

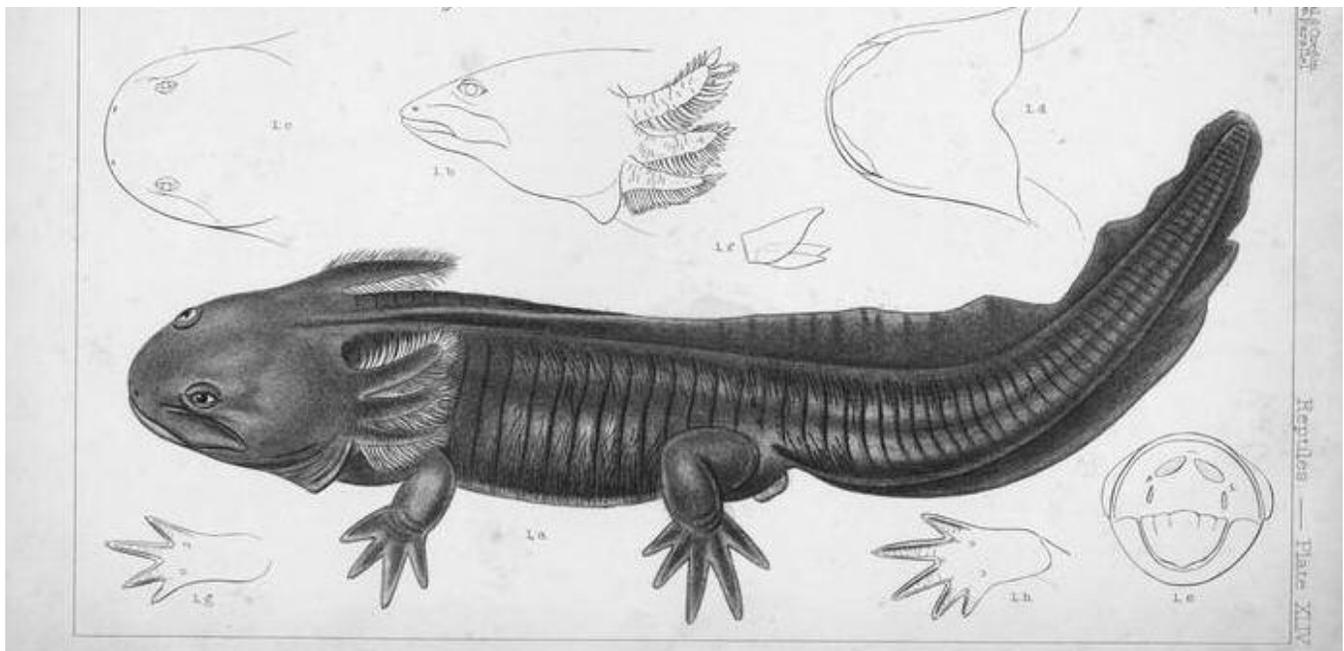
Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – THE DEVIL’S MESSENGER by Embe Charpentier. Ms Charpentier's first two books, *Beloved Dead* and *Sparks*, are published by Kellan Books. She's also been published in a wide variety of online magazines. She maintains an interest in history that guides her writing.

Page 6 – THE TICK-TOCK CLOCK by Mark Joseph Kevlock. Mr. Kevlock has been a published author for nearly three decades. Thus far in 2018 his fiction has appeared or is set to appear in more than two dozen magazines, including *365 Tomorrows*, *The Sea Letter*, *Into The Void*, *The First Line*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Grievous Angel*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Altered Reality*, *The Starlit Path*, *Yellow Mama*, *Literally Stories*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Friday Flash Fiction*. He has also written for DC Comics.

Page 8 – LOST AND FOUND by Steve Bates. Mr. Bates, of Ashburn, VA, writes, “My science fiction and fantasy stories have appeared in *Perihelion*, *The Colored Lens*, *4 Star Stories* and other publications. My website is www.stevebateswriter.com.”



“THE DEVIL’S MESSENGER”

by EMBE CHARPENTIER

Author’s note: According to legend, Lavinia Fisher was the first female serial killer in the U.S. Some doubt the truth of the tale, and say that Lavinia was guilty of highway robbery alone. The author encourages you, gentle reader, to make up your own mind.

South Carolina, 1818

A dinner of Brunswick stew fortified with the meat of two chunky squirrels filled the wooden bowl of Thomas Dillard. He used dark bread as a trencher. His avid chewing kept him from speaking to the charming hostess who insisted he also drink his tea.

In the darkened dining room of the Six Mile Wayfarer House, Lavinia Fisher inquired as to Dillard’s employment. “I sell thread and fabric from England,” he finally replied between bites.

“Need ye a room?” Lavinia smiled gently. “I just lay clean linens atop the mattress. Ye be welcome to stay. My tea will not keep sleep from yer door.”

Lit by but two candles and Lavinia’s sparkling eyes, the small common room held four animated men who played Faro. Dillard wondered if their loud voices would keep him from sleep, but the time had

grown late and he had nowhere else to go. He downed his tea to the dregs and nodded. “Your hospitality is most welcome, Misses Fisher.”

Later that night, as Dillard lay in his bed in a drugged stupor, his mattress split down the center. The sheet flapped like a flag of surrender as he plunged to the basement below. The force of his fall drove the oaken spikes set in the floor through him, piercing his abdomen, but only partially penetrating his chest. Dillard’s blood oozed onto the cold floor, and he moaned as Lavinia approached, dodging the spikes.

“I shall end your misery,” she declared as she lifted her skirt. She used her boot to push his chest hard enough to pierce his dying body.

February, 1819

“We are pleased to have you as our guest, Mr. Pike,” John Fisher said. The gang had met their latest victim-to-be on the road and directed him to the Six Mile. That night, the highwaymen dispersed, leaving Pike at the mercy of the Fishers, or so they thought.

A group of ten men, some bearing torches, strode up to the inn’s front door.

Jonathan Turner pounded on the red wooden door and screamed, "Come ye toward the door, Mister and Misses Fisher! I am Johnathan Turner of Charleston."

Lavinia shook as she opened the door. "Why be ye here?"

"Misses, there are men disappearing on the road. Know ye anything about this?" Johnathan barged into the anteroom and past her into the dining area. His slitted eyes scanned the tables and the four men who occupied them.

"I know nothing of men disappearing," Lavinia replied. Johnathan and two of the other men held lanterns as they made their way into the corridor. They coursed through the hallway like a raging river. The rooms' doors were shut tight, but Lavinia opened each in turn.

Johnathan peered into each room but found them clean and tidy, with nothing amiss. He strode down to the last room still seeking some sign of foul deeds. Even in the last room in the hallway, the ambush room, he found no blood stains. He leaned against the doorway, his elbow only inches from the small lever that opened the bed to the pit of spikes below. "I am still suspicious, lady," he said.

Lavinia held her head up and set her chin. "Ye owe us an apology."

That night, no man fell upon the foul spikes. Mr. Pike left the inn with his money. Yet being suspected of murder would not stop the Fishers when there was

money to be made. "There will be other nights," John said.

The vigilantes left Mister David Ross behind to spy upon the Six Mile, but his hidey hole was not sufficient protection from discovery. At dusk, John Fisher dragged Ross from his observation point in a thatch of bare bushes. "If I do not return, all nature will come looking for me," Ross warned as he was put up against the wall on the outside of the inn. "I had better be given leave to return unharmed."

"Shut yer mouth or I'll give ya a blinker black as a raven's wing," one of the gang said.

David yelped as one of the gang struck him in the side of the head. "Not enough to shut his mouth," Lavinia said. "I m'self will knock ya into a cocked hat." She took Ross by the hair and broke a window with his face. The men in the gang roared as Lavinia wiped her hands on her apron. "Ye will not sully our reputation or these men'll come into town. Won't be enough of you left to fill a thimble when they get done. Ye hearin' me, boy?"

Ross's face was dripping with blood thinned by tears. Lavinia grabbed him by the shirt collar. "Jus' let me go and you'll hear no more from me," he pled. "Yer one ornery woman, Misses."

"Begone, ye ninny. Pull foot afore I get my axe," John said.

Lavinia released Ross, and the gang all laughed at his stumbling gate as he stag-

gered up the dirt path to the main road. “Think he’ll talk, Mister?” the most youthful member of the gang asked.

“If’n he wants to keep his teeth, he’ll shut his yapper,” Lavinia said as Ross finally turned the corner onto the road.

That very night, Mister John Peoples arrived at the inn and asked Lavinia if the inn had room for him. For hours, Lavinia conversed with Peoples, a friendly interrogation that caused an uneasy feeling within

her prospective guest.

“Want ye some tea?” Lavinia finally asked. And though Peoples said no, Lavinia returned with a steaming cup and advised him to drink it all. “I found ye a room, and the tea’ll help ye sleep,” Lavinia advised.

But while Lavinia left the room to make the bed, Peoples, who did not like tea, poured it into a nearby plant pot. Upon Lavinia’s return, he followed her to the dread room with the collapsible bed.



After the length and intensity of Lavinia's questioning, Peoples thought he might fall victim to robbery. He made his mind up to sleep in the chair instead of the bed. So when Lavinia pulled the crank out in the hallway to split Peoples' bed in two, the noise roused him. He saw the bed open onto forest of wooden spikes below and fear struck him a lightning blow.

The terrified Peoples exited the inn through a window and rode to Charleston hell-bent to make sure justice would be served while it was piping hot.

After the Fishers' arrest the next day for highway robbery, the sheriff and his men burned the Six Mile to the ground.

September 13, 1819

The rats in the Old Jail scurried down the corridor as John and Lavinia ripped a bedsheet into strips. Their six by eight foot cell reeked of urine. "Lavinia, what should we do if we escape? We have not one penny and no hope besides thievery of making more."

"Tis better to live than die, for while we live there is hope." Lavinia made a tight knot, then put her forehead tight to the bars. She saw no guards. "The lawmen assume we have given up the fight. Let them think so."

John tugged at the makeshift rope. "This will hold your weight, but I am not sure it will hold mine," he said. After scanning the area from his third story window, he tied one end of the strip of fabric

around one of the metal bars. Squeezing through the narrow space, John wrapped his shaking hand with a loop of the fabric and pushed his feet against the stone wall of the jail. Walking perilously down the wall as Lavinia stood guard, he listened intently for the sound of ripping and tearing. When his feet hit the grass, he exhaled in relief.

But as Lavinia began her climb out the window, the taller of the guards appeared at the front of the cell. The guard commanded her to stop, unlocked the door and pulled the screaming Lavinia from the window.

"Run, John!" she shouted.

But John was not one to listen to his wife. He paced back to the jailhouse door and extended his wrists. With all due dispatch, chains were placed around his hands and ankles and he was herded back up to the third floor. Guards surrounded Lavinia, who wept until her chest heaved.

"We're keepin' a close eye on you from now on," one of the guards spat.

Chains clanged and jangled together as Lavinia and John tried to embrace each other. When they could not, Lavinia howled in anger. "I will never stop trying to escape," she said.

The guards laughed. "She is not sane," John protested. "She should be in an asylum! Do what you will with me but put her where she belongs."

"If I must die, I want to wear my wedding dress!" Lavinia cried, and again, she amused the guards.

"Foolery," one of the jailers said. "She is playing a game. She is no more insane than we are. Woman," and the man took her by the arm, "Be still. You will hang in whatever garb you wear, and you'll go off to hell on a poker."

Lavinia's small fist rose to the guard's jawline and hit solidly.

"I will not hit a woman," he said, but he pulled her arm, then released as she fell forward.

The men filed out, leaving the imprisoned couple holding each other. "I will be pardoned yet," Lavinia muttered.

Feb.18, 1820

Unpardoned and unbowed, Lavinia was given an opportunity to speak with Reverend Richard Furman. Her chance to repent came to naught as Lavinia had her say. Vitriol poured from her lips in torrents, enough to drive the minister away. Their tiny cell resounded with her curses. "The governor will not hang a woman," Lavinia said. "You're a fool for writing that sorry letter, John. No one will care that you have given your soul to God. The Great Beyond wants nothing to do with us."

The guards came in with shackles and Lavinia's wedding dress. "No need for modesty," the skinny jailer said. "Jus' put her on and let's get goin', witchy."

Lavinia took off her clothes, though the frozen air of the cell caused her to shiver. The guards turned their backs to her. She slipped her white cotton dress over her head.

"My pardon awaits," she stated as they put the manacles on her shaking wrists.

Lavinia could not be executed as a married woman, so John went first to the gallows. The reverend read John's impassioned letter. On this rainy day, John tremblingly pledged his soul to God. The crowd shifted restlessly, some calling out for John's hanging, others crying for mercy. The boards of the hastily built scaffold squealed beneath John's feet.

"I am a child of God, and I seek forgiveness for me and my wife," he said as they hung the noose around his neck. As the executioner tightened the noose, he recited the first few words of the "Lord's Prayer", but he never finished as the floor fell out from beneath his feet.

Lavinia did not shed a tear, nor did she repent or apologize. With her last breath, she made an offer to the throng who called for her death. Her wet dress clung to her body. "If you have a message you want to send to hell, give it to me, and I'll carry it!"

Then, Lavinia Fisher jumped from the gallows, hanging and swaying before the scaffold. ❖

“THE TICK-TOCK CLOCK”

by MARK JOSEPH KEVLOCK

Ashley Jannifer flashed her badge and said, “I’m a member of The Tick-Tock Police. I’m here to help you.”

Gregor Martins sipped some more of his whiskey. “You are insane,” he said.

“I know that this will be hard to hear, Mr. Martins, but this is the last day of your life. At 5:29 p.m. this afternoon, you will die.”

Gregor eyed the woman’s clothing. She was not dressed like an escaped mental patient.

“My dear, are you making a threat against me?”

Jannifer put her badge away. “Not at all. I’m a doctor. An omega therapist. I’ve come to aid you, in the resolution of your corporeal existence.”

Gregor opened his mouth but said nothing.

“We’re wasting precious time, as it is,” Jannifer said. “So I’ll offer you the short version....”

She took a palm-sized diamond from her pocket, stood it upon its tip on the library floor, and spun it around like a top. Each facet of the twirling diamond seemed

to draw light into it until the room grew taut. As the diamond wound down, so did the motion in the room surrounding it. When the diamond, at last, came to rest – impossibly on end – it held the very fabric of the room’s reality tightly in place, as if nailed with tent posts at the corners. Dust motes froze in the air. The candle flame did not flicker, did not burn, did not die.

“I’ve stopped time,” Jannifer said, “only to demonstrate that I’m telling the truth. Inside of you, Gregor, you feel your death coming on. You have run from this inner knowledge, but no more. Those closest to death, begin to exist outside of time. Which is why you can still move, but your library study cannot.”

Gregor thought to call her a demon. He longed to label her a sorceress. But he began to suspect, to his dismay, that she was nothing more than stated. He felt it wise to listen.

“My profession,” Jannifer said, “is to travel alongside 24-hour ascendants, to help them cope with the coming transition, and settle their earthly affairs, as best as possible, in the time remaining.”

“I can’t die,” Gregor Martins protested. “I’m forty-two years old. I have yet to

marry. I have achieved no fame. I counted upon decades more, to work with.”

Jannifer said nothing, instead allowing inner truths the silence necessary to reveal themselves.

Gregor rose from his wing chair with fists clenched at his sides. “How do you know the hour of my death?”

“I didn’t know it,” Jannifer said, “until you told it to me. The Tick-Tock Clock, housed at our headquarters, registers the existence of all non-celestial beings. The clock measures lifespans, according to willpower remaining. Yours is nearly run out.”

“I have the will to live!” Gregor insisted. “Your clock is wrong!”

“It never has been, before,” Jannifer said.

“How did you get in here?” Gregor shouted. “Who is with you?”

“I came alone,” Jannifer explained, “in through the cracks in your foundation, if you will. I’m not a genie or an angel. Just a woman with a job to do.”

“I’ve spent my entire life in self-contemplation,” Gregor stated, almost proudly, “there is nothing you can teach me.”

Ashley Jannifer sensed an opening then and began her work. “You’ve kept people at a distance because they were never quite real to you. You viewed the world merely as an extension of your own needs and desires. You created an existence meant to

service only you.”

“Leave me alone,” Gregor said, as he collapsed back into the chair. “I should at least die in peace, shouldn’t I?”

“You drove away everyone who tried to care for you because you asked too much of them. They could never do enough, to prove to you that you were worth caring about.”

Gregor tucked his face into the corner of the chair. “Spare me your last-minute analysis. I know what I am.”

“And you can no longer live with it,” Jannifer said.

“Suicide, is that it? You’re driving me to my death!”

Jannifer shook her head. “I’m helping you to understand... the decision you’ve already made. Here you sit, in this candlelit library, twelve hours a day, or more. You’ve suffocated your spirit, beyond repair. Daylight is your enemy. You exist only in your recollections – of childhood, high school, college. You stopped living, in any meaningful way, a very long time ago. Now your realization is catching up to that fact.”

Gregor cursed his companion. He did not need the world. He was better than that. He had placed himself outside, above it, at a safe distance. He lived in books, where endings were certain, made sense, were already written.

“I can go on this way. I’ve emptied my life, true, but I don’t need anyone else. The

world would only hurt me, can't you see? No sane person would go out there, anymore. This is the way, the only way I can live. I'll make it work. I will."

"I'm sorry," Jannifer said. "But this decision you've made... it's like a trigger that's been pulled. You can't take it back. A small, desperate, fearful part of you may want to go on. But the rest of you doesn't."

They spoke for hours after that. Or perhaps it was only five minutes. Gregor examined each decision he had made that led him to this. Jannifer knew that he just needed to explain himself to someone one last time. She listened, as she always did, until the talk was through.

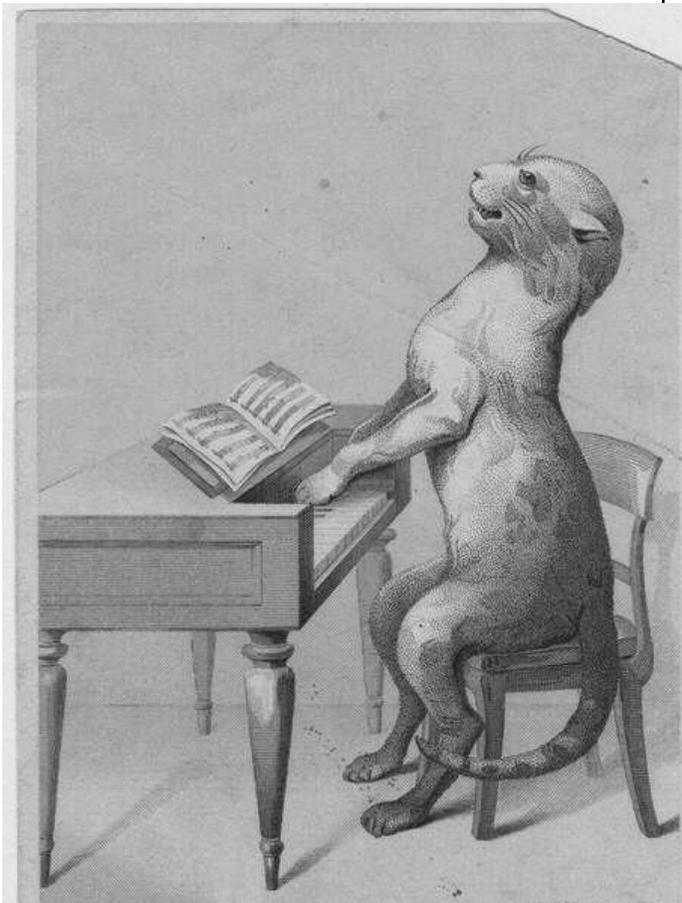
"I just feel tired," Gregor said. "I just

want to sleep."

Jannifer watched him lose consciousness. She picked up the diamond from the floor and put it in her pocket. The candle flame flickered. Dust motes swam. Omega therapy was difficult work. Spirits resisted ascension for countless reasons. No one should die, Ashley believed, with their life unresolved. Gregor Martins lacked the will to continue. But at least now he understood that.

At 5:29 p.m. Gregor awoke, suddenly, from his slumber. He thought about rising from the chair but decided against it. His spirit felt heavy, impossibly burdened. Was it really such a sin to give up, to surrender? All at once, he felt as if he hadn't the will to take even one more breath.

And he was right. ❖



“LOST AND FOUND”

by STEVE BATES

The first notes dance and swirl, intensifying rapidly into the familiar storm of stardust. A ghostly, three-dimensional outline solidifies as a large biped, a hermaphrodite from the Rigel system. It scans its surroundings, smiles and releases a deep breath.

Nearby, several three-legged travelers shimmer and fade as they transit to their home planet, closer to the interior of the galaxy. They leave a brief but delightful burst of color in their wake.

A few people check their communicators or study star maps that they have projected in front of them. Yet you, my friend, seem to find amusement rummaging through the lost-and-found alcove here at Cassiopeia 20 Epsilon, one of the many transfer stations devoted to carbon-based, nitrogen-oxygen-tolerant travelers.

What’s this? Heads turn as a man runs this way, pursued by an Agent. The fugitive peeks over his shoulder as the Agent closes the gap between them. The runner nearly collides with a pair of three-meter-tall beings from Eridanus 4, muttering apologies and stumbling away.

The Agent casts an odd glance in my direction as he races past. It is a questioning look, maybe even an accusatory one. It is difficult to tell with shapeshifters—not

that I harbor any bias. Perhaps I am slightly jealous of them. I have only one appearance, which was engineered to approximate the most common facial and bodily features of the sentient races of this quadrant of the galaxy. That is part of the price of being a station manager.

Did I hear you correctly, my friend? You think that you might have lost this wub-fur coat on a prior journey through this station? I thought you said that you are from the Formalhaut system. Reports indicate that Formalhaut will soon go supernova and incinerate at least four inner planets. The pelts in this garment can reanimate in order to protect the wearer to temperatures approaching absolute zero. I do not think that it is going to help you back home. Now, I really do need to determine what is going on with these two men.

You are correct to point out that this station is automated and that usually there is not much for me to do. The low gravity and oxygen-rich atmosphere provide a subtle psychological boost for most arrivals, with only the occasional adjustment on my part. Like fine draperies caressed by a morning breeze, the station’s background undulates through nearly infinite shades of blue and white. The ethereal music from Draco 6 makes even the briefest visit spe-

cial. The universal translator can handle 99.4 percent of the known languages in the galactic cluster.

But I have dealt with some delicate problems during my tenure. Perhaps you heard about those travelers from the frozen methane world of Xamidimura 9—or was it Xamidumera 9? Anyway, they were so massive that two of them nearly filled the station. It took quick thinking on my part to transport them to an abandoned mining ship in the Izar system. I received a commendation. The news was all over the vids.

You do remember? Good. Sometimes I feel like I spent 25 percent of my anticipated lifespan in the Academy so that I can watch the universe pass by without having the slightest impact upon another sentient lifeform. I am proud of my work, but I must confess that it is a lonely existence. In fact—I do not know if I should tell you this, but there is really no one in whom I can confide; the Agents are not exactly chatty. Now and again I slip away to low-tech but picturesque planets, to breathe glorious natural air and to observe the inhabitants as they go about their lives. I can adjust the relativistic impact of my absences so that each seems like a blink in time here but lasts a circadian cycle or two on the planet, though the technique exerts a certain toll on me.

Look, the runner is headed this way again. He must not know that the station is an inside-out sphere with only the illusion of traditional spatial relationships. No matter which direction he heads, he will keep returning to this nexus. See how the Agent

has assumed the appearance of the runner's species in an effort to minimize the stranger's disorientation. I marvel at the speed and skill of the Agent, who is positioning himself so that the visitor is forced to pause between himself and me.

I wish that the Agent would not keep staring at me, however. It is disconcerting. You know how powerful Agents are, and not just because of their shapeshifting abilities. Technically, he does not outrank me. But he could report this minor incident to the travel authorities, and I would have some explaining to do.

Yes, I do know happen to know where this fugitive came from. I have made a few visits to his planet, Sol 3. It is a backward world. However, you might have heard of it. The Academy offers a six-credit physics course devoted to the dynamics of a single ocean wave crashing onto a beach at a Sol 3 location called Malibu. Students from across the galactic cluster study a 15-dimensional holographic reproduction of that wave and must identify all the forces that generated and sustained it. The waves at Malibu were discovered by scouts from the galactic core, some of whom took up permanent residence in locations with strange names such as Key West and South Beach.

It was on a less exotic Sol 3 shoreline that our visitor was walking rather distractingly not long ago. The man had departed something called a corporate retreat. That is a gathering of people devoted to accumulating private wealth on planets where the practice has not yet been banned. It seems that his colleagues were dissatisfied with his

performance. He had imbibed an excessive amount of an intoxicant called alcohol. And he had no wish to return to his occupation. Sol was just disappearing below the horizon when a glint of light reflected off an object on the beach. He picked it up, examined it casually and began to rub it, removing grains of sand from its hard, smooth, dark, oblong surface.

You might have surmised that this was a travel token, but it was no ordinary token. He was in possession of one of the

first-generation devices. Perhaps you have seen a vid of one that has been tracked down and is being placed in a heavily fortified vault. The four raised dots pay homage to the primary dimensions. Depending on the manner in which your ocular organs process light, the token might appear to be a stone or a metal, or some mixture of the two. As you no doubt recall, those pioneering tokens were manufactured and programmed so poorly that many users were inadvertently transported to cold, empty



space or gouged nasty rifts in the space-time fabric.

You and I take for granted the modern tokens that are attuned to our unique brainwave patterns and allow us to program each segment of a journey with absolute certainty of the outcome. We can enjoy first meal on our home planet, travel to a transfer station like this one, leap to the far reaches of the galactic cluster by mid-cycle, and reverse the trips so that we are tucked into our beds by the time allotted for our sleeping phase.

Speaking of sleep, I can imagine that when the Sol 3 man's token was activated and he became aware of his new surroundings in this station, he might have thought that he had fallen into a dream—you do dream in the Formalhaut system, don't you? The arrival of the token must have set off some sort of alarm, because the Agent appeared here soon thereafter, shouting and pointing in the direction of the Sol 3 man. No wonder the visitor ran.

See how the Agent is trying to calm the stranger, saying in a voice very much like that of his kind: I mean you no harm, but you are in possession of a dangerous device, which you must relinquish at once.

Travelers materialize and vanish all around the visitor from Sol 3, which no doubt adds to his confusion. He asks who we are and where we are. The Agent begins to explain, but it is apparent that very little is making sense.

Give me the token and I will take you home, the Agent says. The visitor hesitates. There is something different about this

place, he says. He closes his eyes briefly, then opens them wide. I don't want a drink, he says. I can't remember the last time that I didn't want a drink.

The Agent lurches for the token. The visitor bolts, with the Agent once again close on his heels.

My friend, please excuse me. I wish to cloak this lost-and-found alcove and de-cloak the station lounge. One moment as I project the controls. Please do not worry about the wub-fur coat; it will be safe.

I am curious; what do you see now? A house of ill repute. Fascinating. Most visitors see a cocktail bar. The young woman with pale blue skin sitting alone at that table is from a world that is mostly covered with water. No, please do not approach her with an unsavory suggestion. I had a lengthy conversation with her after her arrival. She does not wish to return to Nembus 2. Her mate has become habitually abusive, and her civilization does not permit marriage bonds to be severed. Yes, it is a very sad situation.

The Agent has finally captured the man from Sol 3. You must give me the token, the Agent informs him in a tone that nearly causes my bodily fluids to boil. Shaking, the man from Sol 3 acquiesces.

Don't send me home right away, the visitor begs. He notices the lounge, which appears to him as a coffee shop. And he sees the blue-tinted woman. Their eyes connect briefly.

Perhaps this man could rest here a while, I suggest to the Agent. I could ensure that he winds up where he is sup-

posed to be.

How smoothly the Agent returns to his default appearance, gaining height but losing weight, becoming all taut skin and prominent bones. Though the shapeshifter is smiling at me, it is the rictus grin of a predatory animal that is about to devour its catch.

You deserve much credit, I tell him. In just a few circadian cycles, you have located two of the last original travel tokens still unaccounted for—one from this man and another from the woman at that table. This galaxy, and the entire cluster, are safer as a result. No doubt you will receive great accolades when you present these to your superior officers. And please do not give a thought to sharing the honor with me; I am simply relieved that the dangerous devices are no longer missing.

The Agent's expression remains fierce. I sigh. All right, I say. I might have played a small role in the recovery of these tokens. But allow me to elucidate.

I have been complaining—politely—for some time to the travel authorities that I need help here at the station. I'm not getting any younger, and the pressure of being on duty almost all the time has been weighing on me. Occasionally, in the pursuit of respite, I visit worlds known for their attractive shorelines. Have you ever walked on the sand of such a beach? No? I find the experiences very rewarding in an aesthetic sense. I know that this concept has little meaning to your kind, but trust me.

It was during recent excursions that I became aware of this woman and this man.

Each was experiencing a crisis of personal circumstances. As it happens, just a few cycles earlier a traveler had left a wub-fur coat in this lounge. I found two first-generation travel tokens in a pocket.

Yes, I know, I should have reported this immediately. It was always my intent that the tokens be turned over to an Agent. I did not see any harm in placing the devices where these two unfortunate individuals might discover them. I had adjusted the tokens' programming to ensure that the woman and man would be transported here safely if they truly desired to leave their home worlds. I intended to recover the tokens after their arrival and to ask them—at the appropriate time—if they would consider remaining here to assist me in running the station.

Yes, I do see that the man has asked the woman if he might join her at her table. I do see that the woman has asked the man if she might touch his hand; she has never clasped one that is not webbed. And I do see that he has agreed. And that they continue to hold hands.

No, do not worry, Agent. Though they are theoretically compatible species for purposes of sexual function, they probably could produce no offspring. So my meddling—as you call it—is unlikely to have further repercussions. I understand that you consider your work here to be done. I look forward to your future visits under more routine and pleasant circumstances.

What is that you say, my friend from Formalhaut? You must resume your travels as well? Would you care for some refresh-

ment before you depart? You do not, but you ask a favor. Certainly, if I am capable of complying.

You want me to watch over this man and this woman, to help them find happiness together? What a fascinating request.

That function is clearly not within my job description. But, now that I think about it, I can assure you that it will be my pleasure.



END TRANSMISSION