Rescue in Time of War

By

Kurt Springs

Myiles dashed between the ruined buildings of the colony world Axia Prime. His people, the Felis, and the humans once lived amiably on this world. A dispute elsewhere along the border had shattered the peace. By the time his father, Colonel Praxi, arrived, Axia Prime lay in ruins, with survivors huddling in small enclaves, desperately clinging to life.

Myiles crouched behind a wall, his catlike ears swiveling for any sign of danger. He hugged the wall as artillery rounds crashed a few hundred meters away. His pupils narrowed to slits as he scanned the ruined street.

He had found the orphanage two weeks earlier. His father had given him many stern warnings, but Myiles could not leave them to starve. He shifted his pack of rations and took cover as another salvo of artillery struck around him.

I've got to get them out of here, he decided grimly.

The artillery fire tapered off, and he made his final dash toward the shattered building.

Myiles dashed through the door into the building.

More like a cave, he mused. *It's kept them safe so far*.

"Prince Myiles," came a stern, female Felis voice. "You shouldn't be here. Your father has warned you many times."

"I brought rations, Dame Kalis," Myiles replied. "The artillery is getting close. You need to get out of here."

Dame Kalis, her usually regal dress threadbare and grimy, looked around at the small faces of her charges, both Felis and human.

"It will be difficult to move them without help," came a human voice from the back.

Myiles shook his head. "I'm afraid a direct hit will kill you all, Sister Michelle."

The older human woman stepped into the light, holding a small Felis boy. "Frightened children are hard to herd at the best of times. Under fire from both sides…"

A small form darted from the huddled children as Sister Michelle's voice trailed off.

"Myiles," a six-year-old human girl cried. "I missed you."

He opened his arms and pulled her into a hug. "I missed you, too, Alice."

She squeezed him as tightly as her malnourished arms could. "I was frightened."

He whispered into her ear and stroked her matted copper hair. "Remember what I promised. I talked to my cousin, Sheeria. She's anxious to meet you."

She pulled back.

"The princess?" Alice asked in awe.

Myiles nodded. "Don't worry. We'll find a way to get all of you to safety."

Alice looked at him with all the trust of a small child. Myiles hoped he could prove himself worthy of her trust.

"The rations?" Dame Kalis coaxed. "As much as I disapprove of your delivering them, we do need them."

Myiles disentangled himself from his young friend and shrugged off his pack. “It should last a few days.”

“I suppose it’s pointless to tell you not to bring any more?”

Myiles looked from the matronly Dame Kalis to the terrified eyes of little Alice. “Completely.”

“You’d better get going,” Sister Michelle suggested. “The artillery has tapered off.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

Alice hugged him one last time. “Promise you’ll come back.”

“I promise.”

Myiles turned and made his way to the door. As he was about to exit, the artillery picked up again. A round hit nearby. The tremor shattered something fragile in the structure. Myiles tried to get clear, but a rumble crashed upon him. He lost consciousness when a rock struck his head.

***

Myiles felt himself waking with a headache. He kicked involuntarily as something struck his leg. He tried to move and found himself pinned.

His eyes snapped open. The building's entrance had collapsed. His head and shoulders were clear, and his arms were free. He grabbed a handful of rubble and tried to pull himself out.

"Ow," he grunted.

He heard voices from the wreckage of the orphanage. He fervently prayed to the Holy One that everyone was okay. He could hear frantic voices, muffled by tons of rock.

"I'm alright," he coughed. "Just stuck."

He could not make out individual words.

"I bet Father is going to say, 'I told you so,'" he muttered.

He froze at the sound of footsteps moving through the ruins.

***

Staff Sergeant Henry Nolan raised a hand, halting his squad. "I thought I heard something ahead."

"Felis patrol?" Corporal Chen asked.

“Doesn’t sound like one,” the sergeant replied. “Keep low. This artillery duel could start again.”

“Bets on who gets us,” Private Bragg muttered. “The Felis or Friendly Fire.”

Sergeant Nolan signaled for them to move out.

He moved forward ten meters, then rounded the corner. He stopped short upon seeing a Felis youth trapped beneath the rubble. He scanned the area and saw no one else.

“He’s just a kid,” Corporal Chen muttered.

The Felis youth looked at them with a resigned expression. “This day keeps getting better and better.”

Sergeant Nolan shouldered his rifle and held up his hands in a gesture to show he was not there to hurt him.

“How badly are you hurt, kid?” the sergeant asked.

The kid heaved a sigh. “Aside from a badly bruised ego, I think I’m all right.”

The youngster looked around as the human soldiers fanned out. “There are more trapped in the rubble.”

The sergeant nodded. “What’s your name? I can’t keep calling you ‘Kid.’”

“Prince Myiles, son of Colonel Praxi.”

The humans looked at each other in shock. “What are you doing in the middle of a war zone?”

“I was bringing food to the orphanage.”

Staff Sergeant Nolan’s eyes widened. “Get me a scanner.”

A marine placed a device in his hands.

“Seventeen life signs.” His brow furrowed. “A mixture of human and Felis.”

The Felis prince nodded. “Dame Kalis and Sister Michelle set it up. Their religious women who came together to save the children. They gathered every little child they could find and tried to keep them safe. Seventeen? Thank the Holy One. They’re all safe.”

“This building is going to be a problem,” the sergeant said. “The way it collapsed, if we pull the wrong thing, it all comes

down. Worse, we need to get oxygen to them, or they'll all suffocate."

Staff Sergeant Nolan thumbed his communicator. "Overlord, Badger 1. I need to speak to Overlord Actual. We have a situation."

"Roger, One," came the call from the comms operator. "Stand by."

"Wilco."

Henry looked around while his men took defensive positions.

"What will your superiors do to me?" the young Felis asked nervously.

Henry shrugged. "Most of them have kids of their own. I—"

"Badger 1, Overlord Actual, SITREP!"

Henry straightened upon hearing the code for "Situation Report." "Overlord, we have a collapsed building with survivors inside. My understanding is that it is an orphanage. We have a Felis teenager trapped at the entrance. From my observations, this building could collapse if we look at it wrong."

There was a pause on the other end. “Send me your scanner logs and video images.”

“Wilco.”

***

Colonel Praxi was a Felis divided. He was trying to direct the battle on Axia Prime while worrying about his son.

The location of the orphanage is highly contested. Our artillery—

“Colonel?” a drone operator called.

Looking over the operator’s shoulder, he felt his blood run cold.

“Should I send a platoon—”

“What’s the status of our artillery assigned to that area?” he snapped.

“The supply train has delivered more shells,” the operations officer called. “They say they can—”

“Tell them to hold fire,” Colonel Praxi ordered, his eyes never leaving the image of his son surrounded by human soldiers.

The leader of the human squad was speaking with his superiors over his comm system. His son was unharmed for the moment. Then the human handed the boy his canteen. Myiles took a grateful drink of water.

“Comms, can you put me through to the human theater commander on an open channel?”

The communications officer turned to him. Seeing the look on his leader’s face, he turned back to his console.

***

General O’Halloran rubbed his temple as he spoke to the sergeant. “Listen, son, it’s not that I don’t empathize, but war requires hard choices.”

“Sir, these are just children. If we—”

“If this weren’t a war zone, I would okay a rescue operation,” the general cut him off. “If I sent engineers out, the Felis would—”

“Sir!”

“Wait a moment, Staff Sergeant.” The general turned to his comms officer. “Yes, Captain.”

“I’m getting a request for communication from the Felis on an open channel, General. It’s from Colonel Praxi’s headquarters.”

The general frowned. “Sergeant, what was that boy’s name?”

“Prince Myiles, son of Colonel Praxi.”

“Hold on.” General O’Halloran turned to his communications officer. “Put him through.”

The image of a Felis officer’s cat-like face appeared.

“Colonel.” The general nodded.

“General, you are currently communicating with Marines who are near a neutral orphanage,” the colonel began. “My son is trapped under the rubble of the entrance.”

“Go on.”

“I am requesting a ceasefire, so that we can free those trapped.”

The general noted the desperation in his opposite number’s voice.

“You’re asking this on symbiotic grounds?”

The colonel gathered his thoughts for a long moment. “My son, Myiles, has friends in that orphanage, General. Some are human. Yes, on symbiotic, or as you would say, humanitarian grounds.”

The general thought of his adult children and grandchildren. He wondered what he would do if the roles were reversed.

“My superiors will break me down to a private,” the general mused. “Hell. There’s no price on being able to live with yourself. Colonel, I’m having my engineers put together what’s needed for such an operation. I suggest you do the same. I’ll have Colonel Devon get in touch with his opposite number on your side.”

Colonel Paraxi relaxed.

“Comms, inform all commands that a ceasefire is in immediate effect, and I will personally shoot anyone who gets trigger-happy.”

“Wilco, General.”

“Staff Sergeant Nolan was training to be an engineer before being drafted. I’ll have Colonel Devon patch him through. He can do what he can to prepare the site until others arrive.”

“Thank you, General,” the Felis leader replied. “I’m going there myself.”

“Let’s try to maintain communications throughout the rescue effort,” the general suggested.

“Agreed.”

General O’Halloran unmuted his link to the patrol. “Staff Sergeant, change of plans.”

***

Staff Sergeant Nolan kept his eye on the hand scanner as he conducted a more thorough sweep of the building, transmitting structural data to the engineering commanders on both sides. As he returned to the ruined entrance, he saw Corporal Chen listening to the prince describe the people trapped inside the building.

“Alice is really cute,” Myiles was saying. “She always loved fairy tales about princes and princesses. I want to introduce her to my cousin, Princess Sheeri. Although…” The prince grinned. “We need to show her that being a princess involves hard work.”

Henry tried not to laugh as he approached.

“I think we can punch a hole to pump fresh air into that area in the north, the staff sergeant found,” Colonel Devon suggested.

“I just reviewed our combined inventories, Colonel,” the Felis engineer, Lt. Colonel Merrys, advised. “Our equipment almost complements each other for this effort.”

There was a pause.

“What are we missing?” Henery asked.

“We still need a way of keeping the structure from collapsing as we work to free those trapped,” the lt. colonel said.

“Like a gravity stabilizer,” Colonel Devon stated. “And that will just take care of the downward pressure. There are dangerous pieces of debris that can topple in from the sides.”

“Which requires the ability to grab the said pieces of debris and get them to where they can’t hurt anyone.”

“Correct, Staff Sergeant.”

“Our individual heavy machinery could grab a piece, but doing several that could collapse at the same time will be almost impossible with what we have here,” Colonel Devon added. “I’m going to have a word with General O’Halloran. We have reinforcements arriving soon. Perhaps their engineers have something.”

“I’ll broach the subject with Colonel Praxi,” Lt. Colonel Merrys agreed. “We have reinforcements arriving, too.”

“We’d better get word to them before they arrive and restart the battle on us,” Colonel Devon replied. “Let’s hope they don’t just bust us all down to some very funny-looking privates.”

Staff Sergeant Nolan and Lt. Colonel Merrys laughed.

***

Colonel Praxi wanted to rush out to be with his son. Instead, he was making a call he dreaded.

“We’ve reached Emperor Fiorix, Colonel,” came the call from his comms officer.

“I’ll take in my office,” he said.

General O’Halloran called, “Good luck.”

He went through the door and secured it behind him.

Privacy, at least, meant he would not have to bow to his cousin. At least not until the yelling began.

The 3D viewer activated, and his cousin sat in the ready room of his flagship, the Royal Claw.

“SITREP.”

Colonel Praxi took a deep breath. “Both sides in theater have agreed to a cease-fire while engaged in rescue operations, my Emperor.”

His cousin froze as he processed the words. Princess Sheeri stood at his elbow. Her presence offered Praxi some hope.

The emperor glanced at his daughter, then turned back to him.

“Go on.”

Colonel Praxi described the situation with his son, the orphans, and what both sides needed to rescue them. Then he waited.

“Would bloody awkward be a good way to describe the situation we find ourselves in, Praxi?”

“I haven’t thought about terms that describe the situation, Fiorix. I’ve thought of my son and the poor children who are trapped. If you wish to have my command, I’ll surrender it gladly once they are safe.”

“Father!” The princess spoke up for the first time. “We have part of what they need for the rescue operation.”

“I’ve read the intelligence reports, Sheeri. I know what you’re going to say.”

“But, Father—”

“Princess Sheeri, could you please give your uncle and me some privacy to talk?”

“But—”

The emperor put his hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Don't worry, my child. I won't bite and only roar a little. Does that make you feel better?"

The princess hesitated, then nodded. Without a word, the Felis girl turned and left the room.

The emperor turned back to the viewer. "At this stage in her life, she is an idealist."

"Myiles is the same."

Both cousins remained quiet for a moment. "There is something I need to warn you about. You may pass this on to General O'Halloran. This war didn't start because both sides were idiots. Someone is playing us, and they have agents on both sides."

"Have any of my people been identified?" Colonel Praxi asked, shocked but prepared to take steps.

"No, but agents may be among the humans," the emperor told him. "That is why I decided to come myself."

"Are the humans aware of this?"

The emperor nodded. “We haven’t been in communication on the topic, but my sources say the human president has been brought up to speed on the matter. The human task force that is arriving has more engineering equipment. Admiral Alex Heard has been briefed, according to my agents. I’ll try to contact him when I’m done here.”

“Any idea who instigated this?”

“None. That is why both sides have to be careful. While engaged in rescue operations, Axia Prime will be vulnerable. There is no telling where an attack may come from. Internal threats can do as much, if not more, damage to the fragile peace you’ve created. I hope I can build on your start.”

“Thank you, Fiorix.”

“Thank me when everyone is safe. Out.”

The screen went dark. Colonel Praxi returned to his ready room.

***

When Colonel Praxi reentered his control room, he found his staff and General O'Halloran looking expectantly at him. The latter waited on the 3D viewer.

"Well, he didn't order my arrest," the colonel said as he collapsed into a chair. "In fact, he asked me to share some intelligence with you."

The general's eyes widened as his recent enemy explained what his emperor and cousin shared with him.

"This adds a new wrinkle to things," the general mused. "I trust most of my people, but some intelligence operatives were inserted into another part of Axia Prime. I'm going to contact the Admiral and find out what's going on."

"I'm going to get a ride to the rescue site."

"According to Staff Sergeant Nolan, he has two engineering officers telling him what to do." The general grinned. "He says the orders aren't contradictory and seem to complement each other. I'd say our engineering leads operate on the same wavelength. I told the sergeant not to get used to these little treats."

Colonel Praxi laughed. “I guess our bureaucrats aren’t that dissimilar…”

He let his voice trail off. Then turned to one of his subordinates. “Where is Commandant Michezel?”

The comm officer looked startled. “Our political officer? He said he wanted to observe the rescue operations to—”

“Contact the engineering staff,” the colonel said. “He is to be detained.”

“You suspect him?” the general asked.

“He was hot to prosecute the war without mercy,” the colonel said. “He should have stormed in here to insist we sacrifice the orphans.”

“I’ve alerted the lt. colonel,” the comms officer reported. “They’ll keep an eye out.”

Colonel Praxi was already heading out the door.

***

Admiral Heard looked up as his communications officer turned to him.

“Sir, General O’Halloran is contacting us.”

“Put him through,” the admiral said.

The 3D imager brought up the general. “Sir, the situation has become complicated.”

“Go on.”

General O’Halloran explained the situation to him, and the admiral listened.

“Interesting, General,” Admiral Heard said. “I heard about your intelligence from the president himself. We can’t discount a Felis trick, of course, but the evidence is compelling.”

“Sirs,” the comm officer called again. “I’m receiving a hail from the Felis Imperial Flagship. It’s the emperor himself.”

The admiral rolled his eyes heavenward. “Put him through.”

A tall Felis in an Imperial uniform appeared. “Admiral.”

“Your Majesty,” the admiral inclined his head. “I was just speaking with General O’Halloran. It seems we have a few problems we must resolve together.”

The emperor gave a feigned frown. “You mean I don’t have to use my exquisite charm to get your cooperation? I’m crushed.”

“Sadly, no,” the admiral replied with a slight grin. “On the bright side, it saves us some time.”

The emperor laughed. “General, I assume you told the admiral what you still need for the rescue operation.”

“I did, Your Majesty.”

“We have what you need,” the admiral added.

“The engineers have drilled a small hole into the structure without too much trouble,” the general added. “We’re pumping air into the structure now, which buys the children and the women caring for them some time. Colonel Praxi took a traitor into custody before he could plant a bomb in the structure.”

The emperor looked relieved.

“I was going to ask about the intelligence team you had stationed outside the combat zone,” the general inquired.

The admiral froze. “I didn’t send any such team.”

The general grew alarmed. “I’m heading in that direction myself. I’d better send out the Recon Teams to bring in those intelligence operators before they cause trouble.”

The door to the flag bridge opened, and a security officer stepped out of the lift. Admiral Heard sensed something was wrong. The man drew a gun and aimed before a yeoman tackled him.

Someone grabbed the pistol and covered the traitor.

The admiral stared coldly at the man as security hauled him to his feet. “You and those working with you have cost many innocent people their lives on both sides.”

“No one is innocent,” the man spat.

One security agent looked at the admiral. “Should we space him, sir?”

The admiral considered it. “No. I’ll question him later. He is irrelevant. I want whoever is behind this.”

The man was dragged off the bridge.

The admiral turned back to the emperor. “How soon will you arrive?”

“Six hours,” Emperor Fiorix replied.

“About the same,” Admiral Heard agreed. “I suggest we have our tactical people coordinate. We may have to ward off an incursion by our unknown enemy.”

“They are at your disposal,” the emperor agreed. “See you when we arrive. General, tell my nephew we’re on our way.”

“My pleasure, Your Majesty.”

The 3D imagers went dark.

“All commands. Ahead full.”

“Aye, Admiral.”

***

Staff Sergeant Nolan hated to leave the operation, but understood General O’Halloran’s orders to find and detain the so-called intelligence operators post haste. They’d pulled their all-terrain transport into the operations area and fanned out, prepared for the worst.

Corporal Chen returned to the vehicle.

“Sorry, staff sergeant, they’re gone.”

Nolan growled. “Search the perimeter. We need to know where they went.”

A few moments later, a marine waved them over. “It looks like they started out this way.”

“What’s in that direction?”

“Our power plant and a few villages where survivors have taken refuge,” the corporal replied.

“If they intended to interfere with our operation,” Nolan began, “could they alter course to accomplish that if they assumed we would follow?”

The corporal touched his terminal and displayed his map. “They could head for Artillery Battery 7. They could destroy the rescue site before we caught up. They could assume more if they think it would take us time to figure out their plan. I should mention that they could do plenty of damage to the situation if their true target is either the power plant or one of the villages.”

“That’s why you’re taking two fireteams to follow them,” Nolan said. “I can take the direct route and head them off. I’ll radio ahead to warn Battery 7.”

“Understood, Staff Sergeant.”

“Move.”

Corporal Chen took the trail with eight Marines. Staff Sergeant Nolan thumbed his comm as he got into the transport.

“Battery 7, Recon Alpha,” he called. “Stay alert. You may have traitors looking to take your position. I repeat, traitors may head your way. How copy?”

“Copy all, Recon Alpha,” came the reply. “We’ll stay alert.”

“Be advised,” Nolan continued. “I have two fireteams trailing them. I’m moving to head them off. Don’t get trigger-happy.”

“Understood.”

He looked at his people. “Let’s move.”

***

Nolan was closing in on the artillery position when he heard weapons fire.

“Battery 7, Alpha 1, SITREP.”

“They tried to hit us on our six,” the battery commander replied. “We’re in heavy contact.”

“We’re on our way.” He shifted frequencies and called his two other fireteams. “Bravo, Charlie, Battery 7 is under attack. I need you, on the double.”

“Wilco, Alpha 1, we’re on the move.”

The vehicle accelerated without Nolan telling the driver. They saw the turncoats as the traitors saw them. Staff Sergeant Nolan and his team leaped from the vehicle and engaged. Within moments, his other two fireteams arrived from the other direction.

The traitors grew desperate. The battery team fought back, and Nolan’s three teams pressed in, eliminating their options for maneuver. Five minutes later, the survivors surrendered. Three artillerymen lay on the ground.

“The general and admiral are going to want a word with you,” Staff Sergeant Nolan snarled as his men secured the prisoners. He thumbed his comm. “General, Alpha 1. We’ve secured them.

They were trying to take Battery 7. Send MEDEVAC. We have three wounded marines."

The glares that followed the traitors left no doubt about what every marine there wanted to do, but they were too well-versed in their duty to act on it.

***

Sergeant Nolan and his team arrived at the rescue site after turning the traitors over to security. The area now had more people and more equipment.

Sergeant Nolan found the general standing next to a Felis colonel he had not yet met. He saluted as he approached. The two former enemies returned the salute.

"Staff Sergeant Henry Nolan," the general said as the two turned toward him. "I'd like you to meet Colonel Praxi, Prince Myiles' father."

"My son told me you stayed with him until your general ordered you to find the turncoats among you," the Felis officer said, bowing his head. "You have my gratitude."

“He was just a kid, sir,” Nolan replied. “He reminded me of my little brother at home.”

The Felis officer’s ears became erect as his lips curled into a smile. “I hope our actions will create a world where they can one day meet and be friends.”

“How is he?”

The two war leaders turned back toward the rescue site. “He is more worried about his friends in the orphanage than about himself. He also tells me you helped find the spot where your engineers could safely bore a hole to pump in oxygen. I hope you will soon be able to continue your education.”

Nolan only nodded. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

The general considered him for a moment. “Both Colonel Devon and Lt. Colonel Merrys say they could use your engineering expertise and common sense.”

“Thank you, sir.” He saluted the two officers and headed to the rescue site.

***

Staff Sergeant Nolan approached Colonel Devon as Devon handed a data pad back to an aide.

Nolan saluted. “Colonel, the general said you could use my help.”

“Thank you, Staff Sergeant. The two fleets have just entered orbit. They’re offloading the heavy equipment we need. I need you to identify all the points where a gravity hoist can safely grab, and the spots that could give way, so we can try to stabilize the load.”

“Yes, sir.”

An engineer handed him a scanner and a datapad, and Nolan began running structural scans.

***

It is often said that war involves long periods of boredom followed by moments of terror. Staff Sergeant Nolan’s work could have been called tedious. However, he worked with other engineers, both human and Felis. Often, they came together to help with structural equations that were becoming frustrating.

Pooling their knowledge helped solve problems that one person might have found insurmountable.

At one point, an elegantly uniformed Felis asked to see his data pad. Nolan explained a particularly vexing issue that could cause the entire structure to collapse if the load shifted. They shared a few ideas and finally figured out how to brace that section without causing other problems.

“Thank you, sir,” Staff Sergeant Nolan said, saluting and then shaking his hand.

“My pleasure, Staff Sergeant.”

A Felis captain approached and, rather than saluting, bowed. “Your Imperial Majesty, thank you for your help.”

Staff Sergeant Nolan’s eyes widened. “You’re the Felis Emperor.”

The Felis grinned at him. “I was at the Imperial Academy of Science before I ascended the throne. I wanted to be a civil engineer. My father had the bad timing to die and leave me the throne before I could make much of an impact.”

“Well, sir,” Nolan said out of habit, “I’m glad you had time to stay in practice.”

***

They stepped back as the Felis Imperial Engineering Vessel Uplifter extended its struts at a safe distance from the structure. Staff Sergeant Nolan found himself standing with the emperor and his daughter as they waited for the tractor clamps to connect to the points the engineering team had identified.

“We’ve braced all identified areas,” Lt. Colonel Merrys called. “We are reducing local gravity to relieve the stress.”

Princess Sheeria clutched her father’s arm. Minutes passed in nervous silence. Then Colonel Devon flashed them a thumbs-up.

“It’s holding,” he said. “Now, let’s make an entrance to get the orphans and their caregivers out.”

Engineering crews used heavy machinery like surgical instruments, bracing anything that might undo all their hard work.

Slowly, a hole to the interior opened and expanded. At last, it was big enough to extract those trapped inside.

Nolan counted nine Felis children and six human children. Coming last were a middle-aged human woman wearing a cross and a regal older Felis female bearing the symbol of the Felis faith.

Once the group was at a safe distance from the building, the princess left her father's side to help. The engineers prepared to extract Myiles. One little human girl broke from the group and ran to the trapped prince before anyone could stop her.

Nolan ran forward as the princess chased after her. She reached Myiles before the princess did.

"Please, Myiles," the child cried, throwing her arms around him. "Please say you're all right."

"I'll be all right as soon as they get me out of here," the young Felis assured her. He looked up as Nolan and the princess arrived. "Hi, Sheeria. You look well."

“You look stuck, Myiles,” Sheeria laughed, wiping away a worried tear.

“Alice, I’d like you to meet my cousin, Princess Sheeria,” he said, trying to sound formal. “Sheeria, this is the human I told you about.”

The princess’s ears and lips twitched into a smile. “You’re the one my cousin told me about. I am most pleased to meet you.”

Alice, overwhelmed, managed a curtsy. Sheeria extended her hand to Alice, but the child pulled away and cried.

“I’m all grubby,” she wept.

“Bosh,” Sheeria replied, taking the girl’s hands. “There are more important things than dirt. Dirt is easily washed away. Come on, Lady Alice, we need to get back so they can free Myiles.”

Staff Sergeant Henry Nolan smiled as the princess, somehow both regal and comforting, led the child back to the safe area.

“We’re about to extract you,” Nolan told the Felis youth. “How quickly do you think you can move?”

Myiles slumped. “My legs are getting numb.”

Nolan frowned. “The problem is that we only have seconds once we start pulling up on this end for you to get out of there before the structure collapses.”

Nolan thumbed his comm. “Sirs, the prince’s legs have gone numb. I don’t think he can get out on his own. I’ll stay here and pull him free.”

“Understood. We’re almost ready. On the count of three.”

Staff Sergeant Nolan grabbed the youngster’s hands and applied tension, working out in his head the angle to pull and the direction that would get them both to safety.

“Three, two, one, now!”

Nolan pulled and twisted, and the structure shifted. For a split second, nothing pinned Myiles, and that was all Nolan needed. Myiles was suddenly in Nolan’s arms. As the rubble

collapsed in on itself, Nolan twisted, shielding the Felis prince with his body.

Dust and debris filled the air. A few fragments struck the staff sergeant’s helmet and armor. None touched the prince. Soon, the sound of the building's collapse faded. The two disentangled.

“It seems I am destined to call you my champion, Staff Sergeant,” the prince coughed.

“I’ll settle for just friends,” Nolan croaked, the dust in his throat.

***

The gathering was a pleasant affair. Not too ceremonial. Just a space and time for everyone to celebrate being alive. It was not full dress. A shower, clean fatigues, some decent food, and a bit of drink.

Henry Nolan’s new fatigue shirt featured an extra chevron. He had to get used to being called Gunnery Sergeant, or Gunny for short. He spent part of his time celebrating with his squad before being called to the head table.

“I don’t deserve all this,” he confided to Princess Sheeria. “Many people on both sides worked toward this.”

“You are the visible symbol of the success of their efforts, Gunnery Sergeant,” she said, guiding him to a chair between her and her father. “You began the process that allowed us to uncover the trap we could hardly escape. You were in the places you needed to be when it mattered most. All celebrated heroes truly stand for all the heroes who fought beside them.”

Once seated, Emperor Fiorix leaned over to him. “We know who orchestrated this sorry affair—the Telex Consortium. They paid off operatives on both sides to destabilize the peace. Fortunately, neither side is badly mauled. As a united front, we can scare them to death.”

“So, they precipitated the very thing they hoped to avoid,” Sheeria said as she handed a plate to Alice, who wore a gown tailored by one of the princess’s ladies-in-waiting.

“There are still border disputes between us,” remarked Gunnery Sergeant Nolan.

“I’m letting my daughter spread her diplomatic wings to help resolve them,” the emperor replied, pouring Nolan a cup of Felis wine.

“I’m working on the principle that if we are going to play together, we have to learn to share.” She wiped a spilled dark beverage from the child’s chin. “Many of those worlds can be administered jointly. Most of them had combined populations long before the dispute began. Each planet can decide what works best.”

“I am speaking with the president about exchanging ambassadors,” Emperor Fiorix said. “They will need a diplomatic marine contingent. I was wondering if you might be interested in helping. I can recommend you to the Imperial School of Engineering. I think you’ll find it stimulating.”

Nolan set the cup down and thought. “That’s a lot to consider. I’m going to talk to my parents later. Can I give you an answer in the morning?”

“Of course, Gunnery Sergeant.”

Somehow, Henry Nolan thought this might mark the start of something interesting.