



CYTEFIRE

— FILES —

F/03 WHAT LIZARDS
FEEL

ARCHIVE DATE:
FEB. 123 40

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CYNDRALIS III

DALMETA CITY — Service Level 41

08 FEB 129 AO

Her supervisor's voice crackled through the internal comm.

»Line Kappa-44 is losing pressure again.«

Sera pushed the tool case with her foot under the console and pulled the collar of her work suit higher. The material reacted immediately, tightening around her neck and chin. Barely helped. There was a draft somewhere.

»How much?«

»Zero point eight bar since last night. The entire heating circuit on Level 41 is offline.«

»Sensor failure?«

»No. People are already freezing. We've had plenty of complaints.«

A brief silence.

»Damn piece-of-shit line.«

»You're in a good mood again, I see.«

»Always in winter. I hate this cold.«

She cut the channel.

The maintenance catwalk of Sector 41-Kappa stretched out in front of her. One hundred and twenty meters to the next utility node. To the left, it dropped steeply for about three levels. A good two hundred meters. Nobody normally walked around out here. Beneath the grated floor, cables, pipes and two old cooling circuits disappeared into the depths: Beyond them lay Dalmeta City. Buildings stacked on buildings. Platforms, bridges, service levels, shafts. Far above, the towers vanished into the grey sky. Hardly any of it reached this far down. Only wind. And snow.

Sera opened the airlock. Cold air hit her face and immediately bit into her nose.

»Fucking cold.«

She stepped outside. Her boots recognised the structure and magnetically coupled to the narrow grating. The work suit automatically increased its heating output. A small symbol appeared in the Holo.

THERMAL CONTROL: 73 %

That would do. She started walking.

After about fifty meters, the scanner registered the pressure deviation. Sera stopped and opened the diagnostics window.

KAPPA-44

PRESSURE LOSS

SECTION 41-K/7

Right beside her.

»All right. Be nice and let me fix you.«

She crouched down and searched for the marked line. No crack. No ice. No visible damage. Strange. Sera moved the scanner along the panel. A faint echo. A... cavity?
»What the hell?«

She knocked against the wall panel. Dull. Again. Then she noticed something between the support struts. A small, dark movement. Sera turned her head. A lizard sat in the snow less than two meters away. She stared at the animal. The animal stared back. Dark grey scales. Flat head. Maybe twenty centimeters long. A faint blue stripe ran along its back.

»And what are you doing out here in this cold?«

The lizard tilted its head slightly. Sera slowly crouched down.

»You should be somewhere inside. Somewhere warm.«

The animal stayed where it was. Snow collected across its back, right beside the narrow blue stripe. Sera carefully reached out with two fingers, then stopped just short of touching it.

»It's okay. I won't touch you.«

The lizard blinked. Sera grinned.

»You're probably smarter than I am.«

Then the animal darted away and disappeared behind the wall panel. Sera frowned. Wait. There wasn't supposed to be an opening there. She pulled the screwdriver from her hip module and released the two locks. The panel barely moved. One more screw. Then she pulled. Something was caught behind it. She braced one foot against the wall and pulled harder. The panel came free. An arm fell toward her. Sera screamed and stumbled back one step. Her boots locked magnetically to the grating. No pointless fall today.

»Shit!«

The arm hung motionless from the opening. Human. For a moment, she simply stood there. Her heart hammered. Then she forced herself closer. A woman lay between the pipes. Maybe late twenties. Maybe older. Hard to tell. Pale skin. Blue lips. She wore a thin coat made from high-grade Smart-Fabric, completely unsuitable for this area. Sera crouched beside her.

»Hello?«

No response. She touched the woman's neck. Cold. Nothing. Sera activated her comm.

»Control, this is Venn. I need Security and Medical on Level 41, Kappa section.«
Static.

»Control?«

Nothing. She checked the signal. NO NETWORK. Impossible. Dalmeta City had dead zones, sure. Down in the old lower levels. But not here. Sera tried the emergency channel. Nothing. Only now did she become genuinely afraid. She looked at the woman again. Her right hand was closed. Sera hesitated, then carefully opened her fingers.

A small black data block lay inside. No logo. No serial number. She brushed the snow from its surface. The device reacted to her touch.

PROJECT ZETA

Sera froze. More lines appeared beneath it.

TRANSFER RECORD

SUBJECT GROUP: FEMALE

COUNT: 18

STATUS: RELOCATION COMPLETE

She scrolled.

MEDICAL CLASSIFICATION: RESTRICTED

DESTINATION: BETA D—

The display cut out.

»What's Beta D?«

A sound behind her. Metal. Sera turned. The airlock at the end of the catwalk stood open. She was sure she had closed it. Nobody there. Only snow swirling through the opening. Sera pocketed the data block and stood up. Slowly.

»Control? Can anybody hear me?«

No answer. Then footsteps. From the airlock. Not hurried. Calm. Sera caught a black silhouette in the corner of her eye...and ran. She sprinted in the opposite direction, past pipes and utility cabinets.

»Stop!«

Sera had no intention of doing that. A shot. Something struck the catwalk beside her. Metal splintered. Damn it. She ran faster. Ahead of her was the decontamination airlock for Utility Node 42. Thirty meters. Twenty. A second shot. This time she felt a slight tearing sensation along her right upper arm. The suit immediately reported damage to its outer layer. She reached the airlock, slammed her palm against the manual control and threw herself inside.

»Close!«

The door slid shut. A projectile struck the outside. Sera sank against the wall, fighting for breath.

»Emergency lockdown.«

[LOCKDOWN ACTIVE.]

Finally. She had to keep moving. Somehow.

[SCANNER REBOOT AFTER POWER LOSS — 92 %]

Apparently, several systems on this level had gone down. At least this one was working again. The airlock automatically began its contamination scan.

»No. Not now.«

A field of light moved across her body.

[UNKNOWN PARTICULATE CONTAMINATION DETECTED. FULL SURFACE SCAN REQUIRED.]

»Fuck that.«

[REMOVE WORK SUIT.]

The glass surrounding her automatically turned opaque. Sera stared at the door. She could hear voices outside. She didn't have time. Sera looked at the sealed door in front of her. She needed to get out. Now.

She grabbed the manual emergency release beside the airlock. Red.
[EXTERNAL SECURITY LOCK.]

»You've got to be kidding me. Override.«

[OVERRIDE DENIED DUE TO UNKNOWN CONTAMINATION.]

»Damn it.«

She tore open the seal of her work suit. The material released its grip on her body and fell loose. She pulled her arms and legs free and threw the suit into the disposal shaft. A green light came on. Cold air brushed across her skin. The scanner continued. Face. Nose. Throat. Shoulders.

»Come on.«

Chest. Abdomen. Pelvis. Legs.

A second display appeared.

[CONTAMINATION DETECTED. REMOVE REMAINING CLOTHING. FULL BODY SCAN REQUIRED.]

»What the...?«

She pulled off her shirt and panties and threw both into the disposal shaft. Green again.

[EXTERNAL TISSUE CHECK. SCAN READY.]

»Go. Faster.«

The light appeared again. This time it formed a rotating prism that examined every millimeter of her body. And it was moving painfully slowly. Sera knew this procedure.

[HEAD SECTION: ALL CLEAR.]

The voices outside came closer.

[CHEST AREA: BREAST TISSUE CONTAMINATION DETECTED.]

She reached for the data block.

[CONTAMINATION DETECTED. DATA BLOCK REMOVAL STRONGLY RECOMMENDED.]

Someone was already working on the lock. Sera opened the communication manager on her ArmCom. No official network. No emergency channel. Nothing. Then she saw an entry near the bottom of the list.

UNREGISTERED BURST RELAY

ROUTE AVAILABLE

SIGNAL QUALITY: POOR

What was that? No idea. Maybe some old civilian relay. Maybe a smuggler network. Maybe some broken piece of equipment nobody had bothered to shut down in years. Didn't matter. She connected the data block.

»Transmit all data.«

TRANSFER READY

»Go.«

12 %

Something struck the door from outside. Sera flinched.

[PELVIC AREA: LABIAL TISSUE CONTAMINATION DETECTED. INTERNAL SCAN IMMINENT.]

23 %

»Come on.«

37 %

The locking mechanism moved.

She could see it clearly.

Someone was trying to force it open mechanically.

49 %

A metallic crash. The glass around her suddenly turned transparent again.

Sera froze. The scan was still running. That wasn't supposed to happen. The door opened one centimeter. Freezing air poured inside. Sera backed away.

61 %

»Come on, come on.«

74 %

Through the gap, she saw the tip of a black glove. Then part of a helmet.

82 %

The door opened farther.

88 %

Sera held the ArmCom in front of her as though somehow that might make the progress bar move faster.

90 %

A rifle barrel slid through the gap.

92 %

Sera saw it.

94 %

A brief muzzle flash. The round struck her below the right collarbone. The impact threw her back a step. For a moment, she felt nothing. Then the pain came.

Hot.

Deep.

Her legs gave way. Sera hit the wall and slid to the floor. The data block slipped from her fingers and struck the ground beside her. She tried to reach for it. Too far away.

Her right arm barely obeyed her anymore. The Holo flickered.

98 %

Then a new message appeared.

CONNECTION LOST

TRANSFER INCOMPLETE

Sera stared at it. Her lips formed the word.

»No.«

Silent.

Outside the glass, snow swirled through the pale light of the city.
For a moment, Sera thought she could see the little lizard again between the falling flakes.

The grey scales. The narrow blue stripe along its back.

You should be somewhere inside. Somewhere warm. Not here with me.

She was cold.. So fucking cold.

Do you feel it too, the cold? Do you have somewhere to hide for the winter?

A little crack somewhere deep inside the city, where it's warm and dry and safe?

Sera hoped so. At least for this little lizard.

The blue stripe blurred between the falling snow.

Then Sera closed her eyes.



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