



Orphan Star (Adventures of Pip & Flinx Book 4)

By Alan Dean Foster

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One man in the Universe holds the key to the mystery of Flinx's past—and that man is trying to kill him!

It is a strange childhood for a kid, to be adopted by the restless Mother Mastiff and raised in the bustling marketplace of Drallar. Flinx never knew the mom and dad who abandoned him years ago. In fact, his birth has always been shrouded in mystery. But Flinx eventually discovers that his unknown parents have left him a curious legacy—extraordinary mental powers that are both a marvelous gift and a dreaded curse.

This double-edged legacy will lead Flinx, along with his loyal protector, the mini-dragon Pip, on a harrowing journey in search of the truth . . . about who he is and where he comes from. It is a daring adventure that brings him to another world—and into the clutches of one of the most evil and powerful men in the galaxy. . . .

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

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***Orphan Star* is the newest addition to the Del Rey Imagine program, which offers the best in fantasy and science fiction for readers twelve and up.**

About the Author

ALAN DEAN FOSTER has written in a variety of genres, including hard science fiction, fantasy, horror, detective, western, historical, and contemporary fiction. He is the author of the New York Times bestseller *Star Wars: The Approaching Storm*, as well as novelizations of several films including *Star Wars*, the first three *Alien* films, and *Alien Nation*. His novel *Cyber Way* won the Southwest Book Award for Fiction in 1990, the first science fiction work ever to do so. Foster and his wife, JoAnn Oxley, live in Prescott, Arizona, in a house built of brick that was salvaged from an early-twentieth-century miners' brothel.

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Chapter 1

"Watch where you're going, qwot!"

The merchant glared down at the slim, olive-skinned youth and made a show of readjusting his barely rumpled clothing.

"Your pardon, noble sir," the youngster replied politely. "I did not see you in the press of the crowd." This was at once truth and lie. Flinx hadn't seen the overbearing entrepreneur, but he had sensed the man's belligerence seconds before the latter had swerved intentionally to cause the collision.

Although his still poorly understood talents had been immensely enriched several months ago by his encounter with the Krang—that awesome semisentient weapon of the now-vanished masters of the galaxy, the Tar-Aiym—they were as inconsistent as ever. The experience of acting as an organic catalyst for the colossal device had almost killed both him and Pip. But they had survived and he, at least, had been changed in ways as yet uncomprehended.

Lately he had found that at one moment he could detect the thoughts of the King himself off in Drallar's

palace, while in the next even the minds of those standing in close proximity stayed shut tight as a miser's purse. This made for numerous uncertainties, and oftentimes Flinx found himself cursing the gift, as its capriciousness kept him in a constant state of mental imbalance. He was like a child clinging desperately to the mane of a rampaging develope, struggling to hang on at the same time he was fighting to master the bucking mount.

He shifted to go around the lavishly clad bulk, but the man moved to block his path. "Children need to learn how to mind their betters," he smirked, obviously unwilling, like Flinx, to let the incident pass.

Flinx could sense the frustration in the man's mind, and sought deeper. He detected fuzzy hints of a large business transaction that had failed just this morning. That would explain the man's frustration, and his apparent desire to find someone to take it out on. As Flinx considered this development, the man was making a great show of rolling up his sleeves to reveal massive arms. His frustration faded beneath the curious stares of the shifting crowd of traders, hawkers, beggars, and craftsmen who were slowing and beginning to form a small eddy of humanity in the round-the-clock hurricane of the Drallarian marketplace.

"I said I was sorry," Flinx repeated tensely.

A blocky fist started to rise.

"Sorry indeed. I think I'm going to have to teach you . . ." The merchant halted in his stride, the threatening fist abruptly frozen in midair. His face rapidly turned pale and his eyes seemed fixed on Flinx's far shoulder.

A head had somehow emerged from beneath the loose folds of the youth's cape. Now it regarded the merchant with a steady, unblinking gaze that held the quality of otherworld death, the flavor of frozen methane and frostbite. In itself the skull was tiny and unimpressive, scaled and unabashedly reptilian. Then more of the creature emerged, revealing that the head was attached to a long cylindrical body. A set of pleated membranous wings opened, beat lazily at the air.

"Sorry," the merchant found himself mumbling, "it was all a mistake . . . my fault, really." He smiled sickly, looked from left to right. The eyes of the small gathering stared back dispassionately.

It was interesting how the man seemed to shrink into the wall of watchers. They swallowed him up as neat and clean as a grouper would an ambling angelfish. That done, the motionless ranks blended back into the moving stream of humanity.

Flinx relaxed and reached up to scratch the flying snake under its leathery snout. "Easy there, Pip," he whispered, thinking warm relaxing thoughts at his pet. "It's nothing, settle down now."

Reassured, the minidrag hissed sibilantly and slid back beneath the cape folds, its pleated wings collapsing flat against its body. The merchant had quickly recognized the reptile. A well-traveled individual, he knew that there was no known antidote for the poison of the Alaspin miniature dragon.

"Maybe he learned whatever lesson he had in mind to give us," Flinx said. "What say we go over to Small Symm's for a beer and some pretzels for you. Would you like that, summm?"

The snake summmed back at him.

Nearby buried within the mob, an obese, unlovely gentleman thanked a gratified goldsmith as he pocketed a

purchase indifferently made. This transaction had served the purpose of occupying time and covering up his true focus of attention, which had not been the just-bought bauble.

Two men flanked him. One was short and sleek, with an expression like a wet weasel. The other showed a torso like a galvanized boiler, and half a face. His one eye twitched persistently as he stared after the retreating figure of Flinx, while his small companion eagerly addressed the purchaser of the tiny gold-and-pearl piano.

“Did you see the look on that guy’s face, Challis?” he asked the plump man. “That snake’s a hot death. Nothin’ was said to us about anything like that. That big idiot not only saved his own life, but mine and Nanger’s too.”

The one-eye nodded.

“Ya, you’re goin’ to have to find someone else for this bit of dirty stuff.” His short companion looked adamant.

The fat merchant remained calm, scratched at one of his many chins. “Have I been ungenerous? Since you both are on permanent retainer to me, I technically owe you nothing for this task.” He shrugged. “But if it is a question of more money . . .”

The sleek weasel shook his head. “You can buy my service, Challis, but not my life. Do you know what happens if that snake’s venom hits you in the eyes? No antivenom known will keep you alive for more than sixty seconds.” He kicked at the gravel and dirt underfoot, still moist from the regular morning rain. “No, this isn’t for me and not for Nanger neither.”

“Indeed,” the man with half a face agreed solemnly. He sniffed and nodded in the direction of the now departed youth. “What’s your obsession with the boy, anyway? He’s not strong, he’s not rich, and he’s not particularly pretty.”

“It’s his head I’m interested in, not his body,” sighed Challis, “though this is a matter of my pleasure.” Puffing like a leaky pillow, he led them through the bustling, shouting crowd. Humans, thranx, and representatives of a dozen other commercial races slid easily around and past them as though oiled, all intent on errands of importance.

“It’s my Janus jewel. It bores me.”

The smaller man looked disgusted. “How can anyone rich enough to own a Janus jewel be bored?”

“Oh, but I am, Nolly-dear, I am.”

Nanger made a half-smirk. “What’s the trouble, Challis? Your imagination failing you?” He laughed, short, stentorian barks.

Challis grinned back at him. “Hardly that, Nanger, but it seems that I have not the right type of mind to produce the kind of fine, detailed resolution the jewel is capable of. I need help for that. So I’ve been at work these past months looking for a suitable mental adept, trying to find a surrogate mind of the proper type to aid in operating the jewel. I’ve paid a lot of money for the right information,” he finished, nodding at a tall Osirian he knew. The avian clacked its beak back at him and made a gesture with its graceful, ostrichlike

neck, its periscope form weaving confidently through the crowd.

Nanger paused to buy a thisk cake, and Challis continued his explanation as they walked on.

“So you see why I need that boy.”

Nolly was irritated now. “Why not just hire him? See if he’ll participate willingly?”

Challis looked doubtful. “No, I don’t think that would work out, Nolly-dear. You’re familiar with some of my fantasies and likes?” His voice had turned inhumanly calm and empty. “Would you participate voluntarily?”

Nolly looked away from suddenly frightening pupils. In spite of his background, he shuddered. “No,” he barely whispered, “no, I don’t guess that I would. . . .”

“Hello, lad,” boomed Small Symm—the giant was incapable of conversing in less than a shout. “What of your life and what do you hear from Malaika?”

Flinx sat on one of the stools lined up before the curving bar, ordered spiced beer for himself and a bowl of pretzels for Pip. The flying snake slid gracefully from Flinx’s shoulder and worked his way into the wooden bowl of trapezoidal dough. This action was noted by a pair of wide-eyed unsavory types nearby, who promptly vacated their seats and hastily made for the rearmost booths.

“I’ve had no contact with Malaika for quite a while, Symm. I’ve heard he’s attending to business outsystem.”

Flinx’s wealthy merchant friend had enabled him to quit performing his personal sideshow, having provided him with a substantial sum for his aid in exploring the Tar-Aiym world of the Krang. Much of the money had gone to set up Flinx’s adoptive mother, Mother Mastiff, in a well-stocked shop in one of Drallar’s better market districts. Muttering at her capriciousness, the old woman had rescued Flinx as a child from the slave-seller’s block, and had raised him. She was the only parent he had ever known. She muttered still, but with affection.

“As a matter of fact,” he went on, sipping at the peppery brew, “Malaika wanted me to go with him. But while I respect the old hedonist, he’d eventually get ideas about putting me in a ...

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