

Ark Vol 4 C 3

Chapter 3

Meeting Sid Again

Giran's main street was as noisy as ever. Even at dawn, the Trade district in particular was so crowded that there was no space to walk due to the players selling and buying goods. With the exception of a space where three or four people could barely slip out, the street was covered with stalls. It looked exactly like a European flea market that you could see on TV. There were all kinds of items, from material items worth several Coppers to Rare items; there was nothing they didn't have.

If you used the auction house, you had to pay a fee of 5%. As the price of the item grew higher, the fee became very burdensome. From the buyer's perspective as well, there were a lot of players who preferred direct dealing since they could get the item they needed right away. However, there was the risk of getting scammed in a direct deal if you didn't know the market price, so you had to be careful.

'Well, though that doesn't matter to me...'

Ark hadn't been interested in business like that from the very beginning. He could get the items he needed on his own, and it was Ark's opinion that it was more profitable to just use the time to hunt rather than do business to save on the fee.

Ark went through the flea market without much thought. He intended to quickly sell off the japtan he had gathered from the thief gangs in the store and go bounty hunt. But at the end of the flea market, he suddenly stopped.

In Ark's gaze, shoddy clothes were piled up in a secluded corner.

- We are having a clothing sale for all items. Flat price of 50 Coppers!

In New World, casual clothes existed in addition to armor. They didn't have any defense, but they were worn in villages or cities to look cool. Also, there were cases where expensive clothes had an option called 'Charm.' Charm was a stat that influenced intimacy when talking to an NPC. That's why Merchants went around with several articles of such high-class clothes. Naturally, fancy clothes like that were as expensive as armor.

The clothes piled up on the stall right now were just casual clothes. They could only be used for something like trying them on once for a change of mood. Of course, since Ark had no interest in clothes in reality either, there was no reason for him to be interested in game clothes.

What interested Ark wasn't the clothes, but the Hobbit Merchant squatting behind them. The player who was so absorbed in needlework that it was as if he couldn't feel Ark's gaze on him was Sid.

'Why is Sid selling clothes here?' Ark tilted his head.

Sid had changed his profession to Trader. It was a profession where one would buy and sell trade goods from distant villages or cities. But he was making and selling clothes worth just 50 Coppers? Moreover, the feeling that emanated from Sid wasn't bright and cheerful, like before. As if the backdrop around him had changed to grayscale, he gave off a heavy feeling of gloominess.

"Hey..."

As if afraid of Ark's shadow, Sid flinched as he quickly bowed his head. "Ah! We-welcome. I am selling all kinds of apparel at a special discounted price. Use high quality goods to get off on the right start every day. We even have the feathered hat and small fashion items that are popular these days. Please buy one. It's only 50 Coppers. If you buy two, I'll cut 10 Coppers for you."

"Sid, why are you doing business in a place like this?"

Spreading out his goods one by one, Sid's hands abruptly stopped. Then he slo

wly raised his head and stared at Ark for a moment with a dumb expression.

"A-Ark—!"

Tears suddenly dripped from Sid's acorn-shaped eyes. Not knowing the reason for this outburst, Ark asked with a shocked voice, "Ehh? What's the matter?"

"Waaahh, Ark. I wanted to see you."

"Why in the world are you crying? What happened?"

"I... the truth is, I was ruined."

"Ru-ruined?"

"I mean, I even got a loan from the Merchant Guild and bought goods, but... snuffle, I struggled to death and returned, but the market price had dropped all the way to the bottom, and... sob sob, I was put into debt by that... it's hard to even repay my interest, so... waah, I started to do business to make a living somehow, but... my items don't even sell 'cause my Tailoring skill is low, and... I can't even pay my interest so my debt is just growing, and.. WAAAHH, I'm tired of making items that don't even sell now."

It seemed quite a lot had happened.

After explaining with snot and tears dripping, Sid ended up weeping with abandon. He cried so noisily that his wails rang throughout the flea market, making players glance over. Getting glared at unnecessarily as a result, Ark consoled Sid for now. After barely managing to cease his cries like that, Sid rubbed his eyes as he explained with a much calmer voice.

"You know how I was trying to raise the prices of Giran's silk shares, right?"

"Yes, I heard."

"When I parted with you, I had quite a lot of capital. So I went trading with the thought of raising my shares a lot with that. And after reaching the south-eastern region, I found out through the Merchant Guild that Giran's silk prices had been booming for a long time. I thought it was an opportunity!"

Sid clenched his tiny fist tightly, as if reviving his excitement at that time.

No matter how irregular a trade good's market price was, something that had been booming almost never plummeted overnight. Since it had just started to rise, there was a high chance that he would definitely make a net profit despite the time it would take to return all the way to Giran. Having judged it as such, Sid decided to try engaging in a contest with his fate as a Merchant hanging on it.

"The top Merchant Guild Midus gives loans to Merchants as well. So went to a nearby guild and received a loan of 300 Gold, and wrote a contract that I would repay it after selling the silk in Giran. Then I even hired an expensive mercenary NPC to hurry and return to Giran, but..."

"The price of the silk fell."

"...Yes." Sid's eyes welled up with tears again as he nodded. "I was tricked."

"Tricked?"

"There were actually a few Merchants who competed with me for the silk shares. I found out later, but one of those Merchants used his guild's funds to control the price."

"Control the price? How?"

"He offered a price higher than the trading post to the Merchants who came with silk from the southeastern region and bought it all. Since silk wasn't coming into the trading post, of course the price could only skyrocket. Then, when I arrived with the silk, he sold off all the silk he'd gathered at the trading post."

The silk scraped up from players had been sold in an instant. The result was obvious— the dramatic price drop of the suddenly abundant silk!

When Sid arrived at Giran, the price wasn't even 50% of his purchase price.

In a case like this, the Merchant could only sell his goods to another region. But Sid had written a contract upon borrowing the money to sell in Giran. While he was unable to do anything, the contract time ended, all his silk was seized by the Merchant Guild, and he even racked up a debt of 200 Gold.

... Simply put, he had become bankrupt. As a result, Sid's Reliability stat and Fame dropped to the bottom for violating the contract. In addition, his level and the proficiency of all his skills decreased for making a negative trade; since he had a debt on top of that, he had no money to buy goods and had completely become a beggar.

"Kekeke, I knew that would happen. For a Merchant, he looks stupid." Dedric grinned as he rubbed salt in the wound.

But seemingly lacking the energy to even reply, Sid just sighed as he pointed to the clothes. "Now I'm just barely working on repaying my debt by selling clothes with the Tailoring skill I learned before, but..."

There was no knowing how many years it would take to repay 200 Gold by selling clothes worth 50 Coppers. In addition, his Tailoring skill was low so he could only make clothes without any options; there was no reason for them to even sell well.

After explaining that much, Sid glanced at Ark. "Ark-nim, by any chance..."

"I don't have money." Ark quickly cut him off.

There was actually quite a fortune in his bag. He had almost 700 Gold when he left Giran. He had made 100 Gold from selling the japtm he had gathered from the event quest and the bounty he'd gotten just now, so he had 800 Gold in all. But who was Ark? Ark's bag was a gaping black hole. Money that had gone in once would never be thrown back out again.

As if he had remembered Ark's intense personality, Sid's shoulders slumped. "I see... Haahh..."

"I'm sorry. I had a lot of expenses here and there."

"No, it's fine. It was my mistake anyways. Hahaha, I can only work hard on my needlework and repay my debt. Well, hahaha. Pay no attention to me."

The despairing Sid laughed bitterly to himself. Seeing Sid being broken like this made him feel very uncomfortable. Sid was one of the few people he had met in the game, a player he liked. Ark had earned quite a lot of useful information through Sid as well, and he had gotten lots of help from him in the blind auctions too. But to turn a blind eye on Sid as he requested help...

'I'm just like my relatives.'

After his father passed away and his mother was hospitalized, his relatives had changed face overnight. Ark had felt hatred towards them and had vowed to never live like them. Although this was, of course, a game, looking away from Sid, who he thought of as a friend, made him feel just like them. That bothered him more than anything.

'Still, I can't just lend him money when he's sitting atop a pile of debt... isn't there a way I can help Sid without incurring a loss? Without costing money...'

After pacing around for a bit, Ark was soon able to find a way easily enough.

Ark was a combat-style character, Sid was a Merchant. Then wasn't the answer unexpectedly simple?

'Right, there was a method like that!'

"Sid, would you like to hunt with me?"

"Hunt?"

"Yes, I'm of a mind to go around Giran while focusing on bounty hunting for a while."

"But you know that I'm no help in hunting."

"You don't have to hunt."

Ark grinned as he explained. Ark had to go around a large region in order to hunt the thief gangs. Naturally, he would end up hunting trivial monsters and not just the thief gangs. And he even had to collect ingredients, but he couldn't entrust items to Snake if he wanted to use the Deadly Poison skill. As a result, he was always short on bag space. If he had to return to Giran every time his bag filled up, the time wasted wasn't insignificant.

However, if Sid joined in, all the problems would be resolved in a single go. He had the 6 bags of Merchants, so there wasn't a problem with storage, and if Sid returned to Giran instead of Ark, he could even concentrate the movement time on hunting.

"So you're asking me to be your sales agent?"

"Yes, you won't need to shuttle back very often because you have a lot of bag space. Also, when your bag fills up, it shouldn't be dangerous to get to Giran if I escort you to a safe road."

"Then the distribution...?"

"I'm also tight on cash, so it's hard for me to give you a separate compensation. In exchange, you can have the profit that you make with your Merchant skill outside of the original prices of the items. At the very least, it'll be better than selling clothes here. You'll also be able to raise your dropped Reliability, EXP, and skill proficiency."

To be honest, Ark hadn't been the one who had thought of this method. If you went up to Giran's store, Merchants who had failed in business like Sid were gathered. They were people who dreamt of comebacks as they sold japttem gathered by players and prepared capital with the commissions. Of course Sid was aware of this too, but those people were mostly Merchants who could net a profit of at least 20%. But having chosen Trader, Sid could get a 10% profit by selling normal japttem, so no players would leave their japttem to him.

"I'll, I'll do it! No, please let me do it!"

Sid grabbed Ark's hands. He had already experienced how fiercely Ark scraped up japtem before. If he could take a monopoly on those items, then even if he only netted a 10% additional profit when selling them off, it wouldn't be a small sum. If Ark was lucky enough and he occasionally picked up a few expensive items, Sid would be able to make that much more money. It was at least better than sitting here selling clothing for 50 Coppers.

'Huhuhu, this might be an unexpectedly good idea...'

Ark made a satisfied smile. If Sid joined in, he would get 6 bags for free. Moreover, since Sid would automatically return to the village and exchange the goods for money when the items accumulated, he was no different from a walking shop!

Sid was just a bag to Ark after all.

"Alright. Then let's take care of the items I've got right now first and leave."

"Yes!"

Sid hurried to clean up his stand. Then, while Sid was heading to the store, Ark went back to the message board, tore off all the thief gang wanted posters, and registered them. Now that he had no reason to stop by again, he planned to live in the hunting ground altogether.

"I got 15 Gold for it all, and a 2 Gold profit." Having met Sid again in the square, the color had returned to his face.

"Nice. Then you can buy a contract with that money, right?"

"Huh?"

"You have to write up the Merchant contract. Didn't you say that cost about 1 Gold?" said Ark with a suave smile.

In the end, Sid had to hold back his tears, spend 1 Gold, and write up a sales agent contract.

In any case, that's how Ark came to meet the credit delinquent Hobbit Merchant Sid again.

In a dark cave that stirred with dismal energy, two men were walking along the cave. One was a handsome man with blond hair wearing sparkling white armor. It was the highly renowned Holy Knight Alan. The man wearing normal plate armor and looking relatively more lacking was Andel.

Andel looked all around as he asked, "I don't sense any presence at all? Is this really the secret hideout of the ones called the Dark Brother?"

"Don't make me say it multiple times," replied Alan as he lit his way with a shining sword.

In New World, there was still a lot of information that wasn't known to ordinary players yet. One of them was how to use a tavern. There was always a tavern in city-sized villages, and if you paid a certain amount of money to the tavern owner, he would tell you a rumor drifting around in New World. It might be a rumor about what kind of item was where, and there was also quest info. Of course, it was still a rumor so there were cases where you could struggle to find it, but get nothing. But in New World, where the player had to find every clue on his own, even that had considerable merit.

"But there is a separate NPC who gives the really rare information. It's the tavern's Minstrel. If you listen to a certain number of the Minstrel's songs, he will even tell you rare information. Well, he only gives you real info if you pay at least 10 Gold for listening to one song, but the Minstrel's info is at least 80% reliable. We got the clue about the Labyrinth of Tarsha from a Minstrel last time, too."

That really meant the Minstrel was an NPC you could only use by using money like water. Like that, Alan acquired high-quality information with a method Ark wouldn't have even dared to try.

"It took a whole 100 Gold to get the info about the Dark Brother. This is definitely it."

"Then that's a relief, but..."

"Wait, there's something there."

Just then, something got picked up by the 'Life Detection' aura that Alan had cast. When he stopped walking and raised his shining sword, a red crest that looked like a blood-red fingerprint appeared on the cave wall. One old man was standing in front of the crest like a stone statue, staring at the two. It was an elderly man who emitted a somehow strange feeling, but a faint smile spread on Alan's lips.

"Seems like we found it properly." Alan approached by one step as he asked, "Is this the secret meeting place of the Dark Brother?"

"From whom did you hear about this place?"

"I heard it from the capital's Minstrel."

"It appears that he has become lax in keeping secrets, for him to have slipped the info to those who do not even smell of blood." The smell of blood the NPC mentioned was referring to the Chaotic alignment. The elder's eyes narrowed. "And for you to be Holy Knight Alan..."

"You know of me?"

"Huhuhu, just where do you think this is?"

"I don't want to reveal my identity."

"I suppose you would," the elder smiled faintly as he nodded, "since nothing good will come of a rumor that the highly reputed Holy Knight Sir Alan was getting involved with people like us. However, there's no need to worry. We ensure customer privacy; that's our iron-clad rule. In any case, seeing as you're talking like that, it seems you're not idiots who rushed over to subjugate us or something... Alright, shall we hear about your business now, Holy Knight Sir Alan?"

"I heard that you handle all kinds of jobs here."

"Of course. You could call illegal works in particular our specialty."

"There's someone, no, a foreigner... that I want dead."

"An assassination request? I thought you were someone with quite an overflowing sense of justice, how surprising."

"You're saying more than expected."

"Are you offended? Well, alright. The bottom line is that of course it's possible. But... making contact with us shouldn't have been an easy decision for someone like you. For you to come all the way here and ask for an assassination... it seems you have a resentful relationship that you can't reveal?"

"Do I have to say that much?"

When Alan showed a nasty look, the elder laughed bleakly. "No, there's no need. I get it, we always welcome requests. But of course you know that we aren't volunteer workers, yes?"

"State your desired compensation."

"The price differs depending on the term of the request. You probably know since you're also a foreigner, but all foreigners have a mystical ability, so it's impossible even for us to murder them completely. It is, however, possible for us to deal as much damage as you desire. Naturally, how much damage we deal differs depending on the compensation."

At the end of the elder's words, they heard the sound of bleak laughter as a message window popped up.

You have succeeded in having a secret meeting with the secret assassin organization only heard of in rumors, the 'Dark Brother.'

The Dark Brother is an underground organization that keeps countless secrets. They have covertly taken part in the history of New World, and at times they are dangerous people who achieve their objective by any means necessary. However, there are only very few people who know of their identity.

A player who succeeds in having a secret meeting with the Dark Brother can request a special job that cannot be resolved alone.

However, bear in mind that dealing with these shady people can cause a fatal impact on your alignment and Fame. In addition, if the truth of your dealings with them is found out, you could even become enemies of the Church.

For every request made to the Dark Brother, 'Good' alignment will drop by 50 and Fame will decrease by 500. In the case of an alignment of 0, it will become -50 and you will become Chaotic.

'Dark Brother' Assassination Request Manual

A-rank request: Murders the target at least 5 times. Takes at least 3 equipment items. 200 Gold commission.

B-rank request: Murders the target at least 3 times. Takes at least 2 equipment items. 150 Gold commission.

C-rank request: Murders the target at least 1 time. Takes at least 1 equipment item. 100 Gold commission.

"I choose the A-rank request." After reading through the message, Alan replied without hesitation.

At that, the elder's eyes gleamed faintly. "Oho, there aren't that many people who request the A-rank... looks like you've built up quite a lot of feeling with the opponent. Alright, we accept. The person we have to get rid of is?"

"Can I believe in your ability to kill?"

In response, the elder grinned as he flicked his finger. At the same time, torches lit up here and there in the cave. As they looked around, that was when Alan and Andel's faces stiffened. Before they knew it, three men wearing black masks were pointing swords at their backs.

"A-Alan!" Andel murmured with a slightly scared expression.

But Alan smiled faintly instead as he nodded. "Good, you're worth trusting."

Ever since he entered the cave, Alan had left his Life Detection aura turned on. But he hadn't sensed any signs of them, meaning that the level of their 'Stealth' was high enough to not be perceived by the aura.

"I'll ask again, the target is?"

"...Ark!"

At Alan's reply, the elder's eyes twitched slightly. "Ark, you say... Jackson's hero? He's not an easy opponent indeed."

"You know him?"

"This is the Dark Brother. Information of that level is basic."

"Good, you're becoming more trustworthy."

"Wait." Just then, Andel ground his teeth as he took a step forward. "I want to accompany the kill team. I must see that bastard die with my own eyes."

"There's nothing bad for us if someone who knows the objective's face accompanies us. But it shouldn't be good if your relationship with us becomes known?"

"That doesn't matter!"

"Alright. We are prepared to take in the customer's demands at all times. If you tell us where you're staying, we'll compose the kill team and send them to you tomorrow night. Are there any other matters?"

"No."

Alan paid the 200 Gold and backed out of the cave. After walking for a while without talking, Alan asked as if in passing, "Will you be okay? If you're to follow the kill team around, you'll have to give up on leveling up for a while. Your stats dropped again from dying at Jackson. You haven't recovered them yet, right?"

"Something like that doesn't matter anymore." Andel's eyes gleamed as he muttered. "I only did the Global Exos entrance exam for fun anyways. I have no interest in it anymore. My only goal is Ark, that bastard. Lariette said that bastard was an applicant too, right? Che, a fucking beggar with his life hanging on entrance into Global Exos... but it was a mistake to mess with me. No matter what method I have to use, I'll make it so that he won't pass the entrance exam. No, I'll make it so he won't even be able to dare to play the game anymore!"

Alan nodded heavily.

Andel was the eldest child of a considerably wealthy family. He was getting allowance from his parents and using that right now, but in time he'd be able to get at least one decent shopping mall. He was only taking the Global Exos exam because he was trying to pretend that he couldn't overcome his parents' pestering. He didn't have something like an earnest reason, like Ark did.

"Anyways, thanks, Alan. I didn't think you'd go this far for me."

"How bad must it be for you to ask even me?"

"Your alignment and Fame must've been cut down too... I won't forget this favor."

"Don't worry about it," Alan replied with mock graciousness.

The NPCs Alan had sought out were the assassin organization, Dark Brother. When the person you had a grudge with wasn't Chaotic, this was the only way to kill them without becoming Chaotic yourself. But perhaps for the game balance, there were considerable limitations that came with using an assassin guild.

First of all, it wasn't easy to meet the assassin guild in secret because it was an underground organization. Also, the minimum commission fee was 100 Gold, a sum that reached \$1,000 in cash. That wasn't all— if you made an assassination request; even your alignment and Fame were cut. Alan had a different perspective from Andel, whose Fame had already reached the bottom because he had a history of being Chaotic. For a Holy Knight, to whom Fame was as important as level, it was truly an extreme measure.

'Andel, I didn't do it for you.' Alan lightly clenched his teeth.

This was something that had happened a while ago. Occupying 1st place in contribution, Alan had proudly returned to the Warrior Guild. And there, he heard the name of Ark again.

"Have you heard of the name Ark before?" asked the Warrior Guild branch leader.

"I have."

"Actually, there's intel that you tied for 1st place with him."

"What? Are you serious?"

"Moreover, he's neither a Magician nor a Merchant. If you know each other, could you contact him and ask him for the exact details? If you could have him join a subordinate guild of the Warrior Guild, even better."

Alan's face contorted at the branch leader's words.

'... That bastard damaged my pride.'

Until now, the existence called Ark had been no different from a fly to Alan. He was annoying, but he was someone Alan hadn't cared enough about to get up and catch.

Alan was often called a modern noble, and he himself knew that very well. Whether it was sports or grades, he had always insisted on being the best. Everything he wanted came into his hands. That was the same in the game as well. Alan had to be the best in every field that he was interested in. But a meddler he hadn't even considered interfered. And around that time, Alan witnessed a video of Valderas and one player that had been uploaded on the Internet.

The player who was fighting Valderas was... Ark.

'He's a hindrance.' Displeasure crept up in Alan's chest. 'It's a matter of fact that I'll pass the entrance exam. What's important isn't passing or failing. It's about whether I can be the top or not.'

The main character of the video hadn't been revealed on the Internet yet, but Global Exos was probably already paying attention to Ark. They must have received his report, and if you really compared them...

The impact Ark had made was far bigger than the one Alan had made.

That meant that Alan was falling behind Ark in their assessment. That was something Alan couldn't tolerate.

'Alan is my other self. His defeat is my defeat. And...'

He also didn't like how Lariette chattered about Ark whenever she had the opportunity. Alan pretended like he had met her by chance in the game, but Lariette was a girl that Alan had picked out since the day of the interview. That's why he used the game as a pretext to draw her in, and he was slowly winning her over. After all, there was no girl who wouldn't come his way if he put his mind to it. But he absolutely couldn't condone the fact that Lariette was showing interest in a man other than himself. That was what made Alan start to dislike Ark. It was absurd, but considering such an absurd thing so earnestly was the mentality of guys with lots of money.

And now, Ark had touched his pride. It was just a game, but he couldn't fall behind anyone all the more because it was a game. He also had to top Global Exos' entrance exam, of course. He could never tolerate someone who got in his way.

'If there's someone blocking my way, I'll destroy him with all my power, no matter who he is!'

That was the way Alan had always lived, and how he would continue to live.

Alan stopped walking and looked back at Andel. "I also dislike the guy that you dislike. That's all."

"Alan, thanks. After we've smashed the bastard, I'll devote all my power to helping you," responded Andel with a deeply moved expression.

But Alan's eyes were infinitely cold as he looked at Andel's face. 'The reason why I like you is because of that servility.'

Thus, the Anti-Ark Alliance was made.