

Ink, Sun, Nettle, and Knives

A future graphic novel series by Rye Donaldson, Sofia Dominguez, and Aditi Biswas

Logline:

When a sudden sickness disrupts peace in the Valley, a studious young sigil scholar must join hands with three other misfits to uncover buried history and heal the ancient scars of their world.

Characters:

Tala (main character) - An 18 year old member of the Sigils Tribe. She tends to stick to routines in her lifestyle, like wearing the same outfit everyday. Tala was raised by her grandmother, Hilaya, in the outskirts of the Sigil Tribe community. Their relationship is very close, as Hilaya is the only one that can get Tala to listen or calm down. As an outstanding scholar of the Sigil Tribe, her strengths lie in her rational mindedness, intelligence, and her ability to easily memorize. However, because of this, Tala tends to be blunt and a bad listener, making her bad at socializing. However, Tala has deep love for her grandmother, and throughout the story she develops love for her friends.

Sol (ally): A 15 year old member of the Music Tribe. Compared to Tala, she is more flexible and adaptable and values creativity and compassion. A member of the wild and family-like music tribe, Sol loves music but has difficulties performing in front of people due to her shyness. However, when relaxed and in trusted company, she becomes more confident.

Wren (ally): A 19 year old member of the Alchemy Tribe. They use plants and herbs to shapeshift, but the other members of the Alchemy Tribe view this as dangerous and look down upon them for not using magic in a conventional way. They mostly keep to themselves, and as a result there is an initial feeling of distrust between them and the others in their group.

Lazarus (mentor/shapeshifter): A 29 year old member of the Cursed Tribe. Lazarus uses his mastery of charisma and social trickery to worm his way out of difficult situations, making deals and manipulations on behalf of the Cursed Tribe. He harbors a traumatic past, growing up with negligent parents and then being kidnapped by the Cursed Tribe cult. Because of this, he doesn't feel like he deserves connection, and has led a lonely life. Deep inside, he longs to be able to trust people and be free from fear.

Other characters:

Tala's Grandmother (Hilaya): The person closest to Tala, she's her first mentor and tries to guide Tala to be fair and kind.

Olani: A terrible power-hungry figure of the Ancient Tribe, he stands behind the story of Vanquish Day.

Story Overview

Setting:

In this world, doing magic is an ability similar to mental or physical ability. In The Valley there are four main 'tribes of thought' for doing magic: Alchemy, Music, Sigils and spells, and Tool-making (Blacksmith). The Blacksmith tribe is the most highly regarded because of their specialization in tool making that serves all the tribes. In the center of the Valley lies the large city Centrum, where the tribes convene to trade.

Act 1:

As the Valley begins to prepare for this year's Vanquish Festival, elders of the Sigil, Music, and Alchemy Tribes begin to mysteriously fall sick. Tala's grandmother is among them, however, tribe leaders are not taking action. Frustrated with the response, Tala begins to take matters into her own hands when she starts her investigation in the Vanquish Festival. There, she finds a clue. Things worsen when her grandmother is forcibly taken to a "healing sanctuary" by the Blacksmith Tribe, but Tala feels like something else is going on. Determined to get to the bottom of this, Tala ventures beyond her little world of the Sigil Tribe into the unknown.

Act 2:

Tala meets Sol, who helps her figure out the clue and sticks by her side. The clue leads them to the Alchemy Tribe, where they interrupt a public trial condemning Wren for the use of dangerous magic. Lazarus appears, and he helps teach Tala it's okay to twist the truth, and they free Wren, who joins them despite Tala's initial distrust. Lazarus persuades the kids to follow him to the Blacksmith Tribe base to investigate the sickness. Tala and the others force Lazarus to magically swear he won't betray them. In the base, Wren reveals his story and shapeshifting abilities, and the group grows closer. There, they find a huge machine where all the sick had been imprisoned, and learn that there is a fifth tribe and a fifth way to do magic. In a rash attempt to save her grandmother, Tala sets off an alarm, and all chaos breaks loose as the gang is cornered by guards. In a last-ditch effort, Lazarus breaks his promise by revealing that he works for the Cursed Tribe and betraying them, and the group is fractured as Tala and Lazarus are captured.

Act 3:

Tala is trapped, her strength drained, for weeks in a dark cell. She reaches her lowest point, but reflects on her journey and realizes how much she cares for her friends. Using a special Vanquish Day sigil, she manages to do life force magic (the secret fifth way of doing magic) and escapes. She finds Lazarus and they open up to each other and reconcile. They escape and interrogate a cursed tribe official and he tells them that the sickness is actually an ancient curse that they are using to steal the life force of people so they can revive Olani, their leader. Tala and Lazarus learn the machine has been moved to Centrum, where the heart of Olani is buried. Tala and Lazarus meet Sol and Wren and Hilaya there. The main crew stop the whole affair and in a cool magic speech they bring the tribes together to break the spell for everyone. The main crew go their separate ways in life but continue to be friends.

Detailed Description

ACT I

Exposition

Tala and her grandmother, Hilaya, and the rest of the Sigil Tribe, prepare for the Vanquish Festival by drawing special complicated Sigils on Centrum's streets and plaza. There's a main, ancient sigil that is specifically used in Vanquish Day, and although it's said to bring good luck, health, and unity, nobody really knows what it does. Hilaya is giving gentle instructions to Tala and her peers, and Tala is listening obediently. As each stroke of the sigil is created, Hilaya tells her of the old story of Vanquish Day:

(grandmother's 'voice' superimposed on story-like images) *In the ancient times, all the tribes used to be very isolated and wouldn't get along at all. As tensions brewed, they fought over each other for power, and one terrible leader, Olani, rose through the chaos. To silence his opposition and gain control, he massacred people from all the tribes using a special spell he had crafted. In order to save the Valley, the leaders from the four tribes came together to confront him. Their attack interrupted the spell and backfired on Olani and he was destroyed, disintegrated even, by his own malice. His heart is buried in the deep ground of Centrum. Ever since then, on this day, the tribes all come together in Centrum, in unity and solidarity, ready to take on tomorrow, while honoring the deaths of those from the past.*

Tala tries to reach out to her peers by correcting their sigils and teaching them how to do them right, but the peers are cold to her, and Tala gets defensive and starts criticizing them, starting an argument.

Hilaya later pulls Tala aside and lectures her, reminding her how important unity and community is. Inside, Tala knows she's right, but Tala doesn't know how to connect with people because they're not black-and-white, and they don't make sense. Outwardly, however, Tala is stubborn and says that she doesn't care about those 'idiots' anyway, and that

she doesn't need anyone except her grandmother. Suddenly Hilaya gets a heart attack and faints. The Sigil people luckily help Tala bring her grandmother back home and take care of her, but Tala is frustrated and bothered by the event. Her grandmother was strong and healthy, it makes no sense for her to be suddenly sick. And it couldn't be her fault.

Tala spends the next nights pouring over her books and notes on what is happening, and even brings herself to go to the Sigil tribe meeting, but the leaders argue that they need to keep spirits up for Vanquish Festival and can't afford her grandma being sick ruining everything. Tala feels resentful and anxious.

Inciting Incident

Then comes the Vanquish Festival, when Centrum is filled with people of all tribes. While walking around, Tala hears whispers of more people getting sick, and although people are keeping the appearance of safety and happiness, a growing sense of dread is palpable. Tala watches the performance of the Music Tribe. A girl is called up to perform a solo, but she gets anxious and freezes up. Because Tala knows that fear of vulnerability, she feels the girl's extreme discomfort. Suddenly, the two lock eyes, and Tala is conflicted about how to help her, but she panics and also freezes up, unable to do anything.

Later at the celebration, Tala spots someone sneaking around with odd clothes that look like they tried to dress up as the Blacksmith tribe, but failed really badly and comically. Tala follows him into a secluded area, meeting with 2 actual Blacksmith tribe members that looked like they were expecting him. They look like they're trading something but Tala can't see properly, and suddenly they begin to argue. Tala moves closer, and hears about a deal not being made, and that the badly-dressed guy tricked them. He pats one of them on the shoulder, trying to de-escalate the situation, but they look even more furious and push him into the wall. They start yelling threats that they'll knife him. Tala subconsciously starts to come out of her hiding spot, but freezes when she feels like the guy is looking right at her. Suddenly, the guy pulls out a knife from his shirt, says 'Were you looking for this?', and swipes it at the attackers, managing to run away, gone in a flash. The other two try to go after him, but they're slow. Tala gets out of her hiding spot, and sees that the guy left a weird gadget. Tala picks it up and goes home with an uneasy feeling in her stomach.

Act 1 Climax

Weeks later, the Blacksmith tribe starts gathering all the sick people, saying that they're taken them to a healing sanctuary. Tala's grandmother is taken too, and while Tala's rational mind thinks that this is the right thing to do, her instincts tell her that something is wrong. That instinct is validated when she realizes that the Blacksmith people taking away her grandmother are the same suspicious people she saw on Vanquish Day. Feeling the call to

investigate further, and knowing that there's nothing holding her back anymore, she packs up her things and leaves home.

END OF ACT 1.

ACT II

Trial #1

Tala doesn't know where she's going once she's left home. She wanders vaguely towards the central city where she first saw the badly-dressed person, trying to figure out how the gadget he dropped works. As she approaches the city, she decides to rest by a music tribe camp. She spots the anxious girl from Music tribe Vanquish Day performance. The girl recognizes Tala and approaches her. Noticing the gadget, the girl hums a tune and waves her hand over it. Tala notices the needle twitch. Tala realizes the gadget has a lock mechanism that's too small to be broken normally. She has the idea of drawing a sigil that guides the girl's humming to fully open the lock. The needle points towards the woods.

Tala follows the needle and after a few minutes realizes the girl is following her. Her name is Sol, and she admits that she doesn't want to go home because her family has been avoiding her since the Vanquish Day performance. Things are tough in the music tribe with many people sick or gone. Tala remembers when they first met on Vanquish Day and the sympathy she felt for her, and begrudgingly lets Sol tag along.

Tala and Sol follow the direction the gadget points in. Tala is mostly silent with Sol piping up on occasion, making observations and asking questions that go mostly unanswered. One night, Sol tries to talk to Tala about the time they first met on Vanquish Day. Tala snaps, letting her pent-up fears and frustrations spill out, and tells Sol how lost she feels. Sol says that she won't leave Tala alone in this, whether she likes it or not. They continue on their way.

Trial #2

After a couple more days of walking, the gadget leads them to the Alchemy Tribe, where there is a public trial. The tribe leaders face a young person named Wren. They list out Wren's crime: using items of nature and potions to manipulate their appearance and body. They argue that this is disrespectful towards Alchemy philosophy, and therefore dangerous. Wren desperately tries to defend herself, but the tribe leaders interrupt them and decide Wren's fate of lifelong imprisonment, for everyone's good, sealing their fate with a ceremonial rare powdered mineral.

While watching the trial, Tala and Sol can't help but jump to Wren's rescue. They attempt to free them but are caught. The Alchemy tribe debates whether to punish Tala and

Sol for interfering. Suddenly, the mysterious person Tala saw at the Vanquish Festival who dropped the gadget swoops in and comes to their defense. Stating confidently that he, Tala, and Sol are Wren's attorneys, the guy reveals himself as Lazarus. He is dressed in flashy high-ranking Blacksmith Tribe clothing, and the leaders of the Alchemy Tribe trust him.

Lazarus holds a meeting with Tala, Sol, and Wren. He argues they need to lie and manipulate their way out of the situation, but Tala demands they stick to the truth and respect a court of law, even though Wren refuses to tell them anything. During the tense trial, they try to do it Tala's way, but the Alchemy tribe leaders are not convinced. Tala improvises and stretches out the truth, just a little. Lazarus takes the lead and goes off into a wild story that leaves the Alchemy tribe leaders full of tears. The leaders release Wren from imprisonment, but Wren is still outcasted from their tribe with nowhere to go. They're still quiet and mysterious, but stick close to the group. Sol proposes Wren join them, and Tala tries to object. She doesn't trust Wren, but, although she wouldn't admit it, she's grown fond of Sol and can't say no.

Just as they realize Lazarus wandered off, he reappears behind Tala, storing away a new pouch of the rare mineral material they saw on the ceremonial stone. When Wren tries to confront him about stealing, Lazarus ignores them, unfazed. Tala glances between them, confused, but is distracted when he taps the gadget Tala is holding. She realizes that it's been leading them to him all along. Tala asks him why he's been helping them, why he left her the gadget in the first place.

He says he can help her get to the sanctuary, that her instincts about something being amiss are right. Lazarus has a sack full of stolen things from the other tribes that he claims that he swiped from Blacksmith Tribe people who were taking the sick to the refuge, saying they were the real thieves.

But Tala doesn't believe him, because of the fact Lazarus didn't save Wren out of good will, it was only to steal the rare mineral. Sol, Wren, and Tala demand an explanation, but Lazarus asks the kids to trust him. Tala forces him to promise he's telling the truth and won't betray them. She imprints a Bonding Sigil on his arm to make sure the promise is kept, but deep inside she still doesn't trust him.

The group travels to the Blacksmith Tribe city, a busy setting of iron factories and glass and smoke. With his Blacksmith Tribe disguise, Lazarus takes them into the caves: the tribe's main source of metal and gemstone resources. Inside, he says there is a secret base, and that must be where the 'sanctuary' is.

The group enters the underground base. Its narrow passages are dimly lit by natural bioluminescent plants. Peering into rooms, they find prototypes for a contraption. They

stumble into a large opening in the cave with enormous creepy etchings of what seems to be a tale. Tala stops to examine them, and recognizes symbols from her studies of ancient sigils. There's the symbols of the four tribes, and then another unknown but familiar symbol. The main mural shows a levitating figure, a crowd of people bowing around it. Tala notices that the figure is holding their own heart, and realizes the heart symbol is Olani's, used everywhere on Vanquish Day celebrations. Suddenly a horde of footsteps are heard quickly approaching the group. Just as a crowd of strangely-dressed people herd into the room, Wren protects the group by using shapeshifting magic to camouflage them, making them look as if they were part of the murals.

When the people pass, the group looks at Wren, shocked. Wren panics, used to being feared and hated, but instead Sol tackles them with a hug. The group grows closer as Wren tells them their story and explains how shapeshifting works. They give all of them camouflaging potions they can use when in trouble. Lazarus finds a secret passage within the mural wall, and as the group crawls inside, Tala also realizes how much help she's gotten from her friends, she couldn't have done any of this without them.

Midpoint & Act 2 Climax

The passage leads to a massive room, filled with more people in strange attire and others in Blacksmith-like gear, pacing and moving things around. There's a red glowing crystal in the center, tubes and wires clamped onto it. The walls of the room are lined floor to ceiling with hundreds of cramped cells, also hooked up to the machine. In each of the cells is a person, trapped. The group realizes the truth: there is a fifth tribe, a fifth way to do magic, and that something truly insidious is going on. Tala sees her grandmother trapped in one of these cells. Sol and Tala try to get her out, but as they do an alarm is triggered. They are cornered by guards from this mysterious fifth tribe. While Sol and Wren get Hilaya out of the cell, Lazarus tries to cover for the kids by negotiating with the guards. In a last-ditch effort Lazarus reveals he's working for the Cursed Tribe, claiming he caught Sol and the others in an attempt to gain the favor of the Cursed Tribe back. The Bonding Sigil Tala put on his arm shatters and he recoils in pain. Lazarus and Tala begin to fight. She calls him an insecure liar, and Lazarus has the last word when he tells her that no matter how much she denies it, she's also a cold, heartless liar, who only looks out for herself. Tala freezes, shocked. Suddenly she feels a blunt force on her head, and Tala blacks out.

END OF ACT II

ACT III

Darkest Moment

Tala wakes up in a cold and dark cell, alone. She can't move, and she's overwhelmed by everything that's happened, she feels like a failure. Hopeless and alone, she remains immobile on the floor as weeks crawl by.

But just as she's about to give up, she is reminded of her grandmother and how much Hilaya believes in her. With her fingernail, Tala begins to scratch the lucky Vanquish Day sigil from her tribe on the floor, when she remembers a drawing of a similar sigil she saw briefly when looking through the Cursed Tribe's base. She combines the two, and suddenly her strength comes back, and she can finally stand up.

Tala reflects on her journey, how difficult but rewarding it has been to make friends, and she realizes how much she really cares about and needs them. With her strength recovering, she manages to trick a guard using a face-potions Wren gave her. She finds Lazarus sitting alone in his cell, looking like he's given up. Tala apologizes to Lazarus for what she said to him, and asks for an explanation.

Lazarus realizes that his connection with Tala and the others, while to him initially superficial, had become something genuine and meaningful, which he cared about more than he had let himself think. He opens up to her about his traumatic past.

He also tells her about the Cursed Tribe's weird obsession with Olani, how they're regarded as a god, and that there are whispers about the Cursed Tribe trying to resurrect them. He suspects the machine and the sickness has to do with this. Lazarus also reflects on how lonely he's lived, how he's afraid of hurting people and being hurt, and he was too afraid to leave and instead led a selfish life. Apologizing for what he said to Tala, and they reconcile and escape together.

Tala and Lazarus kidnap and interrogate a high ranking Cursed Tribe member in order to gain information, who complies surprisingly easily. The high ranking member tells them about the history of the cursed tribe and how life-force magic works: it's the transferring of life-force from oneself to something else. The forbidden way Olani discovered was how to take life force from others for oneself. With this power, Olani created a cult that committed a massacre using a mega-life-force-stealing spell, but when the leaders of the other tribes interfered, it backfired on them, killing Olani and sickening the rest of the cult members. For generations they figured out a way to redirect the curse and use it to their advantage using a special machine made by the Blacksmith tribe, that would steal the life force of everyone else but them and store enough power to revive Olani. That's the last piece of the puzzle: the fifth way to do magic, the fifth tribe, and the fact that the sickness is actually a curse.

They now know that in order to end the curse, they have to reverse the life magic spell that was originally cast. However, the Cursed Tribe member was just playing along to

distract them. He tells Tala and Lazarus that it's too late and the machine is already in place. They race back to the machine room, only to find it missing, and realize the machine has been moved to Centrum, where the heart of Olani is.

They arrive at Centrum and find the machine with all of the sick people herded around it. It looks as if they are about to start the ritual. Sol, Wren, and Tala's grandmother have also arrived with members of the Sigil, Music, and Alchemy tribes.

SHOWDOWN TIME! Denouement

The group brings the fighting to a complete standstill using enchanting music magic, and Tala does a speech. She convinces the tribes to forgive each other and move on. Finally, she draws a huge sigil that will reverse the curse, and has everyone draw it on their palms and sing together. And then there is an earthquake, and it's the heart of Olani finally disintegrating, and everyone is free of the curse.

The life force gathered in the machine returns to those it was taken from, and everyone works together to bring those injured to a real sanctuary, where they heal together.

Final Resolutions

Tala forms a inter-tribe committee. They draft a treaty, barring the cursed tribe from stealing the life force of others, but also promising their safety from the other tribes. Wren stays in the central city and finds a place where they're accepted, and continues to research shapeshifting magic. They can finally openly live as themselves. Lazarus moves on with his life. He helps out the committee, where he serves people and feels like he belongs. Sol reunites with her tribe. They help her slowly overcome her anxiety, but she is more confident being herself too. She, like the others, visits Tala often, and they take care of Tala from overworking herself.

END OF ACT III