

Ark Vol 4 Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Bounty Hunter

Ark didn't have much knowledge about the Giran region yet. Even when he spread out the map and looked at it, it was almost completely covered in black fog. He had first come to Giran through the Grey Ridge shortcut, and after that he had lived holed up in the blind auction house. Then, the event quest had started right afterwards, so he had no time to hunt. That's why he stopped by a General Store before leaving Giran to buy some maps. In the case of large cities like Giran, if you bought a map with the geography and information about nearby hunting grounds, new info would be added automatically.

Based on that information, there was a diversity in hunting grounds around Giran. There were forest, plains, swamp, and mountain regions, and depending on the region, the monsters that appeared varied vastly and ranged from level 50-100 as well. This was a perfect place for low leveled players to level up after leaving Jackson Territory.

'Let's see. The Old Forest where the Silver Arrow thief gang is...'

When he checked the map, it was marked as a level 60-80 area.

'It's a reasonable level.'

Ark was currently level 78. He felt it was a bit easy, since he had hunted monsters stronger than him until now, but since his goals were information collection and bounty hunting anyway, the easier it was, the better.

Ark moved to his destination along the road. When he travelled on a paved road, an additional effect of +20% movement speed was added. Therefore, he could minimize travel time. Thanks to that, Ark reached his destination in just 30 minutes.

Trees of enormous width were packed closely in the Old Forest, where the Silver Arrow thief gang was hiding.

"It's meat...! Fresh... human meat!"

When he entered the forest, three Trolls appeared as if they had been waiting,. Ark's eyes flashed.

'This is good. I wanted to try out the Deadly Poison skill before I encounter the thief gang.'

"Grrrrrr, DIE!"

Claaang!

Shrieking, a Troll swung its club. But, being in the early level 70s, the Troll was already no match for Ark.

"Dedric, Skull. Buy me some time."

"Huhuhu, playing with such a slow fellow is no problem."

Clack clack clack!

Dedric and Skull replied confidently as they attacked the Troll. With that opening, Ark dodged the club with light footwork and fell back. Then he fed Snake the ingredients he had confirmed as poisonous, having gathered them since entering the forest. A short while afterwards, light blue fluid flowed out of Snake's fangs. It was venom made with the Deadly Poison Production skill.

Swish, ka-chink!

When he spread the venom on the blade, the blade's surface turned blue with an eerie sound effect.

You have applied Neurotoxin (Beginner) to Lancel's Sword.

If the enemy is hit with an attack, the nerves of the struck region will be paralyzed for 5 seconds (5 uses).

"Dedric, Skull. Distract the other guys now!"

Having applied the poison, Ark flexed his muscles before flying out like an arrow.

The Troll swung its club with a roar. However, Ark had faced the irregular attacks of Shadows at Jackson not long ago. He could dodge the incomparably slow Troll's attack with his eyes closed. Ark twisted his head to dodge the club as he stabbed horizontally with his sword. A Counter Attack burst out in that instant as the Troll swayed to one side.

- The Troll's left leg has been paralyzed by Neurotoxin!

Paralyzed in one leg, the Troll retreated while limping very pitifully. But Ark wasn't one to spare a monster because it was pitiful. He immediately rammed his sword into the Troll's other leg. Then, when he let loose a sidekick as he dodged the club, the Troll with both legs paralyzed flailed both its arms before falling over. It was in a perfectly defenseless state!
Double Critical Chance activated.

"Dark Blade!"

After taking immense damage with a brilliant flash of light, the Troll disappeared.

It was the same for the two remaining Trolls. The Troll's arm would droop limply if he struck it with his sword. Occasionally, the spinal nerves were paralyzed when he dealt a critical hit to the body.

Of course, the activation rate wasn't 100%. Perhaps because it was Beginner Deadly Poison, the success rate was roughly 20%. The rate was slightly higher than succeeding a kick with high difficulty.

But there was a point that Ark hadn't thought of. In the case of kicks, large monsters like Trolls almost never got status hexes. But the poison activated at a pretty high rate even when facing large monsters. In addition, it wasn't random like a kick; a specific status condition could be dealt by choice.

This had a considerable effect. Ark took down three Trolls in just 2 minutes.

"Isn't this surprisingly useful?"

In battle, even a single second couldn't be ignored. Especially when in a crisis, the few seconds it took to drink a potion could decide victory or defeat.

So if the enemy could be paralyzed for 5 seconds at a 20% chance, there was nothing more to say. Moreover, an enemy could be paralyzed for a maximum of 15 seconds since it could be used five times.

'I've always got the ingredients on hand, especially since I don't use poisonous ingredients that often. In other words, I can use this whenever I need it!'

Having thought that far, Ark completely forgot the likes of the frost attribute sword. Unlike a sword that he would simply sell off after using it when he got a better item, he could make use of a skill for a long time once he learned it. If it was a useful skill, then it could be better than a Rare item and wasn't bad at all.

'This skill might even be more useful than the Rare sword!'

Humming, Ark scraped up all the poisonous ingredients around and tested them one by one. However, because it was still a Beginner skill, he could only make venom from ingredients with weak poison. Most of the effects were just so-so, but there a few useful ones.

Hesitation Poison, which reduced the enemy's movements by 30% for 5 seconds, Acid Poison, which dealt 30 damage every 10 seconds for one minute, and Vulnerability Poison, which reduced the enemy's defense by

20% for 10 seconds. It was hard to expect absolute effects, but it was more or less fine to use them as support.

However, it wasn't a skill he should recklessly overuse, because the effect didn't apply the same way to every monster. For example, it had a low activation rate on large monsters and the duration was slightly shorter as well. But the Thorny Plant Poison that caused Bleeding actually raised activation rate and lengthened duration. Whereas, if he used Acid Poison on a monster with the acid attribute, it would heal rather than damage.

'In other words, it means I have to determine the monster's attribute well before using it!'

He would study the monster and attack it with a more effective poison. The skill suited Ark's fighting style.

If there was one drawback, it was that it had poor cost to product ratio. There was a limit to ingredients, and there were times when poisonous herbs were needed to use Survival Cooking. He couldn't just make them all into poison. In addition, poison had a usage limit, unlike kicks. Once the poison was applied, the usage count would decrease whether it was blocked or wasted.

'But that too is up to me. There isn't a skill that matches me 100%. To expect something like that is just being greedy.'

No technique is perfect. For balance, of course they all had their own weaknesses. Using that properly was the player's skill!

"Okay, Snake. I like it. You did well."

Hiss hiss!

As Ark grinned for a change, the color returned to Snake's face. Then Dedric grumbled with a very displeased expression. "Tsk, tsk, tsk!"

"What? Do you have a complaint?"

"No, I don't! What complaint would I have towards the distinguished Snake when all I have is a talent for flying? I'll just quietly do some recon, jeez."

Dedric sharply turned his head as he flapped away.

At that sight, Ark held back a wry smile. Dedric pretended not to be, but he really was very jealous.

As Ark's party meandered through the forest while quarreling, at some point the monster spawns suddenly became sparse. Ark knew what such a change meant from experience. He had entered a boundary where the monster domain had changed. But this time, it wasn't just a simple monster. It was probably the Silver Arrow thief gang's turf.

'Come to think of it, this is the first time I'll be facing a human.'

Not humanoid monsters, but real humans. Since this was a realistic virtual reality, the feeling shouldn't be different, though once he thought of it like that, he started to feel pretty uncomfortable. Actually, there was really no reason for him to be uneasy since he had already killed Leo and Andel before.

'A thief gang isn't much different from monsters anyways.'

Ark was thinking like that and moving forward when he thought he heard a sharp whistle. A crimson light burst out before his eyes. Looking down, he saw a thick arrow quivering in his shoulder.

- You have been ambushed. 200 damage. Your shoulder has been wounded, so attack speed will be decreased by 10%.

"Hehehe, we've got good luck today. A guest has crawled in with his own legs."

"It's been tough 'cause we haven't had profit for a while, we're grateful for this guest."

"Then we should entertain him."

"Kekeke, though of course, it's our way of entertaining."

'Dang... is this the Silver Arrow thief gang?' Ark glanced around himself with shocked eyes.

The tree branches were so dense that he couldn't see the sky. He heard the voices of the thieves from somewhere up there. And not just from one place, but all around... they were already in place.

He'd gotten so caught up in testing the Deadly Poison skill that he became careless.

'Even so, to think they would go as far as to lie in ambush...'

No, it was natural if he thought about it with common sense. His opponents were a thief gang in name, so there was no way they wouldn't guard the area around their hideout. But Ark hadn't thought that far since he had only thought of them as monsters. In any case, Ark wasn't particularly worried even though the situation wasn't that good.

'The Silver Arrow thief gang's difficulty was F. Their average level is probably only in the 70s. If it's only that level, there's no need to worry much.'

"Dedric, second tree on the right!"

"Okay!"

As Ark pointed to one tree, Dedric answered excitedly as he flew off. Then, with a "bam" sound, one of the thieves screamed as he tumbled off the tree.

"Aack, wh-what the hell? This bat is--?"

"Shut up, I am a noble of the Netherworld, Dedric-nim!"

"Plan A! Skull, let's go!"

Ark ran at the thief with Skull. But just as he was about to swing his sword, four arrows shot at him from all directions. Ark hastily turned his sword, but even with reflexes trained through Taekwondo, it was impossible to parry four arrows in an instant.

"Argh!"

An arrow lodged into his abdomen and leg yet again.

Hexed with 'Bleeding' and then 'Reduced Movement Speed,' while Ark was staggering, the thief that had fallen off hurriedly scrambled up the tree.

"That bastard, isn't he commanding monsters?"

"Don't be caught off guard. Seeing as he's holding on even after being hit by arrows, he's not an easy one."

"Let's get rid of that bat first!"

"Concentrate attack on the bat!"

"Dedric, dodge! Plan D!"

"Ah, alright! Ack, what the hell is this?"

At Ark's voice, Dedric hurriedly soared into the sky. But before he could fly even a few meters, he got caught in something and flapped. He had been caught by the crude trap of the entangled, dense branches above Ark's head.

"Kikikik, idiot. How embarrassing."

Bam! Bam! Bam!

The thieves laughed as they launched their arrows. Caught in the tree branches and rendered unable to move, Dedric was hit by three or four

arrows in an instant and fell into critical condition. Flying creatures were vulnerable to ranged attacks like arrows, so he took 30% additional damage.

"Dammit, unsummon Dedric!"

Ark barely prevented Dedric from being force recalled by unsummoning him. But then the situation became even more difficult. All the attacks that had headed towards Dedric were concentrated on Ark. Lacking a ranged attack skill, there was nothing Ark could do since they were shooting arrows from atop the trees. Ark rolled on the ground as he blocked and dodged the arrows flying at him crazily from all over the place.

However, it was impossible to avoid all the arrows. He took one hit from every three to four shots, and his situation only worsened because he was hexed with Slow or Bleeding whenever he got hit.

The thieves even acted cunningly.

"I'm next!"

Hearing sound from behind him, he quickly turned around, and an arrow lodged into his back.

"The idiot looked back. Kikik."

"What kind of dickhead would point out where each and every arrow would fly from?"

"Hey, this time I'll attack. Try and block this!"

"Shut up!"

'Do you think I'd fall for that one a second time?'... was what he thought, but when he didn't even turn his head, this time an arrow really did come flying in. After taking a few attacks like that, red-hot anger surged in him.

Who would have even thought of it? That he would take attacks while being teased by thief NPCs.

'Argh, th-these bastards...'

Ark ground his teeth. But no amount of grinding his teeth would improve the situation.

Ark struck a tree with Dark Blade in rage. He was trying to shake a thief loose from the tree. But being a few meters in diameter, the tree didn't even budge.

'Damn it, the hell am I supposed to do?'

He also tried to climb up a tree, but even that wasn't easy because of the thieves' arrow attacks. He only ended up getting hit stupidly by a few arrows before retreating.

Of course, Skull was no help at all. There was no way Skull, who rolled along the ground, could crawl up a tree that even Ark couldn't climb. It also couldn't take the arrows cutting through the air in Ark's stead. In the end, there was no difference whether Skull was there or not. Maybe for that reason, the thieves paid no attention to Skull. While Ark and Skull ran around in confusion like that, his Health was cut down bit by bit and he fell into critical condition.

'No, I can't die against these guys!'

Urgency filled Ark's face.

His opponents weren't ordinary monsters. If he died at the hands of the thief NPCs, there was a 60% chance that he would drop an equipment item.

'I'm angry, but surviving is the first priority!'

"Unsummon Skull!"

Ark returned Skull back to the Netherworld and began to flee.

"You think we'd lose a fish that's already caught?"

The thieves were really not to be taken lightly. They used the vines hanging everywhere in the forest to move from branch to branch like Tarzan as they shot arrows.

Ark slipped between the trees while dodging the arrows, but in the end he took yet another arrow to his knee and collapsed.

"Got him!"

"Finish it!"

'Arghh, dammit... Am I really going to die from level 70 thieves?'

Ark was grinding his teeth while watching the bandits approach when he suddenly spotted a familiar object on the branch the thieves were moving towards. It was a brown object that looked like a rugby ball hanging upside down on the tree branch. Ark knew what that object was.

They were honeybees that inhabited the forests of New World, a Red Bee beehive.

In his beginner days of struggling in the Argus Mountains, there was a time when he almost died after finding out that a top-level ingredient, honey, could be acquired from the Red Bee beehive and recklessly rushed in.

'Good, with this it's all or nothing!'

"Summon Skull! In the end, I can only depend on you!"

Ark grabbed Skull and threw him with all his strength. Skull flew out in a straight line and hit the beehive. Afterwards, the beehive shook greatly and then Red Bees began to pour out in droves. Buzzing with aggressive cries, when the Red Bees poured out, the thieves' faces blanched.

"Shit, Red Bees!"

"R-run away! It's the end if you get caught!"

"Aaaaah!"

As the Red Bees rushed in, the thieves screamed as they fled in all directions. One of them was attacked by the Red Bees and fell to the ground. Then the Red Bees swarmed in like clouds and lowered his Health to the bottom in an instant.

In the meantime, Ark sent Skull back to the Netherworld and ran into the forest. Belatedly discovering Ark, the Red Bees swarmed towards him.

Ark had fallen into critical condition, so the Indomitable skill series and Adrenaline effects were activated. Thanks to that, his movement speed had increased dramatically, but he couldn't lose the Red Bees completely. The buzzing sound closed in on him until it was right behind him.

'It was somewhere around here, wasn't it...?'

Ark tore through the forest like crazy. After a few minutes had passed like that, the forest suddenly disappeared and an expansive lake appeared. It was a lake he had discovered not long after entering the Old Forest.

'Alright, found it!'

Ark immediately jumped into the lake.

"Whew ...!"

The Red Bees milled around above the surface for 10 minutes before leaving. If there hadn't been a lake nearby and if he hadn't had the Mermaid Scale, he would have died without a squeak.

Firstly, Ark recovered his Health while making and eating food.

"Dammit! That hurt, IT FRICKIN HURT! Those bastards! I won't forgive them!" Resummoned, Dedric flew about in rage.

Ark felt the same way.

Thinking about the battle just now, he suddenly recalled an unpleasant memory from when he was young. It was right when he'd entered elementary school. Ark had been a very withdrawn child. And at that age, there was always a brat who bullied such kids. There were punks like that in Ark's class, too.

The brats harassed Ark whenever they could. Most of it was just hiding his shoes or eating his lunch, but there was one joke that made him mad even when he thought of it now.

It was a joke where 3-4 kids would steal his bag and pass it around, taunting him to take it back. If he ran towards one kid it would be passed to another kid, and if he ran to get it once more it would again be passed... Someone who hadn't experienced it wouldn't know the feeling.

He had felt exactly that way when he was getting toyed with by the thief NPCs. A truly incomparably dirty feeling!

"Those bastards... I'll annihilate them no matter what it takes!"

Ark ground his teeth tightly with terrifying eyes. At that sight, Dedric and Skull got scared and shrank away.

"Hiik, w-what's wrong? I did what you told me to do, Master!"

Cla-clack, clack clack clack!

"I know, don't throw a fit and be quiet!"

When Ark yelled at them, Dedric and Skull slinked away carefully and flattened themselves in a corner.

He raised his temper at the Familiars, but Ark knew it wasn't their fault. He wasn't generous enough to defend someone else's mistake, but he also wasn't as narrow-minded as to blame others for his mistakes. He only had himself to blame for the insufferable humiliation from this battle.

'I've got no excuse.'

Actually, Ark had been a little conceited all this time. After changing his profession, Ark had always fought enemies with higher levels than him. 5-10 levels was the usual, and sometimes he even hunted monsters 20 levels

higher than him. In addition, he took down boss monsters that he shouldn't have been able to even touch at his level. Moreover, he got 1st in contribution in the event quest at level 70.

While doing all the things he wanted to do, Ark had forgotten the most important thing.

It was nothing new, but in New World, level wasn't everything.

The competence of the player controlling the character was more important than the level. The reason why Ark had grown faster than others was because he had realized that early on and had refined and polished himself without rest, and because he didn't neglect putting effort into making use of realizations from real life in the game. But at some point, he began to neglect that effort. It wasn't that he didn't work hard to exercise. Like before, he was still working out for two hours every day to the extent of getting muscle pains. The problem was that he had neglected finding out how he could apply the results of the exercise to Ark. He had also neglected research on ways to learn or use new skills. Satisfied with his current self, he hadn't improved.

'I was too easy-going. Because the monsters I've fought up until now have been easy, I thought it would stay that way. But it's a game. I can't fight the same monsters forever.'

There was an absolute, immutable law in all games.

The higher your level went, the harder the battles would become.

If you leveled up, of course you would become that much more powerful. But the monsters you'd have to face at a high level were even stronger. In addition, they would gain various characteristics, making them even trickier to face. In other words, as your level grew, you needed more precise control and a greater understanding of the game. Of course, it didn't matter if he was satisfied with the monsters he was hunting now, but...

'If I'm to make money with the game, I'll always need to be ahead of the others.'

Ark was playing the game to join Global Exos and to make a living. Others invested money in order to play New World, but Ark had to do the opposite, make money off it.

Wasn't it obvious that he had to be one step ahead of everyone?

If the majority of players sold their level 30 items after reaching level 40, of course they wouldn't make any money. You had to sell a level 45 item at the very least to make money. And to do that, you'd have to take down stronger monsters before other people did and finish quests of a higher level.

'I was out of my mind. For me, the game is my job. It's not bad to enjoy the game, but I can't lose sight of my objective because of that enjoyment. If I'm to do better than others, I have to do more and work harder. I can't just play the game for fun.'

Ark clenched his teeth.

'What's important right now isn't the quest or leveling up. My level right now is 78. I'm not level 40. So I have to bring my skills up to match my level 78 character. That is what I have to do right now. Alright, this is actually good. There's no need to think of anything else. My only goal right now is the thief gang!'

The thief gang was no longer simply part of acquiring a clue for a quest. It was a mountain he had to overcome in order to get stronger.

The thief gang went beyond their level and were of a higher difficulty than other monsters. It was natural. The AI that applied to every monster was matched to the monster's intelligence level. But the bandits were human, so of course they would have higher intelligence than regular monsters, and their level of cooperation was also high. But with his Familiars, Ark was in fact no different from a party. If the difference between them and the thief gang had been this great, then the problem was teamwork!

'The most pressing thing is how I use my Familiars.'

The Familiars were now a part of Ark. Looking at the ratio in battle, if Ark was 60%, then the Familiars occupied 40%. In other words, the abilities of the Familiars became Ark's strength in battle; in order to face enemies that used cooperative play like the thief gang, they absolutely needed to level up their teamwork.

'There's a limit to the simple operations we've used until now. We'll use this chance to reinforce the operations a little so that we can deal with more complicated situations.'

It had been A, B, C, and D until now. They had only used four plans. Of course they were as effective as they were simple, but if the number of monsters increased and the situation became more complex, it limited their maneuverability.

'We need an operation that's a bit more methodical and mutually beneficial.'

Ark's strong point was that he could immediately immerse himself in thought.

However, the only operations Ark knew were the ones he had experienced in FPS (First Person Shooter) or RTS (Real-time Strategy) games. After

struggling and racking his brains for a long time to think of a plan, he found a way. It was the battle professional who had been sent to South America to train SWAT, JusticeMan.

Hadn't he already seen how powerful JusticeMan's tactics had been in Jackson?

Finishing his thoughts there, Ark immediately logged out and called JusticeMan.

"Strategy? What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

"I really need it. Do you have anything that could help?"

"Well... I do have something. But the textbook I have is too high level. It's only got things that are hard to understand even for people who came back from the army."

"Isn't there a textbook for learning the basics?"

"Ah, I do have one. I don't know if it'll help, but I'll send it to you."

Just like when he first made the plans, his training opponents were the slow Trolls. Ark used Dedric to lure out Trolls one at a time to try out various operations.

"Plan A-4!"

When Ark gave the command, the Familiars attacked the Troll sufficiently while luring it to the back. After luring the Troll to a remote place like that, they switched to A-1 and Dedric and Skull split to the left and right as they besieged the Troll. When they did so, the Troll floundered, unable to decide on who to attack. Since the attacks weren't focused they were also easy to dodge. In addition, since they were all on different sides, one out of the three was always able to deal a Backstab.

A-2 was a series of attacks where they would strike and back off instantaneously. This was for when the enemy was strong; it helped preserve Health. Also, A-3 was a useful operation when facing a quick monster, where all three of them attacked at once. When Snake's Deadly Poison skill was thrown in properly on top of that, the effect was multiplied.

Like that, Ark used all the A operations to hunt the monsters in the area. And once they reached a level of familiarity with it, he trained them on the B operations.

Of course, the general training went on in Spartan style.

"Skull, you were a few seconds slow in changing operations this time. Food punishment!"

"Kekeke, I knew it. Well yeah, could a skull without a brain even memorize them properly anyways?"

"Dedric, don't act up. Food punishment for you, too!"

"EHH? W-why me?"

"Didn't I tell you? From now on, it's shared responsibility."

"Ridiculous, this is violence!"

"I told you, right? I like violence."

Ark opened the Familiars' mouths and crammed in food. There were a lot of new ingredients because they had never been to the Old Forest before. This was actually JusticeMan's suggestion. When establishing teamwork, wasn't it best to brand them with shared responsibility?

A specialist was indeed different. Thanks to him, the two Familiars put their heads together and whispered whenever they could even when Ark didn't say anything. They didn't want to be hit by a bolt out of the blue because of the other guy. It was a bit oppressive, but it seemed that the Familiars had finally begun to think in terms of the 'all for one, one for all' idea. In any case, through training and punishment, the Familiars' combat ability increased rapidly once again.

Also, the increase in punishments led directly to the rise in the proficiency of Survival Cooking. And then—!

"Yuck, wha-what is this? It tastes hella bad!"

The food you have made with Survival Cooking is 'Appetite Killing Stew.'

It smells and looks fine, but it tastes so awful that when eaten, it will cause trauma. It will make the eater lose their appetite and they won't even want to look at food, no matter how fragrant, for a while. Perfect dieting effect!

The taster will become unable to eat any kind of food for 2 hours. If they force themselves to eat, they will vomit and lose the effects of previously eaten food instead.

The moment when Bat crawled out of the pot and threw up, the skill finally leveled up.

Through much experience, Survival Cooking rank has gone up.

Survival Cooking (Advanced, Passive) : You used various ingredients scattered in nature to make countless new foods. Thanks to your limitless spirit of inquiry and appetite for cooking, you have finally become a Survival Cooking expert.

You can now draw out 100% of the hidden effects in ingredients. Also, the expiration date, additional effects, and the penalties have risen greatly.

As an Advanced bonus, you can make the special dish 'Medley.'

*Medley: Makes a new dish, a 'Medley,' by mixing 2 kinds of dishes together. The Medley dish will mix the characteristics of the two dishes and increase the additional effect, or may even nullify the penalty. Sometimes, a completely different form of additional effect that is impossible with normal dishes will form at random.

However, food made with Medley will not be saved as a new recipe. If there are dishes in your bag that are taking up space but are too regretful to eat or

throw away, daringly making them into Medleys wouldn't be bad either...

Survival Cooking, indeed!

Ark hadn't only made food with good effects this whole time. Since there was a limit to the kinds of ingredients, sometimes there were times when he made dishes that he knew would have penalty effects out of necessity to raise his proficiency, and he had to throw away those dishes while holding back tears. One wouldn't know how wasteful it was to have to waste perfectly good ingredients to make trashy food.

'But now I can recycle the trashy food by making them into Medleys!'

Ark immediately pulled out his useless dishes and tried making Medleys. After putting two dishes in the pot and activating the skill, a new dish was soon made with a bubbling sound effect.

You have made a Medley.

Soup of Horrifying Taste + Tea Tasting Like Steamed Rags = Essence of Fury

Possessing a taste that is hard to even describe, the person who eats this will experience extreme fury.

Fury +50, shouting volume will grow louder by 100%.

Since Medleys had random effects, he could find out the effect as soon as he made it, unlike Survival Cooking.

'Fury?'

Like the Spiritual Power that Ark used when calling out his Familiars, Fury was a value that warrior professions consumed when using a special skill. Moreover, there was no knowing why the shouting volume increase effect had been made. In other words, it was an effect that Ark didn't really need. However, Ark was quite satisfied with the result.

'Soup of Horrifying Taste has a damage dealing effect. And Tea Tasting Like Steamed Rags is a food that actually consumes Mana. It's not bad since useful food was made from mixing two dishes I would have had to toss anyways. And even if I make a Medley, Survival Cooking proficiency rises. Even if a bad dish comes out, it's better than just throwing away food.'

After that, Ark experimented with this and that.

Foods made with Medley had random added effects. Even though the same result was still made at a high rate when he mixed food with the same

formula, occasionally an entirely different dish was made as well. Though well, it didn't make much difference anyways...

Since it was a hard-won technique, he attempted using it with great enthusiasm, but he didn't make any really decent foods. For the most part, there were a lot of effects that gave off the... vague feeling that they were useful somewhere, or maybe not, like the Essence of Fury.

'Well, it should be fine if I think about the purpose of these foods slowly. Since I've halved the foods I've been carrying around 'cause they were a shame to throw away and I've gotten some space in my bag, let's pack them for now.'

If possible, he wanted to test it out a little more, but Ark currently didn't have the breadth of mind. He could take his pot and use it at any time. But there was an appropriate time for training and that was now.

'It's my turn now.'

Ark had no thoughts of being satisfied with just the fact that his Familiars' combat ability had risen. Even if the importance of the Familiars had increased, it was still only 40%. The other 60% was Ark's share. Even if the Familiars got stronger, it wouldn't make sense if Ark didn't grow.

"Thanks to the training I did in the sea, the skills I learned in the beginning have mostly reached their peak. However, I can't use the new skills I've learned properly yet. The success rate of Parry and Counter's chain skill, Riposte, is especially too low. If I'm to face ranged attacks, I have to make these two skills completely mine."

After thinking that, Ark sealed all his other skills. He only concentrated on activating Riposte by chaining Parry and Counter Attack. Of course, it was easier said than done. There was no proficiency to Riposte; it was a technique that had to be activated with the gamer's ability alone. In order to activate Riposte, he had to grasp the almost momentary timing between Parry and Counter Attack. It wasn't easy even if he got into position and aimed for just that moment. It also wasn't easy to activate it successfully with a risky position in a battle situation that constantly changed. Rather, he often ended up taking a hit from getting the 3 second paralyzation penalty upon failing to activate Riposte.

"It was a mess this time. I was only able to succeed with it twice!"

When that happened, Ark ate food. Naturally, he had to use new dishes for the growth of the Familiars, so he made and ate a dish that tasted awful from the ones already registered in his recipes. Ark was stern with others, but also equally stern with himself.

Dedric and Skull stared at him with horrified eyes.

"What a brutal master... he's scary, scary. Let's not be impudent with him anymore."

Clack clack clack.

Like that, the Silmido-level, extreme training went on for five, long days.

[T/N: A special military group called Unit 684 underwent hellish training for over three years on Silmido island for an infiltration mission into North Korea. This is the same island that was used for the membership training in Moonlight Sculptor.]

20 hours of training a day without going to a village even once!

As a result, Ark and the Familiars came to look completely like beggars. It was such a difficult time but it was definitely effective. The Familiars memorized all the operations up to D-4, and their fellowship had become stronger as well. That wasn't all-- Ark dragged the activation rate of Riposte up to 80%.

"Alright, now it's time for revenge."

"Huhuhu, I've been waiting, Master."

Clack clack clack!

Hiss hiss hiss!

With only evil left in them now, Ark and the Familiars' eyes gleamed with bloodthirst.

"Oho, it's a guest!"

"Huh? Isn't that fellow the one who ran away a while back?"

"He was alive?"

"Kekekeuk, he's braver than he looks, seeing as he's throwing away his life."

"Then I oughta put an arrow in his head, as he wishes. 'Cause customer satisfaction is our motto."

Once he crossed the boundary into their turf again, the bandits mocked him.

Soon afterwards, arrows began to pour from the tree tops.

"Dedric, Skull. Plan D-1."

"I know."

Dedric and Skull quickly went out in all directions. Unlike D, where they blindly fled, D-1 was an operation where they determined the location of the bandits and moved into blind spots, using rocks or trees as shields. Ark, however, exposed himself and blocked the arrows with the Parry skill ingrained in his body. After buying a few minutes or so of time, Ark whipped his body around and began to run away.

"Plan A-1!"

"Okay! Skull, come here!"

When Ark shouted, Dedric picked up Skull and cut through the forest.

"Eh? Those bastards are running away again?"

"Catch them! If we lose them again, it'll be a disgrace to the Silver Arrows!"

The thieves yelled as they pursued on vines. When some time had passed like that, there was a crashing noise as the bandits who had been quickly narrowing the gap suddenly yelled while falling to the ground.

That was exactly what Ark was aiming for. Having found out that they moved from branch to branch, Ark had sliced the branches in the area beforehand. As a result, the branches broke as soon as the bandits jumped on top of them.

"Now, Snake!"

Hiss hiss hiss!

Craaash!

Snake opened its mouth wide. In that moment, an enormous number of leaves spewed from its mouth. As the leaves flew out in all directions, it was as if the forest was enveloped in a fog of leaves. It was yet another plan that Ark had prepared for just this moment. He had filled Snake's belly up with leaves in advance for an attack that used Snake's attribute of throwing up items!

"Urgh, w-what's this?"

"Damn, where are they?"

With their vision blocked by the leaves that were pouring out like a rain shower, the bandits fell into confusion. That was when Ark and the Familiars leapt into the swirling leaves.

"Plan A-3!"

"Uhahaha, you bastards! Have a taste of this!"

At Ark's shout, Dedric soared into the sky. Then he drew a steep arc as he plunged down like a lightning bolt. Struck on the top of his head, a thief hurriedly raised his bow. In that moment, Skull sprang up from a pile of leaves as it tore into the thief's thigh. The bandit screamed as he staggered and the arrow went astray. That was the only attack the thief could attempt. Afterwards, Ark ran in and crammed successive critical hits on him, and the thief fell over without even a chance to shout.

"Snake, Neurotoxin!"

After destroying one of the thieves in an instant, Ark fed Snake an herb. Venom immediately pooled on Snake's fangs.

Ark applied the Neurotoxin on his sword and went around all over the place, striking the arms of the bandits. The arms of three or four thieves became paralyzed and went limp. Once three or four thieves became unable to shoot arrows like that, it all fell into Ark's pace from there.

"Th-these bastards...!"

The rogues moaned as they faltered.

A few of them urgently tried to go back up into the trees, but Ark wasn't one to stand by and watch. He immediately unfurled operation C-3, and Dedric flew around in all directions as he stepped on the heads of the thieves. Skull also clamped onto their ankles and dragged them down. When they fell from the trees again, what was waiting for them was Ark's sharp, blue sword.

"You would've played with me oh so well!"

Po-po-pow!

Stabbed in the back, the thieves undoubtedly took Backstab damage and staggered. In the end, they gave up on escaping up the trees and pulled out their daggers. Seeing their flashing blades, a chilly smile spread on Ark's lips.

"You're going to try facing me with blades? I'm thankful."

Ark immediately dove in between the 3 rogues. Daggers were swung in every direction. But who was Ark? A strong, level 78 person who had trained his body day and night with Taekwondo.

Ark had been chased away by the thieves because of their arrow attacks. But if it was simple hack and slash close combat, Ark wouldn't bat an eye even if

he were surrounded by monsters over level 100, much less the likes of level 70 thieves...

Moreover, his opponents were human NPCs. It would be easier to predict their attacks with muscle movements than to try and do so with strange-looking monsters.

'Time to strike!'

If a bandit raised his blade, Ark's body would react more swiftly than expected. He would slip past the blade at an angle and unleash a front snap kick. Then he shot forward as he went right up to his retreating opponent, and unfurled a knee kick and sword strike in rapid succession. Since he was pressed tightly to his opponent, the others couldn't easily swing their swords at him. This was a weakness formed within them because they were clever humans and not ignorant monsters.

Po-po-po-pow!

The three thieves went exploding off in all directions.

"Hiik!"

At that sight, the remaining thief let loose a choked scream. Seeing as he was wearing a stylish hat, unlike the other rogues, it seemed he was the boss of the thief gang. Perhaps because he thought he couldn't face Ark with a dagger after seeing him fight, the thief quickly pulled out his bow. Then he shot an arrow with practiced hands. As befitting of the boss, he must have used a special skill because the arrow was enveloped in black energy. However, Ark didn't even budge and stood right in its way, glaring at the arrow.

Then, the moment when the Arrow was about to lodge itself in Ark's neck--!

'Now!'

Ark's hand moved like a flash. He parried the arrow as if flinging it away with the tip of his sword, then fiercely stabbed with a chained movement.

The technique had become as fast and delicate as to parry away an arrow zipping in almost within the time it took to mark a decimal point and unleash a Counter Attack! He had practiced Riposte for five days to the extent of getting blisters on his hands for this moment. The arrow was an attack, so he had judged that he would be able to parry it and deal a counter. Lacking a way to deal with a ranged attack, this was the desperate measure Ark had cooked up.

The effect met his expectations. With the sound of metal, the arrow bounced off and lodged itself in the thief boss' face.

"Arrgghhh, how, how could such a thing...!"

The thief clutched his face and swung his dagger all over the place, but Ark wasn't one to get hit by such a blind blade. Ark, Dedric, and Skull soon ran in at him, and the bastard quickly turned into a cold corpse.

"Urrgggh, y-you bastard...!"

When the boss collapsed, he dropped a silver bow. Ark picked it up and a message window opened.

- You have killed the boss of the Silver Arrow thief gang.

If you take the evidence to the Giran Guard, you can claim your reward.

Within five days, he had finally taken care of the first bountied criminals.

"Uhahaha, how was that! This Dedric-nim's skills!" Dedric leapt around as if he had annihilated the thief gang all on his own.

"Snake, skill change. Item Storage"

It was time to rake it in. Having annihilated the thief gang, Ark went around the area as he started packing away the items. Compared to normal monsters, the bandits dropped a considerable amount of japtem. Unlike monsters that only dropped things like leather or clubs, there were quite a few daggers or clothing equipment items. That wasn't all— since they were thieves in name, all sorts of items emerged when he rooted through their hideout. The dishes and lanterns the thieves had used, and even the miscellaneous items they had gathered through thievery... Of course, there were only shoddy things that wouldn't make much money since they weren't high leveled thieves, but money was money. Ark even threw all the leftover food that the bandits had eaten into his bag.

'This is more savory than I thought.'

After sweeping up every little copper the thieves had owned like that, Ark immediately moved to his next destination. His next objective was the Grey Axe Gang, which was said to have appeared in the area around Rodellin Village.

Unlike the Silver Arrow thief gang, it was composed of warrior professions. However, they were just as tricky to face. He had always thought of a party with various professions like Warriors, Archers, and Magicians in it to be ideal, but a Warrior party where everyone was armed with shields and axes was also stronger than he expected.

"Chop him up!"

With their shields in front of them, the Warriors surrounded Ark and swung their axes. They were also 5 levels higher than the Silver Arrow thief gang, putting them at 75. And it was no easy matter to take down even one of them because they had tremendous defense. However, Ark broke through the siege with Riposte and used the operation he had practiced with his Familiars to strike and back out as they took care of the Warriors one at a time. When he downed the last Warrior, his level went up.

- You have leveled up.

He had leveled up within five days.

'Now I know why people didn't go for the thief gang bountied criminals.'

Annihilating a thief gang was three to four times harder than catching monsters of the same level. It was due to the cleverness of the human NPCs and because they were armed with profession skills and equipment. They didn't give any extra EXP despite that, so there was no reason to hunt a thief gang with such difficulty. There were plenty of bountied criminals besides the thief gangs anyway.

But Ark shook his head. 'My ability to adapt to circumstances will grow the more I fight tricky opponents. Like how I hadn't even thought of returning an arrow with Riposte a while back, and since I also don't know when I'll have to fight a human NPC next, I have to gain experience with this opportunity.'

"Now, shall I see what you've got?"

Ark swept up all the items that were lying around in the campsite of the Grey Axe Gang. After shaking down two thief gangs like that, Snake's belly filled all the way up. He wouldn't make much even if he sold it all, but the fun of packing away the abundant japtem that poured from the thief gangs was quite pleasurable.

Of course, it was tough to expect much of a quest reward or a jackpot item, but for steadily making money, he felt that the profit was better than going through a hunting ground.

Ah! He almost forgot to mention it, but right when the rascals who had bullied Ark when he was in elementary school rose to 4th grade, they were beaten up by Ark. Ark had been learning Taekwondo for 2 years. His personality of repaying his suffering many times over hadn't changed at all from back then.

"Oh, did you take care of these guys? I haven't seen you before, so you must be a newcomer? Good work, I'll remember your face from now on since you took care of two of them. Ah, this is the promised bounty. I ask that you work for Giran's peace in the future as well."

-You took down a bountied criminal and received a reward.

For completing the task successfully, your Giran contribution has increased by 15.

You have completed your first bounty hunt and your Hunter Rank has been elevated to E.

When he turned in the evidence to the Giran Guard, he received 25 Gold and his contribution and Hunter Rank went up as an additional reward. He thought there wasn't much meaning besides the bounty, but it did feel good to have something rise. Also, he caught wanted criminals and received a bounty. This simple work was surprisingly quite fun.

"I didn't get information about the quest, but... well, it doesn't matter. I'll get it eventually. Let's just sweep through the thief gangs and get experience for a while. It's unexpectedly fun and seems profitable, too."

Ark pulled off two more wanted sheets from the message board.