

Captivity

The Faction War Chronicles

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Nadine Little

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‘Do not go gently into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.’
Dylan Thomas, In Country Sleep, And Other Poems

‘The enemy is anybody who’s going to get you killed,
no matter which side he’s on.’
Joseph Heller, Catch 22

1

Rarely a day goes by where I don't think of my sister and wonder how different it could have been.

How normal.

Okay, maybe not normal. Just not this.

Hannah sighs from the driver's seat beside me. "I hate no man's land."

She twists the key and the rumble of the biodiesel engine fades under my butt. Fat blobs of rain splat on the reinforced windshield.

"I'm surprised you volunteered," I say, my voice neutral.

She slides me a look anyway, her helmet cocked on her perfect chestnut hair. "I'm a soldier, too, Anita. Not as active as you but that shouldn't be a fault."

"That's not what I meant, though there's no shame in a non-combat role."

She wrinkles her nose. "What, give up my dog-tags and work in a factory? You'd love that."

We both know Marshall won't make her work in a factory.

A gust of wind shakes our armoured Reaver and shivers through a mangled branch caught on the front-mounted blade. I ease a breath in and out.

Tempting as it is to punch Hannah's crabbit face, she's the closest thing I have to a sister now.

"Whatever makes you happy," I say instead. "I'll support you."

Her hazel eyes flash. "This will make me very happy so are we going to sit here or do what we came for?"

"Ladies," a voice oozes from the rear passenger compartment, "why don't we all kiss and make up?"

A hand squeezes my shoulder but I shrug it off.

"Fuck off, Reece."

How are his palms always moist? It's April and cold as

balls.

"Such language, Carmichael," he says. "It's really unbecoming."

He laughs at my glare, his platinum hair flopping over his right eye, the left side of his head shaved short. My door clunks, the wind spearing icy bursts through my combat jacket. Hannah, Reece and the three other soldiers in my vehicle join me outside, Reece still chuckling.

I hope he gets eaten by an abomination.

The boxy Reaver sits at the end of a mangled path between the trees. A second vehicle parks beside ours, a belch of fumes fogging in the chilly air. I check my SA80 A3 rifle, the Glock in my waist holster, my flick-knife.

I wish I had more weapons—a rocket launcher, a portable machine gun.

Like Rambo.

We creep through the dripping forest, our gun barrels sweeping the undergrowth. The second team set up a defensive perimeter at our backs.

The gloom brightens, the trees ending in a hacked area sloping downward to a rusted barbed wire fence a couple of metres tall. A cracked road winds towards a rickety metal gate. Shoots of green speck the field of massacred wood. We spread out on our bellies. A bitter-smelling elder leaf slaps me in the cheek with every gust of wind. I pull out my binoculars and scan the encampment beyond the fence. Bullet-pocked buildings, scorched stone, crumpled brick.

"Look at them," Reece sneers, flopping next to me. "They have no defences. We could storm their shitty boundary and wipe them out. Goodbye, Embra."

I inch away from the press of his hip. "This is recon only, Reece. We watch. Nothing else."

"But it's *boring*."

"Would you rather be with the team watching Rebel State?" I say, still searching for movement, dampness seeping into my uniform.

His silence tells me he's quite happy surveying the once-fine capital of Scotland instead of the wasteland surrounding Glasgow.

I roll my eyes at Hannah. Her hair trails in the dirt.

"I *am* glad you're here," I whisper. "Usually, it's just me trying to herd these assholes and not die."

Her lips twitch.

Maybe she's past her huff. I should probably talk to her when we're safe back in Calders but I hate all that girly shit.

We shift position twice, sticking to the tree line, Hannah my permanent shadow. Nothing moves in the shattered sprawl of Edinburgh.

Are they all dead? Maybe there was a disease or they starved or a pack of abominations slipped through their drooping fence and slaughtered them. How disappointing. I need someone alive to answer the question that's been burning in my gut since this whole mess started.

"We have sounds of pursuit on our six," says a voice from the comms system attached to my collar. "Stand by."

I roll to my knees, my rifle pointed into the murky woods. My heart thumps five painful beats before the voice returns.

"Cocking deer," he says. "Stand down."

Reece grins and wiggles his eyebrows. "Fresh venison, lads."

He disappears into the foliage, leaving me and Hannah alone. I tap the shiny screen of my transmitter.

"Knives only," I say and jerk my head at Hannah. "Come on. Two hours in no man's land is enough for me."

Hannah glances at the encampment, something flickering over her face too fast for me to read. Her fingers tighten on her rifle. Gunfire clatters deeper in the trees.

I jab the comms system and bruise my collarbone. "Are we under attack?"

The gunfire stops, replaced by the rush of wind and the patter of rain.

"Reece," I say through gritted teeth, "did you shoot the motherfucking deer?"

"It was getting away."

An alarm wails from the depths of Embra.

"Huh," Reece says. "I guess there is someone in there."

"Everyone back to the Reavers."

Voices and squealing metal drag my gaze to the encampment. Soldiers in grey and brown shove the rusted gate open, leaping into a line of jeeps. Tyres bounce on cracked concrete and lopped trunks.

Can't fault their response time.

Perhaps they wanted us to think they'd be easy to topple.

Hannah's boots thump in tandem to mine, her breath puffing white. Brambles rip my camouflage-patterned combats. We sprint around a fallen pine in a bloom of rhododendron, Hannah lagging behind my stride.

She may be curvy but she's short.

And she's more used to lying on her back than running for her life.

I crash through a snarl of elder bushes, my blonde hair tugged from its ponytail. My boots skid on moss and wet mud.

"Hannah," I say on a whoop of air, wobbling on the edge, "careful, there's a—"

A weight slams into the small of my back.

2

I fall into the crevasse, slamming my chest on the opposite edge, my fingers scrabbling on slick rock. The momentum bounces me off and my boots hit the ground, the force crumpling my legs. I lie and blink at a slice of grey sky. Dirt peppers my face. A figure peers over the edge, chestnut hair spiralling free and fringed with moss.

"Hole," I groan, struggling to my feet, "was going to be the end of that sentence."

I pat myself down. Bruises but no broken ribs, my rifle secure on its sling.

An oak cants across one end of the crevasse, roots snaking over the stone. I grab one, test its strength, and wedge my boot in a crack. I hoist myself up, wood creaking under my fingers.

"Hannah, don't just stand there, give me a hand."

"Why couldn't you have died in battle like everyone else?" she says.

My mouth flaps for a full minute but no words drop out.

I must have misheard her.

"You have *everything*," she says. "Perfect Anita Carmichael, riding on her sister's memory and the people love you for it. Well, there's one thing you can't have."

I lick my lips and say very calmly, "Hannah, what the fuck are you talking about?"

Her silhouette disappears. I yank on the root, pulling myself higher. It snaps and I land on my ass, my teeth clicking together. The walls of the crevasse muffle a burst of gunfire. I tap my comms system but it stays dark beneath a crack spiderwebbed across the screen. Hannah thrusts her head back over the space.

"I know about you and him," she says, twisting to look behind her.

Oh shit.

"It's not what you—"

"You might want to shoot yourself. Who knows what these soldiers will do to you. Our faction is the only civilised one left." She sticks her arm over the gap and wiggles her fingers in a cheery wave. "Goodbye, old friend. Tell Ailsa I miss her."

She leaves me with my slice of stormy sky.

"Hannah! I said no!"

I lunge for the roots, claim a couple of inches then drop down, my palms stinging.

"Hannah?"

She's been moody for weeks. I'd understand some hair-pulling, maybe a bitch slap. A normal, outraged response.

She can't abandon me to die.

Rain mists my upturned face. I swallow the urge to keep yelling her name. Voices echo above the lip of the crevasse. I tuck myself beneath a bulge of rock and suck in a breath of mulch and spiders. Branches crack. Excited cries swell and fade. My fingers cramp on my rifle.

She left me to die.

How the hell did she find out?

I shiver in my nook of stone but give myself a shake.

Survive first. Freak out later.

Hannah better be pretty damn contrite when I set the record straight.

Wind sighs through the trees. I stare upwards but the sky offers no advice. I slide my rifle on its sling and start to climb, scraping my boots, my hands, my knees. Roots hiss free from seams of soil. My fingers curl on the crevasse edge and I peer over. Wet trees, no soldiers. I haul myself up, stalking through the forest to where we parked the Reavers. A crumpled path stretches away, pale bark flashing in the gloom.

The bitch must have told them I was dead.

"I thought The People's Republic was all about the people," a man drawls behind me. "Seems they forgot about you."

I freeze trying to decide whether to go for my gun or reason with the guy.

He didn't shoot me in the back so he's not a total savage.

I turn slowly, hands spread but not too far from my weapons. The man's gun points away from me, his army fatigues and tan boots splattered with mud. The beaded metal chain of his dog-tags angles beneath his collar.

"We are about the people," I say. "Protecting the people."

The man shakes his head. "Oh, yeah, I feel very protected."

You're not on my side, dipshit.

"We're not the ones who struck first," I say out loud. "We didn't start this."

Vivid, cornflower-blue eyes meet mine. "Are you sure?"

I frown at him. My hands droop. His gun swings and I dive, my shoulder thumping into the dirt. My bullets strafe the guy from stomach to chest. Shouts bounce beneath the canopy. I scamper to the body and take the guy's rifle—a battered but serviceable SA80 plus a spare clip. My searching hands avoid his shredded torso and transfer a five-inch knife from his pocket to mine. I sprint down the chewed path between thick trunks.

"Over here!" a voice cries.

Gunfire mangles the vegetation to my right. I lurch in the opposite direction and tumble down a valley slope. I re-join the crumpled route of the Reaver and gallop up the far side, the stolen rifle banging my hip. Ivy-choked trees end past a rotten fence, its wires rusted to flecks of bronze. Abandoned agricultural fields stretch to the distant hills, flattened tracks in the wavering grass marking where the Reavers have been, Calder's beyond.

Home.

I bound along the woodland edge, knee-high grass whipping my legs and tangling my boots. Shattered bricks form ankle-breaking mounds.

There was a village here, once.

A ragged group of soldiers spills from the woods, their shouts rolling over the meadow. I throw myself into a band of trees. A river meanders towards the hills, a corpse bobbing in the shallows, one scalded foot anchored in sludge. An eel-like form writhes next to it, taking dainty bites.

That's not going to be me. I haven't fought this long to become a meal for an aquatic monster.

Or any other kind of monster.

I battle the undergrowth and follow the river downstream.

It'll eventually curve south, emptying into a reservoir at the base of the hills. Better cover than a sprint through open grassland.

But slow.

Feet thunder in the fields and draw level.

Not long before they cut me off. Not long before I die.

Shut up.

My darting gaze passes over it twice before registration sparks like a meteor—a boat, half-hidden in yellow iris. I

jump inside and the hull jerks out of the vegetation. Reactive camo-skin morphs from gold and green to dull brown. The vessel rocks and I fall, gasping as my hands and knees hit water.

No burning. Just rainwater.

I scramble to the controls and pump the manual intake. Liquid sloshes into the outboard. My finger hovers over the water splitter.

A dusty solar panel on the bow will power the electrolysis. If the electrodes haven't degraded. The boat could have sat out here since before the war. The fuel cell should be fine—no moving parts, no combustion.

"No problem," I say and push the button.

A green light flashes and I sag against the controls.

Saved by clean technology.

Pity it's about fifteen years too late for the rest of the planet.

A wave of soldiers pours through the trees, rushing parallel to my boat drifting on the lazy current. I hip-fire the rest of my rifle ammo into them. Their bodies splash into the watercourse, comrades for the nibbled corpse.

The light on the instrument panel blinks at me.

"Come on, come on."

Bullets pepper the river, the water raising angry red blotches on my exposed skin. Shots clang into the starboard side and liquid slurps into the boat. I yank the stolen rifle on its sling, aiming for the shine of eyes and bared teeth. More bodies tumble but other soldiers replace them, darting behind trees. The gun clicks empty.

The light on the control panel strobes. Sweat drips into my eyes, nipping like the river water. A bullet whines past me. I go for my Glock.

The light changes to solid green.

I slap the switch and the engine judders, belching smoke. The boat leaps forward when I shove the throttle, catapulting me into the bottom. Furious voices echo over the water. Shots ring against metal and I curl in the recess beneath the control panel, guiding the boat by feel and sound.

Scraping equals bad.

The yelling and gunfire fade to the ripple of water and the sigh of wind. My free hand grips the dog-tags beneath my shirt, my thumb rubbing the embossed metal.

The People's Republic. The good guys.

Okay, the dog-tags don't say that but they should.

The man didn't know what he was talking about. Just a tactic to distract me. It's one of the few things I *am* sure of.

We're the only faction who didn't start with blood on our hands.