

Once you go <something>, you never go back.

Or something along that line.

## [Rocksea arc] [4] [Cracks] [9620]

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We were back to our usual mining business once we had our plumbing replaced on our Old lady.

However, I soon realized it wasn't the same. I found it boring. Yes, boring, it was the first time that I felt watching a large asteroid breaking down into smaller rocks boring in my class 1 miner.

Something had changed. Although I failed to grasp it early on, it was the credit. The 80k that each of us got. The 80k that it'd take more than ten trips of mining to earn. The 80k that we earned rather easily while doing virtually nothing.

It was easy money and lots of money.

I always thought that the riskier a job was the more reward you can reap. However, the 80k we earned each was way too easy. It basically made us to think that we could do better than just watching rocks fall apart, collect them by drones, and sell them.

However, at this point, none of us was entirely sure of what we were feeling and we were keeping our thoughts to ourselves.

When we got back to Station Oreo and sold our crushed ore, the dockyard officer,

Yating, paid us 70k total. Our monthly payment was 50k for our Old lady. In the end, a misery amount of 5k would fall onto each of us. A mining trip would take about 25 days and we'd take about 10 days of rest after a trip. Even those who were bad at math would quickly realize one thing: mining sucked.

Even without the payment for Old lady, it'd still be 18k for each of us. That number looked far better but we weren't going to get that for few more years. Even then, Old lady would need more repairs.

For the next 10 days, I thought hard about what to do next. Keeping on mining was certainly an option but I didn't really feel like so.

Eventually though, I decided to visit Rabinovich before our resting period was over. He was the most senior person of the group and also had the most experience. His opinion would matter, well, if I liked his reply.

"Well, I've been thinking about it as well," was his initial reply after I told him what was going on in my mind.

His quarter was quite similar to mine; virtually void of anything. His tablet was playing porn which he swiftly turned off as soon as I noticed it.

Clearing his throat, he told me, "I will say that we got really lucky in the hauling job. Now, I haven't been a hauler but I've heard horror stories."

I replied, "Risk versus reward."

"Yeah, pretty much. That's why I am saying we got lucky in that run."

"If we pick right jobs though..."

"Far easier to be said than done. I mean, that's every hauler's dream, no?"

"Are you saying we should stick to mining?"

At this point, he took a deep breath and folded his arms. He was clearly considering his options like I was.

"You know, we all have equal share to Old lady," He said, "If we want to do the hauling job, everyone has to agree."

That was true. The four of us had 25% shares to Old lady. When we wanted to do something that required a decision to be made, all of us had to agree. And, normally, all of us agreed. I wasn't sure about this one though.

"This is something we should talk about together," He told me, "So, let's gather up everyone and have a chat."

I agreed since just two of us making a decision wasn't going to get us anywhere.

We gathered at the station cafeteria and sat down around a table. Rabinovich ordered a cup of coffee. Santino ordered a shot of white whisky, and Juno ordered a cup of green tea. I ordered nothing.

Once we were ready, Rabinovich told us about the issue at hand. As soon as he was done and asked for opinions, Juno immediately disagreed, saying that she just wanted a quiet life. At the same time, Santino was up for it.

It was worth while to note that Juno did not veto it. She simply disagreed.

Rabinovich and I were up for it. Therefore, the result was 3 to 1.

At this point, we had two options. We either buy out Juno's share and expel her from our group or convince her to go along.

As if she knew what we were thinking, she told us, "You boys want to do the hauling job, I get it. The money is good, I get that, too. But ,consider this, there was no way we were going to lose our lives during mining. This hauling job might get us killed at one point. What's the point of money if you end up dying?"

We weren't quite convinced and this was when she came up with another option.

"I don't want to leave this group because you boys are good. It's hard to find a decent group around here, so I want to stick around if possible. I don't dislike the

idea of the hauling job but I don't want to do risky ones like the one we did a while ago."

Rabinovich demanded, "Juno, what's your point?"

Juno looked at me and said to me, "Vazken, it looks like you got on a good side of the woman, Ehka. You ask her to pull only safe jobs and let's see how much it pays. If it's definitely better, why not?"

That wasn't a bad idea actually.

When we sailed over to Duchess' boobs and I went down to the station to meet Ehka and told her our little meeting, she literally scoffed at me.

"Cheap and reliable. Safe and lots of money. Such things do not exist," She told me sternly, "I do know such deals exist and they are recipes for disasters."

I told her about the last job.

She explained, "That job seemed easy because those escorts cost me 20 million credit."

"Holy shit," I uttered.

"It's never easy to take on twelve vessels when you have only four. Those bastards knew what they were doing. Besides, the torps they used, those aren't cheap, either."

After taking in her statements, I gave myself a short moment to think stuff over and eventually inquired her, "Is hauling a better job than mining?"

"That depends. Mining in stable zones pays a lot less than mining in unstable zones. It's the simple concept of supply & demand. We have plenty of miners already, so supply is aplenty."

"So, in essence, risk versus reward."

She gave me a firm nod and told me, "If you want to move up the ladder, I can give you some advice."

My ears twitched at her words. "Like what?"

"Your vessel is LW class 2, yeah?"

I nodded at her and she continued.

"That frigate is quite large and customizable if you remove ore processing bits. Customize it to be a battle frigate and haul stuff alone. That will yield far more credit."

Before I could respond her, she added, "Of course, it will require upfront investment to turn the frigate battleworthy, not to mention the risks of combat."

I had a strong feeling that Juno would dislike the idea very much. She could even veto it straight away, I felt.

Regardless, I brought the news to the guys.

"Veto," Said Juno which was expected by me and probably by others as well.

She added quickly, "I am not getting into combat. No, I won't have that."

Rabinovich quickly glanced at me and Santino. I gave him a faint nod and I felt Santino did as well.

"Juno, will you let us buy your share?" Rabinovich dropped the bomb.

It effectively meant we were kicking Juno out and that we wanted to buy her share in Old lady.

Juno looked at me and the other two and was silent for a short moment before leaving the cafeteria we were currently in.

"I will think about it" She told us as she rushed to leave.

Once she was out of the picture, I asked Rabinovich who was rubbing his face while letting out a long sigh.

"Are we serious about booting her?"

"Kinda have to, don't we?" Santino replied, "Can't have disagreements."

"Um, I am not sure whether I even have money to buy her share."

Rabinovich said, "I reckon it's about 2.3 mil or so. Divided by us, three, it's about 770k."

I did have that much in the bank. However.

I replied, "That's about my entire saving. We won't be able to afford the ship modification. Or at least, I won't be able to contribute."

Rabinovich groaned and clicked his tongue as he looked away from us and at the window in the cafeteria. Looking at the view of the space, he remained silent.

Santino and I, too, did our our things meanwhile. Santino ordered a pack of whisky and I was looking at my tablet for latest news in Rocksea.

Our meeting eventually ended without further ado afterwards.

The bottom line was that we could buy out Juno's share. At the same time, if we did, we'd run out of funds to perform required modification to turn Old lady into a battle capable ship.

With much going in my head, I eventually fell asleep and the next day arrived which was the end of our resting period.

I acted normal and so did the others.

The four of us gathered at a docking bay where Old lady was currently docked. That much was normal but there was an invisible tension between us at this point.

Juno said not a word while Rabinovich gave us his usual speech of safety first and so on.

I assumed that we were going to have at least one more mission session, given the lack of funding. Cutting Juno off was certainly possible but it would have been moot without an ability to go further.

Our mining session was quiet. Well, we normally did not talk to each other much on the job to begin with, so the quietness was nothing new. However, the quietness we had on this job felt more like peace before storm. Regardless though, we got on with the job.

After we returned to Statrion Oreo and our earning was divided once we sold the ore, Rabinovich broke news that he wanted to buy out Juno's share.

This was during our meeting right before we'd leave for a break of 14 days. We were effectively pushing her out of the team. Since her share was being paid, Juno couldn't really get angry.

"Is this decision of yours firm?" She asked, probably for the last time, while looking around at each of us.

"It's been decided. 2.3 mil will be transferred to your account in an hour," Rabinovich told her indifferently.

Juno sighed deeply and sagged her shoulders in disappointed. "Well, it's been fun, guys." She shook our hands and left the docking bay.

Without saying no word initially, I quickly pulled out my computer to transfer my fund to Rabinovich and Santino did the same.

"We do need one more person," Santino added, "Three can barely operate Old lady." That was true. Old lady was a large frigate. Operating her with just three would be a tall task. It was doable though.

Rabinovich was fiddling with his computer as he heard us, presumably transferring the fund to Juno. He responded a moment later, "True, we've got 14 days to sort this out. We could try to find another member from Oreo. But let's not make the new member a founder."

Meaning the new member would not have his or her share on Old lady which

ultimately would mean the new member would have far less importance in his or her opinions at decisions.

Santino and I both agreed on that idea. Juno left easily but she could have contested and it could have gotten far uglier than it should have.

Rabinovich informed us, "I've just posted a thread looking for a new member with details. I will take care of this. You guys take your time off."

Nodding Santino and I both took off.

Once I was in my room, I did check the bulletin board of Station Oreo to check on the post. The post was there with basic info on about us and what we do.

To my mild surprise, there was already a reply to the post and I recognized the user.

It was Yating, the dock office worker I frequently met whenever we sold the ore.

Personally, I didn't think such a woman like her would be interested. She was, by her appearance at least, a polar opposite of Juno. She was rather short, slim, and was pretty feminine.

I ended up becoming quite excited of the prospect of a new member, a female one at that. I fully expected a male member.

When the break period was over and I headed for the docking bay, as expected, Yating was with Rabinovich. Her appearance was that of an office worker. Her long black hair was tied into a pony tail.

I expected her to be there, so there was no reaction from me. For Santino though, he almost dropped his jaw.

"She's cute!" He whispered to me with glee, "Maybe, it was a good idea to have ditched Juno."

Rabinovich cleared his throat to signal us to shut up and declared, "This is Yating. You

may have seen her. She works, well worked, at Oreo docking office."

She carefully bowed at us and introduced herself.

"My name is Yating. Nice to meet you all."

"Why did you quit your job for this?" was what I blurted out.

She looked surprised for a short moment then beamed a grin at me.

She replied, "Do you know how boring the job was? I was losing my mind."

Rabinovich cleared his throat once more and told us, "She will be exclusively working on the bridge of Old lady. Does any of you have an issue with that?"

Nope.

Once that was settled, off we went to mine.

While we did not discuss about this, we understood that we had to continue mining because we didn't have the fund for extensive modifications to install turrets on Old lady.

In that sense, we didn't have to cut Juno loose this early but her presence was building up a tension, so it was a better idea to lose her sooner rather than later.

Yating proved her ability quick enough as a coordinator and communitator from the bridge of Old lady. When Juno was with us, we just sort of did our jobs as miners. As a direct result, we barely spoke to each other and did our own things.

With Yating however, she coordinated which rock to mine and told us for how long to mine and even scheduled daily routines.

We became far more organized and efficient. What normally took us 20-something days to fill up Old lady's was reduced to 15 days. Additionally, our payout was better due to having mined better quality ore.

In just one mining trip, she had won us over. We had some regrets over letting Juno go, but that feeling had completely vanished after the first mining trip with her.

And, during the break period of two weeks, I invited her over to cafeteria. I also invited Rabinovich and Santino but Rabinovich didn't reply.

Around a table, Yating, Santino, and I sat around. After making quick orders, we formally introduced ourselves to each other.

"I guess you know only my name," Yating said, "My name is Yating as you know and a neutral female which I need to make it clear since transgenders nowadays do a very good job being females."

Santino and I chuckled.

She added, "42 years old and never married although I am not a virgin."

"Santino here, 37 years old, male of course. A real one."

"I guess I am the youngest one. Vazken here, 32 and of course a male."

We spent about an hour talking to each other and talked about numerous topics.

Yating turned out to be an Oreo native. She was born on the station and raised on the station. She was apparently looking for some sort of adventure when Rabinovich posted the job offer.

"The station will always welcome me back," She said, "And I do intend to settle down on Oreo one day, but for the time being, I am in a mood for something different."

Santino mentioned that we were planning to do something different.

"Freight business, something of that sort," He explained loosely.

At this point, she mentioned Juno. Because she had seen us for years, she was able to figure out that we kicked her out and asked why.

I told her, "She wasn't willing to do freight. She said it'd be too dangerous."

I explained further that us three and Juno were the founders and we had to pay her share.

"Which is why we are mining for the time being. We don't have the money for ship modifications right now," I added.

"You know," Santino said, "Juno is a big muscular woman. I think she is the female veron of Hulk. Yet, she proves to be quite timid."

I made no extra comment on that. It was her decision and her way of life. I had no right to comment on that.

Regardless, Santino went on for few minutes about how Juno blew her chance for "big money". I wasn't sure about the "big money" but I was certain that I wasn't going to do mining for my entire life.

Once the meeting was eventually over, I got back to my quarter and found an email from Juno, telling me that she saw a new woman among us and asked who she was. I wasn't quite sure how to respond. I mean she was no longer a part of the team. Quite frankly, it was none of her business.

After debating with myself whether to send a response, I ended up opting not to respond at all.

Then hours later, I got an email from Santino that he got an email from Juno asking the same question and he, too, was conflicted to reply. I told him not to and it was the end of the awkward event.

Once the break period was over, we gathered at the docking bay as usual.

When asked why Rabinovich didn't make to the meeting, his reply was -

"Um, I've got a girlfriend now. I was spending time with her," was his answer.

Fair enough.

"Alright, guys, let's get to work!" Clapping hands, Santino pushed us forward. He sounded excited. I assumed it was because of Yating. The guy clearly had the hots for her.

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