodded.

"Even if it's hard, suffer just this once. That bastard is an enemy who messed with me many times. No matter what you have to do, tie up his legs so he can't run away!"

Hiss, hiss!

At the mention that he was Ark's enemy, Snake hissed sharply as it dropped from Ark's waist. Then it nimbly crawled on the ground and wrapped itself around Andel's legs. At this totally unexpected attack, Andel fell flat on his face. Then he stared at Snake with flummoxed eyes and discovered Ark too late.

"Y-you bastard, what have you done...!"

"Who's the one who said wait and see?"

"You're gonna try to do something to me with a snake like this?"

Andel scowled as he raised his sword.

"Too late."

Then as Ark murmured with an evil smile, the torrent filled the valley with a fierce roar. The torrent alone didn't damage the players, but the rocks and trees dragged in with the wave were different. The writhing Andel took a hit to the head from a large boulder and lost 70% of his Health. Snake took damage at the same time and was forcefully recalled, but Snake's Health was just 50, and thus, Ark only received 25 damage.

"Arghhh, d-damn it!! YOU, I'LL KILL YOU!"

Andel screamed as he was carried down with the torrent.

"Don't make me laugh. I wouldn't have even messed with you if I was gonna end it here."

Thanks to wearing the Sharkman's Shackles, the torrent didn't affect Ark at all. And, if he wasn't affected by the torrent, simply avoiding the rocks and trees rushing in was no problem. But Ark ran towards a boulder that was quickly approaching.

'Riposte!'

Ark parried the rock with his chain skill. In that moment, the rock was flung away with a heavy clang.

"AGH! W-what...!"

Andel's face drained of color. The rock Ark had pushed away with his chain skill, was shooting straight towards him like an arrow. Andel

urgently raised his shield, but there was no way he could make proper defensive movements while being tossed around by the torrent.

CRUNCH!

With the sound of something being crushed, Andel's face crumpled in. And then he dropped the sword he was holding as he disappeared, swept up by the rapids. Ark had killed him, but there was no reason for him to become Chaotic since he hadn't attacked Andel directly.

"I'll let you off this time with this. But the next time you show up in front of me, I'll definitely make your stats 0."

Ark grinned as he picked up the sword.

While Ark was taking his petty revenge, the deluge had completely engulfed the valley.

Encircled in flames, Valderas and the monsters that had gained the fire attribute were swept away by the rapids; steam whooshed out with the clamorous sound of water meeting hot metal. As a result, the valley was shrouded in fog made from the steam.

Water. It was Ark's world once again.