



Cold War: Power Plays 05

By Tom Clancy, Martin H. Greenberg, Jerome Preisler

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Unspoiled. Uninhabited. Under attack...

On the wind-swept, ice-covered continent of Antarctica, Roger Gordian's UpLink Technologies has established a scientific research facility called Cold Corners. But its testing of potential robotic landing craft for use on Mars is disrupted when one of the rovers disappears—along with the repair team sent out after it.

Fear of discovery has prompted a renegade consortium—that is illegally using Antarctica as a nuclear waste dump—to wipe out the UpLink base. Now, the men and women of Cold Corners have only themselves to rely on as the consortium mounts its decisive strike against the ice station—and the final sunset plunges them into the total darkness of a polar winter...

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- Sales Rank: #450642 in eBooks
- Published on: 2009-01-24
- Released on: 2001-12-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

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“Pieczenik is a grand master of the geo-political chess game.” —**Stephen Coonts**

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About the Author

Tom Clancy was the author of eighteen #1 *New York Times*-bestselling novels. His first effort, *The Hunt for Red October*, sold briskly as a result of rave reviews, then catapulted onto the bestseller list after President Ronald Reagan pronounced it the perfect yarn. Clancy was the undisputed master at blending exceptional realism and authenticity, intricate plotting, and razor-sharp suspense. He died in October 2013.

Martin H. Greenberg was honored in 1995 by the Mystery Writers of America with the Ellery Queen Award for lifetime achievement in mystery editing. He is also the recipient of two Anthony awards. *Mystery Scene* magazine called him "the best mystery anthologist since Ellery Queen." He has compiled more than 1,000 anthologies ands the president of TEKNO books. He lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Jerome Preisler is the New York Times bestselling author of over thirty books of fiction and nonfiction, including his most recent military histories, *CODE NAME CAESAR: The Secret Hunt for U-Boat 864 during World War Two* and *FIRST TO JUMP: How the Band of Brothers Was Aided by the Brave Paratroopers of Pathfinders Company*. He lives in New York City.

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TOM CLANCY'S POWER PLAYS: COLD WAR

A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with
RSE Holdings, Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY
Berkley edition / December 2001

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For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Putnam Inc.,
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

Visit our website at
www.penguinputnam.com

eISBN : 978-1-101-00260-5

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ONE

BULL PASS (77°30' S, 161°80' E) MCMURDO DRY VALLEYS, ANTARCTICA FEBRUARY 27, 2002

THEY HEARD THE COPTER LONG BEFORE IT CAME INTO sight, cresting the frozen peaks of Olympus on a southerly course toward Asgard.

Its pilot approached from the rear, nosed down a little, and hailed the team below as he flew past. Some cheerful words over his PA, a flap of a red-sleeved arm behind his windscreens. His large Bell 212 was identical to the aircraft that had dropped them into the valleys, but its National Science Foundation decals showed it wasn't one of theirs.

Scarborough's foot party was no less appreciative of the human contact. They were starting their first full day out of Cold Corners, and if mutual reliance made for good neighbors, this qualified as the most neighborly spot on earth.

All three returned the pilot's wave, their own bright red coat sleeves upraised. Then they watched him level his bird in the crystal-clear sky, skirt the rim of Valhalla glacier, and vanish over the crooked spine of mountains running toward the coast. Away and gone with due haste. The fixed landing and refueling pad at Marble Point was some thirty miles off along his flight path, and he'd want to reach it in time for the early shift change.

Minutes later, Scarborough could still hear the chop of rotors echoing between the scoured brown walls of the pass.

The most neighborly spot on earth, and its quietest, he thought. The polar desert's only native inhabitants were primitive invertebrates. A handful of tiny worms and insects on land, anaerobic microbes under the hardened lake surfaces. There would be no noise pollution from them. Nothing to dent the silence except for the occasional beating of wind against the valley walls and far rarer sounds of human intrusion.

Now Scarborough freed a hand from its clumsy pile mitten, leaving on his thinner polypropylene glove liner, adequate short-term protection on all but the worst summer days. The temperature had been 16° Fahrenheit when his group left camp that morning, torrid by local standards even with a chill factor of—20°, and he would need just a few moments to check his bearings.

Scarborough extricated his GPS receiver from his parka and pressed a keypad button. A topographic satellite image of the valley system north of the Asgard range filled his display, its contours reminding him of an old-fashioned ship's anchor. Next, he scrolled down his menu to the "Navigate" option. A color icon representing the object of his search marked its last known coordinates near the deep, craggy notch at the pass's junction with Wright Valley.

Scarborough studied the display a bit longer, his fur-trimmed hood pulled up, his balaclava covering the gray-flecked scruff of beard that would soon grow out into a winter forest. He wore dark polarized snow goggles over the mask's eye slits, heavy-duty wind pants, and neck and leg gaiters for optimal retention of body heat. Here at the bottom of the globe, life was bounded by the cold, shaped by the cold, its limitations defined by how well you adapted to the cold. The threat of hypothermia meant bundling into innumerable layers of gear and apparel before you ventured outside, a tedious routine that packed on thirty pounds of added weight and was the cause of persistent, some might say *epidemic*, crankiness at the station.

As with so many aspects of existence in Antarctica, you either kept a sense of humor about it or went crazy, Scarborough thought. Thankfully most did the former. A wicked hand with a felt-tip pen, his dorm mate had even graced the front of their clothes closet with a masterpiece of graffiti that portrayed them as a couple of sullen, mopish genies who'd been sealed away inside a giant Coca-Cola bottle wearing only their waffle-knit longjohns, a visual pun on the fact that modern polar fleece outer garments were made of a synthetic fabric derived from recycled plastic soft-drink containers. Written above it was the title "PRISONERS OF FASHION." Though this king-sized editorial cartoon had been unveiled months before, their Friday night poker regulars still got a sort of rueful kick out of it, using it as a springboard for their own wardrobe laments. Not that Scarborough could recall hearing anyone grouse about being overdressed out in the field.

His location established, he pocketed the GPS unit and glanced across the moraine at Bradley and Payton, who had wandered ahead of him seeking any trace of the rover. Though he'd been careful to stay mum about it, Scarborough shared a measure of their anxiousness. Developed under exclusive contract with NASA, the Scout IV remote interplanetary vehicle was the product of a tremendous investment in dollars, labor, and prestige for UpLink International. Its sudden and complete signal failure during late-stage field tests had everyone involved with the project on edge, and hoping what had gone wrong was something like a defective microprocessor, a programming error, maybe a radio transmission mast that failed to deploy.

Something *simple*, in other words.

In Scarborough's opinion, however, those scenarios were limp noodles . . . as were the many similar theories being floated at Cold Corners. Scout's critical systems had been designed with multiple redundancies, none more key to its performance as a lab-on-wheels than the telecommunications packet. Information compiled on the Martian surface was worthless if it couldn't be beamed across the void to Earth, making successful data transfer a baseline requirement. The notion that a minor snafu could knock out the rover's entire gamut of backup relays seemed dubious at best, and hinted that accountability for its possible failure was about to become a bouncing ball.

Scarborough's mouth turned down in a private frown under his balaclava. Shevaun Bradley and David Payton were robotics experts who had been on the ice just over six weeks and planned to leave before final sunset, winging off to civilization aboard a Hercules LC-150 ski transport. Not so for Scarborough. Well into his second eighteen-month hitch with the station's winter-over support crew, he had learned from unpleasant experience that tensions could build fast in shared isolation. The stickiest situations often occurred between habituated polies and summer personnel contingents, and part of his role as expeditionary guide was to lubricate the gears, so to speak. He knew Bradley a little and didn't think she'd be a challenge on that score. Payton was another story.

Scarborough made his way toward the techies over wide beds of gravel and patches of bare bedrock that had been scrubbed to a shiny smoothness by time and weather. Stone chips crunched beneath the rubber soles of his boots. Boulders were scattered everywhere around him, many of knee height or smaller, some dwarfing the group's transportable apple hut. The most imposing rocks Scarborough had seen lay back in the direction of camp, a tumbled expanse that had proven sheer murder to negotiate. Carved out of the highland plateau by monumental glacial flows in the Paleozoic, bereft of rainfall for an estimated two million years, the entire landscape might have been transported from another world in some weird cosmic version of a skin graft . . . which, of course, was precisely why it was chosen as the site of the rover's trial run. According to planetary geologists, no place on Earth bore a closer resemblance to Mars.

Scarborough stopped beside Payton, waited to be acknowledged, and was ignored.

He made a loud affair of clearing his throat. "Any luck? We're close to where Scout fell off our screens."

Still examining the ground, Payton merely shook his head.

Bradley was more responsive. "We weren't expecting much," she said. "Scout traversed the area. I'm certain from the feeds it sent before our link broke. But its wheels probably couldn't have left imprints in this stony surface."

Scarborough considered that a moment.

"My sat maps show lots of sand in the lower pass, close to where it hooks into Wright," he said. "Sand cover holds tracks, and the rover's would be damned hard to miss. There're no other mechanical ponies on the range."

His last remark prompted a mild chuckle from Bradley.

"Cute," she said.

Payton finally looked up at Scarborough. "Scout isn't some twenty-five-cent children's ride," he said curtly, sharing none of his colleague's amusement. "We should move on instead of wasting our time here."

Scarborough hesitated. Restraint, he thought. As the rover's project director, Payton was used to the golden-boy treatment, and seemed miffed that even an act of God could screw with his agenda. He had urged an immediate start to their recovery mission, but a chain of sudden Force 10 storms with winds blowing at upward of sixty miles per hour—base meteorologists called them *weather bombs*—had imposed a week's delay. A week of hand-wringing and restless conjecture. It was understandable that he'd be wound tight. His superior attitude was more exasperating.

"Okay," Scarborough said in a controlled tone. "Let's go."

And so they did, Scarborough leading in silence for better than a mile. True to his prediction, the pass's terrain changed radically toward its juncture with Wright Valley. Sand the color of tarnished copper first sprinkled its gritty top crust, then fanned out in thicker accumulations, then coated every inch of ground underfoot with dark, heavy drifts. But however useful Scarborough's GPS unit had been in reckoning their progress, it hadn't helped prepare them for the gaining intensity of the wind. It barreled down from the higher elevations, roaring and growling, flinging tattered sheets of sand over them, making every step forward a slow effort.

Scarborough soon found himself concerned that the tumultuous gusts would have blotted out any sign of the rover's path, a feeling that deepened to quiet worry as they toiled onward with nothing for results. It had become almost oppressive when Payton abruptly halted and touched his shoulder.

"Wait!" He pointed. "Over there."

Scarborough and Bradley turned to look. Scant yards to their left a chain of humpbacked dunes extended along the wall of the pass, unmistakable wheel marks threading up and down their flanks.

The group scurried across the sand to inspect them, crouching together at the base of a dune.

"The deeper, the fresher. And these are pretty deep," Scarborough said. "They can't be more than a couple weeks old, puts 'em in the right ballpark time-wise."

"It's our baby, Alan." Bradley indicated a stippled pattern in the tracks and got out her digital camera for some snapshots. "We couldn't ask for better identification."

Scarborough nodded. Scout's cleated titanium wheels would have left just such imprints. And their close spacing suggested the vehicle was too small to be anything but an unmanned drone. Also, his earlier remark to Bradley hadn't been a colorful exaggeration. There truly *weren't* any other mechanical ponies on the range. To reduce the environmental impact of their activities and preserve the dry valleys as a scientific resource, field workers refrained from operating wheeled or tractor-belted vehicles on ice-free ground, making the snowmobiles that towed their supplies and equipment across lake crusts the only motorized conveyances in use. This self-imposed restriction had been observed for three decades before it was formalized in a multinational code of conduct to which the United States was a signatory. In their negotiations to secure approval for the rover's trials, UpLink and NASA had been firm about guaranteeing participant states that they would avoid leaving behind a mess—or in the language of their written application, would "minimize and remedy any disturbances caused to the natural landscape."

Ultimately, though, the good name of Roger Gordian, UpLink's founder and standard bearer, had carried more weight than diplomatic niceties or signed promises. As a practical matter, implementation of any treaty in this freezing, desolate wilderness relied on the honor system. Somebody broke the rules, who was going to catch on?

The story was in the math, and Scarborough had done his calculations long ago. Antarctica's total land area was five and a half million square miles, double the size of Australia, triple that of Europe. With a winter population of about two thousand cocooned in the research stations, and maybe four times that many summer residents, it averaged between fifty and a hundred fifty thousand miles of open space per person, depending on the season. A tough chunk of real estate to police and patrol. Almost impossible, in fact, because the same agreement that regulated experimentation in the dry valleys imposed a continent-wide ban on military bases, effectively forbidding armed enforcement of its protocols.

But none of this presently concerned Scarborough. He rose from his squat, took his binoculars from the case strapped around his neck, and raised them to his eyes. What he saw of the rover's trail encouraged him. Yes, the wind had scrambled the trail. Completely erased entire segments of it. And was dissipating it into spindling little wisps of sand even as he watched. However, it remained plain enough for several hundred yards before cutting around a sharp eastward bend in the pass.

"All right," he said. "Looks like we're in business—"

Scarborough stopped. He'd noticed something out of the corner of his vision. A momentary wink of brightness far above him on the pass's left wall, formed by the great soaring flank of Mount Cerberus. Curious, he turned the binoculars toward the slope for a better look, but saw only a series of naked ledges climbing to its uppermost reaches between vertical thrusts of stone.

"Find something of interest?" Bradley asked, coming over from behind him.

Scarborough waited before he replied. The flash of light did not repeat. Nor could he be sure exactly where it had originated. Then his view through the glasses blurred and he grunted with annoyance. In extreme cold weather conditions, the vapor from your exhalations puffed up into the air, condensed on the optical lenses of your field glasses, and quickly skimmed them with frost. It was the same with the snow goggles. Worse, really, since your eyelashes could freeze together if you removed them. This charming ECW phenomena didn't get mentioned much in survival handbooks, presumably because their authors considered it a nuisance rather than a hazard. Polies knew the distinction could shift in a heartbeat.

He lowered the binoculars, wiped them with his mitten, and slid them back into their case.

"The sun reflecting off a glaze of ice, I think." He shrugged. "Just happened to catch my eye."

Payton had also approached now, his rigid stance the image of impatience. Scarborough hastened along Scout's trail before he could invite another complaint that they were dawdling.

Bull Pass narrowed as it turned east, its walls pressing in close. Shadows spilled down their sides and pooled on the floor of the trench like black syrup. Channeled into rapid currents, the wind seemed to have inflicted its worst punishment upon the crumbled and broken left slope, a slow erosional process that must have begun untold centuries before. In his mind's eye, Scarborough pictured some colossal ruminant grazing away at the ridgeline with stubborn, tireless persistence, leaving a huge projection of stone here, a fallen granitic slab there, spitting irregular mounds of rubble into the breaches. Opposite, Cerberus loomed in stark contrast: dominant, monolithic, its grooved face darkened with mountain shadows from base to icy brow.

It was perhaps thirty minutes later when Scarborough rounded a broad shoulder of rock and first saw the notch about a half mile up ahead. He paused for a long moment, suddenly reminded of the time he'd visited the Grand Canyon as a youngster. His parents had given him an assortment of educational materials in advance of that summer trip. Books, videos, travel brochures, the works. He'd digested them until he thought he had learned everything there was to know about the place. But when he actually stood gazing out over the chasm from the South Rim, Scarborough realized that neither words nor pictures could capture how it felt to see it with his own eyes. He recognized the natural landmarks. Shiva Temple. Hale's Needle. Point Hanover. They looked just as they did in photos, yet were altogether different. This did not seem a contradiction to him. With his eleventh birthday barely past, Alan Scarborough had in a single shot gained a fundamental and lasting appreciation of direct participatory experience . . . as well as an insatiable yearning for it. He'd never since been content observing reality through windows of separation, framed within neatly bordered perspectives, but had always felt the urge to leap outside to where his feet touched the ground. Why else had he eagerly joined the Marines with an ROTC assignment out of college, and on retirement pursued a civilian gig in a land where the Ice Age had missed its final curtain by ten thousand years? Why else?

Scarborough studied the deep V-shaped notch near the valley intersection with rapt fascination. Like the photos and descriptions in those boyhood references, his satellite readouts had offered detailed information about the area's geographic features. He had come here prepared. But the sheer immensity of the cleft overwhelmed his senses. And stirred his imagination. He again envisioned gargantuan creatures dining on solid rock as they thundered through the ancient pass. What he knew of glacial migrations was momentarily forgotten. Science was Bradley's and Payton's game. His was to see their expedition through the valleys and return them to Cold Corners safe and sound, ideally with the salvaged Martian rover in their possession. He could allow himself a brief flight of fancy. And right now it was easy to believe that the notch in the side of the pass had been left by a prehistoric monster of indescribable scale. Not the same trudging forager that might have munched away at the slope behind him like a fat hippopotamus snacking on reeds and brush. This would have been something more akin to a tyrannosaur. A lunging beast of prey that took vicious bites out of the earth's hide, gulping them down whole, its fangs leaving permanent gouges wherever they sank in.

It looks like a wound, Scarborough thought. A wound that never healed shut.

Bradley had strode up alongside him and was peering through her binoculars, but a glance in her direction revealed she hadn't been focused on the notch. Instead she was scanning the ground. As Scarborough guessed he should have been doing.

"I don't get it," she said.

"Get what?"

She looked at him.

“The rover’s tracks,” she said, and handed over the binocs. “Check them out for yourself.”

Scarborough readily obliged, his gaze following the parallel bands of Scout’s wheel marks. They coursed across the open sand in a fairly straight line for what he estimated was a hundred yards, and then swung away toward the notch. That didn’t surprise him. Rather, it seemed to confirm that the probe had been operational when it reached the area, since one of its selective tasks was to explore, image, and collect geologic samples from the notch’s interior. Why had Bradley sounded so puzzled then?

It took a minute before he understood.

Just when the tracks got to the flat apron of the notch, they evaporated. And insofar as Scarborough could judge from his vantage, did not resume at any point beyond.

“Crap,” he said. “Seems we’re about to lose the trail.”

“Yes,” she said. “What do you make of it?”

Scarborough was thoughtful. “I don’t know. Could be it was scrubbed clean by wind.”

Bradley’s silence betrayed her skepticism. Scarborough couldn’t blame her. His explanation had been pretty feeble. There was a significant distance between the spot where Scout’s wheel marks stopped and the entrance to the notch, and the gusts in this section of the pass were blowing a trifle less vigorously than in the last stretch his party had covered. It seemed improbable that the trail wouldn’t continue further on. At the very least it should have left some partial remains. But from where he stood, the rover might as well have been swallowed up by the sand.

Scarborough’s view through the glasses clouded from his breath, and he rubbed the steam off before it could freeze. Then he wiped his snow goggles. Not that he needed to bother. He knew what he had seen. Or hadn’t seen, to put it more aptly. Neither the wheel marks nor the rover would materialize at his command. That magic trick exceeded a Coke-bottle genie’s abilities.

“What’s happening?” Payton demanded from over his shoulder. “Why are we standing here?”

Scarborough turned to him. The guy was like a perverse talking doll with about four lines of nastiness recorded on its voice chip. Still, he was owed a straight answer. Scarborough would have preferred one that was simultaneously optimistic, but didn’t know how to pair his goals. He chose between them, braced for Payton’s reaction.

“Scout’s trail wipes out short of the notch,” he said. “From what we can see, it doesn’t pick up again.”

Payton looked at him.

“Short of the notch,” Payton repeated. Absorbing the implications of Scarborough’s words at once. “Which would be approximately where the rover lost contact with base.”

Scarborough nodded.

“I don’t understand,” Payton said. “If that’s as far as Scout traveled, that is where it still ought to be.”

Scarborough might have agreed that was the logical conclusion. Except the probe *wasn’t* there. And though a slew of possibilities had occurred to him, none convincingly accounted for its MIA status.

“We’ll keep going. See what’s what,” he said. “I wish I had a better plan.”

Payton thrust a hand at him, palm up. “Pass me the binoculars,” he said with derision. “I want to take a look. With my own eyes.”

Scarborough was tempted to suggest that Payton might also want to use his own field glasses, which were hanging in their case over the front of his parka. Instead he handed them to him.

“No problem,” Scarborough said. “Give ’em back to Shevaun when you’re done.”

Bradley nodded to Scarborough in a way he interpreted as sympathetic. It made him feel appreciated. And glad he’d curbed his irritation.

They waited as Payton studied the trail. A minute or two later he let the glasses sink to his chest.

“This isn’t possible, it—” He suddenly interrupted himself. “Wait. Do either of you hear that noise?”

Scarborough did. It was a kind of high metallic buzz that seemed to drill through the blanketing rush of the wind from an unresolved distance. He glanced at Bradley. The inquisitive tilt of her head revealed she was listening carefully to the sound, trying to pinpoint its source. While the reverberant acoustics of their surroundings made that hard, Scarborough thought it was issuing from the direction of the notch.

Payton evidently thought the same. He brought the glasses back up, aimed them at the yawning, jagged scar in the wall of the pass.

“What the hell is this?” he said. His voice was shaky. An instant later, his hands were too. “Scarborough, do your job. *Will you do your goddamned job and answer me?*”

Scarborough stared at the notch. At first nothing caught his attention. Then an object darted out onto the sand. From a distance it seemed a mere speck. But it was coming on at an incredible speed, growing larger in his vision with a quickness that matched.

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