

# IN THE SHADE OF THE ISHTAR TREES

A TALE OF  
THE FIRST  
VENUS WAR



J.P. MEDVED

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**A Tale of the First Venus War**

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# I

The native guide had assured Colonel Simms this was the shortest way through the forest. His clicking, guttural speech was hardly decipherable as English, and his jerky movements as he described a meandering game trail through the dense Venusian undergrowth were disturbing to even the most experienced men in the column. He led them to the very edge of the forest. There, a dark wall of unearthly vegetation rose cathedral-like above the dense fern grasses and fungal towers that dotted the rolling foothills behind the column. The demarcation was abrupt and, Lieutenant Albo Collins thought, symbolic, marking as it did the border between the American colony and the unexplored tribal lands beyond.

The path had been there, as the guide said it would; a dirt trail hardly wide enough for two men to walk abreast. Broad, leafy branches pressed in above, and violently colored flora ran rampant up to the very edge of the beaten dirt track. The Colonel ordered pickets into the brush on either side of the trail, accompanied by a vanguard of fifty of the cavalry, and reorganized the thousand men of the column so that the two guns were in the center, bookended by the six companies of infantry—three in front and three behind—with the rest of the cavalry, some hundred and fifty horses, similarly split to the front and rear of the formation.

Thus arranged, the column started marching into the forest. As the first pickets and the cavalry scouts entered the imposing jungle they discovered that in the confusion of re-ordering, their native guide had disappeared. Colonel Simms growled something about the cowardice of "one of their race" but he did not halt his men.

When Lieutenant Collins, walking at the head of his platoon, passed under the overhanging branches at the edge of the forest he felt a chill run up his spine. He told himself it was just the abrupt change in temperature from the sweltering grasslands behind to the cool interior of the forest. It was dark under the endless eaves of the Ishtar trees, and the few streamers of light that did penetrate the overgrowth lit up flowers and vines blooming in alien, riotous colors. He loosened the chin strap on his sun helmet and took it off, allowing the forest air to cool his sweat-matted hair as he walked.

"The Colonel's a damn fool," Sergeant O'Malley spat a thick stream of blue Kosh juice on the side of the path as he came up to walk beside Collins. "No one comes this far north of Cape Juno. Leastaways, no one who ever comes back down." He kept chewing the Kosh plug as he spoke, little flecks of blue peppered his gray mustache.

"I'm sure Colonel Simms knows what he's doing, Finn. Governor Cleveland ordered this expedition; the Colonel couldn't disobey him, could he?"

O'Malley gave Collins a sideways glance as he chewed his Kosh thoughtfully. "Maybe so, maybe not, sir. The colony's a long ways from the President in New York." He spat again, "But this expedition is a damn fool idea if you ask me. Did you see how that damned froggy hotfooted it as soon as we were at the trail? Doesn't sit right."

"What do you mean, Sergeant?"

"I mean, those Tahminian devils always seem to be damn scarce right before a big storm hits New Philadelphia. And one of the traders in town, that Fremont fellow, told some of the boys how on one of

his expeditions to Artemis Deep, all the froggy porters suddenly dropped their bags and hopped off into the green. He said while he and the other humans cursed and called after them, a quarhag, must have been twenty feet tall, with teeth and body thorns big enough to be a pack leader, came at them from out of the trees and killed two men before the others brought it down with their Springfields."

"You think our guide knows something we don't?" The air of the forest seemed oppressive now, rather than refreshing, and Collins set the sun helmet back on his head, adjusting the chinstrap to hold it firmly in place.

O'Malley simply spat in answer.

The young lieutenant persisted, "But surely we can't just let the Federalists continue to raid the trading posts and the colonial freeholds. If the Governor didn't order this expedition the public outcry would have him recalled to Earth on the next aether transit."

Collins's Sergeant shook his head, "I don't know about that, I just know a few measly Federalists aren't worth losing a thousand good men. And who knows if their camp is even in this forest."

"Finn, you can't think a few Federalist raiders are a serious threat to a force this large."

"I'm not talking about the Federalists, sir."

Collins shook his head, but he also felt a shiver down his back, and this time knew it wasn't from the chill forest air.

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*Venus in 1887 is no paradise. Hardy colonists eke out a meager living cultivating blue Kosh root to ship back to Earth via aether transit, and traders and explorers brave the deadly foliage and even deadlier fauna of the Aphrodite continent's inner forests in search of riches.*

*Lieutenant Albo Collins has just come to Venus straight from graduating West Point, and the young officer craves more to do than cleaning drunks off the streets of New Philadelphia. When the governor orders the First Venusian Colonial Infantry to the northern border of the colony Collins gets his wish, but as he marches into the unexplored wilderness hot on the trail of Federalist raiders, he has little idea what horrors await him, in the shade of the Ishtar trees.*

*In the Shade of the Ishtar Trees is a 10,000 word (40 pages) steampunk novella.*

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