



CYTEFIRE

— FILES —

F/02 SILENT HARVEST

ARCHIVE DATE:
UNKNOWN

CLASSIFIED
ACCESS RESTRICTED
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT

Taramek Mining District

Northern Foothills, Zone 7

Date unknown

I — DAREN

It was the smell Daren noticed first.

Iron, mold, wet stone, and something sickly sweet that came from bodies that had worked too long underground, without natural light, without fresh air, without any hope that it would ever end.

His father knelt before him, coughing, choking, his hands pressed to his mouth, and between his fingers something dark dripped onto the rock. Turnal had once been a tall man, broad-shouldered, with calm hands and a voice that could quiet an entire room. That had been before the mine.

Now he was hollowed out, his back bent, his joints swollen, and when he coughed, it sounded as if something inside his chest was tearing apart, something that could never be repaired.

Daren knelt beside him and wiped the dirt from his cheek. The skin beneath was gray and thin. His father looked at him, and in that look lay something Daren would only understand much later: not fear, but relief. As if he had only been waiting for a reason to stop.

Bronn's voice cut through the tunnel before Daren could say anything. The kick against Turnal's leg was not hard. Casual, rather. Almost bored. Like kicking a stone lying in the way. »You can see he can't go on«, Daren said quietly, staring straight into the man's empty brown eyes.

Bronn did not even react.

Instead, Turnal lifted his hand and touched Daren's arm. Only briefly. Only once. His lips moved as if he wanted to speak, but no words came. His fingers tightened around Daren's wrist, as though he were trying to hold on to something. It was the last thing his father ever did.

The shot came immediately.

Turnal's head snapped to the side, his fingers released Daren's arm, and he fell as though someone had cut his strings. Blood ran in a narrow line along his temple and gathered in a hollow in the stone that looked like a little bowl.

Daren watched it fill.

Slowly. Evenly. Almost peacefully.

»Those who cannot work do not deserve to live.« Bronn put the weapon away. »You. Back to work.«

Daren felt his hands begin to shake. Tears ran down his face, but he made no sound. He clenched his teeth so hard he tasted blood, and balled his fists until his nails dug into his skin.

Then he stood and drove the pickaxe into the rock. The impact shot through his arms, his back, his chest. He struck again. And again. Behind him lay his father. No one came to take him away.

That evening, Daren lay awake on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. Beside him, a man whose name he had never learned, was snoring. The darkness was complete. No moon reached down here, no star, no light except the dull glow of the tunnel lamps seeping through the cracks of the barracks.

He could still feel the pressure of those fingers around his wrist. And there was only one thing left for him to do.

II — CLARA

Clara liked the moon. When it grew dark outside and Mama drew the curtains, Clara always looked through the gap and searched for it. Sometimes it was round and bright, sometimes only a sliver, and Olivia had once explained to her that it did not really change, that it was because of light coming from somewhere else.

Clara had not fully understood that. But it did not matter, because she still thought it was beautiful. Tonight it was almost full.

She lay on the couch, her head in Olivia's lap, while Olivia played with her hair and twisted strands between her fingers, the same way Mama did whenever Clara could not sleep. The couch smelled of the detergent Mama used, of lavender and something Clara could never name, but which meant home.

Mama was in the kitchen, preparing the tea they drank every evening since Papa had gone. Since the men had taken him away. Clara did not know exactly where, but Mama had said he worked somewhere else now, and her voice had sounded the way people sounded when they smiled even though they were sad.

Clara had not asked again.

Then the shots came.

They came from outside, loud, like someone striking metal with a hammer, only worse. Clara's body jerked. Olivia sat up, reached for her, pulled her close. Mama came out of the kitchen, a cup still in her hand, and stopped. Her eyes were wide.

A voice outside. Loud and angry.

Mama set the cup down, went to the light switch, and turned off the lights. Now it was dark, only the moon shining through the gap in the curtain. Clara heard Mama go to the lock. Heard the click. Then Mama came back to the couch, sat beside them, and took Clara's hand. Mama's hand was cold and damp.

»Be very quiet, do you hear me? Very quiet.«

Clara was quiet. She could be quiet. She was good at it.

Outside, someone screamed. Not the angry voice. Someone else. Then a door was kicked in somewhere down the street, and a woman cried. Clara knew that crying. It was Mrs. Hallert from next door.

Then another door.

And another.

Clara's heart beat so loudly she thought the men outside must hear it. Then came the bang. Not outside. Here. At their door.

The wood around the lock splintered, something heavy slammed against it, and the door burst open. Cold air rushed in, and with the cold air came a man.

He was tall. He had a weapon. His face was in darkness, but Clara could see his eyes because the moon fell upon them, and she did not like what she saw inside.

Nothing. There was simply nothing.

The man pointed at Mama. Just a gesture. A finger aimed at her. Then another man came from behind, grabbed Mama, and yanked her up. Mama screamed, fought, tried to reach for Clara's hand, but the man was stronger, and he dragged her toward the door, and Clara saw Mama's fingers claw through the air toward something she could no longer reach.

»Mama! MAMA!« Clara jumped up, wanted to run after her, but Olivia held her tight, both arms around her waist, and Clara kicked and screamed, and then the door was shut.

Mama was gone.

Clara heard herself crying, but it sounded far away, as if it came from someone else. Olivia held her so tightly it almost hurt and whispered something into her hair, the same thing, again and again:

»I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.«

Then the door opened again. The man with the empty brown eyes came back. He stood in the doorway and looked at Olivia. For a long time. Far too long. And Clara felt Olivia's arms around her begin to tremble.

»The little one too.«

Olivia pushed Clara behind her.

»No. Please. She's only six. Please.«

But the man did not listen, and another man came and reached for Clara, and his hands were rough and cold, and he lifted her as if she were something to be carried.

»OLVI!«

Her sister reached out for her. Clara saw her eyes. Wide. Wet. Full of something Clara could not name, but worse than anything she had ever seen.

Then she was carried out of the house.

Clara stared over the man's shoulder. It smelled of sweat and metal and dust. Olivia screamed. Once. Loudly.

And then... Then not anymore. The door was slammed shut from inside. The world became dark and silent.

Mama was on the transporter. She sat on the floor, her hands bound, and when she saw Clara, something collapsed in her face, something she had been holding together the whole time. She opened her arms as far as the restraints allowed, and Clara crawled into them and

made herself as small as possible. Mama smelled of lavender. Of home. But beneath that was another smell, sour and sharp, and Clara knew that was fear because Olivia had once said fear had a smell.

The transporter started moving. Beside Clara sat other women. Some cried. Some did not. One woman stared straight ahead and moved her lips without making a sound. Clara looked outside through a gap in the tarp. She saw the house. Her house. The light in Olivia's room went out.

Clara closed her eyes, pressed herself tighter against Mama, and tried to think about the moon. The beautiful, round, bright moon that was always there, even when you couldn't see it.

The ride came to an end. Soft knocking sounds could be heard, along with something heavier. The shouting started again, and the women climbed out of the transport. Clara clung to Mama, and Mama carried her in her arms. The air smelled of metal again. And dust. And wet stone.

Clara saw the moon once more, shining bright and beautiful above them. But then the moon vanished behind wood and stone. Mama carried her into a dark tunnel. The smell of dampness and sweat grew stronger with every step.

The women around them had all fallen silent. They stared at the ground as they walked, but Clara couldn't understand what was so interesting down there. There was nothing but dirt, stone, and wood. At the far end of the tunnel, where the transport still stood, moonlight spilled through the entrance.

»I want to go back outside.«

But Mama didn't answer. Instead, she carried her deeper into the darkness until the moonlight disappeared and electric lamps lit the tunnel.

The mine was not a place.

The mine was a sound. An eternal hammering, knocking, scraping, coming through the walls, through the ground, through Clara's bones. It never stopped. Not even at night. Maybe there were no nights here. They gave her a bucket. It was made of metal and almost as large as she was. She was supposed to put stones into it, stones others knocked out of the rock, then carry the bucket to the chute, tip the stones in, go back, and start again.

Again and again.

The bucket was heavy. After one hour she could barely hold it.

After three hours she could not hold anything anymore.

Mama held her tightly at night. Every evening, on the narrow bunk that smelled of other people, Mama pulled her close and stroked her head. But Mama always turned her face to the wall, and Clara's fingers lay on Mama's cheek, and sometimes they were wet, but Clara said nothing, and Mama said nothing, and the hammering went on.

On the fourth day, Clara asked:

»Will Olvi come too?«

Mama did not answer at once. For a moment her body became completely still, almost rigid, as if she had forgotten how to breathe. Then she said quietly:

»I don't know, sweetheart.«

Clara nodded.
She never asked another question.
She never spoke again.

III — DAREN

Three days.

Three days since his father's blood had filled the stone like a little bowl. Three days in which Daren had been beaten and shoveled and kept silent, in which he had forced down food that barely deserved the name, in which he had lain on his bunk every evening and stared at the ceiling until he knew the cracks in the stone by heart, like the lines in his palms.

The next day, new workers arrived.

Women, most of them. Some barely older than him, with empty eyes and bruises that had not come from the rock. And among them, a girl. Small. Six, maybe seven. She clung to an older woman who looked like her, probably her mother. The girl did not speak. Not a word. Not when they gave her the bucket. Not when she fell. Not when a guard screamed at her. Not when her mother threw herself between her and the boot. Daren saw it, and something in his chest tightened. He knew that look. That rigid, inward-facing stare of a child that had decided not to let the world in anymore because what was outside had become too much.

He knew that look because he had worn it himself as a child, back when they had first arrived here and his father had taken him in his arms and whispered something into his ear that he had only understood years later: You are more than this. Never forget that.

He had not forgotten. At night he lay awake and watched. Bronn's patrol. Always around three. Always alone. The upper tunnel. Where the passage narrowed, where a man had to squeeze through sideways. There was a ledge there, used by the workers as a shelf. And on that ledge now lay a stone Daren had placed there. Angular. Heavy. As large as a child's head.

On the seventh day, the time came.

He heard the footsteps. Heavy, even, bored.

Bronn yawned, then whistled softly, a tune Daren did not know and would never forget. The light of the lamp danced over the walls, and his shadow came around the corner, distorted, enormous, then shrinking.

Daren stood in the recess. The stone in both hands. He did not breathe.

Bronn squeezed through the narrow place. His head was level with Daren's chest. He looked down at his steps, watching the ground.

He did not see Daren.

Daren thought of the pressure of those fingers around his wrist. He swung.

The stone hit Bronn's temple. Bronn staggered, dropped to one knee. The lamp fell, rolled in circles across the floor, throwing twitching shadows onto the walls. He tried to lift his head.

Daren struck again. And again. On the fourth blow, the skull gave way. Bronn toppled forward, his face hit the stone ledge, and the sound was final. Blood flowed thickly from the

hole in his skull and gathered in the same small hollow in the rock, the one that looked like a bowl.

Daren let the stone fall. Then he heard the shot. He felt the impact in his chest before he understood the bang. Warm. Burning. Daren looked down at himself. It was strange how little it hurt. He fell to his knees. He fell onto his side and lay beside Bronn's shattered skull. Breathing became hard. Then easy. Then irrelevant.

He stared at the ceiling of the tunnel. The stone glittered in the lamplight. Tiny crystals, enclosed for millions of years. Beautiful, in a way he had never noticed before. Like the starry sky his father had shown him when he was still small, on the roof of the house that no longer existed.

You are more than this.

His final thought was not of Bronn.

Not of revenge.

He thought of the little girl, the way she held the bucket. Too large for her hands.

And he hoped that somewhere on this planet there was someone who would fight for her.

IV — CODA

The man in the gray uniform tapped on his CompPad. The week's notifications, summarized, prioritized, arranged in clean columns. He took a sip of tea before opening the report. He skimmed the numbers. Then he created a new note, sober and precise, the font small:

Foreman Bronn: removed. Replacement arrived.

Labor force losses: 2. 1 liquidation, 1 incident. No operational bottleneck.

Quarterly yield forecast: 340 kg. Target exceeded.

Cost structure: stable.

Work morale: inconspicuous.

He scrolled to the sender field:

Status Report 7-TM to Central Administration, Dalmeta City.

Acknowledgment: Office of the First Protector.

He closed the CompPad, leaned back, and poured himself a second cup of tea. Outside, it was quiet.

Except for the distant, rhythmic hammering from the mountain. It never stopped.

Vel Orun would be pleased.

CYTEFIRE

CYTEFIRE FILES

First Edition – 2026

© 2026 Marcel Hoffmann

All rights reserved.

This publication is protected by copyright law. No part of this work may be reproduced, distributed, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews or critical commentary.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, and events are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or real events is purely coincidental.

CYTEFIRE is an original independent science-fiction universe created by Marcel Hoffmann.

Project & downloads:

<https://cytefire.itch.io>

Instagram: @cytefire

Contact: cytefire@gmx.de