



*Reluctant Press* presents:

# Venus' Milk

Dee Dee Perri



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHAS

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**A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL**

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# Venus' Milk

By Dee Dee Perri

“I had a mind to be another Indiana Jones,” he said with a small, self-depreciating laugh. “I ever tell you that, lad?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Morgan. I remembered you saying *exactly* that, way back when.”

“Hmmm.” Castor Morgan pulled his eyes away from the curious item to which his current guide and former student had led him. He would have bet dollars to donuts before tonight that Eric Carson would spend his life pumping gas or running a tractor across endless acres of Kansas prairie land. In high school the boy hadn't shown much intellectual potential, or ambition for that matter. Castor's eyes came to rest once more on the boy-turned-man. Eric had filled out rather well, in fact, far better than Castor would have expected. Broad shoulders with well-muscled arms suggested that the scrawny kid at some point had been much obsessed with bodybuilding. And the face, oh the features were recognizable, barely, but the mature Eric could have been a Hollywood leading man from the Thirties. It just shows how wrong one can be sometimes about how a kid will turn out. “Eric?”

“Mr. Morgan?”

The retired teacher shrugged, then smiled. “Why don't you just call me Cass, OK? All my friends do.”

“Sure,” responded Eric as a smile bloomed. His handsome features became even more attractive. “Yeah, OK ah, Cass.”

“Better,” Castor Morgan answered with a smile of his own. “Tell you the truth Eric, well, I'm impressed.” He shrugged again. “You, an assistant curator at a world class facility like this. Ah, where did you go to college?”

The smile remained on Eric's face but the warmth died in his eyes as he turned away from his old high school math teacher. "State," he said. It was a lie that was better delivered without eye contact. One didn't need a college degree to clean toilets and mop floors. "You still interested in math, Mr. Morgan, ah, Cass?"

"Yes," Mr. Morgan responded with a lingering sigh. He may have loved to be another Indiana Jones but in the harsh realities of the world, there had been a lot more opportunities for someone proficient in math. The subject had a tendency to grow on one, did it not, and though mathematics was a demanding taskmaster, it was a fair mistress. "Ah, what is *that* thing exactly?"

"If you want to believe the experts, a mirror."

"*That?*" Cass took a step back. The ancient "mirror" was huge. Ten-twelve feet tall and approximately four feet wide with thick slabs of rock forming a frame surrounding a black emptiness. "But there's no..."

"Reflection?" added Eric as he stepped forward and pressed his hand against the surface of the void. "At least eight thousand years old so it's no wonder that the mirrored surface is no longer functional, or so they say. Here. Touch it."

"Huh? That's OK?" he said, visibly shocked.

"Sure, go on." Eric stepped away from the depthless surface. "You'll find that it's perfectly smooth and almost warm to the touch."

Cautiously, Cass did as instructed. His hand tentatively touched, then withdrew. "Uh huh. Smooth."

"Too smooth in fact. They didn't have the technology back then to create such a large and perfectly uniform surface." Eric spun on his heels and walked over to a crate sitting against the far wall. He looked back at the middle-aged man, then sat down. "I made a monumental discovery, Cass. Something so ... enormous." He paused. It was obvious that he'd gotten his former teacher's full attention as the man approached. "Well, I just had to share it with someone."

Castor's eyes were as big as silver dollars. "With me?" he said. Surprise mixed in equal parts with pleasure. He'd had no idea that the boy thought so highly of him. In fact, he felt guilty over his previous negative assessment about the boy. "Please, go on."

Eric looked at his watch and then back at Cass. "In about ten minutes," he paused and looked up, "Cass, this is going to take a very, very open mind. OK?"

"Sure. Ten minutes and then what?"

"That," said Eric with a significant nod toward the "mirror," "is a gate."

"Gate," echoed his now enraptured guest.

"To another Earth."

"Another Earth?"

"Identical and yet in some ways strikingly different from this one."

“Go on,” murmured Cass as he took a seat next to his former student. “Gate?” he muttered under his breath as his eyes fixated upon the artifact, or more precisely, the black void inside the ancient stone frame.

“I’ve been there, on that other Earth.”

“Oh my. What’s it like?”

“You’ll see,” responded Eric as he checked his watch again, “in about eight minutes. That is, if you’re willing to risk having the adventure of a lifetime.”

“Really?” The stunned man looked both expectant and worried. “Is it safe?”

“Safe? I’ve been across more times than I can count, Mr. Morgan, but safe? I mean we’re talking about travel that literally can’t be measured by any scale previously known.” He took Cass by the elbow and looked him in the eye, “And I’ve told no one else.”

Cass looked even more concerned now. “Why not? I mean, why haven’t you told the authorities? This must be one of the greatest discoveries in human history. A gate into another *world*.”

“Because a mass of curious *aliens* pouring into *that* world would destroy it utterly. Listen Cass, *never* has there been such opportunity.” He rolled his eyes as if to say the opportunity was beyond measure.

“And, and you thought of me?”

“Yes. I knew you could keep this secret. You can, can’t you, Cass? No one on this side must know — ever.”

“Gosh.” Cass paused to consider the magnitude of it all. He was properly impressed. After a few seconds passed, he asked, “But what’s it like? This other Earth.”

“It’s a little hard to describe, Cass. On one hand, it’s backward, far more backward than our Earth. Like they were trapped in their own success. A culture that hasn’t made a significant advancement in almost two thousand years because it’s perfect. Or at least *they* think so.” He shrugged and spayed out his hands. “And on the other hand, they possess some technology so advanced that, well, it looks like magic to me.”

“Magic?”

He shrugged again. “How can I explain what I don’t understand, Cass? A couple of years ago, I was this skinny runt with bad skin and, at the age of twenty-four, already going bald. But look at me now.”

A look of comprehension bloomed in Cass’ eyes. So his memory of Eric hadn’t been that far off after all. “And they did that?”

A crooked smile drew across Eric’s movie star features. “They? Some things are the same everywhere, Cass. If you have the money, you can buy the best. Pretty cool though, huh? The right combination of herbs and roots and zam-bang. Anyhow, you might say I’m a trader in alien technology and I’ve done well, if I must say so myself. The manufacture of wooden safety matches has made me a real

power in this retarded timeline.” He smirked. “Imagine what they’d give to learn our math?” He realized almost instantly that he’d taken the wrong tack. Cass’ pudgy, middle-aged face twisted in concern.

“That might not be a good idea, son,” he said as he wrung his hands together. “I really think we should, you know, contact the authorities before...”

“Before what?” interrupted Eric as he jerked to his feet. “Co’e on Cass, you remember I had trouble with fractions and I got to give them a complete algebra, OK?”

Now Cass jumped up, his eyes wide. “That’s *serious* technology, Eric. Not just something to pop on a culture,” he said, waving his hands erratically. “It’s hard to predict what it might do to a society’s structure. Algebra.” He rolled his eyes and shook his head slowly. “A primitive, backward world, you say?” He shrugged. “Some significant thinkers must be consulted before *any* such attempt could even be considered. I’m afraid, as a responsible individual, you’ll just have to be patient and wait until...”

Eric’s hands slipped around his former teacher’s fleshy neck and tightened. “Damn it, Mr. Morgan, I don’t know any mathematicians except you and I’m sure as fuck not going out looking for a replacement tonight.” He whirled and slung Mr. Castor Morgan’s body toward the black void. In the next instant, Eric was alone. “You got to understand Mr. Morgan,” he muttered to himself, “I ... I had no choice in the matter. None.” He drew a deep breath, then went back to pick up some items he’d hidden on his last visit. He still had another twenty minutes remaining before the gate snapped shut.

~oOo~

Thera was a small cluster of islands located just north of the large island of Crete. Setting astride the Aegean Sea, this island group was strategically located midway between the ancient republics of Greece and the grand principality of Lydia on the westernmost coast of Asia. That Eric would emerge here on Thera in the eastern fringes of the Mediterranean should come as no surprise for it was precisely here on “old” Earth that the so-called “mirror” had been found. The gate device, for less obvious reasons, had remained untouched on what Eric thought of as the “new” Earth.

Untouched and unclaimed, the cave, which housed the artifact, had served as Eric’s initial operational center. Even now that he was rich, the cave remained at the very center of his power base though it was currently hidden by a sprawling complex that was Eric’s home and fortress as it was the center of his manufacturing empire. In a pristine, non-industrial world, the heavy stink of the sulfur necessary for the creation of Eric’s wondrous matches was, by far, the greatest security device he could have designed. Visitors were few and their visits short.

“Enos.”

“Lord?”

“Lord? Cut the crap, Enos. How’s our guest?”

“Safe and secure, Sire.” Enos wrinkled his pig-like snout in what passed for a grin. The pointy ears twitched atop the hairless dome which was his servant’s equivalent of a human laugh, “E was a bit put off but ‘e moved readily enough at the nurse’s bidding.”

“Very good, Enos.”

“Your bath is ready, Sire.”

Eric glared. “Eric will do just fine, OK, Enos? You’re a freeman now, remember. No Sire or Lord or whatever.” He turned to begin the long climb up the stairs and out of the depths of the dank cavern. Of course his bath would be ready. Enos was as efficient as he was entirely faithful. Perhaps saving Enos from the slaughter pens and then buying his freedom had been Eric’s wisest move since his discovery of the gate.

In a culture where assassination was a commonly employed device in business and politics and lowly house slaves the vehicle of choice, one freeman such as Enos was priceless protection. Too bad he could do nothing regarding the poor man’s disfigurement short of surgery and this was no world for the latter.

The art of surgery, like so much else on this world, had not risen much above the needs to repair simple battle wounds and certainly, considering the exceptional advances in alchemy, surgical techniques were not as commonly employed as they were on “old” Earth. Perhaps, someday, he’d take his trusted companion to a plastic surgeon on the other Earth. Perhaps. Perhaps not. There were other, more pressing, issues that must be addressed now.

He’d drawn too much attention from the empire. Rome was filled with citizens both curious and envious of his rapidly earned wealth. That he’d been labeled a warlock was utterly predictable given the rarity of significant inventions in this stagnant society. If the charge held, they could easily strip him of his wealth and, like Enos and millions before him; assign him to the slaughter yards. He’d be slowly transfigured into a mindless human pig. He stopped and wiped the sweat from his brow. The sweat was cold, the fear was real. No, he needed Mr. Morgan. At the top of the stairs he turned right instead of left, away from his bath and toward his salvation.

“Mr. Morgan, sir,” bellowed Eric. His loud greeting, in English, caused the nurse to scurry from the room and Cass to whirl about in the bath in which he had been soaking.

“You had no right...” sputtered the naked, chubby man as he started to pull himself from the bath, then stopped and eased back into the soothing warmth. The room itself was cold, very cold. “Where? Where are we?”

“To be precise, in the very heart of the Roman Empire, Cass.”

“Huh?”

“Three thousand years old and still stumbling along. From the British Isles in the North to the frontiers of the Hon Empire, with, ah, China to the East. Most of

Africa and all of Europe and India have been in Rome's grasp so long that there never was a chance to form a German or, heaven forbid, a French identity. Indeed, no national states have ever awakened here, my friend. Latin, my dear teacher, is the one and only language you'll need."

"And home, I mean America?"

"The so-called new world was never conquered and is, today, decidedly not Romanized." Eric spayed out his hands. "From the root Aztec, Inca and woodland native cultures emerged empires that almost rival this most ancient one. I doubt very much that the native Americans in this timeline would willingly trade places with those on Old Earth. A rather steep price that would be for airplanes and factories, Cass."

"It's crazy but fascinating," Cass finally agreed. Interest had replaced anger on his face. "Then that woman was speaking Latin."

"Yes."

"Was it hard to learn? What I mean is..."

Eric laughed. "I told you there were technologies here that, well, are simply miraculous. By tomorrow morning you'll understand the language well enough to follow most conversations and by noon you'll speak like one of the locals. Trust me." Cass just gaped, open mouthed. "Here knowledge can be eaten, well, more exactly, drunk."

"Come again?"

Eric's hands flew out from his side, palms open. "Like I said, it looks like magic but it ain't, Cass. Truth is, instant knowledge like this is probably at the root of the Empire's problem. There are no schools or universities. Science is a hobby like astrology is in our world and, lacking the scientific method, about as worthless. Here the basic, minimal knowledge you need, language, social skills and such can be drawn from your mother's milk."

"Milk?"

"Human milk, yes. And as for advanced information, well, that woman that just left, she's my ah, house ah, nurse. Here the term 'nurse' is applied in the more literal sense, to give suckle." He shrugged. "You want to learn Latin, Cass, you'll take her breast milk." He smiled at the gaping man. "They don't need no stinking books here, Cass, not when basic learning is so painless."

~oOo~

The wind was tugging at Cass' gray hair as he leaned against the railing, staring out at the vista atop Eric's easternmost patio. "I can see why you love this place so much, Eric." Indeed, the view was spectacular. The powder blue of the Ionian Sea seemed to stretch unbroken to the East forever. The early morning air was crisp and clear. Just then the stench of sulfur abruptly bloomed as a new batch of chemicals were poured in the factory below. The latter got to Cass almost



instantly; he stumbled back: “Except for that frightful smell of fire and brimstone. Phew.”

“Up close and personal, the Roman Empire isn’t all that pretty either, Cass; its more than a bit like my operation here. Beauty *and* stench. You know how many Romans there are, I mean *real* Romans? Citizens?” He didn’t wait for Cass’ response. “About twenty million. In our world, the same land area supports almost two billion souls.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. There are maybe another twenty million freemen. It’s the eight hundred million slaves...”

“Slaves?”

“Oh yeah. About forty slaves for every Roman citizen, man, woman and child. And Cass, slavery here is every bit as bad as it must have been back in the old U.S. of A. before our Civil War. That’s probably the second reason why technology never really developed here. Labor’s too friggin’ cheap, as is life itself.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, that’s another reason I’m here. The technology that I can introduce, it could eventually change all that.”

“A humanitarian, my boy?”

Eric shrugged. “Right now I’m just trying to hang on to what I have. As a free-man I have no rights other than that of property and...”

“And you need me. How?”

“Remember I said there wasn’t much call for books here?” Cass nodded. “But they sure like paper. I mean, the Empire swims in a river of ink, OK? Forms and more forms. Anyhow, I copied the formula for making safety matches from an old handbook on Earth, I mean *our* Earth. You know, it was one of those practical how-to-guides?” He stopped and shrugged. “I submitted the formula along with the required documentation for a protective license, a kind of patent, OK?” His old teacher just nodded. “Well, how was I supposed to know?”

“Know what?”

“The formula employed algebra, for Pete’s sake, Cass. Shit. Someone in Rome actually read my application and...”

“And *stuff* hit the fan.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself, Cass. Anyhow there never were any Arabs in this time line, no Muslim golden age and therefore no Algebra.”

“You should be a hero,” the older man laughed.

“Not here, Cass. New ideas, *really* new like Algebra? Well, it’s prime evidence that I’m a *warlock*.”

“Magic?”

“Right. Adequate grounds for taking my freeman status and, eventually, grounds for a state-approved murder. Cass, with me out of the way, they can even continue my operation here. My discovery, my product would belong to one of *them*.” He rolled his eyes. “Just like at home, Cass, the rich get richer...”

“Ridiculous.”

“Right. But you’re a man of *my* world, not this one. So you can mark that up to another reason why this time line is so backward. All serious innovations *must* have a feminine root, which means half the human race is excluded. And it sure guarantees that everyone, especially the slaves, keep their place. Illiterate slaves can only produce illiterate offspring. Knowledge can be controlled, like drugs back on our earth. And there’s nothing to stop the rich from sampling as wide a range of bio-packaged knowledge as they can afford and stealing whatever ideas that prove to be useful.”

Cass was frowning. “So how can I help?”

“It’s ... well, kinda early to talk about stuff like that.” Eric forced a smile. “How about breakfast first, OK, Cass?”

~oOo~

“You got to remember, Cass,” Eric said as he dunked a chunk of bread into a bowl of sauce that was heavy with olive oil, then stuffed the whole of that greasy mass into his mouth. He continued talking even as he chewed. “Knowledge dribbles out of a nipple, see?” He mumbled. “And it’s been that way here, mostly, for the last sixteen-hundred years.” He stopped to swallow and wipe his chin. “And here most of the better ideas flow from the milk of the rich. The first families of Rome don’t miss a bet, believe me and no one is about to accuse one of *them* of witchcraft. So a man, especially a lowly freeman, who comes up with a new idea, something radical like...”

“Algebra.”

“Right. Well he’s dead meat unless...”

“He can produce a nursing female with the same concept. That’s mad, Eric.”

“Actually Cass, mad like a fox. See, the judges take and drink some of the milk from the mutant nurse. That’s the one and only test, OK? I mean Cass, the female *must* have truly integrated the concept before it can be transmitted via her milk. No simple lip service, rote memorization. Impossible to fake. If she’s to transmit Algebra she’s got to *know* Algebra down to her bones. Anyhow, the authorities running the investigation get a free jolt of whatever idea she produced as a kicker. Thus it’s impossible to hide anything significant from the state *and* they get a free, working sample of the knowledge. Now that’s why the State isn’t about to change its policies. It’s got nothing to lose and everything to gain.”

Cass looked concerned, then blurted out, “How much time do I have?”

“For what?”

“For heaven’s sake, Eric! To teach your house nurse Algebra.”

Eric looked startled as if he hadn’t thought about that possibility. Then he resolved that idea. “Not nearly enough time, Cass. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

Now it was Cass’ turn to look startled. He stood up from the breakfast table as pale as a sheet. “You. Can’t. Be. Serious.”

~oOo~

At first he’d been consumed by his rage. That Eric Carson could have done such a thing to him! It was simply unthinkable. He’d never been given a choice. Indeed the die was apparently cast last night shortly after he’d arrived in this alien world. Perhaps in the bath, or in the warm soup he’d taken before bed, perhaps in both or more? That he was transforming into a being every bit as alien to his male essence as this planet was alien to his Earth, that he’d soon be... NO. That *surely* wasn’t the point. It was the way Eric had *used* him. Used him like one might use a ... a *thing*. Oh, Eric had almost convinced him of the need, the value, the purpose of his actions. The poor suffering mass of slaves whose sweat and blood made this culture possible. Eric, the humanitarian. RIGHT. Eric was undoubtedly a selfish, manipulative bastard who was trying to protect a life of wealth. Wealth that he couldn’t achieve on his own on his own home world. The worst case of plagiarism he, Castor Morgan, the teacher had ever encountered. “Why me? Why me?” screamed Cass.

Castor Morgan groaned and twisted about in his apartment as he tore the last of the bedding to shreds and then, once again, began to beat upon the door and demand to be let free of this unwanted *change*. But the anger burned away his rage long before there was any sign of physical change. And finally he eased down onto the cold tile floor and stared at his image reflected from the mirror on the wall. Anger became curiosity as he examined the image of a gray-haired man, girded in fat. When had he become so old? So fat? So tired-looking? He’d been handsome once. The sagging flesh, the bags under his eyes, those things weren’t *really* him. Whatever Eric was doing to him, it would be like this image in the mirror, not *really* him. Somehow that thought eased his mind. He sighed and waited impatiently for this *thing* to be over. A mere change of skin. That was the very essence of what it took to be human, right? To see through the superficial, to understand there were aspects of existence that superseded mere form and flesh.

Ouch. And then there was Sara. She surely wouldn’t understand if he were ... *female*. A May-December romance was a fragile flower as it was. No. This couldn’t be allowed to happen.

As he started to get up off the cold floor, to begin yelling once again, he was struck by a wave of *strangeness* far more alien than any mere bodily change could have invoked. A blinding, confused flood of what had to be racial memories, certainly not of Cass’ world nor of Cass’ sex. The kind of primitive memory that might be passed from mother to fetus. No, from mother to daughter. A hundred thousand years of childbirth pain and nurturing release, a hundred thousand years of

laying on the wet spot and weeping over lost children. THE PAIN. THE PAIN. Consciousness at the moment of conception, an adult male's consciousness in the waxing flood of a FEMALE RACIAL MEMORY. This was threatening his very essence.

Mentally, he tried to twist and turn away from this raw, powerful femininity but there was no escape. The cold floor, the room itself, everything external faded into irrelevancy as Castor Morgan fought to survive.

~oOo~

“Boss?”

Well, that was at least better than Sire or Lord. “Yes Enos, speak to me. How's Mr. Morgan?”

“Boss, I *am* speaking to you.”

“Sorry. It's just a figure of speech. What I mean is...”

“Oh yeah, I got you.” The pig-man shrugged. “Well ‘e quieted down. Just lying there in a fetal position stark naked ‘e is.”

“Is that normal?”

“Ah boss, I was meaning to talk to you about that. See them sex-change transformations, well, they're not all that uncommon. I mean some of ‘em that's got too much time on their hands, you know, its done a lot. And the *making* process, I mean like every female goes though that, mostly though in their mother's womb. I don't know what it was like a thousand years ago but nowadays it's pretty much passed from mother to daughter automatically like... You following?”

“Sure.”

“Now I'm sure that Mr. Morgan isn't the first fella nor will ‘e be the last to go though both processes at the same time, but boss...”

“Go on.”

“It ain't done often for good reason.” He stopped and looked up at Eric. “‘e a good friend of yours?”

Eric was nonplused. “Gosh, I don't know what to say, Enos. I mean, yeah, like he's OK and all, but a friend? No. He was a guy I knew. A guy who knew algebra, to be entirely honest. A guy who I could use, I guess. Man, that sounds a bit cold, doesn't it?”

“That's a relief,” sighed his freeman. “Boss, ‘e'll never be exactly like ‘e was before. This *making* thing, well it kinda doesn't go away.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, you can reverse the physical change, you know boss, but not the *making*. That stuff cuts too deep. Like me and this piggy suit, boss. I'll never be fully

human again, no matter what you do to my body. Unless of course, the Empress might loan us one of 'er special witch-nurses."

"So Cass will never be fully male again?"

"Yeah. Something like that. 'e might hide it but down deep, 'e's not coming back with a loaded prick."

"That's ... unfortunate."

"Yeah. Ah Boss, you want me to, like, call you when the physical change starts?"

Eric shook his head no. "Just let me know when it's done."

~oOo~

"Enos? Is it time?" The pig man looked about as down as a kicked dog. His sharply-pointed pig ears lay flat against his round, hairless skull. His snout twitched but no words came out. "Damn it. What?" Eric turned as if to rush down the hall toward the changeling.

Enos grabbed his master's elbow and blurted, "Sabotage, Sire."

"Who? What?" Eric said as he tugged against the constraint of the pig man's powerful hand on his arm.

"One of them nurses." Considering the complexity of the operation, there had been three. "Probably the one we got in from Rome." The pig man shrugged. "Leastwise, she's disappeared."

"But she was a citizen, Enos."

"Sire, even a high mucky-muck Roman citizen can be bought if the purse is heavy enough."

Eric groaned. "So what happened?"

"Maybe you should see for yourself, Sire." He let go of his master's arm and started down the hall. His short curly tail was twitching with every step. "Sire?" he said, throwing open the door to the dressing chamber.

Eric had remained rooted to the spot at the opposite end of the short hallway. But as the door opened, the image that greeted his eye spoke of no danger or failure. Sitting upon a chair was a young woman in the traditional formal toga used only for special occasions in the Empire. Fair in both form and face, she was the very essence of regal majesty. Flawless. Indeed it was more as if she were an empress. No, *The Empress*. The still young and very beautiful Empress Julia of the long line of Caesars, the ninth Julia to rule the Empire. Almost three thousand years of careful and very selective breeding, or rather inbreeding, had created a unique class of feminine beauty. Skin of flawless translucent alabaster, hair the quality of fine, bright copper.

Eric was too far away to see the color of her eyes but he already knew they would be that shocking yet familiar electric green so common to the imperial line.