



# Vengeance of Orion

*By Ben Bova*

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Born in Philadelphia, Ben Bova worked as a newspaper reporter, a technical editor for Project Vanguard (the first American satellite program), and a science writer and marketing manager for Avco Everett Research Laboratory, before being appointed editor of *Analog*, one of the leading science fiction magazines, in 1971. After leaving *Analog* in 1978, he continued his editorial work in science fiction, serving as fiction editor of *Omni* for several years and editing a number of anthologies and lines of books, including the "Ben Bova Presents" series for Tor. He has won science fiction's Hugo Award for Best Editor six times.

A published SF author from the late 1950s onward, Bova is one of the field's leading writers of "hard SF," science fiction based on plausible science and engineering. Among his dozens of novels are *Millennium*, *The Kinsman Saga*, *Colony*, *Orion*, *Peacekeepers*, *Privateers*, and the *Voyagers* series. Much of his recent work, including *Mars*, *Venus*, *Jupiter*, *Saturn*, *The Precipice*, and *The Rock Rats*, falls into the continuity he calls "The Grand Tour," a large-scale saga of the near-future exploration and development of our solar system.

A President Emeritus of the National Space Society and a past president of Science-fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, in 2001 Dr. Bova was elected a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). He lives in Naples, Florida, with his wife, the well-known literary agent Barbara Bova.

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#### Vengeance of Orion

##### BOOK I

##### TROY

##### Chapter I

THE slash of a whip across my bare back brought me to full awareness. "Pull, you big ox! Stop your daydreaming or you'll think Zeus's thunderbolts are landing on your shoulders!"

I was sitting on a rough wooden bench along the gunwale of a long, wallowing boat, a heavy oar in my hands. No, not an oar. A paddle. We were rowing hard, under a hot high sun. I could see the sweat streaming down the emaciated ribs and spine of the man in front of me. There were welts across his nut-brown skin.

"Pull!" the man with the whip roared. "Stay with the beat."

I wore nothing but a stained leather loincloth. Sweat stung my eyes. My back and arms ached. My hands were callused and dirty.

The boat was like a Hawaiian war canoe. The prow rose high into a grotesquely carved figurehead; some fierce demonic spirit, I guessed, to protect the boat and its crew. I glanced swiftly around as I dug my paddle into the heaving dark sea and counted forty rowers. Amidships there were bales of goods, tethered sheep and pigs that squealed with every roll of the deck.

The sun blazed overhead. The wind was fitful and light. The boat's only sail was furled against its mast. I could smell the stench of the animals' droppings. Toward the stern a brawny bald man was beating a single large mallet on a well-worn drum, as steady as a metronome. We drove our paddles into the water in time with his beat—or took a sting from the rowing master's whip.

Other men were gathered down by the stern, standing, shading their eyes with one hand and pointing with the other as they spoke with one another. They wore clean knee-length linen tunics and cloaks of red or blue

that went down to midcalf. Small daggers at their belts, more for ornamentation than combat, I judged. Silver inlaid hilts. Gold clasps on their cloaks. They were young men, lean, their beards light. But their faces were grave, not jaunty. They were looking toward something that sobered their youthful spirits. I followed their gaze and saw a headland not far off, a low treeless rocky rise at the end of a sandy stretch of beach.

Obviously our destination was beyond that promontory.

Where was I? How did I get here? Frantically I ransacked my mind. The last firm memory I could find was of a beautiful, tall, gray-eyed woman who loved me and whom I loved. We were ... a shudder of blackest grief surged through me. She was dead.

My mind went spinning, as if a whirlpool had opened in the dark sea and dragged me down into it. Dead. Yes. There was a ship, a very different ship. One that traveled not through the water but through the vast emptiness between stars. I had been on that ship with her. And it exploded. She died. She was killed. We were both killed.

Yet I lived, sweaty, dirty, my back stinging with welts, on this strangely primitive oversized canoe heading for an unknown land under a brazen cloudless sky.

Who am I? With a sudden shock of fright I realized that I could remember nothing about myself except my name. I am Orion, I told myself. But more than that I could not recall. My memory was a blank, as if it had been wiped clean, like a classroom chalkboard being prepared for a new lesson.

I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to think about that woman I had loved and that fantastic star-leaping ship. I could not even remember her name. I saw flames, heard screams. I held her in my arms as the heat blistered our skins and made the metal walls around us glow hell-red.

"He's beaten us, Orion," she said to me. "We'll die together. That's the only consolation we will have, my love."

I remembered pain. Not merely the agony of flesh searing and splitting open, steaming and cooking even as our eyes were burned away, but the torture of being torn apart forever from the one woman in all the universes whom I loved.

The whip cracked against my bare back again.

"Harder! Pull harder, you whoreson, or by the gods I'll sacrifice *you* instead of a bullock once we make landfall!"

He leaned over me, his scarred face red with anger, and slashed at me again with the whip. The pain of the lash was nothing. I closed it off without another thought. I always could control my body completely. Had I wanted to, I could have snapped this hefty paddle in two and driven the ragged end of it through the whipmaster's thick skull. But what was the sting of his whip compared to the agony of death, the hopelessness of loss?

We rowed around the rocky headland and saw a calm sheltered inlet. Spread along the curving beach were dozens of ships like our own, pulled far up on the sand. Huts and tents huddled among their black hulls like shreds of paper littering a city street after a parade. Thin gray smoke issued from cook fires here and there. A pall of thicker, blacker smoke billowed off in the distance.

A mile or so inland, up on a bluff that commanded the beach, stood a city or citadel of some sort. High stone walls with square towers rising above the battlements. Far in the distance, dark wooded hills rose and gradually gave way to mountains that floated shimmering in the blue heat haze.

The young men at the stern seemed to get tenser at the sight of the walled city. Their voices were low, but I heard them easily enough.

"There is it," one of them said to his companions. His voice was grim.

The youth next to him nodded and spoke a single word.

"Troy."

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