

The Adventures of the Sky Pirate, Part 7

The Fugue

by Johne Cook

The story thus far:

Flynn has made peace with the Friar and his crew and has started to learn the life of a privateer.

Cooper Flynn and the Friar stood on the helm deck aboard the *Venture*, the elevated stern where the helm wheel was mounted, giving them a great view of the ship and the horizon around them. The former stood at the wheel and the latter scanned the horizon observing a black albatross through his telescope, and whistling.

The wind blew through Flynn's hair, long, and black and flying free. "You know, after all those years growing up on a remote chunk of rock, I love the freedom here on this ship," said Flynn. "I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be."

The Friar grunted knowingly, glancing over at his young friend. "You're taller and tanner than ever. One of the benefits of being on a privateering ship is the convenient lack of uniforms. What are you now, nineteen? In the two years since you came aboard, you've won over the crew and distinguished yourself as a capable leader in action."

Flynn looked over at his mentor. "I'm touched," he said dryly.

The Friar lowered his looking glass. "What can I say? I am given to inconvenient immoral lapses." He smiled and resumed his perpetual scanning. Dete, the head deckhand, stopped scrubbing the deck with his pumice stone and scratched his head, unaware that the two were observing him.

Flynn's eyebrow twitched and an odd look passed over his face. "I, also, have a weakness for moral rectitude," said Flynn carefully.

The Friar laughed vigorously. "Excellent! We

understand each other."

"At least somebody does," muttered Dete.

Flynn grinned widely, and then grew serious. "I'm curious about something in my possession, and I don't know what to make of it."

The Friar listened carefully. "What is the nature of this mystery object?"

Flynn stroked his jaw, thinking, and bobbed his head in sudden decision. "Bring another helmsman up here and I'll show you right now."

The Friar spoke. "Call for the First Mate," he said.

Dete stopped his scrubbing and leaned on his knees. He looked around as the two gentlemen stood there, studiously silent. He sighed theatrically. "I'll do it," he grumbled. The Friar winked at Flynn, who grinned broadly. Dete stood, cracking his back, and went to the rail overlooking the deck below. "Crewmaster," he yelled.

Brandeye looked up from where he supervised the shuffling of some crates, his cotton eye bright in the mid-day sun. "Yes?"

"Cap'n wants the First Mate."

"Aye," he said, and reached into his shirt, pulling forth a silver whistle. He piped off a distinctive pattern and went back to what he was doing. Within minutes, Walenda Darden appeared from below-decks, tying her hair back with some twine and straightening the only truly regulation uniform on the entire ship. Brandeye sketched a salute to her and nodded up to the helm. "The Friar asked for you," he said.

She executed a crisp salute in return. "Thank you, Crewmaster Brandeye," she said formally, and took the steps two at a time on her way to the helm. She stopped, braced, saluted. "First

Mate Darden reporting as ordered," Dete complained, and then turned and stalked back over to his bucket, talking to himself under his breath.

Still standing at attention, Darden glanced quickly over at the Friar out of the corner of her eye and restated Dete's declaration.

"First Mate Darden reporting... as ordered. Sir."

The Friar chuckled, sketched a casual return salute. "Walenda, take the helm for a spell, won't you?"

"Sir! Yes, Sir!"

The Friar tapped Dete lightly on the shoulder with the looking glass. "Here, Dete, take a breather and look through this for awhile. Let's find out what your eagle-eyes can see."

Dete stretched, sketched a salute, and rose with an eager twinkle in his eye, gratefully accepting the telescope. "Thank ya, Captain, Sir."

Darden braced and saluted again, and Flynn stepped back from the wheel with a flourish. She stepped forward and bowed from the waist, and assumed her post, crisp and ramrod-stiff and official.

Flynn looked at the Friar. "After you," he said, and they wandered back toward the Captain's cabin.

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"What I'm about to show you is an utter mystery to me, not just what it all says, but what it all means."

Flynn removed the sash around his waist and untied three leather straps, revealing a secret inner pouch. He withdrew the oil-skin packet and withdrew a small rolled parchment with writing on both sides. He spread it out on the table and looked at the Friar seated across from him. "This is it," he said. "This is the legacy from my father that Tuy Meklanek died to bring to me."

He turned it around and slid it toward the Friar.

"This first side looks like a formula, but what it reveals is beyond me." There was an image of what looked like a stump or a log over a ship's dock.

"The way it's drawn is strange," mused the Friar.

"It's not flying, like a bird, and it's not drawn resting on the dock. It's deliberately drawn **above** the dock."

"It's not hanging suspended from something, nor held elevated in place."

Flynn said, "If anything, it looks like it's..."

Their eyes met. "...floating in mid-air," finished the Friar.

The creaking of the ship echoed loudly in the sudden silence.

The Friar leaned back. "If you ever get to the main island, I'll have to have you look up a young associate of mine, somebody with a great knowledge of things scientific and mechanical. He can build anything if you give him enough resources and challenge him a little. I wager he could tell you what the formula is for."

Flynn turned the parchment over. "This other side just contains a bunch of fancy script." He started reading it aloud. " 'By order of the Queen, the bearer of this writ shall be accorded all rights and resources afforded to the Monarchy in perpetuity until...' " The Friar made a convulsive sound and Flynn trailed off. "What?"

"May I?"

Flynn had only seen the Friar this serious on one occasion, and it involved the Briar Throne. The moment felt like history in the making.

Flynn nodded and carefully handed over the parchment. The Friar looked first at one side and then the other. Then he pulled the lamp over and held the parchment up in front of the lamp.

A shadow of the emblem of the Haddiron monarchy shone down on the tabletop. Flynn didn't know what to make of it, but the Friar's

wide-eyed expression suggested that he did.

The captain quickly gave the parchment to Flynn. The Friar dropped his voice. "Hide that immediately and be extremely careful whom you show that to. What you hold in your hands is unique, and vanished generations ago, presumably lost. The hidden watermark establishes it as genuine."

Flynn cocked his head. "A genuine *what*, though?"

"What you hold there is legendary, the only one of its kind, a document of unbelievable importance, giving the bearer not just manifold wealth, but real power within the realm. Until now, I thought it was just a myth to give people hope and something to strive for."

"What is it?"

The Friar bent closer to Flynn and spoke in a voice so low that Flynn himself could barely hear. "It is a prize awarded to the crown's champion and his heirs after an invasion was beaten back almost single-handedly generations ago, the long-lost Queen's Writ of Haddiron. It is a promissory note, a blank cheque drawn on the combined coffers of the Haddiron treasury. Not only that, it gives the bearer unparalleled authority, second only to the queen herself." The Friar leaned back, his eyes wide. "Considering the ramifications of the two sides of that parchment, I'm not sure which side is more valuable"

With the realization of what he had, Flynn's expression rose, and then fell. "So I should keep quiet about these, then," he said more brightly than he felt, and carefully put the parchments back in the oil-skin, and replaced the packet in his sash. He found it suddenly a little hard to breathe and his imagination whirled in every direction.

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"Sails, ho!" bellowed Dete from above and Brandeye piped. The Friar looked at Flynn. "We'll talk more about this later, hookah?" Flynn nodded, still a little stunned.

The Friar quickly strode out of the cabin. Flynn carefully readjusted his sash and followed after the Friar, stopping just short of running into a mountain of a man in the narrow corridor.

"Pardon me..." Flynn's cheerful resolve gave way when the huge, scarred face turned to regard him. Awful recognition settled like a lump into Flynn's throat.

Degore scowled down at Flynn, and the events of two years ago appeared afresh in his head. Their encounter in a local tavern on Parrot Bay had been brief, memorable, and had given Flynn nightmares for months afterward. There had been no words exchanged, just a fist the size of a melon smashing into Flynn's face and knocking him cold with one brutal blow.

After joining the Friar's crew, Flynn had avoided Degore ever since. That wasn't as hard as it sounds because Degore was frequently away as a regular on crews taking prizes back to port for sale to Haddiron or ransom back to Sylva. When Degore was onboard the *Venture*, Flynn kept his distance and his head, remembering their last brief but energetic encounter.

Until now.

Flynn braced himself for another beating. *If I'm going through this again, I'll take it like a man. Time to stop running.* Then, as an afterthought, *I hope he doesn't break my face.*

Moving deliberately, Degore slowly braced, his back straight and his eyes snapping front in the dark, narrow corridor. "Sir," he rumbled without a hint of inflection.

Flynn couldn't have been more stunned. "As you were, Mister Degore," he said, his voice hardly cracking at all, sketching the briefest of salutes in return.

Degore leaned back against the corridor wall and swept his massive left hand across his body in a mock bow. "After you," he said. "Sir."

Flynn relaxed and started to reach up to pat Degore's shoulder, panicked and thought better of it mid-pat, and flexed his fingers self-consciously in front of his face. "Thanks," he said, dropping his arm to his side in defeat, and carefully squeezed past.

Well, what do you know?, he thought. *I managed not to soil myself. This day might not be a total bust after all.*

Up top, Dete held out the telescope, but the Friar ignored it for the moment and said "Where away?"

"Sylvan merchant two points to port bow," said Dete crisply.

"Is she alone?"

"YesSir. I don't see anything else out there at present."

"Very good, Dete. Walenda, bring us in port abaft, if you please," said the Friar gesturing to the right rear of the ship. He turned to Flynn. "What kept you?"

"I ran into an old friend," said Flynn, grinning.

The Friar nodded, trying to keep a straight face. Only then did he accept the telescope from Dete. He found the ship in his view and nodded his confirmation of Dete's find. "Bring out the hay!"

"Hay?"

"I'm fine - how are you," asked the Friar, who then laughed at his own pun. "Bring out the crucible!" he bellowed. He turned to Flynn. "Time to go barefoot," he said with a wicked smile.

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There was an excellent reason that *The Venture* was able to get close to Sylvan ships—she was not only of Sylvan design, she was smaller and faster than a warship, but longer, and holding more guns than a simple merchant ship. She was

more than capable and was helmed by a crafty and experienced leader.

She was, however, at the moment emitting a great deal of smoke, and her deck appeared to be completely devoid of activity.

The Sylvan merchant started with flags, but there was nobody there to respond to them, so they approached closer until they pulled alongside to starboard and the captain could hail the smoking ship.

"Ahoy!" There was no answer, so the captain tried again. "Ahoy! Ahoy the burning ship!"

A single weathered figure appeared at the rail of the burning ship. "Thank Raj, I'm saved!"

"What happened here?"

"The Friar of Briar Island and his crew took over our ship and started this fire, leaving me on deck all alone. Things were looking pretty bleak. I have no interest in riding this ship straight down to meet the seaghou!"

"I'm Captain Skone of the *Kendersken*," he said as the two ships bumped against each other and members of the Sylvan crew leapt over to lash the two ships together. "I've heard of this Friar pirate before. How long has he been gone?"

"About half an hour, I'd say. Can somebody help me put out the fire?"

Captain Skone directed his men forward with a wave of his arm to where the smoke was billowing up from the deck and turned to talk to Dete.

Dete smiled suddenly and put his index finger up to his lips in the universal "shh" gesture.

The captain heard his men exclaim. "What? The fire is contained in a kind of saucer. The ship's not burning at all, just a bunch of hay."

The captain whirled to look at Dete. Dete had stepped back 20 paces and was joined by a silent crowd of barefooted, competent-looking crew. They had swords and black powder pistols in their sashes, but most stood there with their arms

crossed. For his part, Dete smiled and bowed theatrically.

A figure dressed in a purple coat and breeches with a large black leather belt and brilliant gold buckle stepped silently forward—he was also barefoot. “Captain, I am the Friar of Briar Island,” he said in a low voice. He removed his outlandish tricorn hat with huge plume and bowed. “It is my honor to inform you that your vessel has been commandeered by the Scourge of the Volcanal.”

Standing to the right of the Friar, Flynn grinned at the impulsive title, all the while watching the Sylvan Captain.

Captain Skone took a convulsive breath as if to yell, and Flynn softly cleared his throat. A large and very wicked knife appeared in the Friar’s hand and the Friar quickly stepped forward, his voice dropping an octave as he spoke. “Captain, you strike me as a decent and moral man, a real leader of men. As you value the lives of your crew, I suggest you stay your alarm.”

Captain Skone paused, and that was enough time for the Friar’s men to filter in behind the Sylvan sailors. “...and it’s done,” said the Friar, grinning again. “As you were, captain. Feel free to inform your crew at your leisure, Sir.”

Shooting the Friar an unfathomable look, Captain Skone inhaled and raised his voice. “Listen up! If you value your lives, please drop your weapons and assemble in front of me here. We are now the guests of the Friar and his...crew.”

And that was pretty much it.

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Flynn helped douse the fire, occasionally splashing the deckboys as he did, a practice that grew into something close to a pick-up water fight. Others carefully herded the Sylvan crew below into the hold of the *Kendersken*, locking the hatch behind them. Then the Friar held an impromptu meeting on deck with the crew.

“Well done, everyone. The only thing better than a bloody successful ambush is a bloodless one, and you carried it off by the numbers. We need to get this prize staffed and on its way. Where’s Pate?”

A lanky sailor with a glass eye waved his hand from the middle of the group. “Here, Sir.”

“You get to stay here this time around. However, you’re next when we take another prize.”

Pate waved again, smiling.

“Where’s First Mate Darden?”

“Here, Sir.”

“We’ll escort you and the *Kendersken* back to the Dragon’s Maw, get you outfitted with a proper crew, and offload the prisoners. Following that, you will proceed on to our contact at Bitten Bay. You can deposit the funds in our account there and then continue on to the Naval Academy for further training and an eventual commission if you so deSire.”

“Yes, Sir!” she said, eyes glittering proudly.

“Mister Flynn. You’re in charge of the mop detail. Let’s get that deck clean enough to eat off of.”

Flynn grinned and overturned his bucket on the head of the nearest deckboy so he wore it like a helm. “Yes, Sire!” he shouted boisterously, running away at the head of a pack of laughing boys.

Twenty minutes later, the mopping detail well underway, Flynn was taking two mops down below when he saw Darden steal back behind the stairs going up to the helm deck in the shadow of the mess. She held a messenger bird carefully in her hands. Flynn hung back in the shadows and then saw the bird go up and flap away. She straightened her uniform and strode forward. Flynn’s brow furrowed.

He turned and was about to go below when, for the second time that day, the cry went up.

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"Sails, ho!"

Flynn dropped the mops and took the stairs two at a time. "Where?"

"Behind us on the horizon!"

Flynn took the offered looking glass and got a good look at the vessel before the Friar came up behind him. Wordless, Flynn handed off the looking glass to the Friar and looked at the *Kendersken* still moored off the *Venture's* starboard side. Darden ran to her railing and looked up at the *Venture*.

"Captain?" she asked.

"Cast off," yelled the Friar. "We'll take whoever's left and go meet them. Break out the muskets!"

Flynn looked back at the ship on the horizon and considered the size of the remaining skeleton crew compared to a ship that was at least as big as the *Venture*. He looked down at the deck where a frightened deckboy was paralyzed, unsure where to go. He was sopping wet and covered with ash from cleaning the fire crucible.

The effect was inspirational.

"Captain," said Flynn, "I have an idea." Flynn sketched it out: the size of the incoming ship, the size of the remaining crew, the slow speed of the debarking merchant prize, the resources at their disposal. When he finished, the Friar looked at Flynn with fresh appraisal.

"You know, that just might work." He turned and addressed Brandeye. "Bring the flags." Then he returned his attention to Flynn. "Break out the launch and assemble your crew."

"I'll take the deckboys," said Flynn. The Friar's eyebrows furrowed. "I'll explain later!" promised Flynn, and if the Friar entertained any doubt on that score, he kept it off his face.

"Let's go," roared the Friar. "We haven't much time!"

"Put your back into it, lads!" encouraged Flynn, rowing along with the sopping, sooty deckboys. "The sooner we reach the Sylvans, the sooner we can hit 'em with the fugue!"

"What's a fugue," asked Nickardy.

"You don't want to know," intoned Falt with more knowledge than he actually had.

Flynn just smiled as he rowed and winked at Nickardy, his black eyes twinkling.

Twenty minutes of hard rowing took them far enough out to hail the incoming Sylvan warship. Flynn signaled the deckboys to stop rowing, turned, and stood easily in the rocking longboat. He picked up the cloth and started waving it.

"You there, what are you doing?"

"Hookah, my fellow Sylvans. We have come to warn you away from our ship, the *Skenderden*."

"Is that a quarantine flag? What is it, the plague?"

Flynn dropped the flag to his side as if wearied. "Worse! It's the fugue! Very contagious, and extremely deadly."

"The fugue? I'm not familiar with it."

"Oh, yes, it's quite disturbing. It affects those at the opposite end of age—the older you are, the more susceptible, and the younger you are, the more impervious...for a time. My crew here is immune to its ravages, so far any way, but after we divert you away from our ill fortune, we will return to sail our ship to a quarantined port to wait out the illness and see how many graves we will have to dig."

"What happens to the afflicted? How does it manifest? Might we have something on board to treat this malady?"

"It begins as the water in your body starts oozing out of every pore. First, you're drenched, and then you dry out until you start to spit up ash with great raspy heaving coughs. Your bones

become brittle, your skin flakes off, and you finally blow clean away on the wind. The only cure is a fortnight on nothing but rum and citrus. Those infected are extremely contagious until the fugue-fever passes. We beg you, turn back lest your crew, too, become victims of the fugue!"

The captain looked dubious, but one long look at the ashen, dripping boys was enough to make his decision. "Yes, thank you for the warning. May Raj bless and heal you." He waved and turned to his First. "Change course and make for the Volcanal."

The quarantine flag dropped out of Flynn's trembling fingers, and he waved bravely to the Sylvan warship.

"Extremely deadly?" whispered Qent.

"Worst kind," replied Flynn.

He spoke a low word and they brought the launch around to head back to the *Venture*. The last thing he heard was "Break out the rum and citrus for all hands."

"I love this job," said Flynn to his grinning mates, taking an oar.

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"You can take the Quarantine flag down," said Flynn climbing back aboard the *Venture*. "They bought it."

"Make way for the Maw," yelled the Friar, and then fell in walking with Flynn. "Bought what, exactly?"

"I told him the *Venture* was quarantined with the fugue, an illness that affects older people."

The Friar stopped in mock outrage. "Who are you calling 'older people'?"

Flynn cocked his head, a coy mannerism. "You know – people older than myself! I told them the fugue was a wasting disease that manifested as water leaking from all pores..."

"So, sweating."

"...along with ashen features."

The Friar regarded Flynn with newfound appreciation. "You used dirty, sweaty deckboys as proof of a fabricated illness?!"

Flynn smiled widely.

The Friar nodded once. "You, Sir, are a steely-eyed liar, and I salute you." He removed his fancy hat and bowed deeply.

"By the way," said Flynn, "we should break out some rum and citrus when we return to the Maw."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"No reason," said Flynn, his black eyes twinkling.

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After cleaning up, Flynn joined the Friar in the captain's cabin. "We do have something important to talk about. I told you that I thought I could find the spy in the crowd. I've found him, only 'he' is a 'she'."

The Friar leaned forward. "Who is she?"

"First Officer Walenda Darden. After you gave her command of the prize ship and handed her a grant to the Haddiron Naval Academy, she stole away and flew a black messenger bird. Cyl only knows where she kept it hidden."

The Friar frowned deeply. "You're sure?"

"I saw her with my own eyes while the crew was distracted. I don't know if there's any way to keep an eye on her from contacts at the Academy, but it would be good to find out who her contacts are and what her intentions are regarding you, the Maw, and the *Venture*."

The Friar leaned back in the high-backed chair that he had bolted to the wooden floor. He dug around in his waistcoat and pulled out a pipe, some wood matches, and a tin of tobacco. He prepared and lit the pipe, and smoked in silence, the cherry smell filling the cabin with a homey scent. He nodded once and leaned forward. He pointed the stem of the pipe at Flynn.

"You have matured and grown while here on the Venture. You are a natural leader, and are somewhat wasted here. You can accomplish some things without education, but can accomplish so much more with a proper schooling." He held his hand up to forestall protest. "What you need is a commission to the Academy. I can't grant that to you, but I can provide the funding. If you can find a way to enter the Academy, I'll pay your way if you return here to us when you're finished with your schooling."

Flynn sat on the Friar's hammock, stunned. "What are you saying?"

The Friar grinned. "It takes a spy to catch a spy. I want you to follow Darden and uncover her role. Infiltrate the Academy, find out what she knows, who her contacts are, and if Briar Island has been compromised. Get close to her and find out what she knows. Stop her if you can, kill her if you must, then return here when you're ready."

"That could take four years!"

"Then four years it is – we survived without you before now. This is an advanced assignment that I wouldn't think of giving to anybody with less ability to think on their feet."

Flynn stared at the floor and pushed back and forth in the hammock in nervous energy. "But the privateers of Briar Island are the only family I have, and the Venture my only home!"

"All the more reason to leave now, so you can protect those you love and care for. Will you do it?"

Flynn remained looking at the floor. "I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be right now than here." He raised his head and looked the Friar in the eye.

"I'll do it," he said.



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