

# Homecoming

## **The Faction War Chronicles**

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‘Home is where somebody notices  
when you are no longer there.’

*Aleksandar Hemon*

‘War does not determine who is right,  
only who is left.’

*Bertrand Russell*

# 1

The civilised world is a little more battered than I remember, and that's only the small part I saw from windows as I was ferried from vehicles to buildings and back again.

But no one's tried to rape or kill me, so that's an improvement.

I cross my arms and glare at the sweat-shiny man across the table, the crumples in his brown suit turning it into a landscape of ridges and furrows.

"I want to see Blake."

"Now, Miss Carmichael, be reasonable." His hand smooths his tie in a quick, darting movement. "Mr O'Riley is busy with his own processing. We only need a little more information then you can go."

"It's Anita or Carmichael, lose the Miss. And I've already answered your questions. The same damn questions I answered in Denmark three weeks ago. It's all getting a bit tedious."

Government drone number two frowns, his watery blue gaze never leaving my face. He hardly blinks, his attention fixed on me, as though I'll disappear if he looks away.

It's getting creepy.

"We have procedures we must follow, Miss-Anita. I'm sure you can appreciate our caution. We've had no communication from anyone in Scotland for almost a decade."

"How is that possible?"

The two men share a glance.

"We are still investigating," Drone-one says. "Granted, we had to focus on our own recovery. We haven't had the resources for much else."

"And you all seemed content to hide behind the fence you built."

I raise my eyebrow at Drone-two. "Are you saying we got what we deserved?"

"I'm simply saying we suffered losses when we tried to approach that quickly became unacceptable given the escalating global situation at the time."

"What happened to the Scottish refugees who made it past the border fence before Soldiers of the Lost weaponised it?"

Drone-one tugs at his tie, the material concertinaing towards his Adam's apple as soon as he releases it. "Many were conscripted."

Refusing our war to be forced into another. How unlucky.

"Those who survived have resettled," Drone-one continues. "Some emigrated following the re-stabilisation."

"Will Blake and I be resettled? We're UK citizens."

Drone-two's eyes roll like he's trying to view the inside of his skull.

I've learned it's one of the many expressions people adopt when they access their neuralnet—the world's solution to the internet collapse. They drilled implants into people's brains and the internet transformed into every single living, breathing human being.

They may not have had the resources to infiltrate Scotland but god forbid they go without cat memes.

A young intern in the marbled government office of Denmark delighted in showing me the wonders of the neuralnet, transferred wirelessly from his excitable brain to a nearby screen.

Anything that involves bore-holing into my skull is not going to happen.

I have too many scars.

My fingertips stroke a long pink line on my left forearm, shiny and healed with no weakness in the muscle.

"Your family have yet to return our communication but their last known address is in New London," Drone-two says.

"What about Blake's mum? Is she alive?"

Please let her be alive. Blake has lost enough family.

Twenty-five percent at my hand.

Drone-two shifts in his chair—a plastic contraption of white curves and chrome legs. It looks fancy but mine seems intent on realigning my spine into a shape no normal person can possibly withstand.

"Yes, Mrs O'Riley still resides at her last known address in the Republic of Ireland. She has also been contacted."

I release a breath and steal a minute to compose myself, meeting the gaze of my reflection in the screen behind my two interrogators/interviewers. Tired green eyes stare back.

It's been a whirlwind three weeks since we landed our stolen jet in a field in Denmark, two refugees from a country

that was no longer their home. The end of a perilous ten-day journey through no man's land. I fled the war because it took everything from me.

But it gave me the one person I needed.

"I want to see Blake."

Drone-two sighs and raises his eyes to the panelled ceiling. "You're both lucky you have family who can vouch for you. Some spend years in processing centres. This world may be less welcoming than you remember—"

"Why don't we go through the questions one last time then we'll take you to Mr O'Riley's room?" Drone-one interrupts, sliding a glance at his comrade—sorry, colleague—while a bead of sweat gathers above his eyebrow.

"Where I believe he is being as intransigent as you," Drone-two mutters.

I smirk.

You bet your ass he is.

"Let's start again then, Miss Carmichael," Drone-one says after another fondle of his tie. "How many factions were involved in your war?"

I swallow a huff.

Blake's absence aches in my chest and prickles in my skin. It's the longest we've been apart since I was captured by Unification Army during our attempt to steal one of their warships.

A short but horrific space of time when I thought he was dead.

"Ten," I say.

Drone-two's watery eyes meet Drone-one's, which are the same colour as his awful suit.

"Rather a lot of you."

"Yeah, it was a great big party."

"What factions were left when you chose to escape?"

"Embrea, Revolutionary Front, Rebel State, Soldiers of the Lost, Saorsa, Unification Army and Alba gu Brath."

"And how many of them have nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction?"

"I already told you—I don't know the full details of what each faction has. It depended on what we could initially steal or trade."

Drone-two's palm slaps the table. "But Nationless built this dragon machine, you said. Powerful, amazing, capable of ending the war and dominating the world."

"She's gone."

A bead of sweat trembles on the end of Drone-one's nose and plops onto the polished silver tabletop. The silence

stretches, footsteps clicking down a corridor through the door behind me.

Drone-two slicks his blond hair back with a long-suffering sigh. "You told us you spent time in four separate factions, including your own. Are we to believe you gleaned nothing on their capabilities? Just tell us which ones have nuclear weapons."

I must not bare my teeth and snarl. I must act like a normal woman.

Demure and shit.

"Since I was a prisoner in three of the four, they hardly shared their secrets. The People's Republic didn't have nuclear, that's all I can tell you."

"But your People's Republic is gone so that doesn't help us. Who is likely to possess nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction?"

My fingertips rub the two pairs of dog-tags beneath my t-shirt. "How about you get off your ass and go find out yourself?"

"Now, Miss Carmichael—"

Drone-two thrusts forward, the edge of the table digging into his chest. "I think you learned more than you're letting on during your captivity. What happened in Nationless? You tense up whenever you talk about the place. Where was it, Livingston?"

I leap to my feet and my chair clatters to the floor. The drones recoil.

"Take me to Blake. Right goddamn now."

"But, Miss Carmichael—"

I plant my fists on the table and lean close to the drones. "No more fucking questions. Replay the damn footage on your fancy neuralnet."

I straighten and stride to the door. Drone-one flutters at his tie and skips over, his key jittering into the lock. The door opens on a long, white corridor.

"F-follow me then, please."

Drone-two stays behind, which is for the best since I want to punch his smug face.

No one gets to hear about those days. My torture.

No one but Blake.



# 2

Another door opens into an identical room—silver table, grey floor, spine-killing chairs and a shiny screen on the far wall reflecting the gathered people. A hulk of a man stands in the corner, his dark suit perfectly tailored to his large frame. Blake sits with his back to me, his slim figure as familiar as my own hand. The way his navy t-shirt hugs his shoulders, the choppy fall of his black hair.

The ache in my chest spreads to my gut and I stop myself from barging Drone-one out of the way.

I've been in the same buildings as Blake the last three weeks—the same vehicles with tinted windows, the same ferry to London since the whole world is a no-fly zone—but never really together. They questioned us individually and locked us in separate rooms at night, the spartan, echoing halls of the processing centres identical whether we were in Denmark or England.

We stole moments in passing, practically sitting in each other's laps during meals, the brief touch of a hand, a breathless kiss in a bland corridor.

I struggle to sleep without the thud of his heartbeat under my ear.

And Jesus-fucking-Christ I miss the sex.

"Sorry to interrupt..." Drone-one says, his wheedling voice fading as he steps into the room and leaves me framed in the doorway behind Blake.

A woman perches on the edge of the table next to him, too close for politeness, one tawny leg inches from the side of his body. Her charcoal skirt rucks up to mid-thigh, the top buttons of her shirt undone to flash her cleavage. She laughs and touches his arm, his bare skin, and a growl rumbles in my throat.

He is *mine*.

She doesn't appear to notice his body leaning away from

her, the tension in his shoulders, his hands clasped tight in front of him.

I slide into the room, moving sideways to see the reflection of Blake's face in the screen. The woman glances at me, a slight frown between plucked crimson brows. Blake meets my gaze in the glass. My heart somersaults from my chest to my throat, as it always does.

All he has to do is look at me and I turn into a babbling idiot.

He thinks it's endearing. It's embarrassing but I wouldn't change it for the world.

Blake's expression shifts from closed and blank to a tenderness that weakens my knees. He jumps to his feet and the legs of his chair screech scuff marks on the floor. The woman gasps, a hand flying to her mouth.

I can't blame her for being attracted to him.

Still do, though.

"Woman, where the hell have you been?" Blake says, his dark and sexy smirk not helping the weakness in my extremities. "I missed you."

He halts inches away, exactly my height, and I stare into eyes of deep cobalt-blue tinged with violet. My trembling fingers brush his cheekbone and trace down his jaw to his pouty bottom lip.

My hand moves too slowly for the longing tingle in my skin, the desperate need to press myself against him.

"They wouldn't shut up with their stupid questions," I say.

He smiles and kisses my fingertips, destroying what little control I have around him.

Which is none.

I throw myself at him and replace my fingers with my lips, fisting my other hand in his t-shirt. He smells of sunshine and earth. I swallow his chuckle, concentrating on climbing into his mouth and trying not to faint at the taste of him. My back hits the wall, my fingers gliding upwards to tangle in his hair. I thrust my hips into his, the feel of his erection driving all thoughts from my brain.

"There's my wanton little hussy," he moans against my lips. "I fucking missed you."

The desire in his voice sizzles between my legs and demands I rip off his clothes.

"Where did you learn such language?" I manage to stutter past the pulse in my throat.

"From some woman with a very bad mouth."

"Blake, please—"

'Fuck me' would've been the end of that sentence but the sounds in the room finally penetrate.

Drone-one flaps his hand and squeaks, "Miss Carmichael, Mr O'Riley this is most improper! We are government officials. We--"

"Oh, give it a rest, Jones," the man in the corner says, shoving away from the wall to loom above us, "before you sweat through the whole of your suit."

My respect for him immediately increases.

No Drone-three, this one.

The woman's heels clack on the floor and she clomps past us to stand nearer Jones, who flutters next to the doorway like a panicked moth. A scowl reddens her face. Blake and I finally release each other, standing far enough away that the heat of his body doesn't tempt me to ride him to the ground.

"I'm sorry we've kept you here so long," our supporter continues, holding out his hand. "I'm Quintin. Quintin Sall."

We shake his palm in turn, our slender hands disappearing in his grip.

"Are we done for the day? Can we go?" Blake says.

"And don't even try to separate us again. We're staying in the same room--same bedroom, same interview room--or I swear to god, I will shag him whether you're standing there or not."

"She's not kidding." Blake tangles his warm fingers in mine.

Quintin folds his lips. "That shouldn't be necessary."

The woman stalks from the room with a sniff and a, "I have another appointment. A date."

It's refreshing to have a jealous female who snipes about it but doesn't try to kill me.

Though, give her time.

"Our questions on weaponry still need addressed--"

Quintin chops his hand through the air. Jones's mouth flaps but no more words come out. Quintin shuts his eyes, which flick rapidly back and forth beneath his lids.

"You'll need to be satisfied with the footage you have, question time is over."

"But--"

"Check the memo. We have new instructions."

Jones's left eyelid droops as though he's having a stroke. Both hands smooth his tie, one after the other.

"Oh. Very well then. Miss Carmichael, Mr O'Riley..." He bows stiffly, his forehead slick under the lights, and scurries out of the room.

"What new instructions?" I say.

"Instructions from a level above my pay grade. You've

been granted permission to enter New London. Your publicist will meet you at your accommodation for a short briefing. One room," he adds quickly in response to my scowl.

Blake frowns. "Why do we need a publicist?"

"The news of your arrival has leaked."

Blake's gaze meets mine and he squeezes my hand. "That sounds ominous."

"You're something of a celebrity in these trying times. A fresh excitement from the drudgery of rationing and austerity. There's been increasing pressure on the Prime Minister to act now that our country has stabilised. You could be the impetus he requires."

The last thing I need is to be a pawn in another leader's game. That's part of the shit I escaped from.

"Come. A car has arrived to take you to your quarters." Quintin sweeps his hand out. "That location is secret from the public. For now, at least."

We walk where Quintin indicates through branching corridors of white, past rooms of people who peek at us. Blake's hand keeps me steady, the reassurance of his footsteps matching mine. Quintin guides us to a rear exit, short steps leading down to a squat black car parked in an empty square of concrete. A single security light bathes the courtyard and bounces my reflection from the tinted windows of the vehicle. The door of the car hisses open.

I stop on the bottom stair. "All the windows are tinted. How can the driver see?"

"There is no driver. It's automated and electric. Safer and more sustainable than human-operated vehicles."

"So we'll be totally alone?" A smirk grows on Blake's face and speeds my pulse.

His thumb strokes my palm in a lazy circle, the tiny motion expanding heat low in my belly.

I clear my throat a couple of times. "How long do we have—how long does it take to get into New London?"

"Thirty minutes," Quintin says, the muscles twitching in his cheeks. "Your car has been cleared through the gate so you won't have to stop."

Blake grins. "Challenge accepted."