



I SIARA

‘I’m just worried.’ My mother’s voice barely makes it through the crackling speaker of the phone. ‘It’s been a year now... and we just hope you’re not still thinking about the things she said.’

The knot in my stomach tightens. I scoff into the phone but find myself unable to deny her. Even if she’s right, she’s making a bigger deal of this than necessary. If Dad was home, he’d get it. He’s the one who usually quietens her loud thoughts – neutralising her when she becomes too *worried*.

It’s not like I don’t understand her concern, madness runs in the family – or so I’ve been told – and unfortunately for me, it apparently didn’t skip a generation like it did hers.

My silence must fuel her concern. ‘Have you found it yet?’

I continue my search down the street, eyes eventually falling on a pair of rusted metal numbers, the same pair I was dreading to find. ‘Yes. Just now.’

‘Oh, good.’ My mother pauses, reading my silence for what it is; hesitancy. ‘Siara, we just want to make sure you’re okay.’ I hear a small sigh on the other side of the phone. ‘But if you really don’t want to go...’

An unexpected groan originally intended as a silent profanity escapes between my lips before I have the chance to stop it. Perhaps even more unexpected is the painful empathy that has been breathed into me. How

do they do that? How do mothers find that one small weak spot in your resolve and fill it with guilt instead? The same guilt-fuelled obligation drags my feet to the stone steps. *Should* I go in? I mean, talking is the exact reason I'm here.

If I hadn't mentioned to my parents about what happened in that room, would they still have sent me to a shrink?

Skipping up the clinic's steps, my breath catches. A small, shadowed creature waddles through the flowerbed to my right, no bigger than a child's palm. Its stout arms clamber for the stalk of the largest flower, eventually resorting to a strenuous jump. Once secured, it ascends, climbing its way to the very top and slipping into the unbloomed bud.

A cold, nauseous feeling freckles down my face, residing in the pit of my stomach.

Yes, I think my parents may have still sent me here.

I avert my eyes from the creature's own, dissociating as if I may be daydreaming. Frowning, my grip tenses around the phone pressed to my ear.

'Siera?'

'No. I mean yes – I'm still here, I was just–' I shake my head, daring not to look back to the flowerbed. 'Distracted. I'm going in now – I'll speak to you later.' I push the door open and an array of beady eyes land on me.

'Okay, dear. Your father wants you to call him when you get out, okay? Don't wait too long. The time difference is quite a stretch.'

'Okay, Mum.'

Despite the broken speaker, there's no doubt her voice can be heard in the silent waiting room. 'And, Siera, don't forget to update this new lady about your hallucinat–'

With a frantic push, I end the call.

My heart makes acquaintance with the nausea in my stomach. Releasing a staggered breath, I glance up towards the people waiting in the padded armchairs. Maybe they didn't hear her. Most look away uncomfortably. Or maybe they did. One older lady maintains her stare, turning away as she peers back down through her glasses at the book in her lap.

Mortified, I check in at the counter and take a seat, absorbing myself into the secure embrace of my phone screen. I swipe left and right, each completed level in the game relieving a little bit more anxiety than the last. As soon as I feel my breath start to steady, my name is called from the other side of the room and my moments of peace are gone. A tall lady with frazzled silver hair and rainbow earrings pokes her head out of her office, giving me a small wave as I peel myself off my seat.

‘So, Siara, I have a little bit of a background on your recent challenges, but your mother thought it might be helpful to talk through some specific events,’ she says warmly, motioning to the set of chairs across from her desk. I sit. No doubt she’s already been briefed by my loving mother in great detail. I can’t imagine the things she’s been told – hallucinations, breakdowns, time loss. In reality, I’m afraid I’m going to be a disappointment. She finds her place behind her desk.

The afternoon sun beams rays of light onto the client file. If I lean just a little more in my chair, I might be able to make out the notes. That’s when I see it. In the corner of the office, tucked away under a stand, is a little transparent being. Small but eerie, it warps the space around it, distorting the furniture as it glides through unnoticed. I haven’t seen one like this before.

‘Is something the matter?’

I hold the therapist’s stare. If I don’t see it, it’s not there. ‘No, nothing.’

Her gaze narrows, smile still intact. She doesn’t believe me. I wouldn’t believe me either.

‘I’m just feeling a little sad, I guess,’ I lie as the creature passes under the seat, clicking and whirring.

Her gaze softens.



WILLIAM

His screams howl through the darkness, a piercing sound in the silent forest. By the time I reach him, his voice is lost. What a pitiful sight.

The mound of flesh lies deformed at the base of the cliff. Jagged bones divert off in unnatural angles while lumps of shining skin expand so greatly you would think they may burst. To complete the artistry, hues of the deepest blacks and purples blotch his almost unrecognisable being. What was once a man is now barely a thing at all. How grotesque. Surely something so pathetic must be an act of divine humour.

Rustles on the forest floor catch my attention, drawing my focus behind me. The scurrying and clashing of leaves start to grow louder until the nine year old boy bursts through from amidst the towering trees, running out onto the rocky ledge. His glowing eyes meet my own. 'Master!'

The boy's expression drops as his eyes fall to the object at my feet.

I turn my gaze back to the deformed human. 'If this frightens you then look away.'

The boy steadies his breath, taking a few tentative steps forward in the moonlight and dropping the dangerous plummet to land safely on his feet. 'No. I know now. I shouldn't look away.'

He finds his place by my side.

A faint wheeze struggles from the human. My eyebrows twitch in a rare combination of surprise and amusement. It is still alive.

'Master, can't we do something?'

'... Yes.' From between two swollen lumps of skin, a pair of pleading eyes appear. They cry for compassion. My lungs breathe in an unnecessary breath of air, holding it firm within my chest.

I bring the ice spear down through his body, skewering what was once his skull. His eyes detach from focus, his soul fading out from view. Yanking the spear out with a grunt, human blood flicks onto the ground around us. My breath releases slowly, knowing there is no need for me to take another.

A zap of electricity buzzes from behind us, giving us a split-second warning. Xander's glare finds mine and we both understand. It's too late; there's not enough time. We're caught.

I turn to the small portal forming, wiping the excess blood on my coat. I can feel the small green demon tensing beside me.

'You two will be the death of me,' a feminine voice chimes from

the crackling portal. She steps through gracefully, the space around us becoming heavier in an instant.

‘Heret-Kau,’ I mutter, ‘impeccable timing as always.’

The Goddess smiles. ‘William, getting up to no good – *as always*.’ Her eyes drift disapprovingly to the human lain dead in front of me. ‘Not falling back to old habits, are we?’

My jaw clenches. Xander opens his mouth in protest, but my glance sends the small boy quiet. She wouldn’t understand. Heret-Kau frowns, looking from Xander to myself. ‘Silence is the coward’s confession, William. If you have killed the man, I’ll have you speak it.’

She lifts her chin, her snake eyes bearing down in an attempt of intimidation. It’s unnecessary, her existence itself is intimidating enough, despite how accustomed to it I have become.

‘It was me that ran the human through.’

I see something flicker behind the Goddess’ stare. Disappointment? Anger? Possibly both, but I don’t care enough to investigate.

‘I see,’ she concludes, letting the silence linger. A frown gathers on her forehead, accompanied by a bothered sigh. ‘I will send my people to clean up your mess, give the man a burial and enact his chosen religious rites. For now, walk with me. We have much to discuss.’

My feet find their way but Xander remains frozen, no doubt confused by the speed in which she moved on from the killing.

‘You will remain here in the mortal realm,’ she continues as we walk through the dim forest. ‘Who am I to ruin your rebellious escapade?’ Her teasing humour could fool many, but I know her; it is never something simple with Heret-Kau. I remain expressionless and mute, not playing into her games.

Realising her bluff is called, she grins devilishly. ‘There is a new lead – something has changed.’ With my sceptical glance, she continues, ‘The spirits have whispered to me. There is a girl here in the human realm; they say she is connected to who you’re looking for. They say she sees spirits.’

Xander has found his way alongside me once more, glancing at my expression.

It's been so long, I had almost accepted my fate. In fact, I was convinced it was going to end just moments ago when she arrived. 'I see.'

Heret-Kau glances over to me, a fleeting melancholy gracing her features.

'Best to hurry. Time waits for no one, William,' she says, letting us pass in front. 'Not even the dead.'



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SIARA

Unbelievable.

The metal bucket scrapes against the concrete with a ghastly sound as I practically throw it under the tap. This was supposed to be a holiday, some downtime to spend with family on the school break. The shrink says it's to get away from the 'stressors' – whatever that means. How am I supposed to focus on being less stressed when I didn't even know I was stressed to begin with?

My hand stings from the rusted handle. A reluctant groan sounds before hot water spurts out from the old pipes with a lethargy that is almost relatable. I smirk, mildly amused. 'You and I both.'

With a jolt of realisation, I glance up. Good, no one around. I wouldn't mind people thinking I was crazy if I wasn't actually crazy. It's always worse when people call you things that are true.

A lock of cinnamon hair escapes from the messy bun piled atop my head. I stuff it somewhere else with a huff. There seems to be more lately. The *things* that I see. On the car drive here, I counted at least eight, mostly small little creatures climbing over logs and hiding in plants. They aren't the ones that worry me so much, strange as they are. It's the other ones – the larger ones. I give a small shake of my head. *Don't think about them.* With a grunt, I heave the bucket alongside me, walking the edge of the amenities block, passing Mrs Livingston in the process.

‘Good morning, Siara,’ she greets before narrowing her large brown eyes. ‘Oh dear, are you okay, lovely? You’re looking a little pale.’

I give a sickly sweet smile in return. ‘Oh, no, I’m fine. Just a little tired.’

Her mouth mimics a trusting smile but her eyes tell me otherwise. She knows. She’s heard about my condition.

‘Have you seen your mother today?’

Her sudden question catches me off guard. ‘Oh, not since early this morning. Why?’

What has that woman done now?

‘I saw her just moments ago, looking quite frazzled. She asked if I knew where you were, and here you are.’

‘Here I am,’ I say, with an element of charm. ‘I’d better go find her then.’

‘Of course, dear,’ she says, her voice warm. ‘Siara, before you go, I heard about your great gran. I would like to express my condolences. She really was a lovely woman.’

My heart skips a beat, oxygen ceases to enter my lungs. My great gran’s final words linger like an infestation in my mind. *No, don’t think about that. I don’t want to think about what happened.* Sudden clarity brings me back.

So that’s what *that* look was for; Mrs Livingston doesn’t know about my condition, she’s just heard about Great Gran. To her, I’m not crazy – not yet, anyway – I’m just grieving. On instinct, I produce a disingenuous smile. ‘Thank you.’ She smiles back and we part ways once again.

Halfway there, I can almost see our little van. Despite the distance, it’s hard to miss. Its rusted metal edges and seventies-style curtains stick out like a sore thumb in this camp park of modern monstrosities. I scuttle across the ground, two arms straining under the weight of the bucket – I’m sure not entirely unlike a crab.

‘Siara!’

Did someone call me?

Hands snatch me from behind like claws on my shoulders. The bucket falls from my grip, water splashing out the sides as my fumbling hands try to save it on its descent. Luckily, only half has been lost. I throw a glare over my shoulder to my offender.

‘You can’t just sneak up on people like that,’ I snap.

‘I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Where have you been?’ my mother interrogates, ignoring my remark. Her vibrant red hair is half done, and her energy chaotic.

‘So I’ve heard. What’s wrong?’

‘My phone. I can’t find it anywhere. It’s not in my bag, or the van, or my car—’

‘It’s in your back pocket. It’s always in your back pocket.’

She does a quick slap of the back of her jeans, joy overcoming her. ‘Of course! My beautiful smart girl. What would I do without you?’

Honestly, I have no idea.

She gives me a tight squeeze, her eyes lingering over me when we separate. ‘You know Siara I—’ She stops abruptly, shaking her head. ‘You know what? Don’t worry. It’s nothing. I have an important video call for work, but I’ll be back before dinner.’

‘But, Mum, you said—’

‘I know, I know. I’m sorry – I really am. I know what I said but it’ll be quick. It’s *really* important. It looks like I’ll have to walk into town for it, the reception is shocking down here.’

I nod, turning to face her, but just as quickly as she had arrived, she is gone. My eyes eventually find her silhouette trekking up the road into the distance, a glowing phone held stretched out above her head searching for a satellite.

A shadow walks up alongside me. I ignore it. I’ve found it’s best to do that. Eyes straight and expression neutral. I can’t imagine what the creatures would do if they knew that I was aware of them, whether they actually exist or not, it’s better to be safe than sorry.

‘Hey, you want me to carry that?’

My fear resides. ‘Rye, thank God it’s just you.’

The broad arm stretches out across me, clasp the handle and carrying the metal pail with ease. He places his other hand against his chest, pretending to be mortally wounded. ‘*Just* me.’

‘Shut up. You know what I mean.’

He gives a wide grin, bumping his shoulders into mine. I return the favour in kind.

‘I didn’t even know your family was down here,’ I say as we start the stroll back to the van.

‘Just me and my sister this time.’

I nod. I don’t need to ask. I know that means that his nan isn’t well and I’m not good with topics like that, they remind me of... other things. Things I don’t want to be reminded of.

‘I see that your mother is as neurotic as ever,’ he whispers, saving me from my depressing train of thought.

‘Oh, so you saw that, did you?’ I laugh. ‘I’m convinced she likes you better than me. I’m surprised she didn’t go to you first for help.’

Rye smiles playfully, his blue eyes glinting in a way that catches my heart a little off guard. ‘Well, it’s because she didn’t know I was here, you see...’

‘Oh, of course.’

Something moves in the distance, just down the road. A dark disfigured entity. The playful banter falls to silence. My breath catches. Rye’s stare lingers, watching. He already knows my situation and knows that it will pass. I look away from him. I don’t want to meet his eyes but I don’t want to meet the eyes of the creature either. My breath stays held as the creature sprints down the road, right past me. Afraid. It’s afraid.

I can feel my whole body trembling. *What is it afraid of? Something in that direction...*

‘Siara, I was wondering—’

Is Rye talking? I can’t hear; I can’t focus. Something isn’t right. What is this feeling?

The creature was large, its smell rancid, scrambling over its numerous legs to get away. Away from the very direction we are heading now. But I won’t stop. I can’t stop. I need to keep walking. Keep up the charade. I don’t know anything. I’m just like everyone else. The anxious fog in my mind clears but a bubbling of excitement brews just under the surface. What’s going on?

‘Siara?’

‘What?’ I say, maybe a little too curtly. Rye flinches.

‘If you wanted to see, like, a mov—’

His voice drains out once again as a bellowing voice thunders through

the street. Both of us turn to look. Good, at least this time it's not inside my head.

'The blue moon has risen! Horrid night, the cold one is here.' Mr Valentine stumbles out from inside his van. Passers-by look at each other uncomfortably, keeping their distance from the hunched old man.

A cold chill rushes down the street, lighting my senses on fire. I stare down in wonder as goosebumps consume my arms.

'You know, he's actually really nice when he's not yelling about our doom,' I say frankly, looking back to Rye.

The stunned boy arches an eyebrow in response. 'Should we, uh, get someone?' he murmurs. I shrug. I have too many of my own problems to be worrying about others.

'Usually his niece is around. I'm sure she'll turn up soon.'

The rambling man locks eyes with my own, caught in a fierce glare.

'You see them too, don't you, child? You know what I'm talking about. You can feel it.' His wrinkled finger points to the sky. 'Look.'

My eyes follow and I see it. In the sky, out above the ocean, in amongst the black clouds, like a second sun – a round blue ripple. I squeeze my eyes shut, opening them once more in disbelief. He's right. Doesn't anyone else see this? I look around, my heart sinking deeper into my stomach. They don't. Of course they don't. And neither should I.

'You see it, don't you?' The old man steps closer, my own feet stepping back. I can't answer; instead, my mouth hangs ajar.

'Uncle!' Footsteps dance down from the hill behind me. 'Why are you out here in the pouring rain? You'll get sick. Let's get you back inside.' Mr Valentine's niece places a hand on his shoulder, leading him away. *Rain?* She shoots an apologetic grimace back over her shoulder. 'Sorry about that.'

I can barely hear her voice; it's muted. I wave her apology away politely. 'Oh no, it's fine.'

Mr Valentine looks back at me, mouthing a word over and over. What is it? What is he saying?

Run.

Rye grabs hold of my arm, causing my whole body to jump. 'Siara – hey! We need to get out of this rain.'

‘Rain?’ And as if the rain itself heard me, its thundering sound reaches my ears, snapping me back into reality. How did I not notice before? It’s pouring. It *has* been pouring this whole time. I’m drenched.

It’s cold and hard as it thunders down over the empty camp park, people have already fled indoors, huddled together in the corners of the toilet block. Rye’s hand hits my arm, gaining my attention and gesturing to the large tree. We scurry under its protection.

Turning back to him, I start to open my mouth to speak but shut it and avert my gaze. Objectively speaking, Rye has always been an attractive individual, at least that’s what I’ve been told by my friends, but at this moment in particular, with his drenched t-shirt sticking to his sculpted chest and his blonde hair damp and messy, I’m reluctantly feeling inclined to agree. Rye gives me a quizzical look.

‘It’s so loud!’ I yell, covering my awkwardness. He nods in agreement before his cheery expression suddenly loses its shine.

‘Argh, the chairs.’ He groans. ‘Sorry, I’ll be back.’

I can barely nod before he sprints off down the road, lost in the haze of rain. I breathe in a deep cold breath, pouring the now cold water out from the pail onto the grass. Guess I’ll do the dishes later.

After running back to the van, I jump up the steps and pull the metal door closed behind me with a thud. Letting out a sigh of relief, I throw myself on the padded seating.

It’s wet. Groaning, I pull myself up and look at the ceiling. The small roof vent is slightly open, something Mum does to give some airflow to the van. My gaze diverts to the other windows, each open, and each trickling a small river of water down to the lino floor. Springing to my feet, I close the vent and subsequent windows, finding myself struggling with the last. It jams. I push the winding knob harder and it breaks. Snatching my hoodie with audible frustration, I once again brave the elements. The wind howls as it hits my face, slamming the door loudly behind me. Something in me churns. I try the handle. It’s locked. *Of course it is.*

An unpleasant sound makes its way through the rain.

A pack of sniggering boys sit grouped together under the cover of a nearby barbeque shelter. Wonderful, I have an audience. Gifting them

a cold glare, I trudge around the back of the van to the window. With a small nudge of my shoulder, it eventually retracts back, closing manually.

The electricity catches me off guard, pulsing through every vein in my body and for a moment I believe I've smacked my head. My heart is pounding like I've just run a marathon, my senses more alive than ever. But there is only silence. The rain has stopped.

A deep chill creeps across the hills, my breath fogging out in clouds. I turn to the now-silent group of boys, but they sit strangely, awkward and unmoving. The tree tops bend in an unnatural fashion, like a wind has pushed them one way and they have failed to sway back.

Time has stopped.

Beautiful and intricate icy designs replace the streams of raindrops on the window. I gaze at them in a mix of fascination and horror.

'It's different than I remember.' A young man's voice cuts through the silence.

'It's been quite a while, Master,' a young boy's voice replies.

'Is she close?' the man says. His words take a while to fully process. Who are they looking for? I take a peek under the van.

'According to Heret-Kau, she should be just over here,' the boy says before running up to our van's door. I stifle a gasp as water funnels up from the ground, turning to ice before my eyes. It moulds to make a key. I hear the creak of the door opening. I duck as footsteps thud into the van. Whatever they want, it can't be good if they're breaking and entering.

'Well?' the man says, a cold edge to his tone.

'She's not here.'

'I can see that, Xander.'

A lump forms in the base of my throat. I have to go. Now.

I scramble away from the van, diving behind the group of boys just as the figures emerge.

'I don't understand, Master, the girl should be here. Heret-Kau said—'

'Heret-Kau says a lot of things. That she-demon also gives too much time to spirits and the things they say.' He pauses, the sound of his footsteps stopping abruptly. I can feel his stare scanning the series of frozen figures in front of me. 'It's time to leave.'

They both leave as quickly and as silently as they came but where a sense of relief should sit, an unfulfilled anxiety resides instead. The electricity that once darted through my body is now an unpleasant and dull ache. Rationally, this is where I run inside, grab my phone and tell Mum that this is the worst hallucination yet, that I really have inherited the family curse and I inherited it hard; this is where I run to Rye for comfort in the form of a good laugh and feigned normalcy.

But I don't.

Go, the voice says. Quick.

My bare feet slide across the wet grass and out onto the road, the blue distortion still visible in the dark sky. *Is this a hallucination?* I have to know. This instinct is stronger than anything I have felt in my life. No matter how dangerous and how irrational, my body won't stop. It is no longer my own. Familiar frozen faces pass me by as I follow the ominous pair from a distance. Up the hill, around the corner and onto the small coastal trail that leads down to the shore. I stop for a moment. My hands grasp the log rails that trail along the sandy stairs down to the bottom of the precipice, my first moments of doubt creeping in.

A blue light shines through the cracks in the trees, willing my feet to keep moving. I move down the stairs, careful to not make too much noise, coming to a ledge about halfway down the path where the beach is in full view. Ducking between the rails, I move closer, the two figures now in sight. The tall one is drawing something in the sand and as he does, blue light shines from the stencil. The shorter one, on the other hand, whom I assume is the young boy, stands back watching. Once finished, the sand erupts in a furious blaze of blue flames before simmering muted back down. They place themselves in the circle. What *are* they doing? Is it some sort of weird cultist ritual?

Closer. Move closer.

My fingers grip the edge of the dirt, leaning forward. *Just a little bit closer.*

A pair of firm hands shove me from behind. The ledge gives way as I fall.

Branches cut and whip my body. I tumble, my sight just a blurry vision of trees, dirt and sky. With the sudden sensation of soft sand, my body comes to a gradual rolling halt.

Groaning, I lift my head. And there they are.

The two figures, wide-eyed and staring.

I can't tell if it's the wind screaming or myself. My mind is blank. These people aren't people at all. Their eyes are different. Piercing. They don't look like the creatures I normally see. They are something more, something worse. My mind flashes back to the memory of the fleeing creature. This is what it was running from. This is what my fears are afraid of. And I followed them here.

No. I was pushed. I can still remember the sensation on my back. I look back up to the ledge but there's no one there. Just darkness.

Adrenaline spikes and my instincts finally kick in. It's too late. I go to stand but the imbalanced ground throws me back down. An unnatural feeling of pulling and falling rocks against me. The bizarre lines of the circle have started to rise. Alarm flashes over their faces. The younger one yells out, reaching towards me, his words lost in the whirlwind spinning around us.

And then we fall.