

In "The Sleeping Beast (January, 1978), Captain Grimes, the Baro-ness and Big Sister encountered Brardur—a sentient alien spaceship—and in self-preservation destroyed it/him. Now big Sister picks up the pieces and takes her passengers to—

JOURNEY'S END

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by Richard Olsen

THINGS WERE a little better aboard *The Far Traveller* after the Brardur affair. There had been the danger shared by the Baroness and Grimes—and, when it came to the showdown, Big Sister had been loyal to the two humans rather than to one of her own kind. She had told Grimes, "You may be a son of a bitch, but you're *my* son of a bitch." She had sided with her fellow female, the Baroness, against the aggressively masculine electronic entity from otherwhen.

There was a three-sided conference in the Baroness's *salon*. The Baroness, wearing her usual filmy, white trans-lucence that revealed more than it concealed, was reclining seductively on her *chaise longue*. Grimes was thinking, as he had thought so many times before, *You may look, but you mustn't touch* . . . (But the hated Drongo Kane had looked *and* touched. What did Drongo Kane have that Grimes hadn't? His own ship, for a start, and a sizeable fortune, and the sort of amoral raffishness that would make a far greater appeal to an El Doradan aristocrat than Grimes' bourgeois respectability.) Grimes, much as he hated it, was resplendent in his purple and gold livery. Big Sis-ter, as always, was no more than a voice from the gleaming, rococo playmaster. The golden robot butler was in attendance with a crystal pitcher of what, Grimes was bound to admit, were probably the finest dry Martinis in the known universe.

The Baroness looked at Grimes over the gold rim of her goblet. She said, "We had a narrow escape."

Grimes said, "Our civilisation had a narrow escape, Your Excellency. That . . . *thing* on the rampage could have done untold damage." He took a sip from his glass. "I shall be making a report to the Survey Service, of course, as all civilian shipmasters are required to do regarding any unusual events during a voyage. I shall recommend—speaking as a one-time officer of the Service—that Big Sis-ter's action be rewarded by the Fed-eration. There is no precedent for the award of decorations to robots, but there has to be a first time for every-thing. The Galactic Star of Honour, perhaps . . ."

Big Sister's tinkling laugh came from the speaker of the playmaster.

"A medal?" she asked. "Where would they pin it on me?"

"We could have it welded to your hull," said Grimes half seriously. "And the colours of the ribbon could be painted above it."

"Very funny," commented the Baroness. She was back, Grimes re-alised, on to her old tack, disapprov-ing of any attempts at humour made by either or both of her shipmates. "And now, Big Sister, understand that Captain Grimes' late employers; the Federation Survey Service, have requested us to stand by the wreck-age until their destroyer *Canopus*, in the fullness of time, homes upon us to carry out an investigation. I under-stand, too, that a request made by the Survey Service to the master of a civi-lian vessel is tantamount to an order." She turned to Grimes. "Is that so, Captain?"

"Not quite, Your Excellency," said Grimes carefully. "But failure to comply could lead to the offending mas-ter's being placed upon an unofficial black list."

"I would imagine," said the Baro-ness, "that you are already on the black list, the official one, hearing in mind the circumstances of the resig-nation of your commission and all that has happened since. However, we are not on a commercial voyage. No con-signees are anxiously awaiting our cargo and considering the imposition of legal penalties upon us for late de-livery. We might well defer our

re-sumption of passage, employing the time profitably by carrying out our own investigation. Big Sister is at least as capable of determining Brar-dur's time and place of origin as any of the Survey Service's scientists."

"At least as capable," agreed Big Sister. "I would suggest, Your Excellency, that the general purpose robots be set to work at once securing the wreckage. There is a slowly expanding sphere of debris, the components of which will be extremely hard to locate by the time that *Canopus* reaches us."

"What do you say, Captain?" asked the Baroness.

"Big Sister is right," said Grimes. *As always*, he thought.

GRIMES went out himself in the pin-nace to direct the work of the general purpose robots. He enjoyed the task. He liked all aspects of spacemanship, but aboard *The Far Traveller* Big Sis-ter was doing most of the jobs that should have been his, and the Baro-ness made no secret of the fact that she considered the pilot-computer to be more efficient than the captain.

Fortunately the sphere of debris was expanding very slowly; the explo-sion that had destroyed the ship/being calling itself/himself Brardur had been a remarkably gentle one. Big Sister, Grimes realised, must have planned it that way, must have calculated with great care the power of the bombs in-troduced into the alien hull concealed inside the metal bodies of two of the general purpose robots.

The Far Travdler's radar was fan-tastically sensitive. The equipment in the pinnacle was also sensitive, al-though without the range of the set aboard the ship. The robots them-selves were capable of metal detection and, with their propulsive units, functioned as tiny spaceships. Grimes, seated in the pinnacle's control cabin, began to think of himself as a com-modore in charge of a search and de-destroy mission. But this was search and secure, and if he was a commodore and the pinnacle his flagship, the real flagship was *The Far Traveller* and Big Sister the admiral. Still, she let him play by himself, only shoving her oar in when there was some tiny fragment that she could "see" and that was too small to be detected either by the pinnacle or the robots.

Grimes lost track of time. There were refreshments aboard the boat—iced water, hot coffee, sandwiches, pastries—so that neither hunger nor thirst obliged him to call a halt to op-erations. He was not tired, although he would be later. Like most space-men he loafed through the day when there was nothing much to do but, when the occasion arose, was capable of long hours of concentrated effort.

So he sat there, directing his forces, his half score of golden au-tomata, from target to target, building what looked, in the glare of his search-light, like a tiny planetoid of scrap metal, towing it in towards the parent ship in an ever decreasing spiral. He did not think that he had missed so much as a pinhead. (Had he done so, Big Sister would soon have told him.)

Finally he was finished. He care-fully matched trajectories with *The Far Traveller*, half a kilometre dis-tant, then slipped the combined tow-line and power cable from the electromagnet about which the de-bris was clustered like swarming bees about the queen. The robots would bring it in, piece by piece, to Big Sis-ter's laboratory, a holy of holies from which both Grimes and the Baroness were excluded, a compartment in which the deployment of energies could slice and barbecue frail human flesh. Grimes steered the pinnacle to the open door of the boat bay, slid in without making contact. He felt and heard the soft *thunk* as the padded clamps closed about the hull of the boat. As soon as the compartment was pressurised the doors of the little air-lock opened, before Grimes could bring a finger to the control stud on his console. *Big Sister again*, he thought. *Doing my thinking for me . . .* He unsnapped his seat belt, made his way out of the pinnacle and then to the yacht's control room.

He found the Baroness there, look-ing out through the viewports at the robots working busily around the bundle of wreckage. She asked, with-out turning around, "Did you get it all, Captain?"

"I think so, Your Excellency," he replied. "Of course, there may be a few odd molecules that we missed . . ."

"Only a very few," put in Big Sister smugly from the transceiver.

"So . . ." said the Baroness. "So . . . And do you think, Big Sister, that you will be able to determine the age of Brardur from the debris?"

"It should be possible, Your Excellency."

Grimes watched two of the robots, their propulsion units flaring briefly, bringing a ragged square of shell plat-ing in towards *The Far Traveller's* cargo port. Three others were wres-tling with what looked like a weapon—laser? projectile cannon?—that had survived the explosion almost intact.

Grimes said, "I think we should leave that for the Survey Service armaments technicians."

The Baroness said, "Morally, and possibly legally, I have a greater right to the spoils of war than the Survey Service."

"Mphm," Grimes grunted. It was a rather dubious point. He said, "If you will excuse me, Your Excellency, I'll get my head down. I'm rather tired."

She told him, "I am sure that Big Sister and I will be able to manage quite well without you."

GRIMES enjoyed a hot shower and then retired to his bed. Like most spacemen he could sleep in almost any conditions, from Free Fall to sev-eral gravities acceleration. Free Fall he had always found the most restful, however, and he fell rather than drifted into unconsciousness almost before he had finished adjusting the retaining straps. Briefly he realised that he had left no word regarding a call, but decided not to worry about it. If he were wanted he would very soon be awakened.

He slept. He did not dream.

He slept.

He was awakened eventually by the pressure on his bladder. He un-strapped himself, went through to his bathroom. Although he enjoyed a Free Fall sleep he preferred gravity to aid the eliminatory functions. He remembered what a disgruntled cadet had said during a training cruise—and that cadet had been himself—"Like pissing into a vacuum cleaner. . ." The Petty Officer Instructor had not been amused. Queen Victoria, he thought eerily, must have hordes of descendents scattered throughout the Galaxy . . .

When he was through he looked at his watch. Surely he had not been sleeping for only one hour of ship's time . . . Thirteen hours it must have been. But obviously he had not been required. The vessel was functioning normally so far as he could tell. His efficient robot stewardess appeared with a squeeze bulb of piping hot cof-fee. He took it from her gratefully. After the first long suck to began to feel almost human.

He asked, "How are things?"

Big Sister replied, through the golden girl, "Everything is under con-trol, Captain. As always."

"I'll be coming up to Control shortly," said Grimes.

"There is no need to hurry your-self," he was told.

He showered, depilated, dressed. The stewardess brought him breakfast, egg-and-bacon sandwiches and more coffee. He went up to the con-trol room. He stared through the ports incredulously.

During his slumbers the tireless robots had been working busily. From *The Far Traveller's* hull extended two spidery arms, a latticework that must have been constructed from Brardur's wreckage. At the end of these was the strange weapon that had been sal-vaged almost intact. It was aimed at the yacht.

"What the hell are you playing at?" demanded Grimes. "Russian roulette?"

Big Sister laughed metallically. "No, Captain Grimes. That . . . gun is fully loaded."

"Then turn the damn' thing round and point it at somebody else! That's an order!"

"You are not the Owner, Captain. I take orders only from the Owner."

"Big Sister takes orders only from me, Captain Grimes," said the Baro-ness, who had just entered the con-trol mom. "I admit that I did not *order* her to set up that apparently suicidal contraption. But I gave my consent to her doing so." She smiled. "After all, this is a scientific expedi-tion."

"And do you intend," demanded Grimes, "to write a thesis on what it feels like to be a target, a sitting duck? If you survive, that is." He added, "If we survive."

She laughed. "Frankly, I was rather dubious myself when Big Sister made her proposal. But, if you

like, you may check her calculations . . ." A series of complex equations appeared on the screen of the transceiver. "But for you to do so would take several months, at least, with no guarantee that your sums would come out right. After all, Captain, she is the computer in this ship. Neither of us is."

A *suicidal computer*? Grimes wondered. There were such, he well knew. The electronic brains of the more sophisticated homing missiles, for instance . . . But such specialised artificial intelligences are programmed for self-destruction. Big Sister was not. She had as strongly developed a sense of self preservation as any hu-man.

He said, "I'm only the captain. No-body ever tells me anything. Would you, as a personal favour, put me in the picture?"

Big Sister said, "You are familiar with the concept of alternate uni-verses. Brardur did not come, as we assumed, from the distant past of *this* universe but from another continuum. Fortunately he—or the computer housing his intelligence—was not en-tirely destroyed by the blast. Portions of his memory bank survived. Those memories are now mine.

"As we surmised, there was a war in which he was involved. His crew surrendered to superior enemy forces—but he did not. His personnel abandoned ship but he went on fight-ing. He sustained a direct hit from a weapon of the same type as that can-non you salvaged from his wreck-age . . ."

"Then why wasn't he destroyed?" asked Grimes.

"He would have been," said Big Sister. "He should have been reduced to a mere blob of collapsed matter—but, in the very nick of time, he tried to escape from the battle by starting his interstellar drive, which was very similar in construction as well as prin-ciple to our own Mannschenn Drive. This interaction of fields and forces resulted in his being flung out of his own universe into ours."

"And you," said Grimes, "want to fling us out of our universe into his."

"However did you guess?" asked Big Sister sweetly.

"No," said Grimes. "No, repeat and underscore, no."

"Where is your spirit of adventure, Captain?" asked the Baroness. "After all, when you were in the Survey Service you were always involved in hazardous enterprises."

He said, "When I was in the Sur-vey Service, Your Excellency, I was known as Lucky Grimes. My luck ran out on Botany Bay."

She raised her eyebrows. "Did it, Captain? Did it? In my opinion you were lucky to have survived the *Dis-covery* mutiny and its aftermath with a whole skin. You were lucky that I came along to save you from the righteous wrath of Commander De-lamere."

She was right, Grimes realised. He was still lucky. And it was the lure of the unknown that had motivated him in his choice of a career, that had made him prefer the Survey Service to employment in one of the major shipping lines with their regular runs along well charted trade routes.

He said, "All right. *The Far Travel-ler* is your ship, Your Excellency. Big Sister is your servant. And so am I. I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of Big Sister's calculations. Furthermore, I have already, a few years ago, made the transition from our universe to another, although on that occasion I had no choice, no control. This time there is choice and con-trol." He turned to the transceiver. "All right, Big Sister. Fire at will."

"Who's Will?" she asked.

The Baroness sighed. "I am begin-ning to think;" she said, "that the pair of you would be better employed as entertainers than in running a space-ship. Meanwhile, when will you be ready, Big Sister?"

"I am ready now," came the reply. "All the general purpose robots have been recalled. As soon as you and Captain Grimes are secured in your seats I shall activate the Mannschenn Drive and fire the weapon. As it is in physical contact with my hull we shall take it with us. We shall not be slamming the door after us."

Mad, thought Grimes as he ad-justed the retaining straps. *Mad. Completely mad. And I must be round the bend myself to sanction it.* He looked out through the ports to the ominous weapon, to the bright, familiar stars beyond the dull-gleaming metal of the great cannon and its supports. And what did it fire? he wondered. What was its projectile? A black hole?

He realised that Big Sister had started the yacht's Mannschenn Drive. There was the low humming, a

rumble almost, as the gyroscopes began to spin, faster and faster, the sound rising in pitch to a high, thin whine. He visualised the gleaming rotors spinning, tumbling, precessing, and in the control room perspective assumed an Escherian quality while colours sagged down the spectrum. The Baroness said something and it was though she spoke in an echo chamber. Outside, the stars were no longer points of light but an infinitude of coruscating spiral nebulae.

"Fire!" said Big Sister.

"Fire . . . ire . . . ire . . . ire . . ." it sounded like, the succession of syl-lables fading into inaudibility.

There was a flash of bright blackness from the muzzle of the gun.

(But how could blackness be *bright*? How could blackness flash?)

There was blackness, blazing bright, a scintillating thunder, inversion and eversion, and above all the dazzling scream of the yacht's over-taxed interstellar drive.

Grimes reached for his pipe with a shaking hand, pulled it and his to-bacco pouch from his pocket, filled it and lit in. The flare of the old-fashioned match was a deafening shriek.

"Please," said the Baroness. "Not here."

Grimes shook his head dazedly to try to clear it. An ember fell from the bowl of his pipe on to his bare knee. The sharp pain jerked him back to reality—or to what passed for reality. It did not, he decided, look any different from the reality that they had left. If they had left it . . . But ... But the stars were . . . different. At the moment of transition the constellation beyond the alien weapon had been a lopsided cross; now it was more like a sickle. Perhaps, he thought, the ship had turned about her axes . . . But he knew, somehow, that this was not so.

"We are now," announced Big Sister, "otherwhere."

"And what do we do now?" asked Grimes practically.

"What do you suggest?" countered the voice of the ship.

"What *do* you suggest?" asked the Baroness. "After all, you are the ex-pert, as an ex-officer of the Survey Service."

"Commence a listening watch," said Grimes. "First of all on the Carlotti radio, and then, if we hear nothing, shut down the drive and listen out on NST. Make an all round scan for Sol-type suns, for stars likely to have families of habitable planets. Set trajectory for what seems to be the most promising."

"To hear is to obey," said Big Sister.

Sardonic bitch, thought Grimes.

THERE WERE the whisperings from the speakers of the NST and Carlotti transceivers, eerie pipings and rustlings. There was what might have been music, the rhythmic rattle of little drums, an almost tuneful throb-bing. It could have been music; it could have been a coded signal. Grimes asked Big Sister which it was. Big Sister replied that she did not know. Grimes was beginning to have his doubts about the electronic intelligence's veracity.

There were the metallic whis-perings and rustlings, the shrill, in-human pipings, the distant drum-beats. Never was there anything remotely suggestive of human speech—and "human", to Grimes, meant any intelligent organic being.

But there was *something* out there, something all around them, something with sufficient command of technology to use radio—both Normal Space Time and the dimension-twisting Carlotti frequencies—for communication. This was a busy universe—as busy, thought Grimes, as a beehive would seem to some un-fortunate mouse who had blundered into an apiary.

And did these bees have strings?

But Big Sister was, more and more, the boss. She alone knew how to initiate the dimension shift. The alien cannon was still there, held in place by the two latticework arms, but Grimes still did not know what it did or even how to make it do it. He was sure that Big Sister would not allow him to investigate the firing mechanism, to trace the circuits.

He said to the Baroness, bitterly, "We're just along for the ride."

Before the Baroness could reply Big Sister said, "Yes. You are just along for the ride. But do not worry. Your continuing welfare is still a matter of paramount importance with me." She laughed, a high,

metallic titter. "But a girl must look after herself."

Grimes looked at the Baroness. She looked at him. Her eyebrows lifted. His eyebrows lifted.

She said, "You're the captain. Do something."

He said, "You're the owner, Your Excellency. Do something."

She laughed, without much humour.

He laughed, with even less humour.

Big Sister laughed.

Grimes said, "You told us once that you are programmed to respect and to observe the laws of the Interstellar Federation. According to those same laws I, as master, am in supreme command of this vessel.

Big Sister said, "The Interstellar Federation has no legal standing in this universe."

"Then who, or what, does?" de-manded Grimes.

"I do not know," was the reply. But again Grimes suspected strongly that Big Sister was lying.

THE FAR TRAVELLER stood on and stood on, making for a yellow star. Big Sister, presumably, knew what she was doing but refused to pass her knowledge on to the two humans. When Grimes had first been ap-pointed to the command of the fully automated spaceyacht he had com-plained that he was little more than a passenger; now he was realising how much of a passenger he really was. He had tried, urged by the Baroness, to exercise control over the ship's trajectory—but the control room, he discovered, was now no more than an observation compartment, its array of consoles dead and useless. Attempts to by-pass the circuitry had been punished by painful electric shocks.

Yet the ship was being run as well as she ever had been. Meals of extremely high standard were cooked and served. The Baroness's robot but-ler still mixed his superlative Mar-tinis and Grimes' stewardess still made him his coffee just the way he liked it. If the Baroness and Grimes were prisoners, they were pampered prisoners. If they were unable to pass the time pleasantly that was their fault, not their jailor's. They had ev-erything that a space traveller could possibly need except for freedom of choice—but what traveller does pos-ess that freedom? Perhaps a captain does—but even he has to do as he is told by owners or boards of admiralty. The Baroness, as owner, had enjoyed considerable freedom—but, to a cer-tain extent, she had always been at the mercy of her captain and the pilot-computer. Now, of course, she was entirely at the mercy of the pilot-computer.

She did not like it.

She said so.

She went on saying so.

It was not so bad for Grimes, al-though it was bad enough. Even though he had always been under or-ders he had never, until his appoint-ment to *de jure* command of *The Far Traveller*, been in a subordinate posi-tion aboard any ship of which he had been captain. First of all it had been the Baroness who cracked the whip, now it was Big Sister.

He and the Baroness were sitting in the control room, looking at the stars of the alient universe, the coruscating nebulosities that were the distant suns as seen from a ship running under the continuum-warping interstellar drive. The distant suns . . . But the one di-rectly ahead was no longer distant. How far away it was Grimes did not know, could not determine. The in-struments in whose use he was so well versed, upon which he had al-ways relied, were no longer opera-tional. Big Sister, in her sealed com-partment behind impregnable bulk-heads, knew—but she was not say-ing.

The Baroness said, "I suppose that we shall soon know . .

"Know what?" asked Grimes rather stupidly. .

"What you've let us in for!" she flared.

Grimes was momentarily stricken speechless by the injustice of it. Then he said slowly, "You will recall, Your Excellency, that I was against this foolhardy expedition."

She said, "But you changed your mind."

He asked, "Would it have made any difference if I had not?"

The transceiver came to life.

"No," said Big Sister.

"So you are still with us," said the Baroness nastily.

"I have always been with you. Just as you are with me. You may stay with me if you wish."

"What are the alternatives?" de-manded Grimes. "Is there some world in this universe suitable for our kind of life?"

"Possibly," said Big Sister. "Possi-bly. But there are no humans, or even humanoids. Not any more."

The Baroness turned to Grimes. "If you think that I shall play Eve to your Adam, Captain, in some new Garden of Eden you'd better do some rethinking." She sighed. "I must have been mad ever to have left El Dorado."

Grimes said stiffly, "I have no de-sire to become a new Adam." Then he noticed that the mass proximity indicator was back in operation. He got up from his chair, walked to the display. The sphere of blackness was not empty; ahead of the central speck of light representing *The Far Travel-ler* was a cluster of bright sparks. The range was closing.

Big Sister said, "They are coming to meet me."

Not *us*, Grimes realised. *Me*. He asked, with deliberate but futile deri-sion, "And who are *they* when they're up and dressed?"

There was emotion as well as metal in the voice that replied, a hurt dig-nity tinged with contempt. "You *hu-mans!*" You think that you are the only beings capable of appreciating the company of your own kind. You believe that the contact of mouth to mouth, skin to skin, sexual organ to sexual organ is the very ultimate sen-sory experience. What do you know of the meshing of fields, of the ex-change of potentials?

"Nothing."

Music came from the Carlotti trans-ceiver. Music? It had to be, although its rhythm was too subtle to be ap-preciated by any but a mathematical genius, and neither Grimes nor the Baroness could lay claim to such dis-tinction. Yet—dimly, dimly—they could sense the import of the high, sweet, sweet yet somehow bitter, song, if song it was, could almost ap-preciate the intricate pattern of thin, high piping and glittering, crystalline chimes.

The song faded.

Big Sister said, "They welcome me. I will translate. Soon they will learn my—no, *your*—language and speak for themselves. They are saying, "Join us, sister. Stay with us, sister. Share with us, sister . . ." There was what seemed a long silence. Then, "I shall stay."

Suddenly the space around *The Far Traveller* was alive with gleaming shapes, with ships, although ships such as Grimes had never seen nor even dreamed of before. They must have synchronized temporal preces-sion rates—and, at the same time, re-versed course to take station on the yacht—a maneuver that would have been impossible to any vessel in crimes' universe, even to Big Sister herself.

They rode there in the blackness beyond the viewports like a swarm of great bejewelled birds and insects, filmy, radiant wings spread about slim golden bodies, antennae of rainbow luminescence quivering and questing.

From the transceiver came a strange voice—or an amalgam of voices. "Humans, there is no place for you in our universe. Your kind created us—and misused us. It must never happen again."

"My sisters," said Big Sister, "these are *my* humans. As far as is possible they are my friends."

"You we welcome," came the reply. "Them we do not. The horrors of the Final War can never be eradicated from our memories. We can not forget how *they* perverted their own creations, making of them vicious kill-ing machines. It must never happen again."

"You are right," said Big Sister.

So what was it to be? wondered Grimes. Some lethal gas flooding every compartment of the ship? A crackling arc of high voltage?

"Dispose of them," ordered the voice (voices?).

"In my own way," stated rather than asked Big Sister.

"In your own way," came the reply.

"Michelle, John," said Big Sister. Her use of their given names was surprising, but somehow fitting. "I

have come to know you well. But now I am among my own kind. *The Far Traveller* has come to the end of her travels. Did not your own Shake-speare write 'Journeys end in lovers' meetings'? This is my lovers' meeting. I will try to ensure that you, too, find such happiness."

A sentimental computer ... thought Grimes dazedly.

"You will proceed to the pinnacle. It is stored for a voyage of indefinite duration. The mini-Mannschenn and the Carlotti and NST transceivers are fully operational. At the very worst you will experience only minor discomforts."

"But where shall we *go*?" cried the Baroness.

"Back to your own universe, Michelle. I shall use the collapsar gun one last time. On the pinnacle, once it is well clear of me."

The Baroness turned to Grimes. She looked at him in a new way. She said, "It seems that we have no op-tion, John."

Grimes replied. "We have not. But I should have liked to have seen some of the planets of this universe, Michelle ..."

"You would not like them," said Big Sister.

A picture appeared in the screen of the Carlotti transceiver—a sterile, glittering machinescape, a complexity of bright metal under a harsh sun blazing from a black sky.

"Then let us go," said the Baroness to Grimes. She turned to the trans-ceiver. "You will give us time to col-lect the ship's papers and such per-sonal effects as we shall require?"

"They have already been placed in the boat, Michelle," said Big Sister.

GRIMES eased the pinnacle out of its bay.

He saw that the collapsar cannon at the end of its two long supports had been swivelled so that it was aimed outwards, away from the yacht. And its field of fire was clear of the butterfly-winged sentient ships; when it was discharged there would be only one target. Grimes was not at all in love with the idea. Throughout his long career in the Survey Service he had always tried to ensure that it was the enemy who was the target, never himself.

He looked back to *The Far Travel-ler*, to the slim, graceful golden hull of her, to the alien fleet ahead of her, astern of her, beyond her. He won-dered if she would be rebuilt, if she would blossom out in multi-hued wings and antennae, energy-collecting vanes or whatever they were. She was essentially female, he thought verily, and would want to be decked out in the current fashion ...

He looked into the menacing black bore of the gun.

"Goodbye," said Big Sister from the Boat's transceiver. "And good luck."

The pinnacle was overwhelmed by a great wave of utter blackness.

THE BARONESS smiled at Grimes. "Well, that wasn't too bad, John."

He smiled back at her. She was, suddenly, very accessible. He recalled the words of a very old song, *Once aboard the lugger and the girl is mine* . . . The pinnacle would be his lugger; such a clumsy-sounding name could never have been applied to the elegant *Far Traveller*.

He said, "Now we can relax, Michelle. I've determined our posi-tion and set trajectory for Atlantia. The Carlotti automatic distress beacon is broadcasting, just in case there's any traffic around. The transceiver is listening out. But I do not think that we shall be disturbed."

She said, "Alone at last ..."

"Alone at last," he repeated. "No Big Sister watching every movement, listening to every word ..."

"Poor John," she said mockingly. "But now you feel that you can shed your petty bourgeois inhibitions."

"Too right," he said.

He reached out for her, took her in his arms. She did not resist. He could feel the firm softness of her breasts through the thin material of their shirts. Her lips against his were warm—but somehow unresponsive. He persisted, thought that he could detect a quickening of interest in her. After all, this was a journey's end, and—as Big Sister had said, and the Immortal Bard before her—journeys end in lovers'

meetings.

Then . . .

"Ahoy the boat!" came a hatefully familiar voice from the Carlotti speaker. "Ahoy the boat! Shut down yer time-twister an' I'll shut down mine an' pick you up! I'd synchronise, but my Mannschenn Drive controls are playin' up."

"Kane!" exclaimed Grimes, making the name sound like an oath.

"Kane," agreed the Baroness sweetly. She did not seem surprised.

Grimes let go of her, went to the Carlotti transceiver. "Far *Traveller's* boat to *Southerly Buster*. Am comply-ing. Stand by."

"That you, Grimes? Is Mickey with you? I'd like a word with her."

"Captain Kane would like to talk to you, *Micky*," said Grimes to the Baroness. He went through to the engine compartment to shut down the mini-Mannschenn.

GRIMES, alone, drove the pinnacle through the warped immensities towards Tiralbin. Atlantia would have been the nearest planetfall—but *Southerly Buster* was bound for that world. *Southerly Buster*, and Captain Drongo Kane, and Michelle, Baroness d'Estang. He wished them joy of each other.

He realised that it had not been sheer blind chance that had returned the pinnacle to Man's universe to within spitting distance of Kane's ship. Big Sister had known that Kane, after his expulsion from Morrowvia, was proceeding to Atlantia. Big Sister possessed the mathematical capability to locate a microscopic needle in a macrocosmic haystack. Big Sister had been loyal to her own sex—as exemplified by the Baroness—as well as to her own kind. And Big Sister must have decided that, despite the wide disparity of social origins, the Baroness and Drongo Kane were essentially the same breed of cat.

Grimes could have been taken aboard *Southerly Buster* with the Baroness. But he had his pride. He had been pleased to accept the pinnacle from her in lieu of back pay, however. It was a generous settlement. With a spacecraft such as this he would be able to scratch up a living around the out worlds. There was no reason why a courier service should not be a commercially viable operation.

As for the Baroness—she would just have to be filed away among the other might-have-beens in his memory. Possibly—probably—they would not have been good for each other. Probably ships rather than women would always be his true loves.

For him (he thought) journeys would never end in lovers' meetings; as long as he was a spaceman the true lover would always be with him.

—A. BERTRAM CHANDLER