

Five or Twelve Million

Matteo strained at the cable-ties around his wrists, struggling to see in the dark toilet stall.

A moment later, the door slid open. Rhoda Cortez stood over him, and pulled a knife from her belt.

“Ready to talk?”

“Rhododendron!” Matteo grinned. “How nice of you to pay me another visit. You know, it’s awfully dark in here.”

He spat a wad of blood at her boot. “Are we coming up on Ganymede?”

“Clematis Cortez,” Rhoda said, crouching down in front of him. “He was with you on Europa. Where is he now?”

“Well he’s certainly not on Ganymede,” Matteo said. “He’s flown away.”

“Has he gone back to your FLGA buddies?”

“Now Rhoda, I can’t tell you that.”

“Do you think I care about what the FLGA is doing?”

“Oh I know you do,” Matteo smirked. “Clem said you call us terrorists, that’s a bit harsh, isn’t it?”

“I can think of forty-seven Europeans who would disagree.”

“I’m sorry Rhoda, I can’t trust that you won’t repeat everything I say back to the UN.”

Rhoda jabbed the knife into Matteo’s knee. He jumped in his seat.

“I don’t have to promise you *shit*,” she spat. “This is not a negotiation; You tell me where my brother is, and I’ll make sure you’re turned into the UN with all ten of your fingers.”

“Scary,” Matteo winced. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Captain!” Finlay called out from the front of the ship, “We’ve just been hailed.”

She turned her head.

“Who is it?”

“A UN ship. Border force.”

Rhoda stood up, pulled the knife from Matteo’s knee, and wiped the blood onto his cheeks. “I’ll deal with you later.”

This made Matteo snicker, then laugh. Then he leant his head back and cackled. He started chanting the Ganymede national anthem, and Rhoda shoved a rag in his mouth, and slammed the toilet door.

She stuck the knife back into her belt, and headed over to the bridge.

Finlay stood against the wall. Lucille sat in the pilot seat, typing into a terminal.

"They've been surveilling us," she said. "Passive sensors picked up the first scan about five minutes ago."

"How far away are they?"

"Thirty-two k's; They're in a pretty similar orbit to us."

"Alright, open the channel."

Lucille pressed a few buttons and flipped a switch. A second later, a man's voice crackled over the ship's radio.

"*Casanova*, this is Officer Merrick aboard the UN customs vessel *Rosetta Stone*. Are you aware your ship is not transmitting atmospheric data?"

Rhoda paused, then pressed the button by the microphone.

"This is Rhoda Cortez of the *Casanova*," she said. "We hear you *Rosetta Stone*. Our nitrogen tank and atmospheric monitors are bust, we were just heading to port to get those fixed."

"Right," replied Merrick, followed by a pause. "And what's the issue with them?"

"We ran into some pirates leaving Europa," Rhoda said. "Shot a hole clean through the tank."

"And the pirates?"

"We damaged them pretty good and they fled."

"Do you know if these pirates were affiliated with the FLGA?"

"No."

"Any other damage to your vessel?"

"No, we're sailing just fine for now."

Another long moment of silence; Rhoda glanced at her crewmates.

"*Casanova*, maintain your current course and prepare for an inspection. ETA twelve minutes. Please acknowledge."

"Fuck."

Then, to the radio: "Copy that *Rosetta Stone*, we'll be waiting for you."

Rhoda grabbed her knife again.

"Lucille, wipe the comm buffer. Finlay, double check the seals on the hull."

Before she could leave, the fax machine whirled to life, and started spitting out a message from the *Rosetta Stone*.

She waited for it to finish, then tore the sheet off.

It was a pre-inspection checklist, listing everything Border Force wanted to see. The atmospheric regulators were among them. Appended were mugshots of several wanted FLGA members.

Rhoda grinned, and brought the paper with her.

She pulled the rag from Matteo's mouth. "See this ugly mug right here?" Rhoda said, jabbing at one of the portraits with her knife. "That's you."

This got a snicker out of Matteo.

"And your bounty's been bumped up. You're worth twelve million now."

She then pointed to the number below his image.

"And this right here? That's how much you're worth dead. Take a guess what that is."

Matteo said nothing.

"Five million Pesos," she said. "That's still quite a lot, isn't it?"

"What, are you going to kill me?"

"I don't give a shit about the money," Rhoda said. "Whether it's five or twelve million doesn't make a difference to me."

"You really love your brother, don't you? I wish I had siblings."

Rhoda drove the knife into the wall next to Matteo's head.

"I won't ask again," Rhoda growled. "Where. Is. Clem."

"You know, you're really bad at this. You're far too pretty to be intimidating."

Rhoda groaned. "I don't have time for this."

She shoved the rag back in his mouth, and dragged him over to the beds, shoving him inside one. Matteo giggled. She did the zipper up till he was completely covered.

Rhoda left, and peered out the starboard viewport. The *Rosetta Stone* was now flying alongside the *Casanova*. Three figures were making their way across the docking bridge connecting the two.

Rhoda's crew gathered outside the airlock as it cycled.

Onboard stepped the three Old Worlders. Two men, and a younger woman. One of the men wore a navy uniform, the other two were Border Force.

The woman was carrying a battery pack, and what looked like a portable computer. Merrick held a suitcase.

All three had holstered sidearms.

Rhoda crossed her arms. "Welcome aboard."

"Border Force Officer Merrick," the man said, lifting his chin. "With me is Assistant Border Force Officer Samuels"—he motioned to the younger woman—"and Sub Lieutenant Wright."—the one in the navy uniform.

Merrick pulled a clipboard out of his suitcase.

"Which one of you is Rhododendron Cortez?"

"That would be me."

“Show me to your climate regulators,” he said. “And Officer Samuels to your ship’s computer.”

Rhoda left with Merrick. She nodded at Lucille, who led Samuels to the bridge.

Finlay stayed by the airlock. Watching over Wright, who also hadn’t moved.

Samuels sat in the pilot seat. She set the battery pack on the floor, and the computer on the counter. She detached the keyboard, placing it on her lap, and took a cable from a compartment on the side. It fumbled through her fingers, and fell to the floor.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m a little nervous.”

“.. Have you ever done one of these before?”

“No,” she said. “Exciting isn’t it? I like your ship. I’ve seen the model before, but I’ve never been inside.”

Samuels started typing away. After a minute, she paused, and squinted at the monitor.

“Huh. Looks like your comm buffer’s been wiped,” she said.

Lucille hesitated. “Must have been damaged by the pirates too,” she said. “We hadn’t noticed.”

“No, it’s definitely working,” Samuels said, not moving her gaze from the monitor. “It’s just empty.”

A moment of silence, until: “Your ship’s operating system is pretty old. You’ll need to update that.”

On the other side of the ship, Merrick inspected the climate regulator panel. Rhoda stood behind him.

“It’s just like we said. There’s a hole in our nitrogen tank.”

Merrick wrote this on his clipboard.

“What’s your atmospheric content?”

“100% oxygen at 30 kiloPascals. We vented the last of our nitrogen.”

Merrick then moved to the hull next to it, which was peppered with holes. He looked disapprovingly at the patches. Most were attached with foam, some were duct taped to the hull.

“You should be using the proper sealant.”

“We did. We ran out.”

He scribbled something on his clipboard.

Merrick then swept his way into the room Matteo was in.

The bed was empty.

He went to walk over to the other side of the room, but stopped when he stepped on something. Moving his boot, he saw two cable ties cut in half.

A second later, a shout. Coming from the direction of the airlock.

“Don’t move!”

Merrick glanced at Rhoda, then ran over, Rhoda followed. The navy officer was pointing his pistol at Matteo, who stood near the airlock door. Samuels and Lucille were nearby.

“What’s going on?” Merrick said. He looked at Matteo.

“Is that...?”

Merrick reached for his sidearm.

Handguns were drawn. Finlay at Wright. Wright at Matteo. Merrick at Rhoda, Rhoda at Merrick.

Samuels hadn’t drawn her weapon. She stood frozen, feeling a barrel against the back of her head.

“I’m Sorry,” said Lucille.

Nobody moved.

“Rhododendron, explain yourself.” Merrick demanded. “You’re harbouring a member of the FLGA.”

“He’s our prisoner. I have every right to hold him in my custody.”

“He doesn’t look like your prisoner,” Merrick said. “How am I to know you’re not FLGA?”

“Oh we’re definitely in cahoots,” Matteo said.

Rhoda pointed her handgun at him. He stuck his hands into the air.

Merrick thought for a second. “Thank you for bringing him this far. We’ll take him from here.”

“... That won’t be necessary.”

Merrick frowned, and shifted the pistol in his hand. “This man is a wanted *terrorist*. You are holding him to deliver him into UN custody. I am the UN. Hand him over.”

Rhoda pointed the gun back at Merrick. “No.”

More silence. Eyes dart between targets.

“Last chance, Rhododendron. The state of your vessel is sub-par at best. I’d be happy to forgive that.”

Matteo dropped to the ground, a bullet puncturing the wall where he once stood. He lunged at Samuels, and ripped the pistol from her holster. He sent a bullet through her chin, and shot the other two Old Worlders in quick succession. Finlay turned his handgun to Matteo, but took a hit to the shoulder. He fell to the ground alongside the other officers. Rhoda managed to graze Matteo’s side as he dashed for the airlock.

She jumped over the lifeless body of Merrick and Wright, but the airlock door slammed in her face.

The buttons on the panel did nothing, so Rhoda fired three shots through the airlock viewport. Matteo ducked out of view as the crumbled glass scattered to the floor.

She couldn't see Matteo through the viewport, so she stepped back, and spun around. Lucille was crouched over the young woman's body.

"Lucille!" Rhoda shouted, "Cut thrust, *now!*"

She didn't move.

Finlay got up, and stumbled towards the bridge.

Matteo, now in a space suit, slammed the override button on the airlock panel. The outer doors thrust open, forcing the air outside.

The whole ship heaved, and Rhoda almost lost her footing. Matteo waved at Rhoda, before leaping onto the docking bridge.

The air escaping through the airlock viewport whipped at her hair. It was too violent for Rhoda to properly aim her handgun. An alarm started blaring.

She looked back, Lucille was still on her knees.

Rhoda seized her by the shoulders, and shook her back to her senses. "Get it together woman!"

She shoved her to her feet, and turned to find something to patch the viewport.

She grabbed Merrick's bloodied clipboard, and plastered it over the viewport with some duct tape.

She followed Lucille to the bridge. She was already in the pilot seat, next to Finlay.

"Thrust?" she asked.

"Not now," Rhoda said. "Ready the cannons."

Lucille pulled up an external camera, just in time to see the *Rosetta Stone* withdraw its docking bridge, and cut thrust. It plummeted away from the *Casanova*, and out of sight of the camera.

"Shit, cut it now!"

Finlay hit a button. Their weight disappeared.

Lucille grabbed the right stick and yanked it forward. Finlay and Rhoda held onto the seat as the ship spun around.

A view of the *Rosetta Stone* appeared on one of the monitors.

"He's burning at 3g."

"Distance?"

"Four kilometers."

"That's too far for cannons," Finlay said.

"How many torpedoes do we have left?"

"... Two."

“Captain, the Cassi’s in no state to pursue,” Lucille said.

Rhoda reopened the channel to the *Rosetta Stone*.

“Matteo, surrender now, or you *will* be destroyed.”

“If I wanted to kill you, I would have. You should be grateful, Rhododendron,” Matteo said. “I’ll be leaving now.”

Rhoda slammed her fist into the counter.

“You don’t have to worry about your brother,” he said. “He belongs here with us.”

“Please,” Rhoda said. “Tell Clem I’m looking for him.”

“Oh don’t beg,” said Matteo. “... How about this: send my new ship a fax, and I promise I’ll give it to him.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” said Matteo.

After a pause: “You know, the FLGA could use someone like you.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh well,” Matteo said. “*Rosetta Stone*, signing off.”

He closed the channel.