



Daughters of Doom
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Beyond Ventura B there was no life; there was nothing but one worn out sun after another, each with its retinue of cold planets and its trail of dark asteroids. At least that was what the books showed, and the books had been written by men who knew their business. Yet, despite the books and the men who had written them, Ben Sessions went past Ventura B, deliberately and all alone and knowing that the odds were against his returning alive.

He went because of a file clerk's error. More correctly, he went as the final result of a chain of events which had begun with the clerk's mistake.

The clerk's name was Gilbert Wayne and he worked at the Las Vegas Interplanetary Port. It was Wayne's job to put through the orders for routine overhaul of interplanetary rockets. Usually Wayne was quite efficient, but even efficient men have bad days, and on one of those days Wayne had removed from the active list the name of Astra instead of its sister ship, the Storan.

The very next morning the Astra had been turned over to Maintenance. Maintenance asked no questions. It was that department's job to take the ship apart, fix what needed fixing, and put it. Ten minutes later Jacobs saw Armando Gomez was the mechanic detailed to check the rocket tubes.

Gomez, who always got that job because he was small and slender, dutifully dropped his instruments into his overall pockets and crawled into the left firing tube. Half an hour later he stuck his head out of the tube and yelled to Jacobs, who was in charge of the job:

"Amigo! How many hours this ship she got?"

Jacobs ran his finger down a chart and discovered to his surprise that the Astra had only two hundred hours on its log since the last overhaul. Ordinarily a ship was checked each thousand hours. He scratched his head but decided that if Operations wanted the Astra tuned it was none of his business. So he told Gomez not to ask useless questions and to get back in the tube.

Anyone else but Gomez would have obeyed orders and forgotten all about it. Ten minutes later Jacobs saw Armando's head appear.

"Amigo!" Gomez shouted. "How many hours?"

"Two hundred!" Jacobs shouted back, knowing he would have no peace until Gomez was answered. "Now get to work! We ain't got all year."

But Gomez was out of the tube again in five minutes and yelling for the foreman.

"What do you want now?" Jacobs demanded. He swung himself up on the catwalk beside Gomez.

"Something very funny in here, amigo," Gomez replied. "One plate she is too clean."

"Less work for you," Jacobs grunted. "So why complain?"

Nevertheless he took a look at the plate, which was near the mouth of the tube. It should have been lightly encrusted with the oxides of rocket fuel. Instead, it was only beginning to dull, in strange contrast to its neighbors which were welded to it.

"That is queer," Jacobs muttered.

"*Si*. As you say, amigo. Queer."

Once Jacob's interest was aroused he was also not one to let a matter drop; he told Gomez to work on another tube while he consulted the front office. The front office was not especially interested, but at Jacobs' insistence they called in a metallurgist. The metallurgist, whose name was Britton, was fortunately a thorough young man. He ordered the plate removed and sent to his laboratory for complete analysis.

After that things happened fast. Britton scanned the analysis of the plate and without hesitation called in his superior who ordered a second test just to be safe, and then notified Washington. Washington turned it over to Interplanetary Intelligence, of which Carson was chief of staff.

One week later Ben Sessions stood before Carson's desk.

Sessions was only thirty-five, but in his few years with "Two Eyes," as the organization was known, he had rung up an enviable record. Tall, lithe, darkly handsome, he was well liked by the men who worked with him. At the moment there was a puzzled frown on his face, lengthening the line made by a scar which ran from his forehead down the side of his nose. The scar was the result of a crash landing on Neptune.

"I don't get it, sir," he said. "A single plate from a rocket tube ... So what if it didn't oxidize?"

"That makes me feel much better." Carson smiled, an inner bitterness making the smile wry. "I didn't get it either," he went on. "A mechanic named Gomez got it; a foreman named Jacobs got it; a lab man named Britton got it; but the chief of "Two Eyes" missed the boat. I feel swell

about that." He rose suddenly and hammered his fist on the desk. "Every one of us in Intelligence ought to be cashiered!"

"Take it easy," Ben cautioned. "All because of that plate?"

Carson slumped back into his chair. "Yes. And because we have failed in our duty. Our only hope is that we may have time to make it up. I'll give you the facts:

"Those tubes are made of Virium, but even Virium develops scale. After next week it will develop even more, because next week we make the changeover to the new fuel. If Wayne had made his mistake two weeks later there would have been so much deposit in the tubes that Gomez would not have noticed the difference.

"Now, Virium is one of the most standardized products in the world. So Gomez was rightly astonished that the tube didn't oxidize evenly. Jacobs saw further. Virium is the toughest metal we know of; if this piece was tougher it might be a discovery of major importance. So Britton analyzed the plate."

"Now we get to the point," Sessions grinned.

Carson stabbed a finger at him. "Right. And the point is that this one section of plate is not Virium! In fact, it is a substance which we are positive does not exist in our system!"

"Wait a second. What do you mean by 'system'?"

"I mean every single bit of matter that lies between here and Ventura B."

"Maybe it's not a natural substance. Not an element."

"We thought of that. It's an element, and one we know nothing of."

"Do you mind if I sit down, sir?" Ben asked suddenly.

The enormity of the thing had struck him, almost dazzling him with its implications. Carson laughed bitterly and waved him to a chair, then went on talking.

"Precisely, Ben. The question is: How did this strange substance get into the tube of an Interplanetary rocket called the Astra? To answer that we checked on the ship. The Astra is one of the few ships which have ever gone beyond Ventura B!"

"I almost expected to hear that," Sessions said.

"It adds up, all right, doesn't it? A foreign substance, a foreign system. But this substance had been made into a plate. That means the work of intelligent beings."

"Who took the Astra on that trip?" Sessions asked, his body tense.

"A licensed space explorer named Murchison. Two others went with him but he returned alone. Claims they fell into a chasm."

"But no explorer has reported life beyond Ventura B," Sessions said, taking up the thread of thought. He whistled softly. "You must have been busy this last week."

"Busy is no word for it. It's only three years since anyone has been allowed to go outside our system. For the purpose of science Interstellar Flight granted permits to six licensed explorers. All returned with charts showing only a desolate waste. In our own quiet way we have checked on each of these six men, including Murchison, in the last week."

"And ... ?"

"And we discovered something very interesting. The six who returned from beyond Ventura B were not the same six who went! They are identical in every facial, bodily, and mental characteristic, identical enough to fool even the families of the lost explorers. But when we secretly photographed them with infra-red light we found that their skins contained elements foreign to our system!"

Ventura A and its sister star were the twin beacons that marked the last outposts of the Earth System. Past them was only a trackless waste of inter-stellar space. Ben Sessions knew that the charts he carried were probably worse than useless, were likely downright traps.

He and Carson had planned the trip. Carson had wanted to send a fighting fleet but Ben had opposed the idea. Wayne's mistake had led them to the uncovering of a gigantic hoax, a hoax which could have only a sinister purpose. Somewhere in the void ahead were sentient beings. To send a fleet would be to let them know that their existence was suspected.

Sessions let the automatic controls take over while he examined the charts once more. They showed the constellation which lay directly ahead, the one after that, and then nothing for hundreds of millions of miles. Those first two reflected a tiny amount of light from Ventura B and were visible through telescopes, therefore it would have created suspicion to falsify their position. Past them, however, the blackness was too intense to penetrate.

The speed of the rocket ship increased. Atomic blasts replaced those of the regular fuel. Sessions knew that an Earth measurement would have

shown the ship to have shrunk to half its size. Only light and the radona beam which protected the ship from collisions could travel faster.

From now on it was just a matter of luck. Someone had pulled those six explorers out of space and Sessions was hoping the same thing would happen to him. On the third day it happened.

He was sitting in the pilot's chair, watching the radona chart before him. Most of the chart was blank, only the upper right hand corner showing a mass of black dots which indicated a planetary dispersal about a dead star. Sessions waited for the radona beam to swing the ship leftward.

Instead, the ship was curving in the direction of the dots! Ben's first thought was that the beam had gone out of order, and he switched to manual controls. No use. Despite all his efforts he was being carried toward those planets.

Habit made him shut off the tubes. Why waste fuel? A tight smile froze on his lips as his speed dropped to twenty million miles then lifted again as the ship by-passed a planet. With calm deliberation Ben switched on the camera he had installed before the flight and let it record his course as shown on the radona chart.

Only one dot remained on the chart. It grew larger and larger until it filled the entire screen. There was no longer any doubt as to the ship's destination, and as if to add further proof its speed dropped sharply. Ben clicked the switch on the camera and removed a tiny roll of microfilm. The roll fit snugly into the hollow cap which covered the stub of one of his molars.

The altitude indicator went on automatically, showed fifty thousand feet, then forty thousand, went down to hundreds. Ahead there was only blackness. Ben held his breath and waited for the crash. It never came. Long after the altimeter showed zero the ship still moved. Ben could think of only one explanation: he was below the surface of the dark planet! And then he could think no more; the blackness seemed to filter into the ship and into his mind.

"He awakens," a voice said. It was a pleasant voice, a feminine one, silky and soothing.

Ben Sessions sat up and said, "Huh?"

The first thing he noticed was the light. No more darkness, but a light that came from nowhere and yet was everywhere. He was on some sort

of couch, in a huge room with a vaulted ceiling. Shaking his head groggily, Ben looked for the source of the silken voice. He was alone in the room.

His eyes ran down the length of his body. The flash gun was gone from his belt. That was hardly unexpected. But the belt was gone too. So were his clothes. He was clad in a loose robe of shimmering white cloth.

That meant he had been unconscious for some time. How long? Ben would have given much to know. Suddenly he let out an unearthly moan, threw his arms wide and rolled off the couch. He lay still.

The silken voice was raised again and added to it was another, more masculine. Then a door opened and two people stepped into the room. Ben sat up and grinned at them, especially at the woman.

"I thought that would get you," he said. "It's not hospitable to hide from your guest."

"Resourceful, isn't he?" The woman raised her eyebrows in mock admiration. Her companion growled a reply which Ben couldn't quite catch.

They were an odd pair, the woman towering well above ten feet but perfectly formed, her skin the color of pink marble; the man more beast than human. The women of Saturn were as tall as she, Ben had time to think, but not nearly as beautiful.

"Welcome to Teris, Ben Sessions," she said. Her smile was the smile of the serpent of Eden.

"You're pretty resourceful yourself," Ben grinned.

He had carried no papers except a blanket permit from Interstellar Flight. He wondered if the precaution he and Carson had taken would prove to be in vain. The woman spoke again.

"Ben Sessions, graduate of Neptune School of Rockets; born in Taos, New Mexico, Earth; third of four children; unmarried, unattached at present; first position, co-pilot Earth-Vega Express ... "

She seemed to be choosing items at random from a memorized list. The exhibition was intended to impress Ben and it was succeeding. More than that, however, it was frightening. He held his breath as she neared the end.

"... two years with Interstellar Communications; presently a licensed space explorer, non-affiliated."

"Pretty good," Ben said.

It was better than that. It was perfect. Only the end was wrong. He and Carson had worked that out with the psychoanalyst. The two of them had wanted to falsify the entire biography, but the analyst had convinced them he was right.

"One lie I might attempt to pound into your very subconscious by hypnotism; a dozen would be spread too thin. We would leave holes. Under the type of electroanalysis you seem to think might be used on you I can't even promise one lie will hold up."

Ben reminded himself to recommend the man for honors if he ever got back to Earth. He had certainly known his business; but then, if he hadn't he would not be working for "Two Eyes."

"Now that you've told me all about myself maybe you'll tell me what's going on," Ben said.

"One of your compatriots can do that," the woman told him. Her interest seemed suddenly to have waned.

She said a few words in a strange tongue to the man who stood at her side. He grunted, bowed, and advanced toward Ben. Long arms, covered with thick black hair, reached out. Ben dodged.

"You'll be sorry if you make him use force," the woman said.

"Nothing like trying," Ben told her. He avoided another grab and stepped in and smashed his fist to the hairy man's jaw.

[Illustration: The ape-like figure rushed forward and Ben's head was thrown back by a mighty blow ...]

He might as well have hit a wall. Before Ben could strike another blow he was lifted from his feet by an upward slap that threatened to tear loose one side of his face. Too dazed to resist, he felt both his wrists encircled by a tremendous hand. The woman's voice rose sharply in a tone of command.

The corridor through which Ben Sessions was being led was thronged with people. There seemed to be three classes: rosy-skinned giantesses like his escort; men of his own size, but also with pink complexions; and the squat, hairy men who appeared to be nothing more than slaves.

It was plain that women dominated this society, and from them Ben received curious but contemptuous glances. Any one of these Amazons would have been considered a beauty on Earth, so regular were their

features, but they lacked an air of feminine softness. Instead, cruelty lay thinly masked beneath the surface.

At the end of the long corridor a huge door swung open and Ben was led through it into an immense room. At the far end of the room was a throne, and on it a woman. Ben blinked. As well proportioned as the others he had seen, she was half again as tall, twice as beautiful. He could not contain a gasp of appreciation.

Thick violet hair fell almost to her shoulders, her skin was luminous and flawless, her body breathtaking, more revealed than concealed by a clinging gown of some filmy material. At her breast, flashed a single violet jewel larger by far than the famed sapphires of Uranus.

"I brought him as soon as he awakened," said the woman with Ben.

A malevolent stare from the woman on the throne rested on Ben. "It was unnecessary," she said. "We have no further need of him. Take him to the field."

"Wait a minute," Ben snapped.

"You are addressing Arndis, Queen of Teris," he heard his escort say.

"I don't give a hoot ... " He never finished the sentence. From behind the hairy slave seized him, lifted him and flung him bodily toward the doors. The interview was over.

They went for a while along the same corridor, then turned off and followed a side passage for a way. It led steadily downward to an arched opening and through that out of the building. Here too the light was diffused, but much brighter. Ben had to blink several times before he became adjusted to it.

They were standing in the center of a vast level plain, apparently endless and roofless, for overhead there was no sky, only an increasing intensity of light. Ranged in rows on the plain were thousands of space ships. Ben turned once as they approached the first line of ships and saw behind him the building from which he had just come. It rose upward, a single block of shining stone, for almost a mile. Alongside it were other buildings of the same material, but none so large.

Then Ben and his two escorts were past the first rows of ships. His eyes roved over them, trying to discover what armament they carried. None was visible. Their firing tubes were much the same as those of Earth design, but slightly smaller.

His attention was diverted from his study by a sudden disturbance aboard the closest ship. The sound of an angry feminine voice came

clearly through an open porthole, and mingled with it was a pleading, deeper tone. An instant later a door was flung open and out of it came hurtling one of the men of Teris. He hit the ground, rolled over, and came to his knees facing the open door and the giant woman who stood framed in it.

That the man was pleading for his very life was obvious to Ben, but it was equally plain that his pleas were having no effect. The woman on the ship uttered a single contemptuous word that cut the pleas short. On her face was a sadistic anticipation such as Ben had never before seen. Slowly she raised a cylinder in her hand and pointed it at the man on the ground.

From the cylinder came a violet light, weak at first, but growing in intensity as she pressed some sort of trigger. The man shrieked in agony as the light played on him. Then the smell of burning flesh came to Ben's nostrils, and the shriek became a single high pitched scream which choked off suddenly.

Ben's escort laughed with ghoulish enjoyment, said something to the woman in the doorway, and gestured at the charred body on the ground. The violet light grew to blinding intensity. A puff of smoke and the body was gone.

"What was that for?" Ben gasped.

His escort smiled indulgently and shot a question at the other woman. The reply was a shrug of shoulders and a few short syllables.

"He did something that displeased her," she told Ben. At his look of horror she laughed again, apparently pleased to have shocked him.

He noticed, as they went along, that the space ships decreased in size. Those in the first rows had been comparable to Earth's battle cruisers, those in the last were one or two man jobs. His own ship, the *Rapier*, was at the very end of the last line.

Beyond was a vast army of men, both rosy skinned and hairy, at work on a gigantic excavation project. Great power shovels scooped load after load of earth. But most of the work was being done by the men who labored with primitive pick and shovel.

Above the sound of digging rose the sharp voices of the giant women of Teris, each with a battalion under her command. As far as Ben's eyes could reach men were digging at the ground.

He was hustling along to a point where a dirt spattered group struggled with a metallic lining for the half-mile hole it had excavated. At that point his escort turned him over to the woman who bossed that crew. Ben saw in the hand of the overseer one of the violet ray cylinders.

"Down there," she said curtly, pointing to where a small knot of men worked on a terrace fifty feet below. "They will tell you what to do."

Ben had found nothing strange in the fact that his escort had spoken English fluently. She had been present at his electroanalysis. But he doubted that all the women of Teris could have the same command of the language. Nevertheless he said nothing and clambered down the ladder to the terrace beneath. Ben's unasked question was answered when he saw the five faces turned up toward him.

Earth men! Even the grime that covered them could not hide that. And there was added proof in their widening eyes. They were sorry to see another Earth man captive, yet happy at sight of one of their own kind. Willing hands helped Ben down from the bottom rung of the ladder.

"We'd heard they had picked up another ship," one of the men said. "But we weren't sure the rumor was true."

"True enough, as you can see. I'm Ben Sessions."

His outstretched hand was grasped and shaken cordially. Names were flung at him. Murchison, Davies, Kennard, Bannon, Murchison.

"Wait a second," Ben said. "I thought I heard Murchison twice."

"You did," said the big, rawboned man at whom he was staring. "The first is my daughter Sally."

It was only then that Ben noticed how small and slender was the figure of the one next to Murchison. Even the girl's loose robe, similar to that of the men, could not quite conceal her femininity. Her hair was cut short, her hands toil hardened.

"Carson didn't tell me," Ben muttered. He grinned at Murchison. "I expected to find you and two assistants, but I didn't know one would be your daughter."

"Expected—?" Hope glinted in five pairs of eyes. Above them there was a shouted command to get to work, and a cylinder was waved threateningly.

"I'll explain as we go along," Ben said hastily. "Show me what to do."

Bannon, a short, thickset man with a mop of unruly black hair shoved a pair of tongs into Ben's hands and quickly explained how to hold the rivets with which the group was working. In effect they were constructing a huge cylinder. Looking down, Ben saw that it descended into the bowels of Teris.

The others were pressing Ben for his explanation but he insisted that they tell their stories first. The same thing had happened to them as to him. Within some thousands of miles of Teris they had felt a force pull them toward it. Then they had passed out and awakened to find themselves prisoners.

"I know all that," Ben said. "But in all the time you've been here you must have found out a good deal. What goes on here? Why are they taking prisoner every one who approaches the planet? Why do they conceal its existence from our system?"

Murchison paused between blows of his hammer, as though to wipe sweat from his brow.

"Since you seem in a hurry," he said, "I will tell it in brief. You are in the center of a planet whose evil people are engaged in one enterprise: the conquering and subjugating of our universe."

"I thought that might be it," Ben nodded. "But subjugating billions of people may prove tougher than they think."

"Their intention is to reduce our population so it can be easily handled. And I can assure you that these women are perfectly capable of slaughtering as many people as they think necessary. They have both the means and the contempt for human life that such an undertaking requires."

Ben hazarded a guess. "This project is part of their preparation?"

"The final part. Since the surface of Teris has a temperature of absolute zero it can only be reached from here through a series of locks. What they are building now are new locks big enough to handle their largest ships. As soon as that's done they plan to attack."

"Any idea when that will be?"

"About a week, Earth time." Murchison's shoulders sagged with despair. "We've been wracking our brains for a way to stop them, but it's no use. They're as clever as they are evil. They've even sent doubles of each of us men to Earth to pave the way for the attack. I suppose you've seen your double."

"No."

"Then they haven't made one. You have to be awake while it's being done. I suppose they didn't think it necessary now that there's so little time left."

"Less time than I thought," Ben grunted. "I'd better get moving." He tilted his head back and shouted to the woman above.

For a second time Ben stood before Arndis, queen of Teris. Her eyes probed at him, trying to divine his thoughts. There was anger in those eyes. If she detected a single flaw in his story it would mean Ben's death. More than that, it would mean disaster for Earth. He talked fast.

"When we found that plate in the firing tube of Murchison's ship we knew he was lying. We figured he'd discovered valuable deposits out here and was trying to keep them secret."

"That was all?"

"It's enough, isn't it? Enough for Interplanetary Intelligence to send me on this mission. Those false papers I carried are proof that we suspected something. And if I'm not back in the time we allowed they'll have our entire battle fleet out looking for me."

"Very clever," Arndis smiled. "But if you are trying to frighten us you are failing. The women of Teris had a high civilization before your Earth was born. We can do things you never dreamed of."

At her command Ben's arms were seized and bound behind him. He was carried swiftly into a room nearby, a room filled with a maze of scientific apparatus. On what appeared to be an operating table was a transparent shell, and beneath this Ben was strapped.

Through the shell he saw one of the men of Teris brought into the room and placed in a similar position on another table. Wires were strung between the two shells and somewhere a machine began to hum. The shells filled with a white vapor that lingered a moment and then was gone.

Although he had known what was to happen Ben could not control his amazement. For the man who came out of the other shell was an exact replica of himself! Within minutes he saw the other dressed in his own flying suit.

"You see how simply we solve the problem?" Arndis asked. "Ben Sessions will return to Earth and there will be no search. He will report that he found nothing and request that he be allowed to try again. By that time we shall be ready to attack."

Ben's arms had been untied, and now he put his hand to his face, as though to rub some tender spot. The move attracted no undue attention. An instant later he had two fingers inside his mouth and was working loose the cap over his tooth.

His next move took them completely by surprise. With a leap he was half way across the room and lunging for his double. Ben brought the man down with a flying tackle and for seconds they wrestled on the floor. Then a hairy hand tore Ben loose and he was hauled to his feet. He had done little harm to the other.

"Not quite fast enough," Arndis said. "Within minutes he will be aboard the Rapiere and on his way." Her voice rose. "Take this one back to the locks."

"Doesn't it ever get dark here?" Ben asked.

He and Murchison and the others had been allowed to come out of the tube after what seemed hours of toil. They sat now in a tiny cell into which air came through slits in the wall.

"No," Murchison said. "But Bannon has a good watch and we're able to keep track of time. It's exactly six days and three hours since you were put to work."

Ben nodded thoughtfully. There was not much time left. Work on the locks went on endlessly, and sooner than he could have believed possible they were being completed. Given enough slaves, he thought, anything could be accomplished.

Gluing his eyes to one of the slits, he peered out. The last of the giant gates was being installed. Their own crew would have only one more shift before the job was finished.

Beyond the excavation Ben could see the tower from which the locks were controlled. Bannon, who had been in Teris longest and who had managed to garner some information, had explained their operation to Ben.

"I worked on the new controls when they were being installed," he said, ranging himself alongside Ben. "They're fully automatic. There are five locks in each tube between the interior and the surface of Teris."

"How many ships did you say were kept at the tower?" Ben asked.

"About ten. They make inspection flights each day, although nothing has ever gone wrong that I've heard of. But the tubes and the locks are the only outlets to the surface and they watch them carefully."

"What are our chances of getting to the tower?"

"Zero, I should say. Only the women are allowed to enter it, or a small crew under their supervision."

"Willing to make a try?" Ben asked. He swung around to face them all. Until now he had not taken them into his confidence, given them no inkling of what was in his mind.

"We've talked about it before," Murchison answered. "But there's so little chance we gave up the idea. Better to stay alive and hope for a rescue."

"I can't tell you how I know," Ben told them, "but there isn't going to be any rescue." He kept his eyes on the girl. "How about you, Sally? Willing to trust me?"

She nodded and Ben heaved a sigh of relief. Rather than leave her behind he would have stayed with her. Gathering them about him he outlined his plans. The men were more than skeptical but no one had any suggestions.

Ben and Davies were the last to finish their work, and as they fastened the last rivet to the last hinge Ben looked up and shook his head. To the giant woman who stood watching him it seemed only that he was tired. She failed to notice that Sally had drifted off to one side and was coming up behind her.

Sally's foot suddenly caught the overseer just behind one knee and knocked her off balance. At the same instant Ben stepped in close and wrenched the violet ray cylinder from the woman's hand. The others screened them from sight. Ben looked around and saw that the slight flurry of activity had gone unnoticed by others of the giant women who were nearby.

"We're going to walk to the control tower," he told the woman grimly. "If anyone asks you're to say we have to do some work there. I'm going to have this ray gun trained on you under my robe, so don't try any tricks. Understand?"

She understood all too well. A flicker of fear in her eyes told Ben that she knew he would blast her without mercy. They fell in behind her.

When they reached the doors of the tower a pair of women barred their way.

"We have received no notice of work to be done," one of them said. Ben saw her eyes narrow with sudden suspicion, and then her hand darted for the cylinder at her side.

Ben's ray gun spouted violet death and the charred bodies of three women lay in the doorway. Ben scooped up their guns and thrust them at Bannon and Murchison.

"We'll give you five minutes before we take off," he shouted as they ran past him for the control room.

Behind him and Davies and Sally there were shouts as the two men went into action. But they had their own job to do. The closest inspection ship was several hundred feet away and already women were running to cut them off. Ben cut loose with his cylinder before they had a chance to use theirs.

Then he and Davies were lifting Sally into the ship. While they covered the open door Ben ran for the controls. Somewhere an alarm was wailing and as he swung the ship about Ben saw other ships being boarded. But Bannon and Murchison had not failed. Just beyond the tower a lock swung open.

Ben skimmed along the ground, figuring to pick up the two men as they came out of the tower. Then he saw Murchison wave him on. He had planted himself in the doorway and was refusing to budge. Ben saw why as Murchison blasted away at a group of giant women who were trying to rush the tower.

There was no more time. Already other ships were taking off. Another wasted minute and they would beat him to the lock. Ben yelled to Davies to close the hatch as he turned on the power.

A moment later they were in the blackness of the tube. Davies ran forward to the controls. "There's a light on the ship," he said. He found the switch and threw it in time for them to see the next lock open for them.

"Three to go," Ben muttered. "Looks like we're going to make it."

"Maybe not." Davies tapped his shoulder and pointed to the rear of the ship. Looking back through a porthole, Ben could see other ships behind them.

"As long as we're in the tube they won't fire," Davies said. "But neither can we get very far ahead!"

While he spoke the ship had gone through another lock with the others still directly behind. It looked like Davies was right. But Ben was not yet ready to concede defeat. The fourth lock loomed ahead and he watched it swing open. Just a few minutes more and they would go through the last one. It was still hundreds of miles ahead but at the rate they were travelling they would be on it soon.

He waited until the last possible second and then cut his speed sharply. Behind them the other ships were forced to use their retarding rockets for fear of ramming them. It was just what Ben had expected. As the last lock opened he threw the accelerator all the way forward and felt the ship leap ahead.

That alone would not have been enough, but as the ship roared out of the tube above the surface of Teris he cut sharply to the right. Had their ship been faster it might have worked. But it was not fast enough. Through the blackness of space the exhausts of their pursuers flamed closer. Ben's teeth clamped down on his lips.

"I guess we're out of luck."

There was nothing more to say. It was only a matter of minutes before the guns of the ships behind them would blast them to pieces. They held their breath and waited, watching the exhausts come through the darkness.

And then suddenly there was no more darkness. A light as bright as the noon sun flared. Ben let out a shout, for beyond the light were lined the battle cruisers of Earth. His pursuers turned tail and ran.

"Where the devil did those ships come from?" Davies gasped.

"I sent for them," Ben told him. "We had it all arranged. When I tackled that double I managed to slip a microfilm capsule into his pocket. It had a complete picture of my radona chart. As soon as the double reached Earth, Intelligence grabbed him. All they had to do was follow my chart to Teris."

They were passing the flagship of the Earth fleet, and Ben dipped the nose of his ship in salute. Then he turned to see what was going on.

There was going to be no attempt to invade Teris. Instead, its surface was illuminated with more of the flares. A moment later Teris was gone, blasted by the guns of a thousand cruisers. And for the strange women who would have enslaved a universe, Ben felt no pity.

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