



Playing Tierce

*This little scene didn't make the final cut. It follows Bennet's return to the Gyrfalcon after he and Felix give evidence to the Intelligence Committee (IntCom) on their findings so far regarding the prisoners Bennet had rescued from the Maess in **Makepeace**. This slots between that meeting and Bennet and Flynn's encounter on Yule Day.*

Day 102 : 22 Octavus 7490

Bennet hated the first few days of a new shift, despite knowing how illogical it was to try and cling to concepts like 'night' and 'day' in space. The switchover screwed his internal clock for a day or two. It never felt quite right sleeping through the 'day' or arriving in the gym in the 'early evening', rather than when the ship was waking up. Not even putting the time periods within quotation marks helped. His only comfort was that at least he got the gym to himself.

Pershing met him when he arrived. "Don't you have a big game this week?"

"Eighth-day. Against Flynn and Cruz."

Pershing nodded, lips pursed. "The game you delayed last week."

"Yes." Bennet looked at the treadmill with even more than his usual lack of enthusiasm. "It'll be a tough match. Cruz is rock solid and Flynn's like lightning, all over the court. It'll be hard to keep them in check."

"You aren't bad yourself. I watched you and Kyle take on those two lieutenants in Beta squadron, week before last."

"That? A scratch game, a friendly. I thought I'd better try and get some practice in."

"You creamed 'em." Pershing looked very thoughtful. "It's a shame really that you made Flynn your wingman."

"Oh?"

"I meant, that because he and Cruz are often here when you are, you aren't going to be able to hide the fact that those surgeons did a pretty good job on your knee. If we'd had any sense, we'd have faked it so it looked worse than it is."

“Why?”

Pershing rolled his eyes. “Get a grip, Captain. It would affect the starting odds, of course, and then once I had the money down, you’d go in and stop faking, and we’d clean up. Of course,” he added regretfully, “it’d only work the once.”

“Is there something wrong with just going in and playing?”

Pershing stared at him.

“Okay,” Bennet said. “Forget that. I can’t help the religious upbringing. You and Flynn must be fighting to be gambler-in-residence on this ship.”

“The boy’s good, but I have years on him. It’ll be a while before he catches up.”

Bennet stepped onto the treadmill, watching as Pershing programmed it. “I should tell you, Sergeant, that for low-level practices and friendlies, like the one with the Beta squadron pilots, I just play enough to get a little exercise. For real matches, I play all out.”

Pershing cocked an eyebrow at him.

“And maybe I should add that the only reason I didn’t play in the *Corvus*’s final last season, was that I was called away early to do another job before coming on here. I’ve never mentioned that before now. I’ve particularly never mentioned it to Flynn or Cruz.”

Pershing smiled.

“Deal?” Bennet asked.

Day 112 : 28 Octavus 7490

From where he was standing with Kyle at the edge of the court, watching Flynn and Cruz bask in the adulation given the reigning Tierce champions, Bennet could see his father and Quist. They had their heads together, talking. His father was smiling. By rising on his toes he could just alter the line of sight enough to them shake hands. Quist looked pleased. Caeden met Bennet’s gaze, smiled and winked.

He dropped back onto his heels, shaken, because that wink was just bizarre. His father just shouldn’t indulge in vulgar facial contortions if he wanted Bennet to win. And he most definitely did want Bennet to win, and not just because of fatherly partiality or wanting to win whatever wager he’d just agreed with the Colonel. Caeden was a great admirer of the sport. He’d come whenever he could to watch Bennet play competitively, before Shield and Joss between them had cut too far into Bennet’s life to make regular Tierce feasible.

His father had got back the previous day. When the official military business was done and Quist had left them alone, he'd spent a moment or two reminiscing fondly about the way Bennet had always turned competitive Tierce into all-out war.

"I'm looking forward to seeing that again," Caeden had said quietly as he and Bennet walked out onto the bridge together, and he'd looked pointedly to where Colonel Quist stood, oblivious, beside the Isometrics desk.

It had taken only minutes to agree the distribution of the potential winnings. It wasn't unlike the arrangement Bennet had come to with Pershing, and win or draw, he would come out with a profit.

Bennet turned his attention back to Flynn and Cruz. He'd watched them play a couple of times, although he'd only ever played against them in a friendly in his first few days on the *Gyrfalcon* at the end of the previous season. As he'd said to Pershing, Cruz was solid on the court. She was fit and agile and always there to support one of Flynn's wilder flights or block the other side. She was a strong player who preferred mixed Tierce to the women-only game, and she gave (and expected) no quarter. Flynn was flashy and athletic, all leaps and twists and acrobatics, in the air a lot in the course of a game.

All of which suited Bennet just fine, because he knew exactly how to counter both their playing styles. If Bennet was good at anything in this life, he was good at strategy and planning. And analysis. Oh gods, was he good at analysis. He'd dissected the champions' game plays with film and charts and be damned if there weren't even a few graphs and spreadsheets in there somewhere. He and Kyle had talked tactics for this game and practiced and then talked tactics some more until Kyle's confidence was almost as great as Flynn's. In fact, he and Kyle had almost become friends over the preparations; if he pulled this off and he'd not only have credit with the drill-sergeant and his father, but he may even have overcome any lingering resentment Kyle may have felt. He glanced at his second, eyebrow raised. Kyle nodded and grinned back. Ready.

Bennet smiled. He waited until the referee—a dour Security non-com called Carter—beckoned them forward, once the champions had been allowed their full due of appreciation. He shook hands with Flynn and Cruz. He watched Kyle shake hands with Flynn and Cruz. And then the game was starting and he and Flynn faced off for the first ball. Flynn was grinning, his green eyes bright and alive. In the tight Tierce kit he was all golden skin and glowing heath. And fucking beautiful. Not unaffected, Bennet leaned forward slightly. Flynn smelled of soap and excitement, and the faintest tang of warm-up sweat. Bennet took it all in on a deep breath and smiled.

“I’m pretty good at Tierce, Flynn,” he said, and the unexpected comment had Flynn blinking just as Carter tossed the ball into the air.

Bennet surged up after it and had it through the topmost hole, the Trinity, before Flynn’s surprised mouth closed.

“You utter bastard!”

“Not according to my parents.” Grinning, Bennet slapped Kyle on the back one more time. He hadn’t felt so relaxed in months. “Come on, Flynn. It was an honourable draw.”

“Honourable!”

Bennet could understand Flynn’s annoyance. If Kyle hadn’t stumbled and fallen in the final minutes, allowing Cruz to snatch the ball away, and if Bennet hadn’t been pinned against the side wall at the time with Flynn’s elbow in his ribs, the champions would have lost—not by much, but they’d have lost. It had been one of the closest-fought games Bennet had played in years, and one of the most exciting. It had been very, very exciting. Without the sharp pain in his ribs to take his mind off things, the too-revealing Tierce kit would have betrayed just how exciting it was, being pinned by Flynn’s sweat-slicked body. Bennet wasn’t big on public humiliation. He’d been grateful for the elbow.

“We almost had you!” Kyle crowed.

Cruz, lounging on a bench, shrugged. “Almost isn’t good enough, my man.”

Flynn tossed his helmet into the locker with a crash, still glaring at Bennet. “I should have smacked that knee of yours!”

“You were holding back?” Bennet inspected the purpling bruise over his ribs. “Really? Did I imagine your left foot smashing into my knee then, when you fouled me behind Carter’s back?”

Flynn scowled. “Accident,” he muttered, his ears reddening.

“The fuck it was.” Bennet glanced up when his name was called.

His father was at the locker room door. Caeden raised a hand as Cruz scrambled to her feet. “At ease, everyone. I just wanted to say that I thoroughly enjoyed the game, and I hope that the champions will forgive a little partisan cheering on my part.”

To the chorus of insincere of-course-sirs and delighted-you-could-come-to-watch-sirs, Bennet returned the questioning glance, the *Feeling better?* question that he knew his father wouldn’t ask aloud. He nodded reassurance and Caeden’s smile broadened.

It was true. He did feel better. The weight on his shoulders had lifted when his father had confirmed IntCom's approval for him to drop the Makepeace project. The game had merely hammered home how very good life could be without that particular cloud raining on his head.

“A very good game,” Caeden said. “It will be an interesting competition this year and I’m looking forward to it.” He half-turned to go, then paused, glancing at Bennet over his shoulder. “I’ll see you later about dividing the spoils, Captain.”

“Sir.” After his father had left, Bennet turned back to getting out of his kit. He thought longingly of getting his bruises under a hot shower. Maybe he was getting just a little too old for competitive Tierce.

“Spoils?” Chin jutting forward, Flynn folded his arms over his chest and stared, eyes narrowed.

“He had a bet on with Colonel Quist. I get fifty percent. A better deal than I managed with Pershing, actually, because he wouldn’t go better than sixty-forty, but then Pershing’s covering an awful lot more wagers. I’m not coming out of this game too badly.”

Flynn’s mouth dropped open. He looked shocked, as shocked as he had in the opening seconds in the game when Bennet had scored the Trinity right in front of his nose. “You had a bet going?”

“Several. Well, Pershing did. I was just along for the ride.”

Cruz laughed. She threw one arm around Flynn’s shoulder and hugged him. “Out-Flynned! I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Everything I learned, I learned from him.” Bennet pushed as much offensive sententiousness into his tone as he could manage. “He tempted me from the path of virtue.”

He watched, full of amused affection, as Flynn considered the implied compliment and accepted it as his due. Flynn grinned at him and he smiled back, feeling suddenly more than relieved. He felt happy.

“I’ll be ready, next time,” Flynn said. “No one gets to fool me twice.”

They were all right. Really.