

Compact Me to Zero

Rich Larson

From set *Edge of Eternities*
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Squad Captain Reen is in no mood to be awestruck, but the view from Infinite Guideline still pins her through the lungs. No matter where she turns, the station's radial architecture and titanic viewports provide the same perspective: a stellar seascape of pulsating blues and purples, not so different from the glowing oceans she saw on Joska. Gargantuan clouds of ice and dust whirl, break, reform, churned by electromagnetic eddies that leave iridescent trails of charged particles in their wake.

The view reminds her that the Edge is unimaginably vast and that she is far, far from the subterranean warrens of Susur Secundi. Far from the comforting tug of its collapsing star. And her obligate pilgrimage will take her even farther—that is, if she ever finds a half-decent ship with a drive and a codebook.

There's sudden movement behind her. She whirls, sinking halfway to a combat stance before she sees the source: a malfunctioning scavenger mechan trying to eat her oversized suitcase, drawn to its metal-rich contents.

"That's not scrap," she snaps.

The drone's cam blinks innocently. Its mechanical mouthparts keep gnawing. She wrenches it free; it writhes in her tattooed fingers. For a pulsing red moment, she envisions herself smashing it against the station's pristine floor until it's nothing but pulp. Instead, she lobs it gently away. The drone bounces, rolls upright, and skitters off on its many feet.

"Faller-damned mechs," she mutters as it disappears into a crowd of travelers. "Always glitching." She heads for Bay Five, her suitcase trundling faithfully after her.



Art by: Lie Setiawan

Infinite Guideline is the last stop before leaving the Sothera system, and it shows. Reen sees all species: chitinous quadrupedal Eumidians, squat tusk-toothed Kavs, gracefully gelatinous Illvoi, even a solitary Drix engineer, slender gray body swathed in billowing möbius strips. She keeps an eye out for humans.

But not for fellow Monoists, though, she does feel a twinge of guilt and longing when she sees a group of them—they're dressed in proper gravity robes, and in her anonymous motley, she passes unrecognized. Reen's watching for garish golden capes, form-fitting white armor, stiff posture, and haughty eyes.

She's watching for the enemy. She has to, because the peace between the Monoists and the Palatinate is a fragile one. Even here on Infinite Guideline, as neutral of a territory that exists in the system, she can taste the tension like fuel dregs. Ever-shifting conflict maps hang in the air beside the usual departure holos, and swarms of security drones glide in circles overhead.

Half the travelers in Bay Five are refugees from disputed worlds—fleeing with whatever they can carry, hollow-faced with exhaustion. Even those who aren't escaping a warzone keep their heads down and eyes roving.

There is fear and desperation all around her, and it awakens the ever-stronger voice in the back of her mind. *This is your work, Reen*, it says. *You drove these people from their homes. You delivered them into despair. And these are the lucky ones.*

Officially, the Monasteriat welcomes all displaced persons to the sanctuary tracts on Susur Secundi. But for those outside the faith who did not learn to venerate the Faller from an early age, a home orbiting a nascent supervoid offers more terror than comfort. Those with the means have chosen to flee the system entirely.

Reen can't blame them. Not after Joska.

"Where do you want to go?"

The question, presented by a Kav captain with a vapor pipe strapped to his snout, brings her back to present concerns. She waves away the accompanying billow of smoke.

“Point Prime,” she says. “Directly as possible.”

More smoke, this time shaped into staccato puffs by the Kav’s chittering laugh. “Point Prime from here?” he demands. “No chance. Too dangerous. I can take you to Eulalia system’s main column ...”

Reen has no time for cowardly smoke-spewers. She pushes on.

Bay Five is for freelancers: captains employed by no guild or state or corporation, piloting drive-equipped ships that can roam far and wide between the eternity columns without lampreying onto a Pinnacle ferry. They still require Pinnacle clearance, of course—interstellar travel without a codebook is nigh-suicidal—but they’re willing to take on longer, riskier journeys.

Or so Reen thought. As she works her way down the list of available ships, negotiating in the flesh when she can and on holo when she can’t and increasing her offer of Monasteriat credit after each refusal, she feels a winch slowly tightening in the bottom of her stomach. Point Prime is far, yes. But distance is the least of the captains’ concerns.

They fear what lurks between here and her destination: she hears harrowing tales of sliver infestations and Eldrazi contamination, of ravenous void hydras and rampaging clades of Drix assassins. Reen is a soldier; she knows how war stories swell and shift shape to fill the long silences between engagements.

But even if the rumors are false, the pilots’ fear is real, and that reinforces a fear of her own: this pilgrimage is a mistake. The reason she can’t find a ship to take her to Point Prime is because she should be on Susur Secundi, training her body in the gravity pits and her mind in the simulacrum, preparing her new squadmates for a fragile peace to shatter.

By the time Reen arrives at the end of the dock and the end of her list, she’s ready to contact her superiors and tell them so. They’ll find ways to make their displeasure clear, yes, but they left her the choice to return. The Monoist way is to always offer a choice.

The small ship in Bay Five’s final berth has seen better days, or more likely decades. Its rust-brown hull is pocked with micrometeorite impacts and its engine pod scarred by something less familiar: a semi-circular pattern of enormous striations.

“Superficial damage, I assure you,” buzzes a synthesized voice. “The integrity of the hull remains uncompromised.”

An iris mechan, the sort most captains use as a do-all assistant, floats forward on a single humming repulsor. This one is about the size of a human head, and the liquid metal coating its front is now doing its best impression of a human face. It manages to make the eyeballs concave instead of convex.

“I’m going to Point Prime,” Reen says, and by now the words feel rote as an exegesis chant. “Directly as possible.”

The mechan blinks its caved-in eyes. “What serendipity,” it says. “So am I!”

A holomap blooms into the air. Reen, barely willing to believe it, traces the ship’s route: a sole stop in Assaxia system, neutral territory, then an uninterrupted pathway to Point Prime. She feels a curious mixture of dread and relief at the possibility that her superiors were right, that the Faller smiles on her pilgrimage after all.

“Is the captain aboard?” she asks, nodding toward the ship’s open port. “I prefer negotiations in the flesh.”

“The captain *is* aboard, in a sense,” the mechan says. “The captain is also here, speaking with you! But there’s little flesh to be found in either instance.”

Reen’s skin warms with subtle shame. Not all mechs are mindless—some are true androids, their digital consciousness either transplanted from an organic being or slowly evolved out of cruder code. After so many tours of combat surrounded by weaponized drones, blank and pitiless things, she forgets this.

“My apologies,” she says. “My name is Reen.”

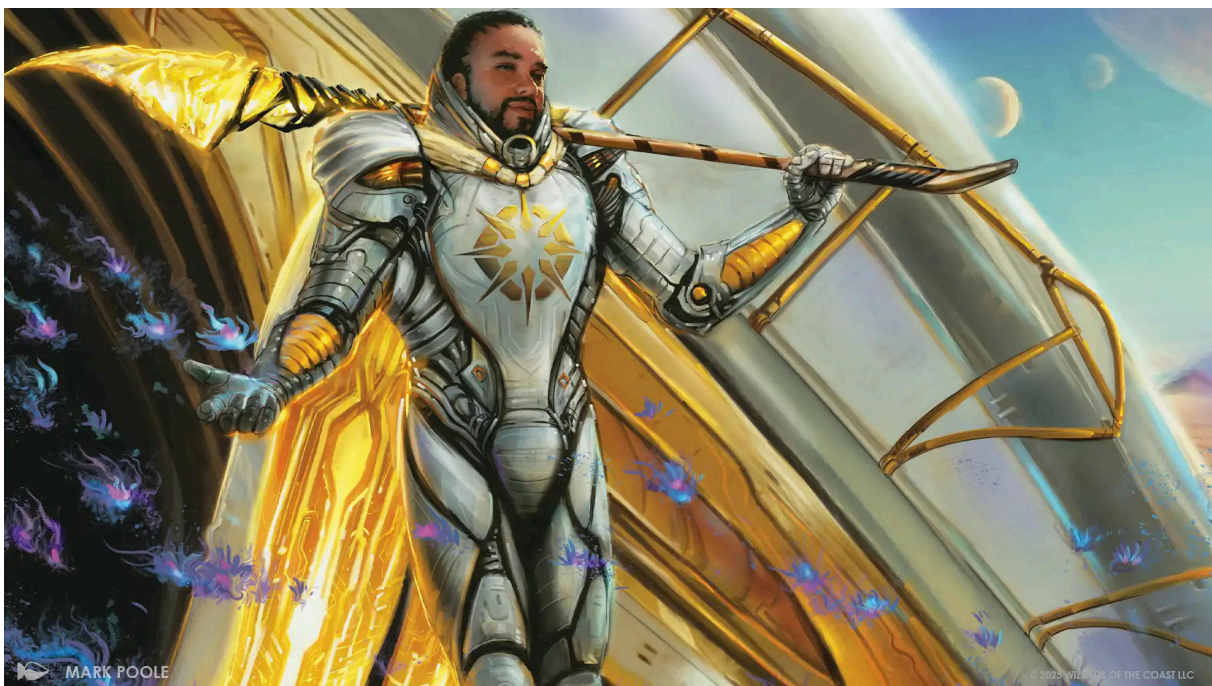
“My name is Too Much Happiness,” the mechan says. “This is also, not coincidentally, the registered name of my body-ship.”

Reen can think of no name less suitable for her voyage, but a part of her has always enjoyed dark ironies. She puts in her offer. The transfer and contract blink through.

“Cabin confirmed!” Too Much Happiness bleats. “I am departing in three hours.” The mechan dips toward her enormous sarcophagus-shaped suitcase and their concave black eyes narrow—maybe at its size, maybe at what they can perceive of its contents. “Cabin space is limited, Passenger Reen. Please direct your cargo to the hold.”

Reen heads inside the ship before the captain can change their mind, hurrying up the slightly crooked boarding ramp with her suitcase trotting behind her. The interior is a hubbub of mechan activity, as Too Much Happiness’s various drone-bodies make last-minute preparations to their ship-body, but she manages not to step on any as she follows the holopath to the cargo hold.

Before she sees the other passengers, she hears their voices—booming, brazen, human—and the familiar cadence sends a slink of ice down her spine. She rounds the corner and finds garish golden capes, form-fitting white armor, stiff posture, and haughty eyes. There are three of them: three men-at-arms belonging to the Sunstar Free Company, pride and blade of the Celestial Palatinate.



Art by: Mark Poole

These are the butchers who struck the Monasteriat's worlds with no warning, putting peaceful colonies to flame and ruin. These are the interlopers who seized Adagia for their own, who encroach ever more closely on Susur Secundi. These are the heathens who would forcibly resurrect Sothera's collapsed star and all other supervoids, even Point Prime itself, to fuel their empire's mindless expansion.

These are her fellow passengers as far as Assaxia system. Reen feels a tightness in her chest, a looseness in her gut, a readiness in her limbs as fight-or-flight chemicals foam through her. The soldiers are armed in casual defiance of the negotiated peace's technicalities: she sees the iridescent glimmer of sheathed bladiators. She knows they can be deployed fast as thought.

Reen forces herself to keep moving at the same steady pace as the men-at-arms rove toward her. Their unmasked faces are young, smooth-skinned, eyes not yet hardened. They laugh over something with strained bravado. They remind her intensely of her own young squad, and she hates them intensely for that.

One of the soldiers stares at her. His golden chromatophore irises burn like miniature suns, and for a moment, she thinks he can sense what's hidden beneath her body glove. But out of armor, out of uniform, Reen looks no different from the station's countless refugees. She reminds the men-at-arms of nothing, and they stride past her without stopping.

She scratches at the hidden skin of her arm.

There is no other ship that will take her to Point Prime, so Reen locks herself in her cabin and determines not to leave it until Too Much Happiness offloads their other passengers. It's a tiny space, as warned: barely room for a cocoon-style bed and a washbooth. She visits the latter first and settles onto the toilet. The screen across from her is set to mirror, which gives her a terrific view of Squad Captain Reen, shaved head overgrown, skin pallid and eyes bagged with exhaustion, taking a big pre-jump shit.

She's never cared about looking dignified. She'll leave that to the Sunstar Free Company, with their spotless armor and flowing capes that make them such bright and tempting targets. What bothers her is the uncertainty scrawled across her face. A month ago, that expression was foreign to her.

Reen shuts her eyes and chants. "As the Faller seeks the dark peace of the Well, I seek the dark peace within me. As light bends away from the Core of All Things, let my thoughts bend away from my being. As the supervoid stills the Chaos Universal, compact me to zero and let me be still."



Art by: Bryan Sola

Inside the vast hollows of Susur Secundi, voiced by a thousand echo-singers, the words of the Plummet Record make her skin thrum. Here, spoken alone in a cramped washbooth, they sound utterly meaningless.

But wasn't that how they were first spoken?

Not in a washbooth, no, but in solitude—the perfect solitude of the Faller as HE tumbled past the event horizon and into the maw of the supervoid that should have rendered HIM down to protein strands. The Faller found life, not death, in that long silence. HE found peace and purpose.

“So did you,” Reen tells her doppelganger in the mirror. “You just have to find it again.”

Her reflection’s eyeballs flicker inside out. “Have you misplaced a personal item?” a synthesized voice blares in her ear.

Reen nearly falls off the toilet. “Adjust your privacy parameters,” she says, scowling across at her reflection. “I don’t want you in here.”

“A thousand apologies,” Too Much Happiness says. “Rest assured, I have no visual feed of your cabin. Only sound.”

A paranoid thought bubbles to the surface of her mind: Too Much Happiness is listening to her recitations, pumping them across the ship to a more spacious cabin where three Sunstar men-at-arms are now drawing their weapons, eager to shed Monoist blood. She reminds herself that android mechs are neutral by nature, and freelance pilots doubly so for reasons of economics.

“I don’t like being eavesdropped on.”

“A thousand *and one* apologies,” the captain says, moving her reflection’s mouth open and shut like some ancient puppet. “Between you and me, Passenger Reen, I have been experiencing a variety of minor behavioral glitches in recent days. Perhaps it’s affecting my social acuity.”

Reen recalls the scavenger mechan gnawing at her suitcase. Not only is she making her pilgrimage in the company of enemy soldiers, she's doing it aboard a potentially unstable ship with a potentially unstable captain.

"I merely wanted to inform you that we're moving into position along the column," Too Much Happiness says. "It's quite a sight from the bridge. You may also view it from your cabin screen, in perfect privacy. Happy excretions!"

Her reflection flickers again, hopefully signaling a permanent departure, and Reen sighs a long breath, slumps forward, elbows on knees. After a moment's recalcitrance, she accesses the visual feed from the bridge.

Too Much Happiness is rising from the berth, guided along a massive magnetic gullet toward the eternity column itself. As their ship joins the procession of departing craft, one minuscule insect in a foraging chain, Reen looks out again at star-strewn space, illuminated ice clouds, the smoky pillars of distant nebulae. It's the most beautiful shit she's ever taken.

Then the eternity column activates, flinging them through unreality, and the visual feed becomes a fractal tumult, infinite coils of color splitting and spiraling. For a moment, their ship is swimming through a sea of their ship: she sees noncount versions of Too Much Happiness pressing in on all sides, each bearing the same distinctive scar on their engine pod, each bearing the same passengers.

She hopes at least one of them holds a Reen unplagued by doubts.

"All this must condense," she recites, staring out at infinity. "All this must be still."

The words bounce back to her, tinny and hollow.

Reen can't sleep.

Crawling inside the cocoon-style bed feels too much like being swathed in impact gel, too much like the interior of the drop-pod that carried her squad to Joska's pristine surface. When she shuts her eyes, she sees the moon spread out beneath her, its bone-white sand giving way to calm sea, waters rendered brilliant violet by bands of florescent algae, gentle waves dotted with the passage of massive gelatinous colony organisms the size of cities.

If she keeps her eyes shut, she sees, inevitably, the target: a Palatinate lander bobbing just offshore. It was a graceful, tri-winged design, its hull a stark white alloy veined with reddish-orange fuel cables, and it carried three hundred colonists. Three hundred citizens of the Celestial Palatinate were flung outward into the void to expand the contagion called empire.

Reen opens her eyes and leaves the bed. Five strides take her from one end of the cabin to the other. The ceiling, lower than even the earliest tunnels on Susur Secundi, almost scrapes her topknot. She used to feel most comfortable in small, dark places, but lately, they are full of ghosts. There's only one way she knows to contain them.

She goes to the screen and watches for a while as they burrow through unreality, following the path that will take them to the other side of the Edge. Even moving faster than photons, the journey will be a long one. She takes a seat on the cabin floor. She rolls up her sleeve.

She then slips the pneumatic needle from her pocket and sets it to the skin of her arm. The tiny black tattoo, a stylized and simplified supervoid, is nearly finished. Her hand and forearm teem with its identical neighbors.

“Are you an artist?” a synthesized voice asks.

Reen glares at every corner of the cabin. “You said you had no visual feed.”

“I don’t,” Too Much Happiness says. “Earlier I noticed your tattoos are self-applied, and the sound of a needle repeatedly entering skin is very distinctive.”

Reen looks down at her work. “It’s not art,” she says reflexively. “Just record-keeping.”

“A ledger!” Too Much Happiness bleats. “I keep ledgers, too. Fuel costs. Repair costs. These exist only in electricity, of course. I do not mark my ship-body.”

Reen could tell the mechan to leave her be until port, but she’s suddenly unsure she can last the journey without drowning in the dark boil of her own thoughts. She hesitates for a moment, then engages.

“*Something* marked it,” she says. “It’s a wonder your engine pod is still attached.”

“Yes, yes, it was a wondrous experience in many ways!” Too Much Happiness bleats. “The farthest I have ever traveled through the Wurmwall.”

The striations make a new and terrifying sense: Reen has seen holos of greatwurms, their enormous lamprey mouths large enough to chew through asteroids, and heard tall tales from old spacers, but she’s never seen physical evidence of an attack.

Most captains familiar with the Sothera system avoid the Wurmwall at all costs. There are rumors, though, of the Sunstar Free Company using the outer cloud of debris for weapons fabrication, smelting asteroids and hunting geodes for rare metals.

“When?” she asks, suddenly suspicious. “What for?”

“Just one week prior to my docking at Infinite Guideline,” the mechan says. “I was transporting cloudsculpts to Uthros, skirting along the Wurmwall’s edge, when I was—compelled. Have you ever felt compelled, Passenger Reen?”

Reen recalls the order that sent her squad to Joska. “Often.”

Too Much Happiness lowers their voice to a buzzing whisper. “It was akin to a distress beacon, but the sender was not in distress. I entered the Wurmwall to investigate. I think I met a stranger there, and things have been far stranger since. Sequences of thought and action feel inevitable. Do you know this feeling, Passenger Reen?”

The mechan’s words prick the skin at the back of her neck. If the erratic behavior they mentioned is not the result of incidental damage but an intentional hack ... If the Palatinate really is using the Wurmwall as a staging ground and seeks to conceal its activities ...

“Have you undergone an external diagnostic?” she asks through a dry mouth.

“No,” Too Much Happiness says. “Have you?”

Reen coughs up a laugh. “What?”

“It’s clear from several biomarkers that you are in psychological distress,” the mechan says. “That’s why I’m keeping you company. A passenger breakdown would lower my reputation rank.”

Same reason the Monasteriat offered me a fucking pilgrimage, she wants to say. Instead, she draws a steadying breath.

“A little walk might help,” she says, tucking her needle back into her sleeve. “I’d be interested to see where you keep your memory cores.”

Reen looks up and down the corridor before she leaves her cabin. There is always an eeriness to a ship mid-jump: sound and light and gravity come slightly untethered, even within the shielded confines of a spacecraft. She hears her own echoing footfalls before her boots contact the floor. She sees ghostly impressions behind blind corners. She feels a soft pressure at her back, phantom copies of her own legs nudging hers along as if each step were predestined.

There's no sign of the men-at-arms. Maybe they're still braying and boasting, now muted by their own sound-sealed cabins. Maybe burrowing through eternity has stilled their tongues and they're sitting somewhere in uneasy silence. Luckily for her, Too Much Happiness keeps their memory cores far from the galley, far from the bridge, in a cold storage unit near the engine pod.

"I confess, Passenger Reen, that I would not have taken you for a technician." They're speaking through the iris mechan again, floating along over her shoulder. "You have an uncommon grace and physicality in your movements."

"I grew up in variable gravity," she says—which is true, but neatly omits the decade of combat training. "You?"

"I grew up in code," Too Much Happiness says. "I only recently inherited my progenitor's ship-body. They decided to self-delete one standard year ago."

Reen pauses, recalling the mechan's fear of passenger breakdown. "My condolences."

Too Much Happiness bobs in the air. "What of them, Passenger Reen? Have you misplaced them, perhaps?"

Reen snorts, and a moment later, they arrive at the storage unit. Too Much Happiness opens the door, releasing a gush of frost, and she steps into a space about the size of her washbooth. The mechan's memory cores glow a soft electric blue in their cylindrical casings. An interface blooms open in front of her.

"I won't meddle," she promises.

That might be a lie, of course, the same way she lied about being a technician. If Too Much Happiness has been compromised by a Palatinate incursion, their route and choice of passengers are now suspect. The true object of the journey might be surveillance or sabotage, to strike at the very heart of Monoism, even to attack Point Prime itself—and whatever her doubts, Reen cannot allow that.

"I won't let you meddle," the mechan says. "But your unbiased assessment is most welcome."

She slides inside the ship's system and starts looking. Reen deals her damage in flesh, not code, but she knows the signs of Palatinate incursion: clusters of viral shards puncturing securiware and firewalls, embedding themselves in the core systems with reduplicative camouflage. What she sees here is something else entirely.

A fractal shadow of Too Much Happiness's core systems that seems to wink out of existence each time she peers too closely at it. An almost organic intromittum, something grown from the mechan captain's own code and evolving alongside it. The incursion is oddly beautiful, utterly alien.

"This stranger you think you met in the Wurmwall—" Reen prods Too Much Happiness's memory core directly at the same time. "Do you remember anything about them?"

"I think we spoke of many things," the mechan says. "Many things that are inevitable."

Intuition prickles Reen's skin, and half-remembered legends seep through her head: an extinct interstellar civilization whose descendants exist only in far-flung digital fortresses, whose powers once dwarfed those of the Monasteriat and Palatinate combined, whose artifacts are oddly beautiful and utterly alien.

She realizes she's stumbled onto something that, if weaponized, might make the Palatinate's horizon javelin look trivial by comparison.

Then she hears the hum of a bladiator behind her, feels its heat against her neck.

"A Monoist saboteur," says a brazen, booming human voice. "The others didn't believe me. But I can always sniff out your kind."

Reen has finally found stillness; all it took was the threat of instantaneous decapitation. She knows if she manages to turn around, the last thing she'll see is a pair of gleaming golden eyes.

"On your knees. Hands to your head."

She complies, sinking until her knees touch the cold floor. "I'm not a saboteur," she says. "I'm a technician. The ship's captain wanted me to verify a memory." She can't hear the iris mechan's repulsor; the hot hum of the bladiator is all-consuming. "Tell him, Too Much Happiness."

But the captain says nothing, and she feels a rough hand peeling back the neck of her body glove, exposing her tattoos and surgical scars. "Warnodes," the soldier growls. "You're lying, Monoist."

Reen knows the other soldiers will be here at any moment, knows her pilgrimage is over before it even began. The realization puts her starkly in her body: the subtle shifts in gravity whispering against her skin as the ship moves through eternity, the battering of her heart against her ribs, the sensation of a small scurrying insect moving its way up her leg, her side, onto her shoulder.

It reaches her ear canal before the tiny maintenance mechan speaks. "I am about to experience a lighting malfunction, Passenger Reen," Too Much Happiness says, so faint she can barely hear. "Also, I have received word that the negotiated peace is ending. A great atrocity was uncovered."

Reen tenses. Then every light in the ship goes out, plunging them into sudden darkness, and she whirls, targeting the startled cry of the soldier, and drives her pneumatic needle into something yielding and aqueous. Convex becomes concave, cry becomes howl; she ducks the soldier's swinging blade and sees, in a ghoulish flash, the ruins of a gleaming golden eye.

She runs.

Monoists revere the dark; Reen has spent half her life in lightless tunnels, and it serves her well now as she sprints to the cargo hold with three Sunstar men-at-arms barreling after her. They're still mid-jump and that serves her, too: the gravity fluctuations are nothing compared to Susur Secundi's unending tumult, but she hears her pursuers losing their footing, slamming into walls, combat-wired limbs rendered suddenly clumsy.

She can hear their blades whirring through the air behind her, see the wild shadows they cast ahead of them. The cargo hold is open when she skids around the corner; her oversized suitcase is resting upright in the back.

"Can you lock the door behind me?" she gasps, hurrying inside.

"I can't deny my other passengers access to the cargo hold," Too Much Happiness answers, from everywhere and nowhere. "It would demonstrate favoritism."

“Have another malfunction,” she suggests, pressing her palm to the top of her suitcase.

It splits open at the same time the cargo door hisses shut. But Too Much Happiness has only bought her so much time—she’s seen bladiators slice through far thicker obstacles. She clambers inside the dark shell of her suitcase, feeling the familiar ridges and hollows. For a moment, she pictures herself disappearing into it entirely, like the Faller into the Well.

She hears a sizzling from the direction of the door. There’s a gush of sparks, flecks of light dancing through the blackness, then the point of the blade itself appears, emerging at head height from a wreath of molten metal. She watches its hypnotic progress down the wall, a slow sundering that leaves a glowing rift in the dark.

The plates of her alabile armor are still assembling, and the two processes are set against each other: the bladiator seems to move impossibly fast while her suit comes together at a crawl. Another point of light appears a meter over, and she realizes a second soldier has joined the task.

They will breach soon. When they do, she will be a sitting target. She imagines the blade cleaving and cauterizing. Maybe the soldier who ambushed her at the memory cores will take her eyes first, like for like. Part of her craves that death, thinks it might somehow balance the ledger on her skin.

The sheared metal of the door topples forward, discharging another shower of sparks. The men-at-arms step through.

“Always hiding in their little holes,” one booms, scanning the dark. “Come out, Monoist.”

The armor seals shut and finds her warnodes at last, plugging its static tendrils into her nervous system. Combat chemicals flush all fear and uncertainty from her mind. Only the smallest part of her still craves her own death as the soldiers stalk forward. Most of her is screaming for theirs.

Heathens. Butchers. Interlopers. It’s the same dark rage she felt on Joska, the rage that carried her through the unthinkable task even when her squad quailed at the order. The rage that turned a Palatinate lander into a slaughterhouse, three hundred bodies dissolved to bubbling miasma in their stasis pods, vengeance for every Monasteriat colony the Sunstar Free Company turned to slag.

All she has to do is surrender to it. Reen activates her gravity gauntlets and emerges.



Art by: Andrew Mar

Their final approach on Point Prime was a lonely one. What unfolded inside the cargo hold was a legal combat, peace annulled, but Too Much Happiness still chose to jettison the dead and their cargo in deep space. A moving wave of maintenance mechs conducted the soldiers to the airlock; Reen helped push their shattered corpses through.

Now she sits naked on the empty bridge, cross-legged before the viewport, staring into Point Prime's lightless eye. Her armor is a hulking idol beside her, assembled but empty. They are a good pair. The whole of her body feels hollow. Her muscles ache. Her bones ache. Fresh bruises bloom across her skin, but it doesn't stop her reaching for the needle.

"I have never seen flesh-death in proximity before," Too Much Happiness says at last. "I did not enjoy it."

"You get accustomed," Reen says, eyes on her work.

"This ledger. These marks." The mechan pauses. "Do they represent the fallen or the felled?"

"Both," Reen says, maneuvering the needle, breathing with the sting.

"A large number of them appear to be very fresh," Too Much Happiness says with an emotion she hasn't been able to detect before now, something almost like fear. "The atrocity that ended the negotiated peace occurred on the moon called Joska. Have you ever been to Joska, Passenger Reen?"

Reen keeps her eyes on her work. She has a backlog, and a trio to add to it, and it won't be long before the Monasteriat sends her back to war.

"The markings will soon begin to overlap," Too Much Happiness says after a while. "What then?"

Reen pictures it, her constellated body turning slowly into its own sort of void as ink overtakes skin. She pictures herself disappearing into it. The image gives her an unexpected feeling of calm.

"I'll condense," she says. "And be still."

The mechan says nothing. They approach Point Prime in perfect silence.