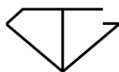


# LOSING GROUND

by

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**SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELLA**

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Coverdesign: Konstantinos Delikostas / Christian Grahm  
Edited by: Tjorven Ruhnke

First publication of the German original: 05.10.2016

First publication of the English version: 01.12.2016

Translated by: Christian Grahm / Diana Loos

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I touched the implant in my head to end the radio connection. We had reached the group of strangers. My pack looked at me expectantly. I silently went through the commands I had just received in my mind.

“What now?” Banyora rocked up and down. She had always been impatient. Always full of energy and always motivated down to the last hair. But this time she was particularly excited. I could not say that I was not, but Banyora was exceptionally jittery even by her standards. Nioka, Karuah and I threw one another a brief knowing look. Today really was a special day. The strangers had reached Djaril two days ago. Their ship was circling in orbit and this morning they had landed with a small

spacecraft. My pack had been ordered to intercept the strangers and observe.

We were part of a large task force whose job was to scrutinize the situation in the case of outer planetary visits and estimate a potential hazard. This was our first field mission. This was the day we had been training for all these years. For 150 years no-one from outside had ended up on our planet. Not since the Great War. And that was a good thing. We loved our loneliness and wanted no otherworldly contact. Back then our hospitality had brought us to the brink of destruction. Now it was time to test in the field the strategies we had developed since then.

Banyora infected me with her excitement. It was our practical test. We were the best pack of the unit. However, only during exercises. Granted, the exercises were very good and simulated possible emergencies accurately, but the real emergencies did generate tension. Now we had to show that we were truly the best and deserved to be at the top of the rankings.

“We shall circle the strangers for now and watch. Abnormalities or even a potential hazard must be immediately reported to me.”

“Yes, Yuka!” the three answered in unison.

“Open radio interconnection,” I said, tapping again against my communication implant. My three hunters

did the same and I heard three quick pops. “Everyone should hear everyone at any time. As in the exercises. Think of our training. We are the best pack and well prepared. No reason to be nervous. Here we go!”

Almost simultaneously we all grabbed our left upper arm. We would shortly step outside the cloaking field surrounding the city, and then only the small mobile unit that each of us carried on our arms would hide us.

Karuah went away first and became invisible after a few metres. Nioka and Banyora did the same. Over the radio the three reported reaching their respective positions. I was the last to get in position.

Only now did I have the opportunity to take a closer look at the strangers. They looked strange. Their bodies were covered with a kind of fur. It was blue and mottled with brown and integrated very well into the surroundings. If they had not moved, it would have been difficult to discern them.

They had arms and hands, as we did. Legs also. However, the exceptional thing was that they walk upright on two legs. This was something I had not seen before.

We stayed in a square dispersed around the strangers and moved along with them. From up in the trees we had an excellent overview. One of the strangers had a remote control in his hands, with which he drove a

vehicle. On the vehicle were several boxes, secured by straps. Furthermore there was a net, which also had patches in brown and blue. The strangers were spread around the vehicle. Altogether there were five. Two a little in front, two right next to it, and one forming the rear. They moved slowly through the woods, as if they were looking for something. Again and again they turned on their own axes in order to look around. The vehicle was making only very slow progress between the trees and bushes. Three of the strangers were carrying weapons. At least I suspected they were. The devices they had on straps over their shoulder and in their hands looked similar to the weapons the Cammarians had carried in the Great War. I knew them from the museum.

I adjusted my communication implant so that I could hear the strangers. They seemed to be conversing with one another. However, I did not understand a single word. Their language was not comparable with ours or that of the Cammarians.



“I hate trees.”

“You already mentioned that.” Isana smiled. “About fifty times.”

“I hate trees!”

“Welcome to hell.”

“I am committed to ensuring that this planet gets the name ‘blue hell’. P0759-281: The blue hell. Hm, sounds good.” Kazemde nodded and stroked his hand in passing over a blue fern leaf.

The five-member squad had been struggling for about an hour through the undergrowth. They had landed with their shuttle in a clearing and were now on the way to a small rock formation, which they had spotted during the

landing approach.

“I think you’re the only biologist who doesn’t like plants,” Isana said to Kazemde.

“I never said that I don’t like plants. On the contrary, ...”

“ ‘... Plants have something very reassuring. I only don’t like this particular plant family.’ Yes, I know.”

“And then they are so big here, too. Huge. And the whole planet is full of them.”

“Dr. Adkinson,” spoke up Captain Tucker, the leader, from behind, “when you said that you are always talkative on field operations, I didn’t think that you really talk continuously.” He was bringing up the rear. Isana, who in rank was just below Captain Tucker, at the front, as usual, turned and walked the next few steps backwards. She saw Kazemde raising his eyebrows.

“Captain, I told you from the start that I don’t like field operations. But you insisted on an exo-zoologist.”

“Don’t tell me that you are not interested in solving the mystery of this planet.”

“Yes, sir. Naturally. I’m always keen on a good mystery.”

Captain Tucker’s distinctive facial features relaxed. He chuckled and then looked up at Isana: “Lieutenant Stein, if you take the lead, it means you have to look forward.”

“Excuse me, Sir.” Isana turned back and watched the



forest in front of them. She knew to classify the captain's tone of voice. They had frequently been together on missions before, appreciated and respected each other.

The Grisedale had scanned the planet from orbit and discovered no major life forms, which was more than puzzling for a planet this size and with this flora. The geological scans were also very strange. There were far fewer visible natural resources than should be normal for such a planet. The readings of the shuttle from a low altitude had supplied no new information. The samples and data that they now wanted to gather here on the surface would hopefully shed some light on it.

Isana saw out of the corner of her eye that Kazemde had caught up with her. She turned her gaze and smiled at him.

“You promised me not to be bad-tempered, Kazi.”

“I know, Isana, I'm pleased that you suggested me for this mission, but did it really have to be a forest planet for my first field operation in two years? Although I must admit, all the blue foliage and the green light does make a nice change.”

“I knew you would like it here,” Isana replied with a mischievous grin.

“Hmph.”

The route was difficult and they could move forward only slowly. The undergrowth between the huge trunks

of trees was dense. The fallen branches of the trees were so large that they had to be cleared away time and again, so that the all-terrain vehicle could get through. Sergeant Sokolov, the engineer of the group, had to zigzag around the smaller trees. They had roughly the size of an average European deciduous tree, but seemed almost tiny in comparison with the giant trees of this planet.

“Stop!” Isana turned to Anthea Luengo who has given the order. The ATV was tilting dangerously to the right. Sokolov had steered it onto a branch which they had just cleared away.

Dr. Anthea Luengo was a geologist. She was to take soil samples and scans to investigate why the Grisedale had received such strange data. She walked to the left of the ATV and made sure that Sokolov went in the right direction.

“Reverse a bit and then more to the right.”

Sokolov obeyed wordlessly, as almost always, and turned the ATV past the branch.

“Sir, how far is it to the rocks?” asked Isana.

Captain Tucker looked at the small screen on his forearm. “Two more kilometres.”

“Come on, people, I don’t want to spend the night here. Let’s go!”