

The Adventures of the Sky Pirate

The Assassin of Patience Bay, Part Two
by Johne Cook

The story so far... *15-year-old orphan Cooper Flynn and his best friend Sandle are playing at swords when a stranger visits Patience Bay, setting in motion a chain of events that finds one of them dead and leaves the other to pick up the pieces.*

And as difficult as that seems, in the events leading up to the funeral, Flynn can't shake a gathering feeling of dread, as if inexorable forces outside of his control have been set into motion. He is now alone, he doesn't know how to deal with his grief, and a storm is brewing.

A shadow passed over the young man on the hilltop. He faced the ocean high above a pristine South Sea island bay. If the weather mirrored the tumult in his eyes, the heavens would blacken and the rain would pound the earth like tears, but the skies were as bright and clear as the half-grin on his face.

And just as false.

A storm was brewing somewhere. Somewhere close.

The shuffle of approaching feet on the

rocky hilltop didn't interrupt Cooper Flynn's solitary vigil. After a respectful pause, the Abbot's assistant cleared his throat and said, "It's time." Flynn looked back at the man, nodded absently, and turned to join the others.

They buried Sandle on the hill from where he and Flynn first espied Tuy Meklanek's arrival.

The Abbot's assistant put his hand on Tuy's shoulder. "Ven Meklanek, would you speak in the Abbot's absence?" Tuy nodded, and stepped forward.

"I have no prepared speech," he said. "I suspect Sandle would have preferred something simple anyway..." He cleared his throat and spoke up. "You, who knew Sandle best, know his history—I do not. You know Sandle's stories—I do not. You know his idiosyncrasies, his quirks, his strengths. I know only one thing of Sandle; he demonstrated great character in his moment of truth at the risk of his own life." Tuy looked around at those assembled. "That's enough for me." Tuy's voice dropped, and he confided, "I pray I may be half as brave at that moment."

He drew his sword, its metal-on-metal

rasp loud in the quiet of the moment, and drove the tip firmly into the rocky soil. He knelt on his right knee and grasped the hilt with his right fist.

Witnessing his homage, those assembled followed his example. Tuy solemnly spoke: "Sandle Grawnsden, I remember you." The others repeated: "I remember you." Tuy bowed his head, traced the sacred four-sided mark of Cyl upon his chest. Raising his head, he rose, sheathed his sword, and stepped back.

An awkward silence fell over the little group, and then Flynn stepped forward. His infamously unruly black hair was corralled and tied in a nape-knot; his black eyes were set wide apart on a face perpetually on the verge of breaking into a grin. Flynn's face shone in the bright mid-afternoon sunlight; the prevailing wind whipped dust into his dry eyes. No sorrow showed thereon, and a careless observer might have mistaken his demeanor as casual, except for one thing—the eyes. On closer inspection, those black eyes revealed a deliberate, intelligent rage.

His voice was clear and controlled, almost soft-spoken. "He was my first and best friend, and he deserved more. He deserved better. The architect of Sandle's unjust death will answer for his crime." He looked around. "That's it."

Flynn's gaze flickered over to the Abbot's

assistant. They locked eyes and the young cleric gasped. He only had strength to stammer the benediction, "Serreh," before he ducked his head and scuttled quickly back toward the Abbey. His retreat ended the ceremony.

#

Flynn appeared bright and early for his fencing practice the following morning.

"I wasn't sure you'd want to meet today," observed Weapons Master Thannon, playing idly with his sword sheath. "Have you slept?"

Flynn shook his head negligently. "I'm fine. I might have been more effective against Sandle's killer with better training." He bowed with a flourish. "Here I am; teach your eager pupil, Master."

Thannon nodded, a grudging half-smile coming to his face. He released the catch and flipped his sheath into the corner, where it lodged, quivering.

"Very well," said the Weapons Master. "Let's see what you're really made of."

#

After a fierce morning practice, Flynn took his sword, along with some bread and meat, and disappeared into the jungle. He told no one where he was going, and didn't explain himself when he returned that night.

He shadow-dueled late into the evening and literally fell into bed, but was back up again at daybreak to start all over again,

driving himself in solitude into excellence with a blade.

Tuy Meklanek remanded himself to the Abbot's extensive library and stood by the window out back, watching Flynn leave each afternoon, before turning his back and returning to the library.

Sometimes, he even read a little.

#

Two weeks later, exhausted after the morning's practice and the pace of his exertions, Flynn fell into a deep sleep beneath a palm tree. Startled awake by something to his right, he blinked and jerked suddenly, ready to scramble back, until he recognized the quiet figure seated nearby. Then he took a deep breath and relaxed.

Tuy sat not far away, quietly looking out over the ocean.

"I didn't hear you sit down," said Flynn, his voice husky from sleep. "How did you find me?"

Tuy continued gazing at the ocean. It was some time before he spoke. "That's not the right question," he said in a low voice.

Flynn rubbed his eyes and sat up with his back against the tree. "Why did this happen?"

"That's not it, either."

Flynn stood and started pacing. Five minutes passed...ten. "Who killed Sandle? Why him? "

Tuy nodded. "It may appear so on the

surface, but this wasn't a hysterical killer, nor a random killing. The mystery blade was a member of the Qantiin, the Assassin's Guild."

"Qantiin? How do you know? Actually, scratch that—I've never seen swordsmanship like that, nor those kinds of moves."

"Exactly. The Qantiin abandon their blood relations and become members of a new family; this new brotherhood makes them all the more fearsome. Kill one and you draw enmity from all: for life."

The color left Flynn's face. "Assassin? What was an assassin doing *here*?"

Tuy nodded again. "That's a better question," he said, his eyes on the ground. He started tracing in the dust with the point of a stick. "Let me ask you something; how do you think Sandle happened to be in the rear courtyard with a real sword just then?"

Flynn frowned and said, "I think that Sandle was more observant than I. He noticed your arrival before I did, as well as the arrival of the second boat, and even woke me to tell me of it. Shells, there were probably other clues I missed so completely that I can't even recall them to tell you now." Frustrated, Flynn threw a stick into the trees.

"A second vessel? What did he say when he awakened you?"

"It was a little weird. He went on about a great, black bird of calamity perched on the second boat, claiming it was a harbinger of death."

“And what did you say?”

Flynn looked stricken. “I berated him for reading too much into it and for waking me when we should both be sleeping.”

Tuy looked pensive. “Did you tell anybody else about that?”

“No. I ate a quick breakfast and had weapons practice with Master Thannon, and was then introduced to you the same morning. That’s all”

Tuy stroked his beard. “There’s more to this than meets the eye. How is it possible to have a clandestine information network on an island so remote and so sparsely populated? The assassin moved too fast for a complete stranger,” Tuy mused, half to himself, “...faster than I would have expected.”

Flynn mulled this over, blinked, and cocked his head. “So how do we know this assassin, this Qantiin, was here for Sandle at all? What if he was actually here to target someone else?” He turned and looked at Tuy. “If Sandle wasn’t the ultimate target, who was? Oh, wait! If there was an ultimate target, will the Qantiin send another assassin?”

Tuy nodded his head and smiled grimly. “*That’s* the right question.” He stood. “Let’s take a walk. It’s time I told you what brought me to Patience Bay.”

Flynn’s eyes grew wide with alarm. “What? What brought you here?” he asked.

Tuy turned and looked Flynn in the eye for the first time that day. “You.”

#

They walked out to the Abbot’s Watch, a rocky point overlooking the ocean to the west. High forerunner clouds started to obscure the sun, making the afternoon prematurely dark. A storm was visible against the horizon, but was still some distance away. Its brilliant white towers reached toward the sky, rising from a base that was dark and expanding.

Flynn said, “Sandle was perceptive. When you sailed in, he noted your weatherworn boat and shabby clothes. I saw only the way you carried yourself, and imagined your boat as my opportunity to finally leave this rock. He was looking out for everyone else, but I only thought of myself.”

Tuy nodded. “I’ve been searching the islands for many months. When I started, I felt I was searching by request of Her Majesty, but later, to fulfill a quest for a friend of mine. However, I’d only recently come to grips with the possibility I might not find you at all, and then discovered to my surprise that I was questing for myself.”

He looked at Flynn. “At first, I was charged with a mission to you at the behest of the Crown, but as time passed, I realized the truth of it: I was searching for what might be called ‘redemption.’ I don’t know what you know of your father, but he was a quietly great man, and I don’t bestow such praise lightly. As you discovered with Sandle, I didn’t appreciate your father fully until he was gone. I came

to value his loyalty and friendship more than my loyalty to my country, and I don't say that lightly, either.

"There's a story I should tell you about us eventually, which I'm only now beginning to understand fully, and can't bring myself to tell anyone at the moment. I have come to believe that I owe him a life-debt. With your father no longer around to repay it to, I started to look around for his surviving family; that inspired my journey here."

At this revelation, Flynn's expression made him look every bit the fifteen-year-old boy.

"But seeking you and finding you were two different things. I have spent a considerable fortune to tease out clues of your existence, much less your whereabouts, and started to discover a pattern." Tuy looked at Flynn. "Your father was more proud of you than I can ever convey, and went to extraordinary measures to obscure your location. That, incidentally, is why we haven't seen any other assassins around here until I arrived, because they didn't know where you were any more than I did."

Flynn blanched. "So how...?"

"As I hinted, I've been looking for a long, long time. I started out, in fact, with a fleet of ships working in concert. However, as we continued to burn through time and money, my ships started to encounter... issues. Sometimes it was weather, sometimes piracy, sometimes Sylvan raiders. One issue

was clear: someone didn't want you found." Tuy cleared his throat. "Either that, or they wanted to find you themselves."

"But why?" asked Flynn, adding, "I have dim memories of my father, my mother, of being content, of everything making sense. I think I remember our cottage, then a boat, and then arriving here. I've never gotten an answer as to where my family went, or why I'm here. I think the Abbot knows, but won't tell me. I think he's hiding the full story from me!"

Flynn swallowed. "I have always had this feeling of being special, that, perhaps, I was the forgotten son of royalty, and, at the very least, expected to find out why I was here, what I was waiting for, what I was meant to do. I felt like a prince in hiding, even while I picked grapes and cleared dirty dishes. But as much as I wanted those things to be true, I didn't believe them."

Flynn turned and addressed Tuy directly. "Who am I? Why do I feel there is more to this life, and I'm missing truths everybody else knows?"

Tuy stared at a small rock by his worn leather boot. "Those questions haunt all thinkers," Tuy said softly. With a stronger voice, he added, "I'd love to tell you you're a long-lost prince kept safe here on a remote island for your own protection until you are of age to go out into the world, right great wrongs and lead our people into a new age of

enlightenment and prosperity.”

Tuy kicked the pebble out and watched it fall out of view over the cliff. Then he turned and looked Flynn in the eye. “But that’s not true. I think you realize it, too.”

Flynn tried to look away, but couldn’t.

“The truth is that you’re the orphaned son of a man I called friend a long time ago. The truth is that my life is drawing to a close and I have no family. The truth is that I’ve been so busy with my own life ‘serving the monarchy’ that I never bothered to set old scores aright, never bothered to make a difference to one person.”

Tuy cleared his throat, fighting unexpected emotion. “I’ve done everything else I wanted to do, and none of it really mattered. After much thought, I realized I didn’t want to go to the bottom without passing something along to one actual person.” He looked at Flynn. “...which, ultimately, brought me to you.”

Tuy looked back out at the panorama and took a sip from the water skin attached to his leather belt. “The good news is: you can be whatever you set yourself to be—the man in the gap, a great hero, one who fights for self or for good. You can obey your liege or your own conscience, see the entire world, or stay here on this quiet little rock.”

He returned the water skin to his belt. “If you ask me, it matters not who you really are, just that you have the awareness to wonder

about it. I can’t answer if you’re special right now, but I can tell you: you *might* be. Whether you in fact become great or not depends on what you decide, and on what you then say and do.”

A ray of light broke through the gathering storm and, in the wonder of the moment as he watched the display in front of him, Flynn wept.

Some time later, Flynn took a deep breath, blinked, and furrowed his brow. When he turned to Tuy, his tone was light again. “So, how did you actually find me?”

Tuy laughed. “I finally gave up and came to the one place where I thought I could beg wisdom from almighty Cyl Himself with the help of the unique library here and the assistance of another old friend, the Abbott. Imagine my surprise when I arrived to see the spitting image of your father running around, playing at swords, frolicking on an island hilltop as innocent as a newborn lamb. Well, after sparring with a Qantiin assassin, you are a lamb no longer. I think you, now, are *The Lone Wolf*.”

Flynn snorted and smiled. “I think, I, now, am hungry as a wolf,” he said, standing.

Tuy rose and clapped him on the shoulder. “Stop by my room later tonight. I have something your father wanted you to have.”

With that, Flynn turned his back to the approaching storm and returned with Tuy to

the Abbey, the thunder starting to rumble deeply in the distance.

#

The storm hit while they were at table. Flynn saw the Abbot burst through the door accompanied by a rush of wind that quickly flowed through the great hall, causing the lamps to flutter wildly. Men ran to close the various shutters to keep out the worst of the storm's fury. As the Abbot strained to close the door, men sprang to his aid to shut out the storm behind him.

Flynn gestured toward the Abbott with his jaw. "He's back," he said. Tuy turned and saw him approach. Standing, he went to meet him, and the two embraced, then walked, speaking in subdued voices, to a private ante-chamber off of the main room.

Flynn dispensed with pretensions, stood, left his plate, and wandered off to the Abbot's library. He spent the evening there in the grip of a peculiar mood, and then started walking upstairs.

The wind whipped and the rain fell as Flynn padded along the balcony until he came to Tuy's rooms. He looked at the door, and then looked closer. The door was open a crack. Flynn stepped forward, curious, and heard a crash inside. When he started to push the door open, the wind caught it, slamming it loudly against the wall. A flash of lightning behind him cast Flynn's silhouette against the

wall as he stood in the doorway. The lamp had been knocked over and oil burned in a narrow strip on the table, casting a weird light over the scene.

Flynn saw Tuy with his back against the far wall, standing defenseless as a figure threatened him with a sword. Their eyes met, and Tuy shook his head once, almost imperceptibly.

His attacker looked over at him and the fluttering light revealed his face.

"It's him—it's the assassin, Master Thannon..." Flynn said conversationally to those assembled. "It takes on a different connotation in a different context, doesn't it?" He stepped slowly into the room, where he saw a table filled with various weapons.

Flynn slowly approached the scene, until the Weapons Master warned, "Stop right there, if you please."

Flynn kept walking, passing the table but touching nothing, until he stood six feet to the right of Tuy. "It's all right. A wise man I know taught me that the best way to survive a fight is not to start one you can't win. I want off this rock; I'm here for a job."

The Weapons Master smirked and said, "This *is* a good day. Very well, take some notes while I finish my little task."

"Yes, Master," said Flynn without irony, sitting down in a chair and putting his feet up on a table. Tuy's eyes grew flinty.

Tuy spoke. “So the boat that came in after me belonged to the other assassin. It appears clear that you both are Qantiin: he the assassin-of-record and you the sleeper. I’ve got a question bothering me, though. If you are ‘family,’ how did you decide to kill your fellow assassin, and why did he go along with it?”

“His task was to take out his target...” and here Thannon indicated Tuy. “When the Qantiin was exposed, I killed Sandle to keep him quiet, and next my brother Qantiin, assuming his bounty-duty. He breathed his blessing to me before he died.”

“You... killed Sandle,” said Flynn, and his voice was studiously neutral.

Thannon waved his left hand as if shooing away an insect. “I flipped my sword’s sheath toward the Qantiin, who blocked it toward Sandle, completing the kill. It is the move of two Masters—you were fortunate to have witnessed a rare maneuver.”

Flynn pushed himself back in the chair until he was leaning back on two legs. “So the offer to teach me swordsmanship was a front to recruit me to become Qantiin?”

“Yes,” said Thannon, smiling largely, “and the offer is still open. All you have to do is kill a man tonight and you will be sworn in and taken under my wing. You will enjoy wealth, power, arcane knowledge, challenging assignments, and brotherhood with bold men.”

Flynn started rocking back and forth as he thought. “How long have you been waiting undercover?”

Thannon’s face reflected his pride. “When Ven Meklanek disappeared from Court, I killed the former Patience Bay Weapons Master on his vacation and came here to fill his vacancy myself. I communicated regularly with the Council via messenger bird. We have agents stashed all over the Empire waiting for news of Tuy’s death. Killing the prey and inducting a new recruit will be a great day for the Council!”

Flynn looked at Tuy, but he was studiously watching Thannon. On cue, Thannon matter-of-factly said “Time to die,” drew a sword with his gauntleted left hand, and tossed it hilt-first toward Tuy, and then drew his own blade.

Tuy never took his eyes off Thannon and side-stepped the incoming weapon, letting it hit the wall and clatter to the floor.

Puzzled, Flynn looked at the sword on the floor. Without taking his eyes from Thannon, Tuy replied “Poison on the hilt. The Qantiin have no end of tricks. They cannot ever be trusted.” Thannon bowed his head slightly, a mocking grin on his face, and then raised his blade in salute.

A gust of wind attacked the stuttering flame, casting momentarily deep shadows. Flynn fell over backward out of his chair, hit

the ground rolling, and grasped the hilt of the nearest sword hanging off the weapons table behind him. He lofted it, hilt first, over Thannon's head and then scabbled for another.

Thannon turned to see what the commotion was, as the sword arced over his head. He spun back around as the sword smacked into Tuy's hand, who dropped into a defensive position.

"The whelp is duplicitous," said Thannon, eyes glinting. Flynn mock bowed and walked around by Tuy. "Even better," grated Thannon. "He will make a glorious Qantiin when I am done with him."

Under his voice, Tuy said "So here we are fighting Qantiin again, you and I."

Flynn said "Fret not, my friend. I'd rather fight Qantiin once a day and twice on Market Day than join them."

Thannon said "That's what we all say," and attacked.

When the two repelled his first attack, Thannon broke off. "You have learned well," he said. "Now I will teach you something new. Know your opponent. Avoid their strength, exploit their weakness." And then, before they had time to move, Thannon beat Flynn's sword out of his hand with one savage blow, knocking Flynn off his feet to crumple hard into the corner. Next, in one fluid move, he spun around lightly and ran Tuy through,

pinning him to the wall.

Tuy gasped and dropped his sword.

Pleased with his handiwork, Thannon released the hilt of his sword and stepped back with a flourish to admire the sword handle protruding from Tuy as it vibrated back and forth.

"Thus I have..."

Flynn exploded out of the corner and heaved, flipping the little table over onto the flame on its top and extinguishing the fire, casting the room into darkness.

A scuff on the floor and then a flash of lightning revealed Flynn's face nose-to-nose with Thannon, whose expression changed from glee to horror in an instant. "Thank you for the lesson, *Master*," said Flynn, savagely, as his hands shot to Thannon's throat. Flynn squeezed, and all those hours spent gripping a sword were put to good use.

With a gurgling roar, Tuy pulled loose from the wall and fell heavily to his knees at Thannon's feet. Tuy grasped Thannon around his knees and lifted him off the floor. Flynn pushed forward and up, catching Thannon's weight squarely in his hands around the Weapons Master's throat. Thannon's hands clawed at Flynn's wrists, but the Weapons Master had no leverage against that steely grip. Weapons Master Thannon was helpless without his blades, and struggled for his life at the hands of his student, and in the grip of

his prey.

And then, caught up in darkness and off-balance, the real assassin of Patience Bay died.

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Together, Flynn and Tuy tossed the body athwart the overturned table, and then Flynn knelt to help a gasping Tuy to his feet.

“Nicely...done,” grated Tuy. “I... thought you’d go for... the dagger.”

“He would have been looking for a blade, I thought, and then I remembered the chicken.”

Tuy raised an eyebrow.

“Killing is never exciting,” Flynn said, “especially when it is necessary.”

“So you wrung his neck instead? Good thinking!” Tuy grinned painfully, and coughed. “I observe that dying...is even less exciting,” he said. He pressed his hands against the wound in his chest and nodded toward the edge of the bed. “The Abbot’s satchel,” he said. “Hurry.”

Flynn reached it in two steps and returned.

“There is...a parchment...” Tuy gasped, and a red foam and spittle flew from his mouth.

Flynn struggled with the satchel and finally got it open. He dug through a number of regular papers and felt around, then drew out a rolled-up parchment with a leather loop around it.

“Hold the document closer to you than your own name,” gasped Tuy. “It is your future. It is...the future of the world.”

Flynn tucked it into his shirt.

“It would be good for you to flee now,” said Tuy. “You have wanted your freedom,” he added, the rasp getting louder every time he breathed. “Beware what you wish for...” he grated. “*The Lone Wolf* is yours!” he said just before his eyes rolled up and he toppled over backward. A thunderclap obscured the sound of his body as it crumpled to the floor.

A stricken Flynn dropped to his knees in the lightning-cut darkness. “Tuy! No. No!” He heard a noise after the thunder, and looked up as a lightning flash revealed the silhouette of another in the doorway stroking a black pigeon. Flynn froze.

“You’d best come with me, lad, “ said the Abbot.

#

Back in his study, the Abbot gave Flynn a rag to wipe his face and walked to a corner of the room. Bending over stiffly, he removed a stone from the corner and pulled out a leather bag that jingled with coins, as well as a rolled parchment. Replacing the stone, he awkwardly regained his feet. Returning to Flynn, he stopped, backtracked, pulled a book from the shelf, and presented the items to Flynn.

“These are the monies given to me for your

17th birthday. I give them to you early. This is a map of the islands, which you'll need for ports. And finally, the Jodkins. I think you will appreciate it most of all. Return it someday if you like, or pass it down to your children if you take a wife."

The Abbot looked at the bird, sadly. "I imagine you have a thousand questions, but time is short, so I must be brief. Tuy knew more of your parents than I. His papers may assist you in your search for your past. As for your present... The first assassin was sent not for Sandle, and not for you, but for Tuy. He was the target all along, for his knowledge or perhaps for what else he carried." He stopped and examined Flynn's face, but saw nothing helpful there. Then a hint of a smile passed over the Abbot's face.

He continued. "I visited... 'friends' ...over at Briar Island. There I discovered that the Qantiin use a network of overt killers and sleeper agents to accomplish their dire work, and keep in touch in a variety of ways, including messenger birds."

Flynn nodded. "Where did you discover this one?"

The Abbot stroked his beard. "This was in the possession of Thannon's assistant. He may be naïve, but I wouldn't count on it. I expect the chances a message will go out tonight are very high, despite my best efforts." He looked Flynn in the eye. "For worse or

better, we must assume that the hourglass is running. You must leave tonight, now, to stay ahead of pursuit."

He looked at Flynn, not unkindly. "I was never comfortable caring for a boy as bright as you. We have been considering an orphanage here, and may well proceed with that plan to enable us to better care for those stuck between circumstance on their way to adulthood. Perhaps you can visit us again some day when you have triumphed over covert machinations and circumstance and achieve what is prepared for you to do."

Flynn spoke with unaccustomed bluntness. "I never liked you, Abbot, and saw you as stern and unyielding. Yet, I have come to respect you, and I suspect I couldn't have made your life and your oath any harder. He swallowed and added, "Please... forgive me," then bowed his head in the Abbot's presence for the first time. The Abbot leaned forward and placed a hand on his head, then sat back.

Flynn looked up, smiled an awkward smile, and said, "I... Thanks, Abbot." Then he gathered his things and strode out into the wind, the rain, and the night..

"Cyl go before you and with you, young Master Flynn," whispered the Abbot.

#

It was nearly dawn by the time Flynn arrived down at the docks and looked around. The wind had abated and the lightning was

past for now, but a steady rain soaked Flynn from head to toe. He looked out at the vessels rocking at their berths and made straight for *The Lone Wolf*.

He stood and sized it up as the waves banged it against the dock. “Looks like freedom to me,” he said under his breath, before tossing his bags onboard; he untied the ropes, pushed the boat out of the slip, and hopped aboard.

Then Flynn set sail out into the steady storm and the coming dawn, oblivious to the great black albatross perched on the assassin’s ship, watching with unblinking green eyes.



*Next episode,
“The Friar of Briar Island, Part One”*

JOHNE COOK

Johne Cook is a founder of Ray Gun Revival, and has written online articles, reviews, and short stories. He was a 2004 winner of NaNoWriMo, the National Novel Writing Month.

He is a Technical Writer and Help Author by day and creative writer / magazine editor by night. Johne is an admitted fan of the Firefly / Serenity series, and gratefully acknowledges that influence in this serial.