

R Cultivator 281

Chapter 281: Fleshborer Worms

"I've never seen a tree this big in this city," the alchemist in the group remarked, her eyes wide with awe as she took in the colossal tree.

"Yeah, it probably crawled out from the Abyss," replied Lian Fu, a man armed with a spear. "We're lucky Abyss trees this big don't develop sentience. If they did, it'd be a nightmare."

Charla, the alchemist, turned to Lian Fu with a sweet smile. "I'm Charla. What's your name?"

"Lian Fu," he replied, matching her smile.

Fake Curiosity twinkled in Charla's eyes. "What would happen if this tree were sentient?" Charla already knew about it, but she just wanted to talk something.

Lian Fu chuckled nervously. "Probably sleep most of the time to preserve energy. With its size, we'd be like insects to it—barely worth its notice."

"Let's hope this one stays non-sentient," Charla said with a slight laugh.

As the group chatted and walked along the massive branches of the tree, they remained oblivious to the faint movement behind them. Three enormous eyes briefly opened on the tree's trunk, observing them silently before closing again.

Under Tyler's lead, the group finally crossed to the other side of the riverbank. Before them stretched a field of purple grass, each blade standing nearly a meter tall. The farmland-like expanse shimmered with an otherworldly hue, a surreal sight against the Abyss-tainted sky.

"Purple Mist Grass," Charla whispered in awe.

Maxwell, who had been skeptical of Tyler's chosen route, pointed at the engineer. "Check for anomalies. Let's not get too comfortable yet."

The engineer pulled out her detection device and began scanning.

After a few moments, Charla's voice cut through the silence. "This grass is incredible. Even though it's infused with Abyss energy, it's still highly valuable. A single blade sells for 5,000 Lydia."

Maxwell's skepticism melted into practicality. "All right, start harvesting as much as you can. We'll leave in an hour."

Without hesitation, the group spread out, carefully collecting the valuable grass. The atmosphere lightened as the potential fortune from their haul brightened everyone's mood.

As the engineer continued scanning, her device began to pick up unusual readings. She frowned. "Wait... there's movement nearby. Small, fast-moving things in a group."

The 'harvesters' froze, gripping their weapons tightly.

"Where?" Maxwell barked.

The engineer adjusted her device, her eyes narrowing. "They're closing in—fast. Almost here!"

The team readied themselves, scanning the grass for any sign of an enemy. Yet nothing emerged.

"The readings are stationary now," the engineer said, her confusion evident. "They should be right here."

Tyler frowned, scanning the ground. His eyes widened in realization. "They're underground!"

Before anyone could react, the ground erupted. Like fish leaping out of water, worm-like creatures shot up from beneath the earth. Their elongated bodies glistened with Abyssal energy, and their segmented mouths opened wide, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth.

Caught off guard, the group scrambled to defend themselves.

The last thing Engineer Girl saw is an ugly worm with teeth biting her head. Everyone saw a horrifying scene. The worm bite her from head to toe and ate her fully.

"It's The Fleshborer Worm" Maxwell shouted, "Quick use fire magic."

It is a grotesque Abyss predator known for its unsettling resemblance to a chunk of raw meat. Its cylindrical body, slightly smaller than an adult's palm, pulses faintly as if alive with an unearthly rhythm. The surface of its flesh is smooth yet sinewy, with subtle ridges running along its length, giving the impression of exposed muscle.

At the front of its body, a solitary, curved tooth protrudes like a dagger, designed to pierce and tear into prey. The creature lacks eyes, ears, or any visible sensory organs, relying instead on vibrations and the scent of blood to hunt. This eyeless feature adds to its horrifying appearance, making it seem like a mindless yet relentless predator.

Another guy tried to use magic, but multiple worms attached on his body and devoured him completely. Then they buried into the ground.

The group stood there without moving. Everything had escalated in an instant, and now they lost two of the members.

"Fleshborer Worms," Maxwell's voice rang out in their minds through Divine Sense, "are solitary ambush predators. They bury themselves underground and attack when they sense movement. Don't make any noise!"

His warning came too late for Charla, the alchemist. She felt something shift beneath her feet, and panic overtook her. Unable to stay still, she bolted, her boots pounding against the soft ground.

"No, stop running!" Maxwell hissed, but his words were drowned out by the ground erupting beneath Charla.

A swarm of worm-like creatures burst forth, their segmented bodies glistening with Abyssal energy. Rows of razor-sharp teeth opened wide as they lunged at the fleeing alchemist.

Lian Fu reacted immediately. With a shout, he leaped forward and thrust his spear, channeling a surge of lightning energy through the weapon. The spear crackled with power as it struck the first wave of worms. The creatures writhed in agony, their charred bodies collapsing to the ground.

"Get back!" Lian Fu barked, keeping his spear poised for another strike.

Charla didn't waste time. Her trembling hands reached into her pouch, pulling out several vials filled with volatile alchemical concoctions. She hurled the vials at the advancing worms, and as they shattered, flames erupted. The worms caught in the explosions screeched, their bodies curling and disintegrating.

The two retreated together, Charla's breath ragged and her eyes wide with fear. "Thanks," she managed to whisper to Lian Fu.

"Just stay close and don't panic next time," he replied, his gaze scanning the area for more threats.

"These worms ran towards the screaming ones, not the couple," Tyler observed, breaking the tense silence.

"We're not a couple!" Lian Fu blurted, his face flushing red. Charla found his reaction amusing. She enjoyed seeing the brave warrior, who had just saved her, flustered. She wanted to tease him but held back, knowing this wasn't the time.

"We already know Fleshborer Worms are attracted to sound, genius," Maxwell sneered, taking the opportunity to mock Tyler.

"True, but those two made plenty of noise while running," Tyler countered calmly, gesturing toward Lian Fu and Charla.

Maxwell's eyes widened as realization dawned. "Ah, I see where you're going with this..."

A few minutes later, a loud, piercing noise erupted near the riverbank. It echoed through the area, drawing the attention of every Fleshborer Worm in the vicinity. The worms writhed and surged toward the source of the sound.

The noise came from an array of sound-producing disks crafted by another engineer in the group. He grinned as he activated the devices from a safe distance.

Tyler didn't create anything this time. Instead, he stood at the perimeter, scanning for any signs of ambush. The worms' attraction to the noise created the perfect distraction, and the group wasted no time taking advantage.

"Move quickly," Maxwell ordered.

The group slipped away, staying low and quiet as the worms swarmed toward the river.

"That was genius," one of the team members said, giving Tyler a thumbs-up.

Tyler just nodded and followed them.

As the group ventured deeper into the Abyss, the dense mist around them grew heavier, almost suffocating.

"This mist is getting thicker. What should we do?" Charla asked, her voice edged with unease.

"The readings," Maxwell barked, pointing at Tyler.

"I lost my device," Tyler replied nonchalantly.

"Useless!" Maxwell growled, turning to another engineer. "Check the readings."

The engineer quickly pulled out his device, his expression shifting to alarm. "The readings are near level 4. I can't detect any creatures nearby. This means we're closing in on the anomaly."

"If only we could bring the giant scanner from the base," Lian Fu muttered.

Charla sighed, explaining, "That device would attract more creatures. Besides, it's not portable."

Tyler remained quiet, his expression thoughtful as the group continued to discuss.

"We'll rest here," Maxwell finally decided. "Tyler, you're on watch."

Tyler nodded, unbothered by the order.

Later, Charla approached him hesitantly. "Hey, can I borrow an instant house? I'll pay you back once we return to the base."

"I don't have any left," Tyler replied curtly.

Charla frowned, feeling slightly insulted, but walked away without further comment.

That night, the camp was quiet, save for the occasional rustling of the mist-laden wind. Inside her tent, Charla vented her frustrations to a fellow teammate.

"I was trying to repay Lian Fu for saving me by spending a night with him in instant house, but that Tyler who bragged about having multiple homes is so stingy!"

Her friend chuckled. "Why not sneak into his tent? Unlike us, they're sleeping alone."

Charla's eyes sparkled mischievously. "Good idea!"

She quickly slipped out and made her way toward Lian Fu's tent, excitement and nervousness fluttering in her chest. However, when she opened the flap, disappointment washed over her—Lian Fu wasn't there.

"Where did he go?" she muttered, puzzled.

Suddenly, she noticed a shadowy figure approaching. Her heart raced with both anticipation and curiosity. "Is it him?"

As the figure drew closer, Charla stepped out of the tent, trying to lighten the mood with a playful scare. "Boo!"

But as her gaze landed on the figure, her teasing expression twisted into sheer shock. It was Lian Fu who has the spear pierced in his heart.

"Run." He said as he fell down. Lian Fu is dead.

A blood-curdling scream tore from her throat, piercing the quiet night.

Chapter 282: Traitor Among Us (1/3)

Morning arrived, but the group's mood remained as dark and oppressive as the Abyss mist surrounding them. Fear, suspicion, and unease weighed heavily on everyone.

Maxwell's voice cut through the silence, sharp and accusatory. "Charla, what were you doing in Lian Fu's tent last night?"

Charla fidgeted nervously, her voice barely above a whisper. "I just wanted to thank him for saving me."

Maxwell's gaze hardened. "What was the last thing he said to you?"

"He said... 'Run,'" Charla answered, her hands trembling.

Maxwell leaned forward, his tone insistent. "Was he running from something?"

Charla shook her head, her brow furrowing in confusion. "I didn't see anything behind him."

Maxwell's expression grew grim. "There's a knife mark on his neck. This wasn't an attack by an Abyss monster. Someone assassinated him. But for a trained warrior like Lian Fu to be caught off-guard... it must have been someone he trusted."

Charla's face paled. "I didn't do it!" she cried, her voice breaking as she looked to her friend for support.

Her friend averted her gaze, leaving Charla feeling more isolated than ever.

"She probably didn't do it," Tyler interjected calmly. "Charla's strength isn't enough to kill a warrior like Lian Fu with a knife. She's an alchemist and a mage, not an assassin."

Charla looked at Tyler with a mix of gratitude and relief, but her reprieve was short-lived.

"You're also a suspect, Tyler White," Maxwell said, turning his attention to him. "You were on watch duty last night, and now someone's dead."

Tyler didn't flinch under Maxwell's gaze. "I did see him leave his tent," he admitted. "When I asked where he was going, he told me to mind my own business and that he was just taking a walk. After that, I went to repel some Lizard Rats on the other side of the camp. It wasn't until I heard Charla's scream that I returned."

Maxwell folded his arms, his eyes narrowing. "If it wasn't one of us, then it must have been something intelligent from the Abyss—Demons, Moon Elves, Succubi, Vampires, or other sentient Abyss beings. But

those creatures haven't infiltrated this world since the Great Abyss Breakout centuries ago. All we've faced since then are mindless monsters."

The group fell silent, the implications of Maxwell's words sinking in.

"There's probably a traitor among us," Maxwell declared, his tone cold and resolute. His eyes darted between Tyler and Charla, suspicion evident in his gaze.

The camp tensed, everyone now looking at each other with distrust. Tyler stood firm, his calm demeanor unshaken, while Charla's hands clenched into fists, her breathing uneven.

"We can't waste time pointing fingers," Tyler said finally. "If there is a traitor, we'll figure it out. But right now, we need to stay focused. The Abyss won't wait for us to sort out our issues."

Maxwell hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. "Fine. But no one goes anywhere alone. Pair up and stay vigilant."

As the group prepared to move out, the oppressive mist seemed to press down on them even harder.

The mist grew denser with every step, swallowing what little light filtered through the cracked and crumbling ruins of the abandoned city. Black tendrils of fog snaked through the air, carrying with them a suffocating chill that gnawed at the group's resolve. Broken debris littered the ground, remnants of a forgotten civilization consumed by the Abyss.

"Can I join you?" Charla asked softly, her voice tinged with vulnerability as she approached Tyler.

"Let me guess. No one trusts you either?" Tyler replied, his tone neutral but laced with understanding.

Charla nodded, her expression bitter. Even her closest friend, the one who had suggested visiting Lian Fu's tent in the first place, now avoided her.

"Alright. Let's stick together," Tyler said, offering her a small nod of assurance.

The group trudged forward, led by the engineer who held a device designed to navigate the mist. It beeped intermittently, faint signals cutting through the oppressive silence. But the deeper they ventured, the thicker the mist became, clinging to their skin and lungs.

A few members of the group coughed and choked, clutching their throats as their ability to channel prana or aura faltered. Panic spread like wildfire among them.

"Drink this," Charla said, stepping forward and offering small vials of potion.

They hesitated, their distrust of her still palpable.

Charla's eyes dimmed, her shoulders slumping under the weight of their suspicion.

Tyler stepped forward without hesitation, snatching one of the vials from her hand. He uncorked it and downed the contents in one go. "If you don't want to die, just drink it," he said, wiping his mouth. "And for the record, it tastes good."

The others exchanged glances, their reluctance melting away as they reached for the potions. One by one, they drank, relief washing over them as the choking sensation faded.

Charla's eyes brightened, and she shot Tyler a grateful look.

As they continued through the ruins, Charla fell into step beside Tyler.

"Did it really taste good?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the crunch of debris underfoot.

Tyler smirked. "No... I lied."

Charla burst into a quiet laugh. "It's not that bad," she said, a playful glint in her eyes. She leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Do you want to taste something sweeter?"

Tyler's grin widened, his tone casual but mischievous. "Maybe during our next rest."

The banter eased some of the tension, a brief reprieve from the crushing weight of their surroundings.

Suddenly, the engineer's device beeped more urgently, the sound echoing unnervingly in the dense mist.

"What's that?" Maxwell asked, his voice sharp.

"Readings are spiking," the engineer replied, his brow furrowed as he stared at the screen. "We're nearing something big. Maybe the anomaly."

"Stay alert," Maxwell ordered, his hand tightening around his weapon.

As the group advanced, the air grew colder, and an unnatural silence descended. Even the faint sound of their footsteps seemed swallowed by the mist.

Then, a shadow moved ahead.

"Stop," Tyler said, his voice low but firm.

The group froze, weapons at the ready as the shadow resolved into a humanoid shape. It was tall and gaunt, its body seemingly made of the same black mist that surrounded them. Two glowing eyes pierced the darkness, staring directly at them.

"What is that?" Charla whispered, clutching Tyler's arm.

"Isn't that Lian Fu?" Tyler muttered.

'Lian Fu' moved closer, its form shifting and flickering like a flame in the wind. A low, guttural sound emanated from it, sending chills down their spines.

Maxwell raised his Dragonova Staff, his mana flaring to life despite the suppressive mist. "Looks like some sort of Abyss Creature is controlling the Dead body. "

The group moved quickly, forming a defensive circle with their weapons aimed outward. Tyler pulled Charla behind him, his eyes locked on the Lian Fu.

Lian Fu's bright, lifeless eyes fixed on Charla, who clung to Tyler's hand. A guttural shriek erupted from his throat, shaking the air around them as the Abyss mist surged, swallowing their surroundings in darkness.

Suddenly, a massive water dragon burst forth from Maxwell's staff. its serpentine body carving through the mist and scattering it in all directions. The glow of its ethereal form illuminated the battlefield, momentarily dispelling the suffocating gloom.

Zombie Lian Fu raised his axe, his movements erratic but deadly. He lunged forward, initially aiming for Tyler. But mid-charge, his body jerked unnaturally, and his head twitched as though he were struggling against unseen forces. Without warning, he veered toward the engineer holding the scanning device.

"Water Globe!" Maxwell shouted, his hands glowing as he cast a spell.

A shimmering sphere of water formed around Lian Fu, trapping him in its fluid prison. The zombie thrashed violently, swinging his axe and clawing at the walls of the globe, but he seemed unfazed by his inability to breathe. His sole focus was breaking free to reach the group below.

The victory was short-lived. The sound of shuffling footsteps echoed through the ruins. Out of the mist emerged a horde of dead bodies, their movements sluggish but unrelenting. Their eyes burned red with Abyssal energy, and the mist clung to their decaying forms like a living parasite.

"Retreat!" Maxwell barked, his voice cutting through the rising panic.

The group scrambled to move, their formation falling apart as they fled the encroaching horde. Charla stumbled as her friend fell behind, tripping over debris and landing hard on the ground.

"Wait!" Charla cried, trying to pull free from Tyler's grasp to help her friend.

Tyler turned, his expression grim as he tightened his grip on her hand. "There's no time."

He dragged her forward, his steps urgent and unyielding. Charla glanced back, her heart twisting as she saw her friend struggling to rise. The girl's hand reached out toward them, her lips moving as though trying to say something.

The cacophony of monster screams drowned out her words.

"Keep moving!" Tyler urged, his voice firm as he pulled Charla along.

Behind them, the horde closed in, and the sounds of fighting and screams faded into the mist. Charla's eyes filled with tears, guilt and helplessness etched across her face as they continued to flee.

The escaped group didn't notice a small knife is plunged into the Girl's Leg.

Chapter 283: Traitor Among Us (2/3)

They reached a clearing where the Abyss mist thinned slightly, offering the group a fleeting respite. Maxwell surveyed the area, gripping his staff tightly, while the others huddled together, pale and exhausted from their harrowing escape.

Charla slumped to the ground, her shoulders quivering as she fought to suppress her sobs. Tyler knelt beside her, his expression calm but resolute. He placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Survive now. Mourn later," he said, his voice steady but carrying a hint of compassion.

Charla nodded, hastily wiping her tears, and pushed herself to her feet. Despite their brief reprieve, everyone knew the Abyss wasn't finished with them yet.

One of the group members broke the tense silence. "Is there any Abyss Monster capable of turning people into zombies?"

"As far as I know, only Ancient Liches or powerful Abyss Fiends have such capabilities," another replied. "There's also a tale about an Immortal Practitioner who returned from a zombie-infested world and accidentally brought the virus back. But the virus weakened in this environment, and they managed to eradicate it quickly."

Maxwell frowned. "We buried Lian Fu, and yet he rose again. This reeks of Abyssal influence. Likely, Abyss Fiends have breached the area and are trying to stop us. They targeted our engineer with the scanner device for a reason."

"Seems like they don't want us finding the new Spatial Rifts," Tyler said, his tone contemplative.

Maxwell nodded. "Regardless, we're not stopping. According to reports, Void Stone fragments might be near the Abyss Crack. If we locate even a small piece, this mission will be worth it."

The mention of Void Stones made everyone's eyes widen. The rarest and most valuable material in existence, even a tiny fragment could fetch 500 million Lydia on the black market.

"Is that information reliable?" someone asked, skepticism mixed with excitement in their voice.

"It is," Maxwell affirmed. "But Void Stones aren't just valuable; they're dangerous. Only those with iron resolve should continue."

Everyone exchanged nervous glances but ultimately nodded. The allure of such wealth was too strong to resist.

"Good. We'll rest in that underground facility until dawn," Maxwell instructed, pointing to the remnants of a razed building. The surface was utterly destroyed, but the underground levels appeared intact. "Set up a Concealment Array around the area."

The engineer immediately got to work, and Tyler joined him. The facility appeared to have been a lab before its destruction, its charred walls and scattered debris whispering of a violent end. Thankfully, no signs of Fleshborer Worms or other threats lingered here.

Once the array was active, its protective energy cloaking the camp, the group set up a temporary base. While most settled in to rest, Tyler and Charla slipped away to explore the lower levels.

The air in the underground lab was stale, filled with the faint metallic tang of old machinery. Charla stayed close to Tyler, her eyes darting nervously at every shadow.

"Do you think this place is safe?" she whispered.

"Safer than up there," Tyler replied, scanning their surroundings. "At least for now."

They descended a narrow staircase that groaned under their weight, revealing a dimly lit chamber below. Broken consoles and shattered glass littered the floor.

As they walked they saw a bed. Suddenly Charla pushed him on the bed.

Charla hugged him and said, "Thank You..."

A few minutes later, moans of a girl venting her frustration was resonated.

Charla and Tyler both broke the bed.

Satisfied Charla stayed on his top naked.

The next day dawned with an oppressive silence, broken only by Maxwell's enraged voice echoing through the underground facility. His face was flushed, veins bulging as he glared at the gathered group.

"Another one of us was assassinated," he roared. "Thankfully, it wasn't the engineer, but only because I made sure he slept next to me. Still, another life lost—this time with a knife wound to the neck."

The group shifted uneasily, their eyes darting around as paranoia seeped in. Maxwell scanned each face, his sharp gaze searching for any sign of guilt.

"There was no breach in the Concealment Array. That means it was one of you."

A tense silence followed.

Maxwell's gaze landed on Tyler and Charla, who stood slightly apart from the others. "Tyler, Charla—what were you doing last night?"

"We were together, just sharing each other warm.," Tyler replied, his voice calm.

Charla hesitated, her brows furrowing in thought. Eventually, she nodded in agreement.

Maxwell narrowed his eyes, catching her hesitation. "Is there something you want to say, Charla?"

"I—" Charla began, her voice faltering. She glanced at Tyler, then took a deep breath. "No, it's just... I'm a little tired."

"Tired? While someone was dying, you two were enjoying yourselves below!" Maxwell barked, his frustration boiling over.

Before anyone could respond, a sharp gasp drew their attention. The corpse of the recently deceased man twitched, his lifeless hand suddenly lunging to grab the throat of a nearby teammate inspecting the body.

Screams erupted as the corpse's glowing red eyes snapped open. Abyssal energy radiated from him like a sickening fog.

"Back away!" Maxwell commanded, his staff glowing as he summoned a spell.

Water coalesced around the undead figure, forming a swirling prison that encased him entirely. The creature clawed at the barrier, its movements frantic and animalistic. Maxwell tightened his grip on the staff, increasing the pressure of the water prison. The sound of bones cracking and the distorted howls of the undead filled the air.

The others watched in stunned silence as the creature's thrashing grew weaker. Its limbs broke along with its bones. The water ball turned into red blood ball. The only way to make sure the 'zombie' won't come after them again.

The group stood atop the broken building, the distant horizon veiled in a pale, swirling mist. The engineer fiddled with his scanner, its faint beeping providing a semblance of direction.

"Did you find the location?" Maxwell asked, his tone firm but tinged with urgency.

"It's directly over Water Street Town," the engineer replied, pointing toward the southeast.

"Water Street Town..." Maxwell murmured, his brow furrowing in thought.

Water Street Town, a quaint settlement renowned for its unique design, had no conventional roads. Over 200 interconnected canals formed a labyrinthine network of waterways that served as streets. Boats replaced carriages, and the sound of water lapping against wooden docks was once a constant melody.

"It should be near the center of the town," the engineer added, studying the scanner.

Maxwell pulled out his communication device, hoping to relay this critical information. However, the screen remained stubbornly blank. No signal.

He cursed under his breath and turned to the group. "Someone has to go back and find a spot with a signal to send this intel. It's too important to delay."

After a moment's deliberation, he handed the device to another mage in the group. "Head back and get this information out. Be quick, but stay cautious."

The mage nodded solemnly, securing the device before disappearing into the mist.

Maxwell turned back to the remaining group. "The rest of us will stick together. Keep an eye on each other. The Abyss thrives on division and distrust."

As they descended toward Water Street Town, the atmosphere grew increasingly eerie. The once-bustling canals were now barren trenches, their muddy beds cracked and dry as if a massive drought had swept through. The air smelled of decay, and an oppressive silence blanketed the area, broken only by the crunch of their boots on the brittle ground.

"What happened to the water?" the youngest member of the group asked, her voice trembling.

Maxwell paused, surveying the scene. "Probably drained into the Abyss Crack," he said grimly.

The group froze, their eyes widening in alarm.

"The main river must've been blocked somewhere too," Tyler added, his gaze scanning the dry waterways.

Maxwell nodded, his expression hardening. "If that's the case, we need to locate the Abyss Crack immediately. If it expands further, another breakout could be catastrophic."

The group advanced cautiously through the desolate town, their nerves stretched thin. Water Street Town, once alive with the gentle lapping of water and bustling boats, now resembled a skeletal ruin. The empty canals stretched like dry scars, and abandoned boats rested in cracked, parched trenches. Wooden docks creaked ominously in the silence.

"Stay sharp," Maxwell muttered, his staff glowing faintly as he scanned the surroundings. "The Abyss thrives in places like this."

Just then, faint footsteps echoed from behind. The group spun around, weapons raised. Emerging from the mist was the mage who had left to send the message. Relief turned to horror as they noticed his glowing red eyes, his lifeless movements, and the unmistakable marks of Abyss Mist.

"He's dead." Tyler shouted.

But the 'zombie' mage wasn't alone. Behind him marched more figures: Lian Fu, Charla's close friend, and several others who had been lost to the Abyss. Their flesh was pallid, their eyes glowing crimson, and their movements eerily synchronized.

"No...." Charla whispered, her voice trembling.

Before anyone could react further, a massive creaking noise filled the air. Tyler looked up just in time to see the skeletal remains of a towering building collapsing toward them.

"Run!" Maxwell bellowed, raising his staff to create a shield.

The structure crashed down with a deafening roar, sending a shockwave that threw the group off their feet. Dust and debris filled the air, obscuring their vision. Tyler shielded Charla as the ground trembled beneath them.

When the dust settled, the group scrambled to their feet. The 'zombie' figures were still advancing, unaffected by the destruction.

Chapter 284: Traitor Among Us (3/3)

how many of us are left alive?" Maxwell asked, his voice strained as he surveyed the group.

"Seven, if we count Tyler and Charla," one of the warriors replied, sweat glistening on his brow.

"I saw them escape earlier," another added. "Yeah, seven in total."

Maxwell sighed heavily. "Keep your weapons ready," he ordered, gripping his Dragonova Staff tightly. "If the Abyss Crack is nearby, we're not alone."

The group trudged forward, their nerves frayed after narrowly escaping the collapsing building. Every shadow seemed to move, and the oppressive silence weighed on them like a physical force.

"Where's the engineer?" Maxwell suddenly asked, scanning the remaining faces.

"He didn't make it," the warrior muttered grimly.

Before anyone could process the loss, a sudden barrage of burning volcanic rocks hurtled toward them.

"It's the mage guy!" someone shouted. It was the mage who left to send message to the camp. He turned into a 'zombie'.

Maxwell acted instantly. Raising his staff, he slammed it into the ground with a resounding crack. A geyser of water erupted beneath the zombie mage, sending him hurtling into the sky.

As the undead mage ascended near the ominous black clouds, a massive claw emerged from the darkness. The claw seized the mage, dragging him into the void above before disappearing completely.

The group stood frozen, their eyes fixed on the sky.

"That means he didn't send the signal," Maxwell muttered, his tone grim.

"Probably because the traitor among us killed him before he could," Maxwell added, his gaze narrowing as it swept over the group.

The remaining four members stood in tense silence: one warrior and three mages. None dared to speak, but suspicion hung heavy in the air.

Maxwell's thoughts churned as he evaluated his companions. Tyler and Charla are the most suspicious, he concluded silently. The two had disappeared together during the night, and now the engineer—their only link to the Abyss Crack—was dead. Tyler is also an engineer but he is suspicious.

"Stay alert," Maxwell barked. "Whatever is out there, it's watching us. And it won't stop until we're all dead."

The group nodded, their faces pale, as they pressed on, the tension between them grew thicker, each step carrying them closer to the Abyss Crack—and perhaps closer to betrayal.

Maxwell gripped his staff tighter. The Abyss wasn't their only enemy. Danger was just as likely to strike from within their own team.

The group moved cautiously, their eyes fixed on the figure of Engineer Mike. His once familiar silhouette was now grotesque, with Abyssal mist curling from his form and his eyes glowing a menacing red. Despite his zombified state, he still clutched the scanner, walking with purpose as if guided by some primal instinct.

"Is he using the scanner on instinct?" Maxwell muttered under his breath, his voice tinged with both curiosity and dread.

"What do we do, Leader?" one of the warriors asked, his grip on his sword tightening.

Maxwell paused, calculating their options. "We follow him—from a distance. He might lead us to the source."

The group trailed the zombified engineer as he moved through the desolate Water Street Town. The eerie silence amplified every creak of their boots on the dry, cracked ground. The once-thriving canals were now barren trenches, their emptiness adding to the town's ghostly atmosphere.

At last, they reached the town center, where the largest canal had once flowed. In its place now gaped a massive fissure, jagged and pulsating with dark energy. Tendrils of Abyssal mist seeped from the crack, writhing and coiling as though alive.

"What is that?" Someone murmured.

"We found it" Maxwell's eyes narrowed as he took in the sight. "It's a small spatial crack... a gateway to the Abyss," he announced, his voice grave.

The group stared at the fissure in stunned silence. The sheer malevolence radiating from it was suffocating.

"If this crack widens, the second Breakout is inevitable," Maxwell said, his tone heavy with the weight of the realization.

"What do we do?" one of the mages asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Maxwell tightened his grip on his Dragonova Staff. "Follow the mission, we will close the spatial crack."

Elsewhere, Charla clung to Tyler, her trembling fingers gripping his hand as if he were her only anchor in the encroaching darkness.

The oppressive atmosphere pressed down on her chest, making it hard to breathe. Every shadow seemed alive, and every distant sound carried the promise of danger.

"We shouldn't be moving alone," she whispered, her voice fragile against the surrounding silence.

"I know," Tyler replied. His gaze darted around their surroundings, scanning for threats. His calm tone belied the unease in his eyes.

After a moment, Charla broke the silence. "I feel a little thirsty."

Tyler reached into his pack and handed her a bottle of water. She took it, her hands trembling slightly, and drank deeply.

As she finished, Tyler's brow furrowed in concern. "Are you okay?"

Charla blinked, her vision blurring slightly. "Why are there... two of you?" she asked, her voice faint and unsteady. Her body swayed as if the ground beneath her had become unstable.

Tyler moved closer, his expression a mix of worry and curiosity. "What's wrong? Is there something you've been keeping to yourself?"

Charla hesitated, her speech slurring slightly. "There... there is something I wanted to tell you," she admitted, her eyes glassy as if caught in a trance.

Tyler tilted his head, feigning encouragement. "Go on," he said gently, his tone urging her to continue.

"That night... after we slept together," Charla began, her voice thick with hesitation. "I saw you leave. You went off alone."

Tyler's eyes flickered, but his expression remained neutral. "And?"

"The next day... one of us was dead," Charla said, her voice cracking. "I wanted to tell Maxwell, but I knew he wouldn't believe me. I didn't know what to do, but I trusted you."

Tyler's smile was faint, his tone calm. "So you didn't tell anyone?"

Charla shook her head, swaying slightly. "No. I couldn't. You... you stayed by my side. I tried to reach Maxwell using divine consciousness, but... but you looked at me so strangely. I got scared."

Her voice trailed off, and a flicker of realization crossed her face. "W-why... why am I telling you this?" she asked, her voice trembling as sobriety began creeping back into her mind.

Tyler's lips curled into a cruel smile. "Well, I drugged your water just a little," he said, his tone mocking. "And look at that. You spilled everything."

Charla froze, her breath hitching as fear washed over her. "You... what?"

Taking a step back, she stared at him, her eyes wide with horror.

Tyler's eyes glowed an ominous red, his calm demeanor now replaced with cold malice.

At the Maxwell group's location

Far away, the zombified engineer abruptly halted in his tracks. His head tilted unnaturally, his glowing red eyes locking onto the group.

Maxwell's hand tightened on his staff. "What is it doing?" he muttered, his instincts screaming danger.

Unbeknownst to them, Tyler was watching through the engineer's vision.

"Tsk," he muttered under his breath. "They've found the spatial crack." His frustration was evident, though his lips curved in a faint, dark grin.

Charla's heart pounded in her chest as she turned and ran, her steps faltering on the uneven ground. The shadows seemed to close in around her, the air thick with an unnatural chill.

"Running won't save you," Tyler's voice called after her, calm and taunting.

She didn't dare look back. Her only thought was to put as much distance as possible between herself and the man she had trusted. Her breathing was ragged, her mind racing as she tried to make sense of everything.

He's the traitor, she thought, her stomach twisting with fear and betrayal.

But the ground beneath her feet began to shift, the terrain warping as if responding to Tyler's will. Charla stumbled, falling hard onto the cold, jagged earth.

"Don't make this harder than it needs to be," Tyler said, his voice closer now.

Charla scrambled to her feet, her resolve hardening. She refused to give up, not after what she had seen.

But suddenly Tyler was behind her. His hand plunged into her heart.

"I really enjoyed that night." He whispered as her life faded away.

"I. Won't. FORGIVE. YOU." Charla shouted her last words.

The one who killed Lian Fu. The one who murdered Charla's friend. The one who controlled those lifeless bodies. It was Tyler all along.

Tyler made a grabbing motion, a ball of light appeared in his hand.

"Ahhh ... A Soul full of Vengeance. I love the smell of it." Tyler said.

Meanwhile, near the giant tree by the river, a lone figure walked along one of its massive branches.

"Damn, they really left me behind," the boy muttered under his breath. His eyes caught sight of a lotus floating gracefully on the river below. Without hesitation, he pulled out a copper ladle and scooped towards it direction.

"Wow... this one's a rare find," He murmured, admiring his catch.

He glanced around, scanning the surroundings. "Now, where did the group go?" he muttered to himself.

Unbeknownst to him, the bark of the giant tree behind him shifted, revealing two massive eyes that opened briefly before closing.

Chapter 285: Tyler's Journey to Water Street Town

A Few Days Earlier

To understand the events unfolding, we must go back a few days—back to when Tyler and Group C were separated while investigating a way to cross the Noy River.

Tyler had taken the left path to explore. Meanwhile, an unknown figure lurked in the shadows, watching both Tyler and the rest of the group before silently slipping away to follow Tyler's trail.

After walking for some time, Tyler arrived at a broken bridge. He sighed as he examined the structure. The bridge had been destroyed by something with razor-sharp teeth, evident from the deep bite marks along the wood and stone. Given the patterns, Tyler could guess the culprits—predatory plants that had shaped themselves like fish.

He reached into his storage device and retrieved a handful of fruits. Tossing them into the air at a calculated height, he watched as a fish-like plant leaped from the river, snapping up the offering in an instant.

"Flying too low isn't an option," Tyler muttered, analyzing the situation.

His eyes caught sight of broken vines floating downstream. Without much thought, he extended his copper ladle and hooked onto one, pulling it toward him.

He then took another fruit, carefully wrapped it in the vine, and threw it onto the opposite shore. This time, the river's deadly fish plants didn't react.

Tyler's eyes gleamed with discovery.

"So they ignore objects wrapped in these vines?" he mused, glancing at the remaining ones.

He stroked his chin in thought. "I should inform the others about this."

Then, without looking up, he spoke in a calm voice.

"You've been following me for quite some time. What do you want?"

Tyler turned around, but all he saw was the rustling of leaves in the breeze. His grip tightened slightly on the vine in his hands.

The truth was, he wasn't entirely sure someone was tailing him—he had only spoken to test the waters.

"Guess it was just my imagination," he murmured.

Suddenly, something whizzed through the air at high speed, striking him square in the chest. Before he could react, a tiny seed burst open, morphing into thick vines that coiled around his body like living chains.

Tyler's eyes narrowed as his instincts kicked in.

Mode Dragon

Dark scales erupted across his skin, reinforcing his strength. With a powerful flex, he tore through the vines, shattering them like brittle twigs.

But before he could fully regain his stance, five more seeds shot toward him from different angles.

The vines wrapped around him, constricting his movements instantly.

As his vision blurred, the last thing he saw was a shadowy figure stepping forward, standing over him.

Tyler slowly regained consciousness, his body stiff and sore. His senses gradually returned, and he realized he was trapped inside an enclosed cocoon. The walls surrounding him were thick, interwoven vines that pulsed faintly as if they were alive.

He immediately tried to force his way out, but despite his strength, the cocoon didn't budge. It was sturdy—far stronger than anything he had expected.

Oddly enough, even though he was trapped in a sealed space, he wasn't suffocating. There was a steady supply of oxygen, making it clear that whoever—or whatever—had trapped him here didn't intend to kill him immediately.

Frowning, Tyler reached for a knife from his storage device. He pressed it against the vines and slashed, but the blade barely left a mark. The material was unnaturally durable.

Not one to give up easily, Tyler rummaged through his storage device, searching for anything that could help. His fingers brushed against a small container made of tree bark. His lips curled into a smirk.

Cloth Melting Liquid.

That's what he called it. It was a potent corrosive substance, something he had discovered after an unfortunate accident involving two Kyla girls. It had melted their clothes right off—along with nearly everything else nearby. Tyler suspected that only materials of Grandmaster-level craftsmanship or higher could withstand its effects.

Without hesitation, he poured a few drops onto the vines. The liquid sizzled, eating away at the fibrous material. However, it wasn't enough. The vines were resistant, their regenerative properties counteracting the corrosive effect.

Clicking his tongue in annoyance, Tyler pulled out another container of the liquid. This time, he also retrieved his copper pot—a peculiar artifact with mysterious properties he had yet to fully understand.

He carefully poured the liquid into the copper pot. Unsurprisingly, the pot remained unaffected. Tyler then dipped his copper ladle into the pot, then poured the liquid out.

This time the liquid poured out without stopping. The liquid flowed steadily, with some of it being blocked by the copper ladle inside the pot. This was one of the abilities Tyler had discovered after combining the copper ladle with the copper pot.

After pouring a significant amount of liquid onto the vines, a large hole had formed in the cocoon.

Tyler didn't waste a second. He squeezed through the opening and escaped.

As soon as he stepped outside, Tyler froze in place. His eyes widened as he took in his surroundings.

He was standing beneath an enormous tree—one so massive it could easily rival a modern skyscraper. Its bark was thick and ancient, its branches extending so far that they disappeared into the mist above.

"I'm pretty sure I didn't see a tree like this before..." Tyler murmured, tilting his head.

He turned on his communication device, checking the date.

His heart skipped a beat.

Several days had passed.

"Holy..." he muttered under his breath.

Had he been unconscious the entire time? How had he survived without food or water? More importantly—who or what had brought him here?

Suppressing his unease, Tyler quickly composed a message to the camp, detailing his encounter and current location.

Then, without hesitation, he turned his gaze toward the colossal tree's branches, which extended across the river like a natural bridge.

"This will do," he whispered.

Using the giant tree's limbs, Tyler began making his way across the Noy River, determined to reunite with the others and uncover the mystery behind his capture.

Tyler crossed the Noy River, its waters flowing fast beneath the giant branches of ancient trees that stretched across the river's path. As he stepped onto the other side, he was met with an unusual sight: a vast field of purple grass.

"Purple Mist Grass," Tyler murmured to himself, recognizing the type of flora. He plucked a handful of it and stored it in his storage device. Unlike the others, Tyler didn't need to collect vast amounts. He knew that a small sample would suffice.

His attention quickly shifted, however, as the ground beneath him suddenly trembled.

Tyler looked around cautiously, his instincts alert. But there was nothing visible, no sign of what caused the disturbance.

Then, without warning, a Fleshborer Worm erupted from the ground with the force of a wild animal leaping from water. Its grotesque, segmented body flailed as it shot upward, its massive, gaping mouth lined with razor-sharp teeth.

The creature lunged at Tyler with terrifying speed.

Clang

The Fleshborer Worm's bite clanged against Tyler's Dragon scales with a loud, hollow noise. Its powerful teeth couldn't even scratch him.

Frustrated, the worm twisted and gnawed at his hand, but Tyler remained unmoving, the dragon scales proving far too tough for it to penetrate.

The ground around him began to tremble once more, and Tyler saw several other Fleshborer Worms burrowing through the earth, their grotesque heads emerging to join the assault.

But like their predecessor, none of their bites could pierce his scales. Each one tried in vain, their attempts futile against the protective armor surrounding him.

Tyler sighed, clearly growing bored of the pointless attacks. "Alright, enough playing... I have something to do," he muttered under his breath.

He then walked away. Behind him there are frozen statues of Fleshborer Worms made of ice.

Turning away from the frozen creatures, Tyler pulled out his hoverboard. He chose to fly just above the ground, using the speed to his advantage. His destination was clear: he needed to find Team C.

He pulled out a scanner from his storage device and began using its readings to navigate through the vast terrain.

The readings helped him hone in on the direction, guiding him as he skimmed over the land at a rapid pace.

As he moved, he couldn't help but notice that the Abyss Mist seemed to be thicker in this area, the swirling tendrils of dark energy more suffocating than usual.

"Tsk... pain in an ass." Tyler frowned, his breathing growing a little labored. The mist made it difficult to channel his prana and aura, both energies he typically relied on to enhance his abilities.

But Tyler didn't panic. Instead, he pulled out a pill from a small bottle labeled "Mathilda's Special" and popped it into his mouth. Within moments, the unease that had settled in his chest began to dissipate. The pill worked quickly, and soon Tyler was back to full strength, unaffected by the dense mist..

A day passed as Tyler continued on his journey. Despite his best efforts, he found himself being pursued by various monstrous creatures.

After an exhausting escape, Tyler found himself at the dried canal that marked the entrance to the Water Street town.

Tyler noticed a figure standing at the far end of the dried canal, looking up at the sky. He is holding a spear.

"Ahhh... Aren't you Lian Fu?" Tyler called out, with happy expression "Hey, where are the rest of the team?"