

## Within Their Grasp, pt. 1

by Cerine Hero

featuring a world and characters by Sumo-Griz / Rogue Wolf

The elevator hummed softly as it ascended to the higher echelons of the *Stormbearer*. With no other sound to drown it out, the mechanical noise formed a tapestry in Rogue's ears. Magnetic rails carried the elevator upwards. They were almost entirely silent save to the continuous thrum of electricity. The security brakes hissed softly as they slid along the quadruple guide beams in the long shaft. The one immediately to Rogue's left was rattling slightly, with some obscure piece being loose within its framing. Within a week, he was sure that this elevator would be serviced, and he'd have to look for a different route up and down the ship for a while.

Zaress stood across from the wolf, her back against the elevator wall. The drake's eyes were closed and her heavily muscled arms lay crossed under her chest. Rogue could feel a tense energy crackling around her despite her relaxed exterior. When the wolf received the order to report on his wrist-comm, it was clear that the order extended to him and Zaress alone. None of the other Rangers in the canteen had received a command order. He found Zaress leaving the rec hall, where she had finished changing into a sleeveless shirt and pants, and together they headed on their way to yet another unusual briefing.

"I notice we're being singled out for missions more often now," Zaress muttered at length, cracking her eyes open and looking at the wolf as he waited in the center of the elevator.

Rogue could understand how she felt. The last assignment they had been given left him with a sour taste in his mouth. Even more so for Zaress, he was sure. Rogue thought of himself as having integrity; working in the shadows, investigating fellow Rangers, and playing cards under political pressure weren't things he envisioned when he thought of the work the Corps did. There was good enough reason for it, he knew, and he wasn't naive enough to pretend it never happened. But knowing there was a greater good and actually getting his paws dirty in it were two very different things.

The wolf swallowed and raised his eyes towards the ceiling. "I see it as recognition for our skills and results," he answered. It wasn't a lie, but neither was it his full thinking on the matter. Part of him was proud to be seen as a reliable operator by command. But he also hoped that he and Zaress wouldn't be treated as enforcers. That would do nothing but strain their relationship with the rest of the Corps.

Zaress took his answer stoically, just shaking her head and letting her brown hair fall down over one side of her face. "If you say so."

Rogue sighed and waited for the elevator to come to a stop. The doors slid open and let them out into unoccupied hallways. It felt uncanny to be called to the briefing hall alone. Normally there would be a press of other Rangers around on the way to the room. Some would be muttering under their breath and wondering what the next mission was going to entail. Others would be boasting and challenging their rivals. But everyone would be quiet when they stepped into the scalloped hall and found their seats so the commander could give his briefing. Today, Rogue and Zaress were silent.

The doors were already open and waiting for them. The silvery glow of holographic projection spilled out into the hallway as a rendition of a planet hovered above the speaking dais. It was a verdant world, covered in green and blue, but in the wide view there was little in the way of detail to be seen. Beneath the slowly-rotating digital globe, the commander patiently waited. The aging tiger had his paws clasped behind his back as he looked up towards the image of the planet and his striped tail slowly curled back and forth behind him.

Rogue nodded at Zaress and started down the stairs in the center of the semi-circle of tiered seats. The two of them normally sat near the front, but since the briefing room was all but empty, finding a seat didn't even seem like a priority. As Rogue reached the bottom of the steps, he noticed another figure standing on the side of the room, somehow standing at ease but still looking as stiff as a

board. Out of the corner of his eye, he could tell the other person was a fellow Ranger, but for now, the wolf halted a respectful distance from the commander and saluted.

“Reporting for briefing, sir,” he said, and beside him Zaress also saluted.

The commander nodded as if he knew they were already there. “Good. Be at ease. We have a lot to discuss.” The tiger turned about and looked to the wolf and drake, who were standing stiff and anxious. He canted his head slightly and then understood why they seemed apprehensive. He held out one placating paw. “Don't worry. This matter is sensitive, but not *that* sensitive this time.”

“Understood, sir,” Rogue replied, feeling a weight come off his shoulders. But that left him wondering why he and Zaress were summoned, if not for more cloak-and-dagger work. And who was this other person?

Now that he had addressed the commander, Rogue spared a fuller look towards the Ranger waiting in the wings. The wolf could recognize pretty much all of the other Rangers on the *Stormbearer* by sight, though he wasn't always able to recall a name. This one was no exception on either part, though Rogue was unsure why he didn't know his name. He was pretty distinctive – a hybrid tiger-coyote. His fur was a lighter gray than Rogue's and he had longer hair, with it partially tied in a ponytail behind his head. Comparatively, he was a bit shorter than the wolf, but made up for it in muscle. His off-duty clothes were pulled snug around a bulked physique. There was a red trim along his clothes, marking him as a member of the medical specialization. Only the medics were required to wear their division color on their off-duty clothes, so they could be found if needed at any time.

The tigyote noticed Rogue staring and nodded respectfully. He had a kind, if well-worn, expression etched into his canine face. Rogue nodded back, wondering if he had ever been patched up by this medic in the field before.

“You are free to sit as you wish, but we are on an accelerated time table,” the commander explained. He made a gesture with his paw towards the globe above him. The image shrank somewhat, displaying some vital information about the planet along its side. It was Gervor II, and from what Rogue could see in the information, it was a deeply wooded world to the point of being nigh-impenetrable. There was also a reference to it being a protected planet by Republic treaties. So there was no – or should be no – permanent habitation.

“Two hours ago, we received a partially unintelligible transmission from a Republic transport vessel. Despite our efforts to clean the recording, we have only been able to glean that the ship had just dropped out of transit in-system and had suffered some manner of emergency. They were diverting to Gervor as the nearest habitable world.”

“Barely,” Zaress interjected, squinting at the planet's holographic image.

Rogue tensed at the drake's remark, but the commander nodded sagely. He scratched at his chin. “Precisely. That is why we are treating this as a priority situation. They would not have diverted to an uninhabited and protected planet if they could have made it across system to Gervor Prime. And there is one other thing that needs mentioning about this mission.” The commander let the statement hang in the air as he breathed in. “We're still trying to confirm through secure channels, but we believe that a Republic senator was on the transport.”

“Do what?” Rogue balked, the words rushing out of his mouth before he could control himself. The wolf glanced at Zaress and then the tigyote standing nearby, listening stoically. “With all due respect, commander, shouldn't we be mustering the entire corps if that's the case?”

The commander shook his head. “For both practical and political reasons, we cannot. On the practical side, Gervor II is densely vegetated.” He gestured at the image of the globe again and it turned into a flat landscape panorama. Choking jungle spread as far as the eye could see, broken up only by tall spires of brown rock jutting like grasping fingers through the canopies. The columns made Rogue wince. He was imagining trying to pilot his Maelstrom between them. Landing any significant force on the planet would be a logistical feat. The commander turned back to the Rangers and continued. “If that wasn't enough, we are talking about a legally protected planet. Any operation we send has to be of the

smallest necessary scale to accomplish the mission.

“For that, we have determined a single team to be sufficient for the task.” The commander nodded to the tigyote standing nearby, and the medic stepped forward a full pace and then saluted. “We will be assigning Rangers Etsin and Ahlmir to you for this operation.”

“Not Ahlmir,” Zaress sighed over her breath, loud enough for her displeasure to be fully noted throughout the room.

Rogue's ear picked up the creak of a chair and he turned to look behind him. He hadn't noticed the vixen in the bottom-row seat until she decided to draw attention to herself. Sitting with her feet propped onto the display console in front of the seat, the fox was staring daggers at Zaress's back. She was fit, golden-furred, and wearing a sleeveless off-duty shirt. Her blonde hair was cut short, barely peeking out of the cap she was wearing. In addition to her sharp-edged stare, she had an obviously-brandished knife in a sheath strapped to her thigh. Rogue furrowed his brow as he eyed the knife. Bearing weapons on the *Stormbearer* was against Ranger conduct.

Unlike the tigyote, Rogue didn't recognize her at all. But apparently Zaress did, if her loud grumble meant anything. In front of them all, the commander cleared his throat to silence any further commentary and to gather everyone's attention back to him.

“Ranger Etsin is from the medical division and Ranger Ahlmir is an infiltrator,” he told the wolf and drake. “Needless to say, the assistance of a medic and scout will be invaluable for this operation. And because of the need to extract the VIP and other survivors, you will be provided with a Squall-class transport. It will be rough to land in this terrain, but make do.”

The tigyote medic added, matter-of-factly, “I can pilot the Squall.”

That made the fur on the back of Rogue's neck raise in irritation. Tensing his muscles around his stomach, the wolf replied, “I am from the piloting division, and this isn't going to be a routine op. I will be piloting.”

The medic squinted back at him but said nothing.

“You will be operating your Maelstrom as support,” the commander told Rogue, his voice tight. “Etsin was selected for this operation because of his supplementary flight training, and he will be piloting the Squall transport. As long as that is to your satisfaction, Ranger?”

Rogue saluted sharply, his ears burning from the reproach. He had jumped the gun on that. “Yes, sir,” he said, frowning.

Zaress just snickered to herself and shook her head.

“Good,” the commander said, wiping his paws. “Gear up and report to the flight deck to await deployment once we are in range of Gervor II. You're dismissed.”

With that, the commander turned and walked out of the briefing room through a door in the rear of the chamber. Silence hung over everyone now. After a moment, the tigyote walked over to Rogue and Zaress. He still had a sharp look on face, but it softened as he held out his paw.

“Gray,” he said, indicating his name and not his fur color. Still stinging from the rebuke, Rogue took a moment before grasping Gray's paw and shaking it. Gray then extended his paw to Zaress, but she just looked down at him and shrugged. The tigyote didn't seem put out at all. “Nice to meet you both. I heard stories about Calotto IV.” He gestured back behind them both. “And that's my partner, Rienne.”

Rogue looked back again, but the gold fox was nowhere to be seen – except for the black tip of a golden tail disappearing around the edge of the open doorway, all the way at the top of the briefing room. He didn't even hear her get up or leave. Infiltrator, indeed. Rogue thought back to his own modest amount of training received from that division and wondered what it would have been like if he had stayed there instead of focusing on piloting.

“So we get the medic who can fly a ship,” Zaress mumbled, “but in return we have to put up with her.”

Gray just nodded wearily. “You get used to her. She does her job, she just likes to push

command's buttons about it. I think they paired her with me to see if I'd bring her in line some. So far, not much luck. But she's not the worst partner to have."

"So you say," Zaress replied. "I've heard she might as well be the head of the disciplinary squad."

"There is that," the tigyote admitted. "Not much point trying to tell her what to do."

"I'll keep that in mind," Rogue said.

"Right, the commander made it clear we are reporting to you," Gray explained. He gestured between Rogue and Zaress both. "I don't know your dynamic. Which of you is--"

"He is." Zaress put her meaty hand on Rogue's shoulder and pushed him forward. The wolf grimaced but nodded solemnly to the hybrid.

Rogue sighed. "Well, see you on the flight deck, then."

The flight deck was quiet, as no ships were heading in or out of the massive carrier vessel at this time. No flight crews were rushing back and forth with supplies or fuel cables, nor were there any Rangers mustering for missions. No one besides them, at least. The starships were resting in their bays, engines cold as they awaited their next time to fly. Older Maelstroms that had avoided or survived the disastrous battle over Calotto IV sat wingtip to wingtip with the newer Mark II models. Rogue's fighter was near the end of the line on this deck, and the Squall assigned to his team was next to it.

The wolf retrieved his weapons from the armorer, sliding his pistol into the holster on his thigh and clamping the rifle against his back. He was armored and ready for deployment. Striding onto the flight deck, he heard the clatter of metal on metal and turned to look towards the noise. Perched atop a stack of cargo containers staged against the wall of the flight deck, Rienne was sitting, decked in her full gear as well. She cut an impressive figure in the black armor of the infiltrators, with her lengthy, golden tail curled around to one side of her. As Rogue walked over to the bottom of the stack of crates, the vixen flicked her arm out and her knife went flying from her fingers. It spun end over end down the length of the flight deck before clattering noisily on the decking. Then the fox flicked her outstretched fingers and the mag-tether invisibly connecting her knife to her gauntlet pulled it back to her at high speed. She caught it and threw it again out of boredom.

"How effective is that in the field?" Rogue asked, looking up at the vixen perched above him.

Rienne flicked the knife back to her paw and tested the edge of it. Satisfied, she slid off the edge of the crate and landed on the deck beside the wolf. Her tail came fluttering down an instant later, curling itself around her feet. Standing straight, she looked at the wolf next to her, an unreadable expression on her face. He didn't get a good look at her before. Now that they were up close, she now struck him as uncannily familiar. He'd never seen her before, that much he knew, but at the same time, her face felt like it was seared in his memory from someplace.

"Explain." Her voice was neutral, and she patiently waited for Rogue to speak. The wolf blinked and worked his jaw, collecting his thoughts together into an argument.

"Well... a thrown knife isn't a particularly viable weapon," he told her, "especially against armor. It has low stopping power and the potential to cause harm is more luck than anything. Even if you recall it to you, you won't have much time to use it again against an opponent armed with a gun or a close-quarters weapon. You could throw it as a distraction, but recalling it would reveal your location. So I am not sure what the purpose is in the field."

The fox slowly raised a pierced eyebrow at him. She hummed thoughtfully and flipped the knife over in her paw before sliding it into its sheath at her thigh. Then she turned about and rest her back against the crates, showing him her right side – where a second, matching knife was strapped, opposite to the first.

"I don't throw them both," she told him.

"Noted," Rogue replied. He shifted his weight in his armor and inhaled. "I haven't served with any infiltrators in a long time. If we're going to work together, then how do--"

“Just save it.”

Rogue bit his words, lowering his brow in annoyance. “I’m sorry?”

The fox sighed and rest her head against the crate behind her. “I get it. They made you team captain and you’re doing the puffed-up strut to make sure everyone knows it. A comment here, a criticism there, and you look like you’re doing something useful. You can go pull it on Gray. He’ll salute and ask for another.” She crossed her arms over her chest and looked down the line of starships waiting in their bays. “I’ll do my job, don’t worry. Just leave me be, I’ll leave you be, and we’ll all be fine. Good?”

Rogue ran his tongue across his teeth. Half an hour into being the team leader and he already felt like this mantle would be better placed on someone else’s shoulders. Gray’s were wider than his, but orders were orders. “I just need to know we’ll work together smoothly.”

“Won’t be any problems on my end.” She turned her silver-green eyes on him. “Just don’t tell me what to do.”

“Well, that *does* sound like a problem.”

“For you.”

Rogue let it go. He could hear boots on the decking and turned around, seeing Zaress and Gray stepping onto the flight deck and checking their weapons. The drake had her plasma axe folded and secured to her back already. She wandered over to the others and peered down her snout at the black-armored fox, who just stared back impassively. Behind her, the medic, heavily plated in assault armor that bulked his already large frame, was fiddling with a device on his left gauntlet. At his thigh was a laser pistol in its holster, and he wore his medical kit on his back in lieu of a larger primary weapon, like Rogue and Zaress did. Behind him, his striped tail twitched anxiously. Zaress peeled her eyes off of the fox and looked down to note the jitter in Gray’s tail.

“Nervous?” she asked, putting her armored hands on her hips.

Gray looked up from his paw and his eyes met Zaress’s before flicking over to Rogue. “I do not *enjoy* flying, if I can help it. But I will manage.” He inhaled and fiddled with his helmet. “On that topic, the Squall has more advanced sensor equipment for surface work than the Maelstroms do, so if we are going to look for the missing ship, I think it would be best if I had an operator to co-pilot.”

When inquisitive eyes fell on Rienne, she shrugged. “Not my job.”

“And why not,” Zaress grumbled.

“To be fair, this operation is out of our element,” Gray interjected. “Rienne and I are more about dealing with people than machines.” He paused for a moment and then cleared his throat. “That was a joke.”

“I got it,” Rogue said. “So you want Zaress on the Squall.”

“If you think you can fly solo.”

The wolf snorted irritably. “Yes, I can fly solo.”

“Very well,” Gray replied, and the wolf’s flaring temper wasn’t lost on him. “I’ll go prep the Squall for takeoff.”

As Gray walked off towards the Squall, Rogue decided that it would be a good idea for him to do the same with his Maelstrom to let his nerves cool down. He let the tigyote have a healthy head start and then made his way towards his fighter. But only a few paces along, he heard the heavy boot stomps of a heavy drake at his heels.

“You two are too much alike,” Zaress confided in him, her voice held down so it wouldn’t carry across the still fairly quiet deck.

“How’s that,” Rogue replied, stopping at the wing of the Maelstrom and looking back at the armored drake. His voice was flat and didn’t quite ask a question.

“You’re both uptight rules-followers trying too hard to be the boss,” she explained. “And you’re taking things too personally.”

“I know,” Rogue sighed. “I don’t like there being a second pilot on the team.”

“This is a milk run. Just deal with them for the flight and back and we'll be done with the both of them.”

“You're right.” Rogue keyed the canopy controls on the Maelstrom and began climbing in.

As he settled into his seat, the commlink on the gorget of his armor chimed. “Ranger team, this is Control. The *Stormbearer* has anchored at high orbit over Gervor II. You are free to disembark when ready.”

“Understood, Control,” Rogue replied.

“Another note,” Control added. “Our sensors are detecting anomalous materials at low orbit around the planet. Recommend you start your investigation there.”

“Affirmative,” Gray answered, securing himself into the piloting seat at the head of the transport.

Zaress was climbing up the docking ramp into the spacious – for a space vessel – passenger hold in the Squall. As the tigyote prepped for launch, the flooring under her feet began to vibrate and pulse from the activating engines. The last time the drake had been standing in the back of a Squall, she had been escorting a vixen sorceress to a dead planet in dark space. Almost as if fate was teasing her, she felt the scales on the back of her neck tense and glanced back to see Rienne trudging up the ramp behind her. The gold fox didn't even spare her a look before settling into one of the seats against the fuselage and closing her eyes. It must have been nice to be so carefree, Zaress grumbled to herself.

Removing her axe and storing it securely, the drake squeezed into the co-pilot's seat beside the tigyote. The cockpit was a tight fit anytime, but with the two of them being bigger-than-average and wearing assault armor to boot, it was pauldron to pauldron. She began to flip switches and activate the survey systems.

A few moments later, the Squall's structure vibrated as the Maelstrom in the bay to their port released from its clamps and surged forward through the force screen separating the flight deck from vacuum. Rogue rolled and banked the fighter to starboard and accelerated through the outstretched and protective arms of the mother ship. Not wanting to fall behind, Gray inhaled deeply and released the Squall from its own clamps. He pushed forward and the heavier transport followed the Maelstrom into space.

They approached Gervor II from its light side, and the planet was flush with blue and green. Jungle covered the majority of the planet's surface, shy of a band of desert around the equator and bald rock and frozen water near the poles. The engine-streaks from Rogue's Maelstrom glowed bright against the backdrop of space high above them and slightly to port as Gray put in a flight path to bring them close to the debris in orbit. The readout display in front of Zaress locked on long before they were able to see anything through the view port.

She flicked through the analysis and frowned. It confirmed what she already suspected. Why else would there be debris around a protected planet? “It's wreckage,” she announced. “Looks like the Republic transport blew apart on approach.”

Gray sighed and gripped his knuckles tighter around the flight stick. “Think it was attacked?”

Rogue's voice crackled through the Squall's speakers. “Don't jump to conclusions. I'm going to get closer for a visual confirmation. Stay on course.” With that, the Maelstrom's engines flared and it soared into the distance.

“I can't tell from here,” Zaress told the tigyote. “Rogue is right, though. They were experiencing distress when they dropped out of transit. But I'm not getting a signal from a recovery box, either.”

“That,” Rienne added from the back, “sounds like sabotage.”

It was hard to believe the fox was listening. She was still sitting in the seat, eyes closed, but one ear was pivoted towards the cockpit to listen in. The blackened tip of her tail waved slowly as the length of it lay spread out across the deck in front of her.

“Confirmed, it's a Republic ship,” Rogue reported. “Zaress, can you train the sensors to detect

escape pod emissions?"

"I can," the drake said, adjusting some settings, "but I'm not receiving any escape pod transponder signals."

"Which you can turn off if you know what you're doing," Rienne added. Holding out her fingers for emphasis, she said, "Two wires. Snip."

"I don't like this," Gray mumbled.

"Me either." Zaress eyed the screen in front of her and double-checked the scan for engine emissions. She eliminated the fresh returns from Rogue's Maelstrom and then picked up two signals. One was from the Republic transport itself, and another streaked down towards the planet. "But I am seeing that at least one escape pod jettisoned and went planetside."

"Then we'll follow it down to the surface and do a more accurate scan," Gray said.

There was a notable pause before Rogue answered over the comm. "Confirmed."

Gray adjusted the controls and brought the Squall in line with the heads-up display of the escape pod's trajectory printed out before him. Gervor II grew larger in their view as they drew closer, and soon enough, the outside of the ship glowed orange from the atmosphere burning around it. The view port automatically darkened to keep from blinding the pilots until they slowed to atmospheric speed and the fire of reentry dimmed away.

The planet was beautiful. Gray dropped altitude to soar only a couple kilometers above the surface. The spires of brown rock towering through the jungle canopy reached towards them hungrily, like giants trying to capture a fly. The vegetation was so dense that not an inch of surface was visible through the trees and vines. As expected, it was going to be difficult to find anywhere to land. As the Squall soared past, with the Maelstrom keeping formation high and to port, pink-hued birds scattered from the trees and the sides of the high spires to flock in the air.

Zaress tapped her fingers on a couple settings on the panel in front of her. "Alright, I'm going to change the scan radius and look for any traces of engine residue in the--"

"Contacts incoming from our rear!" Rogue's voice blasted through the speakers and cut her off.

Behind the Rangers' ships, a pair of fighter craft ascended sharply from between the rock spires and closed in on their tails. Target lock sirens wailed inside the Squall. Zaress quickly switched her console to combat mode, with a readout showing available weapon systems and diagnostics at her fingertips. In the rear of the transport, Rienne calmly reached over her shoulders and pulled down the restraints to lock herself into the seat.

"This is why I hate flying," Grey growled. He immediately took evasive maneuvers, and banked the Squall hard to starboard. Orange laser fire from the fighter on their tail lanced past the view port as the world swung wildly beyond. Zaress braced herself as gravity lurched and pulled her sideways. They watched as Rogue's Maelstrom roared past and zoomed into the distance, the enemy ship struggling to keep up. A moment later, another shrill sound flooded the cockpit and holographic warnings flashed in the heads-up. Gray bared his fangs. "Missile lock!"

"Launching chaff," Zaress told him.

Bright white flares spilled from compartments in the wings and from underneath the Squall. Two missiles streaked from the enemy fighter, leaving streams of exhaust in their wake, but the bright light and heat from the countermeasures scrambled the targeting. One spun and soared wide, vanishing into the sky, and the other trailed downwards, striking a rock spire in an expanding green blast of plasma. The Squall was rocked upwards by the blast but stayed aloft.

"I'm not going to be able to lose them," Gray said, again dodging laser fire. The Squall's defense shield rippled and shimmered around the view port.

Zaress's lip curled and she keyed the comm. "Anytime you're ready, Rogue."

Maelstroms did not operate well in atmosphere. They were designed for astral flight but could land and take off reliably from a planet's surface. Dogfighting was something else. Rogue's paws were

gripped tight on the flight stick and throttle control as he banked hard to try to get behind the enemy fighter. The only advantage he had was that the Maelstrom had superior speed and handling over the other fighter, even in atmosphere.

With g-forces pinning him back into his seat, Rogue pulled into an even tighter turn. He could see the enemy craft through his canopy now. While it was too far to make out a good look, the wings were painted purple. It wasn't a livery he was familiar with. Unfortunately, he wasn't gaining on the enemy, and the Squall was still under fire from the second one. He needed a different tactic.

Breaking off from the turn, Rogue plummeted the nose of the Maelstrom down and descended into the thicket of tall rock spires. The enemy fighter took the bait, following him into the cluster of towers. Rogue had to drop speed and bank hard around the approaching rocks as his craft spooked pink birds out of hiding. The purple fighter struggled to stay on him, occasionally peppering the rock spires with laser fire. Rogue pushed his luck, soaring within feet of the rock spires. He could practically feel the spire whooshing past his canopy. The enemy ship wasn't as bold, taking a wider route and losing ground.

Rogue spun the Maelstrom and took a hard turn to port, looping back around the last spire. He braced as he slid between two of them extremely close together, scraping some paint off the belly of his ship. The pursuing vessel, taking the turns wider and safer, was far too open on the turn, and couldn't abort before smashing into the rock spire. The giants finally caught one. An expanding fireball rattled Rogue's ship, and he leveled out, pulling up to bring himself back out of the reach of the stony fingers.

The Squall passed overhead, clumsily dodging laser fire with its shields shimmering and beginning to dim. Free of his own pursuer, the wolf activated the Maelstrom's main lasers and stitched fire across the fighter's wings and belly. The ship's power plant detonated and flaming wreckage tumbled from the sky. Rogue soared upwards through it, his own ship's shields glowing as they deflected tiny pieces of molten metal away.

Finally exhaling, Rogue reached over and keyed the comm. "Gray, find somewhere suitable to land. I'll catch up with you when I can."

"Affirmative," the tigyote replied, his voice strained but relieved.



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