

## Interlude – Arrival of the Eighth

**Time to the end of the world: 00:hours 03:minutes. Rankers, be ready for transport to the new reality.**

Marianna looked at the notification, watching it tick down. She was nervous, as was everybody else. They didn't know what was going to happen after this. Some were excited, they had grown weary of the constant battles and death. They were eager for something new, a fresh start. She looked around, the city of Remembrance was one of the last still standing, and the few thousand people around were too large of a percentage of the survivors. Only five hundred thousand people were left, of the billions that humanity used to have. And only ten thousand would move on, the rest... well, they didn't know.

She glanced to the side where her team was standing, a few of them hadn't managed to get on the Ranker list, and they were saying their goodbyes with smiles on their faces. Telling each other that they will see each other again, not knowing if that was the truth. It didn't matter in the end, what was, will be.

Most of those around her were the best that humanity had, or perhaps the better word was the strongest. Yet she stood above them all, holding the number one spot. A Peak Foundation Cultivator, on the Path of True Moment, a path that allowed her to exceed her meager strength in moments of glory. With a Class of Siphon at level 38, she had pushed her Cultivation as far as it would go, more than anybody else on the planet had. Yet, what made her the strongest wasn't any of that, it was her skill.

A skill born from the memory of her fallen brother, **|Last Chance|**, the skill that she had evolved to the third tier.

She didn't relish in her strength, no, she knew just how fragile it all was. Even as strong as she was, she hadn't been able to prevent what had happened to the world. All the death and loss.

The timer ticked down and she braced. Then a new notification flashed in front of her eyes.

**Congratulations! You are on the Ranker list, and are eligible for a place in the new reality. Prepare for transport to Infinite Realm.**

A white light flashed all around her and then she was swallowed by darkness.

She woke up on the ground, her back looking at the clear blue sky. It took her a moment to get her bearings and remember. And then she surged to her feet, looking around to see all the other Rankers from the list. Then beyond them, she saw... more people, but different, alien. Some looked like monsters and she stiffened, but then she saw that they seemed just as confused as we were. All of them were on a large open field.

And then a loud voice spoke from above them.

“Welcome to the Infinite Realm, Rankers.”

Marianna turned and saw an alien with tendrils for mouth and elongated head, standing on top of what appeared to be a flying robot,

wearing a tight form black suit. She could feel the sense of power coming from the man, and she knew that he was far beyond her.

Behind him in the distance were flying shapes, what looked like spaceships. And on the ground... she saw death, monsters as tall as hills, most dead, but some still living and fighting what looked like fighter jets and people flying in the air. It was madness, it was hell.

“Be calm, we are here to help. We are citizens of the Infinite Realm, who had been sent from other Iterations just like your own worlds before you. We will help you and guide you, protect you, please follow my people,” the alien gestured at the ground where people of what looked different races waited. She even saw a few that looked like they were human. So much was happening that she didn’t even notice when someone else appeared in the sky above them, and then spoke in a carrying voice.

“Not so fast, Herald.”

Marianna turned to see a... man, human, standing on a piece of air that was strange, looked almost as if it was a twisting mass of black nothingness with edges in violet and silver. He had two large gashes over his eyes, black with the same violet and silver around the edges. His hair was shoulder length, and he wore martial arts combat robes. His eyes were pools of darkness that stared straight into the alien.

From him she felt almost nothing. It was as if he didn’t exist at all. As if he was just a hole in space. She noticed another army behind him, medieval looking ships flying in the air with floating palaces, fighting taking place on the plain below them.

“That was not the agreement,” the human said. “These people will get to choose.”

“The territory is not yet pacified,” the alien, the Herald, said. “We can discuss this after we ensure the safety of the new Rankers.”

“Oh, I know how you ensure their safety,” the human said with a smile. “I am a Ranker myself remember? Stifling and forcing of contracts. There will be none of that here.”

“Hitor will not appreciate your tone with me child,” the Herald said. “The agreement was that the territory would be cleared of all dome monsters first before we offered them the choice.”

“Good thing that he does not rule me then,” the human told him. “And it would’ve been, if you had held to the bargain and at least tried to cooperate. Do not try and twist the situation Herald. These people are as safe here as anywhere else in the territory, and I will not allow them to pass into your hands.”

“Do not insult me Cultivator,” the Herald almost sneered. “I am the Herald of the Machine, not some power-hungry king that would take the choice from these people.”

“I do not care who you are,” the human said.

The atmosphere between them got heavy. And Marianna felt as helpless as she had been when the Framework first arrived, with powers beyond her means dictating her future.

And then the Herald jumped into his machine and the human charged at him. The world flashed with power and destruction. Marianna felt the dread of death coming and then just as it had come it went away. In one blink everything changed. The two beings of incredible power were back in the same positions they were just a moment ago, the human on his twisting mass and the alien on his machine. Both seemed confused, then both turned their eyes to the ground.

Marianna followed their gaze to the center of the clearing in between all the thousands of people that she now assumed were all Rankers, some from other worlds. There stood another human, with black skin and a silver suit of armor. In one hand he held a sword that had a round gap near the handle, with a white orb shining in the middle of it.

He was tall, and looked impossibly calm. His dreads were pulled back, and she could see that his ears weren't as pointed as those of her people, yet he still looked human. She didn't know what was happening, but the man glanced up at the two that floated above them all.

“Zach,” the human in the air said slowly.

“There will be none of that, this is no place for your petty power games. We are all here for the same reason, to protect the new arrivals,” the new man said.

“I will not be made a mockery of by a child, Warden, nor will I let another and his pet in the shadows chastise me,” the Herald said. Marianna wasn't certain, but for a split second she thought that the man on the ground's shadow twisted and darkened. She had to have imagined it.

“You should know better than anyone, Herald of the Machine, that the only thing that matters in the Infinite Realm is power. But if age is what you respect, I assure you, I have lived for longer than anybody else here. If the two of you are incapable of putting aside your arrogance for long enough to see that you both want the same thing, then you will be moved aside. The Wardens will handle the Rankers.”

The two in the air glared at the man on the ground, and Marianna feared that another battle would break out. Then the two glanced back up at each other, finally the Herald went back into his machine and turned

around, flying away. The other human remained for a bit, looking at the other human.

“Zach, I...”

The human on the ground, the Warden Zach, it seemed, waved his hand. “The two of you are too much alike Ryun, if only you could see that, you would not grate on each other’s nerves nearly as much.”

The human in the sky grimaced, but then nodded. “I leave them in your care then.” With that, he turned around and jumped back to the battle in the distance.

“Rankers of the Eight Iteration, be welcome to the Infinite Realm,” the man said, then a woman with horns stepped out of his shadow. “I am Warden Zacharia Gardner, please, choose a representative for me to speak to, all your questions will be answered.”

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Verdon Ha Ran stood up in the carriage as it passed beneath the walls of the city of Consequence. It was... a lot larger than he had thought it would be. He could see expansions to the city everywhere, even the walls themselves. It was solid work, but he could already see flaws. They were having issues with keeping up with the influx of people. It was to be expected, of course.

The Twilight Melody Sect had risen as one of the powerhouses of the Sects as a whole. Ever since the war against the Dome monsters nearly a decade ago. Since then they had expanded, many smaller sects coming

under their leadership and even some larger. They ruled the wild Frontier and pushed their territories further out. They said that the Twilight Melody Sect had a seat among the true leadership of the Sects, and that the Undying Void had the ear of Dragon Heart's Sect Head himself.

Verdon had heard the stories, of course, everyone had. There were songs sung about the confrontation between the Undying Void and the Herald of the Machine at the arrival of the Eight Iteration. Though Verdon himself was more partial to the ones that were sung about the arrival of the Ninth Iteration a few years ago, it was a lot more cheerful.

But in the last few years, the world had changed forever. The Exalted Empire and their coalition had nearly taken over all of the core, those that hadn't outright joined them in an alliance had been conquered swiftly, only a few remained whole, those powerful enough to refuse. But even they were not hostile to the Empire. After all, the Exalted Empire brought a lot of good. Their schools were better, they let everyone advance and they raised up their citizens. It was a far better experience than any other place had been, Verdon could see that. But the safety of their borders, the uplifting that they gave, did come at a price. All such things did. Their laws were strict, and the people lost a lot of their freedoms.

Some were willing to give them away, others not so much. It was why Verdon had left the Island of Dungeons, too many had started advocating for them joining the Empire, and Verdon did not like what that would mean for him. He was a dungeon diver, he had powers that allowed him to fight, and that would make him obligated to join the Empire's military for a service of at least a hundred years. That was... too much for him.

It was why he had come to the sects, here at least he could do more good. He was good in a fight, but he was better as a support. His Class had long since evolved from the simple Stone Shaper it had been, but he was a builder at heart. In the sects, he could help support the powerhouses that would fight in the other's stead.

He had survived his home world, arrived here as the Ranker of the Seventh Iteration. He had his fill of fighting. And he had to admit, coming to the Sect run by a legend of the Seventh Iteration did have its appeal.

Now, all he needed was a chance to demonstrate his talents. He had no doubt that they would accept him.