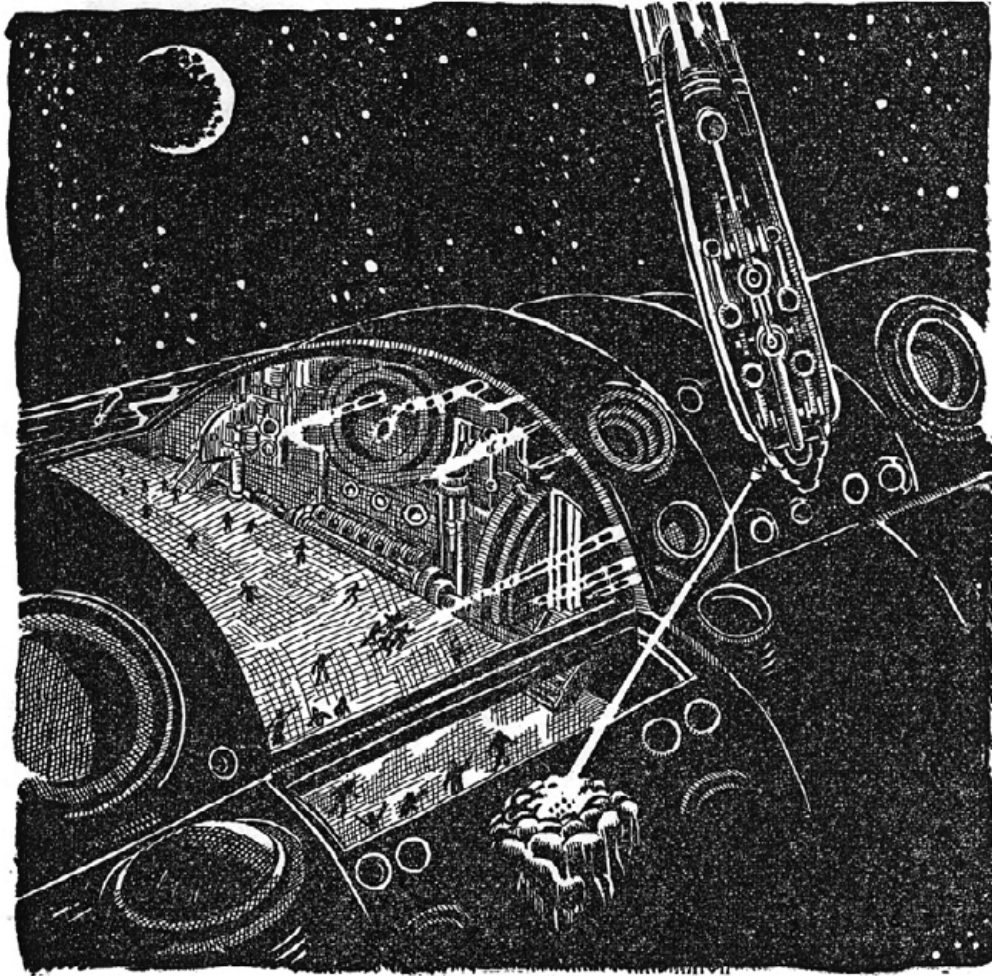


EXAMPLE

By TOM PACE

"That one cruiser, Commander, is more than a match for the entire Beolin fleet."



Malevolent death reared out of inky space before the hurtling liner. From it a frantic voice reached Commander Gray—"You know what to do!" He smiled grimly. Yes, he knew what to do . . .

THE FIFTH SECTOR COMMANDER was known as a rigid man, that was true. And yet no one could say exactly how rigid.

His office, aboard the Polaris, was a rather grim place. All command offices were, essentially, being limited pretty much to regulation furnishings, but rare was the Commander who did not manage to plant some of his personality there. It was perhaps

characteristic of Commander Gray that there was only one item in his office which could be said to reveal anything about him.

He sat now behind the cubical steel desk and looked down at the glowing screen of the television set. The face in it was not at ease. Far from it.

Ordinarily, Jon Brullar, the Commissioner over Gray, was a self-important, unconsciously comical person.

Now he looked neither comical nor important. He just looked very, very frightened.

He licked his trembling lips and said, in a voice hoarse with fear, "Of *course* there is something you can do, Commander! After all," he brightened faintly, "there are important people on the *Stella*. Important people." He emphasized "important."

"I am aware of that, Commissioner Brullar," said the Commander. "Yet, what can I do?"

"You have authority!" sputtered Brullar. "And you know what you can *do!* Get through to Interstellar Command on Sirius VII and tell them just exactly what these Beolins are up to!" He glared, a fat man in mortal fear for his life. "And you can do it quickly, Commander! Quickly, do you understand?"

"I understand," the Commander said.

"Good." Brullar started to speak again, gulped, hesitated, and finally repeated, "Good." He switched off.

The Commander gazed reflectively down the catwalk, through the ship, at the faint glimmer of green outside of an open lock. There was turbulence deep in his steel-colored eyes. He tapped a small stud with a slim, tapering forefinger.

Kina Staun came in.

Kina wasn't all Solarian. He had enough Sol blood in him to make him one in almost every respect, but there were differences, if you looked closely. He was the Commander's personal aide. There was actually more than that between them. The tremendousness of all the Commander governed—and which Kina helped him run—made for a rather involved relationship.

When people saw the Commander, they looked for Kina Staun. The two had not been a hundred yards apart since they had first met as newly-appointed official and aide. It was said that Kina knew every bit as much

about the Fifth Sector and the Commander's work as the Commander knew himself.

For that reason, if Kina ever left his post, he would certainly die within an hour.

THE COMMANDER SAID, "Kina, call Hauns." The Secretary showed no surprise, but somehow managed to give that impression.

"The city of Hauns, capitol of Beolin III, the ruling planet of the Beolin system?" he asked very respectfully.

"Yes. I want to talk to their Commissioner-in-Chief. And also find the present location of the *Stella*."

"Yes, sir," said Kina.

He came back within ten seconds. "The *Stella*," he said, "is now at 3rd Quadrant 3521 NA, W-88236. Speed, one light-year per hour. Heading, 338 Degrees NA of nearest sun, Beolin. And I have Beolin Command for you."

The Commander touched a switch and the screen flicked on again. "Thank you, Kina," he said.

The face in the screen was definitely not human. Its structure, and even more, its expression was alien. It was distinctly unpleasant.

It belonged to Krraula, who was Commander-in-Chief, and the foremost murderer of the Beolin System. He smiled, a smile that was not a smile. He said, "Ah, Commander." And he saluted, sneering slightly.

The Commander said, "Greetings, Krraula. I would like to inquire the reason for your fleet being in its present position."

Krraula smiled again. "The fleet, Commander? Merely maneuvers," he said slyly. "Why do you ask?"

"There is a liner transiting through the outer fringes of your territory in—" he looked at a paper Kina had slipped before him "—about four hours. I would appreciate it if your fleet is withdrawn in time. It would

not go well, Krraula, if an . . . accident . . . were to happen to this liner of which I speak. I think you understand.”

He gave Krraula no time to answer, but switched off. He sat back, and looked aimlessly at Kina.

“Kina,” he said, after a few moments of thought.

“Yes, Commander.”

“Do you get the framework of this problem?”

“I do, sir,” answered the aide.

“Good. Let me hear it.”

“The question is one of Command,” said Kina Staun quietly. “Out here in the stars, power—the authority to command—goes not to men’s heads but to their souls. Krraula of Beolin is an example, and, in a different way—”

“Myself?”

“No, Commander. Brullar. He is the brass-hat type, while Krraula is simply a tyrannical madman.”

“So far, you’re right. But what of this particular problem?”

“Yes, sir,” the aide said. “Krraula and the Beolin rulers have power in and about their system to the extent that their depredations go unchallenged there. And an apathetic Interstellar Command—”

“Does not act,” finished the Commander. “You are entirely correct, Kina.” He touched studs on the desk and reports slid through the viewer on the wall. He said quietly, “We have lost a score of ships—ships that we are sure the Beolins could tell us about. And yet the Command does not act.” He looked reflectively at the slim, impassive man, and then spoke swiftly.

“Kina, I want you to get me two more connections . . . Sirius VII and the Command Cruiser nearest to Beolin. Hurry! The cruiser first.”

A MINUTE or so later, Kina slipped a sheet of paper onto the desk and

touched a switch. The screen glittered into life, showing the face of a man who wore captain’s shoulder bars. Glancing at the paper, which gave the name of the officer and the ship, the Commander said, “Captain Stang, how far are you from Beolin?”

“Roughly twenty light years, sir,” was the immediate answer.

“Do you think that you can make a speed of say five light-years per hour, or perhaps more?”

The captain frowned slightly. “I’m not sure, Commander. Perhaps we can.”

“Good! Stand by at your present position in space.” Gray switched off.

Kina spoke softly at his side. “That one cruiser, Commander, is more than a match for the entire Beolin fleet.” He paused. “Here is your call to Sirius Headquarters, sir.”

The Commander turned back to the screen. “Over-Commissioner Branu, are you aware of the present stage of relations with Beolin?”

The Over-Commissioner frowned at him. “Certainly! Why are you asking, Commander?” There was an imperious sharpness in his voice.

“What are they?”

Branu hesitated, said, “Relations are somewhat strained at present, of course, but not seriously. I—”

“Suppose proof was given that Beolin was back of the recent disappearances of spacecraft?”

“My dear Commander Gray! You—you must not say that! Such an intimation might easily cost you your post! Why—”

The Commissioner cut him off.

“You see, Commander,” said Kina, “the Command simply cannot think of such a thing.”

“Yes . . . but they could be made—forced—to think of it.”

“There is only one way to do *that*,” said Kina. “Only one way.”

“Yes.” Commander Gray fell silent for a

minute, and then said quietly, "Kina."

"I am listening, sir."

"The hands of one man," said the Commander, "were never meant to hold personal power such as this. We can do only the best we can . . . and it will never be perfect. We must be prepared to—" he hesitated slightly before going on "—to set aside all personal things, and substitute the stars for them. Because only in that way can we approach perfection."

Kina was silent and attentive, but his eyes flickered for a second across the one personal item in the office.

"I am not a god, Kina. And yet I must be. Because there are men—such as Krraula—who think they are." He fell silent.

Then he said, "A god *must* have power of life . . . and death."

The screen was on again and, once more, it was Commissioner Brullar. He was almost frantic.

"Commander Gray! Have you acted yet? The captain says that we are being screened out. Only this special set can get a through—and only to you!" He gulped, mopping at his forehead. "Commander, I have my entire family aboard this ship! I—I know that you . . ." His voice faltered for an instant. "Can't you get through to the Command?"

Then, nervously, without waiting for a reply, he plunged on. "The Captain of the *Stella* says he believes there is an Interstellar Command cruiser within four hours or so. Can't you get it here? It could escort us through the edge of the Beolin system in safety! Commander Gray, I in—"

The Commander cut Brullar off.

"Kina," he asked, "what do you think the effect of a Beolin massacre would be on the Command?"

"Roughly estimating, Commander, considerably more than the effect of an unleashed power beam on inert matter."

"Yes," said the Commander. "Yes. Kina, at least ten thousand human lives have been

lost on ships that I know have been captured by the Beolins. Unless the Command takes action—now—there will never be a check on Krraula and his successors. And only a shocking catastrophe would stir up the Sirius Command Headquarters. A certain kind of catastrophe."

"The sacrifice justifies itself," said Kina Staun. "The moral laws, the very framework of civilization itself, is now of a shape incredible to the person of two or three hundred years ago."

"My orders, then, should be . . . ?"

Kina stood up, stiffly. "It would be presumptuous of me, Commander."

The silence did not last very long.

At last the Commander said, "Kina, order Captain Stang to resume his usual patrol activities. Arrange to follow the *Stella* with a long-range recording beam. Prepare for the Interstellar Command's order . . . to proceed with a punitive expedition against the Beolin system." He looked long down the catwalk, and his fingers slowly closed about the one personal touch to his office.

His voice was very low. "No more messages are to be received from the *Stella*."

And he opened his hand.

LATER, after the Commander had gone down the catwalk to walk about for a while on the soft, Earthlike greenness of this world's vegetation, Kina bent to pick up that which had fallen to the floor.

It was a color photograph, and the cold plastic sheen of the film somehow managed to convey the impression of the blonde, young woman's soft, warm loveliness.

It was inscribed, "*With all my love, John Myra.*" Kina had often seen Commissioner Brullar's daughter.

He dropped the photograph in to a disposal chute, and turned to some papers that had to be filed.