

Tyrant 96

Chapter 96: Clash of Convictions

Trafalgar's footsteps echoed softly against the stone, the labyrinth stretching endlessly ahead. The silence pressed down on him, broken only by his own breathing and the faint hum of mana that lingered in the air. He had long since lost track of how many twists and turns he had taken, but the steady glow along the walls told him he was still on the right path.

'Could the Veiled Woman really be my mother?' The thought came uninvited, souring his mood. 'No... her tone wasn't that of a mother speaking to her son. If she were my mother, she wouldn't have acted like that.' He exhaled through his nose, dismissing the thought with effort. 'Whatever the truth is, I'll find out eventually. But right now, I can't afford distractions. The trial's not over yet.'

He paused briefly, glancing upward. Somewhere, hidden from sight, he knew the academy's directors were still watching. Every move, every choice—they were being recorded. Six hours had passed. Only two remained.

'Strange, though... there's no mention of a reward. They're probably gauging what path fits each of us best. Martial arts. Swordsmanship. That'll be mine, obviously.' His lips twitched at the thought. 'And along with that, the headaches from Sword Insight. More pain, more growth. A fair trade, I suppose.'

He allowed Maledicta and Blazewick Torch to vanish into his inventory. Here, the halls shimmered with a faint illumination embedded in the stone itself, enough to guide his way without aid.

'At least the torch isn't needed here. One less thing to hold.' He tightened his jaw, gaze sharp as he scanned the path ahead.

And then—movement. A silhouette broke the monotony of stone and shadow. Long white hair, tanned skin, and golden eyes glinting even at a distance.

Trafalgar froze, breath catching. He knew her instantly.

'Cynthia.'

"Cynthia! Hey—"

The greeting barely left his lips before a sharp whistle cut through the air. A flash of silver blurred past his face, so close he felt the sting of air split against his cheek. An arrow, fast and precise, slammed into the wall behind him, the shaft still quivering.

Trafalgar blinked once. 'Right. She's definitely noticed the Barth thing.'

Cynthia didn't hesitate. Another arrow shimmered into existence, string already drawn. The second arrow screamed forward, faster than the first, and this one wasn't a warning shot.

Trafalgar's body moved on instinct. One foot pressed lightly into the ground. In a curved arc, space itself seemed to shear apart—[Severance Step]. His figure blurred, cutting distance in an instant, reappearing behind her.

Maledicta materialized in his hand, steel humming faintly. "What's going on with you?!"

She turned, eyes wide with fury, her voice raw. "What's going on?! You forced Barth into something dangerous—that's what!"

Trafalgar's brow twitched. 'Didn't expect her to be a brocon.'

"That's a lie. I never forced him. I needed help, and he offered... technically"

Her only answer was another arrow, conjured and loosed in the same motion. It glowed faintly, skill-enhanced, the force behind it enough to punch through stone.

Again, [Severance Step]. His mana burned, another fraction gone as he reappeared farther away.

"Don't run!" Cynthia's voice cracked with rage.

'Don't run? She's insane. What else am I supposed to do—just stand there and die?'

He grit his teeth, speaking louder, trying to pierce her anger. "Why does this bother you so much? Everything turned out fine! Barth gained more than he lost!"

"AND SO DID YOU!" Her voice echoed through the corridor, bow glowing as another arrow formed.

Cynthia's steps echoed as she closed the distance, bow drawn tight. The arrow at her fingertips pulsed with a black glow, veins of light writhing along its shaft.

[Piercing Shade Arrow]

The projectile tore forward, the mana so condensed that it shrieked as it sliced the air. Stone cracked and splintered when it grazed the wall, leaving a hole wide enough for Trafalgar to see through to the other side.

His gut tightened. 'If that hits me, I'm done.'

Once more his foot pressed down, his vision bending with the world around him—[Severance Step]. Space folded, and in the blink of an eye, he appeared directly in front of her, far closer than she expected.

The flicker of surprise in Cynthia's eyes was all he needed.

[Arc Slash] Maledicta hissed, cutting a sweeping arc of blue light. It struck her bow cleanly, the weapon flying from her hands.

The clang echoed as it skittered across the stone.

But Cynthia didn't falter. Her hands snapped up, seizing his wrist with startling strength. A twist, sharp and deliberate, and Maledicta slipped from his grip. The blade clattered onto the floor.

She shoved forward, fierce and unrelenting, as if the loss of her bow meant nothing.

Trafalgar cursed, dispersing the weapon before she could pin it. Cynthia mirrored him, her bow vanishing in a flicker of light.

They collided bare-handed, the narrow corridor amplifying every movement. Fists, elbows, knees—raw exchanges of speed and power.

Even with her class being [Archer], due to having a stronger core than Trafalgar, she was also physically stronger than him. Every blow pushed him back, his muscles straining to their limits just to keep up.

Finally, a brutal shove sent her dropping to one knee, but not in surrender—her bow reformed instantly, arrow aimed directly between his eyes.

Trafalgar froze, Maledicta materialized once more, its edge hovering dangerously close to her throat.

His breath slowed. 'If she lets that arrow fly, I'm finished. She's faster. But if I move first... she'll still win.'

The stalemate locked them in place, neither daring to act first.

Cynthia's breathing was sharp, her yellow eyes narrowed, yet beneath her fury there was hesitation. Her hands trembled slightly—not from weakness, but from conflict.

Then, without warning, the stale air of the labyrinth ripped apart with a violent whoosh. A blazing orb of fire streaked past Trafalgar's cheek, so close he felt the heat sear his skin. He reacted on instinct, throwing himself forward. His shoulder slammed into Cynthia's chest, knocking them both to the stone floor.

The impact forced the arrow from her grip; it clattered uselessly to the ground. Her bow dematerialized at the same time, vanishing into thin air. Maledicta slipped from Trafalgar's grasp, dissolving back into his inventory. For a moment, there was nothing but the heavy sound of their breathing, bodies tangled together on the cold floor.

"Get off me!" Cynthia hissed, shoving at him.

"Calm down," Trafalgar shot back, rolling aside as he scrambled to his feet. His hand pressed against the faint burn left on his cheek. He turned toward the source of the fireball, eyes narrowing. "We've got bigger problems than your anger issues."

Cynthia pushed herself up, dusting her knees with a glare sharp enough to cut. "You're lucky. That shot just saved you."

Another rumble echoed through the passage. A second fireball exploded against the far wall, scattering shards of molten stone. The corridor shook, dust raining from the ceiling.

Trafalgar tightened his grip as Maledicta reformed in his hand. His lips curled into a grim smile.

"Guess we'll have to postpone our little death match."

Cynthia notched another arrow, her expression hard but determined.

"Fine," she muttered, eyes fixed ahead.