

Tyrant 97

Chapter 97: Infernal Warden

The labyrinth stretched on in endless twists of stone and shadow, each corridor identical to the last, as if the place itself wanted to grind down their sense of direction. Cynthia followed a few paces behind, her bow loosely held in one hand, every step deliberate and unhurried.

Trafalgar clicked his tongue. "Do you really have to walk behind me? It doesn't exactly inspire confidence."

Cynthia's reply came calm but sharp. "This way, I can keep you in sight. Don't worry, I won't do anything." She let the pause linger, her voice cool as ice. "For now."

Trafalgar groaned under his breath. "You thought about that one way too long. Not exactly comforting."

He pressed forward, boots dragging slightly on the uneven stone floor. His thoughts churned with unease. 'If she turns on me here... well, this is just an academy test. They said we wouldn't really die. Maybe I'd just be pulled out of this place. At least it would be over. Maybe then I could finally rest for a while.'

Silence stretched for a while, broken only by the hollow echo of their footsteps bouncing off the twisting walls. Finally, Trafalgar muttered, "You saw what happened with Barthlomew. Nothing happened to him, so why are you still suspicious?"

Cynthia's eyes narrowed as she adjusted her grip on the bowstring. "It's not about whether he lived or died. You made him use a skill slot. That's not something you can just buy back with money or favors. Skill slots are... priceless. And you knew exactly how valuable his class was."

The words struck deep. Trafalgar didn't bother replying. She was right, and they both knew it.

Their uneasy silence stretched on, but the atmosphere around them was shifting. The air grew warmer, heavier, until each breath felt like it scraped his throat. Faint motes of ash drifted lazily across the passage, glowing faintly like dying embers. The walls themselves pulsed with a dim orange glow, as though molten veins ran just beneath the rock.

Cynthia lifted her bow slightly, her voice low but tense. "We're close to whatever's been throwing fire."

Trafalgar and Cynthia pressed deeper into the labyrinth, the air growing heavier with each step. The faint orange glow ahead told them everything—they were nearing the source of the fireballs. When the corridor widened, the glow erupted into a blinding blaze.

The creature waiting there towered above them, a monstrous figure nearly three meters tall. Its body was forged of magma and blackened rock, with molten cracks spilling light like rivers of fire. From its chest radiated a pulsating heat, a core beating like a molten heart. Chains of scorched iron clung to its back, fused into its stone flesh. With each slow step, sparks danced across the ground, scorching the very stone beneath its feet.

Trafalgar's breath caught in his throat. "That thing... that's what's been throwing fireballs at us? You've got to be kidding me."

Cynthia narrowed her glowing yellow eyes. "An Infernal Warden. It is Pulse rank core. Pretty dangerous honestly."

Trafalgar swallowed hard. 'Pulse rank... damn it. That's a rank above me.'

"But not above me," Cynthia said with cold certainty. She nocked an arrow and gave him a sidelong glance. "You'll distract it. I'll finish it."

Trafalgar stared at her in disbelief. "Wait, I'll distract it? Do you realize how much mana I've already burned thanks to someone who thought trying to kill me was a fun warm-up?"

Cynthia tilted her head, her expression calm and cutting. "Be grateful this is happening here. If it were outside the labyrinth, you'd already be dead."

A chill traced Trafalgar's spine despite the suffocating heat. 'She's right. Out there, death is real. Here, if I fall... I'd just get pulled out'

He clenched his teeth, materialized Maledicta, and took his stance. "Fine. I'll draw its attention. What do you need?"

"Time," Cynthia answered simply, raising her bow.

The Infernal Warden let out a guttural, metallic roar, smoke billowing from its furnace-like chest. Heat rolled off its body in suffocating waves, and each step shook the labyrinth's stone floor.

Trafalgar darted forward, forcing his legs to move even as every instinct screamed at him to run. Maledicta hummed in his grip as he whispered the activation. [Severance Step]

In a single blur, his body carved through space, reappearing at the creature's flank. He swung Maledicta in a sharp arc—[Arc Slash]. A ripple of dark-blue energy tore outward, slamming against the Warden's rocky hide. The impact sparked against molten cracks... but the beast hardly flinched.

'Damn it. That was nothing. One whole rank above... the difference is this huge?'

The monster's glowing chest pulsed. It swung its arm, a massive claw of obsidian searing with molten light. Trafalgar threw himself back just as the claw ripped a furrow into the stone where he'd been standing. Lava hissed up from the gouge, heat blistering his skin.

"Keep it busy!" Cynthia barked from behind, her bowstring drawn, mana condensing like a shimmering mist around her.

"Easy for you to say!" Trafalgar snapped, gritting his teeth. He lunged again, forcing Maledicta into a diagonal cut. The ground split in a clean line—[Severing Fang]. Dust and shards erupted... yet the Warden only staggered a single step before its chest flared once more.

The monster slammed both hands into the ground—[Lava Surge]. Fire burst up in a ring around it, tongues of flame snapping dangerously close to Trafalgar. He gasped for breath, lungs burning from the acrid smoke.

'I can't even scratch it... All I can do is keep dancing around and pray Cynthia's arrow lands before I run dry.'

He steadied his grip on Maledicta, sweat stinging his eyes. The Warden raised its molten claw again, and Trafalgar braced himself, heart pounding.

Trafalgar's breaths came ragged, sweat and soot clinging to his face. The Infernal Warden advanced, each step cracking the scorched floor beneath molten feet. Its furnace-like chest pulsed with unholy heat, ready to burn the world around it.

Grinding his teeth, Trafalgar planted his feet and raised Maledicta high. Black mana coiled around him, heavy and sharp, feeding into the blade until the air trembled. "Fine... let's see what this can do.
[Morgain's Requiem]

He spun into motion. His sword carved the air in a furious sequence, five sweeping cuts weaving a storm of shadow around him. Each slash unleashed a wave of black energy, and for the first time, the monster staggered. Jagged cracks spread across its molten armor, magma spilling like blood from its torso.

Trafalgar's chest heaved as he saw the result. 'Holy shit... the Morgain skills really are something else. The others barely scratched it, but this actually hurt.'

The Warden roared, chains rattling from its back as it steadied itself. The ground quaked beneath its weight. Even damaged, its core still glowed like a raging sun. Trafalgar's grip trembled, his body nearly spent.

Then Cynthia's voice cut through the smoke. "Move."

He staggered aside, collapsing to one knee just as she drew her bow. Her expression was calm, merciless. Mana surged, compressing into a single arrow so dense the air itself screamed against it.

The shot launched—[Piercing Shade Arrow].

The projectile tore through the chamber, shrieking as it collided with the Warden's chest. A flash of black light punched through its molten core. For a moment the beast froze, furnace-heart pierced clean. Then its body fractured, erupting into a shower of magma and ash before collapsing into nothing but smoldering rubble.

Trafalgar stared, stunned. "You... were holding back? Against me?"

Cynthia exhaled, lowering her bow with a faint smirk. "Surprised?"

He let out a bitter laugh, slumping further against the wall, every breath scraping his lungs. At least the monster was gone.