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INTERPLANETARY REPORTER

The news broke just after Chris Barton left the Stellar Queen at Vhia, the trade city for Venus. He stood on the steps of the spaceport. Looking out over the white city under its pearly dome, he breathed the cooled, scented air. As he listened, his thin mouth was set in a bitter smile of complete cynicism. Silence had settled over Vhia, a silence of pent breath and tautened nerves, of ears strained to catch every word from the great newscasters in every green square. People were converging in soft-footed multitudes on the three-dimensional, full-color television screens. The marts that supplied all Venus with the treasures of the Solar System had stopped in mid-career, to listen.

"I could have told them," Chris Barton thought. "I saw it coming, out in the asteroids. I can smell it the way a vulture smells death." Still the men on the vision screens talked on, curiously low and hurried. The people of Vhia stood frozen in a kind of incredulous daze, through which realization began to seep like pain through a new wound.

"Jupiter has declared war on Venus! Instructions will be given to the civilian population as soon as possible. Military classes will report at once . . ."

"For what?" muttered Chris Barton. "These people are like sheep. They can't fight. Most of them aren't even Venusians. Poor fools, they'd better just run, because Vhia is the first place the Jovians will lay eggs on. Hang it, I've got to stay and watch!"

* * *

He went down the steps. Among the stunned, unmoving mob, he walked like a lean old he-wolf among domestic cattle.

Something about him seemed to penetrate the stricken daze that held them. Perhaps it was his careless, piratical dress, or the hard-bitten arrogance of his walk. It might have been that the outland suns which had burned his skin to dark leather had also burned out all the soft places and left only the steel. Whatever it was, he attracted their eyes, and they drew back from him. He heard his name, tossed between white lips.

"Chris Barton, war correspondent for Interplanetary Press, the Sexton Syndicate. Wherever he goes, it means trouble." Chris Barton smiled—bird of ill-omen, vulture of pain. Beyond the dome of pearly glass, on the other side of Venus, lay the swamp where he had left his boyish illusions, covering the Leng campaigns. Out beyond the steamy canopy of clouds was Mars, where he had stood by a tele-transmitter until it was blown up under him, covering the Martian World War of 2504. There was Earth, where he had dodged bullets and poisoned darts to inform the people of the Solar System how the Dark Invasion was going. And there was the Asteroid Belt, where he had just televised a vicious, small-scale war. Forty-three years of life, and he was alone. The men who had started with him were dead, but his fatalistic contempt of death had pulled him through. There was not a man in the news world who didn't resent or dislike him. There had never been a woman.

Chris Barton stopped. An I. P. man pictured above his head was rehashing the situation—the Venusian defenses, the population of the Jovian moons, the boundaries of the Jovian Mandate in the Asteroid Belt, where the trouble had started. The same words, with different names, that he himself had said so many times.

Standing on the feathery Venusian grass, under the dome of a city listening to its death sentence, Barton felt the weight of those forty-three years increase to a hundred. The sordidness of them made him

sick.

Battle, news, death, and more news, endlessly. For what? Though he was a legend in newspaperdom, for all the thrills he had given the boobs, he was a pariah.

Fear-whitened faces. Voices tight with hysteria. Newscasters droning out death and suffering. They tripped a spring somewhere in Barton's mind, brought to light the worm that had been gnawing at his subconscious. He was tired, old and alone. And there was another war on, which only Chris Barton could give to the people.

His hard, light-blue eyes narrowed. He went on again, across the breathless city, with a sort of grim ruthlessness. He knew quite suddenly what he was going to say. Sanger could take his war and go to blazes with it. The fine white building that housed the Venusian headquarters of the Sexton Syndicate was in chaos. Reporters, rewrite men, telecasters, copy boys, technicians—wherever possible, the Syndicate employs native men—were swarming out into the streets, to find loved ones, to report for duty. Down below, where the great silent presses turned out the indispensable papers in the universal language of the trade cities, it was the same. Only the robot teletypists remained.

Barton shouldered through the mob, heading for the office of John Sanger, I. P. head for Venus. Halfway across the anteroom, he stopped. For a moment he didn't know why. Then his mind, fixed on one urgent goal, registered dimly. It was a woman who had swung from a window at his entrance. She was tall and wide-shouldered and lithe, dressed in a spaceman's dark coverall. Barton saw green, slanting Martian eyes set startlingly in a tanned, heart-shaped face, and hair that was the soft white-gold of Venus.

Confusedly he knew that she was familiar, yet he knew he had never

seen her before. His eyes met hers, held them. For one electric instant he was lost, disoriented, charged with a queer fascination. Then the bitter urge in his heart drove him on without speaking, and the thread was broken. The closing of Sanger's door behind him shut her out of his mind.

"Sanger," said Chris Barton grimly, "I quit."

* * *

John Sanger froze, half risen in welcome. A well built, well kept man, his dark hair had gone gray at the temples, and his clean-cut face was scored deep with weariness. He sank back into his chair.

"Why, Barton? What's the reason?"

Barton's lips twisted. "Getting old, I guess. Cracking at the seams. Anyway, I'm through."

"With reporting?"

"With the whole rotten game!"

John Sanger was silent, looking into Barton's bitter, stubborn face. Then he shook his head in bewilderment.

"You can't quit. I don't know what's the matter with you, but you're a newspaper man. You have your duty, as well as a job. There's a war on. The people have a right . . ."

"Blast the people!" snarled Chris Barton. "A bunch of fat fools, getting a thrill out of other people's suffering and hating you when the thrill comes home to them. No need to preach, Sanger. I learned all about the sanctity of the press with my ABCs—and forgot about it with my second war. I'm sorry if it leaves you in a hole, but I'm finished."

"Be sensible, Barton!" said Sanger irritably. "You've been in this too long. It's all you know. You wouldn't fit anywhere else."

"You let me worry about that."

Sanger suddenly looked what he was, a tired man. He passed a hand across his eyes.

"I was counting on you. I've got a newspaper to run, and I'm going to have to do it almost single-handed. There's no one else. . . ." He broke off and shook himself erect. "Why not? There were reporters before you were born!" He flipped a connection open, and Barton knew his voice was booming out along the empty corridors.

"Bobby Lancer! Report to Sanger's office, at once!" Barton shrugged and turned away. As he did so, a picture on a paper spread on Sanger's desk caught his eye. Picking it up unceremoniously, he stood staring at it.

Slanting green eyes looked back at him out of a heart-shaped face. Pale-gold Venusian hair fell to wide, coverall-clad shoulders. The three-dimensional, natural-color photograph brought her almost to life. The caption read: Kei Volhan, socialite adventuress of Vhia, who, it is rumored, is prepared for a takeoff despite the Venusian Space Committee's injunction. She will try to shatter the existing record for a three-point, non-stop flight—Venus, Earth, Mars, and back.

That was where he had seen her. In the brief lulls between wars and their rumors, he had read casually of her wild exploits along the spaceways. He had put her down as a feather-brained brat, product of the soft, over-stimulated trade cities, and forgotten her. Now he knew he couldn't forget her again.

"What's she doing out there?" he asked abruptly. Sanger shrugged. "Came to raise a fuss about that story. The war changes all that, anyway. She'll probably take it out on young Lance. They're engaged to be married."

Still the enigmatic phantom pulled at Barton. He knew dimly that it wanted him to stay, because of Kei Volhan.

"I still quit!" he grunted, flinging the paper down.

* * *

Yanking his piratical old hat down over his eyes, he started out. He was through, finished, fed up. He hated himself and the world. He was going to get drunk, or die, or both. What difference did a green-eyed girl make?

The door opened before he reached it. She was there, and a tall young man was with her, his arm about her waist. Chris Barton stopped.

"Come in, Lance," Sanger said. "You too, Miss Volhan, if you wish." Those disturbing green eyes met Barton's again, held them, sent an almost electric current through his blood. Something in the girl rose to the emotions in him that everyone else turned away from. It was strange how strongly he felt that, because he didn't know women, didn't like them. He wrenched his gaze away, let it waver back.

It was then that the first Jovian bomb struck!

The instant his ears registered the first reverberations, Barton realized that the Jovians must have had a fleet waiting, invisible somehow from the charted space-lanes. Briefly he wondered how. With the growing tension in the Asteroids, each world had kept a

doubly sharp watch, and there had not been even the rumor of a fleet. But it must have been there. With the declaration of war it had swooped, catching the peaceable Venusians unprepared. There was a splintering crash as the dome was ruptured, a vast ripping sound as the tough glassite starred and cracked away from the hole. The office windows rattled with the change of pressure, as the wet, heavy outer air rushed into the cooler, thinner Vhian atmosphere. Then the shell burst. Chris Barton fell in a shower of plaster.

From the sound, Barton knew that the shell had struck on the far side of the city. Three more of them came in quick succession. The power of the sub-atomic explosive was strong enough to rock the heavy I. P. building like a cardboard toy. He nodded a brief acknowledgment of Jovian marksmanship. The invaders were out beyond the atmosphere, sending the heavy eggs down with a self-contained direction unit.

"Sanger!" he called out. "Have you got a cellar?" The I. P. head pulled himself up from behind the desk, bleeding from a nasty gash over the eye.

"You know quite well there are cellars," he grunted. Glaring upward, he added:

"This is the lowest, dirty-dog trick anyone's pulled in a century!"

"I'd still like to know where they hid their fleet." Barton scrambled up, coughing, and gave his hand to Kei Volhan. She didn't need his help, but she held his hand and looked at him while she rose. He knew that she was no more afraid than he was. Sanger joined them, wiping blood from his face.

"Hurry up. The skunks'll shell Hades out of us before the Venusian fleet wakes up. Hey, Bobby, are you hurt?"

Barton had forgotten Bobby Lance. He was half-crouched against the wall, his gray eyes dazed and staring in a bloodless face. For an instant Barton thought he was hurt, and was vaguely sorry. Lance looked like a promising youngster, well built, with a keen, intelligent face. But he wasn't hurt. He got up jerkily, bending his head to hide his face, running shaky hands through his dusty yellow hair.

"Come on, Kei," he muttered, and started for the door. Barton knew, then. Lance was scared. Barton shrugged cynically as they hurried down the corridor. Lance was young. Eventually you either got the fear hammered out of you, or you let it get you. Either way, it didn't matter, for the System didn't give a hang. All it wanted was thrills at a distance. They didn't dare use the lifts. Bombs began to fall again, cracking the steps under them as they ran down. Already the temperature was rising as the hot Venusian air steamed in. Barton thought of all the soft Vhians who had never been beyond the dome. They looked upon the hardy outsiders as barbarians, while they built their own polyglot civilization in a manufactured comfort. It was the same on all the planets. The trade cities are alien, a law and a race unto themselves. Vhia, at last, was going to get a taste of the real Venus.

"Nuts!" cried Sanger abruptly. "The summer rains are on Outside. With the dome broken, Vhia will be flooded out!"

"Perhaps," said Bobby Lance too loudly, "the cellars aren't such a good idea, after all."

"Perhaps," suggested Kei Volhan, "you ought to join the refugees. They'll be evacuating women and children."

Chris Barton's thin brows went up at the savage contempt in her voice. She didn't sound much in love with Lance. Lance looked at her. There was something in his gray eyes that penetrated even Barton's armor.

"That's not fair, Kei. You know I won't leave. There's the newspaper. There'll be a battle up there. Somebody's got to take the ship up and televise it."

"Why?" demanded Barton. His harsh voice brought Kei's green eyes around, and he felt that stimulating leap along his veins.

"Why?" said Lance simply. "The news has to be broadcast. The people have a right to know what's going on."

Chris Barton laughed, a sardonic bark. Kei's fingers fastened on his wrist. He felt the tingling strength of them answered in himself. Her brown, heart-shaped face was level with his own.

"You'll take the ship up, Chris Barton," she said. For some reason, he didn't tell her he was through with reporting. His hard, dark face went quizzical.

"Who'd fly me?" he demanded, knowing the answer. "I couldn't do it all alone."

"I will" said Kei Volhan.

"Kei!"

Incredulous hurt bleated almost comically in Lance's cry. But he wasn't comical. Barton had seen it before—a kid under fire for the first time, having a hard enough time without his girl going back on him. But those were the breaks. You had to take them, beat them

down and go on, or quit. It was up to Lance.

Barton's gaze held Kei's. His world had exploded in his face. Why not have a last fling? Besides, those green eyes promised something. He didn't know what, but he wanted to find out.

"Okay, sister," he said. "I might as well die that way as any other." Three steps below them, still running down, Sanger laughed.

* * *

The I. P. newscasting ship was in a hangar at the Dehra Spaceport, a private field beyond the dome. Normally it was an easy half-mile jaunt in a car.

"Take it up if you can get it, Barton," Sanger said. "I've got to stay here." They stood in a side entrance at street level, staring out. Barton's harsh face was grim. The pearly dome was cracked and shattered. Through the breaks, the outer air poured in like fog, smelling of jungle and swamp and lush-grassed uplands. There were growing pools of water where the hot rain splashed through. Barton could see smoke and broken buildings to the south, where the heaviest bombing had been. Rain was falling in torrents through a vast hole in the dome.

Refugees jammed the streets, pushing toward the outlets and safety. Men who handled the System's trade with Venus. Women whose lives had been smooth, easy and unruffled. People who had worked in peace and plenty, and ignored the storm signals too long. Barton had coldly seen it a hundred times before, yet this time it made him feel as he had felt in the square—old, tired and alone in a system that was doubly ugly, with this cowardly brutality of the Jovians. He sighed. Then he saw Kei's tumbled pale-gold hair, the brown arrogance of her heart-shaped face, and felt life stealing through him again.

"Come on," he said, "if you're not afraid." She laughed at him like a Martian cat. She must have forgotten Bobby Lance, for she started when he spoke.

"I'm coming, too!"

Barton stared at him. Years of judging kings, dictators and presidents, warlords and treaty-makers, had given him a clinical insight into people. His cold, impersonal judgment managed to be uncannily accurate. When he had first seen Bobby Lance in the doorway with Kei, he had seen only a good-looking young masculine body. After the bombing, he had seen a youngster scared half out of his wits by his first taste of war.

Now he saw a man, disheveled and pale as death, his muscles jerking involuntarily as though with a high-tension current. Sick with fear, he was even sicker with rage against Kei Volhan, for turning her back on him because he was afraid. He raged against Barton as any man would hate the object of his fiancée's sudden favor.

Barton smiled. It was the first time any man had had occasion to feel that way about him. It was a stimulating experience, made him feel as though he were not really dead. He felt that Kei was being hard on Lance, and yet he could understand it. It was his own cynical ruthlessness, the impersonal harshness of a nature that asked no quarter and could see no reason for giving it. Kei had no fear, and she was savagely disappointed in Lance.

"I'm going, too," repeated the young man stubbornly, and his jaw was set and ugly.

"Why?" demanded Kei. "You—"

Her words were drowned in a thundering fury of sound. Great jagged pieces of the dome showered down, meeting an up flung geyser of plastic and concrete where two whole blocks vanished in oily smoke. It was close. Debris fell in the streets around the I. P. building. People screamed and fell, broken like dolls, and the whole mass of refugees surged forward in a frantic wave, mad with fear.

* * *

Lance was whiter than the cracked white terrace he lay on. He didn't seem to realize the time-lag between her question and his answer.

"It's my job. All this is happening. The people have a right to know the truth. The ship needs three—one to fly, one to broadcast, one to handle the equipment. There's no one else, even if it weren't my job." Rising cautiously from the rocking terrace, Chris Barton stopped long enough to meet Lance's gaze.

"I didn't know they still made people like you," he grunted, shaking his head.

"Idealism's a bad thing. Quicker you get over it, the better. Not so tough, then. The boobs can't hurt you."

The barrage had started again, and this time it was too close for comfort. Barton saw water running in ominous little rivers down the streets. Vhia, without gutters or storm drains, was in for a wetting.

"You can't stay, Sanger," he said abruptly. "Even if the bombs didn't smash this place to glory, you'd drown in the cellars." John Sanger sighed. "You're right. I'd hoped. . . . Oh, well, I can probably get over to Lhash. Our nearest branch is there, and I can carry on all right from it, thanks to you." Unexpectedly he gripped Barton's hand. "I knew you'd realize you couldn't quit. Good luck, Chris, and thanks." He

plunged out into the rushing human sea before Barton could open his mouth.

"Well?" snapped Bobby Lance. "Are we going?" Barton was still staring after Sanger.

"What?" he muttered absently. Then, jerking himself back, he rasped. "Come on!"

He led the way off the terrace. It was nightmarish, that struggle toward Dehra Spaceport. The three kept close together, Barton's shoulder touching Kei's. Water ran deeper and deeper in the streets as more of the dome fell in. Bombs were razing Vhia behind them.

The wild stampede slackened somewhat, slowed by the rain. Barton knew that it was thinning out. Most of those untouched by the first bombings had got out. He prayed they hadn't taken the I. P. ship for transport. Then, remembering that it only held two besides the pilot, he decided they probably wouldn't. They came to the smashed pressure-lock in the base of the riven dome, and were carried through with the outgoing press of people. Over in the main hangars and out on the field, people were fighting for space on any kind of ship going anywhere, away from Vhia. Barton's eyes went anxiously to the little private combination hangar and launching rack. He saw with relief that it was still locked.

"This way!" he called, and battled across the stream. Kei squared her shoulders like a man, staying at his side. Lance was taking out some of his inner turmoil with his fists. They won clear at last and broke into a run. The mob, intent upon escape, never noticed them. In five minutes, Kei Volhan had the retractable plastic roof slid back, the motors roaring to life. The trim little Fitts-Sothern quivered on the launching rack. Then it shot up through the rain, past the miles-thick layers of steaming clouds, out into the star-shot black of space.

In those brief moments of acceleration, Barton's lungs felt crushed, his eyeballs bursting. The seat straps were cutting his flesh. He cursed himself, wondering why a green-eyed girl had been able to make him do something he had sworn never to do again. He was used to having his brain clear, like a cold, accurate machine. Since he had stood in the square in Vhia, feeling the Old Man of the Sea that was his life fasten on his shoulders, his mind had been confused. Kei hadn't helped any. It gave him an angry feeling of helplessness, as though he no longer controlled his actions.

The pressure slacked abruptly, and he could see again. The Fitts-Sothern was a sweet little ship. Sanger had evidently wanted the most modern newscasting ship in his territory.

Electronic cameras of the newest type were mounted in nose and keel. The transmitter was compact and powerful, operating on an ultra-short wave controlled beam. Tight and strong enough to pierce the heavy Venusian atmosphere, it would be comparatively unaffected by ionization in the upper layers. Automatic full-color, three-dimensional cameras were mounted with the electronics, along with sound-recording apparatus to make a permanent record of what the reporter sent out to the world.

An extra, independent camera was in the pilot's bay, to be used at the reporter's discretion. All had infra-red and ultra-violet filters to take care of various conditions of light, as well as long-range lenses and telescopic sights.

Barton unstrapped himself, for they were in free space now. He went up beside Kei, noting that Lance, still pale and grimly silent, was already at the instrument panel. Looking out, he frowned.

"Where are the blighters?" he grunted.

Space was black and empty, except for the stars and the great cloudy ball of Venus. There was no fleet, no sign of anything at all. But the meteoric mass-detectors on the board showed the close presence of a small metallic body.

"What the—" shouted Chris Barton.

He was flung back violently, striking against the transmitter panel. Lance was already crumpled brutally against the stern bulkhead. Barton felt the wild, reverberant shuddering of the ship's metal sides.

"Space torpedo!" groaned Lance.

Strapped in her seat, Kei fought the ship to an even keel, shot away in a screaming tangent. Barton got to his feet shakily, hugging his bruised ribs and swearing. That had been much too close, and it had come from nowhere.

"Something funny," Kei said evenly. "Why can't we see the ship?"

"I don't know."

The pilot's bay gave full vision, and there was absolutely no ship. On an impulse, Barton switched on the infra-red projector, a lamp which shot a powerful beam of "black light" that helped in taking pictures in world-shadow areas or heavy atmosphere. It was a nasty feeling, waiting for another torpedo to fly out of nothing. This time it might not be a miss. The little visi-plate of the infra-beam showed a small, dim shape, off to sunward of them, lying still in space. It showed another, a tiny shape, streaking. . . .

"Kei!" Barton almost screamed. "Ahead, fast!"

The Fitts-Sothorn shrieked in agony at the sudden acceleration, but they made it. They were bathed in the red flare of the torpedo that had been fired by a timing device.

Bobby Lance spoke from the transmitter panel. It had taken him a long time to get there. He sat straight in his chair, gripping the arms, and his young face was bone-white under his tumbled yellow hair.

"Can't they see our badge?" he asked flatly. All news ships carried a broad band of white paint, to mark them plainly as non-combatant neutrals. If the reporter were cautious, he could televise his battle from a distance in reasonable safety. Barton knew from experience that an incautious correspondent took the same risks as anyone else.

"Yes," he answered. "Sure they can see it." Whoever they were, they had a reason for ignoring it. Finding them again with the infra-beam, he flipped on the cameras and motioned to Lance. The young man's fingers quivered on the dials and verniers, but in a moment Barton's screen came clear. The man at the I. P. station at Lhash was speaking.

"You've got a System-wide hookup. Go ahead, but watch out for the Venusian fleet. It's on its way up. After what the Jovians did to Vhia, I hope we knock the devil out of 'em!"

"Okay."

Barton flipped the connection over, cuddled the mike in his palm. Then, with his eyes still glued to that enigmatic little blot of darkness in the lens, his mind began to race perversely.

"No more torpedoes," he thought. "Ship's no bigger than ours. No room for more. Why don't I hate this? I hated it back in Vhia. Was Sanger right? It was Kei that made me come, but why did Kei make any difference? And I don't understand young Lance. Could I have understood him once? Did I ever feel that way?"

Then his mind was hard and clear again. There was news, a story in that strange black ship.

"Mr. and Mrs. Solar System!" he began. His voice went on, almost of itself, pouring out those short, electric sentences that had kept people glued to their televisions for twenty years, whenever something exciting was going on. Pale but unshaken, Kei sent the ship arcing toward the black one in obedience to his gesture. Infra-red beams and filters were raking it, pinning it indelibly to sensitive film. Abruptly its rocket tubes burst into flame.

"They know we've seen them," said Barton. "They've been quiet up to now, hoping to destroy us without betraying their position. They didn't count on the infra-red beam. Now. . . . Hold on. They're not Jovians! Their rocket gases—"

A bolt of vivid violet shot away from the black ship. Kei lurched the ship violently aside, but there was no escaping. The purple light was drawn to them. Before Barton could finish his sentence, it struck with a blinding flare of electric blue. In airless space, there was no sound, but the light lasted so long that Barton had an eerie feeling of fire. Fire in space?

"Lance, try to contact Lhash!"

The young man's face was ghastly. Barton hadn't believed fear could produce that gray, deathly pallor. Lance's fingers fumbled uncertainly. Barton heard Kei's bitter little snort of disgust.

"It's dead," Lance whispered. "Antenna fused."

* * *

Barton grunted. No more broadcasting, so the boobs would have to do without their thrill.

"What did you mean, Chris?" Kei spoke over her shoulder, watching the rocket flare of the black ship intently.

"Jovian ships use a fuel mixture that produces a red exhaust flare. If you'll notice, this is yellow. What fuel makes a yellow exhaust?"

"The Martian liquid-hydrogen mixture! You don't mean. . . ."

"I mean that's a Martian ship," Barton said, evenly. "The Jovians didn't bomb Vhia."

"Martians! "The enormity of the thing gradually took shape. Kei was half Martian, but she was Venusian-born. "They've been fighting us over water prices. They claim we victimize them, because they're dependent on us for water. So that's it—revenge!"

Barton shook his head. "There's more to it than that. You are pretty hard on them, you know. They need water badly, especially with these new reclaimed areas. The Jovian mandate in the Asteroid Belt contains three of the wettest little worlds in the System. If she could get hold of those, Mars would be practically independent."

"They'll be coming for us as soon as they break their orbital drag," said Kei quietly. "What should I do?"

Venus loomed, a vast cloudy disc, beside them. Barton shrugged.

"Run like fury. We can't fight 'em."

Bobby Lance spoke behind them. They both started at the vehemence of his labored whisper.

"You can't run. We still have a camera and the infra-beam. The cameras outside are ruined, and so are the films. That bolt of electricity—they planned on a camera ship. But we've got to take pictures of them that will prove the Jovians had nothing to do with Vhia!"

"If we did," said Barton slowly, "it would change the whole aspect of the war. Jupiter wants territory. That's where the fight started. Mars wants water, and Jupiter has it. So Mars deliberately infuriates Venus against Jupiter by committing such an outrage that even peace-loving Venus will never quit until Jupiter is licked.

"Now Mars can either abrogate her trade treaty with Jupiter in return for the Jovian mandate, which Venus will hand over after the war is won. Or, if Jupiter looks like winning, she can give active aid to Venus in return for the Jovian asteroids and water rights here. Either way, it's a filthy business. Vhia didn't have a chance. And Venus is out to smash Jupiter for good because of it."

"That's it. We've got to put the blame where it belongs. Perhaps we can save millions of people from dying." Lance dragged himself erect. "You've got to do it, Barton. Will you?"

Barton's hard, light eyes pinned him, trying to see through him.

"We'd be crazy to try. They're armed, we're not. What about Kei?" The boy looked stubbornly past him at nothing.

"Kei got herself into this. And we have a duty to the world." So Lance

could be ruthless on his own account. Barton's thin, harsh face creased in a puzzled frown. What was it about Lance and Kei that set all his values askew?

"They're gaining speed," said Kei. "We haven't all day." Barton cursed the new confusion of his brain, hesitated.

* * *

Suddenly Bobby Lance was gripping his shoulders with fingers that hurt, shouting at him in a hoarse, strangled voice.

"Curse you, Barton, haven't you got a heart? Why are you a newspaperman, if the truth doesn't mean anything to you?"

"It may mean your death."

"I don't care. We've got to try . . ."

He fell abruptly, huddled at Barton's feet.

"They'll have enough velocity for fighting in a minute now," Kei said. "We won't be able to run much longer. What'll I do, Chris?" She hadn't noticed Lance's fall.

"Hang on a second longer." He was staring down at Lance. Could the kid be right? "Nuts!" he snarled, kneeling. "What does he know? Passing out that way from fright."

He lay on his face. Barton caught his shoulder, pulled him over. Then Barton caught his breath with a sudden hiss, and ran his hand along Lance's side.

"Kei, we're both heels," he said, rising slowly.

"Why?"

The ship lurched upward in a shuddering arc. Something yellow and vicious licked past the starboard ports—just a practice stab with a heat beam, but it showed that the Martians were getting deadly serious.

"Lance is a star-spangled hero," rasped Barton wryly. "He was scared stiff, but he came, anyway. He's stuck to his job, egged me on to be a noble little boy. And all this time, half his ribs were stove in. The first torpedo did it."

Kei dared not leave the controls, but she looked over her shoulder. Barton saw her heart-shaped face, suddenly pale in spite of the tan, the fire softened and misty in her green eyes. Chris Barton nodded.

"You'll make him a good wife, Kei. He needs your strength and you need his idealism. You're too much like me. That's why we're so drawn to one another. But it wouldn't work, even if you didn't love Lance. We'd bring out the worst in each other. Well," he added irritably, "what are you waiting for? The Martians'll blow us out of the sky if you don't wake up. I've got some pictures to take before that happens."

They had a chance, Barton knew—a long one, but a chance. The atomic heat ray was mounted in the nose of the Martian ship, and a good pilot could keep clear for awhile. The Jovian fleet wasn't due from its base on Ceres for an hour or so, and the man at Lhash had said the Venusian fleet was coming up. With luck, he could get his pictures and make a run for it.

He could guess the first plan of the Martian raiders. They had meant to lie still, protected by their black paint, until the two fleets met in battle. After that, the flare of their rockets would not have been

noticed. The I. P. ship had blundered too close. They had tried to finish it with torpedoes. Failing that, they had cut off communications and were out to prevent any word from getting back, even by word of mouth. But they had to work fast, because of the Venusian fleet.

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Barton grinned. "Go get 'em, Kei—for Bobby!" The rockets roared into full power as he knelt again beside Bobby Lance. Not daring to lift him into a seat, because of the broken ribs, Barton wedged him under the transmitter panel.

Acceleration squeezed Barton like a giant press. He fought his way into the seat behind the remaining camera, mounted inside the pilot's bay. The infra-red beam still probed the sky, but they could follow the black ship now by its exhaust flare.

The Martian was equally good as pilot and bomber. Pulling his ship over in a skidding turn, he raked the Fitts-Sothern so closely with his heat beam, the hull glowed cherry-red along one side. Barton saw Kei's face settle into a hard grin. Her strong hands were firm on the controls, her green eyes a bright emerald. Barton nodded and turned all his attention to his camera. If anyone could bring them out alive it was Kei.

Infra-red beam, filters on the camera, black light pinning a black ship to three-dimensional, all-revealing color film. Barton got some striking shots as the two ships wheeled and arced across space under the vast bluish disc of Venus. Time and again the heat beam touched them, so close to destroying them that the hull went almost incandescent. But the Fitts-Sothern had a tough skin, built to resist the heat of atmospheric friction. The beam never found a real chance to eat through.

"Glory!" whispered Barton. "How the boobs will love this!" Kei cried out, a shrill whoop of sheer excitement. The Martian had risked breaking the back of his ship to turn her in her own length. Now he was on their tail, with their already overheated rocket tubes square in his sights. One tube blown or fused, and he could finish them off at his leisure. Barton tensed his lean body against the sudden pressure Kei was calling the final ounce of power, the last shred of endurance from the camera ship. Metal groaned and rang. The shuddering roar of the rockets was brain-numbing in the sealed air of the cabin. Back and up they went, in a shrieking arc that took them right over the black ship, so close that Barton felt he could have touched it. He saw something shining through the black paint, like water marks on silk.

The twin circles of Mars, emblem of her two moons

"Kei," he yelled. "There's our proof! Anybody might use Martian fuel, but not a Martian ship. I've got to get that shot. It'll be the biggest scoop in three centuries. Can you do it again?"

"Watch me!"

The Martian could not have been expecting that mad attack. Kei looped over, through the thinning flare of his rockets, shot under his belly and up in a tight curve, right across his nose. Barton went white, but his eyes never left the camera finder. Every rivet, every seam, every strut in the ship seemed ready to burst apart. And there came the heat beam—

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But the Martian's hand was a second slow on the trigger. The beam caught one rocket tube as they shot past. Kei shut off the fuel stream before the metal was fused, and their momentum carried them over before the remaining rockets could force them off. Barton got his

picture, clear and unmistakable. Now they were finished, though. The Fitts-Sothorn was too crippled for any quick maneuvering. Barton gripped Kei's shoulder, and she smiled at him. Neither spoke.

The Martian swung around slowly, as though savoring his triumph. He could take his time now. Then he suddenly wavered.

"The Venusian fleet," Barton said coolly. "One more try, Kei." Kei blasted her remaining rockets just as the heat beam licked out, then shut off her fuel. The tubes fused as the Martian ray caught them, but the unchecked velocity carried them wide. Then the black ship had no more time. Venusian ships were pouring out of the cloudy disc beside them, their sunward sides flashing. The black ship raced away. It was over. They were safe. After awhile Barton's hand found Kei's.

"For the honor of the Fourth Estate," he muttered. "I'm all confused. It isn't easy for a man to change his ideas all at once. You and Bobby have shown me things I'd forgotten existed. Maybe those things make all the rest worthwhile—loving someone, believing in something. I think I've been alone too much. I think I've seen too much of the ugly things, with nothing to take the taste out of my mouth. I think I need friends, and perhaps . . ." Kei turned her lovely face to him, and her green eyes were smiling. Barton kissed her, was surprised at what it did to him.

"Oh, yes," said Chris Barton. "I'm going to have to learn to live all over again!"