# **The Weapon Too Dreadful to Use**

Isaac Asimov

Karl Frantor found the prospect a terribly dismal one. From low-hanging clouds, fell eternal misty rain; squat, rubbery vegetation with its dull, reddish-brown colour stretched away in all directions. Now and then a Hop-scotch Bird fluttered wildly above them, emitting plaintive squawks as it went.

Karl turned his head to gaze at the tiny dome of Aphrodopolis, largest city on Venus.

“God,” he muttered, “even the dome is better than this awful world out here.” He pulled the rubberized fabric of his coat closer about him. “I’ll be glad to get back to Earth again.”

He turned to the slight figure of Antil, the Venusian, “When are we coming to the ruins, Antil?”

There was no answer and Karl noticed the tear that rolled down the Venusian’s green, puckered cheeks. Another glistened in the large, lemur-like eyes; soft, incredibly beautiful eyes.

The Earthman’s voice softened. “Sorry, Antil, I didn’t mean to say anything against Venus.”

Antil turned his green face toward Karl, “It was not that, my friend. Naturally, you would not find much to admire in an alien world. I, however, love Venus, and I weep because I am overcome with its beauty.” The words came fluently but with the inevitable distortion caused by vocal cords unfitted for harsh-languages.

“I know its seems incomprehensible to you,” Antil continued, “but to me Venus is a paradise, a golden land-I cannot express my feelings for it properly.”

“Yet there are some that say only Earthmen can love.” Karl’s sympathy was strong and sincere.

The Venusian shook his head sadly. “There is much besides the capacity to feel emotion that your people deny us.”

Karl changed the subject hurriedly. ‘Tell me, Antil, doesn’t Venus present a dull aspect even to you? You’ve been to Earth and should know. How can this eternity of brown and grey compare t© the living, warm colours of Earth?”

“It is far more beautiful to me. You forget that my colour sense is so enormously different from yours. [The Venusian eye can distinguish between two tints, the wavelengths of which differ by as little as five Angstrom units. They see thousands of colours to which Earthmen are blind.-Author.] How can I explain the beauties, the wealth of colour in which this landscape abounds?” He fell silent, lost in the wonders he spoke of, while to the Terrestrial the deadly, melancholy grey remained unchanged.

“Someday,” Antil’s voice came as from a person in a dream, “Venus will once more belong to the Venusians. The Earthlings shall no longer rule us, and the glory of our ancestors shall return to us.”

Karl laughed. “Come, now, Antil, you speak like a member of the Green Bands, that are giving the government so much trouble. I thought you didn’t believe in violence.”

“I don’t, Karl,” Antil’s eyes were grave and rather frightened, “but the extremists are gaining power, and I fear the worst. And if-if open rebellion against Earth breaks out, I must join them.”

“But you disagree with them.”

“Yes, of course,” he shrugged his shoulders, a gesture he had learned from Earthmen, “we can gain nothing by violence. There are five billion of you and scarcely a hundred million of us. You have resources and weapons while we have none. It would be a fool’s venture, and even should we win, we might leave such a heritage of hatred that there could never be peace among our two planets.”

“Then why join them?”

“Because I am a Venusian.”

The Earthman burst into laughter again. “Patriotism, it seems, is as irrational On Venus as on Earth. But come, let us proceed to the ruins of your ancient city. Are we nearly there?”

“Yes,” answered Antil, “it’s a matter of little more than an Earth mile now. Remember, however, that you are to disturb nothing. The ruins of Ash-taz.-zor are sacred to us, as the sole existing remnant of the time when we, too, were a great race, rather than the degenerate remains of one.”

They walked on in silence, slogging through the soft earth beneath, dodging the writhing roots of the Snaketree, and giving the occasional Tumbling Vines they passed a wide berth.

It was Antil who resumed the conversation.

“Poor Venus.” His quiet, wistful voice was sad. “Fifty years ago the Earthman came with promises of peace and plenty-and we believed. We showed them the emerald mines and the juju weed and their eyes glittered with desire. More and more came, and their arrogance grew. And now-”

“It’s too bad, Antil,” Karl said, “but you really feel too strongly about it.”

“Too strongly! Are we allowed to vote? Have we any representation at all in the Venusian Provincial Congress? Aren’t there laws against Venusians riding in the same stratocars as Earthlings, or eating in the same hotel, or living in the same house? Are not all colleges closed to us? Aren’t the best and most fertile parts of the planet pre-empted by Earthlings? Are there any rights at all that Terrestrials allow us upon our own planet?”

“What you say is perfectly true, and I deplore it. But similar conditions once existed on Earth with regard to certain so-called ‘inferior races,’ and in time, all those disabilities were removed until today total equality reigns. Remember, too, that the intelligent people of Earth are on your side. Have I, for instance, ever displayed any prejudice against a Venusian?”

“No, Karl, you know you haven’t. But how many intelligent men are there? On Earth, it took long and weary millennia, filled with war and suffering, before equality was established. What if Venus refuses to wait those millennia?”

Karl frowned, “You’re right, of course, but you must wait What else can you do?”

“I don’t know-I don’t know,” Antil’s voice trailed into silence.

Suddenly, Karl wished he hadn’t started on this trip to the ruins of mysterious Ash-taz-zor. The maddeningly monotonous terrain, the just grievances of Antil had served to depress him greatly. He was about to call the whole thing on when the Venusian raised his webbed fingers to point out a mound of earth ahead.

“That’s the entrance,” he said; “Ash-taz-zor has been buried under the soil for uncounted thousands of years, and only Venusians know of it. You’re the first Earthman ever to see it.”

“I shall keep it absolutely secret, Antil. I have promised.”

“Come, then.”

Antil brushed aside the lush vegetation to reveal a narrow entrance between two boulders and beckoned to Karl to follow. Into a narrow, damp corridor they crept. Antil drew from his pouch a small Atomite lamp, which cast its pearly white glow upon walls of dripping stone.

”These corridors and burrows,” he said, “were dug three centuries ago by our ancestors who considered the city a holy place. Of late, however, we have neglected it. I was the first to visit it in a long, long time. Perhaps that is another sign of our degeneracy.”

For over a hundred yards they walked on straight ahead; then the corridors flared out into a lofty dome. Karl gasped at the view before him. There were the remains of buildings, architectural marvels unrivalled on Earth since the days of Periclean Athens. But all lay in shattered ruins, so that only a hint of the city’s magnificence remained.

Antil led the way across the open space and plunged into another burrow that twisted its way for half a mile through soil and rock. Here and there, side-corridors branched off, and once or twice Karl caught glimpses of ruined structures. He would have investigated had not Antil kept him on the path.

Again they emerged, this time before a low, sprawling building constructed of a smooth, green stone. Its right wing was utterly smashed, but the rest seemed scarcely touched.

The Venusian’s eyes shone; his slight form straightened with pride. “This is what corresponds to a modern museum of arts and sciences. In this you shall see the past greatness and culture of Venus.”

With high excitement, Karl entered-the first Earthman ever to see these ancient achievements. The interior, he found, was divided into a series of deep alcoves, branching out from the long central colonnade. The ceiling was one great painting that showed dimly in the light of the Atomite lamp.

Lost in wonder, the Earthman wandered through the alcoves. There was an extraordinary sense of strangeness to the sculptures and paintings about him, an unearthliness that doubled their beauty.

Karl realized that he missed something vital in Venusian art simply because of the lack of common ground between his own culture and theirs, but he could appreciate the technical excellence of the work. Especially, did he admire the colour-work of the paintings which went far beyond anything he had ever seen on Earth. Cracked, faded, and scaling though they were, there was a blending and a harmony about them that was superb.

“What wouldn’t Michelangelo have given,” he said to Antil, “to have the marvellous colour perception of the Venusian eye.”

Antil inflated his chest with happiness. “Every race has its own attributes. I have often wished my ears could distinguish the slight tones and pitches of sound the way it is said Earthmen can. Perhaps I would then be able to understand what it is that is so pleasing about your Terrestrial music. As it is, its noise is dreadfully monotonous to me.”

They passed on, and every minute Karl’s opinion of Venusian culture mounted higher. There were long, narrow strips of thin metal, bound together, covered with the lines and ovals of Venusian script-thousands upon thousands of them. In them, Karl knew, might lie such secrets as the scientists of Earth would give half their lives to know.

Then, when Antil pointed out a tiny, six-inch-high affair, and said that, according to the inscription, it was some type of atomic converter with an efficiency several times any of the current Terrestrial models, Karl exploded.

“Why don’t you reveal these secrets to Earth? If they only knew your accomplishments in ages past, Venusians would occupy a far higher place than they do now.”

“They would make use of our knowledge of former days, yes,” Antil replied bitterly, “but they would never release their stranglehold on Venus and its people. I hope you are not forgetting your promise of absolute secrecy.”

“No, I’ll keep quiet, but I think you’re making a mistake.”

“I think not,” Antil turned to leave the alcove, but Karl called to him to wait.

“Aren’t we going into this little room here?” he asked.

Antil whirled, eyes staring, “Room? What room are you talking about? There’s no room here.”

Karl’s eyebrows shot up in surprise as he mutely pointed out the narrow crack that extended half way up the rear wall.

The Venusian muttered something beneath his breath and fell to his knees, delicate fingers probing the crack.

“Help me, Karl. This door was never meant to be opened, I think. At least there is no record of its being here, and I know the ruins of Ash-taz-zor perhaps better than any other of my people.”

The two pushed against the section of the wall, which gave backward with groaning reluctance for a short distance, then yielded suddenly so as to catapult them into the tiny, almost empty cubicle beyond. They regained their feet and stared about.

The Earthman pointed out broken, ragged rust-streaks on the floor, and along the line where door joined wall. “Your people seem to have sealed this room up pretty effectively. Only the rust of eons broke the bonds. You’d think they had some sort of secret stored here.”

Antil shook his green head. “There was no evidence of a door last time I was here. However-” he raised the Atomite lamp up high and surveyed the room rapidly, “there doesn’t seem to be anything here, anyway.”

He was right. Aside from a nondescript oblong chest that squatted on six stubby legs, the place contained only unbelievable quantities of dust and the musty, almost suffocating smell of long-shut-up tombs.

Karl approached the chest, tried to move it from the corner where it stood. It didn’t budge, but the cover slipped under his pressing fingers.

“The cover’s removable, Antil. Look!” He pointed to a shallow compartment within, which contained a square slab of some glassy substance and five six-inch-long cylinders resembling fountain-pens.

Antil shrieked with delight when he saw these objects and for the first time since Karl knew him, lapsed into sibilant Venusian gibberish. He removed the glassy slab and inspected it closely. Karl, his curiosity aroused, did likewise. It was covered with closely-spaced, varicoloured dots, but there seemed no reason for Antil’s extreme glee.

“What is it, Antil?”

“It is a complete document in our ancient ceremonial language. Up to now we have never had more than disjointed fragments. This is a great find.”

“Can you decipher it?” Karl regarded the object with more respect.

“I think I can. It is a dead language and I know little more than a smattering. You see, it is a colour language. Each word is designated by a combination of two, and sometimes three, coloured dots. The colours are finely differentiated, though, and a Terrestrial, even if he had the key to the language, would have to use a spectroscope to read it.”

“Can you work on it now?”

“I think so, Karl. The Atomite lamp approximates normal daylight very closely, and I ought to have no trouble with it. However, it may take me quite a time; so perhaps you’d better continue your investigation. There’s no danger of your getting lost, provided you remain inside this building.”

Karl left, taking a second Atomite lamp with him, left Antil, the Venusian, bent over the ancient manuscript, deciphering it slowly and painfully.

Two hours passed before the Earthman returned; but when he did, Anti! had scarcely changed his position. Yet, now, there was a look of horror on the Venusian’s face that had not been there before. The “colour” message lay at his feet, disregarded. The noisy entrance of the Earthman made no impression’ upon him. As if ossified, he sat in unmoving, staring fright.

Karl jumped to his side. “Antil, Antil, what’s wrong?”

Antil’s head turned slowly, as though moving through viscous liquid, and his eyes gazed unseeingly at his friend. Karl grasped the other’s thin shoulders and shook him unmercifuily.

The Venusian came to his senses. Writhing out of Karl’s grasp he sprang to his feet. From the desk in the corner he removed the five cylindrical objects, handling them with a queer sort of reluctance, placing them in his pouch. There, likewise, did he put the slab he had deciphered.

Having done this, he replaced the cover on the chest and motioned Karl out of the room. “We must go now. Already we have stayed too long.” His voice had an odd, frightened tone about it that made the Earthman uncomfortable.

Silently, they retraced their steps until once more they stood’ upon the soaked surface of Venus. It was still day, but twilight was near. Karl felt a growing hunger. They would need to hurry if they expected to reach Aphrodopolis before the coming of night. Karl turned up the collar of his slicker, pulled his rubberized cap low over his forehead and set out,

Mile after mile passed by and the domed city once more rose upon the grey horizon. The Earthman chewed at damp ham sandwiches, wished fervently for the comfortable dryness of Aphrodopolis. Through it all, the normally friendly Venusian maintained a stony silence, vouchsafing not so much as a glance upon his companion.

Karl accepted this philosophically. He had a far higher regard for Venusians than the great majority of Earthmen, but even he experienced a faint disdain for the ultra-emotional character of Antil and his kind. This brooding silence was but a manifestation of feelings that in Karl would perhaps have resulted in no more than a sigh or a frown. Realizing this, Antil’s mood scarcely affected him.

Yet the memory of the haunting fright in Antil’s eyes aroused a faint unease. It had come after the translation of that queer slab. What secret could have been revealed in that message by those scientific progenitors of the Venusians?

It was with some diffidence that Karl finally persuaded himself to ask, “What did the slab say, Antil? It must be interesting, I judge, considering that you’ve taken it with you.”

Antil’s reply was simply a sign to hurry, and the Venusian thereupon plunged into the gathering darkness with redoubled speed. Karl was puzzled and rather hurt. He made no further attempt at conversation for the duration of the trip.

When they reached Aphrodopolis, however, the Venusian broke his silence. His puckered face, drawn and haggard, turned to Karl with the expression of one who has come to a painful decision.

“Karl,” he said, “we have been friends, so I wish to give you a bit of friendly advice. You are going to leave for Earth next week. I know your father is high in the councils of the Planetary President. You yourself will probably be a personage of importance in the not-too-distant future. Since this is so, I beg you earnestly to use every atom of your influence to a moderation of Earth’s attitude toward Venus. I, in my turn, being a hereditary noble of the largest tribe on Venus, shall do my utmost to repress all attempts at violence.”

The other frowned. “There seems to be something behind all this. I don’t get it at all. What are you trying to say?”

“Just this. Unless conditions are bettered-and soon- Venus will rise in revolt. In that case, I will have no choice but to place my services at her feet, and then Venus will no longer be defenceless.”

These words served only to amuse the Earthman. “Come, Antil, your patriotism is admirable, and your grievances justified, but melodrama and chauvinism don’t go with me. I am, above all, a realist.”

There was a terrible earnestness in the Venusian’s voice. “Believe me, Karl, when I say nothing is more real than what I tell you now. In case of a Venusian revolt, I cannot vouch for Earth’s safety.”

“Earth’s safety!” The enormity of this stunned Karl.

“Yes,” continued Antil, “for I may be forced to destroy Earth. There you have it.” With this, he wheeled and plunged into the underbrush on the way back to the little Venusian village outside the great dome.

Five years passed-years of turbulent unrest, and Venus stirred in its sleep like an awakening volcano. The shortsighted Terrestrial masters of Aphrodopolis, Venusia, and other domed cities cheerfully disregarded all danger signals. When they thought of the little green Venusians at all, it was with a disdainful grimace as if to say, “Oh, THOSE things!”

But “those things” were finally pushed beyond endurance, and the nationalistic Green Bands became increasingly vociferous with every passing day. Then, on one grey day, not unlike the grey days preceding, crowds of natives swarmed upon the cities in organized rebellion.

The smaller domes, caught by surprise, succumbed. In rapid succession New Washington, Mount Vulcan, and St. Denis were taken, together with the entire eastern continent, Before the reeling Terrestrials realized what was happening, half of Venus was no longer theirs.

Earth, shocked and stunned by this sudden emergency--which, of course, should have been foreseen-sent arms and supplies to the inhabitants of the remaining beleaguered towns and began to equip a great space fleet for the recovery of the lost territory.

Earth was annoyed but not frightened, knowing that ground lost by surprise could easily be regained at leisure, and that ground not now lost would never be lost. Or such, at least, was the belief.

Imagine, then, the stupefaction of Earth’s leaders as no pause came in the Venusian advance. Venusia City had been amply stocked with weapons and food; her outer defences were up, the men at their posts. A tiny army of naked, unarmed natives approached and demanded unconditional surrender. Venusia refused haughtily, and the messages to Earth were mirthful in their references to the unarmed natives who had become so recklessly flushed with success.

Then, suddenly, no more messages were received, and the natives took over Venusia.

The events at Venusia were duplicated, over and over again, at what should have been impregnable fortresses. Even Aphrodopolis itself, with half a million population, fell to a pitiful five hundred Venusians. This, in spite of the fact that every weapon known to Earth was available to the defenders.

The Terrestrial Government suppressed the facts, and Earth itself remained unsuspecting of the strange events on Venus; but in the inner councils, statesmen frowned as they listened to the strange words of Karl Frantor, son of the Minister of Education.

Jan Heersen, Minister of War, rose in anger at the conclusion of the report.

“Do you wish us to take seriously the random statement of a half-mad Greenie and make our peace with Venus on its own terms? That is definitely and absolutely impossible. What those damned beasts need is the mailed fist. Our fleet will blast them out of the Universe, and it is time that it were done.”

“The blasting may not be so simple, Heersen,” said the gray-haired, elder Frantor, rushing to his son’s defence. “There are many of us who have all along claimed that the Government policy toward the Venusians was all wrong. Who knows what means of attack they have found and what, in revenge, they will do with it?”

“Fairy Tales!” exclaimed Heersen. “You treat the Greenies as if they were people. They’re animals and should be thankful for the benefits of civilization we brought them. Remember, we’re treating them much better than some of our own Earth races were treated in our early history, the Red Indians for example.”

Karl Frantor burst in once more in an agitated voice. “We must investigate, sirs! Antil’s threat is too serious to disregard, no matter how silly it sounds-and in the light of the Venusian conquests, it sounds anything but silly. I propose that you send me with Admiral von Blumdorff, as a sort of envoy. Let me get to the bottom of this before we attack them.”

The saturnine Earth President, Jules Debuc, spoke now for the first time. “Frantor’s proposal is reasonable, at least. It shall be done. Are there any objections?”

There were none, though Heersen scowled and snorted angrily. Thus, a week later, Karl Frantor accompanied the space armada of Earth when it set off for the inner planet.

It was a strange Venus that greeted Karl after his five years’ absence. It was still its old soaking self, its old dreary, monotony of white and grey, its scattering of domed cities-and yet how different.

Where before the haughty Terrestrials had moved in disdainful splendour among the cowering Venusians, now the natives maintained undisputed sway. Aphrodopolis was a native city entirely, and in the office of the former governor sat -Antil.

Karl eyed him doubtfully, scarcely knowing what to say. “I rather thought you might be king-pin,” he managed at length. “You-the pacifist.”

“The choice was not mine. It was that of circumstance,” Antil replied. “But you, I did not expect you to be your planet’s spokesman.”

“It was to me that you made your silly threat years ago, and so it is I who was most pessimistic concerning your rebellion. I come, you see, but not unaccompanied.” His hand motioned vaguely upward, where spaceships lazed motionless and threatening.

“You come to menace me?”

“No! To hear your aims and your terms.”

“That is easily accomplished. Venus demands its independence and we promise friendship, together with free and unrestricted trade.”

“And you expect us to accept all that without a struggle.”

“I hope you do-for Earth’s own sake.”

Karl scowled and threw himself back in his chair in annoyance, “For God’s sake, Antil, the time for mysterious hints and bogies has passed. Show your hand. How did you overcome Aphrodopolis and the other cities so easily?”

“We were forced to it, Karl. We did not desire it.” Antil’s voice was shrill with agitation. “They would not accept our fair terms of surrender and began to shoot their Tonite guns. We-we had to use the-the weapon. We had to kill most of them afterward-out of mercy.”

“I don’t follow. What weapon are you talking about?”

“Do you remember that time in the ruins of Ash-tai-wr, Karl? The hidden room; the ancient inscription; the five little rods.”

Karl nodded sombrely. “I thought so, but I wasn’t sure.”

“It was a horrible weapon, Karl.” Antil hurried on as if the mere thought of it were not to be endured. “The ancients discovered it-but never used it. They hid it instead, and why they did not destroy it, I can’t imagine. I wish they had destroyed it; I really do. But they didn’t and I found it and I must use it-for the good of Venus.”

His voice sank to a whisper, but with a manifest effort he nerved himself to the task of explanation. “The little harmless rods you saw then, Karl, were capable of producing a force field of some unknown nature (the ancients wisely refused to be explicit there) which has the power of disconnecting brain from mind.”

“What?” Karl stared in open-mouthed surprise. “What are you talking about?”

“Why, you must know that the brain is merely the seat of the mind, and not the mind itself. The nature of ‘mind’ is a mystery, unknown even to our ancients; but whatever it is, it uses the brain as its intermediary to the world of matter.”

“I see. And your weapon divorces mind from brain- renders mind helpless-a space-pilot without his controls.”

Antil nodded solemnly. “Have you ever seen a decerebrated animal?” he asked suddenly.

“Why, yes, a dog-in my bio course back in college.”

“Come, then, I will show you a decerebrated human.”

Karl followed the Venusian to an elevator. As he shot downward to the lowest level-the prison level-his mind was in a turmoil. Tom between horror and fury, he had alternate impulses of unreasoning desire to escape and almost insuperable yearnings to slay the Venusian at his side. In a daze, he left the cubicle and followed Antil down a gloomy corridor, winding its way between rows of tiny, barred cells.

There.” Antil’s voice roused Karl as would a sudden stream of cold water. He followed the pointing webbed hand and stared in fascinated revulsion at the human figure revealed.

It was human, undoubtedly, in form-but inhuman, nevertheless. It (Karl could not imagine it as “he”) sat dumbly on the floor, large staring eyes never leaving the blank wall before him. Eyes that were empty of soul, loose lips from which saliva drooled, fingers that moved aimlessly. Nauseated, Karl turned his head hastily.

“He is not exactly decerebrated.” Antil’s voice was low. “Organically, his brain is perfect and unharmed. It is merely -disconnected.”

“How does it live, Antil? Why doesn’t it die?”

“Because the autonomic system is untouched. Stand him up and he will remain balanced. Push him and he will regain his balance. His heart beats. He breathes. If you put food in his mouth, he will swallow, though he would die of starvation before performing the voluntary act of eating food that has been placed before him. It is life-of a sort; but it were better dead, for the disconnection is permanent.”

“It is horrible-horrible.”

“It is worse than you think. I feel convinced that somewhere within the shell of humanity, the mind, unharmed, still exists. Imprisoned helplessly in a body it cannot control, what must be that mind’s torture?”

Karl stiffened suddenly. “You shan’t overcome Earth by sheer unspeakable brutality. It is an unbelievably cruel weapon but no more deadly than any of a dozen of ours. You shall pay for this.”

“Please, Karl, you have no conception of one-millionth of the deadliness of the ‘Disconnection Field’. The Field is independent of space, and perhaps of time, too, so that its range can be extended almost indefinitely. Do you know that it required merely one discharge of the weapon to render every warm-blooded creature in Aphrodopolis helpless?” Antil’s voice rose tensely. “Do you know that I am able to bathe ALL EARTH in the Field-to render all your teeming billions the duplicate of that dead-alive hulk in there AT ONE STROKE.”

Karl did not recognize his own voice as he rasped, “Fiend! Are you the only one who knows the secret of this damnable Field?”

Antil burst into a hollow laugh, “Yes, Karl, the blame rests on me, alone. Yet killing me will not help. If I die, there are others who know where to find the inscription, others who have not my sympathy for Earth. I am perfectly safe from you, Karl, for my death would be the end of your world.”

The Earthman was broken-utterly. Not a fragment of doubt as to the Venusian’s power was left within him. “I yield,” he muttered, “I yield. What shall I tell my people?”

“Tell them of my terms, and of what I could do if I wished.”

Karl shrank from the Venusian as if his very touch was death, “I will tell them that.”

“Tell them also, that Venus is not vindictive. We do not wish to use our weapon, for it it too dreadful to use. If they will give us our independence on our own terms, and allow us certain wise precautions against future re-enslavement, we will hurl each of our five guns and the explanatory inscription explaining it into the sun.”

The Terrestrial’s voice did not change from its toneless whisper. “I will tell them that.”

Admiral von Blumdorff was as Prussian as his name, and his military code was the simple one of brute force. So it was quite natural that his reactions to Karl’s report were explosive in their sarcastic derision.

“You forsaken fool,” he raved at the young man. ‘This is what comes of talk, of words, of tomfoolery. You dare come back to me with this old-wives’ tale of mysterious weapons, of untold force. Without any proof at all, you accept all that this damned Greenie tells you at absolute face value, and surrender abjectly. Couldn’t you threaten, couldn’t you bluff, couldn’t you lie?”

“He didn’t threaten, bluff, or lie,” Karl answered warmly. “What he said was the gospel truth. If you had seen the decerebrated man-”

“Bah! That is the most inexcusable part of the whole cursed business. To exhibit a lunatic to you, some perfectly normal mental defective, and to say, ‘This is our weapon!’ and for you to accept that without question! Did they do anything but talk? Did they demonstrate the weapon? Did they even show it to you?”

“Naturally not. The weapon is deadly. They’re not going to kill a Venusian to satisfy me. As for showing me the weapon -well, would you show your ace-in-the-hole to the enemy? Now you answer me a few questions. Why is Antil so cocksure of himself? How did he conquer all Venus so easily?”

“I can’t explain it I admit, but does that prove that theirs is the correct explanation? Anyhow, I’m sick of this talk. We’re attacking now, and to hell with theories. I’ll face them with Tonite projectiles and you can watch their bluff backfire in their ugly faces.”

“But, Admiral, you must communicate my report to the President.”

“I will-after I blow Aphrodopolis into kingdom come.”

He turned on the central broadcasting unit. “Attention, all ships! Battle formation! We dive at Aphrodopolis with all Tonites blasting in fifteen minutes.” Then he turned to the orderly. “Have Captain Larsen inform Aphrodopolis that they have fifteen minutes to hoist the white flag.”

The minutes that ticked by after that were tense and nervewracking for Karl Frantor. He sat in bent silence, head buried in his hands and the faint click of the chronometer at the end of every minute sounded like a thunder-clap in his ears. He counted those clicks in a mumbling whisper-8-9-10. God!

Only five minutes to certain death! Or was it certain death? Was von Blumdorff right? Were the Venusians putting over a daring bluff?

An orderly catapulted into the room and saluted. “The Greenies have just answered, sir.”

“Well,” von Blumdorff leaned forward eagerly.

“They say, ‘Urgently request fleet not to attack. If done, we shall not be responsible for the consequences.’“

“Is that all?” came the outraged shout

“Yes, sir.”

The Admiral burst into a sulphurous stream of profanity. “Why, the infernal gall of them,” he shouted. “They dare bluff to the very end.”

And as he finished, the fifteenth minute clicked off, and the mighty armada burst into motion. In streaking, orderly flight they shot down toward the cloudy shroud of the second planet. Von Blumdorff grinned in a grisly appreciation of the awesome view spread over the televisor-until the mathematically precise battle formation suddenly broke.

The Admiral stared and rubbed his eyes. The entire further half of the fleet had suddenly gone crazy. First, the ships wavered; then they veered and shot off at mad angles.

Then calls came in from the sane half of the fleet-reports that the left wing had ceased to respond to radio.

The attack on Aphrodopolis was immediately disrupted as the order went out to capture the ships that had run amok. Von Blumdorff stamped up and down and tore his hair. Karl Frantor cried out dully, “It is their weapon,” and lapsed back into his former silence.

From Aphrodopolis came no word at all.

For two solid hours the remnant of the Terrestrial fleet battled their own ships. Following the aimless courses of the stricken vessels, they approached and grappled. Bound together then by rigid force, rocket blasts were applied until the insane flight of the others had been balanced and stopped,

Fully twenty of the fleet were never caught; some continuing on some orbit about the sun, some shooting off into unknown space, a few crashing down to Venus.

When the remaining ships of the left wing were boarded, the unsuspecting boarding parties stopped short in horror. Seventy-five staring witless shells of humanity in each ship. Not a single human being left.

Some of the first to enter screamed in horror and fled in a panic. Others merely retched and turned away their eyes. One officer took in the situation at a glance, calmly drew his Atomo-pistol and rayed every decerebrate in sight.

Admiral von Blumdorff was a stricken man; a pitiful, limp wreck of his former proud and blustering self, when he heard the worst. One of the decerebrates was brought to him, and he reeled back.

Karl Frantor gazed at him with red-rimmed eyes, “Well, Admiral, are you satisfied?”

But the Admiral made no answer. He drew his gun, and before anyone could stop him, shot himself through the head.

Once again Karl Frantor stood before a meeting of the President and his Cabinet, before a dispirited, frightened group of men. His report was definite and left no doubt as to the course that must now be followed.

President Debuc stared at the decerebrate brought in as an exhibit. “We are finished,” he said. “We must surrender unconditionally, throw ourselves upon their mercy. But someday-,” his eyes kindled in retribution.

“No, Mr. President!” Karl’s voice rang out, “there shall be no someday. We must give the Venusians their simple due- liberty and independence. Bygones must be bygones-our dead have but paid for the half-century of Venusian slavery. After this, there must be a new order in the Solar System- the birth of a new day.”

The President lowered his head in thought and then raised it again. “You are right,” he answered with decision; “there shall be no thought of revenge.”

Two months later the peace treaty was signed and Venus became what it has remained ever since-an independent and sovereign power. And with the signing of the treaty, a whirling speck shot out toward the sun. It was-the weapon too dreadful to use.