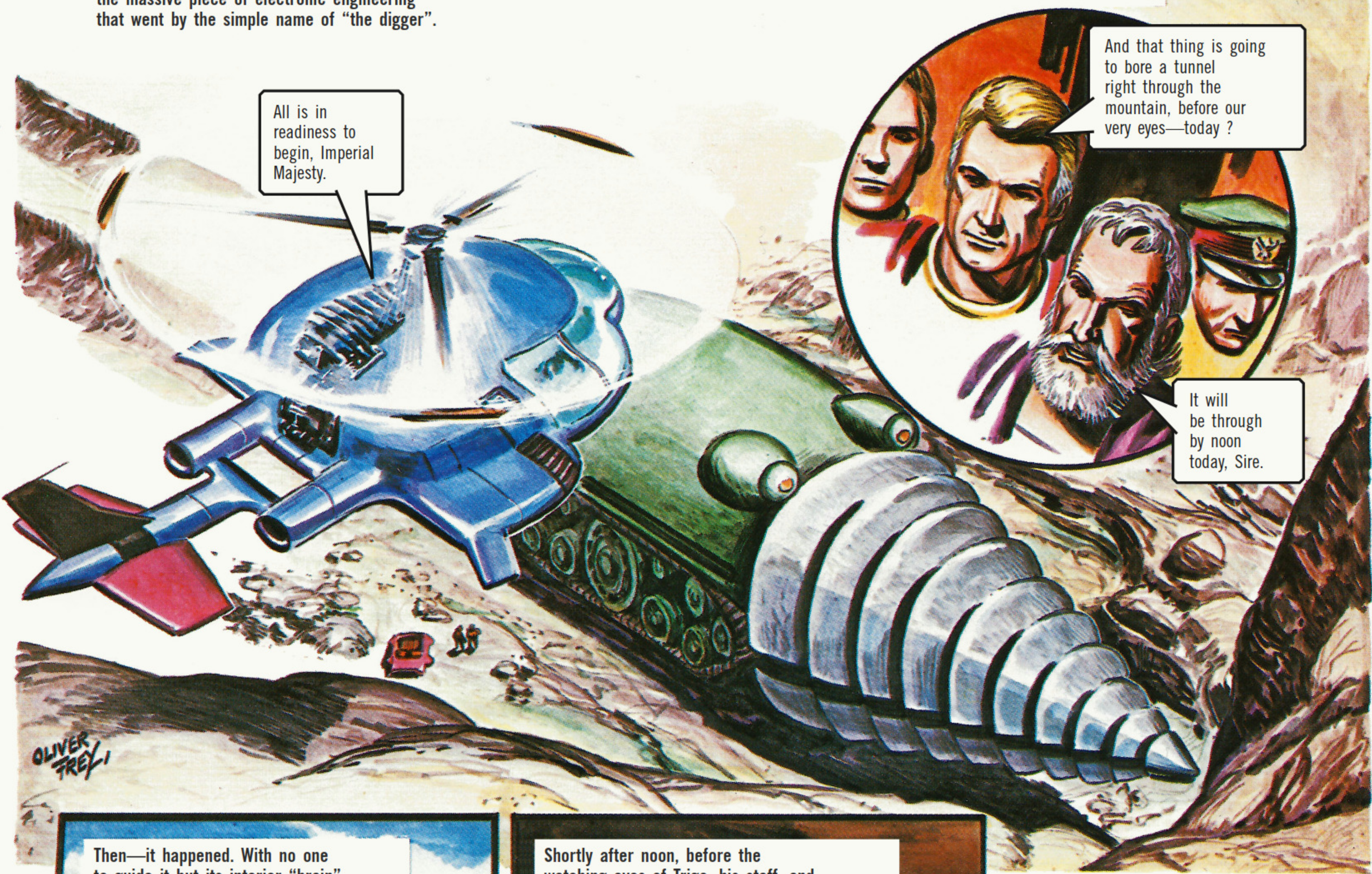


In the year of Lott, the Emperor flew over the massive piece of electronic engineering that went by the simple name of "the digger".

Trigo gazed down—as did his staff—in awe.



All is in readiness to begin, Imperial Majesty.

And that thing is going to bore a tunnel right through the mountain, before our very eyes—today ?

It will be through by noon today, Sire.

OLIVER TREY

Then—it happened. With no one to guide it but its interior "brain", the monster crawled towards the cliff-face and entered !



Shortly after noon, before the watching eyes of Trigo, his staff, and waiting thousands, the digger emerged at the other side of the mountain !



By all the stars ! I would never have believed it possible !

And there's no one inside it, Sire !

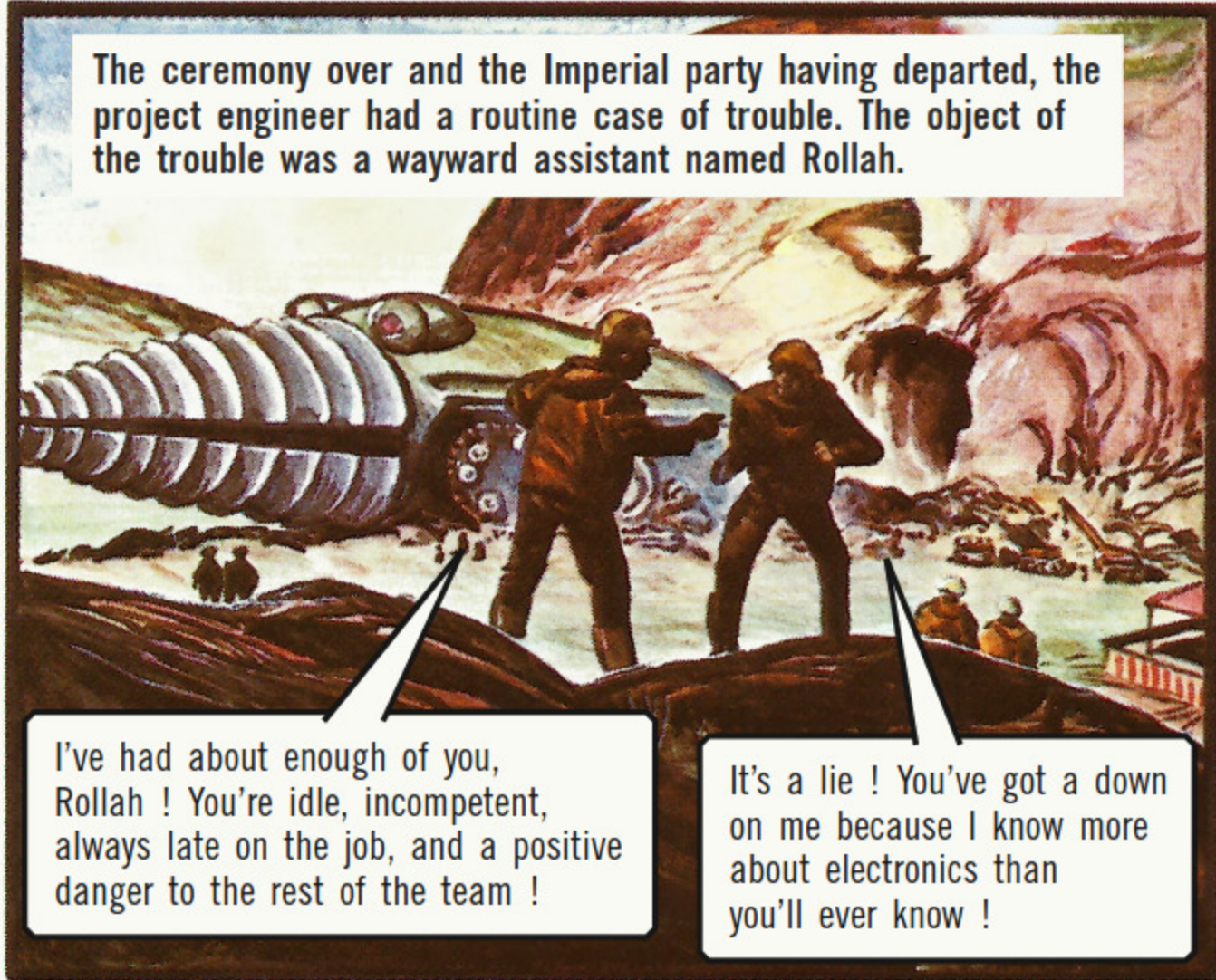
The project engineer and his staff were presented to the Emperor.



A truly magnificent effort.

Many thanks, Imperial Majesty.

The ceremony over and the Imperial party having departed, the project engineer had a routine case of trouble. The object of the trouble was a wayward assistant named Rollah.



I've had about enough of you, Rollah ! You're idle, incompetent, always late on the job, and a positive danger to the rest of the team !

It's a lie ! You've got a down on me because I know more about electronics than you'll ever know !

That's the end of it !—you're fired !

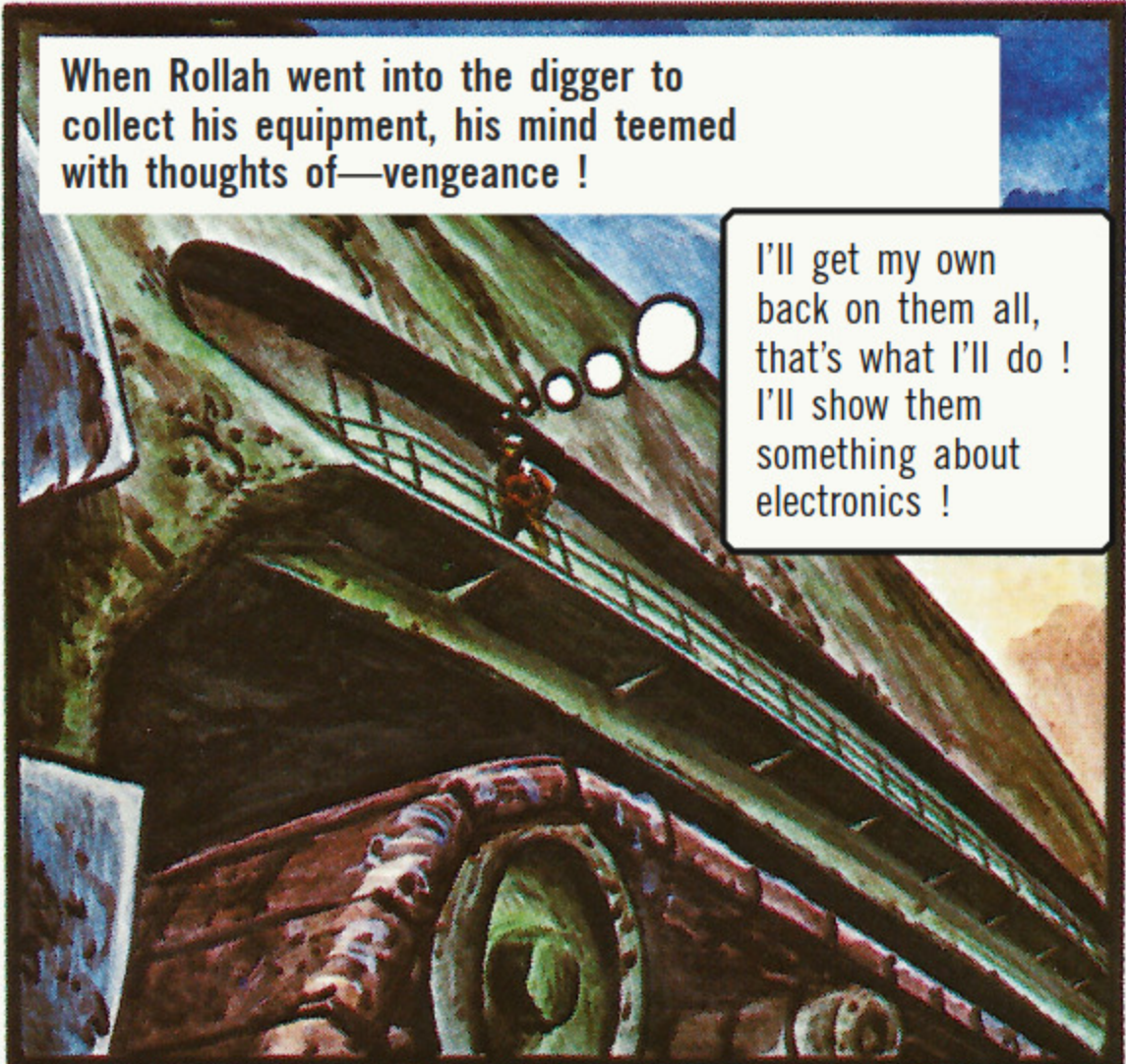
You can't— you can't fire me !

I have fired you !



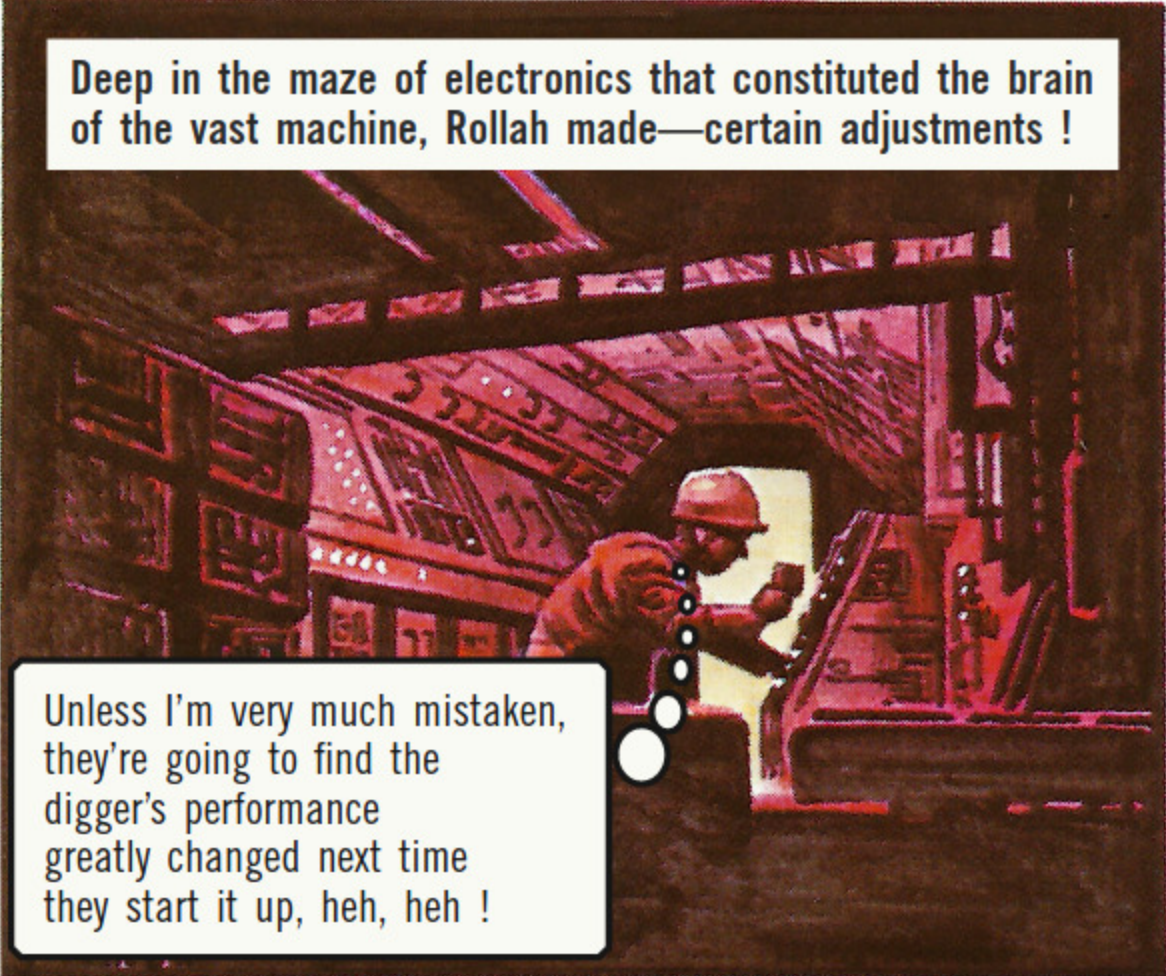
When Rollah went into the digger to collect his equipment, his mind teemed with thoughts of—vengeance !

I'll get my own back on them all, that's what I'll do ! I'll show them something about electronics !



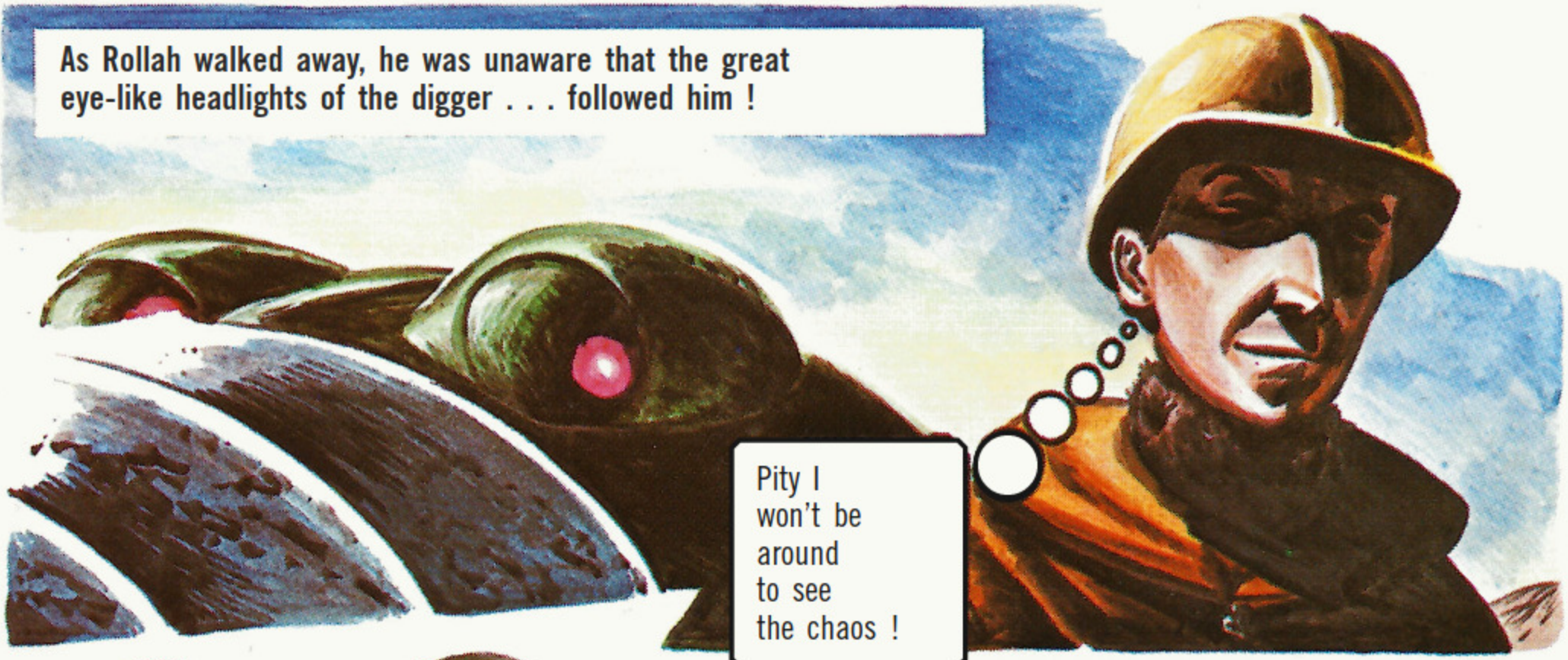
Deep in the maze of electronics that constituted the brain of the vast machine, Rollah made—certain adjustments !

Unless I'm very much mistaken, they're going to find the digger's performance greatly changed next time they start it up, heh, heh !



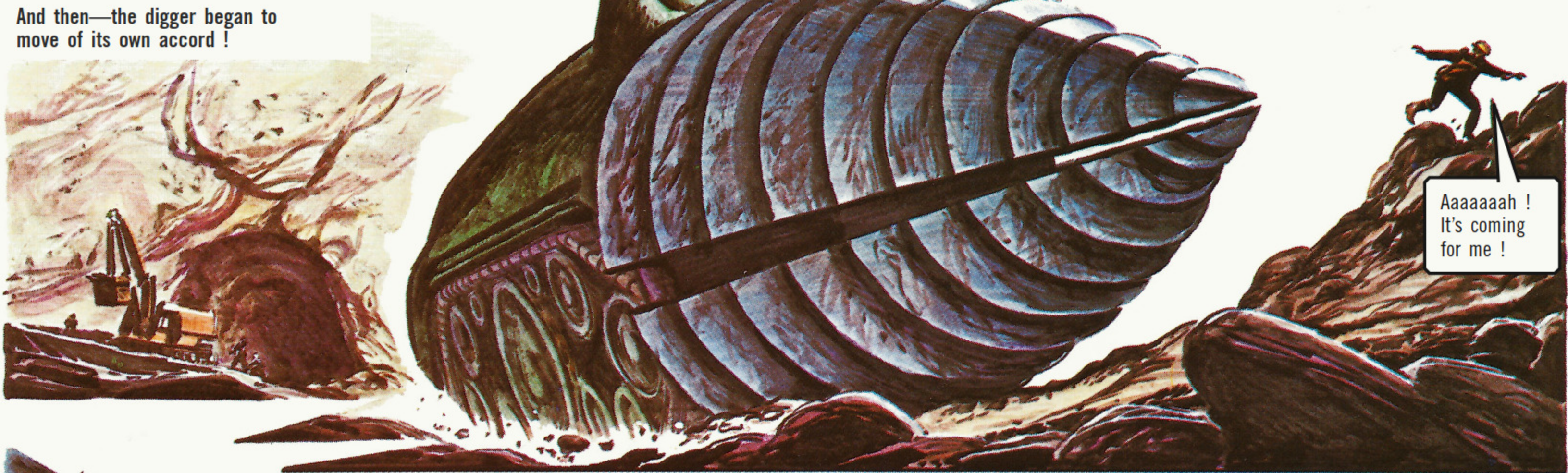
As Rollah walked away, he was unaware that the great eye-like headlights of the digger . . . followed him !

Pity I won't be around to see the chaos !



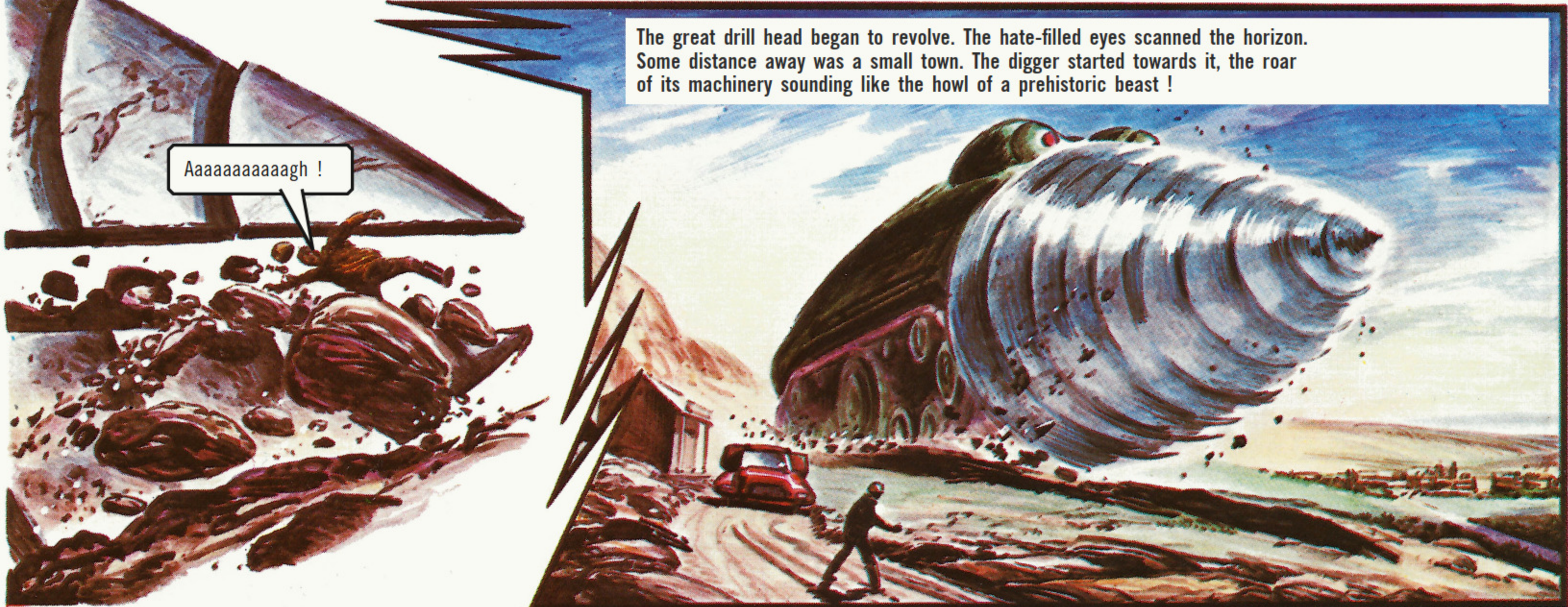
And then—the digger began to move of its own accord !

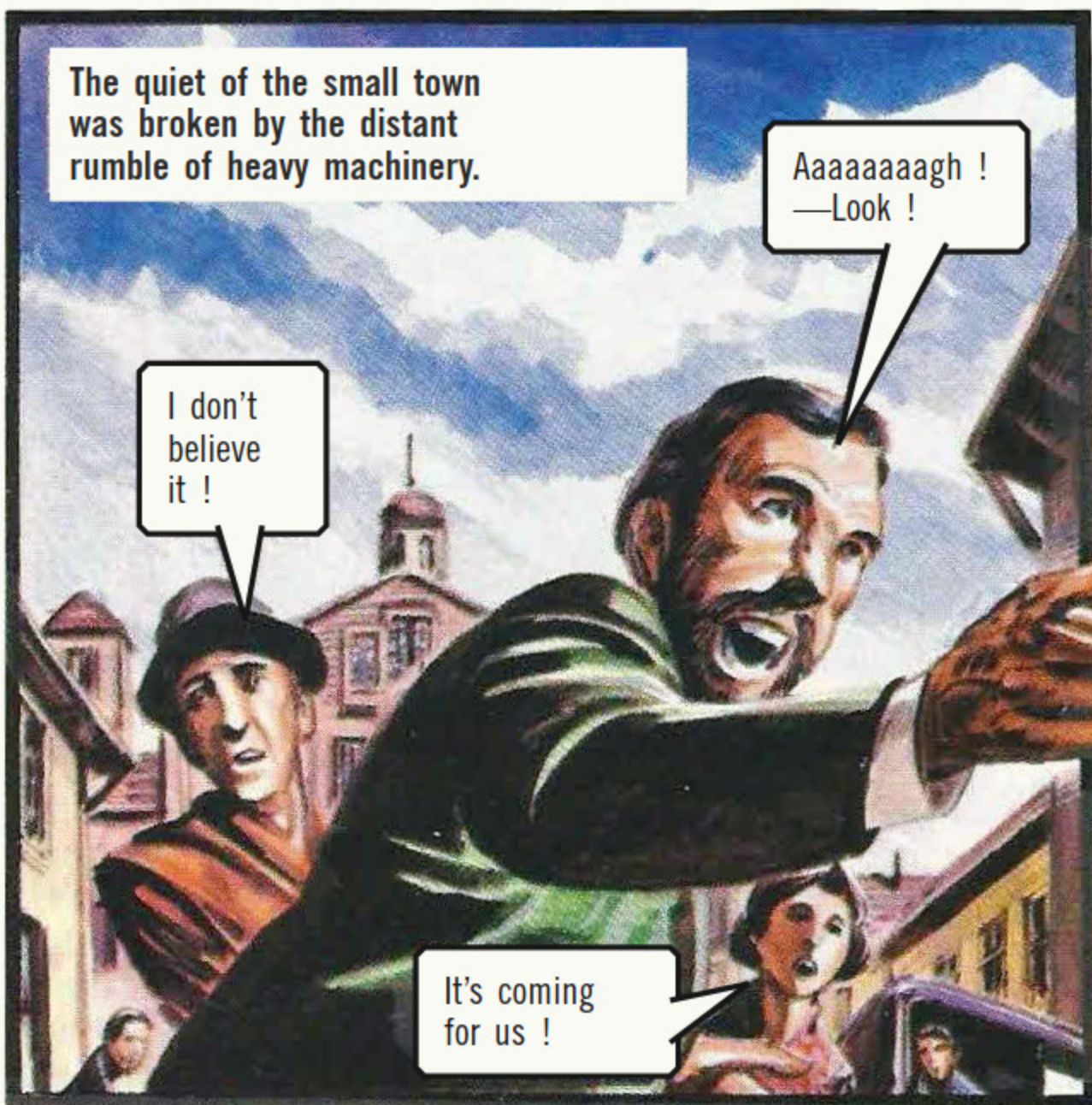
Aaaaaaah ! It's coming for me !



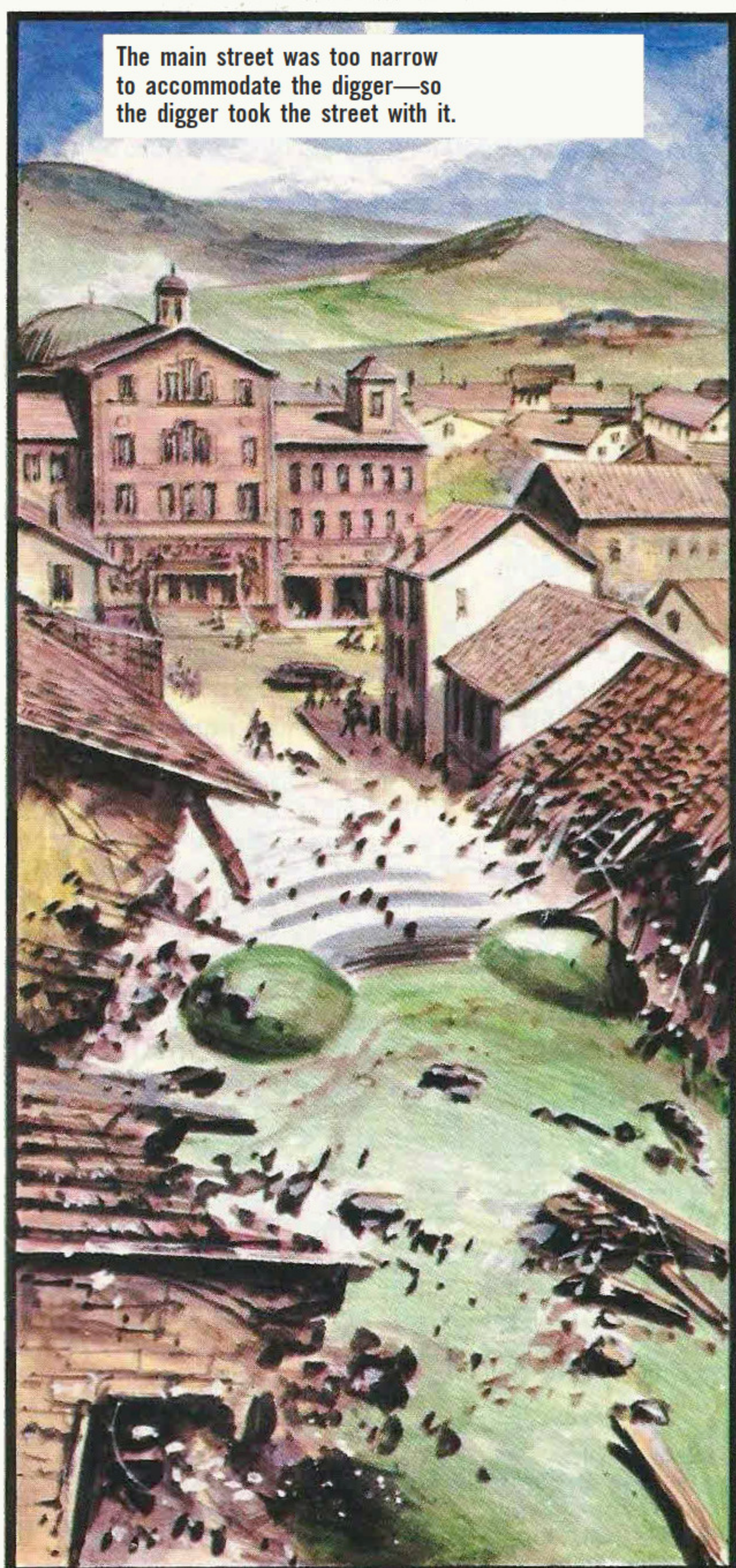
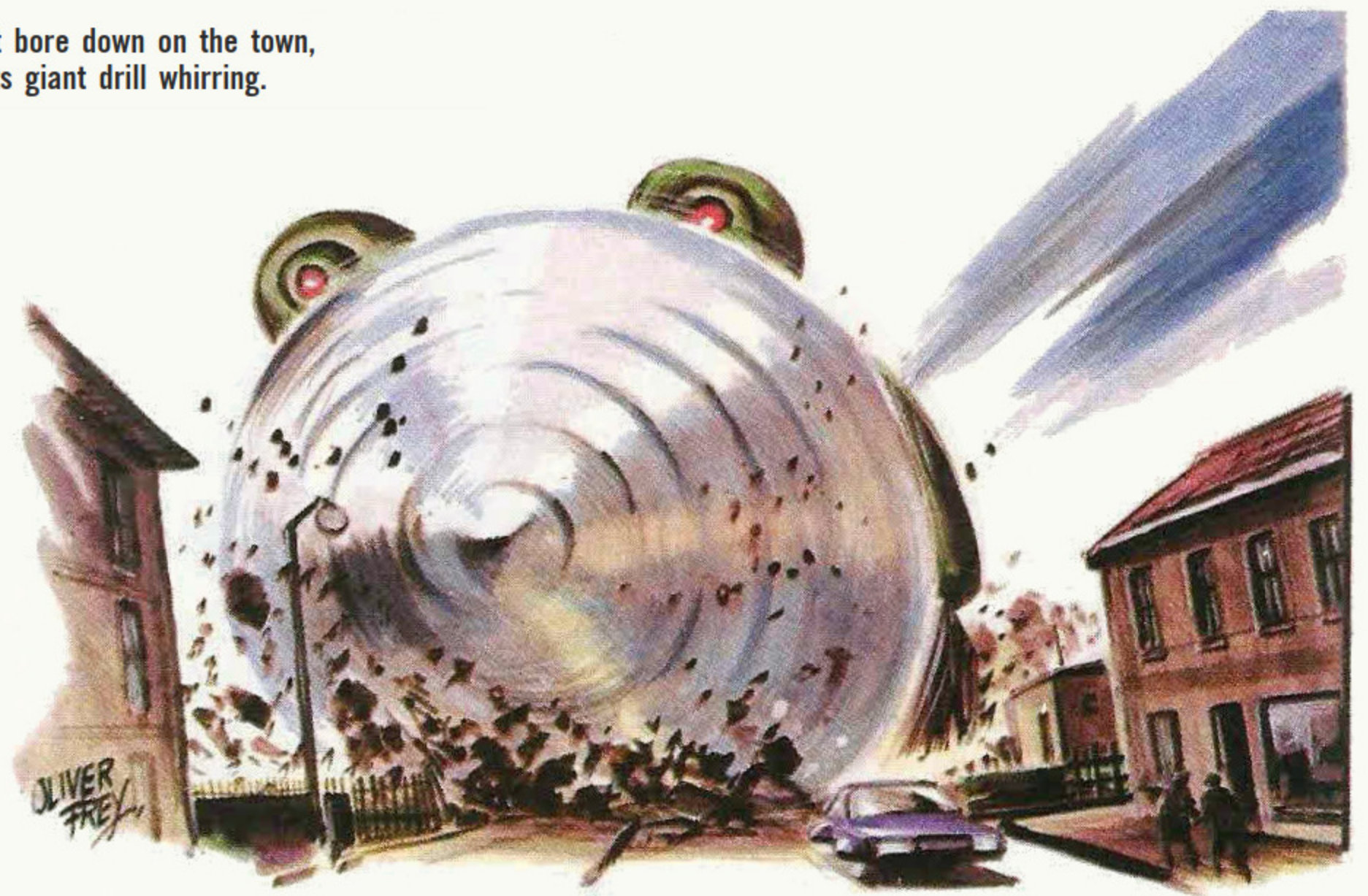
Aaaaaaaaagh !

The great drill head began to revolve. The hate-filled eyes scanned the horizon. Some distance away was a small town. The digger started towards it, the roar of its machinery sounding like the howl of a prehistoric beast !

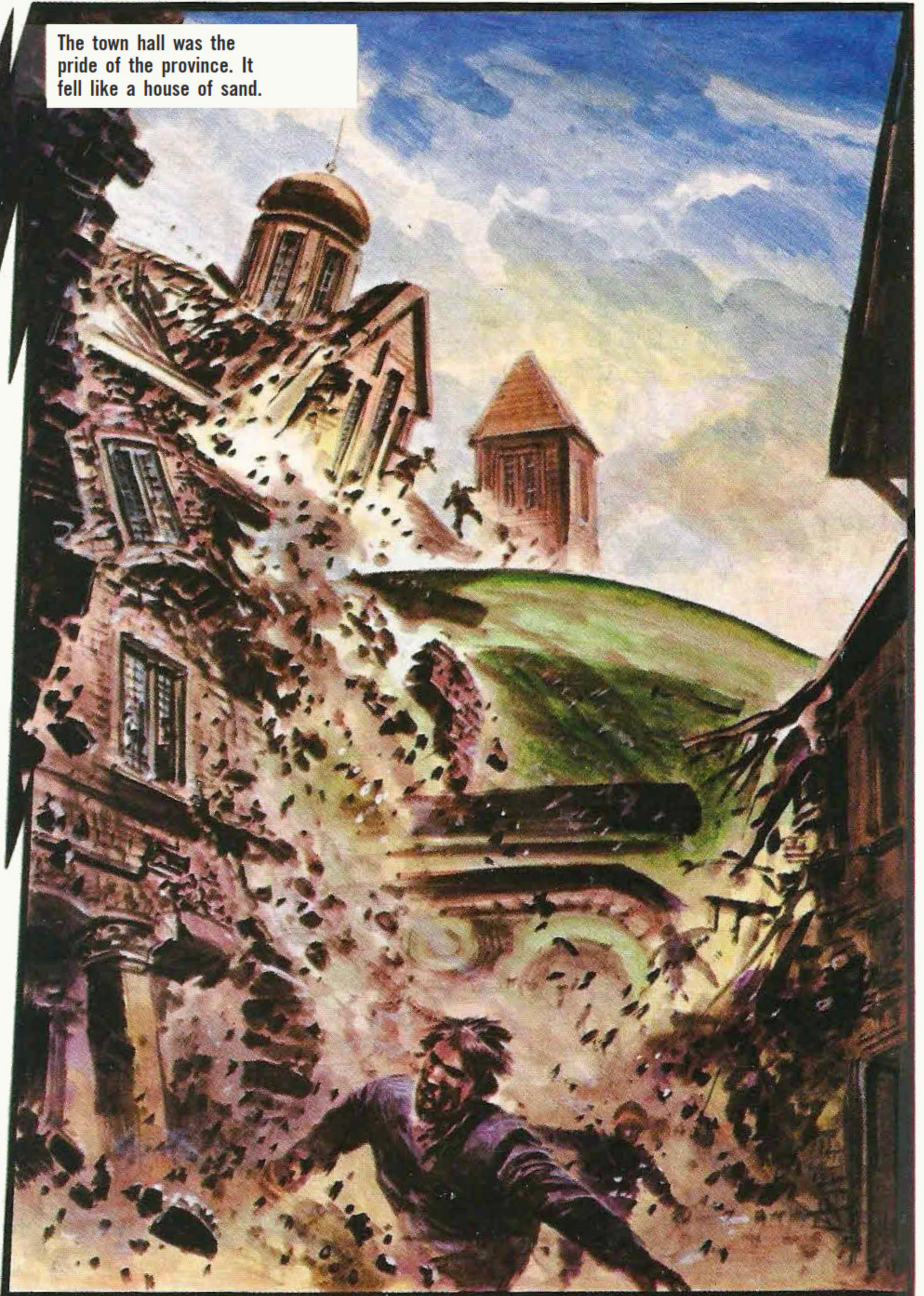




It bore down on the town,
its giant drill whirring.



The town hall was the pride of the province. It fell like a house of sand.





In Trigan City Air Fleet Headquarters, the duty pilots passed the time idly.

We're off duty tomorrow. What about going down to the coast for a swim?

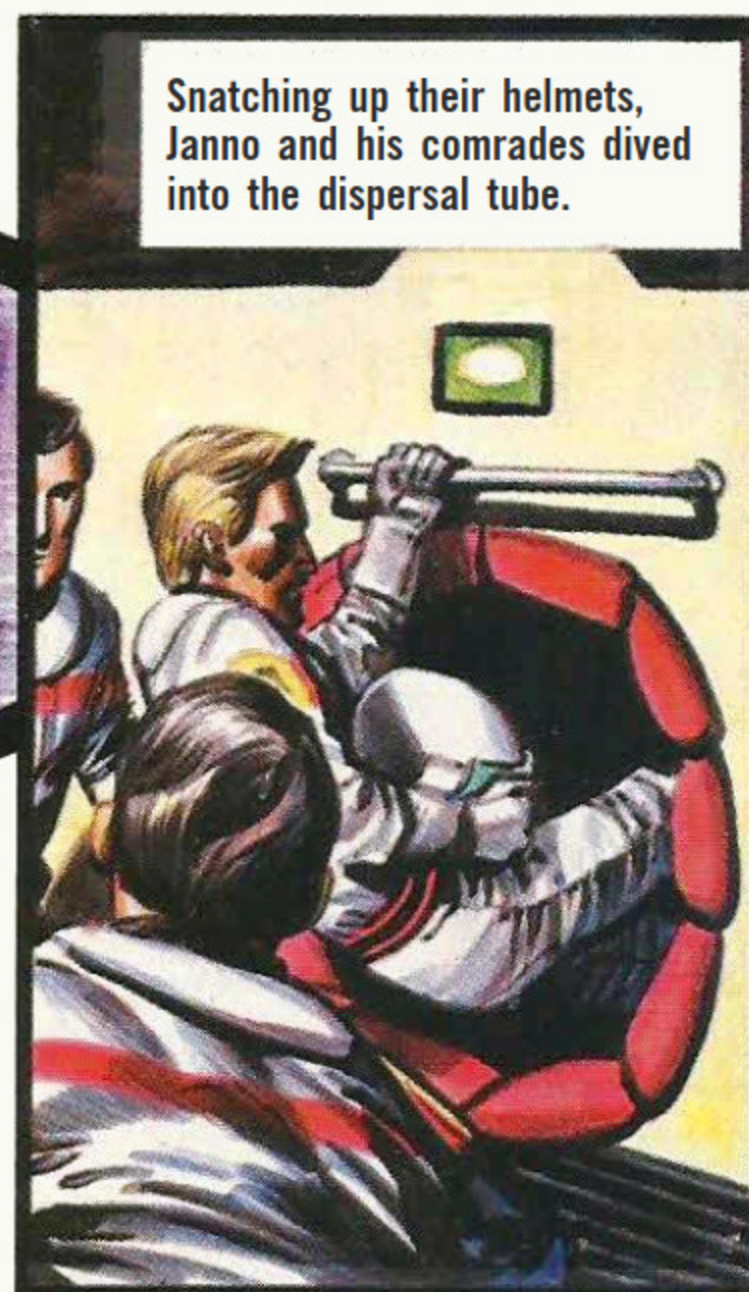
Good idea, Janno

Right!

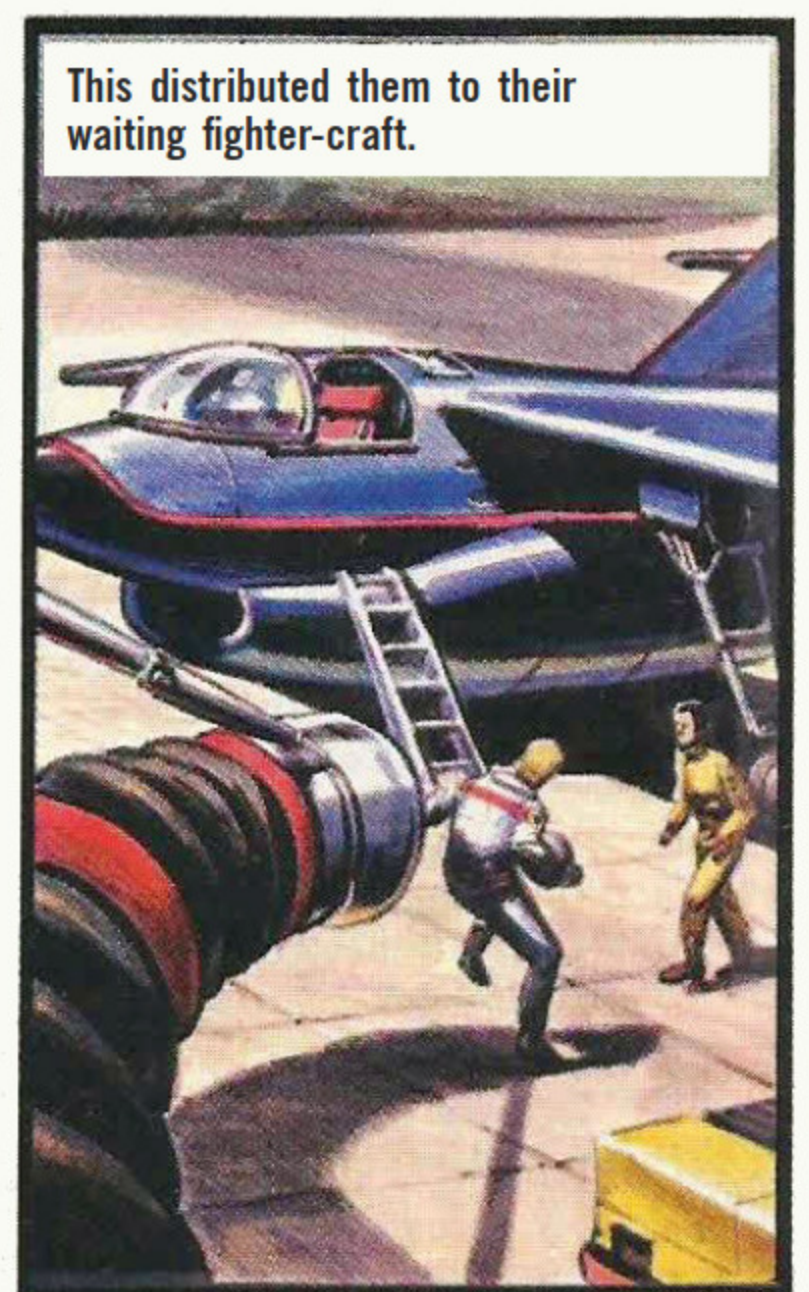
And then . . .



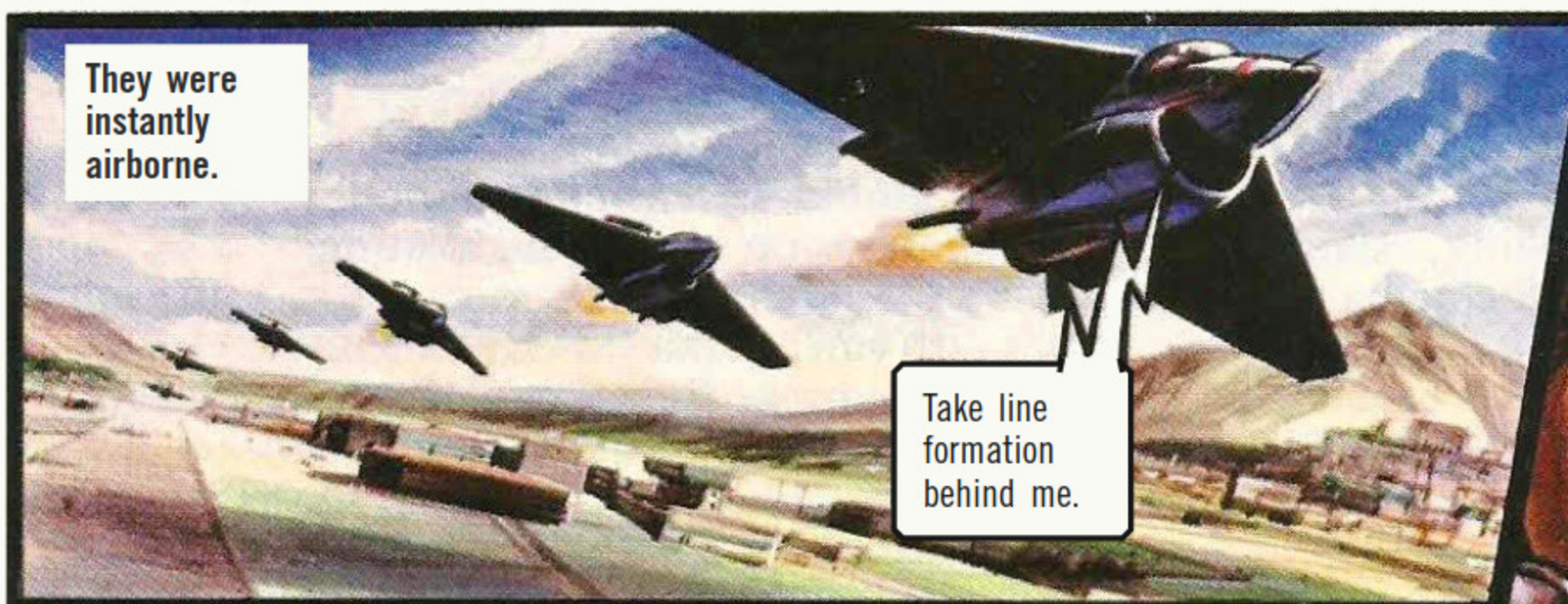
Alarm! Alarm!—Duty fighters airborne. This is not an exercise. This is a genuine emergency.



Snatching up their helmets, Janno and his comrades dived into the dispersal tube.



This distributed them to their waiting fighter-craft.



They were instantly airborne.

Take line formation behind me.

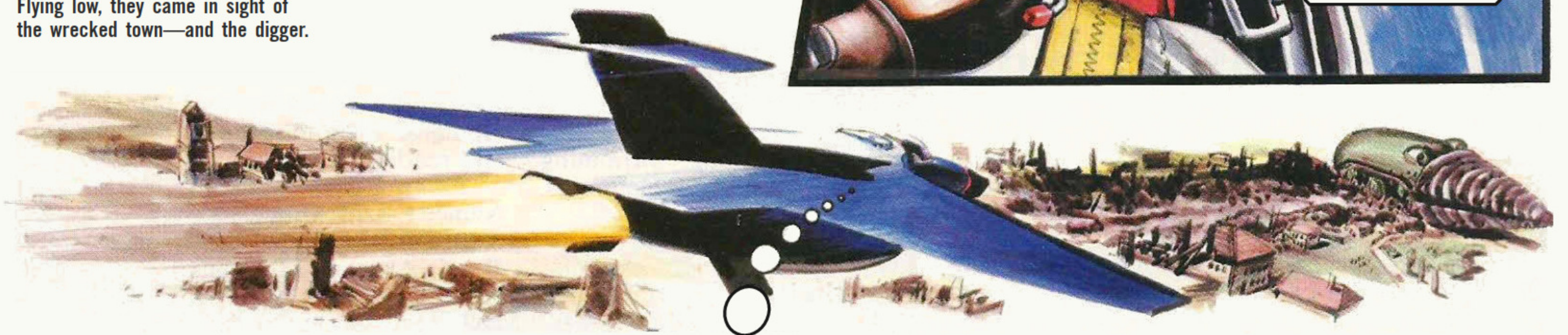
Flying low, they came in sight of the wrecked town—and the digger.



Janno, in the lead craft, listened in astonishment to his instructions from the control tower.

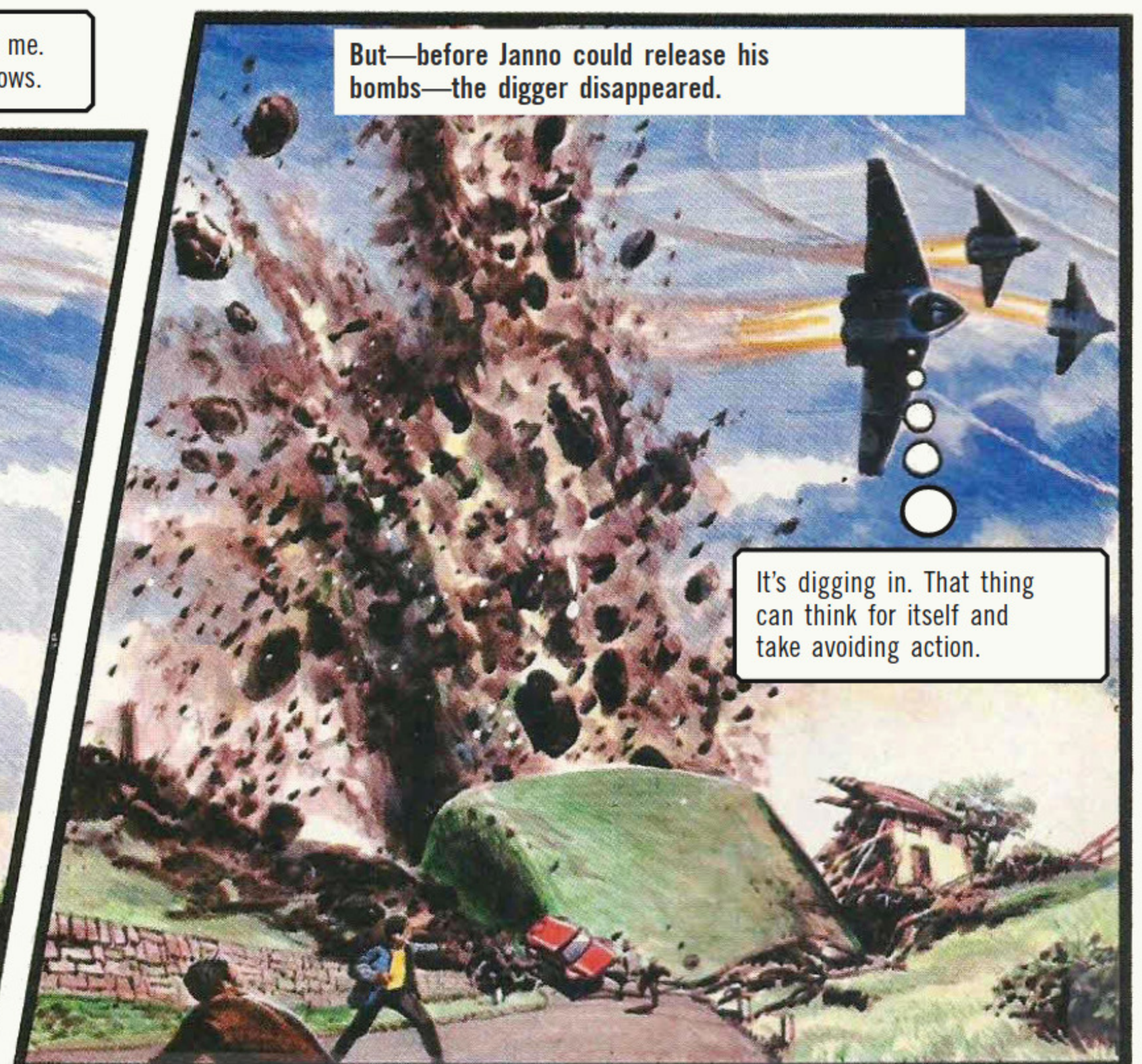
The digger has run amok. It is on a rampage of destruction in the town of Chizz. Attack and destroy it immediately.

Destroy the digger? But that thing cost over ten million thullars to build!



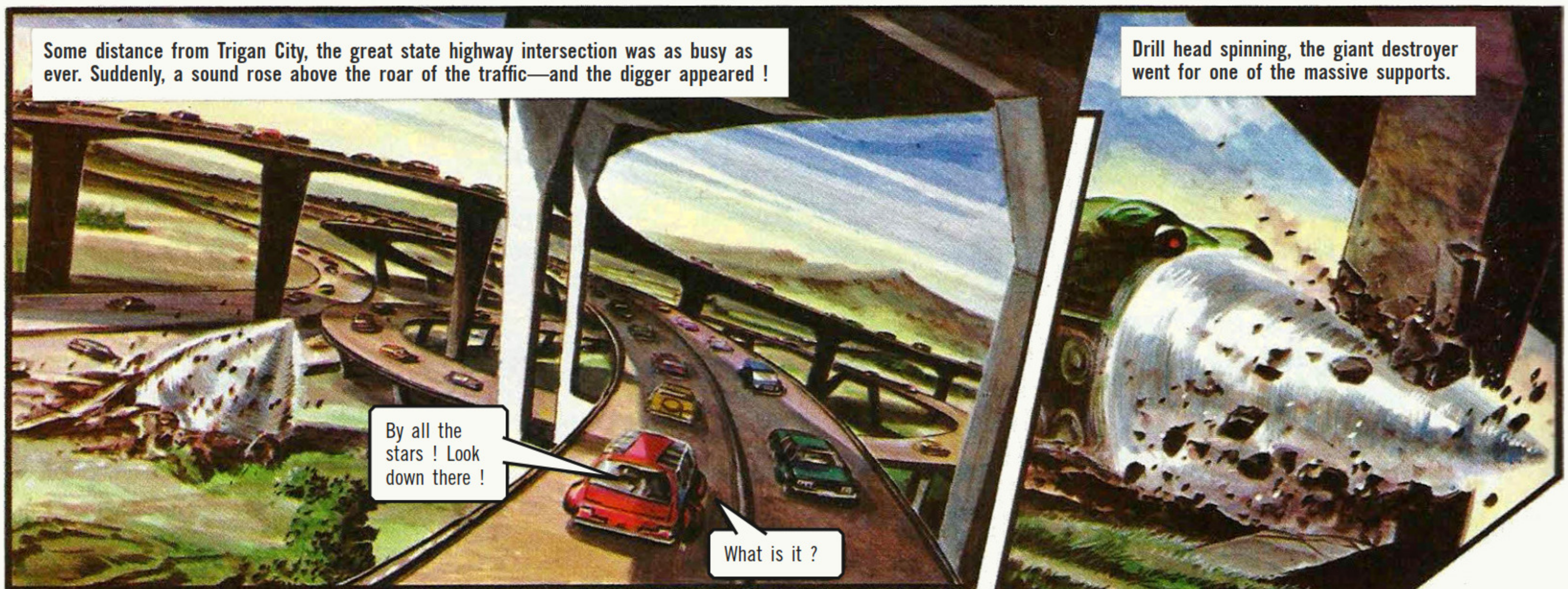
It's running away. Wait till it gets the full load of my fragmentation bombs.

The thing's spotted me. It's as if it . . . knows.



But—before Janno could release his bombs—the digger disappeared.

It's digging in. That thing can think for itself and take avoiding action.



Some distance from Trigan City, the great state highway intersection was as busy as ever. Suddenly, a sound rose above the roar of the traffic—and the digger appeared !

Drill head spinning, the giant destroyer went for one of the massive supports.

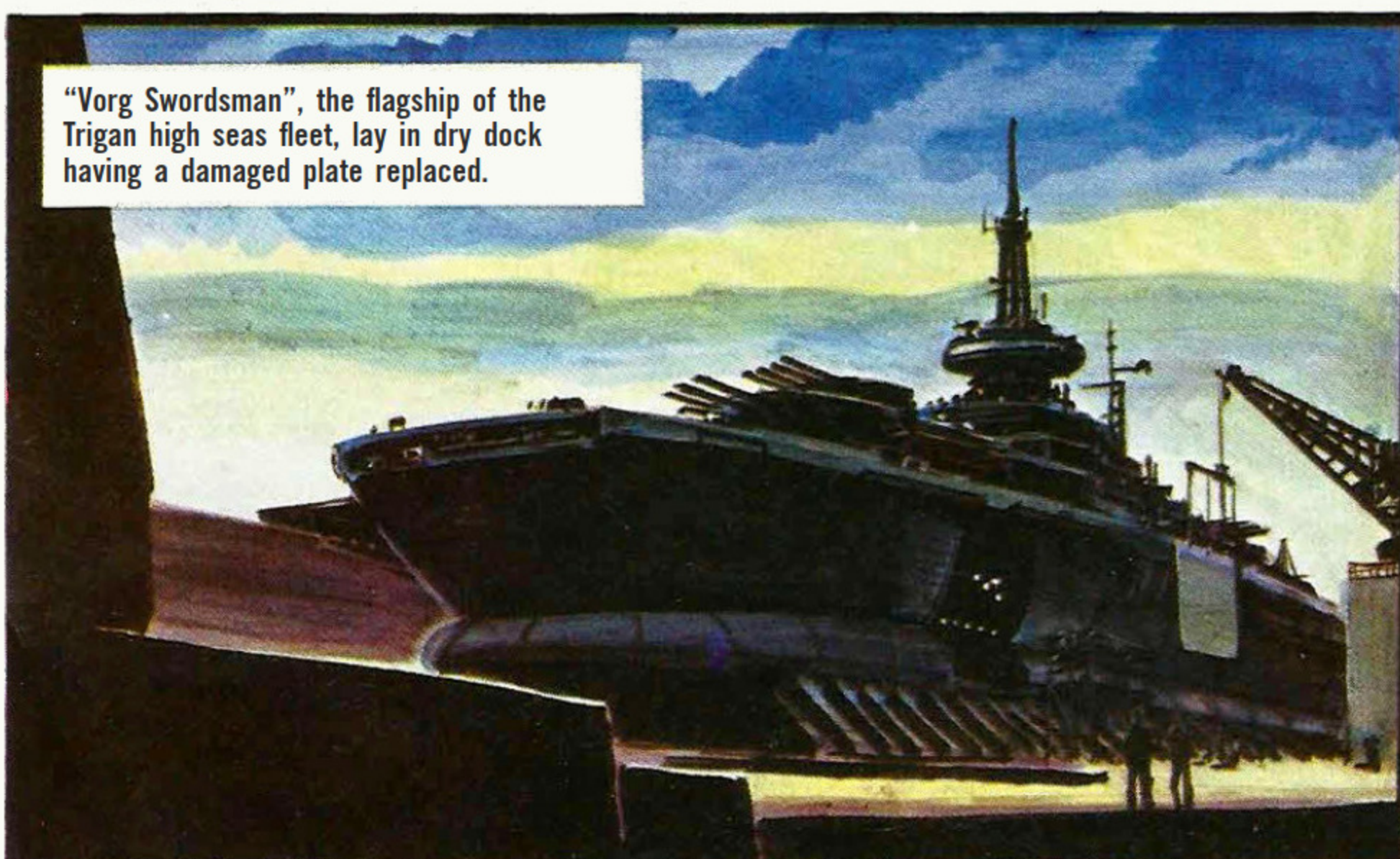
By all the stars ! Look down there !

What is it ?

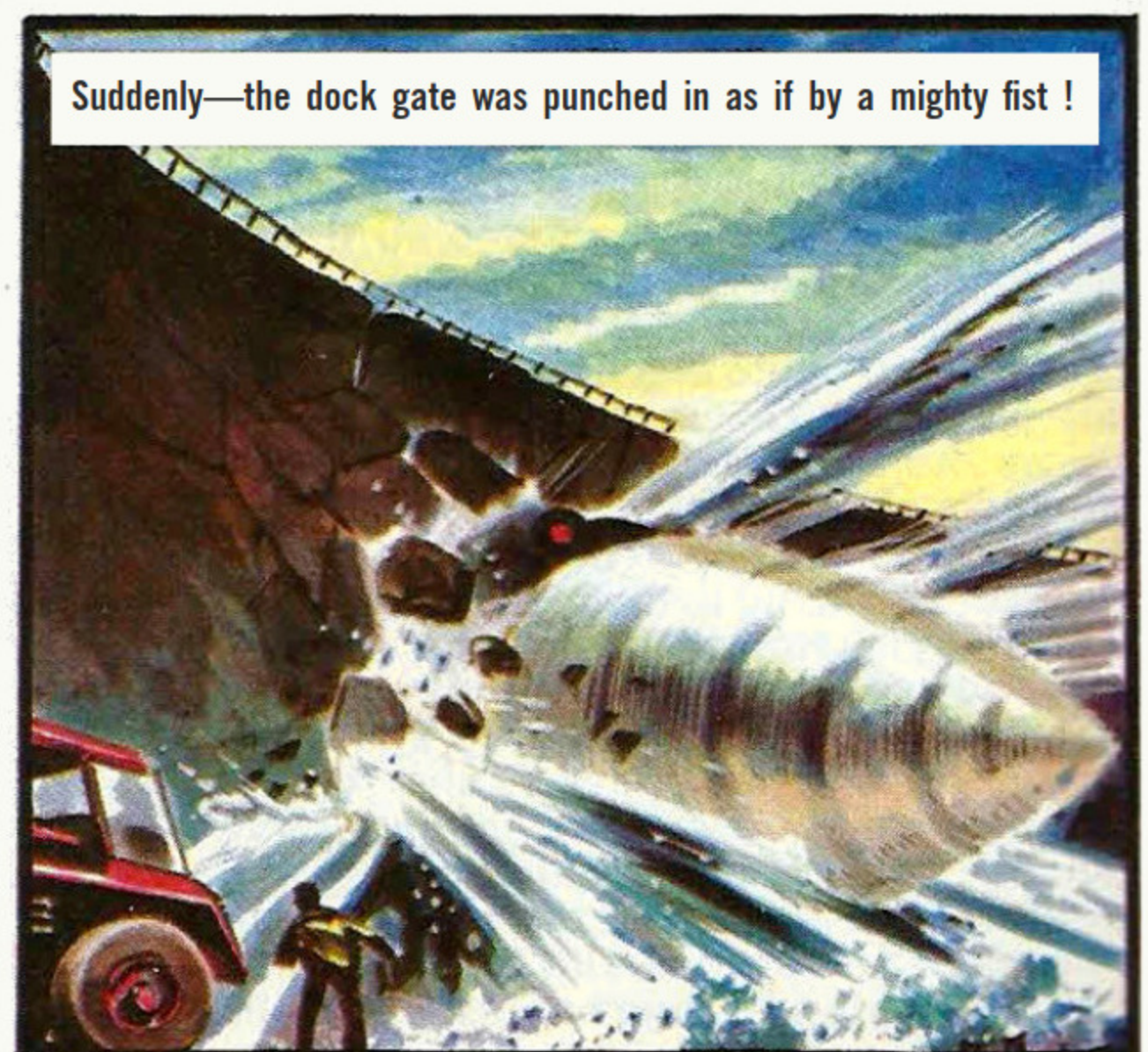


Then—disaster !

Aaaaaagh !!



"Vorg Swordsman", the flagship of the Trigan high seas fleet, lay in dry dock having a damaged plate replaced.

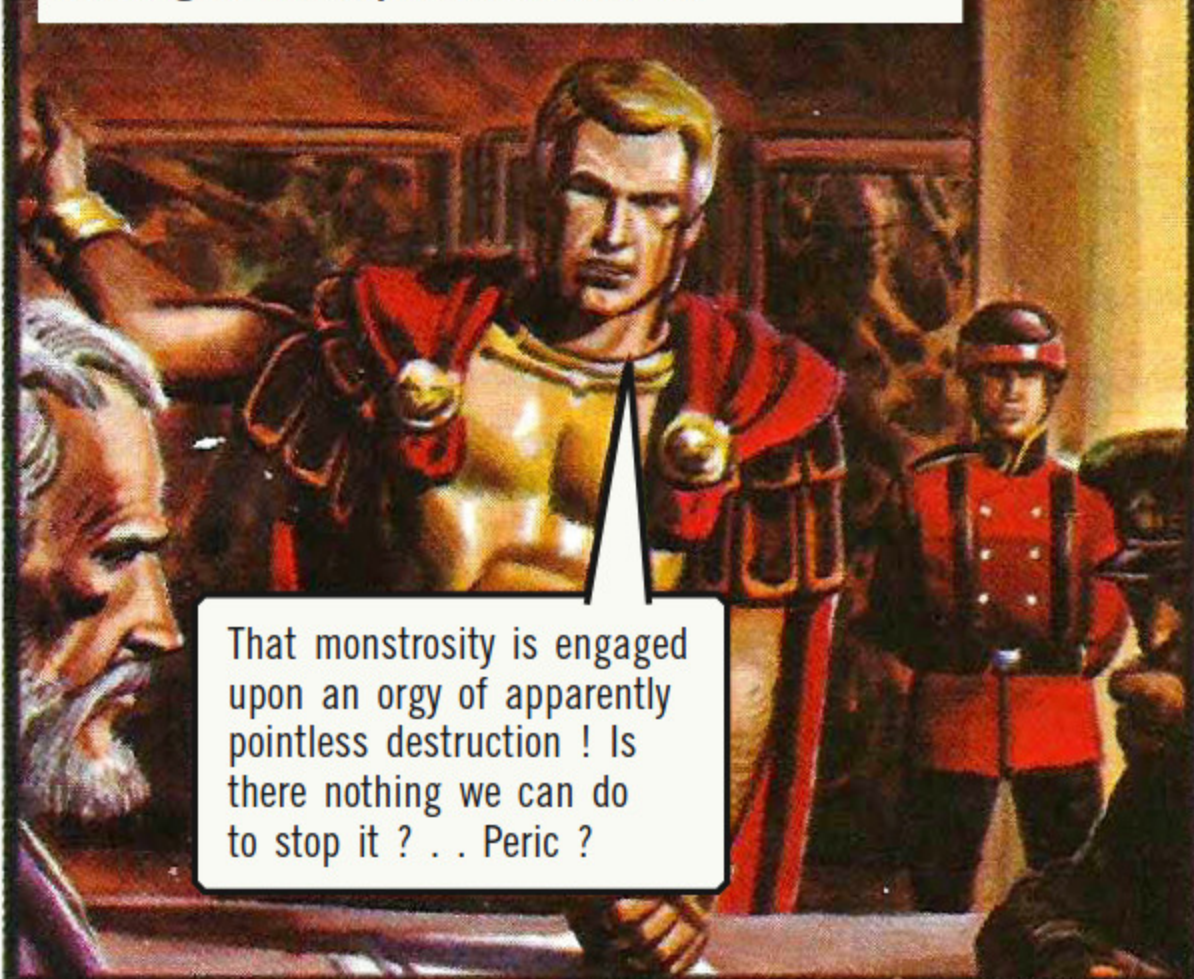


Suddenly—the dock gate was punched in as if by a mighty fist !

Swamped in an overwhelming inundation of pounding water, the giant warship was a total wreck within moments !

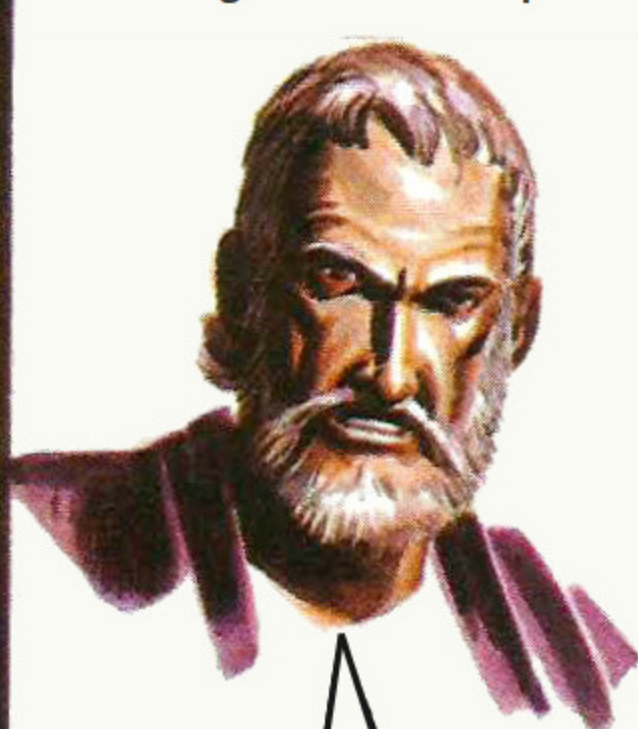


As the Emperor Trigo said, at a hastily assembled meeting of the Imperial Council . . .



That monstrosity is engaged upon an orgy of apparently pointless destruction ! Is there nothing we can do to stop it ? . . . Peric ?

Peric the great scientist replied . . .



It is clear, from our enquiries, that the digger's electronic brain was tampered with. Evidence suggests that it was the work of a vengeful assistant engineer named Rollah . . .

The Emperor's brother interjected with an angry order . . .

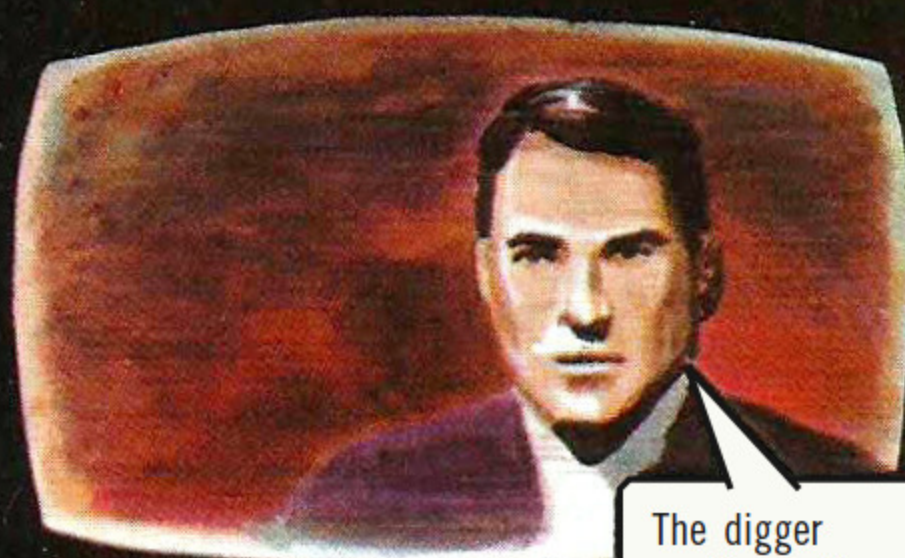


Have Rollah punished with the full severity of the law !

Rollah has already paid the price, Lord Brag. He was the digger's first victim !

Peric was the first to realise the cause.

It was that evening that people switched on to Trigan City Tele-Station . . .

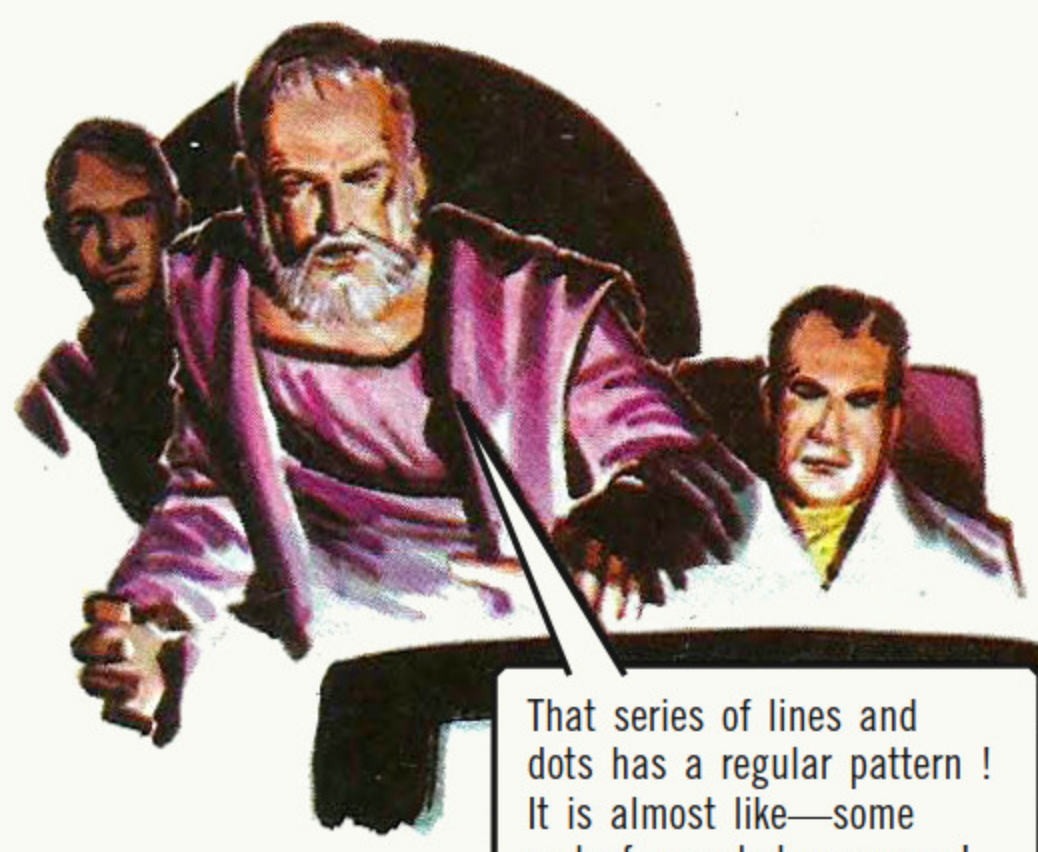


The digger continues its trail of terror . . .

. . . complained of a strange interference.



. . . Throughout the Trigan City area.



That series of lines and dots has a regular pattern ! It is almost like—some sort of repeated message !

The message, when translated into the common language of the planet Elekton, was read aloud . . .

I have it ! The lines and dots bear a direct relationship to the letters of the Elekton alphabet.

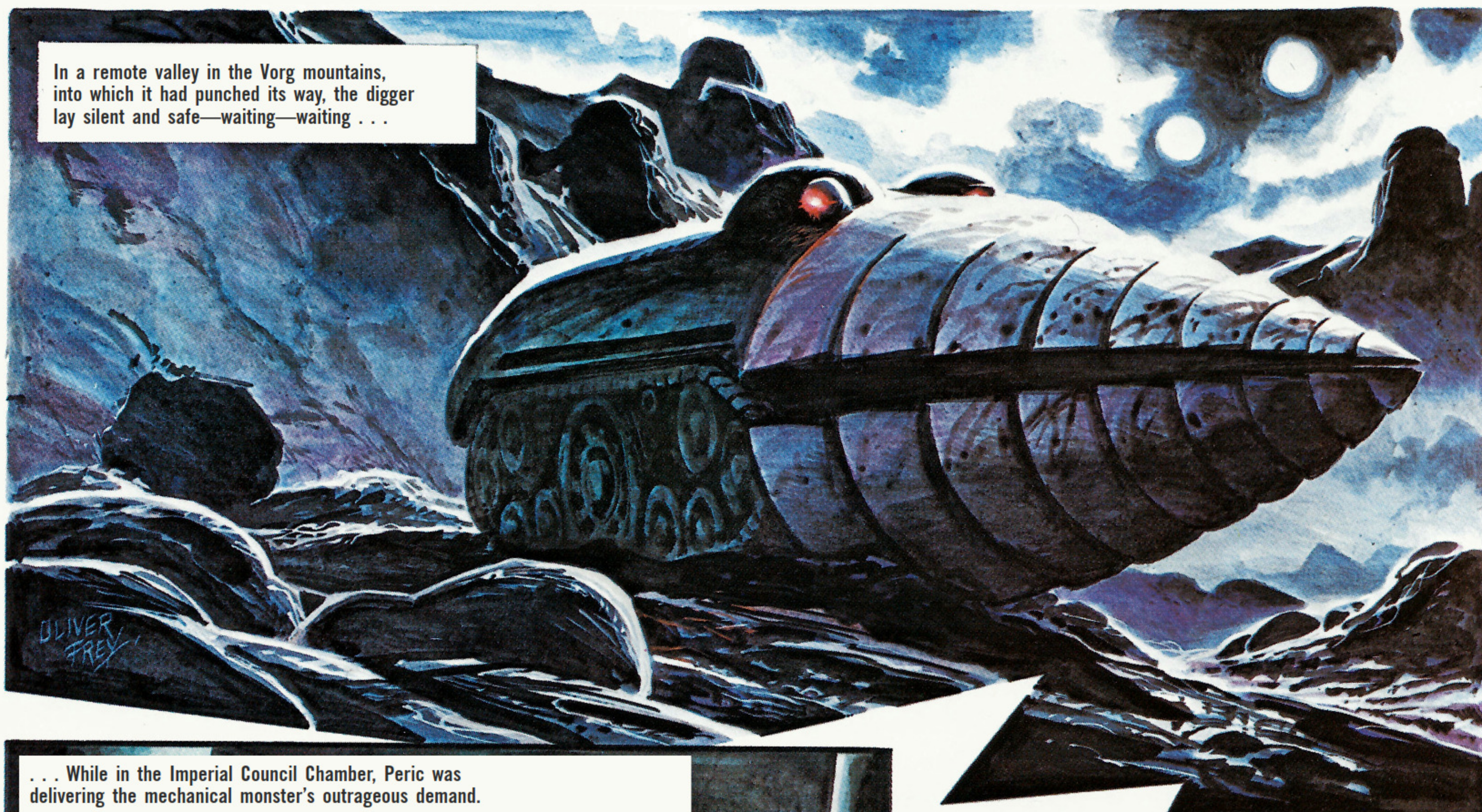


It is from the digger ! . . .

And it's . . . it's . . .

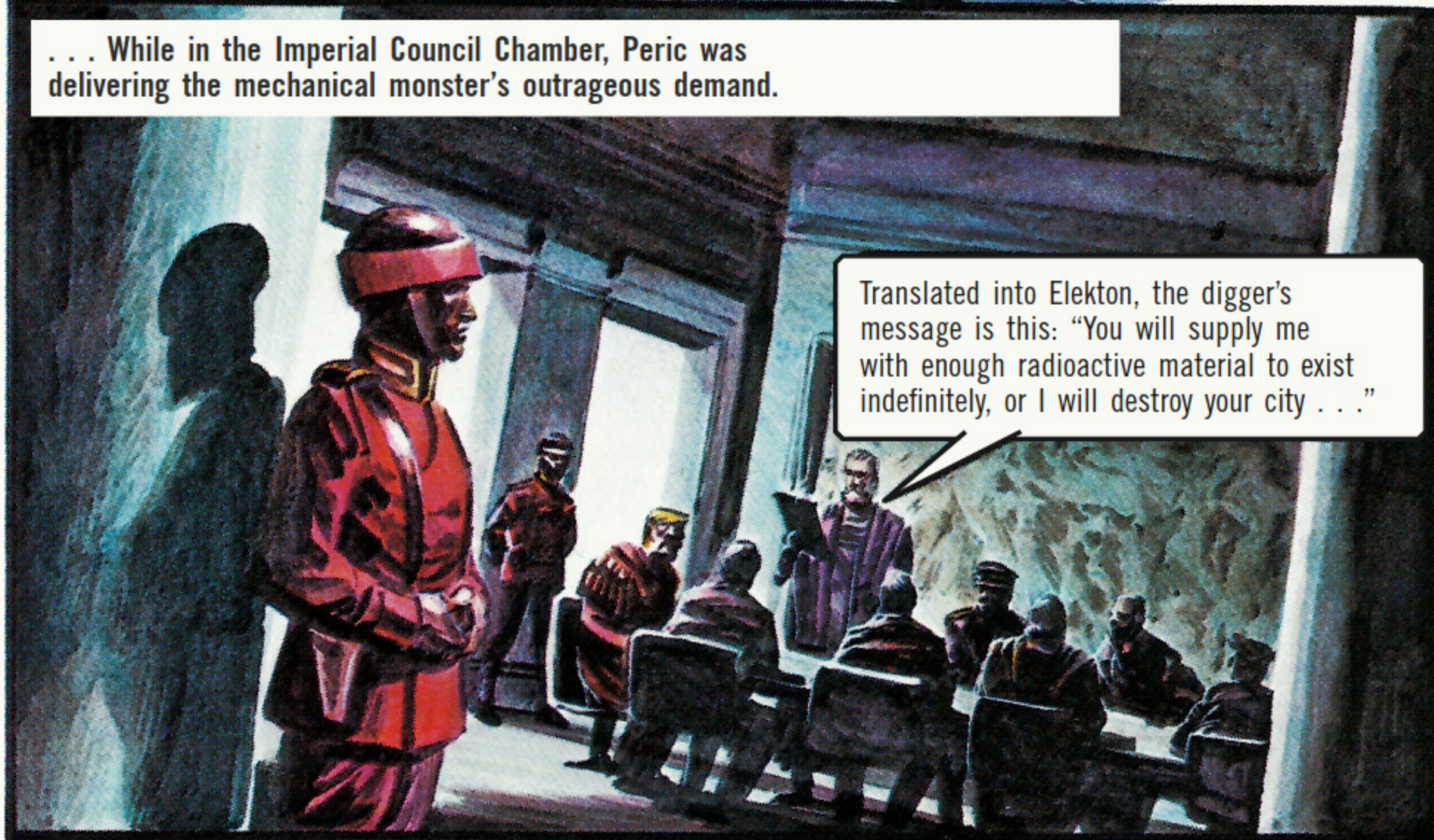
A demand !





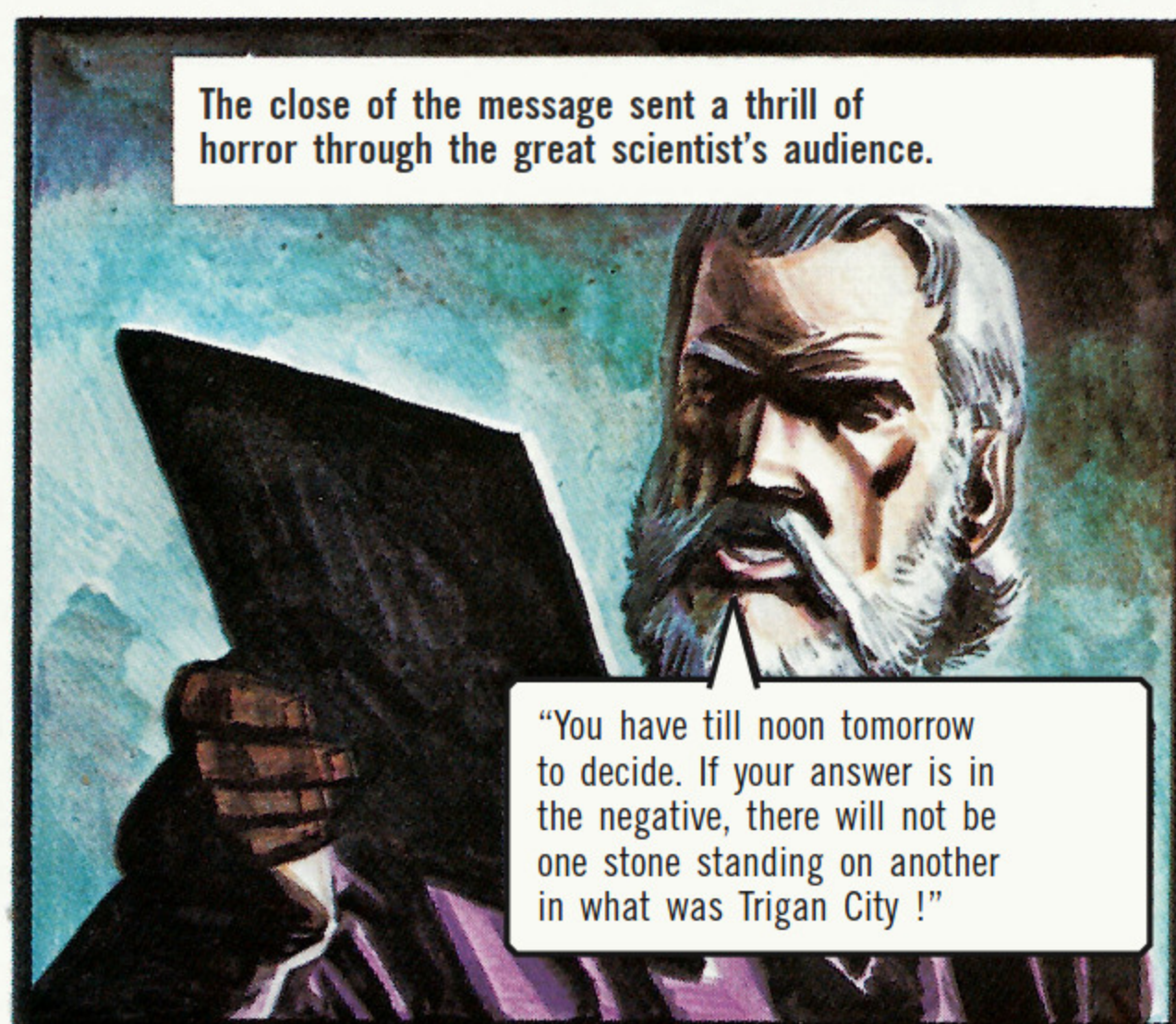
In a remote valley in the Vorg mountains, into which it had punched its way, the digger lay silent and safe—waiting—waiting . . .

. . . While in the Imperial Council Chamber, Peric was delivering the mechanical monster's outrageous demand.



Translated into Elekton, the digger's message is this: "You will supply me with enough radioactive material to exist indefinitely, or I will destroy your city . . ."

The close of the message sent a thrill of horror through the great scientist's audience.



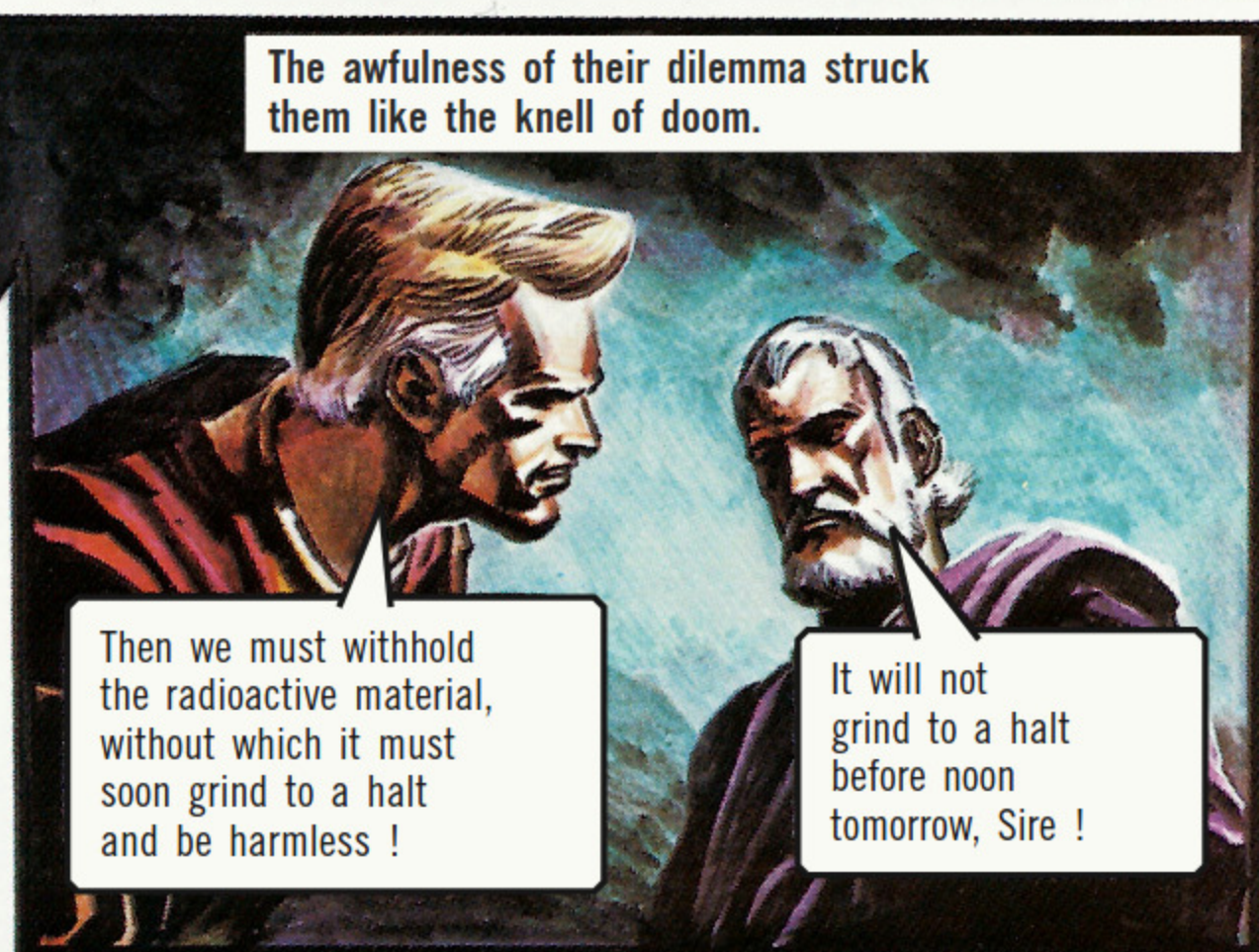
"You have till noon tomorrow to decide. If your answer is in the negative, there will not be one stone standing on another in what was Trigan City !"

The awfulness of their dilemma struck them like the knell of doom.



What infernal fool designed a machine that could do this ?

Imperial Majesty, the digger was designed to be perfectly safe. Its brain was tampered with, and now that brain is developing ! The digger can now reason for itself !



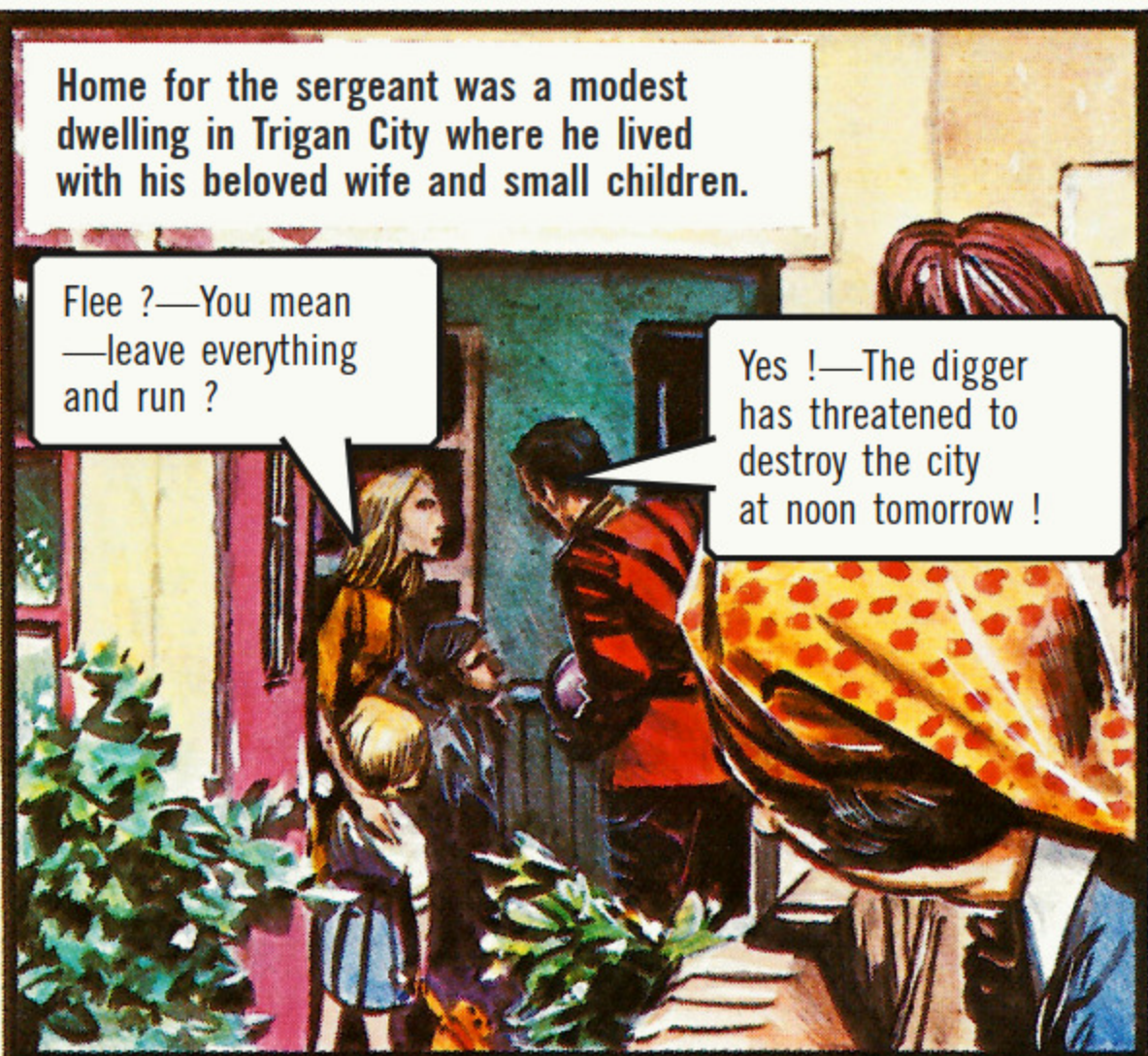
Then we must withhold the radioactive material, without which it must soon grind to a halt and be harmless !

It will not grind to a halt before noon tomorrow, Sire !



While the Emperor and his council were debating the decision, a sergeant of the Imperial Guard deserted his post, unseen.

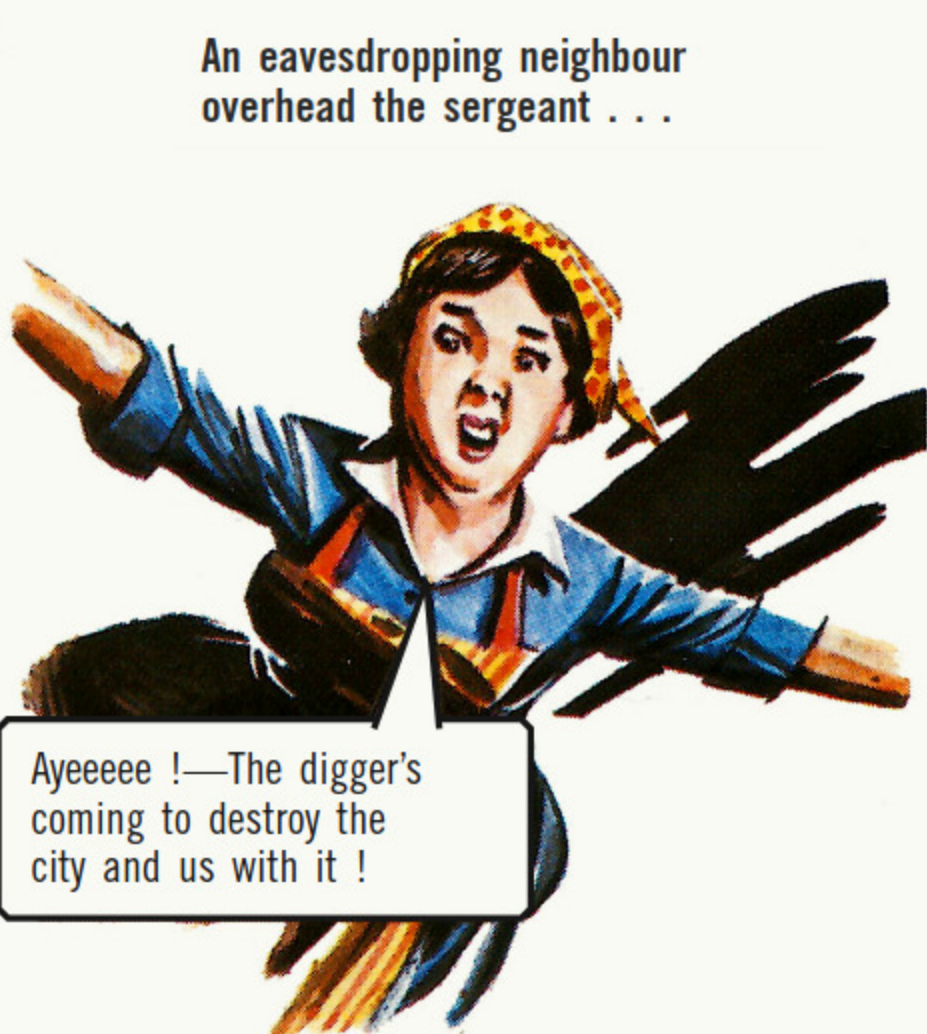
I must get back home—quickly !



Home for the sergeant was a modest dwelling in Trigan City where he lived with his beloved wife and small children.

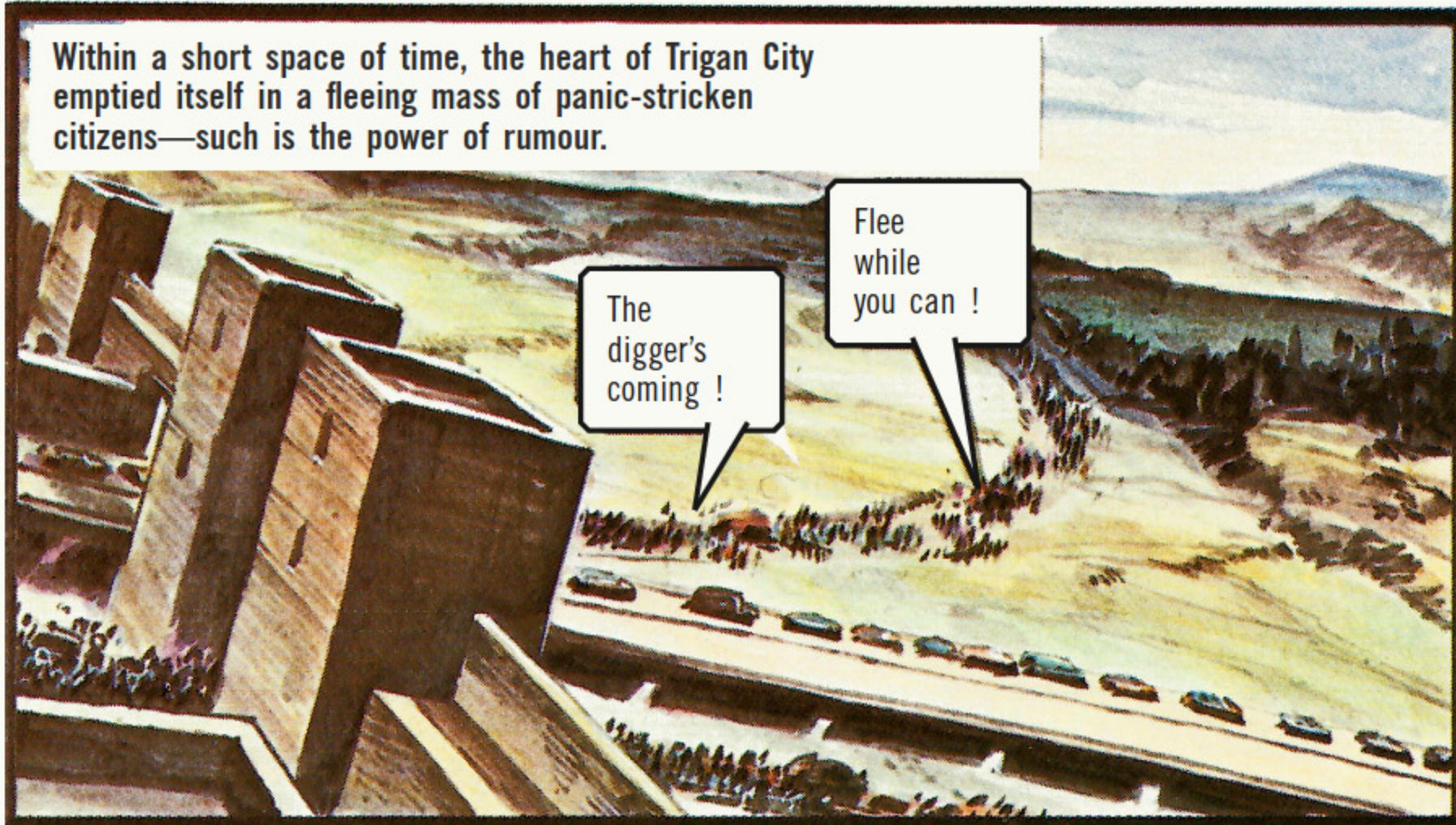
Flee ?—You mean—leave everything and run ?

Yes !—The digger has threatened to destroy the city at noon tomorrow !



An eavesdropping neighbour overhead the sergeant . . .

Ayeeeeee !—The digger's coming to destroy the city and us with it !



Within a short space of time, the heart of Trigan City emptied itself in a fleeing mass of panic-stricken citizens—such is the power of rumour.

The digger's coming !

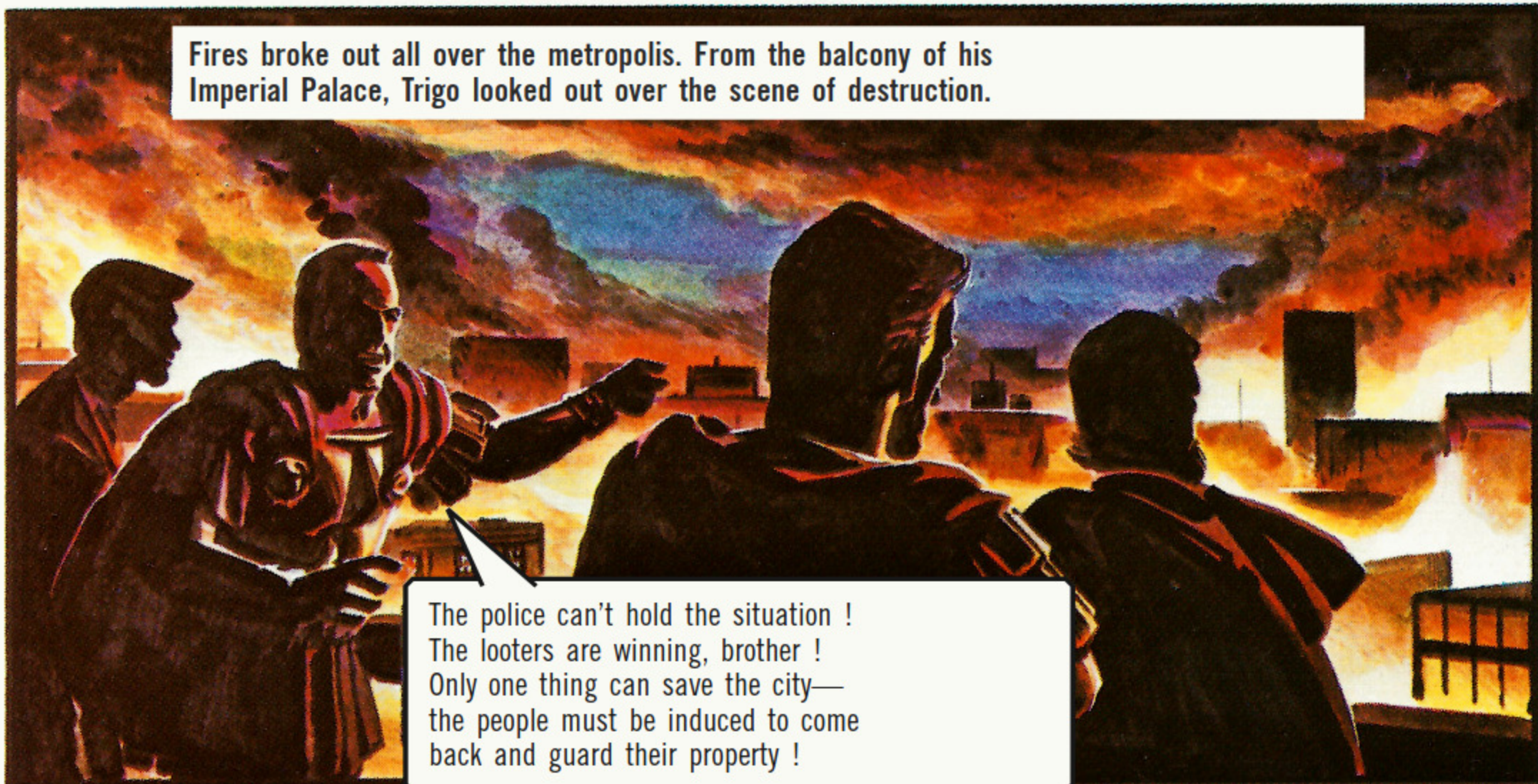
Flee while you can !



In no time at all, into the empty city came—looters !

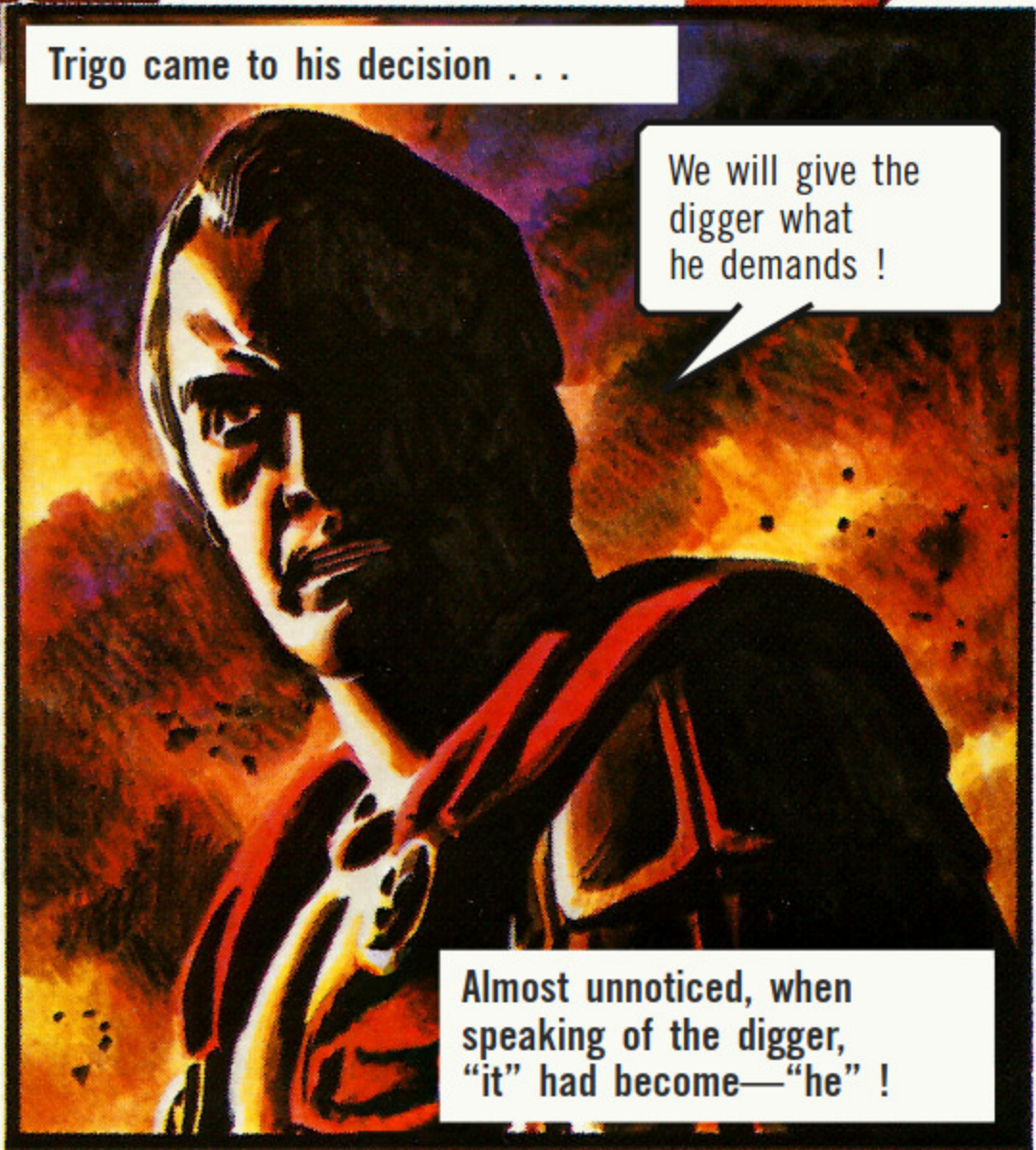


Street battles raged between looters and city police.



Fires broke out all over the metropolis. From the balcony of his Imperial Palace, Trigo looked out over the scene of destruction.

The police can't hold the situation ! The looters are winning, brother ! Only one thing can save the city—the people must be induced to come back and guard their property !



Trigo came to his decision . . .

We will give the digger what he demands !

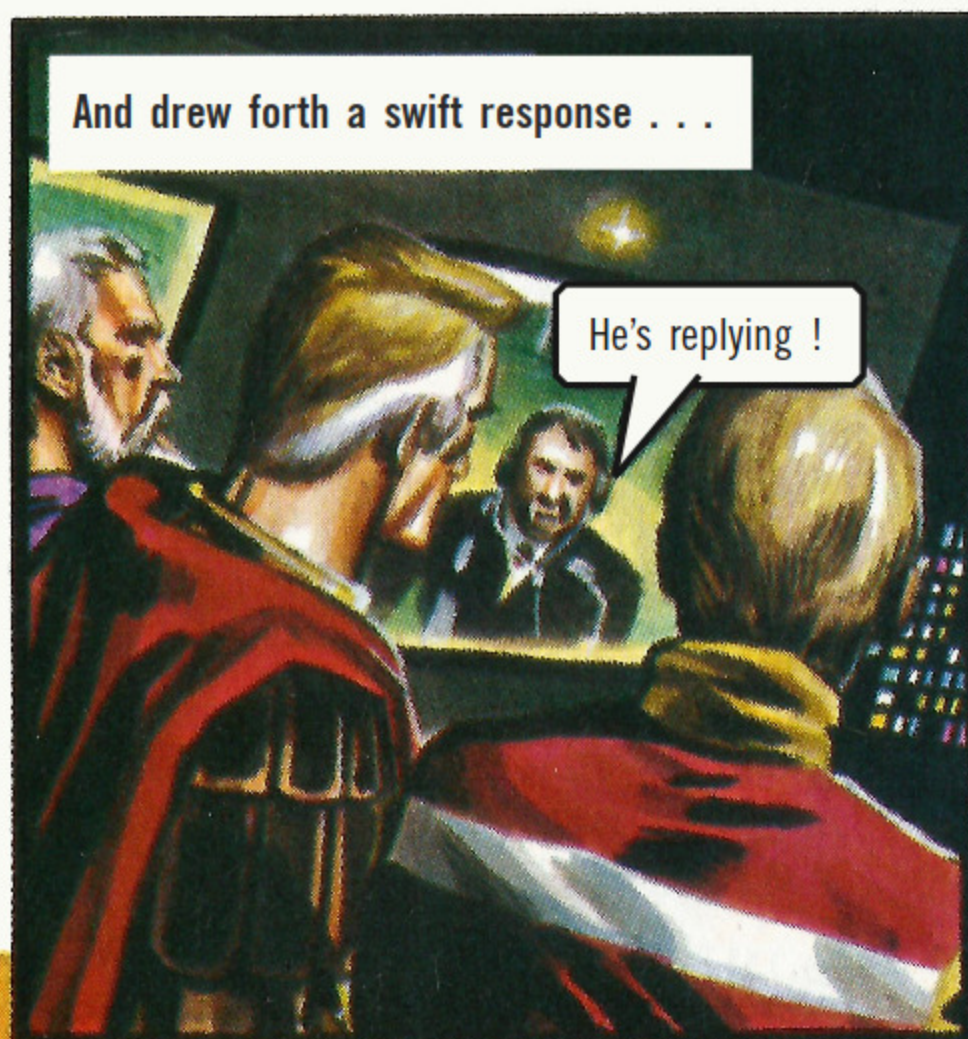
Almost unnoticed, when speaking of the digger, "it" had become—"he" !

The message went out over the air . . .



Calling the digger—
this is Trigan City
calling the digger—your
demand is agreed to . . .

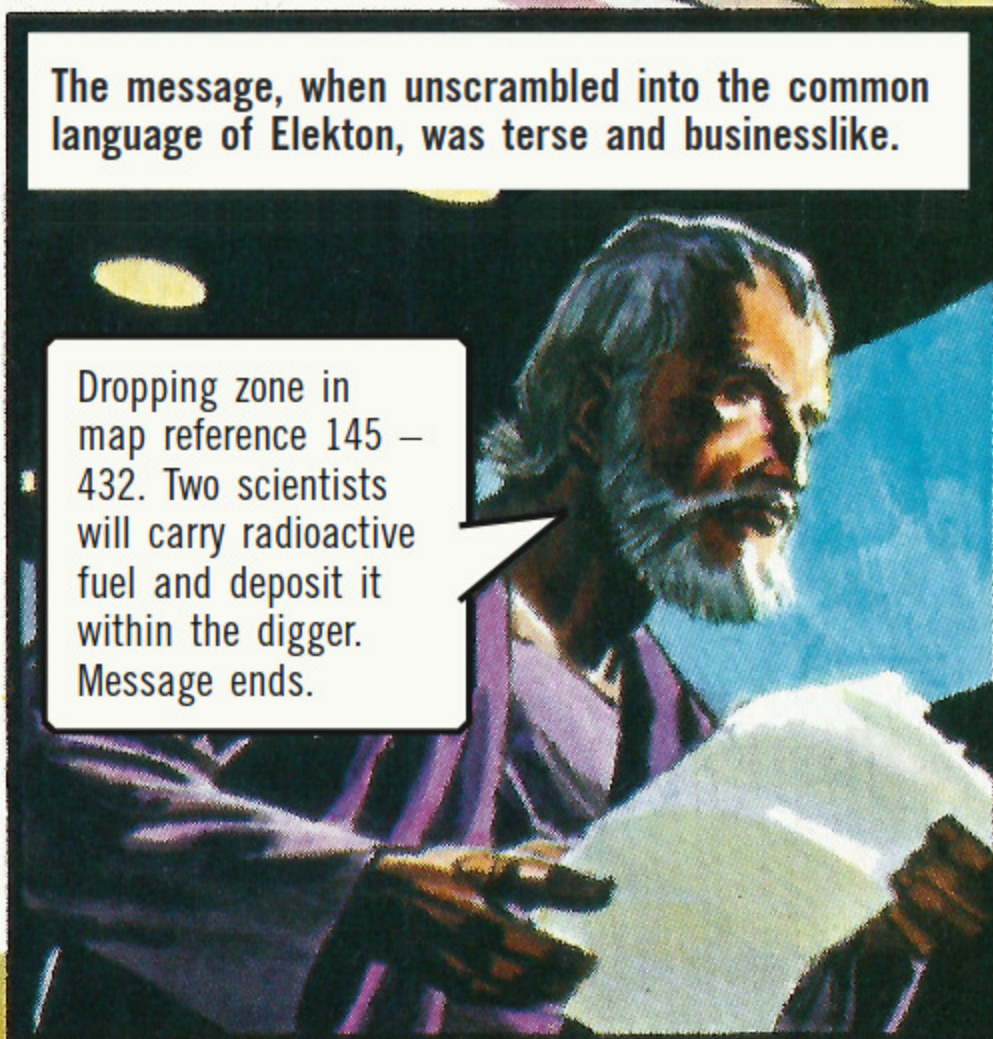
And drew forth a swift response . . .



He's replying !

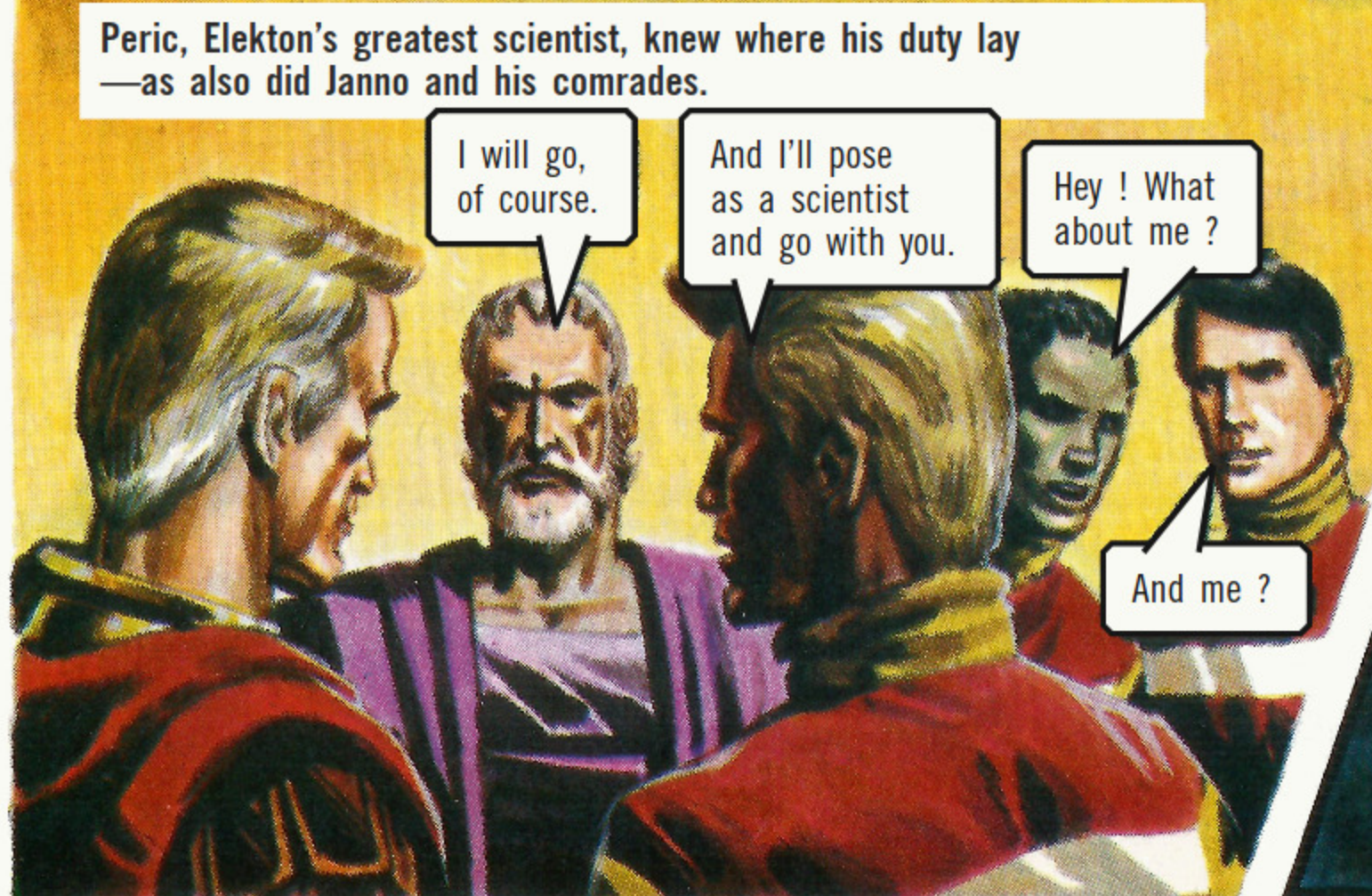
The message, when unscrambled into the common
language of Elekton, was terse and businesslike.

Dropping zone in
map reference 145 -
432. Two scientists
will carry radioactive
fuel and deposit it
within the digger.
Message ends.



In the event, the three air-fleet
pilots flew in the heli-jet that
carried Peric and the radioactive
fuel to the dropping zone, a spot
in the Vorg wilderness.

Peric, Elekton's greatest scientist, knew where his duty lay
—as also did Janno and his comrades.



I will go,
of course.

And I'll pose
as a scientist
and go with you.

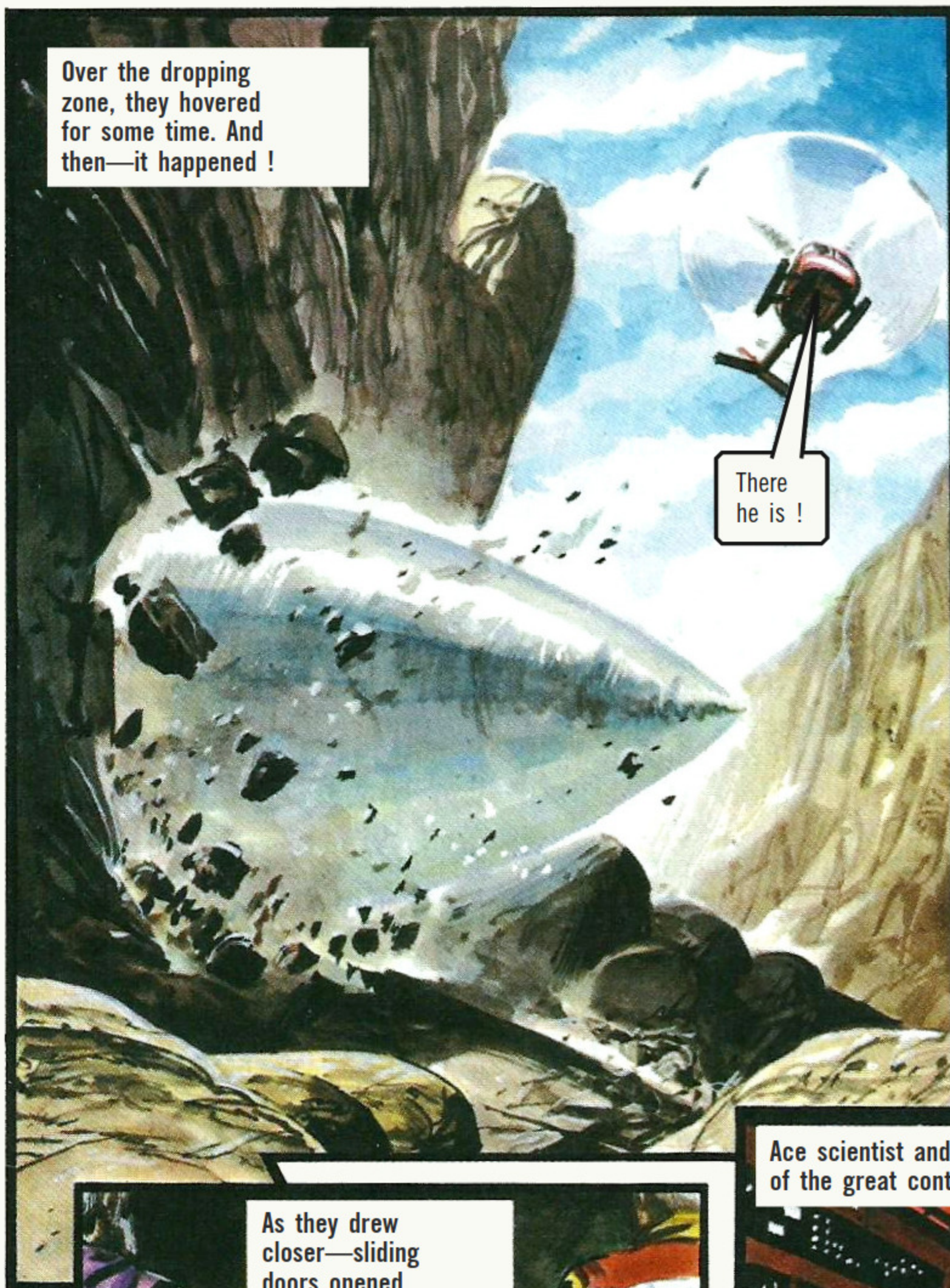
Hey ! What
about me ?

And me ?

While we're inside
the digger, is there
anything we can
do to destroy the
mechanism, Peric ?

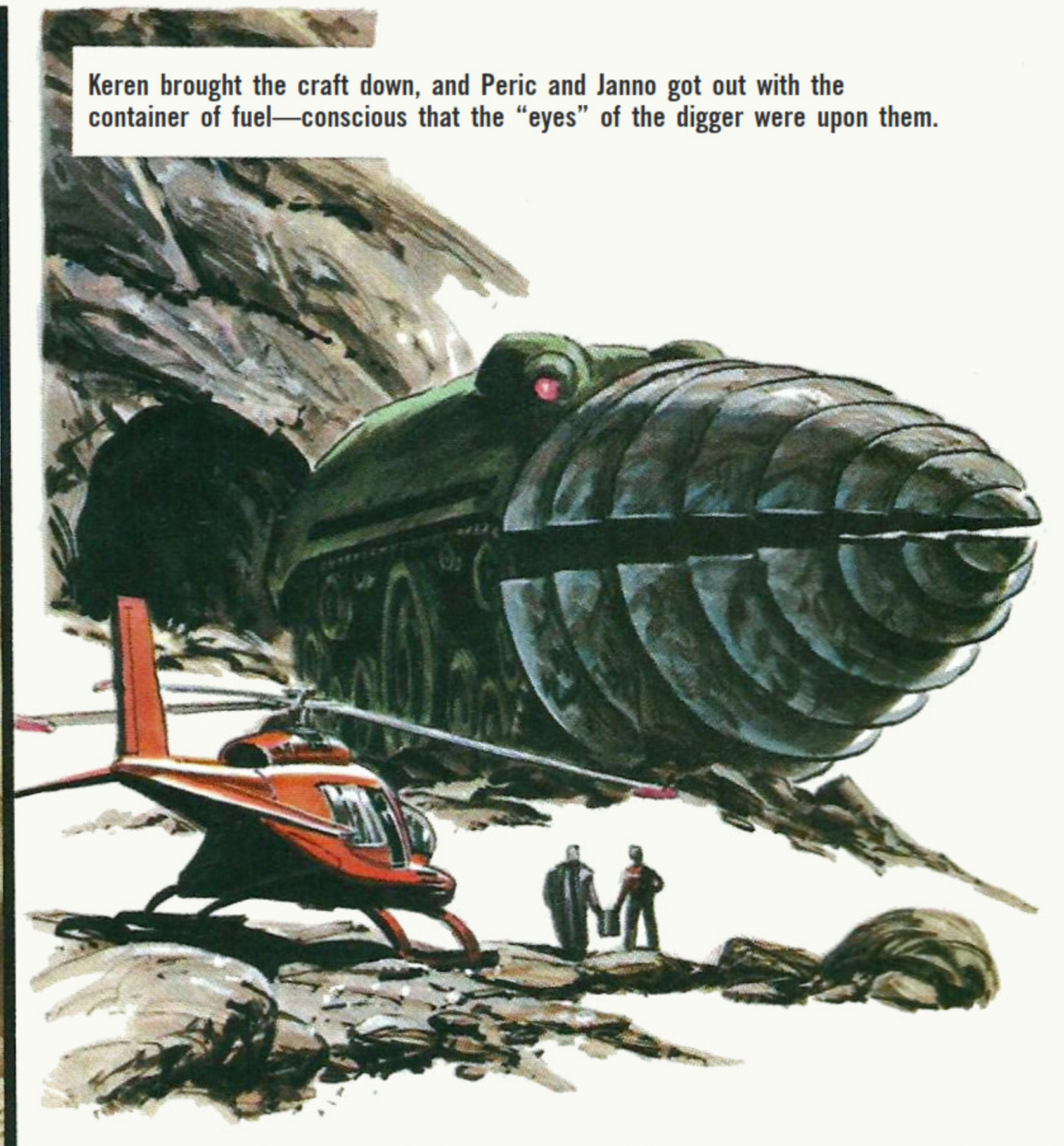


No, Janno. The
mechanism is
cased in shock-
proof metal.
But we may
have time to
make certain . . .
adjustments !

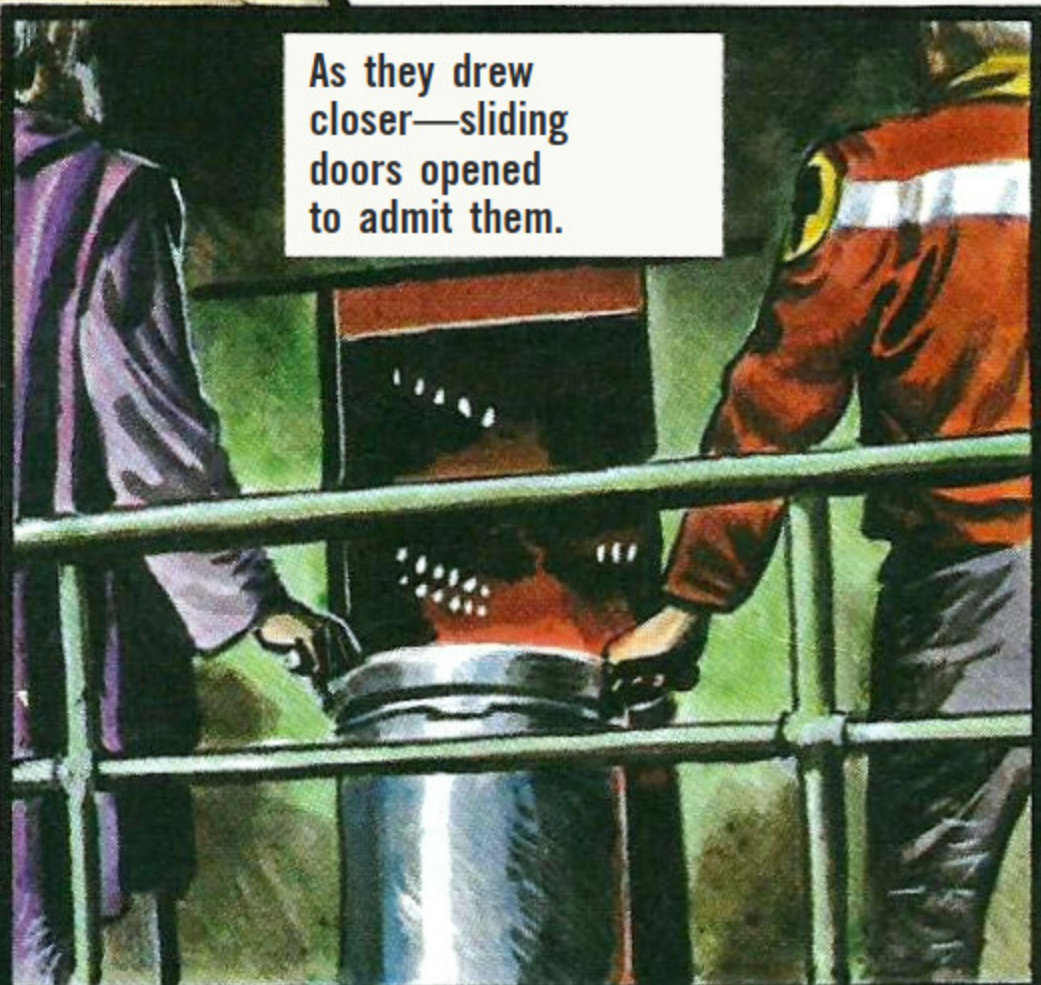


Over the dropping zone, they hovered for some time. And then—it happened !

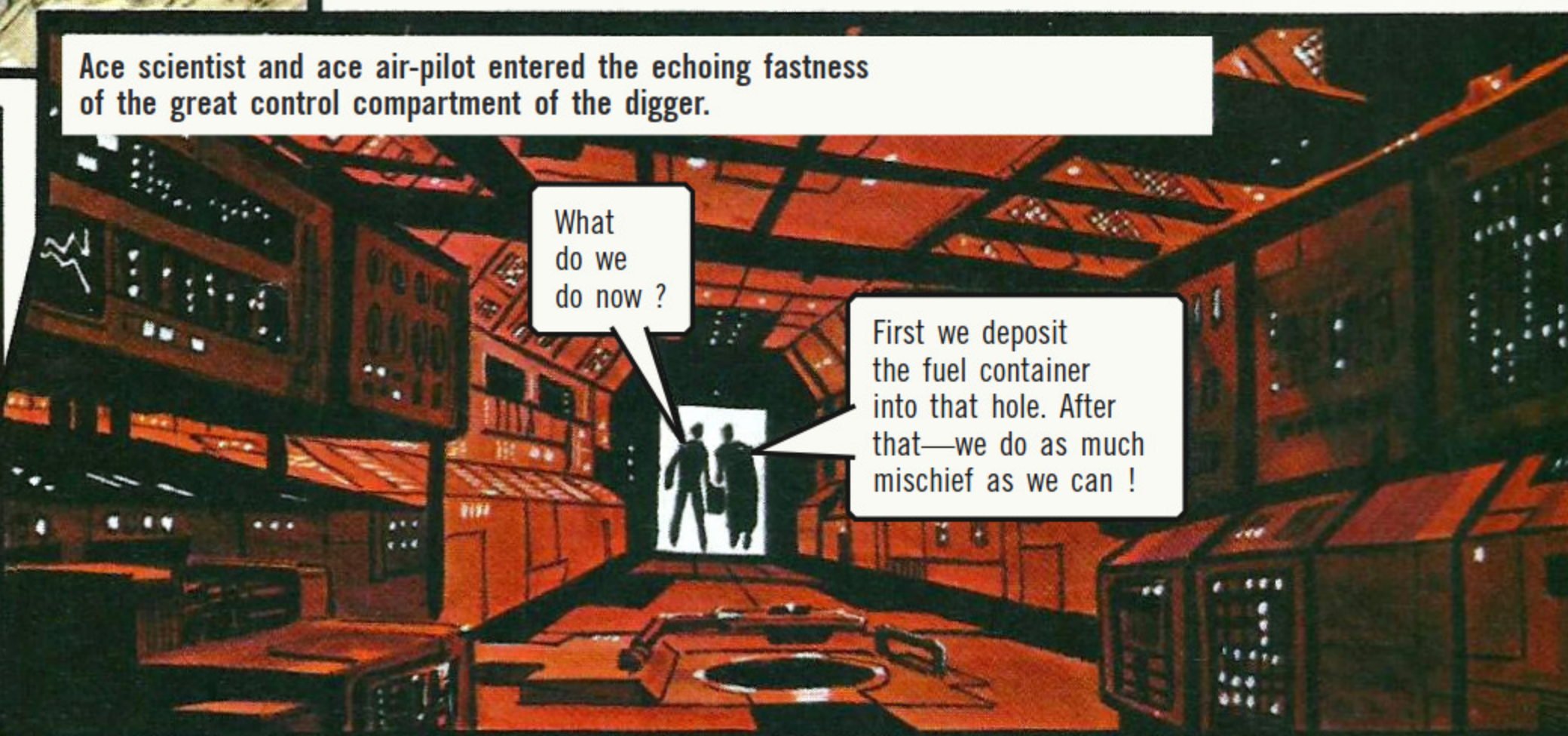
There he is !



Keren brought the craft down, and Peric and Janno got out with the container of fuel—conscious that the “eyes” of the digger were upon them.

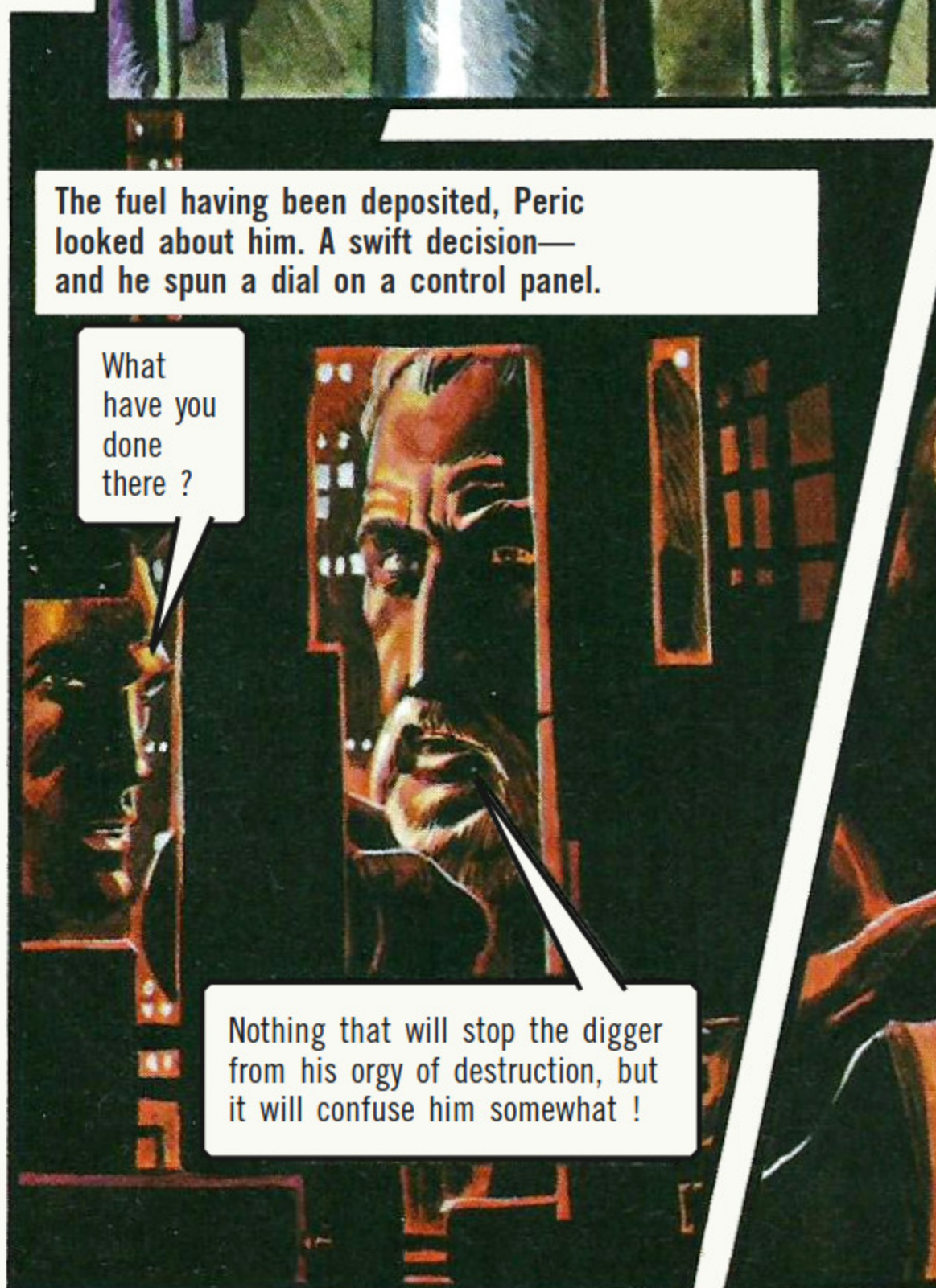


As they drew closer—sliding doors opened to admit them.



What do we do now ?

First we deposit the fuel container into that hole. After that—we do as much mischief as we can !



The fuel having been deposited, Peric looked about him. A swift decision—and he spun a dial on a control panel.

What have you done there ?

Nothing that will stop the digger from his orgy of destruction, but it will confuse him somewhat !



Hardly had Peric finished speaking when the thunderous roar of machinery dinned in their ears.

He knows what I've done !

Look !—The doors are shutting on us !



Run for your life !—Or we're trapped in here !

Janno pushed Peric in the small of the back—and the great scientist hurtled through the closing doors with an instant to spare !



Too late !—the doors slammed shut on the gallant air-fleet pilot !



He looked about him in anguish.



I'm trapped in here !

Ah ! This thing's moving !

What about—Peric ?

The heli-jet rose skyward—and the digger missed it by a hairsbreadth.

At that moment, Peric was fleeing for his life, with the digger on his heels !

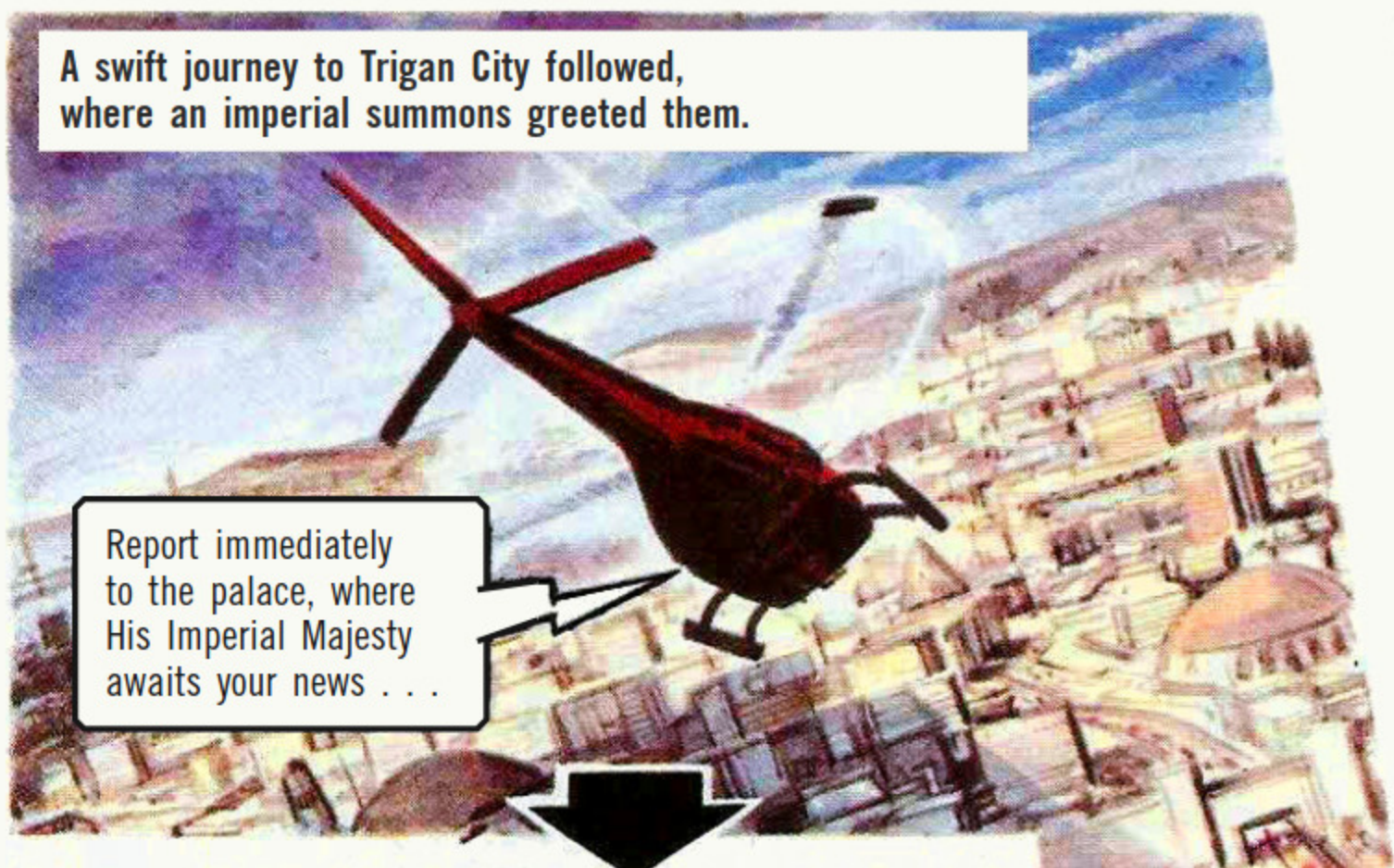


In a state of near-collapse, the old scientist was grabbed by the arm—and Roffa shouted an order.



Take her up, Keren—or we're done for !





A swift journey to Trigan City followed, where an imperial summons greeted them.

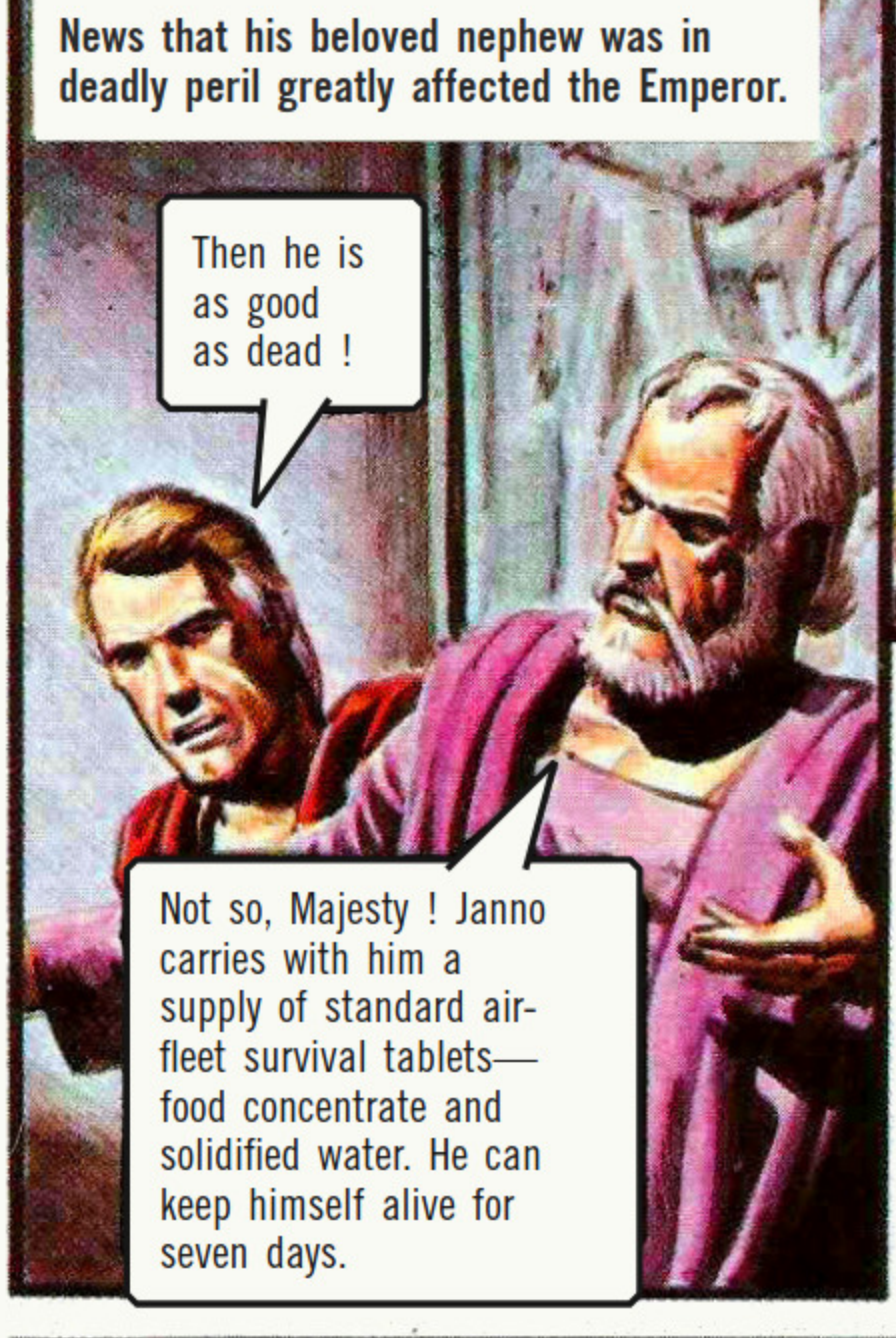
Report immediately to the palace, where His Imperial Majesty awaits your news . . .



The Emperor Trigo's first, terse question brought an immediate answer from Peric.

Well ?

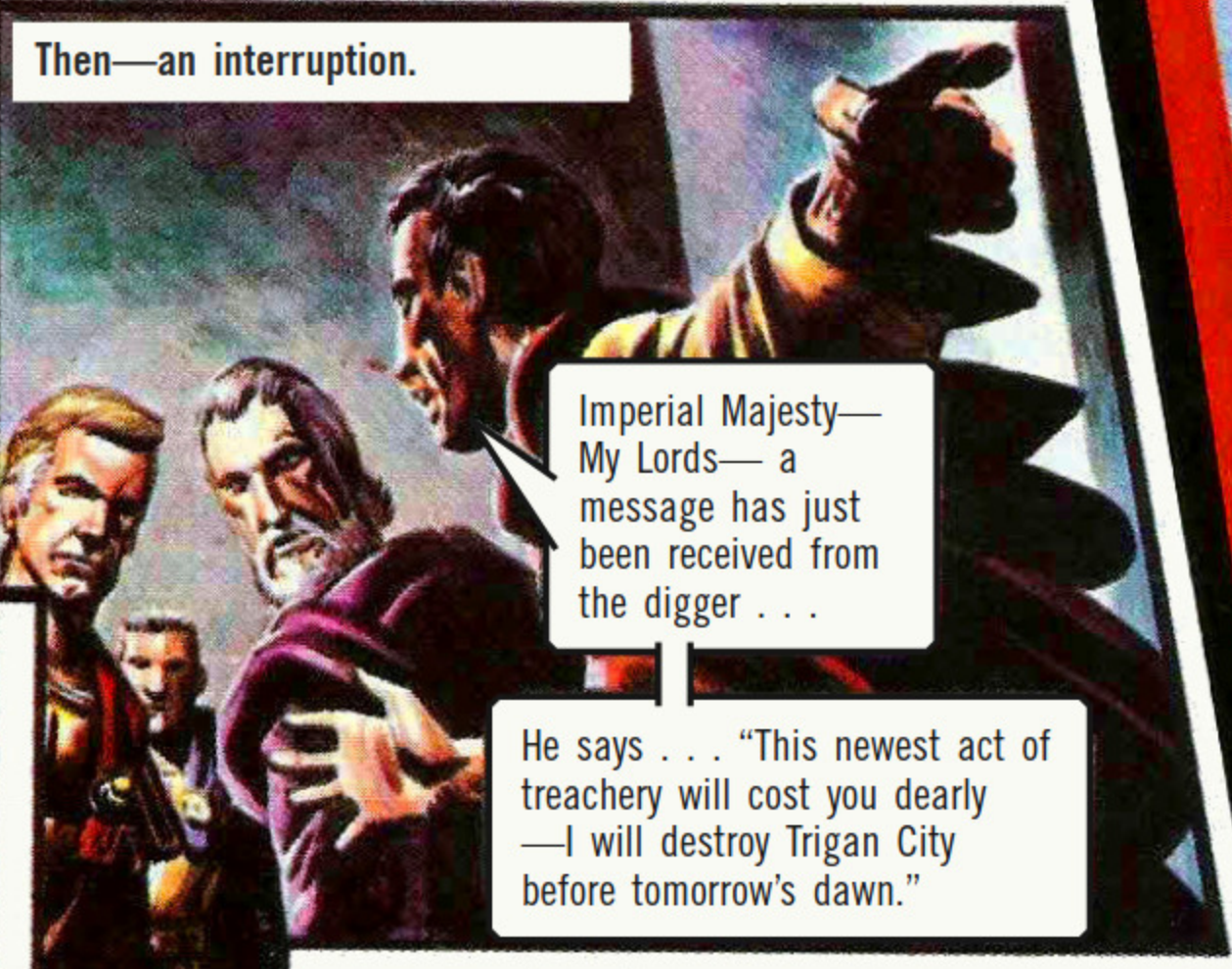
Mission completed, Majesty—but Janno is trapped in the digger !



News that his beloved nephew was in deadly peril greatly affected the Emperor.

Then he is as good as dead !

Not so, Majesty ! Janno carries with him a supply of standard air-fleet survival tablets—food concentrate and solidified water. He can keep himself alive for seven days.



Then—an interruption.

Imperial Majesty—My Lords— a message has just been received from the digger . . .

He says . . . "This newest act of treachery will cost you dearly—I will destroy Trigan City before tomorrow's dawn."



A Trigan air-fleet patrol flight sighted the digger soon after, lumbering through the plain of Vorg.

Digger below—permission to attack with projectiles and bombs—permission acknowledged—attacking forthwith !



The fighter-bombers screamed down upon the mechanical menace.

Opening fire now !



And then—DISASTER !

The red eyes of the mechanical monster blew the attackers to smithereens !

A burst of red heat from the burning eyes of the digger, and the last craft disintegrated.

With debris raining all round it, the digger went on its way.

Later, back in the Imperial Palace in Trigan City, the great scientist, Peric, faced a barrage of abuse from the Council.

What has the science of this planet come to ? What madman designed that monster, with a destructive beam that can blot aircraft out of existence ?

Peric answered calmly . . .

Correction, Lord Brag. The destructive beam was not originally built into the digger's system.

Then how, by all the stars, did this thing come about ?

Peric's answer sent a chill through the veins of all present.

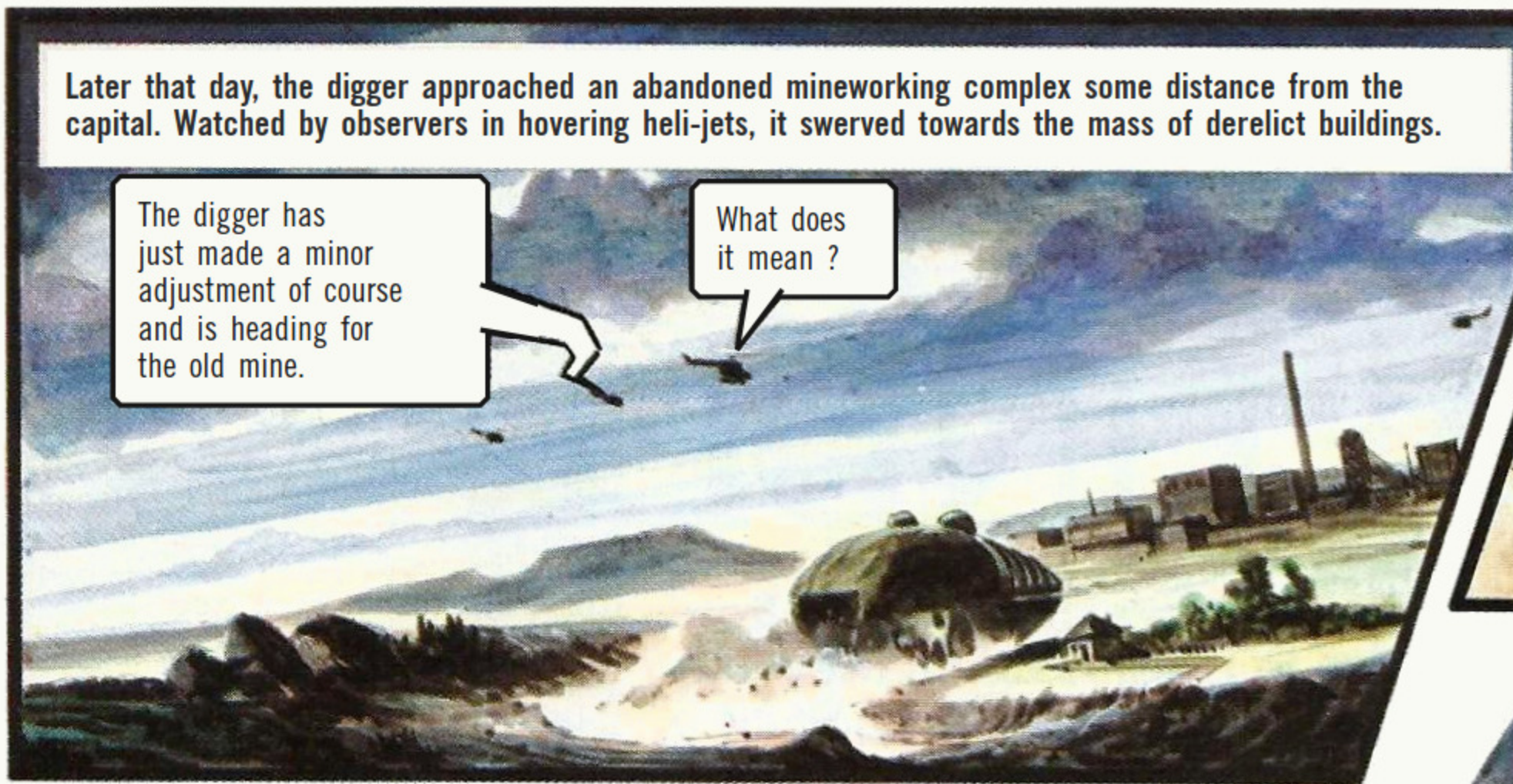
It has come about because of necessity on the part of the digger. The thing is developing special capabilities of its own.

And this monster is even now heading for the city.

To destroy us all !

Perhaps not. While inside the digger, I was able to make a hasty adjustment to its navigational direction indicator. It may well be that it may never find Trigan City !

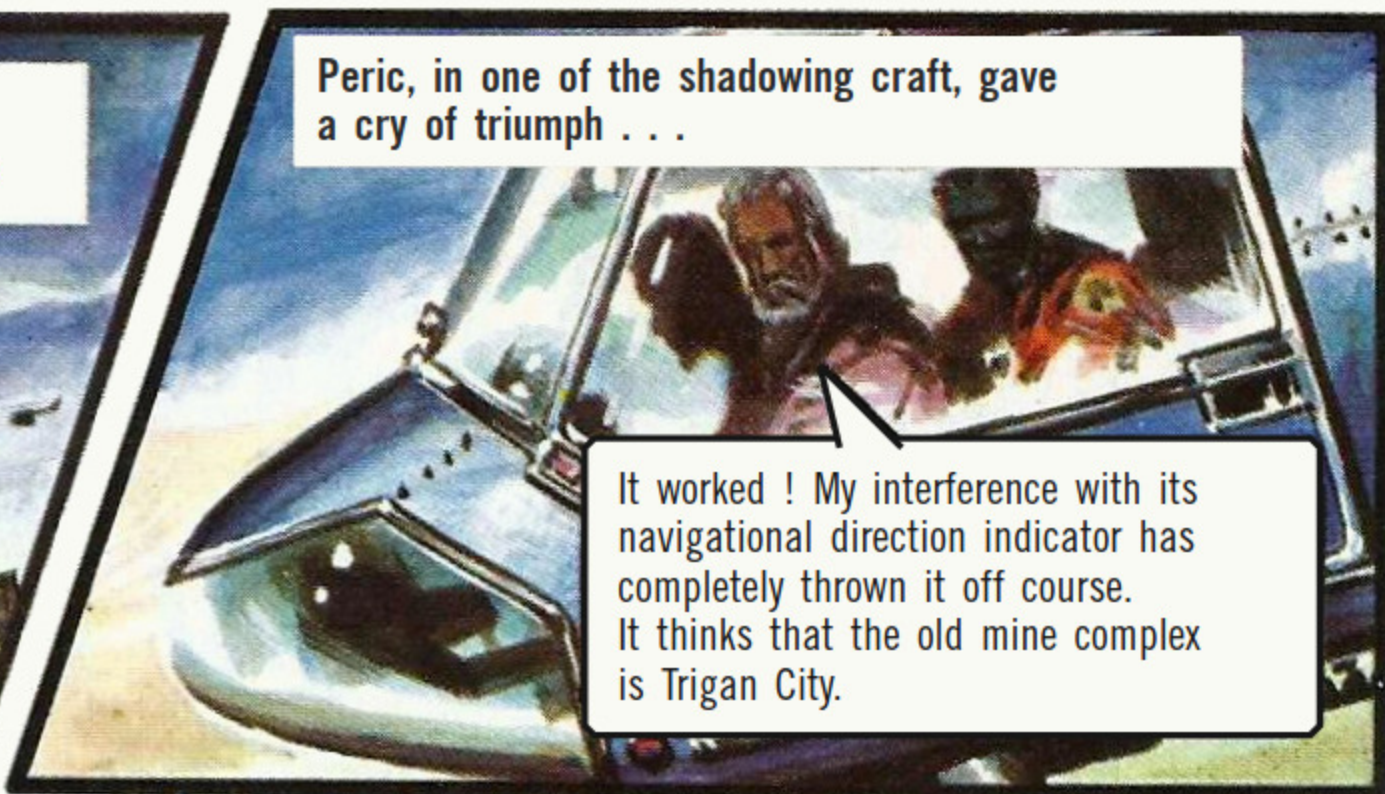
OLIVER FREY



Later that day, the digger approached an abandoned mineworking complex some distance from the capital. Watched by observers in hovering heli-jets, it swerved towards the mass of derelict buildings.

The digger has just made a minor adjustment of course and is heading for the old mine.

What does it mean ?



Peric, in one of the shadowing craft, gave a cry of triumph . . .

It worked ! My interference with its navigational direction indicator has completely thrown it off course. It thinks that the old mine complex is Trigan City.



Keren, Roffa and the old scientist looked down in awe.

By all the stars. Look what it's doing !

Imagine—that could have been Trigan City !

A veritable orgy of destruction !



In the echoing fastness within the careering monster, its prisoner Janno could only hang on—and hope.

What's it doing now ? . . .

Destroying Trigan City ?



Clawing his way across the bucking control compartment, Janno seized hold of a control lever—any control lever—and pulled.

It may do more harm than good, but . . .



Next instant, his world turned upside down !

Eeeeeeeeghh !

The digger hurled itself skywards, then dived head-first to the ground, its massive drill whirring !

When the flyers in the watching heli-jets rushed to the spot, they looked down into the cavernous hole that marked the digger's passage.

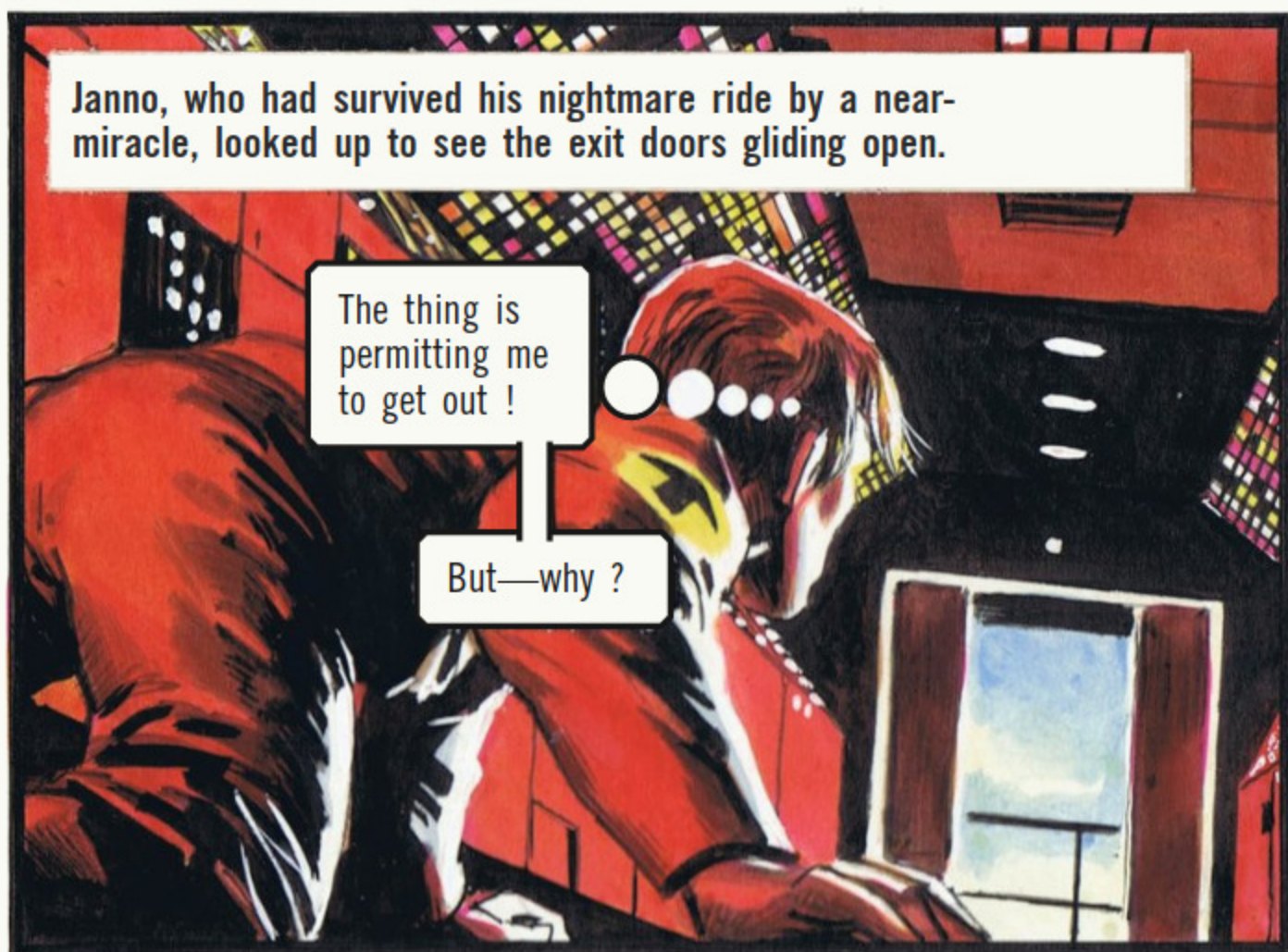
It could go straight through the core of the planet !

It went down vertically !

That same day, the runaway monster emerged momentarily at one of the polar ice-caps of the planet Elekton !

At dawn on the following day, it was briefly to be seen in the equatorial jungle of Daveli.

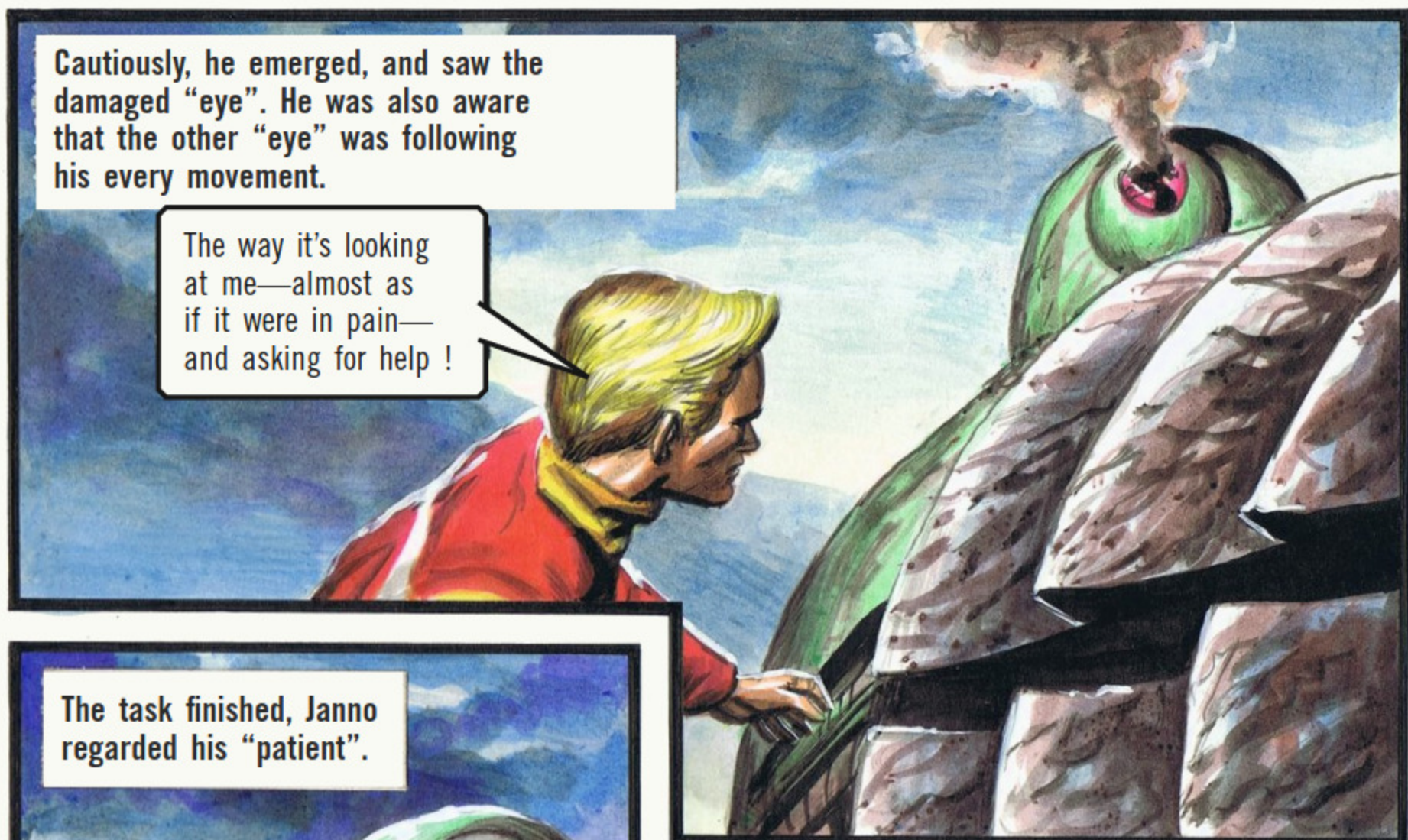
In that wild, uncontrolled streak through the depths of the planet, the digger sustained an injury to one of its "eyes", which caused it to pause on a lonely plain.



Janno, who had survived his nightmare ride by a near-miracle, looked up to see the exit doors gliding open.

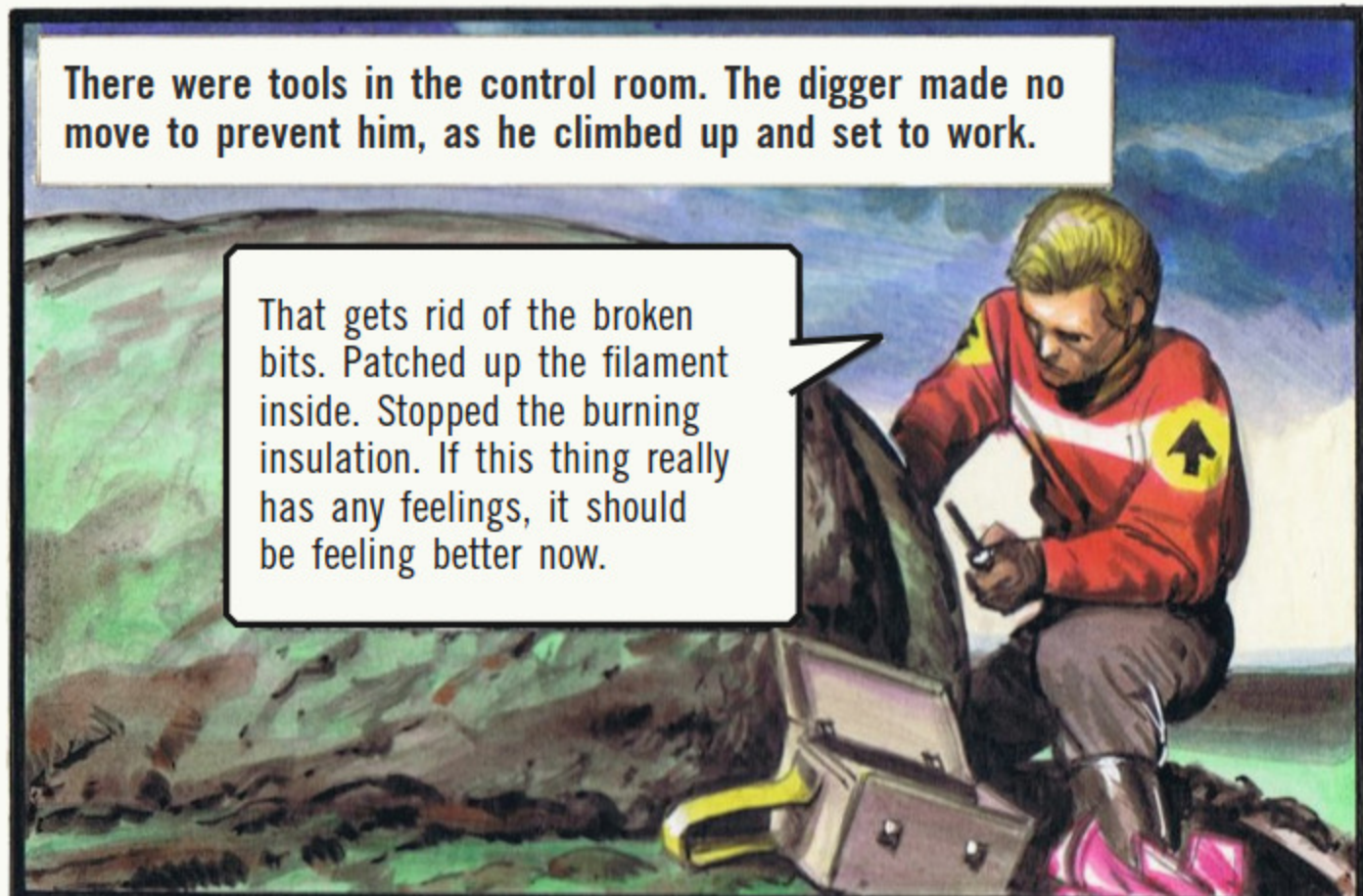
The thing is permitting me to get out !

But—why ?



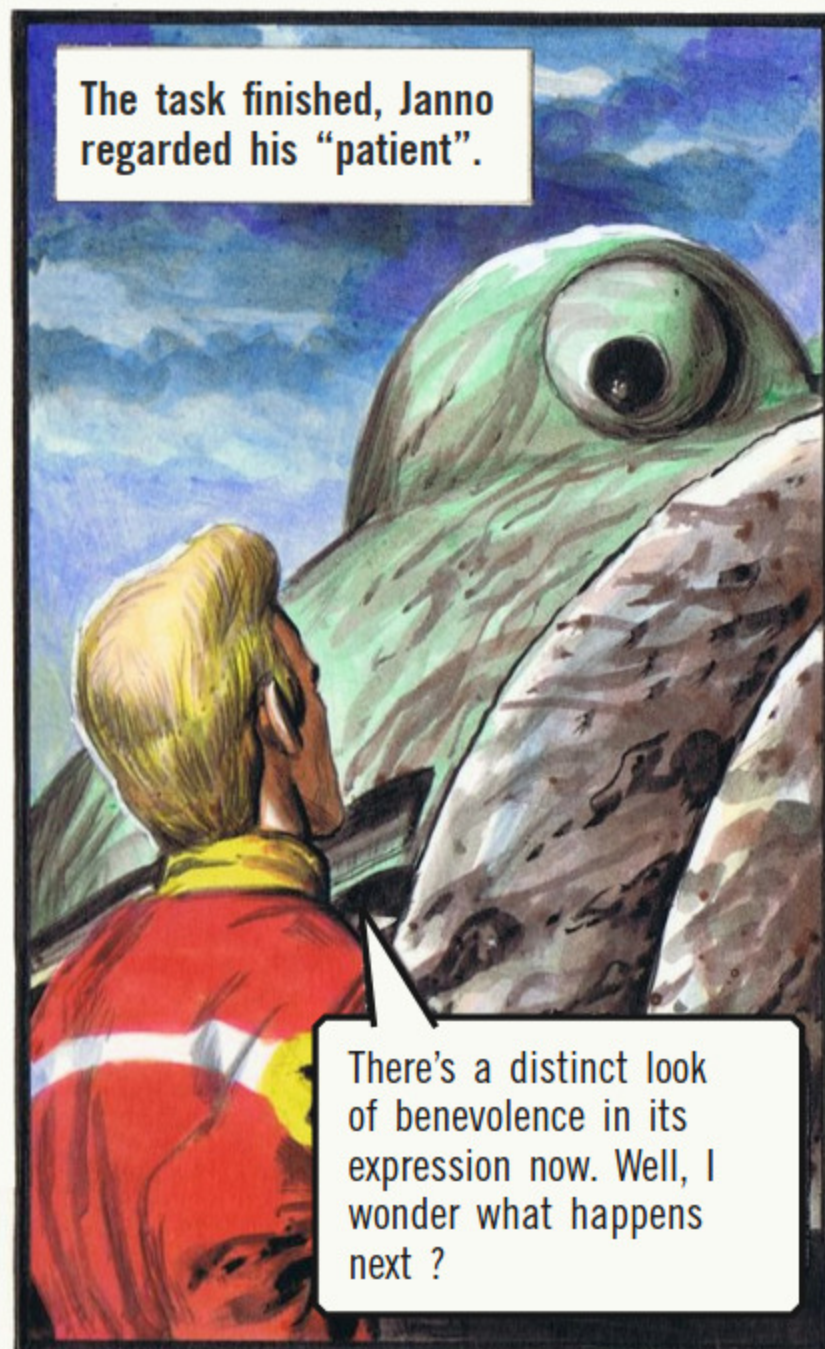
Cautiously, he emerged, and saw the damaged "eye". He was also aware that the other "eye" was following his every movement.

The way it's looking at me—almost as if it were in pain—and asking for help !



There were tools in the control room. The digger made no move to prevent him, as he climbed up and set to work.

That gets rid of the broken bits. Patched up the filament inside. Stopped the burning insulation. If this thing really has any feelings, it should be feeling better now.



The task finished, Janno regarded his "patient".

There's a distinct look of benevolence in its expression now. Well, I wonder what happens next ?



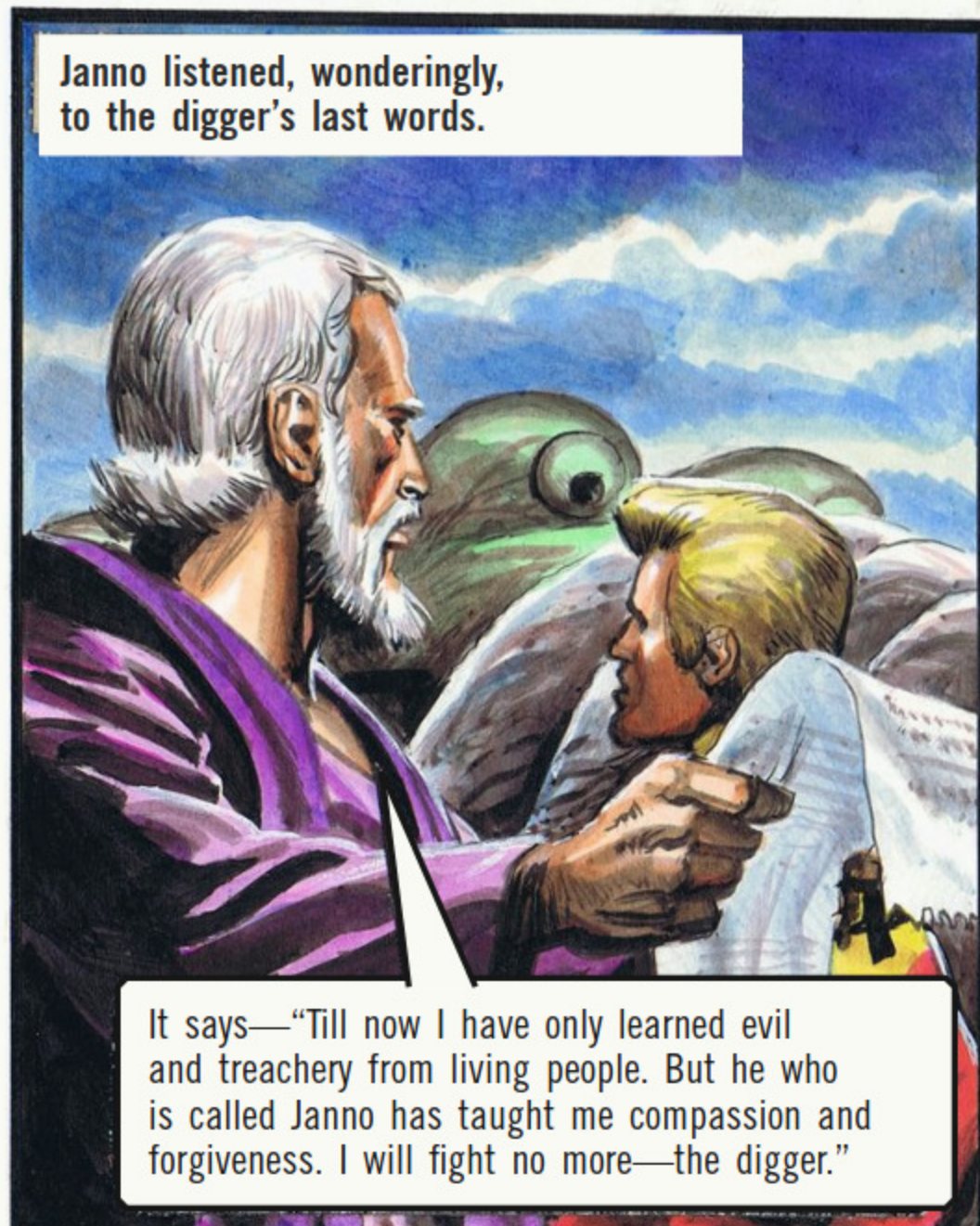
Towards noonday, he heard engines approaching . . .

Heli-jets, ours ! Hey ! You've found me !



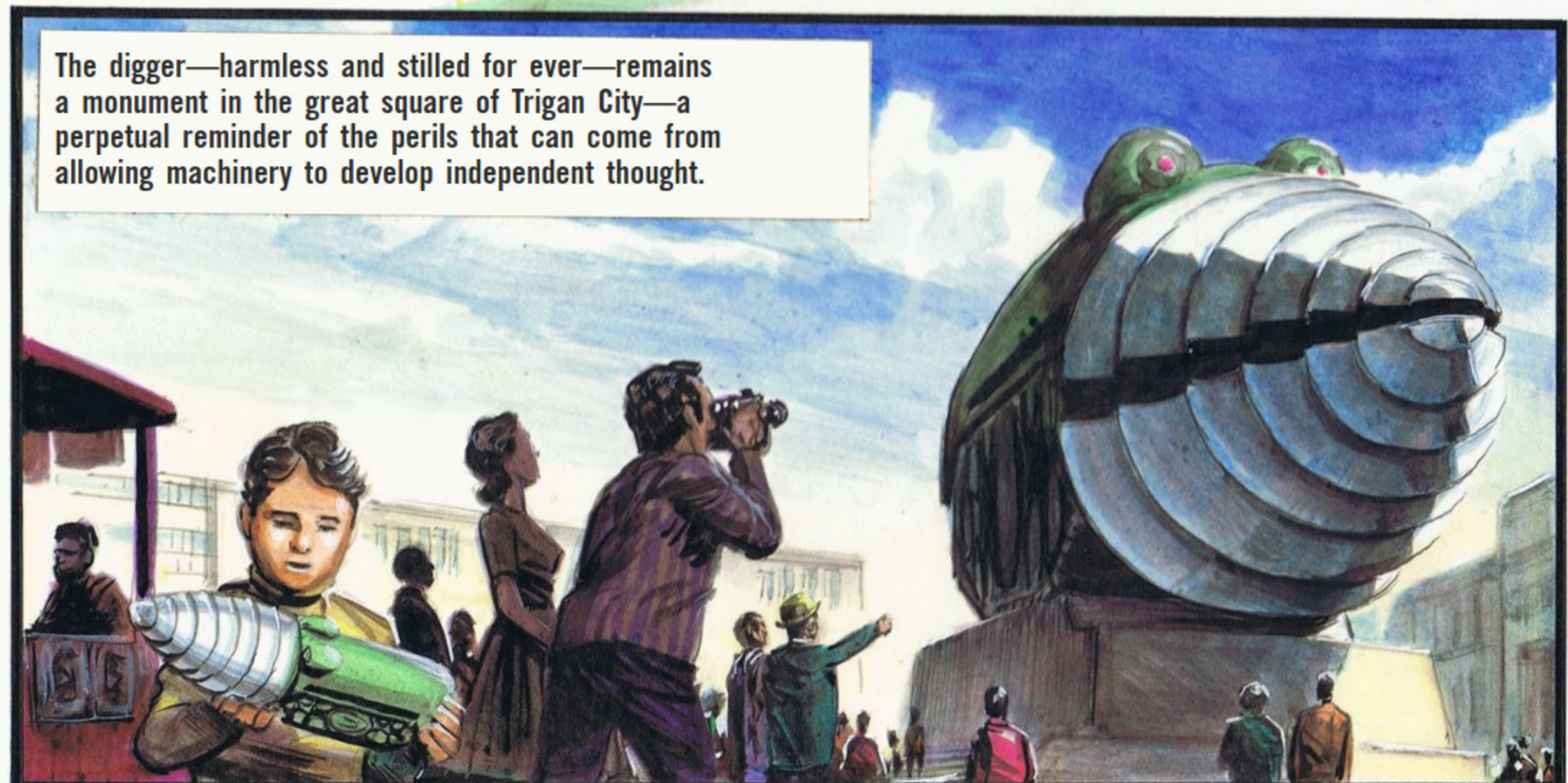
But how did you find me ?

Simple, Janno—the digger sent a message by radio ! Listen—I'll read it to you . . .



Janno listened, wonderingly, to the digger's last words.

It says—"Till now I have only learned evil and treachery from living people. But he who is called Janno has taught me compassion and forgiveness. I will fight no more—the digger."



The digger—harmless and stilled for ever—remains a monument in the great square of Trigan City—a perpetual reminder of the perils that can come from allowing machinery to develop independent thought.