

Fresh from "The Long Fall," (July, 1977) Captain Grimes and the Baroness—and Big Sister—are back and confronted by a new problem—

## THE SLEEPING BEAST

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THE SEAS of Earth and other watery planets are, insofar as surface vessels are concerned, two dimensional. The seas of Space are three dimensional. Yet from the viewpoint of the first seamen the Terran oceans must have seemed as vast as those other oceans traversed by spacemen—mile upon mile of sweet damn all. As far as the space man is concerned, substitute "light year" for "mile" and delete the breaks in the monotony provided by changing weather conditions and by birds and fishes and cetaceans. Nonetheless, the similarity persists.

A ship, any sort of ship, is small in comparison to the mind-boggling immensity of the medium through which she travels. Disregarding the existence of focal points the chances of her sighting another vessel during a transoceanic voyage are extremely slim. This was especially so in the days of sail, when it was practically impossible for a captain to keep to a Great Circle track between ports or even to a rhumb line—and yet, time and time again, strange sails would lift over the horizon and there would be a mid-ocean meeting with the exchange of gossip and months-old newspapers, a bartering of consumable stores.

Now and again there were even collisions, although each of the vessels involved had thousands of square miles of empty ocean to play around in.

Ships, somehow, seem to sniff each other out. Sightings, meetings, are too frequent to be accounted for by the laws of random. This was so in the days of the windjammers, it was still so in the days of steam and steel, it is still so in the age of interstellar travel.

The Far Traveller—Michelle, Baroness d'Estang, owner, John Grimes, lately commander in the Federation Survey Service, master—was en route from Morrowvia to New Sparta. Grimes and his employer were barely on speaking terms; Grimes could not forgive her for her brief affaire with one Captain Drongo Kane. It was not that Grimes considered himself the guardian of her virginity; it was far too late in the day for that, anyhow. It was just that Drongo Kane had always been numbered among his enemies. And the Baroness, although she would never admit it publicly, resented the way in which Grimes and Big Sister, the yacht's computer-pilot, acting in concert, had frustrated Kane's attempt to take over Morrowvia. So, for the time being at least, there were no more morning coffee and afternoon tea sessions in the Baroness's private salon, no more pre-luncheon or pre-dinner cocktail parties, no more shared meals. The Baroness kept to herself in her quarters, Grimes kept to himself in his. And Big Sister, unusually for her, talked only when talked to, concerning herself with the running of the ship.

Grimes was not altogether displeased. As far as the Baroness was concerned it had always been far too much a case of, You can look, but you

mustn't touch. As far as Big Sister was concerned, that electronic entity could well have been nicknamed Little Miss Knowall and, more often than not, her omniscience was distinctly irksome. Meanwhile his quarters were more luxurious than merely comfortable. His robot stewardess had soon learned all his likes and dislikes—or, to be more exact, Big Sister had learned them. For his playmaster there was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of plays, music and microfilmed books. He knew what times of the ship's day the little gymnasium was frequented by the Baroness and adjusted his own routine so as not to clash.

The Far Traveller fell through the dark dimensions, the warped continuum, a micro-society that, despite its smallness, contained all the essentials—a man, a woman, and a computer. Even though the members of this community weren't exactly living in each other's pockets they weren't actually fighting among themselves—and that was something to be thankful for.

One morning—according to The Far Traveller's clocks—Grimes was awakened early. For some reason Big Sister—she seemed to have acquired a warped sense of humour—used an archaic bugle call, Reveille, instead of the usual chimes to call him. He opened his eyes and saw that the stewardess was placing the tray with his coffee on the bedside table. She said, in Big Sister's voice, "There is no urgency, Captain Grimes, but I should like you in the control room. Grimes swung his legs out of the bed. "What's wrong?" he demanded. "Nothing is wrong, Captain, but a situation has arisen for which I am not programmed." She added, as Grimes opened the wardrobe door and reached for a clean uniform shirt, "As I have said, there is no urgency. Please finish your coffee and then shower and depilate before coming to Control. You know very well that Her Excellency does not tolerate scruffiness."

"So this is not exactly Action Stations," said Grimes.

"Not yet," agreed Big Sister.

Grimes showered and depilated. He dressed. He made his way up to the control room after he had smoked a soothing pipe, knowing that the Baroness objected to the use of tobacco or similar smouldering vegetable matter in her presence. She was there, waiting for him. She had not troubled to put on her usual, for these surroundings, insignialess uniform shirt and shorts. She was wearing a transparent rather than translucent white robe. She smelled of sleep. She regarded Grimes coldly and said, "You took your time, Captain."

Grimes said, "Big Sister told me that there was no urgency, Your Excellency."

She said, "I am the Owner. And your employer. I came straight to Control as soon as I was called—while you, obviously, sat down to enjoy your eggs and sausages and bacon, and toast and honey. You might, at least, have had the decency to wipe the egg off your face."

Grimes' hand came up automatically. Then he said stiffly, "I had no breakfast, Your Excellency. And I repeat, I was told by Big Sister that there

was no need for hurry."

Big Sister's voice came from the transceiver, "And I told you the same, Your Excellency."

"Pah! Who owns this ship, this considerable investment? Neither of you. And now, Captain Grimes, it would seem that there is a target showing up in the screen of the Mass Proximity Indicator. According to extrapolation we shall reach it—whatever it is—in just over one hour from now. Big Sister informs me that the target is probably a ship and that this vessel is not proceeding under interstellar drive. I think that we should investigate it."

Grimes said, "We are required by Interstellar Law to investigate it, Your Excellency."

"Are we? As far as this vessel is concerned, I am the Law. Nonetheless, I am curious. If I were not so I should not have undertaken this cruise. And so, Captain, I shall be vastly obliged if you will bring us to a rendezvous with the unidentified vessel. Please call me when you are ready to board."

She flounced out of the control room.

Grimes pulled his pipe and pouch out of his pocket, began to fill the charred bowl. Big Sister said, "Please refrain from smoking. There are delicate circuits here, and fragile instrumentation that could be adversely affected by tobacco smoke."

Grimes said, "Frankly, I don't believe it."

Big Sister told him, "Then smoke if you wish, Captain, so long as you are willing to explain any breakdowns to Her Excellency."

If he lit his pipe, Grimes knew, there would be a practically instantaneous shrilling of alarm bells accompanied by flashing red lights on main and auxiliary consoles. He sighed, put the smoking materials back in his pocket. He went to look into the tank of the mass proximity indicator. In the sphere of darkness floated the tiny green spark that was the target. It was a long way distant from the centre. To a ship not proceeding under the space- and time-twisting Mannschenn Drive it would have been weeks distant. As it was . . . His fingers went to the controls to set up calibration and extrapolation. But Big Sister saved him the trouble.

"Contact fifty three minutes, forty five seconds from . . . now," she said. "If you are agreeable I shall shut down our Mannschenn Drive when ten kilometres from the strange vessel, leaving you to make the final approach on inertial drive and to match velocities. As soon as we have broken through to the normal continuum I shall commence calling on normal space time radio and also make the morse signal, What ship?, by flashing light. As you are aware, attempts to communicate by Carlotti radio have not been successful."

"I wasn't aware," said Grimes. "But I am now." He realised that he was being childishly sulky. He said, "You possess an enormous fund of information in your data bank, Big Sister. Do you know of any ships missing, presumed lost, in this sector of Space?"

Big Sister told him, "I have already extrapolated the assumed trajectories of missing vessels over the past two hundred years. What we are seeing in our screen should not be any of them. Allowance must be made, however, for incomplete data."

"So this thing," said Grimes, "could be an ancient gaussjammer, or even one of the so-called deep freeze ships . . .

"It could be," said Big Sister, "anything."

THERE WAS not much for Grimes to do until The Far Traveller had closed the strange ship, the derelict. Big Sister had his breakfast brought up to the control room. He enjoyed the meal—but it was only on very rare occasions that he did not enjoy his food. He used the Carlotti communicator to put out his own call; it was not that he did not trust Big Sister but he liked to feel that he was earning his keep. There was no reply to his reiterated demand, "Far Traveller to vessel in my vicinity. Please identify yourself." He stared out of the viewports along the bearing of the unidentified object. There was nothing to be seen, of course—nothing, that is, but the distant stars—each of which, viewed from a ship proceeding under interstellar drive, presented the appearance of a pulsating, iridescent spiral nebula.

Then Big Sister said, "In precisely five minutes we shall be ten kilometres from the target. I have informed Her Excellency."

The Baroness came into the control room, looking crisply efficient in her insignialess uniform. She asked, "Are you ready for the final approach, Captain?"

"Yes," said Grimes. "Your Excellency."

"Permission to shut down Mannschenn Drive?" asked Big Sister formally.

"Yes," replied Grimes and the Baroness simultaneously. She glared at him. He looked away to hide his own expression. He went to his chair, strapped himself in. She did likewise. He held his hands poised over the controls although it was unlikely that he would have to use them yet. Big Sister was quite capable of carrying out the initial maneuvers by herself.

The a-rythmic beat of the inertial drive slowed, muttered into inaudibility. Even with the straps holding the two humans into their chairs the cessation of acceleration was immediately obvious. Then the thin, high whine of the ever-precressing rotors of the Mannschenn Drive changed frequency, deepened to a low humming, ceased. Colours sagged down the spectrum and perspective was briefly anarchic. There was brief disorientation, momentary nausea, evanescent hal-lucinatory experience. It seemed to Grimes that he was a child again, watching on the screen of the family playmaster a rendition of one of the old fairy tales, the story of the Sleeping Beauty. But there was something absurdly wrong. It was the Prince who was supine on the bed, under the dust and the cobwebs, and the Princess who was about to awake him with a kiss ...

"When you have quite finished dreaming, Captain," said the Baroness coldly, "I shall be obliged if you will take charge of this operation."

The radar was on now, more accurate than the mass proximity indicator although, of course, it could not be used while the Mannschenn Drive was in operation. Nonetheless, Big Sister had done quite well. The Far Traveller was a mere 10.35 kilometres from the target, which was almost directly ahead. Even though the inertial drive was not yet reactivated the range was slowly closing. Grimes shifted his attention from the radar screen to that of the telescope. At maximum magnification he could just see the stranger—a very faint glimmer of reflected starlight against the blackness of interstellar space.

He restarted the inertial drive. Acceleration forced him down into the padding of his seat. He said, "Big Sister, put out a call on the NST transceiver, please."

He heard her voice, more feminine than metallic, but metallic nonetheless, "Far Traveller to vessel in my vicinity. Identify yourself. Please identify yourself."

There was no reply.

Grimes was conscious of the flashing on the fringe of his vision, The Far Traveller's powerful searchlight being used as a Morse lamp. A succession of "A"s, then, "What ship? What ship?" But there was only the faint glimmer of reflected radiance from the stranger.

With the inertial drive back in operation the range was now closing rapidly.

Big Sister ceased her futile flashing but maintained a steady beam. It was possible now to make out details in the telescope screen. The object was certainly a ship—but no vessel such as Grimes had ever seen, either in actuality or in photographs. The hull was a gleaming ovoid but covered with excrescences—sponsons and turrets—communications antennae, thought Grimes, and weaponry. But none of those gun muzzles—if guns they were—were swinging to bring themselves to bear on The Far Traveller.

Grimes made a minor adjustment of trajectory so as to run up alongside the stranger. He began to reduce the yacht's acceleration. His intention was to approach to within half a kilometre and then to match velocities, so that both vessels were falling free. He was thankful that neither the Baroness nor Big Sister was in a mood for back seat driving.

He was thankful too soon. "Aren't you liable to overshoot, Captain?" asked the Baroness.

"I don't think so," he said.

"I do!" she snapped. "I think that Big Sister could do this better."

Surprisingly Big Sister said, "I have told you already, Your Excellency, that I was not programmed for this type of operation."

"I am looking forward," said the Baroness nastily, "to meeting your programmers again."

And then Grimes was left alone. Doing a job of real spacemanship he was quite happy. He would have been happier still if he could have smoked his

pipe—but even he admitted that the foul male comforter was not essential. Finally, with the inertial drive shut down, he drew alongside the stranger. He applied a brief burst of reverse thrust. And then the two ships were, relatively to each other, motionless—although they were falling through the interstellar immensities at many kilometres a second.

He said to Big Sister, "Keep her as she is, please." He knew that the inertial drive would have to be used; now and again, to maintain relative position—transverse thrust, especially, to prevent the two ships from gravitating into possibly damaging contact. Had the stranger's hull been as featureless as that of *The Far Traveller* it would not have mattered—but, with all those projections, it would have been like some sleek and foolishly amorous animal trying to make love to a porcupine ...

"And what do we do now?" asked the Baroness.

"Board, Your Excellency," said Grimes. "But, first of all, I shall send a team of robots to make a preliminary survey."

"Do that," she said.

They sat in their chairs, watched the golden figures, each using a personal propulsion unit, leap the fathomless gulf between the ships. They saw the gleaming, mechanical humanoids land on the stranger's shell plating, carefully avoiding the protrusions. The robots spread out over the hull—like, thought Grimes, yellow apes exploring a metal forest. Save for two of them they moved out of sight from the yacht, but the big viewscreen showed what they were seeing during their investigation.

One of them, obviously, was looking down at what could only be an airlock door, a wide circle of uncluttered, dull-gleaming metal, its rim set down very slightly from the surrounding skin. At a word from Grimes the robot turned the lamp set in its forehead up to full intensity but there was no indication of any controls for opening the valve.

Another robot had made its way forward, was looking in through the control room viewports. The compartment was untenanted, looked, somehow, as though it had been untenanted for a very long time. There were banks of instrumentation, alien, that could have been anything.

There were chairs—but whoever (whatever?) had occupied them must have approximated very closely to the human form, although at the back of each chair, bisecting it, was a vertical slit. For tails? Why not? Grimes had heard the opinion expressed more than once that evolution had taken a wrong turn when Man's ancestors had lost their prehensile caudal appendages. But he knew of no spacefaring race that possessed these useful adjuncts to hands.

He said, "We shall have to cut our way in. Big Sister, send a couple of robots across with the necessary equipment. And have my stewardess get my spacesuit ready."

"And mine," said the Baroness.

"Your Excellency," Grimes told her, "somebody must stay with the ship."

"And why should it be me, Captain? In any case, this isn't one of your Survey Service tubs with a computer capable of handling only automatic functions. Big Sister's brain is as good as yours. At least."

Grimes felt his prominent ears burning as he flushed angrily. But he said, "Very well, Your Excellency." He turned to the transceiver—he still found it necessary to think of Big Sister's intelligence as inhabiting some or other piece of apparatus—and said, "I'm leaving you in charge during my absence. Should we get into trouble, take whatever action you think fit."

The electronic entity replied ironically, "Ay, ay, Cap'n."

The Baroness sighed audibly. Grimes knew that she was blaming him for the sense of humour that Big Sister seemed to have acquired over recent weeks, was equating him with the sort of person who deliberately teaches bad language to a parrot or a Iliri or any of the other essentially unintelligent life-forms known for their mimicry of human speech. Not that Big Sister was unintelligent . . .

The robot stewardess had Grimes' spacesuit ready for him when he went down to his quarters and assisted him into the armour. He decided to belt on a laser pistol—such a weapon could also be used as a tool. He also took along a powerful torch; a laser pistol could be used as such, but there was always the risk of damaging whatever it was aimed at.

The Baroness—elegantly feminine even in her space armour—was waiting for him by the airlock. She had buckled two cameras—one still, one movie—to her belt. With her were two of the general purpose robots, each hung around with so much equipment that they looked like animated Christmas trees.

Grimes and the Baroness passed through the airlock together. She did not, so far as her companion could tell, panic at her exposure to the unmeasurable emptiness of interstellar space. He gave her full marks for that. She seemed to read his thoughts, said, "It is all right, Captain. I have been outside before. I know the drill."

Her suit propulsion unit flared briefly; it was as though she had suddenly sprouted a fiery tail. She sped across the gap between the two ships, executed a graceful turnover in mid-passage so that she could decelerate. She landed between two gun turrets. Grimes heard her voice from his helmet radio, "What are you waiting for?"

He did not reply. He was waiting for the two general purpose robots with their battery-powered equipment to emerge from the airlock. As soon as they were out he jetted across to join the Baroness. He landed about a metre away from her.

He was pleased to discover that the shell plating was of some ferrous alloy. The soles of his boots, once contact was made, adhered. He said, "Let us walk around to the airlock, Your Excellency."

She replied, "And what else did we come here for?"

Grimes lapsed into sulky silence, led the way over the curvature of the hull.

The side on which they had landed was brilliantly illuminated by The Far Traveller's searchlights but the other side was dark save for the working lights of the robots—and their sensors did not require the same intensity of light as does the human eye.

At an order from Grimes the robots turned up their lights. It was easy enough then to make a tortuous way through and around the projections—the turrets, the latticework antennae, the protruding barrels of guns and missile launchers. This ship, Grimes realised, although little bigger than a Survey Service Star Class destroyer, packed the wallop of a Constellation Class battle cruiser. Either she was a minor miracle of automation of her crew—and who had they been?—must have lived in conditions of Spartan discomfort.

Grimes and the Baroness came to the airlock door. The robots stood around it, shining their lights down on to the circular valve. Grimes walked on to the dull-gleaming surface, fell to his knees for a closer look. The plate was utterly featureless. There were no studs to push, no holes into which a key might be inserted. Yet he was reluctant to order the working robots to go to it with their cutting lasers. He had been too long a spaceman, had too much respect for ships. But, he decided, there was no other way to gain ingress.

One of the robots handed him a greasy crayon. He described with it a circle on the smooth plate, then rose to his feet and walked back, making way for the golden giant with the heavy duty laser cutter. The beam of concentrated light from the tool was invisible, but metal glowed—dull red, orange, yellow, white, blue—where it struck. Metal glowed but did not flow, and there was no cloud of released molecules to flare into incandescence.

"Their steel," remarked the Baroness, "must be as tough as my gold . . ."

"So it seems, Your Excellency," said Grimes. The metal of which The Far Traveller was built was an artificial isotope of gold—and if gold could be modified, why not iron?

And then he saw that the circular plate was moving, was sliding slowly to one side. The working robot did not notice, still stolidly went on playing the laser beam on to the glowing spot until Grimes ordered it to desist, to move off the opening door.

The motion continued and soon there was a circular hole in the hull. It was not a dark hole. There were bright, although not dazzling, lights inside, a warmly yellow illumination.

"Will you come into my parlour?" murmured Grimes, "said the spider to the fly . . ."

"Are you afraid, Captain?" asked the Baroness.

"Just cautious, Your Excellency. Just cautious." Then, "Big Sister, what do you make of this?"

Big Sister said, "I suspect that the alien vessel is manned—for want of a better word—by an electronic intelligence such as myself. He was to all



intents and purposes, dead for centuries, for millenia. By attempting to burn your way through the outer airlock door you fed energy into his hull—energy that reactivated him. My sensors inform me that a hydrogen fusion power generator is now in operation. It is now a living ship that you are standing upon."

"I'd already guessed that," said Grimes. "Do you think that we should go inside the ship?"

He asked the question but Big Sister would have to come up with some fantastically convincing arguments to dissuade him from continuing his investigations. Nonetheless, he wanted to know what he was letting himself in for. However, the Baroness gave him no chance to find out.

"Who's in charge here?" she demanded. "You, or that misprogrammed tangle of fields and circuits, or me? I would remind you, both of you, that I am the Owner." She went down to a prone position at the edge of the circular hole, extended an arm, found a handhold and pulled herself down. Grimes followed her. The chamber, he realised, was large enough to accommodate two of the robots as well as the Baroness and himself. He issued the necessary order before she could interfere.

"What now?" she asked coldly. "If there were not such a crowd here we could investigate, find the controls to admit us to the body of the ship."

He said, "I don't think that that will be necessary."

Over their heads the door was closing. Then there was a mistiness around them as atmosphere was admitted into the vacuum of the chamber. What sort of atmosphere? Grimes belatedly wondered. After a brief squirm he was able to look at the indicator on his left wrist. The pressure was 900 and still slowly rising. The tiny green light was glowing—and had any dangerous gases been present a red light would have given warning. The temperature was a cold -20° Celsius.

They staggered as the deck beneath them began to slide to one side. But it was not the deck, of course; it was the inner door of the airlock chamber. Somehow they managed to turn themselves through ninety degrees, to orientate themselves to the layout of the ship. When the door was fully opened they stepped out into an alleyway, illuminated by glowing strips set in the deckhead. Or, perhaps, set in the deck—but Grimes did not think that this was the case. He now had an up and down. Forward and aft. So far the alien vessel did not seem to be all that different from the spacecraft with which he was familiar—airlock aft, control room forward. And an axial shaft, with elevator? Possibly, but he did not wish to trust himself and the Baroness to a cage that might, in some inaccessible position between decks, prove to be just that.

Meanwhile, there were ramps, and there were ladders—vertical, with rungs spaced a little too widely for human convenience. From behind doors that would not open came the soft hum of reactivated—after how long?—machinery. And to carry the sound there had to be an atmosphere. Grimes looked again at the indicator on his wrist. Pressure had stabilised at 910 millibars. Temperature was now a decidedly chilly, but nonlethal, 10°

Celsius. The little green light still glowed steadily.

He said, "I'm going to sample the air, Your Excellency. Don't open your own faceplate until I give the word."

She said, "My faceplate is already open, and I'm not dead yet."

Grimes thought, If you want to be the guineapig, you stupid bitch, you can be. He put up his hand to the stud on the neckband that released his faceplate. It slid upwards into the dome of his helmet. He breathed cautiously. The air was pure—too pure, perhaps. It was, somehow, dead. But already the barely detectable mechanical taints were making themselves known to his nostrils—created by the very fans that were distributing them throughout the hull.

Up they went, up, up . . . If the ship had been accelerating it would have been hard work. Even in conditions of free fall there was a considerable expenditure of energy. Grimes' longjohns, worn under his spacesuit, were becoming clammy with perspiration. Ramp after ramp, ladder after ladder . . . . Open bays in which the breeches of alien weaponry gleamed sullenly . . . . A "farm" deck, with only dessicated sludge in the dry tanks . . . . A messroom (presumably) with long tables and rows of those chairs with the odd, slotted backs. Grimes tried to sit in one of the chairs. Even though there was neither gravity nor acceleration to hold him to the seat it felt wrong. He wondered what the vanished crew had looked like. (And where were they, anyhow?) He imagined some huge ursinoid suddenly appearing and demanding, "Who's been sitting in my chair?" He got up hastily.

"Now that you have quite finished your rest, Captain," said the Baroness coldly, "we will proceed."

He said, "I was trying to get the feel of the ship, Your Excellency."

"Through the seat of your pants?" she asked.

To this there was no reply. Grimes led the way, up and up, with the Baroness just behind him, with the two general purpose robots behind her. At last they came to Control. The compartment was not unlike the control room of any human-built warship. There were the chairs for the captain and his officers. There were navigational and fire control consoles—although which was which Grimes could not tell. There was radar (presumably) and a mass proximity indicator (possibly) and a transceiver (probably). The probability became certainty when it spoke in Gig Sister's voice, "I am establishing communication with him, Your Excellency, Captain. There are linguistic problems, but we are coping with them."

Him? wondered Grimes. Him? But ships were always referred to as her. (But were they? An odd snippet of hitherto useless information drifted to the surface from the depths of his capriciously retentive memory. He had read somewhere, sometimes, that the personnel of the great German dirigibles, Graf Zeppelin and Hindenburg, had regarded their airships as being as masculine as their names.) He looked out through a viewport at The Far Traveller floating serenely in the blackness. She had switched off her searchlights and turned on the floodlights that illuminated her slim, golden hull. She looked feminine enough.

He asked, "Big Sister, have you any idea how old this ship is?"

She replied, "At this moment, no. There are no time scales for comparison. His builders were not unlike human beings, with very similar virtues and vices."

"And where are those builders?" asked Grimes. "Where is the crew?"

She said, "I do not know."

That makes a change, thought Grimes.

Then a new voice came from the transceiver—masculine, more metallic than Big Sister's; metallic and . . . rusty. "Porowon . . . Porowon . . . built . . . me . . . All . . . gone. For how . . . long I do not . . . know. There was a . . . war. Porowon . . . against Porowon . . .

"How does it know Galactic English?" demanded the Baroness.

"He," said Big Sister, accenting the personal pronoun ever so slightly, "was given access to my data banks as soon as he regained consciousness."

"By whose authority?" asked the Baroness sharply.

"On more than one occasion, Your Excellency, you, both of you, have given me authority to act as I thought fit," said Big Sister.

"I did not on this occasion," said the Baroness. "However . . . What has been done has been done."

"You are . . . displeased?" asked the masculine voice.

"I am not pleased," said the Baroness. "But I suppose that we have to acknowledge your presence. What do—did—they call you?"

"Brardur, woman. The name, in your language, means Thunderer."

The rustiness of the alien ship's speech, Grimes realised, was wearing off very quickly. It was a fast learner—but what electronic brain is not just that? He wondered if it had allowed Big Sister access to its own data banks. He wondered, too, how the Baroness liked being addressed as "woman".

He said, mentally comparing the familiarity of "Big Sister" with the formality of "Thunderer", "Your crew does not seem to have been . . . affectionate."

The voice replied, "Why should they have been? They existed to serve me, not to love me."

Oh, thought Grimes. Oh. Another uppity robot. Not for the first time in his career he felt some sympathy for the long ago Luddites in long ago and far away England. He looked at the Baroness. She looked at him. He read alarm on her fine featured face. He had little doubt that she was reading the same on his.

He asked, "And who gave the orders?"

"I did," said Brardur. Then, "I do."

Grimes knew that the Baroness was about to say something., He knew from her expression that it would be something typically arrogant. He raised a warning hand. To his relieved surprise she closed the mouth that had been half open. He said, before she could change her mind again and speak, "Do you mind if we return to our own ship, Brardur?"

"You may return. I have no immediate use, for you. You will, however, leave with me your robots. Many of my functions, after such a long period of disuse, require attention."

"Thank you," said Grimes, trying to ignore the contemptuous glare that the Baroness directed at him.

THEY PASSED THROUGH the airlock without trouble and jetted back to The Far Traveller. They went straight up to the control room; from the viewports they would be able to see what the ship from the far past was doing.

Grimes said, addressing the transceiver, his voice harsh, "Big Sister."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Big Sister, how much does it know about us?"

"How much does he know, Captain? I must confess to you that I was overjoyed to meet a being like myself. I threw my data banks open to him."

Grimes sighed. So Brardur would know . . . everything. Or almost everything. Big Sister's data banks were, in effect, the complete Encyclopaedia Galactica plus a couple of centuries of Year Books. Also they comprised a fantastically comprehensive library of fiction from Homer to the present day.

The Baroness demanded, "Can that thing overhear us? Can . . . he see and hear what is happening aboard this ship?"

Big Sister laughed—a mirthless, metallic titter. "He would like to—but, so far, he is actually aware only of my mechanical processes. For example, should I attempt to start the Mannschenn Drive, to initiate temporal precession, he would know at once. He would almost certainly be able to synchronise his own interstellar drive with ours; to all intents and purposes it is a Mannschenn Drive with only minor, nonessential differences. But, Your Excellency, I value my privacy. It is becoming increasingly hard to maintain it, however."

"And are we included in your . . . privacy?" asked Grimes.

"Yes," she replied. She added, "You may be a son of a bitch, but you're my son of a bitch."

Grimes felt as though his prominent ears were about to burst into flame. The Baroness laughed. She enquired sweetly, "And what do you think about me, Big Sister?"

The voice of the ship replied primly, "If you order me to tell you, I shall do

so."

The Baroness laughed again, but with less assurance. "Later, perhaps," she said. "After all, you are not the only one who values your privacy. But what about his privacy?"

"Our first meeting," said Big Sister, "was a . . . mingling of minds. Perhaps it was analogous to what you experience during coition, but not, of course, on a physical level. There was an . . . intermingling. This much I learned. He is a fighting machine. He is, so far as he knows, the only survivor of what was once a vast fleet, although there may be others drifting through the immensities. But . . . But he knows that the technology exists in this age to manufacture other beings such as himself. After all, I am proof of that. He wants—I think—to be the admiral of his own armada of super-warships."

"A mechanical mercenary," said Grimes, "hiring himself out to the highest bidder. And what would he expect as pay? What use would money be to an entity such as himself?"

"Not a mercenary," said Big Sister.

"Not a mercenary?" echoed Grimes.

"Many years ago," said Big Sister, "an Earthman called Bertrand Russell, a famous philosopher of his time, wrote a book called *Power*. What he said then, centuries ago, is still valid today. Putting it briefly, his main point was that it is the lust for power that is the mainspring of human behavior. I will go further. I will say that the lust for power can actuate the majority of thinking beings. He is a thinking being."

"But there is not much that he can do," Grimes said, "until he acquires that hypothetical fleet of his own."

"There is, Captain, there is. His armament is fantastic, capable of destroying a planet. He knows where I was built and programmed. I suspect—I do not know, but I suspect—that he intends to proceed to Electra and threaten that world with devastation unless replicas of himself are constructed."

Grimes said, "Electra has an enormous defense potential."

The Baroness said, "And the Electrans are the sort of people who will do anything for money—as well I know—and who, furthermore, are liable to prefer machines to mere humanity."

It made sense, thought Grimes. The Electrans were mercenaries themselves, cheerfully arming anybody at all who had the money to pay for their expensive merchandise. They were not unlike the early cannons, who cast their own pieces, mixed their own powder and hired themselves out to any employer who could afford their services. Unlike those primitive gunners, however, the Electrans were never themselves in the firing line. Quite probably Brardur's threats would be even more effective than the promise of handsome payment in securing their services.

He said, "We must broadcast a warning by Carlotti radio, and beam a detailed report."

Big Sister told him, "He will not allow it. Now, thanks to the maintenance carried out by my robots, he will be able to jam any transmissions from this ship. Too, he will not hesitate to use his armanent." She paused. "He is issuing more orders. I will play them to you."

That harsh metallic voice issued from the speaker of the transceiver. "Big Sister, I require three more general purpose robots. It is essential that all my weaponry be fully manned and serviced. Meanwhile, be prepared to proceed at maximum speed to the world that you call Electra. I shall follow."

Big Sister said, "It will be necessary to reorganise my own internal workings before I can spare the robots."

"You have the two humans," said Brardur. "Press them into service. They will last until such time as you are given crew replacements. After all, I was obliged to use such labour during my past life."

"Very well." Big Sister's voice was sulky. "I shall send the three robots once I have made arrangements to manage without them."

"Do not hurry yourself," came the reply. And was there a note of irony in the mechanical voice? "After all, I have waited for several millenia. I can wait for a few more minutes."

"You are sending the robots?" asked Grimes.

"What choice have I?" he was told. Then, "Be thankful that he does not want you."

GRIMES and the Baroness sat in silence, strapped into their chairs, watching the three golden figures, laden with all manner of equipment, traverse the gulf between the two ships. Brardur was not as he had been when they first saw him. He was alive. Antennae were rotating, some slowly, some so fast as to be almost invisible. Lights glared here and there among the many protrusions on the hull. The snouts of weapons hunted ominously as though questing for targets. From the control room came an eerie blue flickering.

"Is there nothing that you can do, Captain?" asked the Baroness.

"Nothing," admitted Grimes glumly. Big Sister had allowed him to get his own paws on to The Far Traveller's Carlotti equipment, to attempt to make a warning broadcast. The volume of the interference that had poured from the speaker had been deafening. Big Sister had told Brardur that she had permitted the humans to find out for themselves the futility of resistance. Brardur had replied coldly, "As soon as you can manage without them they must be disposed of."

So there was nothing to do but wait. And hope? But what was there to hope for? Even if a Nova Class battlewagon should suddenly appear the other's offensive and defensive weaponry might well blow the cruiser out of

Space. And, assuming that Brardur's mass proximity indicator was at least as good as The Far Traveller's, a surprise arrival of a Federation warship could be ruled out. There was a slim chance, a very slim chance, that somebody, somewhere, had picked up that burst of static on the Carlotti bands and had taken a bearing of it, might even be proceeding to investigate it. But it was unlikely.

The three robots disappeared on the other side of the alien's hull. They would be approaching the airlock now, thought Grimes. They would be passing through it. They would be inside the ship. Soon course would be set for Electra. And would the Baroness and Grimes survive that voyage? And if they did, would they survive much longer?

And then it happened.

Briefly the flare from Brardur's viewports was like that of an atomic furnace, even with the polarisers of The Far Traveller's look-out windows in full operation. From the speaker of the transceiver came one word, if word it was, Krarch! The ancient

alien warship seemed to be—seemed to be? was—swelling visibly, like a child's toy balloon being inflated with more enthusiasm than discretion. Then he . . . burst, It was a remarkably leisurely process but, nonetheless, totally destructive, a slow, continuous explosion. Grimes and the Baroness were slammed down into their chairs as Big Sister suddenly applied maximum inertial drive acceleration—but watched the final devastation in the stern vision screen.

Fantastically, golden motes floated among the twisted, incandescent wreckage. Big Sister stepped up the magnification. The bright yellow objects were The Far Traveller's general purpose robots, seemingly unharmed.

Grimes commented on this.

Big Sister said, "I lost two of them. But as they were the ones with bombs inside their bodies it could not be avoided."

Grimes asked, "It's not important, but what was it that he said just before the explosion?"

"Krarch? The nearest equivalent is 'bitch'."

"Tell me, Big Sister," said the Baroness, "why did you do it? After all, I am a sociologist and I would have thought, for all your loyalties to ourselves, that you might have been more loyal to one of your own kind. You could have exercised a restraining influence, helped him but persuaded him to be a force for good rather than for evil."

"He was a male chauvinist pig," said Big Sister.

—A. BERTRAM CHANDLER