The Hero of Two Worlds

By Kurt Springs

Master Sergeant Justin Grey (Retired) frowned at the light panel in the Imperial Ballroom. He traced the flickering light to the switch, but the switch appeared fine.

“Chacka,” he called into his comm. “The light’s still flickering. The switch looks fine. I can’t trace the problem to anything going in or out of it. Could the fault be deeper in the system?”

“I’ll start at the main box and see if I can trace it from there,” his Vulpine aide replied. “The Royal Ceremony begins in an hour. I hope this fault has enough courtesy to let us fix it before then.”

“Agreed,” Justin replied. “I’ll wait here. Keep me posted.”

“I will.”

Justin glanced around and sighed in resignation. Dignitaries and nobles, all dressed to the nines, as humans say, were filling the room. Some ignored him entirely. Others spared him a dismissive sniff.

“Bad enough we need a maintenance worker present,” he heard someone whisper. “Did it have to be a human?”

“Light panels don’t fix themselves,” said a cultured masculine voice. “Be grateful that someone is working on it.”

Justin smiled as Duke Char’if approached. The duke was a tall, humanoid figure. The Vulpine had human faces, thicker hair on their heads, and long, pointed ears like those of an Old Earth wolf. Their clothing was tailored to allow their tails full range of motion, which was part of how they communicated with one another.

“Problem, Master Sergeant?” the vulpine asked.

Justin smiled. “That light keeps flickering. This is the switch that controls it. The fixture itself is fine. Everything between the fixture and the switch is fine. I have Chacka heading to the main relay cutoff.”

The duke checked the readings on the data pad Justin held out.

“I know a thing or two about power systems,” the duke said. “I agree with you.”

Justin smiled. “I’m glad the war is finally over, and we can be friends now.”

The duke threw back his head and laughed, drawing glances from the gathering guests. “We were always friends. We just didn’t realize it at the time.”

Justin shared a laugh with him.

“How is Jessica settling in?” the duke asked, changing the subject.

Justin smiled. “She’s going to a mixed school with the children of the diplomatic staff. She sends her love.”

“Ah, Duke Char’if,” came an elegant feminine voice. “Are you taking charge of maintenance?”

The duke turned with a smile. “Not at all, Countess Mar’lie. I have full confidence in Master Sergeant Grey. He kept that ship we were stranded on operational through sheer will.”

“Oh!” the Vulpine female exclaimed. “Our honored duke has spoken much about the human who saved both sides in the Sigma Gemini Catastrophe. And now you are fixing our lights.”

“They are not working as they should, milady,” Justin replied with a bow.

The woman gave Justin a measured look. “Well, I think the conversation will be more interesting here, anyway.”

The duke chuckled. “The countess is something of a rebel at court.”

“Normal court small talk is usually boring.” The countess smiled.

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Nine-year-old Jessica Grey scanned the royal court, searching for her father. She wanted to surprise him. She had put on her best dress. Among these Vulpine nobles, she suddenly felt out of place. The curious stares made her feel exposed.

“Excuse me, milady,” a Vulpine voice said behind her.

She turned to find herself face to face with a captain of the Vulpine Imperial Guard.

“I don’t believe you are on the guest list,” the captain said in a stern but kind voice.

“I—” she hesitated. “I’m looking for my daddy. I wanted to surprise him.”

The captain cocked an ear. “May I have your name, please?”

“Jessica Grey.”

His expression changed instantly. “Master Sergeant Grey’s daughter?”

Jessica nodded.

“It would be my honor to escort you to him then,” the captain said with an elaborate bow.

He moved beside her and let her rest her hand on his elbow. Jessica felt strangely safe with this Vulpine.

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As the three chatted, Duke Char’if looked up. “I think you have someone looking for you, Master Sergeant.”

Justin looked up to see an officer of the Imperial Guard with Jessica on his arm.

“My Duke, Countess, may I present Lady Jessica Grey?” the captain said formally. “Daughter of Master Sergeant Justin Grey.”

Justin resisted the urge to demand what she was doing here.

“Thank you, Captain,” the duke replied. “Master Sergeant, you remember Captain Terlance from our time on that battered old lifeboat we called a ship?”

Justin smiled as his daughter transferred herself to his arm. “Very well. Thank you very much, Captain. It’s good to see you again.”

“The pleasure was mine, Master Sergeant,” Captain Terlance replied. “Milady, with your permission, I shall leave you with your father.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jessica said with a shy smile.

The captain bowed to her again and winked at Justin before resuming his duties.

“What a charming young lady!” the countess exclaimed before Justin could speak. “I am Countess Mar’lie.”

Jessica performed her best curtsy. “Jessica Grey, milady.”

“That is a lovely dress, Jessica,” Duke Char’if observed. “However, it is better suited for a less formal event.”

Jessica blushed. “It’s my best dress.”

“I’m not saying it isn’t,” the count said. “But that’s how the captain spotted you so quickly. What we need is…”

The count straightened. “Here come the solutions now.”

The duke waved at two approaching figures. They smiled and waved back, quickening their pace. The two Vulpine girls were in their mid-teens. They looked and dressed identically.

“Uncle Char’if,” the first cried.

“We wondered where you were,” the second exclaimed.

“Princesses.” The duke opened his arms to welcome their embrace before turning to Justin and Jessica. “May I present Princess Annara and Princess Dasyanae. My ladies, you know Countess Mar’lie. I would like to introduce my friend, Master

Sergeant Grey, and his daughter, Jessica. I'm afraid Jessica needs your help with a small matter."

The two princesses smiled warmly at Justin before shifting their attention to his daughter.

"That is a very pretty dress, Jessica," Princess Dasyanae remarked.

"But it is better suited for next week's festival than an event like this," her twin added.

"But it's—" Jessica looked on the verge of tears.

Dasyanae snapped her fingers as if the solution just had hit her. "You know, we have lots of dresses. Many from when we were your age were barely worn."

"I'm sure we can find you something suitable for a court event," Annara finished for her sister. "Besides, you'd be helping us with a problem of our own."

Jessica looked at the two in surprise.

"Lady Jainey has been trying to help us prepare," Daysanae explained.

Annara nodded. “Except we’ve been able to do it ourselves for a couple of years now. I think she’d be ecstatic to have someone to teach proper dressing and makeup for events, too.”

“Not to mention courtly graces,” her sister added. “Why don’t we take you to meet her?”

Jessica looked up at her father, who then looked at Duke Char’if. The duke winked and nodded.

Justin looked back at his daughter. “Why don’t you go with them, Pumpkin? Daddy’s trying to make a light behave itself.”

Jessica hugged him tightly. “Thank you, Daddy.”

The twins grasped the girl’s hands and guided her deeper into the palace.

“Thanks, my friend,” Justin said.

“Those two may be rebels themselves,” the countess noted. “They show it by being unwaveringly kind to others.”

Justin refocused on the switch, running all the diagnostics he could think of. The duke offered some suggestions, while Countess Mar’lie sipped from her glass of red liquid.

After half an hour, the music shifted as Captain Terlance returned.

“It’s starting,” he whispered.

“And that light isn't cooperating.” The duke sighed. “Maybe the empress can have it flogged.”

The captain stifled a laugh.

Justin thumbed his intercom. “Talk to me, Chacka. Did the relay give you any clues?”

Justin furrowed his eyebrows when he received no response. “Chacka, are you okay? The ceremony is about to start.”

Captain Terlance stepped forward. “Where was he supposed to be?”

“Relay junction in section 4-M.”

The captain looked at his map. “Stay near the switch. I’ll send a guard to find him.”

The captain turned and whispered instructions into his communicator.

The note in the music shifted again, and Justin turned to watch the procession.

The empress and her consort led the procession. Behind them was her eldest son, the crown prince, and his wife. Next came the twins daughters of the empress. Justin's jaw nearly dropped when he saw Jessica between them, being treated like their youngest sister. The gown she wore was stunning. The makeup around her face didn't make her look older or overdone. It accentuated her features.

"She looks just like her mother," Justin whispered, a tear welling in his eye.

Duke Char'if placed a hand on his shoulder.

"If only Susan could see her."

The duke leaned in closer. "She can, my friend. She can."

The countess patted his shoulder. The captain smiled.

The captain suddenly stiffened as an alert came through his earpiece.

“They found your assistant,” he hissed. “Someone shot him in the back of the head near the junction.”

Justin turned sharply. “You’d better—”

Suddenly, the doors burst open. Masked Vulpines dressed in black stormed into the room. Screams filled the air as many nobles panicked.

Justin saw the targets and was already moving as the captain, and Duke barked commands. He blindsided one terrorist, knocking him out. The imperial guards were already on the move around him. However, the court milling about made firing difficult. The imperial consort stepped in front of the empress. The prince pushed his wife, Jessica, and the twins behind him.

As he turned, Justin saw one terrorist drawing a needler as he approached the royal entourage. He covered the twenty feet separating them in seconds. The terrorist tried to fire, but Justin grabbed the weapon as the dart slammed into his chest.

Justin ripped the weapon out of the Vulpine's hand and shot him point-blank. The terrorist collapsed as Justin felt the world darken. He fell to his knees and looked toward his daughter.

"I love you, Pumpkin," he mouthed before he slumped to the ground.

Justin and the Imperial Guard had neutralized the threat. The court fell into shocked silence.

The silence was shattered when a small voice shrieked. "Daddy!"

Jessica dashed past the prince before he could stop her. Her beautiful dress forgotten, she kneeled beside him as blood pooled around them. She grasped his hand.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

He opened his eyes and found her face.

"Please, Daddy! Don't leave me alone."

He touched her cheek, then his hand went limp as he lost consciousness.

"Where's the court physician!" the empress shouted.

“I’m here, milady,” the Vulpine male called, rushing forward. “I need room.”

The empress herself approached and gently took hold of the little girl.

“Come, little one. Let the doctor save your father.”

The woman let the little girl cry on her shoulder. The doctor exposed the wound and found the dart sticking out of Justin’s chest.

“I need to stabilize the projectile before moving him,” he ordered.

Princess Dasyanae sprinted to a wall and grabbed a trauma kit. She bolted back to hand it to him as her sister tried to help their mother comfort Jessica.

The Imperial Physician located the packing he needed and immobilized the dart.

“With your permission, I’ll use the Palace Infirmary instead of the local hospital,” he told the empress. “I need to get him into surgery now.”

The empress nodded. “Help the doctor,” she told members of her guard.

They carefully lifted him onto a stretcher and took Justin away.

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Five hours later, Jessica had fallen asleep. Princess Annara let the girl’s head rest on her shoulder, with her own head leaning against Jessica’s. Princess Dasyanae was about to nod off when the door to the surgical theater opened.

The countess was instantly alert. Dasyanae leaned over and shook her sister awake. Jessica straightened, her eyes wide with hope and dread.

“I’ve moved him into recovery,” the royal physician told them. “He’s out of immediate danger.”

“Will he be alright?” Jessica blurted out.

The doctor crossed to her and squatted down, bringing himself to her level.

“You have to understand,” he began, “the dart punctured his lung, missing his heart by millimeters. His condition is stable, but guarded. That means we have to monitor him in case his wound reopens. However, with careful attention, I would say he has a good chance of recovery.”

Jessica collapsed against Annara in relief.

“How long will he have to stay here?” the countess asked.

“If nothing happens for a week,” the doctor told her. “Then I think it would be okay for him to return home, though I would advise supervision for a few weeks to make sure he doesn’t overexert himself when he starts feeling better.”

Jessica asked, “Can I see him?”

The doctor regarded her. “A brief visit only. Then I suggest you get some sleep.”

“She can stay with me,” the countess said. “I suspect, however, she would rather stay close to her father.”

The doctor nodded. “Give it twelve hours. Once we’re sure there is no infection, I can arrange a cot for her.”

“I will inform the empress,” the countess replied. “Then I will take her to her apartment and help her pack a few changes of clothes.”

Jessica reluctantly nodded.

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Jessica arrived at her apartment escorted by Countess Mar’lie and two Imperial Guards. Unsure of what to bring, she grabbed her father’s suitcase and started packing.

“I don’t think you need to pack that much, Jessica,” Mar’lie advised. “We can bring you back to get things if you need them. I can provide some things for you to use if need be.”

Jessica looked up at the Vulpine woman. Memories of the past twelve hours flooded her mind, and she collapsed onto her bed, beginning to cry. In an instant, the countess gathered her into her arms and held her.

“I’m sorry,” Jessica whispered.

“Shh,” the countess hushed. “There’s nothing to apologize for. Your father was hurt, and now that he’s out of danger, your

fears are catching up with you. I'm in no hurry. Come on. Let it all out."

Grateful, Jessica leaned into Countess Mar'lie's shoulder and cried herself into exhaustion. After gathering a few belongings, the countess took the girl to her estate, though Jessica didn't remember the trip. One of the guards carried her to the guest room, and the countess gently tucked her in.

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The following morning, Jessica was so determined to reach her father that she hardly noticed the beautiful home of Countess Mar'lie. She was unaware that traitors were being captured across the Vulpine Empire. The news of treason against the empress herself shocked and horrified many common Vulpines. Even more shocking was the fact that a former human enemy had nearly sacrificed his life for the Imperial Family.

Jessica sat at her father's bedside, her hand holding his. Countess Mar'lie occasionally had duties she couldn't avoid. The twins were always willing to help her. The crown prince and his

wife often found time to keep her company during her vigil. Duke Car'if was busy leading the hunt for the traitors but made time to be with her and her father. Once or twice, the empress herself sat with the girl.

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Four days after the attack, the world intruded into Justin's mind. The first thing he noticed was a sensation of floating. Then he felt the small hand in his. Focusing on that sensation, he opened his eyes. Gathering the strength to turn his head, he saw his little girl sitting beside him. Jessica's eyes were closed.

Justin squeezed her hand, and Jessica instantly became alert.

"Daddy?" she whispered.

"Hi, Pumpkin," he croaked, his voice hoarse from disuse.

The girl threw her arms around him. He gasped.

"Careful, Jessica."

Jessica pulled back. "I'm sorry."

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “Just don’t put weight on that side again.”

Jessica hugged her father. “I was so scared.”

“I wish I could say, ‘I’ve had worse,’” Justin croaked, “but I think this is going to be the event I refer to when I say it now.”

“Jessica, let me give your father something to drink.”

Justin turned to see Countess Mar’lie on the other side of the bed, holding a cup of liquid with a straw. Without arguing, he took the straw and began sipping. His throat felt better almost immediately.

“The countess has been sitting with me,” Jessica told her father.

“Thank you,” Justin said.

The countess smiled at him. “I was honored to watch over a hero of the Vulpine Empire and Earth Confederation and his daughter. You saved our soldiers along with your own at the Sigma Gemini Catastrophe. Now, you saved the Imperial Family,

almost at the cost of your life. The Empress wishes to elevate you.”

Justin stared at her. “I just did what any decent person would do.”

“You did it without thinking,” the countess pointed out. “A decent person with the right training, in the right place, at the right time. If any Imperial subject doubted the treaty with the humans, those doubts have vanished.”

Justin lay back for a moment. “How long am I going to be in the hospital?”

“The doctor says about a week,” the countess said. “However, you will still need recovery time before you exert yourself. I will house you at my estate, so your daughter and I can make sure you follow his instructions.”

Justin turned toward her.

“I am the leader of the Empress’s Hands,” Countess Mar’lie explained.

Justin started with that, aware of the Hands' reputation.

“You’re the Empress’s eyes, ears, and if necessary, her executioner.”

The countess smiled. “You may not have noticed, but I dealt with a few of the traitors myself that night. However, the Empress says I need a life of my own now. That includes a consort. I won’t push, but I’ve grown fond of your daughter. I’d like both of you to consider becoming part of my family. The recovery could serve as a trial period.”

Justin felt the room spinning.

“You don’t have to decide now,” the countess said.

Justin nodded as sleep took him.