



Warrior Race
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Published: 1952

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/29548>

About Sheckley:

Robert Sheckley (July 16, 1928 – December 9, 2005) was an American author. First published in the science fiction magazines of the 1950s, his numerous quick-witted stories and novels were famously unpredictable, absurdist and broadly comical. Sheckley was given the Author Emeritus honor by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America in 2001. There are those who were shocked he was not given the Grand Master Award instead. Commented one scholar, "Kingsley Amis' critical overview of Science Fiction named Sheckley as our field's brightest light. But Sheckley was a humorist, and nowadays this is how our Mark Twains are treated." Source: Wikipedia

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THEY never did discover whose fault it was. Fannia pointed out that if Donnaught had had the brains of an ox, as well as the build, he would have remembered to check the tanks. Donnaught, although twice as big as him, wasn't quite as fast with an insult. He intimated, after a little thought, that Fannia's nose might have obstructed his reading of the fuel gauge.

This still left them twenty light-years from Thetis, with a cupful of transformer fuel in the emergency tank.

"All right," Fannia said presently. "What's done is done. We can squeeze about three light-years out of the fuel before we're back on atomics. Hand me *The Galactic Pilot*—unless you forgot that, too."

Donnaught dragged the bulky microfilm volume out of its locker, and they explored its pages.

The Galactic Pilot told them they were in a sparse, seldom-visited section of space, which they already knew. The nearest planetary system was Hatterfield; no intelligent life there. Sersus had a native population, but no refueling facilities. The same with Illed, Hung and Porderai.

"Ah-ha!" Fannia said. "Read that, Donnaught. If you can read, that is."

"Cascella," Donnaught read, slowly and clearly, following the line with a thick forefinger. "Type M sun. Three planets, intelligent (AA3C) human-type life on second. Oxygen-breathers. Non-mechanical. Religious. Friendly. Unique social structure, described in Galactic Survey Report 33877242. Population estimate: stable at three billion. Basic Cascellan vocabulary taped under Cas33b2. Scheduled for resurvey 2375 A.D. Cache of transformer fuel left, beam coordinate 8741 kgl. Physical descript: Unocc. flatland."

"Transformer fuel, boy!" Fannia said gleefully. "I believe we will get to Thetis, after all." He punched the new direction on the ship's tape. "If that fuel's still there."

"Should we read up on the unique social structure?" Donnaught asked, still poring over *The Galactic Pilot*.

"Certainly," Fannia said. "Just step over to the main galactic base on Earth and buy me a copy."

"I forgot," Donnaught admitted slowly.

"Let me see," Fannia said, dragging out the ship's language library, "Cascellan, Cascellan ... Here it is. Be good while I learn the language." He set the tape in the hypnophone and switched it on. "Another useless tongue in my overstuffed head," he murmured, and then the hypnophone took over.

COMING out of transformer drive with at least a drop of fuel left, they switched to atomics. Fannia rode the beam right across the planet, locating the slender metal spire of the Galactic Survey cache. The plain was no longer unoccupied, however. The Cascellans had built a city around the cache, and the spire dominated the crude wood-and-mud buildings.

"Hang on," Fannia said, and brought the ship down on the outskirts of the city, in a field of stubble.

"Now look," Fannia said, unfastening his safety belt. "We're just here for fuel. No souvenirs, no side-trips, no fraternizing."

Through the port, they could see a cloud of dust from the city. As it came closer, they made out figures running toward their ship.

"What do you think this unique social structure is?" Donnaught asked, pensively checking the charge in a needler gun.

"I know not and care less," Fannia said, struggling into space armor. "Get dressed."

"The air's breathable."

"Look, pachyderm, for all we know, these Cascellans think the proper way to greet visitors is to chop off their heads and stuff them with green apples. If Galactic says unique, it probably means unique."

"Galactic said they were friendly."

"That means they haven't got atomic bombs. Come on, get dressed." Donnaught put down the needler and struggled into an oversize suit of space armor. Both men strapped on needlers, paralyzers, and a few grenades.

"I don't think we have anything to worry about," Fannia said, tightening the last nut on his helmet. "Even if they get rough, they can't crack space armor. And if they're not rough, we won't have any trouble. Maybe these gewgaws will help." He picked up a box of trading articles—mirrors, toys and the like.

Helmeted and armored, Fannia slid out the port and raised one hand to the Cascellans. The language, hypnotically placed in his mind, leaped to his lips.

"We come as friends and brothers. Take us to the chief."

The natives clustered around, gaping at the ship and the space armor. Although they had the same number of eyes, ears and limbs as humans, they completely missed looking like them.

"If they're friendly," Donnaught asked, climbing out of the port, "why all the hardware?" The Cascellans were dressed predominantly in a collection of knives, swords and daggers. Each man had at least five, and some had eight or nine.

"Maybe Galactic got their signals crossed," Fannia said, as the natives spread out in an escort. "Or maybe the natives just use the knives for mumblypeg."

THE city was typical of a non-mechanical culture. Narrow, packed-dirt streets twisted between ramshackle huts. A few two-story buildings threatened to collapse at any minute. A stench filled the air, so strong that Fannia's filter couldn't quite eradicate it. The Cascellans bounded ahead of the heavily laden Earthmen, dashing around like a pack of playful puppies. Their knives glittered and clanked.

The chief's house was the only three-story building in the city. The tall spire of the cache was right behind it.

"If you come in peace," the chief said when they entered, "you are welcome." He was a middle-aged Cascellan with at least fifteen knives strapped to various parts of his person. He squatted cross-legged on a raised dais.

"We are privileged," Fannia said. He remembered from the hypnotic language lesson that "chief" on Cascella meant more than it usually did on Earth. The chief here was a combination of king, high priest, deity and bravest warrior.

"We have a few simple gifts here," Fannia added, placing the gewgaws at the king's feet. "Will his majesty accept?"

"No," the king said. "We accept no gifts." Was that the unique social structure? Fannia wondered. It certainly was not human. "We are a warrior race. What we want, we take."

Fannia sat cross-legged in front of the dais and exchanged conversation with the king while Donnaught played with the spurned toys. Trying to overcome the initial bad impression, Fannia told the chief about the stars and other worlds, since simple people usually liked fables. He spoke of the ship, not mentioning yet that it was out of fuel. He spoke of Cascella, telling the chief how its fame was known throughout the Galaxy.

"That is as it should be," the chief said proudly. "We are a race of warriors, the like of which has never been seen. Every man of us dies fighting."

"You must have fought some great wars," Fannia said politely, wondering what idiot had written up the galactic report.

"I have not fought a war for many years," the chief said. "We are united now, and all our enemies have joined us."

Bit by bit, Fannia led up to the matter of the fuel.

"What is this 'fuel'?" the chief asked, haltingly because there was no equivalent for it in the Cascellan language.

"It makes our ship go."

"And where is it?"

"In the metal spire," Fannia said. "If you would just allow us—"

"In the holy shrine?" the chief exclaimed, shocked. "The tall metal church which the gods left here long ago?"

"Yeah," Fannia said sadly, knowing what was coming. "I guess that's it."

"It is sacrilege for an outworlder to go near it," the chief said. "I forbid it."

"We need the fuel." Fannia was getting tired of sitting cross-legged. Space armor wasn't built for complicated postures. "The spire was put here for such emergencies."

"Strangers, know that I am god of my people, as well as their leader. If you dare approach the sacred temple, there will be war."

"I was afraid of that," Fannia said, getting to his feet.

"And since we are a race of warriors," the chief said, "at my command, every fighting man of the planet will move against you. More will come from the hills and from across the rivers."

Abruptly, the chief drew a knife. It must have been a signal, because every native in the room did the same.

FANNIA dragged Donnaught away from the toys. "Look, lummoX. These friendly warriors can't do a damn thing to us. Those knives can't cut space armor, and I doubt if they have anything better. Don't let them pile up on you, though. Use the paralyzer first, the needler if they really get thick."

"Right." Donnaught whisked out and primed a paralyzer in a single coordinated movement. With weapons, Donnaught was fast and reliable, which was virtue enough for Fannia to keep him as a partner.

"We'll cut around this building and grab the fuel. Two cans ought to be enough. Then we'll beat it fast."

They walked out the building, followed by the Cascellans. Four carriers lifted the chief, who was barking orders. The narrow street outside was suddenly jammed with armed natives. No one tried to touch them yet, but at least a thousand knives were flashing in the sun.

In front of the cache was a solid phalanx of Cascellans. They stood behind a network of ropes that probably marked the boundary between sacred and profane ground.

"Get set for it," Fannia said, and stepped over the ropes.

Immediately the foremost temple guard raised his knife. Fannia brought up the paralyzer, not firing it yet, still moving forward.

The foremost native shouted something, and the knife swept across in a glittering arc. The Cascellan gurgled something else, staggered and fell. Bright blood oozed from his throat.

"I *told* you not to use the needler yet!" Fannia said.

"I didn't," Donnaught protested. Glancing back, Fannia saw that Donnaught's needler was still holstered.

"Then I don't get it," said Fannia bewilderedly.

Three more natives bounded forward, their knives held high. They tumbled to the ground also. Fannia stopped and watched as a platoon of natives advanced on them.

Once they were within stabbing range of the Earthmen, the natives were slitting their own throats!

Fannia was frozen for a moment, unable to believe his eyes. Donnaught halted behind him.

Natives were rushing forward by the hundreds now, their knives poised, screaming at the Earthmen. As they came within range, each native stabbed himself, tumbling on a quickly growing pile of bodies. In minutes the Earthmen were surrounded by a heap of bleeding Cascellan flesh, which was steadily growing higher.

"All right!" Fannia shouted. "Stop it." He yanked Donnaught back with him, to profane ground. "Truce!" he yelled in Cascellan.

The crowd parted and the chief was carried through. With two knives clenched in his fists, he was panting from excitement.

"We have won the first battle!" he said proudly. "The might of our warriors frightens even such aliens as yourselves. You shall not profane our temple while a man is alive on Cascella!"

The natives shouted their approval and triumph.

The two aliens dazedly stumbled back to their ship.

"SO that's what Galactic meant by 'a unique social structure,'" Fannia said morosely. He stripped off his armor and lay down on his bunk. "Their way of making war is to suicide their enemies into capitulation."

"They must be nuts," Donnaught grumbled. "That's no way to fight."

"It works, doesn't it?" Fannia got up and stared out a porthole. The sun was setting, painting the city a charming red in its glow. The beams of light glistened off the spire of the Galactic cache. Through the open

doorway they could hear the boom and rattle of drums. "Tribal call to arms," Fannia said.

"I still say it's crazy." Donnaught had some definite ideas on fighting. "It ain't human."

"I'll buy that. The idea seems to be that if enough people slaughter themselves, the enemy gives up out of sheer guilty conscience."

"What if the enemy doesn't give up?"

"Before these people united, they must have fought it out tribe to tribe, suiciding until someone gave up. The losers probably joined the victors; the tribe must have grown until it could take over the planet by sheer weight of numbers." Fannia looked carefully at Donnaught, trying to see if he understood. "It's anti-survival, of course; if someone didn't give up, the race would probably kill themselves." He shook his head. "But war of any kind is anti-survival. Perhaps they've got rules."

"Couldn't we just barge in and grab the fuel quick?" Donnaught asked. "And get out before they all killed themselves?"

"I don't think so," Fannia said. "They might go on committing suicide for the next ten years, figuring they were still fighting us." He looked thoughtfully at the city. "It's that chief of theirs. He's their god and he'd probably keep them suiciding until he was the only man left. Then he'd grin, say, 'We are great warriors,' and kill himself."

Donnaught shrugged his big shoulders in disgust. "Why don't we knock him off?"

"They'd just elect another god." The sun was almost below the horizon now. "I've got an idea, though," Fannia said. He scratched his head. "It might work. All we can do is try."

At midnight, the two men sneaked out of the ship, moving silently into the city. They were both dressed in space armor again. Donnaught carried two empty fuel cans. Fannia had his paralyzer out.

The streets were dark and silent as they slid along walls and around posts, keeping out of sight. A native turned a corner suddenly, but Fannia paralyzed him before he could make a sound.

They crouched in the darkness, in the mouth of an alley facing the cache.

"Have you got it straight?" Fannia asked. "I paralyze the guards. You bolt in and fill up those cans. We get the hell out of here, quick. When they check, they find the cans still there. Maybe they won't commit suicide then."

The men moved across the shadowy steps in front of the cache. There were three Cascellans guarding the entrance, their knives stuck in their loincloths. Fannia stunned them with a medium charge, and Donnaught broke into a run.

Torches instantly flared, natives boiled out of every alleyway, shouting, waving their knives.

"We've been ambushed!" Fannia shouted. "Get back here, Donnaught!"

Donnaught hurriedly retreated. The natives had been waiting for them. Screaming, yowling, they rushed at the Earthmen, slitting their own throats at five-foot range. Bodies tumbled in front of Fannia, almost tripping him as he backed up. Donnaught caught him by an arm and yanked him straight. They ran out of the sacred area.

"Truce, damn it!" Fannia called out. "Let me speak to the chief. Stop it! Stop it! I want a truce!"

Reluctantly, the Cascellans stopped their slaughter.

"This is war," the chief said, striding forward. His almost human face was stern under the torchlight. "You have seen our warriors. You know now that you cannot stand against them. The word has spread to all our lands. My entire people are prepared to do battle."

He looked proudly at his fellow-Cascellans, then back to the Earthmen. "I myself will lead my people into battle now. There will be no stopping us. We will fight until you surrender yourselves completely, stripping off your armor."

"Wait, Chief," Fannia panted, sick at the sight of so much blood. The clearing was a scene out of the Inferno. Hundreds of bodies were sprawled around. The streets were muddy with blood.

"Let me confer with my partner tonight. I will speak with you tomorrow."

"No," the chief said. "You started the battle. It must go to its conclusion. Brave men wish to die in battle. It is our fondest wish. You are the first enemy we have had in many years, since we subdued the mountain tribes."

"Sure," Fannia said. "But let's talk about it—"

"I myself will fight you," the chief said, holding up a dagger. "I will die for my people, as a warrior must!"

"Hold it!" Fannia shouted. "Grant us a truce. We are allowed to fight only by sunlight. It is a tribal taboo."

The chief thought for a moment, then said, "Very well. Until tomorrow."

The beaten Earthmen walked slowly back to their ship amid the jeers of the victorious populace.

NEXT morning, Fannia still didn't have a plan. He knew that he had to have fuel; he wasn't planning on spending the rest of his life on Cascella, or waiting until the Galactic Survey sent another ship, in fifty years or so. On the other hand, he hesitated at the idea of being responsible for the death of anywhere up to three billion people. It wouldn't be a very good record to take to Thetis. The Galactic Survey might find out about it. Anyway, he just wouldn't do it.

He was stuck both ways.

Slowly, the two men walked out to meet the chief. Fannia was still searching wildly for an idea while listening to the drums booming.

"If there was only someone we could fight," Donnaught mourned, looking at his useless blasters.

"That's the deal," Fannia said. "Guilty conscience is making sinners of us all, or something like that. They expect us to give in before the carnage gets out of hand." He considered for a moment. "It's not so crazy, actually. On Earth, armies don't usually fight until every last man is slaughtered on one side. Someone surrenders when they've had enough."

"If they'd just fight *us*!"

"Yeah, if they only—" He stopped. "We'll fight each other!" he said. "These people look at suicide as war. Wouldn't they look upon war—real fighting—as suicide?"

"What good would that do us?" Donnaught asked.

They were coming into the city now and the streets were lined with armed natives. Around the city there were thousands more. Natives were filling the plain, as far as the eye could see. Evidently they had responded to the drums and were here to do battle with the aliens.

Which meant, of course, a wholesale suicide.

"Look at it this way," Fannia said. "If a guy plans on suiciding on Earth, what do we do?"

"Arrest him?" Donnaught asked.

"Not at first. We offer him anything he wants, if he just won't do it. People offer the guy money, a job, their daughters, anything, just so he won't do it. It's taboo on Earth."

"So?"

"So," Fannia went on, "maybe fighting is just as taboo here. Maybe they'll offer us fuel, if we'll just stop."

Donnaught looked dubious, but Fannia felt it was worth a try.

THEY pushed their way through the crowded city, to the entrance of the cache. The chief was waiting for them, beaming on his people like a jovial war god.

"Are you ready to do battle?" he asked. "Or to surrender?"

"Sure," Fannia said. "Now, Donnaught!"

He swung, and his mailed fist caught Donnaught in the ribs. Donnaught blinked.

"Come on, you idiot, hit me back."

Donnaught swung, and Fannia staggered from the force of the blow. In a second they were at it like a pair of blacksmiths, mailed blows ringing from their armored hides.

"A little lighter," Fannia gasped, picking himself up from the ground. "You're denting my ribs." He belted Donnaught viciously on the helmet.

"Stop it!" the chief cried. "This is disgusting!"

"It's working," Fannia panted. "Now let me strangle you. I think that might do it."

Donnaught obliged by falling to the ground. Fannia clamped both hands around Donnaught's armored neck, and squeezed.

"Make believe you're in agony, idiot," he said.

Donnaught groaned and moaned as convincingly as he could.

"You must stop!" the chief screamed. "It is terrible to kill another!"

"Then let me get some fuel," Fannia said, tightening his grip on Donnaught's throat.

The chief thought it over for a little while. Then he shook his head.

"No."

"What?"

"You are aliens. If you want to do this disgraceful thing, do it. But you shall not profane our religious relics."

DONNAUGHT and Fannia staggered to their feet. Fannia was exhausted from fighting in the heavy space armor; he barely made it up.

"Now," the chief said, "surrender at once. Take off your armor or do battle with us."

The thousands of warriors—possibly millions, because more were arriving every second—shouted their blood-wrath. The cry was taken up on the outskirts and echoed to the hills, where more fighting men were pouring down into the crowded plain.

Fannia's face contorted. He couldn't give himself and Donnaught up to the Cascellans. They might be cooked at the next church supper. For a moment he considered going after the fuel and letting the damned fools suicide all they pleased.

His mind an angry blank, Fannia staggered forward and hit the chief in the face with a mailed glove.

The chief went down, and the natives backed away in horror. Quickly, the chief snapped out a knife and brought it up to his throat. Fannia's hands closed on the chief's wrists.

"Listen to me," Fannia croaked. "We're going to take that fuel. If any man makes a move—if anyone kills himself—I'll kill your chief."

The natives milled around uncertainly. The chief was struggling wildly in Fannia's hands, trying to get a knife to his throat, so he could die honorably.

"Get it," Fannia told Donnaught, "and hurry it up."

The natives were uncertain just what to do. They had their knives poised at their throats, ready to plunge if battle was joined.

"Don't do it," Fannia warned. "I'll kill the chief and then he'll never die a warrior's death."

The chief was still trying to kill himself. Desperately, Fannia held on, knowing he had to keep him from suicide in order to hold the threat of death over him.

"Listen, Chief," Fannia said, eyeing the uncertain crowd. "I must have your promise there'll be no more war between us. Either I get it or I kill you."

"Warriors!" the chief roared. "Choose a new ruler. Forget me and do battle!"

The Cascellans were still uncertain, but knives started to lift.

"If you do it," Fannia shouted in despair, "I'll kill your chief. *I'll kill all of you!*"

That stopped them.

"I have powerful magic in my ship. I can kill every last man, and then you won't be able to die a warrior's death. *Or* get to heaven!"

The chief tried to free himself with a mighty surge that almost tore one of his arms free, but Fannia held on, pinning both arms behind his back.

"Very well," the chief said, tears springing into his eyes. "A warrior must die by his own hand. You have won, alien."

The crowd shouted curses as the Earthmen carried the chief and the cans of fuel back to the ship. They waved their knives and danced up and down in a frenzy of hate.

"Let's make it fast," Fannia said, after Donnaught had fueled the ship.

He gave the chief a push and leaped in. In a second they were in the air, heading for Thetis and the nearest bar at top speed.

The natives were hot for blood—their own. Every man of them pledged his life to wiping out the insult to their leader and god, and to their shrine.

But the aliens were gone. There was nobody to fight.

—ROBERT SHECKLEY

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