

La Fontaine

Some call her the damselfly. Others call her *la fontaine*. None who don't cross her threshold twice knows her real name. 'Course, ain't but few what stepped into her domain just to walk away. She's a fountain of desire: makes promises even the most hardened hearts can't refuse. Time pass you go and ask her what she wants in return...well, she's all but done got it.

It wasn't often lillyanne came across a transplant at the Hub that didn't have some history. It made for some bad company on the best of days, but that was, in the end, her cross to bear. The locals knew better than to spend a night with her. She was marked. Still, good conversation was never hard to come by, and the bartender never cut her off so long as she had credits on her six. The specimen that caught her eye, though, was a regular anomaly. No flags, no warrants. Not even so much as a parking ticket in the last six cycles. Their steel was sharp—sleek, new, high quality stuff. They certainly didn't get it placed in the States. The cuts were too clean for sanction workers and, if she saw right, a glimpse at their eyes as they scanned the top shelf suggested ocular implants banned from the local clinics. Either they'd been in the Force, or they had the credits to look like someone who had.

lillyanne was descended upon them just soon enough to hear what they drank.

“What Kentucky you got?”

Ford gave a dry kind of laugh. "Friend, it ain't *been* Kentucky for a minute." Not interested enough in a reply, he slid the transplant a shot of bourbon and propped up his scanner. "Six?"

The transplant offered their wrist with a shade of chagrin and what lillyanne assumed was the determination to commit this new information to memory.

lillyanne waited until Ford was out of earshot to approach the transplant. Ford had little welcome for the likes of Force troopers. Seeing as she was one, herself, she knew to watch her words around the man. His patience for her waxed only on account of the fact that she dropped out early.

"Nice hardware," she said, proffering her scanner. "Mind if I check your specs?"

"Thanks," they said, throwing their drink back with about as much sophistication as a dehydrated animal. "Usually folks don't go undressing me with their eyes until *after* the first date, though."

"All well. You're a treat on the eyes even with your gear on." lillyanne offered her best *fuck me* smile in concession, pocketing her device. "You don't strike me much as the dating type, though."

"Based on what?"

"My hope that it won't take a first date to get you out of here."

Seldom did lillyanne lay it on this thick with the usual transplants, but she had a feeling about *this* person. Some of that feeling was likely attributed to the fact that it'd been a few cycles since her last lay. More importantly, though, she meant to take this one home.

Mel had long lost count of the cycles that had past since he was deployed. Being only a technician, he hadn't had to man the front lines, but he'd seen more than his fair share of the effects of expedition. Few memories of the States made it back with him from post—not that they would have helped much. For as long as he'd been gone, life was sure to have changed considerably.

He'd heard about the hub in New Orleans just before his dismissal. Troopers who'd had enough of the New Way would wind up there, one of the last cities to resemble something of what Earth was like prior to the slingshot. Sure they still had bioware, and the days were like nights without much in the way of artificial lighting, but the people—indeed, the *people*—maintained a community there.

It wasn't much like him to blindly follow some girl out of the hub the way he did, but something about her. Perhaps it was her swarthy skin, deep, smooth, the likes of which he'd never seen out in the stars. Perhaps it was the registration his facial recognition picked up, pinning her as an ex-trooper. Perhaps the company was just too tempting to pass up. When she suggested they retire to her place, it was all he could do not to think about the last time he felt the warmth of another *human* body. Not that the other troopers weren't human, but they'd been so altered over the course of so many expeditions that not even the blood in their veins ran warm anymore. Once the World Alliance figured out how to minimize oxygen dependency, it was nothing for them to begin designing humans perfectly suited for interstellar operations. Only, they *weren't* quite human, were they? They lived, breathed, and felt like humans, but these ones...they were *born* altered.

“Here we are!”

Mel was jarred from his thoughts as the girl scampered across the bridge and down the pathway to the towering door at the foot of a small mansion. Despite being the largest—the *only*—residence on this side of the bayou, it didn’t feel out of place, nestling comfortably among the willow trees and the brush, inviting ivy to climb its crumbling, stucco siding. The dingy, aged exterior gave the impression that the house, rather than built by human hands, had been birthed by the acid bog that lay before it. As he crossed the wooden bridge into the pathway, the building seemed slant, as though to consider him, to judge his worth. The door eased open, and there stood a woman as grand and as married to her surroundings as the mansion that produced her. She leaned out of the doorway, delivering a kiss to the girl from the hub—only now did Mel consider the fact that he didn’t even know her name. The woman’s eyes fell not *on* him, but *around* him. He was trapped in her gaze, an easy smile seeped into her lips like swamp water. Her breasts spilled from the veil of wooden beaded necklaces living on her neck as she ambled down the a few stairs to approach Mel where he stood.

“Piglet, d’ja bring me another stray from the Hub?” the woman’s voice was an earthy melody as she thoughtfully rolled a bead between her fingertips. Not once did she break eye contact with Mel. The girl from the hub simply saddled up to the woman’s side, offering a long gaze of adoration.

“Yeah, Daddy, I think this one’s a good one. They’re not much like those glassy-eyed troopers. This one wants to feel—I think...”

As they proceeded to discuss him as though he wasn’t standing right there, Mel began wondering what he’d gotten himself into. His guard was up now, alert to the woman who began

to circle him like a predator sizing up her prey. Clearly, the girl was a lure to get him to this—*whatever* it was. The woman paused in front of him, leaning in with a look of concentration.

“I don’t know,” she said, finally, resting a hand on her cocked hip. “Troopers are always a hassle. Nine times out’a ten, they forget how to feel, you know. So, what do you like to be called, sugar?”

She spoke quick, leaving little time for Mel to realize when she was talking to him. “T-they call me Mel.”

“*And?*”

“And...?”

“Well, Mel!” She raised her hands expectantly. “Ain’t no one taught you about pronouns? Which do you prefer to be called?”

“*Pronouns?*” Mel frowned. “The normal ones, I guess.”

Her beads clacked together as she shook her head in defeat, a sign that Mel had given the wrong answer.

“W-well, what about *you*? What are you called?”

“You can call me *whatever* you want.” Mel was caught in the allure of her lips as her easy smile deepened into a voracious, toothy grin. “Unless, of course, you mean to stay.” Lillyanne’s eyes lit up at *that* idea.