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Chapter 353

As the battle rages on, the undead monster proves to be a formidable foe, its movements unpredictable and its attacks relentless. Zhi Ruo, Mei Lin, and Luo Jin fight with all their might, their elemental powers clashing against the dark energy emanating from the creature.

Zhi Ruo's sword dances through the air, leaving trails of fire in its wake as he strikes at the monster's vulnerable points. Mei Lin's water blades slice through the darkness, aiming to disrupt the creature's movements and create openings for her companions. Luo Jin unleashes bolts of lightning, each strike crackling with raw power as he seeks to weaken the monster's defenses.

But despite their efforts, the undead creature seems invincible, shrugging off their attacks as if they were mere nuisances. With each passing moment, its strength seems to grow, fueled by the dark energy pulsating within its decaying form.

As the battle intensifies, the undead monster's relentless assault sends Zhi Ruo and Luo Jin flying backward, their bodies crashing against the cold, stone floor of the tomb. With a manic gleam in his eyes, Zhi Ruo struggles to his feet, his mind racing with desperation.

With lightning speed, the undead monster dashes towards him, its claws poised to strike.

"No, no... I'm not going to die," Zhi Ruo mutters to himself, his voice tinged with madness as he surveys the approaching threat.

In a split-second decision fueled by survival instinct and ruthless cunning, Zhi Ruo seizes Luo Jin, who lies dazed beside him, and without a moment's hesitation, he shoves him in front of himself, using him as a shield against the monster's deadly claws.

Luo Jin's mind reels in disbelief as he feels himself being used as a sacrificial pawn by someone he once trusted. Before he can even comprehend the betrayal, the monster's claws pierce through his body, sending waves of searing pain coursing through him.

Zhi Ruo, his expression twisted with determination, channels the depths of his dark, summoning forth his most potent attack. With a primal roar, he unleashes a torrent of blazing flames, engulfing both Luo Jin and the undead monster in a whirlwind of destruction.

The flames rage unchecked, consuming everything in their path with ruthless efficiency. In the searing heat and blinding light, the last thing in Luo Jin's shattered mind is a single, haunting question: why?

As the flames finally recede, revealing the charred remnants of the undead monster, Zhi Ruo collapses to the ground, completely spent. The last of his energy was consumed in that final, devastating attack. His breathing is heavy, his clothes singed, and his body is covered in sweat and soot.

Mei Lin, standing a few feet away, is frozen in place, her mind reeling from what she has just witnessed. She looks at Zhi Ruo, then at the smoldering pile that used to be Luo Jin, and a chilling realization dawns on her. The man she has followed and supported through countless misdeeds, believing in their shared ambition and loyalty, is capable of sacrificing one of their own without hesitation.

Luo Jin, who had always been a steadfast ally and confidant to Zhi Ruo, had dedicated himself to serving Zhi Ruo's ambitions, participating in their group's cruel activities without question. The depth of his loyalty had been unwavering, and yet, in the end, it was repaid with betrayal.

Mei Lin feels a profound sense of shock and disillusionment. All the years of camaraderie, the shared experiences, and the dark deeds they committed together—none of it had prepared her for this moment. The realization that Zhi Ruo could coldly use Luo Jin, one of their closest companions, as a mere shield to preserve his own life, shatters any remaining illusions she had about their bond.

She looks at Zhi Ruo, who sits on the ground, panting and muttering to himself. "I didn't do anything... I just did it to live," he says, his voice carrying a hint of desperation, as if trying to convince himself as much as anyone else.

Mei Lin doesn't respond. Words fail her, and a heavy silence hangs between them. The revelation of Zhi Ruo's true nature—a nature willing to sacrifice anyone and anything for his own survival—has irrevocably altered her perception of him.

In that moment of heavy silence, Zhi Ruo, still catching his breath on the ground, locks eyes with Mei Lin. There's a lingering tension in the air, the remnants of the battle mixing with the shock of Luo Jin's sacrifice. Pushing himself up to a sitting position, Zhi Ruo breaks the silence, his voice carrying a mix of vulnerability and a hint of his usual commanding tone. "Mei Lin, you won't tell anyone what happened, right?"

Mei Lin meets his gaze, and after a moment, a smile spreads across her face—a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Big Brother Zhi Ruo, don't worry. I will not tell anyone," she assures him, her voice steady and composed. The smile then shifts, becoming more genuine as she continues, "What you did is just right. You are the future Sect Master of our sect, so your life is more important than Luo Jin's."

Hearing her words, a laugh escapes Zhi Ruo's lips, a mixture of relief and something darker. He leans back slightly, a manic glint still lingering in his eyes. "Haha, I'm not really wrong to choose you as my future wife," he says with a confidence that seems to momentarily mask the exhaustion and turmoil beneath. "Don't worry, we will rule the Starlight Sect together."

Their exchange, steeped in ambition and dark undertones, marks a turning point. In the dimly lit chamber of the ancient tomb, surrounded by the echoes of their recent battle and the weight of their choices, a new understanding forms between them. Mei Lin's acceptance and rationalization of Zhi Ruo's actions cement their partnership, one built on shared ambition and a willingness to do whatever it takes to ascend to power.

After an hour of silent healing, using the techniques he had honed over years of cultivation, Zhi Ruo manages to stand, though his movements betray the lingering exhaustion and pain. The remnants of the battle, the charred floor, and the stark absence where Luo Jin once stood, serve as silent witnesses to the recent turmoil.

Casting a wary glance around the dimly lit chamber, Zhi Ruo finally speaks, breaking the heavy silence that had settled between them. "Damn, we can't go further," he states firmly, his voice reflecting a mix of frustration and resignation. "If we do, we will surely die."

Mei Lin, who had been watching him with a complex mix of emotions, reaches into her robe and pulls out an unusual stone. The stone, glowing with a faint, ethereal light, seems out of place amidst the darkness of the tomb. "I think this thing can help us," she suggests, offering the stone to Zhi Ruo with a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

Zhi Ruo, his curiosity piqued despite the weariness clouding his senses, takes the stone, examining it closely. "What is this?" he asks, his gaze locked on the peculiar artifact in his hand.

"Try using your energy on the stone," Mei Lin instructs. "It will give you information about what it is and how to use it."

Nodding, Zhi Ruo channels a sliver of his remaining energy into the stone. As he does, a rush of information floods his mind, revealing the stone's nature and purpose. It's called the Returner Stone, an artifact exclusive to the tower, capable of teleporting its wielder.

According to the information imparted by the stone, Zhi Ruo learns he can use it to get out of the tower. Additionally, the stone offers the option to teleport to an Exchange Floor and Elemental City, places Zhi Ruo finds himself curious about despite the urgency of their situation.

Though the prospect of exploring the Elemental City and Exchange Floor tempts him, the desire to escape the cursed confines of the tomb overshadows his curiosity. "We need to get out of this cursed place faster," Zhi Ruo declares, the decision clear in his voice.

Mei Lin nods in agreement, relieved at the prospect of leaving the tomb and its grim memories behind. The Returner Stone, glowing steadily in Zhi Ruo's hand, seems to offer a beacon of hope—a way out of the darkness that had engulfed them.

Shortly after emerging from the tower's depths, Zhi Ruo and Mei Lin find themselves amidst a crowd of onlookers, their faces a mixture of curiosity and trepidation. The presence of the Twilight Sect's tyranny looms over them, casting a shadow of fear that keeps the bystanders at bay, preventing them from venturing into the portal.

Shortly after activating the Returner Stone, Zhi Ruo and Mei Lin find themselves standing outside the tower. The transition is disorienting, but relief washes over them as they take in the familiar yet unsettling scene before them.

The area outside the tower is crowded, much like when they first entered. Numerous cultivators and onlookers stand at a safe distance, their eyes fixed on the tower's entrance. Despite the tower's promise of treasures and cultivation breakthroughs, fear and caution hold them back. Whispers and hushed conversations fill the air, a palpable sense of unease lingering like a dense fog.

Among the crowd, Zhi Ruo spots the remaining students and teachers of the Starlight Sect, a somber group that stands apart from the rest. Their numbers are noticeably reduced, with only about half of those who entered the tower now standing outside. The excitement and confidence that had shone in their eyes before entering the portal have been replaced by shock, grief, and a haunting sense of loss.

The absence of the Sect Master and the five elders is conspicuous, leaving the Starlight Sect in a state of nervous anticipation. The longer they remain inside, the more palpable the anxiety becomes among their ranks.

