

BLOOD LANDS

By Alfred Coppel

Kenyon felt sick as he wiped his lips.



—drums beating in the feather forests and a wailing in the wind as the red sun sets protect us o father for the past men have returned and we are afraid a deep sullen surging of the soil and a wordless reply of alien anger mixed with pain our father rages whisper the chants leave us alone you

men of space what have we to do with you now?

THE RENDEZVOUS was well away from the charnel, stinking area that had been burned

"You will never take us away from our land, men from the stars . . . and no one who has touched this, our sacred land shall ever leave it!"



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THE RENDEZVOUS was well I away from the charnel, stinking area that had been burned by the starship's landing. Kenyon stood on the edge of a plume-grove that grew down to where the tideless sea lay red and shimmering.

He looked back, cursing the flatness of the island. The spire of the starship commanded a complete view of the territory; there was no place to hide. Kenyon knew that anyone who wished to do so could spy on him easily as he stood waiting for Elyra to come out of the grove.

Not, he told himself defensively, that there was any good reason that he should hide his doings with Elyra. Affairs with native women — while not considered in the best taste — were common enough among starmen. It was simply that the mission here was one of repatriation rather than exploitation, and all members of the expedition had been warned against forming liaisons that could conceivably become embarrassing situations when the natives were moved off Kana.

Kenyon shifted his weight nervously from one foot to another, peering through the picket of quills into the grove. He would have liked to go into the grove to meet the girl, but it was something he had never been able to bring himself to do. One didn't take chances on a planet like Kana — one that had retrogressed from technology into legend-worshipping semisavagery. And there was that unanswered question about cannibalism...

Not Elyra, Kenyon thought quickly; that wouldn't be possible. After all, the mission had been on Kana only a few days. It was only a matter of time until the riddle of the native food-supply was solved.

A soft rustling of the plumes warned him of her approach. Native or not, he reflected, she was a handsome thing. Odd about the red hair — they all had it, men and women alike. And the grey, almost cold, eyes. But there was nothing cold about her body; it was lithe and supple, burned golden by the light of the red sun. Her costume showed most of it, and

Kenyon could fully appreciate the rippling play of muscles under the satiny skin as she walked.

She paused at the very edge of the grove, solemn and unsmiling in the slanting light.

“The sunset comes, Kenyon,” she said.

Her greeting was always the same. A dwelling on the ending of a day, the fading of light from the sky. Kenyon unconsciously looked toward the east, where the first pale light of a star was breaking through the rusty glow of the sinking sun. Stars were pale on the Edge, he thought vaguely. It filled him with a sense of distance, of vast empty spaces, of the parsecs that separated Kana and its red star from the teeming worlds of the inner systems. Little wonder it had been lost for so long...

He shivered slightly and smiled at Elyra. “Shall we walk by the sea?” he asked. “I’ve brought something for you — a gift.”

Ordinarily, the promise of a bauble would have brought a smile to her face, but she remained solemn and, it seemed to Kenyon, unduly aloof. “Tonight you were to walk in the forest.”

Kenyon frowned. He had promised her, and she had remembered.

IN THE FAR distance, on one of the islands across the red water, a drum began to beat with a deep, thudding insistence. A sense of alienage filled him, and something akin to fear — though he knew nothing that should bring such feelings into a starman’s mind. All the teeming billions of a starflung culture backed him with power and machines. There was nothing in the inhabited galaxy a starman should fear; yet Kenyon was afraid — he knew it. Afraid of this watery world and its islands. Perhaps he was even afraid of Elyra.

“We have walked by the sea,” Elyra said, still standing apart from him, “and now we should walk in the plume-forest. You have come here from the sky to take my people from Kana— ”

There was little point in denying this, Kenyon realized, since both Bothwell and Grancor had already announced it to the island chieftain. Manpower was needed in the industrial combines of the inner worlds. It was wasteful to let humans rusticate on a world without commercial value like Kana.

“—I would take you by the hand,” Elyra continued in her quaintly-accented and archaic *lingua spacia*, “and show you why my people have no wish to go.”

Kenyon’s eyes widened at that. No native had yet offered any of the mission’s three members a reason for their reluctance to leave Kana. This was the first apparent break in a wall of courteous passive resistance. If he, Kenyon, could be the one to convince the chiefs that they should urge their people to board the starship without coercion and bloodshed, it would be an excellent mark in his record; it could lead to better things than herding troglodytes back into the fold of the galactic State.

“Wait for me, Elyra,” he said. “I will be back before the sun is fully down, and I will go with you into the forest.”

She smiled, showing sharp white teeth.

Kenyon shuddered slightly and turned back toward the starship. Into the forest he might go, he thought bleakly, but not without weapons — and not without Bothwell and Grancor knowing what he was about to do and where, in the service of the State.

EVEN IN the cargo-holds— the huge pens intended for the natives of Kana — he could hear Grancor and Bothwell arguing.

Bothwell; “You bloody fool — you aren’t even able to tell me what happened to the blasted barges! Even a thousand years in this climate wouldn’t destroy them — let alone a mere four hundred. So where are they, then?”

And Grancor, in his dry and acidtinged tones, like those of an academy professor; “Obviously, my dear Bothwell, when the islands formed they were no longer needed. They simply sank them.”

Kenyon paused to listen. It was a perpetual argument betyreeu the older men, and one he thought both fruitless and exasperating. One he had no wish to join.

It had begun with the planetfall, and the discovery of ten tioasaad islands in the shalio' sea that had once — according to the book — covered the entire planet of Kana.

Five hundred years ago, in the first flush of stellar colonization, Kana had been populated with human beings from the inner galaxy. Since no land of any kind was available, and since tlrere was a ready market for gold salts and nitrates that could be extracted from Kana's sea, a firt-stage barge-culture was established. Floating villages, hydroponics, an essential and highly-developed technology. And then came the interregnum — a commercial interregnum that found the products of Kana unneccded. Trade fell off, and eventually the planet and its people were forgotten. A lost colony. It took five hundred years for the manpower of Kana and other worlds like it to become valuable enough to send repatriation missions out to gather it up and bring it into the industrial combines.

Yet the Kana planetfall brought some surprises to Kenyon and Grancor and Bothw'eil, the mission's nominal head. The barges were gone, the inhabitants strangely changed and uncivilized, and a million islands where none had been before.

“Vulcanism is out,” Bothwell was declaring. “Kana and the Kana sun are too old to support that kind of thing.”

“You don't know,” Grancor said drily; “you are a starman, not a geologist.”

“I'm no agronomist, either,” bellowed Bothwell, “but I can tell you nothing grows here but those damn feathers!”

“They only look like feathers,” Grancor saiu, “you've seen stranger growths— ”

Isolation, thought Kenyon, is sharpening their natural antagonisms. Isolation and failure. A failure that neither of them will face up to. He knew that, in a matter of days, Bothwell would blow up and order the Kana natives herded into the starship's holds by force. They had the weapons, but somehow Kenyon dreaded taking such a step; there were dangers on Kana that none of the three men from the stars had yet recognized — he was sure of it.

He armed himself and went up the ramp toward the bickering voices; it would be a pleasure to interrupt them.

"BOTHWELL looked up as he entered, a frown on his craggy face. Kenyon decided again, as he had every day for weeks, that he didn't like Bothwell.

"And where do you think you're going?"

"Where indeed?" murmured Grancor. "Booted, armed and armored, our young colleague goes to meet his pretty savage, of course."

Kenyon flushed. "Since we seem to be wasting time here," he snapped with some bravado, "I'm going into the forest to talk to the chief."

"Is that wise?" Grancor asked Bothwell.

"Let him go," the big man said. "When he's convinced talking won't help, we'll go out with blasters and herd the trogs into the ship."

Kenyon forced down his anger and turned away. At the bulkhead, he stopped, unwilling to go without asking their help, and hating to do it. "Please guard the command channel," he said casually. "I'll report any progress by radio..."

Bothwell let out a hoot of coarse laughter. "Progress! Into the forest at night wth his pretty trog and he wants to keep us informed!"

Kenyon turned on his heel and almost ran out of the ship, his face burning. Damn them both anyway! The sun was down and a thick dusk hung over the island. Kenyon's boots

sank into the stinking, burned soil as he went, making him stumble. Like a red, unhealed scar, he thought. Typical of the improvements made by man on the worlds he exploited.

Elyra was still where he had left her, waiting in the shadow of the tall plumes. The drums sounded louder, their leaden beat drifting across the darkling water of the sea from island to island. The last bloody light was fading from the sky.

Without talk, Kenyon took the girl's extended hand and together they vanished into the forest of waving plumes.

— the night wind and drums in the forest a feeding circle forms to greet a past man from the stars and the anger in the throbbing beat underfoot grows dark and hungry wait the plumes whisper he is coming wait the soil says he is coming to us your father will care for you and feed you and you need not go out among the stars I will protect you —

IT SEEMED to Kenyon that they walked for hours through the darkness. He was conscious of a growing excitement in Elyra, of a feeling of triumph and anticipation. He thought of Grancor's speculations on cannibalism among the Kana people and a sick thrill ran through him...

As they reached a clearing in the forest, the drums stopped; silence fell nice a blow. Elyra turned to face him, her eyes wide and dark in the shadows.

He struck a match and lit a cigaret, sucking the smoke deep into his lungs. Elyra flicked her tongue over her lips and Kenyon noticed its sharp tip. He almost succumbed to an impulse to turn back, but the thought of Bothwell and Grancor laughing at him held him where he was.

"Be steadfast, Kenyon," Elyra said, as though she had guessed his thoughts. "Be brave and above all — be wise when you meet the father."

“Father?”

She stamped a bare foot on the resilient ground impatiently. “The father, Kenyon,” she said again. “The great one who came to my people after yours had deserted us — ”

There it was again, Kenyon thought — that schism between the people of Kana and the rest of the inhabited worlds. Your people. My people. As though the birth of a legend of gods from space had changed the inhabitants of Kana into something apart from the rest of the human race.

“There are no gods from space, little one,” Kenyon said gently. “Only more men.”

“The father is not a man,” Elyra whispered. Kenyon could almost feel the mystic calm that descended on her as she contemplated the legendary past. “Long ago, when the people of Kana lived on the sea and were dying, the great gods came to us and fed us and made us warm.” Her tone grew scornful. “You would not understand me; I cannot make you understand. But the father will speak with you, I am sure, and you will know why our people must remain here for always.”

“No,” Kenyon said. “One way or another, your people will come with us. You are needed elsewhere.”

She laughed at him. “When time ends — when the red star dies — we will be here on Kana. *And so will every man who touched the sacred soil...*”

She stood on tip toes and kissed him, and Kenyon felt a stinging pain on his lips.

“Savage!” He stepped back, wiping blood from his mouth where her sharp tongue had pierced his flesh. He struck her across the face, hard, and she fell. It came to him in a sickening flash of completion. Not cannibals — vampires. He felt his stomach heave convulsively. That descendants of civilized men could become so depraved was unbelievable.

GRANCOR and Bothwell had to be warned. He keyed his pack radio with the message and waited for a response as Elyra watched him from the shadows. There was no

response. Damn them! Were they guarding the channel or weren't they? He had no way of knowing.

Elyra laughed. The sound of it was infuriating. He drew his blaster and pointed it at her. "Lead the wayback," he commanded with more confidence than he felt.

For answer, she laughed again and vanished into the darkness of the thicket of plumes. Nightmare! Kenyon fired blindly, searing a path through the feathery growth. Again, laughter.

And then a sudden thudding rush of naked feet, and hands laid roughly on him, clawing, beating. He screamed with fright, threshing, about in the grip of strong arms. Then there was a stunning pain at the base of his skull and darkness, deep and black as the night of space itself.

When Kenyon awoke, he lay naked in a clearing lit with torches. All about, a sea of faces — the people of Kana. Someone was beating a drum, very softly, with an insistent and hypnotic rhythm. His bare flesh touched the ground, and for the first time, Kenyon was conscious of the peculiar texture of the soil. Smooth, but warm with some kind of latent, inner heat.

The entire tribe of trogs was swaying, self-entranced by the drum beats and the smoky , night. Kenyon could hear their murmured chant, made endless by repetition:

"— wake father wake father wake father —"

Kenyon tried to sit up, found that he could not. Unseen, fiesny bands held him iinn to the ground. Panic stirred in him, and he suppressed it with all the power of his will and training. He twisted his head about to see if he could find Eiyra in the sea of faces, but she was indistinguishable Irorn any other woman. All were naked, all were swaying in their ritual chant. The very air seemed to vibrate with the beat of it.

Kenyon twisted his head aside and froze with honor. Not ten meters from him a stump of a man stood upright —

— no, it was not a stump at all — but a native buried to the armpits in the ground. His eyes were wide open and his mouth worked convulsively. The soil itself was pulsating slowly as the man sank steadily downward.

The man screamed. A liquid mumbling wail that broke into jibberish. A yell erupted from the gathered trogs.

“—*father wakes father wakes!*”

Kenyon, eyes bulging, lay stiff — waiting for he knew not what. The sinking man raised an arm like an automaton, pointing directly at the captive. As though something had taken control of his vocal cords — something alien that found speech a clumsy thing — the man spoke in a hollow, ragged, sepulchral voice.

“*You — man from the stars! Why have you come here?*”

Kenyon could not reply.

“*To steal my people. To take them from me,*” the accusing voice thundered. “*When their own kind deserted them — I came across parsecs of space — across the gulf between the galaxies — to live with them and care for them. And now you think to take them away?*”

And the buried man laughed. A hollow, booming, awful sound in the firelit forest. The trogs echoed his mirthless laughter.

— *it's a trick, Kenyon thought. Hypnosis. Or I'm going mad. I thought the whole world was speaking through that man's mouth —*

The man swept his arms about in a wild circle. He shouted at the trogs: “*Eat! I feast! Join me, eat!*”

Kenyon struggled against the bonds that held him, panic surging in him. But the trogs did not attack him with their sucking, pointed tongues. They bent over, pressing their mouths

against the ground, plunging their tongues into the soil. The buried man screamed once more and vanished, with a wet, sucking noise.

The whole thing leaped into focus in Kenymn's mind, like a picture forming. The soil, the earth — the islands; that was the father. A race of beings from across space, finding refuge in the shallow, warm waters of a world abandoned by the humans of the inner galaxy. Huge, plumed beasts, willing to live in a ghastly symbiosis with the men they found on Kana. Giving them the blood of the land to eat, and taking in return the flesh of men. It was sickening, horrifying. Kenyon could imagine the people leaving the barges for the islands they could see rising in their ocean, and eventually living like parasites on the blood under the tawny skin...

WITH SICK disgust raging in him, Kenyon threshed about, fighting tooth and nail to free himself. He had to get away — out into the cold, clean dark of space — away from this nightmare of alien and human depravity.

And then suddenly, he was free and running through the forest, with the naked horde of trcgs running behind him, torches blazing.

The awful plumes tore at his flesh, the hot pulsing soil of the island softened to slow him. He could hear himself screaming in mixed rage and terror as he fled.

He had to get back!

Back to warn the others!

Back to the starship and cold clean metal under his naked feet and sanity again.

Behind him the trogs howled, and the dark forest echoed their cries.

And at last he was running across the burned flesh of the area of the starship's landing. A ragged, craterlike puckered mouth. The ground rippled and heaved in anger. Kenyon stumbled, fell. Picked himself up again and plunged into the open valve with a sobbing, rasping cry.

Grancor and Bolhwell sat in the control room, their faces white. They did not move when Kenyon stumbled into the cabin. They did not speak as he babbled his story and yelled at them to lift the ship.

“You’ve gone mad! Can’t you understand what I’m saying? We must get out!”

When they did not respond, he took the controls himself and closed the relays. The rockets did not fire.

There was a sinking sensation to the deck. Kenyon felt his sanity totter.

Grancor took him by the arm and led him to a port near the still-open valve.

“Look outside,” Grancor said gently.

“You got my message,” Kenyon said.

Grancor nodded.

Kenyon stood in the open port, looking out.

The sky was reddening in the east, and in the crimson light the plumes were waving agitatedly. The ground was close. Too close, the red, mutilated mouth had closed on the ship. Kenyon remembered the buried man with a thrill of horror. The ship was sinking. In another few moments it would be completely ingested.

Kenyon was conscious of the nearness of a supernal, mammoth intelligence. It hungered.

Grancor and Kenyon stood in the open port, watching the silent circle of trogs that had formed around the starship. They felt their craft sinking slowly, down and down — into, the bloody, living land.