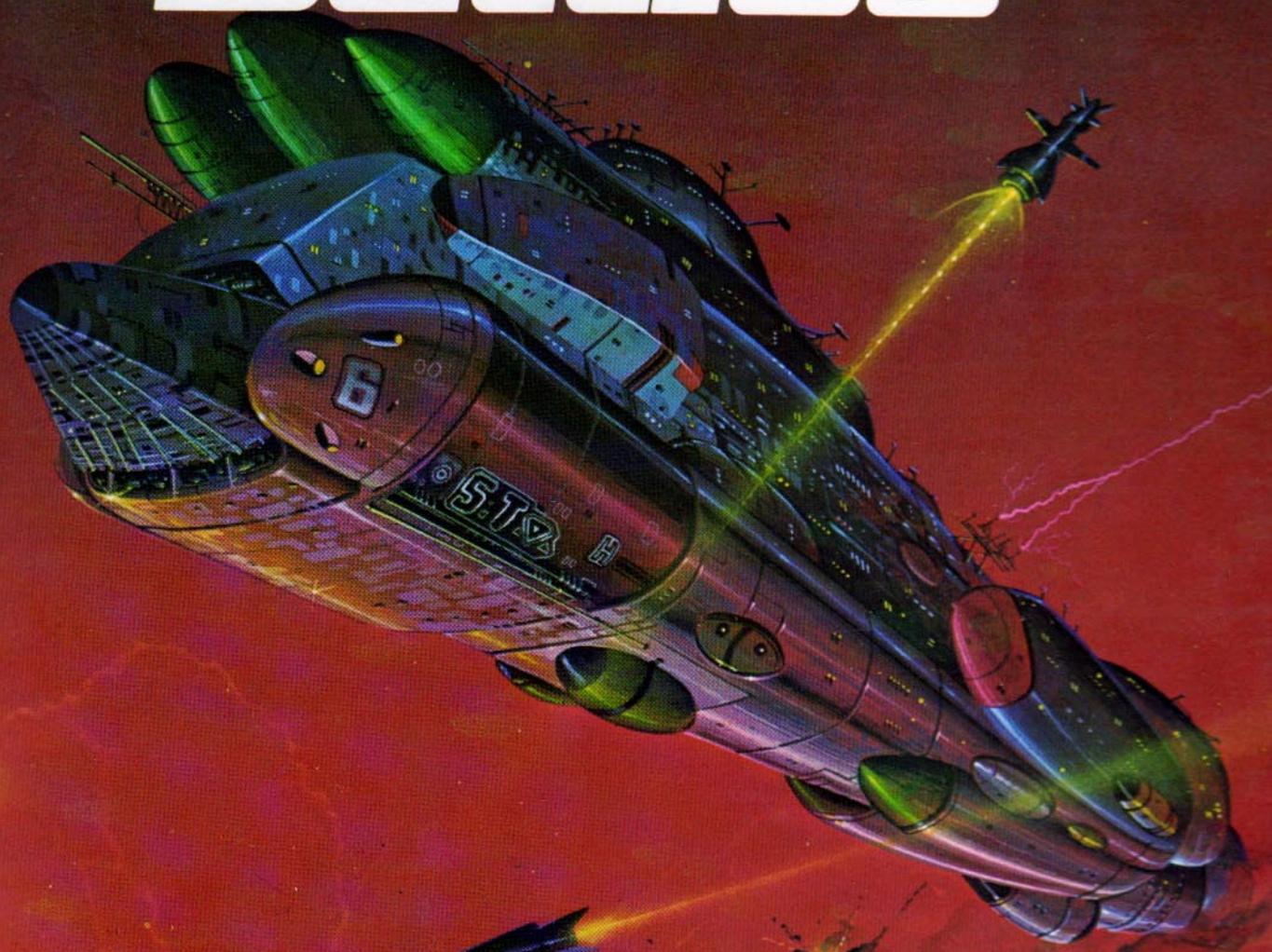


TERRAN TRADE AUTHORITY HANDBOOK

Great Space Battles



Stewart Cowley and Charles Herridge

Great Space Battles

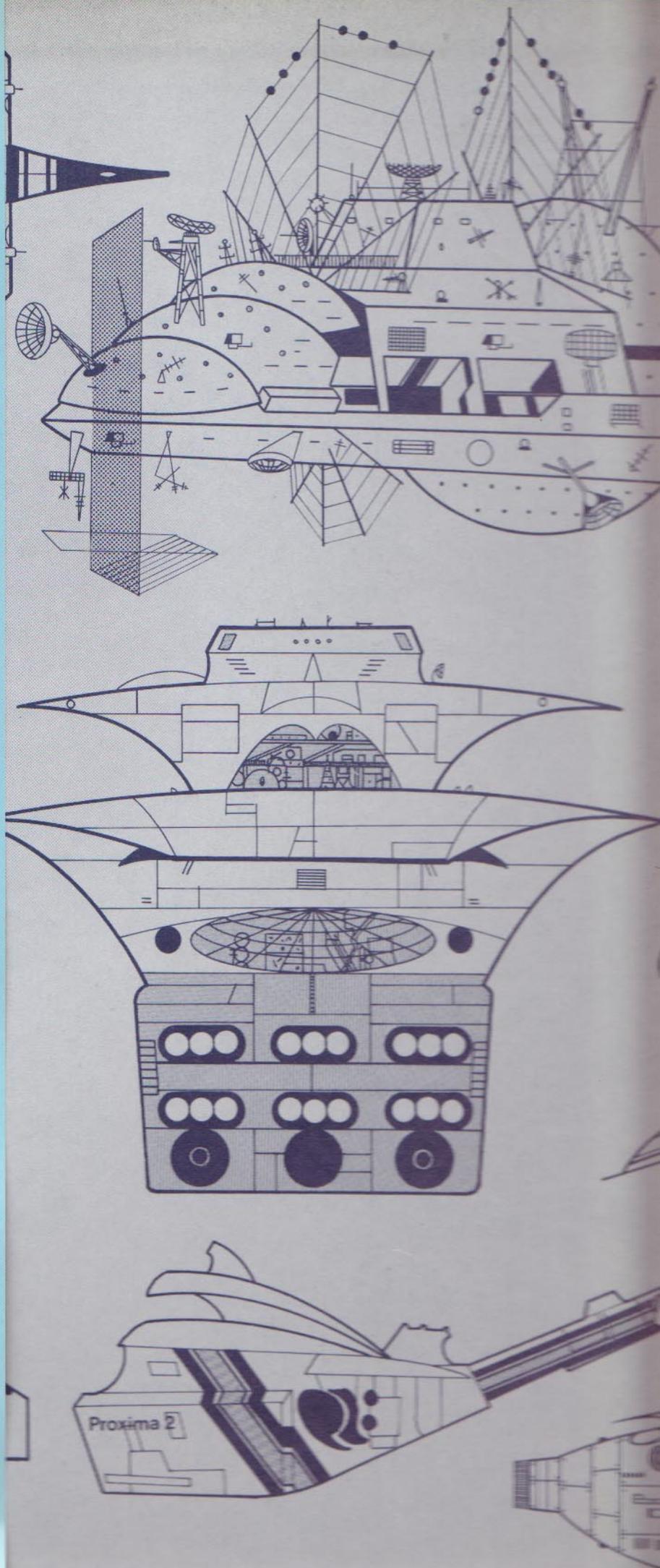
Our freedom to travel without hindrance among the stars has been won by the determination of those prepared to face the many obstacles. Man's evolutionary progress has been marked by his battles against his surroundings and his own wayward nature. The conquest of space has proved no exception.

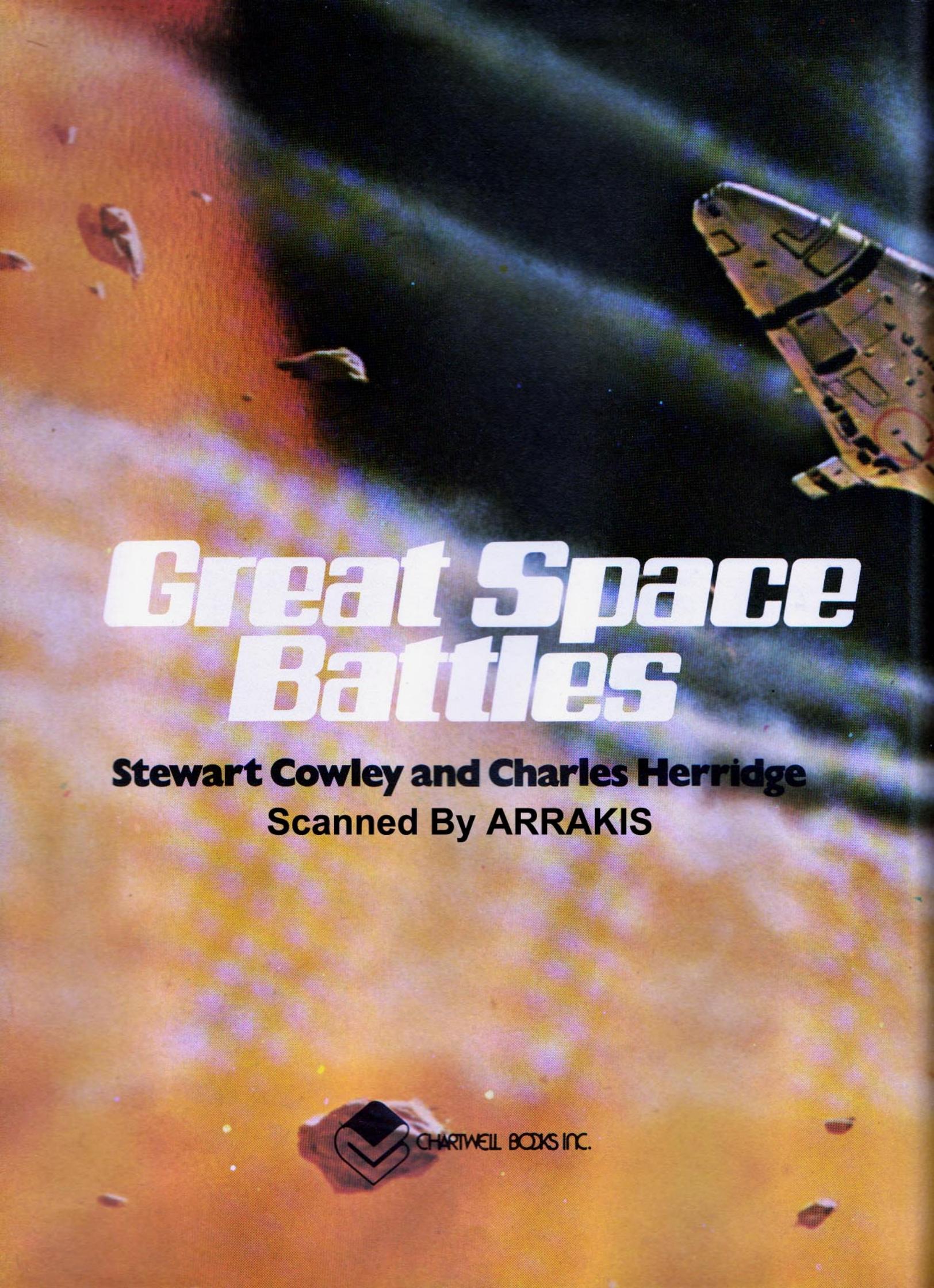
Great Space Battles records in detail the many and various struggles for survival which have taken place in the darkness surrounding the homeworlds of the Terran Federation. The greatest and most awesome of these were the Laguna Wars, a titanic confrontation between two powerful and aggressive races whose very existence was at stake. This book charts the course of the war: the assault against Laguna 9, the fierce counterattack, the desperate defence of Earth against the great city-ships and the final, unexpected victory.

But military supremacy was not the only objective for which men fought and died. The struggle of colonists against the hostile environments of distant worlds is also vividly recreated here, as are the battles of the forces of law against its transgressors, the Great Rebellion when Earthman fought Earthman for control of the Federation itself, and the fight to destroy the grim pirates of Capella.

These and other adventures described in *Great Space Battles* chart the stormy progress of the Federation as its influence extended deeper into the Galaxy, and serve as epitaphs for the men who paved the way to the stars.

Front illustration — Angus Mckie



A dramatic space launch scene with a shuttle ascending on the right, leaving a massive plume of orange and white smoke and fire. The background is a dark, starry space.

Great Space Battles

Stewart Cowley and Charles Herridge
Scanned By ARRAKIS





To Carol
for her forebearance

Title page illustration by Peter Elson

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The Terran Trade Authority

The TTA, formerly the World Trade Authority, was founded in 1999 AD as a subsidiary of the World Council, and charged with the task of administering global trading. Four years later the Commercial Technology Division of the World Community Research Council, together with its extensive manufacturing complex, was absorbed into the corporate structure.

During the long years of the Proxima Wars, the TTA was made responsible for military ordnance and manufacturing, most of which was accomplished through their own facilities. Following the formation of the Terran Federation in 2070 AD, the Authority became the central administrative body of the Federation as well as the main federal manufacturing center.

Subsidiary Offices and Institutions

The Federal Law Enforcement Authority. The Institute of Astronautics. The Institute of Medical Sciences. Interstellar Trade Directory and Data Control. Public Office of Information. The Research Council. The Settlement Welfare Service. Traffic Control and Customs.

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Introduction

The conquest of space was never an easy undertaking and Mother Earth, as though reluctant to let her children escape her influence, placed obstacles in the way which made the enterprise a difficult and costly one. The very force which retained the atmospheric envelope upon which life depended, also formed a barrier requiring enormous energy to penetrate. Beyond this lay an inconceivable vastness entirely antagonistic to our life-form, forcing Man to rely on the efficiency of machines to recreate on a tiny scale, those conditions vital to his survival.

Despite these deterrents, Man gradually edged his way into space: first to Earth's lunar companion, then to Mars and its own moons – Phobos and Deimos – turning their lonely desolation to his own ends. Industry developed there and they became home for thousands, an increasing number of whom had never set foot on the planet which would always remain their spiritual birthplace. As the years passed the expansion accelerated and the men of Terra travelled and worked throughout the Solar System in machines that were increasingly efficient. But peril was ever-present and the smallest error or frailty could end in disaster.

During these early years the dangers faced were all a direct result of the uncompromising nature of space itself, but the discovery that we were not alone in the Galaxy led to further problems and penalties. Our encounter with the inhabited systems of Alpha and Proxima Centauri – our nearest stellar neighbors – led eventually to the awful devastation of the Proxima Wars. The actual course of this prolonged and desperate struggle

has been recorded elsewhere and is outside the scope of this book, but the impetus it gave to the evolution of spaceflight was immeasurable, offering Man a freedom of movement among the stars which had been inconceivable a generation earlier.

By the end of the twenty-first century the first of many settler ships were carrying the pioneers of the Terran Federation to found colonies on the new worlds explored by the survey ships of the Terran Trade Authority. Man was rapidly becoming a truly interstellar being, seeding himself among the stars and filling the black vacuum with his ships. As the web of his trade routes expanded and his restlessness pushed ships deeper into the Galaxy, so the inevitability of further contact with other sentient beings increased – and with it the risk of further clashes between alien cultures.

The design and development of military craft that had begun in earnest with the Proxima Wars was continued as a result, both to support the advance into distant systems and to defend the Federation when the time arose. Battle fleets were maintained and renewed as technology advanced providing the means to construct ever more efficient, ever more deadly ships. But a huge war machine cannot be kept in peak readiness forever when there is no enemy to threaten the steady and remorseless march of colonial expansion. Imperceptibly, efficiency and precision are eroded, and caution is replaced by complacency. As had been anticipated, other inhabited systems were found but in every case where the occupants demonstrated intelligence, their levels of development were always inferior to that represented by the Terran Federation and served to reinforce the growing ambition

and arrogance of its leaders.

As often happens in this kind of situation, fate intervened and disaster struck in the form of the unexpected and catastrophic war with the Laguna system. The Terran Federation found itself confronted by a powerful and determined adversary with weapons at its disposal which threatened the very existence of the sprawling giant which had grown from one planet circling an insignificant yellow star near the outer edge of the Galaxy.

The story of this epic struggle between two alien and proud civilizations with immense power at their command and the survival of their species as the goal represents the greater part of this book. Each of the crucial stages in this battle of the Titans and the events which shaped them are described here. Earth and the Terran Federation came closer to extinction than at any other time in its history and the battles that took place in the dark and silent wastes of space were fought with a ferocity that only sheer desperation can bring about.

But although the war with Laguna must inevitably occupy the greater part of any history of Man's battles with the unknown, this period saw many smaller conflicts and confrontations of individual significance. The trials and tribulations of colonization have challenged the determination and ingenuity of men throughout history, but the struggle to survive in strange and often hostile surroundings has never been more terrible than on virgin worlds deep in space. The horror faced by the settlers of Drakon's Folly was by no means unique in its nightmare quality, and is therefore representative of the hardships suffered in dozens of isolated solar systems around the perimeter of known space.

Similarly, the fight of order and justice against chaos and

rebellion is a story as old as Man himself and his exodus to the stars only broadened the battleground. In a civilization as dispersed as that of the Federation, the enforcement of law required a special breed of men to police settlements light years from anywhere and maintain the security of the spacelanes and trade routes. Too often their lonely vigils and deadly skirmishes with pirates and villains went unrecorded. The accounts included here are not isolated incidents but are part of an unceasing war, and for every hero returning triumphant there are many whose bodies spin like bizarre meteorites through the emptiness.

The maintenance of order in an interstellar civilization requires a degree of control which to many is in itself undesirable, and the nearer one approaches the administrative center of such a society, the more rigid its constraints. It was inevitable that one day someone would attempt to overthrow the leaders of the Federation and suitable contingency plans were constantly under review. But when that day came the reactions so carefully formulated proved almost entirely inadequate.

Here then is a record of some of the most significant battles fought in the history of Earthmen, covering a broad spectrum of human conflict and passions. The same qualities of enterprise and endeavour, courage and determination that both pushed Man into a new era and created some of his greatest obstacles are all to be found in this record of Great Space Battles.

Part One – The Laguna Wars

The Nightmare Begins

When the giant Colonial VIII ship *Venturer* lifted off from Miami in May 2219 its occupants and Terra Control looked forward to an uneventful though long voyage. The crew settled in for the seven months of unvarying routine that lay before them – 24 hours a day for 200 days, with only meaningless, imprisoned rest days to dent the monotony. Laguna 9, their destination, promised the 400-odd colonists aboard a safe, though necessarily hard start as its first inhabitants. The survey carried out some months earlier, though brief, had established that gravitational, climatic and atmospheric conditions would not prove themselves beyond adaptation by modern technology, while the constituent elements of the planet's surface contained minerals sufficiently valuable on Terra to justify their exploitation. As for life, the survey teams had detected no signs other than of rudimentary plant formations.

As the days and weeks passed, the daily transmissions received from the ship indicated nothing unusual: a temporary breakdown of the water condensers, soon repaired; two uncomplicated pregnancies among colonists; a death. Two days before going into pre-setdown orbit, in the middle of the lengthy preparations for arrival, something rather more unusual happened. In the middle of an otherwise uneventful watch the 3rd officer received a report of a major flight computer malfunction – all computer-controlled guidance functions then abruptly shut down.

Before the officer of the watch had had time to grasp the implications of this, or even summon the commander from his quarters, the systems had started to function normally again. The shutdown had lasted perhaps 20 seconds. Repair crews and fault analysis systems were unable to identify any damage and the incident went down in the commander's log as a presumed freak external electronic disturbance.

As the moment of setdown approached, and with the complexities of the manoeuvres to bring the ship into orbit, the incident, though not forgotten, assumed smaller proportions; as the ship settled on to its pads and the thunderous roar of the engines died, it was forgotten. In the control center gyros whined down as switches were thrown, instrument displays flickered out, and the soothing hum of the air system emerged again from the jumble of sounds that had masked it for months past. Then came the hissing of the airlocks and the unfamiliar throbbing of the motors swinging out the exit chutes.

As the settlers gathered beneath the ship in their pressure suits, preparing to receive the machinery that would provide them with air to breathe and water to drink, only two crew members remained in the control center, one on duty at the monitor screens, the other an engineer engaged in routine pre-lift-off checks. Both, at the same time, realized that certain systems were malfunctioning again.

A Colonial VIII similar to the ill-fated *Venturer*, seen here fending off raiders from the Capella system. No pictorial record of the *Venturer* remains.



The symptoms were the same as had shown themselves a few days earlier, but this time an object was visible on the scanner screens. The two men left the computer to shift into its fault analysis programmes and concentrated on the screens, switching from one magnification scale to another in an attempt to gain the best identification. It was definitely a ship, of medium size, approaching rapidly through the planet's atmosphere.

Turning for a moment to the fault analysis checks printing out on another screen, the engineer realized that, as the unidentified ship drew nearer, the malfunction, previously erratic and intermittent, was now complete. Shutting down the affected systems, which controlled the ship's guidance and attitude functions that he had been testing prior to departure, he instructed the computer to scan its spacecraft recognition reference in search of a positive identification, and summoned the commander.

The foregoing is a statement of events recorded on the ship's taped log and function recorder, both duplicated at Terra Control. Even now, little more is known of the fate of *Venturer* or its passengers and crew as they stood helpless on the surface of Laguna 9. There only remains the last recorded message of the commander as he arrived in the control center: 'Preliminary I.D. query pirate . . . no . . . correction . . . a fleet . . . maybe eight ships . . . query the pirate fleet operating around Verkanska group last year . . . no . . . correction . . . unidentified . . . too late . . . under attack. . . .' The end of this message coincided with the automatic switching in of *Venturer's* S.O.S. system, which itself cut out after a few moments. This meant that the entire ship had been destroyed.

This event, intruding suddenly after nearly two centuries of peaceful or unresisted colonization, created little more than a ripple in the stream of sluggish complacency that had flowed throughout the Terran Federation's domains for so long. Since the winning of the Proxima Wars, nothing had stood in the way of Terra's ambitions – and this massacre, involving the deaths of a

mere 400 Terrans, did little to shake the ingrown feelings of confident supremacy: a fly's footsteps on the arm of a dozing giant.

Nevertheless, within hours the Terran Defence Authority's War Group was in session, and a short while later a decision, lightly taken yet momentous in its consequences, emerged. The Massed Fleets exercises, scheduled to commence in three days, were replanned. Fourth and Seventh Fleets would gather off Laguna 9 and carry out a search-and-destroy exercise. The Fourth Fleet, based on Petersen 3, could be at the rendezvous in 15 days, and the Seventh could join it two days later. The remaining fleets would participate in an invasion exercise on Proxima Centauri.

Thus was the ground laid for the disastrous conflict known as the Laguna Wars: without an inkling of what was to come and, as has so often happened in mankind's history, without preparation.

Forty-eight hours later the two mighty fleets, a magnificent and costly spectacle, thundered off their launchpads, 82 craft in all, as majestic in their assembly as the ancient maritime fleets of five centuries before, and many bearing the names of their illustrious naval forebears. Combined, the fleets included the massive battleships *Missouri*, *Repulse*, *Bismarck*, *Temeraire* and *Lenin*, with seven others; eight Space-Interceptor Carriers; eight Atmo-Interceptor Carriers; and assorted troop-carriers, supply ships, repair craft and Ground-Attack Craft.

Settling down to the speed of their lowliest and most ungainly vessels, the fleets set course for the rendezvous off Laguna 9. A sense of excitement pervaded the crews; at last there might be a real enemy, while in the Flagship's wardroom the commander-in-chief held a reception for the captains under his command. For four hours launches wove fiery trails around the fleets as the guests arrived and departed.

As the now renamed First Battle Fleet approached the fringes of the Laguna Group, patrols were sent out to reconnoitre the planets surrounding Laguna 9, with instructions to report any activity

A Terran scout car equipped with detection gear, light laser armament and sand tyres, which is all that remains on Laguna 9 of the *Venturer's* cargo.



and subsequently rendezvous with the Fleet off Laguna 9. On arrival at the rendezvous a final video briefing was held. The principal assault force, under Marshal Keyes, would descend to the site of the *Venturer* massacre, while smaller detachments were organized into a search pattern that would cover the entire surface of the planet. Atmo-Interceptor Carriers were to remain in orbit at equal intervals from each other to provide the maximum cover, and a second major assault force, under Marshal Fodor, would stand off the *Venturer* site in readiness to close in

A Terran Atmo-Interceptor returning to its mother ship, one of the large contingent that fought under Marshal Keyes in the tragic first battle off Laguna 9.

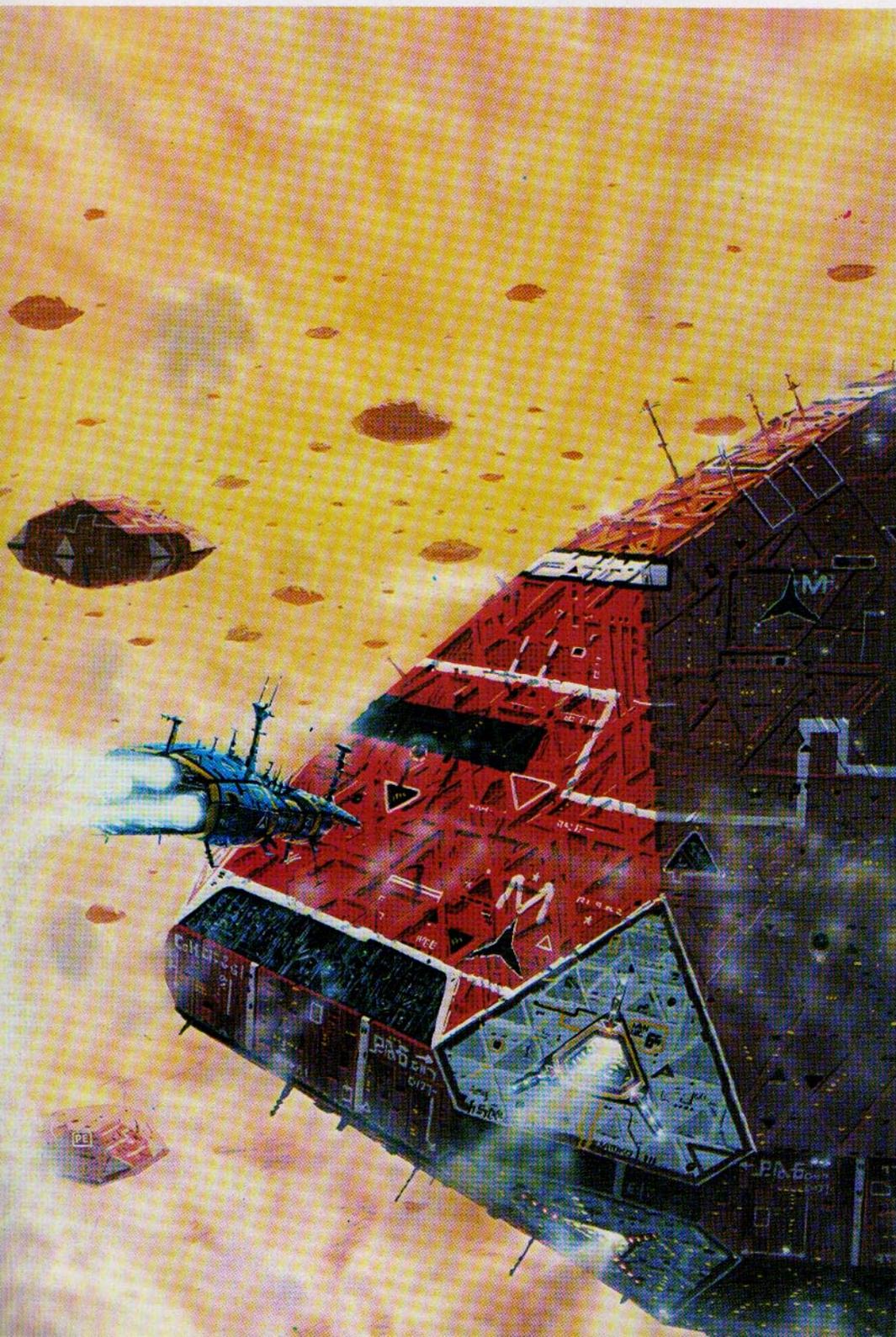
at a moment's notice. In the meantime a Space-Interceptor Carrier supported by four Ground-Attack Craft was detailed to take up station off Laguna 7, following an ill-defined patrol report of activity on that planet.

As the Commander-in-Chief's face faded from the screens a brief hush fell. For all of the men under his command, this was to be the first military engagement, a far cry from the piecemeal policing activities of the past two centuries. After years of drilling and exercising to stave off the awful inactivity of armed forces in peacetime, they were confronted with their first fight. Yet, of course, the lack of a real challenge had produced a steady if imperceptible decline in their state of readiness and their standard of proficiency. If any of them was aware of this, however, he could perhaps find comfort in the visible strength, the sheer overpowering weight, of this great fleet.

For the two hours that followed the commander-in-chief's message, there was a complete intership communication blackout as the infinitely delicate sensor systems probed and tested for signs of activity on the surface of Laguna 9 and in its atmosphere. Computers sifted, sorted, clicked, whirred and printed. Negative, negative, negative, each screen repeated time and again. Negative sound, negative movement, negative living matter, negative electronic activity, negative nuclear activity, negative, negative, negative . . . Finally the two hours dragged to a close: there didn't seem much point in waiting any longer.

The Interceptor Carriers dropped one by one into orbit, the Laguna 7 detachment turned and blasted away, the search groups peeled off down into the murky atmosphere and then, at a given signal, the first assault force began its descent to the *Venturer* site. Aboard the battleship *Repulse*, Marshal Keyes led his force into growing gloom as they dropped silently through the thick atmosphere of the waiting planet, locked into rigid formation by a tracery of laser beams. Negative reports were already coming through from the search ships as they crisscrossed the surface of the planet when suddenly

PETER ELSON





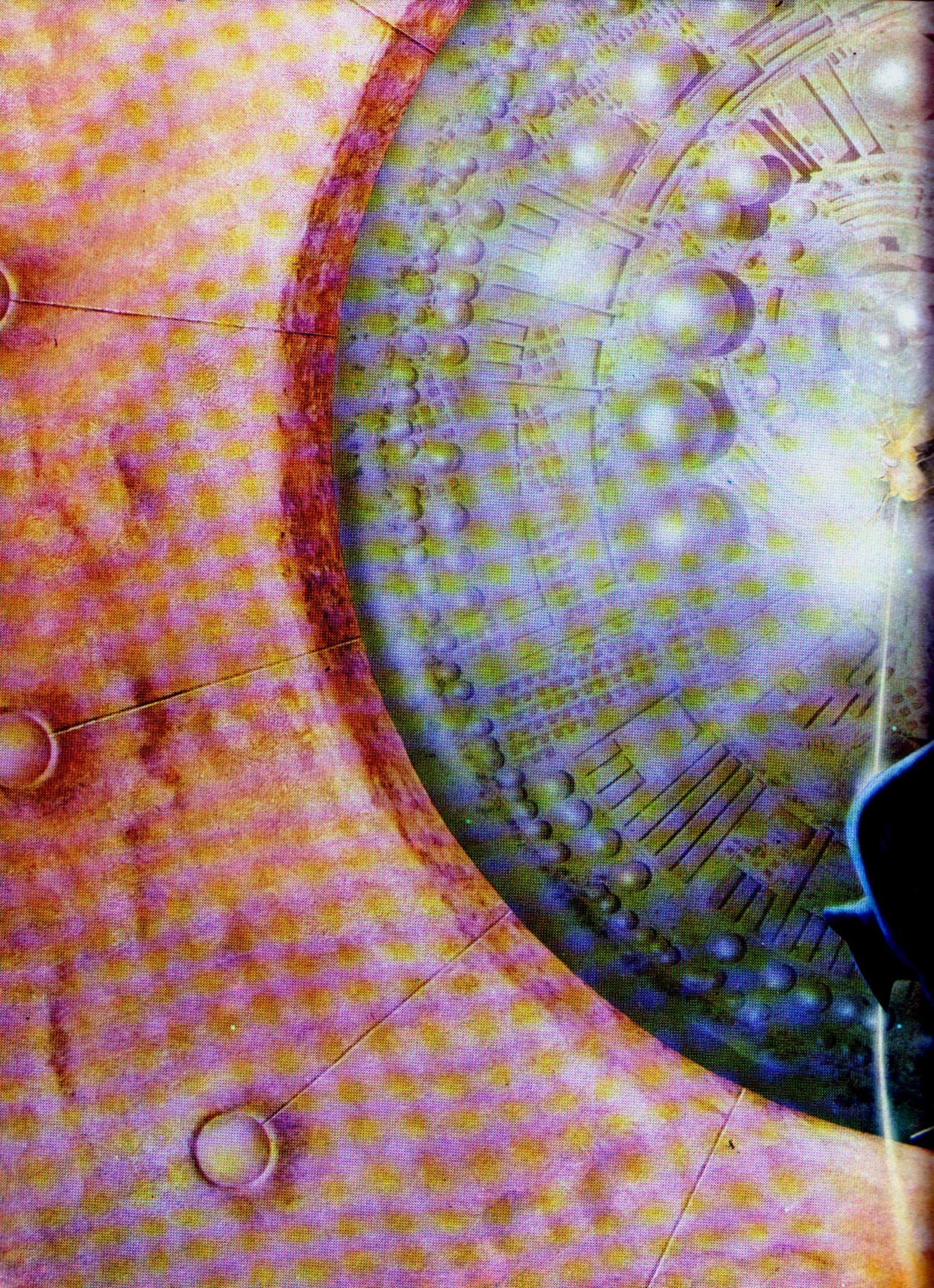
the assault force formation began to break up.

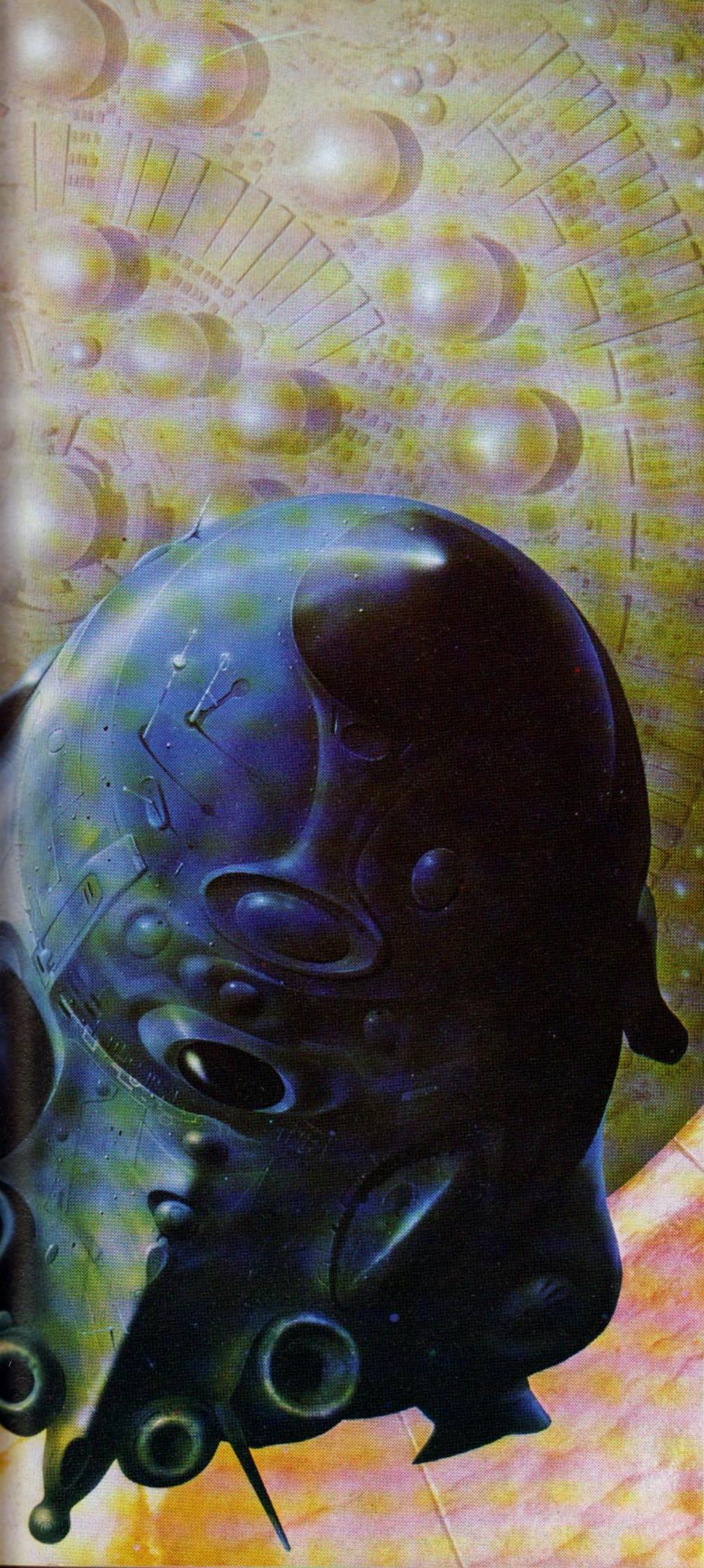
Formation and guidance systems aboard all ships had inexplicably failed. Secondary systems were hurriedly switched in – but without avail. By now the troop-carrier *Remus* had collided with the Ground-Attack Craft *Achilles*. For a frozen instant both remained locked together, then *Achilles* exploded, blasting *Remus* bodily sideways before she fell helplessly towards the surface, turning over and over like a leaf. The blast hit the other ships as their crews struggled to gain manual control of their craft, and further collisions resulted.

In the midst of the chaos, the Chief Scanner Officer aboard *Repulse* reported the sighting of a small fleet of unidentified craft approaching rapidly. As the remaining ships began to respond to manual control and emerge from the wreckage-littered mess of 30 seconds before, the strange fleet opened fire with laser weapons. Commander Keyes gave the order for the fire to be returned, but when the central switch controlling the armaments of the entire force was thrown, all hell broke loose.

The ships' powerful defence force fields had been capable of withstanding the enemy's initial

The ground-attack craft *Achilles* (foreground) at the moment of collision with the troop-carrier *Remus*. This tragic event resulted from the first – and at that time unexplained – guidance systems failure aboard every vessel in Marshal Keyes' fleet.





attack, but force fields have a point at which they cannot be regenerated fast enough to deflect all assaults, and when Marshal Keyes' force opened fire this condition was reached in seconds, for their fire went completely wild.

The *Repulse* sustained multiple hits from her sister ship *Redoubtable*, in turn battered by the missile cruiser *Motumbi*. After a moment of sheer panic, with his ship maimed and spiralling downwards, Keyes realized that the weapon aiming systems had gone the same way as the guidance and formation systems. The assault force's firepower was out of control.

Too late, the weapons systems were shut down, but enemy fire was still taking its toll. Keyes called in Atmo-Interceptors from the waiting carriers, and the second assault force moved into action, but within moments the reinforcing craft were careering wildly out of control. Some collided, others hurtled devastatingly into the surface of Laguna 9, others raced spacewards, and yet others bore on into the midst of Keyes' assault force, spreading terrible destruction.

As commanders fought to regain control of their ships, as men screamed, burned, struggled, died, as damaged ships reeled, exploded, or accelerated helplessly downwards, the enemy fleet slipped quietly away.

Keyes and Fodor, after a brief exchange, ordered their forces to retire. As a tug descended to take the crippled *Repulse* in tow, the dazed survivors guided their craft away from Laguna 9 back towards the haven of Petersen 3. Sixty-two interceptors had been destroyed, as had 18 of the 40 craft in the two assault forces, yet the orbiting carriers and the search details had emerged without damage. Of all classes of ship, the battleships had come off worst; fast, yet huge and unwieldy, they had proved the most difficult to bring under control and, because of their size, the most vulnerable to enemy fire.

One of the Lagunan high command escaping from the subterranean inferno of a command post hit by stray Terran vesta-beam fire. A new weapon of limited availability, the vesta-beam was a heat-generating hyperwave device.

The Forgotten Fleet

Even as the shattered fleet limped back towards base, the TDA War Group was once again in session. The tables had been turned on Terra. An apparently small force had succeeded in completely disabling the Terran Fleet and had sent it home defeated. Now Terra faced the possibility that the enemy would pursue its attack to Terra itself. In such a situation it would have been normal to launch forces that would confine the enemy to his territory or at least keep him at bay on the fringes of the Terran Federation, but in this case no one could be certain that any new Terran force would not be disabled on approach in the same way as the Fourth and Seventh Fleets had been.

Scientists and weapons experts studied the reports coming in from the homebound fleet. All told the same story – there was no clue as to the precise nature of the force or beam that had presumably penetrated the ships' defence shields and the computers' own force fields. All that was known was that it had simultaneously and indiscriminately done so, though only at close range, the latter proved by the fact that the orbiting Interceptor Carriers and the widely-spread search craft had emerged unscathed.

The conclusion was inevitable: any craft that were to confront the Laguna forces must be capable of being manually controlled. Only computerized control systems had been affected, not motive systems – thus there was power for all a ship's

functions and the simpler, localized electronic and automatic devices were untouched. There remained the problem of the main control systems, governing guidance, attitude and armament. Most ships were equipped with emergency manual controls for all three functions, but these were crude and limited, designed for temporary use in desperate circumstances and not for the precise ordering of long voyages or the tactical pursuit of a campaign. It would be suicidal to meet the enemy on this handicapped basis.

As the War Group's session wore on, animated discussion of the fleet's reports gave way to the sombre realization of Terra's plight. Only one man at the massive, sculptured ebony table nursed the germ of an idea. Commander Bernd Gerling, the junior member of the Group in years, rank and service, had won a place on it through his inspired handling of the crisis on Proxima Centauri two years earlier when, through creative improvisation, he had prevented the destruction of the Terran fleet based there. Routine inspection had revealed that the recently renewed warheads aboard the fleet's eight missile ships were unstable and that they had entered a cycle of nuclear activity that would culminate within eight hours in their explosion. Nothing could be done to reverse or halt the cycle, and the indiscriminate launching of the missiles would probably result in the destruction of unsuspecting ships in space or even of nearby planets.

Gerling had acted instantly. Within moments tugs had attached hawsers to a half-built supply ship lying in the Proxima yards and were hauling it spacewards as fast as they could go. Casting off two hours later, they grouped and sped for shelter while Gerling prepared for the firing of the faulty missiles. As they smashed harmlessly into the supply ship's drifting hulk moments later, a cheer went up at Proxima Control, echoed on Terra.

Now, still awed by the abundance of rank seated around him at what was only his second War Group meeting, Gerling wondered how he could present his idea without attracting the derision of his seniors. Shifting restlessly in his chair, he sought to attract the attention of the Chairman. Then those famous heavy-lidded oriental eyes were on him, and he was being invited to speak. A hush fell as the Group's members recognized a hint of hope in what he was saying. Silent among the tiny planets of the Braun formation lay the warships of preceding Terran generations, like the ghosts of previous centuries. Watched over by a small garrison, they hung lifeless on their moorings year after year, vainly awaiting the call to arms but more

The ageing Terran battleship *Umberto* emerges from a service hangar on a planet in the Braun group. Pressed back into service after ten years in the mothball fleet, the *Umberto* was later rammed by a Lagunan city-ship and exploded, killing all aboard.



likely in due course to join one of the batches annually dismantled.

In this graveyard, Gerling went on, there were hundreds of craft actually designed and constructed for manual control. They were not wrecks, only obsolete and decommissioned. They underwent an annual maintenance. Dare he suggest, he asked, that the Group consider the possibility of putting some of them back into service? And as to crews, surely there were reservists, perhaps a little grizzled now, who could be recalled from the nearer parts of the Empire to man them?

By now feeling rather alone and completely unnerved, Gerling abruptly stopped. Someone laughed, others leaned back in their chairs and gazed at the ceiling, yet others talked urgently with their neighbors, occasionally glancing in Gerling's direction. He began to feel as if he had made an improper suggestion. Then the Chairman smiled at him and called the meeting to order. Hours later the plan was complete. Gerling, being still on active service, would lead the mothball fleet against Laguna 9, and would be in charge of the selection and preparation of ships and crews. His fleet would include such already-operational craft as could be modified in time for manual control – a deadline of 30 days was set. In the meantime an intensive programme of reconnaissance and patrol missions would commence, aimed firstly at monitoring activity on Laguna 9 and its neighbors, and secondly at searching out the base of Laguna 9's spacecraft operations.

While the first veteran craft were assembling on Terra and the reservists were beginning their training, reports came in that provided the first clue to the Laguna mystery. One patrol, descending in error closer to the surface than intended, had reported sighting a fissure in the planet's surface. Such a sighting would not have seemed significant had the fissure not closed

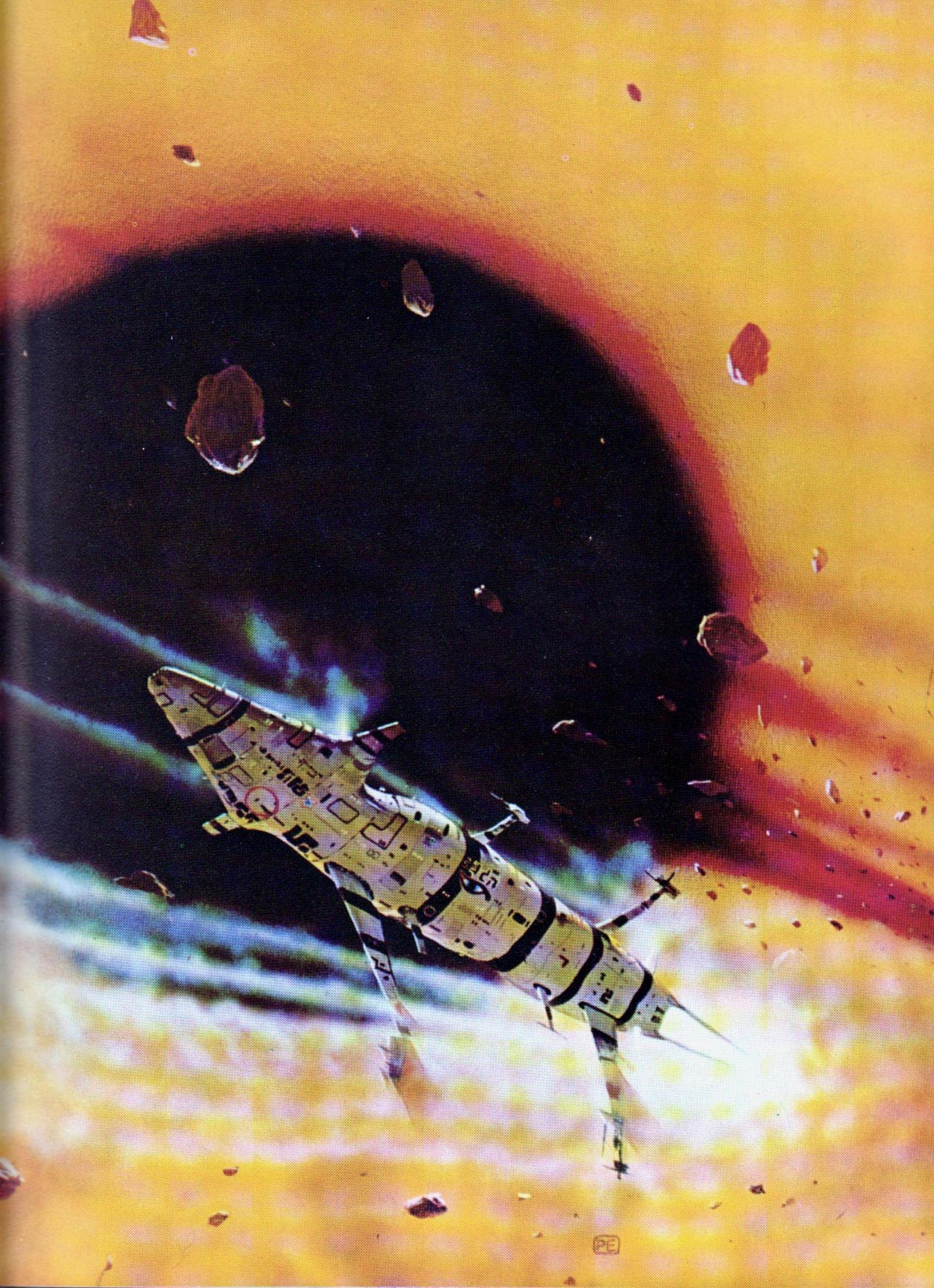
Gerling's command vessel, sole surviving example of the famous and highly successful LG 223 Starraker-class light gunship. This one was 70 years old when returned to active service.

within seconds, leaving no sign of its prior existence.

A second patrol assigned to follow up this first observation was attacked and returned depleted and without further information, but by devising a scheme involving decoy patrols the TDA was able to get a third patrol closer to the site of the fissure than before. On arrival the patrol found the fissure open; sufficiently open in fact for dim outlines to be visible beneath the surface. Pictures relayed back to Terra verified the suspicions aroused by the first patrol's report. The fissure was created by the opening of huge camouflaged doors. Within lay constructions that might be either military installations or part of a center of habitation or city. Presumably the people of Laguna 9 had a good reason, perhaps a historic one, for camouflaging their existence and living beneath the surface of an apparently bare and lifeless planet – but of their physical nature, their numbers and their technology nothing was known, least of all what primitive hostile instincts had led the Lagunans (if it had been them) to destroy *Venturer* and massacre her colonist passengers without investigation or warning.

The presence of this opening and the fact that the second patrol had been attacked from another quarter while surveying it suggested the existence of other such openings, and caused the War Group to modify its plans. If the enemy were not a nomadic race that lived in craft constantly circling the planet, but were entrenched beneath its surface, a different range of craft would be required for the attack. Back to the Braun Group graveyards went Gerling's men for troop-carriers and surface-vehicle landing-craft.

Day and night they ranged through the lines of dead ships, climbing into their dark interiors and over their dully-glinting hulls, until the task was complete. Armoured freighters brought precious cargoes of nuclear piles from Terra to be plugged into the ships' power trains and engineers fussed to an fro as the ships came back to life, checking each system as it was switched in and finally, with the crossed fingers of ancient superstition, firing up the main drive.



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More than one ship exploded, others suffered internal fires as ancient circuitry protested, one tore loose from its moorings, drive controls jammed, and disappeared into deep space, taking with it the engineers' launches and fuel tenders lying alongside. But most of the ships came to heel, and two days ahead of the deadline the Laguna invasion force was complete. Dispersed around the military bases at Peking, Darwin, Tehran, Berlin and Chicago, its ranks included battleships, Interceptor-Carriers, Ground-Attack Craft, troop- and vehicle-carriers, surface-to-surface bombardment craft, and a detachment of special-purpose mobile signal analysis laboratories, the latter assigned partly to learn the secrets of Laguna's disorientation device but more importantly to give early warning of its use.

Though Gerling's assignment was clearly defined, he was to have a good deal of latitude in the conduct of the campaign. His brief was to take all necessary action to silence the Laguna threat and, once arrived at the scene, he would have four months to complete the task before a return to Terra for refuelling or alternatively fuel convoys from Terra would become necessary.

For Gerling personally, the preparation had been arduous, including as it did retraining to adapt his thinking to the obsolete technology of the craft under his command. Responses and decisions usually made by computer would have to be made by him and his commanders. More problematic still, major tactical decisions, previously put into actuality by central control from the flagship, would have to be

relayed to and executed by the commanders singly. In this lay the Invasion Force's weakness, for the process of personally relayed command and the subsequent execution of that command naturally took longer than the computerized system of central control.

The business of assembling the fleet and recalling thousands of reservists had been too conspicuous to escape the attention of the news media, and for days before the launch, crowds, uncertain of its precise timing, had ringed the perimeter force fields of the bases. Right across Terra, from Peking to Chicago, Terrans cheered with one united voice as Gerling's ships took flight. First to leave were the fuel and supply ships, so heavily laden that tugs were needed to coax them off their launch pads and haul them up through the atmosphere against the colossal drag of gravity.

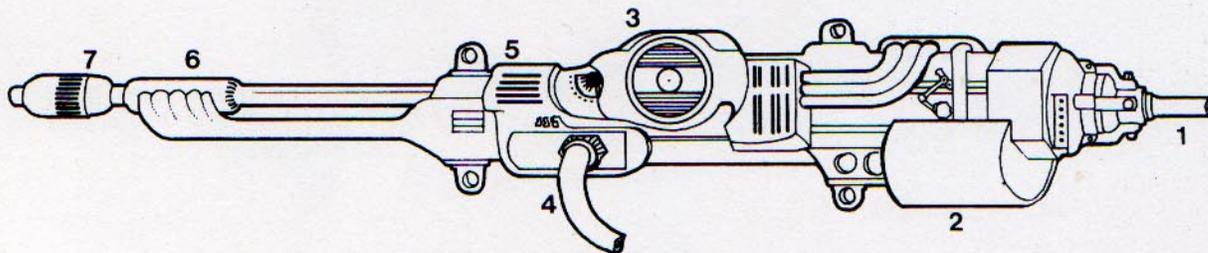
Last to lift off was Gerling's command vessel, a 70-year-old light gunship, tremendously fast but lightly armored, selected because of its agility in both space and atmosphere, and because its modest proportions would not give it away as the flagship. It represented the final development of the human-controlled ship, and Gerling's disappointment that no further examples had been found in the graveyards was intense.

As Gerling lifted off from Berlin, disaster struck. On the other side of the world the Darwin contingent, whose last ships were just emerging from Terra's gravitational pull, was suddenly attacked by a group of three unidentified interceptors, each differing in appearance from the next, which had lain concealed in a

mess of orbiting debris and had blasted into action as the first Darwin ships slid by. Spacecraft are always vulnerable during the moments between lift-off and emergence from atmosphere and gravity, but the period when they shut down the main drive, check their course and adjust with auxiliary drive is one when all operational crew-members are preoccupied, and it was at this juncture that the alien ships struck.

Two troop-carriers, an Interceptor-Carrier and four vulnerable gunships failed to survive the attack, while little fire was directed at the attackers. Aboard the accompanying signal-analysis laboratory, however, which clung magnetically to the side of a giant inter-galactic tug, the message came through loud and clear: the force being transmitted by the alien craft in addition to their nuclear-powered laser attack bore the same characteristics as had caused the near-destruction of Keyes' fleet off Laguna 9.

Within moments the intruding Laguna fighters had been blasted apart by massive salvos from a gunship squadron, but Terra reeled at the shock news of the Lagunans' proximity. Given a few more hours, perhaps Laguna forces would have threatened the Terran Empire's stronghold itself, for the presence of interceptors in Terra's orbit meant the presence of an Interceptor Carrier, and Interceptor Carriers invariably travel with escorts, and so on . . . As Gerling's Invasion Force cleared Terra's influence and set course for Laguna 9, Terran-based interceptor squadrons scrambled to comb near space for Lagunan craft.



Particle Acceleration Weapon
 1 Power Input. 2 Primary Accelerator. 3 Main Accelerator. 4 Control Input. 5 Pulse Feeder. 6 Linear Booster. 7 Focus Diaphragm.

The First Clash

Gerling's plan was fairly simple: Interceptor-Carriers would take up equidistant positions in orbit around Laguna 9, and detachments of Ground-Attack Craft and surface bombardment craft would attack key identified sites simultaneously, with troop- and vehicle-carriers in support though hanging back. Gerling's main battle fleet would lie off Laguna 9 in readiness to support or reinforce as necessary. As the planet finally came into view morale was high – there was a sense of adventure in the air. Orders buzzed around the fleet as ships prepared for their appointed roles.

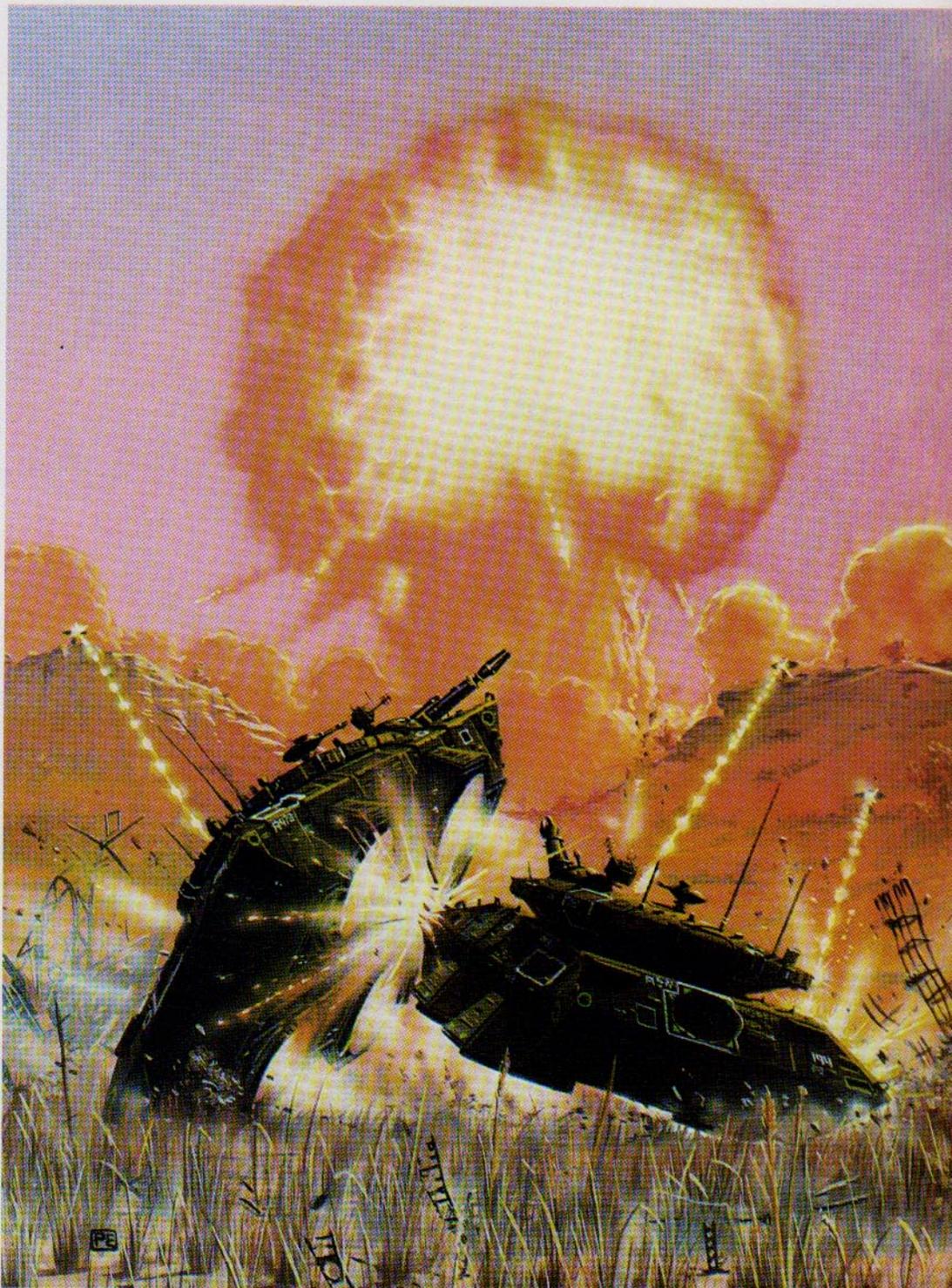
Just then, a massive swarm of craft were sighted, coming into view from the farther side of the planet. More and ever more curved out from behind Laguna's rim.

There was little time for preparation. Gerling ordered his more heavily-armed craft to the fore and flanks, covering the more vulnerable elements of the fleet, and gave the order to fire when the enemy was within range. Seconds ticked by as the hostile fleet drew closer. Gerling estimated it at over 200 strike craft.

As firing commenced, eyes strained for evidence of a hit, but the enemy craft raced inexorably

Terran armoured hovertanks collide during the desperate action around the entrance to the Lagunan underground bases. This collision, like others in space and on the surface, was the result of the use of the Lagunan systems-disorientation device.

PETER ELSON



onwards, apparently unscathed, with detachments peeling off from left and right wings to attack the Terran force's flanks. Now they were at close range, yet the enemy had not opened fire. Meantime Gerling's ships were bringing every weapon to bear.

Then, simultaneously, a thousand minds grasped the same awful truth. They could see their laser beams and missiles passing straight through the enemy craft and continuing out the other side.

Too late, Gerling realised that his fleet was attacking a force of three-dimensional decoy projections. Urgently, over the communications systems, came the report of an attack on the rear of his fleet. A handful of craft was already exacting a severe toll of the supply and support vessels in the van of the force, while escorts wheeled desperately round to meet the attackers.

Wary now of his opponent's tactics, Gerling ordered reinforcements to the rear, while retaining as much strength at the fore and flanks as he could. While the battle raged behind them, scanners probed for signs of other activity: sure enough a further force was lifting off from the surface of Laguna 9. Gerling's mind was already made up: he must take the initiative and attack before his fleet was beleaguered on all sides.

Boldly, he ordered Interceptor-Carriers into orbit. Their interceptors were to give immediate support to the force of Ground-Attack Craft that he simultaneously ordered to attack the Lagunan bases, and the surface-bombardment craft that he had assigned to tear holes in Laguna's protective upper surface. The ground-attack detachments met the Lagunan reinforcements head on in Laguna's murky atmosphere; some losses were sustained but the main force bore on through, leaving its escorting interceptors to fight the battle they left behind.

Minutes later they were pouring missiles into the giant doors shielding the Laguna bases, while the bombardment craft settled on to the planet's surface to commence their terrible and inexorable barrage. As they did so, massive armored vehicles emerged on to the surface and, rolling towards them, began to

return their fire.

Gerling saw that his forces were now strung out to a dangerous degree. There was fighting at his rear, fighting ahead in the planet's atmosphere, and the beginnings of a pitched battle on the surface, while at any moment the enemy might fling a new force at him. He decided that, provided he could keep the rearward action under control, he must press on towards Laguna, pushing the enemy before him, in order to force the pace and (a vital consideration) support his forward detachments.

Gerling knew his decision would be a costly one, but the strength of the enemy was such that he saw he must not allow them to maintain the initiative. As Gerling's main battlefleet moved slowly forward, pressing home its fearful attack and still fighting a vigorous rearward action, losses on both sides began to mount with awful rapidity, but the sheer weight of metal on the Terran side was telling, and within 15 minutes of Gerling's order the Lagunan craft broke off and sped for safety towards the dark side of the planet.

Ordering interceptors to pursue them, Gerling took stock of the situation on the surface. It looked as if his ground forces had the Lagunans encircled, hemmed in at the rim of a mile-wide hole that the bombarding Terran ships had torn in the surface. Now as the circle tightened, retreating Lagunan vehicles toppled helplessly into the chasm. He had them contained at this one point, and having discovered a weakness he decided to exploit it.

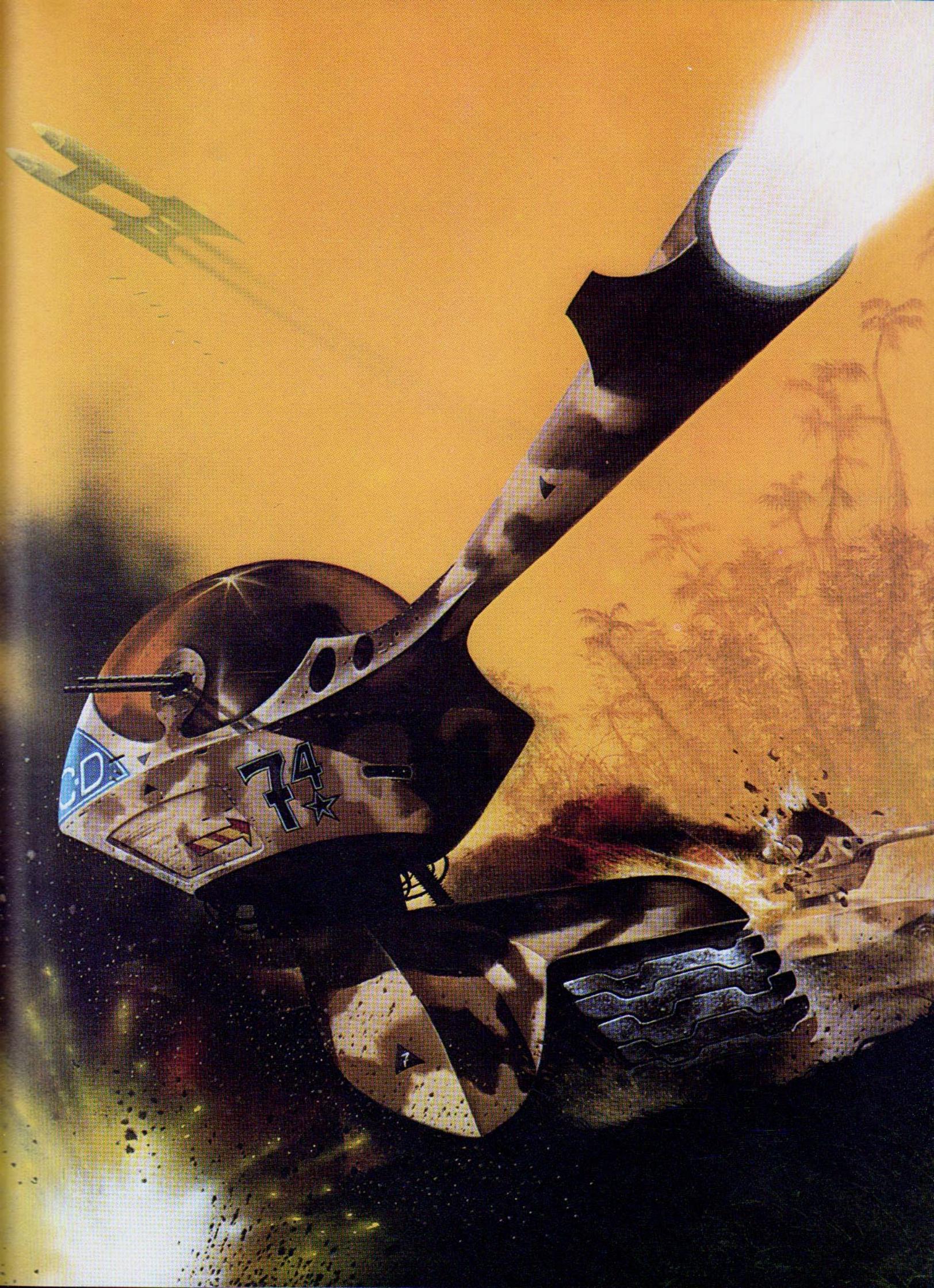
First, however, there must be time, a pause; his crews must have a period of calm to recover from the shock of battle, from the incessant strain of working their ships and weapons under the frenetic pace of battle conditions; his commanders must assess the state of their craft, their crews, their losses, their damage; and he needed time to recover and to formulate the next move in the deadly game. Of advice he had plenty – some human, some from the battle computers that spat out their own analysis of his position – but now, as he sat staring at the face of the ravaged planet, he saw that in spite of all that technology had put at

his command, he would have to make his decision alone.

His mind began to wander away down the paths of ancient history. It was evading its task. Briefly, he despaired; for a single, fallible human brain it was all too complex, too big. Still, as his father used to say, one must get on with the job.

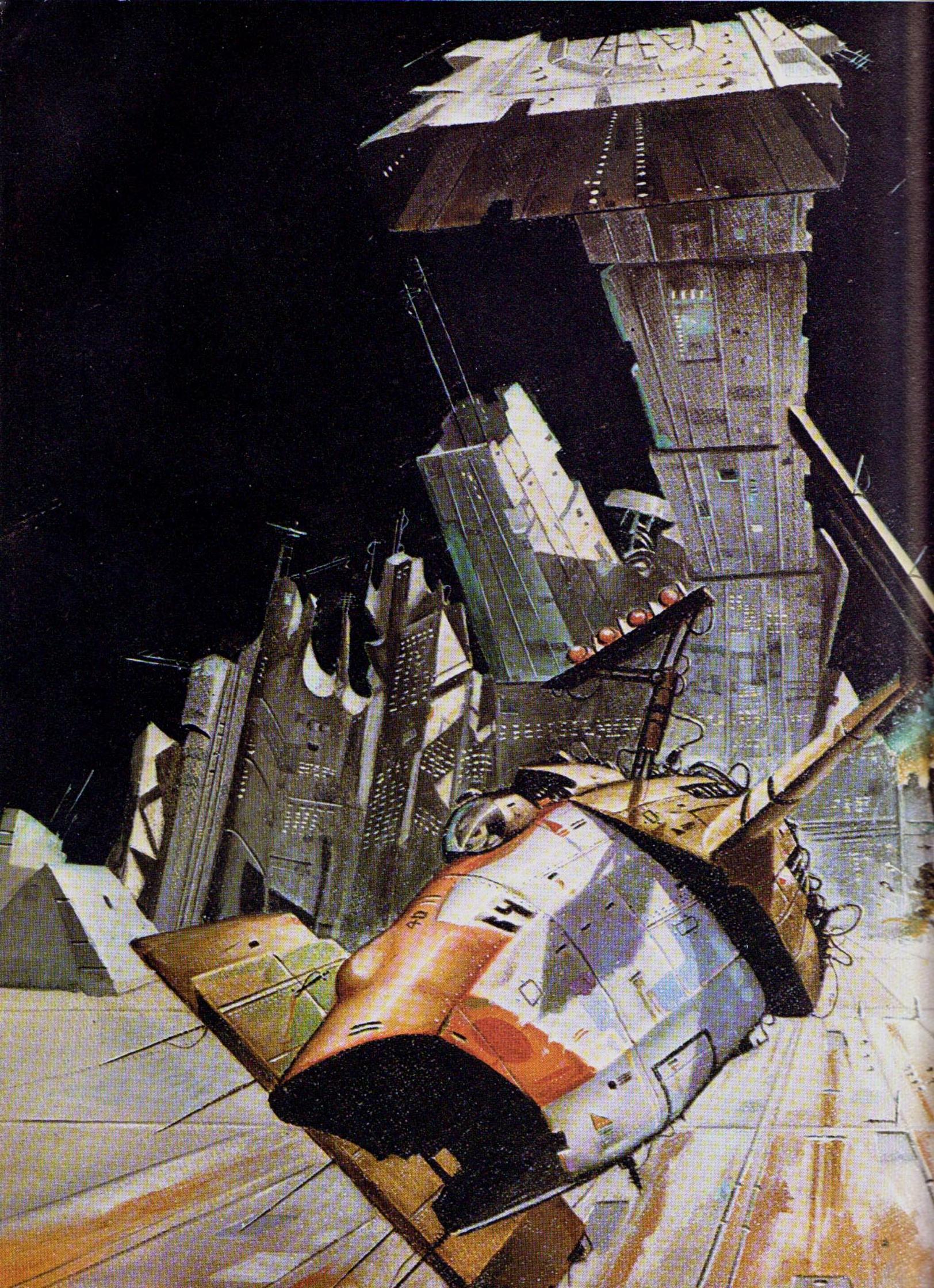
Moments later his commanders had their orders. The main ground force would press on to the rim of the hole, and scout craft would enter it to attempt a reconnaissance; some would be destroyed but it had to be done. Elsewhere constant patrolling of the remainder of the planet would keep Gerling informed of any other activity, and patrols would enter the other holes in the surface. If he could contain the Lagunans inside their planet, he could begin to weaken their resistance by constant erosion of their positions and defences. From where he sat, it looked like a long job.

An obsolete Terran mobile missile launcher of the AV 624 Scorpion type, fires at Lagunan positions. These vehicles were quite outclassed and suffered heavy losses before being withdrawn.



C-D

74
★



A Mysterious Liquid

A Terran scoutship noses through the semi-darkness of a subterranean Lagunan city.

Unaware of what might be lying in wait for them, the scoutships with their interceptor escorts lowered themselves into the mouth of the black and yawning chasm. Around them on the rim lay the shattered, buckled and melted debris of the surface battle that had just ended. A few spacesuited corpses sprawled on the planet's rocky ground.

Observers easily distinguished between Terran and Lagunan suits, but they could not see what form of body lay inside the Lagunan suits. Nevertheless – and this was to prove an important factor later in the wars – the suits proved that the Lagunans needed suits for survival, which in turn meant that they could not breathe the planet's atmosphere. The news was relayed back to Gerling.

Inside the hole all was darkness and calm. As they flooded the scene with light the scoutships saw beneath them a city of towering needle-like buildings, stretching as far as they could see. They calculated that they were flying 1000 meters above the tops of even the tallest buildings, while the buildings themselves were so tall that their lower halves remained shrouded in darkness. Nothing stirred, yet somewhere beneath them in the blackness, they knew, must lie the bases from which the Lagunan attackers had launched themselves.

Receiving these reports, Gerling was perplexed. He had been poised to follow the scoutships and interceptors into the hole had they

been ambushed – indeed an ambush was what he had expected. The longer his scoutships cruised below the surface and the further they flew, the more difficult it would be for him to send aid to them. Well, he would send aid anyway. If he ordered the scoutships out, what would he do next, and what information would he have gained? Perhaps the arrival of a heavier force would tempt his enemy to make a move and thus give away his positions.

The gunships and Ground-Attack Craft eased themselves into the hole and vanished from sight. They too appeared to be having an uneventful passage. For a few moments there was an unexplained break in transmission from the command-ship but before Gerling had drawn the obvious conclusion from it the commander's voice was coming through again loud and clear. Still nothing had happened. Gerling ordered interceptors to descend and investigate from a lower level, though this meant a perilous navigation through the dense forest of buildings.

The interceptors reported the sighting of some weapons installations and stationary craft, but no activity. Puzzled, perplexed and apprehensive, Gerling ordered all craft out. The enemy must have something up his sleeve, but with a large force at risk Gerling was not prepared to wait long enough to find out what it was. Instead, he would play a waiting game above the planet's outer surface.

Even today, with the benefit of

hindsight, he is not to be blamed for failing to anticipate what happened next. It is important to remember that for two centuries previously Terra had held sway throughout the explored universe. No challenge to Terra's supremacy had been raised during this period. Terran weapons and strategy had of course developed, but there had been no competition to meet or new weapons to resist, and thus the armed forces and their equipment were only good enough to meet an enemy playing their own game – not one who invented new rules.

It was the high speed of his detachments' exit from the hole that first struck Gerling. Compared with their hesitant entry it looked either recklessly confident or panic-stricken. In the event he did not have much time to ponder this, for within seconds his own interceptors and gunships had opened fire on his fleet as it hung motionless above the planet.

The interceptors tore into the ranks, loosing missiles and laser beams to the limit of their capacity, while the heavier gunships cruised around the edges of his formation, hiding themselves behind a curtain of fire.

Taken utterly by surprise, the Terran ships were momentarily paralyzed, but as the truth dawned and the attackers began to take their toll, the fire was returned. Within 30 minutes all the interceptors and gunships had been destroyed, while the scoutships and Ground-Attack Craft had spent themselves in fortunately unsuccessful attempts at ramming. Most were damaged or destroyed, but one scoutship was captured, with its two-man crew alive and unharmed.

Desperately the crew struggled to destroy themselves as their craft hung motionless, trapped in the magnetic snare of a battleship, but they were reached in time and brought aboard. Under interrogation the two men remained silent. For all the world could see they were the same men as had climbed aboard their tiny craft an hour earlier, yet the electric impulses of their brains did not follow the human pattern. At some moment, presumably during the transmission blackout, the bodies

of the humans aboard the ships cruising among the towers of Laguna's city had been invaded and occupied by Lagunan minds. Alternatively, and even more mind-boggling, they had somehow been replaced by clones.

At the ensuing video conference Gerling's face was long. Against a visible and tangible enemy his men and his ships could fight, but against subversive weapons, against an invisible force, he felt powerless. All he could do was to try to force the Lagunan's to fight on his terms and according to his rules. But how could he tempt the enemy from his lair?

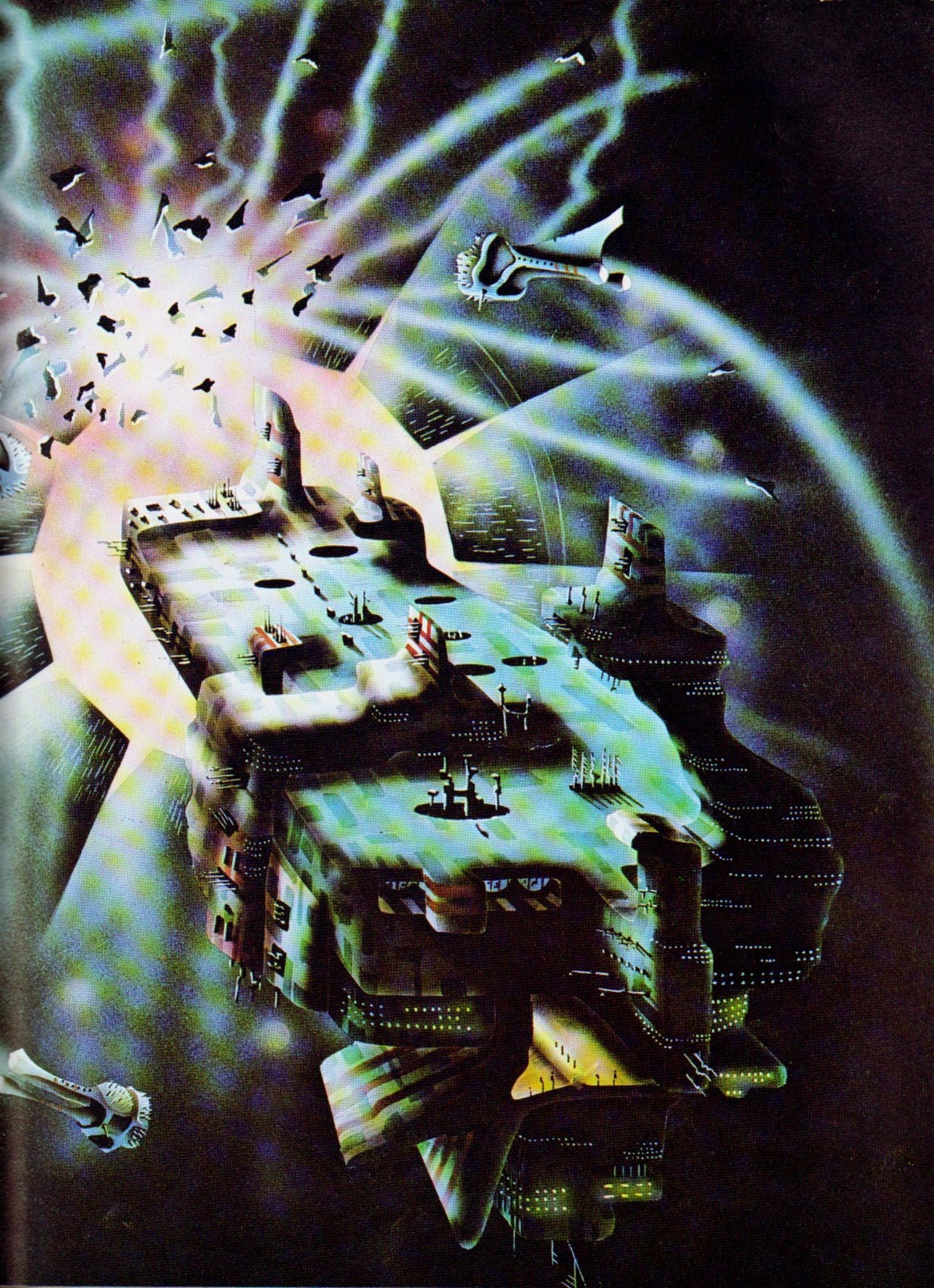
In the middle of the conference Gerling was called to the control center of his ship. Four large unidentified craft, with an accompaniment of smaller craft, had been sighted by the scanners, approaching through space from the direction of Laguna 7. As Gerling watched the screens, further small craft took up station alongside the convoy, themselves issuing from the rearmost of the large ships. Clearly this was an Interceptor-Carrier, whose interceptors were escorting either three heavy warships or three large freighters. By its trajectory the group was clearly heading for Laguna 9, and as Gerling watched it picked up speed and split into three units, the carrier dropping back, and made for the opposite side of the planet. This had to be a valuable cargo shipment, Gerling deduced. Why else would a group of ships, vastly outnumbered by the Terran force, make a run for a Lagunan port? The fact that they had split up reinforced his belief – if all three of the ships did not make it, perhaps one would.

For the freighters and their crews to run such appalling risks, the shipment must be vital. Gerling saw that he must prevent it from reaching its destination at all costs – but very little time was left.

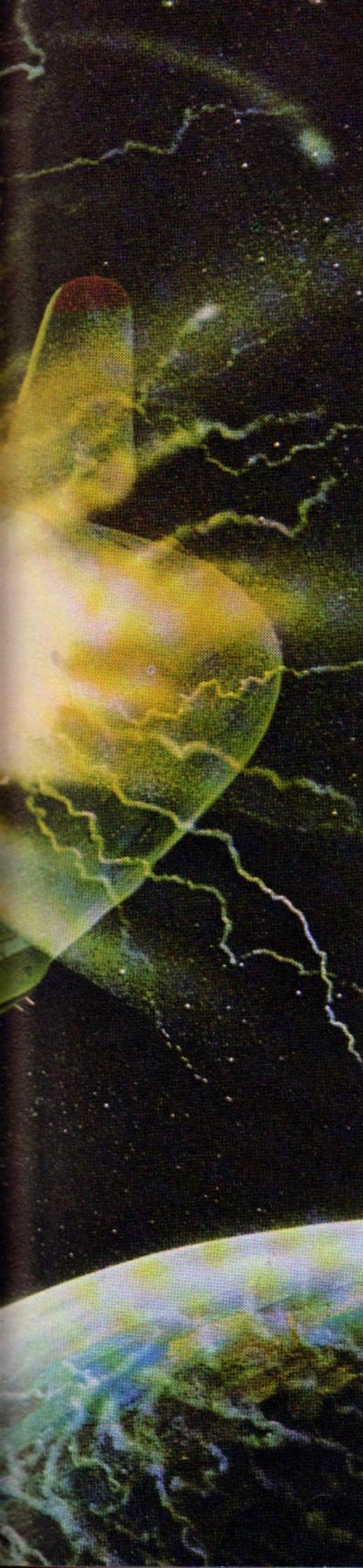
Instantly he ordered a squadron of gunships to take up position between the oncoming freighters and the waiting planet, while interceptors swooped away to attack the three

A Lagunan battleship aided by tugs enters its dock beneath the surface of the planet in an attempt to escape Terran fire.

ALAN DANIELS







units from the rear. As the gunships, racing against time, drew near to their positions, they were met by a hail of missiles from the surface, while the interceptors were themselves attacked from behind by a swarm of like craft from the shadowing carrier.

As his ships, their defence shields soon exhausted, one by one suffered shattering hits from the unending stream of missiles hurled at them from Laguna, the gunship squadron commander asked for leave to withdraw, but Gerling ordered him to stand fast until the Lagunan units arrived and until he could get reinforcements to the scene.

Meantime, the Terran interceptors, themselves already severely depleted, had damaged one of the freighters, which began to veer off course, leaking huge weightless globules of a milky substance as it did so. With a gasp of horror, one of Gerling's observers shouted that the crippled ship, still travelling at enormous velocity, was heading straight for Gerling's command ship, itself motionless above the planet. The freighter was so vast that Gerling knew nothing short of complete disintegration could stop it, and even then the heaviest components, the engines, might well come inexorably on.

As his ships' engines blazed into life and the deck pressed him upward, Gerling's heart was in his mouth. Around him men stood frozen to the spot, while outside Gerling's escort vessels fired furiously and futilely at the mindless hulk that was tearing a terrible path through their ranks, its cargo draining into the space vacuum through the jagged, gaping holes in its flanks, its engines silent and all lights extinguished.

Seconds later the dead ship rushed silently by, finally detonating as it contacted a luckless supply-ship that had failed to get out of its way. The blast threw Gerling's ship and escorts bodily sideways and sent them tumbling towards the planet's surface, and during these seconds of

lost time the battle to halt and destroy the freighters ended. Eight Terran gunships and thirteen interceptors had been lost, while of the advancing force only one damaged freighter, now drifting helplessly, remained. Meantime the freighters' escorts were being mopped up.

Its defence shield, like its main drive, out of action, the drifting freighter was able to do little to fend off the approaching Terran boarding party. For some moments she sustained a steady flow of fire from her auxiliary weapons, but this died out as the armored Terran launch nudged alongside her battered hull. Under orders to capture the cargo and crew with minimum damage, the boarders skilfully blew in the main airlock outer doors, and soon reported that they had penetrated to the interior of the ship.

There they met with fierce resistance from the surviving, space-suited crewmembers, some of whose comrades had died a horribly painful and messy death as a result of the sudden change from normal atmospheric pressure to total vacuum that the blasting of the airlock had produced. By the time the survivors were overwhelmed, three were still alive, all injured, and they were immediately ferried over by launch to Gerling's command vessel. In the meantime damage repair crews were sent to the freighter to rig up a temporary airlock and repressurize the hull.

Two hours later their chief reported the freighter ready to enter and a team of scientists went aboard to begin work on the analysis of cargo. What they found was a system of large interlinked and refrigerated tanks, all containing the same liquid: a sluggish, milky substance. Initial analytic tests failed to offer any clue as to the liquid's constituents. But they did suggest that it had little to do with the two basic human requirements – air to breathe and food to eat.

A Lagunan freighter, out of control, ploughs into a luckless Terran supply-ship after narrowly missing Gerling's own command-ship.

A Clue

Bernd Gerling was worried—and frustrated. What was the mysterious liquid so crucial to the survival of the Lagunans? The scientists had failed to give him the quick answer that he sought, and he decided to turn his attention to the Lagunan prisoners. Two of these, on transfer from the launch to the ship's airlock, had succeeded in struggling free for long enough to tear off their helmets and had thus died instantly, but the third, in spite of similar efforts, was still alive. Gerling went down to the cabin in which he was being held, accompanied by two of his officers. There, strapped to a chair at wrists, neck and ankles, and encircled by armed guards, sat the twisting and writhing figure of a man, in all visible physical characteristics the same as the Terrans in the room.

In anticipation of the possibility that he might have a poison capsule fitted to a tooth, his mouth had been wedged open by the insertion of a steel clamp. With this in position the man could not speak, yet Gerling knew that to remove it even for a split second might bring instant death, and he had to get some answers. Impatient now, he ordered a medical orderly to administer a paralyzing drug, leaving the man conscious but helpless while his mouth was searched. The capsule located and removed, first an antidote to the paralyzing agent and second a large dose of pentathol derivative were administered, and ten minutes later the interrogation began.

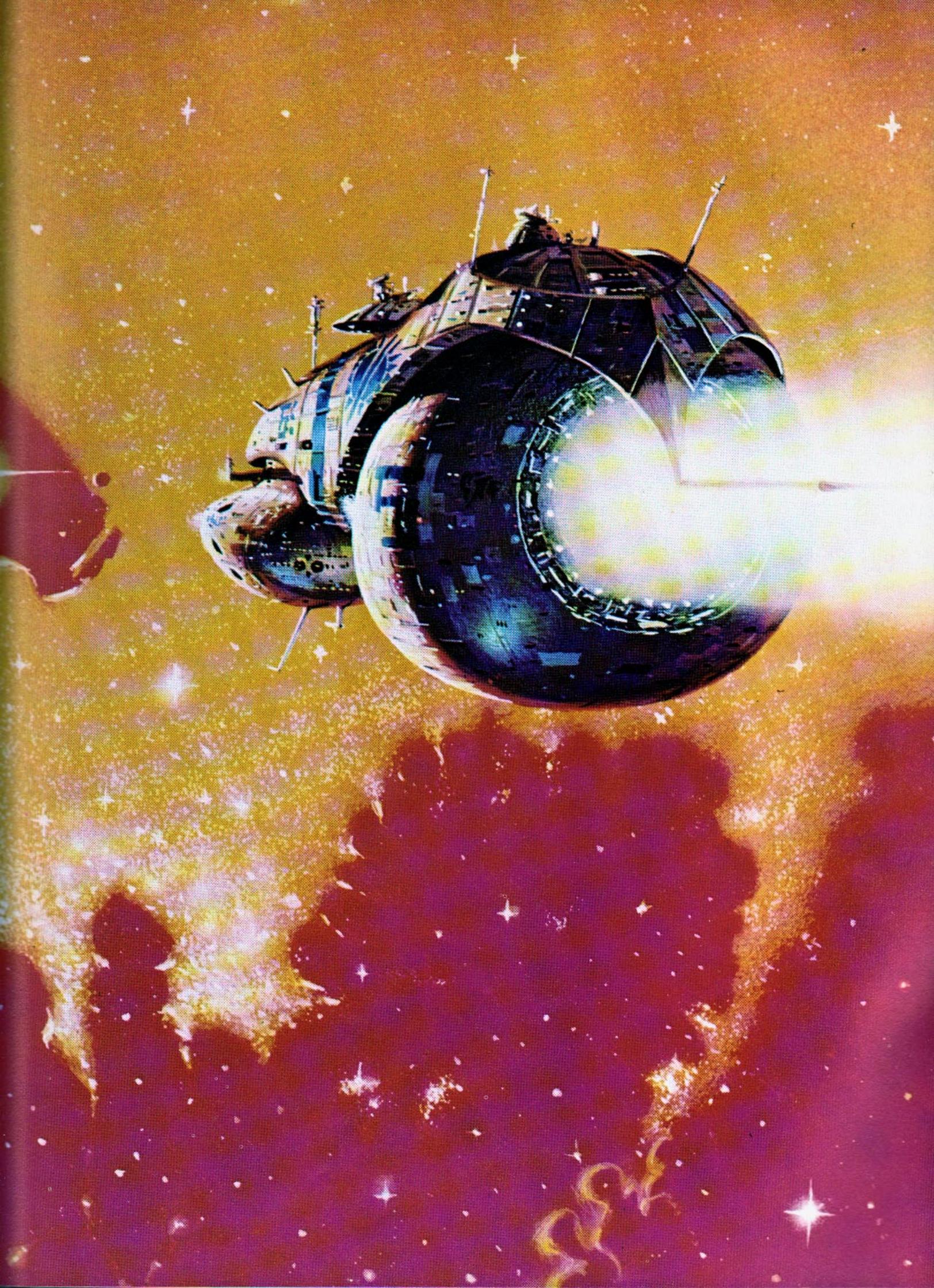
As the door of the cabin hissed shut behind him and he walked briskly back towards his control center, Gerling prepared his next move. He had successfully intercepted the incoming freighters but the non-arrival of their evidently precious cargo would make the Lagunans doubly desperate to receive a further consignment. While, depending on the methods employed, the interrogation of the luckless prisoner might yield information about the nature of the liquid carried and its port of departure, he must take whatever steps he could now to frustrate further attempts to ship the liquid in.

The computer ran back through its tracking of the freighters' trajectory from moment of first sighting, and as it calculated and then traced on the big chartscreen the missing part of the voyage, a line of light advancing across the screen moved slowly towards a large planet with three smaller satellites, whose configuration Gerling dimly recognized. He demanded identification of this group, and the chart on the screen was replaced by a larger-scale image of the planet. Now the information he had wanted began to type on the adjacent panel. Laguna 7 it was.

Turning from the screens, Gerling gave his orders. Without attempting

The ubiquitous multi-cargo SC 98K Sherpa freighter-fueller. Though unarmoured, such ships were forced to undertake front-line operations to keep the combat ships operational.





a landing, a carrier force with escorts and ground-strike craft should set course immediately for Laguna 7 and attempt to effect a blockade of all traffic to and from the planet. If he sent too few craft, these would need to expend a great deal of their on-board fuel supply in constant patrolling and would soon have to be refuelled. If they withdrew to refuel from the main fleet fuellers off Laguna 9 their blockade might be broken, and if Gerling sent the fuellers to Laguna 7 the Laguna 9 force's battleworthiness would be reduced.

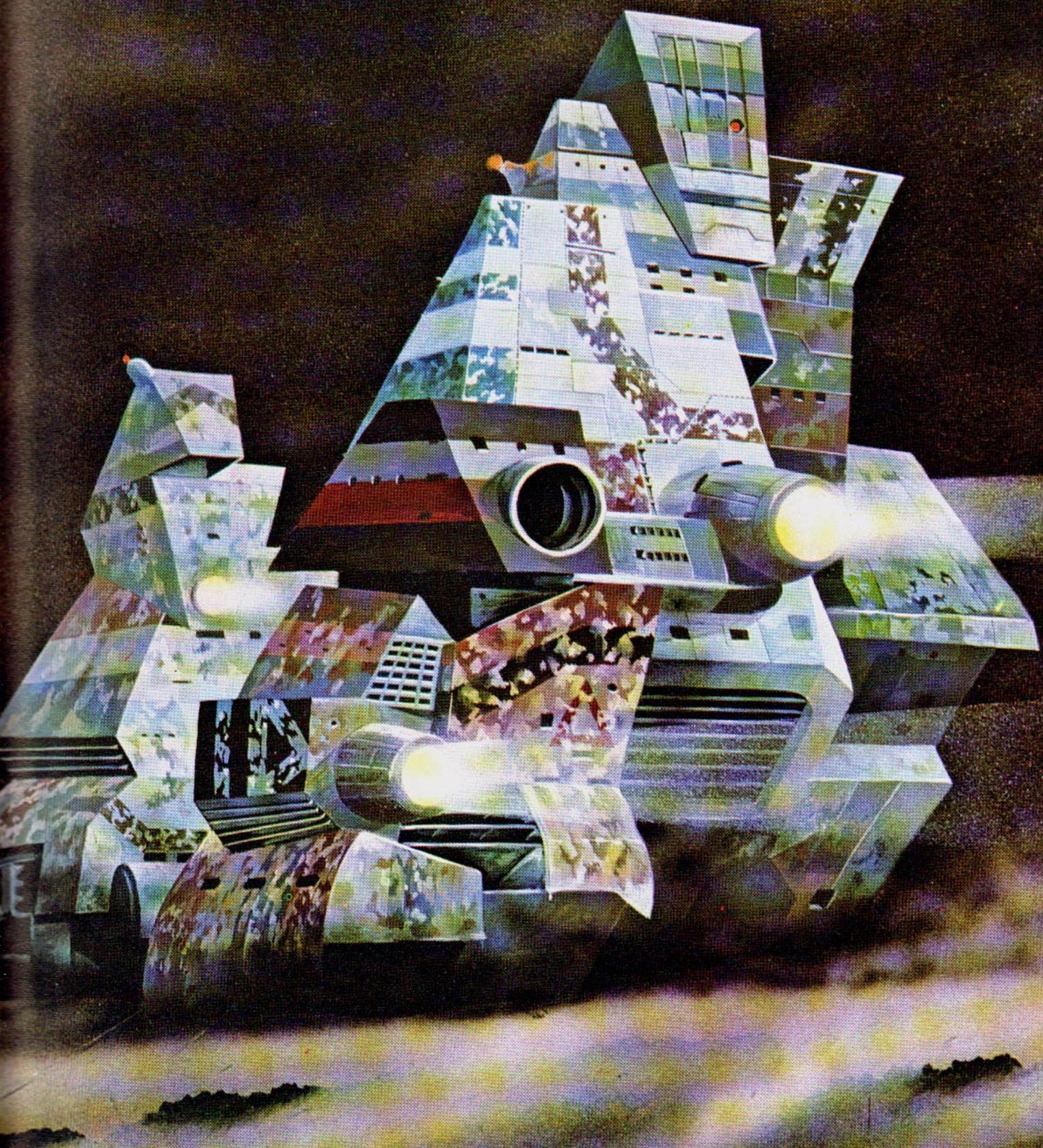
The alternative which he opted for was to send a large force, which could encircle Laguna 7 in orbit and shut off main drives for extended periods. This would leave him weaker, but he had calculated the risks. Two hours later, after a hectic flurry of commands, briefings and conferences, the ships' navigation computers finally received their programmes. At the same time, brief bursts of flame from hundreds of auxiliary drive systems hit the sky as ships manoeuvred into formation for the commencement of the voyage. Then, with a muted farewell, the Laguna 7 force moved out, and the remaining ships, all too conscious of the many gaps now left in their ranks, closed up.

With his ship stirring beneath his feet, Gerling remembered his prisoner. Perhaps two hours of questioning had yielded some information, though the fact that he had received no message from the interrogators during the past two hours suggested that their interesting guest was not cooperating. He would go and see for himself. What met his eyes as the door slid open before him was the sight of a dead man.

The faces that turned towards him as he entered expressed embarrassment. Something had gone very wrong. A doctor who had been leaning over the dead man turned. 'Sir, he must have reacted against one of the drugs. I don't know how. We didn't have much time for it but we did run a test on him before we started and the print-out was

Mobile surface-mining machines pictured at work on Laguna 7. Many of Laguna 9's essential raw materials came from her sister planet.





negative all through. Look at his hand: it's produced a kind of fungal growth – it started happening about three minutes before he died. I don't really understand, sir . . . maybe . . .'

Gerling cut him short: 'Did he say anything before he died?'

One of the interrogators nodded. 'We got plenty about him, sir, about his life, you know. But no matter what we gave him – or how much – he told us nothing about the cargo or about what's happening on Laguna 9. These guys must have some kind of training, maybe a sort of brainwashing. He wasn't about to tell us anything we wanted to know . . . I could see that from the start.'

At Gerling's request the interrogator played back the interview. The man had been a conscript, in his last month of service. The freighters had been under military command. He liked the trips to Laguna 9 – compared with the austere purposefulness of the Laguna 7 factories and their bleak dormitories, the big capital city of Laguna 9 offered unbounded excitement. He had a woman on both planets: on 9 a Terran, on 7 one of those slight, dusky and unpredictable Centaurian girls. His mother was a direct descendant of one of the

original arrivals on Laguna 9 – he could trace it straight back through nine generations. This put him a cut above the others.

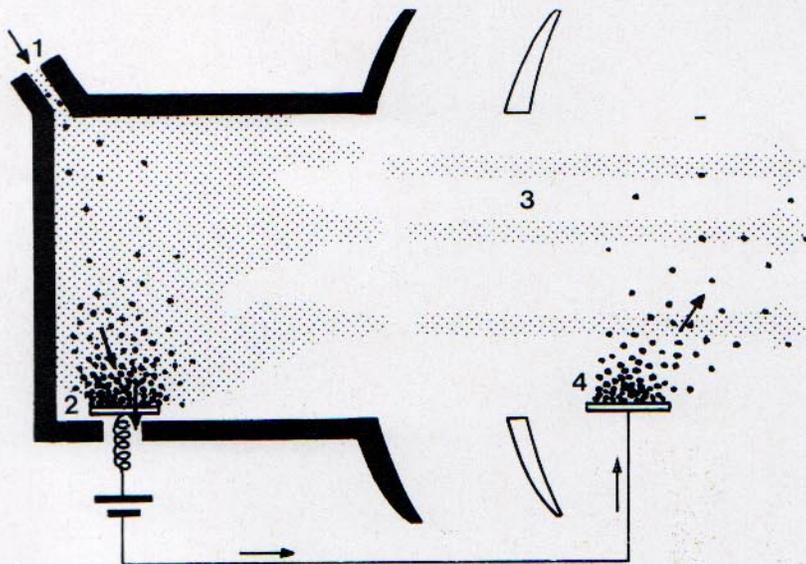
The first men on Laguna had been mutineers aboard the battleship *Chicago*. Two hundred and twelve years before, the crew of the *Chicago* had mutinied after 17 months unbroken deep-space service without surface leave. They had killed all the officers and then cruised around for a further four months before finding Laguna 9, which had seemed hospitable enough. So they had landed, their fuel and supplies nearly exhausted. Sure, there had been some people – if you could call them that – living there already, underground. They had killed them too, and kept a few alive long enough to show them how to run the life-support systems and machines. They hadn't needed to make a lot of changes, just adapting the atmosphere generators to produce something a bit more like Terran air than the Lagunan creeps used. The rest they just moved into and took over lock, stock and barrel. Of course they had been a bit short of women; there'd been a lot of fighting and killing over the few they had, but somehow they'd pulled through and things weren't at all bad until the

Terrans came with their big ideas about taking the place over. If it hadn't been for the surprise weapons and tactics they had inherited from the old Lagunan monkeys maybe the Terrans would have been a bit more successful.

At this point in his wandering monologue, drugged into sentimental self-indulgence, the man had begun to show signs of physical distress. His subsequent utterances had been incoherent, there being only one reiterated plea, almost a terrified obsessional scream, to be given some 'droth' to breathe. This word was to the Terrans meaningless: perhaps this Terran/Lagunan – or even all Terran/Lagunans – were addicted to some form of inhalant drug. In any event he had died moments later.

His mind full of visions and imaginings sparked by the Lagunan prisoner's ramblings, Gerling gazed contemplatively at the surface of the planet as it revolved beneath him, normally mistily visible but sometimes totally obscured by the densest patches in its opaque atmosphere. On which side did right lie? On the side of the Lagunan's, burdened by the superstition of a centuries-old guilt, and fearful still of discovery and reprisals? Or on the side of Terra, overwhelmingly powerful and supremely confident of her right to conquer? Should he seek a truce? It might save lives, put an end to the suicidal destruction each side was wreaking on the other. But how? If he made a move, somehow (God only knew how) got a message to them, would they believe or respect it any more willingly than he would theirs? The question was not answerable.

At least the Lagunan's story had given him some knowledge of his enemy. For instance he now had some understanding of the sight that had met the scoutships as they penetrated to the interior of the Lagunans' world. The holes torn in the planet's surface would have released the atmosphere that the ex-earthmen had been sustaining and replenishing within. Presumably they had fled to shelters long before the invasion, leaving their city empty and lifeless: but where were they now? And what did their leaders plan to deal out to him next?



Electrostatic Ion Drive
 Propellant enters chamber (1) to be ionized by removal of electrons (2). Ions are magnetically accelerated (3) to provide thrust. Negative electrons re-introduced to efflux (4) to prevent bottleneck of positive ions.

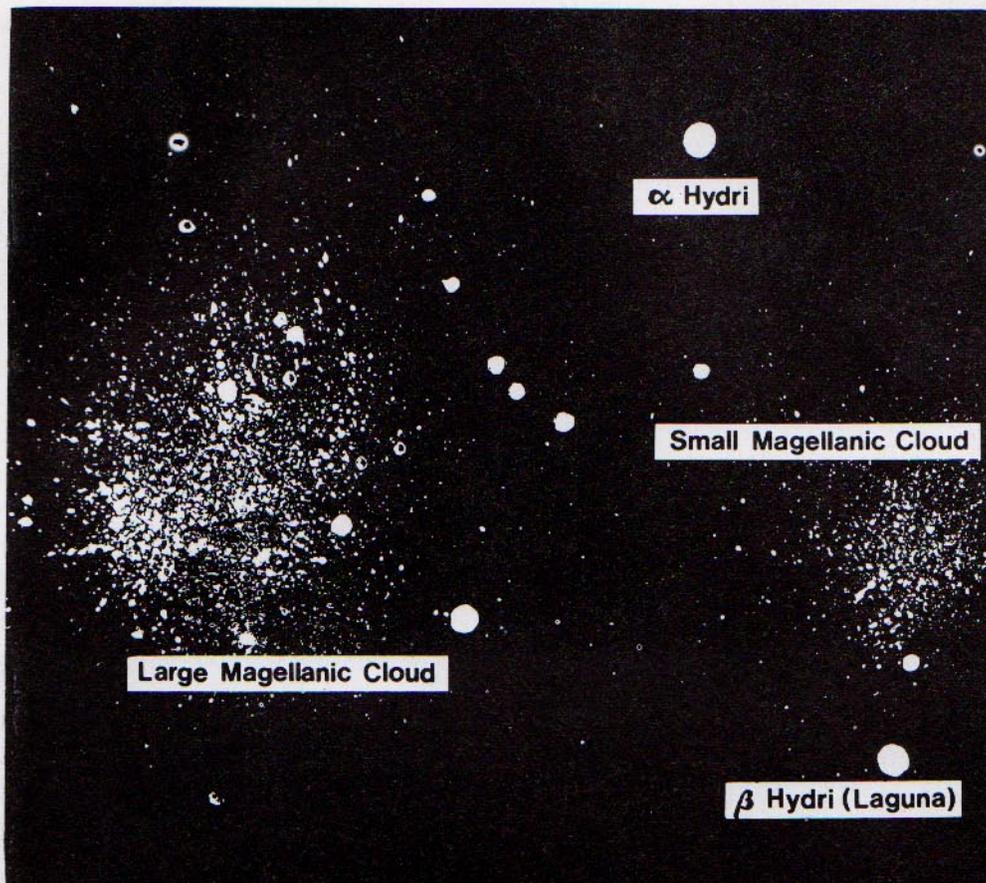
The Breakout

Tired beyond exhaustion, kept going only by the will to win and responsibility for his men – for the whole of Terran civilization – Gerling took stock of his situation. In the fighting so far he had lost 80 of the 300 craft under his command. A further 60 were now on their way to Laguna 7. He still therefore had 140 ships with which to continue the battle, siege, blockade – call it what you will, though invasion it was not – yet over two-thirds of these were support vessels or short-range interceptors, capable only of inflicting painful stings rather than substantial damage. The heavier machinery at his disposal was old; not necessarily outdated in armament, armor or performance – indeed his own ship was the fastest in the field – but time had taken its toll of the ships' auxiliary equipment and the fierce fighting so far encountered had found the weaknesses of many of them.

Now, during this temporary lull, there were so many requiring repairs to faulty systems and engines that, in order to maintain a state of readiness, he had been forced to give orders to restrict the number being repaired and thus out of action at any one time, and many of the ships orbiting with him were awaiting what in some cases were quite major repairs.

The Terran deep-space troop-carrier *Lima*, scene of an abortive mutiny just before the city-ships' breakout. The delta-shaped craft also shown are space-to-surface personnel ferries, with which she was equipped.





Position of Laguna in the constellation of Hydrus.

Of the Lagunans' position he had to admit he knew little. Their systems-disorientation device was useless against ships like all of his, which had no vital systems to disorientate. Additionally, they could no longer count on the element of surprise if they chose to project another attacking force of three-dimensional phantoms – he was ready for that one. And as for their extraordinary, quite unexpected ability to take over, or clone his crewmembers, he had no defence. All he could do was keep his distance from the planet, and hope that their need for the supplies from Laguna 7 which he had already and would continue to blockade would either weaken them where they lay or force them to come into the open. His earlier experience had shown that he could not invade their planet without running the risk of his own ships turning against him. Deeply troubled, he took a pill for four hours of R.E.M. sleep.

The next days were uneventful. The Lagunans remained hidden. He received reports from Laguna 7 that the blockading force had taken up its

station and had already intercepted one convoy. Yet he began to pray for the Lagunans to make a move. Although the fleet had sailed with four months' fuel and supplies, the intense activity of the first days had considerably reduced this estimate, for two vital fuellers had been destroyed and the high rate of main-drive use had eaten far into the ships' fuel supplies.

The days of waiting dragged on. Reconnaissance patrols had nothing to report. He sent in a squadron of Ground-Attack Craft, hoping to prompt some reaction, but although they tore further holes in the surface and directed a hail of missiles through the existing holes above and around the city, nothing stirred. Inevitably, his crews' watchfulness began to wane. His commanders instituted a daily programme of drills

A Terran super-fueller, the SC 520B, affectionately dubbed the 'stellar cow', under fierce attack from Lagunan interceptors. The heavy losses of fleet support ships meant severely restricted operational effectiveness of the main battlefleets throughout the war.





and battle-practices, but the fire was going out of the men. On the messdecks of most ships there was plaintive talk of going home, of how they were wasting their time; while aboard the troop-carrier *Lima* the troops, confined to cramped quarters designed only for short-term occupation prior to a landing, made a half-hearted and abruptly terminated attempt at mutiny. Nine ships had suffered irreparable engine failure, and the whole fleet had watched glumly as a single intergalactic tug had collected them up and towed them unceremoniously away, their fretting crews still aboard.

After 22 days the waiting ended. In the middle of the daily briefing with the TDA on Terra, a shout had gone up from the technician on duty at the screens scanning Laguna 9. Quickly cutting off his transmission, Gerling moved over to the screens, to be greeted by a sight which at first he could scarcely believe.

As he watched, an entire circular section of Laguna's surface, itself already holed in previous attacks, and something more than a kilometer in diameter, was detaching itself from the planet and moving under its own power towards the Terran fleet. As it cleared the lip of the crater, other conventional ships were launched from its underbelly.

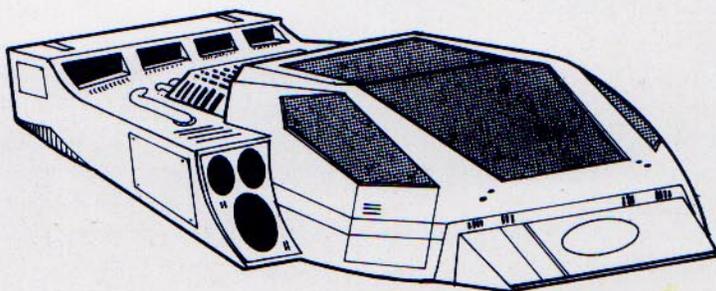
Elsewhere, similar smaller circular ships were taking off, each loosing a load of smaller craft as it rose. Gerling took an involuntary step backwards as he saw the gathering strength of the enemy.

Screens flickered and loudspeakers buzzed with reports of the sighting coming in from observers all round the fleet. His ship's strident klaxon called men to battle stations from bunks, messtables and chores, yet Gerling himself, ringed by the questioning, pleading faces of his staff, remained motionless, transfixed by the force that was pushing up to meet him.

Then he acted, ordering the fleet to split in two and try to outflank the enemy. A thin line of battleships and gunships would try to meet the Lagunans' head-on drive, dropping back as they came on and trying to slow them down. On the flanks, bombardment ships would try to inflict what damage they could on the mighty flying city ships.

Like an ancient warlord, Gerling led his men into battle, his sleek, polished ship showing its paces as it sped through the left-flanking formation to take up position at the front. Throughout the fleet men sat strapped into their combat positions, sealed into the tiny compartments that honeycombed the ships to enable hit damage to be contained in as small an area as possible.

The bombardment ships opened fire first with nuclear fusion powered laser lances and missiles. Several hits were scored on the city-ships' upper surfaces, but no fire was returned from them. Gerling suddenly realized that they were no more than shields for the city-ships beneath. In a flash he was leading a force of interceptors towards the rear of the



Typical attack ship carried by Lagunan City Ship.

Gerling's fleet contained a motley assortment of ancient strike craft, of which this was a typically extraordinary example, being an Atmo-Interceptor captured from the Proxima Centaurians during the twenty-first century. It is here seen attacking a two-man scoutship.





enemy formation, hoping to strike up into the underside of the city-ships, where he thought their weakness must lie.

Now they were in the thick of battle, the blackness of space lit up as far as the eye could see by the numberless weapons of the two sides. Approaching the belly of the first city-ship, Gerling's detachment was met with a hail of fire that within seconds had drained their defence shields, and as he saw the first hits penetrating the exhausted shields of other Terran craft he ordered his spearhead force to swing away back into the ranks of the Terran left-flanking group.

Now the battleships and gunships directly ahead of the Lagunan force had begun to drop back, firing all the way. One, the ageing battleship *Umberto*, veteran of countless colonial conquests and for a century a symbol of Terran supremacy, had been disabled, Gerling saw. Incapable of escape, it was rammed by an advancing city-ship and exploded with colossal force. The city-ship reeled, sections of both upper surface and substructure breaking off and tumbling into the ranks of the following craft, causing untold destruction.

Gerling saw his chance. Temporarily slowed and scattered by the partial disintegration of the leading city-ship, the Lagunans were vulnerable. Taking with him the swiftest craft available, he raced round to face the oncoming Lagunan force, then, ordering the battleships and gunships to follow through, drove a thin wedge into their crumbling front. For a few moments, as the spearhead force took devastating advantage of the enemy's temporary division, it looked as if the Lagunan advance might be halted.

But the city-ships were so vast, and capable of withstanding so many hits, that it became clear that nothing Gerling had in his armory of ships or tactics could stop them. They bore on through, Gerling's ships like angry bees buzzing around them, gradually leaving the battle behind as their escorts turned to confront their pursuers. Soon it became clear to Gerling that he could gain nothing by continuing to attack. The city-ships were now accelerating rapidly

into deep space, while their rearguard was slowing him down more and more. Meantime damage reports were coming in from all over the fleet, and many ships had already dropped back, some disabled, others unable to maintain the offensive.

Reluctantly, he gave the order to cease firing, and watched as the Lagunan escorts wheeled round and swept off after their charges, leaving the Terran forces alone on the suddenly silent and dark battlefield.

Gerling's sense of failure was great. The Lagunans, far from submitting to his relentless blockade, had broken out in force, taking their cities with them, and he, who had left Terra with a massive invasion fleet, was left hanging in space in company with a severely reduced collection of battered, dead and dying ships.

He was jolted out of his thoughts by a violent lurch, accompanied by an agonizing screech of metal. Damage signals flashed on the console before him. Looking up at the screen, he was just in time to see the lifeless wreck of a Terran interceptor, its port side a jagged mess of fused metal, drifting away after its collision and turning gently over and over. Surveying his fleet, he saw hundreds of pieces of wreckage, large and small, any of which might collide with others of his craft. At his command, the Terran ships began to move out under minimum power, their defence shields at full strength to ward off the debris, weaving to and fro as they sought to avoid the larger obstacles.

Gerling's ship for the time being was unable to move, her stern tubes crumpled by the collision with the wrecked interceptor. While damage crews crawled over the rear section, clamped to the hull by electromagnetic boots, attempting to cut away the twisted tubes and thus enable the main drive to be used at least at low power, a bombardment ship edged gradually into position to take up a tow, and soon the ship began to slide gently through the battlefield. The damage crews hurried back into the ship as she did so, for to stay outside while on the move meant risking being crushed or carried away by drifting debris, but once clear of the worst resumed their work.

Even more extraordinary is this missile carrier, a short-lived design of which only two were produced, this being the second prototype. There were no volunteers to pilot it. It is seen here in the melee of the city-ships' breakout.



A Desperate Race

With the enemy now hopelessly far ahead and the remnants of his fleet in any event scarcely capable of taking up the pursuit, Gerling regrouped his ships and called a conference of his commanders. Some came in their launches; others, their launches destroyed, resorted to the lifeboats; and yet others, quite without auxiliary transport, got a ride from their more fortunate colleagues. The conference itself took place in the wardroom of the last surviving interceptor carrier, *Lyons*, whose hangars, formerly crammed with shiny craft, now contained but a handful of blackened and dented veterans.

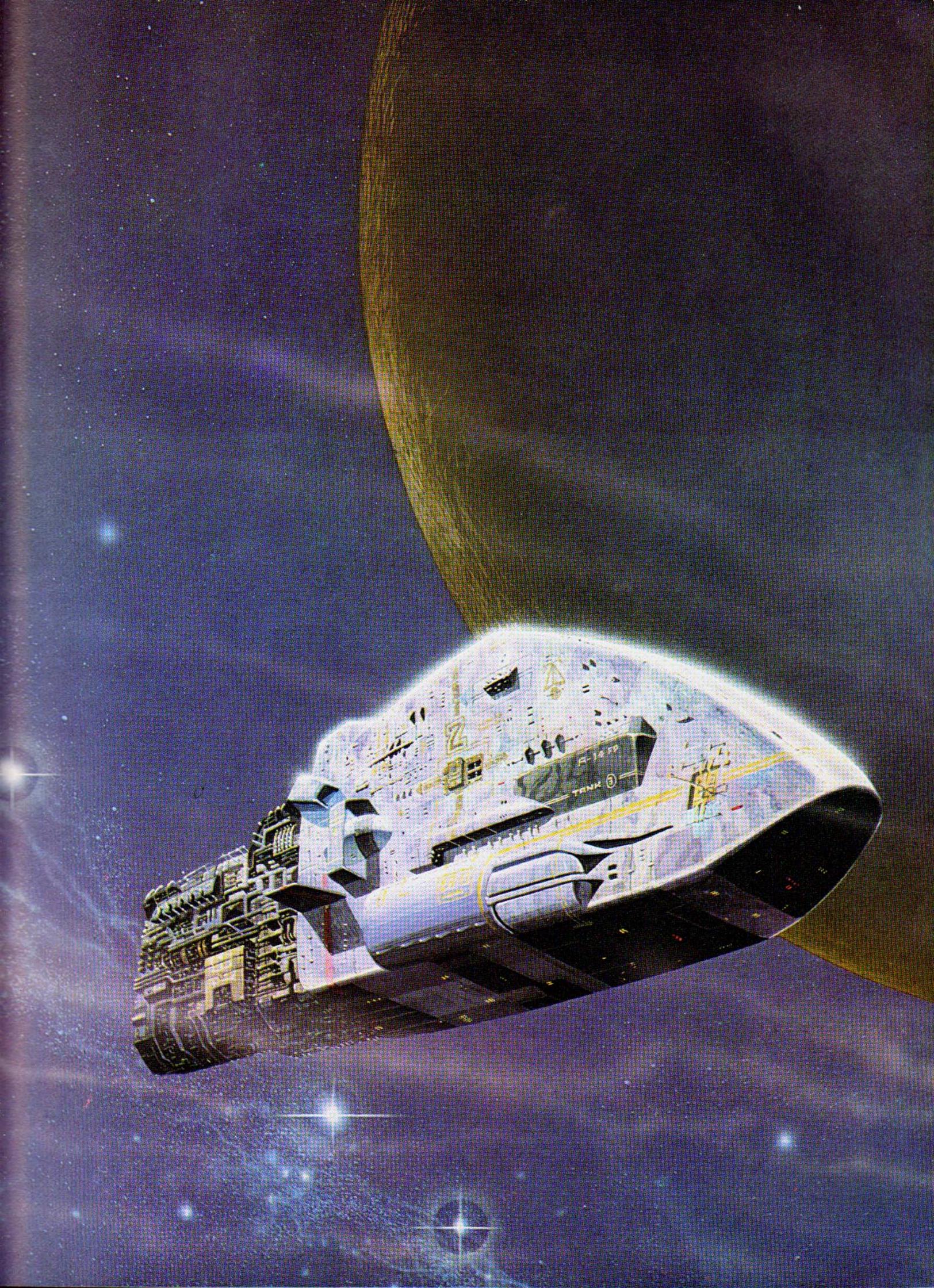
The meeting took place in conditions of utmost security, for what Gerling had to say was grave. With selected members of his staff, he had prepared an analysis of the situation which gave little cause for optimism – or even hope. Fuel stocks were perilously low, and the remaining fuellers had little left to offer. Had every ship been capable of heading homewards under its own power, all should have made it, though by the slimmest of margins. But many ships were under tow, and the extra fuel that the towing ships would use in powering themselves and their charges earthwards might leave them powerless to effect a re-entry into Terra's atmosphere. Besides this, there were ships with shattered machinery of all kinds: some had reduced generating capacity, others had damaged oxygen plants, others faulty water recycling

systems. Few were wholly intact. There were space bases and planetary bases within reach, and his calculations had shown that the chances of bringing all his craft safely to one of these were good, yet the message from Terra was unequivocal. The Terran intergalactic tracking system had picked up the Lagunan city-ship force shortly after the battle, and projections of its course had clearly indicated that it was headed for Terra. Gerling had therefore been ordered to return with all speed direct to Terra, leaving behind those ships that would be unable to make sufficient speed to maintain formation. These would be left to their own devices to make their way either to the nearest base or back to Terra. Gerling knew that, without the assistance of the fully-operational craft, many of the damaged and disabled ships might not reach safety, but try they must.

This was the essence of Gerling's announcement, and it was grimly received by the assembled commanders. Gerling himself would remain aboard the *Lyons*, which would become the new flagship, and if any of the crews of the homebound craft was depleted, men would be transferred from the damaged ships. All the others would remain aboard their own vessels.

Gerling's personal instruction to the commanders of the crippled craft was to stick together, so that crews could be transferred from any ships that became totally unserviceable

A hospital ship limps back towards Terra under reduced power, after suffering severe fuel leakage in an unprovoked attack by Lagunan craft. Later, when her fuel stocks were exhausted, she drifted off course and her whereabouts are not now known. It is presumed that all the injured aboard and the crew perished.



into ships that were at least still alive. In this way the greatest number of lives would be saved.

Faces lengthened as he read out the list of craft that would stay behind. One or two of the unfortunate commanders remonstrated, others claimed their ships were capable of making the homeward journey, but Gerling remained inflexible and the meeting ended in silence. It was not long before the homebound force departed, main drives blazing, every ship shuddering under the strain of maximum acceleration in a determined bid to catch the long-gone Lagunan force.

Behind them receded the sight of their crippled cousins, whose commanders were at that moment explaining to their shocked officers and crews the facts of their situation. Later, huddled together as if for comfort, and with Gerling's former flagship, itself partially disabled, forced to tow a silent gunship, the battered remnants of the fleet limped away. For the sake of the hundreds who died on this voyage, its story

should one day be fully told, but here we can say little. Within 48 hours of departure 90 men aboard the gunship *Malmö* had perished in frightful agony as the atmospheric pressure aboard had sunk to zero, the pumps no longer able to keep ahead of an ever growing split in the hull through which the pressure was leaking.

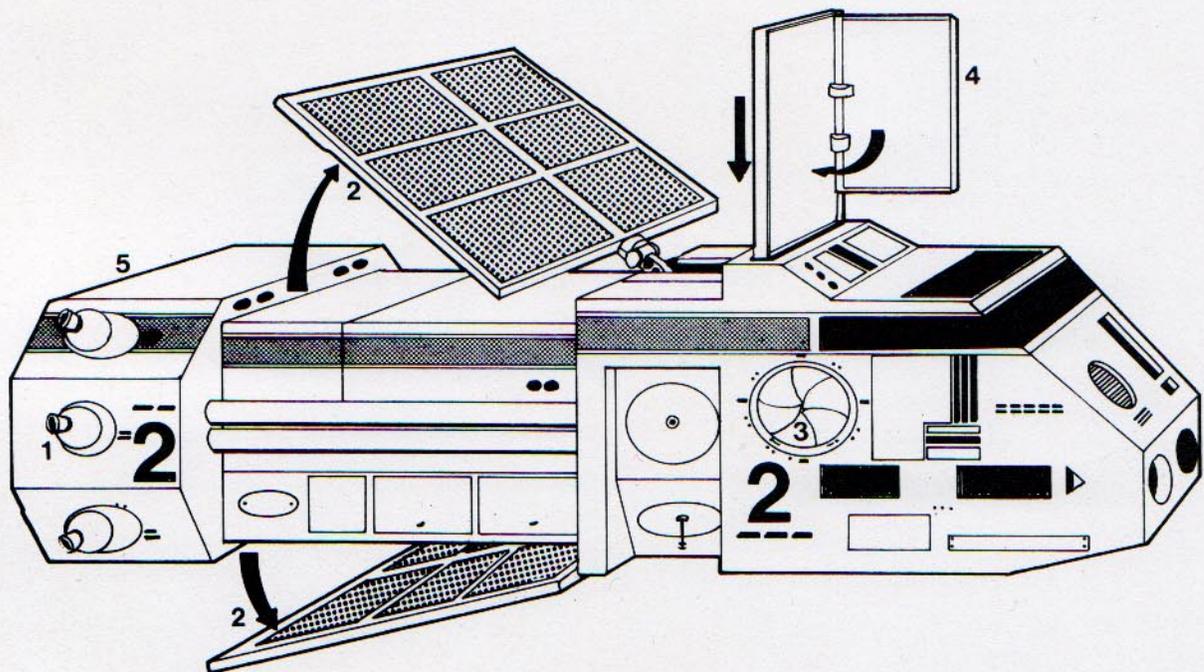
The dead ship had stayed with the formation for hours until a change of course left it ploughing mindlessly forward on its own. This was only the first catastrophe to strike. Two other ships were blasted apart by reactor failures; another fell victim to an internal fire, triggered by damaged circuitry, which swept like a tornado through the ship, sucking up the oxygen and thus asphyxiating those that it had not consumed with flames. Onlookers stared helplessly as survivors ejected themselves from the emergency airlocks, most of them without powerpacks, and flailed wildly in space in the midst of the formation, unable to reach the safety of another ship. Rescue launches found a handful alive – the others had died of their burns or of oxygen

starvation before they could be picked up.

Meanwhile Gerling was having his share of trouble. Though his force was gaining on the Lagunans, he had already lost two ships through fuel exhaustion, while another had been severely damaged by an asteroid during a temporary defence shield failure. All three he had had to leave behind to fend for themselves, sparing a solitary tug for their rescue.

Try as he might, however, it became increasingly clear as the days dragged by that he would never catch the Lagunans before they reached Terra. He might conceivably try firing some long-range missiles, but these were intended for ground attack and could easily be intercepted and deflected by the Lagunan ships if they identified them early enough.

This was the situation that he discussed with the Chiefs of Staff at the TDA Control Center during his next transmission. If he was going to be unable even to slow the Lagunan advance, then Terra would have to bear the full brunt of their onslaught.



Terran Lifeboat.

1 Variable drive venturi. 2 Solar panels. 3 Airlock.

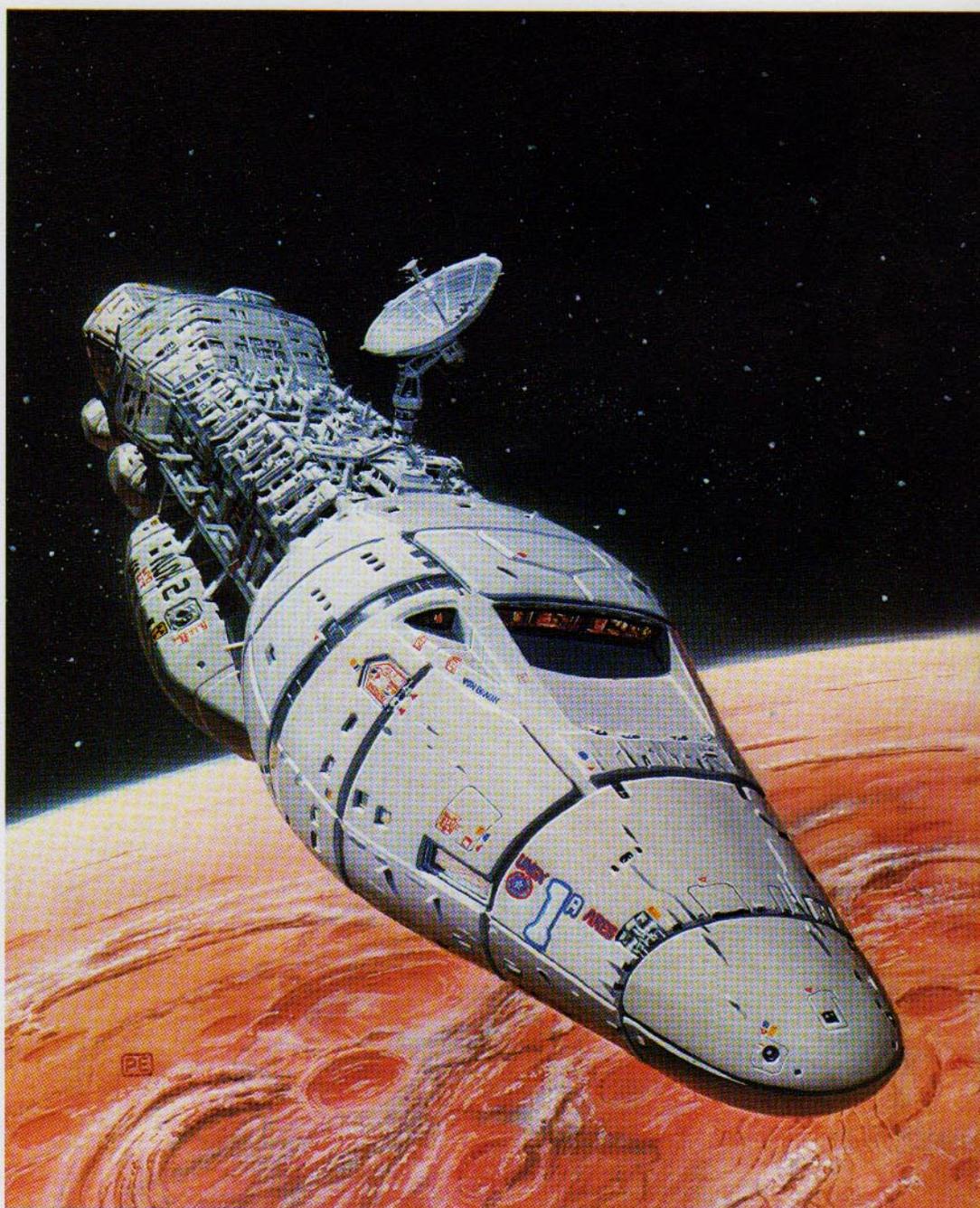
4 Signal Reflector. 5 Reactor Room.

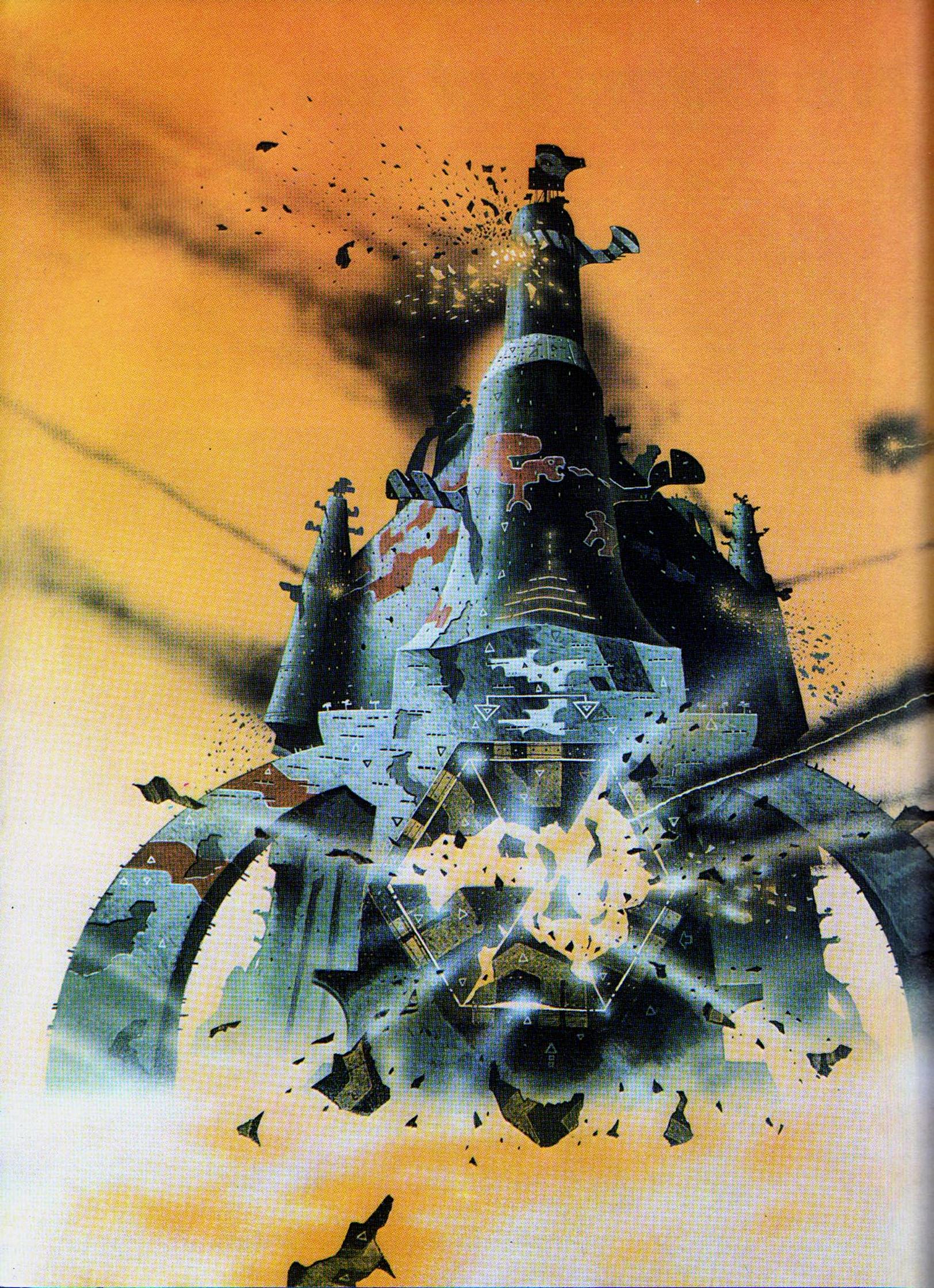
The Defence of Terra

Back on Terra preparations were nearly complete – in so far as they could be. The only ships available for the defence of the home planet, though great in number and in power, were of the fully automated type that had suffered such terrible indignities at the outset of the Laguna war. Who knew whether the approaching Lagunan force would bring to bear the weapon that had effectively deprived Terran Commanders of the ability to control their ships? Such steps as were possible were taken to ease the difficulties of manual control aboard these ships, but the TDA chiefs knew that these would prove inadequate for sustained combat and, more importantly, would actually handicap the performance of the ships, depriving them of their usual agility and speed of response.

Apart from the preparations being made for the flight in Terra's orbit and her atmosphere, steps needed to be taken to protect civilians and their property on the ground, as well as vital installations. For the benefit of the civilians who, to avert mass panic, had been fed a much watered-down version of the true facts, the ancient nuclear fall-out shelters of the mid-twentieth century were re-opened and equipped, while as many people as could be accommodated were shipped off to the Moon, Mars and nearby planets and space bases in

A mobile monitor station orbiting Mars during the tracking of the approach of the city-ships.





The North African fortress city of Tobruk, guarding the perimeter of the great Saharan marshalling yards, under heavy fire from a Lagunan city-ship. This fortress was knocked out in the earliest stages of the engagement and has not since been rebuilt.

requisitioned civil spaceliners and rudimentarily-converted freighters.

As a further precaution, accommodation was prepared in the hundreds of deep-ocean farms and the mile-deep tunnels of the intercontinental vactrains, just as the underground railways of London had sheltered thousands during the city's bombing by German aircraft in the Second World War (1939-1945 AD).

Yet the TDA council were only too painfully aware of the inadequacies of the measures they could take to defend Terra and protect her inhabitants, and as the days passed their doubts turned into sleepless fears. Nevertheless there were other, more aggressive moves that they could make before the Lagunans came within range of Terra, no matter how awed they might be by the size and speed of the Lagunan city-ships.

The first was to organize a series of assault forces to meet the Lagunans at different stages of their long flight, the second to mine the perimeters of Terra's orbit. The former expedient proved largely ineffectual, for at no single point could a sufficiently large force be assembled to seriously challenge the Lagunans. True, a number of the enemy's escort vessels were destroyed and a large number of hits were scored on the city-ships, but nothing seemed to slow or weaken their advance. As for the mining operation, this was rather more successful. The mines were in this case missiles rocketed into orbit in vast numbers and positioned in such a way that any craft travelling in a straight line could not fail to make contact with one of them. While to allow for any evasive tactic the enemy might employ, the missiles could be instantly reactivated to make a positive attack on any craft in their vicinity. These missiles would plainly be vulnerable to the influences of the Lagunan control-disorientation system, but the TDA Chiefs rightly reckoned that they could cause substantial destruction even when out of control in the midst of the hostile fleet.

Their prediction did indeed prove accurate. When the leading Lagunan ships penetrated the perimeter of the minefield, the mines were allowed to remain inert. Then, at the very

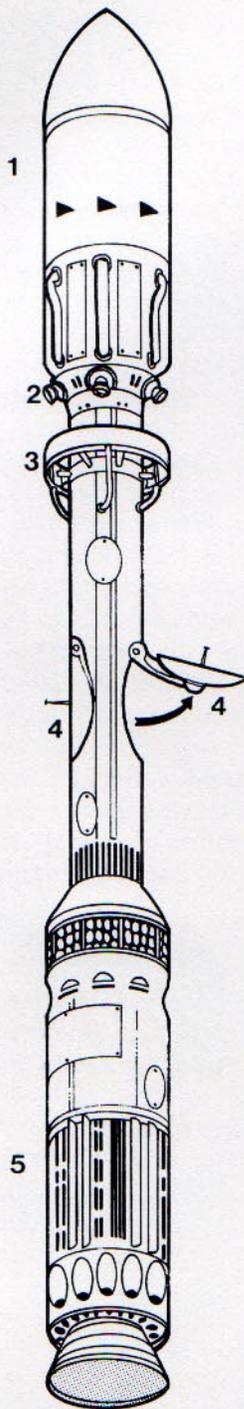
moment when the last ship had slipped in, the mines were activated. Sure enough, they instantly ran amok, but in doing so found a number of targets. Others collided with each other, their combined explosion sending colossal shock waves and spraying the invaders with jagged pieces of hurtling metal.

Yet, though they reeled, staggered and slowed under the onslaught, the mighty city-ships came on. As they emerged from the inner edge of the minefield they were seen to manoeuvre into orbit, their remaining escorts gathering around them and then nudging gently into apertures in their undersides.

This movement gave the TDA Chiefs food for thought. Up till this moment they had not known whether the city-ships would be capable of operating within Earth's atmosphere. Anchored in Terra's orbit they appeared to present less of a threat than they might have done if they had descended through the atmosphere and made a direct assault on the ground. Yet what they actually did gave little cause for relief.

Within minutes they had launched a first wave of ground-attack missiles. As these raced earthwards, traces were picked up of the dreaded signals that had disabled Keyes' fleet off Laguna 9, and technicians monitoring the electronic mechanisms of Terra's own anti-missile missiles, now readied for firing, saw that their guidance systems were being affected by the Lagunan signals.

Powerless to respond, Terran command waited helplessly as the first missiles ploughed devastatingly into Terra's cities and defence installations. Yet even as they fell, blast-shutters were sliding apart, revealing the outlines of craft large and small, readying themselves for the counter-attack. Orders were for all available ships to attack the city-ships direct, and attempt, by sheer weight of numbers, to disable or destroy the enemy's strongholds. One force, consisting of three gunships escorted by over 20 interceptors, was detailed to seek out the source of the control-disorientation signals and silence them.



Tube launched Nuclear Missile Type TMX40
 1 Warhead. 2 Steering jets. 3 Hyperwave
 Detector. 4 Spring loaded Target Scanner.
 5 Minipak Nuclear Driver.

At the word of command, 600 assorted ships lifted ponderously off their launch pads, crews fighting to retain control of their clumsy manual systems, forced to make countless adjustments during every second of the lift-off in order to avert disaster. Now they tore even faster upwards, searing through the atmosphere, the combined roar of their engines sending reverberations through the fabric of every building and the crust of the earth itself, so that deep down in the vacrain tunnels evacuees stirred questioningly to the deep rumble of sound.

As speed increased the difficulty of manual control lessened, but soon the Lagunans were responding, first with missiles, then with interceptors and finally, as the Terran ships came within range, with lasers of unprecedented power. The groups assigned to each of the city-ships were travelling in loose-knit formation in order to make it hard for the Lagunans to concentrate their fire effectively, yet the damage they wrought was considerable.

As defence shields weakened, more and more Terran ships were hit, but now they were close enough to engage the city-ships directly. For the first time since the appearance of these colossi, the TDA Chiefs were able to obtain via their on-board observers some concrete information about them. The city-ships were approximately circular in configuration, with an upper surface irregular in its formation and constructed to resemble an ordinary expanse of the surface of Laguna 9 itself. The lower half was deeper than the upper, being approximately a very shallow cone. The diameter of each ship was about 1000 meters, the depth from top to bottom approximately 300 meters, though there appeared to be quite substantial variations from one ship to another. The upper surface appeared to be armored—indeed no Terran weapon proved capable of penetrating this armor—but itself was not armed, the full firepower of each ship being contained in the lower section. This, apart from the apertures through which the interceptors entered and left, offered no projections and was constructed on a honeycomb pattern, there being

A Terran fast strike ship hit by debris from an exploding city-ship, itself victim of a missile penetrating an interceptor-bay aperture.

no indication of the siting of the armament or the functions of the various sections of the underside.

What the Terran craft were able to confirm was that this lower portion was susceptible to damage, particularly so if its armament officers were able to place a missile through one of the interceptor-bay apertures. In fact two city-ships quite unexpectedly exploded on being hit in this way, though 17 Terran craft, in addition to a large number of Lagunan interceptors, were destroyed by the heat of the blast or by being struck by debris from the explosions.

Nevertheless, these two lucky victories far from compensated for the appalling losses being suffered by the Terran side or for the damage and loss of life still being inflicted by the city-ships on Terra itself. The turning-point came when the gunship taskforce located the source of the control-disorientation signals.

Taking advantage of the Lagunans' concentration on the battle in progress, the taskforce had slipped through, and by circling in powered orbit above the city-ships had soon homed in on the signal. This was emanating from a pair of previously unseen craft equipped with enormous transmitting antennae, guarded by two interceptor carriers. On identification of the approaching Terran craft, the carriers sent a large force of interceptors to hold the Terrans at bay, while the transmitter ships fired their main drives and began to accelerate away.

Aware of the urgency of their mission, the taskforce refused to reduce speed or break formation to meet the Lagunan interceptors, and made as if to plough straight through without wavering. In the event two of the three gunships collided with Lagunan craft and more than half of the Terran interceptors met a similar fate or were destroyed by Lagunan fire, but the surviving gunship broke through and, while summoning help, took up the pursuit of the fleeing transmitter-ships.



The Lagunan disorientation-signal transmitter-ships at the moment of their detection and sighting by the Terran gunship taskforce. They were destroyed by interceptors after a brief pursuit into deep space, and their loss spelt the end of Lagunan supremacy in the final battle.

Firing at extreme range, the gunship's main missile armament succeeded in damaging the antennae of one ship, but both sped on until intercepted on the port beam by Terran interceptors coming to the aid of the gunships. The transmitter-ships fell easy prey to the interceptors, both being quickly reduced to lifeless hulks.

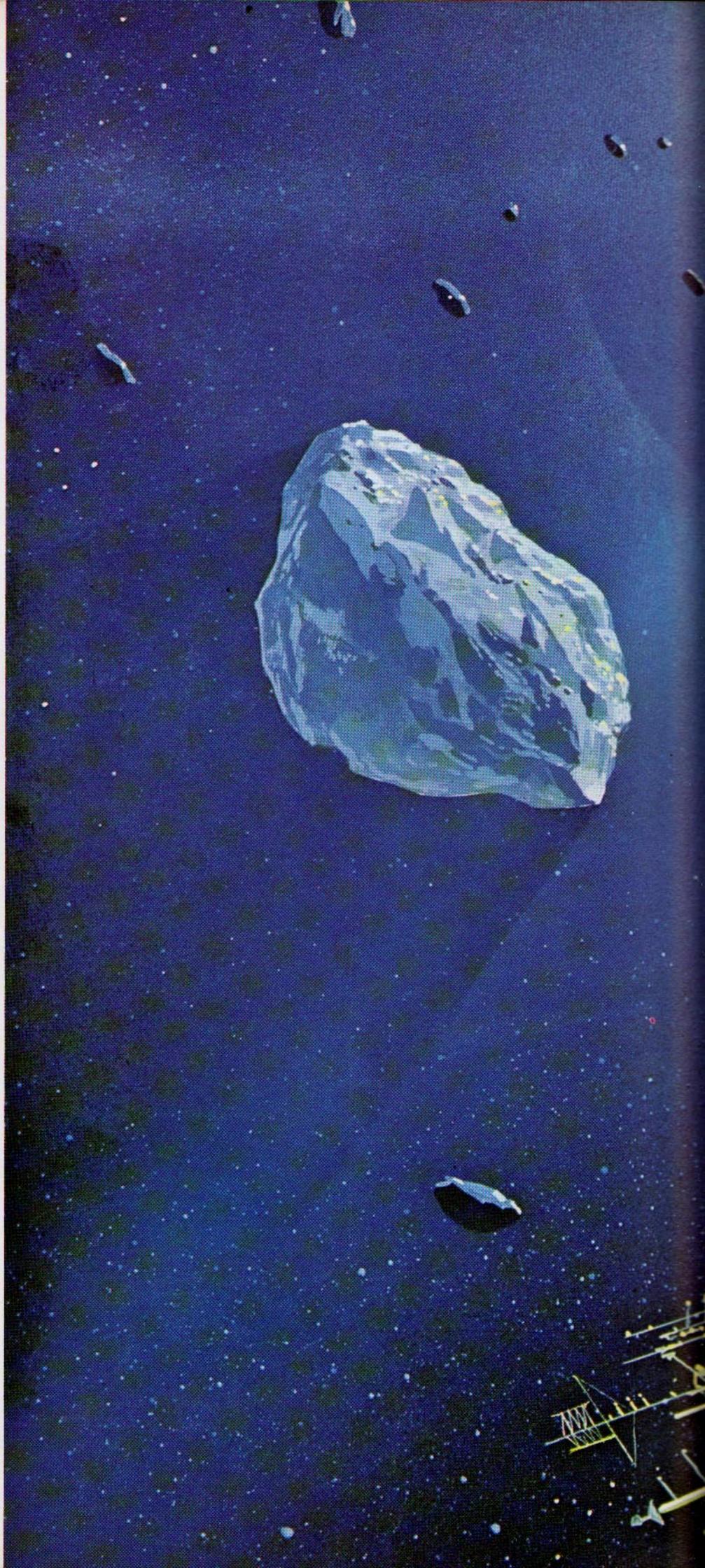
With fully automatic navigation and armament control now restored, the Terran ships could now utilize their full performance, and as reinforcements, including the battered remnants of Gerling's fleet, now began to arrive from Terran stations and bases in the nearer parts of the galaxy, the battle began to be dominated by the Terran forces.

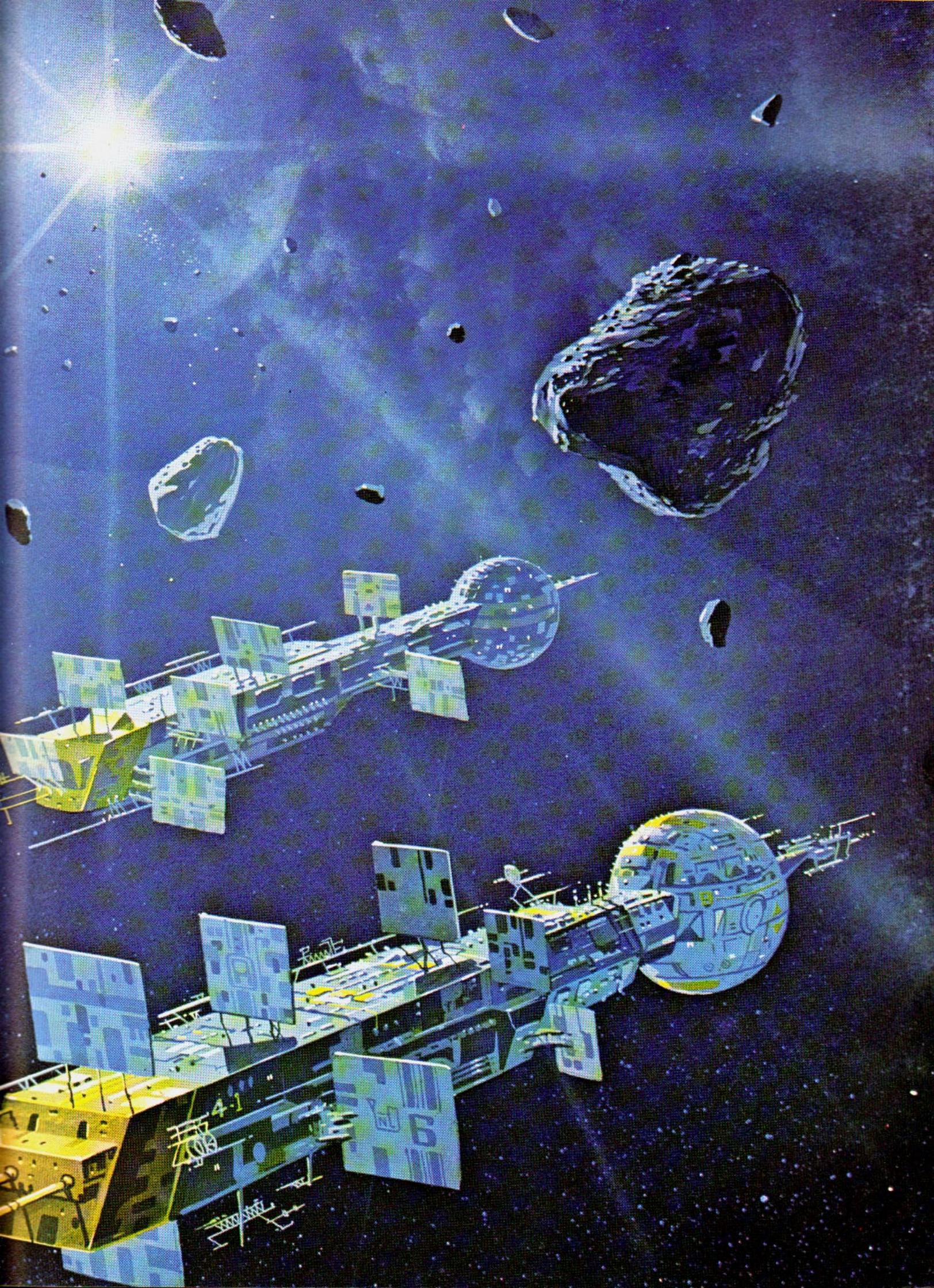
While on the ground fires raged, buildings toppled and emergency service crews and vehicles strove to save life and property, the conflict in near space was so fierce, and involved so many craft, that the blinding light of explosions could be seen with the naked eye from the surface.

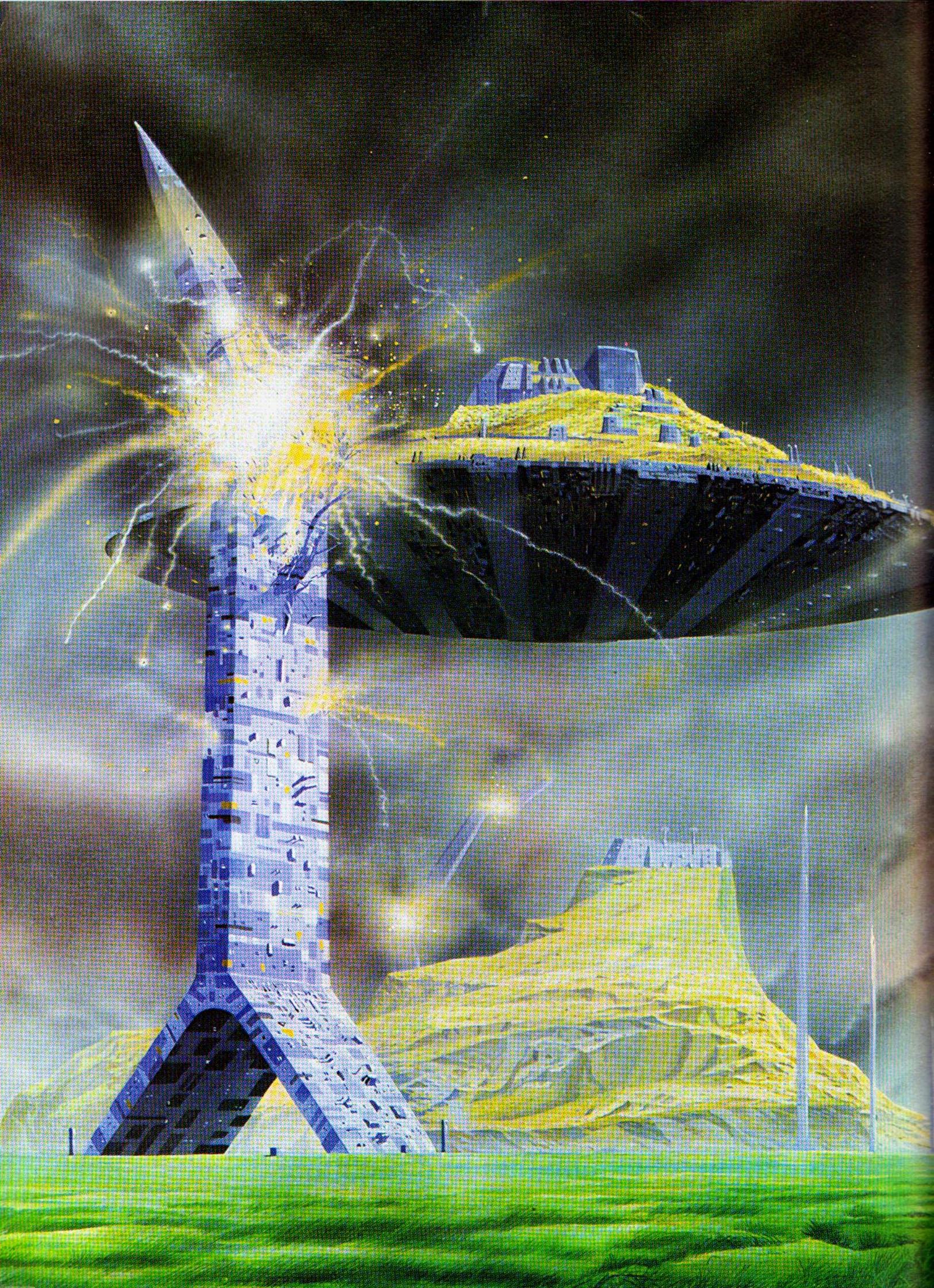
Beleaguered on all sides, and with their escorts now nearly all out of action, the city-ships could not last much longer, yet their commanders were evidently not going to accept the deaths of trapped animals, for suddenly, and in unison, the city-ships' main drives spat flame and the monstrous craft began to gather speed in a descent towards Terra.

With ships firing on them from all sides, they pressed heedlessly downwards, brushing aside any craft that lay in their path. As they drew nearer to the surface, they began to level out, and were soon hurtling along a few hundred meters up, firing at their pursuers and spraying death and destruction at everything beneath them.

Yet their end was near. The first sign of it was when one of the surviving eight, overflying the conurbations of the Great Lakes at a speed in excess of Mach 2, began to smoke. When a report of this







A city-ship slices through one of the TTA's interstellar communication pylons during its mad career across the surface of Terra. Although not primarily military in nature, the beacons played an important part in interfleet signalling.

observation reached the TDA Control Center, it was quickly realized that the city-ships were beginning to burn up, heated to impossible temperatures by the friction at high speeds in dense atmospheres. But they showed no signs of slowing or breaking off the action, and orders went out for them to be brought down in the oceans, for the crashlanding of a burning city-ship would create appalling havoc.

Terran ships broke off and then reformed in wolfpacks to meet the enemy at sea, and six of the city-ships, of which three were by now huge discs of white fire, were subjected to such a bombardment that each crashed into the ocean within 1000 kilometers of interception.

As they fell, the sea erupted around them in vast mushrooming clouds of searing steam that obscured their terrible end from view. A seventh frustrated the efforts of its attackers; eventually, after a heart-stopping east-to-west traverse of the densely populated North American continent, slicing harmlessly though spectacularly into the abandoned twentieth-century petroleum installations in Alaska. The entire area to a radius of 2000 kilometers was instantly shrivelled by the intense heat, even rocks being fused together.

The eighth and last surviving city-ship had so far avoided destruction, suddenly slowing and coming to a halt over Peking, with its 150 million population, nerve center and commercial center of Asia. Powerless to attack lest they kill countless civilians below, the Terran ships hung back, circling slowly around their prey and gradually closing in as its firepower slackened and dwindled. After four hours, as the huge craft still hung motionless over the city, no solution had been found by the TDA Chiefs to its threatening presence. It seemed to them that the city-ship's commander had only three choices: surrender, a desperate solo bid to reach space and then home, or a suicidal act of vengeance – the destruction of Peking by diving, Kamikaze-style, into the heart of the city.

Speculation increased when a number of robot repair vehicles

emerged from the ship and began to bustle jerkily around attending to the worst of its wounds. This activity suggested that the commander might be preparing to make a run for home, a view reinforced by the momentary reactivation first of its weaponry and second of its engines – just as if these were being tested prior to action. But nothing ensued, the ship lying thenceforth silent and motionless.

Then, out of the blue, came a message – an announcement that the wounded and the other members of the crew would now be leaving the ship; a request that they be not attacked as their launches clear the ship and make for a landing-place, and a request for acknowledgement and acceptance. Acknowledgement was given, but with a statement that the TDA would consider the request for safe passage to Terra and respond in due course.

Once again the great ship lay silent as the TDA Chiefs conferred. After 30 minutes their answer came: the crew could have safe passage provided the ship moved, under escort, over the Pacific before releasing the launches. The city-ship commander acceded to this demand, and moments later his mighty craft started gently eastwards, surrounded on all sides by watchful Terran ships. At the appointed place, two hours later, the city-ship slowed and stopped. Then the launches appeared, firing white starshell to signify surrender.

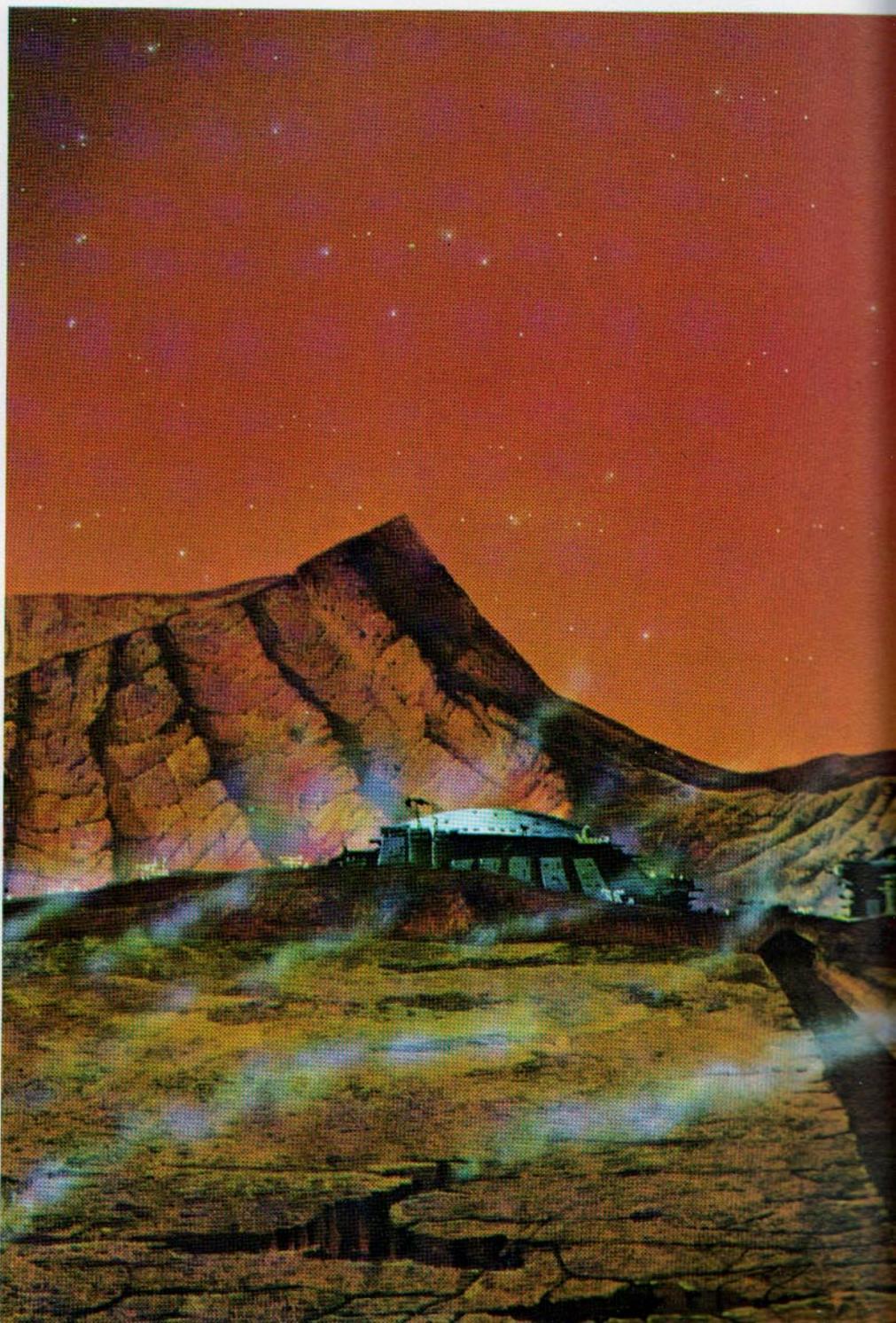
While they were being shepherded away towards Peking spaceport, TDA craft made to come alongside the city-ship to take possession, but before they reached it it suddenly tilted sideways and then, turning slowly over, dropped out of the sky. Striking the surface of the Pacific with an impact that threw water hundreds of feet into the air and created a massive destructive wave, its hull was blown apart by multiple explosions and then started to burn. Four hours later, defying the efforts of salvage experts, it finally disappeared beneath the waves, taking its secrets to the bottom of the ocean.

The Final Victory?

The immediate threat to the Terran Federation's stronghold had died with the capitulation and scuttling of the last city-ship, yet there remained the possibility that the peoples of Laguna 9 and 7 might wish to pursue hostilities. To put paid to any such intentions it was decided that a further force should be sent to Laguna 9 to conquer or destroy, while the blockade on Laguna 7 should be maintained until this operation was over, at which point the Laguna 9 taskforce would proceed on to Laguna 7.

Gerling, because of his experience of Laguna 9 and its peoples, was automatically selected to lead the taskforce, and within hours of the decision, had transferred in mid-space to his new flagship. The voyage was entirely uneventful. Once the force was in orbit around the planet, detector vessels were sent in under escort to report signs of activity and to test for the presence of the now-dreaded control-disorientation signals. On both counts their report was negative. Yet as a further precaution Gerling sent in a patrol of scoutships, instructed to descend to the surface and, if unchallenged, to penetrate beneath the surface and report.

Once again, no evidence of activity was found, and so, not without a little trepidation, Gerling brought his taskforce down on the surface of the planet. Here reconnaissance parties found only the wreckage and the dead of earlier battles. But on entering the subterranean zone an



appalling sight met their eyes.

All around them lay countless dead, every corpse disfigured by repulsive fungal growths. In two days of searching, among all the tens of thousands, no one was found alive. The nature of the disease, on analysis, tallied with that which had claimed their Lagunan prisoner before the break-out. Mystified, Gerling headed his taskforce for Laguna 7, leaving behind where they lay the sprawled bodies of his former adversaries on their dead and shattered planet. Later, on the sister planet, he was to learn the truth. The cargoes which he had so successfully and relentlessly blockaded contained neither food nor fuel nor oxygen.

The freighters so anxiously awaited carried a specific anti-bacterial agent which, pumped into the atmosphere of Laguna 9's cities and settlements, prevented the onset of an otherwise inevitable and fatal disease whose outward sign was a rapid fungal growth on the skin. In the end, it was not the armed might of Terra that had silenced the proud and indomitable Lagunans, but the unseen enemy in their own natural world.

Within days of Gerling's landing, the first detachments of the Occupation Force began to arrive to begin the grim task of salvage, decontamination and the imposition of Federal Law. Now that the long

Gerling's taskforce at rest on Laguna 9 during the mopping-up operation that never was. Note Laguna 7, source of Laguna 9's vital bacterial inhibitor, low on the horizon. A transport is bringing in supplies to the ground forces.

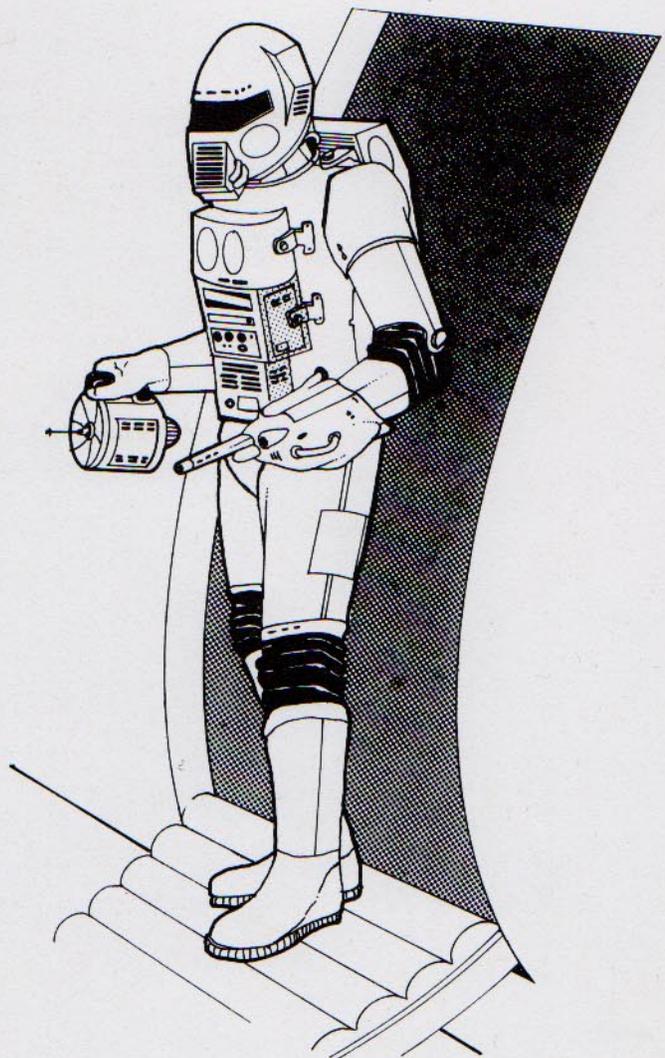
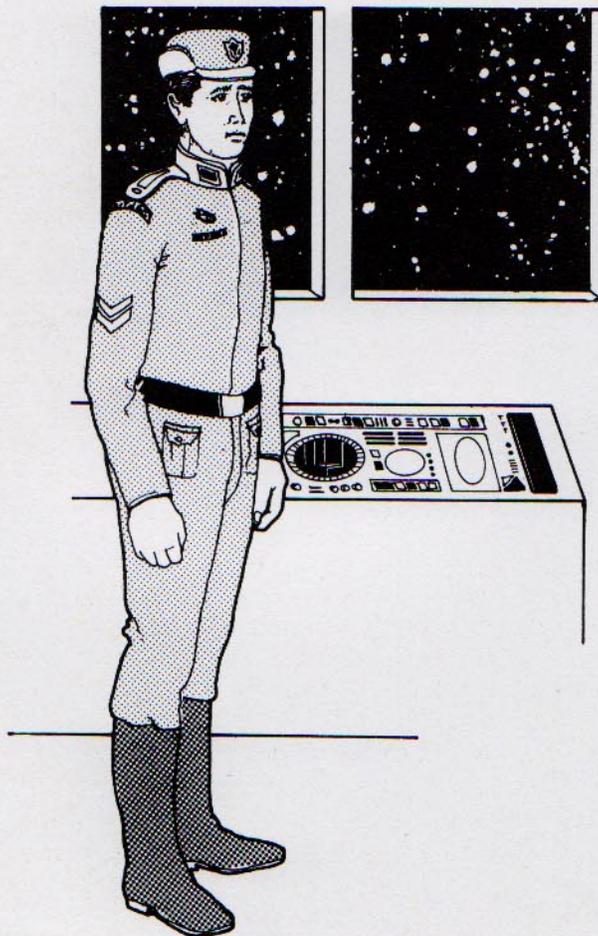


battle was over, Gerling felt only his exhaustion and a growing sense of futility. It was with relief that he handed over command to his young and rather awe-struck replacement, and boarded the ship to take him home to a hero's welcome.

Despite the numbing fatigue, something at the back of his mind was bothering him as the craft carried him rapidly into the darkness of space. He opened his eyes and stared at the distant globe of Laguna 9 as it swam in the viewport. From here there were no signs to be seen of the death and devastation that lay around it. As his mind dully drifted back over the past horrors, the niggling doubt began to surface. How had the descendants of a band of mutineers achieved the technological level they had demonstrated, in 200 years? Even if

the original Lagunans had been highly developed before their extinction by the rebels, how could this explain the fact that none of the enemy equipment was older than 50 years?

Suddenly awake, Gerling tried to thrust out of his mind the conviction that was growing there. Something or someone, either far out in space or lurking within the planet itself must have assisted the men of Laguna 9! But what and why? More importantly, where were they now? Perhaps at that very moment, some sinister power was gathering its strength out in the dark vacuum to strike again at the Terran Federation. A sense of despair swept over him as he closed his eyes and drifted into a fitful sleep, for how can one prepare for a battle that might never come against an enemy one does not know?



TDA Troopers and Kit
1 Standard Uniform. 2 Battledress

Part Two – Conquest of Space

The Nimrodian Club

Robin Maxwell awoke to the melodic tones of the autovalet and irritably punched the alarm cancel key. 'Black coffee,' he groaned into his pillow, and two seconds later an apologetic bleep from the rotund machine announced its arrival in the delivery slot. He fumbled for the control panel and shifted the bed into an upright position. Cradling the drink in his hands he tried to recall last night's party with little success.

After a moment of intense concentration he shrugged and sipped the coffee. What did it matter anyway? He had probably laughed, eaten, danced and drunk just as he had the night before that, and the one before that, and as he probably would tonight. Somehow the prospect was not appealing and he tossed the half empty cup down the service chute with a petulant flourish.

He turned his attention to the day ahead. 'Anything on?' he asked and lay back as the modulated voice of the autovalet recited. 'Item: Maxwell Textiles Board meeting, attendance invited. Item: Fitting for control couch of ground cruiser ordered, attendance invited. Item: Aunt Helga's birthday, acknowledgement advised. Item: Davina Blakely's free-fall party, attendance invited. Item: Tristram Keeler-Finch's Skula hunt, attendance invited. Item . . .'

As the list droned on Robin sighed, swung his legs off the couch and sat with his head in his hands. He really ought to put in an appearance at the meeting but really couldn't face sitting in the Three-

Dee booth next to the bedroom listening to the projected images of the administrator telling him how incredibly rich he was and how much richer he would be by the next board meeting. The list of invitations seemed endless and the valet's voice tedious. 'That's enough' he said, 'Send apologies to the Board, tell the fitters to call next week, send something suitable to the old bat, decline Davina's invite and all the rest. Tell Tristram I'm on my way and get my hunting stuff ready.' With that he eased himself off the bed and wandered into the cleanser.

By the time he emerged his clothes were set out and the valet was plugged into the service circuit organizing the loading of his jet-sporter. Half an hour later he was cruising in the local lane to mid-France and with the craft locked into the flight beam for his destination he sat down in the small saloon, punched a 'Fizzer' and sipped it staring idly through the viewport.

Earth was lovelier now than she had been for a long time. The great industrial exodus of the mid twenty-second century had left her a comparatively empty world. Still the administrative center of the Solar System, it had nevertheless become something of a home for the very wealthy and a holiday resort for off-worlders.

The journey from Switzerland took less than an hour, and feeling the shift in direction as the landing beam locked onto the jet, Robin settled back into the seat clamps. A

slight bump and the clamps slid into their recesses. He stretched, drained his glass and stood up. As he gathered up his gear the door hissed open and Tristram looked up at him. They chatted as they strolled to the hovercar waiting beside the apron and were soon speeding toward the private hunting grounds where the rest of the party waited. On arrival they broke-up into pairs and set off into the dense woods in search of the wild and evil-tempered Skulas which had been imported from Sirius Three to stock the Keeler-Finch estate.

As the two friends pushed into the undergrowth they set their beamers to maximum, checked rechargers and Tristram tuned in his locator set. A single point of light indicated their position and as the rest of the screen was dark he switched the set off. 'We'll have to walk further in, I'm afraid. The last hunt thinned them out a bit.' They came eventually to a small clearing at the foot of a slope and settled themselves beside a fallen tree to wait. Robin sat watching Tristram flick the locator on and off and noted the growing nervousness of the others. In contrast he felt almost nothing and suddenly realized that he was actually very bored. The prospect of a Skula breaking into the clearing hardly stirred him at all. They would know from the locator when it would happen, their beamers would be armed, they would fire and the beast would fall down. They would then wait for the same thing to happen all over again. 'I'm bored,' he grumbled. 'In fact, come to think of it, I am always bored.'

That was when it all began. Over the next months Robin Maxwell devoted considerable time to contemplating this revelation and an idea, at first an unsought fragment of thought, began to take shape as a plan. To Robin and many others like him, risk played no real part in his life, and the more he imagined experiencing an actual threat to life and limb, the more excited he became. It was not long before it became an obsession, until one day he was scanning a vidiotape story set long ago in the eighteenth century and a reference to a duel made everything fall into place. Within two weeks Robin, Tristram and several of

their close friends had formed a society called the Nimrodian Club. Each member was allotted a number which was fed into a computer. On each anniversary of the formation of the society two numbers would be selected at random by the computer. Those members holding those numbers then had one week to hunt down and kill their opposite. If by the end of that time neither had been killed, the remaining members were sworn to find both and execute them. A draw would only be declared if both men were so seriously injured as to be unable to continue.

The first draw took place on June 22nd, 2314 AD and the names paired in this bizarre lottery were Robin Maxwell and a certain Carl Hinton. A week was allowed for affairs to be put in order and preparations made, then both men were taken to a neutral territory in a small transporter equipped with two one-man service craft. At an agreed time both airlocks were opened and the duel had begun.

The two ships were unarmed and both men immediately disappeared in opposite directions, Hinton heading straight to a thickly wooded area about three miles from the parent ship. Robin set down on a rocky outcrop very close by and plotted the landing position of the other ship. As soon as he was sure that his opponent was staying there he moved his equipment outside and began checking it. He was taking only the most primitive of weapons. No beamer or lasergun, no locator set or detector gear, nothing that used electronics and was therefore detectable. Just a plastisteel crossbow and hunting knife, a coil of Thorlon rope and a camouflage smock, thermobaffled to prevent his bodyheat showing on a locator set. He looked at his hands which seemed steady enough, took a deep breath and walked away from the comforting bulk of the ship and scrambled down the jumble of rocks to the forest floor.

It was about four miles to where Hinton had come down, and as he walked he tried to imagine what his adversary would be doing. Knowing Hinton's enthusiasm for gadgetry Robin was relying on him to set himself up in a fixed position

Robin Maxwell pilots his personal craft, an Avery Skysporter, above the gigantic Maxwell Textiles Complex. Immense wealth and endless leisure led him along a dangerous path.



surrounded by all his gear waiting for the hunt to come to him. He knew that a considerable amount of equipment had been loaded into the other ship and it would fit what he knew of the other's personality. Hinton had always been a rather reticent character and Robin had been surprised when he had shown so much enthusiasm for the idea of the Nimrodian Club. Suddenly he wondered if he had made the right decision in not taking any proper equipment and a startling feeling of loneliness swept over him.

Loneliness he recognized, but with it was a curious and unsettling sensation which was new to him.

He stopped walking as a bitter taste grew in his mouth, and an emptiness sucked at his belly. It was fear, it was really fear! He could feel the blood thudding through the arteries in his neck and his lips felt dry and salty. He wanted to run back to the ship very much and found himself backing towards the slope. He stopped and clenched his fists breathing deeply. This was what he had wanted. He couldn't go back now, if Hinton didn't get him the others would. Anyway, it must be the same for the other man, he thought, and the idea relaxed him a little. The first thing to do was to find out for certain what Hinton was doing. Taking a grip on the crossbow he stepped forward again.

An hour later, the light started to fade and Robin slowed his pace, listening to the sounds of the wood and watching for movement among the trees. He placed his tackle at the foot of a large tree and climbed up until he could see the heavily wooded patch where Hinton had landed, only about half a mile away. Descending again, he walked in a wide circle around his target before moving in. Once more he scaled a tree and could just make out the gleaming hull of Hinton's ship. His heart was pounding now and he could feel the sweat on his body. But the fear was tempered with excitement and he felt more alert and aware than he had on any Skula hunt.

The ship was lying at the foot of a rise and Robin was suddenly certain that Hinton was waiting up there. He crept towards the ship, his hands shaking with the feeling of

exhilaration, and lay down on the edge of the clearing where it rested. There was no sign of Hinton so he crawled to the hull and edged round to the airlock, his bow at the ready. He pressed the key and the lock slid open. A quick glance inside the empty craft and he leapt in and headed straight towards the control console. The generator whined as he hit the buttons to create as much interference as possible, before ducking out again and sprinting back into the trees.

Positioning himself within bowshot of the vessel in case Hinton decided to cut the power, Robin waited until it was dusk before moving round to the reverse side of the hillock. Slowly and soundlessly he inched his way up the slope. He felt almost part of the moist earth, every sense alive and straining to detect anything that was out of context. Every nerve-ending tingled as he inched his dirt-streaked face around a fallen trunk. He ducked back breathing heavily, the sweat stinging in his eyes.

In the gloom below him a dark figure was bent over the dim flicker of a locator screen. A broad-beam blaster rested on the lip of the slight hollow, and he could hear the soft ticking of a thermoscanner as he shifted the bow. Holding his breath, he carefully winched back the woven string and slid the heavy bolt into place. His pulse seemed deafening as he eased the bow over the log, and squinted through the sights at the shape below. As the feeling of triumph blazed in him he squeezed the trigger, the barbed flight sang to its mark and the shape folded silently over the viewscreen.

With a shout he sprang to his feet and ran headlong to the hollow, stumbling over the loose soil, sobbing as the tension flooded out of him. He slid into the ring of equipment and looked down at where his bolt lay entangled in Hinton's cloak. But Hinton wasn't there. He stood staring, numb, the crossbow dangling from his hand. There was a small sound behind him and a voice said softly, 'Sorry Robin'. He spun round, his eyes wide, as the laserbeam hummed and cut him in half.

The airlock hissed open and two small ships sped out, heading in opposite directions. The first duel of the Nimrodian Club was about to take place, with Robin Maxwell as one of the combatants.





The Duel of Sisuphos Three

One of the richest mineral sources yet discovered in the Galaxy is the middle of the three planets circling Procyon, about ten light years from Earth. The atmosphere is just breathable and the mass exerts a gravitational pull of about 1.5 G with a temperature range just tolerable for humanoid life forms. Conditions on Sisuphos were far from comfortable. It was dry and bleak, scoured by hot gusty winds which drove the fine sand which covered so much of the surface into every crevice. The only living organisms native to the planet were varieties of lichen and isolated patches of scrubby grasses.

The men who mined the riches of this hellish world came for many reasons. The pay was one, but those who came for the huge salaries rarely stayed, or lived, long enough to return as wealthy men, and those that lasted were more often than not, unable to return to more agreeable societies. Sisuphos was outside the law simply because no-one could be enticed there to enforce it, and it had become something of a refuge for those who were outcasts from more civilized worlds. Disputes and disagreements between individuals were resolved by whatever means came to hand, and duels were commonplace. One such event, however, became legendary.

Each of the many mining camps had its own unofficial hierarchy. Camps 3 and 4 were led by two brothers who, having made

themselves unwelcome almost everywhere in known space, finally settled on Sisuphos. Originally both of the Gruber brothers had signed on at Camp 3 and lost no time asserting their harsh authority over miners and managers alike. It was inevitable that the camp became too small for them both and the younger brother, Hans, moved to Camp 4 to pursue his own fortunes. Although the basic wages on Sisuphos were high, the real money lay in production bonuses, and the two men drove their fellows mercilessly, taking not only their own, but also a proportion of the bonuses earned by the others in their crews.

One day a massive new lode was discovered almost midway between the two camps and both brothers raced to the site, arriving at the same time. The argument became a brawl which became a pitched battle between the two groups, fought with anything which came to hand. Eventually the elder brother, Joseph, ran to the massive Open Cast Mining Tractor towering over the field of battle and took the elevator straight to the control centre. The enormous machine thundered into life and he punched in the programme to start the mining operation. By the time the gouges and separators were biting into the hard, baked soil, Hans Gruber was already making for the controls of Camp 3's blue painted OCM Tractor. A moment later it was picking up speed toward the other machine, and minutes later, crashed into it with a shriek of tortured metal and fractured pressure pipes.

Both men threw on maximum power and the gigantic machines grappled and heaved like a pair of

nightmarish monsters. The air filled with dust and the wail of overloaded servos as the huge wheels clawed and scabbled at the hard surface trying frantically for sufficient purchase to force the adversary aside. Grappling arms and gouges tore at each other as the two men struggled to gain an advantage until eventually the Camp 3 tractor pulled itself free and retreated. There was a brief pause and then with a roar the two monsters closed again with a crash and an explosion of dust and sand. For over an hour the two giants heaved and swayed in the clouds of dust and the ground became littered with debris until suddenly there was a shattering explosion followed by several more, and the forward portion of Camp 3's machine disintegrated in a series of blinding flashes and hurtling wreckage.

Frantically, Joseph Gruber threw his machine into reverse, but the great wheels tore at the ground without effect. The two giants were inextricably locked together. Flames flickered and spread as the protective coating blistered and arcs of electrical current crackled in the torn metal. Suddenly there was an earthshaking roar from the belly of his brother's machine and he sprawled against the bulkhead as the control room tilted crazily. Then a blinding flash and eruption of earth and metal as the reactor went out of control.

Should anyone chose to visit this harsh, uncomfortable planet the site of this epic duel is easily found. All that remains to be seen is a wide circle of sand fused into glass by the intense heat and a large radioactive crater marking what was once a prime mining site.

The two massive mining tractors crashed together as their operators fought a desperate duel.

The Great Rebellion

From its foundation in 1999 AD as a subsidiary of the World Council, the Terran Trade Authority rapidly became the single most powerful entity in known space. Originally established to administer and coordinate trade on Earth its responsibilities and powers grew with the conquest of space; first within the solar system itself and later with the newly colonized worlds as they became established. As more and more sources of supply and demand came into being, so the task of monitoring and controlling them became more complex.

The devastating Proxima Wars of the mid twenty-first century imposed a tremendous strain on Earth's industrial and technological reserves, and in order to meet the demands of an immensely costly war fought continuously for 20 years, the careful husbandry of available resources was of paramount importance. The TTA was awarded the powers necessary for the task of governing the exploitation of raw materials and their distribution to the manufacturing industries whose own output was in turn subject to the Authority's approval. The need for highly specialized goods for particular military requirements resulted in the TTA setting up various of its own manufacturing complexes, and another stage in its development began.

By the end of that century, most military ships were commissioned from the TTA's own yards and the spare capacity of the post-war years

was made available for the construction of civil craft. Licenses were granted to the two major independent shipbuilders, Avery Astronautics and Consolidated Aerospace. It was not long before every craft produced in the expanding Terran Federation was subject to the Authority's approval.

The gigantic complex of the Terran Trade Authority center was situated where the old North African shipyards once were and housed all the sophisticated equipment vital to the difficult task of co-ordinating the wide and intricate web of enterprise of both the Empire and allied systems such as Alpha and Proxima Centauri. From here were operated all the scores of administrative centers, the hundreds of executive bases and the thousands of sub stations scattered throughout the Empire. All the data banks and the machinery of government were housed in a base the size of a large city surrounded by cultivated forests.

There were, of course, many who resented bitterly the degree of control the TTA had over their commercial activities and the powers it had to enforce them. In that respect the Authority was almost a law unto itself, and often the balance of the vast network of interstellar trade was maintained at the expense of minority interests. This was particularly so in the case of the shipbuilding industry which had for many years, prior to and even during the Proxima Wars, been one of the most powerful forces in the hands of

A few military ships had been undergoing minor repairs in the Consolidated Aerospace yards and two were used in the first raid against the Central Administration. Shown here is the TTA 355B Striker attacking with Vesta thermobombs.

any group of individuals. The dawning of the age of Man's expansion into space had channelled huge resources into the industry and its allied fields. The growing reluctance of the population to contribute significantly to government-originated programmes coupled with the undeniable need for the exploitation of space gradually allowed the initiative to fall into the hands of commercial interests.

And so the giant astro-engineering corporations grew into being, the largest of which was Consolidated Aerospace. Possessing the largest privately owned shipyards in the Solar System and controlling many of the associated industries such as electronics and nuclear research plants, Consolidated Aerospace were obviously unhappy to see their influence over the expansion into space reduced and control placed in the hands of an outside agency. Though they resisted bitterly they were unable to prevent the inevitable, and the organization was eventually absorbed into the TTA structure. After considerable initial problems a workable relationship was gradually achieved, but one man never accepted the change of direction.



Harcourt Apseley was a self-willed and independent man who had joined Consolidated as a boy in one of the machine shops, studying electronics in his spare time. He never socialized and spent every waking moment trying to satisfy his consuming interest in astrophysics. He gradually worked his way up to becoming Chief Engineer of the main fabrication yards, before leaving to set up a company producing highly specialized electronic detection equipment with a degree of sophistication far in excess of current needs. Ordinarily it seemed to be the recipe for disaster, but after the contact with the inhabitants of Alpha Centauri had revealed that Man was not alone in the Universe, Apseley had anticipated the war which was to accelerate the evolution of space travel so dramatically

As a result his company flourished and he sold out to Consolidated for a seat on their main board. There was no-one to match his dedication, drive and ambition and it was only a matter of time before the effective control of the corporation was in his hands. He was like a man possessed and

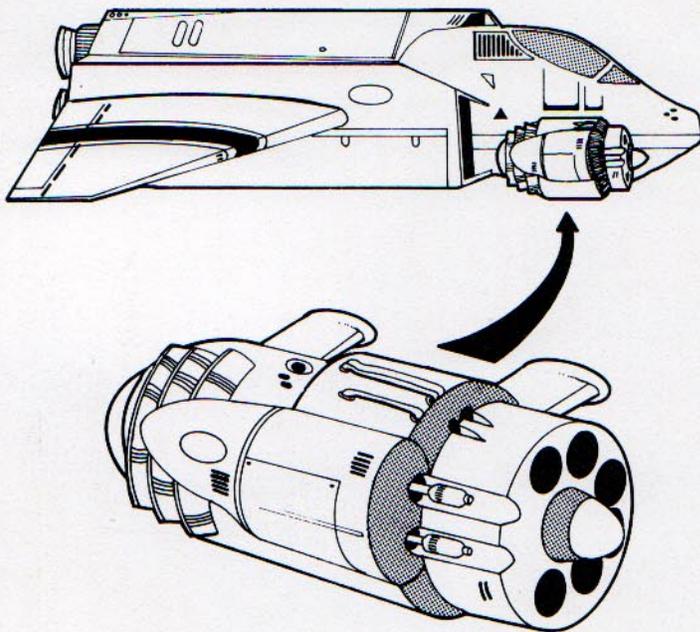
involved himself directly with every aspect of Consolidated's activities, from product development, through the various manufacturing stages to sales and exploitation. He anticipated the move to explore and colonize worlds outside our own system and while others were seeking to exploit the growing demand for small private spacecraft, concentrated on building massive vessels capable of carrying settlers across the vastness of space. His vision was to see Consolidated Aerospace represented on every new world, with manufacturing bases there building the ships to drive even deeper into the Galaxy.

Already the largest shipbuilding facility on Earth, under his direction three out of every major craft in production came off his slips, and it was not surprising that he fiercely resisted the increasing degree of control that the TTA imposed on his activities. His demands for raw materials could only be met at the expense of other areas of manufacturing, and it was felt that there was a risk of supply exceeding demand and therefore introducing an element of premature obsolescence in

times that could ill afford unnecessary consumption. Relationships between the two organizations, always stormy, became impossible and the Terran Central Administration instructed the TTA to cut off essential supplies until Apseley agreed to co-operate in the implementation of a programme of planned growth.

On receiving this ultimatum, Apseley retired to one of his isolated research centers in Brasil where he remained closeted with a number of friends and colleagues for some days. There was much to-ing and fro-ing of private craft during this period, carrying some of the most important men in the astronautics industry as well as some influential government figures. Eventually he emerged from seclusion and returned to Consolidated's main European headquarters. He appeared to be a changed man, and meekly agreed to accept the Authority's stipulations with scarcely a murmur. He offered to personally reorganize the giant corporation to reduce production targets and allow the involvement of the TTA in all major new development projects. Many of the subsidiary organizations would be re-directed towards other commercial ends at the discretion of the Authority. It was a greater concession than had ever been hoped for and the offer was received with enthusiasm.

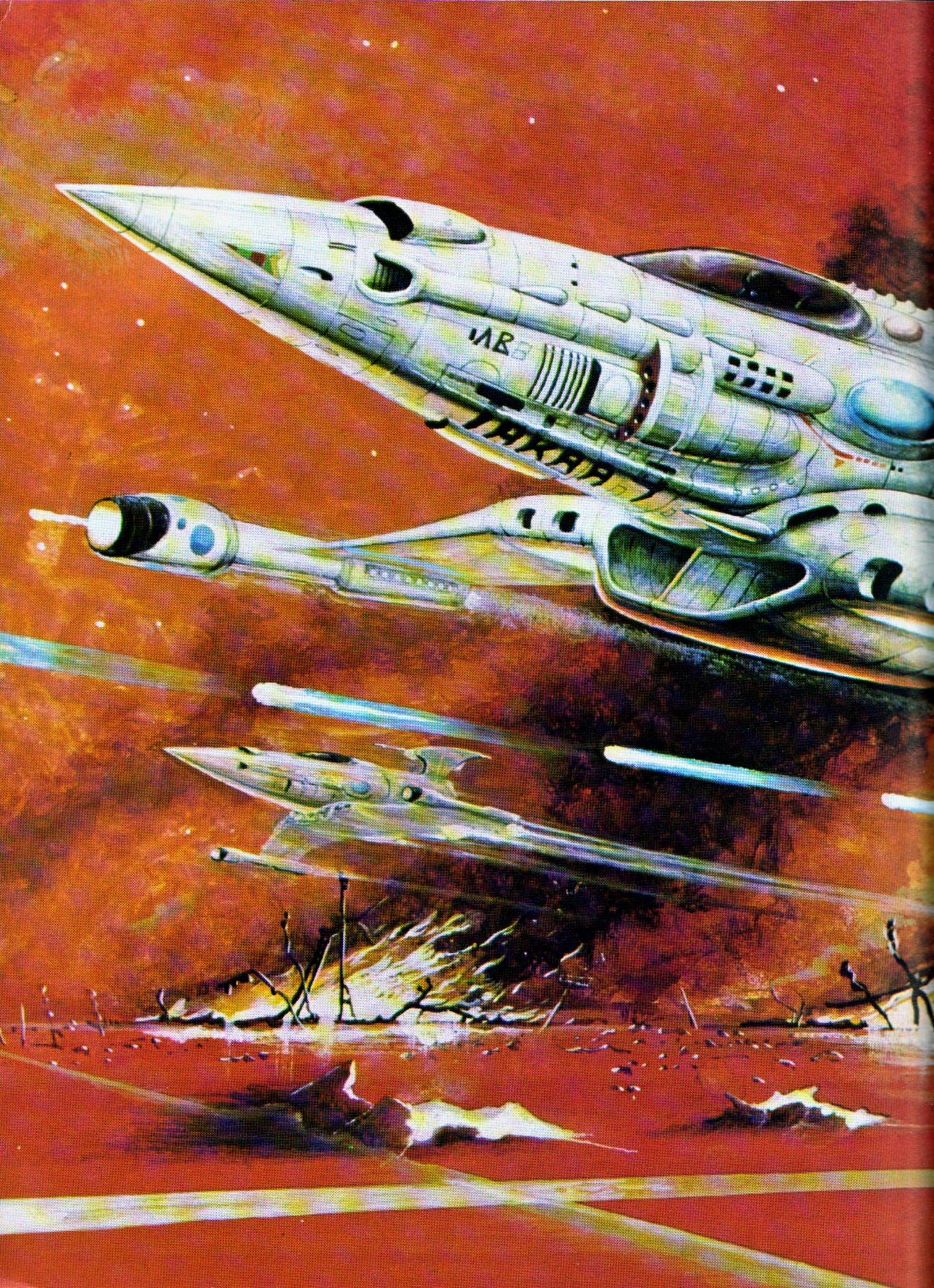
For the next few months, Apseley threw himself into a programme of visits and conferences that would have destroyed a lesser man. Curiously, one or two of his key men disappeared soon to be followed by others until one day, Apseley himself failed to turn up where he was expected. Efforts to trace him revealed the disturbing fact that unaccountably large numbers of his staff from all levels were missing and although reasons had been given in most cases, checks proved them all to be fabrications. Gradually reports started to flood in of missing ships, equipment and materials. Entire craft had disappeared and vast quantities



Rebel Clip-on weapon pack used to convert civil ships for offensive roles.

The Rebel fleet consisted mainly of modified civil craft such as this CA 1992 Ferryman adapted to carry and launch chemical warhead missiles.







of supplies had been re-routed to unknown destinations.

An emergency meeting of the Central Administration was called, attended by the senior officials from many of the government agencies in North America. Much of the missing material had military applications and constituted a grave threat to security. As discussions were in progress, a top priority message came in from Terran Defence Authority headquarters. It read: 'Communications disrupted locally. Contact with various overseas bases lost. Something is wrong. Have ordered General Alert. Please standby to authorize Maximum Alert Status. End.' Two minutes later Vesta thermobombs began to rain down on the city.

Various key military and government centers round the world found themselves similarly under attack. The Central Information Bureau was virtually wiped out in a thermobomb raid. The Military Intelligence Office in Rome suffered a similar fate, and the TTA headquarters in North Africa was destroyed in a surprise nuclear strike. Important military bases reported that they were under attack from an extraordinary range of vessels carrying armament ranging from nuclear weapons to almost useless industrial laserguns. Nearly all the craft appeared to be commercial types modified to carry armament. There were even tiny private transport vehicles fitted with simple chemical rocket launchers striking at military launch sites. Minor bases were being surprised and overrun and used as refuelling and arming facilities. More dangerously, military vehicles were captured and pressed into service. Apseley's 'Impossible Army' was a threat to the very existence of the Terran Federation. Every civil ship and an increasing number of government ones became suspect and the Defence Authority, never having anticipated a civil uprising of this order, was thrown into confusion.

Apseley was utilizing his considerable knowledge of

The fate of the uprising was sealed when the Mars based TTA Barracudas finally arrived to reinforce the hard-pressed government crews.

electronics and communications to intercept and distort messages and instructions. The government forces had no knowledge of his deployment or supply bases and the various detachments operational felt as though they were fighting a Will o' the Wisp. They were simply not equipped to react to this kind of enemy. Desperate attempts were made to intercept the motley bands of assorted craft and contain them until reinforcements arrived from other parts of the System. The situation was further complicated by the evacuation of the civilian population from target areas.

The very preposterousness of Apseley's action was his principal advantage, and he exploited it as much as he could. His ships would move into civil flight paths, follow normal operating procedures, and were almost impossible to distinguish from the regular traffic. Suddenly veering off to strike at their target, they would then disappear in the same way. Soon all civil traffic was grounded to prevent further use of this technique, but by now sufficient military craft with their sophisticated electronic equipment, were in his hands for him not to be so dependent on his earlier improvisations.

The nearest major Defence Force base was on the moon, but the Consolidated Aerospace fabrication yards there had been taken over by Apseley's men who were already tying-up a considerable proportion of the Lunar Squadrons. The latter were badly hit initially but the rebel forces were much easier to locate and strike than back on Earth. They were destroyed without much difficulty once the Defence Forces had recovered from their early astonishment. But valuable time had been lost, and the situation on the Home Planet was becoming extremely serious. Apseley had even taken the opportunity to bomb out of existence the big Australian manufacturing complex of his main competitor, Avery Astronautics, as well as the Southern Hemisphere Control Center of the Terran Defence Authority.

But the picture was soon to alter. Interceptor squadrons based on Mars were already on their way and these craft were far more advanced than

the second line ships with which the Earth based units were equipped and which were really only intended for policing roles. Ten days after Apseley's extraordinary onslaught was launched, the first detachments of the sleek and efficient craft entered Earth's atmosphere. By now the security forces had regrouped and were co-ordinating operations fairly effectively. The movements of the rebel forces were now being monitored and the Interceptors moved in.

The strange and various collection of hastily converted civil craft and captured government ships were no match for the new arrivals and rebel losses mounted dramatically with minimal casualties among the interceptor crews. But there were still too few of them and the battle was far from won as Apseley continued to strike at the launch sites and communication centers of the government forces. He was still gaining access to supplies of fuel and heavy armaments and had sufficient servicing facilities to keep his ships in the air almost continuously. But it was men he was running out of. The lack of replacement crews began to tell as the round the clock operations took their toll in exhaustion and a growing accident rate. He began to lose ships through simple pilot error and morale was declining rapidly. Gradually crews began to disappear, trying to escape what was now becoming inevitable by heading out into space. The interceptors were able to strike at Apseley's bases without even coming under fire, and the security forces were starting to recapture their previous positions.

With the arrival of further interceptors from the now secure Lunar bases opposition collapsed and Rebel crews began surrendering their ships without a struggle. All that remained was the mopping up operation and the long, painful business of counting the cost.

Apseley himself was spotted trying to escape the planet, but escaped retribution by overloading the reactor on his ship as the interceptors closed in. What he had hoped to achieve in the long run remains a mystery, but he had come nearer than any man to gaining control of Earth and possibly of the Federation.

The improvised rebel squadrons – despite their earlier successes – were no match for the interceptors which eventually arrived from Martian bases. In the foreground is a converted CA 440 minifreighter fleeing with a personal transport schooner from government ships.



Colonization

Incident 1

The struggle to survive in unfamiliar and often hostile environments has always been the lot of settlers in strange lands. Throughout Man's history colonists have pushed out from familiar places to carve themselves a new life and wrest their fortunes from the wilderness. It is probably the greatest test of the human spirit when individuals pit themselves against the unknown, relying on faith and their own ingenuity to enable them to survive. This is never more true than when it is not simply new lands that need to be conquered, but entire planets. The traditional problems are multiplied a hundredfold and, very often, the isolation of the colonists is complete.

A typical example was Drakon's Folly, a planet roughly the size of Mars and one of a tight group of four orbiting the double star 70 Ophiuci. Atmospheric density and the gravitational field are somewhat less than Earth's making life possible, if not pleasant. In 2303 AD an advance party of 248 settlers and scientists landed north of the planet's equator and speedily assembled a temporary base to accommodate themselves and the huge mound of equipment and supplies they had brought. The hull of the massive ship that had carried them from the Solar System provided the basis for much of this and the only structures assembled on the planet's surface housed vehicles and drilling equipment for the water supply which was their first objective.

While most were engaged in the business of establishing the

settlement over the next few months, the scientific personnel were exploring their new home and identifying resources which could be exploited or even exported in exchange for those things they could not provide for themselves. There seemed to be an abundance of various valuable mineral deposits and the soil was suitable for growing most of the seeds they had brought with them. Indeed much of the indigenous flora was fit for human consumption, such as the great rafts of algae-like plants which possessed an extremely high water content and a simple cellular structure very rich in nutrients. There seemed to be, however, very few life forms of a higher order, and no animal life that could be identified, although the domestic creatures they had brought seemed to thrive.

One curious phenomenon discovered was a series of slimy paths, slightly radioactive and composed of a mucous material, which ran across the surface some distance from the camp. Some of these had dried and were disappearing while others appeared fairly fresh. Although they were followed for several miles no indication of their source was found and no organized pattern could be found in their distribution.

The early months were extremely busy with the establishment of basic requirements being the first priority. There was little time for casual exploration and the settlement began to take shape with large cultivated areas of test plantings to discover the

A team of settlers set out on an ill-fated journey to track down the monstrous Blueworms of Drakon's Folly.





most efficient strains of various foodstuffs. There were even grazing lands to sustain the animals they had carried so far across space, and an incident in one such area provided a glimpse of the horrors to come.

Two of the herdkeepers were making a routine patrol of their charges one morning when they came to one of the strange mucous trails which had been seen before. They split up to follow both directions of the trail, and the keeper moving along the greasy path away from the pastures found that it was becoming drier as he walked until it was no more than crisp, translucent flakes on the dusty soil before disappearing altogether. He retraced his steps and soon came to the low slopes surrounding the grasslands. As he reached the crest of the ridge a macabre scene came into view. The entire field was littered with the bones of cattle, scattered among the tufts of wiry grass and gleaming wetly as the pale sun caught the strands of mucous covering them. On the edge of the field lay a human skeleton and among the bones lay the electric cattle-prod his colleague had carried. He stared blankly at the desolate panorama then turned and ran back towards the distant ship.

Immediately after his return, a party investigated, and found nothing to indicate what had taken place. The mucous trail crossed and recrossed the area leaving a radioactive trace before disappearing towards the rocky region to the north. Six men set out on hoverscooters to follow the track before it vanished completely in the growing heat of the day. When they reached the fissured crags of the bleak northern range a huge number of the oily marks, some fairly fresh, could be seen among the tumbled, jagged rocks, but nothing to explain their presence. They landed at a spot where the slicks were particularly in evidence, left one of their number to guard the scooters and set off to explore the area.

On some worlds already settled, the colonists had to fight for survival against both the predators of the planet and civilizations already inhabiting it.

There were many cracks and caves throughout the region and one very large one was discovered, its entrance coated in layers of congealed slime and which their counters revealed to be emitting considerable radiation levels. Cautiously they entered, the light from their Flourobeams glinting eerily from the encrusted walls as they edged over the worn, sticky floor. Although the radiation levels were increasing, they were still tolerable and the crevice widened out as they moved deeper into the darkness, until their lights barely reached the polished roof above them.

Rounding a bend in the tunnel, the sides of the shaft vanished into the gloom on either side, and their beams glowed from a sheer cliff obstructing their path which seemed to be composed of a curious blue material. Whatever the substance was it seemed to be the source of the radiation and one of the party checked the closures of his insulated suit and walked up to it. He stretched out his hand and touched it. Instantly the surface shivered and rippled. With a cry he leapt back as the whole wall shifted and slid sideways. There was a terrifying sound of rushing air as the monstrous body of the creature shifted round.

Panic coursed through the men as they stumbled and collided their way to the entrance. Something was moving rapidly up behind them and as the shaft narrowed, two of them became entangled with each other and crashed onto the greasy floor. As those in front burst into the light they were followed by desperate screams quickly drowned in a hideous sucking sound. Without pausing they ran towards the place where they had left the scooters, and gesticulating to the lookout they had left, launched themselves into the air with the bewildered guard close behind.

As they lifted to maximum height, a massive blue shape burst out of the cave mouth, its great bulbous head questing to and fro, mouth agape. It spotted them and reared violently upwards, catching the hindmost craft and sending it spinning to the ground. Its rider crashed onto a jagged peak of rock and hung grotesquely, his suit snagged on a

projection. The great blue worm-like shape lunged down onto the body as the last three craft skimmed across the bleak landscape towards the settlement.

That night a conference was held to decide how to combat this threat to the survival of the group, and the next day the first of many observation parties set out to determine the number and distribution of these fearsome creatures. The Worms were beginning to venture closer and closer to the main base in their search for food in an area which was obviously lacking in wildlife as a result of their voracious appetites. Those of the settlers not involved in the scouting patrols busied themselves in constructing defences such as high voltage fences and improvised minefields.

As the patrols reported back, a clearer picture emerged. The cave first discovered was one of three in the area occupied by the blue serpents and provided accommodation for what was obviously an integrated family group of about ten or eleven Worms. The next nearest 'nest' was 50 miles away and as their range appeared to be fairly limited, they posed no immediate threat.

Moving at night, they seemed not to be greatly effected by the conventional laserguns and beamers carried by those guarding the perimeter fences as their regenerative abilities were extraordinarily sophisticated, and damaged tissue was replaced within minutes. Eventually one of the twin-stilted construction modules was adapted to carry a high capacity industrial lasercutter and after preliminary tests was stationed on the perimeter to await the arrival of the next hunting party of Worms.

When they next appeared the 'stilter' was moved straight to the sector where the massive beasts were ranging backwards and forwards in front of the wire barriers. Positioning themselves as close to one of the creatures as possible the colonists triggered the beam and a powerful lance of light sliced deep into the body of the creature. The huge, black shape thrashed wildly as the beam was played over the coarse skin,



piercing deep to the heart of the Worm. The darkness blazed with intermittent flashes of light as the shredded carcass burst through the electrified fence and crashed to the ground, an evil smelling dark fluid seeping from the many slashes and cuts in the leathery hide. Although still quivering and shifting as its internal organs settled, the huge creature was dead.

The Stilter strode to the break in the defences and began firing streak after streak of intense light at the dim shapes beyond. The creatures seemed incensed by the death of one of their number and pushed up to the wire, reacting less and less violently to the charges of current as though becoming acclimatized. The power supply for the laser was running low so the operator fixed on the nearest of

the Worms, concentrating the beam on one area to prevent the tissue repairing itself. Finally the beast reared and twisted before collapsing to the ground. As if at a signal, the remainder turned and moved off towards the north.

The colonists spent the next few days re-equipping the rest of the Stilters in the same way and, when they were complete, an expedition was mounted to follow the Worms to their nesting grounds. Within hours of their arrival, all the creatures had been destroyed with the loss of only two machines and their operators. Before long all was as it had been before except that on the low ridges surrounding the grazing lands could be seen the spidery outlines of Stilters where the herdkeepers had stood.

Incident 2

Probably the strangest story concerning the settlement of a new world, and one which failed, was the attempted colonization of New Erewhon, now known as Bedlam. This tempting and unapproachable planet was in every respect the ideal subject for exploitation. Early unmanned surveys revealed a lush and obviously fertile world with a climate much like that of Earth, but if anything, more agreeable. The rich vegetation was tropical in appearance and covered most of the land masses. About 60 per cent of the planet consisted of warm seas and a large number of lakes and broad rivers. There were indications of considerable mineral deposits and samples of plantforms and bacterial organisms suggested that the introduction of new species would pose no unusual problems.

The preliminary report submitted to the Colonial Board of the Terran Trade Authority classified it as an A1 Settlement subject, the first to ever qualify for maximum rating. As such

Using an industrial lasergun mounted on a Stilter, one of the colonists attacks the giant worms.

it was given priority status in the manned exploration programme and as soon as the earlier material had been re-examined and the survey teams briefed, the first ships were on their way.

The landing was uneventful and a base camp quickly established. Within two days the first pieces of survey data were being transmitted back to Vega Data Center, but the Day Three routine report contained bad news. A five man biological team had set out on the second day and had not returned. All teams operating away from the base camp carried trace transmitters and when the party failed to show up, their signal was tracked by a second patrol, who followed it to the study group's temporary camp and were met by a grisly sight. The camp was a shambles, with equipment and cases scattered everywhere and inside one of the shelters were the badly mutilated bodies of four of the scientists. The fifth was found crouching beneath their transporter, completely insane. He was heavily sedated and brought back to Base One with the bodies of his colleagues.

Every effort was made to try and discover from him an account of

what had happened, but without success. Three days later a garbled message was received from one of the other teams in an outlying region. It was obviously an incoherent cry for help and another rescue team was dispatched, only to find a scene horribly reminiscent of the earlier tragedy but this time four out of the six men were alive and insane.

Two days later the same thing occurred, and then it happened in one of the dormitories inside the main base. That night a series of hysterical screams was heard coming from the room. Men from a neighbouring shelter rushed into the darkened building, the sounds of utter panic increased, reaching a crescendo before trailing off into silence. By the time others arrived all was quiet, and they cautiously entered to find an all too familiar scene. It was impossible to establish what had caused the deaths or the terror of the victims. Nothing had left the building which could have caused such a panic and in view of the number of instances it was unlikely that in every case, one man had become deranged and attacked his colleagues.

Nothing that made sense could be extracted from those who were still alive. Each of them babbled on with descriptions of impossible and terrifying images, and the only step that could be taken was to declare a state of emergency. There were only two study teams still in the field and they were recalled. One returned. The situation was now becoming desperate, and Vega Data Center sent an evacuation unit to orbit the planet. By the time they arrived there had been no further reports from the surface, and the worst was feared.

Awaiting instructions from Vega, they went into stationary orbit and continued trying to make contact with the base below. Suddenly one of the crew who was staring out of a viewport, shrieked into the intercom, and others ran to look. There, close by the ship, was a dreadful apparition – an impossibly huge three-headed hound, solid and undeniable its head swung towards the ship and its lips curled back in a snarl. As they stared unbelievably, the other heads swung slowly round to face the ship and the creature

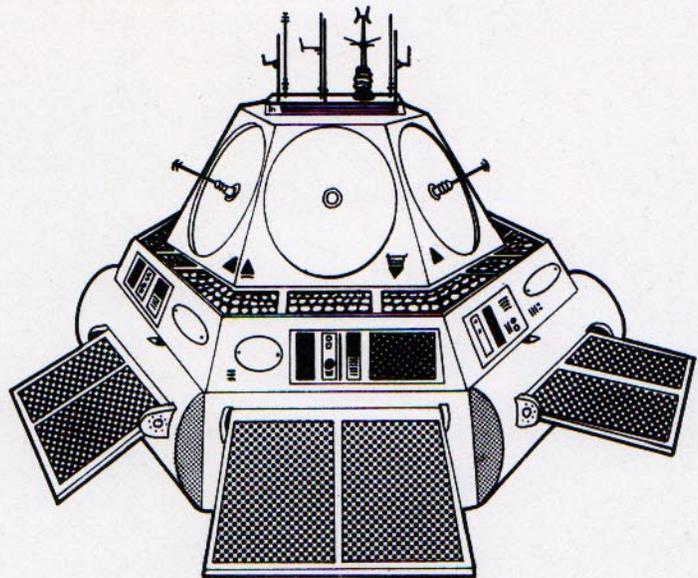
eased back on its haunches and tensed as if to spring.

The Commander tore himself away from the port and punched the alert button. Instinctively, the crew slipped into their positions and the drive units erupted into life, tearing the ship out of orbit and out into empty space. Behind them the fearful image shimmered and faded until there was nothing there but the stars.

The military were eventually called in and experienced for themselves similar hallucinations and mind-numbing sensations of terror. Several attempts to approach the planet were made with increasingly positive reactions, as though whatever caused the images and emotional stimuli was feeding on the fear and growing stronger. Automatic surveillance craft were sent to confirm the fate of the original expedition which was as anticipated.

There has been considerable speculation as to the cause of these phenomena but nothing has been established. Samples taken of the atmosphere have revealed nothing to account for them and there are no detectable emissions or radiations from the planet to explain these extraordinary events. Bedlam has been placed strictly off-limits and is ringed by sensor modules to prevent ships straying into the vicinity of this strange, luxuriant and deadly world.

Visions of a deadly world: the sight that greeted the rescue ship that came too late to save the team surveying a planet which was a colonist's dream.



Orbital Guard Sensors as stationed around Cerberus.



The Pirate World

In 2048 AD the most devastating war in the history of Man broke out involving the civilizations of three great stellar systems. The Proxima Wars, as they were called, lasted for 20 years of unrestrained fury and destruction, during which time the combatants were fighting for more than honour or a political advantage. They were committed to a bitter struggle for the very survival of their respective species, and as the war progressed, so the nature of the weapons employed became ever more sophisticated and efficient. In the early stages crude but effective nuclear hardware was widely and indiscriminately employed, but as defensive measures improved, offensive armament became steadily more refined and specific.

Although the new generations of military hardware attained levels of fearsome ingenuity hitherto inconceivable, it was the comparatively primitive thermonuclear devices employed in the early years which were to have the most serious long-term repercussions. Millions of creatures from all three systems perished in the white heat of nuclear blasts. Millions more suffered lingering deaths from secondary effects, and residual radiation continued to claim lives for many years. Of even greater significance in the light of more recent events were the huge numbers of unfortunates who suffered but did not die as a direct result of the detonating warheads. Many were scarcely aware of the damage they

had sustained and carried on their lives apparently unaffected and, although most of these were now sterile, some carried the seeds of a new horror.

After hostilities had finally ceased the participants withdrew to begin the overwhelming task of rebuilding their shattered worlds. Industry, commerce and the entire social fabric had in each case been drastically changed to meet the insatiable demands of a long and desperate conflict and the task of reconstruction was hampered by sadly depleted resources of materials, manpower and expertise together with constantly shifting priorities. In these early stages, most of the effort was directed toward the revitalization of industry and trade. Everything else was approached in a somewhat piecemeal fashion such as the rebuilding of wartorn towns and cities, the redirecting of communications and the re-establishment of individual communities. The care of those affected by the shadows of the mushroom clouds which sprouted in the early years of the war, but who were outwardly unharmed, was considered to be well down the list of pressing needs.

At first the struggle to rebuild their worlds fully occupied those faced with the task of salvaging their lives from the devastation and masked the terrible images of the war which were burned into their minds. Physical evidence of the long struggle was erased as speedily as possible and the

Hundreds of small freighters, available after the end of the Laguna Wars, carried the mutants in their exodus to the Capella System.



very mention of it became taboo. Those unfortunate enough to carry the scars of war were treated as outcasts from society, and were increasingly forced to form their own communities away from those who were unaffected. Although officially deplored, the strength of popular feeling made it impossible for the authorities to insist that these individuals be integrated into the rest of society. They were despised and instances of lynchings and stonings began to occur with increasing frequency. They were segregated into special communities far from existing settlements and it was here that the first of their children were born.

Those able to reproduce passed on genetic codes distorted by the effects of various radiation doses and the result was a mutation. Many did not survive but others did and invoked the fear inspired hatred of the rest of society. In order to prevent wholesale massacres, the authorities decided to move them to their own planet and a suitable one in the Capella binary system was set aside for this purpose. In 2128 AD the exodus began, and six of the huge Voyager 6 Settler ships set out accompanied by four Connestogas carrying the materials and equipment to enable them to build their own society in the constellation of Aurigae.

As far as the authorities on all the planets involved with the scheme were concerned the problem was now resolved. After government survey ships reported the safe arrival of the mutant settlers and later their apparent well-being, no further contact was had with them until circumstances decreed otherwise.

In 2256 AD a commercial orecarrier returning from the rich asteroid fields in the Menkalinan system beyond Capella, disappeared without trace. Shortly afterwards a convoy of four carriers reported themselves to be under attack from unknown ships before they too vanished. The Federal Law Enforcement Agency dispatched two ships to investigate the area but nothing was found to indicate who or what was responsible. About a year later a general trader taking supplies and luxury goods to the miners never reached its destination and TTA

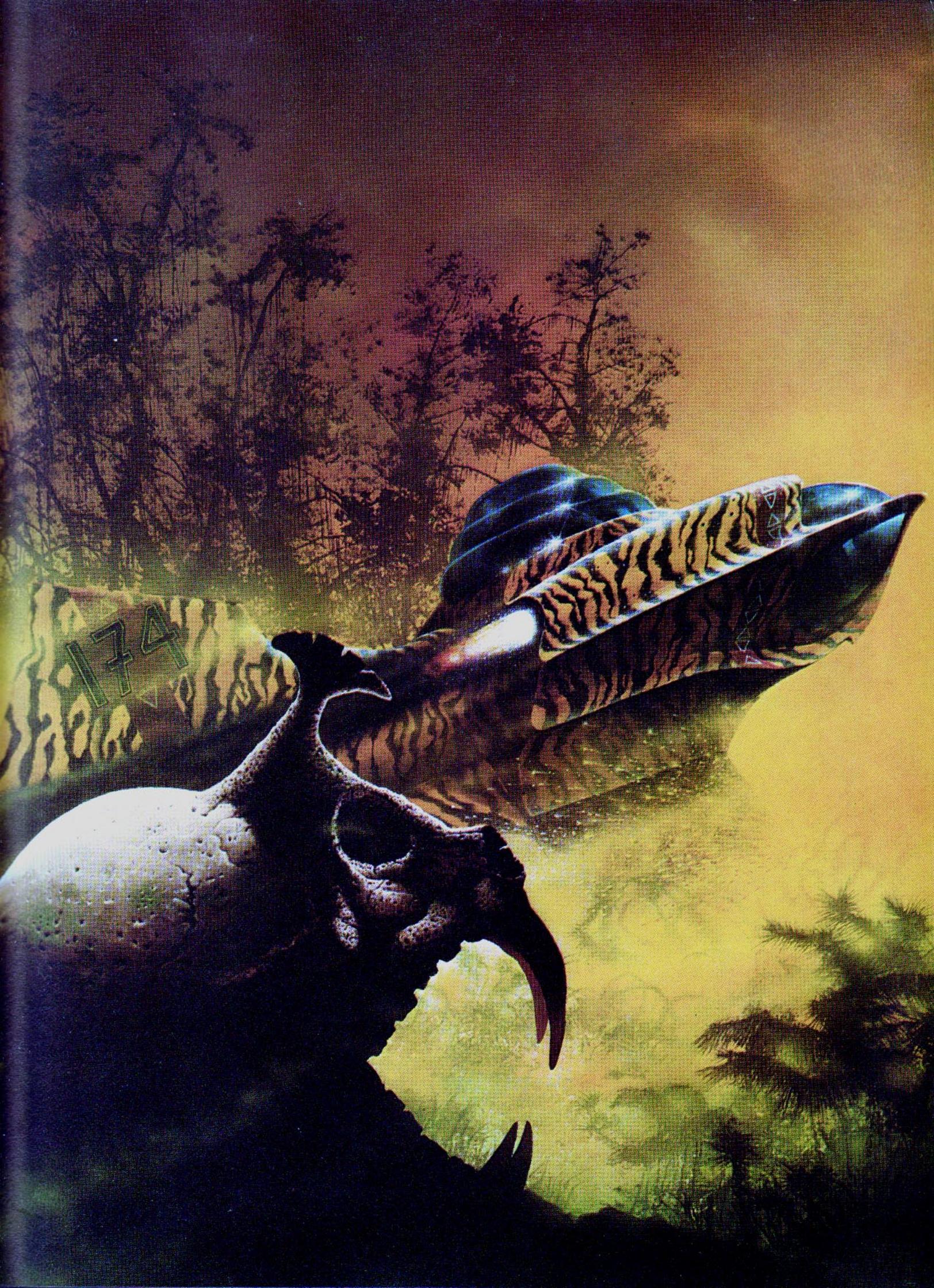
scouts again found no clue. All the craft involved had been travelling the busy and important trade route which led not only to the great ore-fields but also to the growing manufacturing complexes situated in that area.

When, later that year, two more ships disappeared it was decided that something had to be done to prevent the disruption of this vital link, and two TTA ships were fitted out to appear like unarmed freighters and joined a small convoy en route to Menkalinan fields. Their course took them within a light year of Capella and as they neared the distinctive yellow star, their mass detectors picked up the signals of objects emerging from warp-drive. Seconds later four unidentified craft appeared on their viewscreens closing fast, and the tight, brilliant beam of a laser weapon cut instantly across the nose of the leading freighter. The TTA craft immediately launched a counterattack while the rest of the convoy scattered and succeeded in destroying one of the attackers and immobilizing another before the remaining pair retreated and re-entered warp.

Anxious to discover the identity of the assailants, one of the Law Enforcement captains manoeuvred his ship alongside the damaged stranger. As he was jockeying into position there was a blinding flash and fragments of both ships hurtled out into the darkness. Whoever these alien raiders were, they were certainly determined to keep their identities secret, and the mystery only deepened when many of the items of equipment salvaged from the wreckage were found to be of a standard terrestrial pattern, some even bearing Terran Trade Authority serial numbers.

The nearest occupied planet was the mutant colony in the Capella system nearby, but this was a self-sufficient world that was unlikely to have felt the need, or indeed the inclination to develop sophisticated spacecraft. In any case, the raiders had been equipped with warp-drive and could therefore have come from almost anywhere in this section of the Galaxy. It seemed improbable that a world, which by mutual inclination was isolated from, and independent

The small, efficient pirate spacecraft in their distinctive yellow and black camouflage struck at the busy spacelanes from their hidden bases. Despite every effort of the Federal Authorities they still pose a threat to travellers on the busy Menkalinan route.



of, the Terran Federation, would have found justification for developing and producing such a system. Nevertheless every avenue had to be pursued in order to keep the trade route open, and a delegation was sent to the colony to investigate.

Meanwhile, cargo vessels were still vanishing without trace from the same regions of the spacelane, and FLEA ships were placed on continuous patrol throughout the area. Despite their presence and the fact that many of the freighters regularly plying this route were being fitted with defensive armament, the smaller convoys and single vessels were still, though less frequently, subject to the lightning raids.

A Settlement Welfare Team was sent to the mutant world, and in addition to the usual medical, economic and technological personnel a number of ITA Security agents accompanied the mission. The arrival of the group was obviously unwelcome, and they were received with cold formality by the representatives of this isolated planet. It was made quite clear that assistance was neither needed nor desired, but eventually it was agreed that the team would be allowed to see how the mutant colonists had adapted themselves for survival on a new world, and what sort of technology had been developed, ostensibly as a fact-gathering exercise for future settlers. Although no information was freely volunteered, the visitors were taken to any installation or community they asked to see, but nothing was found to suggest that the inhabitants were in any way responsible for the harassment of shipping, or indeed that they even possessed a means of leaving the surface of their world.

Nevertheless, it was felt that the team were not being shown all there was to see, and the security men decided to try and explore a little on their own initiative. While the rest of the party were being taken to see a small factory manufacturing agricultural equipment using nuclear power, the four security men who had been masquerading as information analysts elected to remain in the ship in order to begin the task of synthesizing the mass of

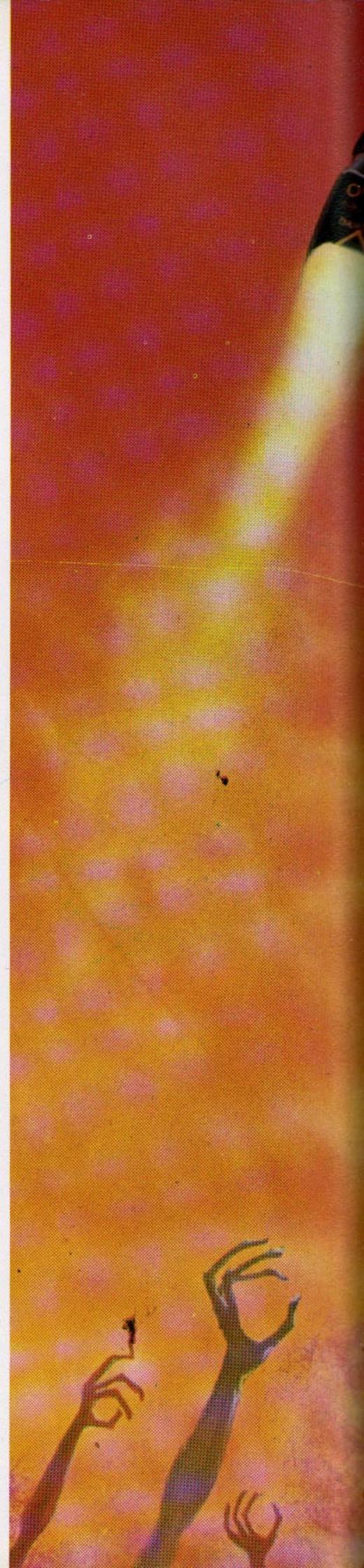
accumulated knowledge. Once the others had left with their ever-present guides, they equipped themselves with lift-packs and each jetted off in a different direction to areas they had not already been shown.

One of the four, Captain Mas Yelwoc, set off for a remote, densely wooded region about 300 kilometers north of the ship. Wearing a pressure suit he ascended vertically through the thin atmosphere until the ship vanished from sight and the landscape became a featureless land mass glimpsed through the drifting cloud layer. Setting his course he sped towards his target, and was soon overhead. It was growing dark, and he made his rapid descent amid gathering gloom, landing in tangled undergrowth about seven kilometers from a less densely covered area at the foot of a range of low hills. Still carrying the lift-pack, he made his way through the lengthening shadows toward the clearing.

As he approached he could see figures moving about beyond a haphazard collection of structures around the edge, and snatches of sound, like machinery being used, drifted through the strange plants surrounding him. Suddenly there was the shriek of a propulsion unit being warmed up. It reached a crescendo and then died away with an eerie moan. He worked his way closer to the fringe of buildings and arrived at the back of the large structure from which the sound had come. A crack in the plastic covering spilled light onto the ground and then onto his faceplate as he pressed his helmet to the aperture.

Inside was the huge, squat shape of an ore freighter bearing the markings of one of the mining companies active in the Menkalinan fields. It was encased in scaffolding and was apparently being dismantled by the strange, wiry figures which swarmed over the hull. One of its steering jets was mounted on a bench nearby, and it was obviously this which Yelwoc had heard. It looked as though he had found the culprits, but how had

The existence of the pirates was discovered by Captain Mas Yelwoc who only just managed to escape with the vital information.





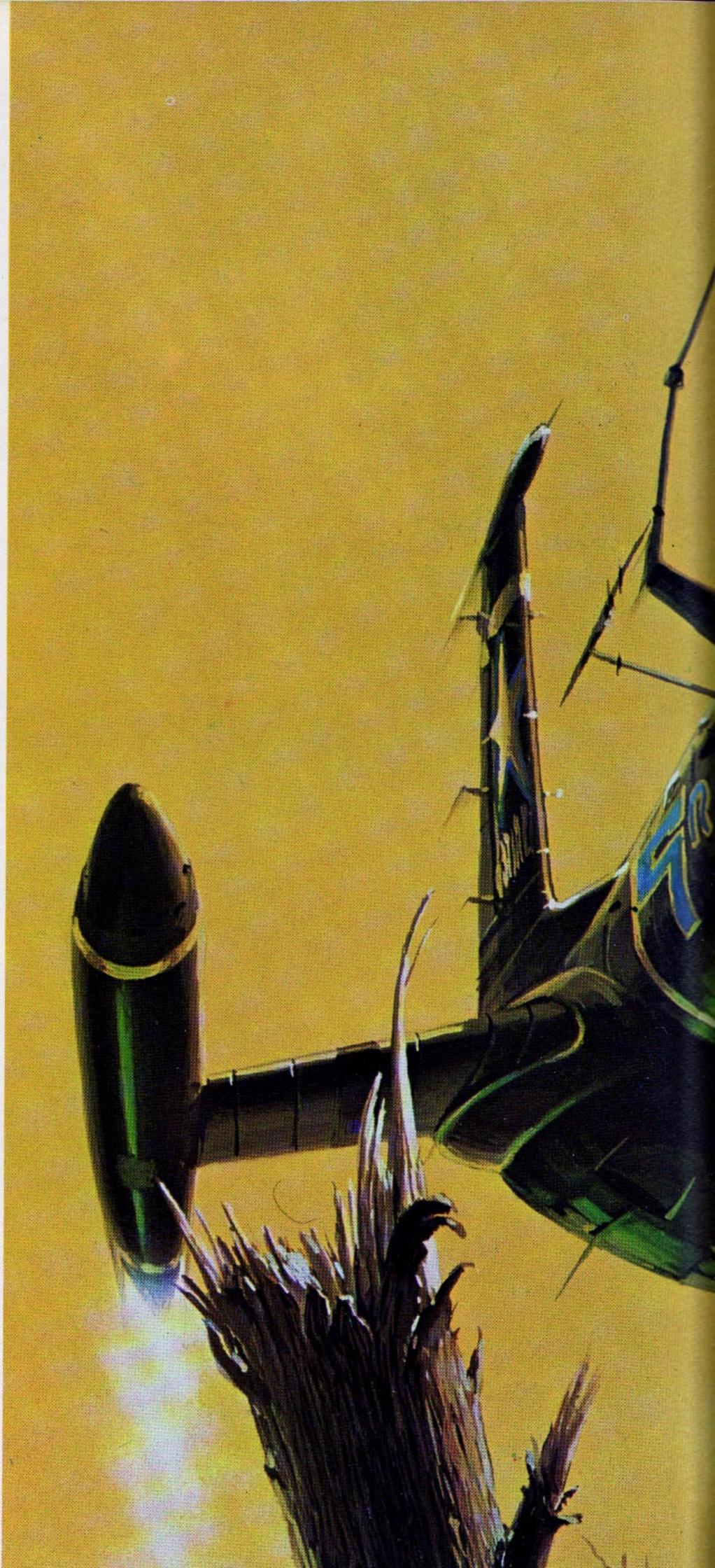
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they snatched the ships from space? Another hangar lay beyond and he decided to have a look, and a few moments later he was in the lee of the darkened building. A few tugs, and a corner of panelling came away far enough for him to slip inside. He stood up cautiously and saw the dim bulk of a ship, the outline of which did not tally with any that he knew of. After a quick glance round the empty shed he walked over to it. It was certainly a pursuit craft of some kind with a cabin only large enough for three or four crew. Lateral thrust engines flanked a domed housing on the upper hull that was large enough to accommodate a warp or hyperdrive generator and the whole ship was painted with irregular yellow and black stripes. Underneath the body of the craft was a substantial fin-like projection, and a series of apertures in the leading edge revealed the snouts of a battery of laser weapons.

As Captain Yelwoc crouched to examine them, the main doors swung open and a blaze of light picked him out against the garish hull. There was a shout and two spindly figures ran toward him, one grabbing the nozzle of a beamwelder from a jumble of equipment as he passed. The white-hot shaft of light hit the side of the ship by the security man's shoulder, and the skin of the vessel hissed and bubbled as rivulets of molten alloy blistered the paintwork. Instinctively he snatched the blaster from the side of his pack and fired, sending the leading figure tumbling against the side of the hangar. He fired again and the second mutant sprawled backwards and crashed into a stack of packing cases.

Awkward in his heavy suit, Yelwoc ran to the gap in the wall he had made as more figures burst in through the door, and hurled himself at the opening, landing heavily on the ground outside amid a shower of plastic shards. Blaster beams punched through the wall above him and crackled into the darkness of the woods as he struggled to his feet only to see his escape route cut off as

The deadly interceptors of the Federal Law Enforcement Authority struck hard at the scattered bases. The problem was not destroying them but finding them.





gaunt figures flitted between the tall woody growth on the perimeter. Stumbling towards the hangar which contained the partially dismantled freighter he could see a horde of the mutants pouring from other buildings all round the clearing.

Once at the building he ducked round the corner and desperately started the procedure to re-activate his lift-pack as the mutants milled around noisily trying to locate him. There was a shout and immediately the horde rushed towards the suited figure as he frantically closed the last switches and the jet nozzles burst into life whipping the ground around him into a maelstrom of smoke and steam. With one hand gripping the controls as the jets heaved him into the air he fired again and again into the forest of hands which clutched and scrabbled at his legs as he rose, veering wildly as he picked up speed in order to avoid the searing laser beams beginning to stab at him from below.

In a few seconds he was clear and rising rapidly through the cloud layer, as he readjusted the controls for the course back to the ship. As soon as the co-ordinates had been fed into the navigator, he signalled ahead but there was no response from the others. Afraid that they too had been attacked, he broadcast on the emergency frequency which would sound buzzers carried by each member of the party. Within seconds he picked up confirmation signals, and with a sigh of relief, headed

The strength and numbers of the pirate forces necessitated the use of Terran Defence Authority troopships in the attack on their fiercely defended stronghold.

straight for the ship.

By the time he arrived, the others were already either inside or on their way back. While waiting for the last two security men to reappear, he briefed them as to what had happened, and once the team was complete, the ship's engines pushed them into the atmosphere. A few minutes later they were over the clearing and the circle of buildings could be seen around the edge, but of their occupants there was no sign. Cautiously the craft settled in the center of the space on a dusty landing apron, and half of the crew spread out from the airlock to take a closer look. The site was completely deserted and the hangars held nothing but odds and ends of discarded equipment and scrap metal. There were recent scorch marks on some parts of the apron and it was obvious that the occupants had made a hurried retreat.

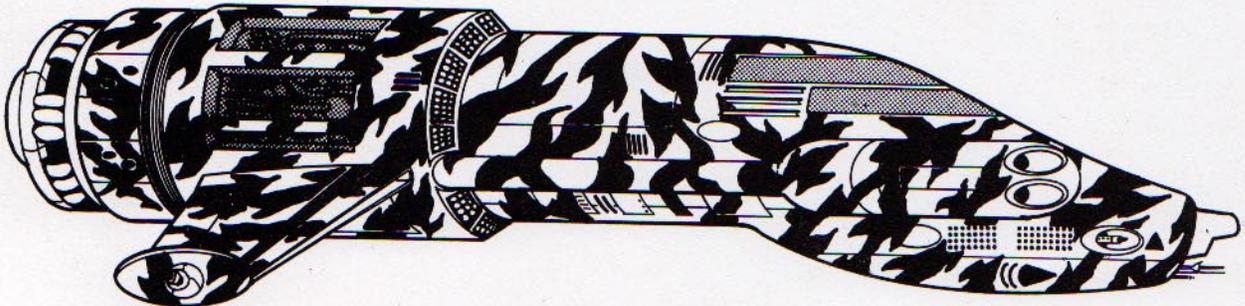
It was decided to return to challenge the mutant leaders with an account of what had happened, but after they did so, the mutants simply shrugged their shoulders and after intensive questioning it was apparent that they had no knowledge of, responsibility for, or even interest in, the existence of the space pirates. Their duty, they argued, was simply to administer the wider issues of government, the affairs of individual mutant communities being entirely their own concern, and that problems of this kind should be resolved between the Terran Trade Authority and the pirates themselves.

And so the delegation returned, but at least the source of the costly raids had been established and before long a special Federal Law

Enforcement unit was formed to strike at the pirate bases. Surveillance satellites were placed in orbit around the planet and as soon as the launch site was spotted, strike ships homed in to blast the area. At first, resistance was fierce and the pirates engaged the interceptors in pitched battles, but their ships were outclassed by the Federal equipment and their losses were heavy.

Eventually, Federal agents on the surface of the planet succeeded in finding a fortified area which was the pirates' main base and the Terran Defence Authority was called in to provide troops. Under covering fire from the Federal interceptors, the military craft landed sufficient men and equipment to overrun the complex, and break up the pirate ring. Inside were found manufacturing facilities capable of assembling entire spacecraft although many of the components had obviously been obtained from elsewhere, such as captured ships cannibalized to provide the more specialized items. Plants to produce and store nuclear fuels were also discovered and there was evidence of attempts to construct various fusion weapons.

Although the main threat had been removed, it has proved impossible to eradicate the pirates completely without the wholehearted co-operation of the rest of the mutant community, and there are still isolated instances of ships being seized. Although there are occasional FLEA patrols as a deterrent, most ships travelling in the vicinity rely on the convoy system for protection and only especially valuable cargoes enjoy the luxury of an armed escort.



Four-man pirate vessel in typical camouflage.



The Hunters of Asterion

In the minor constellation of Canes Venatici is a dwarf star of spectral class G0. Called Asterion, it lies about 30 light years from Earth and is circled by two planetary bodies, the nearest of which is little more than a cinder glowing through its tight orbit. The other is well suited to human occupation with a rich nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere and areas of ocean large enough to limit the temperature range to within our tolerance. As a result, this world was colonized very early in Man's Galactic expansion, and major settlements were established.

As time passed, however, it became something of a backwater in the evolution of the Terran Federation as its ecology provided adequate resources for most of the settlers' needs with little surplus of interest for trading purposes. Initially, tourist traffic kept them in contact with the Home Planets, but as new space routes provided access to more exotic worlds, the Earth-like characteristics drew fewer and fewer sightseers until the only visitors were routine Settlement Welfare Teams or the occasional mineral prospector needing supplies.

The natural fertility of their planet and their dwindling contact with the rest of mankind resulted in a significant degree of regression in their culture. Basically agrarian in nature, their society had no need of a high degree of technology in view of the temperate climate and the richness of the land. But despite these qualities, survival was no easy

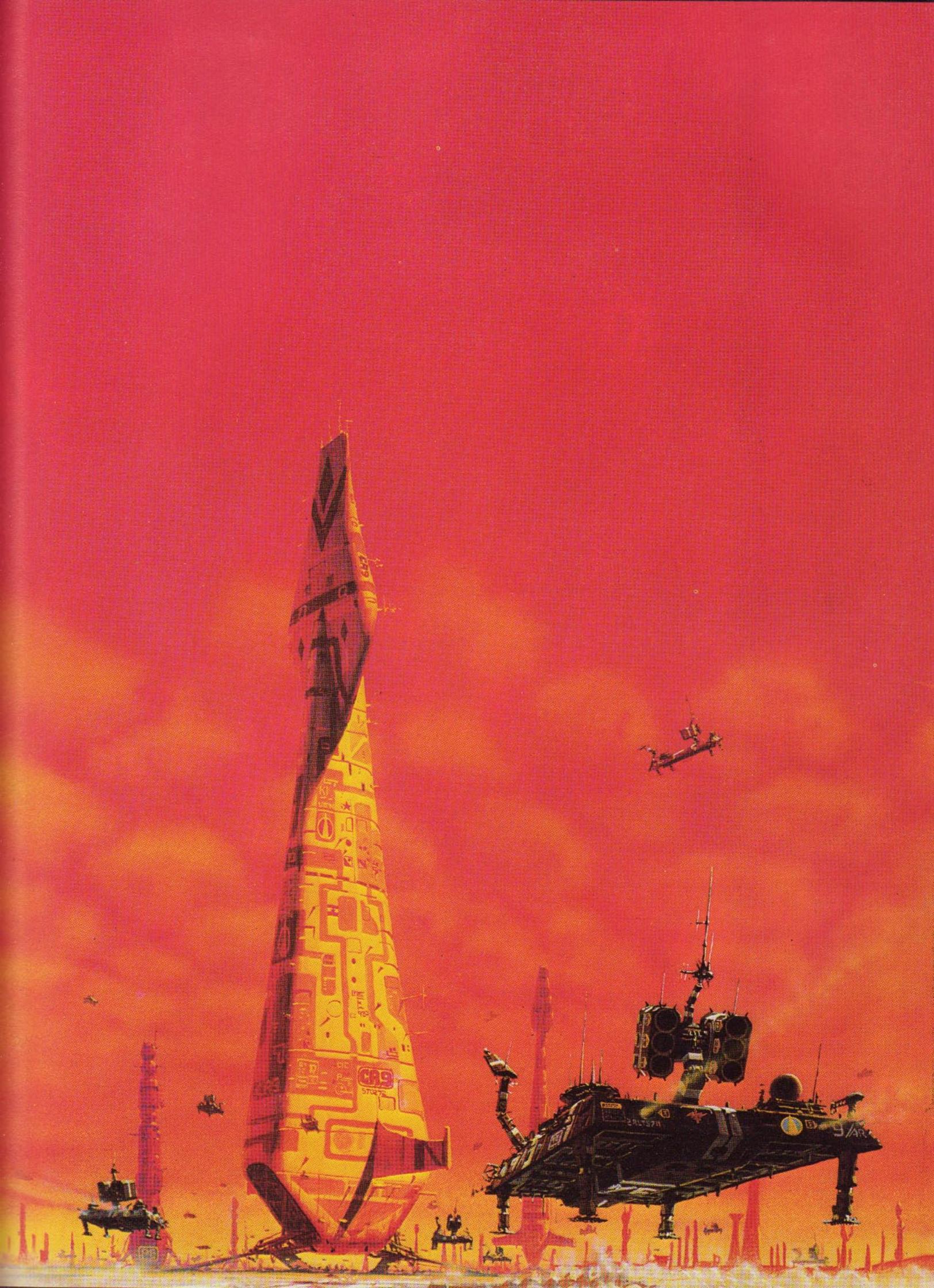
matter, as they had to compete with a great number of other life-forms for the fruits of their lush habitat. The dense forests and jungles were inhabited by some of the most fearsome beasts yet known, and gradually those whose task it was to hunt for meat and defend the settlements against these marauders, evolved as an elite.

Only the children of Hunters could learn how to track and confront the Great White-Maned Tootiez in his lair, or expose himself to the scything talons of the Spurred Wooswoos in order to reach the unarmored and vulnerable point beneath its chin. From the moment they could walk, they were taught to be independent, and to feel at home in the dark, tangled forests that surrounded each community.

At the age of six their fathers carried them deep into the wilderness, pointed out any features that would give them a bearing on the direction home, and abandoned them to the jungle. Many did not return, but those who did had their existence acknowledged for the first time by adults other than their parents. From then on they were allowed to accompany hunting parties, first as observers and then as participants, until the day came when they were judged to be ready to go out alone to bring back the pelt of the Tootiez or the meter long claw of the giant Wooswoos.

The Hunters were fiercely proud and the social differences between them and the tillers and reapers

A TTA supply terminal in the heart of the booming mining fields of Menkalinan. Law enforcement in these far outposts of the Terran Federation was difficult and they were often targets for the crime syndicates.



gradually led to the segregation of the two. The Hunters hired out their skills to the farmers as required in exchange for a share in the harvest, and supplied them with fresh meat and game. Their aggressive natures often led to duels and feuds with rival groups of Hunters who encroached upon their territory or challenged their honour, and differences were settled by combat between elected champions. These men were treated almost as gods, and stories about them spread to other worlds in the Empire. Their prowess with needlebeam and laserwhip, and their singleminded ingenuity in combat eventually came to the attention of the entertainment media, and Hologrid teams were sent to record their skills for the amusement of the inhabitants of more sophisticated planets.

The documentaries served to stimulate interest in this fierce breed of men, and it was not long before an enterprising entrepreneur succeeded in enticing two of the foremost Hunters aboard a chartered ship bound for Earth. Aware that his intentions would not be viewed with approval by the Federal Authorities, the operation was kept a closely guarded secret, and seats for the planned contest were strictly by invitation only. It was the greatest fiasco of the year! The two men, Razzell Kalee and Jeef Kindswoog, who had not been told of the real reason for their journey, refused to fight as neither had slighted the other at any time. After numerous attempts to deceive them into challenging one another, the embarrassed businessman gave up and abandoned them on Earth.

Unable to return home, they wandered unhappily through the streets of Rio de Janeiro where the contest was to have been held until they decided to split up and seek their own ways back to Asterion. An inadvertent brush with the law brought Razzell Kalee's plight to the notice of the Authorities and he was handed over to the Welfare Bureau who gave him an Occupational Guidance Test as part of routine procedure. His profile read-out indicated a law enforcement aptitude with the highest ratings recorded since the system was adopted, and

with his agreement, he was enrolled in a Federal Law Enforcement college where he not only underwent the standard training course, but also intensive subsidiary studies to familiarize him with the Empire that had left his world behind. He graduated with honours and was posted to the wild and unruly mining fields of Menkalinan where the overstretched Federal forces desperately tried to maintain order among the boom towns that sprang up fast and died as rapidly.

Jeef Kindswoog was not so fortunate, and he found himself becoming more and more deeply involved with the darker side of the city's life. At first living on his wits to keep himself fed, it was not long until he decided that the only way he could return home was to steal enough money to buy a ticket, and his daring exploits soon brought him to the attention of the big crime syndicates. His abilities were soon being sought by various factions to whom he hired his services indiscriminately. Eventually he began to appear on police target lists and life became very difficult and his movements increasingly restricted.

One day a mysterious message led him to a dingy bar in the outskirts of New York, and there began his involvement with the notorious Capello Nero, a sinister organization whose presence spread throughout known space. His cunning, courage and physical abilities led him higher and higher within the 'Company' and his original objective gradually faded from his mind to be replaced by a growing thirst for power. Three years later he was given his own territory in the rich and wide-open mining fields of Menkalinan, already the hunting grounds of numerous rival groups. Within months he had absorbed or eliminated the principal factions and was co-ordinating operations from his heavily fortified base on the un-named planet PB34428 on the distant perimeter of the Menkalinan fields.

Jeef Kindswoog rapidly built up one of the most comprehensive criminal networks in history, controlling the protection, gambling and vice rackets throughout the region. He took rake-offs from most of the small mining outfits and

With a spectacular blaze of light, the charges placed inside the battlecruiser detonated, cutting off any escape from the planet.



supplied them with cut-price equipment stolen in raids on the shipping lanes, often with the aid of pirates from the mutant colony on Capella. One of his most outrageous exploits was to ambush a military garrison, wiping it out and vanishing with all their arms and weaponry including a fully equipped Battlecruiser and several Tactical Selfdeploying missile launch towers. The Federal Authorities were at their wits end; as soon as they broke up one ring, another took its place and the fear of reprisal from Capello Nero prevented them from acquiring the information they needed to strike at the heart of the organization.

Rahzell Kalee had inevitably been closely involved with operations against the Capello Nero in this district for some time and was becoming totally frustrated by the lack of success. Eventually he managed to persuade his superiors to allow him to employ his own methods independently, and after drawing equipment and a small scout ship, disappeared among the asteroids. He was not to be heard of again for nearly two years and attempts to trace him proved fruitless, until one day the gutted hull of his ship was found in a scrapyard during a routine check. With great regret his name was deleted from the 'active list' and his record sheet was filed under Missing-Believed Dead.

This was not the case. Rahzell was very much alive but he was living on the other side of the law, involving himself with dozens of small thefts and crooked dealings, working ever closer to the heart of the Capello Nero network. One day he was recruited to participate in a big raid on a TTA supply terminal, and acquitted himself so well that he was singled out to head one of the local smuggling operations. His inside knowledge of the Federal methods and dispositions allowed him to treble the scale of the group's activities in four months.

Sitting in his base on one of the millions of unregistered asteroids, a call came through to inform him that a Starship was making its approach to carry him to PB34428 where he was to receive a new appointment. When the sleek cruiser arrived, he

knew he was nearing the end of his search, but he could not risk relaying his destination to Federal Headquarters. As the tiny service ship which had picked him up eased into the main airlock, he felt a sense of excitement and controlled tension that he had not experienced since the distant days of his old life on Asterion and, unconsciously, he crossed his fingers in the ritual gesture made by a Hunter before he faced his enemy.

About a week later, the shallow greenish seas and sandy wastes of the isolated little planet swelled from a dot in the viewport to fill the screen as the ship descended towards a straggling settlement surrounding the landing apron. The atmosphere was too thin to be breathable and they suited up for the short walk to the largest of the envirodomes fringing the pad. He was shown his quarters and told that he would meet the Formaggio Grande who had summoned him as soon as the captured battlecruiser which served as his mobile headquarters, arrived. In the meantime he was free to move at will around the settlement, and after stowing his gear he slipped back into his suit to explore the area.

Near a complex of large warehouses he could see the tall, angular silhouettes of several Tactical Missile Launchers, but he was more interested in the spacecraft dispersed around the blast pad. Casually he made his way over to where they lay, shimmering in the dry heat. Edging surreptitiously from one to another he fixed a small charge with a microwave trigger on each and wandered back toward the main building, to await the return of the battlecruiser.

Later that evening the sky blazed with light and Rahzell watched the battlecruiser slowly settle into a stasis stop about 500 meters above ground level. Shortly after the secondary drive units shut down, the brilliant flare of a service vessel shot away from the ship and streaked down to the main pad. Thirty minutes later the intercom in his room buzzed and a voice informed him that his presence was required immediately after breakfast tomorrow morning. He acknowledged and in case there were any weight sensors in the sleep

Like two strange monsters, the huge missile launchers careered towards each other as the hunters fought their first and final duel.



couch, placed enough gear on it to simulate his weight. Donning his suit, he slipped out of the door and out of the airlock at the end of the corridor.

Moving from shadow to shadow, he worked his way round to one of the sheds bordering the field and darted inside. His heart thumping, he stripped off the suit and donned one of the engineers lift-suits hanging from the rack. Outside again, he walked some distance from the pad before firing the jets to take him to the cruiser looming overhead. He shut down the thrust units as soon as he came alongside the black and yellow hull of the ship, relying on his magnetic clamps to fix him to its skin. As soundlessly as possible he worked his way along astern to the bulbous aft section housing the main drive units until he came to one of the Hydrogen scoops that ringed the massive craft just forward of the main reactor room. Reaching inside, he dropped the pack of high power explosive down the long funnel towards the centre of the vessel, and checked the display on his microwave transmitter to make sure that the trigger was on standby.

Rahzell drifted down to the surface on minimum power and landed near the sheds from which he had taken the suit. Sensors on the battlecruiser overhead must have picked up the presence of a foreign object, as alarms suddenly shrieked through the night and figures burst out of the main complex closing the last catches on their suits, and lights snapped on down the length of the ship. He had

no choice, and with a determined stab of his finger, he hit the key on his transmitter. There was a blinding flash of light, both from above and from the other side of the hangars where he was sheltering as the charges blew. He ran as fast as the suit would allow as the huge ship, its back broken, plunged downward obliterating the greater part of the structures below in an eruption of flame, and a blast which sent Rahzell sprawling in the sand. Fragments of every craft on the planet rained down as he struggled to his feet, and ran back to the shed where his suit lay.

Having stripped off the clumsy rig and climbed into his own, he ran out to join the throng milling around the perimeter. Then, cutting through the confused chatter from his helmet speaker, a calm voice started issuing instructions, a voice disturbingly familiar to Rahzell, but which he could not identify. Immediately, the crowd broke up as each man rushed to his station. Pressing his chin onto the transmit plate, Rahzell gave his assumed name and requested instructions. There was a long pause and the same quiet voice ordered him to return to his quarters. Something about the tone of the reply made him uneasy, and instead of returning, he made his way to one of the huge missile launchers and climbed up to the control centre. After a few moments spent running over the controls, he armed the missiles and ran up the hover drive, swinging the towering machine round to cover the main dome.

The brief night of PB34428 was

over and the sky lightened rapidly as the target registers settled on the largest of the complex of buildings. Switching to transmit, he delivered his ultimatum, demanding that all personnel should assemble outside the main building and that the signalling equipment be set to transmit a specified Federal code message on Hyperwave. Failure to co-operate would result in the immediate annihilation of the base. There was a profound silence, then the same quiet voice murmured in the launcher's monitor, 'It could only have been you, Rahzell!'

Suddenly he recognized Jeef Kindswoog's voice, and switching the viewscreen to full scan, saw the massive bulk of another launcher bearing down on him. Desperately he swung his own machine round and sideways as a missile blazed past. He fired and dodged and fired again as he headed at full thrust toward Jeef. Both missiles blasted past inches from the other tower, and then he was on it. The gigantic machines collided with a thunderous crash and Rahzell wrestled with the controls as the cabin tilted crazily, then straightened. At first his screen was blinded by dust, but as it cleared the other tower lay broken as wisps of vapour seeped from torn plates. Blaster in hand, Rahzell descended and ran to the shattered cabin. Jeef was dead. Moments passed, then Rahzell walked slowly back to the tower and repeated his orders. His monitor checked the signal as the code went on its way to Federal Headquarters.





Having served as a combat officer throughout the twenty years of the Proxima Wars, Terran Defence Authority Commander Stewart Cowley was posted to Earth as Liaison Officer attached to the Terran Trade Authority. He was later appointed to the Public Information Office of the TTA where he wrote the first of their handbooks, the bestselling *Spacecraft 2000-2100AD*.

As historical advisor to the Galactic Technology Museum at Miami Spaceport and the Mars War Museum, he was instrumental in the founding of the Historical Research Unit of the Information Office whose records provided much of the references for *Great Space Battles*.

Despite his many commitments, he still manages to employ his skills as an amateur model-maker of repute, and an exhibition of his miniature spacecraft constructed from novel materials toured the local systems until an indigenous life-form on Alpha Centauri II ate it.

Charles Herridge held the post of Secretary to the TDA War Group for the greater part of the Laguna Wars and is an acknowledged expert on this period of Terran history.

Back illustration

Federal Agent Rahzell Kalee destroys the command ship of the sinister crime syndicate, Capello Nero – by Robin Hiddon.

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