



THE CHAINS
OF THEIR SINS

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Finding The Navigation Chamber

A much-curtailed version of this scene was left in the published version after editing. A vignette of life aboard the Gyrfalcon, starring Shield Captain Bennet (currently enduring his final year of rotation out of the Shield Regiment), and Fleet First Lieutenants Flynn and Cruz.

The day that Bennet was celebrating new-uncle-hood, not to mention boasting about his elder sister being deluded enough to name an innocent babe after him, was the day that he led Flynn and Cruz on an unusual expedition to the nose of the ship to find the old navigational chamber.

Not that it was really lost, of course, but it had been forgotten for so long that it may as well have been. Flynn wasn't entirely certain that finding it benefited anyone at all, except that it was the sort of geeky, historical thing that pleased Bennet. He was just going along for the ride and Cruz, all grace and charm as usual, said she had nothing better to do anyway.

Not having ever been into geeky historical things except for when, years previously, he'd been trying to impress a visiting Shield officer—and Flynn had grinned at Bennet when he made this observation—Flynn hadn't known that the *Gyrfalcon* had ever had a navigational chamber, much less still had it mothballed somewhere. Bennet himself had only appeared to realise this historical treasure existed in Nonus, when the *Gyrfalcon* took delivery of an entire two flights' worth of brand new, straight-out-of-the-factory Hornets.

New Hornets! Ten bright, shiny, pretty, new Hornets!

Bennet had complained that he would have to put a rota together to allow his pilots to go and salivate over them in shifts, so bad was the effect on the smooth running of the squadrons. There had been talk of nothing else in the OC for days and much unseemly squabbling over who would be getting those pretty new ships to play with.

“Nice paint job on number eight.” (Lange)

“C'mon, who the hell cares about paint jobs when you have that re-engineered weapons array?” (Cruz)

“Yeah, well, some of us appreciate aesthetics as much as fire-power.” (Lange, flipping a derisory finger at Cruz)

“The weapons nacelles are brilliant. Did you see that the modified inertia dampeners mean they'll turn on their own length now without you throwing up?” (Fishbox, casually getting his drink out of the way of Lange's and Cruz's unseemly tussle)

“And the engine modifications mean speeds up to M20 in atmosphere. Imagine!” (Jillia, dreamy-eyed, elbowing Lange in the ribs for invading her personal space)

“Lords! they're soooo pretty and as good as sex. Well, as good as sex with ordinary people, maybe, not as good as sex with me.” (Flynn, smiling at Bennet, whose ears went red but who otherwise managed not to blush)

“You know,” Bennet said, glowering like their own personal thundercloud, “I want a new Hornet. I really, really want a new Hornet. It's taken me several internal talkings-to to persuade myself that real leadership involves self-sacrifice and being a role model and all those other irritatingly noble sentiments. It is fucking annoying to watch my senior lieutenants squabble over the new toys like toddlers. If I had all the pain of setting the good example, the least you lot can do is follow it.”

“Yeah, right.” Flynn twirled his forefinger at his temple. Most of the others acted like they were deaf and hadn't heard. Lange and Cruz didn't even stop tussling to scoff. Looked like foreplay. Flynn had to turn away. Really. Too embarrassing.

The new Hornets allowed the maintenance crews to retire the ten oldest craft to be kept in reserve for emergency use or to cannibalise for spare parts. Bennet invited the two Deckmasters to a morning briefing meeting to discuss who got the new Hornets and where they'd stash the olds ones. The Port Deckmaster, Chelle, came to the discussion armed with a set of *Gyr Falcon's* schematics of such fine detail that staring at them up on the big screen gave Flynn a headache. Not Bennet though. Oh no. Bennet made some fast decisions about where to cache the old Hornets (storage hold 11b down on Deck 21) and appropriated the schematics for further study.

Which was fine. Each to his own, and all that. Except that he insisted on sharing every new little thing he found.

Every. New. Little. Thing.

“Historians,” Flynn said, “should be a dying breed. And if Bennet doesn't stop talking about it, they will be.”

Flynn couldn't get excited by hitherto unknown emergency staircases between decks five and seven, or a storage chamber off the port deck that would be perfect for hoarding

Hornet spares. But if it came to getting excited with Bennet over finding the old navigational chamber or looking at baby pictures, he knew which way he was going to jump.

“I'm not going to show baby pictures!”

“Good, because I don't know I could hold back the mutiny if you did. Congratulations and all that, but no. Just don't.”

Bennet snorted, and waved a printout at him. “Want to come and find it?”

Flynn sighed. A choice between two evil options was no choice at all. “Sure. What was it again?”

Bennet was pleased to tell him again, he was sure. He lay back against his chair in the OC and let Bennet's voice wash over him. Gods, the things people could get passionate about, and Bennet had to choose something centuries old when Flynn was right there—

Flynn closed his eyes and listened, hard.

Gyrfalcon was hundreds of years old and in the early days she'd had limited super-light engines that required her to drop out of hyperspace regularly. Like all spaceships, she had progressed to any destination in a series of short hops. The navigational chamber had been used to check that the ship had dropped out of hyperspace pretty much where the navigators had calculated.

Flynn perked up at that. “Really? It must have been like trying to find your way around the galaxy using a foldy-up paper map and a compass. And probably taking along a pack of sandwiches done up in brown paper.”

The look Bennet gave him appeared to suggest that his captain found his comments less than endearing. “Primitive, maybe, but one helluva lot more exciting than pressing a few buttons on the sophisticated computer arrays we have now.”

Flynn straightened up, all the better to show his interest. “I don't know if that's the thwarted historian or the thwarted romantic complaining there. So, you want to go and look for it?” He glanced at Cruz, who was watching them with the sort of knowing look on her face that was more than a little bit disturbing. “You coming?”

“If you promise he won't show us baby pictures when we get there.” Cruz shrugged. “Why not? It fills an hour or two.”

Bennet had, it seemed, already utilised a little of his bridge duty time running sensor checks of that part of the hull. The chamber was intact and airtight.

“Oh joy,” Flynn said, and motioned to Bennet to lead on. Cruz trailed along with them, already grouching about the walk. Bennet followed the print-out's guidance right up to the top of the ship, to the deck above the Bridge. There, on Deck 1, he located the small blast

door at the end of a long, unused corridor that led past the chapel on one side, and empty quarters and workrooms on the other. A long way past the chapel and well into unused territory.

At least they didn't stop off for prayers.

Bennet was not sympathetic to their complaints. "Just be grateful this is *Gyrfalcon*. In some of the older dreadnoughts, the chamber was way aft of here. We'd be clambering over a walkway at the top of the main thruster chambers."

"No," Flynn said. "I don't think we would."

At least Bennet laughed. Flynn could only be grateful that he'd been spared the thruster chamber. He'd been in there once, on his orientation tour of the *Gyrfalcon* when he'd arrived following his graduation from the Academy. He had lively memories of an immense cavern of a place where he could have parked an entire destroyer and still leave room to spare, and where the darkness was stygian, the shadows so heavy they could almost be felt. Every few microns, coloured lightning had crackled across the empty space, as beautiful as fireworks, lighting up the compartment. The noise had been incredible.

Nice if you like that sort of thing or had foolishly taken an engineering degree. Flynn had merely dismissed it as a place of no interest whatsoever, and never bothered to go back.

The door opened into another narrow corridor, curving away from them in the light of the flashlights that Bennet, with typical forethought, had remembered to bring with him. That was why he was the captain, Flynn said. Planning. Forethought...

"Common sense," Bennet said. "Come on. This is fun."

Fun. The man had no concept of fun. Not real fun.

Flynn swept the flashlight beam up and around. The roof of the corridor curved over them. They must be right under the skin of the ship, getting very close to its nose. Behind him Cruz made a disgusted sort of tchhing sound, and when he turned, she'd wrenched open one of the covers to the power grid in the wall, next to the door they'd entered by. She wasn't bad at jury-rigging repairs on the hoof. She had the soul of an engineer, all precision and exactness. Quist's influence, most likely.

"I'll tell her you said so," she said, when Flynn boasted to Bennet about her accomplishments. "Fried circuit. Sorry to disappoint you, but we'll have to get the techs out."

Oh sure. Ask Natalia, maybe. That would go down well. "I can't see it being high on their priority list," Flynn said.

Cruz didn't appear to care. "Or I steal some parts for it and fix it." She grinned at Bennet. "You'll have to keep me out of the brig if I get caught."

Bennet promised he'd protect her from incarceration with his last breath.

Right at the prow was another door. Cruz tapped on it, looking a touch anxious. "You are sure this chamber's intact? I don't do vacuum breathing."

"It's fine." Bennet pressed his palm against the door mechanism. Flynn and Cruz waited to see if he'd be sucked out and when he wasn't, exchanged grins and shrugs and followed him in.

The chamber wasn't very big, a lozenge-shaped compartment with the long sides following the curve of the ship's walls, the narrow, far end taken up with a chamber large enough to walk into. Its walls were made of panels like segments in an orange, all meeting at the exact front of the ship.

The place was dusty and musty, and really quite interesting.

Cruz pushed past him to get to the little dais set back from the sphere and the computer consoles there. She blew the dust off the top of one and studied it, then threw a few switches and prodded at a few more. "This is pretty ancient kit. I haven't seen anything like it outside of the Science Museum back home. We have power, so it's a separate circuit to the corridor lights. Means this place has never been completely shut down and I might be able to... ah. Right. I see. It's all just in sleep mode, Bennet. It's never been decommissioned."

"Really?" Bennet sounded delighted. "I suppose they hung onto it in case they'd ever need it again."

"Give me a minute to work out what bit does what," Cruz said.

They left her to it. There wasn't much else to explore while they waited.

Flynn soon tired of stumbling about the chamber in the semi-dark. "It would be just like being inside a Hornet cockpit, I reckon, only we'll maybe see a little bit more. Have a bigger arc of heaven to look at. I mean, we're right at the pointy bit at the front. Nothing to spoil the view."

Bennet just nodded.

"Think I've got it," Cruz said, and jabbed at a button. Probably at random.

First, a moment of almost-silent whirring as some mechanism, probably unused for decades, slowly engaged. Then a soft banging noise that Flynn felt, rather than heard; a vibration that ran through the floor, making his entire body vibrate in resonance. It was uncomfortable, but passed quickly, too quickly for him to do more than tense up.

The segments shimmered as the sensors focused on them, projecting the star systems ahead until he'd swear the entire chamber was transparent, that he was looking through clear

glassy windows curving around him like the petals of a flower. Above him, below him, to each side... it was as if nothing stood between him and entire universe.

It was nothing like being in a Hornet cockpit.

Flynn forgot to breathe. It was beautiful. It was immensely, incredibly beautiful, so beautiful that something tight squeezed in his chest. He had never felt so exposed and vulnerable in his entire life, and he'd never felt so unbearably free. It was as if the *Gyrfalcon* had sunk away beneath him, and he was alone, unprotected, his frail human body soaring through the stars; immense, powerful, limitless... free.

Pure, quintessential flight. That's what it was. Flight without wings.

His breath stuttered in his chest. It was beautiful, so beautiful, flying with the stars. Like... like... he flailed for a moment, trying to find the words. Any words, one word, that might capture this for him.

Bennet found it for him. His hand groped for Flynn's, caught it, squeezed tight.

"Wow," he said.