

58

welcome to raccoon city

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Cocytus, better known as Cue Ball, has been the recruit-boot training site for the Steel Annex since its inception. The planet was discovered by accident when three early SA assault ships, precursors to the HWG line of drop ships, dumped from a training jump far from Betelgeuse. Not using transitional shift, SOP then, the two follow on ships exit their jumps only to notice the command ship plummeting through the thin atmosphere while trailing a jet of plasma and slam into the surface with the force of a speeding asteroid.

Two things were a result from this accident. First, the Steel Annex developed and perfected the low energy and low observable pre-jump snapshot of the dump site, now SOP.

Second thing is they set up shop.

The astronomy community, who observed this fiery discovery, gave the planet the name Cocytus, and were immediately silenced by the Annex by way of funds to replace their facility that was taking a beating from solar winds and CMEs—even though they were orbiting all of 20au from the star.

The Annex called it Cue Ball, but assigned the two character mission designation of Sierra Papa. With an initial code name of Sump Pump, and having to change it periodically, follow on names included Sugar Plum, Stoic Priest, Septic Pile, with the last being Stock Pot when the Carrie Nation and her sister station became operational.

These names referenced not only the planet but the one and only actual base of operations the Annex has ever had. Almost nobody ever comes to the 58-Ori system so this place was perfect to lay low. The sprawling sixteen square kilometer airfield was shaved water ice, which acts like stone at these temperatures, and in the middle of that

was a training facility that looked like a six-sided pinwheel from orbit. Beside the airfield was a small rocky mountain and from that they burrowed out a massive base with offices, R&R facilities, endless tracks of barracks and apartment flats. Not stopping there, since this planet was rich in raw materials, beneath the base they excavated a mining, manufacturing and storage facility that was rivaled by nothing before it or since. Thirty stories of levels were dug out with an endless network of tunnels for prospecting and quarrying spreading out in all directions.

This facility was where most troops spent down time until the Kilosphere was built out at Electra-4, and in spite of the extreme cryogenic conditions on the surface, the troops kind of liked the place. It grew on them, and so much so they pitched in and erected a sign by the main entrance saying, 'Welcome to Raccoon City.'

The SA leadership, having been gamers as kids, left it as is.

With the Kilosphere built they shut down that part of the operation, and after completing the construction of the outer shells for the three massive follow on stations they mothballed the whole base. The site became a glorified storage facility that was a dumping ground for old tech, ships, stores, and millions of tons of raw materials.

In fact, a substantive gold mine in raw materials.

Since the start of the previous war it's become so much easier to grind up an asteroid on the run rather than fetch from Raccoon City. For decades the only activity has been the training taking place from the pinwheel yet late last June, to everyone's surprise, three drop ships landed by the entrance and, for the first time in twenty years, breached the seal to the underground vaults.

Two weeks later they were gone.

Senior Deputy Marshal, Charles 'Coco' Hershey, loves his job running this training facility. He barely remembers his old job, that of Brigadier General in command of the Co-op base out at Theta-2 Taurus. Where the CDF is a bit of a cluster-fuck, with too much politics and ass kissing to get anywhere, the trusted Base Defense Force detachments is where the actual soldiers of the CDF can be found.

The BDF was modeled after the old USAF Security Forces base defense group as part of SOCOM. These people do all the heavy lifting such as special operations (anti-insurgency, interdiction and recon), para-rescue, military police, and they are also so far up the intelligence community's ass that you would think of them as a special branch all to themselves. Then to top that off they'll guard a base or two.

General Hershey was a huge score for the Annex. With him came a tsunami of information—okay, information with no practical application or immediate value, but nice to have just the same.

Hershey has been following reports of BDF intrusion into the Orion Constellation. Still referring to it as a constellation from out here is all kinds of goofy, but everyone's visual orientation is still from the perspective of Earth. Out here they add depth and parse that out by region, zone, layer, cylinder and sector.

Thank God science and commerce long ago forced the galactic grid-coordinate system to switch from the original Earth centric axial hub to a navigationally intelligent Sagittarius-A anchor point, and oh halleluiah for that one, but for legal and civics purposes they just can't seem to shake off the old Earth centric system!

Anyway, Vacuum Sandwich One-Eight has been tracking BDF reconnaissance and survey missions over the last few years. Just like how humanity found the Nefer Key's home system, by analyzing and tracing ultra-faint nanoscopic jump and dump gravity signatures, the BDF was using the same techniques out here. Curiously, they don't know what they're actually looking for, it's just that they know they're seeing something that has been getting enough traffic over the years to now pull their focus. It takes a lot of work to get a single linear vector, but once established it's a simple act of following the chalk line and, from this point, things move along really-really fast.

The BDF had to double back to 9-Ori to finally see something pointing in the direction of 58-Ori, and while hopping from system to system along a narrow conical vector they bypass 58-Ori altogether because, seriously, who in their right mind would be stupid enough to set up an operational base there—so why waste time on the obvious?

Frustrated with losing the sent, the head recon team does a quick run out to HIP-28384 where they establish a new vector back towards 58-Ori so, again with the head scratching...

Then the lightbulb!

It was when the BDF first went bouncing past Betelgeuse that Hershey decided to evacuate the base. He had the senior training company, the one closest to graduation, hang back to help police the site before the BDF gets around to figuring it out.

Jesus Zazueta, Master Sergeant and the training company's drill instructor, comes racing up behind Hershey before he steps into his office, "Hey, Coco! Vacuum Sandwich One-Eight just popped into Lagrange-One and flashed us saying that the Reapers finally got their heads out of their ass and will be here real soon."

Hershey turns and, looking at Zazueta, "Ya, I heard. Where did they make the final vector from?"

"I think it was HIP-28384, but don't hold me to that."

Hershey nods, "We gotta evac now."

"Want me to give the order?"

"Order 'em to suit up and stand by." Hershey motions for Zazueta to follow him as he slips through the door, "Then you might as well get in on this in case I get hit by an asteroid."

After broadcasting the orders, Zazueta enters Hershey's office and does a double-take when he faces off with three ghost droids. Not because he was surprised that they were there, he's been around lots of droids before, it's just that under those canopies are the holographic faces of ghosts, digital constructs of troopers who have died, that are old friends he recognizes.

Zazueta goes, "Ozo! Chase! *Órale güey*, motherfuckers!"

The three ghosts cheer in unison, "Zaz!"

Zazueta shakes his head at the head droid, "Fuck me, Griego, when did you cross over?"

"On Arura, last May. Last ship out didn't make it out."

"Sorry 'bout that."

Griego shrugs as best you can as a digital spirit encapsulated in a robot, "I prefer being alive, but this is a kick in the ass!"

Ozo laughs, "*Si*, we can take crazy risks."

Chase also laughs, "I was gonna say you should join us, but I'm already surrounded by enough Mexicans."

Ozo nudges him, "*Puñal gringo*."

Chase blows him a kiss, "You know you want it!"

"Knock it off!" Griego barks, then huffs, "*Pelado chingas*." He then looks to Hershey and says, "We're ready, Coco."

Hershey thinks about it for a sec and, "Okay, orders are as follows... Stock Pot, Sierra Papa Five-Eight Orion, is now designated, Scream Park. Acknowledge change of mission."

Griego nods, as best you can in a droid, "Acknowledged. Sierra Papa Five-Eight Orion, is now code named, Scream Park. Confirm mission change as Scream Park."

"Scream Park, confirmed." Hershey then smiles, "Give my old crew a hell of a scare, okay?"

Zazueta asks, "What just happened?"

"Raccoon City just became a carnival fun house."

Chase laughs, "Yea, baby!"

Griego elaborates, "We got three squads of droids down there and just activated and updated all the old PacMan drones in storage with this mission profile. We got booby traps and scorpion guns hidden all over the place. Homer can cakewalk right on in, but he ain't gettin' out without taking it up the ass."

Ozo says, "It's gonna be a blast."

Chase laughs again, "You know it!"

Zazueta asks, "Can I get in on this one?"

Hershey nods in agreement, "That's two of us, Zaz."

Griego asks, "Coco, I have orders to burst transmit our status and seal the base by zero-thirty zulu on new year's. Do you know what's goin' on 'cause that sounds damned suspicious to me."

Hershey hands Griego a letter-size envelope with the text, 'SP58-ORION OPEN 2318-12-31-23:00' on it, and says, "I don't have a clue but, from the looks of this, you'll know before I do."

"Hu, no shit!" Griego, slips it in the pouch on the mantle of his droid, and, "It'll be me or the last man standing."

Chase goes, "I put money on Simmons!"

Ozo ads, "Ya, Angie, no shit."

Zazueta asks, "Ten Klicks with you guys?"

Griego laughs, "We have eight spare droids and we already took a vote to let Angie burn through 'em."

Hershey asks, "Who's Angie Simmons?"

Zazueta says, "Angela is a little tea-cup of a blonde that's a psycho in a fight." He points to Chase and Ozo, "You two remember Riker's, right?" Then realizes, "Oh, yea, you probably don't."

Ozo corrects him, "Oh, no, we do remember."

Zazueta turns to Hershey and, "Opening shots, Simmons gets her left arm blown off but she continued into the fight."

Griego adds, "It was hand to hand at the end."

Hershey asks, "With one arm?" They all nod yes, so he quietly says to himself, "Dedication...or psychopath."

Griego asks, "Oh, yea, want us to take down the sign?"

"No, that sign was a replacement. I hear it was swapped out in ninety-five. The original is at the Kilosphere."

Chase asks, "Where? I never saw it."

Hershey goes, "Nobody does. It's on the wall on first level of the wet-deck, by the southern bar. Around the corner from the head."

"Oh, no wonder! I was always at the casino looking to get bent over and fucked silly."

"I know the feeling, I'm always losing my shirt there."

Chase laughs, "Ya, but I'm not gambling."

Ozo shakes his head at Chase, "*Pinche puto.*"

Chase puts his hand up to the side of his head and says with sass, "It's *puto jefe* to you! Just slip in here after hours and I love you long time!"

Ozo laughs, "You couldn't handle it."

"Get your brown sugarcane tickling my tonsils and we'll see."

With Hershey and Zazueta trying not to laugh, Griego turns and shouts, "Shut up!"

Zazueta bursts out, "Makes me want to get caulked just to hang out with these fuckers again."

"No you don't." Griego shakes his head, "Hell, I'd shoot 'em both but they'll only respawn."

Just then, the tacnet feed to Hershey and Griego show that a Co-op ship has just popped into the area at thirty au from Betelgeuse and is immediately bearing down on the astronomy facility at 20au.

Hershey looks up, "You see that?"

Griego nods, "Yup. We'll get outta of your hair."

"They've been told to cooperate so we have forty minutes, maybe an hour." Hershey looks to Griego, "Put the burn on 'em." Then to Zazueta, "Suit up and let's get on the hump."

They all scatter with Zazueta running down the corridor while calling out on the tacnet radio, "This not a drill! Get to the staging bay and stand by!"

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It took Zazueta ten minutes to strip and mount his JACC and get topside, where his whole company, all 120 troopers, were already suited and lined up waiting for him. They are wearing a replica of third-gen ACE fighting suit used by the Co-op, but under the skin it's all JACC. Today, instead of the Co-op StG-810 rail gun they trained with, they are all carrying the Annex's older BR1 rail gun that they had a crash course on just three days ago.

Zazueta's training company consists solely of Sikh men and women, and every one of them wear the turbans of their faith but, here in training, they're using the informal and simple two-minute Parna wrap instead of the twenty-minute formal and stylish Paag wrap. Like the Gurkhas these people are dedicated, focused, and an absolute blessing to have as a training company but, as you the reader knows, there is always a fuck up planted amongst them in the ranks.

Zazueta shouts, "We're gonna have to cut through the bullshit so, Sergeant Singh, get your ass up here, front and center!"

Satnam Singh, the Gomer Pile for this cycle, slips out of the back row and jogs up, "Yes, Sergeant! What are your orders, sir!"

"About face!"

If you could tie into the company channel you could hear the troops freaking out that their resident *bewakoof topa*, the dipshit that almost got many of them killed, was a plant this whole time.

Zazueta calls out, "This is Gunnery Sergeant, Satnam Singh! From this moment on he is my right hand, my left hand and my boot in your ass! I do not have time to explain except to say that we are at war and, today, the war has come to us! If you show Sergeant Singh any disrespect, or fail to follow his orders, he is authorized to shoot you with no further provocation! If he fails to shoot you then I will shoot you!" He then shouts, "Do you Punjab's hear me!"

With them shouting, *sir, yes sir*, Hershey has stepped up in his JACC and tells Zazueta quietly, "The charges are set."

Zazueta orders, "Gunny, I'll anchor. You lead 'em out!"

Singh holds up his BR1 and shouts, "Our mission is to get to the evacuation site without being seen and you have these in hand in case we all fuck that up! Just like with the eight-ten you trained with, Sergeant Zazueta loves to have these mylar-strips in your rail guns when we get on the ship! If it's NOT attached to your gun when we mount up..." Singh gets in the face of the three recruits closest to him, "I'm gonna stomp your guts out, strip you of your Parna and strangle you with it! Do you fucken' get me!"

This is not the nice air-head Singh they've spent the last six months with so, in a state of shock, they shout, "Sir, yes sir!"

"Affix helmets, pk-cammo setting. I will take first platoon. Deputy Marshal Hershey will lead second platoon, and D.I. Zazueta will follow with third. You know the drill so don't get spooked and don't fuck up! Do NOT fire your weapon unless ordered too or everybody around you is in a state of dying! You get me?"

Thirty seconds later the bay doors open and they file out.

It's dark with a blustery wind kicking up snow consisting of mostly frozen hydrogen. Everywhere you look the light from a distant sunset refracts red and orange, and blue from the frozen deposits of oxygen mixed in with the nitrogen on the ground. The pink cammo is easy to see up close, but after fifty meters in this light it's like they're invisible. The whole company could be performing the final act of Riverdance and you wouldn't have a clue. The big problem is that in this cryogenic hell, about 10°k (-263.15°C) at the moment, they can't use their holographic cloaking tech because it puts out enough of a thermal signature that at these chilly temperatures they all might as well have neon signs above their heads flashing, *drop bombs here!*

The company has six kilometers to traverse to get to the razorback dropships hidden in the rocky terrain west of the training facility, but about half way there, the tacnet lights up with an alert that HWG83 drop ships, the Javalina ships that were originally developed by the Annex and shared with the Co-op, because they were buddies back then, are now dropping from space from all points of the compass around the base, and look to be converging on the airfield.

That didn't take long.

When the Javalinas are only ten kilometers out, and streaking in while decelerating like mad, first-platoon is already loading up in the Razorbacks, second-platoon is weaving through the rocks only a half a klick away but third-platoon is still two whole kilometers from the evacuation site and in the open terrain just past the airfield.

Zazueta radios, ["Okay, second platoon, hightail it to the ship! Move it! Third platoon, hit the deck and don't move!"]

The troops in third platoon drop and freeze, and when the Javalinas are only three kilometers away, Zazueta fires the charges Deputy Marshal Hershey set in the base. Thirteen cluster bombs, all set for MOAB mode, explode in a three stage sequence. The outer six fire, and a half-second later the next six followed by the final one in the center of the pinwheel facility.

Observing from afar you'd think a nuke went off, but up close the BDF pilots could see that it was demolition charges—and it was intentionally set to go off as they approached, and obviously so.

Zazueta timed it perfectly because the light from the blasts was blinding enough to hide third platoon's thermal signatures and shadows as the drop ships passed overhead.

Zazueta orders, ["Third platoon, move out, double time!"]

With the Javalinas orbiting the wreckage of the base, third platoon make it to the field of rocks before the Co-op thinks to send two ships out to conduct an orbiting survey of the area. The BDF

already knows it was a bot or maybe a small fire team that set it off remotely, and if it were a fire team they would be long gone by now but, either way, sticking to SOP they have to go through the motions and look for traces of Spooky just the same.

Reaching the evacuation site unseen, and as third-platoon loads up, Hershey and Zazueta climb on top of one of the Razorbacks to check out how the BDF landing is going.

Like all JACCs they have binocular telescopes that flip open on opposite sides of the helmet, and with these deployed they can scope out what is going on back at the destroyed base.

Five ships land around the wrecked pinwheel facility—which is actually only about halfway blown up. This crappy demolition job was intentional on their part so as to eat up BDF man hours having them dig and pick through it all. As the two Javalinas expand their orbits in a half-hearted search to the east and the south, the other five ships flair out and put down at the foot of Arklay Mountain, beside the sign where the base entrance is.

That didn't take long at all.

Hershey sighs, ["I'm gonna miss this place."]

Zazueta nods, ["Yea, it grows on ya."] He then asks, ["How long till they breach the entrance you think?"]

["About a week. More like two."] Hershey smiles, ["And all they have to do is to hit the 'open' plate by the blast doors."]

["Really?"]

["Open sesame with the push of a button!"] He elaborates as to what will happen, ["The BDF will survey each level meticulously before going to the next one so they won't remove a thing until this has been done. Griego will probably start in with jump scares around mid-December when they approach the bottom of the facility."]

["Then the killing starts."]

["No, the mission is to scare and maim. Having to rescue screaming wounded is so much more psychologically distressing than dragging out dead guys. Oh, and the annual cease fire will not apply here! It'll be an all-out duck and cover fest when it starts."]

Zazueta nods and, while watching BDF troops milling around in front of the sign at the foot of Arklay Mountain, he quietly says, ["Welcome to Raccoon City, mutherfuckers."]

Hershey smiles, ["Yup, true that."]

Singh alerts them that the troops are all buttoned up so Hershey and Zazueta slide down the side of the Razorback and head

up the ramp into separate ships. The dark and cold cargo bays light up in combat-blue light the second the ramps snap shut.

With Zazueta piloting the first ship, and Singh the second one, Hershey slips into the WSO seat across from Singh and radios, ["Everyone, hold on. We'll pump in warm tropical air and break out the mojitos after we L.O.E. to a safe enough distance."]

The AG-Drive kicks in and they rise by just a few meters as their landing gear retracts. After a few seconds they silently slip out of their hiding place at a smooth quarter-G acceleration to start.

Nice and quiet like.

The two ships were still far from supersonic when they hit the ten kilometer mark and, at that point, they kick up the AG-Drive to a half-G to speed up the acceleration. At forty kilometers they are right on the edge of supersonic, and here they crank it up to one-G while starting their climb out. With all the turbulent helium and snow being picked up and flailed about they leave Cocytus without being seen.

At thirty-five minutes into the flight they've been pulling a constant three-Gs for twenty of those minutes, and at seven-thousand kilometers above the planet they cut the AG-Drive which throws them into freefall. After bracing themselves against the relentless and brutal eyeballs-out acceleration while facing backwards in the racking, the troops can finally breathe without effort. As Zazueta spools up for a jump, Sergeant Singh maneuvers his Razorback around and snuggles it belly to belly with Zazueta's ship.

When the charge is set, a baby-baby black-hole opens wide and swallows them both.