

Traveling for work, our heroine stops in a gym which is queer-friendly and has an encounter with a woman who is their sexual fantasy. Notably average and androgynous before that, they notice a bit of overall growth after the fact.

Mel looked around the brightly lit gym space and sighed. Hopefully, a workout would help with the stress bubbling in their stomach. The meeting with their longest-running client, *Filament Hydraulics*, was less than twelve hours away and the never-ending heartburn was wrecking them. It didn't that their sleep schedule was a wasteland from squaring away her other clients ahead of this trip.

With a shake of their head, they put their earbuds in and set the well-worn gym treadmill to 'Hills'. As their sneakers thumped on the belt, they let their mind wander and the usual suspects stopped by. There was, of course, the creeping sense they were wearing the wrong things. That insidious whisper that their thigh-length mesh shorts and slim-fit tee-shirt were too revealing—that people would notice.

Not that there was anyone around. Aside from Mel, the only other person in the small-town franchise of the national chain was the desk clerk. She was a bored-looking college girl who was half-paying attention to her philosophy text while watching videos on her phone.

Fuck, when was the last time they had been *this* stressed? The first year after getting laid off? When they were just starting out? Yeah, probably. And just like when they had started, Mel was obsessing over all the little details. They were so invested in the outcome of their first face-to-face conversation with Catherine Monaghan, CEO of *FH*, they had been going over every conversation they could think of. Ultimately, it came down to one thing: how would Monaghan react to this paradigm shift?

Then again, everything else was changing, too. Catherine's grant application had come back with a positive response, and that had gotten the ball rolling on all of the projects she had been sitting on—as Mel had found out last week when they had gotten an e-mail inquiring about updating the site.

Right now, *Filament Hydraulics* had a tiny, blog-based site. Something lightweight with an about section, some company-focused news, the firm's contact info—stuff like that. Faced with this opportunity, however, Catherine was looking to expand the website into something that could serve as a virtual storefront.

Rather than try to sort all of the details out over e-mail, Mel had offered to come to them—and then regretted it the moment they had hit send. Since the *FH* offices were two states away, Mel had never formally met anyone working at the firm. Outside of the occasional call, just about all of the communication back and forth had been over e-mail—as was the case with all of their clients. This would mark the first time *any* of Mel's clients would meet them and *that* might have been the most terrifying thing.

Mel had done all they could to alter their appearance in the last year. They had gone to great lengths to distance themselves from who they used to be. They had changed their hair, chopping most of it off and dying it black. They had gotten a lip piercing and a couple in each ear, too. After their recent laser treatment, what had remained of their patchy beard did not grow back and the fruits of their cleanser plus exfoliating routine were finally no longer broken up by stubble. Despite all that though, it was pretty much the same face as before they started therapy.

Yanking their mind out of the negativity, Mel worked to visualize the client's boardroom—just as they had a dozen times already—and tried to dream up another way the

conversation could go. They were so so preoccupied with this that they did not notice someone approaching—at least until their daydream started trying to get their attention.

“Excuse me, miss? Miss?”

Snapped out of their reverie, Mel looked up to see who had spoken and felt their racing heartbeat jump even higher. Standing on the other side of the console, with a bright smile that made her cheeks dimple, was a woman who stood eye to eye with Mel despite not being up on a machine. Her light, reddish-brown hair, up in a messy bun, was shot with silver and the whole mass faded into a deep, wine-like red after a few inches.

The stranger’s face was that kind of effortlessly sexy only possible after years of practice. The slightest amount of dark green liner emphasized the brighter hue of her eyes, a touch of eye-shadow made her crow’s feet less noticeable, and a hint of lip gloss accentuated the plush look of her lips. She was so beautiful that Mel was sure they were still daydreaming. If so, what would it be like to kiss those lips? To feel them against their neck?

“Sorry to bother you,” the woman said with a voice that had a subtle bassy quality. “But is this treadmill open?” she asked, putting a hand on the machine to Mel’s right. Her nails were short and well-manicured. The overhead lights gleamed on the clear finish.

Okay, maybe, this *wasn’t* a dream.

“Uh—” Mel replied, stumbling over their response and almost falling to boot. It was unusual for them to have trouble speaking to strangers—or running for that matter—but, like the weights on the scale at the doctor’s office, their mind had slid over to the notch labeled ‘useless lesbian’. There was a flash of those fingers teasing them and Mel’s whole body throbbed. How long had it been since they had thought about being touched? Months, probably... Anyway, Mel needed to provide an answer.

“Oh! Yeah, it’s open,” Mel said through a mouth devoid of moisture all of a sudden. “I’m here alone.” Wait—Why had they said *that*? That fact was obvious since, until then, the gym had only been occupied by them and the desk clerk. Then why ask? Unless...

The woman laughed and waved her other hand at Mel in an ‘oh, stop’ kind of way. “Well, if you’re alone, do you mind if I join you?”

“S-sure,” Mel replied, trying to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

“Great!” The woman began to walk around but stopped after the first step and turned back to face Mel, “I’m Heather, by the way.”

“Ah, well, I’m Mel.”

“That’s a great name for a cutie like you.”

The sensation of heat spreading over Mel’s face was as sudden and intense as the flash from opening an oven.

Cute? Them? Mel had to admit it was possible, however unlikely, that someone meeting them for the first time could think their semi-goth aesthetic was cute. It was almost impossible for Mel to think of themselves that way. Despite a customized meal and exercise plan, their dream appearance remained out of reach, and that colored their self-impression—especially on bad days. On a great day, they could accept their appearance enough to think of themselves as average. Those days were becoming more frequent, but there were still mornings where nothing was right and all Mel saw in the mirror was the mask they had tried to tear off.