

Lost Children

By Kurt Springs

Princess Zyrillia of the Chartchan Imperium's ship touched down on her personal landing pad. The pad retracted into the palace as she took off her helmet, shaking loose her blue hair. She wiggled her antennae, glad to be home. The Chartchan were humanoid with crimson skin.

Well, kind of, she thought. I would have liked to help Jonathan find his children.

She climbed out of the cockpit as a mechanic approached.

"Damaged stabilizer," she told him. "A friend made some emergency repairs so I could get home."

"I will replace it right away, Your Highness," the mechanic replied.

"Thank you, Gerred."

She walked to the entrance. When the door opened, Minister Sarnus stood there, waiting.

"An exciting flight, Your Highness?" the minister asked.

“Torellian pirates thought I’d be an easy target,” she replied as he matched her pace. “Fortunately, some humans stepped in to help me. It seems the pirates aren’t gaining any friends in that quarter.”

“Indeed,” the minister said. “Your mother has instructed you to meet her in the conference room in one hour. Please make yourself presentable. I will have the data logs retrieved from your craft so the queen can review them.”

Zyrillia was about to protest but thought better of it. *Minister Sarnus is right. Those pirates are becoming a problem. If what Jonathan tells me is true, Mother will need to mobilize.*

Princess Zyrillia, now dressed in a royal gown with a silver circlet on her head, glided into the throne room. Her mother, Queen Zirien, frowned as she looked up.

“You should be more careful,” the queen scolded. “You could have become a hostage. I don’t want you racing around the stars alone. I’ve told you many times.”

The princess sighed. "Yes, Mother."

"We need to find those pirates' home base," General Zaharn added. "They're getting bolder."

"I have reason to believe they are on Zarchan 3," the princess replied.

The queen looked sharply at her. "And you know this. How?"

"Jonathan said that his information places them there," the princess replied.

"The human," the queen hissed. "What is his stake in this?"

"He is looking for his daughters," Zyrillia replied.

The queen straightened and gave her daughter a measuring look. "The logs did not provide specifics. Explain."

The princess took a deep breath. "Major Jonathan Reed is a Terran Marine. He was settling into a peaceful life with his wife and two daughters. The Torellian pirates attacked his home colony. They murdered his wife and kidnapped his daughters. He and a squad are now hunting them."

Minister Sarnus crossed his arms. "Zarchan 3 is a sacred site. The Torellian pirates' lives are forfeit for trespassing there. If your human friend follows..."

"I gave him royal leave," the princess stated, knowing this would trigger an argument.

The queen's eyes flashed with anger. "You had no authority."

"He would have gone without it," she said. "Besides, I understand his point."

"Daughter—"

"Mother," the princess replied. "If the roles were reversed, and someone held me in place where you were forbidden to go, what would you do?"

The queen hesitated before closing her eyes. "I would go anyway."

"This is more than just a gesture of empathy." Minister Sarnus eyed her suspiciously.

“In the short time I was with him while his team fixed my ship, we grew close.”

Mother and daughter exchanged an intense gaze. “Ready the fleet. Have my flagship prepared.”

“It will be done, majesty,” General Zaharn promised.

Major Reed watched as his squad prepared to warp into Zarchan 3’s orbit. First Sergeant Tony Dutton issued instructions while Chief Warrant Officer Charles Michels programmed their captured pirate ship’s final descent.

“Once we enter the atmosphere, Chief Warrant Officer Michaels will set the ship to autopilot. We’ll perform a HALO jump from 10,500 meters. We’ll deploy our chutes at 900 meters.”

Lance Corporal James Rigel raised his hand. “The pirates will blow this thing out of the sky. How do we get off this rock?”

First Sergeant Dutton grinned. “We’ll improvise.”

“Of course,” came a resigned reply.

After some laughs, the first sergeant continued. "We'll ditch our chutes in the forest, along with our pressure suits. Once on the ground, take a bearing. You will find your inertial compasses calibrated to Zarchan 3. The compound we are after is roughly 20 kilometers north-northeast. We'll have an exact bearing once we touch down."

Corporal Richard Anderson raised a hand. "Do you want Lance Corporal O'Mally and me to find an overwatch to cover your escape, or do you want us with you?"

The first sergeant glanced at the major.

Major Reed straightened. "From what we know about the area, you won't find much of a roost. I plan to have both of you with us. We might split up once inside. Our informant mentioned that there are some taller buildings within the compound that could be useful. That said, my plans on that are flexible. I'll make a final decision once we see what we have to work with."

"We move by fireteam," the first sergeant instructed. "We've all done this before during the last war. This will be no different."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Major,” Chief Warrant Officer Charles Michels called through his comm. “We’ll be over the drop zone in five minutes.”

Major Reed turned to the group. “Five minutes!”

“Five minutes!” the squad repeated.

They cross-checked each other’s gear. Staff Sergeant Frank Miller prepared their Dutch Shepherd, King, for the drop. Once the dog’s breathing mask was secured, the major helped Staff Sergeant Miller lift the dog into his harness.

“We’re all set, sir,” the staff sergeant promised. King gave a muffled “woof” of agreement.

The major let out a small laugh and walked to the hatch.

Chief Warrant Officer Michaels stepped out of the cockpit and raised one finger.

“One minute!”

The Marines took up the cry as everyone faced the opening hatch.

The major waited for the right moment. “Now.”

He was the first to dive out of the hatch, followed by the first sergeant. One by one, each marine exited the craft.

Major Reed watched as the meters ticked past. High-altitude, low-open parachuting had been around since the twentieth century. It was still a complex skill. He thought about his last night with Princess Zyrillia. She had impressed him with her knowledge of space flight and her courage. She was like Diana, his wife, in many ways.

Major Reed focused on the here and now. He had 1000 meters remaining before he needed to deploy his chute. He watched his altimeter closely. As he reached 910 meters, he deployed his chute. The rest of the squad followed suit. They maneuvered into formation and headed for the landing zone. Soon, his feet touched the ground, and his chute retracted into its pack.

“Comm check.”

Major Reed listened as his squad acknowledged his call.

“Make for the tree line and consolidate.”

Once off the trail, they hid the gear they used to descend. Now lighter, they prepared the rest of their equipment and took a bearing on the compound.

Like shadows, Major Reed's three fireteams moved quietly through the alien forest. They stayed off the trail. Each fireteam leader monitored his own compass, as did the major. Night vision cast everything in an eerie green glow.

Hearing a noise on the road ahead, Major Reed held up his hand. His twelve marines stopped, heard the sound, and took cover while monitoring the road. A ground transport with a Torellian driver moved past. They waited for the noise to subside before breaking cover.

First Sergeant Dutton moved beside him. "Do you want to take a break here?"

"Just a few minutes," the major agreed.

The first sergeant signaled the squad to take a break for a few minutes.

“Do you think our contact made it back?” the first sergeant asked.

Major Reed looked at him. “He said he would. Once we’re in, we send the signal and rendezvous with him.”

“Are you sure you trust him?”

“He may be Torellian, but he hates this,” the major said. “You could feel the distaste radiating from him. Besides, he knows how to open the stasis pods. Did you sense treachery in him?”

The first sergeant shook his head. “No, sir. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t pick up on something that I missed. I guess you can’t treat any group as monolithic. If this works out, his faction could help us put down the pirates for good.”

“I think that’s just it, Tony,” the major mused. “Xaraxal considers himself a warrior, not a pirate.”

The first sergeant smiled, then signaled to the group that time was up. Fireteam Bravo, with their two snipers, crossed the road. The three fireteams then moved along the road while staying off it.

The squad stopped out of sight of the guard towers. The major lifted his binoculars and surveyed the compound.

“Still want to scout it?” the first sergeant asked.

The major nodded and thumbed his secure comm. “Bravo, move around the compound. Give us a clear view of what we’re up against.”

“Wilco.”

Fireteam Bravo started moving counterclockwise.

“Falcon, go the other way. Keep a pipeline open to me.”

“Got it, boss.”

Fireteam Falcon moved in the opposite direction. Chief Warrant Officer Michaels activated his three-dimensional viewer. Soon, the two fireteams’ scans began mapping the enemy compound.

“Send out the drone.”

One marine pulled out the small quadcopter and tossed it into the air. Its engines caught, and it began capturing more of the compound's interior.

The two fireteams and the drone were meticulous. After thirty minutes, the squad had consolidated once more, keeping the drone overhead.

Major Reed examined the detailed image.

“Most of the pirates are sleeping,” the first sergeant said, glancing over his shoulder. “It looks like the four guards on the towers are it.”

“They have a pipeline to their central command,” the major agreed. “Xaraxal should be pulling the night shift. They need only one at central command to sound the alarm, or so they think. The central building visually blocks the northwest tower from the other three. We’ll take out the guard, and enter that way. Once through, we’ll signal Xaraxal. Once they realize he’s no longer at his post, the fun starts. Hopefully, he can get us there like he promised.”

The squad faded back into the forest and headed toward the northwest tower. Once in position, Corporal Anderson aimed at the guard. The major observed with binoculars. The first sergeant

monitored the drone feed. Major Reed glanced at his longtime friend. The first sergeant nodded.

Major Reed concentrated on the guard. "Send it."

Corporal Anderson squeezed the trigger of the suppressed rifle. The guard collapsed.

"Go!"

The squad rushed to the wall and threw lines with grappling hooks over it. The sergeant and two other marines climbed up the wall. Major Reed hooked King back into his harness, and Staff Sergeant Miller moved up with the next group.

Major Reed went up with the third group. The first group was hiding in the shadows. Soon, everyone was over the wall as the first team stowed their gear. The major signaled Xaraxal. Then, they moved toward the rear door. The light turned purple, and the door opened.

They slipped inside, ready for trouble.

Major Reed checked his comm. "Message from Xaraxal. The stairs to the command center are on the right. He's monitoring our progress."

The squad moved forward. As they reached each junction, Major Reed raised the muzzle of his rifle. The marine next to him raised his in response, then covered the junction, falling back in as the squad passed.

They cautiously made their way up the stairs.

The Torellian pirates designed this room as the security nerve center of the compound, where they held high-value prisoners. Seats lined the security stations, displaying motion and video footage from all angles.

Only one figure took the skeleton shift. The reptilian figure turned in his chair as they entered.

"Neatly done," he rasped. "Timed flawlessly. If this room were fully manned, and I were not here..."

"We would have made different plans," the major replied. "However, this way was simpler."

Xaraxal's neck frill expanded, his people's version of a grin. "One small complication. Captain Yeran is on his way. He has a buyer for your daughters. He is about one of your hours away."

Major Reed stiffened.

"We need to keep up the illusion you are not here for as long as possible," the Torellian explained. "The easiest way would be for me to continue monitoring this station. Unfortunately..."

"We need you to get us to the holding room and get my daughters out of the stasis chambers," Major Reed finished for him.

Xaraxal nodded. "Who are your snipers?"

Corporal Anderson and Lance Corporal O'Mally raised their hands.

"There are balconies that the officers use to get a direct visual on the compound interior. You will have a good 360° line of fire."

"Fireteam Bravo," Major Reed commanded.

Xaraxal pointed to the central council. "I've programmed that relay to make your voice sound like mine. It will also translate the terminology. It should handle basic reports and acknowledgements until the captain arrives. This room is well situated to cover our escape. I have transport ready to take us all to the field where we can steal another ship."

Sergeant O'Rourke, Bravo's team leader, took the central council. He glanced at Xaraxal, who nodded.

He pressed the call button. "Comm check."

He received three return calls.

"Acknowledged."

"Try to hold this room as long as possible," Xaraxal continued. "If things go wrong, I've left a tracker. It will allow you to follow and rendezvous with us."

"Understood, sir."

Xaraxal turned to Major Reed. "Shall we?"

"Let's move out." Major Reed turned to Sergeant O'Rourke.

"Keep giving us progress reports."

The team moved with the Major and Xaraxal leading. The Torellian guided them to a set of stairs. They descended, rifles ready to cover any angle of attack.

“If things go sideways,” the major asked, “how many in this building?”

“About twenty-five,” Xaraxal replied. “Most are in their barracks. Two are guarding the stasis chambers.”

“Can the guard towers bypass the command center if they get suspicious?” the first sergeant asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Xaraxal said. “I tried to find a way around that, but I couldn’t without raising suspicion. Fireteam Bravo will need to stay alert and be clever.”

They reached the lowest level when the lights began flashing, and a klaxon blared.

“At least we don’t have to worry about maintaining the element of surprise.” Major Reed thumbed his comm. “Bravo One, what’s going on?”

“The base just received an alert. Chartchan Imperial warships have entered the system. Captain Yeran has ordered this base to go on high alert. Sorry, Major. He bypassed the command center.”

“We’ll deal with anyone down here,” the major replied. “Keep all other troops away from the command center. See if you can sabotage the gates from there. That could buy us time.”

“Wilco.”

Major Reed glanced at First Sergeant Dutton and Xaraxal.

“No plan survives its first encounter with the enemy,” the first sergeant quoted.

“You’ll find that saying consistent across the galaxy,” Xaraxal noted. “We need to move fast.”

“I just hope the princess convinced her mom not to treat us all as desecrators,” the major muttered as he and Xaraxal pressed forward.

Queen Zirien sat regal on the flag chair of her dreadnought, Chartchan Dawn. Princess Zyrillia stood beside her mother as the queen commanded her fleet into a line abreast, bringing all forward-facing weapons to bear.

The queen turned to her daughter. "They must be on the ground."

"May I have your permission to contact them?"

The queen nodded.

The princess relieved the comm officer and secured the channel to the Terran Marines frequency.

"This is Princess Zyrillia of the Chartchan Empire. Major Reed, please acknowledge."

A minute ticked by, and the princess felt worried sweat at the small of her back.

"Bravo One," came the reply. "We're a little busy here. Your fleet put the pirates on alert. We're trying to keep them away from the command center. Patching you through to Major Reed. Give us a few minutes."

“Acknowledged.”

Princess Zyrillia found her mother standing behind her.

“Princess,” a familiar voice called out.

“Jonathan!” she cried in relief. “Give us a SITREP.”

“I’ve got Fireteam Bravo trying to hold back the rest of the compound,” Major Reed replied. “I’m afraid your arrival stirred up a hornet’s nest. We’ve got twenty-some odd Torellian pirates between us and the stasis chambers. We’re only outnumbered three to one. We’re trying to get there before reinforcements cut us off completely. And be careful of first names on a military frequency. People will get the wrong idea.”

Zyrillia stifled a laugh before turning to her mother.

“I see it,” General Zaharn called. “I can punch through with a battalion of the Imperial Guard.”

“You’ll have a hard time putting them inside the compound,” Zyrillia commented. “I’ll take my personal guard and land inside. If we can sandwich them, we might break the lines.”

“Absolutely not,” the queen snapped. “I will not allow my heir to place herself...”

“Princess,” Major Reed called, “I agree with your mom, you shouldn’t...”

“Enough,” the princess cried. “Without my guard, the pirates can hold that position indefinitely. They will overpower your squad long before we manage to break through. Your daughters need at least one parent.”

She turned to General Zaharn. “Make sure you break through, or my mother will have your skull as a drinking vessel. I’ll bring the supplies we need for hibernation recovery.”

The princess turned and stormed off the bridge before anyone could object. Silence lasted until Major Reed broke it.

“Does she take after her mother?”

General Zaharn snorted. “You have no idea.”

The queen glared at him. “Get your troops ready.”

“At once, my queen,” the General said.

The queen turned to the comm. "Continue pushing toward the stasis chambers, Major."

"Wilco."

Major Reed took cover as the pirates moved to block their path.

"I'd say we have twelve here," the first sergeant said.

"That leaves thirteen," Xaraxal added.

"Plus, two guards," the major muttered. "We need to neutralize them and break through this group now."

The first sergeant nodded. "Put a pineapple down there."

Two Marines pulled the pins from their grenades and threw them down the hall. The Marines turned away when the grenades exploded.

"Go!"

The Marines rose and charged the Torellians, who were still recovering. The rest fell in a hail of electromagnetic projectiles and Xaraxal's plasma rifle.

“Keep moving,” the major roared.

The eight marines and one Torellian warrior kept moving, gunning down any pirate trying to get between them and the stasis chambers. The guards tried to hold the door, but the marines cut them down within minutes.

Xaraxal ran to the chambers. Major Reed realized his children were not the only ones the Torellian pirates had kidnapped; there were a total of twelve chambers.

“Xaraxal, how hard is it to get everyone out?”

Xaraxal grimaced. “I was afraid you would ask, knowing humanity’s instinctive need to protect younglings, even those that aren’t their own. It’s not much harder than opening just two. The hard part will be transportation. I will open the chambers and leave the improvisation to you.”

The Torellian activated the thaw cycle on all the chambers. “It will take thirty minutes before it is safe to remove them.”

“First Sergeant, keep that door clear,” the major commanded.

The sergeant quickly assigned marines to prevent any advancing force from breaking through.

The major thumbed his comm. "Bravo 1, SITREP."

"We have pirates blocking the stairs. I've put Bravo 3 and 4 to take out pirates attempting to break into this building. We can't hold indefinitely."

The major nodded. "Change of plans. Hold position until the princess arrives. We have more than just our two to retrieve. You'll have her guard to help you break through. We'll trust her mother to keep the rest of the reinforcements at bay."

"Wilco."

Major Reed changed frequencies. "Princess. What's your ETA?"

"Almost there," came the reply. "I'm going to touch down on the roof of your compound."

"You have the rest of the building's complement blocking the stairs. Link up with Fireteam Bravo and push through. We have

ten more children that the Torellian pirates have taken. We're not leaving them here."

"Agreed," the princess replied. "Touching down in thirty *rachans*."

"Equivalent to thirty seconds," Xaraxal supplied.

"Just be careful," the major implored.

Princess Zyrillia waited with her guard. She glanced at her squad. Behind hers, two more dropships followed. If all went according to plan, she should land with a platoon's worth of soldiers—more than enough to break through.

Her guard eyed her nervously. *They fear Mother's wrath if something happens to me. Nice to know she cares.*

Her dropship swooped over the roof. She jumped out first, rolled, and came into a shooting position next to one of Major Read's snipers. He took out a pirate on one tower. She eliminated a few enemies in the yard. The other two dropships deposited their troops and veered away.

“We’re down,” she announced. “Squad *Tre*, support Bravo 4 and 5. Fall back to us once we’re through.”

“Yes, milady,” the squad leader replied.

She approached Bravo 1. “Report?”

“The pirates have taken casualties,” the sergeant replied.

“They’re down to six.”

The guard commander nodded. “We’ll handle them.”

“We’ll cover,” the sergeant promised.

The remaining two squads gathered at the top of the stairs, and one soldier tossed a grenade. There were warning shouts before it exploded. Then, the guard charged down the stairs.

A few seconds later, they called back, “Clear.”

“The rest of you,” the princess commanded, “fall back to us.”

Within moments, they had consolidated and started following the tracker.

“Your majesty,” the princess called, “we have broken through and are heading toward Major Read. How soon can you deal with the force outside the gate?”

“We have warships between us and the landing zone,” Queen Zirien warned. “We’re pushing through. I suggest you count on their getting past the gate before we are in position.”

The princess grimaced. “Understood. Major?”

“I’ve got it,” he replied. “With the forces we have, we can stack them up.”

The princess promised, “I have what you need.”

“We’re waiting for the stasis chambers to finish reviving the prisoners,” Major Read informed her.

Princess Zyrillia nodded in approval as she passed the Torrelan pirate bodies. *Humans will be worthy allies.*

Major Read looked up as First Sergeant Dutton signaled him.

“Reinforcements are here.”

The first sergeant stepped aside as Princess Zyrillia entered with her guard.

Xaraxal focused on the stasis chambers. "It will be safe to open them in two minutes."

"We weren't able to do much to keep jamming the gate, sir," Sergeant O'Rourke informed his leader. "I'd assume we're going to have to fight in this building."

Major nodded and saw some of the Chartchan soldiers eyeing Xaraxal.

"He's with us," the major said. "He's been helping us with intelligence and technical skill."

The lights changed to purple on each stasis chamber.

"Done," Xaraxal called, heading to the first chamber. "With what the princess brought and the medical supplies on hand, we should be able to revive everyone. However, they will still recover slowly."

The first chamber held Major Read's oldest daughter, Emily. The major rushed to her side as a Chartchan medic administered the recovery drug. Major Read lifted the 10-year-old and held her close. After a moment, he kissed her forehead and handed her to

Princess Zyrillia. Soldiers picked up each child once the medics cleared them. The last chamber contained 5-year-old Allison.

“Oh, my little firefly,” he whispered as he gently lifted her out of the chamber.

“That’s everyone, sir, ma’am,” the princess’s guard commander replied.

“Major!” the first sergeant cried before plasma bolts tore through the man’s body.

“Tony!”

Major Read’s Marines and the princess’s guard sprang into action. Sergeant O’Rourke and a Chartchan soldier laid down suppressing fire. Other marines and their Chartchan allies moved the children and the wounded to safety. Princess Zyrillia’s commander pushed her back along with the children and stood protectively over them.

Major Read could not get to First Sergeant Dutton’s body as the Torellian pirates took position at the door.

They can't get in without taking casualties. I can't break through. Stalemate.

“What was that phrase human pirates were supposed to use when someone inconvenienced them?” A tall, flamboyant Torellian approached the door. “I remember. ‘Shiver me timbers.’”

Captain Yeran kept under enough cover that Major Read could not get a clear shot.

“However, the Princess Zyrillia came of her own free will,” the pirate continued. “That may be worth something. I’m sure a threat to her and her mother will make them let me go with your children. A shame; my client has a taste for human flesh. Quick and painless are no longer options now that they’re out of stasis.”

Major Read felt his anger rising. One of his men rose to fire. Reluctantly, the major raised a hand to stop him.

Princess Zyrillia found her voice. “You will never touch a child again. You violated a sacred Chartchan world. Mother will see your head on a pike for that alone.”

Captain Yeran laughed.

He's stalling. Major Read realized. He's bringing something up to improve his odds. He has numbers for now. We can stack them up at the door. The major looked at the tanks containing the chemicals that made stasis possible—highly volatile. *Explosives in this room could be deadly to both of us.*

Major Read looked back at where the princess cradled Emily. *Whatever he's planning, I have to stop him before he puts it in motion.*

He signaled Sergeant O'Rourke to prepare a flash-bang and two others to prepare smoke. When they signaled "Ready," he nodded. The marines launched the grenades, filling the room with purple and orange smoke. The flash-bang detonated a moment later, leaving the Torellian pirates momentarily disoriented.

"Now!"

Emily's consciousness started to return. A crack jarred her awake. She found herself cradled in the arms of a beautiful alien woman with a fierce look. She turned her head and saw her father

in battle armor charging into smoke that had now taken on a muddy hue.

“Daddy,” she croaked, reaching out a hand to pull him back.

The woman looked down at her, her antennae turning toward her.

“Easy, Emily,” the woman whispered.

The smoke cleared. Emily saw her father battling a lizard-like creature dressed in an elaborate uniform. She wanted to believe her father could win, but the creature was enormous. She heard a familiar bark. King strained against his leash, wanting nothing more than to join the battle. Staff Sergeant Miller held the leash, urging the war dog to be patient.

Then, her father deflected a stab with a dagger, but not enough. It penetrated the joint in his armor. She struggled out of the woman’s arms to reach him, only for her still-weak legs to betray her. She went down. The woman leaped after her and gathered her up again.

“Daddy!” Emily wailed.

Staff Sergeant Miller released King with a command.

The war dog blurred as he joined the fight. In the next second, he seized the creature's arm with bone-crushing force, his weight and momentum dragging the alien off balance. Her father took full advantage of the distraction, grabbing his own dagger and stabbing it into the creature's neck. It collapsed like a sack of potatoes.

"Daddy!"

Major Read heard his daughter cry out to him as he staggered from his wound. The Torellian pirates were dead or had fled.

"Major," Staff Sergeant Miller called out. "Enemy fire has breached the pressure tanks. This place is going to explode."

Fueled by pure adrenaline, Major Read raced back to the children.

"We need to get them out of here!" he snapped.

Princess Zyrilla had Emily, who was slowly gaining strength.

“I’m here, sweetheart. You’re weak from stasis. Let Princess Zyrilla carry you. I’ll get Allison.”

In two strides, he reached his youngest. “I’ve got you, Firefly.”

Marines and Chartchan guards seized the other children.

“On me!” the major shouted.

The group fled the room as gas lines ruptured and caught fire. Following twists and turns from memory, he guided the group away.

“It’s going to blow!” someone shouted. “Hit the deck!”

Trying to shield his youngest, Major Read curled around her. The explosion tore through the corridor. As the echo faded, Major Read found Xaraxal helping him to his feet.

“I can’t guarantee the integrity of this structure,” the former pirate explained. “We need to move.”

The group picked themselves and their precious cargo up and scrambled through the passageway. As the adrenaline ebbed, Major Read felt his strength fading.

Queen Ziriën stood with General Zaharn as the Torellian pirates surrendered.

While I should execute them, they surrendered, saving us from fighting a pitched battle to the death.

“They’re coming,” one of her officers called.

The queen prepared to deliver a stinging lecture to the humans. *I need to say something to protest this breach of our sovereignty.*

The human major was the first to stagger out of the building, clutching what could only be one of his daughters, supported by a Torellian. The queen’s rebuke died on her lips as she saw the human begin to slump to the ground.

Without thinking, she dashed forward. The Torellian caught him as Zirien snatched the child into her arms before he could drop her.

“Daddy!” shrieked another girl in the arms of her own daughter.

Her Royal Physician was there immediately. “Blood loss.”

“Check for Pressian 7,” the Torellian ordered. “Captain Yeran liked to poison his blades with it.”

The physician ran a scanner over the wound and swore. “I need to get him to the infirmary aboard your flagship, my queen. I can keep it from spreading until we get him there, but it will still be touch-and-go.”

The queen turned to General Zaharn, who was already summoning a medical dropship.

The ship arrived within minutes. The medical team lifted the major into an intensive care unit while Queen Zirien and Princess Zyrillia brought his daughters onboard.

Her daughter held the older child close as she wept, trying to comfort her.

The queen felt the younger child stir in her arms. She looked down as the child's eyes opened.

"Are you an angel?" the little girl asked in wonder.

"No, child, I am Queen Zirien of the Chartchan."

The child's eyes widened. "A real queen?"

Zirien managed a smile despite herself. "Yes, child."

"You're beautiful," the child whispered.

The queen held her close, her maternal instincts kicking in.

Regaining consciousness proved a gradual process for Jonathan Read. His eyes opened to a white ceiling, and within seconds, a Chartchan was at his side.

"Major Read," the physician said, "take it slow. You've lost a lot of blood. The poison in your wound didn't help."

"How..." He coughed.

The physician brought a bottle with a straw to his parched lips. The liquid had a sharp taste, but it soothed the tickle in his throat.

“The wound is closed, and we have neutralized the poison,” the physician said. “Your men are on board the queen’s flagship. Your daughters have recovered from stasis, as have the other children. I sent your daughters to bed a little while ago. The queen and princess are watching them.”

The major started to ask a question when the door opened. Queen Zirien entered just as the doctor turned.

“He is awake, my queen.”

The queen nodded. “Thank you, Dr. Horence.”

“With your permission, I will withdraw. I will be nearby if I am needed.”

The doctor squeezed his shoulder and then left him alone with Queen Zirien.

The queen took a chair and pulled it close to the bed.

“I’m annoyed with you,” she said with a grin. “I had a whole lecture about Chartchan sovereignty prepared, and you collapsed before I could deliver it. Now, I’ve lost my edge.”

Major Read laughed feebly. “Can you forgive me?”

They both shared a laugh.

The queen smiled down at him. “My daughter is with your children. If they weren’t worried sick about you, they’d be quite taken with her.”

“And you, I would think,” Johnnathan noted.

The queen nodded. “I understand you and my daughter have become close.”

Major Read tried to think of something honest and disarming to say, but the queen kept going.

“There is no precedent for a Chartchan royal and a human to become bonded,” the queen said.

“I don’t want to rush things,” the major said. “We need to sort through our true feelings before we upend your nobility. It’s too soon for my girls, anyway.”

The queen nodded. "Good. You see it for yourself. As I told my daughter, be mindful of how even the simplest gestures can be misunderstood. She's used to being scrutinized by the court."

Major Read nodded. "Is the situation on Zarchan 3 stable?"

"It is," the queen replied. "An Earth diplomatic ship is en route and will get your people home. We're contacting the governments of all the children whom we rescued. We will have them home if the next of kin can be found. We will try the pirates for their crimes. Since the survivors surrendered, the death penalty is off the table. The Torellian Confederation will send a representative to advise on their fate. Xaraxal has a place waiting for him in their fleet."

The queen fell silent.

The major felt his fatigue return.

"You rest, Major." The queen rose and placed a hand on his shoulder. "My daughter and I will bring your daughters in the morning. Then your squad will want to know you're out of danger."

"Thank you," he replied.

The next morning, Major Read was waking up when his daughters arrived with Princess Zyrillia. Allison hurried to the bed, where Jonathan enfolded her in his arms. Emma was a bit more reserved, only falling into his embrace when the princess nudged her.

“Oh, Daddy,” was all his oldest could say.

Allison glanced up as the princess sought to slip out of the room.

“Please don’t go,” she begged.

Zyrillia looked at Jonathan, who smiled and nodded.

“We were so worried,” Emily said as she composed herself.

“Well, the doctor says I’ll recover,” their father replied, holding them closer.

Emily gazed up at the princess from her father’s arms.

“What now?” she asked.

“We take it one day at a time.” Jonathan looked up at the princess. “Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Princess Zyrillia replied. “Your squad would like to see you’re all right, too.”

“Ten more minutes,” Jonathan said. “I need some family time for just a little longer.”

When the dust settled, Major Read and his daughters spent time talking. The queen and princess provide a constant supporting presence. The little girls enjoyed the royal courtesy the two women provided, as well as the royal instruction they received. Even the most conservative on the court found the childish laughter refreshing.

The princess had to resist laughing out loud when she found Minister Sarnus with Allison on his lap and Emma beside him as he recounted a Chartchan story.

Eventually, Jonathan had to take his family to their home colony to visit their mother’s grave and find closure. The princess accompanied them. With their mother gone, the princess had become a cross between mother and big sister.

The four stood by Diana's grave.

"I miss her." Allison's face was tear-streaked.

"So do I, Firefly," Jonathan whispered.

Allison looked up at Princess Zyrillia. "I think Mommy would like you."

Jonathan smiled at his youngest.

Emma's face displayed conflicting emotions. "Your Highness, I really like you, but I'm still..."

"Sorting things out in your heart," the princess finished for her. "I understand. Whatever happens between me and your father, it won't happen without you. I can't replace your mother and wouldn't dream of trying. If it helps, you have my permission to keep right on loving her. You will find that love is so vast, you won't have any trouble loving others as well."

Emily sorted through these words and wrapped the princess in a hug.