

My scarring nightmare shattered like delicate glass as my luminous royal blue eyes flew open. I struggled to slow my breathing and relax as I glanced out of my frost coated window. Instead of a blazing fireball of blinding light and scorching heat, I was greeted coldly by the pale, waxing crescent moon.

My heart drummed dangerously in my chest, as if I had just run for several miles nonstop. The vivid memory of the horrific dream seemed to be stamped onto my overactive brain. Her deathly white porcelain skin... Her soft midnight black hair swept back amongst the sterling silver roses... Her lightly shadowed eyes closed firmly... It was as if she was peacefully sleeping in a beautiful meadow of peace, tranquility, and solitude.

Except for the fact that she was actually laid in an onyx coloured casket encrusted with jades, and didn't show any signs of breathing.

It was my older sister, Celia; who was sixteen years old, three years older than me, and six years older than our younger sibling. I was stood over her lifeless body, holding back tears. My widowed mother wept mournfully, and our little sister, Rowena, stood beside her. It had felt so real...

As the nightmare replayed in my mind like a record, a horrible thought crossed my mind.

What was it that woke me up?

Suddenly, a terrified shriek pierced the silence of the Landon Estate. I sat up, banging my head on the low-hanging ceiling. I grunted from the throbbing pain in my forehead as I attempted to figure out the source of the scream. It was vaguely female, which didn't help pinpoint the source. Ever since Father died in the war, I was the only male in the estate besides the butler. Could it be Rowena? No... The voice wasn't high or squeaky enough to be her. Perhaps Martha... But, Martha had a voice like a mouse, and she never shouts. This meant that it must have been Mother, or Celia.

I crawled out from under the thick and welcoming blankets, and stumbled towards my bedroom door. It was opened a small crack, allowing light to flood inside like a typhoon. I swung the door on its hinges, forgetting about how loudly the door squeals when opened too suddenly. Not that it mattered; the scream ought to have woken everyone in the estate anyways.

I peered down the dimly lit hallway. The stars twinkled outside the great arched windows. The hardwood flooring creaked under my weight, even though I was always small for my age. The hallway was quite empty, except for a small figure standing next to Celia's bedroom door.

I couldn't help but think about my nightmare. Celia wasn't really dead; it was only just a dream. But, I felt a sense of dread. Why was this figure in front of Celia's doorstep? I stopped in my tracks, and my eyes flicked over to the closest window. It was open, allowing a cold breeze

to penetrate my skin. Mother's favourite lace curtains billowed outdoors, tickling the branches of the regular oak trees. I rushed over, and yanked the curtain back inside. I was just about the close the windows again, when a raven appeared on the tree branch.

There was nothing special in the appearance of the raven. I could barely see it through the darkness of the midnight sky. Only the moon and stars illuminated it. The raven locked its beady eyes with mine, and spread its majestic, demonic wings. It kept staring at me and cawed into the night.

Tonight, said a deep voice in my head, *everything that you know and hold dear will change forever*. The raven flew off into the night.

I slammed the windows in alarm, accidentally snagging the lace curtain. Cursing under my breath, I pulled it out. *Where had that voice come from?* I thought, *surely that raven didn't just use telepathic communication...*

I dismissed the very idea. Ravens can't talk, just like penguins can't fly. I decided that I would worry about my overactive imagination later. I looked back down the hallway. The figure was looking back at me now. I recognized the large, electric blue eyes and the curly black hair. It was Rowena, and she was looking at me in utter fear and shock.

I sprinted over, not even caring about how angry Mother would have been. When I finally made it over, I noticed that she was sobbing in despair. Suddenly, feeling like the protective big brother I am, I wrapped my arms around her. She choked back a sob, but was still shaking. She felt safe and secure in my embrace.

"Shhh..." I comforted her, "it's okay, Ro, tell me what's wrong. Why are you crying?"

Rowena pushed me away, her eyes shining. "It's not okay, Adriel! Didn't you see what happened?" She began sobbing again.

I looked at her in frozen shock. What was she talking about? I looked inside of Celia's bedroom, and what I saw was not at all what I anticipated.

Celia was laid down in her handmade quilts; Mother was gripping her limp hand tightly. She was hysterical, screaming at Celia... but my sister didn't even flinch. In fact, Celia didn't even *look* like Celia. Patches of black, dead skin covered her bare arms, and there was dried blood spattered on the bed sheets. Her chest didn't rise or fall, indicating that she wasn't breathing. I pulled Rowena behind me, as if to protect her from the sight.

My dream had come true, Celia was dead.

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Mother refused to leave Celia's barren quarters. Rowena kept to herself, speaking to her glassy-eyed dolls for company. I stayed in the music room of the estate most of the time, playing my late Father's violin ferociously with a low and brooding melody. Even our ancient maid and hard-working butler were silent. Martha no longer sang sweetly as she washed the china dishes and laundered the expensive clothes; and Cyril didn't wake us up with a cheerful smile on his face, just a saddened sigh.

It was as if Father was gone all over again.

That sorrowful night, Mother had ordered Cyril to page the doctor immediately; as if there was a chance that Celia could be saved. She seemed almost mad, with a crazed look in her turquoise eyes. I was in too much shock to do much else than stare at the mangled corpse that was once my loving sister. Martha had to drag Mother away, kicking and screaming.

The doctor's claimed that they didn't recognize the disease that had killed her. At first, they thought that she had somehow contracted the lethal Black Death. But, after multiple tests, the unbelievable theory was proven wrong. The doctor's began to suspect that poison was the culprit.

I was too upset to even argue with them. I couldn't get that nightmare out of my head or that voice when the raven came. It definitely wasn't just a coincidence that it happened all on the same night. I began thinking that it was *my* fault that she died. What if I was there sooner? What if...

I bit back the urge to sob and tasted fresh blood on my lip. I kept playing father's wooden violin, the only thing that he had left behind for me after he died in the war. Almost everyone from nearby towns in Wales came out to the countryside to pay their respects to the wife and children of Lord Thomas Landon.

No one came for the Earl Landon's oldest daughter.

I felt a hot rush of anger swirl inside me, and I played harder than ever, not even thinking about how upset Father and Mother would have been. I reached the climax of the melody, the highest point of tension

SNAP!

One of the strings on the delicate instrument broke where I played it, I had pressed too hard. But, for once I didn't care. I kept going, releasing all of my grief and letting it flow through the crumbling violin.

"Sir!" somebody was shouting at me.

I kept playing, hearing more strings snapping and wood splintering.

A firm hand rested on my shoulder, tempting me to stop playing. A soft gentle voice whispered in my ear. “Young Master, please stop this. You’ll ruin your late father’s lovely violin if you keep this up.” It was Cyril.

I stopped, and lowered the violin gingerly. Anger radiated off of me like the sun radiated light. My eyes stung from holding back tears for so long. I felt like screaming at the old man, about how he couldn’t tell me what to do and how he didn’t understand what I was going through. But, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Cyril has taken care of my sister’s and me since we were born, and Father trusted him with his life. He was like a grandfather to me.

“If you’ll allow me, Young Master,” Cyril murmured as he wrapped his strong arms around me; just like he did when I found out that Father had died, about two years ago. I let him, knowing that Celia couldn’t comfort me anymore. I began to sob, the grief coming back when I ceased playing.

“Calm down, Sir,” Cyril said reassuringly, releasing me from his firm grip. “What would your parents say? Heed my advice.

“Remember what your sister used to say?” He continued. “Let the clock reverse”? Excellent quote, if you asked me. She meant that you must leave the past behind, you have to let it all go. Lady Celia would not want this—“

“You don’t know what she wants!” I interrupted, remembering the songs that Celia used to sing. All of those songs had the distinct lyric, ‘let the clock reverse,’ it had become her signature catchphrase in a way. “She’s dead! She’s dead, and there’s nothing that can be done about it!” I sobbed even harder, my knees turning to jelly.

“Pardon me, but you must not speak this way!” Cyril exclaimed. He placed his hand on my forehead. “You’re burning up. Please, Sir, it’s the fever talking. Stop this!”

“I…” my voice failed me, and my knees finally gave out. Cyril attempted to catch me, but before he could, my head smacked against the grand piano.

The room enveloped into shadow, and I could’ve sworn that I heard a raven caw in the distance.

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“Young Master, are you ready to leave?” Martha stood at my doorstep, grasping my coat and hat in her aged hands. I watched her through the tall vanity mirror in the washroom, her expression concerned. I knew why, after the incident in the music room, Martha confirmed that I hit my head hard enough to get a concussion… after I asked where Celia was.

“One moment, Martha,” I muttered, almost to myself. She nodded, and walked away briskly in the direction of Rowena’s bedroom.

I watched my reflection in the mirror, surprised by what greeted me in the smooth glass. There was a nasty cut above my left eyebrow, stitched up from when the grand piano knocked me out cold. My movements definitely weren't as graceful as usual. There were dark shadows under my eyes from lack of sleep, and my posture was horrible. I didn't look like a noble's son at all, more like a slave.

When I woke up hours after the incident, it was late at night. Cyril was there, mumbling off about how sorry he was and how unforgivable his mistake was. Mother wasn't there, neither was Rowena. Both were still mourning Celia's death, not even caring about what happened to me.

Celia would have cared, I know she would have.

Martha had come in with a cold cloth, and checked my temperature. She treated me with ease, occasionally asking me a random question to check if I had memory loss or not. That was when I made the mistake of asking where Celia was. I had completely forgotten that she was dead. Martha and Cyril both looked at me in horror, and didn't say anything until I repeated the question in a calm but demanding voice.

Father used to always say that the truth was painful, he was right.

"Young Master?" Martha was back, "are you feeling okay? Are you sure that you want to attend?"

I turned around and stared into her cold gray eyes. To tell the truth, I didn't want to do this. It was too painful.

"Yes, Martha," I breathed, "I'm ready to go, Celia would have wanted all of us to go... no matter what."

She managed a small smile, and handed me my black overcoat. I was ready... for Celia's funeral.

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Saint Michael's Pentecostal Tabernacle was where the dreaded funeral was being held. It was for family and friends only, so of course not many people came, except for other noble families in the United Kingdom. I recognized Several Barons, a dozen Earls, and about half as many Counts. It was a lonely sight, despite the bustling of people. No one smiled or laughed, and everyone was draped in shades of black. It looked the way that I imagined that the underworld looked like, filling up with souls of the damned like wild fire.

Cyril held the door open for Rowena and I, Mother and Martha were already inside. The church amazed me every time I entered it; with its golden chandelier laced with crystals, its psychedelic stained-glass windows with images from the bible, and its scriptures in perfect

alignment. I thought that it was one of the most beautiful places in all of Wales, besides perhaps the countryside itself.

I scanned the pews in dismay; I couldn't see anyone that I knew personally, not even Mother or Martha. I kept going, but stopped dead when I saw the casket.

It was closed, because of the state that Celia's body was in, but that was fine with me. The casket itself looked different from the one in my dream, *thank God*, but it was just as unsettling. Instead of being onyx coloured and encrusted with jades, it was a rose gold colour with strings of gold stripes crossing over it. There were no jewels, but there were freshly cut pink and white carnations, filling the sanctuary with a sweet perfume.

I was tempted to bolt.

Rowena pulled gently on my sleeve, looking straight ahead. "Are you gonna go up there, or not?" she snapped, her voice more harsh than I had ever heard it before. I nodded my head briskly, and walked with her down the olive green carpet leading down the aisle between the rows of pews.

I heard people talking in hushed tones around me, but they sounded more like echoes. *It must just be the concussion*, I thought, *it's no big deal*. I picked out the odd sentence, and I knew that they were talking about the Earl Landon's family, *my* family.

"That's the Earl's kids, the poor dears. They lost their father and sister in a matter of two years."

"What a sin, their mother must be going mad."

"That scrawny boy is the Earl Landon's heir? The family will be disgraced!"

It took all of my willpower to keep going, I had to stay strong. I couldn't allow them to humiliate my family, especially not at my sister's funeral.

Rowena and I had finally reached the sealed casket, with Cyril standing close behind, ready to escort us to our seat next to wherever Mother and Martha were. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of pain in the deepest part of my already shattered soul. Why was it her that had to die, and not me? I felt depressed, even more than I was when Father died.

My little sister looked the complete opposite. In her black dress and gloves, paired with her black ringlets, she looked even more like the living death. Her expression was hard, almost furious, with her eyebrows scrunched together and lips almost white from being clamped so tightly together. She looked... *older*. Not at all like the Rowena Landon had I known for the past ten years.

I glanced back at Cyril, who nodded at me grimly. I nodded back. He clamped his hand on Rowena's shoulder, and led her towards the front of the pews. I spotted Martha there, patting Mother's shoulder in a comforting matter. I felt relieved, finally seeing a kind and familiar face.

The church suddenly went quiet as we took our seats on the front row. The Pastor had arrived from the back room, carrying a pile of papers in his scarred hands. He also fought in the war, but he had survived... Father, unfortunately, didn't have the same fate.

The Pastor—Pastor Johnson, cleared his throat dramatically, and I noticed his cinnamon toast-coloured eyes flick towards my family. I met his gaze, hoping that his status in the Lord's Army would calm my fried nerves. To my dismay, seeing him stand behind the casket holding my sister's body just made me feel even more depressed than I already was.

Pastor Johnson looked back at the mourning audience, and began to speak in his regal and silky smooth voice. "Good morning and thank you very much for coming to attend the funeral of Lady Celia Catherine Landon, daughter of the Earl Thomas Landon. We are gathered here, in Saint Michael's Pentecostal Tabernacle, to mourn her beautiful soul and pray for her safe passage into the warm and safe hands of God. Now, before we allow her living family to say a few words about the wonderful daughter and sister she was, I will repeat the sacred scripture that has been part of our traditional funeral ceremonies since this church was built."

He cleared his throat once again, and began reading from his papers.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

As it is written:

"For your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughter."

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come,

Nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord – Romans 8:35-39

Pastor Johnson took a deep and shaky breath, but stayed standing. Celia was one his favourite students at Sunday-School, she was like a daughter to almost everyone she met. "Now," he said, "can you all please open your song books to page two hundred ninety-three, so that we can all sing 'Amazing Grace' in memory of Miss Landon?" We stood, and did as we were told.

I felt a cold tear trickle down my cheek. It was all too much for me, and I couldn't understand how Rowena, my ten year old sister, can stay expressionless at a time like this. It was overwhelming, and I felt terrible. With the grief, fever, plus my recent concussion, I haven't been able to take good care of her. Gee, aren't I the best big brother ever?

I let my thoughts wander as I listened to the crowd sing the heavenly hymn. The comforting lyrics washed over me, and the grudge that I held over Celia's death almost floated away with them.

Almost.

The song ended on a depressing note as we all sat back down again. As the clock ticked by, we sang more songs and read more passages from the bible. I wondered why people sometimes called funerals 'celebrations'. I mean, celebrations were supposed to be about happy things, like Christmas being a celebration for the birth of God's son... right?

About a half an hour had passed, and almost couldn't take it anymore. I wanted to scream, running out of the church and away from the people and the unsettling casket. Luckily, Pastor Johnson was just about finished.

"Now that we are approaching the end of the ceremony in honour of Lady Celia, we will now hear from a representative of the family." He looked over at us tentatively, trying to guess who would be the one to rise to the pedestal. At Father's military funeral, Celia was the one who talked about how he had led the Landon family and business with an iron fist. Also, she talked about how loving and caring he was, sacrificing himself to save others in the deadly explosion.

Now, it was my turn. I stood up with shaking knees, and I saw Cyril watching me with concern in the corner of my eye. Mother never took her eyes off of the casket, and Martha was whispering to her gently. Rowena just kept looking straight ahead at the stained glass window in front of us.

"Young Master," Cyril mouthed, "are you really sure about this? You really should be resting, with your fever and concussion."

I shot him a pointed glare, just like Father used to when his orders were questioned. "I'm fine, Cyril." I muttered.

I walked up to the main podium, my confidence wavering. Most of these people thought that there was no chance for the Landon family because I was just a little thirteen year old kid.

Boy, they were going to regret that.

When I finally made it up the rickety and squeaky steps, I strolled over towards Pastor Johnson. He gave me a grave nod, and moved aside so that I may stand behind the pedestal. I

looked down at the crowd of people, watching me expectantly. I took a shaky breath, and the words tumbled out from my mouth.

“Hello and welcome everyone. Thank you all for attending in our time of despair. I know that Celia would have been very grateful to all of you.” I paused, and then resumed speaking. “Celia was a great sister, and she was like Father in many ways. Loving... caring... kind. Her death had definitely impacted our family, as she is no longer the heir. It has been passed on to me, and I shall gladly be taking her place with honour.

“There is a saying that Celia would always say to me, in fact, my wonderful butler reminded it to me just yesterday. ‘Let the clock reverse’. In saying that, she meant that you must move away from the past, no matter how horrible, and move on for a clearer future. It is a very inspiring quote, and I believe that we should all take heed from this, and move on.”

I gave a weak yet encouraging smile, and walked back to my seat next to Rowena. She was still staring at the exact same spot, as if she had never listened to my entire speech.

Pastor Johnson reclaimed his spot on the podium. “Thank you, Adriel Landon, for that very moving speech. I am sure that we will all think of this as we close off our ceremony.” He flipped through his stack of papers until he found the Sermon. He began to read:

But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said to them, “Men of Judaea, and who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words.

“For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.

‘But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God,

That I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh;

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

Your young men shall see visions,

Your old men shall dream dreams.

And on my menservants and on my maidservants

I will pour out in those days;

And they shall prophesy.

I will show wonders in heaven above

And signs in the earth beneath:

Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.

The sun shall be turned into darkness,

And the moon into blood,

Before the coming of the great and notable day of the Lord.

And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. ’

“Men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man arrested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—

“Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;

“Whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

“For David says concerning him:

‘I foresaw the Lord always before my face,

For He is at my right hand, that I might not be shaken;

Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad;

Moreover my flesh will also rest in hope,

Because You will not leave my soul in Hades.

Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.

You have made known to me the ways of life;

You will make me full of joy in Your presence. ’

“Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.

“Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne,

“He, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption.

“This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.

“Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.

“For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says to himself:

‘The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at My right hand,

Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”’

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both lord and Christ.”— Acts 2:14-36

Then, the Benediction was read:

“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘this is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them:

“The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make His face shine upon you,

And be gracious to you;

The Lord lift them up His countenance upon you,

And give you peace.”’

“So they shall put My name on the children of Israel and I will bless them,”— Numbers 6:23-27

Perhaps I should explain. The Sermon and Benediction is tradition in the Pentecostal church for funerals, basically just a bunch of bible scriptures. In my opinion, it is quite tedious, but whatever must be done in the name of the Lord, I guess.

We recited the Lord’s Prayer, and filed out of the dimly lit church. Away from the eerie casket, that was displayed amongst the bright colours animating from the windows. It lifted a heavy weight from my chest, finally getting away.

As my family exited behind the Barons and Earls and Counts, I noticed a slight flicker in the corner of my eye. I glanced over, and I saw a wispy figure dressed in white with short, spiky black hair. She looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

“...Adriel?” Rowena’s small voice clawed away at my thoughts. “What on Earth are you staring at? We have to go; Cyril’s waiting with the carriage.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “You don’t see her?” The girl waved me over, almost taunting me.

Rowena stared right back at me. “Umm... No? Adriel, I think you hit your head a bit *too* hard on Mum’s piano.”

I shook my head, as if that would help clear the image. But no, she was still there. I could almost see her sea blue eyes from here. She looked like a Greek goddess in her flowing white dress, and her hair was as dark as a raven’s wing.

Rowena grasped my hand tightly, slowly transitioning back into the little sister I knew and loved. “Come on, Brother, I think that your fever is starting to get to you. Your skin is hotter than freshly made coffee.” She gave me a small smile, despite everything that was happening, and led me towards the carriage.

When I was seated inside with the velvet seats and laced curtains, I glanced out the window, like I did that horrible night. This time, instead of seeing that girl, I saw a raven. It was standing on its clawed feet at the very spot where she was. I blinked multiple times until the raven extended its wings, and flew away into the cloudy sky. That was when it hit me, why the girl had looked so familiar. Her deathly white porcelain skin... Her soft midnight black hair...

The girl I saw... looked just like Celia.

“Let the clock reverse, Brother, Celia’s voice whispered into my head. “Consider my passing as a transition... not as a fragment of despair. I am with Father now, and I will see you again when the time is right. I love you, Adriel, and Father and I will always be watching over you.”

The voice faded away, and I couldn’t help but smile. *I love you too*, I thought, as the carriage lurched forward, and down the beaten path. Back in the direction, of where it all started.