

Tyrant 52

Chapter 52: Hunter's Greeting

The mountain path twisted endlessly ahead, flanked by snow-covered trees and silent rock faces. Trafalgar rode alone, slumped slightly forward in the saddle, his hands resting loosely on the reins. The steady clop of hooves was the only sound accompanying him for hours.

His breath came slow and tired.

'It's already day again... how long have I been riding? Three hours? Four?'

His body throbbed with dull pain. Muscles sore from the battle. Cuts burning from the cold. Worse still—he didn't know if he was going the right way.

'What if those mercs weren't even taking me to the right place? They could've been leading me anywhere—straight into an ambush for all I know.'

He gritted his teeth, shifting his weight in the saddle. The cold wind bit at his neck.

'The Gate... it's supposed to be a portal connected to Velkaris. Biggest city on the world. Millions of people from all races live there. A place of opportunity and where the academy is.'

He scoffed under his breath.

'Yeah... and I'm wandering around like a lost farm boy with blood on my coat.'

The road didn't split. It didn't twist dramatically. It just... continued. Mile after mile. Eventually, Trafalgar spotted a worn log by the side of the path. He pulled the reins gently, bringing the horse to a halt.

"That's far enough."

He climbed down, legs shaky as they hit the ground. His boots crunched softly on the frozen dirt. He tied the reins to the log, patted the horse lightly on the neck, and collapsed onto the ground nearby.

It wasn't warm. It wasn't safe. But it would have to do.

Before closing his eyes, he reached into his coat.

A small orb materialized in his hand—smooth and black, pulsing faintly with soft purple lines that twisted beneath the surface like living veins.

[Item Acquired: Shadowlink Echo – Rare Rank]

Description: A compact mana-infused node capable of recording and transmitting encrypted voice messages over long distances. Requires a small infusion of mana to activate.

Trafalgar breathed in and pressed two fingers to its surface. Mana surged briefly. The orb blinked once.

"Caelum. I'm alive. Took care of Seraphine's welcoming committee. Barely. I'm in one piece but not unscathed. Pass this along to my father, see if he plans on doing something about it."

He paused, then added, "Also... I have no damn idea where I'm going. How do I know which is the right road? Do you have a way to guide me?"

He let go. The orb pulsed twice, then vanished in a blink of shadowlight, scattering like dust.

Trafalgar exhaled and leaned back against a tree. He shut his eyes.

Just five minutes...

But before even drifting off, the Shadowlink Echo shimmered again, reappearing just a few inches from his chest.

His eyes snapped open.

'So fast... Was he waiting?'

He tapped it once.

Caelum's voice emerged—calm, measured, with a faint edge of satisfaction.

"I'm glad you're alive, young master. I discovered that lady Seraphine send one of his personal soldiers, so you just defeated one of Lady Seraphine's private soldiers—someone three Core Ranks above you. Impressive."

"As for your direction: just follow the sunrise. From any position, the Gate to Velkaris lies due east. Walk toward the sun's rise. I'll inform Lord Valtair and notify the academy. You may arrive late."

The message ended.

But Trafalgar didn't move.

He felt it—that chill at the base of his spine.

That instinct.

That weight behind the words.

"Private soldier... not just some mercenaries...?"

He clenched his jaw. Slowly stood. And summoned Maledicta into his hand.

The shadows coiled into a blade.

'Shit! She sent more than just mercenaries... all this just to get rid of the bastard.'

He turned slowly, scanning the tree line.

And that's when he saw it.

A flicker of light from a distant ridge—

—and the gleam of mana-imbued steel flying toward his chest.

"Agh—!"

Trafalgar dove sideways, barely ducking behind a log as a mana-charged arrow blasted past him. It struck the ground where he'd been sitting seconds ago—exploding on impact. Dirt and snow scattered in a flash of blue flame.

He rolled behind the tree, heart pounding in his ears.

'Shit. He's here.'

His grip tightened around Maledicta.

The real fight hadn't ended. It had just evolved.

Heart pounding, he tried to breathe quietly, listening.

Another arrow whistled through the canopy—this one embedding itself into the trunk inches from his face, glowing faintly with residual energy.

He clenched his jaw.

'No time. I need the horse. I need to—'

A sickening crack echoed through the clearing.

Trafalgar froze.

He peeked over the edge just in time to see the black horse's head burst apart in a mist of blood and bone. Its body crumpled to the side, twitching once before going still—an arrow had punched through its skull like paper.

His bags tumbled with it.

"Fuck!" he hissed, ducking again.

'Forget the horse. Forget the bags. My head's more valuable than anything inside them.'

Another shot struck the tree above him, cracking it at the base. Wood splinters rained down. He rolled out from under it just as it toppled.

No time to think. Just move.

He ran.

Maledicta in one hand, the other arm raised to shield his face, Trafalgar sprinted through the trees, weaving between trunks, ducking under branches. Behind him, mana-imbued arrows whistled through the air—one after another—each one powerful enough to tear holes into solid wood.

Whhhh-TCHK!

A nearby tree exploded into splinters as one arrow struck dead center. Another arrow slammed into the dirt by his feet, carving a small crater and showering him with frost and stone. A third ricocheted off a boulder, buzzing past his ear like a hornet from hell.

He zigzagged, breath ragged.

His coat snagged on branches. Snow clung to his boots. But he didn't stop.

He couldn't.

Trafalgar dove behind a cluster of thick rocks, his chest heaving, lungs burning.

Silence.

No arrows. No footsteps. No movement in the treetops.

Only the soft whisper of the wind brushing through pine needles. Snowflakes drifted lazily around him, untouched by the chaos that had just torn the forest apart.

He pressed his back against the stone, one hand gripping Maledicta, the other clutching his side where a low-hanging branch had scratched him during the sprint. It wasn't deep, but it stung. Everything stung.

His breath steamed in the cold.

He stayed still.

Seconds dragged. Then a full minute.

Two.

Still nothing.

The forest had returned to quiet... but it was the wrong kind of quiet.

Not peaceful—predatory.

Trafalgar's grip on Maledicta tightened as he peeked around the edge of the stone. The trees swayed gently, as if nothing had happened. There was no sign of his attacker.

No silhouette on the ridgelines. No glint of bow or armor.

But he knew someone was out there.

Waiting.

Watching.

'I'm being hunted.'

A cold dread pooled in his stomach. This wasn't a fight—it was a game. And he wasn't the predator anymore. He was prey.

The worst part? He didn't even know how far the assassin's range was. A single mistake—one wrong move—and his head would end up like the horse's.

He ducked back into cover and closed his eyes for a second, forcing himself to breathe slow.

'Think. Think. Do not panic. She sent someone with skill. Probably someone she trusts. That means she's desperate. That means I've become a real problem to her, and I don't know even why.'

The realization didn't make him feel better. If anything, it meant things would only get worse from here.

He didn't move or speak.

He waited—still and silent—as the hunter circled the woods unseen.