

This is the real beginning of this arc. The previous story "Duchess' boobs" is a backstory to this.

## [Rocksea arc] [2] [Old Lady] [9620]

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Rocksea was the name of the region. It was outskirts of Andromeda system and it was basically a gigantic asteroid belt. It was originally simply called "asteroid sea" and, at one point, the name "Rocksea" was given. I reckon Rocksea may not be its legit name but who cares. Everyone in the region called this belt Rocksea.

Rocksea was sparsely populated. The region was home to mostly small-time miners. During the colonization phase about two thousand years ago, tens of outposts were constructed to satisfy the need for immense amount of metals.

Once such rapid developments were done, the outposts were eventually abandoned and random people moved in, making their little home here and there in Rocksea.

"ETA two hours to Oreo," A high-pitched voice cracked up through a speaker.

"About fucking time," I muttered, "I so need a shower."

"Oh, God. Don't remind me."

In my whole life, Rocksea had been my backyard. I was born and raised here and, even before I hit puberty, I was sailing a ship and mining random stuff off some

rocks. When I hit 12, I began to work for real credit on a loaned Lightwave worker class 1 and eventually managed to purchase it when I hit 20. That was when I found like-minded fellows and formed a small mining gang. We, four, eventually pooled our credit and loaned a badly tattered Lightwave worker class 2 which was a frigate. That was about a decade ago.

"This girl is falling apart, literally. Did I tell you that my console came off the floor, literally last night? I could have cracked my skull open if it hit me straight on my head," I spoke through a speaker on my console in front of me.

A feminine voice shouted through the speaker. "Must I fucking remind you that my shower system dumped poo all over me last night?!"

Yep, indeed, ouchie, indeed. Then it hit me.

"Juno, we haven't had running water since that incident. How did you clean yourself up?"

After a moment of silence, she bellowed at me, "I HAVEN'T, YOU DORK!"

I faceplamed myself and said to myself, "Ouchie."

Our business part was doing alright. We were making decent profits and jobs were coming in at a steady rate that we were busy enough.

However, our LW worker class 2, which we named it "Old Lady", was showing its age. According to the ship's mainframe log, the first time she booted up was year 9230, which would make her about 400 years old.

In this era, that was not too bad. I mean the navy used ships that were nearly a thousand years old. However, in order to prolong a machine's lifespan, regular maintenance had to be done. Our Old lady didn't look like it had been taken care of when we loaned it 10 years ago and everything was falling part.

We had been jerryrigging it but that wasn't enough. It needed proper repairs in a

shipyard or at least in a proper docking bay with proper tools & parts.

Two hours later, we arrived at Oreo which was a tiny outpost in middle of Rocksea. Oreo had been our base of operations for some years now. Its location was prime for mining and their rates on ore was very good.

The outpost was built on an asteroid like all other outposts in Rocksea. The reason for this was simple; building on an asteroid would grant some form of gravity. It was normally 0.1 or 0.2 but any form of gravity was a huge benefit in long term.

When we docked at Oreo, I finally got to see Juno covered in dried poo. She somehow managed to clean her face but everywhere else was covered in now-dried feces. I had to resist really hard not to laugh at her. My mates were in the same situation as well.

Walking past us, she glanced fiercely at us. She didn't say a word but we knew that she was pissed as hell. As she slowly paced off, bits of dried poo were falling away from her, floating away.

As we watched her disappear, one of my mates, Rabinovich remarked.

"On a serious note, The lady is really falling apart."

Shrugging, I replied to him, "Yeah, but amazingly its essential parts are working no problem."

Rabinovich put his hands on his waist and looked back at Old lady. "She's the only gal in our team. We might really want to fix the plumbing on priority. I don't want all dudes-team."

That much I agreed. It's just better to have a female in a team instead of just dudes.

"I've looked at the plumbing before," Santino, another member of the team, told us.

"I had no idea what was wrong."

"When was that?" I asked.

Santino replied, "About 15 days ago. Juno was complaining about water flow not being steady, so I cleaned out some goo from pipes. Saw nothing too unusual."

I crossed my arms and delivered my verdict. "Meaning we need a real pro to have a look at it."

We glanced at each other because we all knew what that meant.

"Can we even afford a pro?" Rabinovich wondered.

I replied, "We probably can. Might have to skip on the payment though for this period though."

We were on a rent-to-own program with our frigate. After a decade, we were 11 payments short of completing it. Missing out on a payment wasn't a huge deal. They would understand. We simply didn't want to miss a payment because we were quite proud of ourselves that we never missed a payment.

"Well, let's get the crates out and cash them." Pointing backwards with his thumb, Santino changed the subject.

Nodding, we got to it, silently agreeing that not missing out on the payment was on a higher priority.

Perhaps, our gal, Juno, understood that as well and didn't make a big fuss about the plumbing although she did indirectly make the demand by stating that she wanted a good shower once in a while.

"Mr. Vazken, here is your payment. I am sending you the receipt to your memory implant right now."

I was in a dockyard office. After handing over ore crates we mined, a girl named Yating was progressing and calculating on how much we'd be paid.

As she sent data to my memory implant, I injected the data into my optic nerve. I was basically reading it off from interior of my eyeball.

"Sounds good. I accept."

"Alright, the payment is being sent right now."

"Got it."

"Good, we thank you for your business."

Not that I had been to many dockyard offices to begin with but she was one of the most polite dockyard officers I had met. She wasn't bad looking, either. Most importantly, she looked like a proper woman. Juno was ... badly muscular. If it wasn't for her boobs, I would see her as a guy.

Anyway, I split the payment in four and sent the three to the mates. Then I was off for few days.

Oreo was a small station. Its permanent residents were just 40-something. However, it had a fair amount of frequent visitors, like us. I think the overall number of residents was somewhere around 100 to 150 at any given time.

A charming point for this station was unusually higher level of gravity which was 0.4.

All other stations I had been to had the usual gravity of 0.1 or 0.2 at the best.

Those who were raised in zero gravity dug the sensation of decent gravity. I was no exception to that rule. The weird sensation that you are being pull down all the time felt good.

"Yo, dude." It was Rabinovich who approached me in the cafeteria.

"Yo, sup," I replied casually with my eyes fixed at outside through a wall window.

"Mind if I sit?"

I showed him a chair in the opposite direction of me. "Feel free."

Having sat down, he ordered a cup of coffee. Then we were silent for a moment. He was sipping his coffee and I was simply looking at the space.

At one point, he told me.

"I talked to Juno. She is not leaving."

"Good news. Hard to find girl miners."

"There are far easier jobs for'em."

"Indeed."

We became silent once again but he broke the silence once more after few minutes.

"My last team sucked major balls."

Yeah, he told me that before. He didn't give me any detail though.

"It was the same frigate, the class 2. I mean what else is there on the cheap?"

I snickered in response. Yeah, Lightwave shipyard class 2 was the most widely used mining frigate because it had been around for hundreds of years. Red Plate shipyard had few mining ships but they hadn't been around long enough for cheap, second hand, loanable ships to be found in Rocksea.

He continued, "There were five, four guys and one girl. Just like this team but one more dude."

According to him, the girl turned out to be a whore and a party breaker. Apparently, she had been doing it for fun. What she basically did was sexually entice the guys and made them pay for sexual favors. Whoever bid the highest would have her for a night or something like that.

That eventually created too much of friction between the guys and one dude eventually snapped, ending up murdering another. Having realized that things got

out of hands, the girl fled and the murderer ran away as well after having drained the team bank account.

"Shit story, man. Shit story," I told him while shaking my head slowly.

"But this is a good team and a good team is hard to find," He said assuringly. "I want to keep the original crew as long as possible."

Old lady was my first multicrew ship, so I didn't have any past experience to draw upon. But my dad used to tell me that it was always important to keep certain rhythm or harmony in a team.

"Agreed. And that brings up the plumbing," I told him. "We all know Juno wants to get it fixed. We can ignore it and she may snap one day and just leave."

Rabinovich sighed deeply and sagged his shoulders as he sat deeper into his chair.

"I will get a quote. That's the first step."

"Yeah, can I leave that to you?"

"Sure thing." Having agreed, he stood up and tapped my shoulder before leaving.

Then I got back to enjoying the gravity and space scenery.

You can fake gravity by using steel and magnet. However, no matter how much you get used to it, you know it's fake.

Gravity is different. Real gravity, once you get used to it, you won't know it's even there. And this station had real gravity. 0.4 was enough to feel the gravity, yet not strong enough that your fragile bones break.

It was one of my main reasons to keep coming back to this station.

After four days of rest, we were back at a docking bay where our Old lady was. It was

there Rabinovich made a small announcement.

He stood in front of us and said, "Guys, I had the station dockyard have a look at Old lady's plumbing. They basically said the entire plumbing pipes around the ship was crapping out."

To sum it up, the pipes were never looked at for 400 years and they had corroded to a point that pipe was basically paper thin and was full of corroded junk inside.

Interestingly, the corroded junk was what was keeping the pipes together.

Rabinovich got to the most important part, the cost.

"The dockyard has quoted us 170,000c for full repair," He said.

It was high but wasn't as high as I feared it'd be. But that was an amount that'd force us to skip a payment on Old lady.

Of course, there was an option of using personal wealth as a sort of a bridge loan to make this happen but this was frowned upon by all miners.

For us, miners, it was critical to keep a clear line between personal and business.

Mixing both, especially credit, was seen as a sure step to bankruptcy.

Listen, our life span is 400 years, give or take 10%. We have to save up. We simply must. While we do not age much physically, we must earn while we are still enthusiastic about it.

The golden rule is that you save up to a point that you can live without working for at least 50 years. Then you retire at an age of 350 or so and live your god damn life at your leisure.

We, miners, are taught this at a very early age. I suppose not all miners get to learn this but I certainly was. I was positive that the four of us knew this golden rule and that was exactly why this group was working so well.

Juno carefully raised her hand as she spoke, "Guys, it doesn't need to be repaired

right away."

At this point, Rabinovich glanced at me as if asking me to speak up. I wasn't sure what to say though. Was he asking me whether it was okay to skip the payment?

Was he asking me to go along with Juno? What exactly did he want?

I gave it a quick series of options and something hit me.

"The duke's?" Rabinovich, Santino, and Juno responded at the same time as I explained a plan that might just work.

"He runs Duchess' boobs. I am sure you've all heard about the place at least once."

"Yeah, that's the largest bar slash brothel in Rocksea," Santino replied, "What about him?"

I explained, "My dad told me once that, whenever he needed some extra dough, the Duke usually had some unusual jobs for him for extra credit. We could visit Duchess' boobs and inquire the Duke about a job."

Looking clearly skeptical, Rabinovich asked, "What kind of a job would that be?"

"It can't be a legit work," Juno added, siding with him.

That wasn't something I was going to deny, either. Shrugging, I told them, "Could well be. But we don't know at this point. It's only some days away from here. Might be worth checking out. It's certainly an option we shouldn't overlook."

Santino was with me on this one. It was 2 and 2 but Juno clearly wanted a new shower system, so she eventually folded. However, she added a condition.

She barked at me while pointing her index finger at my face, "I am not going to smuggle anything, you hear? I am not turning into a criminal, you hear?"

I had no intention to become a criminal, either. Thus, I agreed along with everyone else.

So, we sailed toward Duchess' boobs, ultimately to fix our shower system so that our

girl could have decent showers.

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