

oliver ferrie

SUGAR PEOPLE



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Oliver Ferrie

Sugar People by Oliver Ferrie

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GALLANT

*This story is for those of you who were never able to speak up at
the time.*

Those who were not heard.

Those who were not believed.

Those who were far too scared (and with good reason).

*How easy it is to feel as though the whole world is rewriting
your memories into something more easily consumable.*

This is not easily consumable. But I hope it helps.

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*Wasn't it funny? Hear it, all people!
Little Tom Thumb has swallowed a steeple!
How did he do it?
I'll tell you, my son:
'Twas made of white sugar — and easily done!*

~ Mother Goose

CHAPTER ONE

Refusal

Kestrel stood awkwardly in front of the college administrator, watching her watch him from behind round-rimmed spectacles.

She exhaled, slowly, as if what she had to say was terribly unfortunate, although her eyes did not share the sentiment.

‘I want to help you, I really do, but this piece breaks our exhibition rules.’ Another critical look at the canvas on the table.

‘What—why?’

‘It’s the...’ She trailed off, bracelets jangling as she motioned in the space above the painting. ‘It’s the hands... Oh, it’s just not appropriate.’

‘It’s art.’

‘We can’t display it. I am sorry.’

She was not sorry. Kestrel could tell. He stuck his own hands in his pockets, as if hiding them would hide some sin he had not committed. He was starting to feel sick.

'I don't understand how this is any different from Goya's *Saturn*,' he said, speaking all too hastily so she could not stop him. Invoking a famous painting as if art history credentials held any weight, and maybe that was petty at this stage, but he didn't care. He gathered his canvas up, sliding it back into the plastic bag with a crinkle far louder than he wanted it to be. He was rushing, but that was fine. He just wanted to leave.

It was the sound of her sucking in air that gave him pause. He turned. Her eyebrows were doing that thing, the thing that meant she was probably going to ask him if he was okay, if he needed help with anything. But she didn't. She just sighed out the breath, and let him go.

Frost still lined the edges of the sycamore leaves and dead carbon crunched beneath his feet as Kestrel took the narrow path out of campus. He preferred the south entrance; it was always quiet. The pillars that held the gates leading out into the town were made of a soft, light-grey limestone, cut in a traditional, blocky style that seemed somehow too provincial for the college.

His phone buzzed. Bethan, checking in.

— At the café. Where r u?

Just heading down now, he replied.

— Cool. I'll get u a latte while I wait.

At least there was that.

He carried on, past the sycamores, down the street with its low brick wall crusted with lichen and dead moss. The sky seemed too bright and too grey; his bags grew too heavy. By the time he reached the small café his shoulders were crying for a break, and the sickly feeling in his stomach had climbed to the back of his throat. There hadn't even been enough time on the short walk to get through a

song, and he couldn't just stop it halfway, so his earphones had stayed in his pocket. He wanted to pack it in, go home, stew in his thoughts and not have to see, talk, be around anyone.

But you know you'll feel better the instant you talk to Bethan. Just keep walking, one foot in front of the other, easy as anything.

The café was popular with the art students; that was why they picked it. Cheap enough and pretty enough, if that stood for anything. The barrier between the sharp outdoor air and the warming rush of the café changed his mind on going home. A cosier embrace than anything else he had felt that day, maybe longer.

Kestrel went through the perfunctory social awkwardness of scanning the café, the making clear to anyone who might be watching him that yes, he was looking for a friend, he wasn't being weird. The fact he was having trouble squeezing his bags past the serving table didn't help. One false move would mean sugar and napkins and stirring sticks everywhere.

He kept looking, seconds away from feeling desperate.

And there, Bethan, with her long curls and her colourful hoodie—neon pink and blue, how had he missed that on first glance?—hunched at the small high table with shoes hooked under the footrest rail. Her olive skin seemed somehow desaturated in the cold day, despite the café's best attempts to create warmth. She hadn't noticed him yet. He spent a moment just watching, because right then it felt like taking a step forward would ruin something, take something away that couldn't be gotten back. Bethan looked tired, but still as carefree as ever, and it almost seemed a crime to intrude. Much as he knew it would make him feel calmer.

Eventually he did move forward.

She broke into a grin, slid his coffee over to him. 'You made it! Oh—rough day?'

His face must have said it all. He shrugged his rucksack off his shoulders, and let his bag of artwork come to rest against the wall.

'They didn't accept my piece for the exhibition.'

'Really? How come?'

'Said it was inappropriate.'

'For real? What the fuck.' Her thick eyebrows creased and she pushed a curl out of her face. Not happy. Felt nice to have some commiseration.

'They're all kind of biased anyway, when it comes to this stuff. It's stupid.'

'Can I see it?'

'I dunno... I'm not really feeling very confident about it right now.'

'S'ok. I feel that.'

He wanted to tell her about the uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his belly, about how much it felt like being drowned. About all the nonsensical stuff whirling around in his brain that had made him paint the picture in the first place. But it was too difficult to elaborate, so he just sipped his coffee. Bethan talked about her classes—graphic design with a side order of psychology—trying to make parallels with his situation, trying to make him feel better. After a while he was starting to regret taking traditional art; hers sounded far more interesting. Late February, halfway through the second term, too far into the school year now to change subjects.

But for all their talk of school and assignments and the injustices of bureaucracy, they were both dancing around the main topic. These were decent enough distractions, but last time they had hung out, they had done the same thing,

and it felt awkward.

Bethan broke into it first.

‘So. I haven’t heard from Tala in ages.’

Kestrel thought about it for a moment, tried to come up with something to say that wasn’t stating the obvious. ‘Uh, yeah, she’s still...’

‘You’re closest—you should drop by and check on her.’

Easy for you to say.

Tala was ill, which was the simplest way of explaining a tricky situation, and Kestrel severely doubted that he was the best person to go talk to her. He understood Bethan’s reasoning; he had known Tala the longest out of all of them. But what help could he possibly provide that someone like Bethan couldn’t?

What he ended up telling Bethan, though, was, ‘Okay, sure.’

‘Good—cos Aaron told me he wants to continue our tabletop campaign. And I figure, if she’s depressed, it might help to get the gang back together.’

Kestrel did not correct her on the *if*.

‘Yeah, that’s a good idea.’ He grinned, despite his own low mood. ‘You sure you can put up with my rogue’s shenanigans, though?’

‘Dude, my barbarian is more than equipped for that,’ she shot back.

‘I’ll steal every gem in every dungeon. I’ll ruin all your carefully-crafted plans.’

Bethan’s eyes sparkled. ‘Hah! I’m counting on it.’ And then, coffee cup drained, she stood. ‘I’d better go—my shift starts soon.’

The aesthetic was not the only reason they chose this place to hang out; she worked at the corner store right next door. And yeah, he could see the garish green name tag

poking out from under the lapel of her hoodie. All dressed up and ready to go.

‘Ugh, yeah. I should get this stupid thing back home.’
He rustled the bag with his canvas inside.

‘Well. See you round campus. And—I’m sorry about the exhibit.’

Kestrel shrugged, and went on his way.

When he got home, the canvas found its place against the back wall of his bedroom. Beside it, an easel, and a slab of old wood that served as a palette, because what was the point in wasting money on a proper one? The paint he had used yesterday was half-dried in dollops atop it—probably still wet inside, and if he had the urge to poke at the rubbery skin it had formed, he would expect it to ooze out.

He left the paint well alone. Let his thoughts settle. Didn’t have the energy to draw anything more, and couldn’t bear the thought of looking at his journal, although he knew he had homework to do.

A ping from his mobile phone.

—You comin out tonight?

Bram. Probably done with his lectures for the day. Wondering if he was going to show face at the student bar. Oh yeah, it was Wednesday, half price Pimm’s, Bram loved that.

He usually went. He usually enjoyed it.

—Nah, (and now he needed a good excuse, come on, come on...) I have a headache.

That was a terrible excuse.

—Yeah, drinking’s prolly not gonna make that better.

Okay, good, Bram didn’t mind.

Then a few seconds later:

—Next time, eh?

He sent an emoji back, and played videogames instead, drinking on his own (the shitty Jamesons that Aaron had brought over for New Years) instead of drinking at the bar. The latest update for *Morningstars* was out, and that should have been fun, there was nothing like an online arena game to distract the senses. He tried to focus on what new skins he was going to equip his character with, what new maps he wanted to tackle first, but his thoughts kept turning back to Tala.

Should I text her now? Is it too late in the evening? Perhaps that would just stress her out.

He decided not to.

Tomorrow, then.

CHAPTER TWO

Suffocate

It's dark, and he's acutely aware he is running. His thighs burn with the effort, his calves strain, but he keeps going. Around him, the darkness shifts into spindly shapes; trees, shrubs, undergrowth. It smells of humus and wet grass.

He doesn't know how far he is from the thing behind him, but he does know that if he turns around, even for an instant, it will fix its baleful eye on him like a tired parent calling home their child. Exhausted with his antics. Care and concern, but such damning power behind it. And oh, when that hammer comes down.

The ground is soft and marshy, and he sinks into it with every lunge forward. It doesn't take long for him to trip, catching his worn-out shoes on some wayward root. Before he knows it, his face is planted in the mud and the cloying material threatens to fill his nostrils.

He snorts. Coughs. Heart pounding, forces himself to his feet and in front of him now is a mirror.

No, not a mirror. Glassy water that casts a perfect

reflection of his dirtied face. And behind him, the burning eye grows closer, purple as a bruise. Tendrils of smoke flare out from its centre. It's shapeshifting, becoming something else as it grows closer.

He is trapped watching it change, because as much as he wants to run, as much as he tries, his legs won't register the command. Heart pounding so hard now he can taste blood in his throat. On his tongue; he's bitten his tongue.

The bruise becomes a swirl of acrylic. Petrol blue and muddy purple collide, and the canvas buckles and strains like it's alive.

He is utterly transfixed.

The hands materialise from his painting, not grabbing but placing themselves oh so softly on his waist. A firm, but commanding touch. It's familiar enough that he stills himself instantly. He knows there's no escaping.

For a moment things are soft, and he feels held like a babe in swaddling. But he knows it is wrong. This thing, this groaning entity, is going to rip into him any second.

He can't be present to let that happen. The dirt, the salt marsh, he forces his mind down into it, imagines himself sinking, decaying, becoming nothing.

One last dying gasp.

Kestrel woke up filled with shame. His cock was semi-hard. The dream lingered and he couldn't focus, he wanted nothing more than to be sick. He curled up on his side, foetal position, because he didn't want to see the embarrassing bump in the covers. Better to wait for it to go down on its own before dealing with getting up. Think about something, *anything* else. And then the bedcovers felt too clingy about his body, so he had to get up anyway.

Coffee would make him feel more real. Class would

make him feel more real. A workshop session today after lectures—good. He drew back the curtains, let the light stream in to his cramped room. Today he would draw and draw, and yeah, it would never be enough but it was better than nothing.

Kestrel's dull thud of a hangover still hadn't shifted by the time he made it outside. Not like he had far to go from his dorm room to the main campus, but even that short distance felt like a slog with his head stuck in the mire that it was. The sun, too bright. The air, too sharp. Everything, too much and too loud.

'You doin' okay?'

'Bram! Hey.' Kestrel had flinched at first when the hand fell across his shoulders, but now he fell into step beside his friend. Classroom wasn't far.

There was something about Bram's face that always made Kestrel smile. He seemed so optimistic, with his wide eyes hiding behind a dark, heavy fringe. That infectious attitude, despite the fact he still dressed like an edgy little scene kid from high school, made him seem adorably innocent. Hard to hate, even for the people who made fun of his name ('Bram as in Stoker, not Abe as in Sapien,' he liked to say). His full name was actually Abrahán, which was the product of having Colombian parents with a strong slant towards Catholicism.

They had met in Sunday School, once upon a time, and Kestrel had been immediately drawn to Bram's chaotic energy. He rebelled against religion every chance he got, something Kestrel had never had the inclination or the willpower to do. Of course, there was a lot of kickback from Bram's parents, from teachers, from the nuns that ran the school, but despite that he had never lost that impish

edge.

Kestrel might have even fancied him a little. Had no idea what to do about it, though.

He realised he had not answered the question.

'Yeah, I'm okay. Sorta. Sorry I didn't come out last night.'

'No need for apologies, man.' Bram slowed down a bit, to give them more time to walk together. His thin band hoodie—jet black, emblazoned with a silver grungy logo proclaiming *The Malcontents: Cupid Killed The Future*—was not enough to keep out the cold, so his slower pace made him end up with this shivering sort of walk, pigeonlike, small steps, hands in pockets. 'We got like, a thousand other days to go out drinking.'

'There's uh, way less days than that in a year.'

'Lol fine.'

'Did you just say lol in real life? Jesus.' Bram's response was simply to laugh aloud. 'I'm not wrong though,' Kestrel continued. 'It's a *foundation year* course for a reason.'

'You arse.' Bram sidled into him, slowly-on-purpose. 'Okay. Next time you come out, and you buy me a Pimm's.'

'Deal.'

'I'll hold you to it, for sure. Hey, what you doing Sunday?'

'Uh... drinking with you?'

'Heh, nah, I was gonna say, Aaron texted me. He said, look—*Forget Mass, come get this bread on Sunday instead.*' Bram flashed his phone at Kestrel. The text was accompanied by a d20 emoji.

'Oh, yeah, Bethan mentioned something about that, too.' Kestrel could feel the pincer movement from the pair of them, and it made the hairs on his arms stand on end. The

familiar sensation of a new adventure approaching. The group, assembled; the ethereal call, made. Aaron had plans, and this was good.

He smiled as he huffed out in the crisp winter air. Looked like a dragon breathing out smoke—he'd thought that ever since he was little. A sidelong glance at Bram. 'Well, I'm free on Sunday.'

'Midday?'

'Sure.'

They carried on down the path, and the conversation drifted naturally to other things. *Good night out? Did you do the coursework? The new Malcontents album is pretty good—you heard it yet?* It was enough to cover the silence. And he liked seeing Bram's face light up talking about music. It lifted Kestrel's mood considerably, that was, until Bram turned his attention to the Easter exhibition.

'Aw maaaaan, I wonder who got in.' Bram stretched out one arm above his head to ping at a bare overhanging branch, and Kestrel studiously said nothing. He'd already said enough to Bethan last night. For a moment Bram looked like he was going to ask, *didn't you have your assessment last night?* but he didn't.

C Block was getting closer. That familiar off-white square rising up from a backdrop of poplar trees, so spidery in their leafless, wintry state. Kestrel found it hard to suppress a groan.

'Yup. I feel that.' Bram huffed and dug his hands deep into his hoodie pockets. 'Dunno why they're making us learn about Cubism. I mean, yeah, I know, we gotta learn all these different genres and stuff but—why is it just... so much balls? So many balls. All the balls.'

Kestrel snorted.

Bram continued. 'I mean, this is *not* what I expected

when I signed up for art school.'

He was right there. Kestrel had imagined hall upon hall of open workshop space, and countless hours to fill where one could just draw, draw, draw to the heart's content, and then maybe hit upon some stream of artistic genius like a miner might find a vein of ore by chance. Probably every other student had thought the same thing.

'Only two periods, then free workshopping until lunch.' Kestrel let his voice dip into the over-dramatic register he usually reserved for character roleplay. 'We'll survive these dark times. We have to. For the sake of the world!'

'And just like that,'—one hand emerged from the hoodie pocket, punching the air—'the party was filled with... *determination!*'

A reference to a game they had both played many times. Kestrel laughed—so hard he almost tripped on the gravel path. Small blades of grass poking through at the pathway edges, determined to survive the frost, caught his eye. And then a wisp of wind; he pulled his scarf closer about his neck.

There was a natural silence between them, one that gave Kestrel space to think again about the night and the sickly feeling that still settled in the pit of his stomach. Why was it so hard to tell Bram about the exhibition?

What he could have said: *They refused me. And I went home, and thought even harder about being punished for it. And I dreamed...*

'Hey. Hey, you know you can tell me. If anything's up, like.'

God, he was bad at masking his feelings. He might as well offer up some of the truth.

'I, uh. Told Bethan I'd go visit Tala.'

Now, the first quirk of those dark eyebrows.

‘So I guess that didn’t help how I was feeling last night,’ Kestrel added.

‘No, man, that makes sense.’ Bram sighed, and for a moment neither of them knew what to say. Then Bram nudged his shoulder. ‘C’mon, let’s get there before the good seats are taken.’

It was later in the day when Kestrel felt the urge to separate from his friends.

The chapel was only marginally warmer than it was outside, and Kestrel still had his woollen hat pulled tight over his head and ears as he sat near the back, gazing up at the cross in silent reflection.

He had intended to stop worshipping since he left his mum’s house, but old habits died hard. And so, here he was, back in the arms of his jilted god, finding a quiet space to think before lectures began for the day. It was the end of the week now, but that fact alone brought none of the relief it should have.

Kestrel craned his neck.

The walls, white as powder snow. Clean from lack of use. Up at the ceiling, the arches converged into something that was more of a polygonal space than a perfect half-moon. Modernist, designer influence, which made sense for the college. He still had trouble wrapping his head around the style, accepting it as something church-worthy. Everything he had known in his childhood was so much more grand and so much more Gothic. This place he judged, however subconsciously.

But it did cast the light about beautifully, that he could not deny.

He shuffled, knocked the pew in front. It was a small enough space, but still the sound echoed. He tugged his hat

further around his ears, then let his hands fall, clasped together between his knees. Afterwards he lowered his eyes, and let the silence overcome him.

The fabric blocked sound well, so he only realised someone else had joined him when a shadow fell fuzzily across his eyes.

He got up. Bent a knee toward the space where the tabernacle would have been, had it not been a non-denominational space of worship.

‘Ah. Catholic?’

‘Yeah.’ Kestrel pulled his hat off—a bid to hear better which only resulted in his hair falling haphazardly across his face. He hastily brushed the long brown strands out of his eyes and looked up at the newcomer. An older man with barley-blond hair and a disarming smile. Day-old stubble on his sharp jawline, and intense eyes that seemed green from one angle, and golden brown from another. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of the man, other than a strange sense of familiarity that pinged around his gut. Before he could stop himself, he blurted out, ‘Oh!’

‘Oh?’

‘I think I’ve seen you before.’

The man smiled, and adjusted the collar of his jacket—not a plaid or tweed affair like many of the professors had, but a fashionable brown faded leather.

‘Around campus, probably. What’re you studying?’

‘Art.’

Again, that smile. So familiar, so unplaceable. ‘That would be why we haven’t spoken before. I spend a lot more time around the Theology department.’

‘You teach theology?’

‘Oh, no. I’m just a religious counsellor. I know—it sounds kind of lame.’ He must have caught the dubious

expression on Kestrel's face.

'I don't think I'd, uh, call it *lame*.'

'You're too kind. There,' he said, and by way of introduction pointed to the leaflet on the pew before Kestrel. The small print at the bottom.

For more information, see Daran Bailey, Counsellor, Block D-4 Humanities.

'That you? Daran Bailey?'

'Yes. Pronounced *Dah-ran*.' The *ah* was spoken like a sigh of relief. His eyes glittered electric. 'What about you?'

'I'm, uh. I'm Kestrel.'

'Kestrel. It's a beautiful name.'

People always said that. And, because people always said that, Kestrel had not been expecting to really take note of their awe, other than to muster up one of perhaps a dozen phrases learned by rote: "Yeah, my parents were proper hippies," or "It's better than being called Peaches," or maybe "It's very confusing for others when we visit the zoo". But when Daran said it, it was a different flavour of awe. Like the way someone might talk when reading a psalm aloud. It lent a strange sensation to the surface of his skin. By any other standard, a flush. He barely managed a *Hah* in response.

Daran seemed to spot his bashfulness, and interpreted it as a sign to end the conversation. 'Well, I shan't interrupt you any longer.'

'Oh! No, I wasn't—' Kestrel had been about to say *I wasn't praying*, but he stopped short. *Why?* He didn't know.

Wanting to impress? Maybe.

He needed something less self-immolating.

'I mean. I was just gonna get back to class soon anyway,' he said, settling on the most generic sounding thing he could.

Daran waved his excuse away. A battle of politeness.

'I only came in here to check the electrics. Needed to swap out a faulty mic cable.'

'Oh.'

'You don't mind if I...'

'Oh! No, go on ahead. I'll just...'

'I don't mean to rush you.'

Something about the measure of his voice gave Kestrel pause.

'You're not! It's okay. I'm, uh, I'm basically done already.'

Daran smiled at him, and it was so soft, it was the kind of smile that made him want to inhale—and exhale—deeply. 'You're too kind.' It was the second time he had said such a thing. For a moment Kestrel thought Daran was going to rest his hand on his shoulder, but he did not. Strange, how disappointed that made him.

I'm really not, he wanted to reply. *I'm just awkward*. But he said nothing, and he let the silence settle, as he fretted internally about the zip of his jacket and how to pull it up without making a fool of himself.

Daran, luckily, filled the silence.

'Hey, if you're interested, check out the chapel's intranet page. I'm trying to get a lot more stuff started up this half-term. Easter Stations, for one. You're more than welcome if you want to join.'

'Yeah!' Kestrel smiled. 'That'd be super cool, actually.'

'No pressure, though. I just figure it's nice to give people a space where they don't have to think about their daily stresses.'

That did sound nice.

'Kay. See you round.'

Daran nodded. He said something, it could have been a

God bless, but Kestrel was too quick to leave, and was unable to absorb the words properly. It only seemed fair to let the man continue his chaplaincy duties, to stop taking up so much of his time. So, out from the clean-slate walls, white and polished as marble, and into the cold February air, the gravel path back to the main campus, the well-tended shrubs and the Brutalist blocks of the college's sharp exterior.

As he was walking down the frost-lined pavement back to C Block, he finally managed to place the feeling.

It carried *weight*, the whole encounter with Daran carried weight.

His eyes shuttered closed as he passed beneath the hawthorn trees. Thought back to the prayer he'd been partway to forming earlier, before being interrupted—not that he resented that.

Hey, God, I don't know if you're there... probably not, but yeah. If you are. I guess I... I have trouble starting these things. I'm not even sure I want to talk to you. I don't know if I can ever forgive you for how Mum ended up.

Maybe that was a little unfair.

Even if God was real, could he really blame him for letting her go off the deep end? Kind of a tall order, even assuming he was omniscient. *Take care of this one particular person out of a world of billions.* And besides, not like God came up with the Creed, nor the fifty two books of the Bible, nor any of the rules and regulations that followed. People, it was always people.

His mind flew into a spin and he was thinking about her and his father and yeah, even his own weird relationship with the whole thing. Always striving for some kind of ascension, some kind of *connection* beyond the mechanics

of the ritual.

Speaking of connection, he hadn't called her in a while. It was usually up to him to do it, a sort of test of love, a test of faith. One he put a lot of energy into trying not to resent.

It didn't matter. Fuck, it didn't matter.

You can start, at the very least, by making good on your promise, and going to visit Tala. Regardless of who is watching above.

That much was true, and at least for now, it gave him something to focus on.

Tala's mother was a small, skittish Filipina woman, with dark skin and even darker eyes. She had let Kestrel in with a worried sort of smile, clearly grateful for his intrusion. Then she had left to go sort things in the kitchen after waving a hand toward the back of the house, where she said Tala was drawing away. He supposed there was not much to sort in the kitchen, because when they had passed it, it had seemed spotlessly clean, but it must have provided a good enough distraction for her.

Before he had knocked on the front door, Kestrel had been proud he had finally worked up the nerve to visit. Art class had been okay, but he had too much time to think about things, and he would have struggled to forgive himself for not doing the right thing and checking in. He thought he had been ready. But when he finally came to it, he did not feel ready at all. If he responded to that primitive part of his brain that was chittering away like a mad thing, he would have up and left already.

The door to the conservatory was open. A wind chime swung gently in the breeze; a small tinkling of tiny plates of metal. Should have been a tonic for the nerves, but instead it was disturbing. The air: almost stiflingly fresh.

Clear, and with a scent so familiar yet unplaceable. Art supplies lay scattered over the table, and a box of what he assumed were more supplies was dragged out to the centre of the room. Inside, Tupperware containers that held things that glinted in the light.

And there, his eyes fell upon Tala. In the middle of the conservatory she perched on a rattan chair, legs drawn up to her chin, head bowed, dark straight hair falling over her face just enough to be a bother to her drawing, but not enough for her to care to push it back. If she had noticed him enter, she made no sign of it.

‘Hey, Tala.’ He spoke quietly. The pencil scratching stopped. At first she did not move but then, in the time it might take a bird to run a circle round the lawn, she tilted her head towards him. There was something captivating about her eyes—there always had been—but right now it was stronger than ever.

‘Don’t tell me off for drawing,’ she said.

‘Uh. Wasn’t planning on it.’

‘That’s good. The doctor said it’d be good physio for my wrists anyway.’

She seemed oblivious to the implications of that settling in around them. Kestrel watched where she gripped the pencil, wondered if it hurt, and tried and failed to think of something to say.

‘I’ve been having terrible dreams,’ she said. Her words were all stilted, like she was choosing the shapes of syllables from a voice synthesiser.

‘I’m sorry. That really sucks.’ He gave her his softest smile, and hoped it would convey what he intended; that there was no need to be so guarded around him.

She opened her mouth, about to speak, then she let the breath go and turned back to her artboard. All her lines

were grey, spidery, skittering across the page and making almost no discernible shapes. Although, if he turned his head at one angle, it looked like human bodies, clambering out of concentric spirals that amassed on the page like black holes in the sky. A wave of something grim and terrifying washed over him, and for one crystal-clear moment, Kestrel understood how it was for his teachers to look at his own work.

How to say *everyone is worried about you* without coming across as patronising?

God, this was hard. He really wasn't equipped for it.

'We, uh... We miss you.'

'Already? No,'—she shook her head, studying the pendulum lamp above her—'I don't know how to make you understand.'

I'm right here, Kestrel wanted to say, *so try me*. But that would have sounded too challenging.

'The gang's getting back together soon. You, uh, wanna join?' When Tala looked up at him, so curiously, like he was speaking another language, he clarified. 'We're starting a new tabletop campaign. Aaron's GM'ing. It'd be really good to have you there.'

A faint smile pushed at the corners of her mouth, but found it too hard to break through.

'You...,' she began, but then she lost the rest of the sentence. Kestrel did not sigh, did not shuffle about, did not show any sign of impatience. He could tell how hard this was for her, although he had no hope of understanding what it felt like.

If he peered close he could see the medical tape poking out from the underside of her long sleeves. Vertical scars, that's what they had said. Easier to open up the vein that way. Matching on both sides because Tala liked her

symmetry.

Some dark and frenzied ball of energy roiled around in his stomach, threatening to upset its meagre contents. He should have eaten lunch. Should be running on something more than empty. This feeling, it was too much like his dreams. And, rising alongside the cloying sense of wrongness, he felt... rage, although he wasn't sure where to direct it. Not at Tala, never at such an easy target.

'We're meeting up on Sunday. I'll swing by here first, 'kay?'

"Kay.'

'Is it okay if I sit down, by the way?'

Her eyes flashed wide, first at him, then at the table. She shuffled some papers away, closed the lid of the box, in the same embarrassed movements he used when he wasn't quite ready to let other people see his work. Then she looked back at him, pushed a strand of hair away from her face, and nodded.

He took a seat, trying to ignore the obnoxious creak of the rattan furniture. Breathe in, breathe out, watch the pendulum lamp, hear the birds outside. He tried to fall into the same rhythm she appeared to be running on in the conservatory, to attune to it somehow, in the vain hope it would make her more comfortable.

There was nothing he wanted, nor needed to say. Maybe a minute passed.

Then she reached out with her left hand, grabbing his wrist with fervent urgency. It was such a rapid movement, her feet slipping from their hold on the edge of the chair, body rolling forward, that at first he thought she was falling, and he tried to brace. But her grip on his wrist was too intense. Must have hurt her—the medical tape was straining at her skin. He fell slack, just so it wouldn't make

anything leak through the bandages. It had been a few weeks, but the cuts had been *deep*, and how long did that sort of thing take to heal? Chicken scratches and scoremarks didn't count, so he had no frame of reference.

She was looking at him like she was possessed.

'You, most of all.'

Kestrel could feel his eyebrows twisting, inching upward. Should there have been a first part to that sentence? This made no sense. It was obviously important, but it made no sense.

'You, most of all,' she repeated, eyes hard as diamonds. Then, 'I'm so sorry.'

'Hey. Hey, it's okay.' He controlled his breathing, hoping it would make her do the same.

'But it's not though, is it? It's not, it's not.' Her voice grew tremulous, a few degrees away from a meltdown.

He had to do something.

'Hey, c'mere.' He extended his free arm—she was still gripping the other one—for a hug. But she shied away.

'No, no, I can't, I don't... *deserve*... Augh—'

The cry her words devolved into made Kestrel squirm. *Shit, exactly what I had been hoping to avoid.*

Moments later, the door to the conservatory creaked open. A small, worried face poked through. Tala's mother.

'Is everything all right in here?'

This was finally the point where Tala let go of Kestrel's wrist. He glanced down, didn't doubt she had never intended to grip so hard but yeah, there were fingernail indents in his skin. He let his arm slip to his side, so nobody would worry. The whole room felt like a minefield.

He got up. 'I'm sorry. I—maybe I should go.'

'Okay, yes, yes, that's maybe a good idea. Thank you for coming, though.' Her mother was speaking too fast. Bags

under her eyes—she had not been sleeping well, clearly.

Kestrel nodded. He sorted his jacket, and stepped as calmly as he could towards the door, where he turned to look back at his friend one last time.

‘Tala, I don’t think anything bad about you.’

She gave him a look that was unmistakable in its intent. *If only you knew.* He didn’t try to push it by repeating himself. Just kept his eyes soft, expression soft, everything soft and caring.

‘I’ll see you on Sunday.’

[Pages 36 - 436 not included in preview]

Thank you for reading.

GLOSSARY

Tabletop Role-playing Game / TTRPG – A game conventionally played around a table, where people role-play characters and engage in quests, taking actions following a formal set of rules, typically involving dice rolls.

D20 – A 20-sided die often used in tabletop RPG gaming.

Perfect 20 / Perfect 1 – D20 die roll results that confer additional bonuses or penalties. The name of this type of roll varies from system to system.

Campaign – A TTRPG adventure that spans multiple sessions.

Homebrew – Player-made content for a tabletop adventure that does not use content found in official rulesets.

Game Master (GM) – The referee, narrator and organiser of a tabletop game.

NPC – Non-player characters, which can only be controlled by the GM.

LARP – Live-action role-play, a game that involves players dressing up as their character and physically acting out events.

Seminary – Educational institution for trainee clergy members.

Priory – A religious building such as a monastery or convent.

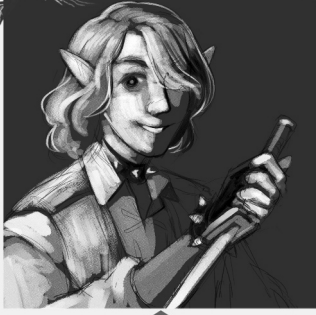
Diocese – Administrative area of the Catholic Church, similar to a county.

Vigil – A contemplative religious service or observance held during the night, often before Sunday or a Feast Day.

Eucharistic Minister – Informal term for a layperson who is given authority to assist in distributing (but not consecrating) Holy Communion.

Transubstantiation – The act of the Offertory (bread and wine) becoming the Body and Blood of Jesus during Catholic Mass.

CHARACTER SHEET



Quinn Therion

CHARACTER NAME

Rogue

CLASS

Elf

RACE

Kestrel

PLAYER NAME

BIO

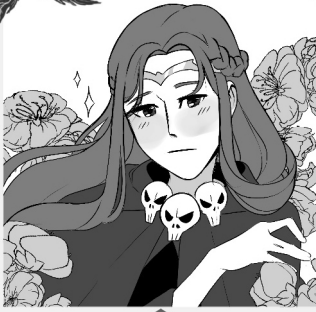
PERSONALITY

Quinn is impulsive and excitable, easily scared but very determined. Absolutely will steal every gem in the dungeon.

BACKGROUND

An elf from the deep forests, Quinn has forsaken his homeland for a life of treasure hunting. He craves excitement and never stays in one place too long.

CHARACTER SHEET



Thorvald

CHARACTER NAME

Necromancer

CLASS

Human

RACE

Bram

PLAYER NAME

BIO

PERSONALITY

Curious, stern and very competent. Has a strong sense of morals. Likes history and animals. Actually likes studying??

BACKGROUND

Thorvald comes from a northern city and has studied magic from a young age. He just thinks necromancy is neat, and has no desire for power.

CHARACTER SHEET



Leilani

CHARACTER NAME

Druid (Water element)

CLASS

Klf

RACE

Tala

PLAYER NAME

BIO

PERSONALITY

Leilani is kind-hearted and soft-spoken, but very loyal to her friends.

She dislikes things that threaten nature, and will obstinately do whatever it takes to stop innocent creatures from being hurt.

BACKGROUND

Leilani's home town was destroyed by a blight when she was young. Since then she has devoted her life to the druidic path, in the hope of rejuvenating what was lost.

CHARACTER SHEET



MARCUS

CHARACTER NAME

BARBARIAN

CLASS

HALF-ORC

RACE

BETHAN

PLAYER NAME

BIO

PERSONALITY

- GRUFF (but a real softie)
 - LIKES TO RELAX
 - BEER? BEER
 - HITTING STUFF IS RELAXING
- PROTECC

BACKGROUND

LEFT BARBARIAN TRIBE AT YOUNG AGE
WAS BODYGUARD-FOR-HIRE
IS NOW ADVENTURER

*Contact the author at **gallant.no***

Download the full tabletop RPG character profiles, and a copy of the Secret of Blackwater Marsh campaign from the website.



Kestrel has a lot to be worried about.

His best friend Tala has been struck by a severe mental illness, attempting suicide over the winter break. She has developed an obsession with making little sculptures she will not let anyone touch.

Meanwhile, Kestrel is struggling at university. His artwork has his teachers concerned, and he can't explain any of it. But it's not just him — all his friends are feeling strange this term, although none of them can place why.

After a chance meeting with the university's charismatic religious counsellor, Daran Bailey, Kestrel becomes drawn back in to a world he had once left behind. As the term marches on, his dreams grow more uncomfortable, and he feels like he's going crazy, until at long last, Tala lets Kestrel in on her secret...

This book contains depictions of abuse. Read at your own discretion. Treat yourself kindly.

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