

Luftschiff Voraus!

A Space 1889 short story by Greg Horne © 2002

I

Numbed by the thunderous beat of the engines in LZ43s forward and aft gondolas, Manfred von Richthofen rested his elbows on the sill of the celluloid window and gazed out and down at the misty Venusian jungle below. The splayed tops of the green-black cycads nodded below rushing wisps and tendrils of the ever-present cloud. He could almost imagine the crash and roar of unseen Thunder-Lizards shouldering their brute way through the dense world-forest below.

Looking through the open back of the tiny amidships gondola, he could easily see the gently swaying form of his brothers Albatross, hooked up to LZ43s keel. Great God, how he longed to take his own machine out on patrol. The fuel reserves that were kept for the aerostats was meagre enough – no more than eighty litres above that carried in their machines' tanks – in addition, Kapitän Krenz had allowed the brothers a proving flight two days before – a brief one.

Brief had been the theme of this whole mission. He and Lothar had been late additions. One week's training on SL9, the army's old wooden Shutte-Lanz ship with a hastily rigged capture trapeze. Just a week and then – away!

LZ34 had been extensively modified with a kit of parts that enabled her to undertake aerostat operations. Her length had been extended by twenty metres to take her to an extraordinary 120 metres. She had been stripped of her military equipment to save weight. This and the extra lift her now much greater internal volume gave her the means to comfortably hoist aloft the two Albatross scouts, the third central gondola and the equipment needed to support them aloft.

Their sister-ship the LZ44 was missing. Three weeks before she had been on a survey mission beyond the Kaiser Frederick III range, out past even the Akna Hills. Her last report via her Marconi Voltatic Spark set had been entirely routine and with no intimation of trouble; it had contained her last position report. So, even though she had probably gone down, her crew had provisions enough for a month, small arms and two maxims that could be unbolted from their emplacements in the hull and mounted on large-wheeled field carriages. Provided that her commander, Schmetterling, had made some sort of controlled descent, Kapitän Krenz had been sure that her crew could hold out.

Absently, von Richthofen looked over at his brother. Lothar was wide-awake in his hammock and raising himself on his elbows, grinning broadly at him. "What was that you said?"

Lothar laughed. "I said: Always daydreaming! Do you dream of potting a Thunder-Lizard? Imagine such a head on the hunting lodge wall back home!"

Manfred smiled. He and Lothar had spent many silent hours in the woods of their Prussian home stalking the great stags. "No brother. I think that I am eager to fly again. I am eager to seek the heart of this mystery. You alone know of my private feelings. I must know my Lotte's fate.

Lothar's smile evaporated abruptly. "The Doctor's niece. Have no fear; I know that they will be found safe and well. Madness for a military mission to have taken civilians along at all."

"Doctor Redl was ever a man to have his own way. He fought for the expedition; he would go along; he would take Lotte along." Manfred struggled to control his bitterness. "He –."

The shrill whistle of the voice-pipe cut him short. Taking the mouthpiece from its hook he listened briefly, then: "At once Kapitän. Lothar; we fly."

In the control car forward, Kapitän Julius Krenz of the Imperial German Airship Service replaced the speaking tube. Looking back he could see the two young aviators clap helmets and goggles on their heads. Heat and humidity made the leathers of the earth-bound aviator unnecessary.

The younger Richthofen boy, the tearaway Lothar was exiting the gondola in his shirtsleeves! He grabbed the tube again. "Leutnant von Richthofen! I may be familiar with Army methods, but in the airship service we go on operations properly uniformed. I request you to wear your uniform tunic!" He smothered a smile in his large Imperial as the abashed young man hastily donned his jacket.

"Trimsman! I want you to stand ready to adjust our attitude when we cast those young devils free."

"Jawohl," Trimsman Klosterheim responded sturdily. He took a steady grip on the trim wheel at the side of the cabin – so mounted as to improve his chances of noting any fore-and-aft imbalance.

"Engine start", reported the Engineering Officer, a young Swabian named Rommel. Gears and drive chains conspired to turn cranks clipped to the airscrews of the Albatrosses. A couple of pops, a bang and clouds of blue

smoke and the 160hp Daimler-Benz engines bellowed into life.

“Very good. Herr Rommel, prepare to let go fore and aft.”

“Jawohl Herr Kapitän.” Rommel’s hand gripped the release lever.

“Let go.”

“Aerostats released.” Rommel turned to watch them go. “Clean separation.” The airship lurched upward, relieved of almost 2000 kilograms weight. Klosterheim gave way then met her, keeping the mighty airship level. Rommel marvelled again at the miracle of powered, heavier than air flight as the two machines dropped away like diving kingfishers to build their airspeed before formatting on the LZ43.

Kapitän Krenz nodded in satisfaction. “Signalman. Make ‘Search’ to our children out there.” The lamp clacked, and both aerostats wagged their wings in acknowledgment, sun flashing on their wings as they banked away.

II

Manfred glanced back over his right shoulder. Lothar’s yellow-tailed machine had taken station a little above and behind him. Good. Their view of the ground would overlap. Twice the chance to see LZ44. Her pale buff skin should be easy to spot against the vegetation.

Hot, damp air roared in his ears. The leather flying-helmet he wore did almost nothing to muffle the noise. He clawed it off in a single motion. That was better. The wind whipped his hair, stinging his forehead. He could feel the occasional hot bite of castor oil on his cheeks. The rapid clatter of the ash-and-walnut prop soothed him beyond his ability to express it. He was a man at one with his element, the air.

At times like this he rather pitied the dull fellows who shuttled the space-lanes between the inner planets. A drab existence clapped up in a riveted iron and steel box floating through the gasping cold of the ether. Better by far to be a creature of the skies be they blue, indigo or the toxic yellow-green of Venus.

The Venusian airs gave his wings twice the lift they’d have had in an earthly sky – the anaemic atmosphere of Mars would have confined him to the lowlands. He was beginning to wonder how one of Anthony Fokker’s old monoplanes would have fared here. His triplanes were needed on Mars if they were to get above two thousand meters above “canal level”. Joyfully he banked to port, leading Lothar to the next track of their pre-arranged search.

He dipped his Albatross’s nose briefly. Lothar did the same. Time he felt for a weapons check. A brief yank on the charging lever and his air-cooled Maxims were ready. *Tak-tak-tak-tak*. A brief stream of lead poured through the

disc of his airscrew. The interruptor gear did its work perfectly. A glance at Lothar’s machine revealed a similar stabbing flame. All was well and they were ready for all contingencies.

What was that? Manfred pushed his goggles up onto his forehead. A glint, surely too steady to be sunlight on water. Could it be metal?

Banking and diving, he lost altitude rapidly until he was circling a scant two hundred meters above the treetops. My God! Yes it was! He jabbed his finger downward. Lothar waved back; he had seen it too.

Below them lay the straggle-boned wreck of the LZ44.

After the ticklish business of hooking back on to the LZ43, the two aviators reported to Krenz.

“Although her back is broken, ‘44 looks substantially intact, Kapitän.” concluded Lothar.

“Hauptman?” enquired the Kapitän. They were seated around what might generously be described as a card table in the commander’s tiny cabin.

“I concur,” said von Richthofen. “There is no evidence of fire. There may be survivors.”

Krenz now had a weighty decision. Ought he to risk his ship to a perilous landing without a mooring mast or ground crew that his beautiful ship would need? To ask the question was to have the answer. “Very well then. We shall make landfall and begin searching. Hauptman von Richthofen, will you take station in the control car forward with me? I would wish you to guide us in.”

III

Matros Engel and Rigger Klein sweated and cursed in LZ43’s nose cone as they struggled to pay out the three hundred-metre bowline. Engel shackled a pair of grappling hooks to the end. These would be used to snag the ground. Many attempts were needed before the hooks caught, and the electric winch tore it free three times before a sound grip was established. Klein wound in a few tens-of-meters to be sure of the ship’s grasp of the ground.

In the control room Helmsman Schmundt allowed the breeze to bring her, like a weathercock, nose into the wind. As she settled, he cranked the annunciator, signalling ‘idle’. The noise of her airscrews died away to a mumble leaving LZ43 with just enough headway to come up her cable as it was winched in.

Clank – clank – clank – clank went the winch’s pawl. Every gain the winch made was against the airships buoyancy. The captain could have valved off hydrogen, but replacing the lost lifting gas would have meant unshipping the whole cumbersome generating gear and waiting tedious hours while more “cooked”.

When she was at treetop height, rope ladders tumbled from her sides and crewmen scrambled down. Armed with heavy mallets and long iron pegs, they nailed the

ladders to the forest floor as other men stood ready with rifles to defend them.

Other men took curious, corkscrew-bottomed poled and fastened metal handles through loops at their top ends. These they carried some little way out from the ship and screwed the poles into the soft, treacherous Venusian clay. Once withdrawn, the loops had cables passed through them and up again into the airship where they were tightened with hand-crank.

Even though the men were sweating and tired by this time they were spurred on by Trimsman Klosterheim to hew down several of the great cycad ferns. These had their great bushy heads lopped with saws and the resultant logs were piled into a crude stockade.

Engineer Rommel supervised the emplacement of their only Maxim on the stockade walls to provide a base of fire should there be an attack of thunder lizards or some more unknowable threat.

Nor did any of the other officers spare their efforts. Manfred stood watch with a rifle while his brother led a small party transferring a stock of food, water and ball ammunition to the stockade. Lothar kept the men working cheerfully with a combination of example and rough banter that he knew he could never match. Kapitän Krenz supervised the laying of charges that blasted the tree ferns down, greatly easing the task of the saw-and-axe-wielding crewmen.

At last it was done and the men were fed, some falling asleep as they ate. A small party were given coffee and detailed to take the first watch.

Krenz, Rommel and the brothers von Richthofen conferred. "Gentlemen, I feel we are secure for now. We will let the men rest and tomorrow we shall send a party on foot to the LZ44 and see what we may find. Rommel, you and young von Richthofen can turn in."

The young men gratefully went to find a place to sleep.

"Manfred. Come with me please and talk a while." Krenz took cigars from his pocket case and handed one to Manfred who lit both of them with a waterproof match.

"Thank you my boy," said Krenz, exhaling a great plume of oily smoke. "You are a good officer, von Richthofen."

"Herr Kapitän." Manfred wondered what was coming. He could guess.

"You and your brother did well today to find LZ44 so quickly. While a bit brash, young Lothar is a credit to you and your family. But you."

"Herr Kapitän?" asked von Richthofen, a serpent of dread coiling in his stomach.

"What is it that oppresses you so? You have been silent and reserved since you came on board. You seem... preoccupied." Krenz paused, plainly uncomfortable. "Do you have a personal stake in this business? Forgive my bluntness."

"This is very difficult for me, Herr Kapitän. I... There was – is, I pray – a young woman among LZ44s complement. She and I –" Manfred paused unable to go on.

Krenz nodded slowly. "Doctor Redl's niece. I am familiar with the identities of all this aboard LZ44."

"Ja, Herr Kapitän. She and I have an understanding that we shall, with her uncles permission, be engaged on her return from this mission." Manfred coughed and drew on his cigar. "I would know what has happened to her, for either good or ill."

"Does your brother know?"

"Ja, Herr Kapitän. He knows, you know and I know. No one else. Herr Kapitän, please, now that I have given you my confidence, may I ask that you respect it? It will alter the nature of my relationship with the men. You know how sentimental they are apt to become."

"And you would not be the 'poor Hauptman von Richthofen'. I understand. Manfred, my boy, I can give you this guarantee – I will keep your secret as long as it does not conflict with what we are trying to do here." Kapitän Krenz offered him his hand. "How do you say?"

"Herr Kapitän, I am satisfied. My own personal considerations will not interfere with the mission" He took the proffered hand. "Thank you."

"Let us say nothing more. Tomorrow you, Lothar, and I shall take a party to the wreck and see what we may find. Young Rommel can remain in charge here. He is a capable fellow – fancies himself quite the tactician. Have you heard he is writing a book on infantry tactics? Remarkable, you young men." Krenz cast away the wet end of his cigar. "We shall turn in now. There will be much to do tomorrow. And we must take a watch tonight." He clapped Manfred on the shoulder. "Come! To bed!"

IV

Next morning a typical Venusian torrential downpour wakened the crew of LZ43. No tarpaulin or oilskin would keep it out. Moments later the sun was blazing fiercely again, filling their little clearing with steamy vapour.

What a place, thought Lothar as he wrung out the kerchief he had mopped his face with. His uniform would be ruined. What was next? Snow? A smattering of frogs? "Get fallen in you men," he yelled at a little knot of crewmen. The airshipmen shouldered rifles and variously put out pipes, cigars and cigarettes.

Krenz ambled over, solar topee on head and stick in hand. "Shall we be off, Leutnant?"

"In just a moment, Herr Kapitän. Ah, here is my brother now."

"Gentlemen," said the Kapitän with his usual courtesy. "Shall we get on?"

“Ja, Herr Kapitän. The men have broken their fast. This is for you.” He handed over a vacuum flask. “Pea and ham soup.”

“Ah, yes. That will do for me nicely. Thank you, von Richthofen. Let us be on our way.”

Although the airship-wreck was only two kilometres away, it took Krenz’s party the better part of the morning to reach it. To Manfred the journey was a nightmare of toil. The tough brush resisted the effect of their Argentine machetes with the will of a living combatant. Eventually they beat down rather than cut the vegetation. Before very long at all they were covered in sticky sap and bits of brush that were difficult and painful to tear free where they adhered to the skin.

Clouds of insects dogged them mercilessly, clogging ears, nose mouth and eyes. More than one man was driven to frantic blasphemy in his torment. Klosterheim spoke sharply indeed to a man who started to douse them away with his canteen. “D__d fool! Do you want to be drinking from that?” He pointed at a deep, sucking footprint that oozed yellow, liquid mud. “Now get on!”

Finally though, Lothar and another man, Bauer, broke through the foliage. They found an area the size of a sports field that had been flattened as though by the footstep of a giant. There lay the wreck of the LZ44. She had broken into two parts, with great quantities of smaller stuff scattered around. The body of a man lay almost at their feet and their passage raised an enormous cloud of the ubiquitous insects.

Krenz took Klosterheim aside. “I want you to form a perimeter with the younger men. I do not want them rattled by what they may see inside. Let them smoke; heaven knows it may help to keep these wretched insects at bay. Keep them under control – see that no-one wanders.”

“Jawohl, I understand.” Krenz tugged at his fine beard. “By twos, Herr Kapitän?”

“If you please, Klosterheim.” Krenz turned. “Hauptman, Leutnant, Professor, Wittman and... Engel. If you would be so good as to accompany me.”

The tail of the LZ44 was largely wrecked. The elaborate venetian blind of elevators and stabilisers leaned drunkenly over to one side. When the hydrogen had escaped the gasbags, the framing had collapsed somewhat under its own weight, giving the hull a fat-bottomed, pear-shaped aspect. The doped fabric of her skin was still bright and the black paint of her name – “Schwalbe” – could still be seen. Nevertheless, this was no swan that would soar the Venusian skies again.

Inside the crushed remains of the rear gondola, the hum of the insects rose again to a roar. “Dear Heavens above”, breathed Lothar. Pale now, he looked ready to be sick. “Herr Kapitän.” Krenz looked. Among the shattered equipments of the gondola lay the remains of two – men? Apart from the mutilation inflicted by the crash, three

weeks in the Venusian jungle had done their terrible work. The bodies were in unspeakable condition. Manfred looked in and abruptly turned away, stomach heaving. Lothar pale and sweating abruptly threw a hand against the hull and vomited again and again. “I am sorry, this is the first time...”

“Terrible, terrible.” said Krenz, only just maintaining his composure. We must – ”

“Let me Herr Kapitän, please.” Manfred took out his sheath knife and tenderly cut away the identity discs. He rubbed the aluminium bright again in the soil. “Horst and, and Soderburgh.”

“I knew them,” said Krenz. “They served with me on my last commission.” He heaved a deep, deep sigh. “Good men, both. We shall give them a Christian burial here. Let them lie where they fell for their fatherland. For it is true that this is a struggle for survival as dreadful as any war: these men fell in the battle for the conquest of this terrible place.”

V

The control car yielded three more corpses. They were the First officer and two more crewmen. The First’s body was in particularly bad shape, as though torn by beasts. Lothar was nothing if not thankful. “We at least know that there were eighteen survivors.”

“Ah, but where might they be? I have not the men to go blundering about the bush. That will only yield us casualties.”

“Herr Kapitän! Herr Kapitän!” Manfred had been looking in the cabins aft.

“Yes, Hauptman, what to you have?”

“The Marconi shack. I found this.” He thrust forward an oilskin packet. It had been sealed by small, expert stitches. “That was done by a woman’s hand, I am sure”

Krenz did not miss the swift glance that passed between the brothers von Richthofen. “Hmmm. Perhaps so.” He took out his clasp knife and slit the parcel open down one side.

Inside lay a paste-backed book, bound in blue cloth. The mould that splotched its wrappings had not touched it. “LZ44’s log.”

“The last entry, Herr Kapitän. What does it say?” Manfred could barely contain his agitation.

“It is in my old comrade Schmetterling’s hand. Ah – yes.” He cleared his throat and began to read.

“May 17. Another eventful day mapping the terrain. Clear skies and the air singularly calm. LZ44 continues to perform well.

“Rather than descend in the business of sample collection, I instead elected again to lower the basket with two men in it. They could again take botanical samples from the forest canopy and expose photographic plates. The men have become quite expert in manipulating a pair of shears wired to the end of a broomstick!

"Dr Redl's assistant has already completed her first series of watercolours documenting the botanical and insect samples we gathered two weeks ago. They are remarkable for the completeness of their detail. I am sure that until the day comes when colour photographic apparatus becomes possible her work will be unsurpassed.

"Doctor Redl himself has described over ninety new species of organism and has done me the honour of naming one 'Schmett-saurus' – Schmetterling's Lizard. I am feeding it scraps of bacon in my cabin until his little belly groans under the strain.

Krenz paused. "Here he breaks off and then resumes, the hand much more hurried, less steady."

"Disaster has overtaken us. LZ44 is a shattered wreck and I have lost five men, including my First Officer, Lang.

"We flew northeast all morning, establishing our position hourly by means of sun shots and the chronometer for our reports via the Marconi apparatus.

"It was just after we had made one such report, Horst in the engine car reported that he and his mate Sonderburg, had seen some kind of flying beast in the distance. In the control car we trained every glass at our disposal to port in an attempt to spot them.

"Would that we had not! Some five kilometres distant we saw them, circling high in the updraft from a nearby volcano. They were some specie of flying reptile; pterodactyls; or pteranodons. I am no expert. They did not fly, but rather soared as the condor. They must have imagined us prey for, quick as thought they were upon us.

"I heard a brief cry as two of them smashed into the rear car. One of them fell, broken by the force of the impact to be torn by its brothers. The other of them bore away an object. Not a man, but undeniably a part of one.

"Even as we recovered from this horror, further impacts told us of collisions against our hull.

"Mindful of my ship's safety and that of the souls aboard her, I ordered that lifting gas be valved off and speed raised. I had it in mind to speedily dive away from the predators.

"It was impossible to raise speed as the engineering crew were already dead or incapacitated. It was at this time that poor Lang lost his life in a brave attempt that was within the highest traditions of our service to communicate to the engine car.

"Nor was our rate of descent to be controlled. The weight of the predators and the slashing damage they had done our gasbags was such that we fell precipitously. My last conscious thought was to order hands to brace for impact. Then we smashed through the trees and for a time I became unconscious.

"When I was again sensible of my surroundings, LZ44 lay a wreck in this clearing we had beaten, and two more of my men lay dead in the ruin.

"Three others, including Doctor Redl were injured. Fräulein Redl who has some medical training assisted my orderly with the wounded. The Doctor appears the worst off of the lot. He has injured his head and appears stuporous, only waking for brief periods. Fräulein Redl fears a fracture of the skull and I see no reason to disagree.

"I intend to take my party to the northeast. There I shall take up a position at the entrance to a cave system that we spotted on some high ground yesterday. I have guncotton with which to make mines and electrical detonators to set them off. I have a rifle for every member of our party as well as one of LZ44's maxims, which survived the crash undamaged.

"We are ready to go now. I estimate we have two or three days' march ahead of us to travel the twenty kilometres we must. We will carry the wounded in their hammocks. The maxim will likewise take two to tow on its carriage. That leaves seven of us unburdened enough at any time to carry the explosive materials and ammunition. We all carry as much food as we can in addition to our other stores. Every one of us who can lift or carry is burdened with 25 kilograms of stores – even Fräulein Redl. I trust that this being Venus, water will not be a problem – we certainly can carry no more than is in our canteens.

"That is all. Fräulein Redl will seal this journal in a waterproof packet. I pray that relief shall come to us soon."

Krenz stuffed the logbook into his satchel. "That is all there is. We shall return to the ship and –"

"Herr Kapitän!" Klosterheim's voice was shrill with urgency.

They ran outside. The crewmen had formed a ragged line. Two, no, three of the terrible thunder-lizards had crashed their way through the jungle wall and stood, roaring in confusion at the scattered manikins before them. Manfred drew his revolver.

In the unreality of the moment he heard his brother's "My God!" and saw him fumble for his own weapon. A Thunder Lizard, the leader of the little pack seemed to hear him and fixed a beady yellow eye upon the pastor and began to stalk toward him. It was only forty meters away. Lothar finally got his pistol out and blazed off every chamber. This was seemingly of no effect; the beast roared and picked up its pace.

"Make ready! Shoulder arms!" called Klosterheim.

The lizard charged with its head lowered its mates at either side of it.

"Concentrate your fire," roared Krenz.

"Fire!" screamed Klosterheim.

Nine rifles barked an irregular volley. Nine bolts click-clacked.

"Again: fire!" The lizard staggered, almost twenty bullets peppering its head and neck.

"And again, range twenty meters, fire!" The huge creature, all of fifteen meters from snout to tail dropped with a crash, torn all over by rifle bullets. Some of the men who had heard of the terrible lizards of Venus, and had dum-dummed their ammunition in contravention of international treaty. They had been remarkably effective.

The inexplicable fall of their leader had confused the other two monsters. "Free fire," cried Krenz.

Perhaps it was the sting of rifle bullets that did it or the unaccustomed pop-popping of musketry. Whatever the cause, the two surviving Lizards turned and crashed

back into the jungle, roaring defiance of the pygmies whom had worsted their leader.

"Well Lothar," said Manfred. "Would you have that on the lodge wall back home?" He waved at the prostrate form of the thunder Lizard. As he did, it breathed its last in a bloody froth on the litter of the jungle floor. Already the insects were gathering.

Lothar was reloading his Mauser. "Pah! The thing is all torn to pieces. It is beyond Taxidermy."

VI

The evening found the airshipmen back at their base camp. Their last duty before abandoning the wreck of the LZ44 had been to bury her dead. Kapitän Krenz took out his prayer-book spoke a few words over the lonely mounds of soil that would forever remain German. Then they left.

Going was easier than coming. They had merely to follow the trail they had beaten that morning. In less than half the time they had spent coming, they were back at LZ 43, responding to the sentry's challenge.

"Rommel! Have your men stand down and rest. Some of my fellows will stand to for a while in their stead. I want everyone wide-awake on the morrow. Klosterheim! I shall want you to take command of the first watch with your section. No grumbling, now. You'll be relieved in a few hours." Briskly Krenz rubbed his hands together. "You too, Herr Rommel. We shall be very busy on the morrow."

"Did you find something, Herr Kapitän?"

"Far more than we could have hoped." Krenz briefly detailed their adventures. "So we have a fair idea of where we may find our survivors. However gentlemen, I do not want to stay here a moment longer than circumstance dictates. The Thunder lizards are aroused. The smell of death will have drawn them, that and the carcass we left behind us at the crash site. That alone will be enough to bring those devils down upon our heads.

"I want us to fly at first light so that we may gain the benefit of a whole day for our search and recovery operation."

Fortunately the night passed with small incident. There was the irruption of a lone thunder lizard, but that was quickly brought short by Matros Engel who expended an entire hundred-round belt in his sudden fright. The beast's body was almost entirely divided by the ferocious stream of bullets.

The next morning, with all their stores reloaded, LZ43 cast off her moorings. The last of her men scrambled up her rope ladders even as the violent sun smote down among the Palaeolithic boughs of the forest.

Below the forest was a monotony of green. It sailed below them at a pace equivalent to a brisk trot – the best that could be managed against the freshening breeze.

No sooner did they reach one thousand meters altitude than Krenz had the airship box the compass, casting about for the high ground that Schmetterling had mentioned in his logbook. Sure enough, before ten of the o'clock young Rommel spotted the only likely place. It was no more than about fifteen kilometres distant on a northeasterly bearing from the crash site. Manfred guessed it would take them no more than an hour to traverse the distance. His stomach tightened with the intensity of his anticipation.

"Herr Kapitän; there!" young Rommel cried, pointing to a small clearing atop a low rise. Its fringe was littered with dark still forms. As they drew closer, it was apparent that they were the slaughtered forms of Thunder Lizards. "Great God, there are scores of them!"

"Ha! Schmetterling has had his work cut out for him, make no mistake." Krenz clapped his hands together in grim satisfaction. "A sad truth gentlemen that nature may not long resist the art of man."

"I think," muttered Lothar darkly. "That Nature may yet show us a trick or two."

They were losing height, preparing to touch down when it happened.

Manfred had been rather nonplussed by the absence of wildly waving figures below or the shots from a flare pistol or any other sign. Klosterheim had started violently and pointed, "Herr Rittmeister, do you see that?" He squinted hard against the sunlight. Tiny specks, black and only barely distinct; he had to shade his eyes to be sure.

"Yes. The flying beasts that Kapitän Schmetterling described. Kapitän! Look, Mein Herr, look."

Krenz's face became grim indeed as he realised the peril they were in. "Hauptman, I want you and your brother aloft at once. Klosterheim! Trim us tail down. Helmsman – signal full speed to the engine car."

Krenz's orders had the effect of turning LZ43's hull into a giant airfoil. With her engines thundering at maximum effort, her inherent static lift was combined with her newfound dynamic lift to change her altitude radically. This effect was exaggerated even more markedly when the two Albatross DII scouts dropped from her keel. Up she soared, up until in seemingly no time at all she had ascended the giddy heights and left the flying creatures two thousand meters below her.

Checked in their charge by the extraordinary behavior of their prey, the beasts circled aimlessly. Not so aimlessly though, thought Manfred. The creatures had found a thermal over the hillock of death and began to soar laboriously upward.

Good he thought. He and Lothar were in an excellent position only a few hundred meters below the LZ43, but many hundreds above the flyers. They stood a good

chance of being able to protect the unmaneuverable airship. He waved at Lothar and let his aerodyne tip over on one wingtip, diving until the whole airframe vibrated; his brother followed behind and to one side of him, ready to protect his back.

The creatures did not even appear aware of them as they closed with them. Manfred located one in his gun sight and waited patiently until the beast's wingtips filled it from edge to edge. Convulsively he gripped the triggers and a stream of bullets transfixed the beast. He Albatross shuddered violently with the recoil, seeming to come almost to a halt in the air. The flying Lizard rolled over on broken wings to fall toward the forest floor below.

The two aerodynes dove through the flying beasts, one with its yellow tail, the other with its red wings. They zoomed violently at the perigee of their dives and fell upon the rear of the beasts, hacking down another two.

Finally aware of their danger, the beasts broke, calling in their harsh voices in alarm and confusion. Manfred shore the wing off another while Lothar neatly spitted one that seemed likely to tangle itself in his brother's wings.

In side-slipping away from the beast, Manfred found himself below the brawl. He and Lothar had killed half of the beasts and some of the survivors had begun to slip away. Even as he watched, Lothar chopped another in two and in that instant had his own lower port wing shorn off. The huge beast had arrowed down out of nowhere and continued down, releasing the fragment of ash, plywood and canvas.

Lothar wobbled unsteadily downward, obviously only barely in control of his machine. He was making for the clearing below in careful spirals.

Time slowed for Manfred. He could see that the beast was going to make another try for Lothar's aerodyne. He might catch him on Lothar's next circle; he did not think his brother had any idea of where the beast was. It must have been that all of his attention was on trying to fly his barely controllable machine.

Most of the other flying beasts were irrecoverably scattered now anyway. He shoved the throttle hard up against the stops and dove after the beast. He had to ignore the vibration of both his own lower planes; he was exceeding the safe limits of operation of his machine. He had to and prayed that Robert Thelen had designed better than he knew!

He could no longer measure the distances with his eye. All he had left was hope. With a dreadful coldness in his heart, he lined his gun sights up a little ahead of beast and with a slowly released breath clamped down the triggers.

The deflection he had allowed meant that the beast flew into the stream of bullets. It was punctured along its entire length and with a malevolent and despairing cry, fell. Manfred could have sworn it glared at him out of its one remaining yellow eye all the way down. He shivered, despite the heat. There had been a terrible and hate-filled intelligence in that eye.

He looked for Lothar and was just in time to see him make a very bumpy landing. The undercarriage must have collapsed, for the scout suddenly flung its tail in the air, wings collapsing entirely. He circled for a moment and saw Lothar scramble from the cockpit, to wave.

Manfred kept circling. Above, the LZ43 had already begun its descent.

VII

It was a dangerous landing on an unprepared field. Manfred set his jaw and eased his throttle right back, leaving his hand on it as his machine settled slowly to the ground. Down the Albatross sank, the engine barely idling. He blipped the throttle a little and put a little gentle pressure on the stick to bring the nose up, shedding some fraction of his forward motion.

A swift rumbling told him that his wheels had touched. Shuddering like a live thing, his machine bounced while the ground raced by under his wingtips – dizzily fast now it was so close. Slowing, he pulled the stick back, flipping his elevators all the way up to increase the drag. One day these aerodynes will have brakes, he thought in that hectic moment.

He did stop though, and leapt from the cockpit, revolver in hand. "Lothar! Lothar!"

His brother stumbled forward, bleeding freely from a jagged gash in his forehead. "Manfred! What a show, eh? What a fight!"

"Are you all right?"

Lothar touched his face. "This? Oh, I banged my head on my gun butts. I'm bleeding like a stuck pig, I am." He barked a short laugh and pressed a handkerchief to his wound. "Nothing that time and brandy won't cure."

Around them lay all sorts of debris. The torn carcasses of thunder lizards were strewn all over the little plain. "Where are Schmetterling's people?" Manfred took a flare pistol from the cockpit of his machine and fired. Eerie blue light shone in the sky, a plume of smoke trailing behind the burning flare.

"I do not know." Lothar finished knotting his handkerchief around his head. "Wait, though. Look, over there!"

A litter of objects clustered around a rude wall of stones and logs. "Hullo! Over there! Hullo, the stockade!"

There was no response to Lothar's call. Grim-faced the two brothers jogged over, sweating freely in the damp heat. The dull roar of feasting insects numbed the senses.

Crates and bundles lay all about. In a huge pile of spent cartridge cases a Maxim mounted on a light field carriage lay toppled onto its side. "My God, Lothar. Are we too late?"

Blood and other, more grisly remains littered the little field. Scraps of cloth, stiff and rusty with gore still adhered

here and there. Manfred fell to his knees among the bloodstained ruins and wept. The throbbing of his pulses almost equalled that of the busy, busy insects, industrious at their bonanza of flesh. "Oh Lothar," he groaned. "This is the end of all my hopes."

Above them the LZ43 dropped her rope ladders and hovered overhead.

Later it was obvious what had happened. LZ44s crew had fought hard; the ruin they had rained upon the Venusian beasts was token enough of that. Krenz was able to deduce from marks on the ground that the airshipmen had been overwhelmed by the weight of numbers borne in upon them. Rommel thought that they had only held out two days on the plateau. Hardly any of the rations the survivors of the wreck had taken along had been consumed.

With heavy hearts the men of the LZ43 buried what remains they could gather. Two of the bodies they identified by their identity discs. Matros Engel found Schmetterlings head and was forever after a changed man for the experience. They prepared to leave.

Klosterheim gave a shout. "Herr Kapitän! There!" At the fringe of the clearing, the bushes were stirring. All over tense men shouldered their rifles.

A slender, white-faced figure stumbled out into the open.

"Lotte?" Manfred swayed visibly. The world seemed to go a little grey around the edges. As though in a dream he watched her stagger toward them, a scarecrow figure emaciated through care and caked with mud.

From the undergrowth behind her crashed the largest Thunder Lizard Manfred had yet seen. From the tip of its mottled tail to its yellow-crested skull, it was at least twenty metres long. Seemingly of its own volition his right arm extended. Foresight settled into the notch of his revolver's back-sight. Like a machine he fired again and again, as cold and unemotional as he could be. He was as calm as if he was stalking deer on his father's estate in Silesia.

The creature's eye burst in bloody ruin as his shots penetrated the tiny brain. Manfred was completely unconscious of his comrade's fire tearing the beast. Down it went as though it had collided with an invisible wall. Down it went, smashing into the mud and litter of the ground.

Manfred dropped his revolver. "Lotte!" And then she was in his arms.

The LZ43 headed for Venusstadt. Tactfully Lothar elected to remain with Krenz and Rommel in the control car forward.

Manfred and Lotte sat on a locker in the brother's quarters. Somehow she had managed to wash her face and borrow a suit of clothes from one of the airshipmen. She looked very small in the pants and shirt she wore. Her feet swam in her boots.

Gingerly he took her hands in his own.

"Manfred. You want to know what happened."

"Yes, my darling, I do."

Slowly Lotte withdrew her hands and with a shuddering sigh pushed them through her reddish hair. "They all died, Manfred. My Uncle, Kapitän Schmetterling and all the others. They are all dead."

"He ought never have brought you to this place. It is no place for a young –"

"Manfred. Manfred. I wanted to come. I pestered and badgered him for the chance to come. How else would I get taken on an expedition such as this? Everyone knows that the Venusian Outback is no place for a nice young woman. I used every piece of influence I could think of on my poor Uncle and wore him down eventually. I went because I wanted to go." Lotte was sitting up very straight, her unflinching desire to take responsibility for the consequences of her actions evident in her determined jaw and fierce eyes. "Manfred, I am not my Uncle's victim.

"This is what happened.

"Those of us who survived the crash were safe enough while we kept moving. We achieved the plateau only two days after leaving the wreck of our airship. Kapitän Schmetterling was confident we could hold out there, but I had my doubts.

"This is not a place that will accept intruders on anything other than its own terms. I told my Uncle as much, but he and Kapitän Schmetterling disagreed. They thought that with our modern weapons and supplies we could hold against all comers. Heaven knows, when it came to the test we destroyed a Lizard easily enough at the crash site."

Manfred nodded. "You were well-equipped."

"But not enough." Lotte went white to her lips. Do not ask me to speak too much of what happened in that dreadful place.

"We went unmolested for the first day. The creatures attacked in the night – I think they had learned to fear us a little – but the soldiers used parachute flares to illuminate them and you surely saw the results. The next day though they came in their hundreds and everyone died."

"You though. Lotte, you survived. How?"

"Ah Manfred, I ran for my life. I ran for my very life. I will not spare my blushes. While those brave men – boys for the most part – died more horribly than I could describe, I ran and hid, throwing myself down a muddy bank. I became so covered in mud and fallen leaves as I skidded and tumbled that I think that I was completely hidden from the Thunder Lizards."

"Do not deprecate your achievement – you survived for three weeks."

"What do you know of the Lizard Men?"

"What? I know them as ignorant superstitious savages. Mmm," Manfred nodded. "I have seen them begging for

whiskey and gin around Venusstadt. Degraded sub-humans, hangers-on at best.”

Lotte drew a little away from her lover. ”What I learned from them in the days before we left on our journey helped me live. I learned what can and cannot be eaten, how to avoid being stung or bitten by the insects – and there are no shortage of *them*.

”Oh yes, I have seen them, all clad in their rotting rags, the rags that we in our Christian Charity give them to clothe their nakedness that no Christian pastor be offended. Really, we Europeans repeat ourselves again, and again, and again. Whether it be in Africa, the Australias or the Astupates, ‘be like us’ is our cry, and if you are different you are bad or simple or ignorant. Ape our ways and you will be treated with a contemptuous indulgence, reject our ways and demand self determination and you are branded as rebels and mutineers and blasted from the mouths of cannon!”

”Well,” said Manfred all at a loss. ”Well, at least you are safe. We can go home and be wed.”

Lotte rose to her feet and turned to gaze out of the celluloid window at the forest below. ”I shall not be coming home, my dear.”

”What? Why?” Manfred’s heart thundered in his breast. Had her ordeal turned her head? ”You will not accompany me home as my bride? Mother is so looking forward to – ”

”Will you wait for me? I have to stay. Will you wait? Manfred?”

”Lotte L.. You will not obey me?”

Lotte smiled, an ironic twitch. ”I have made no vows, my dear. And there is so very much here to learn. I have a wider duty than to you or the Fatherland. Wait for me. Just for a while.”

Manfred looked at the floor. ”I love you Lotte. I will wait. I do not understand why, but women have their ways and I shall wait. I will be thirty years old in four years. In four years I shall ask you to become mine again.”

For a very long time there was no sound in the little car but the throb of LZ43’s engines as she bore them home to Venusstadt.