

Excerpt from Venus for Milo
By Brian Thomas

Milo peered over the side of the Amerikan air ship, down into the murky green Venusian jungle, and wondered for the hundredth time what he was doing here. In the course of a week he'd gone from adjunct professor of Egyptology and hieroglyphic writings at the University of Pennsylvucky to a draftee in the Imperial Amerikan Air Corp. Seven days ago he was gazing out a third floor window at some attractive co-eds and now he was staring down several hundred feet into a dark and mysterious alien rainforest. Milo did not like this new view. The slight, mousey academian was startled by a sudden smack on his back that threatened to hurl him over the airship railing.

"Venus," shouted the big overweight Amerikan officer. "A thousand shades of green, and a million ways to die! Wait until you see it up close, son!"

Milo griped the railing in white knuckled hands and turned to stare in horror at his new commanding officer Major Girth.

Major B.T. Girth was the commander of the Imperial Amerikan warluft *The Irascible Wind*, and held letters of marque and conquest from his beloved Empress of Amerika. He was a high-ranking officer of the Empire, and in military matters had power and authority to rival an Imperial senator.

Major Girth had marched into Milo's classroom interrupting a lecture on the similarities of ancient Egyptian writings and the newly discovered Venusian hieroglyphics, and announced, "...that's exactly what I wanted to discuss with you!"

Girth then produced a blank warrant of Imperial Service, and Milo had watched helplessly as the rotund Major filled in Milo's name enlisting him into the Imperial Air Corp as a "civilian advisor". The Major had pointedly left the "duration of service" line blank. As an officer of the Imperial Service Major Girth had the authority to draft any Free Resident of Amerika into service, and Milo was years away from earning Imperial Citizenship and the privileged protections citizenship granted.

Milo was ordered to collect all his research materials on Egyptian and Venusian Hieroglyphs, and was then escorted by two armed and goggled airmen to a waiting battle luft parked on the campus lawn. "We're gonna' put that sharp mind of yours to work my

boy,” Girth confided. “Besides, service grants citizenship. You’ll earn your Citizen’s Imperial Eagle in half the time it would take in some dingy classroom! You’ll fly her Majesty’s skies, breath clean air and probably even live to talk about it. Praise the Empress you’re a lucky boy!”

Four days later, The *Irascible Wind* had crossed through the Mississippi/Venus skylock, and now flew through purple tinted skies over vast jade jungles. Directly below, Milo could see one of the famous massive pyramids of Venus. As he boarded one of the smaller landing lufts, he gazed down at the grey stoned pyramid and began to suspect why he had been virtually kidnapped to this humid green hell.

The dark stone pyramid though similar to those found in Egypt was easily twice as large as even the Khufu structure at Giza. It rose out of the jungle canopy like a dark iceberg on a deep green sea. The ship’s smaller launch descended down through a hole in the dense canopy, and Milo could now see that the gap had been literally blasted out of the jungle.

The trees on Venus were massive and created a dense leafy dome nearly eight hundred feet high. If what Milo was seeing was true then the only way to penetrate the canopy was to blow a hole in it. The entire area around the eastern face of the gigantic pyramid was burned black, and the little battle luft landed on the jungle floor with a cindery crunch.

Major Girth stomped down the gangplank followed by Milo and at least a dozen armed Imperial airmen. The Major briefly stopped to survey the area, and then to Milo’s surprise and mild horror signaled the luft back into the air.

“Can’t be to careful son,” explained Girth. “Things tend to crawl onboard the launches if they stay grounded very long.”

Milo nervously began glancing at the ground around his feet. That’s when he noticed the bones scattered across the burned field. The ground was carpeted in bones in some spots and Milo gasped as something big moved underneath them.

A female trooper standing next to Milo quickly drew her sidearm and began blasting away at the mysterious moving hump in the ground. “Mice” was her only comment. No

one else seemed to react.

The group started moving toward the pyramid and Milo stumbled to keep up, trying to watch the ground, the bones, the jungle edge and the looming structure all at the same time. A chorus of strange hoots, whistles and growls sounded from the deep green, and Milo kept catching glimpses of “things” at the jungles edge moving through the underbrush or flitting through the trees. He tried to watch the jungle but his eyes began to water and his head ached from the green glare. It was as if the light was too bright or the jungle...too green.

As they rounded the edge of the pyramid’s eastern face Milo’s attention was caught by a loud metallic crunch. He snapped his head up from his search for “things that crawl on board” to see what appeared to be some kind of steam tractor. It seemed to be driving repeatedly into a large pile of coal. Milo could not see the driver, but as the group approached it spun about amazingly fast, honked loudly and brought a large multi-barreled gatling to bear.

Milo froze in place, but the big Major threw his arms out wide and yelled “Rascal!” The honking iron machine churned up the ground and rocketed forward on a collision course with Girth. None of the other troopers reacted to the machine as it sped towards their leader, so Milo took a few hesitant steps forward. The tractor-thing came to an abrupt stop in front of the Imperial officer and the big Major put his hands on either side of a large central glass sphere and shouting loudly ...kissed it.

“Has my good boy been waiting for daddy and guarding the door like a he was told? Did my Rascal miss his daddy? Did my Rascal miss his daddy?”

Milo was getting used to being confused by the Air Corp, but this...he stepped around so he could see the machine better. The machine was roughly five feet high, and looked vaguely like a cannon carriage with two large front wheels and a long backward pointing brace mounting a third smaller wheel. The body was barrel-like with a large central smokestack and a top mounted gatling gun. There did not seem to be any seats for a driver, and Milo couldn’t see the honking horn. The front-the part Girth was holding in his hands looked like a hinged steam shovel bucket, and there was a glass globe perched

on top.

As he looked closer Milo realized he could see inside the globe. Floating in the sphere was a brain and a pair of eyes! The eyes tracked the Major as he patted the globe and stroked the shovel, and the machine thing honked every time the Major patted it.

“It’s his dog,” explained one of the goggled airman.

“Waaa...” stammered Milo.

The airman nodded and continued. “It’s a dog, or at least it used to be-that is the brain and eyes were a dog. I think there may be some other dog parts inside too cause’ it needs to eat meat as well as take in coal for it’s boilers” the airman continued. “That’s probably where all the bones came from! The Major left it here to guard the entrance until he could fetch back an expert to read the hi-ro-glyfs inside that there pyr-a-mid. I guess that’d be you.”

Appalled, Milo turned to see Girth carefully pulling a large bone out of the open shovel-mouth of his mechanical pet. Milo could see inside the thing’s maw and took a step back. The open shovel exposed multiple sets of whirring and grinding teeth like some horrible mobile abattoir.

“Puppy needs to chew his food better” scolded Girth as he waved the bone in front of the construct. The machine was waging its entire back end as the floating eyes tracked the bone in Girth’s hand. The Major took a dramatic step backward and then threw the bone out into the charred field. The dog-tractor gave a final loud “HONK” and chased after the thrown bone. Milo watched open mouthed as the huge mechanical-dog-monster snuffled through the burned field of alien bones looking for the one its master had tossed.