

The Adventures of the Sky Pirate

Chapter 9, Finding Chain

by *Johne Cook*

Part One: The Black Blot

Cooper Flynn looked at the massive young man next to him and back at the door. Flynn said, “I see the closet, yes, ha, a funny joke,” his tone light. He clapped Pitt on his shoulder and regretted it almost immediately. Shaking his hand lightly to work out the kinks, he said, “Seriously, where’s our room?”

Pitt waved one massive paw in the general direction of the tiny space ahead of him before stooping and wedging himself through the small curved doorway.

The room was a compact 12 feet by 9 feet. A one-foot square opening at the top of the outside wall let in the night breezes and the occasional fly. It was covered by a thin fabric curtain that was mostly effective. The bed against each side wall consisted of two wooden blocks with a straw mattress over them. Parchment sheets were tacked over each bed, Pitt’s on the left, Flynn’s on the right. There were two iron rings attached to the far wall, and one on each side wall. Flynn eyeballed his sleeping space. It was barely long enough for him—Pitt’s was grossly inadequate.

“My Reacher friend, we’re going to have to do something about these sleeping arrangements. Let’s go get something to eat while we think about this.”

Pitt pointed at something lying on Flynn’s pallet. Flynn walked over and picked up a parchment. He turned it over and showed it to Pitt, whose eyes went wide and face went white. Flynn said, “What?”

They heard a scuff in the corridor, turned in

unison, and saw a scrappy silhouette standing in the doorway, arms folded.

“Ploys at attention!”

Flynn looked at Pitt, who shrugged. Flynn laid the parchment on his pallet and tossed off his casual shipboard salute. “You’ll have to excuse us, partner—we’re new here and haven’t been shown the ropes yet.”

The silhouette said, “Since you’re new polloi here, when an officer addresses you, you stand with your back straight and eyes front and say ‘Yes, Ven!’”

Flynn and Pitt looked at each other, adopted the correct posture, and repeated the phrase. It was the first utterance Flynn had heard from his new roommate in two hours.

The shadowy figure stepped into the light. “I am Sergeant Lieu Crawse. You are two common polloi recruits in my dormitory. Barring an escalation of hostilities with the Sylva, I will be your father and mother on these premises for the next four years. You may address me by my title. I may address you in any fashion I please. However, in keeping with my personal worship practices, you will find me firm but fair, so I will refer to you with more respect than you strictly deserve.”

He produced a parchment from a pocket in his breeches. “Which one of you is Pitt, and which is the new recruit?”

Flynn and Pitt, facing each other, conducted a clandestine conversation with their eyes—Flynn cocked one eyebrow and Pitt raised his far shoulder briefly. Flynn cleared his throat. “My roommate is Pitt of the Reach Islands and I am Cooper Flynn, a late arrival from Parrot Bay.”

Crawse took their exchange in. "Mr. Flynn, do you always speak for the room?"

Another silent exchange followed. Flynn said, "Yes, Ven, where there is an accord."

Crawse nodded in the manner of one for whom any answer would suffice. "One merit each for cooperation. Two demerits each for indecision in the face of practical need," he said, waving at the pallets. "There is no room in the Haddirron navy for waffling in the face of problems. If no one is at hand to command, you each must command yourselves based on available information."

He looked first at Flynn and then at Pitt. "In other words, I am the authority figure here, but I'm not your mamma. We'll teach you how to think. It's up to you to do the actual dirty work yourself."

He finished looking around the room. "You will follow me to the mess hall where you will take your meals. Afterward, those with demerits will report to the Officer of the Kitchen and work them off, one hour for each."

Sergeant Crawse smiled knowingly. "I will be very surprised if you aren't peeling potatoes in thirty minutes' time. If I were you, I'd work on the problem with your sleeping arrangements while you are there. If you don't solve the problem before lights-out, we will have two new volunteers for the first watch tonight."

He braced and saluted. Stealing covert glances at each other, the two roommates responded in kind.

Crawse nodded at the parchment on Flynn's pallet and raised an eyebrow. "Which backwater province do you hail from, Mister Flynn?"

A smile flickered across Flynn's face. "You wouldn't know it, Ven. Why do you ask?"

"That's a Black Blot. Somebody within these Academy walls wants you dead."

"Or worse," said Pitt, softly, with his deep Reacher accent.

"Who knows you're here at Academy?"

Flynn said, "Two people at the most. I was literally a last-minute arrival."

"That's probably somebody's idea of a prank. Still, it wouldn't be a bad idea to remain vigilant for awhile. Be very careful, will you Mister Flynn?"

"Ven?"

"Some take the Black Blot very seriously. We don't need any undue drama while you're here, do we, Mister Flynn?"

Flynn's eyes sparkled dangerously. Flynn said, "No, Ven." He saluted again.

Crawse nodded and dropped into his command voice. "Recruits, welcome to the Academy! Fall out and follow me to the mess!"

They said "Yes, Ven," in unison and followed after the good sergeant. A flash of copper hair passed by out in the corridor, but Flynn was already deep in thought, oblivious that he fell in right behind Crawse out into the hallway, and that Pitt waited to follow him.

#

At the Mess Hall, the gregarious Flynn worked the room like a pro, sizing up potential friends and foes, and making many a friend with his breezy, infectious wit. Pitt waited as Flynn made a slow circuit of the room, and then the two of them fell in at the back of the line. For his part, Pitt was happy to let Flynn attract all the attention, a welcome change from his unpleasant first exposure to the academy courtesy of Petty Officer Baskins.

Flynn caught Pitt looking at him, winked, and leaned over. "I like to know who the players are," he said in confidential tones. Pitt raised one eyebrow. Flynn nodded once, taking a bite out of a small, hard roll. "Take the hard case over there, Rippe. He's tough but brighter than the thug he pretends to be. He will keep his own counsel but will be a loyal crewmate out on the high seas."

He gestured toward a gap-toothed Shraven. "The red-haired lad is pious and sharp with

numbers. The swarthy roundling next to him is a goofball. He'll be the life of the hall if we let him. He's got a quick tongue and an answer for anything, whether he actually knows the answer or not."

Flynn nodded with his chin toward a vivacious brunette. "And that vision over there is Deena Prentiss. She's finishing her training to be a physician."

Flynn went on to say other things, but Pitt missed everything thereafter, an effect not lost on Flynn, who concluded with a rambling discussion of sons of doorknobs, daughters of toadstools, and turtles of flight. Oblivious to the tangent, Pitt only had eyes for Deena.

#

After dinner, Sergeant Alcorn called for those with demerits to come around into the kitchens. Everyone else dispersed to the canteen for sweets and treats or to the commons for further discussion and spirited intermingling.

Flynn and Pitt accepted aprons and paring knives and were shown to the massive potato bin. They wrangled stools to sit on and pans for potato skinings, and got to work.

One hour and a hundred pounds of peeled potatoes later, they turned in their aprons to a bemused Head Cook. In the space of that hour, Flynn had pumped her for information and stolen her affection by raving over her gooseneck gravy and winning from her a promise to allow him an extra portion of stuffing come Sunday.

Pitt just took it all in. He couldn't get the vision of the lovely Deena Prentiss out of his head. Seeing her made him made him feel all tongue-tied.

After an hour, they turned in their paring knives and aprons—Pitt had to be reminded to remove his—and were sent on their way. As they walked along the ornamental gravel walkway from the Mess Hall in the fading twilight, Flynn

looked carefully at the little groups of 'Ploys huddled here and there around the common grounds. However, he didn't stop and join in at any of the groups.

For his part, Pitt didn't shake himself free from his reverie until they were back in their tiny room. Flynn stood by his pallets stroking his jaw, thinking. Pitt waved his paw as if to ask, "Are we going to do anything about this?"

Flynn looked at Pitt and smiled. "I don't have anything to share. I'm going to think on it. If you would, please collect me when it's time to go." With that enigmatic statement, he set their lamp on the small common table at the head of the room under the window slot, lay down in the pallets, and was asleep almost immediately.

It was far too early to turn in when the prospect of blossoming love was in the air, so Pitt nodded once and wandered back out to the commons. Outside, the scented flowers reminded him of a certain physician-in-training.

#

Sergeant Crawse found Pitt sitting at the fountain at the head of the commons, watching someone across the way in the flickering lamplight of the moonless night.

"Ah, Mr. Pitt. Where is Mr. Flynn?"

Pitt gave the barest nod with his head back toward the room.

"What have you two decided to do about your sleeping arrangements?"

Pitt looked slightly pained.

"I see. Let's go see what the story is. This should be good."

Pitt looked resigned, and followed the Sergeant.

They found Flynn sitting on his pallets with his arms crossed.

"Mr. Flynn!"

Flynn swung his feet over the pallet and hopped to his feet. He snapped to and saluted.

“Yes, Ven!”

“At ease. Have you two reached a conclusion about what to do about your sleeping arrangements?”

“Ven, we have not. Mr. Pitt has had a number of ideas but I was unable to find one solution that satisfied all the criteria.”

Crawse blinked. “You say that Mr. Pitt has been thinking of possible solutions but you weren’t able to see your way clear to adopt *any* of them?”

“Yes, Ven. It is all at my feet.” As speeches go, this one would have perhaps been more fully embraced if Flynn hadn’t seemed so positively chipper about his confession.

Sergeant Crawse winced. “Mr. Flynn, you will report to the Officer of the Guard for the first watch.” He turned to Pitt. “Mr. Pitt, while Mr. Flynn’s testimony persuades me that this is not your fault, you rise or fall together as roommates. However, Mr. Flynn must sit this watch, and you must accompany him. I am sorry.”

Mr. Pitt braced and saluted without animosity. The Sergeant returned the salute, fixed Flynn with one final puzzled glare, and quit the room.

When he was gone, the two relaxed. Flynn fixed Pitt with a sly glance and winked. Then Flynn slapped Pitt on the arm and said, “We’d best be off—don’t want to be late for guard duty.” With that, he led the way out into the hallway, shaking off his stinging hand as he walked.

Pitt took one step over to the table, retrieved the lamp, and turned. He took one long step toward the door and held out the lamp. Flynn stepped back into view, accepted the outstretched lamp, said, “Thank you,” and left again. Pitt smiled gently for the first time that night, wedged himself through the narrow opening, and followed the bobbing light down the hallway.

#

Sergeant Crawse waved a salute at the Officer

of the Guard. “These are ‘Ploys Flynn and Pitt. They are your volunteers for the first watch. Afterward, they are free to return to their room.” He saluted again and left.

The Officer of the Guard looked bemused. “Drew me your first night out, eh? In my experience, you’re either total screw-ups or labyrinthine geniuses. Either way, you’re out of my pay grade, so here’s what we’re going to do: I’m going to tell you what to do, and you’re not going to speak a word to me unless it is ‘Yes, Ven’ or ‘No, Ven.’ Nod if you understand.”

Pitt nodded as Flynn saluted and said “Yes, Ven!”

Officer of the Guard Eckles nodded and muttered under his breath. “Why is it always *me?*”

He gave them each a sash. “Put these on, grab a pike, and follow me.” Flynn slid his sash on and thought it looked dashing draped over his chest.

Pitt looked skeptically at his and tried putting it on over his head, but the sash didn’t fit over his chest, and the sash got stuck behind his ear, with one arm through the loop. He tried a number of different things as they walked until Flynn took the sash out of his hand and hung it off Pitt’s right shoulder.

It was a different sort of look, but it worked for him. Pitt looked relieved.

They were shown around the foregrounds over the course of the first hour, the Officer of the Guard inspecting the other sentries, greeting each man by name, exchanging small talk and pleasantries, and making subtle changes without drawing attention to the instruction. Finally, they came to an entrance toward the rear of the grounds. The entrance was humble, well lit, and fairly busy with merchants and servants coming and going even at this hour. There was another group of guards off to one side. The Officer of the Guard brought them to the other side and instructed them to inspect everything coming

in or going out, and to ask the other guards any questions they might have.

"I'm going to make the rounds. I'll be back by the end of the watch and check up on you then."

Pitt stood at parade rest, his pike in front of him. The pike looked large in Flynn's hands, but somehow puny in Pitt's mitts. Pitt observed Flynn carefully. Flynn spent five minutes watching the scene. His expression grew thoughtful, and then puzzled. He stepped forward to talk to a burly man pushing a sturdy wood cart piled high with dirty laundry.

"Hello, good-man. What is your craft?" Flynn made sure he had the man's eye and flashed him something hidden in his left hand.

A guarded look was replaced almost immediately by comprehension, and he played along with the superficial conversation. "Laundry and soiled garments going out, cleaned clothes and table cloths coming back in."

Flynn said, "And how often to you make your rounds?"

"Four times daily. My mistress owns the business and delivers twice in the morning. I'm a night bird and makes my deliveries in the afternoon and evening."

Flynn stroked his chin. "Tell me, do you enjoy your work?"

The man straightened. "The evening clothes are quite clean and well folded. I take pride in my work."

Flynn looked at him closely. "But..."

"My mistress may be the owner but she doesn't maintain the same quality that I do."

Flynn smiled to himself. "What is your name?"

"I am Benet."

"Benet, how would you like to snip the strings of subservience and make your own good name?" Flynn took him by the arm and they walked together to the gate. They stood there talking for twenty more minutes. Finally, they clapped hands

like long-lost friends.

Flynn turned and walked toward Pitt, grinning. Pitt lunged forward. He raised one huge left hand. He swatted Flynn off his feet and brought his pike to the guard position.

Flynn flew sideways like a rag doll. He heard a metallic clang, and then he fell on his side. He rolled acrobatically and came up, cat-like, in a crouch, his black eyes flashing. He looked up in time to see Pitt standing at the ready, a discarded pike lying on the ground to his left.

One of the other guards rushed in from the shadows and pulled up before he ran right down Pitt's pike.

"Whoa!"

Flynn stood straight and walked to Pitt's side. "What happened?"

"My apologies. I was walking past and dropped my pike. Clumsy me. I don't handle weapons well, I'm afraid. It almost hit you, but your friend here swatted you out of the way. Krak, he's fast! And then, by Cyl, he knocked that pike out of the way faster than thought!"

Flynn smiled to himself. "This is Mister Pitt. He has muscles on top of muscles and the reflexes of a cat." Flynn stooped and picked up the pike, spinning it around expertly and handing it, handle-first, to the other guard.

"Here you go. You might want to hang onto that a little tighter."

The guard said, "Your friend, there, is pretty protective."

Flynn shrugged. "He's a good friend."

"Well, I wouldn't want to be his enemy," he said cheerfully. The guard waved, hefted the errant pike, and walked off.

Flynn looked at Pitt. "Thanks."

Pitt permitted a flitting smile to cross his face, and then he resumed his post.

When the Guardsman Eckles stopped by later, he asked if anything interesting had happened. Flynn said, "Ven, nothing much." Pitt was expres-

sionless.

It was two bells by the time they returned to their room. Flynn looked at Pitt. “Any ideas on how to sleep tonight?” Pitt shrugged, and started to reach for his bedroll.

Flynn smiled. “Allow me.” He touched his arm, prompting Pitt to move back toward the door.

Flynn pushed his pallets over, giving Pitt all four. “This should be long enough, right?”

Pitt nodded, puzzled.

Flynn held up a single finger, produced a hammock scrounged from somewhere, and strung it up between the iron rings on his side of the room.

Pitt nodded once in understanding and lay down on the four pallets, a comfortable fit even for a man of his size.

Flynn blew out the lamp and settled in.

The room was silent as their breathing deepened. After a moment, Pitt’s deep voice said, “Flynn? Thanks.”

The only response he received from the hammock was snoring. Pitt smiled in the darkness and was asleep soon after, himself.

#

Part Two: The Privateer’s Curriculum

The following morning, Sergeant Crawse stopped by and looked in on them. Pitt was just finishing making up his bedding. Crawse took in their modified sleeping accommodations with a glance. He nodded. He said, “Good morning. We start classes today in the morning with shipboard training after noon. Hit the Mess Hall to break your fast and then follow the others to the classrooms. I’ll catch up with you at luncheon.”

He gave each of them a parchment with their class schedules, they all saluted, and he quit the room.

Flynn scanned his schedule, his black eyes

soaking up the meaning written thereon. “Well, this won’t work.”

Pitt raised an eyebrow.

“This schedule will only get in my way. I need another way to pick up all the book learning without actually sitting through the classes.”

Pitt’s glance was indecipherable, and Flynn laughed despite himself. He was still chuckling when he saw Pitt looking at his parchment with a resigned expression. “What’s wrong?”

Pitt looked pained. “I don’t read well.”

Flynn frowned. “I don’t follow you. You’re an intelligent fellow.”

Pitt was visibly uncomfortable. He said, “I have a hard time processing words on a page. I don’t think that way.”

“How do you think, then? How do you learn?”

“I think in pictures. I’m good with arithmetic; I just have trouble concentrating on words—they elude me on the page.”

Pitt looked down and spoke so low and so soft that Flynn could barely hear him. “Friends read to me.”

Flynn slapped his leg, and hooted, the sharp sound startling Pitt—a fearsome sight in itself. “By Cyl, that’s it. Pitt, you’re a genius!”

Before he could say anything, Flynn said, “Don’t worry about this—leave this to me. Go to your classes and bring back any books the teachers hand out.”

“Where...?”

“I’m going to be running some errands today. We’ll carve out time tonight to take care of the education side of things.”

“What...?”

Flynn grinned. “I have a full day in front of me. I need to find the chain today. Therefore, I’m not going to the classes on this schedule. However, I have an idea this experience will still prove educational.”

Pitt didn't push it any farther; however, his expression was dubious.

They went to the Mess Hall where Flynn was as bright and outgoing as usual. He even managed to engage Deena Prentiss in conversation for a short while. Pitt didn't get a word in edgewise, but he didn't mind. His quiet manner masked his almost giddy excitement at simply being in her presence. She did look over and make eye contact once in the course of the conversation, and Pitt gave her the barest nod in return. He couldn't be sure if the corner of her mouth lifted a trifle, but replaying that gesture in his mind would give him plenty to consider in retrospect for the remainder of the day.

After eating, they walked over to the maze of study rooms with their myriad corridors and simple wooden stools. They found their room easily enough. Pitt no sooner sat down than Flynn rose and went to speak to the instructor.

"Because my roommate is in this room already, I've been told to switch over and attend classes from the other instructor."

"Lieutenant Dorn?"

Flynn nodded. The instructor's face took on a sly smile. "They're splitting you two up already? Impressive. The troublemakers usually wait until they get their sea legs before they misbehave. What's your name?"

"Cooper Flynn."

"I'll remember your name, Mister Flynn."

Flynn half-bowed. "I wouldn't have it any other way." The instructor dashed off a parchment and handed it to Flynn. "Off you go, then. I'm sure I'll see you again."

Flynn smiled enigmatically and slid out of the room, found the other room, and promptly walked right in. "Are you Lieutenant Dorn?"

A bespectacled instructor who looked more like an accountant than a seaman looked up from his podium. "I am."

Flynn stepped in the door and saluted. "I'm

here to tell you why I won't be attending your class."

Lt. Dorn put a finger in his book and closed it. "Go ahead. This should be good."

Flynn sketched a quick bow. "I am a late arrival to the academy and was to be a late addition to your class. Here's the parchment." He stuck out the pass he'd just been given. "But then they rescheduled me to be in the same classes as my new room-mate, a Reacher easily twice the man of any of us." Flynn extended the original class schedule Crawse had given him earlier.

The lieutenant nodded slowly. "I've seen him around the campus. He's quite a specimen. Yes, I would be careful to keep a man of that size happy."

"The thing is, Ven, I need a pass to make sure I don't run afoul of regulations on my way over to the other classroom. I nearly earned a week of demerits as it was on the way here just now."

Dorn nodded once, signed his name, and scribbled Flynn's name on it. He made to write more but Flynn intervened. "May I?" He took the parchment. "Will this pass keep me from running afoul of the those walking around in the corridors? I met a petty officer my first day here who would like nothing better than to make an example of me."

Dorn chuckled for the first time. "Baskins. He's a legendary hard case. Yes, even Petty Officer Baskins will steer clear if you show him that pass."

Flynn fairly beamed and tucked the parchment carefully away. "Ah, the security found in the signature of the right man of power," he said. "I shall go straight to class but this will reassure me of arriving with both my confidence and my wits intact! Thank you very much, Lieutenant!"

And with that, Flynn blew back out of the classroom, harboring what was essentially a blank check for unfettered access. He immediately put that simple but effective power to good

use, navigating the corridors until he came to the small side office of the curriculum administrator. A little chitchat and Flynn's formidable charm, and five minutes later, he had obtained the schedule for Walenda Darden.

He found her classroom and set up watch outside. He discreetly followed her the rest of the morning, broke away for lunch with Pitt, and then walked together over to the port. They spent the afternoon being introduced to the various ships of the line, and were told that they would learn every nook and cranny of every one of them in hands-on practice every afternoon thereafter. The training was entirely redundant for Flynn, but it gave him time to think, time he put to good use.

Flynn and Pitt ate dinner in the Mess Hall. As the meal ended, they watched as their peers split off and wandered around the campus or sat in the canteen spending their credits, their best pickup lines, and their best intentions.

Flynn looked at Pitt. "It's time. You have your books?" Pitt nodded. "Let's go."

They returned to their room and Flynn took Pitt's assignment sheet for the day and opened the first book. "Ah, maritime lore—a great way to start. Have a seat."

Pitt sat down stiffly on his pallet as Flynn got comfortable in his hammock and started to read out loud.

#

Three hours later, Flynn was back at the gate from the night before. He saw Benet come around a corner pushing his loaded laundry cart. Flynn stepped out of the shadows and greeted Benet warmly, clasping hands and passing over his last gold laurel.

"Mister Flynn, I see you are a man of your word. And now I will show that I am a man of my word as well." Benet dumped the laundry on the ground. "If you'll climb in, the wood plank down

there conceals a false bottom."

Flynn hopped in. "Brilliant, Benet. Now you shall have your own service and freedom from your mistress, and I shall find the right chain."

Benet shook his head. "I have no idea what that means, and I don't care. You're a good man, Flynn. After I take you through the gate, I'll turn a corner and let you out. Then you'll have two hours before I make my next trip through the gates. If you're there when I come by, I'll take you in. If not, you're on your own until the next trip."

"Cyl bless you, Mister Benet. I trust you'll enjoy your discussion with your former mistress when you break off on your own."

"Oh, yes, I've been planning this speech for years. I know it by heart; 'Mistress, I quit!'" He grinned broadly.

Flynn chuckled and disappeared from view.

They made it through the gate checkpoint without incident. Climbing out of the laundry cart, Flynn sketched a salute to Benet and headed out into the town. He had the chain to find.

#

He first stopped by his humble little rented room and retrieved his messages. He then visited a certain messenger bird service, where he picked up two additional messages and a draft note. Finally, he saw a moneychanger and turned the draft into two bags of coin, one which he put away in a pocket, and the other which he tied to his sash at his waist. He found a secluded corner to unwrap a tiny, tightly wrapped parchment fragment. He read it three times and burned the parchment in a nearby lamp. Finally ready, he sought out an obscure warehouse on the edge of town, at the edge of the water, asking for directions when he got lost.

It was twilight when he found the last warehouse on the pier by the edge of the jungle and the water. He rapped on a wooden door that was sturdy but otherwise unremarkable.

He waited for what seemed like an eternity but was probably only a couple of minutes before he heard a scuffling behind the door.

"Who is it?"

Flynn spoke in a low voice. "I bring greetings from one far away. I come seeking chain."

An uncomfortable silence ensued. Finally, a no-nonsense voice issued forth. "Go away."

Flynn said, "I have come a very long way to find the chain which I seek. I was told this is the place I must look."

"I have very sharp knives and a ferocious dog. Go. Away."

Flynn nodded to himself and produced the pouch of coins at his waist. He shook the pouch vigorously.

After a moment, the door opened a crack, and a hand reached out. Flynn dropped the bag into the outstretched hand, and the door closed again.

After a long moment, there were a series of sliding chains, and the door opened enough to pass one person. "You have five minutes."

Flynn stepped inside, and took in the tableau before him; the room was large and airy, and filled with worktables covered with bits and pieces of mechanisms, workings, and half-realized contraptions. He turned to speak with his host and found a scimitar under his chin.

"You have disturbed me in my work," he said, waving his hand at a handsomely handcrafted chair with cunningly articulated legs. "I sharpen my blade when I'm nervous or stymied," said the man. "Right now, I'm both, so make it quick, and then make tracks out of here."

Flynn looked at his host with interest. He'd half expected a wizened, hump-shouldered old inventor. What he saw was a vigorous young man in his prime. He was two or three inches taller than Flynn, with no mustache, a functional goatee, and small round glasses. Most people look either smart or physically imposing. This

young man looked equally comfortable around books or weapons, an observation reinforced by stacks of each strewn strategically around the shop.

Flynn smiled his most winning smile. "Then I trust you have been self-assured and productive."

His host held the sack in his hand with the tentative manner of one who hasn't decided if he's keeping it yet or not. His grip on the scimitar, however, was distressingly confident. Flynn realized he would have to keep his wits about him to keep his head, so to speak.

"I have been sent here by a good friend and mentor looking for the chain."

"What do you want with the chain?"

"I don't know," admitted Flynn. "If you will tell me where to find the chain I seek, I will see that you are well rewarded, and leave you in peace."

"Go away or I will remove your head, then your effects, and leave you in pieces."

Flynn persisted. "I do not know why a chain is so important, but if I do not find it soon, I will not be able to complete my mission, and people will come looking for me. I surmise that you do not wish the incursion of interlopers."

The young inventor's eyes narrowed and he wiggled the scimitar casually under Flynn's chin. Flynn swallowed hard and broke out in a cold sweat. "No big words, please," the inventor said softly. "I *just* cleaned my floor."

Flynn's eyes flared. "As much as I respect your blade, the Friar sent me, and I am loathe to report back to him without the chain he sent me to find."

The inventor stepped forward nose-to-nose with Flynn. "Who did you say?"

Flynn met his stare fiercely. "I work with The Friar of Briar Island, and I'm not leaving here without the chain."

"The Friar? Why didn't you say so?"

The inventor stepped back and laid the

scimitar down with a clatter on a nearby bench.

Flynn wiped his brow with his bloused sleeve. "You know the Friar?"

"Know him? He's the one who gave me my nickname. My parents named me before they died leaving me an orphan, but it was the Friar who gave me the name I use today. I was born Chance Wilke, but everybody just calls me Chain."

"You're Chain?" Flynn sat on the corner of a tool-laden bench. "Yes, that makes sense now that I think about it. The Friar did this to me on purpose. I will have to repay his jest the next time I return to the Dragon's Maw."

Chain just smiled. "The Friar took me in when the islanders would have killed me out of sheer superstition. I grew up on Briar Island with other orphans, and when I was of age, I came here and the Friar helped me set up this shop to conduct my research."

Flynn nodded. "The Friar said I should show you something, that you would be able to decipher a mystery for me."

Chain held out his hand and snapped his fingers. "Let's see it, then. I don't have all day."

Flynn hesitated and then thought better of it, chuckling. "Sorry, force of habit."

He untied the sash around his waist and produced the parchment from the hidden inner pouch. He carefully handed it to Chain, who took it over a lamp and started to look it over. He whistled a long, low tone and looked at Flynn over the lenses of his glasses.

"Where did you get this?"

"It is a family heirloom, all I have left from my father, a famous mariner."

Chain sat down roughly, preoccupied. "Is this possible?"

Flynn shrugged. "The Friar seems to think so. What does the formula tell you?"

Chain fixed Flynn with a long, searching look. "How good are you with that sword?"

Flynn's eyes shone in the flickering lamplight.

"After finishing my training, I've never been bested in single combat," he said, evenly.

"Good," said Chain. "You'll need all that and more." He carefully passed the parchment back to Flynn. "Keep that hidden away. Men would kill for that. Nations would go to war if they knew of it. It could engulf the entire planet in an arms race unlike any in history."

"What is it?"

"That is alchemy. If it works, it will open up the skies to a whole new kind of technology. You must guard that parchment with your life."

He walked to a small keg and dunked a wood mug into the top. He drank down half a mug of water and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, his right hand shaking just a little. He turned to Flynn and pointed to the door.

"Forget you ever met me. You must take that and leave my shop and never return." Chain retrieved the scimitar and drove it point-first into the wood bench-top. "Now."

Flynn nodded thoughtfully. He reached into his breeches pocket and produced a messenger bird parchment and carefully laid it on the bench in front of Chain. He stepped back and watched his reaction.

Chain looked at the message like it was a serpent. He looked up at Flynn, licked his lip, and reached to take the message. He broke the seal and read the message.

He looked up, unseeing, and the parchment fragment fell from numbed fingers to the floor like a dying dream.

Chain grasped the scimitar's hilt and plucked it out of the tabletop. He turned his back to Flynn and started pacing around the shop, spinning the scimitar. He mumbled softly to himself, and then the dialogue escalated. He wandered over to the far side of the warehouse and snips of the internal conversation returned to Flynn. "If you think I'm just going to roll over... You said you'd never... How can I..."

Eventually, words left Chain entirely, starting with a soft moan and increasing force and tone until he reached a full-throated paroxysm of rage. Roaring his defiance, he raised the scimitar high over his head, and with a mighty bellow, smote a chair with a mighty two-handed blow, funneling all his frustration into that final strike.

The new chair split neatly in half with a sharp crack, the pieces falling away to the left and the right like his life's dreams and plans rent asunder by forces beyond his control.

Chain stood there for a long moment, head down. Finally, he turned, and laid the scimitar lightly on a bench.

"Very well," he said, his voice even and controlled. "Tell The Friar I'll do it. Send the word to forward payment, materials, and manpower. I'll also need a messenger bird to communicate with him directly."

Flynn grinned and pulled forth the final message.

Chain's expression was priceless. He took the message and cracked the seal without taking his eyes off Flynn. Then, he unrolled the tiny parchment and read the message, shaking his head as he finished it.

"Well, that's it, then. You're going to have to run interference. If anything goes wrong, you're going to have to be the point man—I'm just the inventor."

Flynn said, "I have that covered, too," and turned the parchment over, showing Chain the Queen's Writ on the opposite side. Chain whistled a low appreciative whistle. "Yeah, I don't want to be anywhere *near* this. I only hope events conspire to somehow let me make good on that scimitar threat earlier."

Flynn's eyes flared in the lamplight. "Who knows which way the vagaries of fate will take us?"

"Just remember," said Chain. "No big words."

He sighed. "Very well. We have a prototype to build. Let's make history" Noting Flynn's wolfish smile, Chain said, "What?"

"This has been an educational day after all," Flynn said, smiling, and they clasped hands to seal the partnership.



Look forward to Chapter 10 of *The Adventures of the Sky Pirate* coming up in Issue 20, April 15, 2007

This chapter is dedicated to my long-time friend, Jeremie Koepke, the real Chain. He does, in fact, own sharp weapons and a ferocious guard dog.

All errors are my own.

JOHNE COOK

Johne Cook is a Technical Writer and a long-time space opera fan.

*Johne is an Overlord (Co-founder and Editor) of **Ray Gun Revival** magazine.*