FRANCIS GEORGE RAYER

STATIC TROUBLE

Most authors write about Earth-type planets where human beings can at least exist fairly comfortably. Author Rayer writes about one which is the equivalent of Hades — its soil disintegrated siliceous rock and powdered quartz and mica, light enough to float under static repulsion. Try living in that atmosphere !

Joe opened the hut door. The heat leapt in at him like a physical thing and he shielded his goggled eyes with a dustproof gauntlet. A hot wind blew against this side of the building, carrying the usual gritty powder that clogged every pore. He pulled down his dustproof nose-and-mouth protector, and closed the door, standing outside.

The wind had not driven away the customary hovering layers of dust and visibility was a mere three or four paces. Away to Joe’s left lightning flashed redly, its exact position hid, and thunder roared above the wind and shook the hut door. Joe hoped that Dr. Orekden and the others were safe.

A second flash came very close, and Joe plodded along besides the hut. Dust clung to his goggles and clothing, attracted and held by the static that was the bugbear of the planet. Joe swore to relieve his feelings, and halted where the hut joined another. His back sank into the two or three inches of dust that covered the vertical walls. Other particles came, clinging, blending him into the background of brownish grey.

A man came from the second building, hooded as against a snowstorm, cursing and beating his arms to dislodge the dust. From an arm’s length he stared into Joe’s face.

“ It’s not wise to have any men out in a wind like this, Captain Merity,” he shouted. “ You should know that.”

Joe lifted the mouth protector and spat dust, irritated. “ The wind’s risen since they left, Mr. Wyatt.” Why add that he had come out to find them, but could scarcely see the end of the hut ? His reasons weren’t Wyatt’s business.

Wyatt put his back to the pushing wind, garments flapping like flags. “ Is Dr. Orekden with them ?”

“ He is. The choice was his.”

Joe lowered the protector. This was no place to talk. He slapped his long, loose-jointed arms, dislodging dust clouds, and examined the heavens. Two hours to sunset, but the

dust would bring darkness sooner. The planet's sun, from Earth an insignificant dot at the North limb of the Hercules group, was filtered to a ruddy glow. He lifted his mouth piece, his back set to the wind, his bony jaw gathering a beard of dust.

" It's getting late, but Taylor has radio."

Wyatt grunted ill-humouredly and returned to the hut. The doorway spilled light momentarily, outlining Wyatt's broad, heavy body. His antagonism was not insignificant, Joe thought. Men this far from home needed to work together harmoniously; divided, individuals could not survive. The door closed, leaving gloom.

Joe swallowed. His throat was rough. Nothing but enveloping dust ever since the Wallace had landed, he thought morosely. Nor had Dr. Orekden christened the planet Heisswelt for nothing. The thermometer in the hut stood at over a hundred, and that was not unusual.

Beyond the end of the huts, shadows moved in the dust, merging, growing into three men who staggered like exhausted desert travellers. Joe went towards them, eyes searching for the fourth.

The leader of the three halted, shaking dust from the folds of his hood and garments. Grit-inflamed eyes peered out at Joe, and the man rubbed the windows of his goggles, as if unable to see.

" Where is Orekden ?" Joe bellowed at him, facing the wind.

The other rubbed hands over his face and chin, lifted the protector, and spat.

" Lightning got him, Captain."

Joe felt shocked, incredulous. "Our luck can't be that bad!"

" It wasn't luck." Taylor's face was smeared with sweat and dust. " You told us to keep low, and we did. But Dr. Orekden had some notion of finding how strong the static is, or getting a view above the dust. He wasn't much higher than any of us when it happened."

" You're sure he was dead ?" Joe knew the question hopeless : Taylor was reliable.

" Dead as this." Taylor swung a respirator from his belt — its metal was melted, its plastic parts destroyed. " He never knew what happened."

Joe nodded. It was not unexpected. A dim halo was beginning to form round the three men's heads, and the danger on higher ground would be a thousand times more

severe.

“ Let’s all get inside,” he ordered.

The static discharge clung round them as they walked, eerie tongues of faint blue fire that were ten times stronger on the lightning conductors of the huts. The hot wind carried them along, and Taylor closed the door and stood with his back to it, shedding dust.

“ Heisswelt is too hot a spot for men,” he said. “ It was too hot for Dr. Orekden. A man can adjust and endure — but only within limits.”

“ And you think conditions here fall outside those limits ?” Joe asked, removing him face protector.

“ I do — well outside.”

Joe thought Taylor might be right. “ One of you tell Mr. Wyatt.”

He sat on the edge of a bench, listening to the rush of wind and powdery sand upon the walls of the building, and the murmur of the motor driven air purifier. Seats, bench, papers and equipment were covered with a fine, grey dust, and the room was hazed as with cigarette smoke. Speaking left a gritty earthy taste in the mouth. It was six weeks since the Wallace landed, and the air had never been free of the dust . . .

Watson Wyatt dwarfed the crewmen physically, and in Joe’s opinion he had been almost Dr. Orekden’s equal. But there was a hard, dogmatical side to his character that Joe did not like. Taylor had moved from the door, letting Wyatt in.

“ As I see it we’re finished here now Dr. Orekden is dead, sir,” Taylor said.

Joe noted the flat helplessness that had not sounded in Taylor’s voice while Orekden lived.

“ You believe the dust has us beaten ?”

Thunder echoed, but more distantly. The wind was dropping. Taylor’s red rimmed eyes met Joe’s gaze.

“ I do, sir. It never settles. It’s the dryness, heat, and friction causing mutual repulsion between particles, Dr. Orekden said. We can’t do anything about that. If it were ordinary dust we might beat it. You can get clear of ordinary dust, but not this stuff. And it never settles.”

“ That’s true.” Joe recalled long, airless days when the dust hovered in layers, kept there by mutual repulsion. The dust particles had like charges ; so did the surface of the covering of dust which obliterated the planet. Those like charges caused repulsion, and the dust never settled. But the moment man, machine, or building touched the ground there was an electrically neutralised target for all the charged, floating particles drifting by. They sped like dust towards a rubbed ebonite rod, and clung.

Wyatt moved on his stool, and it creaked. “ I agree with Taylor,” he said heavily. “ In my view Dr. Orekden should have been warned not to go out.” He gave Joe a censorious glance. “ But it’s too late now. We’ll never beat this dust, and there’s the risk of serious and permanent damage to the Wallace or other equipment. We can’t survive in a perpetual dust storm.”

Taylor nodded and two of the other men grunted agreement. Joe let the remark about Orekden pass. Taking it up would only cause argument.

“ I’m convinced Dr. Orekden had at least some half-formed idea about beating the dust,” he said factually.

Wyatt made an abrupt sound. “ I doubt it ! And we’ll never know.”

An argument was brewing. Not the first, Joe thought. There had been disputes in plenty — sometimes between Wyatt and himself ; sometimes between Wyatt and Orekden ; sometimes between Wyatt and some of the men. But always, it seemed, with Wyatt prominent. Of late, the men had seemed to be siding with Wyatt, and Wyatt obviously had noticed it.

“ I expect Captain Merity still thinks we should stay here and choke to death,” Wyatt’s voice declared above the murmur of discussion.

Joe stood up. “ I’m not yet convinced failure is as inevitable as you make it seem,” he said, and moved to the door. As he let himself out, he heard only half of Wyatt’s rejoinder.

The wind had dropped as suddenly as it had come. That was the usual pattern of storms. Electrical tension grew and grew until lightning came. Quick winds sprang up, dying when the electrical discharges from sky to earth ceased.

The sun was probably just on the horizon, judging by the lurid red of the heavens. In six weeks Joe had not seen the sun from ground level, or witnessed a sunrise or sunset which was not a dull ruddy hue filtered of other colours by the suspended dust. Only occasionally from the top port of the Wallace could the sun be seen. The dust then lay like a sea below, undulating slowly, concealing huts, vehicles and men.

Joe bent, taking up a palmful of settled particles. It was gritty, almost an extremely fine sand. Analysis had shown it to be mostly disintegrated siliceous rock, with an admixture of powdered white quartz and mica. A deadly combination, light enough to float under static repulsion. Gravity made a carpet-like layer, and that layer was so good an insulator that its surface remained charged, preventing the other dust from settling.

There was still sufficient tension to make a rim of blue along the edge of the roof. Joe slapped his gauntlets together, and dislodged dust from his face protector. He wondered if he were too young to be captain of a ship like the Wallace with all the responsibility that brought. Long boned, with a lean, quizzical face, his habit of never giving up had earned him that position. He did not plan to change his character merely because Orekden was dead and Heisswelt no paradise.

The planet had no satellite and starlight could not pierce the hovering dust. When darkness came it would be complete. Joe let himself into the second building. When they had lowered the sections from the ship six weeks before, and erected the hut, they had supposed the dust was temporary, raised by some spent storm.

Inside, a man with a lean, sad face was working on the air purifier motor. A cable brought current from the ship. This was the third time in six weeks Hughes had stripped and replaced the brushgear, Joe thought. Nothing could keep all the abrasive dust out.

Hughes wiped his sweaty face with a rag. “ Wyatt try to blow you up, Joe ?”

“ A bit, Andy.”

“ He’s got influence on Earth — the kind that makes folk listen. He’s accustomed to having folk listen, and thinks you should too.”

Joe shrugged. He moved the motor casing with a toe. A thin cloud of dust rose.

“ How long shall we last ?”

Andy Hughes sat back on his heels. “ Perhaps another six weeks. After that some spares will be so low it’ll be wise to leave — unless we can rid ourselves of this dust. It penetrates everything. Where there’s air, there’s dust. Oil filters theoretically good for thousands of hours have to be changed twice a day. It’s not rained in six weeks and probably never will, Toby says. There’s no water, or we might improvise some kind of bubble filters, to save our spares and us.”

Joe helped him replace the cover. They started the blower that was supposed to drive cleaned air into the building. To Joe’s ear it lacked its usual smooth hum.

Hughes nodded. “ The working life of any machine is only a fraction of normal. We have to beat the dust, or leave.”

The words came often to Joe’s mind before he slept that night. Unfortunately there was no other planet within light years of Heisswelt, discovered five years before by an exploring ship that carried Orekden. A port would thus have been of great value. Joe wondered whether the next day’s routine explorations away from the camp would discover anything new. He doubted it. The planet was flat, dead. There were no mountains, no hills, no water. A surface stone large as a man’s hands was an object for comment. When the planet cooled there, had been too much soft rock at surface level. If valleys had existed, dust had filled them flush.

Joe awoke with the usual taste of gritty dust in his mouth. Andy Hughes was talking to Toby Farrel, expedition’s meteorological officer, who was preparing to leave the hut. A morning breeze, hot and parching, carried dust past as they opened the door. Farrel pulled up his hood.

“ The weather sample we’ve had is representative of conditions all the year round,” he said. “ I’d hoped otherwise. This planet has no tilt, and hence no equivalent of Earth’s yearly weather cycle. It’s hotter near the equator, a bit cooler near the poles, that’s all.”

He went into the second hut. Hughes’s fingers closed momentarily on Joe’s arm, preventing him from following.

“ I’ve a word or two, Joe.”

“ We’ll go to the end of the huts.”

They halted there. Dawn was as dull red as sunset had been, and Andy Hughes’s face had the strained, ruddy appearance of a man regarding an open furnace door.

“ The men don’t like it, Joe,” he said. “ I’m on your side. So is Toby. Taylor is a bit doubtful. Wyatt impresses him. The others are pretty much on Wyatt’s side. They’re beginning to feel they risk their lives by staying on here, and that there’s no hope. If Orekden couldn’t solve this difficulty, how can we ?”

Joe studied him. Gritty dust had already blended hood, mask and clothing into each other. Joe felt sad.

“ So Wyatt has half convinced you, Andy ?” he said.

The eyepiece glasses blinked momentarily as Hughes shook his head. “ If there’s

argument or trouble, I'm on your side. But there are times when a man should admit he's beaten."

" I didn't gain my captain's rank by giving up !"

" So Wyatt keeps telling the men." Hughes spat, lowered his mouth piece, breathed deeply, and raised it again. " He's saying you're afraid to admit defeat."

Joe agreed it could look that way. " That all ?"

" Not quite. Dr. Orekden was technically leader of this expedition. Wyatt is inclined to consider himself your superior — "

" The devil he does !"

" I'm afraid so. He worked with Orekden years ago, and his influence half financed this trip. If the men are on his side, he may try going over your head."

It could work, Joe thought. There were twelve men, all told. Boredom, fear, hopelessness, the eternal dust — all made Wyatt's hints that it was folly to stay seem good listening.

Hughes went in, but Joe did not follow him. It would soon be necessary to choose between two evils : admit Wyatt was right, and leave ; or defy him and stay.

A figure appeared ten paces away in the dust, and Joe wondered who was out. The man, unclear because of the poised dust, was moving uncertainly and seemed to be studying the huts. Joe raised his mouth protector to call, but hesitated. Limited as visibility was, he suddenly felt that the figure was too short and slender to be one of the party.

Excitement ran through him. He stepped forward, had covered several places before the other saw him. For moments longer the figure was still. He had a very thin, tanned face and wore a compact, belted jerkin. At almost touching distance Joe halted. Eye to eye, they watched each other. Then someone opened the hut door and called Joe by name. He glanced at the building, and when his gaze returned he was alone.

A native, Joe thought. This put everything in new perspective. Where other beings could live, so could men ! Elated, he turned back to the hut.

Andy Hughes stood outside, waiting for him. " We've been wondering if you'd cancelled today's expedition — "

" Cancel it !" Joe chuckled. " Not after what I've just seen — a native, or I'm Dutch !

The first living thing we've found !"

Wyatt and Taylor came from the hut. Wyatt's gaze was heavy behind his protector.

" And where is this native ?"

" He went that way." Joe realised it looked weak. Worse, he saw that neither Wyatt nor Taylor believed him. For the moment, their disbelief seemed unimportant.

Wyatt placed his thumbs in his belt. " I'll believe you when I see for myself." He shook dust from his mouth protector, lowering it to breathe, then lifting it again. " Even if it is true, how does it help us ?"

Joe felt his elation fade. As Wyatt said, it might not help. Living things could adapt, and it was possible that the native could exist in conditions impossible for men.

" Our task now is to find where they live," Joe said.

He had not imagined it would be easy. Their expeditions were on foot, by compass bearing, and visibility was never beyond twenty yards. At that limit a man might be seen as a dim, shadowy form. The heat was extreme. Penetrating dust stuck to their skin, and reached nose, mouth and throat. The first day was calm, but they found nothing. On the day after the native had appeared an electrical storm drifted slowly overhead, with lightning playing frequently beyond the pall of dust, and they stayed in the huts. The following day the expedition was again fruitless.

Wyatt and the men grumbled openly. Hughes looked miserable. Joe longed for a clear day, or even one brief hour of visibility. As that hour would never materialise, the only possibility was to bivouac at nightfall, instead of returning, and thus increase the radius of exploration. Joe decided he would take Hughes, Farrel and Taylor, leaving the other seven men with Wyatt. A watch of three usually occupied the ship and the seven could break the day on duty there.

The camp buildings were almost immediately lost behind the dust poised in the hot, still air. Though their journey was towards the direction from which the native had appeared, Joe feared their chances of discovering him, or others, was minute. They walked as fast as the powdered earth would allow, with pedometer and compass to check distance and direction. Laden, masked against the dust, only a very strong man could average as much as three miles in each sweltering hour.

Andy Hughes moved with a swinging stride economical in effort. Toby Farrel carried a minimum of instruments, and Taylor walked stolidly, mechanically, with the short-range radio. Talking was an effort and their progress was strangely silent over the carpet of dust.

Joe wiped his goggle windows often. The ship's supply of anti-static cleaning tissue had long since been used, and dust found and adhered to any bare surface almost immediately. The hovering particles made a grey brown fog, but the normal fog-penetrating equipment of the ship had proved useless against so much solid material in suspension. Sweat ran down Joe's cheeks, and out under the mask, where the clogging dust stuck.

When the sun was high the heat was extreme. Dust hung in layers, according to particle size and composition, swirling round them as they moved, clinging so that they had to beat their hoods, face protectors and garments.

They halted after noon, resting. Taylor lifted his mask, holding his breath, and wiped his face. He expectorated.

" We could pass a native within spitting distance and not see him," he stated.

The mask was replaced. Joe beat his clothing, silent, half agreeing. Toby took readings with sealed instruments, making notes.

" The aneroid's stuck at about 31.2, as usual," he said. " This is permanent."

His free hand took in the surrounding clouds of dust. With his mask back, only his slighter build distinguished him from the others.

Men could not live in such conditions, Joe thought dispiritedly. Heat, dryness, dust, air parched of moisture, and the planet's surface worse than a desert. His eyes were sore, but he dare not remove the goggles. When he held a hand before his face he could see tiny charged particles, drifting near, speed towards it, each infinitely small, but building up the inch of enveloping dust that slowly cloaked them all. The effect was worst during the hours after noon, when the mutual repulsion between particles was strongest. Dust disturbed by their weary feet did not settle, but hung in their wake like brown smoke, held aloft by electrical stresses which overcame gravity.

The sun was red at mid-day, and a dim, ruddy brown at sunset. Never before had they been so far from camp. They could go a little farther on the morrow, but must then turn back.

They marched until the grave risk of losing contact in the murk brought them to a standstill. The gritty dust of one spot was as good a bed as that of any other, and they settled down to rest, three trying to sleep while one watched.

Heavier particles were settling, and would continue to do so until dawn. It was unsafe to lie still for more than half an hour, and in that time the blanketing layers of dust

blended a man into his surroundings. At about midnight Joe rose for the sixth time, slapping his clothes and mask, sneezing through his filter, and certain he knew the form Hades would take. Farrel was standing a yard away, just visible by the dimmed glow of the battery lamp hooked on his belt. He lifted his mouth protector.

“ I’ve given up hope of ever seeing more of this planet,” he said quietly. He breathed, raised the protector again. “ It’s as bad for machines as for men — everything has to be sealed, dust-proof, self contained.”

Joe grunted agreement. When coming into orbit and landing they had observed enough to make them belive their experience of conditions was representative of the whole planet.

He watched while Farrel lay down to rest. Fatigue might make a man sleep too long. Taylor was groaning, and Joe roused him, sweeping his hood and filter clean of dust. For a long time Taylor sat with his arms round his knees, then he lay down again, on one side. The night dust began to rain on him, slowly building up its obliterating blanket.

Dawn came as a slow relieving of the complete darkness. Joe, his watch over, had dozed, sitting with his pack at his back. Hughes had taken his place, and Taylor had watched until dawn. Andy Hughes seemed very tired, Joe thought. His lean figure sagged, and when he spoke he revealed thin, haggard lips. Toby Farrel, first to take watch, was still lying in the gloom. Joe went to rouse him, dropped on one knee, and knew it was too late. The dustfall was a full inch thick over mask, body, hood and filter. Expiration, the only way of clearing the dust when a man slept, had ceased.

Hughes’s face was grey under the protector. “ He was sitting up when I finished my watch.”

Taylor stood ankle deep in the dust. “ I didn’t notice anything amiss with him — ”

Fatigue robbed his voice of regret. It was a statement of the inevitable. They scooped a shallow channel, took the notes, covered the dusty body with handfuls of dust, and stood a moment with bowed heads.

“ We can allow two more hours outward march, at the most,” Joe said morosely.

They ate briefly, grit and the taste of it accompanying their food. When they were ready to go, dust had obliterated the spot where Toby lay so that never again could human eye or hand discover it.

An hour after they had started thunder began to rumble distantly, and a wind sprang up, whipping dust from the carpet over which they laboured. Soon lightning flickered

behind them, flashes near but hidden. A corona began to glow round their heads and shoulders, and Joe felt his hair striving to rise.

“ It was like this when Orekden was killed,” Taylor said, mask momentarily raised.

Somewhere very near a double flash discharged to earth. An upright man was a conspicuous earthed pole. They lay flat waiting, ruddy light playing around behind the dust and thunder shocking their ears.

The storm moved very slowly. During a lull Joe suggested Taylor radio their base. Hunched over the equipment, his back to the blanket of flying dust, Taylor seemed occupied with his message. But when he came quickly to Joe’s side, and sat down, he was shaking his head.

“ The set’s not radiating,” he said under his raised mask. He pointed to the electrical discharge seeking the short extended aerial rod. “ It’s not built to stand that kind of thing — ”

“ You can’t get it working ?”

“ Not out here. Not if our lives depend on it.”

Joe felt uneasy. Directional readings from the ship could help a homecoming party.

Thunder still rumbled quite near when they rose, going on. The dust was slightly thinner, as always after a storm. The return journey would have to be by compass and pedometer. A bit chancy, Joe thought.

He was plodding on, leading, when Andy Hughes’s call brought him about. Hughes pointed to something too far behind for Joe to see.

“ Somebody’s coming !”

Two outlines showed unclearly, rising and falling, seeming to grow taller.

“ Wyatt !” Andy Hughes said under his mask.

The wind was behind the newcomers, pushing them on in the wake of skimming clouds of dust. They halted, unsteady. Joe swore, lifting his mask, dislodging dust caked with sweat.

“ You damn fool Wyatt ! What’s the idea ?”

Wyatt slapped his clothing. He was exhausted, but drawing on reserves of strength.

He raised his mouth protector, revealing dusty lips that snarled.

“ The idea’s sound enough, Merity ! I never believed your tale of a native. So I decided not to risk your coming back with some lie I couldn’t disprove.” He spat, lowered the mask, breathed, and lifted it again. “ It’s as simple as that. I’ll see any fantastic report you send in isn’t believed. Alternatively, if you’ve found anything, show me.”

Joe studied him, his tingling eyes furious. “ Your job was to help watch the ship and camp, not to follow and bring away another man too !”

Wyatt grunted, derisive. “ What you say doesn’t go any more — and that applies to both me and all the men back at camp.”

A retort came to Joe’s lips, but he left it unsaid. Boredom, lack of progress, discomfort, and Wyatt’s glib tongue, had all done their work. He shrugged, checked his compass bearing, and began to go on. Hughes speeded up, walking by his side. But Taylor drifted back, following Wyatt as a token indication of where his allegiance lay.

“ We’ll soon have to turn back, if we’re to make it,” Andy Hughes said gruffly after ten minutes.

“ I know. I give us another couple of miles.”

“ You’re determined.”

Joe wiped his face. “ I saw that native. Remember ?”

They had covered a mile when static began to crackle audibly in Joe’s ears. The arid dust clung with unusual tenacity, and aurora streamers shed a dancing hue high above the hovering, choking clouds. The heat was intense and when Joe rested to study pedometer and compass he found the needle of the latter making a slow revolution. His eyes prickled, he shook his mask, coughing. A magnetic storm of this intensity had never before been encountered.

They rested, while Wyatt and Taylor grumbled audibly. The needle became still, oscillated, then turned sixty degrees and came to an uncertain halt. Joe watched, fascinated. The reading wavered, then the needle slowly drifted back twenty degrees.

Wyatt got up. Dust had added two inches to his bulk in each direction, obliterating every detail except the goggle windows and mask filter. He slapped the mask, dislodging a cloud which hung round his head.

“ It’s time to take us back, Merity,” he said.

The words had a suppressed snarl, and Wyatt's face under the mask was set. Only his lips moved, showing teeth coated with dust.

Joe coughed, spitting grit. " If we move far before the compass settles we'll never get back."

He expected argument, but Wyatt sat down a couple of paces away, exchanging occasional growls with Taylor. The unseen sun was higher, and heat struck down through the suspended particles. As electrical stresses slowly grew the lower layers of dust began to rise into the air, reducing visibility until Taylor and Wyatt were mere shadows.

Men needed moisture, clear air to breathe, Joe thought. His clothes were saturated with sweat, but the blanket of dust adhering to him prevented evaporation. The heat was intense. Andy Hughes finished his water and flung the container away. Walls of dust surrounded them, hot, dry and impenetrable.

Just after noon the compass settled, but ten minutes later it had again deviated by nearly fifteen degrees. Joe doubted whether any of them would ever see camp or ship again.

He began to wonder if the native had been an illusion. Nothing could live in the dust. The dust covered the planet : therefore it could not support life.

It was a full hour after noon when Joe got up. If the camp was not reached and found by the next morning their chances would be minute. Hughes followed him, and the others, walking like men with burdens.

After two hours march the compass moved five degrees and Joe knew only luck could save them. They might pass within twenty yards of the huts or ship, and not see them, even assuming they could cover the distance, which he doubted.

Taylor's nerve seemed to be going. Once, he stopped, cursing Joe. When he had finished Wyatt pushed up his own mask.

" You've made your suicide our funeral too."

Joe glared at him. " You didn't need to come."

" The hell I didn't, after your damn lying tales."

Joe walked on, leaving Wyatt muttering that the expedition had no leader worth following, with Orekden gone. Once, when they rested, Hughes came near and sat in the dust, arms over knees in a position of extreme fatigue.

“ You — did see a native ?” he asked quietly.

Joe closed his eyes, sweating, exhausted. “ I saw him.”

“ How could natives live in this dust ?”

“ If I knew that, I’d know how to get a useful base on this planet.” Joe wiped his filthy goggles. “ I’m convinced Orekden thought it possible. Unfortunately, he didn’t talk much.”

They went on again, very tired, close together as if each feared to lose his companions. During the afternoon the dust and heat were worst. Joe doubted whether they were within ten miles of their calculated position. It was at least thirty more to base. They had set out fresh from camp, and gone too far.

Towards evening he knew that human endurance had its limits. Multi-coloured lights drifted amid the hovering dust. His feet dragged. He could not maintain his course, nor the step upon which the pedometer depended.

They rested, sitting in a huddled heap, not daring to lie down because the nightfall of dust was adding its layers to the air around them, slowly settling as tension decreased.

The hours of darkness were torment. They walked slowly until the light was so poor that contact would be lost.

“ If we ever get back I’ll see you’re dismissed for risking your men’s lives,” Wyatt said unevenly once.

Joe let it pass. Without rest and water they could never reach camp. Between bouts of near delirium, caused by heat, he struggled up and slapped away the settling dust. He feared Andy Hughes would not last long. Taylor kept up muttered obscenities, behind his mask.

Dawn came as a slow lightening beyond the dust. With no water, they were too parched to swallow. Visibility was perhaps fifteen paces, but decreasing as the sun grew higher and the night dust began to rise.

They walked because to remain still was to admit defeat, and Joe tried to maintain course, though he knew they could never reach their camp now. He had risked everything to find a means of beating the dust, and failed. Fragmented memories drifted across his mind. Dr. Orekden, sure the planet could be used. Images of Earth, of his father, white-haired, smiling : “ Never give up, Joe.” This time, refusing to give up when Wyatt wished, had been fatal.

Noon passed, dreadful with overhead heat. Charged particles clung to them, and Hughes began to stumble and fall. He pushed his mask half aside when Joe lifted him.

“ Leave me here — ”

Joe supported him, walking slowly, heavily, ankle deep in dust. It was the static charge, and hence the attraction of any earthed body, which had defeated them, he thought.

The afternoon was torrid. They lost Taylor, but he came stumbling up behind, unaware they had gone from sight. Heads sunk, shoulders drooping, they crept on.

It was about two hours to nightfall when Joe’s smarting eyes seemed to find a break in the wall of dust ahead. His brain refused to comprehend, but as he walked automatically the break grew to a clear patch where sun shone, and to a city where people a little shorter than men moved, with clear sky above them, trees shading the low buildings, and a dust free atmosphere.

They halted, taking it in, not believing it was real. The far limit of the city could not be distinguished, but beyond it was a hint of green. Near at hand the falling sun threw reflections from what appeared to be a wide moat.

“ Water — ” Wyatt said hoarsely.

He moved forwards, but Joe caught his shoulder, trying to hold him. “ It can’t be water.”

Wyatt pulled away, stumbling into a run. He reached the edge of the moat, knelt down, screamed, and went head first over the side, sliding down a curved glassy surface. A long, blue spark reached out from the near rim of the city, playing on him, and he lay still.

Joe followed slowly, bending where Wyatt had slipped. The moat held no water, but was empty, hard and shiny, surface as glazed as that of a high voltage insulator.

An insulator, Joe thought. Probably silica glass. The planet abounded in the necessary raw material. The city was not earthed, but at the same potential as the drifting dust. Like charges repel. There was no dust over the city, only clear air, high as the sunlit heavens. Men could do the same.

“ I — I think they’re coming out to help us,” Andy Hughes said weakly.

Figures were moving across a high, shimmering bridge to their left, where the moat

was wider. Joe turned from the edge.

“ Let’s go to meet them.”

Never give up, he thought as he walked. He squared his shoulders, walking more briskly, the others following.