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about 2,000 words

Lives Long Lost

by Caitlin Mclinden

Your eyebrows furrow. As a groan crawls from the back of your throat, your eyelids open.

The world drifts into focus. You're in a strange room with bare walls, a heavy-looking whitewashed door, and a concrete floor that looks like it's been scrubbed down recently. You're in a bed, covered by a thin, white sheet. A florescent bulb hangs from the ceiling and the light jolts you awake and alert.

Where the hell are you?

This isn't your bedroom. This isn't your house. Where the *fuck* are you?

You push away the sheet and straggle to your feet. What happened? Where's your family?

What's going on?

Your mind races to recount the past twenty-four hours, but all your memories are too hazy and fragmented to make sense of.

Wait.

The sound of footsteps fall near the room you're in, with distant voices echoing close by. There's a low whirring surrounding you, too; some sort of pipes or machines are close.

You reach the door and press down the handle. It swings open, leading out to a hallway where distant sounds of life grow louder. Several bright lights line the concrete ceiling, revealing other closed doors nearby.

You take slow steps towards the nearest door, hands balled into fists. You knock against the wood, but there's no response. You can't hear any movement from inside, so you try to open the door.

Locked. Damn it.

Deciding that checking the other doors would only waste time, you head down the hallway. If whoever took you is nearby, letting them hear you leave your cell is probably a bad idea.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps fall in your direction. Somebody rounds the corner.

Adrenaline surges through your veins. You turn around and sprint back towards your room.

“Hey! It's okay! I'm not gonna hurt you!”

You slow to a halt and, after some internal debate, turn to face them. It's a girl with dark brown hair, the same shade as her skin, falling in tangled waves. She looks about the same age as you, maybe a little younger, with deep brown eyes and baggy clothes that hang off her frame.

“Who are you?”

“I'm Kessie,” she says, tone soft. “I know you're scared, but nobody's gonna hurt you, okay?”

The tension doesn't leave your body. “What's going on?” you ask, voice shaking.

Her shoulders slump and a look of resignation clouds her gaze. “You've been taken. Kidnapped. By The Redeemed.”

“The what?”

“The Redeemed,” she murmurs. “They're a cult that thinks the end of the world is coming, so they want to ‘rescue’ and ‘protect’ their own population.”

Your mouth falls open. “*What?*”

“I know it's a lot to take in,” she says, “but that's why you're here – and why I'm here, too.”

Her tone grows hollow. “They chose us to be ‘saved’.”

Saved? What?

You splutter out incoherent sentences, stumbling over words as your throat begins to constrict. The world spins.

What? You... she... *What?*

Her mouth twists into a frown, but then she glances over her shoulder and sighs. “Look, I have to go.”

“Go? You can't go!”

Kessie's shoulders sag. “I'm really sorry, but there's something I have to do.”

You gape at her. “But... I – I need to talk to you! Where are we? How do you know all this stuff?”

“We're in an underground hideout. I don't know exactly where, obviously, and they don't keep this stuff secret.” Her eyes grow distant. “They're proud of ‘saving’ us.”

“But... but...” Fear claws at your heart. “What about-?”

She glides past you, moving as if in a daze.

A wave of darkness engulfs the hideout. Hanged bodies drop down from the ceiling, the florescent lights casting swinging shadows across the floor. A near-empty canteen stretches in front of you, with skinny, lifeless people eating at tables. One person stares into space before dragging a blunt knife across his throat, again and again until his jugular finally breaks. His eyes stare up at you, and you can see the moment his gaze flashes from tormented pain to sick relief as blood leaves his body. He falls from his chair with a sick thud, and the other patrons file out of the room mechanically, knowing The Redeemed would move the body later. His eyes bore into you again, vacant and lifeless and pale.

“Okay,” you whisper, with a throat thick with tears. “Just... can we meet up later? Please?”

She screeches to a halt. You watch her, waiting for a response – and you stare in mute horror as she turns to you, offering a smile that's broken and empty.

“You're sweet,” she tells you, sounding almost mechanical. “Go the way I came, and you'll find the others. Y'know... I'm glad I met you today.”

She turns and walks away, disappearing from sight.

Well... okay then.

You spin on your heels and turn the corner, passing by more locked rooms until you reach a large set of double doors. You push them open and they reveal another long corridor with signs pointing in opposite directions: apparently, a canteen lies to the left, and the communal bedrooms are over on the right.

The world flashes before you. There's a large room filled with bunk-beds where girls of all ages, all backgrounds, rest together. Some curl in on themselves and cry into their pillows, small and weak and shattering into a thousand pieces. Others lie on their beds, cold and still, eyes staring up at the concrete ceiling as blood runs in streams from their slit wrists. A few retreat to the corners, some choking on hysterical sobs and some staring at the air in front of them, broken beyond repair.

You go left and walk down the winding corridor, eventually reaching some double-doors that have been propped open. Inside is the canteen, a large room filled with tables and benches, and what you think is a buffet stand at the front of the room.

There are lots of people around. Men, women, children, teenagers, adults; all sitting in small groups and talking over their food. The scene looks almost *normal*.

You approach the nearest table.

It's a small group of teenagers. You swallow. “Excuse me?”

A few of them look up and blink at you.

You squirm. “Uh, I'm new here, and—”

“You don't know where anything is?” A boy with shaggy brown hair finishes for you, bloodshot eyes regarding you. “Bathrooms are in the East wing.”

“Um, actually... How do mealtimes work around here?”

“Pretty much like you'd expect,” he shrugs. “An alarm goes off when the canteen's open for meals, and it goes off again when the canteen's about to close. It closes for a while after every meal, so the Redeemed can clean up and get food ready.”

“Does it get busy?”

“No, this is about as bad as it gets. Some people are put off their food, so...” he trails off.

“Ah. Right. Um, do you know someone called Kessie?”

“Girl with dark brown hair, around my age? Yeah, I know her.”

You say, “I met her just then, and she was acting kind of... weirdly. Like, distant and detached.”

He sighs. “She's been having a rough time lately. I've heard she was one of the first ones here, and she always hoped there'd be a way to escape, but lately... I think she's given up.”

“Do you think she's okay?”

“I don't know, to be honest.” He looks around the canteen, looking like he's scanning the faces he sees. “She's not here. *Fuck*. Hey, you said you saw her before, right? Can you see if you can catch up with her? Y'know,” he fidgets, looking uncomfortable, “before she does anything... dangerous?”

“Okay.”

He looks relieved. “Thanks. I'd find her myself, but she was kind of pissed at me the last time I saw her 'cause I pushed her to talk. She wouldn't want to see me right now. Come find me after, okay?”

You nod.

Time to retrace your steps.

Soon, you find yourself back at your room. You head in the opposite direction and find a hallway with several white doors, with one at the end that's made of dirty brown wood.

You approach the door and nudge it open. You're met with Kessie's back, her head bowed as she stares down at something. You frown. "Kessie?"

She jolts and turns around, eyes wide and lips parted. She's holding a knife.

Your heart leaps into your throat. "W-What are you doing?"

She doesn't respond. The two of you stare at each other, silence throbbing between you. Her eyes are bloodshot and glassy.

"Kessie?" you murmur. "Are you okay?"

She swallows before glancing down at the object in her hands. After a pause, she whispers, "You should go."

"What?"

"Please," she breathes, "please, just leave."

Suicide becomes a large part of reality. When the person who had the most hope snaps under the pressure, a string of others fall in her wake. You watch The Redeemed cart away more bodies, more limp, malnourished forms under thin sheets, and you know you'll follow soon enough. The bedroom is too quiet. The canteen is too quiet. Your mind is too loud, and it fills the silence with roars. The only silence you now long for is eternal, an empty fate you can't turn back from, and you finally realise why so many others preferred it to the haunting thoughts that isolate you in the day and keep you up at night.

"Hey," you whisper, voice shaking. "Hey, look, I... I know we're in hell right now, but this isn't the only way. We'll find a way out together."

"There is no way out," she mutters before choking on a sob.

"You don't know that," you murmur. "An opportunity could be right around the corner. People still care about you, you know. *I care.*"

There's a pregnant silence. Kessie looks between you and the knife, torn.

"You know," you begin, stepping closer, "I still don't know my way around here. Why don't you show me around?" Kessie's breath hitches. She swallows, mouth torn in a broken frown, and

you hold out your hands. “Please? They're gonna move me out of my room soon, and I don't know where anything is. I don't wanna get lost in this place.”

It takes a while, but it's all worth it when she drops the knife and takes your hand.

People die. Some last longer than others and, with no inciting death to spur them on, some refuse to shatter and break. Of course, death hangs over everybody's heads one way or another. Suicide, illness, heart failure, or simply watching others die around you – death is always there, in the cold confines of concrete walls and in the grating hum of flickering lights.

The number of suicides are much less than they could have been, and it's a small victory that helps get you through the day.

Kessie's death wasn't approaching soon enough, so she rushed to meet it. She holds your hand now, her pulse a steady beat under the drag of your fingers, and when your time comes, you can only hope that you won't be pushed to your limit. You can only hope that it's sudden, whether it's in the hideout or a warm bed far from this hell, and as painless as possible. With death curling around corners and lurking in the back of everybody's minds, you can only hope you'll drift away in your sleep.