

The Fall 676

Chapter 676: Zanda

Boje's back was slick with sweat as he hurried down the vast hallways. Being summoned by the Supreme Ancestor could only mean one of two things. You had either made such huge contributions to the clan that the Matriarch actually ended her perennial cultivation to commend and reward you, or that you had screwed up by such epic proportions that it might implicate your entire branch.

Of course, Boje knew he hadn't accomplished any grand feats as of late. Furthermore, his father walked next to him, and his pallid face was ample evidence which of the two scenarios was more likely. The steely demeanor of the two deacons leading the way did not give indications to the contrary either, causing the group to move through the Zethaya Headquarters in oppressive silence.

From what Boje had heard, the last time Zanda Zethaya left her seclusion was over ten thousand years ago. A few select elders were responsible for supplying the endless materials required for her experiments into the Dao of Alchemy, but not even his great grandfather had spoken to her for millennia from what he had heard. Let alone he, a piddling member of the younger generation.

The group soon reached the gate to the hidden realm and passed through, and Boje could barely breathe from how immense the energies were on the other side. Unfortunately, he had no chance to take in the grandeur of the Everseed Gardens, the heart of the Zethaya Clan's Alchemy foundation. Countless priceless herbs grew under the constant care of intricate arrays and watchful Deacons, but both Boje and his father's attention were trained on the walled-off area far in the distance.

The Matriarch's private quarters.

The distance was too far for an early E-grade cultivator like him, so his father lifted him with his spiritual force. The world around him turned to a blur, but it still took twenty minutes before they reached a set of gates. The energy was even denser here, and Boje felt himself quickly losing grip of reality.

A surge of his father's Cosmic Energy traveled through his body to expel the power, waking him up. Boje hurriedly closed his pores as to not get himself accidentally killed before taking a steadying breath.

"Remember, mind your manners," his father urged him as the gates slowly swung open by themselves, and Boje's heart sunk when he saw the trepidation in his eyes.

This was his father, a proper Late-stage Hegemon whose alchemical skills would make him an honored guest in most places in the Zecia sector. Yet here he was like a scared child. There was no escape, and Boje nodded and walked inside while. He kept his eyes peeled to the ground, afraid to look at anything he wasn't supposed to. Finally, he sensed a presence in front of him, and he immediately stopped in his tracks.

"Boje Zethaya of the 1,837th generation greets the matriarch," Boje said as he bowed deeply, and he remained unmoving out of a mix of reverence and fear.

In front of him was Zanda Zethaya, the direct descendant of the founding patriarch of the Zethaya Clan and likely the foremost Alchemy Expert of the Zecia sector. She was once the 3rd Clan Leader, but now maintained the identity of Supreme Ancestor, delegating the running of the clan to the younger generations.

She had taken a thriving but unimpressive faction and pushed it straight to the peak of the sector roughly eight hundred thousand years ago, and she had made sure it never lost its glory in the time after. Anyone in the sector could understand the reverence people held for her, but the ones who knew the reason to fear her were a lot fewer in number.

The terror rather came from her second identity; Thousand Mile Death, one of the deadliest poison masters in the sector. It wasn't a real secret, but it was also not something that you spoke openly about because of the sinister reputation of poison wielders. After all, almost all of them belonged to the unorthodox path.

Zanda was one of the greatest geniuses of the sector in the past million years, and most put her shoulder to shoulder with peak experts like the Void Priestess and just below the Eveningtide Asura. Some even believed she would've had the potential to reach even further if she hadn't chosen a hybrid path.

"Rise, child," a soothing voice drifted over, and Boje hesitantly stood up and glanced at the legendary figure he would normally have no business meeting.

She looked just like the paintings, like a young woman in her twenties exuding infinite charm. She sat on a swirling cloud of pure medicinal essence, and the only tool on her was the large unadorned wooden spoon on her lap. Next to her was a small Alchemy Cauldron, a perfect copy of the far larger one behind her back.

It was golden and reached almost fifty meters into the sky, an enormous monstrosity that hummed with the Dao of Nature. It was covered in dozens of pictures of the wild, or was it just inscriptions? Boje had a hard time telling, and it felt like the cauldron's surface kept shifting as he looked at it.

It was the Cloudsoar Cauldron, the defining treasure of the Zethaya Clan, an ancient relic dating all the way back to the Limitless Empire. Much of the Zethaya heritage was derived from the mysterious runes covering its surface, and not even a peak C-Grade Monarch would have an easy time breaking through the defensive shields it could summon.

If he could just meditate in front of that cauldron for a few days, then he would no doubt make enormous strides on his Dao...

"Tell me about your encounter with the one calling himself Zac Piker," Zanda Zethaya suddenly said, which was like a bucket of cold water that brought Boje back to reality.

Sweat once more started poured down Boje's back. It was just like he feared; this was related to that lunatic and the events in the Tower of Eternity. He had waited, steeped in anxiety for three long years. The elders' response to his handling of the situation had been excruciatingly ambiguous, to the point that Boje had even wished to be punished so he could get on with his life.

But now that he stood here in front of this celestial being, any such thought was replaced with abject dread.

"It's my fault," Boje cried fell on his knees, slamming his forehead into the ground with enough force to bloody himself.

The instructions from his father and grandmother were clear; if things started to go sideways, pray and beg like your life depended on it. Because it did. And not only his but his whole family's life was hanging by a thread. He could only hope to elicit some sympathy for the younger generation from the ancient matriarch.

"Calm down," Zanda laughed. "Do I have such a bad reputation among the younger generations? After all, I am essentially your great aunt. Come, sit."

"N-No, not at all," he hurriedly said, but he inwardly cried from fear.

Who didn't know how this smiling 'great aunt' once annihilated a whole Pill House, from lowest clerk to the Branch Director himself? She waved her sleeves and fifty million people were dead a minute later, including hundreds of D-Grade hegemony. It happened eighty thousand years ago, but the memory was still all-too-fresh in the clan's collective memory.

And that was just one of a hundred bloody tales that detailed her exploits during her long tenure as the peak powerhouse of the Zethaya clan.

Still, there was nothing to do but to sit down and give the same exhaustive report he had done upon returning from the Tower of Eternity. He hid nothing, knowing that his only road to survival was complete honesty. The matriarch occasionally added some questions of her own, often about the Deviant Asura's beliefs and motivations.

That only served to worry Boje even more, as it seemed she tried to sound out his character. Whether he would come back in a hundred thousand years and wash their clan in blood like the Eveningtide Asura did with so many factions. The Zethaya Clan had escaped that calamity unscathed, and their rise to prominence was partly made possible due to the power vacuum the Eveningtide Asura left behind. But what if Zanda Zethaya decided he had brought a similar calamity to their door?

However, it didn't feel like this was what worried the Supreme Elder. But at the same time, it felt like there was something else at play. She didn't look completely satisfied with the answers, and she even had him repeat some parts.

"I-" Boje stuttered, trying to think of anything else to say. "If the Supreme elder could point me in the right direction, I might be able to remember some additional details...?"

Zanda sighed as she knocked the meter-long spoon in her hand against the small cauldron next to her. A clear clang echoed out, completely emptying Boje's mind as the enormous cauldron behind her started to hum. Another tap from the spoon brought Boje back to reality, and he felt his mind cleansed and stabilized. He hadn't felt this relaxed since before that unlucky star crashed into his life and turned his fate sideways.

Billowing clouds black gas suddenly started spewing out from the humongous cauldron. Boje's heart once more clenched, but he quickly calmed down when he saw that it wasn't a poisonous mist or a failed concoction. It rather looked like the black cloud was a piece of the vast sky, with stars and nebulae swirling about inside.

"The Stele of Conflict has appeared, and the heavens have shifted. The ancient factions are gathering their strength while outside forces are eyeing our riches. We tried to fight it, but it has been sanctioned

by the Heavens. War is coming to the Zecia sector, and no one is safe," Zanda said as she looked at the sky.

"The Zethaya Clan is a peak faction with vast connections, surely we..." Boje said by instinct.

"Child, do not be mistaken. Alliances, friendships, even external elders. It's all hollow strength, not something that can be relied on when an era turns. This is doubly true for a force like ours. Our wealth has long surpassed our strength. One misstep and we'll be lost in the river of time," Zanda said with a shake of her head.

"I'm sorry. This descendant is useless and doesn't understand how this relates to Lord Piker. He is just at the E-Grade and cannot impact the fate of the large factions," Boje hesitantly said.

"War is the motor of progress, and a convergence of fate of this scale will last centuries, perhaps millennia. Zac Piker is the first harbinger of change. It might prove lethal to underestimate his role and importance in this mess," Zanda muttered. "The strong will prosper, and the weak will become fertilizer."

Boje's looked at the sky with a mix of apprehension and excitement. There were already talks of this being the era of heroes. Zac Piker was the star who shone the brightest at the moment, but there were many more who stood out.

He had witnessed the strength of the young miss of the Peak Family and the Void Priestess' terminal disciple. There was also Prince Reoluv and that mysterious Draugr. All four of them had reached the eighth floor of the Tower of Eternity, something that should be an extremely rare event. The Draugr even reached the last level of the eighth floor, falling just one level short of the Deviant Asura.

And these were just the people Boje encountered in the Tower of Eternity.

There were also rumors of eonic geniuses appearing in many of the ancient factions, though these individuals were fiercely guarded and hidden from public view. The Zecia Sector was really heading into a golden age. Those who survived would no doubt make enormous progress.

But what was this about war? Boje was more connected than most, but hadn't heard anything.

"Well, it is still early," Zanda said as the cloud was swallowed back into the cauldron. "We still have some time to make arrangements. Prepare yourself. I am opening the Primal World for the young generation in one month. One hundred slots will be awarded."

Boje looked at his ancestor with shock when he heard the news. If the Skysoar Cauldron was the defining treasure, then the Primal World was the defining Mystic Realm in their possession. It contained an ancient piece of a peak C-Grade continent, a pocket of land that eclipsed any of the continents in the sector.

The realm had been refined and improved for over a million years, and the amount of resources that had gone into it would bankrupt most C-grade factions. Cultivating there was apparently like having a direct connection to the Heavens itself, and it was usually reserved for the elders and peak talents on the precipice of reaching hegemony or monarchy. To open it and expend its riches on the younger generations was unprecedented.

"Boje will strive to live up to the ancestor's expectations," Boje said, and he hesitated for a few seconds before he decided to give it a shot. The ancestor was even opening the Primal World for the young generations, and she didn't seem upset with him. If he could learn a thing or two from the ancestor... "With war coming, I am thinking of studying the art of poison. Is th--"

"My heritage does not suit you," Zanda cut Boje off with a shake of her head, immediately dashing his hopes. "You have passable talents, but you do not have the heart to walk the Path of Poison. But you can consider walking the road of life instead of the road of death. I think it might suit you. Besides, you have formed a weak thread of Karma with the Little Deviant Asura, and this might be your road to strengthen it."

Boje was disappointed to be shot down, but not overly so. He knew his talents well, and he knew that the Matriarch hadn't taken a disciple for over two hundred thousand years. It was a long shot to begin with. Still, the fact that the ancestor said he was suited to become a healer was a boon by itself. Those few words alone would open a few doors for him. It might even allow him to get access to one of their better heritages.

His mind was already churning as he went over the matriarch's words while making his way outside, but he was stopped just about as he was to exit through the gates.

"One more thing," Zanda said from behind, making Boje stop in his tracks and look back inquiringly. "What do you think is best? Young flowers or mature aunties?"

"Ah?" Boje stuttered, his mind going blank from the unexpected question.

Zanda laughed as she waved her sleeve, and the familiar scene of the uncategorized insectoid meeting with the Zerathar representatives appeared. That encounter had become a legendary piece of gossip by now, known by essentially all peak factions of the sector.

"That scene where he held that Tsarun brat's head was somewhat dashing, and who would make a better Dao Partner to the next Eveningtide Asura than me? He is still a bit young and tender right now, but a few centuries steeped in bloodshed should do the trick. I only need to help him quash those deviant interests first."