

Within Their Grasp, pt. 2

by Cerine Hero

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

“Control, this is the Gervor II Team, Ranger Gray reporting.”

The tigyote's paws were still shaking in his gauntlets. Despite landing in a clear-enough patch of jungle and taking a moment to breathe, adrenaline roared through his veins like a firestorm. Gray reached out and began to tap his fingertips against the console of the Squall as an outlet while he waited for a reply. The drake in the seat beside him busied herself with checking what scans she could perform from the surface.

“This is Control,” the comm unit crackled. The signal wasn't perfect, almost certainly because of the huge rock spires surrounding them. “Go ahead with your report, Ranger.”

“We were intercepted by two unidentified fighter craft upon reaching the atmosphere,” Gray explained. “Ranger Rogue eliminated both and we have landed on the surface. It is clear we have a hostile element in play in the operational area. Requesting reinforcements.”

There was a long pause over the comm. Gray swallowed anxiously and shifted in his seat. Beside him, even Zaress glanced in his direction, offering a warily cocked eyebrow.

“This needs to be confirmed and discussed with Command, Gervor II Team,” came the reply at long last. “Hold position and wait for further instructions. Control out.”

Gray leaned back in the pilot seat, his armor clattering against the padded backing. His head hit the brace and he exhaled slowly through his nose. “Wait for instructions,” he echoed coldly.

From behind him, he heard the *click* of Rienne unbuckling her harness. The fox stood up from her seat in the transport bay and checked her knives in their sheathes. She walked to the rear of the fuselage and punched the overhead button to open the Squall's docking ramp. As the pistons began to hiss and whirr, lowering the door down, she yelled back, “We're not doing that.”

“What?!” Gray hissed, spinning the pilot seat around and standing up. He folded his ears down as a wash of humid and fecund air from the jungle outside the ship overwhelmed him. “You heard Control. We were ordered to hold position.”

“If they send reinforcements,” Rienne said back, “it won't be until after they deliberate whether we're worth breaking Republic law to rescue us. All the time they spend doing that is time our new friends are going to use hunting us down, and time the VIP may not have. If they pin us in this flying cow, we're dead the second they bring a missile launcher to bear. We'll be safer moving through the jungle on foot.”

Gray turned his attention towards Zaress, who was climbing out of her own seat and moving to fill the rear of the Squall with her muscle mass. The drake grabbed her plasma axe and clamped it to her back plate before turning and looking at Gray over her shoulder.

“Hate to say it, but I agree with her,” she said. “Personally, I've had enough of Command for a while, anyways.”

Both of the women grabbed their helmets and pulled them on, and the inside of the Squall filled with the sound of pressurization. As their colored lenses activated, Gray took that as a subtle sign that any further conversation on the topic was over. Either way, he wasn't going to argue with Rienne's assessment. He trusted that Command wouldn't take hours – or even a quarter of one – to relay them new orders, but any time spent waiting for an update was time they couldn't risk taking. Gray grabbed his own helmet and slid it on, watching the world go dark before a hiss accompanied the telltale pressure of the atmosphere seal around his neck. Then his visor blinked to life, bringing him vision and sound. Outside the helmet, red eye lenses began to glow, matching the medic's red-trimmed armor.

Gray checked his laser pistol in the holster on his thigh and joined the others on the way down the docking ramp. The broad-shouldered tigyote's boots sank into warm, wet mud as he stepped into the modest clearing that had been just big enough to land in. Branches and fronds from the canopy

overhead were laying scattered on the ground, blown down by the Squall's powerful downwash. The air was humid, downright misty, and Gray was glad to be almost completely enclosed in his armor. His tail, however, would need some serious conditioning later. Just as he thought that, Rienne pulled a wrapped bundle from her tools and began to loop a dark cloth around her own tail. She enclosed it almost completely from base to tip, with only a poof of black fur sticking out the end. Once she was done, the vixen noticed Gray staring. Six indigo lights on the front of the fox's helmet stared back at him. Gray looked away, fiddling with the device fixed to his left bracer.

Zaress reached up to her gorget and flipped a switch, changing herself over to internal communications. "Rogue? You read me? We're on foot." They all waited in silence for the wolf's reply, but they received only static. The drake swore and kicked a branch with her boot and then looked up at the high rock spires surrounding them. "Damn. There's no way to bounce a signal on this world. It's direct or nothing, and those rocks are in the way."

"Should we wait for him, then?" Gray asked, but he already knew the answer.

"He'll find us," Zaress replied.

Rienne looked towards the drake. "You had the map, what's our heading?"

Zaress turned and gestured at a nondescript patch of jungle to the starboard side of the Squall. "Best guess, the fighters came from that direction. There has to be some kind of operational base to field ships like that. That's our best bet for finding the VIP."

"Think they took them?" Gray asked, falling in line with the others as they headed into the jungle.

"That was the plan all along, seems like," Rienne replied before skipping ahead and vanishing into the undergrowth ahead of them. The bushes and ferns shook for a moment and then the black-armored fox was completely gone. She was lighter on her feet than the heavily-gear'd tig-yote and drake, and ranged well ahead of them to scout.

To say the jungle was untamed was to suggest that there was some sense of orderliness that was absent. The thick foliage simply *was*. It covered everything, and Zaress and Gray couldn't move without snagging their armor or gear on vines and branches. There was little to hear. Whatever wildlife was around, if any, had likely scattered for cover when the Squall touched down with its loud and powerful engines.

It was slow going. There were no trails to follow, and the ground was tumultuous with upended rocks and roots everywhere. The canopy overhead fully enclosed them, dropping visibility to almost nighttime. Eventually they came to the foot of one of the giant rock spires and found their first evidence of animals. Bones littered the base of the rock, all piled and jumbled to the point that it was impossible to tell where one began and others ended. Gray guessed that it was an instinctive burial ground for the local fauna, though he couldn't guess as to why. He and Zaress admired the mortuous sight for a while before finding a footprint in the mud and continuing along Rienne's trail.

After another couple minutes of trudging through near-lightless terrain, Zaress reached up to her neck and flipped her communications back to speakers. "I'm surprised she's so insistent on completing the mission," she said conspiratorially.

Gray imitated her motion, changing his voice channel as well. "You're not giving her enough credit. She pushes back against Command, but she does her job. She cares, even if she acts cold." He sighed. "Though, she has her own way of doing things, as you've noticed. It's hard to keep her corralled sometimes."

"And here I was figuring she was just a troublemaker," Zaress admitted.

"She still is," Gray said, shrugging.

"You done talking about me?"

The two Rangers halted in their tracks and looked towards the voice. Standing against the bole of a tree, her armor and remaining exposed fur caked in mud and moss, was the infiltrator. Almost like a dryad of myth, she untangled from the tree and jumped down to the ground level underneath to join

the others. Even standing up-close, in the dark, she was almost invisible.

Rienne brought her voice low. “Stay on verbal comms. Don't know if anyone can pick up our signals.” She gestured with one paw towards a rise in the ground. Her knife was gripped underhand between her fingers. “Spotted a patrol of armed hostiles heading towards our landing zone.”

“We can't let them raze our ship,” Zaress replied. “How many?”

“Eight. Laser rifles.”

Gray winced. “That's trouble. A lot for us to take without ranged support.”

“Only option is a close-quarters ambush.” Rienne looked around, as if she was mentally surveying the land around them. “There's a stream they're going to have to cross.”

Rienne's “stream” was more like a small river. It wasn't very deep but it was fairly wide, and it wound against the base of a rock spire, eroding away part of it. In a million years, the colossal column of rock would come crashing down and change the landscape entirely. A second spire, towering as high as the first, rest barely twenty-five feet away from the first on the same side of the river, but the lay of the land pushed the water away from its base. The ground between the two spires was sloped downwards, almost entirely mud, as a mossy stream burbled down to join the river.

From the opposite bank, the undergrowth rustled and parted. Two mercenaries in armor painted purple and white emerged. They held short, broad swords in their hands, the edges of the blades glowing red. The two mercenaries hacked down the overgrowth in front of them and stepped out into the river. Behind them, another six armored figures stepped forth, all carrying their weapons at the ready. They fanned out into the muddy, opaque water, keeping watch. Slowly, the hunting party made their way across the river. Charged energy cells emitted red light on the sides of the laser rifles, reflecting off the rippling, murky water around them.

One of the mercenaries stopped as their foot struck an object under the water. They stooped down and wrenched it loose from the mud and silt underfoot. It was a twisted and ruined metal plate, still decorated with flecks of purple paint from its livery. The mercenary turned it over in their glove and then looked up towards the dizzying height of the twin rock spires overhead. It was a far, far distance towards their peaks, but they were almost certain they could spot the markings of an explosion across parts of the spire. It didn't matter right now, though. They were falling behind the others and trudged through the water to catch up.

The leading mercenaries with the blades reached the far slope, but paused to let the next rank, armed with laser rifles, go first. Boots sank deep into the wet mud, and the mercenaries climbed up slowly and cautiously, weapons readied for an ambush. Slowly, all eight of them were on the muddy bank, making their way up to level ground.

Behind the last mercenary, the water began to stir. The armored ears of a black helmet broke the surface, soon followed by the dim indigo lights of an infiltrator's visor. Muddy water washed down Rienne's armor and bare arms as she stood upright, knives held ready. The mercenaries heard the splash too late. Several of them turned to spot one of their own being yanked into a tight hug, armor pierced by a narrow blade. The vixen whipped her free paw towards the next soldier, knife tumbling through the air. It embedded into their breastplate and they recoiled in shock from the hit. Rienne pressed her fingers together and a crackle of lightning erupted through her knife. The mercenary convulsed and fell over into the water with a splash.

The mercenaries turned, almost falling over in the mud, but they hesitated, not wanting to strike one of their own with laser fire. They wouldn't get another chance at the infiltrator, as heavy footsteps behind them drew their attention. An enormous drake in thick armor swept a two-handed axe over her head, the blade flaring to life with green plasma fire. The first sweep bowled over the front two mercs, sending them down into the mud, their armor glowing red where the plasma was beginning to melt it. Zaress brought her axe to bear again as the sword-wielding mercenaries rushed her – though with the mud, “rushing” was more like stumbling uphill. She deflected one sword blow with her axe blade,

liquidized metal dripping from the mercenary's weapon to sizzle and sputter in the wet mud below. A second swing from her left she warded off by thrusting with the butt of her axe's haft. But the poor terrain was a problem for her as much as them, perhaps moreso. She swung her axe sideways, and the momentum of the heavy weapon dragged her boots forward and deeper into the mud, gumming up her footing. The massive, draconic woman had strength in spades but little she could truly bring to bear here with the poor terrain. When the frightened mercenaries, pinned between two deadly foes, began to swing wildly and recklessly as they advanced up the hill, Zaress was overwhelmed. She attempted to parry while extracting her boots, but she couldn't stop every blow. She took a hit from a heated blade on her left arm, tearing through her armor suit's under layer, and then the tip of a sword found its way under her breastplate, stabbing lightly into her side.

The drake roared and stumbled, pushing the mercenaries back with the flaming edge of her axe. The group of mercs pinned in the middle of the fighting were gathering their wits now, raising their guns and picking targets. One bore down on Zaress and pulled the trigger.

But the lasers were intercepted by a shimmering red field. Gray slid to one knee beside Zaress, left arm curled in front of him. The bulky object on his bracer projected a triangle-shaped shield of force that spread out the laser blasts across its surface, nullifying them. His right paw reached down to his thigh and he drew his own weapon, aiming it around the edge of the shield and firing a few half-aimed shots. The mercenaries had no cover, and trying to duck and avoid the hail of red laser beams caused them to slide and fall. One of the sword-wielding mercenaries took a laser hit in the breastplate and stumbled backwards against the rock. Cheap armor was no match against a finely-tuned Ranger weapon, as evidenced by the glowing hole in the plate. Zaress took the opening to bring herself upright again, axe ready for bear, and she swung the blade down over the top of Gray's shield, dropping the second sword-wielder to the mud.

At the bottom of the hill, Rienne had her paws full. Two of the mercs with rifles were aiming for her, and they decided that their comrade was dead anyways, so they unloaded laser fire in her direction. The beams that missed struck the surface of the river, causing the water to explode into steam. It added to the mist already in the air, and gave the fox cover to drop back under the surface. But the water was too muddy to see, so she couldn't go far, nor was there anything to push off from. She could feel the ripples of lasers hitting the water, flash-evaporating lines of liquid and releasing torrents of super-heated steam that exploded upwards into the air. A lucky hit would find her eventually. Reaching out her paws, she recalled her knives. She felt the handles touch her fingertips and gripped them tight.

Rienne lunged up from the river again, water streaming down her figure. A laser singed her arm fur as she threw her first knife. But before it hit home, a loud *crack* boomed off the rock spires. The first mercenary's breastplate broke apart from an impact and they tumbled into the mud. The second merc quickly shifted their aim from Rienne to the jungle behind her, unloading their laser rifle at full auto above her head. Thinking fast, the fox whipped her second knife through the air. The blade sank into the mercenary's gauntlet, and their aim flew upwards, stitching the air above the river with red lines of light. A second thunderous boom heralded the next shot, and the last mercenary dropped to the mud.

The gold fox turned around in the water, peering into the jungle behind her. From atop a laser-scarred rock on the far shore, a patch of color began to wobble and smudge the air. Light bent and twisted before finally falling aside, revealing a figure in blue and black armor. Rogue shouldered his sniper rifle and brushed back his camo-cloak's hood, revealing the wide blue visor of his helmet. The wolf jumped down from the rock and waded into the river to join Rienne, his cloak drifting lazily on the surface of the water and rapidly adapting to take on the color of mud.

He gestured at the last mercenary to fall. "Great throw, they almost had me. Guess you showed me a thing or two about knives."

Rienne stared for a moment. Then she raised her paws up to her shoulders and flicked her

wrists. Her knives flew through the air to her paws, and she caught them neatly. Splashing them clean in the water, she returned them to their sheathes.

“Good timing,” she simply said. She looked over her shoulder at the muddy hill strewn with bodies. There were only white and purple armored figures laying visible. “I think Zaress was hit. Gray must have her.”

“Shit,” Rogue swore, and he trudged through the water towards the hill.

Behind the rock pillars, the medic had his patient propped against the base of the rock spire in the driest spot they could find. Animal bones were unceremoniously kicked out of the way so Zaress could sit down. When Rogue found them, Zaress had her helmet off and was biting her lower lip with her snaggle teeth as the tigyote sprayed medical foam on her injuries. She looked up as the half-cloaked wolf approached.

“So glad you could join us,” she mumbled through gritted fangs.

“Easy to find you when you start a firefight,” Rogue replied. He knelt down beside her and asked Gray, “How is she?”

“I’m fine,” the drake interjected irritably.

“Just a few scratches,” Gray explained anyways, putting the spray away and retrieving a hypo injector. “She’ll be fighting fit. I’ve sealed any more blood loss, but because your suit’s been compromised and who knows what’s in that water, you need a spectral anti-bio.”

Zaress snarled as Gray wedged a finger into her collar and tugged it down to make room for the injector. Pressing the nozzle against the drake’s meaty neck, he squeezed the trigger and the injector made a loud *pshhh* as it filled her artery with adaptive antibiotics. Zaress twitched and pulled herself away from the injector as soon as it fired.

“Alright, I’d normally say bed rest for two days, but given the circumstances we can reschedule,” the medic told her, extending his paw and helping her up. Gray looked at the wolf and drake both. “You guys don’t laugh much, huh?”

“The effort is appreciated,” Rogue told him. Giving it a second thought, he glanced back towards Rienne, who was digging around the dead mercenaries. “Does she?”

“You’d be surprised,” Gray replied, shrugging.

Rienne stood up and climbed up the muddy bank to join the others. Dangling from one paw were a pair of wet, muddy belts, both heavily laden with square cases. Hazard stripes were etched into the sides of the cases, denoting one important detail: explosives. In her other paw, she held a detonator, the red cap on the end covering the trigger. “Look what I found.”

“Glad I didn’t shoot those,” Gray muttered, blanching.

The vixen pulled one of the cases from the belt and juggled it, much to the medic’s displeasure. Rogue and Zaress just shook their heads.

“Plastic explosives,” Rienne explained for him. “You couldn’t make these blow up if you wanted to without priming them first.”

“How do you do that?” Gray asked.

“Another, smaller explosion.”

“Forgive me for asking,” the tigyote replied, holding his helmet in his paw. “Not my department.”

Rienne tipped her head thoughtfully as she put the explosive back in its place on the belt. “Does anyone else know how to use these?” she asked, looking up towards Rogue and Zaress.

“I do,” the drake replied. She squinted her eyes as she looked down at the fox. “What are you planning?”

“I’m thinking I don’t want to sneak through an entire base crawling with mercs.” The infiltrator slung the belts over her shoulder. Even through her helmet, it was obvious she was grinning.

The others stared at her for a moment. Then Zaress broke the silence, offering a snort of a laugh under her breath. “Well, shit. We *did* bring her for a reason.”

Rienne was able to track the mercenary patrol's trail easily through the jungle, since they hadn't even been trying to hide it. At first, there were seared and smoldering bits of vegetation on the ground, but as those cooled off, she followed their bootprints in the mud. Rogue explained that he landed his Maelstrom a bit towards the north, on this side of the stream. It was less likely that they were able to track his ship, since it was faster moving and registered less on surface radar than the Squall. And if the patrol sent out to find them didn't report back, the base would likely lock down and tighten defenses instead of sending out more patrols piecemeal.

As they followed the trail, Rienne and Rogue began to find additional sets of footprints in the mud. They were older, and moved in random directions and followed paths hacked through the foliage with blades. Deciding to investigate further, the infiltrator and sniper followed some of the meandering paths in the area until they all began to congregate in one spot of dense jungle. Slipping through, they found a churned line of earth and overturned trees, all terminating in the remains of a busted Republic escape pod. The oblong box with descent flaps – several broken off – lay canted at an angle against a risen pile of earth pushed up by its own nose. Rogue set up overwatch at a distance while Zaress took point, Rienne on her heels. Gray crouched out of sight in the jungle but held his pistol in both gauntlets.

The drake and vixen cleared the area and waved the others over. Together, they gathered to investigate the pod. It was significantly smaller than the Squall. Since it was an automated lifeboat, it lacked a cockpit for manual piloting, instead using all of its interior space for passengers. It looked like ten could be crammed into the seating available inside, elbow and leg room be damned. Lockers underneath the seats contained survival equipment and food, but the seats had been torn off and the supplies looted already. There was no one alive still in the pod, but that didn't mean they didn't find anyone.

There were signs of a gunfight all around the pod. The open doorway to the passenger compartment was heavily scarred by laser scorching, and three bodies in pitted and blackened Republic armor lay inside the door. If any mercenaries had been downed during the battle, their bodies had been taken away. Rienne climbed into the escape pod and discovered that the dead soldiers had Praetorian Guard emblems on their armor, confirming that their VIP was, indeed, a senator. The Praetorians were well geared but couldn't hold against limitless numbers. Leaving the bodies alone, Rienne headed deeper into the pod and began to pull a panel off one wall.

“What are you doing?” Zaress asked, shouldering her way into the pod and looming over the fox. She watched as Rienne used one knife to pry the panel loose and then tossed it aside to rattle on the deck. Behind the panel was a reinforced black box, packed tight with extra armor plating around it. It was the escape pod's flight recorder and rescue transponder.

Or it would've been, if there was anything in it.

“Told you,” Rienne said, her voice flat.

Zaress looked back at the bodies in the doorway and then again at the empty box. “Why go through the trouble of putting the panel back and hiding it, then?”

“They didn't,” the fox replied. “Someone else did before it launched.”

Rogue and Gray were listening from the open hatch on the side of the pod. The wolf shook his head. “This is way bigger than we thought.”

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