

The Lush of Lichtenstein

A Pulp Adventure Set in the World of
Venus 1888 by Joe Corsaro



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Princess Franziska Maria Johanna of Liechtenstein pranced freely about the sitting room of the Goldener Löwe Hof royal suite, dancing by herself to a waltz playing in the distance. Colonel Imbach, her appointed protector and chaperone, had refused to permit her to attend the celebrations, so she and her companion had had to make do celebrating by themselves. She twirled around the room, bumping into tables, knocking over empty wine bottles, and tipping crystal goblets.

"It is not appropriate for a recently betrothed Princess to go about the town without her intended," Imbach had said before departing for the 1888 International Electrotechnical Exhibition. Her "intended" was Prince Friedrich Maximilian of Austria, who brought her to Linz on their engagement tour so that he could see the technological achievements on display.

"It's not fair, Betty," the pretty brunette said to Elizabeth Falconbridge, her lady-in-waiting and closest friend. "I am a worldly woman. I have seen the Coliseum in Rome, the pyramids of Egypt, and the Grand Canyon. Why does the prince get to go about the celebrations while I must remain cloistered here at the hotel?"

"It's not like you couldn't have gone along, Sissi," Betty said with feigned reproach. "Freddy asked you to accompany him."

"Well, yes, he did," Sissi said petulantly. "But who cares about locomotives and aetherships when there is wine, music, and dancing?" She strode purposely over to the door and opened it. Private Oskar Gander, the handsome, young soldier who stood guard just outside, nodded acknowledgment and returned to attention without a word.

"Private," she said sternly, "I command you to dance with me."

Gander looked sheepishly to Private Felix Soltermann on the other side of the door, but the other guard stared forward at attention, the slightest hint of a grimace showing on his face.

"I'm sorry, Princess," Gander said respectfully, "but I cannot leave my post."

"And you?" the Princess said to Soltermann with irritation.

"I am also charged with your protection," Soltermann said. "Besides, it would be improper to dance while Miss Falconbridge must wait in the wings," he added with an admiring glance at Betty.

"So neither of you will attend me," the Princess declared haughtily.

"We cannot leave our post until Sergeant Küttel returns," Gander replied. "And he has gone with Colonel Imbach to the exhibition."

"Very well then," Sissi said, slamming the door. She stormed over to a divan and sank dejectedly into it. "I don't see why the men are allowed to enjoy themselves while we must wait here at their pleasure." Then she noticed a mischievous glance from Betty as her companion handed Sissi glass of wine.

"Well, Betty," the Princess said loudly, "if we must remain here, we should at least wait in comfort. There's no need for gowns and corsets here." She winked at Betty with a grin.

"Indeed, your highness," Betty said, her resigned tone barely stifling a giggle. "Let me help you out of that rig before you succumb to the vapors."

As the Princess spoke, Sissi stepped quietly over to the door and peeked through the keyhole. She was disappointed to find that no one was looking in. Nevertheless, she inserted the key and locked the door. She left the key in the lock to fend off prying eyes. Sissi turned to her companion, but then took a rug, laid it across the bottom of the door, and bunched it up. Should someone manage to poke the key out into the room, the rug would prevent them from getting it under the door to unlock it from the outside.

Once the room was secure, Betty assisted the Princess in removing her gown, and then removed her own. Together they donned simple, blue and white, peasant dresses. Then Sissi glanced out over the balcony. The secluded courtyard was empty. She whistled. A moment later, Werner Hofstetter, her driver, led a mule with a cart of hay into the courtyard and stopped below the window. With a last look into the chamber, Sissi slid over the balcony. Betty followed a moment later.

As night fell three hours later, Sissi and Betty found themselves surrounded by unconscious men. They sat at a bench in the secluded courtyard of a Biergarten on Hofgasse near the exposition grounds. Following their exodus from the Goldener Löwe Hof, Werner had transported the young women beneath the hay in the back of the wagon to the banks of the Donau near the Schlosspark where the exposition was being held, which was in the shadow of the Linzer Schloss. As soon as they peeked their heads out from beneath the hay, the two were collected by a pair of gallant young soldiers from the castle and escorted to a Biergarten. They then plied Sissi and Betty with drinks until the soldiers passed out. The challenge was taken up, with subtle suggestions from the "innocent farmgirls on their first trip to the city" by a string of lecherous peasants until word had spread and a crowd had gathered to watch the two wenches drink all challengers under the table.

Betty was bleary-eyed and unsteady, and Sissi was leaning back against the table in an indelicate pose when a squad of soldiers in Imperial livery cleared the courtyard. Once the crowd had been dispersed, Franz Josef, Emperor of Austria and Hungary, emerged from a curtained carriage and strolled into view with a look of amusement. The balding, old man wore a white uniform bedecked with medals. The young man who followed, dressed in a pale blue uniform with a red sash, did not share the emperor's amusement. Prince Friedrich Maximilian fumed as he strode purposefully to the Princess, grabbed her arm, and jerked

her to her feet.

"Again you embarrass me with your frivolity," the prince hissed in her face. Sissi belched, the smell causing the prince to turn away and cover his nose with his free hand.

"You are a boor," Sissi slurred back, slapping the prince's hand away. "I have been cloistered in that hotel for two days while you took in the sights. I have traveled to the holy land, the jungles of Africa, and the American west. Why must I submit to such treatment?"

"Because I am your intended husband and a Prince of the Austrian Empire," Friedrich retorted as he slapped her face. Seeing her friend and mistress attacked, Betty leapt at the prince with unexpected agility and moved between them. The emperor convulsed with laughter and leaned against another table trying to catch his breath.

"Come now, your Highnesses," Betty said, placing her hands on each of their chests. At her touch on his uniform the prince backhanded Betty, who with a startled cry knocked the Princess into the lieutenant commanding the Emperor's guard. Sissi drew the startled officer's revolver and aimed it at the prince.

"I will not be treated in this manner," Sissi said scornfully. She closed her eyes as she pulled the trigger. The shot went wide, ricocheted off the cobblestones, and grazed Franz Josef, Emperor of Austria and Hungary, in the buttocks. The emperor fell onto a table, still laughing uncontrollably, and was swarmed by courtiers.

"Seize her," the prince cried. The soldiers started toward the Princess, but everyone took cover as Sissi drunkenly emptied the pistol, reflexively closing her eyes as she fired. Betty grabbed Sissi's hand and the two ran off through a maze of alleys. When they emerged onto the Hofgasse, they were consumed by the throng and were separated, only to be reunited at the entrance to the exposition.

"There!" Prince Friedrich shouted, pointing at the two from the mouth of the alley. As the three soldiers forced their way through the pedestrian traffic, Sissi led Betty deeper into the exposition grounds. The masses were converging on a pool, behind which stood a ten foot wall, where an electric powered waterfall was to be activated using current generated by a hydroelectric power plant on the river built specifically for the exposition.

While the gathering spectators slowed their pursuers, Betty led Sissi to what looked like a silo of some kind, where she blindly opened a door and the two ascended a stairway into a giant metal sphere with three massive bent legs like a cauldron to support it. At the top of the stairwell was another door, which Betty pulled open and dragged the Princess through. She placed Sissi into one of four comfortable chairs arrayed in two pairs. Betty pulled the door closed and turned a wheel to lock it in place. Then she sat in another of the chairs.

"I think we have evaded them for now," Betty said, "but there's going to be quite a row when we meet the Prince again." She looked seriously at Sissi, and then the two started giggling uncontrollably, kicking their legs and pounding their arms on the armrests and console.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the man at the podium shouted, "when this lever is pulled," he indicated a switch held by a man in a laboratory coat, "electric current generated by the turbines on the mighty Danube behind me will operate the pumps of this artificial waterfall,

enabling the water in the pool below to be cycled to the top and cascade perpetually. In addition, the same current generated will assume the task of illuminating the entire exhibition and all its attractions!"

The speaker nodded to the man at the switch who pulled the long arm down with some unexpected difficulty. There was a buzz when it reached the bottom. A murmur of alarm swept over the gathered crowd. Then a great rumbling knocked down the men on the podium and some of the spectators, followed by the ignition of an array of fireworks behind the stage. The temporary silo around the von Strickenheim aethership, which had been on display behind the waterfall, collapsed. As the spectators watched, the aethership faded away in a cloud of ozone. A wave of applause rose from the assembly. Then the entire exhibition was suddenly lit up as bright as day, and the sound of an amplified musical recording muffled the renewed roar of the crowd.

Suddenly, there was a blinding flash. Princess Franziska Maria Johanna of Liechtenstein and her companion Elizabeth Falconbridge sank into the chairs and passed out.

Betty felt as if she had fallen from a great height. Her balance was unsteady as she rose from the seat and fanned herself in the intense heat. She glanced to the Princess, who was still unconscious. Betty tapped Sissi's hand and then her cheek in an attempt to revive her, but the Princess remained asleep. Betty opened her eyelids and knew from experience that the Princess would be out for quite some time. She wiped the sweat from her eyes with her sleeve and suddenly realized how warm the chamber had become. Then she noticed her shadow across the gently snoring Princess and turned to look out the great window over the console.

The landscape was tropical, with an orange-red sky. A large yellow sun blazed over a steep-sloped mountain range. The aethership sat in the center of a clearing as large as the entire exposition grounds. Betty saw giant flying creatures in the distance with what appeared to be long beaks stretching in both directions from their heads. As she watched in awe, she realized that the forward facing one was a mouth, and the rear some kind of sail. She watched as what must have been several hundred of the creatures perched in the distant cliffs.

"We are on Venus," Betty said to herself. "The aethership must have launched itself somehow. She glanced back at Sissi, still motionless, her chest rising and falling in deep slumber. She had to get help.

Betty searched the cabinets along the walls of the control room and found a map. Looking out of the window, she searched for landmarks. When she spied what looked like identifiable features, she determined that the ship had arrived about 20 miles from the British settlement at Dromopyle. She resolved to go to the camp and bring back assistance.

In her searches, Betty also discovered some clothing more suitable for tropical climates. The blouse, tunic, and long skirt were all khaki in color, along with a khaki explorer's helmet and knee high leather boots. Additionally, she found a utility belt that included a sheathed knife and full ammunition pouches for the Prussian rifle that the

Austrian military used.

After exchanging her peasant dress for the more practical gear, Betty searched for something with which to leave Sissi a note, but found but found no writing implements. In the end, she opened the hatch expecting to see the winding stairway, and almost stumbled when she found a long step to the stony ground. The aethership's three legs were bent so that the hull almost touched the surface.

It was very hot and humid. In a few minutes, Betty's blouse was soaked with perspiration. She could hear the bird calls normally associated with the jungle, but there were also horn-like sounds and thundering roars. Checking that the rifle was loaded, she stepped out and closed the hatch behind her. Betty was not a military woman, but she had been raised among the fens of Dartmoor and knew the workings of a rifle from time spent hunting game fowl with her father.

Using the mountains as a guide, Betty set out, rifle at the ready, toward the nearest humanity on the planet.

Timahuri had sensed the arrival of more outsiders. The dark haired shaman rubbed the green ointment over her bare chest, her face, and down her arms and legs. Then she rattled her hollowed-out gourd noisemaker in the four directions and scowled. The sound changed when the gourd was shaken toward the mountains. She shrieked and stood, and as she did, the gathered women around her stood and shrieked in kind, grabbing their stone spears and their hide shields. Timahuri and her escort mounted their Xokyne and the giant, sharp-beaked land birds sped off quickly. The women on foot followed at a run.

The newcomers took whatever they found, without even an offering to the gods. They dug great holes in the ground and took black rock from womb of Soliope. They defiled the dwellings of the ancestors and had taken the forebears of many tribes hostage to ensure their submission.

Timahuri would not let the Aklete suffer the same fate. Until now, the newcomers had not ventured out of the coastal plains. Or rather, few that did returned to warn off their kind. None had ever been so bold as to appear as they did on the Aklete plateau. These trespassers would have to be made an example to discourage any other attempts by the strangers.

Sissi woke with a throbbing pulse echoing through her head. Opening her eyes slowly, the only thing she seemed to recall was dancing in the hotel room with Betty and something about the Emperor. The light from the huge window blinded her. Cursing, she fumbled around on the control panel until a shutter closed over it.

She rose unsteadily and called for Betty. Then she glanced around the room looking for some clue as to where she was and found Betty's clothes. At first she was annoyed that someone had taken her companion instead of herself, but then she realized that she was alone. The cabinets around the mysterious chamber had been rifled through, but the Princess could not tell if anything was taken.

One thing that she did find, however, was an unopened magnum of Champagne. Smiling and without hesitation, Sissi peeled the foil and expertly popped the cork, which ricocheted around the circular space until it landed in her lap.

Sissi took a long pull of the champagne and realized that the room was quite hot. She absently pulled off the peasant dress, leaving only her white corset and petticoat. The air was getting stuffy, so Sissi grabbed the bottle, wobbled over to the hatch, and turned the wheel.

As the space was again flooded with reddish-orange light, Sissi watched as a large crowd of bare-breasted women gathered in the large open space around the aethership. Most carried shields and spears and wore feathered headdresses. They made space for some who were riding giant, flightless birds. The latter rode up and stopped a fair distance from her, while the others fanned out around them. A sudden quiet rippled through the feathered ranks as the leader rose her club and looked to both sides as if about to give a command.

"Ach Scheisse!" the Princess blurted, hugging the bottle to her chest as she stared at the assembly.

Timahuri was surprised to hear the name of the goddess from the newcomer. She was pale of skin and dressed from her breasts to her feet in white, and golden hair billowed around her strange, rounded face.

"Ah-SHAH-say?" she asked in disbelief, lowering the club slowly and cupping her breasts.

Sissi realized that all the natives were female. They all had long, dark hair, dark, angular features, and slightly pointed ears like fairies were said to have. They were all naked except for their loin clothes and headdresses. Then it dawned on her. She was on Venus! Everyone on Venus was female. The atmosphere drove men insane. And this must be one of the native tribes that she had heard about.

One of the riders parroted her words questioningly and held her breasts. They had initiated communication. Sissi repeated the gesture and said, "Ah-SHAH-say."

At once, the riders dismounted and all of the assembly fell to their knees in obeisance. Sissi smiled and raised her arms, thinking to herself, "If it's one thing a Princess knows how to do, it's making an entrance."

As the natives rose, Sissi regally stepped onto the missing stairs and tumbled into blackness.

Betty navigated using the mountains on her left. She believed that the British settlement was near the end of the range, which did not appear to be too far away, but the map she had found on the aethership had no scale.

She moved carefully through tall grass. Since her departure, Betty had progressed through a region that had been labelled "Aklete" on the map, whatever that meant. She narrowly avoided a large, bipedal carnivore when it spied a four-legged dinosaur with a spiky tail and pursued it. Unfortunately, the prey resisted, and she had to wait for their melee to finish before she could continue. Ultimately, the spiked beast thwarted the predator, which stormed off with a deafening roar.

Wary of other creatures, Betty proceeded slowly, the rifle at the ready. She stopped

every few feet to listen before continuing. This slowed her pace uncomfortably, but it was better to be alive and reach help than to be killed for the sake of expedience. She was getting tired and needed to rest. She considered what to do. Should she climb a tree or stay close to the ground? Much of the wildlife that she had observed was enormous. She would have to find a very tall tree and climb quite high to avoid them. However, if she got too high, she might fall prey to the flying reptiles that owned the skies.

But staying on the ground was no safer. In addition to the dinosaurs, Betty had also seen a purple-striped tiger in the distance, several herds of deer-like animals, and some six-legged bear-like creatures. She had no doubt that there were countless other threats that had avoided her gaze.

Betty was in the midst of a meadow of grass that was almost a foot taller than her. The ground beneath was fairly dry, and the trail she trampled down would provide a path to return by, but there were no trees nearby. Behind her she could see the plateau over the top of the stalks, but ahead there was only the orange-red sky.

Betty continued warily until the tall grass suddenly gave way. Beyond a rocky outcropping, she could see a vast sea, and on the coast, Betty saw a settlement surrounded by a wooden palisade. But the drop off was significant. She would either have to climb down or find another way.

She peered over the cliff and ducked back suddenly, retreating into the tall grass as a flying reptile flew up from below. She dropped to the ground and crawled away further into the grass, and the giant beast doubled back and started pecking where she had been. It found her trail and pursued her, but Betty was ready, and she fired point blank into its face. The creature pecked at her a few more times. She crawled back, chambered another round, and fired again into its chest. It continued to peck a few more times before suddenly collapsing.

"Captain," the sentry shouted, "gunshots from the Aklete plateau. The Colonel wants you to investigate."

Captain Beverly Brighton-Campbell looked up from her paperwork. The young officer hid her surprise from her subordinate and kept a neutral expression.

"Thank you, private," she said evenly. "Dismissed." Gunshots from the plateau meant that someone had ignored the edict against trespassing on the Aklete land. Her majesty's government did not want a war with one of the larger tribes on Venus.

Beverly rose from her desk and donned her cartridge belt. Then she drew her revolver and checked to see that it was fully loaded before returning it to its holster. Of course it was. She had not fired a single shot since she had been assigned to Dromopyle. The edict against trespassing limited her role to policing the border and ensuring that no one crossed it in either direction. This infraction would blemish her otherwise spotless career.

Beverly put her baldric over her shoulder and pulled her brown hair out from under it. In the months since taking command of Delta Company, she had let her own personal discipline lapse. Now, however, there may be some action, either with the trespassers or with other Terrestrial troops. As such, Beverly pulled up her hair and clipped it in place.

She drew her sword. The shiny steel gleamed as it had when it first left the

swordsmith. *Rue Britannia* was etched into the blade. Beverly had never had occasion to use it. She tested the edge and found it to be sufficiently sharp. Then she returned it to the scabbard and took her helmet off the rack.

"Assemble Alpha Platoon for reconnaissance," Beverly shouted to Sergeant Courtney Lewis, "and find Shady." The Sergeant was a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier than Beverly, and had the command presence to keep her girls in line. Delta Company was composed of fresh troops. Beverly was assigned as their commander and deployed to Dromopyle to whip them into shape. Alpha Platoon had the most promising soldiers, but those twenty girls still had no experience engaging a hostile force.

"Yes, sir," Lewis said, snapping a salute before marching into the barracks. Beverly heard a commotion inside, and a few minutes later Alpha Platoon emerged and arranged themselves at attention in two rows of ten. Lewis returned a few minutes later pulling a native woman by the collar of the red coat she wore. The woman was otherwise naked except for an animal skin loincloth.

Lewis released the woman and went to inspect the soldiers. The Sergeant looked over each row from the front and behind, checking gear and ensuring all was in readiness..

"All right and tight, sir" the Sergeant shouted with a salute. Beverly looked over the assembled troops for a long moment.

"Ladies," Beverly said with authority, "we have been assigned to investigate the gunshots that were heard. Shady will take us up to the top of the plateau. This may be your first engagement with hostile forces, either native or colonial. Be ready. Be diligent. Be observant. Be careful."

"Shady," she said slowly to the native, "please take us to the top." She knew that the woman understood enough English to know what was required of her, and speaking slowly did not make a difference, but it was a habit Beverly had yet to break. The woman started toward the gate. The Captain nodded to her Sergeant.

A moment later, Beverly Brighton-Campbell followed the native guide and led her column through the palisade gate and into the jungle.

Sissi was having an incredible dream. Strong, rough, confident hands caressed every nook and cranny of her body. They stroked her thighs, her breasts, her stomach, her face, probed her private parts, her mouth, her ears, her nose!?

Sissi opened her eyes and spied a crowd of the bare-breasted natives pawing her naked body. They were covered in blood and left smears of it on her skin. The women touching her froze. One, who had her hand between Sissi's legs, made eye contact. Sissi screamed.

The woman Sissi had originally communicated with, who she took to be their leader, appeared with a heavy, flat club studded with sharp shards of stone and, in a single stroke, sliced off the head of the woman Sissi started at. It fell away and blood fountained from her neck all over the assembly before the legs gave way and it fell out of Sissi's view.

The other women stepped back, and the Princess got a good look at them. They were all strong, muscular women with dark hair and coffee-colored skin. They wore only loin cloths made of woven leaves. Some had necklaces and arm bands made of bone of colored stones. But all were scarred and blood seeped from fresh wounds.

Sissi sat up, and everyone around her immediately fell to their knees and touched their foreheads to the floor. She was perched on a stone table covered by a woven cushion. It sat underneath a woven awning atop or a stepped pyramid in the center of a small village composed of stone structures.

The pyramid sat in the center of a large square, which was currently sectioned off in layers of squares with partitions. Around the partitioned areas, crowds massed to watch pairs of figures fighting. Sissi watched one contest. The combatants were both women, and they fought a bloody and desperate duel.

Sissi noticed that the leader was watching her intently, and she cast her own gaze to the pair the Princess was watching. When one of the women struck her opponent hard on the back of the head with one of the club-like weapons, the other dropped unceremoniously, and a roar rose from the spectators.

Sissi had read about the natives of Spanish America who were known for violence and stepped pyramids. She recalled that they fought with other tribes to capture sacrifices to their pagan gods.

Timapuri watched as the victors took their turns sharing their souls with the goddess, who lay motionless on the throne. Her warriors fought for the honor of being first in hope that Axaxe would bestow her blessing on them and make them pregnant after the next pilgrimage to the Holy City. It was a great portent that the Goddess of Fertility should come to visit the Aklete in person. Great things were on the horizon for the tribe.

Suddenly the goddess sat up and screamed. Ikal had touched Axaxe's sacred place, and the goddess was displeased. Timapuri stepped up and decapitated the infidel on the spot.

Axaxe looked over the assembled champions, and then down below where the current challenges played out. Her attention focused on the contest between Citlamina and Sakneate. As she watched, the latter dealt her opponent a solid blow to the back of the head with the flat of her sword. Citlamina fell to the ground and did not move.

Timapuri nodded to the herald who blew the victory horn. In an instant, Sakneate vaulted up the sixty-six steps of the temple, saluted Timapuri, and knelt at the goddess' feet.

The leader nodded to another woman who blew a horn. A moment later, Sissi saw the victor run up the steps of the pyramid, past a line of bloody women who she realized were waiting for their opportunity to smear their blood on her. The newcomer climbed the steps effortlessly, nodded to the leader, and then knelt at Sissi's feet.

"Ah-SHAH-say," the woman said reverently, her head bowed. "Sahk-nee-AH-tay," she said, tapping her chest.

"Sahk-nee-AH-tay," Sissi repeated and the woman smiled, though her head was still bowed. "Fran-CHESS-kah," she said, tapping her own chest. The warrior looked confused.

"Ah-SHAH-say," Sahk-nee-AH-tay repeated, and everyone else repeated, "Ah-SHAH-say." Sissi realized that her name was Ah-SHAH-say to these people, and apparently she had selected this woman for something.

Yashada led the blood coats up a narrow trail on the side of the mountain. The

chokawa were hunting now, but the Bev-ER-lee had commanded her to take the foreigners into the territory of the Aklete. Yashada obeyed. The blood-coats held the sacred lodge of the ancestors, and she did not want to anger them. As long as she and the rest of her tribe obeyed the blood-coats, her forebears would be safe.

They treated Yashada better than a slave, but not by much. She was forced to sleep outside and required to conceal her true self beneath one of their blood-coats. They allowed her to carry a spear, but forbade her from returning to her village. Yashada, who the blood-coats called "SHAY-dee" for some reason, was their property for now.

The chokawa hunted during the bright time. When the dark time came, climbing the steep slope would be much safer. But the blood coats had heard the sound of boomsticks from the top, and she was obliged to take them to investigate. They would probably find nothing. If the chokawa caught whoever had made the noise, they would have taken their prey back to their nests.

Beverly scanned the trail ahead. She was slightly taller than Shady, so she could see easily enough. The enormous, bright, hot sun did not help things. There were nearly two months by Earth reckoning before the twilight season started, and then there would be six whole months of darkness, illuminated only by the reflection of the sun off of Neith, the sole satellite of the planet, which always orbited on the side opposite of Venus from Earth.

The pterodactyls were out in great number, but most flew out to the sea, where the flying reptiles dove into the water to pluck out enormous fish. Others disappeared over the plateau. A few, however, scoured the cliff face, and Beverly was wary should any show an interest in them.

Behind her, Privates Cathaway and Harcourt followed with their rifles at the ready. Beverly liked the two and kept them close by. Cathaway would be good in a fight, capable with both blade and bullet, while Harcourt was level-headed and a quick thinker. Beverly was waiting for an opportunity to promote the pair, but so far, neither had seen any action.

Suddenly, Shady signaled and they all pressed themselves low against the rock. A pterodactyl was flying leisurely toward them along the side of the cliff. Apparently the pterodactyls did not see the red of their coats well against the hues of the cliff face, so as long as they did not move, the beast would probably pass them by.

Beverly heard the quiet click of the levers on her troops' Martini-Henry carbines. She hoped that Lewis had sufficiently drilled patience into the girls, but this would be their first test. She slowly drew her revolver, though she knew that she would need to be right on top of the creature to harm it.

The flying lizard used the long sail at the rear of its head to steer, turning its whole head toward or away from the wind to change course. Every so often, a gust of wind would rise from below and push the creature higher unless it turned its entire body vertical and dove, which they did not do often. As the creature approached their position, Beverly heard quiet sounds of panic. *Keep your heads*, she thought. The beasts were not pack animals, but a cry from one of them would attract many more.

A shot thundered when the pterodactyl was just within range. Beverly swore under her breath. The beast had not yet seen them. The shot missed, and the creature turned in their direction. Beverly watched it scan the cliff face. Its gaze passed right by them. It

continued closer, and one of the troopers, Templeton, Beverly thought, cried out and fired. Her shot also missed, but was quickly followed by a thunderous volley. The pterodactyl's wings folded, visible holes showing in the in the leathery membrane, and it plummeted downward.

"Move! Move! Move!" Lewis shouted from the rear, and Beverly started up the path as fast as the unsure footing allowed. Shady was already a dozen paces ahead. As the native passed between the cliff face and an outcropping, Beverly spied another pterodactyl approaching.

"Rear guard, ready weapons," Lewis cried from some distance back. Beverly looked to see the last five troopers and Lewis aiming their rifles at the airborne predators. Just as she joined the native guide at the outcropping, their shots rang out.

There was a piercing cry, and Beverly knew that they were in trouble. The creature was calling to its peers. The patrol would be swarmed soon and would be picked off easily hugging the cliff. She scanned the way ahead of them, and noted that they were only a short distance from the top.

"Point guard," Beverly shouted to the troopers nearest her, "ready weapons to cover the rear! The rest to the top!" She nodded to Cathaway, who saluted crisply, and then ran after Shady who was already disappearing over the lip.

Yashada heard the chokawa war cry and fled up the trail. The blood coats would distract the air beast, so she was fairly confident that she could get to the top and hide in the tall grass there. She had no trouble gripping the stone with her bare feet. The blood coats covered their feet in animal hides with hard bottoms. No wonder they slipped and stumbled on the trail. Yashada did not understand how they could be so powerful when they had so little sense.

As she climbed over the edge, Yashada saw that the grass nearest the edge had been trampled, and a path led deeper into the foliage. She avoided the trampled area and carefully picked her way through the blades so as to not disturb them. As she crawled through the thick stalks, Yashada found another foreigner. But this one did not have a blood coat. Yashada turned back and saw Bev-ER-lee appear.

When the blood coat was clear of the edge, Yashada whistled and the woman looked in her direction. Yashada waved her over excitedly, and Bev-ER-lee nodded. But the blood-coat did not come to Yashada. Instead she crouched by the edge and pointed toward the native as the other blood coats appeared. Those women looked panicked, and they ran haphazardly into the thicket, flattening tall stalks all around.

When they had destroyed a huge patch of cover, the blood-coats lined up in two rows, some standing and some kneeling, and pointed their boomsticks toward the cliff edge. There they waited for the rest of the women to emerge from the cliff face, with the tall, mean one coming up last. They all gathered in the trampled area. The kneeling ones stood and the newcomers joined the two rows.

Beverly thought the platoon had faced their first threat reasonably well. True, Templeton had lost her composure and threatened them all, but her girls had recovered and performed admirably. They had climbed to the top, established a firing line, and covered the

arrival of the rest of the patrol. Now they stood in formation at attention awaiting her pleasure.

Suddenly, Yashada emerged from the foliage carrying a Prussian rifle. Immediately, several troopers raised their carbines toward her. Yashada dropped the rifle and pointed in the direction she had come. Beverly signaled two troopers to come with her and followed the native back into the brush.

A brunette woman dressed all in fresh-looking khaki was unconscious on the ground, partially covered by fallen stalks. Beverly knelt down and felt the woman's face. It was hot to the touch, and her clothing was soaked in sweat. From her pale skin, Beverly could tell that whoever she was, she was not accustomed to the local conditions. Her eyes opened weakly. Beverly cradled her head in her arms. One of the troopers pulled her canteen and poured some water into the woman's mouth. She started coughing. Suddenly, she sat up.

"We must save the Princess!" the woman said in English

"Who are you?" Beverly asked, still cradling the woman's head.

"I am Elizabeth Falconbridge," the woman replied with urgency, sitting up with an unexpected burst of energy, "lady-in-waiting to Princess Franziska Maria Johanna of Liechtenstein." Beverly recalled a dispatch from headquarters about an Austrian princess who stole an aethership after attempting to assassinate the Emperor. . She and her maid were to be arrested and returned to Earth. But first, they must capture her.

"Where is the Princess now?" Beverly asked with equal urgency.

"I left her unconscious in the ship we arrived in," Betty replied. "It is that way. It can't be far, I've been gone less than a day."

"The days here are six Earth months long," Lewis said as she knelt next to her commander. "Do you know where the ship is?"

"It's in a large clearing toward those mountains," Betty replied.

"Is she injured?" Beverly asked. Betty considered her response for a moment, and then decided that Sissi's reputation was less important at the moment.

"She is incapacitated," she replied. "We over-indulged ourselves in Linz and woke up here."

The Captain and the Sergeant looked at each other with poorly veiled amusement. A drunk royal found her way to Venus.

"Shady," Beverly shouted. The native guide appeared at her side. "Can you follow her trail back to where she came from?" she said slowly, realizing immediately after that it was not necessary. Shady nodded.

"She came from the heart of the Aklete," the native guide said anxiously. Beverly ignored her hesitation.

"Sergeant, let's move out!"

Following her inadvertent selection of Sakneate as her champion, the contests had continued for several more hours. Sissi sat on the bench until all the victors had ascended to the prisoner and touched her body with a bloody finger. Her breasts and her stomach were the most popular places, though some also touched her forehead. A few ventured toward her legs, but Sakneate stopped them with a slap to their hands.

All the while, Sissi was provided with the shell of a coconut-like fruit containing a

sweet liquid that she found very pleasant. A servant girl refilled the shell continuously when it was empty from a ceramic vessel, which was in turn replaced by other girls, who seemed to run up and down the pyramid effortlessly.

When the procession was finished, the leader, who had introduced herself as tee-mah-PUR-ee, presented Sissi with a necklace of long, green feathers. Sissi accepted it, and the woman placed it over her head. The feathers were long enough to cover her breasts.

Sissi pointed at the leader's loin cloth. The woman looked down at it and Sissi thought she might tear it off, but instead, she received another bundle of the green feathers from one of her attendants and presented it to Sissi. She accepted this offering as well and unrolled it. The feathers hung thickly from an animal hide belt. It was a loin cloth, and Sissi realized that her raiment was special.

Sissi stood, and immediately everyone around her knelt and bowed their heads. She wrapped the belt around her waist, but did not see a closure. The leader chanced a look at her, and humbly stood and tied the belt in a knot at Sissi's side. Sissi smiled, and the leader's face blossomed into an expression of joy.

Sissi sat again. The leader motioned for the others to rise and then said something very quickly. The crowd in the square below cheered and started chanting: "Ah-SHAH-say! Ah-SHAH-say! Ah-SHAH-say!" repeatedly.

Axaxe seemed pleased. Timapuri maintained her regal bearing, though she beamed inside. After her initial displeasure, the goddess accepted Sakneate as her champion and received the souls of the victors. It was said that the goddess was fickle and did not show emotion. But from what Timapuri had seen, Axaxe appeared to convey all the moods and feelings of mortals, including anger, joy, amusement, and satisfaction.

The goddess drank copious amounts of the fermented honey wine, and her mood seemed to improve as the time passed. Timapuri wondered if the latter warriors were more favorable to Axaxe, or if she too succumbed to the pleasurable effects of the wine. The chieftain worried that their supplies would run out and they would lose the favor of the goddess.

When the last of the warriors had shared her soul, Timapuri presented Axaxe with the holy garments. The goddess accepted the necklace with what appeared to be joyful surprise. Timapuri was puzzled when she adjusted the feathers until her breasts were completely concealed.

Before Timapuri could present it, Axaxe then pointed at her own loin cloth. Timapuri held out the divine garment to her. The goddess smiled as she unrolled the feathered belt. All dropped to obeisance when she rose. After a moment, Timapuri risked a glance and noticed that Axaxe was having trouble tying the belt. The chieftain rose and humbly offered to help. Axaxe accepted and Timapuri tied the ends. Normally the knot would be in front, but having seen the goddess' prior displeasure, she put the knot to one side so that her sacred place was covered.

The goddess looked Timapuri in the eyes and smiled. Her heart leapt at the divine pleasure. When Axaxe sat again, Timapuri rose and gestured for her tribe to do so as well.

"The goddess has accepted our souls and bestowed her blessings," she shouted to her warriors in the square. "She is pleased."

In unison, the tribe started chanting, "Axaxe! Axaxe! Axaxe!" over and over again. The call echoed in the distance as if the jungle was joining them. Timapuri maintained her haughty expression, but she was overjoyed.

Following the trail was not difficult for the native guide, but Beverly could see it clearly enough for herself. As they progressed, the tall grass gave way to tropical forest. Nothing bothered them as the patrol was a large, formidable target.

Beverly kept the English woman close by. While she was technically a prisoner, Miss Falconbridge was preoccupied with the welfare of her mistress. The rifle had not been returned to her, but the trespassing lady had not been bound or actually placed under arrest.

Without warning, Shady stopped at the tree line. Before them lay a large, open space. The ground was covered with low grass that had clearly been trampled through by many people not too long ago. In the center of the clearing, Beverly saw the three legged sphere of an aethership.

"Sissi!" Betty cried as she lurched toward the ship, but Cathaway grabbed her collar and lifted Betty off her feet. "Let me go!" Betty shouted, trying to break free.

"Miss Falconbridge," Beverly said to her face. "Shut up!" When her charge continued to flail about, the Captain slapped her face. The woman went silent, staring at the officer with surprise.

"I'm sorry about that," Beverly said quietly, "but we are in hostile territory, and there is no cover out here." She signaled to Lewis, who trotted up to them. "Take four troopers and have a look at that aethership."

"Yes, sir!" Lewis replied with a sharp salute. She pointed to four troopers and motioned them forward.

No sooner had the five emerged from the trees than the whistle of darts erupted from the direction of the aethership. One of the scouts was struck in the forehead by a dart and silently fell to the ground motionless. The patrol dropped into the grass while those in the trees took cover.

A score or more of native women emerged from their concealment in the grass with blowguns ready. Simultaneously, a similar number appeared from among the trees carrying heavy clubs studded with sharp stones.

"Do not react," Beverly ordered, keeping her eyes on the host before her. "We are on their land in violation of the treaty. Lower your weapons and be still." She heard the sounds of compliance behind her. From the opposite side of the clearing, three riders rapidly approached on the giant flightless birds that they used for mounts.

One of the riders rode up and stopped immediately in front of Beverly and Betty, scowling down at them from the back of her beast. Then she noted Shady cowering behind Cathaway and pointed at her. The red-coated native approached warily, stopped at the rider's feet, and bowed her head.

The two engaged in rapid conversation. Beverly had only heard their language a few times and had learned a handful of words from Shady in the two years since her assignment to Dromopyle. The rider spoke a different language than their guide, but Shady seemed to understand it and communicated that they had come seeking the fair colored one's companion from the metal ball on stilts.

"Did she say anything about the Princess?" Betty shouted to Shady. "Is she in the ship? Do they know where Sissi is?"

The rider looked at Betty intently and said, "Ah-SHAH-say." Then she shouted to one of the other riders who took off rapidly in the direction from which they had come. The rider then spoke to Shady, who told Beverly in her own language that they were to follow.

"Sergeant," Beverly said evenly, "form up the platoon, carefully." Lewis and the remaining three scouts rose slowly and the Sergeant went over to the fallen trooper. Her face was frozen in agony and starting to turn green. Lewis checked for a pulse in her neck and could not detect one.

"She's dead, sir," the Sergeant said, shaking her head. Beverly shook her head and glanced toward the rider and the surrounding natives.

"Take half the platoon and bring her back to the garrison. Tell them that we are taking our warrior back." Shady spoke rapidly with the rider, who then said something to her own people. One of the natives carefully approached the fallen trooper and pulled out the dart. A moment later, the woman started breathing rapidly, though she remained unconscious.

"Take Middlebury up, ladies," the Sergeant said to the remaining three scouts. The two of the three picked up the woman under her shoulders, and the third took hold of her feet.

The riders turned and walked their mounts in the direction they had come. The women with the blowguns disappeared back into the tall grass.

"In parade order," the Sergeant shouted, "A and B squads follow me. C and D squads watch the rear." Beverly nodded at her glance. "A and B squads forward march!"

Beverly watched as the platoon shouldered their weapons and followed Lewis in two columns. She started after them, taking Betty by the arm, who was followed by Cathaway and Harcourt. The three carrying Middlebury followed them, and then the remainder of the platoon. Beverly expected the spearmen behind them to come along, but when she turned back, only her people were visible.

The rider had galloped into the village and jumped from her mount at the foot of the pyramid. She ran up the steps two at a time and kneeled at Timapuri's feet.

"Speak," the chieftain said.

"The blood-coats came to the clearing where the goddess appeared. One of them said 'Axaxe!'"

"Where are they now?"

"Colel Cab brings them here, my chief."

"How do the blood-coats know of the goddess?"

"It was not a blood-coat who said the name. It was a stranger covered in grass-colored cloth."

"And this stranger said 'Axaxe?'"

"She had a strange accent, but that is what she said. It sounded something like SEE-see."

At the mention of the stranger's pronunciation of the name, the goddess, who had

been asleep on the throne snoring loudly under the watchful gaze of Sakneate, opened her eyes and sat unsteadily.

"BET-tee," the goddess said with a pleased expression. That was the first sound from her since the shriek, and Timupuri knew the stranger was important.

"Ride back to Colel Cab," Timupuri said to the messenger, "and tell her that she escorts honored guests." She turned to the crowd that had gathered in the square at the arrival of the rider. "Prepare a feast worthy of the goddess. Her emissary approaches."

Sissi swooned on the cushioned bench. The drink they had given her had snuck up on her, and the sticky sweet fluid packed a wallop. The warrior Sahk-nee-AH-tay watched over her, apparently as her bodyguard, while the chieftain, Tee-mah-PUR-ri, presided over the village.

A woman appeared suddenly at the top of the pyramid and spoke hurriedly to the leader. She heard the messenger say "Sissi" and the Princess smiled broadly.

"Betty!" she said, and the leader immediately started issuing commands. Sissi could tell by her demeanor that the orders were not hostile in nature. She smiled at Tee-mah-PUR-ri, and the chieftain bowed her head reverently.

The procession proceeded through the jungle at a walk. After the rider she had sent away returned, the riders dropped back and the leader effortlessly pulled Betty onto her mount behind her while the other rider did the same for Beverly.

Betty was awed. First she was attacked by a giant, flying reptile, then a column of British troops appeared with their order and discipline. Now she was riding on a giant bird behind a native chieftain! She was worried about the Princess, but the wonder of it all overshadowed her concern.

Beverly was wary. At the best of times, the Aklete were civil. That a warrior had removed the dart from Middlebury, revealing that the poison was not necessarily lethal, was quite unexpected. Now it appeared that she and her command were welcome, at least for the time being, since they were in the company of the lady from Liechtenstein.

Beverly estimated that they rode for eight or ten hours non-stop before the jungle gave way to a stone city dominated by a stepped pyramid. As far as she knew, no British officer had ever been to an Aklete settlement. She looked behind her to see Lewis' reaction, but to her surprise, Lewis, the platoon, and even Shady were not there.

Panic overcame her, but Beverly retained her composure. She was now alone, deep in the territory of a potentially hostile tribe. They could easily see the incursion of her command as a violation of the treaty, if not an act of war. She had read accounts of troops captured by the natives and the horrible atrocities committed against them.

But the natives were throwing flower petals at them. It seemed that she was in their good graces for the moment. The best she could do for now was maintain them.

A commotion arose as a pair of riders, each bearing a foreign passenger, emerged from the jungle. Sissi could not make out the figures, other than that the second passenger wore a red coat, but the villagers were cheering and throwing flowers petals at the new

arrivals. She smiled, and the chieftain seemed relieved.

Sissi tried to stand up, but her bodyguard pushed her back down into the seat, watching the procession below warily. The woman clearly took her duty seriously. As the riders entered the square, Sissi saw that the first passenger was Betty. She thought to stand, but looked up to see Sahk-nee-AH-tay peer down at her protectively. Instead, Sissi sat up straight and looked regal.

Betty squealed when she saw the Princess. She was sitting on a bench under a canopy at the top of the central pyramid. She looked closer and saw that Sissi was wearing nothing but long green feathers over her chest and groin. She nearly screamed when she realized that Sissi's exposed skin was stained all over with blood.

The city was alive with naked women who threw flower petals at the new arrivals. Betty sighed audibly, and her driver started at the sound. When the two reached the foot of the pyramid, the riders dismounted. Beverly followed suit, but seeing Betty's hesitation, her driver unceremoniously picked Betty up by the waist and set her on her feet on the ground.

From up above, Betty heard Sissi laugh out loud. Betty's driver looked anxious for a moment, but then relaxed when she saw Sissi's expression of joy.

The rider then gestured for Betty to climb the steps. She started up the steps, and Beverly appeared at her side followed by the riders. It was a long climb, and Betty was winded when they finally reached the top.

"Colel Cab," Timapuri said, "the goddess is pleased that you have brought her emissary. The Aklete applaud you." She turned to Betty and lowered her head. "The Aklete welcome the emissary of Axaxe..." But she was interrupted when the goddess abruptly rose from the throne and embraced the newcomer before Sakneate could stop her. The assembly in the square cheered and clapped.

"Princess Franziska," Beverly said after they pulled apart, "I am pleased to see that you are well and unharmed. The Emperor of Austria and Prince Friedrich were most concerned for your welfare." She saluted. "I am Captain Beverly Brighton-Campbell of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's Venusian Colonial Forces."

"Thank you for bringing Lady Falconbridge to me," the Princess said with a friendly nod. "Please rest and take some refreshment." Sissi turned to Timapuri, who in turn gestured to the serving girls. A moment later, fresh vessels were provided for the newcomers as well as the riders.

A commotion arose from below again, and this time, two columns of blood-coated figures emerged into the square. The tweet of a fife reached their ears, and the villagers in their path scattered as the platoon marched up, forming two lines at the foot of the pyramid, and stood at attention. Lewis stepped forward smartly and saluted. Shady kept close to the Sergeant, clearly uncomfortable among the villagers.

"Your Highness," Beverly said respectfully, "that native is our translator. Please allow her to join us."

"Of course, Captain." Sissi pointed to the native guide and gestured for her to climb the pyramid.

An exclamation of surprise erupted from the square. Timapuri watched as the Chicchan woman looked to the blood coat next to her, and then slowly climbed the steps. When she reached the top, she ignored Timapuri, fell to her knees, and touched her forehead to the floor in front of the goddess.

Sakneate stepped between them with her club in hand, but Axaxe stayed her hand and shook her head. Sakneate turned pale, bowed her head, and stepped back. The blood coat chieftain was wary of Sakneate, as she should be, but then leaned over and pulled the Chicchan to her feet.

"Shady, please translate." The native nodded. "Tell the chief that we are in their debt for rescuing the Princess and keeping her safe, but we must now return with her to our camp so that she may return home."

The Chicchan said she spoke for the blood coats, and that the emissary, and the goddess, spoke their language. The blood coat leader said that the blood coats were bound to the Aklete for saving their Princess, but that she would be taking her back to the blood coat village.

Timapuri scowled at the Chicchan and then at the blood coat.

"Tell the blood coat that Axaxe will stay with the Aklete. She chose to bless our tribe with her divine presence, and we will honor her for her blessing." She glared at the blood coat and stated loudly in a threatening tone. "Tell her that any attempt to take the goddess away will mean war with the Aklete!" The mood had turned dangerously dark on the pavilion and the crowds became quiet.

"The goddess Axaxe must stay with Aklete," Shady told Beverly nervously. "Taking her away will cause war."

"Goddess?" Sissi said incredulously, and turned toward the chieftain. *They think I am their goddess, she thought. Not a bad situation. No husband here to dictate how to live my life, and a tribe of devoted women to do my bidding.* An evil smile crept across her rosy face.

"No, Captain," she said after a moment. "I will not come with you. Lady Falconbridge and I will stay here among my adopted people."

"Are you serious?" Betty cried.

Sissi looked mildly amused at her friend "You do remember the shooting the emperor in the ass thing don't you? Tell me how that can end well??" Her friend made a puzzled face as she thought for some moments and then sighed in resignation.

Sissi turned back and stared at the Captain. "My most excitable of subjects has prepared an incredible feast, Captain. It's up to you to decide what side of the fork that you want to be on." She adopted a regal pose. "I am not going back."

I have orders to return you to Earth, Beverly thought, but if I attempt to carry them out, the Aklete will declare war on us. And these people think she is their god. Perhaps the Princess will keep the Aklete in check for us. I hope I don't overstep my authority.

"Your highness," Beverly said as she knelt before the Princess, "on behalf of Queen Victoria and the British Empire, allow me to be the first to congratulate you on your deification."

Some time later, a delegation of the Prussian empire, on behalf of Austria and their British counterpart, gathered in the village of the Aklete under a guarantee of safe passage to be formally received by Axaxe, the Goddess of Fertility and ruler of the Aklete to ratify the treaty that had been drafted.

The extensive treaty, facilitated by Captain Beverly Brighton-Campbell with the help of Shady, and witnessed by Prussian Countess Sophia Erlichman of Brandenburg, established the sovereignty of the Aklete and acknowledged the borders of their territory . There had been much wrangling when it came to the borders , as the largest and most accessible field of Venusian Anthracite, or V-Coal as it was known on Earth, was in the negotiated region, but it was eventually resolved with an agreeable compromise.

The Prussian delegate had maneuvered the concession in order to keep it from the British, but the matter was resolved when Prince Franz I, ruler of Liechtenstein, recognized his daughter's dominion over the Aklete, and by extension Liechtenstein's claim to the Aklete V-Coal fields. Both the British and Prussian delegations protested, but with the weight of the tribe behind her, Sissi acknowledged the claim of her homeland and the treaty was ratified.

Joab Stieglitz - Sucker Punch

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joab Stieglitz was born and raised in Warren, New Jersey. He is an Application Consultant for a software company. He has also worked as a software trainer, a network engineer, a project manager, and a technical writer over his 30-year career. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

Joab is an avid tabletop RPG player and game master of horror, espionage, fantasy, and science fiction genres, including Savage Worlds (Mars, Deadlands, Agents of Oblivion, Apocalypse Prevention Inc, Herald: Tesla and Lovecraft, Thrilling Tales, and others), Call of Cthulhu, Lamentations of the Flame Princess, Pugmire, and Pathfinder. Joab channeled his role-playing experiences in the Utgarda Series, which are pulp adventure novels with Lovecraftian influences set in the 1920's.

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