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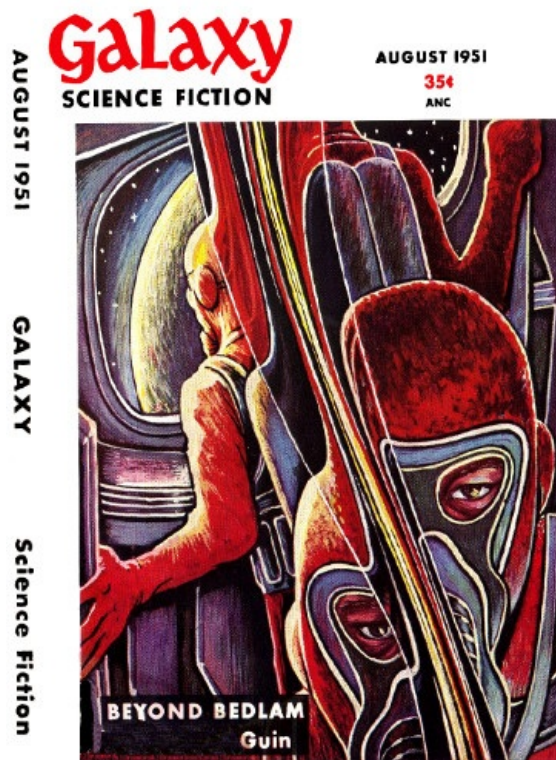
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FIRE AND THE SWORD ***



THE FIRE and THE SWORD

By FRANK M. ROBINSON

Illustrated by EMSH

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Nothing could have seemed pleasanter than that peaceful planet. Then why was a non-suicidal man driven to suicide there? Yet it made sense.

Why do people commit suicide?

Templin tightened his safety belt and lay back on the acceleration bunk. The lights in the cabin dimmed to a dull, red glow that meant the time for takeoff was nearing. He could hear noises from deep within the ship and the tiny whirl of the ventilator fan, filling the air with the sweetish smell of sleeping gas. To sleep the trip away was better than to face the dull monotony of the stars for days on end.

Oh, they kill themselves for lots of reasons. Maybe ill health or financial messes or family difficulties. An unhappy love affair. Or more complex ones, if you went into it deeper. The failure to achieve an ambition, failure to live up to one's own ideals. Weltschmerz, perhaps.

He could smell the bitter fragrance of tobacco smoke mingling with the gas. Eckert had lit a cigarette and was calmly blowing the smoke at the neon "No Smoking" sign, which winked on and off in mechanical disapproval.

He turned his head slightly so he could just see Eckert in the bank facing him. Eckert, one of the good gray men in the Service. The old reliables, the ones who could take almost anything in their stride because, at one time or another, they had had to.



It was Eckert who had come into his office several days ago and told him that Don Pendleton had killed himself.

Only Pendleton wasn't the type. He was the kind who have everything to live for, the kind you instinctively know will amount to something someday. And that was a lousy way to remember him. The clichés always come first. Your memory plays traitor and boils friendship down to the status of a breakfast food testimonial.

The soft red lights seemed to be dancing in the darkness of the cabin. Eckert was just a dull, formless blur opposite him. His cigarette was out.

Eckert had come into his office without saying a word and had watched his scenery-window. It had been snowing in the window, the white flakes making a simple pattern drifting past the glass. Eckert had fiddled with the controls and changed it to sunshine, then to a weird mixture of hail amid the brassy, golden sunlight.

And then Eckert had told him that Pendleton had taken the short way out.

He shouldn't get sentimental. But how the hell else should he remember Pendleton? Try to forget it and drink a toast to him at the next class reunion? And never, never be so crude as to speculate why Pendleton should have done it? If, of course, he had....

The cabin was hazy in the reddish glow, the sleeping gas a heavy perfume.

Eckert and he had talked it out and gone over the records. Pendleton had come of good stock. There had been no mental instability in his family for as far back as the genetic records went. He had been raised in a middle-class neighborhood and attended a local grammar school where he had achieved average grades and had given his instructors the normal amount of trouble. Later, when he had made up his mind to enter the Diplomatic Service, his grades had improved. He had worked hard at it, though he wasn't what you would call a grind. In high school and later in college, he was the well-balanced type, athletic, popular, hard-working.

How long would it be before memories faded and all there was left of Pendleton was a page of statistics? He had been on this team, he had been elected president of that, he had graduated with such and such honors. But try getting a picture of him by reading the records, resurrect him from a page of black print. Would he be human? Would he be flesh and blood? Hell, no! In the statistics Pendleton was the All-Around Boy, the cold marble statue with the finely chiseled muscles and the smooth, blank sockets where the eyes should be. Maybe someday fate would play a trick on a hero-worshipping public and there would actually be kids like that. But they wouldn't be human; they wouldn't be born. Parents would get them by sending in so many box tops.

He was drowsy; the room was filled with the gas now. It would be only a matter of minutes before he would be asleep.

Pendleton had been in his second year as attache on Tunpesh, a small planet with a G-type sun. The Service had stumbled across it recently and decided the system was worth diplomatic recognition of some kind, so Pendleton had been sent there. He had been the first attache to be sent and naturally he had gone alone.

There was no need to send more. Tunpesh had been inspected and certified and approved. The natives were primitive and friendly. Or maybe the Service had slipped up, as it sometimes did, and Tunpesh had received something less than a thorough survey.

And then an unscheduled freighter had put in for repairs, one of the very few ships that ever came by Tunpesh. The captain had tried to pay his respects to Pendleton. Only Pendleton wasn't there. The natives said he had killed himself and showed the captain the little flower-covered plot where they had buried him.

Tunpesh had been Pendleton's second assignment.

The natives were oh-so-friendly. So friendly that he had made sure that a certain box was on board, filled with shiny atomic rifles, needle pistols, and the fat little gas guns. They might be needed. People like Pendleton didn't kill themselves, did they? No, they didn't. But sometimes they were murdered.

It was almost black inside the cabin now; only a thin red line around the ceiling told how close they were to takeoff. His head was thick with drowsiness, his eyelids a heavy weight that he knew he couldn't keep open much longer.

Eckert and he had been chosen to go to Tunpesh and investigate. The two of them, working together, should be able to find out why Pendleton had killed himself.

But that wasn't the real reason. Maybe Eckert thought so, but he knew better. The real reason they were going there was to find out why Pendleton had been killed and who had killed him. That was it.

Who had killed Cock Robin?

The thin red line was practically microscopic now and Templin could feel his lashes lying gently on his cheeks. But he wasn't asleep—not quite. There was something buzzing about in the dim recesses of his mind.

Their information on Tunpesh was limited. They knew that it had no trading concessions or armed forces and that nobody from neighboring systems seemed to know much about it or even visited it. But a staff anthropologist must have been routinely assigned to Tunpesh to furnish data and reports.

"Ted?" he murmured sleepily.

A faint stirring in the black bulk opposite him. "Yes?"

"How come our anthropologist on Tunpesh didn't come across with more information?"

A drowsy mumble from the other cot: "He wasn't there long enough. He committed suicide not long after landing."

The room was a whirling pool of blackness into which his mind was slowly slipping. Takeoff was only seconds away.

Why do people commit suicide?

"It's a nice day, isn't it, Ted?" Eckert took a deep and pleasurable breath. "It's the type of day that makes you feel good just to be alive."

Warm breezes rustled through Eckert's graying hair and tugged gently at his tunic. The air smelled as if it had been washed and faintly perfumed with the balsamy scent of something very much like pine. A few hundred yards away, a forest towered straight and slim and coolly inviting, and brilliantly colored birds whirled and fluttered in the foliage.

The rocketport, where they were standing surrounded by their luggage, was a grassy valley where the all too infrequent ships could land and discharge cargo or make repairs. There was a blackened patch on it now, with little blast-ignited flames dying out around the edges. *It won't be long before it will be green again*, he thought. The grass looked as though it grew fast—it would certainly have plenty of time to grow before the next ship landed.

He looked at the slim, dwindling shape that was the rocket, and was suddenly, acutely aware that he and Templin would be stranded for six months on a foreign and very possibly dangerous planet. And there would be no way of calling for help or of leaving before the six months were up.

He stood there for a moment, drinking in the fresh air and feeling the warmth of the sun against his face. It might be a pleasant six months at that, away from the din and the hustle and confusion, spending the time in a place where the sun was warm and inviting.

I must be getting old, he thought, *thinking about the warmth and comfort. Like old dogs and octogenarians.*

Templin was looking at the scenery with a disappointed expression on his face. Eckert stole a side glance at him and for a fleeting moment felt vaguely concerned. "Don't be disappointed if it doesn't look like cloak-and-dagger right off, Ray. What seems innocent enough on the surface can prove to be quite dangerous underneath."

"It's rather hard to think of danger in a setting like this."

Eckert nodded agreement. "It wouldn't fit, would it? It would be like a famous singer suddenly doing a jazz number in an opera, or having the princess in a fairy tale turn out to be ugly." He gestured toward the village. "You could hardly class that as dangerous from its outward appearance, could you?"

The rocketport was in a small valley, surrounded by low, wooded hills. The village started where the port left off and crawled and wound over the wooded ridges. Small houses of sun-baked, white-washed mud crouched in the shadow of huge trees and hugged the banks of a small stream.

It looked fairly primitive, Eckert thought, and yet it didn't have the earmarks, the characteristics of most primitive villages. It didn't seem cluttered or dirty and you didn't feel like beating a hasty retreat when the wind was blowing toward you.

A few adults were watching them curiously and the usual bunch of kids that always congregated around rocketports quickly gathered. Eckert stared at them for a moment, wondering what it was that seemed odd about them, and they stared back with all the alert dignity of childhood. They finally came out on the field and clustered around him and Templin.

Templin studied them warily. "Better watch them, Ted. Even kids can be dangerous."

It's because you never suspect kids, Eckert thought, *you never think they'll do any harm. But they can be taught. They could do as much damage with a knife as a man could, for instance. And they might have other weapons.*

But the idea still didn't go with the warm sun and the blue sky and the piny scent of the trees.

One of the adults of the village started to walk toward them.

"The reception committee," Templin said tightly. His hand went inside his tunic.

He couldn't be blamed for being jumpy, Eckert realized. This was his first time out, his first mission like this. And, of course, Pendleton had been a pretty good friend of his.

"I'd be very careful what I did," Eckert said softly. "I would hate to start something merely because I misunderstood their intentions."

The committee of one was a middle-aged man dressed in a simple strip of white cloth twisted about his waist and allowed to hang freely to his knees. When he got closer, Eckert became less sure of his age. He had the firm, tanned musculature of a much younger man, though a slightly seamed face and white hair aged him somewhat. Eckert still had the feeling that if you wanted to know his exact age, you'd have to look at his teeth or know something about his epiphyseal closures.

"You are *menshars* from Earth?" The voice was husky and pleasant and the pronunciation was very clear. Eckert regarded him thoughtfully and made a few mental notes. He wasn't bowing and scraping like most natives who weren't too familiar with visitors from the sky, and yet he was hardly either friendly or hostile.

"You learned our language from Pendleton and Reynolds?" Reynolds had been the anthropologist.

"We have had visitors from Earth before." He hesitated a moment and then offered his hand, somewhat shyly, Eckert thought, in the Terrestrial sign of greeting. "You may call me *Jathong* if you wish." He paused a moment to say something in his native tongue to the kids who were around. They promptly scattered and picked up the luggage. "While you are here, you will need a

place to stay. There is one ready, if you will follow me."

He was polite, Eckert thought. He didn't ask what they were there for or how long they were going to stay. But then again, perhaps the natives were a better judge of that than he and Templin.

The town was larger than he had thought at first, stretching over a wide expanse of the countryside. There wasn't, so far as he could see, much manufacturing above the level of handicrafts and simple weaving. Colored patches on far hillsides indicated the presence of farms, and practically every house in the village had its small garden.

What manufacturing there was seemed to be carried on in the central square of the town, where a few adults and children squatted in the warm afternoon sun and worked industriously at potter's wheels and weaver's looms. The other part of the square was given over to the native bazaar where pots and bolts of cloth were for sale, and where numerous stalls were loaded with dried fruits and vegetables and the cleaned and plucked carcasses of the local variety of fowl.

It was late afternoon when they followed Jathong into a small, white-washed house midway up a hill.

"You are free to use this while you are here," he said.

Eckert and Templin took a quick tour of the few rooms. They were well furnished, in a rustic sort of way, and what modern conveniences they didn't have they could easily do without. The youngsters who had carried their luggage left it outside and quietly faded away. It was getting dark; Eckert opened one of the boxes they had brought along, took out an electric lantern and lighted it. He turned to Jathong.

"You've been very kind to us and we would like to repay you. You may take what you wish of anything within this box." He opened another of the boxes and displayed the usual trade goods—brightly colored cloth and finely worked jewelry and a few mechanical contrivances that Eckert knew usually appealed to the primitive imagination.

Jathong ran his hand over the cloth and held some of the jewelry up to the light. Eckert knew by the way he looked at it that he wasn't at all impressed. "I am grateful," he said finally, "but there is nothing I want." He turned and walked away into the gathering darkness.

"The incorruptible native." Templin laughed sarcastically.

Eckert shrugged. "That's one of the things you do out of habit, try and buy some of the natives so you'll have friends in case you need them." He stopped for a moment, thinking. "Did you notice the context? He didn't say he didn't want what we showed him. He said there was *nothing* that he wanted. Implying that everything he wanted, he already had."

"That's not very typical of a primitive society, is it?"

"No, I'm afraid it's not." Eckert started unpacking some of the boxes. "You know, Ray, I got a kick out of the kids. They're a healthy-looking lot, aren't they?"

"Too healthy," Templin said. "There didn't seem to be any sick ones or ones with runny noses or cuts or black eyes or bruises. It doesn't seem natural."

"They're probably just well brought-up kids," Eckert said sharply. "Maybe they've been taught not to get in fights or play around in the mud on the way home from school." He felt faintly irritated, annoyed at the way Templin had put it, as if any deviation from an Earth norm was potentially dangerous.

"Ted." Templin's voice was strained. "This could be a trap, you know."

"In what way?"

The words came out slowly. "The people are too casual, as though they're playing a rehearsed part. Here we are, from an entirely different solar system, landed in what must be to them an unusual manner. They couldn't have seen rockets more than three or four times before. It should still be a novelty to them. And yet how much curiosity did they show? Hardly any. Was there any fear? No. And the cute, harmless little kids." He looked at Eckert. "Maybe that's what we're supposed to think—just an idyllic, harmless society. Maybe that's what Pendleton thought, right to the very end."

He was keyed up, jumpy, Eckert realized. He would probably be seeing things in every shadow and imagining danger to be lurking around every corner.

"It hasn't been established yet that Pendleton was killed, Ray. Let's keep an open mind until we know for certain."

He flicked out the light and lay back on the cool bed, letting his body relax completely. The cool night wind blew lazily through the wood slat blinds, carrying the fragrance of the trees and the grass, and he inhaled deeply and let his thoughts wander for a moment. It was going to be pleasant to live on Tunpesh for six months—even if the six months were all they had to live. The climate was superb and the people seemed a cut above the usual primitive culture. If he ever retired some day, he thought suddenly, he would have to remember Tunpesh. It would be pleasant to spend his old age here. And the fishing was probably excellent....

He turned his head a little to watch Templin get ready for bed. There were advantages in taking him along that Templin probably didn't even realize. He wondered what Templin would do if he ever found out that the actual reason he had been chosen to go was that his own psychological chart was very close to Pendleton's. Pendleton's own feelings and emotions would almost exactly

be duplicated in Templin's.

A few stray wisps of starlight pierced through the blinds and sparkled for an instant on a small metal box strapped to Templin's waist. A power pack, Eckert saw grimly, probably leading to the buttons on his tunic. A very convenient, portable, and hard to detect weapon.

There were disadvantages in taking Templin, too.

"Just how primitive do you think the society is, Ted?"

Eckert put down the chain he had been whittling and reached for his pipe and tobacco.

"I don't think it's primitive at all. There are too many disparities. Their knowledge of a lot of things is a little more than empirical knowledge; they associate the growth of crops with fertilizer and nitrogen in the soil as well as sunlight, rather than the blessings of some native god. And they differ a lot in other respects. Their art and their music are advanced. Free art exists along with purely decorative art, and their techniques are finely developed."

"I'm glad you agree, then. Take a look at this." Templin threw a shiny bit of metal on the rough-hewn table. Eckert picked it up and inspected it. It was heavy and one side of it was extremely sharp.

"What's it for?"

"They've got a hospital set up here. Not a hospital like any we know, of course, but a hospital nonetheless. It's not used very much; apparently the natives don't get sick here. But occasionally there are hunting accidents and injuries that require surgery. The strip of metal there is a scalpel." He laughed shortly. "Primitive little gadget, but it works well—as well as any of ours."

Eckert hefted it in his palm. "The most important thing is that they have the knowledge to use it. Surgery isn't a simple science."

"Well, what do you think about it?"

"The obvious. They evidently have as much technology as they want, at least in fields where they have to have it."

"How come they haven't gone any further?"

"Why should they? You can live without skycars and rocket ships, you know."

"Did you ever wonder what kind of weapons they might have?"

"The important thing," Eckert mused, "is not if they have them, but if they'd use them. And I rather doubt that they would. We've been here for two weeks now and they've been very kind to us, seeing that we've had food and water and what fuel we need."

"It's known in the livestock trade as being fattened up for the slaughter," Templeton said.

Eckert sighed and watched a fat bug waddle across a small patch of sunlight on the wooden floor. It was bad enough drawing an assignment in a totally foreign culture, even if the natives were humanoid. It complicated things beyond all measure when your partner in the project seemed likely to turn into a vendettist. It meant that Eckert would have to split his energies. He'd have to do what investigating he could among the Tunpeshans, and he'd have to watch Templin to see that he didn't go off half-cocked and spoil everything.

"You're convinced that Pendleton was murdered, aren't you?"

Templin nodded. "Sure."

"Why?"

"The Tunpeshans know why we're here. We've dropped enough hints along those lines. But nobody has mentioned Pendleton; nobody has volunteered any information about him. And he was an attache here for three years. Didn't anybody know him during that time? We've let slip a few discreet statements that we would like to talk to Pendleton's friends, yet nobody's come around. Apparently, in all the three years he was here, Pendleton didn't make any friends. And that's a little hard to believe. It's more likely that his friends have been silenced and any information about him is being withheld for a reason."

"What reason?"

Templin shrugged. "Murder. What other reason could there be?"

Eckert rolled up the thin, slatted blinds and stared out at the scenery. A hundred feet down the road, a native woman was going to market, leading a species of food animal by the halter.

"They grow their women nice, don't they?"

"Physically perfect, like the men," Templin grumbled. "You could get an inferiority complex just from watching the people here. Everybody's so damn perfect. Nobody's sick, nobody's unhealthy, nobody is too fat or too thin, nobody's unhappy. The only variation is that they don't all look alike. Perfection. It gets boring after a while."

"Does it? I hadn't noticed." Eckert turned away from the blinds. His voice was crisp. "I knew Don Pendleton quite well, too," he said. "But it isn't blinding me to what I'm here for. We came to find out what happened to him, not to substantiate any preconceived notions. What we find out may

be vitally important to anybody serving here in the future. I would hate to see our efforts spoiled because you've already made up your mind."

"You knew Pendleton," Templin repeated grimly. "Do you think it was suicide?"

"I don't think there's such a thing as a suicide type, when you come down to it. I'm not ruling out the possibility of murder, either. I'm trying to keep an open mind."

"What have we accomplished so far? What have we found out?"

"We've got six months," Eckert said quietly. "Six months in which we'll try to live here inconspicuously and study the people and try to cultivate informants. We would get nowhere if we came barging in asking all sorts of questions. And don't forget, Ray, we're all alone on Tunpesh. If it is a case of murder, what happens when the natives find out that we know it is?"

Templin's eyes dueled for a moment. Then he turned his back and walked to the window. "I suppose you're right," he said at last. "It's nice living here, Ted. Maybe I've been fighting it. But I can't help thinking that Don must have liked it here, too."

One of the hardest things to learn in a foreign culture, Eckert thought, is when to enjoy yourself, when to work and when to worry.

"*Pelache, menshar?*"

"*Sharra!*" He took the small bowl of *pelache* nuts, helped himself to a few, and passed the bowl on. This was definitely the time to enjoy himself, not to work or worry. He had heard about the *halera* a few days ago, and, by judicious hinting to the proper authorities, he and Templin had been invited. It was a good chance to observe native customs. A little anthropology—with refreshments.

The main courses started making the rounds and he took generous helpings of the roasted *ulami* and the broiled *halunch* and numerous dabs from the side dishes of steaming vegetables. Between every course, they passed around a small flagon of the hot, spiced native wine, but he noticed that nobody drank to excess.

The old Greek ideal, he thought: *moderation in everything*.

He looked at Templin, sitting across from him in the huge circle, and shrugged mentally. Templin looked as if he was about to break down and enjoy himself, but there was still a slight bulge under his tunic, where he had strapped his power pack. Any fool should have known that nothing would happen at a banquet like this. The only actual danger lay in Templin's getting excited and doing something he was bound to regret later on. And even that danger was not quite as likely now.

There will be hell to pay, Eckert thought, *if Templin ever finds out that I sabotaged his power pack*.

"You look thoughtful, *menshar* Eckert."

Eckert took another sip of the wine and turned to the Tunpeshan on his left. He was a tall, muscular man with sharp eyes, a firm chin and a certain aura of authority.

"I was wondering if my countryman Pendleton had offended your people in any way, Nayova. Now was as good a time as any to pump him for what he knew about Pendleton's death.

"So far as I know, *menshar* Pendleton offended no one. I do not know what duties he had to perform here, but he was a generous and courteous man."

Eckert gnawed the dainty meat off a slender *ulami* bone and tried to appear casual in his questioning.

"I am sure he was, Nayova. I am sure, too, that you were as kind to him as you have been to Templin and myself. My Government is grateful to you for that."

Nayova seemed pleased. "We tried to do as well for *menshar* Pendleton as we could. While he was here, he had the house that you have now and we saw that he was supplied with food and all other necessities."

Eckert had a sudden clammy feeling which quickly passed away. What Nayova had said was something he'd make sure Templin never heard about. He wiped his mouth on a broad, flat leaf that had been provided and took another sip of the wine.

"We were shocked to find out that *menshar* Pendleton had killed himself. We knew him quite well and we could not bring ourselves to believe he had done such a thing."

Nayova's gaze slid away from him. "Perhaps it was the will of the Great One," he said vaguely. He didn't seem anxious to talk about it.

Eckert stared bleakly at his wine glass and tried to put the pieces of information together. They probably had a taboo about self-destruction which would make it difficult to talk about. That would make it even harder for him to find out by direct questioning.

A native fife trilled shrilly and a group of young men and women walked into the room. The circle broke to let them through and they came and knelt before Nayova. When he clapped his hands sharply, they retreated to the center of the circle and began the slow motions of a native dance.



The sound of the fife softened and died and the slow monotonous beat of drums took its place. The beat slowly increased and so did the rhythm of the dancers. The small fires at the corners of the hut were allowed to dwindle and the center of the circle became filled with the motions of shadows intermixed with the swift, sure movements of glistening limbs. Eckert felt his eyebrows crawl upward. Apparently the dance was the Tunpeshan version of the *rites de passage*. He glanced across the circle at Templin. Templin's face—what he could see of it by the flickering light—was brick red.

A voice spoke in his ear. "It is hard for us to imagine anybody doing what *menshar* Pendleton did. It is ..." and he used a native word that Eckert translated as being roughly equivalent to "*obscene*."

The dancers at the center of the circle finally bowed out with small garlands of flowers on their heads that signified their reaching adulthood. Acrobats then took the stage and went through a dizzying routine, and they in turn were succeeded by a native singer.

They were all excellent, Eckert thought. If anything, they were too good.

The bowl of *pelache* nuts made its way around again and Nayova leaned over to speak to him. "If there is any possibility that I can help you while you are here, *menshar* Eckert, you have but to ask."

It would probably be a mistake to ask for a list of Pendleton's friends, but there was a way around that. "I would like to meet any of your people who had dealings with Pendleton, either in business or socially. I will do everything not to inconvenience them in any way."

"I think they would be glad to help you. I shall ask them to go to you this coming week."

It wasn't a driving rain, just a gentle drizzle that made the lanes muddy and plastered Eckert's tunic against him. He didn't mind it; the rain was warm and the trees and grass smelled good in the wet.

"How would you classify the culture after seeing the ceremony, Ted?" Templin asked.

"About what you would expect. An Apollonian culture, simple and dignified. Nothing in excess, no striving for great emotional release."

Templin nodded soberly. "It grows on you, doesn't it? You find yourself getting to like the place. And I suppose that's dangerous, too. You tend to let your guard down, the way Pendleton must have. You—what was that?"

Eckert tensed. There was a gentle padding in the mud, several hundred feet behind them. Templin flattened himself in the shadows alongside a house. His hand darted inside his tunic and came out with the slim deadliness of a needle gun.

"Don't use it!" Eckert whispered tersely.

Templin's eyes were thin, frightened slits in the darkness. "Why not?"

Eckert's mind raced. It might be nothing at all, and then again it might be disaster. But there was still a chance that Templin might be wrong. And there were more immediate reasons.

"How many charges do you have for that?"

"Twelve."

"You think you can stand there and hold them off with only twelve charges for your needle gun?"

"There's my power pack."

"It's no good," Eckert said softly. "The batteries in it are dead. I was afraid you might do something foolish with it."

The footsteps were only yards away. He listened intently, but it was hard to tell how many there were by the sound.

"What do we do then?"

"See if they're following us first," Eckert said practically. "They might not be, you know."

They slid out from the shadows and ducked down another lane between the houses. The footsteps behind them speeded up and came down the same lane.

"We'll have to head back for our house," Eckert whispered.

They started running as quietly as they could, slipping and sliding in the mud. Another stretch past the shuttered, crouching houses and they found themselves in the square they had visited on the day they had landed. It was deserted, the looms and pottery wheels covered with cloth and reeds to keep off the rain. They darted across it, two thin shadows racing across the open plaza, and hurried down another path.

The last path led to the small river that cut through the city. Templin looked around, gestured to Eckert, waded into the water and crouched under the small bridge that spanned it. Eckert swore silently to himself, then followed Templin in.

The cold water swirled under his armpits and he bit his lips to keep himself from sneezing. Templin's emotions were contagious. Would he have worried about the footsteps? He frowned and tried to be honest with himself. Perhaps he would—and perhaps he wouldn't have. But he couldn't have let Templin stay there and face the unknown approachers. Not Templin.

Footsteps approached the bridge, hesitated a moment, then pattered on the wooden structure and faded off down the muddy path. Eckert let his breath out slowly. The footsteps were curiously light.

There was only one pair of them.

"I would like to know something," Templin said coldly. He stripped off his power pack and let it fall to the floor of their house. "Why did you decide to substitute dead batteries in the pack?"

"Because," Eckert said shortly, "I was afraid you would do something with it that you might regret later. You're inexperienced in situations like this. Your reactions aren't to be trusted. One false move here and we could follow Pendleton, however he died. You know that." He wriggled out of his tunic and slowly peeled off his wet trousers.

There was a timid knock at the door. He wrapped a blanket about himself and motioned to Templin to stand to one side. Templin grabbed a small stool, hefted it in one hand, and complied.

Eckert went to the door and casually threw it open.

A girl stood there, half in the outer darkness and half in the yellowish light from the room, covered with mud to the knees and drenched to the skin.

"The *menshar* forgot this at the *halera*," she said softly. She quickly handed him his pipe and a soggy bag of tobacco, and disappeared instantly into the rain. He listened for the sound of her footsteps in the soft mud and then closed the door.

Templin put down the stool and stared stupidly at the pipe and the tobacco sack. Eckert placed them carefully on the table and began to towel himself.

"We probably face as much danger from our own imaginations as from anything else," he said grimly. "Tell me, would you have fired first, or would you have waited until you found out for sure who she was and what she wanted when she first started to follow us?"

"I don't know," Templin said sullenly.

"Then I'll leave to your imagination the position we would be in now, if you had given in to your impulse."

"We haven't found out much, have we?" Templin demanded some days later.

"No," Eckert admitted. "We haven't."

He riffled through the thick stack of cards on the table. Statistically, the results were not only interesting but slightly phenomenal. During the three years or so that Pendleton had been on Tunpesh, he had met and known approximately seven hundred of the natives. By far the greater majority of these, of course, were purely casual and meant nothing. Almost a hundred, though, had had extended relations with Pendleton in business or social affairs. Of this hundred, none—not a single one—would admit that he had known Pendleton well or could be considered a friend of his. About all they had to say was that Pendleton had been healthy and easy to get along with, and one warm night he had shocked the community by going off and shooting himself.

"Like Richard Cory," Eckert said aloud.

"Like who?" Templin asked.

"Richard Cory. A character in a poem by a Twentieth Century poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson.

Apparently he had everything to live for, but 'Richard Cory, one calm summer night, went home and put a bullet through his head.'"

"I'll have to look it up some day," Templin said. He pointed to the stack of cards. "That's so much waste paper, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Eckert said reluctantly. "To be frank, I had hoped we'd know a lot more by now. I still can't understand why we haven't dug up anybody who will admit having been his friend."

"How do you know they're telling the truth? Or, for that matter, how do you know that the ones we've seen so far are the ones who *actually* knew Pendleton?"

Eckert drummed his fingers on the table. *You handle different human cultures for twenty-five years and you get to the point where you can tell if people are lying or not. Or do you? Maybe just an old man's conceit. Age alone never lent wisdom. Regardless of the personal reasons that Templin might have for thinking the Tunpeshans are lying, the fact remains that they very easily could be. And what should you do if they are?*

There was a polite knock at the door.

"We've got another visitor," Templin said sarcastically. "He probably saw Pendleton at a *halera* four years ago and wants to be sure we know all about it."

The Tunpeshan looked faintly familiar to Eckert. There was something about the man's carriage....

"I met you the day you landed," the Tunpeshan began, and Eckert remembered. Jathong, the guide who had shown them to the house.

"You knew Pendleton?"

Jathong nodded. "I and a fellow weaver took over his small office after he had left it." Eckert recalled the small office in the square with the bolts of cloth on display, and the small mud brick on the window ledge with the incised lettering reading:

DONALD PENDLETON, SERVICE ATTACHE.

"Why you didn't tell us this before?"

"I didn't know what kind and how much information you wanted."

We didn't ask him, Eckert thought, so he didn't volunteer any information. Polite, to say the least.

"How long did you know him?"

"Since he landed. I was the one appointed to him."

"What do you mean—appointed to him?"

"To try to learn his language, and try to teach him ours."

Eckert felt his interest rising. Jathong, then, must have known Pendleton fairly well.

"Did he have any enemies that you know of?"

"Enemies?" Jathong seemed ignorant of the meaning of the word, so Eckert explained. "No, he had no enemies. He would naturally have none such on Tunpesh."

Templin leaned forward, tense. "If he had no enemies, why did he have no friends? You, for example, knew him longer and better than most. Why is it that you weren't his friend?"

Jathong looked unhappy, as if being forced to say something he wanted not to say. "Pendleton was *kava*—I cannot explain it. The concept is difficult. You would not understand."

He might be running the danger of throwing too many questions at Jathong, Eckert realized, and having him freeze up or turn vague. But it couldn't be helped. They had made no progress at all by subtlety, and time would eventually run out.

He tried to broach the next question delicately. "Did Pendleton know any of the women of your race?"

"He knew some of the women, as he knew the men."

The answer didn't tell Eckert what he wanted to know. "Was he in love with any woman?" It sounded crude the way he put it, but it was hard to think of any other way of asking it.

Jathong looked at him incredulously, as if Eckert had asked him if Pendleton had had two heads.

"That would have been impossible. None of our women would have—could have—been in love with *menshar* Pendleton."

One line of inquiry just gone phht, Eckert thought. But Pendleton wasn't one to let a broken heart get him down anyway.

"Why not?" Templin cut in harshly. "He wasn't hard to look at and he would have made a good husband."

Jathong diplomatically turned around to face Templin. "I have told you once—Pendleton was *kava*. It would have been quite impossible."

The answer to what had happened to Pendleton probably lay in Jathong's inability to explain his own terms, Eckert believed. One could get just so close, and then the definitions became vague and useless.

He asked a few more questions and finally dismissed Jathong. The interview, like all the others he and Templin had held during the last week, had been worthless. They knew nothing more than they had when they landed.

"I still think they're lying," Templin said almost savagely. "Or perhaps the ones who really know something haven't come around."

Eckert got his pipe and sat near the doorway, letting the sunlight streaming through the foliage of a nearby tree dapple his face with a checkerboard pattern of modulated lights and velvety shadows.

"If they're evading us or if they're lying, then the society is a dangerous one for us. But I still can't believe it. They're not warlike. They don't seem to have many weapons and definitely none of an advanced type."

"How could anybody know for sure?"

Eckert methodically knocked the cold ashes out of his pipe and added more tobacco. "Easy. Despite what you read in story books, no civilization lives simply, governs itself simply, and yet possesses 'super-blasters.' The sword-and-blaster combination just doesn't exist. Any weapon above the level of bows and arrows or knives is the product of a well advanced technology. Along with weapons, of course, you have to have good communications. Now take an ordinary radio and think of the degree of knowledge, technology, and industrialization that would have to exist to supply it. There's nothing like that here."

Templin came over to the warmth streaming in through the doorway. "It almost seems that they're acting in concert, though—as if there were some kind of plot, where, by prearrangement, everybody knows exactly what to say."

"You're wrong again. You can practically smell a dictatorship or a tyranny, which is the only situation in which almost one hundred per cent of the population will follow the same line through fear of the consequences if they don't. In a situation like that, the people are frightened, unhappy. You can hardly say that's the case on Tunpesh."

"No," Templin admitted, "you couldn't. But, still, you have to admit that the answers we've received so far are just too unanimous—and too sketchy. All agree that Pendleton was a fine fellow; all agree that he had no native friends."

Eckert nodded. "I'll go along with that. And I think it's time we did something about it. Tonight we'll have to start eliminating certain ideas."

He took a small case from their pile of luggage and opened it. Inside was a small, battery-powered box with various dials set on the front and the usual electrodes and nerve probes protruding from the sides and the top.

Templin looked at it with surprise.

"That will be dangerous to use, won't it?"

"It might be more dangerous not to. Time is getting to be a factor and we have to make some progress. We have a safety margin of a sort in that we can erase memories of its use, but the procedure is still risky."

"Who do we use it on?"

"As long as we're going to use it," Eckert said grimly, "we might as well start at the top."

When they had started out, the investigation had seemed fairly simple to Eckert. There were two possibilities—either Pendleton had committed suicide or he had been murdered. Knowing Pendleton's record, the first possibility had seemed remote. A few weeks on Tunpesh had convinced him that the second possibility was also remote. One or the other had to be eliminated. The second would be the easiest.

There were other reasons as well. Templin was still convinced that Pendleton had been killed, and Templin was an emotional man with access to powerful weapons. The question was not what he might eventually do, but when.

The night looked as if it would be another rainy one. It was cooler than usual and dark clouds were scudding across the starlit sky. Eckert and Templin stood in the shadows of the house, watching the dark lane for any casual strollers. Eckert looked at his watch. A few minutes more and Nayova would come out for his evening walk.

Eckert had just started to think longingly of his bed and the warmth inside his house when the door opened and Nayova appeared in the opening. Eckert held his breath while the chieftain stood uncertainly in the doorway, testing the night air, and then let it out slowly when Nayova started down the lane.

They closed in on him.

"The *menshars* from Earth," he said without alarm. "Is there something you wish?"

"We would like you to come with us to our house for a while," Eckert started in.

Nayova looked puzzled. "I do not understand. Would not tomorrow do as well?"

"I'm afraid it'll have to be tonight."

Nayova was obviously not quite sure of their threat.

"No, I...."

Eckert caught him before he touched the ground. Templin took the rag off the butt of the needle gun, lifted the ruler's feet, and they disappeared into the brush along the lane.

They would have to sneak back to the house, Eckert knew, and hope that nobody saw them lugging the unconscious native. He laughed a little grimly to himself. Templin had expected cloak-and-dagger. It looked as if he was going to get more than his share of it, after all.

Once inside the house, Eckert arranged the electrodes and the small nerve probes on Nayova, who had come to.

"I am sorry," Eckert said formally, "but we find this necessary. You understand that we have to find out all we can about Pendleton. We have no choice."

He found it difficult to look the ruler in the face, even with the realization that this was strictly in the line of duty and that the chieftain would not be hurt.

"But I have cooperated with you in every way possible!" Nayova protested. "I have told you everything we know!"

"That's right," Templin said bluntly. "And now we're going to ask you the same questions."

Nayova looked blank for a moment and then reddened as he understood.

Templin turned to the dials on the little square box.

"We would like to know," Eckert said politely, "where you were two weeks ago at this time of night."

Nayova looked surprised. "You know that I was at the *halera*, the coming-of-age ceremony. You were there with me, as my guests. You should assuredly know I was there."

Eckert looked over at Templin, who nodded shortly. It had been a standard question, to test the apparatus.

"Did Pendleton have any enemies here on Tunpesh?"

Nayova emphatically shook his head. "To the best of my knowledge, *menshar* Pendleton had no enemies here. He would have none."

Templin's face showed its disappointment.

"Who were his friends?"

"He had no friends."

Templin glowered angrily, but he said nothing.

Eckert frowned. The same answer—Pendleton had had no enemies and yet he had had no friends.

"Would you say he was well liked here?"

"I would say no."

"Why not?"

A shrug. "It is hard to explain and you would not be able to understand."

"Did somebody here kill Pendleton?"

Eckert could hear Templin suck in his breath.

"No."

"Ask him that again," Templin cut in.

"Did somebody kill Pendleton?"

"No."

"Did Pendleton kill himself?"

A trace of disgust showed on Nayova's face.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I do not know."

Templin gestured to Eckert to take the box. "Let me ask him." He came around and faced the native. "Why did your people kill Pendleton?"

"We did not kill him. We had no reason to wish him harm."

"Do you expect us to believe that Pendleton killed himself? We knew him better than that."

"You may believe whatever you wish. But men change and perhaps he did. We did not kill him. Such an act would have been repugnant to us."

"I think that's enough," Eckert said calmly.

Templin bit his lip as Eckert touched another dial on the machine. Nayova suddenly jerked, looked blank, and slumped in the chair.



Eckert took off the electrodes. "Help me take him back, will you, Ray?"

They carried Nayova to his house, stayed with him until he showed signs of recovering, and then left.

"Why didn't you use a drug?" Templin demanded.

"Possible allergy or serum reaction. We don't know enough about these people to take chances—they're humanoid, not human."

"They can fool machines, though, can't they?"

Eckert didn't reply.

"All right, I know they can't," Templin said grudgingly. "He was telling the truth all the time, wasn't he?"

Eckert nodded. "I never did think he was lying. They don't seem to be the type; their culture doesn't allow for it."

They were silent for a while, walking quietly in the lanes between the shuttered, seemingly untenanted houses.

"I'm glad," Templin said quietly. "It's off my mind. It's hard to believe that anybody here would ... deliberately kill somebody else."

Templin's reactions would be worth something now for Eckert to study. They wouldn't be inhibited by his conviction that the natives had murdered his best friend. Just what reactions and emotions he would display, Eckert wasn't sure, nor how Templin's psychology, so similar to Pendleton's, would help solve the problem.

They had eliminated one possibility, but that still left them with the one they had started with.

Why had Pendleton taken the short way out?

A breeze scampered through the open door and played tag with the papers on the desk. Eckert

swore without annoyance and calmly started chasing those that had been blown on the floor.

"What did Pendleton have to say in his reports?" Templin sat in the doorway, his eyes barely open. He had begun taking siestas in the early afternoon, after their usual light lunch. It was pleasant to sit on the worn wood and feel the warmth of sun and smell the crisp freshness of the outdoors, or maybe watch the kids playing in the lane, catching the butterflies that floated past in the afternoon air.

"About what you'd expect. Mostly reports on the industry, climate, system of government, and general anthropological information that he thought might prove interesting. As far as I can see, he didn't lack enthusiasm for making the reports. If anything, he grew more enthusiastic as time went on. He practically wrote us treatises on every phase of life on Tunpesh."

Templin's eyes closed all the way.

"Any indication in his reports that he didn't like it here?"

"Just the other way around. Everything points to the fact that he liked the climate, the people, the way they lived."

"I don't blame him," Templin murmured. "This is a lovely place to be. The climate is wonderful, the people are happy, hard-working. The society itself seems to be—perfect. Sometimes you can't help but compare it too damn favorably to Earth."

Eckert shoved the papers to one side and came over to where Templin sat. He felt rather lazy himself. The warmth and sunshine corroded ambition, as it did in most climates like this.

"You know, there isn't any crime here," Templin continued. He laughed to himself. "Except the minor crime wave we caused when we landed here five months ago. No criminals, no villains foreclosing mortgages, no gamblers bleeding the gullible white, and nobody trying to sell gold bricks. I can't get over it."

A butterfly flapped into the sunlight that glistened on his tunic, like a drop of water on a piece of black velvet. It hung there for a moment and then was off, its wings flashing.

Eckert watched it go in a sort of torpor. It was pleasant to relax and slip the leash off your thoughts quietly and see where they took you. Maybe it was a sort of letdown. They had expected six months of danger in a potentially criminal culture, and instead it had been paradise.

As Templin said, you couldn't help but compare it to Earth. No greed, no belligerency, no contempt for the rights of others. No cynicism, no sarcasm, and no trampling crowds in the stores. The little important things....

"Where did you go last night, Ray?"

Templin stirred. "A community meeting. Almost like a Quaker meeting. You get up and say what you think. The one last night was about some local government issues. They talked it over, decided what to do, and how much each person should contribute. The original democracy, Ted."

Eckert was wide awake. "I wonder why I wasn't invited." He felt slightly put out that Templin should have been asked to something like that and he hadn't been.

"I wasn't invited," Templin said. "I invited myself."

"Have you noticed," Eckert mused, "we haven't been invited to too many functions lately?"

"They know we're busy," Templin said lazily. "They're too polite to ask us to go some place if they thought we were busy doing something else."

"You like it here, don't you, Ray?"

Templin brushed idly at a marauding mosquito. "It took me pretty long to warm up to it, but I guess I do."

They only had a month left, Eckert knew—a month to do practically nothing but lie in the sun and watch the people. Oh, they could go through the motions of investigating and look over Pendleton's old records and reports, but there was nothing in them of any value.

He yawned and sat down and settled his back against the door frame. It began to look as if they'd never find out why Pendleton had done what he had. And it didn't seem to matter, somehow.

Eckert opened the door slowly. Templin was asleep on the bed, the sunlight lying in bands across his tanned, bare back. He had on a strip of white cloth, knotted at the waist in imitation of what the natives wore.

It was mussed now, and the knot had started to come loose.

He looked a lot healthier than he had when they had first landed. More peaceful, more content. He appeared to have gained ten pounds and shed, five years in the last six months.

And now the vacation was over. It was time to go back.

"Ray," Eckert called out to him softly.

Templin didn't stir, but continued his soft and very regular breathing.

Eckert found a book and dropped it on the floor with a thud. Templin woke up, but didn't move.

"What do you want, Ted?"

"How did you know it was me?"

Templin chuckled, as if it were hugely funny. "Riddles yet. Who else would it be? No Tunpeshan would be rude enough to wake somebody up in the middle of a nap, so it had to be you."

"You know what you would have done if somebody had awakened you like that five months ago?"

Templin tried to nod, but was slightly handicapped by the bed underneath him. "I would have pulled my trusty atomgun and plugged him."

Eckert went over to where they kept their luggage and started pulling the boxes out from the wall. "Well, I've got good news for you. A liner just landed to pick us up. They were going through this sector and they got an order from the Service to stop by for us. Some cargo-wallopers will be here in a few minutes to help us with our gear."

"Ted."

Eckert paused.

"Yes?"

"I'm not going back."

"Why not?" Eckert's face had a look of almost clinical curiosity on it.

"Why should I? I like it here. I want to live here the rest of my life."

The pieces began to fall in place.

"I'm not so sure you'd like it, Ray. Not after a while. All your friends are back on Earth. Everybody you know is back there. It's just the novelty of something new and something different here. I've felt that way a lot of times in different cultures and different societies. You'd change your mind after a while."

"Those aren't reasons, Ted. Why should I go back to a world where most of the people are unhappy at some time and a few people all the time? As far as I'm concerned, Tunpesh is my home now, and I don't intend to leave it."

Eckert was fascinated. It was like a case history unfolding right before his eyes.

"Are you sure you would enjoy it here for the rest of your life? Have you made any friends to take the place of those back home?"

"It takes time to become acquainted, even more time to make friends," Templin said defensively.

"You can't desert the Service," Eckert pointed out. "You still have your duty."

Templin laughed in his pillow. "It won't work, Ted. Duty's just a catch word, a jingo phrase. They can get along without me and you know it."

"What about Pendleton, Ray? He died here, you know, in mysterious circumstances."

"Would going back help him any? He wasn't murdered; we know that. And why do people commit suicide? For what one of several thousand possible reasons did Pendleton? We don't know. We'll never know. And if we did know, what good would it do?"

He had changed a lot in six months, Eckert saw.

Too much.

"What if I told you I knew why Pendleton killed himself?" Eckert asked. "And that you would do the same if you stayed here?"

"Don't use it, Ted. It's poor psychology. It won't work."

The pieces made a perfect picture. But Templin was going back whether he wanted to or not. The only difficulty was that, deep underneath, Eckert sympathized with him. Perhaps if he had been younger, less experienced....

"Then you won't go back with us?"

Templin closed his eyes and rolled over on his back. "No."

There was dead silence. Templin could smell the piny scent of the woods and feel the warmth of soft sunlight that lanced through the blinds. Some place far away, there was the faint chatter of kids at play, but outside of that it was quiet.

Too quiet.

Templin opened his eyes in sudden alarm. "Ted! Don't!" He caught the gas full in the face and tumbled back on the bed, unconscious.

Eckert opened the hatch to the observation cabin as quietly as he could. Templin was seated on one of the pneumatic couches, staring soberly at a small yellow star in the black sky. He didn't look up.

"It's me, Ray," Eckert said.

Templin didn't move.

"I suppose I owe you an apology," Eckert began, "but I had to gas you to get you to leave. Otherwise you wouldn't have left. And the same thing would have happened to you that happened to Don Pendleton."

"You're sure of that?" Templin asked bitterly.

"Reasonably. You're a lot like Pendleton, you know. In fact, that's why you were selected to go—not so much because you knew him as the fact that psychologically you were a lot like him. We thought that by studying your response to situations there, we would have a picture of what Pendleton's must have been."

Templin didn't want to talk about it, Eckert realized, but it had to be explained to him.

"Do you want to know why Pendleton killed himself?"

Templin shrugged listlessly.

"I suppose we should have seen it right away," Eckert continued. "Any race that is so happy with their way of life that they show no curiosity about strangers, the way they live, or what possessions they have, must have something to be happy about. Tunpesh is something that might happen only once in a thousand civilizations, maybe less, Ray."

"The environment is perfection and so are the people, or at least as near to perfection as it's possible to get. An intelligent people who have as much technology as they desire, living simply with themselves and each other. A fluke of nature, perhaps. No criminals, no insane, no neurotics. A perfect cultural pattern. Tunpesh is a paradise. You didn't want to leave, neither did I, and neither did Pendleton."

Templin turned on him. "So it was paradise. Would it have been criminal if I had stayed there? Who would it have hurt?"

"It would have hurt you," Eckert said gravely. "Because the Tunpeshans would never have accepted you. We're too different, Ray. We're too aggressive, too pushy, too persistent. We're not—perfect. You see, no matter how long we stayed there, we would never have fit in. We lived in a harsh society and we bear the scars of it. Our own environment has conditioned us, and we can't change. Oh, we could try, but it would crop up in little ways. Because of that, the natives could never genuinely like us. We'd never belong. Their own cultural pattern wouldn't allow them to accept us."

"Their cultural pattern is like the Fire and the Sword that were placed outside the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve were driven out, to keep it sacrosanct. If you're an outsider, you stay outside. You can never come in."

He paused a moment, waiting for Templin to say something. Templin didn't.

"The natives have a word for it, *Kava*. It means, I suppose, *different*—not necessarily inferior, just different. We should have seen it as time went on. We weren't invited places; they seemed to avoid us. A natural reaction for them, I guess I have to admit."

Eckert cleared his throat huskily. "You see, what happened to Pendleton," he continued awkwardly, "is that he fell in love with paradise, but paradise would have nothing to do with him. By the time three years were up, he knew that he was an outcast in Eden. And he couldn't leave, to come back and try to forget. He was stranded in paradise and had to look forward to spending four more years there as a pariah. He couldn't do it. And neither could you."

He was quiet for a moment, thinking of the cool, scented air and the warm sunshine and the happy kids playing on the grassy lanes.

"I suppose it didn't affect you at all, did it?" Templin asked venomously.

A shadow crossed Eckert's face. "You should know better than that, Ray. Do you think I'll ever forget it? Do you think I'll ever be satisfied with my own culture again?"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"It's dangerous to human beings, Ray. Looking at it brutally, their culture has killed two of our people as surely as if Tunpesh were populated by murderous savages. We'll probably send a larger commission, throw it open to commerce, try to change it."

Templin gripped the sides of the couch, his face strained and tense with anxiety. "What happens to it depends on the report you make, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does."

"Then make up something in your report. Say the climate is bad for Earthmen. Say anything, but don't let them change Tunpesh!"

Eckert looked at him for a long moment, remembering.

"Okay, Ray," he said slowly. "We'll leave paradise alone. Strictly alone. It'll be put on the quarantine list."

He turned and left.

Behind him, Templin swiveled around in his chair and gazed bleakly at the tiny mote of yellow fading in the blackness of space.

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