

Lassitude

By Andy Clark

'Try them again,' demanded Phraig from his place in the Ridgerunner's passenger seat. Laria shot the burly miner an irritated look. She made no move to take her hands from the vehicle's controls. The Ridgerunner bucked on its suspension, jouncing them both in their seats and spurring Laria to return her attention to the view beyond the vehicle's vision slit.

'You want to waste breath, you try them,' she said. 'You might notice I'm busy.' Phraig wasn't doing anything so far as she could see. He just hunched dejectedly in his seat, one meaty hand wrapped around his restraint straps, the other tapping a jittery tattoo on his thigh. Everything about the man was irritating her, from his twitchiness to the persistent stale odour of sweat that Laria normally managed to tune out. She couldn't today, apparently.

Mind you, it ain't just Phraig now is it? she thought, suppressing a pang of nervousness. *Everything's got me on edge these past few days, and the others are feeling it too, Emperor bless n' keep us.*

'Ah, what's the use?' griped Phraig. Now that the prospect of making the effort himself loomed, he had evidently lost interest in the Ridgerunner's vox. 'Camp haven't replied to the last half-dozen hails. Why should they bother this time?'

Laria grunted in response. She had a thumping headache. Peering intently out of the vehicle's dust-streaked vision slit while concentrating on not tipping them into Storfort Gulch wasn't helping. The Ridgerunner banged and bumped along the rocky trackway, and every hard jolt felt like someone was swinging a mining pick right at the spot between Laria's eyes. Her skin kept tingling as though something was scuttling across it, and for several days now Laria had experienced a see-saw from watchful paranoia into lethargic disinterest and back again.

That alone had left her exhausted.

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It was odd that Rachnus Camp had gone quiet. In truth, Laria shared Phraig's sense of gnawing disquiet about the whole business. Thrule Tertius was an unforgiving world of hidden fissures and whirling grit-storms whose mica-laden winds could abrade a Ridgerunner to scrap metal in minutes. It was customary for each mining camp to maintain hourly vox check-ins with its prospector teams. Letting

contact slip for even a few hours could have fatal consequences, not to mention attracting substantial punitive tithes from the Administratum if proper record keeping fell behind.

Laria jumped as the vox crackled suddenly to life, then glowered as she realised it was just Bosk calling from where his own Ridgerunner trailed twenty yards behind hers.

'Still no word from camp? Over.'

'Oh, they've been chatty as a drunk Ratling, Bosk. Just none of us figured to cut you in on the conversation,' Laria voxed back. She couldn't be bothered to keep the sneer out of her voice, nor to observe proper vox discipline.

Not like you, she admonished herself. *Only room for one sourmouth in this runner and Phraig's claimed that spot.*

'Sorry, Bosk,' she added, hating how lame she sounded to her own ears. 'Can't shift this damned headache and I'm worried about camp going quiet. Over.'

'Emperor don't need to forgive what he don't hear, Lar,' Bosk replied, and even this habitual platitude grated on her nerves. 'And I agree. It ain't right. Over.'

Laria could have reassured the older prospector, but she couldn't summon the effort or optimism. Instead, she cut the vox channel and drove on in dismal silence through the swirling dust and the glaring light of Thrule's angry star. Camp was only a mile away now. It sheltered from wind shear down between the cliffs of Gulch End.

We'll get some answers soon enough, she thought, ignoring the panicked little voice at the back of her mind whispering about xenos raiders or macrotalpa attacks. Laria would find out what was going on, then hopefully she could dispel the stifling sense of oppression that had been weighing on her chest this past week.

As she guided her vehicle down the rutted road into Gulch End, her first sight of camp helped Laria breathe a little easier.

'Sentries in the towers. Gates in one piece and no sign of wind damage or rockfall or whatnot,' she said.

'Call those sentries? Being generous, Lar,' commented Phraig, dumping cold water over her lifting mood. She couldn't gainsay the big man, though. As they drew closer it became clear the guards were slouching at their posts, staring disinterestedly off into the middle distance.

'Is he actually sleeping?' she asked, incredulous at the sight of a militiaman slumped over the rail of his watchtower in full view of at least two of his fellows. Overseer Supter was, as a rule, a stickler for discipline; seeing such slovenly conduct from his sentries alarmed Laria worse than ever.

'Got the right idea,' grunted Phraig. 'I could sleep like the dead.'

For some reason, his turn of phase sent a shiver down Laria's spine.

'No spoildust either,' she said, pointing with her chin to the clear skies above Rachnus Camp. 'Why would they have stopped the dig?'

Phraig offered her an ill-tempered shrug.

Ever helpful, she thought wearily.

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Laria guided her Ridgerunner down the last twist of the trackway and into the shadow of the camp's prefab curtain wall. The barrier stretched from one side of the gulch to the other, partitioning off the last half mile of the sheltered depression and the bore-mine in the cliff face at its rear.

Rachnus only had one gate, a big metal affair stamped with an Aquila and flanked by watchtowers; it felt to Laria as though it took the sentries a long while to open it. Servitor guns swivelled to point at her vehicle, and at Bosk and Kardhi's Ridgerunner that had pulled up alongside them. Laria felt a bead of sweat crawl down her temple. The insane thought struck her that the sentries wouldn't hit the saviour runes on their consoles, that they would simply stare like cattle as the servitors, unaware that these targets were friendly, opened fire upon the defenceless prospectors.

She let out a breath as the klaxons sounded. The gate lumbered aside on its servo-runners.

Laria guided her vehicle between the prefab huts, the chugging generatorum shrines and the stilt-legged towers that made up Rachnus Camp. The knot in her stomach cinched tighter at the sight of numerous miners standing about, alone or in little groups, simply staring as though they had forgotten what it was they'd been doing. Others, she saw, reclined on the metal steps of the bunk-huts, some of them lying in the full glare of the starlight.

'Good way to get the scorch,' muttered Phraig as he followed her shocked stare. The next moment he cried out in surprise as Laria dragged her controls hard right and skidded to a halt.

Dust billowed. Grit crunched.

The Ridgerunner rocked on its suspension then lurched as its engine stalled.

'What in Saint Chet's name-' began Phraig, but he stopped at the look on Laria's face. Her heart was skipping double-time in her chest, and she stared at the rearview vid-feed on her dashboard as the dust cleared. She breathed out in relief as she saw a stumbling figure swim into view. That relief flashed quickly to anger as the man shambled onwards, apparently oblivious.

'That moron just walked right out in front of me!' she spat, slamming her fist against the hatch-release rune then hauling herself out onto the Ridgerunner's roof. Once up there, however, Laria found that her annoyance had already melted into despondent lethargy. The figure stumbled away towards the nearest hut and left Laria more unsettled than ever.

What is happening here? she thought, as frightened by how quickly her own anger had fizzled to nothing as by the vacant stares of the miners. Bosk had pulled up behind her, and he and Kardhi were clambering out of their Ridgerunner. She frowned as Bosk helped Kardhi out of the vehicle. The youthful apprentice was normally the most sprightly of them all.

'Something ain't right,' said Bosk as the four of them gathered beside Laria and Phraig's vehicle. 'I don't feel right, Kardhi definitely ain't right, and half these spoil-rats definitely ain't either. What's going on here, Lar?'

Laria's irritation surged again, but the feeling was comparatively faint. Idly, she noticed that her fingertips were tingling and numb, and that she felt cold despite the pummelling heat of mid-morning.

'Why should I know, Bosk?' she asked, and was shocked at the almost pleading note she heard in her voice.

'Supter,' said Phraig, swaying then gathering himself with a blink of surprise. 'Supter'll know what's going on.'

They found the overseer of Rachnus Camp in his stilt-hut. Laria barely managed to muster the wherewithal to clamber up the hut's ladder, while Kardhi had to be left at its foot.

'I'm fine, I'm fine,' Kardhi had assured them, sounding distracted as she lay down in the shade. 'I just... need...' And that had been all she'd said.

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Now Laria pushed open Supter's door, left ajar she noted, and found the overseer slumped behind his cogitator within. The smell of the place made her cough weakly; several plated meals had been allowed to spoil where they sat abandoned amidst scattered reports and depleted dataslates. Cold, dusty mugs of recaf sat around the place, skinned with spoil-dust and the beginnings of something green.

Overseer Supter himself, though, was the main source of the smell. One look told Laria that the man hadn't changed his coveralls in several days, and indeed couldn't have moved from his chair for quite some time. Despite the mouldering food surrounding him, Supter was hollow-cheeked and his clothing had a bagginess to it that Laria hadn't seen before.

She was also shocked to see that one of the overseer's hands was bandaged. The dressing was in desperate need of changing. Fluid seeped from it, and had formed a congealing pool that gummed Supter's hand to his desk.

Phraig pushed in behind her then pulled up short as the sweet smell of corruption hit him.

'Overseer? You... you alright?' he asked, though his tone suggested that Phraig was mildly concerned at best. Though she could see the utter wrongness of all this, Laria found herself struggling to care too.

Why did we come in here, anyway? she thought, distracted.

Supter's red-rimmed eyes swivelled towards them.

'Team Four. You're back,' he croaked. His unwounded hand twitched towards his quill as though he intended to make a note of their return, but he

managed little more than to brush the quill with a fingertip.

Come on, you need answers, ask about the communication blackout, Laria told herself, but the thought seemed somehow unimportant.

'What happened to your hand?' she heard herself asking instead. Supter looked down at the filthy bandages as though mildly surprised to see them.

'Three days ago,' he said. 'Three days...? Stephyn had... an episode... screaming about being watched, about being smothered... kept shouting about a shroud falling... took one of the cutters and... wrecked the master-vox... I... tried to stop him and...' Supter trailed off and his eyes swam out of focus.

At least that answers one question, thought Laria. No vox, no vox contact. Though why someone couldn't have fixed the damned thing or jury-rigged a replacement was beyond her.

'Overseer, what's happening here?' asked Bosk, his loud, firm tone making Laria jump. She felt as though someone had dashed cold water into her face and for just a moment the wrongness of all this rushed back in. Yet her panic was a sickly thing, as malnourished as Supter himself. It quickly faltered again.

'Something... maybe the... rift?' asked Supter.

Could this be some curse spat from the Great Rift? thought Laria, steadying herself as her head spun and the numbness crept up her legs. Was that what was draining her strength and numbing her thoughts? It was a horrible, insidious notion, but even this didn't stir more than the faintest emotion in her now.

'Rift's been there... for a long time... Emperor's kept us safe so... far...' said Bosk. Phraig gave a grunt of assent, though it sounded distracted and vague.

'What if-' whatever Bosk had been about to suggest was drowned in the sudden roar of an explosion from outside. The stilt-hut swayed on its spindly metal legs, shuddering alarmingly underfoot. Old food and sheafs of paper spilled from Supter's desk. A mug hit the decking and shattered.

'The Chett was that?' demanded Bosk, eyes wide. The man clutched the Aquila that hung around his neck and stared at each of them in turn. Laria had no answer for him, but instead thrust the Overseer's door open again and lurched on numbed legs to the railing above the ladder. She clung there, blinking stupidly, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

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Fire leapt and crackled. Smoke billowed. One of the generators had exploded, and now blazing chunks of metal and blackened bodies lay strewn in a wide radius around it. Several of the prefab huts were also ablaze. Even Laria wasn't yet so numbed that she couldn't feel horror at the Human figures still slumped upon their steps even as the flames edged in to consume them.

'Why don't... they move?' she breathed.

Something large shot overhead, a dark streak moving too fast for her to make sense of. The air screamed at its passing, prickling like pins and needles at her deadened nerves. Laria swung her head to follow the moving shape, but before she could make her eyes focus there came another ferocious explosion, this time directly below her.

Kardhi, she thought as fire boiled up beneath her feet and the ladder buckled and fell. *We left Kardhi down there.*

Then she was falling, feeling the sick lurch of acceleration in the pit of her stomach as the hut's stilt-legs bowed and splayed outward. Bosk cried out in terror, his voice barely audible over the throaty bellow of the explosion and the tortured groan of collapsing metal.

Something heavy hit Laria from behind and she spilled over the railing. She was too weak and lethargic even to cling on or try to save herself. The ground rushed up with horrible finality and she hit with a loud crunch of breaking bone.

Metal crashed. Flames danced. Shrapnel span through the air, and the ground shook beneath her rag-doll body, and through it all Laria could only think *I don't feel anything... why don't I feel anything...?*

She had heard of prospectors breaking their backs, their necks and losing all feeling in their bodies. Had that happened to her?

But that doesn't break your emotions too, does it? Emperor, why don't I feel anything?

Dust and smoke billowed around Laria as she lay unmoving in the dirt. She mustered the strength to swivel her eyes in her head and saw Phraig lying near her with his head tilted at a horrible angle. The big man's eyes were glassy. Blood dribbled from his nostrils, and spilled between his teeth where he'd bitten through his tongue.

Won't be complaining any more, she thought, now barely coherent. Laria couldn't frame any kind of response when a large, dark shape loomed over her. Thrule's angry starlight glinted on burnished metal, glinted in cruel, lens-like eyes, but Laria was beyond making sense of what she saw. She couldn't bring herself to care when the figure reached down and gripped her by the hair, nor when it turned and began to drag her broken body through the dust towards the dark mouth of the bore-mine.

It didn't hurt.

It didn't matter.

All Laria wanted to do was sleep...

