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The power of Alfred Coppel's writing has recently burst upon the reader of general fiction with the publication of his hard-hitting novel of auto racing, HERO DRIVER (Crown). That story is based on intimate personal experience; but s.f. readers have long known that Coppel can lend the same quality of seemingly firsthand vigor to probable situations of the future, as in the well-remembered The Dreamer (F&SF, April, 1952) and Mother (F&SF, September, 1952). After too long an absence from these pages, Mr. Coppel returns with a forceful and bitter story of the ultimate implications of carrying earthly power politics into space.

Mars Is Ours

by ALFRED COPPEL

ILLUSTRATION BY NICK SOLOVIOFF

THE RED DUNES woke to the morning sun. The stars dimmed, but did not fade before the dawn. Light touched the mare's tails of high ice clouds and turned them pink against the great cobalt sky. To the far west, the eroded hills along the edge of Syrtis came alive with brilliant yellows and sere browns.

The long column of armored vehicles, insect-like in the vast emptiness, inched northward. The sound of their engines faded quickly in the thin, cold air and the drifting iron sands swiftly covered the tracks of the steel cleats.

Marrane woke from fitful slumber in his tank. The tiny reading light was still on and the book of plays lay open across his chest. He glanced at the clock in the footing of the tank and wondered if he had slept at all.

He rubbed a hand across his stubbled face and fought down the familiar clamoring terror of waking. He forced himself to lie back and relax, letting the undulating movement of the Weasel soothe him.

— this is real, he thought. Steel and rivets and the steady chugchugchug of the air compressor. Forget the nightmare of sticky, fear-ridden plains stretching out and out forever. *And lay off the luminol.*

He felt sodden with the residue of the drug, thick in the mouth and eyes with it. Corday would have to give him something else. He was building a

tolerance for luminol and it wasn't driving away the nightmares. Corday would have to come up with something different. Something out of a bottle to buy a few hours rest and sleep without dreams. He couldn't lead men into battle feeling this kicked out inside —

The communicator light flashed.

"What is it, sergeant?" he asked heavily.

"0600 hours, Major." Grubich's voice sounded tinny through the grill. "We're starting to climb the shelf. You asked me to call you."

"Very well, sergeant."

— out of the coffin, he thought. Out of the coffin and back to life. For God's sake *why?* Another endless day crawling across the endless, featureless desert. He thought of blue lakes and the sea again. How long had it been? Years now. Not that it mattered.

He slipped on his respirator and decompressed the tank. The latches didn't stick, thank God. He had a horror of that happening.

The interior of the Weasel was icy and Marrane shivered naked on the pitching deck. He wondered about shaving and decided against it. What water there was would be frozen and he had no decent blades left. The power shaver had been ruined by the sand months ago crossing Syrtis. All supplies were getting short — like sand running out in a glass. They'd have to make contact soon or the Task Group would fall apart of its own dry decay. *All hail the conquerors* —

Grubich stuck his cropped head around a bulkhead and asked: "Did you say something to me, Major?"

"No," he said sharply. "Carry on."

Grubich's head vanished with a muttered: yes, *sir*.

Marrane dressed slowly. Each movement seemed an effort. He wondered whether it was the dry cold and the low pressure and the canned air. Or was it himself?

— I'm 30, he thought. Not old. But I feel old. Tired and sticky, somehow, and when I look out at the desert, I feel very small.

He thought of the play he had been reading last night. One of the proscribed authors, but it didn't seem to matter much up here. Graylist, Blacklist. The Loyalty Boards. They all seemed far-off and unreal across the gulf of night. But the play had troubled him. Steinbeck, or some such name. And the title so apt as the line of Weasels crawled their way across the Martian plain through the star-shot darkness. *The Moon Is Down*. About invaders in a war that was forgotten now in a place he'd never heard of. Yet there was a frightening phrase in the play. One that brought on the nightmare again in spite of the luminol. Perhaps it had been wise to keep such a book out of the hands of civilians.

He shook his head wearily. It showed the way discipline was breaking down in the Task Group when an officer could lend a Graylist book to his commander without a twinge of conscience or fear. But my God, he wondered, what else can be expected after ten months on this desert looking for a Cominform Base that might not even exist. He told himself that he must remember to thank Hallerock for lending him the book.

From the galley came the smell of burning synthetic proteins. The stoves never had worked properly here under seven pounds air pressure. Nor had the engines — gasping for breath in spite of all the huffing and puffing of the superchargers. Nothing worked properly. Nothing but the guns. And there was nothing to shoot at.

— all hail the conquerors, he thought again, sardonically. Mars is ours. Marzizarz. It made just as much sense that way and it had the sound of officialese. He found himself smiling idiotically at the thought, Marzizarz.

“Crest ahead, Major,” Grubich called.

Marrane stopped smiling and finished dressing hurriedly. His heart was pounding when he took a grip on himself.

— I’m going sand-happy, he thought, and so is every other man in the Task Group. Something basic was wrong with all this — the military vehicles trekking endlessly across the face of a world that had been quiet and dead and at peace for ten times ten million years. We should have come here for some *other* reason, he thought.

He stumbled onto the bridge and stood behind Grubich and the driver.

Behind the lumbering 200-foot machine, he could see the rest of the group strung out behind, following blindly across an endless wasteland of iron sands, radar antennae rotating with idiot military precision, searching for an enemy where none but the bitter frozen land could be seen.

He checked the course and climbed to the navigation deck, his boots gritting on the sand that drifted everywhere in the Weasel. He checked the guns as he went by, making sure they were muzzled and protected against the abrasive rusty filth.

At the chart table he checked the column’s position with young Hallerock, a gaunt and skeletal caricature of the trim officer who had left Mars Base almost a year ago.

— this patrol has to end soon, Marrane thought, the men can’t last much longer.

“Sparks got the radio fixed last night, Major,” Hallerock said.

Marrane’s eyes widened. He felt an illogical stab of anger. “Why wasn’t I told?” he asked.

Hallerock refused to meet his eyes. “We couldn’t raise Mars Base, sir. And Captain Corday said you shouldn’t be disturbed until we could.”

"I see."

Hallerock looked oddly at him. "Do you, sir?"

"They can't be guarding our channel all the time," Marrane said. And even as he said it he knew it wasn't so.

"We've had no contact for three months, Major," Hallerock said unsteadily.

"And what does that mean, Mister?" Marrane asked frowning.

Hallerock didn't answer. In the stillness the thrumming beat of the engines was all that lived.

— no, Marrane thought, don't say it. Don't even think it. They'd not leave us here. And then: if they hadn't been so damned frugal with the equipment it might have been different. It was insanity to send a column out on patrol with only the lead Weasel equipped to contact Base. But equipment cost money. And all the money went into the pounds of plutonium and lithium hydride that rested quiescent in the once shiny now rusty shells waiting to be fed to the guns. The killing matériel was ample, it was only the saving stuff that was in short supply.

"How far have we come, Mister Hallerock?" Marrane asked brusquely.

Hallerock tapped his charts. "Nine thousand miles, sir. We've quartered almost all of Syrtis and a good bit of Solis, too."

Marrane's mouth felt dry. "How far are we from Mars Base now?"

"Eight hundred miles, Major," Hallerock said, and then added: "Within easy radio range."

"Has Sparks picked up the beacon?"

"No, sir."

Marrane fought back the clamoring fear. "They are probably keeping radio silence. Things may have worsened back home."

"Yes, sir. It might be that."

The commander turned from the gaunt face to look out at the iron sands. The Task Group was approaching a line of low hillocks, windworn rock outcroppings covered with lichens. Reefs of a long-ago sea.

— old, he thought. Empty. And alone. The end was getting near. Another 800 miles and Mars Base. They had to be there waiting. The thin spire of the ship pointing at blue lakes and the sea. Just 800 more miles of silence and desert and silted, dead canals. And an end to the hostility of the silent land. They couldn't have deserted us, Marrane thought. They *couldn't* have done a thing like that.

He turned away toward the bridge and stopped suddenly. "Thanks for the book, Evan," he said.

"You read it, sir?"

"I read it."

“We’re flies, aren’t we?”

Marrane frowned at the drawn face. “You’d better see Corday,” he said.

Hallerock laughed, the sound was eerie though the filter of his respirator. “We’ve conquered the flypaper. Remember *The Moon Is Down*? You did read it?”

“I read it, Mister,” Marrane said. “We haven’t conquered anything. Not yet.”

Hallerock rose unsteadily, rocking on the balls of his feet. There were tears running down his cheeks and he shook with unholy mirth, but he wasn’t making a sound. Marrane stood looking at him, numb with shock, knowing his navigator was mad.

They were standing so when the battle alarm shrieked through the steel labyrinth of the Weasel.

“Get to your station, Mister,” Marrane shouted at the navigator. Hallerock sat down again and started sobbing.

“Major Marrane!” It was Grubich calling from the bridge. “A contact, sir! Russkis just over the hill! We’ve found the nest of them!”

“Stay put, Evan,” Marrane ordered and ran down the companionway, his steel-shod boots ringing on the deck.

The gunners were unlimbering the guns and Marrane slipped into the conning tower, buckling on his headset.

“*Plan B. Weasel Able to Group. Plan B.*”

Grubich was at his side, binoculars extended. “They’re just over the ridge, Major. We almost stumbled into them.”

Marrane cursed the thin air of Mars that wouldn’t support aircraft. The Cominform Base was in defilade and the Group would have to spread out along the ridge to bring the enemy under fire. An armored attack against fortified positions without air support was always deadly.

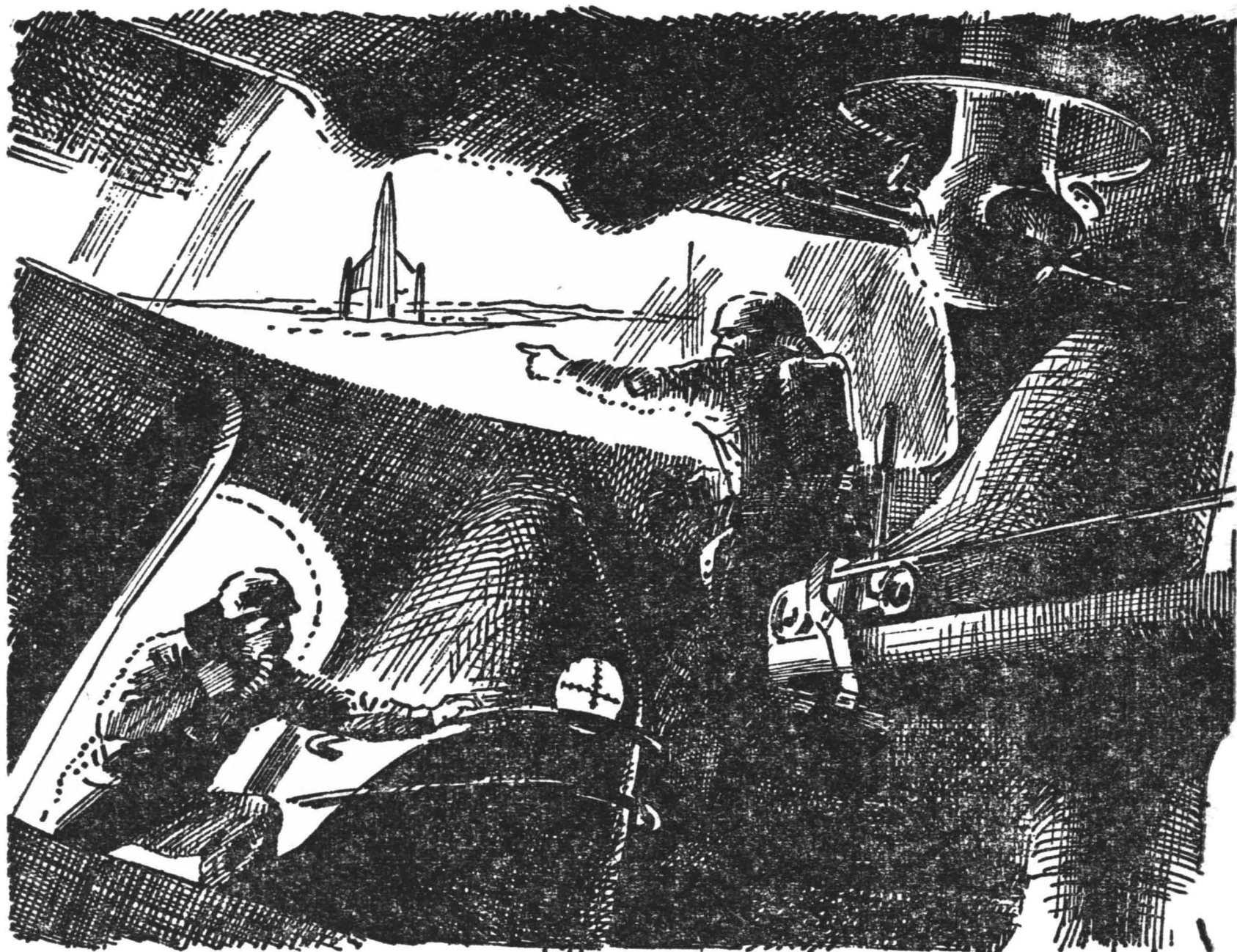
— nothing can go wrong now, he thought bitterly. Not here, so close to home. And then the torturing doubt began eating at him. Was there still a Mars Base? Maybe the Russki had wiped it out. Raw hate was tearing at his insides, but he felt alive for the first time in almost a year.

The Weasel crawled up the ridge and stopped just short of the top. “Scouts out,” Marrane ordered. “Team Six.”

A squad of Marines tumbled out of the last Weasel in the column of six and started over the crest in a skirmish line.

The squad leader’s walkie-talkie cut through the static in Marrane’s headset. “No hostile action, Major. I see a group of prefabs and a few light tanks. There’s quite a bit of milling about. I think we have them cold.”

The memory of years of soldiering rose up inside Marrane to clamor a warning. One couldn’t be sure. Intelligence was always faulty. The evidence



of one's own eyes could be a lie. Maybe there was a Russki tank column just under the hillcrest to the north. Waiting. This could be an ambush.

"Let's see," he muttered. "Have the forward elements move up. Weasel Charlie to load fissionables. Dog and Baker into line abreast on the ridge."

Am I being too cautious, he wondered. Have all these endless weeks of sand and stillness drained the marrow out of my bones? We can strike quickly and win. He felt a sudden hysteric laughter bubbling just under the surface of his mind. The Cominform Base was under their guns. Grouped like a field problem around the blackened field where the Russki rocket towered over the shabby buildings. Ground zero. Epicenter. The terms from the field manuals were so inexpressive, he thought vaguely. What did ground zero have to do with a fireball at a million or two degrees centigrade? Maybe the zero part made sense. Zero for the Russki and it would be ended. *Marzizarz marzizarz — stop it!*

He dug his hands into the pockets of his parka, clenching his fists, letting the pain of his fingernails on the palms steady him. He could see the people pouring out of the prefabs to look at the line of Weasels that had materialized out of the dark morning on the ridge.

— they're helpless, Marrane thought.

He could hear his orders being relayed to the Task Group. Weasel Charlie was complaining of some trouble with its fission bomb. Marrane fought down his irritation and let Charlie finish the report.

“How long to clear your trouble?” he asked.

The radio crackled with static.

“How long, God damn it?”

“Ten minutes, sir.”

Ten minutes. What were ten minutes in ten years — twenty? He could give them ten minutes of life, he thought, looking down at the frightened figures on the sandy plain. Odd, he thought. They look almost human. Strange to see something so familiar in this endless, whispering desolation.

The Marines were spaced out along the ridge in a skirmish line, digging themselves into the sand as though expecting an attack by infantry. We go by the book, Marrane thought. We always go by the book. And the men who wrote the book went by the book, too — and so on, down the endless mirrored halls of time back to Cain killing Abel and even beyond that to the ancestral memory of grisly delight as stone axe crushed blood and bones into the slime.

“Tank moving up, Major,” the squad-leader called.

— time, Marrane thought. Ten minutes and we’ll be done with this. “Track it,” Marrane said to the gunpointer. “Weasel Charlie — how are you coming?”

“Getting it cleared now, sir.”

He wondered briefly if he should have assigned Dog or Baker to fire the fission shell — but no, this playing with time was oddly appealing. And if there were a Russki column coming up, it would give them time to arrive and share in the warmth of the fireball. Risky, very risky. Not according to the book. Blacklist, Graylist, Marzizarz. God, how tired I am, Marrane thought.

“White flag, sir,” said Grubich.

“Stay on them,” Marrane said to the gunpointer. “Able to Group. Lay your guns on the camp, but hold your fire until we see what’s happening here. If anyone makes a move toward that rocket, blast them. Able to Charlie. How much longer?”

“Five minutes or less, Major.”

He stood indecisively, weighing life or death. Why the white flag? Bargaining for their lives? With what? He had them cold. The book said kill them wherever you find them.

He glanced at Grubich. The sergeant’s eyes were intent on him. How would this hesitancy look to a Loyalty Board? Bad — very bad.

“Fire when ready, Charlie,” he said slowly.

"Yes, sir."

"The book always wins, Grubich," he said. "Did you doubt that?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand the Major," Grubich said.

Life or death, Marrane thought. I can still play God. I could change my mind.

No one moved in the camp. The tank rumbled up the slope, red sand streaming from its cleatracks. Its long gun was pointed at the ground and a white steamer fluttered in the thin air. It reached the skirmishers and two heavily padded figures dismounted.

"Bring them in," Marrane ordered.

Somewhere, up on the navigation deck, he imagined he could hear Hal-lerock still sobbing. Flies conquering flypaper —

The two Russkis, masked against the cold and clumsy in quilted uniforms, clambered through the hatch. Marrane saw the smaller of the two wore the collar tabs of a colonel. The colonel's companion was a sergeant, armed.

"Get that burp-gun," Marrane snapped.

Grubich snatched the weapon away and pushed the Russki into a corner of the bridge.

"Get my tank ready, Grubich," Marrane said. "We'll talk inside."

"Recorder, too, Major?"

"Yes, get it all down." Since there was room only for two in the sleeping tank, it wouldn't do not to have a permanent record of everything said that could be run off for the Loyalty Boards back home.

— home, Marrane thought. Blue lakes, the tossing green of the open ocean —

He gave fire control to Wilson in Weasel Dog and led the way to the tank. Grubich stuck the muzzle of the burp gun hard into the Russki sergeant's middle. "You stay put, you red bastard."

The colonel seemed about to protest, but apparently thought better of it and followed Marrane into the tank. Marrane started the compressor. When the pressure stood at eleven pounds he removed his mask and indicated the Russki should do the same. He watched the operation, letting his hand rest on the icy grip of his automatic. Suspicion, he thought. The book says they're treacherous. One move and I'll blow a hole in the bastard's head.

The mask came away and Marrane sat looking at a woman of about thirty. A thin face, with high cheekbones and hollows under them. A tired face, with reddish, sandy grime worn into the skin, pale eyes and prematurely gray hair.

"I surprise you, Major?" She spoke English with only a faint accent.

"Not really."

"No," she said. "There are few taboos left on our side of the line."

“Very enlightening,” he said. “Are we here to compare political systems?” She shook her head slowly. “Why are we here?”

— I can’t answer that, Marrane thought. There’s the recorder to think of. And even if there were not — what could I tell her? That war is part of the intercourse of the human race? Should I quote Clausewitz to her? Here? Thirty million miles from lakes and rivers, from home —?

“Your base is under my guns,” he said.

— that’s according to the book, he thought. Formal. Stern. And a hundred yards away, the rusty shell casing would be in the lift, its blunt nose seeking the breech of Charlie’s rifle, caressing the lands and grooves, tasting them voluptuously with its fuse, feeling the eager grains of powder behind it as the breech lock slammed shut and the gunpointer spun his oily wheels and the muzzle came up searchingly, ready to spit the fireball at a mass of flies trapped on an endless plain of blood-colored flypaper —

He glanced at his watch. Two minutes. Certainly not more. She caught his meaning and bit her lip. “You can’t,” she said. “Surely you can’t. We are surrendering.”

— but the Task Group wasn’t equipped to take a surrender, Marrane thought. It was equipped only to destroy. To carry out its Directive. Blast the Cominform Base.

“Give the order not to fire. Tell your men we are their prisoners,” the colonel said hoarsely.

“I cannot accept a surrender,” Marrane said. It was as though another voice other than his own had spoken. Astonished, he felt his hand tighten on the grip of his pistol.

She looked down at the weapon. “But no, you would kill me? Why, in God’s name? I came to you under a white flag to surrender my command? Is there no way I can touch you?”

“You can try. I haven’t seen a woman in almost a year —”

— time, one minute now. Or less.

She pulled off her helmet and unbuttoned her tunic. She was a handsome woman in spite of the weariness and the grime.

“It won’t do any good,” he said.

Her hands dropped wearily into her lap. She seemed drained of life. Her eyes opened again and she saw the book of plays on the still-rumpled bed.

“Steinbeck — an angry man,” she said.

“He seemed to be,” Marrane said. “He hated anything that destroyed human dignity.”

She began to laugh, soundlessly, as though the spasms were painful.

“We’ve come so far.”

“Far?”

“Yes, far. Far enough to forget what it was that we were sent here to do.” She was shaken by a sudden shudder, as though she had looked into the face of chaos. “I wish I had forgotten it sooner. Oh, God, how I wish I had forgotten it sooner!”

— either she is mad, or I am, Marrane thought.

“We came here so full of hate,” she said. “But what does it matter? We are only men and women against the bitter land. Can you forgive what I have done? Can I, I wonder?”

— this is all wrong, Marrane thought, I shouldn’t have these doubts. But maybe it was more than just doubt. Maybe war had no place here on this silent, empty, world. We should have come here to do something better than kill. But we are in a cul-de-sac, trapped by what we are.

They sat close together in the tiny tank, listening to the chugging of the air compressor.

“Give the order,” she whispered. “While there is still time.”

— yes, he thought. Yes. I’ll give the order because she’s worn and as sick of this icy loneliness as I am.

She moved closer to him.

“Major — Major!”

He scarcely heard Grubich’s voice, frantic in the speaker grill.

“Don’t listen,” she said softly.

“*Major!* We’ve picked up radioactivity. The stinking bastards have hit our Base! Major!”

The thought tumbled crazily through Marrane’s mind. How long ago? It could have been days, or minutes. Terror and revulsion came throbbing up into his throat and he pushed the woman away.

“Three days ago,” she said, her face suddenly shut tight.

Marrane was on his feet, strapping his respirator into place. He flung open the hatch of the tank, filled with a corroding, acid hatred. He flung the woman out into the sub-zero cold ahead of him, watching the agony on her face as she gasped for breath. “Slut,” he breathed. “Rotten red slut —”

He left her crumpled against a bulkhead and clattered across the steel deck. He could hear her faint voice, barely more than a whisper. “I — had — to — do — it —” And then it faded to less than a sigh and was heard no more.

— yes, she had to do it. Just as he must watch while the ground rumbled and the white-hot fireball blossomed in the camp, consuming it, vaporizing it.

The shockwave hit the Weasel and he braced himself against it. Grubich was shouting: “*We got the filthy muckers — every last rotten soul of ’em! Die, you bastards!*”

The rumbling died with surprising quickness. The dustcloud fell in the thin air. The silence came again. For what seemed a long while, Marrane stood staring at the spot where the Russki rocket had been. The last link with home? But how could he know?

— how could he ever know?

In a dull, muffled voice he gave the orders and the Task Group wheeled and took up its search formation again.

Marrane thought: — Hallerock. He might have the answer. Only a madman could give meaning to this ugliness that so briefly disfigured the icy quiet peace of this frozen land.

He opened the hatch to the navigating deck and stood rocking in the doorway. He had his answer.

Hallerock's feet hung a few inches above the deck. He swung gently to and fro with the undulating movements of the Weasel. Back and forth, to and fro, east and west —

Marrane began to laugh. Here it is at last, he thought. We've done it. Mars is ours. The flies have conquered the flypaper. The flies, oh, God —

His shoulders shook helplessly and tears streaked his cheeks. The sound of his laughter penetrated the steel flanks of the Weasel, filtered through the dust of its passing. It drifted out into the thin dry air. Past the dead of the camp, and out across the yellow-red dunes until it was silenced and lost in the thin wind that blew endlessly and forever across the face of the bitter land.