

Foster, Alan Dean - Commonwealth 21 - Sideshow (v1.0 SS)

SIDESHOW

A Flinx and Pip story

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Many years ago, Judy-Lynn del Rey edited a sequence of original novelettes in a series called Stellar. When she asked me for a Flinx Pip story to include, I was at something of a loss as to what to do, never having utilized the characters in anything shorter than a novel. The result, "Snake Eyes," was a lot of fun.

Time passes, and Chris Schluep at Del Rey Books asks for another F P short to include in this anthology. Once again I'm caught wondering what might be appropriate, and fun, when it occurs to me that even the heroes of long-running series need a vacation once in a while. Flinx not having been home in a long time (insofar as he has a home), I thought it was time he paid a visit to his old empathizing grounds.

Of course, this being Flinx, even a vacation back home couldn't possibly turn out to be as peaceful and relaxing as he would hope it to be.

You never know what you'll see on a side street in Drallar.

From time to time, Flinx felt the pull of the only home he'd ever known. So, in the course of his wanderings, he would return now and again to the winged planet of Moth, and to the simple dwelling still occupied by the irascible old woman he, and everyone else, called Mother Mastiff.

It was good to roam the backstreets and alleys of the hodgepodge of a city, taking in sights both new and familiar; inhaling the amalgamating aromas of a hundred worlds; observing the free-floating, arguing, laughing, chattering farrago of humans, thrax, and other citizens of the Commonwealth. Here he had no responsibilities. Here his only concern was relaxation. Here he could mix freely without constantly having

to look over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. Here he could-

Without warning, Pip, his Alaspinian minidrag, promptly uncoiled herself from his shoulder, launched herself into the fragrant, damp air, and took off down a minor side avenue crammed with vendors and street merchants. Fortunately, he reflected bemusedly as he took off after her, she flew high enough to avoid precipitating a panic. Among those strollers and vendors who did see her, few were knowledgeable enough to identify her and recognize her lethal capabilities.

She landed on a diffusion grating the size of a dinner plate that projected from the crest of a three-story building. As soon as he slowed, staring up at her, she launched herself into the air and glided back down to settle once more on his shoulder, her petite but powerful coils securing herself to him.

"Now, what was that all about?" he murmured soothingly to her. "What set you off? I'll bet it was a smell, wasn't it? Some kind of exotic food full of especially attractive trace minerals?" The only problem with this theory was that the nearest food stall lay two blocks distant. No vendors of unusual victuals were open nearby.

What was close at hand was a performance by one of Drallar's innumerable, alien, untaxed, and probably illegal street performers. The human was short, florid of face, glistening of scalp, and thick of arm, leg, and middle. His black sideburns fronted his ears and threatened to overwhelm his jawline. His trained subordinate was decidedly nonhuman, not quite as tall, considerably slimmer, and clad in an elegant coat of soft white fur marked with bright blue stripes and splotches. Its eyes were elongated and yellow, with dark blue vertical pupils. Dressed in short pants and matching vest of garish green and gold silk, with flower-studded beret and oversized necktie for emphasis, the alien was performing a simple yet lively dance routine to the accompaniment of music that poured from its master's quinube player. Almost lost among the fur and silks was the control band, no thicker than a piece of string, that fit tightly around its neck.

Watching the performance, Flinx let his peculiar talent expand to encompass the appreciative crowd, not all of whom were human. The expected emotions were all there: amusement, low-grade wonder, expectation, curiosity. With growing maturity, he had developed the ability to focus his abilities on selected individuals. Probing the musician-master, he sensed approval and contentment, but also an underlying, simmering anger.

Well, the personal emotional problems of the player-owner were no more his concern or responsibility than were those of the hundreds of intelligent beings whose feelings he had sampled since awakening in Mother Mastiff's home early this morning. After watching the performance for another couple of minutes, mildly admiring the owner's skill with the quinube and his creature's agile, three-toed feet, he turned to leave.

Immediately, Pip rose from his shoulder and hovered. Spectators who had ignored the minidrag's colorful presence on Flinx's shoulder now found themselves drawn to the deep-throated whirring of the flying snake's wings. More instinctively wary than educated about the minidrag's potential, a few moved aside to give her more air space in which to hover.

"Now what?" An irritated Flinx extended his left arm. When he moved toward her, the obstinate flying snake continued to refuse the proffered perch. "I don't have time for this, Pip!" Actually, he had nothing but time. Not that his assertion mattered, since the minidrag comprehended only his emotions, not his words.

He eventually raised the level of the former to the point where she finally settled, albeit with evident

reluctance, onto his forearm. As soon as she had curled herself securely around it, he began stroking her. When she tried to rise again into the air, he held her firmly in place, his right hand keeping her membranous wings collapsed firmly against the sides of her body. Anyone else presuming to physically restrain the minidrag's movements would have found themselves with maybe a minute to live, a victim of Pip's incredibly toxic and corrosive venom. Despite her obvious desire to spread her pleated wings again, she would no more harm Flinx than she would one of her own offspring. While she continued to twist and wriggle in an attempt to get free of his grasp, she did not bite, or worse.

They were nearly back to Mother Mastiff's place before she finally relaxed enough to where he felt safe in removing his restraining fingers. Instead of attempting to fly off, she slithered up his arm to curl comfortably around his neck, as if nothing unusual had happened. Shaking his head as he tried to figure out what had gotten into her, he entered the humble dwelling.

It was far less humble within. His travels and adventures had allowed Flinx, during a previous visit to Drallar, to cause the home to be furnished far more lavishly than it appeared from outside. Given a choice, he would have moved Mother Mastiff to another, better section of the city entirely. Upon listening to his proposal, the old woman's reaction had been wholly in keeping with her peppery, independent self.

"And what be a 'better' section of the city, boy? Fancier streets-with no character? Bigger houses-that ain't homes? Folks with money-and no soul? No thankee. I'll stay here, and happily so, where I've stayed all these many years." Wizened eyes that could still see clearly had met his own without wavering. "Was once good enough for you, boy, when I bought you. But-" She hesitated. "-I could use a new cooker."

He'd bought that for her, and much else. Tucked in between two larger, newer structures, her home now boasted the latest in household conveniences, as well as a self-adjusting, transparent privacy ceiling through which she could admire the stars and the sweep of part of Moth's famous broken rings.

She wasn't at home when he arrived. Though it was growing late, he didn't worry about her. A small smile curved his lips. Old she might be, but he pitied anyone who accosted her on the streets. Expecting an easy mark, they would find themselves confronted with an explosive bundle of experience and harsh words-not to mention a lightweight but lethal assortment of concealed weaponry. Mother Mastiff had not survived the mean streets of Drallar for so long by wandering about unprepared to deal with whatever they might happen to throw her way.

Probably visiting Mockle Wynn, he mused, or the Twegsay twins. She knew half the population of this district, and they her. He'd see her again tomorrow.

After checking in with his ship, the Teacher, he prepared supper for himself and Pip. The minidrag had seemingly returned to normal. She ate quietly, evincing no interest in abruptly flying through the door in search of attractions unknown. Afterward, he relaxed in front of the tridee he'd bought for Mother Mastiff, finishing off the evening with a reading of a portion of the new thrax research report on Cantarian hivenoids, before retiring to the small bedroom that was kept ready for him whenever he might choose to visit. Lying on his back on the lightly scented aerogel bed, staring up at the starfield through the tough but transparent ceiling, he wondered which of the flickering lights in the night sky he ought to visit next. Wondered which might be the more interesting, or possibly hold a clue to the mysteries that were himself.

He had just fallen asleep when he felt Pip stirring against his bare shoulder. Almost instantly, his eyes were open and he was fully alert, having developed the ability early in his childhood to awaken to full awareness on a moment's notice. Extending himself, he sensed nothing. Similarly, Pip remained on the bed. Had either of them been in any imminent danger, she would have spread her wings and risen

ceilingward, assuming a defensive posture.

Even so, there was obviously something in the room with them.

As quietly and slowly as possible, he rose to a sitting position. His nakedness did not trouble him. Clothes were for the insecure, shirt and pants hardly weapons in any case. His manner of fighting did not require that he be clothed according to community standards.

The figure that crossed from the now open window toward the door that led to the rest of the house was bipedal and short of stature. Therein the similarity to anything human ended. Reaching toward the bed's headboard, Flinx waved his open palm in the direction of a sensor. Instantly, the bedroom was flooded with soft, subdued light. The responsive, sensitive ceiling opaqued accordingly.

Startled by the unexpected burst of illumination, the trespasser threw up both arms to shield its eyes. Its small mouth opened, but no sound came out. As the long, vertical pupils contracted against the light, Flinx recognized the intruder.

It was the white-and-blue-furred performing animal he had seen earlier in the day.

As naked human and equally unclad intruder eyed one another uncertainly, Pip rose into the air and flew toward it. The elongated, vaguely sorrowful eyes tracked the minidrag's path. Whether out of ignorance or familiarity, the creature showed no fear as Pip glided in its direction. Nor did it panic when the deadly flying snake landed on its shoulder. Quite the contrary. Reaching up, it began to gently stroke the minidrag with the three long, flexible furred fingers of one hand. Flinx tensed as physical contact was initiated. Highly protective of both her human and her wings, Pip rarely allowed herself to be touched by others.

Yet now, instead of reacting aggressively, she completely relaxed, as if she'd settled into the comforting grasp of an old friend.

And still, Flinx felt nothing. As Flinx sat on the side of the bed, it didn't take long to postulate that something about this creature had drawn Pip's uncharacteristically single-minded attention earlier in the day. Was it an empath, an empathetic telepath, like himself and the minidrag? But if that was the case, then why couldn't he feel the slightest emotional emanation from the voiceless nocturnal visitor? By letting his talent range in the direction of nearby apartments and other buildings, he knew that his often erratic ability was functioning. But from the intruder, he sensed nothing. Yet there was palpably something at work here. What was he overlooking?

Certainly not the crash and fracturing that came from the front door, as three figures burst into the house. They headed straight for the bedroom, as if they had a map. A glance in the direction of the alien dancer's now softly phosphorescent control necklace explained why they didn't need one.

Two of the intruders were big, burly, and as sour of expression as the emotions they openly projected. Standing between them and holding a weapon of his own was the alien's owner. His emotions were darker still. While he did not quite transude murder, the potential underlined the rest of his clearly projected feelings.

Taking his time, Flinx slipped on a pair of pants. Pip was airborne. Interestingly, she hovered not close to him, but above the furry alien visitor. The latter, Flinx noted with interest, had pressed itself into a corner of the small room. Though its eyes were alien and unreadable, there was no mistaking the energy and effort it was expending to keep as far away from the three uninvited visitors as possible. For his part,

the emotions its owner projected in its direction were utterly devoid of anything resembling affection.

"Pretty clever of you, kid." Though Flinx was now two and twenty years and stood taller than average, he still had the face of a youngster. "I remember you from the afternoon show earlier today. Thought you could get away with this, eh, blaflek?"

Focusing his attention on the trio of weapons at hand, Flinx casually slipped into a shirt, careful to make no sudden moves as he did so. "Get away with what?"

"Stealing my Aslet monkey. You're not the first blaflek to try. You won't be the first to succeed."

So that's what the creature was called. From his voracious research, Flinx knew what a monkey was: a kind of primitive Terran primate. The creature cowering silently in the corner of his bedroom didn't look much like a monkey to him. He had never heard of Aslet.

He had, however, heard of similar scams. Raised on the streets of Drallar, he had encountered numerous schemes and swindles, and in his youth had even participated in a few.

"I didn't steal him," he replied calmly as he pulled his shirt down over his head. "He showed up here on his own." He nodded in the direction of the open window. "Let himself in pretty quietly. His fingers must be as nimble as his feet, even if he is short a few. Knows his way around basic security systems, too." He eyed the man evenly. "I wonder how and where he learned how to bypass those?"

Smiling grimly, the owner shook his head. "Nice try, kid, but it won't wash. You're a thief, and we're turning you over to the police."

So that was how it worked, Flinx realized. Send the Aslet into somebody's home, preferably someone who had been in the audience for one of the creature's earlier performances. That would establish a connection and provide witnesses. Then claim it had been stolen, and threaten to have the "thief" arrested. Unless, no doubt, some sort of accommodation could be reached that would avoid the need to involve the authorities. Even as they stood there confronting one another, the owner and his goons probably had a bought cop or two awaiting their possible arrival down at the nearest police office. Simple and clean. No doubt most confused, challenged victims paid up rather than risk the possibility of spending time in a correction institute, or the indignity of being exposed in a court trial.

"If you had a legitimate claim about a theft, you would have brought the police along with you, instead of these two." He indicated the pair who flanked the owner.

The shorter man grinned. "You're a clever little snot, aren't you? So you've figured it out."

Flinx smiled faintly. "I live off planet now, but I grew up here."

The owner gestured with his weapon. "Doesn't matter. My friends down at the patrol office will listen to me, not you. Of course, such unpleasantness can easily be avoided."

"I wonder how?" Flinx was much more curious about something else. It would have to wait. "Why pick on me?" He indicated his surroundings. "Neither my mother, whose home this is, nor myself are particularly well off. Why make targets out of us?"

"I don't pick 'em," the owner grunted. Turning, he pointed toward the creature huddling in the corner. "He does." The man squinted at his surroundings. "I agree with you, though. This isn't one of his better

choices."

Flinx frowned. "The Aslet chooses the mark? How- at random?"

The owner shrugged. "Beats me. When I'm in the mood and have the time to do a little business, I just let him loose. After he's had time to make his way across part of the city, my associates and I track him down." Meaningfully, he ran a finger around his neck. "Transmitter is easy to follow." Reaching into a pocket, he pulled out a tiny device and aimed it in the Anslet's general direction. "He doesn't like me much, but that collar makes him do as he's told."

"I don't like you much, either," Flinx declared quietly.

The owner was not offended. "You'll do as you're told, too. I'm not a greedy person. A thousand credits will get all of us out of here, including the monkey, and you'll never see any of us ever again." His smile returned. "Unless you decide to catch another performance, that is."

"No," Flinx told him.

"No?" The man's smile vanished. "No what?"

"No money," Flinx replied. "No credits. Not a thousand. Not a fraction thereof. Get out of my mother's house."

The two men flanking the owner stirred slightly. The owner sighed. "Look, kid, if there's no available credit, you can pay us in goods. I saw plenty of valuable stuff when we came in." He shrugged indifferently. "Or we can shoot you, take what we want, and if anyone investigates, claim that you attacked us when I tried to reclaim my property."

In response to Flinx's rising level of upset and concern, Pip began to dart back and forth against the roof like a giant moth, the equivalent of pacing nervously in midair. Curious, the player-owner looked up in her direction.

"What is that thing, anyway?"

"That," Flinx murmured, enlightening both the speaker and his two accomplices, "is an Alaspinian minidrag. You don't want to make her any madder than she already is now."

"Why not?" The owner smiled. "Is it going to bite me?" The muzzle of his pistol came up.

"No," Flinx told him. "She doesn't have to."

The owner nodded. Turning to the man on his left, he uttered a single brusque command. "Kill it."

Sensing the man's intent by reading the homicidal emotion that rose suddenly and sharply within him, Pip darted forward and spat. Striking the would-be killer in his right eye, the gob of corrosive poison ate immediately into the soft ocular jelly and entered his bloodstream, the incredibly powerful neurotoxin proceeding to instantly paralyze every muscle it encountered. When it reached his heart and stopped that, the man collapsed.

His single shot went wild, blowing a hole in the roof and showering the room with shards of photosensitive engineered silicate. Rising above the noise, the now panicked shouts of the owner and his

surviving associate echoed through the room.

From a drawer in the bed's headboard, Flinx pulled the small pistol he always carried with him in places like Drallar. Unfortunately for the intruders, he did not have time to reset it to stun. The second henchman got off one blast, destroying a fair chunk of the wall behind Flinx's bed, before Flinx put him down for good. Given time, he would simply have used his nascent ability to persuade all three of them to leave. Regrettably, the attack on Pip had reduced the time available for subtle emotional projection to none.

Bug-eyed, the owner fled. He made it as far as the front door he and his friends had blown in. Before he could dash through the opening, something brightly colored, diamond-patterned, and superfast materialized before his eyes.

Then there was only the brief but intense burning, burning in his eyes before he died.

Emerging from the bedroom, his small pistol still gripped tightly in one hand, Flinx walked over to the body of the owner. Smoke rose from his face, the hallmark of an angry Pip's attentions. In his other hand, Flinx held the small device the man had withdrawn from his pocket and pointed in the direction of the alien Aslet. He'd dropped it in his haste to flee.

Letting it fall to the floor, he aimed his pistol at it and fired once. Emerging from the bedroom behind him, the Aslet started, then relaxed. Once again, its mouth moved and no sound came out. The alien's attitude, if not its expression, was readily comprehensible even across interspecies boundaries. As Flinx looked on, Pip landed once again on the furry shoulder.

Flinx gazed long and curiously into the elongated alien eyes. The emotions of the three intruding humans had been clear to him as day. But this peculiar creature continued to remain as emotionally blank as a section of insulated wall.

"I think," he murmured aloud, even though there was no one around to hear him, "we need to find out what you are, besides an agile dancer." He started back toward his room. Behind him, Pip continued to rest contentedly on the Aslet's shoulder, allowing it to stroke the lethal coils without interference or objection. Mother Mastiff would be furious at the damage to her home.

Aslet, it turned out when he presented himself and his furry new companion to the relevant local government bureau, was a newly classified world on the fringes of the Commonwealth. In addition to being the abode of the usual extensive panoply of new and intriguing alien life-forms, it was also home to a primitive species of low intelligence and simple culture. Most definitely not related to any known species of monkey, the natives of Aslet lived in caves and utilized the simplest and most basic of primitive tools.

They also, he learned, communicated in high-pitched squeaks and squirms that were above the range of human hearing. The Aslet Flinx had liberated had been trying to talk to him all along. Flinx, along with every other human and thranx, simply did not possess auricular equipment with sufficient range to detect the alien's verbalizations.

Flinx tried to imagine what it would be like to be constantly screaming your pain, daily pleading for help from a world full of diverse sentient beings, all of whom would appear to be suffering from universal and total deafness.

The Aslet, it was reported, were exceedingly emotional creatures, given to a wide range of displays that evidently supplemented their limited ultrasonic vocabulary. Like their vocalizing, these emotional projections were also beyond anyone's ability to perceive, including Flinx.

But not, apparently, Pip.

The flying snake had been drawn to them immediately, during the forced performance he and Flinx had witnessed on the streets of Drallar. No wonder that when temporarily set free by its owner, the intelligent Aslet had homed in on Pip, locating the empathic minidrag snake in the midst of the city's innumerable twists and turnings. The revelation added directly to Flinx's store of knowledge about himself. Evidently, there were sentient emotional projections that were beyond his ability to perceive. But those were not the final thoughts the experience left him pondering as he bid farewell to the now collarless Aslet, soon to be repatriated by the government to its homeworld.

If no human could sense the very real emotions of something like the Aslet, he found himself wondering again and again, nor even hear, much less understand, their language, might there not be, out there, another species more powerful than any yet encountered that would view humankind in the same unintentionally uninformed light?

Was there even now, on some far-distant world, a collared human being made to dance and perform tricks for a species that could neither understand, nor hear, nor sympathize with the unfortunate captive?

Not for the first time, when he gazed up at the stars, he found himself wondering if there were worlds among that scattered multitude he might not be better off avoiding...

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