

Victor hated having to come into work immediately after the gym. He was sore everywhere, and now he'd have to sit all day in his chair, instead of enjoying a long soak as a way of relaxing, but some idiot had decided to alter the schedule and keep that from him until the last thirty minutes. Now, instead of a nice relaxing evening after an arduous workout, here he was.

It didn't help that he wasn't a fan of exercise. His weight problem hadn't been caused exclusively by the humiliation. Keeping his weight down had been a problem his entire life; being ostracized by the department had just made it easier to justify not keeping up with the regimen. And he ate when depressed.

Victor waved to the desk sergeant and was ignored, even if the man had nothing to keep him busy. He didn't care. Victor had decided that with the new look, he was going to have a new attitude toward life. He was done letting the fact that everyone at the precinct hated him bring him down. Though he couldn't afford an implant to regulate his mood, he'd found his own method, and he was going to be happy. The rest of the universe could just go fuck itself.

That attitude had let him keep the weight off for a year now. The body-sculptor he'd gone to had made it clear that Victor would have to put in the work to maintain the shape. He'd hoped to buy himself a "brand new you", as the advertising went—a body that never lost its shape, that could metabolize whatever food he ate.

But that body had been outside of his reach, so he'd settled for a reputable body-sculptor. Even getting himself rejuvenated back to his forties had proved to be unaffordable. He'd had to settle for taking twenty years off his age, and it had made him realize that for the average universal lifespan to be a hundred-seventy years, a lot of poor people had to die young to balance the unnaturally long lives of the elites.

It gave him a new outlook on the regular "uprisings" throughout SpaceGov, about the corporates overlord and how they were making sure to keep the small folks down. Maybe there was something to it. After all, why was it so expensive to get a new, healthy body when there was such a demand for it?

He dropped in his chair and smiled as it no longer gave its old complaint. He looked at his empty mug on the corner of the desk. He tapped it over the side, waited a second, and then caught it out of the air, grinning. That was one thing he just couldn't get enough of. He'd used the little money he'd had left for a muscle memory augment, fully organic, but permanent, and a side effect of that had been the way his reflexes had sharpened to an almost mechanical level.

He wasn't any faster, but he no longer fumbled about. His hand went exactly where he wanted it to go. His shooting had improved immensely with only a few extra practices a week.

Another side effect for the whole treatment had been his hair. It had been thinning for over a decade, and he'd acquired a noticeable bald spot in the last few years.

At seventy he'd been young to be losing his hair, but there was a history of it in his family. Most of his mother's side were going for treatments by the time they were eighty. The stress he'd been living with at the precinct hadn't helped. Now he was back to a full head of hair that was a vibrant, dark copper.

And finally, there had been the sex. Oh, how he'd missed wanting to have sex. When he'd built his dream body he'd included a hyper-sexual upgrade, but that had been the first thing he'd had to remove. Why was everything sexual so damned expensive?

So he'd done his best to accept he'd have to live with a lack of desire, even if he forced himself to go to clubs a few times a month as a way to prove to himself Tristan had been wrong. He wasn't alone because Tristan had destroyed his trust in other people. He could engage in physical activities with other guys; he just had no desire for it.

And then had come that night.

The man had approached him, bought him a drink. They'd talked for no more than five minutes, and then they were in one of the rooms, competing with the other rooms to

see who could be the loudest.

Now Victor looked forward to going out and meeting guys.

“Hey, Barstone,” a woman said as she stopped by his desk.

“Hey, Becky.” He gave her the brightest smile he could and, as expected, it threw her off. He knew where this was leading; she wasn’t the first one in the last forty or more years who’d treated him this way.

But they were more frequent now. Everyone had noticed the change—how could they not—but unlike the clubs or on the streets, where he’d had to grow used to being stared at in appreciation, here his improved appearance had been met with jeers and ridicule.

“What can I do for you, Officer Newland?” he asked pleasantly, starting his system.

“Sorry, this sunshine attitude’s a little disconcerting.”

“I imagine it is.” He kept the smile going.

“Alright, I’ll get down to it. Me and my friend have been wondering something.”

He looked around her at the other officers milling around a desk, trying to look like they weren’t paying attention. He noted who comprised the group, and any hope he might have had this would actually be a productive meeting was thrown out an airlock.

“Go right ahead.”

“We were wondering why a loser like you would spend all his money to look like that.” She motioned to him. “Who do you think you’re fooling? You think that just because you look better, the rest of us don’t know you for the piece of shit you are?”

Victor’s smile didn’t even falter. “You see, Officer Newland, I spent money on this because I stopped giving a fuck what you and the other assholes in this place thought about me. I didn’t do this for you, I did it for me, and you know what? This little game you and your friends play, trying to make me feel bad, it is probably the funniest thing that’s happened to me since, well, since I was assigned this desk.” He looked at her pleasantly, having to work at not laughing when she looked about to explode in anger. “Will there be anything else?”

“Newland!” Captain Sinor yelled from across the precinct. “Get back to work.” He looked over the room. “What is it with you people? This isn’t a spa, it’s a Law station. Aren’t there criminals out there you’re supposed to catch?”

Becky glared at Victor like this was his fault and hurried to her desk, which her friends had abandoned.

He began entering data to the cold case vault and watched as the captain continued looking over the precinct. Multiple times he looked over Victor, but kept going, as if the desk was empty.

Sinor had stopped making his life difficult a few months before, which had surprised everyone except Victor. Their one interaction, which hadn’t been required by work, had been a comment by the captain when he’d stopped at his desk.

“I’m glad to see you’re not letting yourself go anymore.” Then he’d moved on.

Victor had been surprised by the comment. He’d expected the captain’s own problem to cause him to be even more disagreeable toward Victor.

The city supervisor had come down on Captain Sinor hard after receiving an anonymous tip that he’d let a merc use the precinct as her own personal base of operations. He was sure the captain had done everything he could to defend himself: explained how she’d come with corporate credentials, that he’d had to do as she’d said. Except the tip had included links showing the credentials weren’t valid, links that could have been uncovered with nothing more than a standard net search.

Victor didn’t know if it was finally understanding what it was like to have been used that way which made the captain stop bothering him, or if he was too busy keeping his career from imploding, but Victor enjoyed the peace.

Thinking of Katherine reminded him to check his programs. He’d spent good money for the search programs running through the net. He wanted to keep tabs on her, as well as Alex and Tristan.

None of them had shown up on the net for more than a year now. Her, since he'd last seen her in the precinct getting her mercs out of the cells and ordering officers around. Them, since he'd handed the information about the drug dealers. He was confident they'd been involved in the fighting there, but he hadn't been able to get any confirmation.

He expected those two to be in transit somewhere after saving the universe, since he was still alive. That he hadn't been informed Tristan had left the planet didn't surprise him; there had been a handful of ship thefts, and two of them fit what he'd go for. He figured they'd show up on the net, eventually.

The rest of the night passed quietly, for him at least. Captain Sinor did regular rounds, and anytime an officer was caught not working, there was screaming.

He almost didn't stop by the gym on his way home. Twice a day, the body-sculptor had told him, if he was serious about improving the work done, and he was.

Luck got him a training partner—a good-looking guy, tall, muscular with darker skin. Serious, but not brooding. They talked as they trained, and afterward did more exercises together in the shower that could have gotten them expelled.

He was sore when he got home, but happy. His message center informed him he had multiple messages, men he'd met, or who had heard of him. Today was going to be the kind of day where nothing could bring him down.

And then he saw the message on the terminal screen.

“Victor, I need your help. Crimson.”