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Hairy Situation

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Hairy Situation

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by

Atk. Butterfly



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"That you, Paul? Why are you home so early?" Jane asked.

"I've been tagged to investigate a case on another world," Paul said somewhat glumly.

"I thought you were looking forward to landing an assignment on another world for the benefit of your career?"

"I was, but not on Yul."

"Yul? You mean you'll have to go naked and shave off all your hair?" she asked.

"Those are the rules for stepping foot on Yul. Plus I'll have to wear a standard polymer coating to inhibit skin penetration. Until they wipe out the pseudo-follicles, they don't dare live any other way on Yul." Paul shivered a bit at the thought of stepping onto a world infested with hairlike parasites that attached themselves to people and burrowed in until they encountered nerve tissue before they gorged themselves. It was a grotesque way to die, unable to control one's body functions. Even if the pseudo-follicle was removed in time, it could still cause severe nerve damage. Fortunately, the pseudo-follicles had to bore in from the outside since their bodies needed access to air. Mucus and other body fluids were more than sufficient to ensure that any pseudo-follicles breathed in or ingested could not survive long enough to do any damage.

"I can't understand why anyone is willing to live under those conditions," Jane mumbled.

"You know as well as I that Yul possesses the largest, purest resource of natural trekkite. So long as it's the only real source of that mineral, people will have to live there," Paul said.

"So, what kind of case are you investigating?"

"I'm not sure yet. I mean, I know that it's a death. The question is whether it's accidental or homicide. Since no one there is trusted to be impartial, I have to go there and investigate. Uh, actually, it was suggested that we go there."

"We? Why me? I don't know anything about investigation," Jane said with a puzzled look on her face.

"It was strongly suggested to me that you accompany me so no one will accuse me of being influenced by naked women from either side throwing themselves at me. Seems that the uppity-ups figure I won't fool around if my wife is with me."

"You sound like they don't trust you."

"That's exactly how it sounded to me, even though they said they wanted you along so that no one would send any women my way. I can't afford to take sides in the immigration issue facing Yul's people."

"Do you want me to accompany you?"

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"Frankly, yes. Then neither of us will wonder if our marriage can stand the long separation."

"Long separation? I thought you said this was for an investigation. How long is this assignment for?" she asked.

"If I'm successful, it could become my regular assignment for the next year or two. If not, I'm sure they'll yank me out before I can cause any permanent harm to planetary relations," Paul answered.

Jane nodded, then said, "Well, I guess I can get used to being hairless and naked since it's necessary. When do we leave?"

"You're not worried about whether I'll love you without your beautiful hair?" he asked.

Jane left her stateroom on board the inter-galactic ship that carried them to an orbit around Yul. She left behind the paper clothing she wore on board as she made her way to the barbershop where every inch of her body would be shaved before a polymer coating was applied.

Paul had already left the stateroom to transfer to the orbiting space station. He'd had the treatment earlier so that he could get used to how it felt to go about naked. That would make it easier for him to concentrate on his job. Had it been necessary for Jane to do something other than accompany Paul, she'd have taken the treatment a lot sooner as others destined for Yul had done.

For a few minutes, Jane felt quite self-conscious despite the presence of another dozen similarly naked people. Then they were shaved and the feeling returned. Finally, they were polymered. To Jane's surprise, she learned she had a choice of colors.

"Um, clear," Jane said.

"She wants to look nude, Charlie," the crew woman called out.

"One nude polymer coming up! Got her masked and plugged?"

"Just about."

Jane went through the process of letting the crew woman place masks over her eyes and then put plugs into each orifice until only the nose was left.

"Take a deep breath and hold it for exactly one minute. I'll remove the plugs from your nose when the minute is up. Then you can remove the rest to take with you. You'll need those for your weekly treatments," the crew woman said.

Paul smiled at Jane as she joined him on the space station.

"How's it going?" she asked.

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"Pretty good, so far. We're on the first shuttle down. You look ravishing," he said.

"I just couldn't see myself wearing official government-blue polymer. I almost chose red but remembered that's the choice of their ladies of the night."

"Not really, it isn't. Only in certain areas. The color varies by region," Paul said.

"I wasn't aware of that. You better warn me ahead of time about the color for any region we enter so I won't choose it."

"I'm more concerned about how well you'll take attending the autopsy since you have to accompany me everywhere."

"I have to attend the autopsy?"

Paul nodded solemnly. "We should be together as much as possible while I'm on this case."

"Oh well, I guess I'll manage somehow. Maybe I can look away or close my eyes."

"That might be best. These things are often messy," Paul said.

Jane studied the faces of those in attendance at the autopsy while Paul paid attention to the procedure. She noticed that several of the witnesses seemed uncomfortable at what they were witnessing. The colored polymer coatings on their bodies were too thin to disguise how they felt or to conceal anyone's paleness as the autopsy progressed. Long before a queasy stomach got the better of anyone, Jane knew who was about to faint or throw up. Apparently, so did some of the coroner's assistants who were quick to either usher out the weak kneed before they completely collapsed or hand a barf bag over to the merely queasy.

Paul said, "So it's your opinion that he died from pseudo-follicles?"

"Oh, no doubt about that, Agent Harris," said the Yullian coroner. "You can plainly see the hairlike parasites on his scalp where they gained entry."

"Yes, but how did they gain entry? Did he suffer a scrape that nullified his polymer coating or what? Can you rule this as an accident?"

"Not yet, Sir. We'll have to bring in the microscope and examine the scalp around the pseudo-follicles first."

Paul Harris waited patiently as more equipment was brought in and used. It was clear that for some reason the victim's polymer hadn't resisted the parasites' attack. Otherwise, the victim wouldn't be lying dead on a slab.

"Okay, Agent Harris," said the coroner, "You better move over here so you can see what I'm stating on my official report."

Paul moved to take a look through the microscope.

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"The victim lacks a polymer coating over a portion of the epidermis covering the skull. Either it was poorly applied or removed somehow. There are no signs of accidental abrasion."

"Then how could it have been removed?"

"Oh, perhaps a strong solvent."

"Get a sample of the edge of the polymer nearest the pseudo-follicles and have it analyzed. I need to know for certain whether the polymer was tampered with or poorly applied. Also, I need to know who applied his polymer coating. In the meantime, the body is to be kept in storage," Paul ordered.

Jane asked, "Well? What's the verdict?"

"Appears to be murder. They found traces of solvent around the polymer edge on the scalp. If anything, this tends to clear the polymer staff for his last coating," Paul answered.

"So, what happens now?"

"Well, we investigate further. You and I get to go through records to find out who had access to this solvent and check on our victim's itinerary for his last two days alive."

"Why do we need to know that?" she asked.

"In case he got the solvent spilled on him accidentally. Anywhere else but the brain, it would have taken longer than two days for him to die and the treatment staff would still be suspect. As it is, his last treatment was four days before his death. We have to be conclusive when we announce whether it's murder or not," Paul replied.

"Oh, I see now."

Jane looked at the buckets lying about the construction site as she and Paul entered the work area the victim visited almost precisely forty-eight hours before his death. She felt sure that they'd find the cause of his death was accidental from a spill out of one of the buckets. She tagged along beside Paul as he went to see the foreman who turned out to be a woman named Amanda.

Even without hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes, Amanda was beautiful. It was clear that she knew she was good looking and she used her polymer coating to increase her advantage. Amanda's polymer coating was both beautiful and expensive. Combining colors wasn't easy, not when it came to keeping them from mixing and spoiling the intended effect.

Jane was glad that she was along since Paul appeared to be getting an eyeful. However, no one, not even Jane, could say anything since on Yul it was considered proper to stare hard in search of any pseudo-follicles. Jane's initial briefing on the satellite had covered all that. Jane knew it was actually considered very wrong on Yul not to watch out

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for one's neighbors in light of the constant danger the pseudo-follicles posed. For that reason, Jane couldn't complain about how much or where Amanda stared at Paul in return.

The only thing Jane could complain about was if the stares progressed to touching. However, even that was iffy most of the time since almost any touching could be legitimized by a quick claim of removing a pseudo-follicle. Jane knew that first hand, as she'd been touched more than once already. Jane had to restrain her impulse to slap out at the offenders since the offenders almost always claimed immediately to be brushing off a pseudo-follicle. Jane couldn't complain either when Paul was touched or brushed in her presence. To Jane's relief, Amanda's hands remained by her side.

"What kinds of solvents do you use here?" Paul asked.

"Solvents? None that I know of. Besides, those are controlled substances on Yul. You have to have a license to use those," Amanda answered.

"Which I know your construction crew holds. Surely you use some solvents."

"Very rarely though we do have them in stock. We do our best not to screw up when applying polymers in the finishing phase of our work. Besides, most of the workers don't like using solvents because of the danger posed in using them. The vapors can remove your skin's protective polymer during prolonged use. I have to pay triple time when we do use solvents and have a polymer treatment team standing by as well. It's just too damn expensive to use those," Amanda said.

Jane felt the foreman was answering truthfully. The foreman's facial features and body language had been in agreement with what was said.

"Not even for touch-ups?" asked Paul.

"Just as rare for touch-ups. It has to be really bad in appearance and openly visible before we even do those. We keep all the solvents locked up and strictly accounted for by volume as required by law," Amanda said.

"Were you using any solvents on the day that Council member Chuk visited the site?" Paul asked.

"Not a drop was in use then. Not here, anyway. So, you're saying that he was murdered?"

"No, I'm not saying that he was murdered," Paul said. "I'm still trying to determine how he got solvent on him. It could have easily been an accident even though I know that using a solvent is one of the favorite methods for murdering people on Yul."

"Ain't it, though?" Amanda agreed.

"So, you're certain that all of your solvents can be accounted for?" Paul asked.

"I'd bet my ass on that," Amanda quickly answered.

Jane knew exactly what Amanda meant by that as, it quite literally meant that Amanda would give her body sexually to Paul in payment if she were wrong. That had been covered on the orbiting space station in the reception briefing about Yul's social life and the sexual mores of Yullies. To say such a thing publicly was a serious matter. Yul's

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environment had contributed to a significant deviation in culture from the rest of humanity. Jane knew not to say something like that unless she was willing to go through with it in case she was proven wrong. So far, Jane had only said that to Paul. Twice deliberately in private when Jane knew already that she was wrong. To have said it publicly meant giving the payment in full public view of witnesses. Jane wasn't ready to go that far though it was clear to Jane that Amanda was.

"I hope you're right. Let's go check your inventory," Paul said.

Jane felt relieved to hear Paul rebuff the offer before Amanda could be proven wrong. Otherwise, he'd have been obligated to take Amanda's payment in Jane's presence if Amanda was proven wrong. Jane knew that as a witness to the statement she'd have to witness that the payment was duly rendered. About all Jane could do was toss daggers with her eyes at Amanda and imagine those daggers slicing off thin strips of polymer.

"So, that clears the construction site?" Jane asked as they left.

"Not quite. It would have only taken one drop and the inventory isn't that accurate to account for a single drop missing despite the closed containers. Not when evaporation is taken into account. I can't say anything either way yet. Council member Chuk could have been attacked here without knowing it by someone touching him on the head with solvent on his or her hand in search of a pseudo-follicle. He wouldn't have objected in the least since touching without permission is allowed by Yul law. However, the case is definitely leaning more toward homicide now than before since solvents weren't in use here at the time he visited."

"So it was murder?" Jane asked.

"I haven't said that, either. I'm simply speculating that homicide is the more likely cause of his death than an accident. We'll know more when we have the rest of the lab results. These folks aren't in the clear yet until I know for sure that the solvents they have don't match in chemical composition with the residue found on Chuk. We'll know that when the lab finishes with the canisters they took away."

When Jane and Paul returned to the construction site and met with Amanda once more, Jane switched immediately to tossing daggers again with her eyes.

"So, he was contaminated here, right?" asked Amanda.

"Yes, the solvent used on Council member Chuk was a match to what you have in stock. I need to see your inventory records to find out who had access to the solvents. We're already checking the canisters for fingerprints and residual DNA in case it was someone who wasn't authorized access," Paul replied.

"Sure. You want to see the personnel records, too?" Amanda asked while one hand of hers reached out and lightly brushed down against Paul's groin. "Sorry, looked like a follicle on you there."

Jane bit her lower lip gently to keep from objecting. Jane suspected that Amanda was trying not to be considered a suspect. If anything, Jane knew that Paul wouldn't change

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his mind about anyone no matter what his reaction to the intimate touching given him by Amanda.

"Yes, I want to see the personnel records, too, Paul said. "Including yours," His words left no doubt in anyone's mind that Amanda was still a suspect.

Amanda said, "Well, in that case I'll bet my ass that I did it."

Jane was speechless as she heard Amanda come up with a new ploy against Paul, who couldn't politely reject the offer by hoping that Amanda was right. Not in his official capacity. It would be wrong and could even jeopardize any possible criminal trial if he stated that he hoped Amanda was right, as it could show prejudice on his part during the investigation. For her own part, Jane hoped that Amanda was telling the truth.

Paul smoothly said, "Just show me the records and quit making a play for me in front of my wife."

Jane blushed, her nude polymer permitting the blush to show fully.

Amanda returned to the records room where she left Paul and Jane going through the personnel files. "You've got a call, Agent Harris."

"Who from?" Paul asked.

"The lab. They've got some more information for you. They wouldn't tell me anything more than that," Amanda said.

Paul said, "Okay, Jane, let's go find out what the lab has for us. We'll pick up where we left off if the information doesn't clear up anything."

"Okay, check his fingers. I'll hold on while you do that," Paul said.

"Important evidence?" asked Jane.

"Yes, very important evidence. We'll know more in a moment," Paul answered.

Paul listened, then hung up the phone. "Well, the case is closed now."

"Oh? Did someone confess?"

"Not at all. It was suicide,"

"Suicide?" Jane exclaimed.

"Yep. Suicide according to the final autopsy results. Seems like Council member Chuk was suffering from terminal cancer. He didn't have long to live anyway. That taken along with the discovery of his fingerprints on the outside of one solvent canister leaves little doubt that he took his own life. He tried to make it appear that he was murdered by

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the opposition while ending his own suffering. I just had the coroner check Chuk's fingers for traces of solvent. There was solvent residue present and polymer missing on some of Chuk's fingers as well."

"Why weren't there any pseudo-follicles found on Chuk's fingers then during the initial examination?" Jane asked.

"Fingers are generally used too much for pseudo-follicles to get a start. In fact, the polymer usually wears off fingertips well before the body needs recoating. Anyway, with the evidence we have now, it's fairly conclusive that it was a suicide," Paul answered.

"How's this affect your career?" Jane asked.

"Not badly at all. I've accomplished what I was sent here to find out without being compromised by either side. They can solve their own immigration problem now without either side claiming that Chuk was deliberately silenced because of his opposition to more immigration."

"What about Amanda's bet?" Jane asked.

"No problem. Now that the case is closed, I'm officially assigned as the agent in charge of all galactic investigations on Yul. Amanda won't dare try to pay up now after I cleared her side and her. If she does, I'll remind her that she'd be giving her opponents political ammunition to use against granting further immigration since they could then claim the investigation was a white wash. It's clear to anyone that she's doing well in construction and will continue to do so while more immigrants are permitted to enter Yul. She's not going to jeopardize that. Not with her expensive tastes in polymers."

"How do you know that she's in favor of immigration?" Jane asked.

"Her position on immigration was only too easy to spot because of her job. Nearly everyone involved in construction is eager for more immigrants to arrive because they mean more construction work. However, I strongly suspect that Amanda's the person who inadvertently gave Chuk access to the solvent storage," Paul said.

"Why do you suspect her of that?" Jane asked.

"Can you imagine Amanda letting a VIP run loose without an escort on the construction site knowing that he holds an agenda opposite to hers? Chuk probably got into the solvents while Amanda was relieving herself or otherwise had her attention diverted. Amanda certainly has her weaknesses and Chuk probably knew of them."

"I see what you mean now. So, there's really nothing you can do about Amanda's bet just in case she's stupid?"

Paul waited until Amanda returned, then said to Jane, "I'll bet my ass that there isn't."

Jane grinned wickedly at Amanda and said to Paul, "You're wrong, Paul. There is something. Pay up, buster."

END OF STORY

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