

The Adventures of the Sky Pirate

Chapter 10, Cliffhanger

by Johne Cook

Day One

"I've been looking forward to this year ever since I discovered that meddling Cooper Flynn was spying on me last year," said Walenda Darden, looking out over the craggy cliff facing east. The late afternoon shadows left enough light to see the trail but obscured their faces from casual discovery.

"Cooper Flynn? He's such an engaging fellow," said Darden's friend.

"Hm? Oh, yes, he is that, but it's a front. He's a snake and he's up to something. I just don't know what."

"It sounds like you really hate him."

Darden picked a stone and threw it out and watched it disappear into the shadow cast by the cliff, hearing rather than seeing the end of the long fall down to the surf far below. "Hate? No, I don't hate him. I just don't like him nosing around all the time. I have no idea how he does it. He has marks that are as high as anybody here, and yet I have this sense he's always around no matter where I turn or what I do. I feel like I'm always watched, and yet I can never quite put my finger on where or how." She plopped down on a large rock and hugged her knees to her chest, the sort of thing a much younger girl might do. "For all I know, he could be listening to this conversation right now."

Her friend laughed. "Your imagination is getting the better of you." She sat next to Darden, their shoulders touching. "Besides," she said, "if I thought he was a genuine threat, I'd make sure something unpleasant happened to him." She

drew a knife from a sheath, the blade making a swoosh as it exited the leather, and she buried the point into the base of a tree with a solid *thunk*. "That'd be a pity," she said, "because he really is easy to look at."

"Don't be silly," said Darden. "The redhead wants him for herself."

"MkDougal? I was talking to her at the gate and she didn't mention anything about a beau."

Darden snorted. "I didn't say she knew about it yet."

They shared a good laugh about that as they wandered off down toward the Academy into the gathering twilight.

Five minutes later, a hand groped up over the edge of the cliff, caught the root of a tree, and a shadowed figure rolled nimbly over. He carefully stood and beat his clothes to knock off the dust.

"Interesting," he said, his twinkling eyes darker than the deepening twilight. He carefully followed them down toward the Academy.

Five minutes later, a shadow detached itself from the tree used as target practice and silently followed them all into the darkness.

Day Two

The following morning, Chain unlocked the hidden rear door of the warehouse, stepped inside, relocked it, and pushed some empty crates in front of the opening.

He walked to the workbench running along the north wall, cleared a large area, and set his pack down, the sunlight streaming in from the

east windows lighting up the work area like a localized Jacob's Ladder.

He took off his right shoe, withdrew a scrap of parchment, and smoothed it out. His guard dog padded over. Chain looked at her and rubbed idly under her muzzle. Her tail wagged lazily. "Ready to make history?" She stretched her front legs with a bored doggy groan and padded off again. Chain grinned softly. "Yes," he agreed. "One way or the other."

He opened up the pack and started to lay out various rocks and minerals. He adjusted his small, round spectacles, compared notes with the parchment, and got to work.

#

Flynn leaned back against the gently curving corridor wall, legs spread out for support and arms crossed in front of him, idly watching a classroom door to his right. His lazy gaze flitted briefly back toward the chattering of feminine voices coming down the curving hallway from his left before returning to the classroom door to his right.

The approaching chattering became recognizable as conversation. "And then she rescinded *my* grade and made me re-do the assignment! I didn't cheat from *him—he* cheated from *me*. I ended up doing the same work twice! If anybody needed to do the work twice, it should be *him...*"

The speaker tripped over Flynn's foot, squeaked prettily, and stumbled right in front of him. Flynn experienced the sudden impact more as an assault of sweet female scents than an actual physical collision. He quickly reached out and caught a vivacious redhead with his right arm, keeping her from falling forward on her face. Her momentum pressed her breasts briefly but firmly against his outstretched arm. He quickly stepped forward and put his left hand on her hip. She twisted as she fell with the movement

so she ended up swept off her feet facing him, completely held from falling in Flynn's arms.

She looked up at his face, a mere six inches between them.

"Oh, my!" she breathed, and her voice was instant music to his ears.

"I've got you," he said softly, his black eyes sparkling with humor and an unspoken shared secret. He held the pose for the barest moment, drinking in the wonder of her green eyes, her brilliant copper hair, her flushed cheeks. He regained control of his senses and stepped back, pulling her gently to her feet.

He disentangled his arms and stepped firmly back, bumping into the redhead's friend and tripping himself just a little. He grabbed her right arm briefly for balance and regained his stance and his self-control. He stepped back and bowed deeply to them both.

Flynn grinned. "It is my very great honor to meet you. I'm Cooper Flynn."

Her friend was speechless, but the redhead stomped her foot. "I know who you are!" she snapped, a trifle breathlessly. She blew a wayward strand of copper hair out of her face in frustration.

Flynn said, "May I at least have the honor of your name?"

"I shall give you my name, but that is *all* you shall have from *me!*"

This pronouncement bounced off Flynn's force of personality and fell weakly to the floor. Still grinning, he cocked his head and raised his stunning black eyebrows; his shining black eyes radiated equal parts edgy humor, roguish confidence, and a warmly bawdy sexuality.

Smiling broadly at Flynn, her friend surreptitiously elbowed the redhead and cleared her throat.

The redhead blinked and came to her senses, recognizing the play was hers. "Hm? Oh. Yes. My

name. Clarissa Mkdougal. I am Clarissa Mkdougal.” She winced at the repetition and charged onward. “And this is Selti Dormand.”

Selti curtsied slightly, winning an exaggerated gallant bow from Flynn.

Clarissa stomped her foot. “Our transaction here is complete! Good *day*, Ven!” She whirled, grabbed her friend by the wrist, and stormed off down the corridor, pulling a hesitant Selti along behind her.

Flynn leaned back against the wall, smiling widely, cupping his hands in front of him with apparent delight. “You can say that again,” he said to himself. He opened his hands and revealed a simple gold chain bracelet. He turned it inside out and tsked. “If only that were true.”

Suddenly thoughtful, he pocketed the chain, abandoned his stakeout, and strode steadily back up the curving hall in the direction whence they had come.

#

Pitt was in their tiny room when Flynn returned. Their second year at the Academy was progressing normally, if by ‘normal’ one meant that Pitt attended morning classes that Flynn expertly ditched, they both attended hands-on sailing exercises after lunch, and Flynn read Pitt’s texts out loud to the two of them immediately after dinner. Following that, it was Flynn’s practice to steal out into the night for points unknown. Pitt never asked what he did, and Flynn never volunteered.

On this particular morning, Flynn bobbed his head out toward the hallway. “Are you up for lunch before we go out on the water this afternoon?”

Pitt nodded and rose from his pallet, squeezing through the narrow arched doorway to the hallway. They walked together down the corridor where workmen were running bare copper wire and installing glass globes.

Flynn said, “I suppose a guy as big as you couldn’t be separated from his lunch by a pack of wild dogs!”

Pitt thought about it, and nodded once with what might have been the fleeting ghost of a smile. Then Pitt actually spoke. “I heard a rumor.”

Flynn grew serious. “What did you hear?”

“A Sylvan spy may be on the campus.”

Flynn relaxed. “Interesting. We know how hard it is to get into this place.” Pitt shook his head slightly as if to say, “That’s not it.” Flynn thought and snapped his fingers as the answer came to him. “Of course! This rumor will result in tightened patrols even if they only *suspect* a Sylvan spy of being in the academy. That’s good to keep in mind.”

Pitt had a ghost of smile again. Flynn said, “Look, there’s Deena!” and trotted off, and Pitt’s faint smile was instantly replaced by fleeting longing before he regained control of his expression. That notwithstanding, he strode along behind Flynn looking for all the world like a man who *wanted* to run, but wouldn’t stoop to that kind of extravagant display.

#

Night slipped in like a thief and Chain was just getting into a good channel—insights were coming fast.

He rose, stretched, and crossed to a heavy wood post upon which an enamel cylinder with a wood knob on top was mounted to the side. He twisted the knob and a cheerful orange light briefly filled the room. However, two hollow pops sounded almost immediately.

Chain snorted, turned the knob back off, lit a punk stick from a coal brazier he kept for just that purpose, and retrieved new glass globes from a large straw-filled crate stashed in a corner. He replaced the globes and turned the knob again, a tad gingerly this time, and the globes clawed back

to life. They waned and brightened ever so slightly in a pleasing random pattern, but otherwise lit his shop enough to work. He cleaned the glass shards from the floor and went back to work, whistling a tuneless ditty.

Hours passed. The formula seemed straightforward enough, but every time Chain ground the minerals, created the liquid solution, and applied it to his test stick, the wood kept falling to the floor, decidedly not displaying any sort of special properties other than arousing the attention of his drowsing guard dog.

Chain kept at it, trying different methods, permutations, ratios. The relentless determination that kept him as a relative loner was, in this case, his greatest strength, and he put it to good use.

Night passed without a breakthrough, the stick falling to the floor time after time until even his trusty canine companion stopped looking up.

Day Three

Flynn and Pitt sat at breakfast sharing their customary silence. It was not unusual for Flynn to point out something or other, but he held his own counsel on this particular morning.

Pitt looked up and gestured across the room with a piece of bacon. "Somebody's got eyes for you."

Flynn followed his gesture and dropped his gaze back to his plate, smiling under his breath. "Ha. That's Clarissa McKDougal. We ran into each other yesterday in the curved hall by the classrooms."

"You've had your eye on that one?"

Flynn shrugged. "She's a looker, that's for sure. I was sure she didn't know who I was. I was wrong. Turns out, it wasn't that she didn't know me, it was that she didn't like me."

Pitt grunted. "Did you fluster her?"

"Oh, yes. She fell for me, of course—she just doesn't know it yet."

A large shadow fell over their table and the normal background chatter died like the calm before a storm. Sergeant Crawse stood and barked, "Cadets, *brace!*"

Flynn and Pitt sprang to attention, their wood bench sliding out behind them in their vigor.

An imposing figure strode in front of them wearing the unmistakable uniform of the Academy commodore, sixty-four bits of ribbon and medal affixed to his coat. "Cadets, at ease," he said in his deep, gravelly voice. They came out of their brace and he gestured toward the table. "Please, resume your meal."

They retrieved their bench and sat down. The commodore sported a thick beard streaked through with grey and white, matched by trimmed, greying hair which set off piercing, brilliant blue eyes.

Sergeant Crawse spoke from the commodore's elbow. "Commodore Dondely, these are cadets Flynn and Pitt, respectively."

The commodore sized them up with an eye that had much experience at sizing up horseflesh. "Pitt? From the Reach?"

Pitt nodded his head once, impassive but privately impressed.

"And Cadet Flynn. You are an interesting fellow. I understand you have acquired a copy of the Jodkins!"

Flynn was astonished. He stammered, "Why, yes, Commodore. I have in my possession his unabridged *Treatise on the Ethereal Reality* written in his own hand."

The commodore nodded once, his eyes sparkling, his bobbing beard at once fearsome and comical. "We must compare notes on his theology sometime, the sooner the better. Come around my office later and we'll compare notes, what say?"

Flynn nodded quickly, adroitly, too clever to allow his suddenly raging suspicion to reach his

eyes. The great man rapped the table with implacable knuckles, winked, and left the Mess Hall. Crawse turned to hide his amusement, and Flynn and Pitt's eyes met, Pitt's oddly reappraising, Flynn's utterly baffled.

"Jodkins?" muttered Pitt.

"You don't know who that is, nor that I possess what is a one-of-a-kind volume," stated Flynn, dully.

Pitt nodded.

"There's a very good reason for that—*nobody* knows I have that work, except..." The sun dawned in Flynn's eyes in that moment. He stood bolt upright, clapped Pitt hard on the shoulder, winced, and nearly ran off. "I must go," he breathed, his expression changing from confusion to full alarm. Flynn fled the mess hall, his legendary composure in tatters.

Pitt sat surveying the ruins of their meal. A private smile flickered out over his face. He pulled Flynn's plate over. "Well, now," he said to himself, and he ate Flynn's bacon.

#

The shadow stepped into the light and was seen as a custodian. Sometimes, the best way to hide is in plain sight, and nobody notices service folk, or at least Walenda Darden didn't as she strode past thinking her labyrinthine thoughts. The watcher emptied his dustpan, put the broom back in the closet, and followed at a distance, now wearing the garb of a courier.

He never once blinked.

#

Chain sprawled forward in his chair with the side of his face on the workbench, snoring softly, drooling slightly. Rocksie slowly made a circuit around the inside of the warehouse and finally curled up into a ball in a patch of sunlight.

#

Flynn stood outside the commodore's office, squared his shoulders, and knocked twice on the doorjamb. The gravelly bass rumbled out of the office: "Come!"

Flynn entered and carefully closed the door behind him. The commodore didn't just sit at a desk; he filled the office with his larger-than-life reputation and his gruff charisma. Flynn noticed things as his eyes made their first casual sweep of the room: he had windows everywhere extending ceiling to floor, an expensive effect that let in a great deal of light, but which also gave him a view of the entire Commons area, and, indeed, the entire main grounds of the Academy, his office perched, as it was, at the top front of the office complex overlooking the grounds. The commodore's chair had a cunning metal swivel that allowed him to turn around and take in the matchless view.

Now, however, the commodore's famous blue eyes were focused entirely on Flynn.

The commodore rose, clapped Flynn on the shoulder from across the desk, and gestured toward a chair. "Please, sit. Welcome to the top of the world. One can see nearly everything from here."

Flynn's black eyes were clear but guarded. He presented a picture of a bright young man not used to being on the defensive. He leaned forward restlessly in his chair. "It would seem one can see all the way to Patience Bay, Commodore."

Commodore Dondely chuckled. "I thought that might get your attention. Our mutual friend sends his greetings."

Flynn was, uncharacteristically, speechless.

"I suppose you have questions."

"Yes, Ven, many."

"For instance, how do I know the Abbot, how does the Abbot know of your presence here, and

are you currently in trouble?”

Flynn winced and squirmed lithely in his chair. “The view from here is truly as expansive as you claim,” he observed ruefully.

The commodore lifted a gentle hand and pushed slightly in Flynn’s direction. “Quiet your fears. You’re not in trouble with me. Yet.”

Flynn’s expression did not ease noticeably.

“In all truth, I owe you an apology and an explanation. I received, last year, an appeal for commission of a certain ‘Ploy, but was not able to match up the commission request with an application, and I thought nothing more of it. Such things happen often enough. But your name came before me again recently from an, ah, unusual source, and it rang a gong. It took some digging, but I believe I have solved at least one minor mystery. However, it has opened up a far greater one.”

Flynn was too afraid to even sweat. “Oh?” he said, his voice trembling on the verge of cracking, his mouth dry.

“Yes. As you were not afforded a commission, I’m curious how you managed to secure a position here at our venerable academy.”

Flynn clasped his hands and unconsciously started compressing them together, an unconscious nervous habit. “Well, Ven... That is...”

The commodore’s voice became very quiet, almost personal. “You can tell me, Son. It was Baskins’ racism, wasn’t it?”

Flynn cleared his throat, or tried to. “Ah, well, that was the opening...that is, yes, Ven...”

Dondely smote the desk and Flynn jumped in his seat, his hands flying to grasp the arm rails.

“I knew it!” boomed the commodore, and he laughed long and hard. “You are a clever one, aren’t you, Mister Flynn?”

Flynn leaned back in his chair. “Not clever enough, Commodore,” he said wryly. “Apparently.”

“Others have tried—and failed—to break out of the Academy, but you are the first to break *in*, and it wasn’t even necessary due to an Administrative error, by which I mean I dropped the sail. That notwithstanding, you gained apparently tacitly legitimate entry anyway.” Dondely leaned forward, his beard tickling his desk. “How did you do it?”

“I saw my opening with my Reacher friend, Mr. Pitt. I sold my boat, an ornate and lively craft, and invested the money in gaining entry. Baskins’ hatred for men from the Reach worked to my favor.” He told the entire story with flair and candor, the commodore asking pointed questions to fill the gaps.

“So I know the ‘how,’ now, but not the ‘why.’”

Flynn fixed the commodore with a searching look. “Commodore, I was sent as an emissary from a Crown-approved third party to keep tabs on a suspected spy to ensure the continued anonymity of a critical operation.”

The commodore sat back in his chair and stroked his beard. “And have you been successful thus far in your watch?”

Flynn nodded gravely. “I have been able to monitor the situation without compromising my role here.”

“I see. As you are keeping your ear to the ground, are you willing to keep your ear open for any threat to the Academy as well as your, uh, third party?”

“Yes, Commodore. I examine all information that comes to me, even if it doesn’t directly affect my own watch.”

The commodore nodded. “Very well,” he

said. "Carry on." He rose and Flynn followed suit. "Perhaps we can meet again to actually discuss the Jodkins, eh?"

Flynn smiled, nodded, braced, spun, and left. His legs carried him a safe distance away outside before he tossed his breakfast.

#

Later that afternoon, Deena Prentiss approached Pitt and laid her delicate hand on his forearm. "Hello Pitt. Have you seen Flynn?"

Pitt swallowed and nodded toward the Commons, his eyes gleaming.

She turned away, had a thought, and turned back to him again. "Do you even have a first name?" She laughed at her own joke, patted his arm genially, raised her eyebrows in appreciation, and walked on, unaware of what her gait did to him.

"Yes," he managed, but she was long gone, making a spear-line straight for Cooper Flynn. He watched her all the way over to his roommate before averting his eyes, his jaw pulsing as he unconsciously gritted his teeth. Walking past a spade, he grabbed the wood handle with both hands at both ends and bent the wood. His gigantic muscles bulged, and he snapped the handle like a toothpick. He came to himself with one half of the handle in each of his hands.

Flushing suddenly, he gathered the two halves into one hand and laid them conscientiously together on the ground. He rose, dusted his hands, and strode off.

Minutes later, a shadow fell over the shattered tool. Walenda Darden nudged the broken implement with her toe and smiled to herself, her thoughts as shaded as the splintered remains of the spade.

#

Dinner that night was a strained affair. Flynn

and Pitt didn't always engage in much small talk anyway, but the silence took on a different dimension, both hiding things, neither owning up to feeling the barrier suddenly there for the first time.

After the meal, they adjourned to their room, where Flynn read the day's pages aloud from Pitt's textbooks. His normal reading voice was engaging but his tone this night was deadpan and listless, his attention clearly elsewhere. After an hour, Flynn begged off and left the room, and Pitt went out to walk around inside the grounds wall.

Pitt felt better, physically, after his walk, but had come to no helpful new conclusions.

But Pitt's fortunes changed radically for the better when he lay down on his pallet and put his hand under his pillow. He felt something and smelled something different. Hidden under his pillow was a folded scented parchment. He withdrew it and opened it with fumbling fingers to read a single cursive message written in a feminine hand: *Wait for me in the bushes by the lovers' alcove – midnight – DP.*

Pitt slapped his leg with the note in celebration, and sat on his pallet, carefully smoothing the it. He read and re-read it until thirty minutes before the meeting. He went down to the communal baths and washed up, changed into his best shirt, and polished his boots as well he could. He slicked back his hair, plucked a flower from the garden, and walked over to the lovers' alcove.

Flynn may have commanded the attention of any woman on campus, but Deena—she belonged to him. Pitt arrived early and hid back in a shadowed corner behind a boulder where lovers sometimes sat to gaze into each other's eyes and so forth.

Pitt's eagerness was enhanced as he saw Deena Prentiss arrive and look about her in expectation.

He savored the moment, not quite believing

his sudden change of fortune. He started to rise to go to her from his hidden location when Flynn, of all people, rushed into the alcove.

Pitt's face fell in abject disbelief, not believing what he was seeing.

Deena rushed to Flynn and they spoke in hushed tones. Pitt couldn't quite make out what they were saying. Deena gestured and flailed her hands prettily, in obvious high emotion, but Flynn remained impassive.

And then he produced the jewelry.

Flynn reached into his sash at his waist and pulled out a gold chain.

Pitt braced himself with one hand on the back of the boulder, mouthing 'No! No!'

Flynn presented the bracelet to Deena. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she slowly reached for it as one might a treasure, hesitant, unsure it was real.

Stricken by the tableau, Pitt unwittingly crushed the flower in his great right hand.

Pitt came from a fishing family, and from his vantage, Flynn played her like a fish, waiting for Deena to come close and drawing the bracelet back, speaking to her the entire time. She placed her hand on his arm, replying. Then Deena extended her arm and he placed the chain around her wrist.

Snaring her for himself, or so it appeared.

Pitt watched helplessly from the shadows as they concluded their conversation. Then, inexplicably, they parted, still furtive, fooling everyone, or so they thought.

#

But they fooled no one, least of all those assembled. Walenda Darden watched from her elevated hidden vantage, taking in the entire scene with glittering eyes. She wasn't sure who was more distressed by the unfolding events, the gallantly distressed Pitt to her left, or the strangely

stricken Clarissa McKDougal to her right.

Darden watched the various parties furtively quit the alcove, each unseen by the other. She sat back, put her scented parchment away in its oilskin pouch, and smiled the feral smile of a wolf.

"This fall to me, Cooper Flynn, you viper," she whispered. "This fall to me!"

#

Day Four

Sergeant Crawse turned the light globes on the corridor and banged a tin cup against the wall to rouse Flynn and Pitt. The light of dawn was just beginning to push back the night.

Something was amiss.

"What is it," Flynn growled, his voice rough and uncultured from too little sleep.

"The commodore has called an emergency assembly. Rouse yourselves and assemble on the Commons immediately."

Flynn and Pitt shot each other a dread look, tucking their shirts in as they followed the sergeant.

The commodore and his guard were on the west side of the Commons facing east. The cadets streamed in and started forming up to listen to the announcement.

The great old man of the Academy looked as if he hadn't slept at all, and his mood was grim. Dondely stood with his hands behind him, the meager sunlight reflecting off the medals on his chest. A bagpipe played a mournful dirge as the cadets filed in and lined up.

The commodore nodded once and the pipes ceased. Snare drums on both sides of the impromptu stage rang out four sharp strokes in rapid order—*rat-tat-tat-tat*, the sound echoing off the buildings surrounding the Commons like gunshot reports.

It was the first time the entire Academy had

been together in Flynn's tenure there. It was a small but impressive sight, four hundred of the best and brightest on the field, the staff on one side, the local garrison arrayed on the other.

The commodore had a voice that could be powerfully intimate in the confines of an office, or clearly heard across a battlefield at full volume. He used it to great effect now. He spoke without preamble. "There is a traitor among our midst, a Sylvan spy." A mood rippled throughout the audience, although nobody spoke or moved. The shared revelation was all the more impressive for its collective lack of disciplined response from those assembled.

Dondely nodded to the scroll bearer. "Read the names," he commanded.

An earnest young man stepped forward. He read the names in a clear, albeit nervous, voice. "Cadets Flynn, Mkdougal, and Dormand: come hereto forth and be measured!"

Flynn and Pitt looked at each other, both grim. Flynn stepped out of formation and marched crisply to the front. Clarissa Mkdougal caught Flynn's eye as he passed in front of her. She could have burned holes in his back with her furious gaze as he turned to climb the steps. Clarissa and Selti fell in and followed after Flynn. The three of them formed up, braced, and stood at attention in front of the entire Academy.

With a start, Pitt noticed Deena Prentiss break formation and mount the stage, standing by at the commodore's right hand, her demeanor calm and businesslike.

Commodore Dondely spoke to those assembled. "I shall now expose the traitor. Deena Prentiss, step forth!"

She stepped forward one pace.

"Show me what you showed me in earlier this night."

She raised her hand and displayed the golden chain to those assembled. Flynn was expression-

less. Pitt resisted the urge to grind his teeth.

Beside them, Selti Dormand blanched, but it was Clarissa Mkdougal who gasped.

"How did you come by the chain?"

Deena Prentiss spoke out in a clear voice. "It was given to me last night by Cadet Cooper Flynn." She turned and handed it to the commodore, and resumed her place at his right hand.

"Cadet Flynn, step forth!"

Flynn broke rank and stepped forward one pace. He saluted and stood at attention.

"Cadet Flynn, is that your chain?"

"No, Commodore."

"Where did you acquire it?"

Clarissa made to speak, but Selti surreptitiously cleared her throat. Clarissa spoke up anyway.

"Commodore! That man is a thief! I was there."

Commodore Dondely turned and addressed her. "Cadet Mkdougal. Does the chain belong to you?"

"No, Commodore. It belongs to my friend, Selti."

Selti had a hollow look in her eyes.

"Cadet Dormand is that true?"

Selti remained at attention. She said nothing.

Commodore Dondely said "Sergeant Crawse. Expose her wrist."

He stepped forward and approached her. "Extend your left wrist." Slowly, she extended her left wrist. It was unadorned.

"Extend your right wrist."

She extended her right wrist. It displayed a line of white, untanned skin where a bracelet had rested until recently.

The commodore said, "Place the bracelet on her wrist." He handed the bracelet to Sergeant Crawse, who placed the bracelet on Selti's exposed right wrist.

It was a perfect match.

“See?!” exulted Clarissa. “Flynn stole the bracelet from Selti.” She shot him a glare. “And that’s not all he stole,” she said through gritted teeth.

Pitt, standing at attention, was thinking the same thing for a different reason.

The commodore spoke, and his question echoed around the Commons. “Cadet Selti Dormand—is that your bracelet?”

She didn’t utter a word.

The commodore spoke again. “Cadet Selti Dormand—is that your bracelet?”

She remained mute, eyes-front, her eyes dead.

Commodore Dondely addressed the assembly, “This is the gold chain used as the unique identifier of the Sylvan spy network.” There was a collective gasp, despite military self-control. The commodore spoke above the ripple. “Selti Dormand, I take your silence as corroboration. Captain of the Guard, seize her!”

The Captain stepped forward, clapped her in irons, and led her away, still eyes-front.

The commodore looked weary, but finished his duty. “Assemble the gallows! Reconvene the assembly at four bells anti-meridian.”

Sergeant Crawse dismissed the assembly. Clarissa turned to Flynn, her red hair swinging around, her eyes burning. “How could you? She is my friend!” She slapped Flynn’s face twice in rapid succession, a forehand and a backhand.

Flynn met her raging eyes and said, softly, “She is a traitor.” He mock-bowed to her, an ironic gesture, and walked off the stage.

Pitt remained where he was, thinking.

In the milling crowd, Walenda Darden was not amused. Something was up. She had to do something quickly. She fought her way through the dispersing cadets, found Pitt, and touched his arm, stopping him in his tracks.

“You don’t know me,” she said, “but I know

you, and I know Cooper Flynn. He set up Selti Dormand for execution, and the next one he’ll set up to cover his traitor’s tracks is Deena Prentiss. She’s my sister, although Flynn will certainly deny that. I’m afraid for her. Somebody has to stop him, and I can’t do it alone. Will you help me?”

Pitt’s expression clouded over. “What is he hiding?”

“Has Flynn ever once told you where he came from before he came here? I wager he hasn’t. He can’t!”

“I don’t understand.”

“There is a Sylvan spy on the grounds, but it isn’t Selti.”

“But why would he set up Deena?”

Darden said, “I think he’s trying to get rid of the Sylvan chain and draw attention away from himself. I think he’s trying to use his charm to implicate another innocent and buy himself more time. But we won’t let that happen.” Darden pulled his face down and kissed Pitt on the cheek. “Will we?”

Pitt clenched his massive right hand into a fist. “Not while I’m still here.”

Darden flashed a convincingly grateful smile toward Pitt and melted away into the crowd.

Pitt stood there and glowered as the flow of cadets flowed around him, all sharp edges and mass, like an immovable rock shrugging off the incoming tide.

#

The day passed as an interminable eternity, and a somber mood gripped the cadets. Selti Dormand was a genial, well-liked young woman. The time came, and the cadets gathered back together. Selti’s wrists were tied behind her. The commodore asked if she had any final words.

Selti looked out over those assembled. Her gaze found Walenda Darden in the crowd. Darden shook her head almost imperceptibly. Selti looked

at the commodore. "There is nothing more I can say. Those assembled have already judged me in their hearts." She lifted her head. "Do what you will, and may Cyl have mercy on your souls."

The sergeant in charge of the gallows placed a black hood over her head and the noose over the hood. She was blessed by Cyl's chaplain cleric, and then the time came.

The commodore's voice rang out. "Selti Dormand. In light of ongoing hostilities between the nations of Haddirron and Sylva, I sentence you to death as a spy with designs of espionage against the Crown." He stepped back and nodded at the sergeant.

The sergeant's arm rose.

Selti started to weep. His arm drove downward. The floor fell away. Her cries were cut off in a high, feminine, gargling rasp.

Clarissa screamed and wept, falling to her knees as Selti Dormand's body swung on the rope, her heels shuddering.

Pitt's eyes welled up with tears of grief and determination.

Flynn stood still, eyes-front, his fathomless black eyes expressionless.

#

It was business as usual in Chain's workshop. After trying everything he could think of, he took a break down at the local pub, eating bread and meat he didn't taste, and washing it down with ale he didn't remember drinking. He then closed the door to the late afternoon heat and started back at the beginning.

As the shadows lengthened, Chain turned on the lights (because he could), and another globe popped.

Curiously, a sputtering filament continued to burn, its light garish in the converted warehouse-turned-workshop. On a whim, Chain took up his experimental stick and tapped the filament with

the end of the stick.

A flash sparked and the lights flashed as the filament flamed out.

Chain looked, puzzled, at the stick in his hand, still smoking from the display. He took a deep breath and steadied himself, held the stick out at arms' length, and opened his hand.

The stick fell to the floor again as it had hundreds of times already. Nothing.

Chain reared back his head and roared his frustration. Bending, he scooped up the stick, stalked to the door facing the bay, and furiously flung the stick out over the water, whip-whip-whip. He watched it go, and turned to re-enter the warehouse, still fuming.

Something occurred to him before he reached the open door.

There was no splash.

Comprehension dawned on his face and Chain whirled around, scarcely believing what his mind was already suggesting.

The stick floated six inches above the water, still turning lazily on its axis.

"Yes!" he bellowed, "yes!"

He snapped his finger, dashed to the door, and whistled. "C'mer, Rocksie. Come here, my good dog."

She rose from the floor and padded over, tail wagging slightly.

Chain loved her up good and turned and showed her the tiny harbor in front of them.

"Rocksie, you see that stick? Go get it, girl! Fetch that stick!" he said.

If ever a dog looked happy, it was that dog at that moment. Taking a running leap, Rocksie launched herself strongly out into the water while Chain stood there, hands on knees, still not believing his eyes.

#

Flynn was ushered into the commodore's

office. The commodore stood facing the Commons grounds, his arms clasped behind his back. "This is the first hanging at the Academy in a long time, the first time during my administration here. It is a difficult thing."

He turned and gestured for Flynn to take a seat. "But you did the right thing. I don't expect second year cadets to have the sort of information system you appear to have. You'll have to tell me how you accomplish that sometime."

Flynn sat back in the chair and asked, "How is Deena taking it?"

The commodore's eyes narrowed.

Flynn said, "When I stumbled on the Sylvan spy and wanted to send that information up the line without betraying myself, I received word through the grapevine that Deena Prentiss was the person to handle that. I wondered how a simple Physician Candidate could have such access to the very seat of power here, and then it all became clear while we were standing on the platform this morning."

The commodore's eyes glinted a steely grey. "Go on," he said.

"Deena Prentiss is your daughter, isn't she, Commodore Dondely?"

The commodore's expression went from flinty to amused despite himself. "How did you know?"

Flint tented his fingers. "It wasn't anything she said, or any sort of privilege. In fact, it was the opposite. However, as I introduced myself and started to reveal my interest in her as a conduit for passing along a very sensitive piece of information that could undo me and bring about a premature end to my time here, I encountered a resolute force of personality unlike any I had met to date. And then I had my audience with you, Ven, and something started to click in the back of my head. I didn't put it together until this morning, and then the realization hit me like a harpoon. After that, well, it was so obvious that

it's a wonder that nobody has put the relationship together sooner."

The commodore drummed his fingers on his desk. "Deena is my only child, and she does things her own way. She wanted to prevent any whisper of nepotism, and insisted on taking her mother's name when she applied. She has made her own way, and takes great pride in her accomplishments. I take great pride as well, but from a distance."

Flynn nodded in understanding. "Well, I have a friend who is interested in her if he could only get his bearings."

"Oh? Who?"

"Mr. Pitt, my roommate."

"Ah. Well, silent waters run deep. He might be the one man who could handle her."

Flynn smiled. "So with your permission, I'd like to resume my role as a 'second year cadet.' May I do that?"

The commodore waved his hand. "If you continue to keep the Academy's best interests at hand, you have, as you may have guessed, full sway from me. I won't get in your way. If you happen to discover anything further, my door is always open."

Flynn stood and saluted. "Thank you, Commodore." He turned to go.

"Cadet Flynn?"

"Ven?"

"Are you off to your quarters to get some well-deserved rest after all this?"

Flynn shook his head regretfully. "Unless I miss my guess, I will be spending the next couple of hours cliffside."

The commodore made to speak but thought better of it. "Keep a solid grip, son."

Flynn grinned, turned, and left.

#

Pitt returned to his rooms after the hanging.

He sat restlessly on the edge of his bed. His gaze strayed to Flynn's trunk. He rose, unlatched, and opened the lid. The parchment with the black blot was tacked inside the lid.

Pitt grunted, leaned forward, and tore the parchment free.

He squeezed through the doorway and stormed down the corridor.

#

It was twilight, and Walenda Darden was again at the cliffside with her compatriot.

"This has been a busy few days."

"But not unproductive. Despite some absolutely stunning turns of event, I succeeded in starting things in motion that will restore the balance of power here."

"Can you be no clearer?"

Darden shook her head. "I feel secure nowhere anymore, not even here. I fear I have wakened a sleeping giant, and I'm not precisely sure where that will lead, or who it will smite. But I have a good idea."

They both laughed and hugged before they split up and left.

A hand groped up over the edge of the cliff, feeling about for the root of the tree. A massive shadow fell over the hand and a beefy hand grasped the exposed wrist. Pitt stood and effortlessly pulled Flynn up and over the cliff, setting him lightly on his feet.

"Pitt! Thanks, my friend," Flynn said, dusting off his trousers. He stood up and smiled wearily. "I'll never get used to..."

Pitt leaned forward with both palms out and, with one convulsive motion, darted forward and pushed Flynn by his shoulders up and out over the cliff.

Flynn bounced out into the air as it fired from a canyon and fell, head over heels. His fall was arrested by Pitt, who, standing straight, held

Flynn at arm's length over the edge of the cliff by his right ankle.

"You have some explaining to do," rumbled Pitt softly, a strange catch in his throat. "I no longer know or trust you. You have already cost one good woman her life today, and you will not endanger another."

Flynn, breathless, yelled "What?!" He sounded strangled, struggling upside down as he was.

"I saw you give the bracelet to Deena Prentiss," said Pitt. "I don't know where you really got it, but I think you know more about this than you're telling. I'm going to ask you just once—what is Deena Prentiss to you?"

"What? Deena?"

"Yes, Deena Prentiss. What is she to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know what she means to her sister. She means the world. And she means the world to me!"

Flynn frowned, a comical sight upside down. "Sister? She has no sister!"

Pitt said, "She said you'd say that. What do you know about Deena?"

Flynn gritted his teeth. "I...can't tell you."

Pitt sighed regretfully. "Wrong answer." He loosened his grip and Flynn slipped enough to yelp.

"She's nothing to me," Flynn yelled, "but I can't reveal what our relationship is—I'm sorry, believe me. I promised."

"Like you promised Selti Dormand? You set Selti up, and I have reason to believe you'll set up Deena next."

"Pitt! I have no idea what you're talking about! Put me down!"

Pitt shook his great head sadly. "You have so many secrets, my 'friend.' You are so many different people that I don't know which one of you is genuine anymore."

"I will tell you anything I am able," said Flynn,

his voice sounding strange, the blood rushing to his head, "...but I must keep my secrets to myself. You'll understand in time! I promise! Now let me go, and I'll buy you an ale."

Pitt shook his head. "But I don't understand right now, and *now* is all the time you have." He shook Flynn by the ankle to amplify his point.

"But I'm your friend! Why are you doing this?"

"You *were* my friend. Now you're a murderer by proxy, you viper."

Flynn looked like he'd been struck. "Who have you been talking to?" he asked, swinging gently at the end of Pitt's outstretched right arm.

Pitt ignored the question. He pulled the parchment with the black blot from the folds of his shirt with his left hand and showed it to Flynn. "When you received this death threat, I thought you were the victim. Now, I wonder if somebody didn't know something we didn't know. The more I know of you, the less interested I am in your continued existence here. It's not safe for those I love."

"Love?!" Flynn started snickering. The more he thought about it, the more his amusement gained strength and volume until he was full-out roaring.

Pitt was unmoved except for a slight tremble in his right arm.

Flynn's laughter wore down. He wiped tears away. "I'm sorry," he said, still on the verge of cracking up again. "Pitt, I made that blot and staged it in the room myself."

Very quietly, Pitt said, "What?"

Flynn nodded. "That's why I made such a big deal about the size of the room the first time we went there together. I had to convince you that I'd never seen the room before, much less visited it before. I'm really dizzy. Will you let me go, please?"

Pitt repositioned his feet to give him a little better leverage for his awkward hold. "Why?"

Flynn sighed. "You know I'm not at the

Academy to learn—although I do that just by being here, by reading from your texts. What you don't know is that I'm at the Academy to keep tabs on a suspected spy, and to prevent that agent from betraying the secret existence of a place that means a great deal to me. I knew that I would I need the freedom to come and go at will. Planting the blot myself created immediate sympathy with the staff here for what would normally be interpreted as strange or eccentric behavior. Making myself a 'victim' of an open-ended death threat gave me a blank check among official public opinion, a form of Administrative favor that I have used to good effect to protect the Academy from a genuine traitor."

Pitt considered this with all due gravity, thinking about what Deena had done, what Darden had said. "I'm done with your lies," he said. "You have already engineered the public death of an innocent woman, and I am now convinced that Deena is next," he said. "What you did with the black blot is funny, but the joke is on you." Pitt crumpled the parchment and bounced it off Flynn's chest with his left hand.

"Somebody does want you dead after all. I just never imagined that person would be *me*." And then Pitt opened his steely right hand, and Flynn fell screaming into the darkness.



Look forward to Chapter 11 of
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