

## **Noninterference**

Life was strange. Often times we could make plans so complicated, so in depth, that we could not imagine them going awry. Yet, often they did. Reality seemed to have the power to interfere, to conspire and change our so carefully made plans. How? That was the mystery. All that existed came from the same source, such variance shouldn't exist at all. And yet, it was there. Did that mean that the source of it all was somehow flawed? Or was it just the ultimate proof of their free will? That even such tiny pieces of them could make changes.

Take for the example the Domes. They were imagined as a test, a passing grade. Something that was meant to come after the Iterations were made whole, after the first steps were completed. After the people had the time to grow and to spread, to conquer the world around them, and after they had achieved a cultural and scientific revolution.

They had gone through this for almost a countless number of Iterations. Realities upon realities, civilizations upon civilizations, worlds and universes, stretching so far into the past to the beginning of it all. Some variance was to be expected. They had dealt with it before. But this one, this was supposed to be the final one, the end of the great work.

Yet even here it had sneaked through, plans were changed, projections altered.

Zha Miya watched as a force approached a Dome. It was too soon, but most things in the Infinite Realm seem to be so of late. It had started promising. The First three Iterations arrived, the most barbaric of the Iterations, the people from realities where greed for power and might were virtues. And they accomplished what they were supposed to, they carved out a space for themselves in a harsh world. They grew strong, and they fought amongst each other, they hindered their own growth. They saw nothing that wasn't in front of them, their ability to think inward and improve was never nurtured.

Then came the builders, the growers, the ones that enabled them to spread and tame the conquered world. They were oppressed, as they were always supposed to be, their drive curtailed in order to prevent them from expanding too much. They specialized, the world advanced in a way that allowed them to support their population. They knew how these things went, Zha Miya had guided many worlds along the path herself. First came the Primitive Era, the age of brutality and survival. Then came the Expansion and Exploration, then came the Industrial and Cultural Era, then the Era of rapid Advancement.

Everything had gone according to plan for so long. A few aberrations were to be expected, and were accounted for. Then came the Seventh, and what she thought was another aberration had been growing more and more out of control. Their projections that were within margins now swung widely out of them. And it had all come to pass so fast.

A few incidents here and there over the years had started to multiply. A dozen Glimpses and Grasps over a thousand years now turned into hundreds over decades, all over such a short period of time, a scant number of years. The Way of Time, and the other on the edge of being formed. Too soon, all of it. She looked back, run the numbers again and again, everything that had happened was within the margins on its own, but together...

The Seventh had more of an impact than they had anticipated, beyond just the two monsters from Earth 7. The others were aberrant as well, though not to the same degree. All of the last three Iterations were the same, the dreamers, the ones who were better at innately understanding complicated concepts. Whose worlds and histories were shaped so that they were better at those things. They were always supposed to teach the others, but it was all happening too fast.

A Dome opening up ahead of schedule had always been a possibility. They had known what kind of a devastation the monsters inside could cause. All of their projections said that a Dome opening early would cow the people into delaying facing another for as long as possible. Instead,

here they were. Two Domes demolished before they could even become a threat. That wasn't the test that was envisioned. Yet, it was a test still. They were coming together, they were dealing with them, even if it was on their own terms.

The unexpected had been expected. Even if Zha Miya hadn't imagined anything like this. The Ways were open, Aspects would start to truly form ahead of schedule. There wasn't anything to do but adapt.

So, Zha Miya watched the force approaching another Dome, knowing already the likely result from the projections on the screen next to her. No, the near future was clear, what worried her was not the Dome, but what came after. Zha Miya was an Overseer, tasked with keeping the plan from deviating too much until the final test was done. In that, she had succeeded. But now her job was harder. She was no longer an Aspect, she no longer had any ties to the Essence that had once been the whole of her being. She was changed, and though she did lament the loss of what she once was, she did have a new purpose. To be the hand behind the curtain, keeping the tapestry from unraveling. Time had changed, it was now a single river. No longer could she switch between the streams, no longer could she choose the outcomes. Which meant that now, when her projections went dark just ahead, she couldn't search for the answer in the other streams. It was... frustrating, but it was also what they had wanted to happen.

Something was going to occur, and soon. Something that will throw everything out of line. She had to stop it. She changed the screen away from the Dome and the upcoming assault, searching for what she suspected was the culprit.

She found him with ease, as she always did. His arrival into the Infinite Realm was not through the established channels, but he had not been dealt with. Just because he came ahead of his people did not mean that he did not belong. Ra'azel Equinar was not supposed to be free, yet he was. She could see him as clearly as the others, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that he was the cause of what obscured their projections.

He, like Zha Miya herself, and all other living things in reality, drew his power from the Framework. It was the structure to grant purpose, a ladder that all climbed. Only his was an older version of it, one without the same guided purpose. He was ahead of his people, and so would not enjoy the same benefit. Ultimately, it all led to the same thing, he had already introduced knowledge that was not part of the current iteration. His Runes had already started to spread, he taught one, who taught others.

If only she could just touch upon his—

The world shifted around her, her station disappeared, and she was someplace else. A place where darkness surrounded her, with only a table and a being sitting across from her.

Immediately she inclined her head, and the Dealmaker spoke.

“You are not to interfere,” his voice was like a whisper against her ears.

Zha Miya raised her head. “I wasn’t going...” she trailed off. There was no expression in the darkness of the Dealmaker’s hood, but still, she could tell. “I apologize,” she added.

“You have served as an Aspect for an old Iteration, from its inception to its end. Then, you watched over the new Iterations for a long time, since before they had the Framework. You have guided their cultures and development for what we needed, and you succeeded. I understand,” the Dealmaker said. “But the Infinite Realm is at the moment where we stop our interference, beyond just fixing the mistakes that arise and threaten the whole.”

“Ra’azel is an interference,” she said.

“He is part of the design. All the things in the Infinite Realm are.”

“Even True Death?” Zha Miya asked.

The Dealmaker’s head barely moved in a tilt, but she did notice it.

“All things carry the spark. Free will is desired. True Death was integrated into the new design, it is as part of it now as all else.”

“Of course,” Zha Miya said. “I just worry that something is going to go wrong, the projections...”

“I understand your concern,” the Dealmaker said. “I have inquired. Unpredictability is not a concern.”

“Inquired?” Zha Miya realized what he was talking about just after she spoke the question. Immediately, she bowed her head. To have her concerns be brought before the Three was... unimaginable.

“You can still watch, projections are a tool, nothing more. Time was formed and settled; we always knew that as they came into their power we will be less needed, more restricted. They are the ones that make the rules.”

The Dealmaker’s words made her raise her head up again to look at him.

“I still can’t dismiss the nagging in my mind,” Zha Miya admitted.

The Dealmaker nodded. “I... I confess the same. There is nothing for us to interfere with,” he paused, then added. “Yet.”

Zha Miya understood and inclined her head. “I’ll keep watch.”

The Dealmaker tapped his finger against the table and she was back at her station, as if nothing had happened. She looked at her screens, showing Ra’azel walking the streets of a great city, one of the largest and most advanced in the Infinite Realm. His actions were erratic, hard to predict even for the best models. He was searching for something, learning about the Framework around him. She just wished that she knew what he was searching for.

Only the Dealmaker could see into the minds of others, and only if invited. She wondered if perhaps he knew already. She cast a glance at the other screen, seeing the countdown, the point where all projections went awry, where everything was thrown out of balance. It was coming.