

A

PIP & FLINK

ADVENTURE



THE TAR-AIYM KRANG

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ALAN DEAN FOSTER

**THE
TAR-AIYM
KRANG**

Alan Dean Foster

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Chapter One

The Flinx was an ethical thief in that he stole only from the crooked. And at that, only when it was absolutely necessary. Well, perhaps not absolutely. But he tried to. Due to his environment his moral were of necessity of a highly adaptable nature. And when one is living alone and has not yet reached one's seventeenth summer, certain allowances in such matters must be made.

It could be argued, if the Flinx were willing to listen (a most unlikely happenstance), that the ultimate decision as to who qualified as crooked and who did not was an awfully totalitarian one to have to make. A philosopher would nod knowingly in agreement. Flinx could not afford that luxury. His ethics were dictated by survival and not abstracts. It was to his great credit that he had managed to remain on the accepted side of current temporal morality as much as he had so far. Then again, chance was also due a fair share of the credit.

As a rule, though, he came by his modest income mostly honestly. This was made necessary as much by reason of common sense as by choice. A too-successful thief always attracts unwanted attention. Eventually, a criminal "law of diminishing returns" takes over.

And anyway, the jails of Drallar were notoriously inhospitable.

Good locations in the city for traveling jongleurs, minstrels, and such to display their talents were limited. Some were far better than others. That he at his comparatively slight age had managed to secure one of the best was a tribute to luck and the tenacity of old Mother Mastiff. From his infancy she had reserved the small raised platform next to her shop for him, driving off other entrepreneurs with shout or shot, as the occasion and vehemence of the interloper required. Mother Mastiff was not her real name, of course, but that was what everyone called her. Flinx included. Real names were of little use in Drallar's marketplaces. They served poorly for identification and too well for the tax-gatherers. So more appropriate ones were rapidly bestowed upon each new inhabitant. Mother Mastiff, for example, bore a striking resemblance to the Terran canine of the same name. It was given in humor and accepted with poor grace, but accepted, nevertheless. Her caustic personality only tended to compliment the physical similarity.

The man-child had been an orphan. Probably involuntary, as most of his ilk were. Still, who could tell? Had she not been passing the slave coops at that time and glanced casually in a certain direction she would never have noticed it. For reasons she had never fully understood she had bought it, raised it, and set it to learning a trade as soon as it was old enough. Fortunately his theatrical proclivities had manifested themselves at quite an early stage, along with his peculiar talents. So the problem of choosing a trade solved itself. He proved to be a keen if somewhat solemn observer, and so his own best apprentice. Fine and well, because the older performers always became more nervous in his

presence than they cared to admit. Rather than admit it, they pronounced him unteachable, and left him to his own devices.

She had also taught him as early as was practical that in Drallar independence was ever so much more than an intangible thought. It was a possession, even if it would not fit into one's pocket or pouch, and to be valued as such. Still, when he had taken to her word and moved out to live on his own, the sadness lingered with her as a new coat of paint. But she never revealed it to him for fear of communicating weakness. Not in her words nor in her face. Urged on affectionately but firmly he was as much as the young birds of the Poles. Also she knew that for her the Moment might come at any time and she wanted it to brush *his* life as lightly as possible.

Flinx felt the cottony pain of a sugar-coated probe again in his mind; the knowledge that Mother Mastiff was his mother by dint of sympathy and not birth. Coincidence was his father and luck his inheritance. Of his true parents he knew nothing, nor had the auctioneer. His card had been even more than usually blank, carrying not even the most elementary pedigree. A mongrel. It showed in his long orange-red hair and olive complexion. The reason for his orphan-hood would remain forever as obscure as their faces. He let the life flood of the city enter his mind and submerge the unpleasant thoughts.

A tourist with more insight than most had once remarked that strolling through the great central marketplace of Drallar was like standing in a low surf and letting the geometrically patient waves lap unceasingly against one. Flinx had never seen the sea, so the reference remained obscure. There were few seas on Moth anyway, and no oceans. Only the uncouneted, innumerable lakes of The-Blue-That-Blinded and shamed azure as a pale intonation.

The planet had moved with unusual rapidity out of its last ice age. The fast-dwindling ice sheets had left its surface pockmarked with a glittering lapis-lazuli embroidery of lakes, turns, and great ponds. An almost daily rainfall maintained the water levels initially set by the retreating glaciers. Drallar happened to be situated in an exceptionally dry valley, good drainage and the lack of rainfall (more specifically, of mud) being one of the principal reasons for the city's growth. Here merchants could come to trade their goods and craftsmen to set up shop without fear of being washed out every third-month.

The evaporation-precipitation water cycle on Moth also differed from that of many otherwise similar humanx-type planets. Deserts were precluded by the lack of any real mountain ranges to block off moisture-laden air. The corresponding lack of oceanic basins and the general unevenness of the terrain never gave a major drainage system a chance to get started. The rivers of Moth were as uncountable as the lakes, but for the most part small in both length and volume. So the water of the planet was distributed fairly evenly over its surface, with the exception of the two great ice caps at the poles and the hemispheric remnants of the great glacial systems. Moth was the Terran Great Plains with conifers instead of corn.

The polyrhythmic chanting of barkers hawking the goods of a thousand worlds formed a nervous and jarring counterpoint to the comparatively even susurrations and murmurings of the crowd. Flinx passed a haberdashery he knew and in passing exchanged a brief, secret smile with its owner. That worthy, a husky blond middle-aged human, had just finished selling a pair of *durfarq*-skin coats to two outlandishly clad outworlders . . . for three times what they were worth. Another saying trickled lazily through his mind.

“Those who come unprepared to Drallar to buy skin, inevitably get.”

It did not offend Flinx’s well-considered set of ethics. This was not stealing. *Caveat emptor*. Fur and fibers, wood and water, were Moth. Can one steal seeds from a tomato? The seller was happy with his sale, the purchasers were pleased with their purchase, and the difference would go to support the city in the form of welfares and grafts anyway. Besides, any outworlder who could afford to come to Moth could damn well afford to pay its prices. The merchants of Drallar were not to any extent rapacious. Only devious.

It was a fairly open planet, mostwise. The government was a monarchy, a throwback to the planet’s earlier days. Historians found it quaint and studied it, tourists found it picturesque and frozepixed it, and it was only nominally terrifying to its citizens. Moth had been yanked abruptly and unprepared into the vortex of interstellar life and had taken the difficult transition rather well. As would-be planetbaggers rapidly found out. But on a planet where the bulk of the native population was composed of nomadic tribes following equally nomadic fur-bearing animals who exhibited unwonted bellicosity toward the losing of said furs, a representative government would have proved awkward in the extreme. And naturally the Church would not interfere. The Counselors did not even think of themselves as constituting a government, therefore they could not think of imposing one on others. Democracy on Moth would have to wait until the nomads would let themselves be counted, indexed, labeled, and cross-filed, and that seemed a long, long way off. It was well known that the Bureau of the King’s Census annually published figures more complementary than accurate.

Wood products, furs, and tourism were the planet’s principal industries. Those and trade. Fur-bearing creatures of every conceivable type (and a few inconceivable ones) abounded in the planet’s endless forests. Even the insects wore fur, to shed the omnipresent water. Most known varieties of hard and soft woods thrived in the Barklands, including a number of unique and unclassifiable types, such as a certain deciduous fungus. When one referred to “grain” on Moth, it had nothing to do with flour. The giant lakes harbored fish that had to be caught from modified barges equipped with cyborg-backed fishing lines. It was widely quoted that of all the planets in the galaxy, only on Moth did an honest-to-goodness *pisces* have an even chance of going home with the fisherman, instead of vice-versa. And hunters were only beginning to tap *that* aspect of the planet’s potentialities . . . mostly because those who went into the great forests unprepared kept an unquieting silence.

Drallar was its capital and largest city. Thanks to fortuitous galactic coordinates and the enlightened tax policies of a succession of kings it was now also an interstellar clearing-house for trade goods and commercial transactions. All of the great financial houses had at least branch headquarters here, reserving their showier offices for the more “civilized” planets. The monarch and his civil service were no more than nominally corrupt, and the king saw to it that the people were not swamped by repressive rules and regulations. Not that this was done out of love for the common man. It was simply good business. And if there were no business, there would be no taxes. No taxes would mean no government. And no government would mean no king, a state of affairs which the current monarch, his Driest Majesty King Dewe Nog Na XXIV, was at constant pains to avoid.

Then too, Drallar could be smelled.

In addition to the indigenous humans, the business of Drallar was conducted by half a hundred intelligent races. To keep this conglomeration of commerce pulsing smoothly, a fantastic diversity of organic fuels was demanded. So the central market place itself was encircled by a seemingly infinite

series of serving stands, auto-chefs, and restaurants that formed in actuality one great, uninterrupted kitchen. The resulting combination of aromas generated by these establishments mingled to form an atmosphere unduplicated anywhere else in the known galaxy. On more refined trade stops such exotic miasmas were kept decently locked away. In Drallar there was no ozone to contaminate. One man's bread was another man's narcotic. And one man's narcotic could conceivably make another being nauseous.

But by some chance of chemistry, or chemistry of chance, the fumes blended so well in the naturally moist air that any potentially harmful effects were canceled out. Left only was an ever-swirling thick perfume that tickled one's throat and left unexpecting mouths in a state of perpetual salivation. One could get a deceptively full and satisfying meal simply by sitting down in the center of the markets and inhaling for an hour. Few other places in the Arm had acquired what might best be described as an olfactory reputation. It was a truth that gourmets came from as far away as Terra and Proycon merely to sit on the outskirts of the marketplace and hold long and spirited competitions in which the participants would attempt to identify only the wisps of flavor that were wafted outward on the damp breeze.

The reason for the circular arrangement was simple. A businessman could fortify himself on the outskirts and then plunge into the whirl of commerce without having to worry about being cut down in the midst of an important transaction by a sudden gust of, say, pungent *prego*-smoke from the bahnwood fires. Most of the day the vast circle served admirably well, but during the prime meal hours it made the marketplace resemble more than ever that perspicacious tourist's analogy of the ebullience and flow of a sea.

Flinx paused at the stand of old Kiki, a vendor of sweets, and bought a small *thisk*-cake. This was a concoction made from a base of a tough local hybrid wheat. Inside, it was filled with fruit-pieces and berries and small, meaty *parma*-nuts, recently ripened. The finished product was then dipped in a vat of warmish honey-gold and allowed to harden. It was rough on the teeth, but, oh, what it did for the palate! It had one drawback: consistency. Biting into *thisk* was like chewing old spacesuit insulation. But it had a high energy content, the *parma*-nuts were mildly narcotic, and Flinx felt the need of some sort of mild stimulant before performing.

Above the voices and the smells, above all, Drallar could be viewed.

The edifices of the marketplace were fairly low, but outside the food crescents one could see ancient walls, remnants of Old City. Scattered behind and among were the buildings where the more important commerce took place. The lifeblood of Moth was here, not in the spectacular stalls below. Every day the economies of a dozen worlds were traded away in the dingy back rooms and offices of those old-new structures. There the gourmet restaurants catered to the rich sportsmen returning from the lakes, and turned up their noses and shut their windows against the plebian effluvia assailing them from the food stalls below. There the taxidermists plied their noisome arts, stuffing downy Yax'm pelts and mounting the ebony nightmare heads of the horned Demmichin Devilo.

Beyond rose the apartment houses where the middle and lower classes lived, those of the poorer characterized by few windows and cracking plaster, and those of the better-off by the wonderful multistoried murals painted by the gypsy artists, and by the brilliant azurine tiles which kept the houses warm in winter and cool in summer. Still farther off rose the isolated tower groupings of the rich inurbs, with their hanging gardens and reinforced crystal terraces. These soared loftily above the

noise and clamor of the commonplace, sparkling as jeweled giraffes amid each morning fog.

Rising from the center of the city to dominate all was the great palace of the rulers of Drallar. Generations of kings had added to it, each stamping a section here, a wing there, with his own personality. Therein dwelt King Dewe Nog Na and his court. Sometimes he would take a lift to the topmost minaret, and there, seated comfortably on its slowly revolving platform, leisurely survey the impossible anthill that constituted his domain.

But the most beautiful thing about Moth was not Drallar, with its jeweled towers and chromatic citizenry, nor the innumerable lakes and forests, nor the splendid and variegated things that dwelt therein. It was the planet itself. It was that which had given to it a name and made it unique in the Arm. That which had first attracted men to the system. Ringed planets were rare enough.

Moth was a winged planet.

The “wings” of Moth doubtless at one time had been a perfect broad ring of the Saturn type. But at some time in the far past it had been broken in two places—possibly the result of a gravitational stress, or a change in the magnetic poles. No one could be certain. The result was an incomplete ring consisting of two great crescents of pulverized stone and gas which encircled the planet with two great gaps separating them. The crescents were narrower near the planet, but out in space they spread out to a natural fan shape due to the decreasing gravity, thus forming the famed “wing” effect. They were also a good deal thicker than the ancient Saturnian rings, and contained a higher proportion of fluorescent gases. The result was two gigantic triangular shapes of a lambent butter-yellow springing out from either side of the planet.

Inevitably, perhaps, the single moon of Moth was designated Flame. Some thought it a trite appellation, but none could deny its aptness. It was about a third again smaller than Terra’s Luna, and nearly twice as far away. It had one peculiar characteristic. It didn’t “burn” as the name would seem suggest, although it was bright enough. In fact, some felt the label “moon” to be altogether inappropriate, as Flame didn’t revolve around its parent planet at all, but instead preceded it around the sun in approximately the same orbit. So the two names stuck. The carrot leading a bejeweled ass, with eternity forever preventing satisfaction to the latter. Fortunately the system’s discoverers had resisted the impulse to name the two spheres after the latter saying. As were so many of nature’s freaks, the two were too uncommonly gorgeous to be so ridiculed.

The wing on Drallar’s side was visible to Flinx only as a thin, glowing line, but he had seen pictures of it taken from space. He had never been in space himself, at least, only vicariously, but had visited many of the ships that landed at the Port. There at the feet of the older crewmen he listened intently while they spun tales of the great KK ships that plied the dark and empty places of the firmament. Since those monster interstellar craft never touched soil, of course, he had never seen one in person. Such a landing would never be made except in a dire emergency, and then never on an inhabited planet. A Doublekay carried the gravity well of a small sun on its nose, like a bee carrying pollen. Even shrunk to the tiny size necessary to make a simple landing, that field would protect the great bulk of the ship. It would also gouge out a considerable chunk of the planetary crust and set off all sorts of undesirable natural phenomena, like tsunamis and hurricanes and such. So the smaller shuttle ships darted yoyolike between traveler and ground, carrying down people and their goods, while the giant transports themselves remained in Polyphemian exile in the vastnesses of black and cold.

He had wanted to space, but had not yet found a valid reason to, and could not leave Mother Mastiff without anyone. Despite unceasing bellows asserting to her good health she was a hundred and something. To leave her alone simply for a pleasure trip was not a thought that appealed to him.

He tugged his cloak tighter around his shoulders, half-burying Pip in the folds of thick fur. As human inhabited worlds go, Moth was not an exceptionally cold planet, but it was far from tropical. He could not remember the time when he had not been greeted upon awakening by a wet and clammy fog. It was a dependable but dampish companion. Here furs were used more to shed water than to protect from bitter chill. It was cold, yes, but not freezing. At least, it snowed only in winter.

Pip hissed softly and Flinx absently began feeding him the raisins he'd plucked from the *thisk*-cake. The reptile gulped them down whole, eagerly. It would have smacked its lips, if it'd had any. As it was, the long tongue shot out and caressed Flinx's cheek with the delicate touch of a diamond cutter. The minidrag's iridescent scales seemed to shine even brighter than usual. For some reason it was especially fond of raisins. Maybe it relished their iron content.

He glanced down at the plus window of his personal cardmeter. They weren't broke, but neither were they swimming in luxury. Oh, yes, it was definitely time to go to work!

From a counter of her variegated display booth, Mother Mastiff was pleading amiably with a pair of small, jeweled thranx *touristas*. Her technique was admirable and competent. It ought to be, he reflected. She'd had plenty of time in which to perfect it. He was only mildly surprised at the insectoid's presence. *Where humans go, thranx also, and vicey-versy, don't you know?* So went the children's rhyme. But they did look a bit uncomfortable. Thrانx loved the rain and the damp, and in this respect Moth was perfect, but they also preferred a good deal less cold and more humidity. Paradoxically, the air could be wet and to them still too dry. Every time a new hothouse planet turned up they got ecstatic, despite the fact that such places invariably possessed the most objectionable and bellicose environments. Like any human youngster, he'd seen countless pictures of thrانx planets: Hivehom, their counterpart of Terra, and also the famous thrانx colonies in the Amazon and Congo basins on Terra itself. Why should humans wear themselves out in an unfriendly climate when the thrانx could thrive there? They had put those inhospitable regions to far better use than man ever could or would have—as had humans the Mediterranean Plateau on Hivehom.

Indeed, the Amalgamation had worked out very well all around.

From the cut of their necklaces these two were probably from Evoria. Anyhow the female's tiara and ovipositor glaze were dead giveaways. Probably a hunting couple, here for some excitement. There wasn't much to attract thrانx to Moth, other than recreation, politics, and the light metals trade. Moth was rich in light metals, but deficient in many of the heavier ones. Little gold, lead, uranium, and the like. But silver and magnesium and copper in abundance. According to rumor, the giant thrانx Elecseed complex had plans to turn Moth into a leading producer of electrical and thinkmachine components, much as they had Amropolous. But so far it had remained only rumor. Anyway, inducing skilled thrانx workers to migrate to Moth would necessitate the company's best psychopublicists working day and night, plus megacredits in hardship pay. Even off-world human workers would find the living conditions unpalatable at best. He didn't think it likely. And without native atomics there'd be a big power problem. Hydroelectricity was a limited servant due to the lack of white water. It formed an intriguing problem. How to generate enough electricity to run the plant to produce electrical products?

All this musing put not credit in one's account nor bread in one's mouth.

"Sir and madame, what think ye on my wares? No better of the type to be found this side of Shorttree and damn little there." She fumbled, seemingly aimless, about her samples. "Now here's an item that might appeal to ye. What of these matched copper drink-jugs, eh? One for he and one for she." She held up two tall, thin, burnished copper thranx drinking implements. Their sides were elaborately engraved and their spouts worked into intricate spirals.

"Notice the execution, the fine scroll work, sir," she urged, tracing the delicate patterns with a wrinkled forefinger. "I defy ye to find better, yea, anywheres!"

The male turned to his mate. "What do you say, my dear?" They spoke symbospeech, that peculiar mixture of Terran basic and thranx click-hiss which had become the dominant language of commerce throughout the Humanx Commonwealth and much of the rest of the civilized galaxy besides.

The female extended a handfoot and grasped the utensil firmly by one of its double handles. Her small, valentine-shaped head inclined slightly at an angle in an oddly human gesture of appraisal as she ran both truehands over the deeply etched surface. She said nothing, but instead looked directly into her mate's eyes.

Flinx remained where he was and nodded knowingly at the innocent smile on Mother Mastiff's face. He'd seen that predatory grin before. The taste of her mind furnished him with further information as to what would inevitably follow. Despite a century of intimate familiarity and association with the thranx there still remained some humans who were unable to interpret even the commoner nuances of thranx gesture and gaze. Mother Mastiff was an expert and knew them all. Her eyes were bright enough to read the capital letters flashing there: SALE.

The husband commenced negotiations in an admirably offhand manner. "Well . . . perhaps something might be engendered . . . we already have a number of such baubles . . . exorbitant prices . . . a reasonable level. . . ."

"Level! You speak of *levels*?" Mother Mastiff's gasp of outrage was sufficiently violent to carry the odor of garlic all the way to where Flinx stood. The thranx, remarkably, ignored it. "Good sir, I survive at but a subsistence level now! The government takes all my money, and I have left but a pittance, a pittance, sir, for my three sons and two daughters!"

Flinx shook his head in admiration of Mother Mastiff's unmatched style. Thranx offspring always came in multiples of two, an inbred survival trait. With most things terrene and human there had been little or no conflict, but due to a quirk of psychology the thranx could not help but regard human odd-numbered births as both pathetic and not a little obscene.

"Thirty credits," she finally sighed.

"Blasphemous!" the husband cried, his antennae quivering violently. "They are worth perhaps ten, and at that I flatter the craftsman unmercifully."

"Ten!" moaned Mother Mastiff, feigning a swoon. "Ten, the creature says, and boasts of it! Surely . . . surely, sir, you do not expect me to consider such an offer *seriously*! 'Tis not even successful as a

jest”

“Fifteen, then, and I should report you to the local magistrate. Even common thieves have the decency to work incognito.”

“Twenty-five. Sir, you, a cultured and wealthy being, surely you can do better than taunt and make sport of an old female. One who has doubtless fertilized as many eggs as you . . .” The female had the grace to lower her head and blush. The thranx were quite open about sex . . . theirs or anyone else’s . . . but still, Flinx thought, there *were* lines over which it was improper to step.

Good manners it might not have been, but in this case at least it appeared to be good business. The male harrumphed awkwardly, a deep, vibrant hum. “Twenty, then.”

“Twenty-three five, and a tenth credit less I will not say!” intoned Mother Mastiff. She folded her arms in a recognizable gesture of finality.

“Twenty-one,” countered the male.

Mother Mastiff shook her head obstinately, immovable as a Treewall. She looked ready to wait out entropy.

“Twenty-three five, not a tenth credit less. My last and final offer, good sir. This pair will find its own market. I must survive, and I fear I may have allowed you to sway me too far already.”

The male would have argued further, on principle if for nothing else, but at that point the female put truehand on his b-thorax, just below the ear, and stroked lightly. That ending the bargaining.

“Ahhh, Dark Centers! Twenty-five . . . no, twenty-three five, then! Thief! Assaulter of reason! It is well known that a human would cheat its own female-parent to make a half-credit!”

“And it is well known also,” replied Mother Mastiff smoothly as she processed the sale, “that the thranx are the most astute bargainers in the galaxy. You have gotten yourself a steal, sir, and so ‘tis you and not I the thief!”

As soon as the exchange of credit had been finalized, Flinx left his resting place by the old wall and strolled over to the combination booth and home. The thranx had departed happily, antennae entwined. On their mating flight? The male, at least, had seemed too old for that. His chiton had been shading ever so slightly into deep blue, despite the obvious use of cosmetics, while the female had been a much younger aquamarine. The thranx too took mistresses. In the moist air, their delicate perfume lingered.

“Well, mother,” he began. He was not indicating parentage—she had insisted on that years ago—but using the title bestowed on her by the folk of the markets. Everyone called her mother. “Business seems good.”

She apparently had not noticed his approach and was momentarily flustered. “What? What? Oh, ‘tis you, cub! Pah!” She gestured in the direction taken by the departed thranx. “Thieves the bugs are, to steal from me so! But have I a choice?” She did not wait for an answer. “I am an old woman and must sell occasionally to support myself, even at such prices, for who in this city would feed me?”

~~“More likely, mother, it would be you who would feed the city. I saw you purchase those same mugspirals from Olin the Coppersmith not six days ago . . . for eleven credits.”~~

“Ay? Harrumph,” she coughed. “You must be mistaken, boy. Even you can make a mistake now and then, you know. Um, have you eaten yet today?”

“A *thisk*-cake only.”

“Is that the way I raised ye, to live on sweets?” In her gratefulness for a change of subject she feigned anger. “And I’ll wager ye gave half of it to that damned snake of yours, anyway!”

Pip raised his dozing head at that and let out a mild hiss. Mother Mastiff did not like the minidrag and never had. Few people did. Some might profess friendship, and after coaxing a few could even be persuaded to pet it. But none could forget that its kind’s poison could lay a man dead in sixty seconds and the antidote was rare. Flinx was never cheated in business or pleasure when the snake lay curled about his shoulder.

“Gentle, mother. He understands what you say, you know. Not so much what as why, really.”

“Oh surely, surely! Now claim intelligence for the monster! Bewitched it is, perhaps. I believe it that latter, at least, for I can’t deny I’ve seen the thing react oddly, yes. But it does no work, sleeps constantly, and eats prodigiously. You’d be far better off without it, lad.”

He scratched the minidrag absently behind the flat, scaly head. “Your suggestion is not humorous, mother. Besides, it *does* work in the act. . . .”

“Gimmick,” she snorted, but not loudly.

“And as to its sleeping and eating habits, it is an alien thing and has metabolic requirements we cannot question. Most importantly, I like it and . . . and it likes me.”

Mother Mastiff would have argued further except that they had gone through uncounted variations of this very argument over the years. No doubt a dog or one of the local domesticated running-birds would have made a more efficacious pet for a small boy, but when she’d taken in the maltreated youngster Mother Mastiff’d had no credits for dogs or birds. Flinx had stumbled on the minidrag himself in the alley behind their first shack, rooting in a garbage heap for meats and sugars. Being ignorant of its identity, he’d approached it openly and unafraid. She’d found the two huddled together in the boy’s bed the following morning. She had hefted a broom and tried to shoo it off, but instead of being frightened the thing had opened its mouth and hissed threateningly at her. That initial attempt constituted her first and last physical effort at separating the two.

The relationship was an unusual one and much commented upon, the more so since Alaspin was many parsecs away and none could recall having heard of a minidrag living unconfined off its native world before. It was widely surmised that it had been the pet of some space trader and had gotten loose at the shuttleport and escaped. Since the importation of poisonous animals was a felony on most planets, Moth included, few were surprised that the original owner had not made noisy efforts to reclaim his property. In any case it had harmed no one (Flinx knew otherwise, and better than to boast the fact)

and so none in the marketplace protested its presence to the authorities, although all wished with a passion it would go elsewhere.

He moved to change the subject.

“How are you equipped for credit, mother?”

“Fah! Poorly, as always. But,” and this with a sly, small grin, “I should be able to manage for a while off that last transaction.”

“I’d wager,” he chuckled. He turned to survey the chromatically colored crowd which flowed unceasingly around and in front of the little shop, trying to gauge the proportion of wealthy tourists among the everyday populace. The effort, as usual, made his head ache.

“A normal day’s passings or not, mother?”

“Oh, there’s money out there now, all right! I can smell it. But it declines to come into my shop. Better luck to you, perhaps, lad.”

“Perhaps.” He walked out from under the awning and mounted the raised dais to the left of the shop. Carefully he set about rearranging the larger pots and pans which formed the bulk of Mother Mastiff’s cheaper inventory to give himself sufficient room to work.

His method of enticing an audience was simple and timeworn. He took four small *brana* balls from a pocket and began to juggle them. These were formed from the sap of a tree that grew only in Moth’s equatorial belt. Under the sun’s diffused DV they pulsed with a faint yellow light. They were perfect for his needs, being solid and of a uniform consistency. A small crowd began to gather. He added a fifth ball now, and began to vary the routine by tossing them behind his back without breaking rhythm. The word was passed outward like invisible tentacles, occasionally snatching another person here, another there, from the fringes of the shuffling mob. Soon he had acquired his own substantial little island of watchful beings. He whispered softly to the minidrag, almost buried in the soft fur.

“Up, boy.”

Pip uncurled himself from Flinx’s shoulder, unfurling his leathery wings to their fullest extent. In spite of its rarity the crowd recognized the lethal shape and drew back. The snake soared into the air and performed a delicate, spiraling descent, to settle like a crown around the boy’s head. It then proceeded to catch each ball and toss it high into the air, changing the shape but not the rhythm of the act. The unbroken fluorescent trail took on a more intricate weave. A mild pattering of applause greeted this innovation. Jugglers were more than common in Drallar, but a young one who worked so deftly with a poisonous reptile was not. A few coins landed on the platform, occasionally bouncing metallically off the big pans. More applause and more coins when the snake flipped all five balls, one after another, into a small basket at the rear of the dais.

“Thank you, thank you, gentlebeings!” said Flinx, bowing theatrically, thinking, now for the real part of the act. “And now, for your information, mystification, and elucidation . . . and a small fee” (mild laughter), “I will endeavor to answer any question, *any* question, that anyone in the audience, regardless of his race or planet of origin, would care to tempt me with.”

There was the usual skeptical murmuring from the assembly, and not a few sighs of boredom.

“All the change in my pocket,” blurted a merchant in the first row, “if you can tell me how much there is!” He grinned amid some nervous giggling from within the crowd.

Flinx ignored the sarcasm in the man’s voice and stood quietly, eyes tightly shut. Not that they had to be. He could “work” equally as well with them wide open. It was a piece of pure showmanship which the crowds always seemed to expect. Why they expected him to look inward when he had to look outward remained ever-puzzling to him. He had no real idea how his answers came to him. One minute his mind was empty, fuzzy, and the next . . . sometimes . . . an answer would appear. Although “appear” wasn’t quite right either. Many times he didn’t even understand the questions, especially in the case of alien questioners. Or the answers. Fortunately that made no difference to the audience. He could not have promised interpretations. There!

“Good sir, you have in your pocket four tenth pieces, two hundredth pieces . . . and a key admitting you to a certain club that. . . .”

“Stop, stop!” The man was waving his gnarled hands frantically and glancing awkwardly at those in the crowd nearest him. “That will do! I am convinced.” He dug into his pocket, came out with a handful of change, thrust the troublesome key back out of sight of the curious who leaned close for a look. He started to hand over the coins, then paused almost absently, a look of perplexity on his face. It changed slowly to one of surprise.

“By Pall’s tide-bore, the whelp is right! Forty-two hundredths. He’s right!” He handed over the coins and left, mumbling to himself.

Flying coins punctuated the crowd’s somewhat nervous applause. Flinx judged their mood expertly. Belief had about pulled even with derision. There were naturally those who suspected the merchant of being a plant. They granted he was a very convincing one.

“Come, come, gentlebeings! What we have here is larvae play. Surely there are those among you with questions worth tempting my simple skill?”

A being at the back of the crowd, a Quillp in full post-mating plumage, craned its thin ostrichlike neck forward and asked in a high, squeaky voice, “In what summer-month my hatchlings come about will?”

“I am truly sorry, sir, but that is a question that involves the future, and I am not a clairvoyant” The creature sighed unhappily and prepared to leave the gathering. At this sign of mortality on Flinx’s part a number of others seemed inclined to go with the tall Ornithorpe. Flinx said hurriedly, “But I hope fervent all *five* of your hatchlings successful are!”

The Quillp whirled in surprise and turned goggling eyes on the small stage. “How did you know that number my circle had?” In its excitement it spoke in its native tongue and had to be reminded by a neighbor to shift to symbospeech.

“I make it a policy not to reveal professional secrets.” Flinx yawned with calculated elaboration. “Come, a real question, gentlebeings. I bore quickly. Miracles I cannot produce, though, and they usually bore anyway.”

Two humans, big, muscular fellows, were pushing their way urgently to the stage. The one on Flinx's left wore glasses—not for their antique therapeutic value, but because in some current fashion circles it was considered something of a fad. He extended a credcard.

“Can you accept this, boy?”

Flinx bridled at the “boy,” but extracted his cardmeter. “Indeed I can, sir. Ask your question.”

The man opened his mouth, paused. “How do I know what to pay you?”

“I can't set value on my answers, only on your question. Whatever you deem it worth, sir. If I give no answer I will refund your credits.” He gestured to where the minidrag rested alertly on his shoulder. “My pet here seems to have a feel for the emotional states of others which is quite sensitive. Even more so than myself. A swindler, for example, exudes something that he is especially sensitive to. I am rarely swindled.”

The man smiled without mirth. “I wonder why?” He dialed a setting on the card, extended it again. “Will a hundred credits do?”

Flinx was quick to stifle his reaction. A hundred credits! That was more than he sometimes made in a month! For a moment he was tempted to lower the figure, mindful of the laugh Mother Mastiff might have if she found out. Especially after his comments on *her* pricings this morning. Then he reminded himself that, after all, the man had set the price and surely would not cheat himself. He tried but could detect no trace of humor about the man. Nor his companion. Quite the contrary. And he hadn't heard the question yet. What if he couldn't answer it?

“A . . . a hundred credits would be most satisfactory, sir.”

The man nodded and stuck his card in the little black meter. The compact machine hummed softly and the amount, one-oh-oh-zero-zero, clicked into place on its tiny dial. There was a brief pause and then it buzzed once, the red light on its top glowing brightly. It noted that the amount of so-and-so, card number such-and-such, was good for the amount dialed, and that credits numbering one hundred (100) had been transferred to the account of one Philip Lynx (his given name in the city records) in the Royal Depository of the sovereign Republic of Moth. Flinx returned the box to its place in his pouch and looked back to the two expectant men.

“Ask your question, sirs.”

“My companion and I are searching for a man . . . a friend . . . whom we know to be somewhere in the part of the city, but whom we have been unable as yet to contact.”

“What is there distinctive about him?” Flinx asked from under closed eyes.

The other man spoke for the first time. His voice revealed an impatience that his mind confirmed. It was brusque and low-pitched. “He is not tall . . . thin, has red hair like yourself, only darker and tighter curled. Also his skin is not so dark as yours. It is mottled, and he has wet eyes.”

That helped. Redheads were not plentiful in Drallar, and the reference to “wet eyes” indicated a man with a high sexual potential. The combination ought to be easy to locate. Flinx began to feel more

confident. Still, Drallar was large. And there was the shuttleport to consider, too.

“Not enough. What else?”

The two looked at each other. Then the bigger one spoke again. “This man is dressed in navigator’s clothes. He has with him . . . probably on his person a small map. A star map. It is hand-drawn and very unprofessional looking. He usually keeps it in his blouse, which bulges slightly in consequence.

Flinx concentrated harder. So, a shift in the internal abstract, an angle resolved. . . . He opened his eyes, looked up in surprise. His gaze roved over the rear of the silent crowd and came to rest on an individual at the back. A redheaded man, not tall, with mottled skin, wet eyes, and a slight bulge over his heart. Not surprisingly, Flinx sensed paper therein. As soon as their eyes met the man’s went wide. He broke and plunged into the market mob. At the ensuing commotion the big man turned his head and strained to see through the mass. He clasped a hand on his companion’s shoulder and pointed urgently. They started off in the direction of the disturbance, forcing the other members of the assembly out of their way with far more strength than tact.

Flinx almost called to them, but the action turned to a shrug instead. If this form of an answer satisfied the two, he certainly wasn’t going to argue the matter. A hundred credits! Without even committing himself. And the loose coin on the dais for Mother Mastiff. He waved an impulsive hand at the crowd.

“Thank you ever so for your attention, gentlebeings. For today, at least, the show is over.”

The assemblage began to melt back into the flow of traffic, accompanied by not a few groans of disappointment from would-be questioners. With the unexpected dramatic build-up he had been given by the two strangers he probably could have milked the remainder for a pile, but his gift was capricious and possessed of a tendency to tire him quickly. Best to halt with an unchallenged success. This windfall entitled him to a serious celebration, and he was already impatient to get on with it.

“Pip, if we could take in what we took today on a regular basis, the king would make me royal treasurer and you his official guardian.” The snake hissed noncommittally, the jet-black eyes staring at him. Ink boiled in those tiny poolings. Apparently government work didn’t have much appeal.

“And you are no doubt hungry again.” This produced a more positive hiss, and Flinx chuckled, scratching the minidrag under its leather-soft snout. “That’s what I thought. However, I feel that something of a more liquid nature is in order for myself. So we will make our way over to Small Symm’s, and I will guzzle spiced beer, and you may have all the pretzels your venomous little carcass will hold!” The snake wagged its tail at this, which involved its quivering all over, since it was mostly tail in the first place.

As they made their way over the cobblestone back street he began mentally to reproach himself for not playing the crowd longer. He still felt that to overuse his talent would be to burn it out. But there were times when one had to be businesslike as well as cautious, a point Mother Mastiff had made to him many times. Still, he had slept late today and gotten started later than was usual. It would probably have proved difficult to hold the crowd much longer anyway. In Drallar darkness had a tendency to disperse people rapidly, and it was even now quite black out. Besides, he had a hundred credits in his pocket! Effectively, not actually, since it was in his account at the depository. So why worry? Did the sun fight to gather new hydrogen?

He had almost reached the dimly lit bar when he tasted the sounds. They came filtering out of the alleyway to his left, a hole dark as the gullet of a giant pseudo-sturgeon from one of the Great Northern Lakes. It sounded very much like a fight. A questing probe brought back overtones of fear/anger/terror/greed/bloodlust. Fighting in fun was accompanied by much cursing and shouting. None were uttered in a battle to the death since the participants were too busy and too intent of purpose to waste the breath. Only humans fought quite that silently, so he knew they were not a part of the city's alien populace. There was that peculiar muteness of thought . . .

Flinx did not mix in such conflicts. In a city like Drallar where fat bellies and empty purses coexisted in abundance, one's own business remained healthy so long as one minded it. He had taken one step toward the peace of the bar when Pip uncoiled himself from his shoulder and streaked into the alley.

Even at his comparatively young age, Flinx could curse fluently in fourteen languages. He had time for only five before he was hurtling into the blackness after his pet. It was only in precaution that he drew the thin stiletto from its boot sheath without breaking stride.

Now he could perceive three forms in the dim light from the cloud-masked stars and the city-glow. Two were large and stood upright. The other was slight of build and lay with a recognizable stillness on the ground. One of the others bent over the prostrate body. Before it could carry out its unknown purpose, it jerked and roared loudly in the quiet.

“GODDAMN!”

The man began flailing wildly at a thin, leathery shape which dived and swooped at his head. The other pulled the wicked shape of a neuronc pistol from a shoulder cup and tried to sight on the rapidly moving object. Flinx had no time to think. With vague thoughts of forcing the man to the ground and knocking him out, he leaped onto the man's back. The thick ropes of broad muscle he felt beneath the man's blouse rapidly squelched that idea. The man lurched. In another second he'd be smashed against the wall of the nearest building. The thin blade plunged once, instinctively. The big man buckled horribly and crashed to the ground like a great tree. Flinx had already left the dead hulk before it reached the pavement.

The other whirled to meet this new menace as his companion pitched forward onto his face. Cursing, he fired in Flinx's direction. Rolling like mad, the youth had made the cover of a broken metal crate. Fortunately the man's night vision didn't seem as good as his own. Even so, the near miss sent a painful tingle up his leg. An almost-hit with the ugly weapon would cause a man literally to shake himself to death in a series of uncontrollable muscular spasms. A direct hit to the heart or brain would kill instantly. Supposedly such weapons were outlawed on Moth. Obviously the law could be circumvented. The man rayed the area to his left. It was a mistake. Unhampered, Pip had the time he needed. The minidrag spat once.

It was not a gesture of defiance, but of death. The flying snakes or “miniature dragons” of Alaspin are akin to a few other carnivorous creatures. Among these is the *Hemachacus*, or spitting cobra, of Terra. The latter has forward-facing fangs, and instead of injecting its venom via a bite, can spit it to a surprising distance with remarkable accuracy. The Alaspinian minidrags, however, have no fangs. Only small cutting teeth for biting. Little work has actually been done on them on their seldom visited planet, but they apparently, eject their poison through a narrowing tube of cartilaginous material running along the roof of the mouth. Muscles running the length of the jaw and along the neck force

the venom even farther than the Terran types, and with greater accuracy. Fortunately the minidrag had a relatively mild disposition and attacks only when threatened. Pip's actions were therefore unusual but not incomprehensible.

The man gave vent to a shockingly shrill, soul-tearing scream and sank to his knees, clawing at his eyes. The venom was corrosive as well as killing. It was not fatal unless it got into the bloodstream, and so by rubbing at his eyes the man effectively killed himself. In thirty seconds he had become incapable of even that.

In another thirty he was incapable of doing anything at all.

Pip returned to his familiar resting place. As he settled his coils around Flinx's shoulder, the boy could feel the unnatural tension in the reptile's muscles. There was a brief urge to bawl the minidrag out good and proper, but his narrow escape and the fact that the snake had once again saved his life put it off. Time pressed. Still shaking slightly from muscular reaction of his own, he crept from his hiding place to the results of an undesired action.

The only sounds in the alley were the ruffling whispers made by the always moist air flowing over the silk-cool stones and the steady plop, plop, plop of blood flowing from the wound in the back of the man the stiletto had finished. There remained the third body. In spite of everything, he had been too late to help the small man. His neck had been broken cleanly. Unmoving, the sightless eyes reflected the silent stars.

There was just sufficient light for him to make out the man's brilliant red hair.

A crumpled piece of plastic lay clutched in a spasmodically frozen hand. Flinx pried it from his grasp, bending open the lifeless but still stubborn fingers. Above him lights began to come on as the cautious inhabitants of the alleyway decided it was safe to trust their precious selves to the quiet uncertainty of the night. Prudence had been served and now curiosity had taken over. It was time for him to leave. Now that the locals had bestirred themselves and the action had been resolved the local constabulary would be arriving. Although they would take their time, they would get here nonetheless. It would not do to be found standing over three lifeless bodies, all of them blatantly outworld. Especially when one of them had registered a hundred credits to his account only this afternoon.

He didn't like stealing from the dead, but anything that small that could cause the death of three men in one night was too important to leave to the discretion of the police. Without more than a casual glance at it, he shoved the rumpled sheet into his pouch.

The police arrived shortly after he had exited the mouth of the alley. A sudden increase in the babble of thoughts and voices told him that the bodies had been discovered. For locals action was time-defined and pedantic. When the police discovered that the three corpses were outworlders, a search pattern would be put into effect with small delay. Murder was not conducive to increased tourism. He hurried a mite faster toward the bar.

Small Symm's establishment was notable not so much for its food and drink, but rather for the reputation it enjoyed as being one of the few places in Drallar where a being could go at night, get comfortably drunk, and still be assured of retaining the same amount of body fluid that he had commenced the evening with. Small Symm himself was well aware of the business this favorable

standing attracted to his place and so labored mightily to maintain it. He did not know it, but if his business had been a country on Terra several odd centuries ago, it would have been called Switzerland.

As Small Symm stood well over two meters tall and weighed in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifty kilos, few felt inclined to dispute his neutrality. Those who had yearnings to contented themselves with imbibing elsewhere and commenting on the inordinate size of the barkeep's ears.

There were no drinking laws on Moth. Only sober ones, as the saying went. As far as the judges were concerned one could proceed directly from the mother's breast to a bottle of Old Yeast-Bubble's best mash brew liquor. The end result of this oft-commented upon degenerate policy was a thriving local industry and a surprisingly small number of alcoholics.

However, there had been a few who had commented at times on Flinx's comparative youth and thereby questioned his right to imbibe fermented spirits. One particular person, a traveling sinspinner from Puritan, had been especially obnoxious in this respect. Small Symm had lumbered over and politely advised the fellow to mind his own business. Holding fast to the tenets of his faith (and being a bit tipsy himself), the man had told Symm in no uncertain terms what he could do with his suggestions. The next thing he knew, his right arm had been neatly broken in two places. As gently as possible. The outworlder had gone straight to the police and the police had objected . . . after all, an outworlder, respected . . . but not too vigorously. Especially after Symm had picked up their paddyraft and jammed it immovably into a sewer opening. After that Flinx and Symm both found themselves little troubled by minions of either God or Cop.

The giant was pleased to see him. Not the least of the things they had in common was the fact that both were technically orphans.

"A dry hearth, young master! And how does the world find you tonight?"

Flinx took the seat at the end of the bar. "It finds me well enough, enormous one. Well enough so that I will have a bottle of your very finest Burrberry beer, and a cauldron of pretzels for my friend."

He rubbed the snake under the jaw and Pip's eyes slitted in appreciation. There were times when he would swear he could hear the thing purr. But since no one else could, he never made it a point of discussion.

Symm's eyebrows went up slightly. Burrberry was expensive, and potent. He was far more concerned about the youth's ability to handle the former, however. The red ale was imported all the way from Crnkk, a thranx planet, and packed quite a kick for even a full-grown human. But he fetched it, and the pretzels for the minidrag.

When he returned, the snake did not wait for an invitation, but dived immediately into the bowl and began wallowing around in the salty twists, its tongue darting and flicking with machinelike rapidity at the big halite crystals. Like many things in Drallar, even the pretzels disdained subtlety. Flinx reflected again that for an undeniably carnivorous animal, his pet was notoriously fond of grain products. The minidrag's culinary adaptability had been one reason why it had been able to thrive so well in the city. There had been times when meat had been scarce, and vermin as well, and he and Mother Mastiff had watched in wonderment as the reptile happily downed large portions of salted bread or *pime*, the cheap cornlike growths that infested many of Moth's softwoods.

Flinx hefted the delicately formed bottle and poured the cherry-red brew, watching it foam pinkly over the lip of the mug. Brewing was one of the thranx's most polished abilities. It was too late for the few perpetual drunkards and too early for most night crawlers. Small Symm satisfied himself that his other customers were taken care of and hunkered himself over the bar, leaning on crossed arms like hirsute trees. He watched silently as the boy downed a long draught of the effervescent liquid, then began on the remainder with short, caressing sips. Now and then a satisfied hiss would come from the region to their right, among the pretzels.

The barkeep's eyebrows jumped again when Flinx elected to pay for the nourishments in coin.

"Business has been so good, then?"

"It has, it has. Believe it or not, old friend, I made a hundred credits today. Honestly, too!" The recent memory of three bodies in an alley came back to him. "Although now I am not so glad I did, maybe."

"That is a strange thing to say." The giant poured himself a tiny yttrium cognac. "I am happy for you but somewhat disappointed also, for it will mean that you will not need the job I've lined up for you."

"Oh? Don't be in such a hurry, massive one. And don't try to psych me, either. I am solvent at the moment, true, but money has a tendency to slip unnoticed from my fingers. I give too much away, also. And I have the old woman to think of, although by now she might own the city fountains, despite her protestations of poverty."

"Ah. Mother Mastiff, of course. Well, possibly you would be interested, then. I can at least promise you some intriguing company." He gestured behind Flinx. "The third booth. Two most extraordinary personages."

Flinx turned to look at the small, cloth-covered booths which lined the back of the establishment. Business and pleasure, sometimes mixed, were often conducted in those shrouded enclaves. He peered harder in the fuzzy light. Most people could not have discerned anything at even that short distance, but Flinx did not look with his eyes alone. Yes, there were indeed two figures in the indicated booth. And yes, from what he could see of them they did form an odd pair.

One was a very tall human. His face was not sallow, but composed mostly of acute angles, like knife blades protruding out from under the skin. His hair seemed to be graying at the temples and back, a natural turning of color, and one streak of pure white ran all the way from front to back. The eyes were sharply slanted, almost mongoloid, and as black as most of his hair. They were made to appear mild incongruous by the bushy eyebrows which met over the bridge of the nose. The mouth was small and thin-lipped, and the body, while not skinny, had the slenderness of careful diet more than vigorous exercise. He was heavily tanned on the visible portions of his body, the tan that Flinx had come to recognize as belonging to men who had been long in space and exposed to greater amounts of naked ultraviolet than most.

If the man was unusual, his companion was twice so. Although Flinx had not seen so very many thranx, for they did not congregate in Drallar, he had seen enough to know that the one lounging across from the man was by far the oldest he'd ever come across. Its chiton had faded from a normal healthy pale blue to a deep purple that was almost black. The antennae drooped to the sides and were scaly at the base. Even at this distance he could perceive how the shell below the wing cases (both were present: unmated, then) was exfoliating. Only the glowing, jewellike compound eyes glittered

with a gold that signified youth and vigor. A pity that he could not perceive even deeper.

The cloth effectively cut off their conversation at this distance, but now and then the insect would make a gesture with a truehand and the human would nod solemnly in response. Flinx found the liquor hampering him. Almost angrily, he turned back to his friend.

“You were right, Symm. An odd coupling to find here.”

“They’ve been in every night for four nights running now, and they drink steadily, although it seems to have about as much effect on them as water. But to the point. As is plain to a *Mottl*-bird, they are strangers here. Yesterday they first began inquiring after a guide, saying that they wish to see more of the city. I was at a loss to help them until I thought of you. But now, since you are grown as rich as the king. . . .”

“No, no. Wait.” Flinx was feeling expansive. Perhaps it was the beer. “They should be good for a few stories, if nothing else. Yes, I’ll assume the conveyance.”

Symm grinned and ruffled the boy’s hair roughly. “Good! I thought a glimpse of them might persuade you, as your interest in things off-world is notorious. Why it should be, though, the Tree knows! Wait here, I’ll go tell them.”

He went out from behind the bar and over to the booth. Through the faintly puce haze induced by the beer he could see the giant part the curtain and murmur to the two beings within.

“Well,” he muttered to himself. “One thing’s helping, anyways. At least they’re not common tourists. Perhaps I’ll be spared the agony of watching them chortle over buying shiploads of junk at three times the honest price.” He made a sound that was a long hiss ending in a popped bubble. A scaly, smug head popped up from the bowl of demolished pretzels, which had shrunken considerably in volume. The minidrag slid out onto the table and up the proffered arm, curling into its familiar position on Flinx’s shoulder. It burped once, sheepishly.

Symm returned with the two off-worlders in tow. “This youth is called Flinx, sirs, and offers to be your guide. A finer or more knowledgeable one cannot be found in the city. Do not be misled by his comparative youth, for he has already acquired more information than is good for him.”

Here at close range Flinx was able to study his two charges better. He did so, intently. The tall human was a fair sixth meter shorter than the huge Symm, but the thranx was truly a giant of its kind. With its upper body raised as it was now, its eyes were almost on a level with Flinx’s own. The entire insect was a full 2 meters long. One and a half was normal for a male of the species. That their eyes were busy in their own scrutiny of him he did not mind. As a performer he was more than used to that. But he found himself looking away from those great golden orbs. Meeting them was too much like staring into an ocean of shattered prisms. He wondered what it was like to view life that way, through a thousand tiny eyes instead of merely two large ones.

When the man spoke, it was with a surprisingly melodious voice. “How do you do, youngster. Our good dispenser of spirits here informs us that you are practically indispensable to one who wishes to see something of your city.”

He extended a hand and Flinx shook it, surprised at the calluses there. As the effects of the mildly hallucinogenic brew wore off, he became increasingly aware of the uniqueness of the two beings he was going to be associating with. Each exuded an aura of something he'd not encountered before, even in his wanderings among the denizens of the shuttleport.

“My name is Tse-Mallory . . . Bran. And this, my companion, is the Eint Truzenzuzex.”

The insect bowed from the “waist” at the introduction, a swooping, flowing motion not unlike that of a lake-skimmer diving for a surface swimming fish. Another surprise: it spoke Terranglo, instead of symbospeech. Here was a learned and very polite bug indeed! Few thranx had the ability to master more than a few elementary phrases of Terranglo. Its inherent logical inconsistencies tended to give them headaches. The insect's pronunciation, however, was as good as his own. The rasping quality of it was made unavoidable by the different arrangement of vocal cords.

“High metamorphosis to you, youth. We've been in need of a guide to this confusing city of yours for several days, actually. We're very glad you've agreed to help us out of our difficulty.”

“I'll do what I can, gentlesirs.” This flattery was embarrassing.

“We would prefer to start at dawn tomorrow,” said Tse-Mallory. “We're here on business, you see, and a more intimate acquaintance with the city is a prerequisite which we have put off too long already. We were expecting a guide to meet us, actually, but since he has apparently changed his mind, you will have the commission.”

“We are staying at a small inn a short distance down this same street,” added Truzenzuzex. “Its sign shows three fishes and . . .”

“. . . a starship. I know the place, sir. I'll meet you at first-fog—seven hours—tomorrow, in the lobby.” The two shook hands with him once again and made as if to take their leave. Flinx coughed delicately but insistently. “Uh, a small detail, sirs.”

Tse-Mallory paused. “Yes?”

“There is the matter of payment.”

The thranx made the series of rapid clicking sounds with its mandibles which passed for laughter among its kind. The insects had a highly developed, sometimes mischievous sense of humor.

“So! Our guide is a plutocrat as well! No doubt as a larvae you were a hopeless sugar-hoarder. How about this, then? At the conclusion of our tour tomorrow—I daresay one day will be sufficient for our purposes—we will treat you to a meal at the finest comestabulary in the food crescent.”

Well! Let's see now, twelve courses at Portio's would come to . . . well! His mouth was watering already.

“That'll be great . . . sufficient, I mean, sirs.” Indeed, it would!

Chapter Two

Flinx was of course not a guide by profession, but he knew ten times as much about the real Drallar as the bored government hirelings who conducted the official tours of the city's high spots for bemused off-wonders. He'd performed this function for other guests of Small Symm more than once in the past.

These, however, had proved themselves rather *outré touristas*. He showed them the great central marketplace, where goods from halfway across the Arm could be found. They did not buy. He took them to the great gate of Old Drallar, a monumental arch carved from water-pure silicon dioxide by native craftsmen, and so old it was not recorded in the palace chronicles. They did not comment. He took them also to the red towers where the fantastic flora of Moth grew lush in greenhouses under the tender ministrations of dedicated royal botanists. Then to the tiny, out-of-the-way places, where could be bought the unusual, the rare, and the outlawed. Jeweled dishware, artwork, weaponry, utensils, gems, rare earths and rare clothings, tickets to anywhere. Scientific instruments, scientists, females of other sexes of any species. Drugs: medicinal, hallucinogenic, deadly, preservative. Thoughts and palm-readings. Only rarely did either of them say this or that small thing about their surroundings. One might almost have thought them bored.

Once it was at an antique cartographer's, and then in a language incomprehensible to the multilinguistic Flinx.

Yes, for two who had seemed so needful of a guide, they had thus far shown remarkably little interest in their surroundings. They seemed far more interested in Flinx and Pip than in the city he was showing them. As late afternoon rolled around he was startled to realize how much they had learned about him through the most innocent and indirect questioning. Once, when Truzenzuzex had leaned forward to observe the minidrag more closely, it had drawn back warily and curled its head out of sight behind Flinx's neck. That itself was an oddity. The snake's normal reaction was usually either passivity or belligerence. This was the first time Flinx could recall it's displaying uncertainty. Apparently Truzenzuzex made little of the incident, but he never tried to approach the reptile closely again.

"You are an outstanding guide and a cheerful companion," the thranx said, "and I for one count myself fortunate to have you with us." They had moved along until they were now quite a distance from the city's center. Truzenzuzex gestured ahead to where the tower homes of the very wealthy stretched away in landscaped splendor. "Now we would wish to see the manicured grounds and hanging gardens of Drallar's inurbs, of which we have both heard so much."

"I'm afraid I cannot manage that, sir. The grounds of Braav inurb are closed to such as I, and there are groundkeepers—with guns—who are posted by the walls to keep the common folk from infesting the

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