

The Adventures of the Sky Pirate

The Friar of Briar Island - Conclusion

by *Johne Cook*

The Story So Far:

Flynn arrived on Parrot Bay looking for some human interaction. He met the Friar, a man who befriended Flynn and then betrayed him.

Flynn left Parrot Bay looking for vengeance, but found one surprise after another on foreboding Briar Island, culminating with the announcement by the Friar at the Briar Throne.

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Cooper Flynn gaped at the sight of the Friar seated on the Briar Throne. “Ruler?”

“‘Founder’ is more exact,” said the Friar. “They mostly call me ‘Your Grace,’ which is, itself, a joke. I wouldn’t have stuck around but they’re all so earnest and sincere with their gratitude, and this location happens to be a perfect hidden base to conduct operations to disrupt Sylvan shipping lanes. Anyway.”

He sat up straight, and the likeable piratical goof was suddenly gone. The Friar transformed before Flynn’s eyes in that moment into somebody serious, competent, transparent, regal. “You have my full attention. I will answer anything you ask while I’m on this throne.”

The carefully rehearsed questions and accusations and suspicions fell away from Flynn. To buy time, he countered, “What about when you’re *not* on the throne?”

“Then all answers are automatically suspect.” The Friar winked.

Flynn snickered despite himself. He collected his thoughts, cocked his head, and asked the question foremost on his mind.

“Who *are* you, really?”

The Friar smiled and put his fingertips together as he pondered his answer. “There are a couple of different ways to approach that, but as I’m sitting here, I will be completely forthright—I am nobody.”

Flynn nodded to himself. It sounded like an honest reply. Each new revelation pushed Flynn further from his carefully nurtured hurt and anger. Flynn found himself getting caught up in the complexity of a man he thought he’d figured out, and the effect was hitting him in a strange way.

“I am a man of no account, a vagabond, a former citizen chased out of Haddiron more years ago than I can remember. I came to the islands here much like you, a young man looking for an unspecified something, and finding something else, a genuine life here among the islands, among the mountains, among the locals.”

“How did you find this place?”

The Friar smiled as he revisited the scene in his memory. “I found the Dragon’s Maw by accident, taking refuge there during a storm. I discovered a fissure in the rock and followed it here. I found an island rich with promise and resources, and utterly deserted except for herds of animals and one family of large black cats. I had killed a rabbit and had a haunch of meat roasting. I saw a shadow approach me from behind. I slowly turned around, and there she was. I could have run or fought, but I didn’t. Instead, I gave the matriarch the meat, and, wonder of wonders!, she accepted the offer, and she accepted me. Her cubs learned from her example.” The Friar looked positively smug. “And that’s how I came to have my own personal line of ‘monsters.’” He smiled as he relived the memory.

"Like you, I sailed to Parrot Bay looking for one thing and found something else. The natives gave me a friendly greeting but I discovered soon enough that they maintain an absolutely inflexible superstition. They believe that evil spirits possess mentally afflicted children, and so they kill them. Like you, I couldn't let that pass, and before I knew it, I'd 'rescued' one such and spirited her away. Having nowhere else to go, I brought her back here and built her a hut, being careful to show her how to feed the Mother Monster.

"I didn't count on her brother mounting a search back on Parrot Bay. I warned him away from the island and started the rumor of the monster of Briar Island, but he was determined to find her, no matter what. He was an irritant at first and quickly became impossible, following me everywhere I went, so I 'killed' him.

"I brought him here, showed him the island, delivered him to his sister, and then told him he had a choice—stay here and care for her, or die for real.

"He stayed and helped me build this colony. As new unfortunates cropped up on Parrot Bay, we spirited them away under cover of night and cared for them here.

"The island community grew, slowly at first. Then one day, Sylvan raiders nearly burned Parrot Bay down. I recruited local sailors, boarded the Sylvan ship, and took them over: our first naval action. After years suffering as easy pickings for Sylvan raiders, the local sailors liked the chance to fight back. The crew was born out of that first successful defense."

"Why hasn't the monarchy come after you? I would have thought that having one's own private navy wouldn't sit well with Her Majesty."

The Friar leaned forward in anticipation and his eyes shone. "It was the greatest moment of my 'career.' Some years passed and then I received the most remarkable message from the Haddiron monarchy. Her Majesty wrote that she understood we were mounting a

defense out on the edge of the empire, and she declared me a Paladin before the crown, the Defender of Parrot Bay. She endorsed our activity on behalf of the crown and made it official."

Flynn scrunched his eyebrows. "I thought you were a pirate."

The Friar reclined. "It is a fiction I find useful. The truth of the matter is that we are fully licensed Privateers working on behalf of the Queen, keeping the Sylvan empire at bay, and growing the Parrot Bay economy while building everything you see here on Briar Island."

"Does Haddiron know about the hidden base?"

"As long as we do what we're supposed to and keep Sylvan ships at bay in these waters, they don't ask questions about our operation or our methods, and we don't volunteer. I needed a cover, so I became the Friar, a blood-thirsty pirate, using that persona as a cover for my other, uh, philanthropic endeavors. You should see our library here—it's quite diverse and is my private treasure."

Flynn nodded in approval, but his mind was racing. *How does that square with what he did to me, then? Why did he 'betray' me?* The question was worth asking, so he did. "So what happened back there with the slowboy and the cleric and everything? And who is Blind Bart, and why did you have me brought here?"

He laughed. "Blind Bart wrecked my first ship on a reef. I had to go capture another. I was ready to throw him to the fishes when he rushed up to me and swore that he knew what was going on and how to learn from the experience. He became my best navigator. He sailed for me for twenty years and retired recently on Parrot Bay. He acts as my eyes and ears over there."

The Friar leaned back and was suddenly sad, the most transparent he had been since they had met. "You are not the only one

who has attempted to swim the channel," he said. "Nobody was more surprised to see the slowboy over at Parrot Bay than me, but I couldn't break my cover to rescue him. And then, thank Cyl, you showed up out of the blue. However, there are hidden evils on Parrot Bay, and you, through no fault of your own, delivered the slowboy from the barracuda to the shark when you turned him over to the Cleric.

"The Cleric was never about purely spiritual matters. That was a front. He built up a tidy side-business in addition to holding meetings and conducting marriages and funerals. He knew that I was taking the disaffected and the unwanted. He just didn't know why. I shudder to think what wild and colorful vices he imagined of my character. And since I am often away from the island, he began to collect those lost souls himself, spirit them away to caves outside of town, and then sell them to me off to the side. That turned into an elegant solution to a niggling problem, and he became my unwitting agent in protecting the disaffected from a superstitious community.

"But somebody in my crew is a mole, a spy, perhaps Sylvan, perhaps something else, and that one has been chipping away at me."

Flynn didn't know what to make of any of this, so he waited, enrapt, wheels spinning in his own head.

"I married a local girl," said the Friar, and if Flynn thought he couldn't be any more surprised, he was wrong. "She was young and beautiful, smart and devoted. When our hale young are old enough to spread their wings, we quietly send them to Haddiron to University or off to the Naval Academy, or wherever. But she stayed and ministered to me when I was sick and prevented me from destroying myself with rum and violence. She kept me from growing into my own legend.

"We had a child, a boy, but by some twist that I don't understand, our son was... Well, she died in childbirth, and I raised him myself with the help of this growing community. He loves me, and I him, but he takes it hard when

I'm gone, and I'm gone frequently.

"One day, he discovered the whereabouts of the Dragon's Maw, and the rest of the wide open world. He followed me to the boats and watched me set out for Parrot Bay. And then he swam over after me."

The Friar looked Flynn in the eye. "The slowboy you saved was my son."

Flynn sat down cross-legged on the bamboo floor. *I didn't see **that** coming.*

The Friar continued. "Somehow, the cleric discovered that the slowboy was mine own, and he was going to use that knowledge to control me. It was only a matter of time before I would have to choose between the life of my son and the lives of the people here on the island. But the cleric made two crucial errors; he thought I didn't know where his hiding place was in the caves, and he thought he could manhandle you. He was wrong about both things.

"I saw something in you that I'd seen before in myself, so I heaped misfortune upon you, and for that, I am sorry. I got you drunk and gave Wrebi your pouch to take you to your boat while I went and retrieved my son from the holding cave. Then I put him somewhere safe while he slept. Then I returned to the tavern in time to greet you when you awoke the following day. When we met the cleric, he mistakenly thought that you had followed him to his cave, and thought you were holding the slowboy to gain power over *him*, and that's something he couldn't bear."

Flynn's eyebrows furrowed in thought. "Did you know the cleric was Qantiin?"

The Friar sat up with a jerk. "What?! I thought he was just a fallen clergyman."

Flynn smiled grimly. "No matter. I've dealt with his kind before."

The Friar sat back and smiled with renewed appreciation. "I was right about you," he said, and the words were a balm to Flynn's battered spirit.

"So why did you abandon me to fight the cleric? You saw he had a sword."

The Friar smiled broadly. "I'm not a *complete* saint. I saw a chance to get my son off the island while the cleric was preoccupied, and your boat was the closest at hand. I had to make a fast decision. The way I figured it, if you survived, you'd follow us back over to Briar Island, where I could make my apologies and I could make it up to you. He's out there, back where he belongs, with people who love him and take care of him."

"And if I didn't survive?"

The Friar had a wicked grin when he needed it. "If you didn't survive, you wouldn't be missing your boat anyway."

The audacity of it hit Flynn strangely. He started snickering at the boldness of it, then giggled, then howled with laughter.

A figure appeared silhouetted by the pool. "Your Grace, it is time."

The Friar waved a casual hand. "Thank you, Piki. We'll be right there." He rose and leaned forward, holding out his hand to Flynn.

"Time for what?" asked Flynn as the Friar pulled him to his feet. They started walking back the way they'd come.

"Time to go to work," said the Friar, grinning.

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And so Flynn found himself back in the courtyard, watching the Friar climb the speaker's rock. Piki stood by with a parchment in his hand. The Friar took the parchment as he faced the crew of the Venture.

"Let's see, tonight, we have the return of the Volcanal Merchant Express—should be fat ships and easy pickings. If the Sylvans keep to their rigorous schedule, they'll be sailing without the man o' war, so we should be relatively unchallenged. You know the drill—the second crew will take control of the ship and

sail her to the auction yards at Fenner Point. Get a good price and charter a return trip to Parrot Bay. Stay there and celebrate in the local taverns and eateries, and we'll pick you up in four weeks. Board up!"

Piki handed a sword to the Friar hilt-first. The Friar turned to Flynn and held out the sword along with a small but heavy pouch. "Master Flynn, we come to a milestone for you. I promised you many things when you came to Briar Island: a monster, answers, and—tacitly—opportunity. We go to do our principled pirating, the life of a privateer in clandestine service to Her Royal Majesty of Haddiron. From here on, you are free to return to *The Lone Wolf* and go where you please with my blessing, or you may choose to join us on the high seas of adventure. What say you?"

The Friar smiled, and the dazzling sunshine of his uninhibited personality lit Flynn's soul again. Flynn basked in the moment, reveling in the pure, unmerited favor of grace. It was glorious. He had waited all his life for a moment like this. The crowd quieted as they realized that they were present at something special. Everyone felt it, the arrival of a historic moment.

A single niggling thought intruded in Flynn's consciousness like the barest shadow flitting across one's face in the full, strong sun. It was such a little thing, but it was enough.

The moment shattered. Flynn struggled in vain to retrieve the feeling, but the truth was brutal, and would not let go. The knowledge of that one thought grew and quickly overwhelmed him. A thought, once created, cannot be reclaimed, and now its ramifications were filtering with the speed of thought through his logic centers: this morning, Flynn hadn't planned on how to leave the island, just how to enter it. He understood, then, that he had not expected to live, and now that he was being granted his life back, everything fell apart.

Or more precisely, everything fell together.

A smoldering anger ignited and spawned a blistering arrogance. If he had to put his finger on it, the thought might be summed up in three words: 'Not So Fast.'

Flynn looked at the Friar and a fire flared up in his black eyes. Flynn smiled, and it was a fearsome thing. "What do I say?"

He took a deep breath and addressed the assembled audience. What came up out of him was unrehearsed but long repressed, a reborn Phoenix of bitterness and rage. "I *say* that any man so cavalier with my present well-being is not worthy of my future goodwill. I *say* that I will reclaim my boat as I swore when this day started and take my own chances out on the high waters. I *say* thank-you for my property and for the lessons you have taught me. I *say* you can keep your blood money and your situational 'honor' and throw them at some other impressionable lad."

Flynn turned and looked the Friar in the eye. He lowered his voice and spoke just to him. "I *say* that I am now a man, and I don't need you or anybody else. Good *day*, 'your Grace.'"

Flynn took his sword, slapped the bag of gold aside, spurned the outstretched hand, and brushed roughly by. He hopped down off the rock and strode arrogantly through the silenced crowd.

He didn't look back.

He was shaking by the time he walked through the tunnel to docks, whether with rage or with some other emotion, he could not say.

He boarded *The Lone Wolf*, true to his word, and rowed out of the Dragon's Maw until he was far enough out to unfurl his sail and leave that place behind forever.

He didn't actually weep until he was well away.

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Flynn wiped his traitorous eyes on his sleeve and took the first prevailing wind he found, heading in a southerly direction toward Volcanal. He didn't think, didn't desire, didn't stop—his entire focus was on sailing *away*, his jaw clenched so tight that his teeth ached.

The weight of the moment caught up to him. "Gah!" he roared as the sun started to set to starboard. "If you think I'll fall for that after what I went through, you have another thing coming! I'm not some hick without a thought to his head, and I won't be pushed around. I made sure the slowboy was safe, and I retrieved *The Lone Wolf*. I did what I said! I did what I said!!"

He stomped down below deck, looked around restlessly, and stormed back up to the tiller empty-handed. "How could I kill him? Which 'Friar' should I attack? There are so many! Gah!"

He would have paced if he were on dry land, but the waves were getting larger, as if there were a coming storm, so he kept his seat and the nervous energy had nowhere to go. "Nobody owns me! I am the Captain of my own boat. I'm in charge of my own fate!" And there it was, out in the air at last.

After saying it out loud, reality ricocheted off his consciousness. He blinked and actually started thinking again.

Where was he going? What was he doing? The Friar had made him a pretty good offer, and the feeling of acceptance had been the best feeling of Flynn's entire life. He'd been offered a chance to be a part of something for a change, an opportunity to strike back at an enemy worth fighting.

That's when he heard the boom of a single gun and the whistle overhead of a cannon ball.

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*No! Not now! Not right now! Anytime but **now!*** The geyser erupted to starboard but Flynn had already turned to look toward

the source. His worst fears were confirmed; it wasn't the fat Sylvan merchant ships, it was the Sylvan man o' war, and it was all by itself. Hunting.

Flynn's gaze focused in on the bow of the great warship facing north toward Parrot Bay.

There are moments in life where all becomes clear in one ferocious revelation. The Friar had spoken of a milestone, and Flynn was finally free to consider the full meaning of his words, except that he had an enemy warship shooting across his bow, and he had just had a critical epiphany.

In that moment, Flynn knew it was time for a decision, not just a *fast* one, but the *right* one, the *perfect* one. Flynn had a very strong sense that what he did next would change the path of the rest of his life.

It wasn't just a milestone—it was a crossroads.

"I," he said very clearly to the ocean around him, "am a fool."

The sun was dipping below the sea to the watery horizon to the West, the Friar and the Venture were preparing to weigh anchor in the Dragon's Maw, unwittingly sailing into danger, and the Sylvan man o' War was approaching from the southeast.

And then, on top of everything else, that was when the final piece fell into place. Flynn remembered that the Friar had mentioned in passing that there was a mole within the Friar's crew, somebody willing to attack the Friar from within. At that moment, Flynn snorted and shook his head.

He knew perfectly well that he'd been willing to kill the Friar himself, but that would have been a straight-up fight, an honorable disagreement between men. Flynn had had enough of hidden assassins to last a lifetime, and his thoughts turned to ways to reveal the mole.

The memory returned to Flynn, and he saw the scene play out in his mind's eye. *I released*

the bird and watched it for a long time. It flew to the West. In the background, there was the now-familiar profile of...

Flynn sat up straight. He had it. Of all the places for the Qantiin carrier bird to fly, it had flown to Briar Island! Flynn suddenly knew how to smoke out the mole.

All those thoughts raced through Flynn's mind. He twisted around and looked back for the first time since storming out. The Dragon's Maw was dimly visible. The *Venture* had not yet put out to sea heading for the Volcanal.

He still had time.

What is it about life that you see your destiny when you can no longer choose it? Flynn thought. *I am a fool. I know where I belong. Unfortunately, I'm not even in a position to accomplish anything, even if I sacrifice myself. Unless...*

Flynn was moving even as the idea blossomed. He dove below deck. He grabbed a rucksack and started tossing in everything he needed. He was done in moments. He took one last look around the hold, grabbed the ceramic lamp, and went back up topside. He ran one hand lovingly across the tiller and then drew back his arm and threw the ceramic lamp against the mast, shattering it and coating the bottom of the sails with oil.

He dropped the flint and stone on the deck and scabbled around by feel. He found them, switched hands, and started striking the flint, *rap rap rap rap*. He dropped a spark onto the oil and it lit immediately.

Flynn yanked the rudder around hard to starboard and pointed her straight into the sinking sun and the oncoming storm. He hooked his sword's scabbard around his neck to the left and hooked the rucksack over his right shoulder. Everything else would have to remain with the ship.

The sail ignited with a whoosh, singing his eyebrows, and he fell backward onto the deck, landing on his rucksack and rolling onto his side. The flames roared up the mast, lighting

up *The Lone Wolf* like a waterborne runaway campfire. Flynn rolled to his feet, caught his balance as the boat descended into a trough, then catapulted himself overboard into the cold, dark water.

When the ship rose up on the wave, all-afire, he was treading water behind it. The current and the wind carried the boat away from him. Flynn bobbed up on the top of a wave and saw the Sylvan man o' war coming around, already following the bait.

Flynn smiled an impish grin where he treaded water, and then turned and struck out for the Dragon's Maw.

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Flynn caught the *Venture* coming out of the Dragon's Maw. He swam up to the ship and climbed up the ropes arranged amidships. He poked his head over the rail and spied Pikir. "Hey!" Flynn said, and waved damply.

To his credit, Pikir was a fast study. "Master Flynn!" He dashed forward and helped Flynn clamber over the rail and onto the main deck. "Wait here, I'll fetch the Friar."

A small crowd of sailors started to gather around Flynn, slapping him on the back and shaking his hand.

A deep voice boomed from the elevated fore-deck. "Flynn!" The Friar took the wooden steps two at a time until he pushed forward through the crowd to stand in front of Flynn.

Flynn sketched a casual salute. "Permission to come aboard, Cap'n."

"Flynn! You're returned!" The Friar gestured to a sailor. "Take his effects to his quarters and bring back some towels. Please notify Cook that we'll be feasting tonight!"

"Sir? Which quarters?"

"Next to the First Mate."

"Aye, Sir."

Flynn spoke. "I came back because there is a Sylvan man o' war out there right now and I thought you should know about it."

The Friar's eyes narrowed. "Where is *The Lone Wolf*?"

Flynn's eyes sparkled in the lamplight. "Unless I miss my guess, she is a mile or three away by now heading to the south-southwest, with the Sylvan warship in hot pursuit."

The Friar looked a question at Flynn.

"Captain, I was a fool. My pride was wounded and I wasn't man enough to accept your decision. But all that changed when I saw the Sylvan warship. I sensed that milestone your spoke of, only it was larger than that, it was a crossroads. I knew that what I did next would affect the rest of my life, and I want my life to mean something.

"After that, it was easy. I decided if I couldn't sacrifice my present to change my past, I might at least sacrifice my past in order to change my present. So I lit up *The Lone Wolf* and set her on her final journey, on a course to draw the warship away from the Dragon's Maw. I destroyed my ship to buy time to save your ship."

"Our ship," said the Friar, firmly. "Welcome aboard the *Venture*!" and a roar of approval went up among the crew.



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