

From the Dreams of Morpheus: Five Tales of Fantasy and Science Fiction

Steven Ford
Copyright 2009 Steven Ford

A Special Hell

I decree that the fifty-eighth year of my life begins today. The golden rays of Tau Ceti once again have found their way to the line I etched in the sandstone so long ago. Warmer days have come and Ceti Prime has completed another circuit of its star. A Ceti year is shorter than an Earth year by 36 days, but I have compensated accordingly. What year it is on Earth is beyond my reckoning...or my interest. Happy birthday to me.

As soon as I drive the cold stiffness from my bones, I will work my way down to the grotto where the Blessed Mother promised that I would find sustenance every morning. She has never failed me in all these years. And after consuming what She has provided, I will pray my ragged Rosary and meditate on the mysteries. The Rosary always brings me comfort.

For now, I drink in the peace of the brilliant dawn. As Ceti rises, the sand crabs—at least creatures that approximate sand crabs--will begin their chorus. Their staccato clicks will fill the canyon and provoke the dust stingers to take flight. Once the crabs creep from their burrows, they will visit me, as they always do. The crabs are curious and intelligent. In my first year of exile, we reached an understanding. They will not rob from my food supply and I will not roll boulders into their hive. The crabs have respected our treaty ever since.

There is so little I can recall these days. My past is irrevocably fading. When Mary first appeared to me in my twentieth year, She announced that I was condemned to this place for the murder of a family. I buried my face in the pink sand and wept in shame at Her feet. Thank God I had been spared the hideous memory of what I had done.

I am eternally grateful to the Blessed Mother for wiping that nightmare from my mind.

Thankfully, I can still remember the moment when She placed her radiant hand on my shoulder. The pain of being connected to such sinless purity nearly shattered my soul. I shrank away with a scream. "Do not be afraid," She said. "There is hope yet. You are abandoned by humanity, but not by me."

She fulfills her promise to feed and nourish me, but it has been at least 10 Ceti years since I have looked upon Her Blessed Face or heard Her soothing voice. I have gone gray in Her service and the relentless wind has scoured my features. It would be wonderful to glimpse Her beauty again, unfaded by time. The visage I see in my grotto pool is that of an aging man, well beyond the summer of his life and slouching into autumn.

After my Rosary I believe I will climb to the top of the mesa. As I was falling asleep last night I heard the rumble of the triadons. They are migrating north and it is always a treat to see them. Their long necks wave like a field of impossibly tall grass and their scales flash in myriad colors. I can see their wide mouths inhaling clouds of dust stingers, continuously feeding from air. It will be a week before the last stragglers of the herd pass the mesa and vanish over the horizon.

God is wonderful in His works.

Kathy gazed at the dusty teradisc and tried to read its label in the gathering darkness. A simple voice command would have brought up the office lights, but she didn't want to break the mood. Sleet pecked incessantly at the window while a Bach concerto floated overhead.

The door annunciator chimed. "Come," she called out.

Rafe shook the water and ice from his beige longcoat as he swept into the room. "It is your partner bearing good news and an invitation to dinner!" Rafe fell into his favorite chair and allowed his coat to spill over the arms.

"I'll take the news first."

"Judge Hammond has excused himself from the Burnback case. Lunacon will definitely settle. They won't want to pursue another trial."

Kathy shrugged as she continued to stare at the disc. "That's just as well. I don't think I could have spent another day in that courtroom."

Just working through the pretrial motions was agonizing in itself. Have you told the Burnbacks?"

"No," Rafe replied with a yawn. "I'll ring them up this evening. They'll be happy to know that they've just become billionaires."

"Hmm . . . at the cost of their daughter's life. What else were you going to tell me?"

"Dinner," Rafe said, leaning forward. "Dinner at the Iron Chef."

"I don't have a craving for Japanese today."

"Would you prefer a diet of teradiscs?"

"What?"

"You've hardly looked at me since I came in. What is so fascinating about that disc?"

"Oh!" Kathy managed a slight smile. "This is from my mother's collection. I found it this afternoon while I was cleaning out some old files." Kathy held the disc closer and squinted. "Case number 6354—People vs. Jon Alter. November 23, 2081."

Rafe stood and leaned over her desk for a closer look. "That's the case that put your mother in the spotlight—the first Exile sentencing."

Kathy sighed. "She should never have agreed to defend him. The prosecution had a mountain of DNA evidence. This was just six months after the 8th Amendment was rescinded and Justice had kicked off their Exile program. They were looking to make an example and Jon Alter handed it to them on a platter."

"Exile beats capital punishment," Rafe offered.

"Does it?" Kathy asked. "My mother thought it was horribly cruel. What if an exile is innocent? It's unthinkable."

Rafe plucked the disc from her fingers and flipped it like a coin. "And others would argue that decapitating two children and their mother is unthinkable."

"Careful with that!" Kathy snapped as she caught the disc in mid-flight. "They don't make storage like this any more. I'm trying to find a holo decoder that can play it."

"For historical interest?"

"Not really," Kathy replied as she gently tucked the disc into an envelope. "It would be nice to see my mother in action again, at the top of her game. I was just a child during the trial, but I remember the toll it took on Mom. Every evening she would come through the door looking as if someone had just beaten the hell out of her. I'd awaken in the middle of the night and still see the light shining under the door of her

study. I don't know when she slept. Something troubled her deeply about that case. Just a week before Mom passed away she suddenly asked if there was new information about the Alter trial. Can you imagine?"

Rafe stood with his hands thrust into his pockets. "There is no new information. The case closed 40 years ago. As they used to say in the twentieth century, 'Jon Alter has left the building.'"

"Still," Kathy began as she pulled on her coat, "I want to go over this case myself. Something to do in my spare time. How does Mexican suit you, Rafe?"

"It gives me heartburn."

"Mexican it is. Just keep your bowels quiet during my closing arguments tomorrow."

"Lights out. Security in 30" Kathy said as she opened the door.

"Good evening, Miss Stanson," the system responded. "Security activation in 30 seconds."

Only dust stingers fill the sky today. I have been praying for rain as I watch my herbs wither. The food Our Lady provides is the stuff of life itself, but—and I say this with all due respect—it lacks taste. My Cetian herbs add so much more flavor.

I've cultivated my delicate plants from cuttings I harvested during my journeys to the Black Valley in my first years here. I had no means to gauge their toxicity except by trial and error. I still recall one variety that offered a taste almost identical to saffron, but as I chewed a leaf my lips and tongue swelled to painful size. I could not eat or drink for several days. Another plant with a gorgeous flower enticed me to mix it with a bowl of hot gruel—and I paid for my haste with vomiting for most of a day.

I water my herbs as much as possible, but Ceti sucks the moisture into the powdery sand. This morning I held a dying plant in my hand and cried to heaven, "Lord, why? Have I not been a faithful servant? Have I fallen yet again from your grace?"

In a moment of weakness I took a sharpened stick into the savannah and crouched among the grasses, waiting for an unwary triadon to come my way. Triadon flesh, greasy as it was, would surely be preferable to tasteless mush. A tender infant triadon, hardly a meter tall, was within my grasp, but at the moment I raised my spear, my arm

went numb and pain seared my chest. At the same instant, the mother triadon took notice of her baby, and came thundering toward me. I fell onto my face, calling out for the Blessed Virgin. The huge creature stopped not six meters from me, regarded me with her lidless black eyes and then lumbered away with her offspring in tow.

It was nearly dark before the pain subsided and I found the strength to walk. "Oh my God," I shouted to the twilight, "I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven, and the pains of hell; but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life." Only the rush of the wind replied, but perhaps that was His whispered response. I had strayed from the path that He and Our Mother had set for me. He could have allowed the triadon to rip me to pieces, but instead I was spared with far less punishment than I deserved.

Perhaps if I fast and meditate, He will lift his punishment and restore my herbs. I am a man damned by my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do. But will Blessed Mary, ever virgin, pray for me?

"Kathy!"

Kathy Stanson turned to see Rafe bounding through the crowded hallway. "Hold the lift!"

She allowed the doors to slide halfway shut, enjoying the panicked look on Rafe's face, then jabbed the **OPEN** button at the last moment. Rafe slid across the threshold, spilling papers and folders as he went.

"You did that on purpose!"

Kathy laughed. "I'm in a lousy mood. I needed a diversion. Where to?"

"Authorization Rafe Mackie," he said as he scooped up the last folder. "Judicial level."

"Thank you" the lift responded. "Judicial level. And you, Miss?"

"Authorization Kathy Stanson. Cafeteria."

"Cafeteria, Miss Stanson. Thank you." The lift jerked slightly, then accelerated.

"On your way to see Judge Altobello?" Kathy asked.

"How did you know?"

“Attorney Barrett mentioned that Altobello was getting testy with you this morning. Something about repeatedly leading a witness,” Kathy smirked.

Rafe shook his head and grinned. “I don’t want to discuss it. Too painful. How’s your research going with the Alter case?”

“The man did the crime,” she replied. “Snuffed a mother and two children. It was my mother’s contention, though, that Alter was insane and incompetent to stand trial. Despite all evidence to the contrary, three psychiatrists miraculously declared him sane. They claimed his brain scans showed normal functioning. Something was very wrong and Mom knew it. She just couldn’t prove it.

“In the end my mother believed that the court falsely convicted and exiled a psychotic rather than sending him off for neural reintegration. Do you know why that was allowed to happen?”

Rafe shrugged.

“Because the husband and father was Javier Gonzales. He was Homeland Security’s top investigator back then. A very influential man.”

Rafe’s eyes widened. “Of course! With capital punishment outlawed, Gonzales would never have the satisfaction of seeing Alter dead. So, he wanted the worst possible punishment short of death. Gonzales certainly wasn’t going to allow the government to press Alter’s **RESET** button and send him into society with new personality and a blank memory.”

“Yep. Gonzales pulled all the right strings and had the three-judge panel declare Alter sane and convict him of murder one. That made him a prime candidate for Exile. The story is a little stranger still. Did you know Gonzales also had one of his children Life Scanned?”

“You’re kidding? When?”

“Gonzales showed up at the apartment while EMTs were still working on the youngest victim, a 5-year-old boy. Before the child was completely brain dead, Gonzalez demanded that his son’s memory and high-level neural patterns be scanned and stored at TransLife.”

Rafe shook his head and glanced at the floor display. “After 50 years they still haven’t transplanted those ‘souls’, as they call them, into computers or anything else. A friend of mine is doing research with the TransLife quantum mainframe. He made a breakthrough that allowed him to display visual cortex and auditory data. The idea seems ghoulish to me. He’s a shoe-in for a Nobel, though.”

“Arriving at Judicial level,” the lift announced.

“Wait!” Kathy called out. “Suspend lift. My authorization.”

“Movement halted. Awaiting commands.”

“Kathy!”

Kathy put her hand over her mouth and began to pace. “Your friend can access the memories of anyone stored at TransLife?”

“With permission of next of kin, yes.” Rafe’s eyes narrowed.

“Where are you going with this?”

“I’m thinking that I want to see that boy’s last moments.”

“What’s the point?”

“Maybe it will give me a little piece of evidence that was never available to my mother. There were no eye witnesses to the murder, except possibly for that boy.”

“And where you are going to find next of kin?”

“Javier Gonzales. He’s still alive.”

Rafe exploded with laughter. “You’re going to get his permission to reopen the case of his murdered family? To do what? Retrieve Jon Alter from the exile Gonzalez sent him to in the first place? That’s nuts!”

Kathy didn’t smile. “Gonzales had a rough ride in the years following the murder. He was demoted several times and eventually took a bullet during a terrorist raid in Manhattan. He’s been on disability ever since. A few months ago he was charged with a sensitivity violation for referring to a Muslim as a ‘towel head.’ This is his sixth racial-ethnic sensitivity felony in as many years. Unless someone intervenes, Gonzalez could be looking at prison time under the 2024 Hate Speech Act.”

“And that intervention would come from you?”

“It could,” Kathy shrugged.

“Can I please go to my floor now? I’m running late.”

“Only if you have your quantum-computing friend ring me at the office this week. I want talk to him.”

Rafe shook his head. “Done.”

“Resume travel. My authorization,” Kathy said.

“Arriving at the Judicial level,” the lift responded. The elevator shuddered to a halt and the doors whisked open.

“You are an irrational harpy,” Rafe muttered as he entered the hallway.

“No, I am an attorney—and a good one. When Altobello is screaming at you, just say ‘Thank you sir, may I have another?’ You’ll be fine.”

My God, why have you forsaken me? My herbs are all dead; the crabs have taken the stalks for their hive nests. They were such simple things, Lord. A little pleasure in my meager existence. Why were they taken from me?

Tonight I gaze at the stars and I can see the pinpoint glint of Sol in the blackness. The sight of it fills me with an emptiness beyond understanding. Oh, God, why could you not let the day of my birth perish? It would be better for me to have never existed. At least in oblivion the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

I am old and I am indeed weary, Lord. My existence has been an unending journey of pain. The visitations of the Blessed Mother made the unbearable bearable, but now I fear that even She has forgotten me.

Today a crab scuttled into my cave. At first I was overjoyed for the companionship, but the creature suddenly sprayed me with a foul liquid and sores have now appeared all over my body. I refuse to curse you for my suffering, but can you not deliver me at long last? Strike me, Lord, with the fury you showed that day in the savannah. But this time, seize my heart completely and stop its beating.

I have nothing to do but rest under this alien sky. Oh Lord, if a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my appointed time will I wait, until my change comes.

Kathy stepped off the Greenwood maglev in a pouring rain. She dashed across the street to a gray concrete apartment building and shook the water from her umbrella when she reached the shelter of the main entrance.

“I’m here to see Javier Gonzalez,” she said.

“Please stand by,” the autogreeter replied. Kathy listened to the rain and waited.

“Yes? Who is it?”

“Kathy Stanson. We spoke on the telephone.” There was a long silence, followed by what sounded like a sigh.

“Come in.”

The armored door slid aside to reveal a hallway starkly illuminated by a single LED fixture in the ceiling. “Third door on the right.”

The face that appeared in the doorway was unrecognizable from the one Kathy had seen in her mother’s logs. The robust investigator of 30 was now a frail skeleton of a man at 70. Javier Gonzales still possessed the piercing stare that had locked onto Jon Alter and remained throughout the trial. Now these same eyes regarded her with a mixture of amusement and contempt.

“Miss Stanson. Won’t you sit down?”

Kathy walked into the gloomy living room and seated herself on a threadbare couch. She drew a shallow breath across her lips, trying to avoid the stench of body odor and stale beer. Gonzales lowered himself into a chair opposite her, then scooted it closer.

“The better to see you, my dear.” His sagging chest rose and fell beneath a graying T-shirt. “You look so official in your perky little black suit. That’s hyperfabric, isn’t it? Don’t you ever adjust its color to something more festive?”

“I’m not here to discuss my wardrobe.”

“Of course not,” Gonzales replied with a brittle smile. “You want me to give you access to the memories of my little Miguel. I’m sorry to demand a personal visit, but it seems like the least you could do. You’re asking me to let you peer into the lost soul of my Miguel so that you can succeed where your mother failed. Is that not so?”

“No. I am asking you for access so that I can know, for my own satisfaction, that justice was truly done.”

Gonzales smiled again, revealing a mouth utterly devoid of teeth. “And when you have your satisfaction, will you release the animal that murdered my family? Perhaps a convenient mind wipe so that he can spend his remaining days with a clear conscience? I can’t allow that, Miss Stanson. Jon Alter has spent the last 40 years in a special hell and I want him to remain there.”

“He may have been insane.”

“Yes, or so your mother believed,” Gonzales said as he fumbled for a cigarette. Kathy watched in astonishment as he struck a match and inhaled deeply. “What’s the matter? You’ve never seen a cig before?”

“No.”

“Are you going to report me to the authorities? Possession of tobacco carries an automatic 5-year sentence, does it not?”

“Tobacco addiction is your problem, not mine,” Kathy said as she leaned slightly to avoid an approaching cloud of smoke. “However, there is still the matter of your upcoming trial for the hate speech violation.”

“Oh, yes. I rarely get out of this gulag, but the one day I chose to go to the park I made the mistake of flapping my gums too loosely. The Multicultural Police are sharp. They have technology I wouldn’t have dreamed of when I was with Homeland Security. I don’t know where the monitor was hidden, but they heard me mumbling and had me in restraints within 10 minutes. Thing is, I despise Muslims. Always have. I just didn’t know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“I know the prosecutor assigned to your trial. She owes me a favor.”

Gonzales chuckled and coughed. “So that’s how it is? I give you access, you make an under-the-table deal with her to drop charges?”

Kathy ground her teeth together. “Something like that.”

“I don’t want to spend my last years in a Multicultural Re-Education Camp, that’s true, but...you cannot release that butcher.” Gonzales brushed away a tear that had suddenly appeared. “How could your mother defend him? How can you?”

“I’m not defending what he did, but the man may have been insane. If my mother could have proven that in open court, Jon Alter would have been re-integrated. He would have been freed from his nightmare and allowed to live a normal life.”

“And what about my nightmare? I have been living with my own for the last 40 years.”

Kathy met his stare and shook her head. “You are sane. You have choices. Perhaps Jon Alter didn’t.”

Gonzales did not attempt to stop the tears that streaked across his pale cheeks. “I want a mind wipe.”

“No, Javier.”

“Wipe me and you can access Miguel.”

“Neural re-integration is only for incurable insanity. You know that.”

“I also know the law. I can give you power of attorney. You can have me declared mentally incompetent.”

“That would be unethical.”

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

