



THE CHAINS
OF THEIR SINS

ANNA BUTLER

WRITING TO CRUZ

The first draft of Chains of Their Sins had things in a slightly different order, and Cruz was injured much earlier in the story. A section where Flynn wrote to her while she was back on Albion, recovering, was a flimsy excuse for Flynn to write oodles of stuff all about Bennet. But the exigencies of plotting meant I moved Cruz's injury to a later battle, and the opportunity to meet LiteraryGenius!Flynn was lost.

24 Primus 7491 to 06 Quartus 7491

Flynn surprised everyone, including himself, by turning out to be a faithful correspondent. He hadn't expected that he would manage more than one or two letters to Cruz before the whole thing stuttered to a halt.

"I've never had any practice at it," he explained. "No one to write to. Although I did write to a girl a couple of times."

"Am I meant to be surprised by that?" Bennet enquired.

"You can be surprised that I managed to write a couple of times. She was important to me, too. I went out with her for most of the final year at the Academy. She was kind of mad at me when it all fizzled out, but she wasn't posted here and—" Flynn stopped and shrugged. "You know."

Bennet gave him a twisty little smile. "Out of sight, out of mind?"

Flynn hunched one shoulder. "So far as Alicia was concerned? Yeah."

With Cruz, though, he enjoyed himself writing gossipy letters full of news and anecdotes. He wasn't above seeking scholarly support to sustain the effort, though. "I just need a few ideas."

"Novelty wearing off?"

Flynn ignored the implied cynicism. "Naw. It's not like it's a chore, or anything. I like writing to Cruz. She's the only family I've got. She's like a sister to me." He frowned. "Maybe more like a brother. I forget she's a girl, sometimes." He wondered if it annoyed Cruz, that he often forgot she was a girl. He didn't think so.

"If you want a brother, you can have mine."

“That's not very fraternal of you, Bennet. I notice you aren't offering me a sister.”

The look Bennet gave him would have rivalled lemons for sourness. He ignored the point about sisters. “You haven't met Liam. And it's better if you don't. I was hoping that you'd just take up the offer without wanting to see the goods first.”

“You're not close then? I mean, I know that you and Natalia are a bit distant.”

“It's not the same. Things with Liam are okay.”

Interesting. Flynn had seen for himself that Natalia was usually cool, if not downright cold, towards her big brother. “Do you write to him? What about?”

“He writes to me. Well, he sends me lists.”

“Lists.” Flynn frowned. “Laundry lists? Shopping lists?”

“Girls' names.”

“Ah.” And Flynn smiled. “Inventory.”

Bennet let out the little snort of laughter that Flynn heard all too seldom these days. “Yeah, inventory. You know, you really can have him, Flynn. He's more like your brother than mine—you're both in arrested adolescence, for a start. He seems to think I've got nothing better to do than keep a running tally of his girlfriends.”

“Mmn,” Flynn said, thoughtful, because (of course) every letter to Cruz had one paragraph in it about Bennet and he wondered if that was like Liam sending lists of girls' names. But Flynn, despite knowing Cruz to be a patient and forgiving woman, was always careful to ration himself to just the one little paragraph because to do more was just sad and pathetic, and Flynn didn't do sad and pathetic. The Bennet paragraph went something like this:

Did I tell you Bennet says that he's not doing as much work for the Strategy people at the moment? I'm a bit worried about him, Cruz, because he's too quiet and intense about things, but I'm getting pretty good at distracting him without... well, you know, distracting him. A platonic sort of distraction. He had a happy five minutes today yelling at me for being late for patrol. I hid on the flight deck for a few minutes, to be sure. It made him feel better and it sure didn't hurt me.

And then the rest of each letter was full the things that he knew Cruz would be desperate to know about.

“You could always follow Liam's example,” Bennet said, “and tell Cruz about your conquests.”

Flynn nodded gravely. “Me being not serious now and again, you mean?”

Bennet gave him a sharp look, and then grinned. He'd eased up on the guilt trips recently and Flynn was not at all sure what he felt about that. “Now and again? As far as I can see, you're being 'not serious' with that new comms officer... what's her name?”

“Magdala.”

“And still with Hebe in Engineering, and that blonde nurse—”

“Hey! It's just that there's not a lot to do around here right now.”

“And you get bored easily,” Bennet murmured.

“Besides, Cruz knows all about them already. I suppose I can tell her about our missions and stuff?”

“If you can get it past the military censor, sure.”

“Get what past the military censor?” Flynn asked. “There's nothing to censor. It's fucking boring around here right now.”

It's bloody quiet. I asked our resident spook if he thinks the Maess are up to something, but he went all Shiedly and secretive on me, not to mention snarky about what I'm doing to stave off boredom. After the exercise in Secundus against the Bellerophon and the Isis—and that wasn't a really big one. Pretty routine. Anyhow, all we've run since then are training flights and I ask you, do I need training? I'm practically perfect. I don't like it when there's nothing to do. It makes me twitchy and my Hornet's gathering dust and rust. Bennet says that next time I'm late for patrol he's going to make me lick it clean. Given that the psychologists have a lot of fun telling us that fighters are penis extensions or something, and Bennet says he's going to sell tickets so people can watch me lick mine, why does he think it'll be punishment? For anybody? Mind you, he'll make a profit. I'm very talented.

“I need more ideas. You wrote that history book thing, didn't you?”

Bennet stared, and to his credit, refrained from physical violence. “I revised and edited one volume, yes. That history book thing is the great treatise on Albion's past, all eighty seven volumes of it. It's seminal to our whole culture. It's an entire literary training all on its own. You should try it.”

Flynn knew that, hence his admiration at Bennet's restraint. “I don't want to read it!” he protested, alarmed. He'd tried that once, long ago, when he was attempting to impress one

Shield Captain Bennet, who had commandeered the *Gyrfalcon* for a crazy mission to T18, behind the lines. “I thought that since you wrote a bit of it, you could tell me what to write to Cruz.”

Bennet raised his hands in surrender. “Just tell her what's going on. Tell her about the squadrons.”

“Oh, thanks. That's original and exciting. I can see why you write histories and not, say, porn.”

“Each to our strengths,” Bennet said, piously.

Bennet's made Jilly his second. Bennet says that she's got the seniority and she's a damn good squadron leader, so he's bumped her up to deputy. He's given Beta squadron to Boaz. Bennet says to tell you that he's looking after Alpha. He's got Callum running Alpha day to day, but he's keeping an eye on things. He wants you to have nice, shiny squadron to come home to.

“Do you think she cares about politics much?” Flynn glanced at the screen in the corner of Bennet's office. Bennet kept it permanently tuned to the newlines.

Bennet cast one scornful glance at the reports of the impeachment proceedings against the President, and grunted.

Every now and then I get all civic minded, and watch the more serious programmes on the vid. I know all the arguments for needing to take an interest in politics, Cruz, and the proceedings in the Ennead are fascinating. Sure they are. Bennet says that politicians are worse than the Maess for screwing with us, but even he has to admit that they've been with us for ever—second oldest profession, he says, and nowhere near as respectable as the first—and he can't think of anything to replace them. He says that politics is bad for him, but good for motivating him to get on with the war—makes him itch for something to shoot at.

“What have you got so far?”

“A paragraph on what we're up to, the training missions you make me do, the mindless threats you keep making about my timekeeping, a smidgeon of politics, a bit of gossip—” Flynn brightened. “Hey, why am I worrying? This literary stuff's easy, really.”

“I’ll let you edit the next volume of the History, then. Talking of gossip, did you hear who crawled out of Jilly’s cabin this morning?”

Flynn gave him a pitying look. “Puh-leese. Just who is first with the news around here?”

Bennet raised his hand in the fencer’s gesture that acknowledged a hit. “You are. Even if you have to make it up.”

On the social side, Lange’s having another dance with Jilly. Bennet says that Lange didn’t run fast enough, and that maybe he needs to review our hazard training along with everything else. Jilly heard and did some really impressive flouncing. I wish I had the equipment for flouncing because, man, have I had it with training at the moment. Bennet says I flounce well enough without tits. Bennet says he couldn’t cope with me, tits and flouncing. I think I’d be insulted if I hadn’t worked it around to a compliment, because of course it means that Bennet thinks I’m perfect as I am.

Otherwise our social lives are really boring right now. We missed out on celebrating Bennet’s birthday, because we were in the middle of exercises and not even I could make merry on the one stingy drink a day that is all the regs allow when we’re on alert. Bennet was a bit put out, I think. He’s angsting over being 30 and all grown up now...

“I’m on a roll,” Flynn remarked. “Not that you’re being much help, but I’m getting this letter writing thing down to a real system.”

“Like your gambling systems?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Hopefully without your friends suffering the usual associated pecuniary disadvantages,” Bennet said in what Flynn pointed out was an unnecessarily stuffy and snide manner.

We have new pilots. They’ve been skimmed from the rest of First with a couple of transfers in from other flotillas, kids who were due a step up from destroyers. Some of them haven’t been on a dreadnought since their cadet orientation visits. Bennet says it’s like all the primary schoolers getting to play with the Big Kids. He says he falls over ‘em every time he

turns around. I know what he means. They make me feel like I'm kicking puppies or something, and they're always bloody apologising and blushing, especially when Bennet notices them.

Flynn glanced across the flight deck. His old Alpha patrol was kitting up and doing their final flight checks, led by Carson now. One of the new guys, Herringbosch, was kitting up with them. He and Bennet had a friendly Tierce match scheduled for the following evening against Herringbosch and Nairn.

Bennet appeared to be mind reading. "It'll be interesting to see how Herringbosch shapes up tomorrow night. Carson told me that he's pretty good."

"We played the *Patroklus* people a couple of times last season," Flynn said. "Fishbox isn't bad at all. We beat them, of course."

"His name's Herringbosch. He's from Northern Friesland on Cissante."

"He answers to Fishbox. It might not be culturally sensitive, but it's close enough and people can spell it. And how come you know so much about people? It's downright spooky."

"I get to read the files," Bennet reminded him.

Flynn winced. "Right. I forget, sometimes that you've read mine."

"Cover to cover. I know all about your six-hundred and three disciplinary hearings, yes."

"Six hundred and five, thank you very much."

Bennet grinned. "He's taller than either of us. We'll have to think about tactics."

"Oh God, you aren't going to get the spreadsheets out again, are you?" Flynn looked the patrol over. "I'd forgotten how tall he is. Stringy bastard, too. He must have to concertina those legs into his Hornet."

"Don't make personal remarks about the new pilots. You know it makes them cry."

"It's a perfectly acceptable tactic, making your opponents cry," Flynn grumbled. "You take all the fun outa sport, you do."

Bennet's great with the new kids, though, making sure they're settling in. He gives them a lot of time and he checks every couple of days with their flight leaders to see how they're doing. He'll be a great dad someday, I told him. He said that he was grateful for the offer but I didn't have child-bearing hips. Ha-de-har. He's getting all too above himself now he's a bit more cheerful. Still, he is pretty good at the whole Flight Captain thing, you know.

Different to old Sim. He's usually sober, for a start. Do you think I've got a thing for competence? That'd explain a lot.

“And there's always this to tell Cruz about.” Flynn waved an arm to encompass the Tierce court.

Bennet yanked open his locker door, reaching for his Tierce kit. “Tierce and gambling? Sure. You'll have plenty to say about the thing that's closest to your heart.”

Flynn grinned at him. “Yeah. I do.”

We are the champions!!!! We are the champions!!!

No surprises there, then! We are the best, Cruz! Oh gods, are we the best! We had a great, great final against Lange and Green—not that we were threatened or anything. They weren't that good.

The match was fantastic! I wish you'd been there. We make a damn good team, me and Bennet—you were right about that. Carson thinks we ought to be split up because we are the business and no one else gets a look-in. Fat chance. I like winning. Bennet says that if Carson wants an easier match, he'll set him up with Ogden in Security (remember him? Built like a brick shuttlecraft). Carson almost had a heart attack.

Mind you, Carson has a point. Did I mention that we won?! We had Lange and Greenie all over the court—they didn't have the first idea what we'd do next. We creamed 'em, Cruz! And right before the final whistle went, Bennet scored the sweetest, sweetest Trinity and clinched it. It was almost as good as the one I got two minutes before him. Bennet says mine was flashier. I think he may be humouring me.

You shoulda seen it! Everyone went mad! I could see the Commander pounding Colonel Quist on the back and he was outa his seat and yelling. Natalia was right beside him, cheering us on. And Bennet... he loved it. We both did. We jumped around that court like a couple of kids. It was like we were about twelve, or something, and seeing Bennet let loose that much... well. It was just great. Anyway, we're still celebrating. And no, I didn't get drunk. Honest. And if Bennet tells you differently, it's a gross slur on my character, and

the reason he was holding my head over the flush at two this morning was entirely due to the poisonous muck the commissary served up for supper. So don't you dare believe Bennet's lies.

Pershing cleaned up off the court, by the way and I took a very respectable cut.

Don't tell Bennet. He'll make me share.

Cruz's replies to his letters told him she was as surprised as everyone else that he'd written anything at all. Gratified, mind you, but surprised. Flynn was rather hurt by the unflattering (and widespread) perception of both his literary ability and his faithfulness. Bennet, when Flynn complained to him, looked blank.

"To be honest," he said, "Based on the mission reports you turn in, I wasn't sure you could even write."

"You read my mission reports? I didn't think anyone read mission reports."

"Colonel Quist stuck it into the job description. I read everyone's mission reports. I even grade them for spelling and grammar. Some of you are bloody lucky I don't stick you in remedial classes."

"You can't mean me." Flynn shrugged at Bennet's raised eyebrow. "Well, all right, I don't exactly try when it comes to mission reports. It's not my fault. It's just that I don't find that missions reports are conducive to my literary genius."

"Lacking the porn element, you mean."

Flynn grinned.

"And yet," Bennet said, "I can usually give you extra marks for imagination and creativity."

"Cruz says I don't have any imagination. She says I've got a one-track mind and why can't I write about something else? I don't even know what she means! I've told her about everything that's going on, the new pilots and Jilly's victims and how bloody brilliant we are at Tierce. She's an ungrateful bitch at times, that woman."

"Brothers!" Bennet said. "They're all like that."

06 Quartus 7491

"Here." Bennet handed Flynn a data crystal. "Your orders for the day."

“You're taking to writing them down? My memory isn't that bad.”

“You'll need it for Demeter flight control, to get a berth for the cutter the Deckmaster will give you. Off you go.”

“To Demeter?”

Bennet looked up from his computer and smiled. “It's just a boring little run to pick up some personnel on their way back from home and sick leave. We got the databurst from HQ this morning. I thought you might like to do the run.”

“You're kidding!”

“Not this time. Cruz is at Demeter, waiting for a ride home. Give her my love, tell her that we've missed her and tell her that to the great relief all of us, Flynn, your literary days are over.”