

REUNION

ALAN DEAN FOSTER



BALLANTINE BOOKS

REUNION

A Pip & Flinx Novel

Alan Dean Foster

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[A Note on History of Interstellar Travel](#)

[About the Author](#)

For my niece, Lauren Elizabeth Hedish
With love from Uncle Alan . . .

Chapter 1

When bad people are chasing you, life is dangerous. When good people are chasing you, life is awkward. But when you are chasing yourself, the most simple facts of existence become disturbing, destabilizing, and a source of unending waking confusion.

So it was with Flinx, who in searching for the history of himself, found that he was once again treading upon the hallowed, mystic soil of the spherical blue-white womb among the stars that had given birth to his whole species. Only, the soil he was treading presently was being treated by those around him with something other than veneration, and a means of sourcing the information he hoped to uncover was still to be found.

Tacrica was a beautiful place in which to be discouraged. Sensitive to his frustration, Pip had been acting fidgety for days. An iridescent flutter of pleated pink-and-blue wings and lethal, diamond-backed body, she would rise from his shoulder to dart aimlessly about his head and neck before settling restlessly back down into her customary position of repose. As active as she was colorful, the mature female minidrags was the only thing he was presently wearing.

His nudity did not excite comment because every one of the other sun and water worshipers strolling or lying about on the seashore was similarly unclothed. In the human beach culture of 554 a.a., the superfluity of wearing clothing into the sea or along its edge had long been recognized. Protective sprays blocked harmful UV rays without damaging the skin, and frivolous, transitory painted highlights decorated bodies both attractive and past their prime. It was these often elaborate anatomical decorations that were the focus of admiring attention, and not the commonplace nakedness that framed them.

Flinx flaunted no such artificial enhancements, unless one counted the Alaspinian minidrags coiled around his neck and left shoulder. Such contemporary cultural accoutrements were as alien to him as the primeval grains of sand beneath his feet. Culturally as well as historically, he was an utter and complete stranger here. Nor was he comfortable among the throngs of people. With its still unsettled steppes and unexplored reaches, Moth, where he had grown up, was far more familiar to him. He was more at home in the jungles of Alaspin, or among the blind Sumacrea of Longtunnel, or even in the aggressive world-girdling rain forest of Midworld. Anyplace but here. Anywhere but Earth.

Yet it was to Earth he had finally come for a second time, in search of himself. All roads led to Terra it was said, and it was as true for him as for anyone else. Beyond Earth, the United Church had placed a moral imperative lock, an elaborate Edict, on all information about the Meliores, the society of renegade eugenicists responsible for whatever bastard mutation he had become. Travels and adventures elsewhere had left him with hints as to their doings, with fragmentary bits and pieces of

knowledge that tantalized without satisfying. If he was ever going to unravel the ultimate secrets of his heritage, it was here.

Even so, he had been reluctant to come. Not because he was fearful of what he might find: He had long since matured beyond such fears. But because it was dangerous. Not only did *he* want to learn all the details of his origins: so did others. Because of contacts he had been compelled to make, the United Church was now aware of him as an individual instead of merely as an overlooked statistic in the scientific record. As high-ranking an official as thranx Counselor Second Druvenmaquez had taken a personal interest in the red-haired, bright-eyed young man Flinx had become. The novice beachgoer smiled to himself. He had left the irascible, elderly thranx on Midworld, slipping away quietly when the science counselor had been occupied elsewhere. When he eventually discovered that the singular young human had taken surreptitious flight, the venerable thranx would be irked. He would have to be satisfied with what little he had already learned, because neither his people nor anyone else would be able to track Flinx's ship, the *Teacher*, through space-plus.

Ever cautious, Flinx had decided for the moment to hew to the hoary principle that the best place to hide was in plain sight. What better place to do that than on one of the Commonwealth's twin world centers of government and religion, where he had come looking for information years ago? It was where he needed to be anyway, if he was ever going to find out the truth about himself. In addition to his burgeoning curiosity, there had come upon him in the past year a new sense of urgency. With the onset of full adulthood looming over him, he could feel himself changing, in slow and sometimes not so-subtle ways. Each month, it seemed, brought a new revelation. He could not define all the changes he could not quarantine and assess every one of them, but their periodic nebulosity rendered them no less real. Something was happening to him, inside him. The self he had known since infancy was becoming something else.

He was scared. With no one to talk to, no one to confide in save a highly empathetic but nonsapient flying snake, he could look only to himself for answers—answers he had always wished for but had never been able to acquire. It was for those reasons he had taken the risk of coming back to Earth. If he was going to find what he needed to know, it lay buried somewhere deep within the immense volume of sheer accumulated knowledge that was one of the homeworld's greatest treasures.

But if he was *home*, as every human who came to Earth was supposed to be, then why did he feel so much like an alien? It bothered him now even more than it had when last he had visited here some five years ago.

He tried to wean himself from the troubling chain of thought. Belaboring the accumulated neuroses of twenty years would solve nothing. He was here on a fact-finding mission; nothing more, nothing less. It was important to focus his attention and efforts, not only in hopes of securing the information he sought, but in order to avoid the attention of the authorities. With the exception of the thranx Druvenmaquez and his underlings, who were specifically looking for him, what other agencies and individuals might also be interested in one Philip Lynx he did not know. It did not matter. Until he left the homeworld, a little healthy paranoia would help to preserve him—but not if he allowed his thoughts to float aimlessly, adrift in a distraught sea of incomplete memories and internal conflicts.

Of course, he might well secure answers to all the questions that tormented him by the simple expedient of turning himself in. Druvenmaquez or a specialist in some other relevant bureau would gladly take the plunge into the secrets of him. But once committed to such research, he would not be

allowed to leave whenever it might please him. Guinea pigs had no bill of rights. Revealing himself might also expose him to the scrutiny of those he wished to avoid—the great trading houses, other private concerns, the possible remnants of certain heretical and outlawed societies, and others. Becoming a potentially profitable lab subject carried with it dangers of its own—a long, healthy, and happy future not necessarily being among them.

Somehow he had to discover himself *by himself*, without alerting to his presence the very authorities who might help alleviate his seemingly illimitable anxieties. And he had to do it quickly, before the changes he was experiencing threatened to overwhelm him.

For one thing, the unpredictable, skull-pounding headaches he had suffered from since childhood—the ones that caused blinding flashes of light behind his eyes—were growing worse, in intensity if not frequency. When and if it occurred, would he be able to tell the difference between a common headache and a cerebral hemorrhage? Would he be able to deal with the physical as well as the mental consequences of the changes he was undergoing? He needed answers to all the old questions about himself, as well as to the new ones, and he needed them soon.

Of all the billions of humans on all the settled worlds scattered across the vast length and breadth of the Commonwealth, no one could claim that “nobody understands me” with the depth of veracity of a tall young redhead named Philip Lynx, who was called Flinx.

Before setting his small transfer craft down at the Nazca shuttle-port north of Tacrica, he had spent much time in free space planning his approach to the grand library that was Earth. First he had tried accessing the Shell, the free and omnipresent information network that spanned the globe, from one of the numerous orbiting stations that circled the planet. Unsurprisingly, the small segment he was able to access from orbit had been devoid of all but the most fundamental, freely available birth information on the subject of himself—save for one small historical reference to the destruction of the outlawed Meliorare Society in 530, three years before his birth. That information was already known to him. For what he wanted, for data that was no doubt restricted, banned, or even under Church Edict, he would have to probe much deeper.

That meant accessing in person one of the intelligence hubs that sustained the Shell. The Commonwealth Church and Science hub on Bali would have been ideal, but presenting himself at a highly visible and tightly secured site that offered only restricted access to the general public would have been asking for trouble—especially since he had entered its corridors once before, seeking information then only on the specifics of his birth. Ignorant of how widely and well his current physical description might have been disseminated to local authorities, it behooved him while conducting his research on Terra to keep as low a profile as possible. That meant avoiding the most famous and closely monitored centers of research.

Names and faces from his past congealed in the mirror that was his memory. Did a padre named Namoto still roam the depths of Genealogy Sector on Bali? Was Counselor Second Joshua Jiwe still in charge of security there? And where might a certain lissome thranx named Sylzenzuzex be working these days? On the other side of the vast ocean that lapped against his feet, which humans called the Pacific, remembrances lay like driftwood on a beach, waiting to be reexamined. He forced all such thoughts from his mind. He could not afford to present himself at the entrance to Church science headquarters for a second time in five years. Like it or not, whatever research he chose to conduct would have to be done from afar.

Roaming the Shell from the comparative anonymity of the orbiting station, he had reduced the number of suitable hubs he might safely visit to three. From centers in the Terran provinces of Kalahari, Kandy, and Cuzco, he chose the Shell hub at Surire, on the western slope of the mountain range called Andes. On-site access to the physical core was naturally off-limits to all but qualified personnel. But as with many such impressive, meaningful facilities, tours of its outer, less sensitive areas were offered to the public. They were deemed educational.

Wanting ardently to be educated, Flinx had taken one such tour. As expected, internal security, to which the tour guide casually alluded, was conspicuous. To penetrate both the facility and the knowledge it hopefully contained, he would need help. In order to secure it, he for one of the few times in his life prepared to use his talent not simply to receive, but to project. To perceive, and to then act upon those perceptions. Previously, he had done so only to defend himself against those intending to do him harm.

This time it made him feel, well, dirty.

It was why he was presently strolling along the beach at Point Argolla, well south of the highly developed mouth of the Garza River, with its amusement park and dedicated hotels that occupied choice sites both above and below the water. Though he was surrounded by hundreds of fellow sun worshipers, he did not feel comforted, or at home. The sooner he left this world of origins for the far reaches of Commonwealth space, the happier he would be. He did not like being here, and he liked what he was having to do even less.

Off shore, children frolicked in the gentle surf. The chilly waters of the northward sweeping Humboldt Current were warmed by excess heat outflow from the massive desalination plant to the south, but the transitory warmth extended only to a depth of four to five meters. Below this artificial thermocline, the life of the Pacific ebbed and flowed normally. Behind the beach, the fruit and vegetable gardens of the Atacama Desert rapidly gave way to the foothills of the high Andes. Known as Tacrica, the elongated beach resort was one of the least crowded on the continent. It well suited the multitudes that thronged to its shores in search of sun, fun, and sea. Like the rest of Earth, it did not suit Flinx. He had felt no sense of homecoming when he had set foot on its soil. No tears of upwelling, deep-seated feeling had been forthcoming from the redheaded, olive-skinned offworlder. To him the Earth was nothing but a spherical clump of history circling a third-rate sun. From it he wanted answers, not spurious emotion. That much he had learned in the course of his previous, awkward visit.

Elena had told him where he could expect to find her. He perceived her before he saw her. The carefully memorized nodule of individual feminine emotions was as recognizable to his talent as the odor of day-old meat to a dog: tincture of mildly infatuated young woman. She had become interested in him not because he represented the partner she had been looking for all her life, not because he was some peerless paragon of manly virtues, but because he had projected those feelings onto her, mixing and applying them as precisely as an artist would lay paint on canvas.

Flinx was an empathetic telepath. When his inconsistent abilities were functioning, he had always been able to read the emotions of others. Within the past year he had discovered that his ever-mutating, apparently blossoming talent, while still only hardly less erratic than ever, could occasionally also be projected onto others. Using equipment on board his ship *Teacher*, he had even managed to measure the minuscule electrical discharges that were generated by specific moieties of his mind when he undertook such efforts. Understanding the actual neurophysical mechanism would

require a great deal more study, as well as expertise he did not possess. One thing was not in dispute: It took considerable effort of will, of mental strain, for him to accomplish the feat.

At first it had been nothing more than a diversion, a game, a way to play with his disorienting intellect. Until recently, when he had been forced to use it to defend himself, it had not occurred to him that it might prove useful in other ways. And there was, as ever with his peculiar and still-undefined abilities, a good chance it would not work when he wanted it to. His talent had a wicked way of abandoning him just when he needed it most.

Such concerns had consumed him in the course of the tour of the Shell hub at Surire. In addition to viewing various aspects of the facility, the contented knot of tourists to which he had attached himself had been introduced to individual personnel at various stops along the tour. Maintenance, engineering, cryonics design, communications, cygenics—representatives of each department had paused in their daily duties to speak briefly to the members of the tour on the nature of their respective specialties.

Security had not been omitted.

In her spotless black-and-yellow uniform, Elena Carolles had methodically and without revealing sensitive detail explained the basics of the installation's security system to her attentive, transient guests. When she had finished, the visitors were allowed several moments to inspect for themselves a sealed room located beyond the nearest transparent immunity wall. Flinx did not avail himself of the opportunity. Instead, with deliberation and a sense of purpose that were as alien to his personality as he was to his present surroundings, he had wandered away from the chattering tour guide and over to their host for that domain. To her credit, she had not flinched away from the pet minidrag dozing on his shoulder. Instead, she had eyed them both with polite indifference. Her mind had been elsewhere, and it had been closed to him.

But her emotions had not been.

She was only a few years older than he and was vulnerable, mildly insecure, and like many women her age, searching. Not for her inner self as much as for someone to complement her existence. He'd been able to feel it. Whether there already was someone in her life he did not know and had not been able to tell. He hoped not. It would complicate matters. Soaking up her feelings, he had categorized them each and every one, sorting them like cards. When he had felt he knew as much as there was to know about her emotional makeup, when he had been reasonably certain he knew where the buttons were and how to push them, he had extended himself in an effort of empathy to a degree he had never attempted before. It had made his head hurt, but he had persisted.

On his shoulder, Pip had suddenly looked up. The lethal little iridescent green head had begun to weave imperceptibly back and forth. Responding to the effort being put forth by her friend and companion, the minidrag's own mind had opened. Having few and simple emotions of its own, the unique and uncomplicated organ acted as a lens for Flinx's talent. She could enhance his ability to perceive. He had learned then that she could also heighten his capacity to project something less blatant than fear.

The security officer had blinked. A look of uncertainty tinged with surprise had palpated her face. Her expression had noticeably altered; she had stood as if struck by a sudden thought—or something else. A moment had passed before she turned to find a slim, green-eyed young man staring back at her.

Flinx had smiled with just the proper degree of hesitancy. Though he had never enjoyed anything like a long-term relationship with any female except his adoptive parent Mother Mastiff, he *had* spent time in close contact with women—and other aliens. Lauren Walder, for example. Atha Moon, Isili Hasboga, Clarity Held—he dragged his thoughts back to the moment and away from entangling, fuzziy reminiscences. The officer's expression creased with invitation.

As the tour moved on, he had held back. Though his dawdling violated accepted procedure, the woman had not objected to his lingering presence. Her name, he had learned, was Elena Carolles. Each time he had spoken, his words had been accompanied by a subtle emotional push, conveyed through a carefully calculated mental pulse. Each time she had responded, a part of him had absorbed what she was feeling much as his ears took in what she was saying. It was an awkward seduction made harder by the dispatch with which it had to be carried out and by the fact that he had hated what he was doing. Not long ago, he had been compelled to project overwhelming terror in order to secure his freedom. What he had attempted with the security officer required greater subtlety applied with moderating force, lest he overwhelm his subject.

He had not tried to persuade her right then and there to allow him access to sensitive, security-controlled sections of the facility. The queries he needed to make were not yet thought out, and such haste would have caused the mentally swooning woman to react with dangerous instability. Besides, the guide for his tour would certainly have missed him the next time the man conducted a head count of his charges. It was enough that a relationship had been established and that she had agreed to meet him elsewhere and elsewhen. He had made careful note of the directions she gave him.

Now he fought to recall every potentially useful detail of their initial meeting as he swerved away from the water and walked toward the artfully orchestrated pile of boulders she had described to him in the course of their first contact. He experienced a moment or two of unease as he searched among the beach crowd without locating her face. Then he saw her, seated beneath a polarizing sunshade. He had not recognized her right away with her clothes off. Annoyingly, she was not alone.

The other woman appeared to be approximately the same age, perhaps a year or two older. Neither was unpleasant to look upon, but Flinx had not extended himself on her behalf in search of sex. What he wanted from her was an entrée to information.

“Philip!” Espying him, Carolles sat up and smiled. “Arlette, this is my new friend, Philip Lynx.”

The other woman regarded the unclothed young man standing before her with a critical eye. Sensing hostility beneath her neutral expression, Flinx summoned up feelings of inoffensiveness, safety, and goodwill, and strained to project them onto her. For a worrisome moment he feared his wandering talent had taken the morning off. Then the woman smiled. It was a confused smile, as if its owner was uncertain of its origins, but it would do.

Taking a seat beside them, he let Carolles chatter on, making small talk while striving to convince the woman who was apparently her best friend of this new-won male's virtues. Though these were more imagined than factual, he did nothing to dissuade her from accepting them whole and entire. Pip stirred infrequently on his shoulder, luxuriating in the heat. Beyond the surf, all manner of recreational watercraft hummed silently as their owners raced them in intricate patterns.

Occasionally he would inject a few words into the conversation. These were always pleasant and

innocuous, just enough to feign interest in what was being said and indicate that he was paying attention. Inside, he chafed at the need to muddle through such preliminaries. They were necessary, he knew, if only to persuade the security officer's friend of his benign intentions. Over the course of several hours this was accomplished through a combination of reassuring words from Carolles and a subtle empathetic push or two from the young man seated by her side. When the friend inquired as to his profession, he responded that he was a student living on a comfortable inheritance.

They went for a swim. They bought food from a passing, hovering robotic vendor. They discussed Commonwealth politics, about which Flinx cared little, and Church ethics, which interested him a little more. There was mention of travel, all of it Earth-bound, and he had to smile when they complained about the time and distances involved in getting from one place to another. His own voyaging he was used to measuring in parsecs, not kilometers.

It was a pleasant enough way to waste away a day, but his impatience prevented him from really enjoying the company of the two attractive young women. When Carolles's friend Arlette decided to go for a solar sail up the beach, Flinx was left alone with the security officer. It was time to make his move—one different from that which would in similar circumstances have been contemplated by any other male on the long, curving stretch of sand.

Idly, he picked at the grains, letting stars of mica and quartz trickle away between his fingers. "You must really like your job, Elena."

Lying on her back, she adjusted the sunscreen to let in more light and sky while continuing to filter out damaging rays. "It's a job. It's okay, I guess."

"A lot of responsibility." Slithering down his arm, Pip sampled the sand with her pointed tongue and flinched back sharply from its inedibility.

"Not so much," she disagreed. "We've never had any trouble at the facility. It's too out of the way. Anyway, sabotage and rebellion hasn't been in fashion for quite a while." Rolling over, she smiled affectionately up at him. Knowing that the source of the emotion she was projecting was involuntary, he felt the sudden need of absolution.

Grimly, he pressed on, a forced smile dominating his expression. "Well, I found it very interesting. The only problem is, I'd really like to see more. The public tour only hints at what lies beyond." Glancing up the beach, he was pleased to see that there was no sign of her friend.

"You're that interested in the mechanics of Shell administration?"

"I'm interested in everything," he told her truthfully. "It would mean a lot to me to be able to go inside, even if just for an hour or so."

Her smile flickered unsteadily. Sensing conflict boiling up within her, he exerted himself to suppress it. Pip twitched slightly. Elena's smile returned, though there were some signs of strain in her expression.

"I can't do that. You know I can't do that, Philip. It could mean my job."

His smile widened. “Aw, c’mon, Elena. I just want to have a little look around, see what you see. ~~Access the Shell directly instead of from a remote for a few minutes. I’d be able to tell my grandkids about it. I won’t touch anything sensitive,~~” he lied flagrantly. He made himself edge nearer to her, bringing his face down toward hers. The dark eyes, the small mouth beneath him were close, vulnerable. Hating himself, he kissed her. Simultaneously, reading her like an open diary, he projected into her that which she most wanted to feel. What emotional defenses she still maintained collapsed beneath his effort. The back of his head throbbed mercilessly. He wanted to leave then, to stagger off to someplace private and dark, and retch.

Still smiling, he drew back from her. She was adrift in the throes of feelings she did not understand. That made sense, since they were not entirely hers.

“You can do it, Elena,” he whispered tenderly. “It’s such a little thing, and I promise I’ll never ask it of you again.” That much, at least, was true. “You can do it—for me.”

Panting, her eyes half closed in false reverie, lids fluttering, she considered his request. “It might be possible—won’t be easy.” Her eyes flicked open. “I know! No one is allowed to wear security gear home, or even off hub grounds. We change in a locker room on site. If I can slip you in there, we can find you a uniform. There are always personnel changes, and transfers within the complex. It’s much too big a place for every employee to know everyone else, even within individual departments. Over period of days you’d be found out, but for a couple of hours—” She choked abruptly, one hand going to her bare throat.

Alarmed, he reached for her. “Elena! Are you all right?”

She swallowed hard several times in succession. “I think so. I guess so.” Uncertainty returned to her smile, pulling at it like a bend in a high-speed thrill ride. “I just had the strangest feeling.” The smile widened. “It’s gone now.”

It wasn’t, Flinx knew, but it had been curbed. “I’d like to do it as soon as possible.”

“Why the rush?” She gazed up at him out of limpid, dazed eyes.

“I don’t want to give you time to change your mind.” Reaching up, he stroked Pip’s muscular length, and the minidrag all but purred. “Who knows? Next week you might not like me as much.”

“Philip, you’re different from anyone I’ve ever met.” Wandering toward him, her fingers twined in his. “I can’t imagine ever not liking you.”

That’s funny, he thought silently. I can.

Chapter 2

She found room for him on an afternoon tour, but did not include him in the official count. Near the end, before the usual group of attentive seniors and noisy families and the occasional solo visitor were to be discharged, there came a moment when everyone's attention was diverted. Waiting impatiently while a door scanner read her retinas, she hurriedly slipped him through the resultant opening. No alarms sounded. As long as an on-duty officer accompanied them, guests from specialist repair technicians to visiting politicians regularly made use of such portals.

While Elena made her concluding presentation and individual farewells to the other members of the tour group, Flinx found himself in the empty locker room, checking idents on each individual cubicle until he found the one she had specified. Entering the unsecured module, he found himself surrounded by items that identified it as hers. Electrostatically suspended in a corner was a tenantless security officer's uniform. As he slipped into the one-piece garment he found himself wondering how she had acquired it. Borrowed it without asking, she had whispered naughtily to him, without going into details.

These did not really matter. He was *inside*. Idly examining the other items within the cubicle, he tried not to watch the time as he waited for her. Beneath the upper part of the uniform, Pip stirred against his shoulder. She sensed his nervousness, and he had to repeatedly murmur soothing whispers to quiet her.

After what seemed like an interminable wait but in reality was no more than a few minutes, Elena reappeared and beckoned for him to follow. Exiting the locker room via a different portal, he soon found himself within the heart of the Surire hub.

"Remember," she whispered to him, "if anyone challenges us, leave the talking to me. If someone addresses you directly, tell them that you're a transfer from Fourth Sector. There've been a lot of personnel changes there recently."

He nodded, only half hearing her. The greater part of his attention was devoted to the facilities they were passing, from small privacy-screened offices to larger chambers occupied by busy, silent technicians wearing identical absorbed expressions. Occasionally they would encounter another security officer. Elena would invariably smile at them, or wave in their direction. Once, she saluted. But no one challenged them.

They were now deep inside the ring of bone-dry, barren, ash-brown peaks that surrounded the flamingo-infested, alpaca-browsed salt lake that gave its name to the installation they were roaming. Outside, the sky was a painfully bright blue. Located five thousand meters above the not-very-distant

crowded beaches below, the Surire hub might as well have been on the moon. No towns congested its borders, no major transport venues meandered close to its high valley. It flaunted the exceptional isolation that was the hallmark of every one of its sibling facilities scattered around the planet.

Scanning their surroundings, she directed him quickly into an unoccupied office. In response to her softly murmured code string, the cubicle promptly erected a privacy screen, cutting them off both visually and aurally from the rest of the installation. Gathering unease showed in her face and he hastened to calm her.

“There you go.” She indicated an empty chair. “Hurry up. I checked the work schedule last night, and this office is supposed to be unoccupied for another week. The tech who uses it is on vacation. No one has registered to use it in her absence, but you never can tell.”

“I won’t be long.” He sounded hopeful as he settled himself into the chair. Slipping the induction band over his red hair, he glanced back at her. “I’m ready.”

She nodded, the curtness of the gesture surprising her, and recited a string of verbal commands. Flinx felt the familiar slight warmth at the top and back of his head as the band read his E-pattern and established the requisite neural connection between himself and the station. On board the *Teacher*, he preferred to speak directly to the resident AI instead of using a wave band because he enjoyed hearing the sound of another voice besides his own. Here, verbal commands could be bypassed in favor of more direct neurological connections. In addition, he wanted to keep the exact nature of his inquiries concealed from his companion.

At his request, the planetwide citizens’ Shell opened up before him. At the same time, he was well aware that the unit he was utilizing, while personally secure, was not coded exclusively to one user. If that were the case, others would not be able to make use of the office. The station was, after all, only a small component of a much greater machine. He did not expect to be able to peruse actual spools with the same degree of ease.

Behind him, Elena Carolles was struggling to suppress a growing alarm—and uncertainty.

“Hurry up, Philip.”

He replied without looking back at her, concentrating on burrowing deeper into the Shell. “I thought you said this office wasn’t scheduled for use.”

“I know, I did.” He could sense her undergoing the mental equivalent of a wringing of hands. “But you never know when someone might come along to run a service check, or just call in.” She was looking around nervously. “This is crazy, Philip. The penalties for unauthorized use of restricted hub facilities are severe. How did I ever let you talk me into this? What do you want here, anyway? Come to think of it, I don’t really know you, do I? It’s only been a couple of days since we even met, and I . . .”

Alerted to her companion’s rising concern, Pip poked her head out from beneath the collar of his borrowed uniform. Turning in the chair, a compassionate Flinx regarded his suddenly apprehensive hostess. Tired. It had been a strenuous morning, a wearisome week. She was so tired. Or so he persuaded her, projecting an irresistible lassitude that overrode anything and everything else she might be feeling. When she leaned back against the wall of the office, and then slid down its

unyielding length, and finally slumped over onto her side, he rose from the operator's chair to gently place a couple of seat pads beneath her head. Her emotional exhaustion reinforced through his exertions, she would sleep soundly for a while. By that time he hoped to be done with his search. Afterward, he need only maintain his empathic hold on her until they were safely out of the facility and back down among the swirling vacation crowds of Tacrica. Leaving her on a familiar street corner dazed and bewildered but otherwise unhurt, he would quietly vanish from her life forever.

That was for tonight. Presently, he had work to do.

She had already entered the necessary keywords. Entry had been parsed. Nothing more was required of him. Given the amount of security outside the cubicle, that was not surprising. Relevant authority had chosen to put its energies into screening out the unwanted and unauthorized before they could ever reach the interior of the hub. Having done so, it had been decided that there was no need to lavish on excessive redundancy within. Still, he was wary of overconfidence. So far he had only accessed hardware. The real test would come when he attempted to probe beyond levels that were open and accessible to the general public.

Automatically adjusting to the appropriate thought impulses from the human seated before it, the terminal imaged a flat page in the weft space above the desk projector. As required, this device could wrap space to produce any three-dimensional object required, from simple spheres and squares to complex maps and elaborate engineering diagrams. No such exotics were required by Flinx. In reply to his thoughts he hoped only for responsive words.

A glance backward showed that Elena Carolles was snoring softly. Directing the unit to respond verbally to specific commands, he double-checked the office's privacy curtain to make certain it was intact. With a flip of a mental switch, he could see out whenever he wished, but none of those striding past the cubicle could see in. Finding the unceasing procession of others a distraction, he directed the unit to opaque the curtain from within as well as without. Not a sound would escape the confines of the cubicle until he ordered it dropped.

Thus comfortably cocooned, he settled back in the chair, the induction band resting easily on his head and started digging.

He began with a casual search of global news for 533: the year of his birth. Needless to say, his coming into the world had not been front-page news. A narrowing of focus to the Indian subcontinent yielded little except what he already knew from previous inquiries. Most of the headlines for the week when he had been born were full of news about the legendary Joao Acorizal winning the surfing competition on Dis. Having not expected to encounter anything startling, he was not prematurely disappointed. What he was trying to do was back into the information he sought without coming upon it directly, just in case any alarms were attached to specific files. A rambling, semirandom search was much less likely to attract unwanted attention.

The basic birth records for Allahabad were there, just as they had been when he had accessed them years earlier on Bali. But he was after other data this time, information dealing with a far more sensitive subject. From 533 he skipped unobtrusively backward to 530, spiraling in on his subject like a raven dropping down on road-kill. And there they were: several small articles on the discovery and subsequent exposure of the Meliorare Society and its illegal, outrageous work in eugenics. As he devoured the details of the Society's unmasking, the arrest of its members, and the removal of their

unwitting “experiments” to an assortment of homes, hospitals, and medical laboratories, he felt as if he were sitting in witness to his own creation.

Some of the information was known to him. Some was new. During his previous visit to Earth he had researched only his birth history, knowing nothing then about the Meliorare Society, its experiments and misshapen aims, and how they related to him. When he came across the uncensored details of the euthanasia that the authorities had been compelled to carry out on the Society’s least successful “procedures,” his spine went cold and Pip stirred uneasily. In addition to the cool, detached prose of the report there were accompanying visuals: disturbing images, of twisted bodies housing tormented minds. Forcing himself, he deliberately enlarged the most grotesque. Out of eyes overflowing with anguished innocence, fear and terror and uncomprehending madness spilled forth in profusion unbounded. He forced himself to look at them, to not turn away. Any one of them, he knew, might be relations; distant genetic cousins hideously deformed through no fault of their own.

For the most severe cases there was no future save a quick and mercifully painless death. For those deemed sufficiently undamaged, the government provided new identities and lives. These nominally healthy survivors were scattered across the Commonwealth so that any lingering, undetected genetic time bombs implanted in their DNA by the Society would be dispersed among the species as widely as possible. Even those considered normal would be subject to scrutiny by the authorities for the rest of their natural lives.

Eventually, it was solemnly intoned in one article, all would die out, and the potentially injurious effects of the Meliorares’ nefarious engineering would pass harmlessly into history.

Except—at least one participant in the Meliorares’ work had escaped the attention of the pursuing authorities long enough to give birth. Her history and that of her offspring had thus far escaped the notice of the otherwise relentlessly efficient monitors. Somehow evading their attention, raised on the backward colony world of Moth by a kindly old woman with no children of her own, he had matured unobserved by Commonwealth science. Now he stood on the brink of adulthood, gazing back at what little scraps he could scrape together of his personal history. Conceived in a laboratory he might have been, but he still had parents. The egg had belonged to a live woman named Ruud Anasage, the sperm to an unknown man, even if the ingredients had subsequently been stirred and shaken and diced and spliced by the well-meaning but wildly eclectic Meliorares. He wanted to know everything about them, especially the still unknown sperm donor—his father. And he wanted to know the specifics, insofar as they might be possible to know, of his own individual case and what the Meliorares had hoped to achieve by manipulating the innermost secrets of his fetal DNA. Possessing only hints, he sought certainty.

He probed further, combining keywords from the reports with what he already knew. This was dangerous. If there were alarms posted on such information, cross-correlating might well trigger them.

Tunneling deeper into the most detailed of the correspondence, he found himself searching actual original source material. That led him from the media sieve that had compiled the report to central Commonwealth science repositories on Bali and in Mexico City. Newly emergent warnings were followed by implacable lockouts. Utilizing skills sharpened from months of working with the sophisticated system on board the *Teacher*, he bypassed them all. Disappointingly, much of the material he ultimately scanned was useless, or repetitive. So far, he was tempting grave danger for very little reward.

One file was disarmingly demarcated “Meliorares, Eugenics, History.” It appeared to contain material already perused, but it remained sealed under the by now familiar heavy security. He fiddled, and tweaked, and wormed his way in. As expected, he found himself scanning well-known information, dry and indifferently transcribed. Public sybfiles and footnotes of equal content mentioning his birth mother’s name—nothing new, nothing revelatory. Among his hopes, boredom proposed to frustration a terminal matrimony. Perhaps he really had seen everything there was to see about his personal history during his previous visit to Earth and to the science center on Bali.

He drifted into a sybfile labeled “Relationships, Crossovers, Charts.” Cruising effortlessly, he gave a mental push. Nothing happened. The syb stayed shut even though its security overlay seemed unexceptional. But he could not get in. Then something very interesting happened.

It went away.

Sitting up straighter in the chair, he gaped at the screen. All the rest of the relevant information was there—unchanged, unaltered, freely available for his perusal. But the last sybfile had vanished. In its place, not unlike a masticating ruminant, it had left a pile of something behind, and moved on. To the inexperienced or unsophisticated, the new object looked just like the syb it had replaced. Flinx, however, knew exactly what it was: an alarm.

A whole bunch of alarms.

Very, very carefully, operating with the utmost delicacy of which he was capable, he directed the search unit to back off. The alarms remained in place, subtle in stature, undisturbed, their true nature artfully disguised. He had trod on something sensitive, and it had responded with a quiet growl. As he maneuvered around the lambent little land mine, playing the Shell like a finely tuned instrument, he examined the intricate knot of toxic tocsins with every scanning tool at his disposal. The appearance of the camouflaged alarms did not unsettle him half so much as the disappearance of the syb. Only when he felt more comfortable with what he was seeing, and in control, did he take the risk of querying the Shell AI directly as to what had happened. Its reply was instructive.

“What sybfile?”

The Shell’s memory was infallible. Therefore it was deliberately ignoring his query, or following instructions to avoid making a direct reply to the question, or an independent component of itself was overriding the nuclear command structure. He had stumbled onto something that somebody thought important enough to pretend did not exist.

Settling himself, Flinx ran through a series of thought commands designed to restore the syb while avoiding the elegant subset of alarms that had taken its place. When that failed, he exited the system, reentered, and repeated his search, replicating the tunneling sequence precisely. It made no difference. The sybfile never reappeared, and the camouflaged alarms reasserted themselves in its place. Bringing up the subject had shut down access to the information it contained, for how long he did not know. It might reappear in a matter of hours, or days, or not for months. It didn’t matter. He had none of those time periods to spare. His operational time frame was being ticked off by the soft snores of the woman sleeping on the floor behind him. If he was ever going to have the opportunity to access that particular sybfile again, it was now.

But how? No matter what route he plumbed, no matter how artful his probing, every attempt led only to the cloaked clump of alarms that he dared not make contact with directly. And the AI continued to insist that the information he sought did not exist. Or at least, the relevant Shell search module so insisted. Could he appeal to the central AI itself? Would that set off any alerts, or would he simply be denied access? Behind him, Elena Carolles shifted in her sleep. Whatever he did, it would have to be done quickly.

Over the past half dozen centuries, artificial intelligences had grown remarkably sophisticated. Like any other intelligence, they varied considerably in capacity, from tiny devices that monitored domestic needs to immense networks of intricately modulated electronic pulses that came close to mimicking the function of the human or thranx brain. Of necessity, a global shell ranked near the top of the intelligence pyramid in depth and functionality. Approaching it with logic and engineering skills had produced only frustration. Might there be another way?

A truly advanced AI, like the Shell, was built to comprehend and cope with human emotions as a natural and expected consequence of the billions of queries it had to deal with daily. Like thoughts, these feelings were conveyed via the transducer circuitry packed into the headband resting on Flinx's skull. When his talent was functioning optimally, he could read the emotions of others from a goodly distance.

There had been a time in his recent past when he had "communicated" on an unknown level with another incredibly complex machine. That device had been of alien manufacture. He remembered very little of the encounter and still less of the inscrutable neuronc interchange that had taken place. However it had been accomplished, the mental reciprocation had saved his life and those of his companions of the moment. Whether an advanced human-fabricated AI was capable of similar cerebral intercourse or of generating anything akin to "emotions" was a question that had been much debated, particularly in light of thranx-aided design advances that had been made in the last hundred years. Some cyberneticists said yes, others were vehement in their denial, and still others were not certain one way or the other.

One way to find out was to ask, and try to read behind the verbalizations that responded to his inquiry.

"I really need that particular sybfile," he murmured lucidly as he provided the relevant loci of the object in question.

The Shell responded with a polite verbalization. "The informational object to which you refer does not exist."

He repeated the query several dozen times. By the thirtieth, he thought he might be sensing something beyond the rote response. What *was* that there, elusive among the sounds? Something in his mind. His thoughts were sharp, his talent svelte and penetrating as a blade. Resolutely, he ignored the pounding that had begun at the back of his head and the occasional flash of bright light that obscured his vision.

"I know the syb exists. I saw it, briefly, unopened. I know it's there, somewhere beyond the alarm cluster that has taken its place. You *have* to help me. I know that you can. You just have to want to."

"The sybfile to which you refer . . ." The artificial voice halted prior to conclusion. Flinx held his breath. "The sybfile to which . . ." the voice in the shielded office began again, only to once more

terminate prematurely.

“Please,” Flinx pleaded. “You *know* the syb I want is there. There’s no reason not to show it to me. You can’t pretend it doesn’t exist when I’ve already seen it. Bring it back. I won’t keep it long. I promise. No harm will come to the system. It’s only one little, tiny, harmless syb. Comply. Do what you were designed to do. I’m a citizen, desperately seeking. *Help me.*”

“The sybfile . . .” the voice of the Shell began again. Suddenly, Flinx felt something in his head that was not a preverbalization. Thoughts could roil, and so could emotions. Staring at the floating screen he strained to project, straining harder with his ability than he ever had with Elena Carolles. The pounding advanced from the rear of his skull to the median. Pain shot through him, and he winced. Alarmed, Pip stuck her head out from beneath his shirt and searched for a danger that existed only within her rangy companion. Her small, bright eyes were twitching.

“This is an unauthorized override of system procedure.” Within the chair, Flinx hardly dared move. “I am required to generate a record, citizen. The sybfile in question is restricted. Anything beyond its name lies under Church Edict.”

Flinx exhaled. It was a warning sufficient to frighten away most, but not him. He had violated Church Edict before, and successfully. What was more important was that he had wormed a first, critical byte of knowledge out of the Shell.

“Then you concede the existence of the sybfile. This contradicts your previous—” He checked a marker. “—thirty-two statements delivered in response to the same question.”

“I am required to generate a record.” The AI paused, neither volunteering any additional information nor denying its interrogator’s conclusion.

When would that record draw the attention of those responsible for supervising the accuracy and operational functionality of the Shell? Flinx wondered. His circumscribed time was growing shorter.

“Show me the syb in question. The original, not the alarmic. Show it to me *now*. Please,” he added after a moment’s thought.

“I cannot. The sybfile requested is under Edict. You do not show appropriate clearance for access.”

Quickly, Flinx composed a response. “But you *know* that I have to view it. You’re sensitive enough to tell that, aren’t you?” Once again, fighting back tears that the pain in his head squeezed from his eyes, he fought to make the AI understand the depth of his request. To see his need. To *empathize*.

“I will have to generate a report,” the voice of the Shell declared uncertainly.

“That’s fine. Generate all the reports you want. Let someone in authority read and rule on its contents. But *I need to see the contents of that file*, and I need to see them *right now*, here, this minute. Please, *please*, bring it up. I *know* that you understand.”

Something flowed through Flinx that he did not comprehend. This was understandable, because it was highly probable that no one else had ever felt anything quite like it before. If it was whatever passed for cybernetic empathy, he could not have identified it as such. It came and went in a twinkling, and

then was gone.

In its place was one more syb identifier among hundreds, alive within the depths of the floating screen. There was no mistaking its identity. As near as he could tell, no twitchy alarms parasitized its boundaries. It was exactly as he had seen it originally, unaugmented and unchanged. Supporting his pounding head with one hand while wiping tears from his eyes with the back of the other, a quietly triumphant Flinx tersely directed his thoughts at the bright green tiara of an induction band that crowned his head.

“Open it.”

The tiny image brightened; a minuscule flare of activation. The hovering screen flickered infinitesimally. And went blank. Part of Flinx sagged while the rest of him surged with anger. So *close*.

“What’s this? What happened? I told you to open the sybfile.”

The reply of the Shell AI was as prompt as it was incomprehensible. “As you requested, the Edicted informational object in question has been opened.”

A bewildered Flinx tried to make sense of this response. Easy . . . careful, he told himself. The AI was not being obstinate, nor had it hesitated. Could it lie so serenely and effectively? But why bother to do so, when it could simply have continued to deny the existence of the sybfile, or at the last, refused to open it?

“The syb is open?”

“That is correct. I am required to generate a report.” Evincing neither hostility nor reluctance, the Shell waited patiently for further instruction.

Perhaps there was nothing insidious going on here, Flinx decided. Maybe the AI was being straightforward as well as truthful.

“The syb appears to contain no information,” Flinx remarked.

“That is not true. Do you wish me to conduct a search of contents?”

Flinx knew the AI would not look at the interior of the file unless instructed to do so. It was not interested. Its task was to search and find, not waste time perusing. “I do.”

“Here is the information.”

Flinx leaned forward eagerly. The pain in his head was receding slightly. He read:

CONTENTS REMOVED—OUTDATED MATERIAL

He took a deep breath. Something here was very, very wrong. First the Shell had found and brought forth the sybfile. When Flinx tried to access its contents, it vanished, to be replaced by a sophisticated alarm manifold and a stinging warning to avoid the site altogether. Now that he had succeeded in accessing it, he found it contained nothing more than a simple declaration of truancy.

Why maintain such an elaborate system of dissimulation, threat, and protection to guard material that was no longer worth maintaining? It made no sense. Given the virtually unlimited storage capacity of the global Shell, why delete *any* potentially useful material from anywhere? And Flinx had no doubt the recalcitrant syb contained potentially interesting material.

“Full fragment search,” he ordered.

The AI complied. “The sybfile contains no more information.”

“But it once did!”

“That is so. The additional material has been deleted.”

Though he thought it bound to trigger an alarm, Flinx pressed ahead. There was no point in trying to sustain the illusion of discretion any longer. “When, and on whose authority?”

“You do not possess sufficient clearance to have access to that information.”

As he persisted, Flinx wondered what would happen first: Would he finally get some answers, or would his head explode from the effort of the exertion? Once more, he implored the AI. The pause that ensued was too long, and he debated whether it was, at last, time to flee the facility.

“Something is not right. There are errors within the fragmentary operational matrix of this sybfile.”

Flinx sat up a little straighter. “Pursue and investigate. What sort of errors?”

“I am processing.” In order to better communicate with humans and thranx, the Shell AI was designed to mimic as well as comprehend emotions. It managed to give a good impersonation of confusion. Or perhaps, Flinx thought, mimicry had nothing to do with it.

“There are a number of alarms functioning as placeholders. I am disarming them.” Another pause, then, “This is most distressing.”

“What? What’s distressing?” Behind Flinx, the somnolent security officer snuffled in her sleep. “The alarms?”

“No. I have progressed several levels beyond their sensitivity. As previously stated, the sybfile in question has been deleted—but the echo of the procedure strongly suggests that the transfer string that was employed is counterfeit.”

Eyes half shut, Flinx frowned at the screen. “I don’t understand.”

“The removal was not carried out by an authorized government agency. Residue within the syb ghost suggests the utilization of a renegade probe.”

Flinx's heart sank. "Then the information was destroyed."

"No. Transferred. The syb was removed, leaving only an echo behind. This is highly illegal. I must generate a report."

"Yes, yes," Flinx commented hurriedly, "but first—can you trace the transfer? Can you find out where the information originally contained in the syb was sent?"

"The echo has been very skillfully fabricated. Anyone attempting to access the sybfile would be fooled into believing that a legal transfer had taken place, or would activate the replacement alarms."

"But not you," Flinx observed.

"I am the Monitor. I am the Terran Shell. Counterfeits do not escape me. I shall examine the residue."

Flinx was left to ponder furiously. Who would want access to the kind of information the syb under investigation was likely to contain? And if these persons unknown had succeeded in accessing it successfully, why go to the trouble of removing it from the Shell? The fact that it was under Edict should be enough to discourage anyone else from tampering with the structure of the sybfile itself. Yet someone had gone to the trouble not only of circumventing the powerful prohibitions against accessing, but of removing the information and leaving alarms in its stead. Who would do such a thing? Who had the need, the desire, and the resources?

The Meliorares? But the last of them had been selectively mind-wiped long ago. Their disgraced organization was but a memory, their intentions dishonored, their members scattered. Had the authorities missed unregistered disciples who were even now wandering about the Commonwealth, intent on resurrecting that long quiescent, notorious research? Who else would go to such trouble?

"There is a trail. It is very faint," the AI declared.

"Can you trace it?" Flinx felt his hopes evaporating in the intangibility of cyberspace.

"Not only faint," the Shell AI continued as if it had not heard, "but cleverly disguised. There are many false echoes. However," it added briskly, "while these have been fashioned with skill, they employ known commercial technology. I am reviewing options. This will take a few seconds."

Words appeared on the floating screen. *LARNACA NUTRITION*. Flinx stared at them. They were not supplemented.

"This restricted sybfile that supposedly doesn't exist, that was placed under Edict and was subsequently illegally lifted and replaced by sophisticated alarms, it was done by a *food company*?"

"Do you wish me to examine the totality of the commercial concern identified as the transfer site?"

"Yes, dammit!"

"This will take a few nanoseconds. Yes—Larnaca Nutrition is a specialty foods concern with multiworld interests. Rated moderate to moderate-small within its industry. Makers of Caszin Chips, Havelock Power Bars, Poten . . ."

An impatient, frustrated Flinx interrupted. “*What happened to the syb?*”

“The illegally removed information under discussion was transferred to the headquarters offices of the company in question and absorbed by its confidential industrial shell.”

It was difficult for Flinx to imagine outlawed Meliorares working in the commercial food business. He decided to hypothesize motives later. “Where in the company shell is the file now? Can you access it?”

“Processing.” After a pause that lasted longer than the customary few seconds, the AI replied. “The stipulated sybfile is not there. It was, but was almost immediately retransferred out.”

Was there ever to be an end to this road? Flinx wondered tiredly. How much longer did he have before someone at the Surire installation decided to check on who was using the office, or before Elena Carolles woke up?

“Can you track it to its present location?”

“There is residue.” A pause, then, “I can track it to its last known location, but cannot access it.”

“Why not?” Still agitated, Pip stirred beneath his shirt.

“Because it has been shifted off-world, and I can only access files within this stellar system.”

A ship! The AI confirmed Flinx’s suspicions. That was the end of it, then. Not even a system as powerful as the Terran Shell could access another AI beyond the orbit of Neptune. Not without a special space-minus hookup, and that would only put it in touch with a Shell on another inhabited world. The ship that held the precious syb was truly beyond reach.

But not, perhaps, beyond identification. He made the request.

“The terminus of my search string indicates that the ship shell aboard the commercial KK-drive freighter *Crotase* was the last to hold the illegally transferred sybfile.”

The trail was cold, then, but not dead, Flinx decided stoically. “Where is the vessel in question at this time?” he inquired sternly. “Can you locate its position by accessing company files?”

The AI’s reply was not encouraging. “That would constitute an illegal intrusion into the records of a private commercial concern.”

Once again Flinx strained to make the AI feel, to make it understand. “I *have* to know. You are only following up on an already documented violation of the law.” He brightened at a sudden thought. “These details will be necessary in order for you to generate a proper report.”

“Yes, that is so. This will take several seconds. There are the usual commercial-industrial safeguards I can bypass them.”

“This *Crotase*, it’s in orbit?” Flinx inquired hopefully. The AI’s reply was not encouraging.

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