

A man lives as long as his memories live, and on the Blood Planet, lighted only by its many moons, memories do not last.

THE MAN ON THE BEACH

by Vance Aandahl

THERE WERE THIRTY MOONS, and each had thirty moons of its own, and all the moons glimmered in the night sky like pearls on a velvet tablecloth, and all the moons were reflected on the incoming waves—waves not of water, but of something else, something which no one understood. The waves were purple, purple as blood, crested with the silver light of the many moons: purple and silver, pulsing with the endless rhythm of the endless sea, heavy and thick and oily, not like water, but rather the viscous body fluid of the planet itself—a kind of blood, a kind of open, external circulatory system—and, if nothing else, most certainly a namesake, for the planet was sometimes known as the Blood Planet. The beach was all sand, red sand; the purple waves splashed onto it, and the red sand drank them; then there was only moonlight glittering in the sky and on the waves and across the beach and perhaps also on Alan Bronson's own back, for

he was lost there, strange as it may seem, walking on the beach of the Blood Planet.

"I lost lonely here on the beach red in the land dangerous, none to help me, none to help me. . ."

First there had been the song, and then the drums, and then the fires on the red horizon, and then the nitramligs had danced into sight and destroyed everything, and then the nitramligs had danced away, and then there was nothing. Now he had walked beyond time, searching for the sacred similarity of another man, and finding nothing, for there was only moonlight, much moonlight, and waves, many waves, and sand, much sand, all red and purple and pearly but certainly not green or gentle or soft as once another place had been. Still, he walked.

"I lost lonely. Please. . ."

Nothing came to help him, for there was nothing but the sky and the sea and the earth, and perhaps there were nitramligs, but no men. Only Alan walked upon the beach;

only Alan dreamed of things past: there had been a girl, a brown-skin girl with hair the color of brown nuts; he had found her hidden in a nest of green grass and white flowers, braiding her hair and softly singing a melancholy ballad. That had been a time of long summers and many carnivals—a time also of glass menageries and lemon drinks and innumerable insects. There had been another time as well, full of falling leaves, brown and crumbly—a time of gray skies and thunder-showers and crisp pumpkins. He remembered two dogs that had swum at the side of his rowboat when he had once gone to a certain lake: one of them had been a mongrel, white with black spots; the other had been a golden retriever, fat and indolent. They both had laughed (dogs could laugh then) when he had petted them. There had been other times, but he could not remember such things.

"Some say man made from flesh blood bone brain; but I—I memories alone, nothing else. I memories; when memories go, I go. None to help me, though—none to help me . . ."

Suddenly Alan realized that he was facing a great crimson rock, which rose out of the beach like the spine of some great creature of times long past or yet to come. Scarlet it was, and rust colored, and through it ran great streaks of

ruby: it glittered in the moonlight of the many moons, standing as a twisted monument to the Blood Planet's blatant savagery. Before it, Alan paused, confused by such an obstruction; finally, with a sigh, he sat down, leaned against a bulwark of magenta stone, and gazed at his footprints in the sand—footprints which wandered aimlessly back into an eternity of distance, time, and dreams . . .

There had been a spaceport, the best in the universe, full of every entertainment, every joy, every sadness, every perversion—full of mutant pleasures born from the womb of mankind's insidious imagination; there had been great palaces, and towers whose every room held a new pastime, and vast wedges of bar-filled slums, and great amusement parks, and pleasure domes, and racing tracks, and people who would kill you if you wanted to feel that sensation—people, people of every color, size, shape, and mentality; and other things there had been, things they had kept in zoos and things that had run screaming down the crowded streets. Alan had spent five maddening hours in this spaceport, making love and fighting and drinking; then, as he had paused before the Rinky-dink Inn of You Know What, a shabby old man had addressed him: "One two three four, what we doing here for?" The old man had scratched his filthy head, sneezed once, and

chewed at nothing with his gums; then he had shuffled into the crowd, crying. Alan had paused for a moment, and a thought had crossed his mind: " 'What are we doing here for?' Good question."

Alan felt a pain in his leg; a crab (or something like a crab) was chewing on his knee. Slowly, with much effort, he pulled his leg toward his body, took the predator from its feast, and held it squirming in his hands.

"You only want life, as I, so I won't kill: who to say I better than you? None to say, so I won't kill."

Into the purple waves he threw the crab, which disappeared. Then he stumbled to his feet, circled the great red rock, and shuffled onward, lifting one foot and then the other, progressing, step by step, toward a nebulous cloud of freedom and happiness which his feverish mind could see, but which his eyes were denied: they saw only the beach, the red beach, and the sea, with its crimson waves that no one understood, and the black sky full of moons—only these things, these things of eternal duration on the Blood Planet.

There once had been things of greater duration: the nobility of man's quest into the universe, and the promise of human eternity, which such a noble dissemination seemed to guarantee. There had been the stern wisdom of his instructor at the Academy, a tall man with silver hair and cerulean eyes.

"Stars yours," this man had said, and the words had been words of grandeur and meaning: "Stars yours, and greatness good . . ." There had been the Terran uniform, a thing of sky blue and unending beauty, a thing which he had fought for and learned to love. And there had been the upthrusting silhouette of a starship, the indestructible symbol of mankind's outward journey. All these things had been of great duration, but now they were only the blurred fragments of a dissipating memory.

Once, when he had been on leave, he had met a blind man, a lutist named Blue, who had lost his sight somewhere beyond Betelgeuse. They had met in the lounge of a luxury spaceliner, whose great glass eye had revealed the boundless nothingness of the universe through which they had been drifting perilously, somewhere between two suns. It had seemed ironic to Alan that opulence and vacuum should be so strangely separated, as they were, by only a thin, transparent membrane. The lutist—a twisted man, heavy in the limbs and slender in the body, endowed with a mane of snowy white hair—had agreed, smiling hesitantly and licking his lips with the very tip of his tongue.

"You play chess? Despite blindness, I can play imagining board. It game excellent."

"Indeed."

They had played, Alan using a board, the lutist only his mind.

"Why you venture to stars?"

"It important," answered Alan. "Important fine."

"Importance only judgment subjective. You find never importance absolute—importance absolute not."

"Still — importance personal meaningful."

"Yes, meaningful—but also transient. Importance today, nothingness tomorrow: man fat, ghost thin."

"Or no ghost."

"Yes—or no ghost . . ."

Ghosts there were now, foul spectres of the beach, flitting about his drunken head and singing his death song. With a dessicated laugh-rattle, he drank the last half-ounce of his water supply. Behind him was an insane path of footprints and belly furrows. Ahead of him was another path, less insane, certainly, but far more terrible: he had come full circuit and reached the spot where his journey had begun. The ocean was a lake, and he had circled it. With a whispered shriek, Alan stumbled forward and touched the broken hull of what had once been a starship. He lifted shards of metal in his hands, and mixed with the metal were the bones of his shipmates . . .

They had landed on the beach and alighted in the endless night of the Blood Planet. The air had

been good, and they had stood in helmetless glory, glad to be men, strong as gods, the conquerors of the stars. Then the skirling drum music of the nitramlig horde had floated over the horizon, and the men of Earth had cringed. As a child fears the shadows of a dark room, so they had feared the song of the nitramligs, the song which had joined the drum and had slid over the red horizon, a tongue of alien sound. Finally, holding their banners high in the black sky, the nitramligs had come: by the hundreds they fell, but by the thousands did they come. Only Alan Bronson had escaped—escaped for the sole purpose of encircling, in seven days, a lake of blood, only to come once more upon the scene of his shipmates' destruction . . .

Having run into the last blind alley, having found his ignoble end, Alan sank to the sand of the red beach which is forever drenched by the pulse of the purple sea which is forever silvered by the light of the nine hundred and thirty moons. He slept.

At the outset of the following day, a spaceship came. When the hands of his fellow men gently shook him awake, he rolled onto his back and gazed wisely at nothing. After a moment, he addressed them: "One two three four, what we doing here for?" Then he scratched his filthy head, sneezed once, and rolled over, where he lay face down in the sand, crying . . .