

All good things come to an end eventually.

[Rocksea arc] [5] [Break down] [9622]

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It had been two years since Yating became a part of the team. Things had gone as smoothly as possible. I would even claim that the team harmony became more fluid. With Juno, none of us conversed a lot. We simply went on about our business. With Yating, we became like a group of good friends. We chatted a lot during mining and, even during off duty period, we gathered together often to hang out. With her being the only female member, she basically became glue that held us together. Yes, Juno was also a female but she never really acted the part with her really beefy appearance. Yating was a real female so to speak. She acted like one and looked like one.

And, after our latest mining run, we finally had enough fund to go ahead with installing two turrets on Old lady.

Our mod plan was simple. Old lady had two large protective plates on each side. Those were useful in a scenario where the ship would have to venture through a densely packed asteroid belt. However, in combat situations, they were redundant. Therefore, they'd be taken off and be replaced with frigate class turrets.

"This kind of mod wouldn't be allowed in the union territory," A dockyard worker told us, "Only in Rocksea." This also meant we would be caught if navy caught us and inspected the ship, but the chance was relatively low. In fact, Rabinovich pretty

much gave his word that no one would bother to inspect the ship.

We also worked alongside the docking bay workers at Oreo to keep labour cost down.

And, 14 days later, Old lady was ready.

"Lo and beold," Santino said in excitement in front of now-finished Old Lady with his arms spread out widely.

Old lady was no longer a mining frigate. With two large turrets, it was capable of shooting down Badger class frigates with just few well-aimed shots.

"We don't need the elevated bridge, do we?" I asked. An exposed bridge was a huge risk in combat situations.

"We will use the secondary bridge. We don't have the money to remove it for now," said Rabinovich.

Then it was time to visit Ehka at Duchess' boobs.

Once arrived, I informed her of the ship modifications and our desire of turning full time cargo runners.

She took a good look at our mods, and the first thing she asked was -

"Two turrets, automated?"

"Yes," I replied her.

"I strongly suggest adding at least one more turret that is manned. If you use only automated turrets, they can figure that out and use tricks to avoid being shot. If you add a human element though, things get a lot more complicated."

It made sense but we didn't have the credit to make the mod.

"We don't have any money on us right now. We need to do a job, fast," I told her.

The rest of us, standing behind me, nodded weakly.

We had basically given up on mining and had to do a job fast to get us going. And

our entire hope was resting on Ehka quite frankly.

Perhaps realizing this, she quietly nodded along and took a deep breath.

"I get the picture," She told us eventually after a short moment. "There are plenty of jobs actually. It's just that I want to make sure that they get done, for my reputation.

A good reputation means more jobs. I think we can all agree on that, yeah?"

We nodded along and she continued.

"I will give you a job but your ship is not ready for the fat ones. You have neither combat experience nor a ship capable of doing decent combat."

After that, she gave us an easy job with a payment of mere 20,000c. However, the distance was short and it could be done in less than ten days. Most importantly, it would get us going.

"She seems to know what she is doing," Said Yating as we got back to the bridge of Old lady.

"She's a veteran. While she doesn't actually own the outpost, I'd say she is the shadow ruler," Rabinovish said.

"It sounds like you've done some research on her?" I pointed out.

"I've," He admitted. "She appears to be an ex-agent of the Union. So, she's no ordinary woman."

The job she gave us was a simple hauling job. Old lady was the only escort for two freights. We had no idea what kind of cargo they were hauling. We could have certainly scanned but that was generally against the code of conduct for hauling jobs.

"Can't be hauling too dangerous goods for this price range, yeah?" Santino told us casually, looking relaxed.

He had a point.

The journey was eventless. From the start to finish, it was low profile. The freighters never made a single moment of noise and neither did we. They clearly knew what they were doing.

Once we arrived at our destination, and they made a call to Ehka that the job was done, the payment was deposited into our account shortly after.

And, like that, our lives as non-miners began. Our goal was to become a solo hauler because that was what Old lady was decent for. It had cargo as well as combat capabilities, but Ehka wouldn't let us do that right away, citing that we lacked experience which we had to agree or she wouldn't give us any jobs.

It would be almost 300 days before we'd run into the first battle. The job was nothing out of ordinary. Old lady was a part of a convoy and was acting as a rear guard as well as hauling some stuff in addition. There were three Akabasa I and four badger escorts. Cargo was just miscellaneous stuff and was really nothing of value. We didn't expect any troubles. Then -

"10 signatures detected, 10 Badgers!" Yating alerted all of us. We were really slacking, so it took us few minutes to gather at the bridge, the secondary one. We wouldn't use the primary, exposed, bridge. In fact, we haven't used the primary one ever since we restarted our lives as a hauler.

"Pirates? Why? We haven't got anything of value?!" I heard Santio utter just as I rushed into the bridge.

"I don't know. But they are here, approaching fast. ETA is less than 60 seconds!" Rabinovich entered. He wasn't wearing his top and was half-naked. "Pirates? For

real?" He inquired.

The convoy didn't really have a leader, but Old lady was the most powerful ship, not to mention a fact that it was a rear guard. Therefore, naturally, we took a charge of the situation.

Rabinovich activated a private channel to the convoy and told them, "Akabasas, stay behind nearby rocks. You guys don't have shields. Badgers, form a formation around Old lady."

It was a reasonable request for survival. While the Akabasas obeyed, the badgers did not.

"Who made you the leader?" One of the Badgers talked back.

"This is not the time for this!" Rabinovich barked but had no effect. The four Badgers just charged in against the pirates, and two of them were pretty much instantly trashed as soon as dogs fights began. The rest two started to flee.

"God damn it!" I blurted out of frustration. If the four Badgers used Old lady as a point of defense, it would have worked out so much better. Now it was just Old lady against ten Badgers.

"What do we do?" Yating inquired us. We could still flee at this point.

"We ain't running," I told her. "If we run, we will be done for. Activate the turrets and hug a rock."

Hugging an asterioid would provide us some protection, I felt. Neither Rabinovich nor Santio opposed to my idea.

The automated turret proved to be effective for a short moment before the badgers were dodging it completely. It was when I recalled Ehka's remarks on pilots being able to outsmart automated turrets.

As soon as I realized that, I dashed to a nearby console and worked on taking control of one of the turrets. I didn't know how to control a turret but I felt it was better

than missing every shot.

Because the turret wasn't meant to be controlled by men, options I had was very limited. A manned turret would have its own cockpit indeed. All I could really do was awkwardly veer the turrets in random directions while letting it fire shots.

The mates stared at me swiping across a touch sensitive console awkwardly. None of them stopped me though. The automated turrets were missing all shots either way.

To my, or our, surprise, because I was controlling the turret so awkwardly, the attacking badgers lost some of their rhythm, and an automated turret landed a lucky shot on one of them. It was a critical hit, and the badger exploded pretty much instantly on the spot.

Rabinovich and Santio cheered on while Yating let out a long relieved sigh.

The lucky shot disturbed them and soon enough another badger was shot down by the automated turret.

"God, I suck," I uttered while fanatically swiping across my control in an effort to control a turret.

"You suck in a good way!" Santio snickered in response.

With two of them suddenly gone, the pirates had to make a quick decision to whether press on or just bail out, and it didn't surprise us when we saw them bail out because our cargo was literal garbage.

I mean we were carrying garbage. Garbage still had a value for A.C.M. reactors. For small stations like Oero, their waste level wouldn't be high enough to power an A.C.M. reactor. There were other options like nuclear, fusion, and even plasma reactors but A.C.M. reactor was favored due to its low risk and it being virtually maintenance free once set up properly.

"Why the fuck did they attack us to begin with?" Santino loudly complained. He had a point, given our cargo.

"Maybe, they were desperate," Yating replied.

"For what?!" Santino barked back but quickly apologized to her for raising his voice.

Rabinovich clapped his hands to gather attention. "Alright, guys, let's get this job done. Vazken, can I ask you to keep watch with the turret control."

I nodded at him. "Sure thing." It wasn't like I had anything better to do either way.

The mates left the bridge and I was left alone.

The rest of the journey was quiet and the job was successful. We were paid more since the badgers bailed out. Basically, we received their shares.

Ehka congratulated us for surviving the first attack, telling us that not all of them would make it out alive.

Then we had a few days of rest and were given another hauling job.

And this was where things started to veer off.

You see, we used to stay at Oero when we were mining. Station Oero had virtually nothing. It was a tiny station that was pretty much dedicated to processing ore. It had a docking bay, an office to process invoices, and that was it.

There was nothing to do at the station, and that was hiding faults in our members.

Ever since we began to stay at Duchess' boobs, initially Rabinovich stayed well away from the station itself. He stayed mostly on the ship during breaks. Eventually though, he started to visit the brothel as well as the bar.

In fact, he began to turn up drunk or even really late. The first time, we let it go.

After all, it was the first time. The second time he turned up drunk, we also let it go.

The third time though, Santino had enough. As soon as he saw Rabinovich lazily

walked into the bridge looking clearly drunk, he barked at him.

"Dude, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

To which Rabinovich replied indifferently, "What?"

"You are drunk, and it's not the first time."

I glanced at Yating and so did she. When our eyes met, I shrugged and so did she.

Rabinovich was rather calm in his voice. "Leave me the fuck alone, dude. It's not like we have to work right away. I will get some sleep and get sober."

To be utterly honest, he had a point. We had done nearly ten hauling jobs so far and we usually had nothing at all to do for first several days. Still, that didn't excuse his recent behavior.

During first few minutes, Rabinovich was relaxed and deflected a lot of barking from Santino. However, at one point, he began to get agitated from his continuous verbal attacks.

"Bugger off, dude!" He raised his voice, and the tension on the bridge shot up suddenly. Santino, realizing that he pushed him far enough, thankfully backed off. Both guys were fuming and growling but it didn't escalate.

However, it didn't end there. Rabinovich's behaviours continued to get progressively worse, even skipping out an entire job because he was too drunk to work. Yating seemed to have restrained Santino from going after him but it was Rabinovich who dropped the bomb first after a while.

"I want out," He declared when we just got back from a hauling job. It was his second time skipping out the job. I did find it weird that he was sober this time. I guess he at least had the decency to do this while sober.

Santio took a deep breath as he placed his hand on his waist. Yating was right next to him, silently observing so that he would not go too far. As for me, I stood idly. I mean,

what was I supposed to do or say?

"You know," Santino eventually replied. "Normally, I would ask why and would try to stop you, but I think we all foresaw this coming sooner or later." Then he looked at me and said, "Vazken, you agree, right?"

I nodded and told him, "Yeah."

We had a problem with settling the money. Basically, I did not have the money to pay Rabinovich's share. I used my savings to pay Juno's share a while back. Even Santino didn't have enough credit to pay him, either.

So, we had two options. One was to get a loan using Old lady as collateral. The other was selling Old lady all together. The latter option would mean the end of the group although, with Juno and Rabinovich gone, I'd say the group was over.

I was having the discussion with Santino. Rabinovich wasn't present. He basically told us that he just wanted his share and didn't care how we'd come up with the credit. Yating wasn't a founder. Thus, she had no right.

We were on Old lady's bridge, the primary one with windows. We stood by a console that was near the front window.

"Two options," Santio told me as he gazed through the window to watch the docking bay. "One, we get a loan. Two, we sell Old lady. What's your take?"

I folded my arms and followed his gaze to the window. The docking bay at Duchess' boobs was far larger and far busier. There were ships coming in and out as we discussed.

I told him my earnest opinion which had been in my mind for a while.

"I think this team is done for," I said to him. "With Rabinovich gone, that's half of the original crew. Let us go on our own ways."

His reaction was positive as if he also wanted to go on his own way. He nodded

along as he patted my shoulder.

"I will be honest," He said to me. "I've also wanted to go on my own way. Well, with Yating."

I sort of figured as much. He clearly wanted more private time with her, and our presence prevented that.

"So, selling Old lady then?" I said to him. We just finished the payment for the ship. It was fully ours.

Sagging shoulders but looking clearly happy, Santino replied, "Yeah, I guess. It sucks that we are selling her as soon as she has become fully ours, but then, hey, it could have been worse."

I wasn't sure about that. To be honest, I didn't want to sell Old lady. I did feel that the team was done for though.

Once the decision was made, things progressed swiftly. Old lady was sold within days after it was put on the market. Santino was in charge and he told me something interesting.

"A tracker?" I raised my voice a bit when he told me that.

"Yeah, a tracker. Nothing bad. I understand that Old lady was your first proper vessel. So, I put a tracker on it. Here is the key."

He handed over a small data chip to me and continued, "This chip contains a tracking number for Old lady. If she is sold again, as long as the transaction is done legally on the market, you will be able to track who she was sold to and where, making it easy to track her down and buy her back if you want and can."

"Oh, wow, I didn't know such a thing existed."

"You need a broker license which I do."

I chuckled weakly. "Dude, you were a ship seller before?"

He waved me off. "Yeah, yeah."

A ship broker was a common job. In fact, its entry barrier was so low that it was a job for those who couldn't get a proper job. Even being a miner was perceived better than being a ship broker.

Within half an hour, my share was transferred which stood at nearly 5 million credit. That was a lot of money but I wasn't going to get carried away. I was jobless after all. Shortly after, I paid a visit to Ehka and explained my situation to her, asking her for a job in the end.

I was in her office. There was a rather noticeable muffled loudness despite the room being sound proof. After all, it was located inside of the bar.

The room was rather lifeless with a simple aluminum desk. She was browsing the net while she listened to my woes.

"I see," She stoically replied once I was done explaining. "You lasted long enough, I suppose. Such groups never last long." She tapped on the desk which shot down a holographic screen floating few inches above. Crossing her legs, she rolled her chair to face me who was standing a short distance away from the desk.

"So, you need a job. I have something in my mind," She said to me. "You are going to need some commitment though."

"Meaning?"

"This station always needs security enforcers. In fact, we are hiring, and you need a job. The issue is that you don't have a ship."

She recommended me to purchase a badger. She added, "You can certainly loan it but, in long term, owning it saves money. And you can mod however you want if you own the ship."

A badger was a frigate class vessel. Compared to a more expensive SSS Robin, it was

considered a lowend ship. Regardless, badgers were really common in Rocksea. Pretty much every pirates used one after all. As far as I was aware, the hull itself cost only 400k top, brand new. But, once you add a better engine, better thrusters, guns, and whatnot, the overall cost shot up. I wasn't sure how much it would exactly cost me in the end.

As if she read my mind, she told me, "Two and half mil."

"Pardon?"

"Two and half mil is what a fully geared badger costs. I am pretty sure you can afford that, given you had a share in that Lightwave mining frigate."

I could. That didn't mean I would though. I was hesitant because the job would involve combat. Call me a coward if you want but I value my life.

"Ehh, I am not so sure...."

"What are you going to do then? Back to mining?"

That certainly was an option.

"Look, mining isn't bad. It's a steady income source, but you've been outside. I don't think you can do mining anymore. Mining is for those who don't know anything better."

I cast my eyes downwards and thought about what she said. She had a point. I didn't really feel like going back to mining.

"Time to get used to the tougher side of the life, Vazken. It's the only way to climb the social ladder. While there is nothing wrong with trying to be safe, we live in Rocksea. Safety is a luxury."

She had a point, I felt. It was really a time to move on with my life as well as my style of life.

I nodded at her and told her, "I understand." But I sighed still. "I will do as you say. I reckon that you will hire me?"

"That's right. I like you. You are cool headed. Too many guys think being hot headed

is the way to go, but nope. Being hot headed shortens one's life. Perhaps more importantly, you'd make a good security guard."

I was glad that she pointed out my positives. Regardless, I had to ask what I had to ask.

"Is it a full time job?"

She gave me a nod.

"May I see the contract details?"

There was a faint grin on her face. She activated her computer and a holographic popped up above her desk which, after a short moment, levitated its way to my eye level, displaying my contract details.

The contact looked weak initially.

"It says 3,000c for 90 days. Can't be true, can it?"

She replied, "It is correct. That is the basic salary. Look at bonuses and add-ons."

Each cases I solve would grant me 500c per. If it was a bigger case, like a fight, the bonus was 1,000c for stopping it before it would get out of control.

A good behavior bonus was also present where I'd receive an additional payment of 1,000c if I wasn't caught in any troubles for 90 days.

She added as I read the contract, "If you do your job, it's easy to earn well over 10,000c per 90 days. If you slack though, it's 3,000c plus maybe 1,000c good behavior bonus for you."

It seemed clear that she had thought things through and came up with rather controversial contract terms. I wasn't planning to slack anyway, so I decided to see how it'd go.

"Any minimum contract term?"

"No, but you must complete the first 90 days at least. The loss is on you anyway since you'd be investing in a badger."

Fair enough.

"Fine, I accept." Having said so, using my index finger, I drew my signature at the bottom of the contract on the holographic screen which registered my signature.

"Welcome to the fold, Vazken."

A new chapter in my life, I suppose. As Santino said before, it could have been worse. I didn't expect the group to last forever but it collapsed sooner than I thought.

Well, whatever, I move on.

- Fin